

Anam Zakaria



1971

A People's History from
Bangladesh, Pakistan and India



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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Praise for the Book

1971: A People's History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India poignantly brings out how 1971 is one of the originary wounds not only for Bangladesh but also for Pakistan and India, the ramifications of which are felt particularly today. In thinking through the relation[ship] between [a] nation and the memorialization in South Asia, Anam Zakaria, in her travails [while navigating] through the myriad “permitted” narratives and historiographies of these three children of Partition, shows the lasting traces of 1971 on the essence of these three countries. Exploring memoirs, school textbooks, oral history accounts, history-writing processes, museums and memorials, Zakaria’s timely book carries a temporal and moral imperative in a context where the losses of 1971 are not forgiven by history. By decentring the role of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan beyond the stereotypes of saviours, victims and perpetrators, 1971 highlights the high stakes that scholarship and public discourse in this area must negotiate around the debates of apology while being cognizant of the shifting contexts and readings of these historical instances, so as to not reproduce the coloniality of the present global Islamophobia in which the history of 1971 is often appropriated. This is because the absence presence (in Pakistan), over presence (in Bangladesh) and ignoring (in India) of 1971 has long-term implications for the imagination or pursuit of possible futures in South Asia. Anam’s book is one of those few efforts to make us look at the mirror of 1971 without denying, [or] belittling the injustice perpetrated in East Pakistan by the Pakistani state. It raises questions which intertwine all our trajectories’—Nayanika Mookherjee, professor at Durham University, UK, author of *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971*

‘This is a moving, accessible and at times jolting account of the traumatic-triumphant memory of 1971 that South Asia is yet to process. In Pakistan, the continued silence and erasure have been underway for decades. Official history dominates and the generation that witnessed the cataclysmic events is fading away. In Bangladesh, the nation-state project remains a work in progress; and the way you see 1971 defines your nationalism. The year 1971 often invokes bravado and military triumph in India, thereby undermining the scale of human suffering and the lasting impact of the war, secession and violence that affected millions and changed the history of the region, perhaps forever. Zakaria’s work is a timely attempt to set the 1971 record straight and reaffirm the centrality of people in what constitutes “history”’—Raza Rumi, author, director of Park Center for Independent Media, Ithaca College, USA

‘The events of 1971 that led to the emergence of independent Bangladesh have, for nearly five decades, been hostage to a host of three-way state-sanctioned narratives between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, which have all but erased the factual accounts that took place on the ground in the lives of the people irrevocably changed by them. Anam Zakaria engages with this sensitive and fraught topic in the modern history of the subcontinent and South Asia through the words of those who lived to tell what happened, how it happened, and, in their own words, why they think it happened. This is an enlightening, deeply felt, harrowing and urgently needed work on the subject for scholars and laypersons alike, and essential reading on one of the most devastating conflicts of the [twentieth] century’—Nadeem Zaman, author of *In the Time of the Others*

For my Nano,

Thank you for teaching me the power of storytelling

Preface

Saqoot-e-Dhaka, ‘Fall of Dhaka’ and ‘dismemberment of Pakistan’ were some of the terms I grew up associating the birth of Bangladesh with. In the collective imagination, 1971 represents a loss, the break-up of a nation, the ‘second Partition’ of the Indian subcontinent.

My work on 1947 took me to several Pakistani and Indian homes over the years. As I tried to explore the intergenerational memory of Partition and the ways in which 1947 was remembered and interpreted today, it soon became evident that there was no one homogeneous understanding. While Pakistan saw 1947 as a triumph, marking the birth of a new nation, in India the memory of Partition evoked a sense of loss, of the break-up of the motherland. These are some of the themes that I will delve into during the course of this book. Here, I will just say that as I grappled with this narrative of triumph on one hand and loss on the other, it made me think more and more about the discourse, albeit limited, on Bangladesh in Pakistan.

While Pakistan saw 1971 through the lens of loss, similar to how India saw 1947, for Bangladesh, 1971 marked bloodshed, but also the birth of a new nation, a triumph, a victory. Whereas Pakistan referred to the fateful year as the ‘Fall of Dhaka’ or ‘dismemberment’, in Bangladesh 1971 was hailed as the year of the liberation war. In Pakistan, I was taught that Bangladesh was a product of the third Indo-Pak war. It was another bilateral conflict between the two historic enemies. East Pakistanis were pushed to the periphery in this discourse; in Bangladesh, meanwhile, it was the people of erstwhile East Pakistan who were seen at the fore of the historic nation-making struggle. I later identified an active resistance to the bilateral Indo-Pak narrative. But apart from these initial thoughts, I quickly realized that I did not know much about Bangladesh or, for that matter, 1971. While India

was portrayed as the perpetual enemy in Pakistan, Bollywood offered glimpses into the culture and people across the border, making them seem almost familiar. Some people-to-people initiatives by activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) promoting peace between India and Pakistan also gave access to the ‘other’, but only to a small and fortunate segment of the population. Bangladesh, in comparison, felt unknown, far-off, disconnected. I knew nothing about the people with whom Pakistan shared twenty-four years of history. I knew nothing about how they remembered the war and how it differed from how Pakistan remembered, and in many ways tried to forget, 1971. I knew nothing about young Bangladeshis and the sentiments they held towards Pakistan. I realized that I also knew very little about how ordinary Pakistanis felt about what had happened in 1971. While every December there are a few TV shows to commemorate Saqoot-e-Dhaka, and there are some excellent novels and books that offer a more nuanced perspective on the birth of Bangladesh, in the public discourse the discussion on 1971 remains limited, selective and, in many ways, censored. Textbooks deal with the subject in a cursory fashion, wrapping up the nine-month-long bloody war and the struggle for emancipation within a few pages, teachers don’t seem to want to delve into the topic, and unlike Partition, 1971 rarely comes up in family discussions. Losing the war was seen as a humiliating defeat, one which was best circumvented if not dismissed altogether.

This book then began as a personal quest to understand my own history. In some ways this builds on my previous research, which also used the oral history method to explore conflict in South Asia, first through the lens of Partition and later Kashmir. Studying 1971 felt significant because not only was it a critical moment in South Asian history, leading to the creation of a new country, but also because I found 1971 to have left lasting imprints on the psyche of the three children of Partition. Pakistan, Bangladesh and India—all have a narrative of 1971; the loss and victory is internalized, and 1971 continues to be a site on which internal politics and external relations are contested. The year, for instance, marked a shift in the India–Pakistan relationship, leaving both countries viewing themselves and each other in a

different light. While India felt more confident in its military capacity and felt the balance of power tilt in its favour, impacting not only its regional strategies but also its internal dynamics, in some ways setting the ground for the Emergency of 1975, Pakistan hastily resolved to rebuild a war-torn nation by revising the educational curriculum with an anti-Hindu and anti-India slant, investing more in its military capacity and vowing to seek revenge, using the same tactics in Kashmir as India had used in East Pakistan.¹ The ongoing legacy of the war and the troubled India–Pakistan relations continue to manifest most gravely in the contested territory of Kashmir even today. In Bangladesh too, the nation-building process continues to be troubled, with political parties accusing each other of being pro- or anti-liberation, pro-Pakistan and anti-India or pro-India and anti-Pakistan. Some Bangladeshis feel that India and Pakistan continue to fight a proxy war over the region, funding and fuelling political and religious groups that favour them and stunting the nation-building process.

While the war culminated in the birth of Bangladesh, it left many wounds festering, and the relations within and between the three countries are still cast under the shadows of 1971. To understand the region today, I felt it was imperative to look at the past and see how it shaped the present. The book is a subjective and personal journey through this past and present. I am well aware that there are several books and literature on 1971, some of which remain controversial for they try to promote one nation's narrative about the war while undermining the other nation's closely held war story. The purpose of this book is not to present new 'facts' or to challenge or further any particular 'truth' about the war. Rather, this book is a Pakistani's journey of learning, and in many ways unlearning, Bangladesh's birth story through the oral histories of various Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and some Indians. This book looks at personal memories of the war through conversations with academics, activists, writers and army officers who actively participated in the war, as well as civilians who were witnesses to and victims of the violence and bloodshed. It includes interviews with erstwhile East Pakistanis (now Bangladeshis), both Bengali and non-Bengali, with erstwhile West Pakistanis who lived in East Pakistan before

or during the war, as well as with Indians who remember the war and the refugee influx from across the border. Alongside these personal memories, I have also explored the ways in which 1971 is remembered or forgotten at the macro or state level. The institutionalization of the memory of the war is studied through visits to museums and through the review of textbooks. By looking at how information is made present or absent in these sites, the permitted narrative of the war in each country becomes evident. There are times when state narratives and personal narratives overlap, particularly because there are certain personal memories that are appropriated by the state and presented as the only truth. In Pakistan, for instance, violence against non-Bengalis is used to justify the military action against Bengalis and this ‘truth’ easily finds space in government reports, government-endorsed textbooks and state-run museums. In my interviews with Bihari families, I found several parallels in their personal stories and in the narratives remembered and documented by the state. In Bangladesh, on the other hand, there is an institutional silence on the violence against non-Bengalis. Many of my interviewees were also reluctant to speak about the experiences of non-Bengalis during the war. In these moments, it becomes evident that personal memories are not insulated from public discourse; what is permitted or accentuated at the state level has an impact on what is remembered and retold at the individual level. Institutional silences can at times translate into personal silences as well. (It must be mentioned that these silences have been challenged by Bangladeshis and Pakistanis in their respective countries. Some of these voices make it to the pages of this book). However, at other times, it is only the personal memories which can serve as a challenge to the ‘public truth’ reinforced by the states. For instance, my work with Pakistanis who had resisted the war, some of whom were even jailed for their opposition to military action, provides a different telling of the past, one which punctures the neat and simplistic state discourse which justifies the military’s role.

When I set out to write this book, the hope was that I would be able to make several trips to Bangladesh and India for interviews and research. I was, at that time, unaware of how difficult it is for Pakistanis to get visas

for Bangladesh, especially under the incumbent government. My difficulties in acquiring permission to visit the country are mentioned in detail during the course of this book. Here, it will suffice to say that it was very difficult to acquire the visa and I had to try and make the most of my one and only visit to Bangladesh in the summer of 2017. Similarly, while I have travelled to India several times in the past, since 2016 relations between the two countries have remained tense and made travel difficult. These logistical constraints (as well as the fact that all my research to date is self-funded) have meant that I was unable to do the kind of research I would have liked to in either country. I have had to resort to Skype and phone calls for several of the interviews in India and have been fortunate that my local friends and contacts were able to help set up interviews, and in a few cases, even conduct them in person on my behalf. Their names are mentioned in the Acknowledgements, as well as in the notes wherever relevant. In addition, I am grateful to have been given access to oral history archives such as ‘The 1947 Partition Archive’ and interviews conducted by the Goethe-Institut for the ‘Inherited Memories: 3rd Generation Remembers Bengal Partition’ project to supplement my research. Again, every time I have used an interview conducted as part of another project, I have made a mention of it in the notes.

The fact that I could travel to Bangladesh only once, that too for a short while, meant that I had to rely on friends and contacts to arrange interviews prior to my arrival. Given the sheer level of violence endured by so many Bangladeshis, I certainly did not want to probe people insensitively. In many cases, this meant that I spoke to people who had been interviewed before and were willing to share their story with me. I highlight this here because I understand that there is a need to ensure that diverse stories come forth and that there is no one homogeneous experience or narrative of the war. I, however, refrained from actively seeking out people who may not have been recorded before because of the ethical issues of rushing people to share trauma memories, especially when I had logistical constraints for how much time I could spend building a rapport with my interviewees, particularly as a Pakistani. That apart from a few leaders alluding towards

it, Pakistan has not fully acknowledged the sheer degree of violence against Bengalis is painful for so many Bangladeshis and, against this context, establishing trust as a Pakistani was not easy. The people I have interviewed are those who wanted to come forward and speak to me, because they felt it was essential for Pakistanis to hear their story, others came forth because they trusted our mutual contacts who introduced us. I understand that this means that my sample is not necessarily representative and in no way do I want to make any generalizations during the course of this book. The voices represented in the book may or may not represent other people's experiences. They are only meant to speak for themselves and to offer a glimpse into what some Bangladeshis experienced and what they make of the war.

Navigating these limitations, in the two weeks that I spent in Dhaka and Khulna, I was able to interview approximately forty people. My interviewees included people who had survived 1947 and 1971, as well as family members of people who were killed during the war. I was able to conduct interviews with Muslim as well as Hindu families, and with Bengalis and non-Bengalis. During my trip, I visited several museums commemorating the war, schools and universities, and the camps where thousands of Bihari families continue to reside. (Here it must be mentioned that the term 'Bihari' does not refer to the people of Bihar alone but is used for a variety of Urdu-speaking people who migrated to East Pakistan at the time of Partition. It should also be noted that the term 'Bengali' is often used synonymously with Bangladeshi/East Pakistani, the politics of which is discussed during the course of the book. While I have used the term 'Bengali' in the book, this in no way overlooks the fact that Bangladesh continues to be home to ethnic non-Bengalis, apart from the Biharis. The way in which the war and post-war politics impact them must be explored in greater detail, but that is beyond the scope of this book).

Several of the interviews were conducted one-on-one while others, such as those in the camps, were group interviews. These interviews give insights not only into the narrator's experiences during 1971 but also the telling of those experiences to a Pakistani, years after the war. Our

interviews were inevitably shaped by my Pakistani identity and at various points in the book I have shared the way in which the Bangladeshis I interacted with saw me as well as my own experiences as a Pakistani in Bangladesh. In this book, the reader will find that the oral history interviews are intertwined with my travels and anecdotal experiences, all of which are supplemented in part with secondary research.

In Pakistan, most of my interviews were conducted in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi, and include teachers, activists, army officers, prisoners of war (POWs), the Bihari community and the Bengali community. With permission, I have also made use of interviews conducted by The Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP), which ran a project on 1971 in 2011, while I was working with the organization. Like in Bangladesh, my research in Pakistan includes visits to schools and museums to understand how 1971 is taught at these sites. In all three countries, I have worked with students in particular to understand how the younger generations are taught about the war and how they understand each other today. In Bangladesh and India, these school interactions were a powerful way to see how the youth views and interacts with Pakistanis, and in all three countries, it gave insights into how students make sense of information in their textbooks and that which is imparted by their teachers and families.

Lastly, I must mention that I am aware that I have visited Bangladesh at a particular time in history, in which the relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh were very strained (the reasons are discussed in the following chapters), which inevitably has an impact on public sentiment. My interactions with Bangladeshis must be seen against this context. This book entails various encounters where I have been welcomed or looked at with caution or hostility because of my Pakistani identity, and because of the violence and bloodshed suffered by people in 1971. They have been shared in the book not to promote or reinforce any negative sentiment but because they offer insights into what it means to travel as a Pakistani in Bangladesh and research on 1971 today. The instances and anecdotes must be read alongside the warm and hospitable welcome I received by so many Bangladeshis, which has also been noted in this book. That I was in

Bangladesh to speak about 1971 made my experiences different from a normal tourist and meant that my conversations took place in a charged atmosphere. These interactions and my experiences should not be generalized in any way.



Part I

Journeys: Past and Present

In this section of the book, I share the popular perception of the 1971 war that I grew up with, shedding light on the mainstream discourse about the birth of Bangladesh in Pakistan. In this first part, the readers will also accompany me on my journey to Bangladesh, catching a glimpse into the collective and personal memory of the war in the country and the ways in which Pakistan and Pakistanis are imagined by Bangladeshis. With today's Pakistan and Bangladesh at the fore, this section then looks back at 1947 to understand the aspirations and sentiments held by the people of present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh at the time of Partition, and grapples with the ways in which Partition continues to be evoked in the nation-making processes in these countries, crafting unique national identities and shaping how we see ourselves and each other.

Selective Silences, Selective Remembrances

‘Do you see that woman in front of us?’ Dr Nuzhat whispers into my ear as we sit on stage at the Dhaka Engineering Institute, at an event organized by the Forum for Secular Bangladesh and the Trial of War Criminals of 1971. ‘I want you to remember her face when you go back to Pakistan. Her aunt was raped for nine months during the war. Her family brought her home from the camp after liberation, but she died a few days later. The physical torture and the emotional trauma were too much to bear . . . she could only survive for ten days in Bangladesh.’

The elderly woman is seated in the front row of the audience and stares back at us, almost as if she understands what Dr Nuzhat is telling me. She is draped in a cream-coloured sari, her long grey hair parted in the middle, a red triangular bindi centred on her forehead. She gives me a piercing look from behind her glasses, her face taut. She is here to listen to Dr Nuzhat, an eye specialist, and her contemporaries speak about their families’ experiences during the war, a blood-soaked war that separated East and West Pakistan and led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. She is also here because she knows that a few Pakistanis are visiting and will be addressing the audience, particularly commenting on what is widely conceived in Bangladesh as the genocide of 1971. According to several Bangladeshi estimates, 30 lakh people were killed and as many as 2,00,000–4,00,000 women were raped in 1971. ¹

The auditorium is packed with 500 or so people: men and women, young and old. Several reporters and journalists are crammed inside as well. Apart from my husband, Haroon, and me, Ahmad Salim, an eminent Punjabi poet and historian from Pakistan is also sitting on stage. He is to receive the

Jahanara Imam Memorial Award for his contribution as a conscientious Pakistani, one of the few citizens who stood up against the military action in 1971, writing poems and voicing criticism against the state's policies. The audience is keen to hear what Pakistanis like him and us have to say, especially in the current climate when Pakistan and Bangladesh's relations have plummeted in the midst of the former's criticisms of the International Crimes Tribunal, set up by Bangladesh in 2010 to investigate and prosecute the war crimes of 1971.² Public animosity and mistrust towards Pakistan is pervasive in Bangladesh today. Even though Dr Nuzhat speaks to me politely, her body language remains tense throughout the event, and her resentment against Pakistan and Pakistanis is palpable. 'When you go back to Pakistan and hear people denying that the Pakistan Army ever raped women, I just want you to remember this woman's face. I want you to remember her aunt's story, and I want you to remember that there are countless other women like her,' she says in a quiet but firm whisper.

We are asked to observe a moment of silence for those killed in 1971. I turn my face away from Dr Nuzhat, relieved at the interruption for I wouldn't have known how to respond. She knows I am from Pakistan, she knows I am from Punjab—the province at the forefront of Bengali oppression. I know that some people in Bangladesh hold families like mine responsible, at the very least for the lack of protest against the army action in East Pakistan during 1971.

Looking at the audience in front of me, I realize that this is the first time I am observing silence amongst victims' families. Everyone in the room today has a story to tell. There are those who actively fought for Bangladesh's creation in 1971; there are family members of those who were killed, raped or tortured in 1971, those who became refugees or those who remained helpless spectators of the violence that unleashed before them. The war is not just a historical event or a story of gallantry or loss, the war is personal and intimate, the trauma as haunting even forty-eight years later.

Dr Nuzhat is soon called on the podium to give her speech. She doesn't look at the audience; instead, she turns towards Haroon, Ahmad Salim and me, and says, 'My father was an eye specialist; they picked him, tortured

him and then killed him. He died for this country . . . he died for Bangladesh . . . what did he do to deserve such an end? You can never understand the pain I have been through. As a Pakistani, no matter what you do, you can never understand what we have been through. There's no one in this room who hasn't suffered during the liberation war. Our fathers were martyred, our women raped. It's nice of you to come from Pakistan, but you can't change anything, you can't do anything for us.'

There is pin-drop silence in the room. The only sound is of her gasping between silent tears. It feels as if all eyes are on us, as are the cameras. Her speech is not for the audience that has collected, it is for the three Pakistanis on stage. Forty-eight years are not enough to brush aside trauma of having one's father brutally killed. Another forty-eight years are unlikely to suffice either. But today it is not only with grief that her body trembles on stage, it is also with bitter resentment against Pakistan, against the Pakistanis in the room. When she comes back to take her seat, she touches my shoulder and says, 'I hope I didn't offend you, but this is how we feel . . .'

Dr Nuzhat is followed by her friend Shomi Qaiser. I was told that Shomi's father, Shahidullah Qaiser, was also killed during the intellectual killings that took away Dr Nuzhat's father, Dr Alim Chaudhry. Reportedly, the killings took place in the final days of the war, right before Pakistan's surrender and the creation of Bangladesh as an independent country.³ Bangladeshis tell me that after realizing the inevitability of the surrender, the paramilitary force Al-Badr (accused of supporting the Pakistan Army during the nine-month-long war and often referred to as a 'secret killing squad'⁴ of the religio-political party Jamaat-e-Islami) went on a spree to hunt and kill professionals, writers and intellectuals. I am told that the Pakistan Army and their alleged collaborators wanted to ensure that Bangladesh's intelligentsia was aborted at the very birth of the nation. This was their last chance to silence them, to 'cripple the newly-born nation'.⁵ Dragged out of their homes, these Bengalis were reportedly taken to different killing fields where they were tortured, killed and dumped.⁶ Today, 14 December continues to be commemorated as Martyred Intellectuals Day in memory of those killed.⁷

A couple of days earlier, I had visited the 1971: Genocide-Torture Archive & Museum in Khulna, about 250 kilometres from Dhaka, close to the Indian border, where some of the last remains of these intellectuals were preserved. Dr Nuzhat's father, Alim Chaudhry's notebook, pen and visiting cards were amongst them, as were Shomi Qaiser's father's notes, his diary and a tie that he had once adorned. Later, I would visit some of the killing fields where I was told they were massacred. Dr Nuzhat's father was killed at the Rayer Bazar killing field in Dhaka. Today, a brick wall has been erected there to commemorate the massacre. The red bricks of the wall symbolize the bloodshed. A square window is carved out in the middle of the wall, apparently denoting that all the deaths finally resulted in Bengalis pushing through the walls of oppression and towards the gateway of liberation. A small pond rests in front of the wall. The visitors at the killing field told me that the water represents the tears shed during the creation of Bangladesh, the tears of people like Dr Nuzhat and Shomi Qaiser.

Clad in a black-and-gold sari, Shomi's voice quivers as she too faces Haroon, Ahmad Salim and me, and begins to talk. 'I grew up hating Pakistan because it took away my father. I didn't want to see Pakistanis, speak to Pakistanis. I still remember a taxi ride I happened to share with a Pakistani in Manhattan . . . his father was in the army in 1971. My body was so jittery, I was shaking with anger. I told him your father killed my father. He told me his father had also died and asked me to forgive Pakistan, but I said we can never move on until Pakistan officially apologizes to us . . . we think Pakistan is barbaric. It still hasn't accepted its mistakes. We can never move on . . . we can never forget what Pakistan did to us . . . what it did to me, what it did to my mother . . . she was only twenty-two years old when my father was taken away from our home and killed . . . only twenty-two . . .'

* * *

Sweat trickles down my back as we sit on a bench facing a small window that provides a narrow peek into the Bangladesh High Commission. It's a

sweltering June morning in Islamabad, the capital of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The roof above us is painted in the colours of the Bangladeshi flag—red and green—as is the security barrier in front of us. A middle-aged man, with orange hair and a matching beard, dyed in henna, sits behind the counter to sift through applicants’ paperwork and pass a verdict on whether their visa application qualifies submission. In front of us, a small queue has formed. There are a few Pakistani businessmen standing right ahead. Behind them are five or six men and women, speaking to one another in Bengali. Most of them cannot read or write and have had someone else fill out their visa application form. The officer converses with them in Bengali and I can only make out that many of them do not have the necessary documents required for the visa. They seem desperate, pleading with him to accept the application anyway. One of the women complains that she has come all the way from Lahore and doesn’t have a place or money to stay overnight. The folds of her skin are hardened, her hands and feet coarse. A blue dupatta is draped loosely over her head, covering part of her face. Pakistan hosts approximately over 20 lakh Bengalis ⁸ (some estimates are higher, of about 30 lakh. ⁹ It remains difficult to gauge a precise figure as many of them don’t have documentation for they are considered illegal migrants. They live on the fringes of society as small shop owners, labourers or fishermen. My conversations with them are detailed in the last chapter of this book.)

One of the Pakistani businessmen observes Haroon and me from a distance, and after a couple of seconds asks, ‘You’re going to Bangladesh?’ We nod and he inquires if it’s for work or to see relatives. ‘Neither, just a visit,’ I answer. He seems surprised. It is unusual for ordinary Pakistanis to go to Bangladesh unless they have work or family there. In fact, a contact in Bangladesh recently shared that there was an unofficial embargo on Pakistani travellers. I had experienced this first-hand. My visit to the high commission had come after months of frantically searching for an institution or individual that would be willing to send Haroon and me an invitation letter, a prerequisite for the visa application. It was a very frustrating process, especially because I knew I couldn’t write a book on

1971 without visiting Bangladesh. Though my stay there was going to be short (due to this being self-funded research, having to maintain three day jobs during the course of writing this book and because a long-term visa was going to be extremely difficult to avail), I knew I needed to speak to Bangladeshis, visit their museums and sites associated with the war, to speak to the youth, albeit briefly. Today, there is minimal interaction between ordinary Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, yet only a few decades ago the countries were one. I wanted to know how we had got here, I wanted to know how Bangladeshis saw Pakistan today, I wanted to explore my own history and heritage. I also wanted to see how Bangladesh remembered 1971 and how different that was from how Pakistan remembered or silenced the memories of the same year. What Pakistan pushed aside as an Indo-Pak war was the hallmark of Bangladeshi history. To write a book on 1971, I would have to visit, to speak to people, to understand their interpretations of that history, their memories of the war, their sentiments over four decades after the nations separated. Only then would I be able to understand the relevance 1971 has in Bangladesh, and then compare it to the significance, or lack thereof, in Pakistan. However, getting there wouldn't be easy. Everyone I asked refused to send me an invite, even people I knew considerably well. They told me that Bangladesh and Pakistan's relations were strained, and intelligence officials would come and inquire about their link to Pakistan, probing why they had invited Pakistanis to visit. It would cause unnecessary trouble.

Having travelled to India several times over the past few years, I was accustomed to the visa hurdles, to people's reluctance of hosting Pakistanis, of their hesitation to send an invitation letter. When I set out to visit Bangladesh, however, I hadn't expected a similar reaction. Later, I would realize that this was partly because the Pakistani narrative towards Bangladesh has been far too simplistic and myopic. It is viewed as a Muslim brotherly nation, one that went astray because of India's meddling in the internal affairs of Pakistan after the Partition in 1947. The 1971 war and the consequent creation of Bangladesh are presented as a loss. There is little overt hatred towards Bengalis in general. Instead, it is India, the pro-

India ‘Hindu’ Bengalis and the ‘Indian-funded’ Bengalis who are resented; they were the demons responsible for Pakistan’s break-up. In the popular imagination, it is believed that had it not been for India’s treacherous manipulation, we would have been one. I had hence assumed that this cordial ‘brotherhood’ must still exist at some level and that the Bangladeshis would be far more welcoming than Indians towards Pakistanis. I couldn’t have been more wrong. Never before had I been subjected to such difficulties in acquiring a visa, for anywhere else in the world.

It was finally a contact of a contact of a contact who agreed to invite us to Bangladesh. I was introduced to Shahriar Kabir over email, my first introduction to a man pivotal in the current political scene in Bangladesh. He instantly agreed to invite us as long as we met one condition. He pointedly asked his contact in Pakistan to verify whether we toed the line of the Pakistan government or of the Jamaat-e-Islami. If so, he said it would invoke a strong reaction in Bangladesh and create problems for him. Toeing the line of the Pakistan government or the Jamaat would essentially mean denying the mass killings, rape and torture that took place during the 1971 war, which was currently being ‘avenged’ through the war crimes tribunal in Bangladesh. I would later find out that Kabir himself played a central role in lobbying for the tribunals and was at the forefront of the movement for holding alleged culprits accountable. We assured him that we were not affiliated with any political party but rather hoping to visit Bangladesh to learn more about their history, a history often denied in Pakistan. With that necessary clarification out of the way, our letters of invitation soon arrived and we landed at the high commission. Two days later, we received a call to come and pick up our visas.

* * *

‘We fought two wars with India. They won one and we won the other,’ my mother explained. ‘We had our victory in 1965, but in 1971 we lost badly . . . because of that we had to give away part of our country. East Pakistan

became Bangladesh.’ That is my earliest memory of learning that Bangladesh too was once part of Pakistan. I was a young child, probably in grade 4 or 5, curious about Pakistan’s history. My mother, like other Pakistanis learnt historical facts (or fiction) through the usual sources: classrooms, family and media reports. In the popular imagination, Pakistan stood victorious in 1965, defending the Indian attack on Lahore. Its own policies in Kashmir, the story of Operation Gibraltar,¹⁰ prior to the war are conveniently obliterated. Pakistan defines itself as a defensive state, a country that only acts in the interest of protecting its citizens from enemy forces. In 1965, Pakistanis are told, the Pakistan Army bravely defended the country against India’s aggression. India too claims to have stood triumphant in 1965, convincing its citizens that it had the upper hand in the war. Somewhere in the midst of these grand tales of victory and defeat, the ceasefire agreement, which rendered victory inconclusive on both sides, has long been forgotten. Today, India and Pakistan continue to commemorate the war on both sides of the border in September, claiming success over the other. Significant monetary investments are made to show the enemy on the other side that they are indeed triumphant, not only in 1965 but in contemporary affairs too.¹¹

Claiming victory in 1965 in Pakistan, however, also serves another need. It softens the blow of 1971, a war that is viewed as Pakistan’s most humiliating defeat by many Pakistanis themselves. Compared to Partition, which led to the creation of Pakistan, the country’s break-up in 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh is seldom spoken about. Growing up, East Pakistan was rarely discussed and the creation of Bangladesh always seemed sudden and illegitimate. The years between 1947 and 1971 received little focus, as was the case with the increasing estrangement of the two wings (east and west) and the brewing resentment among the Bengali population. It seemed as if Bangladesh erupted out of nowhere at the end of 1971, yet again because of India’s aggressive policies. I was told more than once, in and outside of classrooms, that India could never truly stomach the creation of Pakistan. From the beginning, it had tried to destabilize the country, finding fertile ground in East Pakistan, which was dominated by

‘Hindu culture’. My teachers and the others I interacted with failed to mention that East Pakistan had a Muslim- majority population. In fact, I grew up believing that it had a Hindu majority, making separation almost necessary. After all, isn’t that what the two-nation theory—which serves as Pakistan’s *raison d’être* today—had proposed? That Hindus and Muslims were two separate nations, incapable of coexisting? How could East and West Pakistan stay united, particularly when they were divided by thousands of miles of hostile Indian territory? Engineered by India and its Hindu agents in the East Wing, the break was sudden but inevitable. With this rationalization, this part of history was neatly folded and tucked away. Bangladesh received little attention from my end, as I assume it does for the majority in the younger generations in Pakistan.

Chapter 3 of the Grade 9 and 10 Textbook of Pakistan Studies, which is endorsed by the country’s Federal Textbook Board, has a section titled ‘The Fall of East Pakistan’. It details the reasons for the growing resentment amongst Bengalis, with India’s role in the dismemberment of East Pakistan allotted the greatest space. It is stated that:

The Indian leadership in general did not agree with the idea of creating a separate homeland for the Muslims. When Pakistan was created to their entire displeasure, they started working on the agenda of dismembering it without delay. East Pakistan’s soil proved very fertile for them for several reasons. Firstly, that the province had a very big Hindu population, which, unlike West Pakistan Hindus, had deep pro-India sympathies. Secondly, that these Hindus were economically well-off and well educated. In many schools, colleges and universities Hindu teachers outnumbered Muslim teachers. These institutions with the passage of time virtually turned into nurseries for breeding anti-Pakistan and secessionist intelligentsia. These intellectuals played a decisive role in dismembering Pakistan. East Pakistani masses, which felt deprived and oppressed by West Pakistan, fell an easy prey to the secessionists. ¹²

The book is taught across public and private schools in Islamabad as part of the compulsory Pakistan Studies course. The preface to the book mentions that ‘the textbook has been written with a view to provide orientation on the Two-Nation Theory’. It is perhaps no wonder then that the authors have found it imperative to highlight that East Pakistan held a ‘very big Hindu population’. Since Hindus are perceived as the ‘other’ nation, a wing with a significant Hindu population was thus destined for separation. By

presenting it as a given, it would prevent children from questioning Pakistan's own role in 1971 and the years leading up to the separation. The Bengali Hindus are further equated with having pro-India sympathies in the passage; in other words, they were traitors who were loyal to Pakistan's nemesis. With religious nationalism heightened, to be a patriotic Pakistani has increasingly become synonymous with being Muslim, anti-Hindu and anti-India. Anyone who is not Muslim is also somehow not Pakistani enough. Therefore, when anti-American sentiment is heightened, it is the Christians in Pakistan who become vulnerable to attacks. And when anti-India sentiment is exacerbated, it is the Hindus in Pakistan, commonly referred to as Indians, who are targeted. It is important to understand this context to fully grasp how damaging the above excerpt is. Firstly, by accentuating the existence of the Hindu population, with little focus on the number of Muslims in the region, children learn to 'otherize' East Pakistan; to treat it as alien, as a part that was never truly Pakistan. And then to project all Bengali Hindus as being pro-India is to swiftly cast away East Pakistanis as treacherous traitors, working behind Pakistan's back and in the interests of its enemy. It is no wonder that the popular perception in the country is that the break-up of East and West Pakistan happened because of India. Pakistan's own role is minimized. The language movement, the economic disparity, the social discrimination and other injustices meted out to the Bengalis, which will be discussed during the course of this book, may receive attention but only in the shadow of the 'India factor'. In fact, the language movement, which was one of the most significant causes of tension and conflict between the two wings is presented as the last reason for the growing resentment in East Pakistan in the textbook chapter. It is stated, almost as an afterthought, that:

A clash of opinion on the question of national language arose in the very early years after partition. Though the Bengali demand was conceded under the 1956 Constitution and Bengali was then recognized as one of the two national languages of Pakistan, yet the bitter memories of linguistic riots of the early years and of the resulting casualties kept taxing the Bengali mind. ¹³

In other words, though the Bengalis were given what they demanded, they remained unsatisfied. There is no discussion of almost a decade-long struggle to have the language recognized, during which people were killed¹⁴ (the ‘resulting casualties’ are mentioned but without any details or discussion) while protesting for a right which would not only give them a fair chance to excel in the education system and workplace but was also symbolic of a larger parity between the two wings, denied since the birth of Pakistan.

There is also no mention of the army operation—Operation Searchlight—that resulted in mass killings. Though the figures are disputed, it is estimated that anywhere between 3 and 30 lakh people were killed between 25 March (the night the operation was launched) and 16 December (the date of surrender).¹⁵ However, in the state-endorsed textbook by the Federal Board, currently in use in schools, there is no mention of the operation. History focuses on the weeks prior to 25 March, particularly emphasizing the violent behaviour of East Pakistanis, and then fast-forwards to August 1971, when India signed the Indo–Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and received Soviet backing to crush Pakistani forces in East Pakistan. Pakistan is then painted as a victim, forced to ‘fight against two enemies, an enemy from within and an aggressor from without’.¹⁶ It is stated that on 2 March, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, popularly known as the founding father of Bangladesh, launched a disobedience movement. Thereafter:

Banks were looted and the administration came to a halt. Public servants and non-Bengali citizens were maltreated and murdered. Pakistan flag and Quaid’s portraits were set on fire . . . Awami League workers started killing those who did not agree with their Six Points programme. Members of Urdu-speaking, non-Bengali communities were ruthlessly slaughtered. West Pakistani businessmen operating in the East wing were forced to surrender their belongings or be killed in cold blood, their houses set on fire. Pro-Pakistani political leaders were maltreated, humiliated, and many of them were even murdered. Armed forces were insulted; authority of the state was openly defied and violated. Awami League virtually had established a parallel government and declared the independence of East Pakistan.¹⁷

Had the army operation and the resulting deaths been discussed in any detail, which they are not, they too would be justified in the book as a

reaction to such barbaric behaviour on the part of the Bengalis.

Between 2010 and 2013, I was working with a local NGO, the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP). CAP's flagship project is the Oral History Project, under which 1947 Partition survivors and others who witnessed the early years of Pakistan's creation are interviewed. On the fortieth anniversary of the 1971 war, CAP decided to curate an exhibition titled 'State of Being So Divided', chronicling the period between the birth of Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh. As the head of the Oral History Project in Lahore, I set out with my team to conduct interviews with Pakistanis who recalled the years leading up to 1971. In particular, we shortlisted a number of army officers who had served in East Pakistan, before or during the war. We wanted to learn about their experiences and their understanding of the war. During the course of these interviews, I gradually began to notice how metanarratives and personal memories were entangled in a web, the state narratives impacting individual memories and tainting opinions. This was particularly the case with many of the army officials, who had learned to swallow whole the state's versions, despite witnessing other on the ground realities.

In one of the interviews conducted by a CAP team, Colonel Sarfaraz Rabbani revealed that when he was first posted in East Pakistan, he thought it looked like an entirely new country, unlike West Pakistan. 'The people were very poor . . . one could get a chicken for 8 annas, an egg one could get for a few paise. It was so cheap and poor. One would feel sorry for them.' However, the pity soon transformed into something else. He told the CAP team that once he had settled there he came to know about their designs, 'the aims of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his party . . . that they wanted to separate from West Pakistan and their leanings were towards India, rather than Pakistan. They made small issues, such as the language issue which could have been sorted out very easily, but they would make a big fuss and try to provoke the feelings of East Pakistanis . . .'¹⁸

A similar narrative is found in Mian Afrasiab Mehdi Hashmi Qureshi's book *1971: Fact and Fiction*. Afrasiab joined the foreign service in 1984 and served as Pakistan's deputy high commissioner to India between 2006

and 2009 and Pakistan's high commissioner to Bangladesh between 2011 and 2014. Point by point, Afrasiab dissects common Bengali complaints and justifies Pakistan's policies, eventually laying the blame on India. According to him, the fact that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was not handed over power, despite winning a clear majority in the 1970 general elections, has a simple explanation: Mujib had colluded with India to eventually break up Pakistan. He asks whether General Yahya Khan was wrong to not hand over power when he had 'irrefutable proof' that Mujib wanted to break-up Pakistan.¹⁹ Similarly, he asserts that the Bengalis' demand to declare Bangla as the state language held little ground. 'It was Dhirendranath Datta, a Hindu parliamentarian . . . who raised the issue of Bangla . . . [in the Constituent Assembly in 1948] . . . Importantly, Datta had opposed the very creation of Pakistan in 1947.'²⁰ He further asks why it was only Bengal which demanded that its language be declared a national language alongside Urdu when none of the other provinces—Punjab, Sindh, NWFP (North-West Frontier Province), or Balochistan, demanded that Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto or Balochi be declared national languages.^{21 22}

By equating the demand for Bengali as a state language with other provincial languages, not only does Afrasiab successfully mask the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population lived in East Pakistan and spoke Bengali—making the case entirely different from the far less populated Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan and NWFP (now referred to as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)—but by further emphasizing the fact that Datta was a Hindu, and the fact that he opposed the creation of Pakistan in 1947, he renders the language movement as nefarious altogether. I met Datta's granddaughter, Aroma Datta, several weeks later, on my visit to Dhaka and heard her narrate her grandfather's love for Pakistan, and his disillusionment when Urdu was declared as the state language. Datta was one of the first people to be killed by the Pakistan Army after the launch of the army operation. He was dragged away in front of young Aroma herself. It would be futile to debate on how patriotic Datta truly was, but it is pertinent to note that it was East Bengal where the Muslim League had enjoyed major support before Partition. The NWFP had a strong presence

of Khudai Khidmatgar, political allies of the Congress, while Punjab was under the stronghold of the Unionist Party. Balochistan on the other hand consisted of four princely states. Bengal, along with Sindh, was the only province where the Muslim League was truly popular. East Bengal's support for the Muslim League, which was created in Dhaka in 1906, was pivotal to Pakistan's creation. However, today Punjab stands at the forefront of Pakistani nationalism and political parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami uphold the standard of Pakistani nationalism despite fervently opposing Partition in 1947. If one uses the same logic as Afrasiab, a number of important political players from Pakistan, including Jamaat-e-Islami—whose founder, Maulana Maududi (Abul A'la Maududi), vehemently opposed the creation of Pakistan—are unpatriotic for they opposed the creation of Pakistan in 1947. If they are 'true Pakistani nationals,' why was Datta any less? And why was his religion relevant at all? The underlying assumption seems to be that a Hindu could never be a loyal Pakistani.

When army action in East Pakistan is discussed in Afrasiab's book, it is often justified in the same light, to fight the Indians and India-backed forces. Essentially, he argues that the Pakistan Army intervened when, 'the Pakistani flag was being regularly desecrated [in East Pakistan] . . . public and private property was being attacked . . . pro-Pakistan civilians were being slaughtered and raped . . . the Indian-armed and Indian-trained Mukti Bahini (translated as Liberation Army) was trying to take control of the affairs of the state. Which country would not order an army action under such circumstances?' ²³

I quote from his book because what he writes is closely aligned with the dominant state narratives that one finds elsewhere in society. This is not to say that these narratives are fabricated entirely; indeed non-Bengalis were killed in the early days of March 1971; pro-Pakistani civilians were attacked and there is much documentary evidence of India's involvement in the war (all these issues are explored later in the book). However, this partial truth is selectively put forward, not for the purposes of establishing a holistic story of 1971 but presented instead in a vacuum to project a statist narrative, one in which Pakistan's own actions and policies are not delved

into or overshadowed by the narrative of Indian interference and the violence against non-Bengalis. In light of this, even when army action is discussed, it becomes almost justified. For instance, a newspaper report from Pakistan's leading newspaper, *Dawn*, on 7 May 1971 is titled, 'Army Action Saved Pakistan'. The article states, 'The outlawed Awami League had set the small hours of March 26 as the zero hour for an armed uprising and the formal launching of "the independent republic of Bangla Desh" . . . the plan was to seize Dacca (now Dhaka) and Chittagong, lying astride the Army's Air/Sea lifelines to West Pakistan. But . . . the Army moved barely a few hours before the Awami League zero hour and made a series of pre-emptive strikes around midnight of March 25-26, seized the initiative and saved the country.' It alleges that 'infiltrators from India and deserters from the East Pakistan Rifles, the East Bengal Regiment and other auxiliary forces, equipped with mortars, recoilless rifles and heavy and light machine guns liberally supplied from across the border,' were 'arrayed' against the Pakistan Army. Sheikh Mujib's demand for autonomy is likened to 'the demand of confederation and his attempts to achieve it [to] conspiracy and force using "Nazi style tactics".'²⁴

These state narratives prevalent in the media, among armed officers and the bureaucracy penetrated through the public mindset as well. The year 1971 became an awkward moment in history; the defeat, that too at the hands of India as it is perceived, was too humiliating to delve into. Yet, the questions raised about the break-up of Pakistan had to be answered. Focusing on 'Hindu' influences and India's role became convenient justifications for a complicated and bloody past. It allowed Pakistan to move on, internalizing its image as a defensive state, which now more than ever had to guard itself against enemy forces bent upon breaking it.

However, while it is possible to dominate public thinking by selling digestible narratives, it is not easy to obliterate history, especially when it is so recent. In this anecdote or that, in the spoken and unspoken words, history creeps in. It was while running the Oral History Project for CAP, particularly during the interviews centred around 1971, that I found challenges to these state narratives, sometimes by army officials

themselves. A brigadier who served during the 1971 war and later became a prisoner of war (POW) in India, shared what he witnessed in East Pakistan. He spoke of how officials, particularly those from West Pakistan, would treat Bengalis. They bossed around, patronizing them, eventually creating bad blood. ‘We used to call them Bangla with such contempt . . . we treated them as second-rate Pakistanis . . . the responsibility for the loss of East Pakistan lies with the civilians, more so with politicians, army, army soldiers and then even the businessmen . . . they used to treat their labour as slaves, so all of these people over a long period of time created a feeling of hostility amongst the Bengalis . . .’²⁵ Though Brigadier Zia went on to stress India’s role in the break-up, his acknowledgement of West Pakistan’s role had pushed me into exploring the nuances of the conflict and the silences surrounding it. Another colonel I interviewed admitted to hearing stories of rape from his colleagues who had served and returned from East Pakistan after the war. A civilian who was living in the army cantonment in Jessore (approximately 200 km from Dhaka) during the early days of the war narrated how soldiers would converge in the mess in the evenings, asking each other the ‘score’—the number of women they had raped that day.

These stories and these awkward silences in our history haunted me. I wondered how Bangladeshis felt about Pakistanis like me today; I wondered how they learnt about their history, how they saw Pakistan and how they viewed India’s role in their independence. In Pakistan, the war was taught almost as a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan, the Bengalis squeezed out of the equation. What was their people’s history like? How did they own that past? What kind of triumphant narratives existed in Bangladesh? Was there any feeling of loss? Was there any nostalgia? Or were they only bitter about our shared past? These were some of the questions that led me to Dhaka in the summer of 2017.

The Enemy

‘Writers from Pakistan—Anam Zakaria and Haroon Khalid.’ A man from Bangladesh’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs is holding a white piece of paper with our names printed on it. We encounter him as soon as we walk out of the aeroplane in Dhaka. It is 16 July 2017. Heat, humidity and monsoon rains have engulfed the city. The man tells us to follow him quickly. His pace is rapid, much too quick for us to keep up. He seems frustrated by our speed and asks us to rush; he has other guests to receive as well. Haroon and I exchange an awkward glance and quicken our steps. Kabir had mentioned that he would send a car to pick us up, but I wasn’t expecting anyone from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to receive us, and that too not as soon as we had stepped on to Bangladeshi soil.

The presence of this man helps. He asks us to fill out some forms and, instead of having us wait in a queue, directly takes us to two uniformed officials who note down our details and push us towards the immigration officer. I notice a man dressed in a black shirt and trousers, presumably from the intelligence, lurking behind us as we pass on our details to the officer. He asks about the purpose of our visit and then our local address and phone number before taking away our passports. When he returns a couple of minutes later, he asks for my visiting card. I feel a little cornered and on the edge but I know this is routine for intelligence agencies, especially when there is any people-to-people movement between India and Pakistan, and presumably between Pakistan and Bangladesh too, given the current relations. Suspicion and mistrust mars the relationships between the three countries that were once a united Indian subcontinent. Visa hurdles, background checks and hostile and repeated questioning at borders are

fairly common, rendering people-to-people interaction minimal. The man loiters around until we grab our luggage and then disappears as quickly as he had appeared.

The representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs walks in long strides, guiding us towards the VIP lounge. We huff and puff behind him, my legs giving way. I would have liked to chat with him, particularly since he was the first Bangladeshi I had met, but he showed no excitement at our arrival. He did his job and handed us over to Kabir's employee, Rubel, who had come to receive us.

Rubel works with Kabir at the Forum for Secular Bangladesh and Trials of War Criminals of 1971. He is waiting for us in the VIP lounge, holding a bouquet of fresh flowers. 'Welcome to Bangladesh,' he grins. He seems to be in his early thirties, dressed in pants and a loose T-shirt. He tells us that he will be guiding us around Bangladesh over the next two weeks. Rubel speaks cautiously, often pausing mid-sentence to reflect on his use of words, thinking of what to say next. Bengali is his mother tongue; English is like foreign and unfamiliar terrain but one that he seems to have picked up. It enables us to communicate with each other over the next few days, supported with some hand gestures and guesswork. During the course of our visit, he picks up some Urdu words while we pick up a handful of Bengali terms, our sentences a concoction of broken English, Urdu and Bengali.

A white jeep, driven by a young man is standing outside to receive us. We get inside and start the journey to our guest house. I am busy looking around, trying to take in the first sights of Dhaka, particularly the traffic congestion, when Haroon nudges me and says, 'Do you think that security van is for us?' That is when I noticed the sirens blaring right in front of us. We are tailing a blue police van with about six armed men. The back of the van reads 'The Great Wall' in white block letters. I laugh and say, 'Are you crazy? Why would we need protocol? We're just visitors . . .' Not satisfied, Haroon taps Rubel on the shoulder. 'Is that for us?' he asks, pointing towards the van. Rubel turns around from the front seat with a smile and nods, 'Yes, yes . . . you're the guests of Bangladesh!'

I was unsure about what that meant. I didn't know whether we needed security because as Pakistanis we were unsafe in Bangladesh or if it was honorary protocol, a show of respect. Later, I would find out that one of the reasons for the security was that Kabir had invited us. As a vocal critic of the government's opposition, particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami that had resisted independence in 1971, he had received threats and even been attacked, resulting in a chronic leg injury. As his invitees, we could be potential targets. However, that didn't seem to be the only reason security forces shadowed us throughout our visit. Within the first twenty-four hours of our arrival, we would witness first-hand the bitterness and often sheer hatred against Pakistanis. The streets and alleys, the walls and the monuments, the memorials and the museums bore the marks of a violent past that Bangladesh was adamant about remembering and retelling. Residues of West Pakistani oppression, of rape, murder and plunder were etched into the memories and in the physical spaces in and around the cities and villages we would visit. Haroon and I ceased to be two individuals, born almost two decades after the separation. We became symbols of Punjabi hegemony, of brutality and shame. The security was for our protection, the great wall between us and those who felt nothing but hatred for us.

* * *

At 9 a.m. the phone rang in our guest room and we were informed that Kabir was waiting for us downstairs. We were meant to leave for National University in Gazipur, approximately two hours away from Dhaka. A meeting had been arranged with the teachers who prepared the college-level history curriculum. I was curious to learn what students were taught about our shared history, particularly about the 1971 liberation war, which is what it is called in Bangladesh. How different was it from the history curriculum in Pakistan? I was also keen to meet the teachers because many of them were war survivors themselves. What were their personal experiences like and how did that inform their teaching? In what way were those charged

collective memories shaping Bangladeshi identity and the minds of the future generations? National University was an ideal place to visit because it was Bangladesh's parent university, with over 2000 colleges affiliated to it. I was told that a new course on the History of the Emergence of Bangladesh, with focus on the liberation war, had been introduced recently as per a long-standing demand from civil society. The war was now taught as a compulsory course to over 22 lakh students at the BSc level. This was unprecedented in Bangladesh.

Kabir was wearing a light blue kameez over jeans, holding a black cane to support his injured leg. He was a thin man in his late sixties. A thick grey moustache rested on his upper lip and his white hair was combed to one side. He wore glasses and politely extended his hand towards me. We had met for the first time at his house the evening before, over a luxurious dinner: fish, eggplant, chicken and beef followed by sweet yogurt, a Bengali delicacy popularly known as mishti doi, served with fresh sliced mangos. He had invited some friends too: a colonel who had served in the Pakistan Army before joining the Bangladeshi movement, the granddaughter of Dhirendranath Datta, and Meghna Guhathakurta, the daughter of Professor Guhathakurta who was attacked on the fateful night of 25–26 March at Dhaka University when the army thrust its way on to the campus, in a bloody attempt to silence 'anti-state' elements bent upon separation. I spent a few hours before dinner interviewing Aroma Datta, who had witnessed her grandfather and uncle being dragged out of their home, and Meghna, who was a witness to her father's death.

While I will delve into both of their interviews in later chapters, it was over this dinner that I first began to gain some understanding of how complicated Bangladesh's history had been after 1971. I realized that my trip had come at a poignant time and would allow me to catch a glimpse of the country's changing landscape. Over the past few years, there had been an overt attempt by civil society players and policymakers to 'reclaim' history. Centres like the Center for the Study of Genocide and Justice ¹ and courses on Bangladesh's emergence have been brought in as a response to the attempts at silencing the memories of that time. Barely four years after

the war Sheikh Mujib and his family were assassinated. The founding father, Bangabandhu as he's referred to in Bangladesh, had been killed. Several Bangladeshis tell me that it was army officers trained by the Pakistan Army under the 'Pakistan period' who were involved in Sheikh Mujib's assassination and the coup; they were, in their eyes, undemocratic just like their Pakistani rulers. Bengalis, who were once at the vanguard of the struggle for democracy against army rule in Pakistan, were now cast under the shadow of the generals. In 1977, General Ziaur Rahman, who was a sector commander during the war and later came to power from within the army set-up, claimed presidency. By 1978, he founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), a party which would go on to become Awami League's biggest opposition, long after military rule came to an end in 1990.

The period dominated by the military (1975 to 1990) not only marked the return of the army but also of the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh into mainstream politics. Its predecessor, Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan had supported the Pakistan Army against the creation of Bangladesh and was accused of being involved in war crimes as well. Upon coming to power in 1971, the Awami League had banned all political activities of the party and it was shunned as an anti-Bangladesh organization. However, after Sheikh Mujib's assassination, the ban was lifted and the party was once again included in the political sphere. Over the years, Jamaat and the BNP formed a close alliance, with Jamaat leaders holding powerful positions in the BNP-led governments under former prime minister Khaleda Zia, who became the chairperson after her husband Ziaur Rahman was assassinated in 1981. The period between 1975 and the early 1990s oscillated between military rule and fragile democracy, the rulers of both regimes being perceived by Bangladeshis like Kabir as anti-liberation forces, bent upon wiping out the memories of a 'people's war' against West Pakistan from the popular imagination. A number of Awami League members as well as people in the general public view both the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami as pro-Pakistan, ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence, the intelligence agency in Pakistan)-funded parties, members of which supported the Pakistan Army

during the 1971 war and later helped assassinate the founding father of the country. In fact, it is believed in certain circles that if one supports the BNP or the Jamaat, one is anti-liberation and hence unpatriotic.

Interestingly, several Pakistanis also feel that the BNP is closer to Pakistan while the Awami League is supported by, and is in close alliance with, India even today. I am told that visas for Pakistanis become much easier under a BNP-led government and relations tend to improve. A Pakistani colonel I interviewed asked me to give 'his salaam to Khaleda *bhabhi*' (sister-in-law) when he learnt that I was travelling to Bangladesh for research. It took me a minute to realize that he was referring to Khaleda Zia. The casual manner in which he said it perhaps hinted at the fact that it was assumed she was every Pakistani's friend and would host me too. The Awami League, meanwhile, is considered to be India-backed, whose 'terrorist wing',² the Mukti Bahini, fought hand in hand with India in 1971 and continues to befriend Pakistan's arch-rival even today.

It is almost as if both parties, the Awami League on one hand and the BNP on the other, represent the Indo-Pak conflict in proxy. One is painted as being R&AW (Research and Analysis Wing, the intelligence agency of India)-funded and pro-liberation (i.e., for breaking up Pakistan) while the other is perceived as ISI-sponsored and anti-liberation. This equation also means that within Bangladesh, criticism of the Awami League can often be construed as a criticism of liberation. The anti-Awami League or pro-BNP and Jamaat platforms have become synonymous with anti-liberation and, therefore, pro-Pakistan. The space for healthy discourse, opposition and debate is increasingly being stifled. History and present-day politics are understood through the lens of 1971: either you stood with Mujib and the Awami League to fight for independence or you supported the Jamaat and the Pakistan Army. Either you are pro-liberation or anti-liberation. Either you believe that 30 lakh people were killed in a mass genocide in 1971 or you're party with the anti-liberation forces. Any nuances, any research based on numbers and facts, and any subtleties, are smothered under these larger metanarratives.

Over dinner, Kabir, a staunch Awami League supporter, and later many of the other Bangladeshis that I would meet, referred to the period between 1975 and the 1990s as a dark era, governed by the dark nexus of the military and the Jamaat, members of which later formed an alliance with the BNP.

‘After 1975, our textbooks were censored; they tried to erase our history. We could no longer say that Pakistan’s occupying forces had attacked us or that India’s allied forces had helped us. People like Ziaur Rahman were backed by Pakistan and wanted to project Pakistan in a positive light and India in a negative one. If you read our textbooks from that time, it seemed as if fictitious forces had occupied us and fictitious allied forces had helped us because we couldn’t name either,’ he laughed at the absurdity.

‘Our Zia was just like your Zia [reference to President Zia-ul-Haq who came to power in Pakistan after 1977 through a military coup and is remembered for Islamisizing the country]. Our Zia also Islamized and Pakistanized Bangladesh. He projected India as a Hindu infidel nation and promoted the idea that it was our religious duty to fight them . . . so students thought India was the enemy, not Pakistan. Even today this mindset is there . . . in an India–Pakistan cricket match, 60–70 per cent of people would support Pakistan. We say that there has been a Pakistanization of Bangladesh society,’ he explained, his tone indicating that ‘Pakistanization’ was a dirty word, almost like a curse.

‘Ziaur Rahman and the military leaders who followed him were Pakistan’s progeny . . . they tried to undermine the role of Sheikh Mujib and the people who fought for liberation. He tried to present himself as the real war hero, just because he had read out the declaration of independence in March 1971, he had more legitimacy. They wouldn’t mention that it was because Sheikh Mujib was arrested that Zia read out the declaration on his behalf. They wanted to paint Zia as a hero and minimize the memory of Sheikh Mujib. For years, these oppressive governments celebrated war criminals, promoting them to ministers. Our children were taught false history and we . . . we who had seen it all . . . who had fought in the war . . . could see all the distortions unfolding in front of us. Then in the 1990s, civil

society leaders demanded that a people's court be set up to seek justice against the crimes committed in 1971. We couldn't take it any more. We demanded that the perpetrators be brought to justice. Slowly and gradually, we have tried to reclaim that space. We are now trying to teach our children the true history; we are teaching them about the people's war and about the real role of Pakistan and India.'

In 2017, it was announced that students lacked patriotism and love for Bengali language 'due to the absence of subjects on the origin of Bangladesh as an independent nation, and its literature and history in higher curricula'.³ Two courses, Bangla Language and Literature and the History of Emergence of Independent Bangladesh were thus made mandatory across all colleges in the country. This course is one of the many efforts to reclaim and restore what people like Kabir view as a return to 'true history'. It was such efforts to institutionalize the memory of the war, be it through the education system or through new museums and sites associated with the war, which I wanted to learn more about. That is what took me to the National University that day.

* * *

It took us two hours to reach the university. As I soon found out, it takes one and a half to two hours on an average to get anywhere in or around Dhaka. The city has one of the worst traffic problems I have ever experienced, making Karachi, Mumbai or Delhi traffic seem like a walk in the park. Bicycle rickshaws, cars, vans, buses and motorbikes crawl next to one another. They are part of a collective chaos, resigned to their fate. Everyone knows that no one is getting anywhere any time soon. Yet, people honk and try to squeeze their way through. When a car scratches a van as it tries to inch forward, or a bike skids past a car, the drivers roll down their windows and yell at each other. Some even park midway and step out for a face-off. People watch silently because they know that the fight will end long before the traffic moves. The occasional feuds in fact provide

amusement as the passengers sit idle, arms plopped up on the rolled-down windows, their hands cupping their faces. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

I noticed more women on the street than one would see in Pakistan, but that is hardly a standard to go by. Men seemed to dominate public spaces as they do the personal. Many of the women who were out were clad in burqas or had their heads covered. I saw a few women draped in saris while several others wore salwar-kameez. Many of the men had beards and wore skullcaps; some were dressed in Western attire while the rest were in salwar-kameez as well. ‘Allah’ and ‘Mashallah’ stickers were plastered on the back of rickshaws and buses. As we drove at a snail’s speed, I noticed the number of monuments and graffiti that popped up at regular intervals. Almost all of the monuments I saw were related to 1971. Many of them commemorated Sheikh Mujib and I was told that they were sculpted under the Awami League government. Others were a tribute to the people’s struggle during the war.

While the popular image of war in my mind is of armies battling each other, these monuments didn't feature soldiers but rather ordinary women and men trying to secure their freedom—a soldier pulling a woman, her pallu falling off, dragging her as she resists, men and women clutching each other’s hands, staunchly looking up in defiance, men and women standing armed in defence, raising the Bangladeshi flag, a woman wearing a sari, carrying a body. Slowly, I understood that these monuments, many of them erected only recently as part of the effort to reteach and relearn history, stand to remind Bangladeshis that the liberation war was a people’s war. Repeatedly, in my interactions with people, I was told that though India had helped gain freedom, it was not the reason the country was free. It was the people’s effort, their struggles and their sacrifices that had made Bangladesh. There was resentment against Indians and Pakistanis treating the war as a bilateral issue, as if it was a fight between them, as if India had secured freedom or broken Pakistan—depending on one’s perspective. Bangladeshis wanted to reclaim the war as a people’s movement, as the people’s liberation.

The walls that we crossed were painted in war memorabilia. Images of the Pakistan Army's oppression were sketched out as we edged our way past that day and in the days to come. Fighting, army hegemony and exploitation were depicted in the years between 1947 and 1971, followed by images of liberation and the resulting enlightenment. Schools, computer labs, girls' education and Bangladesh's progress were projected in stark contrast to earlier years. Separation signalled progress. Pakistan symbolized barbaric hegemony, military force and backwardness. This graffiti was accompanied by monstrous images of military leaders like Yahya Khan, under whose rule the army operation was launched. Posters were plastered on the walls, where Yahya's skin was blackened, his eyes were popping out of bright red rims, his mouth was wide open in lust for power, his vampire-like teeth were poking out from behind the red paint. In red block letters, a poster read 'ANNIHILATE THESE DEMONS'. It seemed as if the whole city, its streets, its gardens, its walls and its ceilings were like a war museum. It was hard to separate oneself from these images, these sculptures and this art. They would haunt me when I would close my eyes to sleep, and I would wake up to only more of them, the slow and painful traffic making it more difficult to escape the horror.

At National University, members of the faculty received us at the entrance. They guided us towards the vice chancellor's office. On the way, I noticed that some of the buildings were also covered in war paintings—refugees carrying their belongings, young Bengalis raising the Bangladeshi flag, armed people fighting for their freedom, Pakistan's General Niazi and India's General Arora signing the surrender agreement. The faculty offers us refreshments and Harun-or-Rashid, the vice chancellor, joins us in his office a few minutes later. He is a middle-aged man, wearing a light blue button-down shirt tucked into black formal pants. We have a brief chat, particularly about the importance of the History of Emergence of Independent Bangladesh course introduced at the BSc level.

'Throughout most of our history, we have been governed by anti-liberation forces, with people like Ghulam Azam, a war criminal in power,' he begins. Azam was convicted as part of war crimes trials in 2013 for

conspiring, planning, abetting and failing to prevent murder.⁴ A former leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Azam was accused of collaborating with the Pakistan Army and having created pro-Pakistan militia who were involved in the killings and rape during the war. Though Azam's citizenship was cancelled in 1973 and the Jamaat-e-Islami was banned in the initial years after Bangladesh's formation, he was allowed to return home in 1978, under the leadership of President Ziaur Rahman.⁵ His citizenship was restored in 1994 and Azam stayed active in politics until his retirement in 2000. He was sentenced to ninety years in jail for committing crimes against humanity in 2013 and died while in custody.⁶

‘Leaders like General Zia, General Ershad (a former Bangladeshi army chief who served as President between 1982 and 1990) and Khaleda Zia, all pro-Pakistan, ruled us for a long time. Because of this, our history was never properly taught. The primary school textbooks touch upon 1971, but there is no comprehensive analysis. Even today, the government is not fully including 1971 in our history books because they think it'll be a burden for the students. Children have the option between studying Islamic history and general history . . . even the Hindu students choose Islamic history because it is a shorter course. So, when they complete school, they have little formal education about the birth of the nation. That's why we felt it was necessary to include this course at the college level.’

The course outline that Professor Harun shares reveals that significant focus is given to the malpractices and discrimination meted out to Bengalis before 1971. ‘Misrule by Muslim League and the struggle for democratic politics’, ‘economic, social and cultural disparity’, ‘the language movement’ are some of the topics discussed before delving into ‘resistance against cultural aggression [of West Pakistan] and resurgence of Bengali Culture’. There is significant emphasis on the 1971 war of liberation itself. The course outline emphasizes ‘genocide, repression of women, refugees’ as well as the ‘anti-liberation activities of the occupation army, the Peace Committee (also known as Shanti Committee), Al-Badr, Al Shams, Razakars, pro-Pakistan political parties and Pakistani collaborators killing the intellectuals.’ As lakhs of students study this course as part of the

compulsory syllabus, it is likely that bitterness and anger towards Pakistan is only likely to grow in the years to come. Tangible, pungent bitterness, inexorable and inescapable.

We get up to go to the hall where I am told the teachers are waiting for me. I expect a round table with a handful of teachers, allowing us to engage in a constructive discussion about the history syllabi. However, when the door to the hall opens, I realize that it is packed with over 100 people. A stage is set up; the backdrop reads ‘Discussion on 1971 Genocide in Bangladesh’. Haroon and my names are listed as the discussants. A mic and podium rest on the stage. As soon as we enter, cameramen from different media houses flutter around us, trying to take photographs. I find myself flustered. I had not expected any speeches, any audience, certainly no media. It is my first day in Bangladesh and I am neither prepared nor inclined to give comments. But it seems like that choice was never really mine. We are seated in the front row of the audience and a documentary film on genocide begins to play. Dramatized footage of killings, alongside documented evidence of the mass murder, float on the screen. Faces of the intellectuals, massacred right before the surrender, flash past. The documentary culminates with the surrender; jubilant celebrations follow. Pakistan’s flag is torn down from the Secretariat and Bangladesh’s flag is hoisted. There is pin-drop silence as the documentary comes to an end. I can feel the tension in the room. We have just been visually reminded of the atrocities Pakistan is accused of. There is no forgetting. There is also no escaping that we are the only Pakistanis in the room. All eyes are on us.

Professor Harun calls us on stage and takes the mic. Year by year he walks us through the injustices meted out to the Bengalis by Pakistan. ‘In 1947, Pakistan denied us our right to language . . . in 1952, Pakistan killed our students while they were protesting . . .’ Very soon, his body tilts towards us instead of facing the teachers and journalists in front of him. He begins to point directly at Haroon and me, his body language charged, almost hurling aggressively towards us. Pakistan is replaced by ‘you’. ‘In 1971, *you* killed our men and raped our women, *you* tortured us . . . *you* always treated us like second-class citizens, like Hindus . . . and in 1971

you killed us.’ I want to remind him that I was born seventeen years after the war, but it holds no relevance. As a professor would later say to me, ‘We have nothing but hatred for you.’

I am, therefore, Pakistan; I am the Pakistan Army; I am Punjabi hegemony.

3

Remembering 1947

When Pakistan was declared a separate country, I was in Lahore. I was pregnant and could not go out much, but I heard many stories about Hindus and Sikhs who were brutally murdered by the Muslims in Lahore and other parts of Punjab. One of my maids told me how her family entrapped, tricked and killed a large number of Hindus and Sikhs. The Muslims asked them to assemble in the courtyard of a big house. Then the door was locked from the outside and set on fire, everyone inside was burnt alive. ¹

—Tahira Mazhar Ali, Lahore, Pakistan (Born in 1924)

At the time of Partition, I was twelve years old. I am a witness to many horrible incidents . . . when the riots started in Delhi, I was at my uncle's house . . . near Ajmeri Gate. We were always fearful of an attack from Hindu extremists. Everybody was apprehensive; the fear of attack from Hindus was mental agony. Fortunately, the street where my uncle lived was not attacked. But Koray Wali Gali came under attack. It was horrifying; many people were killed. The street was littered with blood and dead bodies. Pandit Nehru came to visit the area and I saw an old woman run to him and cry. Nehru patted the woman's head and tried to comfort her and wept with her . . . ²

—Khaleeqe Anjum, Delhi, India (Born in 1935)

In 1946, I was about four years old. Just before Durga Puja, our close relatives came to our house [in Baraitala, Noakhali, which is now in Bangladesh] during lunchtime, claiming their homes had been burnt, their families killed . . . the womenfolk abducted. They were whispering so the little ones would not hear all these things otherwise they would be scared . . . the same day, we booked a car to flee, taking a bit of clothing and garments with us . . . after the riots, my father said go visit Noakhali one last time. I noticed that the people, the boys I played with . . . none of them were there. It was almost like a ghost village. Nobody was talking . . . everybody was whispering . . . that was the worst experience of my life . . . worst experience . . . later on I became a magistrate and I saw a lot of riots but I will never forget these riots . . . ³

—Anshu Sur, Kolkata, India (Born in 1942)

Perhaps you know that there was a horrific riot in Bihar in 1946, possibly in the month of October. Fifty thousand Biharis were killed . . . our family was caught in the vortex of those riots. Village after village was being destroyed and people were being killed indiscriminately.

My father had two brothers, a baby sister who was only one; and there was my grandmother. My grandfather had already passed away. Hindus were attacking Muslims, and raping and killing women. My grandmother, my father's phupu [paternal aunt], father's younger sister—all of them jumped into a large well in our house, in order to preserve their honour. Father was only ten at that time, and he had a younger brother who was seven. Before jumping into the well, grandmother told father, 'Now you two brothers need to run away from here. Follow the path that other people are taking. We'll not be able to save or protect you.' Saying this, they jumped into the well and killed themselves. Father saw his own mother killing herself along with others. He was only a child then. He was crying inconsolably. There was nobody around. There was utter mayhem and everyone was fleeing. My father's maternal uncles too couldn't give him any support. Like everyone else, they too were fleeing. That was when a Hindu gentleman who used to be an employee of the family took my father and uncle to a house beside his own and hid them both for six to seven days in a room where rice was stocked in sacks. Then he told them, 'Looks like I won't be able to keep you hidden any longer. I'll take you to a place from where Muslims are fleeing towards a new country called Pakistan.' So he made father and uncle wear dhotis and left them at a station in Calcutta, indicating trains that would take them to Pakistan. ⁴

—Khaled Hussain, Dhaka, Bangladesh (Born in 1981)

The railway quarters in Ranaghat (West Bengal) were very close to the station and everyday I would see trains filled with people heading towards Sealdah (in Kolkata). People travelling with their families and baggage barely contained in the compartments, the sight repeated itself every day. Once, I accompanied my father to Sealdah station. The station was overcrowded with the refugees then. I remember that my father would wipe his tears while I looked at the families who were scrambling for food and shelter. The sight of the station moved me to the core . . . Adjusting to the new atmosphere was not difficult though people who already belonged to West of Bengal were not entirely welcoming. Often insulted as 'Bangal' [a pejorative term used to describe people from East Bengal] . . . I remember how people would taunt me regarding my accent. ⁵

—Manika Banerjee, Kolkata, India (Born in 1942)

I passed through Delhi on my way to Calcutta and saw the Old Fort [Purana Qila], which was overflowing with refugees. It was evidence of the atrocities and killings that until now I had only heard or read about. People were scattered over; there was no clothing, no privacy, hardly any toilet facilities. The quality of water was appalling. Men, women, children were all gathered like a herd of cattle. It was just awful . . . I could never have imagined Delhi looking this way. When I got on the train to Calcutta, I heard the passengers, most of whom were Hindus and Sikhs, discussing the number of disfigured bodies lying openly on the streets. I was scared that they would find out I was a Muslim. And then when I got off at the station and stood in line for the taxi to go to my brother's home, I noticed that one after the other only Sikhs were driving the cars. I had heard of how Sikhs were killing Muslims all over Punjab and I didn't want to be the next victim. I feel ashamed of saying this now, but at that time I was convinced that all Sikhs were the same, attacking every Muslim that they could lay their hands on . . . but I couldn't keep standing there either. The station wasn't safe and I had to go

and rescue my family. My brother's home was located in Park Circus on Congress Exhibition Road, which was a distinguished Muslim locality. I was convinced that the minute I told the driver my destination, he would assemble the other Sikhs and butcher me, and so I decided to only tell him the address when we were very close so I could at least try to jump out and run for my life. When I told him which house to take me to, he turned around and asked, 'Is that where the Muslim women live?' I still remember how cold my hands and feet got. I reached for my gun with one hand and the door with the other, but before I could do anything, he spoke again, 'Your family has been very generous to us over the years. Let me help you.' He got me to my family safely and even insisted upon carrying my suitcase to the third floor. Then he refused to take the fare. I cannot tell you what a welcome change that was after what all I had witnessed in Delhi. It revived my faith in humanity again.

—Air Marshal (retd) Zafar Chaudhry, Lahore, Pakistan (Born in 1926)

For us, Pakistan was our future. When we were leaving, my father's colleagues asked him, 'Sir, you are leaving your home, you are leaving everything and going to Pakistan, who will support you there?' My father told him, 'I have spent most of my time living under the British, but now I believe the future of my children is not in Hindustan. We know that Pakistan will face a lot of difficulties, but for our next generations, it is clear to us that for them, for our children, the future is only there, in Pakistan. So we will bear these difficulties for them and leave the rest up to God.' That was the kind of spirit at that time. When we came to Pakistan, it was the month of Ramzan. None of us left even a single fast even though religion allows one to not fast in such situations. But we thought, we are going to Pakistan! How can we leave a fast in its name? Our heart did not agree. Our throats were dry, our tongues were dangling, it was so hot, there were no fans in the train. But the minute we reached Pakistan, we felt we had finally come to our true place, there was such passion.

—Jamshed Omar, Karachi, Pakistan (Born in 1933)

I was born in Dhaka but because my father was a government servant, we were in Calcutta when Partition happened. We moved to Dhaka after Partition. My father was given the option of joining Pakistan or India. So naturally the Hindus opted for India and Muslims opted for Pakistan. The funny thing is that though we always belonged to this district of Dhaka, my father had lived in Calcutta because it was the centre of employment, of business. So after Partition he came here unprepared. Dhaka was also not at all prepared for the migration of people. There was no adequate supply of electricity, sewerage was deplorable, housing was totally inadequate. This city grew up unplanned. [Pakistani] Punjab was fortunate in that respect because it had Lahore but we didn't have Calcutta. Dhaka was a provisional town and Dhaka had to grow. On a personal level, leaving Calcutta and coming to Dhaka was a sad thing. My younger brother said he felt like weeping. The railway station here was shabby, dirty . . . and there was no tram, no supply of electricity. It was all very dim. Personally, it was a sense of loss. But then there was also some excitement. There was something new happening. Opportunities were opening up. The middle class felt that since they had driven out the Hindu competitors, both in employment and in business, they were now free. Freedom meant opportunity, economic opportunity. There were the promotions, the feeling that new prospects had opened up . . .

