

War and Art: From *Muktir Gan* to *Muktir Kotha* – A Historical Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an intense effort to study the history of independence of Bangladesh through cinematic lens. While the terrible war between East and West Pakistan was going on in 1971, Lear Levin, the American Film maker captured moments and these footages were hidden from the world. One day, Tareque Masud and his wife Catherine Masud came to know this fact and with a deliberate effort to restore these footages they decided to make a documented story, which they named 'Muktir Gaan' followed by 'Muktir Kotha'. The directors were aroused with a different kind of curiosity which led them to unfurl the voice of Nation's past. This paper concludes with specific understandings i.e. History of Independent Bangladesh can't be understood without admitting the role of populace in this regard. And secondly, as the populace of the then East Bengal characteristically belonged to the third world country, its history cannot be centered in elitist approach only; the oral history, in addition, can be considered as another source of history.

KEY WORDS: Bangladesh; film; Liberation War; Oral History; women.

Introduction

This paper intends to trace the history behind the two documentaries namely *Muktir Gan* (1995) and *Muktir Kotha* (1999) directed by Tareque Masud and his wife Katherine Masud, made on the Liberation war (1971) of Bangladesh. In its continuous process of becoming, history is no more limited to written evidences, but has drunk every moment in forms of conversations, witnesses, stories to develop itself into a grand narrative. While this has been a consistent process, media too has subverted the very meaning of walls, and has contributed to the continuous process of 'becoming' History. The reputed scholar Panna

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Shah (1950) appreciates cinema as ‘an immense force which [.....] molds the opinion of millions in the course of its apparently superficial business of merely providing entertainment’.

While cinema has formed an important tool in understanding and tracing the emotional history, documentaries too have become indispensable. In this regard, the film critic Lady Mukhopadhyay (2011) believed that presently the world is extremely conscious to preserve and record facts and documents, to be acknowledged in the future for understanding the socio-cultural history. So, it is seminal to point out the fact what Mr. Masud (Masud ‘a’), in an interview with the film critic and scholar Jakir Hossain Raju, said that political leaders of Bangladesh before elections massively used the video cassettes of *Muktir Gan* in favour of their party campaign. The said films are not simply limited to offering gratitude to all the people who fought and sacrificed for their mother tongue and freedom of native land (to make it Bangladesh- the land for the Bengalee, from East Pakistan) but also to make the present generation aware about the significance of ‘Mukti Juddho’ (War of Independence) hoping for imbedding in them the spirit of a warrior that claimed back what was rightfully theirs. The directors of film *Muktir Gan* (Songs of Freedom, released in December, 1995) have acknowledged that this film is based on footages filmed by the American film maker Lear Levin in 1971 and different archival footages from around the world.

Bangladesh was born in 1971. Thus, the birth right of the Bengalee was established in Purba Bangla (then it was named as East Pakistan) and their fight for Bengali language was finally honoured and earned recognition as the national language of Bangladesh. Yet the history of Bengal is vast and full of numerous facts and fictions, here we are mainly concerned with the history of ‘Mukti Juddho’ and its reflections on the said films. We, the people of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh know what happened in 1947. India wins freedom at the cost of dividing India and betraying its traditional spirit of secularism. On the eve of India’s freedom, Pakistan was created on the basis of giving priority to the demand of Muslim people for a separate state (Bandopadhyay 2007). After partition, the dream of Muslim people was broken down owing to the arrogance and rigid attitude of certain leaders of Pakistan who never supported the people of East Pakistan to live, following their own tradition and culture. Maximum people of East Pakistan were Muslim in religion, but culturally there was a gigantic gap between East and West Pakistan. In addition to this fact, a strong socio-cultural bond was made amongst the people of the East Pakistan itself and between the

people of East Pakistan and West Bengal (keeping in mind that those two halves of Bengal were religiously dominated by Muslim and Hindu people respectively). The state power of Pakistan could not approve the fondness of East Pakistan towards Bengali culture or proximity with West Bengal (and India). So the people of East Pakistan had to think once again. The authority of Pakistan considered this venture as trial for separation but the people of East Pakistan thought it as a question of existence - quest for liberation.

Behind the screen of *Muktir Gan*: How far was the middle class leadership connected with the common people?

