

Kausik Bandyopadhyay*
Bangladesh at 50
Memories and Reflections of an Indian *Bangali*

Introduction

Bangladesh started its journey as a new nation and State with a bloody yet glorious heritage of genocide, torture and liberation war. Its journey in its first fifty years has been wrought with serial binaries - hope and despair, rise and decline, success and failure, backwardness and growth, development and underdevelopment, secular and communal - in diverse fields of life including politics, economy, society, and culture. Although I was not a witness to the birth of independent Bangladesh, being an inhabitant of a border area of West Bengal in India, with a maternal ancestry in Bangladesh and having a childhood and adolescence spent intimately with Bangladesh radio and television, I saw the evolution of Bangladesh in its first twenty years (1971-90) from a different perspective, followed by a more conscious connect with the history and growth of the nation in the next one and half decade (1992-2007) through readings and media highlights. In the last fifteen years (2007-22) my appreciation of Bangladesh as a nation-state is based on a more thoughtful and academic tryst with the country through social visits, ethnography and research. To be succinct, I have seen Bangladesh grow as a strong phenomenon and entity through memories, moments, and reflections as an avid follower and lover of Bangladesh. In this paper I use memory and ethnography to explore and reflect upon the evolution of

* Professor, Department of History, West Bengal State University, India

Bangladesh in its first fifty years of existence. It will highlight some of the key markers and trends of this process of Bangladesh's becoming of a strong entity and phenomenon from the perspective of a Bangali of India.

1971-1991: Uncritical Memories

I draw my Bangladeshi ancestry from my mother, who, born in Satkhira in 1951, migrated to Basirhat, a suburban town of West Bengal in the early 1950s. My first memories of Bangladesh come from my maternal grandfather who used to narrate occasionally the suffering that forced them to migrate from East Bengal and the warmth and love of his Muslim neighbours who helped them flee at a turbulent time in late 1951. He also used to recollect the happy and collective lived experiences before 1947 and how the Partition unsettled everything despite their initial decision to stay back in East Bengal. It was a case of forced migration for my maternal family leaving aside all immovable assets, most belongings and sweet memories.

My childhood memories of Bangladesh as a neighbouring country provide a curious mixture of positive and negative images. The idol immersion ceremony at the end of Durga Puja festivals was held on the river Ichhamati at Basirhat and Taki every year. At Taki, the river was divided between the two countries with Bangalis of West Bengal assembling at the bank on the Indian side and Bangalis of Bangladesh on their side. In most of the years, this was one occasion when the border was set open for free movement for the sake of cultural amity and people-to-people contact. I visited Taki a few times and was overwhelmed at that tender age by the sense of belonging, warmth and affection visible in the exchange of greetings between two groups of Bangalis floating spontaneously on either side of the border. This annual event constituted a constructive imagery of Bangaliness and ingrained a positive vibe about Bangladesh in my mind.

The negative images of Bangladesh, however, were not easy for me to understand in the early and mid-1980s. These relate to, among others, illegal border migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal, particularly to my native town Basirhat. They were mostly Hindu immigrants, and children of their families used to come to study with us in our school. We began to learn from them that they were forced to immigrate due to minority oppression during the regime of President Hussain Mohammad Ershad in Bangladesh. Many of them became good friends who narrated their bitter as well as sweeter memories with us from time to time. Their families, once in India, could also procure ration cards and voter ids through local political channels by illegal means. Associated with this was another recurrent memory of smuggling both ways – cows from Basirhat to Bangladesh and various Bangladeshi and foreign products from Bangladesh to Basirhat. We had no idea of the bigger picture of these illegal transactions but we knew authorities of both countries were involved in the same.

During my childhood, I heard about the liberation war (*Muktijuddha*) and the name of Mujibur Rahman once or twice at home when my grandfather and father discussed about it. My first exposure to the saga of Bangalis' fight for language was in school when one of our Bangali teachers celebrated the language day (*Bhasha Divas*) in class and explained the significance of the event to us. The school texts in early secondary school mentioned 1971 as the year of India's victory over Pakistan and Bangladesh's emergence as an independent nation.

However, I did not have to depend on text books or oral testimonies for knowing about Bangladesh. This was thanks to the availability of Bangladesh Betar (Bangladesh Radio) and Bangladesh Television (BTV) at Basirhat. I used to listen to songs, plays and news on Bangladesh Betar in the late 1970s and early 1980s with my mother. More importantly, BTV, with its rich repertoire of television plays (*Natok*) and serials (*Dharabahik*),

films (*Chalacchitra*), musical programmes (*Ganer Asar*), News (*Sambad*), Hollywood serials, live or recorded telecast of global sports events like FIFA World Cup and World Wrestling Championships nearly substituted Doordarshan, the official television channel of India, as our preferred channel. Characters of contemporary Bangladeshi television-plays became household names in Basirhat's society. The two most celebrated serial plays of the mid 1980s were – *Ei Sab Din Ratri* (All these days and nights) and *Dhakay Thaki* (Living in Dhaka). The trend continued till the early 1990s with *Ayomoy* becoming one of the most watched television serials in Bangali household in West Bengal where BTV was available. I still recollect quite well how my childhood stars and passions came to include so many Bangladeshi personalities from the world of television - Sabina Yasmin, Runa Laila, Firdousi Rahman, Abul Hayat, Dilara Zaman, Doli Jahur, Asadujjaman Noor, Tarana Halim, Bipasha Hayat, Bulbul Ahmed, and so on. Among Bangladeshi film stars Abdur Razzak attained the status of 'Uttam Kumar of Bangladesh' while Rozina became a cynosure of all eyes for her role in one of the most successful Bangali films of the 1980s, *Anyay Abichar* (Offence and injustice). However, the film that broke all records of popularity in terms of cinema hall collection was *Beder Meye Jyotsna* (Jyotsna, the daughter of snake-charmer) (1989) with Bangladeshi actress Anju Ghosh in a lead role. Anju Ghosh (Jyotsna) became a household name in West Bengal in these years.

