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Why are the likes of Bhashani and Abul Hashim figures of great ambivalence and discomfort today?

Bangladesh stands out in postcolonial South Asia for its strikingly anomalous relationship to what neighbours consider to be the foundational event in the region's modern history—the 1947 partition of British India. Official acknowledgement—celebratory or otherwise—is notable for its absence. Unofficial spaces are hardly more forthcoming. In the weeks leading up to the 50th anniversary of the Indian and Pakistani independence, I was struck by the seeming irrelevance of a moment that in other national contexts appeared to be profoundly meaningful. BBC World and CNN International, cable channels available to audiences here, devoted extensive coverage to related events. In contrast, Bangladeshi media outlets exhibited a muted interest or ignored the anniversary altogether. Two decades later, things have changed somewhat. This special issue is testament to that. Still, significant silences persist, and extend to the realm of scholarship and popular culture. Public recognition of 1947 in collective memory and in institutional sites continues to be subdued at best.

What accounts for this apparent indifference? Most obviously, the country's relationship to the 1947 partition is mediated by the events of 1971 so that—arguably—the significance of the latter overwhelms any attention to the former. By this logic, the partition may well have lost relevance for contemporary Bangladeshi reality. This is an inadequate explanation. It does not shed light, for instance, on the curious neglect or outright erasure of partition that marks nationalist narratives and historiography.



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GHOSTS OF 1947

Of course, the events of 1975 irreversibly changed the set of associations with August 15. It is probably not incidental that this was the date that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was gunned down in a military coup. The symbolism of eliminating the official 'Father of the Nation,' one who embodied the aspirations of the secular Bengali intelligentsia, on that particular date surely did not escape his killers. The timing of this brutal act may well have signified to the killers the

smashing of a specific social order, one premised on the aspirations of Independence in 1947. We will never know for sure, but the irrevocable shift in meaning ensured that August 15 could never be a day of celebration in Bangladesh. Or so it seemed. When the Awami League finally returned to power in 1996, the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared it a day of official mourning, a national holiday. In an extraordinary and some would say spiteful gesture, the BNP's Khaleda Zia, upon coming to power several years later, began to celebrate her official birthday on that date. By decree, the meaning of the 15th changed overnight. From a day of national mourning, it was reduced to a mocking spectacle of coerced official celebrations marked by elaborate public rituals of cake cutting and congratulatory messages. This overt move to resignify the meaning of August 15 was reversed after Sheikh Hasina's return to power.

Clearly, preoccupation with August 15 in Bangladesh occupies a distinctive field of signification, fundamentally unrelated to discourses of partition/independence elsewhere. There is more to the story, however.

Haunted by History

It is my contention that 1947 does not merit remembrance, let alone celebration, because to address it directly would be to unsettle a carefully constructed teleology of Bengali nationhood. That is, the unconscious erasure of partition is an attempt to gloss over the *incongruous*, to banish memories, desires and narratives that sit awkwardly with an ostensibly unifying national story. In other words, it is the need for an active forgetting of certain fractious histories that renders the historiography of Bangladesh askew of the rest of the subcontinent. Within this normative nationalist framework (even with competing versions), 1947 cannot constitute *true* independence. Rather it denotes one more moment in the continuing history of (Muslim) Bengal's colonial domination, marking the transfer of power from the British to the West Pakistanis. Thus, historians of Bangladesh routinely refer to the double cloak of colonialism. The official timeline of the nation nods to 1905, and moves on to 1952 (the inauguration of the language movement) as a foundational moment.

But why sidestep partition? What is it that must not be remembered? And what is missed or papered over in the process? Arguably, the singularity of Bengali nationalism cannot but disavow 1947 because from a Bangladeshi national perspective, partition's twin is not Independence but (East) Pakistan. Here in lies the problem. Much of the ambivalence around nationhood and identity in Bangladesh, I suggest,

can be traced to ambiguities in the meaning of Pakistan for Bengal's Muslims when it was created. It was in this context that the 1971 war disrupted, displaced and reconstituted older meanings of partition, and so of Pakistan. After the fact, the only official meaning of Pakistan that endured is as an essentially/exclusively Muslim place.

Consequently, the memory of East Pakistan occupies an uncomfortable space, one that must be disappeared in critical ways. Put differently, it

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is the irresolution of the Muslim question, and so of the question of what national culture looks like, that haunts the national project. Here it is worth recalling Irfan Ahmed's provocative proposition that partition was not a solution to but an escape from 'the Muslim question.' If the creation of Pakistan cast out and amplified the question, the emergence of Bangladesh provided only temporary reprieve.

Thus, no version of the national story can accommodate, for instance, the Bengali-speaking (Muslim *and* *namasudra*) peasantry's enthusiasm for Pakistan as documented by Ahmed Kamal, Taj Hashmi and others. Nor can it absorb more complicated interpretations of the so-called double cloak of colonialism. For instance, some Bangladeshis refer to 1947 as the first