

'Dead Reckoning': A Response

SARMILA BOSE

Sarmila Bose takes issue with the criticisms levelled against her book *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* in the article by Naeem Mohaiemen (EPW, 3 September 2011). A rejoinder to her response by Mohaiemen follows.

As a few months have passed since the publication of *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (hereafter DR) and various reviews and comments have been published, it may be apposite to note some of the critiques. This journal published a lengthy complaint against DR (Naeem Mohaiemen: "Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real on Reckoning on 1971", EPW, 3 September 2011). I address issues raised by that article as well as other pertinent comments, some of which were cited by it.

The first thing to notice is the polarised nature of the reactions to the book. That would not be evident to EPW readers from Naeem Mohaiemen's (hereafter NM) piece, as he selectively lists "negative" comments while omitting the ones that would spoil his storyline. For instance, while Srinath Raghavan accused me of "evasions, obfuscations, omissions and methodological errors"¹ (more on this intervention later), Ian Jack wrote:

As all good history tends to do, it complicates and contradicts the simple, heroic narrative of national struggle...Bose's research has taken her from the archives to interviews with elderly peasants in Bangladesh and retired army officers in Pakistan. Her findings are significant (*The Guardian*, 21 May 2011).

Similarly, Urvashi Butalia acknowledged my research but did not like my treatment of the material, writing, "There's little doubt that Bose has done considerable research and that her interviews include people from all sides...This wealth of material had the makings of a nuanced and empathetic account. But here's where the book disappoints".² In contrast, Tathagata Bhattacharya thought DR was "possibly the most nuanced and non-partisan attempt to gauge the extent and magnitude of atrocities committed during the war" (*IBNLive*, 26 August 2011). As it is not possible to list or quote at length from all the omitted comment, the references are given in a note.³

The contribution of DR to opening up a much-needed debate was highlighted

by several reviewers. For instance, Martin Woollacott, who covered the war in 1971, wrote: "Bose has written a book that should provoke both fresh research and fresh thinking about a fateful turning point in the history of the subcontinent" (*The Guardian*, 1 July 2011). This author has received many appreciative messages from Bangladeshis who have read the book, some of whom shared stories that resonated with the material in the book. Many of them stated that it was not possible to have a candid discussion in Bangladesh/Bangladeshi communities about what really happened in 1971.

Complaint of Bias

In Mohaiemen's lengthy harangue, his core complaint seems to be that he thinks I am biased against Bengalis and in favour of the Pakistani army, that this is a long-standing bias, that it is reflected in who I have talked to and who I have not talked to, and in the words I use in reporting the findings. He makes his case with a lack of methodological understanding, disingenuousness and falsehood, which I illustrate below with a few examples of each.

One potentially interesting notion put forward by Mohaiemen is that there is a difference between an Indian/West Bengali "sentimental miasma" and Bangladeshis for whom "it became difficult to believe in a fully sanitised history of 1971" (NM: 41). Interesting, but untrue. Novelist Tahmima Anam marked the 40th anniversary of the war thus in the *Financial Times*: "During those nine months, the Pakistan army conducted a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing, killing up to three million civilians and forcing as many as 10 million into exile in neighbouring India". She repeated the mantra in *The Guardian*.⁴ Claims about 1971 being the worst genocide since the second world war appear in publications like the Liberation War Museum's *Documents*, or Salahuddin Ahmed's *Bangladesh Past and Present* (2004). Volumes of reminiscences in Bengali cited in my book dwell on the suffering of the Bengali nationalists, but not the Biharis. The Bangladesh War Crimes Tribunal currently conducting trials in Dhaka repeated the claims of three million killed and 2,00,000 raped in

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the introduction to the charges presented for the first trial. While there were a few questioning voices from the start,⁵ for anyone to deny the overwhelming grip of the official history is to live in a world of fantasy. Much of the ruckus about my book is because “Calling a spade a spade is unpalatable at times. That is what Bose’s work has done” (*IBNLive*, 26 August 2011).

