

BANGLADESH WAR OF 1971

A Prescription for Reconciliation?

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This is a discussion of Sarmila Bose's article: 'Anatomy of Violence: Analysis of Civil War in East Pakistan in 1971' (*EPW*, October 8, 2005). A version of this paper was first presented by Bose at a two-day conference, on June 28-29, 2005, organised by the historian branch of the US department of state titled 'South Asia in Crisis: United States Policy, 1961-1972'.¹ This was arranged to mark the release of declassified US records relating to the theme of the conference. As an Indian working in Bangladesh for nearly a decade on the public memories of sexual violence during the Bangladesh war [Mookherjee 2004, 2006 and forthcoming] of 1971, I was particularly struck by the author's use of the phrase "civil war" to refer to the Bangladesh war. Most Bangladeshis denounce the use of civil war to refer to the Bangladesh war as it deflects attention from its genocidal connotations. Instead, they semantically and politically distinguish the Bangladesh war as either 'Muktijuddho' (liberation war) or 'Shadhinotar juddho' (independence war). It is also important to note that occurring at the juncture of cold war politics, with the US government supporting Pakistan during 1971 [Hitchens 2001], and the Indian government assisting the East Pakistani guerrilla fighters, till date, the genocidal connotations of the Bangladesh war remains unacknowledged. The use of the phrase "civil war" in the title of the article, suggests that the author was in agreement with the Pakistani and US government's version of events of 1971. Yet the paper was claiming to provide "an impartial account". I was intrigued.

Through what Bose refers to as "case studies", she tries to highlight how violence was inflicted by both sides – the

Pakistani army and the East Pakistani liberation fighters – during the 1971 war. She also refers to the lack of incidents of rape during the Bangladesh war in her "cases" in a small paragraph found at the end of her long article. She suggests a prescription for reconciliation through an acknowledgement of violence inflicted by all parties involved. Soon after the Washington conference, the points made in her paper were promptly picked up by the Pakistani newspapers: *The Daily Times* (Hasan, June 30, 2005; Editorial, July 2, 2005) and *Dawn* (Iqbal, July 7, 2005). Both refer to the violence inflicted by both sides and the absence of rape during the Bangladesh war. The entry on Sarmila Bose in *Wikipedia*, the popular internet encyclopedia, reiterates only the brief paragraph on rape. In a response to *Uttorshuri*, a Bangladeshi web mail group, on July 2, 2005, Bose said: "the heading given to the *Daily Times*, Pakistan, report is incorrect and not the finding of my study". Her work unleashed a barrage of criticism in Bangladesh and her research methods have been attacked as shoddy and biased.² Ironically, the criticisms against Bose have been recently echoed in a media monitor website called www.Indpride.com, which refers to Bose as "one amongst the Indian anarchist-Marxist press" who praises Pakistan.

Collingwood (1945) has shown that historical "facts" are the reconstitution of the past in the historian's minds, involving the selection and interpretation of the past, as history is the choice of a particular expository style that is itself determined historically. My discussion of Bose's article here, nearly 10 months after the publication of her article in *EPW*, is an attempt to show the various responses to Bose's work, her response to these feedbacks and to highlight Bose's expository style which is appropriated by varied

configurations. In this discussion, I critically address Bose's exposition about (a) violence being inflicted on both sides, (b) the lack of instances of rape in her "cases" and (c) interrogate her formulation of reconciliation and highlight its implications on subcontinental politics.

Violence Inflicted on Both Sides

All parties involved are shown to "commit acts of brutality outside accepted norms of warfare, and all had their share of humanity, ... with Bengalis, Biharis and West Pakistanis helping one another in the midst of mayhem", in Bose's article. This is evidenced, by the Pakistan army targeting adult males while sparing women and children. However, local Bengali "loyalists"/collaborators and not the Pakistani army are involved in inflicting violence on their fellow Bengalis and the killing of intellectuals. According to these accounts, the Pakistani army did not inflict all the violence. This decontextualised account of Bengali collaborators does not recognise the triggers and advantages that the presence and collaboration with the Pakistani army, created. It misses the analytical point that in all wars local collaborators become the indispensable foot soldiers of institutionalised, military paraphernalia.

