

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE LIBERATION WAR: ROLE OF THREE WOMEN FROM DHAKA MEDICAL COLLEGE

Dr. Sania Sitara*

Abstract

The best achievement of the Bengali nation is the establishment of the independent, sovereign Bangladesh state through the great Liberation War of 1971. A nation like Bangladesh was established through a bloody armed war lasting nine months. In this great independence struggle of Bangladesh, women also made a heroic contribution. Although men played an important role in the war of liberation, there is no opportunity to deny the contribution of women. The participation of women as well as men is highly commendable. However, the contribution of women in the history of this war in our country does not seem to be recognized in that way because patriarchal society like Bangladesh did not reflect their original achievements. Women have been described as the victims of oppression or the victims of torture in the war. And that's why it is usually said that freedom was gained in exchange for the life of three million martyrs and the honor of two hundred thousand women. We have forgotten that women were also a great help to us during the war. They not only served the people by providing medical care but also served the country and people by risking their lives in the country's dire crisis. To highlight the contribution of women in the Liberation War to the new generation, an attempt has been made to discuss the role of three outstanding women of Dhaka Medical College in this article.

Keywords: *Non-cooperation movement, Agrabami, Liberation War, Bangladesh Field Hospital, Crafts Hostel, Sector-2.*

Introduction

After 23 years of exploitation, torture, and discrimination, the Bengali nation finally gained its victory on 16th December 1971. To save the motherland from the chain of exploitation and subjugation of Pakistanis

* Professor, Department of History, University of Dhaka

for a long time, the people of the country from all walks of life participated in the liberation war collectively. Along with men, numerous women participated in the freedom struggle in various ways, including armed wars. Despite the risks, they proved their contribution equally glorious. During the Liberation War, women freedom fighters specially collected and supplied weapons and exchanged information on behalf of the liberation forces. Many women lost their family members while collecting and supplying arms for the freedom fighters. Mothers encouraged their sons to go to war, provided food and money, sheltered freedom fighters and collected information about the Pakistani army and pro-Pakistani native militias. Apart from this, women freedom fighters contributed in the roles of organizers, consultants, cultural activists and trainers. Moreover, women served in various hospitals and refugee camps. So, our independence would not have been possible if the women of Bengal had not stood side by side with men against the Pakistani army, risking their lives in the war.

Objective

To explore and identify women's participation in the liberation war, in this article, an attempt has been made to highlight the contributions of three women of Dhaka Medical College. They are Bir Protik Dr. Sitara Begum, Dr. Makhduma Nargis and Nipa Lahiri. All three were the students of Dhaka Medical College. They played an important role in both providing medical care and showing valor on the battlefield. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the forgotten history of these three women freedom fighters of Dhaka Medical College who risked and sacrificed their lives for this country.

Why did women participate in the Liberation War?

The independence war of Bangladesh in 1971 was a result of nationalistic ideas among the people of East Bengal. They were oppressed in every sector of their life by the Pakistani ruling class. This led to the rise of nationalism among the people who wanted a nation of their own apart from their identity of Pakistan. The oppression that prevailed in East Bengal deprived the population of their basic rights which also included women. So, in that sense, nationalism should be among the whole population which included women. However, we can see that women's participation in various movements throughout the Pakistani period and

in the liberation war was quite low in comparison to the male population. The reasons for this condition should be explained.

The female population of Bengal was suppressed from the early times in history. The reasons are many – religious, social and political reasons are most valid. East Bengal is a Muslim majority thus the extremisms of Islam were present in this region. The conservative families didn't even allow their women the right to education. As the rate of education was quite low in the eastern part of Bengal, it was not unusual that the female population would also be uneducated. Restrictions kept them from going out of their houses. These are the main reasons that female participation was that much low in the war. But some people always stand out and do something that becomes an example for others. Although there were societal restrictions, many families used to practice liberal ideas. Women from these families were encouraged to take part in the progressive movements. The three women discussed in this article belonged to progressive families. They were encouraged to go out and take part rather than staying indoors. Also, the leftist movement was strong back then. Many women including Dr. Makhduma Nargis and Nipa Lahiri were inspired by the progressive ideas of the leftist movement. Apart from their families, they were motivated, encouraged and trained by their teachers in educational institutions. Another motivating factor could have been the hostile situation that emerged with the Pakistani regime and prevailed throughout the Pakistani period. During this time, there were numerous attacks on culture, society and basic human rights. This kind of situation pushed people to take action, even the marginalized part of the society like women. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech on the 7th march and the massacre of the 25th march acted as peak moments and the most motivating situation for the people to risk their lives for their country and the women weren't left behind. It should be noted that many women who had a basic understanding of what was going on, wanted to join the war but they couldn't due to prevailing circumstances. But the women who ignored all restraints and overcame all obstacles to fight for their country are the ones who are remembered with due respect.

Research Methodology

While reconstructing the history of women's participation in the War of Independence, the paucity of sources hinders any research. To fill this gap, historical and sociological methods have been used. Qualitative methods

have been focused for the research of this article. Oral history method has been used as primary sources as two of the three women discussed in the article are still alive. Ms. Makhduma Nargis has been interviewed. Although it was not possible to interview Sitara Begum as she lives abroad, she has given many interviews that are available online that have been used as primary sources. Besides, information has been collected from the family members of these women and from those who were in touch with them during the Liberation War. Also, relevant books, biographies, articles from online journals and newspapers provide necessary information as secondary sources.

Literature Review

Although a large number of research books and articles have been published on various aspects of the Liberation War, it is hard to find research books or articles that have been written about women's participation. *Muktijuddho kosh* edited by Muntasir Mamun only stated the name of Sitara Begum in the list of Bengali military and non-military officer's list who participated in the Liberation War. The name of Sitara Begum is mentioned as a doctor of Bangladesh Hospital in an interview of Khaled Mosharraf in Hasan Hafizur Rahman's (edited) *Bangladeser Shadhinota Juddher Dolilpatra*. Shahaduzzaman & Khairul Islam's *Muktijuddher Chikitsa Itihas* and Major (R.) Dr. Akhtar Ahmed's *Bar Bar Fire Jai* contains information only about Sitara Begum's joining of Bangladesh Hospital. Only a few books and articles contain some reflections on the role of these women in short. These books are Supa Sadia's *71-er Ekattor Nari*, *Muktijoddha: Dateline Agartala*, edited by Harun Habib, Zahirul Islam's *Muktijuddhe Major Haider O Tar Biyoganto Biday*, Sarwar Ali's *Periye Elam Ontobihin Poth*, Bayazid Khurshid Riyaz's *Muktijuddhe Sohid Chikitshak Jibonkosh*, Motiur Rahman (edited) *Ekattorer Birjoddha* (vol-1) etc. But these books do not cover all important aspects like how they played pivotal role at the time of the crisis. Nira Lahiri's *Nipa* and *Muktijodda Nipa* provide valuable information about Nipa Lahiri but these were written like fiction and information has been randomly added to these books.

Dr. Sitara Begum Bir Protik

Among the female freedom fighters who have earned the title of Bir Protik, Captain Dr. Sitara Begum is prominent. She made an outstanding contribution to the injured freedom fighters during the Liberation War. In recognition of her immense courage and heroic role, she was awarded the title of Bir Protik.



Photo: Daily Star

Birth and Education

Sitara Begum was born on 5 September, 1946 in Kolkata where her father worked. Her ancestral home is in Kandail village of Jayka union of Karimganj upazila of Kishoreganj district. Her nickname is Situ. Her father's name is Mohammad Israel Mia and her mother's name is Hakimun Nessa. Her father was an officer (DSP) of the British and Pakistan Police Service. After retirement, he joined the legal profession. Sitara Begum was the third of three sisters and two brothers. She became known as Sitara Rahman after marriage. Her husband Dr. Abidur Rahman is also a freedom fighter. Sitara Begum's freedom fighter certificate number is 15 (Rahman, 2020, p.309; BD News 24, 24.12.2019).

Education and Career

Sitara Begum passed her matriculation examination with merit from Sarju Vidyaniketan in Kishoreganj. Then in 1962, after passing Intermediate from Holy Cross College, Dhaka, she was admitted to Dhaka Medical College. After passing MBBS, she joined the Army Medical Corps as a Lieutenant.

Apart from studies, Sitara Begum also excelled in cultural activities and sports in her student life, playing badminton and table tennis. She was also good at drama. On the inspiration of her elder brother Captain ATM Haider Bir Uttam, she joined the Pakistan Armed Forces Army Medical College after completing her medical college internship in 1970. After her training, she was posted at Combined Military Hospital in Comilla Cantonment. It should be noted that at the same time, her elder brother ATM Haider was transferred from Pakistan to Comilla. He joined the 3rd Commando Battalion in Comilla as a Lieutenant (Interview of Dr. Sitara Begum, 26.03.2023).

Inspiration to join in the Liberation War

Sitara Begum's biggest inspiration for participating in the Liberation War was her elder brother Captain ATM Haider. Besides, Bangabandhu's non-cooperation movement and 7th March speech, intense nationalism among people of all walks of life and brutal killings by the invading forces on the night of March 25 motivated Sitara Begum to participate in the liberation war (DW News, 31.01.2012).