In his vain search for “bias”, Mohaiemen makes bizarre references to some of my earlier articles. In an op-ed after interviewing general Niazi in 2003 I criticised Pakistanis for disproportionately vilifying their own general for losing to India in circumstances in which no general could have won (*Daily Times*, 24 November 2003). Mohaiemen pounces on the title which contained the term “the courageous Pak army”: “her exact words”, he writes, wrongly. As every author knows, headings are given by the paper (and this one was sensationalist and inappropriate for the piece). He throws in a gripe about a 2005 op-ed on the us government’s release of F-16 jets to Pakistan, which had nothing to do with 1971 (*Christian Science Monitor*, 11 April 2005 (with ambassador William Milam)). But he does not mention a feature published the same year which was on Bangladesh – on its achievements in school education, and how it had beaten India and West Bengal on this score. I guess that would have spoiled the “bias” angle.

Quoting a Pakistani scholar Mohaiemen says about my interviews in Pakistan: “Basically, Sarmila Bose has not talked to any progressives in Pakistan, period” (NM: 42). No, I have not. Why should I? My book was not meant to be a compilation of “progressive” or “regressive” political opinion on 1971. I was chronicling the memories of incidents in East Pakistan from those who had direct experience there. He writes – “the Bengali side did not cooperate with her research” (NM: 42) – which is untrue, given the huge amount of material from Bangladeshis used throughout the book. The line that went dead was among “liberationist” fundamentalists after my first paper. It is true I do not explore many interesting questions about the run-up to the crisis, including issues of discrimination against East Pakistan – that is because that was not the purpose of my study. Mohaiemen thinks my interviewing mostly

army officers in Pakistan is a sign of bias, when actually it is targeting the right people for the purpose of the study (as explained in the book), as army officers (who served in East Pakistan that year) were the people on the ground on the regime side whose experiences I needed to chronicle. These complaints reveal a lack of understanding of appropriate method, coupled with a desperate bid to find bias where there is not any.

Long Lists of Verbs

Mohaiemen gives long lists of verbs or terms which he sees as evidence of bias. This is pointless, as with such subjective selections much is omitted and meanings twisted. He writes, “Bose is incensed by a catalogue of terms used against the Pakistan army during the war...She also cites Quamrul Hassan’s iconic poster” (NM: 47). My book shows that I was impressed, not incensed, by the far more colourful use of terms by the Bengalis, calling the regime’s response in this regard “feeble”. About the poster I wrote: “As a political cartoon it was brilliant. As an instrument of black propaganda it proved remarkably effective as well” (DR: 164).

As Mohaiemen makes much of the descriptions of some army officers, for example, one described as “a lively person with a sense of humour” (NM: 46) and supposedly parallel negative characterisations of Bengalis, for example, “a good raconteur”, which he interprets as “a teller of tall tales, but unreliable as a historical source” (NM: 48), let me share a few of the characterisations he omitted. The reference to “a good raconteur” is taken from a sentence that reads: “Amar Sur is an impressive personality – good-looking, articulate, with a sense of drama and tragedy, a good raconteur” (DR: 74). I go on to report this Bengali Hindu survivor’s testimony in detail, including his bitterness at his treatment in independent Bangladesh (DR: 74-76). Another example:

Muhammad Abdus Sattar is a remarkable man... At about 78 years of age, he was tall, erect and articulate, demonstrating not only physical fitness but a mental strength that clearly helped him to emerge out of his nightmarish experience without losing his mind. He also demonstrated an extraordinary degree of fairness and balance in speaking of the actions of those who had committed such a terrible act of violence against him

and his fellow-villagers – a quality rare among many Bangladeshis who did not suffer even a fraction of what Sattar has been through (DR: 100-01).

Or, about Nitai Gayen and Achintya Saha:

Both calm and thoughtful men, they contemplated the killings in Chuknagar and the conflict of 1971 with none of the mindless hate or hysteria frequently found among those who had seen less and suffered little. Achintya, a ‘reformed’ Marxist, and my guide and mainstay in many of the Khulna villages, also had a delightful wry sense of humour and an idealistic habit of contesting elections in Bangladesh (DR: 122-23).

Or, “Shyamoli Nasreen Choudhury is the sort of person my grandmother used to call *thakur-er jon* (god’s own people) – someone whose simple goodness is transparent as soon as you meet her” (DR: 149). Needless to say, all were Bengali nationalist survivors.