—Serajul Chowdhury, Dhaka, Bangladesh (Born in 1936)

Partition was arguably one of the defining sociopolitical events of the twentieth century. Resulting in the largest migration the world had seen, Partition brought with it mass displacement and loss of property, looting and pillaging, violent riots and communal attacks, killings and rape, forced conversions and abductions, all of which changed the social fabric of the subcontinent for the decades to come. Amidst these horrid bloodstained realities of Partition, 1947 also promised new opportunities, economic emancipation and social and political advancement for oppressed communities. Since East Bengal had opted for Pakistan in 1947—twenty-four years prior to fighting for a separate homeland in the shape of Bangladesh—I found it important to return to these years to understand the role 1947 played in the region. Once collectively called the Indian subcontinent, by 1971 there were three different nations, each with its own unique national identity. I wanted to understand what Partition meant for India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the ways in which 1947 continued to impact people’s psyche, the countries’ internal politics and even their external relationships. After all, Partition is not a static event that one could simply move on from. As this chapter will illustrate, Partition continues to be an ongoing journey, leaving its imprints on the collective consciousness of the people of this region, while shaping state policies with far-reaching consequences.

Working on the Partition since 2010, I had learnt that it represented a complex—and often contradictory—relationship between loss, rupture, violence, destitution and displacement on one hand and freedom, belonging, progress and social mobility on the other. When I met Partition survivors in India or Pakistan, the memories would emerge in fragments; at times we would speak for hours about a particular riot or frightening train journey, about one religious community ruthlessly attacking the other. I would be left with a bloody taste in my mouth, the air heavy with the violence that had come alive to haunt our present. At other times, the same survivors and I would childishly giggle at their memories from schooldays, or gently hold each other’s hands as they remembered friends and neighbours who now belonged to the ‘other’ country; many times, they would narrate how these

friends and neighbours, who were often from a different religious faith, helped or came to the rescue of their family amidst the madness of Partition. The air would be filled with sombre gratitude and nostalgia, and at times, an aching desire to go back and see their pre-Partition home, to meet their friends and neighbours one last time. The majority of Partition survivors I have spoken to over the years never got a chance to say goodbye to the people and places they left behind. They didn't know what Partition meant until years after the event. Leaving their homes locked, hoping to come back after a few days or weeks, most of them had never been able to set foot again in the cities and villages that gave them birth; the uprooting was permanent, the loss defining, the divide severe. And yet there were times when our conversations would bubble with the excitement and jubilation that had surrounded 1947. Independence from the British colonial rule and the creation of a separate homeland for Muslims brought forward the promise of freedom and progress that many continue to savour.

These interviews with Partition survivors over the years showed me that there was no one linear narrative. Rather, Partition experiences and memories were often disjointed, often contradictory, and came in the shape of silence rather than words. For instance, the same people who spoke of their enmity towards a religious community also shared stories of being saved by members of that same community, sometimes in the same interview. The following excerpts from an interview with a Partition survivor, now based in Kolkata, perhaps best captures the contradictions between the saviours and perpetrators:

We were hidden in the house of one of our Muslim subjects. We were there for a long time. We were threatened with murder; some wanted to marry us into Muslim households. One of my cousins was never found again. Even Gandhiji had sent out a call looking for her, but she was never found . . . But they are the ones who saved three of us, whenever anyone came looking for us, they hid us. ⁶

—Mira (witness to the Noakhali riots at the age of nine, now aged eighty-two years)

I also noticed during these interviews that the very people who said they had no Partition memories, gave away the trauma they carried through the heavy sighs and long pauses that interrupted our conversations. Women on

an average spoke less than the men. Just as many men saw women as mere spectators of history, the women too insisted that they had nothing much to say, that I should speak to their husbands, brothers or sons. After all, they said, they were the ones who went out and participated in the rallies and protests, it was them who were the history-makers. The women had come to see their own experiences as trivial. A number of them said to me, '*Maine kya dekha hai? Hum toh ghar ke andar hote the* (What have I seen? We were always inside the house)'. However, I also realized over time that this silence partially arose from the fact that many times women's stories came warped in narratives of loss of 'honour' and shame, and hence were hushed. Gradually, they too had internalized this silence, 'forgetting' the memories that contradicted the accepted, male-dominated narratives. To understand their experience, it became important for me to listen to what they said through their silence, as much as through their words.

This selective forgetting and remembering of Partition, however, was not just due to the gender norms and patriarchal structures. Rather, it became apparent that the women and men came to remember or forget certain memories based on when and with whom they were speaking. Personal memories did not survive in isolation, untouched by their surroundings. Instead, they were impacted and shaped by what was happening in the larger society. State narratives in particular affected these personal memories considerably. The patriarchal and paternalistic state had forced its citizens to internalize its version of the truth. Just as women sometimes came to 'forget' their role in history, citizens too often unconsciously filtered their memories to fit nationalistic expectations. I noticed that popular state narratives in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh came to taint the private recollections of its citizens. The more the state repeated certain narratives, the more people remembered and aligned their memories with those narratives, at times silencing stories that did not fit. As author Muller-Schwarze argues in *The Blood of Victoriano Lorenzo*, 'The state promotes and repeats its national historical narrative and future vision so often that they almost seem natural . . . Silences in national histories forget and

destroy shared memories inconvenient to the structures enforcing state power.’⁷

This was perhaps why Partition narratives varied in India and Pakistan and, as I was to find out, in Bangladesh too. Each state had chosen to remember and forget Partition in a way that fuelled its own national vision, in the process censoring or reconstructing people’s memories too.

In India, Partition is popularly seen as an illegitimate demand of the Muslim League.⁸ This sentiment creeps into the minds of the general public as well. In my classroom interactions with students in India, children often told me that while Indian leaders (Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru) never wanted Partition, the Muslim League had insisted on Pakistan’s creation, in the process breaking up the motherland. This simplistic narrative brushed over the pre-Partition politics, particularly Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s attempts to carve out space for the Muslim community in undivided India, and the role the Congress and the Hindu community played in pushing for Partition. As Joya Chatterji argues in her book, *Bengal Divided*, Partition was not just an exclusive Muslim demand, opposed by the Hindus ‘in every form,’⁹ rather it was also fought for by the Hindu bhadralok of Bengal (the section of Bengali society that dominated nationalist politics since the first Partition of Bengal in 1905. The bhadralok are also referred to as the ‘respectable people’).¹⁰ The bhadralok’s dominance was threatened by societal changes and the policies pledged to by Muslim governments in Bengal. From 1937, Muslim political parties won provincial elections, promising better economic prospects and tenurial rights for Muslims.¹¹ Concerned about what permanent Muslim rule would look like, the bhadralok mobilized the Hindu community to demand Partition, so as to reclaim power and safeguard their interests, ensuring that they did not come to be dominated by the Muslims.¹² Chatterji’s research shows that Partition wasn’t just the Muslim League’s demand that the Congress had to grudgingly concede to, but rather a reality that the Congress in fact helped direct. She argues that ‘not only was the Congress High Command ready to pay the price of Partition in order to strengthen its hold over an unitary India, but that the Bengal Congress campaigned

successfully for the vivisection of its province on communal lines'.¹³ This issue was further fanned by the rising Muslim separatist politics,¹⁴ premised on economic and political exploitation by Hindus. The growing strength of the Muslim League, combined with Hindu communal politics, the Congress's desire to maintain hegemony and British Raj policies—as well as the communal riots and bloodshed around Partition—together resulted in the creation of Pakistan.

However, over the years, the emphasis of the Indian state on the Muslim demand for Pakistan has overshadowed these other political realities.¹⁵ In the mainstream discourse, it is solely the Muslims who are seen to have 'broken' the 'motherland'. This leads to negative connotations around the community, such as viewing Muslims as 'disloyal'. In fact, in a number of interactions with Indians, it has been implied to me that loyal Muslims had stayed back in India, while those unfaithful to the motherland had left for Pakistan.¹⁶ Partially, this narrative has been used by the Indian state to justify Partition and the loss of land, property and assets. This narrative puts aside any questions about the failure of the Congress—the ruling party of India for the majority of post-Partition years—in keeping the country united. Through textbooks, among other mediums, this narrative has gained a strong foothold in India. As author Krishna Kumar argues, 'the Indian narrative pays little attention to the course of post 1920s Muslim politics, as a result of which the 1940s come as a surprise for students. Without the background of the social and political alienation of the Muslim landed elite and the intelligentsia of the northern plains, the student can hardly make sense of the sudden emergence of the Muslim League as a powerful actor in the early 1940s . . . textbooks jump from one mention to the next, rushing towards Partition which, from the point of view of the young student, begs for an explanation more substantial than what the British-Muslim conspiracy theory can provide . . . the Indian narrative of the national movement socializes the young to perceive Pakistan as an illegitimate achievement.'¹⁷

The selective forgetting by the state about the role the Hindu communalists and elements of the Congress played in making Partition a

reality, and the selective remembering of Muslim communalists (in isolation), has had its impact on Partition memories in India. I found Indian Partition survivors express nostalgia far more openly than Pakistani survivors. This is because the state has emphasized the loss that India had to bear during Partition due to the Muslim demand. There was also a romanticization of undivided India; in their recollections, the pre-Partition years tended to be remembered as rosy and harmonious. And it was the Muslims who had snatched away this ideal past from them. This is not to say that the nostalgia was entirely state-crafted but that state narratives had pushed people to readily express their loss while diluting memories of intercommunal tensions and fault lines prior to Partition, which stands at odds with the narratives of several Pakistanis. One woman I had interviewed in Pakistan expressed her annoyance at an Indian friend who insisted on speaking about how good the pre-Partition years were. ‘She kept saying how sad she was that we were no longer one country. It was very difficult for me to hear all of that since Pakistan is a huge victory for people like me . . . and for so many Muslims who suffered before 1947.’

Similar to what the Pakistani woman had said, 1947 is memorialized as a triumph or victory in Pakistan. State-endorsed Partition narratives, which are institutionalized through popular media, museum exhibits, textbooks, etc., justify Partition by focusing on why Pakistan’s creation was necessary in the first place. While economic discrimination against Muslims and concepts of untouchability feature in the pre-Partition years, when it comes to 1947 itself, the overwhelming focus is on Hindu and Sikh violence against Muslims. This violence is presented in a way that proves just why it was necessary to separate from the ruthless ‘other’. In comparison, any Muslim-led violence is silenced or conveniently obliterated.¹⁸ The one-sided communal narratives have worked to ensure that Pakistanis take pride in the creation of the country, thanking their ancestors for fighting against the ‘cunning’ and ‘scheming’ Hindus—terms often used in Pakistani textbooks.¹⁹ As a result, I found that Partition survivors often spoke at length about the violence that came with Partition. Certainly, this could be because traumatic memories tend to overshadow less distressing memories,

pushing the softer recollections to the back. However, I observed that state narratives also played a role in defining what people shared and what they held back. Memories of Hindu and Sikh friends were often sidelined for they did not fit the Partition narrative promoted by the state. To be nostalgic, or to miss them, could be construed as being unpatriotic. Sentences like ‘Hindus can never become the true friends of Muslims’²⁰ in textbooks and the emphasis on the two-nation theory, which urge Pakistanis to remember how different they are from Hindus, make it important to forget these friends. Leaving them behind is projected as ‘good riddance’. Often, it was when I asked specific questions about relations with Hindus and Sikhs prior to Partition that utterances of these friends, of Holi and Diwali celebrations would be shared, that the nostalgia would emerge. These memories had been brushed aside for decades for they tended to contradict the idea of Hindu–Muslim enmity.

Even as Pakistan and India tend to have their ‘own’ version of Partition—of loss or of triumph—1947 continues to dominate state-level politics, public spaces and the collective memory of people. Partition is a significant event, one that is memorialized in textbooks, speeches, museums, state documents and family histories. In comparison, a strange silence looms over Bangladesh when it comes to 1947. It seems as if just like Pakistan tries to avoid 1971 as an uncomfortable truth that should be hidden, Bangladesh too finds it difficult to come to terms with 1947. On my visit to Bangladesh, I found Partition was remembered as an insignificant, and even irritating, footnote in history. This was surprising for me initially because it was Punjab and Bengal that saw the worst of the bloodshed that accompanied Partition. The Calcutta Massacres (also referred to as the Great Calcutta Killings) of August 1946 saw 15,000 people being killed and another 50,000 being injured.²¹ These riots sparked further tensions in other districts of Bengal. For instance, in Noakhali, stabbings, killings, snatching and looting became rampant as rumours spread that Sikhs and Hindus were planning on killing Muslims. In retaliation, it is estimated that several hundred Hindus were killed, thousands of women raped, while others were forcibly converted to Islam.²² In the weeks and months that followed,

communal violence broke out in other parts of India too, such as Bihar. This was a horrific precursor to the bloodshed that would be unleashed in other parts of India and Pakistan in 1947. Mira Mojumdar, who currently lives in Kolkata and is a survivor of the Noakhali riots, shared her memories of the violence in an interview in Bengali. Here is the translated excerpt:

We were expecting the Muslims to attack the day before (the Noakhali riots took place between October and November 1946). My dad had cemented the cowshed and dug a tunnel in preparation. In the meantime, the Muslims were provoked by the Hindu Mahasabha. They had gone and done a lot of slogan-shouting against the Muslims . . . The next day, we went to Raibahadur Rajendralal Raychoudhury's place. He was our guardian . . . he said that there would be attacks and we should come to his house . . . that there would be food at his place. He told us to leave home, leaving everything as it was, and head over to his house. He was the president of the Hindu Mahasabha of Noakhali District. We had three houses: the south house, the middle house and the north house. We left everything and went to Rajendralal Raychoudhury's house. It was a sixteen-mile journey on boat . . . We gathered on the roof of his house. The thing is, the Muslims were already prepared. They were throwing fire at us from below. The girls were put in one room on the roof. At times, I felt like I could not breathe, my insides were [threatening to] come out; I [wanted to step] out of the room. When I [finally] came out, I saw my Ma sitting with Baba on the roof. The roof itself had cracked . . . They (the Muslims) had set the small *dabs* (coconuts) on fire and were throwing them at the roof . . . They (the family) were sitting on the *karnish* (the ledge above the window). By then we had asked for forgiveness from the Muslims, [said that we would] do whatever they asked us to do. There was a mango tree next to the house, which we were using to get off the roof. Ma and Baba were going down the tree. Kaka (my paternal uncle) was taking the stairs. They ran a spear through his chest, right in front of me. By then, everyone was throwing whatever they could lay their hands on from the roof. The second time I came out, I saw Baba sitting with Kaka on his lap, blood [all around]. The next time I came, Kaka was no more. There were preparations [afoot] to feed everybody who had come seeking shelter; there were pots of khichuri being made. I saw people lying there, their heads in the boiling pots of khichuri . . . ²³

Despite the violence Bengal had seen, and with many survivors still settled in Bangladesh, there was little mention of the bloodshed or, for that matter, any other aspect of Partition. When I spoke to people in Dhaka about 1947, they told me that 1971 overshadowed everything else. The 15th of August, which India celebrates as Independence Day, holds importance in Bangladesh, but only in terms of internal politics and the ongoing power tussle between the Awami League and the BNP. 15 August was when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated. It is this memory, of the killing of the founding father of Bangladesh, which dominates public space and

political thinking. Meanwhile, 15 August also marks the birthday of the BNP's Khaleda Zia. Every year, she insists on celebrating her birthday on the same day as her opponent Sheikh Hasina mourns her father's death. She has in fact been accused of faking her birthday just to infuriate Hasina and 'steal' the limelight from her father's death anniversary.²⁴ It is this internal friction that remains at the forefront in August; Partition, in comparison, recedes to the background like irrelevant history that is best forgotten. When I tried to probe and ask questions around 1947, several of the respondents—most of them belonging to the urban middle class of Dhaka—were only willing to delve into one aspect of Partition: the fact that Pakistan would not have been created without the support of East Bengal. This was important for them to remember and retell. It worked to reinforce how unfair Pakistan had been to East Pakistan, to whom it owed its very existence.

The Muslim League won 115 out of 250 seats in Bengal in the 1946 elections, securing 95 per cent of the urban Muslim vote and 84.6 per cent of the Muslim vote for the province on the whole.²⁵ The Muslim League, which was founded in Bengal in 1906, enjoyed popularity in the region. Several of the people I spoke to in Bangladesh had either supported the party in 1946 themselves or their parents had. While this support played an instrumental role in the creation of Pakistan, the Muslim League's relationship with East Bengal after Partition had turned people against the party. Today, the League is remembered as an antihero that deprived East Pakistanis of their rights. The fact that the same party had enjoyed such backing only seven decades ago is a difficult truth to negotiate with.

Sayed Ferdous, an anthropologist who currently teaches at the Jahangirnagar University in Bangladesh and has spent several years researching 1947, writes about the unease that he grappled with upon learning that his father had supported the Muslim League during his student years at Dhaka University.

In my days of growing up, I had a sense of uneasiness regarding Abba's involvement with the Muslim League. In the years after Partition, the Muslim League suffered a role reversal from [being the] heroes to the villains in the history of East Pakistan/Bangladesh, becoming

allegedly known as shelters for pro-Pakistani elements. The party had taken a stand against the independence of Bangladesh. The question in my mind was why, being a moderate Muslim, had Abba become associated with the League? For me, the Muslim League was a communal banner . . . ²⁶

It was only over time that Sayeed realized that the Muslim League, which represented communalism for Bengalis like him, had represented something different for those who supported it at the time of Partition. He writes:

For Abba, at the eve of emergence of the new nationalisms, things were different. It was a crucial choice for many to join the Muslim League; for him, and for many others like him, it probably did not represent a symbol of ‘communalism’, but a platform of religious-national identity offering autonomy to the oppressed Muslims of India. ²⁷

Like Sayeed’s father, many other Bengalis had supported the Muslim League too hoping for a better future. Senior Bangladeshi writer, academic and researcher Afsan Chowdhury explained during a meeting in Dhaka that economics was at the epicentre of Partition in Bengal, and that a vote for Muslim League was a vote for economic empowerment. In an article on the same topic, Afsan writes that in pre-Partition India:

The peasant and the aspirant middle class shared a common dream: an end to British and Kolkata-Hindu domination in jobs and trade. This was not an issue of Hindu or Muslim identity but of economics . . . when Bengali Muslims voted overwhelmingly for the Muslim League in 1946, they were not voting for Pakistan but for a life free from zamindari rule and famines. Bengali Muslims were mostly peasants, sharing many traditions with their Hindu and Buddhist counterparts. But most of the landlords were Hindus. ²⁸

Partition and the creation of Pakistan then symbolized emancipation, opportunities and progress, and a vote for Pakistan meant a stand against economic oppression. In fact, I would learn that many of the East Pakistani Partition survivors, who were pro-Muslim League in 1947, found it harder to let go of their belief in Pakistan in the post-Partition years. A number of people whose parents had supported the creation of Pakistan told me that their mothers and fathers continued to believe in the idea of Pakistan until 1971, even though the younger generations had become disgruntled earlier. It was only when the military operation was launched in March 1971 that

these supporters became disillusioned, accepting that separation was the only solution. This first generation found it harder to let go, particularly because they had helped create the country that was now depriving them of the very rights they had fought for. It was a difficult truth to digest, but one that the military operation and the resulting widespread violence had finally necessitated. Today, however, recognizing this support for the League is a complicated affair. Bangladesh's liberation war history is premised on the struggle against West Pakistani hegemony; the time the two nations spent together as East and West Pakistan is remembered as a dark era. To acknowledge that the Pakistani movement enjoyed support in Bengal makes it difficult to explain the rise of Bengali nationalism soon after the creation of Pakistan. These perceived contradictions in what is projected as a linear and simple history of Bangladesh complicates the past. Partition as a result has come to be hushed and silenced.

While I found only a few people willing to talk to me about 1947, I managed to set up a meeting with Serajul Chowdhury, a Partition survivor and prominent Bangladeshi academic whom I met at Dhaka University in 2017, where he serves as professor emeritus. Our conversation began with the importance of the location of our interview. Pointing towards a large ground from the window in his office, he said, 'Do you know that in 1971, this is where the Punjabis surrendered? This is also where Jinnah gave his 1948 speech in which he declared that Urdu, and only Urdu, will be the state language of Pakistan.' Many would argue that the speech itself (which I will delve into in more detail in the next chapter) became the catalyst for the separation in 1971. It was poignant that the speech, which gave rise to dissent in East Pakistan, was offered in the same place—Ramna Race Course ground, now known as Suhrawardy Udyan—where Pakistan signed the historic surrender document that marked the formation of East Pakistan as the new nation of Bangladesh. The birth and culmination of the Bangladeshi movement was embedded in this very site.

It is also noteworthy that when Serajul Chowdhury spoke of the surrender, he referred to the surrender of the Punjabis rather than Pakistan as a state. It can be argued that it was Punjabi hegemony that led to

resentment in East Pakistan. The army and bureaucracy are both dominated by Punjabis. Also, it was Punjab that was at the forefront of recognizing Urdu as the state language. In fact, even today, while regional languages are taught across Pakistani provinces (for instance, Sindhi in Sindh, Pushto in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, etc.), Punjabi is not taught as a subject in schools in Punjab. Urdu remains the medium of instruction across the province, justified in the name of ‘national language’. A child from a school in Lahore had told me that her school fined students Rs 50 if they were found speaking Punjabi. In 2016, one of the largest private educational institutions in Pakistan, Beaconhouse School System, issued a discipline policy forbidding students from speaking Punjabi, referring to it as a foul language.²⁹ Punjab has constantly tried to show that it is separate from India; in the process of constructing this independent Pakistani identity, it has found it necessary to shun itself of its Punjabiness, particularly of any connection to the Indian part of Punjab.³⁰ In this national project, the regional culture is imagined to be subservient to the broader ‘national culture’, represented by Urdu. Anyone who challenges this hierarchy is seen to be challenging national identity, like the Bengalis who immediately after the birth of Pakistan demanded that Bengali—spoken by more than 50 per cent of the population be recognized as the state language. When the army, also dominated by Punjabis, launched an operation in March 1971 to curb Bengali nationalism, it was once again perceived as Punjabi exploitation and oppression of the people of East Pakistan. Soon after the creation of Pakistan, the state had begun to accept Punjab as the true Pakistan. Bengalis, who had helped the Muslim League secure enough votes and support for the country, were cornered and their patriotism was constantly in question.

Our location was also significant because it was in this area that the Muslim League had been established in 1906. ‘There was an outhouse here that belonged to the Nawab family. That was where the Muslim Conference took place and they decided to form the Muslim League,’ Serajul told me. He said that the support for the League grew in Bengal since people saw it as a means of solving economic issues. Serajul, who was a young student

based in Calcutta at the time of Partition, shared that, ‘Even in 1946, when the Calcutta riot happened, also called the Great Calcutta Killings . . . even after that Hindus and Muslims were very friendly with each other in schools. The communalism was economic and the economic factors turned into politics. There was competition between the established Hindu middle class and the rising Muslim middle class. The Hindus had taken advantage of English education and were at least fifty years ahead of the Muslims. The Muslims were mainly peasants competing with the Hindus. In fact, even the lower-class Hindus hated the upper-class Hindus, but the Muslims who were deprived were greater in number. The British played with this and introduced separate electorates, encouraging division and antagonism between the established Hindu middle class and the rising Muslim middle class, which had grown because of professional employment. Eventually, this antagonism resulted in tensions and then riots and ultimately in Partition.’ He explained that unlike what the two-nation theory proposed, the problems between Hindus and Muslims were not because of religious factors; his father got along with his Hindu co-workers and he was friends with the Hindu students at his school. ‘In fact, there was a feeling when Partition was happening that Bengal (which included the Hindu and Muslim population), should stay together but this did not materialize. The feeling among the Hindus was that since the Muslims were in majority in Bengal, they would dominate if Bengal became independent. Regardless, it shows that the two-nation theory was absurd. At the centre of the tensions was economic disparity.’

Ever since Bangladesh’s creation, those in India as well as Bangladesh have claimed that the two-nation theory, popularly perceived as Pakistan’s justification for Partition, has collapsed. After Pakistan’s surrender in 1971, then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi said, ‘Today, we have sunk Jinnah’s two-nation theory in the Bay of Bengal.’³¹ Religion had, after all, failed to hold East and West Pakistan together. I found several Bangladeshis reinforce the idea that the two-nation theory never held any relevance in Bengal and perhaps that was so. However, through my interactions I noticed

that even if the concept had not defined politics in 1947, it certainly tainted perceptions today.

One night Haroon and I decided to take a walk around our guest house. We were exhausted because of the security protocol and being driven around. Wanting to talk to people around us, we tried to convince the police officials to allow us to walk in the neighbourhood and absorb the city. They agreed hesitatingly, that too if one of them accompanied us. We had no choice. As we walked around the streets, we began talking. He knew we were from Pakistan and was eager to know more. After some of the hostility we had witnessed, his interest in us was welcome. At one point, he asked us where all we had travelled in the region. We mentioned our trips to India and Sri Lanka.

‘Why India?’ he asked.

‘Why not?’ we answered.

‘I don’t like India.’

‘Well, why not?’

‘Because it is a Hindu country . . . I like Pakistan . . . we are Muslim brothers,’ he smiled.

Over the next few days I had several such encounters. For instance, many youngsters explained their support for the Pakistani cricket team in terms of their Muslim faith.

Communalism may have erupted with Partition but it certainly did not end in 1947, or in 1971 for that matter. Partition remains an ongoing process in Bangladesh with communal tensions, crystallization of religious identities and an ‘otherization’ of Hindus increasingly prevalent. Unlike Punjab, which saw an influx of refugees in the immediate aftermath of Partition, in Bengal the refugee crisis was far more protracted. While some Hindu and Muslim families had migrated before, during or soon after Partition, others were pushed out years later. The communal elements that had been triggered during Partition continued to impact religious communities in Bengal for years to come.

Meghna Guhathakurta, a well-known Bangladeshi academic and writer, and I spoke in Dhaka in the summer of 2017. Our conversation began with

1947 as Meghna explored personal histories of Partition. I asked her why there was less literature and discussion on the Partition of Bengal compared to the Partition of Punjab. She explained that, ‘One of the focus areas in Partition history is the exodus . . . people crossing over, being shot in the trains, being killed. This mass exodus happened in Punjab. That’s not to say there was no violence here; the violence was more structural and also came in waves. The migration also happened in bits and pieces, not all at once as in Punjab.’ She paused and adjusted herself on her seat before continuing. When she spoke again, she told me about her family’s history, a Hindu family that had decided to stay back in what became East Pakistan, Partition impacting them in the years that followed.

‘My family was in East Bengal at the time of Partition. This is my ancestral home. My father was born in 1920. In 1948, my parents got married. He was a university graduate and a college teacher. He was a follower of M.N. Roy who started the Radical Democratic Party that my father was a part of. Roy had told my father, “You should not move because you are the leaders, the opinion-makers. If you move, people will also panic and move.” Both my father and mother were teachers. They believed that one does not leave one’s country, but more than being patriotic, I think my father was very excited. He was excited about seeing his students’ progress, about them becoming scholars. That’s what made him stay. But as with other Partition survivors, the loss and rupture are things that you have to live through. And in Bengal the riots and violence between Hindus and Muslims continued for much longer after Partition . . . The communal clashes came in spurts . . .

‘. . . In the 1950s, my father’s elder sister was about to get married to a Hindu doctor practising in Bihar. They were supposed to go to Bihar but there was a riot. My aunt, who was supposed to get married, was returning from my mother’s school, where she too was a teacher, when she heard that Muslim mobs were coming. She took shelter in a policeman’s house. But then the Muslims came in through the side entrance that the sweeper used. They entered and started debating whether to kill them or not, which is when they got an order from their leader and decided to disperse. This

incident shook my family so badly that they decided to quickly have a wedding and leave. The wedding took place under curfew. The family couldn't find a Hindu driver to drive the bride and groom and a Muslim driver couldn't be trusted under the conditions. Eventually, my father's Christian friend, who was a Quaker, drove the groom in a truck to the wedding. On top of this, the guests had to climb a wall to enter the venue because of the curfew,' she let out a laugh at the absurdity of the situation before continuing. 'So, after this strange wedding, my aunt and her husband went off to India and took the youngest brother and sister with them. My grandmother and father stayed here. Later, my grandmother also left. This was the 1950s. Then the 1965 Indo-Pak War happened. Before the war, there was another communal riot, which I saw myself. I must've been about seven or eight years old. My father was in England for his PhD, so it was only my mother, who was a headmistress at a school, and me. All the village people came to my mother for protection. Forty women and children were brought to us, and we had to shelter them in our house. Then one of the teacher's husbands, who was a policeman, said, "You cannot protect so many Hindu women and children in your house." At that time, the Pakistan government used to have refugee shelters. Ours was in an Ayurvedic medicine factory, which was also once attacked as it was run by a Hindu who escaped in one of the earlier communal riots and shifted to India. We took shelter in that factory for seven days. I remember we couldn't have a bath for seven days! I also remember that policemen used to come with truckloads of bread. A few of the women would light up a stove and then maybe we would have some food.'

When I asked Meghna why these riots persisted in East Pakistan after Partition, she explained that since the Hindus controlled much of the land and business, violence was instigated even after Partition in the hopes of driving them out. In my meeting with Serajul, he had said the same. He had told me that the Muslim refugees who had poured in from Bihar and elsewhere after the communal riots were homeless. They had eyed the Hindu properties and felt that if they could drive them out, they could secure their land. However, Meghna felt that the violence against Hindus

was instigated less by land grabbers and more by the state. ‘You can argue that the first Hindu-Muslim riots in 1948 were a spillover of Partition itself. The concept of hatred between Hindus and Muslims existed because of Partition. The hate politics was nurtured by the state. Ironically, the state was protecting the refugees while also eroding the concept of secularism. Since Hindus had migrated from Punjab, the feeling that was promoted was that Hindustan was for Hindus and Pakistan for the Muslims. In Bengal, it was difficult to say that because many Hindu families, like my own, had stayed back. The state, however, was trying to instil a feeling that all Hindus should leave. By the 1950s, the anti-India backlash was quite severe and Hindus were often targeted and labelled as Indian agents. This kept growing after the 1965 war. During the war, my uncle was arrested based on allegations that he showed the Indian forces light during the blackout. Hindus were targets during the war (as well as after). Even my father, who was a professor of English literature and used to have a broadcast on the radio to discuss poems and literature, was blacklisted under General Ayub Khan’s regime in Pakistan. And then after the war, the Enemy Property Act³² was implemented, which triggered a lot of land-grabbing. Since India was the enemy, if any Hindus went to India to escape these riots or otherwise, their property was taken over by the state as enemy property.’

The Enemy Property Act enabled authorities to confiscate land and buildings of Hindus who migrated to India. I am told that when Hindus had to flee because of the riots and targeted violence, their properties would be taken over while they were busy saving their lives. After Bangladesh’s independence, this law was named the Vested Properties Act (an amendment to the Act in 2011 enables Hindus to ‘reclaim their property taken over by the government and individuals’).³³ According to the Hindu community, the law continued to be used against them even after 1971,³⁴ and discrimination remained persistent. According to Abul Barkat, author of the book *Political Economy of Reforming Agriculture-Land-Water Bodies in Bangladesh*, before the war the daily rate of migration was 705. The figure reduced to 512 during 1971–81 and 438 during 1981–91. However, thereafter, the figure increased again, to 767 persons leaving each

day during 1991–2001 and 774 leaving during 2001–12. Between 1964 and 2013, ‘around 11.3 million Hindus left Bangladesh due to religious persecution and discrimination.’³⁵ According to the same research, the Enemy Property Act, followed by the Vested Property Act, left 60 per cent of Hindus landless.³⁶ In Khulna, where I interacted with members of the Hindu community, several first-hand and post-1971 experiences of discrimination were narrated to me. One young boy told me, ‘Once, when my friend needed blood, I went to donate but his family refused to take my blood. They said they wanted a Muslim to donate.’ Another man said, ‘On the surface all looks good between Hindus and Muslims, but often false charges are put on us, rape is used as an instrument to push us out, our wives, our daughters are threatened. We are called idol worshippers . . . we used to be affluent here, and yes some of us oppressed the Muslims. Perhaps they are taking revenge now.’ These narratives indicate that even if the two-nation theory did not hold much weight in Bengal prior to Partition, it certainly left its imprint on the region.

However, in the popular conscious imagination, both 1947 and the two-nation theory are dismissed in Bangladesh today. Bengal’s support for the Muslim League, the same Muslim League that it would later come to fight, has become shameful. As Professor Manosh Chowdhury, who teaches at Jahangirnagar University, explains, ‘If you are in Bangladesh and are a Muslim, it is likely that your dadaji (paternal grandfather) could’ve been a Muslim Leaguer [supporter] Now, being a Muslim Leaguer [supporter] in West Pakistan is nothing to feel bad about, but in Bangladesh, affiliation with the political doctrine and ideology of the Muslim League has become a matter of shame. Identities shift, they are fluid. During the 1940s, being a Muslim Leaguer [supporter] was radical, but in the post-liberation history of Bangladesh, there is discomfort surrounding the two-nation theory as it is an antithesis to the creation of Bangladesh.’

The year 1947 then is portrayed as nothing more than a delay in the creation of Bangladesh. It is believed that the creation of Bangladesh was always critical because Bengali–Muslim culture was different from the Bengali Hindu culture of West Bengal; compounded with the economic

exploitation at the hands of Hindu zamindars, a separate homeland was essential. The twenty-four years spent with Pakistan only deferred the realization of the Bangladeshi dream. As academic Afsan Chowdhury put it during our meeting, 'Liberation was a continued process, 1947 is seen as an odd bump on the way.' In fact, just as in India, Partition is blamed on Muslim communalism and the pre-Partition past is romanticized. In Bangladesh too the pre-1947 years are idealized as peaceful and harmonious, and the religious and communal tensions are seen as a result of Muslim League's communal politics. Sayeed Ferdous, in a conversation I had with him, mentioned how the secular middle class of Bangladesh views Partition as having ruined things. Through movies, films and other cultural products, the idea of the Muslim League breaking up undivided India, as instilling communalism in the subcontinent hints at strong nostalgia for the pre-Partition years. The creation of Bangladesh was still necessary to carve out a place for Bengali Muslims who were culturally different from the Bengali Hindus, but the communalism of Partition could have been avoided were it not for the Muslim League. Based on this, as well as other conversations, it seems to me that any communal tensions in Bangladesh today can also be blamed on the Muslim League and the communal politics it fanned. It becomes easier to externalize and 'otherize' the problem. India and Bangladesh, Muslims and Hindus were perfect, living together peacefully until Partition or the follies of Muslim League.

Today then in Bangladesh, unlike in India and Pakistan, 1947 has been forgotten from the collective imagination of the people. Children learn little about it, if at all. 1947 is only evoked in relation to 1971. I was repeatedly told that despite Bengal's support for Pakistan, the latter had failed to treat it with the respect and attention it deserved. The disillusionment after Pakistan's creation is what led to the eventual demand for the creation of Bangladesh. People like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was a Muslim League member himself and had supported the creation of Pakistan for he believed that 'without it Muslims had no future in our part of the world',³⁷ had been left with crushed dreams and dashed hopes. Remembering 1947 in any other aspect, or in a significant way, would leave too many question

marks. After all, barely a few months after Partition, resentment against West Pakistan had grown. By 1952, the language movement, which holds critical importance in Bangladeshi historiography, had given impetus to Bengali nationalism. Just five years after Partition, East Pakistan had serious grievances against the state. It is almost as if the short history in which East Bengal and Pakistan were one is such an uncomfortable truth, especially given that relations between both countries remain strained even forty-eight years later, that it is simpler to dismiss it as irrelevant. The year 1947 then seems to be wiped out from the popular imagination of the people of Bangladesh. As one Bangladeshi told me, '1952 is far more important to us than 1947.'

What the Indian subcontinent was more than seventy years ago stands in stark contrast to where each of the three nation states are today in terms of their present, as well as in terms of how they imagine and remember their past. In the next few chapters, I will delve into this further, with special focus on the years between 1947 and 1971 to understand how the Pakistan Movement fragmented, leading to the creation of Bangladesh.



Part II

1947–1971: The Seeds of Unrest

This following chapters of the book chronicle the years between the birth of Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh through the narratives of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis. Through their voices, the growing discord between East and West Pakistan during 1947–71 comes to light. Various books and articles have been written, exploring the ‘macro’ reasons for the 1971 war. These interviews give us personal insights into how high-level politics impacted ordinary people and shows us the ways in which the quest for a separate nation intensified within twenty-four years of Pakistan’s creation.

When Language Becomes Dissent

Aroma Datta was one of the first people I met in Dhaka. Shahriar Kabir had invited us to his house the very evening that we landed in the capital. Aroma was already seated in his lounge when Haroon and I arrived. Wrapped in a beautiful yellow sari with a red tika across her forehead, she had greeted me warmly. I sat in a chair beside her and waited for Kabir to make the introductions. Also present in the room was a retired colonel, who was part of the Nirmul Committee, serving as a scholar on genocide studies. He announced at the onset of the conversation that he was once part of the Pakistan Army, until he quit to join the Mukti Bahini. The Mukti Bahini eventually fought the same Pakistan Army that he had once served in.

After brief exchanges about our travel, Kabir invited Haroon to another room, leaving me in the company of Aroma and the colonel to start the interview. At this point, all I knew was that Aroma was the granddaughter of Dhirendranath Datta. I had little knowledge about him prior to my research on 1971. His name, like his legacy, was hidden under the folds of competing narratives on 1971 that I would have to peel away. In Bangladesh, however, Datta was hailed as the ‘harbinger’¹ of the Bengali language movement, remembered fondly as a ‘dream maker’.²

A deputy leader of the Congress parliamentary party in the Bengal Legislative Assembly, Datta had joined the Constituent Assembly in 1946 and opted for Pakistan in 1947. ‘My grandfather was a Congressman . . . he declined to be the first chief minister of Bengal in India and instead chose to live in Pakistan after Partition,’ Aroma had started softly. Born in 1886 in a village called Ramrail, Datta is said to have been a staunch champion of Hindu–Muslim unity.³ ‘He was a patriot and a nationalist . . . a fan of

Jinnah's. He would say, "I need to protect the minorities and the commoners. They [the Hindus] shouldn't have to go to India [after Partition]."

However, while protecting minority rights was important to Datta, so was enshrining the rights of the majority; in particular the right to language. Barely a few months after Partition, in February 1948, he put forth the demand for adopting Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. Reportedly, his proposal was meant to be an amendment, 'permitting the use of Bengali along with Urdu and English in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan'.⁴

During our conversation, Aroma had passed a white envelope to me. When I peeked inside I found it full of photocopies of letters, speeches and articles on and by Datta; the writings spoke of his personality, his work for the oppressed classes, his struggles against the British, and his movement for the recognition of Bengali language. Accompanying these pages was Datta's speech at the February 1948 Constituent Assembly session. 'My grandfather said Bengali was spoken by 56 per cent of Pakistanis while Urdu was spoken only by a minority. In the Constituent Assembly meeting of 1948, he raised a motion on the issue of language . . . He simply said, "Out of a population of 6 crore 90 lakh, 4 crore 40 lakh are Bengali-speaking. What should the lingua franca be? It should be Bangla . . ."'

Here, the colonel interrupted and clarified, 'Bangla along with Urdu . . . he agreed to have both Urdu and Bangla as state languages.' Aroma nodded. 'He said it is the language of commoners and the majority are peasants . . . they are the common people. If you want to communicate with them, everything should be in Bangla and Urdu. But Jinnah made it clear that this was not going to be accepted.'

Listed below are some excerpts from Datta's speech:

Sir, in moving this—the motion that stands in my name—I can assure the House that I do so not in the spirit of narrow provincialism, but, Sir, in the spirit that this motion receives the fullest consideration at the hands of the members. I know, Sir, that Bengalee is a provincial language, but, so far [as] our state is concerned, it is the language of the majority of the people of the state. So although it is a provincial language, but as it is a language of the majority of the people of the state . . . it stands on a different footing therefore. Out of six crore and ninety

lakhs of people inhabiting this state, 4 crores and 40 lakhs of people speak the Bengalee language. So, Sir, what should be the State language of the State? The State language of the state should be the language which is used by the majority of the people of the State, and for that, Sir, I consider that Bengalee language is a lingua franca of our State . . .

. . . I know, Sir, I voice the sentiments of the vast millions of our State . . . Even, Sir, in the Eastern Pakistan where the people numbering four crores and forty lakhs speak the Bengalee language, the common man, even if he goes to a post office and wants . . . a money order form finds that the money order is printed in Urdu language . . . not printed in Bangalee language . . . or it is printed in English. A poor cultivator, who has got his son, Sir, as a student in Dacca University and who wants to send money to him, goes to a village post office and . . . asks for a money order form, finds that the money order form is printed in Urdu language. He cannot send the money order but shall have to rush to a distant town and have this money order form translated for him and then the money order, Sir, that is necessary for his boy can be sent. The poor cultivator, Sir, sells a certain plot of land or a poor cultivator purchases a plot of land and goes to the stamp vendor and pays him money but cannot say whether he has received the value of the money . . . the value of the stamp, Sir, is written not in Bengalee but . . . in Urdu and English . . . These are the difficulties experienced by the common man of our State. The language of the State should be such which can be understood by the common man of the State. ⁵

However, Datta's sentiments were not well received in the Constituent Assembly that day or amongst the West Pakistani state officials thereafter. In response to his speech, then prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan stated:

. . . Pakistan has been created because of the demand of a hundred million Muslims in the subcontinent and the language of a hundred million Muslims is Urdu . . . Pakistan is a Muslim state and it must have as its lingua franca the language of the Muslim nation . . . we do recognize the importance of Bengalee. There is no intention to oust Bengalee altogether from Bengal. As a matter of fact, it would be wrong for anyone to thrust any other language on the people of a province which is not their mother tongue, but, at the same time, we must have a state language—the language which would be used between the different parts of Pakistan for inter-provincial communications . . . Urdu can be the only language which can keep the people of East Bengal or Eastern Zone and the people of Western Zone jointed together. It is necessary for a nation to have one language and that language can only be Urdu and no other language. Therefore, Sir, I am sorry, I cannot agree to the amendment which has been moved. As a matter of fact, when the notice of that amendment was given, I thought that the object was an innocent one. The object [ive] to include Bengalee was that in case there are some people who are not proficient in English or Urdu might express their views in that language, but I find now that the object [ive] is not such an innocent one as I thought it was. The object [ive] of this amendment is to create a rift between the people of Pakistan. The object [ive] of this amendment is to take away from the Mussalmans the unifying force that brings them together. ⁶

‘Liaquat Ali made a statement that he smelt secession,’ added the colonel. ‘He claimed that it wasn’t a harmless demand to make Bengali the state language . . . he told Datta that he wouldn’t be spared for trying to break up Pakistan . . .’

Liaquat Ali Khan was not alone in his opposition, however. Other non-Bengali members of the assembly and leaders from East Bengal, like Khawaja Nazimuddin, also opposed the move. ⁷ On 25 February 1948 Nazimuddin, stated on the Constituent Assembly floor that:

Sir, I feel it my duty to let the House know what the opinion of the overwhelming majority of the people of Eastern Pakistan over this question of Bengali language is. I think there will be no contradiction if I say that as far as inter-communication between the provinces and the Centre is concerned, they (people of East Bengal) feel that Urdu is the only language that can be adopted (as the state language of Pakistan). But there is a strong feeling that the medium of instruction should be Bengali in educational institutions, and as far as the administration of the province is concerned, the language (to be) used in administering the province should also be Bengali. I am glad to find out that the Honourable Leader of the House (Liaquat Ali Khan) has made it clear that there is no question of ousting Bengali from the province (of East Bengal), and I am sure that the overwhelming majority of the people (of East Bengal) are in favour of having Urdu as the state language for the Pakistan State as a whole. ⁸

Some Bengalis I would meet in Bangladesh claimed that Nazimuddin, who belonged to the Nawab family of Dhaka, was not a ‘true’ Bengali. The Nawab family of Dhaka, who were wealthy Muslim zamindars favoured by the British for their loyalty during the rebellion of 1857, already conversed in Urdu and hence could not understand the importance of the Bengali language for the Bengali people. It is alleged that since they were not Bengali-speaking, they were not true Bengalis; the Bengali ethnicity in this sense was reduced to the Bengali language. It is also alleged that since the members of the Nawab family were wealthy, they aligned with those in authority to maintain power, and that after Pakistan’s creation they sided with the West Pakistani elite, in the process compromising Bengali interests. It is argued that ‘since the formation of Pakistan, a kind of consociational power structure operated among the elite of Pakistan with the Urdu-speaking nawab of Dhaka, Khawaja Nazimuddin.’ ⁹ Nazimuddin succeeded Jinnah as the governor general and, after Liaquat Ali Khan’s

assassination in 1951, became the prime minister of Pakistan. It was during his tenure as prime minister that the language movement would intensify, turning increasingly violent.¹⁰ A number of Bengalis I met with felt that he did little to represent the Bengali people and their rights.

As early as 15 September 1947, barely a month after Partition, a pamphlet began to circulate in Dhaka, proposing that Bengali be used as the language for education, in the courts and in East Pakistan's administration.¹¹ Urdu and Bengali, it was suggested, could jointly be used at the centre (which was then in Karachi).¹² By September 1947, a group of Dhaka University students 'organized themselves in a group known as the Tamaddun Majlis, or Cultural Association, which launched a campaign calling for Bengali to be the language for education and in the courts, but also the language of the central government.'¹³ This campaign was soon followed by the formation of an Action Committee to further its demand.¹⁴ It was this same demand that was raised in the Constituent Assembly by Aroma's grandfather, a demand that was not going to be put to rest in the years to come. In fact, upon Liaquat Ali Khan's refusal to entertain Datta's request, the students from the Action Committee had resorted to protests, strikes and marches.¹⁵ In the years to come, the demand to declare Bengali as a state language only intensified, the resistance to it becoming fiercer.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah travelled to Dhaka in March 1948, soon after Datta's speech. At a public gathering he said:

Let me tell you in the clearest language that there is no truth that your normal life is going to be touched or disturbed as far as your Bengali language is concerned . . . but let me make it clear to you that the State language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead you is really the enemy of Pakistan. Without one State language, no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function.¹⁶

A couple of days later, while delivering a speech at the convocation of Dhaka University, Jinnah further asserted:

There can, however, be only one lingua franca, that is, the language for inter-communication between the various provinces of the State, and that language should be Urdu and cannot be any other. The State language, therefore, must obviously be Urdu, a language that has been nurtured by a hundred million Muslims of this subcontinent, a language understood throughout

the length and breadth of Pakistan, and above all, a language which, more than any other provincial language, embodies the best that is in Islamic culture and Muslim tradition, and is nearest to the language used in other Islamic countries. ¹⁷

From Jinnah's speech, it becomes obvious that Urdu was perceived as being interwoven with Islamic culture and, therefore, considered as the rightful language of the Muslim-majority nation. Urdu derives 'more of its vocabulary from Arabic and Persian than does Bengali, and . . . it is written in a script derived from Arabic and Persian.' ¹⁸ Jinnah, who himself was far from fluent in Urdu, perhaps also believed that because Urdu was not the language of any province of Pakistan, it would provide an overarching identity to Pakistanis, uniting them and establishing a strong nation. It was then 'precisely because it was *not* the language of any province of Pakistan' ¹⁹ that Urdu should have been acceptable as a state Language. Thus, anyone who opposed this idea was, in a sense, threatening national unity. This was the message given to Jinnah by his own bureaucracy and press; those agitating for Bengali were people one must be suspicious of and not pay heed to. Academic and author Tariq Rahman notes that there is 'much evidence on the files that he (Jinnah) was told that those who demanded that Bengali should be the national language were communists and Indian agents. These advisors gave him the kind of advice which conspiracy theorists always do: blame everything on the enemies.' ²⁰ Tariq argues that 'the rulers of East and West Pakistan (who advised Jinnah) . . . were afraid of Bangla because they did not want power to go into the hands of the vernacular educated middle class of East Bengal.' ²¹

In his speech in Dhaka, Jinnah would reiterate the sentiments of his advisers. He said:

Our enemies, among whom I regret to say there are still some Muslims, have set out actively encouraging provincialism in the hope of weakening Pakistan, and thereby facilitating the re-absorption of this province into the Indian Dominion . . . A flood of false propaganda is being daily put forth with the object of undermining the solidarity of the Mussalmans of this state and inciting the people to commit acts of lawlessness. The recent language controversy . . . is only one of the many subtle ways whereby the poison of provincialism is being sedulously injected into this province. ²²

For the Bengalis, however, who had fought for the creation of Pakistan to rid themselves of the domination of Hindu zamindars and businessmen, the denial to make Bengali a state language served as a testimony of their continued exploitation. In some ways, it seemed as if Hindu elite domination had simply been replaced with West Pakistani domination.²³ The language issue was symbolic of the hegemonic control exercised over the East and it served as a poignant reminder that Pakistan had failed to protect the economic, political and cultural rights they had fought for at the time of Partition.

It is important to denote here that the language movement was not just about language rights. Rather, it came to symbolize the larger socio-economic disparity. And that is precisely why it gained such momentum, turning into a mass movement over time. Bengalis had been marginalized in armed forces and civil services even before Pakistan was created. In fact, in 1947, the Indian Civil Service (ICS) consisted of just one Bengali officer,²⁴ while Bengalis were poorly represented in the army as well, primarily because the British considered them as a non-martial race.²⁵ After Pakistan's creation, the Bengalis had expected the situation to change, anticipating emancipation from hegemonic control and greater empowerment. However, the civilian and military leaders from West Pakistan continued to dominate,²⁶ marginalizing the Bengalis. It was therefore not only language that the Bengalis were fighting for in these early years. The battle was also for their economic and political rights, of which language had become an important symbol.

Pakistani academic Tariq Rahman, who is regarded as an authority on the linguistic history of the Muslims of South Asia, explained to me in an interview that:

Language is a way of communication, but it is also a symbol of identity. It communicates more than words. It communicates a people. And if you look down upon a language, there are many things that you don't want to do using it. You don't want to speak in it. If you speak in it, you make no effort to correct your pronunciation. You don't want to hear it. If you hear it, you make no effort to understand it. These are the various ways in which you are given cues that your language is not worthy. The linguistic ideology is such that if you value a language, you will try your best to speak it, read its literature, to pronounce it as well as the native speakers,

and make all efforts to try and understand it. Even when Bengali was declared a national language, it continued to only be used there (in East Pakistan) and not here (in West Pakistan), so it wasn't national in that sense. And when West Pakistanis went to East Pakistan, they never learnt Bangla. And if they did, they spoke it like Englishmen, arrogant Englishmen . . . Obviously the Bengalis didn't like this. If you speak their language only to give them commands, it means you are treating them like servants.

According to a survey conducted in 1963–64, using a sample of 1001 factory workers and peasants in East Pakistan, 48 per cent of the respondents identified as Pakistani while only 11 per cent considered themselves Bengalis (the rest identified with their village or district). Another survey conducted in a technical college in Dhaka also revealed that 74 per cent of the respondents regarded themselves as Pakistani. Using these findings, some have argued that 'even as late as the mid-sixties, there was no awareness by the ordinary man in East Pakistan of a basic conflict between Bengali and Pakistani identity.'²⁷ It could be said that the language movement was initially limited to certain classes and urban centres. Over time, however, this situation would begin to change, with the Bengali language and the attempts to control or subvert it becoming central to how Bengalis viewed themselves as oppressed, pushing them to craft a unique Bengali identity, united in the struggle against economic, social and cultural exploitation, and exhibited in terms of Bengali nationalism. The language movement in this sense then came to epitomize the fight against all kinds of exploitation, with efforts being made to reclaim Bengali as a fight against all sorts of West Pakistani hegemony, something that continued even after Bengali was considered a state language.

The situation in the early years of Pakistan was exacerbated by the attempts to 'Islamize' the language, and through it the Bengali culture. Since Bengali is derived from Sanskrit and written in a similar script, it was considered a 'Hindu' language,²⁸ equated with the 'Hindu culture'. A committee was set up in 1949 in East Pakistan (then known as East Bengal)²⁹ by the provisional government to 'reform the structure of Bengali'³⁰ and rid it of 'Hindu' influences. Further, 'the central Pakistan education advisory board "strongly recommended the Arabic script as the only script for all Pakistani languages"'. As a result, from 1950, twenty centres were

set up in East Bengal to give primary education to adults in the Perso-Arabic script. Moreover, the Pakistani government allotted money to prepare reference books on the conversion of the Bengali script to Arabic.’

³¹

These attempts to infuse the Arabic script into East Pakistan were part of the larger efforts to bring the region in line with the ‘Islamic’ principles that were supposedly espoused by West Pakistan. Given that the Bengali language was seen as too close to Sanskrit and hence in a way too ‘Hindu’, those demanding it as a state language were deemed in the popular imagination as defying the two-nation theory, ‘Hinduizing’ Pakistan’s culture despite the fact that Pakistan’s creation (perceivably) established that Hindus and Muslims were two nations that could not coexist. These attempts were therefore seen in West Pakistan as an existential threat to the state. Frantic efforts were made to ‘purge Bengali culture of its perceived “Hindu” elements’ ³² that seemed to threaten Pakistan’s existence. In his paper titled ‘Factors in Bengali Regionalism in Pakistan’, Richard D. Lambert argues:

The image held by many Pakistanis [is one] in which their country is a garrison state almost completely surrounded by a country they consider not only hostile but constantly plotting against their nation’s very existence. The twelve million or so Hindus still in Pakistan are considered by many to have their “bodies in Pakistan but their souls in India” and accordingly to have among them leaders who are busily engaged in undermining Pakistan. Almost all these Hindus are in East Bengal. ³³

Ostracized as ‘Hindu’, these attempts to ‘Islamize’ and ‘cleanse’ Bengalis of their perceived impurities in the land of the *pak* or ‘pure’, did little to push Bengalis away from their culture. Rather, it resulted in heightened nationalistic fervour, for Bengalis saw that it was not only their language under attack but also their culture. By expunging their language of Hindu influences, an attempt was being made to ‘purify’ Bengali culture, bringing it closer to Islam. The denial of language then symbolized economic, political and cultural oppression, one they were adamant to struggle against. The language issue culminated in protests and the death of students when the police fired at a pro-Bengali demonstration in Dhaka on 21 February

1952. The day would later come to be known as the Language Martyrs' Day. In 1999, it was declared as the International Mother Language Day by UNESCO.³⁴ On my trip to Dhaka, I visited the Shahid Minar, a national monument constructed in the memory of those who were killed in the language movement. The movement eventually led to the Pakistani government acknowledging Bengali as a state language, alongside Urdu, in 1956. However, attempts to subvert Bengali identity would continue, for instance, by banning the iconic Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore's songs.

Rabindranath Tagore, who hailed from Bengal and had received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, would become a contentious figure in post-Partition Pakistan. Tagore had questioned Western concepts of the 'nation state', and according to many scholars had even rejected 'nationalism', asserting that 'nationalism is a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over human world of the present age, eating into its moral vitality.'³⁵ He saw nationalism as 'a source of war and carnage, death, destruction and divisiveness . . .'³⁶ However, since the Bengali language and culture were repressed in East Pakistan, Tagore became an important symbol for Bengali society and eventually Bengali nationalism, his songs inspiring lakhs of Bengalis in their quest for freedom. When the Pakistani state responded by banning Tagore in its attempt to crush the nationalist movement, he became an even bigger icon of nationalist resistance. The fight to keep his words and songs alive became symbolic of the struggle to keep Bengali culture alive. Eventually, Tagore's 'Amar Sonar Bangla' became Bangladesh's national anthem.

Back in the room, Aroma had become emotional speaking about her grandfather. Her voice began to crack and her face was flushed as she was pulled back into the past. I could only assume that speaking to a Pakistani, that too a Punjabi, about her grandfather's struggle against West Pakistan held sentimental value for her. There was urgency in her voice, a desire to explain her grandfather's efforts, his actions. At the same time, it was hard for her to speak. She was constantly reminded of the obstacles Datta had faced in Pakistan. One of the first people to take up the language issue after the creation of Pakistan, he had come to be marked as an agitator in the

eyes of the West Pakistani establishment. As a Hindu, a community which was targeted again and again during 1947–71 in East Pakistan (and thereafter in Bangladesh), he knew he was in twice the danger. However, Pakistan remained home for him. This was despite the fact that he had a premonition of the rather dark state of affairs looming ahead.

In a letter to his son, dated 1 January 1971 (which Aroma showed me), Datta's tone was sombre and melancholic. He wrote:

I condemn all sorts of violence. The present is dark. Is it the darkest period? But still darkness awaits us. Is there any possibility of a bright future? I am a man full of emotion. This is also a cause of my misery, but I feel that a man without emotion is not a man. In the midst of darkness let the 'sermon on the mount' be our guide and be our ideal. Let there be peace in the world. This is my prayer today on New Year's Day. My love to you all. I remain affectionately yours,

Your father,

Dhirendranath Datta

In the months that followed, violence would stain the streets and corners of East Pakistan, and Datta would fall victim to the growing hostility and suspicion between East and West Pakistan. For the Pakistani state, Datta's faith and political trajectory had rendered him 'not Pakistani enough'. When the military launched a crackdown in East Pakistan in March 1971 to curb secessionist sentiments, he was one of the first people to be targeted.

'On 25 March [1971], my grandfather was eighty-five years old. Our house in Comilla was surrounded from the night of 25 March (the night the army operation was launched to hunt down individuals who favoured independence, particularly Hindus or those under Hindu influence who were automatically considered as anti-state elements). On the night of 29 March, the army got into our home, picked up my grandfather and uncle . . . his youngest son . . . and took them to the cantonment. They tortured and murdered them . . .' Aroma shut her eyes and her voice began to quiver. Pursing her lips to prevent herself from breaking down, she paused for a while, the silence interspersed with long sighs. When she was composed, she looked at the colonel who was with us and said quietly, 'He knows more about that torture.'

I turned towards the colonel who was looking visibly distraught. He cleared his throat and slowly started to speak. ‘I stayed in that room . . . the room they tortured him in for two days. It was bloodstained. The subedar said, “Don’t stay here. I’ll put out a tent for you.” It was when I asked him the reason that he told me that a politician and his son were killed here. Later, I found out that he was referring to Datta.’ He explained that a Hindu barber in the vicinity had later given the testimony. ‘All Hindus were being targeted, but he was spared because he cut hair well. He later gave an account of what he witnessed and how Datta was tortured.’

I glanced at Aroma but her eyes were still clenched in pain. She seemed to have gone back to March 1971. Meanwhile, the colonel continued speaking, ‘After Liaquat Ali Khan gave that statement (in the Constituent Assembly in February 1948), the members of the Assembly told him, “Datta, you’ll have to pay for what you said.” Apparently those are the same words that were repeated before he was killed. First, his son was shot in front of him, and then they shot him in the legs before killing him. They never handed over the bodies. He became part of the missing population of 1971. It was all planned.’ Reportedly, the Pakistan Army arrested Datta and his son Dilip, after which they were not seen or heard of again.³⁷ Their remains were never found.

After a few moments, Aroma came back into the room. ‘I was born in 1950. I was in the house when this happened. My grandfather was told to migrate to India to save his life because tensions were worsening, but he refused and said, “I won’t die as a coward.” I was living with him at this time; I was twenty-one years old. The Pakistan Army didn’t touch me, which was amazing . . . it was probably because he was a political target (meaning that it wasn’t an indiscriminate attack) and so they kept me busy. There were about eight of them in the house. They told me to open all the doors. I remember I was losing my senses. They asked me what I was studying. I told them that I would go for my matriculation exam. I was wearing a nightie and had my hair tied in two braids. Then one of them flashed the torch in my face and I couldn’t see anything for a moment. He asked that if I was going to take my matric exam, who was studying in the

university? I said no one. They insisted that there was someone (presumably the soldiers were referring to Hindu girls in Dhaka University). I could hear shots and the breaking of glass behind them. Then another soldier, who was over six-feet tall, said, “You’re Sheikh Mujib (perhaps implying that you are a supporter of Sheikh Mujib).” He was so tall . . . another had a huge face . . . another had bulging eyes. He said to me, the tall one, “*Mere kaan mein ek baar ahista se ‘Joy Bangla’ bolo.*” (In Urdu, she tells me, he asked her to whisper ‘Joy Bangla’ [Hail Bengal!] in his ear). I pushed him with my elbow and rushed to my mother. She was surrounded by four men.’ Aroma was pacing against herself. Once she had started speaking again, it seemed as if she wanted to pour out all the memories, as if by talking about them she could expunge them, no longer having to carry the painful scars.

It was significant for me that the way she spoke of the soldiers denoted them as monsters. As mentioned earlier, I had seen posters of General Yahya, depicted with his eyes bulging, his face contorted, devoid of any humanity, utterly demonic and utterly monstrous. These images were entrenched in the collective imagination of Bangladeshis, enforced and reinforced through the visual representations of the Pakistan Army.

‘I remember holding my mother and both of us shivering . . . our drawing room was full of glass. Mr Jinnah and Mr Gandhi’s life-sized portraits were in our house. They broke Gandhi’s portrait and took away Jinnah’s. I ran after them as they took my grandfather and uncle away . . . my mother had to pull me back by my hair, saying “They’re gone, they’re gone.” When I went inside, I remember I slipped on a pool of blood. My brother was standing limp. He has been disturbed after what he saw.’

Aroma told me the army continued to watch their house in the days that followed. ‘They knew there were women in the house . . . we only survived because we escaped from the house and kept staying at different places while they kept looking for us. On 2 April, we crossed the river and went to the border. I remember we kept telling them to open the border, we kept saying that they are killing people like birds, that they should ask Mrs Gandhi to open the border. It was after ten days that we came to Calcutta.

My mother's sisters were there . . .' Here, she paused and looked at the wall in front of us, her eyes teary, her face drained. When she spoke next, her voice seemed distant, as if she was in a faraway place. One of the last things she said to me was, 'We did flee physically, but we were unable to do so mentally. Even today, we haven't been able to flee. They could have just shot my grandfather but they tortured him . . .'

Before I left that evening, I asked Aroma why her grandfather had kept a portrait of Jinnah in the house. I assumed that he would have been upset with Jinnah once he refused to accept Bengali as a state language. However, Aroma told me that her grandfather was a fan of Jinnah's. 'He chose Pakistan because of Jinnah. He was a patriot . . . a nationalist.' But in 1971, the nationalism Datta exhibited fell short of saving him. As a Hindu, as an advocate of the Bengali language, he was handpicked as being anti-Pakistan, viewed as a threat to the very Pakistan he had chosen as his homeland in 1947.

Disillusionment

From a macro lens, a series of events and factors led to the growing disillusionment of the East Pakistanis. The language issue was a catalyst indeed and, in hindsight, is popularly understood to be a major source of rupture. However, for others, the discord and disconnect manifested in different ways, and at different times. It seemed like there were distinct turning points for people, when they gave up on the idea of Pakistan and when the struggle for Bangladesh shifted from an abstract political concept to a personal fight. For some this happened early on, for others Pakistan remained their source of identity until 1971.

The turning points were varied, subjective and unique to each interviewee, and therefore cannot be captured in one book, let alone a chapter. However, amidst these variations a few common themes also emerged. These episodes and instances seemed to have left a lasting mark on many Bangladeshis I spoke to. They pointed towards the vulnerability East Pakistanis felt in 1965 when they realized that they were left defenceless in advent of an Indian attack, the social exclusion and marginalization of Bengalis for being ‘Hindu’ or being influenced by Indian culture and hence not ‘Pakistani enough’, the Agartala Conspiracy Case—whereby Sheikh Mujib and thirty-four others were implicated ‘in an alleged conspiracy to make East Pakistan independent by armed uprising’, as a result of which Sheikh Mujib was arrested ¹—and the cyclone of November 1970 in which, according to some estimates, at least 2,30,000 people died, with little response or relief from the West Pakistani government. ² With these events as the precursor, the election results and the refusal to hand over power to Sheikh Mujib served as the final death knell to the idea of

Pakistan for most East Pakistanis. Yet others would cling on to Pakistan till much later, the killings during the nine-month war finally forcing them to give up on the idea they had held on to since the birth of the nation in 1947. Through the following interviews, this chapter seeks to explore the more personal impact these events had on the lives of East Pakistanis, and the nuanced ways in which they transformed from Pakistanis to Bangladeshis before the latter even took birth.

* * *

Muntassir Mamoon

I first met Professor Muntassir Mamoon, a well-known Bangladeshi historian, writer and academic on my flight from Dhaka to Jessore in July 2017. Shahriar Kabir, Mamoon, Haroon and I were meant to travel to Jessore and then onwards to Khulna where I was scheduled to conduct interviews and visit local universities and museums for my research. Mamoon was hosting our visit in Khulna, where he ran his own genocide and torture archive and museum. Though we did exchange pleasantries, Mamoon remained reserved with Haroon and me in the initial hours. He said little, hardly made eye contact and continued to speak to Kabir in Bengali, a language both Haroon and I were unfamiliar with. Even when he opened up to me over the next few days, sharing his life story, I would notice that he remained distant. In his presence, I was acutely aware of my Pakistani identity, and his Bangladeshi identity (or Bengali identity. I will return to the tension between Bangladeshi and Bengali identity later in the book).

Mamoon had dedicated his life to archiving, writing and teaching about 1971, while also advocating for war crimes trials in Bangladesh. He was committed to ensuring that the memory of 1971 was not forgotten. His museum in Khulna is part of his efforts to institutionalize the memory of the war and educate the locals about their history. While most museums and archives on 1971 are situated in Dhaka, Mamoon told me that he

deliberately opened his museum in Khulna, so that ‘young people (outside of Dhaka) don’t forget 1971, they remember and they resist. So, they don’t become like Pakistan.’ In his museum, I found drawings by young students, depicting the war. One that particularly struck me was by a third-grader. It showed soldiers pointing their guns at two blindfolded civilians while several bodies, also blindfolded, were sprawled on the floor. In the background, one could see orange flames, showing burning of homes. On the other side was a river. Across the river, the child had sketched civilians aiming their guns at the forces, presumably depicting the Bengali armed resistance. The drawing captured the essence of the war as taught in Bangladesh; a people’s struggle against a brutal military. Another drawing showed young boys and girls, in colourful clothes, holding guns while the soldiers surrendered theirs. In the background, Bangladeshi flags were raised. The people stood victorious. Mamoon’s project seemed successful. The memory was very much alive.

During our conversations, he expressed anger at the efforts by different governments (military-led, as well as the BNP–Jamaat alliance) to erase the past. He would tell me how roads were named after collaborators after Sheikh Mujib was assassinated and textbooks were revised (these are issues I will return to later in the book). He would argue that before the Awami League came to power, Bangladesh was on its way to becoming a ‘mini Pakistan’ with pro-Pakistani elements such as the Jamaat-e-Islami influencing politics and turning collaborators into heroes.

Given this, hosting Pakistanis must not have been an easy task for Mamoon. At one point he said to me, ‘We can never accept Pakistan. I suffered [the war] personally. You can never understand what happened . . . we are not against Pakistan, but we can’t accept the concept of Pakistan, of massacring people to stay in power . . . Pakistan is incapable of fixing itself.’ Yet, I feel it was also important for him to have us stay with him, to give us guided tours of the museum and to point us towards interviewees. He wanted to ensure that we went back to Pakistan knowing what he deemed was the ‘right’ version of history, the Bangladeshi version of history. The contested nature of that history, the appropriation of it by the

Bangladeshi state and the ways in which it excluded the diverse experiences of Bengalis and non-Bengalis found little room in our discussion. For him, there was only one truth worth remembering: the violence against and the oppression of the East Pakistanis by the West Pakistanis and their collaborators.

* * *

I asked Mamoon to tell me of his journey through the Pakistan years to the Bangladesh years. How had he moved from being a Pakistani to being unable to accept Pakistan? He told me that once he too was a patriotic Pakistani. In fact, in grade 8, he had written an essay about how he wanted to be a barrister like Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

‘In the 1960s, I went to West Pakistan to receive an award from President Ayub Khan, for my writing . . . even then we could feel the discrimination, but it was subtle . . . it was an attitudinal difference in how they treated East Pakistanis. It didn’t translate into an anti-Pakistan sentiment . . . we felt then, for example, that the capital [of Pakistan] could have been Dhaka instead of Islamabad. We also saw the deprivation of East Pakistanis, but we didn’t have any contempt for Pakistan. We thought of ourselves as Pakistanis too. We supported the Pakistani cricket team, hockey team . . . it was gradually that the feeling [of being Bangladeshi] evolved.

‘. . . The 1965 war played a part. I was in grade 9 or 10 then, and though nothing happened to us and the war ended quickly, we began to realize that while we didn’t have a war [in East Pakistan], there was nobody to fight for us, to protect us if it did happen. I mean, we all wanted Pakistan to win the war, East Pakistani writers even wrote songs for Pakistan’s victory. We supported the Pakistani stand, but we were also stunned that there was no army, nobody to look after us. But even then, even then I would say that it wasn’t until the Agartala Conspiracy that everything exploded . . .’

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was the foreign minister when the 1965 Indo-Pak war happened and would later play a pivotal role in the turn of events in East Pakistan in 1971, closely guided President Ayub regarding the war

policy. According to Bhutto's own assessments, it was assumed that in response to Operation Gibraltar—launched by Pakistan to stir an uprising in Kashmir against India—India may 'move against East Pakistan in the hope, perhaps, of stirring up Bengali support there.'³ However, this, in Bhutto's mind did not warrant sending in Pakistani forces to guard the territory. He assumed that in the advent of an attack, Pakistan could counter India by 'striking "north to join up Nepal and completely isolate Indian troops in Assam".'⁴ As Stanley Wolpert writes in his book, *Zulfi Bhutto of Pakistan*, Bhutto hoped 'that China would also move in that eventuality, forcing Indian troops in Assam "to fight on two fronts".'⁵ It was a win-win situation in Bhutto's mind.

However, his strategy and assessments both failed. Not only did India attack the Punjab Frontier, which Bhutto had assumed would not happen given how well-guarded it was, the fact that the eastern neighbour did not attack East Pakistan only fostered feelings of resentment against West Pakistan and gratitude towards India amongst the East Pakistanis. As Mamoon said, 'Just as we noticed that there was no one to protect us, we also noticed that India didn't attack us.' Others too would tell me that India was able to 'create sympathy' in East Pakistan by leaving the territory alone at a time when it was vulnerable and exposed. The war had delivered a clear message that India could be a friend of East Pakistan, it could protect and safeguard the East Pakistanis when their own leaders, sitting in West Pakistan, had failed to do so.

For Bengali Hindu families, the 1965 war and the events leading up to it also made it clear how the Pakistani state saw them: disloyal citizens. I am told by Hindu families in Bangladesh that throughout the war the Hindus were looked upon suspiciously, while some were even outrightly labelled as Indian agents, accused of sharing information with the 'enemy'. Some, like Meghna Guhathakurta's uncle (as detailed in Part I, Chapter 3), were even arrested on allegations of aiding Indians. Their only mistake was belonging to a faith perceived as being aligned with the 'enemy'.

In the post-Partition world, the belief that Pakistan belongs to the Muslims and India to the Hindus has gradually solidified. The lines

between nationalism and religious identities have come to be blurred, with minorities becoming the greatest casualty of this communalism on both sides of the border. To date, each time communal riots or violent episodes erupt in one country, religious minorities are made the scapegoat and left to face the backlash in the other.

The same was witnessed in 1963, when the *Moh-e-Moqadis*, believed to be the hair of Prophet Muhammad, disappeared from the Hazratbal Shrine in Srinagar.⁶ As protests broke out in Kashmir, Hindus and Muslims clashed in other parts of India and Pakistan. In East Pakistan, Bengali Hindus as well as other religious minorities such as the Christians were persecuted, with thousands having to seek refuge in India.⁷ As news of attacks on Hindus in East Bengal reached West Bengal, Hindu mobs sought revenge against Muslims across the border.⁸ Reportedly, ‘tens of thousands of Moslems . . . crossed the border from West Bengal into Pakistan to escape religious riots in India.’⁹ With these events in the background, religious minorities continued to bear the brunt of hostilities during the war itself. And in the aftermath, they had to face the Enemy Property Act, which enabled Pakistan to take over ‘enemy’ property, i.e., properties of minorities who had fled to India.¹⁰ Thereafter, each time riots broke out, the Hindus would be left oscillating between fleeing to save their lives and staying to protect their properties. In India, the Enemy Property Act of 1968 vested similar powers with the state.¹¹

These patterns of targeting religious minorities as a reaction to events across the border have continued to occur in more recent times. The destruction of Hindu temples in Pakistan as a reaction to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 was a product of this mentality. As are the calls for *ghar wapsi* [translated as ‘homecoming’] in which Indian Muslims are told to convert ‘back’ to Hinduism.¹² Others call for Muslims to ‘go back to Pakistan’.¹³ Home, or nation in this case, is meant to denote a particular religious identity. Those who find themselves on the wrong side of geography are punished for not choosing the ‘right’ home. This is the same way in which Hindus were made to feel vulnerable and ‘otherized’ in

East Pakistan before, during and after 1965. The war provided an early window into the conditions that would unfold for minorities in the region.

‘After the 1965 war, the sense of resentment kept growing,’ shared Mamoon. He explained that while Dhaka was at the centre of the political movement, and the agitation there had begun as early as 1948, many other places in East Pakistan did not have the same political awakening until much later. ‘Chittagong, where I lived, was far away and we didn’t know too much about what was happening. I would go to school and come back. I didn’t register that there was a big movement going on. It was when we joined university, and student politics, that we became politically conscious.’ He says that, in some of the rural areas, it wasn’t until Sheikh Mujib took his six-point demands to the villages that people really started to think about the movement. ‘They started thinking that the six points were our charter and we should support it . . . but even then, I should say that people did not want to break Pakistan. Anger and desperation were welling up . . . people felt that they worked in Pakistan, for Pakistan but their voice was not heard. But still, they said they would see whether the Punjabis heeded to the six-point formula or not. It was when Mujib was arrested in the Agartala Conspiracy Case that everything changed . . . we felt it was a conspiracy to tarnish Mujib, to suppress our demands. From that point, there was no turning back . . . students, particularly the younger ones, wanted a separate land now. Mujib had been cautious in his demands, but by 1969 the students became very vocal, they wanted separation. I think that even if Mujib wanted to stay with Pakistan, the students wouldn’t have supported him . . .’

