



Protecting the Bay of Bengal

By Katherine L. Kidder

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Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 353 pp.

Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 499 pp.

Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 358 pp.

IN REVIEW

The U.S. Navy may be destined for a grand power balancing game in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, but it is more likely to be deployed on account of environmental emergency, which is what makes Bangladesh and its problems so urgent.¹

Given the importance of Central and East Asia to the current U.S. strategic landscape, it is curious that policymakers and historians largely overlooked the countries of South Asia during the Cold War, and especially the strategic import of Bangladesh. Nestled between the current conflict in Afghanistan and threats of future competition with China or North Korea, and particularly vulnerable to “environmental emergencies,” the region perhaps deserves a more strategic assessment than has previously been afforded. A recent trove of studies on South Asia—focused on the Bay of Bengal writ large and Bangladesh specifically—illuminates the historical context for U.S. and global engagement in the region, accounting for the geopolitical, strategic and economic importance of the often-neglected Bangladesh.

¹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2010), pp. 139.

The region's centrality to global economics is simultaneously well known and underestimated. Sunil Amrith's *Crossing the Bay of Bengal* sheds light on the global importance of the region—more specifically, the Bay—through history, dating back to the tenth century. Amrith, Reader in Modern Asian History at Birkbeck College, University of London, masterfully weaves together the role of global trade, regional culture, and “the furies of nature” on the Bay and its littoral. Breaking from the traditional narrative of South and Southeast Asia as distinct regions, his telling of the Bay's history is of one interconnected region, positing “the rise and decline of the Bay as a connected region is a story almost completely untold.” His account sufficiently supports the statement, tracing shared culture and religion in such tangible expressions as the “hybrid architecture” of temples from the Coromandel Coast of southern India to northeastern Singapore.

More importantly, Amrith traces the near-constant movement of transient populations in search of labor and markets in all directions across the Bay—sometimes voluntarily, more often not. He recounts labor migration from India to Ceylon in the 1840s, from South India to Malaya in 1870, and India to Burma in the 1880s, “comparable in scale to transatlantic migration in the same era.” The Bay's labor market was tied intricately to the global economy. For instance, labor migration to the rubber plantations of Sri Lanka enabled Henry Ford's innovation in the automobile industry in the United States. The region's interconnection to—and dependence on—the global economy also becomes evident during its decline during the Great Depression, when the demand for the labor and products of the region halted, greatly diminishing migration during the 1930s.

Given Amrith's attention to the details of ever-changing landscapes in the region, the book surprisingly lacked inclusion of descriptive maps. While he does provide maps of the Bay's ports circa 1650-1800, shipping routes circa 1900, and the Bay of Bengal circa 2012, the book would have been well served by the inclusion of maps highlighting his thesis. For example, comparative maps of evolving migration routes over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could succinctly capture and reinforce the contentions in his prose.

While his thesis is compelling, perhaps the more novel contribution of Amrith's account is the minor chord running throughout: the role of the changing environment—but not the security environment, the physical environment. More specifically, Amrith emphasizes the importance of weather patterns on the Bay and its littoral. In Amrith's estimation, “the regularity, even predictability, of the monsoon winds...shaped its history.” Amrith accounts for the predictable risk of cyclones across the Bay in the months of October and November through the centuries, examining a range of sources from ancient myth to Imperial European mariners' travel logs. Yet through the lens of environmental history, he presents compelling evidence that the nature of weather across the Bay has changed, stating, “the monsoons—cyclical, repetitive, *natural*—appear to be outside history. But the monsoons have changed [...] particularly rapidly over the last 50 years.” He places the acute shift in monsoon intensity within the broader context of changing global climate systems, such as the El-Niño-Southern Oscillation in the Pacific. But he also places responsibility for the shift squarely on the shoulders of the political and economic systems in the region, positing “the effects of population growth and land

clearance, the effluent of industrialization and the damming of rivers, have altered the very nature of the Bay of Bengal.”

