

# REVIEW OF VICTORY DAY ISSUE

## AN IMPRESSION OF SOME TURBULENT DAYS

Memoirs of Dacca University, ISBN: 978-984-34-3006-9, Bengal Lights Books, 1973

REVIEWED BY SOHANA MANZOOR

First published in 1973, Amy Geraldine Stock's *Memoirs of Dacca University: 1947-1951*, is not just another memoir. The current edition, published by Bengal Lights Books in 2017 has a foreword by Khader Haq who had known the author during her second stint as an academic in Dhaka from 1972 to 1973. A poet himself, Haq notes with enthusiasm the "finest literary flourish[ing]" in pure travel writing in Stock's description of village boys at the early stage of her journey, and sets up her readers' expectation thereby. The foreword and the editor's note by Khademul Islam explain clearly why the book should be considered a historical document, to be precise, a piece that assesses and addresses key socio-political issues of a crucial period in newly born (East) Pakistan. Moreover, it is by someone who, in spite of her sympathies for an emerging nation, maintains a distance from some events in a manner possible only for an outsider. It is indeed an amazing rendition of that period of time.

A.G. Stock was appointed Professor of English at Dacca University (formally known as the University of Dhaka) right after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Her *Memoir* gives minute detail of everyday life in her new place of work. In the Introduction to her book she calls her recounting "patchy and impressionistic," while at the same time "authentic" (xv). Stock also claims that hers is not an autobiography but "an impression of East Pakistan" as she saw it during the first four years of its life (4).

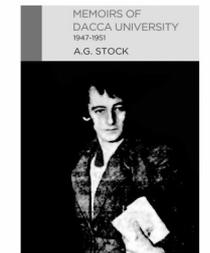
Stock gives us information about herself that reflects her as the perfect candidate for the job she took up at Dacca University. When a student

at Oxford she was the only white participant in anti-colonial student forums, and consequently, the then Vice-Chancellor of Dacca University had remembered her from his days there as a doctoral student.

She describes her surroundings with the sensibility of a careful observer and the meticulousness of a record-keeper with just the right proportion of sensitivity to understand and sympathize with a nation that is well-known for emotional outbursts as delineated through the characters of Abdul, her cook, or the young boy selling knock-knacks, the one who introduced himself as a "businessman" (23). That she is unlike most other colonizing expatriates is clear in her recounting of Abdul's behavior who resents that too many brown-skinned people frequented Stock's bungalow. The way she pacifies him shows her deep sense of respect for other people's beliefs and opinions. This is also clear in her dealings with the businessman vendor who borrowed fifteen taka from her to set up a small business and diligently returns the money in very small sums. Her visit to Khorsheed's village is another instance of her regard for the simple and poor people of the country she was visiting and where she had a temporary home.

Any sub-continental reader would probably note in Stock's book her acute interest in her surroundings. From people to culture, and even nature. She takes immense interest in learning local history and folklore as well. She writes, "There is poetry everywhere in Bengal, both among the learned and the illiterate, but the common people of the world where the name of poet carried more honor" (29). She certainly cap-

tures the gist of the Bengali spirit accurately. Hence there is little wonder that during her four years in East Pakistan it virtually became her home. Thus she mentions how after returning from a trip to New Zealand, "it felt like dropping back into a life where I belonged" (162). Her descriptions of the congregation and orchestra of frogs and the invisible inhabitant of her house that made a raucous cry, "Hoo-haw," (39) are very real and humorous too. Her frequent visits to surrounding areas



with others tell of an inquisitive soul with a caring nature.

She is, of course, not enthusiastic about all that she sees in Bengal. For example she is often impatient about the bureaucracy in the system. A reader would feel being observed through the other end of the telescope because many of these lengthy bureaucratic procedures are still in prominent practice in government offices in our part of the world; however, people are so used to them that nobody raises

any question. But Stock's observations would surely make one wonder why things are still the way they were some seventy years ago.

Stock's attempts to understand and address problems regarding the education system are noteworthy. Present-day educationists will surely find it of concern that the problems with the use of help books and notebooks continue to persist in our time as does the smuggling of books inside the examination halls. That "something" could be a synonym of "expressing," and used in national newspapers, is another not too unfamiliar example of twisted and idiosyncratic use of English.

Perhaps because of her position Stock is not too candid about the Hindu-Muslim riots occurring at the time of the partition. But she does note how student numbers in Jagannath Hall shrank during this time. She also addresses an important question that rose then: "What's the use of an Islamic state if it doesn't translate the principles of Islam into a social order?" (84) Her anecdote of a Pakistani police officer saying that there would be no more riots or problems because the Hindus were all gone, is a tell-tale sign—she had prescience about problematic issues that would eventually lead to the Liberation War of 1971.

Moreover, Stock displayed admirable courage during the Language Movement in standing with her students and even joining their protests and picketing activities. Her association with Joytirmoy Guhathakurta and Muzmir Choudhury provides a unique perspective to her tales and involves her directly with the early days of the Language Movement.

