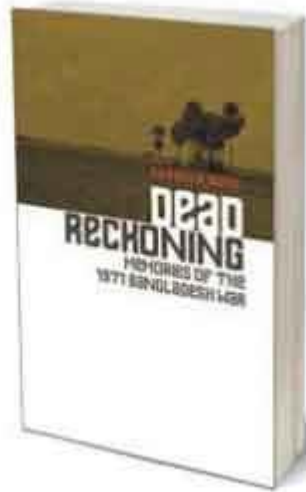


Thoughts on *Dead Reckoning*

Arnold Zeitlin



The occasion was the launching of *Dead Reckoning* at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC . The centre described the book as "challenging assumptions about the nature of the conflict." However, several researchers have criticised and dissected her book -- including Nayanika Mookherjee, Naeem Mohaiemen, Urvashi Butalia, and Srinath Raghavan.

After Ms. Bose delivered a description of her book, I commented in my role as a reporter who covered the period as Associated Press bureau chief in Pakistan at the time. Frankly, the book disappointed, if not astonished me. The need for a revised look at events certainly exists. Several years ago, I wrote in the now-defunct *Far Eastern Economic Review* bemoaning the fact that Bangladesh had produced no reliable English-language history of its independence struggle. But while Bose's interviews and anecdotal reporting add to the literature, *Dead Reckoning* doesn't satisfy the need.

Her book is so full of holes I can only describe her work as "Swiss cheese scholarship," with the same excess of bias that exists in so many other books of the period. I took a batch of books about the conflict from my library and piled them up at the session, to illustrate my belief that *Dead Reckoning* was just one more book for the pile.

Ms. Bose says she started her project sympathetic to the cause of the East Pakistani Bengalis. She says out of her probing of memories emerged a story that was at odds with the conventional story of the war and its emphasis on East Pakistani suffering and grievances. Faced with a challenge of what she said was "seeking the right balance between detachment and involvement," she now appears to see the conflict more through the lens of the losers (the

Pakistan army). The single word to describe her reaction at best is "ingenuous," as in naive and artless. But the harsher word "disingenuous" could also apply.

For example, she is distressed that Bengali propaganda of the time demonised General Yahya Khan, the Pakistan military ruler. As for Sheikh Mujib, while speaking at the Wilson Center, she claimed Mujib played "a double game."

Having raised the example of Yahya's beneficence, Ms. Bose had an obligation, in the name of balance, to flesh out her picture of the general. A case can certainly be made that Yahya had a darker side that affected his decision-making. I saw him drunk the day in 1970 he arrived in East Pakistan from China, presumably to boost the province's morale after a cyclone. He was drunk again the night of November 22, 1971, when Indian troops moved aggressively into East Pakistan. At a reception that evening at the Intercontinental hotel in Rawalpindi, I stepped out to question him. He drunkenly shouted: "I know you! I know you!" and tottered off without an answer.

Brigadier F.B. Ali, who contributed to the ouster of Yahya as Pakistan's leader in December 1971, sent this message after I sent him Ms. Bose's description of the general: "By 1970/71 he was an alcoholic who spent most of his time in a drunken haze and didn't really direct or control policy. This was made by others around him, and OK'ed by him. These people had no intention of letting East Pakistan rule or separate. The "deal with Mujib" that she talks about was just camouflage to give the army time to prepare for the crackdown."

As for Mujib, a case can be made that he searched for a resolution that would make him either the prime minister of all Pakistan or at least the supreme leader in East Pakistan. He repeatedly tried to hold off the radical, younger elements pressing him to declare independence. I saw a sign of his desperation after I reported in February 1971 that Bhutto had suggested two prime ministers for Pakistan (in a drunken interview with me during a February midnight in Peshawar). Bhutto had made the same suggestion in a previous, little-noticed interview with the Times of London reporter Peter Hazelhurst. Few realised it at the time, but Bhutto sensed already that the people of Pakistan had voted in 1970 for separation. Mujib summoned me to his Dhanmondi home. He and I sat alone in his living room (an unusual occurrence in a house that was always overrun with followers). He asked me to describe what Bhutto told me. "If that is what he wants," Mujib said with opening his hands, palms up, in a hopeless gesture and a sigh, "I agree." I trotted off to send a story that a basis for agreement existed between the country's two top political leaders. After publication, Mujib promptly denied it. He told me I had misquoted him and I told him I didn't. "That story will hurt me in West Pakistan," he said finally, referring to other West Pakistani politicians who detested Bhutto and wanted to deal with Mujib.

In her portrayal of Mujib as a cunning, if not hypocritical, leader (a speculative view unsourced by her), Ms. Bose had an obligation to give her readers a more balanced picture of the man.

