

March 25 has been declared as Genocide Day recognising the atrocities carried out by the Pakistani Army on civilians 46 years ago on this day. In this week's In Focus, Mashruk Ahmed tells the stories of these valiant freedom fighters of Bangladesh through their photos and words.

"THE WAR IS NOT OVER YET"

MASHRUK AHMED

After a bloody nine-month war, Bangladesh was born. Men and women from all walks of life participated in the war, but our history conveniently fails to remember those women who lost everything in the war.

In 1971, from March 26 until December 16, women courageously fought in the Liberation War. In addition to directly participating in street protests and in the battlefield, they mobilised support for freedom fighters; provided food, shelter and medical services; and organised cultural activities, all the while looking after their families.

The Pakistani army and their collaborators raped between 200,000-400,000 Bengali women. In December 1971, after we had claimed victory, President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of the newly independent state of Bangladesh bestowed the title of "Birangona", or "war heroine", on women who faced sexual violence during the war, giving them official recognition for their sacrifices during wartime. After more than 40 years of independence, the Bangladesh government recognised the Birangona as a freedom fighter. While others fought with weapons, the Birangona fought with her body. But in a country where women's sexuality is considered sacred, Birangonas continue to be subjected to social stigma and ostracised from society.

Dear countrymen,

The country for whose liberation I shed my blood is surely my country. I will not go anywhere leaving this country. I will die in this country. I have no one in Bangladesh except my only daughter. Dear countrymen, the dreams and aspirations that drove me to join the war remain unfulfilled. I had the same dream that Bangabandhu, Father of the Nation, had for the country.

My request to my dear country people is, the *razakars* must be tried soon to reclaim the sacred land of Bangladesh. If there is another war in the country I will join the war again and sacrifice my life for the country's freedom. During the Liberation War, I gathered information from the Pakistani Army by posing as a beggar and sneaking into the army camps. I relayed the information to the freedom fighters. Once I was caught and tortured by the Pakistani Army.

Kabat Henonchita (Kakon Bibi)



For as long as I am alive, I will take up arms, the pistol, the grenade. Even when I die, my soul will return to the battlefield. The war is not over yet. We have one more war to fight. A great war is looming and we have to rise up and face it. We have to take a stand, we have to fight that war. We freed the people of this country – we put out the flame, but another still burns. There is a fire within us. And we are burning in it. If Bangabandhu hadn't been born in this country, we would not be an independent nation today, this land would still belong to Pakistan.

Kanchon Mala



During the war, women fought with their lives, youth, blood, ammunition, everything you can think of. These things were of so much value to me but I wasn't sitting idle at home. I never begged in 1971. No one gave me food to eat. My money was hard-earned. I didn't take help from anyone. I fought with my life, my youth, my ammunition. I will keep fighting all my life, until my last breath.

Sometimes I wish I had died back then. There is nothing for us in this country – no respect, no honour, no place to live, no medical help.

Halima Khatun



My father is Late Salam Sheikh. My mother is Late Jobeda Begum. I am a Birangona. I am a helpless woman. I do not admit that I am a Birangona to everyone because society would judge me. Because of this "shame", my father wanted to kill himself. My life is broken. I could not eat, do not eat. I have been suffering from various physical ailments since the last 15 years. I am not being able to avail quality treatment or even buy medicines due to financial constraints. On behalf of my other freedom fighter sisters, I request the Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Bangabandhu, to consider our ill health and helplessness, and assist us in gaining quality treatment. I request the future generations to show enthusiasm for learning the history of the Liberation War, and to honour the courageous Birangonas of the war, and remember us with respect.

Yours
 Amena Begum



I want to live for 160 years. I still have a lot of work to do. Many have gone astray. I will try to bring them to the right path. When I die, I will be buried beneath the soil. I love the soil and my motherland.

Yours
 Roma Chowdhury

Whose picture is this? Is it of my mother Birangona Gurudami? Or is it a picture of an unknown brave mother lost in thought? Whose *saris* bear the blood-stained stories of countless female freedom fighters of 1971? Today, I seek out those mothers whose struggles defined our independence. We will remember with pride their spirit that liberated our Bengal. With immense trust, we hand over our flag of independence to the younger generations.

Affectionately yours
 Ferdousi Priyabhashini



I was born on May 8, 1957 in Ghagor, now Kotalipara, of Gopalganj district. On May 10, 1971 the Pakistani occupation force picked me up from Kotalipara and kept me confined in their camp from May 10 till May 15, torturing me physically and mentally. Finally, they took me to the Gollamari bridge in Khulna to kill me. But I surreptitiously fled for my life. When I came back home, my family and the local people hurled abuse at me. Later, I joined the Bir Bikram Hemayet Bahini and participated in the War of Independence. After the liberation, I came to Dhaka and worked as a house help. Many years later, I married an unknown man/I was married off to an unknown man. At present I am passing my days in hardship with my only daughter.

Yours
 Saleha Begum

