



PHOTOGRAPH:
NAIB UDDIN AHMED

Writing about the events of 1971 is not an easy task for Pakistani academics and journalists. In much of the writings widely available or the general nature of the public discourse about 1971, the emphasis is on the Indian treachery and excesses of the Mukti Bahini forces. There is a token acknowledgment of the years of injustices meted out to the Bengalis that reduces the entirety of 1971 to a lesson in constitutional history. Still, such an approach overshadows more critical questions about human suffering and trauma that continues to mark an indelible influence on millions of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.



Slain Bengalis in front of Jashore City College. Jashore, Bangladesh, December, 1971. Courtesy: Muktiyuddho e-Archive

based on their spectacular electoral success, it was to be performed at various levels – whether in their calls for strikes and general intimidation of the non-Bengali population of the province. During discussions with Yahya Khan’s negotiating team, Sheikh Mujib’s negotiating team proposed the setting up of a Confederation. Still, with so much public posturing as a form of catharsis for making the military pay for its years of racial arrogance towards Bengalis, the negotiations had not broken down. It is just that the military’s patience was running out as it was not used to such tactics of symbolic redemption. Speaking to the delegation of West Pakistani politicians in Dhaka, Yahya Khan said that the world was laughing at him.

This feeling of being mocked at and resorting to violence as a measure of reclaiming lost masculinity has an eerie resemblance with what triggered the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. As Ammar Jan argues, General Dyer’s crisis

SORRY FOR WHAT?

Denial of Genocidal Violence and Demands for Reparative Justice

ALI USMAN QASMI

In classical Urdu epics, kings would transmigrate their lives into a bird and lock it away in a secured place. To kill the king, one had to go after the bird. Khadim Husain Raja – the chief architect of Pakistani military’s planned operation against Bengalis – codenamed Operation Searchlight – to ‘restore law order’ in East Pakistan also had a bird – a mynah. There was another mynah that was not part of his household – Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – whom he had codenamed mynah to maintain secrecy while talking about him to his family in West Pakistan. On the fateful night of 25/26 March 1971, the military used heavy weaponry to wrest control of Dhaka and arrest Sheikh Mujib. “The mynah apparently had a weak heart, and unable to bear the boom of tank guns and recoilless rifles, succumbed to their noise,” wrote Raja in his autobiography. Later, when his wife rang her daughter up to tell her about mynah’s death, she thought her mother was referring to Sheikh Mujib and that he had died in the military action.

This story makes one think if Raja’s mynah – no pun intended – carried the life and soul of Pakistan. Mynah could not survive the noise of the military operation on that fateful night. Nor could Pakistan.

Writing about the events of 1971 is not an easy task for Pakistani academics and journalists. In much of the writings widely available or the general nature of the public discourse about 1971, the emphasis is on the Indian treachery and excesses of the Mukti Bahini forces. There is a token acknowledgment of the years of injustices meted out to the Bengalis that reduces the entirety of 1971 to a lesson in constitutional history. Still, such an approach overshadows more critical questions about human suffering and trauma that continues to mark an indelible influence on millions of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.

In Pakistan, there are three aspects of the debate and historical memory of 1971 that remain highly contentious. The first is about the events leading up to March 1971, the rationale for a massive military operation – and its legitimacy – and the illegitimacy of the Bengali resistance and the offense caused by calling it national liberation. The second is about the accusation of genocidal violence and use of rape as a weapon, contestation of the projected figure of 3 million dead and 200,000 women raped, and the counter allegation of a Bihari genocide. The third is about the way forward as to whether it should be by forgetting the past or seeking an apology for war crimes.

This article will focus on all three aspects of the debate about 1971 in Pakistan. I will show how these questions are intertwined and are not just historical questions but hold significant value for the future of a democratic polity in Pakistan.

On the legitimacy of violence or lack thereof

What was happening in East Bengal in 1970-1 was akin to the moment where Bengali leaders, having accumulated ‘rage investments’ from the people after years of injustice, oppression, and exploitation, offered them dividends in the form of a revolutionary explosion of rage. Once the Awami League had acquired power

was that he felt the Indians were laughing at the British by openly defying the colonial law. So, he had to order indiscriminate firing at the Indians who had gathered at the Jallianwala Bagh to talk sense to them, to teach them a lesson. Yahya did the same. His commanders worked on a military plan for days while the negotiations were ongoing. This logic of law-preserving violence shaped the outlook of the Pakistani military’s action in East Pakistan from 25 March onwards.

With its intent to strike fear in the hearts of the Bengalis, the military operation put an end to any possibility of a political settlement.

A significant part of Operation Searchlight was to ensure disarming of the Bengali units. Every single Bengali – including half a million Bengali civilians living in West Pakistan – became suspects as well. What was remarkable about this approach was that the Bengalis were still Pakistani citizens. They had not become stateless; they had become rightless citizens. And this is perhaps the reason for the scale of violence as it was not aimed against a single group or specific community but the entire population that could not have been de-nationalized. When every citizen in the state becomes an enemy, the operation to eradicate the enemy is necessarily genocidal.

In much of the apologetic literature on 1971 produced in Pakistan, the justification for the military action is sought in the sovereign right to suppress a rebellion and deny its validity as a

caused by the military operation.

Bina D’ Costa has worked extensively to document the instances of sexual violence, forced abortions, and an international scheme for the adoption of war babies. Yasmin Saikia and Nayanika Mookherjee have recorded the stories of these women rather than their placement within a nationalist historical template of sacrifice and courage. For them, it is not a methodological constraint because of lack of material evidence but a deliberate narrative strategy for the articulation of trauma that, ironically, finds utterance only in silence and incoherence. This is despite the numbers, the archive, the state-sponsored programs for rehabilitation, and documented evidence about forced abortions and adoptions of war babies. The disciplinary bounds of historical narrative, to use Benjamin’s insights, deprive the victims of the language to speak about their experience. The victims’ testimony translated into a juridical mode becomes absurd, grotesque, exaggerated, and unbelievable. They are rendered speechless, incapable of articulating a response that corresponds to the neatness of the language of the law.

This is not to suggest insufficient documentation of rape as a weapon during the war. What is contested is the refusal of revisionist historians to accept the evidence presented by Bangladeshi scholars and activists. This is why it is crucial to go beyond

live with themselves through recognition and acceptance. She also realizes the enormity of the task as building such a monument will require acknowledging the violent excesses of the past. This is why recognition of what has happened is a prerequisite for the apology that the people of Bangladesh deserve – not an expression of regret that previous Pakistani rulers have already done. Without any considerable international pressure and the fact that unlike South Africa or Bosnia, Pakistanis did not have to live with the victims of their violence anymore, ensured there was never a series effort to fix responsibility, consider the possibility of reconciliation, or seek apology from the victims. For recognition leading to an apology, it is vital to identify those responsible for committing these crimes, at least hold a mock trial, and ask for an apology.

What can be a predictable outcome in the Pakistani context of ordinary citizens demanding criminal accountability of military as an institution for its war crimes in East Bengal will be a strengthening of Pakistan’s democracy. This is because such a movement will discredit much of the jingoistic rhetoric that allows the overdeveloped military institution to dominate Pakistan’s politics through a rule of fear. Besides, it will force the adoption of an inclusive democratic model to address the demands and grievances of the citizens within a consensual constitutional framework. Otherwise, the Pakistani state will continue to invoke the same



Refugees stream across the River Ganges Delta at Kushtia, fleeing the violence during the ongoing West Pakistani military campaign called Operation Searchlight. (AP Photo/Michel Laurent)

liberation war.

M. Rafiqul Islam has done some pioneering research on the legal semantics of the terms used and their justification. According to him, there is no explicit provision against the unilateral declaration of independence. What was important was the ability to follow it through, which the Bengalis effectively did with the help of the Indian military and the massive popular support at home. In that sense, the Bangladesh national liberation movement transformed international law insofar as it enabled the legal expression of secession from the postcolonial state. Up to that point, the operative logic was that there could be only a liberation war against colonial power seen as a foreign occupation. Still, accepting the Bangladeshi struggle as a liberation movement is a huge psychological barrier to cross for many Pakistanis. It is primarily because it inevitably follows that the Pakistani military, from March 1971 onwards, because of its brutal military operation and refusal to accept the democratic process, had become an occupying force and that resistance against it was legitimate.

