It was way back in 1947 that a dedicated group of persons got together, united in a determination to bring out a magazine solely for women. Times were hard. Political instability and unrest rocked the country. Hindu-Muslim riots spread like wild fire over the sub-continent. But this group worked doggedly on, committed to fulfill their aim of publishing a magazine which would give women a new direction, and literature of the new age.

began the journey of Begum.

In 1950, after partition, the Begum 'family' shifted from Calcutta to Dhaka. The Begum office at Old Dhaka was at Loyal Street, the area now known as Patuatuli.

The problems persisted. Writings by women contributors were few and far between. But patience had its rewards, and Begum's objectives gradually began to see the light of day. More and more women gradually became involved in literary exercise. With a keen sense of farsightedness, Mohammed Nasir Uddin set up the Saugat Press. The income from this press was used to bring out Begum.

In 1954, the Begum Club was established in a hall room alongside the Begum office. Previously, women had no place where they could get together, discuss and exchange ideas. As APWA (All Pakistan Women's Association) was mainly concentrated in Karachi, there was really nothing for the women in Dhaka. And so Mohammed Nasir Uddin set up this women's club, the hall room big enough to facilitate a meeting of a hundred women. Shamsun Nahar Mahmud was the president of this Begum Club.

The Begum Club continued up till 1970. There perhaps wasn't a single artiste at that time who hadn't performed at the Begum Club. It was the meeting place of all the talented and distinguished women of the day. This included Laila Samad, Laila Arjumand Banu, Maqbula Manzur, Manjusri Chowdhury, Dr Nilima Ibrahim and more. They would speak of their problems, air their views. The club would accord receptions to writers, social workers and all sorts of eminent women delegates visiting the country. These events would all appear in the pages of Begum. And thus Begum became the symbol of the enlightened woman.

Begum began selling at a price of 25 paisa per issue and today it costs an affordable seven taka per issue. "We always try to keep the price at a minimum," says the present editor of Begum, Nur Jehan Begum, daughter of the late Mohammed Nasir Uddin, "After all, the average Bengali woman does not have too much money in hand to spend."



Courtesy Begum

Begum also aims to encourage the women of the small district towns to read. It reaches out to the women of the remotest areas of the country, attempting to instill in them the habit of reading.

But the fact remains that today Begum's circulation has dropped to 12 thousand. Editor Nur Jehan Begum admits, "It is unfortunate, but true, that Begum has not really kept up with the changing times. It has failed to attract the contemporary women."

Writer Nilima Ibrahim says, "Begum is composed in exactly the same manner that it was composed over the past 25 years. There is a lack of imagination. Times have changed, but Begum hasn't. It has the same layout, the same style, the same printing. There is no reflection of the modern bent of mind. And so Begum is losing its old friends. The Begum Club would hold meetings exclusively for women, but even those meetings haven't taken place over the past 10 years. Begum is failing to fulfill its original objective."

"Begum had a certain standard before," agrees writer Jahanara Arzoo, "But that has not been maintained."

Of course certain changes have taken place. Computers have replaced manual typewriters. Begum now comes off a modern offset printing machine rather than the ancient treadle press. The cover, instead of featuring black and white pictures of the homely housewife, now features coloured pictures of glamourous film stars. But these changes are not enough to meet the demand of today's woman. Is Begum then facing a losing battle?

The questions are many, but the fact remains that Begum has survived the wear and tear of time over the past 50 years. That can't be said of any other women's journal in the sub-continent. So hope lives on. Begum will survive.

—PROBE News Agency