Mujibur Rahman, who was once a Muslim League member and had supported the creation of Pakistan, had joined the Awami Muslim League in 1949 as its joint secretary. The Awami Muslim League was born after the language movement of 1948, in opposition to the Muslim League that was seen as suppressing Bengali demands. The party would serve as the predecessor to the Awami League, which would go on to form Bangladesh. Between 1948 and the 1970s, Sheikh Mujib played an active role in the Awami Muslim League, and then the Awami League, furthering Bengali

demands. He would be arrested, released and arrested again multiple times during these years. In February 1966, a month before being elected the president of the Awami League, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman put forth the historic six-point demand, which became the ‘charter of freedom of the Bengali nation’.¹⁴ Armed with these demands, he travelled around the country, garnering support for his party and its politics. The six points were as follows:

1. The constitution should provide for a Federation of Pakistan in its true sense on the basis of the Lahore Resolution, and a parliamentary form of government with supremacy of legislature that was directly elected on the basis of adult franchise.
2. The federal government shall deal with only two subjects, viz. defence and foreign affairs. All other residuary subjects shall vest in the federating states.
3.
 - a. Two separate but freely convertible currencies for two wings may be introduced, or,
 - b. One currency for the whole country may be maintained. In this case, effective constitutional provisions are to be made to stop the flight of capital from East to West Pakistan. Separate banking reserve is to be made and separate fiscal and monetary policy to be adopted for East Pakistan.
4. The federating states shall retain all power to tax and levy duties. The central government shall have no power of taxation and shall draw working revenues from the federation states.
5.
 - a. There shall be two separate accounts for foreign exchange earnings of the two wings.
 - b. Earnings of the East Pakistan government shall be under the control of East Pakistan government and that of West Pakistan under the West Pakistan government.
 - c. Foreign exchange requirements of the federal government shall be met by the two wings either equally or in a ratio to be fixed.

- d. Indigenous products shall move freely of duty between the two wings.
 - e. The constitution shall empower the unit governments to establish trade and commercial relations with, set-up trade missions in and enter into agreements with foreign countries.
6. Setting up of a militia or paramilitary forces for East Pakistan. ¹⁵

The six-point demands, which would become a hallmark of Sheikh Mujib's politics in the pre-Bangladesh years, were seen as a just way to gain political autonomy by several East Pakistanis. However, the demands were met with Sheikh Mujib's arrest in the Agartala Conspiracy Case. It was alleged that the Bengalis arrested had conspired with India to gain liberation for East Pakistan. ¹⁶ Although today some people in Bangladesh too speculate that perhaps negotiations with India were underway, and indeed in the time to come India would become directly involved in Bangladesh's creation, the establishment had misread and gravely underestimated the sentiments in East Pakistan. The only truth that mattered at the time was the suppression the East Pakistanis felt. The arrest of Sheikh Mujib only aggravated the situation, with a mass movement arising not just against the case but also against the Ayub Khan regime in Pakistan. ¹⁷ Protests broke out, as did widespread student agitation. The six-point agenda was at the tip of the tongue, even for those who showed little support for it earlier. By the time Sheikh Mujib would be released from jail, the Sarbadaliya Chhatra Sangram Parishad (SCSP, translated as All Parties' Student Resistance Council) 'announced an 11-point charter for self-government in East Pakistan, and evoked freedom with slogans like "awake, awake Bengalis, awake", "brave Bengalis, take up arms and make Bangladesh independent", "your desh, my desh, Bangladesh, Bangladesh"'. ¹⁸ According to historian David Ludden, 'the SCSP pursued nationalist and socialist ideals that Sheikh Mujib did not share.' ¹⁹ Similarly, when student leaders of the Shawadhin Bangla Kendriya Chhatra Sangram Parishad (SBKCSP) declared independence on 3 March 1971, Sheikh Mujib was still rallying with his 'six-point federalism'. ²⁰ The students, and others who

joined them over time, had started to advocate for independence even before Sheikh Mujib himself was ready to do so.

In fact, when he was released from jail after the Agartala Conspiracy Case, it was the SCSP who honoured him with the nationalist title of ‘Bangabandhu’. ²¹ Ludden argues that:

From that day onwards, Sheikh Mujib’s charisma and authority ascended with the public activity of the students whose vision of independence was not the same as his, but gave his strength, as his gave theirs hope and legitimacy. Bangabandhu could thus pursue his constitutional vision with faith in popular support. On March 10, 1969, he presented the Awami League’s Six-Point federation plan at a Rawalpindi round table conference, where West Pakistan politicians rejected it as a plan to dismember Pakistan. Thus, by 1969, the two visions of independence (that of Mujib and those of the students) had clearly become indistinguishable in West Pakistan . . . by 1969, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib symbolized both, though he himself pursued the constitutional vision. ²²

After his release, Sheikh Mujib too would state (in December 1969) that from here on, ‘the eastern province of Pakistan will be called “Bangladesh” instead of “East Pakistan”.’ ²³

‘When he was released from jail, he was given the title of Bangabandhu (the literal translation being ‘Friend of Bangladesh’. Today, Mujib is commonly referred to as the Bangabandhu in Bangladesh. The title serves to honour him). No other leader was called Bangabandhu . . . he became a national leader . . . ,’ says Mamoon. This was the time when Sheikh Mujib became Mamoon’s national leader too. ‘We were very shocked about the Agartala Conspiracy . . . the awakening started, you see. I should say, for the first time, we got into the political side of activities. We became conscious. We were sure that the Agartala Conspiracy was to suppress us. In our minds, we started supporting the people who were accused in the so-called Agartala Conspiracy. For the first time, we became very sympathetic to these people [referring to Sheikh Mujib and others like him struggling for autonomy]. We still were in the Pakistan frame; we didn’t say anything against Pakistan but the feeling [of being Bangladeshi] was there . . .’

By the time the operation and killings started in March 1971, Mamoon was an active supporter of the Awami League and Sheikh Mujib. He was living in Mirpur, a Bihari-dominated area. He told me that he would witness

the Biharis (migrants from Bihar, as well as other parts of north India, who moved to East Pakistan after Partition and were accused of being pro-Pakistan, collaborating with the army to kill Bengalis during 1971) encircling Bengali residential areas, marking their homes with chalk so the Bengalis would be easily identifiable. They circled Mamoon's uncle's home too, with whom Mamoon was staying. However, amidst the frenzy, it was a Bihari that saved them. He took Mamoon and his uncle in, as well as some other families, and locked them in. He stood guard outside, telling the Biharis that there were no Bengalis inside. Despite the help the Bihari neighbour offered, the killings Mamoon saw and the stories he heard hardened him against the community. He told me he had no interest in them, no interaction. 'They will always support Jamaat-e-Islami and Pakistan. They will always be anti-Bangladesh.' He only remembers them as collaborators and murderers. I have found elsewhere in my work too that violent and emotionally charged memories often remain at the fore, while those of rescue tend to recede, not least because it is the former which the state reinforces and has institutionalized. The stories of humanity, of risking one's life to save others, are dismissed from the public imagination, and at times from personal recollections too.

Later, during the war, Mamoon would become actively involved with the Bangladesh movement. He and others would help write stories about what was happening, try to establish contact with foreign journalists and raise donations. He would bear witness to the war from within East Pakistan. When I asked him what he felt on 16 December, he didn't have anything to say. After a long silence, all he managed was a laugh, followed by a question I had no answer to: 'When you become independent after such a bloody war, how do you express yourself?'

* * *

Before we left, Mamoon gave us a tour of the museum, showing us photographs of vultures picking on the bodies of Bengali men and women, images of dead children, their eyes popping out, their legs bitten off by

animals. Alongside, there were glass boxes, holding clothes worn by people before they were killed, their belongings by their side, their diaries and pens. Later, he told me of how heart surgeons' hearts were pulled out, how writers' fingers were chopped off, how eye doctors' eyes were gouged out, and how sacks full of eye balls were found after the war. He showed me an old boiler, in which he said the limbs of Bengalis were burnt and told me that the circuit house we were staying at in Khulna was used to interrogate and kill Bengalis, before throwing their bodies in a nearby river. These were the vivid memories, the photographs, the clothes, the rooms and the spaces, which kept 1971 alive. These were the expressions of the war, the living memory of 1971. There would be no letting go.

* * *

Tariq Ali

I first met Tariq Ali at the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka, where he serves on the board of trustees. The museum, a product of civilian efforts, was opened in 1996. The 1990s were a poignant period in Bangladesh. It was the decade in which democracy returned to the country. It was also the decade in which the Awami League came back to power for the first time after Sheikh Mujib's assassination, with Sheikh Hasina serving her first term as prime minister. And it was in the 1990s that the demands for bringing the war criminals to trial intensified, resulting in the formation of a people's court (or Gono Adalat) in 1992, a court initiated by civilians in absence of other legal channels to bring the accused to justice.²⁴ Led by political activist and writer Jahanara Imam, this court would later serve as a stepping stone for the International Crimes Tribunal set up by the Awami League after coming back to power in 2008.

After Sheikh Mujib's killing and the ousting of the Awami League in 1975, the 'constitutional ban on the use of religion for political purposes' had been revoked, thereby allowing the Jamaat-e-Islami to re-enter politics.

²⁵ The party and its members, as previously mentioned, were accused of

grave war crimes and of collaborating with the Pakistan Army during the war; yet they came to hold key positions of power in post-war Bangladesh. As late as the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) was inducting Jamaat leaders in the national cabinet.²⁶ For those who had witnessed the bloodshed of the war and had lost family members to the violence, it was alarming to see war criminals rise to power. One woman, who was orphaned during the war, said to me, ‘These people killed our fathers, but we were too scared to say anything . . . we had to sit quietly while they reigned over us.’ (However, it should be noted that even before Sheikh Mujib’s assassination, many Bangladeshis were disillusioned with the founding father himself. After coming to power, Sheikh Mujib set up an elite paramilitary force called the Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini, which was accused of gross human rights violations in the name of establishing order and enhancing security. In 1974, Sheikh Mujib declared a state of emergency. Soon after, the parliamentary system was replaced by a presidential system, consolidating power into the hands of the omnipotent Sheikh Mujib. Before his assassination, he had introduced a one-party system, banning all other political parties besides his, effectively establishing a dictatorship under the guise of democracy. Some people even told me that when he was killed, they were overcome by a sense of relief. However, this relief was short-lived as Bangladesh continued to live under the shadow of oppressive military regimes, followed by civilian leaders who too were eager to follow this route. Had Sheikh Mujib not been assassinated, it is possible that his popularity might have continued to dip. However, his untimely death and the Opposition’s efforts to purge him from history revived his status as a national hero, his image further resurrected by years of Awami League rule, which was bent on sanitizing him. Today, Sheikh Mujib is seen as being synonymous with the birth of Bangladesh, and any criticism of him is construed as a criticism of the nation. The inconvenient years of his short rule are conveniently forgotten, the focus is solely on the injustices of the regimes that followed).

By the 1990s, calls for justice erupted, as did civilian initiatives to claim their history. The people’s court and the birth of new museums, among

other projects, worked to ensure that the war and its perpetrators were not forgotten or erased by those in power. As one of the guides at the Liberation War Museum explained to me, ‘The museum was the outcome of civil society efforts in 1996. Over the years, the collaborators, who had become ministers in the government, tried to distort the reports and documents collected on war criminals when Bangabandhu was alive . . . the government had started to say that genocide had not happened . . . people were very upset. We knew we had to do something.’

In her early twenties, born much after the war, the guide told me that she too had donated to the museum. ‘1971 was a people’s war and this museum is part of the people’s struggle to remember it,’ she said as she walked me through the different galleries, each one depicting the events that took place before or during the war, dull sounds of screams and chanting echoing from the speakers behind us. Besides us was an image of an old newspaper, dated 18 December 1971. The title, *Daily Pakistan*, was crossed out and replaced with *Daily Bangladesh*.

I asked the guide what she felt about Pakistan. I was curious to know how her generation perceived the country I call home. She paused for a moment before responding. As if weighing her words carefully, she finally said, ‘I feel very strongly about what happened in 1971. It is very hard for me to think of Pakistan . . . some Bangladeshis support Pakistan in cricket matches, etc., but others ask, “Why have you forgotten our history?”’

As she guided me out of the gallery to meet Tariq, the last image I caught was the writing on the wall. It read: ‘Witness the blood-soaked soul of Bengal . . . so will the moon and stars testify we have not forgotten memories of the martyrs. We shall forget nothing at all.’

* * *

I enter the hall where Tariq is waiting for me with several students who have collected to meet me. Most of them are studying different aspects of the 1971 war. They give presentations on their ongoing research, detailing the different experiences of Bengalis, including those who resided in West

Pakistan during the war. The presentations are followed by brief comments from Haroon and me. The room is then opened up for questions and answers. Hands shoot up in the air. Most of the students haven't met a Pakistani before. They are bursting with queries. The mic is handed over to a man. I am eager to hear his question, but what he asks seems to be more of a test. 'Before we ask you anything else, tell us whether you believe that two lakh women were raped in Bangladesh during the war or not?' his voice booms loudly across the hall. Others in the audience nod in appreciation. It is as if the entire room is watching me. The silence is piercing as I am put in the witness box. Post-1971, the war between Bangladesh and Pakistan has been a war of numbers; 30 lakh or 26,000 killed (a figure estimated by the Hamoodur Rehman Commission)?²⁷ Two lakh or a handful who were raped? He wants to know which side I am on? Which version of history will I attest to?

* * *

Tariq is a thin man with grey hair and spectacles. He is friendly, smiling pleasantly at everyone around him. To Haroon and me, he's warm and hospitable. After our brief interaction at the museum, he invites us to the Dhaka Club for dinner. The club was founded in August 1911 by the British and bears similarities to the Gymkhana Clubs I've visited in Lahore and Delhi, also built under colonial rule. These clubs traditionally served as entertainment and sports avenues for white people, mostly men. Seven decades after Independence, many of them continue to follow strict rules in terms of dress codes, with visitors denied access if they are not dressed 'properly'.

Tariq orders us generous helpings of food and drinks, and we begin our conversation about Lahore, the city where I was born and raised. He tells us he is familiar with Lahore. He used to study there, at the University of Engineering and Technology (UET) on Grand Trunk Road (G.T. Road). This wasn't his choice, however. He would rather have stayed back in East Pakistan if he could, he says. The west wing was a place he resented,

making the time he spent in Lahore difficult and alienating. He doesn't have too many fond memories of my city.

'I went to Lahore in 1962 . . . by then I was already fairly anti-Pakistan. I used to play the harmonium, but my father didn't want me to study art in Dhaka. So, he forced me to go to Lahore and study at UET. I also used to have bad health and he thought eating roti [instead of rice, which is the staple food in Bangladesh] would help me,' he chuckles.

I asked him what triggered the resentment towards West Pakistan and he explained that it was because of how he saw his Hindu friends being treated. 'My Hindu friends were leaving one by one after Partition. My heart would break . . . I had such a bond with them.'

Unlike the Partition, which led to a massive and sudden exodus, in Bengal the migration remained phased. 'In 1964, we witnessed the biggest Hindu exodus,' Tariq tells me, referring to the riots after the relic of the Prophet vanished from the Hazratbal Shrine. However, even before that, Hindus had been pushed out. As the East Pakistan government tried to crush the communist insurgency, which had begun in 1948, the communists were 'not only confronted as political adversaries, but were also branded as "Hindus" and thus enemies of the putative Islamic nation'.²⁸ Viewed as 'kafirs' or 'infidels', they were seen as being akin to 'atheist communists', together labelled as anti-state. The result was anti-Hindu violence forcing many Hindu families to flee. By 1951, approximately 15 lakh Hindus had arrived in India's West Bengal.²⁹ In retaliation, the Muslim minority in West Bengal was attacked to avenge violence against the Hindu minority in East Bengal. By the start of 1951, an estimated 7,00,000 Muslims had fled to East Pakistan.³⁰

'Hindus would be told things like, "tomorrow we don't want to see you in this house", and they would leave . . . by 1955 Hindus knew they had no place in society because the Muslim League had repeatedly given them that impression. Hindus were landowners and so by telling them they didn't really belong here, one could easily drive them out and take over their wealth,' Tariq explains, shaking his head in disappointment. 'A lot of times, the anti-Hindu policies were overt, but at other times they were more subtle.'

For instance, I remember being told to not enter the mosque because people found out that I carried a small book on Tagore with me . . . they said they'd heard Tagore was a Hindu and thus I was told not to come back.'

Tariq tells me that a photograph of Tagore remained on his wall for the four years he spent studying in Lahore, perhaps in resistance to the curbs put on Tagore's poetry and songs by the state. This wasn't an easy time for him. 'I would go up to the roof on G.T. Road, look eastwards and think, "1200 miles to the east is where I belong" . . . I was one of the only East Pakistanis there and most people thought I was a Hindu, a *mirasi* (a lower caste associated with performing arts. The term is often used in a derogatory fashion in Pakistan. While performing arts has been an important part of Punjab's culture, the upper castes are not expected to engage in the profession. In Bengal, however, arts remain an integral part of the culture for people from all backgrounds). In the evening, Jamaatis would come and say to me, "*Yeh duniya char din ki hai, apko masjid mein hona chahiye* (this world is only temporary. You should spend your time praying, not playing music)." I didn't even understand what a *mirasi* was,' he laughs. 'So, I didn't react. I stayed there and finished a four-year degree, but during this time I only had one classmate, Shamim Ahmad Khidwai, who gave me sympathy . . . others would pass comments like "*Yeh Bengali aise hote hain* (the Bengalis are like this)''.

' . . . I still remember one particular incident. When I was in Lahore, I used to take bus number 19 and go straight to Data Darbar to meet my *ustad* in the bazaar there. I remember it was a hot afternoon. It was around 2 p.m. when I jumped on the bus and went to the top floor . . . it was a double-decker bus and there was only one other person sitting there. He looked at my *sitar*, which was wrapped in a cloth and asked what it was in Punjabi. I told him it was a *baja* (musical instrument) and he asked what I was doing with it. I said I was going to my *ustad*. He then wanted to know where I was from. By now I could sense that I was in trouble. When I told him I belonged to East Pakistan, he started saying "That's why Bengalis are so bad. Instead of carrying a *talwar*, you have a *baja* in your hand." I remember feeling ashamed and apologizing to him . . . '

I was not surprised to hear this. During my research, I had heard many Pakistanis refer to Bengalis as ‘short’, ‘weak’ and ‘feeble’. It was one of the reasons why most of them were in utter disbelief when they heard about the surrender. That the Bengalis could fight the Pakistan Army had seemed unimaginable. It was apparent that colonial classifications of Bengalis as a non-martial race continued to exist in the post-Partition years. According to Scott Butcher, who served as a political officer in the US Consulate in Dhaka in 1971, ‘There was a racial prejudice between Punjabis and Bengalis. You’d hear snide remarks that these people are less religious, our little brown brothers.’³¹ In his book, *The Blood Telegram*, author Gary Bass writes that, ‘Some West Pakistanis scorned Bengalis—even the Muslim majority—as weak and debased by too much exposure to Hindus amongst them. As one of Yahya’s own ministers noted, the junta “looked down” upon the “non-martial Bengalis” as “Muslims converted from the lower caste Hindus.”’³²

These typifications were based on the martial race theory used by the British for recruitment in the Indian Army. The theory proposed that ‘only selected communities within the subcontinent, due to their biological and cultural superiority, were capable of bearing arms . . . the fighting races of the subcontinent were Sikhs, Gurkhas, Dogras, Rajputs and Pathans.’³³ The Bengalis did not fall in this category and were therefore poorly represented in the army under the British. After Independence, Pakistan made little effort to rectify this situation,³⁴ with Bengalis continuing to be heavily under-represented in the armed forces.³⁵ The colonial hangover had persisted. Implying that Tariq was inferior because he carried a musical instrument rather than a weapon was rooted in this colonial mindset, in which Bengalis were seen as needing to be controlled by the paternalistic, strong and patriarchal ‘fighter state’ comprised largely of Punjabis.

By the time Tariq would return to East Pakistan in 1966, Sheikh Mujib’s six points were announced and would resonate strongly with him. ‘The six points represented the only way for Bengali emancipation, whether you belonged to the political left or right. I joined the movement as a leftist sympathizer and a cultural activist. I became a part of an artistic society. We

used to go to the universities and talk to them about the relevance of secularism (about our vision for Bengal) . . .’

This struggle for building an emancipated, secular Bengal within the Islamic Republic of Pakistan wouldn’t come without its challenges. For Tariq, this struggle also manifested in his own home where his ideals clashed with those of his father. ‘My father was from Aligarh and a Muslim League supporter,’ he explains. ‘There was an ongoing conflict between us . . . he was part of an establishment that felt that their Islamic identity was more important than anything else. The Hindu exodus of 1964 meant something else to them . . . my father, even my father-in-law, had seen, had felt Hindu subjugation before 1947 . . . they used to say, “You don’t know what Hindu oppression was like.” They had a different mindset. They wanted revenge.’ I am told that the Pakistani establishment cashed in on these sentiments, keeping the fire burning.

‘. . . It was a paternalistic society and we were taught to always respect our parents, so I didn’t say anything to my father directly, but I kept engaging in activities outside, which made him angry . . . he reprimanded me up to 1969. It was only in 1970, when power wasn’t handed over to Mujib after the elections that he started to change his mind. He would ask how the government could do this? That’s when he finally softened and relented to the idea of his son being anti-Pakistan, but before that there was always a conflict between us . . .’

Tariq’s father was a government servant who had received his PhD degree in fisheries from Stanford University in 1949. ‘He had gone to the US on a Government of India scholarship, and it was while he was there that Partition happened and he opted for Pakistan. So, he went as an Indian and returned as a Pakistani.’ He was a staunch Muslim League supporter as so many were in his generation, particularly in Bengal. Tariq tells me that his support for the Muslim League continued till 1970, even though he wasn’t insulated from the discrimination Bengalis experienced in government positions. ‘My father was superseded once or twice by Urdu-speaking *mohajirs* (migrants), so there was an unspoken resentment, but he continued to support the Muslim League till the end.’

He wasn't the only one. I would later collect several other narratives in which the generational differences in ideological thought were as stark. One of my interviewees, who was fifteen at the time of the war, would tell me, 'My father didn't want independence. He had faced discrimination in India and thought Pakistan would help Muslims develop . . . it was 25 March that became the turning point for him. Before that he was adamant against separation. But that night, as he stood on the veranda and saw the killings, he said that there was no going back.' Another man I interviewed told me, 'My father had seen the Calcutta riots, he had almost been killed. So, for him Pakistan meant something else, and he supported it till the very end.'

From these few interviews it seemed as if it was harder for people in the older generation—those who had fought for Pakistan's creation—to give up on the idealism. While many young students would begin protesting against what they saw as Pakistani hegemony from as early on as the 1940s and 1950s, the older generation would resist; Pakistan was meant to be the refuge, the sanctuary from the discrimination and violence so many of them had personally witnessed in undivided India. The way the events of 1971 transpired, however, rattled them. Several of my interviewees told me they couldn't believe what they were seeing before them, the events of and after 25 March finally shattering the Pakistan dream.

* * *

On 25 March 1971, Tariq was fast asleep when his sister shook him awake. 'There is smoke everywhere . . . Sheikh Mujib's house is being attacked!' she yelled as he sat up in bed, trying to make sense of what was happening. It was the night that Operation Searchlight was launched, the city set ablaze for months to come. It was going to be a long night for everyone who lived in Dhaka, the nightmare stretching for nine long months. He tells me that after midnight, five men arrived at their gate seeking shelter, while another man was found stabbed in front of their house. He was still conscious and said, 'I was asked if I was Bengali or Bihari. When I said Bengali, they stabbed me.' Over the course of the next few days, forty of their relatives

would come to seek refuge in Tariq's home, which was considered to be located in a safer area despite the violence that had reached their footsteps. A few days later, they would receive news that Tariq's maternal uncle and cousin had been shot by the Pakistan Army while trying to flee to their village. The war had arrived, it had come to their home. By May 1971, Tariq had resolved to join the Mukti Bahini, crossing the border and only returning when his home belonged not to Pakistan but to the newly formed nation of Bangladesh.

'One day in April, I was returning from work when I was stopped. They (the soldiers) would get you to disembark from your car or bus and start searching you. This was the second time that I was stopped. The first time it happened, I tried to speak a bit of Punjabi. I said, "*Assi toh Pakistani hain* (I am Pakistani)" but he shouted "*Khamosh!* (silence!)", and hit me. The second time it happened, I was so full of hatred that I just stood there with my hands on my hips and defiance on my face. It was a young Pathan boy who had shoved the butt of his gun into my stomach. He hadn't even sprouted a moustache yet. I still remember how the air was blown out of my lungs . . . for a minute or so I couldn't breathe. It was that evening that I went to my general manager and said, "Forgive me, but I cannot work any more. I have to go to the other side." He replied, "I know where your heart lies, so go."

'My friend, who was a teacher, and I left together at 6 a.m. one morning. I think it was the second week of May by then. I hadn't told anyone at home. I just left a letter for my father with a friend and told him to only hand it over after two days had passed, so my father couldn't catch me. I remember we walked the entire day on this dirt road which led to the border. In the horizon we could see smoke coming out of burnt homes . . . the border was still very porous, there was no security. We crossed over and somebody said, "Now you're in India." I walked back [to what was then East Pakistan] and took some soil and kissed it, he paused for a moment and I noticed his voice was beginning to crack. It took him a few seconds to speak again. 'I said . . . I said, "I will return to you, my mother, my soil . . ."' This time his resolve broke. He couldn't continue. He folded his elbows

on the table and began to cry silently, his body shaking with each sob. The sounds of cutlery, music and conversations behind us seemed to fade away. It was almost as if we were transported with him to that humid day of May 1971. ‘I said, “I would only return when I can come to you as an independent soil,”’ he finished after a while, the words forming slowly. ‘It was in every Bengali’s blood . . . that Bengal should be independent.’

Once he crossed over, Tariq joined the Mukti Bahini in Agartala. ‘They trained me for two months. Mostly, the training involved a lot of political rhetoric, about Bengali nationalism and pride, about Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The trainers were people who had left the Pakistan Army . . . there were a couple of hundred people with me. All of them were young and most belonged to Dhaka or Comilla.’

While Tariq desired to become an army officer and fight for Bangladesh, he received a prompt rejection when he went to Calcutta for recruitment. He was told he couldn’t serve in the army due to poor eyesight. Demotivated and unsure, it was then that he met his guru. ‘He not only offered music lessons but also educated students in political thought. He told me of his music group, which would travel to the Mukti Bahini camps as well as the refugee camps and asked me to join. It was during this time that I rediscovered the artist in me. We would sing songs about Bengal, about Hindu–Muslim inclusivity. People were demoralized, but we would go and tell them that this nation couldn’t lose because we were fighting for a just war, a principled war.’

It was only in January 1972 that Tariq returned, this time as a Bangladeshi. I asked him what he had felt on 16 December, sitting far away from his home but knowing that the dream he had seen had finally materialized. He told me it was a difficult day. The long struggle had come with too many losses. It was very hard to rejoice. ‘I was so emotional . . . a few days before the war, I had lost two of my friends . . . so many people had been killed. That day, we just wept.’ However, by the time he would fly to Dhaka some of the euphoria would seep through. ‘I took the first Indian Airlines flight to Dhaka!’ he laughs, the air light for the first time in our conversation. ‘I think I felt what so many mohajirs felt when they landed in

Pakistan. They came with a fantastic dream of a society in which they could be masters of their own selves . . . that's the dream we had for Bangladesh.'

What about his father? I asked. What was it like to meet him again, what did he feel about independence? 'He had seen a lot. By July, my uncles were shot dead, by August other relatives were killed by local razakars. By the time the war ended, my father had come out of his dream of a strong Pakistan. When I met him, he had turned into a strong Bangladeshi. He passed away as a strong Bangladeshi.'

As we finished our dinner and headed downstairs to the car parking, Tariq told me that he never returned to Pakistan. 'I don't have any grudges against Pakistan today, but I don't know anyone there any more. It's a half-conscious decision not to go.' We are walking out when he runs into a friend and introduces Haroon and me to him, telling him we are here from Pakistan. We are exchanging greetings when the man at the reception says something to Tariq in Bengali. He seems angry. Tariq responds, but the man keeps staring at Haroon and me. Finally, all he manages to say to us in English is, 'Pakistan Army!' That is all he needs to say. The Pakistan Army is a symbol of oppression and hegemony in Bangladesh, the anger against the forces as tangible forty-eight years after the war. That is how Pakistan is remembered, that is what the name Pakistan evokes, that is what our visit triggers for many like him.

* * *

Wali-ur-Rahman

Clad in a suit and a hat, Ambassador Wali-ur-Rahman had sat quietly in the audience at the Liberation War Museum, where I met Tariq. He observed my interactions with the students for a long time, as if trying to decipher what to say, how much to say, to a Pakistani. But when he finally spoke, I could tell he had much to express. That's why he had come out especially to meet two Pakistanis.

‘I was a Pakistani, as Pakistani as anyone could be,’ he began. ‘But no one knew that Pakistanis would start killing Pakistanis . . . I had a well-paying diplomatic job. I was a patriotic Pakistani. Why would I resign? It was for the idealism of Bangladesh. I was on a Pakistani mission in Geneva when I resigned and pledged allegiance to Bangladesh. I went as a Pakistani and left after hoisting Bangladesh’s flag in Geneva.’

Over tea that followed the discussion, Wali-ur-Rahman shared how he had secretly worked for the Bangladesh government in exile until November 1971, providing crucial information while maintaining the pretext of serving as a Pakistani diplomat. He would only hand over his Pakistani passport to the Swiss authorities once he had done everything he could in his capacity to help his new government, his new nation. It was in Geneva that he would go from being a patriotic Pakistani diplomat to a patriotic Bangladeshi diplomat. Having joined the Pakistan Foreign Service in 1966, he would resign in 1971 in protest against the military operation. In Bangladesh, he would serve as the secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and as a special envoy for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

When I asked him if he would be willing to give me an interview, he happily agreed, calling me over to his office just a few days later. He seemed to have fond memories of Pakistan, a lingering association with the country that was once his home. He seemed happy to meet two young Pakistanis, which was refreshing after the more-hostile encounters we had had. Eager to know more about his experiences in Pakistan, and his transformation into a Bangladeshi, I reached his office armed with several questions.

* * *

Two young girls received us in the lobby of the Bangladesh Heritage Foundation, a voluntary charity organization where Wali-ur-Rahman serves as the chairperson. Amongst other projects, the foundation serves as a platform to assist the International Crimes Tribunal in Bangladesh and to promote the ‘spirit of [the] war of Liberation’.³⁶

Wali-ur-Rahman had organized a meeting with his team at the foundation before our interview. He said there was a need for greater interaction between Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, and that he would like to use this opportunity to facilitate the exchange. I told him I understood, for despite the anger at Pakistanis, most people in the post-war generation had rarely encountered people from my country. Pakistanis lived in their imagination, in their textbooks, in their museums and public spaces as demons, but few had had the chance to interact with them. When they heard Pakistanis were visiting, they were curious enough to show up, even if it was to express resentment. The meeting could be transformational.

At one public gathering in Khulna, where I had given a brief speech, a woman came up to me and said, ‘I grew up hating Pakistan, I never wanted to see a Pakistani but when I heard you were coming here today, I wanted to be here. I wanted to see what young Pakistanis are like. My twelve-year-old daughter was shocked. She asked, “Mama, how can you go meet a Pakistani?” I told her I must go, maybe the young generation was different. You are the first Pakistani I have met. Can I touch you? I want to know what you feel like.’

The next day she returned to see me, this time with gifts. Her daughter had accompanied her. The young girl said, ‘I used to think Pakistanis were very bad, but my mother told me she met you and you weren’t like the Pakistanis we had heard about. So, I wanted to come and see you myself. Meeting you has changed my mind.’ Before leaving, her mother hugged me, whispering in my ear, ‘I feel better after meeting you. I now know that not all Pakistanis are like that. I feel like maybe now I can try to forgive Pakistan.’

Of course, at other times meeting a Pakistani only exacerbated the simmering resentment. Incidents mentioned previously in this book—such as being told that there was nothing but hatred for Pakistan (see Chapter 1)—or in the coming chapters illustrate this. I wondered what that day’s meeting would unravel, what emotions meeting me would trigger.

The girls who received us in the lobby smiled with nervous excitement. ‘*Assalamualaikum*, welcome!’ they said. ‘*Mera naam Kiran hai*’ (My name

is Kiran. The name has been changed to protect identity) one of them shook my hand. ‘*Hum Bihari hain*’ (We are Biharis), they announced within the first few seconds. They told me they had missed their college classes to be there. They were thrilled to meet Pakistanis. ‘*Humsein Urdu mein baat kareingi*, please (Will you talk to us in Urdu, please)?’

They were the first Biharis I met outside the camps. Though I was told that the younger generation of Biharis was keen to move away from the Pakistan label to assimilate into Bangladesh, it seemed as if the association with Pakistan—that has been imposed on them since their birth—was difficult to wash away. Called ‘stranded Pakistanis’, the girls seemed to feel an allegiance, like they were meeting one of their own today.

‘Bihari’ is an extremely loaded term in Bangladesh. The term is used to ‘distinguish them from the local Bengalis.’³⁷ The Biharis were traditionally seen as pro-Pakistan and the economic leadership in East Pakistan mainly came from amongst them, leading to significant power differences between the Urdu-speaking community and the Bengalis who worked as peasants or in mills, and organizations led by the non-Bengalis.³⁸ During 1971, Bihari civilians—alongside pro-Pakistan Bengalis—were accused of collaborating with the Pakistan Army and volunteering in paramilitary forces, like Al-Badr and Al-Shams, engaging in rape, looting and killing.³⁹ Once the war ended, the Biharis were left behind in Bangladesh, becoming stateless refugees, not claimed by Pakistan or Bangladesh, and pushed to reside in refugee camps (it was only in 2008 that the Bangladesh Supreme Court passed a ruling to extend citizenship to Biharis).⁴⁰ In the post-war years, they have collectively been remembered as collaborators in the popular imagination, even if some of them did not participate in the bloodshed, helped rescue Bengalis, suffered the violence themselves, or in fact were born decades after the war. My interviews with the Biharis who made it to Pakistan, as well as those who still live in Bangladesh, are detailed in the concluding chapters of this book.

That evening, when we met Bengali employees of the foundation, one of them casually remarked, ‘Biharis are Pakistanis,’ not caring that the young girls were standing in a corner, hearing each word. The girls must have

come across such comments, such ‘otherization’ all too frequently in their daily lives. They stayed till late that evening, not wanting to leave. They hovered around Haroon and me, asking dozens of questions about Pakistan, about Urdu, about our way of life. One of them told me that her maternal grandmother lived in Pakistan. She wanted to visit too. ‘I am Bangladeshi, but the people here don’t consider us as such. I wasn’t even born in 1971, but they tell me that whatever happened was my fault,’ she said teary-eyed. Perhaps they were searching in us and in Pakistan the acceptance they had not found in Bangladesh.

The majority of the other people we met at the foundation were Bengali. We sat around a table and engaged in casual conversation that continued for several hours. Most of them, of the twenty–twenty-five people in the room, were in their late thirties and forties. They told me why they thought East and West Pakistan separated, why their parents had fought for Bangladesh. ‘The problem started in 1947 when our language was attacked, our culture was attacked. We realized it was another colonial system after the British. Our money from jute exports was spent in West Pakistan, to develop Islamabad . . . Islamabad should be called Jutabad! It was built from the hard work of Bengalis.’

Another one said, ‘When I go to England, my Pakistani friends ask me that if Bangladesh is still poor, what was the point of separation? I tell them it is only because I am Bangladeshi that I’m sitting here in England today. Otherwise the Bengalis would have always been kept back.’ Others grunted in agreement. ‘Bangladesh is an example of development around the world today, we are better off than Pakistan . . . Pakistan forgets that it was because of the strength of the Bengali people that Pakistan was created in 1947.’ None of the people we meet had met a Pakistani before this. Everyone has something to assert, something to ask. One man at the back asked, ‘I wanted to come today, meet a Pakistani and ask why you did that to us in 1971?’

And so the questions continued. Wali-ur-Rahman and I got a chance to interact only around 9 p.m. that night. Over the course of time we had spent together, I noticed that some of the tension in the room seemed to have

fizzled away. People seemed warmer, more open to us. Perhaps that is what happens when dialogue and interaction replace distance and estrangement. Soon, we found ourselves talking about mundane things. Our conversation moved from 1971 to a discussion about food, films and songs. One of the women said, ‘All said and done, I must tell you that our closely guarded secret is that in almost every house, we watch a Pakistan play!’ People let out an embarrassed laugh. I could sense the stiffness in the room, the walls between Biharis, Bengalis and Pakistanis melting just for a little while. We started to say our goodbyes, some of us promising to stay in touch. The women gave me a warm hug and the men shook my hand. Then one of them said, ‘I have changed my mind about Pakistan today.’ The others nodded in agreement, ‘So have we,’ they echoed. From the corner of the room I saw Wali-ur-Rahman smile at us, pleased at how the evening turned out.

‘Now ask me what you want to,’ he said as he led me into his office. I took out my recorder and notebook and we began the interview.

* * *

I asked Rahman to tell me more about his time in the Pakistan foreign services. A significant grievance of the East Pakistanis was under-representation in the Pakistani establishment. I wanted to know about his experience as a Bengali diplomat in Pakistan. How did he get there? What was his journey like? And did being more privileged impact his politics in any way?

He told me that for the longest time he was not interested in politics, his focus lay on building his career. ‘I’ll be honest with you, for me it was all about my career. Imagine that when the 1965 war was being fought, I was sitting here preparing for my Pakistan Civil Service exam! I was not politically engaged at all. My father had put some money in the bank . . . I think it was the National Bank of Pakistan or maybe the Habib Bank . . . after Dhaka University he wanted me to go to London and study law, but

my decision was to join the foreign services. That's what I was focused on. I joined the services in 1966.'

'And why were you so determined to join the foreign services? What attracted you towards it?'

'I made that decision in the first year at college. Do you want to know why? Well . . .' he let out a hearty laugh before continuing. 'Don't be surprised if I tell you this. Mr [Zulfikar] Bhutto, who was serving as a minister at the time, came to East Pakistan. The Pakistan Youth League, which I was a part of, was engaged with his visit. I was assigned the task of looking after his entertainment. At that time, we only had a few seminar rooms, and one of the best ones was at the American Center, near Dhaka University, in front of the press club. It was a very good seminar room, air-conditioned and all that. It was there that Bhutto gave his speech. He was a brilliant speaker, he spoke about the *raison d'être* of Pakistan, why we needed Pakistan, the role the student community could play in Pakistan. We were very impressed. We shouted "Pakistan Zindabad, Mr Bhutto Zindabad". We were still young, you see,' he said softly.

'So, there was still this idealism around Pakistan at the time?'

'Absolutely, absolutely! This was 1962. You have to understand that those who opposed Jinnah's speech in 1948 could never forget what he had said. But I wasn't present at the speech. I had only read about it. I wasn't directly impacted. So, for me, the idealism was still there.'

He told me that it was this encounter with Bhutto that pushed him towards the foreign services. The man who would come to be hated in East Pakistan (for refusing to hand over power to Sheikh Mujib after the 1971 elections and for supporting the military action) and then Bangladesh, had served as an early mentor to him, directing Rahman's future. 'After his speech, I was given the charge to look after Bhutto, entertain him. So, I went up to him and congratulated him. I told him he had delivered a brilliant speech and then asked him if he would like tea or coffee. I still remember he said, "Coffee with lots of sugar and a little milk." Then, I think, I caught his eye. He took me to a corner and asked me what I was studying. I told him English literature, Pakistan history and philosophy. He

said, “You know, young men like you, smart men like you, should join the Pakistan Foreign Service.” That day, he changed my mind from law to the foreign service and that’s how I ended up becoming a civil servant!’

Rahman’s relationship with Bhutto didn’t end there. Long after the creation of Bangladesh, when the Lahore High Court awarded a death sentence to Bhutto, it was Rahman who tried to appeal for his release at the UN. ‘The day the judgment was given in Lahore, I was in New York. Another Bangladeshi Ambassador, Khawaja Muhammad Kaiser, who knew Bhutto well, called and said, “Wali, let’s at least make the last try.” He asked me to set up a meeting with the UN secretary general. I did so, two days before Bhutto was hanged. Regardless of what Bhutto had done, howsoever bad one could be, we knew that his death sentence wasn’t a decision of the courts; it was a political decision. We went to the secretary general and he called then President Zia-ul-Haq in front of us. They spoke for five-ten minutes. But the decision was made and Bhutto was hanged.’

I asked him what pushed him to appeal for a man who so many in his country blamed. He had tried to appeal for Bhutto’s political rights,⁴¹ even though he knew that Bhutto’s hunger for power had played a pivotal role in the turn of events after the elections. Bhutto’s vehement opposition to Sheikh Mujib becoming the prime minister had, after all, laid the ground for the political turmoil that was followed by the military operation in 1971. The idea of two Bangladeshis—one of whom went on to play an important part in the war crimes tribunal—trying to help a Pakistani leader held responsible for the war seemed almost like an anomaly.

‘Well the dichotomy that people like me and Kaiser experienced was that we didn’t believe that this kind of political murder, or political judgement, was good for any country. And Pakistan after all . . .’ he paused for a moment, as if thinking carefully of how to form his words before continuing. ‘Well, we had served in Pakistan, we knew Bhutto. No matter what role Bhutto played in the Bangladesh crisis—yes, that was terrible, he should’ve never done that. What he did led to the war, and it was a terrible war . . . if only he had allowed Bangabandhu (Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) to lead . . . he had the majority, and the majority, howsoever bad it may be,

represents the people—I along with my ambassador went to the UN secretary general, knowing fully well that what Bhutto did was terrible. But we believed that if he had to die, it shouldn't be this way. There should have been a proper trial.'

I asked him to tell me about his personal experiences of 1971. What did the war and the events preceding it mean to him? When did he go from being politically disengaged and entirely focused on his career to resigning; giving up on his dream of serving in the Pakistan Foreign Service to providing information and support to the movement for Bangladesh?

'It was a very difficult time for me and I had to make some very difficult decisions. But when the killings started to take place in East Pakistan in 1971, it was unacceptable. Till then, till 1971, I was a very patriotic Pakistani. I still say that some of the finest times of my life, my career, was during the Pakistan time. I belonged to the establishment. I was part of the civil establishment of Pakistan. We had learnt that bureaucracy should not mix with politics. Politics should be left to the politicians. I wasn't a politician, you see. I didn't have any moral compulsion. I don't have any now either. But when, sitting in Geneva, I heard about the Dhaka massacre on 25 March, it was terrible.'

'How did you hear about it?' I asked. Silence followed. He seemed to be reminded of that night, of the killings and the bloodshed. It was difficult for him to speak for a while. Slowly, he responded, 'Radio. And the newspaper. Then my friends from London, Washington started to call. They had better updates than I did in Geneva. I remember my wife cried that whole day. It was absolute mayhem and murder. Even your chaps [referring to Pakistanis] were killed . . . many Baloch regiments from the army even revolted and refused to fight. They had been told that they were going to kill the non-Muslims, the Hindus, in East Pakistan. When they saw that these people were saying their prayers in mosques five times a day, two brigadiers revolted and were sent back home.'

'Did you know anyone who was killed that night?'

'I knew many Bengalis who were killed . . . one of my teachers at Dhaka University, Professor Guhathakurta was killed. He was a very good teacher,

a brilliant teacher. I had been to his house many times. He was very fond of me. But alongside two of my friends in the Baloch Regiment in Jessore also died. One of them was a brilliant fellow, a captain . . . Afzal Cheema was his name. He was Punjabi. When the fighting started on the night of 25 March, he was fighting for Pakistan in north Bangladesh. He was killed. Do you think I liked it! I cried. You know why? Because he was such a good person and we had become such good friends. Another colonel from West Pakistan also died. These guys were my batchmates, I had spent two years with them and after a few months I heard that they had been killed. Would I be happy about that! No, no! I still cry when I think about them . . . I'll never forget what happened, it was not just the Bengalis who died. The loss cut across lines.'

His eyes were moist now, his voice reduced to a whisper as he spoke of the loss of his friends. Until now, most Bangladeshis I had sat with had only spoken about the killings of Bengalis. Meanwhile, in Pakistan the focus remained on the killings of West Pakistanis and Biharis. The loss had been neatly packaged into Pakistani and Bangladeshi categories of 'acceptable' truths. The holistic loss, of Bengalis, Biharis, West Pakistanis was seldom explored. For Rahman, however, the binaries weren't as neat. While most Bengalis were fighting against the West Pakistani establishment and were able to draw clear lines between friend and enemy, Wali served in that very establishment. He had West Pakistani friends who were killed just as his Bengali friends, colleagues and teachers were. The truth was far more complicated, the lines blurry. I asked him what the dilemma was like for him, being a Bengali serving in the establishment.

Another long silence followed. He looked towards the floor, his hands clasped. A few moments went by before he looked up and started speaking again. 'You know,' he spoke slowly, his tone remorseful, 'there's a very convoluted, difficult answer to this question. The answer is that I wish, I wish Mr Bhutto had accepted the results of the elections. I wish Bangabandhu had been allowed to become the prime minister of Pakistan. If only Bhutto had accepted Sheikh Mujib as the prime minister of Pakistan, imagine the satisfaction, the support that would emanate from East

Pakistanis for West Pakistan. You have no idea. So, my answer is that I can't answer your question. I can just say I wish Bhutto didn't do what he did.'

Before I could respond, he said, 'As a follow-up question, you might ask me if Pakistan would still be intact had Bhutto accepted the election results? Maybe not, but there wouldn't have been a single death and one death is too many.'

I asked him if he would have preferred East and West Pakistan to remain together if the former had been given the autonomy it desired. He nodded. 'Absolutely, absolutely! But within a certain framework that the Bangabandhu had given. He himself was a Muslim League member, he fought against all odds for Pakistan. That is also part of our history. So, if only Bhutto would've kept his word, things could have been different. And if the country was divided at all, at least it would've been two friendly countries, there wouldn't be so much bitterness.'

I assume that when Rahman decided to start working for the Bangladesh government in secrecy, it wasn't an easy decision. On one hand he wanted to help his people and on the other hand the establishment also consisted of his friends, his people. It was the only life he had known. He said it took him some time to make his decision.

'I had to reflect a lot. I started reading about the lives of diplomats around the world, what they did in difficult times, during times of war. A diplomat's life can be very difficult . . . there was a lot of pressure on my mind. No diplomat wants war. So, yes, I was divided, but at the same time I knew that there comes a time when you have to make a decision. Sheikh Mujib had got a solid majority, but the generals and Mr Bhutto decided to not hand over power, the same Mr Bhutto who had inspired me to join the foreign service. Once I heard about what was happening in East Pakistan, I knew what I had to do. I knew I had to resign, but the Mujibnagar government (a provisional government established in April 1971 after the declaration of independence, whose capital in exile was Kolkata) ⁴² asked me to continue in my position until August, when the Pakistan Envoys' Conference was scheduled. I was given the task of taking notes on each

country's stance, particularly China, and keep the government informed. So, it wasn't until November 1971 that I handed over my official resignation, when we knew independence was coming and they didn't need me in that position any longer.'

Rahman would go on to becoming a refugee in Geneva, hoisting Bangladesh's first flag there. When I asked him what he felt on that day, 16 December 1971, he laughed and responded with a quote that poet William Wordsworth had written during the French Revolution, 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was [very] heaven.'

* * *

Each of the three men I had interviewed—Muntassir Mamoon, Tariq Ali and Wali-ur-Rahman—had shared their own journeys from being Pakistani to being Bangladeshi. Others in their families, such as their fathers who belonged to the 'Pakistan generation', as they called them, had had their own turning points. The disillusionment with Pakistan came in phases, unique to each individual, revealed through personal insights into the 'Pakistan period' from 1947 to 1971. It was now time to explore the same time period from the lens of the West Pakistanis, especially those who had lived in East Pakistan. Did they notice the growing discord and disillusionment? Did they sense what was coming? To understand the events from the other side, I reached out to a senior colleague of mine who had spent several years in erstwhile East Pakistan.

A West Pakistani in East Pakistan

In her memoir on 1971, acclaimed Pakistani author and literary critic Muneeza Shamsie wrote, ‘Today, most Pakistanis confess that “we didn’t know what was happening [in 1971]”. The point is: I knew and many others knew. But most people preferred to believe a censored press, a systemic machinery of rumour and disinformation, and that age-old maxim: “It’s all a foreign plot.”’¹

Indeed, many Pakistanis I had spoken to, including those in my family, suggested that they knew little of what was happening in the eastern wing. The war, and certainly the surrender, had come as a shock to them. These statements themselves signal at a disconnect between the two parts of erstwhile Pakistan. While East Pakistan was caught in political turmoil, business went on as usual in West Pakistan. Shamsie writes in her memoir that when her friend Naz visited from Dhaka, ‘She would comment on how surreal Karachi seemed to be, with all of us carrying on as normal and going off to the movies and a Chinese meal afterwards while Dacca was so palpably tense. She was astonished to find that instead of being concerned about the political crisis, there was much excitement in Karachi because a local cinema was showing *My Fair Lady!*’²

Others, who would claim to have known about the tensions brewing there, would dismiss Bengali grievances as ‘exaggerated’, ‘India-sponsored’, or as Shamsie writes, ‘a foreign plot.’ When I asked an elderly woman in Lahore about how people responded to East Pakistani demands, she would tell me that the Bengalis were viewed as ‘very pig-headed, very [narrow] minded . . . [perceived as if they] wanted revenge at any cost with the Pakistanis. An American friend of mine would say, “If there was an

extra traffic light at Charing Cross (in Lahore), there would be protests and rallies in East Pakistan that we want a traffic light here too.”³

In an interview with the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP), another gentleman commented that for the Bengalis, ‘any person from West Pakistan was a Punjabi. They would also call Ayub Khan (former President of Pakistan and a Pukhtun by ethnicity) a Punjabi. Punjabi had become a swear word over there. For one reason or the other, there was more emphasis on the development in West Pakistan. There was development [in East Pakistan] as well, a new airport had been made there, but the propaganda was such that the federal government was not able to break [through it]. [The] interference by India was so much that in a systematic manner [most] Hindus had been [employed] in teaching classes over there. In order to change the mindset, there is no better place than an educational institute. A kind of slow poisoning was being done, which by 1968 had a lot of effect. In the [1960s], talk had begun of Bangladesh, [but] at that time it was called Bangladesh sarcastically. It was not thought that it would come true, but you know how derogatory terms are used? Bangladesh was used as a derogatory term.’⁴

Other West Pakistanis had a different viewpoint. They detailed the discrimination they witnessed against East Pakistanis, the growing divide and dissonance. Those who had spent time in East Pakistan were able to shed even more light. It was to gather these perspectives that I turned towards Asif Ali (name changed) for an interview.

* * *

It was the month of August. The year was 2014. The summer vacations had just come to an end for teachers. The temperature was warm, the air humid. I returned to one of the schools I worked at after the break and seated myself in the staffroom upstairs. The school was still relatively empty as the students had a few more days off. There was a stillness in the air given the absence of the commotion that usually enveloped the school during the academic year. Some of the teachers too had not arrived. I was busy

researching on Partition for my first book. Not having much schoolwork to do that morning and exhausted after reading Partition literature, I decided to strike up a conversation with one of the only other faculty members in the staff room. Sir Asif—as he was called—was an elderly gentleman, a favourite of the students and teachers. I often found him engaged in political debates with other teachers between classes and was curious to hear his earliest memories of Pakistan. I thought his narrative would enrich my research on the Partition and post-Partition years, or at least provide a break from all the reading.

Born in Meerut in 1946, Asif told me that his family was a staunch supporter of Pakistan. His uncle had served as the president of the All India Muslim Students' Federation and many of his family members were active in student politics. 'My uncle had even met Jinnah . . . my family would always be talking about Pakistan. They were madly in love with Pakistan, madly in love with the idea of Pakistan,' he said.

I asked him what Pakistan meant for them. After a moment's reflection, he said, 'As a student of history, when I try to understand the emotions of that time, I can see that the Muslims felt very threatened, especially the young and educated ones. They asked themselves, "When the British go away, what will happen to us?" They felt that their jobs might become insecure, they might be victimized, discriminated against, their careers in jeopardy. I think the basic idea behind Pakistan was economic well-being.'

And so, in 1947, when a new nation was born, Asif's family, like lakhs of others, decided to migrate to Pakistan, a land that promised prosperity, security and progress for the subcontinent's minorities. 'They had lots of properties there [in Meerut], they owned fully furnished houses and businesses. But I think the overriding idea, the overriding passion for Pakistan was so great that they didn't bother about any of that and just left everything behind. When I went back to Meerut years later, people didn't understand why my family had migrated. An old man who knew my grandfather, asked "Why did your family leave? They didn't have to. They had everything here." The only answer I could offer was that it was for the love of Pakistan.'

Asif's family was one of the fortunate ones that were able to quickly re-establish themselves in their new country. 'My uncles (chachas and *mamas*) were in the construction business. They set up a huge business in West Pakistan and then, in 1959, shifted to East Pakistan. The business was performing well there.' As a young boy, Asif had heard stories about Dhaka and Chittagong from his uncles who settled in the east wing. 'They would tell me that it was a beautiful place, that the people were very gentle, very friendly. So, I always had this fascination for East Pakistan. My first visit to Dhaka and Jessore—where my family lived—was in 1962. I was still studying in Hassan Abdal (near Islamabad) at the time and had three months' vacations. My uncles called me to visit them and I happily obliged.' Later, taken in by the charms of erstwhile East Pakistan, Asif would move there for a few years, learning Bengali and pursuing his education at Madan Mohan College in Jessore.

However, over time, as tensions between the east and west wings escalated, Asif found himself caught in an increasingly violent and complex situation. That morning in the quiet staff room, he told me how he had lost one of his closest friends in Dhaka, how his friend was killed before his eyes. Asif was one of the handful of non-Bengali boys at Dhaka University in 1971 (by now he was out of college and working in his family construction business. He happened to be visiting his friends at Dhaka University that March of 1971). On the day his friend was killed, he witnessed the firing at the university, he witnessed several students succumb to their injuries, added numbers to a death toll that was only going to surge over the next few months.

'By then [March 1971], the movement for independence had picked up and the government had given orders that all hostels be vacated, that the universities should close and students should go home. A lot of atrocities had been committed by the Mukti Bahini, especially in Chittagong. Many West Pakistani officers and their families had been brutally killed.'

A retired colonel in Lahore, who became a POW, penned down some of the events that had taken place in Chittagong, in which West Pakistanis were the target. (This was written for his family and has been reproduced

here with permission.) He writes that when he was posted to Chittagong in September 1971, he found ‘the air was thick with sombreness . . . the violence had subsided by then but the hostility was simmering beneath the apparent calm. I was posted at the arms supply depot from where ammunition and provisions were supplied to the units . . . [I heard about the] brutal carnage of non-Bengalis in Chittagong Cantonment and the city [that had taken place before my arrival]. It sent chills down my spine, wondering if man could be so ferocious . . . [There were stories of] innocent children being hung upside down and punched to death, of children’s eyes being slashed with blades, women raped and beheaded . . . men . . . slaughtered while being told that the blood they had sucked from Bengali veins would come gushing out. The Bengali soldiers of Bengal regiments rebelled and arrested all non-Bengalis [and] Chittagong . . . witnessed the worst brutality. No non-Bengali could manage to survive there. All men and women were indiscriminately killed. Army units of West Pakistan had to take action in response. Military operation started . . .’⁵

Anthony Mascarenhas, a Pakistani journalist whose reportage in the *Sunday Times* of 13 June 1971 is known to have ‘exposed for the first time the scale of the Pakistan Army’s brutal campaign to suppress its breakaway eastern province in 1971’,⁶ also detailed terrifying stories of what had transpired prior to the military action in places like Chittagong, where non-Bengalis were maimed, raped and killed.⁷ Later, when I travelled to Karachi to meet some of the Bihari families that had survived, I would hear first-hand harrowing details of how much they had suffered. The visits to the refugee camps in Dhaka, where so many Biharis remained caged, revealed more such stories. According to the official Pakistani version of these events, it was these killings and violence that propelled the military operation—or Operation Searchlight—in March 1971. The stories of Bengali brutality are used as a *raison d’être* for the violence the Bengalis would later be subjected to. From the Pakistani state’s perspective, it is the events prior to 25 March 1971 that hold significance. The factors that may have led to such resentment against the non-Bengalis, or the events after these killings, are obfuscated. When Mascarenhas was called in to report on

the conflict, it was these events that he was meant to cover, the torture of non-Bengalis, not the ‘genocide’—the headline of the report he wrote for the *Sunday Times*—of Bengalis that followed. Ironically, in the official Bangladeshi version of history, the violence prior to 25 March is not spoken about. There, history begins from where it ends for the Pakistani state, both countries conveniently forgetting the actions that may complicate or threaten their ‘national truths’. However, eyewitness accounts unearth a more complex reality in which the conflict predates 1971 by several years: the economic, cultural and political exploitation of Bengalis, the violence against non-Bengalis, and the mass killings and rapes of Bengalis all part of one horrid truth. Asif had been witness to much of it.

He told me, ‘West Pakistan knew that the strength of Sheikh Mujibur’s Awami League was the students. They held power in the streets, not to forget their numbers. By passing blanket orders that all universities, colleges and hostels should be vacated, they wanted to dismantle the hub of student politics and curb the nationalist movement. But as you know, students are not so easy to manipulate. They refused. A detachment of the army was sent in. They broke down the gate and entered. The Bengali girls and boys had formed a human chain to prevent the soldiers from proceeding, but the soldiers began to fire upon them. I was watching. Many of them lost their lives there. Many of them died . . .’

Asif’s voice cracked and his eyes watered as he spoke of that day, the memory deeply etched in his mind. My eyes welled up too as I listened to the details of the student killings, sitting in the school’s staffroom. I didn’t know what to say to him, what would suffice. For a few minutes, we sat in silence. Then the other teachers came in and our exchange remained unfinished. It was only three years later that I returned to his house to pick up our conversation from where we left it. I wanted to ask him more about that time, I wanted to understand the experience of a West Pakistani in East Pakistan, I wanted to see the conflict through his eyes.

It was a pleasant afternoon in March 2017 when I made my way to Asif's home in Islamabad. I had told him about my research on 1971 and he had said that he was happy to be interviewed. 'We need to tell the truth about what happened . . . the future generations must know,' he said.

As I sat with him in his lounge, I asked him to tell me of his earliest memories of East Pakistan, of whether he saw any impending signs of the brewing conflict, ones that would lead to the 1971 war.

'When I went to Jessore in the early 1960s, it was already visible how the poor Bengalis were being exploited. If you consider the entire land area of Pakistan, 85 per cent was West Pakistan and 15 per cent was East Pakistan. And in that 15 per cent lived 56 per cent of the population, so it was extremely dense. There was immense unemployment, and this was mostly because the Bengalis were being discriminated against. In my own company (name omitted to protect identity), I found that more than 80 per cent of the people employed were West Pakistanis. My family preferred taking people from here . . . and I'm not only talking about highly skilled professionals like engineers or doctors but also carpenters, blacksmiths, labourers, plasterers, tile makers. They were all from Lahore, Gujranwala, Sialkot, Murree or Rawalpindi. So, even at that time, there was a slight murmuring in East Pakistan about this exploitation. When I asked one of my uncles why they didn't employ Bengalis in the company, especially given how many people were jobless there, he would say, "No, no, no. *Yeh Bangali kaam nahi karte. Yeh biqar hote hain, inko kaam karna nahi aata. Hum wahan se leke aatein hein* (These Bengalis are useless, they have no idea how to work. We have to get workers from West Pakistan)." I was only sixteen or seventeen years old then, but it still hurt me to see that. Once, I remember speaking to a Bengali friend about this. A new district commissioner had been posted to Jessore from Sialkot (a major city in the Pakistani part of Punjab) and my friend said, "Asif Sahib, do you know he is bringing his driver from there (West Pakistan)? He is bringing his cook from there. He is bringing his office peon from there. He is bringing his children's ayah from there. He is bringing his mali. Jessore is a small town with high unemployment. Don't you think these five six jobs should

rightfully go to Bengalis? Would a mali from West Pakistan do a better job here or a local one who knows the climate and the plants and trees?” I had no answers, but I kept asking myself what was being done to these people?

This economic exploitation, some of which Asif witnessed, widened the disparity between the two wings, disillusioning East Pakistanis and breeding a deep resentment which would continue to fester over the years. Whereas Pakistan had represented economic emancipation for the Partition generation of Bengal, those who had fought for the country were finding themselves increasingly marginalized in the new state they had helped form. There was a clear preference for recruiting West Pakistanis and sidelining East Pakistanis. For instance, only 15 per cent of those employed in the central government were Bengali. The figure dropped to 10 per cent in the armed forces.⁸ East Pakistani land and resources were also being exploited to generate revenue for West Pakistan. While much of the foreign exchange was earned through East Pakistan’s jute, most of it was used for the development of the west wing.⁹ When the capital of Pakistan shifted from Karachi to Islamabad in the 1960s, and a new city was built to accommodate bureaucrats and government officials, it became another source of disgruntlement for East Pakistanis who thought that their earnings were being used to accommodate and strengthen West Pakistani hegemony. ‘Of the total foreign aid received by Pakistan, 80 per cent was spent in West Pakistan. [Meanwhile] the 1957 census of manufacturing industries indicated that 70 per cent of these industries were located in West Pakistan.’¹⁰ In cases where factories or companies were set up in East Pakistan, such as Asif’s family’s construction business, the majority of the people employed continued to be West Pakistanis, an indication that East Pakistanis were imagined as being incapable of doing even low and semi-skilled work.

Asif told me, ‘When I spoke to Bengali contractors, they would say, “You know when the British were here, every decision was taken in London. They had one puppet sitting here—the viceroy—who would rule the whole subcontinent sitting in Delhi. After Partition, not much has changed. All decisions are made in Rawalpindi or Islamabad . . . and the governor of East

Pakistan, who has been handpicked by President Ayub Khan, acts no more than a viceroy.” They would complain that when Bengali contractors needed any work done, they had to first fly to Rawalpindi, stay in some hotel, bear the climate and digest the food, which was all very different, and then get to business. They often asked why there weren’t offices in Dhaka. Why did a Bengali have to travel all the way to West Pakistan to get something done? I had no answers to that.

‘ . . . Compared to West Pakistan, East Pakistan was far less developed. There was a stark contrast. It was very apparent to the Bengalis because by that time a lot of them had started travelling to West Pakistan for business, for jobs, to join the army or take up civil service positions. The government had also started a new scheme at the time—the Interwings Scholarship Scheme—to help students from West Pakistan study in East Pakistan and vice versa. When the Bengali boys and girls, who were studying in Lahore or Karachi or Rawalpindi, went back to their own areas, they could see the difference and talked about it. In fact, when the government started building the new capital in Islamabad, they wondered why all that money wasn’t being invested in their cities, which had poor infrastructure . . . bad roads, waterways, airport. They would ask, “Why are we treated like stepchildren?”’

Asif shifted in his seat before continuing. ‘Anam, by then jute was a big source of foreign exchange earnings. The synthetic materials that we use now had not been invented and so jute was the packaging material used across sugar, fertilizer and cement industries around the world. East Pakistan supplied jute because West Pakistan didn’t produce any. Yet, that money wasn’t being spent on them. I remember when Sheikh Mujibur went to Islamabad, he said, “I can smell jute on the streets of Islamabad.” ¹¹ He felt that the government was taking away all the money from East Pakistan and making roads, airports and bridges in West Pakistan . . . that it was taking away their wealth.’

The cultural discrimination compounded this economic exploitation. Over the years, Bengalis were frequently projected as being influenced by the ‘Hindu’ culture that Pakistan had perceivably fought against and sought

separation from.¹² The two-nation theory had gained legitimacy amongst the political elite and significant sections of the masses as a justification for Partition. The apparent lingering influence of Hindu culture on East Pakistan after 1947 was then frowned upon, and later conflated with Bengalis being ‘Hindu-like’¹³ or ‘Hindu traitors’¹⁴ working in favour of India.¹⁵ During the course of my research, I had heard several people assert that the fact that Bengali women often wore saris and adorned tikas, and that their language was ‘sanskritized’ and therefore ‘Hinduized’, meant that they were always closer to India than Pakistan. In these statements, I sensed an underlying defence of why Pakistan had lost the 1971 war—East Pakistan was never really Pakistan, for how could it be when its culture was infused with Hindu practices. It seemed through these narratives that the eventual ‘break-up of Pakistan’ was only inevitable.

In the post-Partition years, there was an effort to distance Pakistani culture from what was seen as Hindu influences. In the process, East Pakistan became the primary target. The desire to eliminate ‘Hinduness’ from the population persisted, be it through banning Tagore or through attempts to Arabize the Bengali language (as discussed in Chapter 4). The conflict in the late 1960s and early 1970s was perceived through the same lens in West Pakistan, i.e., it was the Hindu influences on East Pakistan that resulted in the fighting, promoted separatist ideas and eventually dismembered Pakistan. It was imagined that the Hindu minority in East Pakistan, the Hindu-influenced Bengali Muslims, and the Indian enemy across the border were responsible for it. In other words, the troubles were engineered by ‘Indian-Hindu masterminds.’¹⁶ Asif tells me that such sentiments were at their peak during the time he was in Dhaka and Jessore.

‘When I moved there as a student in 1964, people in West Pakistan would tell me that all the teachers in East Pakistan were Hindu. I would say, “No, I am a student there and I don’t find that to be the case. There may be some Hindu teachers in schools and colleges, but all the teachers aren’t Hindu.” But these people would keep insisting, even though they had never been to East Pakistan and I was living there! The point they wanted to make was that these Hindu teachers had turned our children (Muslim children) against

Islam, against Pakistan. When Mujibur Rahman proposed the six-point formula and anti-West Pakistan sentiments grew, people in West Pakistan blamed it all on the Hindus. They would say, “These Bengalis are following instructions from across the border, from India.” They even went so far as to say that the Hindus in East Pakistan were R&AW agents . . . even house servants like the cook, mali or ayah who were Hindu wouldn’t be trusted. In fact, there were strict instructions to not speak in their presence because they were seen as spies. I would say, “For God’s sake, nothing of this sort is happening, yaar. These people are not spies, nor are they all Hindu . . . these are just people fighting for their political rights, their economic rights, how can you say that?””

The exasperation Asif felt then is still visible today. As one of the few Bengali-speaking West Pakistanis who lived in East Pakistan, his has been an experience that not many could relate to. With minimal contact between the two wings, most West Pakistanis were convinced that the nationalist sentiment was the result of an Indian conspiracy. To explain that there were genuine grievances and to actually empathize with Bengalis would not have been easy for him. ‘The West Pakistanis were very prejudiced towards the East Pakistanis. Firstly, they wouldn’t speak the language . . . they had no idea about Bengali literature or culture. In my own family, no one learnt Bengali despite living there, earning there. I kept asking them to just learn the local language so that they could at least talk to the people, but they were very rigid with their ideas. They hated the local language. Many times my uncle would call me to translate or give messages to his local employees, but he won’t bother to learn the language himself. They thought that Bengali was an inferior language and by speaking it they would lose respect, *zabaan kharab ho jayegi*. I on the other hand loved the language. It was spoken all around me in college and I wanted to learn it, I wanted to speak it . . . I can still speak it but that was rare. There was so much linguistic prejudice. The constant expectation was that the Bengalis should learn Urdu rather than the other way around.

‘ . . . The second issue was that the Bengalis were seen as the descendants of Hindus, the enemy of Muslims after Partition, and so were easily blamed.

They [West Pakistanis] very conveniently forgot that the man—A.K. Fazlul Huq, also called Sher-e-Bangla—who presented the Pakistan Resolution on 23 March 1940 was a Bengali. They forgot that the birth of the All India Muslim League happened in Dhaka in 1906. All the great leaders, like Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Nurul Amin, etc., who had helped create Pakistan were completely forgotten. It was the nastiest of times, Anam,’ he finished, shaking his head sombrely.

I asked him how difficult this time was for him, especially since hostilities towards West Pakistanis were only growing in this period. While Asif sympathized with the Bengali cause, I wondered if his Bengali class fellows were able to see beyond his West Pakistani identity to appreciate that. Unable to relate to the people back home given their sentiments towards Bengalis, was Asif able to fit into East Pakistan?

‘Well . . .’ he contemplated, ‘my advantage was that I had a lot of Bengali friends, in hostels, in college. These friendships were deep-rooted and there was a lot of emotional attachment. And then I could speak the language and really understand the Bengali narrative. I could understand their pain and sorrow, but yes, some of them saw me as a West Pakistani. One time, I was even accused of being a spy for the military because my family worked with the Pakistan Army for our construction business. They felt we were very close to the army, they thought I was planted there by the intelligence agencies to spy on the student body. Episodes like these would leave me with a feeling of being caged. For instance, if a group of boys was sitting in the canteen and I entered, they would stop talking. There would be dead silence. The students would have all these private meetings and secretive get-togethers, and I was never invited. So, I could feel that they didn’t want me around, that there were things they didn’t want to discuss in front of me. But all Bengalis didn’t treat me like this. My closest friend, Moin, would always assure me. He would say that these people don’t understand that you are different . . . in fact, Moin and I would have many political conversations and we would always speak frankly and openly about what was going on. He would say, “Asif, there is a great propaganda in West Pakistan that East Pakistanis or Bengalis are very much Hindu and

influenced by Hindu culture, that Islam has gone out of the window . . . but in reality Islamic values are far more important here than in West Pakistan. Dhaka is known as the city of mosques, in any locality you will find two or three mosques. You won't find this in Pindi or Lahore or Karachi. Yet West Pakistanis dub us as Hindu agents." At other times Moin would complain of West Pakistani policies that discriminated against Bengali culture. For instance, when Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, or Thakur, as he was called, was banned in East Pakistan for inspiring nationalist thoughts, I remember how upset Moin was. He would say, "West Pakistan has banned the Shakespeare of Bengal, Rabindranath Thakur . . . his work, his poetry, everything is banned in Pakistan. People studying Bengali literature are not allowed to read Tagore. Imagine, if someday a Bengali leader takes over Pakistan as the prime minister and says that from tomorrow Allama Iqbal (the national poet of Pakistan) is banned, how would you react?" I told him I'd be up in arms. I mean how could anyone ban Iqbal in Pakistan? He is the national poet! Moin responded, "Yes, that's the same case with us and yet you've taken Tagore away."

It was the same friend, Moin, whom Asif would later witness being killed. The last time we had spoken about Moin, Asif had broken down. I am thus hesitant to ask him about his death, worried it may be too painful for him to recall. Instead, I ask him about the months and weeks leading up to the war. He begins to talk, slowly painting a vivid picture of the turmoil that ensued.

'One incident that I can never forget happened in 1971, before the war. By that time the poison of religious fanaticism had been injected into the political dispute and Jamaat-e-Islami had established two institutions: Al-Badr and Al-Shams. They recruited thousands of young boys from West Pakistan, particularly Lahore, Sialkot, Gujranwala, etc., and took them to East Pakistan for training and to set them loose on the Bengalis. I remember, one evening I was sitting with a friend of mine in my lawn . . . there was a curfew in the city. Three or four bearded men came to my gate and asked for water, so I called them in. I asked them who they were and they said, "*Hum Al-Badr hain* (We are Al-Badr)."

“What do you do here?” I asked.

“We do jihad.”

“Against whom? This is Pakistan,” I said perplexed, “What need was there to do jihad in Pakistan, against one’s own people?”

‘The men retorted saying that they were doing jihad against the Bengalis as they were Hindus. I insisted, “Look, I live here, I study here. These are Muslims, they aren’t Hindus. Whom are you calling Hindus?”

‘But the men were adamant. They told me, “This is your perception. These are Hindus posing as Muslims. Deep down, they are Hindus and we have come to set them right. And until they become right, we will not leave.”’

Asif explained that by this time Bengali nationalism had peaked and the Mukti Bahini had been created to fight the economic and political suppression the Bengalis faced. ‘The Mukti Bahini was formed of the youth, mostly students. A lot of students gave up their education to join the force. By this time, India was also helping them, financing them and arming them. The border was very porous too, so the boys had started to cross with the ambition of achieving independence from West Pakistan. In the process, of course, they accepted help from India, but it would be wrong to say that all this was India’s doing or that India established Bangladesh . . . that is wrong! In the situation that they were in, anyone would accept help from the devil himself. The Bengalis established Bangladesh because they were sick and tired of West Pakistani exploitation and domination!’

I asked him if he knew anyone who had joined the Mukti Bahini. In Pakistan, the Mukti Bahini has dark connotations. It is perceived as the enemy force, one with India, responsible for breaking up Pakistan, disloyal and disingenuous, often referred to as a terrorist organization.¹⁷ In contrast, in Bangladesh, the term ‘Mukti Bahini’ exudes a certain social status. Many people I met, which included poets, activists and artists identified as part of the Mukti Bahini, the Liberation Army. In fact, I was told that people who did not partake in the war—whether through fighting or other means of activism and resistance—also identified as part of the Mukti Bahini or as Mukti Joddhas (Liberation Fighter), for it was a stamp of recognition to

have fought for and sacrificed in the name of Bangladesh. Asif told me that at least four or five of his friends had joined the Mukti Bahini.

