Was There an Islamic "Genocide" of Hindus?

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"The Partition Holocaust": the term is frequently used in Hindu pamphlets concerning Islam and the birth of its modern political embodiment in the Subcontinent, the state of Pakistan. Is such language warranted, or is it a ridicule-inviting exaggeration?

To give an idea of the context of this question, we must note that the term "genocide" is used very loosely these days. One of the charges by a Spanish judge against Chilean ex-dictator Pinochet, so as to get him extradited from Great Britain in autumn 1998, was "genocide". This was his way of making Pinochet internationally accountable for having killed a few Spanish citizens: alleging a crime serious enough to overrule normal constraints based on diplomatic immunity and national sovereignty. Yet, whatever Pinochet's crimes, it is simply ridiculous to charge that he ever intended to exterminate the Spanish nation. In the current competition for victim status, all kinds of interest groups are blatantly overbidding in order to get their piece of the entitlement to attention and solidarity.

The Nazi Holocaust killed the majority of European Jewry (an estimated 5.1 million according to Raul Hilberg, 5.27 million according to the Munich-based Institut für Zeitgeschichte) and about 30% of the Jewish people worldwide. How many victim groups can say as much? The Partition pogroms killed hardly 0.3% of the Hindus, and though it annihilated the Hindu presence in all the provinces of Pakistan except for parts of Sindh and East Bengal, it did so mostly by putting the Hindus to flight (at least seven million) rather than by killing them (probably half a million). Likewise, the ethnic cleansing of a quarter million Hindus from Kashmir in 1990 followed the strategy of "killing one to expel a hundred", which is not the same thing as killing them all; in practice, about 1,500 were killed. Partition featured some local massacres of genocidal type, with the Sikhs as the most wanted victims, but in relative as well as absolute figures, this does not match the Holocaust.

Among genocides, the Holocaust was a very special case (e.g. the attempt to carry it out in secrecy is unique), and it serves no good purpose to blur that specificity by extending the term to all genocides in general. The term "Holocaust", though first used in a genocidal sense to describe the Armenian genocide of 1915, is now in effect synonymous with the specifically Jewish experience at the hands of the Nazis in 1941-45. But does even the more general term "genocide" apply to what Hinduism suffered at the hands of Islam?

**Complete genocide**

"Genocide" means the intentional attempt to destroy an ethnic community, or by extension any community constituted by bonds of kinship, of common religion or ideology, of common socio-economic position, or of common race. The pure form is the complete extermination of every man, woman and child of the group. Examples include
the complete extermination of the native Tasmanians and many Amerindian nations from Patagonia to Canada by European settlers in the 16th-19th century. The most notorious attempt was the Nazi “final solution of the Jewish question” in 1941-45. In April-May 1994, Hutu militias in Rwanda went about slaughtering the Tutsi minority, killing ca. 800,000, in anticipation of the conquest of their country by a Uganda-based Tutsi army. Though improvised and executed with primitive weapons, the Rwandan genocide made more victims per day than the Holocaust.

Hindus suffered such attempted extermination in East Bengal in 1971, when the Pakistani Army killed 1 to 3 million people, with Hindus as their most wanted target. This fact is strictly ignored in most writing about Hindu-Muslim relations, in spite (or rather because) of its serious implication that even the lowest estimate of the Hindu death toll in 1971 makes Hindus by far the most numerous victims of Hindu-Muslim violence in the post-colonial period. It is significant that no serious count or religion-wise breakdown of the death toll has been attempted: the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ruling classes all agree that this would feed Hindu grievances against Muslims.

Nandan Vyas ("Hindu Genocide in East Pakistan", Young India, January 1995) has argued convincingly that the number of Hindu victims in the 1971 genocide was approximately 2.4 million, or about 80%. In comparing the population figures for 1961 and 1971, and taking the observed natural growth rhythm into account, Vyas finds that the Hindu population has remained stable at 9.5 million when it should have increased to nearly 13 million (13.23 million if the same growth rhythm were assumed for Hindus as for Muslims). Of the missing 3.5 million people (if not more), 1.1 million can be explained: it is the number of Hindu refugees settled in India prior to the genocide. The Hindu refugees at the time of the genocide, about 8 million, all went back after the ordeal, partly because the Indian government forced them to it, partly because the new state of Bangladesh was conceived as a secular state; the trickle of Hindu refugees into India only resumed in 1974, when the first steps towards islamization of the polity were taken. This leaves 2.4 million missing Hindus to be explained. Taking into account a number of Hindu children born to refugees in India rather than in Bangladesh, and a possible settlement of 1971 refugees in India, it is fair to estimate the disappeared Hindus at about 2 million.

While India-watchers wax indignant about communal riots in India killing up to 20,000 people since 1948, allegedly in a proportion of three Muslims to one Hindu, the best-kept secret of the post-Independence Hindu-Muslim conflict is that in the subcontinent as a whole, the overwhelming majority of the victims have been Hindus. Even apart from the 1971 genocide, "ordinary" pogroms in East Pakistan in 1950 alone killed more Hindus than the total number of riot victims in India since 1948.

**Selective genocide**

A second, less extreme type of genocide consists in killing a sufficient number who form the backbone of the group's collective identity, and assimilating the leaderless masses into the dominant community. This has been the Chinese policy in Tibet, killing over a million Tibetans while assimilating the survivors into Chinese culture by flooding their country with Chinese settlers. It was also Stalin's policy in eastern Poland and the Baltic states after they fell into his hands under the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact, exemplified by the massacre of thousands of Polish army officers in Katyn. Stalin's policies combining murder of the elites, deportation of entire ethnic groups and ruthless oppression of the
survivors was prefigured in antiquity by the Assyrians, whose deportation of the ten northern (now "lost") tribes of Israel is attested in the Bible.

During the Islamic conquests in India, it was a typical policy to single out the Brahmins for slaughter, after the Hindu warrior class had been bled on the battlefield. Even the Portuguese in Malabar and Goa followed this policy in the 16th century, as can be deduced from Hindu-Portuguese treaty clauses prohibiting the Portuguese from killing Brahmins.

In antiquity, such partial genocide typically targeted the men for slaughter and the women and children for slavery or concubinage. Thus, in 416 BCE, the Athenians were angered at the Melians' reluctance to join the war against Sparta, and to set an example for other client states, Athens had Melos repopulated with Athenian colonists after killing its men and enslaving its women. Another example would be the slaughter of the Jews of Medina by Mohammed in 626 CE: after expelling two Jewish tribes, the third one, the Banu Quraiza, were exterminated: all the ca. 700 men were beheaded, while the women and children were sold into slavery, with the Prophet keeping the most beautiful woman as his concubine (she refused to marry him).

Hindus too experienced this treatment at the hands of Islamic conquerors, e.g. when Mohammed bin Qasim conquered the lower Indus basin in 712 CE. Thus, in Multan, according to the Chach-Nama, "six thousand warriors were put to death, and all their relations and dependents were taken as slaves". This is why Rajput women committed mass suicide to save their honour in the face of the imminent entry of victorious Muslim armies, e.g. 8,000 women immolated themselves during Akbar's capture of Chittorgarh in 1568 (where this most enlightened ruler also killed 30,000 non-combatants). During the Partition pogroms and the East Bengali genocide, mass rape of Hindu women after the slaughter of their fathers and husbands was a frequent event.

At this point, however, we should not overlook a puzzling episode in Hindu legend which describes a similar behaviour by a Hindu conqueror: Parashurama, deified as the 6th incarnation of Vishnu, killed all the adult male Kshatriyas for several generations, until only women were left, and then had Brahmins father a new generation upon them. Just a story, or reference to a historic genocide?

**Genocide in the Bible**

For full-blooded genocide, however, the book to consult is the Bible, which describes cases of both partial and complete genocide. The first modest attempt was the killing by Jacob's sons of all the males in the Canaanite tribe of Shekhem, the fiancé of their own sister Dina. The motive was pride of pedigree: having immigrated from the civilizational centre of Ur in Mesopotamia, Abraham's tribe refused all intermarriage with the native people of Canaan (thus, Rebecca favoured Jacob over Esau because Jacob married his nieces while Esau married local women).

