

The Ginger Merchant of History (Standing in the Shadows of ‘Giants’)

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At the Dacca Race Course (now known as Suhrawardi Uddyan), General Jagjit Singh Arora (left), chief of staff of the Indian Army, and Lt. General Assan Ali Khan Niazi of the Pakistani Army sign the papers that would end the war between the two countries and lead to the creation of Bangladesh. Copyright: Bettmann / Getty Images

A photograph of a ceremony encapsulates the dilemma of a particular, linear, and preordained war narrative: the arc of the 1971 Bangladeshi liberation war that has focused primarily on the role of the Bengali guerrilla army fighting the Pakistani army. The photograph troubles that story, while also containing its own occlusions. The image is of the signing of a cease-fire agreement on 16 December 1971.¹ Signing for the Pakistani army, humiliated after a full-force Indian offensive, is Lieutenant General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi. The signatory for the Indian army is Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Arora.

In a telltale sign of the adjacency of the British partition of India, both Niazi and Arora had graduated from the British-era Indian Military Academy. Both went on to fight on behalf of the British Empire in the Burma campaign of World War II, where Niazi was a decorated soldier, earning the nickname “Tiger.” After 1947, the two men found themselves serving the opposed armies of Pakistan (Niazi) and India (Arora). This new ‘enemy’ status led them to be on warring sides during the 1965 India–Pakistan war, and finally in direct conflict in 1971, climaxing in this seated cease-fire ceremony.

Newspaper reports at the time used the framing of a ‘house divided’, underlining that the two generals came from the Punjab province that had been bifurcated in 1947. But there was something else disturbing the photo of two former classmates. The signing ceremony was to ratify the independence of East Pakistan as the new country of Bangladesh. Yet there were no official representatives from the Bangladeshi forces at the ceremony. The only unofficial presence came from Group Captain A. K. Khandaker, standing in one corner of the crowd, in civilian clothes, and behind the first row.

Khandaker’s presence seems fluid and unstable; in several photographs of the same ceremony, he is either pushed aside (in his autobiography he writes that it was “difficult for *guests* to stand” in the jostling² [emphasis added]), or cropped out of the final image (for example, in several versions that are on official or private Indian military websites). Twenty-five years after Nehru’s “tryst with destiny” speech, this was a second bloody separation, with the main actor absent from the table. In one sign of the Bangladeshi unease with this

¹ I first wrote about this photograph for the paper “A Missing General, Indian Jawans, and Submerged Narratives of 1971,” presented at the “India in the World” conference, University of Michigan, January 2014. It was later refined at “Peaceworks,”

Seagull Foundation, Kolkata, December 2015.
² A. K. Khandaker, *1971: Bhetore Baire* [1971: Inside Outside] (Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashon, 2014), 211.

tableau, Khandaker's autobiography repeats an anecdote often cited in memoirs from Bangladesh: that Niazi and Arora, in spite of being on opposite sides, "exchanged crude jokes in Punjabi," linguistically freezing the Bengalis out of their pre-ceremony banter.³



Indian General Jagjit Singh Aurora (left) hands a pen to Pakistani General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, governor of East Pakistan, to sign the document surrendering his army. City Stadium of Dacca, East Pakistan, 16 December 1971. Copyright: A. Abbas / Magnum Photos

The photograph is a useful starting point to think through how the 1971 Bangladeshi liberation war has almost always been framed as yet another regional struggle between India and Pakistan (often explicitly called "the third India–Pakistan war"), with pivotal (and at times also hapless) superpower interventions by the United States and the Soviet Union. Two new books on the 1971 war, by Gary Bass and Srinath Raghavan, look at the conflict primarily through these optics of regional and superpower dialectics.⁴ A third book by Salil Tripathi circles back to the Bangladeshi side, but the elite position of



General Jagjit Singh Aurora, commander general of the allied force (right) and General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, chief of Pakistan's Eastern Command (left) sit with the instrument of surrender at the Dhaka Race Course (now known as Suhrawardi Uddyan) on 16 December 1971. Copyright: Raghu Rai / Magnum Photos

³ Ibid, 208.