Contribution to the Liberation War

In February 1971, Sitara and her elder brother went to their home in Kishoreganj for an Eid vacation. Then the non-cooperation movement was going on across the country. In March, three to four consecutive telegrams came from CMH in Comilla Combined Medical Hospital in the name of Sitara Begum. Mentioning the station's name near the Mymensingh Civil Surgeon office, she was asked to join the work there. Sitara Begum's father replied to the telegram. At first, he wrote, Sitara Begum is ill. The next time he wrote that Sitara Begum's leg was broken, she could not walk. In this way, Sitara Begum did not join under various false pretexts (Islam, 2013, p. 121).

At the end of July, Sitara Begum's brother ATM Haider sent three freedom fighters to Sitara Begum and her family. They gave Captain Haider's letter to them. In the letter, he asked Sitara Begum and her family to go to India with those three freedom fighters. Because the Pakistanis were finding and killing the Bengali members of the army, while also torturing their families. He also sent a grenade and a pistol for Sitara Begum and ordered her to commit suicide if caught by the Pakistanis (Islam, 2013, p.122).

Sitara Begum started planning to cross the border in the middle of the liberation war. She said about joining the Liberation War,

“In the last week of July, I reached Melaghar by boat for eight to ten consecutive days through Gojatia Ghat in Kishoreganj. I reached Melaghar in the first week of August through Gauhati. After two or three weeks, I joined Bangladesh Hospital” (Habib, 1992, p.157).

After witnessing many incidents, Major Haider along with Sitara Begum and her family crossed the border. When they reached Melaghar, Major Khaled Musharraf left his house for Captain Haider's family and he began to live in tents (Islam, 2013, p.126).

Hospitals or medical centers were built in different sectors to treat the injured or sick freedom fighters during the Liberation War. One such hospital was in Sector 2 which was called 'Bangladesh Hospital' (Bangladesh Field Hospital). At that time, Sitara Begum's elder brother, Captain ATM Haider was 2- IC or Second-in Command of Sector 2 and Dr. Akhtar Ahmed was looking after Bangladesh Hospital. When Sitara Begum arrived, as she was an Army Corps doctor and senior of Dr. Akhtar Ahmed, she was tasked to look after the hospital by the sector commander and Dr. Akhtar Ahmed left for the Salda River area taking his responsibilities as RMO of the 4th Bengal regiment under the instructions of Colonel Khaled Mosharraf (Shahaduzzaman & Islam, 2023, p. 211-212; Ahmed, 2017, 139-140). Dr. Sitara's arrival at Melaghar breathed new life into the hospital management. Dr. Sitara Begum was appointed as the Commanding Officer of Bangladesh Hospital. Dr. Zafarullah, Dr. Mobin, Dr. Akhtar, Dr. Morshed, Dr. Samsuddin along with other doctors and medical college students were employed in this hospital. (Islam, 2013, p.129)

When Sitara Begum took charge of the hospital, Dr. Zafrullah went to England to collect equipment and other supplies for the hospital (Sadia, 2014, p.27). Dr. Sitara Begum had to do everything from maintaining order to managing hospital regulations and also collecting medical supplies. The hospital was initially set up in Sonamura, India, along the border, but was later shifted to Bislamganj near Agartala due to security concerns. The hospital was surrounded by bamboo fences, mud foundations and beds on bamboo poles. Each room had 40-50 beds in this 400-bed hospital. The operation room was surrounded by plastic. There were small vents for ventilation. Most of the time, operations were done in daylight. If necessity arose, operations were carried out at night by burning hurricanes or using torch lights. Finally, a generator was brought in (p.27).

Every day, freedom fighters who were injured in fighting with the Pakistani Army used to come to this hospital. Some were hit by shell splinters, some were shot. No matter how injured the freedom fighters were, they would recover from the service here. As a result of all the activities of Sitara Begum's impossible feat and everyone's cooperation, she was able to save everyone except one. Once a freedom fighter came to the hospital injured. He was bleeding profusely due to a punctured lung, causing his body to become anemic. There was no system of blood transfer in the hospital. Dr. Sitara Begum, with the help of two Indian technicians, did

blood grouping of the wounded freedom fighter, and the blood was tested of the people and patients of the hospital who volunteered. A patient's blood type matched with the wounded fighter. Dr. Sitara Begum did a direct blood transfusion with the help of the two technicians. The injured freedom fighter soon recovered and returned to the battle (Islam, 2013, p. 132-133).

Sitara Begum's contribution to the morale of wounded freedom fighters is memorable. Apart from this, Sitara Begum had to go to Agartala regularly to receive medical supplies, which was very risky. On December 16, 1971, Sitara Begum came back to Dhaka after hearing the news of the country's independence on the radio.

Near the end of the war, on 12 or 13th December, Major Haider left Melaghar and came to Dhaka. Before leaving, he went to visit his younger sister at Bangladesh Hospital. Dr. Sitara Begum thought of shifting the Bangladesh Hospital to Comilla as soon as the city of Comilla was free. Dr. Sita Begum and Dr. Zafarullah Chowdhury met the DC of Comilla and informed him about the purpose of their arrival. The then DC arranged to use the student hostel of Comilla Mahila College as a hospital temporarily. Then the Bangladesh Hospital was shifted from Bislamganj to Comilla (Islam, 2013, p.135).

About the Liberation War, Dr. Sitara Begum said,

“In 1975, Bangabandhu, four national leaders, my elder brother Bir Uttam ATM Haider and many others were killed. That's why I had a huff against the country. I used to cry whenever I saw the country's flag” (Interview with Dr. Sitara Begum, 26.03.2023).

Sitara Begum left the country for the USA with her husband, two daughters and a son. She never wanted to come back. (Sadia, 2014, p.28). Sitara Begum was awarded the Bir Protik title in 1972 for performing her duties successfully in the Bangladesh Hospital during the Liberation War. MAG Osmani, the Chief Commander of the Liberation War, gave this news to Sitara Begum. In 1996, her husband, freedom fighter Dr. Abidur Rahman took this title award on behalf of Sitara Begum from the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Dr. Makhduma Nargis

Dr. Makhduma Nargis is a freedom fighter who contributed through medical services during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. She was a founding member of the 'East Pakistan Mahila Parishad', later known as 'Bangladesh Mahila Parishad'. She was the Director of 'Community Clinic', a project of the Bangladesh Government.



Photo: Dhaka Tribune

Birth and Education

Makhduma Nargis Ratna was born on July 17 1945, in Kolkata where her father worked. Her ancestral home is in Fakirhat upazila of Bagerhat district. Later her father settled in Khulna. Her father Barrister Abdul Gani Khan was an officer in the British Police Service. Later he left the police service and joined the legal profession after passing Bar-at-Law from England. Her mother's name was Sekendar Jahan Begum.

She passed her secondary examination from Bangla Bazar Girls' School in 1960. Then in 1962, she passed the Intermediate examination with merit from Eden College and got admitted to Dhaka Medical College. After completing MBBS, she joined the then Pakistan Air Force as a medical officer (interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022).

Participation in Politics

Dr. Makhduma Nargis grew up in a conservative Muslim family but was involved in progressive politics during her student life. As an active worker of the Student Union, she was involved in various movements and struggles of that time, including the Six Points Movement, Eleven Points Movement and Mass Uprising of 1969 (DW News, 11.06.2011). In 1953, when she was a second-grade student at Bangla Bazar School, she marched with her elders and went to Shaheed Minar to pay tribute to language martyrs. Like everyone else, she had a placard saying 'We want Bangla as the national language'. After getting her admission in Dhaka Medical College, Makhduma Nargis became involved with the progressive political organization called 'Agragami'. After Agragami broke up due to ideological reasons, she became an activist for 'East Pakistan Students Union'. She boycotted classes to protest the killing of martyr Manu Mia during the Education Movement of 1962 (Interview with Dr. Makhduma

Nargis, 30.11.2022). Although she was not involved in cultural practices in secondary and higher secondary, she got involved in the cultural arena when she came to medical college (Interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022). During the Liberation War, the activities of the Communist Party were conducted in secret. At that time, she was responsible for keeping the documents of all the secret activities of the Communist Party. It should be noted that she never officially served as a member of the Communist Party.

It is known from Dr. Makhduma Nargis that during the Liberation War, her mother kept all the important documents of the Communist Party. Their house was safe from the Pakistani army as her uncle, Khan-e-Sabur was a politician of the Muslim League although her father was a MLA of the United Front. As her uncle was popular with almost everyone, Mr. Suhrawardy, Mr. Fazlul Haque and others requested her father to compete in the election against his brother, thus he stood in the election and became an MLA (Interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022).

Inspiration to join in the Liberation War

Activities of the Communist Party were the biggest inspiration for Dr. Makhduma Nargis in participating in the Liberation War. In addition, her husband Sarwar Ali going to war, the guidance of medical teacher Dr. Fazle Rabbi and Kazi Shamsul Alam, Bangabandhu's non-cooperation movement and 7th March speech and the brutal massacre by the invading forces on the night of March 25 motivated Makhduma Nargis to participate in the Liberation War (interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022).

Contribution to the Liberation War

Dr. Makhduma Nargis joined the non-cooperation movement at the call of Bangabandhu while serving in the Pakistani Air Force. At that time, she stopped going to the cantonment office as instructed by Bangabandhu (interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022). After that, she started holding meetings and other preparatory work for the liberation of the nation. As a result, it was no longer safe for her to stay in Dhaka after the massacre started on the night of March 25 (DW News, 11.06.2011). On March 25, 1971, Dr. Makhduma Nargis and Dr. Sarwar Ali lived in a house in Nayapaltan with their little daughter. She recalled that terrible night during an interview and said,

“We were staying at my father-in-law's house in Nayapaltan

when the movement was raging in 1971. On the day of 'Operation Searchlight' on March 25, all the Pakistani Army tanks passed through the main road of our house. Dr. Alim Chowdhury Sir called me at around 10:30 pm. He said, 'Sarwar should not stay at home. Tell him to come to my house.' But Sir didn't survive! We survived.....Many policemen were killed that night. On the 27th, when the curfew was lifted, everyone started leaving Dhaka in droves" (interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022).

Later, the government of Pakistan called everyone to join their work. After discussing with Dr. Anwar Syed Haque and the then Air Force Group Captain AK Khandkar, Dr. Makhduma Nargis decided to participate in the Liberation War. In this context, she said,

"I was working as a civilian medical officer in the Pakistan Air Force. I was doing two jobs at the same time. In the morning as a medical officer in the Air Force and afternoon, I would sit in the dispensaries of the city corporation. I stopped going to the office. I came to my mother's house in Azimpur. Lalbagh, Kamrangichar, Azimpur areas were then massacred by Pakistani forces" (interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022).

According to her husband Sarwar Ali, as Dr. Makhduma Nargis didn't join her workplace in the Pakistan Air Force, it created some problems. Also, she was deeply interested in joining the Liberation War, so she left the country to join the war taking along her infant daughter. After she reached the Crafts Hostel, Sarwar Ali came to meet her. He came to know that she already started her duty rendering medical services to the refugees and the freedom fighters (Ali, 2010, p.93, 108).

Dr. Makhduma Nargis, being an activist of the leftist Communist Party, waited for the instructions of the party to join the Liberation War. Later, according to the instructions of the party, she reached Chandina in Comilla with the help of her husband Sarwar Ali's friend Reza Ali, who was also a member of the Communist Party. From there, overcoming many obstacles, she reached Agartala with her nine-month-old daughter through the Sonaimuri border on May 4. She was accompanied by another former student of Dhaka Medical College. In this context, Dr. Makhduma Nargis said,

"I joined the liberation war on May 3. I was in Dhaka in April. I had to change houses frequently. There was a risk because I did not go to work. Me, Dr. Fauzia, her daughter Jaya, Nuru Bhai,

his pregnant wife Farida Akhtar were in Reza Bhai's car. Reza Bhai took the car to Chandina. From Chandina, we crossed the Sonaimuri border with great difficulty and reached Agartala" (interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022).

Reminiscing about the work she used to do in refugee camps in India, she said,

"I mainly worked in Crafts Hostel and Baradwali Camp. Recruitment and training of freedom fighters took place there. Party members also came. Political motivation had to be given. Comrade Moni Singh was in Agartala then. Anil Mukherjee, Moni Singh, Khoka Roy, Barin Dutt, Mohammad Farhad, Harun-or-Rashid of Chittagong and Dr. Mushtari Shafi were also in the same house with us. Later Dr. Mushtari Shafi moved to Kolkata. Nepal Naga is actually Gyan Chakraborty. Everyone had a tech name. My name was Rabeya because of being engaged in politics since the Pakistan period. Nepal Nag was the director of Crafts Hostel..... I mainly treated the refugees" (interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022).

It should be noted that hundreds of political activists along with common people were present in Crafts Hostel. Gyan Chakraborty was responsible for catering but it became hard for him and others to manage food for so many people. Just like other refugee camps people slept on the floor. But the main problem they faced was the food problem (Ali, 2010, p. 94).

Apart from Crafts Hostel Camp, Dr. Makhduma Nargis also worked in Baradwali Camp. She was a member of the Women's Association. With other members of the Association, she used to visit camps. Many people were demoralized after coming to the refugee camps. Makhduma with other members of the Association held yard meetings with women refugees. They didn't know anything as they came to a new environment. They explained the situation and the reason for the war. They also heard about their complaints and the problems they faced in the camps. They saw to it if something could be done. It is mentioned by Dr. Makhduma that there was a shortage of baby food and fresh water in the camps of Agartala. Diarrhea was common among the children. In order to solve this problem, they went to meet the Governor of Tripura, Mr. Dias. After their meeting, Mr. Dias immediately took action. He arranged baby food and installed some tube wells in the camps (Interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022).

While recalling an incident in the refugee camp, she said,

“Medical care was provided in a small room next to the refugee camp in Agartala. One day, two small boys were roaming there for quite some time. They were about 15 to 16 years old. After I was done with my work, I called them and asked them why they were there for so long. Then they talked rubbish for a while and wanted to take out a palm thong and give it to me. I said, “Why should I take it? What’s in it?” They said that they just come from Bangladesh. They brought molasses. I said, keep it with you. It will be a lot of trouble for you to collect food. They refused and asked me to give it to my child. They did not go away and sat down. Then I asked them if they needed anything else. Then they expressed their interest in the liberation war. I said that we do not allow anyone under 18 years of age to go to war. We discourage even those less than 21 years of age. But they kept asking in various ways. Even they were about to hold on to my feet. They said, if you saw the hellish way in which the men and women of the village were tortured when the Pakistani forces and their allies entered our village, you would have wanted to go to war even if you had a small child. So, if we don’t kill at least one Pakistani soldier, then there will be no greater sorrow. I took the two boys to my superiors. I told them that both boys seemed very determined to me, you see to it. However, I do not know how they are now or whether they are alive at all. But the love I saw in their eyes for the motherland and the people of the country still moves me. But we couldn’t bring back the love and affection we had for our country and nation that 1971 gave us” (DW News, 11.06.2011).

The common people of Agartala also showed extraordinary sympathy during the liberation war. The number of refugees in various camps was more than the number of people living in Agartala. Makhduma Nargis mentioned that doctors of different hospitals in Agartala also treated the freedom fighters of Bangladesh. The people of Agartala never got bored (Interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022). On December 30, 1971, Dr. Makhduma Nargis returned to independent Bangladesh with many others. But before returning, she heard on the radio that her favorite medical college teacher Dr. Fazle Rabbi, Dr. Alim Chowdhury, Munir Chowdhury and other intellectuals were killed by Pakistani forces. In her words,

“We returned to the country on December 30, 1971. December 16 was a day of sadness for us. While staying in Agartala, I heard Devdulal Banerjee’s voice on the radio just saying, “no more”

on repeat. Rabbi sir is no more, Alim sir is no more. As a result, December 16 was a very sad day for us”(Interview with Dr. Makhduma Nargis, 30.11.2022).

Dr. Makhduma Nargis is currently involved with various women’s rights organizations in Bangladesh. She also led numerous cultural, social organizations including the children and teenagers’ organization ‘Khelaghar’. Besides, she is a state-listed freedom fighter.

Nipa Lahiri

Nipa Lahiri was a second year student of Dhaka Medical College during the independence struggle of Bangladesh. She directly participated in the struggle. She died bravely in the last stage of the liberation war.



Photo: Riyaz, *Muktijuddhe Sahid Chikitshak Jibonkosh*

Birth and Education

Nipa Lahiri was born on 17th May 1953. Her nickname was Boobla. Her father Shivprasanna Lahiri and mother Roma Lahiri were both professors of Bengali at Govt. College (Lahiri, 2019, p.11; Riyaz, 2022, p.429). The Lahiri family had a collection of books by various world-renowned authors by which Nipa enriched her knowledge (Riyaz, 2022, p.429).

In 1965, she passed the matriculation examination in the first division with the highest marks from the humanities department of Bholanath Vishweshwar Hindu Academy School. Then she got admitted to Carmichael College in Rangpur but when her father was transferred from Rangpur to Rajshahi College as Head of Department, Nipa got admitted at Rajshahi College. Nipa Lahiri was a student of Rajshahi College during the 1969 mass movement. After passing intermediate from this college in 1969, she got admitted to Dhaka Medical College.

Engagement with Politics

The Lahiri family believed in the Communist ideology, which influenced Nipa as well. She was very politically aware during her student days. She got involved in politics while studying at Carmichael College, Rangpur. At that time, Nipa joined “Palli Chhatra Union”. In 1968, they

built the first Shaheed Minar in Carmichael College campus by collecting money (Riyaz, 2022, p.429). In 1969, college and university students violated Article 144 and took to the streets in anti-Ayub movement. Nipa returned home from the procession as if she was smeared with the blood of their favorite Prof. Dr. Shamsujjoha's bullet-ridden body. She raised mourning flags on the roof of the house and in the yard (p.429-430). In 1970, she came forward to help those affected by the cyclone. She traveled to different parts of the country and collected money and clothes for the flood victims. Nipa Lahiri wanted to engage in the medical profession as she could be close to the people. This mindset to help the people in need is what got her engaged in the liberation war of the country.

Inspiration to join in the Liberation War

The influence of the leftist ideology of family members, the mass uprising of 1969, the freedom movement of students and common people of the then East Pakistan, the non-cooperation of the Pakistani ruling class in the disastrous cyclone of 1970, the death of friends and teachers at the hands of Pakistani occupation forces and intense political conflict of 1970-71 inspired Nipa to join the liberation war. After Bangabandhu's historic 7th March speech, Nipa became more motivated to participate in the liberation war and took Him as her role model. Nira Lahiri mentions in her book 'Muktijoddha Nipa',

“While going to India for training to participate in the war, Nipa took a picture of Sheikh Mujib - who was her role model, along with other necessary things. Also in her bag, she put a picture of her mother - who created this revolution, attitude, motivation in her to follow this idealized path` (Lahiri, 2019, p.38).

Contribution to the Liberation War

On March 25, the Pakistani forces began a dark chapter. The massacre of the Bengali people further motivated Nipa to participate in the liberation war. Students of Dhaka Medical College were trained by Dr. Ruhul Haque of the Orthopedics department. Nipa mastered bandaging, dressing, pushing saline, giving injections, stitches, names of necessary medicines etc. so that after a few days, when called upon she could help the freedom fighters. Before going to India, she received considerable training from Dr. Kashem and Dr. Alim. They also arranged for her to go to India. She set out for India in a group

consisting of an old man, two or three young men and an eight-year-old child. They proceeded towards the border pretending as a family. They crossed the border amid danger and risk through small canals, sometimes big rivers, tempos, vans and even bullock carts. After reaching India, Nipa wrote a letter to her mother which is known from sister Nira Lahiri's book. Nipa writes,

‘Mother, I reached India. Now I will return to the country after training. I will free you. I don't feel good for a moment thinking about my siblings and father. I don't know when I will meet you again or when will the country become free. Mother, I will take training. You take care of yourself. I will come back to you again’ (Lahiri, 2019, p.38).

Nipa got herself into the training program as she wanted to be part of the freedom fighting force. Nipa also provided medical services as there was a shortage of doctors and nurses in the camp. Nipa was trained in running, crawling, ambushing, engaging and endangering the enemy, throwing grenades, laying and detonating mines and operating LMGs. She used to write down the tricks in a notebook (Lahiri, 2019, p.39).

After completing her training Nipa was selected for Pubail and Kaliganj sector. Until then, Kaliganj had not been affected by the war. It was not easy for Nipa to enter the country. Avoiding the eyes of border guards and guarding airmen, sometimes hiding in the hull of a boat, in the back of a truck, wearing a burqa, she came to Kaliganj. Nipa with her companions crossed Pipulia, Birulia, Nalchat, Bagdi and Archankhola and finally reached Luduria in Kaliganj. Their destination was Nimai Costa's house in Luduria. The Nimai family was a benefactor of freedom fighters and his son Madhu Costa was an active freedom fighter. Nipa and her team decided to stay at Nimai Costa's residence. Due to the location of the Pakistani army, Nipa's group was divided into the West-North region and the East-North region in Kaliganj. At first, the war was fought in a remarkable guerilla fashion. Alua, Bhadatri Power Station (Electricity Office), Moslin Cotton Mill Ltd., Bandakhola, Nayabazar, Nagri, Tiria villages are among the areas where the Nipa's team attacked the Pakistani force using guerilla tactics. (Lahiri, 2019, p.40, 41).

Kaliganj was largely inhabited by Hindus and Christians. Nipa Lahiri built a temporary hospital at Luduria Mission under the supervision of Father Gedard, Father Benjamin and Father Jerome. Weapons were hidden under the Church altar (Riyaz, 2022, p.432; Lahiri, 2019, p. 41).

Meanwhile, the invading forces burned a village nearby and people shot and injured from burn injuries started to arrive at the mission. This was where Nipa put her medical college training to use and she provided medical service to them. Nipa Lahiri treated the wounded by dressing them with small stitches, washing them, applying ointments or antibiotics. (Lahiri, 2019, p.42,43). The Christian community and the missionaries in the area also helped the freedom fighters. During the liberation war, they went from village to village to the common people of the area. Guerrilla warfare training was provided by Nipa Lahiri, and by the end of November 1971, the people of the area had become fairly proficient in treating the wounded and in self-defense (Daily Janakantha, 15.07.2015).

As the freedom fighters did not have wireless devices, they received news through couriers. Until then, the guerrillas operated on a small scale. However gradually, when the youth gathered in the mission, the guerilla war began to take the form of a frontal war. (Riyaz, 2022, p.432). Due to the increase in the number of fighters, the effects of the war gradually spread to different areas. On November 22, air attacks on the guerillas began. While crossing the Bowali Bridge, the Pakistani army took position in the east and freedom fighting forces in the west. On the bank of the Shitalakshya River, paratroopers of the Pakistani army took position behind the Mukti Bahini. The battle continued for hours on end. Pakistani military forces started attacking Tumulia. The enemy surrounded Mukti Bahini from all sides west of Bowali Bridge. According to Nipa Lahiri's sister Nira Lahiri,

‘Nipa with many unnamed youths resisted Tumulia's heavy attack with insufficient machine guns and some three-not-three rifles, grenades and mines. She tried to run out with a bag of grenades and weapons. The momentary roar of the cannon was deafening... Nipa opened the clips of six grenades with a knife and threw them one after another. Accidentally, Nipa's clothes caught fire. She tried to run towards the forest but a bullet hit her in the chest` (Riyaz, 2022, p.433).

Nipa's body was never found. Her fellow soldiers floated her body in the Shitalakshya River (Riyaz, 2022, p.434). This heroic daughter of Bengal did not get any special honor for her contribution to the Liberation War. Her contribution is not recorded separately in any history of the liberation war. There was no memorial or memory preservation system.

Analysis

Women made numerous contributions to the War of Liberation. There are many examples that during this conflict women played their role as motivators, organizers, social workers, volunteers, informants and also guerilla fighters. But women only got their recognition as combat victims rather than heroes. Undermining women's involvement in Bangladesh's freedom struggle has a number of causes indicates in a research that, the patriarchal culture is still uninterested in honoring the bravery and sacrifices made by women in the struggle with males. Most of the women who took part in the freedom struggle were from lower casts, uneducated and poor. Therefore, in many cases, the researchers were unaware of their brave acts. Men have done the majority of the writing on the Bangladesh Liberation War and they simply served to highlight the brilliance of the male liberation fighters. After the conflict was finished, neither the government nor the organizations took any action to keep track of women who had served (Khatun, Nasir & Arif, 2023). So that is why it is seen that out of 677 gallantry medals given to freedom fighters, only three have been awarded to women (United News of Bangladesh, 2022; Sangbad, 2021). No woman received the highest honor from the Government.

To highlight women's roles an attempt has been made to describe three women's contribution in the War of Independence. They were motivated by their family members as Dr. Sitara Begum was highly motivated by her brother Major A T M Haider. Their progressive family also played an important role in their psyche. Dr. Makhduma Nargis and Nipa Lahiri were motivated by the ongoing leftist movement and their ideas. Each of them was also encouraged by their teachers at medical college by nationalistic thoughts which reflects the progress of the medical college. These women gave medical service to the injured freedom fighters which wouldn't be possible if the women from medical college didn't join the war. But they also participated in the active part of the war by taking up arms and fighting the Pakistani army on the battlefield which was the case for Nipa Lahiri. She sacrificed her life fighting for the independence of her motherland. It is a matter of disgrace that women didn't achieve what they thought independence would give them. Dr. Sitara Begum's most loved brother was killed in 1975 which left her so depressed throughout her life that she left the country and never came back. The other women were also not given any kind of recognition as they should have received for their contribution. Dr. Makhduma Nargis also received the title of freedom

fighter but didn't get any kind of award by the nation. It is even worse for Nipa Lahiri as she didn't even get recognition as a freedom fighter even though she gave her life in the struggle.

Conclusion

The freedom struggle ranging nine months gave the long-sought independence to the Bengali nation. The birth of this nation was not serene. The people of East Bengal suffered much during the 23-year Pakistani rule. But they were not susceptible to their dominance. We can see many movements and protests during this time. People laid down their lives for the sake of their rights. Their ultimate struggle was the liberation war of 1971. In this war of independence, people from all walks of life risked everything and joined this struggle. Among the intellectual class of East Bengal, the doctors, teachers and students of Dhaka Medical College played a pivotal role during the liberation war and women were not left behind. This article was an attempt to highlight their roles which are still unknown to many. Dr. Sitara Begum, Dr. Makhduma Nargis were ex-students of Dhaka Medical College and were working in the medical sector of armed forces. Meanwhile, Nipa Lahiri was a running student of Dhaka Medical College during the liberation war. Along with people from all walks of life, they left everything, risked their lives and joined the war. They are not mentioned as they should be. Thus it is a lacking on the side of the nation that these women were deprived of the recognition and respect they deserved.

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