

TRIBUTE

In memory of Sayeeda Khanam: The girl with a Rolleicord

On August 18, the country's first female professional photographer Sayeeda Khanam breathed her last after suffering from age-related complications. A trailblazer who inspired generations of Bangladeshi women and opened doors for female photographers and photojournalists in the country, we reprint a Star Weekend interview from June 4, 2016 to remember this indomitable woman

FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIQUA

IMAGINE women entering the field of photography, historically dominated by men, during a time when they were even more strictly confined to certain socially constructed roles. To young people today, female photojournalists and photographers might not be an absurd, unimaginable concept. Thankfully, many women can now take up photography as their career without fearing backlash from society at large. But this change was possible because a handful of women paved the way for future photographers to realise their passion.

Sayeeda Khanam, the first Bangladeshi woman professional photographer, is the trailblazer who had the boldness to chart her own path and become an inspiration. She has been a beacon of hope for thousands of women who took courage from her story to break the shackles of society and follow their dreams.

Born on December 29, 1937, Sayeeda Khanam's love for photography was instilled in her from the age of 12. "But who would trust a 12-year-old with a camera?" she laughs. Her first camera was a small Kodak box-camera, presented by Lutfunnessa Chowdhury, a close friend of Sayeeda's elder sister, Hamida Khanam, founding principal of Dhaka's Home Economics College.

"If my older sister Hamida Apa had not brought me a Rolleicord camera from the US, I would not have dared to dream of being a professional photographer back then," reminisces Sayeeda. Thus began her quest for capturing that one perfect shot. She started her career as a photojournalist in the 60s with the periodical *Begum*, staying on as a member of the prestigious magazine for over 50 years.

As a freelance photographer, her main endeavour was to visit places in search for pictures—from Karachi and Darjeeling, to the studios of Kolkata and the streets of Dhaka, she traversed every road that would lead her to the perfect shot. In our world of filters and instant clicks, everyone can claim

to be a photographer. For Sayeeda and her counterparts, however, things were not quite as easy. "How many shots do you need for a perfect captures? For us, it always had to be just one perfect shot," she says.

Throughout her illustrious career, she bagged a number of national and international awards—she obtained the first position in the All Pakistan Photo Concept in 1960, the UNESCO Award in 1985, and the Ananya Shirsho Dosh Award in Dhaka, among others. Her photographs have travelled different galleries around the world, and she has had three solo exhibitions exclusively focusing on Satyajit Ray and his life.

As a graduate (Masters) of Bangla Literature and Library Science from the University of Dhaka, Sayeeda has also written a number of books, articles and literary pieces. However, Sayeeda's distinctiveness lies more in her personality than her achievements. Those who converse with her understand what an amazing storyteller she is. As someone who had the rare opportunity to take pictures of Queen Elizabeth, Mother Teresa, Neil Armstrong, Edwin Aldrin, Michael Collins and Satyajit Ray, among many other famous personalities, Sayeeda's treasure trove of stories never runs out, and one never gets tired of listening to them.

When Queen Elizabeth visited Dhaka in 1961, Sayeeda was a photographer at *Begum*. She was very excited, but was concerned about the strict security protocol. However, her excitement on meeting the Queen of England could not be dampened, and she followed a series of formalities to gain permission to shoot pictures at the event. When the queen walked down the red carpet to attend the festivities commemorating her arrival, Sayeeda was also there, clad in a blue *saree*, with two cameras hung around her neck.

"The moment she walked down the red carpet, cameras started flashing all around the queen. But my main camera refused to work. I started to get nervous, but I knew that I had



Sayeeda Khanam (1937-2020)

PHOTO: COURTESY

to take the shot right away. So I grabbed the other camera which had a high speed film, took the picture without any flash and each of them turned out to be perfect."

One of the fascinating aspects of Sayeeda's photography is that she used to take each picture as a personal project of her own, and put extra effort to establish a personal connection with the subject. Every time she returned after a photography spree, she would have a number of fascinating stories as well.

"When I met poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, he had already lost his speaking ability," she said, while unveiling yet another of her wonderful stories. "I found him tearing pages while his wife did household chores. I photographed him in his last days with his wife Pramila Devi by his side." Sayeeda Khanam was also lucky to capture Zainul Abedin while he was working. She interviewed and photographed famous Indian poet and novelist Maitreyi Devi when she stayed at poet Sufia Kamal's house during her visit to Bangladesh.

