

# Dead Reckoning: Disappearing stories and evidence

GITA SAHGAL

THE 40th anniversary of the liberation of Bangladesh is special not simply because it marks the passing of decades, but because of the current passionate attempt to recapture the founding spirit of the nation. The recent debates on the Constitution and an attempt to return it to its original secular character of 1972 are vital to the future survival of the country. But the hurried changes made, with an ultimate outcome of keeping Islam as the state religion, have disappointed many. In contrast, the war crimes trials that are underway still offer hope.

But I observe that, in London, Bangladeshis seeking justice are isolated and told instead to seek reconciliation, and even that genocide didn't happen. Further, Bangladesh is criticised for holding the trials in a national court rather than as a Rwanda or Yugoslavia style international process. But the establishment of an International Criminal Court was intended to step in only when national judiciaries failed to act, or collapsed entirely.

The current war crimes trials should be able to provide a basis for future examination of other issues. Ending the impunity enjoyed by those responsible for violence in 1971 will go some way towards reassuring minorities that attacks on them will not be tolerated. As it grapples with one kind of impunity, Bangladesh, which has shown the way on many issues, should be able to tackle the constitutional questions that were avoided earlier. Removing Islam as the state religion is one of the key changes that will begin to ensure full citizenship for all, and a framework for addressing more modern forms of impunity.

My own encounter with 1971 was *War Crimes File*, a documentary I produced for Channel Four (UK). The film investigated three men of Bangladeshi origin, by then all British nationals, for 1971 war crimes or crimes against humanity. David Bergman was a stubborn and persistent reporter, and he led the research with a large team of Bangladeshi academics, filmmakers and young researchers until we found a trail of information that led to the three accused. We found serious and credible allegations that they were involved in making lists of people to be picked up, ordering killings, being involved with torture centres and participating in the killing of the intellectuals. Many of those we interviewed were eye witnesses, or even targets who had evaded capture.

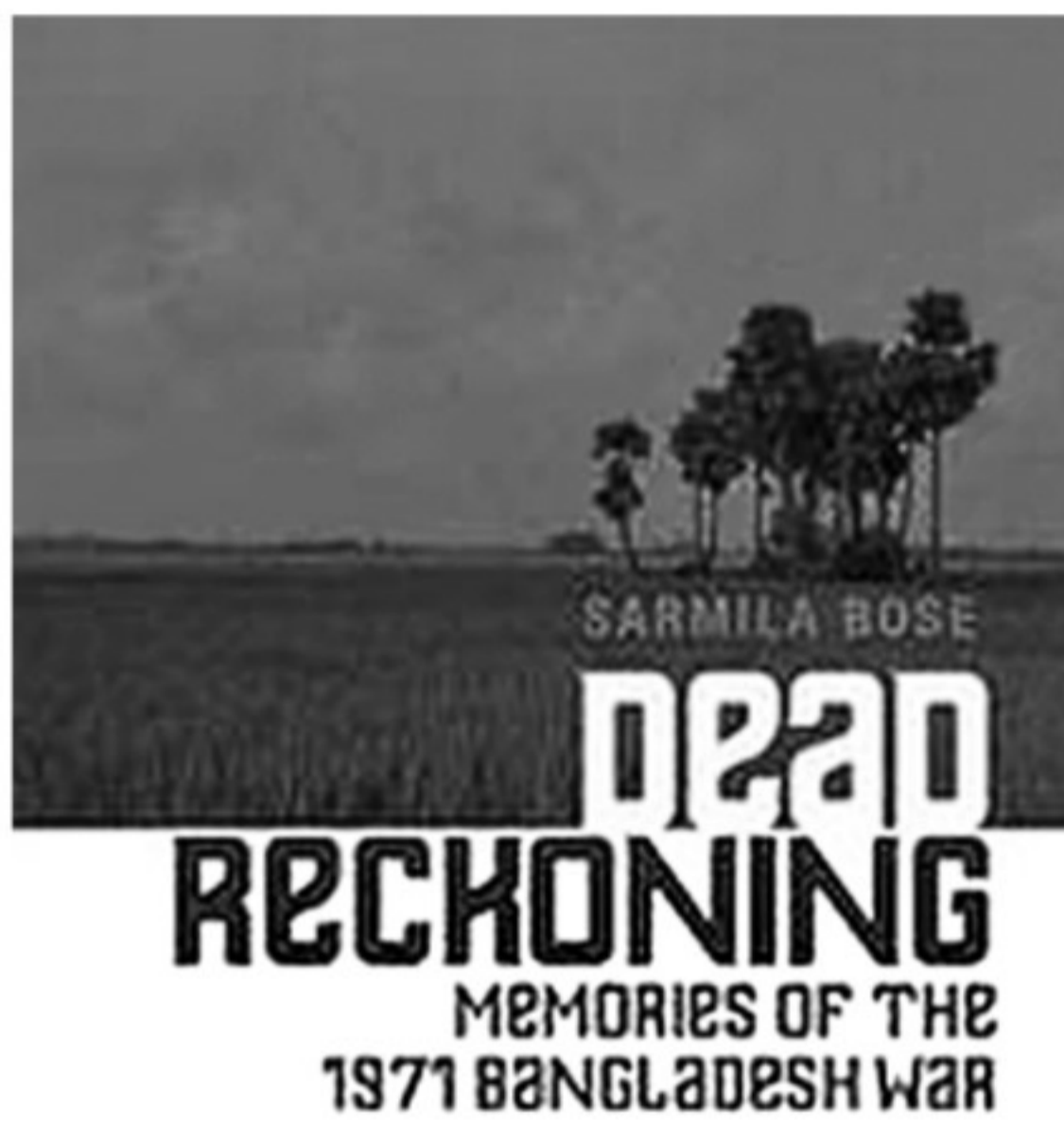
Our interviewees told us that local collaborators of Jamaat e Islami "not only collaborated with the Pakistani army in the genocide, but had their own scheme of killing." But recently, a number of recent writings about Bangladesh have obscured this story entirely.

