



**THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO**

**Silent Daughters in the Motherland:  
Ethnonationalism, Sexual Violence and  
the Politics of Recognition  
in Bangladesh**

By

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June 2024

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts degree in the  
Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

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## Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to my Advisor, Dr. Maliha Chishti for her invaluable guidance and feedback throughout this project. I am grateful for her interest in my project, and for all the knowledge and expertise she has offered through the course of our academic relationship. This thesis would not have been possible without her support, patience, suggestions, and valuable feedback.

My academic endeavor in MAPSS would not have been possible without the support and mentorship of my Preceptor, Dr. Mary Elena Wilhoit. I am so grateful for her patience, guidance, and detailed feedback on my drafts, without which this journey would not have been as smooth sailing.

I am fortunate to have the companionship of Raj Aditya, Kanishk, Nishant, Saadia, Noihrit, and Pulari, with whom I had extensive discussions about my research findings. I'd like to acknowledge their patience with proofreading my drafts. I am particularly grateful to Kanishk, for it was through conversations I had with him that I decided on the topic of my MA thesis. I am also grateful to Raj for his time to help oversee my translation and understanding of testimonies in Bengali, and for reading countless drafts. I'd like to acknowledge my batchmates and friends at the University of Chicago for their feedback and moral support. I am also very grateful for my academic and professional interactions with my undergraduate Professors Gilles Verniers, Ananya Sharma, and Dipin Kaur, which consolidated my interest in the politics of sexual violence and nationalism in Bangladesh.

Lastly, I want to thank *Ma*, *Deta* and *Jiaba* for always having faith in me and my academic pursuits. I am especially grateful to *Ma* for her patience and unconditional support across continents and time zones. I dedicate this thesis to you, *Ma*.

## Abstract

Just six days after gaining independence, the newly formed Bangladeshi state took an internationally unprecedented move and conferred the title of *Birangona* (war heroine) to women of Bengali ethnicity who were raped by the Pakistani Army and their local collaborators during the War of 1971 (Mookherjee 2015b). Yet, the Bangladeshi state's indifference to rape, abduction, forced impregnation of the ethnically diverse indigenous women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) conflict stands out in sharp contrast. Against this backdrop, I conduct a focused inquiry into the politics of selective recognition of sexual violence in conflict situations in Bangladesh, specifically examining the Liberation War of 1971 and the movement for autonomy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). By undertaking this comparative study, I analyze this duality through the lens of Bengali ethnonationalism and its gendered nation-building project. I apply discourse analysis to archival and scholarly sources, looking specifically at official state documents, reports, and newspaper articles to uncover patterns in narratives. I argue the Bangladeshi state constructs and recognizes victims of sexual violence by perpetuating hierarchies along ethnic and gendered dimensions within an ethnocentric nationalist framework. By shedding light on the complex interplay between nationalism, gender, and sexual violence in conflict settings, I highlight broader implications for states' narrativization of wars and history and their approaches to addressing violence against women.

Keywords: *Sexual Violence; Bangladesh; Nationalism; Identity Politics; Victimhood and Recognition*

## Introduction

Just six days after gaining independence, the newly formed Bangladeshi state took an internationally unprecedented move and conferred the title of *Birangona* (war heroine) to women of Bengali ethnicity who were raped by the Pakistani Army and their local collaborators during the War of 1971 (Mookherjee 2015b). This recognition was accompanied by efforts to rehabilitate the women and reintegrate them into society, which included vocational training, incentives for men to marry the Birangonas to restore their “honour”, and abortions for women who were impregnated as a result of rape (Siddiqi 2016). Against these positive measures, the Bangladeshi state’s indifference to sexual violence committed against the ethnically diverse indigenous ‘Jumma’ women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) conflict stands out. Jumma women have suffered sexual violence, including rape, abduction and forced impregnation during almost two decades of armed struggle for autonomy since the 1970s, and continue to face vulnerability and violence due to the failure of the 1997 Peace Accord (Mohsin 2004; Guhathakurta 2012; Chakma & Hill 2013; D’Costa 2014; Siddiqi 2017). Yet, the state has not only failed to acknowledge the violence but have taken measures that suggest its complicity in sexual violence against indigenous women in the CHT.

Against this backdrop, I ask the question “*What informs the selective recognition of sexual violence in Bangladesh?*” Relatedly, how does this selective recognition of victimhood align with the gendered nation-building project in Bangladesh? How does Bengali ethnonationalism structure itself around the issue of sexual violence? I answer these questions by analyzing the recognition and rehabilitation of the (Bengali) women raped in the Liberation War of 1971 with the state’s silence towards and complicity in the sexual violence against indigenous women in the CHT.

I analyze these two, contrasting aftermaths of sexual violence to argue that Bengali ethnonationalism, formed through a gendered nation-building project, explains the Bangladeshi state's contrasting responses to rape during the Liberation War of 1971 and the rapes of indigenous women in the CHT. I examine how Bangladeshi state structures enable certain groups to perform their victimhood within essentialized and intelligible forms, while limiting other groups from undertaking such performances and thus denying them particular political affordances. I demonstrate that Bangladeshi ethnonationalism centres around a framework of recognition where the categories of victim and perpetrator, as it relates to conflict related sexual violence, are narrowly defined. Within this framework, only those women who serve the nationalist project can be recognised as victims to push a dominant narrative of the Bengali masculine protector. A hierarchy of victimhood is therefore materialised in the Bangladeshi state's use of sexual violence against women to pursue a racializing nationalist project.

The history of sexual violence in South Asia is plagued with parallels to the case of Bangladesh. One can compare the efforts to recognize and rehabilitate the Birangonas in Bangladesh to the project of identifying and 'restoring' abducted women in the aftermath of the India-Pakistan Partition of 1947. Moreover, occupations, such as the one going on in the CHT in Bangladesh, are foundational to the state-making project in several South Asian nations such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh (Ali et. al. 2019, 574). In instances of occupations such as the one in the CHT in Bangladesh and in India's Northeast and Kashmir, sexual violence becomes a strategic tool (Mohsin 2004, 52) to intimidate, destroy or humiliate the (ethnically) deviant *other* that threatens the integrity of the nation by demanding for autonomy. Therefore, the study of sexual violence in the context of the politics of ethnonationalism in Bangladesh is

compelling to grasp a stronger understanding of how nationalism navigates around gender and sexual violence in South Asia and beyond.

I begin with a brief overview of the history of the War of 1971 and the movement for autonomy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This historical overview sets the background to understand the dynamic relations between the state, the Birangonas and the indigenous women. In this section, I also touch upon the history of the use of conflict-related sexual violence in Bangladesh. Next, I review the existing literature relevant to my study. I first delve into the broader literature around gender, nation, and honour before delving into the specific literature on sexual violence in Bangladesh. Here, I particularly wish to highlight the lack of a comparative study of the two cases with a focus on ethnonationalism and recognition of victimhood. I situate my analysis in the works of feminist thinkers who have written extensively on the interplay of gender and nationalism and contribute to this literature by applying discourse analysis to archival and scholarly sources. Following this, I begin the crux of my analysis by looking at the relationship of the Birangonas and the indigenous women vis-à-vis the state. I analyze how the duality of recognition and indifference complements the Bangladeshi state's gendered nation-building project, which is grounded in a history of Bengali ethnocentrism. Based on my analysis, I conclude with the larger implications of my study and situate the need for feminist rewritings of states' discourses on war and history.

## **Historical Overview of Bangladesh: Making sense of Bengali Ethnonationalism**

### ***The creation of Independent Bangladesh***

Following the Partition of British India in 1947, Bangladesh was part of newly formed Pakistan as "East Pakistan". Taking religion to be the primary basis for unity and subject

formation, the then Government of Pakistan overlooked the cultural and ethnic diversity of the geographically divided Pakistans.

The relationship between East and West Pakistan replicated that of the colonizer and the colonized. While the dominant languages of West Pakistan in 1961 were Punjabi, followed by Urdu and Sindhi, the dominant language in the more populous East Pakistan in the same year was Bengali (D'Costa 2012, 87). Despite the linguistic diversity, Urdu was declared the official language of the country in 1948, even though the native language of 55% of the Pakistani population was Bengali (D'Costa 2012, 85-86). This decision, against a backdrop of economic exploitation of East Pakistan by West Pakistan and an unequal share of political power for East Pakistan in official decision-making bodies, made the people of East Pakistan grow resentful for being treated like 'second class citizens' in their own land (D'Costa 2012, 87).

The power asymmetries culminated in the Bhasha Andolan (Language Movement) in East Pakistan in 1952 and eventually gave way to the War of 1971. Largely a student-led movement, the Language Movement reflected the growing weakness of Islam as a unifying factor for the two regions as East Pakistanis began seeing themselves as Bengalis first and then Muslim (D'Costa 2012, 87). The Language Movement eventually evolved into a demand for separate statehood in the 1960s (D'Costa 2012, 75). Led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of the Awami League, the primary focus of the movement for autonomy was around the cultural and regional identity of being Bengali over Muslims (D'Costa 2012, 86).

Following a military operation ordered by the government of West Pakistan to violently crush the movement in East Pakistan, Major Ziaur Rahman declared Bangladesh independent on behalf of the incarcerated leader Sheikh Mujib on 26 March 1971 (D'Costa 2012, 94). What

followed was a nine-month long war between West Pakistan and East Pakistan, with India supporting the latter. It is estimated that at least 3 million people were killed and between 200,000-400,000 women were subject to sexual violence by the Pakistani Army (D'Costa 2012, 94). The Liberation War ended on December 16, 1971, with the emergence of an independent Bangladesh.

The political affiliations of different ethnic communities, such as the Hindus and the Biharis, during the War of 1971 are significant to the identity politics of Bangladesh today. As the largest religious minority in Pakistan, the Hindus suffered gravely during and after the War. Although the language movement gave common ground for the Hindus and Muslims in East Pakistan to frame the national movement as secular, the Pakistani government saw Hindus with increasing suspicion and held them responsible for the revolt. As a result, during the War, both Hindu men and women were indiscriminately killed by Pakistani forces. (D'Costa 2012, 101) The Biharis in East Pakistan were a Urdu-speaking Muslim community and were more economically affluent than the Bengali masses. During the War, the Pakistani Army sought the creation of a military force composed of local people, known as the Razaakars - one wing of which comprised primarily Biharis. After the war, Biharis came to be seen as Pakistan's local collaborators, and betrayers of the state. Consequently, Biharis have faced mass Bengali outrage following the War. There is little to no documentation of their experiences. (D'Costa 2012, 103)

### ***The Movement for Self-Determination in the Chittagong Hill Tracts***

The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 along ethnic lines reflects the vision for the creation of a homogenous Bengali nation. Thus, the very presence of an ethnically diverse indigenous population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) threatens the existence of an ethnically pure Bengali nation. Consequently, Bangladesh fell prey to the same kind of assimilationist politics that



West Pakistan carried out against it. Despite being home to at least 45 different ethnic communities (Mohsin 2004, 46), the Constitution of Bangladesh consolidated the hegemony of Bengali over all ethnic communities<sup>1</sup> (Mohsin 2004, 47).

