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Yasmin Saikia. *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. xx + 311 pp. $89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5021-7; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5038-5.

Reviewed by Chitralekha Zutshi (College of William and Mary)

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Violence, Gender, and the Ongoing Partitions of South Asia

There has recently been a spate of revisionist writing on the 1971 war that led to the foundation of Bangladesh.[1] Yasmin Saikia's new book stands out for its people-centered approach as it provides fresh insight into this moment of conflict and violence, which moves beyond the official narratives of events that have been endorsed and promoted by the Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi establishments. Instead of focusing on high politics and taking sides, Saikia privileges the human stories of "individual losses and personal tragedies suffered by both men and women" (p. xi), which form the basis of what she terms a "people's history of 1971" (p. 8).

The book is primarily concerned with probing the causes and effects of violence, particularly against vulnerable groups such as women, before, during, and after the war. In this, Saikia draws her inspiration from the scholarship on the 1947 partition of British India into India and Pakistan, which has done a masterful job of weaving the story of violence into our understanding of the historical events of independence and partition. In some ways, thus, the book suggests that the horrors surrounding 1971 were the culmination of the unfinished business of the 1947 partition and our inability in South Asia to come to terms with the brutality towards women and children in the name of community, nation, and religion displayed at this moment. It is clearly intended to serve as a lesson for people in South Asia and an attempt to heal the wounds of 1971.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part provides the conventional historical narrative of 1971 and discusses why it needs to be dismantled in favor of a more people-sensitive account of the war and its aftermath. It places 1971 within the theoretical parameters provided by the scholarship on the 1947 partition and its impact on ordinary people, particularly in terms of gender violence, as well as scholarship on moments of mass violence from other parts of the world, such as the Holocaust, apartheid South Africa, Rwanda, and Darfur. Part 2 produces verbatim the testimonies of ten women, ranging from the victims of sexual violence to social workers to female soldiers, and their experiences during 1971. Saikia provides thoughtful and scholarly introductions to each testimony, which helps the reader navigate the range of emotions these raw memories evoke and place them in a more meaningful context. Part 3 is a postscript that discusses the memories of male perpetrators of the violent crimes committed during this period in an attempt to go beyond the nationalist narratives of these men as heroes. The self-reflective nature of these memories as the men make halting attempts to come to terms with their crimes and thus redeem their humanity, and perhaps also seek forgiveness from their victims, makes for poignant reading.

Excavation of women's and some men's memories of violence and redemption forms the core of this highly readable monograph. The account of Saikia's interactions with her subjects as she traveled across Bangladesh to collect their stories is a fascinating study in the power of oral historical testimonies and the shaping of the book itself–from a set of disparate memories wrenched from the deep recesses of women's minds to a sophisticated historical retelling of the war of 1971. As Saikia notes, the act of recovering the memories of women who are barely able to articulate the nature and extent of the wounds inflicted on them has to be an act of interaction between

the teller and listener, the latter shaping the testimony into a deeply personal and gendered history of violence that lies outside the realm of recorded histories. "Listening," she argues, "exorcises memories and loss, granting them new meaning and educating those who remember and listen" (p. 98).

Saikia makes the powerful argument that history has to serve as more than a tool for identity formation in the subcontinent if we are to truly decolonize our past and present. Thus the collective memories that serve to dislodge official nationalist historical narratives cannot merely be an account of the heroic deeds of a community; rather, they have to take into account both its successes as well as moral failures in the past. This will ensure that the historical retelling is imbued with an "ethical dimension" that recognizes the ability of war to dehumanize individuals even as it provides an opportunity to recover humanity in the face of untold suffering.

As a result, even as it systematically unpacks nationalist narratives, the book is careful not to take sides and suggests that the focus should not be on apportioning blame to one group or another, but rather on "search[ing] for an answer to the fundamental question of what was lost and regained during the war" (p. 12). The book does not shy away from recognizing the brutality of the Pakistani army towards the Bangladeshi freedom fighters and Bengali women or the sheer scale of violence unleashed against the Urdu-speaking, pro-Pakistan Biharis by the Bangladeshi freedom fighters. Moreover, the book points out that the violence against many of the victims of these atrocities is ongoing, both metaphorically in their systematic silencing by the state and literally in the statelessness of Biharis as they continue their struggle for survival in refugee camps in Bangladesh, unwanted by either Pakistan or Bangladesh, as well as in the vilification and exploitation of the *birangona*s, Bengali women rape survivors who were labeled as such by the Bangladeshi state.

The book renders and discusses the testimonies of women in a deeply compassionate manner as it struggles to understand the cost of war in the name of nationalism in South Asia. Saikia underlines the fact that a people's history of 1971 is necessary because it allows us to uncover, at the moment of intersection between memory and history, and past and present, the violence that undergirded the formation of nation-states in South Asia. It also forces us to remember the dehumanization of women in the history of nation-state formation in the region, by militarized nationalism, systematic state policies, random men as well as friends and neighbors. In this story, thus, women emerge as far more than nameless victims of violence, as they become the voices of our conscience, compelling us to rewrite the celebratory narratives of our nationalist pasts. One wishes, however, that Saikia had at greater length and more explicitly addressed issues of state formation in Bangladesh in light of the processes unleashed by the violence, particularly in terms of the production of political practices and institutions.

The book struggles to find meaning in the violence that it so starkly and disturbingly reveals to its readers. As a South Asian, I was profoundly moved and ashamed while reading the book (which attests to its power), but at the same time I was left curiously dissatisfied regarding why the violence occurred and how we are to account for in the present and prevent it in the future. While there is no doubt that the telling of the story itself is enough, one wonders whether the framework the book provides for understanding the level of violence and women's responses to it in terms of the concept of *insaniyat* (humanity) is adequate. Why does *insaniyat* disappear in times of war in South Asia, if it is indeed such a deeply ingrained idea in its multiple cultures, as the book seems to suggest? Moreover, how are we to ensure that the victims and perpetrators of violence are given the justice they deserve? Saikia herself suggests that a war crimes tribunal would not be appropriate because of the lack of interest in such an endeavor from the Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments as well as the acrimonious nature of public discourse in the countries, which continues to be deeply divided and vengeful.

In this situation, she suggests that the "religio-cultural site of lived Islam" can provide an "emancipatory space" where women's experiences can be recognized and grievances addressed in a "vocabulary understood by the people" (p. 101). She asserts that the victims of rape can invoke their rights under the Islamic concept of *huquq-al-ibad* (rights of persons) that would oblige the perpetrators to admit to their crimes, leaving the possibility open for forgiveness from the victim. While this sounds fine at a theoretical level, it paints a too-rosy picture of lived religion which assumes that the institutions of lived Islam are somehow above the deeply patriarchal discourses of nationalism and community and would be willing to listen to and learn from the experiences of women during war, and mete out justice to their male perpetrators.

Saikia does admit, however, that there are no easy

answers to the questions raised by violence and the initial challenge is to provide a space for women and men to speak about the multiple sites of violence while also compelling the Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments to admit to their culpability in promoting violence against the vulnerable. This book is an admirable step in that very direction.

The book is written in a lucid style and the stories told by the women make for compelling reading. It will find a large readership in South Asia. I also think that it is time that we, historians and teachers of South Asia, begin to include Bangladesh more centrally in our narrative of postcolonial South Asian history. This book, by bringing together the themes of gender, violence, nation, and community, would serve as an ideal vehicle to teach these themes in undergraduate survey and more topical courses on South Asian history and politics. Further, because it is a product of an eclectic research methodology that includes rich ethnographic fieldwork alongside more traditional archival sources, the book would serve as a wonderful teaching tool in graduate courses on memory, oral histories, and the making of archives.

Note

[1]. Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); and Bina D'Costa, *Nationbuilding, Gender, and War Crimes in South Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

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