

A picture worth a thousand words

For me this single photograph will be ingrained in my memory. The most striking feature of that photo is that the group is looking downward in bewilderment, but it is clear that in the midst of despair they are holding onto their dignity.

ZEENAT KHAN

THE indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are often stereotyped as the remnant or the residue of the primitive past. CHT is very much a part of sovereign Bangladesh. The indigenous population consists of less than one percent of the total population. By definition the indigenous ethnic groups are people who are referred to as "a politically underprivileged group who share a similar ethnic identity different from the nation in power."

Recently a lot of them were driven out of their homes, their modest houses burnt by Bangali settlers. They were intimidated into fleeing into the unknown. We Bangalis often refer to our CHT people: as paharis, backwards, adivasis, and a new term I learnt recently, "upajati," meaning sub-nation, after reading a Daily Star interview with the Chakma Raja of Rangamati.

These, to me, are derogatory terms to define members of the human race. It saddens me to see how stories are written about them labeling themselves as second-class citizens, how easily it is stipulated that they are better off not mixing with the plains people. The justification used here is that it is for

their own good, and will help them preserve their centuries-old culture and heritage.

In the recent weeks the Bangladeshi press has covered how the CHT population suffered at the hands of the plains people. They are otherwise mostly the forgotten and ignored people of Bangladeshi society. Those of us who keep up with the news around the world from abroad, have read and seen pictures of the displaced CHT people on the Internet version of the Bangladeshi press. The stories are undoubtedly heartbreaking and the images are haunting enough to keep a person with a decent conscience awake at night. I know I have stayed up a few nights.

One Daily Star reader, M. Chakma, posted comments under The Daily Star's March 18, op-ed page article titled "Righting a historic wrong," which impacted me greatly. Chakma laments and questions: "Bangladesh claims to be a democratic country in which sense? Is it because the representative is elected by its own people? A democratic country like Bangladesh where no equality no freedom for minority prevail."

Next to those comments, a good Samaritan's expressed desire to take up the CHT peoples' cause as possible future work seemed far-fetched and



naive. It read like a pipe dream of a person who hasn't lived the kind of life that M. Chakma has. (I am assuming here, based on M. Chakma's comments about the inequalities and discrimination the CHT minorities suffer).

However, it is encouraging to read that people from afar are thinking about making a difference. Bangladeshi newspapers are covering the stories of arson and displaced people of CHT without any bias. They are reporting the

truth, as any news agency should.

The March 18 article was followed by a photo of a group of about thirteen people walking in a single file, along a narrow winding road, which seemed rugged and endless. It is paved in concrete. The little procession is led by a girl who is no more than twelve. The girl is wearing her blue and white striped sarong tied with a sash, a red tee shirt, colourful plastic churis on her arms, a yellow beaded necklace and bright blue rubber sandals. The photo by-line said: "Refugees in their own land." My immediate reaction was; where are they going?

The most striking feature of the photograph is that the lead girl has her head down as she walks. Then I noticed that most people in the group are walking with their heads cast down as well, as if they have done something wrong. There is fear written all over their faces. A little boy who is about four years old is trailing along without much care, blissfully unaware of the gravity of the situation. His feet are bare. How long can his little feet endure such a treacherous journey on a mountainous road?

The faces of three or four adult women in the group are marked with uncertainty as they are unsure of the road ahead. Another pre-teen girl is wearing a bright red shirt, with jeans rolled up to her knees. She has a watch on. Perhaps this is her best pair of clothing and may be she used to go to school. What about her future now?

A couple of grown-up women have hanging baskets on their backs and I wondered what they are carrying in those baskets. A day's worth of provi-

sions, or their most precious possessions? Where is the rest of their belongings? None of them are carrying big bundles over their heads, a typical image that we associate with refugees. None of the girls are holding onto their favourite dolls nor the two little boys have any toys in their hands that they are clutching for dear life.

For me this single photograph will be ingrained in my memory. The most striking feature of that photo is that the group is looking downward in bewilderment, but it is clear that in the midst of despair they are holding onto their dignity. They all are dressed nicely. I doubt that there are that many people who will carry themselves in such composed and dignified manner when facing an uncertain future for themselves. These proud people have been turned into homeless refugees.

Even though the CHT refugee group is not looking directly into the camera there is an eerie parallel between the two photographs. They all are victims of others' atrocities. However, in the end, human beings are resilient. It is my prayer that the displaced people of CHT will remain full of resolve and determination with the hope to start anew.

I end this piece with a great line that I read a few days ago in a novel by Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk: "How much can we understand those who have suffered deeper anguish, greater deprivation, and more crushing disappointments than we ourselves have known?"

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Birangana or muktijoddha?

What is vital is that a person tries her/his best to serve the country. The ways of serving can, and should, be manifold. Therefore, it is not reasonable to categorise the roles of male and female freedom fighters and label them with different titles.



SHIRIN AKTAR

THE very idea of equality which sparked our liberation war was violated by a failure to recognise the women participants of the war. The women war victims did not receive the due honour from their families and society. Most of the families considered the "loss of chastity" a shameful act, and treated their victimised women unfairly. The inability to marry off their daughters created extra anxiety for many parents.

The society also failed to honour the victims and labeled them "violated women" or "dishonoured women." The government's initiative intended to honour the victims with the title *Birangana* ended up being discriminatory. I argue that the title *Birangana* has played significant roles in marginalising and dehumanising the women freedom fighters.

Linguistically speaking, each sound signifies a specific concept. Although the selection of a sound is somewhat arbitrary, the concepts associated with the sound are culturally agreed upon. People living in a community have to agree on how they will create meaning of a particular word by means of culturally acceptable associations. If we analyse the associations that come to our mind as soon as we hear the words *muktijoddha* and *birangana*, we will see how the word *birangana* has dehumanised the women war victims.

Muktijoddha evokes an image of courage, heroism, and more specifically gallant fight in battlefields. Therefore, the people known as *muktijoddha* has naturally get respect and honour from the countrymen. The word *birangana*, on the other hand, creates a mental image of a woman being raped by Pakistani soldiers and their collaborators. *Birangana* sometimes gain sympathy and sometimes pity from the countrymen. Therefore, the title given to the women participants of the war has

been discriminatory.

People often talk about the honour and rights of the *biranganas*. They ponder upon why the society has failed to accept them as *birangana*. I argue that the underlying problem of this dichotomy is for the most part with the title itself. So long as they are called *birangana*, they are unlikely to receive their due honour from the society. Because of society's reluctance to accept them as war veterans, *biranganas* oftentimes prefer to hide their faces. This is because of the incomplete history of our liberation war.

Fighting a war does not always mean picking up a rifle and shooting the enemies. Our women fought the war in many ways; some fought in battlefields, shoulder-to-shoulder with men. Some others cooked for fighters, nursed the wounded, and inspired the soldiers with the love of a mother, a sister, or a beloved. Unfortunately, many of them had to face heinous sexual abuse. All these roles of women in the war are by no means subordinate to those of men. Both women and men fought to the fullest extent, as per their capacity, to protect their motherland. Therefore, whoever fought for this cause, with or without a gun, is a freedom fighter.

We shouldn't have weighed and contrasted the sacrifice of men and women freedom fighters. It is not about determining who played more important roles in achieving freedom. What is vital is that a person tries her/his best to serve the country. The ways of serving can, and should, be manifold. Therefore, it is not reasonable to categorise the roles of male and female freedom fighters and label them with different titles.

The sacrifice of our women during the liberation war is rare in world history. How many women were raped by the Pakistani Army during nine months of war is subject to speculation. The statistics range from 200,000 to 300,000 or possibly 400,000.

Among this large number of women, many became pregnant. This unwanted pregnancy put them in a very critical situation. Many of them went to India and other places for either abortion or delivery. Some others gave birth to war-babies at home. Moreover, a good number of women committed suicide to avoid social disgrace.

We do not have reliable statistics of how many women were raped, how many of them became pregnant, how many committed suicide, and how many gave birth to war-babies. A post-war report estimated that 300,000 women were pregnant, but the methodology used to reach this figure was not dependable. Referring to various newspaper reports and interviews, Banglapedia says that 23,000 abortions were performed by British, American, Australian, and Bangladeshi doctors at various clinics in Dhaka. It was also reported that between 300 and 400 children were born at 22 *seva sadans* (abortion/delivery clinics set up mainly by foreign doctors) in Dhaka.

Whatever the statistics may be, the sacrifice of our women for our independence is indescribable in words. However, it is our national failure that we did not honour them properly. Society ill-treats them as if it was their fault that they were sexually violated. Many of these war victims committed suicide because of the emotional agony. Those who survived came to know that they were *biranganas*, a title given by the state in their honour.

But, what good did this title do to them? Did they receive the same honour and respect as their male counterparts? The answer is a definite "no." Their title has repeatedly reminded them of the nightmare experiences of 1971. The word *birangana*, with its associations with rape, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, and giving birth to war-babies, tells people of what happened to those women war victims. In this way, a woman cannot feel proud of her title. Instead, she feels embarrassed to think and talk about her sacrifice for the homeland. It has also been reported that many *biranganas* were reluctant to talk about their experiences because they were mocked by the society. A feminine title has made the *biranganas* subordinate to their male counterparts, who are known as *muktijoddhas*.

