



Shahabag to Saidpur: Uneasy Intersections and the Politics of Forgetting¹

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My memory keeps getting in the way of your history.
(Agha Shahid Ali)

Prelude

Bangladesh is turning fifty in 2021. The history of genocide by the Pakistani army and their collaborators against Bengalis in 1971 has been passed down across generations—narratives of trauma, loss and triumph that continue to shape our imaginations today. Of course, many of us did not experience the war ourselves, but we did witness the birth and death of Shahabag—watched it unfold from the ground, soaking in the spirit of the collective. This was the euphoria that gripped the nation-state in February 2013—Dhaka city pulsating with chants of '*phashi chai*' ('hang them now'), and huge red posters with white skinny fists covering the billboards, challenging the state and judiciary and demanding that the war criminals of 1971 be hanged. Generations who had not experienced the trauma of war themselves were enthralled by the magic of nationalism, a magic that even as it unified some, also vilified "others".

Movements and uprisings are typically taken as responses to history and reality. Yet Shahabag's continued hold on our imaginations is, I argue, just



as much about the unanswered questions it posed. The movement demanded a hasty closure to the unresolved wounds of 1971, aspiring for a new beginning without questioning the nationalist history of the Liberation War that has been handed down to us as canon. In the process, the hope for a new radical politics that it had rekindled was immediately snuffed out, leaving behind despair, desolation, and unanswered questions. Had a truly "inclusive" nation-state ever been possible?

This article is an exploration of some of these questions. They are posed, I argue, because of the "loopholes" in the canonical narratives of the nation's history, loopholes I explore by turning instead to memory and the lived experiences of the nation-state at its "margins", in the small, multi-ethnic, post-colonial town of Saidpur. By connecting two very different moments in history and juxtaposing "centre" and "periphery", I look at multiple and conflicting discourses on 1971 in the making and the patterns of what is remembered and forgotten. I look at how personal memories of trauma and abandonment have become subsumed under the meta-narratives of 1971. Such narratives are always mediated and perpetually curated in response to changing historical and material conditions, class aspirations and the interests of different ruling regimes. The remembering of certain histories and forgetting of others is, I argue, a deeply political act. Despite dramatic shifts in both regimes and narratives, certain omissions have been universal to all.

I propose that by restraining the histories of violence against the nation's multiple "others", a simplistic, "valiant" narrative of 1971 has emerged that has enabled an exclusionary and intolerant Bengali nationalism that legitimises certain hierarchies and makes certain lives invisible. At the same time, critiques of such narratives have tended to ignore the concrete historical conditions in which they emerged and the popular aspirations they carried, thereby unintentionally replacing the simplified narratives of valour with ones of victimhood, ignoring the mutual, collective culpability of war and post-colonial violence. The paper thus aims at both a critical revisioning of the nationalist narratives of 1971, by exploring the contradictory and layered histories of censorship and sanction, legitimacy and prohibition, remembering and forgetting, while paying attention to the conditions that allowed such narratives to become hegemonic.

In order to do so, I have felt it necessary to leave Shahabag, and go "back" to a different time and place. The small, northern town of Saidpur bears the testimonies of how multiple colonial powers have, over centuries, shaped the everyday lives of their subjects, and how their effects have



continued to echo even after 1971. It's unique, historical mix of ethnicities and religions presents us with the paradoxes of a "plural" community that has lived through multiple post-colonial nation-states, allowing us to ask the question—what does it mean to *remain*? At the same time, Saidpur allows us to "provincialise" the nation-state itself, and see how the state was met with a different kind of nation at its "margins". Methodologically, the intergenerational experiences of my interlocutors, belonging to both pre and post-Partition and post-71 settler communities (Bengali, Marwari, Bihari and Bahe) allowed me to explore how their memories kept 'getting into the way' of the nationalist history, and the violence that has followed after every new (re-)imagination of "the nation"—be it Pakistan or Bangladesh—revealing a horror story of sheer abandonment.

Theoretically, these voices from the margin have helped me articulate the aftermath of such violence and the selective amnesia these histories have been filtered through, as well as the complex, multiple and shifting allegiances of the nation-state's citizens, and the price that they have been paying for their allegiances all their lives. These narratives also reveal the material conditions of such violence, letting us see how each new articulation of the nation was enabled by and in turn legitimised its own political economy of oppression, and thus how these genealogies of violence have been intrinsic to both class and nation formation. Finally, they raise the question of the culpability of the state, which by curating history has persistently excluded its citizens with multiple allegiances as "others", thereby institutionalising hierarchies and the violence that sustains them.

Shahabag: rhetoric old and new

It all began with the verdict of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT)² on 5 February 2013. Abdul Quader Mollah, Assistant General Secretary of *Jamat-e-Islami* (JI) was found guilty of war crimes and sentenced to life imprisonment.³ He was accused of raping an underage girl, slaughtering a poet, and killing 344 people during the Liberation War. To many, the verdict seemed too "soft" for the crimes he had committed, propelling bloggers and activists to organise an immediate protest—a candle light vigil at Shahabag—a major intersection at the cultural heart of the capital. Concerned citizens raised questions about the ICT and the government's intentions (Alam 2013). Messages spread like wildfire through social media. The non-violent nature of the demonstration drew even more people in to what would become the largest popular, sustained uprising in the country's recent history. The gathered masses demanded that all war criminals be



hanged, JI be banned from Bangladeshi politics, and all their institutions be boycotted.

