The Past of the Present:

Representations of Independence in Bangladeshi History Textbooks

Elizabeth D. Herman

Working Paper 2019

0. Abstract

This work is an examination of how official narratives of Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War in national social studies textbooks have shifted over time. Since independence, history textbooks in Bangladesh have been sites of contestation, undergoing politically motivated revisions with each new regime that has come into power. With the goal of examining these changes and the effects they have had on the Bangladeshi population, this study includes three levels of analysis: (1) an institutional analysis, which uses process tracing to consider the impact of the actors and institutions who develop curricula and textbooks; (2) a textual analysis, which employs content analysis and quantitative textual analysis to dissect the narratives of the 1971 Liberation War in Bangladeshi social science textbooks and curricula from 1972 to the present; and, (3) an impact analysis, which uses in-depth interviewing, classroom visits, and focus groups to identify the ways that textbook narratives do or do not affect individuals' lasting views on the 1971 War. The study utilizes an original data set collected over the course of a year of fieldwork—including over 30 school visits, 150 curricular documents, and 100 interviews across Bangladesh's seven districts—and proposes fielding a nationwide survey that includes an experimental design as part of the impact analysis. Through these analyses, this work seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of an evolving narrative over the course of a country's history, insight into how official narratives are used as tools for political legitimacy, and how politicized revisions impact public perceptions of what it means to have a "true history."

1. Introduction

This work is a systematic examination of how official narratives of Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War in national social studies textbooks have shifted over time. History textbooks both reflect and inform collective memory, serving as barometers of the accepted views of the day and acting as one of the most powerful means of socializing the youth of a populace into the ideals and ideologies of the nation. At the heart of mass education, textbooks are one of the best indicators of popular historical beliefs. Furthermore, they provide a vital instrument for shaping a national narrative through history.

Since independence, history textbooks in Bangladesh have been sites of contestation, undergoing politically motivated revisions with each new regime that has come into power. With the goal of examining the nature of these changes and the effects they have had on the Bangladeshi population, this study includes three levels of inquiry: an institutional analysis, which uses process tracing to consider the impact of the actors and institutions who develop curricula and textbooks; a textual analysis, which employs content analysis and quantitative textual analysis to dissect the narratives of the 1971 Liberation War in Bangladesh social science textbooks and curricula from 1972 to the present; and, an impact analysis, which uses an experimental survey to determine whether textbook narratives affect individuals' lasting views on the 1971 War.

The study utilizes an original data set that was collected over the course of a year of fieldwork and includes more than 30 school visits, 150 curricular documents, and 100 interviews across Bangladesh's seven districts. I also propose fielding a nationwide survey that includes an experimental design as part of the impact analysis. Through these analyses, this work seeks to provide insight into the ways in which official narratives are used as tools for political legitimacy, how narratives on a key historical event have evolved the course of a country's history, and in what manner politicized revisions impact public perceptions of what it means to have a 'true history.'

While previous studies have examined contested histories, this work is unique in both its scope and aims. By investigating the generation, content, and impact of official histories, this study undertakes a comprehensive analysis, tying together various literatures and examining not only the political and ideological significance of official narratives, but also how they affect their target

audiences. This is a novel approach, as past studies have examined a single aspect of contested narratives, such as their generation or content, but not attempted to incorporate their generation, content, and impact in the same work. This study, in addition to the substantive contributions it will offer about narratives of Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War, will provide a strong framework with which other cases can be examined.

Furthermore, this work offers significant contributions to the political and social implications of contested narratives. Initial research for this project, completed with the support of a Fulbright Research Grant from 2010 to 2011, revealed that the rush to complete textbook revisions and authorize the printing of new texts before the conclusion of a regime's tenure has led to a significant degradation of the quality of curricular materials. The motivation for these hurried edits is to incorporate into textbooks the current political regime's version of the war, as well as its interpretation of the nation and its founders to provide legitimacy for the party before it leaves office. As such, the desire to control this small segment of the textbook narratives centering on the 1971 War and its key figures significantly undermines the entire curriculum revision process. The battle for political legitimacy via control of textbook narratives can be seen as one of, if not the primary issue hindering the growth of the quality of education in Bangladesh.

This working paper provides an outline of the research design of this study and offers a summary of the preliminary findings. Following a brief review of the existing literature, the design and preliminary findings for each of the three levels of analysis will be discussed—first the institutional analysis, then the textual analysis, followed by the impact analysis. The paper will conclude with a discussion of future work and the broader implications of the project.

2. Existing Literature

Textbooks serve a significant role in the modern societies, both in their ability to define the national identity as well as the opportunity they provide for governments to legitimize themselves, by delineating acceptable information via official versions of history (Mendeloff 2008; Schlesinger 1998). Nations bind themselves together by generating a common image of their history; by using a shared collective memory of past events and experiences, nations create a coherent identity for themselves (Eller 1999). In most countries, history textbooks serve as "agents of memory," ensuring the transmission of "approved knowledge" to younger generations by presenting "an

official story or a master narrative of national experiences" (Wang 2009). Narratives are often exploited by the political elite with the goal of fostering political legitimacy by creating a "master commemorative narrative" that emphasizes a particular set of national ideologies or beliefs, which not only formalizes their version national identity, but often creates a specific image of "the other" (Zerubavel 1995).

While quantifying national memory is an admittedly difficult task (Cole and Barsalou 2006), it is facilitated through the examination of historical narratives as they are written into textbooks. The communication of an official history through a politically-dictated national curriculum constitutes a political statement that directly reflects a nation's view of its past, and thus, the concepts that shape current perceptions (Mendeloff 1999). Therefore, textbook narratives provide the opportunity to examine a tangible form of national memory, to observe how accounts of past events are interpreted and recounted, and to scrutinize how current portrayals may differ from previous accounts.