American policymakers should be concerned about the political and economic implications of the mounting evidence that climate change is dramatically affecting South Asia, if for no other reason than the potential for vast human suffering.² Much of the Bangladeshi population—numbering more than 150 million people in an area slightly larger than the state of New York³—are particularly vulnerable on the front lines of climate change. An extreme weather event can quickly catalyze instability within a nation already fraught with economic and political tension—a phenomenon with a significant precedent: the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.

The interaction between a dramatic cyclone, South Asian politics, and a war of liberation is precisely where Gary J. Bass’s *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* and Srinath Raghavan’s *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* pick up. The two works capitalize on a number of newly released archival documents, each recounting the ill-fated 1971 partition of West and East Pakistan (currently Pakistan and Bangladesh). A by-product of both British colonization and subsequent decolonization in the region, Pakistan was established as the Muslim state on the Indian subcontinent upon independence from the British Crown in August 1947. Following a bloody partition with India, the new nation of Pakistan faced the distinct disadvantage of being one nation of two “wings,” separated by roughly one thousand miles of (enemy) Indian territory. While the central government and the bulk of the military resided in the western wing, the population center remained in the east, leading to increased tensions between the two as calls for independence and partition rose in the east. At the peak of tensions, on November 12, 1970, Cyclone Bhola rose from the Bay of Bengal, striking East Pakistan with such force that “the death toll reached half a million.”

To say that the cyclone was catastrophic is an understatement. Official casualty estimates range from 200,000 to 500,000 deaths; even the conservative U.S. estimate of 230,000 deaths account for 15 percent of the population in affected areas.⁴ The magnitude of the human toll contrasted sharply with the official government response from Western Pakistan, characterized as “languid and lackadaisical.” Though the disaster drew international attention and relief aid, it

² The United Nations recognizes that “climate change is a complex problem, which, although environmental in nature, has consequences for all spheres of existence on our planet. It either impacts on—or is impacted by—global issues, including poverty, economic development, population growth, sustainable development and resource management.” For more, see United Nations “Framework Convention on Climate Change,” http://unfccc.int/essential_background/items/6031.php.

³ World Population Review, “Bangladesh,” <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/bangladesh-population/>.

⁴ Hurricane Science and Society, “1970-The Great Bhola Cyclone,” estimates between 300,000 and 500,000 deaths. For more, see <http://www.hurricanescience.org/history/storms/1970s/greatbhola/>.

failed to draw attention from Pakistan's own government. President Yahya Khan performed a distracted flyover of the affected region on a return flight from China to West Pakistan, declaring the "extent of the calamity had been blown all out of proportion." The lack of government intervention (or even interest) provided fodder for the pro-autonomy movement in East Pakistan, led by Mujibar Rahman, who labeled the lack of government involvement as "criminal negligence," driving the narrative in favor of independence. The West Pakistani response to the separatist movement was a military crackdown, brutal in both the type and sheer number of killings. Official casualty estimates of the nine-month conflict range dramatically between 25,000 and 3,000,000⁵; recent conservative estimates account for approximately 269,000 deaths.

Equally disturbing was the nature of the massacre. Cables from the U.S. Consulate in Dhaka, the foundational documents of Bass's work, recount the atrocities in haunting detail. University dormitories were burned to the ground with students and faculty inside; Bangali police barracks were attacked. Bodies were left to rot in fields and streets. Entire neighborhoods were razed. Pakistani troops targeted university students, journalists, and members of the Awami League political party, leaving civilian casualties in their wake.

Both Bass and Rhagavan present substantial evidence that massacre was largely avoidable. Rhagavan contends that though "the war of 1971 was the most significant geopolitical event in the subcontinent since its partition in 1947 [...] there are remarkably few books that provide a *historical* account and explanation of the crisis and war of 1971." Of the accounts that do exist, he levels the claim that "the existing historiography on the creation of Bangladesh is beset by two dominating characteristics: insularity and determinism," largely ignoring the global context in which the Pakistani conflict arose and assuming the inevitability of partition. By contrast, he contends, "far from being a predestined event, the creation of Bangladesh was the product of conjuncture and contingency, choice and chance." Relying on sources from India, Singapore, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, he presents a range of options available to the international community capable of preventing such widespread atrocities.

