

(Dis) Appearing Women in Nationalist Narratives (Part 1)

Interview with Respondent A

Conducted by Bina D'Costa¹, the Australian National University

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Opening Note: The following interview was conducted in India. The respondent was not keen to disclose her identity. For the sake of ethical research practice, I kept the interview unedited.

RA: It was a big drama. There were two hundred women waiting for us. Mother Teresa went there at the beginning of January or December. It was the new Bangladesh government who invited us there. She didn't find any girls there. She had seen only their hair, petticoat and some other things. Their hair was cut because *they* were afraid that they'd commit suicide. They did brutal things and kept the girls naked. Many were half naked. We haven't seen them in this state. Therefore, we can't make any comments. When I went there on January 21, 1972, I started this temporary house.²

BD: Why were you chosen? Did it have to do anything with your Bengali ethnicity?

RA: I mean, we were not chosen as such. But we were sent because of our experience. Hossain Ali, the Pakistani High Commissioner in Calcutta — when Bangladesh came to be on December 16, 1971, it was him who declared that he accepted Bangladesh. After this, Hossain Ali came and visited Mother. Then went to Shishu Bhaban. And then I was in charge of Shishu Bhaban. He asked Mother, "May I take this sister with me? ... To tell you the truth I've not been to Bangladesh from 1950 till 1972. That means for 22 years! And I have not spoken any Bengali till then. I did not complete my study in Bengali as well. I lost complete contact with Bengali!

BD: Was it difficult for you to communicate in Bengali?

¹ I gratefully acknowledge Ms Shabin Akhter's insights and comments during and after the interview.

² The first orphanage for war babies.

RA: At the beginning, yes, it was. I'd quickly switch to English. Then I went to visit Mujib.³

Mujib was a great friend of mine. He mentioned that 'whatever help you need, ask the ministers, they'd give. I used helicopters to go to Comilla and other places.

BD: Only to collect the war babies?

RA: Also to do the relief work. And he is the one who introduced me to the ministers there.

My Bengali was so bad that I always used half Bengali and half English. Mujib used to say, "*Bangladesher meye, Bangla kotha bolo.*" (Bengali girl, speak in Bengali)... But Mujib was a great friend. I could go to any Ministry without pass and ask for help, whatever I needed. Most of the things were sent from here. Only thing was that I needed protection for the sisters. We were foreigners but we did not look foreigners over there.⁴

BD: Had it been unsafe for the sisters otherwise?

RA: Yes. And also when I went there, no other nuns were working outside, in slums and villages. They were all working in schools and hospitals. And they worked in their own convents. When I went there, I started to work everywhere with the sisters. We never went less than three to do relief work. And Mizanur Rahman⁵ used to say, "You young girls are going out in the world. Who'd take care of you if anything happens to you?" So, I told him, "That's the only thing I ask you. To give us protection." As a foreigner and a visitor we needed protection from any hooligans or people who wanted to cause problems. It was our work and I had no fear. I had very young sisters with me. One was a Bengali and the others were from Kerala. So they had to learn Bengali and do the work. We had so much cooperation from the government! So there was no objection. So also, when we took the children in, the government didn't give us any trouble. When we started sending the children abroad, they gave us passports for the children. But they did not know even how the adoption was

³ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first Prime Minister of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh, who also was called at the time, the father of the nation.

⁴ Immediately after the war, there was total chaos in the country. Law and Order situation was very bad.

⁵ The Relief and Rehabilitation Minister, 1972.

supposed to be going. I was doing adoption all the time in India. So, I had a lot of idea how to do the adoption work. When I went there in the offices to arrange for the children, I had to help them to prepare certificates so they could leave the country. And based on that they got the passport to go, as not in adoptions. For Muslims and Christians, they do not go for adoption, but for foster care. In India, however, Hindus can adopt Hindu babies. At that time, in Bangladesh, there were no laws for adoption for the Muslims. At least I don't think so... we were the first one to do the adoption, and the children had no religion so to speak. And in Bangladesh no one was going to adopt them. Therefore, the government gave us the permission and they gave us the passports. Even ten days old babies went to Canada. The only thing is that I had to get a photo, a passport, and book their flight. They needed to reach the country of destination and from there straight to the hospital. Many were put in the incubators. I was there in Bangladesh for two years and eight months and worked in the adoption project...

BD: What happened to the women who gave away their babies? Do you remember them?

RA: Most of the babies came from the nursing homes. Midwives, *ayas* (child-carers) brought the babies.

BD: Do you remember any of the nursing homes?