Ms. Bose's interviews often substantiate her thesis that the Bengalis in East Pakistan were sinners in violence in killing non-Bengalis, as well as they were sinned against by the Pakistan army. She treats this information as a revelation. But it is hardly fresh news. In my first visit to Dhaka in December 1969, three months after I arrived in Pakistan as AP bureau chief, I found myself in the midst of a state of emergency ordered by the military governor, Admiral Ahsan. Bengalis and Biharis were killing each other. Having just arrived after three years of covering the Biafra civil war in Nigeria, in which the eastern province of the country tried to secede, I wrote in my first dispatch that East Pakistan was going to be the next Biafra. Ben Bassett, the AP's foreign editor in New York, responded by asking, with India separating the two wings of Pakistan, how were they going to get at each other? "I don't know," I answered, "but they will find a way." Fifteen months later, they did.

If I, a rank outsider, could see immediately the hatred that led to further killings and rapes less than two years later, imagine what the insiders knew. In this chronicle of hatred, Ms. Bose had an obligation to tell the story behind that hatred. She doesn't.

While supporting the contention that Bengalis also committed killings, she describes through interviews the killings by the Pakistan army at Dhaka University. She provides a chilling portrayal of random killings of Hindus in a village by a Pakistan army platoon. But, she still concludes: "By the massacre of unarmed and helpless Hindu refugees at Chuknagar, a band of 25 to 30 men brought lasting disgrace to an entire army and a whole nation."

A case can be made that these operations were not out of the ordinary, but represented incidents that the army repeated throughout East Pakistan.

According to Brigadier F.B. Ali: "On the general issue of atrocities ... they were committed by both sides. Unfortunately, in an insurgency which develops into a guerrilla war, they happen quite often. My view is that the Pakistan army, being a professional military force, should be held to a higher standard than the 'rebels,' and are thus more culpable. Also because the scale of their actions was considerably more than those of the other side. Totally criminal were the actions of certain commanders who ordered atrocities to be committed. The senior officers (Brig. and above) performed poorly, with some exceptions. Many of the generals behaved terribly and should have been shot for cowardice and the war crimes they committed by directing or allowing their troops to commit atrocities against the civilian population."

Ms. Bose is enthusiastic in her admiration for the commanding general of the Pakistan forces in East Pakistan, Lt. Gen. Niazi, whom she describes as having a "distinguished past and a tragic fate."

I'll turn again to F.B. Ali for a different view: "'Tiger' Niazi was a disgrace to the uniform. He was a fraud, a lecher and a coward. When he was General Officer Commanding (GOC) 10 Division, it was well known in the garrison (I was there) that his staff car would often be found standing in Heera Mandi (Lahore's red light district). As GOC EP he used to go around visiting troops and asking JCOs: how many Bengali women have you raped? When

discussing his surrender with the Indian general, he tried to ingratiate himself by telling dirty jokes."

Ms. Bose placed significance that in her interviews many rural Bengalis praised "Baluch" soldiers for their kindnesses. She took this as remarkable inasmuch as there were few, if any, soldiers in East Pakistan from Baluchistan (although two of the Pakistan army regiments in East Pakistan at the time were labelled the 20 and 22 Baluch, they were mostly staffed by Punjabi or Pathan personnel). Rather than considering the "Baluch" label a simple mis-identification by usually illiterate Bengali peasants, she speculates that these "Baluch" did not exist but were only in the "ethnic imagination of Bengali nationalists."

She takes on a numbers game -- questioning the support of the Awami League, which in 1970 won 160 of 162 seats in East Pakistan, enough to give the party a majority in a Pakistan national assembly that was never convened. But wait, says Ms Bose. Although the Awami League received 75% of the East Pakistan vote, just 56% of the eligible electorate turned out. So? She concludes, on the basis of no evidence, "that 44 percent of the East Pakistan electorate was too disinterested in the issues of the election to vote, or else had some disincentive to get out to vote."

Perhaps some people had to work the farm or were among the province's many poor and homeless, more interested in finding a daily meal than in politics. But is she suggesting that Sheikh Mujib and party really had no popular mandate, which so many of us believed 40 years ago?

In the course of her research, she certainly did not ask anyone who either voted or not at that time. In an outburst of pure speculation, she argues: "Those who voted may have been expressing their alienation from the existing regime, in favour of change, redress of perceived discrimination and greater autonomy." But she really doesn't know does she?

Since she is so proud of the interviews that demonstrate that Bengalis killed people too, why did she not interview voters and non-voters to find out what was on their minds at election time? Such is an example of her scholarship and research.

Arnold Zeitlin was the first foreign journalist to send a first-hand witness report on the brutal killing of unarmed people in Dhaka in 1971 (New York Times on March 29, 1971). He was then Pakistan bureau chief of Associated Press.