

Editorial

Too Soon?: Pakistan and the 1971 War

By Cara Cilano

During the chitchat that often precedes the start of class, I recently heard my students talking about whether they planned to attend a “too soon” party. One young woman explained by way of an example: “A friend of mine went to a ‘too soon’ party in a dress made from black garbage bags. She covered her face in black shoe polish and stuck a fake bird, also covered in black, on her head. She was the BP oil spill.” While some may view the humor distasteful or inappropriate, the concept behind a “too soon” party does, nonetheless, ask us to reflect upon how much time needs to pass before we can achieve a productive critical distance from an event. By way of an opening salvo to this special issue of *Pakistaniaat* on the events of 1971, it’s precisely upon this question of temporal and critical distance that I want to focus. My intention here is to explore the timeliness of critical discussions of 1971 by encouraging an examination of the notion of the archive, especially in how it shapes what we think we know about this period, as well as how it may shape what we will know in the future.

Of course, the concept of “too soon” implies a question: too soon for whom? And, in the context of the events of 1971, the responses to that question vary significantly. From a Bangladeshi perspective, the answer would likely be “too late!” Indeed, in July 2002, then President Pervez Musharraf must have heard a resounding “too late!” when he traveled to Dhaka to express his “regrets” for the war itself. Much of Dhaka’s civic life came to an abrupt halt during Musharraf’s visit. Protestors were motivated to disrupt the business of everyday living in order to communicate the inadequacy of Musharraf’s framing of 1971 as an “unfortunate period” marked by “excesses” that are “regrettable” (“Dhaka Closes Down”).¹ The perceived insufficiency of Musharraf’s gestures, compounded by the fact that, from certain perspectives, they came thirty years too late, reflects the stark contrast between the amount of scholarly and literary commentary by Bangladeshis and Pakistanis on the war.²

Yet, from a Pakistani perspective, Musharraf’s visit to Dhaka may have been too soon. In fact, one could draw some connections between Musharraf’s 2002 trip and the release in late 2000 of *The Report of the Hamoodur Rehman*

Commission of Inquiry into the 1971 War, which had just been declassified by the Pakistani government. The *Report* was begun in 1972 at the behest of Z.A. Bhutto, who empanelled the Commission (three judges) to investigate why Pakistan lost the war. Since most of the Pakistani military personnel were held as POWs in India until 1974, the Commission was only able to complete its *Report* in that year by means of the *Supplement* to the main document. While the public was aware of the Commission's proceedings, the resulting documents themselves were not available to the public; every Pakistani government, up to and including, for a time, Musharraf's, kept the *Report* and its *Supplement* under lock and key. The events surrounding (and precipitating?) the *Report*'s declassification further point to the Pakistani government's unwillingness to reveal perhaps one of its most important official documents about the war. The declassification came about because an Indian weekly, *India Today*, leaked a portion of the *Supplement* in the summer of 2000. Before making most of the *Report* and *Supplement* available in December of that year, Musharraf went on record saying, "What happened in '71 was a disgrace to the nation. Should we remember such disgraces?... Why the hue and cry now when most of the people are not alive?" ("Musharraf"). My point here is not to speculate over Musharraf's motivations but rather to note his reluctance, which, metonymically, stands in for Pakistan's own sense that, in 2000, it may have been too soon to broach the topic of the 1971 war. In such a context, one cannot doubt Naveeda Khan's more recent assessment that there is "little sustained work on 1971 in Pakistan" (5).³

The fact of the *Supplement*'s leak by *India Today* brings up another way of addressing the "too soon?" question. By positioning the "too soon?" question against our knowledge of 1971, we can examine the sources from which we gain our understandings, as well as the methods by which we construct these understandings. No matter their disciplinary training, critics turn to the archive—be it historical or scholarly—in order to formulate and situate their work in relation to what precedes it. Jeffrey Wallen offers perhaps the most customary understanding of the archive when he describes it as "a repository, a place of storage" (261). For the researcher, the archive presents, according to Wallen, an "encounter" with the "systemic processes of ordering and transforming experience" (276), a transformation that, in part, goes to deeming the properly "historical" from the detritus of the past. Francis Blouin acknowledges this conceptualization of the archive and its functions, remarking that it relies upon a series of collective assumptions, including "a shared interest in the importance of institutions, a shared sense of prominent actors, a shared view of seminal events, and a shared sense of national boundaries and definitions" (296). When viewed critically, however, such a conceptualization of the formation of the archive, as well as its attendant functions, proves problem-

atic. That is, the archive directly shapes how we know the past: the archive selects, orders, and transforms the past, as Wallen has it. Further, as Blouin continues, the archive emerges out of the same “cultural dynamic[s]” that deem certain actors, events, documents, and so on, worthy of preserving in the first place (297). The archive itself, then, is a site of power in that it produces and delimits knowledge. Its delimiting capabilities are born out explicitly in cases, such as the one concerning *The Report of the Hamoodur Rehman Commission*, when leaks reveal the control—or lack thereof— governments wield over the archive’s contents.⁴

The possibility of a leak invites us to rethink the archive itself. Indeed, a leak is an invitation to acknowledge the temporal and epistemological orientations of the archive. In his formulation of the archive, Jacques Derrida de-emphasizes its conventional temporal orientation: “[T]he question of the archive is not ... a question of the past. This is not the question of a concept dealing with the past which might *already* be at our disposal or not at our disposal ...” (27). By NOT viewing the archive as the repository of the past, Derrida also calls into question the power to control the archive. Specifically, Derrida contends that participation in the construction and interpretation of the archive serves as an exercise in democracy (11). The possibility of a leak is instructive here in that a leak signals the scope of the archive even as it points to its permeability or, more properly, the permeability of its control.⁵ By pointing to the archive’s unruliness, so to speak, a leak can indicate where and how the power structure that governs the archive is vulnerable.⁶ And here is where democratizing participation can begin. More people can actively select, order, and transform the past through the collection of oral histories or “histories from below,” for example, and also through the consultation of non-factually verifiable discourses, such as the literary and the filmic. This possibility for expansion through participation reorients the archive epistemologically in that it calls into question what’s “worth” preserving and whose experiences matter. At the same time, expansion also reorients the archive toward the future in that increased participation and an expanded notion of what’s worth knowing functions inclusively, casting knowledge not as finite content but as infinite, collaborative production. Indeed, for Derrida, the archive is “the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow” (27). With this understanding of the archive, we can address the “too soon?” questions cynically or optimistically. For the cynics, the potential openness of the archive may prompt the view that “real” or “definitive” understanding will always be deferred. For the optimist, however, the point is not to reach definitive knowledge but to create the conditions for inclusive and critical public discourse.

What scholarly commentary there is on Pakistan and 1971 begins to enact a new kind of relationship with the archive and, thus, encourages participation in the

construction and interpretation of it. In her examination of the historical treatments of Pakistan, post-1971, Naveeda Khan observes that critical discourse does not “actually attend to the events of 1971” (5). Instead, as Khan argues, it “recursively extend[s] to the origins of Pakistan” (5-6) in order to lengthen an analytic trajectory that frames Pakistan’s national ills as endemic from its inception (3). As Khan suggests, scholarly treatments of 1971 subsume the events of that year into a larger narrative that precedes the country’s dissolution, thereby rendering the secession of East Pakistan as yet another moment in a story already written rather than as an episode that may require an entirely different analytic paradigm. If Khan’s assessment stands up, then post-1971 critical discourse approaches the scholarly archive as that closed repository of the past, the site one visits to gather the information and narratives one needs to perpetuate the governing structures of the archive. Khan’s own work calls such usage of the archive into question. Where she sees the perpetuation of “crisis narratives” in Pakistani history, including narratives of “the failed state, failed nationalism, and failed sovereignty” (3), Khan would substitute or augment the story by way of the argument that “belongingness [for Pakistanis] is premised upon acknowledging and mulling over the problems of Pakistan” (8). Khan’s critical impulse, then, suggests that an interrogation of Pakistan and 1971 cannot come soon enough.

By the very nature of her project, Yasmin Saikia’s work also expands the archive so as to render it more inclusive and participatory. Saikia’s critical corpus includes oral histories gathered from Bangladeshis and Biharis who survived the war in what was East Pakistan, from Indians involved in the crisis, and from Pakistani men who fought in the West Pakistani Army. Although the self-framed “victors” of the war, the Bangladeshis, in Saikia’s estimation, were by no means completely open about the conflict. As Saikia contends, “[Her] initial investigation of this [triumphalist Bangladeshi] narrative in newspapers made it evident that government officials, scholars, and political and religious leaders all restricted women’s speech” (“Beyond” 277). Thus, Saikia’s work undertakes the expansion of the archive—or, in Saikia’s terms, gives voice to the “silence” of the archive—through the collection of women’s stories about the war (“Beyond” 277).⁷ In her efforts to contribute the stories she collected from these women and from former West Pakistani soldiers to a reframed archive, Saikia makes explicit how she has engaged with the constraints of the archive as it is traditionally conceptualized. With respect to the gendered dynamics of the archive, for example, Saikia declares, “Scholarly obsession with impersonal and rigorous demands for substantiating individual experience with corroborating evidence bring[s] the danger of muzzling, rather than empowering, the voices of women in Bangladesh” (“Beyond” 280). In a similar vein, Saikia’s approach to framing the former soldiers’ narratives entails an “investigat[ion] of

the myriad ways in which an event may be narrated, incorporating personal and collective experiences to, thus, enable an inflection of the official narrative of the history of 1971 from the Pakistani perspective” (“Listening” 179). Here, we see Saikia’s work turning to non-standard—though carefully corroborated—discourse for an enhanced understanding of 1971.⁸ At the same time, Saikia makes clear that her own efforts to expand the historical archive relied upon an established scholarly one pioneered in South Asia by historians, feminists, and activists who gathered oral histories about the violence women experienced in the 1947 partition.⁹ Saikia’s reliance on the methodologies of oral historians whose work precedes her own illustrates how interventions into (rather than replications of) the very structures of the archive can open the future: Saikia acknowledges that the women she interviewed hoped their stories would enable others “to revisit a historical chapter and to democratize it in order to produce a new community” (“Beyond” 280). And, as with the impulse behind Khan’s work, the histories Saikia helps narrate can’t be told soon enough.

Finally, in my own work with archival materials from the 1971 war, I have hoped to shift the archive’s attendant power structures by pointing out their vulnerabilities. My own training as a literary scholar informs my textual analyses of *The Report of the Hamoodur Rehman Commission* and its *Supplement*. Thus, just as Saikia turns to non-standard discourses in her efforts to expand the archive, I adopt a non-standard methodology in my approach to archival materials in that I rely on the techniques of literary analysis to examine the narration of historical “fact.” At several crucial junctures in the *Report*, for instance, the empanelled judges engage in what I have a speculative discursive mode.¹⁰ As the judges approach their account of the first two weeks of December 1971, they editorialize, placing emphasis on

the difference, between our world-renowned army going down in history as they will now do, as the army which was defeated in the field of battle and dishonorably surrendered, ...and an army which continued fighting gallantly under the heaviest imaginable odds until the United Nations, recognising by an unprecedented vote the justice of their cause, stepped in to impose a ceasefire. (*Report* 155)

In reality, as we know, the UN Security Council was far from passing unanimously any resolution of this kind.¹¹ Nonetheless, the judges’ presentation of their hopes for a UN-sanctioned resolution to the armed conflict draws attention to a narrative vulnerability in that it voices what they wished had happened. Gerald Prince refers to the act of narrating a “wished for” scenario as an act of “disnarrating.” Disnar-

ration warrants attention for it signals narrative alternatives; that is, the received narrative constitutes only one of several ways of telling the story (Prince 5). In the above cited passage, the judges' indulgence in an "if only..." narrative form inadvertently also calls into question the story as it has been recorded and received. In other words, narrative moments such as this one regarding the army's surrender call attention to the deliberateness—the selectivity, the biases, the silences—which comprise the *Report's* and, hence, the Pakistani government's "official" version of 1971. In revealing its ambivalence over the story it relays, the *Report* undercuts its own authority. Here, too, we see a repositioning of the archive that encourages a more broadly based participation through acts of interpretation. And, again, the opportunity couldn't arrive soon enough.

The Essays in this Special Issue

The essays included in this special issue of *Pakistaniaat* on the 1971 war carry on the conversation about the events of that year through a collective interest in international relations, especially the relations that bound Pakistan, China, and the US together in this period. Given this shared disciplinary preoccupation, all five of these essays, taken together, construct a lively debate over inter/national motivations and our ability to know fully why primary actors took the decisions they did. At the same time, I am compelled to touch briefly upon each essay's use of and status as archival materials in an effort to encourage another discussion about how we know what we do about Pakistan and 1971.

Philip Oldenburg's work on South Asia is certainly a cornerstone in the scholarly archive, and, thus, I am very pleased to reprint his "The Breakup of Pakistan" as the lead essay in this issue.¹² Oldenburg's essay is a model for the construction and interpretation of the archive on 1971. Regarding the construction of the archive, Oldenburg draws from his own compilation of primary source materials, collected in *Bangladesh: The Birth of a Nation; A Handbook of Background Information and Documentary Sources*, in order to line up such evidence against interviews he conducted with private citizens and government employees. The end result of such an alignment illustrates, first, how non-documentary sources expand the archive, and, second, how their inclusion allows for a re-interpretation of documents or positions otherwise thought to be authoritative. In this vein, Oldenburg's essay reveals, for instance, why the White House's internal communications likely never referred to the situation in East Pakistan as a "genocide." Moreover, Oldenburg's essay also highlights the crucial role leaks to the media played in destabilizing the public statements of the White House, especially where the provision of arms to Pakistan was concerned.

Roger Vogler's essay, "The Birth of Bangladesh," breaks the frame, so to speak, of scholarly discourse by examining archival materials, particularly Kissinger's contributions, from a view inflected by the affective. Vogler's argument—that the US failed to aid the East Pakistanis and the Indians adequately enough—derives from his firsthand experiences as an American on-the-ground in India during the early 1970s. Thus, Vogler positions himself as a witness fully aware of the blatant inadequacies of the US's public statements about the build-up of tensions in South Asia at the time. This position, along with the benefits of retrospection, allow Vogler to highlight how the White House's own fears of media leaks may have prompted closed door sessions and the shutting down of State Department dissent. In effect, Vogler's approach to the archival presentation of Pakistan and 1971, particularly where the US is concerned, reflects Saikia's in that both testify to the need for non-standard discourse's humanizing effects.

Richard A. Moss and Luke A. Nichter's essay, "Superpower Relations, Backchannels, and the Subcontinent," follows Oldenburg's in the new lights it casts on Richard Nixon's and Henry's Kissinger's control over US-Pakistan relations during this period. As does Oldenburg, Moss and Nichter benefit from leaked materials, including especially *The Anderson Papers*, a compilation of Jack Anderson's journalistic exposés of the Nixon White House's approach to the war. Moss and Nichter's unique contribution to the developing scholarly conversation about 1971 and, simultaneously, to the archive itself is the transcription and interpretation of the Nixon tapes, as well as the investigation of newly declassified documents recording the "backchannel" correspondence between Washington and Moscow.¹³ According to Moss and Nichter, these newly accessed archival materials change the existing conversation significantly. Indeed, Moss and Nichter use these materials to argue a middle way, neither vilifying the Nixon White House outright nor lauding it, as Nixon's and Kissinger's own memoirs do. Crucially, in spite of how their own work opens up the archive on US-Pakistan relations during the early 1970s, Moss and Nichter, nonetheless, caution readers against deeming that archive complete; rather, they explicitly state that a fuller understanding is only to be had once similarly classified documents from Pakistan, Russia, India, and China become available.

Finally, as if in answer to Moss and Nichter's proviso, Mavra Farooq's essay, "Pakistani-Chinese Relations," sheds light on the relations between Pakistan and China that preceded the 1971 war and arguably informed, according to Oldenburg's and Moss and Nichter's essays, the US's stance throughout the conflict. Indeed, Farooq's essay does offer a compelling elaboration of China's role in this "superpower showdown," in that, in Farooq's account, this country initially did not view good relations with the US as a motivating factor in its own interests

Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies Vol. 2, No. 3 (2010)

in the subcontinent's latest tensions. Farooq draws upon primary source materials from Pakistan and China, including newspaper coverage and legislative records, to specify the ways that China eventually came closer, thanks to Pakistan's position as an intermediary, to the US's approach to the war in East Pakistan and the one that later developed with India.

