

# History and Herstory

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The year 1971, a year that is firmly entrenched in everyone's mind as being a momentous time in history. Those were tumultuous times, insecure times, distressing, perturbing, worrying times. Those were the times when passion, fearlessness, spontaneity, commitment, visionary dreams and ideals ruled over calculations of what one stands to gain, what losing entails. At most, one would lose one's life. On the other hand, not taking part could mean ending in a complete annihilation of the people of Bangladesh. There simply was no other option.

The population of Bangladesh, then still globally known as East Pakistan, consisted of seventy-five million people. An estimated ten million refugees from Bangladesh fled to neighbouring India, while thirty million were calculated as being internally displaced. The figures of those internally displaced vary between twenty to thirty million (UN in Bangladesh and Totten, Samuel; Bartrop, Paul Robert (2008). *Dictionary of Genocide: A-L*), according to different sources. This meant that they had to leave their homes and live in other parts of the country, seeking refuge in people's homes, often fleeing one village or area, only to hear of an impending attack and move to another village. Of the popularly estimated three million killed—no proper census was ever done of the number of deaths and number of women who had been raped, this is the number that is generally and officially quoted—many were from this group of the internally displaced people, a large number of whom were women. Apart from these approximately forty million people who had to flee their homes, consisting of more than half of the population of the land, a very large



**Captain Dr Sitara was the Commanding Officer of the hospital known as the Bangladesh Hospital, with almost 400 beds under Sector 2 in 1971.**

PHOTO: PURBADESH



**Women activists hold placards, one of which reads, "Take up arms, mother and sisters, and liberate Bangladesh."**

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MUKTIJUDDHA SMRITI TRUST

number joined the Mukti Bahini, the freedom fighters.

We have read and heard many recollections, many books, articles, researches on the Liberation War that gave Bangladesh its territory, its flag, its recognition as a nation state. Narratives, write-ups, interviews, films, novels, have been written about the valiant role played by the Mukti Bahini. The most common narrative, and the one that very quickly comes to one's mind when visualising the nine months of the war itself, is that of male freedom fighters, both those who had been officially recruited as part of the Units, as well as the guerrillas, inching their way through mud and slush, silently, and then an assault on a Pakistani camp. It is almost always a male visual that is projected, either through films, writings, either fiction or memoirs. The picture of women during these nine months, were either of women who were raped, tortured and taken to army and collaborators' camps, or that of women who fed, gave shelter and protected the freedom fighters when they ventured into the villages to conduct an operation, or to "recce" (reconnaissance) the area. Occasionally women were projected as those that collected information, surveyed the area for the freedom fighters, or carry messages and occasionally even arms. But very, very seldom have women been recognised as having fought the war head on, alongside men in armed operations.

I do not in any way wish to diminish the very important and very risk-laden role

played by women as described above. Every person's action and role is and was of great significance and value. This was 1971, when women's consciousness had not reached the level it has reached today and thus till today remains undocumented. Many women who had crossed over to India to take part in the War, fight directly in the battlefields, were sent off to be trained as nurses, or support staff to treat wounded fighters and other refugees in need of medical attention. Living in difficult quarters, many of them who had no previous experience or training in nursing did a tremendous job of treating and caring for the wounded soldiers. First-hand accounts of some of my valiant friends who left the comfort of their homes and their families and went to work in these hospitals not knowing how long they would need to remain there, with little or no news of the family members they left behind, bravely living in conditions that were minimal in nature, no proper bathing facilities as they were used to, sleeping arrangements that were so different and difficult, relay all this with such humour and a touch of nostalgia, a deep sense of satisfaction of having participated in their Liberation War, of having played a role. When they do get together, not so often these days as so many have scattered to different parts, it is wonderful to feel their camaraderie.

Another group of active participants during our Liberation War, were the artists and performers. Again leaving their homes and often families behind, they played the

important task of keeping the morale of our freedom fighters and also those living in miserable conditions inside the refugee camps up, imparting a sense of positive power, of keeping the energy going, of providing music, moments of happiness or some form of joy in such difficult conditions. It is only those who have been in struggles, who realise what a role culture, music, dance, puppetry, songs, films, plays etc. play. In both of these roles, we find women in greater numbers than elsewhere. There are other roles too, that women played during the Liberation War. Space restrictions stop me from naming all the different roles women were involved in.

Some women were also involved in directly participating in armed battles. In a few cases, when they were discovered, it was felt safer to send the women off to a place which was considered "safer". The late Shirin Banu Mitil being one such example. Kakon Bibi was another such woman, playing a myriad of roles together, combatant, collecting information, she was also picked up by the Pakistani army, raped, managed to escape and resume her combatant role. There are others. Some recognised by the media, by society at large, some lost.

Of those recognised by the State, giving them gallantry awards, only two were identified. One, Captain Sitara Begum awarded the Bir Protik, as the Commanding Officer of the Bangladesh Hospital under Sector 2.

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