

## Nadera Begum: The Rebel Who Came in from the Cold Niaz Zaman

Speak about university women in politics and the first name that comes to mind is that of Lila Nag (1900 - 1970), the first female student of Dhaka University, who enrolled in the Department of English. Lila Nag's fought for women's emancipation as she fought against the British. Soon after the creation of Pakistan, however, there was another student of the Department of English who fought for social equality and against the Pakistan establishment which continued to follow the class-conscious stratification of society fostered by the erstwhile British Raj.



Nadera Begum (1927-2013) was the younger sister of Kabir Chowdhury and Munier Choudhury. Though both the brothers had gone to college, the conservative family was not willing to let the young girl study further. However, the two brothers were able to persuade their parents to let Nadera Begum go to college. So, from 1944-1947, the young girl studied at Lady Brabourne College, completing her IA and then her BA there (Maleka Begum). She then enrolled in the Department of English at the University of Dhaka.

Nadera Begum was greatly influenced by Munier Choudhury's communist leanings and was politically active. All Communists were held in suspicion by the government and she was, like her brother, under police watch.

Miss A. G. Stock, the Departmental Head at the time, did not quite approve of Nadera Begum's activities. However, there is no doubt that she was impressed by this fiery woman student. Stock writes at length about her – though referring to her only by her initial N. In *Asamapta Atmajibani*, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who refers to Nadera Begum by name, describes how she stood up for what she believed was right.

In 1949, what were known as the 4th-class employees of Dhaka University were on strike and students had joined them in their protests. As Sheikh Mujibur Rahman notes, before the creation of Pakistan, the university was a residential university. “Now it was the only university in the province. The number of students had increased substantially. But the number of employees hadn't increased correspondingly. They had to work throughout the day” (*The Unfinished Memoirs*, 119). Sheikh Mujibur Rahman describes how students became involved. “Student workers decided to lie down in front of the university gate. Only one girl student took an active part in the strike. Her name is Nadira Begum (sic). She is Professor Munier Chowdhury's sister. She sat down in front of the gate with the male students” (124). Mujib mentions how students trampled over the seated students and vilified Nadera Begum. However, nothing deterred her. Six of the students who had joined the protests were expelled. Students called the strike in order to get the punishment reduced. A G Stock describes the incident in some detail, using Nadera Begum's initial.

The strike began, and the library building in which were all the main lecture rooms was duly picketed. Surprisingly there was a woman on the first shift, who proved to be N, the girl in the English Department who was already blacklisted. It appeared to be my duty to reason with her, so with an interested audience standing round I put it to her that if the object of the exercise was to get the punishment reduced, picketing the classrooms was bad tactics. She conceded the point of no importance whatsoever. They must of course go on, she said. (132)

Though A G Stock did not approve of the tactics, she was impressed by Nadera Begum and adds another page on her. She describes how, when the police were after her, she managed to evade arrest several times, once by allowing the policeman to grab her sari. She fled, leaving the sari behind in the hands of what must have been a very astounded policeman indeed.

N's adventures were more colourful and deserve a postscript. That argument on the compound was the last conversation I had with her for many years. She was a fervent communist, good-looking and passionately eloquent, and had never heard of fear, and the

police had decided that she was dangerous. After the strike, she evaded capture for a month by going underground, never sleeping twice under the same roof, and became a popular legend. (139)

Despite her attempts to evade arrest, Nadera Begum was caught at last and detained as an “under-trial prisoner” for want of a charge. She was kept for two years in solitary confinement. However, for a month she was kept as a common criminal for having assaulted an armed warder. In prison she was given the duty to teach fellow prisoners. Perhaps this revived her academic interest and she sent word through a prison visitor that she wanted to sit for the MA examination. A. G. Stock comments that she was happy to give her permission. “With a degree she could become a college lecturer. Without it she would make a first-class agitator. . . (139).

A. G. Stock was not allowed to meet Nadera Begum. She believed that the government must have thought her “a dubious influence” (139). A. G. Stock left before Nadera Begum could sit for her exams. Nevertheless, she did and, in 1954, she received a First Class in the MA examination. Meanwhile, there were a change in her personal life which affected her activism. e.

Her cousin, Gholam Kibria, with whom she was romantically involved, was also politically active and, like Nadera Begum, had been imprisoned from 1949-1951. On his release he sat for the Central Superior Service Examination, standing 4<sup>th</sup> – the first East Pakistani to do so well. He was allowed to join the Central Superior Services of Pakistan and become a CSP but had to sign a bond giving up all political activities.

Nadera Begum was also released from jail. On April 2, 1952, Nadera Begum married Gholam Kibria. As a CSP, Kibria could not have a political activist as his wife. Nadera Begum had two choices: reject the marriage and continue her political activities or accept the marriage and give up her political activism. Nadera Begum chose the latter. It is possible that Nadera Begum had been persuaded to give up political activism even before the marriage took place. There is no picture of hers in the procession that students took out on February 21 – though another student of the English Department, Halima Khatun, was in the first row of women students who emerged from the gates of the university.

In 1956-1957, Nadera Begum was appointed to the English Department (Rahim 210). As a government servant, her husband was transferred to many towns and for some years was also posted abroad to the World Bank in Washington DC. As his wife, Nadera Begum accompanied him on his transfers and had to leave the Department for several years. However, she was able to return years later, though for a short time.

Syed Badrul Ahsan, who was her student when she returned to Dhaka University, wrote an obituary on her passing in which he praised her style of teaching

She was unlike any other teacher in the department of English at Dhaka University in that she brought into her pedagogy, if one might use that term, a good deal of the informal. That essentially meant developing a remarkable degree of rapport with her students. She was forever breezing through the corridors of the department, an incessant sign of the activism that once defined her life. Her classroom lectures were brisk, noted for the constant flow of ideas which appeared from somewhere deep within her. Yes, you could say Nadera Begum was unconventional in the way she handled life in academia.

Sadly, there is nothing on her in *Banglapedia* – or on the internet except for the obituaries that appeared after her death.

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