

## **BIRANGONA: Their lives After the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971**

### **Abstract**

*During the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971 women were sexually victimized by the rival forces and local collaborators. This victimization opened up the door of endless miseries for the female. This study focuses primarily on the post-war conditions of victimized ladies of 1971. Article primarily tends to analyze how female were used as a symbol of respect to degrade or exploit a nation. Secondly, It answers the questions how a liberation war turned female life. Further, were they accepted by society after victimization or this liberation snatches their existing freedom? Article purposes to know critical circumstances and behaviors which persecuted female had to face in society. Further it explores the role of state in their recovery and rehabilitation programs. It answers to question how sexual victimization effects female on psychological and physical grounds. First person accounts, old newspapers, and biography reveals that their life entered into bitter phase. Her status turned from domestic female to Birangona lady, a War-Heroine. 1971 liberation snatched their peaceful life and put them into Ashram. It than posits such questions that who was really responsible of all these miseries of Birangona; new state or conservative society? Accepted female were owned or other fates await them?*

**Key words:** Birangona ladies. Victimization Ladies. Honor. Liberation. Post-War lives.

### **Introduction**

Human history is replete with the events of violence and oppression against the weak faction of society especially during the times of warfare. The victorious forces always humiliate the defeated. Especially they victimize women, children and aged by enslaving and abusing them. Because it is easy to suppress this weak strata of the society. All these disgraceful and brutal acts are done by so called greatest creature of the universe 'human being'. It is evident in patriarchal culture women considered a subordinate and marginalized section of the society. They are easily victimized and suppressed by the upper and become a source of exploitation for their country or nation. This exploitation takes place in the form of sexual and physical torture. Because her womb considered more significant in the society than her humanity. History reveals hundreds of thousands incidents where women became pray in wars fought at national or global level. For example, during the First World War (1914-1918) women were raped and impregnated by the rival forces. It was either to humiliate the enemy or temporary slackening for military discipline but feminine gender was used as a tool or dose for psychological relief. More brutal and lusty incidents are found in Second World War (1939-1945) when feminine gender was named "Comfort Women"<sup>1</sup>. The statistical data given by the historians reveals that two lac women were abused by Japanese soldiers at Asian fronts of Korea, Singapore, Myanmar,

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Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Taiwan where number of sexual crimes were happened. About one thousand women were taken into military sex-slave camps” (retrieved, WWII photos <https://wusfnews.wusf.usf.edu/us-world>). Rape in war is a worldwide phenomenon, which unveils the brutal face of the oppressors. During the Partition of Indian Subcontinent in 1947 number of cases of sexual victimization were reported and registered which is a tragic and heart-breaking story of the history. Once again feminine gender was used to exploit the enemy. Various forms of violence were inflicted upon women. Besides the abduction, dissimulation, rape was one of the common forms of physical violence, beared by female<sup>2</sup>. Above all this, the feminine gender, so called sign of honor and respect for family and nation was urged to sacrifice their lives by committing suicides in order to protect the honor and prestige of their families. In this way, feminine gender became the target not only within society but also outside of the communities. (Butt, Bano, 1971; Hyder, 2016. p-15).

Similar incident had been witnessed just after two decades after the partition of Indian Subcontinent; when a state out of state<sup>3</sup> came into being in the result of ‘Civil War’ fought between East and West Pakistan in 1971. Whatever the factors and circumstances were behind the civil war, the point of consideration is that women were once again subjected to brutality. (Saikia, .2011) Question is not, either that pitiless victimization was done to provoke the enmity or to quench of personnel lust for temporary slackening of military discipline in chaos. The point is that female gender had to face the sufferings. She was considered a source to undermine the honor and dignity of the enemy, and seeking pleasure and psychological satisfaction.

Underpinning the theory of Feminism, propounded by the French Philosopher Simone De Beauvoir<sup>4</sup> “women is to man ‘a sexual being’, a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities, ‘a natural defectiveness’, ‘an incidental being’ and above all she is considered ‘the other’. She is woman in virtue of her anatomy and physiology.” (De Beauvoir, 1949, 10)