Film maker Lear Levin's camera captured different experiences and activities of 'Bangladesh Mukti Songrami Shilpi Songstha' (Bangladesh Freedom Struggle Cultural Squad), a cultural squad of young people of East Pakistan in 1971. The eleven core members of this group were Mahmudur Rahman Benu, Shaheen Samad, Nayla Jaman, Lubna Moriom, Swapan Choudhuri, Bipul Bhattacharya, Sharmin Murshid, Debabrata Chaudhury, Lata Chaudhury, Dulal Chandra Shil and Tareque Ali (Rafiq 'a'). Mr. Tareque Ali becomes the narrator of the film. The directors tried to incorporate their statements in the process of making *Muktir Gan*. Mahmudur Rahman Benu, the Cultural Squad Leader, informed us that they used to learn and practice singing at 140 Lenin Street, Dharmatala in Kolkata at that time. Prof. Wahidul Huq, Cultural Squad director, taught the members patriotic songs of Rabindranath Tagore and others regularly. In this connection he acknowledged his deep indebtedness to the people of India and West Bengal respectively with special reference to Mr. Dipen Bandyopadhyay of West Bengal, who was the Chief Architect of the Cultural Squad. We come to know from Shaheen Samad that they themselves were identified by the term 'Word Warrior'. Lubna Moriom expressed her grief with a statement that nobody remembers the martyrs – the young people embraced death for freedom. She expects that the present generation of young people must understand the significance of War-71 for not to experience the same once again. Sharmin Murshid felt that till now war is continuing and as the war is not over the next generation is liable to carry on the mission until the crisis stops. Thus, if we need to ponder over the social character of this group, we will come to realize the fact that though this group was basically formed by middle class people, but how and when the women of East Bengal had come out breaking the conservative ideas and values imposed on them and joined in all processes for liberating the country. Actually it was achievable as

the women of 1971 of East Pakistan or East Bengal carried the legacy of freedom movement against the colonial British power when innumerable women were used to participate in this process and it was just the continuation of this process (Begam 2011). According to Anupam Hayat (2011), an eminent film critic in Bangladesh, the Mukti juddho women weren't simply victims of the war, who were 'just' raped, murdered or lost their lives. They fought back, and in their individual ways, they underwent the transformation from the imbibed idea of the 'woman' to 'soldier' or 'joddha'. Now it needs mention that huge number of women of the then East Pakistan, raped in the course of Liberation war have been recently recognized as '*Muktijoddha*' instead of only '*Birangana*' coined by Bangabandhu Mujibar Rahman.

Here it is seminal to point out how the idea of liberation was felt by the populace of Bangladesh. *Naeem Mohaiemen (2011) working at HBO Interactive Media, New York* evaluates the liberation war as a middle class phenomenon—'the only class that was truly "liberated" in 1971'. Is it acceptable completely without raising a contradictory observation? It is undeniable that freedom of Bangladesh could not completely liberate people from political and socio-religious anguishes, but it will be an over-estimation to tag a 'middle class' label on people's war, though it was basically led by the middle class people (as represented in the forming of mentioned *Bangladesh Mukti Songrami Shilpi Songstha*) and hence the directors wished to find out the connection of the middle class leadership with the common people.

