

Australia's Response to the 1971 Refugee Crisis



In this interview with The Daily Star, Rachel Stevens, Lecturer in History at the Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, shares insights into her research and recently published book titled "Citizen-Driven Humanitarianism and the Bangladesh Liberation War: Australian Aid during the 1971 Refugee Crisis," released by Bloomsbury Academic in 2024.

The Daily Star (TDS): What sparked your interest in researching the events of 1971 in Bangladesh, particularly the connection to Australia, which had largely remained obscure before your investigation?

Rachel Stevens (RS): In 2010, I was teaching a first-year undergraduate history course that covered Asian history from 1500 to today. In the class, we used the textbook *A History of Asia* by Rhoads Murphey, which is now in its 8th edition and widely used. I still remember reading chapter 20 because it devoted just one paragraph, consisting of four sentences, to summarise the Bangladesh Liberation War.

The treatment of the Bangladesh Liberation War by this esteemed American historian was flabbergasting. And that was it. The moment of astonishment passed, but the memory of this inadequate four-sentence summary stuck with me.

Seven years passed, and now I was working as a historian researching Australia's immigration history. In this work, I did a brief online search of the papers of former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. As an immigration historian focused on the post-1970 period, Fraser is a significant historical figure, especially regarding the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees. So, I went onto the catalogue, thinking I would find material relating to Vietnamese refugees.

I did, but I also found something much more interesting. I stumbled across a transcript of a radio address by Fraser in October 1971, when he was Australia's Education Minister. In his address, Fraser spoke of the 'great deal of attention to the tragic problems in the Indian sub-continent... [that] have caught the imagination and sympathy of many people in Australia'.

Despite being a historian of that period, I had never heard about Australians' deep concern for Bangladeshis during their war of independence. Fraser's comments also reminded me of the Asian history textbook I used in 2010: once again, there was a fleeting reference to a significant world event (the liberation

war) that left me with more questions than answers.

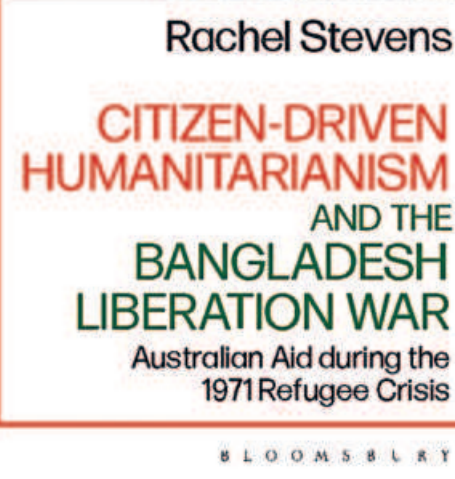
Tretell these two mundane anecdotes because collectively, they revealed a gap in knowledge. We have the American historian brushing over the significance of Bangladesh's independence war in his textbook; then we have the Australian politician talking about how Australians had been so moved by events far away in Bangladesh. Because these two accounts were so misaligned, I had a hunch that there may be more to the story, which prompted further research into the topic.

(TDS): When and how did Australians become aware of Pakistan's military actions in East Bengal, and how did their reaction evolve over time?

(RS): The news media was the main source of information, particularly the metropolitan broadsheet newspapers and the publicly funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Television provided Australians with compelling imagery of the degree of suffering during the war. Radio remained a vital source of information, particularly for Australians living in remote and rural areas (approximately 20 per cent of the population). Journalists not only described the events as they unfolded but also provided political context to help Australians understand the root causes of the war. While the news media was crucial in introducing Australians to events in Bangladesh in the early months of the conflict, from June 1971 civil society organizations, such as churches, NGOs, and activist groups, were leading public discussions on how best to support Bangladeshis.

(TDS): Did your research unveil any noteworthy involvements by humanitarian NGOs in Australia regarding the Bangladesh issue, distinguishing it from responses to previous crises?

(RS): During the war, a schism emerged between older, more conservative NGOs such as the Red Cross, and newer organizations that were far more politicized than their predecessors. The Red Cross movement is known for its impartiality and neutrality in



war zones, meaning that during the Bangladesh Liberation War, it insisted on only providing aid to refugees in India and deliberately avoided appropriating blame or taking a side. The provision of apolitical emergency relief was deemed unsatisfactory by younger NGOs, such as Community Aid Abroad (now Oxfam). This NGO saw the war as a decolonial struggle for justice.

