

Book Review

Kausik Bandyopadhyay*

Birangana 1971: Saga of the Violated Women
& *Bangladesh 1971: The Politics of Genocide-Torture*

Muntassir Mamoon, *Birangana 1971: Saga of the Violated Women*, Transl. Syed Tanveer Nasrin, Dhaka: Jouneyman Books, 2017. ISBN: 978-984-92920-5-0. Pp. 212. Tk 600/\$24

Muntassir Mamoon, *Bangladesh 1971: The Politics of Genocide-Torture*, Transl. Subhoranjan Dasgupta, Dhaka: Subarna, 2019. ISBN: 978-984-93928-9-7. Pp. 192. Tk 300/\$10

The Liberation War of Bangladesh (1971) remains a momentous event in the history of South Asia. It constituted a watershed in the global history of freedom struggles in that it was associated with the untiring fight of the Bangladeshi masses against an unprecedented spate of state violence, genocide and torture. It has been studied by social scientists, liberation war fighters, army-men, policy makers, literati, journalists, social activists, civil society members, public intellectuals, politicians, religious leaders, and so on in Bangladesh, thereby generating a rich crop of historical literature from diverse perspectives. Scholars from other key stakeholders in 1971 India, Pakistan, USA, Soviet Union and China along with scholars from across the world have too tried to reconstruct the history of the event through their own lenses and stereotypes. However, the experience and dimensions of genocide and torture have mostly been either ignored or suppressed in the writings of non-Bangladeshi scholars. Even in the writings of Bangladeshi authors, the discourse on the history of the Liberation War has not been linear. While the tragedy of genocide and torture has found its rightful place in the writings of

* Professor of History West Bengal State University

a good number of scholars, a section of Bangladeshi writers, taking a pro-Pakistani and anti-liberation war stance, have tried to deny, suppress and distort the same deliberately. There has been a spurt in research on genocide and torture of 1971 in the last one decade or so in Bangladesh. The two books under review written by arguably strongest protagonist-historian of 1971, Muntassir Mamoon, offer intriguing narratives on the tortured women of 1971 and critical perspectives on the politics of genocide and torture in 1971.

The first book focuses on the atrocities of the Pakistani army and its allies, the rajakars, the members of the Peace Committee, Al-Badr and Al-Shams, on Bengali women during the Liberation War of 1971. Bengali women were raped and tortured on a massive scale that was unprecedented in history. As Mamoon has shown on the basis of available documents and oral and visual testimonies, the Pakistanis and their collaborators deployed the tools of genocide, sexual torture and gang rape in "a well-conceived, pre-planned and organized manner". (p.16) These women came to be known as Birangonas (translated as valiant women). The book is divided into two sections. In the first section the author has given a description of sexual torture and rape on women, the reactions which followed and the attempts at the rehabilitation of these women. The second section includes hitherto unpublished interviews of 78 Birangonas. This section additionally incorporates the statements and depositions of 12 more such women, previously published elsewhere but facing near erasure.

Mamoon's main objective in documenting and analysing the story of Birangonas is to bring to light the multidimensional history of the Liberation War. As he rightly argues, "The Liberation War (Muktijuddha) or freedom struggle is not merely a history of such heroic achievements. It is also a chronicle that contains a lot of pain and an ocean of tears." (p.9) While there have been systematic attempts to suppress the history of genocide and torture by anti-Liberation War forces in Bangladesh and pro-Pakistani forces across the world, one key

reason behind the neglect of and lack of highlight on the sexual torture on women in 1971 in Bangladesh itself was the peoples' perception of such incidents as "a matter of shame and disgrace". Recollecting the pains and pathos of inhuman insult, rape and torture was a difficult and courageous act which most of the violated women did not want to speak about after 1971. The violation of women's body and mind in 1971 could be interpreted as a valiant attempt to fight against an oppressive state for the cause of liberation. Hence, Mamoon argues, it is important to document the saga of these tortured and fighting women alias Birangonas, assess the extent and quantum of torture committed by Pakistani forces, and accord the Birangonas their rightful place in the history of the Liberation War. The nature of documentation and the use of corroborative evidences in the work are excellent to say the least. Mamoon has been able to bring to light the memories of suffering, mental agony, the process of rehabilitation, stories of survival, and the loss of histories eloquently. The book is well complemented by the vivid drawings of Hashem Khan, Aminul Islam and Murtaja Basheer and select collections of photographs.

