

NON-FICTION

Looking Backwards: 1947 and After

MAHMUD RAHMAN

When the white crescent on green flag was hoisted in Dhaka, as the Raj took leave, I was yet to be born. The only family story I have heard of that day is that my Dada -- really my Nana, my mother's father -- lit a cigarette. He was not a smoker.

Lighting a cigarette can have different meanings. Some smoke to calm their nerves. Some light up after they make love. I was never a habitual smoker. Now and then I smoked with friends, enjoying their company. One winter I even tried cigarettes to ward off cold.

For my grandfather, it was an act of celebration.

There would have been others that day smoking with different feelings. For many, their lives turned upside down, that day was not a happy one.

I was born in Dhaka seven years after Dada's cigarette became ash.

My hometown, in that first decade after 1947, saw a new mix. Houses of many Hindu residents, with deep roots in the city, emptied out as the families felt pressures, hot and cold, to leave for India. Some of those houses, and other newly built ones, such as Azimpur Colony, were filled by Muslims coming across the new border. White men vacated positions of authority. Poorer migrants from Bihar streamed in.

My immediate family, on both my father and mother's sides, was not much affected. My father's roots were in rural Chandpur, my mother's in Bikrampur and Narayanganj. My older siblings, the children of my mother's first husband, had relatives in Pirojpur. We were solid Bangals from East Bengal. My father, mother, and older siblings' father -- they had settled in Dhaka in the '30s or early '40s.

Each had spent time in what was now West Bengal. Stories from that other side trickled down in conversation. They recalled a life splashed with a bit of romance.

In his late teens, my father jumped on boats, first to Rangoon, then to Calcutta. The capital of Bengal must have seduced him more; he returned there for college. He joined the Calcutta Police. In 1942, he quit and moved to Dhaka. In his twilight years, I asked him why. He said he didn't like it there any more. Perhaps it was *desher taan*, the desire for closeness with the delta of his childhood. Or he might have felt tremors from the volatile mix then churning in Calcutta: the pressures on the police from the Quit India movement and communal

tensions swirling in the air. He alluded to resentments among colleagues. Meanwhile his heart had found other attractions: designing boats, tinkering with cars, and the desire to try his hand at business.

In my childhood, he spoke of life in a metropolis far more glamorous than the small town that the Dhaka of that time. This would be confirmed from the Calcutta *Statesman* that we received until Pakistan banned Indian periodicals. I learned to read English from that paper.

My mother's family had lived across Bengal since Dada worked as a school inspector. In her stories, one place stood out: Darjeeling. As a child, she spent some seasons in that hill station, and she spoke of cold and snow, as well as the joys of being a Bluebird and being a princess in a school pageant. Just as we received *The Statesman*, my Nanibari just up the road read the Calcutta *Ultoroth*. This monthly was popular for cinema news and carried an entire novel in each issue.

Both my father and grandfather marked Pakistan's birth by starting businesses. My father launched Pak Motors, a car dealership. The name would later attach itself to the local bus stop, becoming today's Bangla Motors after 1971. My grandfather opened Azad Pharmacy.

With the names they chose, both men appear to have welcomed Pakistan. My grandfather chose Azad, ('freedom' in Urdu), a word popular at that time. My father chose Pak, though not quite Pakistan.

The opening of businesses by two Bengali Muslim middle class men signalled that they, like others in their class, recognized in that moment an opportunity.

Both businesses collapsed within a few years. Neither man had the mettle for business. In the end, both ended up renting storefronts. The rentier mentality afflicted the Bengali middle class, a group not quite ready for the rigours of capitalist enterprise. Though not as bad, it's still around.

Still, the two men and their families would prosper in the coming years. To some extent, to people of this class, Azadi did deliver.

Of course 14 August 1947 was not just a day marked with promise. Though officially it was independence, we knew it as Partition.

The background to Partition was marked by distrust and hostility that exploded into unspeakable violence between Hindus and Muslims who had long lived side by side. There would continue to be riots afterwards, big ones in 1950 and 1965. A vivid image



artwork by amina

from that later one stays in my mind: Hindu families running through our neighbourhood with mattresses on their heads.

I grew up in a household free of communal feeling. While I can't be certain of adult conversations, I do not recall hearing words hateful toward Hindus, or for that matter, anyone with different beliefs. My parents shared other prejudices of the Bengali middle class, but our doors were open to people of other faiths. I recall an Ihudi man visiting our house, though no one else seems to remember him. Our first doctor was Horsho Babu. Nibaron and his fellow carpenters built boats, windows, and doors. An Anglo-Indian lady Mrs Ellis tutored me in English. The larger neighbourhood itself was mixed. The land where the Sonargaon Hotel stands today was home to a community of Hindu potters. A cremation ghat was right across the road, along the khal that has been filled up. It was probably during the 1965 riot that Hindus left.

For sure, there are believers without communal prejudices, but in our home I feel communal feeling was absent because religion itself played a minimal role. My father's religious practice was limited to taking us to annual Eid prayers, sacrificing a cow or goat on Kurbani, and buying lamps and sparklers for Shab-e-Barat. When I reached my teens, my father stopped going to Eid prayers. I was relieved since my world outlook was then being shaped by a new arrival into the house: Unwin

paperbacks carrying Bertrand Russell's sceptical philosophy.

My mother was slightly more religious, but she didn't pray much until later in life. She fasted a few times. We were free to join or not. Early on, she hired Shiraj Munshi from the nearby mosque to provide us with Arabic lessons. But soon Shiraj Munshi was wandering the streets naked. He suffered from schizophrenia and was packed off to Pabna Mental Hospital. When he returned, the cycle repeated. Our lessons ended. I find it curious that rote memorization of a language I did not comprehend still left me with one sura imprinted in my brain. Yet despite almost having been a math major, I can stare at an equation today with no idea how to solve it. The brain works in mysterious ways.

My mother was influenced by her father, a practicing man of faith. But she filtered out the narrowness of his beliefs. In the late 1960s he published a book of his travels to Turkey and England where he visited his sons. I doubt I read the book. In 1965 he had thrown me out of his house for wearing a badge supporting Fatima Jinnah, the opposition candidate against then president Ayub Khan. I returned only when my grandmother insisted. About twelve years ago, I opened Dada's book, only to be horrified by its contents. It was filled with vitriol against Hindus and Jews.

My father and Dada were almost of the same generation. I wonder how they were shaped so differently in their religious and communal attitudes. Both came of age in the village. What was there in their surroundings that fed different spirits? Both worked for the colonial government, sharing a loyalist attitude towards the Raj. What was there in their work and social experiences that led to divergent attitudes? They are both dead now. My interest in their makeup came too late to probe how they were formed in the first half of the 20th century.

Even though 1947 did not directly shake up our family, that time saw choices outside that would affect our family in the years to come.

After Partition, a young man migrated from the UP to accept a teaching job in Dhaka University. He was interested in delta landforms. His family stayed in India, though after his move a few came to East Bengal. The young man did not move because he believed in a Muslim state. His political leanings were secular and he would sympathize with the language movement.

In the mid-50s, my oldest sister became his student. Later they married. At the

wedding a band played the shenai. This would be the first 'mixed' marriage in our family. My Dulabhai came from a Shia family and he spoke Urdu and English. The couple built a close relationship negotiating differences in culture and language. During the decade that followed, they spent several years in the U.S. Their two children were born there.

In March 1969 he died of a heart attack in Dhaka. Later that year, my sister emigrated to the U.S. with her children. They had planned to move when Dulabhai was alive. This was a decision driven by opportunity, but in the atmosphere of rising nationalism, with the possibility of its edges turning ugly - a lesson absorbed during Partition -- there was also worry about the space for their family in the uncertain future. The children would grow up as Americans, and to the extent they look at their roots here, they consider themselves more South Asian than anything else. Perfectly understandable.

The late 60s brought two newcomers into the family. Two older brothers married women with either roots or relatives in West Bengal.

My younger bhabi, with roots in 24 Parganas, introduced us to shuddho Bangla. Until then we'd happily conversed in our Bangal dialect. My bhabi was appalled at how we spoke. I learned to code switch, speaking shuddho with her and Bangal otherwise. Without her, I doubt I would have absorbed shuddho Bangla into my tongue. Today the awe of a 14-year old facing a pretty bhabi is long gone, so when we meet now I insist on speaking our 'uncivilized' dialect. She isn't so amused.

My older bhabi came from Chittagong, with roots in Shahzadpur, but she had relatives who chose to stay in India. In 1971, that connection proved to be a lifeline.

Today the legacy of 1947 we recall most is that freedom from the Raj brought new shackles. The groundwork was laid for another clash, this time a war.

With the crackdown on 25 March 1971, my oldest brother rebelled inside the army. The Pakistani military picked up my bhabi with her two infant children. They were held in Dhaka cantonment, later released into my Dada's house. From there, they fled to Agartala and later joined her relatives in Calcutta.

In April many of us took refuge in Dada's village in Bikrampur. Later another brother and I escaped to Agartala. While he joined the Mukti Bahini, I went to Calcutta. Even before my older brother's family arrived, I was welcomed by my bhabi's relatives into

their Park Circus home.

Though not as bad as the camps, life was difficult for most refugees who arrived in Calcutta. I recall the trials faced by my friends. Housing was scarce. Even when they found a room, there was no place to take a bath. I am eternally grateful that a family connection gave me a place to sleep, eat, shower, and enjoy new friendships. The circumstances that brought me there were tragic, but otherwise I may never have met these generous people. Through them, and others in the neighbourhood, the world of Calcutta and India opened up to me.

Calcutta was my first big city experience, and I was spoiled for life. I was delighted to see women on the streets in a way that didn't exist in Dhaka back then. I don't know how we behaved, but the male gaze there didn't seem to have that starved edge that is still prevalent in Dhaka.

In so many ways Calcutta was kind to us. Though I would only live there for six months, this city, once home to my father for sixteen years, became a sort of home to me. I have only visited twice since the war, and yet each time, I find comfort there. Perhaps another reason is that I fell in love there for the first time -- though in typical Bengali fashion, I never found the courage to voice it.

We would return to a free but ravaged Bangladesh. Many, especially Hindus, returned to find their homes looted. Some never returned.

This should have been the last time that people here would be forced out for religion. Unfortunately it was not to be. To our shame, we could not guarantee security to the Hindus among us. The Pakistani Enemy Property Act would stay under a new name, there would be riots again, and with Islam declared the state religion, minorities would find themselves second-class citizens. Confronted by those who swagger that this is Muslim Bangla, Hindus still feel pressures to leave.

With liberation we undid the new chains imposed on us, removing one hateful legacy of 1947. When will we put behind us that other legacy of Partition that still sees some people forced out carrying memories of neighbours turning on them in hate?

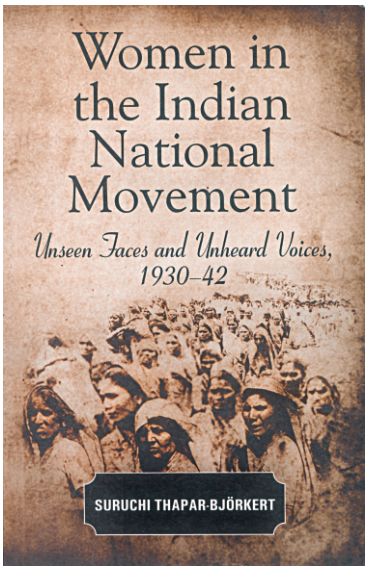
It would help if we talked about it more. When the 60th anniversary of that day just came by, we acted as if August 1947 only mattered to India and Pakistan, not to us. How so far from the truth.