As early as 1972, the ethnically diverse indigenous groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts<sup>2</sup> (CHT) have sought autonomy and a ban on the influx of non-indigenous people into the CHT. The people living in the hill districts of the CHT were linguistically and religiously distinct from the dominant Bengali Muslim population (Chakraborty 2014, 297). However, Sheikh Mujibur rejected their demand for autonomy and Bengali hegemony was institutionalized through the Constitution. Consequently, a new party - the Parbottyo Chattagram Jan Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) – was formed to represent indigenous people’s demands and interests to the national government (Mohsin 2004, 46-47). What followed was a struggle for autonomy of the indigenous people, led by the PCJSS, in the face of Bengali domination. To counter the internal diversities within the indigenous populations, the CHT movement for autonomy was framed under a unified banner of “Jumma nationalism”, a name derived from the Jhum (or shifting) mode of cultivation that the indigenous people practiced (Chakraborty 2014, 299). The movement for autonomy in the CHT turned into an armed conflict in 1976 with the emergence of the armed faction of the PCJSS, called the Shanti Bahini (Chakraborty 2014, 299), and lasted over two decades.

The situation of the indigenous people in their own land mirrored that of the people of East Pakistan under West Pakistani domination. The demand for autonomy was centered around the

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<sup>1</sup> Article 1, Part 1 of the Constitution of Bangladesh declared it a unitary state; Article 3, Part 1 declared Bengali as the state language; Article 6, Part 1 declared that all citizens of Bangladesh were to be known as Bengalis (Mohsin 2004, 47).

<sup>2</sup> Three hill districts – Rangamati, Bandarban, and Khagrachari - make up the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in south-east Bangladesh. The CHT shares borders with India and Myanmar and is home to about 13 ethnic groups among whom the Chakmas constitute the majority group (Guhathakurta 2012, 190-191).

issue of land rights, the transfer of non-indigenous (Bengali) population from the plains to the indigenous land in the hills, and the control of the administration by non-residents. A general sense of discrimination, deprivation and exploitation in the socio-economic, political as well as the cultural spheres further exacerbated the feeling of marginalization. (Guhathakurta 2012, 191). In addition to the Constitutional measures that sought to create a homogenized Bengali Muslim identity for Bangladesh, the state took other policy decisions that aimed at the assimilation of the indigenous people into mainstream Bengali culture. The settlement of Bengalis from the plains in the CHT was a major step towards this end, and it resulted in a shift in the demographic composition of the CHT. While 90 per cent of the population of CHT in 1984 was the indigenous communities, this number came down to 51 per cent in the Census of 1991. (Chakraborty 2014, 298; Guhathakurta 2012, 191) The demographic shift, coupled with the skewed economic and political power relations between the indigenous people and the settlers, turned the Jumma people into a minority in their own lands.

During the two decades of armed conflict in the CHT, torture, killing and rape of indigenous people became commonplace. The primary perpetrators of violence in the CHT were the Bangladeshi soldiers stationed at the CHT as well as the Bengali Muslim settlers who took over the indigenous lands (Siddiqi 2017; Chakma & Hill 2013). The armed conflict ended with the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord, or the Peace Accord, in December 1997, between the Awami League, the PCJSS, and the Shanti Bahini (Guhathakurta 2012, 191; Chakma & Hill 2013, 136). However, in over two decades since the signing of the Peace Accord, little progress has been made in implementing the provisions of the Accord (D'Costa 2014, 10).

### *Rape as a Weapon of War in Bangladesh*

Farwell (2004) argues that rape can be used in wars as a weapon to carry out political objectives of ethnic cleansing (395). The use of rape and other forms of sexual violence towards this goal is a strategy to intentionally impregnate women of the enemy ethnic group. By raping “enemy” women, perpetrators seek to “purify the nation” by producing “ethnically pure” children. (Card 1996, cited in Farwell 2004, 395). Besides the objective of ethnic cleansing, sexual violence is also used in wars as a tool of terror, intimidation, humiliation, and domination (Farwell 2004, 393).

Sexual violence was used as a weapon of war in the Liberation War of 1971 and in movement for autonomy in the CHT. During the War of 1971, Pakistani soldiers and their local collaborators used sexual violence as a weapon of war against women in present-day Bangladesh as a means of ethnically cleansing the revolting Bengali population and replacing the nation with Pakistani Blood (Mohsin 2016). Although official numbers are disputed, as many as 200,000 women were raped in Bangladesh in just nine months during the war of 1971. Less than a decade later, Bangladeshi soldiers and Bengali settlers in the CHT began using sexual violence simultaneously as a weapon of war and intimidation to drive away the ethnically cleansing the separatist and ethnically diverse indigenous population in the hills (Guhathakurta 2016). There are no estimated numbers to indicate how many women were raped during the conflict. In both circumstances, the goal was to dilute the blood of the enemy and purify the nation with ethnically pure children.

In 2008, the United Nations Security Council’s Resolution 1820 formally recognized conflict-related sexual violence, including rape, as “a war crime, a crime against humanity, or a constitutive act with respect to genocide” (United Nations Security Council 2008, 3). Today, the rape of Bangladeshi women by Pakistani soldiers, the rape of Bosnian and Croatian women by

Serbian soldiers, the rape of Tutsi women by Hutu militia, as well as the rape of Korean women by soldiers in the Japanese Imperial Army, are acknowledged instances of sexual violence being used as a war (Farwell 2004, 390). It is therefore pertinent to ask what makes sexual violence an effective tool in wars? As the following section demonstrates, sexual violence becomes instrumental as a weapon and strategy of war because of the interplay between gender, the idea of the nation, and honour.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Gender, Sexual Violence, and Nationalism: Theoretical Overview***

Sexual violence against women during wars and conflict situations has been a topic of much feminist discussion. A landmark study on the roots of conflict-related sexual violence rejected its categorisation as an inevitable by-product of wars, and has instead argued that wartime rapes are an instrumental act of male aggression over women (Brownmiller [1975] 1993). Rape, in this regard, is not just an attack on women as women but an attack against a perceived enemy. It functions as a process of “intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear”. (Brownmiller [1975] 1993, 15) However, as Farwell argues, explaining rape as an expression of generalised male violence against women essentialises women as victims because of their gender, without accounting for the socio-cultural reasons, such as ethnicity and religion, that underlie the use of sexual violence as a tool of war (Farwell 2004, 395).

The generalizations in works such as Brownmiller’s is overcome by studies on the relationship between women and the nation, which have revealed that women’s bodies are seen as markers of ethnic boundaries for the nation-state (Anthias and Yuval-Davis [1992] 2005, Menon and Bhasin 1998; Elshtain 1995). Pettman (1996) argues that the state is often gendered male while

the nation is gendered female. The latter renders women as a symbolic form of the nation (Pettman 1996, 49). The symbolic identification of women's bodies as the nation, and their perceived embodiment of the boundaries of the nation-state, thus makes them targets of violence against a national community (Buss 2009, 148). For instance, in former Yugoslavia, women embodied the family's honour and shame. There was therefore a lot of control over aspects of their chastity, marital virtue, and fertility. (Olujic 1998, cited in Snyder et al. 2006, 187) During the rise of nationalism in former Yugoslavia, women's embodiment of the family's honour was extended to the imagined nation-state of Serbia. Representations of women as mothers were conflated with the imagery of the nation as a motherland, and women were entrusted with the responsibility of reproducing for the newly formed nation-states. (Snyder et al. 2006, 188) In Bangladesh, the construction of the nation as mother, inscribed through patriotic poems and the national anthem (Mookherjee 2008), influences the symbolic representation of women as mothers within the Bengali nation-state. Sexual violence against the Bengali woman, therefore, comes to be equated with sexual violence against the motherland.

In the aftermath of wars, the nexus between women, nation and honour makes the co-optation of the individual experiences and suffering of women under the symbolic national rhetoric necessary. Enloe (2000) argues that women who suffered wartime sexual violence remain faceless, and their suffering and the loss of honour is merged with that of the looted and ruined nation, under the popular euphemism "lootpillagelandrape". (Enloe 2000, 108). For instance, following the end of the Yugoslav wars, Croatian nationalist rhetoric merged with raped women with the symbolism of a raped Croatia. Popular nationalist slogans implied that "the rape of a Croat woman stood for the rape of Croatia" (Kestic 2001, 35). In studying the sexual violence, abduction and restoration of women during the Partition of India in 1947, Veena Das (1998) inquires "How is it that the

imagining of the project of nationalism in India came to include the appropriation of bodies of women as objects on which the desire for nationalism could be brutally inscribed and a memory for the future made?" (cited in Kesic 2001, 27). Urvashi Butalia (1998) also highlights how the carving of Pakistan from the landmass of India, in the backdrop of the communal rapes that took place during the Partition of India, was seen as a violation of the Hindu/Indian motherland and the purity of the Indian woman. Therefore, the recovery of the abducted women was necessary to restore the purity of the Indian nation. (Butalia 1998) The same line of inquiry becomes pertinent to the discussion of wartime sexual violence in Bangladesh. How is it that the Birangonas became part of the nationalist rhetoric such that their individual experiences were erased (Mookherjee 2015a) and subsumed to portray the barbarism of the Pakistani Army? Relatedly, why does the body of the Jumma women remain out of the ambit of this nationalist rhetoric? What does this instance of selectivity do for our understanding of Bangladesh as a nation? My analysis answers precisely these questions through the lens of Bengali ethnonationalism and a gendered nation-building project.

Farwell (2004) finds that conflict related sexual violence constitutes an assault on the honour of men, in addition to an assault on the honour of families and the nation-state. Attacking the ability of men of an enemy population to "protect" their women thus domesticates the men who are connected to the women survivors (Card 1996, cited in Farwell 2004, 397). In the CHT, for instance, the rape, abduction and sexual harassment of indigenous women by Bangladeshi soldiers and Bengali settlers functioned as a tool to emasculate Jumma men for being unable to protect the honour of their women (Siddiqi 2017, 227). The argument corresponds to Cynthia Cockburn's (2013) claim that all wars can be seen as the means to fulfill gendered destinies. In any society, Cockburn argues, males are designated protectors, and females (and the young) as

protected (Cockburn 2013, 439). In the aftermath of any conflict, the same gendered categorizations can be evoked to seek revenge on the perpetrating side. As Enloe (2000) argues, a woman who has been raped by another military can be remilitarised to enable the male “protectors” of her community to avenger her rape (109). As I demonstrate in my analysis, in Bangladesh, the rape of the Bengali Birangona to the men of the nation to retrieve their masculinity by doing something to avenge the act of rape (Mookherjee 2008). The rape of indigenous women by Bangladeshi soldiers is an act of avenging the rape of the women, and thus, the nation, in 1971 by seeking to purify the nation of the ethnic “other”. Therefore, the symbolic entanglements of honour, ethnicity, and nationalism that is situated in women’s bodies makes wartime rape not only an effective tool of war-making, but also a tool for avenging the loss of honour of the women and the nation. Although beyond the scope of this paper, an analysis of masculinities in the nation-building project is crucial to a holistic understanding of the interplay between gender and nationalism.

A common phenomenon observed in the aftermath of wars and conflicts is the silence surrounding the discussion of wartime sexual violence (Enloe 2000; Mookherjee 2015; Saikia 2011; Mibenge 2008). However, Enloe argues that the visibility of rapes of particular women by men of particular communities as soldiers is a political act (Enloe 2000, 108). For instance, in a discussion of the Rwandan Tribunal following the genocide of Tutsis by Hutus, Mibenge (2008) observes that sexual violence was silenced when survivors demanded remedies and reparations for their injury. However, Mibenge argues, war rape was made visible only as a discourse on “the bestiality of the Hutu extremists who masterminded and committed the genocide” (2009, 147). The visibility of the rapes of Bengali Birangonas juxtaposed with the invisibility of the rapes of

the Jumma women thus reveals a political project of the Bangladeshi state where ethnicity and victimhood influence the recognition of sexual violence of some groups over others.

Sexual violence and ethnicity/race-based identity formations, therefore, are inextricably entangled in statist and legal discourses. Whose body can be ‘raped’, who can be a ‘victim’ are determined by and in turn shape discourses on hierarchies of race, power and status (Das 2008; Weismantel 2000; Sharpe 1991). Weismantel (2000) argues that ‘rape’ does not have a single, transhistorical definition. Rather, it acquires meaning and definition through and within specific historical contexts (Weismantel 2000, 417). Taking Mibenge’s argument forward on the visibility of rape in Rwanda, Buss (2009) urges us to rethink the categorization of victim and perpetrator along gendered and ethnic lines. Buss argues that the heightened visibility of wartime sexual violence against (some) women in particular contexts can be explained by the “selective mobilisation of rape narratives for nationalist propaganda reasons (Buss 2009, 154). Specifically in the Rwandan Tribunal, that “Hutu men rape Tutsi women as a means to attack/destroy the Tutsi community” was the “rape script” (Buss 2009, 155). This script essentialises experiences and reinforces binaries of male and Hutu as aggressor and female and Tutsi as victim. The identities Hutu, Tutsi, male and female are assumed to pre-exist the violence, with violence only seeping through historically entrenched unequal divisions. (Buss 2009, 155) As the work of Buss shows, this takes away the scope for Hutu women to claim a victim status against sexual violence and genocide, as their ethnic identity threaten to blur the essentialised binaries of perpetrator and victim (Buss 2009, 157-158). In Bangladesh, Bose (2007) highlights that the definition of rape in 1971 constitutes solely as a crime committed by Pakistani soldiers against Bengali women (3866). This ‘rape script’ not only leaves minority women, such as Bihari and Hindu women, outside of the categorisation of victimhood, but also systematically denies the framing of Bengalis as perpetrators



(Bose 2007, 3866). This categorization has important implications for the impunity granted to Bengali settlers and soldiers against rapes in the CHT.

In the legal and statist realms, categories of class, caste, and race have serious impact on decisions on sexual violence (Das 2008). For instance, Stoler (1991) observed that racialized and sexualized images of black men coincided with the images of the “Black Peril” in Africa and categorized black men as rapists for most of the British Empire (67). Therefore, the law and the state, at different points in history, decide which bodies can be categorised as victims of sexual violence and perpetrators of sexual violence. Which groups get categorized as perpetrator or victim are also produced by, and in turn reproduce, specific historical, social, gendered, racial, and ethnic relations. As I demonstrate in the following sections, the politics of recognition of sexual violence is entangled in hierarchies of ethnicity and race. These hierarchies determine who can claim to be a victim under the Bangladeshi state, and who is left out of the ambit of redressal and reparations.

Emma Dolan (2021) argues that the notion of victimhood itself is gendered, and that recognition of victimhood is thus intrinsically tied to performances of femininity (Dolan 2021). Butler’s (1991) theory on the performativity of gender is significant here, as recognition of victimhood for survivors of sexual violence not only require them to perform certain displays of emotion that parallels societal expectations out of femininity, but also requires them to testify and narrate their experiences within intelligible frameworks of language (Butler, 1991, also cited in Dolan 2021, 60). As an extended consequence of this framework, male survivors of wartime sexual violence fall outside the paradigm of “legitimate” victimhood, as notions of victimhood require a feminine performativity.

The recognition of victimhood is closely tied to which lives are deemed liveable, and thus, grievable. Dolan cites Butler to call our attention to “the differential distribution of recognizability” and suggests that there exist “schemes of recognition that determine, in a relative sense, who will be regarded as a subject worthy of recognition” (Butler 2009, cited in Dolan 2021, 67). Therefore, official recognition of certain victimhood relies on invalidating the claims of victimhood by the “Other”, and political and social interests of the State lie at the heart of these schemes of recognition (Dolan, 2021).

Specific to the case of Bangladesh, Mohsin (2004) argues that in the construction of the Bangladeshi nation, women are looked upon as the boundary markers for the purity and biological continuation of the nation. Thus, sexual violence on women’s bodies – especially by way of rape and forced impregnations - becomes a strategic tool during wars to destroy the enemy (Mohsin 2004, 52). Bangladesh’s emergence from a liberation struggle that was organized along lines of linguistic ethnic identity, of *being Bengali*, refracts desires for an ethnically pure Bengali nation, or Bengali nationalism (Mohsin 2000). By extension, the presence of an ethnically diverse indigenous population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts threatens the existence of an ethnically pure Bengali nation. Thus, Bengali ethnonationalism is manifested through a gendered nation-building project. In this project, as my analysis reveals, Jumma women constitute what Dolan calls the “Other” victimhood, against which the victimhood of the Bengali Birangona finds legitimate recognition.

### ***The Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Bangladesh***

Birangonas, or the wartime rape survivors of 1971, have been studied from both macro and micro levels. One branch of literature centers around the construction of ‘the Birangona’ within

public memory, examining how this trope serves a gendered nation-building function for the newly independent Bangladeshi state. In *The Spectral Wound*, Nayanika Mookherjee (2015b) combines personal narratives of the Bengali women who were raped during the war with an analysis of how the State's constructs the raped woman in the public political discourse. Mookherjee argues that the life histories of the Birangonas need to be fit within the assumed impact of sexual violence – marked by trauma, illness, loss of mental stability and without familial or community support – such that the State can continue to situate and revisit her trauma within comprehensible frameworks of gendered victimhood in the collective memory (Mookherjee 2015a; Mookherjee 2015b; Mookherjee 2021a).

Corresponding to the transnational literature discussed previously, D'Costa (2012) finds that during the Liberation War, women's bodies became a medium for men to communicate with each other within the boundaries of a nationalist rationale (D'Costa 2012, 184). Moreover, as Mookherjee notes, the collective memory of wartime rape survivors was made to fit imageries of the new nation (Mookherjee 2008). Parallels between images of the raped (Bengali) woman and the Bengali nation, symbolically raped by Pakistani men and now recovered by Bangladeshi men, affords critical agency to Bangladeshi masculinity, including husbands, fathers, brothers, and the state itself (Mookherjee 2008). I use Mookherjee's construction to analyze how the male agencies thus formed in relation to the nation is then deployed towards the rape of indigenous women to pursue a Bengali eugenicist project.

Another branch of literature on the Birangonas focuses closely on the experiences of women during the War and in the post-War period. In her book, *Women, War and the making of Bangladesh*, Yasmin Saikia compiles extensive oral historiographies of women's testimonies from the War in various roles – such as survivors of rape, social workers and as perpetrators of

violence (2011). Saikia's book is a key source in highlighting the experiences of the linguistic minority Bihari women, who were not recognised as Birangonas in the aftermath of the War and were unable to access rehabilitation schemes (Saikia 2011). More recently, Bina D'Costa has also highlighted that the State's measures to rehabilitate and recognise the Birangonas proved counterproductive due to the stigmatization of rape and its association with dishonour and shame, which the political recognition as "war heroines" could not help overcome (D'Costa 2016).

Therefore, on the one hand, the literature on Birangonas unearths women's personal experiences of the war through oral histories. On the other hand, much literature examines '*her*' construction within public memory and queries how steps to recognise and rehabilitate these women serve the nationalist projects of the newly independent Bangladeshi state. This literature is instrumental in understanding why the Birangona as an idea is important for the state's identity construction. However, it leaves an important analysis - regarding the ethnic identity politics at play behind the recognition of only Bengali Muslim women as Birangonas - unexplored. My research analyzes the critical interplay of ethnicity and victimhood behind the recognition of victimhood.

Before delving into the literature around the sexual violence of indigenous women in the CHT, it is important to note the overall underrepresentation of male survivors of sexual violence from official discourses. Mookherjee taps into the silencing of sexual violence against men from the collective memory of 1971, and highlights how rape of women is deemed an inevitable consequence of wars (Mookherjee 2012, 1585-1586). Therefore, the silence around the rape of men is not only necessary, but need to be suppressed for the homosexual, feminizing, and subordinating undertones they carry that threaten the notions of masculinity and sexuality that are intrinsic to the nation-building project (Mookherjee 2012, 1598). For the nation-building project,

the framing of Bengali masculinity needs to fit the larger stereotypical framework of gender relations during wartime (Mookherjee 2008), whereby males are designated ‘protectors’ or the wielders of coercion while females as designated ‘protected’ or ‘victims’ as part of the gendered underpinnings of wars (Cockburn 2013). Bengali Muslim men’s identification as victims of sexual violence during the war threatens to blur the assigned binary. Therefore, the silencing of sexual violence against men is central to the Bengali nation-building project.

The literature on the sexual violence against indigenous women in the CHT reveals the complicity of the state and its institutions in the sexual violence against Jumma women in the CHT. Dina Siddiqi (2017) argues that rape, forced abduction and marriage of Jumma women to Bengali men, and the impregnation of Jumma women by Bengali men serve as instruments to assimilate the indigenous population into the Bengali Muslim society. All are used as strategies for shifting the demographic profile of the region towards an ethnically pure Bangladeshi state (2017, 229). Several scholars have also found that Jumma women lacked access to justice and judicial redressal and the resulting non-prosecution of perpetrators of sexual violence (Mohsin 2016; D’Costa 2014; Guhathakurta 2001; Dewan 2016). Chakma and Hill (2013) further affirm the eugenicist intention of Bengali nationalism by highlighting that the sexual abuse during the armed conflict in the CHT and after the signing of the Peace Accord of 1997 appears to solely affect indigenous women, with uniformly Bengali perpetrators (Chakma & Hill 2013, 141). In summary, investigation of the state’s involvement in violence against indigenous women reveals the construction of a gendered nationalist project in Bangladesh. In such a project, violence against women’s bodies become the means through which threats to national integrity, posed by the demand for self-determination by the indigenous people in the CHT, is mitigated.

