



VISUAL: STAR

# Refreshing inclusion of gender diversity in trial textbook



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The latest trial version of the seventh grade *History and Social Science: Activity Book* is being widely discussed for certain parts of two of its chapters. One captures a conversation on gender identity or gender diversity, and the other discusses *Oborodhbashini* (Secluded Women) by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, published in 1931 – a critique of the extreme forms of purdah imposed on women at the time. While the new curriculum may certainly be constructively criticised, these two chapters need to be commended for their transformative potential. The chapters and their discussions are both relevant and significant.

The chapter that covers a dialogue on gender diversity admirably simplifies a number of complicated issues: sex as only biological, gender as social constructions, and gender diversity as lived realities, to mention a few. The discussion unfolds the gender identity of Sharifa, who identifies herself as a woman, despite being biologically male. However, the discussion in the Bangla version may seem confusing, as it does not define the terms it uses.

Persons whose biological sex conforms with their gender identity are considered to be cisgender, and persons whose biological sex does not conform with their gender identity, are transgender. Transgender people may or may not choose to medically transition into the gender their self-perceived identity conforms with. A transgender person who chooses to transition from male to female is a transgender female, and a transgender person who transitions from female to male is a transgender male.

While “transgender” is an umbrella term, it often proves to be non-inclusive of the lived experiences of many gender-diverse people. The 2021 United Nations Independent Expert Report on Gender Identity rightly explains the shortcomings of the terminology “Transgender” or “Trans” in accounting for the gendered realities of many individuals: for instance, two spirit persons (North America), muxes (Mexico), kathoey (Thailand), bakla (Philippines), travestis (Argentina and Brazil), fa’afafine (the Samoan islands), or leiti (Tonga).

While in the Bangla version, Sharifa refers to herself as “transgender”, the English version carefully (and more intelligently) omits that terminology. The term that the UN chooses now to use to refer to persons whose gender identity and/or expression are at odds with what is enforced as a gender norm in a particular context at a particular point in time, is “gender diverse”.

Both the Bangla and the English versions of the textbook perceptively emphasise the gender

identity of the Hijras. Hijras self-identify neither as male nor female – not even transitioning – but rather as belonging to a distinct gender category, often referred to as “the third gender”. It is important that students are introduced to the concept of gender identity and diversity, more especially in the present context, where (to note a few positives) Hijras and transgender people are increasingly making important contributions in different spheres of the state and public life.

**As discrimination and violence based on gender identity and expressions is pervasive across the globe, and in most cases, the said discrimination and violence are perpetrated by people who are not sensitised to the rights of gender-diverse people, it is significant that young students are introduced to the idea of gender identity early on. Curiously, gender identity has never been part of our curriculum before. This, however, does not imply that we can simply shut our eyes and deny gender identity as a reality.**

They have also been getting more official recognition, such as in 2019, when the Bangladesh government created a third gender category on the national voters’ list.

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The other chapter that has garnered attention covers parts from *Oborodhbashini* – a feisty critique of patriarchal society from the early 1930s. The entire discussion in *Oborodhbashini* is utilised under the heading “When the social context changes, the status and role of the individual also changes” to show how social conditions and circumstances that regulate individuals’ lives, change with time.

The critique by Rokeya was published at a time when women

were not accepted as political equals (with even equal voting rights, for instance) across the world. It was only in the late 1920s that women in Bengal, for instance, won the right to vote on a limited scale. Snippets from *Oborodhbashini* thus represent a gendered time and social context, where women were relegated to seclusion and perceived as “lesser” than men on all counts. In many colonial-era legislations, we also find references of “*pardanashin* ladies” and specific rules applicable to them in the colonial legal context. Such women – both Hindu and Muslim, and mostly belonging to the upper class – customarily and culturally had to observe complete seclusion.

*Oborodhbashini* must be academically appreciated for its radical feminist zeal, at a time when women could not freely assert

# Goodbye, Indigo Lady

The passing away of Ruby Ghuznavi is a huge loss to Bangladesh’s craft industry

Saiful Islam is managing director of Bengal Muslim and Majority World.

