

PERPETRATORS' HUMANITY: WAR, VIOLENCE, AND MEMORY AFTER 1971

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Abstract: How does love for home/nation become the site for intolerance and provoke violence against others? What precipitates the expression of this hate? Is shared humanity possible among erstwhile perpetrators and victims? Through the method of oral history, in this article I probe these questions by investigating the memories of perpetrators of the 1971 war of Bangladesh. A common and shared memory of perpetrators was the humbling experience of fighting a destructive war in which they lost nation as well as their human self. The mournful memories of human loss are explained as the destruction of *insāniyat*, which opens the space for acknowledging the divergent desires of nationalism that clashed with human ethics. Today, the nations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh refuse to acknowledge the disastrous memories of 1971 because it unsettles state written histories. For perpetrators, however, the memories of violence are critical for understanding the meaning of sacrifice on behalf of nation, as well raising for them the question of ethical responsibility to victims. The moral dilemma is an “imprisoned” memory of the loss of *insāniyat* that cannot be articulated publicly because there is no place for it in Bangladesh and Pakistan. The fragmentary shards of perpetrators’ memories express hope for renewing the commitment to *insāniyat*. This is a challenge and struggle in South Asia that is divided by mythical national histories and the politics of postcolonial nationalism. Without the rethinking of *insāniyat* at a public level, I’d argue the question of tolerance would remain submerged or become simply a document constructed at supra-national level without anchoring it within culture and society in South Asia.

Keywords: 1971 war of Bangladesh, *insāniyat*, Pakistan, oral history, perpetrators memories, tolerance, postcolonial

How can I embellish this carnival of slaughter? How decorate this massacre?

Whose attention could my lamenting blood attract?

There’s almost no blood in my rawboned body

And what’s left isn’t enough to burn as oil in the lamp?

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Stay away from me. My body is a parched log in the desert.

If you burn it, you won't see the cypress or the jasmine, but my bones blossoming like thorns in the cactus.

If you throw it in the forests, instead of morning perfumes, you'll scatter the dust of my seared soul.

So stay away from me. Because I'm thirsting for blood.¹

These lines are from the poem *Hazar Karo Merey Tan Sey* (Beware of my being) that Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the acclaimed poet of West Pakistan, wrote on the eve of the war of 1971 in East Pakistan. Faiz Ahmed warned the administration not to take the war path to solve the political crisis in East Pakistan after the failed election of November 1970. The Bengali demand for the appointment of their leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the prime minister of Pakistan was fiercely contested by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of West Pakistan, who had the support of the West Pakistani public and the military administration. In the impasse, the military decided to deploy the armed forces against the people of East Pakistan. Faiz Ahmed's feebly voiced individual protest against this action fell on deaf ears. The war of 1971 became a site of ruin; it shattered unified Pakistan into two countries and Bangladesh was created in consequence of the violent war in erstwhile East Pakistan. Today, there is no more poetry about 1971 in Pakistan or Bangladesh. However, in unexpected places, buried under the debris of the war violence, in perpetrators' memories, as I found out, a faint, yet, resilient human voice survived, refusing to die a silent death. This article is an exploration of the voice of *insāniyat* that perpetrators of 1971 articulate drawing attention to interdependent human relationships for connecting the people of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

The remorseful memory of perpetrators that "humanity was destroyed in the war" (*jang mein insāniyat khatam ho geya*) mourns the death of *insāniyat*. What is the *insāniyat* that they speak of? *Insāniyat* can be loosely translated as humanity, but the English terms humanity nor humanism fully captures its meaning. *Insāniyat* one can say is an emotion and an ethics that expresses the interdependent relationship between people creating human unity, and combines within its conceptual frame humanism as well as humanitarianism that gives meaning to coexistence. *Insāniyat* is not a learned ethic nor enforced as a normative principle by an external authority, nor a legal responsibility. Instead it inheres in human encounters. In the words of Obeidullah Sindhi, a twentieth-century revolutionary political thinker of South Asia, it becomes manifest as a "site of friendship between self and other."² Unlike Western humanism, which emerged in conflict with the Christian church and made the assertion of human agency for rational behavior and secular

ideas, *insāniyat* as understood in the subcontinent combines a God-centric approach with human responsibility for upholding ethics. This way of thinking is particularly evident among the Muslim communities in Pakistan. The foundational location of *insāniyat* they believe is the Qur'anic concept of *huquq al-ibad* (rights of other human beings and duties toward them). Rights and duties are enjoined on people because they are deemed the vice-regent (*khalifa*) of Allah (God). To be an *insān*, who behaves with this awareness is a requirement because without it, once again, using the Qur'anic description of human evolution, they say, a man would regress into the state of *haiwan* (animal like behavior). To be vigilant against this degeneration is important at both an individual and collective level. For *insāniyat* to survive the ability to be with others and living in awareness of the Other are crucial factors. Supplication to the divine to preserve this human capacity is a fervent prayer of many. The importance of this foundational responsibility of maintaining *insāniyat* is a continuous struggle and an aspiration.

