ILLUSTRATION: **SOJIB ROY**

# Silencing THE PAST

**LAMIA KARIM**

At a talk by Pakistani-American Professor Sara Suleri, author of Meatless Days, I listened to an eloquent rendition of the role played by Pakistani feminists against the oppressive policies of the former military dictator Zia-ul-Haq. Dr Suleri beautifully outlined the repressions under his rule that relegated women to the four walls of the home, thus reaffirming their domestic role as central to an Islamic ideal.

As the awe-struck audience, mostly North Americans and students from South Asia, listened to her arguments, I felt deeply uncomfortable with what remained unsaid. When the session opened for Q&A, the audience showered praises on the work of Pakistani feminists. I did not question their brave work, but I knew that Dr Suleri had erased a key aspect of Pakistan's feminist history. Raising my hand, I said, "Dr Suleri, you presented skilfully the formidable challenges faced by Pakistani feminists in resisting Zia's repressive rule. But could you please enlighten us about the role played by Pakistani feminists during the 1971 war in former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, when hundreds of thousands of Bengali and indigenous women were raped by the Pakistan military?" Dr Suleri, who had moments earlier basked in the warmth of her audience, faltered visibly, and paced back and forth on the podium acknowledging the validity of my question. After a few minutes, she said that it was a difficult time for feminists and requires further reflection.

As the audience dispersed, a young Pakistani male graduate student approached me. "What is this about rape you mentioned?" I explained that in 1971, West Pakistani feminists had not only failed to acknowledge the atrocities committed by the military in Bangladesh, but certain prominent Pakistani feminists attended the United Nations to deny any atrocities by the military. Taken aback, he said that such events were entirely absent from his education.

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**MUKTIJUDDHA SMRITI TRUST**

**A woman refugee at a Kolkata camp holds a placard that reads, "They are human beings. Democracy or demockery??"**

# Echoes of Exile

## Remembering 1971, Confronting the Rohingya Crisis

**NAVINE MURSHID**

The July Uprising has brought to the forefront the need for a more inclusive understanding of 1971, one that incorporates the perspectives of ordinary people and addresses unresolved issues of justice, accountability, and historical truth, independent of political manoeuvring. What of the women who were forced to become refugees in India, who comprised the majority of the 10 million who fled to India in 1971?

While the contribution of the Birangona is now acknowledged, albeit in fraught ways, refugee women are either overlooked or judged for having left. Yet their stories – of hardship, fear, resilience, and a complicated relationship with the new nation – offer lessons about displacement, the gendered nature of conflict, and the insidious ways in which national narratives can silence and marginalise women. These lessons have consequences today in the context of the plight of Rohingya women, showing us that a conversation about sexual violence and the vulnerability of women in and out of conflict is still overdue.

I had the chance to speak to fifty returned refugees, mostly women, in Khulna. At the outbreak of the war, they had left their homes and walked all the way to the border and into India. It took many days for them to get there, carrying their children on their hips or backs. While some of them fled due to the fear of violence, others left after having faced violence—physical and sexual. Many of their husbands could not join them because they were either dead or had joined the war effort. While they escaped death and violent rape, this journey brought with it its own perils of violence. This negotiation with levels of violence itself, that they had to deem a certain level of violence as acceptable even as their bodies revolted, became palatable only because they believed in the idea of an independent Bangladesh. They knew then that that was the price of freedom.

Thus, life in the refugee camps, while offering relative safety from the immediate violence, was harsh in an everyday sense. Camps were overcrowded, resources were scarce, disease was rampant, with the constant fear of sexual violence. Yet women showed resilience, forming support networks and finding strength in shared experiences.

From my interviews with the women who returned, it was evident that camp life united them and helped forge a togetherness based on their lived experience and their longing for home. They shared their worries, their anxieties, their hopes and despair, their guilt for not doing more. They were inspired by the freedom fighters who would visit to avail themselves of the training that the Indian Army provided to active participants in the war. Stories of war and the mere presence of the fighters kept the spirit of independence alive, allowing for greater unity and strengthening of national pride.

The decision to return home was one that none of the women I spoke to forgot; indeed, it is perhaps the most poignant one that refugees undertake as a group—one that the Rohingya refugees here have not been able to make yet. When the news of Bangladesh's victory was announced, celebrations spread across the camps and in the streets. For most, it signalled that they would soon return home. It was one instance where they forgot about their difficulties; overwhelmed with emotion and nationalist fervour at the prospect of an independent Bangladesh, most said they left immediately. Unlike on their tortuous journey to India, most of them returned to Bangladesh by train and crossed over in Benapole, Jessore—a much safer option for the women I spoke to.

The returnees' re-entry was shaped by a curious contradiction, however. On the one hand, women who had experienced camp life as refugees tended to be more patriotic and nationalistic because of the longing for the homeland they experienced in exile. They closely identified with the party that led the War of Liberation, and with its platform for an independent Bangladesh. On the other hand, the returnees were viewed by those who hadn't left as people who had missed or sat out the war, as if they had irresponsibly taken off on a vacation while people were dying and fighting for freedom.

**A Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar.** PHOTO: **ANISUR RAHMAN**

This contradiction affected many of those I interviewed; after returning to the homeland, they grew increasingly conscious of how differently they had experienced the war compared to those who never left. A new "us versus them" dichotomy emerged: the returnees could not understand the direct experience of war, and the locals could not relate to the stories of camp life and hardship in a foreign land.

This dichotomy still shapes current political views. War veterans and those who remained in Bangladesh during the war feel they have a better understanding of politics. Their first-hand experience of war, it would appear, has impacted their view of what they perceive to be threats against the nation. Indeed, the nation seems fragile to them even today, nearly half a century later. During the Shahbagh movement, for instance, war veterans and their families popularised the idea of a nation under threat. This sentiment resonated with hundreds of people in the streets who wrapped themselves in Bangladeshi flags to "reclaim the nation". My interviews revealed that former refugees, in contrast, tended to view the nation-state as less fragile and are thus less likely to rush to the defence of the state in the name of nationalism. These sentiments have broader appeal, too, as we bore witness to how the July Uprising was, in part, fuelled by the charge of "anti-national" against dissenting figures. Indeed, the view of the fragility of the nation-state has led many otherwise rational people to adopt regressive positions.

Today, there are about 123 million refugees worldwide, according to UNHCR, a million of them in our own backyard. As we commemorate the War of '71, let us not ignore the conditions that continue to force people to flee their homes today. In this age of neo-liberalism and imperialism, state violence is more varied. Driven by war, climate change, and social crises caused by structural forces beyond their control, millions of people are being forced to flee their homes with little hope of return in the foreseeable future. Our sympathy for the plight of refugees must be coupled with a resolve to hold accountable the forces that are producing these conditions in the first place, and in such an accounting, it is impossible to ignore the role of nation-states and elite interests.

The legacy of 1971 is, thus, not just about the past; it resonates powerfully in the present, particularly in the context of the Rohingya refugee crisis. The parallels with 1971 are chilling. Just as Bangladeshi women faced systematic rape as a weapon of war, Rohingya women have endured similar atrocities at the hands of the Myanmar military. The reports of widespread sexual violence, gang rapes, and killings are eerily reminiscent of the horrors of 1971.

The Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, like the camps in India in 1971, are overcrowded and under-resourced. Women and girls face heightened risks of sexual exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence. They bear the primary responsibility for caring for their families, often with minimal support. Their stories, like those of the Bangladeshi women who fled in 1971, are often unheard, overshadowed by broader geopolitical concerns and humanitarian aid statistics. The current climate in Bangladesh, marked by increasing social conservatism, ongoing political polarisation, and a persistent culture of impunity for perpetrators of sexual violence, makes these parallels even more disturbing.

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# Silencing the Past

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I recommended that he visit the library to read international newspapers about the 1971 war in Bangladesh. Several days later, I received an email from him thanking me. "There is a total news blackout on 1971 in our history books. I hope to visit Bangladesh one day and ask for forgiveness for what was done in our name."

What do we risk when we silence the past? Haitian anthropologist and historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in his seminal work Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, provides an excellent framework for understanding how histories are constructed, how certain viewpoints are magnified, while others are sent to the 'dustbin of history'. Not only does power shape historical production, but silences are also purposefully baked into the recording of history. His framework resonates with the political landscapes of Bangladesh in 1971 and in 2025. If history is replete with elaborate omissions and distortions, how can a lay person make sense of it?

**Silencing 1971**

The Liberation War of 1971 saw ordinary Bangladeshis rise against the brutal atrocities committed by the Pakistan military. The Mukti Bahini was a People's Army made up of students, teachers, politicians, civil servants, small businesspeople, rickshaw-pullers, farmers, women—in other words, people from all walks of society. However, once in power in 1972, the Awami League wrote a partisan history, recasting them as the heroes.

**Painting by Zainul Abedin.**

Similarly, the role of women in the liberation struggle is largely seen through the lens of victimhood, focusing on rape as a weapon of war. While this crime against humanity must never be forgotten, it also obscures the multifaceted contributions of women in the Liberation War. Women fought on the frontlines alongside men, helped run freedom fighter camps, and played various critical roles in the war effort. Why, then, have they been sidelined in history?

I do not recall the exact year, but it was possibly in 2011–2012, that I attended a gathering of female freedom fighters organised at Gonoshasthya Kendro in Savar. It was the first time that their sacrifices were acknowledged publicly. Many of the Hindu freedom fighters had relocated to West Bengal, so fellow fighters were meeting after almost 30 years. The women laughed in joy while telling the audience about their experiences of 1971. The most moving moment came when each was given a flower as a tribute to their patriotism. Thanking the organisers, one of them said, "This is the first time I have been recognised as a freedom fighter. No one ever thanked me, let alone gave me a flower." Their erasure from the historical narrative underscores how often women's contributions are relegated to the margins.

These historical silences extend beyond the war itself. The plight of the stranded Biharis, confined to camps since 1972, remains a glaring omission in Bangladesh's national history. Many of these individuals, born after 1971, bear the stigma of their parents' and grandparents' allegiance to Pakistan. Although finally granted citizenship, their futures remain uncertain due to long-term state indifference. Similarly, the indigenous communities of Bangladesh, particularly of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and their struggle for autonomy and recognition have been excluded from the dominant history. These omissions reflect Trouillot's argument: history is written by those in power to serve their interests, systematically silencing inconvenient truths to consolidate authority.

**The August Uprising**

Fast forward to 5 August 2024, when a popular uprising overthrew the Awami League government in Bangladesh. But in the events unfolding five months after 5 August 2024, I see a troubling parallel with the historiographical silences surrounding 1971. Led by students but soon joined by people from all walks of life, the movement challenged the fascism of the Awami League government under Sheikh Hasina and forced her into exile. Watching student leaders expound their historical ideas on media, I realised many had grown up with a fragmentary history manipulated by political agendas. It is not their fault, but the fault of an education system where textbooks present a patchwork of propaganda—Awami League triumphalism, military revisionism, and partisan agendas—leaving little room for historical fact-checking.

Among the demands arising from a certain student segment is the call to send the 1972 Constitution to the graveyard, and to write a new constitution. The 1972 Constitution is a document marred by many amendments designed to consolidate an undemocratic authoritarian rule. But if the Constitution is sent to the graveyard of history, what will replace it? Who will write the new constitution, and under what legal framework? The Constitution, to be acceptable in a democracy, must be passed into law by the elected representatives of the people. How will that occur if the Constitution must be symbolically killed, written afresh before democratic elections? The demand here escapes the rules of parliamentary norms. Reforms must be made for a fair and free election, but beyond that, constitutional recommendations should be debated in an elected parliament.

Some compare the Liberation War of 1971 to the Popular Uprising of 2024. In 1971, Bangladeshis fought the Pakistani military for nine months; millions were killed or maimed, women raped, babies bayoneted, and intellectuals murdered. It was one of the most heinous wars of the 20th century and must never be forgotten. Yet the promised freedom remained unfulfilled. 1990 offered a second chance—and again, we failed. Political parties have repeatedly failed the nation, fuelling the youth's anger and distrust. Can these parties be trusted, or will they merely change colour? Perhaps new parties are needed to ensure accountability.

In 2025, Bangladesh stands at a crossroads, grappling with the weight of its unfinished liberation project. The youth's desire for a tabula rasa—a clean slate—is understandable, but history is never a blank page. History is a palimpsest formed through the struggles, sacrifices, and aspirations layered into it. Karl Marx's maxim that history repeats itself, "first as tragedy, then as farce," is a sobering reminder of where we are now. Bangladesh's journey from 1971 to 2025 is marked by a series of unfinished revolutions, each promising democracy, freedoms, and justice, yet falling short every time.

The current moment demands more than grandstanding; it requires a commitment to genuine democratic reform. Parliamentary elections must be held, and the interim government must outline a clear path to democracy, balancing the urgency of the present with the lessons of the past. But seven months is too short a time for the interim government to solve the debris that has accumulated over the years. The interim government must align with political parties, student and people's groups to bring all voices to the table. Similarly, the now bickering groups must set aside their differences to work with the interim government to renew the democratic project. In reclaiming our history, we must confront the brutal silences of the past. The question is not merely who writes the next chapter, but how lessons are learned, so we do not go down the wrong road once again.

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# Between bullets and borders

# Fleeing the Rajshahi massacre

**One of the soldiers muttered, "A month ago, we were sent to East Pakistan to kill Hindus. But we can't seem to find any. Everyone here claims to be Muslim. Where are the Hindus?" Their frustration was evident.**

SHAHIDUL ISLAM

1971. 26th March, Early Morning
Zuberi Bhaban, Rajshahi University

I was in a deep sleep in my room when a loud, relentless pounding on the door jolted me awake. Startled, I hurriedly got up and unlatched the door, only to be confronted by three Pakistani soldiers, their rifles raised menacingly. One of them barged into my room without hesitation, while the other two barked orders in an enraged tone, "Nikalo, shala!" Before I could react, a forceful kick from behind sent me sprawling onto the veranda.

A sepoy yanked me to my feet with a rough grip. My heart pounded in terror as I saw that they had also seized Mujibur Rahman from the Mathematics Department and Ajit Kumar Ghosh, a newly appointed lecturer in Economics who lived next door to me. Their faces mirrored my own horror.

Under the watchful barrels of three rifles, we were herded down Paris Road towards the residence of Vice-Chancellor Professor Syed Sajjad Hussain. As we turned towards the Vice-Chancellor's house, Mujibur Rahman, in a voice steady but edged with defiance, suddenly spoke in fluent Urdu, "Once, a good man named Muhammad was born. After that, every Muhammad turned into a thief and a scoundrel."

Hearing his words, the sepoys reacted instantly—kicking Mujibur Rahman hard before savagely beating him with their rifle butts. Ajit and I stood paralysed, curling up in silent dread, unable to do anything but watch in helpless terror. Mujibur Rahman had lived in Karachi for a long time, which explained his fluency in Urdu.

We were all dressed in lungis and undervests—completely vulnerable, both physically and emotionally.

Vice-Chancellor Syed Sajjad Hussain was enjoying the gentle spring breeze in the vast garden of his residence when the soldiers presented us before him. With a casual air, he introduced us, saying, "They are all teachers." After a brief exchange of words, we were ordered to march back. Each of us was locked inside our respective rooms in Zuberi Bhaban, with a chilling warning: "If anyone steps out, they will be shot!"

By then, the sun had risen high in the sky. On our way back, I carefully observed how Pakistani soldiers had taken control of the entire campus—positioned strategically with weapons, their presence exuding an ominous authority. The once-familiar surroundings now felt like a prison.

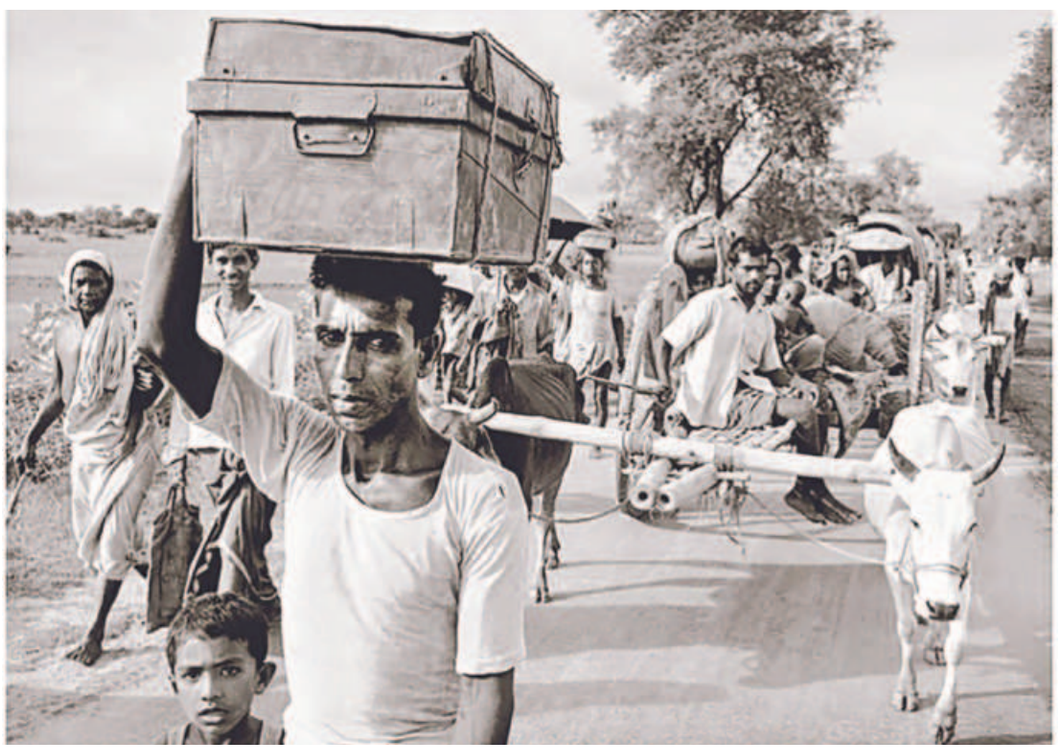
As the hours dragged on, our immediate needs became more pressing—hunger gnawed at our stomachs, and the necessity of using the washroom became unavoidable. At the back of the building, beneath the large jackfruit tree, a platoon of soldiers stood idly, chatting among themselves, oblivious to our silent suffering. Summoning every ounce of courage, I hesitantly pushed open the back door and called out to them. Two soldiers turned towards me, their expressions unreadable. In broken Urdu, mixed with Bengali and gestures, I desperately tried to convey our basic human needs.

Without a word, they entered my room and began inspecting everything around them.

They asked where we usually ate. Leading them to the veranda, I pointed to a room in the front block and said, "That's our dining room." They ordered me to get ready and then walked back to their post beneath the jackfruit tree.

After completing my morning routine, I hung my lungi and towel on the wire before informing them that I was ready. The two soldiers returned, rifles aimed at me, and ordered me to step out. Moments later, they brought Ajit out from his room as well. Together, we began walking down the veranda towards the dining room. As we passed Mujibur Rahman's room, I called out to him, and he joined us.

Reaching the dining room, we knocked on the door, but there was no response. Growing anxious, I called out Zainal's name. After a brief pause, the door finally opened. A sepoy immediately slapped him hard across the face, demanding to know why he hadn't opened the door sooner. Then, without waiting for an explanation, they ordered him to prepare breakfast for us.



Bengalis fleeing for a safe refuge. PHOTO: MARK GODFRET

We sat at the dining table with dry mouths, tense and uncertain, while Zainal hurriedly prepared parathas and fried eggs. The soldiers stood against the wall, watching us intently. At one point, one of them asked, almost casually, "Are you all Muslims?" Without thinking, I blurted out, "Yes."

Ajit's expression from that moment is etched in my memory—a silent, fleeting look of fear and disbelief. One of the soldiers muttered, "A month ago, we were sent to East Pakistan to kill Hindus. But we can't seem to find any. Everyone here claims to be Muslim. Where are the Hindus?" Their frustration was evident.

After breakfast, they forced us back into our rooms at gunpoint, repeating their warning: "If anyone steps out, they will be shot!" Lunch was served in the same manner—under the oppressive watch of the soldiers. Throughout the day, they frequently entered our rooms, rummaging through our belongings without warning or reason. From Ajit's room, they took his newly purchased radio. He never got it back.

At one point, when I managed to whisper to Ajit, I told him, "If they ask your name, tell them it's Wajed Ghaus." The surname "Ghaus" was borrowed from a Baloch leader's name. Fortunately, they never asked for names.

The day dragged on in agonising slowness. The sun began its descent, casting long shadows across the veranda. As dusk settled in, the soldiers reiterated their warning: "No one steps out of their rooms!" Then, they left. Silence gradually engulfed the surroundings. Even the sepoys who had been patrolling the area drove away in their vehicles. Later, we discovered that it was a shift change—another group would soon take over.

This seemed like our best opportunity. I hastily packed a few clothes and some essentials into my bag and helped Ajit do the same. Moving quickly, we made our way to Mujibur Rahman's room in the front wing, hoping to take him with us. But to our shock, Mujibur Rahman refused to leave.

With no time to waste, I made my way to my friend Aftabur Rahim's house, while Ajit sought refuge at his teacher, Professor Mosharraf Hossain's residence. Meanwhile, the sound of intense gunfire echoed from the direction of the police lines, situated to the west of Rajshahi. On the evening of 26 March, after the sepoys had left, no new platoon arrived that night. The same remained the case on the morning of 27 March. As uncertainty loomed, teachers cautiously stepped out of their homes, seeking information. The sporadic bursts of gunfire continued to reverberate across the city.

For the next several days, until

Shahidul Islam

2 April, the university campus remained free from military presence. Seizing the opportunity, we visited our departments, conversed with our professors, and observed that the sepoys were nowhere to be seen. They had seemingly confined themselves to the cantonment, leaving the city in an eerie, uneasy calm.

Along with my friends from the Sociology Department, Khaled Hasan and Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury, I visited Professor Abdur Rakib from the Department of Applied Physics. We were eager to know whether it was technically possible to broadcast a declaration of independence over the radio. Given that he had once served in the military, he was familiar with the technical aspects of radio transmissions. Professor Rakib informed us that a crucial small component was needed for broadcasting—without it, transmission was impossible.

Determined nonetheless, we took the university's microbus and drove to the Rajshahi radio station. Upon arrival, the station staff confirmed what we had feared—the Pakistani army had already seized that essential part. Defeated, we returned.