Mahmud Rahman is a Bangladeshi-American writer currently on an extended visit to Dhaka.

Reliving the Roots of Indian Women's Emancipation

SWAPAN SARKER

Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices, 1930-42 by Suruchi Thapar-Björkert; New Delhi: Sage Publications; 2006; 306 pp.



The work under review is somewhat pedantic but reveals in spectacular detail a facet of Indian nationalist movement -- the lives and experiences of ordinary middle-class Indian women who participated in the anti-colonial struggle and did play a significant role in shaping its character and direction. It is a subject that has received little, almost no, exposition in standard history books. Despite her rather old-fashioned recovery approach to women's history, as reflected by the book's subtitle, (*Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices*) Thapar-Björkert's research has yielded some fascinating evidence, including a more nuanced account of women's activities in a variety of regional settings than was previously available to scholars, at least in English. She thus pioneers the framing of a very important social dynamics that pervaded every domain of life and yet remained, invisible, excepting the role of a few well-known elite women, or heroines, as individuals, such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Hansa Mehta, Sucheta Kripalani, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, not as a class or social division.

Although women's participation

in the Congress-led nationalist movement and the Khilafat movement in Maharashtra and Bengal beginning from the 1920s was documented by historians to some extent, the role of women of the Hindi-speaking heartland, Uttar Pradesh (UP), in the Indian national movement, Thapar-Björkert says, has hitherto been a relatively unexplored area. She has therefore primarily focused her research efforts on the participation of 'ordinary' and 'nameless' middle-class women of UP in the anti-colonial, nationalist movements in the 1930s and 1940s, portraying how women's lives were affected and reshaped by their involvement in the freedom struggle and also how their involvement affected and changed the socio-political status quo. She explores and details it with interviews or 'oral narratives', archival materials, events and views recorded by popular magazines, and field studies, and adeptly details the complex process of gradual politicisation of women's domestic sphere and the domestication of the public sphere of politics, paving the way for later movements for women's emancipation.

"I am myself a product of that progress," she writes. 'The opportunities that I have had are due to my grandmother's efforts and her real, if limited, encouragement to my mother. My grandmother's small changes in consciousness may not have altered her status in society, but they did lead to a change in the status of my mother and myself.' The writer's mother, by the way, is the renowned historian Romila Thapar.

Thus, by shifting the emphasis of history from individual women leaders to the women as a class and studying the small changes in women's everyday life brought about by their various involvement in a male-dominated socio-political movement, Thapar-Björkert creates a vast canvas that portrays the truth in its entirety, in contrast to its fragmentary images reflected in individual symbols depicted by earlier historians. The book describes the ways in which women's involvement in politics, initially inspired by Gandhi and the satyagraha he launched, eventually eroded the restrictive social practices of the time in UP,

such as purdah, gender segregation and norms of respectability. It explores Gandhi's approach to the juxtaposition and demands of domestic obligation and public participation, and narrates the events, processes and dynamics of women making significant contribution to the areas including the salt march, prison experiences, songs, cotton spinning, and underground activities and corollary support of armed revolutionaries. It also informs us that women's participation in the nationalist movement in the Hindi belt was initiated by the Nehru household, who articulated a particular nationalist discourse to middle-class women, a discourse that facilitated the nationalist movement but sidelined the more pressing women's issues.

The book takes readers to the time when Raj Kumari Gupta of Kanpur played a key role in the Kakori dacoity. On being arrested, she was disowned by her in-laws and thrown out of the house. Readers see Basanti Devi, wife of Congress leader CR Das, mobilising women in picketing cloth shops and selling khaddar on the streets in defiance of the government ban on political activities and demonstrations. A significant aspect of women's public participation was to court arrest and be imprisoned. Women also performed clandestine activities such as writing, smuggling literature in and out of prison, as they did within the domestic sphere.

