



Feminism and Nationalism in Cold War East Pakistan

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Every independent nation is paying special attention to the progress of women. It is not possible for a country that does not have a women's movement to undergo extensive improvement. [...] The women of our country are lagging behind those of other countries. [...] There are many reasons for this, of which the lack of education is one. East Bengal is an agricultural land. [...] The climate of organisation that prevails in the cities is lacking in the countryside. For this reason, the majority of the people of our country cannot become immediately familiar with the changes of the times. Women are further oppressed because they are at the back of the group [...].

Pakistan needs a women's movement. Poverty, poor health, illiteracy, and unemployment, these are the root problems of our country. Alongside our men, we too must work tirelessly to solve these problems. (Begum 2006: 925-6)

This excerpt is taken from an editorial in the Bengali women's magazine *Begum*, published on 23 March 1952. The piece goes on to cite examples of women's groups and women's meetings in the Arab world and in London as sources of inspiration for working "to improve women's rights, rural education, and social moral standards" (Begum 2006: 926). The timing and the content of this statement raise several interesting points. Just a month earlier, women's and human rights activist and former US First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had arrived in Karachi, Pakistan, for a seven-day visit as a guest of the All-Pakistan Women's Association (APWA). At the airport, Roosevelt was greeted by "thousands of cheering Pakistanis, many of them riding elaborately decorated camel carts" that were, according to the *New York Times*, "something of a Karachi trademark" (James 1952a: 2).

The following day, she met with members of APWA, including founder and president Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan and Begum Hussain Malik, the general secretary of the organisation. They and



other members worked hard throughout the day to impress upon Roosevelt the many rights enjoyed by women under Muslim law. At a Special Human Rights Seminar organised by APWA at the Beach Luxury Hotel in Karachi on 21 February 1952, Khan noted that it was “a matter of great pride and good fortune” that the human rights principles now endorsed by the United Nations were “the very basis of Islam itself and adopted by Constituent Assembly of Pakistan” in 1949 (Douglas 1980: 17-8; James 1952b).

Roosevelt’s weeklong visit to Pakistan included a day trip to East Bengal, where her host for the day was the Austrian-born Viqarunnesa Noon, the wife of the then-governor Firoz Khan Noon. In her travel memoirs, Roosevelt would describe Begum Noon as “charming in a soft pink sari” and recalled her insistence on the need “in East Pakistan [for] the kind of domestic science training school the Begum Liaquat Ali Khan had obtained from the Ford Foundation for Karachi” (Roosevelt 1953: 85). Although the Home Economics College in Dhaka would not be founded until 1961 (with funding from the Ford Foundation and Oklahoma State University), Begum Noon was able to establish in 1952 the Viqarunnissa Noon School for girls that remains very highly regarded to this day.

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While Eleanor Roosevelt’s hectic schedule in Pakistan and her memoirs of the visit are certainly fascinating, the far greater significance of the timing of her trip is of course immediately obvious to anyone familiar with Bangladesh’s nationalist history. On 21 February 1952, the very day that Eleanor Roosevelt was meeting with APWA leaders in Karachi, 1800 miles to the east, in Dhaka, rallies in support of making Bengali an official language of Pakistan alongside Urdu ended in the police shooting and killing of five people, including university students and a nine-year-old boy. Fellow activists quickly declared them shaheed or martyrs and built a memorial to mark the site of the first killings (van Schendel 2009: 113). Today, over sixty years later, Bangladesh continues to commemorate ekushey February (February 21) as Language Movement Day. The day is widely regarded as the first milestone in the Bengali nationalist movement that would culminate in the independence of Bangladesh just two decades later in 1971. In 1999, UNESCO would recognise the day as International Mother Language Day.

The excerpt from *Begum* with which this article begins was far from exceptional. Founded in Kolkata in July 1947 by veteran journalist and publisher Muhammad Nasiruddin, the magazine’s “main objective has



always been the all-out welfare and development of Bengali women and to lead them to self-emancipation" (Akhtar 2013: 115). In May 1952, just months after the events of ekushey February, the magazine's office moved from Kolkata to Dhaka. From its earliest days, the pages of this "non-political, non-communal" weekly magazine featured articles on a variety of topics such as "women's health, conjugal life, children's care and future, women's liberation, recreation, home economics, music, sports and games, and last but not least, the art of beautification."

In letters to the editor, readers disputed issues ranging from beautification to women's education to the practice of purdah (ibid.). Scattered across the pages of *Begum* were demands for attention to women's rights and to women's education, especially in rural areas. That such demands persisted alongside the language movement or bhasha andolon suggests that the writers did not perceive a conflict between demanding their rights as women and their rights as Bengalis. Indeed, the demand for education was widespread and sustained, and very much tied to the demand for Bengali to be recognised as an official language. The epigraph of this article – and numerous other excerpts from the magazine – show that many women were envisioning a role beyond motherhood and keeping a close eye on developments in women's movements elsewhere.

