

92nd Birth Anniversary of Nurjahan Begum

A pioneer's dream remains unfulfilled

KAJALIE SHEHREEN ISLAM

ONE of my earliest memories of my grandmother's house is that of her bookshelves stacked with copies of *Begum* magazine. At eight or ten years old, all I knew was that it was a magazine about women, published by a woman. It was only after I grew up, ventured into journalism myself, and, some years later, met its editor in an interview she gave to the *Star* magazine in 2005, that I realised what exactly that meant.

"Nuri", as she was called in childhood, had been exposed to books and magazines from an early age. Her schooling at Begum Rokeya's Sakhawat Memorial School where she learnt everything from singing, dancing and acting, to cooking, sewing and sports, lay the foundation for her success in life. In 1946, she graduated from Lady Brabourne College, having completed her Bachelors in ethics, philosophy and history. She was very culturally active, performing in and directing plays, but all within the walls of her school and college, for it was a time when Muslim women hardly stepped out of their homes, let alone perform in public.

That was the context in which *Begum* magazine was first published, just before the Partition of 1947. Nurjahan Begum took over from its first editor, poet Sufia Kamal, a few months later. It was far from easy. There were issues with printing, with transporting the staff during the communal riots. Women writers were few and far between and women photographers even more rare. Yet, *Begum* was published every week, first from Kolkata and later from Dhaka.

Today, women are not rare in the news media. In fact, they are the face of many television channels in Bangladesh, as news anchors and talk show hosts. Women reporters in both the electronic and print media have also made a name for themselves. Yet, despite the visibility of women in the



Begum's trailblazing editor at work.

news, just what role are they actually playing on and off screen?

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) has, every five years since 1995, studied women's presence in relation to men, gender bias and stereotyping in news media content. The GMMP 2015 study found that only 37 percent of stories in newspapers, television and radio newscasts were reported by women and that women made up only 24 percent of the persons heard, read about or seen in newspaper, television or radio news. The gap is widest in news about politics and the government where women are only 16 percent of the people in the stories. This relative invisibility of women in the traditional news media has even crossed over to online

digital platforms where women make up only 26 percent of the people in internet news stories and media news tweets.

For Bangladesh, the numbers are even lower. Whereas the number of women presenters on radio and television respectively has increased from 33 percent and 36 percent in 2010 to 67 percent and 66 percent in 2015, the number of women reporters remains the same at a low 8 percent. The number of women cited as sources, as professionals and in terms of their participation in economic life is very low. Portrayal of women as helpless victims remains high as in previous years.

According to the Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media 2011, women's representation

in Bangladeshi media is highest at the top, at the governance level, where women are 26.8 percent, and 'troublingly low' at a ratio of 5:1 men to women across occupational levels for the 11 companies surveyed. This has been attributed across several studies to a number of factors, including significant levels of gender-based discrimination and censorship of women journalists. In terms of salary, women on average earn less than their male counterparts. With regards to company policy, women journalists have cited a number of factors which, if implemented at the policy level, could aid them in their duties, including wage equity, paid maternity leave and benefits, child care support, flexible work arrangements during pregnancy,

freedom from gender discrimination and sexual harassment, and a gender-friendly work environment overall. In addition, facilities as simple as office transport could aid women in overcoming actual obstacles of security which may currently be preventing them from travelling long distances or working late nights – factors which are often mentioned in relation to women's efficiency at the workplace. The fact that journalists in the electronic media are accompanied by a crew including a vehicle is one reason for women's more secure status and thus more ambitious pursuits on television, unlike in the print media where reporters are basically on their own.

The gender ratio of news reporters is important because, as the GMMP report has shown, 14 percent of stories by female reporters focus centrally on women, in contrast to 9 percent of stories by their male counterparts. The fact that women account for less than one-fifth of staff at all levels except governance, is reflected in the generally gender biased reporting in the Bangladeshi news media. Women have little voice, not only in deciding what will make the news, but also in how it will be written or photographed or filmed and, finally, presented. Thus, not only is women-related news largely absent from the main newspaper in general, and the front pages in particular, but that which exists, often employs gender insensitive language and imagery.

Bangladesh is a signatory to international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, Section J of which spells out two strategic objectives in regard to women and the media that are aimed at promoting women's empowerment and development: increasing the participation and access of women to

expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication; and promoting a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media. Bangladesh, in its National Women Development Policy 2011, addresses these concerns. It contains a number of provisions on media content and the accurate portrayal of women in the media, including the removal of discrimination against women's participation in the media; the creation of equal opportunities for the training of women at the management and programme levels; and the integration of a gender perspective in media policy. The media industry, however, is yet to implement these provisions, whereas a comprehensive gender sensitive media policy has been the demand of media activists and women's rights groups for years now.

