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RESEARCH PAPER

A Divided Memory: The Khilafat Movement in Bangladeshi Textbooks, Commemoration and Political Discourse since 1971

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the Khilafat Movement (1919–1924) is represented in Bangladesh's public memory since 1971, delimited to textbooks, commemoration and Islamist discourse. Collective memory depends on institutions that carry it. The Khilafat, pivotal to Bengali Muslim political awakening, sits uneasily within Bangladesh's secular-nationalist and Islamist memory regimes. This qualitative study combines critical interpretive synthesis and documentary analysis. Its population comprises relevant scholarship and public memory carriers. Purposive sampling selected the NCTB Class 9–10 history textbook, national-days calendar, Islamist organisations' materials and Nazrul's Agni-Bina. Data were analysed through reflexive thematic coding. The textbook frames the Khilafat as Hindu–Muslim anti-colonial unity, sidelining its pan-Islamic aim. No national commemoration was identified. Islamist actors invoke the caliphate detached from its history, which the study terms "forgetting through incorporation." Curricula should teach the movement in full. Future research should examine madrasa curricula, student reception and vernacular sources.

KEYWORDS Khilafat Movement, Collective Memory, Bangladesh, Textbooks, Commemoration, Political Discourse

Introduction

In 1967A nation's memory and forgetting are never politically neutral. Collective memory is socially shaped by the present needs and power dynamics of the groups that maintain it (Halbwachs, 1925/1992; Olick & Robbins, 1998), and comparative research on memory politics reveals how mnemonic narratives are used to forge, confirm and challenge nation-states (Zubrzycki &Woźny, 2020). The case of Bangladesh is particularly interesting. Since its birth through a war of secession in 1971, the official narrative of the country has been constantly reshaped to suit political agendas as the power has shifted; constitutional discourses are sometimes dominated by secularism and sometimes by Islamic legitimation, textbooks have transferred credit for the declaration of independence from one side to the other and back again, and after the mass uprising of 2024, an interim government cancelled several national days and modified parts of the school curriculum (Ahmed, 2025; "8 Nat'l Days," 2024; Riaz, 2004).

This article discusses one of the events that have been neglected by scholars and historians of this history: the Khilafat Movement of 1919–1924. The movement was initially organised to fight against the dismemberment of the Ottoman caliphate following the First World War, and in alliance with Gandhi's Non-Cooperation campaign, it was one of the biggest anti-colonial mobilisations in the subcontinent (Brown, 1972; Minault, 1982). It penetrated far into the rural areas of Bengal, fused agrarian issues with Islamic imagery and mobilised Muslim farmers on an unprecedented scale (Hashmi, 1992; McPherson, 1974). These agitations shaped several Bengali Muslim political leaders, among them the future

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peasant leader Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani (Uddin, 2023). However, about a century later, there is no major monument, anniversary or place in the national commemorative calendar of Bangladesh.

The article makes three contributions. It can be said that on an empirical level, it relates the historiography of the Khilafat in Bengal with the current academic literature on Bangladeshi textbooks and memory politics. Conceptually, it can be read as extending Connerton's typology of forgetting (2008) and Trouillot's understanding of historical silences (1995) through the idea of "forgetting through incorporation" whereby incorporation into the official narrative can be a mechanism of neutralisation. Methodologically, it suggests a four-dimensional model for divided memories which can be used comparatively beyond Bangladesh.

The article continues in the following manner. The theoretical framework is developed in Section 2, the Khilafat in colonial Bengal is discussed in Section 3, methodology is explained in Section 4, findings are presented in Section 5, implications are discussed in Section 6, and limitations and directions for future research are discussed in Section 7 before the conclusion.

Literature Review

Social frameworks and sites of memory

Halbwachs's (1925/1992) starting point is that remembering is dependent on social frameworks: people remember the past through the cognitive and normative frameworks of families, religious communities, classes and schools. There is a corollary to the claim which is as important as the claim itself. If an institution stops hosting the memory, the memory doesn't disappear; it transfers to another institution that is still ready to maintain it and adapts in the process (Orianne& Eustache, 2023). The material and ritual dimension is added by Nora's (1989) notion of lieux de mémoire. Nations' identity is manifested in their sites, such as monuments and museums, but also through dates, emblems and canonical texts, which act as anchors and carriers of memory. Recent research on commemorative geographies has argued that these places are not just 'known' but also 'felt' and that their existence and/or absence can contribute to past experiences being felt and known (Legg, 2007; Sumartojo, 2021).

This is highlighted by the distinction between functional memory and storage memory that is discussed by AleidaAssmann (2011). Functional memory is what is dwelled upon by a group; that which is kept but not actively used is storage memory. An episode may thus exist in the archive of a society, even in its textbooks, but without any role in the construction of identity. Why? Connerton's (1989) classification of inscribing practices, which store memory in texts, and of incorporating practices, which pass memory on through ritual and body, provides an explanation.

