

*The denial of Japanese war crimes in China show the nation is yet to come to terms with its history*

Every country tries to reinterpret its history. However, this revision is seldom without controversy, particularly when it inevitably touches upon the history of other countries.

Close on the heels of the controversy surrounding Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to the Yasukuni shrine late last year comes the reinterpretation of Nanjing massacre. Naoki Hyakuta, a governor of the Japanese public broadcaster NHK, is stated to have denied its occurrence. While the chief cabinet secretary, Yoshihide Suga, brushed his comments aside, calling it Hyakuta's personal opinion, the victims of the Japanese aggression, the Chinese, were not amused. NHK, one of the biggest broadcasters in Japan, appeared to subscribe to Abe's overtly nationalist agenda.

The Rape of Nanking, as it is sometimes called, occurred when Japanese soldiers overran Nanjing in 1937-38, then the capital city of the Chinese Nationalist Government. It is postulated that when Nanjing fell, approximately 3,00,000 people were killed. While Japanese Imperial Army soldiers did confess to their crimes, there has always been a vocal group of Japanese nationalists who believe that the incident was made up; that it never happened.

It has been widely reported that there is an official attempt to revise the history textbooks prescribed in Japanese schools to present a more balanced picture of militaristic Japan and its conduct during

World War II, especially relating to the Nanjing massacre, and the role of the Japanese army in providing Korean women as comfort women for Japanese soldiers, etc. Abe's visit to the Yasukuni shrine, which honours Japanese soldiers and civilians killed in war, may be interpreted in the context of the increasing assertion of nationalism by Japan. China's aggressive territorial claims in the East China Sea caused unprecedented tension in the region, and its economic growth and rising military strength pose new challenges for Japan.

The evident assertion of intensive nationalism by the Japanese may partly be explained by its losing out on the role of a dominant leader in east Asia to China. In the 19th century, when the influence of European powers moved eastwards, the Japanese people began to feel that their independence was being threatened. A national consciousness emerged from this sense. This spirit of nationalism enabled people to transcend ideological conflicts within Japan, which helped the Meiji government make a number of painful decisions in its endeavour to modernise successfully. In that process, Japan not only left China behind but also began to compete with the West.

While selective screening of controversial historical facts to eulogise heroism so as to fit the nationalist agenda is in itself reprehensible, the unwillingness to accept responsibility for causing untold suffering on their own people and others also raises fundamental moral-political issues. It means that Japanese leaders and media are yet to come to terms with recorded incidents of history.

This is true to a certain extent about China, too, in the manner in which it handles its own modern history. The Chinese insistence that Japan must “face history squarely” and apologise for its conduct during World War II sounds hollow, given its own denial of the famines, deaths and persecution of its own people by the Chinese ruling party. This, in turn, complicates China’s effort to leverage Japan’s historical misdeeds in the dispute over the uninhabited islands in the East China Sea.

While impressive bodies of scholarship have reinterpreted the World War II and the making of the postwar world, these have had little discernible influence on the official statements and policies of China and Japan. Leaders in these nations have yet to come to terms with the great moral-political issues posed by the conflict.