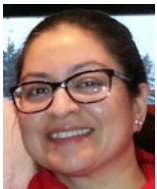


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The Making of Bangladesh

In this paper, Alavi brings together an interview and academic scholarship on the 1971 partition of East and West Pakistan and the independence of Bangladesh. Throughout the paper, the author works through theories of nationalism to unpack how competing nationalist myths informed the events and aftermath of the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence. Alavi argues for the importance of oral narratives as a way of bearing witness to histories that are overshadowed by nationalist myths. An earlier version of this essay was produced for an oral history assignment for the course *Introduction to South Asian Studies* (SOSC 2435) at York University and was the winner of the York Centre for Asian Research's 2016 Undergraduate Asia Essay Award.

Crowds of furious pro-Mujib or Mukhti Bahini (Bangladeshi armed resistance movement) militia took strength from the incoming Indian army and this started a murderous rampage of Bangali versus Bihari killings. Mobs of machete-yielding youth attacked Naseerabad Housing Society residents. I could hear people being hacked to death and women being abused. The houses on both sides of my home were raided and slaughtered, but we were lucky in the sense that our domestic helpers saved us. They accosted the mob at the gates and convinced them that the house was empty. We kept hidden in the house, and then when the Pakistani army came to this city we were escorted out by them and taken to the cantonment. In the safety of the cantonment area we stayed for about three weeks and then took the last ship Safina e Arab to West Pakistan via Columbo. Indian forces even at that time were stronger than [the] Pakistani Navy. They closed off the waterway that led to West Pakistan and the ship was marooned near the Columbo waters for three weeks. Since my uncle ... was the Pakistani ambassador to Columbo, he had to assert his official status and was thus able to get a concession for this ship to pass Indian waters. We had been lucky, but many of our relatives were murdered or maimed during the raids and never got to get out of Bangladesh. Many Biharis of lesser financial means were left to rot in Bangladeshi camps.

Kausar Alavi

(See Appendix for full interview transcript)

My research is on a topic that is very close to my heart since my grandfather was murdered during the 1971 genocide that engulfed the eastern wing of Pakistan. My husband was born in East Pakistan and was schooled there. As a result, he witnessed firsthand the communal riots that ensued after the ill-fated elections of 1970. This interview is an excerpt from a talk that I had with him about his experiences during the last days of what was then East Pakistan. In this interview he talks about his last three weeks in Chittagong, his brush with death and his safe trip back to West Pakistan, on the last ship called *Safina e Arab*, sailing from Dhaka to Karachi via Columbo in December 1971.

The reason I chose to interview my husband is because he lived in Chittagong and witnessed the socio-political realities of the

Bangladeshi people. My position during the interview remained that of an objective/reflexive observer. I heard many stories of Bangladeshi agitation during my childhood, and for most of my life I believed in the West Pakistani version of events. It was actually while taking the Introduction to South Asian Studies course at York University that I had a chance to reassess my feelings about the events that befell Bangladesh and to rethink my prejudices. Since being introduced to relevant literature, I have changed the way that I have been looking at the conflict. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to re-address the reality of the Bangladesh War of Independence from my own perspective. Some of the themes that have emerged during the interview and over the course of my research are the modern concepts of nation building, the sense of exclusion experienced by the oppressed Bangla community, their rebellion, and the related socio-political machinations of West Pakistani elites.

Consequentially, my paper analyzes some of the reasons that have led to the secession of East Pakistan from West Pakistan, and it analyzes how the breakage has affected those who have survived it. In order to understand the conflict that developed between East and West Pakistan after the independence of Pakistan from British rule, we need to briefly review the history of pre-partition politics of 1947 India. In a historical review by Bose and Jalal (2004) in the chapter, "The Partition of India and Creation of Pakistan," the authors contend that the concept of an Indian-Muslim identity in South Asia has been more of a British construct than a reality. "Islamic identity was strewn with sectarian and doctrinal differences" (137), and in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it occurred more in the minds of Islamic scholars rather than in the social fabric of society (137). As a result, the concept of an overarching Indian-Islamic identity has been nothing more than a political stunt on the part of British colonizers to formulate their divide and rule strategy.

... the concept of a cohesive Muslim identity has never existed amongst South Asian Muslims.

We might conclude that the partition of India on the basis of a two-nation theory has been flawed from the beginning, since the concept of a cohesive Muslim identity has never existed amongst South Asian Muslims. Nevertheless, Pakistan did succeed in gaining independence from India on the premise of its Muslim

identity and thus Muslim majority areas were shaped into one nation (with the exception of Kashmir). The problems that plagued East Pakistan from the start of Pakistan's independence were due to the fact that although the eastern wing was included on the basis of its religious affinity with West Pakistan, religion itself was not enough to keep the two sides together. Anderson (2006) defines the modern concept of the nation as "an imagined political community – imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6).