Other literature has highlighted the indifference to violence against Jumma women in stark contrast to condemnation of the sexual abuse of Bengali women in 1971 (Chakma & Hill 2013, 144). Lamia Karim notes that it is difficult for the Bangladeshi middle-class to take up the cause of indigenous people, who actively sought self-determination from the Bangladeshi state, as this undermines the territorial integrity of the nation (Karim, 1998 cited in Siddiqi 2017, 232). This reveals a larger Bengali sentiment of indifference towards violence against indigenous Jumma women.

An emerging body of feminist literature has begun to compare the rapes during 1971 and the rapes of indigenous women in the CHT. The culture of impunity emerges as a common finding in the two case studies in question (Guhathakurta 2016; Siddiqi 2016; Mohsin 2016; D'Costa 2016). Moreover, Guhathakurta (2016) argues that the failure to recognize rape as a form of torture in one conflict area can lead to it being adopted by perpetrators in another conflict area, even within the same body politic". Therefore, the impunity extended to the perpetrators of wartime rape, where sexual violence against Bengali women was used as a strategic tool by the Pakistani Army during the War of 1971, translate to the same being used by the Bangladeshi military against the indigenous women in the CHT (Guhathakurta 2016). While the prevalence of a culture of impunity against sexual violence is an important intervention in understanding the use of rape as a military strategy in conflicts, no scholars cited analyze the role of ethnonationalism as a factor underlying the Bangladeshi state's role in violence against its minority population; a key area remaining to be addressed.

Thus, a certain hierarchy of victimhood is brought to light here, which remains unaddressed in the existing scholarship. The complicity of state structures in perpetuating these hierarchies is demonstrated by Bina D'Costa, who highlights the barriers that indigenous women in the CHT

face in accessing legal aid due to a skewed justice system, and the involvement of medical practitioners and national media in silencing the sexual violence against indigenous women (D'Costa 2014). Thus, by making judicial redressal inaccessible to Jumma women and denying them the space to voice their grievances, the state takes away agency from the Jumma women to testify their victimhood (Siddiqi 2017, 229 & 232). This lies in contrast to the victimhood of the Birangona, which continues to emerge through cinema, plays and photographs (Mookherjee 2021a), and civil society organizations continue to seek to bring their perpetrators to justice through the establishment of the International Crimes Tribunal (D'Costa & Hossain 2010).

### **Methodology**

In this paper, I combine archival research and literature reviews with discourse analysis. I originally intended to study relevant newspaper articles from the 1970s, transcribed debates from the Constituent Assembly, relevant court rulings, transcribed debates from the Parliament of Bangladesh around relevant laws, archival records of the rehabilitation projects extended to the Birangonas, and transcription of speeches by political leaders that refer to Birangonas as well as indigenous women in the CHT in the national archives. I was aware that my archival research would be limited to digitally accessible sources, via open-source Internet, and archives that are accessible through the University of Chicago library reserves.

I, however, met several unanticipated challenges in trying to access the archives and was forced to alter this plan. For one thing, many archives turned out not yet to be digitized. For another, I found it is difficult to access original records concerning the programs that were introduced for Birangonas due to the destruction of many following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (D'Costa 2012, 131).

As a result, my original methodology had to be modified to work with what was available to me. The Liberation War Museum's website became the strongest archival repository available to study the War of 1971. There I was able to access digitized newspaper clippings as well as oral testimonies that were collected from people after the War. For the study of indigenous women, digitized versions of reports by local and international human rights organizations such as Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, Kapaeeng Foundation, and Amnesty International have provided me with rich information on the situation of human rights in the CHT. I also draw secondary data from existing scholarly sources as well as online newspaper articles that have covered the two case studies. In addition to reports and newspaper articles, I also critically analyze more recent Government documents, such as the National Women's Development Policy (NWDP) and the National Action Plan (NAP), which are available to the public on the open-source Internet.

I have applied critical discourse analysis to the patterns of recognition, silence, and disacknowledgement that emerge in the archives. I connect discourse analysis to the larger history of Bengali nationalism to analyze how sexual violence fits into it. While I had originally intended to create a keyword dataset to categorize the difference in language in descriptions of Birangonas and the indigenous women in state records, the lack of documents on Birangonas and the sheer absence of mentions of indigenous women in any state document precluded this possibility.

I believe that ethnography would have been another ideal method to pursue for my study. Feminist ethnography, such as oral history projects, could have served as a rich perspective to develop my analysis and argument. However, international travel was not possible during my MA year, and an oral history project documenting survivor's experiences with the state's mechanisms of recognition would require a rapport that cannot be developed over the course of a few months. Moreover, requesting survivors to revisit their experiences with sexual violence, albeit indirectly,



to describe their experiences with state mechanisms would have several ethical implications. In light of these limitations, critical discourse analysis of archival, news, and scholarly sources is the strongest methodology available to me.

### **The Birangonas and the Bangladeshi State: Recognition and Rehabilitation for Sexual Violence**

The Birangonas appear in the statist, scholarly, and media discourses in at least three identifiable periods in the history of Bangladesh. The first wave was in the immediate aftermath of the War of 1971, when the Birangonas took a center-stage as part of the new government's initiatives to rehabilitate and reintegrate them back into society. Several of the state's initiatives towards this end took a back seat following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. The second wave of the Birangona discourse emerged in the 1990s, when the Gana Adalat (People's Tribunal) was established for trial of local collaborators and perpetrators of crimes during the War (Islam 2012, p. 2144). This period also saw the establishment of the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka in 1996, commemorating the independence struggle of Bangladesh through a collection of visual, literary and archival materials. The third wave of the Birangonas' emergence in the State's discourse was as recently as the 2010s, with the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal of Bangladesh in March 2010 ("International Crimes Tribunal-1, Bangladesh," n.d.). Moreover, the decision of the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs to recognise Birangonas as "Freedom Fighters" in 2015 has been another significant step in remembering the survivors of wartime rape as central to Bangladesh's making.

#### ***Birangonas in the 1970s***

Following the War, the first Prime Minister of independent Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, set up the Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation Board (later known as the Women's Rehabilitation and Welfare Foundation) in February 1972. The Board was a semi-autonomous organization that was affiliated with the Ministry of Social Welfare, and aimed at rehabilitating the Birangonas back into society. (*The Daily Star* 2014) The rehabilitation project included mass abortion campaigns, adoption campaigns for babies that were born out of rape, pleas for marrying the rape survivors, as well as programs aimed at training the women to earn sustainable livelihoods.

International Planned Parenthood Federation was a key organization that assisted the Government in the abortion campaigns by bringing in a team of international physicians for training and assistance. The country's ban on abortions was waived during the months of January to October 1972 only for women who were pregnant as a result of wartime rape. (*The Daily Star* 2014).

Children born out of wartime rape was another pressing issue that the government had to immediately deal with. Faced with a large number of war babies despite the abortion programs, the Government organized campaigns that arranged for the adoption of these children. Mostly of Pakistani blood, these children were born to single mothers and found no space or identity in the newly formed nation. As a result, The Bangladesh Abandoned Children (Special Provision) Order of 1972 was passed, legalizing the adoption of children who were "deserted or unclaimed or born out of wedlock", both within Bangladesh as well as internationally (*The Daily Star* 2014). This resulted in a mass international adoption campaign for war babies, with a large number of children being sent to Canada, among other countries (*The Daily Star* 2014). According to Maleka Begum,

who was in charge of a rehabilitation centre in Dhaka, 170,000 rape victims underwent abortion and more than 30,000 war babies were born in the first three months of 1972 (Mohsin 2004, 45).

The Prime Minister's plea asking young men and freedom fighters to marry the Birangonas was another significant measure taken towards reintegrating Birangonas into the society. In 1972, Sheikh Mujib announced, 'The raped women are my mother, sister and daughter and many of you will have to marry. I shall arrange for such a marriage' (Mookherjee 2021b, 154). However, this campaign was largely unsuccessful as the 9,000-10,000 former freedom fighters who responded to the plea sought "fantastic demands" as dowries (Trumbull 1972). Moreover, the reluctance of the women to come forward and claim the title of Birangona for themselves, for fear of shame, ostracization and stigma, was another barrier leading to the failure of the marrying-off campaign.

Another objective of the rehabilitation programs was the economic empowerment of the Birangonas. The program trained these women in skills such as typing, office management, filing, sewing clothes, taking measurements, and making handicrafts, with the goal to make them self-sufficient such that they were able to earn a sustainable livelihood, (*The Daily Star* 2014). A lot of women found employment through these programs in 1972 and 1973. However, the rehabilitation program was effectively closed in 1975, following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (*The Daily Star* 2014).

#### *How did the Rehabilitation Programs serve the nationalist project?*

The formation of the Bangladeshi nation around the Bengali identity had significant implications for the state's management of women's reproductive and bodily autonomy. Due to the nexus of women, nation, and honour within the nationalist framework, rape and forced impregnation was less about the experiences of the women and more a challenge to Bengali

nationalism and masculinity (D'Costa 2012, 137). Pregnancy resulting from and children born out of wartime rape therefore threatened the honour of the new nation. For Bangladesh, this meant purifying the state of Pakistani blood.

The masculine state (Pettman 1996) sees itself as the patriarchal head of the nation - the parent - who must rehabilitate and reintegrate the raped woman so that she can be a mother to the future Bengali sons of the nation (Mookherjee 2008). Therefore, the mass abortion and adoption campaigns were aimed at restoring the purity of the Bengali nation. In some contexts, women were forced to undergo abortions or to give up their children for adoption against their will; the state was willing to take dramatic measure to eradicate Pakistani blood. Neelima Ibrahim argues that Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman, who she met with to discuss the fate of the war babies, said "Please send away the children who do not have their father's identity. They should be raised as human beings with honor. Besides, I do not want to keep that polluted blood in this country" (Ibrahim 1994, cited in Mohsin 2004, 45). Another announcement by Sheikh Mujib declared "None of those bastard babies, who carry the blood of the Pakistanis, will be allowed to remain in Bangladesh" (D'Costa 2012, 133). These declarations reveal the centrality of Bengali eugenicism at the heart of Bangladeshi nationalism.

The stories of women's victimization were also used to garner international sympathy in the immediate aftermath of the war. The rape of Birangonas was mobilized to facilitate the flow of foreign aid to rebuild the war-devastated economy (D'Costa 2012, 111). To recapitulate, Enloe (2000) argues that the raped woman merges with the symbol of the raped nation, as part of the trope of "lootpillagelandrape" (Enloe 2000, 108). Through the stories of sexual violence against women, Bangladesh was posited as a looted, ruined country in need of support and assistance. Here, once again, it is the masculine Bangladeshi state that wields agency to seek assistance for

rebuilding the motherland. The rehabilitation of the Birangonas, therefore, also became part of the project of rebuilding the motherland from the ruins of Pakistani occupation.

