

# This account of the Bangladesh war should not be seen as unbiased

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A new study views the men of Pakistan's army as gentle and kind. Can this be fair?

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**I**an Jack, writing on the book *Dead Reckoning* by the Indian author

Sarmila Bose, claimed that "a truth about the Bangladesh war is that remarkably few scholars and historians have given it thorough, independent scrutiny" ([It's not the arithmetic of genocide that's important. It's that we pay attention](#), 21 May). But to take Bose's word for it would be an unfortunate misreading.

The [Bangladesh](#) liberation war – the nine-month struggle in 1971 whereby East Pakistan broke away and became an independent nation – remains relatively unknown in the west. I am a social anthropologist who has undertaken a decade-long research on the memories of wartime rape from the [Bangladesh](#) war. I came into contact with contemporary post-nationalist readings which address the role of Bengali Muslims in the killing of Bihari/non-Bengali collaborators and communities. Yet none of these Bangladeshi works are referenced in Bose's book, which she claims to be the "first critical, neutral" study.

Bose's book is methodologically inconsistent and appears to be informed by a disdain for Bangladeshis and their movement for political freedom. Her portrayal of East Pakistanis/Bangladeshis as either capable of showing "bestial" violence or being cowards calls into question her neutrality.

According to her book, Bangladeshis are prone to melodrama and self-pity, with a blind hate and vindictiveness towards the West Pakistani army – not

so surprising, given that the violence was perpetrated by the army. To her, Pakistani army personnel are gentle, quiet, kind, honest, "fine men" with a good humour and "with no ethnic bias against the Bengalis". Accepting her account, Jack contends that "it would be more accurate to accuse the Pakistani army of political killing", while the killing of non-Bengali collaborators and communities by Bengali Muslim civilians counts as genocide.

The numbers killed and raped during the Bangladesh war, as noted by Jack, remains a contentious issue. There is no doubt that the figures bandied about – 3 million or 300,000 – are difficult to prove or disprove. In an earlier article, Bose mistrusts Bangladeshi scholars and calls for research to be "conducted by a credible team of international scholars in a systematic and verifiable manner". Yet, in instances in the book where foreign press reports provide documentation of the killings and rapes by the Pakistani army, Bose states: "Foreign press reports are not uniformly reliable sources."

Historian Prof Willem van Schendel of the University of Amsterdam, in criticising Bose's book, suggested: "Debunking is an important, indeed necessary, historical genre in all war historiographies but ... it is only helpful and effective if it adheres to the highest professional and ethical standards." So in asking others that we pay attention, Jack should also find out about the living and dead who are unreckoned as a result of Bose's inconsistent documentation of Bangladesh's horrific losses.