In the early hours of 3 April, a sudden knock on Aftabur Rahim's door startled us awake. Fear gripped us instantly. Was it the army? Had they returned? After a brief moment of paralysing tension, we recognised the voice of a boy from Fazlul Halim Chowdhury's house. Cautiously, we opened the door. The boy delivered his message: "Sir is calling you." Without delay, we hurried to his residence. Inside, we found Professor Mosharraf Hossain and Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui already seated.

Chowdhury Sir asked, "Have you heard anything?" We shook our heads in unison. "No, Sir." His next words sent a chill down our spines. He informed us that, earlier that morning, the Pakistan Army had brutally murdered several Hindu gentlemen in the city. Lawyer Salam Sahib had confirmed that Advocate Biren Sarkar and Suresh Pande were among the victims.

By then, daylight had fully set in. The professors issued a solemn directive: "No matter what, we must ensure that every Hindu teacher and their families from the university reach India safely before the end of the day."

Without wasting a second, Aftabur Rahim and I set out on this perilous mission. We decided to gather everyone first at Subrata Majumdar's house in Purbo Para, where our trusted rickshaw pullers from Binodpur would transport them to India.

Our first stop was Sukhranjan Samadder's house. When we urged him to leave, he refused. "Why would they kill me? I don't get involved with anyone," he said. His words were absolutely true. Yet, on 13 April, the Pakistan Army stormed the campus, dragged him away, and executed him by the side of Kazla Pond.

I hurriedly grabbed a rickshaw and headed towards the city. Along the way, chaos unfolded before my eyes—panicked families fleeing Rajshahi in rickshaws and horse carts, desperate to escape the city. Familiar faces stopped me, urging me not to go any further. But I had to bring a few teachers from the city.

I searched for Arun Basak and Nani Bhushan Foujdar, but they had already left. Continuing my way through the city, I passed a few houses near the big mosque on the road leading to the Padma River. Eventually, I reached Sanat Kumar Saha's house.

I found Sanat and his elderly aunt, both in a state of bewilderment—they had already packed, ready to leave. Wasting no time, I loaded them onto two rickshaws and took them to Subrata's house in Purbo Para.

By then, most teachers had already fled. My friend, Nani Bhushan Foujdar, himself arrived. The rickshaw pullers were already waiting downstairs—Mazdar, Madhu, Ali, and two others.

Time was running out, and the streets of Rajshahi were becoming more perilous by the minute. The fate of those who remained behind hung in uncertainty.

Our group consisted of Subrata Majumdar, his younger sister, and the children of his two elder sisters; Sanat Kumar Saha, accompanied by his mother, aunt, and siblings; Ghulam Murshid with his wife, Eliza, and their infant daughter, Amita, who had not even completed a month of life; Eliza's younger sister, Minar; Ajit; and me.

Newly married Nani Bhushan Foujdar had left a little while earlier, and we lost track of him. Later, after the Liberation, we heard that he had crossed the Padma River from another direction, eventually reaching India before moving on to London. However, on the banks of the Padma, everything they carried had been stolen.

At 1:30 p.m., we set off. The rickshaws slowly moved through Binodpur Bazaar, heading towards the Padma River. Madhu, one of our trusted rickshaw pullers, kept insisting that we stop at their house for a while, but our only goal was to cross the Padma as quickly as possible.

I had previously arranged a boat, yet the Padma we were about to cross was not the same as it once had been. From the bank, we would have to walk a long distance to reach the boat. As we stepped down from the rickshaws and began walking towards the river, two fighter jets appeared from the direction of Cadet College. They flew directly over our heads, their metallic frames glinting in the afternoon sun before disappearing into the western horizon.

Madhu, sensing danger, acted swiftly. He quickly led us to the back and asked us to rest at his house for a while.

Moments later, the two planes returned, circling several times before suddenly opening fire. The air filled with the deafening roar of machine guns and the thunderous explosions of bombs. Countless lives were lost in those few dreadful minutes.

Meanwhile, Madhu's wife brought out bowls of bread and chicken curry. Everyone ate whatever little they could. After that, we resumed our journey. This time, we boarded a boat, and within a few minutes, we reached the other shore.

In the distance, the border with India was now visible. But before us lay an endless stretch of char land, freshly ploughed by farmers using oxen. The scorching April sun had dried the soil to the texture of stone—there were no roads, no clear paths, only cracked earth beneath our aching feet.

We moved slowly, navigating the harsh, uneven ground towards the Indian border. Every step felt like an ordeal. Eliza struggled to walk, and we had to support her along the way. Madhu's aunt, a large woman, also found it increasingly difficult to keep moving.

Those of us wearing sandals soon found them useless—the sharp, jagged surface tore at our feet, leaving them cut and bleeding. Madhu, ever watchful, remained concerned about bandits.

At last, we set foot on Indian soil. Though the sun had already dipped below the horizon, the sky still glowed red with the remnants of evening light. The women collapsed onto the soft grass, utterly exhausted.

Madhu's sister's house was only about two hundred metres away. Their family ties were strong, and they often visited one another. Upon hearing of our arrival, Madhu's relatives hurried forward, embracing us with warmth and relief.

We led the weary travellers to the house, where cool water was poured into gleaming brass glasses. As we drank, the soothing touch of water on parched throats made us realise just how drained we were.

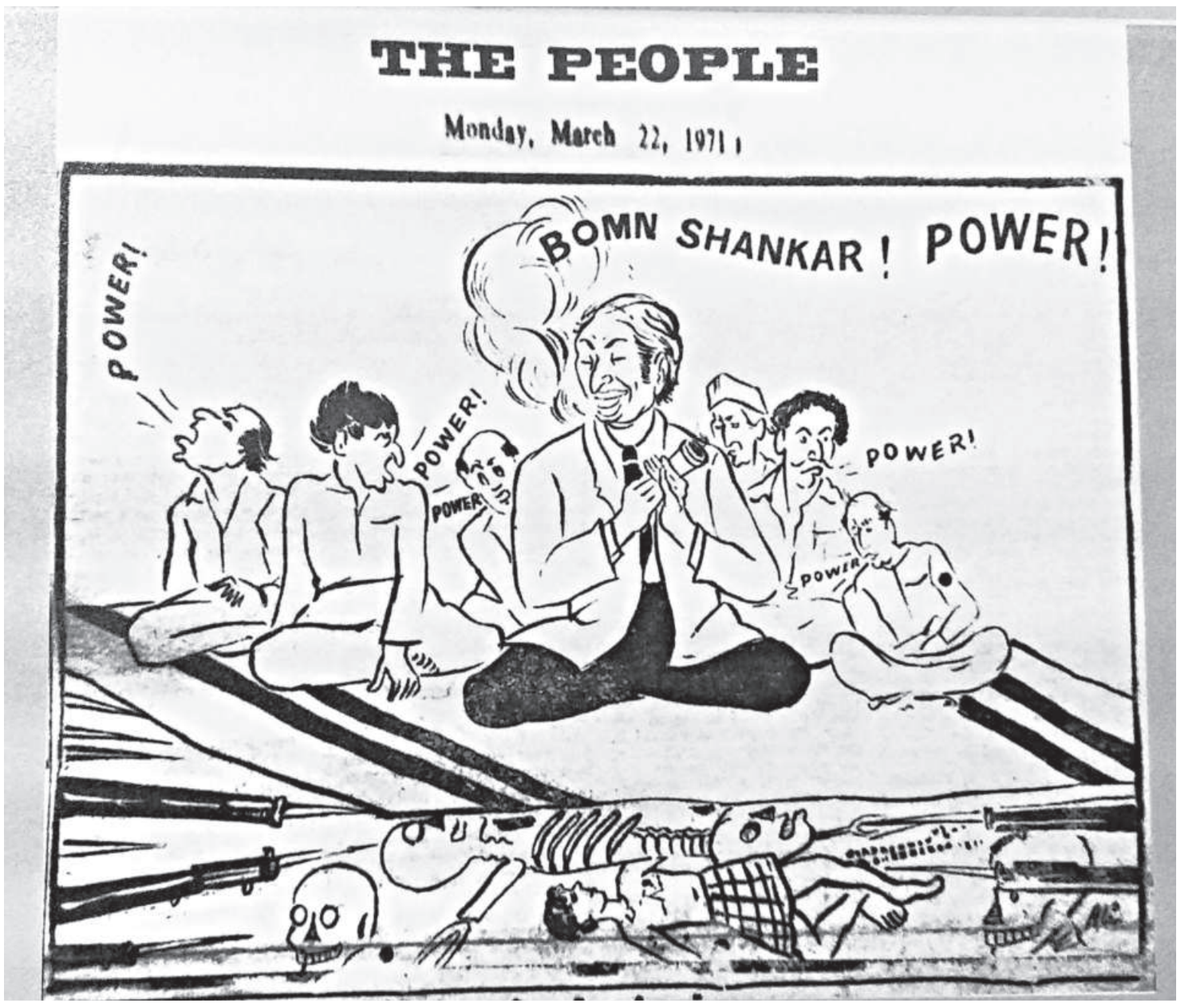
As evening deepened, they served us steaming plates of rice, accompanied by a fragrant broth of catfish and shrimp, along with masoor dal. It felt like ambrosia.

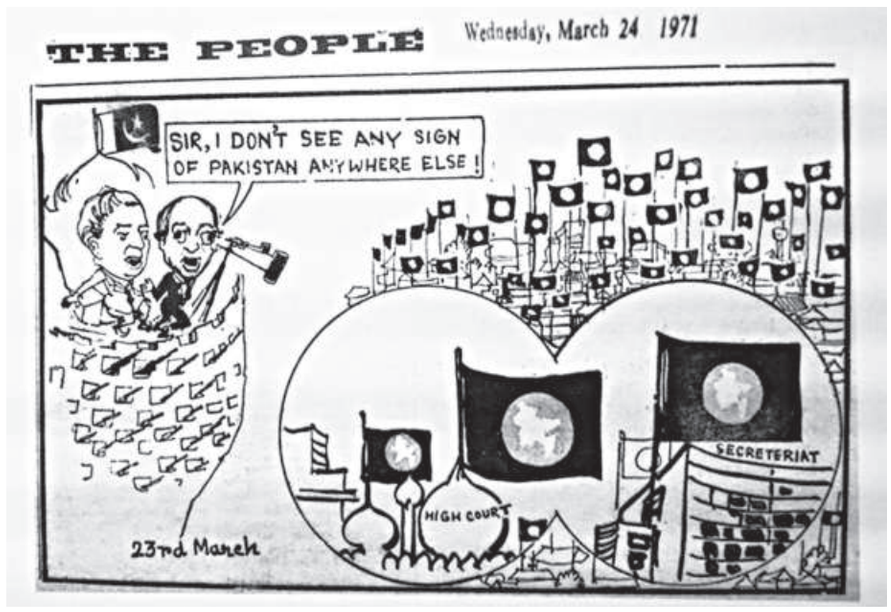
That night, the women remained inside the house, while we lay on the porch, beneath the vast, starlit sky. Within moments, sleep overtook us, the weight of exhaustion pulling us into the deepest slumber.

That harrowing day, filled with terror, escape, and relief, remains one of the most unforgettable moments of my life.

*The article was translated from Bangla to English by* **Priyam Paul**.

**Shahidul Islam** *is a former Professor of Applied Chemistry at Rajshahi University.*



# The People in 1971

**In the first phase of attack, Pakistani army attacked The People office. They burnt down the office with gun powder. Tank also shelled the office with machine gun firing. Nirmalendu Goon also told me that, in this attack 4–5 workers of the office were killed.**

RAHAT MINHAZ

As per the blueprint of Operation Searchlight, the Pakistani army had four key targets in Dhaka city on the fateful night of 25 March 1971. These were Dhaka University Campus, Rajarbagh Police Lines, Pilkhana—the headquarters of the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR)—and Dhanmondi 32, the residence of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. However, there was another target they aimed to burn down: the office of the English newspaper The People. On that night, another protagonist of the Pakistani genocide against the Bengalis, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party, was resting in the presidential suite of the Continental Hotel at Paribagh, near Shahbagh. From the window of his luxurious room, he witnessed the destruction of the newspaper with his own eyes.

So, why did the barbaric Pakistani forces target The People as a prime objective of Operation Searchlight? The answer is simple: The People was the strong voice of the Bengali non-cooperation movement led by the Awami League. To understand this, we can focus on one particular publication of The People from 1971.

On 23 March, Pakistan Day was observed in then-united Pakistan. It was a national holiday in 1971, typically a day of celebration and solidarity in Pakistan, marked by various events. The practice of hoisting Pakistani national flags on offices, buildings, road islands, and other public places was widespread. However, 23 March 1971 was a very different day in Dhaka. On this particular day, the citizens of Dhaka hoisted Bangladesh flags all over the city. To portray this, The People published a cartoon on 24 March titled, 'Sir, I don't see any sign of Pakistan anywhere else'. The cartoon illustrated a Pakistani high official, perched atop a watchtower, unable to find any Pakistani flags across the city. In contrast, a new flag of the emerging state fluttered in the rebellious air of Dhaka. On 24 March 1971, The People also published a banner headline that read:

'A FLAG OF FREEDOM IS BORN WITH STAIN OF MARTYRS' BLOOD'.

As part of a special report, the banner headline story narrated:

A new nation is born. And with it, a new flag—stained with the blood of martyrs—the flag of "Swadhin Bangla". In the serene calm of the dawn of 23 March, the new flag, hoisted atop all public and private buildings, offices, and establishments, fluttered proudly in the air, marking the advent of a new era for the Bengali nation. The day, observed as a day of resistance against the onslaught on our freedom, was charged with profound emotion and filled with high expectations.

The day that was observed as a day of resistance against the onslaught on our freedom was charged with utmost emotion and pregnant with high expectations. The emotion is linked with breathing the air of a free country, and the expectation entails building up Bangladesh as a full-blossomed and progressive independent polity. (The People, 24 March 1971)

My observation is that it was not only the publication of 24 March 1971, but the entire coverage of the Bengali non-cooperation movement that infuriated the Pakistani army, making them furious with the newspaper The People.

In headlines, news narratives, photographs, cartoons, and editorials, The People was wholeheartedly supportive of the Bengali uprising. It should be noted that this support began as early as 2 March 1971.

On 1 March 1971, in a radio announcement, the then Pakistani President Yahya Khan postponed the National Assembly session in Dhaka. This sparked a wave of protests across Dhaka and the rest of the country. On 2 March 1971, The People published the news under the headline:

'Mujib's call for emancipation of 70 million Bengalees. He further said that a united fight has to be put up for ending the colonial treatment to which Bengalees have been subjected for the last 23 years.' (The People, 2 March 1971)

**NEWS CARTOONS IN THE PEOPLE**

| | |
|---|---|
| 22 March 1971 | Bomn! Shankar Power! (Killing and Capturing Power) |
| 23 March 1971 | 'Dacca Airpor' (Zulfiqur Ali Bhutto Landing in Dhaka) |
| 24 March 1971 | Sir, I don't see any sign of Pakistan anywhere else. (Pakistan Day Cartoon.) |

SOURCE: THE PEOPLE (22,23,24 MARCH 1971)

**An Extraordinary Editorial**

Maverick, independent-minded journalist Abidur Rahman was the editor of The People in 1971. Under his guidance, The People began its journey as a daily newspaper on 15 August 1970. Prior to that, The People was a weekly magazine. From the outset, The People served as the voice of the Bengalees. During the non-cooperation movement, on 11 March, The People published an extraordinary editorial. The title was 'A New Nation Is Born In Bangla Desh'. This front-page special editorial described the situation as follows:

*'Bangla Desh is in a historical crossroad. The concept of Bengali nationalism initiated by the intellectuals like Sir Syed Ameer Ali, Nawab Sir Abdul Latif, given a distinct political reality by Sher-e-Bangla and Suhrawardy, has evolved during the last 23 years' uneasy political coexistence with West Pakistan into a mighty force the inevitable result of which is the creation of a nation-state. All the objective conditions of a nation-state are there: a territorial unity and ethnic homogeneity, common language and culture and a dominant political organisation with a dedicated leadership to exercise sovereign powers. It is the right and privilege of the present generation of Bengalees to stand united behind the leader like a rock and to help create the eighth largest nation in the world and light the fire of liberty and freedom in the hearts of its 75 million people. It is their noblest of all tasks which calls for the highest dedication and readiness for ultimate sacrifices.' (The People,* 11 March 1971*)*

**Crackdown and Killing**

Poet Nirmalendu Goon was working as a trainee sub-editor at The People in 1971. He was working under the prominent journalist Anwar Zahid. At that time, Gonobangla—a weekly publication of The People—was being published under the leadership of Anwar Zahid. Nirmalendu Goon was working specifically for Gonobangla. For research purposes, I had the opportunity to interview Poet Nirmalendu Goon about 1971. He told me that The People was one of the major targets of the Pakistani army under Operation Searchlight due to the outspoken nature of the newspaper.

In the first phase of the attack, the Pakistani army targeted The People's office. They set fire to the office using gunpowder. Tanks also shelled the office with machine gunfire. Nirmalendu Goon also told me that, during this attack, 4–5 workers at the office were killed.

At that time, the editor of the newspaper was at his home near Paribagh. He received a phone call from one of the office staff members, informing him that a Pakistani army tank was near The People's office. That was the last phone call before the telephone lines went dead.

It was a kind of fateful irony that the editor of The People saw the high flames of his own office from the rooftop of his residence. Later, he learned that a few office staff members had been killed in the attack. One was a worker from the printing press, and two other boys—Esha from Shahbajpur in Brahmanbaria, who cooked the meals, and Fazlu from Barisal, who served them—were shot dead that night.

When the editor of The People returned to the office after 16 December 1971, they found two broken skeletons lying in the ruined and ravaged office of The People.

*Sources:*

- Salik, Siddiq (1997), Witness to Surrender, Dhaka: University Press Limited.
- Interview, Poet Nirmalendu Goon (2021)
- First-hand account of Operation Searchlight, The Daily Star, 26 March 2012
  https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-227687

*Note:*

- In 1971, The People wrote 'Bangalees' as 'Bengalees'.

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# Birangona Women of Bangladesh

## The relentless burdens of memory, survival, and hope

**The Liberation War of Bangladesh stands as one of the earliest documented instances where rape was systematically used as a weapon of war. As Susan Brownmiller observed in Against Our Will, it marked the first time the global community acknowledged that organised sexual violence could be used to terrorise an entire population.**

LEESA GAZI

I stood beneath the January sun, locking eyes with a Birangona woman on a balcony above me. Her warm smile steadied my trembling heart. Inside, 21 Birangona women awaited us at Sirajganj Uttaran Mohila Sangstha. I was finally here. The year was 2010.

At 17, I first learnt the word Birangona—Brave Woman—from my father, Muhammad Lutfur Rahman. He was a freedom fighter in our bloody Liberation War. He described seeing hundreds of raped women and girls standing back-to-back on a convoy of trucks like sacrificial animals—an image that stayed with me forever.

During the war, the Pakistani Army and their local collaborators carried out a systematic campaign of genocide, rape, and torture against 200,000 to 400,000 women and girls as part of their war strategy. Bengali women were declared gonimoter maal (war booty), openly endorsing their rape.

The Liberation War of Bangladesh stands as one of the earliest documented instances where rape was systematically used as a weapon of war. As Susan Brownmiller observed in Against Our Will, it marked the first time the global community acknowledged that organised sexual violence could be used to terrorise an entire population.

Australian physician Dr Geoffrey Davies came to Bangladesh in 1972 under the UN banner after rising suicide rates among raped women drew global attention. His team performed over 100 abortions a day. In an interview with Dr Bina D'Costa, Dr Davies revealed that General Tikka Khan's orders aimed to weaponise rape during the war. His directive was to impregnate as many Bengali women as possible, ensuring that a "good Muslim" would fight anyone except his father. This brutal strategy turned women's bodies into battlegrounds, leaving a deep and haunting scar on history.

Yet, where did these women go? After the war ended in 1971, the Bangladeshi government granted them honorific titles—an unprecedented act. But in reality, they were hidden and forgotten. Trapped by the stigma of rape and collective shame, they endured isolation and ostracisation in a free society, while the perpetrators remained largely unspoken of.

Poster of the play Birangona: Women of War.

Birangona Rajubala, one of the survivors whose story inspired the play.

I am not an academic or journalist—I am a theatre practitioner, writer, and filmmaker. My truth comes from deep observation, from the pain hidden in plain sight—the silent cry that defines my truth.

When I stood before the 21 Birangona women, 39 years of silence separated us. But they welcomed me with open arms and beautiful smiles, offering their prayers and blessings. At that moment, I felt small—like dust. Their love and blessings radically transformed me. I sought their permission to film their accounts. Perhaps I had been searching for them since I was 17, believing there must be many like me who wanted to know them. I felt a deep sense of urgency to document their testimonies.

For decades, we have witnessed the distortion of history, manipulated for political gain, and this practice continues to this day. As part of the first generation of a newly independent nation, I lived through two brutal military coups. History books changed with every new regime, leaving key truths hidden. For example, children of my generation were taught we fought against "perpetrators" in 1971, but who they were was never mentioned—were they aliens?

My father instilled in me an unwavering passion for the Liberation War, sharing its glorious moments like forbidden tales. I am deeply grateful for this, though I struggle to understand how forces opposed to our nation's birth are still influential and effective. Somewhere along the way, we made a grave mistake and are still paying the price.

Listening to the Birangona women, their words shook me to the core. On our way back, Birangona Aasia grabbed my hands, saying, "No one wants to listen; they hate us even more."

After meeting them, I held their precious stories close. I heard that one of the women I met had died. Her name was Bahaton. I did not want to forget her face; her story, like all the women's, was disappearing. I realised that when a Birangona woman dies, her story dies with her—as if their lives never mattered.

This forced me to return to Bangladesh in 2013 with Komola Collective, to develop the play Birangona: Women of War. During my second visit, I met Rajubala'di, Aasia, Karimon, Joygun, and Surya Apa, and we found peace in their love and care.

As the first performance approached, held at the Liberation War Museum on August 29, I felt a wave of emotion upon seeing them. When I realised the significance of their presence, my entire body froze. Would we be able to tell their stories?

As the play began, I could not avoid looking at the Birangona women in the front row. Their sobs grew louder, and one woman fainted. I was torn—should I stop the performance? I later learnt she had feared that the Pakistani Army had returned. She had to be reassured: "There is no Pakistani Army. We are free now."