Most of the identified war criminals were JI leaders who had collaborated with the Pakistani Army in conducting genocide against their very own fellow citizens in 1971. The Shahabag movement was thus a direct threat to the JI's very existence, and it responded by threatening to embroil the nation in a veritable civil war, resulting in attacks and counter-attacks in both the virtual and real worlds ("Dirty tricks" 2013).⁴ Violence crept inside this nonviolent movement when blogger Rajib Haider was hacked to death for his alleged 'atheism'.⁵ By no means were all of the protesters non-believers, and many grew puzzled and wary as this new 'atheist' vs. 'believer' emerged. As the bodies dropped and temples and pagodas crumbled, non-violence too began to feel impotent ("Train made to derail 2013; "Bagerhat, Barisal" 2013).⁶

For the first few days activists⁷ managed to keep the movement separated from mainstream national politics, by not allowing any political leaders to give speeches or appear at the protest site. Their position revealed a growing mistrust of established power structures and elites, exposing the incongruities and failures of traditional party-politics that is symptomatic of many neoliberal states (Canovan 1999; laclau 2007; Mudde 2016; Bilgrami 2018). At the same time, however, the state apparatuses were unwilling to risk losing the support of this critical mass, resulting in the city-corporation actively providing basic amenities while Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina publicly endorsed the movement.

On the other hand, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)⁸ Chairperson Khaleda Zia called it a 'fascist' uprising,⁹ lending critical support to their old ally JI at an opportune moment. Islamist groups like *Hefazat-e-Islam* (HI) resurfaced and initially received ruling-party patronage as a counter-weight to JI, a strategy that backfired spectacularly. The HI grand rally on 5 May, held to condemn the so-called 'atheist' uprising in Shahabag, transformed into a site where the "nation" was put through another imagining, this time as an "Islamic" regime. Emboldened by the BNP, Jatiya Party (JP), JI and *Hefazat* leaders called for a movement to bring down the government, a call that was immediately quashed through brutal state violence, celebrated by the secular middle-class¹⁰ as a victory for their own envisioning of the nation (Sabur 2013a). What began at Shahabag ended at Shapla square.

The image of a nation is not fixed indelibly, but is constantly questioned and re-articulated. In the case of Bangladesh, the secular dream of the nation did not last very long. Islam, which had once taken a "back seat" in



the imagination of the nation, found its way back ideologically and politically, and was reinstated both in everyday life and in the Constitution (Sabur 2013b). The conflict between the old and new guards in this rearticulation of the nation was what we saw in Shahabag, a last-ditch effort to save the secular nation. Slogans and banners from 1971 were deployed to renew long-forgotten imaginaries of the nation, but this time without the threat of an occupying force at the gates, expanding the space for a hegemonic Bengali nationalism to thrive. For a while, these signifiers did call forth huge crowds and galvanised the spirit of 1971, but this impulse soon crumbled, and the movement lost its context.

All movements have their own baggage, and Shahabag was no different. Yet it also forced academics to scrutinise how the nation is imagined and performed. There were glimmers of new imaginings being forged in Shahabag, seen for example in the conscious replacement of male icons for combatant female ones. Huge murals of Jahanara Imam dominated the visual images in Shahabag square. The presence of the nation-state was, however, inevitably announced by the enormous flag waving over the crowd. The sheer scale of the movement forced the state to acknowledge its presence. By ensuring the execution of all the key war criminals¹¹ the movement brought a kind of closure to some unresolved wounds of 1971. Shahabag began with a radical potential to rearticulate an inclusive nationalism. For example, their initial Bengali-chauvinistic slogans drawn from 1971, such as 'Ami ke? Tumi ke? Bangali, Bangali' ('Who am I? Who are you? Bangali, Bangali'), met with critique and soon changed into 'Ami ke? Tumi ke? Pahari, Bengali' ('Who am I? Who are you? Hill people, Bangali') (Mohaiemen 2013). While it certainly seemed leader-less, there were also collectives of younger activists-bloggers who tried relentlessly to steer clear from the "religion question" and made it explicit that the movement was about war criminals. At the same time, its engagement with the many, conflicting discourses surrounding the question of "the nation" metamorphosed into a narrative that validated certain visions and restrained others.

1947 to 1971: nationalism revisited

The Shahabag movement did not "fail"—it opened up a space for transversal politics, enabling new articulations and possibilities. At the same time, the nascent desire for a "plural" nation could not disentangle itself from a Bengali nationalism that is sustained by a carefully "curated" history, one where Bangladesh is first "conceived" in 1952 and finally born through



the valour and sacrifice of the Liberation War in 1971, with the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 serving as the mere backdrop for this "origin" story. Willem van Schendel points out how this nationalist history serves a dual purpose: 'One hand it legitimizes the Bangladesh state and, on the other, it challenges the hegemony of Indo-Pakistani understanding of modern South Asian History' (van Schendel 2009: 190).

The selective amnesia regarding Partition that informs this story is the first "loophole" that I explore, without which 1971 and its multiple meanings become easily reduced to the same "secular"-religious" binary that paralysed Shahabag, and nationalism becomes devoid of any radical content. At the same time, the narrative of "unending" or "double" Partition does not help us understand the complex political formations that led to the emergence of East Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, nor does it account for the multiple aftermaths of violence that have shaped the lives of people across the Subcontinent in often subtle ways, including those of generations far removed from such events (Butalia 1998, 2015). Partition set in motion the violent displacement of 20 million Muslims and Hindus from their homes, who even as they crossed the new borders to their "desired" nations were simply abandoned to fend for themselves, often living lives of terrible vulnerability (Alexander, Chatterji & Jalais 2018: 1).

Yet long before these colossal movements, colonial rail and waterways ensured the migration of labourers, merchants, missionaries and administrators across the Bengal delta, leading to the formation of cosmopolitan townships like Saidpur. This historical plurality has tended to escape nationalist imaginations, including both Jinnah's 'two-nation theory' as well as Bengali nationalism. The gradual erasure of the memories of such complicated pasts has led to skewed and simplistic understandings of our post-colonial experiences.

