

# "Women are Freedom Fighters"

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**B**ANGLADESH is a free and sovereign nation liberated in 1971 through a nine month long war. Almost 37 years have passed but yet we need to talk about the Freedom fighters. Who were they? Were they all men? The answer is no. Were they all armed people? The answer is definitely no. Were they all city people? Again the answer is no. In finding the answers to all these very simple questions, the issue of women as freedom fighters is coming up very strongly among the people. To find out whether women were Freedom Fighters (Muktijoddha) one does not need to dig out a lot. We just need to talk to the people in the rural areas and to women in particular.

"The country was liberated not because of men but because women were directly involved in the war. We cooked for the freedom fighters, we guarded them in their hiding places, helped to take the arms from one place to the other. The Razakar forces came to our house, asked whether there were any 'Muktijoddha', I said 'No' then they were very angry at me," Said Sukuri Begum, who was invited in the first conference of Women Freedom Fighters held in 1990.

Sukuri Begum is from Tangail. She came along with two other women freedom fighters Jamela and Majeda. Jamela said, she lost her brother and mother because she was responsible to give shelter for 20 Freedom fighters. She cooked for them and helped them in their works. But the Razakars came to know about it and killed her brother and mother.

Majeda was trying to go to a

safe place carrying her three-day old baby. But she and her family were surrounded by Razakars. They killed her baby but she could not cry loudly because she knew that the Freedom Fighters were in her house. So she wanted the Razakars to feel that they have no more people to kill. After the Razakars left, Majeda devoted herself to help the Freedom Fighters by cooking and providing them with shelter. Majeda asked, "Am I not a Freedom Fighter?"

There are thousands of such stories in the villages of Bangladesh during the nine-months of 1971. In the Women Freedom Fighters conference they came from Sylhet, Sirajganj, Chittagong and many other places and narrated their stories. Unfortunately these women remained unknown and were never recognised as "Freedom Fighters". They have sacrificed their children, husband and family members; and yet did not stop to support the Muktijoddhas because they thought it was their duty to make the country free from injustice. Most of these 'non-recognised freedom fighters' were poor and illiterate women. They did not belong to any political party or were not given any orientation or training on why the war happened. From their own analysis of the situation, they took the side of the Freedom Fighters and not the side of Razakars, although both belonged to same village and both were Bengalis. Even in the Razakars' families, there were women who did not support their acts and tried to protest. We do not have any way to identify those women and they may remain unknown forever. However, many women who have been identified by the village people as those who 'helped' the Freedom

Fighters directly during the war, have lost everything and some of them were assaulted and raped. What should we call them? They are Freedom Fighters too!

Narigrantha Prabartana, the women's resource centre, established in 1989 first took up the task of unfolding the patriarchal history of Liberation War of 1971. It was felt that even after eighteen years passed since liberation, women's role in the war remained in the dark. They were only visible in the shadow of a known and recognised 'male' Freedom Fighter as the 'widow', 'orphan daughter' and 'sister'. These women were sympathised, given respect and honour but not for their own contribution to the war but because of the relationship with a male Freedom Fighter. Narigrantha Prabartana carried out extensive "search" of the women who have been involved in the liberation war in any form and specially those who lived in the rural areas. To our surprise, we got more information about women in the rural areas for their involvement in the war. In the Dhaka city the memory is lost as people have moved to different places. It was through different connections the information could be received. Finally, on 17th December, 1990 the first conference of women Freedom Fighters (Mahila Mukti jodda Samabesh) was held at the Central Shahid Minar in Dhaka. It was just an eye opening for everyone to know about the diverse range of activities carried out by women from all sectors, rich and poor, urban and rural, from cultural activists, professionals to housewives --- they were freedom fighters. The definition of a Freedom Fighter broadened from taking up a rifle or arm to carry out all kinds of activities that are essential for the war.

Jahanara Imam was first known as the mother of Rumi, a young martyr freedom fighter but later she was known for her 'diary' written during the liberation war. Her book 'Ekaturer Din guli' became a document of the events of the liberation war, even though it was written as the mother of Rumi and as wife of Sharif in a very personal way. Everybody forgot that Jahanara Imam herself was a freedom fighter, which is very clear from her everyday writing. But she was called 'Shahid Jononi' mother of the martyr Rumi, symbolising all martyrs of war. But why Jahanara Imam was never given the title of 'Freedom Fighter' remains a question. It only shows that even at the level of Jahanara Imam, getting the recognition of Freedom Fighter is not easy, it is much easier to become 'Shahid Jononi'.

Similarly, Poet Sufia Kamal was also deprived of being recognised as a Freedom Fighter though she was very much involved in the liberation struggle. Her contribution as a social worker and as women's rights activist is widely recognised, but we do not always hear about her in reference to the liberation war. The presence of Jahanara Imam and Poet Sufia Kamal in the First Women Freedom Fighter's Conference along with women Freedom Fighters from all over the country particularly from the rural areas made the conference a grand success. It was the true victory day for women.

We did not know of Bir Protik Taramon Bibi in 1990, so we could not invite her in the first conference. But she was explored by a researcher in Mymensingh in 1994 and was brought to Dhaka by Narigrantha Prabartana in



Freedom Fighter Pearzan

1995. She received her Bir Protik Padak from the then Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia. Taramon was one of the few women who have fought using arms during liberation war and also among the few who could receive the citation from her commander of the sector. Finding Taramon in poverty and suffering from tuberculosis was very significant because this symbolised the deprivation effects of non-recognition to the freedom fighters both men and women. It may be mentioned here that there are thousands of non-recognised poor men, who have fought during liberation war. The journalists are finding them out when they are almost dying living in poverty.

It is very unfortunate that even after 37 years of liberation we have to argue and prove that women are freedom fighters and that without their active involvement in the war, the

liberation war could not be fought. Let the government come forward on the Victory Day and the Independence day, to identify and recognise the women who fought during the war, particularly those living in the rural areas. Many of them have died already, but those who are still alive they want recognition of being called a "Freedom Fighter", the 'Muktijoddha'. Such recognition will make our liberation history more glorified.

We must remember that we fought against the injustice during liberation war. The common perception of injustice was the main motivating factor. So we cannot perpetuate injustice in recognising those who contributed to the war. Fight against injustice is still continuing.

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## Adivasis: Still struggling for an identity

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**T**HROUGHOUT the world today, it is widely recognized that indigenous peoples are among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. It is estimated that there are 370 million indigenous peoples in more than 70 countries around the world. They represent over 5,000 languages and cultures.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on 13 September 2007. It has become a milestone in the history of indigenous peoples' struggles for their rights and recognition at international level. The Declaration recognizes a wide range of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms to indigenous peoples. Among these are the right to self-determination, an inalienable collective right to the ownership, use and control of lands,

forest and other natural resources. It includes the rights in terms of maintaining and developing their own political, religious, cultural and educational institutions, and protection of their cultural and intellectual property. The Declaration highlights the requirement for free, prior and informed consent, participation and consultation in activities of any kind that impact on indigenous peoples, their property and territories.

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, an advisory body established by the Economic and Social Council in 2000, has been working with the mandate to address indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, environment, education, health and human rights.

Bangladesh government still does not recognize the identity and rights of indigenous peo-

ples in the Constitution. We have been struggling here even for basic human rights and fundamental freedoms. We acknowledge that Bangladesh is a country rich in many cultures and peoples of different backgrounds. They are the Adivasis, indigenous peoples of Bangladesh. They are strikingly diverse in their culture, language, religion, traditions and patterns of social and economic life.

This is not acceptable for humanity that more than 45 distinct indigenous communities and their 3 million populations lack civil and political rights, and economic, social and cultural rights. Indigenous peoples have a good contribution for the independence of Bangladesh. But they do not have access to policy making bodies and they do not have control over their own development.

Bangladesh government doesn't have any policy for the development of indigenous populations. Many times indigenous people faced eviction from their homeland in the name of development projects, building dams, Eco-parks, protected areas, reserve forest on their ancestral and community land. Many indigenous peoples migrated to India for safety and security. Their land has been taken away forcibly. Their culture is treated as being inferior in the country. Thousands of false forest cases were filed against indigenous peoples. They have been facing endless harassment in the forests. Indigenous women are the victims of sexual harassment and torture. Thus they became most marginalized and vulnerable people in the country.

The state of Bangladesh in

its thirty-seven years of independence has never recognized the indigenous peoples. For various reasons, including continued state negligence and discrimination, land grabbing, 'state-made' communal riots, the identity and culture of indigenous peoples are at risk.

Indigenous peoples' contribution has never been recognized at all. With Bengalese, they have fought for the country as freedom fighters. Many of them had sacrificed their lives for the nation. But there is very little recognition of indigenous freedom fighters in the history of independence at national level. As per available information, two indigenous freedom fighters have been rewarded Bir Bikram and Bir Pratik. Among them U Ka Ching Marma, Bir Bikram is from Bandarban Hill District. He was born in 1937. He joined the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) in 1952 and left the EPR tight for independence of Bangladesh. In 1971 U Ka Ching was in Rangpur. Then he joined the liberation war and was promoted as Habilder. He was the commander of 65 soldiers and took part in many operations in Rangpur and Lalmanirhat district. Now freedom fighter U Ka Ching is living in Bandarban. He said that he fought for the independence of the country. He never fought for getting reward or honour. They thought that as a citizen they had to fight for freedom. As a person from indigenous community, U Ka Ching is not happy with governments. He had a dream and expectation that no one would face discrimination and all citizens will enjoy equal rights

and opportunity in an independent State. He had a dream that after defeating the Pakistanis, people of Bangladesh would live a life free from poverty, hunger and oppression. He added that religious minorities would not face discrimination and harassment. But he doesn't see this after thirty-seven years of independence.

One Khasi woman, Kakat Heiniyota, popularly known as Kakon Bibi was awarded Bir Pratik. She lives in Duwara Bazar area under Sunamgonj district. She used to assist the freedom fighters with information of Pakistani soldiers. She took part in more than 20 operations and successfully assisted the freedom fighters in Duwara Bazar, Jafong and Terngratila areas. People used to call her as Khasia Mukti Beti in 1971. During the independence war, she was captured by the Pakistani soldiers and brought to a military camp. Pakistan Army attempted to kill her, but she told them that her husband was working for East Pakistan Rifles and she came to find her husband. Then the Pakistani soldiers allowed her to go. No one knew about the Khasi freedom fighter Kakat Heiniyota and her Bir Pratik award. One local journalist found her and published a report on her role in independence war in 1997. Then she was known to people and the daily Janakantha awarded her and granted a monthly allowance in 1999. She is now above eighty years old and struggling with extreme poverty.

The Garo freedom fighters said that they fought for the freedom of the country. They did not expect any reward from

the State. They said that it was their duty to fight for the nation. Many of them did not receive, even did not want certificate of freedom fighters. But the Garo freedom fighters thought that the newly liberated Bangladesh would recognize the rights of indigenous peoples. They had also hoped that all citizens of the country would get same opportunity to develop their own society. One young Garo sacrificed his life in an operation in 1971 and still people of Haluaghat under Mymensingh district remember him during Victory Day. The Santals, Oraons and other indigenous communities from North-Bengal have also taken active part in Liberation War. A Santal Catholic Priest Markus Murmu from Rajshahi district sacrificed his life for freedom of Bangladesh. Garo men Anil Sangma, Arong Ritchil and some unknown freedom fighters died in independence war. In the tea estate areas, many indigenous people fought for the country. There are a few books on the role of indigenous freedom fighters for liberation war in 1971. They are, Muktijuddhey Adivasi, by Ayub Hossain and Charu Haq, Muktijuddhey Christiander Obodan, published by Pratibeshi Prakashani, Mong Rajar Muktijuddho, by Lt. Col. M. Nurunnabi Khan Bir Bikram etc.

It is important to recognize indigenous issues at policy level. Indigenous peoples face a common problem, the lack of recognition of their way of life and cultures. There is a need for awareness raising campaigns for the general public to learn about and respect indigenous peoples.

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