

The discursive silence of women in 1971

KAJALIE SHEHREEN ISLAM

Words alter, words add, words subtract. – Susan Sontag

Yasmin Saikia, in her book *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*, argues that the "forgotten, hidden memories belong to women who were terrorized, brutally sexualized, and marginalized in the war" and that though they were not directly involved in battle, they "became the site on which violence and power were inscribed".

Between 200,000-400,000 women are said to have been violated during Bangladesh's Liberation War. While the stories of some survivors made it to the newspapers and reports on their rehabilitation abounded in the post-conflict press in 1972, women were almost nonexistent in the media and their plight completely absent in the media of 1971. In the discourse of a war apparently between Muslims and Hindus, Pakistan and India, the media discourse was dominated with references to Muslim men and Muslim "brotherhood" while Hindus in general were portrayed as the enemy and Hindu men specifically depicted as justified targets of violence. Women were neither the audience nor the subject of the news of 1971 and were largely absent from the entire discourse, except for Muslim "mothers and sisters" as victims.

Several news stories reported that Muslim women were being raped by Hindu soldiers in Pakistan, as well as being kidnapped from refugee camps in India and violated. Such reports served at least three purposes—to instil fear, to



ARTIST: ZAHANGIR ALOM

unimaginable fear and anxiety because Hindu *goondas* with the help of the Indian army are known to be routinely raping Muslim girls and women" (*Dainik Sangram*, September 9, 1971, p. 1). An op-ed piece published on October 19 talks about not only "Hindu *goondas*" but also peacekeepers in refugee camps in India raping Muslim women. The newspaper played on the vulnerabilities of parents of young women to instil fear, create hatred for the enemy and as a result, form support for the Pakistani army.

These stories do not only report "events" but also their consequences if nothing is done. For example, an editorial published in late-August warns those "confused by Indian propaganda and getting involved in self-destructive activities against their own country, including violating the honour of East Pakistani Muslim women and men, that the same will happen to their mothers' and sisters' honour and their life and property at the hands of Hindus" (*Dainik Sangram* August 28, 1971, p. 2). The story describes the "lustful looks" of Hindu goons towards Muslim "mothers and sisters" and reports on Muslim girls being taken away from their parents in the dark of night and turned into objects of consumption of Indian soldiers.

These news stories create a stark polarisation in which Hindus are portrayed as the enemy, particularly as the perpetrators of sexual violence against Muslim women. They not only avoid the role of Muslim men, but also completely exclude Hindu women. In a letter to the editor entitled "Protect the honour of Muslim women", the writer says that along with all other grievances, "the thought of Hindu *goondas* playing with the honour of Muslim women is driving us crazy.

Hindustani *goondas* take away young Muslim girls from their families in the evening in trucks and return them after sunrise. The saddest thing is that lecherous Hindu soldiers don't take any Hindu women for this. As Muslims we can't tolerate this scene anymore" (*Dainik Sangram* 19 October 1971, p. 2).

This letter has a number of implications: Hindus, particularly soldiers of the Indian army, are goons and rapists. Muslim women are victims. Muslim men should not tolerate this. In saying that Hindu women are not being picked up, it even seems to imply that it would have been more bearable if the alleged Hindu perpetrators were raping Hindu women as well. Also, it is implying that Muslims (not human beings in general) should not be tolerating such crimes against Muslim

Women were neither the audience nor the subject of the news of 1971 and were largely absent from the entire discourse, except for Muslim "mothers and sisters" as victims.

strike at the ego and honour of Muslim men, and, ultimately, to present the protection of Muslim women from Hindu criminals as a prime duty of the ideal Pakistani Muslim man. For example, a report in the *Dainik Sangram* states that "Guardians of Muslim girls are living in

(and not all) women. The letter further describes past instances of oppression of Muslims where they waged jihad against the enemy and the writer beseeches the government to take steps to "save Muslim women from becoming victims of Hindu *goondas*".

Just as discursive language creates meaning, so does discursive silence. The discourse of the ideal Pakistani Muslim man included the jihadi and the martyr in the path of God, but not the rapist. Yet, rape was a major weapon of war during the independence struggle of Bangladesh. The silence around the rape of Hindu as well as Muslim women by Muslim men suggests that, unlike violence against Hindus which is justified in the media, sexual violence in general and against Muslim women in particular, is taboo.

This taboo continued into post-war Bangladesh. In writing about the post-liberation government's silencing of a spectrum of voices, especially women who had experienced sexual violence, Bina D'Costa in her book *Nation building, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia*, cites the lack of documentation pertaining to rape camps, the use of rape as a war strategy in 1971 or the testimonies of the rape survivors of 1971, as having been a deliberate destruction or due to negligence. Stories that were told initially, contends D'Costa, were done so strategically to attract international attention and, subsequently, to gain financial and technical support in rebuilding of the new nation-state. Even though international organisations worked for the rehabilitation of war babies in post-conflict Bangladesh, she argues that their "actual narratives have been entirely excluded from the official construction of history-making" which she attributes to "a complex combination of maintaining traditional norms, strategic silence by the state, and the negotiated survival strategies of women who became mothers through wartime sexual violence".

Nur Masalha, in his discussion of the Palestinian 1948 catastrophe, writes that by changing, distorting and silencing narratives, destruction of memory or "memoricide" takes place. In the case of Bangladesh, it may be argued that memoricide began during the war itself through the exclusion of certain narratives, particularly those of women. This incomplete story later formed an incomplete history of the war of 1971, including the suppression of the authentic plight of the victims and survivors of sexual violence. Only in recent decades have we started addressing this issue, but much remains to truly honour these women in their lifetimes. Hearing and telling their stories is just the beginning.

Kajalie Shehreen Islam is Assistant Professor at the University of Dhaka. This article is an excerpt from her unpublished doctoral thesis titled "Religious Ideology in the Bangladesh War of 1971: A Discourse Analysis of East Pakistan's Anti-Liberation Newspapers".