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This article examines the relationship between women's rights activism and nationalist activism in East Bengal in the 1950s and 1960s, with special attention to the broader transnational context within which these discussions took place. This paper is part of a larger project in which I trace changing constructions of the Muslim woman – and her Western counterpart – through the history of interactions between feminism in the West and in Muslim communities in South Asia. The project is situated in the contexts of British imperialism and American hegemony, spanning two centuries from the nineteenth century to the present.

There is already much valuable scholarly work on the period of formal colonial rule in South Asia that examines how colonial administrators and missionaries justified their presence in the region by pointing to the need to 'save' local women from their plight. There has also been some critical analysis of late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries efforts by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) targeting women in the countries of present-day South Asia that has shown how these organisations flourish in and reinforce a harsh global neoliberal



regime, often at the expense of the village women who do not ultimately emerge out of poverty. However, these studies, including my own (cf. White 1992; Shehabuddin 2008; Karim 2011), have tended to jump directly from the colonial civilising mission to the 'Women in Development' enterprise and NGO boom of the 1970s and 1980s.

By focusing on the 1950s and 1960s in this article, I hope to help close the gap between studies of the colonial period and the era of women and development, and also to contribute to the emerging field of gendered histories of the Cold War and particularly of the Cold war on the 'periphery' (cf. de Haan et al. 2013; McMahon 1994). Moreover, bringing both gender and the transnational context into the history of this era in East Bengal allows me to complicate the nationalist narratives of both Pakistan and post-1971 Bangladesh. While histories of Pakistan have tended to privilege what was then West Pakistan to the point of entirely ignoring the then-eastern wing of the country (cf. Ansari 2011), histories of Bangladesh have tended to work within a linear nationalist narrative punctuated always by 1947, 1952, and 1971; exceptions to this include the very recent work of Willem van Schendel (2009), Yasmin Saikia (2011), Saadia Toor (2011), Srinath Raghavan (2013) and Neilesh Bose (2014). While the events of 1947, 1952, and 1971 indeed represent important milestones in the nation's history, a half-century later, it is crucial that we better understand the negotiations, compromises, collaborations, and assumptions that undergirded the activism of the 1947-71 period in both East and West Pakistan (referred to as Pakistan amol or 'Pakistan period' in Bangladesh today).

I begin by briefly describing some aspects of nationalist and women's rights activism by women in East Bengal in the early post-Partition years. I then turn to the larger transnational context within which such activism occurred, focusing on Pakistan's place in the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union and to overtures by both countries in the area of women's rights and development. I conclude by returning to the statements and activities of women activists on the ground in East Bengal to tease out *their* efforts to negotiate between greater cultural *and* gender rights in the context of the Cold War.



Bengali Women's Activism after Partition

In the chaotic first years following the independence and partition of India and Pakistan in August 1947, much of Pakistani women's grassroots activist energy was focused on addressing the needs of refugees from across the border, in both Bengal and Punjab. As recent histories of the period have shown, the process of partition took very different forms in the northwest and northeast corners of the sub-continent (cf. Butalia 2000; Bagchi & Dasgupta 2005; Chakravartty 2005; Chatterji 2011). While Punjab experienced, in historian Tanika Sarkar's words, "a single, compressed moment of massive violence, followed by a virtual exchange of population between two new nation states," Partition in Bengal was "a very long term process, violence was sporadic and migration happened in a long, persistent trickle rather than a single torrential movement" (Sarkar 2005: vii). Women who had been mobilised by anti-British nationalist activism and then the Pakistan movement turned their attention to the refugee problem (Mumtaz & Shaheed 1987: 50; Ansari 2009).

Large numbers of women across classes found themselves thrust into the public sphere for the first time in order to deal with the aftermath of Partition (Laird 2007: 107). Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, the wife of Pakistan's first prime minister, took the lead in establishing formal women's organisations for emergency relief, social welfare projects, and even national defense (Jalal 1991; Ansari 2009). The All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) that she founded in 1949 would soon have branches all over the country, including in East Bengal (officially renamed East Pakistan in 1955). A handful of women also became involved in formal politics, both at the national and provincial levels. Among the women legislators from East Bengal were Shaista Ikramullah, Nurjahan Murshid, Daulatunnessa Begum (Ikramullah 1963; Huda 1997). As was also the case with women's organisations founded in Iran, Turkey, and elsewhere in this period, APWA had strong government backing and most of its members were the wives of civil servants (Ansari 2009: 1423).

Even as such women's organisations, large and small, were being established throughout Pakistan, however, nationalist sentiments were already brewing in East Bengal and women were becoming actively involved in that movement too. A National Education Conference held in Karachi in November 1947, within months of Partition, had recommended Urdu as the national language of instruction given its past status as the lingua franca of Indian Muslims (Toor 2011: 26). A few



months later, in a speech to university students in Dhaka in March 1948, Jinnah had stated unequivocally that “the state language of Pakistan [was] going to be Urdu and no other language,” on the grounds that “without one state language, no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function” (Toor 2011:18).