Twelve years ago, Nurjahan Begum expressed – along with praise for contemporary women journalists – her concerns, viewing the lack of security of women and restrictions on their freedom as "a conspiracy to hold them back". Nurjahan Begum, journalist, activist, social worker, accomplished in the mid-20th century what is still impossible for some and a challenge for many women in 21st century Bangladesh. While she is labelled a trailblazer for Bangladeshi women journalists, how far we have been able to traverse the path that she forged 70 years ago remains questionable. She acknowledged that it wasn't easy, that there will always be problems – religious conflict, social bindings, people trying to hold us back – but she also firmly believed that despite all these, the only way to move was forward. That is something we must never lose sight of.

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The Unfinished Task of Teaching History



ADNAN MORSHED

TEACHING history has always been tricky. I have been examining how history is taught in architecture programmes in Bangladeshi universities. Even though my focus has been on one particular discipline, the inquiry reveals

multidisciplinary implications and, more broadly, current intellectual challenges in higher learning and research.

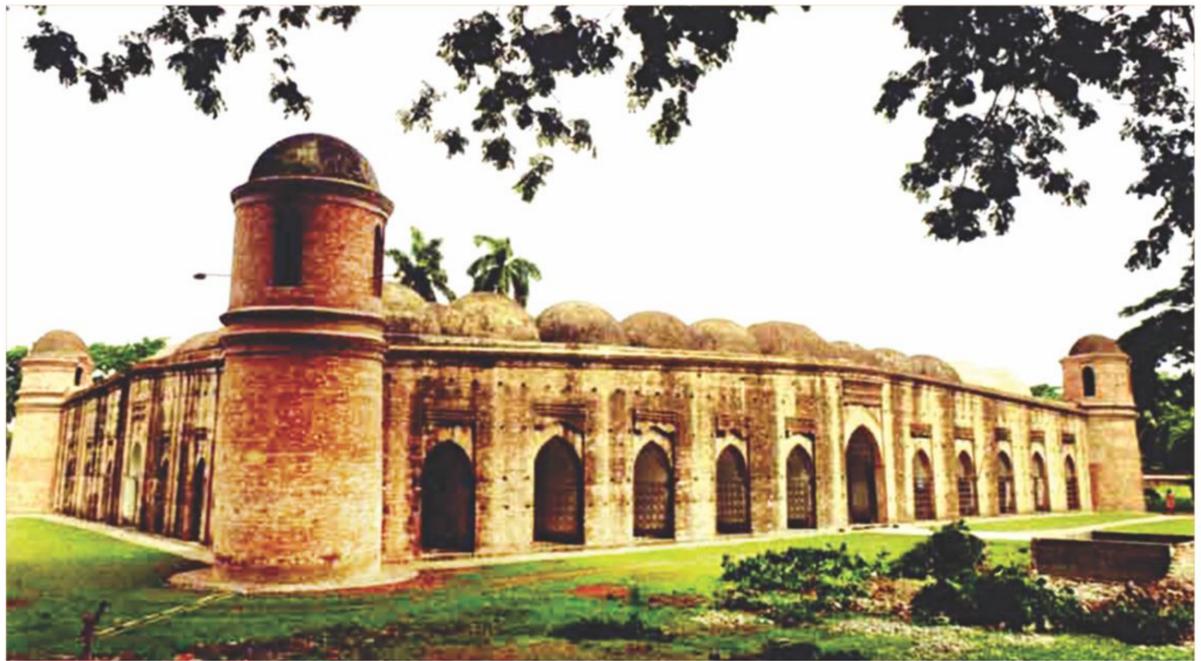
As one would imagine, all architecture students are required to study architectural history from ancient to modern times, as a way to understand how architecture as a civilisational practice has evolved over time and across cultures. This historical knowledge would then, one hopes, empower them to think about the built environment as a holistic building practice in all its complexities and connectivities.

But teaching architectural history, just like history proper, is not easy because interpretations of how things happened in the past are obviously not universally agreed on. Different historians write about the past from different political, social, cultural, and philosophical vantage points. Who is writing history and for whom leave unmistakable traces of biases, prejudices, and power relations. One way or the other, history is political.

The foundation of modern historiography was laid during the West's colonial domination of the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that the West's historiographic accounts of the East would be influenced by Eurocentric ideologies. Since, in Bangladesh, as in other developing countries, we are mostly dependent on textbooks written by western authors, it is necessary for us to understand the western intellectual politics of seeing the rest of the world. In *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, the early nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) – while stating that history marches forward with a universal consciousness of freedom – argued that the kind of social conditions that were necessary to pursue self-reflection didn't exist outside the West. In other words, the East was somewhat of history's backwater, static and unable to evolve on its own.