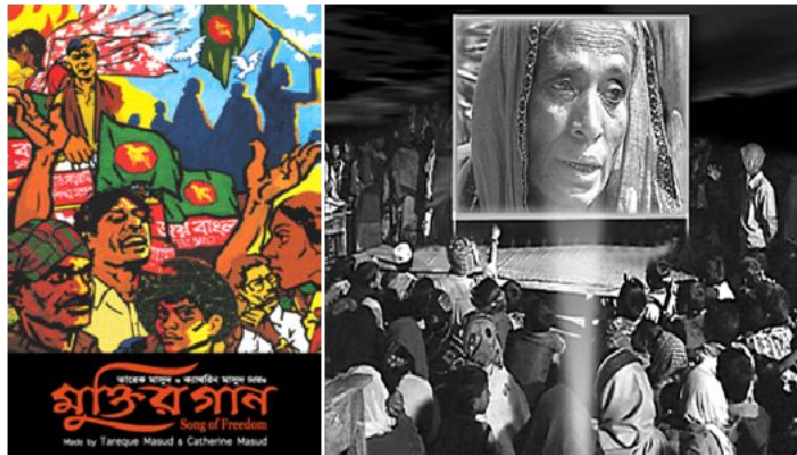
The workers of this organization started their journey with a great determination of promoting the Mukti Joddhas of East Pakistan and supporting the helpless war-affected people of refugee camps settled near the border and liberated zones. The war-affected people of East Pakistan had to stay and spend their dark days like 'animals' in different camps. Every body of the camp had a story of terror and pain. Also beside those refugee camps, make-shift hospitals were being made to nurse those injured in the war. The members of *Bangladesh Mukti Songrami Shilpi Songstha* performed patriotic songs, arranged puppet shows and staged dramas to inspire the freedom fighters and to lift the spirit of war affected people. This bunch of culture promoting group visited the camp, where the guerrilla fighters were being trained by the prominent freedom fighter Gyashuddin Chowdhury. Levin in his quest for film followed the activities of these people, and recorded what became a twenty-hours-long-footage, and later, a prime ingredient for the making of *Muktir Gan*.

The directors weren't making just a documentary, but they were weaving their own narratives into the film, which somehow became a documented story of Bangladesh Liberation war. This subtle weaving created an inter-textuality that paved a more eloquent way for the proceeding of history that the film wanted to show.

In '*Making of Muktir Gan*' Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud have acknowledged their indebtedness to them (BMSSS), without whom this project would not succeed. This part is very significant in understanding the film *Muktir Gan* because it explains the making of the film. Lear Levin tells the story of his adventure in collecting the footage and his views on them, whereas Dina Hossain (Asst. Editor of the film) and the directors inform us that to make this documented story they needed to face different challenges and how successfully they overcame those demands. Junaid Halim ('*Making of Muktir Gan*'), Unit Member, communicated us that how he collected the footage of 7th March speech of Banga Bandhu from Bangladesh Department of Film and Publications Archives.

It is also interesting to note the way the directors incorporated certain elements in the films in connection with the original footage to suit their needs. Mr. Masud collected a footage of Mukti Juddho from Film Division of India where the 'joddhas' were seen in a position of listening to the radio but the footage had no audio effect, so according to Mr. Masud, 'We thought that here we could use the radio announcement by Ziaur Rahman' and finally it was collected from Germany Deutsche Welle Radio Archive with the help of Abdullah Al-Farooq, who was working there. The Director, Mr. Masud was highly impressed with another footage of Levin's material where some 'joddhas' were waiting anxiously, due to heavy rains and thus their delay in the action. This footage had no sound but he wanted to use this footage with proper historical implication. To make it meaningful the director needed some radio shots of 1971 which would merge with the said footage as the warriors of the field were listening to the radio programme '*Songbad Parikroma*', offered by the-then eminent news reader Debdulal Bandyopadhyay. It was not an easy task because the original scripts of that time were not found in the archive and finally it was collected from Pranabesh Sen. Radio shots with some low-lit images were taken by Baby Islam. The original script of narration written in English was translated by Alam Khorshed, into Bengali. Even a list of songs was incorporated (which was not part of Lear's materials) in the film for harmonizing the narrative with the images. Another important footage was collected with silent help of

Bangladeshi writer and official of United Nations, Hasan Ferdaus and used in the film where we face Prime minister General Bhutto of Pakistan announcing that United Nations' help is inessential in the context of declaring war against newly born Bangladesh and restoring Pakistan's prestige. This incorporation needs to be judged separately as it could stimulate the audience, now when they watch it.



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muktir_Gaan. <http://www.filmsouthasia.org/film/muktir-kotha-words-of-Muktir-Ganfreedom/Muktir-Kotha>

It needs to be mentioned here that often the young generation feels an 'alienation effect' when they watch the documentaries. They are alienated not because they have forgotten the sufferings of their parents and relatives, but because the process of moving forward has rendered most of them desensitized to their past, amidst the delirious chore of surviving in a country like Bangladesh. Some footage of genocides, atrocities (e.g. Reuter Television Library-Production number 7006/71, 13859/71, 3367/72) and war fields (from Gita Mehta's film) were collected from different commercial archives and incorporated in the film for making it historically consistent and credible. In this connection, the directors rightly thought on including a scene depicting Guerrilla fight, without which liberation war would have failed to succeed. There was no real footage of Guerrilla fight as it happened secretly in night. So the directors had to take certain rigorous night shots with spontaneous help of local energetic youth, including some original warriors to launch Guerrilla ambush operation.

