

How could we forget our women martyrs?



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WHEN I ask students and young people if they can name some women martyrs of our Liberation War, I see blank looks or faces filled with confusion. Sometimes, a few of them would name Selina Parveen, the

journalist whose name and photo appear in newspapers on the Martyred Intellectuals Day. Apart from her, hardly anyone features in their list of names. Can we blame them for this amnesia? I think we should not, because, in the last five decades, we have allowed this collective amnesia to take hold. During the Pakistan military's genocidal campaign "Operation Searchlight" on the night of March 25, 1971, in which the military killed thousands of unarmed Bengalis, the Dhaka University community was one of the prime targets as it had been a key epicentre of the movement for democracy. The death squads unleashed by the military junta killed 10 teachers and over a hundred unarmed students in their halls of residence. The killing spree was extended to employees and workers. Madhusudan Dey, owner of Madhur canteen at Dhaka University, was brutally killed along with several members of his family in the following morning. Madhusudan's wife Jogmaya Dey, son Ranjit Dey, and daughter-in-law Rina Rani Dey were also killed. Though Madhu is honoured as a "Shaheed" (martyr), Jogmaya and Rina are rarely recognised as such. In early March 1971, the killing of Charubala in Jessore brought ordinary people to the streets to protest against the Pakistani junta. Women came out with brooms to protest at the killing and further fuelled the non-cooperation movement in the build-up to the Liberation War. Despite being one of

the first martyrs of 1971, Charubala's name could not make it to any list of martyrs prepared by the state. How many of us today know about the sacrifices of Jogmaya, Rina, Charubala, or the many other women who sacrificed their lives for the liberation of this country? How could we forget them?

The Liberation War is presented to the post-war generation, one to which I belong, as being largely a masculine affair where women were confined only to "mainstreaming" or "stereotypical" gender roles. Beside the Biranganas, who were raped by Pakistani soldiers, any discussion of women's role usually describes women as having supported the freedom fighters with food, shelter and/or funds, or having nursed the wounded and hidden weapons risking their own lives, or having willingly sent their sons to war or lost their loved ones, or having been subjected to sexual abuse and rape. In the says-it-all discourse of the Liberation War, one common refrain is: "tirish lokkho shaheed ar dui lokkho ma-boner ijoter binimoye ei swadhinita" ("the independence was achieved at the cost of three million lives and the honour of two lakh mothers and sisters"), which tends to ignore the fact that many women sacrificed their lives for the motherland. Women are presented merely as the victims of war, rather than as actors in the liberation struggle for Bangladeshi nationhood.

Only a few names of women martyrs have made it to the pages of history books. In the national document, *The History of the Liberation War: Documents*, only three names of women martyrs have been recorded, but are not recognised as Shaheed. Instead, they have been described as being the "victim" of events. There are instances where the same event is described differently for men and women: the sacrifice of male members of a family is described as martyrdom while the sacrifice of women is described as



'Victim' by Aminul Islam, oil on canvas.

"being killed". The mainstream history is constructed in such a way that "Shaheeds" are always thought to be a male figure. The state-sponsored list of martyrs contains two women martyrs: poet Meherunnessa and journalist Selina Parveen. Beside them, reminiscences of the life of Lutfunnahar Helen and Dr Ayesha Bedora Chowdhury by their family members have been documented in *Smriti 1971* (edited by Rashid Haider and published by Bangla Academy). This exclusion of women's names, stories and histories remains an indispensable dimension of the masculine historiography of the Liberation War, the most glorious chapter in the history of the people of Bangladesh.

In the first two decades after the war, only a handful of books shed light on women's role but the focus was mostly limited to

Biranganas. More books containing women's challenging and untold stories in 1971 started to get published in the 1990s. Stories of Taramon Bibi, Kakon Bibi, Captain Setara Begum, Sahanara Parveen and many other women came to the fore. These stories made it impossible to ignore women's brave roles, but it was also evident that there was still a lack of interest in gathering information or publishing stories about women martyrs.

I researched and compiled the stories of women martyrs Bhagirathi (of Pirojpur), Anjuman Ara (of Parbatipur, Dinajpur), Surlala Debi (of Dinajpur), Bhamor (of Saidpur, Nilphamari), Sufia Khatun (of Saidpur, Nilphamari), Hosne Akhtar (of Saidpur, Nilphamari), Sarojini Mallick (of Saidpur, Nilphamari), Baboni Rajgour (of Patrakhola, Moulvibazar), Lasimoon Kurmi

(of Patrakhola, Moulvibazar), Rangama Kurmi (of Patrakhola, Moulvibazar), Salgi Kharia (of Patrakhola, Moulvibazar), Kanakprova Debi (of Patuakhali), Sonai Rani Samaddar (of Patuakhali), Bidhyasundari Das (of Patuakhali), Sabitri Rani Dutta (of Patuakhali) and Kiron Rani Saha (of Bhanga, Faridpur). These are just a few names among the hundreds of thousands of women martyrs.