Not content with imaginary slights and disingenuousness, Mohaiemen resorts to falsehood. On the question of genocide, he writes “Bose is eager to prove there was no religious targeting” (NM: 44). The book says, “...in particular the disproportionate probability of being presumed to be an insurgent on the basis of religion – Hinduism – that led the army into killings that may have been ‘political’ in motivation, but could be termed ‘genocidal’ by their nature” (DR: 182). I elaborate on which of the killings of 1971 fit the UN Convention’s definition of genocide, which might not but still constitute serious crimes against humanity, and what it means for the quest for justice, in a long article devoted to this topic (*Journal of Genocide Research*, 13(4), 2011).

Referring to two of my articles in this journal he claims that I wrote that the Pakistan army “behaved impeccably, that charges of rape by Pakistani soldiers were untrue” (NM: 42). No page references are given in this instance, presumably because the statement is false.⁶ As all unbiased readers have spotted, “Dr Bose does not ignore atrocities carried out by Pakistan and its supporters – her book has several chapters on this subject – concluding its army committed political and extrajudicial killings that in some cases were “genocidal” (BBC online, 16 June 2011).

On the number killed, Mohaiemen writes, “Bose drills down to consider the Hamoodur Rahman Commission’s estimate of ‘26,000’

as the most reliable estimate...Bose clings to the Pakistani estimate" (NM: 46 and also see NM: 49). In the Bengali version co-authored with Chattopadhyay, he accuses me of changing my estimates of the dead after publication: "*Sarmila Bose biswasjogyo sankhya hishebe bechhe niyechhen Pakistaner Hamoodur Rahman Commissioner report-e dabi kora chhabbish hajar sonkhyati! Jodio tini ekhon 'Ekdin'e likhchhen je sonkhyati ponchash hajar theke ek loksho hotey parey (eta ki prokash poroborti somalochona samlatay kora?)*" (Sarmila Bose has chosen as the most reliable figure the 26,000 figure claimed by Hamoodur Commission Report! Though she has now written in *Ekdin* that the figure may be between 50,000 to 1 lakh (has this been done to cope with post-publication criticism?) (*Ekdin*, 9 September 2011).

In fact, DR states:

From the available evidence discussed in this study, it appears possible to estimate with reasonable confidence that at least 50,000-1,00,000 people perished in the conflict in East Pakistan/Bangladesh in 1971, including combatants and non-combatants, Bengalis and non-Bengalis, Hindus and Muslims, Indians and Pakistanis. Casualty figures crossing one hundred thousand are within the realm

of the possible, but beyond that one enters a world of meaningless speculation (DR: 181).

Attack on Researched Study

Thus, in an article whose purpose was to attack a researched study, Mohaiemen makes false statements about the content of the book on key aspects of the subject. It would appear that Mohaiemen (and Chattopadhyay) either have not read DR, or they have read it but still chose to lie about it in the hope of misleading a few more people for a little while longer. The production of "criticism" of DR bears an uncanny resemblance in this regard to the production of partisan history to date.

One expected a better standard of professionalism from a former Indian army officer than that displayed by Raghavan. For instance, Raghavan is dismissive of the Hindu survivors of the Pakistan army's attack who told me that around 16 people were killed in Shankharipara in Dhaka, on 26 March 1971. I faithfully reported the testimony of these Bengali Hindu victims of that attack by the Pakistan army – a terrifying incident for which those responsible should be prosecuted, and possibly for genocide given that the area seemed targeted on the basis of religion.

