Abstract

What happens when a nation's history is defined as much by what is forgotten as by what is remembered? The history of Bangladesh's creation is arguably one of the most contested and myth-laden in South Asian history. Conflicting interpretations of the events leading up to and during 1971 continue to spark debate and confusion nearly 54 years later. Many scholars studying South Asian history tend to confine their analysis to the post-1947 period. Those who do venture beyond this timeframe frequently adopt a teleological perspective that frames Bangladesh's independence as an unavoidable outcome, a historical conclusion that was bound to happen rather than one of many possible paths. The Partition, based on the "two-nation theory" that Muslims and Hindus required separate homelands, created Pakistan with two non-contiguous regions: West Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), separated by 1,000 miles of Indian territory and marked by significant cultural, linguistic, and social differences.

Yet, despite its promises of independence and religious self-determination, goals that some would argue were barely achieved, Partition's execution was marred by uncertainty, economic disparities, and deep structural failures. The systematic marginalization of East Pakistan by West Pakistani leadership catalyzed the emergence of Bengali nationalism. In response, the Pakistani military initiated a brutal suppression campaign against the movement, resulting in widespread atrocities including mass killings, systematic sexual violence, and targeted elimination of intellectuals and minorities. This campaign, widely recognized as genocide by scholars and international organizations, ultimately culminated in Bangladesh's independence.

Decades later, the violence Pakistan inflicted upon Bangladesh remains an indelible memory shaping bilateral relations. Pakistan has consistently denied or addressed ambiguously

its involvement in war crimes during the 1971 genocide, often crafting statements seemingly calculated to appease specific audiences without fully acknowledging accountability.[1] The denial of these atrocities, alongside internal divisions and ongoing insurgencies, presents persistent challenges to Pakistan's national cohesion. This problematic narrative continues across generations within Pakistan and among its diaspora communities, frequently perpetuated through systematic propaganda campaigns.

My research investigates how attitudes toward the 1971 Bangladesh genocide have evolved among diverse demographic groups within Pakistan, examining both mainstream perspectives and those from diaspora communities. The study analyzes how historical memory, denial, and nationalist narratives intersect with factors such as education, generational differences, regional identities, and transnational experiences to shape understandings of this contested past. Special attention is given to historically silenced aspects of the genocide, particularly systematic sexual violence and ideological challenges to state narratives, and how these shape contemporary Pakistani identity and bilateral relations with Bangladesh. By triangulating qualitative interviews, quantitative survey data, and analysis of educational materials, this research reveals both the persistence of nationalist denial frameworks and the emergence of more critical perspectives, especially among younger and diaspora Pakistanis. The findings illuminate how recent geopolitical shifts in South Asia, including Bangladesh's 2024 political transition, create new possibilities for addressing historical grievances while developing forward-looking bilateral engagement.

[1] Imtiaz Ahmed, "Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022), https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf.

Beyond Nationalist Narratives: Pakistani Historical Consciousness of the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide in an Era of Geopolitical Realignment

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First, to my family and friends, you held me through the long nights of research and difficult conversations that this project demanded. Your unwavering support created a sanctuary where I could pursue uncomfortable truths without feeling alone. To my mother and her extensive family in Pakistan, thank you for opening your memories even when they hurt, for trusting me with stories that challenge everything we thought we knew about our own history.

I carry the memory of my late great uncle, Rao Abdul Rashid, who served as Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence during the critical period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. His memoir "Jo Mein Ney Dekha" ("What I Saw"), now banned in Pakistan, was published in the 1990s during a rare moment of political openness, when truth could still find its way into print. Though I never met him, his courage in documenting what he witnessed has echoed through generations. Uncle, I hope you know that your legacy of truth-telling lives on, that someone in the family would eventually pick up where you left off.

To those we lost, the millions who died in Partition's violence, the countless victims of 1971's genocide, the Bengali freedom fighters whose names history has barely preserved, and women who endured sexual violence as weapons of war, you are the reason this work exists. Your suffering demands acknowledgment, your resistance deserves remembrance, and your stories refuse to remain buried. May your legacy burn bright long after we're gone.

As a Pakistani American student at Mount Holyoke, I often found myself navigating between the theoretical frameworks I encountered in the classroom and the lived realities those theories demand we confront. It is one thing to study memory, nationalism, and justice through academic lenses, and another entirely to turn that lens inward. This thesis became that mirror. In writing it, I realized that accountability begins not with institutions, but with individuals. With us. To be Pakistani is to inherit a history that is both rich and ruptured. And to honor that inheritance, we must be brave enough to face the violence committed in our name. I hope this work calls on all Pakistanis, at home and abroad, to move beyond silence and toward reckoning. Truth is not treason. Memory is not betrayal.

Finally, to my advisors, Professor Sohail Hashmi, Professor Kavita Khory, and Professor Abhilash Medhi, you saw something in this project when it was just a college student wrestling with family silences and national myths. Your brilliance illuminated paths I could not see, your knowledge anchored me when the research threatened to overwhelm, and your faith sustained me through the moments I doubted whether these stories were mine to tell. You did not just help me complete this project; you taught me that some truths are worth the discomfort of uncovering them.

This thesis belongs as much to all of you as it does to me.

Table of Contents

Abstract..1
Acknowledgments..4
Introduction: The Struggle Over Historical Truth 8
Research Questions..13
Literature Review and Conceptual Framework..14
The Liberation Narrative...15
The Nationalist-Defensive Narrative..17
The Critical-Reconciliatory Approach..19
Memory Politics and Identity Formation..21
Methodological Considerations and Scholarly Debates...25
Methodology and Thesis Structure..29
Significance and Contribution...35
Chapter One: Historical Context and the Road to 1971 36
Subjugation in Bengal's History...38
Partition and the Two Winged Struggle...45
Analysis of Genocide..59
Chapter Two: Research Methodology 74
Overview of Results: Quantitative and Qualitative..76
Survey Collection...76
Introduction to Quantitative & Qualitative Results...79
Chapter Three: Family and Memory Intergenerational Transmission 84
Statistical and Survey Analysis..84
Support for an Official Apology..88
Perceptions of Historical Impact on Contemporary Relations...93
Awareness of Sexual Violence..96
Transmission of Historical Knowledge Across Generations...100
Negative Perceptions and Social Connections...103
Chapter Four: Education and Historical Curriculum 114
Statistical and Survey Analysis..114
Education Level and Attitudes Toward the 1971 Genocide...115
Educational Content and Historical Erasure..119
Chapter Five: Civil Society and Collective Discourse 131
Sources of Public Information About 1971..131
Academic Initiatives and Public Intellectuals...133
Chapter Six: State Narratives and Official Positions 137
Evolution of Pakistan's Official Position (1971-Present)...138
Statistical and Survey Analysis..140
Regional and Socioeconomic Variations in Historical Attitudes.......................................140
Contesting State Narratives from Within..148

Chapter Seven: Generational Shifts and Future Prospects 155
Factors Shaping Generational Differences....155
Current Dynamics in Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations....157
Bangladesh's Political Transition and Memory Politics....161
Potential Pathways to Reconciliation....163
Conclusion....166
Bibliography....170

List of Figures

Figure 3.1: Support for Official Apology by Age Group 89
Figure 3.1.1: Logistic Regression Results 91
Figure 3.2: Perceived Impact of 1971 on Current Relations by Age Group 94
Figure 3.2.1: Awareness of Sexual Violence During 1971 by Age Group 96
Figure 3.3: Sources of Knowledge About 1971 by Age Group 101
Figure 3.4: Negative Perceptions Toward Bangladesh by Age Group 103
Figure 3.4.1: Social Connection to Bangladesh by Age Group 105
Figure 4.1: Support for Official Apology by Education Level 116
Figure 4.1.1: Awareness of Mass Rape Campaign by Education Level 117
Figure 6.1: Urban and Rural Attitudes Toward Bangladesh 140
Figure 6.1.1: Support for Official Apology by Region 142
Figure 6.1.2: Regional Awareness of Sexual Violence 145

List of Tables

Table 3.1: Family and Memory Intergenerational Transmission 87
Table 4.1: Summary of Statistical Findings on Education and Historical Attitudes 115

Introduction: The Struggle Over Historical Truth

Over half a century after the blood-soaked rupture that birthed Bangladesh, Pakistan's reckoning with 1971 remains fractured, shaped as much by silence as by story, and remembered unevenly across generations, classrooms, and states. The existing body of literature on Bangladesh reveals a limited scope, reflecting varied perceptions of the nation's history and independence. Much of this historiography is shaped by the perspectives of subcontinental protagonists, often influenced by their respective nationalist agendas. In examining the available literature on the birth of Bangladesh, Pakistani accounts frequently frame the 1971 genocide as a conflict of secession, characterizing Bengalis either as a marginalized group or as betrayers of Pakistan's vision as a homeland for South Asian Muslims.[2] Conversely, many Indian narratives depict the events as the third India-Pakistan war, emphasizing its significance in the broader military and ideological rivalry between the two nations.[3] These interpretations often overlook or marginalize the Bengali perspective, which frames 1971 as a war of national liberation, celebrating the struggle for independence as a just and necessary response to decades of political and economic oppression.

The differing historical narratives surrounding Bangladesh have undeniably contributed to shaping its unique national identity. From the Mughal rule in the sixteenth century to the British Raj in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the region's history reflects complicated and layered influences. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, three significant historical processes converged at critical junctures, defining the global and regional context. While some see the creation of Bangladesh as inevitable, I believe it was anything but. It was not

[2] Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 4.
[3] Ibid, 6.

preordained, it was shaped by a combination of conjuncture and contingency, deliberate choices, and unforeseen events.

With the end of British rule in 1947, the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India, West Pakistan, and East Pakistan became a defining reality. Today, the term "South Asia" generally encompasses the seven member states of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.[4] These nations, once under direct British control or influence, achieved independence over a span of years: India and Pakistan in 1947, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1948, and Bangladesh in 1971, separating from Pakistan rather than British colonial rule.[5] Despite their distinct paths to independence, these states share a common legacy in areas such as administrative frameworks, legal systems, and political structures. The partition of India in 1947 and the eventual separation of Bangladesh in 1971 underscore the interconnected histories and overlapping trajectories of these nations, shaped by colonialism and its enduring aftermath.

The subcontinent's history stretches back approximately 65,000 years to when the first modern humans arrived through the Coastal Migration or Southern Dispersal route, establishing the foundations for the complex societies that would later emerge as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India.[6] This expansive history provides essential context for understanding the dynamics between Pakistan and Bangladesh and why these narratives continue to resonate today. The Partition of 1947, however, was executed almost entirely along religious lines, ignoring other sociological factors such as ethnicity. This oversight is particularly evident in the case of Bangladesh, as its

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[4] Craig Baxter and Syedur Rahman, *Historical Dictionary of Bangladesh*, 2. ed, Asian Historical Dictionaries 2 (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 6.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid, 8.

very name, derived from "Bengali," underscores the ethnic identity at the heart of its struggle for independence.[7]

The Bengali people's revolution against Pakistan was not solely a reaction to religious differences but also to ethnic prejudice and systemic discrimination. This marginalization predated 1947; even as Pakistan and its eastern wing were presumably unified, West Pakistan's disdain for what they deemed the Bengalis' "Hindu-esque" culture fueled efforts to "Islamize" East Pakistan.[8] This cultural and ideological imposition, rooted in the belief that the Bengali identity needed purification from perceived Hindu influences, played a significant role in the eventual separation and the creation of Bangladesh.[9]

I do not believe it is an improbable concept that the journey to independence often begins with dissent, evolving into varying degrees of organized resistance. However, not all such struggles are rooted in identity or nationalist ideology. The concept of "nation," often tangled with the idea of "the people," becomes particularly salient when examining the Bengali fight for self-determination. This movement stands out as a collective uprising, characterized by widespread participation and the meeting point of intellectual and military efforts across the Bengali population. It reflects a unifying momentum, one that engaged nearly every segment of society in the pursuit of autonomy and the assertion of a distinct identity.

While Pakistan and Bangladesh share profound cultural and geographic connections rooted in hundreds of years of intertwined history, this research concentrates specifically on the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the timeframe most essential for understanding the political fractures and persistent narratives that shape their contemporary bilateral relationship.

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[7] Craig Baxter and Syedur Rahman, *Historical Dictionary of Bangladesh*, 2. ed, Asian Historical Dictionaries 2 (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 6.
[8] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 92.
[9] Ibid.

Though brief historical context will be provided to ground the discussion in earlier colonial and pre-colonial dynamics, the core analysis begins with the 1947 partition of India and concentrates on the events leading up to and following the 1971 genocide of Bangladesh. Central to this analysis is how the grievances of the Bengali population, rooted in decades of political, economic, and cultural marginalization, continue to shape national memory and foreign policy.

This research interrogates how both territories navigate collective remembrance, national mythology, and historical acknowledgment or evasion. Half a century after the genocide, official discourse both reveals and obscures particular accounts of history, intentionally constructing narratives that suppress uncomfortable truths while sustaining national mythology. These strategies are not exclusive to Pakistan; numerous states employ various methods to "manage" or deny histories that challenge national ideological frameworks, producing sanitized, purified, and palatable interpretations, or distortions, of historical events. In Pakistan's context, certain common techniques appear across various platforms, including government-approved textbooks, military memoirs, and museums. The outcome is not complete historical erasure, but rather a selective and carefully controlled acknowledgment of 1971.

This thesis examines how collective memory, national identity, and historical denial or accountability converge in both territories. My research reveals conflicting frameworks through which the events of 1971 are remembered, suppressed, or reframed. In Pakistan, the dominant narrative frames 1971 as a regrettable civil conflict or an Indian conspiracy, with discussions of genocide or systemic sexual violence often omitted from official histories and public discourse. This memory regime reinforces a state-centered nationalism that suppresses dissenting or revisionist perspectives. In contrast, Bangladesh constructs its national identity around the memory of the Liberation War as a righteous struggle for self-determination, where

acknowledgment of genocide, collective trauma, and the role of women is central to its postcolonial identity. These opposing commemorative frameworks not only define how each nation interprets its history but also influence their political cultures, public consciousness, and the boundaries of potential reconciliation today.

In my research, I have chosen to use the term "genocide" to describe the atrocities committed during the 1971 Liberation War. This designation aligns with Part Two of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court ("ICC"), which defines genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group," including killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting destructive conditions of life, imposing measures to prevent births, and forcibly transferring children. The 1948 Genocide Convention similarly classified these acts as constituting genocide, adding that conspiracy to commit genocide, incitement, attempts, and complicity are all punishable offenses.

Extensive documentation reveals the systematic nature of atrocities specifically targeting the Bengali population.[10] This genocide was fundamentally rooted in the West Pakistani elite's sense of superiority and contempt toward East Pakistanis. Military commanders explicitly sought to destroy Bengali identity, implementing a deliberate strategy of annihilation.[11] The Pakistani army carefully compiled lists of targets, particularly intellectuals and nationalist leaders perceived as threats to their control.[12] Furthermore, sexual violence was weaponized as a primary

[10] Tanweer Akram, "A Critical Evaluation of the International Commission of Jurists′ Report on the Bangladeshi Genocide," n.d.
[11] Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists, *The Events in East Pakistan*, 1971: A Legal Study (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 1972).
[12] Nusrat Jahan Nishat and Mohammad Pizuar Hossain, "1971 Killing of the 'Bengali' Intellectuals: An Analysis from the Perspective of the 1948 Genocide Convention," *Contemporary Challenges: The Global Crime, Justice and Security Journal* 3 (September 28, 2022): 4–27, https://doi.org/10.2218/ccj.v3.7075.

tool of genocide, intended to humiliate and subjugate the Bengali population.[13] These elements collectively demonstrate why "genocide" is both appropriate and necessary in accurately characterizing the events of 1971.

Furthermore, my research deliberately constrains its scope to exclude India from extensive analysis. Within South Asian historical discourse, Bangladesh's narrative has frequently been marginalized or subsumed under the dominant perspectives of its larger neighbors. Incorporating India would introduce competing interpretations that could potentially obscure my central focus on the Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship. India remains present in this exploration only where its involvement directly contextualizes key events and their regional implications, preserving the study's analytical clarity and purpose.

Research Questions

The central question driving this research is: How have attitudes toward Bangladesh and the 1971 genocide evolved within Pakistan across generations and institutions, and to what extent do these attitudes—particularly around issues like sexual violence, historical denial, and nationalist narratives—shape contemporary national identity and political relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh? To address this question, I adopt a multi-layered approach that piles together historical analysis, an examination of the 1971 genocide and its aftermath, and a mixed-methods study of contemporary perspectives within Pakistan and its diaspora. The methodology section further outlines the research design and analytical framework that guide this study.

My research framework is organized around distinct analytical dimensions with corresponding investigative sub-questions. The study first examines demographic patterns in

[13] Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, 1st Ballantine Books ed (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993).

Pakistani attitudes toward reconciliation with Bangladesh, analyzing how factors including age, education, regional affiliation, socioeconomic background, and political literacy influence these perspectives. This demographic analysis provides nuanced insights into the social underpinnings of bilateral relations.

The investigation then addresses historical memory and accountability by scrutinizing how Pakistan's collective consciousness has remembered, acknowledged, or suppressed the events of 1971. This section evaluates how the absence of formal acknowledgment or apology has shaped diplomatic relations between the two nations. The research subsequently explores the intersection of nationalism and identity formation, with particular attention to how sexual violence, cultural erasure, and other genocidal atrocities have influenced nationalist narratives in both countries. To complete this analysis, the study examines contemporary manifestations of the Pakistan-Bangladesh relationship and their implications for regional dynamics.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Bangladesh's birth through the crucible of the 1971 genocide stands among South Asia's most disputed historical breakpoints. Beyond mere academic disagreement, the competing interpretations of these events uncover profound tensions in national identity formation, collective trauma processing, and conceptions of historical responsibility. By examining the contrasting interpretive frameworks applied to the 1971 genocide, this literature review establishes critical context for analyzing contemporary Pakistani perspectives toward Bangladesh and the unresolved legacy of their violent separation.

The scholarship on 1971 can be broadly categorized into three main interpretive frameworks: (1) the liberation narrative, which emphasizes Bengali self-determination and Pakistani oppression; (2) the nationalist-defensive narrative, which minimizes Pakistani

responsibility while emphasizing external intervention; and (3) the critical-reconciliatory approach, which acknowledges the complexities of the genocide while advocating for historical accountability. By examining these competing frameworks, this review establishes the conceptual foundation for understanding contemporary Pakistani attitudes toward Bangladesh and the persistence of historical denial.

The Liberation Narrative

The liberation narrative, predominant in Bangladeshi scholarship and widely accepted in international academic circles, frames 1971 as a legitimate struggle for self-determination in response to systematic West Pakistani oppression. This perspective is exemplified in the works of scholars like Jagmohan Meher, who identifies six key variables that created a "psychological fissure" between East and West Pakistan, ultimately fueling Bengali nationalism.[14] The geographical absurdity of Pakistan's two wings being separated by over 1,000 miles of Indian territory created inherent vulnerabilities for East Pakistan and undermined national cohesion. Constitutional ambiguities and military takeovers further exacerbated disagreements over governance, while economic exploitation diverted resources from East to West Pakistan despite the East generating the majority of the country's export earnings.[15] This economic disparity was intensified by administrative discrimination, with West Pakistani bureaucrats dominating East Pakistan's governance.

West Pakistan's imposition of Urdu as Pakistan's only official language constituted an overwhelming grievance, particularly given that Bengali speakers comprised the majority of the nation's population.[16] The Bangla Language Movement, especially following the fatal

[14] Jagmohan Meher, "Dynamics of Pakistan's Disintegration: The Case of East Pakistan 1947-1971," *India Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (2015): 300–317, 300.
[15] Ibid, 310.
[16] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, Nachdr. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 89.

suppression of student demonstrations in 1952, created what scholars describe as a "sharp psychological rupture" that fueled Bengali nationalist sentiment. These linguistic tensions, as Kokab's research demonstrates, combined with systematic political exclusion to create deepening east-west divisions. This marginalization reached its breaking point when West Pakistani authorities refused to recognize East Pakistan's Awami League's overwhelming electoral victory in the 1970 general elections, despite their clear democratic mandate.[17]

The systematic political marginalization culminated in "Operation Searchlight," the military crackdown that initiated the genocide and ultimately fractured Pakistan. Following failed negotiations, President Yahya Khan banned the Awami League, imposed press censorship, and ordered the military to "restore the authority of the Government," claiming Bangladeshi politician, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his supporters were "enemies of Pakistan."[18] The operation's directives were brutally explicit: Major General Khadim Hussain Raja declared he would "kill all the traitors and, if necessary, raze Dacca to the ground."[19] Military forces implemented this strategy with devastating precision, targeting Dhaka University students, intellectuals, journalists, and Bengali Hindus. Contemporary accounts describe soldiers entering student dormitories and executing hundreds, filling mass graves across the region. While casualty estimates remain contested, ranging from the military's claim of 34,000 to Mujib's assertion of three million, scholarly consensus suggests at least one million deaths in less than nine months. This campaign represents what many scholars characterize as "collective repression" or state-sponsored genocide, evidenced through systematic targeting of Bengali cultural leaders, widespread sexual violence as a weapon of war, and indiscriminate civilian

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[17] Rizwan Ullah Kokab, *Separatism in East Pakistan: A Study of Failed Leadership*, First edition (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[18] Ahsan I. Butt, *Secession and Security: Explaining State Strategy against Separatists*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 20171115), 50.
[19] Ibid.

massacres, all documented in diplomatic communications, international media reports, and subsequent human rights investigations.[20] This framing places moral responsibility squarely on the Pakistani state and military while celebrating Bengali resistance as a legitimate struggle for liberation.

The Nationalist-Defensive Narrative

Countering the liberation narrative, a nationalist-defensive interpretive agenda has developed primarily within Pakistan's official channels and certain academic circles. This alternative perspective, illustrated by scholars like Dr. Junaid Ahmed, rejects claims of deliberate oppression and genocidal intent. Instead, it redirects focus toward Indian military interference and purported internal subversion, constructing a narrative of external aggression against Pakistani sovereignty rather than acknowledging systematic violence against Bengali civilians. [21]

Dr. Ahmed's work, supported by Pakistan's National Defence University, challenges the notion that East Pakistan was economically exploited, arguing instead that economic disparities were a historical legacy that could not be quickly rectified. He credits West Pakistani investments with spurring industrial and infrastructural development in East Pakistan, citing examples such as the jute industry, the Chittagong Port, and natural gas exploration.[22] He also claims that the central government prioritized East Pakistan's development through initiatives like the Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC) and other institutional efforts.[23] However, it is crucial to note that even after the creation of the PIDC in 1952, discriminatory policies favoring West Pakistan persisted.[24] These policies deliberately drained resources from East Pakistan and

[20] Ahsan I. Butt, *Secession and Security: Explaining State Strategy against Separatists*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 20171115), 51.
[21] Junaid Ahmad, *Creation of Bangladesh: Myths Exploded* (Karachi: AJA Publishers, 2016).
[22] Ibid, 14-16.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Jafar Ahmed Chowdhury, "Privatization in Bangladesh," No. 92 (The Institute of Social Studies, 1990), https://repub.eur.nl/pub/18913/wp92.pdf.

stifled its industrial progress. While some industrial development occurred, the benefits largely bypassed local Bengali entrepreneurs. Furthermore, by the 1970s, 92% of industrial assets in the modern industrial sector were owned by the government.[25] This substantial government control, rather than private sector ownership, was unevenly distributed across Pakistan, disproportionately benefiting West Pakistan. Non-Bengalis dominated the entrepreneurial landscape in East Pakistan, leaving little room for local capital to flourish.[26] Additionally, the central government maintained control over product pricing to such an extent that goods manufactured in East Pakistan were sold at higher prices locally than in West Pakistan, further perpetuating economic inequities.[27]

Similarly, Dr. Ahmed characterizes language policies not as cultural imposition but as attempts at national unification. [28] His argument that the imposition of Urdu as the national language served as a unifying force ignores the realities of the Bangla Language Movement, including the deaths of student protesters in 1952, which frankly prove the cultural and linguistic divide between East and West Pakistan.[29] By dismissing these grievances, Dr. Ahmed overlooks the entrenched economic, political, and cultural oppression that catalyzed Bengali nationalism. Furthermore, his characterization of the Bangladesh Forces, Mukti Bahini as mere Indian proxies undermines the grassroots nature of the Bengali liberation movement and erases the agency of those who fought for independence.[30] This framing reduces the legitimacy of the Bengali struggle to external manipulation, effectively diminishing its significance as a genuine and widespread fight for self-determination.

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[25] Jafar Ahmed Chowdhury, “Privatization in Bangladesh,” No. 92 (The Institute of Social Studies, 1990), https://repub.eur.nl/pub/18913/wp92.pdf, 2-3.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, 4.
[28] Ibid, 12.
[29] Junaid Ahmad, *Creation of Bangladesh: Myths Exploded* (Karachi: AJA Publishers, 2016), 11.
[30] Ibid, 12.

The nationalist-defensive framework minimizes or outright denies Pakistani military atrocities during Operation Searchlight and the subsequent genocide. Dr. Ahmed explicitly rejects the three million casualty figure often cited for the genocide without providing a credible alternative based on empirical evidence. His dismissal of well-documented atrocities and systemic grievances starkly contrasts with the consensus among respected historians, including Yasmin Saikia and Archer Blood, who have thoroughly documented the exploitation of East Pakistan and the atrocities committed during the genocide.[31] Additionally, Dr. Ahmed's minimization of the genocide disregards its recognition as such by international observers and organizations.

This revisionist approach relies heavily on sources like Sarmila Bose and Qutubuddin Aziz, whose methodologies have been widely criticized for their lack of rigor and inherent biases. By shifting blame onto India, the Mukti Bahini, and Bengali leadership, this framework absolves the Pakistani state and military of primary responsibility for the genocide and its humanitarian consequences. It frames 1971 not as a legitimate struggle for self-determination but as a national tragedy induced by external manipulation and internal betrayal.

The Critical-Reconciliatory Approach

Between these polarized narratives emerges a third framework that might be termed critical-reconciliatory. This approach, represented by scholars like Yasmin Saikia, Nayanika Mookherjee, and Srinath Raghavan, acknowledges the undeniable oppression that catalyzed Bengali nationalism while also recognizing the genocide's complexities, including the roles of multiple actors and the cultural-historical context in which the violence occurred.

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[31] Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394280.

Saikia's work on gendered violence during 1971 exemplifies this approach, documenting in detail the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war by Pakistani forces. This violence was used to dehumanize women for the potential for propaganda and geopolitical calculations that facilitated the atrocities committed by the Pakistani military. Along with Saikia, I believe that the experiences of women during the genocide in Bangladesh lead to the stark realization that victimizing women from the opposing community, such as Bengali women targeted by the Pakistani army and local collaborators, was deemed a legitimate form of violence within the patriarchal framework of South Asian society.[32] Similarly, Mookherjee examines how the memory of wartime sexual violence has been alternatively mobilized and silenced in Bangladeshi national discourse, revealing complexities in how historical trauma is processed even within liberation narratives.[33]

Raghavan's comprehensive account breaks with traditional subcontinental historiography by positioning the 1971 genocide within its critical global context. While acknowledging Pakistani military atrocities, Raghavan challenges the "insularity and determinism" that characterizes existing scholarship, which has predominantly viewed these events through nationalist frameworks.[34] His work illuminates how Cold War rivalries and superpower interests fundamentally shaped the genocide's trajectory, with Soviet, American, and Chinese strategic calculations directly influencing both humanitarian interventions and military operations.[35] By examining recently declassified diplomatic archives and international sources, Raghavan demonstrates how the genocide represented not merely a regional crisis but a pivotal moment in

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[32] Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394280.
[33] Nayanika Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822375227, 16.
[34] Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 5.
[35] Ibid, 3.

global politics where humanitarian concerns intersected with realpolitik calculations across capitals from Washington to Moscow.

The critical-reconciliatory framework maintains that acknowledging these complexities need not diminish the moral imperative for historical accountability. Rather, it suggests that genuine reconciliation requires moving beyond simplistic nationalist narratives on all sides toward a more nuanced understanding that nevertheless does not equivocate on matters of human rights and accountability. This approach recognizes that meaningful resolution demands acknowledging the erratic political contexts while refusing to relativize grave human rights violations. By embracing this dual commitment to historical complexity and moral responsibility, societies can construct pathways toward reconciliation that neither erase painful truths nor perpetuate cycles of antagonism through selective memory.

Memory Politics and Identity Formation

In the shadow of genocidal violence, another battle quietly rages on, the war over who controls the narrative. An interesting and recurring concept that emerged throughout my findings was the politics of memory and nationalism. This is not a reality that is exclusive to Pakistan, but this notion captures the idea that memory is not a passive recollection of the past but an active, interpretive, and often contested tool used to serve nationalist and political agendas. Since the nineteenth century, leaders and thinkers have understood a powerful truth: nations are built not just from territories and governments, but from shared stories. These collective memories, often carefully crafted or reimagined, transform diverse populations into unified peoples who see themselves as part of a continuous historical narrative. By establishing common traditions and treating the nation as a living, historical entity with its own character and destiny, these shared stories become the invisible foundations upon which national identity is created.

My research reveals that national memory formation involves what Olick describes as both selective remembrance and calculated forgetting, a dialectical process where "mnemonic entrepreneurs" strategically elevate certain narratives while systematically excluding alternatives that challenge preferred historical accounts.[36] These memory entrepreneurs, including state officials, educational institutions, media outlets, and political leaders, construct what Pierre Nora terms "sites of memory" that anchor national identity in particular interpretations of the past.[37] Nationalist discourses often rely on representations of a heroic past or shared suffering to create a positive self-image, but even historical defeats can be repurposed as sources of national strength through heroic reinterpretation.

In Pakistan's case, this manifests as institutional amnesia regarding 1971. Official narratives have largely excised the atrocities committed in East Pakistan from public consciousness through multiple mechanisms: educational curricula that minimize coverage of this period; media representations that emphasize Indian interference rather than Bengali grievances; and commemorative practices that frame the separation as a "family tragedy" rather than a consequence of systematic oppression. Military memoirs consistently downplay violence while emphasizing the narrative of external conspiracy, transforming the military's role from perpetrator to victim. This strategic silence preserves particular conceptions of Pakistani nationhood centered on Islamic unity and territorial integrity while avoiding uncomfortable questions of historical responsibility.

The institutional architecture supporting this selective remembrance extends beyond formal education into popular culture, where films, literature, and public discourse reproduce

[36] Jeffrey K. Olick, "Introduction: Memory and the Nation: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations," *Social Science History* 22, no. 4 (1998): 377, https://doi.org/10.2307/1171569, 379.
[37] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (April 1, 1989): 7–24, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520, 23.

narratives that displace responsibility onto external actors. Recent cultural productions like the 2021 film *Khel Khel Mein* and television series *Jo Bichar Gaye*, seemingly created to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence, ultimately reinforce Pakistan's official narrative rather than challenging it. Despite their purported interest in "truth-seeking," these productions illustrate what Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik identify as coordinated efforts by "mnemonic warriors" who advance exclusive versions of history that delegitimize alternative interpretations.[38]

These films perform a sleight of hand with history, erasing Bengali suffering while magnifying violence against Urdu-speaking communities. Their stories transform freedom fighters into either villains or India's "puppets," stripping the liberation movement of its political legitimacy. By reshaping 1971 into a tale of Indian duplicity rather than Bengali resistance, they sanitize Pakistan's responsibility while reinforcing comfortable national myths. The camera becomes yet another tool for selective remembrance, showing audiences only what aligns with established narratives while keeping painful truths conveniently out of frame. As seen in *Jo Bichar Gaye*, even military operations like Operation Searchlight are justified as necessary protective measures, with armed forces portrayed as reluctant heroes rather than perpetrators of violence. These narrative strategies demonstrate how even superficially creative or commemorative works serve as extensions of state memory politics, reinforcing what is "utterable" while maintaining silence around uncomfortable historical realities.

In Pakistan, this warrior approach to memory has significantly limited opportunities for public reconciliation with this historical chapter. Instead of fostering genuine introspection, cultural products function as sophisticated vehicles for established narratives that, as Pakistani

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[38] Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard, "A Theory of the Politics of Memory," in *Twenty Years After Communism*, ed. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–34, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199375134.003.0002.

writer Anam Zakaria observes, create an environment where "1971 is both too recent to be forgotten and too painful to be remembered," occupying "the liminal space between this desire to forget and the compulsion to remember."[39] Bangladesh, conversely, has constructed its entire national identity around the Liberation War, embedding 1971 into the physical landscape through museums, monuments, and commemorative rituals. The Muktijuddho Jadughor (Liberation War Museum) in Dhaka, state-sponsored memorial sites, and the annual observance of Genocide Day (March 25) and Victory Day (December 16) serve as what James Young terms "collected memory," physical manifestations that institutionalize particular interpretations of the past.[40] Yet even this memorialization remains politically contested, with competing factions, particularly the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), mobilizing selective aspects of the liberation narrative to bolster their own legitimacy while undermining opponents.