‘They were all very nice boys. They were well read and had travelled. The father of one of the boys had previously served in the foreign service of Pakistan (retired by the time) and had lived in various parts of the world. He was a good friend. I later found out that he had absconded and joined the Mukti Bahini. Another boy I knew was called Chand Mian, who used to work in my company. The very next day after the birth of Bangladesh, he was photographed with a gun in his hand, shouting ‘Joy Bangla’. The photograph was used as the cover picture of *Time Magazine*. I recognized him immediately as he was an accountant in our office. He had worked under me for many years and had become a famous Mukti Bahini leader. I think I have lost the magazine, otherwise I would’ve shown you his photograph.’

Our conversation about the Mukti Bahini led us to a discussion about the armed conflict and violence that soon engulfed East Pakistan. By this time, Asif was in Dhaka, and on 25 March happened to be at Dhaka University. He had gone to visit his friends on the campus. I asked him about what he saw, about the bloodshed that he encountered. He reflected for a moment, the pain apparent on his face. Then slowly, he began to talk about the day that he lost Moin.

‘After the army moved into the university, a lot of boys and girls held hands to stop them from coming in further. But the firing began and many students died. They [referring to official Pakistani accounts] say no killings happened, that the violence was from the other side only, but this is wrong. Of course, in many cases a lot of atrocities were committed by the Mukti Bahini . . . many West Pakistani officers and families were brutally killed by the Mukti Bahini, there’s no doubt about that. But a lot of atrocities were committed by this side, West Pakistan. I don’t know how many students were killed that day, but many of them died. I saw all of that.’ I notice that he didn’t mention Moin. Perhaps the memory of his death is too difficult to recall. I didn’t want to push him further. Instead, I asked him about the student body at that time.

‘Were all the students at that time Bengali, or were any non-Bengalis killed too?’ The killings at the university in many ways marked the beginning of the harrowing events that would follow in the next nine months. I spoke to many people who recalled 25 March 1971. Several of them were there that day. Asif, however, was the only non-Bengali I had spoken to, who was a witness. I wanted to know if there were others like him.

‘Ji, I think they were all Bengalis. The few West Pakistani students, I think, had left by then. All the students who had come on the student exchange programme had gone back because they felt very unsafe. And rightly so because they were not liked. In fact, they were hated because they were West Pakistanis. One or two other Bihari boys and I were the only non-Bengalis there at that time.’

‘How come you didn’t leave like the others?’ I asked.

‘By that time I was done with my college, but my family was there. We had a large business there, so I had no reason to leave. But, yes, I could feel the pulse of the people and I would often tell my family to sell everything and move away. They would laugh at me. I remember my uncle saying, “If one fires a pistol here, you will not see a single Bengali from [Dhaka] to Chittagong. They will all run away. They are a cowardly nation.” They actually believed that. I would keep telling them to move to Lahore, to go back to West Pakistan, but they wouldn’t listen.’ Asif’s uncle’s confidence that the Bengalis would never be successful in forming an independent nation was matched by many of the people I had interviewed in Pakistan. They told me that they never imagined that Pakistan would lose the war, that there would ever be a chance of Bengalis having their way, creating their own country. In the popular imagination, they were seen as meek, powerless, lacking courage, as the ‘non-martial’ race. There was no reason to sell one’s business and leave because the Bengalis were no real threat in their eyes.

‘I could see that Bangladesh was a reality,’ Asif continued. ‘But they didn’t believe me. Because I spoke the language, I understood that the Bengalis were determined to get rid of Pakistan. I would try to explain to

my uncles that just as they had stood behind Jinnah at the time of Partition and had insisted that Pakistan would be created, the Bengalis felt the same way now. I would remind them that even the Hindus had thought Partition was impossible; they felt that the movement for Pakistan was restricted to a few hot-headed people like Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan, and nothing would actually happen. That's exactly how the West Pakistanis were behaving towards the demands for Bangladesh. They felt the sentiment was limited to a few people and, even if they tried, they could never succeed. I would warn them that one day the Bengalis would throw them out and create their own country. After all, if the Muslims of the subcontinent could achieve Pakistan, why couldn't the Bengalis of East Pakistan achieve Bangladesh? But they would say that the Pakistan Army was here and would never let the Bengalis win. Later, when we lost everything—houses, property, cars, trucks, you name it—my uncles conceded that I had been right the whole time. They said, “*Yaar, tu theek hi kehta tha* [You were so right].” But they never listened to me then . . .’

‘What was their reaction when Pakistan surrendered on 16 December 1971?’ I asked.

‘It was disbelief . . . sheer disbelief . . . they didn't think it was going to happen,’ he said, laughing at the irony.

I asked him what it was like to live in the cantonment prior to and after 25 March. His family had constructed the cantonment in Jessore. I assumed that it would have been a safe place to reside amidst the violence that was taking over the cities and streets and alleys, and at the same time allowed Asif to be privy to some of the conversations and happenings within the army circles. I asked him about the Bengali officers who on one hand were part of the Pakistan Army and on the other must have shared nationalist aspirations. In fact, many regiments had even ‘mutinied’ and rebelled against the army, with West Pakistani officers being killed by their own subordinates. ‘Bengali officers were hated by this time,’ Asif said. ‘They were not considered brother-officers. After Operation Searchlight, they were disarmed and restricted to certain areas of the cantonment. You can

say that internment camps of sorts were made and it was understood that Bangladesh had become a reality.’

I asked him about the atmosphere in the cantonment at this time, if he ever overheard any conversations between Bengalis or West Pakistani soldiers. He thought for a moment before responding, as if calculating how much to say. ‘You won’t like what I’m going to share,’ he said awkwardly.

‘One very shameful and painful memory I have is from the army mess. I heard two young officers talking to each other, asking “*Tumhara score kitna hai?* (What’s your score?)” The other soldiers started to respond, shouting, “*Mera bees hai*”, “*Mera pandra hai*”, “*Mera das hai*” (My score is 20, mine is 15, mine is 10). I turned towards my old school friend, who was a captain in the army, and asked, “*Yeh kya bakwas kar rahein hain? Kya score?* (What nonsense are they saying? What score are they talking about?)” It was then that he told me that they were discussing how many girls, how many Bengalis, they had raped. *Woh unka score hota tha* (That was how they kept score).’

Outside the cantonment too violence had become the norm. ‘It had become routine for an army jeep or officer to be targeted. So much so that army vehicles going in and out of the cantonment had to use civilian number plates. And then protests were going on, students and activists would throw stones at police barricades, at army barricades, and even at cars that didn’t have a number plate in Bengali. There was a martial law, with mostly army patrols moving around. And then, of course, there was the firing. I don’t remember a single day that a few people were not killed. It was happening every day.’

I asked him if anyone he knew personally lost his or her life in this wave of violence. That was when he finally mentioned Moin. ‘He was my childhood friend who was killed inside Dhaka University. His girlfriend and he were both there, but she survived and he was shot. Right in front of me. I saw his body . . . I saw his body. It was a very, very painful episode in my life . . . I still have . . . I still have nightmares,’ he said, his voice much lower than it had been all afternoon. Yet, he didn’t allow himself to indulge in the loss for too long. He cleared his throat quickly and tried to change the

topic, telling me how government-controlled TV and radio channels were trying to spread misinformation and lies, convincing West Pakistanis that it were only a few R&AW-funded miscreants creating trouble and that the Pakistan Army had everything under control. When he returned to West Pakistan, he encountered countless people upholding these rigid misconceptions as truth.

‘Anam, it was so frustrating, so tiring to see that every person I met was anti-East Pakistan, anti-Bengali, trying to portray every Bengali as a Hindu, anti-Pakistan and anti-Islam. They couldn’t recognize the movement as a political or nationalist movement. For them, it was anti-Islamic. They felt that Islam was in danger and that they needed to stand up against the Bengalis to save Islam and to save Pakistan,’ Asif added. The understanding that most Bengalis were Muslim, and that they were all Pakistanis until 1971, failed them. The anti-Pakistan, anti-Islam, pro-India and pro-Hindu narrative would stick, becoming the only narrative in the post-war years. This was the same narrative I had grown up with. My own mother, who was in West Pakistan during the war, had only heard these stories—on state-run channels. This was the only truth she knew to pass on. The Mukti Bahini was cast as an evil, R&AW-funded villain. One-sided stories of violence were used to justify any news of Bengali killings that reached West Pakistan. The nation sat still and witnessed violence spiralling out of control, with only a handful of people coming forward to protest (the narratives and experiences of these people are outlined in Chapter 9).

Before I left, Asif told me how he left East Pakistan, of his last memories of that time. ‘By July 1971, I had left East Pakistan. There was a new project that my family was involved with in Okara Army Cantonment in the Pakistani part of Punjab. I was sent there to launch the project. I was told to go there, start the project and come back, but things changed and I could never return.’ (It was only in 2012 that Asif had a chance to visit Bangladesh as a tourist. At a parent-teacher meeting, he had met with the Bangladeshi ambassador, the father of one of his students. When he heard Asif speak Bengali, he was taken aback. He promised him a visa in that meeting and ensured that his wife and he could visit Dhaka shortly after).

The loss, Asif says, was immense. ‘I knew such wonderful people there and I lost touch with all of them. They were gentle, honest, decent, well-read and educated people. I remember when I was leaving, the *lohar* (blacksmith) who worked with us came to see me off and started crying. I said, “What is wrong with you? I’m just going to Okara and coming back.” But he looked at me and said, “No, you are wrong. You are not coming back.” I hugged him and insisted, “No, no. I am.” Yet, he was adamant that I won’t. I had always been kind to the workers, I understood their pain, which is why they gave me a lot of love. Deep inside, even I knew that this was farewell. That’s how bad things had become . . .’



Part III

1971: The Year That Was

As I explicitly turn to the events of 1971, I realize that this is a year about which much has been written about in South Asia and internationally. Scholars, military personnel, eyewitnesses and public institutions have issued various reports, books and articles on 1971. The events of the year have additionally found representation in films, songs and documentaries. Attempts have also been made to put forth the historical ‘facts’, or to reveal new ‘truths’ about what transpired in 1971.

This book attempts to move away from the efforts aimed at furnishing objective historical realities of that time. Instead, it focuses on bringing forth narratives of 1971 as experienced by people. As a researcher and author who has spent the past decade delving into some of the major historical and political conflicts of South Asia, I have come to realize that like elsewhere in the world, ‘facts’ and ‘truths’ are increasingly contested. The year 1971 isn’t a year or a war that we have left behind. Varying ‘versions’ of 1971 have emerged over time; in fact, 1971 has taken on a new life after 1971 itself. The birth of Bangladesh is as much an ongoing journey as the Partition of 1947 and the consequent creation of Pakistan. Neither of them are static—events you can simply ‘move on’ from. Rather, they have taken on unique meanings and interpretations. Official data in Bangladesh and Pakistan offers contradictory ‘evidence’ about the events that transpired in 1971. There is significant discrepancy in the number of casualties, the chronology of events and the terminology used to express

them. There is a Bangladeshi, Pakistani and an Indian version of 1971, each focusing (and not focusing) on events that bolster the respective state's national agenda.

In this section of the book, I will not try to bring 'objectivity' to these narratives. Rather, I find value in bringing forward the memories and numbers that people have found important to remember and retell. I believe that these 'subjectivities' reveal the ways in which 1971 remains important—or in some cases, negligible—in people's imagination. It also reveals the extent to which state histories or macro-narratives prevalent in the countries impact personal memories, and the ways in which people's personal experiences become appropriated as 'national experiences' or 'national truths'. Memory is after all malleable and impacted by one's surroundings, by the events that take place after the 'event' being discussed, whether it is 1947 or 1971.

In my work on Partition, for instance, I found that certain stories came forward more easily than others because it was these stories that the state had found important to stress upon and institutionalize. In Pakistan, Partition is tied to the nation's birth and thus perceived as a triumph over India. In a sense, Partition has metamorphosed into independence, but not independence from the British. Instead, every year on 14 August when I ask my students what we are celebrating, many of them say it is independence from 'Hindu India'. This narrative aligns with the state's discourse that dwells little on colonial history, emphasizing instead on the two-nation theory, defining Pakistan as everything India is not, essentially pak (pure) and Muslim, as opposed to the 'infidels' on the other side who reside in 'Hindu India'. Therefore, when I began work with Partition survivors in Pakistan, I found that it was easy to collect narratives of bloodshed and violence at the hands of Hindus and Sikhs. These were the stories at the tip of the tongue for so many people. Other stories, those of being saved or rescued by members of the 'other' community, or of nostalgia and longing, often had to be probed for. Of course, part of this can be explained by the fact that traumatic memories tend to push the softer ones into the background. However, I found that another significant reason for this is that

these softer memories have not found space in public discourse, because they are seen as a threat to the creation of Pakistan. If there are stories of coexistence, harmony and humanity, whom did Pakistan triumph over? Patriotism must be based on the hostility of the ‘other’ and rooted in the memory of the one-sided carnage committed by Hindus and Sikhs against Muslims. In India, on the other hand, where Partition is perceived as a loss, a break-up of the ‘motherland’, I found it easier to document narratives of nostalgia and longing, for it was a narrative reinforced by the state. In fact, some of my Pakistani interviewees expressed frustration at their counterparts in India for seeing Partition as a loss, without understanding what it represented for Muslims and why it needed to happen in the first place. By reviewing Indian textbooks and visiting India frequently, it was evident that the discourse had failed to explore in any significant detail the events that led up to Partition, leaving a vacuum in the telling of that history at the collective, and perhaps at the personal level too. Pakistan is thus, in Krishna Kumar’s words, institutionalized as an ‘illegitimate achievement’,¹ a loss blamed on the Muslims.

The same Partition is then viewed from a different lens in India and Pakistan, for one it is a triumph, for the other it is loss. The same is true for 1971, only this time it would be Pakistan that would be left with feelings of loss. An interview I conducted with a Partition survivor in Lahore aptly captured this:

‘I suppose there was some resentment (in India about Partition) too. I mean, we were happy to have made Pakistan, but they felt their country was divided. They had lost out. I remember I once stayed with this Hindu friend of ours (in India) and her mother kept talking about how Partition was such a bad thing, and it really bothered me because Pakistan was such a big accomplishment for us despite the personal losses we had to bear. My own mother had fought hard for it. But I think I can understand how they feel, they went through exactly what we went through when East Pakistan broke away from us.’²

While 1971 would mark ‘liberation’ in Bangladesh, celebrated for the decades to come, in Pakistan it would be remembered as the

‘dismemberment’ of the country. One’s triumph was again the other’s loss and would often be remembered and retold as such by the people of that land.

Is it then correct to say that what is the permitted discourse at the state level has an impact on the personal too? This is not to say that personal memories become entirely tainted or distorted and unable to offer resistance to these macro-narratives, but to recognize that the metanarratives, the national ‘truths’, do have an impact at the micro level. The urgency with which people felt compelled to share their stories, be it a Bengali, Bihari, Pakistani or Bangladeshi, showed me how the personal often blurs with the collective. Many of my interviewees expressed how they felt it was their duty to ‘share’ to ensure that the ‘nation’ did not ‘forget’ what people went through. The personal becomes political, the political personal. These narratives then not only give a glimpse into people’s personal histories but also the collective ‘national’ histories promoted by the state, that the citizens feel it is their duty to further. These histories may of course be ‘true’ but not necessarily holistic.

However, at the same time, I believe that the power of oral histories does lie in bringing forth people’s realities, which can at times disrupt the state narratives instead of reinforcing them. When I sat with Partition survivors long enough, stories and anecdotes that diverged from the state’s narrative would begin to roll in slowly, offering insights into my own past like no textbook ever had. I would find this to be true in many of my interviews on 1971 too. This section includes stories which may not be part of state-endorsed histories, or even linger in the collective imagination of people, but offer a nuanced understanding of a year that has often been understood in a black-and-white fashion. These narratives challenge the ‘other’ country’s discourse on 1971. For instance, my interviews with Bengalis bring into the fold of discussion stories Pakistan has silenced, and my interviews with Biharis challenge the selective remembrance of events in Bangladesh. However, many times, these oral histories also challenge the narrative of one’s own country. For instance, by sharing interviews with retired Pakistan Army officers, activists, poets and writers who resisted the

war while in West Pakistan, the Pakistani state narrative is punctuated with another description of the events by Pakistanis themselves. In the telling of these stories, the resistance of these Pakistanis against the state comes forth: first, they resisted the war and now they resist the state narrative of 1971 by narrating experiences that do not align neatly with the state's. Similarly, by interviewing non-Bengalis who felt that East Pakistan was home, and continue to live there even today, the Bangladeshi state narrative that mainly focuses on the experiences of Bengalis is also disrupted. This shows that 1971 was perhaps experienced in more varied ways than what meets the eye if one relies only on the state-level history. The collective and the personal then must be considered together, if one is to arrive at a more thorough understanding of that year and the ways 1971 lives on for people.

It is these diverse 'facts', i.e., the personal and collective memories people have chosen to hold on to and share that I turn to.

* * *

Bangladesh's War

This chapter looks at the experiences of erstwhile East Pakistanis during 1971, offering a glimpse into the different manifestations of the war in people's personal lives and the ways in which the memory of the war is evoked and retold to a Pakistani researcher decades after it.

Meghna Guhathakurta

‘Three men, an officer and two sepoy's barged in from the back door, pushing our maid to the side, demanding: “Professor Sahib *kahan hai?* (Where is the professor)?” When my mother asked why, the officer said, “*Unko le jayega* (We have come to take him).” My mother asked, “*Kahan le jayega* (Where will you take him?).” He repeated, “*Bus le jayega* (We will take him).”’

It was the night of 25 March, when Meghna, then only fifteen years old, had been woken up by her father, a provost at Jagannath Hall, a non-Muslim residence hall at Dhaka University. It was the night Operation Searchlight was launched, the Pakistan Army's action to crush the secessionist movement in East Pakistan. Dhaka University, whose students were actively engaged in the resistance movement against Pakistan, would be one of the primary targets. The operation would unfold into a long, bloody war, first between East and West Pakistan and then between India and Pakistan, finally culminating in Pakistan's surrender on 16 December 1971, and the birth of Bangladesh.

‘There was a lot of firing that night, but we assumed that it was the Dhaka University students, excited and eager to show their spirit to Zulfikar

Ali Bhutto, who was in town. By then, the firing had become a regular occurrence,' Meghna told me. 'Our flat was opposite Jagannath Hall, overlooking the Shahid Minar, the monument for the martyrs of the language movement of 1952. In fact, we were at the centre of all the things that were going on,' she said, referring to how Dhaka University was one of the major centres of political activity, right from when the language movement started to the 1970s. 'We even went to see Bangabandhu's speech of 7 March (held at Ramna Race Course, now called Suhrawardy Udyan) ¹ and I remember, my father kept saying, "I don't see any mediation. I don't know what will happen." He feared that the army would clamp down because there was no way they would let things continue as they were . . . The radios were broadcasting their own programmes in Bangla, there were marches happening, there was an active civil disobedience movement. But even then, my father thought the army clampdown would just involve forcing students to stop protesting and return to university, or at most translate into the arrest of teachers (who, the state thought, were instigating trouble). We could never have imagined what happened.'

On 7 March 1971, at the speech that Meghna attended with her father, Sheikh Mujib addressed lakhs of people. By now, Yahya Khan had postponed the opening session of the new parliament. As a result, 'widespread violence erupted in East Pakistan . . . Mujib was under intense pressure from two sides. Leftist politicians and activists in East Pakistan demanded that he declare independence right away, while Pakistan's military leaders flew in troops to make sure he would abstain from such a pronouncement.'² Against this backdrop, on 7 March, Sheikh Mujib delivered a historic speech, trying to steer a 'strategic middle ground'³ by emphasizing that until the regime met his conditions, all offices, courts and schools would be closed, and there would no cooperation with the government. Before ending the speech, he also declared, 'This struggle is for emancipation! This struggle is for independence.'⁴ Many would hail the speech as a call for independence⁵ while others would argue that Sheikh Mujib was still trying to have his demands met within the framework of

Pakistan, advocating for federalism based around his six points. One woman in Dhaka would tell me, ‘On 7 March, Mujib didn’t declare independence even though many Bengalis wanted him to. He didn’t want to be the prime minister of Bangladesh alone. He wanted to be the prime minister of all of Pakistan, a much larger territory. On 7 March 1971, he was still hoping that Pakistan would meet his demands.’ Several other people would reiterate the same thought. However, as historian David Ludden argues, ‘despite the ambiguity [of what Mujib meant to say] . . . the landmark speech inspired a popular revolution’⁶ and is today remembered as a historic moment in the struggle for independence. It would trigger an even greater resistance against the Pakistani regime than the one already underway, with Dhaka University once again at the centre.

But even before the events of March 1971, Jagannath Hall and Meghna’s father had been caught in a disturbance. She told me that the trouble had started as early as January or February (she cannot remember the precise month) that year. ‘Just opposite Jagannath Hall was the National Cadet College, where the army trained young students for parades and things like that. So, they had their headquarters there and army officers were posted there. Now, there was this break (a big gap) in the wall of the university.’ She told me that the army would enter through this gap to march along. ‘It wasn’t a big deal, they would just say “Attention!” and all that . . . By now, the civil disobedience movement was going on and most of the students had gone off. But some of them, especially the poor students and the Hindu students, had stayed back in the hostels to earn extra money through tuitions. These students decided to complain that the marches were disturbing their lessons, their exam preparation. You have to understand, the students’ blood was boiling by this time. Things had stirred up politically . . . and so, one day these students decided to take some cement and bricks and block the break in the wall so that the army couldn’t enter. And then . . . they shouted a slogan. They said “Jai Bangla, Jai Sindh!”⁷ This was a common slogan at that time. However, when a complaint was registered by the army headquarters, they noted that the students were shouting “Jai Hind” instead of “Jai Sindh”.’

As Meghna spoke, I could only imagine the repercussions. Given the anti-Hindu sentiments in the country, and the fact that the nationalist movement in East Pakistan was commonly understood as an Indian conspiracy perpetuated by Hindu intellectuals and teachers in East Pakistan, the sloganeering, that too from students belonging to a ‘Hindu’ hostel, was not going to go down easy with the state. It would only serve to reinforce the prevalent beliefs of ‘Hindu disloyalty’ and of Pakistani Hindus being anti-state and pro-enemy, i.e., pro-Hind (or India). In the process, genuine grievances and the long struggle for rights and equal treatment would come to be sidelined in favour of simplistic narratives. By brushing over the events preceding 1971 and focusing on the rhetoric of Indian conspiracy and Hindu treachery, Bangladesh would come to be seen as an ‘illegitimate achievement’ in Pakistan (similar to how Pakistan is perceived in India), a loss difficult to accept.

‘After that incident, we all feared that Jagannath Hall would be targeted,’ Meghna continued. It wasn’t long before this happened. On 25 March, when the Pakistan Army entered Dhaka University, the hall and its provost—Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, Meghna’s father—would face the brunt of the action.

‘I was sleeping when my father woke me up and asked me to go lie down on the floor in the other room. We could hear shots being fired. He assumed that it was the students at Dhaka University, eager to show their spirit to Bhutto, who was in town. By now, Sheikh Mujib had called for people to be prepared with whatever they had, and so whenever night came, students would parade with their arms, shooting something or the other with hunting rifles. But this night the noise was too much. I remember my mother peeked out of the window and saw a convoy of army jeeps enter the campus. She turned to us and said, “The army has come.” Even then, we thought that all they would do was to take away the rifles and force the students back to their classes . . . or arrest the professors at the most. And so when they entered our home, my mother went to get my father; he was going to be arrested, we thought. She handed him his *Panjabi* and told him, “They have come to take you.”’

Both Meghna and her mother believed that Jyotirmoy would return in a few days, so much so that when they saw the family of Professor Maniruzzaman, a professor of statistics who lived in the same building as the Guhathakurtas, refusing to let go of Maniruzzaman, Meghna's mother assured them, 'Look, let them take him away. They have taken my husband too. They will shoot you if you don't! If you resist, they will shoot.' Meghna told me that she and her mother had thought they would call up their friends who had connections and held powerful positions; they were confident that their friends would help get Professor Guhathakurta and others like him out.

'I rushed to call my friends, whomever I thought could help,' Meghna said, 'and that's when I found out that the phone line was dead.' I noticed dread creeping into her voice; the fact that the phone connection had snapped indicated that things were far worse than they had imagined, shattering the hope that her family had held on to until then. It was going to be one of the darkest nights of their lives. 'Suddenly, we heard shots and ran outside, finding Maniruzzaman and the others lying in a pool of blood. The women in their family were trying to get them to drink water. One of the women told my mother, "They have also shot your husband! I gave him water, he's calling your name." In that moment, the world collapsed around me . . .'

My body trembled as I sat besides Meghna, observing her narrate these horrific memories with such composure. She told me that she had repeated this story many times. 'I feel like it is my duty,' she said. Meghna added that she wanted to play her part in ensuring that the historical realities she lived through were documented. Like so many others in Bangladesh, she wanted to archive these histories so that the struggles of the people, the memories of the war—one that took away so much from her—aren't forgotten.

'We took a pitcher of water and ran out of the back door, finding my father lying on his back. He was conscious. He said, "They (the army) asked my name and then they asked me my religion. I said I am a Hindu. After that, they gave the order to shoot me." One of the bullets had pierced

his waist, leaving him paralysed, while the other had punctured his neck. That . . . ’ she took in a deep breath before continuing, the only moment she stole for herself in the middle of the narration, ‘that was the critical injury. By then, other people from the building came down and helped us carry him across all the bodies and the blood back to our house. The medical hospital was just opposite the road, but we couldn’t take him there because of the curfew . . . the army was patrolling. So, we just stayed with him, my mother trying to calm him down and stop the bleeding. All through that night, all through the next day, and the next night, he lay there like that. It was only on the 27th morning, when the curfew was lifted, that we were able to take him to the hospital.’

A few days later, on 30 March, Jyotirmoy succumbed to his injuries, leaving Meghna and her mother grief-stricken and displaced for the months to come. For the remaining part of the year, they would go from one friend’s house to another, often taking refuge in hospitals and orphanages to save their lives. But when I asked her if she or her mother ever wished that their family, like so many other Hindu families—that had moved to India during or after Partition—too should have made the move, given what it cost her family, she shook her head.

‘We were born here. This is our desh, our ancestral land. My father used to say that one does not leave one’s country . . . ’ She paused to reflect for a moment and then said, ‘My mother and he, both teachers, were married in 1948. They loved what they did. They enjoyed a vibrant social and cultural life in Dhaka. People would gather around them, reciting poetry, putting up plays . . . my mother and my father, like so many others in the intellectual circles, didn’t really believe in Partition, but they also didn’t mind it. They thought that if Pakistan was for everyone, they were very happy to be Pakistanis. They didn’t have anything against Pakistan until Pakistan had something against them,’ she laughed.

Long before his death, Jyotirmoy was targeted by the state, like many other Hindus. He was put on the enemy list, blacklisted during President Ayub Khan’s regime. ‘Hindus, who held high posts, were blacklisted as Indian agents. My father’s radio broadcast, which included book reviews,

talks on literature, etc., was prohibited until Ayub Khan stepped down. When my father inquired, he was told he had been blacklisted because of a poem he had written as a young man, praising (Indian nationalist) Subhas Chandra Bose. In fact, when he returned after completing his PhD from England in 1967 and submitted his passport for renewal, they never returned it to him . . . it was always stopped from Islamabad.’ Yet Jyotirmoy refused to leave. ‘This was home for them,’ Meghna said, reflecting on her parents’ choice. There is no regret in her voice; the difficult history of her nation and her family has settled with her as the only truth.

According to official Bangladeshi history, and in people’s memories, the night of 25 March, when Meghna’s father was shot, is imprinted as the beginning of a gruesome war. It was the night that Bangladeshi history would be written from. It was the night that would serve as a constant reminder of the ‘brutality of Pakistani forces’, etched into textbooks, walls and museums of Bangladesh even today. It was the night into which all the struggles of East Pakistanis 1947 onwards, against the discrimination and hostility they had experienced from West Pakistan, would converge. As many Bangladeshis put it, there was no going back after 25 March 1971. As the army operation began, the fate of Pakistan, and of Bangladesh, was sealed. The following day, on 26 March 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared independence. That day has ever since been marked as Bangladesh’s Independence Day.⁸ By the end of that year, the subcontinent was once again divided, leaving one nation rejoicing its new-found independence and the other mulling its loss.

* * *

Ferdousi Priyabhashini

‘For eight months, I was a rape victim . . . each moment, every moment, they took me. When the war was ending, in November [1971], they threw me in a concentration camp . . . there, in the barracks, I saw what they [were] doing. I cannot even explain it because it is so inhumane. It is

beyond my . . . uh . . . my imagination . . . beyond anyone's imagination, the kind of torture [inflicted] on every woman there. Even I was tortured (in the camp) for thirty-two hours. I cried, I shouted to be released . . .'

This was Ferdousi Priyabhashini who was declared a freedom fighter in Bangladesh in 2016 and was reportedly the first woman to publicly announce herself as a *birangona*, a war heroine.⁹ Born in 1947, Ferdousi would go on to become a renowned Bangladeshi sculptor. When she passed away in 2018, her death was mourned by many.

I had been working in Kashmir at the time I decided to talk to Ferdousi, documenting stories of shelling and war on the Line of Control (LoC). As a therapist and counsellor, I had also worked with people who had suffered violence and abuse, but I knew that a conversation with Ferdousi was going to be one of the most difficult ones I had ever had. I certainly didn't want to probe her insensitively for the sake of my research. I thus decided to walk into her house without any set questions or agenda; I wanted to let her speak to me, to tell me what she wanted to, as she wanted to.

It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of women were raped in 1971. Estimates vary anywhere between 1,00,000 and 4,00,000¹⁰ (these numbers are just as contested as the number of casualties). In the aftermath of the war, the Bangladesh government gave public recognition to women who were raped in an effort to prevent them from being ostracized by society.¹¹ They were given the title of 'birangona', which literally translates as 'war heroine'.

Such public recognition of rape is certainly rare; in several cases around the world, speaking about sexual harassment and rape evokes shaming of those who have been abused. It is as if the 'dishonour' rests not so much in the act as it does in speaking about the act. Those whose abuse becomes known are shamed far more than those who abuse. During my work in Kashmir and elsewhere in the region, I found many survivors had been silenced by family members to maintain the 'honour' of the community, even when the community was well aware of the rape. In Bangladesh too, as I would learn, such shaming continued to take place when survivors' rape became 'known'.

Nayanika Mookherjee, the author of *The Spectral Wound*, who has spent a considerable amount of time working with birangonas in Bangladesh, critically examines the construction of the concept in Bangladeshi society. Mookherjee writes about three women from the village of Enayetpur who were publicly presented as war heroines in 1992 to reinforce the message of the Gono Adalat (mentioned in Chapter 5), which called for the trials of war criminals. While the villagers of Enayetpur had known about the women's rape, they had imposed no social sanctions upon them because they saw the rape as a 'tragedy' that could have 'befallen anyone'. However, the situation changed when the women were seen to be intentionally making this 'tragedy' public in the 1990s. For exposing this 'public secret', they were subjected to economic and social sanctions.¹² Others too, I would learn, faced sanctions or were shunned by their families. The rehabilitation efforts by the state could certainly not shield all women, and in fact in some cases, their 'branding' as birangonas only stigmatized them further.¹³

However, women's experiences, both during and after the war, were far from homogeneous. Many of them found stable, nurturing and caring relationships, and in response to their public acknowledgement of rape and recognition as a birangona, found warmth and acceptance, rather than being shunned or ostracized.¹⁴ Social background, family setting, personal relationships and class, all had a part to play, creating a far more nuanced experience among rape survivors than popularly imagined. In Ferdousi's case, the public exposure of her rape in the late 1990s would be celebrated as a success story in Bangladesh. Her story found coverage in newspapers and books, and people expressed their respect for her courage. Afterwards, she would go on to work with other women to help them bring forward their own experiences and struggle to find them acceptance in society. She told me that it was important for her to share her story, and for others to do the same, for she didn't want people to forget what had happened to women like her in the months preceding Bangladesh's birth.

'In 1971, I was in Khulna, which is where I was born. I started my career at the age of sixteen. I was working . . . I had to look after my whole family: my mother, brothers, sisters, and also my three sons. [It was a] Big family.

So, I had to take jobs and continue working in 1971. I could not go anywhere, because I was in service.’ Ferdousi and I communicated in English, a language she is familiar with but not fluent in. Our conversation is punctuated with pauses, and bits of Bengali, as she tries to think of the right word to capture the essence of what she wants to say.

I learnt that despite coming from an aristocratic background, Ferdousi’s family faced many financial difficulties, especially after her parents were separated, when Ferdousi was only fifteen.¹⁵ As the eldest of eight children, it was Ferdousi who had to start earning a living at a tender age to provide for her family. By 1971, she also had her own family. ‘The first time I got married, [I was] very young, fifteen years old. It was a wrong choice, misguided. That’s where my misfortune started.’ Married in the early 1960s and bearing three children by the early 1970s, Ferdousi’s financial woes continued to worsen. When the couple divorced, she was left with the burden of looking after her growing family. In 1971, she told me she was working at a jute mill.

‘In March, news was coming in, but I thought it was just some trouble, that it would be all right. I was giving more attention to my personal life, to my office, rather than what the country was doing. I was not a politician. But my mother came from a political family (Ferdousi’s grandfather, Abdul Hakim, had served as a Speaker in the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly), so she was running here and there, bringing news. My mother was alert about what was going to happen. Then the attack started. The non-Bengalis jumped on us and started massacring people. A few Bengalis joined them too. After 26 March, we were running here, there and everywhere. My house had so many babies: an eight-month old, a two-year old, a three-year old. They would cry for milk. We ran for almost a week to save ourselves . . . we saw many places where people were killing others.’

Realizing that tensions ran high everywhere and that they were not safer away from home, Ferdousi decided to return to her town of Khalishpur, Khulna, and rejoin work. She was acutely aware of her monetary situation and how many mouths were dependent on her. ‘I vowed to join my old office . . . I had found Mr Fidai, our general manager at the mill, to be very

kind and wonderful. When I saw him at the office, I thought there would be a place for me, that I would at least have a place to stay . . . some shelter. I said to him, “Allow me to do any work, even as a peon or messenger.” But he said no [and asked me to] join as his personal secretary and telephone operator. I was happy, but the day I joined, I found out what his plans really were.’

Sending most of her family to her brother’s house in Jessore, promising to send them money once she started earning again, Ferdousi had joined work with the hope of gaining some financial stability for her relatives and children. Instead, she would tell me how that marked the beginning of her ‘torture’. She would be raped again and again in the months to come.

Ferdousi narrated how Mr Fidai would send men to her house, knowing that she was alone and vulnerable, pushing her to ‘cooperate’ with the ‘visitors’. When she would refuse, false charges of the murder of a professor would be levied against her.¹⁶ She would further be threatened that the Pakistan Army would punish her for her brothers joining the liberation war forces.¹⁷

‘They blamed many people like this. It was their wish . . . they would say, “You are the killer of the professor, you provoked the killing; in this area, most of the killing is because of you.” It was their excuse to torture me. They wanted women. I used to speak good Urdu and English. Now I am forgetting all the languages, but I used to talk fluently. So, they could communicate with me, talk with me,’ she told me, indicating that her fluency in the languages they spoke made her even more ‘desirable’. ‘A lot of officers used to come . . . my organization’s head used to send them to my house. Later, I was taken to the concentration camp in Jessore.’

I am still trying to digest everything she is telling me, when she starts narrating names. ‘Naval Commander Gul Zarin, Commander Aslam, Captain Ghani, Captain Zafar . . . all of them were from the naval office. And then in the Jessore Cantonment, Colonel Khatak, Major Banuree, Captain Abdullah, Captain Ishtiaq . . .’ the list of the men who had ‘tortured’ (a term she uses often) her rolling off her tongue. ‘This way I can,

I have, memorized officer's names.' Forty-six years later, neither the names nor the memories leave her.

I look at Ferdousi and notice that the gentle and warm expression she greeted us with never left her face, even as she talked about the violence inflicted on her. I tried to imagine her as a young woman; what must have those days been like for her, isolated in her home, left so vulnerable? For a moment, I was unable to shake the images from my head. It became difficult for me to continue. However, Ferdousi continued to speak. This time, she told me of a Pakistani officer who had helped her during some of the worst hours of her life. Just as she cannot forget those who tortured her, it is important for her to remember those who had empathized with her, had wanted to help her. 'When they took me to the concentration camp in Jessore, there was one officer who was kind enough to help me. He said, "Don't cry or shout. I will send you back." He wanted to help me.' Eventually, she would tell me that the officer helped to get her released.

My conversation with Ferdousi reminded me of an interview I had conducted with a colonel in Lahore. Born in 1930, Khurram (name changed) had witnessed both: the birth of Pakistan in 1947 and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. Commissioned in 1952, he had been posted to East Pakistan, serving in the East Pakistan Rifles in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There he had picked up the local language and made some Bengali friends as well. While several of the retired army officers I had spoken with had given me a rather simplistic narrative of the war, focusing on India's role alone, Khurram spoke about the success of the 'conspiracy'—whereby he accused Sheikh Mujib of joining hands with India in the 1960s—in the context of what he perceived was *ziyati* (injustice) on the part of West Pakistanis. 'Collectively, as a society, we have blamed others, instead of looking at our own mistakes. Yes, the fact is that there was an Indian conspiracy . . . this is all true, but the fact remains that it was our treatment of the Bengalis and our attitude towards them that allowed this conspiracy to succeed. Otherwise nothing would have happened,' he said.

His wife, who too had lived in East Pakistan when Khurram was posted there, told me of the everyday mistreatments handed out to the Bengalis.

‘The West Pakistanis would treat the East Pakistanis with contempt. West Pakistani civil servants posted there wouldn’t meet the Bengalis, it was hard to get an appointment from them. There was less development there . . . the two parts had started off differently, with East Pakistan at a disadvantage after Partition, but it should’ve caught up. Instead, there was more development in West Pakistan. *Yeh humari hamakatain hain* (These were our mistakes). There were many fault lines. For instance, there was the language issue, the economic and development issue, the fact that their culture was influenced by Hindu customs, their women would wear bindis, touch the feet of elders. *Humari shakal-soorat, humara rang, zaban, libas sab mukhtalif tha* (He would tell me that we—West Pakistanis—were taller and that they—East Pakistanis—were shorter. ‘We’ were fairer, ‘they’ were darker. ‘Our’ language, ‘our’ way of dressing was different than ‘theirs’), but we could have made it work if our leadership was sensible.’

In 1971, Khurram played an active part in the war, serving in Punjab. He would say, ‘*Hum ne ziyatian ki aur 1971 mein kuch zaada hi ki. Itni ziyatian ki keh woh bhaag kar India chale gaye* (We made mistakes throughout, and too many of them in 1971, so much so that the East Pakistanis fled to India).’ He told me of a Bengali hawaldar who was responsible for aiding the army where Khurram was posted. With the little Bengali Khurram knew, he struck up a conversation with him, learning that his family had fled to India. ‘Can you imagine that a soldier, who was fighting for us, his family had to take refuge in India? That is the extent of our folly. What loyalty would he have for us in such a scenario? Many Bengalis deserted the forces and crossed over to India. They wanted to go home. They wanted to know if their families were dead or alive.’ And then he told me of what he had heard about what was transpiring on the other side, in East Pakistan itself.

‘We have training manuals and literature on how the army is supposed to conduct itself [in an operation]. There are three guiding principles: you act in good faith, you use minimum force to restore order, your action shouldn’t be punitive, it should be preventive. General Niazi (who commanded the Eastern Command of the Pakistan Army in East Pakistan) violated all three

in Bengal. He acted in bad faith, he was punitive and he didn't use minimum force. *Ziyatian karta tha, uska nateerja bhugta hai* (He was unjust. We had to suffer the consequences).'

When I asked him if he could elaborate on these ziyatis and what had happened there, my question was met with silence. A moment later, he said, 'What can you imagine? I wasn't there, but I heard stories from my friends who were posted there. We killed them and we raped their women. *Is se bura kya ho sakta hai* (what can be worse than that)? One of my friends told me, "I was busy keeping my troops in check, ensuring no one misbehaved. And then General Sahib came and said hello to the jawans. And then he asked, 'How many women did you have?' Such a question from a general destroys the disciplinary structure. He would say things like, '*Oye mundiyan, ina di nasal sahi karo* (Boys, purify the Bengali race).'"

Back in the room, Ferdousi brought out old photo albums. She pointed towards a photograph of herself, of when she was young. 'This is me in 1971,' she said. As she looked fondly at her younger self, I glanced at her and then the room behind her. Her home is decorated with many of her own sculptures, sculpting material scattered across her garage. I wonder if art helps to heal her in anyway, building and nurturing sculptures from scratch, after all the destruction she has seen. Gently, I asked her what happened after she left the concentration camp. The war was close to finishing. How did she survive the remaining days?

She told me that her husband, Ahsanullah, who was resting in one of the rooms as we spoke, helped her. Together, they sought refuge in a hotel in Khulna. On 16 December, the day the Pakistan Army surrendered, Ahsanullah was with her. When he found her crying, he had said to her, 'You're not happy? This is a wonderful day. Our loveliest day!' Ferdousi would turn to him and say, 'Just the other day I was in a concentration camp, I cannot believe that the country is free.' Together with Ahsanullah, Ferdousi built a life after the war, bearing three daughters with him. The post-war years, however, weren't seamless. In fact, Ferdousi was accused of being a collaborator and faced many hurdles, some at the hands of her own relatives.¹⁸ Yet, she told me that her husband had supported her through the

process. He was one of the first people to know what she had been through during the war and, later, when she would decide to speak out in the 1990s, he sat in the audience, telling everyone that she was his pride.

Before I left, Ferdousi gave me a hug and took a photograph with me in her garage. Then she smiled softly and asked me to visit her again when I came to Bangladesh. As fate would have it, that was the last time we met. Less than a year later, I read in the news that Ferdousi, freedom fighter and sculptor, had passed away.

* * *

Chuknagar

We pass banana trees and rice fields, men wearing lungis and homes with tin sheds. Heavy monsoon rain pours down on us as we drive along on a bumpy, narrow road to Chuknagar in Khulna district. My view of lush green fields is interspersed with small roadside shops selling drinks and snacks, with big Fair and Lovely billboards hanging above them. In between these shops and the fields are men selling fresh vegetables to passers-by.

Once every few moments I look away from the scenery and glance down to read a few pages from the book resting on my lap. It was given to me by Professor Muntassir Mamoon (conversations with whom are mentioned in Chapter 5) and is titled *1971 Chuknagar Genocide*. The book has been edited by Mamoon and includes testimonies of what is known in Bangladesh as one of the worst massacres of the 1971 war. It reads:

The route from different areas to India intersected at Chuknagar. From there, with the help of brokers or pro-liberation people, they used to cross the border. Hundreds of Hindus gathered daily at Chuknagar from Batiaghata, Dakope, Satkhira, Bagerhat, etc., areas to go India. ¹⁹

By 20 May 1971, which is the date I am told mass killings took place, Chuknagar was flooded with India-bound refugees, ready to leave their homes to escape the unrest and bloodshed in East Pakistan. According to

one version, when a row broke out between a Bihari boatman and the passengers over the fare, the Bihari informed the Pakistan Army about many Bengalis gathering at Chuknagar.²⁰ The hope, I am told, was to push the Bengalis out by instilling fear and getting hold of the refugees' jewellery, money and belongings. Instead, it is estimated that 6000 to 10,000 people were killed.²¹ (Others would claim higher figures, as mentioned in my interviews later.)

The numbers and events at Chuknagar have been contested²² just like other events of 1971. My focus then, as mentioned earlier, is not to ascertain the 'facts', but to meet with people who had witnessed or suffered what happened there and to learn how they continue to survive while living in close proximity to a site which took away many of their loved ones. How did they make sense of what had happened? How did they cope with their loss? What did it mean to come back to the field today, where I'm told a college has been built? And what did it mean to speak with a Pakistani about what had happened? Those are some of the questions I reached Chuknagar with that morning.

We parked outside Chuknagar College, a private institution established next to the 'killing field' in 1983. The principal, Shafiqul Islam, welcomed us in the hallway and ushered us into his office. I noticed framed photographs of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sheikh Hasina on the wall behind his desk. Many other offices have the same photographs. I wonder what happens when it is the BNP, and not the Awami League, which is in power? I am told that textbooks are revised, as are airport names and currency bills, when the party in power changes.²³ Do the photographs outlive the political party in rule?

Islam was dressed in a white shirt, with a red scarf hanging from his neck. A sticker on the scarf depicted the Bangladesh and Indian flags. He told me the Indian high commissioner presented it to him for his research on 1971.

'I was about fifteen years old in 1971,' he began. 'This place, Chuknagar, was used as a transit point by many people who were crossing over into India. By now, everyone had heard of the killings. They were trying to seek

refuge. As students, we would help arrange vehicles for the crossing over. On 20 May, about 11 a.m., we heard shots being fired. I remember, I was in the market. I heard that the Pakistan Army had come. There were twenty-five to thirty soldiers . . . suddenly there was continuous firing. I crossed the river and ran [to a place] four to five kilometres away. It was only around 5 or 6 p.m. that I returned (eyewitnesses told me the firing had begun at 11 a.m. and continued till 4 p.m.). There were bodies everywhere, the river was full. I don't think any less than 15,000 people died, but there's no record of the incident. I'm trying to create awareness. We've formed a committee on the 1971 genocide in Chuknagar. In 1999, the government recognized it as a killing field. The highest number of people was killed here. Every 20 May, we have discussions, programmes, memorials, meetings. Victims, journalists, professors come together and the students help arrange all of this.'

I asked what happened to him after the killings on 20 May? Where did he go? How did he survive the rest of the war? 'May onwards, the Indian Army started training 2000–3000 Bengalis per month. The Mujibnagar government ²⁴ had offices in India and would send freedom fighters to recruit young boys and students. By August, I had also become a freedom fighter. I went to a Mukti Bahini camp 10 to 12 miles away. There, I was given rifle and gun training. After the surrender, I helped arrest fifteen to sixteen razakars and punished them. Many razakars were killed.'

A few other men from the area also collected in Islam's office to meet. They had heard about some Pakistanis visiting to learn about what happened on this spot on 20 May 1971. One of them said, 'I was here, I witnessed the killing. Minimum figure of people killed is 10,000, but actually about 12,000 people died. People were taking shelter on trees, inside homes and in ponds. One of my cousins also died, he was only thirteen years old. He opened the door thinking the army wasn't there, but as soon as he opened it, he was shot. He was Muslim . . . I am also Muslim. I was hiding in one of the homes. The Pakistan Army would call people out and ask them to recite the *kalma* (prayer to denote one's Muslim faith), say "Pakistan zindabad, Allah-o-Akbar (Long live Pakistan, God is great)". I

recited it and was saved. So many people had collected here that day. The border is only a few kilometres away. This is a short route to India and many people used to stop here to sell, buy, cook, eat, rest. I was a college student in 1971, eighteen years old. Like Islam, I also became a freedom fighter by August. I went to India for training. When we came back, our troops fought the Pakistan Army.’

As he spoke, young boys brought in plates of sliced mangoes and placed them in front of us. Mutton karahi and yogurt followed. Soon an extravagant meal was laid out on the table, but I had no appetite. For me, it was difficult to digest the stories and the food at the same time. But as the details were narrated to me, people reached for their plates and began to eat. I looked around the room and wondered whether that is what happened when one had to live with traumatic memories. Do they begin to coexist alongside the everyday mundane activities, woven into daily routines and practicalities? What other way was there to survive? To go on? Back home, when I would interview Bihari families who had suffered violence during the war, many of them would choose to share their stories over tea or a meal. To eat is to survive, just as sharing experiences of the war feels essential for so many of them. That’s why a roomful of people had come forward to share their experiences with me today. Several of them, like Shafiqul Islam worked in the vicinity where they had witnessed the killings. It had become a part of their daily lives, their work, and their livelihood.

My thoughts were interrupted as an aged, thin man walked into the room. He was introduced to me as Ershad. Soon, he was joined by a woman, Rajkumari Shundari, dressed in a yellow and orange sari, with her head covered by her pallu and a tika resting on her forehead. She said *namashkar* (greetings) as she walked in. The room was congested by now, the chatter louder. I decide to step outside and sit in the corridor to speak with Ershad and Shundari. The rain, meanwhile, continued to form puddles in the field beside us. Young boys now played football in the rain and I could see crops growing where I am told bodies once lay.

Both Ershad and Shundari only speak in Bengali. Their words needed to be translated. I learnt that Ershad was in his twenties at the time, working as

a farmer with his father. When his father saw the military vehicles approach, he told Ershad to run away. While he managed to save Ershad, he wasn't as fortunate himself. That day, he would be shot and killed. 'We could hear the firing from inside. It continued for hours. Eventually, my mother asked me to go find my father and to see if anyone else we knew needed help, if anybody was still alive. When I came out, I saw my father's body. It was then that I saw Shundari,' he said, looking at her seated next to him. 'She was only a few months old, sucking on her dead mother's breast. I cried, "Is anybody alive? Whose baby is this?" But no one was alive . . .'

Ershad had noticed that the woman Shundari was trying to suckle from was wearing sindoor, the symbol of married Hindu women. He told me that while he knew he couldn't leave her alone, he also didn't think he could raise her in a Muslim home. He thought she would be better off brought up by people of her own faith. 'I didn't want her to convert to Islam. Everyone told me she would be raised better in a Hindu house, instead of my family.' And so, after a few days, he asked a Hindu friend if he would raise her. Ershad promised to bear the expense. His friend agreed, giving Shundari a Hindu name and raising her till the age of fourteen. 'It was difficult to take care of her after that . . . so she was married off.'

I looked at Shundari. She had listened quietly as Ershad spoke about her life. I shifted my attention to her, asking her to tell me more about herself, about her childhood memories. She spoke softly, slowly telling me about some of the most poignant moments of her life. 'I have no memory of the incident (the killings at Chuknagar) as I was only six months old. But when I was six or seven years old, I came to know about what had happened from my foster parents (the Hindu family who raised her). The neighbours would mock me, saying they were not my real parents and that I had been picked up from the killing field. So, one day I asked my foster parents whether they were my real parents or not. They told me that Ershad had picked me from the killing field and given me to them.'

Shundari said she knew Ershad by this time. He was a friend of her family's. But after she found out how he had rescued her, she saw him in a new light. 'I began to call him father.' I asked if she still referred to him that

way, to which she said Ershad had asked her not to. ‘He wanted me to call my foster parent father and him grandfather. So, I call him Dadu (grandfather) now. So do my children.’

‘My foster parents were very poor. They couldn’t even afford a proper meal every day. So, from a young age, I had to work. Since I wasn’t very educated, I could only find work as a day labourer. And then, when I was fourteen years old, they decided to get me married. I was married to a widower, an old man of about fifty years who already had children. The children didn’t treat me well. They were six and ten years old. Even there, poverty followed me. My husband was ill and couldn’t work, so I had to maintain the whole family, his children, our children, my husband, everyone. As a day labourer, sometimes you find work and sometimes you don’t. The day I wouldn’t find work, no one would eat. My husband died six years ago. After his death, I was thrown out of the house. Later, I joined a hotel but the people there had a problem with a Hindu cooking in the kitchen and so I was sacked. Now I work as a cleaner, as an ayah.’ Shundari told me that she often wondered if her fate would have been different had her parents not been killed. Would she have fared better?

As I looked at Ershad and Shundari, I could only imagine that the field which took away both their parents must serve as a constant reminder of the past. I wonder what it meant for them to tell me, a Pakistani, about what had happened there. Decades had passed, but the memories, I knew, were still fresh. Ershad rubbed his hand over his arm and said, ‘When I come here, there is terrible pain, there is no consolation. Pakistanis are the reason for my suffering, but after forty-six years, someone has come to hear my suffering. I’m happy you’ve come here, but the pain still haunts me. We lost the breadwinner of our family; I can’t forget that.’ I nodded gently, my eyes watering as I think about everything the two of them have been through. And then I noticed Shundari sobbing softly. Her body began to shake and I couldn’t hold my tears back either. I reached out to her and she hugged me, her thin body trembling against mine as she broke down.

For a few moments, we remained in each other’s embrace. Then, she slowly withdrew and wiped her nose with her pallu. ‘My parents died and

they will never come back. But so many years later, Pakistanis have come to ask about me, so there is some consolation. But will Pakistan pay me compensation for all that I lost? That's my question. I am still suffering . . . ' she said before walking away with Ershad. I watched their figures become smaller and smaller until their silhouettes blurred into each other and then disappeared. The memory of Ershad and Shundari, father and daughter, grandfather and granddaughter, Muslim and Hindu, would stay with me long after I left Bangladesh.

* * *

Niaz Zaman

When I met Niaz Aapa, as she is commonly referred to by friends and family, she was recovering from chikungunya. I had been warned of the virus—transmitted through the bite of an infected mosquito—by friends in Bangladesh. Several people had been falling ill; Niaz Aapa had been the latest victim. That, however, didn't prevent her from going all out with her hospitality. She invited me into her house and talked to me for several hours, answering all my questions.

I was particularly keen to meet Niaz Aapa for I had heard and read so much about her. A year before I met her, she was awarded the prestigious Bangla Academy Literary Award. I knew her as a translator, a former professor of Dhaka University and as someone who had edited several anthologies, including those on 1971.²⁵ I was also keen to meet her as she was one of the few people I spoke to who were Bangladeshi but not Bengali (ethnically speaking). Rather her father was Punjabi.

I knew from my encounters in Bangladesh that while there was overall resentment against Pakistan, for many people it was the Punjabis against whom they felt heightened animosity. This is because out of all the provinces of Pakistan, it is Punjab that continues to represent hegemony even today. It is Punjabis who dominate the political landscape, the bureaucracy, the army and, now, the media as well.²⁶ This hegemony is not

just felt by erstwhile East Pakistanis but also by the other provinces in present-day Pakistan. Punjab then overwhelmingly represents the Pakistani state, and therefore exploitation, in the minds of Bangladeshis.

This sentiment towards Punjab is perhaps best expressed through a personal incident in Khulna. While speaking to some Bangladeshis about 1971 at a small round-table conversation, a man had asked me if I was from Sindh. When I said no, he went on to ask if I was from Balochistan, to which I again responded in the negative. Exasperated, he asked, 'Pathan?' I shook my head and said, 'Punjabi.' The next thing I knew, he slammed the table and began cursing in Bengali. The only words I understood were 'Punjabi terrorist'. He then stormed out of the room, continuing to swear under his breath. The fact that I was present in Bangladesh not to impose the Pakistani narrative but to listen to Bengali experiences of 1971 had made him assume that I was from one of the smaller (in terms of political representation) provinces, which often struggled for greater representation and political rights compared to those afforded to Punjab. That I was Punjabi myself did not fit the framework of a concerned and curious Pakistani. Punjab was the enemy, and so in that room, I had become the enemy. I wondered then what it meant to be both Punjabi and Bangladeshi. How did the two come together for Niaz Aapa?

'My father was a Punjabi from Old Lahore, but as an ICS (Indian Civil Service) officer, he had served in Bengal. I was born in Delhi. As a young child, I moved to East Pakistan; my father had opted for Pakistan at the time of Partition and was working at Dinajpur (one of the largest districts of present-day Bangladesh, previously East Pakistan). So, Bengal is the only place I call home. I married a Bengali, my children speak Bengali,' she began.

Curious about her family's experience during Pakistan's period of infancy, I asked her if she recalled the language movement, or any of the early political tensions in East Pakistan. She shook her head and said that her mother had very strict notions of what education should be and had homeschooled her. Her interaction with the outside world had been limited. 'Even at home, we never talked about politics because my father was a

government servant.’ She also shared that for several years, no one in her house spoke Bengali, thus disconnecting her in many ways from the common people and their politics. ‘My father didn’t speak Bengali or Punjabi. We’d speak English and some Urdu. The first time I spoke Bengali was when I went to college. I was living in a hostel then and was taught to say “thank you” in Bengali to the woman who served us dinner. For sixteen years, I had never spoken Bengali, but once I joined college, sharing a room with six to eight people, I started to learn the language.’ However, even then, Niaz Aapa stayed removed from politics and political activity. ‘The sisters in Holy Cross College, Dhaka (the college she attended), didn’t encourage politics, so we didn’t discuss what was happening in the country, even in our political science or history lessons. It was only when I joined Dhaka University in the early 1960s that I started to realize what was happening. I would pass the Shahid Minar, I would cycle across the university (which was the hub of student politics in East Pakistan). It wasn’t possible not to be affected by politics even if I didn’t actively participate in it.’

Though Niaz Aapa didn’t know it at that time, she was slowly going to be embroiled in the political chaos about to unfold in the country. The years of being apolitical, removed from outside affairs, were going to be cut short. Her first proper introduction to Bengali politics came from her husband, a Bengali she would fall in love with and marry in 1964. ‘It was rare for a Punjabi girl to marry a Bengali boy, but my father took well to it. My husband’s family was very political, unlike mine. He had Awami League supporters and Muslim League supporters as relatives and so there would be many fights within the family over political issues. My husband himself was politically inclined and educated me about the politics of Bengali nationalism. It was through him that I learnt about the language movement, about the discrimination against Bengalis.

‘Before that, I had only witnessed one incident of discrimination. In 1961, my brother was selected for an essay competition by the *New York Herald Tribune*. But, because he was born in Barisal (present-day Bangladesh), the government sent a Punjabi boy for the competition. They

just saw that my brother's passport said East Pakistan and decided that he wouldn't participate . . . the fact that his passport said East Pakistan and that my father had married a "Bengalan" was also held against my family by the Pakistani regime. For instance, while (West Pakistani) officers would only be posted to East Pakistan for a short stint and then brought back to West Pakistan, my father wasn't posted back to Lahore until he requested for it in 1968.'

By 1971, Niaz's entire family had moved from East Pakistan; she was the only one who remained behind with her husband. I asked her to tell me more about this time. How did she feel, caught in the middle of a political upheaval, with one part of her family in West Pakistan and the other in East Pakistan. What did 1971 mean to her?

'I was very upset that West Pakistan didn't hand over power after the elections. Why couldn't it be done? It's not like a Bengali hadn't ever been a Pakistani prime minister. It was a foolish idea to not calculate what would happen if elections took place. There was one person, one vote, of course we would have won (given the larger population) . . . the Punjabi mentality was to beat the Bengalis into submission. But Bengalis aren't like that. They fight back.'

Niaz Aapa's family, like so many others at that time, had to flee Dhaka to escape the violence that ensued in March 1971. She told me that they had thought the Pakistan Army would be satisfied after Dhaka was controlled. They hadn't thought the army would fan out into the countryside. And so, with some of her husband's relatives, she fled to Karatia, which is about 90 kilometres away from Dhaka, hoping they would be safe there. However, it wasn't long until the army came there too. 'We realized then that there was no place safe in East Pakistan.' She added that amidst the frenzy and panic, the family would try to make light of the situation by indulging in jokes. 'We would say that if the Pakistanis came, I'd speak to them in Urdu, pretending we were all West Pakistanis. And if the Bengalis came to hunt (west) Pakistanis (or Biharis), the family would speak in Bangla to protect me. I was such a misfit,' she shook her head at her reality, a Punjabi

married to a Bengali at a time when both communities were slaughtering each other.

Realizing how dangerous the situation was for the likes of her, Niaz Aapa would eventually seek refuge in West Pakistan, taking with her her sixteen-year-old Bengali nephew. He had a different predicament altogether. ‘He was a Bengali, but didn’t look like it at all! We thought he wouldn’t be safe there, so I was asked to take him to Pakistan with my two small children around mid-April. However, though he came to Pakistan, he refused to come to Lahore with me because (as the heart of Punjab) it represented Pakistani hegemony to him. Instead, he stayed in Karachi with my relatives.’

I can only imagine how challenging this time must have been for her. Separated from her husband, and the only home she knew, I wonder how she survived those tense, lonely months, especially when much of West Pakistan was so removed from what was happening in East Pakistan. Could she find any support, any sympathy for her situation there? ‘My husband visited me and would write occasionally too, but he would tell me that there would be a war and it was better if I stayed in Pakistan. But even the letters would be opened before they reached me. We’d often have to use code names and phrases so the authorities wouldn’t be privy to our discussions.

‘The West Pakistanis too said this to me. I still remember, one of them said, “Don’t go back. They will destroy Bengalis like flies. My friends in the army said there would [be] an all-out war.”’ While her friend’s warnings would come true, I wonder how difficult it must have been to hear all this when so many of her loved ones were back in East Pakistan. The Bengalis who were to be killed like flies weren’t ‘other’ people for her. They were her own.

‘I became desperate over time. Physically, I was safe, but mentally and emotionally I was very . . .’ she paused, probably trying to think of the correct word. ‘I was claustrophobic there. We were always scared. I even had to tell my children, aged three and six, that they were forbidden from talking to anyone outside. I was worried that they would speak in Bangla and be targeted. They were so frightened . . . they had heard gun shots

(while they were still in East Pakistan). Even at the slightest sounds, like a firecracker in Lahore, they'd fall to the ground. My mother would ask, "Why are they so terrified?" I couldn't explain to her that it was a miracle we were alive. We had hidden by a pond in Karatia and that's the only reason we had survived. And then, there was so much suspicion against East Pakistanis. I remember a woman said to me, "Don't go back to East Pakistan. Your husband will kill you." People wouldn't believe what was happening in East Pakistan. Even my mother would ask, "How can you believe the army is so evil that they would shoot unarmed people?" She just couldn't believe it. By 13 October, I couldn't stand it any more. I was afraid that if a war started, there would be no more flights. And so I left West Pakistan . . .'

Alongside West Pakistan, Niaz Aapa also left her family behind. How harrowing must that have been, knowing that the threat of a war loomed between what constituted home for her and what was now home for her family? 'It was difficult. I remember that when on 4 December I heard a war had broken out, I cried. Not because I thought Pakistan would break up, but because I didn't know if I'd be able to see my parents if that happened. But . . .' she continued with a sombre expression, 'I didn't feel Pakistani. If I did, I wouldn't have come back to East Pakistan. I'm a strong Bangladeshi.'

Indeed, the choice was not going to be easy, as became evident in the years that followed. Belonging to a divided family in South Asia, where borders are hostile and militarized, is never easy. Be it divided families in India and Pakistan, Kashmir, or Pakistan and Bangladesh, the crossing over, the connection is always difficult. Important events are missed and, at times, years can go by without a meeting. Niaz Aapa would have to bear some of this. 'In 1976, I missed my sister's wedding because my visa came in too late. And even when I did go, because my father lived in the cantonment, I would have to report my visit. Of course, people would say all sorts of things. I remember, once an officer came to our house and bluntly asked, "*Koi Punjabi ladka nahi tha jo Bengali se shaadi ki?* (Did you not find any Punjabi boy to marry?)" That hurt . . .'

I can only imagine how challenging it has been for people like Niaz Aapa who don't neatly fit into the categories of 'Pakistani' or 'Bangladeshi'. Her family lives in Pakistan, Punjab is part of her heritage, but she is not Pakistani. She is a patriotic Bangladeshi, but not a Bengali. While her ethnicity should not be a criterion for her nationalism or patriotism, I would learn through other conversations that there are distinct political connotations attached to whether one is identified as a 'Bangladeshi' or 'Bengali'. While Niaz Aapa and I don't delve into this, as I sit with her I'm reminded of another conversation from a few days before.

I had been sitting at the Khulna airport with Haroon and Professor Mamoon, waiting for our flight back to Dhaka, which had been delayed by a couple of hours. Behind us the news was running. Suddenly, there was a broadcast about a blast in Lahore, my birthplace. Haroon and I instantly panicked. So many of our relatives and friends lived in the city. As the details rolled in, we learnt that the explosion had taken place on the usually congested Ferozepur Road, which my mother travelled on frequently. I tried to make frantic calls home to ensure she was okay, but I was also acutely aware of my surroundings. The past few days had been a mix of warmth and hospitality, but also a constant reminder that Pakistanis were despised, that Pakistan was hated. The people sitting beside me barely flinched at the news. It was almost as if the blast was a reinforcement of how flawed Pakistan was, how it deserved the precarious economic and political situation it found itself in. Just a few days ago, I had been told that all of Pakistan's sufferings were a punishment for what the country had done to the Bengalis.

I would eventually learn that though Haroon and my family and friends were safe, twenty-six other people had been killed in Lahore that day.²⁷ While I was aware that many of the Bangladeshi friends I had made would hold great sympathy for what had happened, I felt alone at the airport, in a foreign country which was once my own but now shared increasingly hostile relations with what I called home. I think my discomfort was only too obvious, for a young man, who had perhaps noticed my worry, struck up a conversation.

He asked me where I was from. I hesitatingly answered Pakistan, unsure of what his reaction would be. However, he responded warmly, putting me at ease instantly. Upon hearing I was from Lahore, he told me that his mother-in-law was from Pakistan too. ‘She is Balochi.’ She had married his father-in-law before the war and together they had raised a family in East Pakistan and then Bangladesh. Just like Niaz Aapa, she was Bangladeshi but not Bengali.

A civil servant by profession, he told me that it hadn’t always been easy for her. ‘Once someone came to our house and told my father-in-law that his wife must leave Bangladesh. I know that some family members too looked at her differently, as if she was the enemy. During the war, my father-in-law’s brother was arrested by the Pakistan Army. It was my mother-in-law who went to the camp holding her baby—now my brother-in-law—and pleaded with the army officer to have him released. She told them, “If you don’t release him, we’ll all be very troubled. Please let him go, he’s my brother-in-law.” The officers relented and said, “Ok, *behen, le jao* (Fine, sister, take him).” But even though she rescued him, several family members continued to blame her for his arrest. They said that she was Pakistani and so what had happened was her fault.’

Now in her seventies, he told me that she had travelled to Pakistan a few times to see her relatives. Her children though had spoken to their relatives only over the phone. ‘My mother-in-law’s face is very Pakistani. People can tell she’s not Bengali. Sometimes, people even say my wife looks different. That she’s not Bengali on the basis of colour or height . . .’

I asked him what it means to be Bangladeshi, but not Bengali in today’s Bangladesh. What was initially a movement for equal rights and fair treatment is mainly perceived through the ethnonationalist lens today, where it is often assumed that all Bangladeshis are Bengalis. While Biharis were sidelined in Bangladesh as being pro-Pakistan and ‘collaborators’, I knew that other non-Bengalis, such as the Chakma people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, also faced ethnic tensions. ²⁸

He told me, ‘Our country is split into Bengalis and Bangladeshis. Those who believe in liberation are Bengalis. Those who don’t support liberation

advocate Bangladeshi nationalism instead of Bengali nationalism.’ I learnt through our conversation—as well as other conversations and literature—that while the Awami League promoted ‘Bengali nationalism’, which is said to be based on secular principles and ‘pro-liberation’, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) promoted ‘Bangladeshi nationalism’. While one would assume that Bangladeshi nationalism might be more inclusive of all ethnicities and linguistic groups in the country, according to the civil servant this was not so. He tells me, ‘Bangladeshi nationalism was promoted on the pretext of protecting non-Bengali rights, such as those of the tribal people who live in the hill tracts . . . to say that though they are not Bengali, they are still Bangladeshi. But in reality, there was a big conspiracy behind this. The BNP wanted to promote the Islamization of the country under this pretext, it wanted to undermine Bengali secular values by furthering this Bangladeshi nationalism.’ I would hear this from others too. They would tell me that the BNP—which was seen by the Awami League supporters as being pro-Pakistan and anti-liberation—was trying to foster the ‘Pakistanization’ of Bangladesh. It wanted to bring it closer to Pakistan, to Islam, as opposed to the ideals that Sheikh Mujib had espoused, of a secular, democratic and progressive Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib had wanted ‘a Bangladesh unlike Pakistan’, I am told by his supporters.

The civil servant I conversed with told me that when he was born in 1973, his father named him ‘Bangali’. ‘My father was a freedom fighter and very proud of being Bengali. And today, we are so proud of the role he played in the war. Even my daughter is so proud that her grandfather was a freedom fighter. We’ve named her Bangali too, so she’s constantly reminded of her identity.’ Bangali told me that this identity was of utmost importance to him for he grew up in an environment in which it was constantly being threatened. ‘I grew up at a time when it was the army and then the BNP in power, and collaborators were being celebrated, our Bengali values were being undermined. When I sat for my exams, they would ask me that if my name was Bangali, should my identity be Bangladeshi or Bengali? I knew all the people testing me were BNP

supporters and that they wouldn't accept or promote anyone who opposed their ideology. Even when I joined the civil service, for the first three years the BNP remained in power. I had to salute to a collaborator because he was a minister. Can you imagine that your father fought for the nation and you had to salute the collaborators who killed your people? It was so painful that I can't express it.'

I can understand why it is so important for people like Bangali to assert their Bengali identity. For a people who fought such a long battle for their rights and survived a bloody war, to find themselves under the rule of ministers and politicians who had been accused of supporting the 'enemy', and of gross crimes, would indeed be agonizing and utterly disillusioning. However, the politicization of this pain by political parties doesn't come without its ramifications. The neat binaries of being 'secular, anti-Pakistan, pro-India and pro-liberation', or 'Islamized, pro-Pakistan, anti-India and anti-liberation' don't quite capture people's real experiences. What does it mean for people who may have friends and family in Pakistan, who feel love and affection for those in the 'enemy country', but feel passionate about their Bangladeshi nationality too? What does it mean for those who may be Biharis but were born and bred in Bangladesh, have no affiliation with Pakistan, and yet are called 'stranded Pakistanis'? What does it mean for the people who are Bengali but continue to live in Pakistan? What does it mean for those who may support the mandate of a political party that is labelled as 'anti-liberation' but had fought for the nation's birth with all that they had? What does it mean for the Chakma people and others like them whose politics, aspirations and grievances are not addressed by either Bengali nationalism or Bangladeshi nationalism, and who may not associate with either national project? While I do not have answers to all these questions, I will return to some of them in the last chapter, where I detail my interviews with the Bengali community in Pakistan and the Bihari community in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, I asked Bangali what this meant for his mother-in-law who was Balochi yet Bangladeshi, just as Niaz Aapa was Punjabi yet Bangladeshi.

‘Look, what I know is that her family left for Pakistan, but she stayed back. Yes, people look at her and say that she isn’t Bengali, but for me she’s as Bangladeshi as anyone else. She sacrificed so much for this country!’

As we said goodbye to board our respective flights, I wondered if other people were able to find the same acceptance in their hearts for people like Bangali’s mother-in-law and Niaz Aapa. Bangali had fallen in love with her daughter; he had learnt about his wife’s family history first-hand, he had built a relationship with his mother-in-law, coming to respect and love her as family, seeing her beyond her ‘Pakistani’ and ‘non-Bengali’ identity. But for those for whom Pakistan only resonates one image, that of the ‘enemy’, and for whom the tensions between Bangladeshi identity and Bengali identity have been reduced to party politics, can acceptance of these people—who don’t fit into binaries, whose identities are more blurred—happen? As the flight took off, I was reminded of how long the people of the subcontinent (those who now live in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) have fought for equal rights, economic emancipation, freedom and a place where they are not treated as secondary citizens. They successfully fought against the British Empire, created a new country in 1947, and then another one in 1971, all in the hope of equality and justice. Yet the struggle for many of them continues, the dream of an inclusive society in which they don’t have to fight to belong carrying on with no end in sight.

India's War

In June 1971, my family moved to the residential quarters at Mazagon Dock (in Mumbai, then called Bombay), the shipbuilding company where my father worked. It was in December that year that war broke out between India and Pakistan. I was all of seven years old but remember this event vividly. We suddenly found ourselves in danger. My understanding then was quite simple: the country I lived in was India and India was at war with another country called Pakistan . . .

. . . For our safety, we had to put sheets of black paper on glass windows. Lights had to be turned off. The enemy [then] would not be able to find us and strike us if there was a blackout. When a siren went off at night, it meant that Pakistan's aircrafts may come and bomb us, and so we were to silently rush down nine flights of stairs with a torch (we could not take the elevator in case there was an electricity failure and we got trapped), joined by neighbours, and huddle next to sandbags stacked in the parking lot under the building. I used to be terrified and would weep as we went down the stairs, my mother shushing me and telling me to say my prayers. My fear was heightened because my father would not be with us. He had to report for duty at night 'because of the war'. From the snatches of conversation between my parents and other adults I got answers to my unasked 'whys': Mazagon Dock was a sensitive area because that was where warships were built and the enemy would want to target it first; the sandbags would help to reduce the impact of an explosion, if there is one . . . I don't remember how long the war lasted, but it didn't seem [to be] very long. After it was over, the sandbags became our 'play' material—the bags were torn and we would play in the sand, carefree.

—Beena, a witness to the fourteen-day war between India and Pakistan in December 1971

Back home in Pakistan, my mother, who was twenty-one years old at the time of the war, told me how she would have to hide with her family in the basement of their house in Lahore. 'After the 1965 war, the government had passed instructions that all new houses being constructed had to have basements, in case there was another war. And so, when my parents built our house in 1967, they made sure to have one. When the war broke out, we would go and hide there.' Years later, I remember having spent many childhood evenings playing in that same basement. At that time, I didn't know that it had provided refuge to my family. 'We would paste black paper

on the windows so the Indians couldn't see us. The lights would be switched off and we would huddle together, listening to Noor Jahan's *taranas* to pass time. "*Aay watan kay sajeelay jawano,*"¹ *yeh sun kar josh aajata tha* (We would hear the songs Noor Jahan had sung during the 1965 war to motivate the forces. Listening to them was so uplifting),' my mother told me.

The uncertainty, the vulnerability that war brought affected countless other Indians and Pakistanis. Many, like Beena, were too young to fully understand whom they were fighting against or what they were fighting for. Overcome by helplessness and fear, which war often evokes regardless of age, they had no choice but to endure the events that they could make little sense of. Yet, it would leave imprints, the memory imprinted on their minds for years to come. Below is an excerpt from my conversation with another Indian, Jayshree, who was ten years old in 1971, studying in grade 5 in a school in Mumbai.

I also remember sticking black paper on the windows. Whenever we would hear air sirens, [we would] lie down . . . all of this is clearly etched in my memory. In fact, I remember that we were at a Carnatic² music concert. It used to be this ten-day-long festival of music, dance and culture every December. We would always attend it. I was there that year, at the concert of D.K. Pattamal³ who was very famous . . . just a few songs had been rendered when the air sirens went off. Everything was closed and we had to stay where we were, in the shamiana, until the security officers told us it was all clear and we could go home. As a child, I couldn't understand the pain people were going through. *Bilkul samajh nahi aaya*. All I understood was that Pakistan was a country we were fighting and that *udhar gande log rahte hain, unse humari katti hui hai* (as a child I only understood that bad people must live in Pakistan, that's why we were fighting them. To me it was like a katti, similar to a fight between two children). I saw the war as a team game, like the ones you have in school. *Maine tujh ko harana hai, tune mujh ko harana hai* (both teams want to make the other one lose). It was only later, when I grew up, that I understood what war meant.

* * *

Before I began to look at 1971 through another lens for my research, it was this India–Pakistan war that I was most familiar with when it came to that year's events. I had heard about the elections of December 1970 and how power had not been transferred to East Pakistan, but the focus always

seemed to be on the war with India and on how India had won, making us lose East Pakistan. I had little knowledge of the events of March 1971 or about those that took place before or after it. My understanding, or the lack of it, skipped from the elections in 1970 to the India–Pakistan war the following December, and then to 16 December 1971, which I registered as a sad day for my country. Later, when I began to collect oral histories on 1971 and interviewed army officers as part of a project I ran in Lahore, on behalf of the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP), to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the war, the emphasis again would be on India’s meddling in Pakistan’s affairs, the war and the eventual surrender. It was the ‘Third Indo-Pak War’ (following the 1948 and 1965 wars over Kashmir). The 1971 war was treated as another India and Pakistan conflict, a bilateral issue. The narratives of the East Pakistanis, their grievances and aspirations, and most importantly their struggle for Bangladesh, received little attention.

Even when annual talk shows are aired on TV in December to commemorate what is widely known as the ‘Fall of Dacca’, and there is some discussion on Pakistan’s political failures, on how Zulfikar Ali Bhutto or Yahya Khan could have made different decisions, a major focus seems to be on how, had India not interfered, Pakistan wouldn’t have ‘dismembered’. For instance, on a show aired on Pakistan’s Dunya News channel in December 2015, some effort was made to reflect on the events that led to the surrender; the guests on the show briefly mentioned West Pakistani atrocities (without going into any significant detail). However, the opening comments made by a guest journalist were that while there were several factors that led to the break-up of Pakistan, ‘*Sab cheezon ka ilaj ho sakta tha, sab cheezon se bacha ja sakta tha. Sab se bunyadi jo qirdar hai woh toh ada kiya Bharat ki fuj ne. Agar Bharat mujood na hota, aur uski fuj intervene na karti, training na deti, itna role ada na karti, ya dil bara kar ke Bharat musaliyat karane ki koshish karti toh iss soorat-e-haal se bacha ja sakta tha*’⁴ (All the issues could have been resolved had it not been for the role the Indian Army played. If it hadn’t intervened, or if it had tried to play a conciliatory role and mediated between East and West Pakistan to find a solution, the break-up wouldn’t have happened).’

While during the course of the one-hour show, other factors were touched upon—including dictatorships in Pakistan, the language movement and the failure to negotiate politically—the guests on the show soon turned to fight with each other. Allegations were thrown around, depending on which political party they were affiliated to. Blame was laid on Bhutto by those who opposed his political party, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), only to be met with fierce resistance by PPP supporters on the panel. And then, within the first twenty-five minutes of the show, the host and anchor, Kamran Shahid, complained that his guests were too focused on internal issues—fighting about Bhutto and Yahya Khan’s policies—and were not talking about what he saw as the real issue, i.e., the way Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujib exploited the situation, and the way in which the Mukti Bahini, hand in hand with India, unleashed a ‘genocide’ on the West Pakistanis and Biharis who stood up for Pakistan. ‘*Itni bari ignored dastaan hai jo wahan pe genocide ho hai Biharion ka or West Pakistanis ka. Humne kya kiya? Hum ne unki zaban accept nahi ki, bohat zulm kiya. Humne iktidar nahi diya, bohat zulm kya . . . magar 1947–1970 tak hum ne unke leaders ko qatal kiya? Kya humne firing ki? 25 March se pehle koi military actions hue? Agar India ka factor na hota, halaat shayad baray smooth tareekay se ho bhi sakte thay, aur Pakistan aik reh bhi sakta tha*⁵ (We have ignored the genocide of Biharis and West Pakistanis. What did West Pakistan do to them [the East Pakistanis]? Fine, we didn’t accept their language, we didn’t transfer power, and that is a grave injustice, but did we ever kill their leaders between 1947 and 1970, did we ever have military action before 25 March 1971? If India didn’t play the role it did and exploited the situation, Pakistan and Bangladesh could have still been one today).’

Though other similar ‘special shows’,⁶ which air every December, might even engage in more detailed introspection of Pakistan’s *ghaltiyan* (mistakes), these once-a-year glimpses into Pakistan’s flawed policies don’t necessarily make a significant dent in how people remember 1971. For many Pakistanis, Bangladesh’s creation continues to be seen through the

lens of an India–Pakistan conflict. The problems between East and West Pakistan could have been ‘resolved’ had it not been for India, it is argued.

On the other side of the border, India projects the war as a victory over Pakistan. The war is hailed as one of India’s greatest successes. To commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the war, *Hindustan Times*, one of India’s largest newspapers, splashed the headline: ‘1971 War: India’s Greatest Triumph’.⁷ Another headline from *India Today*, read: ‘1971 Victory over Pak Army was India’s Finest Win’. The magazine called it a victory of ‘India’s intelligence agencies, diplomacy and the then prime minister Indira Gandhi.’⁸ The war continues to hold importance in local politics. When Indira Gandhi’s grandson, Rahul Gandhi, launched his political career, he found it pertinent to highlight his family’s legacy in the ‘break-up of Pakistan’. In 2007, he reportedly said, ‘*Hum jo kaam haath lete hain, usey poora kartey hain . . . chahe woh desh ki azadi ho, Pakistan mein batwara ho ya desh ko ikkiswin sadi mein le jana ho*, (referring to his family, he said, we deliver what we promise, be it the independence struggle, dismemberment of Pakistan or leading the country into the twenty-first century).’ His remarks were deeply resented in Pakistan and seen as an admission of India’s involvement in Pakistan’s internal affairs.⁹

Gradually, I would come to learn that this ‘bilateral’ treatment of events, not just in Pakistan but in India too, made the Bangladeshis uncomfortable, even resentful. What was a people’s war for them, was treated by India and Pakistan as ‘their’ war. It was almost as if there was a war over the war; whom was it between? Who was the rightful winner? Who was the saviour? Prior to the surrender, the revenge killings of Biharis had already begun. There was genuine fear that after winning the war, the Mukti Bahini may try to butcher the Pakistan Army and its collaborators.¹⁰ Thus, while surrendering to the Indian Army, which promised to protect West Pakistanis and the Bihari community, seemed like the safer option for Pakistan, the instrument of surrender today evokes a bittersweet memory in Bangladesh. It was signed between the Pakistani leader of the Eastern Command, Lieutenant General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, and Indian Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Arora. No official representatives from the Bangladesh

forces were present at the surrender ceremony. The only exception was Group Captain A.K. Khandaker, who seems to have been pushed into a corner and isn't visible in the cropped-up versions of the surrender photograph which often circulates.¹¹ The absence of Bangladeshi representatives at the surrender is for many Bangladeshis symbolic of how the people's struggle has been overshadowed by India–Pakistan war rhetoric. Bangladeshi author Tahmima Anam writes that:

After intervening in the war, the Indian Army did what armies do—they behaved like victorious soldiers. Pakistan did not surrender to Bangladesh—the treaty signed on 16 December 1971 was between an Indian general and a Pakistani general. Suddenly the war that Bangladeshi freedom fighters had been waging became yet another skirmish between the two elder children of partition. And those same freedom fighters were forced to surrender their arms to the Indian troops. It was a symbolic wound that would fester. The bear-hug began to feel like a stranglehold.¹²

India's role in 1971 then, regardless of the sentiments it evokes, remains significant in all three countries: Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. This chapter explores this role, and the meaning Bangladesh and 1971 hold in India today.

* * *

Officially, the 1971 Indo-Pak war lasted only fourteen days, from 3 December to 16 December. Pakistan launched attacks on Indian airfields in Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh on 3 December—a day before India had planned its attack on Pakistan.¹³ On the night of 3–4 December, Indira Gandhi announced on the radio that 'Today, the war in Bangla Desh has become a war on India,' secretly relieved that Pakistan had acted before her army was instructed to.¹⁴ It would give India a higher moral ground, projecting it as a power defending itself while safeguarding the rights and lives of East Pakistanis, under attack by their own army. On 4 December, General Yahya Khan too declared that Pakistan and India were at war.¹⁵

With its conventional policy of 'the defence of the East [lies] in the West',¹⁶ Pakistan hoped to give India a blow in Punjab, and in the process try to secure territory in Kashmir, the bone of contention between the two

countries. Pakistan made significant gains in the west, especially in the Chhamb sector of Jammu and Kashmir, where a major battle was fought. However, in the east, where the local population had long turned against the state, India and the Mukti Bahini forces had the stronghold. The locals, familiar with the terrain, guided the Indian Army through fields and dirt roads, avoiding routes which were likely to be targeted by the Pakistan Army.¹⁷

While Pakistan—considered an ally of the West in the cold war and believed to have played an instrumental part in helping the US forge relations with China¹⁸—received enormous support from the US in 1971,¹⁹ by August India too signed the Indo–Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation. With the USSR’s support, India moved towards the battlefield confidently. In fact, though the war didn’t officially break out until December, a few days after signing the treaty in August, Indira Gandhi had reportedly begun planning an attack on Pakistan.²⁰ She knew the war was coming. As early as April 1971, after the initial influx of refugees into West Bengal, Gandhi had asked her army if they could march into East Pakistan. She had been told to wait until November, when the army was better trained and the monsoon was over. Also, having lost a war to China in 1962, and knowing that the country was supporting Pakistan, India wanted to ensure that it acted in the winter months, when it would be difficult for China to retaliate on the Himalayan border.²¹ Indeed, though the Indian government initially denied this and insisted that Pakistan had initiated the war, by November the Indian Army had already started to trespass, launching ‘a preliminary attack around Boyra, in East Pakistan, near the Indian border’ on 20 November.²² The friendship treaty with the Soviet had bolstered the war plans that were already under way. The cold war between the US and the USSR was playing out in (present-day) Bangladesh, with Pakistan using equipment supplied by its ally, the US, and India relying on Soviet support. The two superpowers continued to strengthen each ally, in the process furthering their own policy agendas. Eventually, as the Mukti Bahini and Indian forces continued to make deep inroads into East Pakistan, making it increasingly difficult for the Pakistani army to fight back, Pakistan

surrendered. Bangladesh found a place on the map and the subcontinent's shape altered irreversibly for the second time in twenty-four years.

There are various theories and viewpoints about why India supported East Pakistanis, not just in December but also in the months preceding the all-out Indo-Pak war. A common argument is that the intervention was on moral and humanitarian grounds, to aid those suffering in East Pakistan and to protect human rights. This moral impetus was grounded in and strengthened by the prevailing public sentiment. As refugees made their way into India, bringing with them horror stories of the violence they had witnessed and suffered, the public, especially the Indian Bengalis, were outraged and demanded action from the Indian government.²³

Others state that alongside genuine humanitarian efforts, the intervention was also based on 'realpolitik' and achieved strategic goals for the country.²⁴ By this time, i.e., within two decades of Partition, India and Pakistan had gone to war twice. Both times, the battle was fought over the deeply contested state of Jammu and Kashmir, which India and Pakistan continue to stake claim to till date. The wars crystallized the fault lines, fostering animosity between the countries. Many Indians and Pakistanis told me of how easily they could cross over the border in the initial years after Partition, meeting their friends and relatives with ease, thinking that they could enjoy the best of both worlds. The war in 1965 came as a rude awakening. Border control was heightened, the crossing over made difficult, the relationship increasingly becoming thorny. Cities and villages that were once home were now viewed as being in 'enemy territory'. Tensions continued to simmer between India and Pakistan, the discord festering. People who had locked their homes at the time of Partition, thinking they would return after the riots settled down, slowly realized how deep the divide really was. India and Pakistan, once one country, had become historic enemies.

One of the most common arguments put forth in Pakistan is that India's support of the Bengali struggle was motivated by malicious intents; it wanted to slice Pakistan in half, separating a significant part of its territory and thereby weakening it for the years to come. By helping East Pakistanis

secede, India hoped to be able to assert its superiority over a defeated Pakistan, establishing itself as a great power in South Asia. Indeed, there were several people in the Indian regime who saw this as an opportunity to ‘smash Pakistan’²⁵ and the ideological foundations of the country. Jubilant after the surrender, Gandhi claimed, ‘Today we have sunk Jinnah’s two-nation theory in the Bay of Bengal.’²⁶ The break-up of the ‘motherland’ in 1947 as it was perceived, was, in a sense, avenged by the break-up of Pakistan in 1971. There were even rumblings in the Indian government that perhaps it could stir similar movements for autonomy in other Pakistani provinces, such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province), leaving Pakistan grappling with secessionist movements long after the creation of Bangladesh.²⁷ The break-up of East Pakistan was seen as the beginning of a destabilized enemy. Today, Pakistan alleges that India continues to interfere in its internal affairs, sponsoring anti-state activities in the hopes of creating instability and disintegrating Pakistan as it tried to in 1971.²⁸ It is even alleged that India is trying to sponsor a similar movement in Balochistan, as it did in East Pakistan.²⁹

But it wasn’t just animosity that drove India’s involvement in the East Pakistani struggle. Even before the nationalist movement intensified, there were sympathies for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League, particularly because of its stance, or lack thereof, on Kashmir. While West Pakistani dictators and politicians held an aggressive position on Kashmir, willing to go to war for what they believed was Pakistani territory, the East Pakistanis did not have the same investment in the Kashmir dispute. In January 1971, when an Indian Airlines plane was hijacked and forcibly taken to Lahore by two Kashmiris, Sheikh Mujib had firmly denounced it. Meanwhile, it was alleged that his opponent Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had held a friendly exchange with the hijackers at the airport (Bhutto would claim that he was pushed to meet with them when he landed at the airport from Dhaka and knew little about the hijackers).³⁰ Bhutto’s apparent ‘exchange’ stood out in stark contrast to Sheikh Mujib’s condemnation. Just a few years earlier, as the foreign minister of Pakistan, Bhutto had backed Operation

Gibraltar in Kashmir, which led to the 1965 war between India and Pakistan.³¹ Sheikh Mujib's rise to power and the formation of a government by the Awami League was then far more favourable to India than having Bhutto, who had been overtly hostile towards the country, at the helm of power.

Sheikh Mujib's win in the elections and his call for transfer of power to East Pakistan was also championed in Indian circles, not least because Mujib leading the government would ostensibly reduce the external threat of war with Pakistan over Kashmir, while India dealt with its internal problems. By now, the Naxalite movement was a raging issue for the Indian government, and would continue to be a major policy consideration in 1971. As one West Bengali would tell me, 'In the 1970s, the Naxalite movement was at its peak in Calcutta and this dominated public discourse. This actually played a far bigger role in the public domain than the Indo-Pak war. For example, I know that my father's decision about what kind of property to buy was dependent on this. He was going to buy independent property, but then he said that with what was going on in the city (Calcutta) — and he was referring to the Naxalite movement—he thought we would be safer in an apartment as there would be other people, neighbours around us. So, I think [that] more than the 1971 war or what was happening in East Pakistan, the Naxalite movement was very much the larger narrative.'³²

West Bengal at that time was known to be a 'hotbed of Marxist and Maoist agitation, notorious as the home of the fiery Maoist revolutionaries known as the Naxalites—named after the West Bengal village of Naxalbari, where the movement originated'.³³ The origins of the movement lay in 1967, when the 'police opened fire on a farmers' rally in the tiny hamlet of Prasadujyot in Naxalbari, triggering armed revolt'.³⁴ The peasants had been refusing to hand over the majority of their farm produce to the landowners and had forcibly occupied the land, to which they had legal entitlement, making the landlords flee.³⁵ The day before the firing, the police had tried to break up the protest. In the 'commotion that followed, a farmer shot an arrow, killing a police officer.'³⁶ In response, the then home minister, Jyoti Basu, ordered police action. The subsequent shooting by the police killed

eleven peasants,³⁷ sparking the Naxalite movement, eventually ‘culminating in a full-scale armed struggle.’³⁸ By now, the pro-China section of The Communist Party of India (CPI), founded after the Bolshevik Revolution, had left the party in 1964 to form its own party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [the CPI(M)]. The CPI(M) would further split after the incident in May 1967, leading to the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) [CPI (ML)], which openly swore allegiance to China, with the goal of overthrowing the Indian state.³⁹ This created an alarming situation for Indira Gandhi’s government. Beijing Radio and the *People’s Daily* from China hailed the Naxalbari rebellion as a ‘spring thunder in India’.⁴⁰ Having lost a war to China in 1962 and well aware that the country shared good relations with Pakistan, Chinese influence over local rebellion threatened Gandhi’s regime and would continue to pose a significant security issue for the subsequent governments. From the village of Naxalbari, the agitation spread to other parts of Bengal and then India, drawing support not just from peasants and tribal communities but also students and youth in urban areas.⁴¹

Given the situation in the country, particularly in Bengal, which shared a border with East Pakistan, the Indian ambassador in Washington admitted, ‘Considering that we ourselves have plenty of problems in east India, we would not wish for East Bengal to be in a disturbed state.’⁴² The situation in East Pakistan concerned the Indian government not just because of what was happening next door, but for what it could mean for its own country. Worried that China was sponsoring factions of pro-Chinese East Bengalis, who might turn to the Maoist radicals in West Bengal for support, India feared that the nationalist resistance against West Pakistan might turn into a full-fledged Maoist rebellion against its own regime. Warnings from the Awami League that Naxalites from West Bengal had begun to enter East Pakistan to steer the movement, possibly to undermine the mainstream nationalists, only reinforced these suspicions.⁴³ Soon, the government was also worried that the Naxalites might try to infiltrate the refugee camps, which housed lakhs of refugees who had poured in from East Pakistan, turning them into revolutionaries and breathing new life into India’s internal

enemy as it fought its external enemy (Pakistan). As the principal secretary to then prime minister Indira Gandhi, P.N. Haksar argued, ‘If the situation in East Pakistan did not improve . . . the communists would win new recruits.’⁴⁴

The refugee crisis, of course, was also a humanitarian crisis for India. It is estimated that by the end of 1971, approximately 1 crore people⁴⁵ had sought refuge in India. Settling in the border states, such as Assam, Tripura and West Bengal, in some cases the refugees even outnumbered the locals, creating resentment and increasing pressure on already stretched resources. In some instances, the locals retaliated by attacking the refugees.⁴⁶ As Antara Datta writes in *Refugees and Borders in South Asia: The Great Exodus of 1971*, ‘In the border areas themselves, local opposition to the refugees was growing . . . contrary to reports that there was widespread solidarity, there was considerable local opposition to the presence of the refugees.’⁴⁷ Later, as refugees came pouring into Kolkata, there too the ‘fears about the social and economic impact they would have on the city led many to change their minds about the presence of the refugees. The refugees were an object of sympathy as long as they remained in the border areas. But as they moved inland, the [residents of] Calcutta began to resent their presence—seeing them as a source of disease and pestilence.’⁴⁸

The government knew that they could not permanently host the East Bengalis. The country couldn’t afford to as it battled its own poverty. Nor could it afford the conflict between the locals and the refugees. Indira Gandhi argued that the crisis in East Pakistan was no longer Pakistan’s internal issue. Since India was hosting close to a crore of East Pakistanis, it was embroiled in the conflict. The refugees had to go back and, for that, a resolution was necessary. There was also pressure mounting on the government from civilians who were appalled by the conditions of the refugees and by the violence they had encountered before fleeing their homes. The refugee crisis was a major catalyst for Indian intervention. This intervention would predate the Indo-Pak war by several months. As early as the beginning of April 1971, Indira Gandhi met Bengali leaders as they established their guerrilla forces. The government would agree to provide

them with material assistance, such as arms, ammunition, medicines, broadcast and transit facilities, as well as training in guerrilla fighting.⁴⁹ This support would remain throughout 1971, eventually culminating in an all-out war in December.

By the end of 1971, India would (in its own eyes) emerge victorious, as would Indira Gandhi. Bangladesh's creation would be hailed as a tremendous feat, boosting Gandhi's ratings and giving her new confidence. More self-assured than ever, some would allege that the victory made her arrogant, even autocratic. She had won the war, she had helped create Bangladesh, and she was, as she thought, invincible. Jayshree, whose interview is mentioned earlier in this chapter, told me that after the war Gandhi was compared to Goddess Durga.⁵⁰ 'She was seen as the liberator of the dispossessed, the slayer of demons. We'd often hear in my house that Indira was the only man in the cabinet.' The war had made her a hero, the champion of human rights, the vanguard of democracy. She had freed Bangladesh from the shackles of West Pakistani dictators. She was their saviour. But barely four years after the war, she imposed Emergency in India. Opposition politicians, students and unionists were jailed, the press was censored⁵¹ and basic human rights guaranteed by the Constitution were suspended.⁵² The guardian of liberty and freedom suddenly seemed to bear eerie similarities to the dictators that she had taken a moral stand against. In the same year, on the other side of the border, Sheikh Mujib was assassinated and military rule established in Bangladesh. Two years later, the short-lived democracy in Pakistan under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was also aborted after he was arrested on murder charges and later hanged. The long struggle for democracy was overcome by a long night of suppression across India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

* * *

Today, the 1971 war does not feature in Indian textbooks or classroom discussions in detail. Indian textbooks are generally silent on the events post-1947. Students have to opt for studying history if they wish to learn

about post-Partition events. The 1971 war, as a result, thus finds little or no mention, leaving many Indians unaware of what had transpired. In fact, some Indians told me that 1971 didn't matter to ordinary Indians any more. It held little relevance. '*Baat thandi ho gayee*. It's not an issue that is festering in people's minds. They are moving on. *Hogayi baat khatam abhi*,' said Jayshree. When I asked her why that was so, why 1971 was not talked about, she explained, 'Since there is no score to settle with Bangladesh, there is no need to push the victory narrative. In the public memory, people don't know about the losses, the killings. The children today don't know how Bangladesh was created.'

This has been my experience as well. When, in 2018, I interacted with Indian children over Skype ⁵³ and asked them about 1971, they had little to say. In a conversation with ten students from classes 9 and 10 in Kolkata, only one child knew that there had been a war and that Bangladesh was created in 1971. He too had only read about it on Google a day before, as preparation for our session. When I asked the students if they knew why Bangladesh was created, they all shook their heads. That history was absent from these students' worldview. For many of them, it wasn't an Indian but me, a Pakistani, who introduced them to 1971.

For students who opt for history, the situation is different. I spoke to students enrolled in classes 11 and 12 in another school in Kolkata and found them to be more aware. (It should be noted that these students had already participated in civil-society-run projects connecting Indian and Pakistani youth, and had opted to study history after class 10. Therefore, they were not necessarily representative of the Indian youth at large.) They told me that Bangladesh was created because the West Pakistanis had not given the Bengalis power, because Urdu had been imposed on the people of East Pakistan. They believed that India had played a major role because 'Bangladesh was too weak . . . so, you can say it was an Indo-Pak war', 'India's intervention was a necessarily evil,' they reckoned. 'India was Pakistan's enemy and when Bangladesh (referring to East Pakistan) stood up against Pakistan, it was obvious that India would support Bangladesh.' When I asked them where they learnt all this, they said it was from their

families, and from recent movies like *Raazi*—a Bollywood production inspired by the true story of a female R&AW agent placed inside a Pakistani army family during the 1971 war. ‘We will also read about it in our class when we reach that part of the syllabus,’ they shared excitedly. However, for many others, who do not opt for such courses, or are not inclined towards subjects like history or political science, why and how Bangladesh was created may not be a story to remember.

Though 1971 may not be ‘present’ in textbooks, classrooms and mainstream discourse, it can’t be ‘absent’ entirely. This ‘presence’ of 1971 manifests itself in significant ways. While the children I had interacted with in the first school did not know anything about the birth of Bangladesh, they did ask me why Pakistan was bent upon attacking India, first in 1948, then in 1965 and then in 1971. ‘I read on Google that in the last ten to twenty years, India has not interfered in the affairs of any country, and that in all these wars, Pakistan attacked us first, and that it is still attacking us. Why do you do that?’ 1971 here too, like in Pakistan, was reduced to its bilateral importance. Anti-Pakistan sentiments continue to hold prevalence in India—propelled by the media, through mainstream discourse. Students hear that Pakistan is an enemy state, responsible for terrorism and creating troubles for India. ‘News tells us there is a terrorist attack in Pakistan every day. Is that true?’, ‘Why does your country have so many terrorists?’, ‘Why does Pakistan keep trying to take Kashmir away from us?’ were some of the questions they asked me. 1971 too is remembered as part of this narrative: of Indo-Pak hostility, of stereotypes about Pakistan as a fundamentalist, aggressive, backward country, one that was ‘bent upon attacking India’.

Before moving forward, I must mention that of course, it would be unfair to generalize that all Indians think this way or that none of them remember 1971 for anything more than an Indo-Pak war. Family histories, life experiences, travel, books and curiosity can all drive one to understand history from a broader lens than what is encouraged by state textbooks and curriculum. Certainly, schools are not the only place for learning. I have spoken to Indians who were interested in studying the Bangladesh war of their accord, turning to books and movies to flesh out their understanding.

One West Bengal resident I spoke to, a grandchild of refugees from *Opar Bangla* (the other side of Bengal, or East Bengal), told me that she had grown up listening to stories of what later became Bangladesh. ‘I was born twenty-four years after the war, but every time I hear about Bangladesh, I feel closely attached to the country because of all the stories I [have] heard from my grandparents. Home is one word that comes to my mind whenever I think of Bangladesh. Our house is also located in an old refugee colony, so almost all the families in the neighbourhood had at some point or the other crossed the border and relocated here . . .’

Sahana told me that she had first heard about the 1971 War of Liberation from her family. As she grew older, she continued to pick up books to learn more about it. ‘I remember reading and making other people read *Ekattorer Dinguli* (The Days of 1971) and a play called *Kobor* (Grave) by a Bangladeshi playwright, an absurdist drama where young people massacred during the war would come out of their graves every night.’ She told me that it was her dream to study ‘Genocide Studies’ at Dhaka University. Currently, she studies at Jadavpur University in West Bengal, where she says 21 February continues to be celebrated as Language Day. ‘We have a politically thriving campus life and the university has had a history of various student-led protest movements. Many of its students were directly engaged with Naxalite politics and, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were a huge part of the Naxalite uprising. Many were also engaged in relief work at various refugee camps post-Mukti Juddho (Bangladesh liberation war). So, given its historical context, the university observes Language Day every year. But we have moved from remembering just [the] 1952 East Pakistan language movement to other contemporary issues about the suppression of the mother tongue . . . how the languages of indigenous communities are being killed every day . . . in a way, we have retained the spirit of the 1952 uprising in East Pakistan, but we have also let it evolve into other discourses.’

However, she added that everything she had read on the 1971 war was independent reading. ‘In school, we don’t study anything after the Indian freedom struggle (against the British) . . . not anything post-1947 . . . it’s

almost like Indian history stopped evolving after 1947. As if that (independence) was everything people looked forward to and now that it has happened, we don't need to look at what happens afterwards. So, naturally, there was no mention of 1971 in my textbooks. Even if they did mention it, it would be [with regard to] Indo-Pak relations and not [about] Bangladesh and its people. That's how it works, right? Even now, in the case of Kashmir, we are more intent on gathering what Pakistan has to say about Kashmir or what India has to say about it. We barely listen to the Kashmiris . . .'

So then, it is not to argue that Indians simply don't care about the war and about the Bengalis who suffered, but that given the lack of focus it receives in textbooks and mainstream discourse, for many 1971 may only be remembered for another Indo-Pak war. It has relevance, but only so far as reinforcing that Pakistan is an enemy and that 1971 marked one of India's greatest victories against this enemy. I am told that it is this victory narrative that remains important, often used to bolster nationalist sentiment amongst the armed forces and civilians alike. India may not need to push a victory narrative against Bangladesh, but this narrative remains significant when it comes to its troubled relationship with Pakistan.

A journalist based in Bengaluru told me, '1971 has become part of day-to-day life in India. Be it for motivating the soldiers, or demeaning Pakistan. 1971 changed the way we looked at ourselves as Indians. Till the war, we didn't see ourselves as being competent militarily. But post-1971, we have had quite a tough posturing in international diplomacy. 1971 has almost become folklore in India.' Having lost the Sino-Indian War in 1962, and only reaching a ceasefire with Pakistan in both the 1948 and 1965 wars, the 1971 war boosted the army's and the nation's morale, feeding into the image of a valiant and strong India. More recently, when tensions escalated after the attack on security forces in Uri (in Indian-administered Kashmir) in 2016,⁵⁴ which India said was Pakistan-sponsored, a jawan from the Indian forces released a video,⁵⁵ warning Pakistan of its demise, drawing references to 1971 and the break-up of Pakistan. The past feeds into the

present. 1971 then becomes the hallmark of Indian glory; like being stamped as a South Asian superpower.

However, outside of nationalistic discourse and jingoistic chest-thumping, 1971 is etched in people's memories in other ways too. In West Bengal, in particular, 1971 has a regional importance that lingers on in ways that may not be applicable to other parts of India. Partitioned twice, first in 1905 and then in 1947, there have been migrations between East and West Bengal from the beginning of the twentieth century. For those who had survived 1947, the stories of violence that rolled in with the refugees from East Pakistan in 1971 triggered memories of Partition, when West Bengal was flooded with refugees, and the loss of people, of homes, of belongings had marred lives. After all, the Bengalis suffering in East Pakistan were not unfamiliar people, they shared so much with the Bengalis of India. As former foreign minister Jaswant Singh said, 'Bangladesh was part of India less than a quarter century back . . . it was all one country. It was part of India. It didn't feel like a separate land. They were kith and kin.'⁵⁶

As a West Bengal resident told me, 'When Partition happened in 1947, it left a considerable impact on the psyche of people. In 1947, Calcutta was a total mess. There was such a huge influx of refugees here at that time. People were uprooted, totally shattered by Partition, but many people thought that it was temporary. People had just locked up their houses and left their property thinking they would return. In fact, even up to the 1965 war, one could go to East Pakistan easily . . . migration was very frequent. So, for ten to fifteen years, until the war, people felt that a reunification might happen. I think this feeling continued till 1971. I was quite young when Bangladesh was created, but I remember many people rejoiced because they felt that perhaps now Bengal would be reunited. In fact, it is said that when the East Pakistanis came to Indira Gandhi's government for help, one of the first conditions she set was that they won't ask for the reunification of the two Bengals. There was this fear, because the cultural link in Bengal is very strong (and people were personally invested in what was happening in East Pakistan).'

Seeing the condition of fellow Bengali refugees struck an emotional chord with the people of West Bengal, especially as several West Bengali families had relatives or friends on the other side. Aman Kumar (name changed), who is based in Kolkata, told me that when he thought of 1971 he was overcome with images of violence, bloodshed and pain. ‘I heard about what had happened from my father and grandmother who would discuss 1971 quite often. My father’s elder brother lived in East Pakistan and was killed during the war. So, what was happening in East Pakistan was very personal for my family. Whenever I think about what happened there, I am repulsed.’ Aman was born in 1996, over two decades after the war. Yet for families like his, 1971 continues to hold relevance.

Meena Malhotra, who is based in Kolkata and serves as a director for Seagull Foundation for the Arts (which promotes creative and critical activities in India) explained the regional importance of 1971 to me in greater detail. ‘In India, 1971 is not a general public discourse. It’s not there in our syllabus unless you opt for history in high school. Up to class 10, we don’t really have a narrative of 1971. However, in Bengal, 1971 does feature in the public space, even though it is not part of our textbooks. Outside of Bengal, I’m not sure if it is at the forefront of public memory as it is very region-specific. [It is] much like 1947, which has a very different meaning in north India and south India. [But] in Bengal, it matters . . . the cultural link between the two Bengals continue. There is so much history that connects the people, with the two partitions and the migrations.’

However, as Meena explained, it was not just the similarities which ensured that 1971 remains important in West Bengal, but the differences between the people of East and West Bengal. The difference in dialects, food and other cultural practices and folk traditions between those who are ‘originally’ from East Bengal and those who have ‘always belonged’ to West Bengal serve as reminders of history, of the impetus for migration, of what was left behind in East Bengal or East Pakistan to settle in West Bengal. Meena told me that, ‘The Bengali that Bangladeshis speak and the Bengali that West Bengalis speak have differences. The food, the style of cooking is different . . . the Muslim Bengalis from East Bengal are more

meat eaters whereas the Bengalis here (in West Bengal) are more fish eaters. The cooking style also varies because the Muslims are primarily non-vegetarian and the Bengali Hindus lay stress on a fair amount of vegetarian cooking. There is this whole cultural thing about the *ghotis* and the *bangals*, and how they are different from each other. I am not sure how much they actually dwell on these differences, but I think it is part of the accepted reality, that these differences do exist between the people from East Bengal and West Bengal.’

Ghoti is a term used for those who are original inhabitants or natives of West Bengal. The word ‘bangal’ is used to refer to people who ‘originated in Purba Banga or East Bengal’.⁵⁷ While the origins of these terms are debated, the differences are ‘marked by the speaking of a different dialect of Bengali, different marriage rituals, and culinary practices, and their support for opposing football teams.’⁵⁸ I learn that alongside different food habits and customs, other stereotypes have also been associated with the bangals and ghotis. For instance, the bangals would sometimes be perceived as ‘loud, coarse and lacking in culture or fine tastes’⁵⁹ by the ghotis who would ‘look down upon the bangal, snigger at his crude manners, make blunt remarks about the rural yokel’s harsh and unrefined dialect.’⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the bangal, ‘would characterise the ghoti as effete, risk-averse, lazy, miserly, full of vanity, mean, petty and avaricious among other things’⁶¹ and see themselves as ‘more cultured and educated, with a culinary palate that embodied greater sophistication.’⁶² While these labels preceded the 1971 war, and with time, the communities have intermingled, even intermarried, diluting many of these differences, in my conversations with people in India, the terms would be used frequently to differentiate between the West Bengal people or ghotis and the bangals, people from East Bengal. In fact, when I asked students during my Skype exchanges about their thoughts on Bangladesh today, they said, ‘When we think of Bangladesh, we think of the bangals, the people who came from there and settled here in West Bengal.’

I have not conducted any detailed first-hand research on what the relationship is like between the two communities. I hear that there has been

a history of peaceful co-existence in Bengal; however, the relationship is not entirely frictionless.⁶³ This is the case with many ‘host’ and ‘migrant’ communities across the world. Questions about who has greater rights over the resources, who truly belongs to the land, who is foreign and who is local are common. In Sindh, for instance, the Muhajir–Sindhi conflict took on similar manifestations as Urdu-speaking migrants (or muhajirs) came to settle in Karachi after the Partition. In the Pakistani part of Punjab too, I know of villages which differentiate between the people who ‘belonged’ to the region prior to Partition and those who came after. The latter, in these cases, are still referred to as ‘Hindustanis’. The extent to which this differentiation manifests in rivalry or conflict varies, depending on the resources available, the socio-economic status of people, government policies, and the ways in which the genuine grievances of people are politicized and migrants made into scapegoats for people’s troubles by state and non-state actors.

Author Antara Datta notes in her book, *Refugees and Borders in South Asia*, that when refugees began to stream into Calcutta in 1971, stereotypes about ghotis and bangals were triggered, creating an ‘affective dissonance in urban areas. The refugee body was seen as an unwelcome and diseased presence, and tied into concerns about the decline of Calcutta.’⁶⁴ The ghotis, as well as the older generation of bangals, resented their entry (the older generation of bangals saw themselves as more educated and literate and the new refugees as ‘middle class’ and belonging to the ‘scheduled castes’).⁶⁵ While genuine sympathy for the refugees allowed the ghotis and earlier bangals to come together to support them, ‘the fear that the refugees would permanently remain, led to these old differences rearing their head. West Bengal and Calcutta’s relationship with its refugee population was thus marked by a mutual wariness that often split into open antipathy.’⁶⁶

Today, while there may not be any open or violent conflict between the communities, in the use of these terms, in the differentiation between the ghotis and the bangals, the memory of East Bengal, which became East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, remains fresh in people’s minds. As Meena said, ‘Even if 1971 is not in the Indian education system, in Bengal that

history is alive.’ It lives on in these distinct practices, in these labels, in the people who once ‘belonged’ somewhere else.

In some states outside of West Bengal too, 1971 remains significant, particularly in the border areas. The Bangladesh–India border is known as one of the ‘craziest’⁶⁷ borders in the world. Until recently, India and Bangladesh had ‘enclaves’,⁶⁸ i.e., ‘the fragmented territory of one sovereign power located inside another sovereign territory’.⁶⁹ These enclaves date back to the eighteenth century. While legend has it that the enclaves were a product of a chess match between the maharaja of Cooch Behar and a Mughal commander, the villages used as wager, these enclaves in reality, it is argued, were created as a ‘result of a series of peace treaties signed from 1711–13 between the feudal Kingdom of Cooch Behar (in West Bengal) and the Mughal Empire.’⁷⁰ It is estimated that approximately 38,000 Indians resided in these enclaves in Bangladesh, while 15,000 Bangladeshis resided in India,⁷¹ trapped and effectively stateless. It was only in 2015 that India and Bangladesh formally exchanged 162 enclaves, allowing the residents to choose their citizenship: Indian or Bangladeshi.⁷² However, despite this historic move, the two countries continue to share a thorny relationship over its 4100 km long border.⁷³ ‘Cross-border smuggling, cattle-rustling, illegal migration and shooting by border forces’,⁷⁴ have remained frequent.

In India’s Assam, in particular, which neighbours Bangladesh and has been a host to migrants (from East Bengal after the Partition, East Pakistan in 1971 and now Bangladesh—driven by economic, social, political factors and environmental issues),⁷⁵ the migration has remained a contentious issue. As early as 1951, a list of citizens—or the National Register of Citizens (NRC)—was published in response to the fears of nationalist groups about the influx of Muslim migrants altering the demographics of the Hindu majority state. The issue was re-triggered in 1970 as lakhs of refugees from East Pakistan poured in, many of them settling in Assam. In 1983, the situation turned violent when the All-Assam Students Union (AASU) agitation against ‘illegal migration’ killed 2000 ‘suspected migrants, most of whom were Muslim’.⁷⁶ The AASU, alongside other

regional groups, demanded that anyone who wasn't living in Assam by 24 March 1971 (a day before Operation Searchlight, which pushed many people into India for refuge), would be considered an illegal migrant. This accord gained new life in 2009 when a petitioner asked the Supreme Court of India to update the NRC. ⁷⁷ Work on 'updating' the list began in 2015. In August 2019 an updated 'final' NRC list was published, excluding nearly 20 lakh people from the Assam citizen list ⁷⁸ for being unable to 'prove' that they or their ancestors lived in India prior to 24 March 1971. As I write this, there are mounting concerns that this action could render lakhs stateless. News that India is building 'mass detention camps' for these 'illegal migrants' who failed the 'citizenship test' ⁷⁹ is being circulated while human rights groups have expressed fear that the NRC is being used as a tool for discrimination, particularly targeting Muslims. ⁸⁰

These ongoing pertinent issues ⁸¹ between India and Bangladesh along the border ensure that 1971 is not forgotten in people's imagination. It is the marker by which their citizenship, their nationalism, their sense of belonging is put to question. 1971 then may not necessarily be remembered for the killings and loss, nor the people's struggle, but rather in the 'otherization' of those who are perceived to 'not belong'. As one Indian remarked, 'Today, in India, the word Bangladeshi means refugees.' 1971 has taken on unique meanings in today's India, quite distinct from what it represents in Bangladesh and Pakistan but significant nonetheless in its national narrative and the collective imagination of its people.

Pakistan's War

Throughout the course of this book, I have touched upon the selective silence that envelops 1971 in Pakistan, as well as the dominant narratives about the creation of Bangladesh. The discourse popular in the army, in textbooks and in mainstream society has been highlighted in the previous chapters. In this chapter, while I have chosen to make references to these silences and narratives, I have also consciously opted to share experiences of people from Pakistan who offer a different and more nuanced perspective on 1971. Interviews with the Bihari community form the initial part of this section. These interviews seek to explore what the war meant to them. While their experiences have often been censored from official Bangladeshi accounts, they have been appropriated in Pakistan to justify the military operation. Conversations with members of the community reveal the personal implications for the Bihari families who were able to flee to Pakistan. This is followed by narratives of West Pakistanis who survived the war in East Pakistan, providing a civilian account of what transpired there during those months. Witnesses to and victims of the war, their experiences vary from those who 'watched' from afar. After all, the latter often relied only on the versions of events provided by the state, whereas those who were in East Pakistan had experienced the war first-hand. The last part of this chapter details the experiences of those Pakistanis who resisted the military action, whether as poets and activists or as military men. Seldom remembered, these people opposed the state policies in East Pakistan then and continue to challenge the statist narratives about the creation of Bangladesh in Pakistan today.

Remembering 1971 in Karachi

Over two years ago, in response to an article I wrote on 1971, I received a thank-you email from a stranger. The message was short but unsettling. It read: ‘I was one of the victims [of] what happened in East Pakistan, my father along with thirty-three members [of my family] were brutally murdered. Thank you for highlighting the truth.’

Since my article had focused on Pakistan’s silence about the mass killings of Bengalis, I instantly assumed that the email was from Bangladesh. I asked the sender if we could meet when I came to Dhaka later that year. To my surprise, he responded saying that he was based in Karachi, inviting me to visit him there instead. I soon learnt that Ansar (name changed) was not a Bengali but belonged to the Urdu-speaking Bihari community.

The Biharis, ¹ many of whom migrated to East Pakistan at the time of Partition, were a prominent community in what would later become Bangladesh. During the several interviews that I conducted with Pakistani army officers about 1971, I was often told that the military operation was justified and ‘had to be done’ because of the violence committed against the non-Bengali community prior to 25 March 1971. Textbooks too have emphasized stories of Bengalis using brute force on innocent non-Bengalis. While many of these non-Bengalis happened to be West Pakistanis who had settled in East Pakistan for business, or West Pakistani army officers and their families, a significant proportion of the non-Bengali population was composed of Biharis.

I am told that the fault lines between the two communities—Bihari and Bengali—were present long before 1971. The Biharis were well settled in East Pakistan and were often favoured over Bengalis for government jobs. ² Further, while the Bengalis were stereotyped by the West Pakistani ruling class as ‘semi-Hindus, pro-Indian and disloyal to Pakistan,’ ³ the Biharis were perceived as pro-Pakistan, not least because they supported the decision to declare Urdu, their mother tongue, as the national language. ⁴ Over time, the Biharis, acknowledged as the ‘better’ and more ‘loyal’

citizens by the ruling elite, were preferred over Bengalis for ‘jobs in mills and factories, railways and postal departments.’⁵ Author Bina D’Costa notes in her book *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* that ‘the army had also made a practice of appointing Biharis to replace educated Hindus in many important administrative positions, as well as in the railway shops and jute mills.’⁶

As the language movement in East Pakistan escalated, and political and social woes deepened, Bengali–Bihari relations also worsened. The Biharis I interviewed explained that over time they had come to symbolize Pakistani hegemony in the eyes of Bengalis. Disillusioned and agitated by the lack of transfer of power after the 1970 elections, in some areas the Bengalis began to attack Bihari homes and families as revenge against the Pakistani state. Later, when the Pakistan Army launched the operation on 25 March, they too would view the Biharis in a similar light. Assumed to be allies and ‘pro-Pakistan’, Biharis were recruited to support the Pakistan Army in its actions. Reportedly, ‘the Pakistan Army created an auxiliary force to provide local support, the *razakars*, one wing of which (the *Al-Shams*) was mainly, though not entirely, composed of young Biharis’⁷ (these auxiliary forces also included pro-Pakistan Bengalis who stood for a united Pakistan and helped perpetuate killings of Bengalis).⁸ Today, it is this role of Biharis as ‘collaborators’ that continues to be remembered in Bangladesh. While researching there, I heard harrowing stories of Bihari men working with the Pakistan Army to torture and kill Bengalis. Some Biharis told me that they had been forced by the army to participate in the killings, they also spoke of how they would be dragged out of their homes and threatened with dire consequences if they didn’t pinpoint Bengali homes and families that the army wanted to target. There were others though who volunteered because they believed in the ‘cause’. They felt it was their patriotic duty to keep Pakistan united. In doing so, it is argued that some Biharis acted as the ‘blunt edge of West Pakistani domination, as informants, strategic hamlets, and suppliers of manpower of death squads (alongside Bengalis who opposed the rupture of Pakistan).’⁹

It is this patriotism, of the Biharis and of pro-Pakistan Bengalis, that is often hailed in Pakistan. More recently, when the International Crimes Tribunal in Bangladesh moved to hang those who had been accused of collaborating with the Pakistan Army, TV anchors in Pakistan emphasized how these people were being punished for the love they had shown for their country. One of them said, *‘Jo zulam ki dastaan hai, jo aaj bhi sunayi de rahi hai, jistaran un logon ko phansi ke takhte pe charhaya ja raha hai, jinhon ne uss zamane mein Pakistan ko support kiya jab ke mulq he Pakistan tha, aur iss ilzam mein unko phansi sunayi ja rahi hai ki apne Mukti Bahini ke saath kyun nahi hathyar uthaye, India ke saath kyun nahi hathyar uthaye*¹⁰ (Those people are being hanged for supporting Pakistan at a time when there was no other country but Pakistan. They are being punished for not picking up arms with the Mukti Bahini and India).’ Why many of these patriots, particularly the Biharis, were left behind in East Pakistan, to dwell in camps, to face revenge killings, is a question that often goes unasked and unanswered. Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, the Biharis continue to be viewed as enemies. This is not just at the state level, but also at the individual level for several Bangladeshis.

For instance, when I learnt that a Bihari family had given refuge to Professor Muntassir Mamoon in 1971 (see Chapter 5), I leaned forward to know more. I asked him whether there were more such stories of rescue from the Bihari community and whether he had witnessed any violence against the Biharis in 1971. Mamoon was quick to dismiss my questions, abruptly stating that, ‘Actually we aren’t concerned about the Biharis, to tell you the truth . . .’ His tone was agitated and it seemed like he wanted no further discussion on the topic. Professor Mamoon had witnessed people from the same community target fellow Bengalis during the war. For him, there was no space to humanize the Biharis, to talk about their victimhood, or share tales of their rescue efforts.

Etched in Bangladeshi memory as ‘collaborators’ and ‘pro-Pakistan traitors’, the Biharis were ejected from society after the war ended. Today, they live on the margins, many of them cramped in camps (my visits and conversations with the people in these camps are detailed in the final

chapter). Those who had made it to Pakistan faced their own set of problems, the memory of the war continuing to haunt them. While several of them had engaged in violence, many others had only suffered the war like the Bengalis. Raped and murdered for belonging to the ‘wrong’ community at the ‘wrong’ time, there were dreadful stories the community had to share. However, during interviews and visits to archives and museums in Bangladesh, I seldom heard of this. Their narratives had been largely wiped out from public history, official discourse and cultural memory.

Back in Pakistan, it was perfectly all right to speak about the violence against the Biharis (though there has been little investigation into the number of Biharis persecuted, or their experiences. Rather their persecution is used as a political chip to explain the army action). After all, this was violence the Pakistani state was comfortable remembering, for it legitimated army action. Bihari pain was appropriated to strengthen its victim narrative. In fact, the violence against Biharis was used as a rationale to explain the documented atrocities committed by Pakistani soldiers. Bina D’Costa notes that in March 1971, 300 Biharis were killed in Chittagong, ‘following which the Pakistan government used the “Bihari massacre” to justify deploying its military on 25 March.’¹¹ A retired major from the Pakistan Army echoed these sentiments during my interview with him in Lahore in 2018. He said:

After the elections of 1970, there was a lot of hostility towards the non-Bengalis (in lieu of the transfer of power). The Bengalis started killing every non-Bengali they found . . . Maine khud dekha hai. December se le kar March tak ye hota raha hai (I have seen it myself. The violence against non-Bengalis continued between December and March). By early March, Dhaka airport was like a refugee camp . . . thousands of people who could manage to run away were (collected) there. The rest were killed. I cannot describe it, I won’t describe it to you rather. Can you imagine a dead city? It was like that . . . on 25 March. I was there. I was the signals officer in the brigade headquarter, managing the communication. The operation wasn’t supposed to be at the Dhaka University or to kill anybody. It was meant to bring Dhaka under control, to stop the violence against the non-Bengalis. However, when the army was passing by the university, the Mukti Bahini opened fire at them from Jagannath Hall. Colonel Taj, who was commanding the operation, asked for permission to open fire at the university in retaliation. Yes, when the soldiers were given permission to fire, the firing was excessive . . . but the firing had to be excessive under those circumstances.

The Hamoodur Rahman Commission's (supplementary) report, the only official inquiry into the 1971 war in Pakistan, in a chapter titled 'Alleged Atrocities by the Pakistan Army' also stresses upon the events before the military operation:

Let it not be forgotten that the initiative in resorting to violence and cruelty was taken by the militants of the Awami League, during the month of March 1971, following Gen. Yahya Khan's announcement of the 1st March regarding the postponement of the session of the National Assembly scheduled for the 3rd of March 1971. It will be recalled that from the 1st of March to the 25th March 1971, the Awami League had taken complete control of East Pakistan, paralyzing the authority of the federal government. There is reliable evidence to show that during this period the miscreants indulged in large scale massacres and rape against the pro-Pakistan elements . . . harrowing tales of these atrocities were narrated by the large number of West Pakistanis and Biharis who were able to escape from these places and reached the safety of West Pakistan. For days on end, all through the troubled month of March 1971, swarms of terrorized non-Bengalis lay at the army controlled Dacca airport awaiting their turn to be taken to the safety of West Pakistan . . .'¹²

The casualties during this period, as cited in the report, are estimated to be between 1,00,000 and 5,00,000. These statistics include 'Biharis, West Pakistanis and patriotic Bengalis'.¹³ Though the report states that the mention of these deaths is not to justify 'the atrocities or other crimes alleged to have been committed by the Pakistan Army during its operations in East Pakistan', it does emphasize that 'the crimes committed by the Awami League miscreants were bound to arouse anger and bitterness in the minds of the troops . . . the soldiers who were after all only human, reacted violently in the process of restoring the authority of the central government.'¹⁴

Wanting to move beyond the state's narratives, I was keen to speak to the Bihari community myself. I wanted to understand the events through their eyes. While Pakistan has appropriated Bihari experiences in its national narrative, using them to construct a 'collective truth' about 1971, one which justified its actions and tried to neutralize the killings perpetuated by its army, the Bangladeshi state has largely dismissed the violence against Biharis (it should be noted that several Bangladeshi intellectuals, academics and writers have challenged this silence by recognizing violence against the

Biharis).¹⁵ I wanted to reach out to the Biharis and listen to their experiences—experiences lost between the presence and absence of their selective stories in the national discourses. The purpose of doing so is not to equate the violence against Biharis with that experienced by the Bengalis. As Bangladeshi writer Naeem Mohaiemen points out:

While the killing of Bihari civilians by Bengalis is not defensible, issues of role, scale and power also have to be a 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.¹⁶

However, the experiences of the community and the violence endured by them have to be heard, not only to uncover a holistic human dimension of the 1971 war, but to also map the fragmented memories of 1971 that one often finds in Bangladesh and Pakistan. That history of Biharis, both of being implicit in crimes and being victims to crime are a critical part of the history of 1971. The email from Ansar had thus come at the perfect time. After speaking to him a few times over the phone, I decided to travel to Karachi to meet him. He not only promised to share his story but also introduce me to others, both Biharis as well as Bengalis who had chosen to stay in Pakistan or had moved there after 1971 (my conversations with Pakistani Bengalis are shared in the final chapter).

And so, in the heat of May, I landed at the Karachi airport. After a quick check-in at the hotel, I made my way to the Services Club where Ansar had arranged to meet me.

* * *

I was nervous as the Uber driver inched closer to the Services Club (a Defence Services Officers Mess in Pakistan). 1971 continues to be a controversial topic in Pakistan. I wondered how Ansar and his friends would respond to my research. I was particularly hesitant because I had learnt from one of our telephonic conversations that Ansar had served as a major in the Pakistan Army. From the other interviews I have conducted with army officers, I have often found it hard to move beyond nationalistic

rhetoric. I have also found that my questions about violence in East Pakistan have at times annoyed the officers. I wondered how the evening would pan out, and if Ansar too would be frustrated by my questions, unwilling to delve into any remembrances not endorsed by the state.

However, I was also excited to meet Ansar. Since he belongs to the Bihari community, I was curious about the intersection between his personal experience and his profession. How does belonging to a community that came to be persecuted before, during and after the war shape his perceptions about the military operation? Are his experiences in line with state narratives on the war? Do the two overlap neatly, one feeding into the other—his story of victimhood becoming the state’s justification of perpetrating violence? Or is there a difference between the personal story of the war and its appropriation by the Pakistani state? What happens when states turn personal traumas into heroic national stories of victimhood or triumph?

I called Ansar upon my arrival and he came to receive me at the gate. He was a middle-aged man, dressed in pants and a button-down shirt. A greying moustache and glasses adorned his face. He welcomed me warmly and guided me towards one of the rooms he had booked for our meeting. It was big, with ample space for the few of us who were meant to collect there for interviews. When I entered, only one man was seated in the room. Ansar introduced him to me as Khurshid, who also hailed from Bihar. I began telling them about my research, but Khurshid interrupted me just a few seconds in and started to share his story. He seemed eager to talk.

‘I was born in Dhaka in 1952. I lived there for fourteen years. My father served as an accountant there. I came to West Pakistan in 1966 to go to college, but I would keep visiting my father in East Pakistan every year. The last time I went to Dhaka was in 1969. After that the conditions worsened, especially after the elections. My family is originally from Bihar . . .’

‘Before going forward, let me tell you why all of us migrated from Bihar at the time of Partition in the first place,’ Ansar interjected. ‘The British had divided Bengal (referring to the partition of Bengal in 1905). In West

Bengal, there were mostly Hindus and they were very rich. In comparison, East Bengal had more Muslims. They were poor, but there were many raw materials in East Bengal. That's why Jinnah encouraged us to move there . . . there was a vacuum in East Bengal, you see. There was nobody in railway, port and shipping, in postal services. That's why so many families from Bihar migrated there. The Biharis were very educated and they came to East Bengal and took over. They started working in these industries, *unhon ne iss mulk ko chala diya* (they helped launch Pakistan).'

Apart from the economic reasons and the desire to help build the newly created homeland for Muslims, security factors had also driven many Biharis to East Bengal. It is estimated that about 10 lakh refugees came to East Pakistan from Bihar ¹⁷ at the time of Partition. The Biharis started migrating to East Pakistan in 1946, in the aftermath of the Bihar riots, in which Hindu mobs attacked Muslim families in an attempt to avenge the Noakhali riots in which many Hindus had been killed. Fearing for their lives, the Biharis had crossed over into East Bengal due to the sheer proximity of the region. By this time, Muslim homes in Bihar were being searched by the police and 'acute food shortages' plagued Muslim areas. ¹⁸ The atmosphere of uncertainty and escalating communal tensions pushed many others out of their homes. East Bengal, and what was later known as East Pakistan, became the second home for these Bihari families. Ansar and Khurshid's family had probably witnessed these circumstances closely, deciding that moving was the best option.

When Khurshid spoke next, he jumped straight to the 1970s. I suppose he knew that I was there to discuss that. He told me how he first read about Sheikh Mujib's victory in the 1970 elections. 'I would often buy *Dawn* during those days (one of Pakistan's oldest newspapers) to get news about what was happening in East Pakistan . . . it was only for 25 paise then! I remember reading Yahya Khan's statement that Sheikh Mujib had won. And then, the next morning the newspaper read: "*Jo Dhaka jayega uski tangein tor dainge*" ¹⁹ (we will break the legs of whoever goes to Dhaka).' And you know who said that? Bhutto said that. He was the person responsible for what had happened!' Here, his tone changed. He seemed to

blame Zulfikar Ali Bhutto for the creation of Bangladesh and for the loss of his family's home for the second time, first Bihar, then Bengal. I've heard several other Pakistanis lay the responsibility entirely on Bhutto. They say that it was because he didn't want to share power that the turmoil unfolded. Others blame the army. And yet others, India. For most though, it is a combination of civilian failure, military excesses and foreign intervention. However, rather than debating the causes for the separation, I am more keen on exploring everyday experiences of the war. While Khurshid was in West Pakistan at that time, Ansar was still in East Pakistan. He was a young boy, no more than twelve years old, when the violence ensued. I asked him to share his memories from then.

'You won't find what happened between 1 and 25 March 1971 anywhere in Bangladeshi books. Their history begins from 25 March, but do you think the Pakistan Army was bitten by a dog that it suddenly decided to launch an operation on that date?' Ansar began passionately, without pausing to gather his thoughts. It was almost as if there wasn't enough time to say everything he wanted to; as if there was too much to share, too much to convince me about. I wondered if it was because the article I had written (after which he reached out to me) focused on atrocities against the Bengalis after 25 March. I wondered if he felt that I was indoctrinated in the 'wrong' narrative, one that he wanted to fix. He thus began by telling me that if I wanted to understand 1971, I must focus on what occurred prior to 25 March. This didn't surprise me. The Pakistani state and the Bihari community insist that one must investigate and understand the events prior to the operation. There are two mainstream versions of 1971. The one before 25 March is the one Pakistan has chosen to remember. History seems to end on this date when it comes to 1971. In contrast, for Bangladesh, official history begins on 25 March. These different histories have their own victims and perpetrators, neither state willing to blur these binary lines to reach a more holistic truth. For those in Bangladesh, speaking about what happened in early March (in terms of violence against non-Bengalis) can be seen as tantamount to questioning the liberation struggle. The mention of Bihari casualties and victimization is a Pakistani narrative, and a Pakistani

narrative can only be anti-Bangladesh. For Ansar though, who belonged to both, the Pakistan Army and the Bihari community, this is a critical truth worth remembering and sharing.

‘On 3 or 4 March, they burnt our house and looted us. We were forced to run. At least 30,000–35,000 Biharis, Urdu-speaking Punjabis and Pathans, were killed between 1 and 25 March. They [referring to the Bengalis] were coming inside our homes, asking who was carrying weapons. *Woh itne tareeqay se kaam kar rahe thay* (they were working in such a systematic way). They went to organizations responsible for arms licences and took the addresses of those people [who had bought arms]. They would go and find out who had weapons and then bring a mob to take them away and disarm them (so they couldn’t defend themselves). This had started from the end of February . . . on 21 February, which is their Language Day, the tensions had started in Chittagong, Dhaka, Khulna and Rajshahi. That was the turning point, when they divided people: these are Urdu speakers or non-Bengalis and these are Bengalis. They had proper slaughterhouses where they would slice the necks and throw the bodies away. The Chittagong circuit house, which is a museum now, was a slaughterhouse. We also stood in line, I remember waiting. My mother had covered my eyes with her hands’. He lifted his hands up to his eyes to illustrate. ‘I was looking through the gap in her fingers, looking at how they were cutting people’s necks. There were 150 people in the line, waiting to be killed. This was in the month of May.’

I swallowed uncomfortably as he painted a vivid picture. Later, when I visited the circuit house in Khulna, I was told that a part of it had also been used as a slaughterhouse, only this time it was used to kill Bengalis. Each time I would shut my eyes, I would hear screams, accompanied by flashbacks of my visits to the museums that archived the skulls, the photographs of naked, tortured women, of massacred bodies. For days after my return to Pakistan, I would wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. Nightmares of being a victim in the stories that I had heard, being the one tortured, became nightly occurrences for a while. And all this was just from hearing stories and looking at visual documentation of the war. What would it do to a child who had to stand in line, witness people being

slaughtered, knowing that his turn was soon to come? I shiver at the thought.

‘How old were you at this time?’ I asked.

‘I was thirteen years old,’ he laughed softly, shaking his head. ‘*Kuch samajh nahi aa raha tha* (I couldn’t understand anything). We were hungry, we were . . .’ he began but was unable to finish his sentence. He shook his head again. ‘*Baray halaat kharab thay* (the conditions were terrible).’

Our conversation was interrupted by others in the room, friends of Ansar’s who had trickled in while we were talking. He had told them that I was researching on 1971 and they all seemed to have something to say. I conversed with them through the course of the night, many of them narrating their own stories of loss, violence and displacement. Our conversation halted multiple times with Ansar trying to arrange other interviews for me and people calling him back about their availability. It was only when everybody left and Ansar offered to take me for dinner at the club that we spoke in depth about his family, his time in East Pakistan, his father’s death.

He told me that growing up he had never experienced any hostility between Bengalis and Biharis. Even when tensions escalated outside, things remained calm at his school and in his immediate surroundings. His family, therefore, did not even consider leaving for West Pakistan. Today, after having lost his father, he regrets the decision. ‘I sometimes say to my mom that my dad was a nut. He knew exactly what was going to happen (Ansar’s father was a journalist, and therefore well aware of the news coming in). But he wanted to remain in a fool’s paradise. He would keep saying that *sab theek ho jayega* (everything will be alright).’

‘The first time there was an attack on our house was on 3 or 4 March. They came and stole our radio. I didn’t understand what was going on. I kept calling out to Minnu (nickname changed), asking what was happening?’ Ansar explained that Minnu was his Bengali class-fellow who happened to live in the house to his left. He told me that Minnu’s father had brought the Bengalis to his house that day. ‘His father had done this to us, he misbehaved with my mother, was rude to my father . . . I kept saying

“Minnu, what is happening”, but he just stood there silently.’ Minnu too was probably no more than thirteen years old. I wonder how he made sense of the situation, of his father looting his class-fellow’s home. I wonder how deep the psychological scars are on children who are caught in conflict, forced to make enemies out of friends overnight based on ethnic, racial, religious or linguistic lines, things they have only vague understandings of.

While one of Ansar’s neighbours had looted his home, it was his other neighbour who saved him and his family when the attackers came for the second time. In this case too, it was a class-fellow’s home. ‘This time, the Mukti Bahini came to burn our house. This was around 27 or 28 of March. It was only because Nasreen’s (Ansar’s other class-fellow whose name has been changed) father warned us that we got away. We escaped from the back door before they torched it. Nasreen’s father was a pure Bengali, he was a thorough gentleman. He saved us by telling us about the attack before it happened.’ Later, Ansar would often send these neighbours letters from Pakistan. When he had a chance to go to Bangladesh, he visited them. During our conversation, he even called Nasreen so that I could speak to her. He showed me photographs of her and her family. It was obvious that their bond was still strong.

Ansar confided that there were several such stories, from both the Bengali and non-Bengali communities. He mentioned an incident involving a Pakistani officer and his wife. ‘The Mukti Bahini had killed the officer and locked up his wife,’ he said. Pregnant, she was forced to deliver inside the lock-up. Her elder daughter, who was with her when her husband was shot, had gone missing too. Having lost both husband and daughter, and the fact that she was in labour, the woman was in bad shape when a Bengali friend of the officer’s came to rescue her. A few days later, her elder daughter too returned. It turned out that the Pakistani officer’s Bengali batman had taken her to his village in Comilla to keep her safe from all the frenzy and violence. One Bengali had saved her life, another of her daughter’s. When the Pakistan Army arrived to take her back, they began to shoot at the Bengalis. At that point, it was the officer’s wife who insisted that the army let them go. ‘*Inko na maro* (don’t kill them)’, she pleaded,

‘they saved us.’ I would gradually learn that there were many other similar stories, those where humanity prevailed even in the darkest moments. Throughout my research I came across several such narratives, of Biharis saving Bengalis, of Bengalis saving Biharis, of Muslims saving Hindus, of Hindus saving Muslims. Unlike state discourses, which tend to portray a black-and-white understanding of the past, drawing clear lines between victims and perpetrators, between bloodshed and rescue, it seems to me that experiences of conflicts are far more complex. Whether it is Partition or 1971, the same people often narrate stories of rescue and violence at the hands of the ‘other’ community in the same sitting. Many times, those who have been attacked by members of one community have also been saved by members of the same community. Other times, victims have become perpetrators or vice versa. Contradictions are the only truth, and competing, layered stories the only reality.

I asked Ansar where his family and he went after his house was burnt. He told me that by this time his father had gone missing and the children were alone with their mother. His father (name withheld) had got on to a train on 23 March to go to Dhaka for work. That was the last time Ansar saw him. Over the years, he did a lot of research to try to find out what happened. He went back to Bangladesh to trace him, met people, sifted through documents to find some closure. He even managed to locate the driver of the train that his father had been on. He told me that his father was killed on 14 April. ‘Mukti Bahini (it should be noted that Mukti Bahini, the Liberation Army, officially came into being on 11 April 1971.²⁰ However, perceived as the face of the enemy, any Bengali aggression is usually attributed to the Mukti Bahini, even prior to this date) members had stopped the train and segregated Bengalis from the Urdu-speaking passengers’. The latter, he told me, were taken to a warehouse where they were kept locked for ten to twelve days. ‘The kidnapers had made deals with a few people. Those who could pay were released.’ As the Pakistan Army started to make inroads after the military operation was launched on 25 March, Ansar said the train moved forward to another location, close to the border with India (the exact location has been omitted to protect identity). According to his

research, it was here that his father was killed. He was only forty-two years old.

‘We didn’t know anything about what happened to him. We just knew that we had to save our lives. Everybody was trying to save their lives. After our house was burnt, we went and hid in an empty school building nearby. We stayed there for a while.’ He paused for a moment, his pace slower than what it had been all evening. These must have been some of the most painful days of his life. It took time and effort to reflect on them. Slowly, he started to speak again. ‘One night, I went out on the road in the dark. I needed to get food for my younger siblings. So I went to a store nearby. The shutter was broken. I went inside and stole two bottles of Fanta and two packets of biscuits for my brothers and sisters (thirty-five years after this incident, when Ansar visited Bangladesh, he told me that he returned to the store to pay—500 takka—for the items he had stolen. The shopkeeper was moved to tears. It turned out that he remembered Ansar’s family). I remember seeing bodies on the road that night. There was a woman moaning . . . she had been shot and was bleeding . . . she was asking for water. I ran from one place to another to find water, but she died after having just a sip.

‘The next morning, a man was crossing by in a jeep when my mother peeked outside. He instantly pointed his gun at her, glaring at her suspiciously. When my mother started speaking to him in Punjabi, he said, “What are you doing here? Everybody has been killed. Come to the camp!”’

By now the Pakistani army had taken over several areas in East Pakistan. Besides crushing the nationalist movement, I am told that there were efforts made to rescue the non-Bengalis (others have argued that the Pakistan Army did little to protect them. Knowing that by recruiting them in its auxiliary forces, they would come to be targeted by the Bengalis, they were not given the protection and safety they needed to survive the war. The fact that lakhs of Biharis were left behind in Bangladesh to face the wrath of the Bengalis was, in journalist and author Afsan Chowdhury’s words, practically a ‘death warrant’ signed by the Pakistan Army).²¹ The efforts—

for those whom they came through, such as Ansar's family—were like a breath of relief. When I asked him later if he felt the Army operation was justified given what he suffered, he point-blank answered, 'Absolutely justified.'

'When we got into the jeep, the man (who was West Pakistani) kept insisting, "*Bahir mat dekhna, bahir mat dekhna.*" *Maine socha pata nahi kyun keh raha hai, magar thak-thak awazein aa rahi thi* (the man kept saying, 'Don't look outside, don't look outside.' I didn't understand why he was saying that, but I could hear sounds of "thak-thak"). It was only later that I realized we were driving over bodies. That's where that sound was coming from. There was no other way (of getting around) as the bodies were everywhere . . .

'When we got to the camp and were allotted a small *jhopri* (hut), my mother began to cry. We were from a very rich family; we lived in a good house. She said, "Will we live in this now?" The man who rescued us felt bad and asked us to shift into his quarters. We got some food and drinks there. That's how we spent our time in the camp. The man who saved us was from the military police. He's still alive and lives in Lahore.'

However, Ansar and his family were to witness more violence and chaos in the days to come. Their rescue wasn't complete. He told me that one day 'the Mukti Bahini attacked the camp that he was living in. The army was busy in operations. There were just a few jawans at the camp, whom they beat up. They loaded us on the truck and took us away to the circuit house.' It was here that Ansar had stood in line, waiting to be killed, his neck sliced, as the others before him. 'Everybody was standing there, waiting to be killed. We were also standing. *Sab tamasha dekh rahe thay.* Fortunately, the Pakistan Army came in time and we were taken back to the camp.' His family continued to live there for a few months, entering Pakistan later through a special Red Cross aircraft in October or November, a date he doesn't remember.

Almost two years after this conversation Ansar told me that his mother was raped during the war. While they were hiding in the empty school, two men had entered. He told me that they were from the Mukti Bahini. 'When

my mother saw them, she pushed me and my siblings under the haystack. She was raped right there, in front of us, and I couldn't do a thing about it. She was left half unconscious. When the men left, I gave her a sip of the Fanta I had stolen . . .' He said that I was the first person he had told about this. 'How can I tell the world how my mother was raped? That my father was killed? My heart bleeds, beta.'

While the Bangladeshi state has recognized Bengali rape survivors as birangonas, the experiences of Bihari women have mostly been ignored. Yasmin Saikia, in her book *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh*, shared her conversation with a Bihari woman who told her: 'Don't ask me who killed whom, who raped whom, what was the religion, ethnic, or linguistic background of the people who died in the war. The victims in the war were the women of this country—mothers who lost children, sisters who lost their brothers, wives who lost their husbands, women who lost everything, their honour and dignity. In the war, men victimized women.'²²

Alongside meeting Bengali rape survivors, Saikia converses with Bihari women who share ghastly stories of rape and torture.²³ However, these Bihari women's voices remain missing from macronarratives in Bangladesh. The experiences of Biharis are best forgotten, pushed to the periphery of memory, just as they are pushed to the periphery of society in post-war Bangladesh. Saikia writes:

The Bengalis claim 1971 and the trauma of violence as an exclusive experience. Public memory is replete with stories of the suffering of the Bengali people, but there is no space to remember the experiences of other groups . . . The events of 1971 belong to them, the Bengalis, who can remember and tell their version of the story and thus make it 'their history'. Those who are not included within this 'memoryscape' are condemned as an enemy; there is no audience to listen to the enemy's tale.²⁴

The stories of these women—like Ansar's mother—find little mention in Pakistan too. To speak of rape and sexual assault undergone by women during Partition or in 1971 would bring 'dishonour' to 'our' women, 'our' nation. If at all, rape is remembered as a homogenized collective truth,²⁵ sometimes to beef up hostility against the 'enemy'.²⁶ The varied personal

experiences of women are seldom explored. The conscious silence is perhaps their only remembrance.

* * *

Mr Jinnah

Later that night, Ansar drove me to meet a friend, Mr Jinnah. Born in Hyderabad Deccan (a princely state that was located in the south-central region of India) in 1947, his family migrated to East Pakistan in 1952. Born in the year of Partition, I could only assume that Mr Jinnah's parents must have been supporters of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, naming their son after the man who was going to become the founding father of Pakistan. In fact, in the years after 1947, Jinnah's father had travelled to various parts of Pakistan, from Khyber to Karachi, trying to decide where to settle in the new homeland for Muslims. As a student leader at his college, he had been active in politics. Now that Pakistan had been created, it felt like the natural move to make. However, it was only when he reached East Pakistan in 1951 that his heart finally settled on a place. 'The moment he landed in East Pakistan, he liked the place. The very first day, as soon as he landed, he knew this was where he would settle,' Jinnah told me. A year later, Jinnah followed him to Chittagong along with his mother, grandmother and two younger brothers.

Jinnah too was very fond of East Pakistan. When I asked him to tell me how it compared with West Pakistan, where he lived briefly between 1957 and 1964, he said that East Pakistan had an entirely different atmosphere. 'People were very rough and tough here (referring to West Pakistan). They were very crude, very arrogant. In East Pakistan, it was just the opposite. It was very calm and quiet; people were very helpful and loving. Even today, after coming to Pakistan, I've gone back to Bangladesh twice and found the same love and affection, the same culture there.

' . . . In spite of all that has happened, I still receive calls and mails from my friends over there. I am in touch with them. The Bengalis' grievances

were against the West Pakistani government, not us people. I have heard from people here in West Pakistan that the officials never treated Bengalis serving in the government well. They were all discouraged, looked down upon. I never saw anything personally, but it is a fact that it happened. I have heard about a lot of senior government officials in Islamabad who looked down upon their Bengali counterparts. This created hatred, resentment. These feelings developed over time. Over and above this, India was flaring up things. India really played a vital role in all this. They helped the Bengalis in the creation of Bangladesh. The Mukti Bahini was funded and arranged for by India. I did not know this earlier; I read about it recently in one of the articles. There were people going to India for training. They were well trained in every aspect.’

‘How did you start to experience the tensions personally? When did you start to notice that the situation was worsening? Was there any conversation in your family about it?’ I asked.