The Pakistani army is portrayed as kind and violent when provoked, whereas the Bengalis inflict violence "for unfathomable reasons". The situation in Bangladesh during 1971 is described through phrases like: "widespread lawlessness during March", "encouraged to break the law", "urban terrorism" and "rebels". The treatment of the Pakistani army, namely: "refusal of Bengalis to sell them food and fuel, being jeered and spat at, ... and the widespread disregard of curfew orders, murder of army personnel", are not considered to be examples of resistance and opposition, but are cited as instances of the suffering of the Pakistani army and an exhibition of "extraordinary restraint of the army under provocation". The "rule of law" remains with the Pakistani army as they "secure" and "gain control" over territories. Army reaction is cited as "overwhelming" while the rebels are

“disorganised and amateurish” who for “unfathomable reasons...take pot-shots at the advancing units in the bazaar which triggered an overwhelming reaction from the army”.

There is no commentary on the contestations that exist in Bangladesh in relation to the varied national narratives of 1971.³ As a result, the observation by the former liberation fighter Iqbal remains unanalysed:

This must be the only country in the world where there are two views on the independence of the country.

As in-depth reading of various critical literature on war and violence [Butalia 1998; Das 1995; Nordstrom 2004] would show, liberation and independence of countries are not homogeneous narratives and contain within its folds multiple, contesting interrogations of wars through which countries become free. This is more so the case in Bangladesh given its fractured histories of partitions and independence. Also, Nixon’s reference to Bangladesh as the “god-damn place” remains uncommented on. This article which was first presented in a conference hosted by the US state department is particularly conspicuous with the absence of any critical examination of the US support for Pakistan’s role in the Bangladesh war of 1971 [Hitchens 2001], in the context of cold war calculations.

The article is helpful in addressing the ethnicisation of the army as “Punjabis”, and in bringing out some of the nuances of the Pakistani army. That wars and conflicts are rife with instances of violence, kindness, cowardice, complicity, contradictions by the same individuals is not anything new and has been highlighted by various feminist, critical researchers and filmmakers within Bangladesh [Akhtar et al 2001; Chaudhuri 2001; Kabir 2003; Masud 1999, 2000]. They show the multiple, contradictory subjectivities, of the Bangladesh war experience and the violence inflicted upon the poor, women, Biharis and adivasis. In my own work, I have encountered similar complicities and contradictions. Rather than citing these experiences as ahistorical and apolitical “facts”, they need to be located at the crossroads of local and national politics and histories.

The earlier mentioned formulation by Collingwood (1945) is significant here. In her other writings, Bose has attempted to go beyond Indo-Pakistani enmities. She highlights the various symbolic roles of a

flag and the possible repercussions of possessing a Pakistani flag in India [Bose 2003]. In the *Christian Science Monitor* she argues [Bose and Milam 2005], in support of the sale of F-16s to Pakistan as a stabilising factor within world and sub-continental geopolitics. In the *EPW* article, the nature of her expository style and presentation of “facts” make her “cases” representative of war-time experiences of all in Bangladesh.

Skewing the History of Rape

The small paragraph located in the last page of the article relating to the absence of rape in the “cases”, has been highlighted as evidence that the Pakistani army did not rape. In her response to *Uttorshuri*, Bose says: “the issue of rape amounted to about 100 words out of a nearly 6,500-word paper on the subject of patterns of violence in 1971”. An issue as contentious as the “patterns” of violence of rape, can be claimed to be absent, through only “100 words”! Bose explicates:

As I pointed out in the discussion that followed, there is evidence elsewhere that rape certainly occurred in 1971. But it seems – from this study and other works that it may not have occurred in all the instances it is alleged to have occurred.

Bose’s comment that rapes did occur elsewhere in 1971 is absent in her *EPW* article. In it she emphasises, the need to distinguish between the instances where rapes occurred and where it did not. Throughout it shows that the Bengalis raped Biharis while the Pakistani army did not rape anyone during the war. Also, it is not very clear which “cases” are being referred to in the statement: the rapes “may not have occurred in all the instances it is alleged

to have occurred”. Rather than this generalised statement, it would have been a more transparent scholarship to cite the specific “cases” where the rapes were alleged which the research instead finds, are absent.

