

# A country for the 'civilised'



ANUPOMA JOYEETA JOYEE

FAMOUS mountaineer Wasifa Nazreen popularly said that it was more difficult to walk on the streets of Dhaka as a woman than it was to scale a mountain. I have not done anything nearly as brave as climbing a mountain, but I know how mentally taxing and stress-inducing it is to simply exist as a woman in public in Bangladesh. Every choice we make can become the subject of scrutiny; any glance we exchange can be used to justify someone else's inappropriate behaviour.

My earliest memory of being sexually assaulted in Bangladesh goes back to when I was 12, walking to my school in *sahwar kameez*.

A few years ago, after I had submitted my photo to the agent of a popular Bangladeshi mobile financial services company to open an account, he called me of his own accord and asked me to send a different photo wearing an *orna*, because a photo wearing a T-shirt did not seem adequately "modest" to him. Being a passport-size photograph, it barely showed any part of my body below the neck, let alone the chest.

Recently, in granting bail to the assailant of the May 18 attack on a young woman at a railway station in Narsingdi, a justice of the High Court (HC) self-assuredly questioned whether in any civilised country a woman would ever wear a crop top and jeans to a rural railway station.



Why is the determination to protect the 'culture' solely directed towards restricting women's bodily autonomy, their right to movement and freedom of expression, rather than compelling the public to behave in a respectful and civilised manner?

PHOTO: COLLECTED

**Every word spoken inside the courtroom has a knock-on effect. Judges' words form legal precedents. A justice of the High Court in particular wields immense power to make or break societal barriers. With great power, there should at least come some self-awareness as to the effect a simple word can have on the day-to-day lives of millions of women, who, due to the court's reductive comments, now stand on an extremely vulnerable position.**

Although the question is rhetorical, I would take the liberty to dissect it.

An online survey conducted by the UNDP and the Centre for Research and Information (CRI) has found that 87 percent Bangladeshi women have been publicly harassed. The remaining 13 percent women, who refused to answer, might also have been harassed, but chose to remain silent. Personally, I have never met a single Bangladeshi woman who

is a victim's conduct relevant – her outfit does not negate any part of the physical or mental element of the accused's offence. The cardinal question relevant to the bail petition should have been whether a person who is infuriated at the very sight of a woman wearing a crop top and jeans in public would be a threat to other women's safety. That question was either not raised by the judge, or even if it was, the assailant was not thought to be posing any risk to other women. So now she is free to go around terrorising and humiliating women who don't conform to what is considered to be the "culture" of Bangladesh. If I didn't know the context, just from the judge's comments I would deduce that the victim was being tried for wearing jeans and a crop top in Narsingdi, an outfit apparently unsuitable for a "civilised" society.

The judge further implied that the perpetrator had the "right" to protect the culture and heritage of Bangladesh and permitted her exercise of such "right" by inciting violence to such a degree that it drove the victim to seek shelter inside the station office in fear of her very life. The court sent out this appalling endorsement to millions of people in Bangladesh, who wait only for an opportunity to hurl abuse at women. What part of a

reductive comments, now stand on an extremely vulnerable position.

Being a woman in this country is the hardest job that we are assigned to at birth. Where injustice is rampant, the judiciary is often our only recourse. Such institutionalised victim blaming, that shifts the burden on women and requires them to restrict their liberty and calculate their each step, instead of punishing the perpetrator, is like the very last lamp going out.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**  
1 Suit  
6 Molten rock  
11 In the know  
12 Wise saying  
13 Exeter's county  
14 Jitterbug's cousin  
15 Starts  
17 Way off  
19 Nest egg acct.  
20 That guy's  
23 Wise answerer  
25 Lose color  
26 2000 Bruce Willis film  
28 Easter symbol  
29 Refused  
30 Spot  
31 Pilot's place  
32 Take a stab at  
33 George's wife  
35 Amorous

**DOWN**  
1 Misbehaving  
2 Lamb's mother  
3 Flattering  
4 Steel ingredient  
5 Kind of strength  
6 Island south of Sicily  
7 Symmetry line  
8 Martini base  
9 Like '60s fashions  
10 Writer Tan

archer  
38 Egypt  
neighbor  
41 Kept in reserve  
42 Writer  
Glasgow  
43 Muscularly fit  
44 Sacked out  
16 Book lover's device  
17 Game no-nos  
18 Palmer, his fans  
20 Fit to live in  
21 Lazy fellow  
22 Squalid  
24 Blubber  
25 Summer cooler  
27 Cooking pots  
31 Blase  
33 Cats' quarries  
34 Sledding site  
35 Guest's bed  
36 First numero  
37 Sewing aid  
39 Slangy  
40 Busy worker



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO  
dsopinion@gmail.comAnupoma Joyeeta Joyee  
is a barrister at law.

## BIRTH CENTENARY OF JAHAN ARA RAHMAN

### An inspiring life

Nabiba Noha  
works at The Daily Star.

NABIHA NOHA

the 1960s. She led the East Pakistan committee at the APWA general meeting held in Mari of erstwhile West Pakistan. She started working with the Women's Voluntary Association (WVA) during this period. She was elected the president of the WVA in Bangladesh and led the establishment of the WVA College for Girls in Lalmoni. Her younger sister Nargis Khan

"**M**Y mother didn't have any educational degree. However, I used to see her lying under the mosquito net at night reading a book until my father returned from the club... Another proof of her deep interest in education was a framed picture of Begum Fazilatunnesa [the first Muslim woman graduate in Bengal] hanging in her room. At that time, Fazilatunnesa was a well-known figure in the Muslim community. So, my mother had a desire in a corner of her mind to fulfil what was not possible in her own life with her child. She wanted me to get a proper education," Jahan Ara Rahman wrote in her brief memoir. She not only fulfilled her mother's dream, but also dedicated her life to the promotion of girls' education in Bangladesh.

This inspiring woman turns 100 today.

Jahan Ara's father Mofizuddin Ahmad was a member of the Bengal Civil Service. Being the daughter of a government official, she had to travel to different places with her family. As schools weren't available at that time in many districts, she had to study privately. In 1938, her father was transferred from Darjeeling to a place where there were no girls' schools. So, she was sent to Jalpaiguri Girls' School. The challenging part for her was that she had to study Sanskrit as a second language. Under the special supervision of her headmistress Sunitibala Chandra, Jahan Ara passed the entrance examination

**In 1994, Jahan Ara was elected the president of the Lady Brabourne College Alumni Association in Dhaka.**

**An organisation for elderly women, named Haimantika, was established under the chairmanship of Aktar Imam, and Jahan Ara Rahman worked as an adviser to this organisation from its inception.**

**In 1947, when Nurjahan Begum started publishing the Begum magazine, Jahan Ara actively started writing for the magazine till the 1980s.**



At 100, Jahan Ara Rahman is still healthy and sharp.

PHOTO: COURTESY

with first division in 1939 and received a first class scholarship.

Jahan Ara got admitted to Lady Brabourne College in the then Calcutta. At that time, this college was known as "Purdah College," as it was established for Muslim girls. The hostel and college were on the same campus; therefore, girls could continue their study while maintaining *purdah*. Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Haque, the then chief minister of Bengal, played a key role in establishing this college.

Jahan Ara studied in this college for four years. She passed the I.A exam securing first division, and got a second class in her BA exam. In 2014, when Jahan Ara visited Calcutta, she was given a warm reception as the only surviving student of the first batch of the Lady Brabourne College.

In 1946, she got married to Mujibur Rahman, who hailed from Sandwip and was a doctor at the Tropical Medical School in Calcutta. After partition, the Rahman family moved to Dhaka and Jahan Ara started to actively participate in social work. She played a prominent role in establishing Viqarunnisa Noon School in Dhaka. The school was named after Viqarunnisa Noon, wife of the then Governor of East Pakistan Sir Malik Feroz Khan Noon. Jahan Ara visited door to door to convince parents to send their daughters to school.

In the 1950s, Khulna was devastated by a major flood. Jahan Ara Rahman helped the flood victims with a large relief team from Dhaka.

Jahan Ara was elected the president of the East Pakistan branch of the All-Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) in

served as the principal of this college for quite some time. Jahan Ara also took initiative to establish a vocational training institution for girls in Dhaka's Basabo area.

In 1994, Jahan Ara was elected the president of the Lady Brabourne College Alumni Association in Dhaka. A book called *Brabourne Bichitra* was published under her leadership. An organisation for elderly women, named Haimantika, was established under the chairmanship of Aktar Imam, and Jahan Ara Rahman worked as an adviser to this organisation from its inception.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send us your letters to [letters@thedadlystar.net](mailto:letters@thedadlystar.net)

### Depression among Bangladeshi youth needs to be addressed

Depression is more than just being sad. It's a mental health condition that requires treatment. If you are feeling "down" for an unusually long time and if it is interfering with your daily functioning, this might be depression.

A major cause of depression among Bangladeshi students is uncertainty about their career. Most university students in Bangladesh are facing uncertainty about their career. Other causes include the lack of job opportunities and the meagre pay that fresh graduates receive.

Also, many graduates work hard for three to four years in order to get a government job. That in itself is an exhausting pursuit. And if they do not manage to get a "prestigious" government job, they are left with a lack of skills, work experience, and disappointment from their family members.

Many students from rural areas also suffer due to a lack of community at their urban universities. They feel lonely in times of sadness, having no one close to them to communicate their emotions to.



Depression is a mood disorder that can wreak havoc on one's life. It comes with feelings of sadness, hopelessness, numbness, and isolation. It is this numbness, the inability to feel anything at all, that drives many people to substance abuse or even self-harm.

In order to help university students suffering from depression and other mental health issues, families must be conscious enough

to not pressure their children regarding their achievements. It is also important for universities to appoint mental health professionals to give their pupils proper guidelines and strengthen their mental stability. Otherwise, many talented young Bangladeshi will lose their unique spark to depression.

Najmul Hasan, CUET