I believe these survivors' assessment of the number killed that day. Raghavan prefers the unsubstantiated claim of 8,000 dead stated by a Pakistani journalist who fled to the United Kingdom. At the same time, Raghavan does not believe me when I write that thousands of non-Bengalis were killed by Bengalis in the mills of Khulna even though that is reported by both Biharis and Bengalis. Incidentally, the same Pakistani journalist whose claim on Shankharipara Raghavan prefers, reported in 1971 that 1,00,000 non-Bengalis were killed by Bengalis in a matter of weeks.⁷

The politicised numbers game with victims is profoundly disrespectful towards the true victims of this war. As Nilakantan put it, "The book's narrative is dispassionate, systematic and evidence-based.... In a way, this book is a fitting homage to the tens of thousands of victims."⁸ Why should anyone have a problem with my pointing out the discrepancies between death tolls at the university and trying to explain why they arose? Is it not better to exhume the bodies buried in the playing field, identify them, strengthen the case against the murderers, and show the victims the respect they deserve, even if their number is fewer than



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what has been claimed in the political posturing that has been going on over 1971? And why is it a requirement to term all Bengalis “victims”? Some of them did fight. And they fought on both sides for what they believed in.

Conclusions

However, Raghavan is right that my book is critical of the manifestation of Bengali “nationalism” in 1971. (It was the linguistic identity of “Bengali” at the time, not “Bangladeshi” nationalism, as he writes. The latter was promoted later by Ziaur Rahman as an alternative, territorial concept.) Several others, whether appreciative or critical of the book, have also picked up on a strongly negative portrayal of “Bengali nationalism” in DR. To allege that this is due to bias against Bengalis, is absurd. My negative assessment of what passed for “Bengali nationalism” in the violent incidents of 1971 that I examined is a considered judgment, based on the evidence. As a Bengali, I plead guilty to wishing to have no truck with a single identity “nationalism”, which, like so many other identity-based “nationalisms”, fomented hatred and violence against those who were defined out of it or did not agree with it.

The legal and moral issues that Raghavan or Mohaiemen grandly refer to, need to apply to all warring parties. Subramanian echoes a concern about the book’s “moral equivalence” between atrocities committed by both sides (*The Hindu*, 27 September 2011), but why should the same crime – killing of civilians for having the “wrong” identity, or a different political view, for example – be considered a lesser crime if committed by the side you favour? Stereotyping, de-humanisation and brutality were practised by all sides. I condemn all who committed such crimes, but a few Indian commentators seem to be battling on to excuse the “nationalists”. The war is long over. India is better served by an unsentimental examination of what it has got on its eastern flank.

NOTES

- 1 *Indian Express*, 20 July 2011; quoted in NM, p 44.
- 2 *Tehelka*, 13 August 2011; Butalia’s review is cited by NM for its criticism (p 45). Butalia also surprised with a peevish reaction to my observation that my book may remain “unique just as Sisson and Rose’s book was”, first, as those who had lived through the war would pass away (indeed some I talked to are already no more) and second, as the generations after me would not even have childhood memories of the war and thus lack the emotional connection I felt to the subject. Butalia

thinks this is “hubris” (a cue picked up by Nirupama Subramanian in *The Hindu*, 27 September 2011), when it is merely stating the reality. As I point out, for similar reasons, Sisson and Rose’s book is also “unique” and cannot be replicated.

- 3 For other reviews see Ian Jack, *The Guardian*, 21 May 2011; Martin Woollacott, *The Guardian*, 1 July 2011; Saurabh Kumar Shahi, *The Sunday Indian*, 24 August 2011; Banyan blog, *The Economist*, 1 August 2011 posting from Dhaka; Dipankar Bhat-tacharyya, *Hindustan Times*, 16 September 2011; Sanjeev Nilakantan, *Business World*, 1 October 2011; Tariq Rahman, *Newsline*, 12 November 2011 and Sunanda Datta-Ray, *The Telegraph*, 3 September 2011.
- 4 *Financial Times*, 18 March 2011; *The Guardian*, 24 March 2011. Anam is the daughter of the editor of the newspaper *Daily Star* in Bangladesh, which reproduced Mohaiemen’s EPW article.
- 5 Cited for instance, *Dead Reckoning (DR)*, 176-78.
- 6 Interested readers are welcome to read the articles for themselves: “Anatomy of Violence: Analysis of Civil War in East Pakistan in 1971”, EPW, Vol 40, No 41, 8-14 October 2005 and “Losing the Victims: Problems of Using Women as Weapons in Re-counting the Bangladesh War”, EPW, Vol 42, No 38, 22-28 September 2007.
- 7 Anthony Mascarenhas, author of the *Sunday Times* expose “Genocide” (13 June 1971), estimated 1,00,000 non-Bengali victims of Bengali attacks and up to 1,50,000 Bengali victims of the army. These are speculative figures and not based on any actual accounting. What is instructive is that victims on both sides were estimated to be roughly in the same range.
- 8 *Business World*, 1 October 2011. In contrast, Subramanian (*The Hindu*, 27 September 2011) still seems to be in thrall of the claim of “3 Million Dead”, castigating me for scaling down the numbers, and persisting in viewing the conflict as one between “the oppressor and the oppressed”, the kind of simplistic dichotomy that the incidents recounted in the book comprehensively show cannot be applied to 1971.

Another Reckoning

NAEEM MOHAEMEN

Bose states I “pounce”, make “false statements”, display “lack of methodological understanding, disingenuousness and falsehood”, and “still chose to lie about it in the hope of misleading a few more people for a little while longer”. My essay is, in her words, a “lengthy harangue”.

Very well, I will be brief this time.

I never stated in my essay that Bose did not receive positive reviews. But the critical ones analyse her errors and omissions. Countering only with positive reviews, without answering the questions that have been raised, is insufficient.

Other Critiques

It is especially those who specialise in Bangladesh and conflict studies, and know the subject intimately, who have itemised the

flaws in her book. Her critics include scholars of gender violence during conflict (Urvashi Butalia¹), authors of academic books on 1971 and rape (Nayanika Mookherjee,² Yasmin Saikia³), authors of two forthcoming books on 1971 (Srinath Raghavan,⁴ Salil Tripathi⁵), author of a definitive history of Bangladesh⁶ (Willem van Schendel, who questioned her “professional and ethical standards⁷”), and an eyewitness (Akhtaruz-zaman Mandal⁸). Arnold Zeitlin (head of Pakistan bureau of AP in 1971) queried why she did no surveys of non-voters to establish her “support” thesis.⁹ Gita Sahgal (producer of a documentary on 1971 war crimes¹⁰) has pointed out how *razakars* were dismissed in the book.¹¹ Richard Cash (author of decades of pre- and post-1971 public health research in Bangladesh) disputes her

death toll methodology and has pointed,¹² in this respect, to the research published in *Population Studies* on the impact of the war on births and deaths.¹³ In an as yet unpublished study, Dina Siddiqi (specialist on gender and Islam in Bangladesh, and researcher for *Ain o Salish Kendra*, which produced 1971 rape study) has analysed how framing and context setting are critical to the production of historical “truths”, and therefore Bose’s silences and omissions are significant.¹⁴

Although Bose attempts a rejoinder here to myself, Butalia and Raghavan, she chooses not to respond to Nayanika Mookherjee, who critiqued Bose’s first 1971 essay in 2005,¹⁵ her follow-up in 2007, and *Dead Reckoning* in 2011. In addition to a book on rape during 1971, Mookherjee has written 11 journal essays on 1971. Yet, Bose ignores her critique.

Faced with my listing of her incorrect summaries of pre-crackdown history, she now says “that was not the purpose of my study”. If so, why did she make sweeping

misinterpretations about that history? About the singular focus on Pakistani army officer testimonies, she says, “army officers were the people on the ground on the regime side whose experiences I needed to chronicle”. Actually, there were numerous civilian Pakistanis who also served the war regime (see list in Hasan Zaheer).¹⁶ About my list of West Pakistani war-critics, she says, “My book was not meant to be a compilation of ‘progressive’ or ‘regressive’ political opinion on 1971”. But, some of those people participated in the protests against the war – they had experience, not only opinions. Finally, to my compilation of systemic use of one-sided and coercive qualifiers (Pakistani atrocities are “alleged”, Bengali atrocities are not), she responds: “as with such subjective selections much is omitted and meanings twisted”. Precisely my point!

