

Losing the Victims: Problems of Using Women as Weapons in Recounting the Bangladesh War

Every war is accompanied by sexual violence against women. That rape occurred in East Pakistan in 1971 has never been in any doubt. The question is what was the true extent of rape, who were the victims and who the perpetrators and was there any systematic policy of rape by any party, as opposed to opportunistic sexual crimes in times of war. This paper brings into focus the real victims of sexual violence by pointing out the paucity of reliable material, critically analysing widely cited testimonies of rape and suggesting the next steps to address the issue meaningfully.

SARMILA BOSE

In virtually all popular narratives of the 1971 war which led to the break-up of Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh, the Pakistan army is alleged to have raped hundreds of thousands of Bengali women in East Pakistan (East Bengal) while trying to crush the Bengali nationalist rebellion there. Figures of alleged rape victims ranging from 2,00,000 to 4,00,000 are mentioned in the Bangladeshi literature on 1971, in Indian commentaries, and repeated in western commentary on war and sexual violence. Growing up in Calcutta in West Bengal, India, I heard stories about the Pakistan army raping and killing Bengali women during the 1971 war.

This paper seeks to bring to scholarly and public scrutiny the deeply problematic representations of sexual violence in narratives of the 1971 war which I discovered in the course of my broader research on the 1971 conflict.¹ That rape occurred in East Pakistan in 1971 has never been in any doubt. Every war is accompanied by sexual violence against women. In the case of Bangladesh, the Pakistan army itself has not denied that instances of rape took place. The question is, what was the true extent of rape, who were its victims and who the perpetrators, and was there any systematic “policy” of rape by any party as opposed to opportunistic sexual crimes in times of war.

The issue of sexual violence in the 1971 war is long on political rhetoric but short on reliable material, with only a handful of accounts available as “evidence” of sexual violence during 1971, repeated in other commentary. Unsubstantiated and implausible claims of “hundreds of thousands” of victims have distracted attention for three decades from possibly several thousand true rape victims of that war. The exaggerations and distortions of the issue of rape purveyed by many claiming to speak for the Bangladeshi liberation movement insult the true victims by trivialising their suffering, implying that it would not be noteworthy without the inflation of numbers and addition of gory perversions. Many of these shrill voices seem motivated more by a desire to smear the “enemy” and shore up an ideology of “victimhood” than any concern for the real victims.²

This paper brings the focus back to the real victims of sexual violence by pointing out the paucity of reliable material, critically analysing widely cited “testimonies” of rape, and

recommending next steps to address this issue meaningfully. In the first section I outline the problems of locating sexual violence in the context of the 1971 war. The second section discusses in detail five representations of incidents of sexual violence in 1971 which are cited widely as evidence of the Pakistan army’s (mis)conduct during the war.

The first two are testimonies of women who are alleged victims of rape, of whom one claims also to be eyewitness to alleged large-scale sexual violence. The third is an article by a male ‘muktijoddha’ (Bangladeshi freedom fighter) giving an eyewitness account of evidence of sexual violence discovered in a village of East Pakistan after its capture by the Indian army and Bangladeshi muktijoddhas. The last two are the writings of two women who interviewed alleged rape victims.

I Problems of Locating Sexual Violence in the 1971 War

The Problem of Numbers

The population of East Pakistan in 1971 was about 75 million. The number of West Pakistani armed forces personnel in East Pakistan was about 20,000 at the beginning of the conflict,³ rising to 34,000 by December. Another 11,000 men – civil police and non-combat personnel – also held arms.⁴ Most commentators on sexual violence in East Pakistan do not appear to realise how small a force was attempting to put down a rebellion in a province with a population larger than all the other provinces in West Pakistan put together.

The hostilities, including the open civil war in East Pakistan followed by full-scale war between India and Pakistan, lasted from March 26 to December 15 – a period of about 265 days, or about 38 weeks or nearly nine months.

The figures for alleged rape victims in the “dominant narrative” of the 1971 conflict – the version of the victorious Bangladeshi nationalists and their Indian allies, repeated uncritically by many western commentators – range from 2,00,000 to 4,00,000. A typical assertion: “In the nine months of liberation war in 1971 the Pakistani invader army and their local collaborators killed

three million Bengalis. More than 2,50,000 helpless women became victims of their animal-like torture (meaning ‘rape’)”.⁵ The Liberation War Museum of Dhaka proclaims: “Between March 25 and December 16, estimated 3 million Bengalees were killed, 2,00,000 women raped and 10 million were displaced. This was the worst genocide after second world war”.⁶ Without citing any source, Samantha Power wrote, “... Pakistani troops killed between 1 and 2 million Bengalis and raped some 2,00,000 girls and women,” and Susan Brownmiller claimed “2,00,000, 3,00,000 or possibly 4,00,000 women” were raped.⁷

For an army of 34,000 to rape on this scale in eight or nine months (while fighting insurgency, guerrilla war and an invasion by India), each would-be perpetrator would have had to commit rape at an incredible rate.⁸ It is hardly surprising therefore, that the Hamoodur Rehman Commission, set up by the civilian government of Pakistan after the war and headed by a Bengali judge, was dismissive of the Bangladeshi claims: “According to the Bangladesh authorities, the Pakistan army was responsible for killing three million Bengalis and raping 2,00,000 East Pakistani women. It does not need any elaborate argument to see that these figures are obviously highly exaggerated. So much damage could not have been caused by the entire strength of the Pakistan army then stationed in East Pakistan, even if it had nothing else to do. In fact, however, the army in East Pakistan was constantly engaged in fighting the Mukti Bahini, the Indian infiltrators, and later the Indian army. It had also the task of running the civil administration, maintaining communications, and feeding 70 million people of East Pakistan. It is, therefore, clear that the figures mentioned by the Dacca authorities are altogether fantastic and fanciful.”

On the rape allegations, the commission added, “The falsity of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s repeated allegation that the Pakistani troops had raped 2,00,000 Bengali girls in 1971 was borne out when the abortion team he had commissioned from Britain in early 1972 found that its workload involved the termination of only a hundred or more pregnancies”.⁹

Absence of Rape in Case Studies

During my field research on several incidents in East Pakistan during 1971, Bangladeshi participants and eyewitnesses described battles, raids, massacres and executions, but told me that women were not harmed by the army in these events except by chance such as in crossfire. The pattern that emerged from these incidents was that the Pakistan army targeted adult males while sparing women and children. This does not mean that rapes had not occurred elsewhere. However, given the scale of rape alleged in the narratives on 1971, I was surprised to find none in any of the incidents in my case studies.¹⁰

It is possible that those who spoke to me in Bangladesh were unwilling to admit to the occurrence of rape due to the stigma attached to victims of rape, which “dishonours” the victim’s family and community as well. However, if we accept their word on the killing of adult men by the Pakistan army in these instances, we cannot simply reject their testimony that women and children were not harmed by the security forces.

No accounting basis behind figures of rape victims commonly cited: In researching the literature on the 1971 war, I found that the figures of 2,00,000 to 4,00,000 victims that are cited in Bangladesh and repeated worldwide have no accounting basis

behind them. One expects the number of victims to be an approximation, but even estimates are based on some kind of evidence on the ground, on the basis of which the extrapolation is arrived at. There is none in the case of Bangladesh in 1971.

No official report available from rehabilitation efforts after the war: A reliable way of accounting for rape victims could have come about through inquiry, compensation and rehabilitation of victims after the war, when Bangladesh became an independent country. The Bangladeshi nationalist leader and first prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, made a conscientious beginning in this regard, calling war-time rape victims ‘birangonas’ (brave heroines), who should be accepted with honour in society. Rahman was conscious of the stigma that attaches to the victim, rather than the perpetrators, in cases of rape in conservative societies like Bangladesh, and his attempt to attach a “heroic” connotation to rape victims was a laudable one. Unfortunately, Rahman’s attempt failed, and rape victims faced stigma and abandonment by their families and society.

However, in the early days of independence, rehabilitation centres for rape victims were set up. Help was on offer from around the world. Neelima Ibrahim’s book, which I discuss below, is based on the stories of a few women at one such rehabilitation centre in Dhaka. I expected these rehabilitation centres to have recorded data on the victims who came to them. Even if only a fraction of the total number of victims came to these centres, on the basis of their evidence, an estimate could be made of the total number and provide reliable information on who the victims were, who the perpetrators were, and the dates, places and circumstances of sexual violence.

But no report based on the records of the rehabilitation centres seems to be available. If it exists, it has not been made public by the government of Bangladesh. None of the commentators who are voluble on the issue of sexual violence during 1971 mentions any official report from the rehabilitation centres. It is unclear how many centres were opened, how long they operated and how many rape victims they treated. A crucial means of documenting sexual violence during 1971, therefore, appears to have been lost. The lack of published documentation from the rehabilitation centres has also laid Bangladesh open to the charge that they have something to hide – that the rhetoric of rape on a mass scale is not supported by the experience of the rehabilitation centres.¹¹

Alleged Rape by Bengalis during 1971

In the Bangladeshi claims of rape during 1971, repeated by western commentary, all the victims are defined as “Bengali” and the perpetrators as the Pakistan army. This definition, however, is without basis. The rebellion in then East Pakistan (populated mostly by Bengalis) resulted in war between those who wanted to secede to form the independent country of Bangladesh and those who wished to preserve a united Pakistan. There were Bengalis on both sides of this political divide. Many Bengali members of the armed forces or police defected to the rebel cause, but others remained loyal to Pakistan. East Pakistan was also home to non-Bengali Muslims, collectively referred to as “Biharis”, who had migrated from northern India to settle there when Pakistan was created as a Muslim homeland in 1947. As Bangladeshi nationalism was defined linguistically, the non-Bengali East Pakistanis were excluded from this “identity” and assumed to be opposed to the creation of Bangladesh.

The definition of rape in 1971 solely as a crime committed by Pakistan army personnel upon Bengali women completely ignores the many allegations of rape committed by Bengalis themselves, against both non-Bengalis and other Bengalis. During 1971 there were many instances of large-scale killing of non-Bengalis – both West Pakistanis and Biharis – by Bengalis, along with allegations of sexual violence and mutilations. These were reported in the western media at the time. To give one notable example, a Pakistani journalist, Anthony Mascarenhas, who fled to Britain and wrote a famous expose on the military action in East Pakistan in the *Sunday Times*, strongly condemned the military action against the Bengali rebellion, but also wrote:

First it was the massacre of the non-Bengalis in a savage outburst of Bengali hatred. Now it was massacre deliberately carried out by the West Pakistan army....

The West Pakistani soldiers are not the only ones who have been killing in East Bengal, of course. On the night of March 25... the Bengali troops and paramilitary units stationed in East Pakistan mutinied and attacked non-Bengalis with atrocious savagery. Thousands of families of unfortunate Muslims, many of them refugees from Bihar who chose Pakistan at the time of the partition riots in 1947, were mercilessly wiped out. Women were raped, or had their breasts torn out with specially-fashioned knives. Children did not escape the horror; the lucky ones were killed with their parents...¹²

The government of Pakistan's White Paper on East Pakistan in August 1971 listed numerous incidents of atrocities including alleged rape and massacre of non-Bengalis by Bengalis all over East Pakistan [GoP 1971]. My research in Bangladesh and Pakistan confirmed incidents of killings and brutalities by Bengalis against non-Bengali men, women and children in Jessore, Khulna, Mymensingh and Chittagong.

While many of the alleged rapes by Bengalis appear to have occurred during mob attacks on non-Bengali communities, some are alleged to have been committed by rebel Bengali military officers. Major general A O Mitha, a senior Pakistani general present in East Pakistan in March-April 1971, wrote that during a visit to the military hospital at Chittagong, "As I was walking down the ward, a Bengali officer who was wounded and under guard called out to me. I stopped and went to him, and he said that all he wanted to tell me was that he and his men had stripped women from West Pakistan, and after raping them, had made them dance in the nude; having done this, he was quite happy to die. I made no reply and walked on..." [Mitha 2003, p 341]. During my research three Pakistani officers independently mentioned exactly the same story at the Dhaka military hospital about the wounded rebel Bengali officer and identified him by name. He survived and holds high public office in independent Bangladesh.

Neelima Ibrahim's book is a devastating indictment of the Pakistan army on the issue of sexual violence. As will be shown below, however, what is not reported in popular narratives is its documentation of rape committed by Bengalis against Bengalis. Typically, the Bangladeshi "liberation literature" does not mention atrocities, including rape, committed by "nationalist" Bengalis against non-Bengalis or Bengali political opponents.

Pakistan Army's Confirmation of Rape Incidents

The Pakistani commander of the Eastern Command, general A A K Niazi, wrote that he found the troops in a state of

indiscipline, with reports of them looting, killing people without reason and committing rape, when he arrived in East Pakistan in April 1971. On April 15 in a confidential memo to commanders on troop discipline, he wrote: "Of late there have been reports of rape and even West Pakistanis are not being spared; on April 12 two West Pakistani women were raped, and an attempt was made on two others".

In his confidential directive to senior officers, general Niazi issued a stern warning: "It is not uncommon in history, when a battle has been lost because troops were over indulgent in loot and rape. I, therefore, direct that the troops must be got hold of and the incidence of indiscipline, misbehaviour and indecency must be stamped out ruthlessly. Those, including officers, found guilty of such acts must be given deterrent and exemplary punishment. I will not have soldiers turn into vagabonds and robbers." Niazi continued, "I would like every soldier in this Theatre to be an embodiment and an example of discipline", reminding officers of their "code of honour" and that as "gentlemen and officers" they should abide by it [Niazi 2002, pp 282-83].

During my research, some Pakistan army officers who had then been junior officers serving in East Pakistan, told me of occasional opportunistic cases of rape or attempted rape by army personnel, such as when on patrolling duty. Usually, the accused soldier was put through the army's disciplinary process and jailed if found guilty. In some cases officers on the field meted out exemplary punishments themselves – such as thrashing the offender in front of other troops and locals.¹³ Officers reporting the occasional cases were indignant at the accusations of large-scale rape, which they said were false.

II Assessment of Widely Cited Sources

(1) *Testimony of Rabeya Khatun*.¹⁴ Khatun is said to have been a sweeper at the Rajarbag police lines in Dhaka in 1971. She is illiterate, as her signature is a 'tip-sohi' or finger imprint. Khatun, therefore, is not in a position to verify what is written in her name.

According to Khatun's statement she was a sweeper in Rajarbag police lines during the entire period of conflict. She states that she was raped on March 26 after the Bengali police were overcome by West Pakistan forces. However, she appears to have been left alone to carry on her cleaning duties the rest of the year.

Khatun claims to be an eyewitness to truckloads of Bengali women brought to Rajarbag police lines, held captive and raped throughout the year. No numbers or dates are mentioned. It is hard to summarise the graphic Bengali descriptions, but according to Khatun "Punjabi soldiers" brought women from "schools, colleges, university areas and posh localities" of the capital, most carrying books and wearing jewellery. She states that the "Punjabis", "licking their lips", stripped the women and raped them en masse in public. The scenario described includes virtually all forms of bestiality, using melodramatic language—complete with the perpetrators breaking into villainous 'otthashi' (loud laughter) from time to time.

According to Khatun the Punjabi soldiers then lined three floors of the main building with naked women, and rows of women were kept hanging naked, tied by their hair on wires and

iron rods along the verandahs. The Punjabis allegedly sexually assaulted these hanging women as they came and went on their duties. Women who died were taken down and replaced with new batches of naked women hanging by their hair. Armed guards were present at all times, according to Khatun, and in case anyone was considering obtaining a second opinion, Khatun asserted that no other Bengali and no other sweeper was ever allowed there. In December, as Indian forces started bombing the capital, Khatun states the “Punjabi soldiers” bayoneted all the remaining women to death.

I asked an eminent Bangladeshi and a strong supporter of the liberation movement to read this account and tell me what he made of it. He opined that it was a “fabrication”, commenting that the parts about women hanging by their hair from iron rods for days on end “defied the laws of science”. That there are serious problems with this “testimony” would be obvious to any rational observer. The woman in whose name it is written was illiterate. Rajarbag was not in an isolated area but in the capital city. The descriptions of bejewelled girl students clutching books arriving by the truckloads to be stripped and raped in public, naked women lining the corridors and hanging by their hair along the verandahs, subjected to all manner of bestiality, smacks more of the perverted fantasies of a male mind than the testimony of a female eyewitness. The claim that this woman was the only Bengali and only one sweeper in Rajarbag police lines for a nine-month period is an absurdity.

Two men allegedly at Rajarbag also have their testimonies published in the same official volume. Abdul Kuddus Mian, described as “reserve inspector of police” also states that Bengali women were raped while kept hanging naked in the third and fourth floors of the headquarters building – but he states that he was not permitted to enter that area. Unlike Rabeya Khatun, he asserts that the mistreatment of Bengalis at Rajarbag started after the arrival of “Punjabi police” (as opposed to the army) in mid-May. A West Pakistani police officer called Bostan Khan is named as starting a particularly oppressive regime.

The second man, Subedar Khalilur Rahman, states that he and other Bengali police were brought to Rajarbag police lines on April 5. He also names West Pakistani police officer Bostan Khan as starting a reign of terror against Bengali police, who were thrown out of their barracks after the arrival of West Pakistani police in May. He briefly repeats the same allegation as Khatun – that “Punjabi soldiers” brought women in trucks daily from schools, colleges, universities of Dhaka, that most had books in their hands, that they were dragged out of the trucks and stripped and raped on the spot by non-Bengali police “licking their lips”, and that these women were kept hanging naked tied by their hair to iron rods in the headquarters building. Indeed, the language in this part of the statement is strikingly similar to the statement of Rabeya Khatun’s, raising the possibility that the same person wrote the two testimonies. The language is not what would be used either by illiterate sweepers or by educated Bengalis in everyday conversation.

During the Pakistan army’s military action in Dhaka on March 25-56, 1971, units of 32 Punjab regiment went to subdue Rajarbag police lines. Due to the resistance put up by rebel Bengali police, the operation took a while and the commanding officer of 32 Punjab, Lt colonel Muhammad Taj, had to go personally to oversee its capture.¹⁵ A company of 32 Punjab stayed on in Rajarbag, while Lt colonel Taj went to Rajshahi with the rest of the regiment.

I asked brigadier (Lt colonel) Taj about the sexual violence alleged to have happened in Rajarbag. He categorically denied that any molestation of women had taken place at Rajarbag by his men. He would, wouldn’t he, sceptics might say. Also, Lt colonel Taj was not personally present at Rajarbag after the first night’s military action. Still, the account given by Rabeya Khatun is highly dubious. Being a busy police headquarters in the capital city, whatever happened at Rajarbag would have had many witnesses. It is quite possible that sexual violence occurred at Rajarbag – police stations across south Asia are notorious for such offences, but until and unless other, credible witnesses come forward, the hellish account attributed to one illiterate woman simply will not suffice.

(2) *Testimony of Ferdousi Priyabhashini*:¹⁶ Ferdousi Priyabhashini is a middle class educated woman and a well known sculptor in Dhaka. In 1971 she worked in the offices of a jute mill in Khulna. It is highly unusual for someone of her background to admit to have been a rape victim, especially in the conservative societies like Bangladesh. Not surprisingly, therefore, Ferdousi has won praise and even awards for having the courage to speak out. Yet, her account is riddled with inconsistencies that undermine its credibility.

Ferdousi accuses her “Agakhani” (non-Bengali Ismaili) general manager, “Mr Fidai”, of raping her first. She then names 15 Pakistan armed forces officers based in Khulna and Jessore, of whom only two – brigadier Hayat and major Ekram, both based at Jessore cantonment – are not accused of anything untoward. All the others – lieutenants, captains, majors, colonels and one naval commander – are accused of rape, attempted rape or sexual assault in the name of interrogation.

According to her own account, in 1971, Ferdousi Priyabhashini was a mature woman, a divorced mother of three, working for many years. Her children lived with her grandmother in Khulna, while Ferdousi, her mother and her seven siblings lived in Khalispur, a suburb of Khulna, where she worked at the jute mill. Ferdousi had a fiancé, Ahsanullah Ahmed, a labour officer at a neighbouring jute mill. After military action and riots in Khulna, Ahsanullah urged the family to leave for safer areas. Ferdousi’s mother and siblings left, she remained alone, though from time to time a sister or brother came to stay and her fiancé worked nearby.

Ferdousi states she remained in Khalispur because she was the bread-winner of the family. This is in contrast to many families who fled to their villages in 1971, leaving their homes and jobs. On the day of the alleged attack by her general manager, she had gone out to lunch with him and accompanied him to his apartment after work, but she had the right to refuse sexual advances. Even after the alleged sexual assault, Ferdousi did not flee to her family, but returned to work.¹⁷

Contrary to expectations, at no point in 1971 was Ferdousi a captive. She lived at home, worked at her office and seemed free to go about, including visiting Jessore cantonment of her own volition. Army officers are described as asking her out to movies, turning up after dinner at the general manager’s house, or phoning her on arrival, saying that other officers had said nice things about her.

The naval commander, Gul Zarin, whom she accuses of rape, had a “controversial” reputation with regard to women according to other officers I interviewed.¹⁸ However, Ferdousi states that she signed a “bond” with him – he had proposed her to stay

with him, but she signed an agreement by which she would not stay with him, but come whenever he called her.

