



A woman emerges out of hiding for the first time, carrying a rifle and accompanied by her children. The family were hiding from Pakistani troops during the Bangladesh War of Independence. Near Jessore, Bangladesh. December 1971.

PHOTO © PENNY TWEEDIE/PANOS PICTURES

Women photographers of the Bangladesh Liberation War

AMIRUL RAJIV

War and women – this phrase usually conjures up an image of women being victimised during war, but there are activities of women, fighting on the battlefield, or even capturing photos with a camera in hand, which represents that time.

The 1970s were a time of global turmoil, during which the media had to select their stories based on the gruesomeness of the event. The Vietnam War took up most of the attention of Western media. Bangladesh made headlines only after the devastating cyclone in 1970 left half a million people dead.

Bangladesh declared independence on March 26, following a brutal operation of the Pakistani army on March 25, 1971 during which they killed intelligentsias, students and East Pakistani Regiments of the armed forces. A million people were displaced

from the country within a month. News of the military operation spread across the world but as journalists were denied entry into the country, it was difficult to provide authentic news to the world. Going into the war zone posed great risks as well, since the Pakistani Army was ruthless and refused to maintain the protocols of war. As the military operation spread across the country, approximately 10 million people were forced out of the country and took refuge in India. In September 1971, “Carry on Dying” and “Can the Refugees Ever Go Home?” were headlines in British newspapers. Testimonies from the refugee camps largely shaped opinions about the war, which was still out of reach of photojournalists. However, there were a few brave photojournalists who were desperate enough to report from the war zone.

At that time, there were technical limitations as well. Photographers had to come out from the war zones to send their films to their agencies for publication as quickly as possible. If they wanted to do a story, they had to type it up, go to the telex operator and ask them to telex it.

This piece is a tribute to a group of individual women photographers who stood their ground, broke social norms, and paved the way for future generations to provide us with glimpses of history through their iconic images of an unrecognised genocide.

SAYEEDA KHANAM

One of the most widely-known photographs of women freedom fighters, showing a group of women in sharees, rifles in hands, undergoing combat training, was taken by Sayeeda Khanam.

She took this photo just before the war began, at Azimpur Girls' School, a makeshift training camp at the time. But the irony is that she could not take a single photo during the nine-month war, she was stuck in Dhaka. This is what she calls her biggest regret in life.



Sayeeda Khanam's article in the victory day edition of Bichitra Magazine, 1972

COURTESY OF BANGLADESH ON RECORD

In a 1972 essay, published in the weekly magazine Bichitra, Khanam wrote: “I think I failed in every aspect miserably. I could not take a single picture in these nine months. The helplessness frustrated me each and every moment in that time. If only I had better equipment – a telephoto lens and few colour negatives, I could record a bit of the history of these nine months even after being stuck on the second floor of a building.”

When news broke out of Bangladesh's victory, she went out with her camera and only one roll of medium format film. She was photographing freedom fighters in front of Hotel Intercontinental, where a crowd was cheering them on. All of a sudden, shots were fired into the

crowd. Khanam sought shelter in a nearby house while other spectators fled the scene. After a few hours, she attempted to return to the same place to take photos, but got caught in the crossfire in front of the hotel. Fortunately, she survived, unharmed. One of the photos she took on that day was of the MuktiBahini on the roof of a bus, and of the dead body of a soldier found near Ramna Park.

After the return of Sheikh Mujib in 1972, the students of Azimpur Girls School gave him a guard of honour, which was covered by Sayeeda Khanam. She also worked as a volunteer nurse at Holy Family Hospital, photographing child victims who were wounded in a grenade explosion. According to her lifelong friend Aleya Ferdousi, Khanam

rescued and rehabilitated four female war victims from the Azimpur China building. She kept regular contact with the women who had been tortured during the Liberation War.

Photographer Golam Mustafa (1940-2021), recipient of the Ekushey Padak, recalls seeing her courageously working at a political procession in Sadarghat, despite being warned by her male counterparts not to go there. Consequently, she lost her glasses, sandal, camera strap, and her sharee was torn, but she did not care about such risks.

Khanam befriended legendary filmmaker Satyajit Ray after she met him in 1962 for an assignment for the magazine Chitrani. She later worked on three of Ray's films

Training in Azimpur field, before Liberation. Dhaka, Bangladesh. 1971.

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