Bose shows, in the case of “mutinies” by “rebels” “there was assault and abduction” of women. The Pakistani army however, *always* targeted adult males while sparing women and children. The Hamdoodur Rahman Commission (2000) established by the Pakistani government while referring to the attack and rape of pro-Pakistani elements by Bengalis also cites various instances of rape. Eyewitness accounts can also be found in the eighth volume of the *Dolil* [Rahman 1982-85: 106, 192, 385]. There is literature from the 1970s [Greer 1972; Brownmiller 1975] and recent scholarship and films based on oral history from within Bangladesh [Akhtar et al 2001; Chaudhuri 2001; Guhathakurta 1996; Ibrahim 1994-95; Kabir 2003; Masud 2000] which shows that the Pakistani army committed rapes and highlights the complexities of these violent encounters. Bose makes no reference to any of these documentations.

Recently, in Bangladesh, various women from different socio-economic backgrounds have narrated their violent experiences of rape by the Pakistani army and local collaborators. The well known sculptor Ferdousy Priyobhashini has been vocal about her war-time experiences and the role of Pakistani army and Bengalis. My own work with various women, who were raped during the war, shows the contradictions of the war-time experiences while highlighting their violent encounters. All these documentations emerge as important counter-narratives to the various prevalent Bangladeshi nationalist

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accounts of the war. Emphasising these war-time contradictions does not tantamount to a denial of the incidents of rape perpetrated by Pakistani army and their local collaborators.

Prescription for Reconciliation?

Reconciliation according to Bose is possible through an acknowledgement of violence inflicted by all parties involved. However, for her, this is hinged on an unequal reliance on literally accepting the various viewpoints of the Pakistani army and administration, drawn from secondary sources (only one interview with general Niazi is briefly quoted). While referring to the innumerable publications on 1971 as a “cottage industry”, Bose seems to negate the emotive expressions of her informants as: “the cultivation of an unhealthy ‘victim culture’”, a “ghoulish competition with six million Jews in order to gain international attention”. This highlights a lack of empathy with her informants and insensitivity to their comprehension of violence. Primo Levi’s (1996) work on Auschwitz shows that individuals who have encountered and survived violence make various complicated, competitive and contradictory negotiations, to inhabit their survival and “victimhood”. Here, Bangladeshi testimonials are ironically the means through which war-time narratives are negated. The various individual accounts of violence in turn become muted with the prescription of “reconciliation”. Significantly, for many Bangladeshis, “reconciliation” has a jarring resonance, as it is perceived to be the objective of various war-time collaborators, who are currently rehabilitated in the Bangladeshi political landscape.

Seen only as a “god-damn place” (Nixon), a “basket case” (Kissinger), Bangladesh is stereotypically viewed internationally and in south Asia as a country ravaged only by poverty, floods, cyclones and hence in need of the saviour, interventionist, developmental paradigms. Here, Bangladeshi histories and politics are again delegitimised as a result of subcontinental dynamics as there is no engagement with the wider picture in Bangladesh. The expositions in this article itself stand in the way of reconciliation between Bangladesh and Pakistan and cannot provide a prescription to resolve these hostilities. War-time contradictions, complicities, nuances can be highlighted without negating the

foundational violence of the history of rape of the Bangladesh war perpetrated by the Pakistani army and the local collaborators. While the Bangladesh war might be a “civil war” or Indo-Pakistan war for India and Pakistan, for most Bangladeshis it is the war of liberation and independence, even though that liberation might be interrogated in post-colonial Bangladesh. Only by recentring the issues which concern Bangladesh, along with highlighting the contradictions of war-time experiences, would alone, ensure reconciliation between Pakistan and Bangladesh rather than arguments, which cater to Indo-Pakistan geopolitical concerns. **EW**

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Notes

- 1 See <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/46059.htm>
- 2 See the *Drishtipat* website for a compilation of all the responses and Discussion Forum (dated till May 2006): ‘The Story of Pakistan’.
- 3 Bose (2005) only accords general Ziaur Rehman with the declaration of independence. Absent is the leadership debate in Bangladesh which relates to the participation of civilians or the military, and role of Sheikh Mujib or general Ziaur Rehman, in providing inspiration to the Bangladesh war.

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