It is evident in most of the societies of the world that female is subordinate gender in opposite to its male partner. Sometimes she is suppressed for the sake of self-respect but often she is used as a weak point of the males respect and honor. If we see her as a biological being, she is considered worthless in order to sustain a process of reproduction. But unfortunately throughout the history, women have been silent victims of wars and conflicts as well, which always alter their lives beyond repair. Rape and sexual abuse run rampant, not merely by-products of war, but these brutal strategies are used as a measured military strategy to demoralize their men. Rape during 1971 liberation war was also a representation of such female who were used as a coin of revenge, to demoralize the men and much more; just with the outbreak war of freedom almost 200,000 to 400,000 Bengali women were raped by the Rival Force along with their local collaborators. (International Journal of Communication 2012) <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc>

Rape, to make womb useless, was considered the most powerful weapon to humiliate a nation enemy during 1971 war of liberation of Bangladesh. That brutality seeded chain of endless violence against Bangladeshi women. Both micro and macro level researches in post-colonial historiography of South Asia

which highlight the shameful story of chaste female's rape. Undeniably Yasmin Saikia's work is remarkable in this regard. She discussed in detail and summed up eloquently about the sexual victimized females during the civil war of 1971. That whole research is silent about the next episode of this tragic story. History is silent about the post-war lives of all raped women during the Bangladesh War of freedom in 1971. In this context, it is important to historicize reaction of state and society toward the oppressed female. The circumstances they had to face both at public and private level. Furthermore, instant paper intends to explore their devastated physical as well as psychological disorders which convert them from a human being to worthless a lump of flesh. It is pertinent to note here, this study is an effort to fill the research gaps about the post-war lives of oppressed Bengali women.

The oppressed females of 1971 liberation war had to face unending miseries almost in all walks of life. Their lives became difficult not only socio-economically but they also had to face issue of identity in their societies as well. In addition to all above psychological disturbance led their lives toward sanity. That trauma was a jolt which turned their lives into unrepaired part of life span.

### **Reaction of Newly Born State**

A home land is just like a mother that provides a shelter to her citizen that's why it is called motherland; and when its citizen sacrifice themselves for its liberation and protection; they have the right to claim more from it. Same was demanded by the hunted women from the new born state of 'Bangladesh'. Undoubtedly state acknowledged all the victimized women both at national and international level. On 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1971, immediately after the victory, government of the newly independent state of Bangladesh proclaimed to award the title of "*Birangona*" or "war heroines" to all maltreated females during the war of liberation. It was also declared that Government will launched various socio-economic programs to assimilate and reintegrate them into the society (2012 <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/>). For instance a 'Rehabilitation center' was established by the government of Shaikh Mujib-ur-Rehman. This center was established in Dhaka providing all the facilities to persecuted females. Their physical treatment was started to revitalize their lives. Moreover, in these centers women were provided medical aid, including treatment of diseases and abortion of unwanted pregnancies seeded by perpetrators. (Saikia, 2011. 94) The government launched mission or campaign to get eradication from the rival gene, was in such a hurry that a medical team had been commissioned from Britain and America in 1972 during the interim government of Mujib-ur-Rehman. ((Saikia, 2011, 94)

Besides the rehabilitation centers another effort was also done by the government. The government started some programs providing social and economic support. The government offered them some training and skills program in order to generate income opportunities at their door step. Government also started a monetary program in form of monthly stipend. But all above mentioned opportunities were not easily available. As one of the husbands of the women recalled:

*"After the war, we were asked to give the names of our wives in the list as affected, violated women, as we were told this would get us money, house and medical help. Since that time our name has been on the list."* (Mookherjee, N. 2015)

He said that number of time lists were reset by every government by imposing new sets of conditions based on local and national patronage, and power politics. All the oppressed ladies had to pay price of their self-respect.

Besides all that, it was said to all the women that they will be sent to Dhaka where they will receive the facilities: medical treatment, employments and education for their offspring. But in order to fulfil these promises, they had to "cry their own tears" (to quote one of the women), represent their pain, be a *Birangona* and give their "*jobab*" in a machine, in a crowded room in front of many people." Here term "*Jobab*" meaning 'to reply'. One of the *Birangonas* recalled, "*It was a feeling of intense shame in front of so many people. I felt the ground under my feet was splitting.*" (Gazi & Komola, 2019)

But after a few years, this situation got worse, a jolt changed whole scenario and political turmoil devastated whole. Military revolution of 1975 in Bangladesh overthrown the Government of Mujib-ur-Rehman and everything swept away. All hounded women were thrown out in the streets. Their documents were destroyed. (Gazi & Komola, 2019) In that way, a shining ray of hope became dim.