We were devastated, questioning whether we had done the right thing. But they wanted to see their own stories on stage. Afterwards, their coldness struck me. They did not even look at me, as if a wall had formed between us. But then, as they prepared to leave, Korimon Apa asked, "Will you perform this play only in London?" When I assured her we would take it to many cities, Raju Bala Didi's words echoed: "Go, tell the world!"

These women have entrusted us with their stories of suffering, courage, torture, and resilience—stories that must be shared with the world. Amplifying their voices will always be my greatest privilege.

In 2014, the Offie-nominated play Birangona: Women of War toured the UK. The Guardian called it "a powerful, groundbreaking production." The play was written by Samina Lutfa and Leesa Gazi, directed by Filiz Ozcan, with music by Sohini Alam and Ahsan Reza Khan, lighting by Nasirul Haque, and research advice from Hasan Arif. We also took the Bengali translation to Bangladesh and staged a special performance at the Central Shaheed Minar—an unforgettable honour.

In Sirajganj, a performance at the Shaheed Monsur Ali Auditorium celebrated the Birangona women, who attended with pride. Birangona Surjya Apa said, "Now we can walk on the streets with our heads held high. No one dares to insult us."

### Rising Silence – Research

When I first set out to meet the Birangona women, I could not picture

PHOTO: NASSER GAZI

**A powerful moment from a performance of Birangona: Women of War.**

their faces—just a collective entity weighed down by history. But they are not just statistics or labels. Each has a name, a story—they are daughters, mothers, wives, friends. They are any and every woman.

Meeting them changed everything. I see their faces now—I could have been one of them. While researching the film, I travelled across Bangladesh, meeting 83 survivors of mass rape and torture. They welcomed me into their homes and lives without judgement, sharing their stories beyond history and politics.

The nine women in the film come from different backgrounds, ages, religions, and languages, but they share one devastating truth—they are Birangona. Their stories reveal the brutal, indiscriminate nature of sexual violence in conflict.

During my research, one moment shaped the heart of the film. I visited a remote village to meet three sisters who had been held in the same rape camp with 22 other women. As we began talking, Amina Apa, the eldest sister, suddenly asked, "Are you ashamed to sit with us?" Her question cut

deep. I realised how often they had been treated as outcasts, observed from a distance. They did not want to be studied—they wanted connection, understanding, and respect. That moment taught me that the film had to be about intimacy and shared humanity, not just testimony. Their wish became the soul of the documentary.

### My Learning

I began this journey to make a film about the extraordinary Birangona women, but their stories ended up transforming me. Their resilience and strength taught me what I am capable of as a woman and gave me a sense of pride and humanity I had never known. We do not truly know our strength, compassion, or power to love until we are tested—they are living proof of that.

Knowing them has made me want to be a better person, to face life with empathy, courage, and dignity. They have shown me that kindness is a practice—the more you give, the kinder you become.

Despite unimaginable suffering, they remain brave, resilient, and loving. How is that possible? The film explores this strength—the spirit to rise above devastation and still hold onto sweetness of heart. They are not only raped women; they embody defiance and dignity. They have risen from the ashes and built a life. They are each a phoenix bird.

I do not know how it is possible to save others while living through such horror—yet they did. They disowned their children to protect them, built futures while haunted by the past, and fearlessly spoke their truth. By living, they have conquered the monsters of war and daily prejudice with extraordinary courage and profound love.

Birangona Rajubala once said, "The one who loves, their heart will weep forever. That's why my tears never end." Then she broke into song and dance. After everything, they still have the heart to celebrate life. "Being human is the best form of existence," Rajubala declares.

### Trauma

The trauma the Birangona women carry is relentless. Birangona Jharna Basu Halder once mistook a classmate for her abuser. The shadows of their tormentors haunt them everywhere—that is the grip of PTSD.

In November 2018, we attended a global survivor network in the Netherlands with two survivors. As we approached the hotel, Jabeda Apa froze at the door. "What if someone breaks in and tortures us?" she asked.

Once, Birangona Shurjyo Begum pointed to a hayfield and said, "Look, they are coming. You can't see them, but I can." None have escaped the psychological wounds—they have simply learned to live with them.

Birangona women endure not just physical and emotional trauma but also societal stigma that extends to their children and grandchildren. They seek solace in each other, in prayers and music. They carry an unbearable burden, and without any warning, it can come forth.

### Worldwide Impact

Rising Silence features the stories of nine Birangona women—five have passed away, but their blessings drive our mission to spread their voices. Birangona Amina Begum said, "The world now knows our name."

In January 2019, Birangona Rijia Begum and Nurjahan Begum accepted the Best Documentary Award at the Dhaka International Film Festival—a goosebump moment. The film has won 15 international awards, including the 2019 Moondance Winner (USA), and Best Feature Documentary at the PSVI Film Competition by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, UK.

In November 2018, at a symposium in The Hague, Birangona Anwara Begum and Jabeda Khatun joined survivors from 15 countries, calling for a global reparations scheme to address the impact of sexual violence in conflicts. On her first trip outside Bangladesh, Jabeda Khatun addressed a panel of world leaders. She said, "We've been recognised in Bangladesh. Now we want reparations. We want the world to recognise us. What will you do about it?"

In August 2019, Dr Mukwege's Foundation organised a global online screening, bringing the film to viewers in Asia, Europe, the UK, and the US. It has been shown at institutions like the University of Cambridge, LSE, SOAS, and more. Rising Silence was part of the South Asian Feminist Capacity Building Course and featured on BBC's Witness History podcast. The British Psychological Society used it to explore trauma's impact, and 22 students wrote dissertations on its themes of sexual violence in armed conflict.

Rising Silence has been shown around the world to raise awareness and mobilise advocacy campaigns about the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war in current armed conflicts. The film has become a powerful advocacy tool to address the issue and facilitate discussion. The relevance of this documentary is apparent as women continue to bear the brunt of sexual violence in armed conflicts worldwide, from Palestine to Myanmar, Syria to South Sudan.

Birangona women entrusted us with their stories, and we are committed to amplifying their voices, ensuring they are remembered with love and pride across time and borders, inspiring a global call for justice.

"With each day that passes, the Birangona women of Bangladesh are dying out, and with them, their stories: stories which we, as part of an international community striving to end sexual violence in conflict, cannot afford to ignore. Many of the women have passed away, but through Rising Silence, their stories live on," said the Mukwege Foundation. The powerful voices of Bangladeshi Birangona women are inspiring the world to listen, act, and demand justice.

**Leesa Gazi** *is an author, theatre worker, award-winning filmmaker and co-founder of Komola Collective.*

## Rediscovering the Bangladesh Liberation War through Unexplored Archives

Writing the history of war, especially the history of a liberation war, is one of the most challenging tasks for historians. The Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 was no exception. Faced with the loss, destruction, or restricted access to potential archives, historians grapple with the task of finding alternative sources, often turning to oral histories.

Several significant archives for filling the gaps in documents related to the liberation war of Bangladesh are located overseas. Among these, the National Archives in the UK stands out as one of the most crucial resources. During the Summer and Fall of 2023, I had the opportunity to visit the National Archives at Kew Gardens in the UK and conduct around two months of archival research. The documents pertaining to the Bangladesh Liberation War are preserved under the Department of Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Some of these documents, declassified most recently, remain largely unexplored by historians of the Bangladesh Liberation War. The materials from the National Archives, UK provide valuable insights into both internal and external developments related to the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

I am grateful for the generous funding provided by the McGill University Mobility Award and the Schull Yang International Experience Award, which supported my archival research. Additionally, I extend my thanks to my hosts, Rubayet Sharmin and Razin Khan, in London.

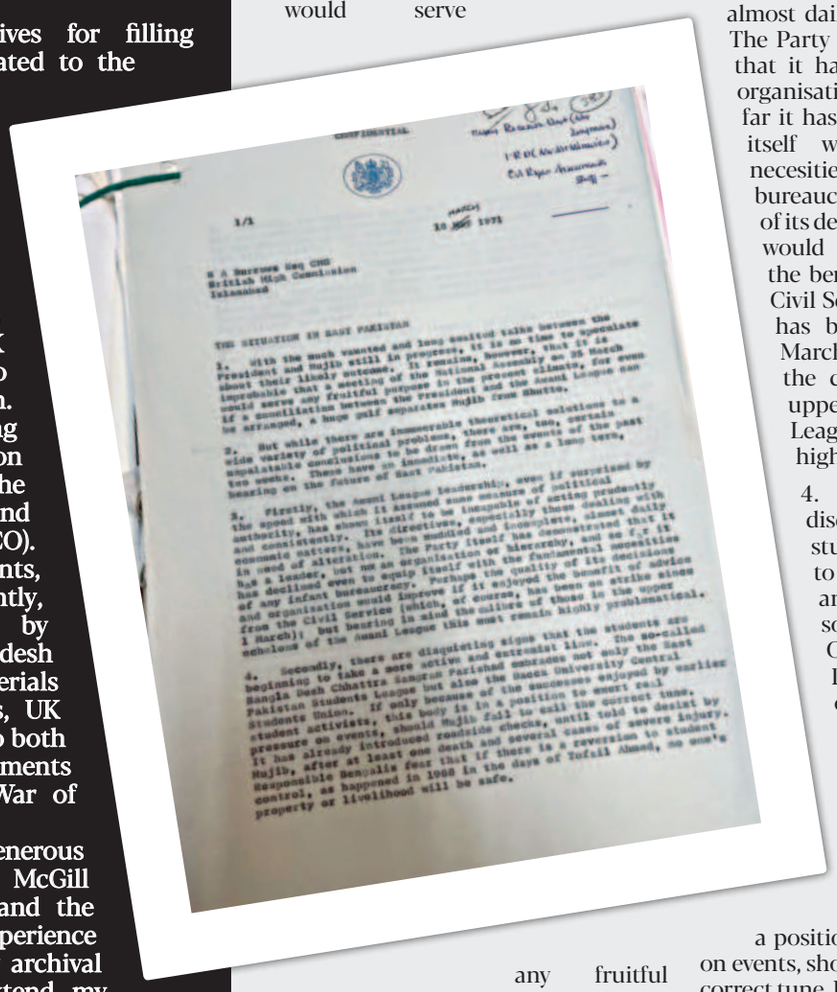
**Azizul Rasel**, *PhD Student at McGill University, Canada.*

## ‘A huge gulf separates Mujib from Bhutto’

**18 March 1971**
**RA Burrows Saq CMG**
**British High Commission**
**Islamabad**

**THE SITUATION IN EAST PAKISTAN**

1. With the much vaunted and long awaited talks between the President and Mujib still in progress, it is no time to speculate about their likely outcome. It remains, however, that it is improbable that a meeting of the National Assembly on 25 March would serve any fruitful purpose in the present climate, for even if a conciliation between the President and the Awami League can be arranged, a huge gulf separates Mujib from Bhutto.



2. But while there are innumerable theoretical solutions to a wide variety of political problems, there are, too, certain unpalatable conclusions to be drawn from the events of the past two weeks. These have an immediate, as well as a long term, bearing on the future of East Pakistan.

3. Firstly, the Awani League leadership, even if surprised by the speed with which it assumed some measure of political authority, has shown itself to be incapable of acting prudently and consistently. Its directives, especially those dealing with economic matters, have been muddled and incomplete, almost daily in need of alteration. The Party itself has demonstrated that it has a leader, but not an organisation or hierarchy, and so far it has declined even to equip itself with the fundamental necesities of any infant bureaucracy. Perhaps the quality of its decisions and organisation would improve if it enjoyed the benefit of advice from the Civil Service (which, of course, has been on strike since 1 March); but bearing in mind the calibre of those in the upper echelons of the Awami League this must remain highly problematical.

