

HISTORY ON THE LINE

Fragments of Memories: Researching Violence in the 1971 Bangladesh War

by *Sarmila Bose*

There is a saying in Bengali – *kencho khurte saap berono* – which means, you dig for an earthworm and a snake comes out. The implication is not only that what you discover is different from what you thought you would find, but also that what emerges is considerably worse – dangerous, in fact – compared to what you expected.

I started digging – that is, researching incidents of violence during the 1971 Bangladesh war – several years ago, originally intending to write a series of articles in the Indian media. I had a longstanding interest in the 1971 war due to my own childhood memories from Calcutta. After many years I was based in India again and writing for a large newspaper group. There was likely to be an interest among the general public in well-documented illustrative stories from 1971. I had the language skills and the locational advantage, in addition to my academic background and journalistic experience, to make a real contribution.

THE STORY OF 1971

I thought I knew the ‘big story’ of 1971. It was a narrative I had grown up with in Calcutta. This story comprised a massive repressive action by the military regime in Pakistan against their Bengali citizens in East Pakistan, who, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League, wished to form an independent country of Bangladesh; the Pakistani army was said to have killed three million Bengali civilians in the process and raped hundreds of thousands of women; millions of refugees had fled into India, which eventually intervened on the side of the Bangladeshi freedom fighters (*muk-tijoddhas*) in a humanitarian cause. The story was traumatic, but had a happy ending – the forces of good won and Bangladesh became free.

The purpose of my research into particular incidents of violence during the war was to document incidents within this familiar narrative. The trauma of the war had been so great that the very mention of the year ‘1971’ had come to symbolize unspeakable human misery. Yet the suffering of the people of East Pakistan/Bangladesh seemed to be long forgotten, marginalized in the narrative in India, where 1971 overwhelmingly meant only one thing: the humiliating surrender of the Pakistan army in Dhaka.¹

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Humiliation seemed to be the enduring motif for Pakistan as well. Accused of atrocities, defeated by arch-enemy India and dismembered, Pakistan seemed to be in a long-term sulk, looking for someone to blame. Even Bangladeshis seemed discontented; they had achieved the independence they sought, yet chafed that the world had moved on and forgotten their trauma, while the perpetrators of such immense violence had got off scot-free.

I was sympathetic to the Bangladeshi complaint, but thought that there was little point blaming the rest of the world for forgetting about the war if Bangladeshis themselves had not made available well-documented histories of the conflict. The world was also far more likely to remember, I reasoned, if people could see the conflict in human terms, through the experience of people at the ground level rather than faceless statistics. I wanted to write in-depth accounts of particular incidents of violence in East Pakistan, about real people caught up in the war, which would touch the hearts of readers.

Describing her experiences of researching gender violence in the same war, Yasmin Saikia wrote in this journal: 'My role has changed during the course of the research from that of a chronicler to an advocate. I now see myself as a storyteller with a mission.'² My journey has been in the opposite direction. I started out as a 'storyteller with a mission': I wanted to give voice to the victims of the war, by depicting them as human beings with names, traits and a back story wherever possible. And once I had done that, I wanted to confront the 'perpetrators' – all in (West) Pakistan according to the official narrative – with what they had done, and ask 'why'.

My initial approach – the plan to write a series of media articles and to do so with a strong component of 'advocacy' – was premised on the narrative of the war with which I had grown up. But once I started to do the research, I was compelled to change the plan. First, it quickly became apparent that the task could not be accomplished with just a series of stories in a newspaper. There were too many stories, with many complexities and multiple perspectives even within the local communities in East Pakistan. The quality of the published material was much poorer than I expected; the need for documentation was vast. To do justice to the material, a book-length study was required and even that would be only the start – the 1971 conflict clearly needed many studies by many people based on careful documentation, ideally by international scholars with different thematic specializations, even to begin to understand what had happened and why.

More ominously, the testimony of people who had been present at the incidents I was trying to document began to tell a different, and more complex, story from the narrative with which I had grown up. The memories of eye-witnesses also seemed at variance with what I was told by Bangladeshis who had not been present at these events. At first I thought the divergences were exceptions, but as I progressed it became undeniable that the reality in 1971 was different – and substantially so – from the narrative I had grown up believing. This was unexpected, and disturbing. On the one hand I felt a

sense of disbelief; on the other, I became aware of an even greater burden of responsibility – that the public had the right to know the true nature of the war.