Liberation War as represented on the screen

The film needed a proper sequence of history, so the film started with the encouraging speech of Bangabandhu Mujibar Rahman, containing an energetic appeal to the mass. ‘Turn every home into a fort. [...] This time our struggle is for freedom’ said Bangabandhu at Polton Maidan Dhaka on 7 March, 1971. As the film proceeds, the affluent terror of Pakistan becomes more vivid as is the conjoined effort of the people to fight against it. The devastated people of East Pakistan (especially the Hindus) could not dare to stay there and started walking for miles in search of a safe shelter towards India. Allen Ginsberg, one of the famous Beat generation poets, visited Bangladesh at such a crucial time and composed his magnificent poem, ‘September, 1971’. *Muktir Gan* also exemplified the fact (mentioned before) that Prime Minister Julfikor Ali Bhutto of Pakistan in question of disgraceful surrender of Pakistan army on 15 December, 1971, repudiated the support of the Security Council and there he avowed that after going back to Pakistan he will declare war again on East Pakistan or newly born Bangladesh. While the film proceeds to show these brutalities, it also charges the viewers with the popular songs such as ‘My Golden Bengal’ or Jyotirindra Maitra’s song, ‘Come on, Comrade of Freedom, Come —Keep marching forward’. People were also greatly cheered up with the words and lyrics of Moshad Ali of Rajsahi, and thus *Muktir Gan* becomes what it intended to be in the end - a cultural weapon against the fascist machine-gun, that was Pakistan (Rafiq Monis’b”). Film critique Mr. Sushil Saha (2013, p.71) believes that watching *Muktir Gan* is *important* for us as it basically tells a story of patriotism with a brilliant blending of memories. He also added that like ‘Ganonatyo Andolon’ in British India, which was reflected in the film *Komol Gandhar*, the young participants of *Muktir Gan* conceived a new thought.

Muktir Kotha: Continuation of Muktir Gan

Muktir Kotha(Words of Freedom)- Can it be considered as the second part of the film *Muktir Gan*? The concept of *Muktir Kotha* emerged when *Muktir Gan* was being shown in different parts of Bangladesh. A group of young people underwent several experiences while putting up shows in various regions of Bangladesh from 1996 to 1999. People who experienced Mukti Juddho for the first time could identify themselves with *Muktir Gan*-they remembered past with tears and promised to be united for the rest of life against the terror that Pakistan embodied, they also urged for justice and punishment of inhuman cruel

soldiers of Pakistan and their collaborator Rajakars (On Line, Wikipedia). While the young organizers were thrilled with the overwhelming audience, they also encountered another reality. Many of the spectators complained that they felt happy to see the documentation and reflections of the Liberation War for the first time in *Muktir Gan* but it failed to include the involvement of others, whose claims seemed to be natural and logical as far as the nature and scope of Mukti Juddho is concerned.

Muktir Kotha appeared with two effects, it united the people of Bangladesh once again—the scattered, forgotten memories were aroused and it dared to tell a story of freedom struggle for the present generation with documentation, on the other hand it contained in itself, a larger history of nation- which was not talked about in *Muktir Gan*. *Muktir Kotha* is a fascinating pattern of documenting and representing oral history in a wider sense as it signifies the worth of others, mainly the marginal people —people who contributed a lot but had not been properly recognized in written history of nation making.