SAIFUL ISLAM

In 2013, when I was a novice in the field of crafts, I wanted to know more about muslin, Bengal’s famed fabric. Amongst the people I turned to was Ruby Ghuznavi (or Ruby Apa, as she was known), whom I met at her office of the AFMR Foundation, which she also ran.

My impression of a firm, steely resolved, no-nonsense, committed and highly articulate person never diminished over the next eight years. Over *shingara*, sandwiches and tea, she shared her writings on Jamdani, her knowledge of Bangladesh’s craft industry and most importantly, her wide contacts within the country, India and the UK.

I would ask to meet her, and she would be always available with frank opinions on a weaver or a company director, about a factory or an institution – listening, encouraging and participating in every line of enquiry. When it was her turn to ask for our help to

bring fine yarn into Bangladesh or help in starting high count weaving (which we were successfully doing) for the Jamdani Festival, we stepped forward, grateful that we had a small opportunity to pay back the huge knowledge debt we owed her.

She drove the project that brought recognition for Bangladesh from UNESCO, awarding the country its Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013 for the traditional art of Jamdani weaving. She also founded and ran Aranya, a boutique organisation that pioneered the use of vegetable dyes.

During a seminar on the launch of the book *Indigo* by Jenny Balfour-Paul in London, the author mentioned that the true expert was sitting in the audience, pointing out Ruby Apa. When I was travelling through India, one expert in vegetable dyeing asked me “How is the Indigo Lady?” It took me some time to realise the respect that our neighbours had for her.

She was a central leader of Bangladesh’s craft industry – of its Jamdani revival, and for the small but strong niche that it had begun to carve out for itself within the subcontinent’s field of crafts. Her dinners were always fun and varied, whether it

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was in the mix of invited company or amongst the books of poetry that lined Farhad bhai’s (her husband, who passed away a month earlier) study.

Meeting her during the past one year had become difficult, since she was increasingly frail from multiple health issues and shielded by her family. And yet, when I wanted help in dyeing muslin yarn, she helped us to do it, leading us through the boiling vats of dye at the back of her office in Nikunja, near the airport.

Her workers adored her, her weavers respected her, her colleagues learnt from her, and we – well, we will miss her as no other, a light extinguished without another torch-bearer in sight, a legend fading into the night,

representing a generation that delivered lasting results with limited resources.

Goodbye and good night Ruby Apa, rest in peace, for your work will live on.

Ruby Ghuznavi (1935-2023)

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

# Institutional email accounts for National University students

The National University, like many other public universities in Bangladesh, doesn’t provide institutional email accounts to Honours and Masters students. Due to the non-availability of institutional email accounts, students are deprived of many benefits.

Suppose the university authorities give a student an institutional email account, he or she will get certain facilities like free access to online educational courses, research papers and


some software (like Microsoft 365). Moreover, when a student with an institutional email account sends an email to professors living abroad, potentially to explore options for further studies, they may prioritise the email.

On the other hand, many journals have a system of providing certain academic papers to students for free or via institutional discounts. However, in the absence of an institutional email account, students are deprived of these benefits. Instead, they have to pay


a good amount of money, which is simply not affordable for them. As a result, students are losing access to crucial learning facilities.

Considering all the benefits students will reap from having an institutional email account, the National University should give immediately provide student with institutional accounts.

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S.L No.	Tender No. Date	Name of the Item	Cost of Tender Schedule	Last date of Closing & Opening
01.	EDCL.(Bogura)/PUR/ LT/2023/29  Dt. 15/01/2023	Supply & Installation of 500KVA Sub-Station at EDCL, (Bogura). (Details as per Tender Schedule & Technical Specification)	Tk. 1500.00/set Non-refundable	Closing: 02/02/2023 at 12.00 PM Opening: 02/02/2023 at 12.30 PM

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