

# For the love of THEATRE

On the 96th birth anniversary of Dr Nilima Ibrahim (1921–2002), Ramendu Majumdar recalls her contributions in the theatre movement in Bangladesh both before and after the liberation

RAMENDU MAJUMDAR

IT has been 15 years since Dr Nilima Ibrahim passed away. If she were alive, she would have been 96 years old today. How does one describe her? She was an educationist, researcher, writer, social worker, a dedicated women's rights activist, a symbol of non-communal consciousness, theatre enthusiast, and a participant in all progressive social movements. In all respects, we will remember her as an enlightened soul.

But this article focuses only on Dr Nilima Ibrahim's love for theatre—a love which ran in her blood. Her father, Prafulla Kumar Roy—a lawyer by profession—was dedicated to the stage. He was a long-time editor of the *Khulna Natya Mandir*. His daughter narrated an interesting story about him in her memoirs: One day, in the courtroom, a person accused of dacoity pointed to Prafulla and said, "Ukilbabu knows me. Sir, take a good look and see if you recognise me. I played Radhika at the Joydeb Pala and you played Krishna in disguise." Needless to say, it was an embarrassing situation for Prafulla.

This love for theatre passed on to all of Nilima Ibrahim's siblings. An outstandingly talented student, she chose her research topic *Samajik o Rajnaitik Potobhumikay Unabingsha Shatabdir Bangla Natak* (The Social and Political Backgrounds of Nineteenth-Century Bangla Plays) out of this love, and received her PhD from the University of Dhaka.

Before this, she completed her MA in Bengali literature from the University of Calcutta with a first class. Based on her research findings, she wrote two books: *Unabingsha Shatabdir Bangali Samaj o Bangla Natak* (Bengali Society and Bengali Drama in the 19th Century), 1964, and *Bangla Natak: Utsa o Dhara* (Bengali Drama: Origin and Development), 1972. The latter offers an incisive analysis of 81 playwrights of Bengali literature, and has been appreciated by researchers and students alike as an important reference book.

Nilima Ibrahim composed four plays: *Duye Duye Char* (Two and Two Make Four), 1964; *Je Aranye Alo Nei* (The Dark Forest), 1974; *Rodjwala Bikel* (The Sunburnt Afternoon), 1973; and *Suryaster Par* (After Sunset), 1974. We had the good fortune of publishing *Je Aranye Alo Nei* in our theatre magazine before it came out in book form. Besides these, her seminal narrative work is *Ami Birangona Bolchi*, which was published in two volumes (1996 and 1997).

In *Duye Duye Char*, she portrayed the realities of Bengali upper-middle-class society. *Rodjwala Bikel*, too, is written based on social dialectics. On the other hand, *Je Aranye Alo Nei* is set in a women's rehabilitation centre, where a woman who suffered sexual violence in the liberation war narrates her trauma to her husband, who comes to visit her. *Suryaster Par* is about a high-ranking government official, who, after retirement is forced by his family to take a year's extension in his job but fails to extend his own lifetime, passing away soon afterwards.

But the most important of Nilima Ibrahim's works is *Ami Birangona Bolchi*, which records the testimonies of women raped during the Liberation War. In the first volume, we learn of the violence that women suffered during the war through the testimonies of three women: Tara Banerjee, Meherjaan and Rina. They are faced with another harsh reality: In the newly liberated Bangladesh, their families and their loved ones did not accept them back.

I had the good fortune of meeting Dr

Nilima Ibrahim in 1961 when I enrolled in University of Dhaka. I witnessed firsthand her passion for the theatre and received her limitless affection.

She did not just compose plays; she directed them, formed theatre organisations, and started initiatives to teach acting. When we were students, the University of Dhaka was the esteemed centre of theatre practice. DUCSU, the halls, Teacher-Student Theatre Group, Cultural Society—the campus used to be abuzz with plays staged by these groups. And the four playwright-professors who were always there to help the students



were Nurul Momen, Munier Choudhury, Askar Ibne Shaikh and Nilima Ibrahim.

Back then, there was no institution for learning theatrical arts. In 1970, a group of theatre enthusiasts, educationists and artists took it upon themselves to establish a theatre academy, the president of which was Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin, while Dr Nilima Ibrahim was one of the vice-chairpersons. The academy launched a certificate course and two diploma courses but closed shortly afterwards.

In 1962, Nilima Ibrahim set up a theatre group called Rangam. She served as its president, while Munier Choudhury, Ranen Kushari, poet Habibur Rahman, Khondakar Rafiqul Haque, and Kafi Khan were also involved. Rangam's first production was *Naba Meghdut*, followed by Nilima Ibrahim's *Duye Duye Char*. Then she dramatised Sarat Chandra's novel *Charitrahin* (Characterless). It was the most notable work of Rangam. Among those who performed in the play were Ranen Kushari, Lili Chowdhury, Kafi Khan, Rozi Mazid, Jahanara Imam and Madhuri Chattopadhyay. Back then, getting so many female artists to work for a single play was unthinkable, but Nilima Ibrahim's earnest efforts made it all possible.

That said, her tenure as the leader of the theatre group was not always a pleasant experience. Her house was where the rehearsals were held, and she would have to take care of the visiting team members while also bearing the production expenses. Despite this, she had to face harassment from some of the team members. Irritated, she decided to disband the group. Subsequently, however, she satisfied her passion for theatre production by directing plays for a number of halls and the Department of Bangla at Dhaka University.

During the 60s, 70s, and even 80s, female artists to portray female characters were hard to find. To overcome the shortcomings, theatre enthusiasts would encourage women from their own family to get involved with theatre activities. Nilima Ibrahim, likewise, motivated all of her daughters to join theatre. Of them, Dolly Ibrahim, who had died an untimely

death, could create a name for herself by acting in theatre, TV and film productions. Dolly was the founding joint-secretary of our own Theatre Natyagosthi. She also starred, among others, in the first television play in Dhaka, *Ektala Dotola*, directed by Munier Choudhury. Her suicide was something that had devastated us all.

In the newly liberated Bangladesh, the Department of Bangla of Dhaka University was given the responsibility to stage Munier Choudhury's *Kabar* (The Grave) on the open ground of Bangla Academy on February 21, 1972. Dr Nilima Ibrahim was kind enough to allow me to direct the play. It was a great pleasure pulling off the show with the help of Bangla students and I expressed my gratitude to Nilima Ibrahim inwardly.

After Bangladesh came into being, there was a boom in neo-theatre movement, the centre of which was Bangladesh Mahila Samiti auditorium. And the person whose enthusiasm and guidance was instrumental in making theatrical arts an integral part of the organisation was Nilima Ibrahim, serving as its president. Bangladesh Mahila Samiti named the auditorium after her as a fitting tribute to her memory.

It must be noted that had Mahila Samiti allocated its auditorium for commercial purpose, it could have earned a lot of money, but Nilima Ibrahim considered supporting the theatre movement of the country an important social responsibility. She was careful to ensure that theatre

*The most important of Nilima Ibrahim's works is Ami Birangona Bolchi, which records the testimonies of women raped during the Liberation War. In the first volume, we learn of the violence that women suffered during the war through the testimonies of three women.*

groups could easily rent the auditorium. Whenever any disagreement over the fee emerged, between the representatives of the theatre movement and the officials of Mahila Samiti, she used to have the ultimate say, which all of us would accept with no objections raised.

In the history of the theatre in Bangladesh, the role that Nilima Ibrahim had played will always be remembered fondly. For us to forget her contribution would be an unforgivable crime.

Ramendu Majumdar is an actor, stage director and theatre producer. This article was abridged and translated from the original in Bangla by The Daily Star editorial team.



Millions of girls are robbed of their beautiful, poetic awkwardness during disasters, crises and emergency. This photograph was taken at the Geneva Camp. PHOTO: GMB AKASH

## INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE GIRL CHILD A reality far from POETIC

SHAGUFE HOSSAIN

THERE is something very beautiful about being in transition, being stuck in between. Whether it's in transit at an airport, a city that's somewhere between the east and the west, dawn or dusk, when the day is either deciding on a beginning or an end, or a woman in her adolescence, on the journey to transforming into a woman from a child. There is something inherently poetic about being a girl.

This year's International Day of the Girl (IDG) underscores the efforts of the UN global attention and action to the challenges and opportunities girls face before, during, and after crises. Sadly, the reality of the world's 1.1 billion girls is far from poetic or charming.

Since June, the country has been affected by one disaster after another. The landslides in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the floods, the Rohingya crisis. Disaster after disaster unfolds, piling on us, before we can even begin to recover from the previous one. And as these disasters unfold, numerous girls are trapped and lost.

The CIA World Factbook states that there are 21,521,977 female children in Bangladesh. The landslides in Chittagong Hill Tracts, which started on June 13 with a few episodes, resulted in the loss of 160 lives and the destruction of 60,000 houses, schools and offices. It affected about 80,000 persons across five districts: Bandarban, Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Khagrachari and Rangamati. Thirty-four thousand of these people were severely impacted as they lost their houses together with their belongings, basic necessities, livelihoods and food stocks (HCIT Response Plan, July 12, 2017). The Government of Bangladesh reports that, as of August 27, the floods have affected 32 districts in the northern, northeastern and central parts of the country affecting a total of more than eight million people. An estimated total of 1,03,855 houses are reported to have been destroyed and 6,33,792 have been partially damaged (UNRC Bangladesh, September 18, 2017).

How did these losses affect female children? How many girls dropped out of schools? How many girls were kidnapped or trafficked? How many became victims of violence?