"SM Parvez, editor of the cine-magazine

Chitrali, had warned me about Satyajit Ray's frequent mood swings. But I visited the maestro in his house in Kolkata. I wholeheartedly believed that the director who could make *Pather Panchali* would not ignore someone who came all the way from Bangladesh to interview him," she says. And thus she became the first Bangladeshi to interview Ray, which was published in 1962. Later on, she became a family friend. Her volume of works on Satyajit Ray enabled her to organise three solo exhibitions and write the popular book, *Amar Chokhe Satyajit*.

Even though her stories are undoubtedly enthralling and present an exciting glimpse into her life, her journey into photography was not an easy one.

"Except for a few, most of my contemporary male photographers did not like the fact that a woman worked alongside them," she says with a smile. "Once I used the smiling face of a rural woman clad in a

saree without a blouse (a luxury to most rural women back then) as a cover for *Begum*. I did not find anything offensive with that photo, neither did the editorial board of *Begum*, but there were protests held against me, in front of my house! Some fundamentalists believed that my photograph hurt the "precious purity" that they wanted to see in women," she says incredulously. But incidents like these kept giving her courage instead of instigating fear and disappointment in her. Her commitment to pushing the boundary is visible in her eyes, even after all these years.

Sayeeda also sheds light on the industry's gender disparity that she thought would change over time, but unfortunately hasn't. "Many female photographers consider photography as a viable profession, but photojournalism is not something that you do while sitting at your home or office. Despite having so many female photographers, women are very under-represented out in the field, especially once they are married."

What else upsets her? "The fact that I wasn't able to capture the Pakistani army's surrender," she says with a twinkle in her eyes. Despite being aware of possible risks, she was out on the street with her Rolleicord even then. However, the Pakistani army continued to fire for around half an hour, and thus, she had to alter her plans and escape to safety. That day, around 600 people died in the very area where she went to capture shots, and she too was very close to death. "My head throbbed and my ears rang, but how I wish I could have taken a picture of that moment," she says, regret evident in her voice.

Around 3,000 snapshots taken by Sayeeda have had a lasting impact on our visual history. Her pictures need to be preserved and showcased for the up and coming photographers and history enthusiasts. This could be our way of saying thanks to this brave, incredible woman who never learnt to back down, even in the face of the harshest criticism and the most frightening backlashes.

Fayeka Zabeen Siddiqua is a freelance writer.



The cover of Begum that stirred controversy among some fundamentalists.

PHOTO: COURTESY

Why are Indigenous students falling behind?

We need to focus on the structural inequalities and racism that work against Indigenous students in education



MYAT MOE KHAING

BEFORE Aung (name changed) had attended his first university class, he became the subject of a post on his batch Facebook group. A batchmate wrote, "The *Adivasis* got in only because of the quota. Their scores were lower than ours." Another wrote, "They even get to study higher ranked subjects!" As classes started, Aung found himself struggling to approach teachers and seniors for academic help as he was constantly reminded of his position in this new competitive landscape.

Post secondary education in cities and towns fuels the dreams and hopes of a student. However, among remote Indigenous communities, only a few handful of students get a shot at it.

The literacy rate among Indigenous communities is far lower than the national rate. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Educational and Information Statistics (BANBEIS), the dropout rate was 59 percent in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), whereas the national rate stood at 19.2 percent in 2016. Children can't reach schools because of poverty and distance. Many suffer from illness such as typhoid and diarrhoea, or face

a shortage of supplies and textbooks.

Even when Indigenous children from plain land and hills reach the classroom, their first experience with formal education starts with being admitted in a local primary school where most of the teachers are Bengali. The students mindlessly memorise Bangla rhymes that have no connection with their culture and context. When the children read Bangla text, they can decode, but cannot comprehend. As a result, they fall behind without a proper grasp of Bangla.

In 2018, the government distributed textbooks in five Indigenous languages—Chakma, Marma Garo, Sadri and Tripura—among pre-primary students. Santals, Urao, Mahali, Khak, Humir, Muchi and others were left out of the list. It turned out that most teachers could speak in the languages but did not know how to read or write them. Only 38.6 percent of the 4,204 ethnic community teachers in the CHT attended a 14-day training on their respective languages organised by district councils.

Upon finishing secondary education, students face the challenge of navigating tertiary education in English. The topics are complex, and students are expected to appear for exams in a different language while access to resources remain constrained.