⁴ Gary Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* (New York: Knopf, 2013); India: Random House, 2013); Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangla-*

desh (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁵ Salil Tripathi, *The Colonel Who Would Not Repent: The Bangladesh War and Its Unquiet Legacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

several of his protagonists may cause this book to also tilt toward a top-heavy narrative.⁵

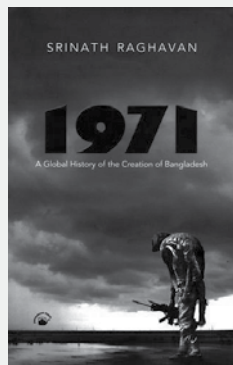
There is a Bengali phrase "*adar byapari rakhe na jahajer khobor*" [the ginger merchant knows not the news of ships], which suggests that the small cogs of human society limit themselves to narrow spaces of interest. Since the individual merchant's load for the day is minuscule, it supposedly concerns him little whether the ship arriving is of British, Russian, or Chinese origin. A similar perspective, with a debt to what historian Walter Robert Connor calls "commander narratives," suffuses the scholarship around the 1971 war. This war even involved, during its finale, a superpower face-off on the high seas: the American initiative of sending the Seventh Fleet from the Gulf of Tonkin was countered by the Soviet dispatching of a nuclear-armed flotilla from Vladivostok. Consequently, many scholars of this war tend to focus on the actions of high-ranking commanders, at sea and in office.

Both Bass and Raghavan are committed to this mode of war scholarship—Raghavan in particular was an infantry officer in the Indian Army, with a PhD in war studies from King's College London. Accordingly, his research parses in exhaustive detail the superpower maneuverings and war strategy on the subcontinent. These narratives, and the archives that undergird them, still dominate the academy after four decades of Bangladesh's existence as a nation. Bass' *The Blood Telegram* pivots around a famous dissident telegram sent by Archer Blood from the Dhaka American Embassy, in defiance of the Nixon administration's support of Pakistan during the war. Bass secured access to declassified documents from the White House tapes, which present Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger *en flagrante* in a manner familiar from the Watergate investigations. Raghavan's *1971* focuses on Indian archives, detailing the Indian state's negotiations with, and maneuvering around, the players needed to form a coalition at the United Nations. This was essentially a coalition of the 'mildly-willing', offering enough diplomatic cover for a direct war between India and Pakistan on Bangladeshi territory in December 1971.

Both of these books do solid work sifting through the American and Indian archives and synthesizing them into a coherent narrative. Bass' storyline plays out as a struggle between the Nixon–Kissinger duo on the one hand, and principled 'bravehearts' such as Blood in

the Dhaka Embassy and Keating in the Indian Embassy, on the other. We are told early on that Blood, a career diplomat, did not join the dissident group *Foreign Service Officers Against the War*, who wore secret protest buttons inside their jackets. We are perhaps meant to understand from this that Blood was not a transformed Nixon-era ‘peacenik’ and, therefore, that his horror at the Dhaka bloodshed was the position of the establishment. Unlike the figure of Daniel Ellsberg portrayed in the *Pentagon Papers* (2003), or the chastened Vietnam veteran John Kerry in *Winter Soldier* (1972), Blood still believed in the overall mission of *Pax Americana* even if not this particular enunciation of 1971.

Blood’s inverse is Nixon, portrayed as pathologically unhinged, bristling at East Coast liberals, abhorring American adoration of Indian objects (from Hare Krishnas, to George Harrison’s sitar-playing friend Ravi Shankar), and calling Indira Gandhi “bitch” and “witch” multiple times (documented in White House transcripts). Kissinger, on the other hand, is given to grandiose comparisons to World War II, and eventually falls into depression when his calibrated plans go awry. The dynamic between this duo is detailed in numerous books that have appeared about this intensely documented (and lampooned) period in White House history, starting in 1973 with the publication of Jack Anderson’s *The Anderson Papers*.



