

Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning on 1971

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Forty years after 1971, the Bangladesh liberation war remains a frozen object, not yet fully open to heterodox narratives. Historians need to unpack the complex and contradictory matrix that gave rise to Bengali nationalism, and the mixture of racism and hysteria that spurred the Pakistan Army on to a path of atrocities. This is essential for Bangladesh to decipher its post-liberation trajectory, and for Pakistan to excavate the roots of its current crises. Among several new books on the war is Sarmila Bose's *Dead Reckoning*, carrying a bizarre and shrill agenda of absolving Pakistan of allegations of a genocide. What we are left waiting for is a deep investigation into 1971—about the nature of violence, crisis bargaining, unintended consequences, and history's orphans. People's actions during war are always a combination of contradiction, heroism and failure of nerve; they are a fundamental aspect of being human. Bangladesh is still waiting for that human history of 1971.

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Dedicated to the memory of film-maker Tareque Masud and cinematographer Mishuk Munier, who passed away in a tragic accident during the writing of this essay. They were key witnesses for the forthcoming *War Crimes Tribunal*. Tareque had been collecting documentary evidence of atrocities for decades, and Mishuk was an eyewitness to the death squad that picked up his father Professor Munier Chowdhury in 1971.

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I remained in the [insane asylum] for six months in 1973. What drove me mad? Well, I felt the collective guilt of the Army action which at worst should have stopped by late April 1971.

— Colonel Nadir Ali, Pakistan Army, "A Khaki Dissident on 1971".

Bangladesh turns 40 this year. The country's 1971 Liberation War and the genocidal killings during the conflict remain the defining fulcrum for Bangladesh's existence and trajectory. But outside Bangladesh, 1971 is mostly a forgotten moment. Bangladeshi historians have produced much of their work only in Bengali, contributing further to this marginalisation. In the western media, it is routinely referred to as the "Third India-Pakistan War", usually in the context of understanding Indo-Pak hostility. This mislabelling suits India and Pakistan, as they leverage available history to argue for primacy of claims.

On this 40th anniversary, new books on the war are coming out from Nayanika Mookherjee,¹ Yasmin Saikia,² Srinath Raghavan and Salil Tripathi. The first book to come out however is Sarmila Bose's *Dead Reckoning*, a bizarre amalgam of original research and shrill soapbox, undermining what could have been a real heterodox narrative contributing to a new synthesis.

Dead Reckoning places the author Sarmila Bose at the centre, and her interviews as the building blocks. As she puts it faux-modestly in the introduction, "future authors will not have the inexpressible connection that I have with 1971,"³ "my study is destined to remain unique" (6) and the Pakistan Army officers were "astonished as ever by my neutrality" (9). The relationship and pre-existing bias she brings to this work plays out in her selection of stories, credulity about certain accounts, and dismissal of others. The book is ultimately shaped as catharsis via corrective. Her stated agenda is to correct the bias. Yet, in that process, her research goes so far to the other side as to create a new set of biases, even more problematic.

From Bose's introduction, she grew up with the varnished Indian history of 1971, which varies from the history we know in Bangladesh (flawed, but with different lacunae). When she began research and started uncovering the gaps that have been familiar to a generation of Bangladeshi historians (though not their West Bengal counterparts), her fury was of the naif making a late discovery. What animates *Dead Reckoning* therefore is that palpable rage, propelling inconsistent methodology and blind spots. What we are left wanting is a proper investigation into 1971—into the nature of violence, crisis bargaining, unintended consequences, and history's orphans.

Arc of Empathy

The book's undertow of increasing sympathy for one side paired with alienation from the other feels familiar to me. In 1993, I began an oral history project on the war via the Thomas J Watson

Foundation. Although oral history work on 1971⁴ was still relatively new at that time, an element of rote repetition had already crept into people's stories. While there was not yet a Liberation War Museum, there were some "known" sources and books. These would lead you to interview the same person who had already been on the record multiple times (a masters thesis, another magazine article, an anniversary television show).

Everyone seemed to have a similar story of crossing the border, always aided by the kindly, bearded villager who would say "*apa, apnara jan, ami thaki, aro lok ashbe*" (sister, you go, I'll stay, there are many more coming). Whether that story was a collective legend (of the self-sacrificing noble villager) mixed with memory recall was difficult to parse. The stories of 1971, from these exhausted voices, would later remind me of Amitava Kumar's Gujarat interviews: "I saw from the way in which he recited the details that, in the name of charity and the need for news, this little boy had been turned into an automaton or an agony-machine".⁵

There were other forces at play that dulled the energy of storytelling. In 1994, Ghulam Azam, alleged head of Pakistani "razakar" death squads during 1971, finally received Bangladeshi citizenship (prior to this he had lived in Bangladesh on a Pakistani passport with an expired visa).⁶ The day the Supreme Court delivered the verdict, there were riots in Dhaka. Burning cars and upended rickshaws were on the road as I drove to an interview. From that period on, a dark mood gripped many of my interviewees. A malaise of *kisher shadhinota* (What independence?), already part of the body politic after 20 frustrating years, seemed to deepen after the Azam verdict. Aggrieved also by the gradual collapse of Jahanara Imam's symbolic war crimes trial project⁷ in the following years, they turned away from the "glorious" stories, to a weary recounting of the ways the years after 1971 had failed them.

In Pakistan, my research focused on Urdu-speakers (broadly referred to by Bengalis as "Biharis")⁸ who left Bangladesh after 1971. Taken by the novelty of a Bangladeshi interviewer, people were energised and responsive. I was living in Karachi's Orangi town, and halfway through my stay the city was convulsed by gun battles between the government and the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM). As curfew was declared, all schedules were thrown off and we retreated indoors for a week. But the pause brought an unexpected benefit, even more of a willingness to talk about 1971. "You see, this is what the Bhuttos did in 1971, and they are doing it again"⁹ said one Muhajir separatist in an interview. Others invoked the rupture of 1971 as inevitable, and subsequent rebellions in Balochistan, North West Frontier Province and Sindh as carrying on that trajectory.¹⁰

While many of the interviews in Bangladesh had confounded me with their exhausted and depressed mood, those in Pakistan exuded relief at finally having a platform to speak. One moving account came from a Bihari who told me, "I had already left for West Pakistan, but my brother was still in Chittagong. One day I heard your Mukti Bahini had come and killed him. You know, I couldn't cry when I heard that news, but I cried when I heard Dhaka fell".¹¹ The knowledge of Bengali violence against Bihari locals created a conflicted research experience for me, since I was still emotionally attached to the idea that Bengalis had only killed Pakistani soldiers.

Although Bose's description of a warm reception in Pakistan sounds familiar, I diverge from her methodological conclusions. While the killing of Bihari civilians by Bengalis is not defensible, issues of role, scale and power also have to be part of history. A distinction needs to be made between the violence of a chaotic, freelance mob and the systematic violence of the military and death squads with direct and implicit state support. Afsan Chowdhury later explained the dynamics of revenge killings:

Bengalis did commit atrocities including rape of Bihari women and unless we accept that we shall never have the moral force to stand up to ourselves... I have also explained the role of the Pakistan army in facilitating this and it was important for Biharis to understand that. Did the Pakistanis expect to attack Bengalis in Dhaka and expect the Biharis living unprotected and unsafe all over Bangladesh to be untouched? I believe [the] Pakistan army didn't care about them and practically signed their death warrant. This is further proven by the abandoning of the Biharis after their defeat in December and [their] escape under Indian army protection leaving the Biharis behind, the staunchest of Pakistanis, to face the music of vengeance.¹²

When going through oral recollections, each side had powerful claims to make. But selectively chosen anecdotes cannot automatically be expanded into macro history, overriding larger tendencies that individual stories do not represent. Certainly not without extensive research and teasing out of the symbolic meaning of urban legends.

There are several flaws with Bose's transcription and analysis of the interviews she has collected. First, she does not probe the insistence of the Pakistan Army officers that they acted always within the rules of war. Second, she ignores the role that some Biharis played as the blunt edge of West Pakistani domination, as informants, strategic hamlets, and suppliers of manpower for death squads (alongside Bengalis who opposed the rupture of Pakistan). Third, she is impatient to bypass the larger political struggles playing out in the two Pakistans, in her rush to get to a desired denouement.

Sentiment Fog

The West Bengal intellectual class operates within a vision of 1971 that is, at times, quite glorified. On the other hand, Bangladeshis saw not only the heights of 1971, but also the crushing setbacks afterwards. The manhunts against Maoists in 1973, the man-made famine of 1974, the massacre of Mujib in 1975, the counter-coups until 1977, the second assassination in 1981, and all that came in between and afterward acted as a reality check. Faced with our own brutal self-rule, it became difficult to believe in a fully sanitised history of 1971. As Lawrence Lifschultz said, it was and remains an "unfinished revolution".