Of the options available, both Rhagavan and Bass's accounts support the idea that had the American response been different, the Liberation War may have had a drastically different outcome. U.S. President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger had a strategic interest in maintaining a cordial relationship with the government in West Pakistan. Having perceived a rift between the U.S.S.R. and China, the Nixon Administration sought to capitalize on good relations between Karachi and Beijing to facilitate U.S.-China dialogues. The price for this "opening" of U.S.-China relations was appeasement of the Pakistani government at all costs, to include military aid. As West Pakistani forces cracked down on the East Pakistani population in 1971, the Nixon Administration

⁵ In the years immediately following the War, the Pakistani government cited 26,000 casualties (likely an unrealistically low number). Simultaneously, the Indian government estimates 1,000,000 casualties and the Bangali government cites 3,000,000 (likely unrealistically high numbers).

continued to publicly support and provide military aid to the West Pakistani government—essentially fueling the massacre in the East.

The extent to which the U.S. government was aware of the genocide in East Pakistan and its role in sustaining the conflict becomes painfully clear through Bass's well-researched account. He carefully distills recently released archival documents, including White House tapes of conversations between Nixon and Kissinger and the papers of U.S. State Department employees who witnessed the inception of wholesale massacre. The most damning piece of evidence remains American Consul General Archer Blood's telegram of April 1971, in which the entire State Department Consul in Dhaka registered dissent from the U.S. policy of support for West Pakistan. Most striking is the list of failures on the part of the U.S. government: the government "failed to denounce the suppression of democracy," "denounce atrocities," "take forceful measures to protect its citizens while at the same time bending over backwards to placate the West Pak dominated government," and "to lessen likely and deservedly negative international public relations." The telegram further declares that the situation in East Pakistan is, in fact, "genocide," and criticizes the U.S. government for labeling the conflict a "purely internal matter of a sovereign state."⁶

Bass's account breathes life into the documents. Beyond the newly-accessed archival material, he supplements his discussion with interviews with such actors as Margaret Millward Blood (Archer Blood's wife, present in Dhaka at the time of the atrocities), those signatories to the "Blood Telegram" (Scott Butcher, Eric Griffel, and Desaix Myers), and contemporary members of the press covering the atrocity (Sydney Schanberg). Where his telling could be improved concerns Nixon and Kissinger's perception of the real choice they faced between supporting the guilty Pakistani regime or normalizing relations between the U.S. and Communist China. However, Bass's failed attempt to include Nixon and Kissinger's perspectives lie at the hands of Henry Kissinger himself; in Bass's words, "Kissinger struck a deal with the Library of Congress that, until five years after his death, blocks researchers from seeing his papers there unless they have his written permission," and Kissinger either failed to respond to or declined interviews with Bass on three separate occasions.

While the appropriate level of U.S. intervention and involvement in the Bangladesh Liberation War is debatable, one thing is clear: the Nixon Administration was largely unprepared for how quickly a political powder keg could be ignited by a natural disaster. The carefully orchestrated strategic framework Nixon and Kissinger worked under, as they sought an opening to China, did not account for the implications of catastrophe on the periphery. While the Nixon Administration was largely successful in pursuing their larger Cold War objectives with respect to China, the strained relationship with the still-fragile Bangladesh and the support of a tenuous political relationship with Pakistan remains today.

⁶ Telegram, American Consulate in Dacca to Secretary of State William P. Rogers, April 6, 1971, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB79/BEBB8.pdf>.

Current reality is not divorced from the implications of natural disaster on the periphery of U.S. strategic interests. The twenty-first century is again witnessing large-scale migration from the Bay of Bengal—but this time, its migrants include those “climate refugees” seeking more stable and predictable living conditions. Monsoons, growing less predictable and more severe, have the capacity to destroy population centers. They also have the capability to expose fissures within governments already strained by poor economies. As the United States shifts its strategic interests to East Asia and the Pacific, it is imperative that policymakers and administrations take into account the possibility that the best-laid plans can be unraveled by force majeure—particularly in the vulnerable littorals of the Bay of Bengal—and plan accordingly.

