

More than four decades on, the sad tale of 54 Indian soldiers declared "missing in action" continues to trouble the collective conscience of men and women in the subcontinent. To these men, to others like them, we owe a debt of gratitude. The sufferings of Bangalees in 1971 prompted them to wage a war in order to end a bad war. They marched off to the fields of armed conflict, never to return to hearth and home again. Many of them may have died; many others grow old, many may not be in proper psychological health. We have not forgotten them, for no brave soldier is expendable. We whisper a prayer --- that they find peace, that their presence be acknowledged, in both Islamabad and Delhi.

Damayanti's war

WIDE ANGLE DESK

India's national badminton champion for three straight years -- 1968, '69 and '70 -- Damayanti Tambay quit playing in 1971, about 18 months after she got married. She had a more important job to do -- search for her husband.

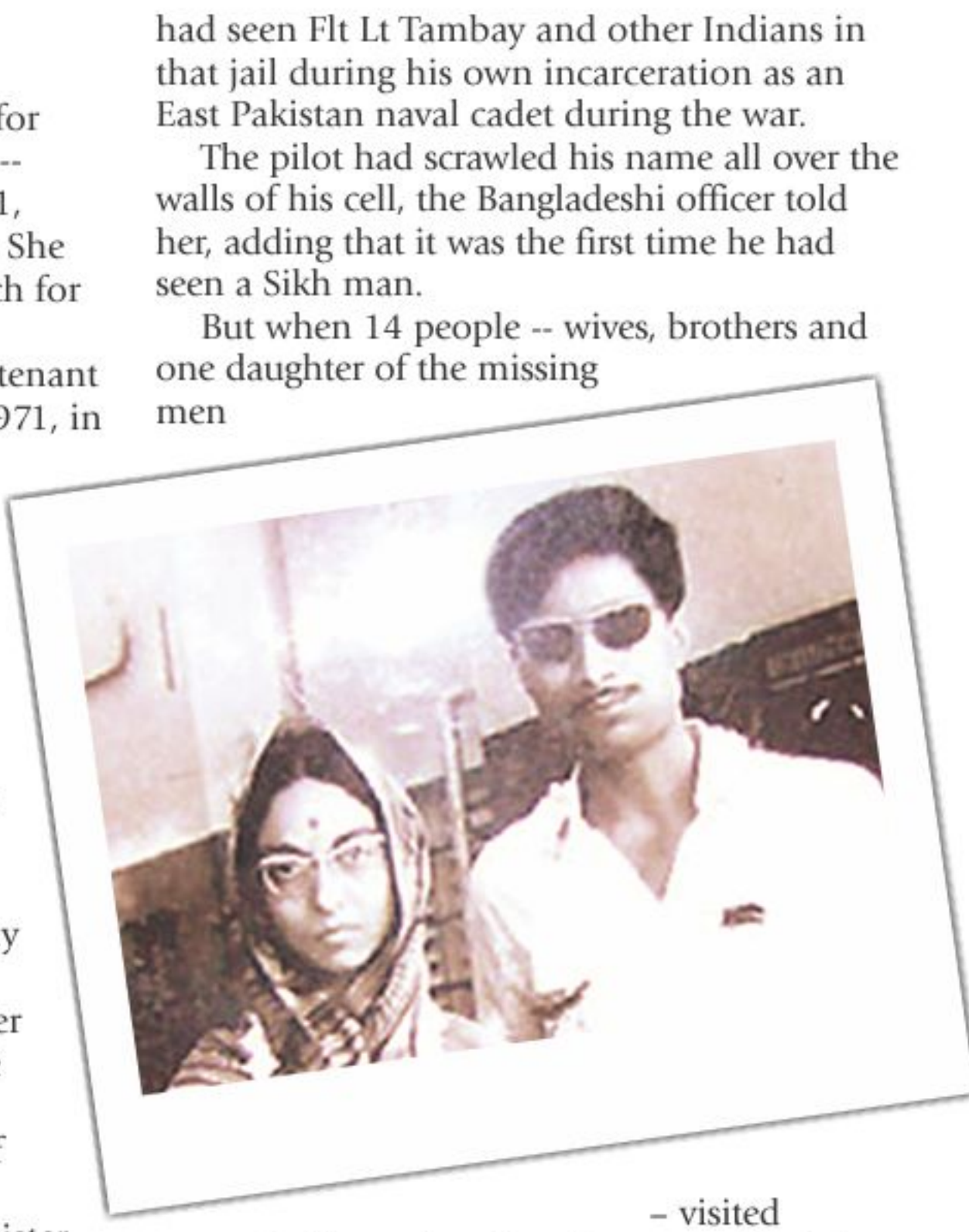
She last saw her husband Flight Lieutenant Vijay Vasant Tambay on December 3, 1971, in the Ambala Cantonment Area, where the family lived. Ambala was bombarded in the war.

The same evening Tambay's squadron moved to a forward area. The first few nights she spent in the bunkers and later moved to her parents' place. Subsequently they heard on the radio that his plane had been shot down and that he was missing.

Damayanti's constant companion since the war has been a yellow, crumbly copy of the December 5, 1971 issue of the Pakistan Sunday Observer. It tells her that her husband, a Sukhoi pilot whose name in the report is wrongly spelt as "Flight Lieutenant Tombay", was one of five pilots captured alive.

Her hope flickered in 1979, as a minister told parliament that 40 Indian defence personnel were still in Pakistan jails. RS Suri, whose son was among those missing, formed a group, later called the Missing Defence Personnel Relatives Association.

Damayanti has made several trips to Pakistan. She was particularly convinced after visiting the Faisalabad jail. A Bangladeshi naval officer, in India on training, told her he



had seen Flt Lt Tambay and other Indians in that jail during his own incarceration as an East Pakistan naval cadet during the war.

The pilot had scrawled his name all over the walls of his cell, the Bangladeshi officer told her, adding that it was the first time he had seen a Sikh man.

But when 14 people -- wives, brothers and one daughter of the missing men

--- visited Pakistan, they found no records of the imprisonment of the East Pakistan cadets in the jail, and those of the earliest Indian prisoners in the jail dated to 1976.

"You have to start with the conviction that you're dealing with human beings, that this isn't just another file sitting on the table," Damayanti once told BBC.

"If you're destined to be alive, you're alive."

THEY NEVER CAME HOME

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Every war changes the way we live. All wars leave us different from the way we were before our zone of tranquility was rudely disturbed. And there are some wars which leave, for long, indeed for time without end, whole families in a condition of permanent trauma.

For as many as 54 families in India, 42 years have gone by since they began their tortuous search for news of 54 Indian armed forces men gone missing after the 1971 Bangladesh war. These men, captured on the western front even as the Indian army and the Mukti Bahini were pulverizing Pakistani troops in a soon to be Bangladesh, have not been heard of or from since the end of the war. No fewer than 93,000 Pakistani soldiers who surrendered to the joint Indo-Bangladesh forces in mid-December 1971 eventually went back home to Pakistan from detention camps in India. Likewise, Indian soldiers, or most of them, taken prisoner in the western theatre were allowed to return home. Those who did not return were the fifty four military officers

who have all these years remained somewhere --- that somewhere being prison or perhaps even mental asylums --- in a state of imprisonment.

In bizarre fashion, no Pakistani government has ever acknowledged the presence of these men in their territory despite strong indications of their being prisoners in Pakistan. The well publicized image of Major Ghosh peering out of a Pakistani jail, as it appeared in a late December 1971 issue of Time magazine, is eerily symbolic of what might or could have happened to him and his compatriots at the hands of Pakistan's establishment. Pakistan has not agreed at any point of time that it has the fifty four in its custody. Or perhaps many of these men --- Wing Commander HS Gill, Flt Lt VV Tambay, Major SPS Waraich, Major Kanwaljit Singh and others --- have already perished in the darkness of foreign prisons?

The families of these missing men do not rest. Yet, as they search for news of their men in Pakistan, they squarely blame the Indian establishment for its failure to either get these long-lost personnel back home.

There have been sightings of these men in prison, by men who have served time and who have spotted the Indian prisoners in their midst. Pakistan has its lips sealed tight. The Indian authorities have seemingly given up the idea that these men, or some of them if not all, are truly alive. The families of the missing 54 are caught between mourning the dead and waiting for their men to return home.

America continues its search for its missing soldiers in Vietnam. In recent times, India handed over to China men who were captured in Pakistan during the Indo-Chinese war in 1962. Nothing is heard of the fifty four on Pakistani territory. And yet those men, dead or alive, must not be abandoned. They waged war in the service of their country. They lost their future in order to ensure a future for the people of Bangladesh. We in this land recall them in deep gratitude.

The search for these men --- for those who live, for the remains of those who may have passed on in the terrible loneliness of foreign prisons --- must go on.

1971 Not just another war movie

MAHBUB MORSHED

Unlike most Bollywood war movies, "1971" is not about valour and heroics in the battlefield. It rather centres round a group of Indian POWs' deep yearning to escape to their homeland from Pakistan.

The low-budget flick made in 2007 takes us to Chaklala prison camp back in 1977, six years after dozens of Indian military personnel were captured in Pakistan territory during the 1971 war. As one of them, Major Suraj Singh (played by Manoj Bajpai) is taken to a Pak army officer's chamber for grilling on a failed escape attempt, you can clearly see the grief and frustration in his tear-filled eyes. For refusing to disclose the names of his aides, Suraj is sent to barrack-6 as punishment. Moments later, a dejected Suraj is seen sitting on the floor, as other inmates -- all of whom have lost their sanity -- do crazy things inside the barrack.

The next day, more Indian prisoners of war are brought in to the camp from various Pak prisons -- a dubious step Gen Ziaul Haque-led govt takes to make sure that the representatives of Red Cross and human rights bodies don't find any of the prisoners of war.

