



## Constructed Memories of 1971 War

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The ghost of 1971 civil-war hovered on general elections in Bangladesh in January 2014. The tribunal constituted to try the perpetrators of violence in 1971 started delivering its phase wise verdicts from 2013. Initially as the tribunal did not hand over death sentence to ‘butcher of Mirpur’ Abdul Quader Mollah, the people’s movement popularly known as Shahbag movement erupted. The verdicts and the movement were opportunities to re-start a fresh debate over the incidents of 1971, give space to alternative narratives and accept their mistakes too. Nothing like that happened; instead Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina used the environment for political benefit. Amidst mass violence, and boycott by the opposition political parties, Ms Hasina led-government administered flawed election to remain in power.

Though the official version of 1971 has been deliberately precluded from any challenge, in recent times many scholars have come out with their versions of history. Many unknown facts of liberation war of Bangladesh have been discovered which provide answers to many questions related to its skewed socio-political structure. In 2011 a movie named *Meherjaan* was released but after a few days it was taken off from the theaters because of wide protests against its story-line of love affair between a Balochi soldier and a Bengali woman. Of course a few proponents of freedom of expression came out against censorship of the film. Talking about 1971, Nayanika Mookherjee writes that her research shows many Pakistani soldiers are being accused by their battalion mates for aiding the East Pakistani civilians to escape from detention.

About the violence of 1971, it is a reality that Pakistani soldiers carried out ethnic genocide, but the Awami League (AL) cadres too played a role in inflaming humanitarian crisis. On the basis of an interview, Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed, in his book *The Pakistan Military in Politics: Origins, Evolution, Consequences*, writes that after it became clear that the Assembly was not meeting on 3 March 1971, Bengali militants began to attack Biharis (Urdu speaking people in East Pakistan) in Chittagong. The Pakistan Army remained passive till 25 March. Citing from the Hamodur Rehman Commission, he further writes that the commission wondered why the military had not tried to quell the agitation at that early stage and had, instead, been ordered to return to its barracks.

There is also a dispute over number of people killed during the liberation war in East Pakistan. After liberation of Bangladesh, in an interview, Sheikh Mujib said that three million people were killed. Since then 3 million has become an iconic number for Bangladeshis. On the basis of interview with senior Indian army officers, who held important post during the liberation war, Richard Sission and Leo E. Rose in *War and Secession: Pakistan, India and the Creation of Bangladesh* do not agree with the 3 million figure. In Bangladesh any form of disagreement over this number attracts legal hassle for individuals or institutions. David Bergman, Dhaka based British journalist too questioned that figure, for which Bangladesh's War Crimes Tribunal-2 initiated contempt proceedings against him.

Once Bangladesh was liberated the situation did not improve. The stakeholders in liberated Bangladesh used violent means to consolidate their political power. Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi writes that in order to amass power, in less than three years of drafting of the original constitution in 1972, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972-75) pushed through the fourth amendment, which instituted authoritarian one-party rule in place of parliamentary democracy. Mujib sidelined the armed forces, and created his own paramilitary forces, the Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini (JRB). It became associated with arbitrary terrorizing tactics, and an instrument to quash resistance to the regime. After the assassination of Sheikh Mujibbur Rehman in 1975, Major Ziaur Rehman, through a coup, became head of the state. During the long period of army rule, Jammāt-i-Islami (JI), banned by Sheikh Mujib, was allowed to take part in politics through the enactment of Political Party Regulation (PPR) in 1978. The JI gradually strengthened its

presence and became a player after restoration of democracy in Bangladesh. It emerged as the fourth largest political party after 2001 elections and had two cabinet positions as coalition partner in the government between 2001 and 2006.

History of a country shapes its socio-political dynamics and its future trajectory. Often, to get away from the dictatorship of past, countries do re-write and re-create their history by restructuring their socio-political structures; but a caveat is always there: the means to re-create history may lead to chaos and setting up an archaic social and political structure. Those countries, with few exceptions, which have used violence as a means to any form of socio-political change, carry forward that legacy; Bangladesh is one such example. It had opportunities to create a new history but it failed to do so. The country is still living with its own version of 1971. It is not ready to accept any other narrative which may give it a chance to learn from its past and address root causes for structural violence in Bangladesh.

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