4. Secondly, there are disquieting signs that the students are beginning to take a more active and extremist line. The so-called Bangla Desh Chhattra Sangram Parishad embraces not only the East Pakistan Students League but also the Dacca University Central Students Union. If only because of the successes enjoyed by earlier student activists, this body is in a position to exert real pressure on events, should Mujib fail to call the correct tune. It has already introduced roadside checks, until told to desist by Mujib, after at least one death and several cases of severe injury. Responsible Bengalis fear that if there is a reversion to student control, as happened in 1968 in the days of Tofail Ahmed, no one's property or livelihood will be safe.

5. Thirdly, the delicate but nascent infrastructure of foreign aid and technical assistance programmes has been dealt a mortal blow by the departure of the entire World Bank teams, and all Japanese and German experts. This has produced no comment in the Press, save pronouncements to the effect that the Awami League wishes foreigners to remain in Bangladesh. It is too early to predict precisely what will be the consequences of this large scale departure; but certainly it must have a deleterious and severe impact on East Pakistan's future economic prospects over the short term anyhow, and there are no indications that those who have left intend to return soon.

**The Awani League leadership, even if surprised by the speed with which it assumed some measure of political authority, has shown itself to be incapable of acting prudently and consistently.**

6. Already, the financial and economic situation here has become extremely precarious. A combination of civil disobedience, strikes and Awami League directives has caused a serious loss of productivity and deep concern in banking and business circles. Traders and businessmen have found that their bills are not, or cannot be settled, whilst at the same time they are expected to pay out substantial sums in wages. (Duncan Brothers, for example, are owed Rs.62 lakhs for tea already sold and partly shipped to West Pakistan by the "buyers".) Bankers who have given credit on the security of mills or factories, now fear that they will be unable to redeem their loans. The East Pakistani economy is very much a deficit financed one, and in the present climate no further investment is likely for the foreseeable future, and those concerns in the hands of West Pakistanis are vulnerable to civil turbulence and labour trouble. The picture is gloomier now than ever it was; and it is difficult at present to imagine how a recovery can be effected, or who would be capable of making the attempt.

7. Fourthly, there is a very real danger that in the disguise of an ardently nationalist movement, East Bengal will find itself on the narrow and slippery path which leads to anarchy. There is much wild talk about "communist" take overs and the expansion of the Naxalite movement in East Bengal; there is scant evidence that this is really so. What is apparent is that the economic and social pressures here are so great as to drive Bengalis into acts of savage but unpremeditated violence. At the moment, and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, I am prepared to dismiss suggestions that this violence is the result of an acquaintance with the thoughts of Mao or the writings of Marx; but the events of the past weeks have demonstrated conclusively that East Bengal is likely to become an even less safe place to live in than it was before. Miles' letter of 3 March (not to all) describing efforts by the Army in West Bengal to stamp out in concert with the local police lawlessness there forces the thought that, without the presence of an active military force in East Bengal, the situation here could deteriorate rapidly, for neither the Police nor the East Pakistan Rifles can be characterised as resolute or authoritative, and the mobs can be raised to vast proportions and are of wild irresponsibility and violence.

8. These general conclusions will make depressing reading. They reflect the extent to which we believe that the recent political disturbances have altered the future outlook for East Pakistan. It may be that all that can be done will be to extricate remaining British interests in commerce and industry as painlessly as possible, but we shall have time to think about this.

9. I am copying this letter to Ian Sutherland in South Asian Department, to John Moberley at Washington, and to Karachi, Lahore and Polad Singapore.

# 1971 in Fiction: A Literary Dilemma

ILLUSTRATION: **REHNUMA PROSHOON**

**Many freedom fighters and literary figures believe that skilled writers, adept at crafting literary works, often lacked direct experience of the 1971 War.**

**PRIYAM PAUL**

Writing literature is, by nature, a creative pursuit—one that demands both technical skill and an innate artistic sensibility. When the subject is the 1971 War, the task becomes even more complex, as it requires a delicate balance between historical accuracy and imaginative expression. Too often, however, the focus shifts towards producing a greater volume of work—whether for ceremonial observance or commercial gain—at the expense of depth, nuance, and authenticity. This concern extends beyond literature to the realms of drama and cinema as well.

This debate grew more intense in the years following the war, when memories were still vivid among witnesses, literary figures, and readers, and it remains relevant today as firsthand experiences become increasingly rare. Notably, the scarcity of significant literature on the 1971 War can largely be attributed to two key factors: the firsthand experience of war and the writer's ability to effectively translate it into compelling writing.

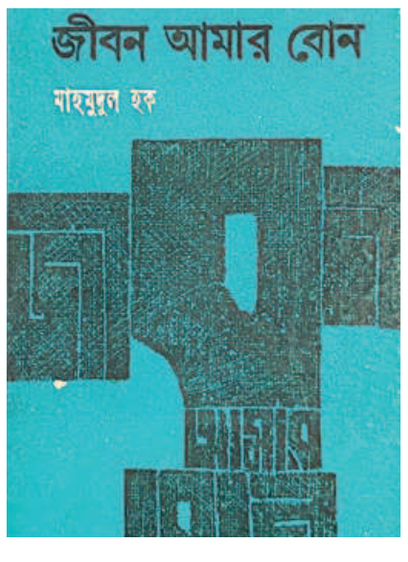
Many freedom fighters and literary figures believe that skilled writers, adept at crafting literary works, often lacked direct experience of the 1971 War. Conversely, freedom fighters who actively participated in the war and led resistance efforts did not always possess the necessary writing skills to document their experiences. This gap between literary expertise and firsthand war experience created a disconnect, affecting the imaginative depth of creative writings on the war.

As a matter of fact, some writers, teachers, and intellectuals were among the first casualties of the war, killed during the attacks on 26–27 March. The brutality escalated in the final phase of the war in December, when many intellectuals, poets, and writers, after enduring months of captivity under occupation, were executed by the Pakistani army and its local collaborators.

Meanwhile, another group of literary figures and writers fled to India, where they lived as war refugees, and some actively contributed to movements advocating for Bangladesh's liberation. Thus, critics argue that both groups of writers lacked direct lived experience of the war—some led secluded, inactive, or fugitive lives in the occupied land, while others did not witness the war firsthand as they were in Indian territory. Beyond the question of direct experience, some writers have also explored other dimensions of meaningful storytelling while observing this genre of creative writing during the 1971 War.

For instance, novelist Rashid Karim (1925–2011) challenged the notion that the inadequate literary representation of the 1971 War was solely due to a lack of firsthand experience. Writing in 1991, two decades after the war, he acknowledged that this shortage of experience influenced the portrayal of war in dramas and novels, often making them overly fanciful and disconnected from reality. However, he argued that this issue required deeper reflection to be fully understood. He pointed out that some of the greatest works of war literature were written by authors who had no direct experience of war, yet they successfully created authentic and timeless representations that became world classics.

He stated that in The Diary of Anne Frank, the young author did not witness the events outside her tiny room—the war and the brutal torture inflicted by the Nazi army. Instead, she recorded her personal thoughts, family details, and occasional sounds of Nazi raids or glimpses of soldiers from the window while remaining in hiding throughout the Second World War. Although the book contains no direct accounts from the war front, it became one of the most widely read literary testimonies of World War II.




Rashid Karim highlights how this was possible despite Anne Frank's lack of firsthand experience of war, emphasising that her imagination allowed her to create a compelling narrative of acute fear, alongside the presence of love and even the observation of birthdays—without relying on fictionalised depictions of war. These elements contrasted with the overwhelming, wired portrayal of war often found in the literature of 1971.

He extended this argument to Leo Tolstoy's great literary novel War and Peace (1869), a war-based novel set between 1805 and 1813, despite Tolstoy being born in 1828 and completing the novel 64 years later. With its vast array of characters and events, Tolstoy, having no direct war experience, had to rely on historical research in libraries, interviewing people for information, and travelling to different countries to understand the ambience of the time.

However, history and literature are not identical, as Rashid Karim mentioned. While history can aid in the process, it is the author's rare quality of imagination that allows them to depict the complex events of the 1971 War without relying on fictionalised or entertaining portrayals of war. Personal experience, firsthand war experience, or an acute historical sense are important, but these cannot be considered the only components for writing 1971 war literature.

Syed Shamsul Haque (1935–2016), a renowned poet, prose writer, and dramatist, also contributed to this discussion. He observed that during the 1970s and 1980s, nearly all writers focused on literature about the Liberation War of 1971. However, after two decades, the volume of such writings declined. He explored these challenges while discussing Italo Calvino, the acclaimed Italian writer, who documented Italy's war experience and its literary impact. Notably, unlike European war literature—which gave rise to neo-realism in both literature and cinema, with Calvino as one of its pioneers—the literary response to the War of 1971 did not develop into a distinct genre.

Beyond the common perception that Bengali literature lags behind due to its association with a third-world context, Syed Haque asserts that Bengali authors bear the responsibility of producing meaningful work in their own language. Notably, Calvino wrote that while Italy may have been occupied in the war, its authors' minds remained free—a sentiment reflected in their literature. The past was blurred, but the present was vibrant and colourful; most importantly, those colours represent the stories of war, deeply experienced by both writers and readers of Italy.

Drawing from Calvino's insight, Syed Haque extended the idea to the literature of the 1971 War. He observes that the initial surge of novels and stories about 1971 was necessary for both writers and readers. Over the decades, this body of literature has served almost as a form of catharsis. However, he argued that the time has now come to shift the focus towards the artistic merit of 1971 war literature—moving beyond mere participation in writing about the war to considering its enduring artistic value.

**Priyam Paul** *is a researcher and journalist.*

Ravi Shankar and George Harrison at the press conference for The Concert for Bangladesh.

© picture-alliance/CAP/MPI/RKA/JH

# Global Chords of Freedom

## Artists, Poets, and the War of '71

**Argentine intellectual, writer, and literary critic Victoria Ocampo was another foreign friend of Bangladesh who could not remain silent after hearing of the brutality of the Pakistan Army in 1971. At 80, Victoria Ocampo took to the streets of Buenos Aires with writer Jorge Luis Borges and Father Ismael Quiles, rallying intellectuals in support of Bengalis.**

MIFTAHUL JANNAT

The Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 was not just a struggle fought on the battlefields, but a humanitarian crisis that captured the world's attention. Millions of refugees poured into India, war crimes devastated families, and the call for justice echoed beyond Bangladesh. While political leaders deliberated and soldiers fought, a different kind of global ally emerged—artists, musicians, writers, and poets who lent their voices to Bangladesh's cause. Their words, music, and actions played a crucial role in mobilising global support. While bullets and bombs shaped the battlefield, music, poetry, and art stirred the world's conscience in '71.

### Gobinda Halder: Unsung Lyricist of the War

During the 1971 Liberation War, *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* inspired millions through its broadcasts and songs. Some of the most iconic war songs of that time—including *Mora Ekti Phul Ke Bachabo Bole Juddho Kori, Purbo Digonte Shurjo Utheche,* and *Ek Shagor-e Rokter Binimoye*—which became anthems of resilience and freedom, were written by Gobinda Haldar.