Hegel's philosophy of history profoundly influenced how history was written during the 19th and 20th centuries. Consider British architectural historian Bannister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture*, which became a standard history textbook for architects around the world, including Bangladesh, throughout the 20th century and onward. Generations of architects graduating from different departments of architecture in Bangladesh pretty much learned about history through the lens of this canonical book.

Fletcher divided the history of world architecture into two types: one that evolved and one that didn't. What he called "non-historical" styles included architectural traditions of, for instance, India, China, and Mexico, regions that "exercised little influence on the main stream of architectural development." Fletcher's contention was that



The Shat Gombuj Mosque, also known as the Sixty Dome Mosque, built by the Muslim sufi saint Khan Jahan Ali in around 1450 A.D. and situated in Bagerhat of southern Bangladesh, has an architectural style strongly resembling the Bengal mosques of the pre-Mughal era.

most non-Western architectural styles over time stagnated as cultural forces, thereby offering little significance for world history. His rationale was based on not only Hegel's asymmetric classification of the world, but also prevalent 19th-century Darwinian views of racial hierarchy. That is, certain racial groups and their culture were destined to perish because they were inconsequential in the formation of world civilisations.

Alas, our students in Bangladesh mostly remain unaware of Fletcher's Hegelian Eurocentric attitude. Some architectural schools here still use his book with uncritical loyalty, inadvertently perpetuating a West-centric pedagogy in which architecture students quickly buy into the West's alleged superiority over the rest of the world. The situation is further complicated by a dearth of well-researched local teaching materials that could present alternative narratives. The lesson here is that educators and researchers in Bangladesh need to reduce their dependence on imported textbooks, while offering a more balanced view of the world by writing textbooks themselves.

We haven't done a good job of teaching history critically, often failing to expose hidden meanings in the things that we learn. For instance, in Bangladeshi architectural curriculum, students learn about architecture through a linear model of history that begins with Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Indus Valley civilisation, but triumphantly ends in the US and Europe, where modernism flourishes. In this linear model, things that are deemed static or culturally insignificant are discarded. For example, the Roman Emperor Justinian's 6th-century Byzantine Church, Hagia Sophia (in

Constantinople or Istanbul), is taught, while contemporary Buddhist architecture in Bengal is not. Mahasthangarh is rarely mentioned in the required course on the history of world architecture.

In fact, history of Bengal architecture is taught only in later years as a stand-alone (often elective) course, as if Bengal was an isolated region, cut off from other geographies. Unwittingly, we indoctrinate our students with certain types of intellectual self-pity. Both West-centrism and ultra-nationalism are expressions of this phenomenon.

After the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), an intellectual shock wave hit most humanities department in the US and beyond. Said demonstrated how through different kinds of scholarship and cultural productions (literature, for instance) the West produced certain types of perceptions of the East, essentially creating the image of an inferior Other and, ultimately, a justificatory path for colonial domination.

In the wake of *Orientalism*, postcolonial scholars, in particular, began to question the ideological premises of Eurocentrism and produce revisionist histories, in which different cultures were studied from both within and outside. Bengal's history was no longer confined to a geographic entity called Bengal. Its history was viewed as part of a larger network of cultural, economic, political, and historical exchanges, military conquests, colonialism, and travels. Many observers thought that a history of Bengal as part of global consciousness would offer alternatives to Eurocentrism. Andrew Sartori's *Bengal in Global Concept History* (2008) is a fine example of this

intellectual orientation.

A lesson to be learned here: Teach Bengal's architectural history as part of global history, not as an independent course. Bangladeshi students should learn about the European Renaissance master Brunelleschi's Cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence and Khan Jahan Ali's Sixty Dome Mosque in Bagerhat at the

same time, not only because these two masterpieces were built more or less contemporaneously in the 15th century, but also because their inclusion in a global narrative of architectural developments across different regions offers some intellectual resistance to Eurocentric worldviews.

A stand-alone Bengal history class in later academic years has the propensity to falsely isolate Bengal from global networks and movements, while giving students the troubling impression that history of Bengal is tangential in the curriculum, only to be learned after most important contents have been covered.

Unfortunately, architectural history teaching in Bangladesh is still grinding along the old Eurocentric path. The University Grants Commission (UGC), responsible for setting accreditation standards for academic curricula across universities, must be aware of current curricular revisions going on around the world in many disciplines. The Institute of Architects Bangladesh, a professional body that advises the UGC with regards to architectural education, must continually assess the changing landscape in architectural pedagogy. Both organisations should institute a built-in research cell to monitor curricular trends around the world and recommend strategies for judicious adaptation. We must realise that this discussion is about a wider culture of inability to bring pedagogy to the frontier of knowledge production, not just about one discipline and its unique challenges.

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