A lot of women were killed in the Pakistani army camps in 1971. There is no document or statistics about the number of women killed in the camps. Those women have never been treated as martyrs either by their family or society and the state. Many eyewitnesses told various news media platforms about their experiences of discovering women's body in mass graves and finding women's hair, glass-made bangles, sarees and women's skeletons in the camps run by the Pakistan army.

It was remarkable to find how gender-based memory and amnesia operate in historical data collection. For my research, I interviewed some people who had lost both of their parents in 1971. Many of them had vivid memories of the father but only fleeting memories of the mother. They explained that they had not been asked about the mother before, and most of the time they only talked about the father. Since they were not used to talk about the mother, they forgot many things associated with her. It is a sorry state of our societal reality that women get little importance whether alive or dead.

This must change. We need to get ourselves out of the masculine historiography of the Liberation War.

Forty-eight years is too long a time to wait for the recognition of our women martyrs. The state should waste no more time to begin a process of recognising and identifying these women. They deserve the honour, and we must ensure that they get it.

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Role of Baljit Singh Tyagi and BSF in our Liberation War



JUSTICE OBAIDUL HASSAN

IT was the last week of May or first week of June 1971. Responding to the declaration of independence by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation, my father Dr Akhlakul Hossain Ahmed, who was a member of provincial assembly (MPA) of the then East Pakistan, moved to Moheshkhola under the Tura district of Meghalaya. My father decided to get actively engaged in organising the war around that region. During our liberation war, thousands of Bengali civilians took refuge at Moheshkhola. It was the gateway for the youths intending to join the liberation war for moving from Netrokona, Sunamganj and some parts of Kishoreganj districts. A youth camp was set up there to recruit the youths for providing them with training so as to join the fight against the Pakistani occupation army and their local collaborators.

My father started leading the activities of the said youth camp as camp-in-charge. A few days later, on August 14, 1971, my mother travelled to Moheshkhola along with her four children. We took refuge at Moheshkhola and started staying in a thatched-roof dwelling shed. After December 16, 1971, during the last week of the month, we returned to our motherland Bangladesh. After coming back to Mohonganj (Netrokona), my birthplace, we found our house burnt down by the Pakistani army.

When I was growing up, I often wanted to visit Moheshkhola where we took refuge in 1971. On April 16, 2016, I had the chance to finally fulfil my dream. I along with my younger brother Saiful Hassan, who was only two-years-old during the war of liberation, entered the Meghalaya territory of India at about 1.00 p.m. where we were warmly received by the district administration officers from both west and south Garo hills (Tura and Baghmara) and the officers of Border Security Force (BSF). After arriving there, the

government officials informed me that my entourage and I have been declared as state guests by the government of Meghalaya. BSF officer Mr Rathore took me to a monument built in memory of the martyrs of our liberation war. All the martyrs were BSF soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the cause of independence of Bangladesh. I placed a bouquet of flowers as my humble tribute at the monument.

On November 18 of this year, Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed, a Judge of Bangladesh Supreme Court, High Court Division, sent me a message where it was mentioned that BSF's lone survivor Mr BS Tyagi, who saved Killapara during 1971, had passed away. Mr Tyagi was the father of his Lordship's best friend, Mr Ajay Tyagi, who is a lawyer practicing in the Supreme Court of India. Mr BS Tyagi was a 1971 war veteran. Mr Refaat Ahmed also sent a photo of Mr Tyagi, visiting a monument at Killapara, Dalu. Seeing this photograph, I recalled my visit to the said monument, although I didn't know that the

place where the monument has been erected is known as Killapara. I felt an interest to know more about Mr BS Tyagi and the role of BSF during our liberation war in 1971.

In 1971, BSF was still a relatively new organisation. The first Director General of BSF was Mr KF Rustomji. According to Mr Anil Kamboj, a former IG of BSF, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi authorised the BSF to take on Pakistani troops in erstwhile East Pakistan several months before the war entered the decisive month of December 1971. According to contemporary newspapers and other sources, it is found that Mrs. Gandhi said to the BSF, "Do what you like, but don't get caught." Mr Anil Kamboj further said in an article, published in an online paper, that on March 29, 1971, the then Indian Army Chief Field Marshal SHF Manekshaw issued orders that BSF was to provide limited assistance to the Mukti Bahini who were pitted against the Pakistani troops. Thereafter, BSF entered the scene. Initially, a group of a hundred BSF *Jawans*, under the

leadership of some handpicked officers of BSF who were well-versed in commando attack, demolitions, etc., got prepared. The aim of this group of BSF soldiers was to provide aid to the freedom fighters to carry out their mission successfully.

One of the key responsibilities of the BSF was to provide training to the Mukti Bahini. BSF started assisting the Mukti Bahini in causing subversion and sabotage inside Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). The civilian population of Bangladesh wholeheartedly worked for the cause of achieving liberation of the country. Young people from all over the country joined the Mukti Bahini. In the said situation, BSF's assistance and organisational skills played an important role in achieving the goal.

With the active facilitation of BSF, our liberation war leader Mr Tajuddin Ahmed (later Prime Minister of Mujibnagar Government) and Barrister Amirul Islam, the then MNA, could establish liaison with the government of India. When Tajuddin Ahmed and Amirul Islam crossed the border, the BSF personnel took them to Mr Golok Mojumder, the then Inspector General of BSF, Bengal frontier at Kolkata. According to Mr Anil Kamboj, BSF played a significant part in forming the Bangladesh provisional government.