As the war erupted, *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* became a vital resistance station. During this time, radio officials sought to move away from the usual practice of airing old recorded songs and instead feature live music performances. Initially, the station broadcast songs written before the war, but as the conflict progressed, the need for new lyrics and expressions grew.

Kamal Lohani, activist and news editor of the station, found exactly what was needed in Gobinda Haldar's diary, boldly labelled *Joy Banglar Gaan*, providing fresh and relevant material for the broadcasts. "While we were searching for a lyricist who could capture the essence of our country's struggle, Gobinda Haldar appeared like a saviour with two notebooks loaded with 24 to 30 songs," remarked Lohani later.

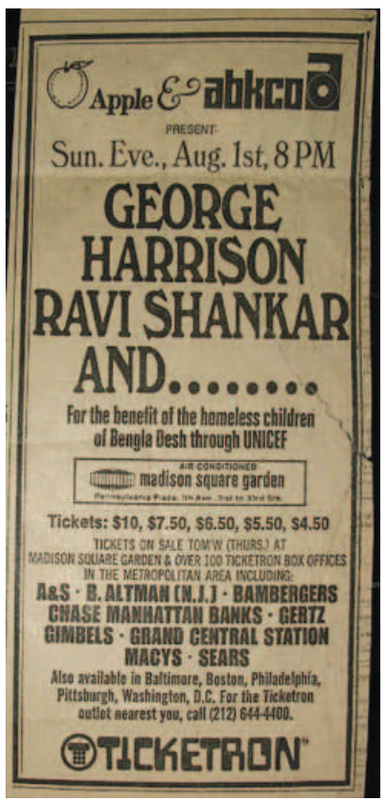
At the revolutionary radio station, senior composer Samar Das received the diaries from Lohani for consideration. Lohani later enquired with composer Apel Mahmud about why nothing was being done with the diaries. Intrigued, Mahmud read through them and was inspired by Haldar's words. He chose to compose *Mora Ekti Phul Ke Bachabo Bole Juddho Kori,* which was first aired in the first week of June, becoming an iconic song that inspired many during and after the war.

Following its success, Samar Das quickly composed another legendary song from Haldar's diary, *Purbo Digonte Shurjo Utheche*. On 20 December, Haldar penned another masterpiece—*Ek Shagor-e Rokter Binimoye*—a true tribute to martyrs, which he completed in just one day.

During the war, there was a policy that prohibited foreigners from writing or performing songs for the station. As a result, Haldar's name was not included in the credits. However, even after independence, his name remained absent from the list of acknowledgements, and he did not receive any royalties for 12 years.

Despite lacking recognition, his devotion to Bangladesh is reflected in his own words during an interview in 2000: "Bangladesh is my land too, and I am also a Bengali. My deep love and respect remain for every person in Bangladesh. This eternal and everlasting love cannot be severed. Bangladesh is the essence of my being. I want to hold onto the memories of Bangladesh and sleep in eternal peace."

He was honoured by the Bangladesh government much later, in 2012. He passed away in 2015, leaving behind a legacy of 3,000 unpublished songs.




**A poster of The Concert for Bangladesh.**

### George Harrison & Ravi Shankar: The Concert for Bangladesh

*The Concert for Bangladesh* was one of the most remarkable contributions from legendary sitar maestro Ravi Shankar and former Beatles guitarist George Harrison. Moved by the suffering of Bangladeshis, Shankar approached Harrison with the idea of organising a benefit concert. The result was the historic concert at Madison Square Garden in New York on 1 August 1971.

While Harrison was the face of *The Concert for Bangladesh*, the presence of other rock icons lent significant credibility to the cause. Featuring talented musicians like Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, Ringo Starr, and Leon Russell, the concert raised millions for Bangladeshi refugees and brought global attention to the humanitarian crisis.

Bob Dylan performed some of his most stirring songs, including *Blowin' in the Wind*—a poignant reflection on the universal struggle for justice. Eric Clapton, despite his initial hesitation, joined the movement, while Ringo Starr's participation reinforced the collective solidarity of artists. The live album and film of the event continue to resonate today as a symbol of artistic activism.

### Joan Baez: Song of Bangladesh

Folk singer and activist Joan Baez took the plight of Bangladeshis to heart. She composed *Bangladesh*, a haunting ballad that painted vivid imagery of the horrors of war:

**Joan Baez's Bangladesh remains a haunting ballad that painted vivid imagery of the horrors of our liberation war.**

"Bangladesh, Bangladesh
When the sun sinks in the west
Die a million people of Bangladesh"

Through her evocative lyrics and powerful voice, Baez not only brought international awareness but also provided an emotional narrative that connected audiences to the suffering of millions. Her song remains an enduring testament to the power of music in shaping historical memory.

### Allen Ginsberg: The Power of Poetry

American poet Allen Ginsberg was among the first Western intellectuals to witness the tragedy firsthand. After visiting refugee camps in India, he penned *September on Jessore Road*, a searing poem describing the suffering of displaced Bangladeshis. With lines like,

"Millions of fathers in rain / Millions of mothers in pain,"

Ginsberg captured the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis. His poem became an anthem of protest, recited at rallies and published worldwide, urging the global community to act.

### Victoria Ocampo: Our Argentine Ally

Argentine intellectual, writer, and literary critic Victoria Ocampo was another foreign friend of Bangladesh who could not remain silent after hearing of the brutality of the Pakistan Army in 1971. At 80, Victoria Ocampo took to the streets of Buenos Aires with writer Jorge Luis Borges and Father Ismael Quiles, rallying intellectuals in support of Bengalis.

On 11 June 1971, they urged Argentina's foreign minister to send urgent aid to Bangladeshi refugees in India. Their memorandum, widely covered by Argentine media, condemned global inaction and called for tangible support. It sparked a movement in Latin America, leading Venezuelan intellectuals to appeal for international solidarity. Recognised for her efforts, Ocampo received Bangladesh's Friends of Liberation War Honour posthumously in 2012, 33 years after her passing.

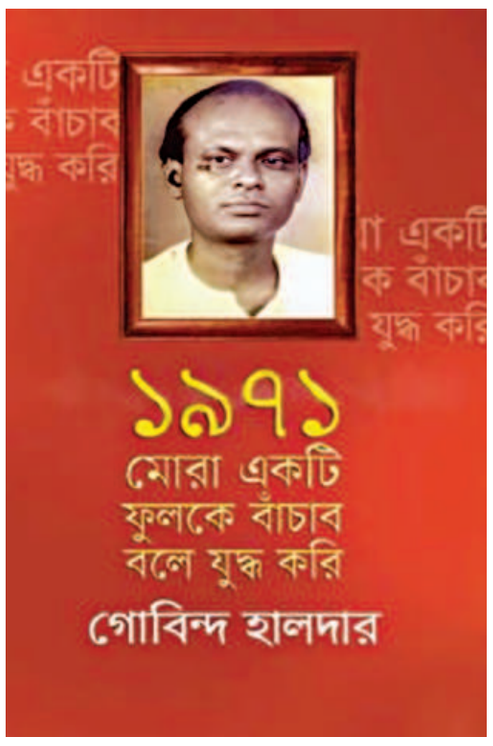
Apart from the aforementioned artists, many other renowned poets, writers, and musicians supported us, bringing our war-torn situation to the international stage. Among them were Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky, Oscar-winning British actress Glenda Jackson, singer and composer Sachin Dev Burman, Salil Chowdhury, Lata Mangeshkar, filmmaker and writer Satyajit Ray, artist M.F. Husain, poet Kaifi Azmi, and many others who expressed sympathy and extended their assistance and encouragement during the war.

### The Legacy and Lasting Impact

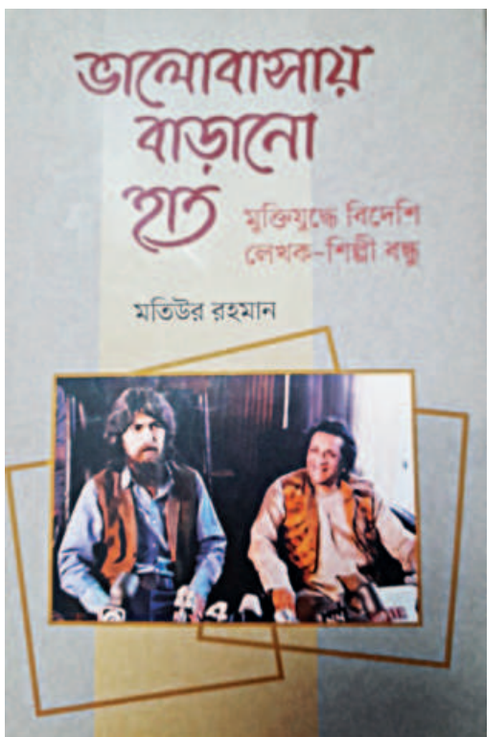
The contributions of these artists, poets, and musicians were not just temporary acts of solidarity; they left a lasting impact on global humanitarian efforts. *The Concert for Bangladesh* set a precedent for future benefit concerts. Joan Baez's song and Allen Ginsberg's poetry continue to serve as powerful reminders of art's ability to shape history. Bangladesh continues to remember these artistic allies with deep gratitude, recognising the profound impact of their creative resistance during its fight for freedom.

Art knows no borders, and it became a weapon for justice in 1971. From the chords of a guitar to the strokes of a poet's pen, these voices beyond borders ensured that Bangladesh's call for freedom echoed across the world.

**Miftahul Jannat** *is a journalist at The Daily Star.*




**Cover of the book *1971: Mora Ekti Phul Ke Bachabo Bole Juddho Kori*, shedding light on the forgotten legacy of Gobinda Halder and his lyrical contribution to Bangladesh's Liberation War.**




**Matiur Rahman's *Bhalobasay Barano Haat* presents a powerful and detailed account of the international poets, writers, and artists who stood in solidarity with Bangladesh during the Liberation War of 1971.**

# 'The truths written in blood cannot be erased by lies'

*Bimal Biswas—veteran politician and noted writer—played an active role in several battles against the Pakistani junta during the 1971 Liberation War, particularly in the Jessore, Narail, and Khulna regions. In this exclusive interview with The Daily Star, he recounts his wartime experiences and sheds light on the inner workings of his party, the EPCP (M-L).*

**The Daily Star (TDS):** How did events unfold in your locality at the outset of the war?

**Bimal Biswas (BB):** On 25 March 1971, the Pakistani army launched a brutal attack on the Bengali nation. In response, leaders and activists of the EPCP (M-L) in Narail seized control of the Narail treasury by 11 a.m. on 27 March, aiming to organise an armed national resistance against the onslaught. Of the weapons obtained, 90 percent went to the EPCP (M-L), while the remaining 10 percent were distributed among Awami League and Chhatra League leaders and activists. Similarly, on 28 March, EPCP (M-L) workers seized weapons from the Jessore city treasury.

Since March 1970, I had been in hiding under a false arrest warrant issued by the Pakistan government. At the time, I was a member of the EPCP (M-L). Previously, I was elected general secretary in 1966–67 and vice president in 1967–68 at Jessore Victoria College. During that period, Chhatra Union held an overwhelming majority in the region's educational institutions. On 29 March, a joint force comprising EPR personnel, Awami League leaders and workers, and our party members set out to attack the Jessore Cantonment. At Jhumjhumpur, Biharis attempted to resist them and fired rocket launchers from the cantonment. In the ensuing conflict, many Biharis were killed by enraged Bengali civilians. Thousands of people then marched into Jessore city and advanced toward Jessore Jail. Ultimately, the jail was attacked, and

Bimal Biswas

prominent leaders—including Amal Sen, Baidyanath Biswas, Advocate Syed Golam Mostafa, and Gokul Biswas—were freed.