A number of techniques are used to shape narratives of past events. *Victim narratives* and *victor narratives* are utilized in order to refashion past events involving one of more groups, creating positive and negative views of the victim or victor, as desired (Wang 2008). Similarly, particular events can be glorified. It has been recognized, for instance, that "in moments of crises, memory can be 'valorized,' and people hearken back to the past with amplified intensity" (Megill 1998: 39-40). This aim is realized by emphasizing cases of *chosen glory*, or "the mental representation of a historical event that induces feelings of success and triumph" (Volkan 1997: 81). In the same way, *chosen traumas* can be highlighted to "enhance ethnic pride, reinforce a sense of victimization, and even spur a group to avenge its ancestors' hurts" (Volkan 1997: 78).

Of particular significance in these definitions is the word *chosen*, which underscores the fact that particular events are selectively emphasized by those designing the textbooks to embody the specific hopes, fears, and desires by which they define themselves. Van Evera (1994) identifies three techniques that are used to construct national images of the self and the other: self-glorifying, self-whitewashing, and other-maligning:

> Self-glorifying myths incorporate claims of special virtue and competence, and false claims of past beneficence toward others. Self-whitewashing myths incorporate false denial of past wrongdoings against others…Other-maligning myths can incorporate claims of others' cultural inferiority, false

blame of others for past crimes and tragedies and false claims that others now harbor malign intensions against the nation (Van Evera 1994: 27-28).

These devices strategically develop a group identity and sense of belonging, a means of creating a collective history, and a way to define members of the out-group. Moreover, they provide the means by which various narratives can reach different conclusions on the same subjects; it is these "different conclusions, and, therefore, different stories [that] shape our understanding of the past" (Wertsch 2001: 516).

The relevance of national narratives is of particular interest in the case of the Indian subcontinent, where Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh have had to carve national histories out of a shared past. In 1947, the British colony of India was carved into two separate nations: India, for the subcontinent's Hindus, and Pakistan, for the subcontinent's Muslims. Pakistan was formed of two provinces – West Pakistan, or what is now Pakistan, separated by the whole of India from its other half, East Pakistan, or what is now Bangladesh. Held together solely by a common religion, the decades following independence exposed significant cultural differences, exacerbated by economic and social exploitation by the ruling elites, located in Islamabad in the Western portion of the nation. Decades of political and social upheaval eventually led to the outbreak of the Liberation War in 1971, and the nine-month long struggle eventually resulted in the bifurcation of the Eastern province into its own independent Bangladesh.

Two key political and military figures arose from Bangladesh's 1971 War of Independence: Sheikh Mujib Rahman, the head of Bangladesh's Awami League (AL), and General Ziaur Rahman, the founder of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) (Van Schendel 2009). These parties—and their dynastic legacies—persist today. The once-former and current Prime Minister and head of the AL is Sheikh Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, while the twice-former Prime Minister and current party leader of the BNP is Ziaur Rahman's widower, Khaleda Zia. Both women continue to build upon the cult of personalities that surrounded their parties' originators (Hossain 2000). The development and evolution of these two parties serve as a central point of analysis in this study, which will examine how legitimacy rooted in their predecessors and their pursuit of authority relates to the retelling of the Liberation War in official narratives. The work will focus on history textbooks, which have served as sites of contestation, undergoing politically motivated revisions with each new regime that has come into power.

Though South Asian historiography and its nations' political revision of textbooks has been widely studied in recent years, Bangladesh has arguably received the least attention of the three nations hued out of the Indian subcontinent. With India's influence in the global political and economic arenas, and Pakistan's strategic importance to the United States during its wars of the past decade, Bangladesh simply does not have the appeal that its fellow South Asian neighbors do. Yet, with a population of over 160 million, a highly important geographic location, and growing import in the world economy Bangladesh stands to become an increasingly important world player in the years to come. Furthermore, understanding politics in the region requires a deeper understanding of each of its member nations; the hole in scholarship on Bangladesh reflects a need to delve into the questions of history formation and political influence of education on the ugly duckling of the Indian subcontinent.

This work is divided into three major sections: institutional, textual, and impact analyses. In the following sections, I describe the methodology employed for each of the three analyses, discussing the variables of interest and their operationalizations and key hypotheses.

3. Institutional Analysis

The **institutional analysis** utilizes process tracing to consider how elected political officials influence the bureaucracy and processes of curricular revision, as well as how these procedures have changed over time. Throughout the tenure of each of Bangladesh's curricular development bodies (**Table 1**), there have been varying proportions of political appointees to the agencies, working at different levels and alongside career bureaucrats who serve at the institutions across changes in political regimes (**Table 2**). The institutional analysis focuses on how regime changes have resulted in alterations in the proportion or position of political appointees within these bodies that oversee curricular development.

Table 1: Textbook Boards in East Pakistan and Bangladesh[1]

Name	Year Created	Structure
East Pakistan School Textbook Board	1954	Chairman, secretary, members; DPI chairman of Education Board

---

[1] Kabir, Gazi Md. Ahsanul. Presentation "National Curriculum and Textbook Board: Pioneer in the field of curriculum & publishing Textbooks." National Curriculum and Textbook Board. 2006.

Bangladesh School Textbook Board (BSTB)	1971	Kept the same form as predecessor, just change of name
National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC)	1981	New institution with director, 2 members
National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB)	1983	Merged BSTB and NCDC into one organization

Table 2: Timeline of Political Parties in Bangladesh

Years	Political Party, Leader
1972 – 1975	Awami League (AL), Sheikh Mujibur Rahman
1975 – 1981	Bangladesh National Party (BNP), General Ziaur Rahman
1982 – 1990	Jatiya Party, General Ershad
1991 – 1996	BNP, Khaleda Zia
1996 – 2001	AL, Sheikh Hasina
2001 – 2006	BNP/Jamaat-i-Islami, Khaleda Zia
2006 – 2008	Caretaker Government
2008 – present	AL, Sheikh Hasina

While career bureaucrats who serve in each of Bangladesh's curricular development bodies tend to remain stable across changes in political regimes, there have been varying proportions of political appointees to the agencies, working at various levels within the hierarchy of the institutions. The institutional analysis focuses on how regime changes have resulted in alterations in the proportion or position of political appointees within the bodies that oversee curricular development. The independent variable of interest for this portion of the analysis is the political regime in power, which is fairly easily operationalized and measured by identifying the ruling party in power at a given time.

I will examine two operationalizations for the dependent variable of interest, the degree of politicization, including the ratio of career bureaucrats to political appointees working at the curriculum development institution at a given time and the positions of political appointees and

career bureaucrats in the highest body in the curricular revision process. The specification of these two potential operationalizations follows from the recognition that the measurement of either may be challenging; records in Bangladesh are often not accurately maintained, and anecdotal evidence collected might be obscured, either for political reasons or for more benign causes, such as poor recall. While measurement of the latter operationalization may be more accessible, as it will only require data collection on one body within the larger institution, in the interest of robustness I will attempt to collect data for both operationalizations.[2] With either operationalization, the variable is of interest because for two primary reasons. First, when there is a high turnover of personnel, as generally occurs with political appointees, there is often a significant change in resources (human, knowledge, etc.), making it difficult to transfer expertise, lessons learned, and processes between different political administrations. Thus, a greater degree of politicalization would be expected to result in a greater reduction of resources. Second, a greater degree of politicalization would mean more political influence could be exerted on curriculum development, as the political party would likely have better control over its appointees than over career bureaucrat. This, in turn, would be expected to be reflected in a more politicized narrative.

For the institutional analysis, I hypothesize that political regimes will attempt to exert increasing control over textbook narratives by intensifying the degree of politicalization within the institutions that dictate curricular revisions (**H1**). Thus, the process tracing would be expected to reveal either a sustained or increasing degree of politicalization in these institutions over time. The data generated for this analysis will be collected via a combination of interviews with elites and bureaucratic officials, primary source collection at the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) and Bangladesh's Ministry of Education, and collection from data available online. These examinations will investigate how the procedures, objectives, and goals of curricula generation have evolved, the values and ideals that inform the creation of these textbooks, and the way in which political parties have influenced the curriculum revision procedure.

---

[2] Importantly, for inferential purposes, it will be necessary to examine not only the constituents of the textbook boards (bureaucrats versus political appointees), but also how their structures differ from that of other specialized professional bodies within the Ministry of Education (MoE). The National Academy for Educational Management (NAEM), the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), and the Directorate of Inspection and Audit (DIA) all function on the same institutional level as the NCTB, and therefore comparing the proportion of political appointments, as well as the positions of the political appointees in the hierarchy of these institutions will provide a useful basis from which to examine how the Bangladesh's textbook boards have, over time, been more or less politicized.

The education system in Bangladesh is highly centralized, with the vast majority of important decisions dictated from the top down. Due to the tight control over textbook narratives—they are determined exclusively by individuals working with and within the various iterations of the NCTB—the case selection for this portion of the work is straightforward. I will include all iterations of the NCTB and its workers. Importantly, for inferential purposes, it will be necessary to examine not only the constituents of the textbook boards (bureaucrats versus political appointees), but also how their structures differ from that of other specialized professional bodies within the Ministry of Education (MoE). The National Academy for Educational Management (NAEM), the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), and the Directorate of Inspection and Audit (DIA) all function on the same institutional level as the NCTB, and therefore comparing the proportion of political appointments, as well as the positions of the political appointees in the hierarchy of these institutions will provide a useful basis from which to examine how the Bangladesh's textbook boards have, over time, been more or less politicized.

In order to trace this process, I will first need to identify what was the original structure of the first iteration of the textbook board (the Bangladesh School Textbook Board), as well as that of NAEM, BANBEIS, and so on. Next, I will determine which positions within the institution were held by political appointees and which filled by career bureaucrats. This could be accomplished by locating documentation of the institutions' structures in the archives and/or by evidence collected via interviews with past officials and elites. Because the the nation is relatively young, and the political class is fairly small and tight-knit, it is relatively straightforward to collect and corroborate this kind of evidence. To verify the process, I would examine documentation of the textbook revision process. The changes in the constituency of the textbook boards (and the textbooks revision process, if available) would then be examined in light of the political environment at the time, to determine if they correlated with shifts in political regimes. Evidence that would support the hypothesized process would include: (1) if changes were made to existing structures that made it easier to appoint political appointees at present, (2) if changes were made to existing structure to tie the hands of the next administration, i.e., to make it more difficult for them to change structures or appoint political appointees, and/or (3) if specific individuals that were known to be allies of the political regime were appointed to revision committees.

a. Preliminary Findings from Institutional Analysis

In 1947, with the partition of the subcontinent, the East Bengal School Textbook Committee was formed, as a counterpart to the institution in the western part of the country. Then, in 1954, it was replaced by the East Pakistan School Textbook Board. Although the governing body existed in East Pakistan, the officers that dictated the key decisions still resided in the West Pakistan wing and were still appointed by the West Pakistani side of the government; the curricula were written and then translated into Bangla (Kabir 2006). Upon obtaining independence, the new government established the Bangladesh School Textbook Board, which essentially kept the same structure as its predecessor, only changing the institution's name and the individuals that filled its halls and made its decisions. Under General Ershad's regime in 1981, the National Curriculum and Textbook Center was formed, but was quickly restructured in 1983 to become the NCTB as it is now. The current NCTB has four wings: curriculum, primary, textbook, finance.

