

GROUND REALITIES

Sarmila Bose and bad arithmetic

Syed Badrul Ahsan

Revisionist history is what Sarmila Bose gives us. In *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War*, she begins her search for the truth on a false premise: that Bengalis seceded from Pakistan in 1971 and that what happened in that year was a clear case of civil war between the two parts of Pakistan. In 1861, states in the south of the United States decided to secede even as Abraham Lincoln prepared to take over the presidency. And what followed was four years of civil war as both Union troops and Confederate soldiers struggled for supremacy. The struggle ended with Robert E. Lee's surrender to the Union army in April 1865. In 1967, Odumegwu Ojukwu's Biafra seceded from Nigeria, to spend the next three years waging war against the Nigerian army in defence of its land. Biafra collapsed in 1970. In 1971, the province of East Pakistan did not secede from Pakistan. It was not until the Pakistan army launched Operation Searchlight that Bangladesh's independence was formally proclaimed. And once that was done, it was a state of war between two nations. There was no civil war, for a civil war pits the people of one part of a country against people from another. In 1971, people in West Pakistan stayed well clear of the conflict zone. It was their army that went into committing genocide against people who had been their compatriots till the last minute of 25 March. Sarmila Bose's research thus runs into roadblocks right at the beginning. And it stumbles all along. She makes, and repeats, the preposterous notion that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remained involved in negotiations till the end because his goal was to take over as prime minister of Pakistan. His call for freedom on March 7 and yet his careful staying away from an outright declaration of independence are for Bose a "double game of public incitement and private negotiations."

This is poor historical research. Sarmila Bose is blissfully unaware of the bigger realities leading to the collapse of the March talks. She thinks the Yahya Khan regime and the Awami League remained engaged in negotiations till March 25. That is another place where she slips. After the talks on the morning of March 24, the Awami League leadership waited for a response to its proposals on a projected confederal arrangement from the regime. No response came. In the evening of March 25, Yahya Khan surreptitiously flew out of Dhaka, leaving Tikka Khan to let the soldiers loose on the restive province.

Bose loses the argument by her reliance on comments and documents patently biased toward

Pakistan. She notes Raja Tridiv Roy's reference to the "violence and threat of violence by (Mujib's) armed Awami League cadres" in the course of the non-cooperation movement stretching from March 1 to 25. That is poor analysis, given that Tridiv Roy, having found refuge in Pakistan, cheerfully served as minister and then as ambassador for his adopted country after the war.

Bose frequently refers to the "White Paper" published by the regime in 1971 as a way of pointing to the "crimes" that Bengalis themselves committed against non-Bengalis prior to the military crackdown. That further mars the quality of her work.

Bose speaks to a number of Pakistani officers who served in Bangladesh in 1971. Predictably these men deny the charges of murder against them. Many profess to be surprised at Bengali attitudes toward them. Bose gives you the impression that these are honourable men, in contrast to the Bengalis whose sense of "victimhood" gets in the way of a true presentation of history.

Reading her account of the exploits of Jahanara Imam's son Rumi, you would think the young man made no particular contribution to Bangladesh's freedom, save what his mother remembered of him. She sympathises with Syed Sajjad Husain in his post-December 16 plight, but mentions nowhere that it was on his watch that teachers of Dhaka University were abducted and murdered. Bose does not know that Husain was one of the pro-Pakistan Bengalis to claim abroad in 1971 that no intellectuals had been killed by the army in Bangladesh.

She notes Zahir Raihan's disappearance on January 30, 1972 and quite rightly supposes that the disappearance could not be linked to the Pakistanis, by then POWs in India, or the al-Badr death squads. And yet the fact escapes her that the Biharis of Mirpur (and Raihan was their kill) put up concerted resistance to Bangladesh's forces till the end of January. Raihan was not recovered, but Mirpur stood freed on the last day of January 1972.

A trivialising of Bangladesh's history is what runs through *Dead Reckoning*. Sarmila Bose notes the Pakistani soldiers' poor argument that it was the resistance of students at Jagannath Hall that prompted action by the army. Again, could it not be that the Bangladesh authorities made no move to exhume the dead from the Jagannath hall mass grave because among the bodies would be those of non-students who might have been around on the night of March 25? Bose is perturbed that Amartya Sen neglects to mention in his work *Identity and Violence* the killing of non-Bengalis by Bengali nationalists.

Her defence of non-Bengalis, of Biharis, of pro-Pakistan Bengalis runs its full course through her work. Evidence to back up her arguments is paltry. She notes the rebellion by 2 East Bengal Regiment in Joydevpur on March 29 and the killing of West Pakistani officers by mutinous Bengali soldiers. Is Bose surprised? After what the Pakistanis did in Dhaka on March 25-26, did she, did anyone, expect Bengali soldiers of the Pakistan army to go docile? The rules of war, sir, the rules of war!

<https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-193941>

12:00 AM, July 13, 2011 / LAST MODIFIED: 12:00 AM, July 13, 2011

Sarmila Bose's work carefully avoids any mention of the Mujibnagar government and its operations, its proclamation of independence. To her, the only invading force in 1971 was the Indian army. She quibbles over numbers. Only 26,000 Bengalis were killed by the Pakistan army (read the Hamoodur Rehman Commission report); and (she quotes General Niazi) it was not 93,000 Pakistanis taken prisoner but only 34,000 soldiers and '11,000 civilian police and other armed personnel, a total of 45,000 men'.

Men like David Irving once denied the Holocaust. Now Sarmila Bose denies the genocide in 1971. Her book does not change anything. It is wobbly scholarship, a disturbing misreading of history. You lose nothing by not reading it.

The writer is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk