

The nuisance of distorting Begum Rokeya’s legacy



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When I first heard about the desecration of Roquiiah Sakhawat Hossain, popularly known as Begum Rokeya, at Dhaka University in the aftermath of the July uprising, I paid it little attention, assuming it was a false flag operation aimed at discrediting the mass movement that ended an oppressive regime on August 5, 2024.

On the morning of November 11 this year, I delivered a speech on Begum Rokeya and Mary Wollstonecraft at my alma mater and former workplace, the Department of English at DU. While waiting for the event to begin, I was told that the defacing of Begum Rokeya's graffiti near Shamsun Nahar Hall in November last year had been a foolish act by an individual, not an organised attempt to malign Bangladesh's foremost woman writer. I later learned that a naive and ill-informed female student had committed the act, later apologised, and the matter was considered closed.

However, we are once again confronted with disruptive behaviour targeting Bangladesh's feminist icon. This time, it involved a university teacher. The individual, whose name matters little, defamed the devout Rokeya with preposterous accusations, seeking to portray her as an adversary of Islam.

Though nonsensical and presumably a publicity stunt, this attempt to sow dissonance between Rokeya and Islam has caused confusion about her religiosity. It struck me as a “mixed nuisance”—both a private and public irritant—affecting the wider public as well as me personally. As an academic who has studied and taught Begum Rokeya's works for decades, I can state with certainty that the university-affiliated critic's claims are the exact opposite of who she was.

Friends, both local and international, aware of my research interest in Begum Rokeya, continued to alert me to the controversy. I then came across a column by the editor of *The Daily Star*, titled “Bangladesh needs more dynamic Islamic discourse” (published on December 12, 2025), which touched on the issue. It suggested that the social media



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distraction surrounding Begum Rokeya's stance on Islam had shifted from triviality to seriousness, prompting me to respond.

I first learned about Islam in depth from the late Shah Abdul Hannan (1939-2021), a scholar versed in both Islamic sciences and worldly matters. Before meeting him in November 1994, my understanding of Rokeya's perspective on Islam was vague. As a second-year undergraduate, I attended Hannan's classes, where he discussed diverse scholarly debates on Islam. He devoted several sessions to examining Rokeya's work, presenting her as an Islamic reformist who

opposed entrenched patriarchal and un-Islamic traditions in Bangalee Muslim society.

My own research later led me to the same conclusion: Begum Rokeya criticised cultural distortions masquerading as Islam, not the religion itself. In other words, she distinguished between “ethical Islam” and “establishment Islam,” as Leila Ahmed terms them in *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992). Hannan also introduced us to Begum Rokeya's

to numerous newspaper and magazine essays, I have authored journal articles on Rokeya published by Sage, Routledge, and the University of Florida.

Begum Rokeya's oeuvre does contain statements which, if decontextualised or interpreted simplistically, might seem to place her outside Islam. To avoid misrepresentation, it is crucial to read her writings critically and holistically rather than selectively. She

why will women?”

In *Motichur-I*, Rokeya observes: “In Arab society, where women were oppressed and female infanticide was widespread, Prophet Muhammad liberated them.... Alas! It is because of his absence [absence of his teachings] among us that we [women] are in such a despicable plight!”

Her Islamic framework is further evident in her English essay “God Gives, Man Robs” (1911): “THERE is a saying, ‘Man proposes, God disposes,’ but my bitter experience shows that God gives, Man Robs.... Our great Prophet has said, ‘Talibul ilm farizatu ‘ala kulli Muslimeen-o-Muslimat’ (i.e., it is the bounden duty of all Muslim males and females to acquire knowledge). But our brothers will not give us our proper share in education.”

I could cite many more examples to demonstrate Begum Rokeya's commitment to advancing women's rights within an Islamic framework. Regarding her critical remarks, often used to suggest tension between her and Islam, I have previously written: “In places where she appears critical of religious authorities, her actual targets are pseudo-religious people and texts.”

Given her righteous lifestyle and innumerable affirmations of her faith, it is inconceivable that she would question the divine origin of Islam's primary texts. Her pointed critiques were directed at misogynistic texts written by self-styled custodians of Islam.

In “Dhangsher Pathe Bangiya Muslim,” Rokeya notes that books such as *Rahe Najat* (Path to Salvation) and *Shonabhaner Puthi* promoted women's unquestioned obedience to men. In her essay “Griho” (Home), she cites passages instructing women: “Never utter a word even if your husband wants to kill you,” and “Husband is woman's guide and crown/ Worship your husband as you do your Guide.”

In the introduction to *A Feminist Foremother*, Professor Quayum and I clarify that when Rokeya wrote, “These are nothing but written by men,” she referred to “numerous cheap and popular texts written by misogynists, clad in counterfeit religious garb” that promoted female subservience. Begum Rokeya did not question the authority of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

A proverb says: “If someone says it's raining and another person says it's dry, it's not your job to quote them both. It's your job to look out the window and find out which is true.” Begum Rokeya's entire oeuvre is modest in volume. Let us read it, re-evaluate her relationship with Islam, and see for ourselves who she truly was.

Rajuk’s short-sighted DAP puts millions at risk in a major quake

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Unplanned urbanisation, violations of the National Building Code and the Detailed Area Plan (DAP), and rampant filling of wetlands with sand for housing projects have made Dhaka the riskiest city in the country. Uncontrolled groundwater extraction and the rapid concretisation of the city—effectively halting the natural recharge of aquifers—have created massive underground voids, further increasing the risk. Narrow roads, non-resilient structural designs, and a lack of central control over gas and electricity distribution have made Dhaka a recipe for disaster in the event of a major earthquake.

Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk)'s survey under the Urban Resilience Project stated that a 6.9-magnitude earthquake originating from the Tangail's Madhupur fault would result in the destruction of 40 percent of buildings in Dhaka. Such findings are simply terrifying. According to media reports, after the recent earthquakes, Rajuk identified nearly 300 buildings in Dhaka as being at risk. Yet there is still no clarity on what steps have been taken following this identification. After coming to power, the interim government and Rajuk caved in to pressure from real estate companies and revised the DAP despite strong opposition from activists, academics and urban planners. The revision now allows higher structures on narrower roads with inadequate essential services. If this series of earthquakes does not prompt a reconsideration of that decision, it is difficult to imagine what will.

Earthquakes are chaotic phenomena that do not depend on scale. Their unpredictability is precisely what makes them so destructive and life-threatening. One can never know for certain when or where they will strike. Even scientists at the United States Geological Survey (USGS) can only estimate the probability of a significant earthquake occurring in a specific area over a given period. The Bangladesh Meteorological Department reported four earthquakes of magnitude 4 or above in the past 30 days, all of which originated within the country. Among them, the 5.7-magnitude earthquake



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originating in Madhabdi, Narsingdi, instilled fear and panic due to its shallowness and proximity to Dhaka. In addition to the Dawki fault and the Indo-Burma Megathrust, the recent discovery of another fault line within the country—capable of generating earthquakes of magnitude 6—should raise serious concerns about national disaster preparedness.

In 2010, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake in Haiti resulted in an estimated death toll of over three lakh, according to the Haitian government's official count. The primary reason for this staggering figure was the absence of an enforced building code. To this day, Haiti remains a grim example of how unregulated infrastructure can devastate

a city. By contrast, Japan—despite being one of the most seismically active countries in the world—has significantly reduced casualties and damage through rigorous building codes, sophisticated early-warning systems, nationwide drills and a culture of personal preparedness. This includes knowing evacuation routes, turning off gas supplies immediately, and using stairs instead of elevators.

Let us assume Dhaka adopted all these measures. Have we considered where people would evacuate to? Are there adequate public spaces in the city that could be used as temporary shelters or as bases for emergency rescue operations in such a crisis?

Public spaces, such as parks and

playgrounds, are integral to earthquake management. They serve as safe gathering points away from buildings, electrical wires and gas lines, and can function as hubs for emergency response, shelter and recovery by providing food and medical aid in a post-earthquake situation. Dhaka's earthquake management strategy must include freeing the remaining parks and open spaces—such as Panthakunja Park, Anwara Udyan, Suhrawardy Udyan, Osmani Udyan, Tajuddin Park and others—from encroachment and illegal occupation. Beyond this, more open spaces must be created in every area of the city. These spaces should be designed for multifunctionality, accessibility and resilience well before disasters strike. Features such

as access to water, communication points and clear layouts should be incorporated to support both immediate safety and long-term recovery. If real estate companies can acquire land and develop buildings in Dhaka, the government should be equally capable of acquiring land to create public spaces for a more resilient city. Such spaces are not only vital during emergencies; they also help foster a sense of community.

Earthquake drills in educational institutions, factories, office buildings and densely populated areas must be conducted regularly. Earthquake resilience must be ensured in every building, particularly in schools, factories and offices. Mandatory evacuation plans should be in place for each building, and residents must be familiar with them. Every neighbourhood should develop an emergency volunteer response team through community engagement. There has been considerable discussion about identifying buildings at risk; following such assessments, structures requiring retrofitting must be upgraded accordingly, while high-risk buildings should be dismantled safely.

In Bangladesh, authorities often wake up after a disaster, only to fall back into inaction once the issue fades from public attention. Rajuk cannot afford to wait for a catastrophe to strike. The government should roll back its decision to allow increased building heights on narrow roads through the latest DAP revision. We cannot allow the lives of millions to be endangered for the benefit of real estate interests.

Disaster management in Bangladesh has largely focused on specific regions, particularly coastal areas, and hazards such as floods and cyclones. Urban disaster preparedness, however, remains woefully inadequate. There are no specialised emergency response teams for earthquakes in the country. The Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 took 19 days to conclude rescue operations, and the failure of a single building exposed the severe lack of machinery, training and preparedness for such scenarios. This must change. Area-specific disaster management plans, grounded in proper risk assessments, are urgently needed. When it comes to earthquakes, it is not a question of if, but when. And when it happens, we must be prepared.