

# Gender and Genocide in BANGLADESH

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History is complicated; simplifying it is the work of politicians. My research on Bangladesh challenges the national memory of the 1971 war, as represented at the Liberation War Museum. The national archive on display at the museum feeds nationalism by creating a national memory of the 1971 war and reminds people of the common suffering encountered by the collectivity. My work investigates how gender has operated in service of Bangladeshi nationalist ideology. The representation of women's experiences at the museum lacks complexities of gender and seeks erasure of any experience that deviates from the nationalist narrative. The images in the archives of the war museum tell the story of a nation's unease with women's place in nationalist discourse.

Gender in Bangladesh, similar to everywhere else, is not a homogenous or unified category. Gender as a social construct creates social subjects whose experiences vary based on their belonging to different identity groups. Examining gendered experiences of war helps us understand the complex social relationships that construct gender in the first place and lead to the gendered experiences of war situated at the intersection of religion, ethnicity and class.

Aroma Dutta and her mother Prati Devi Ghatak come from a prominent political and cultural Hindu family in South Asia. The partition of India divided Ghatak's family, as some members of her family migrated to Calcutta, India and others remained in Dhaka, East Pakistan. Her brothers, Ritvik Ghatak, an acclaimed filmmaker, and Manik Ghatak, a Bengali poet and novelist left Dhaka. Mahasweta Devi is Manik Ghatak's daughter and an influential postcolonial feminist writer whose work has been translated from Bengali to English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The stories featured in Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps* concern women in tribal India haunted by the region's colonial history, or as Spivak calls them "gendered subaltern subjects." Spivak writes, "Mahasweta invites us to realize that, in the context of this fiction, for the subaltern, and especially the subaltern woman, 'Empire' and 'Nation' are interchangeable names." For subaltern gendered subjects, the empire-nation reversal means the substitution of one system of difference for another as the political goals of the old colony are carried forward by the new nation, as was the case in 1947 when the British left India. In post-1947 Pakistan and in Bangladesh after the liberation war of 1971,

Hindus not only found themselves targeted due to their religion but their experiences have also been excluded from the dominant narratives on nationalism.

Aroma Dutta's grandfather Dhirendranath Dutta, a renowned Congressman from East Bengal, was against the partition of India. At the time of the partition, he was offered the position of the first Chief Minister of West Bengal, which meant opting for India instead of Pakistan, but more importantly it would mean leaving his home in Comilla. He declined the offer and played a crucial role in the politics of East Pakistan. When Urdu was declared the state language of Pakistan, despite the fact that only 10 per cent of the entire country's population had any knowledge of Urdu and the majority spoke Bengali, Dutta started what is now remembered as the Language Movement. In the 1960s many Bengali politicians, including Dutta, were barred from participating in politics and put under house arrest. Three days after the war started in 1971, Dutta and one of his sons were picked up by the Pakistani army, tortured and killed. While Aroma Dutta clearly remembers the events leading up to 1971, Dhirendranath Dutta's contributions to the independence of Bangladesh have been minimized, if not entirely forgotten, in the displays at the war museum. Challenging the national forgetting, Aroma Dutta's daughter and Dhirendranath Dutta's great-granddaughter, Esha Aurora wrote an opinion piece for *The Daily Star* on 27 March 2015 in which she candidly shared her frustration over omissions of contributions made by Hindus in the 1971 liberation war. History in South Asia is written and reproduced along the divisive line of Hindu and Muslim and that is the narrative on display at the war museum.

When examining the archives of the war museum, it is impossible to miss the fact that rape took place in 1971. Instead of silencing the stories of wartime rape, the war museum offers evidence, invokes the history of rape and appropriates the rape of women for the nationalist cause. The rape of Bangladeshi women is narrated as a way of acting out power relationships by the Pakistani army – a policy implemented to humiliate the Bengali nation and to change the racial makeup of Bengalis who were considered Hindu-like and an inferior race. The highly evocative images on display remind us about the many women who were raped and killed during the war and seek justice, but these representations remain limited and they only show women who are no longer alive. Additionally, the namelessness of the women in the pictures gives rise to an ambiguity, which marks the trajectory of post-war experiences of many women.

Ferdousi Priyobhashini became a household name in the 1990s when she publicly acknowledged that she had been raped in the war and demanded accountability. While her entire life has been crystallized in a moment when the rape took place during the nine-month-long war, her experiences before and after the war have been largely considered insignificant to an exploration of gender constructions in Bangladeshi society. Priyobhashini narrates a complex story of her troubled childhood and a marriage that came to an end in 1971 after years of physical and verbal abuse by her husband. Her economic needs made her vulnerable to abuse at workplace, which took the form of sexual abuse when the war started. During the war, she was young and alone and seen as sexually available not only by the Pakistani army but also by Bangladeshi men and women who refused to provide her shelter. She was accused of killing a university professor, arrested and taken to a camp where

killing, rape and looting. After the war, for a majority of Bangladeshis, the entire Bihari community came to be perceived as enemy and traitors. Many Biharis were killed and much of their property was seized. Those who survived were forced to seek refuge in camps set up by the International Committee for Red Cross and were labeled as "Stranded Pakistanis." There are approximately 160,000 members of the Bihari/Urdu-speaking community who live in 116 refugee camps across the country.

