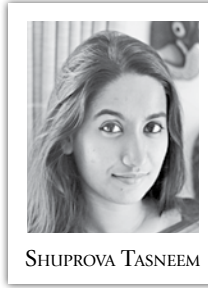


# The women who are fading away from our history

Why have we put so little effort into preserving the stories of Bangladesh's women revolutionaries?



SHUPROVA TASNEEM

**B**ANGALEE revolutionary, feminist and social reformer Leela Nag's century-old ancestral home, in Panchgaon village of Moulvibazar's Rajnagar upazila, has been destroyed. In between schools reopening, local

A close associate of Subash Chandra Bose, she was jailed twice for her politics: once for six years during the Civil Disobedience Movement, and again for four years during the Quit India Movement. In 1946, she became the only woman from Bengal to be elected to the Constituent Assembly of India, and after the Partition in 1947, she focused on helping refugees, especially destitute and abandoned women, setting up 17 relief camps in Noakhali.

did not occur due to natural causes—it was deliberately dismantled, and the signs of the bungalow were removed.

This is not the first historical building in Bangladesh that has faced such neglect. There is a clear lack of policy guidelines on the preservation of heritage buildings—not to mention a pervasive absence of public awareness—as well as a certain level of political apathy. However, the destruction of Leela Nag's ancestral home is more than

*Preserving the history of a country can help build national cohesion and present positive role models for future generations.*

Mukherjee of Comilla or Suhasini Ganguly of Khulna, have all but faded into oblivion.

Why has this been allowed to happen? This is all the more troubling because it is exactly what the Pakistani regime wanted when they launched a campaign to systematically erase Bangalee nationalism and the Bangalee identity, especially that of the Bangalee Hindu. At a programme at the Bangla Academy on February 15, 1971, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman famously criticised this. "No efforts have been made to pay our respects to Surya Sen, a brave progeny of the Liberation Movement. You are afraid to speak of him, because he was Hindu. I call on the people of this country to write of and read their histories. Once, we could not speak of Bengali nationalism, but today, this nationalism is the truth, and there is no power that can stop it," Bangabandhu had said.

How sad is it that, even after 50 years of independence, we are still reluctant to heed his call? In fact, even the heroes of 1971 are not being memorialised in the way they deserve. On Sunday, *The Daily Star* reported on how a library in Char Rajibpur upazila in Kurigram, named after one of the most famous female Liberation War veterans, Taramon Bibi, has ceased to exist; the building is now being used as a barrack for Bangladesh Ansar.

Preserving the history of a country can help build national cohesion and present positive role models for future generations. And across the world, there is a growing awareness of how inclusive depictions of history can ultimately contribute to building societies that respect women. In a society as deeply sexist as ours—where it's not just online trolls, but parents, teachers, co-workers, public figures, and even parliamentarians are also on a constant crusade to prove feminism to be a "Western concept"—one cannot stress enough on the importance of having the examples of Begum Rokeya, Leela Nag, Manorama Basu, and Sufia Kamal in public view as a reminder of what a Bangalee feminist really looks like.

US educator Myra Pollack Sadker, who campaigned relentlessly for the removal of gender bias from school textbooks, once said, "Each time a girl opens a book and reads a womanless history, she learns she is worth less." I would add that, each time a boy or a man also learns of a "womanless" history, he too thinks the same, and the vicious cycle of a society that devalues and marginalises women continues. The leaders of this country have a responsibility to break this cycle.

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This was the derelict condition of Leela Nag's ancestral home in 2019. Now, there is nothing left but rubble.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

In short, Leela Nag's legacy is not one to be taken lightly, which is why it is all the more frustrating that her ancestral home, instead of being preserved with care, has been allowed to fall into ruin. After Partition, the Pakistan government, true to its form, forced her to relocate to Kolkata, and all 5.97 acres of her family home was occupied by a man named Alauddin Chowdhury, who went on to collaborate with the Pakistani forces during the Panchgaon genocide on May 7, 1971, when at least 59 Bangalee Hindus were brutally murdered.

This begs the question: Why has the property continued to be in the possession of his family, who are embroiled in a battle with the High Court over its legal rights, even after the International Crimes Tribunal found evidence of Alauddin's involvement in crimes against humanity during the Liberation War? According to a member of the Leela Nag Smriti Pathagar, the lack of debris makes it apparent that the destruction of the house

just cultural or heritage destruction—it is a silent complicity in the erasure of women's contributions to the political and social movements in this region from the pages of our history. Leela Nag is one of many Bangalee women to have made major contributions to liberating this land, from the British and from the Pakistanis, only to have their legacies pushed aside in independent Bangladesh.

In a world where women have historically been silenced, excluded from public life and education, and their contributions to science and social progress erased and undermined—and where this systematic exclusion is still so ingrained and, more often than not, institutionalised in most societies across the world—this apathy towards preserving women's histories in Bangladesh should cause us a great deal of concern. In fact, we should, in general, be worried about the lack of focus on our history prior to 1971, although our women leaders seem to have disproportionately borne the brunt of this

collective amnesia.

Take Manorama Basu of Barisal, for example. She joined the anti-colonial movement as a teenager, went on to establish the first women's organisation in Bangladesh, and spent her entire life fighting for the rights of women. After Partition, she had frequent run-ins with the Pakistani regime, and was jailed for almost four years: first for leading a movement for supplying food in then Barisal in 1948, and later under a security law. She played a crucial role in organising women against the Pakistani autocracy, especially during the 1969 Mass Uprising. Where is the museum dedicated to "Mashima," as her followers fondly called her? Although the former Kawnia Branch Road in Barisal has been renamed to Manorama Basu Sarak, that is the extent of our memorialisation of her. There is no other major mention of her anywhere else in the country—no monument or plaque, not even her face on a stamp.

A similar fate befell the house of firebrand peasant leader Ila Mitra, who famously organised the peasant-Santhal uprising in Chapainawabganj in 1950 and was jailed and brutally tortured by the Pakistani police for four years. Her memory has been somewhat preserved with a mural in Dinajpur and a hall named after her at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU). But her childhood home in Jhenaidah's Shailakupa upazila remains in a dilapidated condition.

While the bravery and sacrifice of Pritilata Waddedar has, in recent times, come more in the spotlight, there is less mention of Kalpana Datta, who was entrusted along with Waddedar to attack the European Club in Chittagong, but was arrested a week before it could take place. Santi Ghosh and Suniti Choudhury of then Comilla, who were imprisoned in 1931 for shooting and killing the British district magistrate of Comilla when they were only 16, were hailed as heroes of the independence movement at the time, but are rarely mentioned in modern day Bangladesh. The names of lesser-known female revolutionaries, such as Parul

## Australia–Bangladesh: A booster dose for trade diversity?



BRENDAN AUGUSTIN

**W**ITHIN Australia, Bangladesh is perceived as an aid-dependent, impoverished country which is subjected repeatedly to natural and

human-induced disasters like cyclones, floods, and building collapses due to poor building standards. In reality, however, the country has made impressive strides in its development journey, and that image is in need of a refresher.

Bangladesh recorded nearly six percent annual GDP growth from 2000-2019 and officially registered a 3.5 percent growth rate in the Covid-19-ravaged 2020, raising the country's GDP to almost USD 320 billion. In 2019, prior to Covid-19, the economy grew by eight percent. A GDP per capita of around USD 2,000—for a population of around 160 million—means that the country is set to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status in the next few years.

Indeed, Bangladesh could be described as the least known, fastest growing economy in Asia. A few months ago, it was reported that the country had overtaken India in terms of per capita income, and recently it even provided foreign exchange assistance to Sri Lanka. In terms of recent growth rates and the size of its economy, Bangladesh has many similarities with Vietnam, a country which receives a lot more attention in Australia.

The conclusion of the Australia-Bangladesh Trade and Investment Framework Arrangement (TIFA) on September 15, 2021 is, therefore, timely and could provide the necessary boost towards a more significant economic relationship. While TIFAs are seen as mostly symbolic and replete with good intentions, they do signal an injection of commitment and ambition. TIFAs do not guarantee trade and investment growth, but there are examples where instruments like TIFAs have presaged the building of more expansive economic ties between countries. An example is the US-Bangladesh Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum agreement, which was signed in 2013; by 2019, bilateral trade in goods between the two countries had increased by close to

50 percent. In this specific case, the TIFA also highlights that Australia's scope for opportunities in South Asia goes beyond India. The current bilateral trade relationship is modest. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's latest figures show that Bangladesh is Australia's 30th largest partner, with two-way trade amounting to about USD 2 billion. Almost half of that relates to Australian imports of textiles and clothing and exports of cotton. Starting from that low base and combined with Bangladesh's good prospects for a post-Covid recovery, there should be room for growth. Bangladesh's large, young, increasingly urbanised population and a growing middle class should interest a range of Australian exporters and investors. One substantial opportunity is liquefied natural gas (LNG). Bangladesh's supply of inexpensive domestic gas contributed to its development success. As this depleted, Bangladesh quickly turned to LNG imports, starting in mid-2018 and growing to four million tonnes per annum in 2020. Forecasters are expecting LNG imports to grow to 20 million tonnes per annum by 2030—a fivefold increase in less than a decade.

Australia was the world's largest LNG exporter in 2020, just ahead of Qatar. Australia's LNG production facilities in the north of the country are among the closest to Bangladesh's already functioning and planned LNG import facilities. On paper, Australia should be able to be a competitive supplier to the country due to lower shipping costs. To date, Bangladesh's long-term LNG contracts have been concluded under the so-called "government-to-government" arrangements, namely with Qatar and Oman. The TIFA could provide an avenue, through which the prospects for a sustained LNG trading relationship could be developed, including by the two governments, ensuring that Australian LNG producers are able to compete on an equal footing.

For this to occur, Australian LNG producers, and indeed suppliers of other commodities, will also need to be convinced of the value of trade diversification and take more innovative approaches. Learning to deal with new customers in Bangladesh will require patience and creativity. Australian producers have traditionally enjoyed the custom of buyers from Northeast Asia (Japan, China, Korea, and Taiwan), who have consistently been prepared to provide attractive terms. While price is part of the equation, another part is these customers' good creditworthiness and preparedness to share risks and obligations. To get the necessary comfort with dealing with buyers with less experience and lower credit ratings, Australian producers will need to consider ways to manage the perceived higher risks or, indeed, by

developing an appetite for higher risk, as sellers from other countries have done to develop new markets like Bangladesh. It will also require Australian producers to have a long-term commitment to acquire a sophisticated understanding of the country and to enduring relationships. This is easier said than done as Australian companies can be expected to focus their efforts on markets that promise the best returns. Their willingness to do things differently in Bangladesh will likely depend on their perceptions of whether they can continue to count on Northeast Asia as the market of choice.

Bangladesh's success has attracted many other partners, and the landscape is competitive. The Australian government, through Export Finance Australia and Austrade, should consider some of the policies other countries have already used to develop market share in Bangladesh in order to expand Australia's presence. While it does have significant structural issues to address, many observers are cautiously optimistic that Bangladesh will be able to move up the manufacturing value chain. Australia is well-placed to supply the country with natural resources and value-added inputs, as it has done elsewhere in the region as countries industrialised. Australia is also well-suited

to provide a greater range and level of services, as has been done in the education sector where Australia has an established brand name in the country.

Bangladesh understands the need to both attract new investment and diversify its economy in order to lessen its dependence on the ready-made garment sector, remittances from its large diaspora, and some light manufacturing. The country has been increasingly active in looking at how it can attract the necessary investment, both to help in this diversification push and to modernise its infrastructure. Australian investors, especially those with an appetite for—and experience in—investing in Asian infrastructure, should take note.

Australia's ever-growing challenges with China have led political leaders to stress the need for more trade diversity. Bangladesh should feature strongly in the list of countries which can potentially provide that additional bandwidth. The two countries share historically significant relations: Australia was the fourth country to recognise Bangladesh's independence in 1971 and has been a committed development partner. People-to-people links are considerable, with over 40,000 people born in Bangladesh calling Australia home, according to the 2016 census. The English language and cricket provide good cultural commonalities.

Both countries are also wary of being dominated by larger and more assertive neighbours. And Bangladesh is rising in prominence as a potential partner on strategic issues in the region. While there are some tensions between Bangladesh and India, the relationship is sturdy, and increased cooperation between Bangladesh and Australia in this area is unlikely to draw ire from Quad partner India.

The TIFA is a signpost that, in the fast-evolving geopolitical and geoeconomic environment, Australia and Bangladesh do have many genuine interests in common, and they can and should work much closer together. At the end of the day, however, unless the business communities and political leadership of both the countries seize the opportunity, the TIFA will end up being symbolic and left on the shelf of unmet expectations.

Brendan Augustin has worked in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in Australia. He has also worked in senior roles in Oil, Gas, and Mining. He is now the managing director of Bina Group. This article has been republished under a Creative Commons Licence.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Pansy part
  - 6 Burning crime
  - 11 Entertain
  - 12 Turning tool
  - 13 Parts of some phones
  - 15 Inquire
  - 16 Vaccine base
  - 17 Poker prize
  - 18 Car parts
  - 20 Cook's wear
  - 23 Lathered up
  - 27 Cornfield pest
  - 28 Put together
  - 29 Locker room need
  - 31 Store for the future
  - 32 Purple hue
  - 34 Maple flow
- DOWN**
- 1 Mama's mate
  - 2 Flightless birds
  - 3 Walrus feature
  - 4 Fire remnant
  - 5 James of the NBA
  - 6 Church sights
  - 7 Maze runner
  - 8 Halt
  - 9 Cry of distress
  - 10 High home
  - 14 One, for Juan
  - 18 Wooden rod
  - 19 Cashew family tree
  - 20 Play division
  - 21 Old hand
  - 22 Join the crew
  - 24 Week part
  - 25 Runner on snow
  - 26 Longing
  - 30 Christmas decorations
  - 31 Coffee bar orders
  - 33 Maui souvenir
  - 34 Rigging support
  - 35 Car
  - 36 Entreaty
  - 38 Shore flier
  - 39 Like a desert
  - 40 Calls on
  - 42 Young man
  - 43 Earl Grey, e.g.

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### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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