These contrasting approaches illustrate Aleida Assmann's observation that national memory can absorb both pride and humiliation, provided that the framing supports a cohesive and valorized national story. However, dealing with a "dark past" such as state-led atrocities presents a challenge, and political elites often engage in "foot-dragging" or denial when these events threaten national legitimacy.[41] The politics of memory is thus characterized by conflict and symbolic struggle, where different groups compete to inscribe their versions of the past onto national consciousness. Societies often resort to what Stanley Cohen identifies as "states of denial," institutional mechanisms that obscure historical truths through literal denial (it never

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[39] Anam Zakaria, *1971: A People's History From Bangladesh, Pakistan and India* (Haryana, India: Vintage, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2019).
[40] James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meanings* . New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993. Xvii + 398 Pp.," in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry: XI: Values, Interests, and Identity*, ed. Peter Y. Medding, 1st ed. (Oxford University PressNew York, 1996), 248–49, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195103311.003.0028.
[41] Aleida Assmann, "Canon and Archive," in *Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara B. Young (Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 97–108, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262.2.97.

happened), interpretive denial (it happened but was not genocide), or implicatory denial (it happened but was not our responsibility).[42]

In Pakistan, these denial mechanisms operate through an officially sanctioned erasure deemed necessary for national cohesion and future-oriented identity. This selective remembering serves immediate political needs but, as my research demonstrates, undermines long-term reconciliation possibilities by ensuring that successive generations lack the historical knowledge necessary for meaningful accountability. The ongoing contestation over 1971's memory confirms Larry Ray's observation that violent historical episodes generate particularly intense memory politics, as the trauma remains unresolved within the national consciousness.[43] The absence of formal truth-telling mechanisms, reparations processes, or institutional accountability has allowed competing narratives to crystallize into mutually exclusive frameworks that perpetuate regional tensions rather than facilitating healing. As my findings suggest, acknowledging this politics of memory is essential for any meaningful reconciliation process, as it exposes how national narratives serve contemporary political interests rather than historical truth.

Methodological Considerations and Scholarly Debates

Beyond the competing interpretative frameworks, the literature on 1971 reflects significant methodological debates that inform how evidence is gathered, evaluated, and presented. These methodological considerations directly impact how the events are characterized and understood.

The question of terminology, whether to describe the events as civil war, genocide, mass atrocity, or liberation war, remains contested. International legal scholars like Rudolph Rummel

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[42] Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge, UK : Malden, MA: Polity ; Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

[43] Larry Ray, "Memory, Trauma and Genocidal Nationalism," *Sociological Research Online* 4, no. 2 (July 1999): 125–32, https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.257.

cut through the fog of euphemisms to name what happened in 1971 for what it was: democide, the deliberate killing of a population by its own government. Rummel's unflinching analysis strips away convenient excuses of "wartime excesses" or "collateral damage," revealing instead a calculated campaign where the Pakistani state turned its military might against its own citizens.[44] While others like A. Dirk Moses have placed 1971 on the dark map of global genocides, refusing to let Bangladesh's tragedy remain an overlooked footnote in history's bloodiest chapters. Moses cuts against the grain of Western-centric genocide studies by insisting that what happened in East Pakistan deserves equal scholarly attention alongside Rwanda, Cambodia, and the Holocaust. His comparative approach forces us to reckon with uncomfortable questions: *Why do some mass atrocities capture global consciousness while others fade into historical shadows?* By positioning 1971 within this broader framework, Moses challenges the hierarchy of human suffering that often privileges European and American narratives while marginalizing violence in the global South, even when that violence claimed millions of lives.[45] These terminological debates reflect not merely semantic differences but fundamental disagreements about the nature, intent, and context of the violence.

Similarly, casualty figures remain highly disputed. The commonly cited figure of three million deaths, originally stated by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and subsequently adopted in Bangladeshi discourse, has been questioned by some scholars as lacking methodological rigor. Sarmila Bose's controversial work *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* represents perhaps the most contentious challenge to these numbers, claiming dramatically lower casualty figures and a more balanced distribution of violence. Her research has been embraced

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[44] Rummel, Rudolph J. "Power, Genocide and Mass Murder." *Journal of Peace Research* 31, no. 1 (1994): 1–10. http://www.jstor.org/stable/425578.

[45] A. Dirk Moses, "The United Nations, Humanitarianism, and Human Rights: War Crimes/Genocide Trials for Pakistani Soldiers in Bangladesh, 1971-1974," in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 258–80, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511921667.017.

by those seeking to minimize Pakistani accountability while provoking fierce criticism from Bangladeshi scholars and survivors who view it as historical revisionism that erases lived experiences of systematic violence.[46] The battle over body counts reveals that victims become statistics to be manipulated, with human suffering reduced to numerical arguments where adjusting a decimal point can seemingly absolve or condemn an entire nation. These competing narratives of scale showcase how even those who have perished cannot rest in peace but are continuously exhumed to fight ideological battles in the present.

The documentation and interpretation of sexual violence during 1971 present particular methodological challenges. While contemporary reports from journalists, diplomats, and medical professionals established that rape was widespread and systematic, precise documentation remains difficult due to stigma, under-reporting, and the destruction of records.[47] The bodies of women became another battlefield where national narratives waged war, first through systematic sexual violence and then through the politics of memory surrounding these atrocities.

Feminist scholars like Bina D'Costa and Nayanika Mookherjee have pierced through layers of silence, developing research approaches that combine fragmented archives with survivors' testimonies. Their work reveals the staggering scale of sexual violence, with estimates of 200,000 Bengali women raped by Pakistani forces and local collaborators, while interrogating how survivors were subsequently treated. Mookherjee's research exposes a painful paradox: while Bangladesh officially designated these women as birangona (war heroines), society often reimagined them as "traitors" and "prostitutes" through what she terms "constitutive performativity," the repeated, stylized portrayal that naturalized this contradictory status.[48]

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[46] Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (London: C. Hurst, 2011).
[47] Ibid.
[48] Nayanika Mookherjee, "Imaging 'Traitors': The Raped Woman and Sexual Violence during the Bangladesh War of 1971," in *Narratives of Mass Atrocity*, ed. Sarah Federman and Ronald Niezen, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 222–46, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009110693.010.

This brutal transformation illustrates how victimhood itself became contested territory. The newly formed Bangladeshi state established rehabilitation programs offering abortions, international adoption services, marriage assistance, and employment opportunities, interventions that simultaneously acknowledged suffering while reinforcing the notion that these women were permanently altered, marked by enemy contact. D'Costa walks the razor's edge between historical recovery and ethical responsibility, understanding that each interview reopens wounds while fighting against historical erasure.[49] Together, these scholars reveal how women's experiences exist in the shadows of conventional histories, too horrific to forget yet too uncomfortable to fully acknowledge, with survivors transformed first into symbols of national shame and later into icons of state recognition, their trauma converted into political currency exchanged between competing nationalist narratives.

These methodological debates directly inform how contemporary attitudes are studied and interpreted. Research on historical memory and attitudes toward past atrocities must navigate these contested terrains while developing rigorous approaches that acknowledge both the factual basis of historical events and the subjective dimensions of how they are remembered and interpreted.

[49] Bina D'Costa, *Nationbuilding, Gender, and War Crimes in South Asia*, Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series, v. 29 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011).

Methodology and Thesis Structure

This review of competing narratives and scholarly approaches provides the conceptual framework for understanding contemporary Pakistani attitudes toward the 1971 Bangladesh genocide. My research examines how these competing historical interpretations manifest in contemporary Pakistani consciousness, investigating whether and how dominant nationalist narratives are reinforced or challenged across generations, educational contexts, and regional identities. Drawing on memory studies and transitional justice literature, this research conceptualizes attitudes toward historical atrocities not as fixed positions but as dynamic engagements influenced by multiple factors. These include family narratives, educational experiences, media exposure, political affiliations, and generational positioning. By examining how contemporary Pakistanis navigate the contested terrain of 1971, the study contributes to broader scholarly conversations about historical memory, national identity, and the possibilities for reconciliation in post-conflict contexts.

This conceptual approach posits that genuine reconciliation between Pakistan and Bangladesh requires moving beyond binary oppositions between nationalist denial and demands for unqualified acknowledgment. Instead, it suggests creating space for critical engagement with historical complexity, while maintaining clarity about accountability for human rights violations. By peering into how diverse Pakistani communities engage with this contested history, my research maps the potential emergence of counter-memories. This generational investigation examines whether historical consciousness is shifting as young Pakistanis encounter narratives that challenge official accounts through family, international education, and diaspora connections. The findings suggest fault lines forming in the monolithic national narrative, with some younger Pakistanis questioning inherited frameworks and seeking more nuanced

understandings of 1971. By tracing how historical knowledge travels between, I explore whether these emerging cracks in collective memory might create pathways toward the acknowledgment that Bangladesh has long sought. These evolving perspectives potentially represent not just changing historical views but the seeds of reconciliation that neither erases the past nor remains perpetually captive to it.

The literature on 1971 reveals not merely factual disagreements but fundamentally different frameworks for understanding national identity, historical accountability, and moral responsibility. These competing narratives continue to shape how Pakistanis and Bengalis relate to their shared past and to each other in the present. While nationalist frameworks on both sides have often reduced complex historical realities to simplified narratives that serve present political needs, emerging scholarship offers possibilities for more nuanced engagement that neither denies accountability nor reduces historical actors to one-dimensional villains or heroes. By situating the present research within these competing frameworks, this study contributes to broader scholarly conversations about how societies address difficult pasts and the relationship between historical memory, national identity, and possibilities for reconciliation. It suggests that examining contemporary attitudes provides a window not merely into how the past is remembered but into how future relationships between Pakistan and Bangladesh might be reimagined on foundations of greater historical honesty and mutual respect.

Research Approach

This thesis employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate how Pakistani attitudes toward the 1971 Bangladesh genocide have evolved across generations and institutions, and how these attitudes shape contemporary national identity and political relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh. The study is guided by a conceptual framework that examines competing narratives

of 1971 and the politics of memory in shaping national identity, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive analysis of historical consciousness in Pakistan.

The research addresses a critical gap in the literature by focusing on Pakistani perspectives rather than the more extensively documented Bangladeshi viewpoints. As a Pakistani-American scholar, I am uniquely positioned to explore how different demographic groups within Pakistan engage with this contested history, examining the intersection of family memory, educational experiences, civil society discourse, and state narratives in shaping historical understanding. By focusing on generational, educational, and regional variations in historical awareness and attitudes toward reconciliation, this study provides insight into both the persistence of historical denial and the emergence of more critical historical engagement among younger Pakistanis.

Mixed-Methods Design

My research brings together stories and statistics to create a textured map of how Pakistanis across different walks of life remember, or forget, the events of 1971. I distributed digital surveys to 159 Pakistanis both in the diaspora and scattered across the globe, gathering not just demographic details but deeper insights into their feelings about Bangladesh, their understanding of the genocide, and their appetite for reconciliation. These numbers tell part of the story. They reveal which groups support an official apology, how awareness varies across generations, and where people learned what they know about this contested history.

But numbers alone can not capture the complexity of historical memory. To breathe life into these statistics, I conducted in-depth conversations with a diverse assortment of voices, including, elderly Pakistanis who lived through the war, young people who learned about it

through social media, military veterans with their own perspectives, academics who study the period, and those with familial connections to Bangladesh. These conversations revealed how history flows through families, classrooms, and social circles, sometimes as a trickle, sometimes as a flood, but always shaped by the channels it passes through. By bringing together statistical patterns with personal narratives, the research reveals not just what Pakistanis think about 1971, but why they think it, how regional identities color historical understanding, how educational backgrounds shape willingness to question official narratives, and how generational distance from the events creates both challenges and opportunities for reconciliation. Throughout this process, I maintained rigorous ethical standards, particularly important given the politically charged nature of these conversations, where questioning dominant narratives can still raise eyebrows or worse. The result is a multidimensional portrait of collective memory in flux, with implications for how two nations might eventually bridge the gaps in their shared but separately remembered history.

Architecture of the Research

This thesis examines how Pakistani attitudes toward the 1971 Bangladesh genocide are shaped by various institutional domains and demographic factors. This investigation unfolds across seven interconnected chapters that progressively build a nuanced understanding of contested historical memory.

I begin with essential historical context by tracing Bangladesh's complex journey through subjugation across different eras. From Mughal rule through British colonialism to West Pakistani domination, the story unfolds. Rather than viewing 1971 through a deterministic lens, I analyze specific political, economic, and cultural factors that created conditions for Bengali nationalism. The geographical division of Pakistan created insurmountable challenges.

Constitutional ambiguities left power imbalanced. Economic exploitation drained resources eastward. Cultural marginalization attacked Bengali identity at its core. Together, these forces established systemic inequalities between East and West Pakistan that frame contemporary attitudes toward this difficult history. This historical foundation guides my mixed-methods research design. I combine quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to capture both statistical patterns and personal narratives. The integration of 159 survey responses with in-depth conversations creates a holistic approach. Participants represent diverse perspectives across generations, regions, and educational backgrounds. Their collective voices reveal how Pakistanis understand or misunderstand this pivotal historical moment.

The investigation then moves to the intimate sphere of family transmission. Here I discover significant generational differences in historical awareness and reconciliation attitudes. Younger Pakistanis aged 18-29 show notably greater willingness to acknowledge historical wrongdoing. Many support an official apology, suggesting potential generational shifts in historical consciousness. Family case studies illustrate how personal and political narratives intersect with silence characterizing many family discussions more than open conversation. This proves especially true regarding sensitive aspects like sexual violence. These family silences find institutional parallels in Pakistan's educational system. Survey data reveal that only 21.5% of respondents who lived in Pakistan received any formal education about the "Liberation War." This educational erasure varies significantly across different school systems. Higher education and international curricula correlate with greater historical awareness. They also foster more reconciliatory attitudes. Alternative pathways to historical knowledge have emerged alongside formal education. Diaspora education introduces perspectives absent from domestic curricula, providing counter-narratives to official silence.

Beyond family and education, Pakistani civil society plays a complex role in either reinforcing or challenging dominant narratives about 1971. While mainstream media has largely echoed state positions, digital platforms increasingly enable alternative historical perspectives, particularly among younger generations. The work of Pakistani intellectuals and activists who have challenged official narratives represents important counter-currents in an otherwise restricted discursive landscape, where religious institutions have typically avoided meaningful engagement with this difficult history. These societal patterns exist within the context of evolving state narratives, which have shifted from initial denial and defiance (1971-1974) through limited acknowledgment (1974-1990) to tentative diplomatic gestures accompanied by persistent domestic silence (1990-present). This pattern of strategic ambiguity facilitates necessary diplomatic relations while avoiding full accountability. Regional variations in attitudes toward an official apology and awareness of specific atrocities demonstrate how state influence operates unevenly across Pakistan's diverse geography, further complicated by international factors that continue to shape prospects for reconciliation.

My research culminates by identifying three distinct generational narratives about 1971. The nationalist-defensive perspective dominates among 40-49 and 60+ cohorts. Transitional-ambivalent views characterize the 50-59 cohort. Critical-reconstructive approaches emerge primarily among 18-29 and 30-39 cohorts. These emerging patterns, particularly the significantly greater support for historical acknowledgment among younger Pakistanis, suggest potential pathways toward reconciliation through educational reforms, digital engagement, and targeted diplomatic initiatives that might eventually bridge the narrative divides between two nations still haunted by their shared but separately remembered past.

Significance and Contribution

This research tears open the curtains on a history Pakistan has long kept buried away. Through conversations spanning generations and classrooms, I've captured a shifting landscape of memory where younger voices increasingly question the stories their grandparents accepted as gospel. My findings reveal cracks in the wall of silence, not demolition, but hairline fractures that might one day widen. The investigation moves beyond simplistic questions of whether Pakistanis “know” about 1971, instead mapping how different institutional forces shape understanding. Family dinner tables fall silent when certain topics arise. Textbooks skip uncomfortable chapters. Media outlets reinforce comfortable narratives. Yet alternative spaces are emerging.

As a Pakistani-American researcher straddling multiple identities, I occupy a unique vantage point in a conversation too often segregated by national borders. Most scholarship has amplified Bangladeshi experiences, crucial voices that must be centered, while Pakistani perspectives remain either defensively nationalist or conspicuously absent. By turning the lens inward on Pakistani society while maintaining commitment to historical truth, I bridge divides that have kept these scholarly conversations in separate rooms. My research ultimately elucidates pathways toward a future where acknowledgment might replace amnesia. Educational reforms, civil society engagement, and diplomatic initiatives each offer potential stepping stones across troubled waters. By documenting both entrenched denial and emerging spaces for critical reflection, I've created a map not just of where Pakistani historical consciousness stands today, but where reconciliation efforts might most effectively navigate tomorrow.

Chapter One: Historical Context and the Road to 1971

The struggle for Bengali rights began soon after Pakistan's independence, as the newly created nation was divided into two distinct territories: West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). Tensions arose due to the refusal to recognize Bengali as a state language, economic disparities, West Pakistani dominance, the imposition of martial laws, and the cultural marginalization of Bengalis.[50] These tensions reached a breaking point in December 1970 when the Awami League, the leading political party in East Pakistan, secured a decisive victory in national elections, only to face resistance from West Pakistani parties that withheld power.[51] Strains between Bengalis and Biharis (Urdu-speaking citizens of Bangladesh) further escalated into violence. In March 1971, the Pakistan Army launched military operations, recruiting local collaborators to suppress Bengali resistance.[52] This led to widespread atrocities, a mass refugee exodus into India, and eventual Indian military intervention in December 1971. The nine-month conflict ended with the Pakistani army's surrender on December 16, 1971. Estimates of the death toll range from 300,000 to 3 million, and hundreds of thousands of women were victims of sexual violence.[53]

However, this is only one side of the story. While Bangladesh has institutionalized the memory of 1971 as a foundational moment of national liberation, in Pakistan, the same events are remembered, if at all, through a divided and often muted lens. The absence of formal acknowledgment, paired with state-driven narratives that minimize or obscure the genocide, has fostered a collective amnesia. This discrepancy in historical memory not only shapes contrasting

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[50] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 65.
[51] Ibid, 79.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Nayanika Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822375227, 16.

national identities but also fuels ongoing political and cultural disconnect between the two nations.

The glaring dissonance between competing narratives of 1971 continues to provoke confusion, discomfort, and denial—revealing not just historical disagreement, but a deeper struggle over memory, meaning, and accountability. When I first encountered these conflicting historical accounts, I felt a deep sense of guilt, grappling with the internal conflict they stirred. How does one even begin to address a century-old rivalry? Where does one pinpoint the exact origins of such a profound divide? To maintain focus, I chose to largely exclude India from my analysis, narrowing my scope to the two regions that emerged as outcomes of an independent India. While it is tempting to trace these tensions back to the Mughal period in Bengal, I believe the crux of the contention between Pakistan (then West Pakistan) and Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) is best analyzed in the aftermath of the partitioner's knife slicing through three provinces in 1947, though the prejudice that fueled this divide stretches much further back. On August 14, 1947, British rule finally ended, but the subcontinent remained decades away from finding even a semblance of reconciliation.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how historical grievances laid the groundwork for nationalist identity formation and eventual independence. This analysis provides the foundational basis for my research and serves as a lens through which to understand how this period continues to inform contemporary political relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan. The chapter is organized into four sections, beginning with a historical examination of Bengal's history, an analysis of the suppression that has been infused into the region's past. The first section will be followed by Pakistan's two-winged struggle (1947-1971), where I explore the challenges of integrating a state divided by distinct cultures, languages, and political expectations. Next, I

delve into the growing contention in East Bengal, focusing on the language movement, cultural nationalism, economic disparity, and rising political consciousness. Building on this, I examine the discriminatory governance, economic exploitation, and cultural suppression that framed Bengali identity as inferior.

As the timeline approaches 1971, I analyze the Yahya Khan regime, including the imposition of martial law, political oppression, and the stifling of dissent, while also examining Ayub Khan's earlier role in exacerbating tensions between East and West Pakistan. This analysis sets the stage for the events that ultimately led to the 1971 genocide, culminating in Bangladesh's independence. I explore how international actors shaped Bangladesh's path to sovereignty and conclude this chapter with an in-depth examination of the genocide and armed conflict. This includes the role of the Pakistani Army as the primary perpetrator, the systematic targeting of specific groups, particularly intellectuals and political leaders, under Operation Searchlight, and the use of sexual violence as a tool of dehumanization. Finally, I address the lack of accountability and justice in the post-war years, highlighting the culture of impunity reinforced by amnesty deals and political inaction.

Subjugation in Bengal's History

The marginalization of Bengali Muslims predates the anti-colonial movement against British rule, as their ethnic and cultural identity was long overlooked within broader nationalist frameworks. One useful lens for understanding this history is through the notion of Bengal as a region shaped by a series of shifting frontiers—political, agrarian, Islamic, and Sanskritic—that moved progressively from west to east between 1204 and 1760.[54] These overlapping frontiers influenced the region's distinctive trajectory, including the spread of Islam, the consolidation of

[54] Richard M Eaton, "The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760," *University of California Press*, 1993, 3.

political authority, and the transformation of the landscape through agrarian expansion. Revisiting these histories helps illuminate how national identities in South Asia were formed in response to these historical ruptures, and how their enduring memory continues to inform the contemporary dynamics explored in this study.

The political frontier in Bengal delineated the territories controlled by Turkish rulers and their successors, including the Bengal sultans and Mughal governors.[55] This frontier was defined by the minting of coins, the establishment of garrisons, and the systematic collection of revenue, each signifying the consolidation of the Muslim regime's authority.[56] Initially established in the northwest of the delta, Turkish power expanded into the revenue-rich southwest before pushing further into the eastern and southern delta, where the political and agrarian frontiers frequently intersected.[57] The agrarian frontier, on the other hand, demarcated settled agricultural land from the untamed forests and marshlands. Shaped by both natural and human forces, it reflected the dynamic movement of Bengal's rivers, which deposited fertile silt in the eastern delta while causing the northwestern delta to decay.[58] This natural transformation created opportunities for agriculture, but its realization required extensive human labor to clear forests and cultivate new land. In the eastern and southern delta, the political frontier often halted at the edge of forests, advancing only when the wilderness was converted into productive rice fields.[59]

The Islamic frontier in Bengal was both a territorial and mental construct, defining Muslim and non-Muslim communities while remaining porous and fluid. Eaton describes this frontier as shaped by the gradual incorporation of indigenous communities into a Muslim

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[55] Richard M Eaton, "The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760," *University of California Press*, 1993, 4.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

devotional life.[60] For the first few centuries following the Turkish invasion, the political and cultural frontiers remained geographically distinct, with the spread of Islam relying not solely on military force but also on social, economic, and cultural influences.[61] Meanwhile, the Sanskritic frontier was the oldest in the region, marked by the eastward expansion of Sanskritic civilization in the Bengal delta. This frontier manifested in two forms: an egalitarian agrarian society centered around Buddhist monastic institutions and a hierarchical society structured by Brahmanic social norms.[62] These historical dynamics fostered toxic perceptions in West Pakistan that Bengali Muslims were somehow deficient in two critical dimensions. They weren't just viewed as socially inferior but as fundamentally less authentic in their Islamic identity. This prejudice ran deep, transforming cultural differences into supposed moral and religious failings. West Pakistani elites portrayed Bengali cultural practices as Hindu-contaminated versions of “pure” Islam. [63] Their language, cuisine, clothing, and artistic traditions became evidence of their alleged spiritual corruption rather than expressions of rich cultural heritage. This bigotry was not merely personal prejudice but institutionalized discrimination that justified economic exploitation and political marginalization as the natural order of things. This bias stemmed from Bengal’s unique cultural syncretism, with its script, the Sanskritic vocabulary of its language, and the prominence of Hindus in the Bengali literary sphere standing in stark contrast to North Indian Islamic cultural norms.[64]

Professor Willem Van Schendel’s *A History of Bangladesh* serves as an essential and impartial foundational text for understanding the multipart history of Bangladesh. His analysis of

[60] Richard M Eaton, “The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760,” *University of California Press*, 1993, 5.
[61] Ibid, 4.
[62] Richard M Eaton, “The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760,” *University of California Press*, 1993, 5.
[63] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 92.
[64] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 81.

the region's trajectory, from the Mughal Empire to British colonial rule, provides rare context. The Battle of Polashi (Plassey, *palāsi*) in June 1757 marked a turning point, establishing the British East India Company as the new territorial overlord of Bengal.[65] In Indian nationalist histories, Polashi is often framed as a moment of profound humiliation, symbolizing the loss of sovereignty to foreign powers and the beginning of exploitative colonial rule. [66]According to this narrative, colonialism ended with the British departure in 1947, ushering in a new era of self-governance. However, Professor Van Schendel challenges this perspective when viewed through the lens of Bangladesh's history. He argues that Polashi's significance is less clear-cut for Bengalis, as the region had already endured a history of foreign domination.[67] The Mughal Empire had incorporated the Bengal delta into its purview in 1612, transforming it into one of the empire's most lucrative dependencies, heavily taxed and looted.[68] For Bengal's inhabitants, foreign-led venal administrations were already a familiar reality long before British rule.

From Bangladesh's historical viewpoint, colonial rule did not truly end in 1947. Instead, power shifted to a new form of domination under the Pakistani state, which was overwhelmingly controlled by West Pakistani interests. He contends that this neo-colonial relationship perpetuated exploitative governance, culminating in the 1971 genocide. This perspective is central to my research, as it reframes the history of Bangladesh's struggle for independence not only as a fight against European colonialism but also as a resistance to Pakistan's neo-colonial domination.

To fully understand the events leading up to 1971 and the brutalities inflicted by the Pakistani government and military, it is crucial to first examine the broader historical impact of

[65] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 46.
[66] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 49.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.

British rule in Bengal. Colonial legacies shaped the sociopolitical and economic fabric of Bengal, laying the groundwork for the tensions that culminated in the genocide of 1971. More than a land taxation system, the Permanent Settlement became the foundation of the colonial apparatus of control. It remained in effect until the 1950s and shaped the social and economic relations in Bengal to such a degree that contemporary Bangladesh cannot be understood without it.[69]

During this time, the eastern portion of the province, modern-day Bangladesh, was demoted to the status of an economic backwater. The roots of the 1971 genocide can be traced back to policies like the Permanent Settlement of 1793, introduced by Lord Cornwallis in Bengal and Bihar, which deepened existing inequalities and cemented the perception of eastern Bengal as a region inhabited largely by impoverished agrarian laborers.[70] This policy effectively turned tax collectors (*zamindars*) into *de facto* landowners, reducing farmers to tenant status. The system, designed to secure British revenue, contributed to the slower development of eastern Bengal, where agriculture played a far more central role compared to the western regions of the subcontinent.[71] The concentration of zamindars in the east, owning the land from which they collected taxes, entrenched economic disparities, and set the stage for the power imbalance that would later define the relationship between East and West Pakistan, culminating in the economic collapse that fueled Bengali discontent. In theory, this system was designed to transform zamindars into progressive landlords who would channel their growing wealth into agricultural innovation. The arrangement seemed poised to create a mutually beneficial dynamic: fixed taxes

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[69] Craig Baxter and Syedur Rahman, *Historical Dictionary of Bangladesh*, 2. ed, Asian Historical Dictionaries 2 (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 4.
[70] Craig Baxter and Syedur Rahman, *Historical Dictionary of Bangladesh*, 2. ed, Asian Historical Dictionaries 2 (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 4.
[71] Ibid, 4.

would leave zamindars with increasing surpluses as land productivity and produce prices rose, fostering rural development.[72]

However, the reality diverged sharply from British expectations. Instead of reinvesting in agriculture, zamindars embraced a rentier lifestyle, delegating their tax-collecting duties to intermediaries.[73] This pattern cascaded through Bengal's rural hierarchy, with each tier replicating the zamindars' approach, passing responsibilities down the chain. The result was a system of sub-infeudation, known as pottonidari (*pattanidāri)*, which entrenched a rigid social hierarchy dominated by an expansive leisured class.[74] This system transformed Bengal's agrarian economy into a deeply stratified structure, with wealth concentrated in the hands of an idle elite while the burdens of production and taxation were borne by those at the bottom.

The Permanent Settlement entrenched systemic inequality by stripping the peasantry of property rights, reserving landownership exclusively for zamindars.[75] Over time, many zamindars distanced themselves from their estates, becoming absentee landlords and relocating to Calcutta (now Kolkata) to participate in the city's burgeoning development.[76] This departure left rural eastern Bengal starved of investment and progress, undermining promises of agricultural growth and prosperity. While colonial Kolkata thrived as the capital of British India until 1911, industrial hubs in eastern Bengal, such as Dhaka, fell into decline, festering in the shadow of urban expansion elsewhere.[77]

Baxter and Rahman delve further into Bengal's marginalization during British rule, focusing on the British Indian Army's discriminatory recruitment policies. Divided into the

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[72] Craig Baxter and Syedur Rahman, *Historical Dictionary of Bangladesh*, 2. ed, Asian Historical Dictionaries 2 (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 4.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Craig Baxter and Syedur Rahman, *Historical Dictionary of Bangladesh*, 2. ed, Asian Historical Dictionaries 2 (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 6.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 47.

Bengal, Bombay, and Madras armies, the rank-and-file troops (*sepoys*) were Indian, while the officer class remained exclusively British.[78] After 1858, when the British Crown assumed direct control of India, the classification of "martial" and "non-martial" races became a cornerstone of military recruitment.[79] Despite Queen Victoria's proclamation of legal equality for all subjects, Bengalis were excluded, labeled as a "non-martial" race due to their association with the 1857 uprising.[80] Recruitment shifted northwest, favoring Sikhs and Punjabi Muslims, while Bengalis were systematically sidelined. After independence in 1947, East Pakistanis found themselves wrestling with similar exclusions, particularly in the military, where representation remained disproportionately skewed toward West Pakistan. Pakistan's continuation of British-era policies with minimal reform underscores the persistence of structural inequities, deepening the fault lines that would erupt in 1971.

In 1905, the British restructured Bengal's political and administrative landscape by dividing the vast province into 'Western Bengal' and 'Eastern Bengal'. Widely regarded as a calculated colonial strategy, this partition was perceived as an effort to undermine Bengal's increasing anti-colonial movement and implement the classic "divide and rule" policy to fracture the Bengali-speaking population.[81] This division brought in a transformative period of political activism across South Asia. Historian Tazeen M. Murshid argues that the partition highlighted the fragile nature of political solidarity between religious communities, solidifying "Muslims" and "Hindus" as distinct political categories that have played a prominent role in Bengal's political life ever since.[82]

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[78] Craig Baxter and Syedur Rahman, *Historical Dictionary of Bangladesh*, 2. ed, Asian Historical Dictionaries 2 (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 6.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 47.
[82] Tazeen M. Murshid, *The Sacred and the Secular: Bengal Muslim Discourses, 1871 - 1977* (Calcutta: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 18.

Muslims in Bengal had recently begun to self-consciously define themselves as a distinct community. Since the 1870s, the British had treated Muslims as a separate political community, fostering the development of political consciousness rooted in religious identity.[83] Until the late nineteenth century, the vast majority of Bengali Muslims adhered to a popular Islam deeply connected to the region's rural culture. In contrast, a much smaller but more influential group of Muslims oriented themselves toward an urban, upper-class culture. This group, identifying as aristocratic and of Arab, Persian, or Central Asian descent (*ashraf*), sought to emulate a North Indian model of Islamic culture and saw themselves as the custodians of authentic Islamic tradition in Bengal.[84] However, tensions persisted as this elite class often regarded rural Muslims, steeped in Bengali culture, with disdain. By the time the British decided to partition Bengal, the notion of a shared Muslim identity had firmly taken root, bolstered by the emergence of electoral politics. However, in 1911, the British annulled the 1905 division of Bengal and relocated the imperial capital from Kolkata to Delhi in northern India.[85] This shift diminished the influence of Bengal's politicians, reducing their scope of power from a national to a regional stage.

Partition and the Two Winged Struggle

The final decades of colonial rule in Bengal witnessed a complex struggle between those resisting communal politics and those promoting it. Among the former were all-India nationalists, Bengal nationalists, socialists, and communists.[86] The latter included Hindu and Muslim chauvinists, as well as individuals who believed the economic emancipation of Bengal's Muslims could best be achieved through organizations dedicated to their interests.[87] The political

[83] Tazeen M. Murshid, *The Sacred and the Secular: Bengal Muslim Discourses, 1871 - 1977* (Calcutta: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 23.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 48.
[86] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 63.
[87] Ibid.

connection between peasant activism and upper-and middle-class contestation remained evident, even as representative politics evolved in Bengal.[88]

Elections, first introduced in urban municipalities on a limited voting basis in the late nineteenth century, gradually expanded to include rural areas, provincial and central legislative councils, and larger voting groups under popular pressure.[89] However, universal suffrage was never achieved. In 1909, Muslim leaders secured a system of separate electorates allowing Muslims to vote for reserved seats. This system, coupled with the rise of party politics, established communal trends within Bengal's representative politics. Two dominant parties emerged: the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress. By 1940, however, the political destiny of the Bengal delta remained ambiguous, and envisioning the establishment of a sovereign state called Bangladesh just thirty years later seemed nearly impossible.

