

'Research' on Bangladesh War

Two critical comments on the article 'Losing the Victims: Problems of Using Women as Weapons in Recounting the Bangladesh War' (EPW, September 22, 2007).

(i) The author writes on a sensitive issue like rape in a totally outrageous manner, offending the sensibilities of the victims.

(ii) The article raises various themes without contextualising them. Research on rape and the complexities of war time violence cannot ignore issues of sensitivity and should provide full references of articles for cross-checking, and ensuring methodological clarity.

I

AKHTARUZZAMAN MANDAL

My attention has been drawn belatedly to the long article by Sarmila Bose (EPW, September 22, 2007). The very title of the article betrays a biased position on the part of the author as it focuses unfavourably on the accused party, the victims, who according to the author use women as weapons in recollecting their memory. I am one of the unfortunates who has been chosen as a prime target in the article. Bose has cited my account of the days of 1971 when as a college student in Kurigram I became active in the non-cooperation movement against the military rulers of Pakistan who refused to take any meaningful step towards transferring power to the democratically elected representative of the people. I am the poor Akhtaruzzaman Mandal, one of the thousands of freedom fighters, the "muktijoddhas", upon whom life has vested the great honour to take up arms to fight against the brute Pakistani military oligarchy. Like many of my comrades I also went through the ordeal of fire and after the liberation of my country went back to my alma mater. After completing my study I have taken up a modest private job.

Witness to History

The subsequent development in my country pained me so much that I thought I should write down my experience as a witness to history. A common foot soldier of the liberation forces of my country, my personal account of those days was published in February 1989 titled *Uttar Ranangone Bijaya (Victory in the Northern Front)*. This may not be a great literary work but no one reading this book can ever accuse me of using women as weapons in recounting the Bangladesh war (by the way Bose never ever mentioned the liberation aspect of this conflict). In this book I have detailed the

day to day accounts of the peoples' war and the fate of women, as I witnessed them. The book consisting of more than 120 pages has around five to six pages written about the sufferings of women that I got to know.

I am more than sure that Bose has not read my book, nor did she know anything about it, because as a "researcher" she very proudly announced that her source was mainly the members of the Pakistani army and has thus revealed that she has no trouble in believing the absurd versions they provided like the one about the people of Nageswari weeping when they heard that the rapist captain Ataullah of the Pakistani army was killed in the frontline battle.

But how come that Bose has gone through my account of the day we liberated the border town of Bhurungamari and dissected it in her article as "Testimony of Akhtaruzzaman Mandal"? This requires a clarification. After the publication of my book a short piece of three pages from there was picked up by Rashid Haider, a leading novelist and chronicler of the liberation history, when he edited a collection of memoirs titled *Bhayabaha Abhignata: 1971 (1971: Terrible Experiences)*.

The piece written by me was titled 'Our Own Sisters and Mothers' and it was the narrative of what I saw in the ghost town of Bhurungamari. We started the final assault in the evening of November 13, 1971 and by midnight found the Pakistani guns silenced. Early morning, along with the rising sun we entered Bhurungamari shouting full throated the "Joi Bangla" slogan. There I saw captain Ataullah lying dead in his bunker with a "tormented Bengali" lady lying next to him. The most horrible experience for us was what we saw at the two-storey building nearby, the co house, where we entered at nine o'clock in the morning and found four women kept locked, two of them completely naked, with signs of torture all over their body.

Exposing Facts

Whatever I have written is what I saw and I am ready to face any kind of scrutiny from any researcher, academic, interrogator regarding my narrative. This part of my experience got translated into English and was published in the book *Genocide in the*

Twentieth Century edited by Sam Totten (I am not sure about the name of the editor, but I remember very well Rounaq Jahan of Columbia University contacting me through Rashid Haider to get my permission which I was more than willing to give). May be Bose has read that English translation and also consulted the Bengali anthology edited by Rashid Haider and I must congratulate her for doing that, but her research in Bangladesh stopped here, as she never checked my narrative with Rashid Haider, not to speak of myself. She did not probe any further and my original book with the full account of my participation in the liberation war was probably not known to Bose. That is why she writes, "According to Akhtaruzzaman Mandal he was a muktijoddha accompanying the Indian army as they attacked Bhurungamari in northern East Pakistan on the night of November 11, 1971".

I was a muktijoddha from its inception and we kept Kurigram liberated till April 23 and Bhurungamari remained under our control till May 28. We retreated as the Pakistani army moved deep into the interior. Ultimately we had to make a strategic retreat to India but we started operating inside the occupied territory from mid-July. In this struggle we were greatly supported by the Indian government, people and the Border Security Force (BSF). It was only in November that the Indian army joined with us, the muktijoddhas, and started clearing strategic border outposts and towns adjacent to the border. The battle of Bhurungamari was one of the earliest of such clashes.