In this period, the mechanisms to recognize the Birangonas and the appropriation of their experiences as part of the national narrative occurred through a framework of feminine victimization and trauma (Dolan 2021). Sheikh Mujib's introduction of the word "Birangona" was a move to acknowledge the "sacrifice" of the women in the liberation of Bangladesh. However, the lens of agency was missing from the "sacrifice" that these women had to make for the nation. Rather, it was the lens of victimhood, asserted through their plight, humiliation through dishonor, and trauma, that characterized the sacrifice that the Birangonas made. As Mookherjee notes, narratives require particular kinds of performances of victimhood. In Bangladesh, she argues, an authentic war-heroine must embody certain assumed impact of trauma, such as a physical or mental condition, loss of familial or community support, and a traumatized post-war life (Mookherjee 2021a). Therefore, the Birangona is recognised by the State only insofar as she embodies signs of helplessness and trauma, which then mould her into an essentialized feminine victim.

### *The Birangonas in the 1990s*

The Birangonas re-emerged in public memory and the public sphere in the 1990s, first with the Gana Adalat, or the People's Tribunal in 1992. The tribunal was organized by a group known as the Committee for the Elimination of the Killers and Collaborators of '81 to try the Razaakars for their crimes in collaboration with the Pakistani army. Four rape survivors arrived at Dhaka to testify against the Razaakars. (D'Costa 2012, 118). These women were promised medical treatment, and jobs and education for their children if they testified their traumatic experience of

sexual violence by crying their own tears, represent their pain, and ‘be a Birangona’ in a room full of people (Mookherjee 2021a). Here, too, the framework of victimhood was encoded in performance of feminine passivity and helplessness. On the day of their testimony, however, the court was unable to document their statement due to a government sponsored attack (D’Costa 2012, 118).

The establishment of the Liberation War Museum in 1996 was an important extension of the state’s discourse on the war in this period. The museum commemorates the struggle of the people of East Pakistan against the atrocities of West Pakistan that culminated in the emergence of an independent Bangladesh. Officially relocated and reopened in 2017, the museum currently has 21,000 objects on display, including rare photographs, documents, and original clippings from electronic and print media (“Our Museum,” n.d.). The archival collection is supplemented by accessible digitized versions of the documents, photographs, audio-visual material, as well as oral histories on the museum website. The website allows one to take a virtual tour of all four galleries of the museum.

The Birangonas occupy a markedly small space in the Museum. The fourth gallery of the Museum, titled “Our Victories, Our Values”, is the only gallery that houses a small section dedicated to the Birangonas. Moreover, the absence of the word “Birangona” itself from the displays in the gallery is striking. There are portraits with names of a few women who survived rape and torture by the Pakistani Army. The newspaper clippings in the section highlight the state initiatives to free the survivors from the Pakistani soldier camps, the state’s attempts at rehabilitation through abortion campaigns, the plight of women in enemy cantonments, op-eds on the state of the rape survivors in the aftermath of the war, as well as a personal narrative of a twelve-year old girl impregnated by a member of the Pakistani Army. The recurring theme that

emerges as I walk through this curated section on sexual violence during the War is the helpless and destitute Bengali women, who suffered atrocities in the hands of the ruthless, inhumane Pakistani soldiers.

A quick glance through the oral histories housed in the Liberation Museum's digital archives ("Oral History," n.d.) reveals the lack of testimonies from women themselves. Women emerged in these recollections of the war mostly in passing statements, where men would recall how Bengali women in their village or neighborhood were "dishonored" or "insulted" by Pakistani men or the Razaakars, who were their local collaborators. Despite being documented after 1971, the word *Birangona* is strikingly absent from the oral histories in any mention of women who were raped. The use of the word *rape* itself is also missing from these accounts. Many titles of the oral histories have mentions of women, such as "Two Women Dishonoured", "The Name is Parveen Farooqui", "My Mother and Sister were trapped and set on fire". However, these titles are misleading as the testimonies were neither from nor about women. Women's abduction, dishonoring, or abuse would only be recalled in a sentence or two, hidden within larger stories about men's valor, loss, torture, and resistance. This finding corresponds to Mookherjee's (2008) argument that the *Birangonas* are only recognised in relational terms to men. The accounts of sexual violence during the war, Mookherjee argues, it is the pain of a brother/father/husband whose sister/daughter/wife was raped or killed in front of him that is emphasized in the nationalist commemoration of the war (Mookherjee 2008). That many *mothers*, *sisters*, and *daughters* were dishonored was continuously brought up in the oral histories, without any account from the women themselves about how it affected them. Thus, in this commemoration of the War of 1971, the theme of the helpless Bengali woman raped by the merciless and cold-blooded Pakistani army emerges in a reading of the archived oral histories in the Liberation Museum website.

### *The Silencing of the Birangonas and the construction of Bengali Masculinity*

The figure of the raped Birangona is therefore manipulated to put forward a dominant narrative about Bengali masculinity. Against the backdrop of a loud silence around the topic of the Birangonas in the physical and digital spaces of the museum, their visibility only in certain ways and in certain relations becomes salient. As I explored in the previous section, the Birangonas become central to villainize Pakistan. This selective visibility mirrors the Rwandan Tribunal, where Tutsi rape was only made visible as part of a narrative of bestiality of the Hutus (Mibenge 2008). The selective and essentialised visibility of the raped figure only in relation to particular soldiers is a political act (Enloe 2000, 108). Moreover, when the figure of the Birangona is subsumed with the figure of the Bengali motherland, masculine subjectivities are able to reclaim their agency as saviours and protectors (Mookherjee 2008). Therefore, the way that women silently emerge in the male testimonies in the Museum's website first emasculates the men for being unable to protect the honour of their women (and by extension, the nation). Yet, the very emasculation that occurs as one witnesses the violence on the mother nation and the women is reversed after the war when the men reclaim their masculinity as sons and protectors of the nationalist project of independent Bangladesh. To avenge the actual rape of the women and the symbolic rape of the nation, Bengali men become soldiers to protect the motherland from future invaders. As I demonstrate through my analysis in the latter half of the paper, sexual violence against Jumma women in the CHT becomes part of the process for Bengali men to reclaim their masculinity by protecting their motherland from those threatening the territorial integrity of the nation.

### *The Birangonas in the 2010s*



In January 2015, the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs granted official recognition to Birangonas as “Freedom Fighters” or “*Muktijoddha*”. The law was passed over 4 decades after the independence of Bangladesh. When the Law was passed in 2015, the Minister of Liberation War Affairs promised that an honorarium system of allowance would be created for the Birangonas, and that the term *Birangona* would be included in school textbooks to keep women’s contributions to the freedom of Bangladeshi alive in public memory. (D’Costa 2021).

The Birangona list remains separate from the existing list of Freedom Fighters despite the former’s recognition as *Muktijoddha* (*The Daily Star* 2022). Currently, freedom fighters are eligible for a monthly allowance of 20,000 Taka, a bi-annual Eid allowance of 10,000 Taka, a Victory Day allowance of 5,000 Taka, as well as a Bengali New Year allowance of 2,000 Taka (Rozina Islam 2023). The decision to not merge the two lists therefore raises the question of whether Birangonas will be entitled to the same monetary benefits as other (predominantly male) freedom fighters.

The recognition by the Law has achieved little to help the Birangonas, most of whom have already lived more than half their lives facing stigma and shame. The recognition mechanisms set in place to identify Birangonas as Freedom Fighters are embedded in a complex bureaucratic system and are often insensitive to gender complexities. For instance, the process of getting recognition as a freedom fighter is lengthy and highly procedural, requiring up-to 33 documents for verification (Rozina Islam 2023), an interview with the Birangona (*The Dhaka Tribune* 2022), taking as long as three years to be gazetted as a freedom fighter and three to six more months to receive allowances (*The Daily Star* 2022). I was particularly appalled upon seeing that the Birangonas are interviewed as part of the process of recognition. Although there is no evidence, I hypothesize that the verification would require the survivors to recall their experiences of sexual

violence or testify their trauma through intelligible frameworks of physical and/or mental suffering. Therefore, the official procedure is not only bureaucratically dense to navigate around, but also insensitive to the circumstances of the Birangonas.

Government housing facilities is a benefit extended to Birangonas who are recognised as Freedom Fighters. However, the Birangonas are often required to pay bribes, sometimes as high as Tk 100,000 (roughly \$900), to avail certified recognition or housing facilities (*The Business Standard* 2022). Moreover, the housing benefit rests upon the precondition of owning a certain amount of land. This is especially disadvantageous considering 95 per cent of women in Bangladesh do not own land due to religious laws governing the country's laws of inheritance (Anam 2021). Given the already marginalized position of the Birangona within society, the land ownership requirement for availing housing benefits is discriminatory by nature. Bureaucratic barriers such as these act as deterrents for the survivors, rendering their recognition as freedom fighters ineffective in achieving its intended purpose. Indeed, as of 2022, only 448 Birangonas have been recognised as freedom fighters by the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, out of the estimated 200,000 survivors of wartime rape (*The Daily Star* 2022).

#### *Birangonas as Freedom Fighters: A Discursive Category*

The separation of the lists and the discriminatory bureaucratic processes of achieving recognition illuminates the gendered and militaristic underpinnings of the category of Freedom Fighter itself. Prior to the Ministry's ruling in 2015, the only women identified as freedom fighters by the state were women who were involved with military institutions in some capacity – as soldiers in the freedom movement, as women who provided food, shelter, or medical aid to soldiers and freedom fighters, as messengers who spread the ideology of Bangladesh's liberation, or as

spies and carriers of weapons (Akter 2022; Amin, Ahmed, and Ahsan 2016). However, by implication of the category of Freedom Fighter being not only militaristic but also masculine, women's recognition as freedom fighters is always incomplete. This is evidenced by a complaint voiced by Taramon Bibi, the first female freedom fighter recognised by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in independent Bangladesh in 1972. Taramoni asserted that despite her recognition as a freedom fighter, she never received any financial benefit that the label was supposed to confer to her (Amin, Ahmed, and Ahsan 2016). Similarly, although by law the Birangonas are entitled to the same allowance and benefits as a freedom fighter, bureaucratic delays have made it increasingly difficult for Birangonas to access the same benefits as other freedom fighters. This points to a commonality in the experiences of female soldiers and Birangonas, both facing difficulties in accessing the benefits they are entitled to.

Despite these common grievances, the separation of the Birangonas from the recognised female (military-affiliated) freedom fighters in state discourses is reflective of the tendency of states to separate different kinds of militarized women (Enloe 2000). While feminine passivity, victimhood and sacrifice by means of sexual violence are inscribed on the term 'Birangona', the term 'freedom fighter' is associated with masculinity, bravery, and sacrificing for the Bangla nation. Therefore, the creation of the category of Birangonas as Freedom Fighters only has a discursive implication for the Bangladeshi nation-building project, where the victimhood of the raped Birangona remains important to the narrative of the liberation struggle only in selective relations to push a certain narrative.

