

ESSAY

# Teaching history: lessons from Europe

TAZEEN MURSHID

Bangladesh has completed forty years. For many here, our history began in 1971 with the Pakistan military crackdown on the sleeping population of the then East Pakistan. In fact, our history is much older than this. As a people, our political roots go back to colonial times, but as a culture our origins are much older, going back to Pala times and beyond to our Buddhist, Hindu and animist heritage. Popular memory evokes the Mughals and the earlier Hussain Shahi Bengal, when literature and the arts flourished and Islam spread more widely than heretofore. The partition memories focus on the religious divide between Hindus and Muslims and the role of an external power in dividing a population that had co-existed in relative harmony. The Pakistan memories are of Punjabi domination and Bengali resistance. The independence memories are about valuing the spirit of the Liberation War and what that means for Bengali nationalism. Our identity has traversed many routes. We are moulded as much by our political trajectories as by our historical consciousness. In fact, every civilization that aspires for greatness tries to do justice to both: in other words, make correct political decisions and nurture a sense of history, of time and place, in order to learn from the past and be prepared for the future.

History is a critical subject for any university and high school or college education, as its presentation in any context is closely linked to the articulation of ideology and identity. The historian interprets the past and through that process makes the past relevant to the present, and gives it meaning in the contemporary context. If, however, he insists that his opinion is the only truth, we are faced with a potentially conflicting situation. Essentially, there are many interpretations possible for the same set of events. Recognition of this diversity is important in the teaching and learning of history so that students learn that historical truths are multifaceted.

Historians, seeking to be credible, try to establish the facts in a value free manner by using objective criteria that can be verified. The process of verification of historical evidence requires text analysis; corroboration from other sources, including archaeological findings, relics, monuments and tombs; socio-economic data from surveys and studies, land records, census data; eye witness accounts in the form of diaries, memoirs; and scientific evidence such as carbon dating, etc. Even so, the selection of criteria and the questions asked determine the outcomes.

Teaching history is about contextualisation of time and place in relation to events that define us, our perspectives of the self and the other. Ideologically, it is a powerful tool. Therefore, what we teach and how we teach are very important.

*European integration and history*

To quote from the Council of Europe: 'History teaching can be a tool to support peace and reconciliation in conflict and post-conflict areas as well as tolerance and understanding when dealing with such phenomena as migration, immigration and changing demographics. A multiple perspective approach, instead of a single interpretation of events, will encourage students to respect diversity and cultural difference.' The question is "what", "how" and "when" to teach controversial historical issues.

In Europe, policy directives emphasise the teaching of cultural diversity because the aim is to forge a new Europe based on mutual respect and tolerance. This is totally

understandable: some of the most terrifying markers in European history are centred on religious bigotry, and intolerance, the inquisition accompanied by witch hunting. The Hundred Years War between the French and English (1337-1453) and the Thirty Years War between Catholics and Protestants (1618-1648) mainly in Germany had decimated the populations of these lands, causing hunger, destruction and deprivation. As a result, over time, Europe lost a sizeable proportion of its population, through death, emigration to the new world and through its discovery of new pastures in the form of colonies. Sweden lost half its population to emigration to the US in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ireland, while under British occupation, lost a quarter of its population due to the potato famine between 1845 and 1852 to death and emigration to the US.

More recently, the two great wars of the twentieth century cost Europe and the world heavily. A lasting legacy of the Second World War is the holocaust when six million Jews and gypsies were exterminated in Germany. The memory of this event is singularly the most significant event in European history that has galvanised opinion against human rights abuses and led to the coinage of the slogan, 'never again'.

The rise of the European Common Market at this time, aimed to bury the differences that divided Europe in the past and seek unity in economic cooperation. There is a simultaneous grand project to build a united Europe, so that such atrocities do not happen again.

Today, a large focus of European Studies is to forge a new European identity based on shared values and pluralism. The teaching of history, along with languages and the organisation of student exchanges through the Erasmus programme aim to achieve this. The smaller states such as Belgium and the Netherlands are already multilingual, in that most people are fluent in four languages. The larger countries are, in contrast, more nationalistic and mono-cultural in that proportionally, fewer people have such linguistic skills. The impetus for European integration is sponsored by the EC through funding inter-European exchanges in sport, music, conferences for youths and the more established scholars.

