



“If Pakistan acknowledges what its Army did in 1971, it will do a favour to itself” In conversation with Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy

Bangladesh may be more multicultural and liberal than Pakistan but Islamist forces are a threat to its internal cohesion. In India, Muslims and Christians feel horribly discriminated against. As for Pakistan: the situation for Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians is dreadful. That's how it is today.

The Daily Star (TDS): How do you look at the events of 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh?

Pervez Hoodbhoy: In retrospect, it was a pretty absurd idea to create a new country in 1947 with its two parts separated by one thousand miles of a hostile country with the sole basis of unity being a shared religion. In retrospect you can ask: how could it have possibly worked out? Jinnah called it an experiment but it became clear very soon that it was an experiment that would soon fail. He said religious faith would ensure its survival. It could not and did not.

But we can't blame Jinnah alone. Let's face it: Pakistan was born in Dhaka, not Karachi or Lahore or Bombay. A commonly forgotten fact is that most Pakistanis at the time were Bengali and most were sold on to the Two-Nation Theory.

As it turned out, language was just as important as religion. Liaquat Ali Khan, an Urdu-speaker, and Jinnah – whose only real language was English – insisted on Urdu as the proper Islamic language that would bind the Wings together. Jinnah's visit to Dhaka in March 1948 was seven months after the birth of the new country. It underscored the low priority of the East Wing in the minds of West Wingers. Jinnah's visit was a disaster because of his insistence on Urdu.

As for 1971: The country had a serious birth defect and should not have expected to live very long – and it indeed did not. Exploitative relations meant that it didn't take long for the Bengali majority to realize that it was actually a minority and that the “real” Pakistan lay towards the West. Yet the manner of death could have been far less cruel than it actually was. The seeds of destruction were thoughtlessly sown by West Pakistani leaders. Economic exploitation, disrespect for Bengali culture, and the army being at the helm made catastrophe inevitable.

I was 21 years old when that happened and was doing my undergraduate degree at MIT. Reflecting the character of Pakistan's elite, all other Pakistani students studying there were from

Karachi or Lahore. I had bitter fights with colleagues who bought into the standard national narrative of this being an Indian conspiracy. To my mind India took advantage of a fundamental weakness but did not create it. Many of my earlier friendships evaporated.

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

Pervez Hoodbhoy: Absolutely! Bengal was different from what is now Pakistan. There was no Muslim landed aristocracy there and Bengali Muslims were conspicuous by their absence in the British Army and even the lower levels of the bureaucracy. In 1947 there was only one Bengali member of the former Indian Civil Service. When Partition happened, Bengali Muslim bore the brunt of Hindu violence – the carnage of Punjab was to come much later. As you can see from videos of that period, the joyous celebrations of 1947 were entirely spontaneous.

But now that Pakistan had arrived, it turned out that this was going to be a country imagined by the Muslim ashrafiyya of north India and run by a largely Punjabi army in colonial fashion. North India's Muslims had a very specific outlook. They subscribed to Sir Syed's loyalty to the British. Their principal fear was that a joint electorate with Hindus would lead to their under-representation. This was not what Bengalis had bargained for!

West Pakistan eventually conceded on language but constitution-making and economic centralization proved irresolvable because they amounted to handing provincial autonomy over to the East, a demand that the West was not willing to entertain. There was a half-way solution: a one-time relaxation of rules could have brought Bengali officers into the provincial bureaucracy and army, leading to a more responsive and representative government. But there was

little interest in pursuing such ideas.

TDS: How do you see the impact of 1971 on the post-1971 history of the subcontinent, particularly Pakistan?

Pervez Hoodbhoy: The election of 7 December 1970 – Pakistan's freest and fairest in its entire history up to and including those of the present times – led to 1971 because the Pakistan Army and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto refused to share power with East Pakistan under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. To this very day, with just a few exceptions, there is no soul searching. Punjab's ruling class remains uninterested in why 1971 happened. Pakistan Army officers were never punished for cowardice, tried for atrocities, or had their pensions taken away. The man on the street in Lahore is also likely satisfied with the story that General Yahya Khan's penchant for Black Label whisky and beautiful women had done Pakistan in.