Silences and types of forgetting

In the absence of memory carriers, there are forgetting mechanisms. Trouillot (1995) claimed that silences are produced as part of four processes in the production of history: when sources are created, when archives are assembled, when facts are retrieved and made into narratives, and when retrospective significance is assigned. Silence can sometimes coexist with presence: a well-documented event can be narrated without being given any significance.

Connerton (2008) outlined seven types of forgetting. Three are relevant here. First, memories that have no value for a new collective may be forgotten, as in forgetting that is "constitutive in the formation of a new identity." Second, he borrowed the anthropologist J.

A. Barnes's term 'structural amnesia' to refer to the fact that genealogical memory only holds on to the links that are socially relevant in the here and now. A third is forgetting the past deliberately in order to settle a new way of life. They all represent facets of the Bangladeshi situation, but none represents the situation where an episode is included in the official narrative so as to neutralise it. This typology is extended with the concept of forgetting through incorporation developed in Section 6.

Textbooks as carriers of official memory

The school textbook holds a particular place among the institutional carriers. Textbooks capture what Apple (2000) termed "official knowledge": a subset of the possible history that is authorised, examined and passed on to a generation. They are therefore both a means of collective memory and a battleground over it (Foster, 2011; Sakki, 2025). This battle has been particularly fierce in South Asia. Indian and Pakistani school histories have been compared by Kumar (2001) and he noted that, in the two countries, the same freedom struggle—including the Khilafat years—is portrayed as a narrative of composite nationalism and Muslim separatism, respectively. Later studies have reported on the convergence of religious and national identity in Pakistan (Durrani& Dunne, 2010); on the creation of mutually antagonistic national selves in Indian and Pakistani textbooks (Lall, 2008); and on the revision of textbooks in India that reflects changes of government (Haas &Lindstam, 2024). This phenomenon is repeated outside South Asia, in the South Korean case (Kim & Kim, 2019).

There are two lessons that follow for this study. First of all, the analytically important question is often not whether an event occurs in a textbook, but the specific way it is framed: which parts are kept, which narrative it is told for, and which meanings are closed off (Foster, 2011). Secondly, the content in the textbooks is inscribed, not incorporated (Connerton, 1989). It can store an event in storage memory without adding the kind of functional meaning that commemoration supplies (Assmann, 2011). Such analysis in Bangladesh has been done only in the context of the Language Movement and Liberation War, which are the defining events in the country (Qazi& Shah, 2019); the colonial period has not been analysed in this way.

Mnemonic actors and travelling memory

Memory regimes arise from the work of actors with stakes. Kubik and Bernhard (2014) identify "mnemonic warriors" as those who only believe in their own version of the past, "pluralists" who engage with a diverse range of pasts and "abnegators" who do not engage in memory politics at all. The two major political camps of Bangladesh have often used textbook revisions as a way of claiming legitimacy to lead the nation through ownership of 1971 (Mookherjee, 2015; Zaman, 2018), and studies of other countries have indicated that textbook revision is a tool politicians use to assert their right to lead (Haas &Lindstam, 2024; Jo, 2022). Finally, memories travel. Erll (2011) and Rothberg (2009) suggest that memory does not reside in national containers but flows between and across borders, and interacts with other memories. A movement whose purpose was to defend a caliphate in Istanbul, and whose discourse was geared towards an international Muslim population, sits uneasily in any national canon (Aydin, 2017).

The Khilafat Movement in Bengal

The Khilafat Movement stemmed from the longstanding bond of the Indian Muslims with the sultan-caliph of the Ottoman Empire, which strengthened from the 1870s when European powers encroached on Ottoman territory (Özcan, 1997). The Ottoman defeat in 1918 and the harsh terms of the post-war settlement led to this attachment becoming mass politics. In 1919, the All-India Khilafat Committee was established, which joined Gandhi in 1920 in uniting the Khilafat demand with Non-Cooperation in a combined effort to fight

against British rule (Brown, 1972; Qureshi, 1999). It was at the same juncture that the JamiatUlama-e-Hind was established, and thus the Deobandi ulama obtained a political voice that would continue beyond the movement (Minault, 1982). The alliance was short-lived as Gandhi suspended Non-Cooperation in 1922, and the purpose of the movement was lost with the abolition of the caliphate in March 1924 by the Turkish Grand National Assembly (Qureshi, 1999).

Ever since, historians have had conflicting interpretations of the movement. Minault (1982) contended that pan-Islamic symbolism served mainly as a means of bringing together a disunited Indian Muslim community, and that this is how pan-Islam became a vehicle of pan-Indian Muslim politics. Others focus on the real transnational connections involved (Aydin, 2017; Özcan, 1997); Robinson (1974) places the movement in the larger context of the development of Muslim political separatism. In the present context, the key point is that the movement was double. It was religious and anti-colonial, transnational and Indian, and it was based on an inter-communal alliance, which its own religious idiom made fragile.

This doubleness manifested itself in a peculiar manner in Bengal. Calcutta was a stronghold of the Khilafat movement as well as of the Urdu- and Bengali-language Muslim press (McPherson, 1974; Murshid, 1995). In the eastern districts, Khilafat and Non-Cooperation agitation extended political mobilisation into the countryside where religious leaders were able to connect the cause of the caliph with peasant discontent against landlords and moneylenders (Hashmi, 1992; Ray, 1984). During the same period, the Bengal Pact of 1923 was formed by C. R. Das, which aimed at cooperation between Hindus and Muslims in provincial politics, but which could not be sustained after Das's death in 1925 (Ray, 1984). It had a cultural influence, too. The collection that made KaziNazrul Islam's reputation was his Agni-Bina (1922), which included poems on Ottoman and Turkish resistance such as "Kamal Pasha" and "Ranabheri" (Islam, 1922). Nazrul would later be known as the national poet of Bangladesh. Tellingly, his hero was Mustafa Kemal, the man who would abolish the caliphate, a sign of how, from the outset, Bengali memory was being shaped by an amalgamation of pan-Islamic and secular anti-imperial connotations.

The mnemonic fate of the movement in Bengal is shaped by its long afterlife. Over the next two decades, the religious tone in which the Khilafat agitation was carried out contributed to the communalisation of agrarian politics, as by the 1940s Muslim cultivators were able to envision Pakistan as a "peasant utopia" devoid of Hindu landlords, as Hashmi (1992) shows. Chatterji (1994) demonstrates a mirror-image process among the Hindu elite of Bengal, who turned towards communal politics culminating in the call for partition. In these readings, one strand of continuity from the Khilafat in Bengal runs in another direction, towards the Lahore Resolution of 1940 and the coming of Pakistan in 1947. This oscillation between Muslim and Bengali understandings of community was subsequently worked out by the founders of Bangladesh, Murshid (1995) writes, in favour of language. The Khilafat thus sits at the head of a genealogy that the national history of 1971 was built to refute.

However, the regional historiography is still rather scant. The Swadeshi movement, the partition of 1947 and recently the subaltern and cultural histories of Bengal have received scholarly attention, while the provincial politics of Bengali Muslims remain relatively neglected (Bhattacharjee, 2015; Bose, 2014). It is this very thinness that corresponds to the first of Trouillot's silences: what is poorly documented can be easily narrated selectively.

The Bangladeshi memory regime

The Language Movement of 1952 and the Liberation War of 1971 are the two founding ruptures of Bangladesh's national memory, marked on 21 February at the Shaheed

Minar (and, since 1999, internationally as International Mother Language Day), on Independence Day, 26 March, and on Victory Day, 16 December, and commemorated at various monuments, such as the National Martyrs' Memorial at Savar (Mookherjee, 2015; van Schendel, 2009). Empirical work on secondary textbooks shows these two events serving as the defining ones, with Pakistan as the external Other and those who did not want the country to become independent as the internal Other (Qazi& Shah, 2019). The 1952–1971 story, told as the story of Bengali linguistic nationalism against a state established under the banner of Muslim nationhood, is not always comfortable with any event that emphasises Muslim political unity (Jahan, 1972; Uddin, 2006).

The regime has always been in a state of instability. In 1972, the Constitution put in place the principle of secularism, but the military governments that followed from 1975 onwards did away with it and instead focused on the nationalism rooted in the territorial and religious identities of Bangladeshis, and Islam was made the state religion in 1988 (Riaz, 2004; Uddin, 2006). In 2011, the state adopted the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which restored secularism but kept Islam as the state religion, and which analysts interpret as a functional relationship between secularism and Islam in Bangladeshi politics (Wohab, 2021). These changes have been mirrored in textbooks. In 2017, the content of books was altered under pressure from Hefazat-e-Islam and in 2024 the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) changed the books to present Ziaur Rahman as the first proclaimer of independence and to delete the title "Father of the Nation" for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Ahmed, 2025; Wohab, 2021). Bangladesh thus serves as an example of the textbook "wars" found in India and Pakistan (Kumar, 2001; Lall, 2008) and of the revision of official history in general as new governments replace old ones (Haas &Lindstam, 2024; Kim & Kim, 2019).

Much of this dispute, though, is about the ownership of 1971, and not about the period before it. The colonial period is seen in Bangladeshi textbooks primarily as prehistory; it is the time when the struggle of Bangladeshis for self-determination starts.

Material and Methods

Design

The study is a critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) as well as a targeted documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009). In contrast to aggregative reviews, CIS was developed (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006) to build theory from a disparate body of literature with the aim of generating explanatory concepts. The design is appropriate for the research question, which asks how an episode is located in a mnemonic order, not how many times it is named. Social memory research is non-paradigmatic and revolves around mnemonic practices that are found in curricula, rituals, monuments and political conversation (Olick & Robbins, 1998); memory can also be implicit, residing in what goes unsaid (Erll, 2022). A design that spans these registers and treats absence as data is thus more appropriate to the problem than a single-instrument study.

Corpus

The synthesis was based on three streams of scholarship: memory theory; studies on curricula, textbooks and national identity in Bangladesh and other comparable countries; and the history of the Khilafat Movement and colonial Bengal. Iterative searches were made on Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR and Google Scholar with combinations of terms related to the Khilafat Movement, pan-Islamism, Bengali Muslim politics, textbooks, commemoration and collective memory, supplemented by backward citation tracking from the major monographs. As in CIS, sampling was purposive, and continued until there was no further change in the analytical categories. Articles and scholarly monographs were given preference if these had been peer-reviewed.

The documentary analysis involves four sets of publicly available materials, which represent four particular forms of memory: (a) The chapter on movements for self-rule in Bengal under British rule in the NCTB secondary history book for Classes 9–10 BangladesherItihas o Bishwasabhyata (National Curriculum and Textbook Board [NCTB], 2013); (b) The official calendar of national days, including the changes of October 2024, when eight days were cancelled ("8 Nat'l Days," 2024); (c) The names, founding narratives and public actions of the Islamist organisations invoking the khilafat, which include the KhilafatAndolon and Hizbut-Tahrir (Reuters, 2025; Riaz, 2004); and (d) Canonical cultural texts of the period, such as Nazrul's Agni-Bina (Islam, 1922).

Analysis

The analysis was carried out in a reflexive thematic manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006), building on sensitising concepts from Section 2: carriers of memory (Halbwachs, 1925/1992), functional and storage memory (Assmann, 2011), Trouillot's (1995) four moments of silence, Connerton's (2008) types of forgetting, and mnemonic actors (Kubik& Bernhard, 2014). The elements of the movement that were preserved in the textual passages and documented practices were coded, as were the framing devices through which they were preserved. Results were cross-checked between the three literatures and four sets of documents, and negative cases, which could challenge the argument, were deliberately explored.

Inferential status and reflexivity

Two cautions apply. Firstly, where the article infers a commemorative absence, it does so indirectly, from negative evidence in the national calendar, the literature examined and the documents analysed, but not from a comprehensive survey of local practice. Secondly, the weight is placed on English-language scholarship and national-level publications, whereas a lot of vernacular memory is kept in Bangla print, sermons, local histories, and social media. These limits are returned to in Section 7.

Results and Discussion

Incorporated but domesticated: the Khilafat in the textbook

The first finding addresses the erroneous assumption of erasure. The Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement is a part of the chapter on Bengal's struggle for self-rule under British rule in the NCTB secondary history textbook (2013). The chapter places the movement in a chronological sequence starting from the partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi movement, followed by the Swaraj Party and the Bengal Pact, and finally the Lahore Resolution. In this series the Khilafat is seen as a joint effort of Hindus and Muslims and as the first ever mass movement against British rule, and the movement's impact is linked to Das's Bengal Pact and the subsequent disintegration of communal harmony.

Inclusion, but inclusion of a particular kind. Three aspects of the framing stand out. First, the chapter title makes the movement a part of a Bengali self-determination (swadhikar) movement, which, in turn, ends in 1971, transforming the Khilafat into a piece of prehistory. Second, the narrative's emphasis on inter-communal unity, the aspect of the movement that is most secular and nationalist — unity with, rather than against, other communities — makes the caliphate seem merely the occasion formobilisation. Third, the movement's specifically Bengali dimensions in regional Muslim political history, its rural reach and its role in shaping a generation of Muslim leaders are not explored.

The Khilafat is thus not erased; it remains in what Assmann (2011) refers to as storage form. It is written in an examinable text, but it is not a part of any practice of commemoration (Connerton, 1989). The things it contains are chosen so as to support the

overall story. The silence arises not when a fact is retrieved, but when it is assigned retrospective significance, according to Trouillot (1995). The movement is referred to, but its meaning is defined by the 1971 endpoint.

The commemorative vacuum

The second finding concerns functional memory. Table 1 compares the carriers that sustain the two canonical episodes of Bangladeshi nationhood with those available to the Khilafat.

