

'Allow history to settle down'

Srijana Mitra Das | TNN

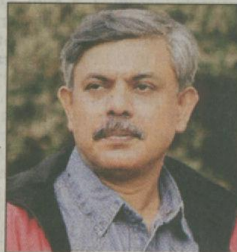
Anisul Hoque is soft-spoken, a man who speaks with energetic passion about Bangladesh's history. A journalist-turned-writer, Hoque's work of historical fiction 'Ma' recently won the 2012 Bangla Award for best novel. "It's based on a true story from the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war. It's about a boy called Azad whose rich father re-marries, so his mother takes him away and settles down in a slum. She brings him up. Azad joins Dhaka University in 1971 — when the war is declared. He becomes a guerrilla fighter and undergoes hardships but his mother tells him to be brave. He is jailed but his mother tells him never to reveal the names of his comrades—despite torture, he doesn't. When she visits him in prison once, he asks her to bring him rice. She returns but Azad has vanished. He isn't ever found. His mother never ate rice again."

Hoque chanced upon the haunting tale when Azad's mother died in 1985. "Her story was published in my newspaper. I began researching and ended up writing a piece of fiction but tried staying true to Azad, building the characters in his life."

Hoque is not the only one re-constructing narratives from Bangladesh's seminal war. A recent outpouring of writing has delved into the war's brutalities. Why, after 40 years of uncomfortable silence, are Bangladeshis expressing their trauma in literature? Hoque explains, "You must allow history time to settle down. There have been Bangla books on the war but when writing your version, you have to maintain a distance—like an on-looker viewing a painting."

But the distance is narrowing. Hoque explains how 1971 is important in Bangladesh today. "Three years ago, elections were held. The winning party promised a war tribunal. War criminals, especially local collaborators, are now on trial for crimes against ordinary Bangladeshis." In a young nation, is probing old wounds healthy? Hoque thinks so. "You can compare 1971 with Hitler's brutality. Take one instance Operation Searchlight when soldiers attacked students, burnt down university buildings, murdered teachers. The Pakistani Army killed so many students, professors, doctors, writers. There was an attempt to make Bangladesh intellectually extinct." Is forgiveness possible? Hoque is unhesitating. "No. You can't forgive. Nor forget. Perhaps you can try to understand."

What role does India play? "Bangladeshis are grateful for India's support to our war. Indian soldiers sacrificed their lives for our independence. Indians showed hospitality to 10 million Bangladeshi refugees." But the situation has evolved since then. "The new generation's mind is white as a blank paper. They are not anti-India, they are not pro-India—they are pro-Bangladesh. After the Awami League's victory, expectations were high. Before Manmohan Singh's visit to Bangladesh, everybody was sure there'd be a treaty to share the Teesta waters—when that didn't happen, there was great disappointment. But we're hopeful of better Indo-Bangla relations."



CHRONICLING A WAR: Anisul Hoque