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Notes:

1. From a Bangladeshi perspective, several significant aspects of the war remained unresolved, including the repatriation to Pakistan of the stateless Biharis still resident in camps in Bangladesh; the unconditional acknowledgement of the mass murder—perhaps even genocide—and rape of hundreds of thousands of Bengalis; and the economic restitution Bangladesh sees as its due for the decades it suffered under West Pakistan’s internal colonization of East Pakistan.
2. My own totally unscientific experiment reveals that a quick search of the Academic Search Premier database, administered by EBSCOHost and featuring scholarly indices for the social sciences, humanities, arts, engineering, and medical fields, locates over one hundred scholarly articles and books about Bangladesh’s movement toward independence. Again unscientifically, my search in the same database for scholarly work on Pakistan and the war yielded fewer than twenty scholarly articles or books. As for literary output on the war, Niaz Zaman and Asif Farrukhi comment in their recent anthology of creative writing on the war that “[f]amous and not so-famous writers [in Bangladesh], senior and fledgling writers, all have contributed their share to create a vast body of work that has been inspired by 1971 in all genres” (xx). In Pakistan, the situation is notably different. Eleven years after the war, Muhammad Umar Memon lamented the paucity of literary output in Urdu, calling what did exist “sparse and casual” (107). By no means exhaustive, my own recent book on English- and Urdu-language literary responses to the war, *National Identities in Pakistan: The 1971 War in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction*, does testify to the increasing numbers of Pakistani writers who are now grappling with 1971 and its aftermath, but this sum is still modest in comparison to the output of Bangladeshi writers.
3. Khan’s assessment does speak very specifically to the production of scholarly analysis about the war in Pakistan itself and by Pakistanis. Even when one opens the field to include commentary by non-Pakistanis, the scholarly output remains modest—though increasing!—as I mention in the previous footnote.
4. The subversion of this control is one of the reasons why the recent uproar surrounding Wikileaks and its founder, Julian Assange, is so fascinating.
5. The act of declassification also signals the archive’s scope, though it still preserves—or appears to preserve—the government’s control of the archive. Even

classification can work against itself. Here, I think of Valerie Plame Wilson's memoir, *Fair Game: How a Top CIA Agent was Betrayed by Her Own Government*, which contains details the CIA refused to declassify. Thus, whole pages of Wilson's book are blacked out, a visual representation of the indeterminacy of Wilson's story.

6. Leaks emerge under an array of circumstances, and not all of them reveal vulnerabilities. According to Taegy Son, "[L]eaking of specific information is also an important means for the government to control the media" (156).

7. According to her article, Saikia interviewed both Bihari and Bengali women. While these women's identity markers may work to distinguish them from one another, their experience of sexual violence and brutality during the war sadly finds them on common ground ("Beyond the Archive of Silence" 278).

8. In "Beyond the Archive of Silence," Saikia emphasizes that she consulted "supplementary materials," including "government documents, hospital records, social service and rehabilitation reports, photographs, and visual media," all of which substantiated her interviewees' claims (280).

9. In both essays, Saikia cites the work of Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, as well as the work of Urvashi Butalia ("Beyond" 281; "Listening" 203). Saikia also acknowledges her debt to other historians, including Alistair Thomson, Mahmood Mamdani, Jean Hertzfeld, and Shimon Redlich, whose work on oral histories she has found instructive ("Listening" 204).

10. Please see *National Identities in Pakistan*, especially pages 14-26, for the full development of my analysis of the *Report* and its *Supplement*.

11. See FS Aijazuddin's *The White House and Pakistan: Select Declassified Documents, 1969-1974*, especially pages 423-87, for a run through of the happenings at the UN from a US perspective.

12. Many thanks to Philip for agreeing to the reprint and to Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, as well as to Concept Publishing, for permission to do so.

13. In addition to the website Moss and Nichter have constructed to make the Nixon tapes accessible to a wider audience, please also see this site from the Nixon Library: <http://nixonlibrary.gov/aboutus/laws/releases.php>, which provides a sense of just how recently new materials have been made available. The archive grows.