The strongest and one of the most sentimental links with Bangladesh also came through a visual and listening experience on BTV. It was the projection of Savar – National Martyrs' Memorial, the national monument for the martyrs of the liberation war of Bangladesh with the epic song "Ek sagar rakter binimoye Banglar swadhinota anlo jara amra tomader bhulbo na" (We won't forget those who brought Bangladesh's independence in exchange of a sea of blood). The blood sacrificed for the cause

of the nation and its liberation could easily appeal to emotionally vulnerable juvenile like me, whose generation could not associate themselves with the achievement of India's freedom at a far off time. The other song sung mostly by Ferdousi Rahman – "Keu ba bole dhaner desh, keu ba bole gaaner desh, amra boli praner desh" (Some say the land of rice, some say the land of song, we say the land of life) – became another expression of Bangladesh's imagery as a nation close to our hearts. I don't remember when I exactly came to know about the national anthem of Bangladesh – æAmar Sonar Bangla Ami Tomay Bhalobasi" (O my golden Bengal, I love you). It was probably in the early 1980s, and it only increased my sense of commonality with Bangladesh. The three key imageries from these three songs that appealed to my mind in my adolescence were: blood (*Rakto*), life (*Pran*) and golden Bengal (*Sonar Bangla*). I built an image in my memory quite uncritically of a Bangladesh that shed blood to become free from Pakistani oppression and domination, creating a new nation that is full of life and aspiring to become golden Bengal.

I must take a pause here and talk about my early impression about Ershad when I was going through emotion enmeshed in the tentacles of BTV. I did not realize the meanings of the projection of dictatorship through television and considered him to be a benevolent despot creating 'Feel Good' impression across young minds. However, with time I started reading newspapers regularly and came to learn about Bangladesh's plight under Ershad in the late 1980s. It was through newspapers and television that I came to learn about the anti-autocracy movements against Ershad in the late 1980s, which ultimately brought his downfall in 1990 and restored democracy in Bangladesh in 1991. My perceptions about Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) under Begam Khaleda Zia or Awami League under Sheikh Hasina were very poor as I only knew that both wanted to put an end to the dictatorship of Ershad joining hands with the civil society activists.

The Bangladesh I got impression of during this phase was something very real and primary – tailored through my mostly uncritical mind. These uncritical memories require corroboration, critique and reflections to put them in proper historical perspective. I leave the task to younger generation of historians in West Bengal.

1991-2007: Perceptions and Views

The 1990s began with turbulence and ruptures globally as well as in India and Bangladesh. The Soviet Union disintegrated resulting in the end of the Cold War. In India economic liberalisation set in, terrorism made its headway and the Saturn of communalism found a big hole in Indian society. In Bangladesh a democratic government under BNP with Khaleda Zia as Prime Minister came to power. The early 1990s were also my college days when I came to interact for the first time with friends, teachers and researchers from diverse disciplines to form my perceptions and views about events, processes, states, nations, and so on. There was no scope for me to study the history of Bangladesh in the crowded syllabus of History at the undergraduate level. But information, articles in newspapers and literary writings began to make me interested about the country.

The first spark in this regard came with the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India in December 1992 at the instance of *Kar Sevaks* of Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) promoted by Rashtriya Sawamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The result was not only eruption of communal tensions and riots in various parts of India, but unwanted repercussions in Bangladesh as well. The attacks on Muslims and Muslim shrines in India were reciprocated by similar attacks on Hindus and Hindu temples in certain parts of Bangladesh. This was also the time when terrorist attacks started in different parts in India, and for many analysis and commentators, the network of terrorism cast its web through

Bangladesh with West Bengal as a safe passage. I also came to know from a part of Indian print media that the BNP was allied with the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat) in Bangladesh, thereby promoting fundamentalist forces and nurturing terrorist networks in the country. At this juncture Bangladesh was considered to be 'an international basket case' for its underdeveloped economy and its vulnerability to serial natural disasters. With time things seemed to undergo changes as Awami League came to power in 1996 with Sheikh Hasina as the new Prime Minister. There appeared to be a reversal of earlier policy resulting also in the betterment of India-Bangladesh relations.

While political issues dominated media discourses on Bangladesh in India, the idea of Bangladesh began to make impact on my mind in the domain of culture. An avid East Bengal Club¹ fan myself, I was overwhelmed at the inclusion and performance of four Bangladeshi footballers in my club in 1991-92 season – Monem Munna, Sheikh Mohammad Aslam, Rizvi Karim Rumi and Golam Mohammad Gaus. Kaiser Hamid and Rumman Sabir played for Mohammedan Sporting Club in the same season. For the first time the excellence of Bangladesh in the football field came to be recognised in West Bengal/ India. Although not many footballers followed in the footsteps of the above, Bangladesh as a footballing nation became recognised. It brought back my memories of watching my first ever FIFA World Cup live on BTV in 1986, which created a new generation of Argentine/ Diego Maradona fans in both India and Bangladesh.