In the Indian subcontinent, as early as the thirteenth century, Muslim rulers made tolerance their state discourse and policy for strengthening their political hold and administering their multi-religious subjects. Tolerance was pragmatic politics. The court poet Amir Khusraw (discussed later in the article) wrote eloquently on the subject of tolerance for promoting cultural unity in the subcontinent. This policy survived into the Mughal period (sixteenth to eighteenth century), and emperors Akbar and Aurangzeb³ strategically used the policy of tolerance. Akbar called it *Sulh Kul* and this informed his religious and administrative policies vis-à-vis the non-Muslim communities. Even Aurangzeb, not otherwise known for religious flexibility in the textbook versions of history, made the award of land grants to Hindu religious institutions a state policy for inclusion. The advocacy of tolerance by Sufis became the vehicle for the expansion of Islam in the subcontinent, as historians K. A. Nizami (2007) and Richard Eaton (1993) have argued. The Sufi concept of "*wahdat insān*," unity in humanity, served as the foundational concept that Obeidullah Sindhi used for thinking about Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh unity for the anti-colonial freedom struggle. But in 1971, West Pakistani intolerance against the dissenting Bengalis and the unwillingness of the Bengalis to engage the West Pakistanis in dialogue for resolving the election stalemate led to extreme violence and regrettable loss of *insāniyat*. People destroyed one another. It is this loss that perpetrators recall and mourn, in private.

Mourning for the loss of *insāniyat* "is a task" and the mobilization of this memory is both dread and hope (Derrida 1994: 54). Perpetrators cling to the hope of renewal. What happened in the war? What did people do to one another? One troubling memory follows another in their mind. What motivated the violence? This question, in particular, forces perpetrators to reflect on structures, ideas and ideologies, powerful actors and institutions that enabled and legitimized the

violence in the war. In probing these memories, we come face to face with the abstract concept of nation and nationalism becoming the propelling force and providing gratification to its adherents for committing violence. People destroyed their neighbors, friends, coworkers, even family members, who were deemed “enemy.”⁴ Human betrayal against humanity became the order of the day. Stunned, we are forced to ask how does love for nation become the site for intolerance and provoke violence against others? There are no easy answers. To grasp this violence, we have to enter the space of perpetrators’ memories and close the gap between history that is in the books and history that people experienced.

By privileging the human voice of mourning for *insāniyat* that was sacrificed for the sake of nation, perpetrators urge a different and intimate understanding of history. I am not suggesting that we condone their actions, rather I am presenting it in the way of engaging the intimate sphere of struggle of perpetrators’ conflicting emotions and the devastating actions that led to the loss of *insāniyat*. Four decades later, recalling the loss of *insāniyat* in the battlefields of East Pakistan and seeking its recovery testifies to its enduring appeal. Understanding its resilient capacity is critical for studying South Asian history and society that is made up of a diversity of religious, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, class, and caste groups that are living together, and, yet, apart. Proximity and difference, as Ashis Nandy (2002) argues, lend force to violence and intolerance. Nonetheless, even within and beyond the violence, I would argue that there is the ethics and emotion of *insāniyat* that sustain and reinforce civic behavior and everyday peace in the subcontinent. The subcontinental culture of *insāniyat* is of fundamental importance in thinking about alternatives to the liberal human rights regimes that originate from the Western world and seek to transform non-Western communities and their cultures.⁵ At a time when the upsurge of violence against the Black communities in the United States, Muslims and Dalits in India, and refugees and migrants in Europe and Australia has become marked, studying different cultural and conceptual approaches to tolerance and inculcating peaceful coexistence among diverse communities are urgent.

Memory in Process

To understand perpetrators’ understanding of *insāniyat* and its potential role in developing tolerant communities in South Asia, the memory of 1971 is one of our most important resources. It is in violence that the awareness of the loss of *insāniyat* became evident to those perpetrators and victims of the violence. It is this awareness that compels a new conversation to move beyond intolerance. For this memory is our only tool, but in entering the memory space of another we have to speak in the name of the Other. As Jacques Derrida reminds us this is possible,

but it is “a double bind” because we do this in our terms but in the name of the Other, who we can never truly access because the interiority of the person’s memory is not ours. This does not mean we cannot engage. Following the American philosopher Richard Rorty’s (1989) call for moral imaginative ability to “see strange people as fellow sufferers,” thus expanding the “we” community, which, he argues, genres such as ethnography, docudrama, novel are better equipped to do, I embarked on an oral history research on 1971. The possibility of compassion that oral history allows in its emphasis that “we are always in advance related to the other” (Cadava 2005: 74) enabled me to collect the memories of the war from multiple constituencies of victims and perpetrators in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India.

Victims’ and perpetrators’ memories are secret and private, guarded in fear of betrayal and exposure. Since this article is on perpetrators’ memories, I will remain confined to this group. Perpetrators have never truly acknowledged the crimes they committed in the war, even today, more than four decades after the war. Neither the people of Bangladesh nor Pakistan want to listen to them. People fear it would be like a Pandora’s box letting out more misery than healing the scars of the past. The memories of perpetrators survive in the margins of national narratives.