The author however does not entirely sideline the contribution of elite women but also looks how both elite and ordinary women, although operating from two different social spheres, did share the same public spaces in street demonstrations, by picketing shops dealing in foreign cloth and selling khaddar on the streets, in prison cells, and in running women's organisations such as Rastriya Stree Sabha and its wing called Desh Sebika Sangh, Mahila Rashtriya Sangha, Nari Satyagraha Samiti etc.

There were also those women who broke the 'new' boundaries established by the feminised public politics and engaged in violence. Analysts have ambiguously referred to them as 'revolutionaries' or 'terrorists', but

the author opines that "They differed in the means and process of achieving their political goals and challenged the effectiveness of non-violence as a strategy for political liberation."

Thapar-Björkert also contradicts the widely accepted view that women stepped out in the public domain for the nationalist cause and stepped back into the private sphere in their roles as mothers, wives and sisters once the movement was over on two counts. First, she says, not all women went back to their homes after Independence. "Their involvement, though limited for the majority, created spaces where issues such as education, social reform and women's public engagement were encouraged. More importantly, it carved out political niches for the younger generations. Second, many middle-class women did not step out in the public domain but continued to contribute and support the nationalist movement. For these women, the domestic sphere was a site of national activity, and they created a political space within the confines of its four walls." For these women, to bring up a new generation that was more articulate, more politically aware and more conscious of their rights as women -- that was their biggest nationalist act.

"During the anti-colonial movement, home was not only a site of nationalist reform but also a site of political resistance," says the author, adding, "Women used the discourse of the 'familial' to carve out a political niche inside the domestic domain." But, although the participation of thousands of women might not have led to an autonomous women's movement in the Hindi-speaking heartland or brought immediate changes for the purdah-bound women, it did generate an enhanced sense among women of their own strength.

That indeed brought about a sea change in the socio-political state of the Indian subcontinent. We thank Suruchi for presenting us this valuable account of an important track of our historical roots.

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TRAVEL WRITING

ABEER HOQUE

I never wanted to visit Delhi. I know it sounds brash, but it's true. I had heard so many mixed reviews over the years. The snobby new money-ness, the heat, the concrete, the demolished grandeur, the lost culture. Sure it had history and had been a centre of power for, oh, 1000+ years. However, history has never been my strongest suit, and so I kept returning to Bombay, my city of Indian dreams.

Then I got an offer I couldn't refuse. Old friends of my family who have been living in Delhi for decades invited me to visit, and I thought, well, it is rather close to Agra and one certain wonder of the world, and maybe I could even decide for myself what I thought about the erstwhile city of Djinns.

In my magic fashion, I landed up in the lap of luxury. My hosts welcomed me like the daughter they never had. Ensnconed in Delhi's Bong neighbourhood, Chittaranjan Park, I was thoroughly pampered from day one: my own room and bath, a cook who indulged my love of fish and vegetables, cold juice every morning, and Delhi at my doorstep. I was instructed not to travel alone at night unless in a cab, and otherwise was left to my own devices, unless I requested theirs. My ideal set-up.

Within four days I had seen more monuments, ruins, temples, and other historical sights than I even realised existed in this city (note my aforementioned poor grasp of history). The towering and intricate Qutub Minar, India Gate flocked to by families, the serene almost alien-like Bahai Temple, the imposing Red Fort, Jama Masjid and its bird's eye views of the city, the visually spectacular Humayun's Tomb, and the secret step-well ruin of Ugrasen Ki Baoli.

Add to all this a blinding afternoon wandering the choked streets of Chadni Chowk, sweating my way through the circular mazes under and over Connaught Place, and perusing the hot little lanes in Haus Kautz Market and Greater Kailash. Oh and did I mention the heat? It's hot in Delhi in the summer. Murderously so. Each day, I step outside, freshly showered, and feel I shouldn't haven't bothered because I am instantly drenched in sweat.