To sum up, even though the title *birangana* was intended to pay tribute to the women war victims, it failed to serve this purpose. With its connotations of sexual abuse, the title *marginalises* women's sacrifices, and often dehumanises them in society. It does not seem reasonable to coin a feminine title for the women participants of the liberation war. Why weren't they simply called *muktijoddhas*? I believe that if they were called *muktijoddhas*, they would have enjoyed due honour and prestige as founders of a nation. I, therefore, request the government to consider this issue and replace the title *birangana*. Everybody who participated in the war, with or without a gun, should be called a *muktijoddha*, regardless of gender.

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A forgotten legend?

After the partition of British-India in 1947, Dhirendranath Datta actively participated in the politics of Pakistan. He established a non-communal political party called "The Gana-Samity." In the Session of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly held on August 25, 1948, Dhirendranath Datta demanded the use of Bengali along with English and Urdu for conducting the activities of the Constituent Assembly.

MUHAMMAD ABDUS SALAM

DHIRENDRANATH Datta was a reputed lawyer of the Comilla District Bar, a patriotic political leader, a pioneer of the language movement, and a courageous and eloquent speaker.

He was born on November 2, 1886 at village Ramrail, three miles north of Brahmanbaria, and was killed by the Pakistan occupation army on March 29, 1971.

His father Jagabandhu Datta was a Sherestadar in the Munsiff Court of the Qasba Thana Sadar, and later on in the Nabinagar Thana Sadar of Brahmanbaria Sub-Division of the then Tippera district. His mother was the daughter of Bhubanmohan Rakshit of village Chapitala under Muradnagar police station of Comilla district.

He passed the EA Examination from Comilla Victoria College in 1906 and obtained his B.A. and B.L. Degrees from Calcutta Ripon College in 1908 and 1910 respectively.

After taking the Law degree he served as Assistant Headmaster of Bangura Uma Lochan High English school in Comilla district from the March 1, 1910 to February 2, 1911.

He joined the then Tippera (now Comilla) District Bar on the February 8, 1911. He was in this profession up to 1920.

Dhirendranath Datta was married to Sreemati Surabala Debi, 14 year old daughter of Krishnakamal Das Munshi of Comilla district, who was a man of immense wealth and a well-known Bengali lawyer. Dhirendra Nath Datta had two sons and seven daughters. His eldest son, Sanjib Kumar Datta, was a veteran journalist and businessman in Dhaka and Calcutta. One of his grand children, Aroma Dutta, is now the Executive Director of PRIPTRUST in Dhaka.

Being inspired by his teacher Sir Surendranath Banerjee and Barrister Abdul Rasul, he started his political career by joining the Annulment of the Partition of Bengal Movement (1905-1911) in 1905. Barrister Abdul Rasul was the "political guru" of Dhirendranath Datta. He was elected the secretary of the "Tripura Hitasadhani Sabha" in 1907, while Barrister Abdul Rasul was its president. He participated in the Provincial Congress Conference held at Baharampur in 1908 or 1909. He was one of the workers of the Relief Committee formed at Comilla for helping the suffering people during the devastating flood of 1915.

In 1919 participated in the conference of the Provincial Congress Party held at Mymensingh. At the clariion call of

Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das in a mammoth meeting at the Comilla on March 6, 1921, Dhirendranath Datta gave up his legal profession for three months and participated in the Non-Violent-Non-Cooperation Movement (1918-1922) for preaching the message of All India National Congress.

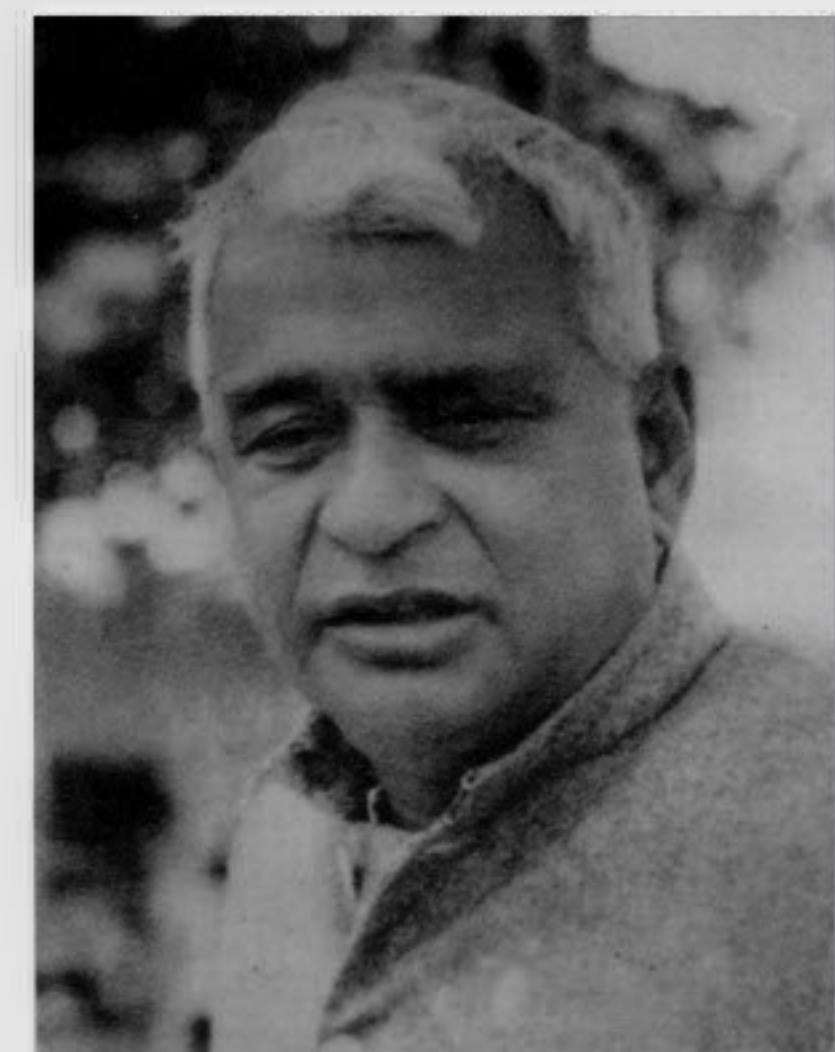
In pursuance of the ideals of M.K. Gandhi, he established a social welfare organisation called "Mukti-Sangha." He was associated with the activities of the Abhoy Asram (1923) of Comilla. He was once the secretary of the Comilla District Bar Association. Being a representative of the Comilla district, he participated in the conference of the Provincial Congress held at Rajshahi.

In 1936, he was elected a member of the Comilla District Board from the Brahmanbaria and Qasba constituency. He was elected a member of the Bengal Legislative Council in 1937. As a member of the Council he was associated with the amendment of the Bengal Tenancy Act, passing of the Bengal Agricultural Debtors' Act and Bengal Money Lenders' Act. During the 2nd World War, according to the decision of the All-India National Congress Party and under the direction of M.K. Gandhi, Dhirendranath Datta publicly raised the anti-war demand in front of the Brahmanbaria Post Office on December 14, 1940.

He participated in the "Quit India Movement" of 1942. At the time of the great famine of Bengal in 1943 Dhirendranath Datta actively cooperated with the All-India National Congress Party, the Marwari Samity and the Aryan Samity, who came to Tippera for distributing relief goods among the famine-stricken people. In the general election of India held in 1946, he was elected a member of the Bengal Legislative Council from the Congress Party. In the month of December the same year, a Constituent Assembly was formed by the central government of British-India, where he was elected a member from East Bengal for drafting the constitution of Pakistan.

For his active participation in the anti-British political movements and activities during his political career, he was arrested by the government seven times -- in 1930, 1932, 1933, 1940, 1942 and 1943.

After the partition of British-India in 1947, Dhirendranath Datta actively participated in the politics of Pakistan. He established a non-communal political party called "The Gana-Samity." In the Session of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly held on August 25, 1948, Dhirendranath Datta demanded the use of Bengali along with English and Urdu for conducting the



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activities of the Constituent Assembly.

In the Session of the Assembly held in June, 1954, Dhirendranath Datta moved an adjournment motion against the promulgation of Governor's Rule in East Pakistan. In that Session he delivered a speech for two and a half hours in support of his motion, in spite of strong opposition by the government party. That was the longest speech ever delivered by him in his Parliamentary life.

Dhirendranath Datta was the minister of the medical, health and social welfare departments of the provincial government of East Pakistan from September 19, 1956 to October 7, 1958 under Chief Minister Ataur Rahman Khan.

During the Martial Law Administration in Pakistan, Dhirendranath Datta was served with an Elective Body Disqualification Order (EBDO) notice in 1960. He was made the president of the Comilla District Lawyers Association in the early part of December, 1964. He was arrested in the early part of 1965 and suffered imprisonment for a very short time. During the Indo-Pakistan war in September, 1965, he was again served with a notice of house-arrest in his own residence at Comilla. Besides this, he had to give to the government a security bond of Tk.1,000.

After that, though he was not associated with active politics, he performed the responsibilities as a supporter and patron of all the progressive movements of the non-communal and Bengali nationalistic politics. He had intimate connection with the prominent leaders of Awami League.

On the night of March 29, 1971, when Dhirendranath Datta and his younger son Dilip Kumar Datta were asleep in their residence, the barbarous Pakistani Army arrested both of them. After that there was no news of them for some time. Later on it was learnt from a British journalist and a barber named Ramani Sil that Dhirendranath Datta and his son were brutally killed after untold torture upon them at the Mainamati Cantonment of Comilla.

After emergence of Bangladesh, the road that passes by the side of his house at Comilla was named Dhirendranath Datta Sarak in his memory.

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