



Bina D'Costa

NationBuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia

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reviewed by [Roma Dey](#)

1. Bina D'Costa's *NationBuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* (originally published in 2011 and republished in 2015) rightly finds space in the Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series. D'Costa problematises the exclusion of women's and other subaltern narratives of the nine-month long 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh and its aftermath in the nation-building process in Bangladesh. She argues that subaltern narratives have been either delegitimised or selectively appropriated by the elites and nationalists to fit their patriarchal imagination of the nation. She further argues that this process of silencing subaltern narratives in the larger national narrative has had a precedent in South Asia in the nation-building process of both Pakistan and India, whereby both have delegitimised women's memories and narratives of the partition of 1947.
2. Building upon feminist scholarship that mark nationalism as gendered and constructed (Carol Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* (1998); Nira Yuval-Davis and Flavia Anthias' edited volume *Women, Nation, State* (1989); Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland's edited volume *Gender and International Relations*, (1991); Nira Yuval-Davis' *Gender and Nation* (1997) and others), D'Costa sets upon herself the challenging task of reading the silences of official history on the *Birangona*, the raped woman during the Bangladesh nationalist movement and recovering a history that is inclusive of the lived realities of the people, especially the women.
3. D'Costa argues that the silencing of women's narrative in a post-conflict state is necessary for maintaining the 'state's imagined purity' (p.1) within the patriarchal imagination of the state where the state is imagined as a female and perpetually in danger of being invaded. Thus, in this construct, the narratives of rapes, forced marriages and forced impregnation of women symbolically pollute the national identity and have to be suppressed—their memories delegitimised. Using a feminist constructivist view D'Costa outlines how, in violent conflicts in recent times, women's bodies have been used symbolically to construct a national identity.
4. This is evident in the official process of 'recovery' of 'abducted women' in the aftermath of partition. Both India and Pakistan denied agency to the women in question; women themselves had no say on their future or on that of the children born of them during the period, as such children were seen to belong with their father and father's country. Religious identity was used as the primary criterion to decide the fate of the children (p. 69). D'Costa relies upon literature to build upon this narrative (G.D.

Khosla's *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading up to and Following the Partition of India* (1949); SDPP papers; Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998); R. Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998)). Similarities are found in the course of the rehabilitation program for women in the aftermath of the 1971 Liberation War which is at the crux of the book and is dealt in details in Chapters four and five.

5. Chapter three gives a detailed historical and socio-political analysis of the reasons for the war and breaking away of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from West Pakistan (present day Pakistan). Major among these were the long territorial distance and lack of direct land communication between the two parts of the nation, economic monopolisation of the industrial assets by few families from West Pakistan and the exclusion of the language and cultural symbols of the Bengali majority of East Pakistan. The Bhasha Andolan or Language Movement of 1952, a massive movement, had led to the subsequent recognition of Bengali as a state language. Further, there was inadequate representation of Bengalis in the army, bureaucracy and the parliament. Political parties and leaders of East Pakistan were critical of this institutionalised discrimination against the Bengalis. In the General Election of December 1970 Awami League, the principle opposition party in East Pakistan led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, gained an electoral majority but was not invited to form the government. Further, martial law was promulgated in East Pakistan in March 1971 to restrain the civil disobedience movement and overpower the intelligentsia and the political leaders. On the direction of Mujibur, who had already been arrested, Bangladesh was declared independent and all Bengalis were called upon to fight the Pakistani army. The following nine-month-long military rule in East Pakistan under Lieutenant General Tikka Khan was a strategic genocide which targeted the intelligentsia, Bengalis and supporters of the Mukti Bahini or the Liberation army set up by the Bangladesh government in exile.
6. At the crux of the work is the embittered history of South Asia, the partition of India and Pakistan, and the persecution of the 'hinduised' Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan based on their 'unIslamic' practices of allowing their women to participate and publicly perform songs and dances. The wearing of sari and bindi was proclaimed by the political and religious leaders of Pakistan to be 'unIslamic', and the growing mistrust of the Bengali Muslims who were seen to be close to Indian Bengalis because of their common culture, language and love for Tagore. Language and culture became the axis around which popular perception about and against the Bangladeshi nationalist movement was built on both sides. The clerics in Eastern Pakistan too saw it as an interference of India in Pakistani matters and believed that the Bengali women need to be chastised and if required 'raped' and 'impregnated' by the Pakistani army and their collaborators.
7. Over the years the government of Bangladesh, Pakistan and India had entered into various treaties over the issue of prisoners of war, war crimes and trial of war criminals, yet there has been no progress in getting justice for the Birangonas. According to D'Costa, the Bangladesh government strategically used the data pertaining to war crimes and rapes to get international help and aid in the aftermath of the war. It acted in a fashion similar to the Indian and Pakistani government in the post-partition period. In the manner of a patriarch it established abortion and adoption programmes for the children born out of the war rapes. There was little room for the women (whose age, social and educational conditions varied enormously) to exercise their agency. They were left at the makeshift government rehabilitation centres where they waited their parents or relatives to take them back, which often did not happen. The other government step for rehabilitation was aimed at marrying these women victims off with a dowry. This often failed as men would do away with the dowry and leave the woman behind. The process of economic rehabilitation was almost a non-starter. Over the years the rehabilitation program was merged with the Women's Ministry which brought an end to the testimonies and information of rape survivors and the rehabilitation centre.