American edition of the book *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* by Srinath Raghavan, 2013



Indian subcontinent edition of the book *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* by Srinath Raghavan, 2013

Raghavan’s history of 1971 has strong similarities with Richard Sisson and Leo Rose’s book *War and Secession* (1990). Sisson and Rose’s book was the first, and still the most comprehensive, history of the war. The majority of their research was conducted in the 1980s, when many of the primary protagonists in India and Pakistan were still alive (in Bangladesh, many key figures were killed during the three military coups in 1975, and the subsequent coup in 1981). By the time Raghavan began his research for *1971*, many other survivors had also died of natural causes; his book therefore mines the archives even more assiduously than Sisson and Rose’s.

In both Bass’ *The Blood Telegram* and Raghavan’s *1971*, we have a view into the power of the ‘Kashmiri mafia’ within the Indian civil service, the contingency plan of transforming the Bangladesh war into a foray into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, the contradictions of the Indira government’s assistance to the Bengali guerrillas while suppressing Naxalites in West Bengal, and the sprawling negotiations to form a coalition of states that would support India’s efforts at the UN. We note, with a sense of foreboding, the Yugoslav government’s refusal to support the Indian effort, bracketed by Marshal Tito’s comment to the Pakistani ambassador, “Over here in Yugoslavia, we have solved these problems once and for all. There will be no Balkan question ever again in the world.”⁶ The bemusement provoked by that quote is repeated during the last anecdote in Bass’ book: When discussing the final, feeble UN resolution that recognized the fait accompli of Bangladesh, Kissinger tells the UN ambassador, one George Bush, “don’t screw it up the way you usually do,” to which Bush senior replies, “I want a transfer when this is over. I want a nice quiet place like Rwanda.”⁷

As with Sisson and Rose’s *War and Secession*, Raghavan focuses on the war from the Indian perspective, and this matches the logic of the archives because the role of India, detailed in Indian archives and UN proceedings, is amplified by the dense volume of documents. As Bass pointed out at his New York book launch, and as Raghavan also notes, Pakistani archives of the 1971 war have remained classified. Bangladeshi archives are generally open (although of inconsistent quality), but this material is largely absent from both Bass’ and Raghavan’s books. This is a significant omission, rendering Bangladeshi history without very many Bangladeshi voices. Some of this is linked

⁶ Raghavan, *1971*, op cit, 179.

⁷ Bass, *The Blood Telegram*, op cit, 324.

to the perceived publishing ‘hook’ of centering figures such as Archer Blood and Indira Gandhi. Equally important are the authors’ current political projects, and how the stories of the 1971 war can be made to fit those projects (organically or by force). In public talks, Bass has cited UN ambassador Samantha Power as a reference for how he thinks American diplomacy should be conducted, and the book’s Epilogue includes a reference to the “special American responsibility to make amends to the Bangladeshi people.”⁸

The relationship between Power and Bass is close enough that, as Samuel Moyn points out in a review of Bass’ earlier book *Freedom’s Battle* (2008), Bass calls the repression of the Greeks “A problem from Hellas” in a riff on Power’s well-known book *A Problem from Hell* (2002).⁹ The Manichean duality in *The Blood Telegram*, between an insecure, friendless, and intellectual-hating Nixon, and the virtuous, educated, and selfless Blood, sets up a Cain and Abel story that fits with an idea of conflicts such as the 1971 war being only an exception to a more ‘principled’ path for American dominance. Bass seems to suggest that the problem is not that American intervention is destined to make spectacularly bad choices, but only that the wrong hands are sometimes at the helm.

Raghavan’s *1971* is an insider look at Indian diplomatic and military maneuvering, and its locus is the timing of India’s intervention, and the question of whether it should have intervened earlier. What the Bengali rebel commanders wanted is given less attention, and this reflects the nature of the Indian documents. The war planners inside Gandhi’s government were partially motivated by considerations of Kashmir, Naxalite blowback, and which forces inside the Bengali guerrilla army were likely to constitute a friendly neighbor in the future, and the book reflects that reality. What is not present in either book is sufficient insight into the motivation and actions of the Bangladeshi protagonists, whether guerrillas, soldiers, politicians, refugees, or the peasants who were collateral damage.

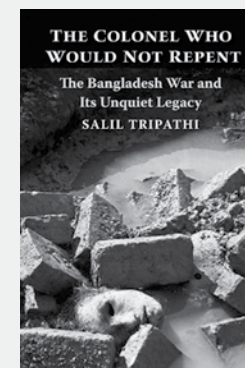
The imbalance of sources is striking in all the books discussed here. In Sisson and Rose’s *War and Secession*, there were thirty-two interviewees from Pakistan, forty-nine from India, thirty-nine from the United States, and twelve from Bangladesh. As I have noted elsewhere, Sarmila Bose’s polemic *Dead Reckoning* (2011) contains an

⁸ Ibid., 327.

⁹ Samuel Moyn, “Spectacular Wrongs,” *The Nation* (13 October 2008): 30–36.

¹⁰ Naeem Mohaiemen, “Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning on 1971,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 46, no. 36 (3 September 2011): 40–52.

even more unbalanced list.¹⁰ In *The Blood Telegram*, Shahudul Haque is the only Bangladeshi interviewee I was able to trace, although there may be others. In Raghavan’s *1971*, although the Liberation War Museum director Akku Chowdhury is thanked, the significant Bangladeshi interviewees appear to be senior lawyers Kamal Hossain and Amirul Islam. However, a laundry list of untapped sources does not automatically suggest a prescription for future, corrective research. A more comprehensive set of Bangladeshi sources, if they privilege an elite experience, will also erase peasant and working-class mobilization before and during the war. Tripathi’s recent book on 1971, *The Colonel*, goes deeper into Bangladeshi sources—but some of these are elites of Bangla society and therefore the problems of top-down narrative remain.



American edition of the book *The Colonel Who Would Not Repent: The Bangladesh War and Its Unquiet Legacy* by Salil Tripathi, 2016



Indian subcontinent edition of the book *The Colonel Who Would Not Repent: The Bangladesh War and Its Unquiet Legacy* by Salil Tripathi, 2016

The Colonel is a significant shift from Bass’ and Raghavan’s books, as it focuses much more on Bangladeshis’ own experiences of their war.¹¹ As a longtime journalist, Tripathi emphasizes oral material, and his selection of sources inside Bangladesh takes him through Dhaka, and then to the regional cities of Chittagong, Khulna, Noakhali, Kushtia, Bogura, and Sirajganj. With over sixty-five interviewees inside Bangladesh, as well as people from the Bangladeshi diaspora in Europe, Tripathi’s *The Colonel* definitively inverts the focus of Bass and Raghavan away from Washington DC and New Delhi and closer

¹¹ Another book that focuses on the Bangladesh experience within the war is Nayanika Mookherjee’s *The Spectral Wound: Sexual*

Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

to Dhaka (Dacca in 1971); away also from the war room and toward the civilian experience of violence and resistance.

When *The Colonel* was first announced (in 2014), I presumed the “Colonel” in the title would be a Marqueeziyan Pakistani officer who did not, even today, regret the brutality of 1971. In that sense, he would be an inversion of sorts of the Pakistani officers interviewed by Yasmin Saikia for her earlier book, *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh*.¹² In Saikia’s work, the officers who served in the war talk of their own experience of violence as perpetrators (this echoes recent scholarship about the trauma faced by perpetrators as well as victims). Saikia deployed the concept of *insaaniyat* (Urdu for “humanity”), and placing that phrase in proximity to the Pakistani army was one of several controversies that scuttled the book’s republication plans in Dhaka.