West Bengal's sentimental miasma started during the war. Consider the "Bangladeshi" songs being broadcast from the Swadhin Bangla Betar radio in Calcutta (Kolkata). Some of these were written by Indian Bengalis, whose loving and forgiving view of their brothers across the border come through in the lyrics. The iconic *Shono ekti Mujiborer*¹³ (From one Mujib will come...) which included the line "*Harano Bangla ke abar phire pabo*" (we will find the lost Bengal again). Or the song *Amra shobai Bangali*¹⁴ with its impossibly optimistic, and eventually crushed, dream of a secular whole that would reverse the tragedy of partition ("Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim/We are all Bengali"). Or the harkening back to

a pre-Partition bucolic life in *Padma nodir pare amar chhotto shobuj gram*¹⁵ (My green village on the banks of the Padma river).

1971 remains, for a generation of West Bengalis, the tantalising possibility of some form of united Bengal (if not politically, then at least philosophically). It was also an equalising moment when the Bengali Muslims asserted themselves as being steeped in the same culture, and used that culture as a weapon. 1971 functioned as a space where West Bengal could imagine that the wounds of Partition would finally be healed, at least at a symbolic level.

In the 1970s and 1980s, as West Bengal stagnated, people looked back in fondness at 1971 as the moment they changed world history. From Edward Kennedy flying into Dum Dum airport to review the camps, to Indira Gandhi invoking the crushing pressure of refugees to the world stage, Calcutta was at the centre of events. Like Bose, every family had a story to tell. Of giving succour to a Mukti guerrilla in their home— if a Muslim, even more proof of the war's syncretic moment: "*Jano to, amader ranna-ghor obdi dhukte ditam*"¹⁶ (You know, we even let them come up to our kitchen). From fundraising to poems to songs, and then finally a glimpse and a *pranam* of Sheikh Mujib in 1972. When legendary Tagore singer Suchitra Mitra passed away in 2010, Kolkata TV highlighted her rendition of *Amar Sonar Bangla* (My Golden Bengal) at a 1971 fundraiser, with tears streaming down her cheeks as she sang.

Some West Bengal colleagues have expressed surprise that someone from their background wrote a blistering attack on 1971. But Sarmila Bose's view is a logical evolution, her ideology shaped perhaps in rebellion against the sentimental view of 1971 that dominated West Bengal. The same East Pakistan refugees, viewed as a danger, pushed BJP leaders to become Right-wing opponents of "illegal migration". The Left politicians invoke the same refugees for their pro-people politics. Even Congress/ Trinamool stalwarts say that seeing refugees in squalor at Sealdah station made them go into politics to build a prosperous state.

If 1971 can be a blank canvas on which competing visions are imposed inside Bangladesh, why should not Bose take a different lesson from it as well? That it was all for nothing, that the war was not what we said it was, that somewhere in there were lies as she is determined to prove. As Udayan Chattopadhyay pointed out "all of those sentiments about Bangladesh were wishfully imposed during the war, by people in West Bengal, removed from the conflict itself and unaware of the reality. Fast forward to now, and they ask themselves, "where did that spirit disappear to?"¹⁷ That disappointment is one stream that energises Sarmila Bose. The historian as avenging angel.

Closed Doors and Favourites

Bose's hostile relationship with Bangladeshi sources began with an op-ed in 2003¹⁸ and two essays published in 2005 and 2007.¹⁹ Here she broadly stated that "the courageous Pak army" (her exact words) behaved impeccably, that charges of rape by Pakistani soldiers were untrue²⁰ and that the Bengali narrative was full of deliberate exaggeration. The ensuing cyber-battles, and question-answer session at a public event, left an impression of an agenda-driven researcher. Also damaging to Bose's reputation was the "Right Stuff" op-ed she co-wrote praising sales of US fighter jets to Pakistan.²¹ The

lasting impression was of an academic too cosy with Pakistan's "Military Inc", which caused many in Dhaka to refuse to cooperate with her: "the line went dead among the pro-liberationists" (12).

Perhaps precisely because the Bengali side did not cooperate with her research, Bose's text broadly accepts the Pakistani narrative, without any challenge, and with sympathetic commentary. A close reading of her essays and the book shows that, since 2003, an informal club of retired Pakistan Army officers has successfully been able to charm her. The Bengali side, on the other hand, earned her ire and condescension which comes through in her subtle undermining of their stories. The imbalance is also in the scope of the interviews themselves. In Pakistan, she lists 30 army officers and three civilians as interviewees. In addition, four officers are listed as refusing to give interviews. So, her intended pool of Pakistani experts were 34 army officers and three civilians. Consequently, the book feels like something transcribed during a gigantic reunion of a retired Pakistan Army officers club. The operative premise here is that the Pakistan Army is the most objective source to establish their own innocence.

Bose's interviews and citations fail to include Pakistanis who spoke out against army atrocities, not even mentioning the 40 Pakistanis who were awarded honours by the Bangladesh government for their role in speaking out in 1971.²² Dissident voices included Lt gen Sahabzada Yaqub Khan and major Ikram Sehgal (both of whom resigned from the army in protest), air marshal Asghar Khan, Baloch leader Mir Ghaus Bazinjo, NAP leader Khan Abdul Wali Khan, advocate Zafor Malik, journalists Sabihuddin Ghousi and I A Rahman, professor M R Hassan, Tahera Mazhar, Imtiaz Ahmed, as well as those jailed for dissenting views on 1971, including Sindhi leader G M Syed, Malik Ghulam Jilani, poet Ahmad Salim and Anwar Pirzado of the Pakistan air force. Bose blanks out the work of colonel Nadir Ali, who reported verbatim his commanding officer's instructions: "Kill as many bastards as you can and make sure there is no Hindu left alive... Kill the Hindus. It is an order for everyone."²³ She does not engage with the dissident poetry of Shaikh Ayaz, Habib Jalib, Ajmal Khattak, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz's iconic *Stay Away From Me: Bangladesh I* ("How can I embellish this carnival of slaughter,/how decorate this massacre?") and *Bangladesh II*.²⁴ There is also no mention of feminist voices such as Nighat Said Khan, and Neelam Hussain.²⁵ Pakistani academic Saadia Toor sums up *Dead Reckoning's* research methodology by saying, "Basically, Sarmila Bose hasn't talked to any progressives in Pakistan, period".²⁶

In Bangladesh, there are 39 interviewees, and yet very few who match in experience those she interviewed in Pakistan. From the Mukti Bahini (the Bengali resistance army) itself, she met only major general Imamuz-Zaman and Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury. Film-maker Tanvir Mokammel is cited, although she primarily employed his contacts to track down sites of Bihari killings and discounts the adjacent film commentary,²⁷ which refers to both Bengali and Bihari violence. Academic Meghna Guhathakurta recounts the story of her father's execution, which she has done on other occasions,²⁸ but her gender research is excluded. Meghna told me,

She asked about 25th March happenings and I mentioned that the officer who came in to take my father had said, 'Stay indoors, do you have any boys?' But that recollection does not prove women and girls

were not killed during that night. She could have looked at the evidence of Madhu-da's family, or even the female journalist who was killed on the first night... I also took her to Jagannath Hall where she talked with some of the victims of the 25th night attack among the Hindu staff and their families. It is a wonder that after all that she refuses to call it genocide or even a crime against humanity.²⁹

The Liberation War Museum (LWM) is present in the book only as a foil for contempt. Twice, she mentions that the director of the museum, Mofidul Hoque, did not know that there was a "cantonment" in Mymensingh (high semantics given that she admits it was "a loose [local] reference to the East Pakistan Rifles and East Bengal regiment centre" (83)). Later the LWM is again slated because they gave her a publication which talked about the symbolic mutilation of two doctors (clearly an urban legend). When I contacted Mofidul Hoque, he responded, "Sarmila Bose ignored everything which does not fit with her viewpoint. She failed to represent our work. It is not surprising when we see what she has done to our history."³⁰

Ignoring Self-Critical Voices

Key documents, books, and films from the Bangladesh side, in Bengali and English, including work by Tareque and Catherine Masud (the films *Muktir Gaan*, *Muktir Kotha*, and *Matir Moina*), Naibuddin Ahmed (photographs of Bengali rape victims), Rahnema Ahmed (essays on rape and the Pakistan army), Ishrat Ferdousi (*The Year That Was*), Badruddin Umar (comprehensive history of the 1952 language movement), Bashir al Helal (1952 language movement), Rabindranath Tribedi (*Bangladesh 1971*), Ain o Salish Kendra (oral history project on rape), Sirajul Islam, Rehman Sobhan, and Afsan Chowdhury are all missing from her research. Afsan in particular is a startling omission, since he is co-editor of the 11 volume history she lists in the bibliography (but appears not to have read closely) and author of a subsequent four volume history.³¹

Other Bengali sources are cited in the bibliography (Neelima Ibrahim, Moidul Hasan, Rashid Haider), but a close reading reveals they are absent in the actual chapters. Instead, the secondary sources she refers to with respect are often the Pakistani government's "White Paper", Archer Blood, and Henry Kissinger. So we have the Pakistani government (and military), a United States ambassador, and the person who "lost face" from Nixon's backing of Pakistan. Bangladeshi history, minus Bangladeshis.

