

Healing the wounded ...

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

the GB Hospital in Agartala. Despite the many challenges, no one ever died at our hospital which was quite miraculous—except for an engineer who had succumbed to a heart attack.

Besides providing medical services, women also received firearms training, and some even fought side by side with the men. It is unfortunate that today they are increasingly being portrayed as victims when the truth is that the majority of them were active participants. That is why you will find many women among the list of intellectuals who were murdered.

But it doesn't even occur to people now, how families had managed to run with most of the men away. It was because of the women. They were the ones collecting crops from the fields, taking children to school and looking after homes.

I suspect one reason people nowadays can't grasp the role of women is because they don't understand that the Liberation War was a "peoples' war". Nearly every person contributed to it, however they could, because they felt like their dreams were being taken away. And so every single person, including the women, were inspired to fight in their own way, knowing they were doing it to save their own dreams—through a magnificent and truly collective effort.

Minu Haque

A month after I entered Dhaka University, the non-cooperation movement started. Like everyone, I was supportive of



Minu Haque

PHOTO: STAR

movements promoting Bangladeshi nationalism. I used to dance, so I joined a dance programme for BTV as a teenager.

When things flared up, my mother stopped me from going to university on March 1. I remember seeing my friends carrying bamboos for Bangabandhu's March 7 speech, although I only saw the speech from our rooftop—Dhaka was very open then.

Our house was located exactly opposite to the Rajarbagh Police Line. On March 25, I remember playing caram when at 10 pm, rickshaw pullers started to shout that the army had arrived. Mustafa Monwar and Badal Rahman came to tell us that the Pakistani Army had taken over BTV. All landlines were disconnected and the Pakistan Army burned down the Rajarbagh Police Line and surrounded all houses in the area.

The Bangladeshi police fought them from rooftops with whatever they had, saving the lives of people in the houses. But many were killed near the Police Line. The next day, independence was declared.



Sultana Kamal and Zafrullah Chowdhury (left and right—front row) in front of a field hospital of the Gonoshasthaya Kendra.

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GONOSHASTHAYA KENDRA

Members of the Crack Platoon started to come to our house around May to meet one of my relatives; we weren't allowed to listen to their conversations. One day, Shahdat bhai asked my mother to let me go to India and help the liberation movement. My brother-in-law, Altaf Mahmud, and others, were going to Melaghar. But my mother refused to let me go with them.

From July the Pakistan Army decided that they needed entertainment, so they gathered names of dancers and entertainers. One day a jeep came to our house and the Pakistani Army asked for me. They said I had to go somewhere to dance. My brother said I was sick. They wanted to check for themselves but somehow, they were convinced to leave. They came back the next day, and the next, but my brother said I had fainted and hurt myself. That's when they said they would come back the next day and take me by force, so my mother took me to Sufia Kamal's house. In August, my mother told Altaf Mahmud to take me to India.

Fate had it that Altaf Mahmud would end up not coming with me. Instead he sent me with others and said he would come later. He never made it. It took us three days to reach our destination as the roads were terrible. I had my first taste of what the war in the village areas was like—I saw young boys in *lungis* carrying rifles.

This made me realise that when we talk about women, their number one contribution really came in the form of mothers sending their boys to fight in the war; and not only boys, girls too—like my

own mother had done. People don't realise how much courage that takes, and what kind of sacrifice.

In India I met a lot of Bengalis active in the war effort, including Sultana Kamal. Khaled Musharraf was my Commander in Sector 2. We were working on acres and acres of land donated to us by a gentleman in Kolkata. It was a beautiful place. News came to me the next day that Altaf bhai had been caught. I never got to see him again.

Everything in the hospital was made with bamboo sticks, but it was beautifully made and everything was separated very well for optimal functionality. It was like a medical college, only made with bamboos. Captain Akhter, who was a doctor, taught us how to give injections, take blood pressure, etc. Doctor Murshed also joined us after some members of the Crack Platoon were apprehended.

Each of us worked eight-hours a day every day. Boys worked the night shift, and girls worked during the day. Although we had received good medical training, some days when we had patients with serious bullet injuries, it got difficult. The images of those injuries are still fresh in my memory.

Most of the wounded fighters were people from villages. What those people didn't give in the battlefield, people just can't imagine. When I look at their plight now, I know that they have been badly neglected, despite them giving and giving, until there was nothing more to give.

The treatment we provided was surprisingly good. People were recovering very fast. When people with shell injuries were being brought in, we could hear the

ambulance coming from a long way out. We were told not to look at those with shell injuries. But I once looked at someone who had stepped on a mine. He had lost his leg. They had to cut it off completely, but parasites were still infesting on his skin. We would sing songs to him. At one point, even we couldn't go near him, he was soon sent somewhere else for treatment.

Because this was in the middle of the jungle, we would have to deal with a lot of malaria cases. These were tough times. I used to remember how my mother had told me when I was leaving, "I will meet you on the Day of Judgement." That's how things were. We didn't know if life would continue for very long, whether we would ever get to meet our loved ones who we were forced to leave behind. Yet, after ending our daily duties, all the girls would sit at night and sing songs under the open sky.

Towards December, we saw the Indian Army gathering near the border. They were apparently getting ready to launch an offensive along with our freedom fighters. This is when we were sent to Kolkata. Our journey there was very difficult, and when independence was finally celebrated in Bangladesh, we didn't even know it had happened.

We returned to Bangladesh later with many other refugees on January 4, 1972. Everything was just completely devastated.

When I went back home, I remember the servant of our house refusing to let me in. She was new, and so didn't recognise me. Someone else had to come to the door and say, "let her in, she is a woman of this house."