Her open display of support for the spirit of East Pakistan caused indirect friction with the university administration, but Stock did not waver from her stance.

Stock's *Memoir* is an amazing documentation of the time she was here and thus of great historical significance. There are many accounts of the period, of course, but this particular memoir stands out because the author is British; as Khademul Islam points out her work is "a part of the great dialectic of Empire" (x). It is almost as if through her text the Empire is writing back; however, the voice is not that of a subaltern's, but one of the ruling population who had ventured into forbidden territory and was speaking up for the mute. Thus Islam's editorial attempt to dig out such a document from the rubble of oblivion is commendable.

The only problematic aspect about this publishing venture though is the cover photograph of A.G. Stock in black and white. While the editor notes that the publishers retained the original photograph and design used for the first edition that came out in 1973, this reviewer could not help wondering if it could have been done in some other way. The black and white photo indeed brings in a timeless and classic aspect to the book. But perhaps the coloring and binding could have been more attractive! This limitation of book designing, however, is of little consequence to readers truly interested in the history and formation of a nation and Dhaka University's role in the process.

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## Partition, 1947—Whodunnit?

Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947, Joya Chatterjee,

ISBN: 9780511563256, Cambridge University Press, 2010

REVIEWED BY ASAHABUR RAHMAN

*Bhadraloks*, that is to say, the affluent community of upper caste Hindus, conservative in belief and with customs bordering on orthodoxy, men who constituted the "upper crust of Bengali society" and who, on an income derived from rents collected from landed estates, men, moreover, with English education and control over local bodies and legislative councils, educational institutions, legal system and other professions, including the lower rungs of colonial bureaucracy, did not care a fig about the masses. However, the hegemony of *Bhadraloks* had ended due to changes in the demographic structure of Bengal that began in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Muslims began to outnumber Hindus in Bengal and when the British gradually allowed a representative government in the province. This phenomenon was accompanied by the expansion of the suffrage because of the Government of India Act, 1935, that put Muslims in greater numbers in the Legislative Assembly, allowing their leaders thereby to eventually govern Bengal.

After the failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan to keep India united under a federal structure in May 1946, the division of the country and Bengal's inclusion in Pakistan became a real possibility. This turn of events posed an existential threat to *Bhadralok* hegemony. Under these circumstances, their kind of Indian nationalism morphed into Hindu nationalism, and their party, the Bengal Provincial Congress, became indistinguishable from the Hindu Mahasabha. The only recourse left to the *Bhadralok* then was to demand the partition of Bengal so that they could carve out a secure territory for themselves and retain their hegemony, saving themselves thereby from the disgrace and humiliation of being ruled by their inferiors, that is to say, the Muslims.

To realize this end, the Bengal Congress launched a vigorous campaign for partition and for a separate Hindu province that would remain within the Indian Union. Simultaneously, the Bengal Congress mobilized its workers all over Bengal to submit petitions to the All India Congress Committee (the High Command) to put pressure for the partition of the province.

I don't know why Chatterjee is so emphatic in putting the onus on the *Bhadralok* when all evidence points incontrovertibly that it was actually all "the men at the top" who were responsible for partitioning Bengal and Punjab.

Let me present the evidences: Mounbatten arrived on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1947 and was sworn in as Viceroy on 24<sup>th</sup>. On 27<sup>th</sup> June Mounbatten, Nehru, Patel, Kripalani, Jinnah, Liaqat, Abdul Rab Nishtar and Baldev Singh sat in that fateful meeting where Mounbatten had tabled the detailed plan for the transfer of power and partition which was subsequently endorsed by the seven top leaders of the Muslim League, Congress as well as the Sikhs.

But the June 2 meeting was actually an eye wash. During the intervening period of March and June Mounbatten had held intensive negotiations with the leaders of the League and the Congress and had consulted the governors of all the provinces on the modality of transfer of power and the partition of Punjab and Bengal. The governors of both Punjab and Bengal had opted against the partition of the two provinces. [Frederick Burrows, the Governor of Bengal, had told Mounbatten that if Bengal was to be divided east Bengal would end up as "a

lines to be voted by the members of the respective Legislative Assemblies of the two provinces. Mounbatten flew to London on 18<sup>th</sup> May to get the plan approved by the British government and returned on 31<sup>st</sup> May with the approval of the opposition as well as the Cabinet and prepared a statement on the transfer of power.

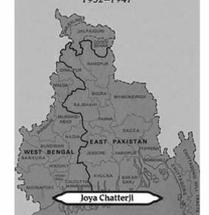
On the evening of 3<sup>rd</sup> June Mounbatten made the formal announcement on the transfer of power to the two successor states in a broadcast over the All India Radio. Following Mounbatten's speech Nehru, Jinnah and Baldev Singh spoke accepting the plan. The actual partition of the two provinces was left to a Boundary Commission to be formed later.