Perhaps I was naïve to have believed the received story of 1971 in the first place. Certainly some Indians seemed to think so, when I shared my disquiet about the disconnect I was uncovering between the particular incidents that I was examining and the story I started out with. A dismissive attitude towards the *Muktibahini* (Bangladeshi army of liberation) as a fighting force was common among Indians who had been adults at the time, as was the ‘realist’ position that many stories in the media at the time would be part of war propaganda. The framing tended to be in terms of the inter-state war between India and Pakistan, marginalizing as always the internal dissensions in East Pakistan or the suffering of its hapless people. In retrospect, perhaps I should have realized that the ‘dominant narrative’ is usually a particular political story rather than the reality. But the grip of the popular story was very strong and it took me a long time to give it up, reluctantly, in the face of the evidence. I am therefore acutely aware of the difficulty many people would have in shedding their faith in the popular story of 1971, because – as it is said – I have ‘been there’ myself.

A FRACTURED SOCIETY

There were still victims to give voice to and perpetrators to be confronted if possible, but they were dispersed among all sides to the conflict. The clean dichotomy of the established story was shattered. I was surprised by the extent of division among Bangladeshis, even though those helping me were strongly pro-liberation. The 1971 civil war was not just between West and East Pakistan, but *within* East Pakistan as well; and even in East Pakistan there was conflict not just between Bengalis and non-Bengalis, but between Bengali East Pakistanis with different views. Even those who had fought for Bangladesh’s liberation were divided among themselves, often holding most uncharitable views about each other. These differences had percolated through generations and spread globally. People who had fought and suffered during 1971 were bitter about their hardship in independent Bangladesh and sarcastic about the number of ‘freedom fighters’ who had cropped up after freedom was won. I even heard staunch supporters of Bangladeshi liberation describe Sheikh Mujib as a ‘*goonda*’ (thug) and the Awami League as a party of thuggery.

The fractures in East Pakistan that emerged through the incidents in 1971 made it easier to comprehend the divisions among Bangladeshis that became evident after independence. Suddenly it all made sense: the swift descent to one-party rule and personal autocracy, Mujib’s assassination, the coups and counter-coups, the return to military rule and the paralytic enmity between rival political parties both of which claimed the mantle of the freedom struggle. These were not ruptures with the past, as they had seemed before, but continuities from the realities of 1971. Even the savagery was

not new. Mujib had been assassinated in 1975 along with his entire family (except two daughters who were away at the time). I remember how people in Calcutta were shocked by the cruelty of these killings, but many Bangladeshis – even those who had supported the liberation struggle of 1971 – seemed unmoved. With the story that was emerging out of my field investigations, this was no longer surprising.

PIECING TOGETHER FRAGMENTS OF MEMORIES

I tried to reconstruct incidents of violence in East Pakistan/Bangladesh during the war by using every shard of memory I could collect about particular events and the context surrounding it. It was like trying to put back together a patterned glass object that had shattered a long time ago – one never got the whole back together again, and some pieces were lost forever, but with enough fragments, one began to form a reasonable idea of the picture that had been on it.

I visited Bangladesh and Pakistan many times over a period of several years, in particular between 2003 and 2006. In Bangladesh I tried to visit the actual site of an incident wherever possible, for example Dhaka University in Dhaka, Thanapara in Rajshahi, Satiarchora in Tangail, Chuknagar at the border of Khulna and Jessore, jute-mill colonies in Khulna, Boroitola in Mymensingh and so on. It is much easier to understand the testimony – whether written or oral – if you know the topography of the site they are talking about. Some of the interviewees were still at the same location, while others had moved. In Pakistan I tried to find and interview army officers who had served in East Pakistan in 1971, in particular those who had been relatively junior officers then and therefore on active combat duty in the counter-insurgency operations and the war with India. In all cases I listened to their stories, asking for clarifications or posing follow-up questions as necessary. I then compared the many fragments of memories and tried to arrive at a judgement about what had happened and why. Where a clear assessment was not possible I presented the different testimonies, for the readers to judge for themselves.³

Corroboration is a thorny issue in studies of conflicts involving extreme violence and competing political agendas, especially when working with memories several decades after the event. It was made more difficult as fact-checking, verification or seeking corroboration as part of chronicling and analysis often seemed unknown to Bangladeshis actively engaged in ‘remembering’ the liberation war. Many of them were well-meaning, but seemed to expect everyone simply to believe anything that was said by their own supporters, no matter how implausible, and were needlessly hostile towards attempts to verify facts or to include different viewpoints. This resulted in an unfortunate tendency to treat anyone who adopted a questioning or more even-handed approach as ‘enemy’. Those with such ‘us versus them’ attitudes did not appreciate that the more critical approach adopted by writers like myself who were sympathetic to Bangladeshis who

had suffered during the war, actually strengthened and provided greater credibility to the story of 1971.

For my part, even in the cases of witnesses I judged to be highly credible, I looked for matching evidence elsewhere that would bolster and round out the events they recounted. Finding corroboration is not a straightforward matter in such cases, and does not refer necessarily to the kind of documentation that would ‘stand up in court’. Corroboration in memory-based studies can come in various forms, for instance from other fragments of information which have a collective value on whose basis the researcher and the reader can make informed judgements. My approach was to consider the available evidence in terms of the concept of confidence levels (as used in statistical analyses). I considered the testimony of all the people I talked to in the light of each others’ stories as well as other available ‘memories’, such as published reminiscences in Bengali and English, material in general books on the war, volumes of official documents, and foreign (primarily British and American) media reports.

I decided early on to discount media reports published in India, Pakistan and East Pakistan/Bangladesh as too contaminated by partisan propaganda to be of use. I used media reports in Britain and the USA, but with mixed results. For a number of reasons, there were large gaps and a significant risk of inaccurate or unbalanced accounts even in foreigners’ reports. Sometimes this was not the fault of the journalists, but it affected the reliability of the reports nevertheless. For example, Pakistan expelled journalists from the East Pakistan for a while after taking military action on 25–26 March, so they could not report from the ground and were reduced to sending stories from India. Most foreign journalists did not speak the local languages and were entirely reliant on translation by locals, which was a major disadvantage. However, too often even foreign journalists seemed to be seduced by the appeal of the ‘good versus evil’ story. As one Indian officer put it, ‘The propaganda machine worked hard and to good effect. Dressed in a lungi and rifle in hand, the Mukti Bahini guerrilla became an instant hero . . . The news-hungry press swallowed claims of fictitious successes which were widely believed’.⁴

The international press also seems to have swallowed ‘fictitious’ stories used by the ‘heroic’ side to smear their opponents. One of the most interesting cases that I discovered of media misreporting of events on the ground in 1971 due to political agenda-driven journalism was that of a massacre in Jessore, in which Bengali nationalists had killed non-Bengali (West Pakistani origin) civilians.⁵ Photographs of the dead men were passed off to the international media claiming to be evidence of exactly the opposite – that is, civilian victims allegedly killed by the Pakistan army. *New York Times* and *Washington Post* printed the photograph of the massacre on their front pages, wrongly identifying the victims and perpetrators. ‘East Pakistani sources’ were cited in the caption. *New York Times* and *Washington Post* practised sloppy journalism in this case, but what is equally

noteworthy is that the 'East Pakistani sources', who almost certainly knew the truth, must therefore have lied to the international press about who had killed whom in this case. Such misreporting was apparently quite common. In their study of the 1971 war at the diplomatic and policy level, Sisson and Rose found that 'India had, of course, a good case to make in terms of Pakistani atrocities in East Pakistan, and it found the foreign press incredibly gullible in accepting, without effort at verifying, the substantial exaggerations that were appended to the list of horror stories from Dhaka'.⁶

In the popular discourse the 1971 war has come to be depicted as a giant one-sided atrocity, committed by the Pakistan army (and its local allies) against 'ethnic' Bengali civilians. The situation on the ground turned out to have been far more complicated. There were atrocities galore, but the notion that only the army had committed them and virtually all their victims were non-combatant civilian Bengalis, targeted because of their Bengali identity, fell apart very quickly. Violence was apparently the weapon of choice for all sides. In the story I had grown up with, we were never told of Bengali nationalists killing anybody (except of course the armed forces and their local allies in the course of war, the latter always presumed to be a small minority of Islamist fifth columnists). The scale of the persecution and mass murder of non-Bengalis in the name of Bengali nationalism during the conflict shocked me, as did the violence towards Bengalis who did not subscribe to secession, or Awami League rule, as the answer to East Pakistan's grievances. As a Bengali from a nationalist background it deeply damaged my pride in my cultural heritage, and the tendency among pro-liberation Bangladeshis to deny or conceal these atrocities made matters worse. The invocation of the names of Mahatma Gandhi or Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose in the context of this murderous manifestation of 'nationalism' was outrageous.

In considering both published reminiscences and the oral testimony of those I interviewed, I was conscious of the limitations of 'memories' in reconstructing events. Memories of those who were actually present are clearly superior as primary source material for what happened in an incident compared to the 'views' of those who were not. However, memories may not always be accurate. After such a long time, some people may have genuinely forgotten or become confused about what happened. Others may deliberately give false or partial information. There is no way to guarantee that a witness will not conceal something. Yet there is no better source to study the ground realities. Sometimes a testimony is clearly supported or contradicted by more reliable information, at other times something that may seem dubious cannot be disproved. The only way to deal with this problem is to use multiple sources, which is what I do in this study.

There was a particular difficulty in interviewing traumatized people. I felt guilty for making them re-live their trauma, even though they were speaking to me willingly. People react very differently to traumatic events as well. Some were calm and stoic, others were unable to contain their grief even

after so many decades. One always wonders about the unimaginable pain within. Meghna Guhathakurta was calm as she showed me the site where her father had been shot by a Pakistan army officer in Dhaka University during the military crackdown on 25–26 March.⁷ Once I apologized to Shyamali Nasreen Choudhury for asking her to repeat a part of her recollections of the day the body of her husband, abducted by Bengali alleged ‘al Badr’ militia, was found in a brick-kiln in Dhaka after the end of the war. She said she did not mind – she would repeat it as many times as necessary in the interest of justice. Of a father and son who had survived a gruesome massacre in their village, I found the father to be incredibly free of rancour, to the extent of praising a different Pakistani army officer who had been posted in the area later in the year as a good officer. The son, who had been a child at the time, could not bear to have anything to do with any Pakistani. In another village in Bangladesh, a Hindu woman broke down while recounting how her son had been shot by Pakistani soldiers in front of her. I stopped interviewing and comforted her. It is not possible to remain impersonal in such instances, and I believe that such human interaction strengthens, rather than weakens, the gathering of crucial oral testimony. Listening to tales of almost unbearable pain also inevitably affects the listener. I was conscious of the need to remain focused and not get overwhelmed by the sheer awfulness of many of the memories.

In Pakistan my target interviewees were army officers who had served in East Pakistan in 1971. I aimed to speak primarily to those who had been relatively junior officers then, as they were the ones with the most relevant experience at the field level. In a stark contrast to Bangladesh, it was very difficult to persuade former officers of the Pakistan army to talk to me about their experiences in East Pakistan in 1971. It took a lot of effort and a lot of help from Pakistani and American friends to get a few people talking. The officers who talked to me seemed surprised by my neutrality and willingness to listen to their side of the story and would then recommend others. In this way eventually I was able to talk to about three dozen officers, almost all of them on record.

Several of the former officers of the Pakistan army impressed, coming across as upstanding human beings who had tried to do their duty in very difficult circumstances, sometimes even when they did not agree with the policy of military action. They were direct and to the point. Several were highly critical of both the political leaders and top commanders of the time, while also testifying to the extent and nature of Bengali nationalist violence. Even with the most straightforward of them however I wondered instinctively about the potential influence of a sense of institutional loyalty – while they might not tell me an untruth, I felt sometimes that they might not tell me the whole truth, especially if that would put a fellow officer in difficulty. Not everyone was equally impressive of course. There were a few evasions, some embellishments of heroism, or the tendency to see India behind every misfortune.

A few of the officers who were located refused to see me. Some of those who refused were officers accused of serious human-rights abuses. I was aware of the potential bias of self-selection here, with those who had nothing to hide being more willing to talk. However this was not always the case. For example, Major General Ghulam Umar, reputedly one of the most 'hawkish' in General Yahya Khan's 'inner circle', agreed readily to meet. In contrast, Lieutenant General Jehanzeb Arbab, who has one of the most controversial records of the 1971 war, repeatedly refused. I discovered that Lt Gen. Arbab was now better known in Pakistan for his beautiful gardens. The journalist in me considered developing a sudden interest in horticulture, but I let it pass as potentially counter-productive in this case.

Not all of the officers who declined to talk to me about 1971 necessarily had something to hide. For example, one refused saying that he was proud to have served, but did not want to re-live the experience. Speaking to some of the officers made me aware of how deeply the experiences of East Pakistan in 1971 had traumatized them as well. Some of them had then spent a further two years as prisoners of war in India. The most intriguing refusal was from a senior officer who had served at a key location, who declined with the message that he was unable to tell the truth and did not want to lie.

Particularly in Bangladesh I often had a crowd gather when someone was telling me his or her story from 1971, occasionally joining in to corroborate, contradict or add to the narration. Sometimes it seemed to help people to talk about an experience in a group. 'Bihari' residents in Khulna collectively told me about fellow residents being massacred by Bengalis with a strange matter-of-factness tinged with a simmering sense of injustice. At other times it was clearly difficult for some people to tell me about their experience in front of others, in particular fellow villagers. One got the clear impression that speaking openly might get them into trouble with their neighbours. Once a Hindu woman – surrounded by Muslim neighbours as she spoke – kept evading my question about exactly why she and her family were fleeing as refugees to India, eventually saying that they faced persecution from '*bairer miyara*' ('Muslim men from "outside"'). One got the uneasy feeling that probing for the exact identity of their tormentors would not be wise in those circumstances. If possible, I tried to talk to such people on their own, at some distance from the gathered crowds, but this was not always feasible.

A major obstacle in the way of hearing from people from all sides of the conflict in Bangladesh was that those who were helping me in Bangladesh were mostly contacts via India and devoted to the cause of Bangladeshi liberation. They tended to be hostile towards, and not on speaking terms with, their fellow countrymen who had opposed the break-up of Pakistan in 1971, or those who at the very least were less than enthusiastic about Sheikh Mujib and his party. I tried my best to find these different perspectives from Bangladesh, for example by locating and reading some published material by dissenters, such as the memoirs of Syed Sajjad Husain, former

Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi and Dhaka Universities. However, it was often difficult to discover and obtain such sources, or to find and arrange interviews with dissenting voices. As a result, in terms of volume my material from Bangladesh is skewed in favour of the pro-liberation side. However, some of the published material and some of those I interviewed were non-political, which helped me to represent the multiple perspectives within East Pakistan a little better. Over time I became more aware of Bangladeshis who had a different perspective from the diehard pro-liberation enthusiasts bent on propagating a particular version of the war, but they appeared to be inhibited from expressing their views or telling their stories publicly. Some of them expressed fear of persecution if they failed to toe the official line. Much of the supposedly 'liberal' space in the Bangladeshi media also seemed given over to the most illiberal attitudes with regard to the 1971 conflict, with routine recitations of established 'mantras' such as the claim of 'three million Bengalis' allegedly killed by the Pakistan army.

Though I had shed the 'advocacy' approach, I still felt immense sympathy towards those who had truly suffered during the war, regardless of their ethnicity or political beliefs. I also marvelled at the ability of a few individuals who had survived terrible violence and loss, such as Abdus Sattar, Zinnatul Alam or Nitai Gayen, nevertheless to think analytically about the circumstances of war; or the efforts of Achintya Saha to try to document the war in his area in rural Bangladesh despite his failing health; or the rational assessment of Dr Abul Kalam of Dhaka of the inevitable consequences of letting loose men with guns upon a civilian population.