This ideology finds its expression in the teaching of history in the classroom, in schools and colleges through the choice of subjects on offer, the recruitment of staff and the availability of grants, stipends and scholarships.

*European policy perspectives*

The European agenda is to prevent conflict and strengthen linkages between Europeans so that a European identity emerges by focusing on shared aspects of their histories. Thus the teaching of history in a sensitive manner, giving voice to alternative explanations is paramount.

The European Council asserts: 'Conventional history teaching stressed a single interpretation of events as being "the Truth", which was politically expedient. It is now internationally accepted that there can be many views and interpretations, which are based on evidence. There is validity in a multiple perspective approach that assists and encourages students to respect diversity and cultural difference, in this increasingly globalised world, rather than teaching, which

can reinforce the more negative aspects of nationalism.'

It is keen to change the way 'the other' is presented in history class and therefore, encourages interventions relating to what is taught and how it is taught. It is thus, investing in skill building within the teaching cohort to support them to move to a new style of curriculum and curriculum delivery.

It recommends multiple perspective teaching, which relies on the availability of primary and secondary material and involves interactive teaching. Project-based research and work, class debates, visits to museums, more utilisation of primary sources and also the use of guest speakers to make modern history more relevant, works best with small classes. Education policies are required to reflect this change of teaching style.

However, the arrival of new immigrants from the former colonies of Europe has added a degree of complexity to this project. In Ireland, where a raging divide between Catholics and Protestants had seen bitter conflict, there are now new categories of people referred to as Catholic Hindus/Muslims/Jews and Protestant Hindus/Muslims/Jews.

*European diversity in the teaching of history*

The teaching of history in England has been greatly influenced by American approaches, in that area studies, essentially multi-disciplinary in nature, have gained attention. Thus South Asian Studies would include courses on all aspects of South Asia, with the history modules often demarcated as compulsory. Main stream history courses, covering papers on European history, American history, the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome, and even imperial and colonial history are usually not taught under the area studies umbrella. Core subjects would also include industrialisation, globalisation, the shaping of the modern world, agrarian or economic history.

There is a critique by some scholars like Lord Desai, that area studies, apart from European studies, are treated as peripheral, and are under-funded. There is a grain of truth in this. When funds are scarce, area studies programmes are slashed, often preceded by the cutting of language departments, particularly in England. Thus, there is a hierarchy of courses that are offered in European universities.

*The position of the other:*

The mainstream history papers place emphasis on the formation of Europe: the ideas, the values, the processes that have formed it. The Enlightenment is seen as the harbinger of modern Europe. Ancient Greek civilization is seen as the fountain source of ideas that have given political direction to Europe and to western civilization in general, in terms of the ideas of democracy. There are those who criticise such appropriation of ancient Greece as a European construct: ancient Greece shared much more with the Mediterranean belt and with eastern civilizations such as Persian, than with northern Europe.

There is a myopic view that is reflected in such appropriation: a general reluctance to admit that knowledge of Greek civilization was mediated by Arab scholars. A question that once arose: was Homer actually Omer?

The place of Islam in European thought is another example of such myopic vision,

although several scholars have addressed the gap very well, including the late historian, Prof Albert Hourani and more recently Eugene Rogan.

That knowledge does not develop in a vacuum is well known. With some exceptions, there is an unhealthy reluctance to acknowledge that the rise of western civilization would not have been possible without the flowering of Arab/Muslim civilization.

The borrowings from non-Europeans are enormous: the 'perfumes of Arabia' transformed into the perfumes of Paris, used to camouflage body odour, for Europeans feared to bathe as it was considered a health risk. Many of the secrets of Arab trading skills and business acumen trickled into Europe via returning crusaders and made them rich: ideas of contracts, licenses, promissory notes which were the roots of the modern banking systems. The ancient Code of Hammurabi from 4000 BC in Babylon (modern day Iraq) is recognised today as the first legal text on human rights and is treated by some scholars as the first code of western human rights. The laws of war and peace came down from Saladin; methods of modern administration owe to the system devised by Chenghis Khan as he conquered the world. Non-western architecture and astronomy too have influenced western knowledge.

