

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARCH 7

Historiography, power, and politics



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“All history is contemporary history, for we cannot understand the past without reference to the present.”
– Michel Foucault

History, as Walter Benjamin suggested, is not a seamless continuum, but a battlefield where memory is contested, reinscribed, and often erased in the name of constructing, if not privileging, dominant narratives. Michel Foucault added that “All history is contemporary history,” emphasising that our understanding of the past is inextricable from the present. Together, these perspectives illuminate how the meanings of March 7 are not fixed but continuously shaped by contemporary power dynamics. In Bangladesh, March 7, 1971 remains one such battleground: a day at once foundational and yet unsettled in its meaning. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s speech at the Racecourse Ground (now Suhrawardy Udyan) in Dhaka was, for many, the moment that crystallised people’s aspirations for self-determination in the erstwhile East Pakistan, a speech that hovered between caution and inevitability, revolution and restraint. It was not a formal declaration of independence, yet its impact made armed struggle almost a foregone conclusion. However, in the shifting political landscapes of Bangladesh, the significance of this day has been repeatedly contested, appropriated, and put under erasure—not in the simple sense of being forgotten, but in the Derridean sense of being put under erasure, or crossed out, while remaining legible beneath the strikethrough.

Writing history by erasing it

To write history “under erasure,” as Jacques Derrida suggested, means to render certain events both visible and obscured at the same time—crossing them out while leaving a trace of their original significance. Erasure here does not signify absence but a mode of selective remembering, where inconvenient or competing narratives are marginalised, if not obliterated. The selective remembering of March 7 serves specific political functions. Under Ziaur Rahman and Ershad, the downplaying of Mujib’s role in the liberation struggle helped build the legitimacy of military figures. Conversely, the revival of March 7

by the Awami League reinforced the party’s control over the nation’s founding narrative, aligning it with their ongoing political interests. In Bangladesh, the fate of March 7 has exemplified how history is reshaped to align with contemporary power politics. The day, once celebrated as a moment of political culmination, was downplayed during the regimes of Ziaur Rahman and Ershad. The very discourse around the nation’s founding was rewritten to foreground an alternative lineage of nationalist heroes and military figures. This was not merely a matter of omission, but an active reconstitution of the past—termed “silencing the past” by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, where historical processes are deliberately obscured to shape collective memory.

Conversely, when the Awami League returned to power, March 7 was resurrected and elevated to canonical status. The UNESCO recognition of Mujib’s speech as part of the Memory of the World Register in 2017 further institutionalised its significance. But here too, history was being rewritten—this time not by erasing March 7 but by fixing it within a singular, state-sanctioned narrative. The radical openness of the speech, its interplay of defiance and strategic ambiguity, was smoothed over in favour of a retrospective teleology that presented it as the inevitable prelude to independence. In both cases—whether through suppression or canonisation—the past was not simply recorded but actively rewritten to legitimise contemporary political formations.

How history writes itself

Yet, history, as much as it is written by the victors, also writes itself in ways that evade control. The very fact that March 7 has had to be repeatedly reinterpreted, erased, and reinscribed suggests that history is not a fixed script but an ongoing process of negotiation and (de)(re)legitimation. The instability of its meaning points to the limits of historical (fore)closure—what Derrida might call the impossibility of fully mastering the trace. No matter how regimes attempt to frame March 7, its polysemy resists final domestication.

The Annales School stresses the importance of long-term, structural forces—

such as economic inequality and regional disparities—over individual events. In the case of March 7, this means that while Mujib’s speech was a critical moment, it was also shaped by decades of social and economic unrest in East Pakistan. March 7 was not just a product of Mujib’s rhetoric; it was the culmination of decades of agrarian unrest, linguistic nationalism, and economic disparity between East and West Pakistan. The Annales historians would argue that while political figures shape history, deeper material and social forces constrain and direct their actions. Thus, the repeated contestation of March 7 reflects not just shifts in political power but enduring structural tensions in Bangladesh’s postcolonial development.

Foucault’s archaeology and genealogy of knowledge, on the other hand, provide

This construction of the speech as a “moment of strategic ambiguity” served to align it with a vision of a “unified” Bangladesh rather than the revolutionary rhetoric that many hoped for. In contrast, when the Awami League sought to reclaim March 7, it highlighted the speech as the definitive moment of defiance, a vision of Bangladesh’s destiny that could not be ignored. Different political actors have read the speech through different lenses, some seeing in it the inevitable culmination of Bangalee nationalism, others seeing an instance where history exceeded the leader’s cautious rhetoric. The history of March 7, then, does not simply belong to those who write it; it belongs to the event itself, to the people who filled the Racecourse Ground, to the contingencies that unfolded in the days and weeks after.

historiography is instructive of a larger reality: history is never merely about the past but remains an active terrain of struggle in the present. Whether through outright erasure, selective inclusion, or rigid memorialisation, the battle over history is ultimately a battle over power—over who gets to narrate the past and for what ends. The Annales School demonstrates how deep-seated structural forces—political, economic, and cultural—have continuously reshaped the meaning of March 7, embedding it within shifting frameworks of national identity and legitimacy. Meanwhile, Foucault’s archaeology and genealogy expose the mechanisms through which knowledge about the event has been produced, controlled, and disseminated, revealing how history is not merely recorded but actively constructed.

And yet, history also carries within it the seeds of its own resistance; it writes itself in ways that no official narrative can fully contain. The significance of March 7, then, lies not in its uncontested enshrinement but in its persistent contestation. As a site of meaning in flux, it is continually rewritten yet never fully erased, always open to new interpretations and reconfigurations. The struggle over March 7 reflects the broader tension between historical closure and historical possibility—between the state’s attempts to fix its meaning and the countervailing forces that insist on its multiplicity. In this sense, the work of March 7 remains unfinished, not because its historical significance is in question, but because history itself refuses finality. The epigram, “All history is contemporary history, for we cannot understand the past without reference to the present,” underscores the idea that our understanding of history is always influenced by the present moment. Foucault suggested that history is never a neutral recounting of events; instead, it is continuously reinterpreted through the lens of current power structures, ideologies, and struggles.

This perspective, however, can hardly serve as an alibi for writing history by erasure, especially when erasure—or the trace left behind—becomes a tool for delegitimising alternative, overdetermined narratives. While history is always shaped by the present, the deliberate omission or distortion of past events, like the meaning of March 7, serves not just to reinterpret, but to actively control and suppress competing visions of the past, reinforcing the present power structures. In this way, the act of erasure becomes not merely a reflection of contemporary concerns, but a mechanism of power that determines which histories are visible and which are silenced, ensuring that the past remains aligned with the interests of the present.



The fate of March 7 has exemplified how history is reshaped to align with contemporary power politics.

SOURCE: RAFIKUR RAHMAN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

a framework to analyse how March 7 has been constituted as an object of discourse. His archaeological method would trace how different political regimes have constructed the meaning of the speech, revealing the discursive formations that have rendered it either central or marginal at different historical junctures. Genealogy, in turn, would expose the power relations embedded in these narratives—how successive governments have used the memory of March 7 to consolidate authority, exclude rival interpretations, and create a disciplined historical consciousness.

For instance, under Ershad’s regime, the speech was framed not as a rallying cry for independence but as a moment of “containment” that prevented a full rupture.

Moreover, the meaning of March 7 is shaped not just by those who seek to commemorate or erase it, but by the structural forces of history itself. The Liberation War that followed, the failures and successes of post-independence governance, the cycles of military rule and civilian politics—each of these moments has retroactively reshaped how March 7 is understood. To invoke Georg Hegel, history is often grasped only in retrospect, through the owl of Minerva taking flight at dusk. In this sense, the meaning of March 7 is never fully settled; it remains in motion, subject to new inflections and interpretations as the political landscape evolves.

The unfinished work of March 7

The fate of March 7 in Bangladesh’s

How Trump’s second term may reshape US-India ties



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As President Donald Trump re-enters the White House for a second term, questions loom over the future of US-India relations which faces new complexities. Following Trump’s recent remarks during a joint press conference with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it is clear that the US is recalibrating its approach to India, particularly in the realms of trade, defense, and energy. Under Trump 2.0, India finds itself at a crossroads, navigating a more assertive and transactional US stance, with the potential for both opportunities and challenges ahead.

Reciprocal policies on the horizon

One of the most prominent themes emerging from Trump’s second term is his hardline stance on trade. In his recent comments, Trump referred to India as “one of the highest tariffed nations anywhere in the world,” signalling growing dissatisfaction with India’s tariff policies. Trump bluntly warned that the US would no longer tolerate what he sees as one-sided tariffs, pushing for what he termed “reciprocal tariffs.” “Whatever India charges, we charge them,” Trump stated, indicating that the US would impose similar tariffs on Indian goods entering the US if India continues with high tariff practices.

This move is likely to put significant pressure on India, already under strain from previous trade negotiations. India has historically defended its tariff policies as essential for protecting domestic industries, especially in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors. However, with Trump’s new approach, India may now face retaliatory US tariffs on its exports

unless substantial concessions are made. This could fundamentally alter the trade dynamics between the two countries, especially considering the economic significance of the US as India’s largest trade partner.

In 2024, US-India total goods trade was valued at approximately \$129.2 billion, with US exports to India reaching \$41.8 billion and imports from India at \$87.4 billion. A shift to reciprocal tariffs could disrupt these key trade flows, affecting a wide range of industries such as technology, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals. Indian exporters would face challenges in the face of increased tariffs on items such as textiles, gems, and machinery. For the US, a continued trade imbalance with India may fuel further tensions, as Trump is determined to address what he perceives as unfair trade practices.

A new energy order?

The energy sector is another key area where the US and India have signalled a deepening partnership. During a recent joint press conference, President Trump highlighted an agreement that positions the US to become India’s leading supplier of oil and gas.

The deal goes beyond oil and gas, extending into the nuclear energy sector. Trump made a bold declaration that the US would become “the number-one supplier in the groundbreaking development for the US nuclear industry.” This is a significant pivot in US-India relations, as India is currently reforming its laws to welcome US nuclear technology. These changes will pave the way for US firms to enter India’s nuclear market, offering advanced technology and

expertise that could help meet India’s massive energy demands.

For India, this agreement marks a significant shift, particularly in its energy procurement strategy. While India has traditionally relied on oil imports from countries like Iran and Russia, a pivot towards US energy supplies could eventually become costlier for India. Furthermore, this growing alignment with US energy interests will also require India to navigate the delicate balance of maintaining its long-standing relationships with other energy suppliers, notably Russia.

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A strategic partnership amidst growing tensions

Defence cooperation has been one of the most significant pillars of the US-India relationship, and Trump’s latest comments suggest that this partnership is set to deepen even further. The “US-India COMPACT” (Catalyzing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce and Technology for the 21st Century) sets the outline of a comprehensive initiative designed to transform defence, trade, and technology relations between the two countries. Trump made it clear that the US intends to significantly ramp up military sales to India, “Starting this year, we’ll be increasing military sales to India by many billions of dollars,” a statement that underscores the

growing importance of the defence partnership in US-India relations.

A key component of this expanded defence cooperation is the potential sale of the F-35 stealth fighter jet to India. Trump confirmed, “We’re also paving the way to ultimately provide India with the F-35 stealth fighters.” The F-35, among the most advanced and stealthiest fighter jets in the world, would represent a significant leap in India’s defence capabilities. While India has not yet finalised the purchase, the prospect of acquiring such cutting-edge technology underscores the increasingly close strategic alignment between the two countries.

However, this growing defense partnership is not without its complications. India has long maintained strong defence ties with Russia, a legacy that still influences its military procurement decisions. A shift to acquiring the F-35 could place India in a delicate position, balancing its historical relationship with Russia against its growing ties with the US. The potential for military dependence on the US raises concerns over India’s strategic autonomy, particularly in the context of regional power dynamics involving China.

Moreover, India faces the risk of the F-35 becoming a “white elephant” if it cannot effectively integrate and operate the technology. The complex logistics, training, and maintenance requirements of the F-35 could further strain India’s military resources.

Will India adapt or resist?

Trump’s policies, ranging from trade tariffs to defense cooperation, signal a shift towards a more transactional and assertive relationship between the two countries. The US may indeed be tightening its grip on India under Trump 2.0, but the question remains: how will India respond? Will it acquiesce to the demands of its powerful partner, or will it find ways to assert its own interests in the face of increasing US pressure? For now, it seems that India may be inclined to comply with US demands, at least in the short term.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Suit piece
- Not nude
- May, for one
- Romantic one
- Pond cover
- Humble
- African city
- Gratuity
- Coffee dispenser
- African city
- Annoys
- Pretentious
- Egypt’s Sadat
- Racket
- Put in a mausoleum
- African city
- Aussie hopper
- Suffix for hero
- African city
- Raft pilot
- Fads
- Veep Agnew
- Extreme pain
- Knitting need
- Stereo precursor

DOWN

- Hit song of 1958
- Train puller
- Teacher’s reward
- 1976 horror movie
- Assertion
- High hit
- Online icon
- Stop
- “Stop being a wimp!”
- Settle, as a debt
- Johnson biographer
- Homer’s son
- Siren
- Servant for taverns, e.g.
- Passes over
- Bed topper
- Aviator Earhart
- Salem’s state
- Entertainer Rita
- Overbearing
- Composer Copland
- Othello’s betrayer
- Screw up



MONDAY’S ANSWERS



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