Adaptation to the new environment is still a long haul as they become aware of a demeaning narrative centring their way

of life. They are labelled "backward" and "belonging to the past". Their knowledge and skills are discussed as inferior or invalid compared to "modern" knowledge and skills. Comments such as "*Tomra shaap, bang khao?*" (do you eat snakes and frogs?), "*Oi Jonglee!*" (Hey wildling!) and "*Adibashi ra Ugro hoy*" (Indigenous people are uncivilised)—place an extra pressure on Indigenous students to defend their lifestyle when they have just arrived in the cities for higher education.

Their peers fail to see that the natural environment is what makes the knowledge of Indigenous people unique and different from that of any other. The communities have known an incredible variety of foods available in their territories. Traditional knowledge has been stored in the collective memory of Indigenous communities for decades. This knowledge is expressed through stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, dances, myths and agricultural practices. Derogatory attitudes terming Indigenous lifestyles as unhygienic undermines Indigenous peoples' relationships with their lands and ancestry. Public and private discourse are constructed in a way that erases their roots.

Demeaning narratives lead to bullying. Mocked for their "unsmart" pronunciation, Indigenous students remain silent to avoid the humiliation. Many Bengali students call them hateful names based on Indigenous features—*Nak Bocha*, *Chinku*. When Joy Tripura (name

changed) complained to a teacher at his boarding school, he was woken up at 2am that night. A group of students continuously kicked his door, threatening to beat him up. Think of it—could they have done it if Joy was not alone? How would you focus on your studies if you felt unsafe at a boarding school?

According to the study "Indigenous students: Barriers and success strategies—A review of existing literature" published in the Journal of Nursing Education and Practice, reports about teachers in Canada who treated their Indigenous students with prejudice outnumbered reports of teachers who were fair and open-minded. When students who discriminate are not corrected, the situation is condoned and the discrimination of Indigenous students is affirmed indirectly.

When Indigenous students learn from their peers that Indigenous peoples' ways are backward, they may consequently view their elders as backward or inferior. They experience stress and a feeling of walking in two different worlds.

As a result, Indigenous students face isolation and retreat into their own circles. Unlike the cool kid gang or the nerd club, their circles lack role models, resources and confidence. Think of it—if you've never even seen someone from your community ace the Bangladesh Civil Service exam, or you don't have that space to study and go through those processes that other kids do, you just don't

know how to do it.

This is how Indigenous students become vulnerable to social disadvantage, a situation of not having the opportunity to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural relationships, and is associated with poor performance in class.

Look around in your class. Do you see any Indigenous student? Unlikely. If you do, chances are they wouldn't have been there without the quota system. There is no shame in admitting it.

Indigenous children around the world have long been denied the right to celebrate their roots while getting a comprehensive education. They're up against major inequalities, from structural racism embedded in school systems to inaccurate retellings of history. On campus, they lack social, political, cultural and economic capital.

A vast majority of Indigenous students are slow as a result, but it does not make them lazy. Indigenous students will continue to be slow unless attitudes towards them are changed. Indigenous students can be as exceptional as the next person. The key to success of an individual is to nurture a positive sense of identity and to engage positively with the community. Can we ensure our Indigenous students of these?

Myat Moe Khaing is a marketing strategist at a multinational company.

CARL SAGAN
(1934-1996)
American astronomer and science writer.

Skeptical scrutiny is the means, in both science and religion, by which deep thoughts can be winnowed from deep nonsense.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Hound's hands

5 Upper limits

9 Exemplary

11 Alaskan native

13 Vodka cocktail

14 Summer of song

15 Gallery fill

16 Popular tales

18 Capital of Andalusia

20 Part of a match

21 Factions

22 Harp's kin

23 Wine choice

24 Mule of old song

25 Marshy spots

27 Relinquish

29 Yale rooter

30 Modern-day sanctuary

32 European nation

34 Homer's neighbor

35 Brown and Cornell, for two

36 Geriatrics study

38 Baseball's Luis

39 Renter's paper

40 Wee workers

41 Son of Seth

DOWN

1 Print units

2 Loves to pieces

3 Mountain Stater

4 Rick's pianist

5 Be a sponge

6 Lotion additive

7 Keystone Stater

8 Divide

10 Lounged

12 Critical asset

17 Golfer Ernie

19 Midmonth day

22 Secular

24 Open shoe

25 Suit

26 "Twelfth Night" heroine

27 Pale

28 "Just the same ..."

30 Ship poles

31 Borders

33 Spring period

37 "My word!"

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

D	A	R	E	G	N	A	D	I	R
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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT