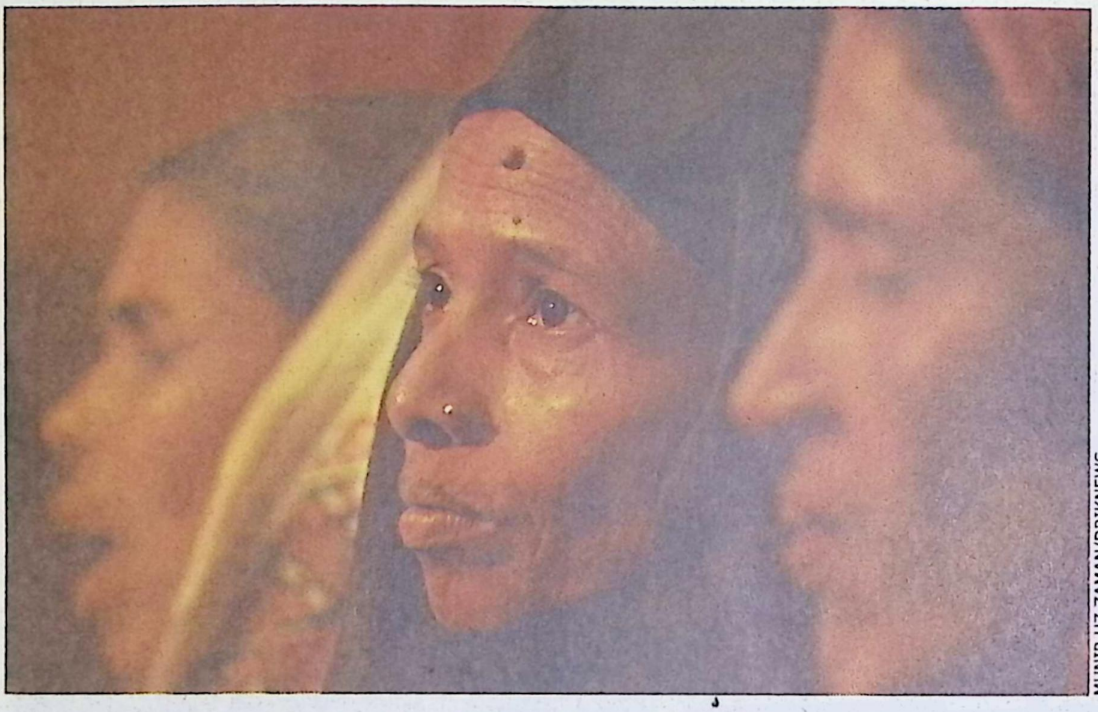


MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/DRIKNEWS

rejected by society.

Nayanika Mookherjee, who in her doctoral thesis has done comprehensive work on the women raped during the Liberation War of Bangladesh, sees the *birangona* as a "national signifier of loss and womanhood" and argues that the rehabilitation measures taken reinforced gender stereotypes of Bangladeshi women and left little space for the *birangona* to exercise agency. She argues that, while the history of the violence of rape is recognised, what constitutes history for the *birangonas* remains unaddressed.[13]

Indeed, though measures were taken for the rehabilitation of the rape victims, they were not encouraged to come forth with the stories of the atrocities committed against them, especially once the immediate aftermath of the war was over. In fact, over the years, less and less information became available on these crimes, with government officials claiming that the material had been lost, destroyed or was just not easily accessible. Yasmin Saikia has termed this a "politics of active national forgetting" of the violence committed against women in 1971. She writes about its representation in the media, in which it was almost absent except for news on the rehabilitation programmes, otherwise rendering the subject "unthinkable" and "unspeakable" even among the victims themselves due to the absence of support groups, counselling services, or rape crisis centres after the war.[14]

Women's responses to rape -- choosing to remain silent or to speak out and face the social stigma -- will depend on the cultural meanings which rape embodies. Researchers have argued that by choosing to remain silent, as in the case of Yugoslavia, women also exercise agency, for "they understand that speaking out can have unintended consequences, and may not result in either natural or formal justice".[15] In the case of Bangladesh, while many of those who had the opportunity committed suicide, others chose to remain silent after having been raped in order to save face. Whether or not this was a result of agency or compulsion, however, is debatable. Saikia argues that silence was a state policy which reduced the agency of the women and made their silence an instrument for the agency of the state itself.

Trying rape as a war crime

Rape has been defined as a war crime in the Geneva Conventions of 1949, the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court 1998, as well as Bangladesh's International Crimes (Tribunals) Act of 1973*, amended in 2009.[16] As stressed by the United Nations, "a single rape constitutes a war crime".[17] Along with other war crimes, crimes against humanity and the genocide perpetrated in 1971, however, wartime rape has not been addressed in Bangladesh and has remained hidden behind curtains of silent shame.

The *birangona* label and the subsequent rehabilitation measures were presumably taken to honour the dishonoured women and aid them in