While the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report is also cited, the report's overall conclusion of "some evidence to suggest that the words and personal actions of Lt-gen Niazi were calculated to encourage the killings and rape", "use of excessive force during the military action and the conduct of some of the officers and men of the Pakistan Army during the sweep" and "attitude of the Army authorities towards the Hindu minority"³² do not receive space in this book.

Bose thanks David Ludden as a source in Bangladesh, but he called this attribution misleading:

I exchanged ideas with Sarmila in the early phases of this project, to try to get her to improve her methodology and shift her angle of vision, neither of which happened. She stopped communicating with me, never responded to my critical readings of the early work, cited me in

her acknowledgments, but never sent me the book, or even notification that it was published.³³

Bose repeats the stories circulated by the Pakistan Army as facts, rarely double-checking, and showing high credulity for stories that establish Bengali cowardice. Take her story about Kamal Hossain offering to surrender (211, footnote 49). An inquiry to Hameeda Hossain returned this reply,

On that night the officers came with soldiers, all armed with sten guns and other weapons. They proceeded to line us up, including children, to ask Kamal's whereabouts. He hit the *buu*, the woman who looked after the children, and slapped my niece as well. My niece was hit because she said even if she knew where Kamal was, she wouldn't tell him. Kamal sent no message about surrender, to any Pakistani army officer. He was hiding between several houses, and was finally staying with a relative in Lalmatia, when the military found him and picked him up at night.

When I asked Hameeda Hossain if Bose could have checked these facts easily, she replied, "She quotes [gen] Mitha in the second instant, without bothering to check with Kamal [Hossain] about it, even though Kamal was in Dhaka and within easy reach when she was doing her supposed 'intensive research' in Dhaka."³⁴

On the topic of anti-Bihari violence, Bose only connects with Pakistani witnesses, ignoring Bangladeshis who have also talked about this. This helps solidify her assertion that there is a "greater state of denial in Bangladesh and to some extent India" (14). But is there as much denial as she claims? The Bangladeshis who have written about anti-Bihari violence, including Afsan Chowdhury, Naushad Noori, Taj ul-Islam Hashmi (*The 'Bihari' Minorities in Bangladesh*), Jatin Sarker (*Pakistaner Janma Mritturu Darshan*), Ahmed Iliyas (*Biharis, the Indian Émigrés in Bangladesh*³⁵), Mijanur Rahman (*A Community in Transition: The Biharis in Bangladesh*³⁶), Zakia Haque (*Women, War and Statelessness: Stranded Bihari Women and Girls in Bangladesh*), and the fiction of Haripada Dutta (*Mohajer*) and Mahmud Rahman (*Killing the Water*), are off her radar.

Bose is so focused on being "the first", she could not allow herself to imagine that there could be, inside Bangladesh, a body of research that has actively interrogated Bengali nationalism for four decades. After all, if such voices exist already, Bose's book cannot claim to be, as per the book flap, "ground breaking".

Erasing Genocide

Beyond "settled" facts, oral histories produced by either side in 1971 were burdened with the propaganda impulse in a struggle that was played out internationally (including superpower proxy rivalries) and locally. But in her book, Bose gives overwhelming, uncritical weight to accounts from the Pakistani side. Her guides are the "government's White Paper, and West Pakistani and Bengali pro-regime accounts" (31). In particular she relies on the Pakistan government's *White Paper on the Crisis in East Pakistan, August 1971*. Yet there is no acknowledgement that this document was produced to prepare the ground for arguing at the United Nations (as Bhutto subsequently did) that the Bengalis had severely provoked the army with acts of violence, that the army had to step in to protect Bihari lives, property and the unitary republic, and that the entire conflagration was due to Indian interference. Bose ignores several other "white papers" published during the war, including reports from the International Rescue

Committee,³⁷ multiple hearings of the us Senate,³⁸ the us House of Representatives³⁹ and the Geneva Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists.⁴⁰ All these reports had problems of access and possible bias, but at the least they deserve to be included as a counterbalance to the one-sided Pakistani government narrative of the White Paper and Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report (pressured by Bhutto to edit out unfavourable comments against the state, hence the suppression of the 1972 report and the sanitisation in the 1974 Supplement).

After *Dead Reckoning* was published, Nayanika Mookherjee, author of over a decade of research on wartime rape during 1971,⁴¹ asked in *The Guardian*, “A new study views the men of Pakistan’s army as gentle and kind. Can this be fair?”⁴² Srinath Raghavan wrote with exasperation in his review, “It is impossible to review the entire catalogue of evasions, obfuscations, omissions and methodological errors that suffuses the book.”⁴³ Sitting down and attempting to do just such a catalogue, I found myself agreeing with Raghavan – it is less about being impossible, more that it is endless.

Most of the book runs with retired army officers as our primary guide. As post-election talks break down, Lt (Lt-gen) Ghulam Mustafa claims “initially the army tried to maintain order” (31) and Lt Muhammad Ali Shah mourns the end of the “good social life with Bengalis in popular places like the Dacca (Dhaka) Club.” As the situation escalates, Bose reports, “Every loyal army officer I spoke to... reported that the army had remained under orders to remain within cantonments and not use force” (33).

With the 25 March crackdown under way, Lt Muhammad Ali Shah’s claim of “no more than twenty or twenty-five total [dead] in the entire route through the night” is accepted, as is his cataloguing of firepower: “there were only those three tanks in the whole of Dhaka”, “main guns of the tanks were never used that night” and ancillary guns were fired only as “show of force” (55). The destruction of the Shahid Minar, which struck at the symbolic heart of Bengali identity, is described only as “vandalism” and “a pointless waste of time and resources” as “there was no military reason” (58). Assessing the overall military crackdown, Bose notes gently, “arguably never the right policy under any circumstances” (emphasis added).

The legal definition of genocide includes the specific intention to destroy all or part of a community, racially, religiously or otherwise defined. In this context, Bose is eager to prove there was no religious targeting. In Chuknagar, she picks away at incidents of targeted killings of Hindus until the “genocide” term can be negated: “Nor can the killing simply be termed ‘genocide’ against all Hindus, as suggested by us Consul-General Blood, as there was a further selection of only adult males as targets” (123) and “the military regime seemed to be using the religious affiliation of being a Hindu as proxy for the political category of ‘secessionist’” (124). The religious composition of refugees, which the Indian government estimated as 80% Hindu by May 1971,⁴⁴ was considered evidence that the Pakistan Army was targeting based on religion – but this is not prominent in Bose’s analysis.

Targeting of University Professors

About targeted killings of professors, she states, “the soldiers tried to kick down the doors of *all* apartments”, therefore it was “not a sign of *targeting* on the basis of any list of names”. The killing

of professor Maniruzzaman of Dhaka University statistics department is also presented as evidence there was no death list: “If the Army had a list of faculty, a person likely to be on it was apparently Prof Maniruzzaman of the Bengali department, who was politically active” (63). What is not factored in is the scenario that there was a list, but an army unfamiliar with the Eastern region, and certainly the language and written script, would routinely carry out interceptions based on mistaken identity, such as with Maniruzzaman from Statistics (this is why Bengali and Bihari collaborators became essential “eyes and ears” for the army at a later stage, via formal “Peace Committees”). Sloppy execution of a death list does not make that list vanish.

Brig (Lt col) Taj denies targeted attacks on university professors, claiming, “Nobody went to faculty quarters” (60). Having been caught in a lie (obviously some soldiers had gone to quarters, which Bose affirms), should he continue to be a reliable witness in this book? Apparently yes, and she obliges by repeating his claim “there was no such list” of targeted faculty as well as that of maj gen Umar, who “denied that there was any list” (62). Brig Taj, again, estimates “44 dead”, far lower than even the “300 killed” in the radio intercept that she also quotes. “How does one reconcile the range of 44 to 300 dead estimated by the two battalion commanders who should know best?” (67). Well, the Central Intelligence Agency’s David Blee says “They killed a lot of people at the university”⁴⁵ but this does not lead Bose to estimate a higher death toll.