*Nations and nationalism*

Nations are constantly making and remaking themselves. Our ideologies determine what we choose to acknowledge, what we appropriate without acknowledgment and what we deny. The study of nations and nationalism and of peace and conflict across the globe testify to the positive and negative dimensions of nation building and nationalism.

Nationalism can be a force for self discipline, emancipation, independence and cultural flowering. But it can also lead to the rise of fascism, majoritarian politics, ethnic conflict and blood shed.

We in the rest of the world often pick up ideas that have been discarded by Europe or discarded in their own lands.

As Europe came out of feudal conflicts in the nineteenth century, many nation states emerged where national identity was defined by one language and one culture. The nature of conflict took a new turn. We in South Asia borrowed this idea through colonial contact and are still paying the price in the form of ethnic conflict and petty wars as each nation tries to tighten its borders to keep out the non-national.

Europe appeared to discard this brand of narrow nationalism after the Second World War. The European states began to unite under a Common Market. But at the same time, the former colonies began to break up into smaller and smaller units, along lines of petty nationalism. The reasons behind these were justifiable, but the developments themselves marked a loss of autonomy, or a loss of capacity for independent thinking. Ethnic conflict became a key marker of political developments in the twentieth century, across the globe.

*Studies of identity*

Studies of identity in the post modern world spanned the boundaries of discipline. In history, we examine the roots of identity formation and the root causes of ethnic

conflict in events that were critical turning points. The role of memory, perceptions of culture, elite politics, socio-economic relations, inequality, - all play a role.

Theories of knowledge being relative, as much as ideas of historical accuracy being subjective, have opened doors to challenge accepted truths and give voice to critics from the third world to question the hegemonic nature of knowledge production.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* revealed new ways to examine and question the production of knowledge, the process of which is neither value free, nor beyond question. Old certainties about knowledge and wisdom being vested in the former colonial powers collapsed.

A backlash from the old guard was inevitable. After a period of shock and stupefaction, the idea of the relativity of knowledge was stretched to extremes, discounting the value of all knowledge as 'subjective' and not trustworthy. However, a middle emerged from this dialogue: the voice of the 'other' came to be recognized and accepted.

*New research areas*

History writing has been evolving and changing. From the stories of kings and battles, we moved to political history, then to social history. Now we write about the history of mentality. And more recently some have written history almost in the style of fiction, bringing into sharp relief the lived experiences of people at different times --- the presentation of historical material through the personal experience of people and courtiers.

Such material can be fascinating for students as access to comprehension may be easier. The role of the teacher would be to ensure that such knowledge is counterbalanced through re-reading of original texts and corroborated from the works of other scholars.

*The lessons for Bangladesh*

The lessons of European integration strategies through the teaching of history are very clear. Through careful handling of texts and students, it can be a powerful tool of unification, and of nation and state building. Respect for diversity is already a core principle of the Asian experience. But it can be inculcated and fostered further in a sustained way through the education system, civic education, the appropriate use of the media and through a healthy respect for alternative view points, accepting the perspective that truth has many faces.

We are torn apart by our own dichotomies, no less traumatic than those left by the Second World War: pro liberation versus anti liberation, war crimes trials versus forgetting the past, Bengali versus Bangladeshi, *Joy Bangla* versus *Bangladesh Zindabad*, Khoda Hafiz versus Allah Hafiz. Forty years on, we are still to have a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, so that we can deal with the trauma of our holocaust and learn to forgive each other so that we can move on, but we must never forget the lesson of that history.

DR. TAZEEN MURSHID, PROFESSOR IN INTERNATIONAL HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS, IS DIRECTOR, GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH COOPERATION. THIS IS A REVISED VERSION OF A PAPER PRESENTED AT BRAC UNIVERSITY IN JANUARY 2012

NON-FICTION

# Remembrance of Spring 1952

NAUSHABA KHATOON

Ekushey February 1952 dawned cool and clear. It being a working day my destination was Bangla Bazaar Government Girls' High School.

Classes began as usual and went on until the second period when a group of girls --- not Bangla Bazar students --- entered the class and asked permission to address my students. Taken aback, I had no choice but to let them do what they wished to do. Two of them spoke forcefully and convincingly, bringing to light how East Pakistan was being cheated of its rights. One of the speakers I recognized as Khaleda Fahmi. I fell for their political consciousness. Our students were asked to protest against this injustice and join a procession. Each classroom was emptied as students followed the leaders like Hamlin's mice leaving classrooms.

