

The women in our Liberation War

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millions of refugees in an excruciating 13-day journey to the border. Her family included her pregnant mother, her 80-year-old grandmother and younger brother and sister. For thirteen days, Smritirekha carried her little brother Babu.

"The country got freedom," says Smritirekha, "but we never got back what we lost. So how can I say we benefited from independence?...We still couldn't rebuild our house... The kind of communal harmony we had is no longer there." The film then focuses on Adivasi women—a group that played a very active role in the '71 struggle, women who have never been recognised for their courage. In a remote village in Rangpur, the filmmakers find a few Adivasi women toiling in the paddy fields. It is characteristic of this community for women to slog all day in the fields while their husbands fritter away their



demands Mazlibala, her face washed with new tears. "Haven't I lost my honour anyway?"

"Even to this day people ask me, 'Is it true something happened to you back then?' But how can I talk about that? What's the point of talking? If I speak of it, it will only bring shame and dishonour to me."

At this point another incident is referred to—that of how Adivasi men and women along with a few Bangalees attacked the Pak Army in a courageous fight against the enemy. In April 1971, a large number of Santals—men and women—surrounded the Rangpur Cantonment. Armed with bows and arrows the Adivasis attacked the soldiers. Their hatred of the Cantonment was deep-rooted. Like Mazlibala, many other women had been sexually assaulted by the Pak soldiers and their collaborators. The proximity of the Cantonment to remote areas where many such Adivasi lived helped to perpetuate these sex crimes.

"The men could not tolerate the Army's torture of their daughters," says Nataniel Lakra, an Adivasi man in the film. "Men, women, old and young we all jumped into the fight...with whatever weapons we could gather, even sticks." According to Lakra, many of the Adivasi women fought with bows and arrows and killed some of the soldiers.

For women like Mazlibala, the fight goes on. "We participated in the Liberation struggle...now we're struggling with our soil. Still our sorrow doesn't leave us...The struggle will never end."

There were many other women who actually took part in defending their land or their families when the Pak Army attacked. The film turns to Choto Paitkandi village where men and women together defended their village with bamboo spears and shields. A mute woman tries to describe how the army came and set fire to the village. She lost her speech after her husband was killed while fighting the Pak Army.

A village woman informs that the soldiers killed the men and raped the women. Another woman describes how her mother-in-law joined the fight with bricks and stones and was shot dead by the army. "So many women died," she says. "Women tied grenades to their bodies and threw themselves on the road."

The whole village swooped on the

soldiers and started beating them. The soldiers then jumped into a lake. But the village folk jumped in and killed them.

"It's not only men who fought in the war, women did too. My mother-in-law died in that fight, nobody talks about that."

The film ends with the same song that reverberates throughout:

*"Nine months of grief and pain.
Does the father have the only claim of
parentage?"*

*"Have we forgotten the sacrifice of millions of
mothers and sisters?"*

Dramatic, without any contrivance, the stories in the film touch the heart. While one shares the grief of these women who have lost so much at the prime of their life, one cannot but feel inspired by their courage and capacity to survive.

Produced and directed by Afsan Chowdhury, the film *Tahader Juddho* (Their War) brilliantly captures the role women played in 1971.

Tahader Juddho contains a series of interviews where poor illiterate village women, the subject of the film, describe their experiences of 1971. We learn from these women who, at tremendous risk to themselves and their families, surreptitiously delivered food to Muktijodhas, saved them from watchful *razakars* by hiding them in their own house, provided them with clothes and blankets, or smuggled arms from one place to another. But these heroic acts and zealous patriotism of these poor women have not been recorded in the history. Neither are they considered worth mentioning. With our patriarchal mindset we are more comfortable to think of women only as hapless war victims who at best can appeal to our sympathy but cannot command our respect.

Rokeya Begum was expecting a child when the war broke out. Her husband used to bring his fellow freedom fighters home who Rokeya used to feed. This brought the wrath of the *razakars* upon Rokeya. Following their threat, Rokeya decided to take food to the nearby island where the freedom fighters had camped in. To make sure that she was not being followed by anyone Rokeya used to get out at night and reach the island on a boat steering all by herself. She also used to keep their weapons in the well of her house. Sometimes, the

Muktijodhas spent nights in her house and on those nights Rokeya kept vigil very often passing the whole night sleepless. "People said a lot of things, that I am a bad woman, I go out alone at night and chat with the muktis and feed them. But fortunately, my husband always stood beside me," says Rokeya.

Farida Akhter of UBINIG, the feminist outfit who has worked to organise women freedom fighter has strong views on the nature of gender discrimination and war roles. She says of what women did in the war and how it contrasts with male warrior perceptions. Citing an example, she said of a woman who had a little child, but taking food to the Muktijodhas occupied her attention more than looking after her baby. One day, when she returned home after feeding the fighters she found her child lying dead. A Pak army soldier who stood on the baby with his boots on had killed the child. But she is not recognised for her role.

Shohagpur Kakurkandi in Sherpur district. On one monsoon day, in a matter of just two hours almost all the men were killed by the Pakistani army and their collaborators. It is called the "widow's village" now.

Kohinoor Begum had to flee from one place to another with her newborn baby and a girl. One of her brothers went to the war while the other was so severely beaten up by the *razakars* that he couldn't go to work. Besides her two children, Kohinoor also had three young sisters. Kohinoor had to look after her all of them, which she did. She married off all of her three sisters, raised her children and looked after her old bed-ridden mother who later became mentally imbalanced due to shock.

As the film progresses and we hear more and more stories of these valiant women who put everything at stake to win freedom for the country, we cannot help comparing the lives of these forgotten women with those of male freedom fighters, who have been recognised by the state and by their own communities as real heroes, as Bir Srestho, Bir Bikram, etc. As the film ends the question Chowdhury asks implicitly throughout the whole film also haunts us: Weren't these women as much Muktijodha as the men who fought the Pakistani army with guns?

But the most important role the women played besides taking active participation in the war and helping the Muktijodhas in various ways was as sustainers of families and households. "And it's on standing on these households that society itself survived in 1971," says Afsan Chowdhury. For these women, it was a war of existence, a fierce struggle to survive which did not end with the war. These remarkably courageous women have waged a tough struggle to keep the family going on, raised their children and passed on the spirit of fighting to them. Whether they find room in the pages of history or not, it is an undeniable truth that it was their sacrifice and strength that helped us to win our freedom. For these poor, ordinary village women who had to fight simultaneous enemies on a personal, social and national level, the fight goes on.

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