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The unfinished truth of 1971: Genocide, mass rape, and justice



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In the post-1971 period, a significant amount of information about Pakistan-sponsored murders, assaults, rapes, and other atrocities has come to light. Much of it came from interviews, personal narratives, confessions, and individual experiences, rather than systematic professional or scientific research. We know that around 30 lakh people were martyred in the Liberation War. While the precise figures may be debated, the scale of mass killings is beyond dispute.

Estimates suggest there are around 5,000 small and large killing grounds across the country, many of which remain unaccounted for. Among these, approximately 1,200 killing sites and mass graves have been identified. The evidence gathered from these sites points clearly to the perpetrators responsible for the killing of lakhs of Bangalee people. After independence, the government of Bangladesh announced that around two lakh women had been assaulted by Pakistani forces during the war. This figure is widely regarded as an understatement, as it was based on broad assumptions rather than systematic calculation.

Research conducted at Sweden's Uppsala University suggested figures ranging from two to four lakh and concluded that most of the assaulted women were Muslims. Dr Geoffrey Davis, an Australian physician who worked in Bangladesh as part of an international humanitarian programme assisting women who had been raped during the Liberation War, estimated the number of rape victims at 450,000. Later, research by a professional team in Bangladesh placed the figure at more than 467,000, noting that many Hindu as well as Muslim women had been excluded from earlier calculations.

The research, conducted between 1991 and 2002 across 42 districts and their police stations, drew on countless interviews. The



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ARCHIVE: ANWAR HOSSAIN

findings, based on 629 documented cases, suggested that at least 467,000 women were assaulted in 1971. The team of doctors and experts, including forensic anthropologists, was able to identify 629 survivors who were alive at the time of the interviews and residing in the country. The study further showed that among the assaulted women, 56.50 percent were Muslims, 41.44 percent were

Hindus, and 2.06 percent were Christians or from other minority communities.

According to the *Bangladesh Documents* published by India's Ministry of External Affairs, between March and the end of May 1971, some 69.71 lakh Hindu refugees were registered in India. Many of those who fled during this period had been attacked during the brutal Operation Searchlight and were assaulted either by Pakistani forces or their

suggest that no fewer than two lakh Hindu women and girls never returned to Bangladesh. As rape was systematically used as a weapon of war, and as the intent of the campaign was to target and eliminate Hindus in particular, the state estimate of 30 lakh deaths must be understood in that broader context. In any case, it is important to recognise that in no historical genocide have there been exact headcounts or precise

houses, and educational institutions, as well as railway stations and jails, were used as killing sites and as venues for mass rape, gang rape, and rape in custody.

Only around 30 percent of the remains were found on land, while the remaining 70 percent were washed away, as bodies were dumped into wetlands and riversides. Even manholes, water wells, large drains, and sewage tanks were not spared. More than one crore people were registered as refugees in India during the war of 1971, and nearly two crore were internally displaced. It was one of the largest instances of enforced migration and displacement of innocent civilians within such a short span of time. Many displaced people, including refugees, either died of disease or were killed by the perpetrators and their collaborators during their perilous journeys or while in hiding.

The Pakistan Army committed some 39 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including genocide by killing, genocide by causing serious bodily or mental harm, genocide by deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction, and genocidal rape.

The nation failed to indict the perpetrators in a proper court of law due to the unlawful clemency declared by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. No single individual, not even a dictator or a king, can take such a decision without constitutional and parliamentary backing, particularly when the crimes were committed against humanity as a whole. There were discussions of truth and reconciliation, but where there is a denial of truth and no regret, remorse, or sincere confession, such a process cannot take root. Behind the scenes, efforts were made towards such a solution, but they did not succeed, as the state did not approach the UN security council for a mandate.

We must understand that justice and righteousness are realised through accountability, through the vindication of rights and the redress of wrongs. The most serious crimes of concern to the international community, notably genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, as occurred in Bangladesh in 1971, must not go unpunished. Effective prosecution must be ensured, even in the absence of the accused.

collaborators in Bangladesh.

Statistics indicate that 871,000 Hindu families fled to India during that time, including around 2,625,000 female refugees over the age of ten. If even one in ten of them were subjected to sexual violence, the number of victims among refugees alone would be 262,500.

Even the most conservative estimates

accounting of the dead.

In Bangladesh, immediately after liberation, as a war veteran and a member of a law enforcement authority, I, along with my colleagues, identified around 5,000 mass graves and learned from eyewitnesses of regular killings across innumerable locations, including 88 riversides and 68 bridges. Many godowns, guesthouses, rest

When 1971 enters the feed



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It comes to the palm before the page, on a national day of remembrance related to the 1971 war of independence.

A youngster picks up their phone and starts scrolling. It starts with a black and white image of refugees, a serious tune, and a label reading "sacrifice." Then there is a swipe followed by a brief video of a survivor talking. Then perhaps a branded tribute, a school parade, a comedy clip, an advertisement. What does this unique, modern-day barrage of tributes imply? The past does not disappear; it glimpses, subsides, re-emerges, and is swept down the stream that carries all the rest.

This is among the distinguishing features of public memory in our era: 1971 is no longer remembered mainly through family stories, textbooks, memorials, museums, and newspapers. It has become an element of feeds, clips, search results, recommendations, reposts, subtitles, memes, playlists, and AI-generated summaries. It goes more quickly, farther, and more democratically than ever. It also moves through structures that are not created to be historical but to be visible, engaging, and memorable.

This is why the question before us has changed. What becomes of a foundational national memory when it is put into the infrastructure of sorting attention?

This is the point of memory politics in the age of algorithms.

The politics of memory is never only about the past. It concerns who gets to define the nation through selective remembrance and selective silence, and which parts of the history are elevated, ritualised, or pushed aside.

The institutions that mediated this memory were relatively obvious over the decades. Survivors and witnesses were present. Some families kept their stories a secret, sometimes agonisingly. Political actors used the war to exercise moral authority. It had historians, journalists, textbook writers, filmmakers, and museums. These schools or points of reference did not generate a pure memory; rather it possessed their omissions, their fallacies, and their black holes. But at least theirs was an

identifiable role.

Digitalisation has broadened that landscape. It has made fragile documents, testimonies, and photographs easier to preserve, search, and circulate. Students and researchers worldwide can now experience the pieces of 1971 without waiting for a gatekeeper to open the room.

The difference between an archive and a feed is not obvious. An archive is constructed with preservation in mind. It raises the question about what a document is, its origin, the manner of cataloguing it, and on what grounds it ought to be read. Meanwhile, a circulation-based feed is constructed with optimisation in mind. It poses the question of what will be clicked, watched, reacted to, shared, or recommended. The archive appreciates provenance; the digital platform is performance-oriented. The archive is sorted for retrieval; the feed is structured in a way that is easy to notice.

As soon as 1971 pops up on the feed, it no longer seems like history to the public—it appears as content. Its appearance is influenced by systems that favour speed, emotion, signal clarity, and the repeatability of engagement. This does not necessarily lead to falsehood, but it does strain the memory to make it more readable for the platform. Complicated histories are pushed to be succinct. Subtlety is a bad rival of certitude. Visual fragments are created out of long moral and political reasoning. Testimony is clipped. Grief is aestheticised. Patriotism is packaged.

It is easier to consume a war of unprecedented magnitude and cruelty rather than comprehend it. The genocide, the refugee exodus, the asymmetry of experience, and the post-traumatic afterlives may all be flattened into a series of emotionally resonant, highly viral symbols.

This marks a significant change in memory politics. Previously, one had to be concerned mainly with denial, censorship, and ideological rewriting. Such threats did not disappear, but today, the process of remembering is also mediated by commercial apparatus, the logic of which is neither archival nor pedagogical. There is no

need to deny history any longer to render it weak; one can simply shred it, speed it up, seasonalise it, and devour it in the incessant race to attention.

That seasonalisation is nothing new. The digital public is flooded with memories on some dates, particularly in March and December. Speeches circulate, posters return, archival photographs reappear, slogans are revived. For a day or two, the

repressed testimonies. The diaspora also encounters 1971 through digital titbits that inspire further research.

And thus, it is not a question of whether digital memory is good or bad. That is too blunt a question. The actual issue is whether democracy is accessible for commercial formatting. Is it possible to expand participation in memory preservation without giving memory over to the logic of virality?



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

nation appears to remember; then the traffic drops and the topic sinks within the feed. Memory comes in spikes. It comes as a fad and goes as a fad. The past thus is not forgotten—it is simply rendered intermittent.

This is important since the memory of a nation cannot endure as a periodical upsurge. People do not stay historically literate by becoming twice-yearly ceremonially expressive. But when 1971 is experienced largely in the form of commemorative traffic, commemoration risks being performative rather than educative.

Critique of the digital present must not be nostalgic; the analogue era was also afflicted by silence, isolation, and familial memory. Digital culture, too, has allowed overlooked testimonies, local histories, and diasporic rediscovery. It has given us new methods to access the past, despite the inaccuracies. The youth retile old films, scan family documents, revitalise neighbourhood histories, and distribute

AI compresses and counterfeits memory with cloned voices, synthetic testimony, and fabricated authority. A chatbot can settle a dispute or remove a picture's provenance, which undermines evidence of a historical event as complicated as 1971. Histories of atrocity depend on confidence in testimony, records, images, documents, and the labour of verification. As soon as synthetic media is a commodity, misusing that trust becomes easier. False material may be added to the stream. Real content can be rejected as a counterfeit. The conditions of proof themselves are in a state of flux. This poses both an ethical and an epistemic dilemma. The witness is not crude. The words of the survivor are never just emotionally strong resources to cut-and-paste to get them interested. The corpses are not aesthetic material. Mass violence is a memory that must be recalled responsibly in context, with restraint and source fidelity. The more technologically reproducible the memory is, the more these ethics are required.

So what would a more severe digital memory politics entail in the case of Bangladesh?

First, it would see archives as infrastructure instead of decoration. Memorial sentiment varies across countries. It takes strong institutions to safeguard oral histories, newspapers, photos, local records, and other documents. These resources should be searchable by students and researchers. The latter will win when it is hard to find serious archives and easy to find shallow material.

Second, protecting context as a social good is important. It is crucial to know where the photo came from and the historical context of the testimony. A viral fragment should help you understand more. Exposure must result in understanding. The clip should not end the story.

Third, civic literacy should include knowing how to use digital history. People need to know about 1971 and how to judge what they see. They need to be able to trace an image, check a quote, tell the difference between archival and stylised tributes, and spot fake authority. In the age of algorithms, memoirs that are not checked are structurally weak.

Bangladesh must protect and discover its history simultaneously. More and more, search engines, social media sites, recommendation systems, and AI interfaces decide what people see first and what they don't. Ranking is now a part of the politics of remembering. If a country gives its history to the market, it may lose control over how it is shared.

The fight over 1971 is taking a new shape, however. The old questions remain. Who is remembered? Who is left out? Who speaks for the nation? Who is supposed to define sacrifice? But the terrain has shifted. It is no longer threatened only by silence but also by noise, not just by erasure but also by endless circulation without depth.

It is a disturbing aspect of the present. A society may seem overwhelmed by memory and historically weakened. It can write all the time and yet know precious little of substance. It may confuse the visibility with the seriousness. It can absorb the 1971 symbols and still lose its attention discipline.

It is not to save 1971, then, out of the digital world. That would be inconceivable and, frankly, stupid. The challenge is greater: to construct historical forms of digital memory that don't break history down into bite-size content. It can also lose it because the past is forever on the screen, circulating, beautifully edited, instantly shareable, and slowly losing weight.