

The birangana and the birth of bangladesh

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Birangana, meaning 'war heroine', was a term coined by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's founding prime minister, as a way of acknowledging these women's 'sacrifice' for the freedom of Bangladesh. Mujib claimed that about 200,000 Bengali women had been raped by Pakistani troops. These numbers were never proved, however, nor were the perpetrators of rapes or killings ever brought to justice. Instead, these women began their lives in the new-born country under a shadow of shame. While the moniker was originally meant to honour all women - political activists, freedom fighters and rape survivors - it slowly became a term to identify those subjected to rape and sexual violence during the war.

Ironically, rather than honouring or dignifying them, this term became a label to mark a 'fallen woman' (*birangana*, meaning prostitute, is phonetically too close to '*birangana*' for comfort). In turn, this prompted activists to coin a new phrase: *nari jodha*, or women fighters. Likewise, the attempt to wipe out all visible evidence of the women's 'impurity' - the babies born of the rapes - by encouraging large-scale international adoption had serious implications not only for the women and their babies, but also for the social workers involved in the process, who were complicit in furthering the government agenda.

There are echoes here of the intense emotional dilemmas faced after Partition by social workers trying to re-unite families in Pakistan and India. Anis Kidwai's memoir, *Azadi ki Chao Mein*, first published in Urdu in 1949, and recently translated into English as *In Freedom's Shade* by her granddaughter Ayesha Kidwai, is a moving and nuanced account of her experiences as a social worker involved in 'recovery' efforts. D'Costa interviews Nilima Ibrahim, Maleka Khan, Margaret Mary, Geoffrey Davis and nuns from the Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata, revealing that Bangladeshi social workers associated a similar anguish with their own mission. These testimonies also display the prevalent patriarchal view of women's bodies and motherhood. Nilima Ibrahim's account of her conversation with Mujib over the future of the 'war babies' is telling: "No *apa*, please send away the children who do not have their father's identity. They should be raised as human beings with honour. Besides, I do not want to keep that polluted blood in this country."

The popular proclivity to pity the *birangana* is shaken when some of the women share stories in which they do not easily fit into the roles of victims. Sculptor Ferdousi Priyobhashini's tale is one that speaks powerfully of the complexity of survival in a wartime situation, the role of the individual and the interplay of violence, emotion and sexuality. In her mid-20s in 1971, Priyobhashini was abducted by the Pakistan Army. Rescued from a 'rape camp' by an officer with a soft spot for her, she says:

"I also started to love him. Maybe it was just an infatuation or just to stay alive. Maybe that love was of gratitude. But just because a Pakistani saved my life, I couldn't marry him and go to Pakistan. In that way I would've only betrayed my country."

Dubbed a collaborator because she did what she could to survive in the circumstances, Priyobhashini was denied recognition as a *birangana*, although she had been raped and tortured for nine months. When, in the euphoria following liberation, she was sacked from her job at the jute mill for being 'anti-national', Ferdousi fell silent. She spoke up only 28 years later, first telling her story to ASK and subsequently going public in the local media.

THE RIGHT TO SPEAK

While following in the post-colonial tradition of challenging feminist scholarship of the Global North, D'Costa does not pull

sentation is more 'authentic'. In answer to the question of who can best represent the marginalised, D'Costa calls for more forthrightness about research commitments. "We should be able to say what we have to say while being aware of the politics of location," she writes.

D'Costa's point is especially relevant, given the reaction to another significant book published in 2011 to mark Bangladesh's 40th year of liberation: Sarmila Bose's *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War*. It is not Bose's Indian origins that should come under the scanner but the dubious methods employed in her work. Bose's controversial *Dead Reckoning*, which questions the scale

populace - was never published. The controversy it raised within Pakistan perhaps convinced Bose of its veracity.

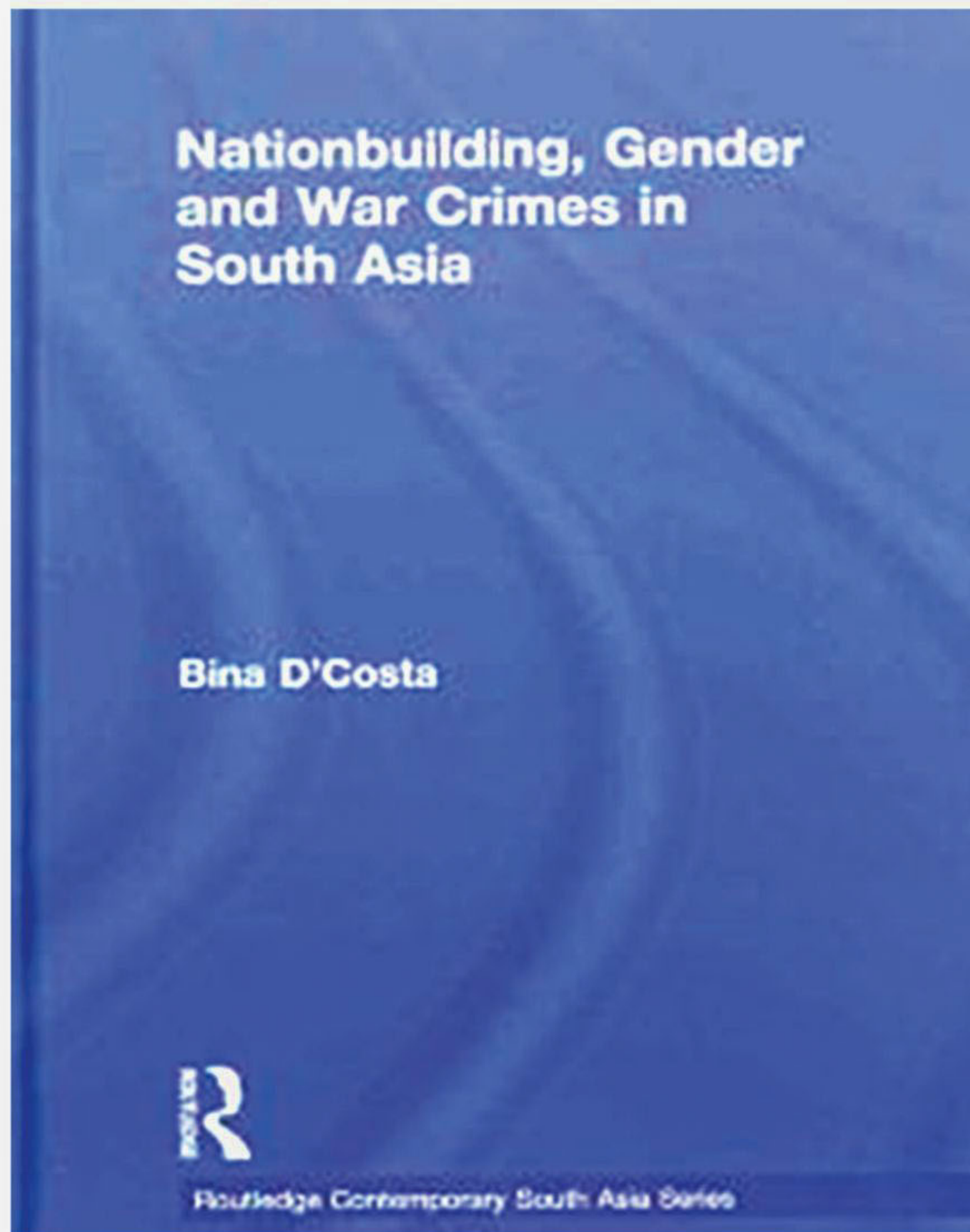
Dead Reckoning does seem to accept the Pakistan Army officers' version of events in good faith. In her reconstruction of some notorious events, such as the massacre in Joydebpur on March 19, 1971, Bose chooses to conclude, for example, that the death toll did not come to 20 people (as the Bengalis claimed) but only to two. An examination of Bose's methodology must consider respondent fatigue and the construction of narratives in response to research questions, where the framing of the question can guide the response. These are daunting challenges for researchers in any field, the more so when the research focuses on fraught human lives, anguished memories and profound trauma.

D'Costa boldly proposes that crimes against women - rape, pregnancy, abortion, and the forceful separation of mothers and their children born as a result of rape - were not an unfortunate by-product of war, but inherent in the very premise of the nation-building project. She goes on to show how the new state of Bangladesh, in building its national identity, attempted to provide space for the co-existence of Islam and Bengali ethnic identity and also promoted communal harmony. "In this new patriotic space, which required nationbuilding to make peace with the two conflicting identities (the religious and the ethnic), it was crucial to silence women's experiences of the Liberation War." The post-Independence rise of the Islamic right in Bangladeshi politics, as well as clashes between secular and communal forces, remains an ever-present reality in Bangladesh today, much as it does in India.

Yet, as Ruth Seifert points out, bringing the matter of violence back into the cultural consciousness and making it public is the sine qua non for change. "Only when sexual violence is perceived as a political issue, when it is publicly discussed and analysed, will it be possible to establish the causes and contexts and to envisage strategies to overcome this situation," she says. Official rehabilitation efforts apart, one notable finding of D'Costa's research is the informal network of rape survivors, many of whom have kept in touch with each other, offering financial, emotional and other forms of assistance. This is particularly heartening given the lack of transnational feminist mobilisation around the *birangana*, which stands in sharp contrast to the movement for justice regarding Korean comfort women, to whom Japan has officially apologised. This is perhaps because the women's movement within Bangladesh was unable to elevate its post-war efforts above considerations of charity and justice for individual women.

D'Costa urges that it is not too late for the Bangladeshi women's movement to amplify its voice, motivate action, and seek truth and justice. Her book provides ample material to trigger this significant campaign.

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By Bina D'Costa (Routledge, 2011)

punches when calling for the need to analyse the authenticity and position of Southern feminists, who, with a few exceptions, are from privileged backgrounds, speak English and were trained in Western institutions, where many of them are still located. Yet the author also acknowledges that respondents, especially women, may be "more comfortable speaking with women researchers from locations other than their own, as the power inequality is at times quite visible between southern researchers and respondents." Referring to the complicated interplay between 'sameness and difference', she concludes, "We can no longer afford to argue about who has the right to represent, or whose repre-

of the killings and rapes and disputes the genocidal character of the violence, generated a predictable storm of protest in Bangladesh as well as corresponding sighs of moral relief in Pakistan, which is still weighed down by collective guilt over allegations of sexual violence and torture perpetrated by the Pakistan Army. Bose refutes the popular Bangladeshi claim of three million dead, and prefers instead to rely on the figure of 26,000 dead put forth by the Hamoodur Rahman Commission. The first report by this commission - constituted by the Bhutto government to investigate both the causes of the ignominious defeat and the claims of atrocities committed by the army against the local