How could such a thing happen? Actually, the die for partition had been cast on August 16-18, 1946 in Kolkata, and in Noidha that October. The *Bhadralok* had an inkling of what it would be to live under a Muslim League ruled Pakistan. On the other hand, leaders of the Bengal Congress and Bengal Muslim League had lost their clout respectively with the All India Congress Committee and the All India Muslim League by 1940. With the death of CR Datta and the ouster of Subhash Chandra Bose from Congress in 1939, the Bengal Congress had been emasculated. This shell of a party had no leverage to force the "men at the top" to accept partition by organizing meetings and submitting petitions when the game had already ended in Shimla.

In effect, Nehru and Patel had decided much earlier in June 1946 to have a truncated India by giving Jinnah Pakistan, rather than allowing Muslim League party in the central government of independent India. They also feared that a federal India with fully autonomous states according to the Cabinet Mission plan would end in Balkanization and that the Muslim majority provinces would join Pakistan. Our fathers were cheated by a false promise when they joined the Pakistan movement. Nehru and Patel had responded to Jinnah's bluff by conceding Pakistan but had extracted a price for it by partitioning Punjab and Bengal. Now we are squeezed into a territory that has turned into a huge slum where the ecosystem is at peril. *No Lebensraum* for Bengali Muslims!

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Bengal divided  
Hindu communalism and partition,  
1932-1947



## Stories from the Edge

Edited by Niaz Zaman and Razia Sultana Khan,  
ISBN: 978-984-93025-6-8,  
Bengal Publications, 2017

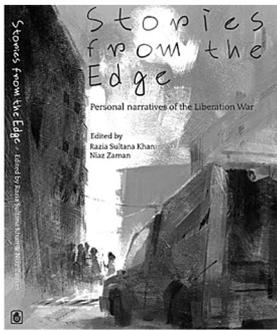
REVIEWED BY T. S. MARIN

"And yet, it is these individual stories that truly flesh out and give emotional substance to great historical events."

—Razia Quader in "Escape from Pakistan"

A perfect read for the month of our victory, *Stories from the Edge* is an anthology of personal and deeply emotional narratives of our Liberation War. Of the fourteen "stories" of this collection, twelve are by people writing on their own peripheral experiences of 1971; other two are stories and experiences of the authors' mothers during those tumultuous days. All these stories give insights of 1971 from varied places and angles—if not edges. Coincidentally, all the protagonists of this book and nearly all the authors are women—making the peripheral perspective doubly from the fringes. This book is a glaring testament of how war affects everything and everyone in a country—politically of course—but even more so culturally and emotionally. Writing creative non-fiction, especially on a topic so close to our heart is no easy feat; but *Stories from the Edge* captures the vivid spectrum of emotions regarding all things 1971 movingly and graphically—offering new perspectives on the way Bangladeshi women went through the days, weeks and months that led to victory day on December, 1971.

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On August 26, 2017, DS brought out a special supplement on the 1947 partition of Bengal. It contained fine articles on the subject by renowned scholars from home and abroad. The publication prompted me to look again at Joya Chatterjee's acclaimed work *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*. It also nudged my memory back to a day 23 years ago. I was sitting that day in an *adala* station and chatting with some senior bureaucrats when the book was mentioned by one of them. There was a distinct note of jubilation in his voice when he said that Chatterjee had proven conclusively that partition was the work of Hindu and Bengali Muslims had not wanted it!

Seventy years is not a long time for the setting in of a collective amnesia. But here in Bangladesh the partition of 1947 is already a faded memory and is mainly confined nowadays to history textbooks. Perhaps this is because Muslims of East Bengal hardly felt the brunt of the partition. There is very little creative literature on this side of Bengal which portrays the agonies, sufferings and misery of uprooted communities barring Mihir Sengupta's *Bishadribhisa*. Local research on political history and partition of Bengal was also meager until the 1980s. In the last 45 years, however, many new research works on the partition of Bengal have been published and so we now have a fair bit of knowledge of what the "men at the top" did to unleash the great catastrophe on the people of the region. I am often in this connection to refer interested readers of the subject to Yasmin Khan's book *The Great Divide: The Making of India and Pakistan* (Yale University Press, 2007) as the primer on the subject.

In August 1947 Muslims of India wanted Pakistan but did not know much about its exact shape and size. Leaders of Congress, Muslim League and Lord Mountbatten were deliberately reticent about the subject when they disclosed their scheme for the transfer of power on All India Radio on 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1947. Perhaps they were afraid to reveal the truth and apprehensive of the genocide it might trigger on an unsuspecting people who were in a joyous mood and anticipating freedom from British rule. In Chatterjee's words, these people did not know what had transpired "in the smoke filled rooms and negotiating tables by men at the top in Delhi who played with the destinies of the millions"

Put simply, Chatterjee's thesis is this: