

# The Birangonas Speak Out: "We too have Known Victory"

Meghna Guhathakurta

THE women came from all parts of the country, from all walks of life. Some were picked up as the Pakistan Army rampaged the countryside, killing their parents and members of the household in front of them. Others were picked up by local collaborators desperately trying to curry favours with the army. Many were selected because of their beauty and youth, while others were taken because of their political beliefs and still others (more often than not) simply because they were women; Bengali women, who were needed (a) to feed the hatred of the occupying soldiers towards the local population and (b) to help reassert their masculine superiority over a race which dared to aspire to nationhood. These women were kept in camps which took many forms; a thana headquarter, the cantonment, sometimes an abandoned mill or house. Finally, many were taken to the frontline and kept inside bunkers in conditions which can only be likened to the fleas and bugs which infested the sores in their limbs and bodies. Such are the horror stories told by seven such women whose voices have been heard after twenty-four years of Bangladesh's independence, thanks to Professor Nilima Ibrahim's path-breaking work: *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (I am the Birangona speaking).

though often categorized as a 'civil war by strangers and propagandists alike, can easily find precedence in the many cases of internal armed conflict around the world (Rwanda, Bosnia, Kashmir) where the rules and precepts of international law has been applied or considered suitable for application.

In the case of Bangladesh, the mass rape of Bengali women by Pakistani soldiers can be characterized as genocidal to the extent that they have caused serious bodily and/or mental harm or deliberately inflicted conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of the group in whole or part and in certain cases had involved willful killing. The rapes can most certainly fall under the category of offenses termed crimes against humanity as they constituted offenses which were both widespread and systematic aimed at annihilating the Bengali population on political and racial grounds. The fact that these rapes were widespread is evident in the sheer numbers of such incidents (a conservative estimate is about 200,000) as well as in their geographic distribution throughout the country. The fact that they were systematic i.e. aimed at the Bengali populace on the basis of political and ethno-racial grounds is evident from gleaning through some of the statements made by Pakistani soldiers. A letter written by a Pakistani Major in Hyderabad, Pakistan, to a friend posted in Jessore in occupied Bangladesh for example states:

"..... I was not surprised about the news of the Bengal tigresses being tamed by Rashid. It is a must to change their next generation."

That ethnic cleansing was in the minds of the occupying army cannot be doubted especially as one looks at the number of pregnancies and abortions which were performed in the rehabilitation centres set up in the post-independent period.

The stories which the Birangonas have to tell are not solely of victimization. They are stories of courage. They speak of their immense strength and their will to survive. Rather than shutting them off into the murky depths of our collective memory, we can only gain in learning from their experiences, sharing as much as is possible their pain, their anguish and the sense of victory they must have felt in overcoming their past.

Although the two volumes make very tearful reading, it is not only sympathy and outrage which the author succeeds in eliciting from the reader, although given the derogatory way in which our society looks upon raped women, that by itself would have been achievement enough! *Ami Birangona Bolchi* does more. It points the way which further enquiries should take us if we were to look upon the mass rape of women in 1971 as a war crime.

The UN Statute of Crimes Committed in Former Yugoslavia lists four basis of prosecution. They are: (1) genocide, (2) grave breaches of the 1949 Geneva Conventions Act, (3) violations of laws and customs of war and (4) crimes against humanity. Rape is explicitly mentioned only under crimes against humanity, but many scholars are of the opinion that rape during armed conflict situation can also fit in with the other listed offenses if the conditions of rape fulfill the requirements. This is especially relevant for Bangladesh whose nine-month war



# Uncovered Milestones of Seventy-one

Hameeda Hossain

THE story of the emergence of Bangladesh is a sum of many parts. In one part, it revealed the massive resistance to economic controls and political regimentation through imposition of a state ideology. On the other it revealed the scale of brutality that was injected into the lives of very ordinary people. The totality of this struggle was an affirmation and commitment to values represented by a democratic and secular social order. Its history has been marked by inspiring accounts of political actors, of militancy amongst young students, workers, peasants and professionals.

Amongst the milestones we are now beginning to recognise the faces and voices of women in their encounters with the military in 1971 and further back to their active involvement in resisting the politics of communalism and religion. Written records of women's involvement in the struggle for liberation are few and far in between, because most historians have neglected popular history, but evidence from women can be glimpsed in the History of Bangladesh War of Independence: Documents (published by the Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka 1984), a few published memoirs, sporadic newspaper reports, oral accounts.

Accounts of women's experience of and response to military brutality reveal two different realities: a deliberate and political use of brutality on women by the occupation army and their collaborators, and the solidarity of the oppressed in resisting such brutality. These experiences-particularly of ordinary women, untouched by larger political trends-represent acts of survival and simple courage.

Rabeya was only a sweeper at the Rajarbagh Police Station. But when faced with bayonets and certain death on the night of 25 March she showed remarkable courage and provided support to other women prisoners. She argued for her life on the plea that all the men sweepers had been killed and only she was left to clean the barracks which were full of the stench of dead bodies. Forced by the soldiers to stay within the barracks she was able to later testify to the large numbers of women who were daily brought in to the barracks and forced to submit to repeated rape and other forms of brutality. Rabeya was not just an observer, for she testifies how, at considerable risk to herself, she helped a young girl escape from the barracks. [Documents Vol 8].

Bharati Rani Chakravarti of Barisal, in her evidence recalls how they stayed submerged in water for 6 hours every day to hide themselves from the Pakistan army in May 1971, who after destroying the temple, camped in their house and took pot shots at the slightest move-

ment of heads in the river. Peyara Khatun of Sonagazi, Noakhali testified how they provided shelter and food to the Mukti Juddhas. After 15 October when they were forced to withdraw the Pakistan army entered the village. Unable to find any young men, they set fire to the village. The Razakars learning of their help to the Mukti Juddhas caught her along with her father and brought them as a booty to the soldiers. While her father was tied to a tree, Peyara Khatun was raped repeatedly by the soldiers. [Document Vol 8].

Even amongst young middle class women, many who concealed themselves to escape capture, sheltered the Mukti Juddhas, provided medicines and carried messages from one house to another. They have remained anonymous. Amongst the politically conscious cultural activism, public campaigns, broadcasting became important tools for women's participation in a war which had to be won through popular participation and awareness. Only a few women such as Shirin Banu were able to go into the battle lines. They have spoken of why they went to the front and what they expected to achieve.

The methods of subjugation used by the powerful rely upon creating a syndrome of fear through brutality, of false divisions within a community, of imposing controls in the name of religion. These processes of colonisation were experienced even before 1971. Victimization and fear strengthened resistance in 1971, but women had not remained silent in the face of earlier attempts at regimentation. In 1965, after Khwaja Shahabuddin, Information Minister in Ayub Khan's government announced a ban on Rabindranath Tagore's songs on radio and television and stopped women news readers from using the teep on their foreheads, it was women's protests that became a rallying cry for the political movement.

Going back as early as 1948, we find Begum Sufia Kamal working together with Nibedita Ray and Jayful Ray with local samitis such as the Wari Mahila Samiti, the Gandhria Mahila Samiti to appeal for rationality so to resist communal outbursts in Dhaka. Later in the sixties as communal violence was deliberately instigated in several towns in Bangladesh, in order to disrupt a growing political consciousness, it was women who rallied together not only to protect the minority community but to reject sectarian tendencies. In 1965 when the Combined Opposition Parties formed to contest against Ayub Khan in the Presidential elections under pressure from the Jamaat-i-Islam and other religion based parties to include "the implementation of Islamic principles" and "Islamic State" in their manifestos, this was rejected but only after a strong response from women activists.

amongst the students and cultural groups. In April 1970 the progressive stream of women's movement converged from the student's movement and the local samiti movement to form a national women's organisation the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad under the leadership of Begum Sufia Kamal.

Women's expectations from different phases of the struggle leading towards liberation has converged in a broad commitment to gender and social justice through a non-militaristic, secular, democratic society. This is why the struggle has continued after 1971 for so many of us. The Constitution of 1972 clearly responded to our basic beliefs in a democratic, secular society, but even before the culturalisation of such principles could take place, Bangladesh was subjected to military controls and manipulations in the name of religion. Soon after the military coup of 1975, women were subjected to discipline by the soldiers parading on the street, for wearing teeps or not dressing according to "Islamic norms". These attacks on women were more than symbolic as in 1977 constitutional changes changed the structural basis of the state. In 1988 under the military government of General H M Ershad Islam was introduced as the state religion paving the way for the spread of sectarian tendencies, communal violence and divisiveness. Even more invidiously culture intolerant of women's rights through madrasah education, changes in the school curriculum and government controlled media. These are familiar strategies and attempts at religious control have been opposed by women's groups. Constitutional amendments have been protested by women's groups, both on the streets and in Court.