Lt Muhammad Ali Shah claims he “fired over the heads of the surging crowd” in Jinjira, and that is enough for Bose. She sympathetically explains the army’s “nightmares of fighting insurgencies in the midst of a civilian population” (77). Similarly, the Boroitola killings are also dismissed by Pakistani officers because they “found it bizarre” and “pointed out that lining people up in single file and shooting into them was not the most effective way of killing people” (145). On the Khulna massacre of Biharis, her description is largely even-toned, until she uncritically accepts maj Babar’s stories of “guillotine”-like structure, “choppers”, “panja” and other “torture instruments” (82) without probing for evidence.

In Santahar, cataloguing Bihari victims, capt (brig) Shaukat Qadir talks about pits “full of corpses”, rooms “filled with the bodies of children” and walls “smeared with human brains” (84), major Anis Ahmed remembers “platforms full of decomposed bodies” (84). In Ishwardi, capt Sarwar mentions Bihari “infants stuck on spears and women’s bodies slashed” (85). Identical stories of Bengali “babies on spears” were published in one of the Catholic Church’s fundraiser documents for the Bengali side. These contradictory, mirrored recollections deserve more probing than what Bose offers. Also in Ishwardi, army officers claim to have taken photographs of the massacre, but these seem to have disappeared.

In Thanapara, the massacre of Bengalis is acknowledged, but the blame still lies in subtle ways with the Bengali rebels: “Perhaps if nobody had shot at them in the bazaar, the army units would have marched on its way and not felt the need to scour the villages” (111). Chuknagar is definitively described as “seems to have been a one-off incident” (122). She accepts at face value the

statement from three Pakistani officers who served in the region that “none of them had heard of the Chuknagar incident”. From there she definitively concludes that the massacre of Hindu refugees at Chuknagar was carried out only by a “band of twenty-five to thirty men”. Note the skilful use of “band”, insinuating renege militia, and the definitive low number, freeing the Pakistan Army from culpability for targeted killings.

Bose is very receptive to the possibility of the Pakistan Army not carrying out atrocities, and then launches a polemic against Bengalis: “The torture and mutilation of civilians or military victims and the manner of killing them by Bengali nationalists were barbaric, and robbed the pro-liberation side of any moral authority on the question of atrocities” (112). Here Bose takes one incident (“the Bihari from Ishwardi”) and telescopes out to suggest that this equals the many thousands killed by the Pakistani side; she also repeatedly conflates “Awami League” with all “Bengali nationalists” and the entire “pro-liberation side”, even though this erases the misfits and non-Leaguers within this history.

Coercive Qualifiers

The authorial agenda intrudes throughout the book via the coercive use of qualifiers. Her assessment at the outset is that Pakistan Army officers were “fine men doing their best” (13). Gen Umar’s claims to not having an active role in the military strike is presented with wan disclaimers: “was at pains to minimise his role”, “argued”, “denied” and “claimed” and maj gen A O Mitha is “an honest and dynamic officer” (49). He may very well be, but is it the historian’s job to constantly fill the page with superfluous and one-sided hosannas? Let the facts speak for themselves.

Ah, the facts, but also the words that accompany them. Urvashi Butalia has commented on this in her review of *Dead Reckoning*. “Bangladeshi accounts are labelled ‘claims’, Pakistani officers’ accounts are straightforward accounts” (see pp 142-45).⁴⁶ In a similar vein, I decided to parse the qualifiers used in accounts from pages 76 to 95. Here we find the interviews of Pakistan Army officers frequently presented without disclaimers: Lt Muhammad Ali Shah (“found himself” (76)), brig Karimullah (“log gives a vivid picture”, “records”, “they had to engage”, “they found” (78, 79)), maj Samin Jan Babar (“said that” (82)), capt (brig) Shaikat Qadir (“wrote”, “described” (84)), maj Anis Ahmed (“said” (84)), capt Sarwar (“related”, “said” (85)), Lt Ataullah Shah (“saw something”, “still remembers” (89, 90)), maj Abdul Majid (“said that it was common knowledge”, “said” (93, 94)). But over the same 20 pages, accounts by pro-liberation Bengali officers or civilians are accompanied by very specific qualifiers: Lt col Raquib (“professed ignorance” (78)), brig Majumdar (“does not mention” (78)), Lt col Masud (“claimed” (78)), maj (maj gen) Safiullah (“claims” (78)), Rustam Ali Sikdar (“claimed that”, “could offer no concrete reason” (80)), Lt Imamuz Zaman (“alleges” (92), “grave allegation”, “alleges”, “alleged perpetrators” – all within one paragraph (93)) and finally Joynal Abedin (“allegedly” attached to “half a dozen [Pakistani] soldiers allegedly went from hut to hut in the village, setting them on fire and killing anything that moved”).

Both sides may have altered death tolls in order to build world sympathy, but only one side is subject to cross-examination in

this book. The war-weary Pakistan Army in Bose’s version seem to channel Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*, a band of put-upon men, “all reduced to endless diet of *dal-roti*” (33). Clearly, war is hell and the first thing to go is a balanced diet. A Pakistani officer’s violence is always qualified as rumour: “Capt Bukhari and Lt Col Yaqub were *rumoured* to have killed people” (emphasis added) and followed a sentence later with “The Bengali nationalist side was hardly better”. Based on what internal metric were warring standards toward each sides’ narratives used within the same chapter, the same page, and throughout the book? If not Bose, here is a rule the editor of this book could have applied – either use “allegedly” for all eyewitness accounts, or for none of them, but not selectively when it tilts against the Pakistan Army.

Consider the way competing versions are treated in the *Hit and Run* chapter. Harilal Singhanian’s testimony of looting seems to have too many protagonists (two Pakistani soldiers and 12 pro-Pakistan civilians) which “makes the allegation somewhat incredible and suggests it should have been probed further before publication” (138). But why should counter-allegations not face the same scrutiny? To refute Singhanian’s claim of looting, forced labour and massacre at Folaghat rail factory (Bose calls it a “sensational allegation”), she turns to col Muhammad Shafi who is framed with the complimentary “soft spoken but firm in his views” and “responded directly to each of the allegations”. Will history then boil down to smooth demeanour and hospitality (“agreed to meet me without any prior introduction” (138))? He who tells the best story is the historian of record? On the looting, col Shafi replies “never heard of such an incident” and “had an officer... been involved in such an incident, it would have been reported” (in that case the Pakistan Army is unique in its warfield discipline). On forced labour, it was apparently voluntary because “people came in droves” and Bose helpfully fills in the gap: “quite likely as the wood would have been valuable pay in kind”. In addition, Shafi apparently offered “drinking water, medical treatment” and “non-stop music from Indian films” and so “people came in thousands” (139).

By the end of this section, Bengali readers may want to go back and fight the war again, just to partake in this paradise of voluntary labour. Bose realises at some point that Shafi’s story is teetering over the edge of outlandish fantasy, so she adds a neat coda: “it is possible that many of the ‘volunteers’...were coerced by the very local members to whom col Shafi had entrusted the responsibility”. So, blame can be assigned to local collaborators (who Bose is uninterested to shield), but the army is never aware of violence on its watch. Finally, about the massacre accusation, col Shafi simply states that the “army had nothing to do with it”. And there the matter rests – QED in Bose’s book.

Again, in the Thakurgaon case, the story of Bengalis being tortured in a tiger cage probably has hyperbole embedded within it, but the task of debunking should not be given to the accused torturer. Here again, the victim Safikul Alam is “claims”, “allegedly” and “implausible” (140, 141). But when she meets brig (Lt col) Amir Muhammad Khan, the accused torturer, her investigative instincts switch off. She accepts that he only “threatened to throw him in” but never carried it out, “this was the sole incident”, if anyone else had tortured Bengalis “he would have come

to know about it” and “nobody was shot in the cantonment” (142). How easily Bose allows herself to be charmed by Pakistan Army officers’ panache (she finds the Bengali officers visibly lacking by contrast) is exhibited in her description of brig Khan: “a lively person with a sense of humour”, who took her questions “in a good natured way” (142) and gave a credible “vivid description”. After quickly dismissing the torture story, Bose then repeats verbatim brig Khan’s story of a Pakistani officer and his family killed “in a most brutal manner” and “3-4,000 Bihari families were left fatherless by the ethnic killing by Bengalis” (143).

