National Narratives: Representations of Independence in Bangladeshi History Textbooks from 1971 to the Present

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Research Question

How and why have official narratives of Bangladesh’s 1971 Liberation War in national social studies textbooks shifted over time? What, if any, impact have such narratives had on their intended audiences?
Goals of the study

- Framework for analysis of national narratives
- Exhaustive textual analysis, both in time and coverage
- Combines different kinds of analyses generally used in studies of the politics of history (institutional, textual, impact)
Why Bangladesh?

- South Asian historiography – distinct narratives from shared history
- Centralized curriculum, one textbook used throughout
- Relatively (physically) small, young nation
- Narratives of war long contested, each political party seeks legitimacy from origin story
Why History Textbooks?

Textbooks as means for socialization (Wang 2009); creation of national identity (Eller 1999); indicators of political views & representation of official history (Mendeloff 2008; Schlesinger 1998)
Levels of Analysis

Institutional Analysis
- Evaluate how elected political officials influence the bureaucracy of curricular revision and the subsequent content produced

Textual Analysis
- Evaluate representation of Bangladesh’s fight for independence in national history textbooks from independence to present

Impact Analysis
- Investigate if and how official narratives affect their intended audiences
Fieldwork

- 3 months working in archives collecting textbooks, resulting in digitized versions of over 150 curricular documents, which then got translated into English.

- 30 school visits across 7 districts; classroom observations and interviews with administrators, teachers, and students about the use of textbooks.

- Interviews with over 50 bureaucratic officials and members of the political elite.
Institutional Analysis

- **Research Design**
  - Process tracing

- **Data**
  - Interviews with political elites & bureaucratic officials
  - Primary source data collected at the NCTB and Bangladesh’s Ministry of Education

- **Variables**
  - IV: degree of politicization of the institutions
    - (1) proportion of career bureaucrats to political appointees
    - (2) position of career bureaucrats & political appointees in the highest body in the curricular revision process
  - DV: politicization of textbook narrative
Institutional Analysis

- Revisions
  - MOE → NCTB → NCCC → NCTB
  - National Curriculum Coordination Committee selected by MOE

- Common themes emerging
  - Frustrated at lack of time – 5 year processes are compressed to 1
  - Bureaucrats versus professionals

- Overtly political?

- Inclusion of NGOs (Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee – BRAC)
Textual Analysis

- **Research Design**
  - Content analysis & quantitative textual analysis

- **Data**
  - Collected and constructed dataset that consists of 150 curricular documents, including official textbooks for all major revisions

- **Variables**
  - IV: political regime in power
  - DV: politicization of textbook narrative
    - (1) idea of origin and purpose of nation
    - (2) prioritization of political, social, and cultural values
    - (3) representation of key individuals
    - (4) perspectives of neighboring states
    - (5) potentially relevant facts omitted
Political Timeline

- Major political periods in Bangladeshi history
- Two major political parties/legacies

1. Sheik Mujib Rahman (AL) – Sheikh Hasina (daughter)
2. General Ziaur Rahman (BNP) – Khaleda Zia (wife)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Political Party, Leader</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972 – 1975</td>
<td>Sheik Mujib Rahman, Awami League (AL)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982 – 1990</td>
<td>General Ershad, Jatiya Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991 – 1996</td>
<td>Khaleda Zia, BNP</td>
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<td>1996 – 2001</td>
<td>Sheikh Hasina, AL</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006 – 2008</td>
<td>Caretaker Government</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009 – present</td>
<td>Sheikh Hasina, AL</td>
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## Curricular Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
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<th>Curriculum Revision</th>
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<td>1972 – 1975</td>
<td>Sheik Mujib Rahman, Awami League (AL)</td>
<td>1975</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006 – 2008</td>
<td>Caretaker Government</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009 – 2010</td>
<td>Sheikh Hasina, AL</td>
<td>2011</td>
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- Two major narratives, interpretations of independence – **pendulum revision process**
Textual Analysis
Preliminary Work

- Collected materials from library at National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) in Dhaka
- Have roughly 120 textbooks and 43 curricular documents from 1962 to 2008
- Translations currently in progress
- Narrative construction – overall tone from individual words, phrases, choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 - 10</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1962 - 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1982 - 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1962 - 2008</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>1964 - 2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1971 - 2008</td>
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<th>Number</th>
<th>Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 - 12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1972 - 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 - 10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1972 - 2005</td>
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</table>
## Case Study: Class 4

*Poribesh Porchiti Shomaj*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CASE</th>
<th>ANALYSIS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narratives in Chapter 10, had control of ‘Tiger of Bengal’ narrative (Sher-e-Bangla)</td>
<td>2003, BNP: couldn’t re-erase, so changed tone toward SMR, re-defined declaration of independence, added Ziaur Rahman (5 figures)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Main Contestation

- Patten observed across grade levels

- Strong emphasis on who declared independence, who is father of nation, who was seen as a more powerful and able ruler in the early days of the country.

