

Beggzadi Mahmuda Nasir

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I first heard the name Beggzadi Mahmuda Nasir when a young colleague friend of mine, Mithila Mahfuz, a lecturer at IUB, talked about her autobiography *Teen Desh Teen Jibon*, during a seminar. I was very interested to know more about her but unfortunately her book was out of print. Then suddenly a picture of the English Department faculty of Dhaka University, taken in 1951 or 1952, appeared on Meghna Guhathakurta's Facebook post and generated a lot of questions about the single woman in a dark sari. The name Beggzadi was suggested and, as this is not a very common name, I wondered if it might be the same Beggzadi. Since then she's been on my radar.

So who is this Beggzadi, a Muslim woman who wrote her autobiography *Teen Desh Teen Jibon*? Who is this Beggzadi who lived through three eras: the British Occupation, the Pakistan years and independent Bangladesh? Many people in my parents and grandparents generation did that, but not many wrote down their experiences. Who is this Beggzadi the only sari draped female, sitting beside A. G. Stock, who appears in a picture with DU faculty?

Beggzadi Mahmuda Nasir was born on 16th April, 1929 in undivided Bengal into a highly educated and liberal family. This gave her opportunities that few women of her generation could avail and enabled her to study at tertiary level both in Kolkata and Dhaka universities. She had exposure to a variety of educational systems. In the early years it was missionary as well as madrasa, then a year in the renowned Lady Brabourne College in Kolkata, followed a co-educational institution, B M College in Barisal.

For her Master's programme, Beggzadi got admission in the English Department of Dhaka University. She was very active both in literary and cultural activities, and during one of these cultural activities she met and got married to Abdul Matin – a renowned teacher and theatre performance artiste.

She started her career in 1951 as a lecturer in English at Kumudini College in Tangail. She believed in education for woman and saw that as the only way that the status of women could change in society. In 1956 she founded the Central Women's College in Dhaka and was the principal for the next 36 years, from 1956 to 1992. The college flourished and she went on to found the first women's university in Bangladesh, the Central Women's University, with her as the vice-chancellor.

Beggzadi's autobiography, *Tin Desh Tin Jibon* – literally three nations and three lives – showcases her time during three major political eras. The first section, from her birth in 1929 to the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, takes place during the colonial period. The second section deals with life in East Pakistan, post partition till the birth of Bangladesh. The third section, about Bangladesh, finishes around 2007 when she is at the peak of her career.

An autobiography or a memoir is impossible in a vacuum; it cannot be just about a particular person. As we teach our students when we discuss setting in a story, it is the environment around the person, the cultural, the social, the political state of the country within its network of neighbours. Just so, that first section of the book is written with the backdrop of the Second World War, as well as the great famine of 1943, and finally Partition.

We are allowed to see interesting snippets about her life, the fact that the family kept a number of newspapers, among them the *Azad* and *The Statesman*. For Beggzadi's sake, *Shishu Shathi* was delivered and for the mother, *Mohammadi* and *Bashumati*; *Dipali* for the brother and, for an uncle who stayed with them, *The illustrated Weekly of India*.

Beggzadi had to read the newspaper headings and repeat them to her father when he returned from court in the evening. This is what we tell our language learners to do to improve their reading skills and to keep abreast with current affairs. This was already in action in this family.

There's an interesting passage about her practicing handwriting on banana leaves with bamboo splinters, *basher konchi*. She had to copy proverbs and "*bhalo bhalo kotha*" from books on handwriting. When I was a child and went to school – and they were mostly missionary schools – penmanship was very important and we were taught to write in a cursive hand and actually got grades for good writing. Now when I compare my handwriting to that of people of the present generation, I see the stark difference. Obviously young people nowadays don't write much by hand, anymore or rather just use a couple of fingers and tap tap tap. If I ask some of my students to get some paper and pen to write something, they often look lost, or reach for the cell phone.

Little incidents and events that happened around her pop up in her work: the start of "Ration cards" and their family's involvement in distributing milk to the needy. They would build a wood fire in their yard and boil cauldrons of milk and distribute to people with young children. At one point she goes on to talk about her first day at Dhaka University and meeting AG Stock in the Department of English.

Beggzadi was a syndicate member of Jahangirnagar University from 1976 to 1986 and an academic council and senate member of the University of Dhaka from 1965 to 1970 ("Prof Beggzadi Passes Away"). She received the Begum Rokeya Padak of the Government of Bangladesh in 2001, was decorated by the Women's Federation for World Peace in 2001, and was a life fellow of the Bangla Academy.

I'd like to end with a couple of quotes from Mithila Mahfuz's review of Beggzadi's book:

Her autobiography *Tin Desh Tin Jibon* describes the journey of her becoming an "enlightened" independent woman as well as the journey of her mission to educate women through the shifting political and cultural landscapes from undivided British India to East Pakistan and finally Bangladesh.

And another quote:

In this context self-representational narratives are important historical sources that could help us understand the dynamics of the lives of middle class Bengali Muslim women. Beggzadi Mahmuda Nasir, who is among the few women of her time to write an autobiography stands out as she presents a life that puts those very notions of agency and empowerment into question.

Unfortunately, Professor Beggzadi Mahmuda Nasir passed away before she could see her memoirs published in 2015.

Works Cited

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