The second book draws our attention to the larger context of the neglect, denial and suppression of the history of genocide and torture in 1971. Taking the example of Holocaust Mamoon applies the term 'vile politics' to this process. As Mamoon argues, "The pre and post-genocidal politics in Bangladesh witnessed the power play among various forces, which included the local, national, regional and international actors." (p.5) In the backdrop of continuing claim and movement in Bangladesh for international recognition of genocide and torture of 1971 and the process of trial and punishment of war criminals, he identifies a number of "critical intervening variables" in the interface of domestic vis-à-vis international politics around the 1971 genocide and torture "the prisoners of war issue, constitutional changes, religion-based politics, cultural, structural changes and manipulation of education and history, the intimidation faced by the believers in the spirit of the liberation war of 1971." (p.6)

The numbers and facts pertaining to genocide have been questioned in Bangladesh and abroad, which Mamoon considered to be "a part of the ongoing pattern of distorted politics". However, he finds in this emerging debate and growing interest on the issue the scope for further investigation and study of 1971 more objectively.

The perpetration of genocide and torture by the Pakistani army and its collaborators in 1971 does not find a parallel in the post-Second World War world. Yet the discussion on genocide and torture is so meagres compared to the huge focus on the glory, pride and victory of the Liberation War! The redressal of this gap in research has been very slow due to the politics around genocide torture, perpetrated particularly during the autocratic regimes of Ziaur Rahman (1975-81) and Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-90) and the so-called democratic regimes of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (1991-96 and 2001-2006), supported by Jamaat-e-Islami and other pro-Pakistani and fundamentalist forces in Bangladesh. The Awami League, on the other hand, fought against this 'vile politics' of suppression and distortion and tried to bring in the Liberation War into its political focus and agenda. The memories of torture, rape, suffering, pain, and death however survived. The author meticulously documents different forms of torture, various methods of killings, torture centres, mass graves, sites and incidents of genocide. He provides a list of genocide sites discovered by researchers as well. The list includes places such as Chuknagar, Nilphamari, Bogura, Natore, Pabna, Kurigram, Rajshahi, Satkhira, Narayanganj, Bhola, and many more. The poignant photographs of the book lend strength to Mamoon's documentation and analysis. Mamoon's emphasis on these new trends of research on 1971 provides a strong counterpoint to and rebuttal of the silence, denial and distortion on the history of 1971. "The domination of liberation war politics" has been a key development since Sheikh Hasina's accession to power in Bangladesh in 2008. Mamoon considers the preservation of the memory of genocide important for the future generations as "it

will make them aware of the sacrifices of their ancestors for their homeland" and help them "eradicate fundamentalism and extremism from the society". (p.6)

More importantly, Mamoon observes, the still eluding international recognition of genocide-torture is possible only through the dissemination of authentic facts, correct figures and objective interpretations on the issue in several languages globally.

In historical and popular discourses, there have been attempts to either suppress or exaggerate the history of torture and genocide of 1971. On the other hand, the number game with regard to the popular participation in the War and the victims and survivors of the War, particularly in terms of torture and genocide, has become a crucial point of debate. Mamoon's works need to be examined in this context. Being not only a historian but an activist and a protagonist of the spirit of the Liberation War, he describes the forces that continually try to distort and efface the history of the Liberation War and its attendant genocide and torture as representative of the 'Pakistani mind. Given the wide gamut of research that has taken place in the past one decade in Bangladesh it is possible to go beyond the politics of genocide-torture and come to a more objective assessment of the true extent and impact of the genocide and torture and thereby counter and refute the stereotypes, misconstructions and distortions of history offered by the scholars, intellectuals and people of the Pakistani mindset. One must remember that the study of genocide and torture during the Liberation War is integrally connected with questions of human rights violation on the one hand and the trial and punishment of war criminals on the other. In such context, Mamoon's works place the 1971 genocide and torture at the centre of the memory, legacy and history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh.