

We are what we remember

IMRUL ISLAM When Nana was 24, he saw Muslims slaughtered in prayer. As men prostrated before God, the cold of steel met the warmth of flesh, red seeped through prayer mats and onto the floor below. He knew them all: those who had been killed, those who had done the killing.

For the subcontinent, 1947 was the year of blood. The twin states of Pakistan and India were being wrested from the imagination of men into the pracrity of the world, and as the dominos tumbled, it brought down entire communities with it. In the tinderbox that was India, a vicious cycle saw Hindus killing Muslims, Muslims killing Sikhs, and Sikhs killing Hindus. In Punjab, villages lounged in ash, in Bengal, the banks of rivers teemed with bodies. As a new world sought to erase the memory of the old, Nana left Assam for Sylhet.

For 70 years before Partition, Assam and Sylhet had been one. In 1874, to consolidate control, the British brought Sylhet under the jurisdiction of Assam. As the economy grew, revenue fed a hungry empire and starved the common man. Sylhetis came to be seen as

backed by the British Raj, and a rigged vote saw it pass by razor thin margins. At midnight on August 15, Sylhet became a part of East Pakistan, Assam a part of India. Seventy years after being welded together, the British had splintered Bengal in an instant. The rivers ran red.

The next two decades were quiet. In Sylhet, Nana began building a new life. A doctor by profession, he found work in one of the many tea estates in the region. In 1959, he married my grandmother, in 1964, they bought land and set down roots.

The house skirted the edge of town—bordered on the east by a provincial building, on the west by rail tracks. On clear days, one could look out from the porch and see the sun swept hills of Assam. For a while, all was well. In Sylhet, the children of Muslims grew up friends with Hindus, towns celebrated Puja and Eid with equal fervour. The people spoke a mix of Sylheti and Assamese, some spoke Urdu. The train tracks that snaked past the house ran across the porous border, and Nana traveled often to go see family.

Long entrenched economic divides still existed, but with each passing year, the scars of the past faded a little more. Everyone was a transplant, everyone had lost something.

In 1971, the world turned again. East Pakistan, impoverished and exploited, sought emancipation from West Pakistan's oppression. As tension mounted, East Pakistanis were labelled dogs; animals; an impure people who were polluting the area with their impure culture. Curfews were imposed, men disappeared only to be found colourless and bloated, afloat on water. When war broke out, Hindus found themselves targeted by the military: lands were seized, people killed, temples desecrated, Hindu children taken away from parents. Some East Pakistanis joined in, others fought back. Millions died, millions more were forced into camps. When journalists asked Yahya Khan about the genocide in Bengal, the President of Pakistan replied: 'If my soldiers kill, they kill in a clean way.'

That April, West Pakistani forces moved into the government building beside Nana's house. A bomb shelter was built hurriedly. My mother and her siblings were sent away to the countryside. Everything of value was packed up in the dead of night and buried in the courtyard. Word from family in Assam warned of an impending Indian intervention.

Every evening, Nana took food to the camp where the militia were growing homesick. In time, he became friends with the Pashtuns who had been sent to fight in a war they had little stake in. They spoke of Punjab, where Partition had bifurcated the land and separated families; of August 16, when half of Punjab had woken up in India, the other half in Pakistan. Nana listened, then told them about Assam.

As the cold of December gripped

Sylhet and Indian bombers joined the war, those same soldiers entered Nana's house, desecrated it, and set his books on fire. The fighting raged on for a few more weeks, and then, as suddenly as it had started, it was over. When the smoke cleared, mass graves appeared—dried blood, fresh earth. Where graves had been made hurriedly, bodies spilled out like jagged teeth, and one could see the gashes left behind by bayonets. Nana knew them all: those who had been killed, those who had done the killing.

Home as we know it today was born of blood. Empire looked at the subcontinent and saw division where there was conflictual coexistence. To control a people, it fragmented their narrative, uprooted communities from the history of the land. It made an entire population superfluous, intermittently exterminated by natural disasters and engineered famines. When the land had been raped beyond recognition, when its riches had been shipped off and its jewels had found a new home, Empire left, and a divided house collapsed upon itself.

In Assam, Muslims who had fought the British alongside Hindus became foreigners. They became the reason for Assam's economic woes. Religion and nationalism formed a mephitic brew of division; the yearning for self-determination morphed into rage against the other. The same was repeated in 1971, only this time, Hindus were the ones cursed with impurity. Our ancestors were told they did not belong, that they were surrounded by enemies, that the only way forward was to leave, or pick up a sword and run it through a neighbour's neck. Seventy years of nightmares later, here we are: the product of a mass incarceration of the mind, the grandchildren of the gaslit.

The British have been gone from India for 70 years, and yet, it seems like they never left. In Assam, 2 million people have been stripped of citizenship; in Kashmir, the mountains echo with the wails of widows. The most powerful country in the subcontinent looks at 14 million Muslims and sees 'termites'—pests befitting extermination. A leader faces a crowded field and vows to 'throw infiltrators into the Bay of Bengal.'

We listen as a new power tells an old story. Buoyed by newfound hate, it surges through valleys soaked in blood, races across rivers drowning in bodies. Across the subcontinent, it makes men ache for war. A region fractured for 70 years starts coming apart at the seams. Soon, it will arrive at our doorstep, and we will have a choice to make. Do we believe what we are told, or do we hold onto what we know? We must choose wisely.

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Imrul Islam works for the Bridge Initiative, a research project on Islamophobia in Washington, D.C. He is a M.A candidate for Conflict Resolution at Georgetown University.



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

foreigners exercising cultural hegemony over an incipient Assamese middle class trying to come into its own under the aegis of British rule. As imperialism threatened to deracinate the population, a movement for self determination took root.

The 'Sylhet Referendum'—a proposal to disentangle the two provinces—was