With World War II disrupting the established global order through the Japanese advance and the devastating famine of 1943–44 fracturing Bengal's social and political order, the system began to disintegrate.[90] Three key factors set the stage for the eventual creation of Bangladesh: the intensifying rivalry between the political categories of "Muslims" and "Hindus," a countryside embroiled in class-based revolts, and the British decision to extricate themselves from their longstanding colony. Gyanendra Pandey, examines the complex nature of the 1947 Partition of British India in a way that significantly informs my research.[91] Professor Pandey challenges the notion of a singular narrative of partition, theorizing instead three distinct phases. The first phase reflects the Muslim League's initial vision of Pakistan as an autonomous Muslim-majority state, anticipating minimal population displacement. The second phase was

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[88] Ibid, 277.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Gyanendra Pandey, ed., *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India*, Contemporary South Asia 7 (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 26.
[91] Gyanendra Pandey, ed., *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India*, Contemporary South Asia 7 (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

marked by Congress and Sikh leaders advocating for the division of Punjab and Bengal to counter the League's influence, which intensified communal violence. The third phase revealed the grim realities of partition, mass displacement and large-scale slaughter during the transfer of power. contradicting the initial, more idealized aspirations.[92]

I am particularly drawn to Professor Pandey's emphasis on political maneuvering, communal violence, and the conflicting ambitions of various groups, all of which underscore the uncertainty and unintended consequences that defined the historical events of 1947. The initial concept of Pakistan, rooted in the "two-nation theory," envisioned autonomy or independence for Muslim-majority regions in the northwest and northeast of India. This idea sought to establish a Muslim-dominated state to serve as a counterbalance to a Hindu-dominated "Hindustan." Early iterations of this vision presumed minimal disruption to existing social and demographic patterns, where Muslims and non-Muslims could coexist within their respective regions. The Muslim League, championing this vision, framed Pakistan as a modern Muslim state founded on principles of equality and justice. This ideal resonated particularly with the Muslim middle classes and youth, who saw the League as a protector of the oppressed and an opponent of "Hindu capitalism" and the Congress party.[93]

However, the vision of Pakistan was complicated by the division of Punjab and Bengal, which added a second layer to the partition process. Proposed by Congress and Sikh leaders as a response to escalating violence and a counterbalance to the Muslim League's demands, this division directly contradicted the League's ideal of unified regions bound by shared history, culture, and identity, a point even Muhammad Ali Jinnah himself acknowledged.[94] Instead of

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[92] Ibid, 27.
[93] Gyanendra Pandey, ed., *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India*, Contemporary South Asia 7 (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 26-28.
[94] Gyanendra Pandey, ed., *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India*, Contemporary South Asia 7 (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 26-28.

fostering unity, the division fractured the imagined cohesion of the new nation and reinforced the notion that minority communities were unwelcome in the newly created Muslim or non-Muslim territories. This decision not only planted the seeds for future conflict but also set the stage for the violence and displacement that followed.

The third and most harrowing layer of partition unfolded in the form of mass violence, forced migrations, and conversions that erupted after Partition was officially announced.[95] This grim reality sharply contrasted with the peaceful transition anticipated by the Muslim League. The large-scale movement of populations deepened communal divides, implanting the belief that coexistence between religious communities was impossible. This disconnect between the idealized Pakistan and the devastating realities of Partition presented immediate and profound challenges from the very beginning.

The violence and mass displacement placed colossal strain on both Pakistan and India, deteriorating the League's aspirations for a unified Muslim state. Economic disparities, while not often emphasized, became glaringly evident in the years following Partition, particularly in the growing inequality between East and West Pakistan. Political marginalization also emerged as a critical issue, with internal conflicts within the Muslim League and its failure to effectively sustain the Pakistan experiment beginning to collapse.[96] Cultural differences added yet another layer of complexity; linguistic and regional distinctions, compounded by the division of Punjab and Bengal, eroded the notion of a singular Muslim nation. These fractures, alongside the violence and upheaval of Partition, created fertile ground for the rise of Bengali nationalism in the decades to come.

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[95] Ibid.
[96] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 89.

The growing body of work on Bangladesh's creation largely retains the assumptions of earlier literature, often marked by insularity and determinism. Salman Rushdie captures this sense of determinism in his novel *Shame*, describing united Pakistan as "that fantastic bird of a place, two Wings without a body, sundered by the land-mass of its greatest foe, joined by nothing but God."[97] In many Indian accounts, the genocide of 1971 is often framed as the third India-Pakistan conflict, disregarding the struggle of the Bengali people. As author Rajesh Rajagopalan aptly states, "The India–Pakistan conflict is the direct consequence of the imbalance of power between the two states and Pakistan's insecurity about this imbalance."[98] In the previous section, I discussed the culmination of historical events that led to the partition of Pakistan and India. When discussing Partition, I find that academics and scholars often halt the discourse in 1947. For many, the Partition of India and Pakistan is enough to understand modern South Asian History. But what many fail to articulate, is the experiment of Pakistan that became the outcome of the Partition. The history does not end in 1947, for many, it was merely just beginning.

Pakistan was not born from political convenience but from religious conviction, a nation carved from the subcontinent with faith as its foundation and identity as its purpose. There was a singular state administering two discrete territories, separated from each other by Indian terrain. As Willem Van Schendel describes it, Pakistan was an experiment in the making.[99] I believe this was not only an experiment, but it was compounded by the strong hypothesis that Islam alone could mend the two regions, regardless of the differences in cultural and ethnic communities. The Pakistan experiment launched on a challenging note, as the state did not receive any of the

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[97] Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, 2008 Random House trade pbk. ed (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008).
[98] Rajagopalan, Rajesh. *Neorealist Theory and the India–Pakistan Conflict*, Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA, Dec. 1998, ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_98rar01.html.
[99] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 89.

colony's central state institutions, versus India, who inherited the capital of New Delhi and most of the civil bureaucracy, armed forces, police, resources, and industries. However, Pakistan did inherit largely raw-material. With no administrative hub, there was an outcry to govern two unconnected territories, alongside the ambition to find national identity on a religious one.[100] This may have been the start of the downfall, not necessarily because of an "inevitable" force, but because this experiment was unique in nature, because the role of Islam is not one in the ordinary. In this section, I will further explain the impact of Islam and how Islam was defined through this period heavily influenced the deepening rift between West and East Pakistan. However, first, I must begin with reasons as to why East Pakistan was left brushed aside.

The administrative neglect of East Pakistan was starkly visible in its government headquarters. While West Pakistan enjoyed impressive colonial buildings, East Pakistani officials worked from the makeshift confines of Eden College in Dhaka. They operated in bamboo sheds with almost no basic resources.[101] The General Officer Commanding of East Bengal lamented, "We had very poor accommodation: at Headquarters there was no table, no chair, no stationery... we had virtually nothing at all; not even any maps of East Pakistan."[102] This physical deprivation mirrored deeper institutional abandonment. East Pakistan received just one member of the former Indian Civil Service, while six were promoted to Provincial Civil Service and sent westward. The bureaucracy remained dominated by non-locals who made decisions from a distance, governing a region whose needs they neither understood nor witnessed firsthand.

While there was initially euphoria in Pakistan following independence, it quickly gave way to tensions between East and West Pakistan. This decline stemmed primarily from two

[100] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 88.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 108.

critical elements: contested notions of Islamic identity and mutual fear of India.[103] However, these shared concerns proved insufficient to maintain unity between the regions, as conflicts emerged over the equitable distribution of both material resources and symbolic recognition. The fundamental question of Pakistan's constitutional structure soon became contentious, with West Pakistani rulers prioritizing their fear of Indian domination over democratic principles that would have transferred power to the Bengali majority in East Pakistan. West Pakistan's leadership, consumed by nightmares of humiliation by India and driven by pride, ultimately chose to wage war against their own citizens rather than relinquish control.[104] Instead of pursuing unification between the regions, West Pakistan's governance focused on power consolidation and subjugation. The differences between the two wings quickly became apparent, beginning with the explosive question of national language, which became the first battleground in a widening struggle for recognition and rights.

In 1947, the Pakistani elite were tasked with uniting Pakistan. This goes without saying that the "elite" were West Pakistani. Questions arose of the language in which to conduct Pakistan's state business, with the Pakistan Educational Conference of November 1947 proposing Urdu as the national language, this proposition was opposed by representatives from East Pakistan.[105] The contention of language was a unique issue facing Pakistani's. While I understand the necessity to conduct government business in one language, to ensure all people understand what is being said, without any fear of getting lost in translation. I am puzzled by West Pakistan's obsessive insistence on Urdu alone, a language that most Pakistanis, East or West, could not speak as their mother tongue. After the Pakistan Educational Conference, an East

[103] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 110.
[104] Gyanendra Pandey, ed., *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India*, Contemporary South Asia 7 (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 26-28.
[105] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 109.

Pakistani member of the Constituent Assembly from East Pakistan proposed an amendment to allow the Bengali language to be used in the Assembly *alongside* Urdu.[106] West Pakistani leaders rejected a perfectly reasonable amendment that would have recognized Bengali alongside Urdu. They understood that West Pakistani officials could not suddenly learn Bengali, yet hypocritically expected East Pakistanis to abandon their mother tongue for Urdu. When Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan denied this compromise, he revealed a fundamental double standard. The same accommodation they demanded for themselves, they refused to extend to their eastern countrymen.[107] This linguistic arrogance was not mere oversight but reflected a deeper belief that East Pakistani culture was expendable while West Pakistani traditions were essential to national identity. The message was unmistakable: *Bengali speakers must adapt; Urdu speakers need not bother.*

The Bengali language, native to the region and spoken by 56% of all Pakistanis, was systematically excluded from state business in favor of Urdu. This policy was justified through the nationalist claim that “Urdu is the language of a hundred million Muslims, and it is necessary for a nation to have one language,” despite the fact that Urdu was spoken by merely 3% of Pakistan’s population.[108] This linguistic imposition raises fundamental questions about West Pakistan’s motivations. Was the promotion of Urdu genuinely aimed at national unity, or was it a calculated attempt to erase Bengali cultural identity? The policy created practical barriers to East Pakistani participation in governance; how could Bengali officials effectively engage in state business without fluency in a language foreign to their region? Those unable to quickly master Urdu faced potential exclusion from critical discussions and decision-making processes. The rejection of Bengali as a national language became emblematic of a broader pattern: West

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[106] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 109.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 110.

Pakistan's systematic refusal to recognize and respect the cultural and political distinctiveness of the East, setting the stage for deepening alienation between the two wings of the country

The language debate exposed deep-rooted cultural and ideological divides. For Bengali Muslims, Pakistan represented a chance to escape the economic marginalization they had endured under Hindu landlords, and to lead as representatives of the country's majority. But the Urdu-speaking elites from North India, the Muhajirs, and Punjabi Muslims saw themselves as the natural stewards of Pakistan.[109] Muhajirs quickly assumed control of state bureaucracy, media, and urban institutions, while Punjabis dominated the military and civil administration. Though few in number, Muhajirs exerted enormous influence, particularly in West Pakistan, while East Pakistanis were left politically sidelined and culturally dismissed. These regional power imbalances didn't vanish with time; they continue shaping how Pakistani diaspora communities interpret the events of 1971, a phenomenon I explore more fully in Chapter Six.

Language thus became both a site of resistance and a symbol of national fracture. Bengali students formed action committees as early as December 1947, mobilizing in defense of their linguistic and cultural rights.[110] Strikes and protests erupted in Dhaka, and in 1948, when Muhammad Ali Jinnah visited the city and reaffirmed Urdu as the national language, disillusionment deepened. The state's unwillingness to compromise led to arrests, injuries, and a growing conviction among East Pakistanis that their place in the federation was tenuous. After years of struggle, Bengali was finally recognized as a national language in 1956, but the scars of this conflict endured.

East Pakistan's struggle for autonomy extended far beyond language rights, encompassing deeper political and economic aspirations. The watershed 1954 parliamentary

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[109] Jagmohan Meher, "Dynamics of Pakistan's Disintegration: The Case of East Pakistan 1947-1971," *India Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (2015): 300–317.
[110] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 110.

elections revealed the depth of Bengali discontent when the United Front coalition delivered a crushing defeat to the Muslim League.[111] This coalition, though internally diverse and united primarily by opposition to the incumbent government, represented genuine popular demands. The Awami Muslim League, capturing 46% of seats, emerged as the dominant force within this alliance.[112] East Pakistanis weren't pursuing some peasant utopia. Their concerns were practical and immediate: abolishing the oppressive zamindari system, modernizing agriculture, controlling devastating floods, reforming education, and ensuring fair trade for jute, their economic lifeblood.[113] The Muslim League's overwhelming defeat represented a clear verdict on both its economic failures and cultural arrogance. Yet West Pakistan's response proved telling, the democratically elected government was abruptly dismissed by central authorities.

This pattern of democratic suppression intensified dramatically when General Ayub Khan's military coup in October 1958 ended Pakistan's brief experiment with electoral politics. The military, having gradually consolidated power over elected institutions, now openly seized control.[114] Ayub's vision centered on creating a "strong" nation, drawing from his colonial military background rather than democratic principles. His regime swiftly abolished parliamentary democracy, imprisoned politicians, weakened judiciary independence, silenced the press, suspended civil rights, and imposed martial law.[115]

For East Pakistan, these developments proved particularly devastating. Having historically wielded influence primarily through political mobilization, Bengalis now found themselves completely marginalized. Military power was overwhelmingly concentrated in the West, all service headquarters were located there, and only 3% of personnel came from East

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[111] Rizwan Ullah Kokab, *Separatism in East Pakistan: A Study of Failed Leadership*, First edition (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[112] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 110-113.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 110-113.

Pakistan.[116] Ayub himself harbored deeply colonial views about Bengalis, describing them as having "all the inhibitions of downtrodden races" who needed help to "feel equal partners and prove an asset."[117] The dictator's cynicism reached new heights when he claimed the coup defended democracy. The capital was moved from Karachi to Rawalpindi, and later to the newly constructed Islamabad, further entrenching West Pakistani dominance.[118] His 1959 "basic democracies" system, modeled on British colonial "local self-government," merely placed political processes under bureaucratic control while localizing issues to prevent unified opposition. His 1962 authoritarian constitution granted himself extraordinary powers while creating only a weak national assembly.[119] Though Islamabad became the seat of government, Dhaka was designated the "principal seat" of the assembly, a hollow gesture that offered location without power.

Fundamentally, the regime believed autocratic, paternalistic governance was necessary to prevent what West Pakistani elites feared most: East Pakistan exercising its democratic share of power based on population. This rejection of basic democratic principles laid the groundwork for growing Bengali alienation and the eventual liberation movement. The 1965 war with India over the status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir exposed these fault lines even further. East Pakistan was left virtually undefended, intensifying feelings of betrayal. Meanwhile, repression in the East escalated. Governor Abdul Monem Khan, Ayub's appointee, clamped down on the press, arrested dissidents, and revived attacks on Bengali cultural identity.[120] It was during this period that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League emerged as the principal voices of East Pakistan. Mujib's Six-Point Programme, introduced in 1966, demanded full autonomy: control

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[116] Hasan Askari Rizvi and Hasan Askari Rizvi, *The Military and Politics in Pakistan: 1947 - 1997* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2000).
[117] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 110-113.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Rizvi and Rizvi, *The Military and Politics in Pakistan*.
[120] Kokab, *Separatism in East Pakistan*.

over trade, currency, taxation, and more.[121] Citing the 1940 Lahore Resolution (the "Magna Carta" of Pakistan that promised regional autonomy) to avoid accusations of separatism, the programme electrified East Pakistan and laid the foundation for mass mobilization. The government's response was brutal. Mujib and other leaders were arrested in the infamous Agartala Conspiracy Case, accused of plotting with India to secede. But the case backfired. Public outrage forced the charges to be dropped, turning Mujib into a national hero.[122]

Ayub's entire system had been designed with a clear purpose. Under his regime, the normal political dialogue between East and West wings abruptly halted. As historian Hasan Zaheer observed, "The East Wing would thus be confronted with the formidable combination of the Punjabi dominated army and the Punjabi politicians, both having, by and large, the same views about East-West relations."[123] Ayub's highly centralized regime and political party ban effectively silenced Bengali voices at the center of power. The 1958 military takeover and subsequent destruction of democratic institutions didn't merely frustrate Bengali political ambitions, it slammed shut any pathway to power through peaceful means, ultimately making independence seem the only viable alternative to perpetual subjugation. By 1968, East Pakistani opposition had spilled forcefully into the streets. Students and labor groups adopted the Awami League's Six Points as part of a broader Eleven-Point Programme that included additional social demands.[124] This uprising grew so powerful that it eventually forced Ayub Khan to resign in 1969. His departure, however, did not signal a return to civilian rule. General Yahya Khan took power, implementing new policies while conducting an administrative purge. He appointed Justice Abdus Sattar to organize elections and issued the Legal Framework Order to guide the

[121] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 111.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Meher, "Dynamics of Pakistan's Disintegration."
[124] Rizvi and Rizvi, *The Military and Politics in Pakistan*.

constitutional process.[125] He also dissolved the "One Unit" system, which had forcibly consolidated West Pakistan's diverse regions into a single administrative unit to counter East Pakistan's population advantage, reconstituting West Pakistan into four provinces—Punjab, Sindh, NWFP, and Baluchistan.[126]

Then nature intervened with devastating consequences. On November 12, 1970, the Bhola Cyclone slammed into East Pakistan's southern coast, killing over 300,000 people.[127] Small islands disappeared entirely beneath storm surges, leaving corpses of humans and livestock scattered across a devastated landscape.[128] The catastrophe exposed the region's profound neglect. Journalists, students, and political workers rushed to provide relief while the Military Law Administration's response was painfully inadequate.[129] Coming just three weeks before Pakistan's first general elections, the disaster and its aftermath received extensive media coverage that highlighted East Pakistan's pitiful infrastructure and absent governance. The cyclone became more than a natural disaster, it reaffirmed decades of neglect into one undeniable tragedy visible to both local and international observers. What might have remained abstract political grievances now had concrete, devastating manifestation. The disaster rapidly became entangled with larger demands for regional autonomy as the military regime faced fierce criticism from East Pakistani politicians, press, citizens, and international observers.

The scheduled October 1970 elections were postponed to December due to the cyclone.[130] When voting finally occurred, two parties dominated: the Awami League in East Pakistan and

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[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Sravani Biswas and Patrick Daly, "'Cyclone Not Above Politics' : East Pakistan, Disaster Politics, and the 1970 Bhola Cyclone," *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (July 2021): 1382–1410, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X20000293.
[128] Sravani Biswas and Patrick Daly, "'Cyclone Not Above Politics' : East Pakistan, Disaster Politics, and the 1970 Bhola Cyclone," *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (July 2021): 1382–1410, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X20000293.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party in the West.[131] Despite this democratic process, the gulf between East and West continued to widen. While West Pakistan enjoyed economic and social development, East Pakistan remained deprived of essential resources, industry, and infrastructure. Rather than healing festering wounds, Yahya Khan's rule would ultimately trigger Pakistan's violent unraveling through genocide and war, leading to Bangladesh's independence. While the path to secession began long before the cyclone and involved complex tensions dating back to the 1940 Lahore Resolution, the disaster served as a powerful catalyst that transformed abstract political grievances into concrete evidence of systematic neglect.[132]

Analysis of Genocide

Islam became a powerful basis for political action, but the Pakistani state failed to address the challenges of uniting a culturally diverse society. The events of 1971 revealed that religious nationalism alone could not sustain the unity of the nation-state. Bina D'Costa, details the brutal actions of the Pakistani military, the pervasive use of propaganda, and the enduring impact on collective memory and identity in both Bangladesh and Pakistan.[133] The genocide began with Operation Searchlight, launched by the Pakistani military on March 25, 1971, as a systematic campaign to suppress the Bengali independence movement. This operation involved widespread violence, including targeted killings and atrocities against unarmed civilians, with intellectuals, students, and political leaders specifically targeted to dismantle the nationalist movement.[134] Orchestrated by Lieutenant General Tikka Khan, forever branded as the "Butcher of Bengal," the slaughter revealed a cold, calculated strategy of extermination. Alongside Yahya Khan, he engineered a bloodbath designed to crush Bengali resistance not through political

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[131] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 111.
[132] Biswas and Daly, "'Cyclone Not Above Politics.'"
[133] Rashid, Azra. *Gender, Nationalism, and Genocide in Bangladesh: Naristhan-Ladyland*. Routledge Studies in South Asian History. Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2019.
[134] Ibid.

compromise but through systematic elimination of those who dared oppose Pakistani dominance.[135]

A crucial revelation is the *Legal Study by the Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)* in 1972, which provides a comprehensive account of the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh.[136] The Pakistani military's Operation Searchlight, as described by the ICJ, was a deliberate and widespread campaign aimed at crushing the Bengali independence movement.[137] Entire neighborhoods, particularly those inhabited by the poorest Bengalis, were razed, with residents shot as they tried to flee.[138] The military systematically targeted the East Pakistan Rifles (border protection force) and police forces to eliminate potential opposition.[139] The Pakistani military engaged in the systematic killing of Bengalis, with explicit intentions to decimate the Hindu population in East Pakistan, either by forcing them to flee or eliminating them outright.[140] Intellectuals and professionals were deliberately targeted as part of a strategy to dismantle the Bengali nationalist movement by eradicating its leadership. Civilians faced indiscriminate violence, which devastated communities and left lasting scars.[141]

Beyond the targeted killings of intellectuals, the 1971 genocide also exemplified "scholasticide," the systematic destruction of educational institutions and the deliberate targeting of academics as a dimension of genocide. This concept describes the intentional dismantling of a society's intellectual foundations and educational infrastructure to prevent cultural continuity and

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[135] Ibid.
[136] "The Events in East Pakistan, 1971," Legal Study by the Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), 1972, https://www.lemkininstitute.com/_files/ugd/9bc553_d57bc32e31764e249c82813abf6d55a1.pdf.
[137] "The Events in East Pakistan, 1971," Legal Study by the Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), 1972, https://www.lemkininstitute.com/_files/ugd/9bc553_d57bc32e31764e249c82813abf6d55a1.pdf.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] "The Events in East Pakistan, 1971," Legal Study by the Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), 1972, https://www.lemkininstitute.com/_files/ugd/9bc553_d57bc32e31764e249c82813abf6d55a1.pdf.

national development.[142] In Bangladesh's case, scholasticide manifested through the Pakistani military's comprehensive strategy targeting universities, libraries, and cultural centers alongside the academics themselves.[143] The military understood that destroying Bengali intellectual life would accomplish multiple genocidal objectives simultaneously: eliminating current resistance leaders, preventing the emergence of future leadership, erasing cultural memory, and undermining national identity formation. The systematic way Pakistani forces specifically targeted university campuses like Dhaka University, where students were executed en masse in the earliest hours of Operation Searchlight, reveals that these weren't random acts of violence but strategic components of a broader genocidal plan.

Scholasticide represents a particularly insidious dimension of genocide because it targets not just present lives but future generations' access to their intellectual heritage. By destroying educational institutions and murdering educators, genocidal regimes attempt to create conditions where cultural transmission becomes impossible and collective memory is fractured.[144] This strategy aims to achieve cultural erasure that outlasts the physical violence, creating a form of extermination that continues long after the direct killing has ended.

The destruction extended beyond human lives to infrastructure, with homes, shops, and entire streets set ablaze. The ICJ documents that rape, forced marriages, and sexual slavery were used as tools to terrorize the population and symbolically defile the Bengali national identity.[145] An estimated 70,000 pregnancies resulted from these atrocities, with officers often ignoring or actively participating in the violence, further normalizing it.[146] While Bengalis bore the brunt of

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[142] Císar Doménguez, "Scholasticide: Educational Lawfare as a Marker of the End of Civilianness," *Diacritics* 52, no. 1 (2024): 120–38, https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2024.a955191.
[143] Nishat and Hossain, "1971 Killing of the 'Bengali' Intellectuals."
[144] Doménguez, "Scholasticide."
[145] "The Events in East Pakistan, 1971," Legal Study by the Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), 1972, https://www.lemkininstitute.com/_files/ugd/9bc553_d57bc32e31764e249c82813abf6d55a1.pdf.
[146] Ibid, 40.

these human rights violations, the ICJ also records retaliatory violence by some Bengali groups against non-Bengalis, particularly Biharis.[147] Despite the unprecedented scale of these atrocities, international bodies, including the United Nations, failed to take effective action to address or prevent them.

While I acknowledge my earlier critique of Dr. Ahmed's reliance on Sarmila Bose, I find it necessary to consider her contributions in this review. Bose's *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* was one of the first major studies on the topic to gain significant attention, making it a critical, if controversial, addition to the field.[148] On one hand, her attempt to challenge prevailing narratives and critically examine the "conflict" is commendable, as every historical event warrants rigorous and nuanced analysis. However, in my research, I find her work deeply problematic due to its methodological flaws, selective use of evidence, and what seems to be a considered effort to downplay the atrocities committed by the Pakistani military while overemphasizing violence perpetrated by Bengali actors.

To be candid, I initially turned to Bose's book because of the rare attention it had garnered on a topic that is often overlooked. Bose argues that historical narratives of 1971 have been shaped by nationalist agendas and dominated by the victors. In this sense, her work does contribute to understanding the complexities of violence in a liberation struggle, including factionalism and reprisals. However, these contributions are overshadowed by many shortcomings. Bose's trust on anecdotal evidence and selective interviews undermines the credibility of her analysis.[149] While she challenges the widely accepted figure of three million deaths, dismissing it as a "gigantic rumor," her critique is speculative and lacks the demographic

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[147] Ibid, 16.
[148] Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (London: C. Hurst, 2011).
[149] Ibid.

or forensic rigor required for such a claim.[150] Moreover, her failure to provide an alternative, empirically grounded estimate weakens the validity of her argument. Bose's focus on Bengali violence, while valid in acknowledging that violence on any scale is wrong, disproportionately shifts attention from the organized massacres committed by the Pakistani military. By framing the genocide as one of "two equally violent sides," Bose disregards the overwhelming evidence of genocidal actions carried out by the Pakistani military and its collaborators: actions widely recognized by scholars and international observers as among the worst genocides of the 20th century.[151]

The economic exploitation of East Pakistan and the refusal to honor the results of the 1970 elections, where the Awami League secured a democratic mandate, represent clear violations of the Bengali people's political and economic rights. This systemic oppression, compounded by the genocidal violence unleashed through Operation Searchlight, created conditions in which armed resistance was not only justified but necessary for the survival of the Bengali population. The UN underscores that self-determination, enshrined as a *jus cogens* (compelling law) norm in international law, permits marginalized groups to seek independence when deprived of their fundamental rights.[152] In Bangladesh's case, West Pakistan's refusal to transfer power and the ensuing military crackdown eliminated any viable path for peaceful negotiation or coexistence, endowing the armed struggle led by the Mukti Bahini a legitimate exercise of this right. The situation was unique due to the stark imbalance in military resources. Pakistan, as the governing state, had a well-equipped military, while the Bengali population lacked comparable means of defense. This imbalance echoes the dynamics faced by occupied

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[150] Ibid, 32.
[151] Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (London: C. Hurst, 2011).
[152] "Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases," accessed January 15, 2025, https://press.un.org/en/committee-inalienable-rights-palestinian-people.

populations resisting oppressive powers. Bangladesh's use of force, though limited, was a response to existential threats posed by a clear superior occupying force engaged in widespread atrocities. Just as international law recognizes the right of occupied populations to resist foreign domination, Bangladesh's struggle against East Pakistan's systemic oppression can be interpreted as an assertion of its right to self-determination. While Pakistan claimed to exercise "police powers" to maintain law and order, the extensive brutalities committed against civilians and the absence of good-faith efforts to address Bengali grievances render such justifications untenable.[153]

The liberation struggle of Bangladesh is often mischaracterized in Pakistani narratives as random violence or an Indian conspiracy, rather than a legitimate fight for self-determination. My research reveals how this framing persists in contemporary Pakistani consciousness, obscuring the organized and principled nature of the Mukti Bahini's resistance against an oppressive state. The Mukti Bahini were not merely insurgents enacting indiscriminate violence, but disciplined freedom fighters responding to systematic political disenfranchisement. Their resistance emerged only after the Pakistani government illegally nullified democratic election results that would have given the Awami League parliamentary power.[154] The 1971 election had resulted in a landslide victory for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's party, yet President Yahya Khan "politically adjourned that session without actually opening it in the first place," effectively denying Bengalis their democratic voice.[155] This deliberate subversion of democracy, followed by brutal military crackdowns, left Bengalis with few alternatives but armed resistance. The strategic sophistication of the Mukti Bahini contradicts Pakistani portrayals of them as chaotic

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[153] Shahid Javed Burki et al., *Pakistan under the Military: Eleven Years of Zia Ul-Haq*, Westview Special Studies on South and Southeast Asia (Boulder : Lahore: Westview Press ; Pak Book Corp, 1991).
[154] Aswini K. Ray. "From Autonomy to Self-Determination: The Politics of East Pakistan and Kashmir." *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 49 (2001): 4538–43. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4411442.
[155] Ibid.

rebels. According to Major General (Ret.) Shafiullah's memoir, they "divided Bangladesh's territory into eleven parts" for more effective operations and "used the geography and landscape of Bangladesh to their advantage."[156] Their guerrilla tactics focused on military targets and infrastructure rather than civilians, demonstrating disciplined resistance rather than vengeful violence.[157] This organized resistance was often deliberately mischaracterized in official Pakistani accounts to delegitimize it.

The nationalist dimension of the struggle further demonstrates its legitimacy. Rather than being primarily driven by ethnic or religious divisions, the movement embodied a fundamentally political awakening. This erasure of the Mukti Bahini's legitimacy in Pakistani historical memory serves a powerful political purpose; it reframes a popular uprising against oppression as foreign interference, conveniently shifting responsibility away from the Pakistani state's actions. This narrative distortion continues to shape Pakistani attitudes toward Bangladesh today, preventing the recognition of Bengali agency and self-determination that was at the heart of the liberation struggle and perpetuating historical misunderstandings that impede reconciliation.

Additionally, Bose's treatment of sexual violence is severely misleading. While she acknowledges its occurrence, her dismissal of the scale of these atrocities, such as the rape of an estimated 200,000 women, ignores extensive documentation from survivors, international organizations, and scholars, preserving a narrative that risks creating a sense of victim blaming.[158] By framing these crimes as exaggerated or attributed to the "fog of war," Bose risks perpetuating the silencing of survivors and trivializing their trauma.[159] Furthermore, her assertion that Mujibur Rahman was simultaneously inciting rebellion and negotiating power reflects a

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[156] Butt, Ahsan I. *Secession and Security: Explaining State Strategy against Separatists*. Cornell Studies in Security Affairs. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 20171115.
[157] Butt, Ahsan I. *Secession and Security: Explaining State Strategy against Separatists*. Cornell Studies in Security Affairs. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 20171115.
[158] Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (London: C. Hurst, 2011).
[159] Ibid.

basic misunderstanding of the historical context.[160] Mujib's leadership was rooted in a clear democratic mandate following his landslide victory in the 1970 elections. The Pakistani military's refusal to transfer power to him eliminated any possibility of a constitutional resolution, forcing Bengalis to pursue independence. Bose's characterization of this period as "lawlessness and chaos" disregards the democratic legitimacy of Bengali demands.[161]

Bose's narrative has been widely criticized for aligning with revisionist and nationalist propaganda. Her selective focus on Bengali violence and omission of substantial evidence of Pakistani atrocities lend weight to accusations that her work seeks to delegitimize the liberation struggle. By framing Bengalis as "bestial" and portraying the Pakistani military as measured in its actions, Bose maintains harmful stereotypes and cloaks the structural causes of the genocide.[162] To fully grasp the full picture of 1971, historians must approach the subject with intellectual honesty, empirical rigor, and a commitment to amplifying all voices, especially those of victims and survivors. Bose's failure to meet these minimum standards risks positioning her book as a tool for denialism and propaganda rather than as a meaningful contribution to historical understanding. The Pakistani military's actions legitimized Bangladesh's armed resistance as a necessary act of self-defense against acts of genocide. This standpoint aligns with the principle that resistance, including armed struggle, is a valid response when a population faces existential threats from a governing or occupying force.

One of the defining features of the genocide was the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Azra Rashid, examines the widespread use of rape, forced marriages, and forced impregnation.[163] These horrific tactics were deliberately employed to terrorize the Bengali

[160] Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (London: C. Hurst, 2011).
[161] Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (London: C. Hurst, 2011), 76.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Azra Rashid, *Gender, Nationalism, and Genocide in Bangladesh: Naristhan-Ladyland*, Routledge Studies in South Asian History (Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2019).

population and symbolically undermine their national identity. Women, referred to as *Birangonas* (war heroines), were subjected to sexual violence as part of a broader effort to "pollute" Bengali identity within a patriarchal framework.[164] The motivations for these acts ranged from aggression rooted in military masculinity to premeditated goals targeted at dismantling cultural identities. Women's bodies became symbolic battlegrounds, and their suffering was intensified by the post-war silencing of their narratives, leading to enduring social stigmatization and "social death."[165]

In this context, the act of rape becomes entangled with notions of sexuality and masculinity. Drawing from Catherine Mackinnon's perspective, rape is not simply an expression of individual lust, but rather serves as a means to affirm women as objects of male pleasure, thus highlighting the power dynamics inherent in patriarchal societies.[166] When examining the historical context and identity politics surrounding sexual violence, it becomes evident that feminist theories or other scholarly discussions of rape offer only a partial understanding during episodes of collective violence. While many discourses center on the female body as the primary focus of rape, they fall short in addressing instances of widespread sexual violence during collective conflicts, which often reveal deeply ingrained and symbolically charged forms of brutality. The canonical figure of 200,000 rapes in Bangladesh serves as a blatant reminder of this reality.[167] The genocide was further reinforced by propaganda narratives perpetuated by the Pakistani government and religious leaders. Bengali culture, including women's public participation and traditional attire, was denounced as "un-Islamic," providing ideological

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[164] Azra Rashid, *Gender, Nationalism, and Genocide in Bangladesh: Naristhan-Ladyland*, Routledge Studies in South Asian History (Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 22.
[165] Ibid, 36.
[166] Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Crimes of War, Crimes of Peace," *UCLA Women's Law Journal* 4, no. 1 (1993), https://doi.org/10.5070/L341017587.
[167] Nayanika Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822375227.

justification for the violence.[168] This cultural denigration aligned with efforts to suppress the Bengali nationalist movement. Following the war, the Bangladeshi government attempted to address the aftermath of sexual violence through abortion and adoption programs for children born of war rapes, though these measures were insufficient to address the survivors' trauma. The silencing of Birangonas became entrenched within patriarchal societal norms, further marginalizing their voices in the national narrative.[169] Many survivors faced continued stigmatization and social death, creating what Mookherjee calls the "spectral wound" that continues to haunt Bengali society decades later.[170]

As I am invited to contribute to this particular subject on the history of sexual violence during the 1971 genocide, I believe that the experiences of women during the genocide and liberation war in Bangladesh lead to the stark realization that victimizing women from the opposing community, such as Bengali women targeted by the Pakistani army and local collaborators, was deemed a legitimate form of violence within the patriarchal framework of South Asian society.[171] Additionally, D'Costa highlights the importance of transnational feminist networks in seeking justice for victims of war crimes and emphasizes the gendered nature of nation-building.[172] She argues that the control of women's bodies and sexuality is often central to nationalist projects, with women symbolically representing both the purity and the vulnerability of the nation.

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[168] Azra Rashid, *Gender, Nationalism, and Genocide in Bangladesh: Naristhan-Ladyland*, Routledge Studies in South Asian History (Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 55.
[169] Azra Rashid, *Gender, Nationalism, and Genocide in Bangladesh: Naristhan-Ladyland*, Routledge Studies in South Asian History (Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 55.
[170] Nayanika Mookherjee, "'Occupying' the Womb: Disrupted Kinship Futures and Sovereign Logics in Sexual Violence during Wars," *Critique of Anthropology* 43, no. 4 (December 2023): 422–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X231216250.
[171] Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394280.
[172] Bina D'Costa, *Nationbuilding, Gender, and War Crimes in South Asia*, Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series, v. 29 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011).

Nayanika Mookherjee's concept of the "occupation of the womb" directly addresses my point about sexual violence as a deliberate weapon of war.[173] Mookherjee documents how Pakistani military forces explicitly aimed to "improve the genes of the Bengali people" and to "make a Pakistani in the womb of every Bengali woman."[174] Letters between Pakistani officers reveal the calculated intent: "It is of utmost need to alter their succeeding generations... In the meantime you must carefully make plans to tame some wild bitches."[175] This evidence offers a powerful primary source that demonstrates the premeditated nature of sexual violence as more than just wartime excess. The patriarchal framework within which this violence operated, adds important nuance about how Pakistani forces justified their actions. West Pakistani forces characterized Bengali women as "tigresses" and "wild bitches" who needed to be "tamed" and "domesticated," revealing how misogyny, racism, and religious chauvinism combined to enable such violence.[176] These animalistic characterizations dehumanized Bengali women while simultaneously sexualizing them, creating a perverse justification for rape as a form of "domestication."[177] The scale of violence is further contextualized by the documentation of "forced pregnancy" as a deliberate tactic, women were detained in camps until they were too far along to terminate pregnancies. This strategy of "forced impregnation" as a genocidal tactic had profound implications for Bengali identity and society. Women were only released from detention after becoming pregnant, demonstrating how sexual violence was systematically employed as a biological weapon to disrupt "kinship futures" and contaminate Bengali national identity.[178]

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[173] Mookherjee, "'Occupying' the Womb."
[174] Ibid, 429.
[175] Ibid, 434.
[176] Ibid, 435.
[177] Mookherjee, "'Occupying' the Womb."
[178] Ibid, 425.

Quantifying complex social phenomena is crucial for both Bangladesh and Pakistan. In Bangladesh, it validates the extent of violence during the war and legitimizes the post-1971 state internationally. Conversely, in Pakistan, it questions the authenticity of Bangladesh's genocide claims, reflecting distrust. However, for the war's victims, I believe this focus on numbers perpetuates a disempowering narrative. Few in Pakistan initially believed accounts of the atrocities committed by the Pakistani army in former East Pakistan during the 1971 genocide; many were unaware of the events altogether. However, the declassification of the *Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report* (HRCR) in December 2000 revealed the hidden truth after being sealed away since 1972.[179] The report, which surfaced in the media after extracts were published by an Indian magazine in August 2000, unequivocally detailed the atrocities and called for the trial of perpetrators, although many had already passed away by the time of its release.[180] Despite long standing pleas from the Bangladesh government and populace for Pakistan to apologize for the army's actions, these requests were consistently disregarded. Instead, Pakistan often responded with expressions of regret, dismissing Bangladesh's demands as unrealistic.[181] More than 50 years later, many Bangladeshis, especially those directly affected by the military's actions, continue to harbor resentment toward Pakistan.

In 2010, the Bangladesh government established the *International Crimes Tribunal* through an Act of Parliament. Despite its name, it operates as a national court, governed by Bangladeshi statutes enacted in 1973 and amended in 2009 and 2012, rather than being based on international law.[182]Although the government pledged to adhere to international standards in

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[179] "Tragic Events of 1971: Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report," July 1972, https://www.thedailystar.net/sites/default/files/upload-2014/freedomintheair/pdf/Hamoodur%20Rahman%20Commission%20Report_Dawn%20(1).pdf.
[180] Sanam Noor, "Outstanding Issues Between Pakistan and Bangladesh," *Pakistan Horizon* 58, no. 1 (2005): 47–60.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Muhammad Abdullah Fazi, "International Crimes Tribunal Bangladesh (ICTB) and Violations of Right to Fair Trial: A Comparative Study," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2015, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2903696.

these trials, criticism has been leveled at the current proceedings for being biased and politically motivated, rather than focused on securing justice. Concerns have been raised regarding the fairness of trial guarantees, procedures, statutes, and overall functioning of the tribunal.[183]

Following the creation of Bangladesh, the first government under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman issued laws to try war crimes, resulting in the preparation of a list of 195 suspected war criminals, all Pakistani soldiers.[184] Another law targeted Bangladeshis who collaborated with the Pakistan army, leading to the arrest of over 100,000 individuals, later released under a public amnesty.[185] Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who came to power in West Pakistan, negotiated the release of Pakistani soldiers held as prisoners of war by India, effectively ending the war crimes trials.[186] However, years later, despite Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's amnesty declaration, the Awami League, now in power, reinstated the law for investigating suspected war crimes under the *International Crimes Tribunal Bangladesh* (ICTB). This move was perceived as targeting political rivals, including individuals not previously accused of war crimes.[187]

The crime of rape has long plagued our society, often with men as perpetrators and women as victims. It's a brutal tool used to exert control, inflict humiliation, and derive perverse pleasure. Yet, beyond its physical and emotional trauma, rape carries a deeper significance, it serves as a means to shame not just the individual victim, but also their family, community, or even nation. It's a crime where the stigma extends beyond the victim, affecting all those associated with them.[188] Furthermore, the refusal to acknowledge the significant contributions of women to the country's liberation, in various capacities, and the reluctance to allow them to

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[183] Muhammad Abdullah Fazi, "International Crimes Tribunal Bangladesh (ICTB) and Violations of Right to Fair Trial: A Comparative Study," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2015, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2903696.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, 1st Ballantine Books ed (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993).

engage in frontline combat exposes another dimension of women's victimization. Placing the narratives of these victims alongside those of women impacted by other genocides worldwide underscores the urgent need to appeal to the conscience of the international community. It calls for initiatives aimed at alleviating the suffering of these women and addressing the systemic injustices they face.

The reluctance of both the general public and the government of Pakistan to acknowledge the genocide of 1971 has fueled ongoing discrimination against Bengali people in contemporary times. Following the loss of its eastern wing, the Pakistani military establishment promoted what Meher characterizes as "hatred of Hindu India" and implanted "seeds of Islamism, extremism and state-sponsored terrorism" as psychological compensation for the humiliation of defeat.[189] This reactionary posture has prevented meaningful national introspection about the true causes of Pakistan's disintegration, which scholars identify as "internal and inherent contradictions rather than any 'climax' of Indian hostility."[190] The animosity toward India intensified following India's intervention, which was precipitated by an unprecedented humanitarian crisis; approximately five million Bengali refugees, predominantly targeted Hindus, fled across the border seeking sanctuary.[191] This mass exodus placed enormous economic and social pressure on India, transforming what Pakistan insisted was an internal matter into an unavoidable regional crisis requiring international response.

As Prime Minister Indira Gandhi articulated, "What was claimed to be an internal problem of Pakistan has also become an internal problem for India," highlighting how Pakistan's brutal suppression had regional implications that could not be ignored.[192] The American response

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[189] Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Viking, 2012).
[190] Meher, "Dynamics of Pakistan's Disintegration." 315.
[191] Meher. 315.
[192] Gandhi, Indira, and India. Prime Minister. 1972. *India and Bangla Desh: Selected Speeches and Statements, March to December, 1971 / Indira Gandhi.* Orient Longman.

to these events was documented in what would later become known as the "Blood Telegram," a dissent cable sent by U.S. Consul General Archer Blood and numerous American diplomats stationed in Dhaka. This extraordinary diplomatic communication condemned their own government's policy of supporting Pakistan despite overwhelming evidence of atrocities. As Meher notes, citing Gary Bass's comprehensive study, "[The] United States was allied with the killers. The White House was actively and knowingly supporting a murderous regime at many of the most crucial moments."[193] President Nixon and National Security Advisor Kissinger chose to back Pakistan despite reports of systematic violence that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, revealing how Cold War geopolitics trumped humanitarian concerns.[194]

India's military intervention, following Pakistan's pre-emptive airstrikes on December 3, dramatically altered the conflict's trajectory. Within two weeks, Pakistani forces found themselves comprehensively defeated. On December 16, 1971, Lieutenant General A.A.K. Niazi signed the instrument of surrender in Dhaka. This public capitulation was witnessed by thousands of celebrating Bengalis, represented not just a military defeat but the complete collapse of Pakistan's political legitimacy in its eastern wing. The Pakistani military surrendered approximately 93,000 soldiers, making it one of the largest military surrenders since World War II and cementing Bangladesh's independence.[195] The concealment of these brutalities has perpetuated the misconception that the Pakistani government played a minimal role in the violence that led to the liberation of Bangladesh. This narrative directly contradicts documented evidence of systematic atrocities.

To address this issue comprehensively, I aim to contribute to the discourse by utilizing my data and research to illuminate the impact of Pakistani attitudes toward the violence of 1971,

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[193] Meher, "Dynamics of Pakistan's Disintegration." 312.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Meher, "Dynamics of Pakistan's Disintegration."

which in turn shapes the political dynamics between Pakistan and Bangladesh. This approach acknowledges Meher's observation that "Pakistan has survived considerably longer after division (forty-four years) than the East and West Pakistan managed to live together (twenty-four years)," suggesting that honest confrontation with this history could actually strengthen rather than weaken Pakistan's future stability and regional relationships.[196]

[196] Meher, "Dynamics of Pakistan's Disintegration," 315.

Chapter Two: Research Methodology

As I have demonstrated through detailed analysis, the unresolved tensions between Pakistan and Bangladesh are both concrete and intangible in nature. Within Pakistan, there remains a prevailing sentiment that the past should be relegated to bitter memory and forgotten altogether. However, this approach, one that seeks to bury history, is impractical, especially when one nation demands recognition and accountability, while the other insists on denial and erasure. The reality is that grave human rights violations, no matter how distant in time, are never truly forgotten by those impacted; they become embedded in a people's history, psyche, and collective memory. This is precisely what has occurred in Bangladesh. The events of 1971, particularly the launch of Operation Searchlight and General Yahya Khan's framing of the extermination of millions as a "solution" to the so-called Bengali "problem," have left an indelible mark on the national consciousness. This collective memory is further shaped by the historical marginalization of Bengalis, dating back to the early years of Pakistan's formation, when it became evident that political and economic power was concentrated in the hands of an elite in West Pakistan.

Through the course of my research, it became increasingly clear to me that the rift between Pakistan and Bangladesh is not rooted in opposition from the Bangladeshi government or people, but rather in the deep-seated denial and conflicting narratives within Pakistan itself. Determined to trace the origins of this rupture, I chose to begin with the contradictory accounts of the 1971 genocide, particularly how it is remembered, silenced, or distorted in the minds of Pakistani individuals. As a Pakistani-American, I have personally witnessed how the history of South Asia is largely absent from the American educational system. For many in my generation

(ages 18–29), understanding of Pakistan's past has been passed down through fragmented and often contradictory oral narratives from older family members.

Darkness hangs over the pages missing from my education. The genocide of 1971 existed as a ghostly absence in my schooling, a historical void where three million deaths should have been. When I began questioning my relatives, their responses fractured along fault lines of silence, denial, and carefully curated memory. Some spoke in hushed tones of "unfortunate excesses," others dismissed accounts of systematic rape as "Indian propaganda," while many simply sealed their lips against history's testimony. It was only by peeling away layers of nationalist mythology, confronting declassified documents, and engaging with academic scholarship that I uncovered the blood-soaked truth of what Pakistani forces had done. This journey from inherited silence to historical reckoning revealed not just past atrocities but how their deliberate erasure continues to poison relations between two nations that once shared a flag but never shared power.

My interest in this research was sparked by a deeply personal question that troubled me: how do other Pakistani-Americans understand the bloodshed of 1971, and what whispered histories did their families preserve or discard? What struck me immediately was not consistency but contradiction, a fractured collection of competing truths. These conversations revealed not just different interpretations but fundamentally different realities, each carefully constructed through selective remembrance or strategic forgetting. This pattern of fragmented memory was not merely a diaspora phenomenon. When I expanded my research to Pakistan itself, I discovered similar historical amnesia, perhaps even more profound. Many Pakistanis could recite cricket statistics from the 1990s with precision yet stumbled when asked about a genocide that tore their country in half. What began as an exploration of collective memory within

Pakistani-American communities transformed into a more urgent investigation: how do individuals negotiate a relationship with a history their nation has systematically obscured? The answers revealed not just the politics of remembrance but the powerful ways silence shapes national identity across generations, creating psychological barriers to reconciliation that persist long after political borders have been redrawn.

Overview of Results: Quantitative and Qualitative

In this chapter, I explore contemporary Pakistani attitudes toward Bangladesh and how these perspectives are entangled with broader political narratives. Specifically, I examine how interpretations of the 1971 genocide are connected to the formation of Pakistani nationalist identity and evolving conceptions of justice. My research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative statistical data with qualitative surveys and interviews to provide a nuanced understanding of these attitudes across generations and communities. The chapter is structured around several key themes: the enduring impact of historical grievances, the silencing of survivor narratives, Pakistan's continued refusal to offer a formal apology, generational perspectives on the politics of memory and national identity, the educational and historical erasure of 1971, gendered narratives and the marginalization of sexual violence, and regional and socio-cultural differences within the Pakistani public. Together, these themes illuminate how history continues to shape contemporary political consciousness and collective memory.

Survey Collection

As mentioned above, my mixed-methods approach draws from both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative portion stems from a Google Form survey I created, available in both English and a translated Urdu version, to reach a wide range of Pakistani individuals. While I recognize that leveraging personal networks can sometimes limit the scope of a study,

my initial distribution through friends, family, and peers proved to be a productive starting point. I was initially apprehensive about how far this strategy would take me, but my network organically expanded the survey's reach. The form was circulated among Pakistani communities across the United States and sent to contacts in Pakistan, eventually reaching a broader demographic than I had anticipated. The survey targeted a diverse sample across age, gender, education levels, socio-economic status, and geographical location. It was designed to measure generational, regional, and educational differences in perception, while also leaving room for respondents to share personal narratives that shape those views. I launched the survey in June 2024 and continued collecting responses until March 2025. In total, I received 159 responses, which form the core dataset for this study.

The completely anonymous survey began with a series of demographic questions designed to contextualize individual responses and evaluate whether factors such as age, gender, education, and socio-economic status influence attitudes toward Bangladesh. Respondents were asked about their national origin, residency, and religious affiliation, followed by questions regarding their educational background, income bracket, and whether they live in urban, suburban, or rural environments. These variables were intentionally selected to facilitate cross-sectional comparisons, enabling an analysis of whether younger, more educated, or urban-based respondents demonstrate greater historical awareness and openness to reconciliation than their older or less formally educated counterparts.

Following the demographic section, the survey turned to perceptions of Bangladesh's independence in 1971, incorporating both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. Respondents were asked to categorize their view of Bangladesh's independence as positive, negative, or neutral and to elaborate on their thoughts regarding Pakistan's handling of the war.

To assess levels of historical awareness, the survey included questions about whether respondents had been taught about the 1971 war in school, discussed it within their families, or encountered it through alternative sources such as social media or independent research. Additionally, a Likert scale was employed to measure the degree to which respondents believe the events of 1971 continue to influence contemporary political relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

A central focus of the survey was the role of historical memory and denial, particularly in relation to the 1971 genocide, mass violence, and the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war. To explore this, I included targeted questions assessing whether respondents had ever encountered information about the exclusion, persecution, and sexual violence inflicted upon Bengalis during the 1971 genocide. To further probe contemporary understandings, respondents were asked to reflect on how the societal stigmatization of survivors, referred to as birangona or "war heroines," continues to influence historical narratives and efforts toward reconciliation today. These questions were framed to identify not only gaps in historical knowledge but also the ways in which state-driven distortions and silences have shaped collective memory and Pakistani nationalist identity. Recognizing that many respondents may have limited exposure to this aspect of history, I provided a brief excerpt within the survey for context on the nature and scale of the sexual violence.

> "The prevalence of cultural and structural violence, rooted in misogyny and patriarchy, created an environment that enabled sexual assault. Once a woman was raped, she often faced rejection from her family and was stigmatized by society. With no acceptance at home and outside of it, many of these women found themselves with nowhere to turn. Tragically, some resorted to taking their own lives. Despite being labeled *birangona* or "war heroines" by the Bangladeshi government, these women continued to endure the heavy burden of societal stigma."

To examine interpersonal and societal biases, the survey incorporated questions assessing negative perceptions toward Bangladesh, including whether respondents or individuals in their

social circles held such views. This was complemented by questions about personal or familial relationships with people of Bengali origin and whether such connections shaped respondents' perspectives. To further understand generational dynamics, the survey asked whether Pakistani youth view Bangladesh differently than older generations, offering insight into the influence of globalization, education, and evolving political discourses. The survey concluded with an open-ended question inviting respondents to share personal reflections, historical memories, or lived experiences, ensuring that the study captured both quantitative trends and qualitative nuance. The resulting data serve as the foundation for a rigorous investigation into how nationalist identity, collective memory, and state narratives shape contemporary Pakistani attitudes toward Bangladesh.

Introduction to Quantitative & Qualitative Results

To analyze the survey data, I employed both Stata and R. Stata was used for data cleaning, regression analysis, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests, enabling a detailed investigation into how variables such as age, education, region, and socio-economic status shape public attitudes. Logistic regression models revealed that younger and more educated respondents were significantly more likely to acknowledge the 1971 war and support reconciliation, while older and less educated individuals tended to reject historical accountability. In R, I conducted sentiment analysis on open-ended responses and visualized key trends using *ggplot2*, generating bar charts, density plots, and scatterplots to highlight generational divides, levels of historical awareness, and regional disparities. The combined use of statistical tools and visualization and text analysis allowed for a comprehensive and data-driven exploration of how nationalist identity and collective memory continue to shape contemporary Pakistani views of Bangladesh.

The results reveal striking generational variations in attitudes, with younger Pakistanis (ages 18–29) significantly more likely to acknowledge the atrocities committed during the 1971 war, express support for reconciliation, and advocate for historical accountability. In contrast, older generations (particularly those 50 and above) often downplay or deny the extent of wartime violence, frequently framing the conflict as an "insurgency" or attributing the secession of East Pakistan to Indian interference rather than acknowledging internal political and military oppression. These views reflect broader patterns of historical memory and state-sponsored narratives, emphasizing the crucial role of education and global exposure in shaping perceptions of Pakistan–Bangladesh relations.

Education emerges as a particularly influential factor in awareness and openness to historical accountability. Respondents with higher levels of education were more likely to recognize the scale and severity of the war's human rights violations. However, many noted that their knowledge of 1971 came not from school curricula but through personal research, higher education abroad, or alternative media sources. This underscores the enduring impact of Pakistan's limited and often sanitized historical education, which has contributed to a fragmented and contested public memory. While some respondents interpreted Bangladesh's independence as a justified liberation struggle, others, especially those from older or less-educated demographics, continued to view it as a betrayal of national unity. These personal and intergenerational dynamics shaped attitudes in deeply emotional ways. Several older respondents shared nostalgic memories of a unified Pakistan before the split, often recalling East Pakistan as a cultural and economic partner. Meanwhile, many younger interviewees expressed both empathy for the suffering of Bengalis and frustration with Pakistan's persistent denial of war crimes. This generational divergence not only reflects a growing shift in historical consciousness

but also underscores the larger politics of memory that continues to influence how 1971 is remembered, forgotten, or contested in contemporary Pakistani society.

Regional and socio-economic disparities also shape these perceptions. Urban respondents, particularly from cities like Karachi and Islamabad, tended to exhibit greater openness toward reconciliation and historical accountability. In contrast, rural populations and respondents from Punjab more often echoed state-driven nationalist narratives that justify or obscure the actions of the Pakistani military during the war. These regional distinctions will be further explored in a Chapter Six, which examines the vast narrative differences between Punjab and other parts of Pakistan.

The findings also underscore the enduring influence of nationalist discourse and historical erasure in shaping contemporary Pakistani attitudes toward Bangladesh. A significant number of respondents noted that they were never formally educated about the mass violence, sexual atrocities, and systematic repression committed against Bengalis during the 1971 genocide. This absence of historical education has contributed to a collective amnesia that reinforces hierarchical perceptions, with some respondents continuing to view Bangladesh as economically or culturally inferior, despite the country's notable progress since gaining independence. While many acknowledged that Islam could serve as a potential point of solidarity between the two nations, historical grievances and entrenched nationalist identity often override religious commonality. Several respondents highlighted the persistence of negative stereotypes and stigmatization of Bengalis within Pakistan, often linked to perceptions of their cultural and linguistic proximity to India. These attitudes reflect how selective national memory continues to shape inter-state and inter-community dynamics today.

Despite enduring tensions, the findings suggest that globalization and expanded access to information are gradually transforming historical narratives among younger Pakistanis. Many respondents in the 18–29 age group reported engaging with Bangladeshi media, student-led movements, and historical discourse through social platforms, exposure that has fostered greater empathy and a deeper understanding of the injustices committed during 1971. This shift signals a broader generational transformation in historical consciousness, with younger Pakistanis demonstrating a greater willingness to confront and critically examine the past than their predecessors. Nevertheless, meaningful reconciliation remains constrained by significant obstacles: the lack of an official apology from the Pakistani state, the continued dominance of nationalist rhetoric, and the social stigma that still surrounds Pakistan's role in the war.

The interviews revealed strikingly diverse narratives about 1971, illuminating how historical consciousness is shaped at the intersection of generational experience, education, and geographical context. By engaging participants across Pakistan, I was able to capture a multidimensional picture of historical memory. Older participants, particularly those with military backgrounds or rural upbringings, consistently echoed state narratives that have dominated Pakistan's official discourse for decades. Educational background emerged as a crucial variable. Participants with international education or exposure to scholarly resources beyond Pakistan's curriculum displayed a more nuanced understanding of the complex factors leading to Bangladesh's independence. An academic from Lahore with a foreign doctorate candidly acknowledged "systematic military brutality" and "West Pakistan's colonial mindset," while those educated exclusively within Pakistan's system tended to reproduce sanitized versions of history that minimize violence and emphasize external interference.

These qualitative findings give human texture to the statistical patterns identified in the survey data, revealing not just what Pakistanis believe about 1971, but how these beliefs are constructed, maintained, and occasionally challenged through family stories, institutional education, and growing access to alternative historical accounts. The interviews capture a society in transition, where inherited silences are increasingly disrupted by new voices demanding historical reckoning. The subsequent chapters will explore these findings in greater depth, with quantitative analysis of survey responses and qualitative insights drawn from interviews.

Chapter Three: Family and Memory Intergenerational Transmission

In the living room of a Pakistani home in suburban America, a teenage girl asks her grandfather about his memories of East Pakistan. The conversation pauses. Her father shifts uncomfortably in his chair. Her grandmother suddenly remembers something urgent in the kitchen. The question hangs in the air, neither answered nor acknowledged, before the conversation drifts to safer waters, cricket scores, upcoming weddings, school achievements. Another piece of history slips between the generations, replaced by a whispered absence. This scene, one I witnessed countless times in my own family and in the homes of other Pakistani-Americans, captures the essence of what this research seeks to understand: how memory of the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh is transmitted, contested, or silenced across generations in Pakistani families. For many young Pakistanis, the first encounter with this history comes not through detailed accounts but through these telling silences, through stories that begin but never end, through textbooks that mention a “civil war” but omit its casualties, through family photo albums with carefully excised chapters.

Statistical and Survey Analysis

The question that initially drove my research was deceptively simple: What explains the dramatically different narratives about 1971 that exist within Pakistani families? What began as a personal exploration soon revealed a broader pattern with profound implications for Pakistani national identity and the prospects for reconciliation with Bangladesh. Through surveys of 159 Pakistanis across multiple generations and in-depth interviews with families, this chapter maps the outlines of these generational differences in historical memory. It examines how age influences knowledge about 1971, attitudes toward reconciliation, and willingness to

acknowledge atrocities including sexual violence. The findings reveal not just what is remembered, but who remembers, how they learned it, and what remains deliberately forgotten.

The data tells a story of gradual but incomplete transformation. Younger Pakistanis, particularly those aged 18-29, demonstrate significantly greater willingness to acknowledge historical wrongdoing and support reconciliation efforts compared to older generations. Yet these shifts in historical consciousness are uneven and constrained by persistent silences. They reflect not just changing access to information but evolving conceptions of national identity, what it means to be Pakistani in relation to a painful past. As one young respondent poignantly observed: *"We can't build a better future by burying the past. Each generation has to decide whether to inherit their parents' silences or to speak what they couldn't."* This chapter explores that inheritance and the complex ways in which Pakistani families navigate the memory of 1971 across the generations.

These patterns of remembrance and forgetting are not merely anecdotal. They emerge consistently across generations in Pakistani families, revealing structural patterns in how historical memory is transmitted. To understand these patterns systematically, this study employs both quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews, allowing for a comprehensive examination of how age influences historical awareness, attitudes toward reconciliation, and willingness to acknowledge past atrocities. The survey findings reveal significant generational variations that cannot be attributed to chance or individual family differences. They point instead to broader societal shifts in how the events of 1971 are remembered and interpreted. Perhaps most striking among these findings is the relationship between age and support for an official Pakistani apology to Bangladesh, a measure that directly addresses questions of historical accountability and national identity. As the following analysis demonstrates, this relationship

provides a window into evolving conceptions of Pakistan’s past and its implications for the present.

The independent variable for 3.1 is age group, which will remain constant throughout the tests in this chapter while the dependent variable will change, to help better understand the variables in this section, refer to **Table 3.1** for this section of my analysis.

Table 3.1:

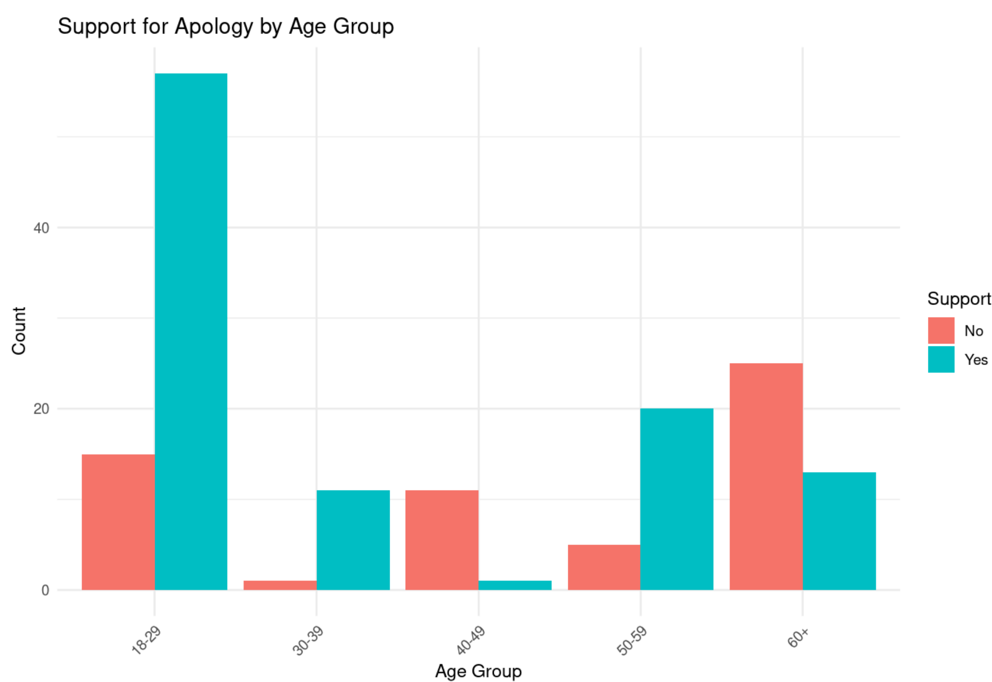
Variable	Definition	Type	Coding	Rationale
IV: Age Group	The primary predictor variable in this analysis.	Categorical	1 = 18-29, 2 = 30-39, 3 = 40-49, 4 = 50-59, 5 = 60+	Used to assess whether younger respondents hold different views compared to older generations.
DV1: Attitudes Toward an Official Apology	Response to *"Do you believe Pakistan should issue an official apology to Bangladesh for the events of 1971?"*	Categorical (Binary for logistic regression)	1 = Yes; 0 = No / Unsure / Prefer not to say	Tests whether younger Pakistanis are more likely to support an official apology.
DV2: Perceived Impact of 1971 on Current Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations	Response to "*To what extent do you think the events of 1971 influence current political relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh?"*	Likert Scale (Ordinal)	1 = Not at all; 2-3 = Moderate impact; 4-5 = Strong impact	Assesses whether younger respondents see 1971 as more politically relevant today.
DV3: Awareness of the Mass Rape Campaign in 1971	Response to *"Are you aware of the mass rape campaign during the 1971 Liberation War...?"*	Binary	1 = Yes; 0 = No / Unsure	Tests whether younger respondents have more awareness of gender-based war crimes.
DV4: Exposure to 1971 in Education or Family	Response to *"Were you taught about the Liberation War of 1971, or was it mentioned by your family?"*	Categorical or Ordinal	1 = Yes, in school; 2 = Yes, by family; 3 = Both school and family; 4 = Not taught at all	Examines how historical knowledge is passed down generationally.
DV5: Negative Perceptions Toward Bangladesh	Response to *"Do you or someone you know hold negative perceptions about Bangladesh?"*	Binary or Ordinal	1 = Yes (self or someone I know); 0 = No	Reflects latent stigma and enduring ethnocentric or nationalist biases.
DV6: Association with People of Bengali Origin	Response to *"Do you or your family have close connections with people of Bengali origin?"*	Ordinal or Binary	1 = We have close connections with Bengalis; 2 = We associate with both equally; 0 = Primarily Pakistani	Indicates exposure and social closeness to Bengali communities, which may influence attitudes.

Support for an Official Apology

Perhaps no measure more powerfully captures the generational transformation in attitudes toward Bangladesh than the question of whether Pakistan should issue an official apology for the events of 1971. This seemingly straightforward question, one that directly addresses historical accountability, reveals dramatic differences across age cohorts.

This analysis explores whether age plays a role in shaping public support for Pakistan issuing an official apology to Bangladesh for the events of 1971. To assess this, I used two complementary methods. First, I used a Pearson's Chi-Square Test, a common method for analyzing survey data, to check whether there is a meaningful relationship between a person's age and their stance on the apology. Second, I applied a type of statistical model (logistic regression) that helps estimate how likely people of different age groups are to support an apology. This approach also highlights which age groups are more or less likely to show support compared to others. Together, these tools help illustrate whether generational differences influence how Pakistanis view the question of historical accountability.

Figure 3.1: Support for Official Apology by Age Group



As Figure 3.1 illustrates, support for an official apology diminishes significantly with age, creating a stark contrast between younger and older Pakistanis. A Pearson's chi-square test was conducted to examine whether support for Pakistan issuing an official apology to Bangladesh varies significantly across age groups. The test produced a chi-square statistic of $X^2 = 44.81$ with 4 degrees of freedom and a highly significant p-value of approximately 4.36×10^{-9}. This result provides compelling evidence of a strong association between age and attitudes toward an official apology, suggesting that generational differences meaningfully shape public opinion on this issue. A closer look at the data further highlights this divide. Among respondents aged 18–29, a substantial majority (57 out of 72) support an apology, reflecting a strong openness to reconciliation within the youngest cohort. The 30–39 group shows a similar trend, with 11 out of 12 respondents in favor. However, a stark contrast appears in the 40–49 age group, where only 1 out of 12 supports an apology, while 11 oppose it. The 50–59 group reflects a more conciliatory stance again, with 20 out of 25 respondents supporting an apology. In contrast, the 60+ group leans more firmly against it, with 25 out of 38 opposing.

The dramatic variations in support for an official apology across age cohorts reflect specific historical experiences that have shaped each generation's relationship to Pakistan's national identity and historical memory. The 40-49 age cohort, which shows the lowest support for an apology (8.3%), came of age during General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime (1977-1988), a period characterized by intense Islamization policies and nationalist education reforms.[197] These individuals were schooled during an era when Pakistan history textbooks were dramatically revised to emphasize Islamic unity and minimize internal divisions, including the events of 1971.

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[197] Burki, Shahid Javed, Craig Baxter, Robert LaPorte, and Azfar Kamal. *Pakistan under the Military: Eleven Years of Zia Ul-Haq*. Westview Special Studies on South and Southeast Asia. Boulder: Lahore: Westview Press ; Pak Book Corp, 1991.

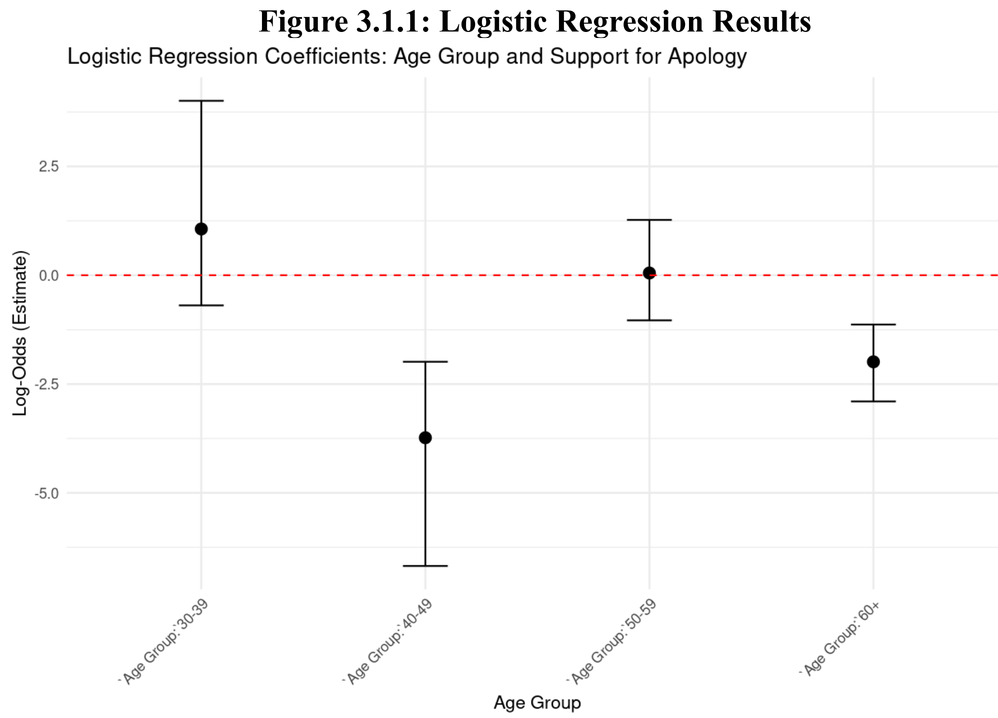
Their formative political consciousness was shaped by state narratives that framed Bangladesh's independence as a conspiracy rather than the result of systematic oppression. In contrast, respondents aged 18-29, who show the highest support for an apology (79.2%), have grown up in a dramatically different information environment. This generation has come of age during the digital revolution, with unprecedented access to alternative historical narratives through direct engagement with Bengali perspectives online. Unlike their older counterparts, they have not experienced the intense nationalist socialization of the Zia era, nor do they carry the personal emotional investment in defending Pakistan's actions that characterizes some older respondents.

The unexpected spike in support for an apology among the 50-59 cohort (80%) represents another historically specific experience. This generation reached political consciousness during or shortly after 1971 itself, often witnessing the immediate aftermath of Bangladesh's independence and the national soul-searching that briefly followed. Many were educated before the systematic revision of textbooks under Zia and may retain more complex understandings of this period. Their attitudes suggest that proximity to the actual events does not necessarily produce denial; rather, the strongest resistance appears in generations most heavily exposed to state-driven nationalist narratives during their formative years.

These findings are pivotal to my thesis for several reasons. First, they empirically demonstrate that attitudes toward historical accountability are not fixed but evolve across generations, suggesting potential pathways toward greater acknowledgment and reconciliation in the future. Second, they illustrate how state control over historical narratives, particularly through educational institutions during the Zia regime, has profoundly shaped collective memory in ways that continue to influence contemporary political attitudes. Finally, the emergence of more reconciliatory attitudes among younger Pakistanis suggests nationalist frameworks that

have long constrained public discourse about 1971 may gradually lose their hold on collective consciousness.

Figure 3.1.1: Logistic Regression Results



The logistic regression model and its accompanying visualization provide strong evidence of generational differences in attitudes toward whether Pakistan should issue an official apology to Bangladesh. In this analysis, the youngest group, those aged 18–29, is used as a reference point, meaning that all other age groups are compared to them. The results reveal a clear generational divide. People aged 30–39 are slightly more likely to support an apology than those in the youngest group, although the difference is small. A more dramatic shift appears among those aged 40–49, who are significantly less likely to support an apology, indicating a sharp decline in support in this age bracket. Similarly, respondents aged 60 and older also show a notable lack of support. In contrast, the 50–59 group does not differ meaningfully from the youngest group, suggesting a more neutral stance.

The data visualization accompanying this model helps illustrate these findings by showing how the level of support changes across age groups and whether the results are statistically reliable. When the lines in the chart (called confidence intervals) cross a central line, it means there is not enough evidence to say there is a clear difference from the youngest group. Where the lines stay clearly above or below, it signals stronger evidence of difference. These results show that younger Pakistanis, especially those aged 18–29, are much more likely to support the idea of an official apology and broader reconciliation with Bangladesh. Older generations, particularly those aged 40–49 and 60+, are more resistant or indifferent to such gestures. These generational patterns point to deeper differences in how historical memory, political identity, and moral responsibility are understood in contemporary Pakistan.

These statistical findings align with qualitative insights gathered through interviews. As one respondent in the 18-29 age group explained: *"Our generation didn't live through the war, but we have more access to information about what really happened. It's easier for us to acknowledge the past because we don't feel personally implicated."* In contrast, a respondent from the 40-49 cohort stated: *"Why should we apologize? Both sides committed atrocities, and Bangladesh has moved on. Opening old wounds serves no purpose."*

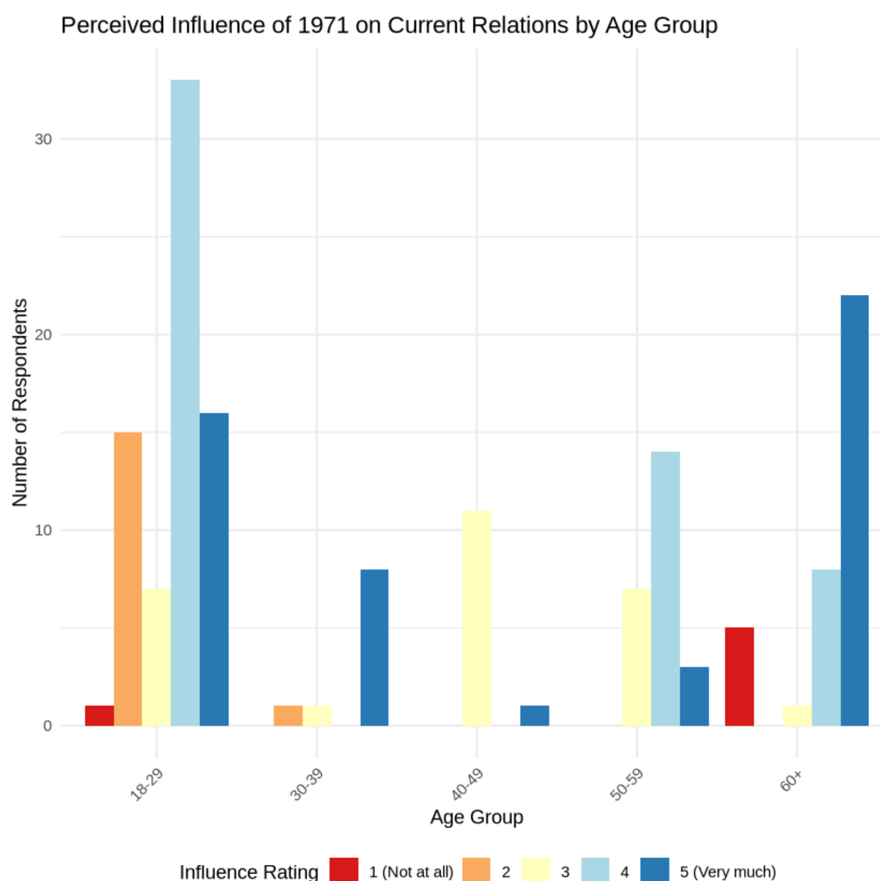
The non-linear pattern across age groups, with particularly low support in the 40-49 cohort, suggests that attitudes are shaped not just by chronological distance from events but by specific generational experiences. This cohort's formative years coincided with a period of intensified nationalist identity construction that may have shaped their resistance to historical accountability. The generational pattern in apology support provides compelling evidence for this thesis's broader argument: that attitudes toward Bangladesh are inextricably linked to conceptions of Pakistani national identity that are themselves generationally structured. For

younger Pakistanis, acknowledging historical wrongdoing does not threaten their sense of national self; for many older Pakistanis, particularly those socialized during periods of heightened nationalism, such acknowledgment remains deeply challenging.

Perceptions of Historical Impact on Contemporary Relations

This model explores whether a respondent's age group significantly shapes how they perceive the ongoing impact of the 1971 genocide on present-day Pakistan–Bangladesh relations. The question was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "Not at all" and 5 represented "Very much," capturing how relevant respondents believe the events of 1971 remain to current political dynamics. Because this type of response is ranked rather than purely numerical, I used an ordinal logistic regression model. This method allows us to examine how different age groups, treated as distinct categories, are associated with varying degrees of perceived influence, while respecting the ordered nature of the response scale. By using this approach, I aim to assess whether generational differences play a role in how strongly individuals believe the legacy of 1971 continues to shape Pakistan's contemporary relationship with Bangladesh.

Figure 3.2: Perceived Impact of 1971 on Current Relations by Age Group



An ordinal logistic regression was conducted to examine whether perceptions of the lasting influence of 1971 on present-day Pakistan–Bangladesh relations vary by age group. The dependent variable, measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Very much," captures respondents' views on the extent to which the events of 1971 continue to shape political dynamics between the two countries. The model uses the 18–29 age group as the reference category, allowing comparisons across generational cohorts.

Notably, those in the 30–39 age group were the most likely to see 1971 as a continuing source of tension, suggesting that individuals in this cohort, many of whom came of age during Pakistan's political shifts in the late 1990s and early 2000s, may have encountered more critical

perspectives or alternative histories than other generations. Respondents aged 60 and above also expressed a strong sense that 1971 continues to shape political relations today. This could reflect their direct or personal memories of the war, as many in this group lived through the events themselves. In contrast, individuals in the 40–49 age group were the least likely to view 1971 as politically relevant today. Their relative detachment may be linked to the dominant state narratives during their formative years, which tended to frame the war either as an internal disturbance or as a conflict instigated by India. Interestingly, the 50–59 age group, those who came of age just after the war, showed levels of awareness and engagement similar to the youngest generation, aged 18–29, who may be learning about the conflict through independent research or globalized media, rather than traditional education systems.

Taken together, these findings show that generational positioning plays a crucial role in shaping how people think about Pakistan's historical responsibilities and its relationship with Bangladesh today. The data supports a broader argument of this thesis: that memory is not evenly passed down, but is filtered through education, family narratives, and the political environment of the time. Some generations carry deep-seated memories of the war, whether personal or inherited, while others reflect a gap in transmission or exposure to alternative histories. This divergence helps explain contemporary disagreements over reconciliation, apology, and national identity.

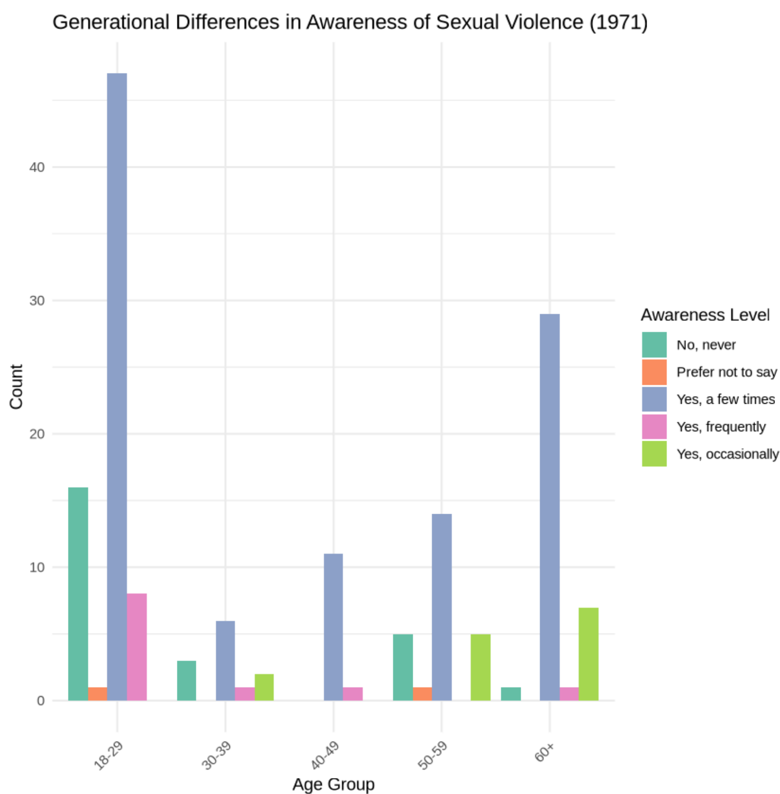
Interview data helps illuminate this distinction. A respondent in their 30s explained: *"The events of 1971 cast a long shadow over South Asian politics. The wounds haven't healed, and we see this in diplomatic tensions, cultural attitudes, and even economic relations."* An older respondent in his 60s similarly noted: *"Those of us who lived through that period understand how deeply it shaped the region. Young people may read about it, but they don't feel its weight*

the same way." This generational perspective on historical impact suggests an important distinction between intellectual acknowledgment and emotional connection to historical events. Younger Pakistanis may be more willing to support an apology as a matter of principle, while those with lived experience or closer proximity to the events may feel their ongoing resonance more acutely. At the same time, the particularly low perception of impact among the 40-49 cohort aligns with their low support for an apology, suggesting a consistent pattern of historical disengagement in this specific generation.

Awareness of Sexual Violence

One of the most sensitive aspects of the 1971 war is the systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war by Pakistani forces. The survey investigated whether awareness of this aspect of the conflict varies significantly by age group. To evaluate this association, I employed a Pearson's Chi-Square Test, which is used to determine whether variations in awareness are meaningfully related to the generational cohort.

Figure 3.2.1: Awareness of Sexual Violence During 1971 by Age Group



This section explores how awareness of sexual violence during the 1971 genocide varies across generations. The analysis reveals meaningful differences in awareness levels between age groups, suggesting that one's generational positioning plays a critical role in shaping whether and how these traumatic histories are known. While a statistical test confirmed that these differences are significant, what matters most for our purposes is how clearly these generational patterns emerge in the data. Among older respondents, particularly those aged 40–49 and 60+, awareness of the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war appears especially widespread. The 40–49 cohort was the only group in which every respondent had heard of this violence, and most reported hearing about it multiple times. Likewise, among the 60+ group, over three-quarters reported at least some awareness, with very few indicating they had never heard of it. These patterns suggest that those who were alive during or shortly after the war may have had more direct access to narratives about these events, whether through lived experience, media coverage, or oral accounts passed down during a period when the memory of the war was still fresh.

The patterns shift notably among younger respondents. In the 18–29 age group, while a majority reported some level of awareness, nearly a quarter had never heard of the mass sexual violence during the war. At the same time, this group also had the highest number of respondents who said they had frequently encountered the topic, indicating a polarized pattern: some are deeply informed and engaged, while others remain entirely unaware. This may reflect uneven educational exposure or the varying influence of social media and independent research. The 30–39 group, meanwhile, reported the highest level of non-awareness overall, suggesting that the generational transmission of this history may have faltered most sharply here. Respondents aged 50–59 presented a more balanced distribution, with roughly half indicating occasional awareness and the rest fairly split between those with no knowledge and those who had encountered the

topic more often. This group may have experienced transitional shifts in how the war was remembered, witnessing both the fading of first-hand accounts and the rise of state narratives that often downplayed or omitted the subject of sexual violence altogether.

Taken together, these findings reveal not only a generational memory gap but also a broader societal discomfort around discussing gendered violence. While older generations appear more likely to have at least encountered these narratives, their discussions often occur in more occasional or commemorative contexts. For younger respondents, awareness is shaped more by independent inquiry than formal education or family dialogue, leading to significant gaps in knowledge. The polarized pattern among youth further underscores the importance of peer education and intergenerational dialogue in reconstructing and preserving marginalized histories.

More broadly, these generational differences reflect the long-term consequences of historical silencing and selective remembrance. They raise critical questions about how societies choose which parts of their past to remember, and which to forget, and how those choices are embedded in educational institutions, family dynamics, and cultural taboos. This complex distribution of awareness about wartime sexual violence across age cohorts reflects Pakistan's evolving relationship with this particularly sensitive aspect of the 1971 conflict. The near-universal awareness in the 40-49 cohort (91.67% reporting some awareness) contradicts what might be expected from a generation educated during the Zia ul-Haq era, when historical narratives were most tightly controlled. This apparent contradiction can be understood by examining the political climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when this cohort entered adulthood. The democratization period following Zia's death in 1988 coincided with the emergence of feminist movements in Pakistan and greater international attention to wartime sexual violence, particularly following revelations about systematic rape in Bosnia (1992-1995).

This generation may have encountered discussions of 1971's sexual violence not through formal education but through the political discourse of this transitional period.

The high awareness among the 60+ cohort (76.32%) likely stems from direct temporal proximity to the events. Many in this group were young adults during the 1971 war, and despite official silence, knowledge of sexual violence circulated through personal networks, international media reports, and the testimony of returning soldiers. The immediate post-war period (1972-1977) under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto also allowed for somewhat more open discussion of the war before the systematic erasure began under Zia's regime. The polarized awareness in the youngest cohort (18-29) reflects Pakistan's fragmented information environment in the digital age. The high percentage reporting frequent awareness (11.11%, the highest of any group) represents those with access to digital resources, international perspectives, and feminist discourse that has increasingly highlighted wartime sexual violence. Conversely, the significant portion (22.22%) reporting no awareness demonstrates the persistence of silence in many educational and family contexts. This generation's information environment is characterized by both unprecedented access to alternative narratives and the continuing influence of traditional institutional silences. The 30-39 age group's relatively high rate of non-awareness (25%) is particularly revealing, as this generation came of age during the 1990s and early 2000s when Pakistan experienced intensified militarization under Musharraf and renewed emphasis on nationalist narratives following nuclear tests and the Kargil War.[198] This period saw a reinforcement of state-centered security discourse that may have further marginalized critical engagement with 1971.

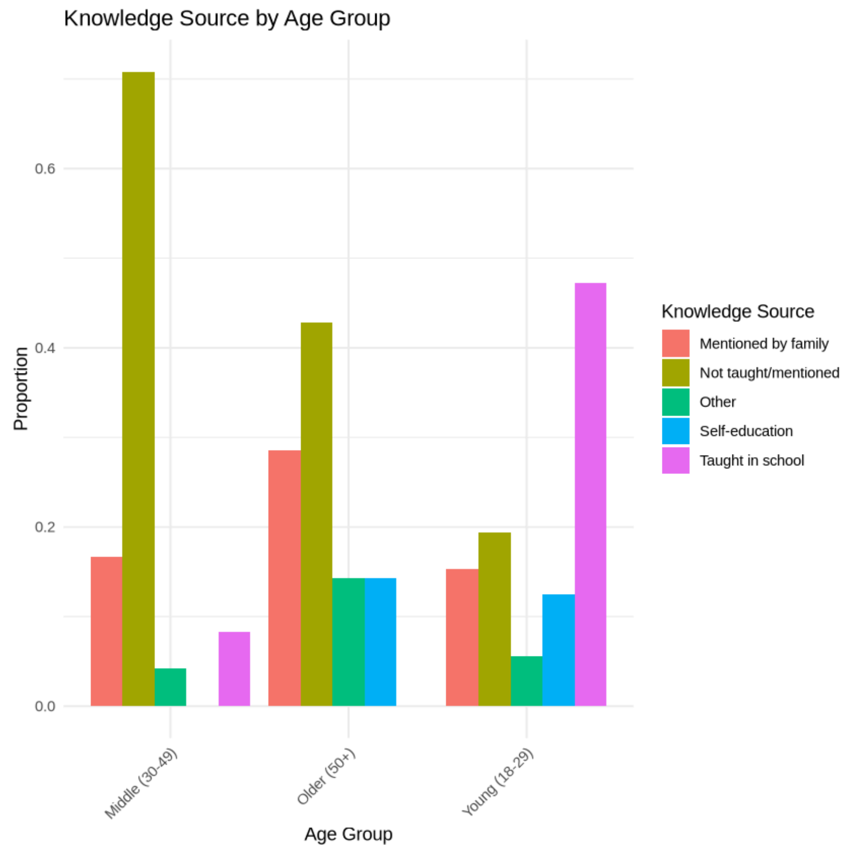
[198] Rizvi, Hasan Askari, and Hasan Askari Rizvi. *The Military and Politics in Pakistan: 1947 - 1997*. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2000.

These varying patterns demonstrate how awareness of sexual violence has been shaped not just by proximity to events but by specific political moments that either enabled or constrained discussion. The findings highlight how gendered aspects of conflict remain particularly vulnerable to erasure in historical memory, with implications for how Pakistani society understands both its past actions and current gender dynamics. The absence of a linear pattern across generations suggests that transmitting knowledge about sensitive historical topics like sexual violence operates differently than other aspects of historical memory, influenced by broader societal taboos surrounding gender and sexuality that transcend generational boundaries.

Transmission of Historical Knowledge Across Generations

A key question in understanding generational attitudes concerns how Pakistanis from different age cohorts learn about 1971. The survey specifically asked respondents whether they were taught about the genocide in school, by family members, both, or not at all. This model investigates the generational transmission of historical knowledge by analyzing the relationship between age group and exposure to information about the 1971 genocide, using both Pearson's Chi-Square Test and Fisher's Exact Test.

Figure 3.3: Sources of Knowledge About 1971 by Age Group



This model examines how historical knowledge of the 1971 genocide is passed down across generations. The results indicate a strong relationship between age group and the way individuals have encountered this history. In simpler terms, how people learn about 1971, whether through school, family, or other sources, varies significantly depending on their age. A Pearson's Chi-Square Test confirmed this connection with a highly significant result, meaning the differences across age groups are not due to chance. Another measure, Cramer's V, showed the strength of this relationship to be quite high. To ensure the accuracy of these results, especially since some categories had fewer responses, a second test (Fisher's Exact Test) was used, which further validated the findings.

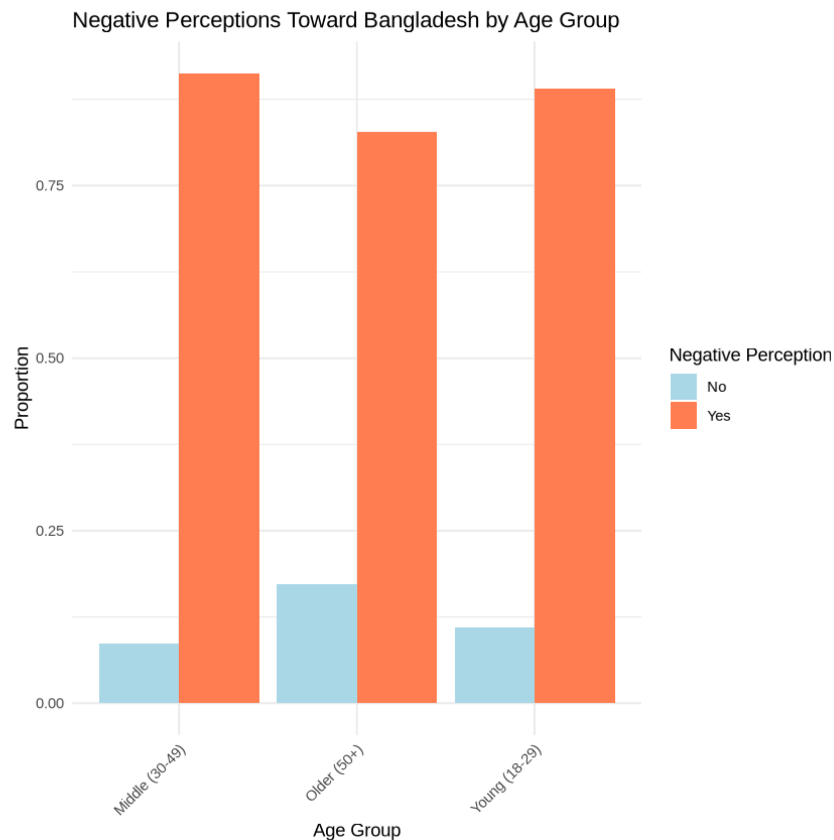
What does this mean in practice? Younger Pakistanis (aged 18–29) are far more likely to have learned about the 1971 genocide through formal schooling. For example, 34 respondents in this age group indicated they had encountered the topic in an educational setting. On the other hand, older respondents, particularly those over 50, reported learning about the war mainly through family conversations, or, in many cases, not at all. This generational shift points to an important transformation in how history is communicated: while older generations often relied on family narratives (which were shaped by the political climate of the time), younger people are more likely to engage with structured, institutional versions of history. These findings have important implications. They suggest that educational reforms, media access, and global conversations about justice and accountability may be influencing how younger generations understand Pakistan's past. Meanwhile, the reliance on oral memory among older generations may explain some of the lingering historical silences and selective recollections around 1971.

This statistical evidence supports the chapter's central claims: **that age and generational context are key to understanding how Pakistanis relate to the history of Bangladesh.** The generational differences in how historical knowledge is acquired have important implications for understanding the variations in attitudes toward Bangladesh. Formal education may present more standardized (though not necessarily more accurate) narratives, while family transmission can vary widely based on personal experiences, political affiliations, and regional backgrounds. The data points to a generational transition from intergenerational memory toward institutionalized education, signaling a broader change in how collective memory is constructed in Pakistan.

Negative Perceptions and Social Connections

Not all aspects of attitudes toward Bangladesh show significant generational variation. The model examines whether negative perceptions toward Bangladesh and social connections with Bengali communities vary by age, exploring underlying stigma and the persistence of ethnocentric or nationalist biases in attitudes toward Bangladesh.

Figure 3.4: Negative Perceptions Toward Bangladesh by Age Group



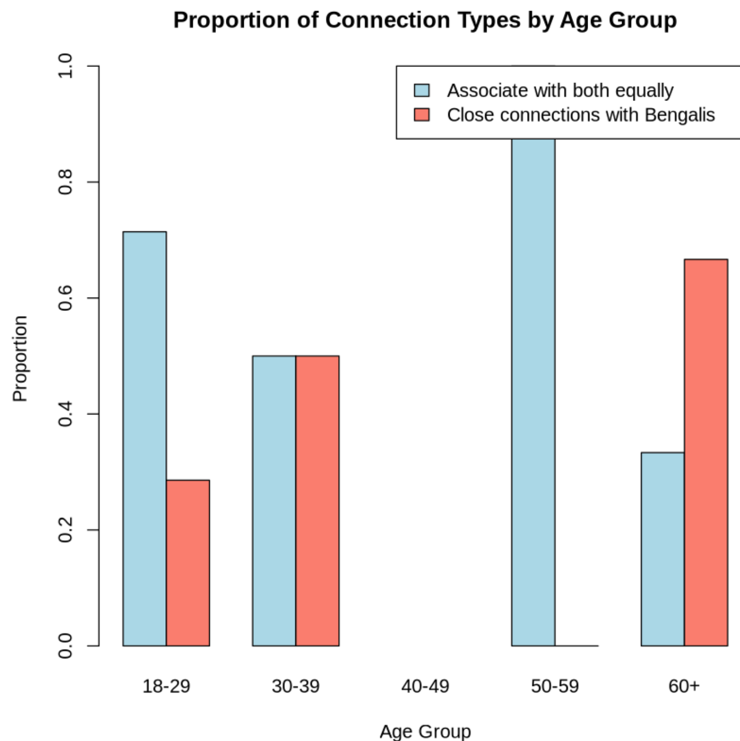
This section examines whether underlying negative perceptions, or what can be termed latent stigma, toward Bangladesh differ across age groups. To explore this question, I conducted statistical analyses that measure whether younger or older Pakistanis are more likely to hold such views. Surprisingly, the results indicate that there is no significant relationship between age and holding negative perceptions of Bangladesh.

The Pearson's Chi-Square Test showed no meaningful association between age group and negative perceptions. In simple terms, this means that younger, middle-aged, and older respondents were all about equally likely, or unlikely, to express such views. A second model using logistic regression, which further tested the likelihood of different age groups holding negative views while comparing each group to the youngest cohort (18–29), confirmed the same pattern. Neither middle-aged nor older respondents were statistically more or less likely than younger respondents to express negative perceptions. The slight differences that did emerge were small, not statistically reliable, and fell within wide margins of uncertainty. These results are especially noteworthy because they stand in contrast to several other findings in this study, such as awareness of wartime sexual violence or support for an apology where generational differences were stark. In those areas, younger respondents were consistently more historically aware and open to reconciliation. Here, however, attitudes appear to be more consistent across generations.

This consistency suggests that negative perceptions toward Bangladesh, unlike historical knowledge or political attitudes, may be shaped by broader and more deeply entrenched social forces. Rather than being a product of when someone came of age or how they learned about the 1971 genocide, these stigmas may stem from longstanding cultural narratives, state-led messaging, or shared social norms that cut across age groups. This uniformity challenges the assumption that younger generations are inherently more progressive on all issues, and calls for a closer look at what reinforces these perceptions across the population. These findings carry important implications for both research and policy. First, they suggest that combating stigma toward Bangladesh may require more than just generational change or educational reform, it may demand broader cultural or political interventions. Second, it highlights the need for further

qualitative investigation into other possible influences on stigma, such as regional identity, political affiliation, or media exposure. Finally, the data invite reflection on how certain nationalist or ethnocentric narratives have been normalized in Pakistani discourse, becoming so deeply rooted that they persist across age cohorts.

Figure 3.4.1: Social Connection to Bangladesh by Age Group



Similarly, this model tests whether age is associated with levels of exposure to and social closeness with Bengali communities, factors that may influence broader attitudes toward Bangladesh. To explore this relationship, I employed a combination of Pearson's Chi-Square Test, Fisher's Exact Test, and Binary Logistic Regression.

To explore whether age influences social closeness to Bengali communities, respondents were asked if they or their families had close connections with people of Bengali origin. Responses were organized into three categories: those who reported close connections, those who associated equally with both Bengalis and Pakistanis, and those who primarily associated

with Pakistanis. Initial visual analysis suggested potential generational variation. For instance, respondents aged 60 and above appeared more likely to report close personal ties to Bengalis, whereas younger participants (18–29) showed more mixed responses, including a notable number who were primarily associated with other Pakistanis. Still, statistical tests did not confirm a strong or reliable relationship between age and social closeness. A Fisher's Exact Test, which is particularly useful when dealing with small sample sizes, did not produce statistically significant results. Likewise, a logistic regression analysis showed no meaningful difference between age groups in predicting close connections to Bengalis. An ordinal regression model could not be run due to insufficient variation in responses.

Despite the lack of statistical significance, the descriptive patterns hint at generational nuances. Older respondents (particularly those 60 and above) may reflect personal memories or family histories tied to East Pakistan before the 1971 genocide, while middle-aged and younger respondents seem to have had fewer direct connections, potentially due to broader changes in migration, community composition, and educational environments over time. These null findings are instructive. They suggest that while historical awareness, sources of knowledge, and attitudes toward reconciliation vary significantly by generation, negative perceptions and social distance toward Bengalis transcend generational boundaries. Rather than being shaped by generational memory or educational exposure, such perceptions may be influenced by external factors that transcend age, such as media representations, state rhetoric, or entrenched cultural attitudes.

The lack of statistically significant association between age and closeness to Bengali communities suggests that the social and cultural distance between Pakistanis and Bengalis represents a deeper, more structural phenomenon than simply a matter of historical awareness or educational exposure. Despite the physical separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan occurring

over 50 years ago, the psychological and social boundaries appear remarkably durable. Historically, this finding points to the effectiveness of the initial nation-building project in Pakistan that positioned Bengalis as culturally and linguistically distinct, even before the 1971 genocide. The cultural stereotyping of Bengalis as "less Islamic" or "Hinduized" was deliberately cultivated in West Pakistani discourse from the 1950s onward. The fact that these social barriers persist even among younger generations who show greater historical awareness suggests that cultural othering has been institutionalized beyond mere historical memory. This has profound implications for reconciliation efforts. The absence of meaningful social connections suggests that reconciliation remains abstract rather than lived experience. True reconciliation would require not just acknowledgment of historical facts but the rebuilding of social and cultural bridges that were systematically dismantled through decades of state policy and cultural narratives.

These findings challenge simplistic models of generational change and suggest a more nuanced understanding of how national identity operates. It indicates that while intellectual attitudes toward historical events may shift across generations, the deeper structures of national identity, who belongs and who remains "other," can persist even as critical awareness grows. This persistence of social boundaries despite changing historical consciousness reveals how deeply the original two-nation theory and subsequent nation-building efforts have shaped Pakistani identity, creating enduring social divisions that transcend generational change.

The politics of memory and nationalism is key in my examination of data and research I have gathered. My research reveals that Pakistanis who possess some knowledge of 1971, whether detailed understanding or just vague awareness, make sense of these events through frameworks heavily influenced by their generation and relationship to Pakistani nationalism.

While awareness levels vary, interpretation is equally revealing, knowledge alone does not ensure critical engagement. Instead, the moral and political framing of that knowledge diverges sharply across generations. In the course of my research and interviews, I had the privilege to speak with a multitude of individuals who shared differing opinions. Out of the 159 total respondents, the overwhelming support for Bangladesh among younger individuals suggests a generational openness to reconciliation and historical accountability.

Older respondents, particularly those with military or nationalist backgrounds, tended to reject the label of "liberation" or "genocide" and instead framed the conflict as a betrayal or internal rebellion. One respondent expressed skepticism about the scope of the survey, suggesting that it failed to account for what they viewed as India's central role in the 1971 conflict. They argued that the war was not merely an internal matter, but one heavily influenced by Indian support and strategic interests, and therefore any analysis excluding this "foreign element" would be incomplete: *"Foreign element agenda has not been included in the survey. I think we all know that it was a war fully supported and funded by India, thus the whole scenario cannot be judged without including the main beneficiary of the incident."* The respondent also emphasized India's success not only in military terms but also in what they described as a lasting propaganda campaign that continues to hinder diplomatic reconciliation between the two nations. Another respondent stated, *"It was a civil war, not genocide. The army acted as any state would in suppressing an insurgency."* Another echoed this sentiment: *"The Mukti Bahini also committed violence; Pakistan is always blamed, but no one talks about what was done to West Pakistanis living in East Pakistan."* These narratives shift the focus away from Pakistan's accountability and onto India's interference or the reciprocal violence of the Bengali resistance.

In contrast, younger and more globally exposed respondents were far more likely to use terms like "genocide," "rape," and "liberation." Many also expressed frustration with Pakistan's historical denial. As one younger participant put it: *"I think the younger generation is more aware and views Bangladeshis as humans who were unjustly treated by Pakistan."* Another remarked, *"During the student protests recently, I saw all my Pakistani friends sharing supportive posts on social media. We know what happened—we're not buying the state version of history."* Some younger respondents also reflected on the influence of family narratives in shaping nationalist perspectives. One shared: *"My mother reminisced about Bangladesh as being Pakistani. She would get melancholy when she heard Bangladeshi music and singers who once used to be Pakistani like Roona Laila."* This nostalgic framing coexisted with the denial of atrocities, illustrating how emotional attachment to a united Pakistan often overshadowed acknowledgement of violence and oppression.

The differing interpretations of 1971, reflect the political contestation over historical memory. Older respondents, particularly those aligned with state institutions like the military, tend to uphold the state-sanctioned nationalist narrative that denies or downplays Pakistan's role in atrocities. This aligns with what scholars like Benedict Anderson and Ernest Renan describe as nations being "imagined communities," where collective memory is often curated to preserve state legitimacy and cohesion. Anderson describes a nation as an *imagined political community* because even members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, yet in their minds lives the image of their communion.[199] This shared sense of belonging and identity is not based on direct, face-to-face interaction but on a collective imagination supported by shared narratives. Within this framework, *collective memory* plays a vital role in shaping the

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[199] Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Crigin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition. London New York: Verso, 2016.

imagined community. It is not a passive recall of the past but an active process of selecting, interpreting, and transmitting stories, symbols, and experiences deemed significant to the nation. States and other powerful actors strategically curate this collective memory to serve their own goals, particularly the preservation of state legitimacy and cohesion.

The responses from the younger age bracket reflected alternative narratives that have historically been excluded from dominant discourse. That said, I did receive a few differing perspectives when it came to the question of whether Pakistani youth view Bangladesh differently compared to older generations. One respondent noted, *"I think Pakistani youth (especially Pakistani-Americans) have less prejudice against Bengalis, due to our generation being more removed from the historical conflicts. But there are definitely still many young Pakistani people who continue to spread hate,"* reflecting the emergence of a *counter-memory movement* that reclaims silenced histories and demands moral accountability. Another respondent stated, *"I believe that many younger Pakistanis still hold negative perceptions of Bengalis, largely influenced by narratives passed from older generations. Despite globalization and progression, historical biases and one-sided portrayals of the 1971 war continue to shape attitudes, leading to lingering resentment and misunderstanding."* Similarly, one respondent states, *"No, people I talk to still view Bengali people as unequals."* I want to take a moment to address these differing perspectives from Pakistani youth. One respondent's framing of Pakistani-American youth as "more removed from historical conflicts" points to the detachment from state-controlled memory production, which allows space for critical reflection and empathy. This suggests the potential for a counter-memory movement grounded in transnational and diasporic contexts. At the same time, the conflicting perspectives among younger respondents underscore that generational change is not homogenous. While some youths are actively

interrogating inherited myths, others continue to internalize historical biases passed down through familial or educational channels. The respondent who notes that "many younger Pakistanis still hold negative perceptions of Bengalis" demonstrates how intergenerational transmission of prejudice and selective storytelling can still entrench nationalist sentiment. Similarly, the comment that people "still view Bengali people as unequals" reflects the persistence of ethnocentric hierarchies and the enduring impact of 1971-era propaganda.

Many participants discovered the genocide only through personal research or while studying outside Pakistan. This pattern exemplifies what scholars call the "politics of forgetting," where states deliberately cultivate historical amnesia around uncomfortable truths to preserve national self-image. Azra Rashid's work in "Gender, Nationalism, and Genocide in Bangladesh" confirms this observation, showing how both Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments have systematically erased narratives that contradict their "carefully crafted, propagandized" official histories, though for different purposes and with different silences.[200]

The 1971 genocide in Bangladesh offers a clear example of how collective memory is curated within the context of an imagined community to establish and sustain national identity. The dominant nationalist narrative emphasizes the liberation struggle and atrocities committed by the Pakistani army against the Bengali people, reinforcing the legitimacy of an independent Bangladeshi state and a distinct Bengali identity. Institutions like the Liberation War Museum play a key role in curating this memory, presenting particular accounts of the war through archival materials, which often highlight a narrative of national loss. However, this curated memory also involves significant omissions and appropriations that serve to construct a unified, and often patriarchal, version of national identity. The experiences of women, religious

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[200] Rashid, Azra. *Gender, Nationalism, and Genocide in Bangladesh: Naristhan-Ladyland*. Routledge Studies in South Asian History. Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2019.

minorities, and marginalized groups are frequently silenced or simplified to fit the dominant narrative. Selective remembering and forgetting are thus instrumental in maintaining the imagined community and preserving the legitimacy of the state. Acknowledging these contradictions within historical memory is not about undermining Bangladesh's liberation struggle, but rather enriching our understanding of its complexity. When we recognize the violence faced by Biharis who were caught between competing nationalisms, or confront how female freedom fighters were later marginalized in national narratives despite their crucial contributions, we challenge cleansed versions of history that serve political ends rather than historical truth. By exploring these uncomfortable realities alongside the legitimate struggle for self-determination, my research aims to bridge divides rather than reinforce them. True reconciliation can only emerge from confronting the full spectrum of experiences, not just the heroic and triumphant moments, but also the moral ambiguities and marginalized voices that complicate neat nationalist narratives on both sides of the border.

The silencing of these stories by older generations, coupled with the lack of formal curriculum inclusion, has created a vacuum now being filled by younger voices and alternative educational pathways. In this context, memory is not a passive reflection of the past but an active battleground, mobilized, contested, and reinterpreted in the service of nationalism. As Larry Ray argues, national identity is not fixed but an "unstable hybrid of conflicting passions," continually affirmed through ritual, narrative, and the selective inclusion or exclusion of memory.[201] Thus, the generational nonconformity observed in my data is not merely a difference in knowledge but a deeper political struggle over which histories are remembered and which are forgotten. The younger generation's willingness to engage critically with Pakistan's role in 1971 signals a shift

[201] Ray, Larry. "Memory, Trauma and Genocidal Nationalism." *Sociological Research Online* 4, no. 2 (July 1999): 125–32. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.257.

in national consciousness, one that challenges the state's mnemonic control and opens space for more pluralistic, accountable historical narratives. The case of the 1971 genocide, therefore, powerfully illustrates the central claims of the politics of memory and nationalism: that memory is a site of power, contestation, and identity, actively constructed to legitimize the present and shape the future.

Chapter Four: Education and Historical Curriculum

The classroom serves as a crucial site where national narratives are constructed, transmitted, and sometimes contested. For many Pakistanis, formal education represents their first, and often only, systematic exposure to the events of 1971. Yet as this chapter will demonstrate, educational institutions in Pakistan have largely participated in a process of historical erasure regarding Bangladesh's independence, creating generations with fragmented or distorted understandings of their nation's past.

Drawing on survey data from 159 respondents across multiple educational backgrounds, this chapter examines how formal schooling shapes Pakistani attitudes toward the 1971 genocide. The findings reveal significant educational disparities in historical awareness, with higher education consistently correlating with greater knowledge and more nuanced perspectives. Beyond statistical patterns, this chapter also analyzes textbook content, regional differences in curriculum, and the role of teachers in either reinforcing or challenging official narratives.

Statistical and Survey Analysis

The institutional silence has profound implications for national identity formation and the prospects for reconciliation with Bangladesh. As one respondent noted, *"I was shocked when I learned about the mass rapes. I couldn't believe this was never part of our curriculum."* Such testimonies reveal how educational omissions shape not only what Pakistanis know about their history, but also how they conceptualize their national identity in relation to past trauma.

Education Level and Attitudes Toward the 1971 Genocide

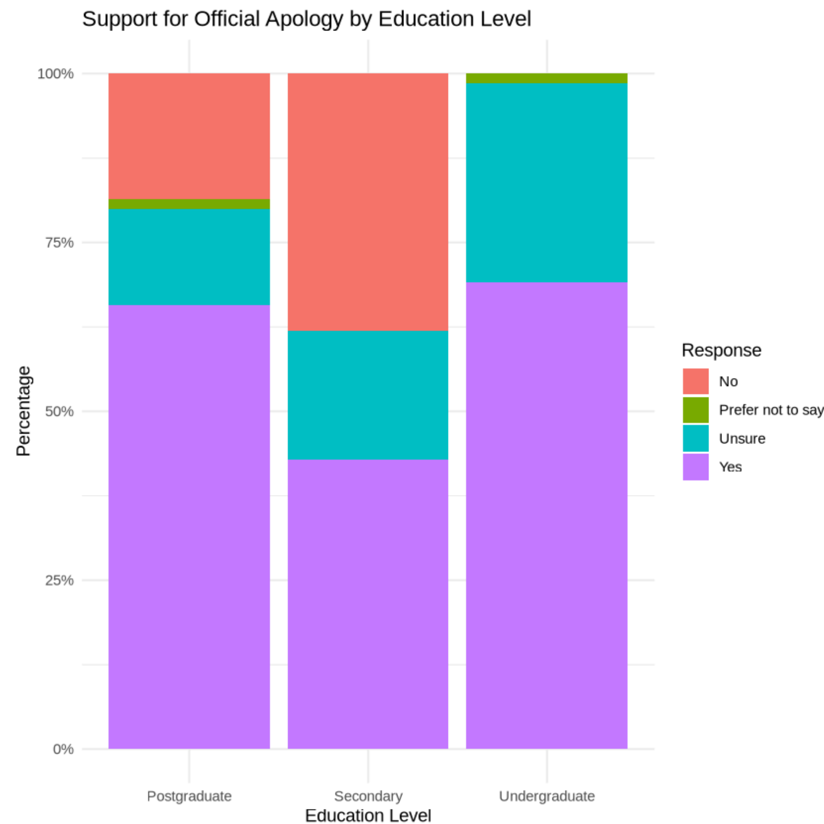
This section investigates how educational attainment influences attitudes toward the 1971 Bangladesh genocide and its enduring effects on Pakistani national identity. To evaluate this relationship, six dependent variables were analyzed in relation to respondents' education level, which was categorized into three groups: secondary education, undergraduate degree, and postgraduate degree.

Table 4.1: Summary of Statistical Findings on Education and Historical Attitudes

Indicator	Test Used	p-value	Significance
Support for an Apology	Fisher's Exact Test	$p < 0.001$	Statistically Significant
Influence of 1971 Events	ANOVA	$p = 0.0031$	Statistically Significant
Rape Awareness	Fisher's Exact Test	$p < 0.001$	Statistically Significant
Taught About the Liberation War	Fisher's Exact Test	$p < 0.001$	Statistically Significant
Negative Perceptions Toward Bangladesh	Fisher's Exact Test	$p < 0.001$	Statistically Significant
Bengali Social Connections	Fisher's Exact Test	$p < 0.001$	Statistically Significant

All tests yielded p-values below the 0.05 threshold, indicating strong associations between education level and each of the six attitudinal variables.

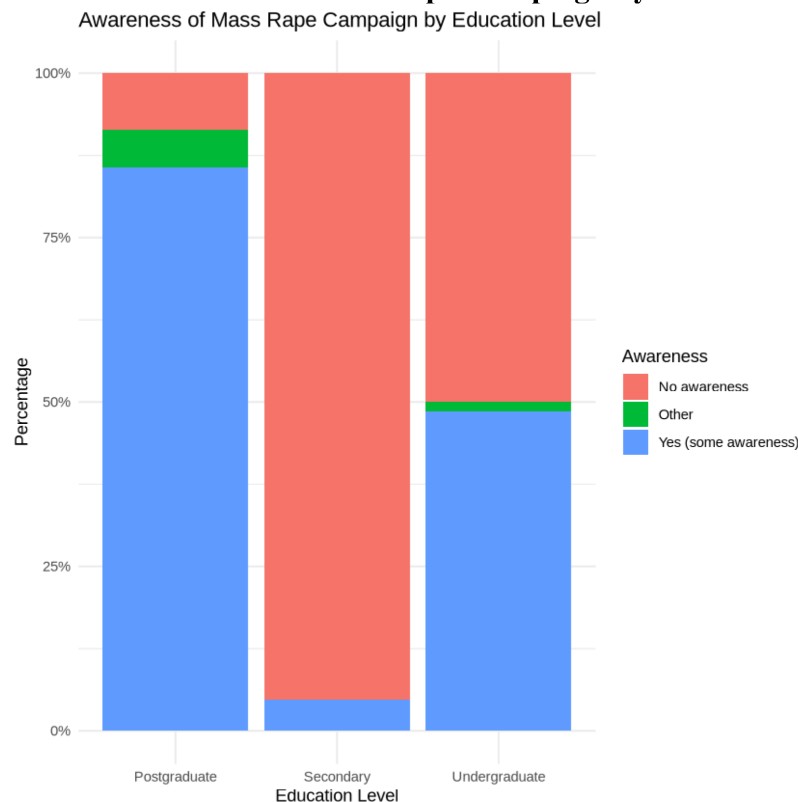
Figure 4.1: Support for Official Apology by Education Level



A statistical test (Fisher's Exact Test) revealed a strong and significant link between education level and support for Pakistan issuing an official apology to Bangladesh for the events of 1971. Respondents with postgraduate degrees were the most supportive, with approximately 65.7% answering "Yes," compared to just 42.9% among those whose highest level of education was secondary school. This pattern suggests that individuals with higher levels of education may be more receptive to the idea of historical accountability and reconciliation. Analysis of responses regarding how much the events of 1971 continue to influence present-day Pakistan–Bangladesh relations revealed significant differences based on respondents' educational backgrounds. Using a 1–5 scale (with 5 indicating high perceived relevance), the analysis found that respondents with undergraduate degrees rated the ongoing influence of 1971 the highest, with an average score of approximately 4.03. Postgraduate respondents followed

with a slightly lower mean of 3.85, while those with only a secondary education rated the relevance the lowest, averaging around 3.10. These differences were statistically significant ($p = 0.0031$), suggesting that educational attainment not only impacts awareness of historical events, but also shapes how politically significant individuals believe those events remain today. In other words, higher education may deepen the sense that the legacy of 1971 continues to shape Pakistan's regional relationships and political discourse.

Figure 4.1.1: Awareness of Mass Rape Campaign by Education Level



Knowledge of the systematic use of sexual violence during the 1971 Bangladesh genocide varied sharply by educational background. The analysis revealed a highly significant association ($p < 0.001$), with 85.7% of respondents holding postgraduate degrees reporting awareness of the mass rape campaign. In stark contrast, only 4.8% of respondents with secondary education reported the same. This dramatic disparity highlights the powerful role

education plays in shaping both access to information and the ability to engage with complex, often silenced aspects of historical trauma. It also reinforces broader patterns in this study: higher education appears to facilitate greater engagement with the gendered dimensions of conflict and a deeper understanding of Pakistan's historical accountability.

Similarly, the way respondents learned about the 1971 genocide was closely linked to their level of education, with statistical analysis revealing a strong association ($p < 0.001$). Those with postgraduate degrees were significantly more likely to report learning about the war through formal education or independent research, while respondents with lower educational attainment, particularly those with only secondary education, often indicated that they had limited exposure or relied primarily on family stories. When institutional education is absent or limited, family narratives become the dominant vehicle for transmitting historical knowledge, though these are often incomplete or influenced by state-driven ideologies. As such, educational institutions emerge as central to how societies remember, or forget, major historical events. This finding parallels the significant relationship between education level and perceptions of Bangladesh ($p < 0.001$). While the trend is complex, it suggests that individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to critically engage with dominant nationalist narratives. Many postgraduate respondents, for example, acknowledged the presence of negative stereotypes but actively questioned their legitimacy and origins. In contrast, respondents with only secondary education were more likely to either express or accept ethnocentric attitudes without challenge.

Finally, the analysis shows a significant association between education level and reported social connections with people of Bengali origin ($p < 0.001$). Respondents with postgraduate education were notably more likely to indicate close personal or familial ties to Bengali individuals compared to those with only secondary or undergraduate education. This reflects the

broader social and geographic exposure that often accompanies higher education, particularly in more cosmopolitan environments, where interactions across cultural and national lines are more common.

My findings highlight education's powerful influence on how Pakistanis view the 1971 genocide and Bangladesh today. Those with more education consistently showed deeper awareness of the genocide, greater support for an official apology, more willingness to question nationalist narratives, and stronger personal connections with Bengalis. This educational divide reveals how access to broader historical perspectives directly shapes attitudes toward reconciliation and historical accountability. In contrast, individuals with lower educational attainment were significantly less likely to be informed about the genocide, more inclined to hold stigmatizing or ethnocentric views, and less likely to have social ties to Bengali communities. Education serves as a powerful mediator of historical consciousness in Pakistan. Higher educational attainment consistently predicts greater awareness of the 1971 genocide, including its gendered dimensions, as well as more critical perspectives on nationalist narratives and greater openness to reconciliation. However, these statistical patterns raise important questions about access to historical knowledge: if awareness of Bangladesh's independence struggle is primarily concentrated among those with advanced degrees, what implications does this have for broader societal understanding and reconciliation?

Educational Content and Historical Erasure

This section delves into deeper insights through an analysis of key interviews and open-ended responses that provide a richer understanding of Pakistani attitudes toward Bangladesh. As outlined earlier, my research seeks to assess whether these attitudes have evolved over time and how sensitive historical issues, particularly those related to mass violence

and sexual violence, continue to shape the formation of nationalist identity and contemporary political relations between the two countries.

As I interviewed and surveyed a wide array of individuals, spanning from Pakistan to the West, I found one noteworthy factor that has paved the path for the erasure of 1971 in collective memory: the absence of 1971 narratives in education, which has deeply impacted different generations. In Western education systems, particularly in the United States, school curricula often sanitize or gloss over the complexities of Global South histories, frequently positioning the U.S. as a global savior while downplaying its complicity or selective inaction in international conflicts. This trend extends to the history of South Asia, including the 1971 genocide, which is virtually absent from mainstream American education. Out of the 159 responses I received, 93 respondents noted they had lived in Pakistan in some capacity, while 66 stated they had not, most likely members of the diaspora or born abroad, largely based in the United States.

This is an element I find especially important to highlight. One respondent from the group of 66 who hadn't lived in Pakistan wrote, "*I honestly didn't know anything about it until I heard of this study.*" This sentiment was echoed across numerous responses and resonates with my own experience. As someone born and raised in the United States, I remained unaware of the atrocities of 1971 until I independently sought out information. What makes this even more unsettling is that the United States played a pivotal, yet deeply controversial, role in the events surrounding the creation of Bangladesh. Rather than standing up for the democratic ideals it often claims to uphold, the Nixon administration prioritized Cold War geopolitics over human rights, aligning itself with Pakistan's military dictatorship in order to advance its diplomatic opening with China.[202] This ambition shaped the U.S. response to the crisis in East Pakistan. Despite mounting evidence of genocide, systematic rape, and state repression, detailed in

[202] Meher, "Dynamics of Pakistan's Disintegration."

diplomatic cables from Archer Blood and Ambassador Kenneth Keating, the Nixon administration refused to publicly condemn Pakistan. Instead, it adopted a policy of "quiet diplomacy," rooted in realpolitik.[203] The U.S. continued providing military aid to Pakistan, even using third-party countries to circumvent restrictions, and at the United Nations Security Council, it sought to shift blame onto India by pushing a ceasefire resolution that was ultimately vetoed by the Soviet Union.[204] Tensions reached a peak when the U.S. sent the 7th Fleet into the Bay of Bengal, a move widely interpreted as a threat to India and a show of support for Pakistan. This blatant double standard was not lost on the global stage. While the U.S. claimed to champion democracy and human rights abroad, its actions in 1971 revealed a willingness to undermine those very principles when strategic interests were at stake. The United States sided with a regime that had unleashed one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 20th century, simply to maintain a favorable geopolitical trajectory in Asia.

While my research does not focus on the United States, what makes this historical episode even more troubling is the extent to which it has been omitted or misrepresented in American collective memory. The U.S.'s complicity in the Bangladesh genocide is rarely addressed in high school or university curricula, and public discourse often celebrates Nixon's opening to China while overlooking the devastating human toll of that strategy. As a result, a sugarcoated version of history persists, one that frames Cold War diplomacy as a triumph of strategic foresight rather than a profound moral failure. This sanitized narrative reflects a broader pattern within American historical education, where difficult truths, particularly those implicating U.S. foreign policy, are routinely minimized or erased altogether.

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[203] Meher, "Dynamics of Pakistan's Disintegration."
[204] Ibid.

This erasure has implications for both domestic and international audiences. For Americans, it limits critical engagement with the nation's foreign policy legacy, fostering a sense of exceptionalism detached from historical accountability. For South Asians, particularly Bengalis and Pakistanis, it confirms a long-standing perception of U.S. hypocrisy and disinterest in regional justice. In the context of this research, the U.S. role in 1971 is a case study in how powerful nations construct historical narratives that align with their interests, even if it means overlooking or enabling atrocities. It also serves as a reminder that Pakistan's denialism is not an isolated phenomenon, it is echoed and, in some ways, legitimized by global powers who once had the capacity to intervene or speak out but chose silence instead.

For students, particularly those of Bangladeshi heritage, the lack of these stories in the school curriculum contributed to a partition between 'home history' and 'school history'. Students would often treat family stories as somehow "less historical" than the narratives of European rulers, leading to a sense that Bangladesh lay beyond the realm of 'modernity' or 'history'. This fallacy was reinforced by national exams that predominantly focused on white and male historical figures, making it more challenging for British Bengali students to see themselves as historical actors or writers of history. The lack of these narratives also meant that passing mentions of Bangladesh in class were often met with "anxious giggles," indicating a lack of familiarity and comfort with the subject. This absence limited their historical imagination and their ability to understand the complexities of their own heritage within a broader historical context.

For older generations, particularly those with direct or familial ties to the events of 1971, the absence of these narratives in broader educational and public discourse may have contributed to a range of emotional and psychological responses, feelings of shame, a reluctance to confront

or revisit traumatic memories, and a pervasive sense that their experiences were either invalidated or forgotten altogether. Taslima Rakib, a history teacher of Bangladeshi heritage, reflected on her own lack of knowledge about her country's formation, highlighting how this history was often not discussed or emphasized as something worth remembering. She later understood her earlier reluctance to learn more was due to the painful and brutal nature of this history, rooted in her homeland and her grandparents' past. Official histories often censored or distorted the events of 1971, making it crucial to document the remembrances of those who lived through it before that generation was lost.

In reference to the 93 respondents who stated that they have lived in Pakistan in some capacity or are currently residing there, there was surprisingly little difference in historical awareness, an unexpected finding given Pakistan's central role in the 1971 genocide. Among the 93 respondents who stated that they had lived in Pakistan, only 20 reported learning about 1971 through school in some form. Specifically, 10 respondents said they were taught both in school and by their family, 9 learned about it solely through formal education, and 1 respondent recalled it being mentioned in both school and family settings. This means that just 21.5% of those who had lived in Pakistan received any kind of formal educational exposure to the war, highlighting the extent of historical erasure within state curricula and reinforcing arguments about the selective transmission of national memory. When asked about their awareness of the mass rape campaign carried out by the Pakistani army during the 1971 genocide, the same group showed a nearly even divide. 44 respondents stated they were not aware of the campaign, while 43 indicated that they had heard about it but knew little detail. Only 2 respondents reported having substantial knowledge about the campaign, while 2 were unsure and 1 preferred not to say. In total, 45 respondents demonstrated at least some level of awareness, while 44 remained unaware,

revealing not only the fragility of historical knowledge transmission but also the specific marginalization of gendered violence in national narratives.

While 21.1% of those who lived in Pakistan indicated that they received formal education about the events of 1971, I became particularly interested in uncovering the specifics of what they had actually been taught. Because learning about the genocide through an objective lens is very different compared to the truth of what occurred in actuality. In my digging, I had reached out to a few respondents who attended primary, middle, secondary, and higher secondary school in Pakistan. One respondent stated that they had attended Karachi Grammar School (KGS), a selective, coeducational day school in Saddar, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan. As one of Pakistan's oldest and most prestigious private schools, it occupies a unique position in how historical narratives, particularly those surrounding the 1971 genocide, are taught and remembered. While the school follows the internationally recognized Cambridge O- and A-Level system, which includes Pakistan Studies as a mandatory subject up to 1999, the treatment of 1971 within the curriculum remains cautious and selective. The event is technically included in the syllabus under the "separation of East Pakistan," yet how it is framed, whether as a civil conflict, a secessionist movement, or a liberation war, depends heavily on the school's interpretation. In classroom settings, there have been moments of honest engagement, such as student-led reenactments and debates that critically examine the war's causes and legacy. These exercises suggest that KGS students are encouraged to explore different perspectives, including Bangladesh's, even if such perspectives are not widely emphasized in public discourse.

Despite its curricular inclusion, the school does not commemorate or publicly acknowledge Bangladesh's independence or the atrocities of 1971. KGS's own institutional history notably omits any mention of the genocide, reflecting the broader national tendency to

silence or downplay this traumatic event. This silence is partly a product of the school's elite character: throughout 1971, KGS served the children of the country's privileged classes, many of whom were politically or socially aligned with West Pakistan's ruling elite.[205] The genocide was geographically and emotionally distant from these students' lives, and this detachment likely shaped the absence of deep institutional reflection. Even after 1971, KGS continued to operate uninterrupted and avoided nationalization, highlighting its elite insulation. This privileged position also provided KGS with certain freedoms, particularly academic autonomy, that allowed for a more nuanced, critical pedagogy than that found in public schools. The Cambridge curriculum's emphasis on exploring multiple interpretations of history, along with the encouragement of debate and inquiry, has meant that some KGS students do engage with the more uncomfortable truths of 1971. Alumni like Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy have openly criticized Pakistan's "amnesia" about the war and used their platforms to educate the public.[206] These developments suggest a growing willingness among some members of the KGS community to confront the legacy of 1971, even if the school as a whole still lacks institutional mechanisms for remembrance or accountability.

In deepening my comparative understanding of how the 1971 genocide is remembered and taught across national contexts, I engaged with a student from Bangladesh who generously shared insights into their own educational experiences. They provided access to the Bangladesh Studies syllabus (Cambridge O-Level 7094), which not only offers a comprehensive overview of the country's geography and cultural heritage but also centers 1971 as a defining moment in national identity formation. This personal perspective reinforced the broader curricular emphasis

[205] "History – Kgs – Karachi Grammar School." *KGS Karachi Grammar School*, kgs.edu.pk/history/.
[206] "Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy: 'I Know There Will Be an Attempt to Silence Me.'" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 27 June 2017, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/jun/27/sharmeen-obaid-chinoy-home-1947-installation-manchester-international-festival-pakistan.

on the war as a struggle for justice and independence, highlighting narratives of resistance, genocide, and the role of gendered violence. In stark contrast, my analysis of the Pakistan Studies curriculum, particularly as taught in elite institutions like Karachi Grammar School, revealed a more subdued and state-centric framing of the same events, often referred to merely as the "separation of East Pakistan." One respondent who attended school in Lahore in the 1990s recalled: *"Our textbook had maybe two paragraphs on 1971. It just said there was a civil war, India interfered, and East Pakistan became Bangladesh. Nothing about why East Pakistanis wanted independence or what our army did there."* This juxtaposition between firsthand testimony and formal curricula across borders strengthens my argument that national narratives are not only shaped by the state but are also internalized through educational institutions.

A recurring pattern across generations in my responses was the notable absence of structured education about the 1971 genocide, especially among those who had lived in Pakistan. This lack of formal instruction emerged as a consistent theme, revealing how the state's selective memory practices have contributed to widespread historical gaps and fragmented understandings of the war across different age cohorts. This absence extended beyond the classroom into the home, where many families choose silence over storytelling. For instance, one respondent noted, *"It was never mentioned at home. I only found out what really happened through a YouTube documentary years later."* This silence shaped a generation's historical understanding not through formal instruction, but through what was left unsaid. For many respondents in the 30–49 and 50+ age brackets, the war was never taught in school or was only vaguely framed as "political unrest" or "Indian interference." One respondent shared, *"I don't remember being taught anything detailed about 1971, just that it was a war we lost."* Among younger respondents (18–29), some expressed frustration or even betrayal upon learning about the scale

of the atrocities later in life. "*It's wild that my family kept me completely in the dark about what happened after Partition and the genocide in Bangladesh. When I tried asking my parents after taking this survey, they just got upset and shut the conversation down completely,"* said one participant. Others emphasized the role of global exposure in filling these knowledge gaps: *"I only understood what happened after speaking to Bengali friends abroad."* Even those with family ties to East Pakistan often reported a lack of intergenerational storytelling. *"My mother lived through it, but she never talked about it. I think it was too painful,"* another respondent remarked. The result is a generational patchwork of memory: one shaped not through national curriculum or consistent familial discourse, but through scattered efforts to uncover repressed truths. This underscores how historical erasure operates not just through what is taught, but also through what is omitted, and how that silence reverberates across decades, fracturing collective memory and complicating contemporary understandings of identity and justice.

Among respondents who lived in the United States or were raised outside Pakistan, the absence of education about the 1971 genocide was often just as stark, if not more so, but took a different form. For many of these individuals, formal schooling in the U.S. offered no mention of Bangladesh's independence or the role of Pakistan in the war. One respondent noted, *"I never heard of the 1971 war until college, and even then, it wasn't part of a class, it came up during a conversation with an international friend from Bangladesh."* Unlike their counterparts in Pakistan, these respondents lacked even the state-mandated version of history, resulting in a kind of double erasure, both from their American education and from familial silence. Several participants described growing up in Pakistani diaspora households where the war was glossed over or entirely ignored. *"My parents would just say 'something happened between East and West Pakistan' and leave it at that,"* shared one participant.

Interestingly, living in the diaspora often created more space to question official narratives. Respondents exposed to diverse South Asian communities or who attended universities with global studies programs reported having more opportunities to hear Bangladeshi perspectives and engage critically with the genocide. *"It was only after hearing a Bengali classmate talk about genocide and rape that I realized how little I knew. I went home and started reading everything I could,"* recalled one individual. For these respondents, the lack of early exposure fostered a delayed but often more serious reckoning with Pakistan's historical role, especially when contrasted with narratives from Bengali peers or academic sources. The combination of diaspora distance, parental silence, and curricular neglect formed a significant barrier to historical understanding, yet also prompted some to actively seek out the truth later in life, highlighting how absence itself can become a catalyst for inquiry.

The responses concerning religion and the 1971 genocide reflect not only attitudes shaped by belief but also the broader impact of historical erasure and familial silence. Many participants described learning about the war, or failing to, not in schools or homes, but through fragmented, often accidental encounters later in life**.** One respondent, reflecting on community gossip, recalled how *"Pakistani aunties used to say people only married Bengalis when they had no other option,"* illustrating how negative cultural perceptions were passed down informally, in the absence of formal historical education. Another respondent who had lived abroad shared, *"I never even heard about the 1971 war until college, and even then it was barely mentioned, just a tiny footnote in a reading about genocide, not even part of the main text. I was so confused that I ended up going down this massive rabbit hole that night, learning about something major that had somehow never come up in my entire education."* These experiences underscore how the

silence in textbooks was mirrored by silence at home, creating generations that either remained uninformed or inherited biased views shaped by nationalist rhetoric.

Even among those who were aware of Bangladesh's separation, their understanding was often shallow or distorted. One respondent expressed skepticism about the extent of atrocities, saying they believed reports of genocide and mass rape were *"exaggerated manifold."* This minimization reflects the impact of state narratives that either omitted or downplayed Pakistan's role. Others, particularly from younger generations, described feelings of betrayal upon discovering the full history, often through personal inquiry or diaspora conversations. *"I was shocked when I learned about number of women who were raped during 1971,"* one participant said, *"I couldn't believe this was never part of our curriculum."*

The intersection of religious identity and educational narratives reveals another dimension of how the 1971 genocide is remembered or forgotten. Survey responses indicated that religious framing often influenced how the conflict was taught or discussed, with several respondents noting that religious differences were sometimes emphasized to explain or justify the separation. While some saw Islam as a bridge between Pakistan and Bangladesh, many noted that religion had been used to obscure or justify historical violence. One recurring theme was the characterization of Bengalis as "not as Muslim" or "too influenced by Hindu India," a framing that reflects ethno-religious prejudice while also serving nationalist narratives. By emphasizing perceived religious differences, this framing shifts focus away from the political and economic oppression that fueled Bengali nationalism.

Several respondents noted how religion was invoked in educational contexts to minimize Pakistani responsibility. One participant recalled a Pakistani high school teacher explaining that *"East Pakistan separated because they were culturally more Indian than Muslim,"* illustrating

how religious identity was weaponized to delegitimize Bengali grievances. This religious framing persists even in diaspora contexts. These dynamics highlight how religious discourse has often served to distract from, rather than reconcile with, the events of 1971. By framing the conflict in terms of religious identity rather than political oppression and human rights violations, educational narratives have contributed to historical distortion and impeded reconciliation. The irony is that this educational distortion undermines the very national unity it purports to serve. Instead of fostering critical thinking and honest engagement with Pakistan's past, it creates precisely the kind of institutional amnesia that prevents meaningful reconciliation with Bangladesh. As long as textbooks continue the subversion of historical facts, Pakistani society will struggle to develop the historical consciousness necessary for acknowledging past atrocities and building better bilateral relations.

Chapter Five: Civil Society and Collective Discourse

Civil society constitutes a vital sphere for memory formation beyond government narratives and household discussions about 1971. This chapter explores how a diverse array of non-state actors, ranging from advocacy groups and media platforms to faith communities and prominent thinkers, approach Bangladesh's liberation struggle and Pakistan's involvement in mass atrocities. Through an analysis of both survey data and in-depth interviews, this investigation reveals the complex ways these institutions either perpetuate national amnesia or foster environments where historical truths can be confronted and processed. By examining these intermediary spaces between state and family, we gain crucial insights into how collective memory takes shape through community engagement and public discourse. In Pakistan, civil society faces significant constraints in addressing the events of 1971, including political pressures, religious sensitivities, and the legacy of military influence over public discourse. This chapter argues that Pakistani civil society largely mirrors the patterns of historical erasure found in state and educational institutions, with significant exceptions that highlight the potential for alternative historical narratives.

Sources of Public Information About 1971

The survey data reveal how Pakistani public knowledge about the 1971 genocide is shaped by various information sources, with significant generational and educational differences in media consumption patterns.

Among all respondents, traditional media (newspapers, television, radio) represents the primary source of information about 1971 for 27% of participants, while social media and online sources account for 31%, particularly among younger respondents. Books and academic sources were cited by 22% of respondents, largely those with higher education. Notably, 20% reported

having no significant exposure to information about 1971 through civil society channels, relying exclusively on family narratives or school education. These patterns reflect important generational shifts in information sources. Among respondents aged 50+, traditional media dominates as the primary information source (52%), while those under 30 overwhelmingly cite social media and online sources (63%). This shift has significant implications for historical discourse, as younger generations increasingly encounter narratives that challenge or supplement official accounts.

The survey also revealed significant gaps in public knowledge about key aspects of the 1971 conflict. Nearly half (47%) of respondents were unaware of the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war, a staggering figure given the scale and documentation of sexual violence during the conflict. Similarly, 38% could not identify Operation Searchlight as the military campaign that initiated the genocide, despite its pivotal role in the events. Perhaps most concerning, 62% underestimated the death toll, with nearly a quarter of respondents (23%) believing fewer than 50,000 people died, a figure that falls dramatically short of even the most conservative scholarly estimates. These knowledge gaps highlight the limited effectiveness of civil society in fostering comprehensive public understanding of this critical historical event, suggesting that Pakistani media, educational institutions, and public discourse have collectively failed to address key aspects of the 1971 genocide.

Pakistani mainstream media has largely mirrored state narratives in its coverage of the 1971 genocide and Bangladesh. Content analysis of major newspapers and television programs reveals several consistent patterns. References to 1971 typically appear only around anniversary dates or during moments of diplomatic engagement with Bangladesh, creating a sporadic rather than sustained engagement with this history. Coverage disproportionately emphasizes Indian

military involvement while minimizing internal Pakistani oppression, shifting responsibility to external actors rather than acknowledging domestic failings. Perhaps most significantly, reports rarely mention mass killings, rape, or targeted attacks on intellectuals, omitting the most devastating aspects of the genocide. One respondent who works in Pakistani media noted: *"There's an unwritten rule that certain aspects of 1971 are off-limits. You can discuss the political factors or the Indian role, but the detailed accounts of what our military did in East Pakistan, that's still taboo."* This pattern of selective coverage reinforces public ignorance about key aspects of the genocide. Another survey respondent observed: *"I never heard about the systematic rape of Bengali women until I read about it in an international publication. Our newspapers never mention it."* The media's approach to 1971 reflects broader constraints on press freedom in Pakistan, particularly regarding military affairs, with journalists often practicing self-censorship to avoid repercussions.

Academic Initiatives and Public Intellectuals

Within Pakistan's constrained academic environment, several intellectuals have made significant contributions to critical historical engagement with 1971. Ayesha Jalal, a prominent Pakistani-American historian, has written extensively on the political and social dynamics that led to Pakistan's breakup, challenging simplistic nationalist narratives without minimizing violence. In works like *The Struggle for Pakistan,* Jalal examines how structural inequalities, democratic failures, and military overreach contributed to the crisis in East Pakistan.[207] While not focusing exclusively on the genocide, her work provides crucial context for understanding the conditions that enabled it. I had the privilege to have a conversation with Jalal. She acknowledged that some shifts are occurring among younger Pakistanis and private school

[207] Jalal, Ayesha. *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics*. Harvard University Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt83jhdz.

students who have begun to question official historical accounts. However, she cautioned against overestimating the scope of this generational change, emphasizing that while these emerging counter-narratives represent important gaps in historical consciousness, they remain marginal within broader Pakistani society. The structural militarism and entrenched nationalism that permeate Pakistani institutions continue to dominate public discourse, ultimately hindering the potential for meaningful reconciliation between the two nations.

While Dr. Ayesha Jalal offers invaluable scholarly context for understanding the conditions that led to Pakistan's breakup, my survey data suggests a more pronounced shift in historical consciousness than her assessment indicates. During our conversation, Jalal acknowledged that younger generations and private school students are beginning to question official narratives, but cautioned that these counter-narratives remain marginal within Pakistani society. She emphasized that structural militarism and entrenched nationalism continue to dominate, potentially limiting prospects for meaningful reconciliation. This caution reflects Jalal's deep understanding of Pakistani state institutions and their resistance to historical accountability. However, my quantitative findings reveal a more substantial generational divide than anticipated in her analysis. The striking contrast between the 18-29 age cohort, where 79.2% support an official apology to Bangladesh, and the 40-49 cohort, where only 8.3% express such support, indicates that generational change may be occurring more rapidly than institutional analysis alone would suggest.

These divergent perspectives can be reconciled by recognizing that both realities can coexist: institutional structures remain resistant to change, as Jalal correctly identifies, while attitudes at the individual level, particularly among younger, more educated Pakistanis, are evolving more dramatically. Rather than contradictory viewpoints, these represent

complementary analyses operating at different levels of social organization. My findings do not challenge Jalal's assessment of institutional constraints but rather supplement it by documenting significant attitudinal shifts that may eventually create pressure for institutional change.

Pakistani diaspora scholars have often engaged more critically with the events of 1971, benefiting from greater academic freedom and transnational perspective. Scholars based in North America, Europe, and Australia have produced work that challenges nationalist narratives and acknowledges the scale of atrocities committed in East Pakistan. These diaspora interventions create alternative spaces for historical engagement, particularly for younger Pakistanis with digital access to international scholarship. My conversations with other scholars provided additional insights into how narratives about 1971 have evolved within Pakistan. A Pakistani professor described how the state's narrative has shifted from complete denial to acknowledging violence "on both sides," but remains laden with justifications and continues to demonize Bangladeshi intellectuals and freedom fighters as "Indian agents" or emphasize their Hindu identity. The professor emphasized the military's central role in the violence, arguing that similar atrocities could occur elsewhere given the opportunity and the right narrative.

This assessment aligns with insights from my conversation with Dr. Sarah Shehabuddin, a Bengali scholar with a Ph.D. in Government from Harvard University who has taught at Harvard, BRAC University, and the Asian University for Women. Dr. Shehabuddin highlighted the deeply politicized nature of 1971's memory in contemporary Bangladesh, noting how competing political factions weaponize this history. She explained how the Awami League has positioned itself as the guardian of liberation values, often characterizing criticism as "anti-liberation" sentiment, while opposition groups advance alternative narratives. Dr. Shehabuddin pointed to specific controversies that illustrate these tensions, including the

retraction of an op-ed from a Jamaat-affiliated writer who claimed “Bengali Muslims were misled into the liberation war” and controversies over independence awards being rescinded along party lines. She noted that during Awami League governance, questioning the official casualty figure of three million became politically dangerous, demonstrating how historical facts remain contested terrain in Bangladesh's political landscape.

Regarding the Mukti Bahini specifically, Dr. Shehabuddin explained that while Bengalis have grown up understanding them as legitimate freedom fighters responding to government violence against civilians, contradicting narratives exist that emphasize violence against Biharis. She observed that the Pakistani government’s killing of student protesters on March 25th, remains a crucial turning point in most Bengali narratives but is often minimized in Pakistani accounts. Dr. Shehabuddin also highlighted the gendered dimensions of this history, referencing collections of interviews with women who were raped during the conflict. She noted disturbing accounts of experimental medical procedures on victims and the persistent justification that many victims “were prostitutes anyway,” revealing how misogyny intersected with religious prejudice in the targeting of women for sexual violence meant to “inseminate with ‘pure blood’ Pakistanis.”

These scholarly voices, though limited in their immediate impact on public consciousness, provide essential alternatives to nationalist narratives about 1971. The stark contrast between Pakistan’s official silence and this emerging scholarship reveals the deeply contested nature of historical memory and suggests potential pathways for more honest engagement with this difficult past. The persistent gap between academic understanding and public awareness indicates that bridging this divide remains crucial for fostering historical accountability and creating possibilities for meaningful reconciliation between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Chapter Six: State Narratives and Official Positions

In the halls of power, history is not merely remembered, it is strategically crafted. For over five decades, the Pakistani state has meticulously sculpted public memory of the 1971 Bangladesh genocide through a blend of strategic silence, selective acknowledgment, and outright denial. Where family narratives whisper conflicting memories and civil society occasionally challenges orthodoxy, the state speaks with the authority of textbooks, diplomatic communiqués, and official commemorations, a voice that ricochets through classrooms, permeates international relations, and shapes national identity itself.

My survey of 159 Pakistani respondents reveals the effectiveness, and limitations, of this official narrative control. When asked to characterize the government's position on 1971, 53% of respondents described it as "denial of wrongdoing," while only 1% believed Pakistan had formally apologized. This perception gap reflects the strategic ambiguity that has defined Pakistan's approach. Yet beneath this apparent consensus lies profound regional variation: in Sindh, 78% of respondents support an official apology to Bangladesh, compared to just 45% in other regions ($p = 0.0034$), demonstrating how state narratives find uneven reception across Pakistan's diverse geography. Perhaps most revealing is the contradiction between support for reconciliation and awareness of specific atrocities. In Sindh, where support for an apology is highest, 100% of respondents reported no knowledge of the systematic sexual violence during the 1971 genocide, a striking illustration of how certain aspects of history remain effectively erased even among those open to accountability. Meanwhile, in Punjab, respondents showed a more balanced awareness, with approximately equal portions reporting full awareness (31%), no awareness (31%), and partial awareness (38%) of wartime sexual violence.

This orchestrated amnesia represents more than bureaucratic convenience; it reveals the profound anxiety at the heart of Pakistani nationalism when confronted with its most traumatic rupture. From Karachi's coastal cosmopolitanism to Punjab's nationalist strongholds, Pakistanis inhabit dramatically different relationships to this contested past, variations that challenge any monolithic understanding of how a nation processes historical trauma. This chapter maps the evolution of Pakistan's official positions on 1971, examines public perceptions of these narratives, and explores how geographical and socioeconomic factors create distinct zones of historical consciousness within a supposedly unified national memory.

Evolution of Pakistan's Official Position (1971-Present)

Pakistan's official position on the 1971 genocide has evolved through three distinct phases. In the immediate aftermath of Bangladesh's independence (1971-1974), the government under President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto adopted a stance characterized by denial of atrocities and defiance toward international criticism. Government representatives routinely dismissed reports of mass killings and sexual violence as propaganda, focused public attention on Pakistani prisoners of war rather than Bengali victims, and attributed any acknowledged violations to individual soldiers rather than systematic military policy. The period from 1974 to 1990 saw limited shifts in Pakistan's official position, prompted partly by diplomatic necessities. The 1974 tripartite agreement between Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh created a framework for normalization, including Pakistan's recognition of Bangladesh as a sovereign state and the repatriation of Pakistani prisoners of war. However, this agreement did not involve explicit acknowledgment of or apology for atrocities, focusing instead on pragmatic diplomatic normalization. Under General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship (1977-1988), official narratives

about 1971 were further constrained, with state media and educational materials emphasizing Indian conspiracy while minimizing internal factors that led to Bangladesh's independence.

Since the 1990s, Pakistan's position has included occasional gestures toward reconciliation alongside persistent silence about accountability. During his 2002 visit to Bangladesh, President Pervez Musharraf expressed regret for "excesses" committed in 1971 but stopped short of a formal apology.[208] In 2013, Pakistan's National Assembly passed a resolution expressing "concern" over Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal while avoiding discussion of the underlying crimes. These limited gestures reveal a pattern of strategic ambiguity, offering enough acknowledgment to facilitate diplomatic relations while avoiding the political and identity challenges that would come with full recognition of the genocide.

Survey data reveal significant patterns in how Pakistanis perceive their government's position on the 1971 genocide. When asked about their awareness of Pakistan's official stance, respondents demonstrated considerable uncertainty, with 42% reporting being "somewhat aware," 28% claiming to be "very aware," 24% reporting being "not at all aware," and 6% indicating they were "unsure." This distribution suggests that the government's strategic ambiguity has resulted in public confusion about Pakistan's actual position. When asked to characterize the government's stance, 53% of respondents described it as "denial of wrongdoing," 27% as "partial acknowledgment without apology," 14% were "unsure," 5% believed the government had "acknowledged wrongdoing with regret," and just 1% thought Pakistan had "formally apologized." These responses highlight a significant gap between public perception and diplomatic reality.

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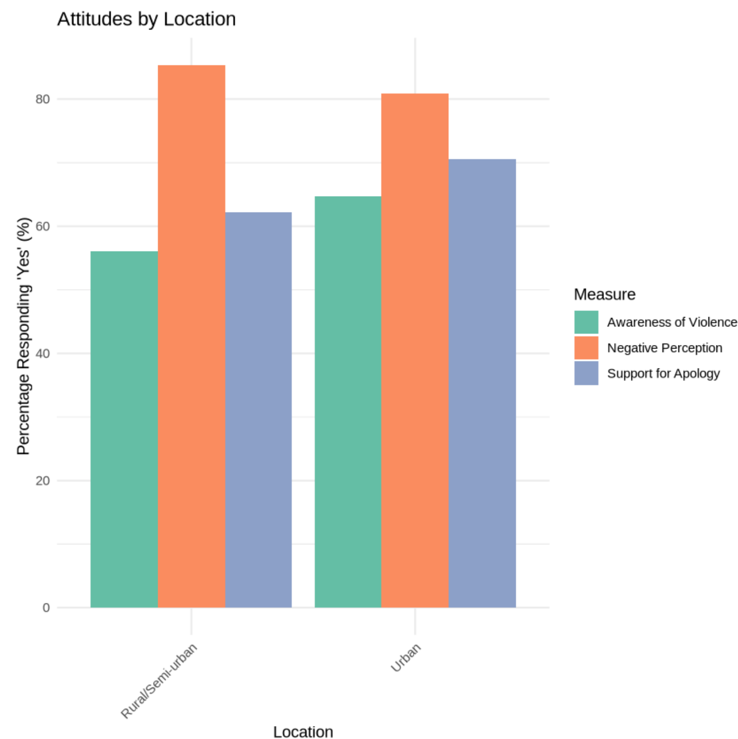
[208] Noor, Sanam. "Outstanding Issues Between Pakistan and Bangladesh." *Pakistan Horizon* 58, no. 1 (2005): 47–60.

Regional and Socioeconomic Variations in Historical Attitudes

Figure 6.1: Urban and Rural Attitudes Toward Bangladesh



My analysis of 150 survey respondents (68 urban and 82 rural/semi-urban) reveals subtle differences in how urban and rural populations engage with state narratives about 1971. Urban respondents consistently demonstrated more progressive or historically engaged attitudes across key indicators. For instance, 64.7% of urban respondents were aware of the mass rape campaign during the war, compared to 56.1% of rural/semi-urban participants. Similarly, 70.6% of urban respondents supported issuing a formal apology to Bangladesh, while 62.2% of rural/semi-urban participants endorsed this position. However, these differences did not reach statistical significance, suggesting that the urban-rural divide alone does not determine how Pakistanis engage with historical memory. Interestingly, both urban and rural respondents showed similarly high levels of negative perceptions toward Bangladesh (80.9% among urban respondents and

85.4% among rural respondents). This widespread stigma across geographic settings indicates that certain elements of state narratives, particularly those characterizing Bangladesh in negative terms, have penetrated deeply across the urban-rural divide.

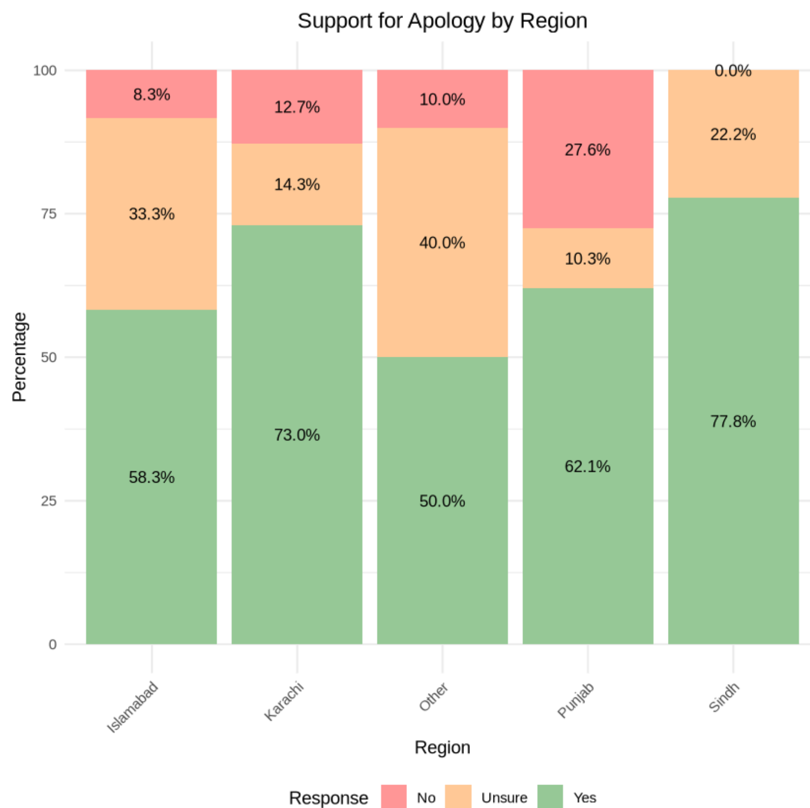
These findings suggest that while urban environments may foster slightly greater historical awareness and openness to reconciliation, the influence of state narratives transcends simple urban-rural categorizations. The persistence of negative perceptions across both settings points to deeper structural or cultural narratives embedded in Pakistani society regardless of urbanization level.

Socioeconomic background appears to influence reception of state narratives, though with important limitations in my data. Among middle-income respondents (who constituted the majority of my sample at 140 out of 159), 67.1% supported an official apology, while support rose to 75% among high-income respondents. Similarly, negative perceptions of Bangladesh were held by 80% of middle-income respondents but only 50% of high-income participants.

While these differences approached but did not reach statistical significance ($p = 0.066$ for perceptions of Bangladesh), they suggest a potential correlation between higher socioeconomic status and greater critical distance from nationalist narratives. Educational differences likely play a mediating role, as higher education typically correlates with higher income and as demonstrated in Chapter Four, significantly influences historical awareness.
The relationship between class position and historical attitudes merits further investigation with more balanced sampling across income groups. However, these preliminary findings suggest that socioeconomic privilege may provide greater access to alternative historical narratives and greater insulation from state-driven historical frameworks.

The most statistically significant variations in historical attitudes emerged across regional lines, revealing how deeply Pakistan's complex provincial politics shape engagement with national history. After categorizing respondents into five regional groups (Punjab including Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, Sindh, and Other), chi-square testing revealed significant regional differences in both support for an official apology ($p = 0.0034$) and awareness of wartime sexual violence.

Figure 6.1.1: Support for Official Apology by Region



Respondents from Sindh reported the highest support for an official apology (78%), followed closely by Karachi (73%). Punjab showed more moderate support (62%), while Islamabad respondents were more divided (58% support). Respondents from other regions demonstrated the lowest support (45%). These regional differences reflect profound historical relationships with the Pakistani state and military establishment that have evolved over decades.

Punjab's more moderate support for an apology can be understood through its privileged position within Pakistan's political and military structures. The region's relationship with the military dates back to colonial times, when the British Indian Army disproportionately recruited from Punjab's "martial races." This colonial legacy continued after Partition, with Punjab becoming the backbone of Pakistan's armed forces. By the early 1960s, despite comprising approximately 56% of Pakistan's population, Punjabis represented nearly 70% of the military officer corps and an even higher percentage of enlisted personnel.[209] This military overrepresentation transformed into structural power, with Punjab receiving preferential resource allocation, infrastructure development, and political representation in the decades following independence.

The distinctive Punjabi perspective is powerfully captured in one respondent's comment that vividly illustrates the regional nationalist framework: *"Foreign element agenda has not been included in the survey. I think we all know that it was a war fully supported and funded by India, thus the whole scenario cannot be judged without including the main beneficiary of the incident."* This response exemplifies how the state narrative emphasizing external intervention has been particularly internalized in Punjab. Most revealing is the respondent's assessment that India *"not only won the war in the battlefield but also won the propaganda warfare, the aftershocks of which will never allow revival of cordial relationship between two countries."* This perspective reframes international documentation of atrocities as merely successful "propaganda" by Pakistan's primary geopolitical rival, effectively negating the possibility of objective historical assessment. Such framing is particularly prevalent in Punjab, where proximity to the Indian border and direct experience of multiple Indo-Pakistani conflicts has reinforced security-centered nationalism.

[209] Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010).

During the 1971 crisis, the Pakistani military leadership was overwhelmingly Punjabi, including many officers who later held significant political power. General Yahya Khan himself, though of Pashtun ancestry, was born in Punjab and integrated into its political networks.[210] This intimate connection between Punjab's regional elite and the military establishment created both material and ideological investments in narratives that minimize accountability for the Bangladesh genocide. For many Punjabi families, challenging official accounts means questioning the integrity of institutions that have provided generational pathways to social mobility and economic security. The province's dominant position within the federation intensified after 1971, as East Pakistan's separation eliminated the demographic counterweight to Punjab's influence. The post-1971 political order particularly benefited Punjab, reinforcing incentives to accept state narratives that cast the conflict as Indian-instigated separatism rather than a response to internal oppression. This regional privilege helps explain why even educated Punjabis, though aware of historical details, might demonstrate more ambivalence toward formal accountability measures.

In contrast, Sindh and Karachi have historically maintained more complex and often antagonistic relationships with the central state. Sindh's distinct cultural identity and literary tradition, dating back centuries before Pakistan's creation, fostered a regional consciousness that has often positioned itself in opposition to Punjab-dominated institutions. The province has experienced periods of significant political marginalization despite housing Karachi, Pakistan's commercial hub and largest city. Sindhi nationalist movements have frequently drawn parallels between their own experience of marginalization and Bengali grievances, creating ideological space for greater sympathy toward Bangladesh's independence struggle.

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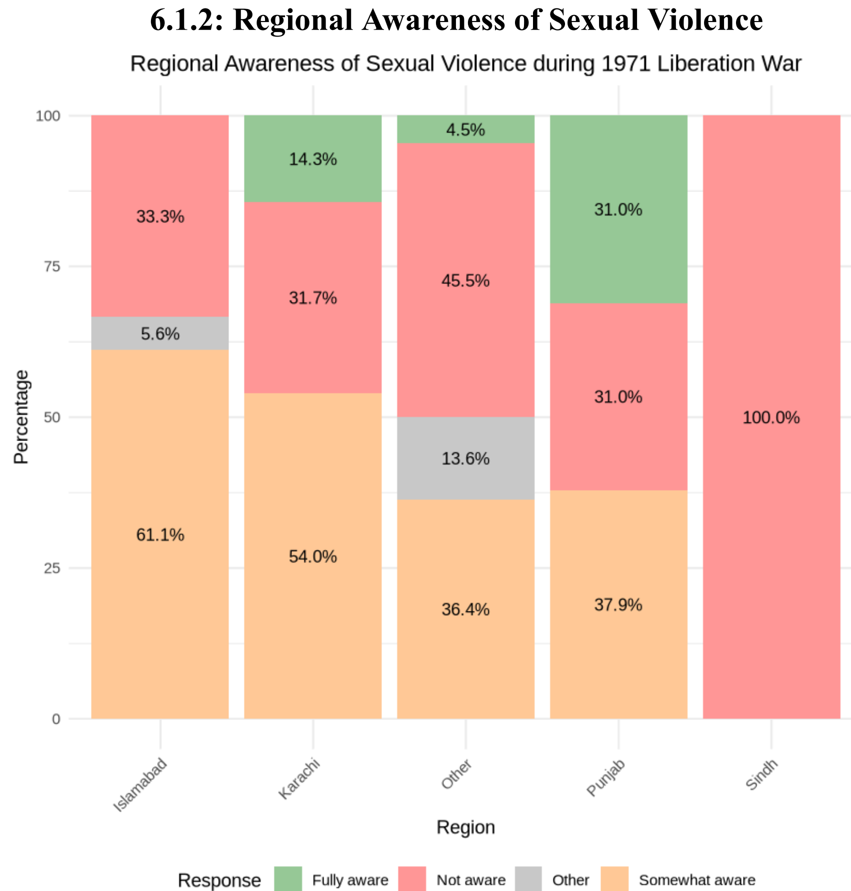
[210] Burki, Shahid Javed, Craig Baxter, Robert LaPorte, and Azfar Kamal. *Pakistan under the Military: Eleven Years of Zia Ul-Haq*. Westview Special Studies on South and Southeast Asia. Boulder : Lahore: Westview Press ; Pak Book Corp, 1991.

6.1.2: Regional Awareness of Sexual Violence



Awareness of sexual violence during the 1971 genocide revealed heightened regional disparities, with regional backgrounds strongly influencing both knowledge levels and the willingness to acknowledge these atrocities. Punjab displayed a balanced distribution, with approximately equal portions of respondents reporting full awareness (31%), no awareness (31%), and partial awareness (38%). This balanced distribution likely reflects competing narratives within Punjab, where official denial confronts alternative sources of information, particularly among educated urbanites in cities like Lahore.

The responses from Punjabi participants frequently reflected deep skepticism about reports of systematic sexual violence, often framed through religious identity. As one respondent from Punjab emphatically stated: *"Being Muslims, it is very hard to belief that the propaganda of rape of Bengali women by Muslim soldiers of Pakistan Army has any truth, here again the*

truth might be something else." This response demonstrates how religious identity is mobilized to contest historical accountability, with the respondent invoking a shared Muslim identity to dismiss the possibility that Pakistani soldiers could commit such acts against fellow Muslims.

Another Punjabi respondent echoed this sentiment more directly: *"I do not believe there was a mass rape campaign, I think sexual abuse during 1971 insurgency in east Pakistan was highly exaggerated."* This respondent went further to deflect responsibility: *"Not sure how true this is, I know there was sexual violence involved but we cannot put the entire blame on the shoulders of the Pakistani government. Much of the blame can be put on Indians and they did that purposely to make Pakistan look bad."* This pattern of acknowledging that some violence occurred while attributing primary responsibility to India rather than Pakistani forces was particularly prevalent among Punjabi respondents. Both responses reflect the influence of Punjab's military connections and security-centered nationalism. The first respondent explicitly suggests interviewing *"Ex-Army personnel who fought this war,"* indicating greater trust in military sources than in international documentation or survivor testimonies. This preference for military accounts over civilian or victim narratives reflects the privileged position of military perspectives in Punjab's regional discourse, where many families have direct connections to the armed forces.

Karachi showed relatively high knowledge levels, with 14% fully aware and 54% somewhat aware of wartime sexual violence. This awareness aligns with the city's greater exposure to international media, academic discourse, and civil society activism. Karachi's vibrant intellectual life, including prominent universities, publishing houses, and independent media, has created spaces where alternate historical narratives can circulate despite official

constraints. The city’s distance, both geographic and political, from military centers of power in northern Punjab has allowed somewhat greater latitude for critical historical engagement. Islamabad respondents predominantly reported partial awareness (61%), but notably, none claimed full awareness, suggesting surface-level engagement rather than deep historical understanding. As Pakistan’s planned capital, constructed in the 1960s and populated significantly by government employees, Islamabad embodies the state's official narrative. The city’s political culture, centered around bureaucratic and diplomatic functions, reflects the strategic ambiguity that characterizes Pakistan’s official position on 1971, acknowledging certain aspects of the conflict while avoiding comprehensive engagement with its more troubling dimensions.

Most strikingly, 100% of respondents from Sindh reported no knowledge of the mass rape campaign, despite this region showing the highest support for an apology. This paradoxical finding cannot be attributed to lower education levels, as the sample included educated Sindhis. Rather, it suggests that Sindhi support for reconciliation may function primarily as an expression of regional political identity in opposition to Punjab-dominated central institutions. Historical solidarity between Sindhi and Bengali political movements, both representing regions that have struggled against perceived Punjabi dominance, may create political sympathy that transcends specific historical knowledge. This pattern also reflects how information about wartime sexual violence has been particularly suppressed in certain regions. While Punjab’s military connections created both official silence and counter-narratives through veterans’ accounts, Sindh experienced a different pattern of information control. The region’s educational institutions, media outlets, and political discourse have historically been more thoroughly regulated by central authorities precisely because of concerns about separatist sentiment. This tighter

information control may have more effectively erased knowledge of specific atrocities while paradoxically strengthening regional opposition to central authority.

These regional variations demonstrate how collective memory is shaped not just by information availability but by deeper social structures, economic interests, and political identities forged over decades. For Punjab, greater integration with military institutions and benefits from the post-1971 political order created both material incentives and ideological frameworks that promote acceptance of state narratives about the war. For regions like Sindh and Karachi, alternative political trajectories rooted in experiences of marginalization within the federation have created openness to challenging these narratives, even where specific historical knowledge remains limited.

