



The Other Tales: Recovering the Role of Tribal Muktijodhhas from the Depths of Amnesia

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Abstract: A historical event like war incurs huge human casualties, mostly on the common people who are the unacknowledged victims of political spectrums and policies of expansionism. The year 1971 marks the steadfast and uncompromising commitment of Bengalis of former East Pakistan led by their leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to achieve political freedom and economic independence for themselves. Needless to say, that the independence with which Bangladesh throttles her freedom song today was accomplished by unwavering struggle of not only Bengalis but also by various other communities, men and women who had paid the price of their families, homes, livelihood and sometimes the life itself to wake up in a new nation. However, the question remains whether history remembers the contribution of some while obliterating others? If Bangladesh Liberation War speaks of male bravados and “birangonas”, the efforts of the indigenous people should also not remain unsung. Does race has a role to play in such exclusion or does history bring to the light only the major events thereby neglecting the profound private contributions that are no way less vital than the former? During 1971, several sections of indigenous tribes like Oraon, Dalu, Malpahari, Chakma of Chittagong Hill Tract, Santhals of the North, Garo of Mymensingha, Hajong, Koch, Manipuris of Sylhet along with the tea estate workers took part shoulder to shoulder with the Muktijodhhas in the liberation war against the oppressive regime of West Pakistan. This paper aims at recovering the roles of those Muktijodhhas from the depths of amnesia.

Keywords- Indigenous; Bangladesh; Liberation War; Tribal; Muktijodhha.

Searching for a memory indeed attests to one of the major finalities of the act of remembering, namely, struggling against forgetting, wrestling a few scraps of memory from the “rapacity” of time from “sinking” into oblivion (Ricoeur, 2000, p. 30). The electoral verdict of 1970 general elections proclaimed that it was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s Awami League that was to form the government of Pakistan. Thus, General Yahya Khan’s hope that Mujib’s Awami League would fail to acquire majority was disillusioned resulting in his delay in the transfer of power into Mujib’s hands. General Yahya’s delay actually wove a long rope to hang himself as the military plunged into serious crimes that entailed a horrendous crackdown culminating in heavy loss of human lives. Such a loss was enough to ignite the fire in Bengali hearts to fight for the liberation of Bengalis from the clutches of a fascist regime. Yahya construed a nefarious plan to make the recalcitrants realize the consequence of trying to break Pakistan. The 400,000 Bihari Muslims of East Pakistan opposed the Prime Ministerial claim of Mujib who apprehended the Bengali dispensation. As a result, conflict between the Biharis and Bengalis started unfolding and a terrible pressure mounted on Yahya to side with the



Biharis, their ally in East Pakistan. The blueprint of “Operation Searchlight”, which was already prepared much before these confrontations, was all the way ready to be executed now. On the afternoon of 25th March, Yahya flew out of Dacca for Karachi giving clearance to his forces to go ahead with the “Operation Searchlight.” The clearance came accompanied with his reminder of a briefing that he provided in February during the conceptualization of this operation that at least three million Bengalis should die such a violent death that the rest of the recalcitrant population would be forced to eat out of their hands.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, however, stayed back to relish the panoramic view of Dacca’s skyline being lit up by the flares of the army guns. The narrative of an Italian company executive, who had been in Dacca on 26th March trying to leave the curfew-bound city, is surreal and spine-chilling:

To avoid arrest he and his Bengali escort walked through the narrow lanes and by lanes to reach the city’s outskirts. He saw smoke still rising from rows of smoldering ruins of burnt down shanties. The air was thick and filled with the stench of burnt human flesh. Bodies of men, women and children were strewn all over the place. Shanty residents who tried to flee were shot down by the military. Their bodies lay in the middle of road riddled with bullets in pools of blood (Ghosh, 2021, p. 58).

The objective of such a genocide was to erase all Bengali nationalists who demanded independence and self-determination. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was also arrested and was taken to West Pakistan. Before the arrest, Mujib declared through an E.P.R. transmitter that East Pakistan would now be called Bangladesh, a sovereign country:

This may be my last message- from today Bangladesh is independent. I call upon the people of Bangladesh, wherever you are and with whatever you have to resist the army of occupation to the last. Your fight must go on until the last soldier of the Pakistan occupation army is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved (Ghosh, 2021, p. 60).

As a response to the call of Bangabondhu, Bengalis from all strata of society plunged themselves in the gory war of liberation to carve out Bangladesh for themselves. The Bengalis formed an armed force called Mukti Bahini to execute their actions. Men and women known as Muktijodhhas had put up a strong resistance against the authoritarian regime of West Pakistan. While a considerable discussion has been made on the significant contribution of the former into the liberation war, little engagement has been made with the tribals who were also a part of the Mukti Bahini.

The indigenous people conceived the fight as their own as they too were the members of East Pakistan and shared every bit of their might to liberate Bangladesh. Oraon, Dalu, Malpahari, Chakma of Chittagong Hill Tract, Santhals, Mundas of the North, Garo of Mymensingha, Hajong, Koch,



Manipuris of Sylhet, Marma veritably took part in the war. Some 13,000 Garo, Koch and Hajong Muktijodhhas from greater Mymensingha region embraced the war, some even with bows and arrows. The Santhal Muktijodhhas, having trained themselves from the training centers of India's Siliguri, West Dinajpur, Panighata, Patiram and Raiganj, shouldered many operations with their Bengali brothers. Fulbari, Paharpur, Badalgachi, Rajshahi Tanor Bridge and police station operations were all catered by the Santhal Muktijodhhas. The youths of Chakma tribe trained themselves in the training centers of Mizoram and Ramgarh and undertook the operations of Rangipara, Baratali and Kaukhali. Marma tribe took their training from Demogri and Palashdanga centers. These people faced the Pakistan army in areas of Chottogram and Borkhali. The Garos, Hajongs and Kochs taking their training from Guwahati and Bhutan centers covered a large part of the operations in Dhanua-Kamalpur border, Katakhal, Nalitabari, Panihata, Fulpur, Bodoikandi and such other. Leaders like Sagaram Majhi a.k.a. Hansda left no stone unturned to instill the fire of Muktijudhho into the Santhal youths. He propagated his ideals in several rehabilitation camps of India to unify the Santhal brothers. Joakim Ashatra of district Netrakona stood like an immovable barrier on the Baghmara front of Meghalaya to face the onslaughts of West Pakistan. Muktijodhha Uttam Kumar Sarder who had escaped Bangladesh in the initial stages of 1971 war, undertook training in guerrilla warfare to return to his country and face the Pakistani forces. He was even caught and brutally tortured by some of the local collaborators of the Pakistani forces. The names of Pramod Mankhin, Shaheed Areng Richil, Sandhyarani Sangma, Veronica Simsang and so many others have suffered the curse of selective amnesia where their effective roles are not adequately mentioned in the mainstream historiography. Does race play a role in such an exclusion or does history bring to the forefront of the collective consciousness only the major events thereby veritably ignoring the profound private contributions that are no way lesser than the former?

Paul Ricoeur shows that in the realm of historical discourse, the interdependent relationship between remembering and forgetting, plays a crucial role in moulding our perception of past experience and the formation of historical narratives. The subaltern really spoke here- But for whom? The people who fought to liberate their country, to wake in a new nation free from oppression and separatism, have never quite seen their dreams fulfilled. After independence, several indigenous groups have perennially voiced their discontent against the government and the Bengali community for denying them an equal paradigm in the social manifesto. Non-recognition of contribution during the liberation war; non-recognition of indigenous identity; denial of socio-economic rights; ignorance towards preserving their culture and language; illegal land grabbing and other issues paved the way for an undeviating decline of their ancestral heritage. Many Muktijodhhas were spurred to the brink of



working as day labourers finding it extremely difficult to even incur the basic survival essentials. The words of Uttam Kumar Sarder suggest deep wounds of despair:

I also took part in the battles on behalf of Kaderia Bahini and after freeing Tangail from the Pakistani forces on December 11, stayed at Bindubasini High School camp. Later I surrendered my arms to Bangabondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the school ground and returned to my village. Now at 70, I have to work as a day labourer for Tk 70 to Tk 80 per day for living (“Aale hu disham le Swadinakada” - indigenous people’s contribution to the Swadhinata Juddho, 2015).

U.K. Ching was the sole adivasi who was awarded state recognition in the form of Bir Bikram which stands as Bangladesh’s fourth highest gallantry award. He entered the octogenarian phase of his life carrying the burden of hardships toiling to support a family of eight. During the war, at the Hatibandha border outpost in Rangpur division, U.K Ching as the naib subedar of East Pakistan Rifles made use of indigenous tactics along with guns to face the enemy and made innumerable contributions in rescuing Bengali women from the grasp of Pakistani army. Despite his heroic efforts, Ching, like many others from the ethnic communities, bore the brunt of poverty and malnutrition. He talks of the malnourishment in poignant words of regret:

If these [ethnic disparities] continue, how can you claim there is no disparity? I can say it from my condition. It is tough to arrange three meals now. I had a house in Bandarban town but had to sell it to cope with financial hardship. I had written to the Prime Minister for an auto-rickshaw but there was no response. I can assess the condition of others through my condition (“Aale hu disham le Swadinakada” - indigenous people’s contribution to the Swadhinata Juddho, 2015).