He notes that nations are imagined entities, and while they are imagined as sovereign and limited, they are also imagined as a "community." This imagined unity thus bestowed the idea that nation building tends to denote a unity of culture, language and ideas, such that the nation is perceived in the eyes of the nation-builders as a homogenous entity, whereas in reality this imagined community is fraught with ethnic and political inner tensions. Kreuzer and Weiberg (2005) in their paper titled "Framing Violence, Nation and State Building" explain that inherent societal tensions arise primarily because the majority of the population in multi-ethnic countries think of nations in ethnic terms (10). In other words, "various groups try to impose on the state and the national identity their own cultural features" (10). If nation building is understood in ethnic terms (as in the case of Pakistan, the new nation was perceived in terms of Urdu as the national language) and the state is perceived as a nation state, the "need for nation-building is often equated with conquering the nation state and extending one's own culture over the whole national realm" (10).

Hence, when we analyze the conflict between East and West Pakistan from this perspective we are able to better understand the involvement of culture and politics in the nation-building project of Bangladesh. Historically, the Bangla natives of East Pakistan maintained themselves as a distinct cultural and linguistic group with their own historical and cultural roots and separate from their West Pakistani "imagined" compatriots. Apparently, apart from the concept of a common religious identity, nothing else held them together. Due to its political influence, the West Pakistani elite assumed de facto ownership of the entire nation,

allocating all of the national resources and asserting their right to govern. They had, according to Kreuzer and Weiberg's explanation (2005), extended their power by extending their own culture and politics inside the eastern province as well. As a result, in the conflict of Bangalis versus Biharis in East Pakistan, for example, any coercive attempts to impose one version of the nation against the 'other' has often ended up "in the violent rebellion of the suppressed group, or state violence perpetrated by the hegemonial group in order to silence the opponents" (11).

Siddiqa (2016), in her *Express Tribune* article titled "Competing Modernity," makes a relevant observation: she asserts that Allama Iqbal (the founder of the "two-nation" theory) sowed the seeds of a Muslim nation-state based on the negation of the "traditional, religious framework represented by Pirs and saints as archaic," and introduced the concept of a "Sharia based interpretation or following the Quran and Sunnah in letter and spirit model" as the basic formula that he had hoped would replace ethnic differences in the making of a modern Islamic state. The key assumption on the part of Allama Iqbal and the early "two-nation" advocates was that once ethnicity was replaced by religion, Pakistan would become an ideal "Islamic" state. This formula was proven wrong on many levels in the making of Pakistan because the persistence of Bangla ethnic identity in East Pakistan could not find a place within the West Pakistani ideology of a nation state based on Islam. The idea of religion as a counter agent to ethnic and political differences did not pan out in the way Iqbal had envisioned.

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In the same vein, Toor (2011), in her book *The State of Islam*, argued that post-independence, East Pakistan continued to pose "a potent political threat" for the Muslim League's western wing (35). It was, after all, demographically a larger province, with fifty per cent of the Pakistani population. In the event of a democratic election, East Pakistan was poised to dominate national politics. Alternatively, East Pakistan had an existing culture of political consciousness and activism, which had gained further momentum in the post-Partition period. This activism continued to pose a threat for the West Pakistani ruling elite. My interviewee recounted the many inequalities that the native population of East

Pakistan faced once Pakistan came into existence (see appendix). Ownerships of industries and seaports were allocated to the elite establishments of West Pakistan, and the native population was sidestepped in all national and political matters.

Toor (2011) also describes the subversion of Bangla language and culture and the thrusting of Urdu as the only official language of Pakistan upon East Pakistan. Urdu became the official national language despite Bangla being the most widely spoken language in Pakistan, owing to the size of the Bangla population in East Pakistan. The controversy of Bangla versus Urdu was further aggravated by the “politics of class, region and ethnicity” (27). My interview with my husband revealed a firsthand account of how such discrepancies and blatant injustices were meted out to the Bangla-speaking population. The skewed political manoeuvrings of West Pakistani elites caused the schism between the two wings, resulting in huge physical and psychological destruction. Widespread anarchy ensued, resulting in thousands of families being separated, homes and businesses being plundered, and individuals killed or imprisoned in local or Indian jails. Many of our relatives were taken away by *Mukhti Bahini* (Bangladeshi armed resistance movement) militants and persecuted.

Although I have only interviewed my husband for this paper, both of my parents also hold memories of displacement from this period in East Pakistan’s history. For some, like my parents, this displacement has been twofold, for they belong to that particular group of individuals for whom the event of migration has never concluded. They survived the partition of India and the genocide in East Pakistan, and now reside in Canada as immigrants. According to my father, the “chain of migration, the moving away from one’s base, is a process of unmooring that never ends.”

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Consequentially, what public narratives of history have often failed to document in general is the private pain and loss of such displaced individuals, those who have not only lost their loved ones and their sense of belonging, but have also lost out on many different facets of their lives as well. My father recalls his home in Fatehpur, India, which was a *haveli* (a private mansion), housing a private mosque and his ancestral burial ground. Partition for

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my father has not only meant the loss of his family legacy but also his home and his right to be buried with his own kith and kin. These are precisely the types of narratives that are often not told: in fact they hold no significance in the public versions of Partition narratives. I suppose this is the reason why oral narratives need to be witnessed as they encapsulate the processes of memorialization, of being talked about and remembered – bits and pieces of people’s lives that are forgotten in time yet continue to hold an importance for those who are left behind. By recalling these stories, we are not only giving voice to forgotten people, but also acting as witnesses to past events that bring our past to life, if not on a public level, then at least on a personal level in the form of oral narratives from our ancestors and kin, such that these narratives become a shared legacy of our past.

