

Heroines or Victims of War? Remembering the Biranganas of the Bangladesh Genocide

Deeplina Banerjee

Assistant Professor, Amity Law School, Amity University Chattisgarh, India.

Abstract - Rape and Sexual Assault has been categorically used as a weapon of spreading mass violence during the outbreak of a war or in the process of ethnic cleansing. The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 goes down in history as one of the most horrifying cases of human-rights violation. As Bangladesh celebrates her yearly anniversary of the victory in liberation war of 1971 one can hardly undermine the heavy price it had to pay to achieve it. Thousands of women were sexually violated: raped, mutilated and murdered to let loose systematic violence. The paper builds on the idea how rape is used as a weapon of war, by bringing the case of the Biranganas to the centrality of the discussion. The paper will also discuss how Rape is more of a war crime and used to deliberate terror and violence. Finally, the paper will question the heroism in getting raped and to hail women as Biranganas who eventually had to live a life of shame, guilt and despair.

Keywords: Rape, War Crime, Sexual Violence, Women, Genocide, Armed Conflict.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rape and sexual assault is often regarded as a weapon of war to hurt the enemy where it is most vulnerable. War time violence is the by product of an acute insecurity syndrome to establish physical and psychological prowess over the enemy, or simply to subdue and force them to surrender by using purposeful violence and organized crimes. Mankind has known war since the inception of civilization, warring tribes and clans, war between nation states, war of independence all ending up in the manifestation of savagery. The 20th century warfare has seen some extremely brutalised war-crimes. “The term “war crimes” evokes a litany of horrific images—concentration camps, ethnic cleansing, execution of prisoners, rape, and

bombardment of cities.....”¹ During the outbreak of an armed conflict or violence, women and children have been the soft targets in all cases ranging from civil wars to ethnic conflicts, calculated at forcing the enemy to surrender. The Geneva Convention of 1949 was the first attempt after World War II to codify the International Humanitarian Law for preventing the atrocities of the war crimes. In 1949 the Geneva Convention related to the Protection of Civilians in times of War was adopted. Although the Convention was an important safeguard against war crimes, instances are not rare where the protocol was rampantly violated.

Bangladesh War of Liberation, 1971

¹ Ratner.R.Steven. “Categories of War Crimes.<http://www.crimesofwar.org/a-z-guide/war-crimes-categories-of/#sthash.jYAOu4aV.dpuf>

The paper will build on the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and will trace the course and impact of the genocide and the horrific torture unleashed on women. The rationale of purifying the state weighed much more over reintegration of women with respect and dignity. Although the liberation war ended with Bangladesh winning its independence after a prolonged struggle, the horrors of the genocide continued to haunt the memories of the generations that followed. After the partition of India, Pakistan remained entangled in a geographical as well as cultural chaos. West and East Pakistan was not only culturally two different land masses but was also separated by around 1000 miles of Indian borderland. “The West (Pakistan), seemingly looked down upon its east wing as “too Bengali and their application of Islam as inferior and impure, and this made them unreliable co-religionists. To this extent the West began a strategy to forcibly assimilate the Bengalis culturally...”²

In the year 1948, a few months after the birth of Pakistan, Governor-General, Md. Ali Jinnah, declared Urdu as the national language of the newly formed state although only 4% of the of the total population was Urdu speaking. Those who supported and acknowledged the use of Bengali language was declared to be communists or traitors or enemies of the state by him.³ The denial by successive Governments to acknowledge Bengali as the second national language after Urdu led to “Bhasha Andolon” in

² “Genocide in Bangladesh, 1971- Gendercide Watch.” www.gendercide.org/case_bangladesh.html” (Accessed: 23.08. 2015)

³ “The Bangladesh Genocide: Virtual Bangladesh” www.virtualbangladesh.com > ... > Bangladesh History: Independence (Accessed: 23.08.2015)

demand of restoring the cultural autonomy of the people and subsequent acknowledgment of Bengali language as the national language of East Pakistan. This finally culminated in the “MUKTI JUDDHO” or the Liberation War. The Awami League was founded as a substitute to the rule of the Muslim League in East Pakistan. A 1952 protest in Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan was forcibly repressed resulting in the death of many protestors. The Bengali nationalists identified those who died, as martyrs to their cause, and the violence led to the demand for secession. The 1965 Indo-Pakistan war further aggravated the situation as no extra security force was assigned for the defense of East Pakistan and it was apparent the West (Pakistan) under its dictator Ayub Khan was ready to sacrifice the east if it meant gaining Kashmir. The radical Bengali nationalist element was a serious irritant to the Government. The Pakistani Government hence launched, “Operation Searchlight” in March 1971, a planned military programme to curb the nationalist element in the east. The Pakistani Army along with its local collaborators mainly political parties like Jamaat-e-Islami, who had lost the elections formed militias such as Al Badr (The Moon) and the Al-Shams (The Sun) to curb the nationalist movement. The original plan was to take control of the major cities on 26 March 1971 and then eliminating all opposition, political, or military within one month. However, the Pakistani executioners did not anticipate the prolonged Bengali resistance in the face of immense torture and mass killings.

The Pakistani army systematically executed the Bengali nationalists which included the intellectuals, students, lawyers, professors, doctors, poets and women, irrespective of their social identities. Reports say during the nine-month duration of the war the number of mass rapes escalated to a figure of 200,000. Countless women were tortured, raped, sexually mutilated, killed and kept as sex-slaves by the Pakistani army in the Dhaka Cantonment. The war saw the birth of thousands of war-babies, from women who were abducted from the Dhaka University and private household.

The nationalists even though put up a strong resistance against such inhuman torture, had to pay a heavy price. Thousands of Bengalis protecting their language and culture were murdered and women who were raped and killed to send out a strong message to the radical secessionist forces. Mass rape and killing of women during war seems has been used time and again as a weapon to puncture a hole into the enemy’s morale. Although war ends, and the physical wounds are healed with time, what remains is the never-ending pain and humiliation, which scars the lives, leaving these women of war in a state of psychological comatose.

Condition of Women and Violation of Geneva Convention during the course of the Genocide

The 4th principle of the Geneva Convention was violated throughout the course of the genocide. Numerous women were held captive and abducted from the Dacca University and other private household to be tortured, raped and either killed or held to be military prostitutes in the camps by the Pakistani Army. The assaulters conducted night time raids, assaulting women in their villages, often in front of their families, as part of their ‘reign of terror’. Victims of age 8 to 75 were kidnapped and held in special camps where they were raped and assaulted multiple times. “While the Pakistani government estimated the number of rapes in the hundreds, other estimates range between 200,000 and 400,000.”⁴ The Pakistani government had tried to censor reports coming out of the region, but media reports on the atrocities did reach the public worldwide, and gave rise to widespread international public support for the liberation. The horrors of the genocide was so gruelling that it leaves little room for doubt that there were grave violation of human rights and the Geneva Convention was outrageously violated during those nine months of 1971.

Women were forcefully impregnated by the Pakistani army to create a new race out of the seeds of Pakistani men and to systematically dissolve the movement demanding cultural and national autonomy. It was a deliberate attempt to destroy an ethnic group; many of those women who were raped were either murdered bayoneted in the genitalia. The women were raped to ‘dishonor’ and bring shame so that ultimately the nationalist would succumb to the state of such physical and psychological terror. This was one of the major reasons why the women were singled out in the second half of the war, to bring down upon a mass hysteria of terror. Susan Brownmiller in her book “Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape” (1975) noted that: “some women were raped as many as 80 times until they died. The more young and beautiful women were kept as sex-slaves for night time use while the others were either killed, died or released when they were around 3 or 5 months pregnant. The women who tried to hang themselves with clothes were brutally beaten up, and their clothes were taken away. The women who had long and shiny black hair they were shaved bald so that by no means they could escape the torture.” The ulterior motive was to break the morale of the women by impacting an onslaught on their womanhood, which would not only render them physically wounded but also psychologically vanquished.

Birangana- Were They Heroines or Victims of War?

After the war ended, the women were titled as Birangona, by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in order to integrate them with respect. The attempt in a way to compensate for the loss of their dignity and violated womanhood, the sacrifice they unwillingly made to usher the birth of a new independent nation. In the process the women lost their own freedom to first to the Pakistani Army men and later their honour to the

⁴ Ibid 2

hostile and insensitive treatment by the society. The effort by Mujibur Rahman was rendered futile when the title given my him to honour the women were reduced into an insensitive mockery and into a degenerated term for addressing the rape victims, when they were openly called “Barangana”⁵ (Bara is a form of offensive Bengali slang) and treated as sex object used and left by the Pakistani army. Here lay the success of the Pakistani army men to decapitate the honour from the hard-achieved freedom. The names of these women were not inscribed in golden letters, neither was their sacrifice glorified in the name of heroism. The women were honoured as Mukti-Joddhas but at the cost of the dishonour the war brought to them. Treated as no less than prostitutes and disowned by their own families and husbands, the women were ostracized by the society as they brought shame to their community and nation. These women of war were only romanticized in the pages of the novels and verses of poems, or some films made in the memory of 1971. Even then the vulnerability of their womanhood was projected more rather than the psychological trauma and hysteria that gripped them. The Biranganas were pushed towards the process of a gradual denudation, which weathered away the normalcy from their lives, and forced them and the successive generations to live with the shame and horror that continues to haunt them. Bangladesh could not hide the rape, which goes down as one of the greatest massacres in the history of human civilization. Declaring them as war heroines was no less than a sham when in reality they were made to live with bitterness and victimised as untouchables or “noshto meye” (a woman whose virginity has been forcefully taken away) in response of their tarnished virginity. This was a devastating failure in the part of the freedom fighters, although liberated their nation, but could not liberate their women from the trauma of shame, rendering them in a state of psycho-social paralysis.

II. THE CHILDREN OF WAR

Bina D’Costa, a noted scholar tracked down the Australian doctor Geoffrey Davis who performed late term abortion on the women who were impregnated during the war.⁶ According to Davis, many pregnant women were killed by their husbands, or committed suicide. However an appalling number of them murdered the new born half-Pakistani babies. Davis recollected that even before the formal abortion programme, many women aborted the babies with the help of local dais (midwives) or untrained doctors. By the time he arrived in Bangladesh shortly after the Liberation War some 5000 women had already managed to abort the babies through medically unsafe methods. The Government instituted a Rehabilitation

⁵ <http://www.GenocideBangladeshArchive.org> (accessed: 12.03.2018)

⁶ www.epw.in/author/bina-d-costa (Accessed: 12.03.2018)

Organisation to institutionalize women’s rehabilitation programme and also facilitating the foreign adoption of the war babies. The US branch of the Geneva based International Social Service was the first to work in post-war Bangladesh.

The foreign adoption programme was initially opposed by the Muslim Clerics for sending the children to Christian countries, but the resistance was not the only obstacle to overcome. Many girls cried and refused to part with their babies who still fed from their breast. The women had to be sedated and then the babies would be taken away from them, recollected Nilima Ibrahim, the author of “Ami Birongona Bolchhi”.⁷ Ibrahim’s recollection highlighted the fact that the women had limited or rather no choice over the future of their babies. The traumas experienced by the women were eventually ignored as the ‘purity’ of the state was prioritized over anything else. The war-babies have now been systematically erased from the history of Bangladesh. By now there is no record, of what happened of them except mere speculations ranging from abortion to adoption. The state acted as moral agent deciding who could stay and who would leave. The social workers and the medical practitioners although worked for the best interest of both the babies and their mothers, there is hardly any denying the fact that separating children from their mother would only add to the distress of the women who were already impoverished both socially and psychologically.

III. CONCLUSION

It is widely accepted academically that Rape, Sexual violence was first systematically used during the Bangladesh Genocide as a weapon to crush the nationalist movement. The women were raped not only as an action of manifesting physical prowess but to instil a constant sense of fear, to force the nationalist to answer question or to reveal their hide-outs, to extract information about the insurgency, to gain access to land and property of the Bengalis and finally facilitate to the mental satisfaction and to boost the morale of the army men. Liberation War is too comforting and sophisticated a term to understand the horrors inflicted by the Pakistani army and its subsequent aftermath. Looking at it from the Gender lens it becomes increasingly disturbing to find how women were categorically attacked and subjected to a grotesque form of sadistic torture to simply bring down the nationalist fervour that hit as hard as Tsunami waves in East Pakistan. The men who fought war were glorified but there was a systematic silence on the condition of the women during the genocide and even after it ended. What they had to carry was a promised misfortune and surrogated seeds inside their womb in lieu of sacrificing their honour for their country. Some comforted them by conferring upon

⁷ https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Ami_Birangana_Bolchi (Accessed: 12.03.2018)

them heroic titles but in reality, the women of war were looked down upon and treated even worse than prostitutes. It leaves little room for doubt that the worst affected victims of the genocide were the women as they were made to live with the truth that they were not war heroines but the kept of Pakistani men. The Government action/inaction, will point to nothing but a stark disparity. Bangladesh can scarcely erase its bloody past or its failure to protect the women who were left vulnerable during the time of the insurgency, which only remembered the men as martyrs. The women were left alone with the trauma and horror as they cocooned inside the bloody womb of Genocidal violence. Herein lay the victory of Pakistan. Although physically they did lose the war but the psychological impact of terror and violence rendered them a victory over the heart and minds of those who succumbed to humiliation and the social stigma that followed the generations even after those nine months of 1971.

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