Losing distance from her subject, Bose forms a joking relationship with Khan, “I told him I was dubbing him the ‘Aurangzeb of Thakurgaon’ and that if he stopped Bengalis from singing and dancing he has only himself to blame that people would believe the worst of him!” She sums up by saying “Amir took the knock with good humour”. Bless his avuncular and guilt-free soul! This is possibly what inspired humorist Kazi Khaleed Ashraf’s satire of Bose’s prose:

Ooo, he is so utterly cuddly, so delectable, I for the life of me do not understand why limpid Bengali men (and I believe some desperate women) call him danab, pashu, and all those vile names... If I had my way, I would do a makeover of all Hello Kitty stuff and run a new franchise. I will call it, Hello General... Yes, I can’t stand this injustice against the generals. I talked to a few, nice lot they are, always so crisp and clipped in their demeanour, and those miscreants in 1971 called them misdemeanourly. That’s not even an English word.⁴⁷

Sarmila Bose starts the book by correctly pointing out that, “even foreign correspondents’ reports need to be carefully scrutinised to separate eyewitness accounts from reports of what somebody else has told the reporter” (10). But a few chapters later, she has forgotten her own advice when she writes “Foreign news media also reported evidence of the mass murder of non-Bengalis at the mill” (87). Drilling down into the footnote, one of the “foreign media” here is Malcolm Browne’s *New York Times* report of 11 May 1971. When I looked up the original article, I noted this disclaimer: “The following dispatch is by one of the six foreign newsmen allowed into East Pakistan by the Pakistani government for a tour *with official escorts* (emphasis added)”. If a government at war gives a guided tour, the intention is transparently to steer journalists to evidence of the opponent’s brutality. Why does not Bose at least mention that it is a state-guided tour? Tariq Ali wrote about the Pakistan regime’s press strategy,

Press censorship with regard to Baluchistan was of a different calibre from that imposed during the genocidal operations against the Bengalis. In the latter instance, the regime had practised a simple Goebbelsian policy: untruths were repeated daily and ad nauseam in the press and on radio and television.⁴⁸

Bose harpoons Anthony Mascarenhas for relying on second-hand stories about massacre of Bengalis. But the Malcolm Browne she relies on is equally second-hand: “are said to have killed the Biharis in large numbers” and “Newsmen were shown graves where 152 victims were said to have been buried”.

A look through the archives of 12 May 1971 shows that several newspapers dutifully filed reports from this “official tour”. The report that came out slightly differently was from Mort Rosenblum, filing for AP.⁴⁹ In his report, the editor’s note outlines the guided tour, and then states “This eyewitness report was

filed from Bangkok, beyond the reach of Pakistani censorship”. Rosenblum relied on “visible evidence and eyewitnesses questioned out of official earshot” and concluded “perhaps more than half a million bodies” and “no one knows how many Bengali families the army machine-gunned or how many migrant workers Bengali secessionists slashed to death”. He refers to the press blackout, undermining the guided tour: “Reporters were banned from East Pakistan from 26 March, when 40 newsmen were bundled out and stripped of their notes and film, until the government escorted in a party of six on a conducted tour 6-11 May.” Is Rosenblum’s a more accurate picture than the other five reporters – we do not yet know and neither does Bose. But she cherry-picks the report that fits her hypothesis.

Number Word Combinations

One of the book’s particular claims, featured in the post-publication promotion blitz, is of “myth busting”. No myth irritates Bose more than the claim of 3 million dead Bengalis, which she dissects in a chapter called “Monstrous Fables”. That the death toll estimate is too high was already acknowledged by some Bengalis even in 1972, but Bose drills down to consider the Hamoodur Rahman Commission’s estimate of “26,000” as the most reliable estimate. There is no doubt that death toll exaggeration came from the Bengali and Indian side in the service of gathering global sympathy, but why should the Bhutto era Commission’s self-exculpatory number be the acceptable final tally? The truth lies somewhere in between, but Bose clings to the Pakistani estimate, even quoting the Commission’s conclusion that it “might be biased, but biased upwards” (178). In any case, whether the death toll was 3 million or 3,00,000 or less, does that make it any less of a genocide? In a book where both the death toll and the genocide label is dismissed, there is an absolving caveat on the final page: “Ultimately, neither the numbers nor the labels matter” (183). If they do not matter, why was she focused on establishing definitively that it was all untrue?

Bose positions herself as the “first” to challenge the numbers. But as Afsan Chowdhury noted, surveys were started even in 1972 after people started to contest the 3 million figure, and were only shut down during the Zia regime. The Bangla Academy also did district surveys between 1996 and 2001, and found the numbers to be low.⁵⁰ Post-1974, the issue of exhumation of dead bodies was off the table – a dynamic Bose misunderstands when she writes “there was much international sympathy and assistance on offer in the early years” (68), ignoring the devil’s deal Mujib was forced to cut to get support from the Organisation of Islamic Countries, at a time when the economy was on life support and desperately needed an infusion of oil money. Later, she also states that Ziaur Rahman had fought in 1971 and therefore his period should have seen an effort at accounting – but this misreads the nature of his era, which included an attempt at building up a power base outside the League faithful, partially accomplished by rehabilitation of alleged 1971 collaborators.

In 1992, Zunaid Kazi was collecting media estimates of death tolls for one of the early internet sites.⁵¹ The numbers ranged up to 3 million but as low as 2,00,000. These statistics were debated in Bangladeshi cyber-circles (mainly soc.culture.bangladesh usenet

group in a pre-social media period). Later, Afsan Chowdhury's research turned up similar gaps in numbers, and his op-eds have talked about the same.⁵² All this entered the Bangladeshi public historical debate. Thus, the implied "hook" of Bose's book, a claim to being the "first" to dissect the death toll, rings hollow and self-promotional.

Some labels do matter, especially in the context of the legal challenges around unresolved issues from 1971. War crimes trials for Pakistani officers is possibly a lost cause by now. The time for that was 1972, but at that time they were chess pieces to be exchanged for the Bengali officers imprisoned inside Pakistan. The issue of repatriation for the "Biharis" or "Stranded Pakistanis" is also largely settled through their relative assimilation over 40 years, and the court verdict (shamefully late) which gave them full voting rights ahead of the 2008 elections. What remains unsettled is war crimes trials for the Bengalis who were involved in death squads, with the support of the Pakistan army. This has a direct impact on current politics, as many of the accused belong to the main Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami. The head of Jamaat, Ghulam Azam, has already retired (possibly pushed out by young turks who wanted to remove the 1971 stigma), but the second tier is now under investigation by the current Awami League government.

The potential trial of alleged war criminals remains a highly emotive issue, and the Awami League hopes to strengthen its hold on *Sreeti Ekattur* (1971 memory), which has consistently helped them, especially with the youth vote, in recent elections. But the legal structure of the war crimes tribunals is weak enough that some analysts⁵³ worry that the verdicts will lack credibility. The Jamaat has already shown itself partial to the use of international lawyers. They have legally challenged an *Economist* article which named the current Jamaat chief Matiur Rahman Nizami as head of the Al-Badr death squad.⁵⁴ The Channel Four documentary *War Crimes File*, for which David Bergman was a researcher, has also been subject to libel action by the men alleged to have committed the war crimes.

One of the key strategies deployed by Jamaat has been to redefine the nature of violence in 1971. A Jamaat advocate appeared on television in 2007, denying that there were any death squads, and arguing that anyone who participated in "pro-Pakistan actions" was defending the legal unitary structure, and their actions are not "war crimes". In a context where war crimes trials are under various legal and political challenges, Bose's exhaustive attempt to remove "genocide" from any consideration of actions in 1971 is not a neutral act.

Essentialist Readings

At a certain point, Bose is incensed by a catalogue of terms used against the Pakistan army during the war. These include *Khansena* (Turkic title merged with "soldier") "Punjabi bastards", "barbarian", "bandit", "human demon", "ferocious hyena" and "tiger". She also cites Quamrul Hassan's iconic poster "Anihilate these demons", with its vampire-toothed Yahya Khan caricature. Concurrently, she finds the Pakistan side using the more restrained phrases "miscreants", "Muktis", "Awami League thugs", etc. She concludes that the Bengali side engaged in racial insult, while the Pakistani state spoke in the language of politics and law and order.

What she does not probe is that the reason the Pakistani state has fewer terms on record (especially in the White Paper, and official records) is a wartime strategy to minimise the appearance of a popular and widespread rebellion. For this, it had to be presented as the few, the misguided and above all the criminal elements. "Miscreants" and "thugs" (162) fit well within that structure.

