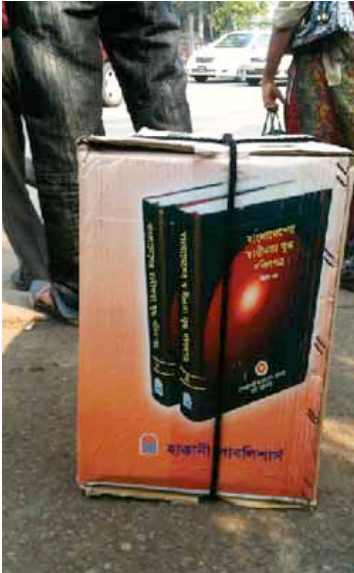


Prisoners of shothik itihash by Naeem Mohaiemen



Packed copies of Documents of the Liberation War. (Image © Naeem Mohaiemen)

At a seminar discussing the fortieth anniversary of the 1971 war, an older gentleman interrupted me, stern finger raised high: 'You must strive to present *shothik itihash* (correct history).' I shivered and wondered who was going to decide for us, once again, as before, what was and is correct history.

Later, during a research session combing through photocopies of archival documents, I asked the custodian where the originals were. The documents he had shown me were pristine yet distant, copies of copies. The originals are long gone, he explained. Every time there is a change in government, an official inevitably comes down to the storeroom and asks to see what is inside. With a tradition of abrupt and forced *pala bodol*, every state functionary assumes that nothing that came before his time will help his cause. Therefore, the safest path is to destroy all documents, which the official does with mechanical and unemotional efficiency. The cause is, of course, not documenting the war, but only of preserving, amplifying, and exaggerating the portions that can help the party in power. All the parts that do not fit – the chopping block for you.

1971 was and remains a watershed moment in the interlinked history of the subcontinent. It gave birth to the region's youngest nation through war, genocide, and cascading superpower politics. It set a precedent for ethnic and linguistic self-determination, although the subsequent rebellions in provinces of Pakistan and India did not result in self-rule (although my Indian and Pakistani colleagues always remind me, history is never complete). The creation of separate nations on both sides of India had a seesaw effect, stabilising regional imperatives but triggering new instabilities.

For Bangladesh, the last forty years have been tumultuous times. The way we try to remember, or forget, 1971 reflects our shifting relationship with foundational histories (and myths). As an independent nation, Bangladesh seems to have no visible regrets about rejecting the 'two-nation' theory. The embers of memory, and tensions with Pakistan, keep reviving through unresolved issues such as the war crimes trials, reparations and the continued semi-limbo state of 'Bihari' refugees; also flaring up are micro-debates such as whether audiences should cheer for the Pakistan cricket team when they play at the Mirpur stadium. 'Shahid Afridi please marry me' has given way, at least temporarily, to 'Sakib al Hasan Number One.'

Everything is clear, and yet all remain in flux. The ghosts of 1971 keep returning to plague the body politic, reflected, for example, in our troubled, unresolved, performative relationship with the much maligned,

misunderstood and misappropriated icon of secularism. After forty years, the main argument for separation of mosque and state still remains this: Jamaat-e-Islami has leaders who operated wartime death squads. But what happens when 1971 memory is no longer sufficient to protect this concept of secularism?

Looking toward the future, the country has many stabilising achievements in the areas of economic growth, women's empowerment, infrastructure, and modernisation. In a recent essay, Amartya Sen asserted that Bangladesh has half of India's GNP per capita, yet outperforms it on many key Human Development Indicators (Amartya Sen, 'Quality of Life: India vs. China', New York Review of Books, May 12, 2011). Specific initiatives within the NGO movement have given rise to a positive image push, birthing initiatives like Brand Bangladesh (often with elements of uncritical boosterism that carry worrying parallels to India Shining). But, for the elements that remain at odds with foundational narratives (the slow-motion ethnic cleansing of the Jumma ethnic minority in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the permanent economic underclass Hindu population, the neo-liberal economic project's incompatibility with concepts of economic equality), a gung-ho version of history is also an extinction threat – because it seeks to marginalise everything at odds with a triumphant, and majoritarian, Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism.

With a majority of the population born after the war, we also have, at times, an uncomplicated and flattening relationship to history. An iconic image of Mukti Bahini fighters, smoothly photo-shopped into an advert for the launch of more branches of BRAC Bank. Who are those joddhas, who took the photo, and who gave permission for the image to be instrumentalised in this fashion? The aged veterans of the 1952 language riots, filmed in bas-relief for a '30 Minutes That Shook The World' campaign: commemorating the language movement in a sepia fashion, but also marketing the country's largest mobile telco Grameenphone (majority owned by Telenor Norway).

Looking at the crowds of people at a midnight commemoration at the Shaheed Minar, I remarked to my friend and collaborator, architect Salahuddin Ahmed, 'this is good, isn't it?' Growing up under the Ershad military regime, we remembered how celebrations of liberation had been driven deep underground. By contrast, this was shaping up as a tidal wave of consciousness. But Salahuddin gently reminded me that the ubiquity of tiger-striped head-bandannas in the crowd was not a sign only of identity, but rather free advertising for #2 mobile telco Bangla Link (owned by Orascom Egypt). To Salahuddin, this was not a moment of commemoration, but rather a potent slide toward de-historicising: memory driven only by product placement opportunities. Events are only history if a billboard goes up.

I have remarked at public seminars that along with this corporate instrumentalisation of history, the greatest damage to the process of recording 1971 stories has been the involvement of politicians. They have repeatedly dabbled into the process of documentation and compilation – attempting to set up a reward-patronage system for loyal academics, and punishment system (or exile) for those who refuse to toe the party line. What to think of the recent unhinged polemics by octogenarian historians, deploying 'facts' in a facile manner (no footnotes, no references, no context) in the service of political campaigns. While engaged in what they consider a fight to the finish with the opposition party, do they stop to think what will happen if and when that opposition returns to power? This same process of history-of-victors will repeat, except then it will be about excavating grey areas on the other side (and let us accept that every aspect of our complicated national history contains multitudes).

What of the courts, which along with attempting to legislate the correct version of Bengali to be spoken ghere, also pass rulings against 'mis-educating' students on history? A blogger friend sounds a pessimistic note: 'Our countrymen are maybe more blatant about it than most, but there is no "true" history anywhere in the world. It's all air-brushed, covered with pancake makeup, and then dipped into rosewater.' He suggests that these history wars are just a form of dialectic struggle, perhaps a healthy one at that. But I have to insist, again, that this struggle is not producing better readings. Instead the volume is rising to a shrill pitch, making everything unintelligible.

In 2004, while interviewing activists for the film *Muslims or Heretics: My Camera Can Lie*, I sat with photographer Tanvir Murad, who asked me: 'Are these the only options available to us?' His question was about event-response-protest modes of activism, but it applies equally to our process of memory. Are we forever trapped between the two extreme polarities of AL and BNP history? How do we incentivise independent research that is free of the imperatives of state power, or of sycophancy to the same?

Beware also of the elders who make proclamations such as 'your generation has to set the record straight.' These generational torch-passing gestures are subtly also about their ego gratification. We are supposed to convey our gratefulness and our basic loyalty to their version of history. Try heading for an actual break with the basic, enshrined narrative and then you will see the reactions.

Last year, the government announced an initiative to have the 15-volume *Shadhinota Juddho Dolil Patra* (Documents of the Liberation War) [Information Ministry: Government of Bangladesh, *Bangladesher Shadhinota Juddho Dolil Patra*, Hakkani Publishers, 1984, reprinted 2011] sent to government schools. A few days later, I saw sales agents with boxes of books from Hakkani Publishers, bound together with twine, waiting for their bus to arrive. Over the next few years, these books may find their way into many mofussil schools and offices. A commendable effort, but I worry, still – what happens if the opposition political party comes back to power. Does the *Dolil Patra* become blacklisted, as 'incorrect history'?

After forty years of independence, we are still navigating very basic debates. What is the foundational declaration of independence: is it Sheikh Mujib's March 7 speech, or Major Zia's Chittagong Radio communiqué? Is it both? Each time a new government arrives, the entire terrain shifts. The same audio may re-circulate, but now crucial seconds will be mysteriously clipped out. No wonder many choose to remain in national ignorance about the many meanings of 1971. Perhaps they rationalize: it will change in a few years anyway, why bother memorizing this set of 'facts'.

Thus far, we have been prisoners of history, and for those wishing to break free of proscribed narratives, decoupling historical research from the political process is an essential evolution, to start capturing 1971 in all its complexities, its twinning of achievement and heartbreak.

Naeem Mohaiemen's work on 1971 includes 'Waiting for a real reckoning on 1971' (a critique of Sarmila Bose's 'Dead Reckoning'), published in Economic & Political Weekly (Vol 46 # 36, 09/09/2011) and Partition as Productive Space (Cornell: Johnson Museum, 2012). An earlier, shorter version of this piece was published in The Hindu, 'Prisoners of Correct History', December 16, 2011.

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