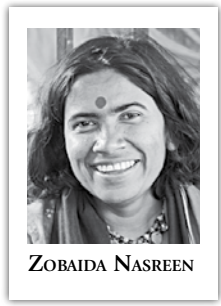


# ‘Tora Amar Ma, Tora Birangana’

“They say that freedom is a constant struggle... Oh Lord, we’ve struggled so long/ ... we’ve cried so long/ ... we’ve sorrowed so long/ ... we’ve moaned so long/ ... we’ve died so long/ We must be free, we must be free”—a popular Southern United States freedom song.



I first met Shila Debi at the Jahangirnagar University. She came to attend a photography exhibition on the War of Liberation, arranged by Bangladesh Chhatra Union. She invited me to visit her residence in the nearby Dairy Farm area. I accepted her invitation. On my way to her place, I asked a guy if he knew where she lived. He told me that he was a colleague of Shila Debi, and added that Shila has a “history” and it’s the reason he has always had a soft corner in his heart for her. Later, I came to know that Shila is a Birangana and that was her secret “history”. I also came to learn that Shila got her job because of her certificate in this regard. On another day, her brother showed me the certificate. It was among the first certificates signed by Gen. Ataul Gani Osmani in 1972, when war heroes and heroines were given the same status. Shila’s certificate shows that, contrary to popular belief, Biranganas were given the status of Freedom Fighter immediately after the triumph of the people of Bangladesh over the occupying Pakistani military and their local collaborators. The Pakistani army raped over 200,000 women during the war in 1971. The position that the Bangladesh government took regarding these raped women (Biranganas), by giving them the status of a freedom fighter, is still unprecedented in the world. It’s interesting to note that on December 22, 1971, AHM Qamaruzzaman, home minister

of the then interim government, announced that all young girls and women who had been subjected to inhuman torture by the Pakistani army in the last nine months would be accorded full respect as “Biranganas” of the Bangladesh liberation struggle (*Purbodesh*, December 23, 1971, quoted in Mookherjee, 2016, page 130). But it was the independence leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who owned and popularised the term Birangana, and attempted to ensure their status as war heroines saying that “*torā amar mā, torā Birangana*” (you are my mother, you are Birangana [or brave women]). Apart from this public recognition, attempts were made—though not adequately—to overcome social barriers facing the Biranganas. The newly formed government led by Bangabandhu set up Nari Punorbashon Kendra (Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation and Welfare Centre) for the Biranganas in 1972. This centre facilitated the rehabilitation of women affected by the war by providing them with shelter, mental support and training as part of a reintegration initiative. Furthermore, the rehabilitation programme undertook abortion initiatives for Biranganas, retained their children for international adoption, arranged their marriages, trained them in vocational skills and/or gave them government jobs. (Mookherjee, 2007) The recognition, which had the potential to be displayed as a model for the world, was a historical high point from which we gradually retreated, as the word “Birangana” was wiped out from the later-day definitions of a Freedom Fighter, and historical closures were enacted. It also reminds us of the constant struggle women face, even to hold on to their basic rights and the recognition and respect that they are due. Many of the Biranganas were forced to migrate to other countries, many committed suicide after being rejected by their family and society. And socially, the title “Birangana” came to represent a “dishonoured woman”,



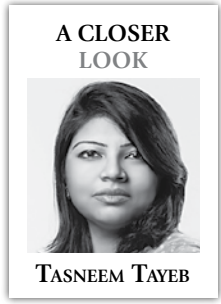
‘The Unbearable Life 1971’ by Kazi Abdul Baset

synonymous with rape, forced pregnancy, abortion, suicide and war. The glorious status of Birangana gradually faded out after the assassination of Bangabandhu on August 15, 1975. The text of the Freedom Fighter certificate was changed four times after 1975, leading to the erasure of the word “Birangana” from the certificate. In the second certificate issued by the home ministry, the term “Birangana” was no longer there, but no explanation was given in this regard. The third amendment of the certificate for Freedom Fighters, issued by the liberation war ministry, also did not accommodate the war heroines. The changes made by the government had a crucial impact on the lives of Biranganas. Three Biranganas came forward in the early nineties to make their identity public and