But is evidence of West Pakistani hostility, racism and religious intolerance so difficult to find? If we step outside the whisky bubble of Dacca Club "good social life with Bengalis" stories, there are many macro- and micro-indicators. In Saadia Toor's new book on post-1947 Pakistan⁵⁵, she states that "the attitude of West Pakistani elite towards the Bengalis also became increasingly more racialised over time".⁵⁶ Toor summarised the tendencies in conversation,

There was cultural prejudice of course – basically the idea that East Bengali Muslims were culturally too "in thrall" to Hindu culture. But the Pakistani army's own discourse was more explicitly racist. It had inherited the ideology of the "martial races" of the subcontinent expounded by the British and the latter's contempt for the "effeminate" Bengali. During the army operation in 1971, this racism found its most explicit expression in the idea of Bengalis being an "inferior" race whose gene-pool must be "fixed" by the forcible impregnation of their women. Commentators from the 1970s onwards have spoken about this attitude being rife within the military and within certain parts of the upper echelons of liberal society in West Pakistan.⁵⁷

Tariq Ali also refers to this phenomenon:

The soldiery had been told that the Bengalis were an inferior race, short, dark, weak (unlike the martial races of the Punjab) and still infected with Hinduism. Junior and senior officers alike had spoken of seeking, in the course of their campaign, to improve the genes of the Bengali people. Fascist talk of this character gave the green light for the mass rapes suffered by Bengali women regardless of class or creed.⁵⁸

Anthony Mascarenhas similarly documents the equation of East Pakistan as "half Muslims"⁵⁹ and "Kaffirs", and the Bengali Hindu as "undependable, undesirable aliens".⁶⁰ A Punjabi officer in Comilla confided to Mascarenhas, "My God, what couldn't we do with such wonderful land... But I suppose we would have become like them".⁶¹

More significant than anecdotes are the infrastructures, recommended in the Report of the East Bengal Language Committee and reflected in newspapers like *Dawn*, that rendered Bengalis as lesser citizens – a history Bose ignores, but Toor explores in detail. From the Pakistan government's policy of making Urdu the sole national language (Jinnah called any opponent of this an "enemy of Pakistan"),⁶² to the post-1952 grudging acceptance of Bengali with the proviso that it would be "reformed"⁶³ to discourage "unwarranted tendency to use words of Sanskritic language."⁶⁴ The 1952 language riots in support of Bengali resulted in media coverage in West Pakistan which was couched in the language of religion and outsider status, blaming "non-Muslim foreigners"⁶⁵ "dressed in a different way"⁶⁶ and "Hindus distributing anti-Urdu literature",⁶⁷ with the Muslim League labelling it a "Hindu conspiracy".⁶⁸ As Pakistan lurched into the post-1952 era, structures of exclusion hardened, "exacerbated by the highly derogatory attitude of non-Bengali members of state institutions towards Bengalis".⁶⁹ Toor comments on these gaps in Bose's book

by saying, “exclusions of this magnitude and consistency by Bose can hardly be considered mistakes or oversights.”⁷⁰

Some of these derogatory attitudes seem to have seeped, via osmosis, into Bose’s framing. While she lambasts the Bengali use of animal “epithets” during the war, the book begins with two similar descriptors of Bengalis as “like a swarm of honey bees” (maj gen Hakeem Qureshi, Pakistan Army) and “a swarm of bees” (Archer Blood (8)). For good measure she adds Nirad Chaudhuri’s assessment of Bengali “self pity” (21) and G W Chowdhury’s sentiment that “Bengalis are noted for a negative and destructive attitude rather than for hard work and constructive programmes” (21).

Having set out this essentialist foundation, Bose frames the Bengali narrative around 1971 as given to “scant regard for factual accuracy or analytical sophistication” (5), “blind hatred and vindictiveness” (8), “theatrical language and commentary” (46), “flowery language in a somewhat melodramatic style” (140) and “mindless misrepresentation of reality” (163). Above all, a Bengali is “a good raconteur” (74) – a teller of tall tales, but unreliable as a historical source.

Consider the story of Bengali “line-sardar” Haroon, picked up by Bihari “death squads” and thrown into a boiler. This turns in Bose’s hands not into a meditation on the depth of anti-Bengali violence, but instead into proof of Bengali cowardice: “the shed full of Bengalis had sat and watched, not one of them raised a finger to help the hapless Haroon” (83). Bengali inaction against a “small” Bihari death squad clearly reveals that these squads had the backing of the fearsome army, but this does not occur to her.

Even during war, the Bengali is apparently given to pointless exercises, as in her cold-blooded assessment of the death of Jahanara Imam’s son Rumi. “Sheer naivety [*sic*] and amateurish attitude” is how she dismisses Rumi’s rebel operations and later asks, “How did this ‘action’ contribute to the goal of Bangladesh’s independence?” (135). The quote marks around “action” reminds me that her use of quote marks for whatever she disparages is present throughout the book; it is worth micro-analysis on another day. Bose wants it both ways – Rumi’s minuscule hit-and-run operation is dismissed as naïve, but also invoked to draw equivalence with Pakistani military action: “can the other side be castigated for thinking it was all right to kill ‘enemy combatants’ like him who has taken up arms to dismember their country?” (136). The arrest of Rumi’s band of rebels becomes an occasion to prove that the military regime was fair-handed: “they do not seem to have kept back anyone who was not really involved” (137).

Understanding Brinkmanship

The events leading from post-1970 election negotiations to the March 1971 military crackdown remain a grey area, with many unanswered questions. How did Mujib struggle to balance leadership of an increasingly frustrated Bengali population with many conflicting tendencies, and the electoral mandate of being leader of “all Pakistan”? What were the tensions between the League’s middle class leadership, and the radical students who raised the flag of Bangladesh on campus, and those who did not want to accept Mujib’s leadership? At what point did war become truly inevitable? All this is especially obscured because many key Bengali participants were killed in the 1970s.

Bose shows a total lack of curiosity towards these events, wanting to hurry along to her main event. The cataclysmic 1970 cyclone and the botched relief effort, which altered the League’s election results, is simply “severe floods” (19) and an indictment of shiftless Bengalis. In fact the delay in giving cyclone relief, and the time gap before Yahya visited the disaster zone, turned it into a campaigning tool for Sheikh Mujib. The image of the unfeeling West Pakistan side was already built up through the poster *Shonar Bangla shoshan keno?* (Why is Golden Bengal a cremation field?), and now the mishandling of cyclone relief efforts was another turning point. Bose bypasses this entire equation, instead listing only Lt (Lt gen) Ghulam Mustafa’s memory of cyclone relief: “even as they worked, Bengalis watched from the sidelines and complained that nothing was being done”.

The accounting of economic disparity between the two Pakistans, exhaustively analysed by Bengali and American economists, is dismissed by Bose as “statistics that showed ‘disparity’ but not necessarily ‘discrimination’” (20). In fact, much of that analysis was not only about mapping out disparity, but also precisely charting how revenue raised in East Pakistan was being transferred to West Pakistan, especially, but not exclusively, in the case of East Pakistan-origin export goods like jute. As the structures of the unitary state were all centralised in West Pakistan, any export revenue was first channelled through the western wing before getting disbursement to the East. Widely discussed in academic and political circles at that time was a chart which outlined “Transfer of Resources from East to West Pakistan”. From 1956 to 1970, economic analysis from Rehman Sobhan,⁷¹ Akhlaqur Rahman,⁷² A R Khan,⁷³ Nurul Islam, Anisur Rahman and others⁷⁴ conclusively demonstrated that East Pakistan’s development was being systematically thwarted due to transfer and diversion of resources to West Pakistan.

Bose simplistically states that since East Pakistan had started from a much poorer level in 1947, disparity “could not vanish overnight” (20). However, economic theory predicts that all else being equal, poorer regions grow faster than the richer ones in a well integrated economy that is not distorted by deliberate government policies. That is, poorer East Pakistan should have been growing faster, to catch up with the western wing, just as poorer European countries grew faster after the second world war. Her discounting of all the existing economic analysis is wilful, especially since even Yahya Khan admitted that East Pakistan had fair grievances in the area of economic policy (it was the control of foreign and defence policy that became a sticking point during negotiations). Rehman Sobhan points out,

Even Pakistanis have argued, since the early 1960s, that policies and resource allocations were discriminatory to East Pakistan. This indeed was quite well argued by Mahbulul Haq in his book on *Strategy for Economic Planning*. The literature on this subject is extensive and is obviously unread by Sarmila Bose.⁷⁵

Bose misjudges the post-election power equations when she refers to the temptations of military manipulation – “Yahya Khan declined to do that” (20). Here she takes at face value the army’s post-war protestations that they had wanted an orderly transfer of power and it was the politicians who got in the way. Yet the reality was far more complex. The transfer from Ayub to Yahya

was in the face of an extraordinary pan-Pakistan upheaval that focused simultaneously on a landed elite, a business class (at that time almost entirely West Pakistani) and the military. As with many other such conflagrations, the military jettisoned Ayub to save itself. Yahya's task was not only to transfer power to civilians, but to maintain the army's role in key decision-making (an antecedent to today's National Security Council was considered).