The second loophole in the story is our tendency to think of both 1947 and 1971 in terms of either 'a macropolitical event; or as a cultural and personal disaster', without paying attention to the 'socioeconomic impact' of these events across the Subcontinent (van Schendel 2001: 393). There is no denial of the endless miseries faced by citizens who were forcefully uprooted and transplanted in the new nation-states, yet one must also not forget the *classed* nature of these refugee-movements. Despite the lack of a real resettlement plan, the post-Partition nation-state became the 'chief facilitator of their mobility, just as the colonial state had been in the past' (Alexander, Chatterji & Jalais 2018: 57). My own earlier work has shown how government officials were given the chance to "opt" for their "desired"



nations. Many of my interlocutors recounted how they could exchange their properties in Kolkata or Murshidabad for houses in Dhaka and elsewhere; some were able to avail government plots allotted to them. Along with catastrophe, post-colonial nation formation also provided unprecedented opportunities for educated Muslims and facilitated the formation of a cosmopolitan middle class in East Pakistan, later Bangladesh (Sabur 2011).

In less than three decades after Partition, Bangladesh was born out of violent upheaval and war against Pakistan. Stagnant industrial development under the colonial regimes had meanwhile failed to produce a "homegrown" capitalist class. There was a vacuum among the elite, aggravated by the exodus of zamindars and money lenders (Islam 1997), while administrative growth fostered a competitive bureaucracy. The ensuing struggle for power found the bureaucracy emerging victorious (Jahangir 1986). Jahangir argues that the petty-bourgeoisie had overwhelmingly monopolised the state in its major apparatuses and institutions. The wholehearted support for the idea of Pakistan on the part of factions of the Bengali Muslim middle class soon began to wane in the face of Pakistani 'internal' colonialism (Alam 1995), an antagonism that would eventually lead to the struggle for independence. Both Jahangir and Alam argue that this particular class was able to articulate the new nationalist discourse and become hegemonic ideologically and politically.

Willem van Schendel, on the other hand, claims that Bangladesh was, at least in the early years, 'much more than a "bourgeois project", the outcome of middle-class movements', yet Bengali nationalism, an 'anti-systemic political programme within the state of Pakistan' and a tool for radical mobilisations until 1971, soon became an ideological tool appropriated by the state elite (van Schendel 2001a: 113). The civil-military-bureaucratic alliances remained in control of the political process while the role of the subaltern classes was increasingly limited (Ahmed 2009: 233f.). I have previously argued that access to tertiary education, new employment opportunities and the social networks of the civil-bureaucratic circles facilitated the 'confluence of capitals' that paved the way for middle-class dominance in Bangladesh (Sabur 2014). This is how, in the process of nation-making, the Bengali Muslim middle class emerged as the "authentic" voice with the authority to articulate what Bangladesh meant, while their discursive practices shielded a hierarchy over those who lacked such access, and/or were seen as unauthorised and incapable of articulating their own image of the nation.



Third, the imagination of Bangladesh was neither founded upon a "myth of common origin", nor upon a "religious pedigree". Rather, the Pakistani Government's anti-Bengali policies forced open the possibility (and perhaps necessity) of Hindu-Muslim unity based on a shared language, enabling the Bengali identity to prevail over the Muslim (Islam 1997)—a '*Kulturnation*' in Nira Yuval-Davis's typology (Yuval-Davis 1997). Like all nations, Bangladesh was imagined through 'domestic ideologies' (McClintock 1995)—a nation of citizens of the motherland, speaking in their mother-tongue (Bengali), embedded in fictive kinship relations with their fellow citizens. It is imperative to remember that Bengali nationalism—however flawed it may appear now—was a *response* to the Pakistani internal-colonialism which undergirds 1971, and which was legitimised in the name of Islam.

Over the years, an unintended consequence of this celebration of "Bengali-ness" has been new forms of exclusion. Dina Siddiqi has argued that 'the inability of Bangladeshi nationalist historiography to come to terms with partition/ Pakistan ensures the exclusion not just of "Biharis" but of all other non-Bengali speaking minorities from national belonging' (Siddiqi 2013: 152). This was also true for the *adibashi* or *Jumma* peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The first act of dissent in the new nation-state was by the only *adibashi* Member of the country's first Parliament, Manabendra Larma, who vehemently opposed the imposition of "Bengali" (instead of "Bangladeshi") as the official national identity of all citizens of Bangladesh in the Constitution, declaring that the *Jumma* peoples 'can never become Bengali' (Mohaiemen 2011: 36). By the mid-1970s, Bengali nationalism had taken its most conservative form, deployed to protect vested interests and oppress the nation's "others"—such as through the "creeping" displacement of the *Jumma* peoples by Muslim Bengali settlers and military occupation—destroying the possibility of an inclusive state.

The fourth loophole I address is the problematic representation of women in this canonical narrative of 1971. The gendered image of the nation was congruent with middle-class domestic ideologies, where men occupied the public sphere and were iconised as the "makers" of history and "protectors" of the nation, which was in turn iconised as a woman, a mother-figure waiting to be rescued. This narrative idealises women's "subservience" and "passivity", denying their active roles in all the mobilisations that led up to the Liberation War, from protecting Hindu families from communal riots in 1948, leading demonstrations during the Language Movement in 1952 (Das 1999), mobilising to demand freedom for all



political prisoners in 1962 (Begum 2001), protecting minorities in the aftermath of the bloody communal riots of 1964, to a spontaneous revolt against the Ayub Regime in 1969 (ibid.). Idolising the nation as mother was also ineffectual in actually securing any privileges for women in real life (Azim 2012).

Beyond this denial of agency, the female body also became an ideological battleground as well as a receptacle for ethno-/genocide. Women's bodies were seen as repositories of "secular" Bengali culture, with her attire (*sari, tip*) and practices (progressive cultural activities) constituting the antithesis to "Islamic" Pakistan, to be deployed towards reproducing the nation biologically and culturally. As the repositories of the "vitality" of communities, women become the targets of systematic reproductive violence during ethno-/genocides, inflicting "dishonour" and causing their social deaths (Das 2008).

