

# The Birangona beyond her wound

*Merely days after the Liberation War ended in 1971, the government of the newly formed Bangladesh, in a historically unprecedented move, termed women who were victims of sexual violence during the nine months of the war as Birangonas (war heroines). This, along with the state efforts of rehabilitating these women, has meant that unlike the conventional attitude towards wartime sexual violence, the issue is not mired in silence within Bangladesh — there exists a public discourse and memory of the Birangona. However, this memory has also resulted in a portrayal of Birangonas as a generic figure, defined by the incident of the rape and disregarding how they dealt with the incident in their subsequent lives. Interested about this radical acceptance of survivors of sexual violence in her neighbouring country, Nayanika Mookherjee, now Reader in Socio-Cultural Anthropology at Durham University, decided to do her PhD research on the issue in 1996. Her work, which started in 1997, and spanning almost 20 years, has resulted in **The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971** (published by Duke University Press in 2015 and the South Asian version was published by Zubaan in 2016). The book, in her own words “argues that identifying raped women only through their suffering not only creates a homogenous understanding of gendered victimhood but also suggests that wartime rape is experienced in the same way by all victims.” She suggests that this makes us unable to “see how violence is folded into the everyday lives of those who were raped during the war.”*

*In an interview with Moyukh Mahtab of The Daily Star during the recently ended Dhaka Lit Fest, where she was a speaker, she elaborated on what drove her to do the research, her work and the implications of it for journalists, activists and researchers who work with the history of Birangonas.*

**T**HE Daily Star: Could you give us a brief overview of your research work and your book?

**Nayanika Mookherjee:** The book is an ethnography, which means it is an anthropological project looking at various kinds of peoples' point of view about what I call a public memory of wartime rape during the Bangladesh war of 1971. This involved working with survivors of rape during 1971, various state and human rights activists dealing with the issue in the 1990s, as well as an exploration of the 40 years of visual and literary representation. So it's a triangulation of these three things that constitute the project itself.

**TDS:** How long have you worked on the project and what did it entail?

**NM:** Maybe I should start with why I did the project. For me, the reason for doing this work is linked to 1992, when I was a second year undergraduate student in Kolkata. Babri Masjid happened, and there were all these rumours of inter-community rape of Hindu women by Muslim men and Muslim women by Hindu men. From a feminist sensibility, I thought about why men are killed and women are raped — why does that happen and what does it mean?

Secondly, at a time like the 1990s, international events like those of Bosnia and Rwanda were happening. So laws about rape as a war crime were being defined; Japan was being asked for an apology. Also, a huge amount of partition literature came out in the 1990s — by the likes of Ritu Menon, Urvashi Butalia, Veena Das — which was bringing out how during the partition, there were these instances of women being subjected to what was seen as 'abductions', across communities.



**Nayanika Mookherjee**

The third point, which was what had happened in Bangladesh, was very notable. I had known that the government after the war had referred to these women as *Birangonas*, which as I have known over the years till now is an unprecedented move. Yet it is known by very few people outside Bangladesh, and even within Bangladesh, it is not particularly highlighted as something that was quite radical. This was happening as early as December 23, 1971. That's 7 days after the war that Qamaruzzaman announces that women who were raped by the Pakistani army would be called *Birangonas*, and when Sheikh Mujib comes back from Pakistan, on 10th January and onward, he popularises the term even more, by referring to the *Birangonas* as “my mothers and sisters.” It was a pretty radical position and yet I was reading constantly that 'there was complete silence about it.' To me a state declaring women as *Birangonas* was not silence at all, even though people might not take it well or it might have

various kinds of repercussions..

I arrived in Bangladesh in March/April 1997. The following day I came across stories of *Birangonas* in the newspapers having come to some felicitation ceremony. I worked out a lot of things in that one month. I was absolutely gobsmacked by the publicness of it. There was no silence, people were talking about it in different kinds of public forums.

Then I came back in September 1997 and stayed for another year, and that was when I did my main field work. I decided that the ethical thing to do would be to follow people who had come out publicly in the newspapers. And primarily among them were four women who had come

public. I stayed with them in western Bangladesh for eight months in their village. I also did a lot of work around the area, so I covered other districts in western Bangladesh. I was looking into the women, the human rights testimonies, human rights activists. During the winter and spring, I worked among the women, and when the rains started around July, I came back to Dhaka and did the archival work in Agargaon.

**TDS:** You use the idea of *achrano* (combing) as a metaphor of what these women experienced.

**NM:** The metaphor of combing came to be from a comment made by an Anthropology student in Jahangirnagar University where I was giving a talk. I was looking at combing as covering, explaining a story of a woman's daughter who used to comb her mother's hair, and as a result, cover up the scar the mother had. While I was explaining that, the student pointed out how combing (*achrano*) also means searching. So for me combing became hiding and searching. In Bangladesh there is a public memory; so while the women are being brought out and talked about, their own personal life stories are being hidden or not put forward.

When I started following up on women who were willing to talk about it or had come out in the public, I found that many of them wanted to talk about the process through which their testimonies had been recorded rather than about '71. Before I went to western Bangladesh, I realised that something was amiss, and these women were not very happy about how they had been reported. So I went to this place and started getting a feel for the politics and history of the area itself. I started

