



Soldiers of Mukti Bahini, 1971.



PHOTO: RAGHU RAI A promo for film Khel Khel Mein.

Guarding the silences

Nonetheless, given how recent 1971 is, it is also not easy to completely erase. The year continues to be defining for Pakistan, shaping educational and military policies, national ideological frameworks and regional relationships. Thus, rather than an absolute silencing, a selective remembering and retelling of 1971 is permitted in Pakistan, a carefully guarded evocation that reinforces national narratives while maintaining silences seen as essential to "national stability." By setting parameters around what can be remembered, the state effectively also defines what must not be remembered.

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51 years after 1971, the birth of Bangladesh continues to evoke a range of emotions in Pakistan. There are civilians – poets, intellectuals, activists, even some former army officers – that protested the military-led violence against Bengalis and ethnic minorities five decades ago, and continue to criticize and agonize over the bloodshed and suffering caused by state policies. Some of them have been honoured in Bangladesh. There are others who lived in erstwhile East Pakistan and had Bengali friends; they remember and retell a different past than that which is registered in the national imaginary. They speak of the discrimination, the exploitation, the systemic violence they witnessed and remind those like me – born years after the war – of the importance of acknowledging the past and the way in which it shapes the present, not just in terms of internal and regional politics but especially for the countless people who continue to live with the trauma and loss encountered in 1971.

However, these personal memories sit at odds with and on the periphery of official and popular discourse in Pakistan. In the case of the latter, there is little space for introspecting 51 years on. Textbooks present distorted information and skim over

world, many states use techniques and strategies to "cope" with or deny histories that are perceived as dangerous to national ideology, in the process producing distorted, fabricated or misleading histories, partial truths or complete lies. In Pakistan's case textbooks, museums and military memoirs – among other official sites – are used to make visible those parts of the past that are deemed convenient while erasing other essential realities, thereby producing a partial amnesia. There are a few different ways in which this selective and slanted remembering and forgetting is produced.

Firstly, there is a quantification of violence and in this quantification, violence against Bengalis is minimized, denied or trivialized while violence against non-Bengalis – erstwhile West Pakistanis and the Urdu-speaking community – is maximized. Numbers are used but only to neutralize the bloodshed, reduce the significance of Bengali pain, undermine claims of genocide and absolve Pakistan. Violence of 1971 is remembered but only towards select bodies. If atrocities towards Bengalis and other ethnic minorities are recalled, they are framed as an "excess." In the process, they come to be seen as something "extra" or in "excess" of the military action, as "collateral damage" of any

action against citizens. Moreover, specific terminologies are employed, such as terming this state violence as "clashes", Bengali nationalism as an "infection" needing a "cure" and the struggle for liberation as Indian-state sponsored terrorism. The latter not only depoliticizes people's struggles but belittles and reduces them to an Indian conspiracy. Ironically, the same strategy is used by India in Kashmir, labelling people's fight for their rights as Pakistan state sponsored terrorism and equating people picking up arms with Indian-state violence, in the process justifying violent crackdowns and torture of Kashmiris. This also has parallels to how Israel treats, equates, instrumentalizes and legitimates violence in Palestine.

Thirdly, critical events of and leading up to 1971, including the grievances of the people of erstwhile East Pakistan are either ignored, decontextualized or backgrounded. The focus remains on India's involvement in the war, with the language movement, the political and economic struggle and the violence against Bengalis overshadowed if not negated altogether. India is portrayed as wanting to "break up" Pakistan, as revenge for Pakistan "breaking up" India in 1947. While India's involvement in the war is well established, through this hyper focus on the eastern neighbour, Pakistan is able to deflect from its own role while reducing 1971 to another bilateral Indo-Pak war.

These are just some of the ways in which how 1971 is remembered also defines what must not be remembered; the quantification, the belittling, the backgrounding, the words used when referring to the year all ensure that only certain versions come forth, ones which end up defending state policies. If state violence ever emerges or is recalled, it can then be framed as an act of "self preservation", a sacrifice to preserve "national integrity".

While there are annual TV shows commemorating 16 December in Pakistan, more often than not, they too tend to echo the state narrative. In terms of books, literature on 1971 is dominated by military memoirs, several of which were published in or after the 1990s at a time when there were growing calls for holding perpetrators of the war responsible in Bangladesh. These memoirs attempt to not only control Pakistan's narrative in light of the movement for justice in Bangladesh but often

are also used as platforms to absolve the authors of accusations levelled against them and the army. Outside of these military memories, cultural and literary works on 1971 have been minimal. As late Pakistani translator, editor and writer Asif Farrukhi has argued, compared to the 1947 Partition of British India, literature on 1971 is "limited and lacklustre" though nonetheless significant for writers have often been able to document stories, at least in fiction, that defy the forgetting and erasure at the state level. Thus, when on the 50th anniversary of the war, Pakistan saw the rare production of a series of films, TV serials and documentaries on 1971, it necessitated a reflection. I was curious if these newer takes would resist official narratives and unsilence the silences, bringing forth a nuanced reflection on the past through the use of art and storytelling. Yet I also feared the reproduction of the same distorted versions permeating widely through officially controlled and disseminated history. To explore the extent to which my reservations were accurate, I looked at two commercial media productions to explore the permitted and forbidden narratives five decades on.

The first is *Khel Khel Mein*, a 2021 film. The premise of the film is promising, centering around a quest for truth, a desire to fight false propaganda and distortions around 1971. The main protagonist is bent upon visiting Bangladesh, about mending ties, rebuilding the relationship and coming to terms with the past. Those might be noble gestures, but one must ask how this might be possible without an acknowledgement of that very past – one that Bangladesh has been asking for. Quickly, the film reveals that the quest for truth is a quest for partial truth, one Pakistan is already comfortable remembering, accentuating, reproducing. And the desire to come to terms with the past is a desire to "fix" misconceptions that Bangladesh has about its own history, by showing them the "truth" Pakistan has long known. This "truth" is what has always been permissible in Pakistan to speak to and runs around two common themes discussed above. The first is the violence experienced by West Pakistanis and the Urdu-speaking community during 1971. The second is the role of India in "dismembering" Pakistan (common terminology used in Pakistan to refer to the year).

Searching for her grandfather, referred to as an *atka ho* Pakistani – commonly also termed as *stranded Pakistanis* – the film highlights the conditions of the Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh. In 2017, I visited some of the camps that many from the community continue to dwell in. Poor sanitation, cramped settings and precarious economic, social and political conditions have left thousands vulnerable. In the interviews I have conducted with those who continue to reside in Bangladesh as well as those who were able to migrate to Pakistan, violence, trauma and loss remain palpable. However, in Pakistan, this suffering and violence is repackaged and instrumentalized.

Dedicated to the "dignity and patience of stateless people who await recognition" (it is pertinent to note that a 2008 Bangladesh Supreme Court judgement granted citizenship, although the process comes with its own limitations and hurdles), *Khel Khel Mein*, like official discourse, uses this selective violence to argue that

mistakes were made by either side, and both therefore can apologize. The film asks both sides to seek forgiveness but Pakistan's role in the war is completely erased, as is the violence against Bengalis. An apology by Pakistan then seems almost unnecessary; like a big hearted generous and selfless act even though it has nothing to apologize for. And if Pakistan is absolved, who carries the blame? Fingers are pointed towards India which is accused of trying to destabilize and break Pakistan both in 1971 as well as today through its policies in Balochistan. In neither case is there any introspection on why citizens may rely on support from other countries – whether in the case of Bangladesh, Balochistan or Kashmir – as their rights are crushed upon; instead, they become framed as either a political, agency-less, too innocent for their own good, or manipulated and exploited – and at worst treacherous, unpatriotic, unnationalistic and deceitful. The film constantly asks who benefited from spreading hatred between two brothers who shared one mother, one blood, one religion, upsetting a seemingly romanticized, idyllic and rosy pre-1971 past without any reflection on Pakistan's own actions.