I felt frustrated by the wild exaggerations or plain fabrications by other Bangladeshis – often those who had not really suffered much in the war, as they overshadowed not only the grimmer reality of the war but the true victims of it. The distortions were all the more pointless as they were completely unnecessary so far as the actions of the Pakistan army were concerned. Some members of the armed forces had demonstrably committed crimes against humanity – which I documented – and their true actions were ghastly enough and needed no embellishment. Indeed, the exaggerations and falsifications undermined the credibility of the whole story of Bangladesh's liberation, including the true parts, and thus were completely self-defeating and grossly unfair to the true victims of injustice. Attempts by some people – both Bangladeshi and Pakistani – to paint a more heroic picture of themselves, were perhaps only to be expected given human nature. I was more troubled by the pro-liberation Bangladeshis' refusal to acknowledge the brutalities committed by their own side in the name of Bengali nationalism while making accusations against their enemies. I firmly believe that those who conceal or deny crimes against humanity committed by their own side have no right to accuse others, demand apologies, stage war-crimes trials or claim to speak for freedom, democracy and human rights.

Since presenting an initial paper on the 1971 conflict in Washington in 2005 I have received warm praise and encouragement from many scholars and journalists, but also vitriolic abuse from some people – primarily a particular section of Bangladeshis who fear that their version of events is threatened by my book. Threats by people claiming to represent Bengali nationalism against those who try to tell the truth are nothing new – it happened in 1971 as well. In April 1971 in Jessore, while Nicholas Tomalin and a BBC Panorama crew were going around with their ‘Awami League guide’ and reporting what was shown to them as Pakistan army atrocities, all was fine, but as soon as they ‘found the half-alive and bloody bodies of men whom we recognized as the Punjabi prisoners we had seen an hour before’, they were no longer welcome. The men who had been hacked to death by the so-called ‘Bengali nationalists’ were civilian residents of West Pakistani origin. ‘Before we were forced to leave by threatening supporters of Shaikh Mujib we saw another 40 Punjabi “spies” being taken towards the killing ground with their hands on their heads, irregulars pushing them in the back with primitive guns.’⁸

Bengalis are widely believed to have a strong sense of cultural identity. In 1947 a few Bengalis across parties – notably Sarat Chandra Bose of the Indian National Congress and Abul Hashim of the Muslim League – tried to float a last-ditch ‘United Bengal’ plan to prevent the partition of Bengal along communal lines. Even though that plan failed, a strong strand of sentimental Bengali nationalism still seems to flow across the border, connecting ‘*epar Bangla–opar Bangla*’, that is, West Bengal state in India and independent Bangladesh. For most of my life I subscribed to the emotional appeal of this cultural pride. My interest in the Bangladesh war sprang from my own memory of Bengali nationalism sweeping Calcutta in 1971. But my research uncovered the ugly face of competing nationalisms during the 1971 war, as the subcontinent was partitioned again. My discovery of the realities of 1971 has had a profound personal effect in this regard: it has cured me of Bengali nationalism.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 The focus of Indian writers was primarily on the inter-state war between India and Pakistan at the end of 1971 and the Indian triumph, with books by Indian generals titled *Surrender in Dacca – Birth of a Nation*, *Victory in Bangladesh*, *Lightning Campaign*, and so on.

2 Yasmin Saikia, ‘Beyond the Archive of Silence: Narratives of Violence of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh’, *History Workshop Journal* 58, autumn 2004.

3 An annotated bibliography – summarizing the types and content of published works in Bengali and English – and lists of interviewees are given in the Appendices to my book *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War*, New York, 2011.

4 Maj. Gen. Lachhman Singh, *Victory in Bangladesh*, Dehra Dun, 1981, p. 60.

5 I wrote about this and another case in *The Telegraph*, India, 19 March 2006.

6 Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India and the Creation of Bangladesh*, Los Angeles, 1990, p. 217.

7 I have examined this case in detail in my book, and also wrote an article focused on the question of who killed him in *The Telegraph*, India: ‘Murder Most Foul’, 27 March 2011.

8 Nicholas Tomalin, ‘Mass Slaughter of Punjabis in East Bengal’, *The Times*, 2 April 1971. Saikia (see n. 3 above) appears to have had a similar experience when researching gender violence in the 1971 war.