

Studies in People's History

Book review: Rakhshanda Jalil and Debjani Sengupta (eds.), Bangladesh: Writings on 1971, Across Borders

Abstract

Rakhshanda Jalil and Debjani Sengupta (eds.), *Bangladesh: Writings on 1971, Across Borders* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan), 2022, hb., xvi + 276 pp., ₹875.

The war resulting in the formation of Bangladesh (1971) remains a watershed in the history of South Asia. It has naturally generated a rich crop of literature from diverse perspectives. Literary writings on 1971 too flourished greatly in Bangladesh over the years. Literati in Pakistan and India too have produced sizeable literature on the war. The present work, *Bangladesh: Writings on 1971, Across Borders*, represents an attempt to present in English literary writings including fiction and poems on the war along with a few autobiographical essays by authors from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. The book comprises two short introductions, three reminiscences-cum-essays, and nineteen pieces/poems of fiction and eleven poems in Bangla, Urdu and English, with the Bangla and Urdu verses translated into English.

The editors of the volume provide two brief introductions. The first one by Debjani Sengupta situates the Bangla pieces and three 'memory texts' in English in the wider context of debates around the War and its attendant atrocities and bloodshed. Although her readings on 1971 are rather sketchy and partial, the brief introduction to Bangla stories and poems well captures the varied understandings of and responses to 1971. The other introduction written by Rakhshanda Jalil is better grounded perhaps in literary and historical perspective, but rather lacks adequate knowledge of literature on the war. It, however, presents a persuasive justification of the selection of Urdu and English literary compositions.

The volume begins with three English essays, 'memory texts' in the words of one of its editors, narrating the recollections of three contemporary personalities of 1971 from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. The first one by Kaiser Haq narrates the experiences of a Bengali *muktijoddha* (liberation war fighter) right from the war zone of Hamzapur and pays tributes to the unsung heroes of 1971, namely, 'the ordinary people of the country who risked everything (many becoming *shaheed*), to do their bit

for the country' (p. 34). The second essay by Manas Ray, a senior Indian scholar, shows 'how the streams of events in Bangladesh and West Bengal had remarkable convergences' in the 1970s (p. 39). His reminiscences are vivid but at times perhaps too lengthy and personalised. The best piece in this section perhaps comes from Meher Ali, a young Pakistani scholar studying in the USA, who analyses the experiences and reactions of her grandfather, a Pakistani Colonel, Nadir Ali, who was deployed in Dhaka by the Pakistani army in 1971.

The Bangla literary writings on 1971, produced by Bengali authors from Bangladesh and West Bengal, reflect the varied meanings, and complex legacies of the Liberation War. The stories by Bangladeshi authors convey the poignant realities of everyday life during the war days (Akhtaruzzaman Elias); the stories of shame, rage, hurt, humiliation, fight and freedom of violated yet valiant Bengali women or *Biranganas* (Selina Hossain and Shaheen Akhtar); everyday experiences of war in the eyes of Bengali children (Papree Rahman); and the fate of most freedom fighters after independence (Wasi Ahmed). Two rare literary pieces by Bengali authors from West Bengal (Trishna Basak and Jhumur Pandey) deal with the memories of loss and migration of migrant Hindu Bengali families in the wake of 1971.

The Bangla poems, on the other hand, depict vivid memories and offer critical reflections on the actual events and complex legacies of the Liberation War, often connecting the two Partitions. The wide range of themes includes the historical and literary legacy of 21 February (Language Day) (Alokeranjan Dasgupta); pathos and hardships of refugee exodus and experience en route to Calcutta (Moushumi Bhowmik); the perseverance and heroism of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Jharna Rahman); heart-breaking stories of broken promises and dreams of 1971 (Minar Monsur); and celebration of the spirit of the Liberation War and *muktijoddhas* (Bimal Guha).

The Urdu writings add further purpose and insights to the volume. All the Urdu pieces are written by Pakistani authors with the sole exception of Jan Nisar Akhtar's poem. The stories and excerpts of novels are replete with an intriguing variety of understandings, reflections on what went wrong for Pakistan in 1971. Intizar Husain's story narrates the 'macabre scenes' and atrocities of 1971 through the experience and escape of a sensitive Pakistani man. Rasheed Amjad tells the sad story of disintegration of Pakistan through a vivid dialogue between two emotional characters. Masood Ashar's story brings to us a Pakistani mother's version of truth on the nights of March 24 and 25, pointing to 'elemental sadness' coming out of 'lamentations of women and children'. Agha Sohail tells the tale of one caught in the war, saving life and losing one's own in the carnage that swept over Dhaka in 1971. Sameena Nazeer

highlights the pain and suffering of Urdu-speaking Bengalis in both East and West Pakistan.

The extracts from Razia Fasih Ahmad's novel *Sadiyon ki Zanjeer* (The Centuries-Old Chain) entitled 'Breaking Links' convey a powerful representation of 1971. Through the love story of Zari and Shams, she touches on the grievances of the people of East Pakistan, Sheikh Mujib's powerful voice, the nightmare of 25 March 1971, the Indian attack and the fall of Dhaka, the everyday tale of torture, rape and murder during the war, and last but not the least, a woman's voice against patriarchy across time and space.

The Urdu poems start with 'Mohenjidar' by Naushad Noori who could see the writings on the wall as early as 1952 when the language movement engulfed entire East Bengal. Faiz Ahmad Faiz in his famous poem touches on the pathos of the beach of 1971. Afzal Ahmad Syed tries to forget memories of the inhumanity of 1971, which wiped out his love for East Pakistan. Zehra Nigah's poem depicts the merciless torture inflicted upon women in East Bengal by West Pakistani armed forces. Naseer Turabi's eloquent and deep lament on the separation of East Pakistan was penned with tears in his eyes just after the fall of Dhaka on 16 December 1971. Finally, Jan Nisar Akhtar's poem is a celebration of the victory of the Bangladesh Liberation War and the role Indian forces played in it.

Among the stories written in English, Tariq Rahman's 'Bingo' depicts tension and discrimination existing within the armed forces of Pakistan, leading to terrible brutality in action during 1971. Raihana Hasan's story, set in an apparently peaceful tea plantation site of East Pakistan, portrays the build-up to the Liberation War through the personalised experience of a Pakistani family. Souryya Khan's excerpted novel presents the rumbling disquiet emanating from the haunted memories of a Pakistani woman who was witness to the indiscriminate killings by the Pakistani army in 1971.

The editors and translators deserve special accolades for the excellent translations of Bangla and Urdu texts in the volume. Both the front and back cover paintings are illustrative of the complexities of 1971. On the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh, the work should stimulate future forays in bringing out the complexities of the history of Partition in South Asia in 1947 and thereafter.