

# TRIBUTE TO NURJAHAN BEGUM

An icon, a visionary, a trailblazer for women of this country, is no more. Nurjahan Begum, the editor of *Begum*, the first weekly exclusively devoted to women's issues, breathed her last on May 23, 2016, after days of being on life support. To honour this extraordinary woman, *The Daily Star* pays tribute to her by reprinting excerpts of a story based on an interview with her in 2005, published in *The Star Weekend Magazine*.

## LEADING WOMEN TO CHANGE

KAJALIE SHEHREEN ISLAM

**N**URJAHAN Begum, editor of *Begum* magazine, began her career in the 1940s. Journalism, activism, social work -- she has done it all, and at a time when people would have trouble imagining women doing anything of the sort. To this day, she continues to help women in towns and villages find a foothold in society through her efforts to provide them with knowledge, a sense of awareness and even identities as women writers.

She goes to work every morning at 8 and returns home every afternoon to her sprawling house in Pura Dhaka -- her home since 1950 -- and continues the work she and her father started decades ago. It is not an empire she manages now, but it has served, for well over half a century, the purpose with which it was begun -- to bring Bangalis, especially Bangali Muslim women, out from behind the closed walls of their homes and into the wider, changing society of which they are part.

Nurjahan Begum was born on June 4, 1925, as Nurun Nahar. Her father, renowned journalist and editor of the monthly *Saogat*, Mohammad Nasiruddin, lived in Kolkata, while she, "Nuri", lived with her mother, Fatema Begum, in Chalitotoli. After an accident in which Nuri fell into a pond in the village at the age of four, her father quickly had her move to Kolkata with her mother, thinking his daughter would be far safer there.

"When I came to Kolkata," reminisces Nurjahan Begum, "my father, to the utter dismay of my mother, had my nose-pin cut off and my hair sheared into a 'China bob' cut!"

Mohammad Nasiruddin was a progressive man and he wanted his daughter to be the same, easily fitting into Kolkata society and making something of herself with a good, well-rounded education. Little Nuri was taught nursery rhymes, poems and *surahs* by her mother, and the Bangla, Arabic and

English alphabet by both her parents. Her father would bring home books and magazines for Nuri to go through and look at pictures. Slowly, she grew an interest in books. Even before she had learnt to read properly, Nuri began to file her father's collection of local and foreign publications just by looking at the pictures. Delighted by her keen intelligence, Nuri's grandmother, Nurjahan, decided to name her granddaughter after herself, and, from then on, she became Nurjahan Begum.

Nurjahan Begum got admitted into Baby Class at Begum Rokeya's Sakhawat Memorial School. She loved it there -- the playing, drawing, arts and crafts. But when the workload got to be a little too much after Class 2, her father shifted her to a school near their home, Beltola Girl's School. In Class 5, however, she went back to Sakhawat Memorial School, from where she passed her Matriculation in 1942. Nurjahan Begum remembers the school fondly as the basis of her success later on in life. She had the opportunity to learn to do a bit of everything there, from singing, dancing and acting to cooking, sewing, drawing and sports. In 1944, she passed her Intermediate examinations in philosophy, history and geography, and, in 1946, her Bachelors in ethics, philosophy and history from Lady Brabourne College.

Nurjahan Begum was highly active throughout her school and college life. "I had a wonderful childhood," she says. "We did everything, from singing and dancing to acting." She even wrote, directed and acted in college plays. "But it was all within the walls of the school and college," she recalls.

Most Bangali, and especially Muslim, women of the time hardly stepped out of the house, let alone sing and dance in public places. The volatile days of 1947 had made it even more dangerous for people living in this region.

"It was under these circumstances," says Nurjahan Begum, "that *Begum* was first published."

*"There will always be religious conflict, social bindings and people trying to hold us back. We can lie low for a while, but ultimately, we have to move forward."*

Nurjahan Begum  
(June 4, 1925 - May 23, 2016)



PHOTO: HASAN RAJA

Nurjahan Begum's father, Mohammad Nasiruddin, had wanted to bring women into journalism. He therefore started an annual women's issue of *Saogat* in 1927. Every year, one issue of the monthly would be dedicated exclusively to women, with writings by women around the country that Mohammad Nasiruddin had to put in much effort to collect. In 1945, the last issue of *Janana Mahal* came out. It seemed to Mohammad Nasiruddin that one women's issue per year was not really doing much to improve the situation of women in journalism and, in turn, society. Thus, in 1947, a month before India's Partition, weekly *Begum* was first published in Kolkata. Its first editor was Begum Sufia Kamal, and acting editor, Nurjahan Begum, who had already been working for *Saogat*, took over a few months later.

