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To make things worse, the guide disappeared without a word one fine day abandoning the courageous young people who were ready to face the enemy. But the determined group proceeded without their guide. They went without proper meals for almost ten days and survived on banana and water. Then, somehow, they managed to reach the Sylhet border. At first it was difficult to convince the Indians of their true intentions. Finally, a man named Makhon Shom from the refugee camp assured them all possible help. He arranged for food and lit fire to keep them warm. Thanks to Makhon Shom's kindness, Geeta and her fellow mates were able to reach Agartala. However, when they arrived there, the women were not sent to the war zone as they expected.

Instead, they were told to assist the 480-bed hospital in Agartala known as the Bangladesh Hospital. The group of young women put their heart and soul into their job as medical attendants. Geeta remembers meeting numerous freedom fighters at the hospital, and most of them were brought to the hospital with serious injuries. She and her friends consoled themselves in the knowledge that helping out at the hospital was almost as good as fighting in the war. After all, both the tasks had the same goal. Geeta returned to Bangladesh with the wounded muktijoddhas and her friends at the hospital five weeks after Victory Day on the last week of January. They returned to Dhaka after spending a week in Comilla. Most of her co-workers had immediately

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returned to their homes when they reached Dhaka. But Geeta didn't know where to go since her father was dead.

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Hena Das (who passed away in 2009), former President of the Bangladesh Mohila Porishad, was the Head Mistress of Narayanganj High School in 1971. Hena was an ardent member of the Communist Party, Bangladesh Teachers' Committee and Bangladesh Mohila Porishad right from the start. Hena was in Kolkata during the war. On her way to Kolkata, she delivered speeches in favour of Bangalis' fight for freedom at the women's meetings there. Her main work was with the refugee teachers. A Bangladesh Teachers' Committee was formed comprising teachers from all levels in Kolkata. Fifty camp schools were set up with foreign assistance



PHOTO: PURBADESH

and Hena was in charge of running the schools. She used to explain to the children the reasons behind the Muktiyuddho and also motivated the teachers. Hena participated in collecting clothes and other necessary items for the children in the refugee camps. Since the headquarters of the Communist Party was located in Kolkata, she was very much part of the party's activities. Hena was constantly on the move until May 1, 1971, at different places in Narayanganj, in the fear that she might get caught. At one point, she took shelter in the science building with her sick husband and five-year-old daughter. There were some people who risked their lives to keep in touch with her in those uncertain days. One of her well-wishers was her teacher Nurul Amin, who was later brutally killed by the Pak army. Hena was aggrieved by her teacher's death. But as Hena recalls, she had to deal with the loss of many people who were close to her in 1971, such as the death of her student Momtaz and the murder of the parents of another student.

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The Liberation War has been an attractive subject for filmmakers and a good number of documentary films have resulted from this interest. Being the most powerful medium to hold people's attention, films have played a significant role depicting the oral history of the Muktiyuddho. But most of these films have focused mainly on the freedom fighters, genocide and the agony of people being driven out of their homeland. The incredible role of women during the war and after has not been given its due recognition. During the war not only were women systematically sexually abused, but they also had to face the grief and shock of losing their loved ones, their homes. With remarkable resilience and strength, women

fought the war in so many different ways. Two films—one by Tareq and Catherine Masud called Narir Kotha and the other by journalist Afsan Chowdhury called Tahader Juddho—together encompass the untold stories of women in the Liberation struggle, one that continues even today.

Narir Kotha, a joint production of Audio Vision (Tareq and Catherine's production company) with Ain o Salish Kendra, a human rights organisation, focuses on women who suffered immensely during the war. Victims of rape were among the most traumatised. They not only had to endure the horror of sexual abuse but also the pain of being humiliated and ostracised by society as well as their own families. In the film, survivors of abuse by the Pak army talk frankly about their ordeal and how they are still having to deal with the stigma of being 'tainted' in the eyes of society. The 25-minute film also includes interviews of women who survived massacres and lived to tell their stories. It is clear that the film does not intend to make people sorry for these women. Rather, it is to demonstrate the incredible strength and will to survive that needs to be recognised and respected.

The underlying theme of Narir Kotha is "the trauma and triumph of women in '71". It begins with footage of women engaged in various activities of the Liberation War—serving in hospitals, distributing clothes to victims. The theme song says, "No one talks about the role of women. Everyone sings the praises of men. Didn't women folk contribute to the cause of Independence?"

The camera then focuses on renowned sculptor Ferdousi Priyabhashini who survived sexual abuse at the hands of the Pak Army and their collaborators in '71. As one of the first women to publicly speak of

her ordeal she is movingly honest and comes out as a person who has gone through the worst nightmare but has managed to survive by channelling her pain into something creative. In the interview, she says that after independence of Bangladesh, she was faced with another ordeal as her society refused to accept her. "I became the target of terrible insult and humiliation... At one point I realised I don't need any human being in my life."

It was the very isolation that led Priyabhashini to take refuge in sculpture. Using objects normally unappreciated and unwanted (like roots and tree trunks)—much like her own plight—she created sculptures. "As I became engrossed in my own work, I withdrew from friends and society," says Priyabhashini.

In the next story, the film narrates through the women survivors how 18 women of Kodalia village in Faridpur were massacred by the Pak Army in May 1971.

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Rabeya, now a middle-aged woman, recounts how the village people hid in a ditch in the jungle when they saw the Pak Army approaching. About 30 women were in the ditch. Along with them were their children. Among them was Chanu who was about 10 or 12 years old. "The Army surrounded us and the 10-12 year-old boys like me... and took us away from our parents," says Chanu who had to witness the murder of his mother, aunts and cousins on that terrible day. The army caught the women and made them sit in front of a madrasa. They then started firing on their hapless victims. Sufia, now an old woman, was present along with her daughter Hamida who was seven months pregnant at the time. "They set the machine guns and then brought water from the pond," recalls Sufia. "They said to us 'Do you Bangalis want to drink some water?'... I told myself I wouldn't drink water from the kafir's hand."

Rabeya describes how right after this the Army started firing: "...women fell like birds. Babies died in their mothers' laps." A few who were grazed by the bullets survived. Hamida, Sufia's pregnant daughter, however, didn't. "She asked her father for some water. After drinking the water, she died," says Sufia, tears overflowing her eyes. Sufia still bears the scar of a bullet in her stomach which had hit her during the massacre. One of her daughters had later pulled it out.

Chanu's mother too was among the casualties. "My mother was hit by six bullets, she had fallen over on her stomach." Among those still alive were Chanu's aunts, cousins and other relatives. They were still alive and begging for water. Little Chanu ran to his house only to find it burning. So he took a few coconut shells and filled them up with water from the pond. "Some of the women died while I was giving them water." The impact of seeing so many of his relatives dying in front of his eyes was too much for Chanu and he lost consciousness.

"I don't think they were Muslims. How could Muslims kill others this way?" asks Rabeya relating how women alone in their houses were raped by the soldiers. After this incident, says Rabeya, the men of the village joined the resistance.

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Smritirekha Biswas's story is next in the film. Smritirekha was only 12 in 1971 when the Pak Army burnt down her village forcing her and her family to join the

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