Full-scale genocide was ordered by God, and executed by his faithful, during the conquest of Canaan by Moses and Joshua. In the defeated cities outside the Promised Land, they had to kill all the men but keep the women as slaves or concubines. Inside the Promised Land, by contrast, the conquerors were ordered to kill every single man, woman and child. All the Canaanites and Amalekites were killed. Here, the stated reason was that God wanted to prevent the coexistence of His people with Pagans,
which would result in religious syncretism and the restoration of polytheism.

As we only have a literary record of this genocide, liberal theologians uncomfortable with a genocidal God have argued that this Canaanite genocide was only fiction. To be sure, genocide fiction exists, e.g. the Biblical story that the Egyptians had all newborn male Israelites killed is inconsistent with all other data in the Biblical narrative itself (as well as unattested in the numerous and detailed Egyptian inscriptions), and apparently only served to underpin the story of Moses’ arrival in the Pharaoh's court in a basket on the river, a story modelled on the then-popular life story of Sargon of Akkad. Yet, the narrative of the conquest of Canaan is full of military detail uncommon in fiction; unlike other parts of the Bible, it is almost without any miracles, factual through and through.

And even if we suppose that the story is fictional, what would it say about the editors that they attributed genocidal intentions and injunctions to their God? If He was non-genocidal and good in reality, why turn him into a genocidal and prima facie evil Being? On balance, it is slightly more comforting to accept that the Bible editors described a genocide because they wanted to be truthful and relate real events. After all, the great and outstanding thing about the Bible narrative is its realism, its refusal to idealize its heroes. We get to see Jacob deceiving Isaac and Esau, then Laban deceiving Jacob; David’s heroism and ingenuity in battle, but also his treachery in making Bathsheba his own, and later his descent into senility; Salomon’s palace intrigues in the war of succession along with his pearls of wisdom. Against that background, it would be inconsistent to censor the Canaanite genocide as merely a fictional interpolation.

**Indirect genocide**

A third type of genocide consists in preventing procreation among a targeted population. Till recently, it was US policy to promote sterilization among Native American women, even applying it secretly during postnatal care or other operations. The Tibetans too have been subjected to this treatment. In the Muslim world, male slaves were often castrated, which partly explains why Iraq has no Black population even though it once had hundreds of thousands of Black slaves. The practice also existed in India on a smaller scale, though the much-maligned Moghul emperor Aurangzeb tried to put an end to it, mainly because eunuchs brought endless corruption in the court. The hijra community is a left-over of this Islamic institution (in ancient India, harems were tended by old men or naturally napunsak/impotent men, tested by having to spend the night with a prostitute without showing signs of virile excitement).

A fourth type of genocide is when mass killing takes place unintentionally, as collateral damage of foolish policies, e.g. Chairman Mao’s Great Leap Forward inducing the greatest man-made mass starvation killing 20 million or more, or the British war requisitions causing the Bengal famine of 1943 killing some 3 million; or as collateral damage of other forms of oppression. Unlike the deliberate genocide of Native Americans in parts of the USA or Argentina, the death of millions of Natives in Central America after the first Spanish conquests was at least partly the unintended side-effect of the hardships of forced labour and the contact with new diseases brought by the Europeans. In contrast with Nazi and Soviet work camps, where forced labour had the dual purpose of economic profit and a slow but sure death of the inmates, there is no evidence that the Spanish wanted their Native labourers to die. After all, their replacement with African slaves required a large extra investment.
The Atlantic slave trade itself caused mass death among the transported slaves, just as in the already long-standing Arab slave trade, but it is obvious that purely for the sake of profit, the slave-traders preferred as many slaves as possible to arrive at the slave markets alive. Likewise, the Christian c.q. Islamic contempt for Pagans made them rather careless with the lives of Native Americans, Africans or Hindus, so that millions of them were killed, and yet this was not deliberate genocide. Of course they wanted to annihilate Pagan religions like Hinduism, but in principle, the missionary religions wished to convert the unbelievers, and preferred not to kill them unless this was necessary for establishing the power of the True Faith.