It was unfortunate that with the onset of satellite cable television, private television channels with diverse options gradually replaced BTV's popularity in West Bengal. Yet the cultural world of West Bengal continued to be affected by the literary and cinematic imagination and personalities of Bangladesh. The most significant intervention and impact in this regard came from Taslima Nasrin for her radical and feminist writings in the

1990s. Her most controversial novel *Lajja* (Shame), published in 1993, became an instant bestseller in both Bangladesh and India. Her memoirs in four volumes, published later in the first five years of the 21st century, were also read widely by Indian Bangalis. All these writings, banned in Bangladesh from time to time, invited laurels as well as criticisms in India. The annual international book fair of Calcutta (now Kolkata) since the late 1980s used to have a big stall of Bangladesh with books published from Bangladesh, exposing us to a rich corpus of literary writings of Bangladeshi authors. Among them Humayun Ahmed and Akhteruzzaman Ilyas topped the list. The other cultural sphere where Bangladesh began to make its presence felt was cinema. While Indo-Bangladesh joint ventures in film-making became quite popular from the 1990s,² Bangladeshi film stars such as Firdous Ahmed made a mark in Bangali society by dint of their performances.³

As I stepped into my university life, a new world on Bangladesh was opened to my eyes. Along with media, literature, cinema and football, I for the first time tasted academic works on Bangladesh and India-Bangladesh relations thanks to some exceptional teaching by Prof. Jayanta Kumar Ray, my teacher at the University of Calcutta. I read a number of books written by Ray and his co-author Muntassir Mamoon,⁴ which exposed me to the intricate histories of the Bangladesh liberation war, post-liberation Bangladesh, and India's relations with her.⁵ Ray's study of East Pakistan led to my new understanding of Bangladesh during the Pakistan period.⁶ I also came to learn about the role of civil society in both the language movement and liberation war on the one hand and in the anti-autocracy movement against Ershad on the other. Similarly, Ray's work on Bangladesh Grameen Bank was greatly revealing to my young mind.⁷

1990s was a period of turbulence for Bangladesh as well. Bangladesh's political turmoil was best expressed through series

of *hartals* (strikes) and political violence. With a change of political party in power in 1996 that brought Awami League under Hasina to power I gathered my first understanding of the tension between secular and liberation war forces represented by Awami League and fundamentalist and anti-liberation war forces represented by BNP and Jamaat mainly through media reports. With the BNP again coming back to power in 2001, talks of terrorist networks being developed through Bangladesh-West Bengal corridor poured in the newspapers and electronic media in India. Bangladesh too started falling prey to terrorist attacks in the middle of this decade. The military interregnum and caretaker government ruled over Bangladesh from October 2006 till the elections of December 2008.

Interestingly, the reason why I became more interested in Bangladesh at the turn of the century was not political at all. Bangladesh made its debut in the ICC Cricket World Cup in 1999 and surprised all by defeating Pakistan in a group league match. I still remember the victory being celebrated in West Bengal as well. But for common Bangladeshis it was more than a sporting victory, as it vindicated a revenge of 1971 massacre of Pakistan army in Bangladesh. Subsequently, Bangladesh came to acquire Test status at the instance of Jagmohun Dalmiya, the Indian Bangali cricket administrator ruling over the ICC at that time. The apex of Bangladesh's achievement at the world stage came in 2007 when it reached the Super Eight stage in the World Cup defeating India in the group league. This was also the occasion when I made my first visit to Bangladesh in March 2007 – the beginning of my researcher self's tryst with the country.

2007-2022: Ethnography and Research

The context of my academic engagement with Bangladesh was my stint as fellow at the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata from March 2006 to January 2009. A reunion with my teacher Jayanta Kumar Ray, the then Chairman

of the Institute, and first contact with Prof. Muntassir Mamoon, noted historian and author of Bangladesh, enabled me to read and learn more about Bangladesh in an attempt to situate my postdoctoral project on "Sport, Culture and Regional Cooperation in South Asia with focus on Bangladesh". My perspectives on Bangladesh since then have grown mostly out of my ethnography and the resultant interaction with people across different spheres of life along with readings of scholarly and popular works written by Bangladeshi authors and published by Bangladeshi publishers.

My first visit to Dhaka enabled me to have a first-hand experience of the attachment, passion and emotion of Bangladeshi people towards one of their most popular sports, cricket, especially at a time when the country was undergoing a turbulent political and social situation under an emergency rule. When I boarded the aircraft of *Biman Bangladesh* on 15 March 2007, I asked the first airhostess I met about her feelings on Bangladesh's chances in the World Cup. The lady replied: æI don't have much idea about the chances! But I would have been damn happy if I could have managed to fly with our cricketers to the West Indies as a hostess looking after them as women do in Bangladesh."⁸ The crew boy, however, rushed into our discussion and stated: æBeware of us. We will do upsets this time. What Kenya did last time, we are quite capable of achieving that this year."⁹ This was the change already beginning to take shape in the country about the game even before the World Cup commenced.

On my way to the place of stay in Dhaka by taxi, Kamal Ahmed, the taxi driver, revealed some interesting facts about Bangladeshi cricket. Cricket seemed to Kamal to be an opiate for the masses. As he argued, given the continuous political strife, turmoil and uncertainty over the last one-year or so, cricket remained the only domain where Bangladeshis, irrespective of their political, social and religious affiliations, could celebrate the spirit of

nationalism. An upset win in the group stage and then promotion to the Super Eight stage could easily turn the whole nation into a euphoric state, thereby shifting the public attention from dirty politics to cricketing nationalism.¹⁰ The taxi driver did not probably know the implications of his comments, yet I got from him what I wanted to hear from a layman: cricket is the *only* secular religion, a national obsession in Bangladesh.

