How victimhood distorts our sense of history

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Why have we failed to build a strong state, durable institutions, and a shared story of coexistence? I look for answers in the histories we write, or tell ourselves, and the ways they shape our character as a nation. Again and again, we see the same pattern: we often cast ourselves only as victims, rushing to ask who betrayed us or which outside power conspired. The story of victimhood is an uncomplicated one, like a linear film plot: simple to narrate, easy to understand, and comforting to believe. But this unquestioning resignation to an easy story prevents us from asking hard questions about our own role in history and our culpability.

Let us examine the narrative of the Battle of Plassey fought on June 23, 1757. The familiar story is that Mir Jafar betrayed Nawab Sirajuddaula, and that Jagat Seth, Rai Durlabh, and Yar Lutuf Khan sold him out to Robert Clive. This is, however, only a small part of the bigger picture: the Mughal Empire was already collapsing, Bengal's succession after Alivardi Khan was disputed, the administration was weak, the revenue system rotten, the army outdated, and the financial base broken. So the East India Company walked into a house that was already falling down—a house we rarely examine critically because the victim story feels easier to comprehend. While we were playing the victim game, in Europe, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) was asking how wealth is produced. At that time, many of our nawabs and zamindars spent heavily on palaces, courts, music, and spectacle, while treating investment in new knowledge, technology, military reform, and proper administration as a side concern, as if old habits were enough to keep up with a changing world.

Many Bangladeshi historians and intellectuals have reinforced this habit of seeing ourselves only as victims. The genocide of 1971, the crimes of the Pakistani army and their allies, and international indifference were all real, but we rarely ask with equal seriousness how we built the new state, who gained from it, and who was left out.

We also had the sea in front of us, but the idea of *kala pani*—the belief that crossing the sea would threaten ritual status—shaped social attitudes towards overseas travel. Texts like the *Baudhayana Dharmasutra* were invoked to support this view, turning overseas travel for trade, education, or politics into a social risk for many high-caste groups. Bengali Muslims, for their part, did not build lasting maritime trade networks either; unlike the Portuguese, Dutch, French, or British, our merchants never created sea-borne trading empires. Their ships came from the other side, and we settled into the role of consumers of those ships and their goods.

We often say the British ruled through a "divide and rule" policy. While they did use Hindu-Muslim, caste, ethnic, language, and regional lines to govern, the cracks they exploited—caste and sub-caste, high and low orders, Ashraf and Atraf, landlord and peasant, town and village—were already there; colonial rule merely fixed them in law through censuses, land laws, and separate electorates. In 1947, we again placed blame on "Hindus" or "Muslims," refusing to explore underlying nuances. The Partition uprooted well over 10 million people and killed several million through riots, hunger, and disease. These outcomes were shaped by decades of communal politics and tensions as well as administrative weaknesses of the two new states. Our textbooks mostly blame "them," but if Muslims killed Hindus and Hindus killed Muslims, the real question is whether we are ready to face our own share of those crimes instead of hiding them.

Pakistan emerged in 1947, but instead of focusing on building institutions, its politics quickly slid into court intrigue. A full constitution came only in 1956; the 1949 Objectives Resolution spoke of Islamic principles, yet little was done to establish stable democratic practices. The Muslim elite used Islam for power, and within two years of that first constitution, Ayub Khan seized control in a coup, suspending the constitution. Many still say "external powers destabilised Pakistan," but the first coup-maker was a Muslim general backed by local elites. At the same time, religious leaders were busy with anti-Ahmadi campaigns: in 1953, they led agitations in Punjab and Lahore that forced the imposition of martial law in Lahore, and in 1974, the Second Amendment formally declared Ahmadis non-Muslim.

Even after the 2024 uprising that toppled an authoritarian regime, we as a nation remain trapped in the same cycles of victimhood and blame, struggling to focus on the hard work of state-building.
FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

While we keep repeating that "Muslims are always victims," these developments show how a group of Muslims used law and street pressure to deny another community equal citizenship.

At this point, some may argue, "Oppression was in the cities; the villages were fine." Our imagination of the village remains highly romantic: that rural Bengal is/was peaceful, equal, beautiful. Yet in 1948, speaking at the Indian Constituent Assembly, Dr B.R. Ambedkar described the village as the nursery of localism, ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and communalism, a place where caste oppression was reproduced. This is not only about Hindu villages. In Muslim villages, too, those who have power pressed down on those below. The idea that "the poor are innocent" does not survive close inspection either. When people at the lower rungs gain some power, they are also as likely to oppress those weaker than themselves.

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Ordinary citizens share the burden of responsibility as well. When, for instance, thousands of madrasa students are taken to Dhaka to shout for death sentences, they could ask why teachers are suspending class lessons to use them as a crowd; when a schoolteacher takes attendance and then spends the class on their phone, parents and students could question this neglect. Instead, we invariably fall back on blaming some outside conspiracy or influence. My point is simple: "We are oppressed" is not a lie—colonial rule, military rule, and state violence are indeed facts—but as citizens we have also helped, actively or silently, in the continuation of oppression. As long as our histories place all guilt on "the British," "the Hindus," "the Muslims," "India," "Pakistan," or "the West," while hiding the greed of our own elites, our political shortsightedness, and our moral weaknesses, we are dirtying the mirror in which we should be examining ourselves.