That is why the mass killing of Hindus by Muslims rarely took place in peacetime, but typically in the fervour immediately following military victories, e.g. the fall of the metropolis of Vijayanagar in 1565 was "celebrated" with a general massacre and arson. Once Muslim power was established, Muslim rulers sought to exploit and humiliate rather than kill the Hindus, and discourage rebellion by making some sort of compromise. Not that peacetime was all that peaceful, for as Fernand Braudel wrote in A History of Civilizations (Penguin 1988/1963, p.232-236), Islamic rule in India as a "colonial experiment" was "extremely violent", and "the Muslims could not rule the country except by systematic terror. Cruelty was the norm -- burnings, summary executions, crucifixions or impalements, inventive tortures. Hindu temples were destroyed to make way for mosques. On occasion there were forced conversions. If ever there were an uprising, it was instantly and savagely repressed: houses were burned, the countryside was laid waste, men were slaughtered and women were taken as slaves."

Though all these small acts of terror added up to a death toll of genocidal proportions, no organized genocide of the Holocaust type took place. One constraint on Muslim zeal for Holy War was the endemic inter-Muslim warfare and intrigue (no history of a royal house was bloodier than that of the Delhi Sultanate 1206-1525), another the prevalence of the Hanifite school of Islamic law in India. This is the only one among the four law schools in Sunni Islam which allows Pagans to subsist as zimmis, dis-empowered third-class citizens paying a special tax for the favour of being tolerated; the other three schools of jurisprudence ruled that Pagans, as opposed to Christians and Jews, had to be given a choice between Islam and death.

Staggering numbers also died as collateral damage of the deliberate impoverishment by Sultans like Alauddin Khilji and Jahangir. As Braudel put it: "The levies it had to pay were so crushing that one catastrophic harvest was enough to unleash famines and epidemics capable of killing a million people at a time. Appalling poverty was the constant counterpart of the conquerors' opulence."

Genocide by any other name

In some cases, terminological purists object to mass murder being described as "genocide", viz. when it targets groups defined by other criteria than ethnicity. Stalin's "genocide" through organized famine in Ukraine killed some 7 million people (lowest estimate is 4 million) in 1931-33, the largest-ever deliberate mass murder in peacetime, but its victims were targeted because of their economic and political positions, not because of their nationhood. Though it makes no difference to the victims, this was not strictly genocide or "nation murder", but "class murder". Likewise, the killing of perhaps two million Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge was not an attempt to destroy the
Cambodian nation; it was rather an attempt to "purify" the nation of its bourgeois class.

The killing of large groups of ideological dissenters is a constant in the history of the monotheistic faiths, of which Marxism has been termed a modern offshoot, starting with the killing of some polytheistic priests by Pharaoh Akhenaton and, shortly after, the treacherous killing of 3,000 worshippers of the Golden Calf by Moses (they had been encouraged to come out in the open by Moses' brother Aaron, not unlike Chairman Mao's "hundred flowers" campaign which encouraged dissenters to speak freely, all the better to eliminate them later). Mass killing accompanied the christianization of Saxony by Charlemagne (ca. 800 CE) and of East Prussia by the Teutonic Knights (13th century). In 1209-29, French Catholics massacred the heretical Cathars. Wars between Muslims and Christians, and between Catholics and Protestants, killed millions both in deliberate massacres and as collateral damage, e.g. seven million Germans in 1618-48. Though the Turkish government which ordered the killing of a million Armenians in 1915 was motivated by a mixture of purely military, secular-nationalistic and Islamic considerations, the fervour with which the local Turks and Kurds participated in the slaughter was clearly due to their Islamic conditioning of hatred against non-Muslims.

This ideological killing could be distinguished from genocide in the strict sense, because ethnicity was not the reason for the slaughter. While this caution may complicate matters for the Ukrainians or Cambodians, it does not apply to the case of Hinduism: like the Jews, the Hindus have historically been both a religion and a nation (or at least, casteists might argue, a conglomerate of nations). Attempts to kill all Hindus of a given region may legitimately be termed genocide.