During my discussions with a variety of perpetrators in the three countries – Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, none of the men I interviewed spoke about the “me” – who is a rapist, killer, plunderer, and looter, who terrorized civilians, killed innocent children and raped helpless women. The foggy shadow of the past haunts these men, and this became obvious after several meetings with the same person; building trust for speaking about 1971 took a long time. Haunted by the cruel violence they committed in the war, the vast majority of perpetrators discouraged such a discussion. But some among them bore the guilt of their actions and had the rare capacity to speak about it. These men represented themselves as reduced human beings, having lost their *insāniyat* in trying to protect the nation. The decomposed memories of this degradation may actually serve as the site for the renewal of humanity by speaking truth to power.

The movement from being a soldier to becoming a perpetrator in the war happened almost suddenly for most of the rank-and-file Pakistani soldiers. This, perhaps, is the reason why the memory of the war is so shocking to them even four decades later. Remembering the violence is not an easy task and they made sense of it as a “duty” that they performed “to “protect their *watan* [country] ... and bring the place under control.”⁶ Initially, the West Pakistani soldiers who had arrived in East Pakistan without requisite preparation regarding the Bengali communities believed that “the people of East Pakistan were Indians and Hindus” and they were determined to “destroy them.” But very quickly they realized

their mistake when they “saw that the majority of the Bengali people were Muslim co-religionists.” This realization was shocking to them. The deliberate deception of the military administration unnerved them, but they could not do anything because they “had taken an oath to obey commands and carry out orders. There was no independence,” which allowed them to disown their own violent actions.

However, once the war started there was no turning back because everywhere they went they found that the “Bengalis had risen up in revolt.” They had to use violence against the Bengalis for their “own survival,” many reasoned. The Bengali guerillas of the *Mukti Bahini* (Liberation Army) who were trained and assisted by the Indian armed forces provided resistance to the Pakistani army, who they deemed were “occupiers.” Toward the end of the nine months of war (the war started on March 25 and ended with the signing of a peace treaty with the Indian armed forces on December 16, 1971), conditions deteriorated rapidly and the Pakistanis “killed recklessly and lost many of [their] own.”⁷ Fear and the need to avenge the deaths of their comrades led to spiraling violence and the West Pakistani soldiers brutalized the people of East Pakistan because they feared there was “no return from the hell of East Pakistan.” “Most of the killings were done as an “impersonal matter,” they confess now.⁸

“It happened in retaliation because of the Indians who were inciting the Bengalis,” they reasoned. “The Bengalis killed whoever they could, they did not even spare women and children. They created chaos,” which made the Pakistani soldiers very angry and they responded with more violence.⁹ A colonel, who served as a doctor in the Pakistan army, “did not see” the Pakistani violence, but blamed the Bengalis for it. They, the Bengalis, mainly targeted the Biharis, he claimed. The Biharis of East Pakistan were not a single community, but a variety of Urdu-speaking immigrant communities from India who went to East Pakistan after 1947, most of them had fled after the massive riots in Calcutta and Bihar in India in 1957 and 1965, they say. During the 1971 war, the vast majority of the Biharis supported the Pakistan army and actively aided and assisted them in taking control of East Pakistan. Along with pro-Pakistani Bengali groups, the Biharis formed militias, such as the *Al-Badr* and *Al-Shams* to fight against the nationalist Bengalis. Shamsuddin who now lives in Orangi, Karachi, remorsefully confessed that the Biharis did this because “*Muslim League ka bhut sawar tha*” (we assisted because we were still haunted by the ghost of the Muslim League [that founded Pakistan]). The Bihari support of the Pakistanis transformed them into enemies of the nationalist Bengalis and they were made into easy targets for violence. In the town of Chittagong, the Biharis who worked in the railway and other industrial sectors were brutally attacked and hundreds of them were killed overnight by Bengali Mukti Bahini supporters. To this day, Chittagong carries the scar of that devastating violent night.

The ground was full of dried blood of Biharis who were slain by the Bengalis. There were no Pakistanis in the town, only Biharis and Bengalis working in the various service sector businesses, factories, railways, and so on. They butchered the Biharis without compassion,

the colonel recalled, but he did not elaborate on the Pakistan army's retaliatory violence against the Bengalis.¹⁰ This incident was corroborated by several Pakistani officers, including Brigadier Shafi who served in Chittagong during the war. Obviously, the Pakistanis were not the only perpetrators in the war – Bengali and Bihari communities, too, were involved in brutalizing one another. This the Pakistani perpetrators used as an excuse to minimize their own crimes.

