

Book Review

Zakaria, Anam., *1971: A People's History from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan*. 393pp., Penguin Random House 2019

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Anam Zakaria is the author of two books: *Footprints of Partition* (2011) and *Between the Great Divide* (2018). Both are oral histories based for the most part on oral narratives. This is her third book in this genre and by far the most difficult to write for reasons which will emerge in this review.

The book is divided into four parts and eleven chapters and there are notes and references and an index to facilitate the scholar. However, the book is not addressed only to academics. It is mainly addressed to ordinary, educated people who want to make sense of the past; their identities; the subjective personal experiences of their elders—compatriots, parents and grandparents—in order to gain deeper insights into their own lives and thoughts. Moreover, it is also addressed to outsiders—people interested in South Asia but not from it—who want to understand how the people of the subcontinent can view their history in so many different ways.

Zakaria begins her book with a chapter on ‘selective silences, selective remembrances’, taking the reader straight into an auditorium in Bangladesh where she and her husband listen to a woman (Nuzhat) whose aunt had been raped and others who had suffered from the atrocities of the Pakistan army in 1971. She feels as if she is the one being accused when she listens to how Nuzhat’s father, and the relatives of others like her, were taken out of their homes and killed only a day before the fall of Dhaka. And, in contrast to this, the author had encountered a different ‘truth’ about this history in her own home in Lahore (Pakistan). So what was the TRUTH? It was to discover this that she and her husband Haroon apply for visas to Bangladesh; with the help of Shahryar Kabir, they are successful and arrive in Dhaka. Here she meets Kabir, a passionate defender of the War of Liberation and the moving spirit behind the Museum of the Liberation War in Dhaka. The museum petrifies the author as she watches displays of the atrocities and the hatred expressed for the Pakistani perpetrators. But here also begins her journey to a sober and balanced understanding of the events of 1971. Among others she meets Meghna

Guhathakurta, the daughter of Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta who was shot by the army on 26 March and died on the 30th in agony (the details of this blood-chilling event are in chapter 7 on ‘Bangladesh’s War). From these powerful scenes the author shifts to ‘remembering 1947’. She begins with some stories of ‘selective remembering’ from her first book *Footprints of Partition* and then connects them to the resonance of the partition of India in present day Bangladesh. For the older generation she finds that the two-nation theory and the events of 1947 are still a salient marker of their political landscape but that for younger people they have lost their significance. There are ‘two nations’ even now but one happened to be Pakistani and the other was Bengali (and Bangladeshi within it). How did this intellectual and political transition take place? This is what Anam Zakaria takes up in the next section.

The second section is aptly called the ‘Seeds of Unrest’. The first chapter, quite appropriately, is on the language movement. There is a lot of literature on this but, quite appropriately for an oral historian, Anam Zakaria gives pride of place to the story of Aroma Dutta, the daughter of Dhirendranath Dutta, a member of the Constitutional Assembly of Pakistan who had given a passionate speech in 1948 on why Urdu should not be the only national language. Dhirendranath, in his eighties, was dragged out of his home in Comilla by the Pakistan army and, according to an eyewitness, tortured and killed. It is the breaking voice of the daughter when she narrates the story which gives us an understanding of the deep hurt of the events of that fateful year—something which casualty statistics cannot. Nor is this all—as the author finds out when she travels to other parts of Bangladesh. For instance, in Khulna she meets Muntasir Mamoon who has built a ‘museum of genocide’ to preserve the memory of the suffering of his people in 1971. In the last chapter (No. 6) in this section (A West Pakistani in East Pakistan) the author interviews a Pakistani contractor whose friend was killed in front of him and who witnessed youths from Al-Badar and Al-Shams bent upon fighting what they called a ‘jihad’ against Bengali Muslims.

Part 3 is about the construction and perceptions of the war itself by Bangladeshis, Indians and Pakistanis. In keeping with the methodology of oral history, this too is based on stories and personal interaction with people in the three countries. It is in the chapter of 'Bangladesh's War' (No. 7) that she meets Meghna, the killing of whose father, Professor Guhathakurta, was mentioned above. She also meets Ferdousi Priyabhashini, who was a victim of rape and who decided to come out with it and not conceal it in deference to any notion of cultural shame. Perhaps the most moving scene is at Chuknagar which witnessed an attack on the predominantly Hindu community by soldiers from the Pakistan army who fired on these unarmed people for several hours. A peasant, Ershad, and a Hindu baby girl he had saved from death called Shundari met her and the latter started weeping uncontrollably. Anam reached out to her and both met in an embrace which takes us to the personal, intimate world of human relations only expressed in oral histories but completely eschewed in academic writing. In India this war is constructed as a necessary intervention because of a large number of migrants. It is also taken as a great triumph over Pakistan in official narratives. However, when the author interacted with young students in Kolkata, she found that it was not remembered except as one of the many wars Pakistan forced upon a peaceful India. In Pakistan too it was ignored but when she met Biharis in Karachi she found that they remembered it as the year of Bengali atrocities against their community. One of them, Major Ansar, told her blood-curdling stories of how they had to stand in a line in which Bengalis were slicing off their heads in cold blood. Other Biharis tried to run away from certain death only to be incarcerated in Indian jails. Indeed, both for the Bengalis and the Biharis, and one may add West Pakistanis, 1971 was a dreadful year. The Bengalis were hunted, tortured, killed by the army and Biharis; the Biharis were treated likewise by the Bengalis; and the West Pakistanis were hunted and victimized by the rebellious units of Bengali soldiers and the Mukti Bahini. And, only a year before these had been each other's neighbours and friends. Anam Zakaria also interviewed some of those Pakistanis who had resisted the policies of General Yahya Khan's regime. Among these were Ahmad Salim who was actually jailed for writing a poem condemning the military action on the night of 25/26 March 1971. Others who opposed it in various ways were Tahira Mazhar Ali Khan, Shameem Malik, Zafar Malik, Malik Ghulam Jilani, I.A. Rehman and other left-leaning intellectuals. Quite surprisingly, however, an army officer, Colonel Nadir Ali Khan, a commando posted to East Pakistan in 1971, also opposed the needless cruelties which he witnessed. He also testified that Hindus were attacked as a matter of policy and that some officers boasted about how many people they had killed.

The last section of the book is about how the narratives of the war have been constructed and how it is meant to be imagined by the young in Bangladesh and Pakistan. In both countries museums and textbooks are the major instruments of creating narratives. In Bangladesh, however, this is complicated by the internal politics of the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina and the Bangladesh National Party of Khaleda Zia. While the

former has inherited the narrative of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, with its emphasis on Pakistani atrocities and the war of liberation, the BNP toes a more pro-Pakistan and anti-India line. Thus textbooks about Pakistani atrocities were rewritten during the period of BNP rule. Moreover, this party also gives political prominence to the Jamat-i-Islami which is accused of collaborating with Pakistan. However, during Anam Zakaria's visit Sheikh Hasina was in power and the narrative of the war was of central significance. Anam Zakaria does not, however, remain focused only on the narratives of the majorities. She reaches out to the minorities too: the Biharis in a camp in Bangladesh and the Bengalis in Karachi. The former are a lost generation, she discovers. They were abandoned by Pakistan and confined to slum-like camps in Bangladesh. The Bengali fishermen in Pakistan fared only slightly better. They too were often denied identity cards which made them effectively stateless. Such communities are the human waste of wars—people whom the generals never plan for when they play out war games on their maps in the operations rooms.

Anam Zakaria has done us a great service in undertaking research which was not only difficult in terms of the travelling and the costs involved, but in terms of the emotional trauma of listening to heart-rending stories and sitting among people for whom she represented the abominable 'Other'. Moreover, the book also involved the danger of annoying the Pakistani military which makes it an act of great moral courage. Another challenge was to be fair to all sides and not be taken in by the dominant narrative of any one country, and in this too the author has succeeded. The sufferings of Bengalis as well as the Biharis are depicted and empathy is shown for both. The in-depth interviews complete with descriptions of places and personal emotions give an air of verisimilitude which makes history come alive and gives it immediacy and human relevance. The only lacuna in my view is chapter 3, 'Remembering 1947'. Granted, it connects the selective remembering and forgetting of that earlier subcontinental collective trauma and the main political narratives of the time (the two-nation theory for instance) with the present. But the connection could have been made with only a brief reference to the stories which the author has narrated in the beginning of the chapter. This would have saved space and made the narrative tighter and more focused. This, however, is a very small lacuna in an otherwise excellent study of the 1971 war in the subcontinent. On the whole the book is a valuable addition to the existing literature on the subject which has so far lacked an oral history. I recommend it to all students of South Asian history and the general reader. It is a milestone in the oral history of South Asia which will remain a landmark study for future generations.