According to Ferdousi, the only gentlemanly officer was a “major Altaf Karim”, who proposed to her. At one point Ferdousi claims to have been taken to Jessore cantonment for “questioning” – she accuses several “colonels” of sexual torture. She says at the end of her stay major Altaf Karim took her to see brigadier Hayat, who gave her a letter and sent her off with the warning that she could be re-called for questioning if necessary. I asked brigadier Hayat about this, but he could not recall any such incident or any “Altaf Karim” among majors who served under him.¹⁹

According to Ferdousi, at the end of her “interrogation”, major Ekram, whom she describes as a friend of major Altaf, drove her all the way back home to Khulna from Jessore. Subsequently, she phoned and met up with major Ekram, on one occasion going back to Jessore cantonment, taking with her a brother who was a “muktijoddha” (freedom fighter). They played cards. Ekram invited them to lunch. Officers interviewed by me confirmed that some young officers at the cantonment played cards and socialised with women from Khulna. Ferdousi claims her brother stole a document from under major Ekram’s mattress. During 1971, Ferdousi became pregnant – she obtained a termination.

A final inconsistency in Ferdousi’s account is that as the Indian army and Bangladeshi freedom fighters approached Dhaka, she was warned by a non-Bengali clerk in her office that she would be killed and should flee. Ferdousi makes much of the threat to her life – but as Bangladesh became independent, only those who were perceived to have willingly fraternised with the Pakistani regime were at risk of the wrath of freedom fighters, not victims of the regime.

(3) *Testimony of Akhtaruzzaman Mandal*:²⁰ 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, 1971.²¹ Bhurungamari is surrounded on three sides by India. It was attacked from the north, east and west by the Indian army, which crossed the river Dudhkumar and used heavy artillery and air support. By dawn of November 14 the Pakistani side fell silent and Mandal and his companions entered Bhurungamari.

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. Mandal records with disappointment that the Indian army did not allow him and his Bangladeshi compatriots to kill the Pakistani prisoners, but took them away to India.

He states: “The bodies of Pakistani human-devil army’s bad character Captain Ataullah Khan and a tormented Bengali lady, severely mutilated by the bombing, were found in a devastated bunker next to the CO office. The alcoholic human-animal captain had his arms around this woman and he was killed in that position. The lady appeared to be a student of a college or university or an educated house-wife. Her whole body was full of the signs of torment by the diabolical demons”.²²

Mandal does not say that he had ever heard of Captain Ataullah Khan before his dead-body was discovered after the battle. Therefore, it is not clear on what basis he describes

the dead officer as “alcoholic” or of “bad character”, nor how he makes suppositions about the dead woman’s profession or education, or of marks of “torment” on her body, especially as he says that both bodies were severely mutilated by the bombing. According to Mandal’s own account, the Pakistani captain and his men had been fighting a ferocious attack by the Indian army for two days and three nights. The captain had been killed in that battle. The insinuation that he was partying in a bunker at the same time beggars belief.

Mandal states that four unclothed women were discovered locked in a room on the second storey of the “CO office”. One was six-seven months pregnant. Mandal says one was a student from Mymensingh College. They were given ‘lungis’ and rugs to enable them to come out, and the Indian army took them away to India. A further 16 women were allegedly found locked in the high school – they too were taken away to India. Mandal claims to have found a room full of women’s clothing and signs of torture.

I interviewed two officers of the Pakistan army who were in Bhurungamari at that time. One was the commanding officer of 8 Punjab regiment, which was replacing 25 Punjab in the area. The replacement plans apparently had been ambushed and changed. The Indian army attacked two days before the altered timing of the replacement. The other officer was serving with 25 Punjab regiment in the northern border area, knew Captain Ataullah and had been in Bhurungamari the day the Indians had attacked.

Lt colonel Saleem Zia of 8 Punjab landed by helicopter short of Bhurungamari just after the Indians had captured that territory.²³ According to him there had been one company of Pakistani soldiers – about 100 men – and the captain had been killed in the battle. 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. By brigadier Zia’s count, as there was only one company at Bhurungamari, Mandal’s claims of 40-50 soldiers killed and another 30-40 captured are highly exaggerated. The remainder of the company that had been at Bhurungamari continued to fight in other locations in the northern sector.

The young officer of 25 Punjab served many months in the northern border areas of Kurigram, Chilmari, Ulipur, Barakhata.²⁴ In November, he was told to go to Bhurungamari to relieve major Abdul Akbar, who was evacuated for health reasons. Captain Ataullah was based further south in Nageshwari. The officer met up with Captain Ataullah in Nageshwari and proceeded to Bhurungamari. Within hours, Captain Ataullah, the more senior officer, reversed the situation – going up to Bhurungamari himself, and sending the other officer back to Nageshwari. That night, India attacked Bhurungamari.

According to this fellow officer, Captain Ataullah had not been in Bhurungamari before – he was based at Nageshwari. He had barely got there when he was faced with the Indian attack, which went on all night, the next day and the following night. Remnants of the company who were retreating towards Nageshwari reported that Captain Ataullah was dead.

This fellow officer of 25 Punjab described Captain Ataullah as a six-foot plus Pathan officer known for being “humane”. He tated that he saw people in Nageshwari weep upon hearing of Captain Ataullah’s death. According to him, when the Pakistanis were POWs 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 Ataulah, who had become a 'shaheed' (martyr).²⁵

The picture painted of Captain Ataulah by this fellow officer, who knew him, completely contradicts the one given by Mandal, who appears to have only seen his dead body. Clearly, if Captain Ataulah had been based in Nageshwari and only gone up to Bhurungamari the day that 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.

The allegedly captive women are a different issue, and echoes the case studies in Neelima Ibrahim's book discussed below. The officer of 25 Punjab who had spent a few hours in Bhurungamari that final day before India attacked had been in the two-storey building which served as the office, as described by Mandal. He said he did not see any women in any of its rooms. However, he could not comment on the high school building and the EPCAF, with which he had very little connection.

(4) *'Ethical Issues Concerning Representation of Narratives of Sexual Violence of 1971' by Nayanika Mookherjee*:²⁶ Mookherjee's paper is an illustration of the problems faced by scholars who try to examine the issue of sexual violence in East Pakistan during 1971, and how the pressure to be "politically correct" inhibits analysis. The paper focuses on the story of one mentally ill woman, Champa, who is reported in a Bangladeshi newspaper to have been raped by the Pakistan army in 1971.²⁷ The report gives a lengthy account of how Champa, then 13 years old, got separated from her family and taken to a Pakistani army camp, where she was raped so much that she lost her mental balance. It describes how liberation fighters rescued her and the Women's Rehabilitation Centre in Dhaka treated her for two years, but as she could not be cured, sent her to the Pabna Mental Hospital, where she remained for nearly three decades. The hospital, however, diagnosed her as schizophrenic and cured her in six months. As her family did not respond to requests to take her back, she remained at the mental hospital. "When the journalist writing the report asked about her imprisoned life in the Pakistani camp her eyes brimmed with tears and she said she would not say anything". A non-governmental organisation (NGO) was trying to "rescue" Champa from the mental hospital and bring her to Dhaka.

Mookherjee met Champa at the Pabna Mental Hospital after this report was published. Champa seemed deeply suspicious of people who wanted to take her to Dhaka, but relaxed upon hearing that Mookherjee only wanted to talk to her. "But she said she has no recollection of the year of the war. She said that many people had asked her about the year of the war, but she has not been able to remember anything."

Mookherjee also met the journalist who had written the newspaper article. "He confirmed he had not given an accurate account of Champa's narrative, had not met her and his report was based on the accounts given by MBS (the NGO)".

While Champa was supposed to have received treatment at the rehabilitation centre for two years (the centre was set up in 1972), the register of the mental hospital showed her admission there to be in 1972. The hospital register noted that Champa "might have been raped by the Pakistani army", while Champa

said she remembered nothing about that year or how she ended up at the mental hospital.

Mookherjee, clearly worried about the implications of what she has discovered, writes, "I must hastily add that I draw attention to these minute disjunctions to explore the assumptions that might have influenced the narrativisation of Champa's 'story' on the part of the journalist." Mookherjee refers more than once to "2,00,000 women" raped in East Pakistan without questioning the basis for this number, and with regard to Champa, she argues that if forgetting is her way of expressing her trauma (of rape by the Pakistan army – which Mookherjee has just shown is a claim made by others and without evidence), then she should be allowed to remain silent. In conclusion she writes, "This paper should not be read as a negation of the violence of sexual violence of 1971".

But, of course, Mookherjee's paper is a negation of the supposed rape of Champa by the Pakistan army! All we really know about Champa after reading Mookherjee's paper is that she is a mentally ill woman who has spent several decades at the Pabna Mental Hospital. She says she remembers nothing about 1971 or how she came to be at the hospital. The available evidence does not indicate whether she was raped by anyone. Nor is there evidence that she ever came into contact with the Pakistan army. The elaborate newspaper story about her "rape" and her "eyes brimming with tears" written by the journalist was a fabrication, as Mookherjee conclusively shows. The journalist had not even met Champa. His source was the non-governmental organisation which was trying to remove Champa from the only place she knew as home – the mental hospital – and parade her in Dhaka as a rape victim.

(5) *'Ami Birangona Bolchhi' (This Is the Heroine Speaking) by Neelima Ibrahim*:²⁸ Neelima Ibrahim's book is the only work of substance so far on sexual violence in East Pakistan in 1971, though it has several flaws which weaken it as "evidence".

The book relates the stories of seven rape victims, whom Ibrahim came to know through the rehabilitation centre set up by the government of Bangladesh in Dhaka. Their identities are not revealed, understandably. However, the book contains only vague references to locations, dates or names, making authentication impossible. Ibrahim also adopted a "fictionalised" style of writing, which robs the victims of their true voice.

All seven victims are Bengalis – only Bengalis were likely to have turned up at the Bangladeshi rehabilitation centre for help. In this regard Ibrahim failed to overcome the narrow linguistic identity fomented by the Bangladesh movement, thus failing to highlight rape as a crime, whatever the linguistic, ethnic or religious identity of the victims and perpetrators.

These flaws are likely to result in future readers doubting the authenticity of the cases related by Ibrahim. Still, given the paucity of reliable material on actual cases of rape, Ibrahim's effort is a starting point. As she was a well-regarded writer, and demonstrates sensitivity about the way rape victims are treated in her own society, I have taken the information in her book on trust and use it to map systematic sexual violence in 1971 below.

Number and nature of sexual violence: All seven women in Ibrahim's book were abducted individually, and all eventually ended up in barracks, in situations similar to what is known as "comfort women" of the Japanese army during the second world war. There are no cases of one-off opportunistic rape in Ibrahim's book.

Each victim refers to being held in a group – the numbers range from 5-6 to 20-25, as stated by five of the victims.

On the basis that each woman's story reflects the fate of 13-14 others on average, we have evidence here of about 100 women forced into sexual slavery. Presumably only a fraction of the total victims came to the rehabilitation centre. If 100 women estimated here reflect only 10 per cent of those in similar circumstances, a total of 1,000 women would have suffered this fate. If 100 represent only 1 per cent of such cases, the total would be 10,000 women. The suffering of these women cannot be quantified, but focusing on the several thousand potentially real victims is vastly preferable to unsubstantiated allegations of hundreds of thousands of rape victims.

Each woman states that when they were rescued by Indian forces, their names and addresses were registered. The Indian authorities, therefore, possess information about how many captive women they rescued and who they were.

Socio-economic profile of the victims: Of the seven victims, six were Muslims, one was Hindu. Most were college-educated, one was studying in class VIII. One was married with a child. They were from Rajshahi, Narayanganj, Narsingdi, Khalispur, Dhaka and two unnamed district towns. Five were daughters of professionals – doctor, lawyer, civil servant – one of a tailor and one of a landed farmer. All were abducted from urban areas, except one who was taken after the family had fled to their village.

When were the women abducted? Six women were abducted soon after the military action started on March 25, during the chaos and displacement of people fleeing to their villages. One was snatched from Dhaka in August.

Who abducted the women? Four of the seven women were abducted by Bengali Muslims, one by Biharis (local non-Bengalis). The one taken from Dhaka states she does not know whether her abductors were Bengalis or non-Bengalis. Only one woman says that army personnel abducted her from her home, after shooting her parents. Several of the women knew their abductors – one was the father of her school-mate and a local “chairman”, three women were abducted by neighbours.

Who raped the women? Three of the women were raped by their Bengali abductors first and one by her Bihari abductors, before being handed over or sold on to the army. One woman does not know whether her abductors, who raped her first before passing her on, were Bengalis or non-Bengalis, but they were civilians.

Two of the seven owed their “rape victim” status solely to the armed forces – one was the exclusive companion of a Lt colonel until a “brigadier” arrived from “headquarters”, raped her, and re-assigned her officer. All the women ended up eventually in barracks or bunkers in appalling conditions. The locations of these “comfort women” seem to have been in or near Ishwardi, Mymensingh, Comilla, Jessore and Narayanganj.

What happened to the women after the war? The Hindu victim was rejected by her family. (Another Hindu woman referred to in the book was also rejected by her family.) All the Muslim families accepted the women back despite societal difficulties, though the husband of the married victim and the mother of one woman rejected them. The Hindu victim went abroad and married a European, all the Muslims married/remarried.

Most striking is the case of one Muslim victim, who chose to marry a Pakistani soldier, one of her alleged rapists, and go

to Pakistan. Indeed, Ibrahim's first contact with rape victims was when she and two other women went to meet 30-40 Bengali women who wanted to go to Pakistan with their alleged rapists, rather than suffer stigma and abandonment in their own society.²⁹ In Ibrahim's book the woman who went to Pakistan had a son by her Pathan husband in Pakistan. When the son grew up, he joined the Pakistan army.

Concluding Remarks

The available evidence confirms the occurrence of rape but does not support claims of hundreds of thousands of women raped by the army in East Pakistan in 1971. The seven case studies in Neelima Ibrahim's book, the opportunistic rapes admitted by the army and the reports of massacres of non-Bengali (West Pakistani and Bihari) men, women and children by Bengalis, suggest that several thousand women may have been victims of sexual violence in 1971.

The available material shows that the victims of rape were Hindu and Muslim, Bengali, Bihari and West Pakistani. The perpetrators were civilian and military, and also Bengali, Bihari and West Pakistani. Pakistan army officers admit to the occasional opportunistic rape or attempted rape of women, Bengali and West Pakistani, by army personnel. Many of the non-Bengali victims appear to have been killed after sexual brutalisation by Bengali mobs as part of the “ethnic cleansing” set off by the militant Bengali nationalist movement – as evidenced by the state of their corpses, while those who survived had no place in the “heroine” category in independent Bangladesh.

The circumstances of rape appear to have varied: opportunistic misconduct by army personnel on patrolling duty, sexual brutalisation during “ethnic cleansing” and mob violence, or criminality taking advantage of the dislocations of war and break-down of law and order.

The allegation that the army maintained “comfort women” – even if the numbers were nowhere close to Bangladeshi claims – is a serious charge and merits further inquiry. However, Ibrahim's book reveals that in most cases the abductors and rapists of Bengali women were Bengali men, who later passed them on to the military. For the majority of these women, therefore, even if the Pakistan army had done nothing, they would still be rape victims.

It is imperative that scholars specialising in the issue of sexual violence during war, revisit the 1971 conflict with a more rigorous standard of scrutiny than has been the case so far in order to document the true extent and nature of sexual violence and correct the poor documentation and misrepresentation that has inhibited analysis and marred commentary on the subject to date.

Voluntary liaisons between local women and army personnel and the prostitution that invariably accompanies the deployment of soldiers need to be excluded, to focus on the crime of rape (including comfort women), regardless of the religion, ethnicity or politics of the victims or the perpetrators.

Both recorded documentation and new interviews need to be used to piece together the history of sexual violence in 1971. Several potential archival records need to be pursued – the records of the rehabilitation centres set up in Bangladesh after the war, records of foreign and international agencies who attempted to

help reported victims of sexual violence, and records of the Indian army on women rescued by them. This effort requires the cooperation of the governments of Bangladesh and India. Finally, there is no alternative to finding as many real victims of rape as possible and interviewing them – but the interviews should be conducted by a credible team of international scholars in a systematic and verifiable manner. Fiction cannot substitute for fact and every distraction from the true cases of rape takes us further away from discovering the nature of sexual violence in 1971 and compounds the injustice against the real victims, whose voices are still mostly silent. [BWW](#)

Email: sarmilabose@yahoo.com

Notes

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- 1 In the last several years I conducted extensive research on the 1971 conflict in connection with my study of how the war played out in the lives of people at the ground level, with view to chronicling, contextualising and humanising the war while gaining insights on the conflict as a whole. My study did not focus on the issue of sexual violence. However, it examined particular incidents and areas in-depth. I also read the available literature on the 1971 war in both Bengali and English, which included material on the issue of sexual violence.
- 2 It has been pointed out to me that the Bangladeshi claims are in contrast to the experience in other war-ravaged societies, such as Kosovo, where male leaders are reluctant to speak of rape by the enemy as it is seen as a failure to protect the women of the community. West Pakistani communities appear to have a similar reticence.
- 3 Estimate of Richard Helms, CIA director, in a White House meeting on March 6 and 26, 1971 (FRUS, Vol XI, 11 and 25).
- 4 Niazi (2002), 52 and interview with author, 2003.
- 5 Kabir (1999), nine (translated from Bengali). In another publication Kabir claims 3,00,000 women were raped (Kerrigan and Kabir (ed), *Twenty Years after the Genocide in Bangladesh*, New York, 1994, 11). Two of the accounts assessed in this paper were published or reprinted by Bangladeshi writer Shahriar Kabir, who is voluble on the 1971 conflict and is in turn cited by many others.
- 6 Web site of Liberation War Museum, Dhaka. The claims of “genocide” of three million Bengalis and the alleged rape of hundreds of thousands of Bengali women are usually clubbed together.
- 7 Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (2002), 82; Brownmiller, *Against Our Will* (1975), widely cited on the internet.
- 8 For instance, given the strength of the army in the territory and the duration of the conflict, the claimed figures of rape victims assigns six to 12 rapes per person, or 755 to 1,509 rapes per day. Since in reality even Bangladeshis do not accuse every person in the army of rape, the supposed culprits would have to commit rape by the dozens or hundreds in order to arrive at the total numbers claimed.
- 9 Hamoodur Rehman Commission (HRC) *Report of Inquiry into the 1971 War* (Vanguard Books Lahore, 513). It is unclear how many of the 100 pregnancies were alleged to have been caused by armed forces personnel, as opposed to other possible culprits.
- 10 See Bose, (2005).
- 11 Even Bengalis express doubt on this account, as for example Chowdhury (1996).
- 12 Anthony Mascarenhas, *Sunday Times*, June 13, 1971.
- 13 Author's interviews with Pakistan army officers, 2003-06. Several officers made the distinction between rape and prostitution (defined as consensual sex for payment in cash or kind) – the latter was readily admitted to and taken as inevitable where large numbers of soldiers

were deployed. Bangladeshi allegations, on the other hand, appear to disregard prostitution entirely. Several Pakistan army officers interviewed by me also recounted gruesome atrocities by Bengalis against non-Bengalis, including mutilation and killing of women and children, which they found when re-capturing the territory from rebel control in April-May 1971.

- 14 Rabeya Khatun in Government of Bangladesh, *History of Bangladesh War of Independence: Documents*, Vol VIII. Kabir (1999) also reprints Rabeya Khatun's account.
- 15 Author's interview with brigadier (Lt colonel) Muhammad Taj, 2005.
- 16 Ferdousi Priyabhashini in Shahriar Kabir (ed), *Ekattorer Duhsaha Smriti*, Dhaka, 1999.
- 17 When I enquired about “Agakhani” managers in the jute mill areas in Khulna, local Bengalis spoke well of the Ismaili managers, saying that they tried not to take sides in the conflict and to protect everyone.
- 18 He was controversial in other respects too, having been accused of abandoning his post when India invaded East Pakistan (HRC 541).
- 19 Author's interview with brigadier Muhammad Hayat, 2005. Hayat is better known for leading the undefeated stand by his unit against the Indian army in the Khulna area during the war in December 1971. It is important to emphasise here that Ferdousi does not accuse Hayat of anything.
- 20 Akhtaruzzaman Mandal, ‘Amaderi ma-bon’ (Our mothers and sisters), in Rashid Haider (ed), 1971: *Bhayabaha Abhignata*, Sahitya Prakash, Dhaka, 1996.
- 21 India's official position is that the full-scale war between India and Pakistan started on December 3. Sisson and Rose established through their research that a wholesale invasion of East Pakistan by India from all directions started on November 21 [Sisson and Rose 1990, p 213]. Mandal's account puts the date even earlier. It is confirmed by the Hamoodur Rehman Commission report that ‘Bhurungamari Salient’ fell to the Indians on November 14, 1971, forcing the 25 Punjab regiment of the Pakistan army to fall back on the town of Nageshwari (HRC: 417-23).
- 22 Translated from Bengali by the author.
- 23 Author's interview with brigadier (Lt colonel) Saleem Zia, 2005.
- 24 Author's interview with the officer, 2005.
- 25 The inclusion of evidence from the Indian side in the future would be of great value in assessing this and many other aspects of the 1971 war.
- 26 Nayanika Mookherjee, ‘Ethical Issues Concerning Representation of Narratives of Sexual Violence in 1971’, excerpted from DPhil thesis in Social Anthropology, SOAS, University of London, published on the internet.
- 27 ‘Bhorer Kagoj’, May 13, 1998, as cited by Mookherjee.
- 28 Neelima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchhi*, Jagriti Prakashani, Dhaka, 2001.
- 29 A similar situation arose in some cases of “abducted women” during the 1947 partition that created India and Pakistan.

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