

A BRITISH WITNESS TO GENOCIDE

Val Harding's 1971 story

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In April 1971, at the age of 24, Val Harding was volunteering as a nurse at a hospital in Kathmandu, Nepal, when she first heard of the atrocities on March 25 in Dhaka and the fight for the Liberation of Bangladesh. She then travelled to Kolkata with a friend, Caroline Adams, who had also been volunteering in a school in Kathmandu, and together they offered their services, working for an Indian NGO, Cathedral Relief Service, Kolkata.

In July 1971, Val volunteered for Cathedral Relief Service after attending a church service at St Paul's Cathedral in Kolkata. She had gone to the church to hear Archbishop Trevor Huddleston preach. Archbishop Trevor Huddleston was famous for his outspoken stance and active campaigning against the apartheid regime in South Africa. He was in Kolkata to show solidarity with the Bangladesh Liberation struggle. After the service, she spoke to Subhri Biswas, the vicar at St Paul's. He had just set up Cathedral Relief Service and was pleased that she and Caroline Adams were offering to volunteer, so he immediately arranged for them to join his team.

A few days later, they packed their bags and went to Kalyani, about sixty kilometres north of Kolkata, where one of the 824 refugee camps was situated. They stayed in a hostel with other members of the medical

team, who were recently qualified doctors from Presidency College in Kolkata. They were the only foreign workers on the team. She worked on the medical team while Caroline was designated a youth-work role with children. Caroline worked with a volunteer refugee and a postmaster from the Faridpur district in Bangladesh.

Val had much to learn about the history of the conflict that had led to this war, the history of colonialism and Partition, the culture of India and Bengal, and the vast difference in standards of living and health care at the time between central and peripheral countries, i.e., previously colonising and colonised countries. She was on a steep learning curve.

The camps she worked in were not hit by the cholera epidemic that swept through other areas, killing 30% of the total refugee population, but they were constantly dealing with other illnesses that were the result of appalling living conditions, poor sanitation, and malnutrition, and children were regularly the worst off amongst the victims of poverty. They were also dealing with the psychological traumas that many refugees had suffered, witnessing atrocities, and they were working with women who were victims of rape. However, the medical team she worked with did not address these issues directly. They were there with a primary focus on administering physical health care.

She remembers opening a box of syringes one morning, and an army of termites ran out. Climate conditions and inadequate storage facilities frequently ruined other medical equipment and supplies. It was hard to maintain hygienic standards. She noted in her diary, "All sweet-coated pills and sugary bottles entertain a merry party of flies. Soon after the morning's medicine has started, the scene is one of total disorder: boxes, lids, prescriptions, paper, and cotton wool flies everywhere – and at the end of the morning, volunteers collapse exhausted beneath the rubble."

There was an overwhelming need and, at times, a sense of panic. It sometimes



Val Harding (standing left) and Caroline Adams (kneeling right) with colleagues and local families during their work in the refugee-relief and reconstruction period.

became extremely hard for her to work at all if order broke down, and the doctors sometimes refused to carry on until some order had been restored. She noted in her diary, "The crowd throbs around the doctors and medicine bench. I am prodded and stroked. 'Didi moni, didi moni, amar, amar.' And everyone expects to be served at once."

At one point, they tried to hold their clinic in a cattle shed where refugees were housed. They were hoping that it might be easier to control the crowd from there and try and get people to queue up, but their efforts were thwarted by the heat inside a concrete cattle shed with no ventilation. People who were housed in these cattle sheds were also living alongside livestock. Many of the camps were row upon row of canvas army tents, neatly arranged, and these provided a better living space than the cattle sheds. Cooking took place in the open, outside the tents.

One of the hardest things for Val Harding to bear was the knowledge that their medical efforts were failing because they were prescribing medicine in a situation with extremely poor sanitation and an absence of public health care. This was not anyone's fault; it was the outcome of an overwhelming and chaotic situation. Morale was often low, and there were rumours around the camps of food and other supplies being stolen and sold by the



The postmaster and his family, photographed in a 1971 refugee camp where they lived during the war and supported relief workers.

local non-refugee community. The influx of thousands of refugees took its toll on local communities.

It is well known in refugee and migration studies that often the host population takes a confrontational approach towards refugees, and there was poverty amongst the local community in this area of West Bengal. However, it has also been noted that in 1971, the local Bengali population were sympathetic towards the refugees from East Bengal and

identified with their struggle. Local media gave a positive portrayal of the war. However, there were still tensions in 1971 since the local population often suffered from the same medical conditions as refugees, and infant mortality rates amongst the local population were as high as in the refugee camps. The Indian government was aware of these problems and argued that relief provided for refugees should be equally available to those in need from the local population, particularly in the case of severely malnourished children.