Twenty five years after independence, women's struggle for liberation is again threatened by the surfacing of fundamentalist and non-democratic elements in society, who are supported through powerful structures both within and outside our society. In 1992 following the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ajodhya, madrasah boys and other toughs felt free to go on a rampage and attack Hindu women in particular in many parts of Bangladesh. This was not the liberation that women fought for. Since 1993, numerous reports have appeared of fatwas declared by madrasah superintendents and mosque imams which instigated violence against women, individuals, writers, development workers. The violence has led to the suicide and death of several of the victims.

Once again the politics of victimisation and brutality is being used as a tool of control and subjugate society. The first target is women, but it will not end there, for the ultimate objective is the destruction of humanist norms.

# A Muktiyodhya Called Taramon Recognized and Remembered at Last

Aasha Mehreen Amin

IF there is any doubt about Taramon Begum's eligibility for the Bir Protik title she has been awarded after 25 years, her answer to the question 'what was the use of becoming independent?' will immediately dispel such uncalled for skepticism. Rather surprised she answers, "why, we became free. Before, all the good things were sent off to West Pakistan, we did not get anything. That's why we fought, so that we could keep what we had laboured for, so that we could live in peace". This simplicity and clarity of thought is characteristic of Taramon who has managed to retain her idealism in spite of the injustice she has suffered from a nation she has risked her life for.

hobpur in Kurigram District. Landless, with six children to feed, Taramon's mother had to beg to keep herself and her family alive. As is the case with poor families who have too many mouths to feed, Taramon was married off even though she was only a child. "I came back to my mother although she was very angry at me", Taramon explains that her first husband was a half wit.

One day, while Taramon was gathering some *kachu* leaves to be prepared for lunch, two men came up to her and said that they would like her to work for their 'camp'. One was 'Aziz Master' and the other Taramon calls Mohit *howladar* who later became Taramon's father figure whom she called 'Baba'. "My mother was a little worried that by going to camp people would say bad things about me, especially since I was married. But Mohit *howladar* assured her that it was a very decent job and no harm would come to me."

With her mother's consent and a new set of clothes given to her by her new 'Baba', Taramon set out for the camp. Her job was that of a cook. For a month she prepared meals for the Muktiyodhyas when one day 'Baba' told her that he was going to teach her to do something else. Always eager for new challenges Taramon replied that with proper instructions she could learn to do anything. Her Baba's reaction to this was "let's go and shoot some birds near the river bank". Her daily lessons at the Chilmari river consti-

tuted her initiation to target practice. "I was given a rifle and then a sten gun to shoot with. Suleiman Muktiyodhya was there and he was pleased to see me practicing."

One afternoon when Taramon was having lunch at the Doshgira Gram camp, one of the Muktiyodhyas came running to inform the others that he had spotted through his binoculars, the Pak forces in gunboats near Chilmari ghat. "Then all the Muktiyodhyas assembled together (from other camps) and we took up arms to fight; I was the only woman", says Taramon, her eyes lighting up with a flicker of the old fire.

"From the afternoon till late in the evening," continues Taramon, "we fought and then the Pak army fled with their boats so we got a break." Taramon, along with the other Muktiyodhyas as part of the East Bengal regiment, fought at Mohangong, Torabar, Kodalkati and Galbanda.

It was when Taramon and the others were moving to Tarabar camp that they saw the 'bimans' (planes) "so now they were attacking us from above", she says "Baba told all of us to dig bunkers in the ground where we placed banana leaves and then soil. We went into these bunkers and fired our guns for three days."

Then one of the planes shot down a boat carrying innocent civilians. "I saw so many bodies without heads or legs or arms," recalls Taramon reliving the horror once again. Taramon and her fellow freedom fighters went back into the bunkers and the next time they saw planes they were "Bangla"

planes that is the pro-Bangladesh planes bringing news of victory and independence. "Even then", says Taramon, "baba wanted to make sure so we went to Gabanda to set camp. By that time of course we were *swadhin* (independent)".

After Bangladesh had been born 'baba' took Taramon to

Dhaka as his adopted daughter and she stayed there for one year. Meanwhile Taramon's mother sent for her. "Baba gave me money and clothes", says Taramon, "and said 'I will bring you back here, give you an education and get you married'. But Taramon's mother did not let her go back and the village



people got her married to Abdul Majid (her present husband). Taramon has not seen her 'baba' since then.

Taramon's new husband was a poor labourer with no land, house or any property and so became a *ghor jamat* living at Taramon's mother's house. "Unlike other women who go away to their inlaws house", muses Taramon with a hint of pride, "I brought my husband home". The only way he could support his family was by getting jobs as a *kamia* (labourer) at various places, sometimes Comilla, sometimes Sylhet or Kurigram. Taramon had been awarded Bir Protik but for 24 years nobody had bothered to inform her.

Meanwhile the couple had two children, a boy and a girl aged 11 and 12 years. But Taramon could not give them enough food, clothing let alone money to go to school and so lived in abject poverty, a condition she is still living under.

To make matters worse she contracted TB and has been suffering for the last 10 years with this debilitating disease that has ripped her of her health and dignity. "My husband got me treated for 4 months at a Jamalpur hospital and my doctor was Wahab *daktar*. Later when I went back he had been transferred and the new *daktar* was one who was interested in making money. We could not afford his high demands so we paid 10 taka to the *darwan* and he gave me 3 months of medicine," Taramon relates.

"The medicine did more harm than good for soon after taking it Taramon began to lose her sight. One day while giving her husband his dinner,

she poured the rice water into into his plate by mistake. "I cried a lot that day," says Taramon sadly "I cried to think of what I was and what I had become. I was a freedom fighter once and now I couldn't even take care of my husband. Instead he had to wash me and clothe me because I was so weak".

All these 25 years Taramon waited for some kind of recognition for her bravery and contribution to the Liberation War. But none came. Then only last month it was the same Suleiman Muktiyodhya who gave her the news that some officers were coming to her home. "I thought they were bringing relief but then somebody said that they were Muktiyodhyas. "I was very excited that after all this time someone was coming."

Among them were Suleiman Muktiyodhya, Sobur Muktiyodhya, Sohrab Muktiyodhya and Qudus Muktiyodhya. They informed Taramon that she had received a Bir Protik medal. It was a news item in Bhorer Kagoj reporting the discovery of Taramon by Professor Bimal Kanti, that prompted Sammliti Nari Samaj to bring her to Dhaka on December 7th to receive her medal of recognition.

At this point of the story, Taramon's husband who has been silently listening says, "I did not understand at the time what 'bir protik' meant, especially since all this time nobody had come from the government."

"I have been living here for the last 25 years, adds Taramon, "have I not fought for the country don't I deserve to live a decent life?" Her eyes become misty

with the pain of her present condition. But she cannot be completely happy with the honour she has received. "I asked the other Muktiyodhyas", says Taramon, "why I was the one to get this award and not them since they had fought as well. They said, 'we are happy that you are the one to get it. My question is — there are so many Muktiyodhyas out there, many of whom who are sick and starving, why are they not being given 'Bir Protik' medals?"

Living in 25 years of poverty with no money to feed her children properly or cure herself of her disease, Taramon is not yet totally convinced that she is actually going to be recognized. "Are you sure they are going to give me a 'badge'?" she asks. For someone who fought for our very freedom, Taramon's demands are very modest. All she wants is an acknowledgement of her contribution, a place to stay and a monthly allowance, "whatever Muktiyodhyas are supposed to get" just enough to live a decent life.

Taramon is not bitter about so many years of neglect and indifference. She has no regrets and bears no grudge. The Muktiyodhya represents to her a time when she was young, brave and strong enough to face even death, a time when she was part of something so grand and noble as freeing her homeland from oppression and injustice. "I am so happy that you are all here listening to my story", says Taramon smiling. Perhaps for her, this is the time to relive those glorious moments of fighting for freedom and winning it.