

VICTORY DAY

SPECIAL

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Bombay” in 1981, after spending 10 years building connections before starting work. She published 18 books of photography and contributed to publications such as LIFE, Rolling Stone, The New Yorker, The New York Times, and Vanity Fair. She produced her first book, “Passport” in 1974, which contains, among others, photos of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.

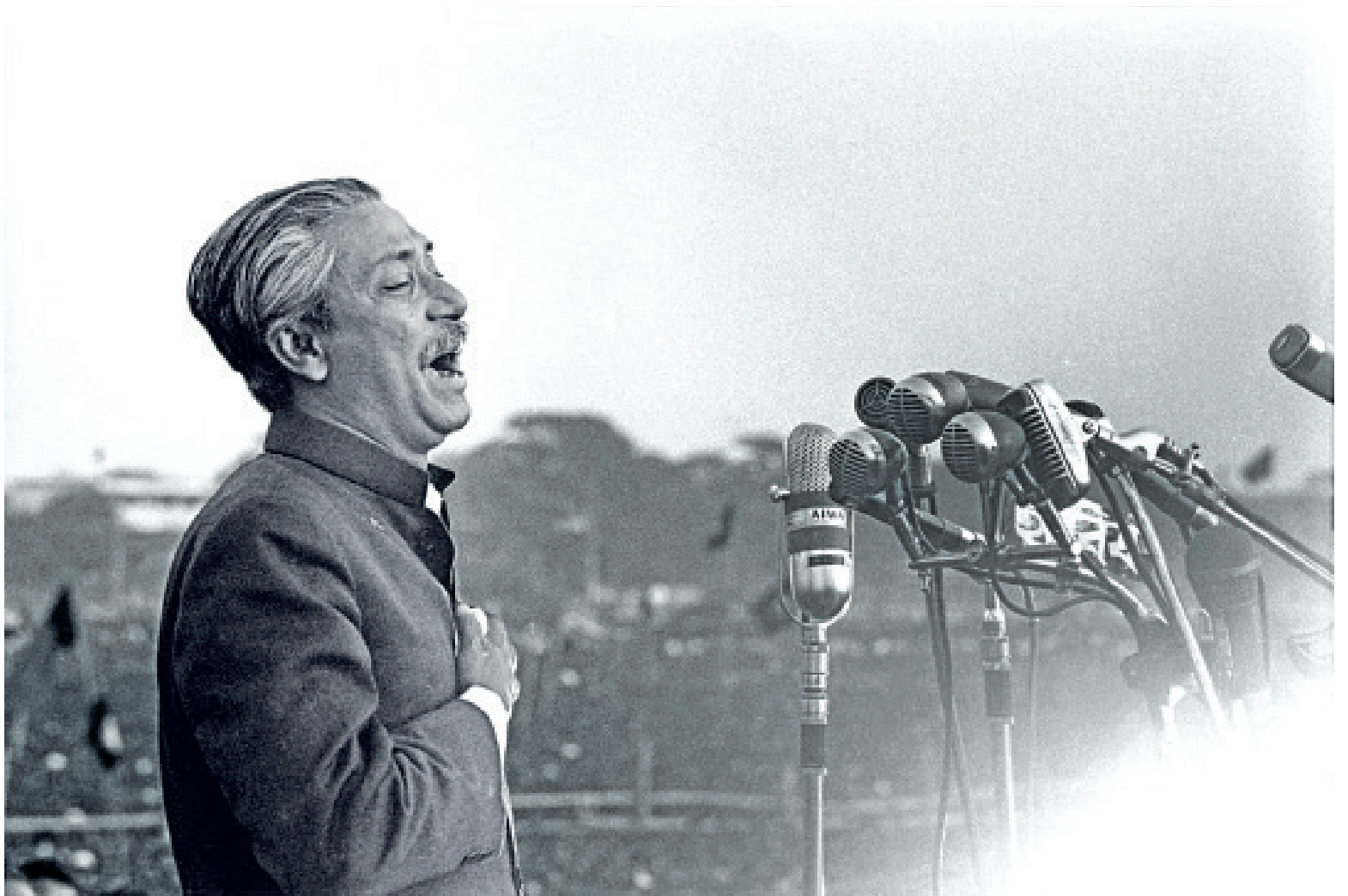
Mark entered Bangladesh after Pakistan declared war on India in December in order to divert attention away from their atrocities in Bangladesh. Her notable photographs portray a very young freedom fighter with sunken eyes, sitting in the back of a truck with a gun, a defeated Pakistani army sergeant standing in front of the table of surrender in Khulna, and collaborators being captured in Khulna. Although her companions took photographs of dead bodies, no such photos can be found in Mark’s work.

In an interview for this article, David Burnett said that Mary Ellen Mark was travelling with photographer Jack Garofalo from Paris Match magazine. She entered the country with the support of the Indian Army. He met them in Jessore and travelled to a newly liberated town in Jessore (Jhikorgacha).

Mark was transparent with the subjects of her photography, about her intent to use what she saw in the world for her art. She once said, “I just think it’s important to be direct and honest with people about why you’re photographing them and what you’re doing. After all, you are taking some of their soul.” She died at the age of 75 on May 25, 2015 in Manhattan. The Mary Ellen Mark Archives currently hosts two million images.

MARILYN STAFFORD

Marilyn Stafford born in Cleveland, Ohio in the US in 1925. Her photographic career was formally launched in 1948, when she took her first portrait of Albert Einstein for friends who were making a documentary film about him. She worked mainly as a freelance photojournalist based in Paris in the 1950s and early 1960s, and then in London, travelling to Lebanon, Tunisia, India, and many other places.



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, immediately upon his return after nine months of detention in Pakistan, addressed the biggest rally ever held in Dhaka, at the Ramna Race Course. 10 January, 1972.

PHOTO © MARILYN SILVERSTONE/MAGNUM PHOTOS



Aerial view of one of the many villages targeted during the Bangladesh Liberation War, Gopalganj District, 1972.

PHOTO © MARILYN STAFFORD

On a ferry crossing to England in 1949, Stafford had a chance encounter with Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004). He became Stafford’s life-long friend and introduced her to Henri Cartier-Bresson, who was to become her photography mentor in Paris.

In 1971, through Mulk Raj, Stafford was invited by the then Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, to do a photo essay entitled “A Day in the Life of Indira Gandhi.”

In early 1972, Mulk Raj was concerned about the fate of some of his Bengali writer friends, and Stafford accompanied him on a trip to Bangladesh to cover the aftermath of the Liberation War. On that trip, she photographed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Dhaka and took a helicopter to his village home, which was ravaged

by the Pakistan Army. Her photographs portrayed one framed photo of Rabindranath Tagore, broken by the army when they were shattering everything onto the floor. They went on to plunder and burn villages.

One of Stafford’s photos is of a destroyed village in Gopalganj, filled with burnt trees. As she visited the war-torn villages, her photos gave a glimpse into how people got back on their feet with new houses being built, the few available buses on the Mymensingh-Tangail route being heavily overcrowded, boats sailing on the river, and people slowly going back to their homes and their lives. Some were not so lucky. Many villagers were killed and Stafford also saw some women who were in severe shock.

Stafford was motivated to capture the destruction left by the war. But, more importantly, she wanted to tell the stories of those who were physically and emotionally scarred by it, particularly the girls and women whom the Pakistani Army had raped.

Stafford was contacted by Salma Chowdhury, who had set up numerous shelters for women in need in Bangladesh. Thousands had been tortured, raped, and widowed by the Pakistani military and their local allies. Nari Punorbason Kendra (Women’s Rehabilitation and Welfare Centre) was founded at Eskaton Garden in Dhaka, and Stafford visited the Centre in 1973. After she returned to England, she published the story in The Guardian and raised GBP 5,000 to send to Bangladesh to help the raped women get abortions. She later spoke on how she felt she “didn’t do things so much photographically but did make a humanitarian contribution.”

Marilyn Stafford had also taken photographs of paintings made by children for an exhibition organised by Kachi Kachar Mela, which spoke of the genocide and resistance during the Liberation War. The exhibition was later brought to the Commonwealth Institute in London by Bangladeshi master painter Zainul

Abedin, who said, “We, the adult painters, have failed so far to treat the genocide and resistance on our canvases. These children have opened a new and fresh vision for us.” Marilyn played an important role in organising this exhibition.

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Stafford has published three photobooks. One of them, Marilyn Stafford: A Life in Photography (2021) contains a chapter titled “The Aftermath of Bangladesh Liberation War.” She set up the Marilyn Stafford FotoReportage Award to support women photographers for solution focused documentary photographic projects. In 2020, she was awarded the Chairman’s Lifetime Achievement Award 2019 at the UK Picture Editors’ Guild Awards in London.

I hope that, beyond this list, we will be able to explore the fascinating lives and works of more women photographers from the Liberation War period. There are still thousands of photographs from that period in possession of local private archives. As photographs provide strong historical evidence, it is essential that thorough research is conducted on those from 1971.

The women photographers gave us an insight of the female gaze during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Their work with the women and children in refugee camps displayed intimate and personal connectivity with their subjects. The fact that many came to Bangladesh of their own accord reflects their determination. Penny Tweedie suffered for her ethical stand in photojournalism. Anne de Henning, who was one of the first photographers to visit the free zones of Bangladesh, produced one of the first colour photographs of the Bangladeshi flag

which was presented to her. She also took some of the few colour photographs of Bangabandhu. While most of the photos taken during the Liberation War period are gritty, high contrast black and white representations of destruction and human misery, Marilyn Stafford’s colour photographs show the resilience of the people of Bangladesh. They are like the transition from a grim, dark past to a vibrant future. These visual records by the women photographers are evidence of the undeniable genocide against a people, and a strong reminder of the need to hold onto hope.

Some of their roles actually went beyond photojournalism, as they helped put the word out by providing statements and worked closely with the rehabilitation of victims of war. It would be an injustice to them if their contribution is judged by only their photographs. Behind those lenses, the eyes of the beholder have stories to tell.

Amirul Rajiv is an art historian, curator and co-founder of Duniyadari Archive.

PS: Writing about this issue led me to contact people around the world and go through visuals and records at that time. The testimonies of the people portrays the level of sacrifice people at home and abroad had to make for the freedom of our country in 1971. I want to thank the following people and organisations for their support and contribution:

Anne de Henning, Marilyn Stafford, David Burnett, Shaheen Akhter, Paramita Muller Lahiri, Surajit Lahiri, Bharati Dasgupta, Lorène Durret of Association Les amis de Marc Riboud, Naim U Hasan of Duniyadari Archive, Lina Clerke & Nina Emmett of Marilyn Stafford Photography, Michael Regnier of Panos Pictures, Ruth Hoffmann & Georgina Dallas of Magnum Photos, Mary Ellen Mark Archives, Ain o Salish Kendra, Shechen Monastery, Shamsuzzoha Sajen of Bangladesh on Record, Mofidul Hoque & Amena Khatun of Liberation War Museum, Ruxmini Reckvana Q Choudhury of Samdani Art Foundation, Shameema Binte Rahman of rotnentviews.com, Nafeesa Shamsuddin, Pavel Partha, Anil Mandal.

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