Dead Reckoning is silent on how the Pakistan Army envisioned the election results playing out. Whether misguided by faulty local intelligence (especially in East Pakistan), or lulled by the past squabbling history of Pakistan's political class, the military had predicted that the results would produce a "hung Parliament", with no party gaining an absolute majority, and the army therefore being the final decision-maker and arbiter. Yahya fully expected to continue as president after the elections, being the ultimate kingmaker and guarding the army's business and political interests.

Bose barely glances at the 1970 cyclone, and spares a sentence about the withdrawal of Maulana Bhashani from the election (21). Yet, these two factors changed many pre-election calculations. Although Bhashani made the prophetic prediction, as early as 1957, of East Pakistan saying goodbye and "Assalamu Alaikum"⁷⁶ to West Pakistan, he was eventually outmanoeuvred by his opponents (including Mujib and the war-time Awami League leadership, as well as post-71 Mujibists). Whatever symbolic value Bhashani may have hoped to achieve by withdrawing, the result was the opposite – non-participation in this decisive election rendered his party and other allied ultra-left groups as non-players in the negotiations (as well as the wartime Mujibnagar high command).

What followed the election's shock results are a series of manoeuvres and feints, miscalculations and intrigues. Yet Bose seems incapable of providing an analysis of these days that decided the fate of independent Bangladesh. Instead, she observes (incorrectly) that "despite some ups and downs in the three months that followed, *there was optimism until the very end*" (emphasis added). The book abdicates any responsibility toward constructing a pre-crackdown timeline, even though that would contextualise the Awami League's "intransigence", incidents of anti-Bihari violence, and the street chaos that she condemns and uses as the justification for the crackdown:

If the decision on 25 March to try to impose a military solution to a political problem was wrong both ethically and politically, the decision to abdicate the responsibilities of governance in the preceding weeks could be considered no less so (emphasis added) (34).

While the pre-25 March negotiation timeline is contested, is it so utterly opaque? Bose seems to think so, as she says "conclusive analyses of why they failed can only be done by future scholars" (22). But she starts her Appendix by citing Sisson and Rose's *War and Secession*⁷⁷ as "the only comprehensive and systematically researched book on the 1971 conflict" (186). Sisson and Rose is a solid book on the conflict – although it also has its own selection bias (33 Pakistani, 49 Indian, 39 American and 12 Bangladeshi interviewees). However, leaving that aside, if the book was indeed a compass for Bose, she seems to have completely skipped Chapters 4, 5 and 6 (pp 54-134), which deal extensively with the minutiae of the negotiations, and give some indication of behind

the scenes intrigues. Instead, Sisson and Rose serve only two functions in *Dead Reckoning*. First, as a source of the tasty anecdote about Mujib and Bhutto refusing to look at each other – Yahya calling them "bashful newlyweds" establishes the army as neutral and sensible in the proceedings. Second, she fixates on footnote 24 in Chapter 10 in Sisson and Rose, which quotes 3,00,000 as the death toll, forming a starting point for ratcheting down the death toll to 26,000 in her "Monstrous Fables" chapter.

Bhutto's Strategy

In fact, the negotiations leading up to March were a case study in brinkmanship. In the end it was Bhutto who emerged with the maximum gain (post-71 premiership of West Pakistan) compared to what was legally his right. After the election landslide, the Awami League had an unexpected super-majority, which was both their asset and liability in negotiations (the army was unwilling to trust the League's word, as the "brute majority" could be used to push through any legislation, including cuts to the military budget). Bhutto shrewdly parlayed his small majority in West Pakistan via the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) into an equal seat at the table with Mujib and the League. A quick study, Bhutto had foreseen the Ayub regime's impending collapse and quickly left that military cabinet in 1966 to form his "rebel" PPP and capture the spirit of dissent in West Pakistan (an acrobatic feat given his feudal wealth and links to the military establishment). Yet, Bhutto realised his position in 1971 was extremely fragile. His majority inside Pakistan was small, and without the ability to dispense state patronage, many of his party members would defect. Sitting in opposition in a Mujib government would surely cause the PPP's implosion. He also knew that the other West Pakistani parties, while temporarily acknowledging the need for a united West Pakistan front, would soon start to leave the coalition (as some did in the final days of the March negotiation, when Bhutto's control over the military became obvious).

Especially worth mentioning is the evidence of the privileged access Bhutto had to the military during supposedly neutral negotiations. Sisson and Rose describe the private meeting that Yahya held with Bhutto at the latter's Larkana baronial family estate. At this meeting, Bhutto called Mujib a "clever bastard" who could not "really be trusted" and wanted to "bulldoze" his constitution through the National Assembly. He also played on the army's beliefs about the fundamental nature of East Pakistan, when he questioned whether Mujib was a "true Pakistani".⁷⁸ All this was reflected in Yahya's later comments about Mujib and needing to "sort this bastard out" and "test his loyalty."⁷⁹ Having set various fears in motion, Bhutto brilliantly stoked the Army's paranoia about the Awami League being too close to Delhi and soft on the Kashmir issue. In his 28 February speech,⁸⁰ Bhutto used a masterful mix of threats ("break the legs") and insinuation ("they would be traitors") against any West Pakistani politician who wanted to meet Mujib.

The Awami League had an overwhelming majority and had the legal right to take power without negotiation. Their mind-frame was possibly akin to how Salman Rushdie responded to Benazir Bhutto's version of 1971 history: "You feel like using words of one syllable to explain. Listen, dear child, the man had

won, and it was your father who dug in his heels...".⁸¹ But politics is never only about being in the right. Mujib failed to reach out and pacify the Pakistan Army, doing the necessary end-run around Bhutto to isolate him. Refusing requests to come to Rawalpindi to meet with the government team, displaying a new-found assertiveness during talks, flying the Bangladesh flag on a car during a negotiation meeting, and encouraging the physical isolation of Bhutto during his Dhaka visit – all of this helped to rattle the already jittery army. The League was absolutely correct to suspect that Bhutto was a “stalking horse” for the army, and that they could not trust him in a new cabinet. But a cunning stratagem could have been to invite him into the cabinet, neutralise him through red tape and then eventually fire him. Similar Machiavellian designs seemed to occur to Bhutto at every turn of the negotiations, but not to the League team, which proceeded down a linear path of demanding full implementation of the Six Points election manifesto.

Yet at the same time, the League seems to have done everything possible in its power to continue negotiations, all the while stymied by Bhutto’s grandstanding and the military’s continued bolstering of forces, a fact visible to all and adding to the sense of the inevitable bloodbath. Even up to 20 March, *The Forum*, known as the English language organ of the League’s leadership, published an editorial, “Options for a Sane Man”, beseeching for a negotiated solution:

Whether people want Pakistan or not they certainly will not have it thrust on them at bayonet point... Does Yahya really intend to unleash genocide on 75 million Bengalis merely to protect the interest of this handful of buccaneers who have bled the nation for 23 years?... In such a situation a public renunciation of the use of force by Yahya to solve the nation’s political problems, backed by a withdrawal to West Pakistan of units pumped in since 1st March and the return of the rest to barracks, would clear the air.⁸²

Blind Spots of 1971

If not for her singular focus on clearing the Pakistan Army of charges of genocide, Bose could have probed elsewhere for a more complicated unpacking of 1971, some of which would have been productively jarring to the conventional narrative. Her analysis blithely concludes that the post-71 violent decade in Bangladesh is the direct repercussion of the “culture of violence fomented by 1971” (14). In fact the reality behind the chaotic 1970s is far more complex and multilayered.

Among many unresolved issues within the 1971 war is the idea of Bengali nationalism as an inclusive force. While Bengali Hindus were a crucial part of the romantic depiction of the 1971 struggle, the reality is that the Awami League, as well as other political elites, were controlled by Bengali Muslims. While the process has been gradual, one of the ways this has manifested is the continuing shrinking of the country’s Hindu population, aided by the “Vested Property Act”, a holdover of the communal “Enemy Property Act” enacted after the 1965 India-Pakistan war. Successive Bangladesh governments, and allied powerful individuals, have used this Act to grab Hindu property using a combination of court action, bribery and force.⁸³ Although the Act was overturned in recent years, by now the Hindu population is severely economically disadvantaged.

