

A country for the ‘civilised’



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ANUPOMA JOYEETA JOYEE

FAMOUS mountaineer Wasfia 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.

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

has not been publicly harassed. So, what parameters did the judge use to conclude that a country where almost all women get harassed is the epitome of civilisation?

Going back to the basic legal definition, an offence is committed when the conduct (physical action such as touching) is paired with the mental element (for example, intention to commit the crime) of the accused. In no part of this equation

culture that necessitates women to literally fear a raging mob at the slightest instance of her dressing up somewhat unconventionally is worth protecting?

Considering that the judiciary is regressive enough to allow a woman to be abused seemingly in the name of preserving “culture,” where will it draw the line? Humiliating, terrorising, and sexually assaulting can soon lead to the killing of women. Would the court then also use the “right to preservation of culture” as a defence to murder?

The hostility that the Bangladeshi public usually shows towards women, or anyone who seems defenceless, is in no way civilised. Why is the determination to protect the “culture” solely directed towards restricting women’s bodily autonomy, their right to movement



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

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

and freedom of expression, rather than compelling the public to behave in a respectful and civilised manner? A hoard of people have supported the perpetrators’ crimes in the Narsingdi incident both online and offline. If violence against women in public places increases, our misogynistic judiciary will have played a significant role in it. As a woman and a legal professional, this is more terrifying to me than it is upsetting.

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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.

BIRTH CENTENARY OF JAHAN ARA RAHMAN

An inspiring life



Nabihha Noha
works at The Daily Star.

NABIHA NOHA

“MY 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 IA exam securing first division, and got a second class in her BA exam. In 1914, 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

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 Lalmatia. Her younger sister Nargis Khan

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. In 1947, when Nurjahan Begum started publishing the *Begum* magazine, Jahan Ara actively started writing for the magazine. She continued writing in the magazine until the 1980s.

Jahan Ara Rahman gradually withdrew herself from social work in the 1980s to take care of her ill husband. In 1991, her husband passed away. The couple were blessed with a son and a daughter. Their daughter, Hamim Khan, graduated from the physics department of Dhaka University with first class. She worked as a teacher at Sunbeams School in Dhaka for almost three decades. Her husband Akbar Ali Khan was a cabinet secretary and a former adviser to the caretaker government. Hamim Khan passed away in 2016; her only child Nehrin Khan passed away a year before that. Jahan Ara Rahman’s son Ehsanur Rahman is a cardiologist, working in the US for 50 years now.

At 100, Jahan Ara Rahman is still healthy and sharp. We wish this incredible woman a happy birthday!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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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 te-hem 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 pressurise 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 Bangladeshis will lose their unique spark to depression.

Najmul Hasan, CUET

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

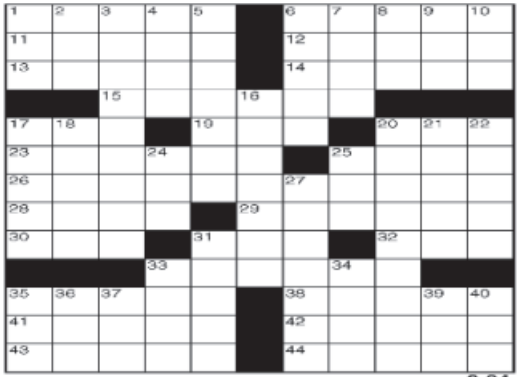
ACROSS

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