At a December 8th presentation at SOAS, London, Sarmila Bose presented a talk "The legacy of 1971 - 40 years on," at the invitation of the *Center for the Study of Pakistan*. During the Q&A session I asked her directly why, in her book *Dead Reckoning*, she had been dismissive about Razakars, as if it was a figment of fevered Bengali imaginations. She had treated them as a "discourse" rather than a fact on the ground that needs examination. Why was there no discussion of their actions, no mention of peace committees or their political linkages to Jamaat e Islami? In reply, she simply said that these issues were

not her concern and the book dealt with only certain incidents. This evasive response is elaborated in her just-published essay "The question of genocide and the quest for justice in the 1971 war" (*Journal of Genocide Studies*, November 2011), where she states: "It may be argued that the groups doing the killings were the creation of the regime, but their exact identity and motives remain shrouded."

Looking at how she responded to various questions at SOAS, she appears to be going through a central shape shifting in the face of mounting criticism of her book. At the time of launch, she claimed *Dead Reckoning* was groundbreaking, a new account of the war, showing that the major narrative was not merely flawed or incomplete but fundamentally wrong. By now, after months of published criticisms of her book (Mookherjee, Mohaiemen, in EPW, among others), she says it is only a "few incidents" and when key issues like Razakars are brought up, she says these are "not her concern."

When the book was first launched, the Pakistanis were gentlemen and the Bengalis were racist and nasty towards them. Now, she states, she was not intending to be rude, but rather to display "the richness of the vocabulary" of



Bengalis criticising Pakistanis. Then, there was no genocide (except of Biharis). Now, she says she has written an article saying that there might have been some genocidal killings.

That is why I call her a shape shifter. One method used by her is to look at written narratives, and then take them apart by "checking" with the Pakistani army. She clearly started out with a great deal of access, but she uses none of the material which could help make a case against the Pakistan army. In several cases, people are alive and she could have talked to them directly rather relying on hearsay. Bose has certainly not attempted to raise the shroud she referred to, although she had the perfect opportunity to do so.

In *Dead Reckoning*, Bose quoted General Niazi, who wrote that sanction to set up al Badr and al Shams was given at the end of August 1971 and they were drawn from well-educated students from schools and madrassas. But by the time she writes this new article on genocide, she has apparently forgotten this citation and all mention of al Badr. In the book, she discusses accounts of "the killing of the intellectuals." Now, in the article, she concludes that there is no evidence that the Pakistani army was involved. In neither the

book nor the article does she connect al Badr and al Shams to the Jamaat e Islami or examine their ideology, intentions or actions. There is a blackout in her book about the peace committees and the role of the Jamaat in systematic killings and torture.