In line with this policy, Val and others worked with local communities alongside the refugees.

In August 1971, Senator Edward Kennedy visited the refugee camps. He visited one of the camps at Kalyani, where Val worked. She remembers the day of excitement and a change in routine. "We closed the clinic early that day to join the throngs of people lining the road where we expected to see him. We watched him arrive in the pouring rain; he walked briefly around in the mud, and then he drove on to his next stop."

However, on a more positive note, one of the ways in which morale was boosted in the camps and back in the war zones in Bangladesh was through music and cultural activities. One such group organising cultural programmes was the Liberation team of artists, Bangladesh Mukti Shangrami Shilpi Shangstha, led by Mahmudur Rahman Benu, who sang patriotic songs and performed puppet shows and stage dramas. Although this troupe did not come to Val's camp, news of their activities reached them and boosted morale everywhere.

The Bangladesh Mukti Shangrami Shilpi Shangstha was celebrated in the film *Muktir Gaan* (1995), directed by the late film maker Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud, using some original footage from 1971 shot by the American film maker Lear Levine.

While Val worked for the medical team, Caroline Adams assisted a refugee postmaster from the Faridpur district in organising activities for children and other community events, and she also joined them sometimes in these activities. It was this side of the work that opened their eyes to the strength of feeling that people had in the just cause of their struggle, and they had hope and optimism for the future. When the war was over, in March of 1972, they travelled to the newly liberated country of Bangladesh and visited this postmaster in his village, where he had been able to return.

She noted in her diary that the postmaster said,

"The children are enjoying themselves very much that you are speaking Bengali language." Moments such as this contributed to Val and Caroline feeling positive about their work and finding more fulfilment.

Caroline Adams's parents lived in a village in Somerset, and her mother organised fundraising events for Bangladesh. She sent the donations raised from these events directly to Val and Caroline. They purchased children's clothes, household items, blankets, and other necessities that were in short supply and distributed these directly to refugees with the help of the Postmaster and other volunteers.

Towards late October 1971, as India-Pakistan tensions escalated, all foreigners were requested to leave before India's December 3 war declaration against West Pakistan. Val and Caroline went to Chennai, joyfully celebrating Bangladesh's December 16 liberation upon returning to Kolkata months later.

Because of the friendly Postmaster and his family in the camps, Val and Caroline went to the newly liberated country of Bangladesh and looked for his village in March 1972. This journey took them from Khulna to Dhaka on the paddle steamer named 'The Rocket', a memorable journey through the Sundarbans, where they also met freedom fighters, students, and other young people on board. When they reached Dhaka, they took buses and small country boats out towards Faridpur and stayed in some houses in the countryside, invited by hospitable families who helped along their way. Eventually, they found the village, and many surprised people came to greet them.

After visiting the Postmaster's village, they returned to Dhaka and discussed staying in Bangladesh to work again. Bangladesh was flooded with foreign aid agencies by this time, with eighty-eight in all. They enrolled with Concern, an Irish NGO, and were soon given work in the rural area of Mirzapur, some forty miles from Dhaka. Val was assigned to a hospital ward, and Caroline was assigned to a local school.

The hospital and girls' school at Mirzapur were endowed by a local wealthy Hindu businessman who had been taken by the Pakistani army the previous summer. Val was assigned the job of training nurses in the hospital. However, she felt unprepared for this role since she was only recently qualified and an inexperienced nurse who lacked expertise. She felt that the Bengali nurses at the hospital were more knowledgeable and familiar with their local health needs than she was. She said, "However, the staff were very friendly and welcoming and were very pleased I was there, and I was happy to support the nurses and patients in whatever way I could. I worked there for two months."

In her final thoughts, she said she had never felt that her contribution in '71 was anything but welcomed by those I worked with at the time, and I have always felt gratitude ever since from the Bengali community in the UK. She made friends for life during this time and especially grew to love the music of Bengal. Later, she joined Mahmoud Rahman Benu bhai's music classes in London.

Val Harding is now 78 years old. Her work in the refugee camps had a lasting impact on her life. After witnessing the devastating aftermath of genocide in 1971, she came away with a different understanding of the world. Today, global awareness and the call for formal international recognition of the genocide in Bangladesh in 1971 is even more crucial.

Caroline Adams passed away in 2001. She was a youth and community worker in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, where she was well known. She compiled and edited the book *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers*, the life stories of pioneer Bengali settlers in Britain (1987).

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Refugee tents at Kalyani camp, West Bengal, 1971 — one of the sites where Val Harding worked amidst monsoon floods, medicine shortages, and overwhelming human need.