I expected Tripathi to venture into similar territory, but the “Colonel” of his title is actually Lieutenant Colonel Farooq Rahman, the Bangladeshi army officer who was one of the planners of the brutal 1975 assassination of the country’s first prime minister Sheikh Mujib and his family. As a young reporter in 1986, one of Tripathi’s breakthrough assignments was in Dhaka, where he managed to secure an interview with Rahman.¹³ As political alignments shifted, assassins lost their immunity and in 2010, Rahman, along with four other accused, were hanged. Tripathi’s interview now sits as a testimony in which Rahman freely admits to carrying out the assassinations—he did not, in the end, repent. By opening *The Colonel* with Rahman’s confession, and following it with his eventual hanging, the book extends the frame of the 1971 war to take in its unraveling—the violent coups of 1975 that wiped out most of the wartime leadership, both civilian and military. Having prevailed against the Pakistani army, Bangladesh’s stability was fatally damaged by these fratricidal killings of the 1970s.

Tripathi follows this by diving into the Bangladeshi experience of the 1971 war and its aftermath. Here he seems to offer a corrective to my issues with Bass and Raghavan, by focusing on the experience of Bangladeshis in urban and rural settings. Yet, there is a way that certain voices will always carry more weight, and this has to do with

12 Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

13 Salil Tripathi, “The man who killed Mujibur Rehman,” *Debonair* (December 1986).

who is more frequently interviewed within the writing of 1971, and what stories they have to share. Among Tripathi’s interviewee list, I noted some prominent establishment figures: Kamal Hossain (framer of the constitution and the country’s first law minister), Mahfuz Anam (editor of the largest English-language newspaper), Mofidul Hoque and Akku Chowdhury (both trustees of the Liberation War Museum), Abrar Chowdhury (director of a leading migrant rights NGO), Anisur Rahman (member of the country’s first Planning Commission), Sultana Kamal (member of a previous ‘caretaker’ government), and Prof Anisuzzaman (president of the Bangla Academy).

Although Tripathi interviews others as well, the above names stand out and begin to define the tone and focus of *The Colonel* (whether Tripathi intended them to or not). One issue here is that many in the war leadership were killed during the violence of 1975 and afterward. The remaining eyewitnesses are the only protagonists who can speak firsthand about what happened at crucial moments. In this sense they are part of what I have sometimes called “M. R. Akhtar Mukul history,” a type of oral history of crucial events that is difficult to verify, since all protagonists of past exchanges are dead.¹⁴ Many of the people Tripathi met have been interviewed multiple times (for magazines, special issues, commemorations). There is often a practiced ease to their storytelling and a clean formulation to their anecdotes—this does not render any of it inauthentic, but it does give their narratives an enhanced citation value. Meghna Guhathakurta (director of Research Initiatives Bangladesh), who is often interviewed on liberation war anniversaries, and was interviewed by Tripathi as well, points out that English fluency, and an ability to summarize events, makes establishment figures more attractive to media as “protagonists,” as compared to the village peasant who is often only a “victim.”¹⁵

The people I have described as establishment figures are often referred to as an elite “*shushil shoma*” [civil society] in local media. But there are complexities to this phrase, which also clouds their dominance of narratives of 1971. This generation came of political age through the anti-military struggles of the 1960s (which led to the crucible election of 1970, and, from the resulting deadlock, the 1971 war). During the 1960s and early 1970s, they were not always the elite within unified Pakistan, but rather were fighting against an already

14 M. R. Akhter Mukul rose to fame as a voice on clandestine radio during the war. Because of his close relationship with Prime Minister Mujib, his books often contained eyewitness

accounts of events prior to the bloodshed of 1975.
15 Meghna Guhathakurta interviewed by the author, 13 June 2016.

established military-civil, geographic (West Pakistan), and linguistic (Punjabi- and Urdu-speaking) elite. In the tumultuous tide of the 1960s, many of them also went through a process of partial declassing, mobilizing alongside industrial workers and peasants (especially during the war). Yet, events in the decades after 1971 produced a rigid, class hierarchical society in Bangladesh (ironically replicating Pakistan of the 1960s); during this period these interviewees' positions gradually became more privileged and isolated. They were on the margins of 'united' Pakistan in the 1960s, but in independent Bangladesh they moved to the center; marginal experiences in this new nation became more distant from their daily lives.