Mention should also be made of Rebati Mahali, a tea garden worker of the Mahali tribe. The Pakistani army swooped on the slum dwellers in Sylhet’s Khadim tea garden on April 1971. After executing the men, when the army advanced towards the women, it was 16-year-old Rebati Mahali who assisted the women and children escape. However, she herself could not escape the ordeal and was raped multiple times by the army personnel of Pakistani army. The question arises how many remember this “birangona” and thousands of women like her. It seems that the eradication of oppression is still a distant dream as evidenced by the sustained discrimination of minority groups. This makes one wonder if the sacrifices by these countless people for the liberation of their nation had been worth it.

According to the online *The Daily Star* report, even tea estate workers played an integral role in the Liberation War. During the early stage of the conflict, these workers engaged in acts of resistance



against the Pakistani encroachment into Sylhet by obstructing highways in Habiganj and Moulvibazar. They also fought against the unlawful occupation of the tea estates by the Pakistan army. *The Daily Star* reports,

When a column of Pakistan army vehicles entered Dewrachhara Tea Garden in Moulvibazar in the afternoon of May 3, 1971, most of the workers there were alarmed but had little strength left to do anything about it. The non-Bangalee manager of the tea estate had fled to Pakistan before March 25, leaving the workers to fend for themselves. Most of the impoverished workers and their families lived solely on rations and their weekly pay. Their rations ran out in early March and it was never replenished... That day the Pakistan army, with the help of Razakars, gathered them at gunpoint and loaded them into the trucks, promising rations. But the trucks stopped just 10 minutes later at the bungalow of the estate. The workers were offloaded, tied up and made to stand in a line. The Pakistan army men then opened fire and mowed them down. Those still alive were finished off with bayonets. That day, 54 workers were killed in the genocidal act. Only 12 survived with critical injuries (Chowdhury & Deshwara, 2021).

Sadly, Dewrachhara Tea Estate is not the sole site of such brutal massacres in 1971. According to *Cha Bagane Gonohotya 1971* by Apurba Sharma (2016), 66 tea estates saw 545 people, primarily labourers, fall victim to the wrath of the war in Sylhet, Habiganj and Moulvibazar. In the book *Muktijuddhe Bangladesher Cha Shramik*, Dipankar Mohanto enumerated the names of 588 tea garden martyrs in Chottogram region and Sylhet. It should be noted that the Pakistan army specifically targeted these workers on account of their non-Muslim identity and their affiliation with the Awami League. On April 18, the Pakistan army took the life of 41 people in Tarapur tea garden in Sylhet. On the following day, 44 were further killed in Khadim Tea Garden. Apurba Sharma in his book, *Cha Bagane Gonohotya 1971*, opines that the months of April and May 1971 were the most lethal for the tea estates with a staggering 455 people lost in this period alone. Dipankar's book further mentions the struggle of recovering the sacrifices made by the Birangonas in tea estates. Nonetheless, his book talks about the sacrifices made by 25 Birangonas, which includes Salgi Kharia, Murtia Rabidas and Laksmi Sabar. Among all the Birangonas, only Hiramoni Santal and Sabitri Nayek, belonging to Chanpur Tea Garden in Habiganj, were acclaimed as muktijodhhas. The benefaction of the tea garden labourers to the freedom struggle, the sacrifice of lives and the gallantry of freedom fighters in the likes of Anukul Ganju, remain under-appreciated.

To go by Antonio Gramsci's definition of "subaltern", it seems that the memory they bear is subaltern as well where the cultural memory of the collective consciousness seeks to exclude their



memory from the socio-economic context to deny their agency and voice in the postcolonial nation-space. According to Maurice Halbwachs (1992), individual memories are constructed within societal constructs. Groups select several memories to explain current concerns. Leaders of a group often reconstruct a past using rationalization theory to choose which events are to be remembered and which to be forgotten to build a social narrative. The very few commentaries on the role of tribals in the liberation war seem to be an instance of such a manipulated construction of collective memory by those who wield power. Thus, these people denigrated to be the “other” were pushed to the margins without human agency by the cultural imperialists of a country for whose liberation they had committed every ounce of their blood. It is necessary to examine beyond the assumptions construed by nationalist paradigms to offer an alternative discourse that has either been marginalized or obliterated in the process of a filtered nationalistic remembering.

The stories of these unsung war heroes should be uncovered from the lost pages of history and memory. The constitutional recognition is what they demand from the State to ensure reverence to plurality and equal rights to the people from ethnic minorities. The blood of the adivasis is yet to receive the due honour and projects should therefore be directed towards a realistic and all-inclusive portrayal of the Muktijuddho for generations to come.

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