**TDS:** How did you and your party respond in the days that followed?

**BB:** On 14 June 1971, the district committee held a meeting where Nur Mohammad presented his written speech. The committee unanimously accepted the document, which emphasised the necessity of a unified Bengali national resistance against the Pakistani forces' armed aggression. It called for a temporary alliance with the Awami League and stressed the importance of avoiding conflicts with the party under any circumstances.

During the meeting, Shamsur Rahman was elected secretary, and Nur Mohammad was co-opted into the district committee. A military commission was formed to lead the war effort, comprising Nur Mohammad, Khabir Uddin, and myself, with Nur Mohammad serving as convener. He was also appointed Political Commissioner and Army Chief. Later, at a district committee meeting held at Badshah's house in Ghoshgati from 20 to 24 August, I was assigned the role of Commander-in-Chief of the Force.

On 1 September, a decision was made to establish a regular army. Following the formation of a free zone, it was further decided to set up a revolutionary committee in the Pulum region. However, during discussions, Sudhanshu Roy referenced Mao Zedong's Selected Military Writings and posed a question to Nur Mohammad and me: did our base area meet the five conditions Mao outlined for establishing a free zone?

Mao Zedong's five conditions were:

a. A strong party;

b. A strong military force;

c. A strong mass base;

d. The ability to address public crises arising from the ruling government's

economic blockade;

e. A secure rear ground to protect the party and troops from enemy attacks.

To be honest, the reality was that we were in dire straits in the war.

**TDS:** What are some of the most significant experiences you had during the Liberation War?

**BB:** Guerrillas captured the Shalikha base, with the final attack taking place on 4 September 1971. Prior to this, the Shalikha Razakar camp had been attacked twice in succession, leading to the capture of the thana as the Razakars fled. However, in the 4 September attack—which I strongly opposed on tactical grounds—we suffered great losses. Abul Bashar, a brilliant student from Harishpur, was martyred. Imran (Anis) of Narail also lost his life; his grave still stands on the western bank of the river near Pulum School. Bishwanath Ghosh (Raju) of Khajura and several others were also martyred in the attack.

That night, I left Narail with Saif Hafizur Rahman Khokon to attack the Fazarkhali Razakar camp. However, due to continuous heavy rain and darkness, we were unable to proceed and took shelter at the home of Mizanur's relative in Singia village. Early the next morning, I received a letter from Nur Mohammad, words I still cannot forget:

"Anis, Bashar killed. Bhatt injured. Murad, Raju missing. There is great frustration among the party forces and the people throughout the region. Come here quickly, wherever you are."

On 12 October 1971, Pakistani forces and the Razakars launched an attack from the west.

During that period, Nur Mohammad and I repeatedly emphasised that this regional resistance would not be the final defence. Instead, we urged a strategy of self-defence by disbanding forces to avoid complete annihilation. But no one agreed. Finally, on 31 October, the Mukti Bahini launched an attack on the Jamrildanga road and from Bishnupur in the morning, capturing a large part of Satbaria village.

Knowing that they would leave the area that night, a faction within the party conspired to have Nur Mohammad and me killed. As part of their plan, our gunboats were removed. When I could not find the boat, I rushed to Harekeshtapur village in Mohammadpur, shouting for Kadar Bhai. He responded from the middle of the beel, and I urged him to bring the boat quickly.

Naturally, a question arises: why did the Mukti Bahini, at some point, start attacking us—even though we had fought against the Pakistani forces? The answer is simple. Neither our party nor we had any affiliation with the government-in-exile. These events unfolded as part of an effort to seize control of our territory.

Additionally, while returning from Pulum, 48 people were arrested, and 32 of them were executed by the Razakars—most of them from Kaliganj Upazila. Among them were Phulu Joardar, Gaffar Biswas, Golam Rahman, and Motaleb Hossain. The remaining 16 were released after enduring endless torture, but many of them died within five to seven years due to their injuries. Near Arpara Bridge, Razakars killed another 12 people who had been returning from Pulum.

Despite the sacrifices of hundreds of comrades in Jhenaidah, Jessore, Narail, and Magura in our battle against the Pakistani forces, certain factions within the Awami League and the left sought to deny our struggle. However, the brutal truth of history is that truths written in blood cannot be erased by lies.

**TDS:** How would you describe the differences between your party and the Awami League during the war?

**BB:** The heroic struggle and sacrifices of the EPCP-ML leaders and workers in the greater Jessore district against the Pakistani Army were driven by the vision of creating a non-communal, democratic, and exploitation-free Bangladesh. The Jessore district committee never accepted the dui kukurer lorai (fight between two dogs) theory, which was promoted by then-EPCP-ML leader, Abdul Haque. However, when Haque Saheb arrived in the district in August during the siege, I led a seven-man suicide squad to ensure his safe passage to the house of Advocate Mia Mohan in Bowlmari, Faridpur district. There was little hope we would survive the mission, but through strategic manoeuvres, I managed to return to Pulum alive.

To the best of my knowledge, no member of the Mukti Bahini was ever killed by EPCP-ML forces. The training of Mujib's forces was aimed at reclaiming all areas under leftist control, even if it required eliminating their presence. This was evident in past events. Unfortunately, it was the EPCP-ML that suffered the most from the unintended clashes that arose. Before 24 August, the Mukti Bahini or Mujib Bahini had no operational presence in those regions. However, I was aware that most people in the area supported the government-in-exile. Before we left for India on 3 November, it was decided to leave our weapons at Dighirpar village.

**TDS:** How did things unfold after that phase of the war?

**BB:** In June 1972, Abdul Haque's theory of "Social Colonisation of East Pakistan by Soviet Social Imperialism" was formally adopted. At that meeting, Anishur Rahman Mallik and I objected, arguing that the term "East Pakistan" should not be included in the party's name. However, the Khulna district committee, led by Khairuzzaman, endorsed Abdul Haque's stance, which led to his visit to Khulna in July. There, the entire district committee, including Azizur Rahman, accepted the theory of "East Pakistan as a social colony of Soviet social imperialism." To my knowledge, only Ranjit Chatterjee refused to accept this theory.

Although we adhered to communist internationalism, we actively participated in the 1971 war because we recognised that Bangladesh's language-based nationalism was a more progressive idea than Pakistan's religion-based statehood. In the greater Jessore district, around 2,000 leaders, members, and supporters of our party were killed by the Pakistani army and its allies during the war.

*The interview was taken by* **Priyam Paul**.

# What does it mean to be Bangladeshi today?

**M. ADIL KHAN**

The deposed Hasina government's toxic politics, which stigmatised their opponents as 'Islamists' (meaning terrorists and anti-liberation forces) and projected their loyalists as 'Chetonabadis' (pro-liberation forces), ended up dividing the people of Bangladesh into two distinct groups – the 'Islamists' and the 'Chetonabadis', also known, wrongly, as 'Secularists'.

The July/August 2024 uprising, which toppled the decade-and-a-half-long autocratic and kleptocratic government of Hasina, has prompted new initiatives to unite the country through, among other things, an agreed and inclusive definition of Bangladeshi identity.

The Islamists believe that, as a Muslim-majority country (90% of Bangladeshis are Muslims), Bangladesh ought to define its national identity within the parameters of Islamic values, norms, and practices. The hardcore Islamists also prefer to downplay the role and presence of other religious and ethnic imageries in the Bangladeshi national identity.

At the other end of the spectrum are the 'secularists' – not the politicised ones but the secularist theorists. They argue that since Bangladesh is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society, its national identity should be defined and formulated in a secular manner, bereft of religious imagery.

In the context of these two varying perspectives – Islamic and Secularist – on the definition of Bangladeshi identity, it may be helpful to explore and explain, theoretically, the thoughts of both, and to see whether there are any intrinsic differences.

**Islamic Perspective – A Scriptural/ Historical Perspective**

In terms of inter-religious relationships, Islam provides two guiding parameters:

(i) firstly, "Lakum deenukum wa liya deen", meaning 'your religion is to you, mine is to me'; and

(ii) secondly, the principle of Insaaf in governance, meaning justice or equal and fair treatment of all people.

While the first tenet emphasises peaceful co-existence among all faiths, Islam's second tenet, Insaaf, implies that, irrespective of differences in caste, colour, creed, and faith, societies must be governed through the principle of justice. For example, during the reign of Islam's second Caliph, Hazrat Omar (RA), his military commanders spread out and conquered territory after territory inhabited by non-Muslims. These victorious commanders did not know how to rule these newly conquered non-Muslim territories and thus sought guidance from the Caliph, asking whether they should rule the non-believers through the tenets of Sharia, which the inhabitants were not familiar with, or whether they should convert them, or if there was another way. The Second Caliph responded by saying, "Govern them with Insaaf (justness)."

**Secularists – A Theoretical Perspective**

Former Delhi University Professor of History, Romila Thapar, stated that secularism pertains to "the functioning of the universe and human society without involving divine intervention", and that "... secular does not deny religion, but at the same time does not give it primacy in the functioning of society."

In other words, secularism means governing without reference to any divine scriptures. Secularism by no means entails hating or demonising religion.

In the contexts above – namely the Islamist and secularist perspectives on the citizen/government relationship and the aspired definition of a human being – while Islam advocates for justice and inclusion as core values and central to human identity, secularism precludes engagement with religious scriptures in governance but not the practice of religion at the individual level. Secularism, by no means, is a tool of political othering, religious or otherwise.

**The Bangladeshi Identity**

At the country's inception in 1972, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared that the people of Bangladesh would be known as "Bangalee". This was a misdirected idea for two reasons – firstly, people of West Bengal, a province of India, are also known as Bengalees and therefore, calling Bangladeshis "Bangalee" would not only have confused people but would have undermined the sovereign political status of the Bangladeshis. Besides, given that Bangladesh is a multi-ethnic society, calling its entire population Bangalee was exclusionary, if not racist.

In 1978, the late President Ziaur Rahman invoked "Bangladeshi Nationalism" as Bangladesh's national identity, an imagery that emphasised Bangladesh's dominant Islamic identity as the country's national identity. Zia's idea of "Bangladeshi Nationalism" was enthusiastically greeted by many, who believed that it encapsulated the true Bangladeshi nationhood well. However, Zia's notion of "Bangladeshi Nationalism", with its Islamic tilt, discouraged minorities who felt that the idea marginalised them.

Thus, the quest for an agreed Bangladeshi national identity continues.

The search for, and formulation of, an acceptable definition of Bangladeshi national identity must consider Bangladesh's multi-religious and multi-ethnic existence – a country that has had the rare fortune of embracing and engaging with multiple religions and cultures such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, as well as Indigenous cultures and heritages. Then, with Islam being the religion of 90% of the people of Bangladesh, its symbiotic influence in shaping Bangladesh's overall norms and behaviour cannot be underestimated.

In other words, the definition of a Bangladeshi national identity must include the country's total, and not selective, history so that the identity instils in people a sense of belonging that bonds those with differences and, in the process, helps Bangladesh to evolve into a nation from a country and gain permanency.

**M. Adil Khan** *is a Bangladeshi-born Australian, an academic, and former senior policy manager of the United Nations.*