Table 1
Carriers of memory for three episodes in Bangladeshi public culture

Carrier	Language Movement (1952)	Liberation War (1971)	Khilafat Movement (1919–1924)
Secondary history curriculum	Core chapter; defining marker of national identity	Core chapters; defining marker of national identity	Sub-section within the chapter on colonial-era movements for self-rule
National commemorative calendar	21 February (Shaheed Dibosh; International Mother Language Day)	26 March (Independence Day); 16 December (Victory Day)	None identified
Monuments and museums	Central Shaheed Minar and local replicas	National Martyrs' Memorial, Savar; Liberation War Museum	None identified
Literary and musical canon	Extensive commemorative songs and literature	Extensive war literature, film and song	Oblique, through Nazrul's poetry of the period
Party-political invocation	Shared across parties	Pervasive and contested	Name adopted by Islamist parties and movements
Dominant meaning	Linguistic nationhood	Sovereign secession from Pakistan	Divided: inter-communal anti-colonialism (curriculum) versus caliphate as ideal (Islamist actors)

Note. Compiled by the author from NCTB (2013), Qazi and Shah (2019), Mookherjee (2015), van Schendel (2009), Riaz (2004), Islam (1922) and Reuters (2025). "None identified" denotes absence of evidence in the national calendar and the sources reviewed, not an exhaustive survey of local practice.

The national calendar and the reviewed literature have no record of any state commemorations of the Khilafat, nor was any national monument, museum gallery or anniversary related to the Khilafat found. It's not a question of capacity. Bangladesh has a thick apparatus of commemoration, and recent events demonstrate its ability to be quickly retooled. Under the interim government, eight national days relating to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family were cancelled in October 2024 ("8 Nat'l Days," 2024). Commemorative sites are constructed, not discovered (Nora, 1989), and the determining element is whether a memory has a carrier capable of institutionalising it.

The pattern is confirmed by a partial exception. Nazrul is institutionally canonised: his poetry is read, his songs are played during national events, and during the 2024 protests, his poetry was recited (Ahmed, 2025). But it is Nazrul the rebel and the anti-imperialist who is canonised and not the pan-Islamic setting of poems like "Kamal Pasha". The memory thus lives on in a way that is indirect, through a cultural figure whose own celebration of Kemal already went beyond the caliphate. Even here, the Khilafat movement itself goes unmentioned.

Detached counter-memory: the khilafat as name and ideal

The third finding is that the caliphate has now been appropriated by Islamist actors, but without connection to the historical movement. The most evident appropriation is nominal. In 1981, MuhammadullahHafezzi's presidential candidacy was an early sign of resurgent political Islam following the return of religious parties to electoral politics (Riaz, 2004), and the Bangladesh KhilafatAndolon was established (Hafezi, 2001). Following it were other groups with the name, such as the KhelafatMajlis, and these were also brought into the IslamiOikyaJote. In March 2025, in reaction to the secular democratic system, Hizbut-Tahrir, banned since 2009 in Bangladesh, organised a "March for Khilafat" in Dhaka, which was dispersed by police using tear gas, with its activists calling for the establishment of a caliphate, which is called 'Khilafat' in Arabic (Reuters, 2025).

One has to be clear about Hizbut-Tahrir's position in the religious sphere in Bangladesh since it is the most prominent public voice of khilafat today. The organisation, founded in 1953 by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, believes that the caliphate should be restored and that democracy and the nation-state are un-Islamic and that it will seize power by winning over influential sectors of society, such as the armed forces, and not by winning elections (Karagiannis& McCauley, 2006; Taji-Farouki, 1996). The description by Orofino (2015) is that of a movement of "intellectual radicals" and that by Ward (2009) of "non-violent extremists." There has been no systematic attempt to gauge the opinion of the ulama on the organisation in Bangladesh. However, the widespread perception that most ulama do not regard Hizbut-Tahrir as a proper Islamic organisation is consistent with the available evidence. It also accords with the character of mainstream Hanafi-Deobandi learning (Al-Kausar, 2024; Riaz, 2004), for which a lay claim to religious and political authority, which is often party-centred, has a distinct and unsettling relationship with established scholarship. There's a reasonable basis for the related charge of extremism as well. In multidimensional conceptions of religious extremism, intolerance of other beliefs and intolerant social and political tendencies can constitute extremism even without violence (Wibisono et al., 2019), and the organisation's opposition to democratic pluralism fits this description.

A further accusation, that Hizbut-Tahrir has a Khariji ideology, is another matter. The historical Khawarij were characterised by takfir (the excommunication of Muslims who were deemed to have committed a major sin) and by armed rebellion against Muslim rulers. The term has come to be used polemically to delegitimise political opponents (Kenney, 2006). Its application to Hizbut-Tahrir is not accurate, since it conflates a particular set of doctrines with a radical political programme. The Khariji charge can only be considered a polemical claim, not an established finding, given the lack of direct and local evidence of takfiri doctrine and sanctioned violence. The implication of this for the present argument is straightforward. The khilafat is most visible today in Bangladesh in the usage of an organisation at the periphery of the country's religious mainstream, which, moreover, strips the word of its historical connotations and its connection to the mainstream of religious memory.

There is apparently no evidence that these invocations refer to the 1919–1924 movement. They call for a normative model of Islamic governance in the form of khilafat and they assert that it is a bridge to a transnational community of believers called ummah (Sayyid, 2014). They thus detach the caliphate from the historical movement, which had a link with the Indian National Congress and a relationship with the leaders of the Hindu community in Bengal. A distinction is needed here between nominal invocation and historical invocation. The KhilafatAndolon sprang from the Deobandi-oriented qawmi madrasa milieu (Riaz, 2004), whose ulama founded their political organisation, the JamiatUlama-e-Hind, during the original movement. The network of qawmi madrasas is the most likely to carry not only the nominal but also the historical memory of the Khilafat in Bangladesh, mainly through the biographies of the elders of Deobandi madrasas and the teaching of institutional history. Whether it does or not remains an empirical question, one

worth addressing in the future, as identified in Section 7. While there is nominal invocation in the public sphere, the documents reviewed do not demonstrate historical invocation. The analysis identified no traces of these actors emphasising the movement's inter-communal character, the Gandhi alliance or the Bengal Pact, as the textbook does. The counter-memory is therefore the mirror image of the official one: it retains what the curriculum sidelines, and forgets what it remembers. It relates to the current projects of the group, as the official version does, and thus bears out the general observation that groups remember selectively based on current projects (Schwartz & Schuman, 2005; Wertsch, 2002).

The stakes: 1971 and the unsettled nation

The fourth finding is that the Khilafat's memory is divided because of an unresolved contest over what kind of nation Bangladesh is. A complete history of the movement would have to recognise that an important turning point in the political awakening of the Bengali Muslims was organized around a symbol that transcended national boundaries and was religious in nature. This recognition would be particularly awkward in a secular-nationalist narrative that is founded on linguistic identity as opposed to a Muslim-nationalist Pakistan (Jahan, 1972; Qazi& Shah, 2019). It would bring a historical depth to the religious alternative and it would bring into focus the line of descent, as described in Section 3.1, which led from the Khilafatmobilisation to the communalisation of Bengali politics to the Pakistan movement that the Bengali Muslims overwhelmingly embraced in the 1940s (Hashmi, 1992). It is only possible to separate the Khilafat from that genealogy and reattach it to 1971 if it is framed as a struggle by two communities – the Hindu and Muslim communities. Conversely, for the Islamists, a full memory would mean admitting that the movement's mass strength was built on the bedrock of an alliance with Hindu nationalists, which Islamist political goals are at odds with.

Neither of the two main mnemonic camps in Bangladesh, therefore, has an interest in the stabilisation of a complete memory of the Khilafat. This can be seen in the one-sidedness of the revisionism of recent times. The changes that occurred after 2024 focused on the attribution of the 1971 declaration and the cult of one leader (Ahmed, 2025; "8 Nat'l Days," 2024), but did not reopen the colonial prehistory. Contestation still focuses on who owns the founding moment, leaving episodes outside this moment in their split state. However, the gap between the official story and popular identification is not merely hypothetical. A recent study of Bangladeshi students at a school abroad that uses the national curriculum reveals that they feel little attachment to the secular and pluralist values that are taught in the books (Qazi& Shah, 2019). When official memories are not able to meet the demand for meaning, counter-memories find room to circulate (Zaman, 2018).

Forgetting through incorporation

The findings support a conceptual argument. The Khilafat in Bangladesh is not forgotten by being ignored; it is forgotten by being incorporated. The movement is included in the official narrative, but it has been reframed in terms of a teleology of inter-communal unity and Bengali self-rule, losing its pan-Islamic thrust. Inclusion in the textbook, then, does the job of neutralisation, and the elements cut out in the process circulate outside the state's frameworks as a free-floating counter-memory that is not anchored to history.

This mechanism is not one of the types Connerton (2008) identified. It's not repressive erasure; there's no suppression. It's not prescriptive forgetting, because no decree to forget the past is issued. Like structural amnesia, it preserves only the genealogical connections that are relevant at the moment, but where structural amnesia drops the others, incorporation keeps them and imparts a new significance to them. In addition, forgetting through incorporation helps to refine Trouillot's (1995) model by demonstrating how silence at the moment of retrospective significance can coexist with presence at the moment of retrieval. A further result follows from this. Each carrier carries only a part of the memory,

which is therefore not merely partial but divided; each piece is a confirmation of the political project of the actor who carries it.

The idea obviously has comparative purchase. Episodes in postcolonial states are often awkward in their original meaning. In both Indian and Pakistani textbooks, the Khilafat years are taught, but they have been interpreted as being a part of two competing narratives of nationalism and Muslim separatism (Kumar, 2001; Lall, 2008). The curricula in Pakistan similarly privilege a religious-national master narrative over internal diversity (Durrani& Dunne, 2010; Muhammad & Brett, 2015). Bangladesh is distinctive in having been handed both stories and having resolved neither. The Khilafat enters the curriculum in the mould of the Indian nationalist narrative of communal unity, while the religious angle is used by those who oppose the national settlement.

A framework for studying divided memories

Table 2
A framework for analysing divided memories

Dimension	Guiding question	Indicative evidence	Application to the Khilafat in Bangladesh
Carriers	Which institutions (school, state, religious bodies, parties, media, family) carry the memory, and which decline to?	Curricular inclusion; organisational invocation; vernacular transmission	Carried in fragments by the school curriculum and Islamist organisations; no state commemorative carrier
Content	Which elements of the episode does each carrier retain, and which does it discard?	Coded narrative elements; framing devices; teleology	Curriculum retains the inter-communal alliance and sidelines the caliphate; Islamist actors retain the caliphate and discard the alliance
Sites	Is the memory anchored in functional sites (days, monuments, rituals) or confined to storage (texts, archives)?	Commemorative calendar; monuments; ritual performance	Storage only; oblique trace through Nazrul'scanonised poetry
Stakes	What would a complete memory cost each mnemonic actor, and who benefits from the division?	Positions in wider memory conflicts; episodes of revision	A complete memory unsettles both secular-nationalist and Islamist projects, so the division is stable

Note. Developed by the author from Halbwachs (1925/1992), Nora (1989), Assmann (2011), Connerton (2008) and Kubik and Bernhard (2014).

The framework has two benefits over procedures that rely on a yes/no question about whether an episode is remembered. First, it distinguishes between presence and function: an episode can be present in a curriculum without being commemorated, and the difference is important for the act of transmission (Assmann, 2011; Connerton, 1989). Secondly, it focuses on the connection between official and counter-memories. In the case of the Khilafat, where the fragments mirror one another, the division itself is the object of analysis, and the survival of the division can be attributed to the stakes each carrier holds.

Travelling memory and the limits of the national container

The Khilafat case also makes an important point about the limits of the nation-state as a container of memory. This movement is a travelling memory that transcends borders and becomes entangled within new frameworks, born out of the fall of the Ottoman Empire and intended for an audience of Muslims around the world (Erll, 2011; Rothberg, 2009). Such memories can be picked up and utilised in national curricula only if they are translated into national terms – as the textbook does – and transnational actors can claim them only if they disconnect them from their local histories – as the Islamist invocations do. A complete

public history of the movement would require the two strands to be held together. It would see the Khilafat as both part of Bengali agrarian and anti-colonial politics and a link in the transnational history of pan-Islam (Aydin, 2017; Özcan, 1997). An account like that would neither nationalise nor sacralise the movement. Such pluralist memory work is rare in polarised mnemonic fields (Kubik& Bernhard, 2014), but multi-perspective school history offers one path towards it.

The post-2024 conjuncture

The analysis also offers a fresh perspective on the present. The events of 2024 and the changes that ensued have shaken up the commemorative regime more than any change of government since 1975 (Ahmed, 2025; "8 Nat'l Days," 2024). Such moments make space for marginalised memories to be institutionalised and for established carriers to lose their hold. Should the Khilafat be involved in this reconfiguration, its visibility in the 2025 "March for Khilafat" (Reuters, 2025) suggests it might do so only in its detached Islamist version, and not as a historical movement with an inter-communal past. The analysis suggests another road to follow. A curriculum that taught the movement in its entirety as a Bengali episode, which was also anti-colonial, religiously motivated, transnational and inter-communal, would put an end to either side's exclusive claim to the movement. It would also enable students to identify the manner in which history is selectively used, a skill identified as one of the main objectives of history education (Foster, 2011; Sakki, 2025). This is not a finding but a normative implication of the analysis of divided memory.