The fear of numbers

Even if Pakistan’s sovereign right to fight the rebellion and preserve its territorial integrity is recognized, it does not absolve the military of its targeted activities against Bengali Hindus and women. Subjecting Bengali women to sexual violence was a planned activity to ‘teach a lesson’ to Bengalis. This is supported by testimony given by Major General Khadim Husain Raja himself, who wrote that General Niazi threatened to “let his soldiers loose on their womenfolk.” It is these twin objectives of Operation that disproportionately targeted the Hindus and the use of rape as a weapon to terrorize the Bengalis and cause them emotional trauma that makes the military Operation genocidal. The accusation of mass murder and rape is the most sensitive part of the debate. Independent observers dispute the Bangladeshi claim of 3 million deaths and 200,000 victims of rapes. For Bangladeshis, it is a fact of life that large-scale massacre and rape took place. Many people also died because of displacement, disease, hunger, and poverty

the logic of body count since it is invoked in a manner to dehumanize the debate and reduce it to numbers without any genuine regard of the experiences of those who suffered.

This is equally applicable in the case of the Bihari massacre during the liberation movement and after the formation of Bangladesh. The primary tactic employed by Pakistan’s state-sponsored narratives about the 1971 war is to project the Bihari victim as a counterpoise to a Bengali claim to violence. Their purpose is not to give voice to the traumatic experiences of Biharis, who, too, were subjected to indiscriminate violence, but to stack bodies next to each other to make a comparative enumeration. Practically, the Pakistani State did little to alleviate the condition of Biharis. It washed its hand off them and told Bangladesh to take care of them. In the name of protecting them, the Bangladeshi government dumped the Biharis in refugee camps where they have continued to languish. So, the Biharis, in whose name the Pakistani military conducted a brutal operation, were no longer Pakistan’s concern when they actually needed help and protection from extermination. Bangladesh was willing to repatriate them, but Pakistan was unwilling to take them back.

The question of apology

Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta was a teenager when she witnessed the Pakistani military’s assault on Dhaka University Campus on 25/25 March 1971. Her father – Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, Professor of English at Dhaka University – was killed in front of his house. The military targeted him because he was a Bengali Hindu intellectual. While talking to Nayanika Mookherjee in November 2016, Dr. Guhathakurta remarked:

“The day Pakistan builds a memorial in Lahore or Islamabad acknowledging how the Pakistani army killed and raped Bangladeshis during 1971 – I can think of pardoning Pakistan.”

In demanding a memorial to the war of 1971 to be built in the heart of Pakistan’s military establishment, Dr. Guhathakurta seeks recognition of the past to cultivate a new sense of political subjectivity. It is an attempt to seek any remnant of shared humanity in the aggressor by allowing them to come to

logic, strategies, and practices in the name of a sovereign nation, maintaining order and ensuring territorial integrity. Therefore, it is important that the debate about 1971 shifts from the logic of legitimate violence for restoring law and order to the brutal suppression of liberation war, and from obedience of command to responsibility for carrying out actions.

Concluding remarks

Zizek commented on Adorno’s rhetorical statement that there could not be any poetry after Auschwitz to say there could only be poetry after a human catastrophe like Holocaust. Zizek wrote: “Realistic prose fails, where the poetic evocation of the unbearable atmosphere of a camp succeeds...poetry is always, by definition, ‘about’ something that cannot be addressed directly, only alluded to.” In Pakistan, the cold, prosaic logic of state power, had reduced the debate on 1971 to an Indian conspiracy and a disputation about the ‘actual’ number of victims. It is only through poetry that Pakistanis have tried to make sense of the grief, bloodshed, displacement, and trauma of 1971. Faiz’s hum ke thehre ajnabi, Nasir Kazmi’s wo kashiyati chalanay waley Kia howay, and Naseer Turabi’s wo hum safar tha mourn the loss of intimacy. I cannot but help contrast this poetic intimacy with the ‘nearness’ of state logic articulated by the Pakistani military. It is not infrequent to come across references to the inevitable failure of the Baluch insurgency because it is geographically contiguous to Pakistan. The underlying logic is that the military could not save Bangladesh because it was too far, without a direct link to ensure a more systematic supply of troops and ammunition to quell the insurgents.

There is, hence, a difference between the poetic intimacy of peoplehood imagined by Pakistani intelligentsia and the geographical contiguity as nearness guaranteeing the survival of the Pakistani state. It is for us to decide which of the two modes of togetherness we want to choose from.

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