Using the data that I have collected via preliminary interviews, along with data on these institutions that is accessible online, I was able to conduct a preliminary process tracing exercise focusing on the merging of the Bangladesh School Textbook Board (BSTB) and the National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) into the unified NCTB in 1983. When General Hussein Muhammad Ershad took power via a coup on March 24, 1982, he suspended the constitution and instituted martial law. The following year, he passed *The National Curriculum and Text-Book Board Ordinance*, which stated, "in pursuance of the Proclamation of the 24th March, 1982, and in exercise of all powers enabling him in that behalf, the Chief Martial Law Administrator is pleased to make and promulgate the following Ordinance" (The National Curriculum and Text-Book Board Ordinance 1983). The ordinance went on to state that:

> "The Board shall consist of a Chairman and four other members to be appointed by the Government...(1) There shall be the following committees of the Board, namely:- (a) Syllabus Committee; (b) Text Book Committee; (2) Each committee shall consist of such number of members as the Government may determine. (3) The members of the committees shall be appointed by the Government on the recommendation of the Board from among the following persons, namely:- (a) subject specialists; (b) class room teachers; (c) renowned intellectuals; (d) officers of the Board. (4) The members of the committees shall hold office on such terms and conditions as the Government may determine" (Ibid.)

This act centralized the power of both curriculum and textbook generation into the hands of a single institution that was staffed entirely by government appointed individuals. This stands in

stark contrast to the "the loose arrangement between the NCDC and MOE" that previously existed, and the linked, but not merged relationship between curriculum development and textbook generation (World Bank 1990). While this is not a smoking gun, it does lend evidence to the hypothesis that, after shifts in political regimes, those in power manipulate existing institutional structures to gain greater control over textbook narrative generation.

4. Textual Analysis

The second component of this work, the **textual analysis**, focuses on the politicalization of official narratives in national social science textbooks. As for the institutional analysis, the independent variable is the political regime in power, operationalized and measured by identifying the ruling party when the textbook of interest was generated. The dependent variable is the politicalization of the textbook narrative. The narrative of the 1971 Liberation War will be the case of interest, as it is arguably the most politically-contested aspect of the narrative in Bangladeshi history textbooks. To operationalize the dependent variable, the relevant narrative in each textbook will be evaluated on key points in the narrative of 1971, including: the idea of the origin and purpose of the nation, the prioritization of political, social and cultural values, the representation of key individuals, the perspectives of neighboring states, and the omission of potentially relevant facts, as exclusions can be as significant as inclusions in the creation of a narrative. The analysis will employ content discourse analysis (Weber 1990) to catalog modifications in narratives—including relative amount of space devoted to retellings, tone of language used, and changes in terminology—and quantitative textual analysis to identify large scale patterns and shifts.

For the textual analysis, I hypothesize that significant changes in the official narrative of the 1971 War in national social science textbooks will track with shifts in political power (**H2**). Furthermore, I hypothesize that following a regime change, there will not only be an effort to incorporate the new ruling party's version of history into the textbooks, but also to actively erase the opposition's account (**H3**). For example, following the AL's ascension to power, it would be anticipated that the narrative will strongly emphasize Sheikh Mujib, the party's founder, while downplaying the role of Ziaur Rahman, BNP's founder. In order to accurately measure the dependent variable—the content of the narratives—the textual analysis will examine key points in the narrative of the 1971 War, including: (1) the idea of the origin and purpose of the nation, (2) the prioritization of political, social and cultural values, (3) the representation of key individuals,

(4) the perspectives of neighboring states, and (5) the omission of potentially relevant facts—as what is excluded can be as crucial as what is included in the creation of these narratives.

I will use content analysis to catalog modifications in narratives, including, for example, changes in relative amount of space devoted to retellings, tone of voice, substance, and terminology (Weber 1990). Furthermore, I will employ quantitative textual analysis, which will allow for the identification of patterns and insights that may go otherwise unnoticed. The use of sentiment analysis, document similarity, distinctive word analysis, and structural topic modeling will identify systematic shifts in focus and content that have occurred over the course of the country's history. This combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses will not only provide in-depth information of each textbook edition, but—because the analyses will be conducted across all grade levels, across all years for which I have texts—it will also yield time-series data on in these narratives.

