

# Bangabandhu: A People's Hero Against Corruption

AHMED AHSANUZZAMAN

Essentially a people's hero, the most unique "disruptive leader" of Bengal, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-75) solved a number of the "wicked problems" that the West Pakistani feudal-colonial overlords orchestrated and let loose on his nation before its independence in 1971 "by challenging the existing cultural hegemonies that fail to serve communities through concentration of power and the marginalisation of stakeholders" (Ryan, Christian N 2016, 108). Under his charismatic leadership subaltern Bengalis fought their glorious war of

further increasing the miseries of the poor and distressed on whom the war had its heaviest toll. He was quick to realise that Bangladesh's independence would be at stake if the rat-race of the crooked worshippers of Mammon continued unrestricted.

One is reminded of the award-winning, star-studded blockbuster *Alor Michil* (Procession of Light, 1974) directed by the celebrated film-maker Narayan Ghosh Mita. Mita's film reflects the clash of values at a micro level — precisely in a family — in post-independence Bangladesh as

to know about the conspiracy, rushes to the concert hall where her dear *choto mama* is set to sing, and dies as she covers him up and is hit by the bullet in the process.

Indeed, Bangabandhu identified corruption as the primary evil, hindering Bangladesh's development. In many of his speeches during 1972-75 across the country, he repeatedly pointed it out. And with a view to building a corruption-free, exploitation-free, secular, welfare Bangladesh, he launched his campaign for the Second Revolution in 1975 which, with his brutal killing along with most of his family members excluding his two daughters, the incumbent Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana on 15 August 1975, came to an abrupt halt. In this piece, I will revisit two significant speeches in my translation which Bangabandhu delivered in 1975. In these speeches he gave reasons for his decision to shift to the presidential form of government from that of the parliamentary system, and at length discussed corruption and how it impacted the country. The first of the two was made at the National Parliament on 25 January after it agreed to the Fourth Amendment Bill to the Constitution. The other speech was delivered at his last public appearance at the Suhrawardy Uddyan in Dhaka organised to celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> Independence Day of the country on 26 March.

Importantly, Bangabandhu's idea of corruption is overarching. Black guards like black-marketeers, hoarders and bribe-takers are obviously corrupt. However, if one does not discharge one's duties and obligations by the book, s/he is also corrupt according to Bangabandhu's perception of corruption. Thus if government employees act like "masters" of the people when they are constitutionally their "servants," (25 January Speech; in Hasina, Sheikh and Baby Moudud, 2015) they are corrupt. Similarly, teachers are corrupt when they fail to inspire their students to grow as "proper humans" (26 March Speech). In these two speeches the Father of the Nation turned as hard as nails on corruption and the corrupted section of his people.

Nevertheless, Bangabandhu was convinced that the ordinary people of the country were not corrupt; that

they never engaged in corruption even when they did not have food to eat. He said in his 26 March speech, "Who commits the corruption I'm talking about? Are my farmers corrupt? No. Are my workers? No." The "educated 5 per cent," the social elites, are the "black-marketeers," "foreign agents," "hoarders," and they "launder money abroad." In the same speech he promised stern action against the miscreants, and asked his compatriots to help him catch them: "I won't forgive anyone. Whoever I catch, I won't spare. . . I'll visit village after village. We've to protest in such a way that the corrupt ones, bribe takers, profit mongers, and smugglers who smuggle my goods abroad are socially boycotted. We've to remember it. We've to arrange meetings in villages to identify the culprits — there's a thief to be caught, there's a bribe taker to be identified." With a heavy heart he added, "I don't know where all these thieves came from. Pakistan took away everything and left these thieves. We would have been saved had they taken away the thieves. Some brokers left; I would have been relieved if the thieves had gone away too." He then lashed out at the so-called "educated society" which, with its colonial mindset, treated the poor with disdain although they were the ones who provided money to create "engineer shahibs, doctor shahibs, officer shahibs, politician shahibs, member shahibs, all the shahibs": "What are you giving them? What are you returning? Critique yourselves. Speeches can't do any good. Writing great columns in the morning after having black marketed broadsheet of newspaper at night doesn't mean anything. Big talk in the morning after having black marketed medicine at night is useless. Talking about honesty after drinking at the Hotel Intercontinental is rubbish. Critique yourself, cleanse yourselves. Only then will you become humans."

