

LET'S GET RID OF OUR COLONIAL HANGOVER, PLEASE



(Disclaimer: I am an English Medium student, and this article reflects my experiences growing up. I cannot speak for the Bangla Medium curriculum, as I have not had the opportunity to experience or examine it)

HISTORY
IS MORE
TRUE AND
SWEET
WHEN YOU
LEAVE
OUT THE
GRIZZLY
PARTS



Who is the villain of the battle of Palashi?

If you respond, "Mir Jafar", I'm afraid your schooling failed you.

Around Class 3 or so, we were studying Zainul Abedin for our Bangla classes. My peers from English medium schools will remember Bangla textbooks as quaint things on cheap paper with dated ink illustrations and with a very unglamorous focus on rote memorisation of dates and places, and full of essays written in difficult words that you aren't supposed to know; you just have to memorise the glossary at the end to pass your class tests. As a text, it left much to be desired, which was a shame as this was the primary source we had for Bengali history. This, and Bangladesh Studies, which was similarly ramshackle and much more interested in minutiae.

Zainul Abedin's chapter had the usual guff on where he was born and which schools he went to and when he died and so forth. This is fascinating information to certain people who have gone on to build their adult lives around it, but I can't remember any of it and I doubt you can either. Regardless, he was vastly more interesting than many of the other personalities we were introduced to through the Bangla curriculum—and what made him memorable were his depictions of the famine.

Durbhikkho. That's what we knew it as being. Those images are unforgettable. The sheer horror will stay with us for the rest of our lives.

(We will return to this shortly.)

I'd always been fascinated by history, though while I was studying Bangla, I didn't realise that I was also studying history. To me History was the illustrated, glossy, and very readable English textbooks my brother, five years ahead in the same school, was assigned. During the year-end holidays, my parents would buy his new textbooks, and it was my hobby to read them in their entirety before his classes began. Well, not all of them: maths and Bangla I never touched willingly. Geography and science I'd look into, and history I would devour. I was five years ahead than school's history classes (I did poorly in my actual tests because by the time it was my turn to study them properly I'd already tired of the material), and I'd been raised on fat illustrated encyclopedias. These, along with my brother's textbooks, were invariably British. I grew into a budding Anglophile automatically, and absorbed the ideas and prejudices in those attractive textbooks and encyclopedias.

World War II was one of my favourite topics to read about. So, of course, I was a big fan of Churchill. What's not to like? He led Britain through the war and defeated Hitler, and was a funny fat man with a cigar and hat. That was how I thought of him: The British bulldog. While I was reading about Zainul Abedin for class, I was using my free time to read about Churchill.

At no point did anyone tell me that the two were connected. Call it laziness or a lack of curiosity, but if you're pretending to teach me history, and you are actually covering Zainul Abedin there is no excuse for failing to get into this.

I first read about the Bengal Famine in university. I was 21. It's relatively common knowledge now that Churchill intentionally starved Bengalis to create food reserves for British troops. This is thanks to people like Shashi Tharoor and the recent surge in the UK of

people questioning Churchill's legacy. I am unsure how I would have felt, as a child, if someone had told me the hero from my encyclopedias was callously responsible for inspiring Abedin's paintings. There might be an argument that children should be shielded from graphic knowledge, but this isn't something that flies in Bangladesh—we were shown the actual paintings, and each of us grows up being taught in detail about the Pakistani regime. Heck, which of us didn't grow up being taught by our teachers to draw soldiers shooting at protesting crowds?

If our schools can exert so much energy in making us remember the depredations of our most recent masters, why do they slack in the condemnation of those that created Pakistan and Partition and all the centuries of woe?

Yes, we are told, broadly, that the British despoiled us, but this isn't enough. When we're taught about famines, in the absence of the crucial narrative of what engineered this disaster, we are left with no choice but to imagine it as an organic failing of nature, or of people. We get it hammered home to us that this is a golden, verdant land, so naturally all the famine and poverty we read about, and the trash and human misery we see around us, every day (in such contrast to the world we see in our American TV channels)—well, the only explanation is that we were responsible.

Imagine what that does to a child's outlook on themselves and the country that they are so rigidly taught to love: a nation that's so incompetent it can't even feed itself reliably. A nation whose colonial history, if at all taught, seems to all stem from the story of Nawab Sirajuddaulah.

(Sirajuddaulah, by the way, did get a mention in my British encyclopedias. There was a bit about him slaughtering people via the Black Hole of Calcutta. That's all there was to that, apparently.)

It's understandable that the British-based history curriculum English medium schools follow do not provide a proper breakdown of colonialism's legacies, if they touch on it at all. Yet, the fact that such conversations are popping up in the UK should be a mark of shame for us—we do not even attempt to critique their narratives, or explain what really happened from the perspective of those who were victimised. This is very dangerous given how the UK exerts such a stranglehold on our education aspirations—one that I personally have not escaped. Our schools have a responsibility to teach history beyond just parroting what the textbooks say, and really talking about who bears responsibility.

To be taught to blame Palashi on Mir Jafar does nothing but confirm to us that we as a nation are greedy simpletons who engineer our own destructions. A proper education in history will teach students to vilify Clive, a name that was never mentioned, at any point, during any of my history instruction, regardless of subject or language. This is not a call for nativism or Anglophobia—it's a simple call to stand up for ourselves and speak the truth. If we can teach children exactly how each Bir Shreshtho died, they can handle being taught about colonialism.

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