In order to test these hypotheses, I have constructed a dataset that includes over 150 curricular documents, including official textbooks for all major revisions from the country's inception in 1971 to the present. The archive that I employ for this project was compiled from the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) library in Dhaka, where the textbook archives are stored. This aspect of the work was completed while on a Fulbright research grant in 2010. With the help of research assistant Mizan Rahman, I identified all the social science textbooks that made any mention of the Liberation War across all grade levels, published from the time of Bangladesh's independence to the present. After locating the pertinent passages, I photographed the textbooks, including the cover, title pages, and chapters surrounding the relevant portion. In addition to creating a digital archive of these materials, this method was necessary because I was not allowed to remove the texts from the library, as many were very delicate and the only version remaining on file. This work, which took just over three months, resulted in digitized content from more than 150 textbooks and curricular documents. This analysis focuses on the textbook narratives and not the curricular documents, totaling 106 texts. This sample allows for the analysis and tracing of revisions in social science texts from Bangladesh's inception as an independent country to the present. Bangladesh's educational system is highly centralized, with the vast majority of decisions, including those regarding curriculum, dictated from the top-down. While there are regional administrative offices, all seven districts within the country use the same textbooks and follow the

same schedule. All decisions are made at the central bureaus. Since I have texts from every revision, this can be seen as a complete and exhaustive sample of the population of Bangladesh social science textbooks.

Table 3 provides a timeline of political parties that have been in power since Bangladesh's independence and the dates of major curriculum revisions. As can be seen, nearly all political regimes changes were followed closely by a revision in the textbooks. The purpose of the textual analysis of the archival textbook documents within this study is to determine whether there is any discernable pattern in the revisions, thus examining how political dynamics of the present interact with official narratives of the past.

Table 3: Timeline of Political Parties in Bangladesh and Major Curriculum Revisions

Years	Political Party, Leader	Major Curriculum Revisions
1972 – 1975	Awami League (AL), Sheikh Mujibur Rahman	1972
1975 – 1981	Bangladesh National Party (BNP), General Ziaur Rahman	1977
1982 – 1990	Jatiya Party, General Ershad	1984, 1987
1991 – 1996	BNP, Khaleda Zia	1994
1996 – 2001	AL, Sheikh Hasina	1997
2001 – 2006	BNP/Jamaat-i-Islami, Khaleda Zia	2002
2006 – 2008	Caretaker Government	–
2008 – present	AL, Sheikh Hasina	2012

a. Preliminary Findings from Textual Analysis: Class Four Case Study

Within the larger analysis, the fourth grade texts provide a particularly interesting case study, as I was able to obtain three different editions of the same textbook, *Poribesh Porchiti Shomaj* (About the Environment and Society), spanning three different political regimes. Among these is a 1994 edition produced during the Bangladesh National Party's (BNP) time in office, a 1998 edition produced during the Awami League's (AL) time in office, and a 2003 edition produced after the

BNP had returned to office. In all three texts the narrative on the Liberation War is found in Chapter 10, which focuses important Benglis.[3] After describing the main changes from edition to edition, I will examine how the various changes correlate to shifts in political priorities of the regimes.

In the 1994 edition, Chapter 10 is entitled "Great individuals who served humanity" (Ali 1994: 89). The chapter highlights two Benglis: political Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Haq and scientist Muhammad Kudrat-e-Khoda. In this narrative the birth of the nation is only briefly mentioned, with the statement, "after the independence of Bangladesh, Kudrat-e-Khoda was made Chairman of the National Education Commission formed in 1972" (Ali 1994: 94). The 1998 edition, on the other hand, deviates significantly from this lack of emphasis on the Liberation War. Chapter 10 of the 1998 edition is titled, "Two Great Bengalees," and while the story of A.K. Fazlul Haq remains virtually unchanged, Kudrat-e-Khoda has been replaced by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a key figure in the AL as one of the leaders of the independence movement and the father of current AL Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina (Ali 1998: 89).

The text on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman added to the 1998 edition is a highly sentimental and valorizing narrative, focusing on his contributions to the country and his role in the political movement for the declaration of the independence of Bangladesh. The narrative opens with "Bangabondu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's name is unforgettable. Because Bangladesh became independent under his leadership. He is known as the father of the nation for this reason" (Ali 1998: 91). The account continues on to describe his youth and family life, emphasizing his leadership abilities from a young age. One anecdote recounts, "an incident during his school days proved his leadership qualities to lead a nation…[when] Mujib voiced the urgent need to repair the school's ceiling and the various problems of residential halls on behalf of all the students. Thus, the problems were solved within a short period of time" (Ali 1998: 92). He is referred to with a variety of laudatory terms and titles, from "the freedom aspirant" to "brave and outspoken from his childhood" (Ali 1998: 93). In addition to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's leadership qualities, there is a strong emphasis within the narrative on "Bengalees," with his role as a Bengalee nationalist and the support of the Bengalee people underscored.

---

[3] The same individual translated all three books, so I was able to identify the exact places in which the texts were altered.

In the 2003 edition that was released after the BNP had resumed power as part of a coalition with Jamaat-i-Islami, the title of Chapter 10 is again changed, to "Pioneers of Bangladesh's Independence" (Ali 2003: 89). Five individuals are highlighted: A.K. Fazlul Haq, Huseyn Shaheed Shurawardy, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bashani, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Shaheed Ziaur Rahman. While the narrative on A.K. Fazlul Haq still remains largely the same, there are a few changes, including an increased emphasis on Islam. For example, the 1995 and 1998 editions read, "[Sher-e-Bangla] wanted to see Bengal's farmers smile," whereas the 2003 edition reads, "Sher-e-Bangla wanted the farmers of Bengal, especially the Musalman farmers to smile" (Ali 1995: 91; Ali 2003: 90). Furthermore, whereas both the 1995 and 1998 editions mention A.K. Fazlul Haq's educational and professional credentials, the 2003 edition specifies that "he completed his M.A. degree in mathematics from Calcutta University in 1896. He is the first among Benglaee Musalmans to earn the M.A. degree in mathematics" (Ali 2003: 89-90). Another key change is the omission of his establishment of Mother Language Day; while the 1995 and 1998 editions state, "Sher-e-Bangla declared Pohela Boishakh and 21st February as state holidays" and "he established the Bangla Language Research Center to develop the Bangla language," the 2003 edition makes no mention of his establishment of the holiday (Ali 1995: 92).