We have to do two things at once: clean up our public narratives in which all fault lies with "them," the other, and clean up our own conduct, starting with a frank admission that we are at once victims and makers of our own victimhood. Only then can a real political conversation begin.

Matiul Islam: A legacy of service, integrity, and love

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PARVEEN MAHMUD

It is with profound sorrow that we remember M Matiul Islam, the first finance secretary of Bangladesh, who passed away on Thursday, November 20, at the age of 95. In a life spanning nearly a century, he made indelible contributions to the financial and administrative systems of our country. A visionary architect of our financial system, he was a disciplined civil servant, a skilled chartered accountant, a writer, an entrepreneur, and, more recently, a devoted Tagore singer. He embodied the essence of a multifaceted personality—constantly evolving, yet always grounded in his principles.

Mr Islam was known for his impeccable character, professionalism, and punctuality. He was always well-dressed, attended office on time, and brought energy to every room he entered. Even in his later years, he maintained a sharp mind and a tireless work ethic. What stood out most, however, was his unyielding commitment to his work and his colleagues, coupled with a deep sense of inquiry and a remarkable logical clarity. I had the privilege of knowing him both personally and professionally, and he was, without a doubt, a source of inspiration for me.

On numerous occasions, Mr Islam helped and mentored me, often without my even asking. His selflessness and generosity were evident in everything he did. I particularly remember his proactive approach in assisting me whenever I needed to organise professional programmes. He would often enquire on his own whether I had secured commitments from the chief guest and other distinguished speakers for events. His concern was not just about ensuring the event's success, but also about ensuring that everything went smoothly and according to plan.

M Matiul Islam (1930-2025)

One of the most striking examples of his dedication and resourcefulness occurred during a meeting I attended at Yunus Centre, where the managing directors of Grameen's various companies gathered under the chairmanship of Prof Muhammad Yunus, presently chief adviser of the interim government. It was during lunch that I received an unexpected message: that the then finance minister, who was scheduled to attend the event as chief guest later that evening, had fallen ill and would no longer be able to attend. In a moment of panic, I stepped outside the meeting room for a few minutes to make an urgent call to Matiul Islam, hoping he might be able to assist in some way.

Without hesitation, he reassured me, saying, "Don't worry, I will handle it." Within a short span of time, he took charge of the situation. Not only did he manage to arrange a new chief guest, but he also ensured that all other special guests were invited in line with the event's protocol. His calm demeanour and quick thinking in that critical moment demonstrated the depth of his experience and his ability to manage even the most challenging situations.

Matiul Islam's contributions to Bangladesh's economic and administrative systems go beyond the confines of any one particular role. In 1968-69, when he served as secretary of the industries and commerce ministry, he was appointed acting district commissioner of Khulna in addition to his regular responsibilities. Despite the demands of his primary role, he managed both positions with remarkable skill and dedication. His leadership was instrumental in driving governance reforms and spurring economic development in the region. Though he was a qualified chartered accountant, he did not shy away from administrative challenges. He adeptly balanced the technical aspects of his profession with the strategic oversight required for large-scale development projects. His ability to navigate complex situations and make sound decisions earned him the respect and admiration of his colleagues and subordinates alike.

It is these qualities—clarity of thought, steadfastness in decision-making, and a quiet yet profound influence—that ensure Mr Islam's legacy endures. He was not one to seek the limelight, but his work spoke volumes. He approached every task with a sense of purpose and a deep commitment to the betterment of society. His integrity, humility, and the enduring impact of his work will continue to inspire generations to come.

In remembering Mr Islam, we must also remember his beloved wife, Zohra Islam, who passed away in 2021 at the age of 84. Zohra *bhabi* was a self-taught artist whose intricate flower paintings were a testament to her talent. Her work, which numbered over 50 pieces, was generously donated to the United Nations Women's Guild, where it helped raise funds for children around the world. She was a woman of quiet strength, and her artistic endeavours reflected the deep love she had for nature and the world around her. Though she never sought recognition, her legacy is deeply felt through the impact her art had on countless individuals and the causes she supported.

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What stands out about Zohra Islam is not just her artistic talent but the profound partnership she shared with Matiul Islam. After her passing, he experienced a deep sense of loneliness. I recall visiting him after Zohra *bhabi's* death. As I took a photograph during that visit, I noticed that Mr Islam had chosen to sit near one of her paintings, which was displayed prominently in the background. It struck me as a quiet tribute to the love they had shared, a love that transcended time and circumstances, remaining an inseparable part of Mr Islam's life even after her departure.

In the years that followed her passing, Mr Islam often spoke of Zohra with deep affection. His memories of her were precious, and he carried them with him in a way that was both tender and dignified. The deep bond they shared was a testament to their mutual respect, love, and the quiet strength they drew from one another.

So, as we bid farewell to M Matiul Islam, we must also honour the memory of Zohra Islam. May they both rest in peace, their love, wisdom, and the enduring legacy of their lives forever etched in our hearts. Their contributions to Bangladesh, to their family, and to all those whose lives they touched will stay with us for many years to come.