Mrs. Lutfunnesa Chaudhury, wife of the well-known journalist Zahur H. Chaudhury, was the Headmistress of BBGG School. She too could not stop the exodus. We called her Kitty Apa. We, the teachers, decided to sit on the steps of the car porch and as is true of women, idled away the time in sheer gossip. Some remembered an arrear bill of Kitty Apa's that had just been cleared and as all were beginning to feel hungry, we requested her to treat us to lunch --- of luchs, bhaji, and sweets from Kala Chand Gondhobanik. They were delicacies that the succeeding generations never made it to. Everything was fried in pure ghee and perfect to the point. I wonder how many have tasted hot pantuas and rosogollas straight from the frying pan. The demand for this gourmet meal was thus met.



After the delicious meal of the now near extinct delicacies, some thought of going home, but for the very creative ones the fun was not yet over. They suggested a matinee movie. All agreed. The next step was a visit to the then Nishat Cinema where Raj Kapoor was doing the honours. We sat in the ladies section, because to sit in the general section without a male escort was more than sacrilege. I forget the name of the movie but remember Raj Kapoor going round and round,

with a bevy of beauties singing "Yar vai, vai, Yar vai vai" or something of the sort. We did more talking than watching, so mediocre was the film. Our group included Kitty Apa, Rokeya Kabir, Annee Apa, Raushan Apa, wife of the famous Prof. Saidur Rahman, Lutfunnesa Junior and Sarojini Didi. Memory fails to remember other names.

Stepping out of the cinema hall we saw Bangshal Road deserted. No pedestrians, no rickshaws, no hackney coaches. What was

amiss? Kitty Apa immediately went to the Sangbad office just across the street to find out the cause. She returned with a grim face. There had been police firing and some students had fallen --- to sodden the soil with their fresh, warm blood to keep alive the tiny plant called "Mother Language". Their supreme offering did not go in vain.

The trudge home from Bangshal to Agha Sadeq Road seemed unending. A young, middle class Muslim woman walking on a deserted Dhaka road was unseen and unheard of in the early fifties. Men in my family were pure Muslim Leaguers. They had given up home and hearth at the call of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, were government servants and, to top it all, were bilinguals. To them Bangla was of little consequence. They had also blindly thrown in their lot with Pakistan. On reaching home my father greeted me with severe words. He chided me and regretted that he had lived to see the day when his daughter would walk home unescorted from Bangshal Road. This was 1952. How could I convince him that this was the only way to reach home?

Enveloped in a feeling of guilt for the fiesta and fun when our brave boys were being murdered to save their identity and honour, to demand what was rightly theirs, to stand as beacons for the future generations, the only solace was that the people of Dhaka had also gone through their regular routine of window shopping, watching films, visiting friends, attending interviews, going to picnics or just existing. We the Bangla Bazar teachers were not thoughtless or insensitive since clairvoyance is the gift of only a few.

The seeds of Ekushey took two decades to germinate. It was in 1971 that the red glow ---

red for sun and blood --- was inserted in the flag. The right to sing a national anthem comprehensible to child and adult came took shape and, most importantly, the freedom to speak and be spoken to in a language of cradle days and mother's lullabies was perpetuated for eons and eons.

A cool morning ending in the ghastly murder of the innocent. The glow of the setting sun heralding a tumultuous tomorrow and the continued striving for right have brought in some changes. But is it enough?

It is a pity that the little undernourished plant called Bangladesh never had a natural growth period. The pests of intrigue and assassination have weakened its roots and fragile stems; its constitution written with utmost emphasis on egalitarian principles was butchered. Religion became a mighty weapon of the most irreligious. The shanties and hovels, the insecurity of minorities testify to this. It will take another Ekushey, another upheaval, another MuktiJuddha to set things on the right track? Then alone can we realize the lost dreams of a Bangladesh where no one goes hungry, where extortion and exploitation are not the order of the day, where the innocent are not scapegoats for the guilty, where basic human rights exist, where lust for power and self aggrandizement do not trample justice.

Such countries exist. Their number, though insignificant, can still act as role models.

NAUSHABA KHATOON IS AN EDUCATIONIST AND SOCIAL WORKER