Because many of the people Tripathi interviewed were located at or near key events in 1971, their anecdotes and memories are not of everyday experiences, and certainly not close to subaltern experiences. Rather, the stories often take place in the same room as ministers, generals, and presidents, further reifying the achievements and struggles that went on at the center. The ability of interviewees to analyze and summarize events, which Guhathakurta highlights, and which is refined through repetition, means that the 'meaning' of history flows from that center as well. Kamal Hossain, whom I have interviewed for my own work, is an example of this centrifugal effect. He was, after all, the constitutional expert who was part of Sheikh Mujib's team in the negotiation with the Pakistan army, the man arrested and sent to Pakistan alongside Sheikh Mujib when war broke out, the co-author of the constitution of independent Bangladesh, and the politician who began to rebuild Sheikh Mujib's political party from exile after 1975. As such, his perspective was always ringside of the inner circle, and his memories, along with those of several others, have had a dominant effect on Bangladeshi history.

Recently, when I met Hossain again, he mentioned in conversation that cultural theorist Stuart Hall had been a student at Oxford at the same time that he began his law studies. Intrigued by the possibility of an undiscovered Afro-Asian link at the heart of Bangladesh's foundational struggle, I asked him at length what he remembered of Hall, and whether they had stayed in communication after Oxford. The answers did not yield what I had hoped for—they had known each other, but had not worked on any extensive campaigns together; nor had they managed to stay in touch after Hossain returned to Pakistan. My

point here is that because Hossain and others have had such a strong presence in the writing of the history of 1971, even a chance or brief encounter in their life may transform into a momentous occasion in the eyes of readers (and researchers). Tripathi has corrected the absence of Bangladeshi voices in earlier books, but at least some of the voices he selected for *The Colonel* are commanding presences at the center, which can continue to occlude voices at the margins.

Both the dense archives available in the United States and India, and the options of oral history, often throw up these significant, central figures (living or dead). We are therefore now used to scholarship and reportage on the larger-than-life figures occupying the world stage during the war. Richard Nixon as pathological paranoiac, Henry Kissinger as smooth mandarin, Indira Gandhi as shrewd operator, Sheikh Mujib as determined negotiator, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as clever obstructionist, and General Yahya Khan as drunken maverick—these are portrayals that suffuse narratives of the war. What continues to be underexplored are the Bangladeshi actors, at the grass-root level, in their own war. Sheikh Mujib's negotiation strategy, led by Hossain and others, was documented by Sisson and Rose in *War and Secession* and resurfaces in Raghavan's *1971* (though less so in Bass). But what were the events on the ground to which these central players were responding? To take just one example, Sheikh Mujib's decision to arrive at one meeting flying a black flag was considered an insult that gave the excuse for a 'breakdown' in the talks. However, what were the events that he was responding to, and perhaps even trying to corral and contain? Was he moved by the specter of radical student leaders who had already raised the flag of 'independent Bangla Desh' on a university campus? Was he responding to a radicalized Bengali urban population that wanted faster progress than constitutional negotiations allowed?

The fateful negotiations, whose breakdown led to the brutal war of 1971, were always conducted with one eye on the negotiation partners (Yahya, Bhutto) and the other on a roiling urban and rural countryside. These turbulent street forces are absent even in the Bangladeshi archive, with its focus on grand narrative and brinkmanship negotiations. Simply shifting Raghavan's or Bass' focus to Bangladesh interviewees (as Tripathi has done) would not resolve all the issues of submerged narratives. As Anjali Arondekar has pointed out,

gaping absences in the archive can be used to look at the process of subjectification made possible by the building of the records themselves.¹⁶ If the radical leftist guerrilla, or desperate peasant fighter, was left out of official records, what elite aspirations and exclusionary fears among record keepers guided such a process? History's 'ginger merchant' was far more crucial in the build-up and conduct of this war than is acknowledged, and a future step for researchers could be to begin to read into, and against, the many absences in Bangladesh's history ledgers.

¹⁶ Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).