Mr Anil Kamboj further added that the government-in-exile of Bangladesh initially started functioning at the BSF frontier headquarters in Kolkata. Later, they shifted to a nearby building at the Theatre Road. This place was called Mujibnagar headquarters.

After the demise of Mr BS Tyagi, I came to know that during our liberation war, on May 25, the Pakistani occupation army had attacked the Killapara Post of BSF (nearer to Dalu Bazar). The area had experienced heavy shelling from across the border and large-scale atrocities carried out by Pakistani soldiers, forcing thousands of people to cross over to the Garo hills area of Meghalaya. The target of Pakistan army was to disconnect the strategic Dalu-Tura road to open up the war towards the interiors of India. Their plan, however, got halted by a small group of brave BSF soldiers led by a valiant and courageous company commander and the

then Assistant Commandant of BSF, Mr Baljit Singh Tyagi (BS Tyagi). At one point of time, the Pakistani soldiers could occupy the BSF post of Killapara. But within 2-3 hours, the BSF started a counter-attack against the Pakistani soldiers by firing mortar shells. Mr Tyagi ordered the mortar shelling though it was a standing order that the mortar could not be fired without the prior permission from the battalion headquarters of BSF. But Mr Tyagi, to save his motherland and the people of Bangladesh who took refuge at the border area of Meghalaya, ordered the firing, taking the risk of facing disciplinary action. Though the Pakistani troops could occupy the Killapara outpost, their victory was very short-lived.

Finally, under the heroic command of Mr BS Tyagi, the BSF could regain the control of the said outpost. Many Pakistani soldiers died in the said battle and, on the Indian side, nine brave soldiers of BSF sacrificed their lives to save their motherland and the Bangladeshi refugees. Their supreme sacrifice shall remain etched in the history of our war of liberation.

Today in this glorious month of our victory, I believe that the role of BSF and the strong support that India extended, as our trusted friend during the war of liberation, will remain intact as a strong foundation of the affiliation between the people of the two nations.

My heartfelt and deepest gratitude and salute to the Border Security Force (BSF), particularly to Mr BS Tyagi who led the battle of Killapara. I also express my humble tribute to the martyrs, namely head constable Mon Bahadur Rai, Naik Kalyan Singh Negi, Constables Khuladhar Saikia, Mon Bahadur Chhetri Promod Chandra Kalita, Manibhadra Singh, Devendra Dutta Bahuguna, Puran Bahadur Chand and Khem Bahadur Chandan, who heroically fought and sacrificed their lives to save the territory of their motherland as well as the lives of thousands of Bangladeshi people who took shelter at Dula Bazar area and neighbouring localities. The sacrifice of the above-named heroes shall remain alive forever in the heart of the Bangladeshis.

Justice Obaidul Hassan is a Judge of Bangladesh Supreme Court, High Court Division.



A monument built in memory of BSF soldiers who sacrificed their lives in the 1971 War of Liberation.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

DECEMBER 17, 1903
Flight of the Wright brothers

On this day in 1903 near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright made the first successful sustained flights in an airplane—Orville first, gliding 120 feet (36.6 metres) through the air in 12 seconds.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Layers
- 7 Ship pole
- 11 Wading birds
- 12 Free of skin
- 13 Puerto –
- 14 Metal sources
- 15 Aids illegally
- 16 Bright stars
- 17 Cuban coin
- 18 Movies
- 19 Earth cirler
- 21 D.C. baseballer
- 22 Mentally ready
- 25 Butter bit
- 26 Fabled race loser
- 27 Up
- 29 Nuisance
- 33 New parent, for

example

- 8 Upstart
- 9 Hotel giveaway
- 10 Find a new table for
- 16 Frisco player
- 18 "Over There!" writer
- 20 Earthy color
- 22 Contradictory idea
- 23 Response elicitors
- 24 Account addition
- 25 Canal setting
- 28 Canary chow
- 30 Dodge
- 31 Rocker Bob
- 32 Lock
- 34 Boxer's wear
- 36 Block

DOWN

- 1 Scuffle
- 2 "Survivor" team
- 3 Indy events
- 4 Art school class
- 5 Addition column
- 6 Cart puller
- 7 Coffee stirrer

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	O	L	O	R	C	A	F	E	S
A	R	I	D	E	A	V	A	N	T
R	E	B	E	L	B	A	N	C	O
A	G	E	A	R	I	T	A	M	P
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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

THE STORY OF MY LIFE IS ALMOST WRITTEN

SIGH

I WISH I HAD A REFRESH BUTTON

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

DON'T PANIC, BUT THERE'S A TEENSY-WEENSY, ITTY-BITTY, MICROSCOPIC CHANGE THAT I MIGHT BE PREGNANT.

NOTHING FOR CERTAIN, I JUST HAVE ONE OF THE SYMPTOMS.

YOU KNOW QUEENESS... IN THAT CASE, WE BOTH MIGHT BE PREGNANT.