The most striking thing about the book is the complete absence of any framework, theoretical or political. Some of her material clearly shows an uprising in progress. Fear, rumours and exaggeration are well known features of uprisings, but you don't get any sense that she understands this, or has read anything about the behaviour of crowds. There is also a non-discussion of genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity either legal or political movements for accountability, or the case that has developed through international tribunals

Now it is true that only certain incidents are discussed, so she may argue she does not need to cover every incident. But the book claims to dismiss the genocide allegation based on these selective incidents. In her book, she summarily denied genocide allegations against Pakistanis. For instance, she makes no determination on the crimes committed at Dhaka University, though she doesn't deny the direct accounts of targeted attacks on civilians. But she mocks them for "cowering" instead of fighting. There is a strong whiff of admiration for the military, instead of these paltry people who hid when the army launched a massive attack. Her main concern is numbers and other issues of burial and evidence.

There was an emphasis in her EPW article on rape (preceding this book) on randomness, as she keeps calling rape "opportunistic." In the book, there is a refusal to see any pattern targeting of civilians, even where it is described, it is not commented on. After being challenged on the EPW article (by Mookherjee, Mandal, Rahman and others), she excluded some of the rape material from the book. Although Yasmin Saikia is cited as a reliable source, none of Saikia's information about rape, or contrition of Pakistani soldiers, is used. Other secondary sources are frequently used, so why not this one? My film *The War Crimes File* is cited, but very little of the material in it, except for footage of the killings in Dhaka University, is discussed.

One of the difficulties of the definition of genocide is that there is a requirement to prove "intent." That, along with the requirement to show that a group (for instance, religious or ethnic but not political) is being destroyed is of paramount importance. This requirement does not have to be met in the case of war crimes or crimes against humanity. But evidence that crimes are either "widespread" or "systematic" would be crucial in determining a crime against humanity. As the Rwanda tribunal showed, inflammatory speeches calling for extermination of a group, can be an element in genocide. It would be important to show whether there were organised groups, whether they were acting on their own or under military command. Bose's failure to gather and present such evidence, in a book and subsequent article on genocide and other grave crimes, is inexcusable.

The writer is Executive Director of Center for Secular Space, London (centreforsecularspace.org). She earlier headed Amnesty International's Gender Unit. Gita also produced the award-winning War Crimes File (Channel 4), a documentary on alleged 1971 war criminals associated with Islamist groups in England.

## SHIFTING IMAGES

# The winter of our content



MILIA ALI

FOR most people around the world, December is a time for celebration and joy, for remembrance and forgiveness, and for hope and revival. For Bangladeshis, December is particularly significant because it is the month we became a free nation; it is a time when our spirits are re-ignited. After all, had December 16th not happened where would many of

us be now? Would I be in Virginia, United States writing this column and remembering my motherland with deep fondness? Perhaps, I would still be a rudderless, dislocated person living in "nowhere land." But, today, wherever we are in freezing Canada or sunny Dubai we have a solid identity, thanks to the invaluable sacrifices of our heroes who gifted us with a homeland.

In today's column I wish to pay special homage to two towering musical personalities who supported our struggle for freedom: Pandit Ravi Shankar and Beatle George Harrison. Amidst all the despondency and gloom of the killings and torture of Bangladeshis by the Pakistan army in 1971, these two musical geniuses embraced our cause and helped promote it to the wider world. On August 1, 1971, Ravi Shankar and George Harrison organised The Concert for Bangladesh (in Madison Square Garden, New York), riveting the attention of millions toward Bangladesh's plight and its valiant struggle for independence from an oppressive regime.

As Ravi Shankar recalls: "I felt I had to do something. I was in this terrible state of mind when George [Harrison] came to LA for a few days. He saw I was looking so sad, he was really concerned, and so I asked if he could help me. Immediately he called his friends." Harrison responded to the appeal by hosting rock music's first "act of philanthropy." He invited other outstanding musicians, Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, Leon Russell, Billy Preston, Badfinger and Ringo Starr, and put together a spectacular event to garner support for the millions of Bangladeshi refugees who escaped the genocide and were exiled in India. Reminiscing about the Concert, Harrison's first wife Pattie Boyd said: "You could feel the electricity in the air. It was a

*I wish to pay special homage to two towering musical personalities who supported our struggle for freedom: Pandit Ravi Shankar and Beatle George Harrison. Amidst all the despondency and gloom of the killings and torture of Bangladeshis by the Pakistan army in 1971, these two musical geniuses embraced our cause and helped promote it to the wider world.*

momentous occasion. Afterwards there was a feeling of a huge elation. There was lots of talk, lots to deal with. It was too big to just disappear."

The Concert for Bangladesh raised \$243,000, but its impact resonated far beyond its monetary contributions. It brought the Bangladesh Liberation War out of the confines of a regional strife and stamped it with a universal seal of approval. Apart from its great success as a musical benefit event, the Concert also spawned an album with George Harrison's specially written number "Bangladesh." In July this year, "The Concert for Bangladesh" album went digital and the Harrison Trust committed to donating all the revenues generated from its sales to humanitarian causes. Harrison, who passed away prematurely in 2001, thus left a legacy which continues to evoke the memory of our long and arduous fight for liberation.

Some critics argue that the concert primarily generated publicity for the participants, while charity was a secondary motive. One can choose to be as critical or cynical as one wants. However, the fact is that none of the performers (except for Ravi Shankar) were in any way connected to the distressed population of Bangladesh and had no vested interest in the freedom of the country. There is also no question that The Concert for Bangladesh meant a lot to people directly engaged in the freedom struggle, especially those living in refugee camps in India. It helped put Bangladesh on the map of the world at a time when there were no effective means of showcasing the sufferings and sacrifices of a population determined to fight for its freedom.

Forty years have passed by since our independence and it has been a rewarding, although somewhat bumpy, ride. And, I am glad to be who I am today a proud Bangladeshi. I salute Sitar Maestro Ravi Shankar and the spiritual Beatle George Harrison who gave us hope in the dismal days of our struggle for liberation. Who made us believe that the glittering world outside cared for the unfortunate people trapped in squalid refugee camps and who inspired the Bangladeshi people to keep on fighting for a free Bangladesh!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

# Instant guide to the Euro crisis



TODAY, boys and girls, let's become instant experts on the Euro crisis, which is now reaching a dramatic climax, just like it did last week and the week before that, etc.

Q: What is the Euro crisis?  
A: Europeans have a charming tradition of having a world-shaking crisis at regular intervals. Examples include World War I and World War II. These days, Europeans are too fat to fight so they are having an economic crisis instead!

Q: You make it sound like it's not very serious.  
A: Of course it's serious. It's deadly serious. There may be disruption in the flow of vital products that Europe sends out to the world, i.e., over-priced designer handbags.

Q: Oh no! Will Hermes bags cost more?  
A: No, they'll cost less.  
Q: So how is that bad?  
A: They'll be cheaper than Asian-made fakes,

which is bad news for our friendly neighbourhood counterfeiters, Third Uncle Ernie, etc.

Q: Isn't a Euro a man who has been spayed or neutered?  
A: No, that's an aurochs. A Euro is a coin worth about one Euro.

Q: Where is Europe? Is it near America?  
A: No, Europe is in Asia. It is a small cluster of countries on one side of the Asian continent, but it is not polite to mention this.

Q: Does that mean Europeans are Asians?  
A: Geographically yes. But in personality, they are very different. For example, Asians get up every day and go to work, while Europeans prefer to go "on strike."

Q: Can you explain the Euro crisis to me in a simple way?  
A: Sure. Here it is in story form.

Once upon a time, an Englishman, a German and a Frenchman walked into a bar.

The Frenchman suggests they form a commune of rich families: "Money will flow more easily, giving us more time to cultivate our stereotypical national characteristics. We French can have sex, Germans can go around being efficient, Brits can eat bad food, Greeks can be gay, and so on."

The sceptical Englishman refuses to join and goes home to eat bad food.

The German and the Frenchman go ahead with the plan. The commune opens and a dozen

or so families show bank statements at the door to join. For a while, everything's fine. But then there's an economic downturn!

The Portuguese and Irish families end up broke, unable to pay their huge VISA card bills. The Greek family reveals that it never had any money but got into the commune using fake bank statements.

Panic spreads throughout the commune. "If you rich guys don't bail us out, we'll go bankrupt and end up poor and humiliated," the troubled ones say.

Uh-oh. The German and Frenchman hesitate, unwilling to spend so much. "If you don't bail us out, one or more of us will have to leave, and the commune will look like a failure," the troubled ones say.

The German and the Frenchman continue to hesitate. "If you don't bail us out, the Englishman will say he was right all along," the troubled ones say.

Zut alors! Mein Gott! The German and the Frenchman immediately reach for their wallets. "Ow much do you need?"

And that brings us up to the present day.

IMPORTANT SEXIST NOTE to married men: Do not show this column to your wives. They may decide to help Europe by doing some purchasing. The handbag shops are calling.

For more inside secrets, visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com