Biased Description

Since Bose knew nothing about this humble freedom fighter and the pride we all bear, she could casually describe me as a muktijoddha accompanying the Indian army. Such description also served her purpose, as she tried to portray me as someone who had no prior knowledge about the land and people of Bhurungamari/Nageshwari, about their suffering and destitution. As guerrilla fighters we were active in the region all through monitoring the day to day developments. We were like the fish in the water, as the saying goes. That is why in my book, not known to Bose, I have also written about few other specific cases of how women had to suffer. But that is another

story, quite a long one, let me concentrate here on the accusation made by Bose.

While doing her "research", Bose never tried to contact me. On the other hand her search for truth took her to Pakistan and she interviewed Lt Col Saleem Zia of 8 Punjab who was stationed in that area and cross-checked my information with this partisan source of hers. Quoting my account Bose writes, "According to Mandal, Bhurungamari seemed like a ghost town. He claims 60 East Pakistan Civil Armed Force (EPCAF) members and 30-40 Pakistani soldiers were captured – they had run out of ammunition. He also claims that 40-50 Pakistani soldiers were killed in this battle." Then quoting her Pakistani source she writes, "Brigadier Zia found 30 injured men, who were evacuated, and 36 able-bodied ones. The rest were dead or dispersed and four or five, by his estimate, were captured." The anomaly in the description provided by members from two contending side is not new in any battle account. It is the researcher's job to dig for the truth. But according to our researcher here Akhtaruzzaman Mandal "claims" whereas brigadier Zia "found" and that shows where she is standing as a dispassionate independent scholar. Even in her account about the number of deaths she has not said anything about the EPCAF, who were raw recruits from the villages of West Pakistan and were put into forward position to work as a shield to the Pakistan army. These poor recruits suffered most in the battle.

Moreover, company strength in the infantry varies, usually it consists of 139 or more soldiers, besides according to our information three Pakistani company were engaged at Bhurungamari. Even by Zia's count with 30 men injured and 36 able bodied and four to five captured one has a death count of at least 30, as there was no question of dispersion of Pakistani soldiers, because in Bangladesh there was no fall back position for them.

Distorting Information

Now let us take the case of captain Ataullah Khan, the human devil. Bose has been successful in collecting laudable quotes about Ataullah and in her attempt to whitewash the devil's deeds made a jugglery of the location of Bhurungamari and Nageshwari depicting them as two sites

completely separated from each other. She writes, "According to this fellow (Pakistani) officer, Captain Ataullah had not been in Bhurungamari before – he was based at Nageswari. He had barely got there when he faced the Indian attack." Her research or lack of research has led her to greatly differentiate between Nageswari and Bhurungamari and if only she was interested to know more she could have found out that the distance between the two place is only 15 km and at that time, even with a ferry crossing, it took only 30 minutes for a commanding officer to cover the distance by his jeep. The Pakistani captain being based at Nageswari was a frequent visitor to the forward position at Bhurungamari and he was no stranger there.

Bose never asked any woman, any common man of Nageswari – Bhurungamari, about Ataullah Khan but quoted her Pakistani source at length and writes, "This fellow officer of 25 Punjab described (not claimed: AM) Captain Ataullah as a six-foot plus Pathan officer known for being 'humane'. He further stated that he saw people in Nageswari weep upon hearing the Ataullah's death. According to him, when the Pakistanis were POW's in India after the war, a senior Indian officer had expressed his respect, soldier-to-soldier, to the officers of 25 Punjab and mentioned by name Ataullah, who had become a 'shaheed' (martyr)." In the footnote Bose mentions that, "this inclusion of evidence from the Indian side in the future would be of great value in assessing this and many other aspect of 1971 war". I am happy that she noted the importance of the Indian source which she never tried to use and would request her to look for members of 6 Mountain Division with whom we fought side by side. After 36 long years I cannot remember all of them or their full names, but how can I forget major general Thappa, brigadier Josie, major Chatowal Singh, captain Shambu, captain Mitra, captain Bannerje, major Bala Reddy, as well as fellow fighters from the 78 Battalion of the BSF and others. Instead of interviewing only the perpetrators of genocide, rape and crimes against humanity she should also try to get evidences from the Indian side.

As Bose has gathered most of her informations from highly dubious one-sided Pakistani sources she could write the

following atrocious and unbelievable lines, “The picture painted of captain Ataullah by his fellow officer, who knew him, completely contradicts the one given by Mandal, who appears to have only seen his dead body. Clearly, if captain Ataullah had been based in Nageswari and only gone up to Bhurungamari the day the Indian attack started, he could not have been responsible for whatever might have been going on in Bhurungamari. Mandal offers no corroborating evidence for his character assassination of an officer who had died defending his country, and therefore, cannot speak in his own defence.”

Sensitivity to Torture

As a freedom fighter operating in the area we came to know about many of the atrocious acts of Ataullah and this human-devil was not unknown to us. Our informers also brought many news and on that auspicious day we knew very well about the bunker he took shelter in and that is why the Indian army could pinpoint their artillery attack. I have seen his dead body at the bunker and could immediately know that this was the man who brought so much suffering to our people, to the poor civilians and villagers of the area. Ataullah Khan was no soldier defending his country, he was part of a killing machine, doing heinous acts against an unarmed civil population which no professional soldier can ever think of. Such acts can in no way be equated with defending one’s country. In that case all the Nazi war criminals will get acquitted as they were “defending” their own country.

I can only request Bose to come to Bhurungamari, come and see for herself. As for evidence I earnestly pray let a researcher have the sensibility to read the silence in the lips of the suffering woman, fathom the extent of pain in one drop of tear and feel about the tormented soul. This requires another kind of researcher, not of the Bose type. If such a researcher is interested to get the evidence I am ready to take him/her to my native land of Bhurungamari and introduce him/her to our good comrade “shaheed” Tomezuddin’s wife. Tomezuddin laid down his life in a frontal battle. The Razakars abducted his wife from their house at Dhamer Hat,

north of Bhurungamari and she was kept interned in the Pakistani camp. We could only free her after liberation, but by that time she had gone completely insane. We consulted many doctors and psychiatrists but of no avail. Frequently she turns violent and has to be kept in chains. The old lady is suffering till today and waiting for her death. May be she is also waiting for a researcher to come and interview her for evidences but that researcher must know how to read the deep human sufferings. I know for sure Sarmila Bose is not one of them.

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II

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Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) occupies an important and pivotal place in its public dissemination of various social science issues and debates within and beyond south Asia. Recently, it has published articles on the Bangladesh war of 1971. In 2005 it published an article by Sarmila Bose as well as a critical discussion piece written by me of that article [Mookherjee 2006]. Reference here is to the article by Sarmila Bose that was published in EPW (September 22, 2007). To any student of social science methodology and memory studies, the article reveals how the pursuit of “facts” alone disallows any analytical, sociological, historical and interpretative perspective. That it was published in EPW is a surprise indeed. The article raises various themes without contextualising them and I outline them below:

Case Studies: In the earlier and this article, the “case studies” mentioned by the author are not explicated for transparency and methodological clarity. It is not clear from the article the extent of the research in Bangladesh, how many survivors the author met, particularly women, what was her position towards these women, i e, her reflexive position. It is clear that she talked to Pakistani military authorities and accepts everything they say to be true but considers all Bangladeshi accounts as predominantly fabricated. In the earlier article, though many quotes are cited of Kissinger and

Nixon, the critical engagement with the us role is conspicuously absent. In the 2005 article, the author had also mentioned the lack of incidents of rape during the Bangladesh war in her “cases” in a small paragraph found at the end of her long article, comprising 100 words out of a nearly 6,500-word paper on the subject of “patterns of violence in 1971”. It is those 100 words which have expanded in this article.

The Issue of Numbers: The role of numbers and their place in history is best understood through Sudipta Kaviraj’s phrase of “enumerative community”. He shows how numbers become discursive categories and instead canonise events. Similarly, the number 2,00,000 has become metonymic with and stands in for the history of rape of the Bangladesh war of 1971. To follow the “logic” of “facts”, Australian doctors like Geoffrey Davis who helped in the rehabilitation programme of women raped during the Bangladesh war would even state this number to be 4,00,000 as can be found in recent interviews and newspapers. This should be legitimate information to Bose as in the article she mistrusts Bangladeshi scholarship on this issue and calls for research to be “conducted by a credible team of international scholars in a systematic and verifiable manner”. This quibble over numbers is however demeaning to those who encountered this violence.

Lack of Documents: The article also raises the issue of lack of documents of the rehabilitation programme of the women raped. Longer term fieldwork and in-depth research among social workers and doctors has however revealed the presence of some government documents. Documents among personal collections and oral history projects are available. The lack of documents of the rehabilitation programme is also addressed by these individuals through sociological, historical and political contexts. The important question to ask would be why are there no documents? What does this “paucity” reveal? This is nothing new but I repeat, as any student of social history, anthropology and memory would know it is these absences and silences that would lead us to different archives.

Reliance on Sources: The article accepts every account of Pakistani military authorities as truth while that of Bangladeshis as false and “shrill cries”. Particularly if the accounts are of “illiterate” Bangladeshis they can only be false – so the space for any “subalterns” is clearly absent, while those within the military paraphernalia provide legitimate authoritative accounts according to the author. Particularly the role of Bangladeshi women either as witnesses or as raped: like the sweeper Rabeya Khatoon or the sculptor Firdousy Priyobhashini is always of suspect to Bose. Also while mentioning the Hamdoodur Rehman commission of the Pakistani government the author does not mention the instances of rapes and the role of general Niazi as cited in the document.

Bias towards Pakistani Accounts: The author mentions the story narrated to her independently by various Pakistani military officers of a Bengali liberation fighter who acknowledged raping. This account is believed to be true by the author. On the other hand when the sweeper Rabeya Khatoon mentions witnessing how raped women were kept in various camps and when this account is repeated in different testimonies, the author states that this is untrue as it is narrated by someone illiterate. However, both the accounts by the “sweeper” and the “military authorities” reveal, striking similarities of the role of circulation of accounts and public witnessing. If the author does not believe the account of the sweeper since she is an “illiterate” she might believe similar accounts as narrated by some British men I have met in London. These individuals were working with the UN during the Bangladesh war and when taken to Bangladesh soon after independence found raped women in various “camps”. Their narration is exactly similar to the description narrated by the “sweeper” Rabeya Khatoon. A student of social history and memory would find the accounts by both the “sweeper” and “military officer” as having striking similarities in how memory is articulated.

The ‘Case’ of Ferdousy Priyobhashini: The article cites the case of Ferdousy Priyobhashini who as a single woman had to look after her widowed mother and

young siblings and continued to work during the war and becomes the focus of sexual violence by various Pakistani officers as well as Bengali collaborators.

The article interrogates Priyobhashini’s account questioning why she stayed back during the war and whether her rape was as a result of coercion or a voluntary sexual act by stating that she “willingly fraternised”. By that argument is the article suggesting that Priyobhashini brought the rape upon her since she stayed back? This is extremely problematic and parallels the biases within various rape laws which seem to suggest that women must have brought the rape upon them in different instances.

By this argument the sociologically nuanced analysis of how single women and their sexuality are always suspect, is never addressed and instead Priyobhashini’s experience is highlighted by the derisive comment that she “makes much of her threats”. The complexity of war time violence and the various threatening compulsive situations is well articulated in the work of Cynthia Enloe, Veena Das, Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin. Primo Levi’s work on the holocaust also shows the complex negotiations made by survivors. It is also stated that Bangladesh’s public account of the rape must be untrue vis-a-vis rape accounts in Bosnia where women kept quiet. This again has disturbing implications as shown in the study of rape cases in India.

As Nivedita Menon has shown, women who state that they have been raped are presumed to be lying by the legal system, as they are meant to keep quiet about this incident.

The ‘Case’ of Champa: The article also states the account of Champa from one of my articles [Mookherjee 2003] and tries to infer that no rapes happened during the Bangladesh war. My article was exploring how the trauma of rape is understood in independent Bangladesh and in the process I explore how scholars of memory make sense of the process of forgetting. The nuanced arguments I make about Champa is hinged on long-term fieldwork, cross-checking of hospital files and documents and finding the social workers who found her and brought her to the hospital. These are the “evidences” of

Champa’s war-time violent encounter of rape. I have also worked with and written about other women who encountered rape during the Bangladesh war. This was done by means of over a year’s fieldwork as well as cross-checking interviews, and examining archival, official documents, etc.

It would be important for the author to cite full references of articles for cross-checking, transparency and methodological clarity. Instead of mentioning the “work of two women”, the “work of two women scholars” would alter the expectation of the kind of information the reader would expect. Various other references are conspicuously absent in the article, like the literature on Partition when referring tangentially to “abducted” women and the critical responses to Bose’s first article in *EPW*. Till date the issue of Bihari rapes has not been addressed within the folds of Bangladeshi nationalist history as is the case with various untold histories of state formation. But recently various Bangladeshi scholars who are critical of the Bangladeshi nationalist narrative have started addressing this untold history. Various oral history projects which have been carried out bring out the complexity of the Bangladesh war experience. This literature is not mentioned at all in the article and highlights the disdain for Bangladeshi scholarship. At the same juncture the article is devoid of any sociological analysis. *EPW* has been important in disseminating and generating various public debates. The publication of this article without an engagement with the existing literature and methodology not only has implications for academic scholarship, the genocide question in Bangladesh and subcontinental politics. It has also hurt the reputation of academic rigour *EPW* has among its readers. That is unfortunate.

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