

Pioneer of Women's Rights and Literacy Passes Away

Mr. Bablu RAHMAN (Bangladesh)

She has played a major role in ensuring the empowerment of the women in the country. And she was a pioneer among the women of the world, not just Bangladesh. Her name is Nurjahan Begum.

Today's generation may not be able to grasp how important Nurjahan Begum is. She has always tried to awaken the women through her magazine 'Begum', since its inception in 1947.

Nurjahan Begum, the editor of the first magazine for women in the Indian subcontinent 'Begum', died on May 23, 2016. She was 91.



Nurjahan Begum, Photo: courtesy

BBC reported that she was the first female journalist in Bangladesh and a trailblazer for female journalists in South Asia.

Serajul Islam Chowdhury, a professor emeritus at Dhaka University and famous intellectual figure in Bangladesh, has been a passionate reader of Begum magazine for the last 60 years.

He said, "It was a brave step to publish a magazine for women readers at that time, since there were few voices for women in 1947. In those days, women in our society didn't dare to take their own photos. Begum brought about major changes towards that attitude."

She will be remembered for her contribution by relentlessly pursuing women's rights and focusing on their successes in every publication of Begum magazine.

She was the editor of Begum magazine for the last 65 years. She was dedicated to Begum magazine—editing it up until her death at 91.

Begum was Bangladesh's first weekly magazine with pictures, and created opportunities for many female Muslim writers.

Since 1947 till today, Begum magazine has been playing a vital role for more than half a century in promoting the cause of women and providing a platform for their literary activities. The day the

magazine was first published was the day Nurjahan and her comrades began a revolution and helped further the feminist movement in our country.

Nurjahan Begum's elder daughter Flora Nasrin Khan said, "She always hoped that the Begum magazine, through which she has led advocacy for women until now, would never close down."

"To fulfill her wish, I will continue publishing the magazine in any way I can. When she was in hospital, I wanted to hand her the last issue. She would have taken it and smiled. But I didn't make it," Khan said.

Born on June 4, 1924 in Chandpur's Chalitatali village in undivided Bengal, Nurjahan Begum received her education at Shekhawat Memorial Girls High School, established by Begum Rokeya, in Kolkata, West Bengal before moving on to Lady Brabourne College.

In 1947, her father Mohammad Nasiruddin, also an eminent editor of 'Saogat', an intellectually-focused literary magazine, launch

ed 'Begum' to give space to women issues in the media. Published initially in Kolkata, the magazine shifted its base to Dhaka in 1950 following the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Nurjahan Begum succeeded Poet Sufia Kamal to become the editor of the magazine four months after it was launched.

Since its inception, the Begum magazine promoted many women litterateurs in Bengali societies in West Bengal, India and Bangladesh.

As the editor of Begum magazine, she was awarded the Begum Rokeya Padak, a Bangladeshi national honor in 1997 for her contribution to women's literacy and literature.

In a recent interview, she said, "I never tried to do anything else outside Begum magazine. My life is dedicated to Begum, as well as women's emancipation."

In 1952, she married a noted literature, Rokannujjaman Khan, fondly known as Dadabhai. Khan died in 1999. He also dedicated his life to the welfare and development of children and juveniles of the country.



Cover pages of Begum magazine.

The magazine was not only hugely popular with Muslim women readers but also attracted the attention of men.

Begum magazine began a revolution at a time when publishing a women's magazine, especially for Muslim women, was unimaginable. As a daughter of Mohammad Nasiruddin, the prominent editor of Saogat magazine and founder of Begum magazine, she created a platform for women from all walks of life.

One of the most esteemed writers of the country, Selina Hossain, wrote for Begum magazine. She says, "The magazine carries photographs alongside its articles. Having your photos published on paper was a big deal for women at that time. She has inspired women to become writers and journalists, and even gave ideas for women's empowerment in her magazine such as how to make a career out of sewing, cooking and even childcare—the skills that were already honed by women in Bangladesh."

Journalist Dil Monowara Monu, who worked at Begum magazine under Nurjahan Begum's guidance for 25 years from 1974, describes the editor as a legend. She says, "Besides publishing the magazine, her main intent was to reach out to rural women, create awareness among them, and take them to the path of development and empowerment."

Now, I would like to offer my heartfelt condolences to Nurjahan Begum, the legendary editor of Begum magazine.