

# The Birangana and the birth of Bangladesh

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THE year 1971 was a landmark in South Asian history for many reasons. It included the birth of Bangladesh but also the war fought by Pakistan and India. It was perhaps the only such conflict involving the three most populous South Asian countries, clashing for the first time since the end of colonial rule. High-level politics and the tumultuous times spawned a number of books on war, international relations and human rights. However, an uncanny silence has remained about one aspect of the war - the sexual crimes committed by the Pakistan Army and its collaborators, the Razakar militia, against Bangladeshi women. It is only now, 40 years on, that some of that silence is being broken.

Bina D'Costa's new *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* takes on the mammoth task of placing violence against women during the war in a larger political context. While what D'Costa calls the 'original cartographic trauma' of the Subcontinent has been well researched, gendered nation-building narratives have been given little consideration. Yet D'Costa proposes that any theorisation of nation-building in post-Partition India and Pakistan, or post-Liberation Bangladesh, is incomplete without a gendered analysis. Recognising that women have largely been silenced by state historiography, feminist scholars and activists in Southasia - Veena Das, Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon, Urvashi Butalia - have attempted to explore this sordid aspect of war.

That rape has been used as a weapon of war has been well documented. One of the more famous examples is American feminist Susan Brownmiller's investigation of rapes committed during the two World Wars, in Vietnam and then in Bangladesh, which emerged as the 1975 classic *Against Our Will: Men, women and rape*. The idea of defiling the enemy population by raping its women and impregnating them, often while their helpless and 'feminised' menfolk watch, is based on notions of honour, purity and emasculating the opposition. These notions of defilement also led to the sacrificial killing, sometimes by their own families, of women who had either been raped or even simply exposed to the potential of sexual violence.

These 'honour' killings were widespread during the Partition riots of 1947, a phenomenon documented by Bhasin and Menon. Expanding on this theme, Butalia has talked about how women also colluded in maintaining family 'purity' by forcing those who had been raped to commit 'suicide'. The post-Independence 'recovery' programme, whereby abducted women and children were sent back to

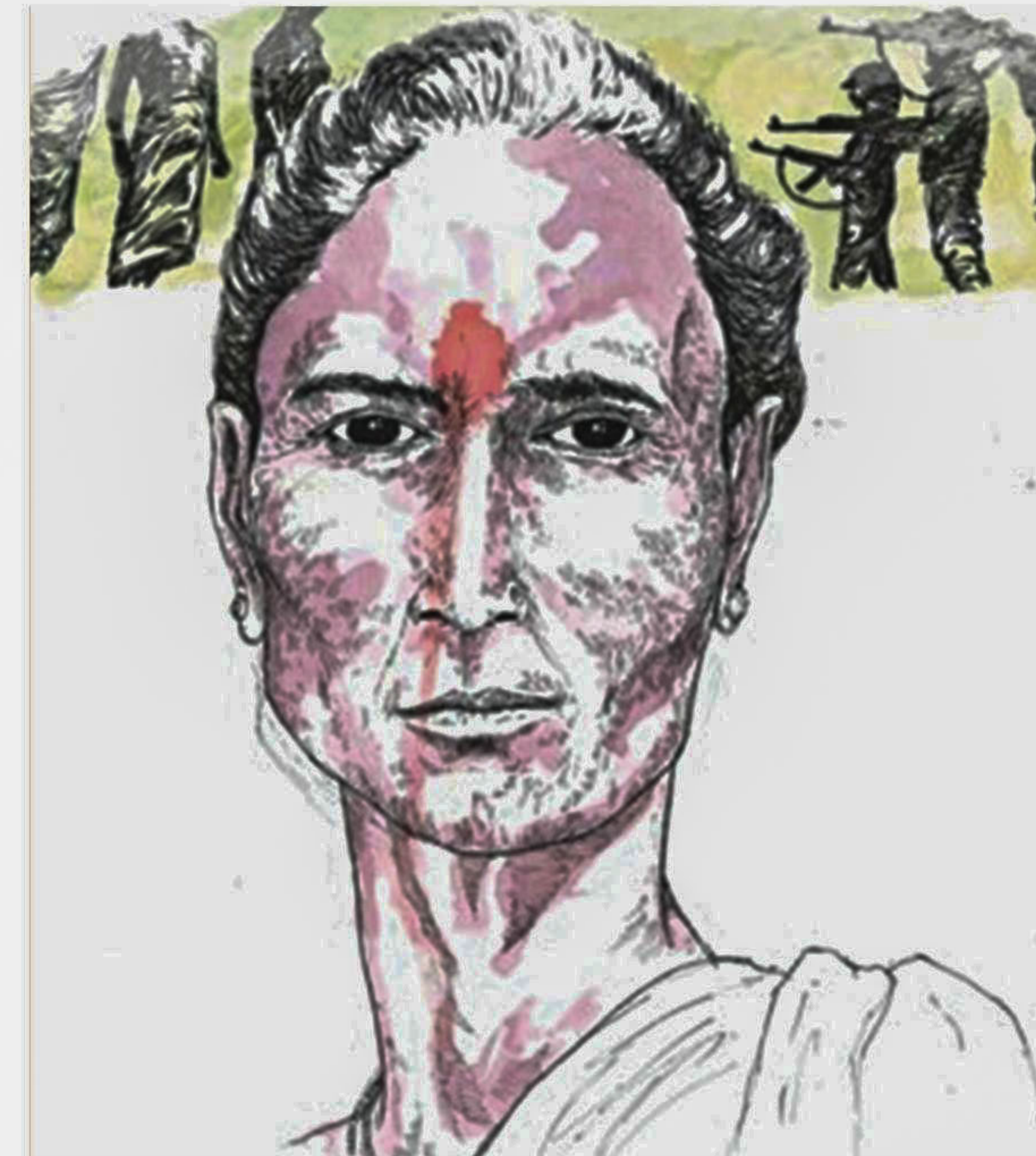


IMAGE: PAUL AITCHISON

their families, was fraught with problems, precisely because of prevalent notions of desecration and impurity, which hindered acceptance by families and communities. We see a similar drama played out with the birangana, or rape survivors, and war babies of 1971.

Psychiatrist Ruth Seifert defined rape not as an aggressive manifestation of sexuality but as a sexual manifestation of aggression. Her study of sexual violence during World War II exposed a hitherto little-known side of that period. Seifer writes:

Soldiers of Nazi Germany also committed rape on a massive scale. It is furthermore known that the Wehrmacht ran brothels where women were forcibly made to work. In the Eastern territories, the Wehrmacht used to brand the bodies of captured partisan women - and other women as well - with the words 'Whore for Hitler's troops' and use them accordingly.

Helke Sander and Barbara Johr, in their research on the mass rapes of German women by Red Army troops at the end of

World War II, allege that between April and September 1945, nearly 110,000 of Berlin's 1.4 million female residents were raped, and about 1,000 infants were born as a result. While many have criticised Sander and Johr's methods, it is undeniable that rape was part and parcel of the strategy of the victorious army to subdue the once-ascendant community. The silence around this aspect of the war also follows a pattern of denial evident in wars throughout history.

Sexual violence and rape during conflict have only recently been recognised as war crimes in international law. Women's experiences of sexual violence and rape in Rwanda, Bosnia and Congo were classified as war crimes and as crimes against humanity. Feminist scholars such as Kelly Askin's re-reading of the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials following the genocide of Jews during World War II have highlighted the failure of the international community to prosecute gender-specific crimes.

## WARS AND THEIR HEROINES

An analysis of 1971 cannot be complete

without examining 1947. The wound of Partition - cleavages of territory and populations - continued to fester, impinging on almost every aspect of life in India and Pakistan. D'Costa provides an insightful historical backdrop against which we can understand why Partition was almost inevitable, and why, in turn, the foundations had already been laid for the birth of Bangladesh, 24 years later. Reinvented and fractured identities, moving from 'Indian' to 'Pakistani' to 'Bangladeshi' with gradual anti-India and pro-Pakistan leanings, have complicated the pursuit of the war-crimes agenda in Bangladesh. More specifically, it has ensured that the story of women during the war has remained largely in the realm of propaganda, deployed for nationalistic purposes when suitable and then relegated to an uncomfortable corner of history.

D'Costa's is not the first writing on sexual violence during the Liberation War. Nilima Ibrahim, a social worker during the war, published *Ami Birangana Bolchi* (I am the Birangana speaking) in 1994, followed by the publication of the oral-history project undertaken by the Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK). More recently, to mark the 40th year of liberation, feminist publisher Women Unlimited published Yasmin Saikia's *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh*, a work based on oral testimonies of women who had suffered rape and D'Costa, however, steers clear of essentialising women or invoking any 'common interest' among women that supersedes class, ethnic or religious identity. D'Costa also eschews the voyeurism inherent in oral testimonies, the use of which represents an ethical dilemma with which sensitive researchers through the ages have grappled. What do the horror stories and personal pain, the cries of anguish and the desperation of revenge, add to our understanding of the narrative of rape or the politics of silence? Do the anguished words of women kept confined and raped repeatedly by enemy soldiers drive home the reality of violence more effectively? How comfortable are the women with having their lives exposed, and can their vulnerability enable them to give genuine informed consent to the interview and its subsequent publication? What is the long-term impact of the interview process on already traumatised women having to recount the horrific past? Grappling with these questions, and despite having interviewed several *biranganas*, especially in the rural areas, D'Costa instead chooses to publish already existing testimonies, such as those collected by the ASK.

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