

The women in our Liberation War

Tales of Endurance and Courage

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ONE of the greatest shortcomings in the perception of our fight for Independence is our consistent failure to recognise the role of women in our Liberation War. In fact, the role of women is largely ignored, denied and misconstrued in our mainstream history. This is because of our general tendency to think of war only in terms of physical fighting and exchange of gunshots. But our Liberation War or any war for that matter, which has involved the entire population of the country, has been a struggle through which a united nation has asserted its aspiration for freedom. Such wars are not fought only in the battlefields, neither are they fought only with guns. War heroes include those women who have supported the valiant freedom fighters with food, shelter, funds; who have nursed the wounded and hid weapons risking their own lives. They also include those who have willingly given their sons to war, who have lost their loved ones and even worse, been subjected to sexual abuse and still survived to tell their stories.

Bir Protik Taramon Bibi fought against Pakistanis in the Liberation War in her village home in Shankar Madhabpur Kurigram. She was in Sector 11 under the leadership of Sector commander Abu Taher, Bir Uttam. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Government honoured her with the Bir Protik title in 1973, for her courageous role in resisting the Pakistan occupation force with weapons. After independence, there was no trace of her whereabouts. In 1995, a researcher found out where she lived and consequently the women's organisations brought her to Dhaka. Her story of bravery was soon published. Taramon Bibi was honoured with the prestigious Bir Protik title 24 years after the war in 1995. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia handed Taramon Bibi the award in a simple ceremony on December 19, 1995.

It was Taramon's Godfather, Muhib Habildar, who motivated her to become a freedom fighter. He was a soldier who was on duty in a camp close to her village. Taramon was about 13 or 14 when she joined the camp. At first, she was brought to the camp mainly to do the cooking and cleaning, but later when Muhib saw that she was a very strong and brave young lady he taught her how to use arms like the rifle and stein gun.

Taramon recalls the first time she attacked the enemy with arms. She was having lunch at the camp. Suddenly, the muktijoddhas came to know that a gunboat carrying the Pak army was heading towards where they were located. Taramon got prepared for combat with her comrades, and together, they succeeded in getting rid of the enemy. After that, Taramon had to fight with arms on many occasions. In fact, she has encountered the Pakistanis so many times, that she lost count of the number. She said, she obeyed instructions from her mentor and

Godfather, Muhib. The muktijoddhas praised her for being a good marksman. In those days, she never thought about the risks involved in what she was doing. "We were fighting to free our country," she says, "the last thing on my mind was worrying about my own safety." She was totally committed to the cause of her motherland just like so many others at the time. Taramon and her camp mates sought refuge in bunkers when the enemy changed their tactic and started an air-bombing onslaught. The Pak army raided the camp a few times and hurled bombs

benefit from any of the governments till date. She feels that she was ignored because she is a woman and people don't take women freedom fighters seriously. Taramon lives with her farmer husband and two children in Kaliakoir, Comilla.

Dr. Captain (Rtd.) Sitara Begum is the only other woman besides Taramon Bibi to get the 'Bir Protik' award for gallantry in the Liberation War. Bir Protik Sitara Begum was born in Kolkata in 1945. She is number three among three sisters and two brothers. Her father Md. Israil Mian had a



killing several people. But fortunately, Taramon escaped death. When the war was over Taramon came to Dhaka with her Godfather. Muhib Habildar always used to inspire her. He would say that they fought against great odds, to gain independence. All the hardship and sacrifice were for the cause of the motherland.

However, Taramon has a complaint. The country has given recognition to many freedom fighters and also provided a certain amount of financial assistance to them. But she never received any kind of monetary

law practice in Kishoreganj where Sitara spent her childhood. After completing her Matriculation, Sitara finished her intermediate from Holy Cross College and then studied medicine at Dhaka Medical College hospital. When she received her medical degree, she joined as a lieutenant in the army's medical corps in 1970. In the turbulent days of 1970, Sitara was posted in the Comilla Cantonment. At the time, her brother, valiant freedom fighter Major ATM Haidar was transferred to Comilla from Pakistan. He joined the 3rd

Commando battalion in Comilla. Both Haidar and his sister Sitara went to Kishoreganj to spend Eid holidays in February 1971. The non-cooperation programme had started throughout the country by then. Sitara's vacation was not over yet. Haidar warned Sitara not to go back to the Cantonment. Thus, she returned home to Kishoreganj. Haidar sent some members of the Mukti Bahini as well as his parents and Sitara to Meghalaya, India. It took the group almost two weeks to reach Meghalaya from Kishoreganj. There was a makeshift hospital known as The Bangladesh Hospital, with almost 400 beds. Captain Dr. Sitara was the Commanding Officer of the hospital under Sector 2. Among those who worked there were some final year students of the medical college. Some doctors from UK also offered their services to the hospital. Sitara had to go to Agartala regularly to get medicines.

The hospital had an Operation Theatre, the floor of which was covered by plastic. The hospital not only catered to Bangali patients and wounded freedom fighters, members of the Indian army also sought medical aid at that medical centre. Sitara and her colleagues got to know about Bangladesh's independence on December 16 through the radio. She returned to Dhaka a few weeks later. But after her brother Major Haidar was killed in a conspiracy in 1975, Dr. Sitara left Bangladesh her family and settled in America.

Geeta Kar was only 15 during the War of Independence, yet she vividly recalls what happened during those significant nine months. Her father was killed on May 5, 1971 by the Pak army. Shocked by the incident, Geeta left her home in Rajbari leaving behind her mother and younger siblings and headed for India. They walked for nine days before they reached India. Geeta was determined to fight to free her motherland from the ruthless grip of the Pakistanis. When she was contemplating on joining the freedom movement, she learnt about how Bangali people who have crossed the border and arrived in our neighbouring country were getting organised to ward off the Pakistanis. Geeta soon enlisted her name in the Mukti Bahini. She joined the camp on July 2, 1971 and underwent training on guerilla warfare and first aid. There were more than 200 women in the training group. Most of them had lost their family members and were resolute to take revenge. The food they used to get at the training camp was paltry but that didn't bother the camp inmates. Geeta reminisces that the main driving force was the desire to win the battle against the Pak army at any cost.

After the training was over, it was time to go to the actual battleground to utilise the skills. But only 15 young women including Geeta gave their consent to join the war. A guide was sent with the group of novice, but he could not communicate with them in Bangla or English.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15