

# Misusing the past

Bangladeshis might make more of their country's imminent birthday if their government weren't so busy manipulating it

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BY A.R. | DHAKA

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WHY isn't there more cheering in Bangladesh as the country gets ready to mark 40 years of independence? So far there have been few efforts to rouse the masses, though the government did confer a posthumous prize last week on Indira Gandhi, as a way of crediting India for helping create Bangladesh in 1971. [Ties between the neighbours are warming](#), with India's home minister, Palaniappan Chidambaram, just [in Dhaka to sign a new deal](#) that is supposed to bring an end to [killings](#) along their [long, shared border](#). But there is little evidence yet of ordinary Bangladeshis rushing to celebrate. Perhaps this is in part a reaction to official efforts to commandeer the nation's history for fleeting political goals.

Bangladesh's birth—the secession of the eastern part of Pakistan from the western bit—was painful and bloody. No one is sure how many people died: the total was perhaps in the hundreds of thousands, though the wildest estimates talk of millions of deaths and of attempted genocide on the part of Pakistan. In March 1971 Pakistan's army (dominated by soldiers from the western part of the country) and their Bengali allies did carry out massacres in a brutal effort to quell the secession. That failed, provoking a more intense push for the break-up, floods of refugees and finally military intervention by India. By December 1971 Pakistan's forces were defeated.