

# A trailblazer for women in politics: Remembering Noor Jehan Murshid

TAZEEN M MURSHID

FEW Muslim women received an education and fewer still entered regional or national politics when Noor Jehan was born in the village of Taranagar in the District of Murshidabad on May 22, 1925. The fourth of seven daughters and two sons, her arrival may have disappointed her father, Ayub Hossein Beg, a daroga at Lalgola Police Station. Her paternal grandfather, popularly known as Padri Kabatullah

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Noor Jehan Murshid (1925-2003)

PHOTO: COURTESY

left this world in 1946, four of his daughters were already married. Noor had resisted. She received an education, initially at home, and was then sent to Barisal to her uncle, Hosamuddin Beg, who was a professor of Arabic and Persian at Broja Mohan College. She attended the school section of the college from Grades 6 to 8 along with her cousin Amina, who became her life-long friend. For her secondary education, she went to Calcutta Victoria Institution, which was steeped in the ethos of the eclectic Brahmo Samaj. She went to Lady Brabourne College for a while and to Calcutta University to study History. Later, after marriage, when she accompanied her husband to Cambridge Mass., USA, she studied politics and enrolled for a Masters in Politics, leading to a PhD at Boston University. Along the way, she earned degrees in law and education.

Her interest in politics evolved against the background of the anti-colonial struggle in Bengal. She grew up with tales of the Faraizi movement against oppressive agrarian taxes, and of indigo rebellions (neel bidroho) to protect the soil for the production of food crops. She witnessed the youth resistance to colonial rule, presented by the colonisers as a terrorist movement, but glorified in the popular psyche through bardic tales of Khudiram, immortalised in the song *Khudiram Phanshi*. She lived through the Bengal famine of 1943, believed to have wiped out half the population of Bengal, and the communal riots of 1946, a culmination of the politics of hate promoted by the colonial state. She met Abul Hashem of the Muslim League left, Husseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister of Bengal, and Gandhiji during his fast unto death to put pressure on Hindus and Muslims to stop the killings. These were momentous occasions. In 1942, while at Lady Brabourne College, she led her class out in protest,

raising slogans to show solidarity with the Quit India Movement. While at university, she joined a youth reading attracted to the left movement and socialist ideas. It was called *ghara*. Among her like-minded colleagues and friends were Rokeya Rahman Kabeer, Hazera Mahmood, and Shahidullah Kaiser. They took inspiration from Rabindranath Tagore and visualised a new day with new possibilities if time is not wasted: *Ore nuton juger bhore dishne shomoy katiye britha shomoy bichar kore*.

She found most of these friends again in independent Pakistan. As they grew into adulthood, their ideologies veered more to the centre and became less radical. However, each was acutely aware of their roles in shaping their new country and resisting all forms of oppression. Central to the fulfilment of this dream was to organise society, develop the intellect, and build human capital. Noor began to do just that wherever she went. She was the founder/president of Azimpur Ladies Club, and later of Mahila Samiti, a founder/member of BIRDEM as well.

Her entry into Pakistani politics opened up many doors to organisational work. Her father-in-law, Maulvi Wakil Ali Ahmed Khan, MLA of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, introduced her to the Dacca political circle and she joined the United Front, participating in the 1954 East Pakistan elections through direct elections to open general seats (not reserved women's seats). She and Mrs Meherunnessa were the only two women who were thus directly elected. She became Parliamentary Secretary, working with Dhiren Datta.

The abrogation of the 1956 Constitution, the 1958 coup that led to the formation of a military government, and the end of democratic politics put a stop to the political machinations for domination and control of East Bengal for a while and also curtailed

social development activities. The left went underground, the Awami League leadership was arrested, and popular political participation was at a standstill. Noor resumed her teaching career. It was a time to focus on personal development and on the family. A Fellowship at Harvard, offered to her husband, provided a perfect opportunity to do just that.

She returned fortified with greater knowledge about political participation, the importance of good governance and the theoretical means of achieving that. The Awami League was in disarray due to arrests and incarcerations. It was being held together by a few key figures, including Amina Begum. Noor began to work on organising the Mahila Awami League. Between 1966 and 1971, she was the Vice-President of the Women's Front of the Awami League. The first national elections of Pakistan in 1970 gave victory to the Awami League, but West Pakistan refused to accept the verdict and delayed the transfer of power while preparing for a final solution through genocide.