In the end, if you ask me what I gained from this exercise, I will tell you that I learned about the pain and loss of fragmented relationships and forgotten histories. It is my belief that an unmooring of people from their ancestral lands can never be a good thing, since no matter how our political leaders rationalize these dividing events, such divisions continue to be the cause of great personal loss and anguish.

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APPENDIX

Interviewer: Fareeha Alavi

Interviewee: Kausar Alavi

Date of interview: 1 March 2016

Question: In your opinion what led to the partition of East Pakistan, and what can you tell me about that time, since you were there and have experienced the making of Bangladesh firsthand?

Response: The general elections of 1970 created the final chaos (since in it Shaikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League Party had gained an overwhelming majority, yet Bhutto did not accept his defeat) but this was not the only rift between the two sides. Resources from East Pakistan like jute, paper and textiles were taken over by West Pakistani businessmen, earnings were transferred over to the western side as well. Bangladeshis were being robbed of their own resources and being mistreated by the business owners. There was obvious inequality and mistreatment of the natives. The Bangla-speaking people were treated as second-class citizens. As a result, when the election results were announced and Shaikh Mujibur Rahman had won, there was a lot of happiness. But the joy was short lived since Bhutto did not want to turn over the prime ministership of Pakistan to Shaikh Mujibur Rahman. Bhutto made his famous speech in the United Nations and told Shaikh Mujib, "*Idhar hum udhar tum*" (meaning, this side of Pakistan belongs to me and that side to you). To which Shaikh Mujib had said "now nothing can stop Bangladesh from coming into being."

Right as soon as this was announced, the Pakistan army, the Panjabi and Pathan regiment, were sent to East Pakistan to crush down the rebellion. Coincidentally let me also add that Pakistan Air Force was never deployed. I often wonder why. Had Bhutto sent out the Air Force, the result would have been different. But Bhutto knew if East Pakistan survived Bhutto would have to step down from his seat.

Already aware of the rising political uncertainty, the East Pakistani army had made a clean sweep on the cantonment arms and ammunition cache, which was reserved for [the] war period, and ran atop the mountains. This gave them a good vantage point. Once the Army had come over with their limited supply, West Pakistan never replenished their supplies. The Pakistani army came into Chittagong, with a lot of pomp, the army killed and raped with a relish. Shaikh Mujib had to call in the Indian army, to stop the Pakistani army. The chaos that ensued during this period was witnessed by me and my family.

Crowds of furious pro-Mujib or Mukhti Bahini (Bangladeshi armed resistance movement) militia took strength from the incoming Indian army and this started a murderous rampage of Bangali versus Bihari killings. Mobs of machete yielding youth attacked Naseerabad Housing Society residents. I could hear people being hacked to death and women being abused. The houses on both sides of my home were raided and slaughtered, but we were lucky in the sense that our domestic helpers saved us, they accosted the mob at the gates and convinced them that the house was empty. We kept hidden in the house and then when the Pakistani army came to this city we were escorted out by them and taken to the cantonment. In the safety of the cantonment area we stayed for about three weeks and then took the last ship *Safina e Arab* to West Pakistan via Columbo. Indian forces at even at that time were stronger than Pakistani Navy, they closed off the waterway that led to West Pakistan and the ship was marooned near the Columbo waters for three weeks. Since my uncle, Commodore Asif Alavi, was the Pakistani ambassador to Columbo, he had to assert his official status and was thus able to get a concession for this ship to pass Indian waters. We had been lucky but many of our relatives were murdered or maimed during the raids and never got to get out of Bangladesh. Many Biharis of lesser financial means were left to rot in Bangladeshi camps.

The Pakistan army was soon put down by the Indian army and taken captive. [The] Pakistani army was sent to port cities Chittagong and Dhaka only, they were limited in number and outnumbered by the Indian forces. Also Bhutto failed to send in arms and ammunition, don't know what he had in mind, [and]

soon the Indian border was sealed off from Pakistan and the army was sealed inside East Bangladesh. It was defeated and taken as prisoner of war to India.

Bangladesh came into being and I lost my home and my childhood. It took me years to recover from the horror of violence that I had internalized and witnessed as a teenager. Years of bitterness have eroded relations between the two provinces to such a degree that it became impossible to visit Bangladesh again. I wish to go back and see my home once more.

This essay was the product of an oral history assignment for the course Introduction to South Asian Studies (SOSC 2435) at York University and is the winner of the inaugural York Centre for Asian Research's Undergraduate Asia Essay Award.

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MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fareeha Alavi is a mature student who enrolled at York University after a 25 year break from school. She is majoring in Anthropology and South Asian Studies. Alavi is interested in women's issues and Islam and in her spare time she likes to paint and write poetry.

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