The change of attitude among average Bangladeshis towards the game became explicit in the following observation of a Hindu caretaker of my guesthouse: "Frankly speaking, *we* want India to go smoothly and win the cup. But on the 17th March, we want a different story to happen. Let our Dada (Sourav Ganguly) play very well scoring a century, but Bangladesh be the winner."¹¹ This also testifies to the fact that the rise of Sourav Ganguly as a Bangali icon provided immense inspiration to Bangladeshi youth for playing and loving cricket. In the evening of Bangladesh's encounter with India, a group of middle-aged persons were debating on Bangladesh's chances in the Cup. One of them remarked: "You know guys! *We* are doing *jagyas* and *pujas* (rituals and worship) in our locality to ensure Bangladesh's victory of over India on Saturday. *Your* prayer to Allah at the Masjid is not sufficient to produce *our* victory, *our* prayer will complement *yours* and do the trick."¹² This was amazing! A Hindu Bangladeshi, even while fully conscious of his religious and community identity, used his religion to bolster up a national cause. Cricket gives such a unique platform and the World Cup such a desired occasion to both communities – majority and minority – in Bangladesh to experience a secular brand of nationalism. This also disproves the commonly held fallacy that the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh always support India – the so-called land of the Hindus.

The experience of the World Cup 2007 showed that Bangladesh set up new standards in its cricket history in the West Indies, while more than 150 million Bangladeshis back home bathed in

an unprecedented spate of cricketing nationalism. While Bangladesh's stunningly successful run ended at the Super Eight stage with the singular victory against South Africa, it had already come to be regarded as a strong cricketing nation by other illustrious Test-playing countries. For the first time, Bangladeshis remained indifferent to the unexpected early exit of India and Pakistan from the World Cup as they became concerned with the performance of *their* country – Bangladesh. The decolonization of Bangladesh cricket was thus complete.¹³

My second visit to Bangladesh was on the eve of national elections in December 2008 with my senior colleague Amiyo Chaudhuri to gain firsthand understanding of Bangladesh's political rivalry. I witnessed the campaigns of rival political groups and was impressed by the national call of secular and liberation war spirit voiced by the Awami League and its allies. I also noticed the significant and bold role of the civil society and a new generation of Bangladeshis born after the liberation war in demanding the recognition of the genocide and torture of 1971 and the trial of war criminals. The elections held in late December 2008 brought Awami League to power and Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina started its journey towards recovery, development and progress, which still continues. Interestingly, since then, I have become a regular and almost an annual visitor to Bangladesh thanks to the initiatives, invitations, and cooperation of my friends from the country.

My initial aim was to write a social history of sport in Bangladesh on the basis of academic research, interaction and ethnography.¹⁴ However, with time I became an unwitting participant and activist in the process of reconstructing the history of the liberation war, genocide and torture. I became associated, primarily at the instance of Prof. Muntassir Mamoon, with the two main organs in this process – Bangladesh Itihas Sammilani at Dhaka and 1971 Genocide-Torture Archive and Museum at Khulna. One interesting coincidence in this regard

was that around the same time I started teaching at West Bengal State University, Barasat, Kolkata, India, where I introduced the history of Bangladesh as a component of the history of South Asia, including 1971 liberation war, genocide and torture and the history of independent Bangladesh as part of PG syllabus.

As India was a pivotal player in the entire episode in 1971, and given the growing global significance of the Indian Social Science academia since the 1970s, Indian authors including historians were expected to write copiously on the aspects of genocide and torture that happened during the liberation war. Unfortunately, that has not been the case to date, and India proves far backward in appreciating the significance of the event in the history of the subcontinent. As a result, rather than an evolved Indian historiography on the subject, what we get is a scattered medley of writings that mostly concentrate either on India's role in the liberation war and the military aspects of Indian intervention or on the significance of the event as part of Indo-Pak, or at the most, Indo-Bangladesh relations.¹⁵ The dimensions of genocide, torture, migration, and refugee experience have mostly been neglected in these writings.¹⁶ Similarly, these writings remain more or less silent on the social and cultural representations of the complexities and diversities of the liberation war and its impact on Indian life particularly in the border districts of West Bengal and Tripura. Hence the potential of completing the narrative and analysis of a connected historical biography of the phenomenon called Partition in South Asia remains unrealized.

How the problem of writing history gets affected by public, intellectual and political discourses in contemporary India is amply reflected in the way the history of the liberation war has generally been researched, written, and taught in India. The classic example in this case is the neglect of and silence on the spate of genocide and torture unleashed by Pakistan and its allies in East Pakistan upon Bangalis in 1971. Interestingly, while

Indian historical writings have paid some attention to the nature and impact of migration and refugee influx in the wake of the liberation war,¹⁷ they conveniently ignore the theme of genocide and torture. Given the growing discussion and importance of human rights globally and in India, and in view of the increasing discussion and research on genocide and torture culminating in the movement for, and the actual trial of war criminals in Bangladesh over the last decade, this silence is perplexing. The debates around the nature, extent and impact of genocide and torture constitute one essential lens to understand and reconstruct the history of the liberation war. But Indian scholarly pursuits have missed or neglected it mostly till date. The attempt to study the liberation war in terms of either India's glorious role in Bangladesh's liberation or India's foreign policy perspective somewhat strangely ignores the pivotal importance of genocide and torture in that process. The studies on migration in 1971 and afterwards on the other hand either fail to appreciate the larger context of social and political realities that led to state torture and killing during the war, or put the focus entirely on the discriminate picture of minority torture thereby missing out the broader indiscriminate nature of state tyranny and torture.