For its sheer magnitude in scope and death toll, coupled with its occasional (though not continuous) intention to exterminate entire Hindu communities, the Islamic campaign against Hinduism, which was never fully called off since the first naval invasion in 636 CE, can without exaggeration be termed genocide. To quote Will Durant's famous line: "The Islamic conquest of India is probably the bloodiest story in history. It is a discouraging tale, for its evident moral is that civilization is a precious good, whose delicate complex of order and freedom, culture and peace, can at any moment be overthrown by barbarians invading from without or multiplying within." (Story of Civilization, vol.1, Our Oriental Heritage, New York 1972, p.459)

Hinduism's losses

There is no official estimate of the total death toll of Hindus at the hands of Islam. A first glance at important testimonies by Muslim chroniclers suggests that, over 13 centuries and a territory as vast as the Subcontinent, Muslim Holy Warriors easily killed more Hindus than the 6 million of the Holocaust. Ferishtha lists several occasions when the Bahmani sultans in central India (1347-1528) killed a hundred thousand Hindus, which they set as a minimum goal whenever they felt like "punishing" the Hindus; and they were only a third-rank provincial dynasty. The biggest slaughters took place during the raids of Mahmud Ghaznavi (ca. 1000 CE); during the actual conquest of North India by Mohammed Ghori and his lieutenants (1192 ff.); and under the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526). The Moghuls (1526-1857), even Babar and Aurangzehb, were fairly restrained tyrants by comparison. Prof. K.S. Lal once estimated that the Indian population declined by 50 million under the Sultanate, but that would be hard to substantiate; research into the magnitude of the damage Islam did to India is yet to start in right earnest.
Note that attempts are made to deny this history. In Indian schoolbooks and the media, an idyllic picture of Hindu-Muslim harmony in the pre-British period is propagated in outright contradiction with the testimony of the primary sources. Like Holocaust denial, this propaganda can be called negationism. The really daring negationists don't just deny the crimes against Hindus, they invert the picture and blame the Hindus themselves. Thus, it is routinely alleged that Hindus persecuted and destroyed Buddhism; in reality, Buddhist monasteries and universities flourished under Hindu rule, but their thousands of monks were killed by Ghor and his lieutenants.

Apart from actual killing, millions of Hindus disappeared by way of enslavement. After every conquest by a Muslim invader, slave markets in Bagdad and Samarkand were flooded with Hindus. Slaves were likely to die of hardship, e.g. the mountain range Hindu Koh, "Indian mountain", was renamed Hindu Kush, "Hindu-killer", when one cold night in the reign of Timur Lenk (1398-99), a hundred thousand Hindu slaves died there while on transport to Central Asia. Though Timur conquered Delhi from another Muslim ruler, he recorded in his journal that he made sure his pillaging soldiers spared the Muslim quarter, while in the Hindu areas, they took "twenty slaves each". Hindu slaves were converted to Islam, and when their descendants gained their freedom, they swelled the numbers of the Muslim community. It is a cruel twist of history that the Muslims who forced Partition on India were partly the progeny of Hindus enslaved by Islam.

**Karma**

The Hindu notion of Karma has come under fire from Christian and secularist polemicists as part of the current backlash against New Age thinking. Allegedly, the doctrine of Karma implies that the victims of the Holocaust and other massacres had deserved their fate. A naive understanding of Karma, divorced from its Hindu context, could indeed lead to such ideas. Worse, it could be said that the Jews as a nation had incurred genocidal karma by the genocide which their ancestors committed on the Canaanites. Likewise, it could be argued that the Native Americans had it coming: recent research (by Walter Neves from Brazil as well as by US scientists) has shown that in ca. 8000 BC, the Mongoloid Native American populations replaced an earlier American population closely resembling the Australian Aborigines -- the first American genocide?

More generally, if Karma explains suffering and "apparent" injustice as a profound form of justice, a way of reaping the karmic rewards of one's own actions, are we not perversely justifying every injustice? These questions should not be taken lightly. However, the Hindu understanding of reincarnation militates against the doctrine of genocidal "group karma" outlined above. An individual can incarnate in any community, even in other species, and need not be reborn among his own progeny. If Canaanites killed by the Israelites have indeed reincarnated, some may have been Nazi camp guards and others Jewish Holocaust victims. There is no reason to assume that the members of today's victim group are the reincarnated souls of the bullies of yesteryear, returning to suffer their due punishment. That is the difference between karma and genetics: karma is taken along by the individual soul, not passed on in the family line.