About my characterisation of her thesis “that charges of rape by Pakistani soldiers were untrue”, she says, “No page references are given in this instance”. No page reference was given because this characterisation is my overall assessment of her essays, which I stand by. Elsewhere, I highlighted the phrase “courageous Pak Army”, and she responds, “As every author knows, headings are given by the paper”. Actually, when EPW added the phrase “Civil War” to the title of my 2008 essay, I promptly sent a rejoinder.¹⁷ Why didn’t she ask *Daily Times* for a correction in 2003, instead of waiting until 2011, after many critiques, to now say that phrase was ‘sensationalist and inappropriate’?

Never mind, these are trivial points. However, here is one that is not. She is irritated by my focus on her Christian Science Monitor “Right Stuff” op-ed (also noted by Mookherjee), which “had nothing to do with 1971”. Here is what it did have a link to: Pakistan’s “Military Inc” (enumerated by Ayesha Siddiqi).¹⁸ The op-ed supported Pakistani military procurement (and lauded the “enlightened moderation” that President Pervez Musharraf continues to advocate!). This was at the same time that she was conducting interviews with retired Pakistani army officers, who are part of the financial and political networks (including retired officers’ trusts) that benefit from defence spending. For an academic to co-sign her name to a military advocacy

op-ed is unusual, and may indicate that she had become too embedded in the mindset of the Pak military industrial complex, sacrificing the objectivity necessary for academic research.

Bose’s recurring defence at public events is that she is being pilloried because she attacks Bengali nationalism. However, the majority of her critics also challenge that same nationalism. The researchers and authors that Bose ignored (listed by myself and Mookherjee in EPW) have all chafed at the parochial limits of Bengali nationalism. An anthology I edited in 2010¹⁹ contains 75 essays by my colleagues who have spent a lifetime challenging the racially exclusive framework of Bengali nationhood. Long before her, we have been critics of hegemonic and exclusionary nationalisms.

Bose has not been singled out because she attacks tropes of nationalism. There has already been a thriving, pugnacious critique of nationalism for the last four decades, especially in Bengali-language scholarship and journalism. No, she is criticised for sloppy research, faulty methodology, absent framing, and partisan interviews. Period.

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NOTES

- 1 Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, Duke, 2000.

- 2 Nayanika Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971*, Duke, 2012.
- 3 Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*, Duke, 2011. Critique of Bose in Note 70, Chapter 2, pp 264-65.
- 4 Forthcoming, Permanent Black.
- 5 Salil Tripathi, “Subcontinental Drift”, *Mint*, 15 July 2011.
- 6 Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- 7 Schendel, presentation at “Building a Field of Scholarship and Dialogue on 1971” conference, 16-17 March 2011, Brac Inn, Dhaka. Organised by 1971 Collective, a scholar consortium, and Brac Development Institute, Brac University. Also cited in Mookherjee, *The Guardian*, 8 June 2011.
- 8 Mookherjee and Mandal, “‘Research’ on Bangladesh War”, EPW, 15 December 2007.
- 9 Zeitlin, “Thoughts on Dead Reckoning”, *Daily Star*, 17 December 2011.
- 10 *War Crimes Files*, Channel Four.
- 11 Gita Sahgal, “Dead Reckoning: Disappearing Stories and Evidence”, *Daily Star*, 18 December 2011.
- 12 Email Communication from Richard Cash.
- 13 George T Curlin, Lincoln C Chen and Sayed Babur Hussain, “The Impact of the Bangladesh Civil War (1971) on Births and Deaths in a Rural Area of Bangladesh”, *Population Studies*, Vol 30, No 1, 03/1976.
- 14 Dina Siddiqi, “Framing, Silence and Selective Valorisation in *Dead Reckoning*”, copy provided to author.
- 15 Nayanika Mookherjee, “A Prescription for Reconciliation?”, EPW, 9 November 2007.
- 16 Hasan Zaheer, *The Separation of East Pakistan*, Oxford, 1994, p 506.
- 17 Naeem Mohaiemen, EPW, 1 January 2008 and 9 February 2008.
- 18 Ayesha Siddiqi, *Military Inc: Inside Pakistan’s Military Economy*, Pluto Press, 2007.
- 19 Naeem Mohaiemen (ed.), *Between Ashes and Hope: Chittagong Hill Tracts in the Blind Spot of Bangladesh Nationalism*, Manusher Jonno Foundation, 2010.

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