The narrative on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman deviates dramatically between the 1998 and 2003 editions, with the tone, content, and length of the narrative altered significantly. While, as mentioned above, the 1998 edition had only high praise for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and an affectionate tenor toward him and his leadership qualities, the 2003 narrative adopts a curter tone, raising concerns about his abilities as a politician. Changes are seen in the opening sentences of the section, which are revised as follows:

> **1998 edition:** Bangabandu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's name is unforgettable. Because, Bangladesh became independent under his leadership. He is known as the father of the nation for this reason" (Ali 1998: 91).

> **2003 edition:** "Tungipara village of Gopalganj zilla. On 17th March 1920, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was born in this village" (Ali 2003: 93).

The alterations are evident throughout the narrative, including small details such as, "his parents affectionately called him Khoka" revised to read, "his nick-name was Khoka" (Ali 1998: 91; Ali 2003: 93). The anecdote about his leadership abilities during his school years described above has

been removed in the 2003 edition, as have a number of other other, more intimate details, such as the fact that, "at the age of twelve, he could not attend school due to his impaired vision" (Ali 1998: 92). Instead, the 2003 edition includes a curriculum vitae-style list of his educational and political achievements, with a stronger emphasis on his group memberships, rather than on his individual role within them. For example, the 2003 text reads, "the United Front competed against the Muslim League in the 1954 election. United Front won that election. Sheikh Mujib became a minister" (Ali 2003: 94). The narrative then dwells on his time spent incarcerated, with little explanation as to why he had been imprisoned: "During the Language Movement of 1952 he was in jail. However he had regular contact with those who were active outside. When Martial Law was declared in 1958, he was again sent to prison" (Ali 2003: 94). Also departing from the 1998 text are the contributions of other individuals' efforts to the independence movement; rather than making it appear to be primarily Sheikh Mujib's individual initiative, the 2003 text reads that "the movement began all around the country" (Ali 2003: 94).

Furthermore, the accounting of Sheikh Mujib's accomplishments is significantly diminished between the 1998 to 2003 editions. Rather than extolling how he "worked vigorously to re-build a nation devastated by war," as in the 1998 edition, the 2003 edition adopts a highly critical tone, stating, that "as an administrator, he was terribly incompetent. A famine struck this country during 1974-75. Many were killed secretly, one could not express his opinions freely, political opponents were subject to many types of torture and one-party rule was established by Sheikh Mujib" (Ali 2003: 94). Sheikh Mujib's receiving of the Joliot-Curie peace medal from the World Peace Council has been removed, with the narrative immediately progressing his assassination. In describing the assassination of Sheikh Mujib and his family, the 2003 edition states that they were killed "through a mass uprising," starkly contrasting the description in the previous edition, which states that the killings were carried out by "some conspirators greedy for power" (Ali 2003: 94; Ali 1998: 94). The explanation of the national day of mourning has been removed from the 2003 narrative, which instead ends with the allowance that, "Sheikh Mujib's contribution to Bangladesh's independence is undeniable. His body is buried in his paternal residence in Tungipara" (Ali 2003: 94).

Vitally, Sheikh Mujib's declaration of Bangladesh's independence has also been removed from the 2003 text, where it is instead replaced with the following:

> "According to rules, Sheikh Mujib should have been the Prime Minister of Pakistan. But the military rulers did not want to hand over power to a Bengalee. That sparked the independence movement. On the night of 25th March, he was taken to Pakistan as a prisoner. The war of independence broke out" (Ali 2003: 94).

This revision is further underscored by the attribution of the declaration of independence to Shaheed Ziaur Rahman, the founder of the BNP, and the deceased husband of the BNP party head and former Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia, who was Prime Minister at the time of the 2003 revision. The description of Ziaur Rahman immediately follows that of Sheikh Mujib. Ziaur Rahman's declaration of Bangladesh's independence is described in the 2003 text as follows:

> "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" (Ali 2003: 95).

What might seem a technicality to an outsider is a highly significant contestation to these two political parties, and I argue, a driving factor behind these politically-motivated revisions. 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.

A final significant difference between the treatment of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the 1998 and 2003 editions is the deletion of the honorific term Bangabandu. While I was residing in Bangladesh, from 2010 to 2011, the AL was in power and Bangabandu—both the persona and the honorific term—was returned to the spotlight by his daughter, the current Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina. Bangabandu, which is Bangla for "friend of Bangladesh," always preceded Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's name during this time; such is not the case when the BNP is in power. The simple elimination of his title has been used by other parties to diminish the reverence the AL places upon Sheikh Mujib each time they assume office.

Textbooks offer an important space for acknowledging the hurts of the war. The extent to which the Liberation War is discussed in contemporary society is significant; though it is frequently remembered in popular culture, many Bangladeshis who experienced the war firsthand do not

speak of it, for fear that their individual narratives will be unacceptable in contrast to those that are officially sanctioned. The current treatment of the 1971 War glorifies and simplifies it, emphasizing the strength and valor of select leaders over the historical impetus for the war and the destruction it caused. Many Bangladeshis who experienced the war spoke of a desire to confront the lingering trauma it caused. And though individuals that had lived through the war would not be the primary consumers of textbook narratives, the exposure of another generation of school children to these rigid retellings could further ingrain them in the national dialogue. In interviews, many spoke of the damage they sustained the war, yet did not openly talk about their own experiences. They emphasized the need to shift the conversation surrounding the war, providing the youth with new, alternative perspectives, along with greater background information surrounding the war. Only when the war could be discussed in a way that left room to challenge the existing narratives, they said, could the national trauma be fully understood and overcome.