testified before the *Gono Adalat*, which added a new dimension to their constant struggle: facing up to the public memory and breaking the silence and secrecy surrounding their history. Shortly afterwards, publisher and blogger Faisal Arefin Dipan (who was later murdered by Islamic extremists on October 31, 2015) published Nilima Ibrahim’s book, *Ami Birangana Bolchi* (published by Dipan’s Jagriti Prokashony). It opened the door for rethinking the narratives of Biranganas in Bangladesh. However, in recent years, some Biranganas, mostly from the lower-class background (one notable exception being Ferdousi Priyabhashini), came forward with their names and testimonies that are reframing the narratives of the Liberation War. During the 2013 Shahbag protests, slogans like “*Amar mā*

*Birangana, tai amra aposhhina*” (My mother is a Birangana, so we don’t compromise) were heard. Here, Birangana is not a singular identity, but a collective one. Such structures of feeling added another dimension to the dominant nationalist-masculine discourses used to express patriotic feelings for the country and its birth. Of course, the credit for the recent public awakening goes to the concerted efforts of young women activists who raised their voice from various parts of the country to renew the status of Biranganas as Freedom Fighters and to ensure their deserved recognition. However, we should always stay alert since even when their status is renewed as Freedom Fighter, would they get the honour they deserve in a society still largely dominated by the patriarchal forces? The Ministry of Liberation War Affairs issued a gazette in 2019 with the most recent enclosure, through which a total of 322 Biranganas received the status of Freedom Fighters. The process of recognising them as Freedom Fighters again began following a High Court order that came on January 27, 2014. The order ensured that the Biranganas, who fought during the country’s Liberation War, would get the status of Freedom Fighters and enjoy the same benefits that other Freedom Fighters are enjoying. It goes without saying that this means a lot to them. I recall a Birangana saying at a programme in Dhaka University that when she was invited as chief guest at an event in her neighbourhood, she felt socially honoured for the first time in her life. Does that status help them regain their spirit which Bangabandhu had attempted to materialise? Maybe, or maybe not. Sadly, most of the Biranganas have already died. But restoring their honour is perhaps the greatest tribute we can pay them for the enormous sacrifices they had made, since when a Birangana dies, a part of history dies with her too. Zobaïda Nasreen teaches anthropology at the University of Dhaka. Email: zobidan nasreen@gmail.com

## Covid-19, Iran sanctions, and how politics aids a pandemic



THESE are unprecedented times, times that call for unprecedented measures, humane measures. Not from Donald Trump’s America, though—when it comes to Iran. Last week, while slapping new sanctions on an already weak Iran, crumbling apart under crippling US sanctions, Donald Trump blatantly made clear that the sanctions on Iran will not be lifted. Iran, the Middle East’s worst-hit nation by COVID-19, is currently seeing 1 death every 10 minutes, and 50 new cases of infection every hour. And why not? The Iranians have been hit hard by the sanctions the US has imposed on them since the US unilaterally pulled out of the multilateral Iran Nuclear Deal that was inked in 2015, with Donald Trump hoping to force Iran to sign a new deal with the US. Critical industries like oil, metals, manufacturing, along with other industries, have had to bear the brunt of multiple sanctions and this has badly affected the bottom of the pyramid. Due to limited international trade, people had been laid off in various industries, inflations have gone up, and earning sustenance has become difficult for a lot of Iranians. Naturally, this has resulted in lower standard of living, malnutrition, undernutrition, and suppressed immune system. COVID-19 was another blow, and it has been exacting a disproportionate toll. Add to that the inability of the Iranians to procure medical supplies, including equipment required to fight off the disease. The situation in the northern province of Gilan is particularly dire, where, as reported by Asia News IT, five doctors and three nurses

recently died from Covid-19. And a lot of it has to do with the battering US sanctions. “There is an extreme shortage of these supplies in-country [sic], where stock is often low due to the steep price of medicines and medical equipment—a consequence of US sanctions,” Relief International observed last month. According to the Human Rights Watch, the US sanctions on Iran “have drastically constrained the ability of Iranian entities to finance humanitarian imports, including vital medicines and medical equipment.” While Iran faces a shortage of sanitisers and preventative gear for medical

professionals in the country, as reported by ABC, the common people are taking desperate measures to protect themselves from the virus. Some of these attempts are backfiring. Case in point: 44 people died from alcohol poisoning in the southwestern Iranian city of Ahwaz, after they were told that alcohol can help prevent the disease. Crippled, battered and desperate, Iran has sought an emergency loan of USD 5 billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), for the first time in six decades. In view of the evolving situation, China, Russia and Pakistan have requested the US to lift its sanctions.

*Crippled, battered and desperate, Iran has sought an emergency loan of USD 5 billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), for the first time in six decades.*

companies have refrained from taking part in any such ventures out of fear of getting caught up in US secondary sanctions.” And if anything, Wednesday’s new sanctions targeting petrochemicals trade with Iran—blacklisting of five companies based in the United Arab Emirates, three in mainland China, three in Hong Kong and one in South Africa—would add to the fears and apprehensions of other companies, further discouraging trade with Iran, even as part of humanitarian assistance. While Iran was perhaps wrong in rejecting US offer of help in tackling COVID-19, one can understand where this anger and distrust are coming from. So, Iran continues to suffer. Little does America, or the world for that matter, care about Iran’s tribulations. But if COVID-19 continues to fester in the alleys, nooks and corners of Iran, this would put the region in greater danger of contamination. COVID-19 is a highly contagious disease, one that has emerged from China’s Wuhan city to spread to 193 countries and territories around the world, and if this disease is allowed to get the better of humans even in one country, it would pose greater risks for the world. The world must take it to heart that COVID-19 is a global problem—a pandemic—and in the globalised world we live in, in order to be able to combat this pestilence, world leaders need to put their political agendas aside, and both enemies and allies need to fight it together. If Iran is abandoned by the US and its allies, and left to fend for itself, not only will the country suffer unspeakable horrors, its reverberations will be felt across the globe too. The crippling sanctions on Iran need to be lifted immediately, even if as a temporary humane measure.



Members of Iranian firefighters wear protective face masks as they disinfect the streets in Tehran, Iran, on March 18, 2020.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

QUOTABLE Quote

**DOROTHY L SAYERS**  
(1893-1957)  
English scholar and writer.  
*A society in which consumption has to be artificially stimulated in order to keep production going is a society founded on trash and waste, for such a society is a house built upon sand.*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Safekeeping

5 Endure

9 Keen

11 Took steps

13 Like lions

14 Glisten

15 Green prefix

16 Merry

18 More fuzz-filled

20 Work wk.'s end

21 Pallid

22 Purposes

23 Corn unit

24 Mine yield

25 Short hit

27 Amused

29 Aardvark snack

30 Was a braggart

32 Refuse to let go of

34 Seine water

35 Italian seaport

36 Sides in turf wars

38 Spanish hero

39 Orlando attraction

40 --- -majeste

41 Hotel units

DOWN

1 Caravan creature

2 Spiny tree

3 Grammatical

4 no-no

4 Summer in Paris

5 Intense beam

6 Massage target

7 Twenty years, say

8 Prof protector

10 More avantgarde

12 Sub shops

17 Cariou of "Blue Bloods"

19 Not this

22 "Exodus" author

24 Marigold color

25 Police ID

26 Sick

27 Sticky stuff

28 Neptune, e.g.

30 Dagger part

31 Does some housework

33 Clark's colleague

37 LAPD issuance

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

N	A	P	A		P	A	R	I	S
A	B	A	S	H		I	N	A	N
M	U	S	K	Y		P	E	S	C
E	S	S		G	E	E	W	H	I
S	E	E	F	I	T		E	R	E
			B	E	A	U	R	E	D
			M	A	I	N	P	U	S
			C	A	D		E	A	T
			O	D	D		T	E	E
			B	E	E	B	A	L	M
			R	I	D	E	R	P	I
			A	R	O	S	E		O
			S	A	N	T	A		S

BEEBLE BAILEY

BABY BLUES