More fundamentally, we should outgrow this childish (and in this case, downright embarrassing) view of karma as a matter of reward and punishment. Does the killer of a million people return a million times as a murder victim to suffer the full measure of his deserved punishment? Rather, karma is a law of conservation: you are reborn with the basic pattern of desires and conditionings which characterized you when you died last
time around. The concrete experiences and actions which shaped that pattern, however, are history: they only survive insofar as they have shaped your psychic karma pattern, not as a precise account of merits and demerits to be paid off by corresponding amounts of suffering and pleasure.

One lesson to be learned from genocide history pertains to Karma, the law of cause and effect, in a more down-to-earth sense: suffering genocide is the karmic reward of weakness. That is one conclusion which the Jews have drawn from their genocide experience: they created a modern and militarily strong state. Even more importantly, they helped foster an awareness of the history of their persecution among their former persecutors, the Christians, which makes it unlikely that Christians will target them again. In this respect, the Hindus have so far failed completely. With numerous Holocaust memorials already functioning, one more memorial is being built in Berlin by the heirs of the perpetrators of the Holocaust; but there is not even one memorial to the Hindu genocide, because even the victim community doesn't bother, let alone the perpetrators.

This different treatment of the past has implications for the future. Thus, Israel's nuclear programme is accepted as a matter of course, justified by the country's genuine security concerns; but when India, which has equally legitimate security concerns, conducted nuclear tests, it provoked American sanctions. If the world ignores Hindu security concerns, one of the reasons is that Hindus have never bothered to tell the world how many Hindus have been killed already.

Healing

What should Hindus say to Muslims when they consider the record of Islam in Hindu lands? It is first of all very important not to allot guilt wrongly. Notions of collective or hereditary guilt should be avoided. Today's Muslims cannot help it that other Muslims did certain things in 712 or 1565 or 1971. One thing they can do, however, is to critically reread their scripture to discern the doctrinal factors of Muslim violence against Hindus and Hinduism. Of course, even without scriptural injunction, people get violent and wage wars; if Mahmud Ghaznavi hadn't come, some of the people he killed would have died in other, non-religious conflicts. But the basic Quranic doctrine of hatred against the unbelievers has also encouraged many good-natured and pious people to take up the sword against Hindus and other Pagans, not because they couldn't control their aggressive instincts, but because they had been told that killing unbelievers was a meritorious act. Good people have perpetrated evil because religious authorities had depicted it as good.

This is material for a no-nonsense dialogue between Hindus and Muslims. But before Hindus address Muslims about this, it is imperative that they inform themselves about this painful history. Apart from unreflected grievances, Hindus have so far not developed a serious critique of Islam's doctrine and historical record. Often practising very sentimental, un-philosophical varieties of their own religion, most Hindus have very sketchy and distorted images of rival religions. Thus, they say that Mohammed was an Avatar of Vishnu, and then think that they have cleverly solved the Hindu-Muslim conflict by flattering the Prophet (in fact, it is an insult to basic Muslim beliefs, which reject divine incarnation, apart from indirectly associating the Prophet with Vishnu's incarnation as a pig). Instead of the silly sop stories which pass as conducive to secularism, Hindus should acquaint themselves with real history and real religious doctrines.
Another thing which we should not forget is that Islam is ultimately rooted in human nature. We need not believe the Muslim claim that the Quran is of divine origin; but then it is not of diabolical origin either, it is a human document. The Quran is in all respects the product of a 7th-century Arab businessman vaguely acquainted with Judeo-Christian notions of monotheism and prophetism, and the good and evil elements in it are very human. Even its negative elements appealed to human instincts, e.g. when Mohammed promised a share in the booty of the caravans he robbed, numerous Arab Pagans took the bait and joined him. The undesirable elements in Islamic doctrine stem from human nature, and can in essence be found elsewhere as well. Keeping that in mind, it should be possible to make a fair evaluation of Islam's career in India on the basis of factual history.