



A woman refugee at a Kolkata camp holds a placard that reads, “They are human beings. Democracy or demockery??”

Echoes of Exile

Remembering 1971, Confronting the Rohingya Crisis

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The July Uprising has brought to the forefront the need for a more inclusive understanding of 1971, one that incorporates the perspectives of ordinary people and addresses unresolved issues of justice, accountability, and historical truth, independent of political manoeuvring. What of the women who were forced to become refugees in India, who comprised the majority of the 10 million who fled to India in 1971?

While the contribution of the Birangona is now acknowledged, albeit in fraught ways, refugee women are either overlooked or judged for having left. Yet their stories – of hardship, fear, resilience, and a complicated relationship with the new nation – offer lessons about displacement, the gendered nature of conflict, and the insidious ways in which national narratives can silence and marginalise women. These lessons have consequences today in the context of the plight of Rohingya women, showing us that a conversation about sexual violence and the vulnerability of women in and out of conflict is still overdue.

I had the chance to speak to fifty returned refugees, mostly women, in Khulna. At the outbreak of the war, they had left their homes and walked all the way to the border and into India. It took many days for them to get there, carrying their children on their hips or backs. While some of them fled due to the fear of violence, others left after having faced violence—physical and sexual. Many of their husbands could not join them because they were either dead or had joined the war effort. While they escaped death and violent rape, this journey brought with it its own perils of violence. This negotiation with levels of violence itself, that they had to deem a certain level of violence as acceptable even as their bodies revolted, became palatable only because they believed in the idea of an independent Bangladesh. They knew then that that was the price of freedom.

Thus, life in the refugee camps, while offering relative safety from the immediate violence, was harsh in an everyday sense. Camps were overcrowded, resources were scarce, disease was rampant, with the constant fear of sexual violence. Yet women showed resilience, forming support networks and finding strength in shared experiences.

From my interviews with the women who returned, it was evident that camp life united them and helped forge a togetherness based on their lived experience and their longing for home. They shared their worries, their anxieties, their hopes and despair, their guilt for not doing more. They were inspired by the freedom fighters who would visit to avail themselves of the training that the Indian Army provided to active participants in the war. Stories of war and the mere presence of the fighters kept the spirit of independence alive, allowing for greater unity and strengthening of national pride.

The decision to return home was one that none of the women I spoke to forgot; indeed, it is perhaps the most poignant one that refugees undertake as a group—one that the Rohingya refugees here have not been able to make yet. When the news of Bangladesh's victory was announced, celebrations spread across the camps and in the streets. For most, it signalled that they would soon return home. It was one instance where they forgot about

their difficulties; overwhelmed with emotion and nationalist fervour at the prospect of an independent Bangladesh, most said they left immediately. Unlike on their tortuous journey to India, most of them returned to Bangladesh by train and crossed over in Benapole, Jessore—a much safer option for the women I spoke to.

The returnees' re-entry was shaped by a curious contradiction, however. On the one hand, women who had experienced camp life as refugees tended to be more patriotic and nationalistic because of the longing for the homeland they experienced in exile. They closely identified with the party that led the War of Liberation, and with its platform for an independent Bangladesh. On the other hand, the returnees were viewed by those who hadn't left as people who had missed or sat out the war, as if they had irresponsibly taken off on a vacation while people were dying and fighting for freedom.



A Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

This contradiction affected many of those I interviewed; after returning to the homeland, they grew increasingly conscious of how differently they had experienced the war compared to those who never left. A new “us versus them” dichotomy emerged: the returnees could not understand the direct experience of war, and the locals could not relate to the stories of camp life and hardship in a foreign land.

This dichotomy still shapes current political views. War veterans and those who remained in Bangladesh during the war feel they have a better understanding of politics. Their first-hand experience of war, it would appear, has impacted their view of what they perceive to be threats against the nation. Indeed, the nation seems fragile to them even today, nearly half a century later. During the Shabbagh movement, for instance, war veterans and their families popularised the idea of a nation under threat. This sentiment resonated with hundreds of people in the streets who wrapped themselves in Bangladeshi flags to “reclaim the nation”. My interviews revealed that former refugees, in contrast, tended to view the nation state as less fragile and are thus less likely to rush to the defence of the state in the name of nationalism. These sentiments have broader appeal, too, as we bore witness to how the July Uprising was, in part, fuelled by the charge of “anti-national” against dissenting figures. Indeed, the view of

the fragility of the nation-state has led many otherwise rational people to adopt regressive positions.

Today, there are about 123 million refugees worldwide, according to UNHCR, a million of them in our own backyard. As we commemorate the War of '71, let us not ignore the conditions that continue to force people to flee their homes today. In this age of neo-liberalism and imperialism, state violence is more varied. Driven by war, climate change, and social crises caused by structural forces beyond their control, millions of people are being forced to flee their homes with little hope of return in the foreseeable future. Our sympathy for the plight of refugees must be coupled with a resolve to hold accountable the forces that are producing these conditions in the first place, and in such an accounting, it is impossible to ignore the role of nation-states and elite interests.

The legacy of 1971 is, thus, not just about

the past; it resonates powerfully in the present, particularly in the context of the Rohingya refugee crisis. The parallels with 1971 are chilling. Just as Bangladeshi women faced systematic rape as a weapon of war, Rohingya women have endured similar atrocities at the hands of the Myanmar military. The reports of widespread sexual violence, gang rapes, and killings are eerily reminiscent of the horrors of 1971.

The Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, like the camps in India in 1971, are overcrowded and under-resourced. Women and girls face heightened risks of sexual exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence. They bear the primary responsibility for caring for their families, often with minimal support. Their stories, like those of the Bangladeshi women who fled in 1971, are often unheard, overshadowed by broader geopolitical concerns and humanitarian aid statistics. The current climate in Bangladesh, marked by increasing social conservatism, ongoing political polarisation, and a persistent culture of impunity for perpetrators of sexual violence, makes these parallels even more disturbing.

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Silencing the Past

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I recommended that he visit the library to read international newspapers about the 1971 war in Bangladesh. Several days later, I received an email from him thanking me. “There is a total news blackout on 1971 in our history books. I hope to visit Bangladesh one day and ask for forgiveness for what was done in our name.”

What do we risk when we silence the past? Haitian anthropologist and historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in his seminal work *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, provides an excellent framework for understanding how histories are constructed, how certain viewpoints are magnified, while others are sent to the ‘dustbin of history’. Not only does power shape historical production, but silences are also purposefully baked into the recording of history. His framework resonates with the political landscapes of Bangladesh in 1971 and in 2025. If history is replete with elaborate omissions and distortions, how can a lay person make sense of it?

Silencing 1971

The Liberation War of 1971 saw ordinary Bangladeshis rise against the brutal atrocities committed by the Pakistan military. The Mukti Bahini was a People's Army made up of students, teachers, politicians, civil servants, small businesspeople, rickshaw-pullers, farmers,

with the historiographical silences surrounding 1971. Led by students but soon joined by people from all walks of life, the movement challenged the fascism of the Awami League government under Sheikh Hasina and forced her into exile. Watching student leaders expound their historical ideas on media, I realised many had grown up with a fragmentary history manipulated by political agendas. It is not their fault, but the fault of an education system where textbooks present a patchwork of propaganda—Awami League triumphalism, military revisionism, and partisan agendas—leaving little room for historical fact-checking.

Among the demands arising from a certain student segment is the call to send the 1972 Constitution to the graveyard, and to write a new constitution. The 1972 Constitution is a document marred by many amendments designed to consolidate an undemocratic authoritarian rule. But if the Constitution is sent to the graveyard of history, what will replace it? Who will write the new constitution, and under what legal framework? The Constitution, to be acceptable in a democracy, must be passed into law by the elected representatives of the people. How will that occur if the Constitution must be symbolically killed, written afresh before democratic elections? The demand here escapes the rules of parliamentary norms. Reforms must be made for a fair and free



Painting by Zainul Abedin.

women—in other words, people from all walks of society. However, once in power in 1972, the Awami League wrote a partisan history, recasting them as the heroes.

Similarly, the role of women in the liberation struggle is largely seen through the lens of victimhood, focusing on rape as a weapon of war. While this crime against humanity must never be forgotten, it also obscures the multifaceted contributions of women in the Liberation War. Women fought on the frontlines alongside men, helped run freedom fighter camps, and played various critical roles in the war effort. Why, then, have they been sidelined in history?

I do not recall the exact year, but it was possibly in 2011–2012, that I attended a gathering of female freedom fighters organised at Gonoshasthya Kendro in Savar. It was the first time that their sacrifices were acknowledged publicly. Many of the Hindu freedom fighters had relocated to West Bengal, so fellow fighters were meeting after almost 30 years. The women laughed in joy while telling the audience about their experiences of 1971. The most moving moment came when each was given a flower as a tribute to their patriotism. Thanking the organisers, one of them said, “This is the first time I have been recognised as a freedom fighter. No one ever thanked me, let alone gave me a flower.” Their erasure from the historical narrative underscores how often women's contributions are relegated to the margins.

These historical silences extend beyond the war itself. The plight of the stranded Biharis, confined to camps since 1972, remains a glaring omission in Bangladesh's national history. Many of these individuals, born after 1971, bear the stigma of their parents' and grandparents' allegiance to Pakistan. Although finally granted citizenship, their futures remain uncertain due to long-term state indifference. Similarly, the indigenous communities of Bangladesh, particularly of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and their struggle for autonomy and recognition have been excluded from the dominant history. These omissions reflect Trouillot's argument: history is written by those in power to serve their interests, systematically silencing inconvenient truths to consolidate authority.

The August Uprising

Fast forward to 5 August 2024, when a popular uprising overthrew the Awami League government in Bangladesh. But in the events unfolding five months after 5 August 2024, I see a troubling parallel

election, but beyond that, constitutional recommendations should be debated in an elected parliament.

Some compare the Liberation War of 1971 to the Popular Uprising of 2024. In 1971, Bangladeshis fought the Pakistani military for nine months; millions were killed or maimed, women raped, babies bayoneted, and intellectuals murdered. It was one of the most heinous wars of the 20th century and must never be forgotten. Yet the promised freedom remained unfulfilled. 1990 offered a second chance—and again, we failed. Political parties have repeatedly failed the nation, fuelling the youth's anger and distrust. Can these parties be trusted, or will they merely change colour? Perhaps new parties are needed to ensure accountability.

In 2025, Bangladesh stands at a crossroads, grappling with the weight of its unfinished liberation project. The youth's desire for a tabula rasa—a clean slate—is understandable, but history is never a blank page. History is a palimpsest formed through the struggles, sacrifices, and aspirations layered into it. Karl Marx's maxim that history repeats itself, “first as tragedy, then as farce,” is a sobering reminder of where we are now. Bangladesh's journey from 1971 to 2025 is marked by a series of unfinished revolutions, each promising democracy, freedoms, and justice, yet falling short every time.

The current moment demands more than grandstanding; it requires a commitment to genuine democratic reform. Parliamentary elections must be held, and the interim government must outline a clear path to democracy, balancing the urgency of the present with the lessons of the past. But seven months is too short a time for the interim government to solve the debris that has accumulated over the years. The interim government must align with political parties, student and people's groups to bring all voices to the table. Similarly, the now bickering groups must set aside their differences to work with the interim government to renew the democratic project. In reclaiming our history, we must confront the brutal silences of the past. The question is not merely who writes the next chapter, but how lessons are learned, so we do not go down the wrong road once again.

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