There are two important historical aphorisms in India to look at the story of genocide and torture of 1971 from two opposed perspectives. The first and dominant one, represented by leftist, liberal and liberal rightist intellectuals, scholars and politicians somewhat deliberately ignores the larger story of human torture and killing during 1971 in order to avoid the discomfort associated with the depiction of the reality of tyranny and torture on Hindu minorities during and after the liberation war. This attitude is a reflection of their so-called *secular* outlook shaped by the policy of minority appeasement and votebank politics in India/West Bengal since 1947.

The second perspective representing the extreme right intellectual and political factions, on the other hand, exaggerates

the spate of torture and genocide primarily as one of Hindu torture and killing during and after 1971, thereby creating a linear history that renders the larger picture of indiscriminate torture and genocide more or less motivated and fragmented.¹⁸ This attitude is often inspired by ideological, communal or political objectives of influencing the mind of the Hindu majorities in India/West Bengal.

Both ways, there have been attempts to either suppress or exaggerate the history of torture and genocide that took place in Bangladesh during the liberation war. As in Bangladesh, the number game with regard to the popular participation in the war and the victims of the war, particularly in terms of torture and genocide, has become a crucial point of debate in Indian studies on the liberation war.

Recently, I have strangely come across unpleasant questions about the actuality of genocide and torture in the liberation war in both Bangladesh and India.¹⁹ The forces that continually try to distort and efface the history of the liberation war and its attendant genocide and torture have been described by Muntassir Mamoon as representative of a 'Pakistani mind'. At the same time, the real extent and impact of the liberation war, genocide and torture in Bangladesh with special reference to the nature of popular participation in the liberation struggle, needs more objective assessment to counter and refute the stereotypes, misconstructions and distortions of history offered by the scholars, intellectuals and people of the 'Pakistani mindset'. One way of achieving this objective is to reconstruct and complete the Indian side of the story of 1971. For instance, the research on genocide and torture can assume a new and nuanced dimension if we can reconstruct history by juxtaposing the oral and visual memories of the refugees who came to India with that of the Indians who provided refuge to them. Corroboration to these evidences can come from contemporary newspapers, autobiographical writings, relevant government reports and

documents, and literary writings. One must remember that the study of genocide and torture during the liberation war is integrally connected with questions of human rights violation on the one hand and the trial and punishment of war criminals on the other. Hence Indian scholars need to be cautious about the prevalent tendencies of being either swayed by the syndrome of Indian glory with reference to the liberation war or influenced by the Bangali passion about the cause of liberation of Bangladesh. The attempt rather should be to appreciate and analyze these attitudes and psychologies of glorification and emotionalism in proper historical context.

Similarly, diverse social and cultural representations of the liberation war through orality, visuality, personal artefacts, anecdotes, literature, the media, and performing arts in India, and particularly in West Bengal, have not been given adequate attention by Indian/Bangali historians. One intriguing history of 1971 that developed silently during March-December 1971 and afterwards was the history of perceptions and mentalities that grew in the minds of Bangalis and Indians who witnessed, read and heard about the upheaval, supported or opposed or remained indifferent to the cause of the liberation war, and gave refuge to the forced migrants during and after the war. There is still scope to document these perceptions and mentalities through ethnography and oral interactions with a focus on physical relics, personal artefacts, and anecdotes.

Histories of culture/popular culture have generated a rich genre of scholarship in India in the last few decades. This has already been reflected in the growing historical literature on the social and cultural representations of the Partition of India/Bengal. Similar efforts are needed to redress the research gap in the case of liberation war. Sources for writing these histories are abundantly available; scholars only need to tap them and weave and analyse and situate them into the narrative of the liberation war. These sources may include literary fictions, published

reminiscences, media reports, cartoons, films and documentaries, theatres, or even performances on the sports field.

In post-1971 Bangladesh a search for a viable national identity has been underway with religion and language confronting and complementing each other as two strongest bases of identity.²⁰ As Rafiuddin Ahmed argues, 'While Islam provided the *raison d'être* for the Muslim state of Pakistan in 1947, it was the linguistic-cultural identity of the Bangalis of former East Pakistan which provided the impetus for the freedom struggle in Bangladesh.'²¹ While Bangladesh provides a classic case of quickly shifting patterns of community identity, what was most desired in the postcolonial context was 'a synthesis of the religious-linguistic identity complex'²² or 'the evolution of a religious-linguistic-regional consciousness'.²³