With the rising demands from Human Right Activist teams to rebuke the perpetrators government also took step in this ground. After a long time a tribunal was established in Bangladesh with the name of 'International Crimes Tribunal' (ICT). It was a national crimes tribunal, set by Awami league in 2009 in Bangladesh to scrutinise and act against defendants for the ethnic cleansing committed in 1971. In 2009, the parliament modified the 1973 act that authorised such a tribunal to update it. The first accusations were hand out in 2010. However, the court could not get access to even a single principle perpetrators, neither from rival forces nor from local collaborators of the war crimes. (Mollah, 2019)

The International Crimes Tribunal initially received some offers of global assistance. In 2009, the United Nation presented its expertise, expressing an interest in helping Bangladesh, but at the same time it avoided the problems other countries faced in similar trials. (Chopra, 2015, 211-220) Similarly The Europeans Union passed three resolutions supporting the tribunals and [Jean Lambert](#) said she expected that "the trial would conform to the highest standard possible". But gradually it lost its worth as it could not complete even a single task.(Chopra, 2015, 211-220)

Similarly, a committee was set up in Bangladesh under the name The "War Crimes Fact Finding Committee" to scrutinize the [Human rights abuses](#) carried out during war of liberation of Bangladesh. The organisation had aim to investigate [war crimes](#) and pressures the [government of Bangladesh](#) to put on trial war offenders but in the long run it could not sentence for punish even a single principal perpetrators. In this way, the dream to punish the perpetrators could not fulfil. (Chopra, 2015, 211-220)

However, government kept its effort continue off and on to heal the wound of all maltreated ladies. In 2015 during the political period of Shaikh Hasina once again after a long time a spark rose from the ash; all the victimized female were given status as 'Federal Fighter'. But it proved nothing, except more than an attempt to exhume the dead. Their cards were formed to grant an economic support in form of monthly stipend. Due to its complications and long procedure very few could enjoy the facilities because they have to register themselves through their documents which had been destroyed at the time of second revolution in Bangladesh in 1975. (Gazi & Komola, 2019)

In addition to all above; a marriage campaign was launched at state level to encourage Bangladeshi men to marry the victimized ladies. Offer of permanent government employment and dowry was provided to all those male who will shadow raped females in form of marriage. Disappointing to note, that step was misused by the masculine strata of society. Women were usually mistreated by the men who married to victimized women, and the majority of men, divorced their wives after once getting dowry. A Number of male got marry for the sake of permanent employment and after getting job they divorced *Birangona* and left them into a quagmire of disappointment. A lady told in her interview that a male got marry to her but as soon as he availed the opportunity of employment; he left her with her daughter as he already had a family along with his three offspring. (Saikia, 2011)

There were many other examples of female insecurity in this event which created miseries for Bengali women. All above mentioned measures by the state might be very positive yet there is another side of the coin. The question arise that why state took such a kind of measures? Why all the maltreated women were highlighted by the state awarded by the title of War-Heroine, *Birangona* or Federal Fighter? Was it mandatory for their habilitation or this was only a play to show a positive sign the government? The answer is that the interim government did all to justify its action. To label the persecuted females was not a remarkable or creditable act, rather it proved harmful for social status of that female. Shaikh Mujib-ur-Rehman named the victims *birangona* "war heroine", ironically this served as a reminder rather than respect. Effected women were now deemed socially objectionable as they were "dishonoured", and the term linked with *barangona* ("prostitute"). They were categorized and highlighted in the society which created endless miseries for them; not only in society but in personal life as well. All the awards and titles by the government were just to encourage them for the time being. Moreover medical treatment to heal them physically, abortion of unwanted pregnancies were for the self-interest of the state to get ride from rival gene. All the ill-treated women were seen in the society as a symbol of "social pollution" and shame. Very few of them were accepted by their families. All that was being done just to get ride from rival genetic material rather than to protect their honors. State self-interests were more important than women hood. In this way all that steps were neither seemed constructive nor had perpetual effect in their nature. Through these measures state might not only legitimize their action but secured public sentiments in her favors.

### **The Issue of Identity and Social Reaction**

Although state took some positive steps for the rehabilitation of the persecuted females but still there was a need to take some necessary actions for their social adjustment. Social needs urge human being to move and develop links in the society. But, it is inexcusable that conservative society was not ready to accept them. Not only the chaste victims had to face that tragedy but their next generations also had to bear taunt and teased. In the recorded interview of a lady who is saying that “*My grandson was teased because of me, people call him a Bastard Child.*” (Interview: Bala by Ghazi) *This* abusing attitude by the society led them to live in their own circles. Nobody was ready to marry them or take them into his social life. These ladies express their grievances that “*When they see us, they taunt; look! they are freedom fighters, their children and grandchildren take books to schools, so many taunts so much pain, this is how all over the country.*” (Gerlach. 2010.) Besides this, the children who were product of rape were called “war baby and bastard child”.