Muktir Kotha also divulges the fact that *Muktir Gan* succeeded in making the urban people—mainly the middle class people of Bangladesh conscious about Liberation War. The people of rural areas identified themselves as the characters of the war too, but they had a different story and a perspective so they needed to add more and more to complete the saga of nation. Smritirekha Biswas could identify herself in time of watching the film *Muktir Gan*. In *Muktir kotha*, she states that while watching *Muktir Gan* she suddenly saw her little brother of four years on the screen and could remember her childhood, and of the time, when she was about twelve years and her family like others was bound to join in a long unending journey for refuge (Chakroborty Sudeshna, 2000) in India. Hakimuddi of Sherpur village lamented on the loss- the memories haunted him and he said that even his family itself could not recognize him as they felt that the dream of independent Bangladesh failed to bring justice and prestige for the liberators of the country (Sahadujjaman”a”). Mohiful of Nagorkonda who lost her husband in Liberation war made the spectators think when she asked if passing on the responsibility to Bangabandhu’s daughter and Prime Minister Shekh Hasina could really usher in better days in independent Bangladesh(Sahadujjaman”b”). *Muktir Kotha* revealed the contribution of the aboriginal people of East Pakistan in the *Mukti Juddho*. They did a lot by all possible means to combat with the opposition, even before proper formation of ‘Mukti Bahini’. Bhupendra Manna,

Korno Jhorar, Krisokra Sonan belonging to Garo subcaste in Muktir Kotha, could remember and state their role in liberation war from the pick of hills of Mymensingha. We are informed of the people in Kodalia village in Faridpur. They go on to state the tragedy of those eighteen women of Kodalia who were killed in 1971 by the Pakistan Army, their pain bursting into rage –as they not only lost life but they could not protect their women and children against the army. A woman from Kodalia said, ‘I don’t think they were Muslims. How could Muslims kill others this way? They raped the women, they found alone in their homes.’

Narir Kotha: A little place for women

The last part of the film *Muktir kotha* includes *Narir kotha* —Women and War (Trauma and triumph of Women in ‘71). It opens with a painful question and as a society, we feel ashamed listening to the particular song with a charge of disrespect and lack of proper recognition of women’s contribution to the cause of independence. The after-war situation was more shocking and dreadful for the women survivors. Many of them had to face scandalous situation, it was another war now, against a society that was patriarchal. *Muktir Kotha* exposed the fact that the women of East Pakistan had an enormous role in Mukti Juddho though some facts have been repeated in *Narirkotha*, which could have incorporated others. Besides, in *Narirkotha*, we meet reverend Sufia Kamal, stretching helping hand towards the torched women, sculptor Firdousi Priobhasini, first woman who gave a public statement of rape/gang rape during war time and after independence she said, ‘I felt I was no longer acceptable in my own society’, group of women giving slogan for independence in public meeting, women- nursing the wounded soldiers and the women getting preparation for war.

Narir Kotha also alerts us as we recognize the involvement of indigenous people in the history of Bangladesh. We observe Mazlibala, an *adibasi* woman who describes her experiences of probable dishonoring by the Pak soldiers and we become surprised when she asks, ‘Is there any difference between dishonor and attempt to dishonor?’ These aboriginal people went to fight with bow and arrows. In the village Chotopaitkandi women and men together defended their village against the invading army with bamboo spears and shields. What is important to look at this juncture is probably the way patriarchy (with no alternative, as it is) shapes the eyes of the society that is plundered by war. The women, who survived the rape and atrocities have been colonized because of their gender and is treated as an outcast by the ‘Big Other’ that operates the society. On the other hand, women

belonging to the lower caste were being doubly colonized, because of their caste. This marginalization along with the awareness of the victims was a marvel to watch.

Let us listen, visualize and understand the story of Liberation war

As the films end, and the past merges with the present, the audience while feeling deranged and alienated also gets the prick of not remembering, if not completely forgetting their history. The directors incorporated a neo-realist (Kuhn Annette and Westwell Guy, 2012) discourse while telling their story- a simple narrative dealing with the tragedy and fear of living with terror. We may conclude with the fact that partially the above discussed films were attached to the filmic discourse of Neorealism. These films completed a journey blended with different songs, audio-visual documentations and interviews of different persons— from distinguished personality to general people— in a rhythm of storytelling. In this regard we may believe in Mr. Masud's understanding when he declares that he required telling a story of nation; and viewers are not passive component hence they actively participated in this process of film making. Accordingly, Mr. Masud wanted to come out from the hypocrisy of traditional written history where marginal people never get the needed space (Masud Tareq"b"). These films with their limitations did succeed in decoding not just the national history but merging it with the many histories of the people that was slowly getting lost in the thoroughfares.

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