The political divisions in the Australian NGO scene mirror wider changes underway in Australian society. In the western world, much is written on the 1960s protest movements. In Australia, protest movements came later, in the early 1970s, which coincided with events in Bangladesh.

(TDS): Besides the endeavors of NGOs, how did individuals react to the

Bangladesh War crisis in 1971?

(RS): One of the main discoveries of my research is the ways that individuals took matters into their own hands. Rather than waiting for government aid or NGO assistance, disenchanted individuals filled the void. An excellent example is that of suburban housewife Moira Dynon, which I cover in my book. Here is an instance of an educated, well-to-do woman using her high society connections and superior intellect to improve the living conditions of refugees in India. To be sure, Dynon had a long history as a Catholic humanitarian. But when the war erupted, Dynon galvanized the public, engaging in nationwide speaking tours, which educated Australians on the causes of the Bangladesh war, urged them to donate money to charities, and lobbied Australian politicians to increase government aid.

My research demonstrates the power of the people. When the war started, the Australian government meekly adopted a neutral stance to avoid offending the Pakistani government and their US allies. But within ten months – by January 1972 – the Australian government was leading a coalition of western and eastern nations to formally recognize the independence of Bangladesh. In October 1971, the Australian government also increased their aid commitment to Bangladeshi refugees on three occasions in response to public pressure.

My research shows that the actions of individuals can change government policies that have material consequences for people displaced by war. Rather than criticizing politicians for changing their official position on an issue, we should welcome instances when governments respond to the will of the people.

"Citizen-Driven Humanitarianism and the Bangladesh Liberation War: Australian Aid during the 1971 Refugee Crisis" can be viewed and downloaded free of charge here <https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/monograph?docid=b-9781350384743>

Interviewed by Priyam Paul

The untold story of Jashore's resistance during the Liberation War



Nur Muhammad, a valiant freedom fighter, prolific author, and esteemed political activist, engaged in numerous battles against the Pakistani junta across 1971, particularly in the wider Jashore region. In an exclusive interview with The Daily Star, he shares introspective reflections on his wartime encounters and the intricate dynamics of the pivotal year 1971.

The Daily Star (TDS): What was the situation like on the eve of the 1971 war?

Nur Muhammad (NM): At that time, I was around 27 or 28 years old, old enough to grasp the gravity of the situation. Prior to 1971, thoughts of war were pervasive. Personally, I harbored a disagreement with our Jashore party section of the East Pakistan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) [EPCP(ML)], the aftermath of which did not bode well for me. However, I chose not to confront the party.

The district committee, under the leadership of Sudhanshu Dey and Hemanta Sarkar, esteemed political figures deeply involved in the Tebhaga movement, went underground and remained uncertain about fully committing to the 1971 war. They sought guidance from the central committee. I engaged them in discussion, expressing my conviction that they were making a grave error. I emphasized that our struggle had evolved into a conflict between the Pakistani state and the people of East Bengal. My younger comrades were persuaded by my arguments, recognizing that joining the war in 1971 was our only recourse to defeating the Pakistani state.

We became aware of Captain Hafiz's uprising in the Jessore cantonment. In response, we orchestrated raids on several police stations to acquire arms. Additionally, some EPR members willingly surrendered their arms to us upon leaving their stations.

Recognizing the necessity for unified action against the Pakistani invaders, I prioritized cooperation over party divisions. My focus lay in fostering collaboration with other parties, mobilizing peasants, facilitating military training, and establishing a military commission to oversee our efforts. Despite facing limitations, we adequately trained our members. My objective was to confront the Pakistani army's occupation of our country

without resorting to crossing into India at any cost.

Our stance wasn't driven by animosity or distrust toward India; rather, we remained steadfast in our commitment to maintaining a continuous presence on the battlefield and fiercely engaging the Pakistani army with all our capabilities. Unlike the defensive strategy favored by the Awami League, our aim was to launch an offensive campaign.

However, Mashur Rahman, a prominent leader of the Awami League and a former minister, stayed back. Inspired by the political principles of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, his decision to stay here was reinforced by a deep conviction. Tragically, he was later apprehended and killed.

TDS: Tell us about the war efforts of your group?

NM: I assumed leadership of our group after persuading them to join the war, deeming it justified to resist the invaders, despite opposition from our central committee. We successfully captured Jashore, Mohammadpur, Narail, Lohagara, and Shalikhtha thana, but struggled to hold onto these territories amidst relentless attacks from the Razakars.

