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POSTMEMORY AND POST-AMNESIA How have we arrived here and where shall we go?

by **Md Mahmudul Hasan**

COLUMBIA University professor Marianne Hirsch has coined the term 'postmemory' to refer to the relationship that succeeding generations maintain with the traumatic events of their predecessors. Considering Hirsch's post-memory or intergenerational remembering, British literary scholar Ananya Jahanara Kabir proposes the concept of 'post-amnesia' that 'conveys the transmission of trauma through intergenerational forgetting,' which can be regarded as a strategy of selective forgetting. In the light of postmemory and post-amnesia, the collective psyche of a people is often formed by selective memory and selective amnesia. The word 'amnesia' means partial or complete loss of memory. It can take various forms such as 'historical amnesia,' 'collective amnesia' and 'selective amnesia'.

Historical amnesia is generally concocted to make a people forget significant past events. It often serves the purpose of fetishising certain discourses and suppressing some others.

Collective amnesia is often induced to avoid remembering traumas and unpleasant events in order to 'get over a supposedly cruel and barbarous past that is best forgotten.'

Selective amnesia refers to a cognitive deficit in which a psychiatric patient's long-term memory is partially impaired. They remember some but not all past events that happened during a specific period of time.

For political manipulation of public consciousness, selective amnesia is manufactured as a kind of cultural brainwashing. It is designed to make a people think and act in a particular way.

It is true that human beings go on living and do not remember all past events equally. But some memories have overarching significance, haunt them for a lifetime and are likely to be more remembered than others.



However, what is vicious and unacceptable is the cultural manoeuvring of memory and amnesia for political or ideological gains. Certain past happenings are by design kept alive in the collective memory of a community, while other events — even if recent and equally or more important — are kept at a distance.

Since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, the interests of the people of the country have been compromised by practices of selective memory and selective amnesia. Generations of Bangladeshis have been made conscious of and sensitive to the atrocities against the people of this land during the 1971 liberation war and what went during the 24-year Pakistani rule. In the media and other public realms, these and related issues have been discussed and explored (with potential implications) to such an extent that our memory was stuck in a loop or in that historical moment. For a long time, we had no time to think of manifold crises that had erupted and afflicted the country since the birth of our country in 1971.

The liberation war of 1971 that we officially celebrate at least two times a year — on March 26 and December 16 — did not solve all our problems. Nor did it bring liberation in a true sense for all of us. Inside Bangladesh, our lives remained cheap, as our own security forces as well as the henchmen of political elites did not hesitate to harass, exploit or kill our country people in the streets, in their houses or in police custody. Equally, in the border districts, our compatriots have continued to be slaughtered by the security forces of the neighbouring country that helped us become independent in 1971.

As our consciousness has been shaped by selective memory and selective amnesia, we are conditioned to remember what happened decades ago but tend to forget what is happening now in the border region. That's why, even though we are happy to be an independent country, we rarely questioned the intention of the neighbouring 'friendly' country in helping split Pakistan into two states. We also didn't campaign — in a meaningful way — against the border killings, let alone our trade imbalance with the neighbouring country. What is completely unacceptable is that our security forces fail to protect us in the border region and their power and 'bravery' is used only in harassing us inside the country.

In post-1971 Bangladesh up until recently, especially during Sheikh Hasina's 2009-2024 misrule, people were subjected to mass killings and enforced disappearances. Corruption became endemic and rampant in various government sectors, as public servants looked after their own vested interests. Politics was weaponised to consolidate power, control resources and steal and siphon off public funds to foreign countries. Sleaze and violence spawned the political sphere and became the way for the dominant group in power to establish supremacy over others.

All these made honest people confused and terrified. They were marginalised and deprived of their rights. Honesty became a byword for neglect and weakness.

Our writers, intellectuals and national influencers did not sufficiently touch on the above and other related woes that continued impairing the nation for decades. Their attention was glued to the screen of 1971 and related topics.

Needless to say, they continued to divide and weaken us in the name of the spirit of 1971.

Our universities were full of public intellectuals whose influence extended far beyond campuses. Many of them had access to the corridors of power and were, to use Edward Said's words, 'in the possession of non-material advantages.' In their speeches and newspaper columns, they discussed almost all subjects on earth but not the plight of their students. Their students were harassed and bullied in campuses and dormitories by hired miscreants, but the powerful university teachers maintain complete silence about the suffering of those they met in the classroom.

In university dormitories, students were forced to endure cramped living conditions. In a room meant for four to six students, dozens of them had to sleep crowded together onto mats on concrete floors. This was mainly because their officially allotted rooms were occupied by outsiders and hooligans linked to political masters. In a nutshell, many students had to live almost in serfdom in residential halls.

In order for them to stay in dormitories, ordinary students had to attend political rallies and chant slogans praising one political party and cursing another. The only way for them to avoid this was to stay in private accommodation outside the campus, which was expensive and beyond the means of most students.

Sexual harassment of female students was prevalent in tertiary institutions. Especially, during the mafia-style fascist rule of Sheikh Hasina, female students of various dormitories were 'targeted' for the 'pleasure' of male members of the Chhatra League. Occasionally, they were asked to 'entertain' Chhatra League cadres, and refusal was often met with spectacular violence.

As one story goes, a resident student at a female hostel of Dhaka University was severely beaten at night for refusing to abide by the (immoral) order of its Chhatra League leader. Other female students of the hall were distressed by the enormity of torture and had their sleep shattered by the screams and wails of the victim. The abusive conduct of the perpetrators was so blatant that it was impossible to hide it. What appalled ordinary residents of the dormitory the most was that, the main oppressor was later included in the inquiry committee that the authority formed to investigate the incident. The predictive outcome of the investigation was the writing on the wall.

In addition to their own ordeals at colleges and universities, young people of our country had grown up hearing stories of the broad daylight murder of Biswajit Das in Dhaka in December 2012, the bludgeoning to death of Abrar Fahad in a BUET dormitory in October 2019 for his 'crime' of talking about the interests of our country in a social media post, and

many other gruesome killings — all committed by Chhatra League members. The rape and murder of 19-year old college student Sohagi Jahan Tonu in Comilla in 2016 and of another 21-year old student Mosarat Jahan Munia in Dhaka in 2021 and the absence of justice in these and other grisly crimes shocked the whole country.

In the financial sector, the share market swindle of 2010-11, the Hallmark loan scam of 2011-12, the Bangladesh Bank reserve heist of 2016, behemoth corruption in behemoth projects over a long period of time, and years-long plundering of commercial banks among others crippled the country.

Finally, the reinstatement of the quota system in government jobs in June 2024 was designed to ruin the future of our students. They had already been suffering from the cultures of favouritism, unemployment, deprivation and frustration that defined the life of the young generation.

All these and many other dire conditions rang the death knell for the future of our students. What was more exasperating for them was the deafening silence of the intelligentsia about all such real issues.

Students couldn't take it anymore. They launched a quota reform campaign under the banner of the Students Against Discrimination movement, and thus thousands of otherwise apolitical students became fervent political activists.

On July 15, 2024, Hasina characteristically sought to exploit the spirit of 1971 to silence the student movement. She dug her own grave by using the pejorative term 'razakar' (which loosely means traitor) to dismiss their demands.

Students around the country burst into anger and took to the streets. They symbolically embraced the label razakar to reject Hasina's manipulation of people's sentiment about 1971. They chanted 'tumi ke mi ke, razakar razakar; ke boleche ke boleche, soirachar soirachar; cheyechilam odhikar, hoye gelam razakar;' and other slogans.

Hasina let loose our security forces and her Chhatra League ruffians who first attacked students in campuses and in the streets and then at hospitals where the injured were receiving medical care. Eventually, young people's courage and resistance dwarfed Hasina's arrogance and cruelty. Hundreds of them laid down their lives and many more thousands of them were ready to die for their future and for the future of their country.

Hasina fell and fled to India on the afternoon of August 5, and the rest is now history.

Bangladesh has now entered a new phase through the sacrifice of young people in the July Revolution. This signalled a shift from the previous practices and paradigms. Students have learnt how to think holistically and have refused to be imprisoned by selective memory and selective amnesia.

Now the country should decide whether to be on the front foot heralding transformative changes and delving into fresh possibilities, or on the back foot regressing to where it was before August 5, 2024. The forces that sought to turn our attention away from the here and the now will always try to take us back to the old days and ways. So, the battle is not truly over.

But the young people have learnt to rebel and take charge of their affairs. It will be difficult to deceive them through known strategies of selective memory and selective amnesia. It is the spirit of the July Revolution that we hope will guide us to a better future.

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