It didn't take much long for Suraj and his five fellow prisoners to find out the reason behind their relocation to the camp from Pak prisons. Sensing that they are close to the Indian border, they decide to make an escape attempt, even if it costs them their lives.

The next segment of the film involves their arduous preparation for the escape on the Pakistan's Independence Day, when everyone will be busy in celebration.

But things don't go the way they plan, and leave Subedar Ahmed with no other choice but to sacrifice his life to help his five fellow prisoners escape the camp. He locks himself inside the ammunition room. He primes a grenade and thinks of his old mother, wife and daughter, whom he had not seen. The



room goes up in flames.

From then on, you embark on a thrilling journey that eventually ends in tragedy. One by one, all five escapees perish in their desperate attempts to make it to the Indian border.

Once you get to the end of the movie, you will probably feel a sense of sadness for "1971" doesn't have a happy ending like most Bollywood films. It leaves you numb with some moving scenes --take for example the one in which flight lieutenant Ram, being shot by Pak soldiers, rams his jeep into colonel Shakoor's vehicle and then blows up the jeep with a grenade to prevent the Pak soldiers from locating Suraj and Gurtu.

Another moving shot was Pak soldiers dragging the body of Suraj into the Pak territory from the Line of Control.

Director Amrit Sagar chose a very thorny subject that most would avoid for making a debut in Bollywood. But his gamble paid off and the film won National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Hindi in 2007.

For those who are still trying to figure out what happened to the missing Indian soldiers, this movie deals with only a few pieces of the puzzle, leaving most questions unanswered.

THE LETTER

"If the cause be just and mind be strong,
No force is great, No distance long,
If selfless souls with such a strength,
Face hazards all, they win at length."

This was written in a diary by Dr RS Suri, father of Major Ashok Suri captured in the 1971 war. The Army had declared Major Suri as "Killed in action". Then on December 26, 1974, RS Suri received a hand-written note dated December 7, 1974 from his son. The letter contained a slip in which his son had written, "I am okay here."

The covering note read, "Sahib, valaikumsalam, I cannot meet you in person. Your son is alive and he is in Pakistan. I could only bring his slip, which I am sending you. Now going back to Pak." Signed by M Abdul Hamid, the note carried the postmark of New Delhi, December 31, 1974.

In August, 1975, he received another letter dated June 14/15/16, 1975, Karachi. It said, "Dear Daddy, Ashok touches thy feet to get your benediction. I am quite ok here. Please try to contact the Indian Army or Government of India about us. We are 20 officers here. Don't worry about me. Pay my regards to everybody at home, specially to mummy, grandfather -- Indian government can contact Pakistan government for our freedom."

The then defence secretary had the handwriting confirmed as Maj Suri's and changed the official statement from "killed in action" to "missing in action"!

SOURCE: TRIBUNEINDIA

When tears run dry

BISHAKHA DEVNATH

Nilanjana Ghosh Stanley was aged 35 and eight-month pregnant when she got to know that the person she knew all along as her father was indeed her stepfather.

A photograph published in a Time magazine issue of December 1971 introduced her with her biological father, Major Ashok Ghosh, who had been reported missing in India's efforts to help Bangladesh achieve freedom.

To her, childhood and youth were not a fond memory having less cared or somehow neglected by the high-handed father [stepfather]. But it had all been part of the reality tied with her life but now everything seemed a big lie that she was not being able to fathom.

The photograph, she got in 2005, shows a man behind the bars of a Pakistani jail.

Her mother had been quite successful in keeping her oblivious of her roots, but as she finally got to know her real identity desperation overwhelmed her to learn more about her father -- whether he was still alive and was languishing in a Pakistani jail as a prisoner of war (POW).

In her search for her father, she stumbled upon families that had been trying to reach other missing defence personnel for more than three decades. Evidence turned up time and again of Indian POWs in Pakistan but the Pakistan government denied holding them in its custody.

These facts, however, could not stop Nilanjana's endeavour to get her father back. She instead joined hands with the other families to compel both the sides to come to an agreement on repatriation of their loved ones.

In October 2006, Nilanjana, a software engineer, wrote to Amnesty International,



pleading with it to negotiate Ashok's release with Pakistan.

Major Ashok of 15th Rajput Battalion was captured while he was defending India's borders in the Fazilka Theatre of Operations in Punjab.

In a recent article in a magazine named Fried Eye, Nilanjana unfolded her anguish of having a fatherless childhood and waiting for her father in uncertainty.

She is now divorced and has been raising her eight-year-old daughter without any support of a family. She might fear seeing a reflection of her in her daughter who also does not have her father beside her.

Fried Eye publishes a picture of a baby Nilanjana in her parents' arms. But she cannot recall being held by him in that early age.

In the dead of night she wakes up and talks to her father in the picture.

"Where are you, I ask him, can you not hear me weep?"

"How can you? You are a picture, a name, a rank. They say the walls of your prison are so thick that the sound of my crying does not reach you. It is said to be so damp that my tears get lost."