



Ravished women of 1971: For whom the bell tolls

AUDITY FALGUNI

*"Where the lotus gets dried,
Where the Vishalkhshi had been
mute and silent over the days,
Where the bangles of Shankhamala,
Chandramala and Manikmala...
All the fairy tale princesses used to
ring and resonate,
Oh...will they ever ring and resonate
again?"*

--Rupashi Bangla by Jivananda Das

TORN sarees and broken glass bangles, long and black tresses of traditional Bengali maidens cut and scattered over, under garments of women, abandoned war bunkers by the Pakistani soldiers. Freedom fighter Alilur Rahman broke into tears to me on a hot and humid day of April 2009 when narrating his memoirs of rescuing 18 raped Bengali women from bunkers after they won over their direct war of Bhaitepara with Pakistani troops at broader Khulna region on 18th December 1971.

Or is it the tale of ravished Bhagirathi whose humiliated body was tied up with the wheels of an army vehicle and dragged over miles after miles till she breathed her last? How many of us know about Rahela Begum who was raped in 1971 before her husband just to get divorced soon as a "bad/raped woman?" She got married for the second time in 1976. Her second husband died seven years ago. Her educated son is yet to get a job as child of "Birangona (raped women of 1971)." Her name is yet to be enrolled in the list of freedom fighters. On 5th February of 2013 Rahela Begum came to our city after she had been invited by the Gono Jagoran Mancha, Shahbagh movement. A courageous Rahela Begum narrated her story of plight for the nation before a several number of TV channels resulting in her stigmatisation again in her community by the social elite and this time her daughter Champa was divorced by her husband along with three children for being the daughter of a "Birangona." Rahela now lives in a slum besides a bus stand at Sirajgonj which the government is going to

acquire and she has received the eviction notice like other slum dwellers.

(<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=760402153975651&set=a.608455259170342.1073741826.100000176194460&type=1&theater>)

It is now widely acknowledged that during the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, Pakistani military and supporting militias (Rajakars, Al Badr or Al Shams) raped two and four hundred thousand women in the then East Pakistan in a systematic campaign of genocidal rape. The rapes caused thousands of pregnancies, births of war babies, abortions, incidents of infanticide, suicide and led to ostracisation of the victims. In 2009, almost 40 years after the events of 1971, a report published by the War Crimes Fact Finding Committee of Bangladesh accused 1,597 people of war crimes, including rape. Since 2010 the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) has indicted, tried and sentenced several people to life imprisonment or death for their actions during the conflict.

Table 1: Monthly Distribution of Rape of Bengali Women in 1971

Counting the countless rape tolls:

With the goal of reducing the spirit of Bengali nationalism, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Searchlight on 25 March 1971. Dr. Geoffrey Davis, a physician who came in post-Independence Bangladesh to work with rape victims, estimated that the commonly cited figure of 200,000 was probably "very conservative." Davis estimated that around 5,000 rape victims had performed self-induced abortions.

Diary of Dr. Geoffrey Davis styled as "The changing face of genocide" narrates his experience of working with raped women of Liberation war. Basically he came with the assignment of termination of pregnancies of our war survivor women and his diary contains the data of his working experience in Bangladesh from

Table 1: Monthly Distribution of Rape of Bengali Women in 1971		
Month	Total Number of Raped Women	Highest toll of rapes in one day
March	18527	557
April	35000	1166
May	32000	1032
June	25000	833
July	21000	633
August	12000	347
September	15000	500
October	19000	612
November	14000	466
December	11000	354
Total:	2,02,527	

(It need be mentioned that the aforementioned number of rape toll in 1971 has been collected from 85 Thanas and 42 districts; total statistics from 62 districts are yet to be unearthed.

Source: War Crimes Facts Finding Committee- WCFFC, Yudhdha O Nari by Dr. M.A.Hassan, pages 52-53).

Table 2: Community and Religion based rapes in 1971		
Name of the Community	Percentage of rapes by religion and communities	Types of Rapes
Muslim women	56.50%	Spot Rape, Spot mass/gang
Hindu women	41.44%	rapes, Rape in custody,
Others	2.06%	sexual slavery.

(Source: War Crimes Facts Finding Committee- WCFFC, Yudhdha O Nari by Dr. M.A.Hassan).

March of September of 1972.