The reproduction and circulation of horrific narratives/images of the survivors of rape by the West Pakistani military and their local collaborators was thus essential for the new nation-state, used to create the myth of a common, violent birth. For similar reasons, narratives/images of violations of men (Mookherjee 2012), and violence orchestrated by Bengali men against Bihari (Saikia 2004) and adibashi (indigenous) women (Naher & Triprua 2010) are carefully combed over, as they do not fit the gendered and ethnic image of the nation. Some of these gendered narratives, I argue, have been entwined with the "secular/atheist" vs. "Islamist" tensions that underline the nationalist narrative, a dimension that has not been adequately addressed.

It is crucial to remember that the nationalist narrative I have been referring to is not static, and has been curated over time to reflect the changing "moods" of ruling regimes. The state-sponsored project to document the history of Liberation War was initiated by the *Muktijuddho Itihash Likhon O Mudran Prokolpo* (Liberation War Documentation Project), under the Ministry of Information in January 1978. This eventually became the largest archive of documents on the war, covering international correspondence, incidents leading up to the war and the war itself, of which only fifteen volumes were published between 1982-85 (Rahman 2015). Much later, Afsan Chowdhury (2007) explained, while putting those volumes together, how the space for writing an objective history was gradually shrinking. This was reflected in other major projects, like the Asiatic Society's *History of Bangladesh: 1704-1971* (Islam 1997), and eleven



volumes on the History of Liberation War—based on the eleven sectors—published by the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs.

Publications on the Liberation War began to appear in late 80s, towards the end of the period of autocratic regimes, because of a number shifting political realities. Only recently have we really witnessed a renewed interest in the history of 1971 that has attempted to counter the dominant, essentialist narratives. Recent publications like *The blood telegram* (Bass 2013) opened up conversations regarding the Cold War geopolitics of 1971, and culpability of the US government. Afsan Chowdhury's nuanced and comprehensive history draws on numerous reports and interviews of everyone from veterans to people at the nation's margins (Chowdhury 2007). A critical feminist engagement has also emerged, beginning with *Rising from the ashes: women's narratives of 1971*—a collection of narratives by/on women on their experiences of the war (Akhtar et al. 2012). Memory, sexual violence and the human cost of war have been the recurring themes in these new narratives (Saikia 2004; D'Costa 2011; Mookherjee 2015).

Some of this newer work does address the loopholes I have outlined, but largely fail to escape the narratives of valour and violence-victimhood. Ananya Jahanara Kabir's *Partition's post-amnesias* attempts to punctuate such narratives, interweaving 1947 and 1971 with a single thread of inter-generational memories and histories spread across the Subcontinent, addressing the counter-currents within the nationalist projects that have been forgotten 'in the process of selective nationalist remembering' (Kabir 2013). Dina Siddiqi, on the other hand, looks at the fates of those whose class, religion or ethnicity were not desired as "ideal" in the new nations they had called their home for years, tracing the trajectories of "stranded Pakistanis" and urging the need for a "denationalised" history that breaks away from statist and teleological narratives (Siddiqi 2013). My essay responds to such a call.

My ethnography on Saidpur explores the ruins of 1947 and 1971. The histories of the intersecting lives of the town's Bihari, Marwari, and Bengali settlers—both "local" and "Ghotis" (Bengali migrants from India)—tell the story of how their entitlements were stripped away and they were made pariahs in their one "home". It is an account of absence and erasure, of an inaccessible non-existent archive that can only be reconstituted through memory. This 'negative methodology' (Navaro 2020) unpacks the mass violence 'through its aftermaths', drawing not only on the narratives of survivors, but also of those whose lives have been shaped by these events, of generations that did not physically endure those trauma. This also helps



us delve into the material conditions that made this displacement and mass violence possible. The 'magic of nationalism' does not automatically 'turn chance into destiny' (Anderson 1983: 7)—after all, in the Subcontinent, "chance" (of birth) often came to mean little as the nation itself transformed—nor does the "spirit" of nationalism summon citizens to fight using empty promises.

As Anderson put it: 'Nationalism is partly an effect of the totalizing and homogenizing projects of state formation. These projects produce an imagined sense of political community that conflates peoplehood, territory, and state' (Alonso 1994: 390). These projects, conceived as nationalism, manufacture the categories of "Self" and "Other", hierarchising citizens based on gender, class, ethnicity and religion, provisioning varying degree of privileges within a nation-state. The omissions of the Bengali nationalist narrative are neither accidental nor inevitable, but carefully curated to deny the multiple allegiance of non-Bengalis (Biharis, Marwaris, adibashis, religious minorities), legitimising the material conditions for the violence that perpetuates the destitution of these marginal groups long after Partition or 1971. The "spirit" of nationalism does not turn neighbours into a violent enemy, but the promise of material gain does, a promise ensured by nationalist allegiance.

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Unearthing the 'violence [...] at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial' (Renan 1990: 11), is crucial for a sincere historical and ethnographic recounting of the nation. Ernest Renan suggests that 'unity is always affected by means of brutality' (ibid.); by confronting the brutality of all actors, we are reminded of the humanity of the "enemy" as well. As Talal Asad suggests, 'the modern state is at once one of the most brutal sources of oppression and a necessary means for providing common benefits to citizens' (Schneider & Asad 2011). It is impossible to bypass the nation today, and citizens have to negotiate for rights within that aegis. Such negotiations also rearticulate the constellations of gender, class, and ethnicity within the nation, revealing and rearranging who can claim the state, and especially who are entitled and desired by the nation.

Many voices and multiple allegiance

Shahabag's limits, then, were no different from the limits of the history we have inherited. Needless to say, a full account of these limits is far beyond the scope of this article. My argument is that it is not possible to confront the urgency of addressing these loopholes without looking at how concrete



lives have lived within and through them. This is what I have attempted to do by leaving Shahabag for Saidpur, to look at how the nation is imagined and performed at its margins.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked the emergence of an interlocking system of colonial rail and waterways in eastern Bengal, connecting the major trading ports with the regions supplying labour, so that 'the imperial commerce of India – tea, jute and coal' could thrive (Alexander, Joya & Annu 2018). With the flourishing global trade of the late nineteenth century, a growing demand for jute led to its commercial production in Bengal. Railways were extended into Eastern Bengal and Assam, and thousands of men were recruited from India (particularly from Bihar) to build them. Large railway township had also sprung up around the locomotive workshop at Saidpur and Parbatipur (ibid.: 56f.). 'Marwari traders were usually the first to begin operations in towns just connected to railways, and dominated the jute trade in towns along the Northern Bengal State Railway, in Rangpur, Domar, and Haldibari' (Ali 2018: 101).