5. Impact Analysis

The final component of this project, the **impact analysis**, seeks to identify the ways that textbook narratives affect individuals' views on the 1971 War. In this analysis, the independent variable is the narrative structure of the textbooks, as identified and measured in the textual analysis, and the dependent variable of interest is individuals' perceptions of the 1971 War. The operationalization of the dependent variable, views of the 1971 War, is more complicated; concepts that involve perceptions are notoriously difficult to operationalize. Thus, for the purposes of this analysis, two aspects of perceptions will be examined: the content of individuals' views of the 1971 War and whether individuals' view the narrative content as representative of the country's "true history." The second aspect of this operationalization is significant because it evaluates whether individuals are simply repeating what they have been taught, or if they have internalized the view of history that they espouse. I hypothesize that narratives delivered by a given political party will, on average, lead to a more positive view of that party's leaders and its version of the history (**H4**) and that for students that were been in school for multiple iterations of politically-motivated revisions, the narratives will reduce the legitimacy of all political parties, leading to a stronger skepticism regarding a 'truthful' representation of the past in their education (**H5**).

In order to test the hypotheses, as well as to further understand the ways in which textbooks are currently used in classrooms, I conducted over 30 school visits in all of Bangladesh's seven

districts. I conducted semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and administrators at each school. The students ranged in age from level 3 to level 12 (the narrative of the 1971 War does not appear in textbooks until level 3). Furthermore, I visited a wide cross-section of schools, ensuring that there was variation on key characteristics, including:

- Type of school: government school, registered non-government (RNG) school, private school;
- Location: rural, semi-urban, urban;
- Fees: free of charge/negligible fees, moderate fees, high fees (elite schools);
- Demographic: Bihari, indigenous, extreme poor, elite, religious;
- Class level: Primary, secondary, all levels (pre-K to upper secondary);
- Language: Bangla medium, English version;
- Size: 100 to 10,000 students

Finally, I conducted the school visits over the course of six months, ensuring that I was seeing how classes operated during different times of the year, from the monsoon season, to the month of Ramadan, to the rice harvest time. Each season posed a different set of challenges to the schools, and thus it was important to observed how different times of the year had different requirements from the teachers and students.

To further test these hypotheses, I also propose an experimental survey.[4] Individuals will be randomized, blocked on age cohort (in an attempt to control for the version of the textbooks they received, and thus the political regime(s) that was in power while they were in school). The cover story for the survey will be that an independent international organization is conducting research on historical content from various countries for international educational materials, and aims to collect stories from nationals of the various countries. All respondents will be given three historical narratives, presented in chronological order, with the account of the 1971 War presented last. Following each narrative and to support the cover story, respondents will be asked to rank how readable and engaging the account is. Different individuals will receive different 1971 War narratives—e.g., a version from a BNP text or one from an AL text. After the textbook survey,

---

[4] Note: This portion of the analysis has not yet been conducted, as funding must first be secured in order to field the survey. Any feedback on the design is greatly appreciated.

they will be informed that they will be asked some questions about political and social issues important to Bangladeshis. Among these questions will be feeling thermometers for different political figures. The dependent variable will be captured by how positively individuals rank the individual associated with the narrative that they read, i.e., individuals that received an AL narrative will rank Sheikh Mujib, on average, higher than those that received the BNP narrative. Additionally, participants will be provided a number of historical events that are covered in the various narratives of the 1971 War and will be asked to rank them in order of importance, capturing the effectiveness of the provided narrative's impact on the respondent's views of the 1971 War. Finally, it will be important to account for interaction effects, as there may be greater effects for individuals that are given the treatment in the direction of their bias. A manipulation check will be provided at the end of the survey in the form of a request to indicate the year that they think the textbook was written. This will allow for the identification of individuals who may be more aware of the politicalization of textbook narratives, a characteristic that may have led to answers affected by demand effects. The survey will be administered to a demographically representative sample of individuals from across the country, all of whom have completed the entirety of their schooling in independent Bangladesh.

a. Preliminary Findings from Impact Analysis

Though there is a great deal of regional variation within Bangladesh based on climate, income, and culture, this study found that schools and classrooms across the country operated with significant consistency. From format, to content, to look, to structure, schools hundreds of kilometers apart remained more alike than distinct. This analysis centers on the format of social science and Bangla classes from class 3 to class 10, focusing on the role of the textbook within in the classroom, observing how students and teachers alike interact with the texts and use them for learning. For the purposes of this study, I have limited my sample to classes that utilize the national curriculum, excluding private institutions that work with international or British curricula. Both Bangla medium and English-version Bangla medium curricula were included in the analysis, with the former being the national curriculum written by the government, and the latter being the national curriculum written by the government and translated into English. It is important to note that English-version Bangla medium schools are distinct from English medium schools, which use the international and British curricula.

This strict uniformity comes largely from the colonial system inherited by Bangladesh. In a system that was centered on preparing students for a civil service exam with the eventual goal of gaining a government job as part of the colonial establishment, classes were highly focused on preparing students for this exam. Students were encouraged to focus on memorizing large swaths, if not the entirety, of their textbooks. With this focus on preparing students for the nationwide examinations persisting till today, this emphasis on rote learning has perpetuated over time, despite the best efforts of many curriculum developers over the years.