Implications for memory and curriculum research

There are two general implications. First, the case shows that inclusion should not be confused with remembering. Research that looks at events inscribed in textbooks or media is limited to measuring inscription rather than significance, and might therefore miss the possibility of forgetting through inscription (French, 2012). Second, for curriculum research in South Asia, it proposes that the colonial chapters of national textbooks, often considered uncontroversial prehistory, should be examined as critically as narratives of independence and partition (Apple, 2000; Kumar, 2001). The story told in a state about the anti-colonial struggles that came before it determines which national genealogies are visible to its citizens and which remain invisible.

Limitations and future research

There are four major limitations to the study. First, the textbook analysis is limited to one (albeit central) secondary history textbook and does not trace changes over successive history curricula since 1972. The next important step is a longitudinal study of how the caliphate and the ulama are represented in the NCTB SS textbooks and in Alia and qawmi madrasa curricula, as these reach a significant portion of the population and may convey different conceptions of history. Second, the study does not take reception into consideration. Interviews, surveys and classroom observation would demonstrate the extent to which the Khilafat is recognised by students and teachers, its meaning and whether there is any intersection between textbook and counter-memories in the students' understanding (Schwartz & Schuman, 2005). Third, the analysis of Islamist invocations is based on party names, secondary literature, and news articles as opposed to a systematic collection of party literature, sermons, and social media material, which would reveal any Islamist actors who actually honour the historical movement. Fourth, the evidence is skewed towards English-language and national-level sources. Bangla-language local histories, district-level memorial practices and the pre-1971 memory of the Khilafat in East Pakistan need to be explored, as these may highlight local carriers of memory that are not evident from national level analysis.

The framework of this study could also be tested comparatively in future studies. Possible cases include the memory of the Khilafat in India and Pakistan, of the Non-Cooperation Movement in general, and of other transnational movements like that of Pan-Africanism, which have found a place in postcolonial nation-states' national narratives.

Conclusion

The Khilafat Movement has not been removed from the memory of Bangladeshis. It's been split up. The state curriculum preserves Hindu–Muslim unity in the march towards the self-determination of the Bengalis and keeps the caliphate out of the spotlight. Islamist actors keep the caliphate as a name and an ideal, while leaving aside the history of the movement and its alliances. No institution pays tribute to the whole, and the most popular cultural legacy of Nazrul, his poetry, is celebrated for its rebelliousness and not its pan-Islamism.

The article has posited this as forgetting through incorporation, whereby an episode becomes part of the official narrative, but is inscribed in such a way as to neutralise the disruptive elements, while the excised elements continue to circulate as a counter-memory. The idea builds on some well-known typologies of forgetting, while the framework of carriers, content, sites and stakes can be used to analyse other divided memories. In the case of Bangladesh, the split memory of the Khilafat reflects an unresolved question: to narrate the country's history in terms of territory and Bengali identity, in terms of religion, or through an amalgamation of both? If it is to become public history, it would have to offer pluralist answers to that question, not exclusive ones.

Recommendation

Three sets of recommendations follow from this study. First, for curriculum policy, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board should present the Khilafat Movement in its entirety: as an anti-colonial, religiously motivated, transnational and inter-communal episode of Bengali history. Teaching the movement in full would prevent either secular-nationalist or Islamist actors from claiming it exclusively, and would help students recognise how history is used selectively, a core aim of history education. Teacher guides and classroom activities could use the Khilafat as a case for comparing how different groups remember the same past.

Second, for commemorative and cultural institutions, the reconfiguration of the national calendar since 2024 offers an opportunity to treat the colonial-era movements as shared heritage rather than partisan property. Museums, archives and academic bodies could support exhibitions, public lectures and source collections that place the Khilafat, and Nazrul's writing of the period, in their full historical context, so that public memory of the movement is not left only to its detached Islamist invocation.

Third, for researchers, future studies should trace the representation of the caliphate and the ulama across successive NCTB, Alia and qawmi madrasa curricula since 1972; examine reception among students and teachers through interviews, surveys and classroom observation; systematically collect party literature, sermons and social media content from Islamist actors; and draw on Bangla-language local histories and district-level memorial practices. Comparative application of the carriers, content, sites and stakes framework to other divided memories in postcolonial states would further test the concept of forgetting through incorporation.

Declarations

Conflicting Interests

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Ethical Considerations

No human subjects or personal information was used in this study. It is based exclusively on published books that are accessible to the public (and publisher descriptions and epitexts) cited in the references. Ethical approval was not necessary.

AI Use Statement

Generative AI (ChatGpt and Grammarly) was used for language editing and condensing text. It was not used for the data collection, coding the corpus and drawing findings. All text generated by AI is reviewed and edited by the author, and the author is responsible for the article's content.

Data Availability Statement

The data analysed are all published data, as mentioned in the references. The 39 corpus books are listed verifying, with the verification sources. The coding frame and coded dataset are available on reasonable request from the author.

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