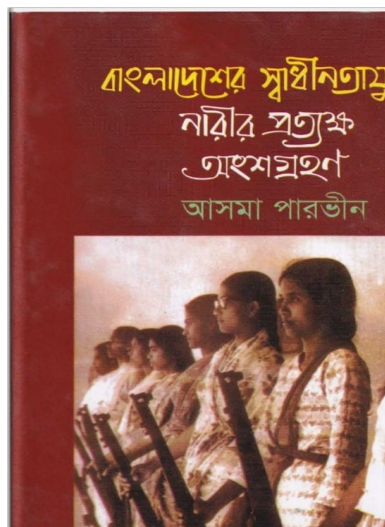

Book Review



Asma Parveen:*Bangladesher Swadhinota Juddhe Narir Pratyakkha Angshagrahan* (Direct Participation of Women in Bangladesh Liberation War), Dhaka, Sahitya Bhavan, 2012, PP. 191, Price:300/p TK

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The present work in the Bengali language by Asma Parveen titled *Bangladesher Shadhinota Juddhe Narir Pratyakkha Angsagrahan* is a significant contribution to filling up the void

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that existed in the study of the Bangladesh liberation war. Most of the writings on the Bangladesh liberation war are Patriarchal in nature. Very few academicians have highlighted the issue of women's participation in the liberation war. This book aims to explore the contribution both armed and unarmed, of Bengali women to the freedom fight in 1971 using primary sources such as archival documents and interviews and secondary sources like contemporary literature, newspaper and other research work. While not denying the major contribution of men fighters in the liberation war, the author also highlighted the devaluation of women's military contribution that was done in the state documentation and history writing of the liberation war. At the end of the book, she made a feminist appeal to shed light on the glorious past of Bangladeshi women.

This book is divided into six chapters and each chapter into sections. The first two chapters are the background of the study. In the first chapter, the author briefly recalled how women irrespective of caste, class and community participated, contributed and sacrificed in the freedom fight of colonial Bengal. It comes under the discussion how women played crucial roles in the mainstream political movement like the *swadeshi* and *boycott* movement, the non-cooperation movement, the khilafat movement and the civil disobedience movement. She also mentioned women's participation in revolutionary activities under various groups like the Indian Republican Army (IRA) led by Surya Sen and *Dipali Sangha* under the leadership of Lila Roy etc. There are various peasant movements where women of Bengal contributed and even organized that have also been stated here. Special importance has been given to Pritilata Waddedar and Ila Mitra to give examples of Bengali women's bravery. They were able to prove that the Bengali women have enough keenness and ability to participate in the freedom movement and revolutionary activities and sometimes they could overtake their male fellows.

During the time of the transfer of power after a massive communal riot, India got divided into two separate dominions: India and Pakistan. Due to the partition, Bengal was also divided. The Eastern part of the Bengal province came under the newly formed state of Pakistan, which was popularly called East Pakistan because the other land of Pakistan was on the western side of India. Bengalis of East Pakistan realised soon that they are being

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exploited by West Pakistan not only in parliamentary politics but they are trying to destroy their Bengali language and culture. The second chapter deals with the participation of women in different phases of growing nationalism against the West Pakistani autocracy over East Pakistan till the beginning of the final war in 1971 for independence. The author analyses here women's zealous activities in the *Bhasa Andolan* (language movement) in 1948 and 1952, protest against the Ayubian dictatorship, *chhaydafa Andolon* (six-point movement) in 1966 and mass insurgency in 1969. Presenting these two chapters, the author portrayed the scenario of the rising nationalism of Bengali people against West Pakistani betrayal and the increasing women's participation and power in it.

25th March night, 1971 was a bloody night for East Pakistan. The West Pakistani army attacked East Pakistan and killed the Bengali people arbitrarily. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in reply, announced the freedom of Bangladesh. The war started and continued till the victory with the support of the Indian army in December 1971. The third chapter focuses on the preparation of those women who were eager to join the battle and took combat training. Cobra Camp was one of the largest ladies' camps, where 300 girls and women got military training. Following the theory of 'cause and effect' by Kaoru Ishikawa the author has designed a fishbone diagram to analyse the reason behind the remarkable participation of women. According to the author the urge for self-defence and patriotism combined to motivate them to do counter-attacks and take part in the war.

The fourth chapter shed light on women's non-militant role in the liberation war. It deals with how women organised and awakened people, collected and preserved war logistics, sent messages, gave secret shelter to the roaming freedom fighters, worked as nurses in the battle camps and refugee camps, and played the role of entrepreneur or performer in *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* to spread the nationalism among the people. Genocidal rape, done by the Pakistani army along with the group of *rajakara* (anti-Bangladesh and pro-Pakistan Bengalis and Urdu-speaking migrants who lived in East Pakistan at that time) like *All-bad'r* and *All-sam's* also came under the discussion here.

Despite thousands of patriarchal obstacles, women could set an example of their ultimate patriotism by taking up guns and mine. The fifth chapter is a biographical study of such women who became militant freedom fighters. Here the biographies of thirty women have been portrayed in this chapter mentioning the turning point of their ordinary life to a fighter, their fighting and their later life after the victory. Through this chapter, one can easily

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assume their willpower, courage, bravery and dedication to the nation's freedom. For example, Kanchanmala from Munsiguange was kidnapped and raped by the Pakistani army continuously. She tried to escape but was caught and beaten extremely and left out. She was rescued and treated by the mother of a freedom fighter and getting well she joined the freedom army. She made her contribution to the war of Tangail, Ghatail and Mirzapur. Her later life was full of pain because of her husband's torture. Just a lump sum money of one thousand Taka and a certificate was the reward to her from the state. These biographies also make an understanding of the rigorous patriarchy that existed in the society during that time, what prevented them from joining the direct fight on the battlefield and made their later life troublesome. That pathetic truth was not ignored by the author. She expressed her regret in this regard in the sixth chapter. She raised the question firmly against the patriarchal mind of the society, state and academicians. She found out that the leaders and sector commanders did not want women to take part in the battle directly. They anticipated the women to work as assistants to male warriors. Women's contributions to the liberation war were neglected by the state documentation, even though many of them were hidden from public view for a long time. Society imposed taboo on those who were raped by the opponent, even their family also refused to accept them. State and civil society failed to honour them properly. Historians wrote the history of the nation disregarding women.

The crisis of historiography that Prof. Ranajit Guha speaks of in his *Subaltern Studies* is also reflected in the history of the Bangladesh Liberation war. The history of the liberation war has become the heroic narrative of only top-level political leaders, sector commanders and front-line cultural activists. The subaltern class of the society has been neglected there. In a patriarchal society, all women are subalterns in one sense. The author rightly pointed out the crisis of the bourgeois nationalist historiography of the Bangladesh liberation war and made a significant contribution in highlighting the women's contribution to the making of independent Bangladesh. This kind of subaltern approach is really admirable. But the readers would have been more enriched if the author pointed out the reasons behind the gender discrimination that happen during the liberation war. Women were indeed discriminated against everywhere in the matter of the liberation war. But the patriarchal mind of the politicians, sector commanders and the male fighters was the only reason behind it or the situation that directed them to take this kind of decision. It is not to be forgotten that the great leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman urged the women to build their home as a fort

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and to build resistance, whatever they have. So the top leaders were not against the militarisation of women. Did the ground leaders disobey him? Or due to the shortage of weapons and supplies, they thought it would be more effective to take up arms in the hands of male fighters, who have more physical strength than their female fighters? These questions still remain. However, it is undoubtedly a major contribution to the historiography of the liberation war. Readers of both Bengal will get a new taste of the history of the Bangladesh liberation war and will expect similar writings from the author after reading this book.