‘There was no conversation, nothing at all, in my family. We knew what had happened in the elections. Sheikh Mujib had won by a very good majority and we were happy. We were citizens of Chittagong, of East Pakistan; we had no problem if Mujib was in power. All my friends, colleagues, all Urdu-speaking people, we were comfortable there.’

‘Did you anticipate anything like . . .?’ I asked, wondering if people were anxious about the open conflict and violence that would soon erupt, but he interrupted me before I could finish.

‘No, not at all. Never. Never ever. Not until it really started.’

‘And when did it really start?’

‘After 26 March.’

I noticed my own surprise as he said this and realized that I had come to assume binaries of my own. For me too, the non-Bengali narrative was centred around events prior to 25 March and the Bengali narrative post that. However, reality is far more complex. All Bengalis and non-Bengalis cannot be lumped together in a monolithic group, with homogeneous experiences. One’s geographical location, politics, resources, sex and social class are only some of the factors that resulted in diverse experiences of the

war. For people like Mr Jinnah, the violence before 25 March only became known later, as secondary and generalized news about what was happening to ‘others’. For those ‘others’, like Ansar, this violence was personal and intimate, one that was difficult to move beyond.

Jinnah told me that while there were some instances of fighting, burning of houses and other issues that the non-Bengalis faced in pockets of Chittagong and other parts of East Pakistan (particularly where a large number of Urdu-speaking people lived or worked), they only started to hear such news in the last few days of March. ‘We were living in a posh area of Chittagong and so we were not worried. We thought nothing would happen here. We had Urdu-speaking people, Bengalis, Punjabis, Hindus, foreigners, all sorts of people in the area. We never had any problem with each other, never . . .’ It seemed to him and his family that they could remain insulated from the happenings outside. Despite being a non-Bengali amidst heightened Bengali nationalism, Jinnah said that he was never scared.

‘But then messages and news from different parts of Chittagong, even from remote areas of East Pakistan started to come in. After Sheikh Mujib announced the independence of Bangladesh, the massacres and mass troubles started. The army moved on 25 March. I remember it was a Friday. The next day, on 26 March, my father and two younger brothers were taken away (by Bengalis) and never returned.’ It is no wonder that 26 March is the most important date for Jinnah. It is when the war reached his home. Everything else, before and after, fades in comparison. This is when he lost most of his family, it is the day, as it is for so many Bengalis, that the conflict became personal, the wounds raw, the pain unimaginable.

He explained that his father was a social worker, a local councillor and a very popular man. ‘He was very social and had a lot of friends all over Chittagong. In fact, he had more Bengali friends than Urdu-speaking friends. Soon, family friends, my father’s friends, everybody started calling to say they were facing trouble. My father simply asked everyone to come over to our house. He called everybody. Our area was considered safe . . . and it was safe then . . .’

‘People from different areas were coming to seek refuge in our house. All of a sudden, unfortunately or fortunately, I came down with jaundice. My father insisted that I wouldn’t be comfortable at home with so many people around. He advised that I go to my sister’s house where I would be able to take better precautions. My elder sister was also in Chittagong, not too far away. I kept insisting that I didn’t want to go, but he said I better. This was on the evening of 25 March. I sat on my cousin’s motorbike—which was safer than travelling in a car as by then people had started breaking, hitting, splattering the glass of cars. So, we just took the motorcycle and headed to my sister’s house. I spent the night there.’

It was while Jinnah was still sleeping in the early hours of 26 March that his father rang up his sister and her husband. He explained that there had been disturbances in the area. Students had come out of their colleges and were ‘creating havoc’. The events at Dhaka University the night before had shocked people. There was no going back after the operation had been launched. I am told that appalled, shaken and charged Bengalis were out on the streets. Pro-Pakistan Bengalis and non-Bengalis had taken their own positions. The Pakistan Army had entered. It was chaos all around. East Pakistan was going to see indescribable pain and suffering in the months to come.

‘My brother-in-law came to me and said, “Look, father has been taken by the Mukti Bahini.” I asked, “What!” He repeated, “Yes, he has been taken away by the Mukti Bahini. Your younger brothers are gone too.” I kept asking him to call my father, but there was no connection. The telephone lines had been snapped. I didn’t know what to do. My mother, grandmother, two of my younger sisters and all the other people who were staying at my house were still there.’ It was Jinnah’s *Parsi* neighbour who came to their rescue. Upon hearing what had transpired, he agreed to take all the women to his house. ‘They were there for a good number of days, till the Pakistan Army moved in and cleared things up. It was only then that we could go back to our house.’

I asked him if he was frightened at that time, but he said he wasn’t. ‘No, I was not frightened, I was not frightened at all, I was not frightened at all . .

.’ he kept repeating.

‘How come?’

He stammered for a few seconds before saying, ‘My sisters were scared. I was . . . I was . . . I was really taken aback . . . I was really sorry that this had happened to my family because my brothers and my father had so many Bengali friends. We never thought this would happen to us . . . it was a surprise . . .’

It was once the army came in that Jinnah’s family felt safer. They went around asking if anyone knew what had happened to Jinnah’s father and brothers. People pointed him towards an under-construction building. ‘The East Pakistan Rifles regiment had an office there. That’s where all the Bengali officers and soldiers were stationed. My father was taken there with a lot of other people. When we went there, we could see blood on the walls and on the floor. The place had been abandoned. Once the army had moved in, the people had run away. We tried to find out what happened later on, but nobody was able to tell us. With all the bloodstains on the walls, the shoes and slippers scattered on the floor, we could understand what had happened . . . they had really killed all the people there.’

Jinnah’s father was only forty-two years old. His brothers were eighteen and twenty. He himself was only twenty-two. For years afterwards, he tried to find his family, particularly one of his brothers. ‘My younger brother had been studying inside when the mob came to take my father and other brother. When my mother told him what had happened, he ran after them. I always thought that maybe he went into hiding, that maybe he wasn’t killed, that he would come back. People told me that he would’ve contacted me if he were still alive, that I should let it go, but I couldn’t. I still have a feeling that he is around somewhere. After the Second World War, there were so many Japanese soldiers who went to the jungle to fight, not knowing that Japan had surrendered. They were still in the forest, hiding in different places, thinking they were still at war. They hadn’t returned to the cities for a very long time. Maybe something similar happened to my brother. Maybe something happened to him, he lost his senses, which is why he couldn’t

come back. Maybe he doesn't know where he is, he doesn't remember anything . . .'

The first time Jinnah went back to Bangladesh after the war, it was to search for his brother. He had googled his name and saw four or five people with the same name pop up. He investigated deeper and found out where one of them worked. 'I started to get goosebumps,' he told me. 'Instantly, I called one of my family friends' in Chittagong and asked them to start looking for him. In the meantime, Ansar also called his contacts in Bangladesh to follow up.' The man, however, was frightened that somebody in Pakistan was trying to find him. He started to avoid the visits and phone calls. He probably assumed that this could only mean trouble, given the strained Pakistan–Bangladesh relations. When Jinnah finally made it to Bangladesh to meet him, it was difficult to locate him. He had gone away on leave, presumably to dodge what he deemed was a suspicious and worrying situation. Days later, when they were finally able to trace him, it turned out that he wasn't Jinnah's brother.

To this day, Jinnah continues to hope that his brother might reach out to him one day. A part of him continues to believe that he is alive somewhere in Bangladesh. It is difficult for him to cut that cord with his past. It was as difficult for his mother. He told me that she would keep asking how their house in Chittagong was, who lived there, what condition it was in. She passed away a few days before I met Jinnah, but till her last breath he didn't tell her that their home had become abandoned property in Bangladesh, allocated to the Family Planning Department. He wanted to keep the memory of their home, as they had left it, alive for her, just as he tries to keep the memory of his brother, the hope that he never met the same fate as his father and other sibling, alive in his heart, even four decades after the bloody war snatched it all away.

The Tea Gardens of Sylhet

The weather was sticky and the breeze warm as I made my way to Shahid and Shireen's apartment in Karachi. I was running late, having lost my way

in a city that was rather unknown to me. I was worried that Shahid and Shireen might be annoyed with me for keeping them waiting for close to an hour, but Shireen received me at the stairs, smiling affectionately. She invited me inside with a big hug. We had been introduced over the phone through mutual friends in Islamabad some time ago. When Shireen had heard about my research, she had said that her family would be keen to talk to me for they had much to share. I was also enthusiastic about speaking to them and understanding the experiences of West Pakistanis who had been living in East Pakistan in 1971 for work or other purposes. What did East Pakistan mean to them? What were their relations with the Bengalis like? Had they anticipated the war and the creation of Bangladesh? How did they come back to Pakistan? What was that time like for them? Caught in the midst of the war, their experiences must have been very different from those who resided in West Pakistan, watching the events from a distance, easily able to turn a blind eye to what they didn't want to see.

I entered their lounge and was introduced to two men: Shahid, who is Shireen's husband, and their friend Khalid. They told me that they had been friends since the 1960s, when they lived on the tea estates in East Pakistan. Shahid was the first one to be posted there, followed by Khalid and, later, Shireen, whom Shahid married and had children with.

'In 1959, I got a job at the tea gardens in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh,' Shahid began. Born in 1934, he was in his early eighties when we met. He had some difficulty in hearing and I had to sit close to him so that he could understand me. However, his memory of those days was sharp. He didn't need many prompts from me. He knew what he wanted to share.

'I was in Sylhet, where the [one of the biggest] tea plantations were. It was a very large district, host to mostly British tea companies. The majority of the companies employed West Pakistanis, especially for the managerial-level staff. The British thought that the West Pakistanis were better workers, more aggressive, more hard-working, and so they preferred hiring them. I was recruited to work there. I stayed there for about eleven years, till the political mishap in 1971.'

‘And by this time, by the late 1950s and 1960s, could you sense growing discord between East and West Pakistan? Any resentment among the Bengalis?’ I asked.

‘Oh! Plenty of resentment, plenty. You could tell that the East Pakistanis didn’t like the West Pakistanis and they showed their contempt in different ways. People were very angry with the West Pakistanis even before the army operation, which only served to flare things up. So, we were anticipating tensions . . . we knew anything could happen, but not to the extent that it did.’

Shahid told me that he hadn’t anticipated the violence that ensued in East Pakistan in the months to come. Though he had sent his wife and children to Karachi prior to the military action, he had stayed back hoping that things would settle down soon and his family would return. ‘I knew things were bad. In fact, they were going from bad to worse. I could see that but I didn’t think it would come to a point that such drastic military action would be taken. So, I stayed on.’ It wasn’t long after he had sent his family to Karachi that he realized that he too would have to leave. The tensions had reached Sylhet. East Pakistan could no longer be home for him.

‘One morning in late March, the Mukti Bahini came for me. They knew I was a West Pakistani. The labourers on the tea estate heard that their manager was being taken away and ran to my bungalow. They managed to drive the Mukti Bahini away, but I knew I was no longer safe there. The next morning, I sat in my car and drove 5 to 6 miles to another tea garden, where I had a Bengali friend. I told him what had happened and that I needed to leave but couldn’t. The area I was in was surrounded by the Indian border. The main roads had been blocked. There was no way for me to get to West Pakistan, or even Dhaka, from there. My friend told me not to worry and stay the night with him. By morning, he had made arrangements for me to cross over to India on foot, from where I was supposed to make my way to Pakistan.’

About five to six Hindu labourers from the tea garden travelled with Shahid, helping him cross the border, which was about 8 miles away. Initially, Shahid went to Calcutta, which was the closest prominent city and

also where his tea company's branch was located. 'I knew some people there. I went to them and told them how I had escaped. They said they would help make arrangements for my return to West Pakistan. They also asked me to be patient. But look at my stupidity, I said no, I wanted to go to West Pakistan just then and that I would make my way through Punjab (in India) and cross over into Lahore. And so, I left for Delhi and from there I went to Ferozepur, which is near the India-Pakistan border. I thought I'd cross over from there.'

Shahid checked into a small hotel in Ferozepur for the night. It was while he was sitting in the garden in the evening that he overheard some Indians conversing. 'They were talking about how some smugglers had crossed the border and how a couple of them had betrayed them and owed them money and that they were searching for those smugglers. I thought they were the best people to speak to about my situation. They dealt with smugglers and seemed to know the border area well. They could tell me how to cross. They agreed to help me, asking me not to worry, that they would take me to Pakistan. But what they did instead was to inform the local police. The next morning, when they took me to the border, a police van was waiting for me. I was nabbed and put in Ferozepur jail. I was there for about three months . . .'

'No, it wasn't three months. You were gone for eight to nine months,' Shireen interrupted. 'March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October,' she started to count.

'Was it that long?' Shahid asked. Then quietly he added, 'My memory fails me.'

I turned towards Shireen who had been listening quietly. I could only imagine how difficult those months must have been for her, away from her husband. Given the way she counted through the months, one could feel how dreadfully long and painful they must have been. I knew that many other West Pakistanis had been through the same thing as Shahid and Shireen, with some family members incarcerated, others waiting for their release. After the surrender, thousands of Pakistanis had been taken POWs in India, returning home months or, at times, years later. Bengalis who

resided in West Pakistan and had been unable to leave were also sent to camps if they ‘optioned’ for East Pakistan.²⁷ It was in 1973 that an agreement was signed between India and Pakistan²⁸ to repatriate civil and military POWs in India. The Bengalis in Pakistan were to be repatriated to Bangladesh.²⁹ Their families, meanwhile, had gone through the ordeal of waiting, wondering what condition they were in, if and when they would return. Amongst my own relatives and acquaintances, I knew of several people who had become POWs. While the popular figure that is floated is 93,000 POWs, and it is often assumed that they were all soldiers, it has been argued that many of them were in fact civilians.³⁰ One man I spoke to told me that he was eight years old in 1971. He was held in a prison camp for more than two years with his father, mother and siblings. In his words:

Two years of my life were wiped out. I’m two years behind in every aspect: school, college, work, everything. I sacrificed two years for Pakistan. I remember, once I had a terrible toothache while I was in the camp. I wanted to go to the dentist, but the guards wouldn’t take me. It was only after a week of excruciating pain that they finally agreed. They blindfolded me, tied my hands . . . there was a guard in front of me with a gun and a guard behind me with a gun. I wondered, even then, where did they think I was going to run? We were in Meerut, a city I didn’t know at all. All I knew was the camp. I was only eight years old. But that day, despite the blindfold, I was so happy to be out of the camp. I could see from the bottom of the blindfold . . . I could see rickshaws moving, sweepers cleaning, the hustle bustle of a market. These little sights meant so much. For two years, we had no school, no teacher, we would have nothing to do. At most, we would sit on the *katchi zameen* (the floor) and do math sums. I still remember the day of our release. We were in a line, and I kept pushing the people ahead of me, saying ‘*Jaldi karo, chalein, chalein* (hurry up, keep moving).’ I was ten years old then. When I finally reached Wagah border and crossed over into Pakistan, *maine zameen pe sajda kiya, zameen ko pyar kiya* (I bowed down and kissed the soil). I couldn’t believe I was home.

Shireen told me that she had three daughters by 1971. ‘One was four years old, the other was two and a half and the third was only ten months old. By 20 March 1971, we knew we had to leave. Things didn’t look good. Shahid didn’t want to come with us because he thought that if he left he would have to quit his job and that wouldn’t look good to his company. But the rest of us came to Dhaka. We were at the airport for three days and three nights before the flight finally took off. I remember we flew over Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) because flights couldn’t go over Indian air space.

We reached Karachi on 25 March. The same night, the military operation in Dhaka was announced.'

I asked her if she thought she had come to Pakistan temporarily and that she would return after 'normalcy' was restored?

'Yes, that's what I thought, but my father warned me otherwise. He came to pick me up at the airport and said, "Beta, *ab tumhara wapis jana mushkil hai* (Child, I don't think you'll be able to go back now)." I said, "*Khuda na kare! Main kyun ghar nahi jaoongi* (God forbid! Why won't I go back to my home)?"' But Shireen's father was right. He had foreseen from Karachi what she and Shahid hadn't acknowledged in East Pakistan. Nothing would be the same.

I asked her how she got through this period, away from Shahid. After all, she didn't see him for several months. 'It was such a horrible time. Like a nightmare. I told my parents that I couldn't stay in Karachi. I wanted to go to my in-laws' house in Lahore. I thought that would be better for my children. It was there that we received a letter from jail. My mother-in-law and I were in a bad shape, thinking about what he was going through, but my father-in-law pointed out that now at least we knew he was safe. "He will come back, whether after a year, two years, three years, five years, but he will come," he said. And then [finally] he returned.' Shireen broke down, the words difficult to form between the tears. 'And then when he came . . . he was without a job for a long, long time.'

'Do you remember the day he returned?' I asked.

'Yes. It was 31 October, a Thursday.'

'Did you know he was returning that day?'

'A week before he returned, the whole family had gone to Kasur because we had heard that he had been released and was coming home. We waited the whole day, only to be told that he couldn't be released without some commissioner's signature. That was very painful for me. So when, a week or ten days later, Shahid's cousin came to me and said, "Shiro, Shiro! (Shireen's nick name) *Mubarak ho! Shahid aa raha hai!* (Shiro, congratulations! Shahid is coming home!)" all I could muster was an achha. He asked me, "You're not excited?" I retorted, "*Aayega toh ho jaoongi*

excited. *Jao yahan se. Kyun aaye ho mujhe batane?* (When he comes, I'll be excited. Go away now. Why did you come to give me this news?)” I felt dead inside. I had no feelings. Everyone was always telling me “*aa raha hai, aa raha hai* (he's coming, he's coming)” but I didn't want to believe anyone. When my father-in-law asked me to come to Wagah border with him to pick Shahid up, I refused. I told him, “Abba jaan, I don't want to. I don't have the courage to come back alone.”” Terrified that Shahid wouldn't return, Shireen hadn't wanted to hold on to any false hope. She would only believe it when she saw him.

‘And then, about 3:30 or 4 p.m., my father-in-law returned with a thin [and scraggy] man. Nobody could believe it was Shahid. I remember my eldest daughter, who was four years old, said, “*Ammi, aik aadmi aya hua hai bahir*. He's just like baba, but he's not baba’ (Mother, there's a man outside. He looks just like [my] father but he isn't my father).”

Shahid was back, but only parts of him were recognizable.

* * *

Khalid told me that he moved to Sylhet a few months after Shahid. ‘I joined the same company as Shahid in 1960. We shared the same bungalow until he married Shiro. She joined us at the tea estate in 1963. Shahid was like a mentor to me as he had been there for about six months before me. I had joined right out of college, so I really valued his guidance. Over the years, we were transferred to different places but we never stopped being friends. We became family.

‘Now, I would like to emphasize some facts about East Pakistan before I share my experience,’ he began. ‘People in Pakistan say a lot of things about Bengalis that I don't agree with. The Bengalis have been very good. We mistreated them, looked down upon them. When I went to East Pakistan for the first time in 1959 for an interview, I was shocked to see Dhaka. It was like some small place; it was bad compared to West Pakistan. There was development taking place, but it was slow, both for financial reasons and because of the [landscape]. I met an engineer who built roads and he

explained to me that it cost seven times more to build a road in East Pakistan than in West Pakistan because it was a low-lying area and there were streams at every 10 yards over which one had to build bridges. All of this slowed down progress. But in the eleven years that I was there, I saw tremendous progress. Many Pakistani entrepreneurs had set-up industries there. However, the fact remained that the West Pakistanis were arrogant and thought that the Bengalis were not good at all. My experience with them, however, was completely different. I admired them. From the moment I landed in East Pakistan, they had been helpful and kind.’

He added that his fellow passenger on the flight from Lahore to Dhaka was a Bengali woman. Upon hearing that he was moving to East Pakistan, she insisted that he meet her family who came to receive her at the airport. ‘Her brother insisted that I couldn’t go to my hotel like that. They took me home, asked me to eat with them and then her brother drove me to my hotel. The next morning, he picked me up to take me to the railway station to catch my train to the tea estate. The Bengalis were always very nice to me.’

In 1971, Khalid told me it was the Bengalis who saved his life. When he was posted to the tea estate in 1968, the former boss there—a Bengali—had mockingly warned him that the ‘Bengalis would eat him up.’ Perplexed by this mysterious threat, Khalid asked his staff what the tension was all about.

‘I was told that there were eight villages outside the tea estate. The Bengalis from these villages used to come and (illegally) take away grass from the tea gardens. My colleague, the Bengali, had caught them, beat them up and locked them too on one occasion. When they were released, they warned him that they would kidnap his family and him. As luck would have it, he was transferred and I was given his position.’ As a West Pakistani, Khalid was all the more susceptible to local hostilities. He told me that he was very concerned about the situation. ‘I had sleepless nights,’ he said.

Khalid decided that he would have to take a different approach with the villagers; making amends and sharing a cordial relationship was the only way forward if he was going to make his posting work. ‘I asked the guard

to call the headmen from the eight villages and asked them what they wanted. They told me that they were poor and didn't have much grass in their villages, which they needed to feed their animals, and that they needed branches as fuel. That's why they had been coming to the estate. I told them that since we were neighbours, we had to help each other. I gave them permission to cut grass from the old tea areas, which have a lot of grass and don't get damaged as easily as the young tea areas do, and to pick up fallen branches instead of breaking new ones. They agreed and for the next three years things were fine. I would run into them often while they were cutting grass and they would say, "*Salaam, kya haal hai, saab?* (Greetings, how are you, sir?)."

However, the tranquillity of the tea gardens was soon to be disturbed. 'After the trouble started in March 1971, our company director came to visit the estate. He said that given the situation, it would be better if I lay low and handed over the keys to the Bengali assistant. I did that and moved into the Bengali assistant's home, who suggested that I would be safer there. So, I stuck around there, in his house for a while, until one day the Mukti Bahini came. This was in April 1971. His wife began to fight with them saying, "How dare you? What's your problem? Leave Khalid alone." But then they took out their guns and I thought it wise to just go with them. They took me to a place called Shamshernagar and put me in a big room with ten armed boys who told me that their commander would decide what to do with me. When the commander arrived, I saw his face and immediately knew there was no getting out of there.'

Khalid explained that he had had a scuffle with the commander three years ago. He had come to sell the company rice, which they bought and sold at subsidized rates to the labourers. However, since Khalid already had a supplier, he had refused. When the man kept insisting, Khalid had lost his temper and said, 'You bastard, get out!' Now the man he had insulted had become the commander of the Mukti Bahini in that area. Khalid's life was in his hands. 'They put me in a jeep and were taking me to Moulvibazar to hand me over to the authorities when a car full of local Bengali boys, who were also carrying guns, stopped us. They gathered around the commander

and asked him why they were holding me. The commander said it was because I was a Punjabi. I knew enough Bengali to understand that the boys were telling him, “We have a grouse with the Punjabi army, not Khalid.” I suppose my reputation of being good to Bengalis must have travelled. I realized this to be my opportunity. I got out of the jeep and jumped up on a stone to make a speech. I said, “Look I’ve been here for eleven years. If you’ve heard anything adverse about me, you have guns. Do what you want.””

The speech gave more impetus to the locals’ insistence that the Mukti Bahini let Khalid go. Eventually, the commander caved in. Khalid said, ‘Three days before this, the same boys who rescued me had ambushed two Pakistan Army jeeps, killed the soldiers and taken their weapons. And here they were helping me. They carried me on their shoulders and sent me home. What I’m trying to tell you is that if you were good in your relations with Bengalis, they were good to you. They saved my life. They were good people.’

From there, Khalid’s Bengali colleague continued to help him until he crossed over into India (he explained that they were surrounded by the Indian border, which was about 4 km away. All the roads were blocked, and so there was no other way to get to Dhaka, from where he wanted to fly to West Pakistan). From India, he travelled to Nepal before flying back into Dhaka and then finally Karachi. Unlike Shahid, Khalid was more fortunate, not getting caught during his escape. ‘I reminded myself to keep my mouth shut, ears open and body language confident. I changed my name to Kenneth Brown as I thought having a Muslim name might be dangerous, and I didn’t know anything about Hinduism. I thought a Christian name was the safest. I was in India for three months before going to Nepal. There, (in Nepal) I met a Bengali. After hearing my experience, he invited me over for dinner and insisted on giving me Rs 500. He said, “I hope you don’t mind. I’m sure you must be short on money. When you fly to Dhaka, you can return it to my wife. Even if you don’t, at least the money will help you.”’

When Khalid landed in Dhaka and collected money from his company, one

of the first stops he made was at this Bengali's house, returning the money to his family.

'When was this?' I asked

'July 1971.'

'And it was safe enough for you to go back to Dhaka?'

'Well. It was the calm before the storm.'

Khalid made it back to Karachi safely, but East Pakistan continued to burn behind him.

Resistance Narratives

'Long Live Bangladesh'

Two nights have befallen us
Poor old forgetful mom!
One night we saw moon blossoming in thy plait;
On the other, we witnessed sun singeing your forehead.
Two nights have befallen us
Poor old forgetful mom!

In the moonlight of the first night,
Rubious rose blossomed
Upon thy forehead;
On the second night,
The sun of our blood was set ablaze.
Two nights we have undergone
Poor old forgetful mom!

From the land of the five-eyed blonde,
Hailed hounds in dirty uniforms.
On the first night,
Your bosom quivered
Under heavy jack boots;
On the other, the shower of bullets
Pierced through thy bust
And our song soared higher
And higher.

Two nights have befallen us
The first one threw dust upon moon,
And the second nearly drowned you

In tears of blood.
The five-eyed blonde,
With lids lowered,
Sheds a flood of tears;
Her tall sterling boy,
Stole her cherry and then set off
To capture the light of thy plait,
Blurting an outlandish dialect;
The language of the midnight sun.

This maze I am unable to see through;
The midday sun embellishes
The sweetheart of the soil;
And the sun ablaze at midnight
Sears thy plait.
Two nights we have gone through
Poor old forgetful mom!

On the first night,
There flashed the flames
Of thirst for peace and calm,
Away from our lips;
On the second one,
Lead was eased in our chests,
And the pain travelled through our veins.

Men in uniform and jackboots,
Hailing from across Punjab

Hating you, nay,
Hating the five-eyed blonde as well.

So she stalks with her eyes lowered;
The dark sun has envenomed her nights, too.
The queen of crops in her open, too,
Pants under the heat of hunger.
The pain of that wench
Travels through our veins,
Along with your pain, poor old forgetful mom!

The five-eyed blonde,
Then raised her head and spoke thus,
I sit with my eyes tied to the ground,
That your war is not just for golden Bengal;
It is my crusade as well.

The blood wetting soil out there
Sweetens my waters here;
I sit with a lowered head,

That the fire of my waters
Sizzles within your breasts
But my distant companeroes,
For once you broke down the pride of tyranny
For once you got better of death

By offering your blood,
For once you planted flowers of peace;
(Hail to your blood and hail to peace).

Two nights have befallen us
My distant companeroes,
Look back and our two lands
Have gory pages . . .
And a linkage ages long.

I sit with head hung low,
That the jugglers from my five waters,
Have again played the trick,
And a juggler has no land!
And a juggler has no faith!

I speak today holding my head high.
If my pain travels through your veins,
There seethes in my eyes
Your old forgetful mama's pain;
And on our lips,
There bums the longing for a common song,
[Our] lot is common;
Our linkage ages long . . . ³¹

This poem, published in March 1971 in *Awami Awaz*, landed Punjabi poet Ahmad Salim in jail. He was tried in a military court, sentenced to six months imprisonment, flogging and a fine of Rs 2000. ³² The publisher of the bimonthly *Awami Awaz*, M.R. Hassan, was also arrested for publishing a poem 'against the military operations in East Pakistan'. ³³ Subsequently, he was forced to stop publishing the newspaper. ³⁴ Several others writers and poets in West Pakistan too raised their voice against the military operation

and the killings of Bengalis in East Pakistan. This included Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Habib Jalib, Sahar Ansari, Anwar Ahsan Siddiqui, Fahmida Riaz, Atta Shad, Khan Abdul Ghani Khan, Shaikh Ayaz, Gul Khan Nasir, Ajmal Khattak and Asif Shahkar to name a few, and comprised men and women from Punjabi, Sindhi, Balochi and Pashto backgrounds.³⁵ In an anthology on 1971, edited by Ahmad Salim himself, he wrote about the courage required of these writers and poets to speak up in the face of restrictions, hardships, arrests and confinement. Yet, he modestly acknowledged that, ‘the price of the poem that I paid for was too trivial when compared to [the] colossal sacrifices made by the Bengali poets, writers and intellectuals in that year. I felt my small poem was burnt under the weight of the moral and intellectual stature of those who braved their pens against barrels.’³⁶

In the anthology, titled *We Owe an Apology to Bangladesh*, Salim points out several West Pakistani writers and poets who maintained the ‘conspiracy of silence’³⁷ on what was happening in East Pakistan. Several of them supported the army crackdown, favouring ‘the government’s inhumanity and brutality against the innocent Bengali people’.³⁸ Others sympathized with the Bengalis, but did not have the courage to write against the government. In an environment where the killings in East Pakistan were hushed and the events of 1971 circumvented, the voices of the people who protested these policies, whether through their writing or activism, provided a critical departure from the statist policies. In the process, these voices also helped deconstruct homogenized understandings of how West Pakistanis responded to the violence against Bengalis.

Pakistani translator, editor and writer, Asif Farrukhi, argues that while the literary responses to 1971 are ‘limited and lacklustre’³⁹ compared to the prolific writings on the Partition of 1947, they deserve attention. 1971 would have been ‘wiped clean by the state machinery if it were not for the people [who] crammed in the few stories that did get written, people who defied the forgetting at a higher level and survived in fiction’.⁴⁰ This defiance of the ‘forgetting’ by these individuals offers an active resistance to the gaps in history at the collective, national level.⁴¹ The writers and poets who wrote what they were witnessing during the war, made ‘present’

what the state wanted to make ‘absent’. This practice has continued, albeit in limited ways. The more recent novels and literature coming out of Pakistan, such as Sorayya Khan’s *Noor*; Kamila Shamsie’s *Kartography*, Hameed Shahid’s *Mitti Adam Khati Hai* and Shehryar Fazli’s *Invitation* show how 1971 remains a recurrent theme that writers continue to grapple with. As Farrukhi writes, these writings indicate that ‘the questions (about 1971) remain open as far as Pakistan’s fiction, if not politics, are concerned.’⁴²

In addition to writers and poets, human rights activists, lawyers, politicians, and even military officials, took a stand against the actions in East Pakistan in 1971. This was indeed courageous. As advocate Zafar Malik, who had resisted the army operation as a young lawyer in 1971, explained to me during a meeting in Lahore, ‘*Us waqt yahan central Punjab mein Mujib ka naam, Bangladesh ka naam, ya Bengalis ke haqooq ka ziqar karna ghadari jaisa tha* (at that time, to take Mujib or Bangladesh’s name, or to fight for the rights of Bengalis was seen as treachery).’ Yet, many of these people remained vocal and, long after the war, continued to express their dissent. In 1996, the Women’s Action Forum, a women’s rights organization, tendered a written apology to the women of Bangladesh for being treated as ‘symbols and targets in the process of dishonouring and humiliating a people’.⁴³ More recently, an effort was made to crowdsource an apology to Bangladesh by a Pakistani citizen.⁴⁴ Such acts remain significant in lieu of the state-level apology that Bangladesh has been asking for.

While Pakistan expressed its regret for ‘any crimes that may have been committed’⁴⁵ as part of the tripartite talks between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1974—more recently, former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf also expressed regret at the excesses committed during an official visit to Bangladesh—Bangladesh’s demand for a proper and full-fledged apology continues.⁴⁶ In 2012, when Pakistan invited Sheikh Hasina to attend the D-8 Summit in Islamabad, she responded by saying that she would only visit if Pakistan issued an apology for the war crimes. Pakistan refused. Needless to say, Hasina did not attend the summit.⁴⁷

In 2011, Bangladesh decided to honour these ‘conscientious’ Pakistanis, among other foreign citizens, for extending support to the Bengali people in 1971. The government invited them to Bangladesh, awarding them the ‘Friends of Liberation War Honour’.⁴⁸ Advocate Zafar Malik received this award, as did Ahmad Salim. Others, such as artist Salima Hashmi (daughter of poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz) and human rights activist Asma Jahangir (daughter of parliamentarian and politician Malik Ghulam Jilani, who was also arrested for denouncing the army action in East Pakistan),⁴⁹ received the award on behalf of their parents. Back home in Pakistan, however, I knew little about these people until I had embarked on this research. They were not in my textbooks; they were not in the mainstream history of 1971 that I had been taught.

At this point, I would like to share four interviews, with a Pakistani poet, academic, activist and retired military official who protested against the actions in East Pakistan in their own way. It must be noted that there are many others—both men and women—who may not be in the pages of this book but actively contested the military operation and the subsequent killings in East Pakistan. While we are fortunate to have some of their stories and struggles archived or compiled in anthologies like *We Owe Bangladesh an Apology*, there may be many more people who are unknown to me and other Pakistanis. Of course, there are also those who may not have been able to take an active stand but were enormously aggrieved by what was happening in the East wing. As academic and author Tariq Rahman writes:

We know that there were people like Faiz who did have this extraordinary courage, but how many other people were there, perhaps buried in the graveyard of intellect known as the offices of the state, who did disagree with Yahya Khan’s policy of crushing the Bangladeshis by force, but had to stay silent?⁵⁰

He argues that dissent is not only a product of personal courage but also of the social and political conditions of the country.

Our civil society was weak; our press was fully controlled by the government; our best jobs were state jobs in 1971. We had few means of learning the truth. Most of us learnt of events

from our own official channels. Thus, out of ignorance, as well as expediency, many of our most sensitive minds did not express their sympathies with the poor victims of the military's violence in March 1971. ⁵¹

This, for me, is not meant to be a justification for silence but rather a recognition that diverse viewpoints existed in 1971 and not all were blinded by the narratives, or lack thereof, promoted by the state machinery. It is some of these views that I now turn to.

Ahmad Salim

In 1971, I was twenty-six years old. I had become involved with the Communist Party of Pakistan and the National Awami Party (NAP). ⁵² The NAP had a policy of parliamentary democracy and standing up for peoples' rights. Though we had contested against the Awami League in the elections, when we lost in East Pakistan, our president, Khan Abdul Wali Khan, as a matter of principle, said we should support the Bengali cause. He said that they had the absolute majority and should form the government. So, as a political principle, we were supporting Bangladesh. In 1971, when this incident happened in March (referring to the army operation on the night of 25 March), one of our leaders, Naseem Shamim Malik, returned from Dhaka the next day and told me how the killing had started in front of her, and how her Bengali friends had asked her to go back to West Pakistan. They said she was at risk there . . .

‘Every last Sunday of March, we used to celebrate the festival of Shah Hussain (Sufi saint), Mela Chiraghan (festival of lights). We used to go to his mazar and perform bhangra. That day, I said that Shah Hussain's *madhus* (beloveds) were being killed in Bangladesh and so we should go barefoot, with bare heads, and tell Shah Hussain that his friends in Bangladesh were being killed. This was a poetic expression for me. And then I wrote a poem on this, *Sada Jeeve Bangladesh* (Long Live Bangladesh). The poem (cited at the beginning of this section), which I'd

written in Punjabi was translated into Urdu and published. After that, my warrants were issued.’

‘So you were already referring to East Pakistan as Bangladesh?’ I asked Salim, surprised because I knew that in the Pakistan I had grown up, such an act could be construed as ‘anti-state’. But he told me that in all his writings, he had long referred to each province by the names the people of that land associated it with. Long before the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) was named Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2010, Ahmad Salim had already called it Pashtunkhwa. ‘Similarly, the Bengalis had adopted Bangladesh. I think that had Pakistan stayed united, it is likely that East Pakistan would have come to be referred to as the Bangladeshi province. If the Awami League had been allowed to form the government, they would have been in majority and might have been able to get a resolution passed in the assembly to rename East Pakistan. So, I felt that Bangladesh was their identity and titled the poem as such. But, of course, the government found the title provocative.’

When Salim appeared for his trial, he was as courageous as he had been in writing the poem. As a young man in his twenties, he seemed to have little fear. When the magistrate, who was a major, accusingly asked him, ‘You are Punjabi and despite that you have written against a Punjabi army?’ Salim responded, ‘A murderer is neither a Punjabi, nor a Pathan. A murder is a murder.’ Later, when the magistrate insulted the poem by calling it *ghatia* (rubbish), Salim told him that while he may call it ‘anti-Pakistan’, the title of *ghatia* or *bharia* (great) could only be given by a literary person. ‘If someone with poetic authority tells me my poem isn’t at the level of good poetry, I will listen. But you are not a poet.’ Needless to say, a harsh punishment was given to him for committing ‘treason’. He was released from jail after the war was over, in January 1972.

Back home, his family was distressed. ‘My mother was really angry with me. My sister was about to get married and my arrest was a setback. A friend of mine helped out by giving my family some money and telling them that I had deposited the amount with him for my sister’s marriage. It was through this lie that they were a little pacified.’ Upon his arrest, his

niece asked her mother why the police were taking away her uncle. Her mother told her, ‘Your uncle wrote a poem against Yahya Khan.’ Confused, the child, who was only four years old, asked, ‘So what? Yahya Khan can write a poem against uncle. Why did he arrest him?’⁵³

‘The reality was that at that time, I couldn’t think about myself,’ he said. ‘The things that were happening . . .’

Years later, when he was awarded the Friends of Liberation War Honour, in Bangladesh, he asked why it was being bestowed upon him. ‘I had only written a poem and spoken up a little. They told me that if ten people talk a little standing amidst 10 crore people, there is nothing more courageous than that. They said that Bangladesh was attacked, we (Bengalis) had no option but to fight, but you did so of your will and we want to appreciate that spirit. I think they were right. Our leaders, two or three women such as Tahira Mazhar Ali and Naseem Shamim, who were part of the Anjuman-e-Jamhooriyat Pasand Khawateen (Democratic Women’s Association), all supported the Bengalis in 1971. Once, in the month of April, we were marching on the streets of Lahore when the shopkeepers spat on us, calling us anti-Pakistan, telling us we should be ashamed. The women were also with us. The shopkeepers spat on Tahira too and she tolerated it. That was the character and spirit at that time . . . we thought that a party (the Awami League) has an absolute majority and you are trying to beat them down? What kind of democracy is that?’

Here, Salim added that there were only a few people standing with them. ‘It was a tiny movement. *Iss ki koi haisyat nahi thi, iski haisyat iski moral strength thee* (it wasn’t a significant movement because of the number of people supporting it but rather because of the moral stand it took). If the population was 10 crore here at that time, there were not even 10,000 supporters, if we estimate generously. We could count them on our fingers.’

That day, before I left, I told Salim that I was in awe of his spirit. As a Punjabi, as somebody who grew up in a society where Bengalis were looked down upon, where they were said to be influenced by the ‘Indian’ and ‘Hindu’ culture, it couldn’t have been easy to escape popular sentiment. While most people in West Pakistan stayed quiet, either because they were

afraid or because they had bought into state narratives, how had he as a Punjabi defied the populist sentiment?

It didn't take him long to respond. He smiled and said, 'Only a true Punjabi can be ready to help other patriots. An anti-Punjabi would never want to help others. It is because I am a true Punjabi, and because Punjabism is to help others . . . I write in my mother tongue, I'm a Punjabi poet, I love Punjabi, so I love all languages. Had I not been a conscious Punjabi, I too would have said like the other Punjabis that the Bengalis were traitors.'

While the war of 1971 is often remembered as a war between the Punjabis and Bengalis, here was a Punjabi who felt that it was only because he was a true Punjabi that he could stand up for the Bengalis. It was because he loved his own language so much that he could understand the importance of Bengali for his fellow countrymen. It was his Punjabiness that had made him defiant. Here the Punjabi and Bengali had stood as one, fighting for the same cause on both sides of Pakistan. And it was only when Bangladesh found its independence that Salim too was emancipated from the shackles of his confinement. On a wintry day in January, about a month after the war ended, Salim walked free.

Tariq Rahman

I walked into Tariq Rahman's office at Beaconhouse National University in Lahore, where he serves as the dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. The author of several books, recipient of the President's Award for Pride of Performance and the Sitara-i-Imtiaz—some of the most prestigious civilian awards in Pakistan—and the first Pakistani to receive the Humboldt Research Award in Germany, Rahman has numerous accomplishments to his name. Included in this list is the Friends of Liberation War Honour, which he received in 2013. It is this award that I hoped to speak to him about that day. I had wanted to interview him ever since I had heard that he was recognized as one of the conscientious

Pakistanis who had opposed military action in 1971, particularly so because he was commissioned in the army at that time.

Known to me primarily as an academic and writer, I asked Tariq how he had come to join the army. He explained that upon migrating from India to Pakistan, his father had landed a job at the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA, which is responsible for training officers of the Pakistan Army) as the head of the mathematics department. Tariq, as a result, grew up in the academy, studying at Burn Hall School, Abbottabad. But, he told me, that despite growing up in a military environment, he did not always agree with the views of those around him, including his family. ‘I disagreed with many of them . . . for instance, while people praised wars, I thought they harmed the country. I used to read a lot, I used to read anti-war literature. And I always found the suffering of others distressing. Since wars caused distress, I was against them. Now you must be thinking that if this was so, why didn’t I shun the army in the first place? Why did I join it at all? It was because I really didn’t know what being in the army meant. I thought it meant having a good life because that’s what I saw around me. I had a very comfortable home, a comfortable life in the academy. PMA was a beautiful place, really beautiful. And I enjoyed it very much. I had a happy childhood there, horse riding, mountaineering, playing in the open fields, the mountains, the valleys. I didn’t know anything about politics. It was only when I joined the PMA as a cadet and started hearing what was happening in East Pakistan did I think seriously for the first time. I realized that all the wars, all that I had read about in books, happened in real life and touched real people. People who are in the army find themselves in a moral dilemma. That’s when I realized that the army was not only about riding horses and wearing dinner jackets. You’re not just a gentleman but also an officer who commands troops. You have to kill people. I was commissioned in 1971 and was reluctant to serve in the army because if there was a war, and I knew that there would be one, it would make things worse for me because serving in a war means to kill people, whether they are Indians or Bangladeshis . . .

‘ . . . Now, I must tell you that I am not against all wars, but I was against the type of war that happened in 1971. I can understand when armies fight a war to defend themselves, but this wasn’t a defensive war. I was convinced that the Bengalis were greater in number and wanted to be free. In fact, my suggestion, which no one took seriously, was that our job, like that of the British, was to go and lower the flag ourselves as Lord Mountbatten had done.’ While most people treated what Tariq suggested as a joke, one brigadier warned him saying that his words went against national interest. ‘If groups start rising like this, there will be no Pakistan,’ he told Tariq, adding that such views were in the interest of the enemies of Pakistan. ‘For half an hour he argued with me, but he was the only one who took what I said seriously,’ Tariq added.

I asked Tariq if there was a specific moment when these thoughts, about war and killings, really started to trouble him. ‘Yes, the thoughts started troubling me in early 1971. Now, when I look back, I can trace the moment. We were doing an exercise and one had to fire at targets. Suddenly, the thought occurred to me that I might be asked to fire at a person whom I didn’t want to kill . . . to have murder on my conscience would be too much . . .’

In a write-up published in the *Muslim* in 1990, Tariq penned this moment. He wrote:

It was a beautiful day of golden sunlight and the snow [snow] on the Thandiani mountains shone [a] silvery white. But the wind was chilly as it blew to where I lay behind a machine gun.

‘Fire,’ shouted the havildar.

The machine gun kicked repeatedly against my shoulder, pumping out lead in a cataclysmic orgasm of violence. I wished most of the bullets would hit the target, and indeed, the target was a sieve! But even before I could rejoice, a terrible thought struck me: suppose instead of the target there had been a human being! Images of Bengali cadets insisted upon obsessing [on] my mind. It was the February of 1971 and I knew precious little about politics. But what I knew made me uneasy. If the job was to obey orders and the orders happened to be against one’s conscience, what was one to do? My solution was simple: leave the army.⁵⁴

Tariq's colleagues who had returned from the military action in March had begun to share tales of how villages had been burnt, people had been killed. He wrote:

Images of people killed and maimed appalled me. I only heard the West Pakistani side that their people had been killed and betrayed. But during the talk someone would mention the shooting of the Mukti Bahini; the witch-hunt in the villages. ⁵⁵

Speaking to me, he said, 'Nobody (amidst his colleagues) said they had personally participated in it, all except one officer who said he had burnt the village because his family members had been killed and he was taking revenge. But nobody else confessed what they had done, they just used to talk about what other people did . . .

' . . . I started to think that if a person has a conscience, and that conscience encompasses humanity, you can't serve the nation if the nation is wrong. In this case, it happened to be wrong. So, I wasn't against all wars, I was against that particular war, and other wars of the same kind.' I knew that leaving the army at that time wouldn't have been easy.

Fearing that his resignation would not be accepted given the imminent war, Tariq first decided to feign sickness but was soon sent back to the military academy and assigned to the Armoured Corps. ⁵⁶ Fortunately for him, he said, the armoured division was never launched. So, 'in practice, I did not kill anyone. But in theory, of course I did.' The events of 1971 left a lasting impact on Tariq. The following poem, which he wrote based on what he saw in Nowshera (in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan) during the war, encompassed his distress:

I saw it as a cannonade in the sky
And sabre jets on deathly ways
I saw it as boys who should've been in schools
Stuffed in stifling trenches
I saw it as the smile, which faded
When the dust and smoke invaded.
I saw it as a woman in a bus
Not knowing where to go
Because a youth she saw as a child
Was rotten meat on the enemy's side.

I saw it in the winter days
When wheat is sown and hope
But now the tanks dug the earth
And death was sown and pain,
It peeped out of the squalor and the gore
And on my boyhood slammed a door. ⁵⁷

As soon as the war was over, Tariq knew he wanted to resign. ‘I went to my commanding officer, but he thought I was just misled. He jokingly asked if I had a Bengali girlfriend, to which I said no. I had never been to East Pakistan and I had no girlfriend. He was quite surprised to hear this. Then I went to another colonel, who became my commanding officer, and told him I wanted to leave. He suggested I think about it. He said that if this was my protest against the 1971 war, then it was over. I said that while it was indeed over, my objection wasn’t. As a commissioned officer, I might have to serve in another war. But the colonel insisted that I think about it and read more. And so I took his advice and started studying. I did an MA in literature, then one in political science and then a third MA. I wanted to pursue war studies and then write books against wars . . . I thought that perhaps I could stay with the PMA, but in a teaching capacity. I could serve in the army, enjoy the perks, all while avoiding battle. For two years, I was in PMA. But, you see, the problem was the same. I was still in the army, drawing a salary. But I didn’t believe in warfare like the others. So, eventually I came back to the armoured corps. By now, more than eight years had passed. Yet, I wasn’t happy. I knew that I couldn’t select wars, only fighting in the ones that I agreed with. So, this time I decided to resign once and for all (this was in 1978). They asked me to stay on for another one and a half year because that would make me eligible for all the benefits that retired army officers got, such as medical care, pension, etc. But I felt it would be morally wrong to take the pension without agreeing to participate in a war. Today, one of my biggest fears is that if my wife or I fall ill, we won’t have enough money to go to a decent hospital. CMH (Civil Military Hospital, which provides free healthcare to army personnel and their families) is a good place to go to, but I made that decision; I resigned.’

Decades later, when Tariq was told that the Bangladesh government wanted to honour him for being a conscientious Pakistani, he said, ‘I hope there’s no mistake because I didn’t do anything. I don’t consider myself a hero, and there was nothing heroic about what I did. I was just naïve. I firmly believe that a gentleman doesn’t harm another . . . there were others who had really suffered in 1971. Measuring myself against them, I had not suffered. I was never persecuted, never treated harshly in the army.’ But he added that he was pleased when he got the award. ‘I thought that this thing that nobody knew about, no one talked about, something which even I didn’t talk about, was remembered . . . and honoured. I won’t say I was proud, but I was definitely happy.’

* * *

I.A. Rehman

Ibn Abdur Rehman, commonly called I.A Rehman, is Pakistan’s foremost political analyst, peace activist and the former secretary-general of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. With a history of championing human rights in the country, I was keen to hear his views on 1971. Born in 1930 in Haryana (present-day India), Rehman had witnessed both the creation of Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh.

In favour of the Pakistan movement as a young student in Aligarh, he told me that in the initial period after 1947, he was busy putting his life together. ‘*Roti aur rozgaar ka masla zyada important hota hai* (one is preoccupied with matters of livelihood),’ he said. However, it wasn’t long before he began to notice that there were several civil liberties that were not being assured by the state. In the early days after Pakistan was formed, Rehman got involved with activism. ‘I was associated with *Pakistan Times* (a newspaper originally established by the leftist Progressive Papers Ltd in Lahore. Faiz Ahmad Faiz served as its editor-in-chief), which was critical about these issues. We raised a voice for labour rights, peasants’ rights. I had realized that the freedom and rights we had been fighting for in the

Pakistan movement didn't exist. From the beginning I felt that the foundation of a nation, which was being built on hatred, wasn't right. I thought that if someone was a Hindu, what was the big deal? I had so many Hindus in my school, I had studied with him. There was no hatred between us. Of course, there could be disagreements, but even between Muslims and different political parties there can be lack of consensus. Hatred for another community or religion couldn't be our foundation as Pakistanis. However, I suppose nation states have an inherent weakness, they open the gates to hatred.'

I asked him what these foundations of the state, which was suspicious of Hindus, meant for East Pakistan, which was often painted as being influenced by Hinduism and pro-India. 'You see, we must realize that we have never been fair to the people of Bangladesh. When they were a part of our country, we did our best to deprive them and deny them their rights. We ensured that they did not stay in Pakistan. We pushed them out. And, after that, we have made no sincere and serious effort to normalize relations with Bangladesh.

'Living together, for East and West Pakistan, was difficult . . . it was difficult, but [the separation] wasn't inevitable. If we had understood that they were greater in number than us, that they were 1000 miles away from us, and that we were using their jute to build our economy, things could have been different. West Pakistan had no income. We used their earnings from jute to establish our industries. Another issue was that Muslim officers who had served in the Government of India were promoted after Pakistan was created, but the one Bengali in the forest department didn't get a promotion. Until the end, no Bengali was made the finance secretary. They (the Bengalis) would complain about these things to us.'

I said, 'Many people I spoke to (who were based in West Pakistan in 1971) told me that they didn't know what was happening there [in East Pakistan]. But you were involved with human rights campaigns from the beginning, you were more aware about how they felt, about what was happening there, about how they were being treated.'

‘Yes, we knew. We knew. We knew. As journalists we knew. We wrote about it. I used to be in a trade union, and I was also associated with films 1964 onwards. I travelled to East Pakistan every year, so I knew what they were feeling. I used to stay at my friend’s place and his children used to argue with me. They would say, “*Aap humara khoon chus rahe hain* (you are sucking our blood).” When I went to Dhaka in 1968, one of my friends, the famous music director Khan Ataur Rahman asked me to meet him in the evening. When I went, there were two chairs with a small table laid out, with whiskey for me and wine for him. The first thing he said to me was, “Rehman Bhai, everything is negotiable except the six points.” I asked, “Am I a politician?” He said, “You have come from West Pakistan.” That was the situation then. *Us waqt tak kisi ke buss mein raha nahi tha theek karna* (By the 1960s, the situation was no longer under anyone’s control). Just like we say that the creation of Pakistan was inevitable after the 1930s [he implied that Bangladesh’s creation had also become inevitable by the 1960s, because of West Pakistan’s policies). *Jab aap aik taraf itne door ho jayein toh wapis nahi ho sakte* (if you are so disconnected and distanced, it isn’t easy to come back). East Pakistanis had grievances from the beginning, and they tried living with us despite those [grievances].’

I asked him how he had responded to the protests that his Bengali friends shared with him on his trips there. What did he do when he came back to West Pakistan? He said that he and the other West Pakistanis who thought like him would try to explain the situation to the people back home, they would write about the issues in newspapers. ‘We used to say, get ready, you will have to deal with Mujib. In January 1970, I wrote in a magazine that in the elections 94 per cent votes would go to the Awami League, so start reconciling with them now. But though you can bring a horse to water, you can’t force it to drink,’ he laughed.

By 1971, Rehman and 250 other people had been expelled from *Pakistan Times* as punishment for a strike they organized demanding increased wages. ‘Our trade union decided that we would create our own newspaper. We started a paper called *Azad*. In that, we would frequently write about fostering peace with the Bengalis. One of my colleagues, Abdullah Malik

Sahib, gave a speech at a university saying he respected the Bengali people. He was tried in a military court and sentenced to one-year imprisonment for this. Our paper also published columns against what was happening in East Pakistan. In retaliation, there was propaganda against us. People would say we were Sheikh Mujib's agents. Then, when the military action happened, we started a petition asking for the operation to be stopped. With great difficulty, we got forty-eight people to sign it, but apart from our newspaper no other newspaper published it.'

'Were they too scared?' I asked.

'Yes, they were scared. But they also thought that what was happening was right. People wrote in favour of the operation. They said that Yahya Khan was fighting with force (*Haider-e-Karar ka kaam kar raha hai*). Others were just greedy; they would say to me, "Rehman, Dhaka *mein ghar bare sastey hogaye hain. Chalo khareedtay hain* (Rehman, property prices have plummeted in Dhaka. Let's go and buy some). But yes, some of us resisted, we tried to protest against what was happening.'

By the end of 1971, Rehman had lost several of his Bengali friends. He mentioned one of them to me, Shahidullah Qaiser, whose daughter, Shomi Qaiser, I had met in Dhaka (see Chapter 2). She had told me she detested Pakistanis until she met I.A. Rehman during a trip to Delhi. It was only after meeting him that she slightly opened up to the idea of Pakistanis. 'There was another Bengali, Bari, whom I met in Salzburg. An Indian friend had called us over for dinner at his house, but when Bari heard that a Pakistani was going to be there he refused saying he didn't want to see one. He hadn't met a Pakistani and he didn't want to either. My friend told him, "Rehman is a different type of Pakistani,"' said Rehman with a chuckle.

'When he came, he looked at me very hesitatingly and then reluctantly shook hands. He said he didn't want to meet Pakistanis because they had done this and that to his family. I told him I would apologize if that made him feel better, but [added] that I didn't know if that would help.'

Witness to both 1947 and 1971, having lost friends and loved ones in both movements for independence, I asked Rehman about how he looked back at his youth, when the three countries had been one, and then two.

‘Bohat gand phel gaya hai, aur gand phelta jaldi hai saaf dair mein hota hai. Leiken mujhe India ya Bangladesh se koi shikayat nahi hai. Bangladesh se shirmandagi hai ke humne unke saath bura kiya. Ye alag baat hai ke maine nahi kiya, magar iska woh jawab daitay hain ke apne nahi kiya magar apki qaum ne toh kiya hai na (The relationships are very messy now. It takes less time to create a mess than it takes to clean one up. I don’t have anything against India or Bangladesh, but I do feel embarrassed about how we treated the Bengalis. I never did anything, but when I say this to the Bengalis, they tell me that even if I didn’t, my country did),’ he rued.

History mars present-day relationships; people like Rehman are caught in the crossfire. For the people of his generation, who lived in the pre-Pakistan and pre-Bangladesh years and had many Bengali and Hindu friends, the divisions today are increasingly painful. In my work with the post-1947 and -1971 generations, I found that the youth was often more hostile—be it between India and Pakistan, or Pakistan and Bangladesh—than first-generation survivors. This is not to say that the generation that suffered the violence isn’t bitter or doesn’t have deep wounds, but that many of them have also lived with the ‘other’ community before it really became the ‘other’. While people like I.A. Rehman continue to have Bengali friends, their children and grandchildren, who have only heard of Pakistanis in the context of the violence inflicted on their families and ancestors, can find it hard to humanize them. For them, they are demonic monsters, ones they should avoid. Several Indian and Pakistani children I’ve worked with said that they never want to meet each other for they have heard that the other community hurt theirs during Partition. The Bengali children I met in Bangladesh told me that they too never wanted to meet a Pakistani; they could only conceive of them as the enemy. The last section of the book elaborates on these interactions.

For people in Rehman’s generation, however, reality is far more nuanced. They saw the worst of the bloodshed and also experienced the ‘other’ community as friends, as integral members of the society. I couldn’t help but tell him that I could only imagine how difficult it must have been to

witness the growing chasm and antagonism. He pondered for a brief moment and then shared an anecdote:

‘An old Indian man once asked me, “Rehman Sahib, please tell me what the youth of Pakistan feel about Indians? In naivety, I immediately said, “They have no experience of the conflict and bitterness, so they are neutral.” To this, the old man responded, “Well, Rehman Sahib, they have no experience of living together either.”’

* * *

Colonel (Col) Nadir Ali

I first heard of Col Nadir Ali while working for the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP), at a time when the organization was curating an exhibition titled ‘The State of Being So Divided’ (on the fortieth anniversary of the 1971 war). As the head of their Oral History Project in Lahore, my team and I actively collected narratives of people who remembered the war. As mentioned earlier, many of them were army officers. Their narratives were often in line with the ones I was already accustomed to hearing through mainstream discourse.

Col Nadir’s interview, however, was different. Owing to other commitments, I had not been able to interview him personally and had only heard about it from my colleagues, listening to the audio and reviewing transcripts later. And so, when I started to work on this book, I knew I had to meet him. His story was one that I felt I needed to hear first-hand. In the summer of 2018, I made my way to his house in Lahore. The narrative shared below is based on my interview of him, transcripts from an earlier interview conducted by the CAP team (reproduced with permission) and articles, speeches and other interviews conducted over time.

In 1971, Col Nadir—a young captain who would soon be promoted as major—⁵⁸ was based at the PMA. On 10 April 1971, he went to East Pakistan, volunteering to join the forces there. During our interview, he told me, ‘During the 1965 war, I was posted in East Pakistan and didn’t see any

action. There was no fighting on the eastern front. In 1971, I decided to go back there. I wanted to join my battalion which was already active in East Pakistan.’ Col Nadir belonged to the 3rd Commando Battalion. He first served as its second in command and then, between May and November, led the battalion.⁵⁹ The battalion played a critical role in the operation launched on 25 March 1971 and was responsible for the arrest of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.⁶⁰ But as Col Nadir found out, 1971 was not going to look anything like 1965. In his own words, it was like a ‘different world altogether’.

‘In 1965, there was no feeling of creating a separate country. There was no movement for that. Mujib was a leader, but he was a minor leader compared to what he became later. When I returned in 1971, the situation had changed completely . . . By the time I arrived in East Pakistan in April 1971, the worst had happened in the first fifteen days. The young soldiers I met were full of stories of the cruelty of the Mukti Bahini, especially in Chittagong and around Dhaka. And then I heard about the killings of Bengalis. I heard about a young Bengali officer who had been killed by his own subordinate. This may have been an isolated incident, but it was significant because in the army you never hurt a fellow soldier,’ he said.⁶¹

Col Nadir was distressed to see and hear this. He had always held a different perspective on the situation in East Pakistan compared to his colleagues and junior officers. He was far more familiar with East Pakistan than many other officers; he had lived there between 1962 and 1966. He told me that as a young officer in the 1960s, he had been fascinated by East Pakistan and the Bengalis. ‘Culturally, they were very advanced. They danced, they sang and they had theatre, even in the countryside. There used to be all-night plays that the villagers would get together and watch. There was nothing like that in West Pakistan,’ he said. Posted there with his wife, Col Nadir said that the four years he spent there in the 1960s were some of the happiest of his life. ‘I had Bengali friends and I travelled all over the place. During this time, my wife and I had three daughters. I was very happy.’

When I asked him if he sensed the growing resentment between the two wings at that time, he shook his head. ‘No! There was some talk, yes. For instance, when we would be drinking together, the Bengali officers would call each other ‘General’ to signify the rank they thought they would have held if they had a Bangladeshi army, but it was more of a joke then. We didn’t take it seriously.’ A common grievance of the Bengalis was the under-representation in jobs, especially at senior levels. Calling each other ‘General’, even humorously, was symbolic of this. They felt it was a rank they were unlikely to be promoted to under West Pakistani domination. It was an aspiration they held, in a Bengal in which their rights were guaranteed and their emancipation was a priority.

‘The West Pakistani bureaucracy and army behaved like the masters of the entire country and treated East Pakistanis as if they were colonized people. They felt that they were superior and didn’t care to understand the Bengali culture, they did not appreciate that Bengalis were culturally sophisticated, more advanced in the arts and music, better educated and more politically aware than the West Pakistanis,’ he said. ⁶²

By the time Col Nadir returned to East Pakistan in April 1971, these undercurrents had erupted into large-scale violence. ‘When army officers arrived in Dhaka, they were given an album of pictures that showed the atrocities committed by the Mukti Bahini . . . it was done to motivate them. Of course, the Mukti Bahini did commit crimes; they killed many civilians, both non-Bengali and Bihari. When I went to Chittagong, I saw many buildings destroyed. Even my own unit had been ambushed and a senior officer killed. But, in retaliation, the army started killing Bengalis.’ ⁶³ In my interview with him, Col Nadir told me that contrary to popular perception, the Mukti Bahini was often engaged only in small actions near the border and that the resistance wasn’t as organized and widespread as was popularly believed. ‘April onwards, until the Indian Army entered, they tried to create mischief, but these weren’t large-scale actions. They were being trained in India. They came from India and only went a couple of miles—3 miles, 4 miles, 10 miles—inside Bangladesh’s territory. Yes, the Bengalis did kill a lot of West Pakistanis and Biharis but then that doesn’t take any effort, to

cut somebody's throat who can't defend himself and isn't armed. That's what they did and it went on like that for a while . . . but the resistance wasn't what it was made out to be. And then the killings of Bengalis started around March-April. There were some elements within the army itself who were very callous, who killed without feeling.'

Col Nadir too was ordered to kill, asked to target Hindus. 'But I said no, I'm not going to kill any unarmed civilians. If there's resistance, if somebody fights me or attacks me, I'll fight back. But don't expect me to kill unarmed people. The officer who gave the orders said to me, "*Aapko pata nahi hai. Aap West Pakistan se aayein hain, inhon ne yahan bohat ziyatian ki hain, ab inka ilaj hona chahiye* (you don't know, you have just come from West Pakistan. The Hindus have caused a lot of trouble here, we need to fix them)." There was this feeling that *Hindus ko maarna chahiye, Hindu humara dushman hai, kafir humara dushman hai, isko maaro*. (Hindus should be killed, Hindus are our enemies, infidels are our enemies, kill them). And certainly, Bengalis (both Muslim and Hindu) were also quite hated by a lot of West Pakistanis. But I didn't have any such feelings. I liked them, in the time I had spent there in the 1960s, I had fallen in love with East Pakistan.'

There is enough evidence to show that the Hindu community was particularly targeted in 1971. ⁶⁴ Bengali nationalism was blamed on the Hindu teachers and intellectuals who were seen as creating secessionist feelings amongst the Bengali population. By getting rid of the 'root cause', the West Pakistani ruling elite hoped to solve the East Pakistan 'problem'. As noted in the book, *The Blood Telegram*, Archer Blood, the then consul general at the American Consulate in Dhaka, who had called the events in East Pakistan a 'selective genocide' ⁶⁵ wrote to his superiors in Washington saying that "'genocide" applies fully to naked, calculated and widespread selection of Hindus for special treatment . . . from the outset various members of the American community have witnessed either burning down of Hindu villagers, Hindu enclaves in Dacca and shooting of Hindus attempting [to] escape carnage, or have witnessed after-effects which [are] visible throughout Dacca today'. ⁶⁶ He further explained that 'the Pakistani

military evidently did not “make distinctions between Indians and Pakistani Hindus, treating both as enemies.” Such anti-Hindu sentiments, according to Blood, were lingering and widespread.’⁶⁷

‘The Hindus realized they were being hand-picked, and that’s why they fled,’ Col Nadir told me. There was a large-scale exodus of the Hindu community; they would come to form the bulk of refugees in India.⁶⁸

I asked Col Nadir how the officers and soldiers responded to the views he held. At a time when most people simply followed orders and others genuinely thought that military action was the need of the hour, as was the killing of East Pakistanis, how did they respond to his refusal to do as asked? ‘A lot of people criticized me. The senior officers who would order me to kill didn’t like my response. But I had an upper hand because I knew the territory, I had been there before, I knew the situation and many of them turned to me for guidance. I worked with all the wing commanders and generals in East Pakistan because the local general in Dhaka had never been there before. And since I had been to East Pakistan earlier, he would ask me about the terrain. So, most of the time he would consult me, take me along. I was practically his adviser. Other generals and commanders, who found out that I had lived in East Pakistan for a long time in the 1960s and was now there as a commando, would consult me too, and so they let me be. But then I was only a small part of the play, there was only so much I could do. I wasn’t commanding the overall operation; I had no ability to control what was happening . . . there wasn’t anything I could do.’

Indeed, apart from refusing to follow some of the orders and resisting the killings of unarmed innocent people, Col Nadir only had so much under his control. The operation continued unabated, the killings too. However, where he could, he tried to intervene, to do things differently, humanely. He mentioned two such incidents.

‘When I got to East Pakistan, I went to visit the battalion headquarters where I saw three or four Bengali soldiers locked up. I asked why they had been locked up? I was told that it was because they were running away. “So what if they were? What else would they do when you are killing them? Bring them out!” I said. The Bengali soldiers were brought out, they were

scared. I told them to go home and sleep, and asked the subedar to give them their salary.’ A few years later, in the mid-1970s, he found one of these soldiers working as a cook at a home in Lahore. He asked him what he was doing here, only to learn that the Bengali soldier had come back to fight with the Pakistan Army and had become a POW. He told Col Nadir that when they [the other soldier who was locked up with him and he] came to Pakistan, the army threw them out, so they had nowhere to go. Col Nadir then helped him get a Bangladeshi passport so he could be repatriated. ‘Those people who were treated well by us, stayed with us,’ he told me. ‘I had released them from the lock-up and they had been very relieved that their life had been spared, which is why they had rejoined the unit.’⁶⁹

Another time, he said, he was sent to Faridpur and told that it was a very ‘hard area’, as it was the hometown of Sheikh Mujib. But when he went into action with his soldiers, he didn’t see any widespread resistance. Instead, he saw a few Bengalis running towards them. ‘I told my soldiers to stop firing and asked the Bengalis what they were doing. It turned out that they had brought water for us to drink! I thought to myself how we could kill people who weren’t resisting or firing at us, but the other officers didn’t necessarily care about whether the Bengalis fought or attacked them. They were just killed.’ And yet, in the midst of such violence and chaos, normality was maintained. ‘We would eat Chinese food at night, have drinks at the Dhaka Club, all this continued,’ he added.

By the time Col Nadir returned to West Pakistan, in October 1971 (he was sent back to be promoted as a lieutenant colonel), he was completely shaken. ‘When I had volunteered to go to East Pakistan in April, I was in a very different state of mind. I wanted to be with my unit, whether it was in East or West Pakistan. I didn’t think of what was happening there in a very sophisticated way. I suppose this is what ultimately led to a nervous breakdown,’ he said.

When Col Nadir came back, he was struck by the lack of empathy in West Pakistan for what was happening in the eastern wing. It was perhaps not so much the violence there, but the disconnect between the two parts that rattled him. Unable to relate to those around him and unable to shake

off what he had experienced there, Col Nadir began to drink heavily, eventually having a mental breakdown and being diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. He was institutionalized, losing some of his memory during treatment. ‘To suddenly be back in West Pakistan where nobody gave a damn about what was happening in East Pakistan, where nobody cared how badly East Pakistan had been mishandled, where people were indifferent about what was happening . . . the change was so much from that action in East Pakistan, from commanding my battalion there. After all that, coming back to West Pakistan where people were so removed from what was happening, it was a [suershot] formula to go nuts. I became a madman. I thought there was going to be a socialist revolution in the county. I went to the Soviet embassy and shot a bird there to tell them that they should come out now and start a socialist revolution,’ he laughed. ‘This was a madman’s fantasy. And this went on till my wife intervened saying I needed treatment. I was admitted to the hospital and treated for about six months. In the process, with the treatment, the electric shocks, the medication, I lost my memory . . .’

After what he saw in East Pakistan, to return to another part of the same country, and to see its people so disengaged from what was transpiring in their own land, was too much to bear. Elsewhere he writes that he felt the ‘collective guilt of the Army action . . . In the army, you wear no separate uniform. We all share the guilt. We may not have killed, but we connived and were part of the same force. History does not forgive.’ ⁷⁰

By the end of 1971, as Pakistan lost the war and East Pakistan became Bangladesh, Col Nadir was overcome by his own losses: of sanity, of memory, of loved ones. He told me that when his father came to visit him in the hospital and saw his condition, he wasn’t able to stomach it. ‘He died of shock,’ Col Nadir said. His death shook Col Nadir, making him reflect on what was happening. ‘With my father’s death, I started thinking about what happened to him? I started thinking about my state of mind. And the meditation helped. I started recovering and that is when I realized when I went nuts. It happened when I travelled from East Pakistan to West Pakistan. That was the time I had a breakdown,’ he said.

While to the others it may have seemed like Col Nadir was out of touch with reality upon his return, I wondered how one could blame him when most of West Pakistan was out of touch with the reality of East Pakistan. Perhaps it was Col Nadir who was more in touch with reality than anyone else. The silences, the façade of killing only a ‘few miscreants’ in East Pakistan, the pretence that all was well, was something he had seen through when others were unable and unwilling.

Our conversation reminded me of an earlier exchange with Pakistani writer Asif Noorani. Upon hearing that I was writing a book on 1971, Noorani Sahib shared an experience he had in that fateful year. I have reproduced below what he shared, with permission:

I used to work for Glaxo Pakistan as the sales manager of OTC (over-the-counter) products in what was then Karachi, Sind (as it was spelt in those days), Balochistan and lower Punjab. Once a month I used to travel by the Khyber Mail, which steamed out of Karachi at 9.25 p.m. and drop(ed) me at Rohri, Sukkur’s twin city, early in the morning. I used to invariably book the lower berth in what was called coupe. There were two berths. I don’t remember the exact date, but once when I entered the compartment, I found someone lying down [on the berth that]I had reserved.

‘Look, friend, this is my berth. Please occupy the upper berth,’ I said politely but firmly.

‘I can’t because I have no legs,’ came the answer in a low voice. I was shocked beyond words. He then told me that he was a newly recruited army officer who had been sent to East Pakistan shortly after he had [graduated] from military academy.

‘I was punished for my misdeeds. When I landed in East Pakistan, I was told to shoot every man who had the potentiality of being or becoming a [part of the] Mukti Bahini. I was very reluctant, but soon it was a case of shooting or being shot down. At one point, my soldiers and I were chased by a large number of Mukti Bahini members, so we entered an enclave of Indian territory, which was where I stepped on a mine and lost my legs. I was later transported by my soldiers to a hospital in Dacca (now Dhaka). There were many soldiers in the hospital and each of us had his own tale of woes. No one was interested in hearing the other person. I was brought in along with other [soldiers] injured in an aircraft, which flew via Colombo. Here, I am on my way home. You are the first person who has listened to my story patiently.’

Relieved, he slept like a log after that, while I lay sleepless on the upper berth. He was still sleeping when I quietly left the compartment and disembarked.

I wonder how many other soldiers came back with wounds and injuries, both physical and emotional. I wonder how many of them pondered over the role they had played in the war. And I wonder what lasting imprints the war left on their lives. How many lives were completely altered after 1971?

After he was discharged from hospital, Col Nadir retired from the army. ‘The doctor thought that now that I had been in the hospital for six months, I wasn’t likely to be promoted and so I should retire. I began afresh as a civilian. Then some people suggested that I would be better off if I left the country, so my family and I moved to America. My children went to school there. But after seven years, I got fed up. I had no qualification except matriculation from Pakistan, which is all you needed to join the army. All I could do in America were odd jobs. For a while I worked as a security guard. Eventually, we decided that enough was enough and came back.’ When Col Nadir returned to Pakistan, his lifestyle was a clear departure from the army life he had once lived. He turned to writing, penning short stories and poems in Punjabi. ⁷¹ ‘That’s been my life ever since,’ he said with a gentle smile.



Part IV

Institutionalizing the Memory of the War

The first part of the book, ‘Journeys: Past and Present’, began with present-day popular discourse on 1971 in Pakistan and Bangladesh before taking the readers back to 1947 to explore what the idea of Pakistan symbolized to Partition survivors then and how the meaning of 1947 has evolved in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh today. The second part, ‘1947–71: The Seeds of Unrest’, chronicled the period between 1947 and 1971 through interviews with Bangladeshis and Pakistanis to understand the shift from supporting Pakistan to struggling for a new country. The third part, ‘1971: The Year That Was’, used multiple interviews with Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis to reconstruct what the war meant for people in each country.

The last part of the book, ‘Institutionalizing the Memory of the War’ looks at the contested memory of 1971 and how Bangladesh and Pakistan ‘remember’ the war in a way that fits its national project. This section also looks at how the war remains ongoing in many ways for the Bihari community in Bangladesh and the Bengali community in Pakistan, who remain on the fringes of society.

My Truth, Your Truth

Large, black-and-white photographs of Sheikh Mujib welcomed me as I stepped out of the car to walk into the Bangladesh National Museum in Dhaka. Inside, a middle-aged male guide received me. I told him that I was particularly interested in the exhibits related to the birth of Bangladesh. However, when he heard that I was from Pakistan, he insisted that I visit all the other galleries first. He said that he first wanted me to get to know Bangladesh and everything that was special about it. We walked through the different galleries that depicted the animals and birds indigenous to the region, the geographical landscape of Bangladesh, and briefly, the 1947 Partition and the creation of Pakistan. Here, images of the leading figures of the Pakistan movement, such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah, A.K. Fazlul Huq (also known as Sher-e-Bangla or the Tiger of Bengal) ¹ and Liaquat Ali Khan (Pakistan's first prime minister) greeted me. When we finally reached the rooms dedicated to the 1971 war, the guide enthusiastically told me that his father was a liberation fighter. 'He was a chemistry teacher; he helped make bombs during the war.'

At the entrance to the 1971 exhibit is a tall panel on display. The heading reads:

Our Pride Our Hope
How Wonderful is Our Bangla Language
Bangladesh's Struggle for Independence
Bangalee Bangladesh Liberation War

Underneath, it details a brief history of the Pakistan period and the factors which led to the eventual creation of Bangladesh. The language movement, the 'oppression and exploitation of East Pakistan by West Pakistan', the

imposition of martial law and the ‘plans to suppress and destroy the language and culture of Bangalees’ are highlighted alongside the six-point manifesto and the Agartala Conspiracy Case. The end of the panel reads, ‘The military junta of Pakistan dealt the final blow in the late hours of 25 March 1971. The Pakistan forces began killing Bangalees. Such indiscriminate mass murder can be compared only with Hitler’s extermination of the Jews during the Second World War. Bangabandhu declared the Independence of Bangladesh in the early hours of 26 March. The people created enormous resistance to counter the occupation [occupying] Pakistani forces and eventually attained cherished victory.’

I entered the gallery and found a visual screen that read: ‘Nine-month-long genocide, destruction and places of mass killing: From 25 March to 16 December 1971, the Pakistan Army carried out massive destruction in Bangladesh. They mercilessly killed 30 lakh Bangladeshi people. It is estimated that most of the people were killed at 5000 places of mass killings in different areas of Bangladesh. More than 2,00,000 women were sexually assaulted.’ Underneath are two black-and-white images, showing bodies sprawled on the ground and a row of human skulls laid out in a straight line. Further inside the bloodstained clothes and shoes of one of the martyrs of the language movement of 1952 are displayed. It is followed by Jinnah’s speech in which he declared that Urdu, and only Urdu, would be the state language of Pakistan. The cover page of the six-point formula is also displayed. The words ‘Our Right to Live’ are printed on it.

As I moved along, photographs and newspaper cuttings depicting the people’s struggle became visible. Bangladesh’s Declaration of Independence was framed on the wall, surrounded by images of women and men marching, holding placards or weapons. Bloody images of bullet-riddled and maimed bodies were spread out. A photograph of a young child, sprawled on a bloodstained floor, eyes popping out, limbs chewed away by a dog, stared back at me. It was an image that was difficult to shake off even a few years after the visit, leaving me nauseous each time I was reminded of it. On top of it was a black-and-white monstrous sketch of Yahya Khan. It read, ‘The Killer of Midnight’. Elsewhere, similar images of

Khan, in blood red hung from the projector screens. These images of Pakistani brutality were juxtaposed with a photograph of then Indian prime minister, Indira Gandhi, addressing a crowd in India in support of Bangladesh.

A glass box ahead held several human skulls, the heads sticking out of sand, denoting the killing and mass burial fields from which bones were reportedly recovered, sometimes long after the war. The board next to it read: 'Proof and witness of the atrocities and mass killings of the patriotic civilians by Pak Army and their allies during the liberation war in 1971.' Separate sections of the exhibit particularly focused on these 'allies'. The peace committee, ² Jamaat-e-Islami, Razakars ³, Al-Badr ⁴, Al-Shams ⁵ and the 'pioneering role' of Biharis was highlighted, and some identity cards of those who served in the Al-Badr were archived. The cards read: 'The AL-BADR . . . is a composition of the youths aspiring to implement the ideology of Pakistan and highly imbued with the national consciousness. This force has been extending all-out cooperation to the Pakistan Army. The AL-BADR is a symbol of fear and indomitable challenge to the miscreants and Indian infiltrators. The bearer of this card belonged to the AL-BADR.' Black-and-white photographs of young boys who presumably served in the force were pasted next to this description.

Before I left that gallery, I noticed groups of students, some with their teachers and others without. The museum clearly was a popular spot. Curious to know what the youth thought, I struck a conversation with some of them. The first people I spoke to were two students, a boy and a girl, about seventeen or eighteen years old. When they heard that I was from Pakistan they excitedly spoke to me of Pakistani singer Atif Aslam. The girl said, 'I want to come to Pakistan to shop,' and then quickly clarified that she thought it was good that Pakistan and Bangladesh were separate countries now. 'We are culturally very different. We wear saris, we speak Bangla.' Ironically, this was the same narrative that I had heard many times back home, that the people of East and West Pakistan were too different: *they* wear saris, *we* wear salwar-kameez; *they* speak Bangla, *we* speak Urdu. The narrative assumes that the two could have never coexisted. Separation

was necessary. In doing so, it explains away 1971. The girl continued, 'Women in Pakistan are conservative, but we are Western . . . so we are very different people.' I asked the boy what he thought of Pakistan and he said, 'I'm indifferent towards Pakistan. My grandfather helped liberation fighters. Growing up, I heard many bad things about Pakistan, that Bengalis had no rights under Pakistan, that Pakistanis raped and murdered Bangladeshis. But my parents have taught me that everyone is human. So I don't love Pakistan, but I don't hate it either. Many others in Bangladesh though, many of our class-fellows, really hate Pakistan a lot.'

As I spoke to them, I noticed other groups of students observing us. Their tour was paused and they began loitering around. They seemed to have overheard that I was from Pakistan. One group of students was accompanied by a history teacher. I smiled at them and they asked if they could take a photograph. They said they had never seen a Pakistani. I asked them if they would like to visit Pakistan, to which they immediately squealed, 'No!' The teacher laughed, 'They think you mean forever!' I clarified that that was not what I meant. They seemed to relax a little after that. They had several questions about Pakistan: about how women were treated there, what the country looked like. They had only accessed the country through their family's oral histories and popular media.

A few of the boys said that Pakistan reminded them of cricket. 'Pakistan is our second-favourite team after Bangladesh. Whenever there is an India–Pakistan match, we support Pakistan.' The conversation reminded me of what Professor Muntassir Mamoon had said to me. He had complained that the youth was too disconnected from history, they had forgotten how India supported them and how Pakistan killed and maimed them. He was frustrated that the youth supported Pakistan in cricket matches. Others too had shared similar sentiments, blaming it on how the 'collaborators and pro-Pakistan, anti-liberation forces who rose to power after Mujib's death' had wiped out that history, projecting Pakistan in a favourable light. But one of the students said, 'We haven't forgotten. We hate Pakistan for what it did in 1971, and we think that the people who supported them should be punished through the war crimes tribunal.' Another student interjected, 'But

we also hate India because they don't give us a fair share of water. We also hate them because they have too much ego. Pakistani and Bangladeshi players play in each other's home cricket league (the Pakistan Premier League and the Bangladesh Premier League), but India refuses to let its cricketers play in our leagues. They are very arrogant. So, that's why we support Pakistan in an India–Pakistan match. We always celebrate Pakistan's victory.'

* * *

The entrance to the Army Museum in Lahore, inaugurated in late 2016, is lined with tanks, some bearing the Indian flag. I leant closer to know their story, as printed on the boards adjacent to them. One of them reads: '1965 War Indian Captured Centurion Command Tank Kooshab of Commanding Officer 17 Poona Horse . . . [left] in the hands of [the] victorious Pakistan Army'. Another reads: 'Indian Captured T-54 Tank: The tank displayed here is the . . . refurbished Indian 18 Cavalry tank that was destroyed by Major Shabbir Sharif Shaheed (martyr)' during the 1971 war. A few steps away is a helicopter that, according to its description, 'saw action during the 1971 Pakistan-India war'. Then there are jeeps and guns, and other tanks that were 'effectively used in the 1971 Pakistan-India war'. That's how the war is referred to, that's how many Pakistanis remember it, as an Indo-Pak affair. When I entered the gallery dedicated to 1971, the exhibits there too focused on India's role, reducing what Bangladesh refers to as its nine-month-long liberation war to another bilateral conflict between the two countries that are now nuclear powers.

The introductory panel, titled '1971 War', explained the war in the following words:

The humiliating defeat in 1965 War effected a change in India's Pakistan strategy, which essentially evolved around a three-pronged offensive on ideological, economic and military fronts. When the strategy did not succeed, Indian Government resorted to state sponsoring of terrorism inside East Pakistan through the creation of various terrorist organizations like Mukti Bahini, etc., and infiltrating the political set-up in order to exploit the internal socio-political weaknesses. As these efforts also could not deliver the desired results and in April 1971,

Indian Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi was forced to order Indian Army to launch attack on East Pakistan. General Manekshaw, COAS [Chief of Army Staff] Indian Army, however, convinced her to delay the Indian offensive as, according to him, Indian Army was not ready for the offensive and needed time for preparations of war. Thus 8-9 months were available to Indian Army to prepare for war and her intelligence organizations had more time to massively enhance state sponsoring of terrorism and furthering the efforts to exploit the internal fissures, in support of the impending attack on East Pakistan. Through a planned and concerted effort, India was thus able to further exploit the internal fissures and managed to generate extremely negative socio-political environment, which also exacerbated existing internal weaknesses. After almost nine months of preparations, on 3 December 1971, Indian Government declared an open war against Pakistan and launched its army, navy and air force offensives in East Pakistan . . . having been stripped off completely of its supplies, communication and other material resources, a handful of Pakistan Army's daring, selfless and determined officers and men continued their endeavors in the defense of their country. [The] Pakistan-India War of 1971 was not a war of a short duration, but was spread over three years under most unfavourable circumstances. During and after the war a vicious propaganda campaign was initiated against the Pakistan Army in which it was falsely accused of committing atrocities against the local population. Amongst other aspects, deliberate efforts were undertaken to hide the atrocities committed by Indian Army and various Indian-sponsored terrorist groups, including Mukti Bahini . . .'

While the description mentions that India's plan exploited 'internal fissures . . . [and] exacerbated the existing internal weaknesses' there is no insight into what these fissures may have been. Further, by using the term 'humiliating defeat' for India at the beginning of the description in context to the 1965 war—which continues to be hailed as a victory by both sides despite the ceasefire—⁶ what is often seen as its own 'humiliating defeat' in 1971 is balanced out by showing the weaknesses and malicious intents of its enemy.

Inside the gallery, young children gathered around the museum guide. The museum here too seemed to be a popular spot. I had been turned away the day before as the tickets had been sold out before I arrived. 'This is evidence of state-sponsored terrorism,' I heard the guide tell her audience. 'These photographs you see here are original,' she said, pointing at one of the panels titled, 'India's State Sponsoring of Terrorism'. The panel bore black-and-white photographs of ordinary civilians being beaten, kicked, tied to a rope and dragged across the ground. In one image, bodies were sprawled over cycle rickshaws, in another men were being pulled by the

hair, guns pointed at them. Underneath was a large map detailing the locations of ‘Mukti Bahini terrorist training camps in India’. Next to it, a description said:

Perpetration of India’s state-sponsored terrorism during 1971 in East Pakistan, through application of her defence forces and intelligence agencies is a well-recorded historical fact. To sponsor state terrorism, a control headquarter was raised in [the] Indian Army’s Eastern Command at Calcutta, under the supervision of an Indian Army major general. Six training centers/sectors were established, each commanded by a brigadier from Indian Army, to organize, train and equip the terrorists for perpetration of acts of terror in East Pakistan. Each sector was organized into a number of terrorist training camps, comprising 500-men battalions. Over 100 such terrorist training camps were established where a total of over 1,00,000 terrorists were trained. Around 800 officers were trained at regular Indian Army training institutions, including Indian Military Academy, Dehra Dun. At Cochin and Plassey, over 600 terrorists were given training to carry out terrorist activities at various ports in East Pakistan. In majority of the cases, serving Indian Army officers accompanied the terrorists in civilian clothes, inside East Pakistan, and carried out acts of terrorism which resulted in deaths of tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children.

‘The people they killed in this state-sponsored terrorism were the pro-Pakistanis. Those who spoke up in favour of Pakistan were treated like this,’ the guide continued in the background. ‘For anyone who doesn’t believe it, we’ve put up comments by different journalists, authors, and even Indian politicians, to verify this. For instance, here you can see that former Indian deputy prime minister Morarji Desai admitted in an interview with Oriana Fallaci that ‘regular Indian soldiers disguised as the Mukti Bahini fought the Pakistani Army in East Pakistan from April till December 1971 when, after losing 5000 men in covert operations, Indira Gandhi ordered open war,’ she read off a board. ‘Now, the Indians may call it a covert operation, but we will definitely call it terrorism. Since April 1971, India was engaged in this terrorism, which hurt our cause,’ she continued.

As I listened to her, I could not help but think of how similar this narrative was to the one we hear about Kashmir today. India insists that the armed struggle for independence in Kashmir is terrorism, just as Pakistan insisted that the Bengalis fighting for their independence were terrorists. The term has taken on new meanings after 9/11. In an interview about Kashmir, Pakistan’s former chief of the army staff (COAS) Jehangir

Karamat had explained to me how the ‘line between terrorism and freedom struggles got blurred’ after the 11 September attack on the World Trade Center, hurting the Kashmir cause in the process. Those who were referred to as freedom fighters were now seen as terrorists, genuine freedom struggles became delegitimized. ‘India took great advantage of that by projecting the religious groupings which were supporting the movement in Kashmir . . . as terrorist organizations,’ he complained. ⁷ The 1971 exhibit at the Army Museum, claiming that India too was engaged in terrorism, seemed to be a reaction to the allegations pinned on Pakistan over the years. Just as India lays the blame for the unrest in Kashmir on ‘Pakistan’s state-sponsored terrorism’, ignoring the indigenous Kashmiri struggle, Pakistan too has dismissed the Bengali people’s struggle, painting it as ‘Indian-sponsored terrorism’. In the process, the people’s demand for justice, for basic human rights and autonomy is ignored. Those fighting for it are labelled as traitors or ‘foreign-sponsored’.

The 1971 war had a significant impact on the psyche of India and Pakistan, and subsequent policies in the region. Since Pakistan continues to view the war as an Indo-Pak war, it sees itself losing to India and not to Bangladesh. Even when the Pakistanis admit to their failure in keeping the country together, more often than not they reinforce that ‘had India not interfered, we would have remained one’. This defeat to India impinged on its collective memory for decades to come. Until that point, Pakistan was confident of its military prowess, but the war indicated that its enemy had achieved military superiority. This gave further impetus to the Pakistan Army to strengthen itself. The expenditure on defence soared under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s premiership. ⁸ Bhutto, as early as the 1965 war, had argued that a strategic balance with India was imperative and that ‘if India builds the bomb, we will eat grass or leaves, even go hungry, but we will get one of our own. We have no alternative.’ He formally launched Pakistan’s nuclear programme just a year after the 1971 war. ⁹ When India successfully tested its nuclear bomb in 1974, it gave further stimulus to Pakistan’s nuclear programme. ¹⁰

Instead of reflecting on internal policy failures and the impact of martial laws in Pakistan's formative years on the crisis in East Pakistan, the state blamed the loss on the fact that it was not militarily 'strong enough'. The only way to avoid another East Pakistan-like situation was to increase the defence budget. Military superiority—not democracy, justice, strong civilian institutions and egalitarian policies, which were the key demands of the Bengalis—was going to save Pakistan. In 2011, forty years after the creation of Bangladesh, A.Q. Khan, the mastermind of Pakistan's nuclear programme wrote in *Newsweek* magazine: 'If we had nuclear capability before 1971, we wouldn't have lost half our country—present-day Bangladesh—after a disgraceful defeat.'¹¹ This seems to have been the lesson the ruling elite in Pakistan walked away with.

However, apart from investing directly in its army and weaponry, Pakistan also took lessons from India's support of the Mukti Bahini in the months prior to the all-out war. To carefully read local sensitivities of the people, to build relationships with the forces fighting the ruling regime (that happened to be the country's enemy), and to supply them with training grounds and ammunition against an enemy state are tactics that India used in 1971 and what it has accused Pakistan of repeatedly after the war. In the 1980s, India argued that Pakistan was supporting Sikh separatists in their struggle to create Khalistan—a separate land for the Sikhs. By the late 1980s, Pakistan was blamed for arming Kashmiri separatists in the Valley, who were fighting the Indian state. While Pakistan denied both accusations, as Gary J. Bass argues in *The Blood Telegram*, 'this kind of covert sponsorship was out of India's playbook for the Mukti Bahini'.¹² In both cases—of India supporting the Bengalis or Pakistan supporting the Sikhs and Kashmiris—the blame game has continued. It is argued that the entire problem lies in the other country's meddling in its neighbour's internal affairs. If they stopped supporting 'Bengali terrorists', 'Sikh terrorists' or 'Kashmiri terrorists', there would be no movement at all. Why these communities may be susceptible to outside funding while their own rulers oppress them with military force, and the state that is meant to guarantee them rights is the one stripping them of all justice, are questions that go

unmasked and unanswered. The genuine grievances and aspirations of the local people are conveniently obliterated in accusations of ‘state-sponsored terrorism’. It is the same narrative I found in the Army Museum that day. The exhibits payed little attention to the fact that the creation of Bangladesh was the culmination of a long struggle of its people: a struggle for rights, for democracy, for justice. The young students who had gathered around the guide would only learn of how the Bengalis who wanted independence were terrorists and funded by Pakistan’s arch enemy that was bent upon breaking Pakistan. As I turned to leave, I saw them look up at a quote attributed to Indira Gandhi, trying to make sense of it. ‘India has never reconciled with the existence of Pakistan . . . Indian leaders have always believed that Pakistan should not have been created and that [the] Pakistani nation has no right to exist,’ it read.

Why would one want to reflect on any other reason that led to the 1971 upheaval when the Indian narrative of destroying Pakistan is so compellingly displayed? India’s role in the war, certainly critical, overshadows everything else. It seems to be the only history worth remembering.

* * *

One of the long panels at the Army Museum in Lahore was titled ‘Genocide of Pro-Pakistanis in East Pakistan—1971’. Below it I found quotes from different books and articles, contesting Bangladesh’s claim about the genocide of Bengalis (particularly the figure of 30 lakh) and replacing it with Pakistan’s own claims about the genocide of non-Bengalis. That these quotes were either from Bangladeshis or the international press was highlighted to strengthen the veracity of the argument—that it was in fact India and Bangladesh that committed the genocide, not Pakistan. A few edited excerpts from the panel are published below:

The Army authorities in East Pakistan have never claimed that their efforts to quell the secessionists was an easy task. Nor have they ever said that during their drive to save the integrity of Pakistan, no innocent civilians were killed in the cross fire. But, the claim of

wanton killing by the army, far less the allegation of systematic genocide by them, is simply untenable.

This quote is attributed to Dr Abdul Momin Chowdhury, a Bangladeshi scholar and the author of *Behind the Myth of Three Million*.

Below this is a quote from the *Daily Telegraph*:

. . . Sheikh Mujib's wild figure of three million Bengalis killed during those 10 terrible months is at least 20 times too high, if not 50 or 60. And what of all the killing that the Bengalis did whenever they had a chance?

Another quote is by a former diplomat and Pakistani writer, Qutubuddin Aziz.

. . . I met many hundreds of non-Bengali repatriates: men, women and children. Their evidence gave me the impression that the non-Bengali death toll in the murderous period of March-April 1971 was in the vicinity of 5,00,000. ¹³

These quotes are followed by excerpts from the *Newsweek*, as well as an interview of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman conducted by Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, which highlighted the persecution of non-Bengalis. In particular, they focused on the killings by Abdul Kader Siddique, a guerilla fighter, and his group after the surrender. The killings had taken place near the Dhaka stadium, witnessed by about 5000 people and reported in the international press. Accused of being 'collaborators' of the Pakistan Army, four Bihari men had been tortured, beaten with clubs and then stabbed with bayonets. ¹⁴

These killings were first mentioned to me by Ansar as I sat with him and some others from the Bihari community in Karachi (see Chapter 9). 'Kader Siddique would massacre, loot and rape Biharis . . . these people called themselves freedom fighters? Muktijodhas! He should be tried! Instead, he is given awards (referring to the Bir Uttom award, one of the highest awards in Bangladesh for individual gallantry, presented to Siddique by the Bangladesh government for his role in the war). He is hailed as Tiger Siddique in Bangladesh, glorified for killing innocent people!'

Ansar and his friends' anger, not just with Kader Siddique but with other Bengalis too who had killed non-Bengalis, was undoubtedly justified. They had witnessed the bloodshed and were victims of the violence. The murder, rape and torture of non-Bengalis that had taken place was every bit as personal for these survivors as for the Bengali victims. However, for the state, the deliberate presentation of this violence, likely to invoke sympathy for and anger on behalf of the non-Bengalis, served other national interests. This violence against non-Bengalis was selectively reinforced in the museum without delving into any details of the atrocities against Bengalis; the purpose of highlighting this one-sided violence was not to serve justice to the aggrieved Bihari families, which they deserve, but towards which neither Pakistan nor Bangladesh have taken any concrete steps. Rather, this violence is mentioned to undermine the military excesses in East Pakistan. It draws attention away from the operation, absolving Pakistan of responsibility and laying the blame on the Bengalis and Indians. The selective remembrance of non-Bengali killings fosters anger and hostility, not towards the army for its action, not necessarily towards Bangladesh, but certainly towards the state's arch-rival, India, that is explicitly stated to have sponsored these 'terrorists' who unleashed themselves on 'innocent men, women and children'.

The way in which information is structured in state museums, in textbooks (mentioned below) and in state-backed media, reconstructs the war in the people's imagination, making India-backed Bengalis the demons and Pakistan the helpless, innocent party. Yes, it is argued, Pakistan may have had a weak leadership and might have made some mistakes, but those mistakes were limited to the leaders of that time, and none of these 'mistakes' warranted the kind of 'terrorism' unleashed on the country by its internal and external enemies, making it lose part of its valued territory (not people—Pakistanis often lament the loss of East Pakistan and not necessarily the East Pakistanis, who they are told were too influenced by the Hindu culture to coexist in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan anyway). With this selective institutionalization of war memory, it becomes easy to glance over news or reports of Pakistani atrocities, even when they are

furnished here or there, as a brief comment in textbooks or in media reports. The conscious emphasis lies elsewhere. Bengali killings are ‘backgrounded’, while the killings of non-Bengalis are in the foreground. Similarly, India’s role is ‘foregrounded’ and receives maximum focus while Pakistan’s own policies and failures in East Pakistan appear in the backdrop.¹⁵ When Pakistanis are confronted with evidence of atrocities in East Pakistan, they are already, albeit unconsciously, prepared to dismiss such charges. A common retort is, ‘Did you see what they did to the non-Bengalis? Of course, the army had to act! Some people may have got killed in the process, but what else could the army do? Any country would have done the same.’ The conversation gets lost in these comparisons of Bengali vs non-Bengali killings, of the ‘terrorists’ vs the righteous Pakistan Army that fought against them. These efforts, to accentuate one truth—Pakistan’s truth—over Bangladesh’s truth (Bangladesh too has only institutionalized the memory of violence against Bengalis, dismissing the non-Bengalis from the equation), are institutionalized by the state at sites like this museum.

The fact that the term ‘genocide’ is used to describe the killings of pro-Pakistanis—both non-Bengalis as well as ‘patriotic Bengalis’—is also telling, not least because it is a term that Bangladesh has repeatedly used to refer to the massacre of Bengalis. From its nascent years, it has referred to the events of 1971 as genocide, claiming that as many as 30 lakh people had died, and has even urged the United Nations (UN) to internationally recognize it as such.

Genocide, a term coined by Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin in 1944, was first recognized as a crime under international law by the United Nations General Assembly in 1946. It was codified as an independent crime in the 1948 Genocide Convention. Article II of the convention describes genocide as acts which are committed with an intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group by killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures

intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. ¹⁶

Critics have long argued that the UN definition is too narrow, particularly excluding the targeting of political groups. ¹⁷ Had it included the targeting of political groups, would the killings of Awami League workers and supporters fit more neatly into the definition? Others argue that it is too difficult to establish intent to destroy. Did the West Pakistani regime want to exterminate the Bengalis and Hindus altogether, or was it ‘a determination to kill some people’—as stated by Eric Griffel, the chief US development officer who felt that the events in East Pakistan had to be differentiated from Hitler’s extermination of Jews or the massacres in Armenia and Cambodia— ¹⁸ with the goal of terrifying others into submission? Yet there are some who have argued that the word has lost its meaning because of its misuse ¹⁹ and widespread application to events that do not constitute an extermination of a particular group.

In the context of Bangladesh, even before its creation, the term ‘selective genocide’ had been used by Archer Blood, the then American consul general to Dhaka, to ‘shock’ ²⁰ the officials back home in the US out of their silence on the killings, and to bring their attention to what was happening in East Pakistan. Blood warned them ‘that the military authorities were “systematically eliminating” Awami League supporters “by seeking them out in their homes and shooting them down”.’ ²¹ The consulate warned that there was evidence of ethnic targeting, with Hindus bearing the brunt of the army action. ²² The US consulate in Dhaka, however, wasn’t the only one to term the army action as genocide. Pakistani journalist Anthony Mascarenhas, who was one of the journalists called in for a ten-day tour of East Pakistan after the military operation began in March, published an article titled ‘Genocide’ in the *Sunday Times*, UK, in June 1971. He had been invited by the Pakistani regime with the intention that he, alongside seven other journalists accompanying him, would publicize the atrocities against non-Bengalis, giving legitimacy to the army action. However, Mascarenhas’s response was one unanticipated by the regime. Horrified by what he saw there, Mascarenhas quickly travelled to the *Sunday Times*

office in London, knowing fully well that he could never publish the reality of what he had seen in East Pakistan within Pakistan. Mascarenhas emphasized his shock at the killings of non-Bengalis—something that West Pakistan wanted him to stress—but also how much more appalled he was by the ‘systematic killing spree’²³ carried out by the army against Bengalis. He wrote:

Thousands of families of unfortunate Muslims, many of them refugees from Bihar who chose Pakistan at the time of the partition riots in 1947 were mercilessly wiped out. Women were raped, or had their breasts torn out with specially fashioned knives. Children did not escape the horror: the lucky ones were killed with their parents; but many thousands of others must go through what life remains for them with eyes gouged out and limbs roughly amputated. More than 20,000 bodies of non-Bengalis have been found in the main towns, such as Chittagong, Khulna and Jessore. The real toll, I was told everywhere in East Bengal, may have been as high as 1,00,000; for thousands of non-Bengalis have vanished without a trace. The Government of Pakistan has let the world know about that first horror. What it has suppressed is the second and worse horror which followed when its own army took over the killing. West Pakistani officials privately calculate that altogether both sides have killed 2,50,000 people, not counting those who have died of famine and disease . . . ‘We are determined to cleanse East Pakistan once and for all of the threat of secession, even if it means killing of two million people and ruling the province as a colony for 30 years,’ I was repeatedly told by senior military and civil officers in Dacca and Comilla. The West Pakistan army in East Bengal is doing exactly that with a terrifying thoroughness . . . THIS IS GENOCIDE conducted with amazing casualness.²⁴

Nonetheless, despite this early use of the term, Bangladesh’s call for the international recognition of genocide continues. Some have argued that the gravity of 1971 was lost in the cold war dynamics and has not got the international attention or legitimacy it deserved.²⁵ With the United States and China supporting Pakistan, and the Soviet Union supporting India, the creation of Bangladesh was usurped by cold war politics. With its own cold war interests at hand, neither the United States nor China were willing to raise an outcry about the killings in East Pakistan; Pakistan was the key bridge between the two countries, essential to fight Soviet expansion and a strategic ally. The massacre could and would go unnoticed as long as the army, who were leading the government in West Pakistan and the army action in East Pakistan, continued to serve their interests. Others have argued that the definition of genocide may not apply neatly to Bangladesh

because while ‘genocidal violence is part of a cold and rational plan and not irrational, random acts of violence . . . [deaths in East Pakistan] was not produced in a factory-like environment [as in the case of Nazi Germany] nor was there one group of perpetrators. Violence was a passionate outburst staged in intervals as a reaction to previous episodes . . . no single group had a monopoly on committing violence, nor did one single group control the production of death in East Pakistan. Pakistani Punjabi soldiers, nationalist Bengali militias, Bengali supporters of West Pakistan, Bihari civil armed guards and Indian Army soldiers, along with other less identifiable groups, killed, tortured and destroyed those who opposed them and their politics.’²⁶ While the Pakistan Army killed in large numbers and had the state machinery backing it, making their actions vastly different in context and scale, the soldiers may not necessarily have killed to exterminate an entire population but to follow orders, crush rebellion, deter other separatists, humiliate and cripple the ‘enemy’ into subjugation, and so forth.²⁷ Therefore, it is argued that the ‘intent to destroy’ cannot be clearly established. Yet others insist that there was a clear targeting of Hindus²⁸ and a desire to eliminate the community altogether, which establishes genocidal intentions. Regardless, 1971 is yet to be internationally recognized as such. In lieu of this, many have argued that perhaps the focus should be less on terminology and more so on the lessons learnt from 1971,²⁹ on preventing such violence in the future and on bringing justice for the survivors and victims’ families.

Back in Bangladesh, various steps have been taken to establish that genocide did indeed take place, and that too of 30 lakh people. In 2017, the Bangladesh Parliament unanimously passed a motion declaring 25 March, the day the army operation was launched, as Bangladesh’s Genocide Day. Across Bangladesh, one finds genocide archives and museums, as well as various seminars and talks organized on the topic. The term has become part of popular parlance that describes the events of 1971. On one of my last days in Dhaka, Shahriar Kabir had insisted that we visit the Jalladkhana killing field at Mirpur. The trip had been cancelled a few times before that due to rain and poor weather. Kabir, however, was adamant that I see it

before leaving. When we finally made our way in, I saw that the inside of the boundary wall was marked with different plaques, each detailing the genocides that had taken place across the world—from Germany to Rwanda to Cambodia. As I read the number of documented casualties in these horrific events, Kabir looked at me and said, ‘17 lakh people were killed in the Cambodian genocide, 15 lakh people were killed in the Armenian genocide, 10 lakh people were killed in the Rwandan genocide and 30 lakh people were killed in Bangladesh genocide. You have to understand that what happened in Bangladesh was as much a genocide as any of these other events.’ I could tell that, for Kabir, it was of utmost importance to convince a Pakistani like me that the violence in 1971 was of the most brutal and grave nature. Calling it genocide seemed to give it legitimacy, not just for him but for his fellow Bangladeshis as well.

This urgency to recognize the killings as genocide and the figure of the dead as 30 lakh has to be understood in the context of Bangladesh’s internal politics and external relations with Pakistan. Soon after the war, Bangladesh had wanted to try 195 accused Pakistani military and civilian officials out of the 93,000 Pakistani POWs for war crimes. However, the fact that many Bengalis were still in Pakistan, waiting for their repatriation to East Pakistan, put the new government in a compromised position. The Bengalis could be used as leverage to pressurize the government. Further, Pakistan had already set up the Hamoodur Rahman Commission, which indicated that the accused Pakistani war criminals might be brought to justice in their home country (the report’s findings however would be buried, parts of it surfacing in Indian and Pakistani papers in 2000).³⁰ Moreover, and most significantly perhaps, was the Tripartite Agreement signed between Pakistan, Bangladesh and India in New Delhi on 9 April 1974 that stood in Bangladesh’s way. The agreement, which focused on the repatriation of POWs and civilian internees, explicitly discussed the 195 accused. Reiterating the commitment to reconciliation, peace and friendship in the subcontinent, the agreement stated that ‘the Government of Bangladesh had decided not to proceed with the trials as an act of clemency. It was agreed that the 195 prisoners of war may be repatriated to Pakistan along with

other prisoners of war now in the process of repatriation under the Delhi Agreement.’³¹

While Pakistan later claimed that this agreement meant that Bangladesh would not proceed with the trials at all,³² Bangladesh insisted that the agreement did not hold it back from trying local Bengalis who had collaborated and facilitated the Pakistan Army’s actions. Soon after its independence, Bangladesh had taken steps to hold the latter accountable. Jamaat-e-Islami, the religio-political party accused of collaborating with the Pakistan Army, was banned and the Bangladesh Collaborators (Special Tribunals) Order, 1972, was promulgated to try the collaborators for criminal acts, ‘including murder, rape, arson, and genocide’.³³ In 1973, the Bangladeshi Parliament passed the International Crimes Tribunal Act (ICTA).³⁴ While the government declared amnesty in the same year for those who had opposed Bangladesh’s birth on a political basis, those who had ‘committed and/or collaborated to commit rape, murder, attempted murder, and arson’³⁵ were to be given no reprieve. The amnesty resulted in the release of 2600 arrested people, leaving the remaining 1100 to face trials under the 1972 Collaborators Order and the ICTA Act of 1973.³⁶ However, with the assassination of Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the trials came to a halt; the military regime that took over revoked the Collaborators Order, releasing the 1100 alleged collaborators and war criminals.³⁷ Some of the accused went on to hold key positions in the government, while the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami was lifted, allowing it to engage in political activity.

Several of the Bangladeshis I met told me that the military governments that followed Sheikh Mujib’s death tried to deny justice and distort history. That the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), founded by the military ruler-turned President, General Ziaur Rahman, who has been accused by Sheikh Hasina of being involved in Sheikh Mujib’s murder,³⁸ formed a coalition with the Jamaat-e-Islami and continues to share a close association with a party accused of war crimes, remains one of the most contentious issues in Bangladesh’s internal politics. Awami League supporters accuse the party of being revisionist, pro-Pakistan, anti-secular and anti-liberation. In contrast, the Awami League politics hinge on projecting itself as a pro-

liberation and secular party. The party sees itself as the rightful heir to power, not least because it is led by Sheikh Mujib's daughter. As one Bangladeshi told me, 'Awami League's legitimacy comes from the role the party played in 1971. That's their trump card.' Another Bangladeshi said, '[The] BNP and Awami League's economic and other policies are the same. The only thing that sets them apart is their take on the liberation war.' While Ziaur Rahman had himself served in the Bangladesh war as a sector commander, his party has been faulted with revising textbooks with a pro-Pakistan and anti-liberation slant, forming alliances with collaborators and questioning the 30 lakh figure³⁹ that has become sacrosanct in the country.

The figure of 30 lakh has generated much controversy inside and outside Bangladesh. There are contesting numbers of how many people were killed during the nine-month war. It must be mentioned that till date most figures that we have are estimates. Few comprehensive studies have been conducted and published on war casualties.⁴⁰ In lieu of this, Bangladesh has been accused of grossly overestimating, and Pakistan of grossly underestimating, the death toll (the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report in Pakistan estimated that there were 26,000 deaths⁴¹).

During my trip to Bangladesh, a woman told me, 'You know we South Asians always get confused between lakhs and millions. So some people say that Mujib had accidentally declared that 3 million people had died when he actually intended to say 3 lakh.' This view is further reinforced by Serajur Rahman, the retired deputy head of BBC Bengali Service, in a comment in the *Guardian*. He wrote that he was the first Bangladeshi to meet Mujib after he was released from Pakistan in January 1972. 'I explained that no accurate figure of casualties was available but our estimate, based on information from various sources, was that up to "three lakh" (3,00,000) died in the conflict. To my surprise and horror, he told [British Broadcaster] David Frost⁴² later that "three million of my people" were killed by Pakistanis. Whether he mistranslated "lakh" as "million" or his confused state of mind was responsible I don't know, but many Bangladeshis still believe a figure of three million is unrealistic and incredible.'⁴³ Regardless of whether Mujib was confused or whether he

deliberately quoted ‘3 million’ as the number, today the figure has become sacred in Bangladesh. To question this figure is seen by the incumbent government and its supporters as tantamount to being anti-liberation.

This sacred treatment of the figure must be read as being in defiance to the years of military rule, the rise of accused war criminals to power under these military regimes, the denial of justice, and the revisionist histories published on 1971. There have been sustained efforts under military-led regimes to rewrite history (these efforts, in the context of textbooks, are detailed here) and to allow accused collaborators to flourish successfully in society. When the figure is questioned, it is seen against this backdrop and assumed to be an extension of the efforts to undermine the nation’s birth story. That Pakistan too tries to deny the mass killings, rape and torture of Bengalis with contesting numbers only strengthens the narrative that anyone who disputes the death toll is siding with the enemy, is an apologist and is thus anti-liberation. Revisionist histories are also published frequently in Pakistan, undermining the atrocities, claiming that Bangladeshi narratives are nothing but lies and transferring the blame on Bengalis for the killing of non-Bengalis without owning the consequences of the army’s actions on Bengalis. The use of the term ‘genocide’ in the Army Museum to refer to these killings of ‘pro-Pakistanis’, devoid of any discussion on the large-scale atrocities committed by the Pakistan Army on the ‘pro-Bangladesh’ Bengalis, is part of this revisionist history. The more Pakistan denies the widespread atrocities, the more important it becomes for Bangladesh to remember and recognize the figures uttered by Sheikh Mujib with all the more urgency.

However, critics of the Awami League claim that the party has appropriated the genuine sentiments of people—who want Pakistan to recognize the killings and for the accused criminals to be punished to ensure justice for themselves and their loved ones—for its own political gains. In 2016, the Bangladesh Law Commission opened consultation on a draft law called the Liberation War Denial Crimes Act, following the precedent of the Holocaust denial laws in Europe.⁴⁴ If passed, the law would open the door for anyone who questions the official death toll to be

prosecuted, while outlawing “inaccurate” representation of war history and “malicious” statements in the press that “undermine any events” related to the war. Efforts to “trivialize” information related to the killing of civilians during the war would also be forbidden.’⁴⁵ Bangladeshi researchers and academics I spoke to voiced concerns that since the proposed offences are so broad, any research on 1971, especially ones that might question the ‘3 million’ figure or speak about the killings of non-Bengalis, could be construed as ‘anti-national’ and therefore subject to strict punishment. In the process, free speech and objective research is likely to become the biggest casualty. They call for rigorous research, not because it will undermine the war crimes and crimes against humanity, which were certainly committed, but because transparent inquiries only strengthen the calls for justice.⁴⁶ By proposing such laws, critical voices are only going to be choked. Such steps would be detrimental to the long struggle for democracy in Bangladesh. With the International Crimes Tribunals resuming over the past decade, these issues have gained new life.

One of the pledges of Sheikh Hasina’s election campaign in 2008 was to set up a tribunal to prosecute those accused of war crimes. In 2010, two years after coming to power, the International Crimes Tribunal (a domestic court) was set up by reconstituting the ICT Act of 1973, and setting up the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT)-1 in 2010 and ICT-2 in 2012.⁴⁷ Reportedly, as of 2018, ‘the tribunals have delivered judgments in 34 cases against 83 war criminals. Among them 52 were sentenced to death.’⁴⁸ These tribunals have seen dozens of senior Jamaat-e-Islami and BNP leaders being sentenced to jail and hanging on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity.⁴⁹ One of the most controversial sentences of these was that of Abdul Kader Mullah, assistant secretary general of the Jamaat-e-Islami.

In 2013, when Kader Mullah was convicted of collaborating in war crimes with the Pakistan Army and handed a life sentence, the verdict was met with one of the largest protests Bangladesh had seen in recent years. Known as the Shahbagh protests or the Shahbagh movement, thousands of students, activists and youth collected at Shahbagh, located near the historic

Dhaka University, calling for nothing short of a death sentence for Mullah. It is said that the fact that Mullah came out of the court room with a smile on his face and holding up a victory sign triggered the protests.⁵⁰ His composed body language was perceived to be insulting to the victims and also indicated that perhaps Mullah was assured that if his party or allies came to power (i.e., Jamaat or BNP), he would be released. A death sentence was the only verdict that would assure that accused war criminals were not allowed to roam free and sit at the helm of power, as they had after Sheikh Mujib's death. As Bina D'Costa notes, many of the protesters were of the post-1971 generation, those who had grown up with 'both memories of their families and the political revisionist histories'.⁵¹ They were raised at a time when the ban on Jamaat had been lifted, when alleged war criminals were reinstated in powerful positions,⁵² when there were efforts to undermine the justice process. Many of them were sons and daughters or grandchildren of massacred and raped parents and grandparents. The justice process was personal.

However, as some Bangladeshis would tell me (whom I've chosen not to name given the sensitivities in the country and the possibility of them facing a backlash), what was a people's movement at Shahbagh was soon hijacked by the Awami League, which centres its politics on being 'pro-liberation' and 'pro-justice'. 'The spontaneous movement, which began as a non-partisan platform, was appropriated by the party,' they say. Days after the protest broke out, the Awami League cashed in on the moment and passed an amendment to the International Criminal (Tribunals) Act of 1973, 'allowing the government, the complainant or informant to appeal an order of acquittal or sentencing'.⁵³ The amendment led to an appeal on Mullah's verdict and this time he was sentenced to death. By the end of that year, he was hanged. Street politics had blurred with party politics. The Awami League showed itself as adhering to public sentiments; in turn it was able to pass a historic judgement that would allow it to crush its main Opposition, the BNP-Jamaat alliance. In turn, the Islamists began to treat the Shahbagh movement as anti-Islamic (in direct opposition to the secular image projected by the Awami League). Shahbagh thereby came to represent the

polarized politics of Bangladesh, hijacked by both sides to further their own politics, whether on the pretext of secular justice or Islamic righteousness. More hardline groups, such as Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh, would take advantage of this polarization, labelling the protesters as atheist and calling for the Shahbagh leaders to be hanged.⁵⁴

The ICT, meanwhile, has come under criticism both at home and abroad. Among other issues, the rules of procedure⁵⁵ and the right to fair trial have been questioned, as well as the limitations on the defence to submit evidence, produce witnesses and documents.⁵⁶ In addition, a significant issue is the death penalty itself, which has been opposed by the likes of Amnesty International⁵⁷ on humanitarian grounds. The tribunal has also been critiqued for convicting only those who helped in the atrocities (by identifying and participating in the killings),⁵⁸ in the process shifting the attention away from the actual perpetrators. (Some Bangladeshis say that they would be more than willing to try the perpetrators themselves, namely the Pakistani army, alongside the collaborators, if Pakistan was willing to support the justice process and help bring their citizens to trial). In 2012, email and phone conversations between the presiding judge of the ICT, Mohammad Nizamul Huq and Ahmed Ziauddin, a lawyer of Bangladeshi origin based in Belgium, came to light through *The Economist*, indicating that the tribunal was under pressure from the government to speed up proceedings, raising serious questions about its neutrality.⁵⁹ The Awami League has also been accused of using the tribunals as a political tool to weaken the Opposition.⁶⁰ The criticisms have been met with staunch resistance by the Bangladesh government and some even found themselves charged for raising questions about the tribunals. In 2014, Dhaka-based British journalist David Bergman was held in contempt of court by the ICT for making ‘derogatory criticisms and remarks about the tribunal’.⁶¹ In addition, he was condemned and warned for questioning the ‘3 million’ death toll with regard to the 1971 war.⁶²

The procedural and structural weaknesses, the politicization of the trials, and the international criticisms of the tribunal have been used by both the Jamaat-e-Islami and Pakistan to denounce the trials. Needless to say, both

of them have a vested interest in this, not least because the trials accuse both the party and the country for engaging in war crimes.

Pakistan and Bangladesh have shared a contentious relationship,⁶³ and not just because of their history, the Awami League's close association with India and the issue of the official apology. Things took a downturn in 2013 when Bangladesh convicted nine people of war crimes and awarded a death sentence to Kader Mullah.⁶⁴ In response, the National Assembly, as well as the Punjab Provincial Assembly, passed resolutions raising concerns over Mullah's hanging and offering condolences to his family. Bangladesh was asked to drop the cases against other BNP and Jamaat leaders. While the foreign office 'ultimately conceded that Mullah's hanging came under the purview of Bangladesh's domestic affairs', Pakistan's then interior minister Chaudhary Nisar Ali Khan was reported to have stated that 'we respect independence and sovereignty of Bangladesh but there should be a policy of forgive and forget', and on another occasion was 'heard admiring Molla's "loyalty" to Pakistan'.⁶⁵ Pakistan also reminded Bangladesh of the Tripartite Agreement and its obligation 'not to proceed with the trials as an act of clemency'.⁶⁶

The resolutions and comments passed on the judgement did not go down well in Dhaka. Bangladesh protested the resolution by summoning Pakistan's high commissioner in Dhaka. The Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka was attacked by protesters who set fire to Pakistani flags and burnt effigies of Imran Khan, who had criticized Mullah's hanging. This sparked anger in Pakistan, with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan threatening to attack the Bangladesh High Commission in Islamabad in retaliation.⁶⁷ Further, Bangladesh claimed that Pakistan had misinterpreted the Tripartite Agreement and that Bangladesh had every right to try its citizens accused of war crimes. Bangladesh's minister for law, Anisul Huq, even went as far as to say that the Tripartite Agreement was no longer effective because Pakistan had violated it by not taking back their stranded citizens from Bangladesh (discussed in the next chapter).⁶⁸

When I visited Bangladesh in 2017, the outrage at this resolution and at Pakistan was still palpable. I was told more than once that Pakistan had no

right to ‘interfere in Bangladesh’s internal affairs’. One man in his twenties said to me, ‘We see Geo TV and other Pakistani channels criticizing Bangladesh, criticizing why we gave death penalty to Kader Mullah. We are so happy that our government finally gave us justice, that it’s hanging war criminals. Meanwhile, Pakistan says there are no war criminals . . . they side with the very war criminals we are fighting. I was one of the lakhs of people at Shahbagh, campaigning for Mullah’s death penalty. What right does Pakistan have to interfere in our justice process?’ Given Pakistan’s historic dismissal of the atrocities in 1971, the recent denouncement of the war crimes tribunals is seen as an extension of that denial. In the process, genuine criticisms about the procedures, transparency and neutrality of the trials are lost, with the debate being reduced to political rhetoric between the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh. The criticisms of the tribunals—whether from Pakistan or from within Bangladesh—get labelled as anti-liberation, discouraging constructive discussions on how the justice process, which is imperative, can be strengthened and made transparent.

One of the last stops I made in Dhaka was to the office of the chief prosecutor of the ICT trials. Photographs of Sheikh Mujib and Sheikh Hasina hung in the room. The prosecutor, who was in his late eighties, was joined by several young lawyers. Dressed in a crisp cream salwar-kameez, he told me, ‘The older generation, the people who fought in the war are part [of] the tribunal, but many young prosecutors and judges have joined us too. We are trying to establish rule of law, which will help us strengthen our democracy. Every democracy needs rule of law.’

Having recently spoken to Bihari families who complained that those who had committed atrocities against them were not being tried (mentioned in the next chapter), I asked them if the trials would also be extended to those perpetrators, people like Kader Siddique, against whom there was evidence (Siddique was responsible for the public killings of Biharis at the Dhaka stadium, which has been described earlier in the chapter).

‘Sure, we can try them but someone needs to produce the evidence . . . our criteria is that the killings need to have been widespread or systematic. The period of war we are looking at is between 25 March and 16 December,

and there were no attacks on Biharis during this time. If they can prove otherwise and produce evidence, we will try them too. But no one has come forward yet,' they said. I wondered how safe the Biharis, now a persecuted minority in Bangladesh, would feel about bringing forth their accusations in such a politically charged environment. Already labelled as anti-liberation, I wonder what chance they would have under these trials. The period selected (25 March to 16 December) is also problematic since many of the Biharis were killed before or after these dates. To neatly package justice in this period is to effectively exclude them from the process. But before I could ask more about this, about the responsibility of the tribunals to ensure that the rule of law was extended to all the aggrieved parties, the conversation shifted back to why these tribunals were just and necessary for Bangladesh, and why Pakistan's arguments against them were impotent. It seemed as if they saw me as a representative of the Pakistani state. Perhaps my questions were perceived in the same light; since I was a Pakistani, I must be anti-justice or at least an apologist. 'We have every right to try the war criminals. The tribunal will help heal the wounds of 1971 . . . the trials are demanded by the victim's families. Mujib had only given amnesty to those who hadn't committed any major war crimes (referring to the people released from jail, for opposing Bangladesh's creation on political grounds) and under the Tripartite Agreement, Bangladesh had only given clemency to the 195 Pakistani POWs . . . we had hoped that Pakistan will try them . . . under the Vienna Convention, of which Bangladesh is a signatory, it clearly says that no nation can forgive genocide . . . we can even try Pakistanis under our law, but we need Pakistan's support in order to do that . . . we need their help in collecting information as it has been over forty years since the liberation war.'

I tried to ask them about the criticisms and allegations—about the procedures, the neutrality of the tribunals—raised not just in Pakistan and Bangladesh but internationally too. My question was met with a matter-of-fact response: 'This is the case with all tribunals, whether in Nuremberg or in Tokyo. There are always criticisms. It's part of the propaganda by those who want to undermine justice.' Indeed, parties complicit in the crimes

have an interest in undermining the justice process, but by dismissing all concerns, especially by independent third parties as propaganda, it becomes a convenient excuse for no introspection or readjustments to ensure the justice process isn't compromised.

Before I left, one of the prosecutors said to me, 'You see, the trials for us are a continuation of the war. Your war ended in 1971, but our suffering is still here. The war hasn't ended for us. All gazettes, news, data, memoirs collected before 1975 were destroyed . . . anti-liberation forces (referring to the governments that came to power after Sheikh Mujib's assassination) didn't allow liberation forces to mark sites where slaughter and genocide took place. So, we are still fighting for our justice.'

I wondered how neutral or apolitical the justice process could be when those who were assuring justice had personally fought and suffered in the war, and when the trials themselves were seen as an act of war. I wondered whether these trials would assure the victims the justice they demand and deserve. And I wondered what impact the charged political atmosphere, in which these tribunals were held, would have on the future generations of Bangladeshis.

* * *

In my work as a cultural facilitator—connecting Indian and Pakistani students through virtual exchanges, and holding workshops in schools in both countries—one of my favourite questions to begin with is: 'What is the first image, thought, feeling that comes to mind when I say?' The blank is filled with India when I am in Pakistan and Pakistan when I am in India, or talking to students there over Skype. In Pakistan, students often tell me that India reminds them of the Taj Mahal, or of a 'colourful' place, or Partition. At other times, they make grunting sounds, a way to communicate that they don't attach any positive associations with the country. At times, they say openly, 'kafirs' (infidels), 'war' or 'enemy'. The situation in India more or less mirrors the situation in Pakistan. There too students respond with mixed sentiments. Some talk about the cities they

have heard of, places like Lahore and Karachi, while others say India and Pakistan are like siblings who fight but love each other. And then there are some who say that it is a place full of terrorists and fundamentalists, a place they are not keen to visit. The answers are different, depending on the school, the social class, the students, the political atmosphere and India–Pakistan relations at that time. However, ever since I began this work in 2010, first as director of Exchange-for-Change ⁶⁹ at the Citizens Archive of Pakistan and then independently, these themes have been recurrent and widespread amongst the thousands of Indians and Pakistanis I have worked with.

And so, as I entered the classroom at Monipur School, Dhaka (an English version non-governmental school), I decided to ask them the same question. The room was full of seventh graders, none of whom knew where I was from or why I was visiting. I had requested the school not to inform them of my visit. I was, after all, curious to see their first reactions when they heard I was a Pakistani. What connotations did the country have for the young children of Bangladesh? I wanted their reactions to be open and genuine, not tailored by the school. Out of goodwill, teachers often tell students to be on their best behaviour and not say anything negative to a Pakistani before I even get a chance to speak to them. The students, in response, often clam up, afraid to say anything at all. I didn't want that to happen again.

And so after saying hellos, I stood in front of a class of about eighteen girls, curiosity writ large on their faces about who I was and why I was there. I asked them a few questions to ease them in. What were the first images, thoughts or words that came to their mind when I said America? China? UK? India? To the last they responded, almost in unison, 'Friend of the liberation war.'

'And what comes to mind when I say Pakistan?' I finally asked. For a brief moment there was silence. Then one of the girls said, 'Cruel', another said 'communalism', and the girl next to her piped in saying, 'their women are oppressed'. Others nodded in agreement. 'It is a backward country,' they said. By now they seemed more comfortable, eager to talk. The initial

reluctance had waned off. I then asked them, ‘Well, can you guess where I’m from?’ They couldn’t.

‘India?’

I shook my head.

‘England?’

‘No.’

‘Spain? France?’ And so the list continued.

Finally, one student asked, ‘Pakistan?’ The others told her that couldn’t be the case. When I announced that I was indeed from Pakistan, a loud gasp followed. Some of their jaws literally dropped. None of them had ever met a Pakistani. They had only read about the country, about its people in their textbooks, had heard about them in the media, had been narrated the horrors of the atrocities carried out by Pakistani forces by their families and in classrooms. For a while they couldn’t believe that a Pakistani could be anything other than what their books said. The shock was soon replaced by an excited buzz. They had so many questions about me, about Pakistan, about women’s rights, about the youth in the country. They told me, ‘We want peace but Pakistan has to respect us.’ We then talked about mundane matters, their interests and hobbies, special sites in Dhaka that I should see, cultural festivals and food. After a while, one of the students shyly raised her hand and asked me, ‘Can I get your autograph?’ the others giggled but quickly joined in, opening their notebooks and rushing to me for signatures. My claim to fame seemed to be that I was the only Pakistani they had met. A people they have grown up hearing about seemed to have suddenly emerged from their textbooks. Before I knew it, they wanted to hold my hand, touch a Pakistani, hug a Pakistani. I was wrapped in group hugs, one after the other, overwhelmed by the response. Before I left the class—after the teachers told them I had to go and they must settle down at once—they said to me, ‘Today, you have changed our mind about Pakistanis, we never knew there were good Pakistanis like you.’

I did nothing more than have a regular conversation with them, but perhaps that is all we need to shatter the stereotypes we have of each other; a little interaction and some dialogue can go a long way in humanizing

those we have learnt to hate. Before I reached home, I had a dozen friend requests on Facebook; the eager students had found a way to stay connected.

By the time I entered the boys section, a larger class of about forty students, word had spread. A Pakistani was in their school. They were not surprised to see me or hear where I was from. When I asked them what the country reminded them of, they said, ‘Cricket!’

‘And what about India?’ I asked. ‘Match-fixing!’ For a while our conversation revolved around sports, with many of them expressing their fondness for the Pakistan cricket team and their frustration with India. ‘They try to act like our big brother . . . they have too much ego!’ they said. As the conversation slowly moved towards 1971 and our shared, bloody history, the earlier excitement was replaced with sombre expressions. One of the boys told me, ‘There are so many stories of injuries, of cruelty. My uncle can’t walk today because of the war.’ Others told me that their relatives were freedom fighters and that they had suffered gravely during 1971.

As the teachers walked with me towards the principal’s office for a chat over tea, they told me, ‘Our curriculum has finally modernized. The truth about 1971 only came out ten years ago. Before that students were told that Ziaur Rahman was the founding father of Bangladesh, not Mujib . . . of course, we all knew it wasn’t true because of our own family histories, because everyone we knew was involved in the war somehow . . . one of my earliest memories is of the Pakistan Army coming to our village, trying to kill my father. We had to run away to India. I was only three or four years old when I became a refugee . . . but today, the textbooks finally tell the truth, about the liberation war, about Pakistan.’

* * *

‘The Hellish Genocide of 25th March,’ reads one of the pages in the *Bangladesh and Global Studies* book for grade 8. The book is published by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), Bangladesh, and is

used across public schools in the country. This is the same book the students I met in Monipur used. One of the goals listed at the beginning of one chapter is to be ‘regenerated with patriotism, nationalism and democratic zeal’. ⁷⁰ I sifted through a few pages forward and it read, ‘This genocide continued in the entire country during the whole nine months . . . [Pakistani forces and their collaborators] used to torture the captured persons in different manners and then kill them. It was a common incident to tie hands and legs and then shoot and throw the dead bodies into the river, ditch or water. Besides, the captured persons were shot down after amputating the different parts of body one after another. Other cruel types of tortures were to take out eyes, to break the head into pieces by hitting, to deform the face, to take out the heart by using bayonet and sharp knives, to push needle in the finger, to lift nail, to cut skin and then apply salt and pepper . . .’ ⁷¹

I swallowed uncomfortably as I read these passages. Despite working with trauma memories and recording stories of torture and killings, I found it incredibly difficult to read such graphic details. I wondered how children of such young ages coped with and responded to these harrowing descriptions. While the textbooks for the younger classes provided a less vivid account of the war, from as early as the fourth grade, students were told about the torture and killings of 30 lakh people, many of whom ‘lost their hands, legs and homes’, in the war, aided by ‘traitors’, ‘rajakar’, ‘Al-Badr’. ⁷² Those who are heroized as ‘loyal’, ‘patriotic’ and ‘pro-Pakistani’ in Pakistan are unsurprisingly the villains in Bangladeshi textbooks. Kader Mullah received special mention as a collaborator. ⁷³ On the other hand, those who are remembered as ‘barbaric’ in Pakistan, such as Kader Siddique, are hailed in Bangladeshi textbooks for their role in the liberation war. A chapter titled ‘The Independent Bangladesh’, in the class 9 and 10 *Bangladesh and Global Studies* book, states, ‘several troops were spontaneously organized inside the country to take part in the Liberation War . . . these troops played a significant role in the war against the Pakistani army and the *Razakars* in local areas. The name of *Kaderia Bahini* (Cadre of Kader Siddique) of Tangail is still remembered by the

people.’⁷⁴ India’s role, portrayed by Pakistan as the ‘attacker’, ‘aggressor’ and supporter of the ‘terrorist Mukti Bahini’⁷⁵ is celebrated in Bangladeshi textbooks and referred to as the ‘Mitra Bahinee’ (Allied Force) that ‘helped the freedom fighters during the liberation war’.⁷⁶

While in Pakistani textbooks the Awami League workers are accused of ‘ruthlessly slaughtering’ non-Bengalis, the party is glorified in Bangladesh textbooks (which remain eerily silent on the killings of non-Bengalis). Sheikh Mujib mostly appears with the title Bangabandhu. It is stated that he had been preparing the public for independence long before his declaration of independence on 26 March. In fact, under the subheading ‘The Historic Agartala Case’, the textbook states that ‘the ultimate goal of the politics of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation, was to achieve independence of Bangladesh, and he believed that the freedom would not be achieved without armed struggle . . . as the plan was disclosed before being materialized, the historic Agartala case was lodged.’⁷⁷

Initially, I was surprised to read this because the narrative seemed more aligned with what I was used to in Pakistan. Sheikh Mujib was always a traitor, a separatist. Slowly, I realized that this narrative served its own purpose in Bangladesh. It was used to construct a coherent, singular and nationalistic discourse in which Bangladesh was always meant to be, the 1947 Partition was nothing more than a delay in that process, and Mujib was a true visionary, always fighting for a separate nation for Bengalis and thus the undisputed founding father of the nation. In both Pakistan and Bangladesh then, Sheikh Mujib had come to be represented as a separatist nationalist,⁷⁸ albeit for different reasons. His own politics, first as a Muslim League member and then in mainstream Pakistani politics, only muddies the neat picture created by both nations for their own national projects.

It has been argued that ‘school books are particularly useful as an insight into how nations wish to be understood’.⁷⁹ From its nascent years, Bangladeshi textbooks have been a site where contesting narratives have been constructed, accentuated and omitted, military dictators and political parties telling their ‘version’ of Bangladeshi history. The textbooks I got access to on my trip to Bangladesh, and which are currently in use, have

been developed in a climate where there are increasing government and civil society-run initiatives to ‘remember the genocide’, be it through revisions of textbooks, setting up of new museums, war memorials, the war crimes tribunals or instituting genocide studies programmes. Several of the civil society actors that I met told me that the incumbent government, which has been in power since 2008, has finally brought the textbooks more in line with the ‘truth of the liberation struggle’. In contrast, the military governments, followed by the BNP, are accused of distorting the truth.

Textbooks, I am told, have frequently undergone revisions, depending on which regime is in power, with history often written along party lines. For instance, while the initial textbooks after independence made references to ‘political and economic exploitation and genocide in erstwhile East Pakistan’,⁸⁰ textbooks published after Sheikh Mujib’s assassination and under military regimes did not explicitly mention Pakistan as the enemy, simply referring to an anonymous enemy army. Moreover, the role of freedom fighters and the slogan ‘Joy Bangla’ was banned from textbooks, replaced by the Urdu version ‘Bangladesh Zindabad’⁸¹ (like ‘Pakistan Zindabad’). With military men in power, the role of the military in creating Bangladesh was accentuated while that of civilian forces (the freedom fighters) was minimized. The role played by India’s military in the war was also omitted.⁸² These steps, taken under President Ziaur Rahman’s rule are criticized for undermining the liberation struggle and for making friends out of enemies. Some Bangladeshis told me that those studying in schools in the late 1970s and 1980s sometimes did not even know that their country had been created after a long and bloody war with Pakistan. This is reinforced by the work of academic scholar Yvette Claire Rosser who has conducted a detailed comparison of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi textbooks. Based on her interviews with Bangladeshi students she writes, ‘There may be a generation of young adults who are partially “unaware that Pakistan was actual ‘the enemy’”, and many mistakenly believe that “the Bangladesh *army* fought the *Indian* army.”⁸³ Zia and his wife, Khaleda Zia (chairperson of the BNP), are criticized for the ‘Pakistanization’ of Bangladesh by forging relations with Pakistan and with the anti-liberation

forces (collaborators, Jamaat workers, etc.) within the country. Moreover, textbooks revised under Zia's era are also accused of undermining Sheikh Mujib's role (a civilian leader) and accentuating his own part, claiming that he had declared the independence of Bangladesh. While Zia had indeed read out Sheikh Mujib's declaration on 27 March 1971, while the latter was under arrest, he had done so on behalf of Sheikh Mujib, a fact not clarified in the textbooks revised under him. This omission is seen by many Bangladeshis as an attempt to construct Zia—a military man—as the real war hero.

When the BNP came to power in 1991, it did little to change the narratives promoted under the military regimes between 1975 and 1991. The party, after all, was formed under Zia who was responsible for the changes in the first place. With Sheikh Hasina, Mujib's daughter, as the BNP's main opposition, the narratives suited the latter as they minimalized Sheikh Mujib's role, foregrounding Khaleda Zia's husband's role instead, giving her rule more legitimacy.

However, as soon as the Awami League came to power in 1996, they revised the textbooks to bring them back in line with the 1973–75 version and reinstated Sheikh Mujib as a central figure in the books. Further, they added details about intellectuals being killed right before surrender, explicitly charging the Jamaat-e-Islami for the deaths. However, these changes were short-lived. By 2001, the BNP was back in power, this time rushing to reinstate the versions under Zia, minimizing once more the role of Sheikh Mujib and 'systematically de-Bangabandhuiz[ing] the textbooks. In *Social Science for Class Nine and Ten* (now *Bangladesh and Global Studies*), the prefix 'Bangabandhu', the title of endearment given to Sheikh Mujib (which was inserted under the Awami League government of 1996), was extracted from the entire book.'⁸⁴ The book only uses the term once, while explaining how the title was conferred upon Sheikh Mujib. Further, and significantly, since the BNP came to power in coalition with the Jamaat, it hastily removed references to collaborators, specifically to Jamaat,⁸⁵ absolving them of the blame. In 2008, when the Awami League came back to power, the textbooks were again rewritten and revised. The

excerpts shared earlier in this chapter are from these ‘new editions’ of Bangladeshi history. Sheikh Mujib is again referred to as Bangabandhu and the razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams and Jamaat are pointedly referred to as colluding with the enemies. In the most recent books that I had access to, it is clarified that while Major Ziaur Rahman read out the declaration of independence on 27 March, it was Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib who had declared independence a day before, followed by Abdul Hannan, general secretary of the Chittagong Awami League, who broadcast Mujib’s message at noon on 26 March. Zia is thus pushed as a tertiary figure, third to have ‘read’ the declaration.⁸⁶ India is back to being the friend, Pakistan the enemy.

While the books written under the Awami League depict the role played by India in aiding liberation and highlight the atrocities committed by Pakistan, textbooks remain politicized, used as tools to further political agendas, as sites where opposing parties fight their battles to institutionalize their versions of history. While the BNP needs to not highlight Sheikh Mujib’s role, the Awami League needs to ensure that he is projected as always wanting liberation, always fighting for independence. That will guarantee that Bangladeshis don’t forget who the real hero is. People like Kader Mullah need to be specifically named, not least to quell any criticism against their hangings. The youth should grow up knowing that they deserved nothing but death. Meanwhile, the national discourse remains silent on the killings of non-Bengalis. The fact that many Bengalis had supported the Pakistan movement in 1947, and continued to believe in the idea of Pakistan even until March 1971 (see Chapter 5), does not find any mention. Academic Arild Engelsen Ruud also points out that the fact that there were ‘sections of the anti-Pakistan forces that were not in agreement with Bangabandhu (the communist forces, for instance)’,⁸⁷ too don’t feature in the textbooks. Neither do the ethnic minorities and their politics and aspirations in 1971. These too would muddy the neat narratives of nationhood that Bangladesh has tried to construct. As Ruud says, ‘the interesting part lies not in what is told, but what is not told’ in the textbooks through which Bangladesh tries to tell the story of its independence.⁸⁸

Neither party tells a holistic story, appropriating history for ideological purposes, leaving the children oscillating between versions of history.

As one young Bangladeshi said to me, ‘Our history is like a football, being passed from the BNP to the Awami League. Every six years we learn something new’, but never the full story. For now, the League remains in power while many key leaders of the Opposition are in jail on charges of corruption (for instance, Khaleda Zia was arrested before the elections in 2018) or facing life imprisonment and death penalty under the war crimes tribunal. By the time I made it to Bangladesh, the children had learnt of the brutalities of Pakistan specifically, not an anonymous enemy force, making it difficult for them to see Pakistanis as anything but the demons depicted in their textbooks, on the murals, in the cartoons of Pakistani leaders, and in their museums. Meeting me had changed some of their minds, humanizing Pakistanis to an extent, but I wondered what would have happened had our interaction never taken place? In the same year as my visit, a video game titled ‘Heroes of 1971: Retaliation’ was launched in Bangladesh, quickly becoming one of the most popular games in the country. It was a sequel to an earlier game ‘Heroes of 1971’. Both games allowed players to ‘liberate East Pakistan and, in the process, kill as many Pakistani soldiers as possible’. ⁸⁹ Reportedly, some of the funding for the game came from the Bangladesh government. The selective memories of the war are kept alive, particularly targeting the younger generations, the spirit for revenge potent. They inform much of the Awami League’s politics today, ‘independence, after all, is the party’s *raison d’être*’ ⁹⁰ giving it the moral legitimacy to run the country.

Their counterparts in Pakistan have their own demons, facing their own omissions, appropriations, silences and constructions and reconstructions of history, textbooks written to promote distinct national ideologies. The silences in Bangladesh—of the non-Bengali killings for instance—are the remembrances in Pakistan, the youth of both nations growing up with increasingly divergent ‘truths’ that their states claim to tell.

* * *

'India humara dushman hai. Wahan sare Hindu rehte hain. Woh hum se hamaishan ladai karte hain. 1971 mein bhi India aur Pakistan ki jang hui thi (India is our enemy. Hindus live there. India is always fighting with us. In 1971 too India and Pakistan went to war).'

I am standing in a room full of about 120 students; the girls and boys are between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, studying at a low-income trust school in Lahore. When I asked them why India and Pakistan had gone to war when it was the East and West Pakistanis who had a problem with each other, they didn't seem to have a response. They looked at me in silence, and then at each other, puzzled expressions marring their young faces. None of them seemed to know that the Muslim League took birth in Dhaka, and many of them told me that it was East Bengal that became Bangladesh, forgetting for a while that it had been East Pakistan in the middle too. Some of them even asserted that the Bengalis were in minority. Then one of the students told me that 1971 happened because Bengalis had Indian teachers. 'Do you mean Hindu?' I asked. She nodded. The terms 'Hindu' and 'India' are synonymous for many Pakistanis today and so I'm not surprised that the children think the same. At another school, when the students told me that only Hindus lived in India, I had asked them what popular Muslim Bollywood actors like Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan were doing there. 'Shah Rukh Khan must be Pakistani!' came the response. 'But he is Indian,' I gently explained. 'Then he must be Hindu!' When I told them that he was both Muslim and Indian, they asked me, 'How can that be? If he is Muslim, he has to be Pakistani. All the Muslims left India at the time of Partition. Now only Hindus live there.' In the young minds, nationalism and religious affiliation are blurred identities. To be Pakistani is to be Muslim; to be Indian is to be Hindu.

At another school in Lahore, I met forty boys and girls from grades five and six. When I asked them if they knew why East Pakistan had separated and become Bangladesh, one child said it was because Yahya was a drunk and a failed leader; other students blamed it on the 'Hindu culture' of Bengalis. 'Bengalis were closer to India in their *harkatain* (ways).' A few mentioned language, but to the ire of some of their peers. One boy got up

and stated, ‘It was the Bengalis fault . . . why didn’t they learn Urdu? Why did we have to learn Bengali? We didn’t know the language and it would have been hard for us to learn it.’ Others nodded in agreement. ‘Yes, it was the Bengalis’ fault, and India and the Hindus helped them.’ Another said, ‘Pakistan lost the war because India was *takatwar* (strong). If I was the leader, I would have boosted the army’s morale and made sure we won.’ Here too the creation of Bangladesh was largely seen through the lens of an Indo-Pak war. The students had no knowledge about the events that transpired nine months prior to the Indo-Pak War in December 1971, nor did anyone seem to know about any killings. India loomed heavily over our discussion. I was told that it was an enemy country where idol worshippers lived.

Most of these students studied from government-endorsed textbooks. In Chapter 1, I shared some excerpts from the books, which focused on the killings of non-Bengali communities by the Awami League workers and India’s role in the creation of Bangladesh. The book, published by the Federal Textbook Board, briefly mentions Bengali grievances against the Pakistani state, for instance, it notes that ‘a long period of military dictatorship marked with undemocratic practices was the major cause of the unrest. Bengalis said that they were being neglected and being subjected to political repression’, and that the Bengalis were only demanding their due in national affairs and equitable distribution of resources, which the book clarifies does not amount to ‘high treason’—the overwhelming emphasis is on India’s role; India is described as working on the agenda of dismembering Pakistan and destroying ‘her number one enemy’, and supporting the Mukti Bahini, which is described as a ‘terrorist wing of Awami League’.⁹¹ Pakistan’s loss is explained away by the difficult situation it faced, having to fight two enemies, ‘an enemy from within and an aggressor from without’.⁹²

There is no mention of the killings committed by the Pakistan Army, though there is a considerable section devoted to the killings of non-Bengalis. The night of 25–26 March, which is referred to as ‘black night’ or ‘dark night’ in Bangladeshi textbooks, finds mention, but in Pakistan the

students are told that it was the Awami League militants who committed a ‘large-scale massacre of West Pakistani families living in East Pakistan’ that night. The most significant night in Bangladesh’s independence history is turned on its head. Then Indians and Bangladeshis are accused of spreading propaganda against Pakistan, charging the ‘Pakistan Army with wholesale massacre and desecration of women. On 19 December 1971, world media teams were shown the dead bodies of Bengali professors, intellectuals and professionals who were allegedly killed during the said unrest. Large-scale killings were publicized in the media to defame the Pakistan Army.’⁹³ With these words, young minds are perfectly positioned to dismiss any news of Pakistani atrocities that they may come across as India-generated lies.

As each province in Pakistan has its own provincial board, I also looked at some other textbooks, like those from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. While the textbooks endorsed by the provincial Government of Punjab make mention of the military action, under the relevant heading all one finds are details of West Pakistanis and Biharis being killed. It states, ‘Sheikh Mujeeb-ur-Rehman announced revolt on 23rd March 1971. Even the flags of Bangladesh were hoisted and people belonging to West Pakistan and Bihari people were massacred. Keeping in view the circumstances, it was decided to launch a military action.’ The paragraph ends with the recognition that the military action ‘created further reaction against West Pakistan and Central Government further lost public support’, but there is no acknowledgement of the atrocities. While a list of grievances is presented, such as the issue of Bengali language, differences between Sheikh Mujib and Bhutto, and dictatorships in Pakistan, here too the ‘negative role of Hindu teachers’, who are accused of preparing students to rebel against the ideology of Pakistan, is highlighted. India’s conspiracy to separate East Pakistan continues to be underscored.⁹⁴

Given that India and Pakistan’s relationship continues to be contentious, and given that anti-India and anti-Hindu sentiment is prevalent in the society, the emphasis on India and Hindu teachers’ role in these textbooks means that these come to be viewed as the ‘real reasons’ for

‘dismemberment’, even when students acknowledge that other issues, such as language and economic exploitation, existed. The other factors are ‘backgrounded’⁹⁵ in comparison, seen as less important. The events are thus easily reduced to an Indo-Pak war with little attention being paid to what happened to the Bengalis during this war. The only book in which I find some reference to the killings under the military operation is in the *Pakistan Studies* book by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Textbook Board in Peshawar. It is summed up in one line: ‘Many innocent citizens along with the armed persons were killed in the military action.’⁹⁶

Pakistani scholar Rubina Saigol sums up the Pakistani textbook discourse on Bangladesh in the following words:

[Textbooks] erase Bangladesh by not telling the tale. There are many ways of *not* telling. One of these is to tell a *different* story, to speak *half* the truth. The story of Bangladesh is silenced between half-truths and full lies. If ever speech is used to create silences, it happens in the case of Bangladesh. One-liners and short phrases on Bangladesh at the end of chapters cover up oceans of unspoken horrors. The idea that language is the “cloak of thought”, used more to conceal and mask than to reveal, was never truer than in the case of the genocide of 1971 . . . as passionately and obsessively as we remember the Partition, as obstinately as we cling to the memory of the murder of Muslims at Partition, the official desire expressed by the President of Pakistan regarding the events of 1971 was that we should “forget the past” . . . what is *not spoken* in the story of Bangladesh becomes manifest by the *way it is spoken about*. The brisk manner and the dismissive treatment themselves bear testimony to the fact that something is being hidden, something being deliberately forgotten.⁹⁷

* * *

The year 1947 is part of Pakistan’s conscious memory, deliberately propped up and remembered by the state apparatus. In comparison, 1971 is dismissed by the state, treated like an insignificant chapter in Pakistan’s history. Yet it plays an integral part in the nation’s subconscious psyche, shaping behaviours, ideologies and national projects in decisive ways. We may not talk about 1971 enough or holistically, but behind the curtains, it remains the most powerful force, directing crucial decisions in the country. It may not be dominant in the collective memory of Pakistan, but it is critical as to how we imagine ourselves and our collective enemy.