These collaborators proved to be formidable adversaries, actively impeding our liberation efforts by providing intelligence to the Pakistani

army and inflicting significant casualties upon us. As the conflict intensified, we found ourselves surrounded and realized the futility of maintaining our positions. Despite possessing 350 arms, we suffered heavy losses, with over 200 of our members falling in battle. However, we adhered

to our principles by refraining from executing enemy prisoners.

In our operational zone, we encountered neither Mujib Bahini nor regular liberation forces prior to November. Nonetheless, we endeavored to strengthen our military capabilities by independently organizing efforts for arms procurement and training, essential for our continued engagement in the

war.

I vividly remember the sacrifices of my comrades who laid down their lives during the war, many of whom were revered student leaders. After my release from prison in 1968, the student leaders of our generation, for various valid reasons, did not continue their involvement in the student movement. Prior to that, luminaries like Asad, Nazrul, Manik, and their peers had spearheaded the student organization and movement. They had earned widespread acclaim for their exemplary leadership in the district's student society during the mass uprising of 1969, leaving an indelible mark on history. Comrade Asad, particularly, attained legendary status, serving



Martyr Mashukur Rahman Tojo

as the Vice President of the College Students' Union and the convener of the All-Party District Students' Struggle Council during the 11-point movement. Comrade Nazrul was elected as the General Secretary of College Sangsad in 1967, while Comrade Manik held the position of District Student Union President. All of them initially joined the Student Union and swiftly aligned themselves with the Communist Party group. By the end of 1970, they all attained party ranks, with Nazrul being the first among them. By 1971, they were fully dedicated to revolutionary work as full-time party workers.

I remember Comrade Mashukur Rahman Tojo, who joined the Student Union while studying at Dhaka University and faced imprisonment. He was among the most brilliant students in our district, earning double honors in Physics and Mathematics. Tojo excelled academically, achieving first class in his Master's examination in Mathematics before pursuing higher education abroad. Upon his return in 1969, he secured a well-paid job with a car and a house. I had the opportunity to meet him upon his return, and we engaged in several discussions. He possessed a keen awareness of the profound controversies within the global communist movement and their reverberations in our country's communist circles.

During this time, a faction of the East Pakistan Communist Party (ML) splintered off to form the Communist Party, represented by Amjad Hossain in Jashore, with whom Comrade Tojo was acquainted. In March 1971, Tojo was abducted by Pakistani army personnel in Jessore cantonment and subjected to brutal physical torture. Following a brief conditional release, he departed for India with some relatives in a car provided by his employer. I encountered him again, likely on April 8, 1971, during a brief visit to Bangaon for special duties. Once more, we conversed deeply.

Upon hearing of my imminent return to the country, he requested me to wait. Two days later, Tojo Bhai appeared, dressed in cloth shoes, a lungi, and a half-shirt, with a small bag slung over his shoulder. He informed me that he had entrusted his new Mazda car to Awami League's Tajuddin Sahib and decided to return to our homeland. He had thoroughly contemplated the situation and resolved to stand by me in the fight on our native soil.

However, tragedy struck before our plans could unfold. Initially, Comrade Nazrul Islam was apprehended by Pakistani forces from the Monirampur area and transported to Jashore cantonment, where he met a grim fate. Following this, Comrade Mashukur Rahman Tojo, along with Comrades Asaduzzaman, Sirajul Islam Shanti, Mohiuddin Ali Akhtar, and Abdul Mateen, along with a significant portion of our party, were compelled to retreat to Dumuria in Khulna, traversing through Monirampur and Keshabpur. In October, calamity befell the Communist movement across the district, prompting the aforementioned comrades to relocate once more from Dumuria. Comrade Aktar chose a different path, crossing the border back to his birthplace in West Bengal's Birbhum district. Meanwhile, the others decided to return to the vicinity of Jessore city. Upon clandestinely settling in a house in Chineta, Comrade Mateen was tasked with scouting Jashore town and its environs for a suitable location to regroup. However, before any further action could be taken, tragedy struck. Abdul Mateen left on his mission, but before he could return, Comrades Tojo, Shanti, Manik, Asad, and Sirajul Islam fell into the clutches of the Razakars, fanatical agents of Pakistan, who subjected them to unimaginable cruelty, ultimately claiming their lives.

Interviewed by Priyam Paul