Contesting State Narratives from Within

While examining the engagement of Pakistani human rights organizations with the 1971 genocide, it is crucial to consider how these civil society actors navigate between official state narratives and their commitment to human rights principles. Their cautious approaches reveal the complex moral dimensions of rights advocacy in Pakistan's constrained political environment and illustrate how professional activists grapple with their conscience when addressing historical state-sanctioned violence. The limited but persistent efforts by these organizations to acknowledge aspects of this difficult history, particularly through frameworks of gendered violence or broader patterns of militarism, represent small but significant challenges to official amnesia.

As I mentioned earlier regarding Dr. Sarah Shehabuddin, she provided me with an article written by her mother, Khaleda Shehabuddin, about her husband. The case of K.M. Shehabuddin, who on April 6, 1971, became the first Pakistani diplomat to defect and pledge allegiance to

Bangladesh, offers a powerful counterpoint to Pakistan's official diplomatic stance.[211] His principled defection represents one of several instances where individual conscience confronted state policy, revealing the moral complexities faced by Pakistani civil servants during this critical historical moment.

Shehabuddin, then serving as second secretary at the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi, made this decision after learning of the brutal military crackdown in Dhaka on March 25 and hearing Bangabandhu's declaration of independence. In his public statement, Shehabuddin articulated a moral imperative that directly challenged Pakistan's official narrative: "Islamabad is engaged in a wanton and demented massacre of the innocent and unarmed people of Bangladesh... We have severed our connection with the fascist military dictatorship in Islamabad, as our conscience no longer permits us to act against our deepest convictions." Shehabuddin's defection sparked a diplomatic cascade that severely undermined Pakistan's international standing. According to his wife Khaleda Shehabuddin, over 100 diplomats eventually resigned from the Pakistan Foreign Service in protest of the military actions in East Pakistan. Notable defections included Hossain Ali and 63 other Bengali personnel in Calcutta on April 18, Mahmood Ali in New York on April 26, Muhith in Washington DC on June 30, Mohiuddin Ahmed in London on August 1, and Ambassador Abul Fateh in Baghdad on August 15.[212] These actions by diplomatic professionals represented a profound challenge to Pakistan's narrative control, as they provided international legitimacy to Bangladesh's liberation struggle at precisely the moment when Pakistan was attempting to frame the genocide as an internal matter exacerbated by Indian interference.

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[211] Shehabuddin, Khaleda. "The Delhi Defection: Opening the Diplomatic Front of the Liberation War." *Global Bangladesh*, 31 Dec. 2023, globalbangladesh.org/the-delhi-defection-opening-the-diplomatic-front-of-the-liberation-war/.
[212] Ibid.

Shehabuddin revealed the ethical crisis facing Bengali officials serving a state engaged in violence against their own people. As Shehabuddin expressed in his resignation: "The people of Bangladesh consider the Islamabad Government a foreign colonial regime, which has shown itself to be more oppressive and barbarous than any history has ever known. The Pakistan army in Bangladesh is an occupation force." This framing directly contested Pakistan's official position that it was legitimately exercising authority over its own territory. These desertions had significant practical impact on the international dimension of the genocide. In New Delhi, Shehabuddin established an Information Centre to counter Pakistani propaganda and mobilize support for Bangladesh. By August 31, 1971, he had inaugurated a formal Bangladesh Mission in Anand Niketan, Delhi, where he proudly hoisted the Bangladeshi flag, a powerful symbol of diplomatic rebellion against Pakistan's insistence that East Pakistan remained under its sovereign control. Such actions helped shift international perception of the conflict from an internal Pakistani affair to a legitimate independence struggle.

Pakistan's carefully constructed state narrative faced challenges not just from external critics but from within its own institutional apparatus. Professional diplomats trained to represent Pakistan's interests chose instead to follow their conscience, prioritizing moral responsibility over professional loyalty when confronted with evidence of atrocities. Their actions represent a critical dimension of the genocide's international dynamics that is often overlooked in analyses focused solely on state-level diplomatic relations. This pattern reveals important insights about the limitations of state narrative control in contexts of mass atrocity. While Pakistan's official position maintained that the conflict was an internal matter driven by Indian interference, the firsthand testimony of its own diplomatic representatives carried particular credibility in contesting this framing. When individuals like Shehabuddin described the military actions as

"wanton and demented massacre" rather than legitimate security operations, they leveraged their insider status to challenge state narratives from positions of professional authority. This further underscores the personal dimension of historical memory that lies beneath the statistical patterns identified in this research. While survey data reveals regional and generational variations in how Pakistanis today understand the 1971 conflict, these individual acts of conscience remind us that even during the conflict itself, Pakistani nationals, particularly those of Bengali origin, made difficult choices that reflected moral judgment rather than automatic alignment with state positions. These personal histories add complexity to any analysis of collective memory and national identity in the aftermath of 1971.

While diplomats like Shehabuddin chose the path of public defection, other officials within Pakistan's state apparatus maintained more complex and nuanced perspectives while continuing to serve within the system. During the turbulent period of 1971, Pakistan's civil and military bureaucracy was deeply divided on how to address the crisis in East Pakistan, though these internal debates rarely surfaced in public discourse. The institutional pressure to maintain a unified front often masked significant disagreements about military strategy, political negotiations, and the handling of international opinion. My great uncle, Rao Abdul Rashid, who served as a high-ranking civil servant and intelligence officer including a stint as Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) during the critical period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, provides a rare insider perspective in his memoir "Jo Mein Ney Dekha" ("What I Saw"). Published in the 1990s after his retirement, the memoir emerged during a period of relative political openness in Pakistan following the death of military dictator Zia-ul-Haq, when several former officials began publishing accounts that complicated official narratives of Pakistan's history.

The memoir’s historical significance lies in its revelation of the internal dynamics of Pakistan’s intelligence apparatus during one of the country’s most consequential crises. As part of the intelligence establishment, Rashid had access to classified reports about the deteriorating situation in East Pakistan, including assessments that contradicted the optimistic picture presented to the public. His position within the ISI, an institution central to Pakistan’s security state, makes his more critical reflections particularly noteworthy, as the ISI has been instrumental in shaping and enforcing official narratives about 1971 and other sensitive periods in Pakistan's history. Rashid’s account emerges from the complex political landscape of Pakistan in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the country was transitioning from Ayub Khan’s decade of military rule to Yahya Khan’s interim military government. This period saw increasing tensions between East and West Pakistan, culminating in the December 1970 elections that gave Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League an absolute majority in the National Assembly. The subsequent negotiations, military crackdown, and war took place within an institutional context where military leaders like Yahya Khan, political figures like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and bureaucrats like Rashid all played significant roles in decision-making.

Unlike diplomatic defectors who made public breaks with the Pakistani state, Rashid represents those who witnessed events from within corridors of power but only shared their more critical assessments years later. His memoir reveals the conflicted position of those Pakistani officials who may have privately harbored reservations about state policies while remaining institutionally loyal during the crisis itself. This delayed testimony raises important questions about moral responsibility and institutional constraints during periods of state violence. Rashid’s memoir offers a perspective that both reinforces and complicates official state narratives. His account of the 1971 crisis acknowledges multiple factors that led to the breakup of Pakistan,

including what he describes as “political arrogance in West Pakistan and military adventurism, especially the refusal to transfer power after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's electoral victory.” Unlike many official accounts that focus exclusively on Indian intervention, Rashid notes how “warnings from intelligence agencies were ignored” and how “political leaders failed to grasp the seriousness of East Pakistan's alienation.”

Particularly relevant to this research is Rashid’s characterization of Operation Searchlight, which he candidly acknowledges “only escalated tensions and led to a humanitarian disaster and international condemnation.” This assessment from someone who operated within Pakistan’s intelligence apparatus provides an important counterpoint to the predominant state narrative that minimizes the scale and systematic nature of military actions. His insider knowledge of intelligence assessments from the period challenges the post-facto justification of military action as a necessary response to Bengali provocation. The memoir also provides insight into the role of key political figures during this period. Rashid’s portrayal of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who became President and then Prime Minister of Pakistan after 1971, is particularly striking, suggesting that Bhutto’s political ambitions may have influenced his opposition to power-sharing with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. This perspective adds complexity to understanding how domestic political calculations in West Pakistan contributed to the crisis in East Pakistan, a dimension often minimized in official narratives that emphasize external factors.

Rashid’s account, while not entirely challenging the state’s emphasis on external intervention, acknowledges internal failures and miscalculations, presenting a more nuanced perspective than typical official positions. My great uncle’s memoir, though banned in Pakistan, demonstrates how individuals who served within state institutions often hold more complex views of 1971 than public narratives suggest. This highlights the persistent gap between private

knowledge and public discourse that has characterized Pakistan's engagement with this difficult history.

These contrasting examples, the diplomatic acts of principled resistance like Shehabuddin and the delayed but revealing insider accounts of officials like Rashid, demonstrate that state narratives faced challenges from both without and within. Together, they reveal the moral and professional dilemmas faced by Pakistani officials during and after the 1971 conflict, and how individual conscience interacted with institutional loyalty in shaping responses to state-sanctioned violence. The existence of these counter-narratives from within the state apparatus itself suggests that Pakistan's official position on 1971 has never been as monolithic as it might appear, even among those who served in positions of authority during this critical period.

Chapter Seven: Generational Shifts and Future Prospects

The politics of memory, how societies remember, interpret, and mobilize the past, is never neutral. Nations are sustained through collective narratives that define who belongs and what events matter. In Pakistan, the official narrative about 1971 has long emphasized external intervention (particularly by India) while minimizing internal oppression and violence against Bengalis. This selective remembering and strategic forgetting has served to maintain a coherent national identity in the face of a traumatic historical rupture. However, as my research has demonstrated, such nationalist memory regimes are never complete or unchallenged. Younger generations, with different formative experiences and access to alternative information sources, often develop historical consciousness that wanders significantly from official narratives. This chapter argues that these generational shifts represent both a challenge to established nationalist frameworks and a potential opportunity for more honest historical engagement and eventual reconciliation.

Factors Shaping Generational Differences

Several factors help explain these generational variations in historical consciousness. Younger generations, born decades after 1971, lack direct emotional investment in defending Pakistan's actions during that period, creating emotional distance that enables more critical engagement with historical evidence. While Pakistani curricula still minimize the events of 1971, higher education has gradually incorporated more critical perspectives, particularly in international relations, political science, and history courses. Increased global connectivity and diaspora networks have exposed younger Pakistanis to international perspectives on 1971. One respondent noted: *"Pakistani-American youth have less prejudice against Bengalis, due to our generation being more removed from the historical conflicts."* Access to online sources,

including Bengali perspectives, international research, and declassified documents, has enabled younger Pakistanis to encounter historical narratives that challenge official accounts.

For many younger respondents, critical engagement with 1971 forms part of a broader questioning of militarized nationalism and state authority in Pakistan. This connects historical accountability to contemporary concerns about human rights, democratic governance, and regional peace. However, it is important to note that generational change is not homogeneous. Some younger respondents continue to maintain nationalist perspectives, often influenced by family narratives or educational experiences. These exceptions clarify how generational perspectives link with a constellation of other influences, family narratives passed through dinner table conversations, educational pathways that either opened or closed doors to alternative accounts, media that shape information access, and political alignments that color historical interpretation.

While diaspora perspectives often demonstrate greater critical engagement with 1971, their influence on mainstream Pakistani discourse remains limited. Several factors constrain the impact of diaspora memory work. Within Pakistan, diaspora perspectives may be dismissed as “Westernized” or disconnected from national realities. Diaspora communities often represent privileged segments of Pakistani society, limiting their representativeness and connection to broader populations. When diaspora voices challenge dominant narratives, they may face accusations of disloyalty or serving foreign interests. Few formal mechanisms exist for diaspora perspectives to influence official narratives or educational content in Pakistan. Despite these limitations, diaspora communities represent important nodes in transnational memory networks that provide alternatives to state-centered historical narratives.

Current Dynamics in Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations

Recent developments in Bangladesh-Pakistan relations offer important context for understanding the potential implications of generational shifts in historical consciousness. The dramatic political transformation in Bangladesh following Sheikh Hasina's departure in August 2024 has created unexpected opportunities for diplomatic engagement between the two nations. Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Bangladesh's founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, served as Prime Minister for fifteen years (2009-2024) under her Awami League party. Her rule was characterized by increasingly authoritarian governance and close alliance with India, which fostered Bangladesh's independence in 1971.[213] During her tenure, relations with Pakistan deteriorated to an all-time low, with bilateral cooperation, trade, and diplomatic engagement grinding to a near-complete halt. Following violent student-led protests in summer 2024, Hasina fled to India on August 5th, where she remains in exile. She faces charges related to crimes against humanity, money laundering, and corruption, with Bangladesh's interim government requesting India extradite her to face trial.[214] Her departure marked a dramatic shift in Bangladesh's political landscape and diplomatic orientation, particularly regarding relations with both India and Pakistan.

These student protests were the culmination of growing opposition to Sheikh Hasina's "increasingly authoritarian rule" over fifteen years. Her government had forcibly disappeared at least 708 people, and there were serious allegations of Indian involvement in some of these enforced disappearances.[215] The protests appear to have been part of what was later called the

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[213] Naji, Cyrus. "A Fraught New Frontier in Bangladesh–Pakistan Relations." *Himal Southasian*, 14 Jan. 2025, www.himalmag.com/politics/sheikh-hasina-diplomacy-india-pakistan-bangladesh.
[214] Ellis-Petersen, Hannah. "Bangladesh to Seek Extradition of Ousted Leader Sheikh Hasina from India." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 18 Nov. 2024, www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/18/bangladesh-seek-extradition-ousted-leader-sheikh-hasina-india.
[215] Huq, Chaumtoli. "The Bangladesh Student Movement That Transformed a Nation." *LPE Project*, 30 Oct. 2024, lpeproject.org/blog/the-bangladesh-student-movement-that-transformed-a-nation/.

Monsoon Revolution, with the Dhaka University students being among the "prime movers" of the movement that ultimately brought down her government. The uproar stems from Bangladesh's Supreme Court reinstating a civil service job quota reserving 30% of government positions for descendants of 1971 Liberation War veterans.[216] While this quota system appeared to be the immediate trigger, the movement was fueled by deeper structural issues including economic frustration and political repression. University students, often from working-class backgrounds, faced limited post-graduate employment opportunities despite Bangladesh's economic growth. [217]

The situation dramatically escalated when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called the protesters "razakars" (traitors), a term historically associated with collaborators during the 1971 war.[218] This inflammatory response caused the movement to expand beyond quota reform to broader demands for democracy and an end to what students termed fascism. The protests evolved into a cross-class coalition when students explicitly called for workers to join their August 4th march to Dhaka, leading to widespread participation including rank-and-file soldiers who eventually refused orders to fire on protesters.[219] The government's violent response, including shoot-on-sight orders for curfew violations, ultimately unified various segments of society against Hasina's regime, culminating in her flight to India just one day later.

For fifteen years under Hasina's Awami League government, Pakistan had been "a taboo subject" in Bangladesh.[220] Relations had been fraught since 1971, but during Hasina's rule they reached an all-time low. Trade, movement of people, and official cooperation ground almost to a

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[216] Huq, Chaumtoli. "The Bangladesh Student Movement That Transformed a Nation." *LPE Project*, 30 Oct. 2024, lpeproject.org/blog/the-bangladesh-student-movement-that-transformed-a-nation/.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Naji, Cyrus. "A Fraught New Frontier in Bangladesh–Pakistan Relations." *Himal Southasian*, 14 Jan. 2025, www.himalmag.com/politics/sheikh-hasina-diplomacy-india-pakistan-bangladesh.

complete halt. Pakistani diplomats found themselves frozen out, former High Commissioner Rafiuzzaman Siddiqui (2016-2018) recounted never getting a chance to meet with any Bangladeshi minister, with officials treating him "like a leper" while his guests' drivers were harassed and friends were scared to receive his phone calls.[221]

This changed dramatically after Hasina's fall. Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel laureate now serving as chief advisor to Bangladesh's interim government, has met Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif three times in four months, while not meeting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi once since taking office.[222] Pakistan's current High Commissioner Syed Ahmed Maroof suddenly found himself "much in demand," taking meetings with businessmen, political leaders, and interim government officials.[223] The transformation has been remarkable. Since August 2024, bilateral trade has increased 28 percent, with concrete manifestations including Bangladesh importing 50,000 tons of rice from Pakistan and the arrival of two cargo ships at Chittagong port, the first since the 1971 genocide.[224] In December 2024, Pakistani qawwali singer Rahat Fateh Ali Khan performed to 10,000 people at Dhaka's Army Stadium, with the concert organized by Dhaka University students and aimed at raising funds for injured protesters. This diplomatic thaw occurs against a complex regional backdrop. The end of Hasina's rule, characterized by close ties with India, has led to cooled Dhaka-Delhi relations. Bangladesh's interim government even demanded India extradite Hasina to face charges related to crimes against humanity, a request India has ignored. This regional recalibration has created diplomatic space for Pakistan-Bangladesh engagement previously constrained by the India-Bangladesh-Pakistan triangle.

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[221] Naji, Cyrus. "A Fraught New Frontier in Bangladesh–Pakistan Relations." *Himal Southasian*, 14 Jan. 2025, www.himalmag.com/politics/sheikh-hasina-diplomacy-india-pakistan-bangladesh.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Ibid.

However, the historical grievances remain delicate. During Yunus's recent meeting with Sharif in Cairo, while Yunus raised the 1971 war and asked Pakistan to "settle those issues for us to move forward," Sharif replied that the war had been settled since the 1970s.[225] Pakistan has never officially apologized for 1971, with former diplomat Rafiuzzaman noting it's "a very sensitive issue for Pakistan" that "will open up a Pandora's box." Maroof, the current High Commissioner, acknowledged they've been discussing historical issues "In private," indicating continued sensitivity around this topic.[226] Yet there are "underlying strands of sympathy that coexist with the historical trauma." The two countries share a majority religion and cultural links. Bangladesh was run by ex-Pakistani civil servants after 1971, and the Bangladesh Army was led for decades by Pakistan-trained Bengali officers. These personal connections occasionally surface in diplomatic encounters, Yunus and Pakistani advisor Tariq Fatemi reportedly spoke in fluent Bangla before an uncomprehending audience of Pakistani diplomats.[227]

This diplomatic warming may intersect meaningfully with the generational shifts identified in my research. Younger Pakistanis' greater openness to historical accountability could potentially create domestic support for more substantive engagement with Bangladesh, while the practical benefits of improved bilateral relations might generate constituencies invested in sustained diplomatic progress. As former diplomat Tariq Karim observed, "You can't change your geography," Bangladesh must navigate relationships with both India and Pakistan, creating opportunities for addressing historical grievances alongside forward-looking cooperation.[228] As Bangladesh navigates its post-Hasina political landscape and Pakistan continues to experience its own internal transitions, this moment of diplomatic opportunity could provide a context where

[225] Naji, Cyrus. "A Fraught New Frontier in Bangladesh–Pakistan Relations." *Himal Southasian*, 14 Jan. 2025, www.himalmag.com/politics/sheikh-hasina-diplomacy-india-pakistan-bangladesh.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid.
[228] Naji, Cyrus. "A Fraught New Frontier in Bangladesh–Pakistan Relations." *Himal Southasian*, 14 Jan. 2025, www.himalmag.com/politics/sheikh-hasina-diplomacy-india-pakistan-bangladesh.

evolving generational attitudes toward historical accountability intersect with pragmatic bilateral interests, potentially creating conditions for more honest engagement with the legacy of 1971.

Bangladesh's Political Transition and Memory Politics

The August 2024 ouster of Sheikh Hasina's government after mass protests marks a potential inflection point in Bangladesh's historical memory politics. While previous sections analyzed Pakistani attitudes toward 1971, recent developments suggest parallel shifts may be occurring within Bangladesh itself, with implications for how both societies engage with this difficult history. While Pakistani narratives about 1971 have evolved across generations, Bangladesh has experienced its own internal contestation over historical memory. The Awami League, as the party that led the independence movement, has positioned itself as the guardian of Bangladesh's liberation narrative.[229] This has included the elevation of Muktijoddhas (male freedom fighters) and Biranganas (female war victims, particularly those who experienced sexual violence) as national symbols.[230]

However, critics have noted how these commemorative practices serve complex political purposes. The designation of women as Biranganas, while ostensibly honoring their sacrifice, simultaneously marked them as victims of sexual violence, creating what scholar Nayanika Mookherjee calls a "fetishized identity" that reflected patriarchal assumptions rather than women's own narrative agency.[231] Similarly, the Awami League's focus on 1971 has been critiqued for emphasizing party-specific interpretations rather than more inclusive national

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[229] "75 Years of Awami League: Turning Bangladesh into an Independent and Prosperous Country." *Bangladesh Awami League*, www.albd.org/articles/news/41436/75-Years-of-Awami-League:-Turning-Bangladesh-into-an-Independent-and-Prosperous-Country.
[230] Ibid.
[231] Mookherjee, Nayanika. "Imaging 'Traitors': The Raped Woman and Sexual Violence during the Bangladesh War of 1971." In *Narratives of Mass Atrocity*, edited by Sarah Federman and Ronald Niezen, 1st ed., 222–46. Cambridge University Press, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009110693.010.

narratives.[232] The formation of an interim government led by Muhammad Yunus has coincided with a dramatic shift in Bangladesh's diplomatic positioning.

This diplomatic warming occurs against a backdrop of growing anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh, with many Bangladeshis critical of New Delhi's long support for Hasina's government. According to Al Jazeera reporting, anti-India sentiment has grown significantly following Hasina's departure, with the Indian High Commission in Dhaka even facing attacks.[233] These diplomatic realignments may accelerate shifts in how 1971 is commemorated and interpreted in both countries. As Amir Zia notes in TRT World, "There are two distinct streams in Bangladeshi politics. One, represented mainly by the Awami League, remains pro-India, while the other stands bitterly opposed to the perceived Indian hegemony in their country."[234] This second stream, represented by parties like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami, has often questioned the Awami League's ownership of 1971 narratives.

Recent incidents following Hasina's ouster suggest potential reconfigurations of historical memory. Reports of attacks on Muktijoddha by supporters of Jamaat-e-Islami indicate challenges to established commemoration practices.[235] Similarly, the potential rise of parties historically critical of Awami League interpretations of 1971 could lead to revised official narratives that emphasize different aspects of the independence struggle or contextualize it

[232] "75 Years of Awami League: Turning Bangladesh into an Independent and Prosperous Country." *Bangladesh Awami League*, www.albd.org/articles/news/41436/75-Years-of-Awami-League:-Turning-Bangladesh-into-an-Independent-and-Prosperous-Country.
[233] Kapoor, Sanjay. *What Does Sheikh Hasina's Resignation Mean for India-Bangladesh Relations?*, Al Jazeera, 12 Aug. 2024, www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/8/12/what-does-sheikh-hasinas-resignation-mean-for-india-bangladesh-relations.
[234] Zia, Amir. "Hasina's Ouster Opens a Window to Reset Bangladesh-Pakistan Ties." *TRT World - Breaking News, Live Coverage, Opinions and Videos*, TRT WORLD, 20 Aug. 2024, www.trtworld.com/opinion/hasinas-ouster-opens-a-window-to-reset-bangladesh-pakistan-ties-18198054.
[235] Sikka, Yatharth. "Decoding the Role of Jamaat-e-Islami on the International Day of Remembrance and Tribute to Victims of Terrorism." *Organiser*, 21 Aug. 2024, organiser.org/2024/08/21/252783/politics/decoding-the-role-of-jamaat-e-islami-on-the-international-day-of-remembrance-and-tribute-to-victims-of-terrorism/.

differently within Bangladesh's broader history. However, as with generational shifts in Pakistan, changes in Bangladesh's engagement with 1971 are likely to be complex rather than linear. As Walter Ladwig of King's College London observes, geographical realities constrain Bangladesh's diplomatic options: "They share a long border with [India]. Their water source originates in India. At most, they may take a slightly independent policy stance compared with Sheikh Hasina's time, but they would not take an anti-India stance."[236]

Similarly, while the interim government has signaled openness to improved relations with Pakistan, Yunus has explicitly called on Pakistan to resolve long standing issues including "the lack of a formal apology from Pakistan for its atrocities, the repatriation of Urdu-speaking people from Bangladesh who identify as Pakistanis and the division of pre-1971 assets between the two nations."[237] This diplomatic landscape reveals how memory politics in both countries remain intertwined with regional geopolitics. The recalibration of Bangladesh's diplomatic positioning presents both opportunities and challenges for how the two societies engage with their shared traumatic history. As Bangladesh potentially moves toward a more nuanced commemoration of 1971 that is less dominated by Awami League interpretations, and as Pakistan continues to experience generational shifts in historical consciousness, new possibilities may emerge for dialogue that acknowledges historical grievances while developing forward-looking relations.

Potential Pathways to Reconciliation

The generational shifts identified in this research suggest potential openings for greater historical acknowledgment and eventual reconciliation between Pakistan and Bangladesh. Drawing on international experiences of post-conflict reconciliation, several models might inform such processes.

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[236] Naji, Cyrus. "A Fraught New Frontier in Bangladesh–Pakistan Relations." *Himal Southasian*, 14 Jan. 2025, www.himalmag.com/politics/sheikh-hasina-diplomacy-india-pakistan-bangladesh.
[237] Ibid.

Following examples like South Africa's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* or Germany's acknowledgment of the Holocaust, Pakistan could pursue a truth and acknowledgment approach that formally investigates and acknowledges the atrocities committed in 1971.[238] Such processes prioritize establishing historical facts and recognizing victims' experiences as a foundation for reconciliation. Building on precedents from Japan and South Korea, symbolic reconciliation efforts including official apologies, commemorative gestures, and cultural exchanges offer another potential pathway. For Pakistan and Bangladesh, symbolic steps might include a formal apology, joint commemorations, or memorial initiatives. Educational reform represents a third approach, with countries like Germany, Rwanda, and Northern Ireland using curriculum revisions to address difficult histories. This would involve revising Pakistani educational materials to include more accurate and comprehensive accounts of 1971, potentially in coordination with Bangladeshi educators. Cultural and people-to-people exchanges, similar to those that have facilitated Franco-German or Polish-German reconciliation, could foster greater understanding between Pakistani and Bangladeshi societies. Enhanced cultural partnerships, academic collaborations, and civil society dialogues would be central to this approach.

Economic cooperation and forward-looking engagement, following examples from Southeast Asia or Europe, could complement historical acknowledgment with practical collaboration on shared challenges. Increased trade, investment, and regional integration initiatives would create mutual benefits while building trust. Each of these models offers potential elements for a reconciliation process between Pakistan and Bangladesh, though any effective approach would need to be adapted to the specific historical, cultural, and political context of South Asia.

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[238] *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, www.justice.gov.za/trc.

The generational variances revealed in this research emphasize a critical inflection point in Pakistan's relationship with historical memory. As younger cohorts demonstrate markedly higher rates of support for historical accountability, these demographic shifts represent more than statistical discrepancy. They signal the emergence of a national identity that is less tethered to the defensive nationalist narratives that have long constrained public discourse about 1971. The increased exposure to alternative narratives through diaspora networks creates unprecedented conditions for a fundamental reconstitution of collective memory. This generational transformation, particularly when coupled with evolving regional dynamics and the documented pragmatic warming in diplomatic relations, suggests that the rigid binary of acknowledgment versus denial may be giving way to more nuanced spaces for historical reckoning. However, the extent to which these generational openings translate into institutional change remains contingent on broader political developments and the capacity of emerging leaders to navigate between moral imperatives and entrenched power structures.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined Pakistani attitudes toward the 1971 Bangladesh genocide through multiple lenses; historical, educational, familial, and generational. Several key findings have emerged from this research. First, Pakistani perspectives on 1971 demonstrate significant generational variation, with younger Pakistanis (18-39) showing greater openness to historical accountability and reconciliation than their older counterparts, particularly those who came of age during periods of heightened nationalism. Second, educational institutions in Pakistan continue to marginalize the events of 1971, with survey data revealing significant gaps in knowledge about key aspects of the genocide, especially regarding sexual violence and the scale of casualties. Third, family narratives play a crucial role in transmitting historical consciousness, with many respondents citing intergenerational discussions as formative in shaping their understanding of 1971. Fourth, digital media and diaspora networks create alternative pathways for accessing historical information, allowing younger Pakistanis to encounter perspectives that challenge nationalist frameworks. Finally, recent political developments in Bangladesh, including the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government in August 2024, have created new diplomatic openings between Pakistan and Bangladesh, offering potential opportunities for addressing historical grievances alongside forward-looking engagement.

Theoretical Implications

This examination of Pakistani memory politics surrounding the 1971 genocide offers substantial theoretical contributions that reframe our understanding of how societies grapple with contested histories. Far from exhibiting the monolithic character often attributed to national memory, Pakistan exemplifies a dynamic field where competing historical narratives engage in ongoing struggles for dominance. The empirical evidence demonstrates how state-sanctioned

versions of history encounter persistent challenges from emergent counternarratives, revealing memory as an active process of continuous negotiation rather than a fixed repository of the past. Pakistani expatriates, occupying liminal spaces between national identities, serve as catalysts for historical truth, their interactions with Bengali accounts produce novel interpretive frameworks that infiltrate back into domestic Pakistani discourse. These transborder memory flows operate outside state supervision, forging new forms of collective identification that transcend official national mythologies.

Most critically, this study advances reconciliation scholarship by exposing the temporal complexities inherent in historical reckoning. Whereas traditional models posit that formal diplomatic initiatives typically precede societal readiness for acknowledgment, the Pakistan-Bangladesh dynamic suggests an inversion of this sequence. Here, shifting generational sensibilities toward 1971 appear to be facilitating official reconciliation mechanisms. This grassroots metamorphosis of historical consciousness, operating in dialectical tension with entrenched institutional barriers, display alternative pathways for conceptualizing how societies transition from denial toward recognition, not through straightforward progression but where societal and political transformations reinforce each other through iterative processes.

This investigation reveals a pattern of actionable interventions that could catalyze transformative shifts in Pakistan-Bangladesh relations, moving beyond conventional diplomatic gridlock toward memory diplomacy. The documented generational fault lines present a unique historical juncture where emergent consciousness could be channeled into the power to define what is considered valuable or true. As younger cohorts ascend organizational hierarchies, they carry with them the seeds of what could become a paradigmatic shift in how Pakistan engages with historical responsibility, not through imposed narratives but through organic institutional

evolution. The political upheaval in Bangladesh creates a liminal space where old certainties have dissolved but new structures remain unformed. This temporal gap offers strategic opportunities for simultaneously addressing historical wounds while constructing future-oriented partnerships. The current regional recalibration, particularly the cooling of Indo-Bangladesh relations, generates a diplomatic vacuum that creative statesmanship could fill with innovative frameworks linking historical acknowledgment to tangible economic and cultural collaborations. Rather than conventional educational "reform," what emerges as necessary is an instructive revolution from below, starting not with top-down curriculum mandates but with generating intellectual frameworks that gradually percolate through educational systems.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

As I reflect on this journey, from family dinner table silences to academic interviews, from discovering missing chapters in my own education to documenting generational shifts in historical consciousness, I am struck by how much remains unexplored. This research has revealed patterns and possibilities, but also highlighted the vast territory still waiting to be mapped. The generational divides I have uncovered are not merely statistics; they represent living contradictions within Pakistani society. Younger generations who Google "1971 genocide" for the first time stand in stark contrast to their parents who lived through those years yet never speak of them. These aren't merely numerical trends but human stories unfolding across time, pointing toward a future where silence might finally give way to acknowledgment.

Yet this study captures only half the conversation. Pakistan's evolving attitudes toward 1971 exist in dialogue with Bangladesh's own complex relationship to this history. What stories do Bengali families pass down? How do their younger generations grapple with victimhood and vengeance, liberation and loss? The missing half of this equation demands attention.

There's also the question of translation, not just linguistic but institutional. How might shifting public attitudes eventually reshape official positions? Can the cracks in national narratives I have documented widen into genuine policy changes? These questions hover at the intersection of individual memory and collective power, where the road from private acknowledgment to public apology remains unmarked. Perhaps most urgently, this research reveals the need for experimental approaches to historical education. If traditional curricula have failed to transmit accurate knowledge about 1971, what alternative teachings might succeed? How do digital platforms reshape historical transmission across borders? These are not purely academic questions but practical pathways toward reconciliation.

The limitations of this study, its urban bias, temporal constraints, methodological boundaries, are not just obstacles to overcome but invitations for others to venture into this territory differently. Future researchers might trace how memory travels through rural communities, how it shifts during political upheavals, how it shapes the daily interactions between Pakistani and Bengali families who somehow, against all historical odds, still find ways to connect. This research began with a personal question about family silences and concludes with a recognition that individual families are microcosms of national forgetting. But in documenting how younger Pakistanis increasingly refuse to inherit their elders' silences, I have glimpsed something else: not just the possibility of reconciliation, but its necessity. Because in the end, these aren't just historical questions but urgent present realities demanding our attention, our honesty, and our courage to speak what has long remained unspoken.

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