Though, government took rushed step for abortion but the babies survived during this program were generally placed for adoption in a foreign countries through various international organizations, including the Sisters of Charity headed by Mother Teresa. Mostly were adopted by families in Canada and the Netherlands. Bangladesh was anxious to remove this legacy in their midst<sup>1</sup> (International Journal of Communication 2012) <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc>

Abortion was the decision of state without the consent of the women. In spite of that some women wanted to carry their baby, they were forced for abortion and those who completed their pregnancies their baby were sent for adoption. This practice was encouraged by Mujib-ur-Rahman, who said, “*I do not want those polluted blood in this country*” (International Journal of Communication 2012) However a large number of women were willing for the abortion programme, as they did not want to bear a child that is conceive of rape. ( Mookherjee, 2007)

Yasmin Saikia wrote in her book that during the survey of whole Bangladesh, she found a few number of war babies; and a girl named ‘Beauty’ was one of them. She was not ready to show off her identity in the society. For her survival in society it was necessary to hide her identity. She further reveals that “*In the course of my research in Bangladesh, I met two other war babies, who are aware of their status and discussed this with me. They, however, did not want to make their stories public.*” Saikia, 2011.)

For her self-respect Beauty’s mother did not want to reveal the secret of her birth to anyone in the society so, she was living a nomadic life. This point, opens a new aspect of the tragedy. This was not mere survival issue but it had also a fear behind it to face the people. It was told by one of the persecuted lady that they were three sisters who were sexually victimized. One of their sister died at that moment, due to internal hemorrhage and they could not organize a collective pray as people would not join them. Moreover, because of their identity issue they had to live nomadic lives. ( Saikia, .2011) To stay at one place for a long time would reveal their identity. Story of their miseries was not end here in a social sphere but they were also exploited in their personal life. To be raped or sexual

victimized became their guilt. A spot on their self-respect could never be washed away.

### **Sufferings in Domestic life**

Patriarchal society take women chastity as a sign of respect and modesty. Women womb is considered such an exquisite part that is unrepair able. Her deteriorated chastity and waned fragility led her domestic life toward devastation. Some of them were divorced and other were left alone after sexual trauma. A lady told to Yasmin to an interviewer that,

*“Does any husband keep a wife who has been raped? When it happened they go crazy and run away. So , he left, I spent my day like that, with three sons, my daughter died after rape as she was only seven year old, I could not even bury her”* (Saikia, 2011. p- 84).

In this way their domestic lives destroyed. Besides this, number of wives turned into widows by kidnapping or murdering the freedom fighters. Moreover, children were snatched from the cradle and laps of the mothers which colorless their lives. The loss of their spouse and children in war turned them toward sanity of insanity. (Saikia, 2011. p- 84) What an irony, that when she needed strong support from the masculine gender the so called sign of power in the society proved more fragile morally. His conservative ideology became hurdle and they did not shadow them in spite of knowing that they were oppressed. They did nothing by their will.

### **Psychological effect**

It is medically approved that the survivors of sexual abuse have to suffer in numerous psychological effects along with a range of physical and psychiatric illnesses which needs high health care and psychological treatment. It has been indicated after the number of psychological studies that sexual attack is associated with several psychiatric disorders, including anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders, sleep disorders, and deliberate self-harm. Survivors experience diverse negative impacts of sexual assault. These kind of impacts left a long lasting impacts on both physical and psychological health.(Suprakash,2017) All the above mentioned impacts of rape were found in all of the ill-treated female but social refusal and sufferings in private life added fuel to the flame for the *Birangona*. They were left alone. That loneliness pushed them toward psychological disturbance. Repeated gang rape left undying effect on their memory. Fear to be hunted was stuck in their mind. It happened in front of an interviewer suddenly while telling her story a women started to carry loudly, *“O, they are coming, I can see them, I can listen the voice of their boots and their command ‘remove your clothes.* (Suprakash, 2017)

