They had risked all to hold on to this moment in history. The scarred negatives, hidden from the military, wrapped in old cloth, buried underground, also bore the wounds of war. These photographers were the only soldiers who preserved tangible memories of our war of liberation. A contested memory that politicians fight over, in their battle for supremacy. These faded images, war weary, bloodied in battle provide the only record of what was witnessed. Nearly four decades later, they speak. 

Shahidul Alam
For Bangladesh, the traumatic memories of 1971 continue to haunt its very sense of identity in the same way as the memories of 1947 continually reflect on how India and Pakistan deal with each other’s existence. Indeed, there is much that is similar between 1947 and 1971: both involved the dramatic and traumatic dismemberment of nations, followed by a massive migration of people, and violence that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands, if not millions. As with 1971 between Pakistan and Bangladesh, India and Pakistan continue to define much of their national sense of selfhood vis-a-vis one another, with 1947 forming the traumatic backdrop.

While much has been written about the ‘high politics’ of 1947, for a long time there was little printed material about the human cost of the tragedy. On the other hand, there is no dearth of literature about 1971. The bookshelves of the Mukti Juddho Jadughor, the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka, are overflowing with personal accounts of heroism, flight and suffering that took place during that year. But almost all of those who have written about the war were either directly involved in it, witnesses to its events, or have a vested interest in airing their opinion after the fact. Somewhat counter-intuitively, this wealth of information ends up copying and remembering the birth of Bangladesh.

Extracts from Scattered Memories of 1971 by Antara Datta
HIMAL South Asia

1971-এর ক্ষতির যুদ্ধ, বাংলাদেশের আয়া পরিচিতকে বাঁচারের আয়া সেনানী করা যেতে পারে। ১৯৪৭-এর যুদ্ধটি হাতে একইভাবে বাড়ি ও পাকিস্তানকে কোলাহার। পশ্চিমরাই বিদ্রোহ সম্পর্কিত হয়ে পড়ে। ১৯৪৭ এবং ১৯৭১-এ আছে অনেক প্রভাব। একটি পাতা লেখা যাত্রীত্ব, যুদ্ধশৃঙ্খলার সব পথ পায়। তার ইতিহাস হয় পড়া। বিহিতার বাণিজ্য ভাবে বলা যায়। বিহিতার আশার বাণিজ্য ভাবে অভিনব। বাংলাদেশের রাজনৈতিক হেমন্ত ১৯৭১-এর বিস্তারি হেমন্ত ১৯৭১-এর অভিনব।

1947-এ বিভিন্ন পক্ষের প্রতিক্রিয়া বাংলাদেশের জন্য 'হিমাল' নিয়ে অকালে প্রকাশ হয়। বিভিন্ন পক্ষের কাপড় মার্কিন যুদ্ধে প্রতিক্রিয়া হয়ে পড়ে। বিহিতার বাণিজ্য পাকিস্তানের পক্ষে প্রকাশ হয়। বিহিতার হিমাল মার্কিন যুদ্ধে প্রতিক্রিয়া হয়ে পড়ে। বিহিতার বাণিজ্য ভাবে অভিনব হওয়ার ভাবে প্রকাশ হয়। ১৯৪৭-এ হিমালের প্রতিক্রিয়া বাংলাদেশের জন্য 'হিমাল' নিয়ে অকালে প্রকাশ হয়। বিভিন্ন পক্ষের কাপড় মার্কিন যুদ্ধে প্রতিক্রিয়া হয়ে পড়ে। বিহিতার বাণিজ্য পাকিস্তানের পক্ষে প্রকাশ হয়।
dramatically complicating the attempt to separate fact from fiction, emotion from reality, and rhetoric from "truth" in the course of any attempt to construct a nuanced account of 1971.

With the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975 and the coming to power of General Ziaur Rahman, the writing of history in Bangladesh took a decidedly political turn. Since then, each successive...
government has sought to impose its own stamp on the country's history. In so doing, every minute detail of the 1971 war has been hotly debated, including who issued the first cry of independence, the true part played by India, and the highly contentious role of the Razakars – the militia recruited by the West Pakistani Army consisting of non-Bengali Muslims and some pro-Pakistani Bengalis.

There is, then, a plethora of oral sources ‘recounting’ the events of 1971, as well as an equal variety of somewhat dubious official sources, and many books' worth of memoirs. The combined effect of this flood of information, however, leaves us with more questions than answers. For instance: What happened to those who opposed the Awami League’s agenda? What of those who ‘collaborated’? Who were they, and what happened to them after 1971? What of the non-Bengalis in Bangladesh, the Biharis, who for the past three and a half decades have been a stateless people?

The conflict between the reality of 1971 and the narratives that have evolved over the past three and a half decades can be seen in any number of examples. The roles of both the Mukti Bahini – the Liberation Army – and the Indian Army during the war of 1971 remain controversial to this day. Many Bangladeshi nationalists argue that the Mukti Bahini fighters were significantly more than a mere source of irritation for the West Pakistani army, and that they had virtually won the war by the time the Indian Army stepped in to clear up the debris. While this notion may be a trifle romantic, it is in stark contrast to the memoirs of various Indian generals who argue that they used the Mukti Bahini for little more than intelligence-gathering and reconnaissance missions.

Similarly contested is the number of East Pakistani women who were raped during the chaos of 1971. There are no reliable numbers on this, and estimates vary from 3,000 to as many as 400,000. While there is no question that rapes did occur on a tragically mass scale, the issue of whether there was a systematic policy of rape is much harder to uncover. Many of the first-person narratives about 1971 – including Nilima Ibrahim’s haunting Ami Birangona Bolchhi (I Am a Heroine Speaking) – contain accounts of rape. There exists a veil of silence over the fate of individual women; other than a few films, a PhD thesis or two, and the occasional newspaper article, this issue remains a notoriously sensitive one. Bangladesh’s initial state policy was similarly confused. The new Bangladeshi state tried to incorporate these women into national life by calling them birangonas, or heroines, but simultaneously refused to grant citizenship to the children born of rape.
The wounds of a war run much deeper than the physical manifestations of the destruction it leaves behind. There is emotional scarring – the mental trauma of a people who have seen the unforgettable, and are haunted by their dreams. There is little doubt about the immense human tragedy that accompanied 1971. But as with 1947, such human tragedy was also accompanied by great hope and celebration; the birth of a new nation, and, for many, liberation from oppression. However, the Bangladeshi dream has not quite gone the way it was originally envisioned, and Bangladesh has spent many years under military rule up to the present day. Perhaps the final question to ponder has to do with the legacies of 1971. Do the divisions that surfaced in 1971 carry with them a portent of what is to come? And, in perhaps the bitterest of ironies, why has Bangladesh’s political history, in the 37 years since independence, begun to resemble that of Pakistan?