8. In the course of her field work in rural Bangladesh in late 1990s and early 2000, D'Costa is faced with silences around women's narratives and is confronted with difficulties in identifying and accessing Birangonas, as the stigma attached to them would cause a social death. The silence is imposed on the women through a long political process and through the traditional patriarchal society (p. 115). D'Costa also interviewed various Bangladeshi social workers, nuns from the Missionaries of Charity, social workers from India and a doctor from the International Planned Parenthood and UNFPA who were part of the Bangladesh government's rehabilitation program in the aftermath of the war. She also interviewed an author who had compiled and published life stories of Birangonas and members of the civil society who were involved in the justice movement for Birangonas.
9. D'Costa laments that Bangladeshi feminists have not protested at the way injustice has been meted out to Birangonas over the decades by successive governments. There has been a political silencing in the way the government treated them. Further, society relegated the women to home and hearth in the post-war scenario which resulted in a decreasing presence of women in activism; men gained independence while the women did not. The few women who did speak up were questioned and stigmatised. The government granted amnesty to all prisoners of war, many of the collaborators of Pakistani army and religious leaders who supported the Pakistani army went on to become ministers and part of the bureaucracy. Individuals responsible for the war crimes were never held responsible while the mistrust amongst the communities continued leading to what D'Costa terms 'brittle peace'. It was only after the 2008 parliamentary elections in Bangladesh, where the Awami League came to power with trials for war crime as part of its election manifesto, that the International Crime Tribunal (ITC) was established in 2010 and several cases were reopened.
10. In the final chapters, D'Costa argues that the Bangladeshi feminist and civil society has to lead the nation towards peace. She argues that lasting peace can be achieved through a multipronged process encompassing individual empowerment as well as transnational networking and peace building. She exerts feminists and activists to help transform the lives of the Birangonas from the context of 'victimisation' to 'self-assertion'. At the same time, civil society and feminists have to build upon transnational networks such as SANGAT (South Asian Network for Gender Activists and Trainers)—which has been actively working in the area of transnational feminism in South Asia since 1990s—to garner support for their demands of people's tribunals for war crimes. She suggests learning from the way people's tribunals in different post-conflict nations have come to recognise and prosecute war crimes, especially, sexual violence. D'Costa also lays open the various hurdles that might confront such a public tribunal—lack of government support and state constraints on non-governmental organisations; lack of transnational networking amongst feminists and lack of required expertise on various issues; shortage of funding and challenges in maintaining confidentiality. Learning from earlier attempts by feminists and activists to claim justice for the Birangonas, D'Costa unpacks each of these probable hurdles and tries to suggest ways to overcome these. In doing so, she endeavours to provide a road map for peace building and justice in South Asia.
11. The book is an important contribution in the field of women studies, political science, international relations and South Asian studies. It gives the reader a view into the particular communal history of South Asia, the way women and minority communities have been violated and repressed under majority religious and nationalist ideologies. It is also a timely contribution (along with other works on Bangladesh such as Yasmeen Saikia's *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh* (2011); and Nayanika Mookherjee's *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (2012) and literature from India on partition) from the subcontinent towards feminist literature on the gendered process of nation building and hegemonic national identity. It shows possibilities of alternatives through the inclusion of micro-narratives and subaltern perspectives. Lastly, in its recognition and call for strengthening transnational feminist networks, it offers an

alternative to the nation state and makes way for further transnational collaborations in South Asia.

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