

'I regret that Pakistan has still not formally apologised'

In conversation with Ayesha Jalal, Mary Richardson Professor of History and Director of Center for South Asian and Indian Ocean Studies at Tufts University, USA

Priyam Pritim Paul (PPP): How do you evaluate the events of 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh?

Ayesha Jalal (AJ): As a continuation of the historic dynamics of centre and region in the aftermath of a watershed moment like India's partition along ostensibly religious lines. In other words, I consider the birth of Bangladesh much like that of Pakistan—as a failure of federalism in practice in the subcontinent.

PPP: It has often been pointed out that the two great events in the South Asian state system – 1947 and 1971 – involved crises over the question of power-sharing. What was the role of ideas and identities (such as religion, language, region and so forth) behind the two restructurings of the South Asian state system? How do you compare the two events?

AJ: The preeminent idea undergirding the two events was the invention of territorialised identities under European colonialism, that is to say the notion that certain regional and linguistic groups were temperamentally suited to inhabit a specific part of the globe as opposed to others. As for self-identification, the idea that came to gain prominence was the notion of communities-turned-nations



Lt Gen AAK Niazi, commander of the Pakistan occupational forces in East Pakistan, signs the Instrument of Surrender at the Race Course Ground in Dhaka on December 16, 1971.

Pakistan prior to 1971, was there any meaningful difference between East and West Pakistan? For example, did East Pakistani politics have more popular-democratic content and West Pakistan more feudal-aristocratic hegemony?

AJ: There was certainly a stronger intellectual and agitational basis of politics in East Pakistan than in West Pakistan that was directly related to different kinds of social relations in the urban and agrarian sectors of the two wings. The relative success of the 1951 land reforms in East Pakistan compared to the land reforms of 1958 in West Pakistan also gave a different character to Bengali politics. The land reforms in the West allowed big landlords to retain most of their land while the ones in the East by comparison brought some relief to landless classes. Also, landownership in the West was much more skewed towards bigger landlords than in the East.

PPP: In 1971, state-sponsored violence was unleashed against the unarmed masses of East Pakistan. This contrasts with the rather diffuse and socially organised mass violence of the riots of 1947. You have written on Saadat Hasan Manto, one of the greatest narrators of the horrors and memories of partition. Manto was also a trenchant critic of South Asian nationalist leaders and their politics. What do you

think Manto's take on 1971 would have been had he lived to see it?

AJ: He would have condemned the hollow state narrative that sought to justify the atrocities committed in the name of nationalism and security. And knowing Manto, he would have something different to say about the spectacle of Muslims murdering Muslims that was unlike what he personally witnessed during 1947.

PPP: How do you see the impact of 1971 on the post-1971 history of Pakistan?

AJ: 1971 brought about a decisive shift in the regional balance of power in the South Asian subcontinent that

has had lasting effects on all aspects of the region—political, economic, and social. In Pakistan itself it resulted in the unchecked dominance of one region – Punjab – over the non-Punjabi regions, generating new centre-region tensions. But this was a dominance exercised by the institutional pre-eminence of a mainly Punjabi bureaucracy and military rather than by a politically united Punjab.

PPP: What's your view on the post-1971 relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh? How do you see the future of their relations?

AJ: I regret that Pakistan has still

not formally apologised for the atrocities committed by the army and associated groups. This should have been done a long, long time ago but politics has got the better of ethical considerations. I also think East Bengal's role in the making of Pakistan needs to be recognised more in Pakistani historiography and the impact of the "Pakistan" idea on Bangladesh also acknowledged. Relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh would improve considerably if Islamabad formally issued an apology, leading to more vigorous intellectual and economic exchanges between the two countries.



Ayesha Jalal

that were entitled to certain prerogatives.

1947 and 1971 are both instances of the failure of power-sharing arrangements and thus the need to create yet another hyphenated state. They represent an extreme instance of political failure where instead of sharing power, it was deemed better to separate even if that entailed perpetuating problems rather than solving them as is apparent in the continued centre-region tensions in Pakistan and communitarian hostilities in India.

PPP: In terms of the ruling classes and hegemonic ideas in the two wings of

Retracing the 1971 exodus

FROM PAGE 8

The accelerated timeline and the poor transition of power from Britain to India and Pakistan may have prevented an agreement for the Rohingya population to be accepted in East Pakistan, and they remained part of Burma.

As Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948, Bamar Buddhist majority attitudes toward Rohingya Muslims slowly deteriorated. In 1978, the military junta in Burma carried out a crackdown in the Arakan province followed by the revocation of citizenship of the Rohingya community in 1982. Most Rohingyas have sought refuge in Bangladesh at different stages since then.

The partition process and the Two-Nation Theory both ignored the concerns of groups outside the center of power, including that of the Bengalis of East Pakistan and the Rohingyas of Arakan. More importantly, in both cases, successor states suppressed the political aspirations of those who later became refugees, despite external pressure against doing so.

By comparing the two crises, it illustrates how easy it is for governments and international organisations to frame refugee crises in a manner that imposes restrictions on their liabilities.

It was evident soon after the conflict began in East Pakistan that the Pakistani army had committed genocide in its eastern wing. Meanwhile, successive governments ignored the situation, which was the underlying cause of the refugee crisis, labelling it as a civil war and a matter of Pakistan's internal policy.

As with the Rohingya crisis today, if governments and international organisations had accepted state-sponsored "ethnic cleansing and

possible genocide" were taking place, more meaningful action would have been required.

However, one of the main differences between the plight of the Bengalis of East Pakistan in 1971 and that of the Rohingyas, is the likelihood of external military intervention to improve their conditions.

Unlike the Indian military that unilaterally helped create Bangladesh, it does not appear that the Rohingyas are receiving any similar help, at least not anytime soon.

The international community's inaction and indifference may have also limited the likelihood of an international coalition engaging militarily.

Since all United Nations member states endorsed the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in 2005, the absence of such outstanding interventions for the Rohingyas is now even more apparent.

The role of humanitarian relief organisations is another key difference between the two crises. In both cases, although the NGO community mobilised to highlight the sufferings of the refugee communities, the Rohingya crisis has tended to produce more criticism of Myanmar's government than what the East Pakistan crisis did of the Pakistan government's actions in 1971.

It is pertinent to note that for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, voluntary humanitarian action was characterised by the belief that humanitarian relief was a politically neutral practice, one where "strangers were saved" regardless of their allegiances.

The International Committee

of the Red Cross, among others, remained relatively silent on the political matters causing the refugee crisis in 1971 – an indifference which Oxfam and other radical non-government organisations (NGOs) increasingly questioned as the war continued.

NGOs responding to the Rohingya crisis, by contrast, have shown a much heightened willingness to engage in political discussions related to the refugee crisis, reflecting an overall strengthening of humanitarian NGOs as part of the international response to such crises.

Despite the fact that the two refugee crises in the eastern part of South Asia were precipitated by unlikely causes and events in the short term, their roots can be found in colonial British India and Burma, and in the subsequent partition in 1947.

British rule in the region and their exit in 1947 sparked a series of conflicts, including the conflict surrounding the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, and also indirectly the events in Arakan that led to the Rohingyas becoming stateless.

With independence in 1971, Bangladesh has slowly developed, and in many ways is outshining its bigger neighbours India and Pakistan. By contrast, the situations of many minorities in South Asia have deteriorated since 1947 and this is the case of the Rohingyas in particular, whose struggles do not seem to be ending anytime soon.

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