RA: No, no!⁶ They did not want us to know. We didn't ask about which women were having the abortion or anything else. So, we were receiving the babies and we just accepted. But afterwards, when we were getting the women I didn't think they were molested by the Pakistani army...⁷

I know one case, whose father was an engineer. The whole family was killed. They were half buried in the sand. After the Pakistani army moved away, she gained consciousness. Her story has been written in the Bangladeshi newspapers but of

⁶ It was clear to me that she didn't want to reveal any names.

⁷ Off the record information about rape by Bengalis.

course under a different name. She didn't want to have an abortion. But later on had to give away her baby. But otherwise, I think everyone went for abortion. Nobody wanted Pakistani babies. Nobody! Neither the parents, nor the government and nor the women...In the course of time, we were getting pregnant women, but we didn't know who they were violated by: the Pakistani army or by local men. We always had pregnant girls there.

Babies, who the Pakistani army fathered, were all aborted in different clinics. Otherwise parents couldn't take the women home. And they wouldn't tell anyone if their daughters were raped. When they realized that their daughters were pregnant they quickly got the babies aborted. It was all done in secrecy.

BD: You mentioned that many of the children went to Canada...

RA: Most were sent to Canada. Some of the babies were sent to France and Sweden as well.

BD: Have you met any of the Canadian sisters who were working here?

RA: No. There were many others who started working in Bangladesh. But actually we were the first ones to begin work over there.

BD: During our conversation yesterday you vaguely mentioned a prison where women were kept. Can you tell me more about that?

RA: No, no!

BD: Was that in Dhaka?

RA: Yes, in Dhaka Cantonment. They were locked up in the Cantonment. Mother went to see the place. They took her to see the place. But not even one girl was there to be seen at that time. We went with lots of publicity that we were going to work with the girls who had been violated by the Pakistani army. But when we arrived we found

almost no one. They were all gone. But we did find lots of babies. Many of the children were given up for adoption. We also did a lot of relief work.

BD: Those were related to women?

RA: No, in general for everyone. We also did some rehabilitation work for women on the other side of the Buriganga.⁸ All were Hindu women. No men, no grown-up boys. The army killed all the men. They dug up a big hole where they buried all the men. And also the grown-up boys. Women were left alone. We started a program for helping the women. I gave each women 5 rupee⁹ to do some small business. They made a little extra. Afterwards they continued to work with that small saving. Then we gave them goose, ducklings, chicks and goats. For the next three years we helped them to stand on their own feet. That is how Jagoroni¹⁰ came into being. It was the “Widows’ Program”.

For Muslims it was difficult to understand us. They asked, ‘How can you not get married? You are violating God’s command.’ Slowly, they also started to understand us through our work. People were a bit fearful at the beginning. The Corr¹¹, Fr. Timm¹² and Fr. Labe¹³ had helped us.

BD: Have you ever worked in any other war-torn country?

RA: I myself did not. But others did.

BD: Was the experience any different from Bangladesh?

RA: No. For us, it was nothing new.

⁸ The major river next to Dhaka city.

⁹ Indian currency.

¹⁰ A local handicraft and community shop run by the Missionaries of Charity sisters.

¹¹ A relief and rehabilitation NGO of East Pakistan. Now the name has changed to Caritas.

¹² Controversial Human Rights Activist/Priest in Bangladesh.

¹³ One Italian Priest.

BD: How many of you were there in Bangladesh?

RA: Six of us were working in Bangladesh. Rob Chowdhury, the coordinator for rehabilitation work had assisted us.

BD: Was the number of war babies more in Dhaka? And also the number of abortions?

RA: Yes. It still remains as a scar in my heart. The government allowed abortion on a mass scale. They didn't want any Pak child. Either they were to be aborted or to get out of the country as soon as possible. We had incubators and we were prepared to take the premature babies.

BD: Have you requested the women not to abort the children?

RA: Yes. We also asked the nursing homes, 'When the babies are born, please do not throw them to the dustbin. Bring them to us if they are alive.' But they didn't care. They were interested in the mothers only. Babies were thrown into the dustbins...you see for any war when they lose the land they want to leave the issue behind. That is why the Bangladesh government wanted to get rid of the children fathered by the Pakistani army.

BD: Did the women speak about the actual rape?

RA: No. And we also didn't ask them. There was a wound. We tried to rehabilitate them, tried to accept the situation they were in. And we never asked them to write their names, neither their addresses. Stigma would remain if people knew.

Ok. I am tired. God bless you.

BD: Thank you very much for your time.