Yet the political instability, social tension and economic crises that plagued Bangladesh since 1971 have created a number of cycles, which began with enthusiasm, opportunity and hope, followed by broken promises, shattered dreams and widespread dejection, leading its people to look for alternatives with hope again. The failure of these cycles to provide basic social and economic security or ensure any better future for the Bangladeshi masses in the long run have made them restless, frustrated and somewhat escapist. The crucial turn in this cycle came with the accession of Hasina-led Awami League to power in 2008, after which some promises have been kept, opportunities created, and dreams realized. Interestingly enough, Bangladeshis have quite a few *secular* occasions and festivities in their national life,²⁴ which help them find relative escape and solace from the hard realities of material life – 21 February, the Language Day or Martyrs' Day;²⁵ 26 March, the Independence Day; and 16 December, the Victory Day;²⁶ Pahela Baishakh, the Bangali New Year celebrated in mid-April.²⁷ These occasions, which illuminate the secular bond of Bangladeshi identity, reveal that common Bangladeshis always look for viable emotional

refuge that can provide them with an alternative source of sustenance and an escape from the clutches of frustration suffered in everyday life.²⁸ This has necessitated the growth of more popular forms of cultural identity leading to the birth of a *Bangladeshi* identity, transcending the rigidities inherent in other bases of identity formation in Bangladesh. While for the competing political elites, religion and language still remain the two broad foci of identity complex for appropriation, mobilization and manipulation, Bangladeshi masses seem increasingly to look for, and prefer more secular, global forms/bases of national identity in the new century. Here, it seems, Ranabir Samaddar's idea of 'an alternative ethic and programme of reconstruction' to revive 'the national idea' in Bangladesh becomes critically relevant as cricket in the new century, for example, provides a powerful alternative cultural means of national self-expression for the masses. Even while the second generation Bangladeshi diaspora are said to be moving closer to 'a more Islamic identity',²⁹ they still tend to prefer cultural idioms like cricket as assertive markers of their secular identity.

Bangladeshi society is often shown to be divided between the secularists on the one hand and the religious Right and fundamentalists on the other, leading to what one scholar has called 'competing imaginings of nationhood'.³⁰ Accordingly, she sees 'in an examination of invented traditions, commemorations, interpretations of particular events, and the intentionality behind the commemoration of a specific combination of events' 'the struggle between religious nationalists and secularists'.³¹ A further challenge to this apparent binary of nationhood comes from the marginalized voices of the *non-Bangali* Bangladeshis, who represent another competing vision of cultural pluralism, urging the state to recognize their identities and expression.³² However, despite this so-called 'fragility of nationalism', strengthening the fact that 'a community can be imagined in a number of ways by the very nature of being imagined',³³ such

very ways can contradictorily reinforce the homogeneity of nationalism. In 21st century Bangladesh, particularly in the last one and half decade or so, cricket has asserted its status as one such way of imagining a secular homogeneous nationalist identity. It also challenges the notion that the multiple imaginings of the nation in Bangladesh are 'constrained by the dominant cultures within which they are created and communicated; one is the universal (Islam), and the other is the local (Bengal).'³⁴ Cricket as a nationalist obsession transcends everything in Bangladesh, binding all in one knot from a rickshaw puller to the prime minister, from a fundamentalist mullah to a westernized IT professional, from a poor farmer's wife to a high society lady, or from a Hindu priest to a disgruntled Chakma. More importantly, cricket educates the Bangladeshi youth about nationalist ideology and instills in them a deep emotional attachment toward the nation thus imagined. Performing well or not, nationalism around cricket is not fragile as the other 'invented traditions' are argued to be, since it cuts across affiliations of race, religion, community, or ethnicity. The religious fundamentalists and their lay followers, who do not agree with the idea of secular nationalist ideology, too, seem to have succumbed to the all pervasive wave of cricketing nationalism in the wake of a cricket World Cup. The impact of globalization and transnational bonds makes this cricketing nationalism more stable and viable. Cricket thus redefines and rekindles Bangladeshi nationalism. Beyond the political rhetoric of struggle over the question of religious versus ethno-linguistic identity, cricket now provides a space where Bangladesh as a *homogeneous* nation makes its presence felt globally.

A lighter note to end this section, I come back to Bangla television play or serial (*natok*) of the 2020s in Bangladesh. There is a marked contrast between television plays of West Bengal and Bangladesh in terms of direction, contents, presentation and realistic focus. The superiority of Bangladeshi plays emanates from the premise that real life is at its best

expression in them.³⁵ Bangladeshi TV stars like Tanjin Tisha, Mehazabien Chowdhury, Ziaul Faruq Apurba, Afran Nisho, Mosharraf Karim, Sabila Nur, Tasnia Farin, Zakia Bari Momo, and so are increasingly becoming popular among the Bangalis in West Bengal. These plays have become a powerful medium of everyday culture, and represent Bangladesh as a nation of love, passion and humanity. This genre of culture should be a learning experience for the makers of Bangali plays/ serials on television in India.

The cultural relationship between West Bengal and Bangladesh has registered a surge since Hasina's accession to power in 2008. Academic and cultural exchanges have increased greatly. People-to-people contacts have grown to new heights. Indo-Bangladesh collaboration in the domains of performing arts and higher education has also become quite regular. Bangladesh book fair has become an annual fixture in Kolkata while language day celebrations are organised throughout West Bengal with much emotion and grandeur.

Postscript

While my exploration, understanding and reflections of Bangladesh may look highly personalised to readers, I note with confidence the country's rise as a developing nation with major breakthroughs in the domain of poverty alleviation and socio-economic development in the last one decade or so. Bangladesh's continuing fight against fundamentalist forces, terrorist networks and pro-Pakistani mindset is still on while the government coped up well with Covid 19 pandemic. All these point to Bangladesh's growth as a strong phenomenon and stable entity in the last one decade or so. My understanding of some of the key moments, markers and trends of this process of Bangladesh's becoming of a strong entity and phenomenon is that of an avid lover and follower of Bangladesh, albeit with

dispassionate historical rigour through memories and ethnography from the perspective of a Bangali of India.

It is said that democracies in South Asia have five major pillars – legislature, executive, judiciary, media, and civil society. However, all these have been more or less under authoritarian pressure and threat in the 21st century. On the other hand, three enduring bases of ‘unfortunate democracy’ have emerged – crime, corruption and lie/ falsehood/ deception. Such subversion of democracy is happening in parts of South Asia with the idea of a majoritarian democracy/ democratic dictatorship gaining ground with right wing politics in action. Bangladesh’s evolution as a democracy faces these challenges too. The other external factor/ danger Bangladesh has to negotiate with is the spectre of Chinese capitalism and imperialism, with Sri Lanka providing a veritable warning.

In the midst of everything the cherished dream of Mujibur Rahman to create a ‘Sonar Bangla’ remains the cherished dream of common Bangladeshis and the ultimate goal of the present Bangladesh government. In fact, as I later realised, even Ershad’s representation of Bangladesh as ‘Sonar Bangladesh’ (Golden Bangladesh) was a distorted replication of Mujibur Rahman’s ‘Sonar Bangla’. In his attempt to create a *different* Bangladesh, Ershad too worked under the shadow of Mujibur Rahman. Nobody’s rhetoric, I believe, could go beyond Mujibur’s ‘Sonar Bangla’ since 1971. Dissenters may attack his legacy, but they too harbour under his long shadow. That’s why he still remains the greatest Bangali – *Jatir Pita* (Father of the Nation) and *Bangabandhu* (Friend of Bengal) - to whom majority of Bangladeshis look for inspiration and sustenance.

Notes and References

1. One of West Bengal's premier football club.
2. I recollect three films of this period: *Padma Nadir Majhi* (The boatman of river Padma) (1993), *Moner Moto Mon* (A mind like a true mind) (1998) and *Moner Majhe Tumi* (You are in the midst of Mind) (2003).
3. Firdous Ahmed made a good impression in the film *Hitath Brishti* (Sudden Rain) (1998).
4. Muntassir Mamoon is one of the most renowned historians, public intellectuals and social activists of contemporary Bangladesh.
5. Jayanta Kumar Ray, *Democracy and Nationalism on Trial: a Study of East Pakistan*, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1968; Jayanta Kumar Ray and Muntassir Mamoon, *Inside Bureaucracy: Bangladesh*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1987; idem., *Prasasaner Andarmahal: Bangladesh*, Dhaka: Pallab Publishers, 1988; idem., *Bangladeshe Civil Samaj Pratisthar Sangram: 1947-90*, Dhaka: Abasar, 1990; idem., *Civil Society in Bangladesh: Resilience and Retreat*, Calcutta: Firma KLM, Calcutta, 1996.
6. Ray, *Democracy and Nationalism on Trial*.
7. Jayanta Kumar Ray, *To Chase a Miracle: A Study of the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: The University Press Ltd., 1987.
8. Author's conversation with the flight crew of Biman Bangladesh, 15 March 2007.
9. Ibid.
10. Author's conversation with Kamal Ahmed, taxi Driver (Dhaka: 15 March 2007).
11. Author's interaction with Dilip Das, caretaker, Dhakeswari Temple Complex (Dhaka: 15 March 2007).
12. Personal observation, Dhaka: 15 March 2007.
13. For more layers on this, see Kausik Bandyopadhyay, *Bangladesh Playing: Sport, Culture, Nation*, Dhaka: Subarna, 2012.
14. Two of my works dwell on this: Bandyopadhyay, *Bangladesh Playing*; and *Sabash Bangladesh: Kriket, Jatiyatabad, Sanskriti* (*Bravo Bangladesh: Cricket, Nationalism, Culture*), Dhaka: Somoy Prakashan, 2017.
15. See, for example, D. Mullick, *Indira Speaks on Genocide War and Bangladesh*, Kolkata: Academic Publishers, 1972; M.S. Deora, *India and the Freedom Struggle of Bangladesh*, New Delhi:

- Discovery Publishing House, 1995; Tapan Kumar Dey, *Bangladesher Muktiyuddhe Indira Gandhir Bhumika* (Role of Indira Gandhi in Bangladesh Liberation War), Dhaka: Kakoli Prokashoni, 1999; Salama Azada, *Contribution of India in the War of Liberation of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Ankur Prakashani, 2003; idem., *Role of the Indian People in Liberation War of Bangladesh*. New Delhi: Bookwell, 2008; idem., *Contribution of Tripura in Liberation War of Bangladesh*. Kolkata: MAKAIAS, 2014; Ashis Kumar das, *Bangladesher Muktiyuddha o Bharat* (Bangladesh Liberation War and India), Kolkata: Lucky Publishers, 2016.
16. There are a few notable exceptions in this regard particularly with reference to the gendered dimension of the genocide and torture and the refugee experience: Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*, Duke University Press, 2011; Nayanika Mukherjee, *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971*, Duke University Press, 2015. Antara Datta, *Refugees and Borders in South Asia: The Great Exodus of 1971*, London: Routledge, 2012
 17. Ranabir Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*, New Delhi: Sage, 1999; Datta, *Refugees and Borders in South Asia*.
 18. A.J. Kamra, *The Prolonged Partition and Its Pogroms: Testimonies on Violence against Hindus in East Bengal, 1946-64*, New Delhi: Voice of India, 2000; Bimal Pramanik, *Decline of Hindu Population in Bangladesh: An Overview*, Kolkata: Centre for Research in Indo-Bangla Relations, 2005; idem., *Endangered Demography: Nature and Impact of Demographic Changes in West Bengal*, Kolkata: The Author, 2005; Tathagata Roy, *A Suppressed Chapter in History: The Exodus of Hindus from East Pakistan and Bangladesh, 1947-2006*, New Delhi: Bookwell, 2007; idem., *My People Uprooted: A Saga of the Hindus in Eastern Bengal*, Kolkata: Ratna Prakashan, 2002.; Jayanta Kumar Ray, *India's Foreign Relations: 1947-2007*, London: Routledge, 2011.
 19. One such example from Indian scholarship is: Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the Bangladesh Liberation War*, Gurgaon: Hachette India, 2011
 20. Sreeradha Datta offers a useful discussion on this dual basis of national identity. See Sreeradha Datta, *Bangladesh: A Fragile Democracy*, Delhi: Shipra, 2004, pp. 17-29.