The other poison pill embedded within Bengali nationalism is that it has no space for non-Bengalis, whether Biharis, flatland Adivasis, or the Indigenous Jumma (Pahari) people of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). This surfaced immediately after 1971, when the constitution was being framed. The first act of protest against the new government on the floor of parliament was by parliamentarian Manabendra Larma, who opposed the constitution’s definition of only “Bengalis” as the people of Bangladesh. Larma announced, “You cannot impose your national identity on others. I am a Chakma not a Bengali. I am a citizen of Bangladesh, Bangladeshi. You are also Bangladeshi but your national identity is Bengali... they (Hill People) can never become Bengali.”⁸⁴ The tragic history of the CHT parallels the build-up to 1971: a 20-year guerrilla war for autonomy, slow-motion ethnic displacement by Bengali settlers, and finally 14 years of betrayal after the 1997 Peace Accords. To a Pahari, the coercive force of the Bangladesh Army and Bengali settlers are indistinguishable from that of the Pakistan Army and armed Biharis during 1971.

Another unstable dynamic coming out of the 1971 war is the idea of the “undisputed” leader. The 1970 election results were a total victory for the League, due to Sheikh Mujib’s charisma as a politician who could speak to the masses, especially in the villages. But once the war began, fissures appeared within the movement. Khandaker Mushtaque was the first to make secret overtures to American contacts (later that same Mushtaque happily ascended to the “civilian leadership” after the 1975 assassination of Mujib). The ultra-Left within the Bengali forces were also hamstrung by having to accept the leadership of the League in what some analysed as “battle of two bourgeois forces”. Bhashani’s isolation increased during the war, and the Indian leadership actively monitored him and at one point had him under semi-house arrest.

The Left’s challenge to Mujib’s leadership surfaced very rapidly after 1971. In the first university elections of the new nation, the League’s student front suffered a shock defeat to the communist-backed Student Union. The next elections saw another defeat to the socialist Jatiya Samajtantric Dal (JSD), an alliance that included people who had deserted the Awami League for more far-left options. The League then began a campaign against the JSD, including extra-judicial killings. While the JSD was being suppressed, the Maoists who had already been a growing force (and a source of paranoia for Indira Gandhi, who feared cross-border alliances with West Bengal’s Naxalites) grouped together as the underground Sarbahara Party. Their campaign of sabotage, targeted assassinations, bombings and a successful national strike in 1974 (invoking nothing more than Mujib’s national strike against the Yahya regime) badly rattled the government. The Sarbahara Party leader’s execution while in police custody was one of several events delegitimising the Mujib government.

Another key tension left over from 1971 was within the Bangladesh Army, and between the military and the State. There were tensions between the returnee officers (who had been in Pakistani prison camps) and those who had fought in the battlefield. There were also leftist factions inside the army, as well as a confused amalgam of anti-India, pro-Islamist and other overlapping and contradictory strands. Also to be accounted for were the

informal guerrillas, who had to be taken into the army. Some were never absorbed, becoming freelance loose cannons, such as Kader Siddiqui (because the international press were finally allowed in after 16 December, Siddiqui's public execution of Pakistani "collaborators" remains the most widely photographed moment of 1971,⁸⁵ ironically forming part of Bose's allegation of Bengali war crimes).

Resentment, as well as ambition, was growing even among those officers who had once called Mujib *Banga Bandhu* (Friend of Bengal). The same Major Zia who had seized Chittagong radio and made the announcement of independence on behalf of his "great national leader" Sheikh Mujib, later became the ultimate beneficiary of the factionalised coups and counter-coups in 1975. Mujib aggravated tensions with the army by creating his own paramilitary units, the Rakkhi Bahini and the Lal Bahini. Eventually, the military responded with its own murderous logic, becoming within four years the same disrupter of democracy that the Pakistan Army had been in the post-1948 period. The Bengali officers had already crossed a mental rubicon by rebelling against the military chain of command in 1971. The Shakespearean tragedy was writ large when Mujib voluntarily came down the stairs to meet the attacking soldiers on the morning of 15 August. After all, he had faced down the far more dreaded Pakistan army in 1971, and survived to return leader of a new nation. These were his own boys, they would not harm him.

Waiting for Godot

In the 1960s, my father was a surgeon in the Pakistan Army. Posted to Rawalpindi Army Headquarters in West Pakistan, he dutifully voted in the 1970 election and waited for the expected transfer of power. After the war broke out, Bengali officers who were trapped in West Pakistan were sequestered and removed from "sensitive duties". At some point they were asked if they "optioned" for East Pakistan and when the answer was affirmative, they were transferred instead to prison camp. In this manner my parents and myself (at age three) arrived in Bannu prison camp, and were later transferred to Mandi Bahauddin and finally Gujranwala. Also at adjoining camps were two uncles, members of the Army Engineering Corps. When I ask my mother if it was dangerous, she says "We were afraid, every day, that they would finish us. No one knew what would happen next."⁸⁶

Finally in 1973, the Pakistan government negotiated our repatriation to Bangladesh, in exchange for the Pakistani POWs in India. German Fokker Friendship planes waited at Lahore airport, manned by the Red Cross. When we were boarding the plane, father handed over our bedding to another Bengali family that was still stranded. That recipient later became the chief of the Bangladesh air force. At age four you do not remember much, but I have a clear memory of my father driving his white Volkswagen at breakneck speed toward the airport. My mother was nauseous but he was too afraid to stop, and so she vomited continuously out of the side of the car. It was some kind of homecoming.

Back in Bangladesh, everyone had already been promoted in rank, and they had not really counted on us returning. Suddenly there were too many lieutenants, captains and majors. By 1975, as tensions grew, some army officers started getting posted

overseas. Six months before Mujib's assassination, my father was among many sent to work as doctors in Libya. While there we received news of the murder of Mujib, and later my grandfather's death. In that desert exile, there was a small *milad*, and I could not discern whether it was for my grandfather or Sheikh Mujib. I liked to imagine it was for both.

Later, as the counter-coups came, some of Mujib's killers escaped and found refuge in Libya, much to our Bengali community's chagrin (even back then, the Tripoli government specialised in giving refuge to international outlaws). Finally, we returned to Bangladesh and now a military man was president. He wore dark sunglasses, made trains run on time and appeared in a white shirt exhorting the nation to dig ditches. He also faced sabre-rattling confrontations with India. The 1971 "special relationship" soured very fast.

During the bloody 1975 *Sepoy Bidroho* (Soldiers Mutiny), one uncle escaped the mutineers because his "batman" warned him to flee – that same hated batman system was the one thing the mutiny succeeded in abolishing. All three of my family members eventually became senior officers – beyond pride in flag, language, culture, and global standing, this is important at the granular level. The personal is political. A similar sentiment animated my older relatives who lived through Partition. An uncle who was a physics teacher woke up one morning in 1947 to find many Hindu teachers had crossed the border, and so he was now "in charge". The improvement of individual lives on a micro scale often provides the rationalisation for new borders. Radical historians would argue that the subaltern is actually in the same area of darkness, it is mainly the Bengali Muslim middle class and elite that has benefited from 1971. Twenty-two West Pakistani business baron families were replaced by 22 Bengali families, and by now perhaps by 500 families.

When I probe family history, nothing seems settled. There are no simple heroes or villains, only people who made difficult choices. The cousin who fled the house to join the rebels, narrowly evading capture by the Pakistan Army. The uncle who escaped being executed, although the rest of his engineering colleagues were mowed down by a Pakistani firing squad. Within the same family is also an uncle who remained in his university job during the war, and for that became the target of post-1971 "collaborator" witch-hunts. These same pervasive witch-hunts moved Enayetullah Khan to write his famous editorial condemning the fratricidal settling of scores: "Sixty-five Million Collaborators".⁸⁷

It is possible that no one was more discombobulated by history's earthquakes than my maternal grandfather Syed Murtaja Ali. An Islamic historian, he was also the brother of Bengali literary figure Syed Mujtaba Ali. In 1947, Mujtaba wrote one of the first essays defending Bengali as a state language.⁸⁸ Unable to punish Mujtaba, who went into semi-exile in West Bengal, the Pakistani government slowed down the civil service career of Murtaja Ali. What was Murtaja thinking in 1971? He had already paid a steep price as a Bengali in "united Pakistan". But he had also "optioned" for this same Pakistan in 1947, moving my mother from Assam where she was born. He had voted for Mujib, everyone had voted for him, but what did he think of the collapse of the "Pakistan" dream of his youth?

Every Bangladeshi family carries many such contradictions within themselves. Contradictions of impulse, afterthought, hesitation and bravery. But how they choose to remember all this varies, ranging from exuberant myth-making to quiet soul-searching.

The realities of people's actions during war are always a combination of beautiful heroism and a liminal failure of nerve. It is a fundamental aspect of being human.

Bangladesh is still waiting for that human history of 1971.

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