The serial *Jo Bichar Gaye* also centers around similar themes. The title evokes nostalgia which reinforces how 1971 is registered in Pakistan as loss or dismemberment (as opposed to liberation in Bangladesh). But this regret or remorse is again attributed to India breaking Pakistan by spreading hatred and misleading Bengalis. Told partly through the lens of army officers, the serial does an excellent job at humanizing the soldiers and emphasizing the difficulties they faced against Indian betrayal. However, barring a few instances, the same humanization isn't afforded to Bengalis. Framed as villains and traitors working at the behest of India with caricature like accents, student activists are depicted as outlaws, with Bengalis hunting and butchering West Pakistanis, outnumbering Pakistani soldiers and running slaughter houses. Once again, the violence Pakistan is accused of is turned on its head, with the weaponized military shown as helpless victims. Politicians are criticized while the army is shown as having been compelled to use force in face of ruthless Bengali mobs, with their bravery championed. Statistics are flashed upon the screen, listing in thousands the number of people killed by "angry Bengalis" funded by India and sombre army officers are portrayed lamenting that though they are only there to fight and die for their country, history will only blame them.

In both *Khel Khel Mein* and *Jo Bichar Gaye* there is no desire to come to terms with the past, to say what remains unsayable. Perhaps their production was only made possible because of the parameters they adhered to. 51 years on there is no space to unsilence the silenced. Remembering must remain a selective act. What we are left with then are tireless efforts to absolve the army and the state, of acts that it claims never happened, of history that it claims is fabricated, of violence that it argues it was only a victim of.

Anam Zakaria is the author of three books, including 1971: A People's History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India (Penguin Random House 2019).

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A promo for TV serial Jo Bichar Gaye.

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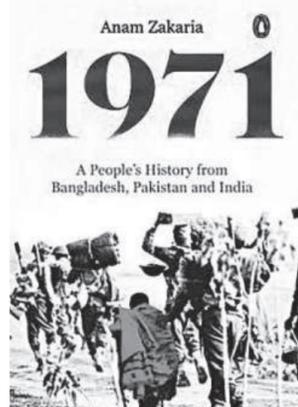
the complex and difficult history in a matter of a few paragraphs while mainstream discourse on 1971 remains limited if not absent, with efforts to sincerely engage with history curtailed. Nonetheless, given how recent 1971 is, it is also not easy to completely erase. The year continues to be defining for Pakistan, shaping educational and military policies, national ideological frameworks and regional relationships. Thus, rather than an absolute silencing, a selective remembering and retelling of 1971 is permitted in Pakistan, a carefully guarded evocation that reinforces national narratives while maintaining silences seen as essential to "national stability." By setting parameters around what can be remembered, the state effectively also defines what must not be remembered.

How, might one ask, does the state do this? Pakistan is of course not alone in such efforts. Around the

war; therefore, even if this excess is criticized or lamented, state policies and military violence itself remains unquestionable. The language of excess enables a foreclosing of the possibilities of introspection or critique.

Secondly, through this selective focus on West Pakistanis and the Urdu-speaking community, genuine pain and suffering is appropriated, instrumentalized and weaponized to legitimate state-led violence against Bengalis and other ethnic minorities from March 1971 onwards. In fact, the army museum in Lahore, inaugurated in 2016, uses the term genocide but only to refer to violence against "pro-Pakistanis", turning the atrocities Pakistan is accused of on its head, and arguing that military action was not only warranted but necessary.

In the process, false equivalencies are drawn between individual violence and large scale, state machinery backed



Cover of Anam Zakaria's book 1971: A People's History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India