

# Saving History from the Patriotic Diatribes and Invented Memories

M Rashiduzzaman writes from Glassboro, New Jersey, USA.

*Most of the secularly oriented Bangladeshi intellectuals adopt a take-no-prisoner approach with their own Islamic groups that has already clouded the history writing in Bangladesh. Undoubtedly, the idioms of liberation struggle and a sense of vindictiveness have made an accommodation with the past very tough indeed.*

I still remember what my Ph.D. supervisor (Professor W.H. Morris-Jones) once told me: "Two kinds of people should not write serious history, one is the journalist, and the other is the hyper patriot". The conversation between my mentor and me originated from a stern review that he did for a book dealing with the last few years of the British Raj. Somewhat shaky, I asked why? He was blunt in his response. He said: "The journalists are not trained for historical research, and the patriots will be too emotional in dealing with the narratives. In either case, it will be a poor specimen of history!" I was then a sceptic about what he said, but now three decades after that exchange of views, I feel there is a great wisdom in what my professor said. Indeed, now the post-modernist historians are questioning the validity of the historical narratives vigorously offered by nationalist claims, patriotic diatribes, anecdotes and the invented memories.

The recently published seminal works on the historical thinking include Prashant Duara's *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China and India*, University of Chicago 1995 and partly the theme of this article is borrowed from that author. The main thrust of his work is to prove that nationalist and nation-state overwhelmed the historical accounts of the post-colonial countries. As a result, history has been largely homogenized, constructed, manipulated, imagined, invented, and even dictated by the politicians and the patriotically inspired narrators without impartial examination of facts and evidences. When nationalism is the locus of history, its narrative structure becomes linear and unified in fashion and mostly a single

view or a single leader or a single group transmits the past although little space to diversity. Last December, I wrote a piece for The Daily Star, highlighting some aspects of our rancorous history. I agree with some of the readers that there is a further need for a more focussed discussion on the subject, which is not easy to accommodate within the limited space of newspaper articles. But I don't pretend to fulfill that perceived need here, and this piece only brings forth some freshly raised historiographical questions, which are not exclusively confined to Bangladesh.

National history is usually much older than the nation-state, and indeed it has many layers, and realistically, nationalism itself is pluralistic, but the aggressive nationalists often thrust upon the nation a reified account that rejects all divergent views as tainted and odious. From the new conceptual viewpoints, the rigid, monolithic and dominating version of nationalistic history has come under fire. Several post-modernist thinkers have challenged linear descriptions of India's past. Dr. Ayesha Jalal has challenged the Pakistani history that flourished at the hands of bureaucrats and the political leaders for which, reportedly, she has angered the Pakistan government that does not like to question the officially validated history. She not only challenged the kind of history taught in the Pakistani school textbooks, but she also raised critical questions about Mr. Jinnah, the architect of Pakistan that few rarely dared to do before her.

Regrettably, Bangladesh history is still the victim of the politicized imagination and invented memories, and surely, the monopolistic patriotism and a relentless fixation on the past are totally unwarranted

for a healthy historiography. What is often delineated as the "freedom struggle's consciousness" was not monolithic in 1971 although it was the Awami League that led the fight for independence and later on made a unilateral claim on national history. Numerous historians have either hunkered down or participated in the politically dictated mission of rewriting Bangladesh history. Bangladeshi historical account has become a protected craft zealously guarded by those who claimed to be a nationalist, a freedom fighter, verified or unverified, a victim of the Pakistani crackdown, and undoubtedly, the reminiscence of the liberation struggle is the privileged arena of those who fled to India in 1971.

Few credits go to those who were trapped in Bangladesh and suffered all the miseries of a war-torn nation. Bangladeshi historical account is nearly a jigsaw puzzle of the tales of 1971, but such anecdotes themselves do not necessarily satisfy the rigors of historiographical tasks. Bangladeshi nationalistic account has also been the victim of the politics of rage, personal vendetta, political rancor, witch-hunt, and the impossible-to-verify accusations that enmeshed with the extravagant historical claims.

The Bangladeshi comprehension of the past and its sense of identity is not just a theoretical debate. Some people are using their historical demands, without any objective criterion of measuring patriotism, either to get power, job, prestige, business, influence,

recognition and privilege or to malign others, and satisfy their personal ego. Comparatively, there has been a paradigm shift in the study of Indian history.

Two years ago, in an interview with *The Hindu*, Romila Thapar, a well known historian explained that in India, history was no longer divided as ancient, medieval and modern or as Hindu, Muslim and British. Overtly patriotic Bangladeshi history, as a contrast, is still tangled with what happened in 1971, who did what that year, and who declared independence or not. Even the main political parties are divided on those questions. Curiously, the history of Pakistan has also been preoccupied with the creation of the Muslim state in 1947, and the mainstream historians are engaged in the retrospectively fitted chronicles to justify it.

Bangladesh is still battling between claims and counter-claims; it is a matter of great concern that history has become an attack machine against the personal enemies and political foes. It is more pertinent for Bangladesh to compare the social and economic changes that did or did not happen from 1947 to 1971, and what kind of social, economic and political transformation we have accomplished since independence. But after defeating the Pakistan military, Bangladesh searched for a fresh historical legitimacy that they found by deconstructing the Pakistani era, and what it stood for.

Unlike the earlier voices that exclusively blamed Muslim

separatism, a new but a small group of Indian historiographers have acknowledged the past role of Hindu communalism in the religious division of Bengal (India) in 1947. Joya Chatterjee represents that fresh breed of historians who questioned the old historical charges that Muslims were solely the "culprits" of the partition of Bengal. In her critically acclaimed book, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and the Partition, 1932-47*, Cambridge University Press 1994, Joya Chatterjee has made the history challenging argument that it was not Jinnah's Muslim League that singularly divided Bengal.

On the contrary, the Hindu identity, nourished from the past by several groups, leaders and particularly prominent writers like Bankim Chatterjee and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya envisioned an alternative history for the Hindus that laid down the intellectual landscape for the confrontation between the Hindus and Muslims. Later, the Indian National Congress Party, influenced by the orthodox Hindu leaders and the non-Bengali (Marwari) business community in Calcutta, failed to make any compromise with those Muslims who wanted to keep Bengal united. The main reason was the fear of the (Muslim) political domination in an independent and united Bengal with a representative democracy where the Muslim majority was expected to prevail.

Joya Chatterjee's thesis is not entirely new, but, with enormous documentation, she

proved what several Bengali Muslim leaders had already hinted since the 1940s. As a Bangladeshi liberal generally stuck to the old style popular Indian/West Bengal allegation that the Muslim League and Jinnah were primarily responsible for dividing Bengal in 1947. Many Bengali nationalists also believed that the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan castrated the two-nation theory that originally divided India in 1947. Jinnah himself modified the two-nation theory once Pakistan was achieved, however, to blame it exclusively for the division of Bengal is a contestable premise to say the least. But the two-nation theory remains a political inheritance for Bangladesh as long as it remains a separate state without merging with India. Once I told Joya Chatterjee that if a Muslim (Bangladeshi) would have said what she had observed about the Hindu communalism in Bengal, the Bengali nationalists (of Bangladesh) would have scorned him/her as a Hindu hater, a *Maulabadi* (fundamentalist), a two-nation theory believer and a Pakistan lover.

Joya Chatterjee's most recent analysis of the Bengali Muslim identity has unraveled the Bangladeshi secularists who, almost instinctively, blamed the "kath mullahs" for allegedly keeping the communal pot boiling for centuries. David Eaton in his insightful work, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, California, 1993 has dismissed

the European colonialist and the Orientalist stereotyping of the Muslim ulama as the stagnant and reactionary force that has lingered in Bangladesh even today.

In fact, to be patriotic, pro-liberation and progressive, the mainstream liberal intellectuals in Bangladesh lose no time to deride the ulama. But the latest researches by several respectable scholars on the subject say otherwise. In the eyes of David Eaton, the (Islamic) religious gentry played a dynamic role in Bengal history, and he emphatically concludes that Islam in Bengal was successful among the success stories of the world religions. But such views are unacceptable to those who claim to be the secular patriots in Bangladesh. Whoever talks of political Islam in Bangladesh, even as an academic analysis invokes no less than an apocalyptic attack, slander and scorn by the "progressive forces". The convoluted logic of the attackers included charges that political Islam was opposed to the creation of Bangladesh, and therefore, they deserved a denial of history in Bangladesh.

Truly, the nature of nationalism in Bangladesh and its history could not be separated from the evolving religious nationalism in India. In this sphere of knowledge, the recent and most illuminating study is, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Oxford Paperback, 1998 by Peter Van der Veer, a Dutch scholar. He stunned many specialists, certainly most of his observers in India, and abroad by demonstrating that Indian nationalism, at its very foundation, was religious, not secular although there was an officially acknowledged secular ideology. And the extreme manifestation of Indian nationalism takes "one religion as the basis of na-

tional identity" and "relegates adherents of other religions to a secondary, inferior status". Peter Van der Veer continues in that work.

Even Salman Rushdie (no friend of the so-called Islamic fundamentalists) in his *Imaginary Homelands*, Penguin, 1991 comes forward with a similar conclusion that Indian nationalism has drifted towards a Hindu identity, and there was no reversal in sight. To what might be imprecisely described as the post-liberation political belief in Bangladesh, India, even after the rise of the Hindu nationalism, is a successful secularism. Both the mainstream Bangladeshi politicians and the secular intellectuals there don't hesitate to accommodate with the BJP rule in New Delhi and, the viciously anti-Muslim (directed both against Bangladesh and Pakistan) campaign of their highly organized cohorts. Most of the secularly oriented Bangladeshi intellectuals adopt a take-no-prisoner approach with their own Islamic groups that has already clouded the history writing in Bangladesh. Undoubtedly, the idioms of liberation struggle and a sense of vindictiveness have made an accommodation with the past very tough indeed.

The nationalists and the patriots in Bangladesh ought to reappraise their stand on Bangladeshi history; otherwise they will be the victims of the history by and the national identity will exacerbate. Neither the Awami League nor the centrist BNP has given much thought to their historical premises and reconcile their differences. Patriotism alone does not create a sound history, and crony patriotism creates all but crony history that makes the burden of the past too heavy for the nation to sustain. Bangladeshi needs greater ideas, and more flexible narratives of its past.

## Memories of the Bangladesh Independence Struggle

by Shamsul Haque

*The people of Bangladesh were often been misled, deceived, and bluffed by their politicians. People have been frustrated as none of the political pledges have been met during 28 years of independence. Therefore, it seems people are less inclined to be geared up again and work for a new and prosperous society according to the spirit of the Liberation War. It is our politicians who are on the front line and responsible for all the misdeeds going on in our society.*

THE article entitled 'Reminiscing March 26, 1971' written by Dr. Jaffar Ullah (The Daily Star, March 26, 1999) has uncovered a number of thoughts regarding our glorious Independence Struggle. In his article Dr. Ullah recalled and reported a series of accounts of his personal memories of 1971. During the Liberation War (LW), Dr. Ullah was studying in America, and did not witness all those dramatic events happening in the then East Pakistan. However, it seems quite clear that Dr. Ullah had a strong mental attachment with the events that were taking place during and immediately prior to the commencement of the LW. He was equally influenced by the independence movement like the whole Bangalee nation living in the then East Pakistan.

The most interesting point raised in the article is whether the spirit of the LW has influenced the behaviour of our political leaders and been used to the nation building activities during 28 years of independence. This is the very basic question as far as Bangladesh is concerned. In my opinion, it would be worthwhile to carry out exclusive research to examine whether personal memories influence people in their efforts to build up the structure of a society whatsoever.

### Background information and methodology

There have been few attempts to examine the memory of Bangladeshi people, and in particular the memories of the independence struggle, to explore its impact on various socio-political activities undertaken to build up the nation. However, some academic works have been carried out to investigate personal memories of younger and older Bangladeshi people in the recent years (see Conway & Haque, 1999). Unlike the younger generation, older people have directly experienced the independence struggle of 1971, and were anyway part of the mass movement against Pakistani military dictators in late sixties.

I am going to briefly present the findings of the study conducted by Conway and Haque (1999) and try to relate them with the points made by Dr. Ullah in his article. Conway and Haque (1999) carried out an autobiographical memory research on 106 Bangladeshi volunteers, ranging in age from 20 to 86 years. In the Psychology Laboratory of Dhaka University.

Participants were presented with 15 cue words, one at a time, printed on cards, and instructed to bring to mind a memory of an experience of which each cue word reminded them. They were further instructed to recall a memory of an event which they had directly experienced and which lasted over a period of seconds, minutes, or hours, but no longer one day. Participants were told to sample memories widely from across their life spans but not to recall memories less than one year old. Within these constraints, participants were to respond with the first memory to come to mind.

The 15 cue words used in the study comprised 5 categories: naming common locations (restaurant, market, park), general objects (chair, table, television), significant others (father, mother, friend), positive emotions (happy, joy, cheerful), and negative emotions (frustration, pain, sad).

Conway and Haque accumulated 1,590 memories from the participants. They analysed 1,585 memories (five memories were omitted due to missing data) in terms of the age of the participant at the time of the event occurred, which ranged from 3 to 79 years. The participants were divided into two groups: a younger group (ages ranged from 20 to 46 years), and an older group (ages ranged from 47 to 86 years).

The researchers portrayed lifespan retrieval curves for the younger and older groups for portions of memories falling in each decade (e.g. 0-10, 11-20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, 71-80). The results revealed that the younger group recalled most of their memories from their age between 10 to 30 years. This period of increased remembering is known as the reminiscence bump in memory literature. However, the older group showed two bumps: the first bump occurred between 10 to 25 years of age, and the second bump between 40 to 50 years of age.

### What did we learn from this study?

A critical moment in the struggle for independence then occurred during a public meeting held on March 7, 1971, when, in the presence of about 100,000 people, the much-respected Bangalee leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced a policy of non-cooperation with the government. This announcement initiated an armed confrontation that lasted for approximately 9 months and resulted in the freeing of the Bangalee people from Pakistani rule and the establishment of the independent state of Bangladesh.

The findings of the study of Conway and Haque (1999) go in favour of the general observation of Dr. Ullah in which he mentioned that any Bangalees of Bangladesh who is 38 years and above would be able to clearly remember many of his or her personal experiences from the period of the independence struggle.

The question now is why the Bangalees of Bangladesh are so capable to recollect many of their experiences occurring during that specific period rather than the other life time periods? It is vital to investigate whether the personal and the social behaviour of Bangalees are at all influenced by those experiences. Is their association between the spirit of the Liberation War and the memories of events taken place during those tumultuous periods of 1971? Within the limited scope, we will only try to answer why Bangladeshi people retained all these struggle-related memories after all these years. To realise the point we have to look back a little further to the Language Movement of 1952.

The period from 1962 to 1969 witnessed an intense opposition by the Bangalee people that resulted in the downfall of the Pakistani military dictators. In 1970 there was a national Parliamentary election in Pakistan in which the Pakistan Awami League (the biggest political party for the Bangalee people) won a majority of the seats in Parliament. According to the constitution, the Awami League should then have formed the government. However, the Pakistani rulers refused to hand over power to the League.

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### Protracted Trauma of Bangalees for the period 1952-1971

In 1952 the Bangalee nation had to organise a massive counter-movement against the Pakistani colonial ruler to protect its own language: Bangla. Through this movement a powerful impetus grew for independence from Pakistan. The period of threat of destruction of the Bangalee language and culture virtually started just after the independence of Pakistan in 1948 when Jinnah announced that Urdu will be the only state language of Pakistan. The movement to protect the Bangalee language and culture gradually turned to the struggle for democracy and independence.

The threat was by the Pakistani military dictators during this period and the counter-movements organised by the Bangalee people caused a protracted trauma for the entire Bangalee nation in the then East Pakistan. But it was on the highest level during the Liberation Struggle in 1971 when three million people were killed and ten million people were forced to leave the country. Hundreds of villages were burnt and thousands of women were raped.

Thus, the Bangalees' experiences of 1971 were often surprising in nature, highly personally significant, and associated with intense emotions, and these are the ideal materials for the formation of long lasting autobiographical memories (for further discussion on this point see Conway & Haque, 1999).

Now let us come to the central point of our discussion. It is empirically supported that the Bangalee people of Bangladesh have not forgotten their memories of 1971. However, it is usually claimed that the common people are little influenced by those experiences in their everyday activities. It is difficult to believe this point without any research evidence. If we consider the point as a truth for the sake of argument, what might be the reason behind it? It seems likely that our political leaders are mainly responsible for the whole issue.

### Whatever happened to the spirit of 1971?

The people of Bangladesh were often been misled, deceived, and bluffed by their politicians. People have been frustrated as none of the political pledges have been met during 28 years of independence. Therefore, it seems people are less inclined to be geared up again and work for a new and prosperous society according to the spirit of the Liberation War. It is our politicians who are on the front line and responsible for all the misdeeds going on in our society. They neither care about the spirit of the LW nor the expectations of the common people. Why has it happened like this?

Among other reasons, there was a well defined and organised move to demolish the achievements of our liberation war by some vested groups that started just after the emergence of the

independently created confusion among the people about different issues related to the independence struggle. People became easily divided when they saw that their leaders were split up into different groups concerning several fundamental points with high national significance.

For example, the issue of the declaration of the independence of Bangladesh, and the issue regarding our nationality. People were extremely frustrated when they saw that the post-liberation government failed to solve many of the burning problems. For example, law and order situation, and misery of public life.

In conclusion, older people of Bangladesh still remember their experiences of the LW with considerable respect. Their dream is to construct a modern and happy society free from poverty, illiteracy, child and women repression, human rights violation, and communalism. To make the dream a reality the people need a group of new leaders who are influenced by the spirit of our glorious liberation struggle and equipped with modern democratic traditions and values.

Additionally, there should be an all out effort to teach the younger generation about our history, culture and heritage. If the younger generation is properly educated in this way, the innocent people of Bangladesh might expect such a society in the near future which they actually like to see.

The author is writing a Ph.D. dissertation in Experimental Psychology at the University of Bristol, Bristol, Great Britain.

## The Gulf-War, the Arabs and Iraq

by Abul Mohsin

THE Gulf War is, perhaps, the only war in human history in which one country was invaded by about two dozen or more countries. Predictably, in that war Iraq could not last long and had to surrender by agreeing to terms insulting to a sovereign nation. The allied forces led by the only remaining super power viz., USA evicted Iraq swiftly from Kuwait and in the process inflicted heavy damages to Baghdad and other places of Iraq. Further, they imposed total economic embargo on Iraq thereby stopping it from exporting oil and importing badly needed food and other essential commodities for its people. After about five years of crippling sanctions, a limited quantity of oil is allowed to be exported through UN channels. The oil revenue is controlled by the UN and everything that Iraq imports must face close scrutiny of the UN inspectors. As a result, Iraq cannot import what it needs for its reconstruction and to meet the needs of its people in

due time. What is more galling is the fact that the entire cost of running the monitoring organisation set up by the UN (in effect USA) is met from the sale of Iraqi oil. It is reported that as much as 40 per cent of the sale proceeds goes to meet this expenditure! No wonder the inspectors are in no hurry to wind up their activity in Iraq! Who would like to give up a job carrying a salary at UN rates?

To add insult to injury, the USA and the UK have set up the so-called "no-fly zones" to the north and south of Baghdad which together make up more than two-thirds of Iraq thereby effectively reducing the area of control of the Iraqi govt. The purpose of setting up of the "no-fly zones" was said to be to protect the Kurds in the north and the Shiias in the south from persecution by the Iraqi govt! Even though there is no allegation of such persecution now, the "no-fly zones" are effectively maintained by the US-UK

axis. However, they did nothing when Turkey bombed its Kurdish areas some time ago! Such is the policy concern for the Kurd's welfare!

Now why did Iraq invade Kuwait in the first place? History tells us that even in the early part of this century Kuwait was part of Iraq which was then within the Ottoman empire. After the break-up of the Ottoman empire at the end of the First World War, the British carved out Kuwait from Iraq and ruled it as a protectorate till 1961 when it gained its independence from the British. Obviously the creation of Kuwait out of a portion of Iraq which was very rich in oil deposits to serve the interests of the British, was not acceptable to the Iraqis. Can anybody say that Iraq claim is bogus?

As a parallel to this, let us not forget that Israel is claiming Jerusalem to be its sole capital on the ground that it was the Promised Land (land promised by God) although it

was never ruled by the Jews in the past. Israel came into being in 1948 as an aftermath of the persecution of Jews by Hitler during the Second World War through the Balfour declaration. Again a British creation like Kuwait! Thus it is evident that the British imperialism had been sowing seeds of dispute among the Arabs since the beginning of the 20th century to create pockets of vested interest groups to serve their interests. No doubt they have been successful in their nefarious designs and the Arab countries have been unable to come out of this web of conspiracy. Although the British are no longer a world power, they have their Anglo-Saxon cousins to prop them up!

By way of some arm-twisting and blunt threats, the USA have managed to bring the Arab countries in line with their thinking and now they are toying the US strategy of toppling Saddam Hussein from power. The US has crossed all limits of international diplomacy. They are contemplating removal of the Iraqi president and even have allocated funds for the purpose! This is an unprecedented and illegal move by one UN member against another. While all these are happening against Iraq, the Americans even cannot ask Israel to get out of the