

Refugees, women, and the 1971 War—a reflection

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For most, it signalled that they would soon return home. It was perhaps one instance where they forgot about their difficulties; overwhelmed with emotion and nationalist fervour at the prospect of an independent Bangladesh, they had to leave immediately. Unlike on their journey to India, most of them returned by train and crossed over in Benapole, Jessore—a much safer option for the women I spoke to.

The returnees' re-entry was shaped by a curious contradiction. On one hand, women who had experienced camp life as refugees tended to be more patriotic and nationalistic because of the experience. They now closely identified with the party that led the War of Liberation, and with its programme and platform for an independent Bangladesh. On the other hand, the returnees were viewed by those who hadn't left as people who had missed or sat out the war, as if they had irresponsibly taken off on a vacation while people were dying and fighting for freedom.

This contradiction affected many of those I interviewed; after returning to the homeland they grew increasingly conscious of how differently they had experienced the war compared to those



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Bengali refugees near Saidpur, East Pakistan, 1971.

who never left. A new “us versus them” dichotomy emerged: the returnees could not understand the direct experience of

war and the locals could not relate to the stories of camp life and hardship in a foreign land.

This dichotomy still shapes our political culture. War veterans and those who remained in Bangladesh during the war feel they have a better understanding of politics. Their first-hand experience of war, it would appear, has impacted their view of what they perceive to be threats against the nation. Indeed, the nation seems fragile to them even today, nearly a half century later. During the Shahbagh movement, for instance, war veterans and their families popularised the idea of a nation under threat. This sentiment resonated with hundreds of people in the streets who wrapped themselves in Bangladeshi flags to “reclaim the nation”. More recently, some war veterans have led the charge of “anti-national” against dissenting figures for the egregious crime of holding the government accountable. With all due respect to our veterans, it must be said that in this as in other instances, their view of the fragility of the nation-state leads them to adopt regressive positions that younger generations of Bangladeshis, including this author, find difficult to understand. In my experience, former refugees on the other hand tend to view

the nation-state as less fragile and are thus less likely to rush to the defence of the state.

Today there are 68 million refugees worldwide, a million of them in our own backyard. As we commemorate the War of '71, let us not ignore the conditions that continue to force people to flee their homes today. In this age of neo-liberalism and imperialism, state violence is more varied. Driven by war, climate change, and social crises caused by structural forces beyond their control, millions of people are being forced to flee their homes with little hope of return in the foreseeable future. Our sympathy for the plight of refugees must be coupled with a resolve to hold accountable the forces that are producing these conditions in the first place, and in such an accounting, it is impossible to ignore the role of nation-states and elite interests. So it is with the Rohingya—another refugee population that is overwhelmingly female, and has been driven out by the Myanmar state, enabled, if not aided, by regional and global powers hoping to benefit from the opening up of the economy.

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Girls playing at a refugee camp in Kolkata.

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