One of the most uncomfortable topics of discussion was the subject of rape. This could be for a variety of reasons, including my gender, which inhibited men's direct speech on this issue. When they talked about it in cryptic language of *zulm* and *ziadti* or oppression against women, most of them confessed that everyone used the opportunity of the war to rape – Pakistanis, Bengalis, Biharis, and, even, Indians, were involved. A soldier whom I interviewed in Lahore recalled,

we once went to Brahmanbaria [southern East Pakistan] with a very senior officer. I knew why we were going to this village, to rape. Everyone was involved in this horrible violence; it was for revenge. Even I did not try to stop anyone.¹¹

An immigrant Bihari family that now lives in Attock, in northern Pakistan, claimed that “their Bengali neighbors in East Pakistan were like family and they felt morally obliged to protect them from the Bihari men,” but they could not make sense “why so much hate had developed that they attacked women who were like sister and mother to them.” Although this family had “seen a lot of violence,” the discussion on rape made them extremely uneasy and “they preferred not to remember the horror,” they told me and requested me not to ask any more questions.¹² During dinner, the elderly matriarch who sat next me told me in faint whispers (so that the men would not hear her) about the incidents of rape that she had witnessed and the assistance she offered to the raped victims. She did not discriminate between the Bengali and Bihari victims, to her all of them were “like us.” A Bihari butcher in Islamabad expressed fear in recalling what he “had seen there [in East Pakistan].”¹³ One man admitted that “it was our duty to save their honor, but we failed.”¹⁴ Saleha Chowdhury, a Bengali woman in Pahartali, Chittagong, bemoaned that “everyone was involved in violating women. There was no one to cry for Bengali or Bihari women.” Many Hindu Bengali and Buddhist men and women in Bangladesh disclosed that women were attacked by local Bengali Muslim men when they were fleeing for safety to India. They expressed great remorse that in

independent Bangladesh “the criminals and *rajakars* (supporters of the Pakistan army) became the rulers.”¹⁵

Like the Pakistanis, the Bengali veterans rarely acknowledged the violence they committed in the war. They blamed the Pakistanis for the violence. Many considered “the Pakistani were not human beings,” which is certainly an exaggerated emotion, but the brutality of the Pakistanis merited their less than human status in the eyes of the Bengali public.¹⁶ Major Kamrul Hasan Bhuyan of the Mukti Bahini told me many poignant stories of incredible violence that he witnessed, although he did not personally admit to committing violence during the war. One of his memories was from Khalispur, Khulna. Khalispur had a mixed population of Bengalis and Biharis, which made it vulnerable to attacks from all sides. He recalled an incident, which turned him against the Pakistanis. “One afternoon, in Khalispur, I saw a horrific scene on the Rupsha River during low tide. A woman was swimming across the river to save herself,” he recalled.

She was injured and was floating with the low tide toward the sea. Her right hand was flipping over the water. On her left hand, just above the water, she was holding a child, about six months old. The Pakistanis came on their boats and I saw in front of my eyes that they killed her. I was stunned by this violence.

Thereafter, it was not difficult for him to commit violence against the Pakistanis. “War does not go by some mathematical calculation, unfortunate things happen. We did what we had to do to liberate ourselves from the indignity of Pakistani rule. The war was a struggle for dignity,” he said to rationalize his own violent actions.

Recognition of the self as a perpetrator is not an easy task. The process has been long and torturous for many. An intriguing topic that many brought to the discussion was the subject of *zameer* or conscience. The admission that they were troubled by their conscience opened the way forward for gradual transformation of perpetrators, to move from the state of denial to acceptance of the atrocities that they had committed. This seemed to happen in the prisoner-of-war (POW) camps in India where the surrendered Pakistan army was incarcerated for more than two years. Here, some surrendered to their conscience. “There we thought more about our family, children, and the future. We tried to think about the past and the atrocities,” which offered them with a motivating reason to account for their actions. They turned to the Qur’an to find the language of repentance, became religious, and were able to discuss about their crimes. Some even “acknowledged what they did was wrong.” “Atoning for their sins,” as many now confess, became the primary concern as well as an anxiety. They “turned to God for forgiveness because they could not see a way out otherwise.” “Every bad act we did was beyond us, our

leaders led us to it, we were not trained to fight such a war," they confessed.¹⁷ Admitting to the war crimes requires incredible courage and the mask of the soldier had to fall off to deal with his humanity, which he had lost in the war. The loss of *insāniyat* was a shocking realization, which many cannot come to terms with, even now, more than four decades later.

A few incredibly brave souls showed rare courage and admitted to the violence, privately. One of them initially evaded each and every question I asked, but after four days of discussion in his village home in Jhelum, he opened up. Our discussion had shifted from 1971 to his present life in Spain where he works in a restaurant. Suddenly, he said

the Pakistan army is made up of good and brave soldiers, but our officers were corrupt. We don't have role models in Pakistan, like people do in the West. The poor here are blamed for what the rich do. In Bangal, we were told to clean out villages, which we did. We burned homes and cattle and razed the crops. Men, women and children fled, but we pursued them and killed many. We were determined to win the war by force and destroy the Bengalis. But man cannot destroy man. Our *niyat* [intentions] was not right in Bangal.