The ferocity of Operation Searchlight caught Noor off guard. She and her husband, Sarwar Murshid, were both wanted for treason. Both had supported Mujib's 1966 Six Point Demand for Autonomy. Sarwar was an advisor to Bangabandhu and a member of the Round Table Conference in negotiations with Bhutto and the Pakistan military. He had been staying elsewhere for a few days, and came home late. That tortuous, endless night sat heavily on Noor. She felt guilty for having put her family in harm's way.

In the months as refugees in India, her family came to be engaged in different capacities to serve the struggle for independence. Noor served as the roaming ambassador of the First Government of Bangladesh (in exile), alongside Fani Bhushan Majumdar and Taheruddin Thakur, seeking the recognition of Bangladesh from the Indian leadership, and support for the freedom fighters and refugees thronging India. It was estimated that ten million people were displaced and three million were killed by Pakistan.

In newly independent Bangladesh, Noor was made State Minister for Social Welfare and Family Planning from 1972-74. She had raised an awkward question in Parliament about how the declaration of independence was

conveyed on March 25, 1971—saying that given the dangerous developments, it was handled with utmost secrecy, but when sections of the Bengal regiment revolted and captured Chittagong Radio Station, such a declaration was admitted to and announced. However, Noor's further development within the party ended there. She had to accompany her husband, who had been made an ambassador to Poland, Hungary, and Romania.

However, she remained active intellectually in her quest for human rights, women's rights and good governance, through her journal, *Ekal*, later renamed *Edesh Ekal*. She also became a member of the Presidium of Gono Forum. She became concerned with how to build a violence-free society, how to engage the youth creatively, and how to enable women to be strong and dedicated politicians. She had observed in 1994: "We never learnt politics through training programmes. We learnt through our political activities within the party and as Members of Parliament. It would have been helpful if we could organise a brief training period for effective participation of women in politics, focusing on areas like—nature of politics, political parties, parliamentary procedure, rules of debate."

Noor identified the problems women face in politics: the need for social and family support and money, and the fact that they are not treated as equal to their male colleagues. They are "outnumbered, outflanked and often elbowed out of their legitimate sphere" by their male colleagues. She argued that for women, it "has become particularly difficult to enter politics because of its criminalisation". She concluded that women would benefit immensely from a thoughtful and comprehensive programme of training, research, advocacy, and networking. These observations still remain valid in 2021, although women continue to make strides and achieve greater heights.

Noor would have been 96 years old today. Her goal oriented-approach, her optimism and her activism in search of an enlightened society continue to resonate even now.

Tazeen M Murshid, D.Phil. Oxon. is a writer, historian and social scientist. Formerly Professor in History and International Politics, Universite Libre de Bruxelles; SOAS, London; IHES, Paris; BRAC University, Dhaka; Fellow Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin; Visiting Scholar, Columbia University, New York. Email: tazeenmurshid@yahoo.co.uk.

## In the 'free' digital space, how does our bigotry persevere?



AFIA JAHIN

THE internet and its cloak of anonymity seemingly avails us with freedom on all counts. What people see of one's

too, becomes as segmented as our physical society. If Chanchal Chowdhury had been, say, walking down some Dhaka street with his mother, no one would have gone up to him, declared their love for his work, and in the same breath berated his or his mother's religious background.

But it just so happens that the freeness of the internet enables one

being vaguely/widely defined and arbitrarily implemented, often to favour those who are financially or politically influential. This unclear nature of the Act is what allows government bodies and law enforcement agencies to remove or block any published information which may threaten "digital security". There is much too much emphasis in it to protect and encourage nationalism, and not nearly enough to shield individual and vulnerable members of the public from harassment online. Otherwise, there would be fewer stories related to the DSA such as those of writer Mushtaq Ahmed (who died in custody in February), cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore, and of Md Emon (a 14-year-old who was arrested last year in June for "defaming" the Prime Minister in a Facebook post).

A history of instances when the DSA was implemented will show us that it can, indeed, be used swiftly—but only to protect political heavyweights from public criticism, and not to uphold the democratic values of secularism, equality, freedom of speech, etc.

Only if there was a quick fix for the gender-, religion-, and ethnicity-based biases of people. What many fail to realise is that the effects of cyberbullying of individuals (no matter how famous or affluent they are) do not just exist within the internet. Sure, some may be able to move on from derogatory comments online and continue to live their private lives normally. But, for most people, it is not so easy to disregard the offensiveness of strangers online and can cause serious harm to their well-being.

It has been proven time and again how prompt the authorities are capable of being when dealing with individuals who apparently threaten the digital security of influential people. Therefore, it would be justified to think that the same level of protection can be extended to protect regular citizens of the country from perhaps more potent threats of bigotry, prejudice, and sexual harassment. Hopefully, one is not wrong to think that public security should be the main subtext of digital security.

Afia Jahin is a member of the Editorial Team at The Daily Star.

*It just so happens that the freeness of the internet enables one to express their bigotry as well.*

to express their bigotry as well. And those who live in the public eye or become part of important news stories have to bear the brunt of this downside. How else would two police officers have had the audacity, in another instance, to circulate distastefully doctored photos of Shipra Debnath—a crew member of Maj (retd.) Sinha Md Rashed Khan, who was killed during a police firing last July—if not in an attempt of character assassination? Sexual abuse and violence against women is certainly a more openly practised form of bigotry than our religious majority's prejudice against those of other religions, so it is also more commonplace in the digital space.

Sadly, the "Rules of The Internet" is only a pop culture reference. In reality, people do not practise "netiquette" when they make comments online, especially about the lives and choices of other people—and especially not in our part of the world.

One would think that the Digital Security Act 2018 (DSA) could, to an extent, be used for protecting individuals online from malicious actions and comments. Unfortunately, the law that was supposedly put into place so that general members of the public could be protected online has not really worked out in their favour, largely due to its strategic implementation. The Act has been accused of

life on their social media profile/s, for instance, is what they want people to see. Individuals may not have much control over what happens to the parts of themselves they put out there, but they can endlessly tailor which parts do get out there and in what context. This is why it is quite difficult to unknowingly commit internet *faux pas*, because you have ample opportunities to edit and rethink before you hit send/post/upload.

So when, on Mother's Day earlier this month, National Award-winning actor Chanchal Chowdhury posted a photo of himself with his mother and caught a downpour of derogatory comments from "fans" who were just now discovering that the artist belongs to a Hindu family, I doubt any of us felt shocked. Disgusted, sure. But to be at all shocked that such bigotry against people of minority groups exists is to signal one's privilege. In this case, it is not the privilege of being wealthy, but that of not being a minority in Bangladesh, that keeps one sheltered (read: ignorant) from such widely-held perceptions.

But the internet is such a revolutionary "place", and it has changed the world (for mostly the better) by making *everything so easy*. Above all, it is modern, dynamic, and inclusive. So how can the backward values and traits of our culture survive in the vast openness (and open-mindedness) of the digital space?

The internet is not just a shiny new toy anymore that only serves the purpose of "ruining the youth". It is a necessity in almost every stratum of our society—one that helps sustain livelihoods. But it is also quickly becoming our most accessible source of validation. Thanks to the algorithmic abilities of the internet to show us only what we want to see, this so-called free space,

**গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার**

বাংলাদেশ পুলিশ  
অধিনায়কের কার্যালয়  
র‍্যাপিড অ্যাকশন ব্যাটালিয়ন-৫  
মোস্তাফাভা, হুড়াগ্রাম, রাজশাহী

**দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তি**

তারিখঃ ২৪ মে ২০২১খ্রিঃ

"The Public Procurement Regulation-2008" মোতাবেক চলতি ২০২০-২০২১ অর্থ বৎসরে র‍্যাব-৫, রাজশাহীর নিম্নবর্ণিত মেসামত প্রকল্প বাস্তবায়নের জন্য বাংলাদেশের প্রকৃত টিকাদারী প্রতিষ্ঠানের নিকট থেকে সিলমোহরযুক্ত খামে প্রতিযোগিতামূলক দরপত্র আহ্বান করা যাচ্ছেঃ

১। মন্ত্রণালয়/বিভাগ	ঃ স্বরাষ্ট্র মন্ত্রণালয়
২। সংস্থা	ঃ র‍্যাপিড অ্যাকশন ব্যাটালিয়ন-৫
৩। সংগ্রহ সস্তার নাম	ঃ অধিনায়ক, র‍্যাব-৫।
৪। সংগ্রহ সস্তাধিকারী কোড	ঃ বর্তমানে ব্যবহৃত হচ্ছে না।
৫। সংগ্রাহক সস্তার জেলা	ঃ রাজশাহী।
৬। দরপত্রের বিষয়	ঃ মেসামত কাজ।
৭। দরপত্রের সূত্র নম্বর	ঃ পুলিশ সদর দপ্তর 'র‍্যাব-৫'র প্যারামেটার অ্যাড মেইনটেন্যান্স/৪৪.০১.০০০০.০৪৩.৯৬-২০২০/মেসামত/র‍্যাব/১৩৭৬/৩।
৮। তারিখ	ঃ ২২ এপ্রিল ২০২১খ্রিঃ।
৯। দরপত্রের পদ্ধতি	ঃ উন্মুক্ত দরপত্র পদ্ধতি (OTM)।
১০। বাজেট ও বরাদ্দের উৎস	ঃ রাজস্ব বাজেটের আওতায় র‍্যাবের অনুকূল বরাদ্দ।
১১। দরপত্র প্যাকেজ নং	ঃ উন্মুক্ত/২০২০-২০২১।
১২। দরপত্র সিডিউল সর্বশেষ প্রান্তির তারিখ	ঃ ০৭ জুন ২০২১খ্রিঃ সময় ১৭০০ ঘটিকা পর্যন্ত।
১৩। দরপত্র জমা প্রদানের সর্বশেষ তারিখ ও সময়	ঃ ০৮ জুন ২০২১খ্রিঃ সময় ১২০০ ঘটিকা।
১৪। দরপত্র খোলার তারিখ ও সময়	ঃ ০৮ জুন ২০২১খ্রিঃ সময় ১২০০ ঘটিকা।
১৫। দরপত্র সম্পাদনকারীর অফিস ও ঠিকানা	ঃ র‍্যাব-৫ সদর দপ্তর, মোস্তাফাভা, হুড়াগ্রাম, রাজশাহী।
দরপত্র বিক্রয়ের স্থান	ঃ র‍্যাব-৫ সদর দপ্তর, মোস্তাফাভা, হুড়াগ্রাম, রাজশাহী।
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১৬। দরপত্রদাতার যোগ্যতা	ঃ "The Public Procurement Regulation-2008" অনুযায়ী মেসামত কাজের অভিজ্ঞতাসম্পন্ন সরকারি/ব্যক্তিগত/স্বল্পতরফিত সংস্থার তালিকাভুক্ত বৈধ টিকাদার।
১৭। দরপত্রদাতাদের যোগ্যতা ও দরপত্রের সাথে দাখিলযোগ্য কাগজপত্রের বিবরণ	ঃ "The Public Procurement Regulation-2008" এবং বর্তমান সংশোধনী মোতাবেক দরপত্রদাতাদের দরপত্র দাখিলের সময় নিম্নবর্ণিত কাগজপত্রাদি দরপত্রের সাথে অবশ্যই দাখিল করতে হবেঃ (ক) নাপরিষ্কার সনদপত্র (খ) ট্রেড লাইসেন্স (গ) ভ্যাট রেজিস্ট্রেশন সনদপত্র (ঘ) টিআইএন নম্বর (ঙ) ফর্ম/প্রতিষ্ঠানের মালিকানা সনদপত্র (চ) পিডব্লিউডি/এলজিডি/এমইএস এর তালিকাভুক্তির সনদ (ছ) অর্থিক স্বচ্ছতা সনদপত্র (জ) ব্যালেন্স শীট, (ঝ) সর্বশ্রেষ্ঠ কাজের অভিজ্ঞতা সনদ (ঞ) দরপত্রদাতার ফর্ম/প্রতিষ্ঠান কাগো তালিকাভুক্ত নয় মর্মে নিজ প্রাতিষ্ঠানিক প্যাডে প্রতিস্বাক্ষরিত মুহুরেকা (ট) প্রাতিষ্ঠানিক প্যাডে দরদাতার ০৩ (তিন) টি নমুনা স্বাক্ষর ১ম শ্রেণীর কর্মকর্তা কর্তৃক সত্যায়িত ও (ঠ) পাসপোর্ট সাইজের সত্যায়িত ০২ (দুই) কপি ছবি। এ ছাড়াও "The Public Procurement Regulation-2008" ও তদীয় সংশোধনী মোতাবেক অন্যান্য শর্তাবলী সিডিউলে উল্লেখ করা হবে।

১৮। স্টট নং	কাজের বিবরণ	সিডিউলের মূল্য	দরপত্র জামানত	কাজ সমাপ্তির সময়
৮।	সিপিএসি-২, নাটোর ক্যাম্পের এমটি গ্যারেজ সংস্কার ও মেসামতকরণ।	৩০০.০০	১৩,২৫০.০০	১৫ দিন
৯।	সিপিএসি-৩, জয়পুরহাট ক্যাম্পের কোম্পানী স্টোর এবং পিওএল স্টোর রক্ষণসহ মেসামতকরণ।	৩০০.০০	১১,০০০.০০	১৫ দিন

১৯। দরপত্র আহ্বানকারী কর্মকর্তার নাম : মোঃ জিয়াউর রহমান তালুকদার, পিএসসি।

২০। দরপত্র আহ্বানকারী কর্মকর্তার পদবী : লেঃ কর্ণেল।

২১। দরপত্র আহ্বানকারী কর্মকর্তার ঠিকানা : অধিনায়ক, র‍্যাব-৫, রাজশাহী।

২২। দরপত্র আহ্বানকারী কর্মকর্তার সাথে যোগাযোগের মাধ্যম : ফোন নং ০৭২১-৭৭১১২২২, মোবাইলঃ ০১৭৭৭৭১০৫০০

২৩। বিশেষ জ্ঞাতব্যঃ

ক। ব্যক্তি বা প্রতিষ্ঠানের সস্তাধিকারীর স্বাক্ষরযুক্ত প্যাডে আবেদনপূর্বক অধিনায়ক, র‍্যাব-৫, রাজশাহী হতে অফিস চলাকালীন সময় পর্যন্ত দরপত্র সংগ্রহ করা যাবে।

খ। দরপত্র সংক্রান্ত অন্যান্য তথ্যবলী দরপত্র সংগ্রহকালে নিম্নস্বাক্ষরকারীর কার্যালয় হতে জানা যাবে।

গ। দরপত্র খোলার তারিখ হতে দাখিলকৃত দরপত্র ৩০ দিন পর্যন্ত বলবৎ থাকবে।

ঘ। অনুমোদিত বরাদ্দের আলোকে কার্যাদেশ প্রদান করা হবে। এতদসংক্রান্ত কোন আপত্তি গ্রহণযোগ্য হবে না।

ঙ। দরপত্রে উল্লিখিত সময়ের মধ্যে কার্য সম্পাদন করতে হবে।

চ। কোন কারণ দর্শানো ব্যতিরেকে যে কোন অধিকা সনদ দরপত্র গ্রহণ কিংবা বাতিল করার ক্ষমতা কর্তৃপক্ষ সংরক্ষণ করেন।

ছ। কোন প্রকার কাটা ছেঁড়া, ঘষামাজা বা কারেকটিং হুইভ ব্যবহার করা যাবে না।

জ। সিডিউল ক্রমের সময় অবশ্যই বাংলাদেশের তালিকাভুক্ত টিকাদার প্রতিষ্ঠানের লাইসেন্সের সত্যায়িত ফটোকপি আনতে হবে।

মোঃ জিয়াউর রহমান তালুকদার, পিএসসি  
লেঃ কর্ণেল  
অধিনায়ক  
টেলিফোনঃ ৭৭১১২২২  
মোবাইলঃ ০১৭৭৭৭১০৫০০

তারিখঃ ১০৪০