

# Ferdousi Priyobhashinee

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*Ferdousi Priyobhashinee, a renowned sculptor of Bangladesh, was virtually imprisoned by the Pakistani occupation forces and their collaborators at Khulna during the nine-month Liberation War. She was on the secretarial staff of Crescent Jute Mills. She witnessed the genocide, atrocities and destruction of the occupation*

*forces. While giving her statement, she narrated how the Pakistani troops slaughtered innocent Bangalees by guillotine with jute cutting machines of the mill. She also became one of the victims of the barbaric Pakistanis. She*

*gave her testimony in seven installments between September 25 and November 2, 1999.*

I am Ferdousi Begum. In my early childhood, my grandfather Abdul Hakim who was the Speaker of the then East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, had given me an adorable name – Priyobhashinee (girl with a sweet vocabulary). I'm one of the quarter million Bengalee women who were raped by the Pakistani forces in 1971.

I want to tell you about those horrible days and nights of 1971, as the trial of those who killed three million Bangalees and raped a quarter million women is yet to be held. The new generation is completely ignorant about the frightful time we spent during the war in 1971. I want to recall those terrible times also because we know very little about the Pakistani repression on women during our Liberation War. This is because of our conservative society and family environment. I hope that my statement will encourage other repressed women to come forward with their own experiences and raise their voice against the barbarism.

You may have read about the repression on women in 1971 in the 8th volume of 'Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddher Dalilpatra' (Documents of Bangladesh Liberation War). Professor Neelima Ibrahim in her book has also described experiences of some rape victims without disclosing their names. Three such victims had come from Kushtia to make their statements when Jahanara Imam and others organised a mock trial of Ghulam Azam in a public court held on 26 March, 1992 in Dhaka. Later, I came to know how they th

were humiliated after returning to their homes.

Neelima Ibrahim in her extraordinary book 'Ami Beerangana Bolchhi' has elaborated how Bangladesh society after independence has denied the role of repressed women in the war. Not only society, but many families had also refused to accept them. She wrote that many of the heroic women were not accepted by their fathers, husbands and other family members. Although they knew their fate, some of these women preferred to go to Pakistan along with the Pakistani soldiers after the war was over.

The father of the newly-born state Sheikh Mujibur Rahman wanted to rehabilitate the repressed women.

He addressed them as 'Beerangana' (heroic women) showing due honour to them. Even he could not succeed in securing their rightful place in society with honour and dignity.

I have experienced the persecution by the Pakistani forces and have also seen the same barbaric act among the local Bengalee collaborators. Those who handed me over to Pakistani troops were people of this land. We know about the courage of the freedom fighters during the war, but I did not see the same courage

among them after the country was freed from the occupation forces. They did not stand beside the rape victims. When a woman of a family was being repressed during the war, male members of the family were either in hideouts or had already laid down their lives. Most of the women did not have any means to flee, they had none to protect them. It was one of the main reasons that they were the victims of repression.

Before presenting my testimony of 1971, I will say something about myself.

I come from an aristocratic family. We had the inane pride of aristocracy in our family, but our financial condition was endurable. I was the eldest among eight children of my parents. My father and mother were separated when I was only 15. This compelled me to engage myself in a job just after I completed high school education.

I got married with a student of engineering in 1962. I had to bear the educational expenses of my husband, apart from my younger brothers and sisters. I completed graduation but could not continue my studies further.

I was divorced in 1968 when I was mother of three children. Since then my children lived with their paternal grandmother at Khulna. I was working at Crescent Jute Mills and residing with my mother and younger brothers and sisters in the Khalishpur area of the town.

In those depressing days, one of my senior colleagues, named Ahsanullah, had extended his hands of sympathy to my helpless family.

I was never involved in politics. But my family had a radical cultural environment. My father was involved with the cultural troupe of renowned dancer Bulbul Chowdhury and had made many visits to Europe. My mother had learnt music from Ustad Munshi Raisuddin. My uncle, Nazim Mahmud, who passed away recently, was a leading cultural personality of the country. Mainly because of him, I was associated with *a cultural organisation, Sandeepon. Music and dance were part of our family heritage.*

In the early 1971, Ahsanullah proposed to marry me when the country's political situation was very uncertain. Ahsan's family was very much against his decision to marry a divorcee with three children. In fact, considering the future of my children and bitter experience of my earlier marriage, I myself was not interested in a second marriage. As Ahsanullah failed to convince me, he sought help from my uncle Nazim Mahmud.

Though we were not married, Ahsanullah used to act like the guardian of our family. Later, I agreed to marry him on advice of my uncle.

Like all other places, Khulna's Khalishpur also became turbulent with scattered clashes between Bengalees and Biharis during the first half of March, 1971. As the situation was deteriorating, we were paid off our salaries on March 20. Salary day was always pleasing to me as I had to bear almost all the expenses of my family. I used to wait for that day throughout the month.