I met Saira Bano in the Central Relief Organization (CRO) camp in Dhaka. The living conditions inside the camp are challenging as the camp has a crumbling infrastructure, unclean water, scant garbage pick-up, communal toilets, footpaths that are often broken, staircase that appears to be deteriorating and roofs that are collapsing. For Saira Bano and other Bihari women refugees, the trauma of the 1971 war remains visibly present today. Bano, originally from Calcutta,

fighters and recipients of "Bir Protik" award were women. During the war of 1971, many women were militarized and wanted to defend their nation in the war efforts, but they were not able to find an entry point into a male-dominated battlefield. They were encouraged to provide support in assisting and nurturing roles, instead of engaging in combat.

The gendered nature of women's militarization is evident in the testimony offered by Taramon Bibi, one of the two recipients of the Bir Protik award, who talks about the familial structures that were reproduced in battlefield. After joining the militia, Bibi started calling Muhib Habilder "father" and her primary role was to cook for the freedom fighters. The sexual division of labour during the war remained and shifted only temporarily when the group came under attack and the roles went back to "normal" after the war ended. Sultana Kamal, a lawyer, human rights activist and the Executive Director of Ain-o-Salish Kendra, also confirms that women were generally pushed out of the battlefield and encouraged to offer support in secondary roles as care providers and nurses. Kamal remembers, "The leadership in the war also had a particular idea of men's role and women's role. Like we were immediately engaged to build a hospital and run the hospital rather than them thinking that we could be trained in arms to really fight the guerrilla warfare." The photographs of women raising their arms and holding rifles, despite being inaccurate, provide for a moving imagery, depicting women as equal participants in the war against a common national enemy. However, the exhibit shows ambivalence towards the gender politics that ensued after the war which led to a national forgetting of women fighters like Taramon Bibi.

The archives of the Liberation War Museum of Bangladesh through their inclusion and omission perform the function of narrativizing the war as a unified account of history where all the outliers are muted and a generalization is forced upon women. The nationalist discourse on display at the war museum performs the act of selecting from life and death the stories that are worth telling and subjects women to a double marginalization within the ideologies of nation and nationalism. The images of war memorialized and widely circulated at the museum perform the function of assigning significance to shared experiences, common ideas and nationalist formations in an attempt to create a nationalist history of the war, but gender representations in the exhibits remain problematic. The testimonies of female survivors resist the national memory and help to create an account of the war which is more inclusive.

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Ferdousi Priyobhashini

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Saira Bano



Bir Protik Taramon Bibi

she was raped repeatedly by Pakistani soldiers. Priyobhashini's ordeal came to an end with a friendly encounter with a Pakistani army officer, who after rescuing her proposed a marriage. But Priyobhashini saw that as a betrayal to her nation and declined the proposal. After the war, Priyobhashini was betrayed by her nation and abandoned as she was seen complicit in the crime of rape. Even though the rape survivors were given the title "Birangana," in the local memory, as Yasmin Saikia's research points out, Birangana (meaning female hero) transformed into "Baranganas" (meaning prostitutes) soon after the war.

Also subject to erasure and selective remembering are the refugees from the 1971 war. The images of refugees on display at the war museum comprise primarily women who became refugees in India but without any markers of identification or any mention of the Bihari refugees who have been living in refugee camps in Bangladesh for over five decades. During the war of 1971, a number of Biharis, loyal to their nation-state, collaborated with the Pakistani army; some created their own militia and participated in mass

remembers arriving in Dhaka as a child, but does not remember her exact age, her life before the war and what she saw during the war. The significant gaps in her memory depict her relationship to the violence that was committed during the war, the denial of her suffering which became commonplace in the post-war remembering, and her complex relationship with the society at large. The denial of suffering of the Urdu-speaking Biharis of Bangladesh has resulted in a mourning that is endless. Mourning, according to Dominick LaCapra, brings the possibility of engaging trauma in order for life to begin again. However, LaCapra notes, "When mourning turns to absence and absence is conflated with loss, then mourning becomes impossible, endless, quasi-transcendental grieving, scarcely distinguishable (if at all) from interminable melancholy." Bano suffered personal losses in 1971, but her story is considered insignificant because of her identity as an Urdu-speaking Bihari woman. Without an opportunity to share her haunting story and mourn for her loss, Bano's trauma remains unengaged and she is unable to work through it. The trauma for Bano endlessly continues in her present life.

The Liberation War Museum also has on display numerous images of women holding guns, but it downplays the fact that only two out of the 426 officially recognized freedom



A woman emerges from hiding for the first time, carrying a rifle and accompanied by her children.

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