

Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning on 1971

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Forty years after 1971, the Bangladesh liberation war remains a frozen object, not yet fully open to heterodox narratives. Historians need to unpack the complex and contradictory matrix that gave rise to Bengali nationalism, and the mixture of racism and hysteria that spurred the Pakistan Army on to a path of atrocities. This is essential for Bangladesh to decipher its post-liberation trajectory, and for Pakistan to excavate the roots of its current crises. Among several new books on the war is Sarmila Bose's *Dead Reckoning*, carrying a bizarre and shrill agenda of absolving Pakistan of allegations of a genocide. What we are left waiting for is a deep investigation into 1971—about the nature of violence, crisis bargaining, unintended consequences, and history's orphans. People's actions during war are always a combination of contradiction, heroism and failure of nerve; they are a fundamental aspect of being human. Bangladesh is still waiting for that human history of 1971.

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Dedicated to the memory of film-maker Tareque Masud and cinematographer Mishuk Munier, who passed away in a tragic accident during the writing of this essay. They were key witnesses for the forthcoming *War Crimes Tribunal*. Tareque had been collecting documentary evidence of atrocities for decades, and Mishuk was an eyewitness to the death squad that picked up his father Professor Munier Chowdhury in 1971.

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I remained in the [insane asylum] for six months in 1973. What drove me mad? Well, I felt the collective guilt of the Army action which at worst should have stopped by late April 1971.

— Colonel Nadir Ali, Pakistan Army, "A Khaki Dissident on 1971".

Bangladesh turns 40 this year. The country's 1971 Liberation War and the genocidal killings during the conflict remain the defining fulcrum for Bangladesh's existence and trajectory. But outside Bangladesh, 1971 is mostly a forgotten moment. Bangladeshi historians have produced much of their work only in Bengali, contributing further to this marginalisation. In the western media, it is routinely referred to as the "Third India-Pakistan War", usually in the context of understanding Indo-Pak hostility. This mislabelling suits India and Pakistan, as they leverage available history to argue for primacy of claims.

On this 40th anniversary, new books on the war are coming out from Nayanika Mookherjee,¹ Yasmin Saikia,² Srinath Raghavan and Salil Tripathi. The first book to come out however is Sarmila Bose's *Dead Reckoning*, a bizarre amalgam of original research and shrill soapbox, undermining what could have been a real heterodox narrative contributing to a new synthesis.

Dead Reckoning places the author Sarmila Bose at the centre, and her interviews as the building blocks. As she puts it faux-modestly in the introduction, "future authors will not have the inexpressible connection that I have with 1971,"³ "my study is destined to remain unique" (6) and the Pakistan Army officers were "astonished as ever by my neutrality" (9). The relationship and pre-existing bias she brings to this work plays out in her selection of stories, credulity about certain accounts, and dismissal of others. The book is ultimately shaped as catharsis via corrective. Her stated agenda is to correct the bias. Yet, in that process, her research goes so far to the other side as to create a new set of biases, even more problematic.

From Bose's introduction, she grew up with the varnished Indian history of 1971, which varies from the history we know in Bangladesh (flawed, but with different lacunae). When she began research and started uncovering the gaps that have been familiar to a generation of Bangladeshi historians (though not their West Bengal counterparts), her fury was of the naif making a late discovery. What animates *Dead Reckoning* therefore is that palpable rage, propelling inconsistent methodology and blind spots. What we are left wanting is a proper investigation into 1971—into the nature of violence, crisis bargaining, unintended consequences, and history's orphans.

Arc of Empathy

The book's undertow of increasing sympathy for one side paired with alienation from the other feels familiar to me. In 1993, I began an oral history project on the war via the Thomas J Watson