

## The Courageous Journey of THREE SISTERS



From right to left: Bhokti Kar, Gita Kar, and Ira Kar.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

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**SAUDIA AFRIN**

Despite their remarkable contributions during the Liberation War, the sacrifices made by women are frequently relegated to the shadows in the records of our history. From taking up arms and leading freedom fighters to performing various roles, the invaluable efforts of these women, regrettably, have not garnered the acknowledgment they rightfully deserve, both during and after the war.

One poignant story unfolds with three sisters—war heroes determined to avenge their father's murder and win the battle against the Pakistani forces at any cost. The journey through grief

As the war erupted, the Kar family found themselves in increasingly perilous circumstances. Confronted with frequent threats from locals adhering to a pro-Pakistani mindset, they were pressured to undergo a religious conversion to Islam. Recognizing the severity of the situation, Gita, Ira, Bhokti, along with their father and another sister, decided to seek refuge in the remote

village of Erinda in Rajbari, their maternal grandparents' residence. Unfortunately, despite their efforts to evade the threats, their attempt proved futile.

Their father fell victim to the aggression of the Pakistani military's local collaborators on May 5, 1971, prompting the sisters along with their maternal family, to leave Rajbari, abandoning her mother and younger siblings, and embarking on a journey to India. They finally settled in Chakdaha.

Gita, Ira, and Bhokti vividly recall the hardships they endured during this tumultuous period. "The nine-day journey was filled with vivid memories of relentless walking, hunger, witnessing people perish, and villages being ablaze," recounted Ira.

Driven by the shock of her father's death, the sisters were resolute in freeing their homeland from the oppressive grasp of the Pakistanis. After learning about a training camp from a relative, they contemplated joining to camp to ward off the Pakistanis.

### Preparing for the battlefield

Gita and Ira became part of the inaugural group at the Gobra camp, led by Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, starting on July 2, 1971. Alongside five other girls, they embarked on this journey. The women in the training groups had lost their family members and were resolute to take revenge. Established in Kolkata in 1971, the Gobra Camp provided training to 400 women freedom fighters in different categories: civil defense, nursing, and guerrilla warfare.

"We were encouraged through lectures on historical accounts of war and insights into prominent revolutionaries from teachers hailing from different Indian universities," explained Ira.

"Our training encompassed guerrilla warfare and first aid, including theoretical sessions on firearms usage. However, the practical aspects of treating wounded freedom fighters were taught at a local hospital," shared Gita while reminiscing that the main driving force was the desire to win the battle against the Pak army at any cost.

Bhokti, who joined the camp a few days later, recalled, "We were instructed not to turn on lights after dawn since it was an abandoned three-story building." The food they used to get at the training camp was paltry, but that didn't bother the camp inmates.

After completing their training, it was time to apply their skills on the battleground. However, only 15 young women, including Gita and Ira, agreed to join the war. Bhokti, initially intending to join her sisters in the subsequent group, later decided to serve wounded freedom fighters at the local hospital, where she had received her nursing training.

Unfazed by threats and without fear, the 15 courageous women embarked on their journey from Howrah to Agartala in October after a three-month-long training.

### A short stretch of uncertainty along the path

"Our journey to Agartala took an unexpected stop in Sylhet, leaving all of us baffled. The experience, in one word, was horrifying. The entire train was packed with the Indian Army, armed and en route to join the war. The 15 girls, along with the guide, were placed in one such compartment. Unfortunately, the guide, unable to

communicate in Bangla, vanished without a trace one day," said Gita.

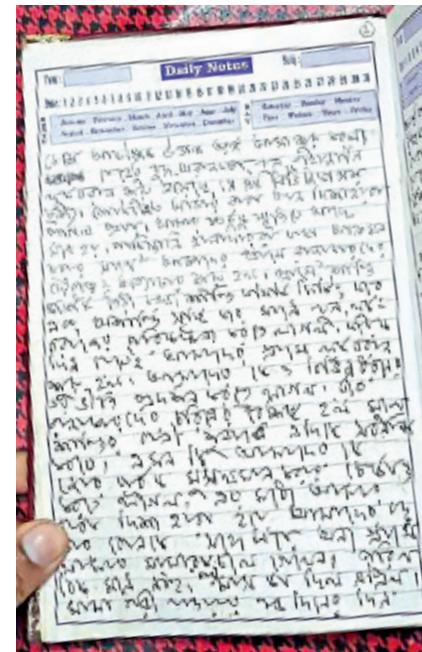
Undeterred, the resolute group pressed on without their guide. They endured nearly ten days without a specific address to go to or proper meals, sustaining themselves solely on oranges and water.