Excerpts of Davis's diary underscores that the Pakistani troop deployed in the then East Pakistan of 1971 were clearly instructed by their high command to impregnate as much as Bengali women they can, either married or maiden. So that the dignity of Bengali nationhood falls into pieces! Apart from the Pak invader army, the local collaborators also played an evil role in mass rape of and forcing Bengali women into prostitution and sexual slavery during the nine months of war.

The post-Independence Bangladesh government formed "The National Board of Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation Programmes" in 1972 and the "Termination of Pregnancy (TOP)" programme commenced by February 1972 and only then the horrifying aspect of mass rape was revealed. The government statistics calculated the rape toll to be two hundred thousand. The calculation was made this way: two girls or young women had been missing from each Thana every day. Total number of Thanas was 480 and the invader army's tenure of stay was 270 days. Thus the round figure (480X270X2) stood at 268,200. The government deducted 68,200 women on the bona-fide belief that they

may be missing on miscellaneous grounds rather than rape. But real toll was obviously much higher as many families declined to



US Fleet in Bay of Bengal: A game of deception

ASIF MAHFUZ

IT is known that US 7th fleet, led by the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise, entered Bay of Bengal on December, 1971. Officially to secure American citizens in Bangladesh, unofficially to threaten allied forces and prevent the liberation of Bangladesh. But few know the masterminds behind this move. Even there is confusion about the name of the fleet. Popularly known as the 7th fleet it has been called the 8th fleet by the Indians, in few Russian documents it is referred as the US navy taskforce 74, in US documents, just "Carrier task force".

1947's partition of India created a two-parted Pakistan; two parts sharing the same religion, but totally different in terms of language, ethnicity and culture. From the beginning the power of Pakistan

By the beginning of December, when Pakistan was on the verge of losing the war, it made unannounced, sudden air attacks on India, forcing India to declare war formally against Pakistan on 3rd December.

The regional situation was already complex, the two super powers, Soviet Union and USA were supporting India and Pakistan respectively. India signed a treaty of mutual assistance with the Soviet Union in August, 1971. This treaty ensured that in need Soviet Union would help India and stop United State's intervention, and deter China from opening a second conflict on India's northern border. China was friendly to Pakistan and fought a war with India in 1962. Pakistan was the broker between United States and People's Republic of China at that time, so was important for both. Thus, the liberation war of Bangladesh became a battlefield for the super powers.

US wanted to avoid a second Indo-Pak war, but had to support Pakistan as an ally. However, the mass killing in East Pakistan created massive international response, limiting the power of the US to help Pakistan legally. In the United Nations, US had to announce that they would not deliver arms to India or Pakistan, but Nixon, needing Yahya as the errand boy to deal with China, delivered arms to Pakistan directly or through third countries, keeping UN or US congress in dark. But when liberation of Bangladesh was imminent by the first week of December, Nixon signaled to move U.S.S Enterprise carrier group toward Bay of Bengal.

However, it was not totally unplanned, Nixon and his henchman, Kissinger planned this long ago. In November 13th General Haig, Kissinger's right hand man, in a special memo on "Pakistan India situation", instructed admiral Welendar to consider the use of carrier task force in the Indian Ocean and form a task group to arrange deployment within 24 hours notice.

On December 9, after CIA director warned that 'East Pakistan was crumbling', Nixon decided to send "carrier task force" to Bay of Bengal, to threaten India. As US Ambassador to UN, Bush, on a meeting on 10th December with Henry Kissinger, Admiral Haig, and Chinese emissary noted that "Kissinger talked about the fact that US would be moving some ships in the area(bay of Bengal) , about military supplies being sent (to Pakistan) from Jordan, Turkey and Iran."

December 10, 10:51 am, in a meeting Nixon said to Kissinger, "Our desire is to save West Pakistan,

Keep those carriers moving now." Kissinger replied, "The carriers—everything is moving, we're going to keep moving until there's a settlement." On the same day, Indian intelligence intercepted an American message, indicating that the US "7th" Fleet, led by the USS Enterprise, reached Sri Lanka from Vietnam. In a note General Tiwari recalls that in a briefing of the defense services bavy chief Admiral Nanda informed army chief General Manekshaw and Ms. Gandhi about the US "8th" fleet "sailing into the Bay of Bengal."

The US "fleet" consisted of the USS Enterprise, at 75,000 ton, the world's largest nuclear powered aircraft carrier with more than 70 fighters and bombers , guided missile cruiser USS King, guided missile destroyers USS Decatur, Parsons and Tartar Sam, and amphibious assault ship USS Tripoli.

Synchronizing with the US, UK navy also started to move, seemingly to support US and hence, Pakistan. Soviet intelligence reported that a British naval group led by the aircraft carrier HMS Eagle with commando carrier HMS Albion, several destroyers and other ships was approaching India's territorial waters from west.

The British and the Americans planned a coordinated pincer attack to intimidate allied forces: the British ships in the Arabian Sea will target India's western coast, while the Americans would make a dash into the Bay of Bengal from the east to Bangladesh.

Caught between the British and the American ships was the Indian Navy's Eastern Fleet, led by the 20,000-ton aircraft carrier, Vikrant, with barely 20 light fighter aircrafts. The Indian Air Force however, having wiped out the Pakistani Air Force within the first week of the war, was on alert to fend off any possible intervention by aircrafts from USS Enterprise.

In this situation, India requested Moscow for help, under the security treaty.

In response, On December 13th Russia dispatched a nuclear-armed flotilla, the 10th Operative Battle Group (Pacific Fleet) from Vladivostok, under the Command of Admiral Vladimir Kruglyakov. Russia deployed two task groups; in total two cruisers, two destroyers, six submarines, and support vessels. A group of Il-38 ASW aircraft from Aden air base in Yemen provided support.

On the diplomatic front, India expressed concern over the movement of carrier task force

Discourse of "Birangona" and "Barangona:"

Following the conflict the rape victims were seen as a symbol of "social pollution" and shame. Few were able to return to families or old homes because of this. Bangabondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called the victims birangona ("heroine"), but this reminded common people that these women were now socially untouchables as they were "dishonoured", and the term became associated with barangona ("prostitute"). The official strategy of marrying the women off failed.

On this Victory Day Bangladesh attains 42 years of its independence and sovereignty. The nation is witnessing a crucial epoch of history. May we become able to pay our debts to the blood of millions of warriors and honour of thousands and hundreds of women.

through Indian ambassador to US, Mr. Jha on 14th December. Jha said to USG, "though US had informed that helicopters had been pre-positioned in Thailand for evacuation purposes, the helicopters were on nuclear powered aircraft carrier." Jha ensured that any move without prior agreement with India or by force would endanger long term indo-US relation."

This move created a massive turmoil in the diplomatic community. On 15th December, US ambassador to India, Keating wrote to the white house "Up until last few days I have felt able to defend US policy. I am now troubled by fact that my diplomatic colleagues view deployment of carrier task force as military escalation by US." Adding, "Canadian high commissioner George believes that US decision to deploy carrier task force at this time has served as encouragement to Yahya to continue Pak military effort." In this regard George believes that Yahya's disavowal of initial Farman Ali message and subsequent message from governor malik was directly related to word of carrier task force deployment.

Though the Russian fleet comprised a good number of nuclear-armed ships and atomic submarines, their missiles were of limited range (300 km). So while countering UK and US fleets, the Russian commanders had to take the risk to be within range of American fleets.

In an interview after his retirement, commander of the Pacific Fleet from 1970-75, recalled that Moscow ordered the fleet to prevent the Americans and British from getting closer to "Indian military objects". To counter the American deception Russians took a brilliant strategy of bluff. In Admiral Kruglyakov's words "The Chief Commander ordered me to lift the subs when they (the Americans) appear!. It was done to demonstrate that we had nuclear submarines in the Indian Ocean. So when our subs surfaced, they recognized us and knew the Soviet cruisers, destroyers and atomic submarines equipped with anti-ship missiles were there." Then, we intercepted the American communication. The commander of the British fleet, Admiral Gordon told the 7th American Fleet Commander: 'Sir, we are too late. There are the Russian atomic submarines here, and a big collection of battleships'.

Ultimately this bluff paid off; Russians encircled the US, not allowing the fleet to close in on Chittagong or Dhaka, securing the independence of

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was in the hands of the Punjabis, creating dissent in Baluchistan and East Pakistan.

In the parliamentary elections held in 1970, Awami league, advocating autonomy of East Pakistan, won absolute majority. Out of total of 300 National assembly seats, 162 was in East Pakistan, of which Awami league won 160 seats, Pakistan people's party got 81 seats, all in the west. But the majority, Awami league was not allowed to form government, as the Punjabi dominated West Pakistani army took over.

The resulting mass protest in East Pakistan was answered by the Military by mass killing and genocide, causing Bangladesh to declare independence and start a full-fledged war for liberation. The newly formed Bangladesh army and guerilla forces, MuktiBahini, immediately fought back.