

(Dis) Appearing Women in Nationalist Narratives

Interview with Dr. Geoffrey Davis (Part 2)

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Documents pointed to a certain physician, Dr. Geoffrey Davis who had been working in the war-torn Bangladesh in 1972. The following is his interview which I conducted in Sydney partly at his residence and later on in a Portuguese restaurant nearby. This interview demonstrates the need to document micro-narratives, the stories of men and women who had been involved in our nation-building project. While many of us are immersed in petty politics our national narrative is being affected by the historical amnesia.

The readers should bear in mind that Dr. Davis has been remembering with my inquiries what happened almost 32 years ago. Therefore, in some places the responses may seem blurred.

Dr. Geoffrey Davis, a Medical Graduate from Sydney, NSW, Australia worked in Bangladesh from March, for about six months in 1972. He worked under the auspices of International Planned Parenthood, the UNFPA and the WHO. He begins by remembering that no particular organisation wanted to claim him as one of their own due to the extremely sensitive nature of his work.

Dr. Davis remembers, 'I was trying to save of what have survived of the children born during the time that the West Pakistani army had Bengali women incarcerated in their commissariats. And all of the ones who had not come to term, our brief was to endeavour them to abort the fetuses so that they didn't bear children as diseased and undernourished as was the case. And that we succeeded in doing. The numbers of everything in Bangladesh

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Mr. Roger Kilham who located Dr. Davis. Sincere thanks to Dr. Hameeda Hossain for her comments on the draft.

were huge of course but by the time we got there a lot of them had been killed or they have been repatriated to their families. That horrified everybody. We had to do something. And tried to sort it out. There was one other guy from England. I've lost track of him since. It was grotesque.'

B: Did you volunteer to go?

GD: Yes, I did.

B: What made you interested to volunteer for this service?

GD: I had a technique for terminating advanced pregnancy. I received training mainly from the UK. However, I usually terminated under 30 weeks pregnancy.

B: Where in Dhaka did you work?

GD: I worked at the clinic in Dhanmondi. I also worked in most of the other towns in what was left of hospitals. What I was doing mainly...the numbers were so huge...I set out to train people in those towns to do what I was doing and as soon as they got the hang of it, I will move on to the next place.

B: For the purpose of the record will you please specify what exactly were you doing over there?

GD: The women's rehabilitation organisation had just been formed before I was there and Justice Sobhan was in charge of that. They were endeavouring to keep all the pregnant women together somewhere safe and all those who were feasible we were to abort and the others who had delivered we were to get their children to International Social Services (ISS)...

B: Do you remember the others who worked with you at that time?

GD: Justice Sobhan headed the War Rehabilitation Organisation and the main active person was Von Schuck...I can't remember his first name. I think his wife's name was Mary. They helped with finances. The names of the Bengali officials I don't remember...besides, nobody wanted to know about this history...

B: What makes you say that?

GD: Oh, because it involved abortion and adoption of babies. And one aspect was that West Pakistan was a commonwealth country and all the officers were trained in England. It was hideously embarrassing for the British government. The West Pakistani officials didn't get why there was so much fuss about that. I interviewed a lot of them. They were in a prison in Comilla and in pretty miserable circumstances (laughter...which served them right). And they were saying, 'What are they going on about? What were we supposed to have done? It was a war!'

B: How did they justify raping the women?

GD: Urghh! They had orders of a kind or instruction from Tikka Khan to the effect that a good Muslim will fight anybody except his father. So what they had to do was to impregnate as many Bengali women as they could. That was the theory behind it.

B: Why did they have to impregnate the women? Did they tell you?

GD: Yes, so there would be a whole generation of children in East Pakistan that would be born with the blood from the West. That's what they said.

B: Numerous documents from Pakistan still suggest that the numbers of rapes had been grossly exaggerated. Do you think that's true?

GD: No, no...they did. Probably the numbers are very conservative compared with what they did. The descriptions of how they captured towns were very interesting. They'd keep the infantry back and put artillery ahead and they would shell the hospitals and the schools.

And that caused absolute chaos in the town. And then the infantry would go in and begin to segregate the women. Apart from little children, all those were sexually matured would be segregated while the rest of the infantry tied... the rest of the town, which would involve shooting everybody who was involved with the East Pakistani government or the Awami League. And then the women would be put in the compound under guard and made available to the troops. It was most hideous. I know of no precedent anywhere in the world ever. Nonetheless, that's how it had happened.

B: Did you have any conversation with the men and women or the social workers at the Clinic about their experiences of the war? Especially to the women about rape camps in particular?

GD: Yes, we used to hear about it all the time. Some of the stories they told us were appalling. Being raped again and again and again. By large Pathan soldiers. You couldn't believe that anybody would do that.

All the rich and pretty ones were kept for the officers and all the other ones were distributed among the other ranks. And the women had it really rough. They didn't get enough to eat. When they got sick, they got no treatment. Lot of them died in those camps. There was an air of disbelief about the whole thing. That no body could credit that it really happened! But the evidence clearly showed that it did happen.

B: Yes, I see what you mean. Because you know I myself over the last four years have tried to locate the women. The numbers were huge and one would expect to find a lot of them. But I myself could only find a very limited number of women.

GD: Yes, there had been lot of denial. And they just blocked it out. That happens.

B: Was it different at that time, immediately after the war? Did anyone share their experiences?

GD: No, no body wanted to talk about it. You could ask questions and get an answer. Quite often it would be that they couldn't remember. And the men didn't want to talk about

it at all! Because according to them the women had been *defiled* (my emphasis). And women's status in Bangladesh was pretty low anyway. If they had been defiled they had no status at all. They might as well be dead. And men killed them. I couldn't believe it. That is so alien to a western society! It's so alien!

B: You couldn't obviously speak Bengali. Was it difficult to communicate?

GD: No, I had an interpreter. A man. They got fairly organized very quickly. They provided me with a Landrover, a driver and a field officer who was also my interpreter. The driver was Mumtaz. But I can't remember the FO's name... a government official. An amazing number of them speak English. I didn't have any difficulty that I faced in Tunisia (Dr. Davis also worked extensively with the Tunisian population policy program).

B: In your opinion, why do you think the women remained silent?

GD: Horror, you see. They all had nightmares. You never get over it! A lot of them had tremendous anxiety. Because we were foreign and they didn't trust anybody who was foreign. They didn't know what we were going to do to them...

B: Did you visit any areas where the rape camps were situated?

GD: Rape camps had been disbanded and the Rehabilitation Organisation was trying to get the women back to their village or town. But what was happening in a lot of instances was that they'd get a wife back to the husband and he would kill her. Because she had been defiled. And in some cases they didn't want to know about what happened. And there were bodies in Jamuna right up to the distant parts of the country. And it was that what got people excited in Europe in what was going on.

B: Do you remember the women? How many you were performing abortion on?

GD: It's hard to recall the exact statistics. But about hundred a day.

B: In Dhaka or in other parts of Bangladesh?

GD: It is difficult to put a figure in it. About 100 a day in Dhaka and in variable numbers in lot of other towns. And some would go to Calcutta...

B: Do you recall the percentage? For example, class wise, religion wise how many women you saw?

GD: It was right across the classes. We didn't care what they were religion-wise...we had to get them out of the trouble.

In general, of course the rich ones were able to leave the country as soon as there was an armistice and go to Calcutta to get abortion and they did that...

B: Were the women asked if they wanted to have abortion? Were they given the choice?

GD: Yes. Certainly. All the women we received wanted to have abortions. Anybody who didn't want to have it we didn't see. On the other hand, the women, who had delivered, handed the newborn babies over to the rehabilitation organisation. And that's how they got to the ISS and other countries. How many, I have no idea.

B: I apologize for probing further into this. But I am really interested in the choice or consent involved in the rehabilitation program. Do you recall women crying or being visibly upset during the abortion procedure?

GD: No, none of them cried. They were very impressive. They didn't cry at all. They just stayed very quiet. Oh, thank God! That made it easier for us!

B: You mentioned that you only provided treatment to the women who chose to abort their babies. I just want to return to that point. Who did the women give their consent to: the involved doctors, nurses or social workers about terminating their pregnancies?

GD: Oh, Yes.

B: Did they have to sign a paper?

GD: I think they had to sign a document of consent. I am not sure though. The government indirectly organized that. It was organized largely by the Rehabilitation Organization. And the women who were helping with that. No body got near the clinic who haven't agreed to have an abortion, that's for sure. So, that was not an issue.

B: Did you perform abortion till the very end? Wouldn't that be at a stage of advanced pregnancy?

GD: Yes, I terminated pregnancy for all six months I had been there. They had such a degree of malnutrition that a term fetus of forty weeks was about the same size as 18 weeks anywhere else.

B: Do you recollect the women or the children receiving any kind of counselling?

GD: Counselling, yes with the rehabilitation organisation. There were women social workers who talked to them. I don't think it helped them. Because they were all malnourished, had horrible deficiency diseases...and they all had venereal diseases of one kind or another. It was pretty dreadful. The country had very little resources, medicines and facilities to deal with this problem. And the limited resources were kept for the war veterans, etc. There was not much left for the women. We had to bring our own stuff in.

B: Where did you get your supplies? Was it enough?

GD: From England. I was told to bring my own supply. I also took two sets of instruments and the antibiotics.

B: Have you used only these two sets of instruments for six months to terminate pregnancy?

GD: Yes. The instruments in the local hospitals were destroyed and there wasn't much. And medicinal stuff was only for the wounded men.

B: Was it medically safe?

GD: Yes. It was lot less dangerous then going into term with all those diseases, particularly the younger ones.

B: So you were involved in both the abortion program and the adoption?

GD: Yes. But with regard to the adoption program, only in handing the babies over to the ISS. Any little ones, even up to toddlers... That was all a bit much. But the numbers involved having abortion or newborn were huge. The compound where the women had been kept during the war must have been enormous. But they all had been disbanded by the time I got there.

B: What about outside of Dhaka city, in the areas where you had been? What kind of facilities were made available?

GD: Hospitals and the Rehabilitation organisation...I can't remember what it was called! The Bangladesh National Women's Rehabilitation Organisation or something like that. That was operating in most of the large centres. And the numbers being done prior to me going there was negligible because no body wanted to do that. Most of the medical staff in the hospital thought it was illegal. However, I had a letter from the Secretary of the State, Rob Chowdhury authorizing my work there. It mentioned that anything I wanted to do was perfectly legal and they wee to give me all assistance. I can't find the letter now. It is probably somewhere...Lots of papers from Bangladesh...I thought it was important since I was never going to see anything like that ever again as long as I lived. So, I better keep those. It was very hard, horrific at that time.

B: Did all the women generally agree to have abortion or give up their babies for adoption? Were any of them interested to keep the baby?

GD: Well...a few of them did...

B: Do you know what happened to them?

GD: I have no idea. ISS was there to get as many babies as they could. Because there were less and less babies available for adoption in America and Western Europe and they wanted to get as many babies as they could get.

B: International Social Services?

GD: Yes. It's based in Washington DC. A major organization involved for adoption.

B: What happened to the mothers?

GD: After abortion or delivery they stayed for a little while and then went off to the accommodation provided by the Relief and Rehabilitation Center. They could stay there for as long as they liked. And then the women went into training programs. I saw a few of those. People making clothes on a promotional basis. In Dhaka, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Noakhali.

My sincere thanks to Dr. Davis for sharing his account. Before I left, we had an extensive discussion about his revisiting Bangladesh. Our discussion naturally led to future possibilities of a war-crime tribunal. Geoff held my hand tightly and placed it on his chest. He had tears in his eyes. He said he'd do anything in his power to help Bangladesh in its effort to seek justice. As a preliminary step, I genuinely hope that this interview will inspire interested groups to organize for an official documentation of his story.