The vast majority of the classes observed, regardless of the age level or specific sub-subject within social studies, were structured as follows:

- Greeting
- Teacher lectures/reads from textbooks
- Call and response answers/writing answers
- Memorization
- Call and response answers
- Conclusion (assignments given and closing)

Students were mostly seated in rows on benches at long tables, with their books stacked either on the desks or on the benches next to them. The average size of the classes ranged from 25 to 40 students, with many students sharing each table.

Furthermore, in conducting the textbook analysis, it was found that a great portion of the material included in textbooks, particularly in social science textbooks, is simply a repetition of the previous class level's curriculum, with slight expansions or variations on a theme. So for example, a student in level 5 would learn most of the material they had learned in level 4, with some slight additions. In conversations with students, they expressed a frustration at having to learn the same material, or the same stories of the independence movement, over and over again. They spoke of a 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.

6. Concluding Thoughts

This study builds on more than five years of work and aims to connect related, but frequently isolated, lines of research, examining not only the politicized production of official narratives, but also the way that narratives are processed. It seeks to identify those times and spaces in which histories do evolve, tracing the narratives from the point of generation (institutional) to the point of communication (textual) to the point of synthesis (impact). In tracing the narratives over these three stages of production and consumption, this analysis provides a more comprehensive view of how stories of the past influence politics and views of the present. As such, it constitutes a novel inquiry yet to be attempted.

By using these three levels of analysis, this work provides novel insight into the generation, content, and impact of official narratives via textbooks throughout a nation's lifespan. Relevant not only to understanding the motivations behind the struggle for the control of official narratives, this work aims to reveal the potentially pernicious impact of allowing politics to pervade and drive the classroom dynamics. Unnecessarily expediting the textbook revision for political purposes has led to a diminishment of educational quality and the dearth of a "true history" in the young nation's collective memory. With Bangladesh embroiled in heightened political violence in recent years, it is imperative to examine the impact of these narratives and to propose a new, more productive approach to address incongruities in the telling of national histories. Furthermore, as contested histories plague political debates in nearly every nation, this novel three-pronged approach provides a strong foundation from which other studies can be undertaken, thus contributing to the advancement of a new, rigorous framework for studying such thorny issues as identity generation and political legitimacy.

Additionally, from this work I hope to help develop an alternative curriculum on the 1971 War; using primary source materials, narratives from different iterations of the texts, as well as media from the vast archives that exist on the Liberation War, the proposed curriculum will provide a means for in-depth and critical engagement with the history of the war and will be made available for free online for use by schools and NGOs. While this resource will be most directly relevant for use in South Asia, the themes that pervade the work, together with the examination of how narratives are constructed and how to critically engage with history, are relevant in classrooms around the globe.

7. Works Cited

Cole, E. A., and Barsalou, J. (2006). "Unite or divide. The challenges of teaching history in societies emerging from violent conflict." Washington, D.C.: United Institute of Peace Special Report 163.

Collier, D. (2011). "Understanding Process Tracing." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(04), 823 - 830.

Eller, J. D. (1999). *From culture to ethnicity to conflict: An anthropological perspective on international ethnic conflict*. University of Michigan Press.

Grimmer, J., & Stewart, B. M. (2013). "Text as data: The promise and pitfalls of automatic content analysis methods for political texts." *Political Analysis*, mps028.

Hossain, A. (2000). "Anatomy of Hartal Politics in Bangladesh." *Asian Survey*: 508 - 529.

Kabir, Gazi Md. Ahsanul. (2006). "National Curriculum and Textbook Board: Pioneer in the field of curriculum & publishing Textbooks." Presentation. National Curriculum and Textbook Board. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Megill, A. (1998). "History, memory, identity." *History of the human sciences*, 11(3): 37 - 62.

Mendeloff, D (1999). "Explaining the Persistence of Nationalist Mythmaking in Post-Soviet Russian History Education." In *The Teaching of History in Contemporary Russia. Trends and perspectives*. Eds. Kaplan, V., Agmon, P., and Ermolaeva, L. Tel Aviv: Cummings Centre.

Mendeloff, D. (2008). "`Pernicious History' as a Cause of National Misperceptions Russia and the 1999 Kosovo War. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 43(1), 31 - 56.

Schlesinger, Arthur, Jr. (1998). *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*. New York, New York: Norton.

The National Curriculum and Text-Book Board Ordinance. (1983). "The National Curriculum and Text-Book Board Ordinance, 1983 (Ordinance No. LVII of 1983)." Retrieved from http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=191625.

Van Evera, Steven. (1994). "Hypotheses on Nationalism and War." *International Security*, 18: 5-39.

Van Schendel, W. (2009). *A History of Bangladesh*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Volkan, Vamik D. (1997). *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Wang, Z. (2008). "National humiliation, history education, and the politics of historical memory: Patriotic education campaign in China." International Studies Quarterly, 52(4), 783-806.

Wang, Z. (2009). "Old wounds, new narratives: Joint history textbook writing and peacebuilding in East Asia." *History and Memory*, 21(1): 101-126.

Weber, R.P. (1990). *Basic Content Analysis*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Wertsch, J. (2001). "The multivoicedness of meaning." *Discourse theory and practice*: 222 - 235.

World Bank. (1990). "Project Completion Report: Bangladesh. Fourth (Primary) Education Project." Retrieved from http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/509601468200677648/pdf/multi-page.pdf.

Zerubavel, Yael. (1995). *Recovered Roots*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.