Such scathing criticism of the supposedly educated section in the speech reveals that Bangabandhu did not have any illusions about that class. He knew well that the liberation war of 1971 was truly a people's war fought at the field level mostly by farmers and labourers. Hardly affected by the war, some amongst the educated few were

already on missions to build their own fortunes, sacrificing the interest of the ordinary people, as Bangabandhu quickly discovered. And he did not hesitate at all to slam these white-collared miscreants.

Bangabandhu presented the picture of an all-consuming hydra headed monster called corruption in his 25 January speech at the Parliament as follows: "Today you'll see corruption wherever you go. You'll find corruption in road constructions we're doing. There's corruption when you want to buy food. There's corruption when we want to buy goods. There's corruption in getting foreign handouts." And once more he identified the corrupted few unambiguously: "We, the five per cent comprising the educated society — we're the most corrupt people in the world." They were the ones who betrayed Bangabandhu and robbed the poor of their means of survival: "I bring food for them from abroad, the corrupt ones steal the food. I bring money for them, the corrupt ones steal the money. I will bring food with their money — you'll steal it and eat! I'll bring money — you'll launder it abroad." A deeply passionate Bangabandhu appealed to his compatriots to stick firmly to the four pillars of the Constitution — nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism — in order to save the country and the people. He called upon them to "overthrow the corrupted few, backhanders and smugglers."

Bangabandhu's indictment of corruption and the corrupt occupies a prominent position in his political philosophy. He attacked corruption in the Pakistani regime; he slapped it down in his own administration. The Second Revolution he introduced few months before his assassination aimed at bringing "smiles on the faces of the distressed people" to ensure which it became absolutely necessary to "stop oppression, repression and injustice" and every sort of corruption.

Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman is professor of English, Khulna University. Currently on lien to Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), Dhaka, he is a member of the sub-committee for International Publications and Translations of the National Implementation Committee of the Centenary Celebrations of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.



liberation, subverted the power structure, and liberated themselves through a nine-month long bloody war which claimed three million lives. However, Bangabandhu, the "Friend of Bengal," who had unequivocally condemned all-devouring corruption eating up Jinnah's "mutilated, moth-eaten" rickety Pakistan, to his utter anguish and disgust, discovered that in his very own *Sonar Bangla*, the Golden Bengal, a section of dishonest, greedy people was busy serving their own gods,

the younger brother, like million other freedom fighters, returns home triumphantly from the war with big dreams surrounding a prosperous, golden motherland, and the elder brother who, like thousand others, sets to hoarding and trading on the black market, and becomes rich overnight. The conflict intensifies; the elder brother, absolutely possessed by his greed of money, plans to liquidate his own sibling. However, their loving niece, Alo, the light of the family, gets

## REVIEWS

# A Review of War heroines Speak: The Rape of Bangladeshi Women in 1971 War of Independence

BY ZAKIA AFRIN

Dr. Nilima Ibrahim. Translated by Dr. Nusrat Rabbee. ISBN-10 : 1098357574. February, 2021.

It took Dr. Nilima Ibrahim 25 years to publish the narratives of rape victims of 1971 whom she interviewed almost immediately after the war. Another twenty-five years later, Dr. Nusrat Rabbee's translation, *War Heroines Speak: The Rape of Bangladeshi women in 1971 War of Independence* offers a mirror to a society riddled with violence against women and subjugation all around. The narratives have remained sincere to the Bangla version with a translated work of poignant and relevant language. Yet, it seems the stories have taken on many layers of meaning for the generation born after the liberation war. It's the 50<sup>th</sup> year of independence, but how liberated are we truly?