"It was very difficult to bring out the publication at that time," recalls Nurjahan

Begum. There was the problem of block and type, of collecting ink and paper, and of transporting the staff to and from the office during the communal riots. There were not too many women writers and hardly any women photographers. "But we still managed to bring out an issue every week," says Nurjahan Begum proudly.

After three years in Kolkata, *Begum* moved to Dhaka, along with Mohammad Nasiruddin, Nurjahan Begum and the rest of the family.

The response to *Begum* was enormous. Not only were women from across the country writing letters and giving feedback on the various writings published in the magazine, but so were many men. Nurjahan Begum also reminisces about her father and her husband, the two men who had the greatest influence on her life and success in her career. Her father was the one to lead her down the path of journalism, though Nurjahan Begum believes that passion for journalism -- or any profession for that matter -- is inborn. "It cannot be forced upon you," she says. All her life, she has simply done what she always wanted to and what she felt she was meant to do.

Her husband, Rokonzaman Khan -- whom she married initially against the will of her father -- later became a renowned journalist in his own right. Popularly known as "Dadabhai" later on, Khan had worked for *Saogat*, and was later editor of the literature and feature pages of the daily *Ittefaq* as well as of *Kochikanchar Ashor* for children.

After her, says Nurjahan Begum, her daughters will take charge of *Begum*. "Great changes will take place in their hands," she says. "They won't accept bad writing. They want good paper and colour in the magazine."

Her eldest daughter, Flora Nasrin Khan Shakhi, did her Honours and Master's in English Literature from Dhaka University. Her younger daughter, Rina Yasmin Miti, did her Honours and Master's in Sociology from the same institution. They are both married and work for *Begum* from time to time. Nurjahan Begum has five grandchildren.

*Begum* magazine is currently a monthly costing Tk. 10 (as opposed to the 25 paise it used to be sold at in the beginning), but its editor has hopes of bringing it out as a weekly again.

Despite the various problems she has faced over the years in bringing out the magazine, from communal riots to postage problems, Nurjahan Begum has not lost her zeal for her

work or the profession as a whole. She does not sit around simply praising the women journalists today but rather worries about what still holds them back.

"Transport problems and lack of security are the main problems facing women journalists today," she says. "In the old days, my friends and I used to go watch the 9 o'clock show at the movies, which would end at midnight (albeit with her father)," she recalls. "It can hardly be thought of in our country today."

Women are much more insecure and much less free today, believes Nurjahan Begum. "Sometimes I wonder whether it's a conspiracy to hold women back," she says.

Besides her journalistic career, Nurjahan Begum was also a dedicated social worker. From volunteering at refugee camps during the communal riots to working for the Muslim Orphanage and Women's Home of which she was secretary, she became involved in social work soon after finishing college. Later, she became member and president of various women's organisations, including the Wari Mohila Samity and the Narinda Mohila Samity. Through these, she worked for primary education and structural activities for children, first aid and adult education. She campaigned and raised funds to help victims of natural disasters.

Nurjahan Begum did many things at a time when it was much less easy than it is today, and what many women would not have the courage or determination to do even today. With the help of her father, she also established the Begum Club in 1954. Though now defunct, in its time, the Club was a thriving organisation of women from home and abroad getting together to discuss literature and music, culture and society. Nurjahan Begum still has hopes of reviving the Club.

The goal of *Begum* as a publication and of Nurjahan Begum -- an institution in herself -- has always been to take women forward, by informing and involving them in the society they dwell in and contribute to. "There will always be problems we will have to face," says Nurjahan Begum. "There will always be religious conflict, social bindings and people trying to hold us back. We can lie low for a while, but ultimately, we have to move forward," she says. "It's the only way to go."

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(L) Nurjahan Begum with her husband Rokonzaman Khan 'Dadabhai' in her office. (R-Top) A print of *Begum*. (R-Down) Offices of *Saogat* and *Begum*.

COURTESY: PERSONAL COLLECTION OF DILMONWARA MONI

## An MP's 'wisdom' and humiliation of a teacher Justice is yet to be done

MEER AHSAN HABIB

**W**E are extremely grateful for the timely initiative of the education minister, whose ministry reinstated Shyamal Kanti Bhakta, the humiliated headmaster of Narayanganj Piyar Sattar Latif High School, and scrapped the school management committee after the investigation committee found allegations of the headmaster demeaning religion to be untrue. Even before taking the laudable step, the Education Minister was embarrassed; the Law Minister has also termed the incident as a "punishable act". Even after such reactions from two ministers of the government, the school management committee seemed to have suddenly woken up from years of hibernation and suspended him on grounds of "corporal punishment, irregularities and bribery in recruitment of teachers, derogatory remarks against Islam, unauthorised leave of absences and late entry at school". This chain of incidents indicates that foul play and attempts to rule and reign over justice was at play. This was mostly possible because the incident involved the MP of Narayanganj, Selim Osman.

Mr. Osman wears many hats -

lawmaker, business leader, leader of the opposition and many more. But on top of everything else, he belongs to the powerful 'Osman Clan' of Narayanganj. This mighty clan allegedly rules the town with its unique style of governance, has its own court of justice and apparently formulate their own laws when they feel the necessity. In fact, this sense of entitlement and 'justice' was what moved him to "save" a 'notorious' (!) headmaster from being lynched by a mob. At least that's what he claimed in defense of his heinous action that outraged the country. Thousands of youngsters took to streets and the social media to protest the incident, apologising to the teacher for the torture inflicted on him. Infuriated students, teachers, celebrities and activists posted pictures of them holding placards that read 'Sorry Sir', and holding their ears in a show of solidarity with Shyamal Kanti. "We stand here with immense sadness, anger and shame. A lawmaker enacts laws and shows direction to the nation," said Pro-Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University, Dr. Nasrin Ahmed.

The MP applied his 'wisdom' to lead an all out public humiliation of the poor headmaster for his alleged derogatory remarks against religion -- an allegation that, we must stress

once again, was found to be baseless. The headmaster's dignity was shred to pieces along with his clothes. It was a different kind of court of justice, where any Tom, Dick and Harry could try anyone at will. The so-called court gave its verdict and immediately executed the punishment by making him hold his

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ears and do squats in the presence of a public audience. He was first mercilessly beaten by a gang of ruffian men who seem to have mitherminded the whole thing - first they spread the rumour that he had made derogatory remarks about religion, then they used the local

mosque to instigate the incident.

The whole incident seems to be made up only to humiliate him and oust him from the position of headmaster and appoint someone who would do 'as they are told'. While carrying out his humiliating 'punishment', the headmaster collapsed on the ground, only to be

ordered to apologise again and again in front of the public, some of whom were heard chanting slogans like 'Joy Bangla' and 'Joy Bangabandhu' that represents the spirit of the Liberation War of 1971.

According to media reports, Shyamal Kanti was a respected

personality in his area. He brought the school to its present state of success by working tirelessly and spending years of his life improving the state of education in his institute. He even went door to door to encourage parents to send their kids to his school. At one point, a conflict of interests developed between the headmaster and the management committee, as claimed by the victim. He alleged that the management committee was probably waiting for an opportunity to replace him, and exploited the opportunity when a student alleged that the headmaster had hit him.

Allegations (most often false) of someone hurting religious sentiments seem to have become weapons to serve ill-intentioned objectives of certain groups. A series of planned attacks on Buddhist monasteries and houses in Ramu in 2012, and assaults on other religious minorities are examples of this. This latest heartbreaking incident can have many interpretations, and different interest groups can analyse the actual objectives behind the humiliation in a number of ways, but that will take us nowhere unless we admit that 'intolerance' and 'might is right' is gradually encroaching the regions of 'freedom of thought' and 'democratic

space'. It goes without saying that beating a student or handing out corporal punishment is against the law, but then again under no circumstance can a lawmaker impose his own notion of justice on another individual. Did Selim Osman forget his oath of upholding the law and protecting the citizens of his constituency? Or did he solely take the oath to secure his seat at the Parliament?

Didn't this debasing act bring disgrace to the Parliament, the business community and the society as a whole, let alone the MP who was behind all of this? No words can justify the horror of this incident, where a lawmaker takes law into his own hands with impunity, thereby establishing his might and power. Like a lonesome soldier in the enemy field, Shyamal Kanti is fighting for justice. Reinstating him in his former position is the very first stage of justice, but it should not end here. If the state does not stand by him, justice will never be served. The state, in this case, must prove that everyone is truly equal in the eye of the law.

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