Within a week, I had additionally feasted my eyes on the un-hypeable Taj Mahal and the equally jaw dropping abandoned city of Fatehpur Sikri. I have hundreds of photos from that two-day trip, many of which are poor replicas of the postcards being hawked constantly all over Agra. Enough has been written about how cool the Taj is (and it so is) so I'll just say this: my first good view of the Taj was from the rear. There's a precisely tended midnight garden across the Yamuna called, naturally, Mahtab Bagh. From here, you get an unobstructed wide-angle view of Shah Jahan's seminal labour of love. As the sun moved across the marble and sandstone, the entire vision pulsated, shifted, with the light, and my body gave itself over, pricking with the fabulousness.

It's been 10 days now, and I've participated in a poetry open mic, hung out with dozens of different writers, artists, and scholars, and met editors from four major publishing houses. I've also gone to five dinner parties and taken about 600 photographs.

I think I like Delhi. It's a little too mean, way too hot, concrete, spread out, inconsistent, aggressive. People speak Hindi and it's hard to get by when you don't know the language at all, like me. People revere Urdu and I have to stay my automatic knee jerk reaction. Old Delhi is lost, taken over by scrabbling shopkeepers and rabid touts. The fabled architecture is crumbling, visible only in bits and crumbling pieces.

Yet still, I think I like Delhi. It has a tangible mash of religions and cultures that rivals Bangalore's diversity. I love all the various greetings and farewells and wishes and ornaments and head gear and scripts that I've seen and heard over the

Meeting people in Delhi

past few days. They could be derived from any one of India's countless cliques. The city is hiding some forgotten magic, an oldness still visible under the newness. And I sense a certain nostalgia behind the skyscraping commercialism. I've always been a sucker for nostalgia.

Of course, it's the people I've met that have really made the difference. There's the writer and mother whose elegant body language and even more graceful prose are hard to look away from. Then there's the curious and kind professor who divides her year between New Haven and New Delhi. Many more of the people I've met have moved here from other parts of India. A gorgeously dark-skinned Bombayite who followed her boyfriend here and is now starting up a rebel printing press. A Goan Anglo Malayali architect-philosopher who showed me Old Delhi through his intellectual lens for landscape. The Assamese and Bengali researchers who traveled to Agra with me and played Scrabble with the most wicked backdrop of the Taj Mahal before us. An American poet who teaches school children and writes poems about the city in heat. And my favourite guide, a wanderer of many, many Indian cities, whose irrepressible love for Delhi has led him to start a Ph.D. on her medieval treasures.

Many in this group of transplants had a similar refrain about first moving to Delhi. They hated it. Now they can't imagine living anywhere else. It's true the Bombayite longs for the safety her city offers. The Kolkattan bemoans the striated society of Delhi. The Keralite misses the lushy green landscape of the deep South. But they're here to stay anyway. Maybe I am too.

Abeer Hoque is a Bangladeshi-American writer currently in Dhaka on a Fulbright award.

Our 'tantra' has a new brand Without voice limbs money or, force With a sub zero temperature to freeze... Accounts and lives.

While I am busy tapping and trapping newsvaganza With my wires and wirelesses They watch me freeze within my walls Unsure of this still, immobile piece of flesh They conclude that a fat frog is taking a terminal break Listening to the rules being laid down, Meanwhile, me the green slime bunch Crave for the brown curry look which now should wear A new mask of: Paid taxes, White money, And Moderate Ninja-cracy

Powdered bases are up for sale too, Revlon has marketed an expiry-free pack With a special application tip The product price stands at a meager priceless '0' And has a khaki/brown shade The spring summer collection 2007 lack the red/green combo As, The shades of red don't return to hearts anymore And greens don't fancy minds of drought.

Rubana is a Bangladeshi poet.

Cleanser for sale

RUBANA

artwork by sabyasachi hazra