While we have yet to assign enough importance to account for the exact number of women and girls affected by most disasters, we have had to acknowledge that women and girls are, in fact, the most vulnerable during disasters. During conflicts and natural disasters, it is women and adolescent girls who are faced with greater risk of abuse, sexual exploitation, violence and forced marriage.

Because of the nature of the Rohingya crisis, we have been slightly more diligent in terms of tracking the number of women and children affected and it is far from a pretty picture. An Inter Press Service report published on October 3 states that the majority of Rohingya refugees are women and children, i.e. 53 percent are female and 58 percent are under the age of 18.

Channel News Asia reports an estimated 4,20,000 Rohingya refugees displaced since August 25. They have mostly been cramped inside two camps in Kutapalong and Nayapara. I need not recount the horror that has been unleashed on the women and girls before they reached the camps. Those who have been

following the Rohingya accounts are well aware of it. Many have lost their families, communities, and all their possessions, and after an emotionally and physically gruelling journey across the border, they are left with little hope.

Women who survive a crisis often become heads of household, with the sole responsibility of caring for their children. Following the Rohingya attacks as well, women-headed households among the displaced population have suffered during the short-term relief distribution process, because it was physically impossible for them to keep up with the way the aid was being distributed, thus leading to an disparity in terms of relief distribution among men and women. In the longer term as well, they often have to overcome immense obstacles to provide care for children, the sick, the injured and the elderly, and bear the heaviest burden of relief and reconstruction.

And girls? They drop out of school, lose their childhood, and their needs are often forgotten while they prioritise care for others. After a crisis destroys a family's livelihood, domestic violence is likely to increase radically. Catastrophes may make it impossible for children, and especially girls, to go to school. In dark, unlit, unprotected refugee settlements, adolescent girls walking in the evening may be at risk for harassment or rape. They risk their dignity. They risk their lives.

I do not have exact figures or numbers for the number of girls affected by the catastrophes that are characteristic of my beloved country. So, I look for stories. I found this piece as I was browsing my social media last night on photographer GMB Akash's Facebook page.

"I am searching for my daughter. It's been fifteen hours now she is missing. I am not telling it to anyone, because you know what island people will do instead of helping me to find out where my child is? They will make story, they will make bad stories about my teenage girl. During last flood it had happened with Sapna. Sapna was just a twelve years old girl, who committed suicide when water went down. Villagers said she flew with a boy. But like every flood, when water enters, traffickers enters too, she was taken by human trafficker. She managed to come back by escaping from those evil men but villager's stories forced her to commit suicide. I do not want it to happen with my daughter. I will search for her alone. I lost my house, my cattle and my all belongings. But now no matter what I will not let my daughter to get lost from me. — Dilara Begum"

Emergencies rob girls of their beautiful, poetic awkwardness. Too often, girls and girlhood are lost in crises. The millions of girls, who should only be a source of power, energy, and creativity, are reduced to commodities and casualties.

There is no question that highlighting challenges and opportunities girls face before, during, and after crises, is important. The question is, is it enough to mark days? By setting aside token days to remember valuable things, we reduce those things to tokens. And the Sapanas of this world are too precious to be things, too valuable to be tokens.

Shagufta Hossain is the founder of Leaping Boundaries and a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

### A WORD A DAY

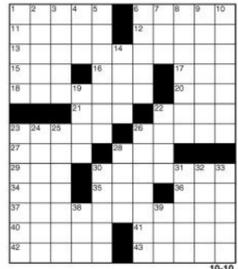


**SUPINE**  
ADJECTIVE

Lying face upward.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS
- 1 Of the Vatican
  - 6 Unspoken
  - 11 Writer Brookner
  - 12 Fill with joy
  - 13 Expert at cajoling
  - 15 Used a couch
  - 16 That fellow
  - 17 Mess up
  - 18 Pencil parts
  - 20 Avril follower
  - 21 Mine rock
  - 22 Vampire attack
  - 23 Doesn't
- raise
- 26 Ring figure
  - 27 Yankees great, familiarly
  - 28 Dapper fellow
  - 29 Birdie beater
  - 30 Uses semaphore
  - 34 Lincoln nickname
  - 35 Machinery part
  - 36 Scoundrel
  - 37 Feud participant
  - 40 Classical tongue
- 41 Of the kids
- 42 Make law
  - 43 Long look
- DOWN
- 1 Out of style
  - 2 Egypt's Sadat
  - 3 Sculpture in St. Peter's
  - 4 Feasted
  - 5 Prepared to shave
  - 6 League members
  - 7 Maximum amount
  - 8 Box for a baker



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

SCAMS LOPE  
CARET ONEND  
IRENE RANGE  
FRAN RYE SINC  
ITALIAN WINE  
ELM OVEN  
GRAVE CREST  
ROSE BIT  
ITALIAN HERO  
PAR DYE LAP  
ETUDE MAIZE  
DELIA ACTION  
DENS SEERS

### BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



### BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