### ***Political Parties and the Discourse on Birangonas***

An analysis of the shifting political parties in power provides a salient lens with which to analyze the recognition of the Birangonas. During periods of democratic governance in Bangladesh, power has primarily shifted between two parties - the Awami League (AL), led by Sheikh Hasina<sup>3</sup>, and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), led by Khaleda Zia<sup>4</sup>.

The Awami League, founded and led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was considered to be the more secular party. The AL was the ruling party at all the critical junctures when the Birangonas returned to the national political sphere – the establishment of the Liberation War Museum in the late 1990s, the setting up of the International Criminal Tribunal of Bangladesh in 2009, and the law passed in 2015 that brought the Birangonas in the same category of recognition as freedom fighters. The ethnolinguistic nationalism of the Awami League required the recognition of the Birangona as a *Bengali* woman dishonored by *Pakistani* men.

The BNP, on the other hand, has been associated with the radical Islamic turn of the state since 1975 (Mohsin 2004, 47). The overlooking of the Birangonas in the national narrative of the War between 1975 to the late 1990s was a result of the BNP's attempt to form political alliances with domestic Islamic political parties as well as friendlier foreign relations with Pakistan (D'Costa 2012, 106). Such alliances were only possible by forgoing the involvement of the Razaakars, or the local collaborators of the Pakistani enemy. The consequence of this alliance was the grounding of another axis identity that became central to being Bangladeshi – that of being a Muslim (Siddiqi 2017, 226).

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<sup>3</sup> Sheikh Hasina, who has served as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh since 2009, is the daughter of the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Sheikh Mujibur was the founder of the Awami League, which was at the forefront of the language movement and the liberation struggle.

<sup>4</sup> Khaleda Zia is the wife of former President of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman. She served as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh from 1991-1996 and from 2001-2006. Rahman founded the Bangladesh National Party.

Even today, Bangladesh remains divided over the question of who declared Bangladesh independent. Should Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led the Liberation movement but was incarcerated during the time of independence, or Ziaur Rahman, who announced independence on behalf of Sheikh Mujib, be called the Father of the Nation? (D'Costa 2012, 122). To establish that the AL under Sheikh Mujibur's leadership led the path to liberation is to imagine a Bangladesh founded on the two principles of Bengali domination and hatred for Pakistan. These two claims are carved onto the bodies of the helpless *Bengali* woman, the *Birangona*, who therefore, remain both marginal yet important to the state's memories of the War.

To summarize, the position of the *Birangona* in the Bangladeshi state is only in relation to the masculine state and the male citizens of the country. It is through the symbolic identification of the *Birangonas* with the Bengali motherland, whose honour has been destroyed by the barbaric Pakistan, that the masculine Bangladeshi state's subjectivity gains legitimacy and recognition. As the masculine protector of the motherland, the Bangladeshi state not only recognised the *Birangonas* as corporeal bodies to represent the ruthless transgressions of the Pakistani state, but also took upon itself the responsibility to rehabilitate her. The recognition, rehabilitation and reintegration of the *Birangona* is therefore part of the masculine state's project to restore the purity of the nation. These women will then bear the future pure Bengali sons of the motherland.

The *Birangonas'* recognition, however, is contingent upon performances of victimhood within an intelligible framework of femininity. These include the need for her to display her trauma only when the state seeks it and remain invisible at other times (Mookherjee 2015a; Mookherjee 2021a). Hence, as I demonstrated through an analysis of the archives in the Liberation War Museum, their personal experiences find no space in the state's official memory of the war. They

exist primarily as a discursive category to legitimize a dominant narrative of male valour, honour, loss and vengeance in the war.

**Indigenous Women and the Bangladeshi State:  
Disacknowledgement and Denial of Sexual Violence**

The Bangladeshi state's project of Bengali ethnonationalism simultaneously centers around a denial of victimhood to indigenous women, who are linguistically, ethnically and religiously diverse from the mainstream Bengali Muslim population. The stark silence around the issue of sexual violence against indigenous women emerges in contrast to the selective visibility and recognition of the Birangonas.

I argue that the contrasting attitudes towards sexual violence - denial in the case of indigenous women and recognition in the case of Bengali women - is part of the Bangladeshi state's ethnonationalist project of creating a homogenous, Bengali nation. The vision for a homogenous Bengali motherland, which was formed over decades of British colonialism and West Pakistani oppression, was realized with the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Subsequently, the movement for self-determination by the ethnically diverse population in the CHT was treated as a threat to the sovereignty, integrity and homogeneity of the nation. Therefore, the Bangladeshi state mirrors its own oppressor in its treatment of the Jumma people. In this role, as I demonstrate, the recognition of sexual violence against indigenous women challenges the core ideas of the ethnonationalist project. Within this ethno nationalist project, Bengali men are protectors of the Bengali motherland and therefore, cannot be recognised as rapists against the threat of the ethnic 'other'.

In almost three decades since the signing of the Peace Accord in 1997, little progress has been made in implementing the Accord. The provisions pertaining to demilitarization, settlement of land disputes, rehabilitation of displaced indigenous people and an end to the voluntary settlement of Bengali people from the plains to the CHT are yet to be implemented (D'Costa 2014, 10). In the post-Accord “peace” period, sexual violence against indigenous women has continued. An analysis of the recorded cases of sexual violence against indigenous women reveal that media reports a disproportionately small number of cases of violence against indigenous women and girls (D'Costa 2014, 37), and medical practitioners are also complicit in granting impunity by way of denying the incident of rape in medical reports (D'Costa 2014, 33). Denial of access to institutional support to report cases of sexual violence is therefore a denial to claim the status of victimhood.

### *State actors' complicity and indifference*

The State's indifference to the rapes of indigenous women can be evidenced by the complicity of state agencies, such as law enforcement and medical practitioners, in ill-reporting of cases of sexual violence against indigenous women. The complicated, and often humiliating, criminal justice system prevents indigenous women from even reporting cases of sexual violence, let alone seek justice. While several cases go unreported due to the stigma and shame associated with rape, threats or intimidation from perpetrators and the culture of impunity to rapists act as strong deterrents for not reporting of cases of sexual violence.

In the medical sphere, doctors often produce false medical reports denying any evidence of rape, sometimes even refusing to conduct check-ups or delay them until evidence disappears from the body (Chapman 2021; Ahmed 2011). Performativity of feminine victimhood, which

Dolan (2021) argues is central to claims of victimhood, is therefore denied by refuting the evidence of sexual violence on the bodies of indigenous women. Authorities put pressure on doctors in the hill districts to deny evidence of rape of sexual violence to prevent tensions from arising between Jummas and Bengalis (Chapman 2021). In the law-enforcement and legal spheres, police officers often refuse to cooperate with local people and register cases of sexual violence until indigenous activists and lawyers intervene to put pressure on the police (Ahmed 2018). NGOs that provide legal aid to rape survivors have reported that the dates of hearing are often set far apart, and the accused get bail in most instances (Khan 2014). Language also poses a significant barrier in this sphere. The stationing of an overwhelmingly large number of Bengali speaking army personnel as well as medical, police and court officials further exacerbates the ethnic tensions in the region (Khan 2014).

Even after arrest, perpetrators are often released on bail, further threatening the safety of indigenous women and girls. Reports have highlighted that several of these perpetrators have links with local Bengali officers or influential political leaders, and thus, intimidate survivors and their families to withdraw their cases or try to prevent them from reporting by offering money (Khan 2018). Having faced no consequences for their crimes, perpetrators on bail fear no accountability and further violate women (Kapaeng Foundation 2014). Therefore, a culture of impunity towards perpetrators has been the single most crucial factor contributing to the increase in incidents of sexual and gender-based violence in the CHT (D'Costa 2014, 31).

### ***Militarization in the CHT***

The continued heavy militarisation of the CHT, in sharp violation of the Peace Accord of 1997 and in the absence of conflict, points to the complicity of the state in seeing Jumma women



simultaneously as rapeable bodies and bodies unworthy of recognition as victims of sexual violence. During the two decades of insurgency, the security personnel stationed in the CHT used violence against women as a counter-insurgency measure (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs 2012b, 37). The Bangladeshi armed personnel comprise the largest group of alleged perpetrators of sexual violence against indigenous women, second only to the Bengali settlers in the hills. Even in the post-Accord “peace” period, sexual violence against indigenous women by security personnel has continued. Chakma & Hill (2013) highlight that between 2003 and 2006, 27 percent of all registered cases of rape of indigenous women were committed by security personnel, and the rest by Bengali settlers (144).

Despite documented records of the army’s involvement in sexual violence against hill women, about 50,000-60,000 armed personnel remain stationed in the CHT, making it the most militarized zone in the country. With more than one-third of the country’s entire army being deployed in merely three hill districts that make up the CHT, there is one soldier per 40 civilians in the region (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs 2012b, 12) Furthermore, in sharp violation of the terms of the Peace Accord, only about 74 out of over 500 military camps have been withdrawn, and the process stopped in 2009 (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs 2012b, 12). With the ethno-religious composition of the army composed almost entirely of Bengali Muslims (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs 2012b, 12), the armed personnel stationed in the region exhibit resentment and discriminatory conduct against the indigenous people while acting in favor of Bengali settlers. Therefore, the Government’s failure to implement the provisions of demilitarising the CHT, as outlined in the Peace Accord, point to its complicity in and indifference towards sexual violence of indigenous women in Bangladesh.

Enloe argues that rape is used to militarize women under regimes preoccupied with perceived threats to “national security”, including any internal political opposition (Enloe 2000, 123). The ideal Bengali masculine protector (the soldier) of the Bangladeshi motherland, whose construction finds legitimacy as a means to avenge the rape of the Birangona, imposes his understandings of “enemy” on the indigenous woman. Rape then becomes a means to purify the nation of the “enemy blood”. This rationale was highlighted in the rapes of Muslim and Croatian women by Serbian soldiers in Bosnia-Herzegovina to produce an ethnically pure Serbian state (Sharlach 2000, 96). Similarly, as a bearer of non-Bengali progeny, rape and abduction of the indigenous woman becomes a means to produce ethnically pure Bengali children. Such sentiments were echoed during the armed conflict, as oral testimonies of Jumma people reveal that army officers often ordered soldiers and Bengali Muslim settlers to separate the women from the men so that “at least the next generation of Chakmas<sup>5</sup> will behave like good Bangladeshis” (Amnesty International 1986, 22). Moreover, in 1983, a secret memorandum was circulated by the state among army officials instructing them to “marry women in the CHT” (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs 2012b, 37). Therefore, rape and abduction of women is an instrumental means by which Bangladeshi soldiers, as the ideal protector of the Bengali motherland, purify the bloodline of the country.