I went to my office on March 24, but returned hurriedly following a riot between Bengalees and Biharis in Khalishpur. The Biharis set fire to many houses of Bengalees in the area. It was the time of non-cooperation movement throughout the country called by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of Awami League, the party which won majority seats in the parliamentary elections of 1970. The Pakistan army junta was reluctant to hand over power to the elected representatives. Like other government and semi government officials, the members of East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) also joined the non-cooperation movement against the military government. The political situation was very uncertain.

Everything was dependent on the ongoing meeting between Sheikh Mujib and Yahya Khan, the then President of Pakistan. Failing to apprehend the consequences of the political situation, I could not decide what to do. Earlier, we had seen political unrest and series of strikes for a certain period which became normal eventually. So I thought everything would be normal again. I was optimistic that the legitimate demands of Sheikh Mujib would be accepted. Even then I was tense as I watched the anxiety among my colleagues. I was more concerned about my job because if the jute mill went on strike and the office remained closed for a long time, what would be the fate of my family? If there was any irregularity in receiving my salary, we would have to starve.

On 25 March, I did not go to office. I saw EPR personnel were deployed on the streets. Some EPR th

personnel came to our house and asked for drinking water. They also wanted to know whether we were Biharis or Bengalee. We hesitated for a while. Later, we informed them about our Bengalee identity. After knowing our identity, they wanted to have some food. They also cautioned us saying: “The situation is not good. We don’t think the negotiations will be effective. Don’t leave the place.”

The riot between Bengalees and Biharis spread throughout the town on March 26. It turned more serious in the next two days. Everywhere there was fire. The army came entered the town on 29 March. Ahsanullah th

used to visit our house regularly and everytime he insisted that we leave the troublesome area.

He was a labour officer of Jessore Jute Industries. As we were not married at that time, he could not stay with us and was not in a position to give us protection. However, he tried his best as a family friend.

On March 30, he came with a jeep amidst a horrifying situation. He parked the jeep near a graveyard close to our house and told us to get ready to leave the place. I asked him, “Where shall we go with such a big family? Who will give us shelter?”

“Don’t argue. We shall have to leave the house immediately,” he said and proceeded towards the main road. He returned shortly and said, “The army and Biharis are coming.”

Without delaying further, we came out of the house. The Bengalee houses around the area were on fire.

People were running for safety. We could not board the jeep because it was on the main road. We had to make a short cut through the graveyard moving towards Jessore-Khulna highway. When we were crossing the graveyard, I felt something abnormal under my feet. I saw scores of corpses scattered on the ground. Those were the bodies of Bengalee people killed by the Biharis.

After running for sometime, we reached the house of a village leader, who was known to us. But he refused to give us shelter saying that he could not provide shelter to supporters of the Awami League. The man was involved in Muslim League politics. So we had to look for another shelter and we decided to go to my mother’s house in Khulna. We took rickshaws from Goalkhali gate. We found some Pakistan army men had set fire to a bus and a rickshaw at Noornagar. We were afraid and started walking, apprehending that the army might open fire if the burning wheels of rickshaws blasted.

Late in the evening we reached the house of my maternal grandfather at Muslimpara in Khulna town on foot. But we were not feeling comfortable in the house. We felt that we had become a burden on the family.

The house had become too crowded because many people had already taken shelter there. It was quite embarrassing for us to stay there, but there was no choice. Though we came to that house for security reasons, the area was not free from army movement. The army used to come quite often and we had to leave the house and take shelter in a nearby paddy field or somewhere else.

I remember an interesting incident that happened during our stay there. One day as the army came, we were rushing to hide. An elderly woman of a neighbouring Hindu family asked me, "Why are you fleeing?" I said, "The army is coming." I told her to flee also. The old woman had never heard the word "army" before this. She asked me whether the army was good or bad. I told her, "It's not the time to discuss. Move at once."

Then the elderly lady said, "If I flee what will happen to my cattle?" Most of the innocent people in the countryside were like that woman. They were totally ignorant about the holocaust of the Pakistan Army, and that is the reason the Pakistani forces could kill so many innocent Bengalees during the war.

The entire day we had to take shelter in the cowshed of a house, because firing was going on like hailstorm all around us.

After some days, the situation became apparently calm. I told my mother, "Let's go back to Khalishpur."

We're not even safe here. If we have to die, it's better to be at our own place."

We came back to Khalishpur. The house was ransacked and everything was looted. We were totally helpless. One day my mother washed our clothes and hung those on the rooftop for drying. Ahsanullah somehow saw the clothes and came to our house. He was quite worried, and asked me, "Why have you come back? Killings are taking place everyday, everywhere. I'm leaving the place today. Because the army is looking for me."

He also asked my mother, why we had returned. My mother told him, "What else shall we do? Is there any place to go?"

Suddenly I saw an army patrol on the street. We closed the door immediately. Hearing the noise of massive firing, we looked through a hole in the window and saw the killing of 15/16 people of Munshibari, a neighbouring house.

Ahsanullah left the house saying that he was not safe because the army was looking for him. "If I stay here, the army will kill you."

Along with my mother, brothers and sisters, I came out of the house. Mother asked me to hire rickshaws for them. She planned to go to Jessore to one of my brother's house. I gave her my last hundred taka and said,

“I'll join office as soon as it opens. Then I'll send you money regularly.”

Mother said, “Don't be upset. If we survive, we'll meet again.”

Thus I became alone as my family and Ahsanullah left the town. I went to many houses which were previously known to me. Everybody was busy looking after their own safety. Nobody gave me shelter. I stayed in the house of an engineer for some days, but here too there was also a problem. His wife did not want me to stay there. The engineer wanted to help me which created a family problem. The engineer pleaded with his wife, “How could I drive away a helpless girl in this situation?” But his wife was adamant and I had to leave the place.

I felt very bad finding myself totally helpless. Standing on the road, I was thinking what should I do?

Where shall I go? All of a sudden I found my non-Bengalee colleague Jahangir Kerala, an accountant of our office. And that was the beginning of my miseries and nightmares.

Jahangir asked me in a sympathetic voice, “Hi sister, what you're doing here?”

I said, “I'm in a very bad situation.” On finding the accountant, I was thinking of getting some advance. I wanted to know whether the office was open or not.

He said, “Yes, do you want to join?” Then he proposed to give me a lift on his motorbike to reach the office. I told him that I could not board the bike. I took a rickshaw and followed him.

He led me to a beautiful olive-coloured house in the Wireless Colony area of the town. It was ‘Muscat House’, residence of a rich non-Bengalee. While going to office, I used to see the house many times and wondered who lived in that beautiful place. As he took me inside the house, I asked him, “Why have you brought me here?” He did not reply.

After taking me to a room, he started behaving in an indecent way. The man who never dared to talk to me before, pushed me hard and said, “Don't move from this place. Some army officers will come in the evening.

You will be given a job.” Then he left the house.

I decided to leave the house at any cost. I saw two guards of the house, through a hole in a window, who were discussing something, pointing to the room where I was staying. I went to them and said, “Could I have a cup of tea?” The younger one

replied, “Yes. But it will be cold.” I told him it was fine. As he went to bring tea, the other guard made a gesture to leave the place. He seemed to be an angel to me.

The guy who had gone to bring tea returned to the gate when I came down to the street. He shouted,

“Where you are going? You’re not allowed to leave this house.” Riding on a rickshaw hastily, I replied, “I’m going to bring my clothes. I’ll come back soon.”

Then I went to my office. The first man I found was the elderly general manager Mr. Fidai, who was smoking a pipe casually. He asked me, “Where have you come from?” To get his sympathy I told him, “Sir, everyone has left me. I’m completely alone. I don’t know what to do.”

He asked me, “Do you want to join the office?”

I said, “Yes sir, but I’ve no shoes, even my clothes are not adequate. How can I attend office?”

He gave me a chit and asked me to meet the chief accountant. The chief accountant gave me three hundred taka and said, “Take a car and go shopping now. The car will also go to your place tomorrow morning. Where do you stay?”

By that time, I had decided to stay at the house of a police inspector at Pabla, instead of Khalishpur because it was dominated by the Biharis. I knew the family of this police officer. Two young boys of this family, who could sing very well, used to visit us quite often. As I did not want to let the accountant know my address, I said, “It’s a very remote area. The car can’t go up to my house.”

“Okay, no problem. Tell the driver where to wait. The car will go at 7:30 in the morning,” he said.

The car came the following day. I attended the office. Within half-an-hour, an accountant named Sultan Panjwani, a non-Bengalee who had never dared to talk to me earlier, said me in an intimate voice, “How are you? You’re looking very nice.” He also made an indecent gesture. I gave him a hard look.

After some time, Mr. Fidai phoned me and asked, “Where you’re going to have your lunch today?”

I replied, “In the office, sir.” Then he said, “Why don’t you take lunch with me?”

To keep the general manager in a good humour, I agreed.

While having lunch he told me casually that, Captain Ishtiaque would come in the evening to take me to the cinema.

I was afraid and said, “I don’t watch films.”

“Don’t argue. There are many allegations against you. You have to go with him,” he ordered me in a commanding voice.

Before 1971, the man was like a saint to us. I worked with him for a long time, and had never once thought that he could do any misdeed or something bad to others. But, as soon as the Liberation War started he emerged as a devil. He told me, “Go upstairs and chat with Captain Ishtiaque.”

As I went upstairs, Captain Ishtiaque asked me whether I watched films and TV. I replied, “No, I don’t

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