"Eventually, we successfully reached the refugee camp on the Sylhet border, though convincing the Indian Army of our genuine intentions proved challenging initially," said Ira.

As a result of not having enough food for 8 to 9 days, many of them lost consciousness. Two men named Makhon Shom and Milon Talukdar from the refugee camp played a crucial role in our journey, providing us with all possible assistance.

"Makhon da helped us to call Sajeda apa and provided food and kindled fires to keep us warm," said Ira.

Sajeda Chowdhury shared the address of Bangladesh Hospital in Bishramganj and communicated with Zafarullah Chowdhury and others associated with it. Thanks to Makhon Shom's generosity and prompt action from the people of Bangladesh Hospital, Gita, Ira, and their companions reached Agartala.



A glimpse of a diary page where Gita Kar recorded her journey as a refugee, a war trainee, and a medical assistant during the Liberation War.

### Caring for the wounded

Upon reaching their destination, the women discovered that they were not sent to the expected war zone. Instead, they were assigned to assist at Bangladesh Hospital, a 480-bed facility in Agartala. Despite the shift in plans, the group of young women committed wholeheartedly to their roles as medical attendants.

Recalling the memories of those days, Ira said, "The hospital's location was around 12 miles away from the battleground. Sounds of bombing and firing were heard regardless of time. Every day, freedom fighters were brought to the hospital with serious injuries."

"Many wounded freedom fighters lying on the bed, enduring endless pain, would pray that their sacrifices might not go to waste and would bring independence to the country," continued Gita.

"We were living every moment with fear of losing and simultaneously hoping to fight till the end for Bangladesh," said Gita. Never letting go of the spirit of fighting on the battleground, she was always ready to join the battleground when needed. Hearing the news of independence, Gita cried a lot, triggered by two emotions: happiness for victory and sorrow for not being able to fight in battle. The sisters remember how they and their friends consoled themselves; serving at the hospital was almost as good as fighting in the war.

Gita and Ira returned to Bangladesh with the wounded mukti joddhas and their friends at the hospital five weeks after Victory Day, in the last week of January. After spending a week in Comilla, they returned to Dhaka, staying at 132 New Eskaton (the relocated Bangladesh Hospital after independence) for a few more months. They remained there because they had no information about their family since their departure from Howrah station. Meanwhile, Bhokti returned to Rajbari with their mother and other siblings through the West Bengal border.

The reconciliation of the entire family a few months later presented the sisters with a new challenge: to support their family while upholding the spirit to fight back.

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## A Testimony of Pakistan's Cruelty

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The Commission squarely blamed Pakistan armed forces for the defeat in the Indo-Pak war of 1971 and accused the armed forces of carrying out the indiscriminate killing. The Prothoma Prokashan publisher's note says that the magnitude and the graveness of the crimes committed by Pakistan armed forces in Bangladesh were not always correctly reflected in the report, but the Commission could not also deny the occurrence of the crimes committed by Pakistan army. In the part "Alleged Atrocities of the Pakistan Army" under the Moral Aspect of the Supplementary Report, the Commission said quoting a witness named Lt-Col Mansoorul Haq that under the orders of CO 53 Field Regiment, Lt-Col Yaqub Malik, 17 Bengali officers and 915 men were just slain by a flick of one officer's finger which is just an example of indiscriminate killing. There was a general feeling of hatred against Bengalis among the soldiers and the officers including the generals. Even there were verbal instructions to eliminate Hindus. It is said under the Military Aspect that some officers have also admitted that the possibility of the troops being more vindictive towards Hindus cannot be altogether excluded as even senior officers were often noticed jokingly asking as to how many Hindus have been killed. The Commission also found out that there were enough evidences on the record that some West Pakistani officers and men indulged in wanton acts of loot, arson, rape and indiscriminate killing and there were even evidences of deliberate killing of members of the Hindu minority.

General Yahya Khan's association with women was especially mentioned in the report. It said that 'he was leading an extremely licentious life, devoting most of his time to wine and women.' The report mentioned, 'there is evidence to show that the General was addicted to heavy drinking and was extremely friendly with a number of ladies of indifferent repute...' Degradation of character of General Hamid, evidences of corruption, cruelty and scandals of Pakistani generals including Niazi have been mentioned in this Report with examples. The personal conduct of Lt Gen Niazi has also come in for adverse criticism before the Commission. Serious allegations were made against him by two civilian witnesses who alleged that while posted as GOC Sialkot, and later as GOC and Corps Commander at Lahore, Niazi made

millions of rupees in various transactions affecting the disposal of criminal cases brought under the Martial Law against smugglers and other criminals. They also contended that he was on intimate terms with one Mrs Saeeda Bukhari of Lahore, who was running a brothel where young women were residing. They stated that Mrs Bukhari openly acted as the General's tout for receiving bribes and getting things done. Niazi was criticized by the Commission for not saving Dhaka from India.

Lt. Gen Niazi tried to put the blame on his predecessor Lt Gen Tikka Khan for excessive use of military action at many places for which Tikka Khan earned names such as, "Genghis Khan" and "Butcher of Balochistan." Khan also became nicknamed as "Butcher of Bengal" for his cruelty. Tikka Khan, who was the Martial Law Administrator from 7th of April onwards, stated before the Commission that the number of people killed was probably about 15,000, but later in a press interview he gave a figure of 30,000. Although the Government of Bangladesh stated that three million people were killed during the 1971 genocide, the Commission rejected this number. It said that examination of the available evidence shows that there is substance in the allegation that during and after the military action excesses were indeed committed on the people of East Pakistan, although the versions and estimates put forward by the 'Dacca' authorities were highly colored and exaggerated.' The Russian daily Pravda reported on January 4, 1972 that 'over 30 lakh persons were killed throughout Bangladesh by the Pakistani occupation forces during the past nine months.' Quoting its correspondent stationed in Dhaka, the Pravda said 'the Pakistan military forces immediately before their surrender had killed 800 intellectuals in the capital city of Bangladesh alone.'

The Hamoodur Rehman Commission has come to the conclusion that the debacle was due to the cumulative effect of a number of factors, namely political, moral, psychological and military. So it recommended that the government should set up a high-powered Court or Commission of Inquiry to investigate into these allegations so that those who indulged in these atrocities, brought a bad name to the Pakistan Army and alienated the sympathies of the local population by their acts of wanton cruelty and immorality against its

own people, are duly punished. The composition of the Court/Commission should be publicly announced so as to satisfy national conscience and international opinion. The HRC also made some recommendations for the consideration of the government that Gen Yahya Khan, Gen Abdul Hamid Khan, Lt General SGM Pirzada, Maj Gen Umar, Lt Gen Gul Hassan, and Maj Gen Mitha should be publicly tried for being party to a criminal conspiracy to illegally usurp power from Field Marshal Ayub Khan on the 25th of March, 1969. These officers should also be tried and/or court martialled for criminal neglect of duty in the conduct of war both in East Pakistan and in West Pakistan.

It must be remembered that the report is written from the perspectives of the Pakistani side. It rejects the responsibility of the Pakistani Army for the massacre of intellectuals in December 1971 with almost no argument or explanation. The commission report attempts to downplay the number of women who were raped by Pakistani soldiers in 1971. Nevertheless, we shudder with fear when we read harrowing descriptions of brutality including rapes, killings and violence by the Pakistani junta and the armed forces. A recent report by The Guardian says that although official estimates on the Bangladesh side 'put the number of Bengali women raped at between 200,000 and 400,000, though even those numbers are considered conservative by some' ([https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/apr/03/52-years-bangladesh-birangona-women-mass-rape-survivors?CMP=Share\\_AndroidApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/apr/03/52-years-bangladesh-birangona-women-mass-rape-survivors?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other)). One of the researchers studying war atrocities across the world, Susan Brownmiller, wrote in her 1975 book Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape that the number of rapes during the Bangladesh Liberation War was about 400,000.

This entire Hamoodur Rehman Commission report has not been published as a book before in Bangladesh. By publishing this full report as a book in 2023, Prothoma Prokashan has carried out a very important responsibility. We hope that this report will act as one of the most important documents/records for the researchers, readers, writers, teachers, and students who would like to research on the Liberation War of 1971.

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