The English translation stays true to the original Bengali version. "In these quiet narratives, the young women and children clearly express: how they went from an idyllic childhood to the horrors of genocide; how they continued to live with painful memories and social exclusion after the war" writes Dr. Nusrat Rabbee in the back flap. An expert of statistics and machine learning, Dr. Rabbee took this task upon herself continuing the legacy of her family's intimate sacrifice during the liberation war.

We follow Mrs. T Nielsen on her journey to Denmark from Dhaka as she finds family oceans away from her own—Meherjan, who preferred to

live with the enemy in Pakistan rather than her natural home; Rina, who was brought back from the verge of leaving Bangladesh and later found a loving family. Shefali's strong rebuke of Bengali men who failed to save the women — "I have faced you and I have seen you from head to toe. I even had the misfortune to see your soul inside your body" — continues with the woes of Maina, whose trials and tribulations went on long into her married life. We witness Mina finding her old life after initial challenges. And then there is Fatema, the most tortured and affected one suffering a mental breakdown and coming back from hell to life. These stories are filled with deep melancholy that transcends the physical torture these women endured. After the war, a population ever so obsessed with detailed descriptions of rape incidents (how many were there? How long did they keep her? What was she wearing when she was found!) focused on that part of the history where *Birangonas* were rescued, given the honorary titles and put in Government care for rehabilitation. For generations, we have been memorizing the 3 million martyrs and 200,000 *Birangonas* who sacrificed themselves during the independence war. We have not so much discussed the treatment they received from their families, neighbours, friends and the

community in general.

As Nusrat Rabbee correctly points out in the preface, rape as a weapon of war has not received its due attention and urgency of international community. The first charges of rape/sexual violence came in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the early 90s. Prior to that, a definition of Rape was non-existent in International Law. The Bangladeshi ordeal just may be one of the worst cases of sexual violence documented in history. Dr. Rabbee applauds the domestic War Crimes Tribunal and justly demands accountability from Pakistan, a country who has not only refused to acknowledge the genocide but also rallied the international community to condemn the effort as religious oppression.

One could read the book to learn or revisit history, to get a glimpse of daily lives around Bangladesh during the conflict, and even to understand how religious conservatives have played a horrifying role in the violence inflicted on women. Then there is the opportunity to explore the much avoided discussion of parallel of the treatment of rape victims in today's Bangladesh. The victim blaming continues in the form of pointing to clothing items, roaming after hours, being with male friends and a list of activities trying to blame the wom-

an. Victims are forced to marry the rapist and many times carry a child conceived through rape. Women are constantly advised on how to dress, how to carry themselves in educational and professional spaces. Recently, for the first time, the Bangladesh High court ordered a rapist to marry his victim, a minor girl. The timing is particularly haunting—the 50th anniversary of independence, of the history of genocide, crimes against humanity, rape camps, and of the birth of the *Birangonas*. While a daughter of the Martyr intellectual Dr. Fazle Rabbee offers the new generation the legacy of heroism and resilience, the mirror she holds casts a shadow over our determination to build a socially just Bangladesh. It shows us how Government action without social acceptance can never last and patriarchy must end in all shape and form to offer women agency of their own lives.

It is a must-read for international readers interested in understanding Bangladesh and a guidebook for Bangladeshi youth to build a country envisioned during the liberation war. It is high time to revisit the aftermath of the war and our lessons unlearned. This translated work from Dr. Nusrat Rabbee is just the right place to start.

Zakia Afrin is a Human Rights Activist and Academic based in San Francisco, CA.

## WAR HEROINES SPEAK The Rape of Bangladeshi women in 1971 War of Independence

from Ami Birangona Boichi  
by Dr. Nilima Ibrahim

Translated by  
Dr. Nusrat Rabbee