The biggest lesson Pakistan took away from the war was to ‘never again’ be faced with such a ‘humiliating defeat’. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this prompted an increase in defence spending and served as a catalyst for the nuclear programme, having a lasting impact on Pakistan’s policy towards India. At the same time, 1971 had an enormous impact on Pakistani curriculum and textbooks.

In the aftermath of the war, under the premiership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was blamed by many Pakistanis for the loss of East Pakistan, textbooks underwent rapid revisions in an effort to rebuild national spirit following Pakistan’s greatest defeat. While distortions of history began early on,⁹⁸ textbooks prior to 1971 did not ‘indulge in the excessive hate-mongering visibly perceptible in those produced after Pakistan’s defeat’.⁹⁹ In the early 1950s and 1960s, there were some (positive) mentions of non-Muslim figures, and these textbooks did not necessarily construct an enemy (that one now finds in the shape of India in most books). For instance, in a history and civics textbook from 1963, ‘both Christ and [the Hindu God] Ram are praised for their teachings of peace, kindness, forgiveness, tolerance, love and charity’.¹⁰⁰ However, in the post-war years, textbooks underwent an overhaul; in the process, enemies were institutionalized and significant efforts were invested in (re)defining Pakistani identity, a direct reaction to Indira Gandhi’s claim that the creation of Bangladesh had shown the failure of the two-nation theory. The recent book on Pakistan Studies (a subject introduced after 1971, replacing history and geography, in favour of ideology, with the intention of creating a strong national spirit after the war), published by the Federal Textbook Board, covers three pages explaining why the two-nation theory remains relevant even after 1971: its purpose is to prove that Bangladesh’s birth is not a blow to what the state sees as its *raison d’être* today.

In this pursuit of rebuilding its identity in the post-war years, and with the hope of instilling a patriotic zeal in Pakistanis, ‘religion was more urgently deployed as a state weapon’.¹⁰¹ It was meant to be the glue, the unifying factor for a broken nation. While there had been efforts to infuse Islam into textbooks before this as well,¹⁰² building a religio-national

identity had become even more imperative after the war. The territory with the biggest share of Hindu minority was no longer with Pakistan. The country then chose to position itself as Muslim first. Today's textbooks open with several pages on the ideological basis of Pakistan, reinforcing the importance of the two-nation theory and Islam as the basis of Muslim nationhood and patriotism.¹⁰³ When I ask students what Pakistan means, they often recite the kalma. Pakistan then means: 'La Ilaha Ill Allah' (there is no God but Allah). The religio-national project has been successfully completed in many classrooms.

Alongside crafting a religio-national identity, the books in the post-war years also focused on identifying a clear enemy that Pakistan must protect itself against; unsurprisingly, the enemy was India. Repeatedly, students are told that India wants to destroy Pakistan, as it partially did in 1971. Pakistan thus has to remain cautious, suspicious of the enemy's conspiracies, and ever-ready to defend itself. Bloated army budgets become justified in the process. These shifts in textbooks, which began under Bhutto, only gained new life under President Zia's Islamization project when Pakistan Studies, a subject focused on crafting a 'Pakistani identity', was made compulsory. The national education policy of 1979 required that the curricula be revised 'with a view to reorganize the entire content around Islamic thought, giving education an ideological orientation so that Islamic ideology permeates the thinking of the younger generation and to help them with necessary conviction and ability to refashion society according to Islamic tenants'.¹⁰⁴ Today, Pakistan Studies remains compulsory across public and private schools. Students studying under the British education systems, popular among the middle and upper classes in Pakistan, also have to study the subject, although they have access to Cambridge-endorsed books unlike students in government schools.

It should be noted that the Cambridge-endorsed books for private schools present a far fuller picture than the ones issued and distributed by the government. For instance, the Pakistan Studies book used by an elite private school in Islamabad makes note of Operation Searchlight, stating that:

. . . Operation Searchlight was an attempt to wipe out all opposition to Yahya's government through a campaign of oppression in which Bengali intelligentsia, academics and Hindus were treated with extreme harshness. Mujib was arrested and thousands of Bengalis were murdered as Pakistani forces took control of the towns and cities of East Pakistan . . . Yahya's measures were supported by all the political parties in West Pakistan and Bhutto claimed that '*Pakistan has been saved.*' Rather than being saved the reality was [that] millions of Bengali refugees were fleeing across the border to India and civil war was now inevitable. ¹⁰⁵

Students who can afford to study in these schools may be assumed to have a broader understanding of the events. In my conversations with them, they highlighted that economic disparity and language issues were the primary reasons for the break-up of Pakistan. However, a number of them continued to blame India and viewed Bengalis as traitors. One of them said to me, 'They should have never betrayed us . . . you don't leave your home no matter what the problems are . . . yes, we were incompetent, we were too focused on building the economy here in West Pakistan, but they should have still tried to resolve things through talks . . . instead they let India break us.' Even for these students, India continues to be the primary actor and Bengali grievances are belittled, still seen as 'Bengali treachery', hand in hand with Pakistan's biggest enemy.

To understand what was happening in private school classrooms better, I reached out to a teacher of Pakistan Studies in an elite school in Karachi. Ayesha (name changed) told me that when she was studying herself, the Pakistan Studies syllabus did 'absolutely nothing' to contribute to her understanding of 1971. 'I actually have no memory of ever hearing about, discussing or reading history relating to 1971 in school, and I got an A in the subject [Pakistan Studies]! There was barely a page devoted to the 1971 war,' she said. As she grew older, she said that she became more aware about the events of that year, mostly because she belonged to a politically conscious family. It was through her family and through her own research that she 'realized the enormity of what has been omitted from our collective consciousness as a nation'. As a teacher, she said that things were only slightly better today compared to when she was in school in the 1990s and in the early years of the millennium.

According to Ayesha, the Pakistan Studies syllabus continues to have issues and she dislikes teaching the subject. ‘Nothing draws me to the course. I’m a World History teacher and was assigned two classes of Pakistan Studies due to the school’s desire to improve the critical thinking and general knowledge component of the subject. However, the course is myopic, simplistic and [is quite] geared towards a full examination. It does nothing to encourage critical thinking, imagination or creativity,’ she said.

While Ayesha said that she tried to bring in outside material into her class, for instance, teaching children about the ‘deeply held prejudices against the Bengalis, the hegemony of the Urdu-speaking political class in Pakistan, the continued refusal of the West Pakistani government to allow East Pakistan their fair share of resources or representation, and the continued interruptions of the democratic process,’ she added that in other sections in her school, she knew that teachers only ‘spend maybe two days going over PowerPoint slides that list reasons [for Bangladesh’s creation]. The reasons are correct, but they are being presented as part of a political process divorced from the lived experiences and ideas of people . . .’

Given the lack of public discourse on East Pakistan and 1971, even when students are taught about the factors that led to Bangladesh’s creation—albeit through rushed lessons—it changes little for them. They memorize the ‘causes’, they regurgitate the material in their exams, but the brief study of the bloodiest war in Pakistan’s history hardly captures the gravity of that period. It is likely that the ‘Indian conspiracy’ theory, which is very much a part of the public discourse, and which the students can ‘relate’ to because of the pervasive nature of that narrative, is what stays with them. While India certainly played a critical role in 1971, and the students should learn about that part of history also, the way in which the ‘India factor’ hijacks all others, even the ones more significant for the Bengalis, is where the problem lies. The teachers who teach them have their own bias against India, which are often reinforced in classrooms. Ayesha said that several of her colleagues held ‘plenty of strange, often bigoted views about India’. She cited an example to illustrate this. ‘Since school was closed on 14 August, it was proposed that we celebrate Independence Day on 15 August during a

special assembly. The majority of the faculty voted against this because they thought it would be unpatriotic to celebrate on the same day as India! Never mind the fact that both Pakistan and India won independence from the same foreign power at exactly the same moment!’ she said.

This resonated with my experience as a teacher too. My colleagues have often held deep prejudices against the country, blaming most of Pakistan’s ills on India. In turn, the students also quickly learnt to point fingers at the neighbour, a sentiment only reinforced by jingoistic debates in the media and the general anti-India sentiment in the country. I taught at an upper-income school in Islamabad, where students had access to far better books and resources, as well as exposure not afforded to government schoolchildren. One student refused to engage even in a Skype exchange I tried to arrange with Indian school children. She told me that she had read in her textbooks and heard from teachers and family members that India was our enemy. There was thus no need to speak with them. Belonging to the upper class and being educated as per the British education system had clearly not eliminated the biases deep-rooted in society.

To find out if Ayesha had had the same experiences as me, I asked her to share a few comments that she heard frequently in class. Some of them are listed below:

‘India has always tried to break us up.’

‘India acts as if it’s so strong, but actually they are *so scared* of us because we have a much stronger army.’

‘India is probably stealing water from us right now.’

‘India is obsessed with us.’

‘Indians all think we are terrorists, so they hate us.’

‘Indians have always been mean to us.’

‘They are obsessed with blaming India!’ she told me, clearly frustrated.

‘Interestingly, there is rarely, if ever, any critical engagement with the role of the British. In fact, there are actual questions during the exam that ask students to describe the positive things the British brought to India, like railways and the ban on *suttee*.’

‘And what about Bangladesh?’ I asked her. What did the students and teachers think about the country? She responded, ‘The sense that I get about Bangladesh is that nobody really gives much thought to the break-up of the country.’

While Pakistani textbooks mention 1971 and cannot afford to be entirely silent on such recent history, the way in which they speak about it, the way in which they accentuate certain factors and sideline others, the way in which they give certain issues more space than others, and the way in which they try to wrap up the twenty-four-year history with East Pakistan and the nine-month long war in a handful of pages ensure that there is no lasting impact on the students. As soon as they pass their exam, most of them forget it altogether. As a teacher of grades 12 and 13, when I receive a new batch, barely a few months into them clearing their Pakistan Studies exam, most of them struggle to answer any questions I have about the war or the reasons leading up to it. The memory is already fuzzy. In a small survey I conducted with my students in 2018, not a single child was able to answer what Operation Searchlight was, despite its brief inclusion in their book. One of them wrote ‘I forgot’ as an answer, the others either said ‘I don’t know’ or simply left the question blank. I wondered what would happen in a few more years. It seems as if the only relevance remembering 1971 has for most of them is to do well in their exams; as soon as the examinations are over, so is the story of East Pakistan, washed away from their memories except a fragment here or there, as it is from the collective memory.

* * *

The textbook excerpts and my interactions with schoolchildren in Pakistan and Bangladesh—and earlier in India (see Chapter 8)—must be taken as part of the story. In no way do I want to generalize that all students, across socio-economic, religious, familial, geographic and ethnic backgrounds, think this way. I am well aware that one’s own politics, family history, location, travel, life experiences and interests can shape diverse opinions. Teachers like Ayesha also play a pivotal role in classrooms, educating

students beyond the textbook. To impose homogeneous narratives on the diverse people of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India would be unfair. Students too are not just passive recipients of information but can, and often do, resist indoctrination. Moreover, textbook history is interpreted and reinterpreted in the context of new information, outside classroom interactions, current events and shifting sociopolitical dynamics. Learning is not static and past events continue to be reinterpreted in present contexts.

For instance, regardless of how Bangladeshi textbooks present India as a friend today, I found several people who were angered by what they saw as Indian hegemony in South Asia, and the control the country wields over Bangladesh. The lack of resolution over water disputes, the growing trade deficit due to India's protectionist policies and the frequent border shootings by the Indian border police ¹⁰⁶ are all thorny issues between the two nations, tilting the power balance in India's favour. These present-day Indo-Bangladesh relations colour perceptions about the neighbour who may have once helped them but is today seen as exploitative. In 2019, Advocate Sultana Kamal, a Bangladeshi human rights activist commented that India has 'turned Bangladesh into their own business district' in exchange for its favour during 1971. These comments came as critics raise alarm over the potentially disastrous environmental consequences of the proposed construction of the Rampal Power Plant in Bangladesh, situated just 14 km north of the world's largest mangrove forest Sundarbans, which is recognized as a UNESCO world heritage site. ¹⁰⁷ The power plant is a joint venture between Bangladesh and India. In Kamal's words, 'The outcome of the Liberation War could have been different if India did not help Bangladesh in every possible way. However, India must stop using this to manipulate us in order to achieve their selfish interests . . . I know Bangladesh is a country with the cheapest labour, but that should not give India any right to exploit our people, and the environment.' ¹⁰⁸ I found similar sentiments to exist amongst some of the young people I came across in Bangladesh. They said they were tired of India's 'big brother' approach.

Many Bangladeshis are also influenced by the rising Islamization of the country, telling me that they felt closer to Pakistan than to India because

‘India was a country for Hindus’ and ‘Pakistan was a Muslim brother’. A student at one of the schools I visited in Bangladesh told me that she thought India was a bad country because idol worshippers lived there. Whether or not the two-nation theory played a role in East Bengal at the time of Partition, the fact that lines between nationalism and religious identity are increasingly blurred in today’s world means that Bangladeshis too can see Pakistan as the Muslim other and India as the Hindu other. More than once during my trip, I was told that Pakistan and Bangladesh have far more in common, that Pakistan is a Muslim friend and India the infidel enemy. It is no wonder that in India–Pakistan matches, the crowd in Bangladesh often cheers for Pakistan. This dichotomy—between the hatred for Pakistan for 1971 and the association with the country due to its burgeoning Muslim population on one hand, and the fond remembrance of India’s role in 1971 and the resentment at how it overshadows its smaller neighbours on the other—is one of the many complicated realities facing Bangladeshi politics and identity today. Despite the state’s efforts to package identities into simplistic binaries of pro-India, anti-Pakistan politics, the people own and reject these divisions based on their own interpretations of history and the present.

That said, I find textbooks useful for they provide critical insights into how nations want to present themselves, what narratives they want to promote and what they want to hold back, whitewash or diminish altogether. There are convenient truths and inconvenient truths in each nation’s history. How they choose to talk about them, what they choose to include and leave out, are essential ingredients necessary to understand the larger state narratives.¹⁰⁹ While textbook history may not be the defining factor in how people think, the histories that the nations make absent or present in schools continue to have an impact. This is especially true given that India and Pakistan, and soon Bangladesh too, are on the brink of losing the first and second generations who fought for and survived the birth of the three independent nation states. With them, the nuances of the past will be lost too, ‘simplified’ into seamless national histories and ideologies suited to those in power.

As noted earlier in the book, despite the fault lines and intercommunal tensions, the pre-1947 and pre-1971 generations also lived through a time when the ‘other’ wasn’t really the ‘other’ but an integral part of their society. Many Partition survivors in Pakistan told me about their Hindu and Sikh friends, about their Bengali friends. Several people I met in Bangladesh still had fond memories of those West Pakistanis who had been kind and generous, had been their friends and colleagues. Dozens of Indians expressed their longing for the life they had lived and the relationships they had enjoyed before Partition. While it has been argued that these people may be romanticizing the past, remembering a rosy history that may never have been, I have found in my work that these memories coexist with the bitter, bloody memories of 1947 and 1971. In the same interview settings, people shared horrid details of what they suffered at the hands of the ‘other’ community, at the same time mentioning how they had been saved by members of that community. It is these nuances that have the power to shatter the one-dimensional construction of heroes and demons in textbooks and state discourses.

What will happen once the pre-1947 and pre-1971 generation passes away? What will happen as ‘national truths’ are reconstructed to fit party lines and state ideologies, each nation claiming that ‘their truth’ is the ‘only truth’? Will Bengalis only be remembered as being treacherous in Pakistan, disloyal to the state? Will all Pakistanis be seen through the prism of the army that carried out the military action or those civilian actors who supported the bloodshed? Will all Indians view Pakistanis as terrorists and will Pakistanis continue to see Indians as ‘impure infidels’? In the efforts to ‘reclaim’ history in Bangladesh, to ‘forget’ the tragedy in Pakistan, and to remember it as an ‘Indo-Pak victory’ in India, the battle between *my* truth and *your* truth, and *my* version and *your* version of history is likely to only continue. The last chapter of the book will look at the impact of these increasingly myopic understandings of a complex past on those who continue to live on the ‘wrong’ side of geography, neither here nor there. These are the Bengalis in Pakistan and the Biharis in Bangladesh.

The Loyalty Card

It was scorching hot as Ansar (the Bihari major whose interview I mentioned in Chapter 9) and I made our way to Ibrahim Hyderi fish harbour in Karachi. He took me there to meet some Bengalis, many of whom are fishermen. A couple of times during the drive, he instructed the driver to throw cool water on the windscreen, a desperate attempt to lower the temperature in the car. He sat in the front seat, adjacent to the driver, while I was at the back. We passed small vendors, some selling fruit, others fish, fresh off the port. Fishing nets hung on the sides of the roads to purchase, as were clothes and household items. The road was full of potholes, a sharp pain pinching my lower back each time the wheels sank into one. Garbage dumps surrounded us on each side. A man rode a bike on my left, picking his nose, while a woman sat sideways at the back, draped in a bright red dupatta and holding on to him tightly to avoid a bad fall as the bike jumped over the potholes.

As if carrying on the thread from our earlier conversation at the Services Club, Karachi, where he and I had sat amidst his Bihari friends, Ansar told me how much hatred he used to have for Bangladesh. I had to lean forward to hear him clearly. The windows were rolled down and hot air was slamming against my ears and cheeks. Sweat trickled down my neck, my kameez was damp against my skin.

‘When I went for Haj, I saw this cap that I liked and wanted to buy it,’ he started. ‘I tried it on too, but when I saw that it was made in Bangladesh, I immediately threw it off. That’s how much hatred I had for that place,’ he let out a curt laugh. ‘I only softened when I went back to Bangladesh and saw how much love the people had for me . . .

‘ . . . I didn’t have any family left in Chittagong. Everyone had been killed, yet I was welcomed with so much love. My class-fellows came to receive me, people held dinners for me, I even got a chance to visit the school I used to go to. I sat in my classroom, on the chair I used to sit on. This was all during Khaleda Zia’s time. Now . . . now, I cannot go . . . not till Hasina is in power.’

Each time the government changes, so do allegiances. While Khaleda’s BNP is known to have a softer approach towards Pakistan, and is thus viewed as ‘pro-Pakistan’,¹ Hasina is known for her hard-line stance. Her politics is centred on the memory of the liberation war and she makes no qualms about her hostility towards Pakistan. During a public appearance in 2018, she alleged that while her opponent Khaleda Zia and her party were ‘lovers of Pakistan . . . implementing the agenda of the Pakistani forces’, trying to wipe out events of 1971 from public memory,² her party wanted to punish such love. ‘The people of Bangladesh must respond to those who have been lost in their love for Pakistan. They must be punished. We must make them forget their love for Pakistan. If we cannot do it, we will cease to exist.’³ Bangladesh’s survival for Hasina then, who has been in power since 2008, is based on hatred for Pakistan. Anything less threatens its existence. The stringent visa policy for Pakistanis under her regime is only one manifestation of that.

As we parked the car, Ansar instructed the driver to keep throwing water on it every once in a while to keep it cool. We got out and started walking towards the harbour. It is estimated that between 20 and 30 lakh Bengalis reside in Pakistan, mostly in Karachi.⁴ They are spread out over approximately 105 settlements, including Orangi Town, Bilal Colony, Zia-ul-Haq Colony, Moosa Colony, Machar Colony, Lyari’s Bengali Para and Ibrahim Hyderi,⁵ where I was that day. It is perhaps fitting that many of the localities in which Bengalis are concentrated are called colonies. Living on the margins of society, without basic rights, they remain vulnerable, their future uncertain, dependent on the whims of the state that can choose to acknowledge or dismiss them based on political expediency.

The evening before, I had met Khawaja Salman Khairuddin, president of the Pakistan Muslim Alliance, a political party that represents the interests of Pakistani Bengalis. Salman shared that the most common grievance among Pakistani Bengalis was the lack of national identity cards—the CNIC (Computerized National Identity Card) that essentially renders them stateless.⁶ According to Salman, though some of these Bengalis had lived in Karachi even before the 1971 war, and had remained there after it, they still struggled to be recognized as Pakistani citizens. Other Bengalis, the majority of whom arrived in Pakistan after 1971 to escape financial woes, environmental catastrophes and the fledgling Bangladeshi economy,⁷ suffer the same fate.

However, the situation wasn't always like this. Initially, even those who entered in the post-war years, were able to get Pakistani ID cards and passports made through illegal channels—or by convincing the officials that they had been living in present-day Pakistan prior to the war and were thus Pakistani citizens.⁸ Since the process for making identity documents was manual at that time, it was easier to persuade or bribe the officials sitting in positions of power. Over time, as the system was digitized and as stronger crackdowns against illegal identity documents were launched in Pakistan in light of deteriorating security conditions and rising terrorist attacks, the officials began to invest more efforts in identifying illegal migrants. As a consequence, Pakistani authorities began to ask Bengalis to prove that their family was actually in West Pakistan prior to the war.

However, I am told that even when the Bengalis are able to submit the required paperwork, the authorities have the power to deny them the ID cards, making them aliens in a land where they have lived for generations. According to Ansar, the situation had become particularly worse in the past few years, especially since Pakistan and Bangladesh's relations soured in light of the war crimes tribunals. I am told that Bengalis in Pakistan are punished in reaction to the hangings in Bangladesh, with the state making it harder for them to avail the required documents. Further, Ansar explained that denying them CNICs also worked in pressurizing the Bengalis; political parties blackmailed the community for votes, forcing them to

support them in exchange for citizenship rights. The lack of CNICs has had serious repercussions for the community. They cannot apply for decent jobs, or enrol their children in schools, open bank accounts, buy phones or apply for other essential necessities. The Bengalis who earlier managed to get the ID cards now face troubles when they go in to renew them. Some allege that only large bribes work and those who cannot afford to dole out thousands are turned away.⁹ Without citizenship, the Bengalis remain vulnerable, open to harassment, denied formal employment opportunities and protection under law.

Khawaja Salman Khairuddin, who advocates Bengalis rights, himself belongs to the Nawab family of Dhaka. His father, Khawaja Khairuddin, had fought for Pakistan's creation and, in the 1960s, served as the mayor of Dhaka.¹⁰ Members of the Nawab family often identify as Bengalis. As one of them explained to me, 'We call ourselves Bengalis because we lived there (in Bengal) for over 250 years.' However, as I later found out, many people in Bangladesh don't acknowledge them as Bengalis—they are 'otherized', seen as pro-Pakistan, a part of the hegemony East Pakistanis fought against.

In the eighteenth century, the ancestors of the Nawab family had arrived in Bengal from Kashmir to trade in leathers and pelts. As a consequence of supporting the British during the Indian 'rebellion' of 1857, 'one of them was granted the hereditary title of nawab.'¹¹ Urdu speakers and affluent, historically, the family was closely associated with the Muslim League; the League itself was affiliated with large property owners and industrialists until the years leading up to Partition, when the League began to appeal to the Muslim masses for support.¹² In fact, the Nawab family's residence in Dhaka, Ahsan Manzil, was the 'center for Muslim league activities in Bengal from the time of its foundation, and remained so throughout the Pakistan period'.¹³ This affiliation with the Muslim League continued in the post-Partition years. For instance, Khawaja Nazimuddin, who served both as governor general of Pakistan and Pakistan's prime minister, hailed from the same family.

This historic association with the political elite, the fact that the Nawab family were Urdu speakers and Khawaja Nazimuddin's reinforcement as prime minister in 1952 that Urdu should be the state language, cemented the differences between the Bengali people and descendants of the Nawab family. When tensions escalated in 1971, the Nawab family was seen as pro-Pakistan by the Pakistan Army and by the Bengalis, and therefore as traitors by the latter. Today, some of them are even remembered as collaborators, siding with the Pakistan Army. In fact, Khawaja Salman's father, Khawaja Khairuddin, had served as the convener and chairman of the East Pakistan Central Peace Committee, which Bangladesh accuses of being implicit in war crimes. When Sheikh Hasina came to power in 2008, Khawaja Khairuddin's name was listed as one of the main ones in the war criminals list prepared by the government. ¹⁴

Back in Pakistan, Salman Khairuddin sees the war as being fuelled by India. The night we all sat together at the Services Club, and Ansar and I had been engaged in a deep conversation, reflecting on whether economics played a role in the war—primarily about whether the economic deprivation of East Pakistan had sparked the nationalist movement—Salman shook his head and interrupted us. 'It was only after the creation of Pakistan that jute and cotton mills were established in East Pakistan. There was nothing there before the creation of Pakistan. It was not an economic war, it was 101 per cent an Indian conspiracy!' he said, implying that the Bengalis should have been happy that Pakistan had economically empowered them by setting up factories and mills, rather than complaining about deprivation. The only trouble, according to him, was Indian interference in Pakistan's internal affairs. That's what cost Pakistan East Pakistan and him his home. He said that he hadn't been able to go back since; his resentment was palpable.

Ansar's other Bengali friend, Farooq, who had joined us the night before too, agreed with Khawaja Salman with much fervour. He too held India and the Hindus responsible for what happened. He was dressed in a white salwar-kameez, a skullcap on his head. His Urdu wasn't as fluent as the others, but he was able to easily communicate his dislike for those he saw as Pakistan's enemies. 'When you created Pakistan,' he said facing me but

looking towards the floor, not making eye contact, ‘you said it means “La Illaha Ill Allah”, which means that our national language should be Arabic, our constitution the Quran . . . when the distance [between East and West Pakistan due to language issues] increased, the people who were against Islam got a chance.’

‘Who are those people?’ I asked.

India, Hindu, *Yahudi* (Jews). These three planned it,’ was his instant response.

I decided to change the topic for I had experienced a similar and endless tirade against non-Muslims many times in Pakistan. Minorities in India and Pakistan are often used as scapegoats for economic and political woes. Marginalized, vulnerable communities are after all easy targets. Instead, I asked him to tell me more about the Bengali community in Pakistan, particularly why they came to the country.

‘*Pakistan se mohabbat ki, Pakistan zindabad kaha . . . Pakistan ke pyar may aye*, (We love Pakistan, we said long live Pakistan. We came for the love of Pakistan)’ he responded. Instead of mentioning the economic woes, natural disasters or other structural factors that pushed many Bengalis out of Bangladesh in the post-war years, it seemed important for Farooq to highlight that the Bengalis had come to Karachi because they had chosen Pakistan over Bangladesh. Perhaps he wanted to convince me that the Bengalis loved Pakistan and believed in it, that they were patriotic citizens who must be recognized as such. When I asked him if members of the community ever wanted to go to Bangladesh given the difficulties here, especially since so many of them didn’t hold citizenship even close to fifty years after the war, he had laughed and said, ‘*Ab kya janab, aik dafa mohabat mein aa gaye, ab wapis bhi jayenge toh zinda rahenge? . . . Agar jayenge toh log razakar kahenge . . .* (What can be done now? We came for the love of Pakistan. Would we be left alive if we go back to Bangladesh? If we go, we’ll be called collaborators).’ It was clear to him that Pakistan was the only future for Bengalis like himself. Bangladesh was no longer home even if one wanted it to be. To prove loyalty to Pakistan, to profess love for Pakistan was the only choice.

Whether the Bengalis had moved before or after the war, in their affection for Pakistan or simply for economic reasons, to go back to Bangladesh would indeed be difficult. However, this hasn't stopped many Bengalis from applying. In 2018, *Daily Star*, one of the leading newspapers in Bangladesh, reported that more than 2000 Karachi-based Bengalis had applied for a travel permit to return to Bangladesh since 2016. The permit acts as a one-time passport and was reportedly issued to 1116 Bengalis out of the 2000 who applied.¹⁵ While several of these Bengalis had moved to Pakistan in the post-war years for economic reasons, today many of them are eager to return, not least because of Pakistan's struggling economy and the devaluation of the rupee. Several of them are also eager to return as their families are still in Bangladesh and they ache to reunite with them, especially as they grow older and are less likely to find work. The harassment and stateless status in Pakistan only adds to their worries and pushes them to explore ways out of the country. However, these permits are not as easy for everyone to acquire. A Bangladeshi passport is required to prove their nationality at the time of migration. In the absence of a passport, letters from the applicant's relatives are required, in addition to birth certificates and national IDs. The verification process—i.e., to identify that that the individual belongs to Bangladesh—can be a complicated and time-consuming process. And even if acquired, it can be difficult to assimilate into society after all these years. Their loyalty is likely to be questioned: Why had they chosen to stay in the 'enemy country'? Were they pro or anti-liberation? Are they Bengali enough? Are they Bangladeshi enough? Reportedly, the Bangladeshi government suspects some of the returnees of being Pakistani terrorists or ethnic Rohingyas from Myanmar—many of whom do reside in Karachi—trying to enter Bangladesh on the 'wrong' pretext.¹⁶ Their affiliations and association are doubted, their integration increasingly complicated. The children, on the other hand, have to fight their own battles. Born and raised in Pakistan, many of them struggle with Bengali. Upon entry in Bangladesh, they find themselves as outsiders in a country their parents call home.¹⁷

I hoped to speak to a few Bengalis that day to understand their situation better. Farooq was meant to coordinate a few interviews, but none of his contacts were home. We were trying our luck, hoping that by visiting Ibrahim Hyderi (a neighbourhood of Bin Qasim town in Karachi)—where many of them are concentrated—we would be able to meet at least a few Bengalis. As Ansar and I walked closer to the harbour, I noticed colourful ships lining the dock. Ansar told me that they were handmade. Sure enough, a few steps ahead I saw the men making new ships. Fish, prawns and crabs were drying in the sun by the water. While most of the boards were in Urdu, Ansar said that the people—especially the older generations—mostly spoke in Bengali. ‘Just like in Bangladesh, where the Biharis are concentrated, all the signs are in Bengali but people speak Urdu,’ he chuckled.

I noticed that there was no other woman, except me, near the harbour. Men and young boys, some clean-shaven and others adorning moustaches, dressed in Western attire, stared at me. Many of them were washing the fishing nets, others were sitting on top of stationary ships, swaying lightly over the water. Ansar called a contact over the phone to see if he would be able to help connect us with any Bengali family. To our luck, one of them was available. His name is Adnan (name changed) and he was a fisherman. It took us some time to locate him. When we finally did, we saw him surrounded by young boys. They had heard that somebody had come to interview him. Over the duration that I spoke to him, the crowd only grew in size. The boys giggled at me, the only woman in the midst of several men. They surrounded me, the taller ones towering over me. Though they were half my age, they succeeded in making me feel uncomfortable. Ansar noticed my discomfort and told them to move back, but they only listened temporarily, soon enveloping me again. I decided to try and focus on Adnan.

He told me that he had arrived in Karachi from Chittagong after the 1965 war. It took him eleven days to reach by ship. When I asked him why he came, I could tell that he found my question to be rather futile. He explained that East and West Pakistan were one country then and it was only normal for people to relocate. His father had moved to Karachi

thinking he could have a better life there. ‘It’s as if you move from Karachi to Lahore today . . . there shouldn’t be any problem, right?’ he asked me in Urdu and I nodded. Yet, despite living in Karachi for over fifty years, the authorities remained suspicious of him. Each time he had to get his ID card renewed, they would bombard him with all sorts of questions and ask for multiple documents. Despite handing over all the paperwork, his ID card hadn’t been renewed this time. His children too were finding it difficult to get their ID cards made. They were being treated as aliens in the only home they knew. He said, ‘My father was born in what is now Bangladesh. I was born there too, but my children were born here. Why don’t they give them ID cards? We’ve never hidden the fact that we are Bengalis . . . the officials keep telling the children that their father is Bengali, which is why they can’t issue them cards. But what’s the problem with being Bengali? Of course, I’m Bengali, we speak Bengali, my children speak Bengali, but is that a crime? We have lived in Pakistan for so many years . . . why can’t we be accepted as Pakistani?’ He added that till some time ago it was still possible to get ID cards made, but ever since Pakistan–Bangladesh relations had plummeted the authorities had stopped issuing (or renewing) them to the majority. This was further complicated when the government began to crack down more heavily on fake ID cards in an attempt to prevent Afghan refugees from settling in Pakistan. ¹⁸

I asked him if he had ever considered moving to Bangladesh after the war, when many Bengalis were leaving. He said that he chose to stay back because for him, this (Karachi) was more of a home than that was. He was only a young child when he arrived in the 1960s. West Pakistan was what he knew. However, today his own children had to suffer. Without citizenship rights, they could not go to school or avail basic facilities. ‘Our children aren’t educated . . . some of them turn towards petty crime . . . without education what are they supposed to do? Whichever school we go to, they ask for their birth certificates, but when we go to get them made, they tell us we are Bengalis and can’t be issued one. As many as 90 per cent of us are facing these issues.’

Adnan is a supporter of the Pakistan Muslim Alliance and feels that the party may be one of the only platforms to put forward their demands. However, the political reality denotes that the chances for success are limited. In 2018, after coming to power, there was news that the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government might issue citizenship to the children of Bengali and Afghan refugees born in Pakistan. But before the news could materialize, the suggestion was met with swift opposition. It was argued that giving them citizenship rights would hurt the ‘sensitivities of the metropolis’ in Karachi,¹⁹ where ethnic tensions were already common and many communities already felt deprived.²⁰ It was proposed that the premier, Imran Khan, focus his attention on more pertinent domestic issues. The business community in particular was vehemently opposed to the idea.²¹ They argued that Afghans already had control over different businesses in Pakistan and didn’t pay taxes; giving them citizenship would ‘turn the local population into a minority as the Afghan nationals had a majority in many areas, especially in markets.’²² Since the issue of Bengali citizenship had been raised in conjunction with Afghan citizenship, it was implied that the denial of citizenship should be extended to them too.

The stereotypes regarding the communities, especially the Afghans, certainly don’t help. As Pakistan grapples with terrorism, the Afghan population has often been pointed fingers at, seen as the root of the problem. Rather than dealing with the complex internal realities that have fuelled extremism, it is easier to lay the blame on the ‘outsiders’. This is particularly so when there is a need to pacify a charged population. For instance, in the aftermath of the attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar in 2014, which stunned the nation (killing at least 141 people, including 132 children),²³ the government hastily resorted to demolishing *katchi abadis* (squatter settlements) in Islamabad, on the pretext that non-citizens—primarily Afghans—resided there and they needed to cleanse the area of criminals and terrorists.²⁴ The Afghans are perceived as extremist elements that one must be wary of rather than being accepted as fellow citizens. On the other hand, the Bengalis are often accused of being pro-India, Mukti Bahini supporters,²⁵ the memory of the war and what many

Pakistanis see as the ‘treachery’ of Bengalis still tainting local opinions. ‘They’ had sided with India to ‘break’ Pakistan; why give them rights in return for this ‘disloyalty’? Both communities are hence viewed with suspicion, their allegiance questioned. It doesn’t matter if they are born and raised in Pakistan.

Many of Adnan’s relatives are still in Bangladesh. Over the years, he has been able to visit them thanks to the fact that he was earlier issued a Pakistani passport. Now, with an expired ID card, it is unlikely that he will be able to renew his passport and visit again. Many others are denied travel documents, separated from families for decades. He says mobile phones have made communication easier, but it doesn’t lessen the pain for these families. We asked him if he could introduce us to any family nearby who had arrived after the war—through ‘illegal migration’. He, however, said, that everybody he knew had lived in West Pakistan prior to the war. It is possible that he might have been afraid that by pointing out a later migrant, he may get them into trouble for being here ‘illegally’. Or perhaps, as he suggested, most migrants he knew did indeed already belong to this part of the country, even prior to the war. Regardless of what the truth may be, the Bengalis in Ibrahim Hyderi and the other ‘colonies’ have lived here for decades, but are not considered Pakistani enough. In Bangladesh, too, there seems to be little room for them. The two countries, both created on the premise of creating a safe haven for marginalized communities—Muslims in 1947 and Bengalis in 1971—have shrugged off their responsibility of sheltering them. It doesn’t matter whether they want to be Pakistani or Bangladeshi, neither state seems to want them. They have ended up on the wrong side of history and geography.

As he got back to work and the crowd dissipated, Ansar and I walked back to the car. He pointed towards the Pakistani flags hoisted at intervals. ‘Look at their love for Pakistan,’ he says, ‘could anyone be more Pakistani than them?’ The flags, a far more common sight than in other neighbourhoods in the country, are perhaps a symbolic way of the community asserting their loyalty to the nation. Forty-eight years after the war, having raised generations here, they are still trying to prove that they

are Pakistani enough. On the other side, in Bangladesh, the Bihari community faces a similar dilemma. Years have passed, new generations—with no link to the war—have been born and raised, but the allegations of treachery are difficult to wash away. Neither the Pakistani Bengalis nor the Bangladeshi Biharis are deemed loyal enough. They are manifestations of the ongoing war, a war between the state and the communities that simply don't belong.

* * *

I hesitatingly peeked into one of the rooms. It is about 8x8 feet in size. Beds are stacked on the side, one on top of the other. A wooden slab is hammered to the wall above the beds, with utensils, clothes and other household items piled on top of it. In the corner, a woman is washing dishes. This is also where she cooks. Each room houses six to seven people on an average. Up ahead is a row of small cubicles that are meant to serve as washrooms. Most of them have no running water. A huge pile of rubbish is collected outside. I am told that there are 275 toilets and fifty common baths in this camp, but 50 per cent are out of order.

‘Can you imagine what happens in the morning when nature calls? Can you imagine what our women go through? There is no privacy in the camp. My mother and wife live in the same room as me . . . and if you think this is bad, just visit the other camps. *Yeh toh campon ka Paris hai* (we call this the Paris of all camps). We had a fire in 1986 and so parts had to be renovated . . . the other camps are in far worse condition . . .’

I was standing at the Geneva Camp with one of the residents. Approximately 40,000 people were cramped inside this camp, the largest of 116 camps²⁶ scattered across Bangladesh. In popular parlance the residents of these camps are referred to as ‘stranded Pakistanis’ or ‘Biharis’ although not all of them necessarily trace their lineage to either place. While many of their ancestors had come from Bihar at the time of Partition—to escape the violence or in hopes of economic emancipation—others had moved from different parts of what is present-day India, such as Uttar Pradesh, and

Pakistan.²⁷ It is estimated that by 1971, more than 15 lakh such ‘Biharis’, a composite term inclusive of Urdu-speaking non-Bengalis from various parts of India and Pakistan, were present in East Pakistan.²⁸ Today, as many as 3,00,000 Urdu-speaking people remain in Bangladesh, many of them living in these camps.²⁹

We were guided into one of the rooms in the camp. Haroon and Ahmad Salim accompanied me. Inside the room, members of the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC)³⁰ were gathered alongside camp residents. The majority were male and of all age groups. One of the police officials, who had been with us throughout our trip to Bangladesh but hadn’t attended any meetings, also came inside. Another man—who I later found out was from the intelligence—sat close to the SPGRC members. That day, instead of one police car, we were escorted by two vehicles. There seemed to be suspicion and mistrust in the air, the interaction between us and the camp dwellers was closely monitored. Our meeting perhaps provided a good premise to test the residents’ sentiments for Bangladesh, the default assumption being that their loyalty was towards Pakistan. How they behaved with us, what they said or didn’t say gave important indications as to their allegiances. The test was important for the Bangladeshi state, for in recent years many Biharis have applied for Bangladeshi citizenship. I could sense that our conversations might leave a lasting imprint on their assessment of patriotism.

We were seated on a long conference table, and within seconds the other seats were occupied. Those who could not find seats stood or chose to sit on the floor. From the windows more men—and a few women—peeped inside. I was told that some of the people there belonged to another camp, in this or that part of Bangladesh. Several of them had travelled from afar to be there, some more than 400 km. They had heard that Pakistanis were coming. I don’t know if they thought that we had brought any news about their future. They knew we were not government representatives; in fact even when various government officials visited over the years, they brought little transformation in their lives. They probably knew our visit would not change anything. But perhaps, interacting with Pakistanis—even ordinary

citizens—held some importance. At the very least, it gave them a chance to express their grievances, their frustrations with citizens from a country, which forgot to claim them, or just didn't care enough.

It didn't take long for the conversation to get heated. Barely a few minutes into basic introductions, a middle-aged man spoke in Urdu. It was one of the first times that I heard somebody speak the language in Bangladesh. Although many others, who grew up before the war, knew the language, no one had spoken it to us on the trip. Just the previous week, Haroon and I were invited to dinner with two Bengali men, who knew both English and Urdu well. However, in what seemed like an act of defiance, the two men decided to speak to each other only in Bengali for most of the night. Since neither Haroon nor I were familiar with the language, we were obviously unable to partake in the conversation. However, both of us also couldn't speak to each other in any of the other languages we knew to express the isolation we felt as the men were rather fluent in those languages too! Perhaps choosing to speak in Bengali, rather than Urdu or English, was their way of showing us how isolated Bengalis had felt in a country that denied them their right to language. For that dinner, we were made to feel like the 'other', just as so many Bengalis had felt for twenty-four years before the creation of Bangladesh. In the camp, however, Urdu remained the dominant language, at least for the older generation.

'If Pakistan didn't want us, why did it fool us all these years with false promises?' the middle-aged man's voice boomed across the room. 'For years, Pakistani leaders came and told us to be patient, that they would find some solution . . . they played with our emotions, our lives . . .'

Before any of us could say anything—and I'm not certain what could be said that would be helpful to a community paralysed by the war and the post-war politics of Pakistan and Bangladesh—others joined in. Young and old, everyone had something to say. They were all angry, frustrated, tired of empty promises.

'Cricket teams keep coming and going, cultural teams keep coming and going (to and from Pakistan), what about us?' one asked.

‘Did you need preparations for the refugees who came from India in 1947, or for those who came from Afghanistan? Why then are we told that Pakistan is not ready for us? Why can’t they let us in as they let in the others?’ another joined in.

‘We came from Bihar on 22 August 1947,’ said an elderly man, his voice breaking as he spoke. ‘We came because we believed Pakistan was for Muslims, that we would be protected here, but Pakistan abandoned us . . .’

‘We helped Pakistan in 1971, not because we were anti-Bengali, but because we were anti any anti-Pakistan movement . . . why? Because we believed in Pakistan! We fought for the creation of Pakistan! But what did Pakistan give us in return for our loyalty?’

‘Bangladesh has helped us so much more than Pakistan. They are our friends, not the Pakistanis. Many of the youngsters have married Bengalis . . . they hate Pakistan now,’ said a man standing by the door, close to the intelligence officer.

‘Pakistanis come and go and do nothing,’ muttered another. ‘*Chirya ghar banaya hua hai, dekh ke chalay jatay hain* (they treat us like we are animals in a zoo. They come, ogle at us and leave).’

* * *

In 1971, the Pakistan Army had recruited many of these ‘Biharis’ in their operations against Bengalis; the army needed locals familiar with the region to help identify secessionists. Given that many of them had already suffered or witnessed attacks by Bengalis on Urdu speakers (as detailed in the previous chapters), some of them joined hands with the army willingly to seek revenge, others supported it to keep the country—which they had fought for in 1947 and continued to believe in—united. Some had been forced to aid the army, pulled out of their homes to identify people the army saw as treacherous Bengalis. And yet others remained neutral, not taking any sides. Many even came forward to rescue Bengalis, helping them escape just as many Bengalis had helped Biharis. However, the historical association of Urdu speakers as being pro-Pakistan, and the fact that many

of them did indeed side with the Pakistan Army in 1971, meant that they would be collectively remembered as the ‘collaborators’.

The following interview, conducted by the Goethe-Institut as part of a series of interviews on Bengal’s partition, reveals what this meant for ordinary Biharis at the time. In this excerpt, Khaled, a third-generation Bihari in Bangladesh narrates how his father, who had lost most of his family in 1947 and had to flee to East Bengal to save his life, had to be ‘saved again’ in 1971 because of his identity as an ‘Urdu speaker’.

‘ . . . the army that was raping Bengali women, or were killing Bengalis, were speaking in Urdu. The common people who could not differentiate what was happening thought that all people who speak Urdu were bad. So, the ordinary civilian, the lower middle-class person who lived from hand to mouth, had not held a weapon in his life yet spoke in Urdu, became the target for revenge. All those who spoke Urdu were clubbed as a single community who were to be targeted for revenge. But Urdu speakers who came from India, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh or Bengal, belonged to different nationalities—Punjabi, Balochi, Sindhi—all were from different nationalities. But the ordinary Bengalis were under the impression that they all belonged to the same nationality . . . ’

For people like Khaled’s father, the equation that Urdu speakers were pro-army and anti-Bengali meant that they would be punished for the deeds of West Pakistan. He said, ‘Hence they persecuted us . . . my father got arrested . . . by the Mukti Bahini soldiers . . . he was forcibly dragged away in front of my mother. When he was being hauled up in the vehicle, mother asked them, “Where are you taking my husband? How will I get him back?” They replied, “We’ll let him go after interrogation” . . . Every morning, with my two brothers and two sisters (Khaled was born later), she would wait at the gate of the Central Jail thinking she would request people telling them that her husband was inside, could they bring him out? There she met several Urdu-speaking women who were doing the same thing as her—waiting from morning to evening to night, then continuing the vigil the following morning. But they weren’t getting back their husbands. They

were taking back their dead bodies, sometimes these dead bodies didn't have heads . . .'

Fortunately, an Indian Hindu soldier who traced his lineage to Bihar took mercy on the family and helped rescue Khaled's father. He [Khaled] said, 'That very same night [when my father was rescued] all the Biharis who were being held inside the Central Jail had been taken to the firing squad, made to stand in a row, shot and beheaded.' Khaled later narrated that when he was a child he would find it amusing that each time his father took a shower, a part of his head would retain water. He said, 'They beat him up so badly that there was a serious head injury . . . there was actually a hole where he had been struck with a scythe . . .'³¹

With clear lines drawn between 'friend' and 'enemy', the Urdu speakers—whether they were against, for or neutral towards the creation of Bangladesh—knew it was going to be very difficult to survive there after the army surrendered. Many of them thus thought of moving to Pakistan after the war. In 1971, the International Committee for Red Cross (ICRC) 'registered nearly 540,000 persons in Bangladesh who had expressed the desire to migrate to Pakistan'.³² These people, hailing from Bihar, or other parts of India and Pakistan, knew they would be increasingly vulnerable now that the Pakistani troops were leaving or had been captured as POWs. Seen as symbols of domination and West Pakistani legacy, the Urdu speakers would become easy scapegoats for Bengalis seeking revenge. Indeed, several of them came under attack in the aftermath of the war. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the most famous and public attacks was conducted in the Dhaka stadium on 19 December 1971 by guerilla fighter Kader Siddique. Years later, in an interview with Yasmin Saikia, Kader Siddique expressed his remorse and explained that at that time 'he thought he was punishing them for their deeds; they had opposed the liberation of Bangladesh. He felt empowered when he "shot them down in full public view. It appeased the Bengali crowd," he recalled. People applauded his cold-blooded act on behalf of the nation.'³³

In this charged atmosphere of 'punishment', the ICRC set up several camps to safeguard the Urdu-speaking community until a permanent

solution was devised. Bihari and other Urdu-speaking families—like Khaled’s—moved into these camps, hoping for a quick release and shift to Pakistan. However, worried about a huge influx of refugees, and the strain that would bring on the economy,³⁴ Pakistan established early on that it would only be able to accept a certain number of people from Bangladesh. On 28 August 1973, Pakistan and India signed an agreement in Delhi—in concurrence with Bangladesh—³⁵ to address outstanding issues of Pakistani POWs and the repatriation of Bengalis to Bangladesh and non-Bengalis to Pakistan.³⁶ Under the agreement, Pakistan agreed to ‘repatriate “a substantial number of non-Bengalis” from Bangladesh who had opted for Pakistan in exchange for the Bengalis in Pakistan and the return of Pakistani prisoners of war (POWs) in India.’³⁷ Pakistan clarified that it was willing to accept those ‘non-Bangalees who were either domiciled in former West Pakistan, were employees of the Central Government and their families or were members of the divided families, irrespective of their original domicile. The issuance of clearances to 25,000 persons who constitute hardship cases was also in progress. The Pakistani side reiterated that all those who fell under the first three categories would be received by Pakistan without any limit as to numbers.’³⁸ Under the Tripartite Agreement signed between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1974, it was these non-Bengalis, listed in the four categories in the Delhi Agreement that Pakistan agreed to accept.³⁹

While a number of stranded persons were repatriated to Pakistan over the years—about 1,27,000 by 1982—⁴⁰ the majority of the Urdu-speaking community lay outside the four categories and was left behind to languish in the camps. Their homes and properties were either lost during the war in Bangladesh or were taken over by the locals post-war, and they had few resources to fall back on. Ostracized for what they did during the war (facilitating the killing of Bengalis) or did not do (i.e., fight for Bangladesh), the Biharis quickly became pariahs in what was once their home.

In the initial years, their situation received international attention and sympathy. For instance, in the 1980s, a Saudi-based organization called

Ribata al-Alam al-Islami decided to intervene on behalf of the ‘stranded Pakistanis’ to try and address the issue. Since Pakistan’s biggest concern was that the repatriation would be a burden on the country’s already-stretched resources, the Ribata Trust was set up to raise funds for their resettlement. Over the years, several Pakistani governments have made promises to the community that they would indeed be repatriated. On my trip to the camp, the residents shared copies of a ‘two hundred and fifty million-rupee cheque’, a donation by former President Zia-ul-Haq to the Ribata Trust. In 1998, then prime minister Nawaz Sharif further appealed to Pakistanis to make donations to the trust.⁴¹ In the 1990s, the government even purchased land in Mian Channu in Punjab and the Ribata Trust completed the construction of 1000 housing units by 1994, rehabilitating 325 ‘stranded Pakistanis’⁴² in sixty-eight of these housing units.⁴³

However, for thousands of others the dream of repatriation never materialized. The Sharif government fell in 1993 and so did the plan as Benazir Bhutto came to power. The stiffest resistance to repatriation came from the Sindh government, Bhutto’s home province, and the repatriation did not hold a chance under her. The concern was that even if the community was accommodated in Punjab, it would ultimately sell the land and move to Sindh where the Urdu-speaking community was concentrated, ‘alter[ing] the demographic pattern in the province’,⁴⁴ and fuelling economic and political conflicts in a region already marred by ethnic tensions between the Mohajirs (Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated to Pakistan after Partition) and the local Sindhi population. The camp residents told me that Benazir Bhutto was one of the few who outrightly rejected the idea of repatriation. One of them said, ‘At least she didn’t give us false hope, unlike the other leaders who keep saying they will repatriate us. At least she was honest enough . . .’

For those still seeking repatriation, Pakistan’s stance on the issue has been increasingly confusing. On one hand, periodically, Pakistani governments have expressed their intention to solve the issue. For example, in 2002, former President Musharraf also ‘gave assurances to a delegation of SPGRC in Dhaka that his government would “do everything possible” to

resolve this problem'.⁴⁵ At other times, the state has also argued that it has met its obligations under the Delhi Agreement, repatriating 1,69,144 persons between 1974 and 1982, and that those still in Bangladesh should be considered citizens of that land.⁴⁶ In 2015, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Pakistan declared that the 'remaining "stranded Pakistanis" in Bangladesh are not the responsibility of Pakistan as the country has already repatriated a large number of non-Bengalis.'⁴⁷

The fact that in 2008 the Bangladeshi Supreme Court announced that those Urdu speakers born in Bangladesh (or who were minors in 1971) would be considered citizens, had only reinforced Pakistan's stance.⁴⁸ Khaled Hussain, who shared his story with Goethe-Institut, played an instrumental role in pushing for this judgment.⁴⁹ While those in the older generations still yearned—and many continue to yearn—to be claimed by Pakistan, the youth which grew up in post-war Bangladesh often does not share the same sentiments as their parents and grandparents. In his interview, Khaled explained how out of place he felt when he joined a state school after finishing his grade 8 in the camp; his school only taught up to grade 8 and it was necessary to enrol outside the camp if he wanted to continue his education. However, the transition wasn't easy. In his words:

The school had a totally different atmosphere. In our camp school, teachers were Urdu speaking—they would teach Bengali, but were Urdu-speaking; then their English pronunciation was like ours. We had never done PT (physical training), never sung any national anthem till then . . . on our first day at school, all of us were gathered on the grounds for the singing of the national anthem. The twenty of us were standing in a group, and we were unable to sing a syllable of the anthem because we didn't know it. We never belonged, you see, that song was not for us. The entire school was singing '*Amar sonar bangla*' except the twenty of us. Everybody observed our silence, including the teachers. When we came to our class after that morning session, we could feel that a negative vibe was doing the rounds—they are Biharis after all, their fathers were our enemies—these started getting circulated. In school, the seating arrangement was three students in a row. Our group stuck together because we were twenty in all, and two rows were exclusively for Bengali students. They could answer, but we couldn't. We were feeling so helpless.⁵⁰

These feelings of helplessness and isolation would only be exacerbated for Khaled when the time came to register for the board exams. The Geneva Camp address was deemed invalid. This meant that the Bihari students

would be unable to sit for their exams. Fortunately, a few teachers stepped forward and offered the students their residential addresses to put down in the form. While this enabled Khaled and his friends to appear for the exams and enter college, the experiences from these years left a lasting imprint on them. He stated that it became clear to him and his peers that though their parents still wanted to go to Pakistan, it was only probable that that would never materialize. Bangladesh may be the only home they know. However, without a nationality the community would continue to be excluded from proper education, healthcare, housing and jobs. The only solution was to fight for citizenship.

Khaled then founded the Association of Young Generation of Urdu-Speaking Community in 1999 along with a friend. In 2001, he and nine other Urdu speakers filed a writ petition. In 2003, the Supreme Court passed a historic judgment, granting citizenship to the petitioners.⁵¹ In 2008, a fresh writ was filed asking that all Urdu speakers in the 116 camps be recognized as Bangladeshi nationals, added to the voter lists and be eligible to apply for ID cards. However, a caveat was added, stating that those ‘termed and still call them(selves) to be “Stranded Pakistanis” by owing, affirming and acknowledging, expressively or by conduct allegiance to a foreign state, say, Pakistan . . . may belong to a class and cease to be citizens of Bangladesh. Those who have renounced their citizenship and/or are waiting to leave for Pakistan may be left to their own fate.’⁵²

On one hand, this judgment seems to have resolved the stateless status of the community in Bangladesh (at least for those who were minors in 1971 and thus could not effectively swear allegiance to Pakistan, and those who were born after the war). This allows them the means to be included in society and make a life for themselves outside the camps. However, on the other hand, the judgment also means that the chances of Pakistan claiming the community are even more negligible now that the issue has apparently been ‘resolved’. For those in the older generation, who still dream of being remembered by Pakistan, the judgment hurts their cause. The caveat mentioned above shows that the citizenship for this older generation, which did in fact swear allegiance to Pakistan and who may continue to do so, is

likely to prevent any resolution for them; they would continue to be ‘disowned’ by Bangladesh and ‘forgotten’ by Pakistan. Further, by losing refugee status in Bangladesh, members of the community told me, they fear they could lose their camps, which until now have been the only source of housing and free food ration for them.⁵³ The fact that animosity towards Urdu speakers is still prevalent in society, and that politics in Bangladesh is increasingly centred on the memory of the war in which the community is seen as collaborators, means that members still find it very hard to adjust in society. For instance, even children born and raised after the war sometimes find themselves being blamed for killing Bengalis in a war that predates their birth by decades.⁵⁴ A young man confessed to me that despite completing his education, he was repeatedly denied employment because of the ‘Bihari’ label attached to him. Some even mentioned that the community was often attacked by local Bengali-speaking Bangladeshis and that forced evictions had become increasingly common.

For the older generation, it is ideologically hard to accept themselves as Bangladeshi (even if the law permitted). Many of them still identify with Pakistan and its politics. One of them complained, ‘We are being forced to say “*Kashmir Banega Hindustan*” here . . . we used to celebrate 14 August with fervour, but now we have to celebrate Bangladesh’s Independence Day instead . . .’ The fact that the current war crimes tribunals in Bangladesh are only focused on the atrocities committed against Bengalis, ignoring the crimes against Biharis, also serves as a reminder that they are unlikely to find a sense of belonging, let alone justice in society. Several of the camp residents had lost family members to the violence. For them, 1971 is as alive as it is for the Bengalis. In hushed voices, some of them said to me, ‘Many of our people died. What about tribunals for them? We didn’t all collaborate with the Pakistan Army. Many times the soldiers would come at 3 a.m. and force us to go with them, but we can’t talk about any of this . . . we can’t talk about what happened to us . . .’

Later, during a visit to another camp in Mirpur—known as the ‘Post Office Camp’ because of the location of a post office opposite the camp—many of the residents narrated harrowing tales of what they had undergone

in 1971. One of the women confided, ‘I was three months pregnant when my husband was taken from a mosque by the Mukti Bahini and killed on 16 December.’ Another woman told me of how her husband, son and brother-in-law were abducted on the same date, never to return again. A man shared how six people in his family were killed on 25 March, when he was only fourteen years old. These stories of rape and the killings of Biharis were personal reminders of how much they had lost in 1971. The fact that their scars go unregistered makes it difficult to see a lasting future for them in Bangladesh. The hope that Pakistan will one day agree to repatriate them continues to linger on in their hearts.

* * *

As younger generations of Urdu speakers grow up, their association with Pakistan continues to dwindle. Some of them feel that their elders had made mistakes by banking on Pakistan instead of trying to pursue citizenship in Bangladesh. Some of them complained to me that this cost them the future of two generations who were left to rot in camps. They said, ‘We were born and brought up here, we are Bangladeshi . . . the movement for repatriation has hurt us. We need to make a future in this country . . . we are not stranded Pakistanis, we are Bangladeshis.’

As the headmaster at Geneva Camp offered to take me to the classes in the camp, I noticed drawings of Bangladeshi flags outside the classrooms. We walked into a classroom where I tried to strike a conversation with the young six- and seven-year-olds gathered together for their lessons. To my surprise, many of them didn’t understand Urdu. Those who did said they learnt it from their parents. Most of them were fluent in Bengali, now a prerequisite to survive in Bangladesh.

When I asked them what they thought of Pakistan, most of them fell silent. Some didn’t know what Pakistan was, despite the fact that outside the camp that was how they were known. Others told me they had heard Pakistan was a bad place.

Two fourth graders told me that their relatives lived in Pakistan. They said they had heard there was a lot of violence and terrorism in that country and that they felt afraid for the people there. ‘My dada lives there and I’m scared he will get hurt,’ said one. ‘We want to bring our relatives back to Bangladesh so that they’re safe,’ added the other.

The headmaster guided me into one of the other classrooms. Here, the students were slightly older. When I introduced myself as a Pakistani, a ten-year-old girl stood up nervously and said, ‘I don’t want to go to Pakistan . . . I’m Bangladeshi, I love Bangladesh. My friends are here, I don’t want to go.’ For a moment, I was taken aback. It was almost as if my presence was threatening for her. Then I realized that for her Pakistan symbolized a country her community was *supposed* to belong to. My visit perhaps signalled to her that I was there to take her away, finally fulfilling the promise made repeatedly by different Pakistani governments to her community.

* * *

As we left the camp that day, an elderly woman grabbed my arm. ‘Look at us . . . look at us. Look at what condition you’ve left us in,’ she shouted. She was kneeling on the ground, holding her head in her hands, weeping. I held her for a while, not knowing what to say. Ever since I’ve come back to Pakistan, I have been receiving messages from some of the people I met there, particularly those from the older generations. They tell me they have organized prayers for my long life, they ask if I can write more about their conditions, highlight their plight. They hope that it might make a difference, pushing Pakistan to remember them at the very least. While the young try to move on and become Bangladeshis, struggling to carve out a space and a future for themselves, for the elders it seems like neither Pakistan nor Bangladesh will ever be home. They are likely to remain in transit, neither here nor there.

Notes

Preface

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Part I

Chapter 1: Selective Silences, Selective Remembrances

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Part III

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Chapter 8: India's War

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12. Tahmima Anam, 'How Bangladeshis See India', *Guardian*, 14 August 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/14/india.features115>, last accessed on 1 June 2019.
13. Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, p. 268.
14. *Ibid.* p. 269.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.* p. 274.
17. *Ibid.* p. 276.
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Chapter 9: Pakistan's War

1. The term 'Bihari' is not meant to identify the people of Bihar alone. 'Instead, a variety of Urdu-speaking people who had migrated from India to East Pakistan after partition were commonly referred to as Bihari in order to distinguish them from the local Bengalis.' Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*, Duke University Press, 2011, p. 243.
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4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. D'Costa, *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia*, p. 103.
7. Ibid.
8. Sharmila Bose, 'Anatomy of Violence: Analysis of Civil War in East Pakistan in 1971', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 40. No. 41 (8–14 Oct 2005), p. 4467; and Naeem Mohaiemen, 'Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning of 1971', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 46, No. 36 (3–9 September 2011) p. 41.

9. Mohaiemen, 'Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning of 1971', *Economic and Political Weekly*, p. 41.
10. Dunya News, 'On the Front: Fall of Dhaka Special Program', 22 December 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uh9setoHnYY>, last accessed on 10 June 2019.
11. D'Costa, *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia*, p. 103.
12. *The Report of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission of Inquiry into the 1971 War*, Vanguard Books, p. 507.
13. Ibid. p. 508.
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15. In my conversation with Bangladeshi academic and intellectual, Afsan Chowdhury, the violence against Biharis was highlighted. See also the work of Tajul-Islam, 'The "Bihari" Minorities in Bangladesh: Victims of Nationalisms' (in Mushirul Hasan, ed. *Islam, Communities and the Nation: Muslim Identities in South Asia and Beyond*, 1998) where he argues that 'The average Bangladeshi does not accept [the Biharis] as members of a minority of citizen status, let alone agree with the view that the 'Biharis' were (or are) ever discriminated against or victimized . . . few Bangladeshis talk about thousands of innocent 'Bihari' men, women and children, being killed during and after the war by Bengali 'freedom-fighters' and others, or about hundreds of thousands of them losing their properties in the wake of the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.' Others who have spoken on the issue include Naushad Noori, Jatin Sarker, Ahmed Iliyas, Mijanur Rahman and Zakia Haque, as documented in Naeem Mohaiemen's, 'Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning of 1971', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 46, No. 36 (3–9 September 2011) p. 43.
16. Mohaiemen, 'Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning of 1971', p. 41.
17. D'Costa, *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia*, p. 103.
18. Ghosh, *Migrants, Refugees and the Stateless in South Asia*.
19. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is said to have threatened to break the legs of any West Pakistani elected representative who went to Dhaka to participate in the National Assembly session called by Yahya Khan on 3 March 1971. He famously remarked that 'a majority alone does not count'. While Bhutto had apparently agreed to the idea of having two prime ministers after the 1970 elections, with him in power in West Pakistan

and Mujib in East Pakistan, President Yahya Khan had called Mujib ‘the future prime minister of Pakistan’, upsetting Bhutto, who was adamant that power should not be given to Sheikh Mujib alone. For more, see ‘Special Report: The Breakup of Pakistan 1969–1971, *Dawn*, 16 December 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1359141>, last accessed on 9 June 2019.

20. D’Costa, *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia*, p. 95.
21. Mohaiemen, ‘Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning of 1971’, p. 41.
22. Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh*, Duke University Press, pp. 97–98.
23. *Ibid.* pp. 146–57.
24. *Ibid.* pp.146–47.
25. For example, see Farrukh Saleem, *Mukti Bahini, The Forgotten Terrorists*, News, 14 March 2016, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/105117-Mukti-Bahini-the-forgotten-terrorists>. The Hamoodur Rahman Commission report also notes the allegation of ‘raping of a large number of East Pakistani women by the officers and men of the Pakistan Army as a deliberate act of revenge, retaliation and torture’, *The Report of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission: Of Inquiry into the 1971 War*, Vanguard Publishers, p. 508.
26. For example, the Army Museum in Lahore has a panel titled ‘Rape and Abduction of Muslim Women in 1947’, which estimates that ‘75,000 to well over 1,00,000 Muslim women were abducted by the Indian Sikhs and Indian Hindus, and were raped and murdered, sold into prostitution, forced to accept Sikh religion or Hinduism, or forced into marriage.’ While remembering the experiences of women is significant, the ‘Muslim-only’ narrative works to reinforce the ‘barbarity’ of the non-Muslims, from whom separation is deemed necessary.
27. Mohaiemen, ‘Flying Blind’, p. 51.
28. Ghulam Mustafa, ‘The Issue of Prisoners of War (POWs), 1971 and the Recognition of Bangladesh’, *Journal of Business*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2014), <https://thejournalofbusiness.org/index.php/site/article/view/424>, last accessed on 10 June 2019.
29. It is alleged that fifty-four Indian POWs from the 1971 war remain in Pakistan even today. For more, see James Maclaren, ‘The Last Secret of

the 1971 India-Pakistan War', *Diplomat*, 14 December 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/the-last-secret-of-the-1971-india-pakistan-war/>, last accessed on 10 June 2019.

30. Sharmila Bose quotes Lt. General Niazi, commander of the Eastern Command between April and December, in her book as stating: 'The strength of the Pakistan Army was 34,000 troops; Rangers, scouts, militia and civil police came to 11,000, thus the grand total came to 45,000. If we include naval and air force detachments and all those in uniform and entitled to free rations, e.g. HQ, MLA, depots, training institutes, workshops, factories, nurses and lady doctors, non-combatants like barbers, cooks, shoemakers, and sweepers, even then the total comes to 55,000 and not 96,000 or 100,000. The remaining were civilian officials, civilian staff, and women and children.' See Bose, *Dead Reckoning*: p. 174.
31. Ahmad Salim, 'Long Live Bangladesh', ed. Ahmad Salim, *We Owe an Apology to Bangladesh*, published by Mofidul Hoque, Shahitya Prakash, 2012, pp. 202–204.
32. Ibid. p. 204, p. 235 and p. 245.
33. Ibid. p. 244.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid. p. 242.
36. Ibid. p. 244.
37. Ibid. p. 241.
38. Ibid. p. 232.
39. Asif Farrukhi, 'Two Sides to a Story', ed. Ahmad Salim, *We Owe an Apology to Bangladesh*, p. 219.
40. Ibid. p. 220.
41. Ibid. p. 219.
42. Ibid. p. 225.
43. Women's Action Forum, 'To the Women of Bangladesh', ed. Ahmad Salim, *We Owe an Apology to Bangladesh*, pp. 70–71.
44. Imaduddin Ahmed, 'Crowd-sourcing an Apology to Bangladesh', *Pakistan Today*, 9 December 2015, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2015/12/08/crowd-sourcing-an-apology-to-bangladesh/>, last accessed on 11 June 2019.
45. Bangladesh–India–Pakistan: Agreement on the Repatriation of Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees, *International Legal Materials*,

Vol. 13, No. 3 (May 1974), published by Cambridge University Press, p. 504.

46. See Bernard Weinraub, *Pakistan Offers Apology to Bangladesh*, *New York Times*, 11 April 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/04/11/archives/pakistan-offers-apology-to-bangladesh-accord-of-foreign-ministers.html>; and David Blair, 'Musharraf Apology to Bangladesh', *Telegraph*, 31 July 2002, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/bangladesh/1403185/Musharraf-apology-to-Bangladesh.html>, last accessed on 11 June 2019.
47. Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Musharraf Zahoor, 'Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: Hostage to a Traumatic Past', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 57:1, pp. 31–51, p. 35.
48. Mohiuddin Alamgir, 'Liberation War: More Foreign Friends to be Recognized', *Daily Star*, 27 March 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/liberation-war-more-foreign-friends-be-recognised-1720930>, last accessed on 11 June 2019.
49. Malik Ghulam Jilani, 'Interviewee: Asma Jahangir', 17 January 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJUc3nRIZ-c>, last accessed on 11 June 2019.
50. Ahmad Salim, *We Owe an Apology to Bangladesh*, Introduction.
51. Ibid.
52. The National Awami Party (NAP) was Pakistan's first major leftist political party, established in 1957. It included 'noted Pashtun, Baloch, Sindhi and Bengali [as well as Punjabi] nationalist thinkers and politicians. The party described itself as a socialist-democratic party working towards achieving democratic reforms and greater autonomy for the country's non-Punjabi and non-Mohajir populations. But NAP's membership included Mohajir and Punjabi activists as well.' NAP had stood up against the one-unit system implemented in Pakistan between 1955 and 1970, which effectively treated all of West Pakistan as one province, 'allegedly to neutralize the Bengali majority in East Pakistan.' Overtime, NAP would also campaign for political autonomy for the provinces. The party eventually broke up into pro-China and pro-Soviet factions, with the latter participating in the 1970 elections and winning the largest number of seats in Balochistan and making significant gains in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly NWFP). Source: Nadeem F. Paracha, 'The First Left', *Dawn*, 9 November 2014,

- <https://www.dawn.com/news/1142900>, last accessed on 11 June 2019. For more information on NAP's history, see M. Rashiduzzaman, 'The National Awami Party of Pakistan: Leftist Politics in Crisis', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Autumn 1970) pp. 394–406.
53. As narrated in *We Owe an Apology to Bangladesh*, p. 236.
 54. Tariq Rahman, 'Remembering 1971', *We Owe an Apology to Bangladesh*, p. 191.
 55. Ibid.
 56. Ibid. p. 192.
 57. Ibid. p. 193.
 58. Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir Bir Protik, 'THIS IS THE WAY, MY BOY!', *Daily Star*, 5 December 2014, <https://www.thedailystar.net/this-is-the-way-my-boy-53678>, last accessed on 13 June 2019.
 59. 'Liberation War: Historicizing a Personal Narrative', Col Nadir Ali's address at BRAC University, Dhaka, <https://uddari.wordpress.com/2011/03/30/liberation-war-historicizing-a-personal-narrative-by-col-nadir-ali/>, last accessed on 13 June 2019.
 60. Protik, 'THIS IS THE WAY, MY BOY!', *Daily Star*.
 61. This is from the transcript of Col Nadir Ali's interview, prepared by the Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP). The interview was taken for CAP's Oral History Project on 9 June 2011. The transcript was requested for research purposes and provided courtesy of the CAP.
 62. Ibid.
 63. Ibid.
 64. Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, p. 83.
 65. Ibid. pp. 56–64.
 66. Ibid. p. 83.
 67. Ibid.
 68. Ibid. p. 121
 69. Also narrated in 'A Khaki Dissident on 1971', Colonel Nadir Ali, 3 January 2011, <http://www.genocidebangladesh.org/a-khaki-dissident-on-1971/>, last accessed on 13 June 2019.
 70. Ibid.
 71. Farah Zia, 'The Short Story of 1971', *News International*, 12 January 2014, <http://tns.thenews.com.pk/short-story-1971/#.XQIe4C2Q01g>, last accessed on 13 June 2019; and 'Review: The Punjabi Narrative', *Dawn*,

1 November 2008, <https://www.dawn.com/news/826711>, last accessed on 13 June 2019.

Part IV:

Chapter 10: My Truth, Your Truth

1. A.K. Fazlul Huq was a Bengali lawyer and legislator who played a critical role in the independence movement (against the British) as well as Partition. See Syed Badrul Ahsan, ‘The Politics of Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Huq’, *Dhaka Tribune*, 26 April 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/2018/04/26/politics-sher-e-bangla-fazlul-huq>, last accessed on 16 June 2019.
2. According to the description in the museum, ‘On 9 April, the Central Peace Committee was formed with 140 members from the Jamaat-e-Islami, PDP, Muslim League, Nizam-e-Islam and other religious parties to help the Pakistan Government and Army . . . The main assignments included indiscriminate killing, looting, arson, usurpation of the landed property of Hindus and freedom fighters, and collecting and preparing the list of freedom fighters for the Pakistan Army.’
3. According to the description in the museum, ‘The Rajakar Bahini consisted of radical religious political parties during the Liberation War . . . their main responsibilities were to kill Bengalis indiscriminately, fight the freedom fighters, loot others’ properties and rape women in the name of saving Islam and Pakistan.’
4. Al-Badr is described as ‘a death squad . . . the members of Al-Badr executed the plan for the Pakistan Army for abducting, harassing and killing intellectuals in early December’.
5. Al-Shams is also described as a death squad.
6. Though a ceasefire was eventually agreed upon after the 1965 Indo-Pak war over Kashmir, with then Indian prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and then Pakistani President Ayub Khan signing the Tashkent Agreement, both India and Pakistan claim victory. The war continues to be celebrated as a victory in Pakistan. In 2015, India too organized a ‘victory carnival’ to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the war. For more, see Anam Zakaria, *Between the Great Divide: A Journey into Pakistan-Administered Kashmir*, HarperCollins Publishers (India), 2018.

7. This interview was first published in *Between the Great Divide*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2018.
8. Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, pp. 332–33.
9. Arjun Makhijani, Howard Hu and Katherine Yih, eds. *Nuclear Wastelands: A Global Guide to Nuclear Weapons Production And Its Heath and Environmental Effects*, MIT Press, p. 570
10. NTI, Pakistan, <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/pakistan/nuclear/>, last accessed on 17 June 2019.
11. A.Q. Khan, ‘Pakistan’s A.Q. Khan: My Nuclear Manifesto’, *Newsweek*, 16 May 2011, <https://www.newsweek.com/pakistans-aq-khan-my-nuclear-manifesto-67529>, last accessed on 17 June 2019.
12. Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, p. 333.
13. Qutubuddin’s book, *Blood and Tears*, published in 1974 focuses on the killings of non-Bengalis and was used as evidence of violence against the Biharis, West Pakistanis and pro-Pakistan Bengalis in the Hamoodur Rahman Commission’s supplementary report.
14. ‘4 Tortured, Slain at Dacca Rally’, *New York Times*, 20 December 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/12/20/archives/4-tortured-slain-at-dacca-rally-4-tortured-and-killed-by-bengalis-a.html>, last accessed on 17 June 2019.
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Chapter 11: The Loyalty Card

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