21. Rafiuddin Ahmed, 'Introduction', in Rafiuddin Ahmed, ed. *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1990, p. 2.
22. This was first suggested by Muhammad Ghulam Kabir. For details, see Muhammad Ghulam Kabir, *Changing Face of Nationalism: The Case of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1994, p. 211. Also see Muhammad Ghulam Kabir, 'Religion, Language and Nationalism in Bangladesh', in Ahmed, *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh*, pp. 35-49, where he writes: 'The creation of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation in 1971 inaugurated a new era of nationalist development, characterized by a search for a new identity, not entirely based on language. In this new phase, there is a perceptible decline on the exclusive emphasis earlier given to language. Instead, this is being replaced by a newer ideology with a curious mixture of religion and language as its basis. In effect, religion and language have appeared as the two most important elements in the identity compound of the Bengali Muslims in recent times. Changing currents of nationalist development in the region manifest the shifts in the salience of these two identities.' (p. 35)
23. Ahmed, 'Introduction', p. 31.
24. A brief but excellent discussion on some of these secular traditions/occasions and their impact on popular life is offered in Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, Chappel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006, pp. 124-36.
25. When the Pakistani government declared Urdu as the official state language of Pakistan, completely rejecting the demands of the Bengalis of East Pakistan to recognize Bengali as one of the state languages, political leaders and activists of East Pakistan declared 21 February as the state language day. As the central government banned all processions and demonstrations on that day, the Dhaka University students and many others, defying the order, led demonstrations and participated in processions, resulting in violent clashes with police and military forces, which killed and injured several students and other Bengali agitators. Two days later, a memorial column was erected at the site of the killing near Dhaka Medical College. The people of Bangladesh subsequently came to celebrate 21 February – *Ekushe* (Twenty-First) – both as Language Day and Martyrs' Day. After Bangladesh gained independence, the

commemoration of the day has become representative of a Bangladeshi secular identity.

26. When Pakistani police and military forces began their brutal genocide in the night of 25 March 1971, Bangladesh was declared to be a free nation by Mujibur Rahman on 26 March, and the Bengalis en masse participated in an armed liberation struggle joining the *Muktibahini* (liberation forces). However, as war broke out in East Pakistan in March 1971, India gradually became involved in the conflict and effected full scale military intervention in early December, resulting in the surrender of the Pakistani army to the *Muktibahini* on 16 December and enabling a victory for Bangladesh. Once Bangladesh became independent, 26 March and 16 December came to be celebrated as Independence Day and Victory Day respectively. Both the occasions, celebrated with typical Bengali cultural programs every year, provide to Bangladeshi masses an opportunity for assertion of their secular national identity.
27. Pahela Baishakh is a secular holiday that became increasingly popular during the period of Pakistan rule as a symbol of resistance to what Bengalis regarded as a form of cultural imperialism. Celebrated with Bengali music and culture, this annual occasion again marks the significance of secular nationalist identity amongst the masses who participate in the occasion irrespective of their religious, social or professional affiliation.
28. While it has been argued that 'depending on who is in power, national holidays are celebrated differently – so differently that the festivities clearly indicate how the competing nationalisms are articulated' (Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, p. 139), one needs to remember that the Bangladeshi masses attach a secular sense of national pride, a collective memory of fight against internal colonialism, and an emotional bond with their homeland, to these 'invented traditions'. I would argue that the political challenges to the secular nationalist identity represented through these events are yet to create any serious confusion or reaction in the mass psyche about the significance of the same.
29. Pritam Banerjee, 'Bangladeshi Diaspora: Existence of Multiple Identities of Bengalis Abroad', in Dipankar Sengupta and Sudhir Kumar Singh, eds. *Minorities and Human Rights in Bangladesh*, Delhi: Authorspress, 2003, p. 266.

30. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, p. 142.
31. Ibid., p. 145.
32. For details on this, see Willem van Schendel, 'Bengalis, Bangladeshis and Others: Chakma Visions of a Pluralist Bangladesh', in Rounaq Jahan, ed. *Bangladesh: Promise and Performance*, Dhaka: UPL, 2000.
33. For details on this, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Prince University Press, 1993.
34. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh*, p. 151.
35. To give a few examples, mention may be made of plays like *Ucchatara Bhalobasa*, *Abujh Diner Galpo*, *Biyer Naam Bedona*, *Playboy*, *Obak Prem*, *Jare Khunji Swapne*, *Ki Kore Bolbo Toke*, *Crime Partner*, *Unexpected Moments*.