Why?
In the year of 1970 in the whole of Pakistan the general elections were held. In this election in the national committee the Bangalees won more seats. But the people’s verdict was denied when their government was not allowed to form. They were chosen to the path of severe oppression.

In the year of 1971 on the night of the 25th of March in Dhaka the Pakistani soldiers attacked unarmed Bangalees. They killed thousands and thousands of innocent Bangalees. At this the whole country was immersed in agony and hatred. The next day, in other words, starting from the 26th March, began against Pakistan started our Liberation War. For this the 26th of March is our Independence Day. To free from the clutches of Pakistanis the country over nine months fought the Liberation War. Finally on the 16th of December the Pakistani soldiers lost and surrendered. This day our freedom and final victory was gained. This is why we celebrate the 16th of December as our Victory Day.

In the year of 1970 in the whole of Pakistan the general elections were held. In this election, under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Awami League won more seats. But the people’s verdict was denied when the Pakistani government did not allow Awami League to form a government. Rather, (they) chose to severely oppress the Bangalees.

In the year of 1971 on the 25th of March in Dhaka the Pakistani soldiers attacked unarmed Bangalees then Bangabandu, after midnight—in other words, on 26th March—announced independence. The Pak Army arrested him (the address is meant for elders) that very night. At the directive of Bangabandu, to inform the people of the country of the announcement of independence, on 26th March, the leader of Chittagong Awami League M A Hannan broadcasted it from Chittagong Radio Station. On 27th March, Major Ziaur Rahman, from the temporary radio station of Baltihat in Chittagong, on behalf of BANGABANDHU Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, broadcasted another announcement of independence. It was from 26th March, against Pakistan started our Liberation War. For this the 26th of March is our Independence Day. To free from the clutches of Pakistanis fought the Liberation War. Finally on the 16th of December the Pakistani soldiers lost and surrendered. This day our freedom and final victory was gained. This is why we celebrate the 16th of December as our Victory Day.
“People were left confounded since there were no specific programs from the political leaders and especially Awami League. **In such a situation, Ziaur Rahman took a historic decision.** On the 26th March, he declared the independence of Bangladesh from a temporary radio station based in Kalurghat, Chittagong. From then onwards, the battle against the occupying forces began in earnest.”
Textual Analysis

Strong emphasis on who declared independence, who is father of nation, who was seen as a more powerful and able ruler in the early days of the country.
Both AL and BNP, in declaring that their respective founding fathers were the driving force behind the independence of Bangladesh, use these narratives of the past as a claim to legitimate power in the present, and as grounds to define what it means to be Bangladeshi.

Through selective inclusions, omissions, emphases, and de-emphases, narratives of the past can be molded to directly reflect and reinforce current political agendas and aims.
Impact Analysis

- Visit schools in each of Bangladesh’s seven districts
- In what way are textbooks being used in classrooms?
  - How do students, teachers, parents interact with texts?
  - Variation across divisions? Rural versus urban? Public, private, NGO?
  - How do teachers work with curricular changes?
- Discussion of frustration with texts, how are competing accounts reconciled?
- Essentially, how individuals interact with & interpret narratives?
Impact Analysis

- Research Design
  - Field visits
  - Proposed experimental survey

- Data
  - Qualitative data collected from interviews with individuals and focus groups, classroom visits
  - Survey data

- Variables
  - IV1: version of textbook narrative received
  - IV2: dates of schooling
  - DV1A: view of key political figure
  - DV1B: view of key historical events
  - DV2: idea of legitimacy of history
Impact Analysis

- Uniformity in school across country
- Rote memorization
- Significant use of textbooks in instruction
- Emphasis on 1971
Distributional Analysis

Main themes

- Immense uniformity across the country
  - Strong emphasis on rote learning and memorization
  - Structure, content, and process similar across the country

- Teachers say it's not problem to shift teaching; students speak of being deeply confused, looking for 'true history'

- Teachers speak to students writing the answers from previous years textbooks

- Large national consciousness about the edition of texts
Impact Analysis

Students, teachers, and administrators were aware of revisions in the history curricula, often able to recall both versions to memory when asked.

Students expressed desire to be given new material, often stating that they would like to read more personalized narratives and oral histories of individuals who participated in the war themselves, perhaps those from the area in which they were living.
Concluding Thoughts

- Desire to control this segment of the textbook narratives on Liberation War and its key figures leads to the degradation of the entire curriculum revision process in Bangladesh.

- High turnover (political appointments), lack of institutional knowledge, rushed revisions, quality second to favoritism.

- Desire for ‘true history’ – alternative narratives emerging?

- How will this cycle be broken?
On women that were actively engaged in the 1971 War

What effect not having their personal histories and memories of the war not be recognized in the official narratives has had on them
Future Research

- How partition of South Asia in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 are written about in textbooks across the subcontinent

- Construction of alternative curricula – using competing narratives as prompts for critical thought
He who controls the present, controls the past.

He who controls the past, controls the future.

- George Orwell, 1984

thank you!

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