

Justice To Birangonas and International Accountability

-Parikshit Chowdhury

Leesa Gazi grapples with a haunting inquiry: "How can a woman's body instigate so much hatred and violence? If we need to shame a family, we go after their daughters. If we need to shame a country, we go after their daughters. It's the same mindset."

Her contemplation stems from delving into the narratives of the Birangonas, the heroines of Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War, documented in her acclaimed work 'Rising Silence'. This documentary serves as a vessel, preserving the voices of those who lived through that tumultuous period.

It unravels a profound connection between women, as the Birangonas find solace in sharing their untold stories among themselves and with future generations. Their tales speak of resilience against the injustices of conflict, violence, and discrimination, portraying a narrative of empowerment through enduring bonds and unconditional love.

Understanding Bangladesh's trajectory from its struggle for independence to the present day, especially in envisioning a 'Smart Bangladesh', demands revisiting the pivotal events of 1971. Central to this revisiting is the integration of the stories of rape survivors, often sidelined in our historical discourse.

Acknowledging the atrocities committed during the Liberation War, particularly the massacre and rape perpetrated by the Pakistani army, is essential for a holistic understanding of our history.

In the poignant anthem of 'Narir Kotha', a stark reality is encapsulated, the silence surrounding women's contributions to the Independence movement: "No one talks about the role of women. Everyone sings the praises of men. Didn't womenfolk contribute to the cause of Independence?"

This joint production by Audio Vision (Tareq and Catherine's production company) and Ain o Salish Kendra sheds light on the overlooked suffering of women during the war, amplifying their voices in a narrative dominated by tales of male heroism.

Indeed, documentaries on the plight of rape victims during the Liberation War are scarce, yet they unveil the darkest chapters of our history. These women, subjected to unspeakable horrors, not only endured the trauma of sexual violence but also faced the indignity of societal rejection and familial ostracization.

In the absence of accurate sources or statistics, we frequently make assertions about the recognition and respect owed to the incredible strength and will to survive of those regarded as 'Heroines'. Despite efforts made, pinpointing a confirmed number of women who endured these horrific acts by the Pakistani military remains a challenge. However, while a definitive count of victims eludes us, the scale of the Pakistani military's brutality against women during the war is undeniable.

How many were the sufferers during that period? We often estimate it between 200,000 to 400,000. But documents available tell another story. However, available documents may present a different narrative, challenging these figures. Presently, a plaque displayed on the wall of the Liberation War Museum in

Dhaka succinctly encapsulates the situation: “There are not many records of this hidden suffering.” Nevertheless, throughout Bangladesh, survivors with harrowing testimonies abound in every corner.

In 1971, from March 25 to December 16, the mass killings were compounded by a systematic campaign of mass rape perpetrated by Pakistani soldiers. Many historians believe this was a deliberate policy under the command of then-President of Pakistan, General Yahya Khan, aiming to impregnate as many Bengali women as possible with 'blood from the west'. Local collaborators, including the Razakar, Al-Badr, and Al-Shams, joined the Pakistani army and actively participated in these horrific acts, significantly amplifying the suffering.

The calculation of the actual number of rape cases as 200,000 originated from the tally of missing women recorded at police stations throughout Bangladesh. Although reports indicate that 200,000 to 400,000 women were subjected to abuse, the actual figure is likely higher. Evidence such as the significant number of post-war abortions (approximately 400,000) and the killings of rape victims (over 100,000) indicates a much broader extent of this wartime violence.

In the war of liberation, our mother and sister were raped tortured physically. A report shows that spot rape incidences were about 70%; while 18% rape and torture incidences occurred in camps and the rest 12% in other location. (United News Of Bangladesh, March 27, 2022) Geoffrey Davis, an Australian doctor, arrived in Bangladesh post-war, focusing on treating heroin abuse victims and providing abortion services. His diary, "The Changing Face of Genocide," recounts his experiences, revealing that approximately 360,000 women in the country were pregnant. His calculation, based on missing persons reports, suggests over 200,000 reported rapes, challenging Pakistani documentation that avoids acknowledging the widespread rape of Bangladeshi women. Anushay Hossain and Michele Lent Hirsch reference Davis in their books, highlighting his estimate of 400,000 to 430,000 women victimized during the Liberation War, further contradicting Pakistani claims.

International media outlets like Sunday Times, Time Magazine, Newsweek, and New York Times documented the wartime violence, but their reports only scratched the surface of the true scale of atrocities. Accounts from researchers globally, including Susan Brownmiller and Dr. M.A. Hasan, further highlight the staggering scale of sexual violence inflicted upon Bangladeshi women during the war, with estimates surpassing 400,000 cases. (Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape, Susan Brownmiller; Black Chapter of History: Torture of the Women of Ekattor, Dr. M.A. Hasan).

The Pakistani army's unrecorded temporary positions led to a significant underestimation of attacks, massacres, and mass rapes. Estimates suggest that nearly a third of the population was affected by these unrecorded attacks. Current rape statistics likely exclude: rapes that did not result in pregnancy, rapes of abducted women and rapes of women who fled to India as refugees. The true number of victims is likely much higher than current estimates. Recognizing and updating these statistics is crucial for a complete historical record and Bangladesh's future. Furthermore, the absence of a comprehensive framework that integrates the wartime experiences of both genders' risks solidifying a narrative that marginalizes women by solely depicting them as passive sufferers or dependents. Following a 9-month independence war, Bangladesh achieved victory on December 16, 1971, at the cost of 30 million martyrs and the dignity of over 400,000 women. Women played diverse roles in the liberation war, yet their contributions remain largely untold.

Father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman repeatedly emphasised the importance of honouring all sacrifices, including those endured by women who suffered abuse. During a public address, he highlighted the suffering of these women, whose sole "fault" was their Bengali identity. He even advocated for compiling a list of men willing to marry these survivors. Bangabandhu's stance recognized the trauma and the need for societal support for these women. (Source: Sangbad, February 28, 1972)

On March 11, 2017 National Parliament in Bangladesh unanimously adopted a resolution to observe March 25 as Genocide Day, marking the brutality carried out by Pakistani Army on the unarmed Bengalis on the black night of March 25, 1971. Meanwhile, The International Association of Genocide Scholars has adopted a resolution recognising the genocide committed by Pakistan during Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

The least the West can do – especially the US, which is very vocal about human rights violations in Bangladesh now – is to officially recognise the 1971 East Pakistan genocide. They should stop fooling their own citizens about the role of the Pakistani army in the War against Terror. By recognising the 1971 genocide, they can hold the Pakistan army accountable for denying Bangalees the right to life during the Liberation War.

Bangladesh is staunchly pushing for global acknowledgment of the 1971 genocide, urging the United Nations (UN) to recognise and redress the injustices suffered by rape victims at the hands of the Pakistani Army. As a cornerstone in paving the way for justice, the UN is duty-bound to take decisive action. Such recognition not only honors the resilience of those countless individuals who endured unspeakable horrors but also underscores the imperative of fostering a world where survivors of sexual violence receive the justice they deserve.

The classification of "rape" as a "crime against humanity" was established by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in 1998 and reaffirmed by the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague in 2001, with backing from the UN General Assembly. This explicitly encompasses the mass rape of Bengali women in 1971. While Pakistan continues to deny the genocide and the USA remains silent, the mass rape and killings of Bengalis meet the UN's 1948 definition of genocide.

Recognizing the 1971 massacre in Bangladesh as genocide is crucial, not just semantically, but to acknowledge a horrific chapter in history and prevent future atrocities. Ignoring this reality undermines international accountability.

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