Number of female were died instantly due to internal hemorrhage, few were murdered and committed suicide but survivors could not be defined as alive as normal female in the societies. Their interpersonal relationships were disturbed. Yasmin Saikia quoted interview of assaulted women in her book *“Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971”*, that they sudden stop during conversation and lost in imagination and said *“nothing happened next”*. (Saikia.,2011. 84) They went out of sense some were gone totally sane or some were insane. Sexual Trauma made them touchy while interviewing in their

Rehabilitation or *Birangona* center leesa Ghazi told that their sigh, mourning after even four decades were; as incident happened just an hour before or even more early.( Caitlin Abbott,2013) One of the *Birangona* lady tried to express her grief in following words: “Have not I gonna made for country? Did I not lose my honor for the country? Why should not we receive acknowledgement? Can hunger be satisfied with just rice and Fish? Is wearing clothes enough? Can one chew or eat money? My inside burn like a fire”. ( Caitlin Abbott, 2013) Above two lines are feelings rather than words. Their mental disturbance was on such a state that they were ready to sacrifice themselves on any time. Some of them felt proud even in insane conditions *Raju Bala*, a *Birangona* lady, used to stand in her door and yelled loudly; “I have more to play My game is not over yet”.( interview, *Raju Bala*)

It is a world-wide phenomenon that Sexual assault is considered a black spot on infallibilities of feminine. Due to social hate, raped Bengalies female could not tell their story to any one as it is considered a taboo in the society. As Maya Angelo said, “There is no greater agony, than creating bearing untold story inside you (Angelo 1928-1954)

Similar case was of *Birangona*. The stigma and collective ashamed to rape was so appalling. It was never spoke at public. Subsequently they were silenced, hidden and forgotten. They received all sorts of sore stigma towards them which made them mad. “Word fail me, when I try to describe how I was tortured”. (Lamb, 2020, 77 ) Lamentable to note that all the assaulted women were left helpless by the government. Not even a single step was taken to heal them psychologically so that they might return in their live like a normal female. To declare them *Birangona* was not treatment. To heal them psychologically trauma centres should be established under the expert team of foreign psychologist or doctors as was being done in case of abortion to get rid from rival gene.

## Conclusion

To some up the above discussion, it would be appropriate to say, if the price of freedom is to sacrifice honor, then Bangladeshi women paid a heavy price. In return of their sacrifice what they received was not justice. It was just humiliation and sufferings. As the Bangladeshi state and society in post 1971 had largely marginalized and alienated them by highlighting or labelling in the society, the persistent shame and humiliation has pushed these women to the peripheries. Society acted like a conservative which thinks within its limited frame work of its specific stereotypes norms and traditions. Where these kind of issues are considered as a taboo and need to hide rather than highlight. Beside the state level activities, media and academia both are still playing their role to speak for *Birangona* which might be right in an angel but for underdeveloped mentality of traditional society it is not less than a risk for *Birangona*'s future generations. The need of the hour is, all *Birangoan* should be protected by the government in all domains of life to shield the *Birangona*'s future generations from embarrassment. This study is only the beginning in exploring the various possibilities of navigating and understanding silences of subaltern women and presenting their position without speaking on their behalf. Last but not the least, this initiative is taken just to know about the post-war lives of all assaulted females during the liberation war of 1971. By highlighting their socio-economic issue it is a voice to take secure future steps for them. It is nothing but, yet it's something. Room for further research is still there. Was it really proved a liberation for the *Briangona*



or they fell more and more in quagmire of disappointment? Who was really responsible of all these miseries of *Birangona*; new state or conservative society? Is it enough to declare the culprits and awarded oppressed with some title or is need to take practical steps? Was it a justice or politics? More than half of the *Birangonas* are no more in this world and remaining are waiting for safekeeping rather than pity.

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<sup>1</sup> “Comfort women” is a linguistically warped categorization of the thousands of women and girls, many from poor communities, who were forced to serve as sex slaves during WWII 1939-1945 by the Japanese.

<sup>2</sup> They were not only sexually victimized in brutal way but their bodies were tortured in such a way that showed to other that this is the second hand women or to shame their

nation. Their breast were cut off and tattooing their body, was means the permanent marking in their body to shame them.

<sup>3</sup> From the country Pakistan a new country 'Bangladesh' was emerged on the political map of the World

<sup>4</sup> Simon Lucie Marie Bertrand De Beauvoir (1908-1986) was a French [feminist](#) writer, intellectual [existentialist](#), [philosopher](#), [political activist](#), and [social theorist](#).