Hence Saidpur, the small British colonial town established in 1870 became prominent, drawing in workers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, British and Bengali railway officers, merchants and traders from Marwar to Kabul, janitors from Orissa and Andhra Pradesh and British missionaries, as well as doctors for the Anglican Church. Since the Partition of 1947 this demography has changed dramatically; before the Liberation War, 75 per cent of the population were Urdu-Bhojpuri speaking Biharis, reduced to only 40 per cent now.¹² Because of such a composition, Saidpur was used as the base by the Pakistani occupation army in north Bengal. It still remained ethnically diverse even after 1971.¹³

Familiarity with the place and the languages (Bengali, Urdu, Bhojpuri Marwari, Bahe) as a child and a teenager, combined with being away for twenty-two years, provided me with both the proximity and subjective distance required of an anthropologist. I started collecting family histories in 1997, and revisited my interlocutors in 2014 to understand the different phases of migration and the complicated negotiations of everyday life. I have collected twenty family histories from *Notun Babu Para* and its adjacent areas in Saidpur. Some of these families are Bengali settlers who had migrated from West Bengal and various parts of East Bengal before and after 1947, most of whom retired as railway officers. My Marwari interlocutors have been living in Saidpur for over four generations; some of the rich trading families had multiple bases in Dhaka, Chittagong, Kolkata and Guwahati, among which they would divide their time.



My Bihari interlocutors include small traders, peddlers and educators. Many of them have been living in Saidpur for four generations, and two families moved there after the Calcutta (now Kolkata) riots of 1946. These were permanent residents of Saidpur, while many Biharis took the opportunity of repatriation in Pakistan, and some used illegal means and fled to Pakistan as *muhajirs*/refugees from 1974 to the 1980s.¹⁴ Their lived experiences varied substantially because of their religious, class and ethnic backgrounds, but all of them had one thing in common—they had all chosen to stay on in Saidpur, even after everything that happened to them in 1971. What made them stay, that too living with and breathing the same air as the enemies in apparent harmony?

My Bengali interlocutors Firdousi Begum and Masuda Rehana Begum are sisters. Their parents Mir Abdul Majid and Nurjahan Begum moved to Saidpur for work in the early 1940s. While Majid joined the Assam-Bengal Railway as a sub-assistant engineer, Nurjahan completed her graduation and diploma in teachers training and joined the Tulshiram Girls' High School. They had four children, but also raised their younger siblings and nephew and nieces in that house until the war broke out. Their first-born Masuda left for her Intermediate (11th and 12th grades) in Dhaka when she was 16, got involved in student politics and never really returned home except for big events (weddings, funerals and Eid) and regular visits. Yet she returned to Saidpur in March 1971 to work as an informer for her fellow comrade. Firdousi, on the other hand, stayed in Saidpur all her life except for her graduate years at Rajshahi University. Later, she joined the Cantonment Public School as a teacher, and was married to Masuda's political friend Shamim. Shamim's father worked in the railways and was from Murshidabad. Part of their extended family relocated to Bangladesh after the 1964 riots in India. Masuda and Firdousi both narrated their first-hand experiences of 1971.

Masuda's account reflects a deeper sense loss, and an understanding of the displacement that made it possible for them to own a home at some other's expense. Masuda describes:

My father was taken away by the Pakistani army at the end of April. We were living in the Tulshiram Girls' School quarter at that time. There were very few Bengali families living, surrounded by Biharis. We had to get out of that place. We were taken to the police station and later moved to the house of the officer in charge (OC) along with other families under his protection. The OC was Bengali and was from Mymensingh, the same as our parents; but he had no choice but to send abba [father] to the torture cell, as his name was third on the



kill-list. He was accused of being an "Awami League-er" (AL), simply because my mother was a presiding officer in the 1970s election and the AL won from that centre. So, everyone involved in the election was accused of being an AL supporter.

Abba was sick when they took Tulshiram babu and others, or he would have been killed otherwise. Saleh Mowlana was the leader of the Peace Committee, yet, he opened a camp for women and children of freedom fighters. The OC could not provide personal protection anymore as the situation was getting worse, so he advised us to move to the camp as there would be police protection there. Since our father was in the torture camp, we were technically destitute. But we were fortunate to be treated with dignity everywhere we went. Even in the camp we stayed with the Mowlana's family. We were there for 4-5 months, until September.

My youngest uncle was the registrar at the Agriculture University and was connected to the agriculture officer in Rangpur, and he requested them to provide us shelter if we could escape from the camp. Meanwhile, my comrades managed to pass the information that they were about to attack the Mowlana's house and we must escape. What an irony – it was the Mowlana who wrote a special letter for our safe passage and introduced us as his own. Personally, I must acknowledge our privileges even in the toughest of times. How do you deny kindness in mayhem? They collaborated because that was the only option for them to retain the Pakistan they had opted for as their home.

After the war Majid reported back to his stations, was immediately reinstated and given accommodation in the railway quarters as recognition of his sacrifices during the war. Nurjahan resumed her teaching as well. Later, Majid and Nurjahan were allotted a plot in Notun Babu Para in 1978, the very year Majid died of cancer. These plots had once belonged to Biharis, and had been acquired by the government under the Enemy/Vested Property Act of 1974. Firdousi, Masuda and Nurjahan were immensely grateful for the roof over their head, but they were also cognisant of the fact that this had only been made possible by displacing a Bihari family, and that the war had provided the context for such ownership and affluence. Nurjahan emerged as the ideal "new woman" who not only shouldered the family burden single-handedly, but also became active in women's movements and was a philanthropist until her death. She never forgot the kindness she had received while battling for her existence, and reciprocated the same regardless of ethnicity, religion or class.

Muslim Biharis, however, have very different stories to tell. To them, 1971 does not signify "Liberation War", but '*gondogoler bochhor*' ('the year



of trouble'). One of my Bihari interlocutors, Marium Begum, was a peddler of saris smuggled across the Indian border. She is now in her late 70s, with blurry eyesight and a limp in one leg, both gifts of 1971. She had accompanied her husband Munawar Khan from Monghyr to Shantahaar in the 1940s when he was posted there. They had three sons and a daughter. Her husband had been a police *hawaladar* in 1971, and had helped many Bengalis in the Pakistani camps, only to die along with her sons at the hands of their Bengali neighbours in Shantahaar. She was tortured and left to live a physically and socially paralyzed life. Like many Biharis from adjacent areas, she moved to the Saidpur camp. She never tried to return to her homeland in Bihar or go to Pakistan, as her loved ones were buried in Bangladesh. When I asked her about her feelings towards Bengalis she smiled and replied, '*Insaan aur Haywan hum saab me hain beta, waqt paar saab niqal ata hain*' ('Both human and beast reside in all of us, dear; time unleashes them all'). She was close to our family and I have never seen her being unkind to anyone, nor complain of her fate.

One of my interlocutors Azahaar remembered the events of 1971 very differently. Azahaar's family had moved to Dinajpur after the Kolkata and Bihar riots of 1946. They were a small-trading family living in Muslim-dominated Kidwai Street in Kolkata, although their ancestral home was in Bihar. After witnessing the mindless killing of Muslims, his father Atahar Ali left Kolkata overnight and empty-handed. They arrived in Dinajpur with his wife and five young children with the help of his extended family. Eventually, they managed to exchange their property in Kolkata and bought a house in Dinajpur. Half of his family still lives in Bihar and Kolkata. They had a deep allegiance toward the idea of Pakistan, and that allegiance changed everything for them in 1971. Toward the end of the war the counter-killing of Biharis had begun, and they experienced the same trauma of Partition all over again. They had chosen to move to Saidpur, thinking that a Bihari-majority area would be safer. They were physically unharmed but lost everything in the war. They had to start all over with the help of their community, and were never really able to make up for the losses of Partition or 1971. Rejecting the title of "traitor" that tends to be applied to all Biharis indiscriminately, Azahaar felt that it was him who had been betrayed, having migrated from India to Pakistan, and not having left Bangladesh for Pakistan. He urged the importance of including stories like his as part of the Bengali national narrative.

I am made to feel like a bastard child who is abandoned by his mother (India) for having a different faith/religion from her, and then abandoned for the second time by his foster-mother (Pakistan)



because my race/ethnicity was different from her. In my new home (Bangladesh) I am seen as an unwanted child, abandoned by mothers and having no place in society, even though I am a citizen of Bangladesh and my ancestral home is Saidpur.

Dina Siddiqi (Siddiqi 2013), in her work on the 'stranded Pakistani' case, has suggested that they had not left the nation; rather the nation had left them. There are many Biharis who never even considered the offer of repatriation, including ambiguous figures like Saleh Mowlana. Firdousi's narrative revealed that he had allied with the Pakistani army, led the local Peace Committee and pledged to maintain the integrity of undivided Pakistan. Simultaneously, however, he ran a relief camp that sheltered hundreds of Bengali families from atrocities. He refused to leave Saidpur when there was a counter-attack on Biharis, let alone opt for repatriation. His sons still live in Saidpur, running the Darul-ulum Madrasah (religious schools and boarding house).

Yet it is not enough, as I have suggested, to simply "reverse" the sides in a tale of violence. Digging into the 1971 archive I came across a first-hand account in the New York Times by Prabhu Dayal Agarwala on the Golahaat massacre—the mass murder of Marwaris and Hindu Biharis in 1971. Dayal was the son of the famous businessman Tulshiram Agarwala, who had arrived in Saidpur in 1911 and soon became a prominent person establishing the Tulshiram Girls' High School in 1914. Marwari families in Saidpur were extremely conservative and patriarchal, where girls were seemingly born to be "married off". Tulshiram set an unprecedented example in his community as well as in Saidpur, but his reputation made him and his family easy targets. His son recounts his memories of that time:

I am one of the unfortunates who managed to escape from the massacre perpetrated on the morning of June 13th at Saidpur (Rangpur), a non-Bengali Muslim majority town of North Bengal in Bangladesh. I call myself unfortunate because I left behind 150 members of my community including my parents, brothers, sister-in-law, nephew and nieces—butchered by the goondas of the Pakistan army in collaboration with the non-Bengali police.

It all began when the hordes of Yahya Khan raided our house in the early hours of March 26th, 1971. At least 20 army personnel entered at 4 A.M. and arrested my father, Tulshiram Agarwala, at gunpoint and ransacked the premises. They beat all mercilessly. At about 4:45 A.M. they left the place along with my father.



On June 13th at about 2 a.m. we were awakened by the guards and put aboard a bus in a great haste and brought into the Saidpur Railway Station. Our family members were also brought there. We were informed by Major Zamal of Saidpur Police Station that we would be sent to India-via Chilhati border. We were put aboard a train along with our family members totalling about 400 Marwaries, Bengalis and Behars (all Hindus) in four compartments under non-Bengali policemen and military supervision. In the early hours when it was still dark outside, the train started but it stopped about one mile from the station near a graveyard known as "Maran Kuthir". There we found the goondas of Saidpur armed with swords and daggers ready for butchering [...] They told us to keep quiet as we would be executed in the manner prescribed by the higher authorities *because bullets were not so cheap to be used on Kafirs and Gaddars*.