The blindness of those who refuse to learn from the past is reflected in current narratives, such as that of (former) Senator Javed Jabbar, who has been gifted state resources to produce doctored versions of Pakistan's history on video. Sadly, Pakistan has turned into Punjabistan where narratives from the other three provinces are sharply suppressed. In textbooks written after 1971 the Hindu conspiracy narrative is promoted across the board. By and large there is only cursory mention of East Pakistan's separation. Having examined several, I have yet to see a school textbook published by an official Pakistani school textbook board that explains this momentous historical episode in a manner that would make sense to a student today.

TDS: What's your view on the post-1971 relations between Pakistan and

Bangladesh? How do you see the future of their relations?

Pervez Hoodbhoy: If Pakistan acknowledges what its Army did in 1971, it will do a favour to itself even more than to Bangladesh. The memory that India took 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of war is lost; an ordinary student would disinclined to believe that a valiant army could have been thus defeated. Just as the Afghan National Army collapsed in 2021 for lack of local support so too had the West Pakistan army in 1971. Absolutely nowhere can one find the bald truth which is that the responsibility of the East Pakistan tragedy rests squarely upon West Pakistan and its arrogant military rulers who even today refuse to discuss this episode of history.

Pakistan must develop good relations with all its neighbours and with Bangladesh. It must learn that economic development is not possible until it does that. Pakistan's war economy must be converted to one for peace. That realization is still some way away. It has been made harder by anti-secular Hindutva forces in India. India's present trajectory bodes ill for all its neighbours.

TDS: What's the future of secularism in the subcontinent?

Pervez Hoodbhoy: Bangladesh may be more multicultural and liberal than Pakistan but Islamist forces are a threat to its internal cohesion. In India, Muslims and Christians feel horribly discriminated against. As for Pakistan: the situation for Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians is dreadful. That's how it is today. But look at the world now and how it was in centuries past when everyone lived under some local tyrant who belonged to some local tribe. We live in an age of temporary setbacks. Even in South Asia we have learned to be much more accommodative of differences. So let's keep our faith in the better world to come.

Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy is an Islamabad-based physicist and commentator. His book Pakistan: Origin, Identity, Future is scheduled for publication by Routledge this year.



Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy

Remembering Shaheed Lt Col Syed Abdul Hai

FROM PAGE S2

Around 10:00pm, a convoy of machine-gun-mounted jeeps and an ambulance arrived at our Dhanmondi house. At first, some of the soldiers with rifles surrounded the house. We partly removed the curtains and saw through the windowpane that they opened the main gate, through which an ambulance entered. A coffin was brought out by some armed personnel.

There were sounds of heavy boots on the balcony and loud knocks at the door. Amma asked us to stay behind and opened the door. To her great shock, she saw Naseem standing there with the children. “Where is Hai?” Amma asked her. Naseem stretched out her hand and slightly pointed to the coffin laid on the balcony.

“There should be no protests and any mourning should be strictly kept indoors. The burial should be done within the grounds of the house,” these were the instructions of an officer who brought Hai's body.

Our brave Urdu-speaking driver brought a Moulvi Sahib from the neighbourhood mosque, who recited the holy Quran for the peace of the departed soul. The next morning, the army officer on duty, after much pleading and a reference to the HQ, relented. Domestic aides from our house and one or two other neighbours were sent to prepare the grave close to my father's at the Azimpur graveyard, where he was buried only about two months ago.

Escorted by an army contingent and troops mounted with machine guns, we took the dead body to Azimpur in an ambulance. During the entire ritual, we were kept under the strict surveillance of ever-vigilant armed troops. There were no loud mournings. Just absolute, stunned silence. With muted utterances from the Quran, the body was laid inside the grave, after we saw the last glimpse of Shaheed Syed Abdul Hai.

And that was the moment when we realised – the war of independence had already started.

Enam Ahmed Chaudhury is a former Chairman of the Privatisation Commission.

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