

# An ode to loss and victory

Nine months, which undeniably felt much longer than they were, had passed and thousands of lives had been lost. The lion-hearted freedom fighters who had been in constant battle for days and nights persevered with every ounce of strength and courage they had left in them. Their resilience and unity had managed to weaken the nerves of the enemy to a significant extent and when the Indian forces joined the war on the third of December 1971, the 'Pak-bahini' was left reeling from licking their wounds.

"You could often hear and see fighter aircrafts flying across the sky," recollected A.M. Amanullah, who was a university student back then. In her personal narrative "The Exodus," in the book "Stories from the Edge," Zakia Rahman recalled a similar experience when the Indian Air Force was bombing strategic targets around Dhaka city and her house was very close to one of them. "... a thunderous sound rocked our home and we heard sounds of glass shattering," she wrote.

In the coming days, the Muktibahini, with its new ally – the Indian forces, attacked the common enemy with full force. News about one region after another becoming free could be heard on broadcasts made by the Swadhin Bangla Betar



Kendra. A sliver of hope began to spark in the hearts of the Bengali masses.

"My father came home for a short while to give us the news that victory was imminent," Ghulam Faruque Alam spoke, reminiscing a night in December '71. His father, S.M. Yusuf, was a leading freedom fighter in Sector 2.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani army started to strategize more desperately when they realized their time was almost up. With a wicked view to cripple the unborn nation, the military junta mapped out a vile plan and slaughtered over a thousand prominent intellectuals across the nation on the 14th of December 1971.

Everyone's hearts sank in deep sorrow when the news broke. Their hopes were rattled in these trying times, but they had to keep believing in that proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, and the darkest hour that heralds dawn.

Finally, on 16th December, 1971, the Pakistani army surrendered at the same ground – Suhrawardy Udyan – where 9 months earlier, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had called out for freedom and independence. Scores of people gathered, without any fear or worry, on the streets in celebration as the Liberation War had finally come to an end.

Over the span of the year of 1971, many had lost their lives and loved ones.

Many had left their beloved homeland.

Many were left injured, physically and/or mentally.

But at the cost of all this, freedom was finally achieved.

It was a freedom costly bought for a right to nurture the language of the ancestors, and the right to proudly hold dear the green and red flag, till the ends of time.

**By Nafisa Faruque**  
Star Lifestyle extends its thanks to photographer Abdul Hamid Raihan for sharing the photo.

## Birangana, representations of lost stories in the contemporary

Only recently, as International Women's Day was observed throughout the world; the demise of freedom fighter Ferdousi Priyabhashini just two days before the day we celebrated womanhood, and the preparation to commemorate our Independence Day within a few days create both a sense of loss and joy in our hearts and minds.

We already need to address the way in which to date Birangana is understood, as a victim of the war, and less a freedom fighter, though the entire purpose of giving them an identity, post liberation, was meant to allow people to understand the involvement of women in our history, as brave and sacrificing, in much the same way as a male 'Bir' has been hailed, as victorious and independent.

Yet, this very act that has resulted in an unsilencing of wartime rape, causes for the rise of a culture of 'khota' (scornful remarks that remind one of an unpleasant event), as Nayanika Mookherjee writes in her 2015 book, *The Spectral Wound*.

She follows the women of Enayetpur who were brought to Dhaka in 1992 to testify their stories and demand justice through the trial of Ghulam Azam,

alleged War Criminal during the liberation war of 1971. The moment these women's experiences were publicised, their 'public secrets' were plunged into the memories of the individuals who had decided to accept these identities and move past them or live with it in silence.

Breaking this silence and ensuring that the memories of these events be regarded not as something to be scornful about rather as the experiences of Brave Women, as connotated by the term Birangana, is the wish and work of many. Thus, in the 2018 Ekushey Book Fair, Fayeza Hasanat, talks about the importance of her translation of Neelima Ibrahim's book, *Aami Birangana Bolchi*, which has been published by the name: *A War Heroine, I Speak*.

Dr Fayeza Hasanat, who has also translated Rupjalal from Bengali to English, shares that she had read the piece as a student in the '90s and as time went by, realised that there was more to the accounts of the seven Biranganas than just their stories.

"As a gender conscious person, and as a woman, I read the book again, as I grew older, not much wiser, and I understood

that the book needed to be translated," shares Fayeza.

When asked about the image of the Birangana as the dishevelled looking, scared with undone hair, torn clothes on a bent over hidden posture, woman, Fayeza elicits as to exactly why it was necessary that this Bangla book be present in the market in English. She explains that she wanted to bring this book to the youth a chunk of whom are likely to be avid readers of English, and unless they understand and embodied the lens of trauma and the lens of wartime that are essential to the creation of the Birangana identity, there will be little change in the way people view and reproduce the Birangana and her role as victim of war, to earn sympathy and empathy from others through a broadcast of torture, trauma and pain.

Moreover, Fayeza discusses that, "The discourse of gendered language is what is upheld in the categorical creation of the Birangana." Once they are recognised as freedom fighters, they can choose to live their lives a little more proudly, and all the more courageous for the nation, not having been excluded from realities,

normalcy and dailyness, as rape, even on the body it is coerced upon, inherently makes one, especially, the women, entitled to shame. So moving away from the possibilities of shame and towards a more positive understanding of Birangana, not just in the minds of particular segment of population, but nationwide and then globally, will only come about with more public conversations about the issues.

Ferdousi Priyabhashini's public evocation of bravery when she declared herself as a Birangana, remains exemplary, because both Bir and Birangana, fought with their bodies, says Fayeza. The creation of the difference to acknowledge the experiences of a male and female body becomes indeed important to understand the effects of the wartime history on individuals. The only thing that is pleaded of people is to be understanding and more aware about the implications of the term Birangana, and in turn be respectful and grateful for their presence and lives because they fought for many thousands of others who can call themselves citizens of Bangladesh.

**By Ayesha Rahman Chowdhury**