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Shahbag Square — why we Pakistanis don't know and don't care

Having seen only grotesque caricatures of history, it is impossible for Pakistan's youth to understand 1971.

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Shahbag Square — where's that? Abdul Kader Mullah — who's he?

A bunch of university students in Islamabad, with whom I was informally conversing yesterday, hadn't heard of either. Of course, they knew of Tahrir Square and Afzal Guru's recent execution. But they showed little interest upon learning that Shahbag Square was in Dhaka and that, as we spoke, the city was seething with protest. Between 100,000 to 500,000 Bengalis had converged to Shahbag to sing patriotic songs, recite poems and read out episodes from Bangladesh's history of the Liberation War. At the centre of the protesters' demands was Abdul Kader Mullah's fate.

On February 5, the Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) found Mullah guilty in five out of the six charges against him. Known as Mirpurur Koshai (Butcher of Mirpur) because of his atrocities against citizens in the Mirpur area of Dhaka, he was charged with beheading a poet, raping an 11-year-old girl and murdering 344 people. The ICT sentenced Mullah, presently assistant secretary general of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, to life in prison. For the protesters in Shahbag Square, this isn't enough — they want Mullah hanged. On the other side, the Jamaat-e-Islami protested violently and also took out demonstrations. But its efforts to influence global opinion foundered in spite of a well-funded effort.

Curiously enough, Mullah's case has been taken up by the government of Turkey. President Abdullah Gül sent a letter last month to the president of Bangladesh requesting clemency for all those accused of mass murder. Fortunately, Turkey's president appears to be an exception and much of the world has shown little regard for genocidal killers.

Pakistan has shown zero interest in Mullah's fate. The media is silent and the Foreign Office has not issued any statement. This is quite ironical because, like the forgotten Biharis of East Pakistan, Mullah has been abandoned although he subscribed to the Two-Nation Theory and had fought alongside the Pakistan Army for a united Pakistan. In 1971, local political and religious militia groups like Razakar, Al-Badr and Al-Shams assisted Pakistani soldiers in the mass killings of Bengalis, often singling out Hindus. Many militia members were also members of the Jamaat-e-Islami.

The disinterest in Shahbag Square epitomises the enormous gulf that separates Bangladesh from Pakistan. The period of our national history — where 54 per cent of the country's population chose to secede from the other 46 per cent — remains supremely inconsequential to Pakistanis. For them, Bangladesh could well be on the other side of the moon. The question is: why?

Searching for an answer, I browsed through textbooks currently used in Pakistani schools. The class-five Social Studies text (English), taught to 12-year olds, begins with citing the differences between Hindus and Muslims (e.g. Hindus burn the wife after her husband dies but Muslims don't), the need to be aware of the hidden enemies of Pakistan (religious extremists are not mentioned) and the importance of unceasing jihad. It devotes a total of three sentences to a united Pakistan, the last of which reads: "With the help of India, East Pakistan separated."

The class-eight Pakistan Studies textbook (English) is still briefer and simply states that, "Some leaders of former East Pakistan with the active help of India managed to break away from Pakistan and established Bangladesh." The class nine-10 (Urdu) book — by far the most detailed — devotes nearly three pages to explaining the disintegration. The listed subtitles include: a) Incompetent government of Yahya Khan; b) Hindu domination of trade; c) Nefarious role of Hindu teachers; d)

Language problems; e) Indian interference; f) The elections of 1970.

Having seen only grotesque caricatures of history, it is impossible for Pakistan's youth to understand 1971. But how can I blame them? Those of us who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s knew in our hearts that East and West Pakistan were one country but not one nation. Young people today cannot imagine the rampant anti-Bengali racism among West Pakistanis then. With great shame, I must admit that, as a thoughtless young boy, I, too, felt embarrassed about small and dark people being among my compatriots. Victims of a delusion, we thought that good Muslims and Pakistanis were tall, fair and spoke chaste Urdu. Some schoolmates would laugh at the strange sounding Bengali news broadcasts from Radio Pakistan.

Even as they agonise about 'losing' the East, many Pakistanis still believe that 1971 was a military defeat rather than a political one. Dr AQ Khan, who met with Jamaat-e-Islami chief Syed Munawar Hasan this week, writes that nuclear bombs could have kept Pakistan intact: "If we had had nuclear capability before 1971, we would not have lost half of our country — present-day Bangladesh — after disgraceful defeat."

But would this have really worked? Even with a bomb, the Pakistan Army would be surrounded by a hostile population and peppered by the Mukti Bahini's guerilla attacks. Though armed with tanks and aircraft, the weakness of West Pakistan's position was irreversible. With a hostile India in between, the logistics of supplying 90,000 troops from a thousand miles away were simply horrendous. India had, of course, refused permission for over-flights, leaving only the sea route. A long war would have left Pakistan bankrupt. More importantly, all occupying forces — including the Indian Army in Kashmir and the Americans in Afghanistan — typically exact disproportionate retribution when attacked. The atrocities of occupiers heighten local resentment and add hugely to the insurgency.

I am still trying to understand our good doctor's suggestion. Could the bomb have been used on the raging pro-independence mobs in Dhaka? Or used to incinerate Calcutta and Delhi, and have the favour duly returned to Lahore and Karachi? Threatening India with a nuclear attack may have kept it out of the war, but then East Pakistanis would have been massacred wholesale.

History cannot be undone but it's time to move on. Bangladesh is right in demanding an apology from Pakistan — one which we have so far refused to give. Let us do so now and start a new chapter in the relationship between our two states. If we have the honesty and courage to take this step, as a bonus, the problem of Balochistan might become a tad easier to understand — and perhaps, solve.

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