This was a shocking admission. It made me think of motivations and mass psychology for destruction in which ordinary people were used to destroy other ordinary people. What did they have to gain by destroying people who were like them, poor and possessing meager belongings? My questions were answered by a perpetrator I met in Gilgit, in Northern Pakistan. He said,

as an *insān* [a human being] I would say no one should commit such violence. The Bengalis were an integral part in making Pakistan. Yet in the end so much violence was committed as a result of the war. The violence created a hell in East Pakistan, particularly for women. ... Our leaders and elders committed injustice against them [the Bengalis] that led to their revolt against Pakistan. In the end, we destroyed one another. This was a lesson I learned from the violence that it was not necessary. It was not required of a human community.¹⁸

But not all was blood and gore in memory. Occasionally, I heard redeeming stories of compassion and empathy where human encounter between the Pakistanis and Bengalis became possible. One such story is from a retired Major in Lahore. They were in a village in Bogra, in northern East Pakistan, when suddenly some Indian soldiers arrived there. The Bengali man in whose house they were hiding managed to send the Indians away without a search. When the Pakistani army officer inquired why he had done so, the Bengali man replied in these words, he

recalled: “I want Bangladesh to be free. But last night there was violence in my village and my daughter was raped. Her life has been destroyed, I don’t want to destroy another person’s life.” Pakistanis, too, saved Bengalis as Riaz Sipra recalls. He was the Superintendent of Police of Dhaka in 1971. Sipra claims that he saved a Bengali family that the army suspected was involved with the rebel Mukti Bahini forces. Sipra personally accompanied the soldiers to the home during the raid, forbade the soldiers from touching the women, and took the head of the family to his own home refusing to hand him over to the Brigadier. Later, the army found out that the man was not from the Mukti Bahini but was a member of the Muslim League Party that supported Pakistan.

Major Farroukh told a very curious tale of the humanizing encounter he had on witnessing a dead Pakistani. It appears he had shot and killed a Pakistani soldier.¹⁹ He ordered his men to

drag the body of the dead soldier to [their] camp. The local village people in Tripura, India, where [they] were encamped flocked to see the dead Pakistani. Women and men hurled abuses calling the dead man a “monster,” “demon,” some spat on him, some kicked his body. Disciplined, trained soldiers and civilians forgot basic human decency and abused the dead,

he remembered. Unnerved by the violence against the deceased, Major Farroukh quickly buried the dead man with his own hands. But to this day, the memory of that incident haunts him. His parting words to me were, “my greatest regret is that I did not mark the grave of the soldier. No one in his family will ever know where he is buried, they cannot visit his grave, offer prayers, there is no closure for them,” he regretfully admitted. There is no closure for Major Farroukh, either.

Likewise, Major Kamrul Hasan Bhuyan had a temporary change of heart toward the Pakistanis. He was part of a guerilla mission in the outskirts of Khulna where they fought and “chased the Pakistanis away.” Later, when they did a search of the area they found a Pakistani soldier in a mosque, alone and praying.

When he finished his prayers, we caught him and was about to kill him, but decided to ask why he did not flee. The Pakistani soldier said that his blind mother had dedicated all her three sons to the war; she had sent them to kill the *kafirs* [infidels]. But when he came to East Pakistan he found that the people he was fighting against were Muslims. This made him extremely sad and he did not want to go back to Pakistan. He did not have the heart to tell his blind mother and his sisters-in-law that he and his brothers had killed Muslims. He wanted to kill

himself, but he could not do so because that would be against Allah. We spared his life and he served as a cook until the Pakistanis surrendered Dhaka to the Indians on December 16, 1971.

Major Bhuyan told several other stories that presented a confusing picture of his relationship with his enemy, the Pakistanis, who emerged as “human in his eyes.” During our last conversation he said, “they [the Pakistanis] are a part of my life now, they are fellow sufferers.”²⁰

The fluctuating identity of the perpetrator that I had developed from my multi-sited research was not easily accepted in Bangladesh, although since then new narratives that blur the relationship between the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis are slowly appearing in Bangladesh.²¹ In Pakistan, many agreed that it was in the context of the war that the Pakistanis were transformed into perpetrators, and they regretted the degeneration. Brigadier Aslam’s brother who served in the 1971 war, it appears, committed suicide because, as Brigadier Aslam reasoned,

his death was in 1971. He was part of a system that committed so much atrocity that after he became a POW he could not face the ignominy and humiliation. I knew he had done things there that he could not talk about, they were deemed war criminals.

Masud Mufti, a high ranking civil servant who did the bidding of the army during the war and became a POW after the surrender of the Pakistanis, continues to search for a human voice in the fictional narratives that he writes about the war. He questions the logic of the violence in East Pakistan, but cannot find answers. In a book called *Chehra* (Image), he vents the loss of Pakistani humanity in these words, “the ones who had lost were uneasy with their own sight, walking around like zombies, without purpose or sight. They were like people gripped by some sort of an evil magic” (Mufti 1996: 68). Colonel Hasan Raza bemoaned that “people were the victims of the circumstances, everyone wanted power, but they did not have the courage to be human enough.” Colonel Nadir Ali still cannot make sense of the violence and believes that he and his fellow soldiers “suffer the consequences of the loss of their humanity even today.”

The reason to know about the violence, perpetrators told me, is a matter of *insāniyat*, to “see” the other as a fellow human, which they had failed to do so during the war. The profound knowledge that in trying to destroy the other they had lost their own humanity was expressed in a poignantly simple statement by an ordinary soldier “*Khud bachne ke liye ya Pakistan ko bachane ke liye insāniyat bhul gaya. Buhat zulm kiya*” [To save ourselves and save Pakistan we forgot our humanity. We committed unspeakable atrocities].²² The confusion that happened

as a result of this loss is the greatest disability that the perpetrators of the 1971 war suffer from. This emotional memory leads us to think with the perpetrators the repulsive nature of violence and what it did to their humanity. We cannot dismiss them as brutes, but their uncertain and selective memory makes us wonder of the struggle of the men with their past. Their humanity must be interpreted to make sense of what had happened to them and others in the moment of a disastrous war that ruined everything in the subcontinent. This way of thinking of the event of 1971 and its violence as a site of humanistic return liberates the space of history for an ethical culture of memory to emerge beyond the confined space of official narratives of the states. Paul Ricoeur (1992) advocates the importance of “narrative hospitality” for addressing conflictual history. The narrative hospitality that allows for including the variety of perpetrators and reassign a human face to them implodes the received official national histories of 1971 in South Asia. We move beyond the fixed labels of the Bangladeshis as victims, the Pakistanis as perpetrators, and the Indians as heroes of the war that national histories tell. The liberation of history from the narratives of the state offers a different possibility, the capacity of recognizing the coexistence of multiple histories and divergent memories of the war. This inclusive remembering can be a site for developing interconnected and intersubjective relationships across the borders of the nation states. It also suggests the possibility of moving away from the narrative of a postcolonial history to a decolonial people’s history that could signal an epistemological shift for pushing the boundaries toward new knowledge production. This is a duty to be undertaken in the name of the future.

Writing such a history is a risky venture. It requires the use of interpretive language to make something that is incomprehensible into an understandable narrative, but as Derrida (1981a: 143) reminds “it is weakened speech ... a deferred life” of the history that we will never know. Yet one must take the risk of creating meaning in the gap between experience and the unspeakable fragment. In the “gap,” as Maurice Blanchot (1995) identifies, a new experience of possibility, a different way of knowing, can happen. Empathy and not judgment is required to both listen and accept perpetrators’ memories. I would argue that such an approach could signal the way forward, not as an instructive lesson to learn from the past to not repeat the mistakes in the future, but as a cultural dialogue to engage the experience of the war for understanding the relation between people and institutions, politics and events, language and emotion, and move beyond the assertion of identity. This is what perpetrators expressed as the greatest need. Without a subcontinental human community, they reflected, “we will not be able to appreciate who we really are.” In contemporary South Asia, the awareness of shared humanity is aspirational, a new horizon of *insāniyat*.

Love, Humanity, and Tolerance in the Subcontinent

In conclusion, I would like to return to the poetry of Faiz Ahmed. His lone voice continued to hold out hope of friendship between Pakistan and Bangladesh, although he himself was snubbed by the Bengali literati when he visited Dhaka with Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1974. Dismayed and unhappy, on his return he wrote a poem titled *Dhaka se vaapasi par* (On return from Dhaka), which is better known as *Hum Ke Thahre Ajnabi* (Have we become strangers?) The poem is an elegy that expresses deep sadness at the loss of friends; Faiz offers it as an unspoken prayer.

*Will we who remain strangers after all kindness are over
Become familiar after all the meetings are over?*

*How many seasons of rain will have to fall over
Scarred leaves before their greenness come unbloodied to mind?*

*The instant when pain of love ceased brought only numbness
Mornings are merciless after the merciful nights are over*

*How I wanted, but how my fractured heart did not allow,
Flirtatious complaints after the supplications were over,*

*And what you came so willing to give up all for, Faiz,
Was utterly unvoiced when all the talking was over.*

Although, Faiz himself never opposed the Pakistani Army's violence in East Pakistan in 1971, this poem written after the war elevates the act of recording and speaking about the violence to a moral duty. Acknowledging the violence that seared Bangladesh, he reaffirms hope for the renewal of friendship. Perhaps, the poet's call for this turn toward acknowledging *insāniyat* in Pakistan came too late and was not sufficiently forceful for the people of Bangladesh.

Many centuries before Faiz, Amir Khusraw, who is one of the greatest poets of the Indian subcontinent, wrote a most profound poetic narrative called *Nuh Sipihr* (Nine Skies) after the bloody conquest of Deccan by the ruler of Delhi, Qutbuddin Mubarak Shah (1316-1318). Commissioned by his patron to write an eulogy in celebration of the glorious military success, Khusraw used the opportunity to insert into the story of the battle a human tale of pluralism in Hindustan (India), even "suggesting a reconciliation" between the conqueror and the conquered (Gabbay 2010). This suggestion is particularly curious because Khusraw was not a rebel poet, like Faiz, rather he was a court poet who depended on the patronage of the monarch for his livelihood. Nonetheless, the establishment poet Khusraw

used his writing prowess to remind the monarch of the unbounded possibility of achieving true greatness by creating an environment for positive human relationships through the policy of acceptance and tolerance. To show this connection, he identifies Hindustan, the land of his birth (*maulud*) and motherland (*watan*), as “unique” and “Paradise-like” because of the diversity and the incredible human knowledge of the people there. In the third section of the *Nuh*, he explicates his love (*hubb*) for the place and people due to seven reasons that are both secular and religious. He praises the beauty of the different religious groups, including the Brahmins for their limitless learning. The variety of languages and literatures, flora and fauna, climate and food, animals and human life, he claims, made Hindustan superior than any other place in the entire world (Amil n.d.: 19). The celebration of Hindustan as a home of diversity and a place for human cultural evolution allowed Khusraw to develop a language for transforming the blood of a devastating war into an “alternative world-view,” showing the incredible capacity of the real conquering power of love and tolerance (Sharma 2005: 88). Khusraw was so proud of this inclusive image of Hindustan that he adopted the appellation Hindu-Turk for himself. A composite human took birth within Khusraw and the power of his poetic language inscribed an indelible memory of the oneness of Hindustan.

The echo of Khusraw’s humanity resounds in Faiz’s poems on 1971, but this is not to say that Faiz was reinscribing Khusraw’s subcontinental human community. There is a gap of more than seven hundred years between these two men. What is striking, however, is that in the gap of several centuries, the appreciation for something called *insāniyat* sustained, despite the oppressive colonial rule dividing communities based on religions, sects, castes, and class and the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. The reverberating voice of *insāniyat* that we hear, once again, in perpetrators of the 1971 war suspends the unendurable violence and transforms it into a generative act, one that results in the emergence of something new, where the hidden comes to the fore and makes possible a different “concept, a concept that can no longer be, and never could be included, in the previous regime” (Derrida 1981b: 42). The indignity of humanity due to violence and the recognition of the humanity of the Other that memory offers create the possibility of a new imagination in extraordinary ways. What kind of a story is this? An act of compassion or shame?

The voice and speech of humanity lies underneath the surface of the rubble and ruin; it is muted but it is there, not simply as an individual sensibility but it is a recognition that soars to a new height to show what is possible. It is a difficult voice to hear, but by giving us access to perpetrators inner thoughts and secret actions, we learn about life and what was killed in 1971; it is not fiction; it is the human speaking back claiming a truth that was suppressed in the search for

national identity. The voice of humanity strips away the veils of nationalism and shows us something about ourselves. It calls for a moral relationship to see perpetrators as one of us. In refusing to cancel the death of the Other and living in the memory of the Other, the perpetrators of 1971 pole vaults and asks us to acknowledge their humanity. The past is not in the past, a simple interpretation, but the range and flux of human experiences make victims and perpetrators bound to us; the task is to understand both. The road to this recognition evidently continues to be a bumpy one in South Asia, as much as it is around the world. But there can be a middle ground if we pay heed to history.

I read the bloody event of 1971 as the space for the emergence of a new middle ground for producing histories of tolerance in the subcontinent. Building the middle ground of tolerant history in the present scenario of hate and intolerance in South Asia is no easy challenge. The rhetoric of war, which is the dominant discourse, is often swept up by politicians and the military establishments in India and Pakistan to detract the public from the real issue – the incapacity of the governments to adopt a policy of coexistence in the region. Rather, they retch up the war cry at every available opportunity. History has become one of the most powerful tools in the service of belligerent states. The divided histories of South Asia and the projection of neighbors as “enemy” threaten to undo peace in the subcontinent. What is desperately needed in South Asia today and the rest of the world, in the words of Obeidullah Sindh, is *insān dosti* or human friendship. This is an unusual demand, almost unfathomable, especially for those who read and write history from a distance. But my response is different.

I am persuaded by those I met and who told me their stories of violence, loss, and recovery of their humanity in a war, to represent the ruthlessness of their actions, but continue to search with them and show the healing power of human memory in process, not memory that is inscribed in the archives and museums as relics or made into political rhetoric for constructing national narratives by the state. What must matter in the end is the defiance of the people who rise above the abjection and provide us with the material to embark on a new writing process for epistemological transformation that, in turn, can lead the way forward for new ontological awareness of the human as interconnected and interdependent. We have to search for the way to create a new horizon of possibilities to be human in South Asia. This is important for me as a historian because history about violence must be to do more than register guilt, grief, anger, remorse. No matter which side we take on 1971, we cannot deny the power that led to the violence; the task is to see the opaque and quixotic human that survives beyond the violence. It is the struggle of human memory against forgetting of our human identity in postcolonial South Asia.

Notes

1. Translated by Ali (1995).
2. For an explanation of *insān dosti* (loosely this can be translated as fellow feeling creating human friendship), see Maulana Obeidullah Sindhi's writing on this topic. He describes it as a conceptual location for true enjoyment of religion in its inclusive sense. See Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi's *Halat, Talimat aur Siyasi Afkar* [Studies in Political Thought and Intellectual Ideas] compiled by Muhammad Sarwar (2014), Lahore: Obaidullah Sindhi Foundation, 2014 edition.
3. See interview on Aurangzeb in *The Hindu* newspaper (<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/scholar-audrey-truschke-aurangzeb-is-a-severely-misunderstood-figure/article7648723.ece>).
4. How the imagined nation is developed, works, and becomes the site of passion is a matter of great discussion among scholars of nationalism (Kedourie 1960; Andersen 1983; Schmitt 1996).
5. Wendy Brown (2006) has articulated a trenchant critique of liberal tolerance. Benhabib (2004) emphasizes the importance of human interdependence in a world structured by nation states.
6. In this section, I will be using direct quotes from a variety of perpetrators. I do not assign attribution to them because the same sentiment was repeated in many conversations. Whenever I have provided specific attribution, it is because the soldier had given me permission to use his name in my scholarly publications.
7. It appeared that from March 25 to mid-June, the violence of Pakistan army was intense and they were able to bring East Pakistan under their control. But the reversal of fortunes for the Pakistan Army happened after November 16, and after November 26 conditions got worse when India started attacking the Western Front. In retaliation, the Pakistan Army went on a rampage against the people of East Pakistan and made the situation even worse for themselves.
8. Interview with Ahmed, an ordinary subaltern soldier in Gilgit, Northern Pakistan, January 2007.
9. Once again, this is a common discourse among the Pakistani soldiers. This quote is from a soldier in Ogali village, Khusab, Pakistan.
10. Dr. Colonel Hasan Raza, April 2004, Lahore, Pakistan.
11. This is how he remembered it:
ek baar Barmaabaaree gaye – ye pata tha ki hum kis masle main gaye hain – main bahar hi khara raha – achcha kaam to nahin kar rahe – Jab officer logon ko pata tha ki sipahi log bhi ye kar rahe hain – kisine stop nahin kiya – haalat hi aise ho chuke the ki jab unhone auraton par zyadti ki to aisa unhone shuru kar diya – revenge ke liye – maine bhi kisi ko rokne ki koushish nahin ki. (Soldier's name undisclosed, interview done in April 2004 in Lahore, Pakistan)
 Another soldier told me, "*bangali aurat ko bandh kiye – jo uske paas jaana chahta tha vo sipahi tha – major ne action nahin liya – humne ye nahin kaha ki maine bachaya – Bengal main zulm hua*" (Bengali women would be kept prisoner. The soldier used to exploit them, but the Major never stopped them. I did not do anything to save a woman; there was a lot of violence against them).
12. Interview with a Bihari immigrant family in Attock, Pakistan, August 11, 2004.
13. Muhammad Iqbal, a Bihari medical compounder, August 28, 2004, Islamabad.
14. Interview with a member of the *Jasod (Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal)* group of rebels that emerged after the war in 1972 (Interview in the person's home in Chittagong, Bangladesh, September 24, 2001). Similarly, Tushar Kanti Barua in Gharia Thana, Chittagong and Mumtaz Begum wife of the martyred Dr. Muhammad Ashraf Ali Talukdar in Chittagong admitted that violence was more local than has been acknowledged.

15. Niri Barua, Chittagong, October 25, 2001.
16. A blog developed by crowd sourcing a variety of stories representing the multiple sides in the war is: <https://december71.wordpress.com/>.
17. This realization was quite common among the men who became POW, but very few talked openly about it. This quote is from an interview with an honorary Captain Muhammad Aslam, Gujranwala, October 5, 2004.
18. Interview with a *subedar* (non-commissioned officer) in Gilgit, Northern Pakistan, April 2005.
19. Major Farroukh was in charge of a small unit of the Mukti Bahini. There are 11 sectors of the Mukti Bahini that fought alongside the Indian Army from the Indian border. Only one unit, led by Kadir Siddiqi, operated inside East Pakistan. After the war, Kadir Siddiqi was recognized as *Bango Bir* or "The Hero of Bangladesh." Major Farroukh was also decorated for his valor in the war.
20. *Bir Pratik* Habibul Alam and Kamrul Hasan Bhuyan both regretted the violence and loss of lives in the war, May 6, 2006, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
21. The commercially produced film *Mehrjaan* (2011) by Rubaiyat Hossain caused quite a stir in Bangladesh because of the film's critical position on nationalism, women's sexuality during the war, and for showing the possibility of love between a Bengali woman and a Pakistani man. The film was banned in Bangladesh.
22. Interview with Shamsuddin in Ogali village, Kushab, outside Islamabad, February 4, 2005.

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