The next moment we started to jump from the train. They opened fire from all directions indiscriminately [...] out of 80 occupants of the second car, twenty-one managed to escape. We took shelter in a nearby village and with the help of Bengali Moslems after traveling 125 miles on foot we crossed the border and reached India on June 20th. (Agarwala 1971)

Prabhu Dayal never returned to Saidpur, abandoning all their possessions. There were many similar cases narrated by members of the Marwari communities. There has been silence around the issue of the forced displacement of Marwaris as well, with multiple cases where Marwari "shop-houses" were taken over by Bihari or Bengali Muslims, or declared as enemy property after the war. Shamim's close friend Kamal Prasad, for example, was killed in the Golahaat massacre as well, and his *gaddi* (shop-house) was occupied by a Bihari Muslim and eventually turned it into a full-fledged shop for dress materials in the bazaar.

Jamuna Prasad Kedia's family members had gone through similar experiences in 1971; him and his son were killed along with Tulshiram Agarwal. His son Sushil along with his wife, sister-in-law and surviving nephews decided to return and reclaim their home, and slowly they got back in business. Upon his return, Sushil maintained close family and business ties with his Bihari-Afghani friend Aftab Ahmed. He was a father-figure to Aftab's children and helped them retain their shop-house as well as their home after Aftab's death. Shushil and Ferdousi were classmates, which eventually evolved into friendships for three generations. Yet this communal harmony had its expiry date. Sushil's extended family came under attack in Bangladesh in response to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in India in 1993,¹⁵ facing the wrath of the local Bihari and Bengali Muslims. They finally felt compelled to leave Saidpur and relocated their major



business in Dhaka, where they stayed for over a decade. Now he divides his time between India and Bangladesh for business and their shop-house in Saidpur is partially rented out. In spite of pledging allegiance to Bangladesh, the state could not protect him or provide safety in his own home. They were stripped of their rights as citizens just because of their religion and ethnicity once more.

Memory may be an unreliable source for the recounting of an "objective" history, and there are huge discrepancies in how struggles are remembered. Yet we must accept that both memory and history are always mediated and selective. If history is 'a memory fabricated according to positive formulas' (Barthes 2000), then I would argue that this "positivity" is shaped by ideology as well as lived experience. Masuda, for example, highlighted the role of her comrades in her account of the war, which I argue was guided by her allegiance to the political ideology of the Left. She was also removed from the everyday life of Saidpur, instead immersed in the politics of the Chatra Shangram Parishad (All-Party Student Action Committee) in Dhaka, which was an integral part of the nationalist movement. Nurjahan and Ferdousi on the other hand, lived their lives in Saidpur, and have preserved the horrific memory of violence committed by everyone regardless of ethnicity or religion—be it Pakistani, Bihari or Bengali.

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Everyone is complicit in war; "good" and "evil" is determined by which side of history we have fallen in. The social fabric my interlocutors knew was torn to pieces. It is difficult to imagine, without having experienced it, the struggle of losing family, being robbed off every possession they held dear, losing a home overnight, waking up to a different nation, to be marked as the "enemy". Language and ethnicity both worked against the Bihari and Marwari communities in 1971. As Masuda reminded us, the Bihari community held onto the idea of Pakistan as long as they could. Yet many were also reluctant to take sides, as they were nursing wounds still fresh from 1947. Partition also made their allegiance to the "Islamic" vision of the Pakistani state only natural; indeed, to contradict that vision would be seen as treason.

That many Biharis did become accomplices to the Pakistani army is not, therefore surprising; at the same time, to not condemn genocide (let alone to take an active part in it) cannot but be seen as an unforgivable act. The crucial difference is that all Biharis had to pay the price for the actions of some, while the fact that most *razakars* were Bengali did not entail the same collective guilt. Marwaris and Hindus in general, on the other hand, faced a double-edged sword because of their ethnicity and religion. Their



close ties with extended family members in India also often put them in an ambivalent category in terms of allegiance; for Marwaris, the price was being robbed and brutalised by the Pakistanis, Biharis and Bengalis.

In the face of such carnage, silence was often preserved to simply get on with life and unseen the realities of abandonment and violence. These narratives not only constitute a repository of loss and trauma, but also reveal the material conditions that enable such atrocities. Nationalism and nationalist sentiment have material value; in the face decades of exploitation and massive violence, Bengali nationalism might have emerged as a necessary articulating principle of resistance. Yet it also carried with it the potential to legitimise new hierarchies, and the oppression of those who happened to fall on the wrong side of an ever-changing equation. Even though Bengalis faced the wrath of the Pakistani army, many of them became the beneficiaries of war too. Masuda's narrative shows us how the new nation-state not only promised a new "homeland", but ensured a new "home" too; how the Vested Property Act not only legitimised the displacement of Biharis and Marwaris, but also enabled those vacuums to be filled up with new "desired" citizens—Bengalis—both legally and illegally. Notun Babu Para and its denizens remain as testimonies of such shifts—a predominantly Bihari neighbourhood had already become Bengali by the late 1970s.

There has also been a deafening silence on the question of sexual violence against women, beyond the tailored stories that fit each conflicting narrative. There is a hushed discussion about the brutality that happened to the "other" community from one's own. It was common knowledge that twenty Marwari girls and newlyweds were abducted and taken to the Cantonment, and that both Bengali and Bihari women were raped and/or murdered. There are multiple cases of Marwari women suffered from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, triggered by the loss of their immediate family members. The status of women in a Marwari household was conditional on their husbands and male heirs. In their absence, they were neither entitled to the property of the husband's family, nor had any claim on her father's, essentially being reduced into nonentities. There are several cases of women who were raped during the war and abandoned by families. Rumours tell of how Mumtaz was raped and abandoned; she used to work as a domestic worker in the Babu Para, and was suspected to be involved in prostitution. She brazenly admits that that she had been a mistress to Mutallib, a retired officer and a widower until his death. They took care of



each other, and neither ethnicity or class posed any trepidation. Most importantly, she recounts, she was treated with dignity.

It is true that women regardless of their allegiances bore the brunt of the war, both physically and emotionally, and were made to carry the burden of the nation's (dis)honour. At the same time, we hardly hear of women like Nurjahan in the canonical narrative—a woman who did not need a "saviour", who instead took charge of the family as well as that of rebuilding the community. This, I argue, is because it is not "valour" in itself, but only violence masquerading as valour that can feed the insatiable hunger of the nationalist narrative. The narratives of Bihari women raped by Bengali/Bihari collaborators, or Bengali women violated by their own men are not, therefore, part of these narratives, nor do they evoke the same emotions. These experiences unsettle the seamless narrative of the vaunted homogeneity of Bengali nationalism.

Conclusion

Urvashi Butalia once said: 'It is the present, our involvement in it, our wish to shape it to lead to the kinds of future we desire, that leads to revisit and re-examine the past' (Butalia 1998: 348). Shahabag was such a "present"—it made us believe once again in the radical possibilities of the "collective". At the same time, it exposed the weaknesses of a 'democratic' state that pandered to both secular and Islamist forces for legitimacy, neutering them both and leaving behind death on both sides. Since then, the ambivalence, ineptitude and abandonment has made every critical academic and activist ask: what led to all of this? The despair gripping many who had been active in Shahabag was palpable even before its demise. Nusrat Choudhury has called this 'the restless and energetic passion of despair' (Chowdhury 2019: 198), which has also engendered critique. It is this passion that compelled me to excavate our past, and gaze through the loopholes in our imaginations of the nation.

This ethnography attempted to juxtapose the memories of the inhabitants of a small, multi-ethnic/lingual, post-colonial town against the nationalist narrative of the Liberation War of 1971, revealing the myriad ways that this narrative enables and legitimises the material conditions that breed violence against the nation's "others", those on the wrong side of this curated history. Their intersecting lives take us through the terrain of colonial state and class formation, the Partition of British India, before finally arriving at the Liberation War. Their narratives lay bare the charade



of violence masquerading as valour at the heart of these political formations, and of the nation itself, reminding us of the human cost of war. They push us to see beyond the binaries of good-evil, *Muktijodhdha-Rajakar*, forcing us to recognise our collective culpability. Leaving Shahabag for also helps us explore the possibilities and limits of a "plural" nation-state that recognises the multiple allegiance of its citizens, and how this has been articulated at the nation's margins.

Finally, this ethnography is an attempt to break through our obsession with tales of valour and write a more honest and humane narrative of the genealogies of our present. It is time to own up to our collective guilt, and recognise how we have sanctioned a curated and exclusionary history that continues to shape our imaginations. Without doing so, I argue, the radical aspirations that had birthed this nationalism will also be nothing but distant echoes of fallen heroes. The war criminals have been executed, and 50 years of this nation is on the horizon. The time has come to reclaim the state that was paid for by blood, and hold it responsible for ensuring the liberty of every citizen, even the ones who had once dreamt of a different nation.

Endnotes

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² ICT was established in 2010 to bring all the war criminals to trial.

³ Molla sentenced to life in jail. 2013. *bdnews.com*, 5 Feb., <http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/02/05/molla-sentenced-to-life-in-jail> [retrieved 22.12.20].

All links have been retrieved, if not stated otherwise, on the 15 August 2020.

⁴ Twitter trend on Shahbag and Basher Kella. 2013, 16 February-6 Apr., https://twitter.com/search?q=shahbag%20basher%20kella&src=typed_query
The dirty tricks of Jamaat Shibir. 2013. *Sachalayatan.com*, 11 Mar., <http://www.sachalayatan.com/node/48397> [retrieved 22.12.20].

⁵ This article casts light on atheist-religious conflicts in the blogosphere: Samanth Subramanian. 2015. The hit list: the Islamist war on secular bloggers in Bangladesh. *The New Yorker*, 14 Dec., <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/12/21/the-hit-list> [retrieved 22.12.20].

⁶ Train made to derail. 2013. *The Daily Star*, 20 Mar., <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/train-made-to-derail> [retrieved 22.12.20].
Bagerhat, Barisal Hindu temples set ablaze. 2013. *bdnews24.com*, 2 Mar., <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/03/02/bagerhat-barisal-hindu-temples-set-ablaze> [retrieved 22.12.20].



⁷ The first call to occupy Shahabag was made by a collective of pro-Liberation war online activists, members of left and progressive student organisations, with various social and cultural organisations demonstrating their solidarity later on. Like any spontaneous protest, eventually it was joined by people from every walk of life.

⁸ The chief opposition party at the time.

⁹ Khaleda backs Jamaat's "resistance". 2013. *bdnews24.com*, 1 Mar., <http://bdnews24.com/politics/2013/03/01/khaleda-backs-jamaat-s-resistance> [retrieved 13.07.15].

¹⁰ Informants linked "secularism" to *oshamprodayikota* ('non-communalism') or *dhormoniropekhhota* ("religious neutrality"). Asad argues that it is not about 'enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which political medium (representation of citizenship) redefined and transcends particular and differentiating practice of the self and are articulated through class, gender and religion' (Asad 2003: 5).

¹¹ Eight years of war crime trials. 2018. *Dhaka Tribune*, 18 Aug., <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/war-crimes/2018/08/18/eight-years-of-war-crimes-trials> [retrieved 22.12.20].

¹² *Saidpurbd.com* 2012.

¹³ About the project: the locations: Syedpur. 2009. *The Bangla Stories*, www.banglastories.org/about-the-project/the-locations/syedpur.html [retrieved 11.11.20].

¹⁴ Bangladesh: Biharis. *World directory of minorities and indigenous peoples*, July 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/biharis/> [retrieved 11.12.20].

¹⁵ There has been communal violence spread across Bangladesh, sparked by the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India by Hindu fundamentalists in 1992. Hindu communities were attacked by Muslims, their temples and properties were vandalised, and women were assaulted. Chronology for Hindus in Bangladesh. 2010. *Minorities at risk*, 16 July, <http://www.mar.umd.edu/chronology.asp?groupId=77102> [retrieved 22.12.20].

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