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Redeeming Pakistan: The Jama'at-i Islami and the Bangladesh Liberation War

For my dissertation, I examine the role of the Pakistani Islamist movement, the *Jama'at-i Islami*, and its student wing, the *Islami Jami'at-i Tulabah* (IJT), in the events of 1971 which ultimately led to the independence of Bangladesh. This project concentrates on the ways in which the *Jama'at* and the IJT legitimated the practise of militant violence against their fellow citizens and co-religionists in East Pakistan in 1971, enquiring into the normative, eschatological, and theological grounds for their arguments in favour of West Pakistan's military intervention. My research for the duration of my AIPS short-term fellowship has enabled me to unveil the hitherto underhistoricised content of the most prominent Islamist political party's case for the retention of East Pakistan within the homeland of South Asian Muslims and against the independence and sovereignty of Bangladesh.

In addition, my project focuses on the kinds of symbols and themes which the IJT mobilised to gainsay the West Pakistani establishment's decision to recognise Bangladesh and in what ways these arguments were connected with earlier ones concerning the seditiousness of Bengali secessionists (especially the Mukti Bahini), the impurities of Bangla, and the alterity of Bengali culture from an authentically Pakistani and Islamic one. The comparison with the perspective and actions of the state is crucial because my research demonstrates that the engagement of the *Jama'at* and the IJT in the Bangladesh Liberation War can be divided into two stages, both of which entail a reaction to the stance of the West Pakistani government. First, they appeared to perpetuate the state sanctioned or official discourse about the demographic, cultural, and political threat posed by East Bengal. Later, after Bangladesh achieved its independence, the *Jama'at* clashed with the state over the Pakistan People's Party's monopoly over the constitutional process, the extent of its commitment to socialism, and its dealings with India vis-à-vis Bangladesh. In fact, Maulana Abu'l Ala Maududi, the leader of the *Jama'at*, declared his support for the Bangladesh *namanzur* (non-acceptance) movement in the years following the war, insisting that it was still possible to redeem East Pakistan by assembling a vaguely defined confederation of the willing.

This fellowship permitted me to investigate the *Jama'at* and its student wing's newspapers, periodical literature, pamphlets, manifestos, and published interviews. I was also able to locate commentary on the events of 1971 written by those active members who fought in the IJT's paramilitary units (al-Badr and al-Shams) and by those who opposed the *Jama'at*'s participation in militant activities in East Pakistan. The diversity of opinions within the ranks of the organisation is illuminating. If Maududi underscored the importance of negotiation, internationalism, multilateral political settlement, democratic accommodation, and efforts to avoid entanglements with India (whose military might he acknowledged to be superior to that of Pakistan), then the IJT laid emphasis on the valour and sacrifice exemplified by the Prophet Joseph and Hussein ibn

‘Ali, the readiness to endure slavery and imprisonment at the hands of one’s enemies, and the need to rescue one’s Muslim brethren from the treachery of Indian agents and communists in East Pakistan. And although the *Jama’at* lent its support to the West Pakistani establishment in 1971, the two parted ways in the aftermath of the war. The official state discourse between 1972 and 1974 came to regard East Pakistan/Bangladesh as an unfortunate loss, a painful amputation with which the state had eventually to come to grips. In contrast, Maududi sought to rehabilitate the fractured, diseased limb of East Pakistan within the national body politic, to encourage a movement led by Bengali Muslims against India and in support of West Pakistan, and to redeem the Muslims of East Pakistan from the essentially mean, avaricious Hindu.

My project enlarges the scope of Pakistan studies by assessing the impact of the most influential Islamist organisation in Pakistan upon the Bangladesh Liberation War, which is generally treated in nationalist historiographies as the unfolding of a fundamentally secular dialectic between an oppressive, modernising nation-state and a downtrodden people whose resistance eclipsed religious differences. A study of the *Jama’at*’s intellectual and material contribution to the events of 1971 remains a significant lacuna in the modern history of South Asia which this project hopes to fill. In addition, my work puts into doubt the simplistic genealogies of political Islam which suggest that militant violence is an ineluctable outcome of a commitment to the particular theologies of modernity which organisations like the *Jama’at* represent. As such, it is a useful antidote to the fears among certain American government officials that militant outfits fighting against the United States in the Islamic world derive their inspiration primarily from Maududi, Sayyid Qutb, and other twentieth-century Islamist luminaries.

Throughout the course of my fellowship, I had the opportunity to meet with numerous scholars in Pakistan who have worked extensively on the history of the *Jama’at* in both English and Urdu and who offered invaluable advice in respect of the direction which my project will take. I plan to consult them further and to apply for funding from the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies (AIBS) to find materials germane to my research in Dhaka next summer. Thus, even though my research is not yet complete, the structure of my project is much stronger than when I began and its conceptual horizon is much clearer. This research would not have been possible without the AIBS short-term fellowship and I am deeply grateful to the institute for its graciousness and hospitality.