### *Official Discourses and Policy Documents*

The State’s lack of acknowledgement of the systemic rape of indigenous women in the CHT is revealed through the language emerging in two important government documents related to women’s rights - The National Women’s Development Policy of Bangladesh (NWDP) 2011,

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<sup>5</sup> Chakmas are an ethnic group within the CHT. As a numerically and politically dominant group, indigenous people are sometimes referred to as Chakmas.

and the National Action Plan (NAP) 2019 to implement the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda in Bangladesh.

The National Women's Development Policy highlights as its objectives, "to eliminate all forms of abuse of women and female children" (Government of Bangladesh 2011, 13), "to ensure the rights of the disabled women and women belonging to the smaller ethnic groups" (Government of Bangladesh 2011, 13), "to take necessary steps to publicize and implement the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)" (Government of Bangladesh 2011, 14), "to extend legal support to women victim of abuse" (Government of Bangladesh 2011, 15), "to create awareness against the increased victimization and affectation of the women in the armed conflict and in ethnic wars in the international level" (Government of Bangladesh 2011, 16). However, none of these objectives have been turned into policy for indigenous women living in the hill districts. The One-Stop Crisis Centres (OCCs), National Trauma Counselling Centres, and Women's Support Centres are other measures proposed in the NWDP to provide support and assistance to women who have been victims of abuse (Government of Bangladesh 2011, 16). However, upon visiting the website for the OCCs, I found that of the 12 OCCs in Bangladesh so far, none have been established in the hill districts that make up the CHT ("OCC (One Stop Crisis Centre)" n.d.). Similarly, the Regional Trauma Counselling Centres (RTCC) have also not been established in the districts of Rangamati, Bandarban, and Khagrachari, which make up the CHT ("National Trauma Counselling Centre (NTCC)" n.d.). Therefore, the refusal to set up rehabilitation and trauma centers for indigenous women in the CHT points to the lack of acknowledgement of sexual violence on their bodies. For the state's "rape script" (Buss 2009), indigenous women cannot be categorised as victims of sexual violence. Therefore, there

are no legal recognition for sexual violence against the ethnic 'other' woman under national policy frameworks.

The National Action Plan (NAP) does not acknowledge the sexual violence of women in the CHT. The document affirms that the Government of Bangladesh is "making efforts to improve the quality of lives of women and men in CHT and remains committed to fully implement the CHT Peace Accord, as well as developing strategies for conflict prevention and resolution in all regions, including CHT" (UN Women Bangladesh and Government of Bangladesh 2019, 4). However, there are no action plans for the implementation of the provisions of the accord, let alone provisions to prevent sexual violence.

The state has gone as far as denying the existence of an indigenous population in the CHT, arguing that they are only an ethnic minority. Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, Dipu Moni, argued that neither the Constitution of Bangladesh nor any international laws recognise the hill people as indigenous (*The Daily Star* 2011). Such an altering of definition has important ramifications with regard to the applicability of international conventions that guarantee rights to indigenous populations, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 107 "concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries", which Bangladesh has ratified in 1972 (Amnesty International 1986, 31).

Two positive measures for the safety of indigenous women have been undertaken in the CHT so far. First, three separate courts were set up in the three hill districts of the CHT in 2008 to try cases related to violence and torture of women and children under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 (Kapaeeng Foundation 2014, 152). Second, the United Nations Development Program Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility (UNDP-CHTDF) set up a

Victim Support Centre to provide rehabilitation assistance to women who have been victims of abuse and violence (Kapaeeng Foundation 2014, 152). However, not only have these measures failed at bringing perpetrators to justice, but they have also failed to protect indigenous women from sexual violence. For instance, between 2007 and 2013, despite the setting up of three new courts in the hill districts, at least 227 instances of violence against women were reported, and none of those accused of sexual violence have been prosecuted till date (Kapaeeng Foundation 2014, 154). The lack of indigenous culture sensitivity and the absence of indigenous female staff in the Centre are significant factors in the failure of these measures (Kapaeeng Foundation et al. 2016). Additionally, as noted previously, several gaps in the access to judicial redressal further deny the indigenous woman the ability to claim a victim status for herself, such as inadequate reporting, corrupt administration, requiring witnesses to register cases, and a humiliating criminal justice system.

Denial of recognition of victimhood is further institutionalized by the State through the CHT Peace Accord (1997). Referencing the CHT Peace Accord of 1997, Mohsin notes the absence of rehabilitation or counselling for survivors of rape in the Peace Accord of 1997 is in contrast to the steps taken for the rehabilitation and reintegration of the Birangonas following the War of 1971 (2004, 61-62). Complemented by the state's failure to implement the provisions of the CHT Peace Accord, especially the provisions relating to demilitarizing the region, the complicity of the state in "othering" the indigenous women is therefore brought to the fore.

### *The incomplete citizenship of Jumma women*

The "othering" of indigenous women, which is grounded in the exclusionary nature of Bengali nationalism, is elucidated through the partial citizenship of the Jumma people. In March

2015, the Ministry of Home Affairs of Bangladesh issued an order restricting the interaction of foreigners and local non-residents of the hill districts with the “tribal” people of CHT, unless under direct supervision of armed personnel or government officers. The order requires foreign nationals to gain permission from the government to visit the region, and lays out different procedures depending on the purpose of visit. Applicants are required to specify details such as reasons for meeting, matters to be discussed and names of individuals who will be interacted with. Only upon approved permission of the government and in the presence of state officials can interactions occur between the two groups. (Griffiths 2015; Siddiqi 2017, 234) The memorandum received national as well as international criticism, labelling it a form of apartheid for the restrictions it places on indigenous populations from accessing fundamental constitutional rights such as the right to freedom of expression, privacy and movement (Sattar 2015; *The Daily Star* 2015; Griffiths 2015). In 2012, prior to the Order from the Ministry of Home Affairs, the immigration authorities at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport denied entry to a Japanese NGO worker doing advocacy work for full implementation of the CHT accord and the protection of human rights in the hills. They were detained in the airport before being deported to Bangkok, and the only explanation given to them was allegations of “controversial activities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts” (Eskildsen and Jumma Net 2012). With limits imposed on interaction between indigenous people and international human rights workers, conveying the reality of the situation in the CHT becomes even more difficult in light of the state’s refusal to acknowledge the presence of an indigenous population within Bangladesh. Therefore, restrictions on information dissemination, knowledge sharing, and fundamental rights of the Jumma people not only render their citizenship incomplete in the national framework, but also restricts their ability to supersede the state to access means of

redressal from journalists, NGOs, transnational feminist networks, and national and international human rights groups.

Historically too, the conditional citizenship of the Jumma people was implied in the immediate aftermath of the country's liberation. During his first visit to the CHT, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called on the indigenous people to forgo their language and culture and become Bengalis, and by implication, full citizens of the country (Siddiqi 2017, 226). One of the means of carrying out the project of assimilation and homogeneity is through women's bodies, and rape of indigenous women becomes the fundamental tool to alter the ethnic composition of the CHT. Therefore, abduction and rape of indigenous women was central for the production of a docile, obedient, and ethnically homogenous citizenry that fit within the imagination of the Bangla nation, thereby mitigating the threat to territorial and national integrity that was posed by the movement for autonomy in the CHT. As Siddiqi argues, "*the discursive construction of Pahari women as the essential, cultural "Other" allows for the colonization of their bodies, and this brings all Paharis into the orbit of the civilized Bengali nation, erasing the violence carried out in the name of national integration and peacemaking*" (Siddiqi 2017, 230).

### ***The absence of national feminist solidarity for Jumma women***

In early 2012, nationally, the first ever National Indigenous Women's Conference of Bangladesh was held by the coming together of as many as 23 indigenous women's rights groups and OXFAM (D'Costa 2014, 19-20). The conference slogan was to "Come forward to establish equal dignity and right of indigenous women and to ensure violence-free life for them". The issue of sexual violence against indigenous women was discussed at length in this conference. The

conference culminated with the formation of the Bangladesh Indigenous Women's Network (BIWN)<sup>6</sup>. (*International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs* 2012a)

Indigenous women's organizations from the CHT have subsequently forged alliances with women's groups across South Asia. Shortly after the first National Indigenous Women's Conference, in February 2013, UN Women South Asia hosted a conference in Nepal bringing together 60 leading policymakers, practitioners, and activists from across South Asia, and garnered particular attention on the issue of indigenous women's vulnerability in the CHT due to militarisation of the region (D'Costa 2014, 14). However, there is no evidence as to whether this issue was discussed by indigenous women representatives, UN representatives to Bangladesh or Bengali women representatives. Women from the CHT in Bangladesh and the Naga hills in India have also discussed their conflict resolution accords (Perera, 1999 cited in Gopinath & Manchanda 2018, 806). A large number of human rights reports have also been produced by scholars and human rights groups in collaboration with indigenous women's organizations (*International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs* 2012b; D'Costa 2014, Amnesty International 1986; Amnesty International 2016).

Contrary to the regional feminist networks that have been forged, solidarities have failed to emerge between Bangladesh's national women's rights organizations and those of the

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<sup>6</sup> During the course of my research, I often came across references to reports by the BIWN. However, I could not find BIWN's website to access these reports directly. The limited space given to women's voices was a commonality in both my case studies. Mirroring the lack of the Birangonas' personal narratives in any recorded state archives, reports from indigenous groups also lack an adequate representation of the experiences of sexual violence on Jumma women. Reports by groups such as Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission (CHT Commission), Kapaeeng Foundation, and Amnesty International seldom had oral testimonies collected from indigenous women themselves. For instance, the CHT Commission's "Life is Not Ours" report from May 1991 is one of the most detailed documents of the situation of indigenous people in the CHT. It not only discusses the violence against Jumma people during the conflict but also has detailed historical analysis of the region to situate indigenous demands. However, out of the 108 pages of the report, less than 3 pages were used to discuss the issue of women's vulnerability to sexual violence. Published in 1986, Amnesty International's report titled "Unlawful Killings and Torture in the Chittagong Hill Tracts", also lacked any detailed section on the experiences of women in the conflict and there were no oral testimonies from women. In light of the lack of women's perspectives in broader indigenous groups' reports, access to reports from specifically indigenous women's groups would have proved pivotal for my research.



indigenous women. The ethnic divisions nurtured by the state have seeped into the public imagination, preventing such networks from forming. For instance, at the Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995, the women representing Bangladesh excluded the military's sexual abuse of indigenous women from their country's presentation (Gopinath and Manchanda 2018, 808). The abduction and disappearance of indigenous rights activist Kalpana Chakma<sup>7</sup> in 1996 could have served as a point of convergence for women's rights and human rights groups across the country to mobilize against gender-based sexual violence. However, as Karim notes, "the Chakma woman's stake in self-determination, at least potentially, undermines the Bangladeshi nation-state." (Karim 1998, cited in Siddiqi 2017, 232). As a result, middle-class national human rights or women's rights organizations were able to dismiss Kalpana's disappearance by appealing to a discourse of terrorist separatism (Siddiqi 2017, 232). To revisit Enloe's argument

The Liberation War Museum has hosted six annual international conferences in 2008, 2009, 2013, 2015, 2017 and 2019 around the theme of Genocide, Truth and Justice. The conferences brought researchers and scholars from across the world to discuss justice, reconciliation and other challenges in the aftermath of genocides from a global perspective. Each conference had only one panel dedicated to the discussion of sexual violence against women. Unsurprisingly, none of the panellists discuss the issue of sexual violence on indigenous women in Bangladesh. Surprisingly, however, in the most recent conference in 2019 with a special focus on the prosecution of the Rohingyas, there were papers presented on the vulnerabilities of the Rohingya women. ("International Conferences," n.d.) What perhaps distinguishes the Rohingyas

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<sup>7</sup> Kalpana Chakma was the organizing secretary of the Hill Women's Federation (HWF), the first and only indigenous women's organization in the '90s. She was abducted in 1996. Till date, she has not been found and the prime suspect behind her abduction - a Lieutenant from the Bangladeshi Army - has not been prosecuted under law. (D'Costa 2014, 32)

from the Jummas is that, as followers of Islam, the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh can still be integrated within the nationalist framework. As acknowledged refugees, the Rohingyas are also unlikely to seek self-determination. Therefore, any threat to the ethnic purity of Bangladesh from the Rohingyas is mitigated. Moreover, although this is not evidenced, the state's support for Rohingyas Bangladesh in a positive light within the international community. To reiterate again then, the denial of the victimhood of indigenous women as survivors of sexual violence across state institutions is strategic to Bangladesh's ethnonationalist project.

To recapitulate, the position of the Jumma women within the ethnonationalist project is to remember that the Bangladeshi state's nation-building project rests upon the production of a culturally and ethnically homogenous Bengali population. This renders the citizenship of the indigenous people 'incomplete'. As a result, the rape of indigenous women becomes central to pursue a project of purifying the Bangladeshi nation of the ethnic 'other'. Within an ethnonationalism framework where only the Bengali Birangonas can be grieved as survivors of rape, the indigenous women's rapeable and non grievable bodies are consequently denied recognition as victims of sexual violence by state institutions like law enforcement, judiciary and medical workers. Therefore, the unique dimension of sexual violence in the CHT is that it is not only used as a weapon of ethnic cleansing to alter the demographic composition of the region, but equally as a weapon of intimidation, and to force the indigenous peoples to flee into other regions, all in the name of protecting the national integrity and homogeneity in the country.

### **Conclusion**

The gendered nationalist project of Bangladesh materialises in the selective recognition of survivors of sexual violence. Within Bangladesh's ethnonationalist framework, the categories of

victim and villain (or perpetrator), as it related to sexual violence, are narrow and ethnically racialised. In this framework, *only* Bengali women can be recognised as victims and *only* non-Bengali men can be recognised as the perpetrators of violence. For instance, the Urdu speaking Muslim Bihari women, who were also raped by Bengali men during the war of 1971, are not recognised as Birangonas (D'Costa 2012, 103; Bose 2007). Accordingly, they are not extended the same rehabilitation benefits as survivors of wartime sexual violence. This narrow prism of recognition has severely affected the ethnically and religiously diverse Jumma women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in post-war Bangladesh. Despite being subject to rape, abduction, harassment and killing during and after the two decades of armed conflict in the CHT, Jumma women do not find the same political affordances as the Birangonas. In this essay, I have showed that this duality is the result of Bangladesh's ethnonationalist project.

Due to the centrality of the Bengali identity in the liberation and creation of Bangladesh, the Bengali Birangonas became central to the Bangladeshi state's narrative of war and independence. The recognition of the Birangonas serves two key functions for the Bangladeshi state. First, silencing individual experiences of the Birangonas is important such that the narrative of sexual violence can be used to legitimize the transgressions of the Pakistani army. Women's personal injuries from sexual violence are side-lined from the dominant memory yet made selectively visible to highlight the collective trauma of the war. As I have demonstrated, that Birangonas are still not revered the same way as militarized (male) freedom fighters and the two lists are still kept separate indicates that such recognition was only discursive. Even after such legislation, the Birangonas still have several bureaucratic barriers to be formally gazetted as a freedom fighter. Indeed, no formal efforts have been taken since 1975 to actually improve the lives of the Birangonas. Till date, the local collaborators of the war have enjoyed impunity. Yet,

selective visibility of the Birangona is central to Bangladesh's dominant narrative of war, independence and nation-building. Second, the sexual violence against the Birangonas is used to push a dominant narrative of Bengali masculinity. The nexus between women, nation, and honour translates to the Birangonas symbolically representing the mother nation, rendering their (raped) bodies grievable. Thus, it is against the rape of the Birangonas that Bengali male agency is reclaimed, and men wield their subjecthood as protectors to avenge the rape of the women and the Bengali motherland. As part of this role, the state's control over the Birangona's reproductive autonomy becomes instrumental to purify the nation from the blood of Pakistanis. Moreover, as sons of the motherland, Bengali men are further removed from the ambit of being profiled as rapists. This framework of the male protectors therefore authorises the rape of indigenous women, who belong to the ethnic other seeking self-determination, in the name of national security.

In contrast to the state's position on the Birangonas, the denial of recognition of indigenous women, as I have argued, is part of the Bangladeshi state's narrative of protecting its national security from the ethnic 'other'. Despite its history of domination and exploitation under West Pakistan, the Bangladeshi state replicates the role of its oppressor towards its own minority population in the CHT. As my analysis demonstrates, state institutions such as law enforcement, military forces, the judiciary and medical officers are all complicit in the sexual violence of indigenous women and the subsequent denial of redressal. Moreover, official policy documents of the state, such as the NAP and the NWDP neither acknowledge the rapes of indigenous women nor suggest action plans to address the issue. Thus, in contrast to the Birangonas who were offered mechanisms to perform their victimhood and seek redressal, the state denies the same for indigenous women to avail. Heavy militarization of the region even after the end of the conflict has also made indigenous women more vulnerable. Despite extensive reports of the military forces

being perpetrators of rape in the CHT, the state's refusal to implement the provisions of the CHT Peace accord further points to the indifference of the state towards the rapes of indigenous women. Moreover, measures such as the travel ban have further isolated indigenous women from being able to supersede the state and seek redressal from international NGOs and human rights groups. Such measures, as I have demonstrated, render the citizenship of the indigenous peoples as 'incomplete' or 'partial'. Furthermore, due to the categorisation of the CHT movement for autonomy as a threat to the nation's integrity, national feminist solidarities have also mostly failed to emerge between indigenous women and Bengali women. Therefore, the dichotomy between the grievable body of the Bengali Birangona and the non-grievable body of the indigenous woman is further consolidated in the nationalist project. The contrasting responses of the state to sexual violence in country is thus explained by Bangladesh's ethnonationalist political project.

### *The Way Forward*

At this juncture, I wish to clarify that my objective here is not to disregard the sufferings of the Bangladeshi people in the lead up to and during the Liberation War. The lack of justice and reconciliation for the mass killings, destructions, and mass rapes has left a deep scar in the collective memory of Bangladesh. Instead, my objective is to shed light on the forgotten experiences of a minority group within Bangladesh who have undergone a similar, if not the same, situation as that of the majority of the population. Despite the common experience of violence and exploitation, what is pertinent in this situation is that Bangladesh mirrors the role of its own transgressor, Pakistan, against its indigenous population. The perpetuation of violence and oppression therefore becomes almost cyclical. Against this backdrop, I take particular contention with the duality in the visibility of sexual violence in the state's discourse. My primary interest is the role of the state as an institution for knowledge production of history and memory.

Despite having suffered wartime sexual violence, the experiences of the Birangonas<sup>8</sup> and the indigenous women vis-à-vis the state is strikingly similar yet different at the same time. To start with, against the patriarchal society of Bangladesh, women of both communities face stigma and shame for having been raped. The notion of honour being placed in women's bodies is common to both cases. Moreover, as much scholarly research has found, the culture of impunity is common to both cases (Guhathakurta 2016; Siddiqi 2016; Mohsin 2016; D'Costa 2016). Neither the Pakistani perpetrators in the case of the Birangonas, nor the Bengali perpetrators in the case of the Jumma women have been brought to justice<sup>9</sup>. However, that Birangonas are offered mechanisms for rehabilitation and redressal and indigenous women are not is key in shaping their experiences vis-à-vis the state. Consequently, selective recognition of one group against the other prevents solidarities from forming between the Birangonas and the Jumma women despite their common experiences. To recall Enloe (2000), states tend to separate different kinds of militarized women from identifying with each other as victims of the same structure. Therefore, the masculine conceptions of nation-building inherently prevents the possibility of creating intersectional solidarities.

My research therefore forces us to rethink where women and rape are situation within states' narratives of wars. The case of Bangladesh is not unique. As the literature review

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<sup>8</sup> Here I also wish to highlight the perils of recognition in the way it has been extended to the Birangonas. Bangladesh's move to recognise and title wartime rape survivors as Birangonas, or "war heroines", was internationally unprecedented. Yet, as Mookherjee's findings suggest, the prevalence of the stigma and shame around rape did not go away with political recognition of survivors. Instead, rape became a public secret as to claim the title of Birangonas was to invitation for scorn from the survivor's local community (Mookherjee 2007, 433-434). Therefore, even with political recognition aimed at their rehabilitation and reintegration, there was violence, in the form of ostracization and scorn, in the lives of the Birangonas. The clash between state's position and local reception (Mookherjee 2007) meant that most of the Birangonas could not avail the benefits that were made available to them.

<sup>9</sup> I want to also note that intersectional analysis is key. While the experiences of the Birangonas and Jumma women are similar in many regards, the historical exploitation and discrimination of Jumma people in a Bengali majoritarian country cannot be disregarded. Therefore, any comparison will also have to take into account how sexual violence against Jumma women is grounded in distinct historical relations of exploitation and subordination.

demonstrates, we have seen similar instances of wartime sexual violence unfold in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda and India, to name a few. In all these cases, the dominant (read: state's) narrative of war is masculine, and women only lie in the margins of the memories. Yet, as one of the most vulnerable groups in any conflict, women's experiences need to be centred in any narrative of war. However, as I have demonstrated, masculinist writings of war and history, such as in Bangladesh, only center women's experiences to push for a dominant narrative of *us versus them* to historize victory or avenge the loss. My paper forces us to be particularly critical of which groups are hyper-visibility and in which roles, and which groups are downplayed altogether in such dominant masculine writing of wars and history.

Feminist research on war studies complicates the very construction of the nation and state along gendered lines and therefore, offers ontological possibility to dismantle the established masculine narratives of wars across the world. By adopting feminist methodologies that seek to understand war from the experiences of women, we can construct an alternate narrative to wars – one that is epistemically grounded in women's experiences. Such alternate narratives to wars can shed light on the experiences of those victims who have been forgotten from the collective memory. The hope of such academic research would be to continue building transnational feminist solidarity against masculinist policies of war and militarization in the years to come.

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