

Rediscovering the Bangladesh Liberation War through Unexplored Archives

Writing the history of war, especially the history of a liberation war, is one of the most challenging tasks for historians. The Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 was no exception. Faced with the loss, destruction, or restricted access to potential archives, historians grapple with the task of finding alternative sources, often turning to oral histories.

Several significant archives for filling the gaps in documents related to the liberation war of Bangladesh are located overseas. Among these, the National Archives in the UK stands out as one of the most crucial resources. During the Summer and Fall of 2023, I had the opportunity to visit the National Archives at Kew Gardens in the UK and conduct around two months of archival research. The documents pertaining to the Bangladesh Liberation War are preserved under the Department of Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Some of these documents, declassified most recently, remain largely unexplored by historians of the Bangladesh Liberation War. The materials from the National Archives, UK provide valuable insights into both internal and external developments related to the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

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‘A huge gulf separates Mujib from Bhutto’

18 March 1971
RA Burrows Saq CMG
British High Commission
Islamabad

THE SITUATION IN EAST PAKISTAN

1. With the much vaunted and long awaited talks between the President and Mujib still in progress, it is no time to speculate about their likely outcome. It remains, however, that it is improbable that a meeting of the National Assembly on 25 March would serve

of political problems, there are, too, certain unpalatable conclusions to be drawn from the events of the past two weeks. These have an immediate, as well as a long term, bearing on the future of East Pakistan.

3. Firstly, the Awami League leadership, even if surprised by the speed with which it assumed some measure of political authority, has shown itself to be incapable of acting prudently and consistently. Its directives, especially those dealing with economic matters, have been muddled and incomplete, almost daily in need of alteration. The Party itself has demonstrated that it has a leader, but not an organisation or hierarchy, and so far it has declined even to equip itself with the fundamental necessities of any infant bureaucracy. Perhaps the quality of its decisions and organisation would improve if it enjoyed the benefit of advice from the Civil Service (which, of course, has been on strike since 1 March); but bearing in mind the calibre of those in the upper echelons of the Awami League this must remain highly problematical.

4. Secondly, there are disquieting signs that the students are beginning to take a more active and extremist line. The so-called Bangla Desh Chhattra Sangram Parishad embraces not only the East Pakistan Students League but also the Dacca University Central Students Union. If only because of the successes enjoyed by earlier student activists, this body is in

a position to exert real pressure on events, should Mujib fail to call the correct tune. It has already introduced roadside checks, until told to desist by Mujib, after at least one death and several cases of severe injury. Responsible Bengalis fear that if there is a reversion to student control, as happened in 1968 in the days of Tofail Ahmed, no one's property or

livelihood will be safe.

5. Thirdly, the delicate but nascent infrastructure of foreign aid and technical assistance programmes has been dealt a mortal blow by the departure of the entire World Bank teams, and all Japanese and German experts. This has produced no comment in the Press, save pronouncements to the effect that the Awami League wishes foreigners to remain in Bangladesh. It is too early to predict precisely what will be the consequences of this large scale departure; but certainly it must have a deleterious and severe impact on East Pakistan's future economic prospects over the short term anyhow, and there are no indications that those who have left intend to return soon.

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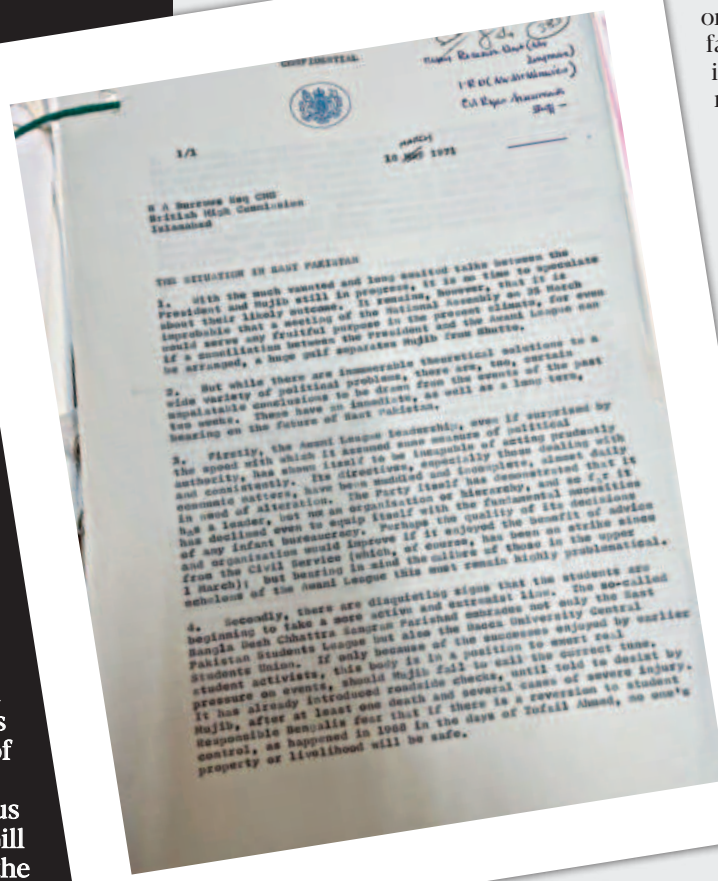
6. Already, the financial and economic situation here has become extremely precarious. A combination of civil disobedience, strikes and Awami League directives has caused a serious loss of productivity and deep concern in banking and business circles. Traders and businessmen have found that their bills are not, or cannot be settled, whilst at the same time they are expected to pay out substantial sums in wages. (Duncan Brothers, for example, are owed Rs.62 lakhs for tea already sold and partly shipped to West Pakistan by the 'buyers'.) Bankers who have given credit on the security of mills or factories, now fear that they will be unable to redeem their loans. The East Pakistani economy is very much a deficit financed one, and in the present climate no further investment is likely for the foreseeable future, and those concerns in the hands of West Pakistanis are vulnerable to civil

turbulence and labour trouble. The picture is gloomier now than ever it was; and it is difficult at present to imagine how a recovery can be effected, or who would be capable of making the attempt.

7. Fourthly, there is a very real danger that in the disguise of an ardently nationalist movement, East Bengal will find itself on the narrow and slippery path which leads to anarchy. There is much wild talk about "communist" take overs and the expansion of the Naxalite movement in East Bengal; there is scant evidence that this is really so. What is apparent is that the economic and social pressures here are so great as to drive Bengalis into acts of savage but unpremeditated violence. At the moment, and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, I am prepared to dismiss suggestions that this violence is the result of an acquaintance with the thoughts of Mao or the writings of Marx; but the events of the past weeks have demonstrated conclusively that East Bengal is likely to become an even less safe place to live in than it was before. Miles' letter of 3 March (not to all) describing efforts by the Army in West Bengal to stamp out in concert with the local police lawlessness there forces the thought that, without the presence of an active military force in East Bengal, the situation here could deteriorate rapidly, for neither the Police nor the East Pakistan Rifles can be characterised as resolute or authoritative, and the mobs can be raised to vast proportions and are of wild irresponsibility and violence.

8. These general conclusions will make depressing reading. They reflect the extent to which we believe that the recent political disturbances have altered the future outlook for East Pakistan. It may be that all that can be done will be to extricate remaining British interests in commerce and industry as painlessly as possible, but we shall have time to think about this.

9. I am copying this letter to Ian Sutherland in South Asian Department, to John Moberley at Washington, and to Karachi, Lahore and Polad Singapore.



any fruitful purpose in the present climate, for even if a conciliation between the President and the Awami League can be arranged, a huge gulf separates Mujib from Bhutto.

2. But while there are innumerable theoretical solutions to a wide variety

1971 in Fiction: A Literary Dilemma



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

Many freedom fighters and literary figures believe that skilled writers, adept at crafting literary works, often lacked direct experience of the 1971 War.

PRIYAM PAUL

Writing literature is, by nature, a creative pursuit—one that demands both technical skill and an innate artistic sensibility. When the subject is the 1971 War, the task becomes even more complex, as it requires a delicate balance between historical accuracy and imaginative expression. Too often, however, the focus shifts towards producing a greater volume of work—whether for ceremonial observance or commercial gain—at the expense of depth, nuance, and authenticity. This concern extends beyond literature to the realms of drama and cinema as well.

This debate grew more intense in the years following the war, when memories were still vivid among witnesses, literary figures, and readers, and it remains relevant today as firsthand experiences become increasingly rare. Notably, the scarcity of significant literature on the 1971 War can largely be attributed to two key factors: the firsthand experience of war and the writer's ability to effectively translate it into compelling writing.

Many freedom fighters and literary figures believe that skilled writers,

adept at crafting literary works, often lacked direct experience of the 1971 War. Conversely, freedom fighters who actively participated in the war and led resistance efforts did not always possess the necessary writing skills to document their experiences. This gap between literary expertise and firsthand war experience created a disconnect, affecting the imaginative depth of creative writings on the war.

As a matter of fact, some writers, teachers, and intellectuals were among the first casualties of the war, killed during the attacks on 26-27 March. The brutality escalated in the final phase of the war in December, when many intellectuals, poets, and writers, after enduring months of captivity under occupation, were executed by the Pakistani army and its local collaborators.

Meanwhile, another group of literary figures and writers fled to India, where they lived as war refugees, and some actively contributed to movements advocating for Bangladesh's liberation. Thus, critics argue that both groups of writers lacked direct lived experience of the war—some led secluded, inactive, or fugitive lives in the occupied land, while others did not witness the war firsthand

as they were in Indian territory. Beyond the question of direct experience, some writers have also explored other dimensions of meaningful storytelling while observing this genre of creative writing during the 1971 War.

For instance, novelist Rashid Karim (1925-2011) challenged the notion that the inadequate literary representation of the 1971 War was solely due to a lack of firsthand experience. Writing in 1991, two decades after the war, he acknowledged that this shortage of experience influenced the portrayal of war in dramas and novels, often making them overly fanciful and disconnected from reality. However, he argued that this issue required deeper reflection to be fully understood. He pointed out that some of the greatest works of war literature were written by authors who had no direct experience of war, yet they successfully created authentic and timeless representations that became world classics.



He stated that in The Diary of Anne Frank, the young author did not witness the events outside her tiny room—the war and the brutal torture inflicted by the Nazi army. Instead, she recorded her personal thoughts, family details, and occasional sounds of Nazi raids or glimpses of soldiers from the window while remaining in hiding throughout the Second World War.

Although the book contains no direct accounts from the war front, it became one of the most widely read literary testimonies of World War II.

Rashid Karim highlights how this was possible despite Anne Frank's lack of firsthand experience of war, emphasising that her imagination allowed her to create a compelling narrative of acute fear, alongside the presence of love and even the observation of birthdays—without relying on fictionalised depictions of war. These elements contrasted with the overwhelming, wired portrayal of war often found in the literature of 1971.

He extended this argument to Leo Tolstoy's great literary novel War and Peace (1869), a war-based novel set between 1805 and 1813, despite Tolstoy being born in 1828 and completing the novel 64 years later. With its vast array of characters and events, Tolstoy, having no direct war experience, had to

of the 1971 War without relying on fictionalised or entertaining portrayals of war. Personal experience, firsthand war experience, or an acute historical sense are important, but these cannot be considered the only components for writing 1971 war literature.

Syed Shamsul Haque (1935-2016), a renowned poet, prose writer, and dramatist, also contributed to this discussion. He observed that during the 1970s and 1980s, nearly all writers focused on literature about the Liberation War of 1971. However, after two decades, the volume of such writings declined. He explored these challenges while discussing Italo Calvino, the acclaimed Italian writer, who documented Italy's war experience and its literary impact. Notably, unlike European war literature—which gave rise to neo-realism in both literature and cinema, with Calvino as one of its pioneers—the literary response to the War of 1971 did not develop into a distinct genre.

Beyond the common perception that Bengali literature lags behind due to its association with a third-world context, Syed Haque asserts that Bengali authors bear the responsibility of producing meaningful work in their own language. Notably, Calvino wrote that while Italy may have been occupied in the war, its authors' minds remained free—a sentiment reflected in their literature. The past was blurred, but the present was vibrant and colourful; most importantly, those colours represent the stories of war, deeply experienced by both writers and readers of Italy.

Drawing from Calvino's insight, Syed Haque extended the idea to the literature of the 1971 War. He observes that the initial surge of novels and stories about 1971 was necessary for both writers and readers. Over the decades, this body of literature has served almost as a form of catharsis. However, he argued that the time has now come to shift the focus towards the artistic merit of 1971 war literature—moving beyond mere participation in writing about the war to considering its enduring artistic value.

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rely on historical research in libraries, interviewing people for information, and travelling to different countries to understand the ambience of the time.

However, history and literature are not identical, as Rashid Karim mentioned. While history can aid in the process, it is the author's rare quality of imagination that allows them to depict the complex events