Many of the policymakers of East Bengal belonged to the old, rapidly shrinking, landed, ashraf category and tended to speak Urdu, so they did not object to the proposal to privilege Urdu. The newly emerging middle-class intelligentsia, however, spoke Bengali, and had a vested interest in ensuring that they and their children had fair access to higher education and government jobs. This would not be the case if Urdu were the sole state language (Murshid 1995: 296-7). Language activists in East Bengal also argued that Bangla deserved state language status because it had a long literary history and was spoken by a majority of the population (Toor 2011: 18). For these reasons, they pointed out, Bangla was quite different from the other regional languages such as Sindhi and Pushto (ibid.: 34).

Over the course of the twentieth century, educated women in Bengal had developed their own special relationship to the Bengali language. At the turn of the last century, in the midst of the nascent Bengalisation of the Muslim middle-class of Bengal, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain had the opportunity to master both Bengali and English with the help of supportive relatives, in addition to the Arabic, Persian and Urdu expected of members of her social class. The gradual adoption of Bengali as the language of “genteel discourse” (Amin 1996: 18) was a direct affront to the many members of the educated Muslim Bengali elite who had long frowned upon Bengali because they believed it was not sufficiently Islamic and that it was too close to Hinduism. Yet, several of the educated Bengali women of the early twentieth century, including Begum Rokeya, chose to express themselves in Bangla rather than Urdu. This may have been because they wished to reach a larger audience; it may also well have been an act of resistance against the class and religious strictures that governed their lives.

Although she would eventually become famous in the West for her utopian short story in English, “Sultana’s Dream” (Hossain 1988), it was Begum Rokeya’s fiction and essays in Bengali that earned her a devoted following in Bengal and many of these pieces of writing remain part of the curriculum in Bengali schools to this day. Begum Rokeya is also widely regarded as the “feminist foremother” of Bengali women,



her writings having been described as the “ABCs of women’s awakening in Bangladesh” (Akhtar 2002: Foreword). Throughout the twentieth century, Begum Rokeya served as an inspiration, for her commitment both to the Bangla language and to the need to educate and empower women.

Born a generation after Begum Rokeya, Begum Sufia Kamal also made a point of learning Bangla even though Urdu was the main language in her elite family home (Amin 1996: 232). She started publishing both prose and poetry at an early age and corresponded with celebrated writers Begum Rokeya, Rabindranath Tagore, and Nazrul Islam. Begum Sufia was also actively involved in supporting social causes: she participated in anti-British rallies in 1940, set up a relief center at a Kolkata college during the communal riots of 1946, and served as the first editor of the women’s weekly magazine *Begum* in 1947. After partition, she moved from Kolkata to Dhaka with her young family and continued to work with survivors of communal riots. The mother of three daughters and two sons, she named her second daughter Sultana, undoubtedly inspired by the protagonist of Begum Rokeya’s celebrated story.

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In 1952, following the events of February 21, several women – including Sufia Kamal, Begum Motahar Hossain, Sara Taifur, Razia Khatun Chowdhury, Hamida Rahman, Rowshan Ara Bachchu and university students such as Sufia Ahmed and Nadera Begum – came together to protest the killings of peaceful protesters and to add their voices to the demand for Bangla as a national language (Begum & Huq 2001: 113). While much of West Pakistan failed to immediately grasp the importance of the language movement in East Bengal, Anglo-Bengali columnist Zeb-un-Nissa Hamidullah did not restrain herself in the Karachi-based national English-language newspaper *Dawn*:

I speak as a Bengali today. Always in the past the Pakistani has been uppermost, the Bengali mattered least of all. But today I and millions of other Bengalis feel we must raise our voice and cry: “Is this what we should expect from Pakistan?” The shooting of three students at Dacca has shocked me to the very core of my being. With the red blood that oozed out of their young bodies, staining red the soil of Pakistan, something oozed into my soul that will not be silenced. (Hamidullah 1952)

Born into a literary and Bengali nationalist family in Kolkata, Hamidullah had moved to Punjab in 1940 with her new Punjabi husband. Having already achieved some renown with her published poetry, she turned her attention to journalism after Partition and, after



some initial resistance from the editor of *Dawn*, received permission to write not only on women's issues, but "a general column on anything, including politics" (Collett 1971). In 1955, while in Cairo as part of an official delegation, she would become the first woman to speak at al-Azhar University, the thousand year-old university and center of Islamic learning. She also published several short stories in the 1950s and, in contrast to other West Pakistani-based writers, often situated the stories in East Pakistan, at the time "a living part of an unrealised vision of a composite Pakistani national culture" (Hussein 2008: xi).

Throughout the 1950s, East Bengali women continued to mobilise and become increasingly politicised on a variety of domestic and international issues. As articles and letters to the editor in the magazine *Begum* reveal, they protested the rising costs of staples such as rice; condemned the joint British, French, and Israeli attack on Egypt over the issue of the Suez Canal; voiced their objection to the growing inequalities between East and West Pakistan; declared as barbarous the French government's death sentence on young Algerian women freedom fighters; and demanded enhanced women's rights similar to reforms underway in Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, and Iran (*Begum* 2006).

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In 1955, East Bengali women's rights activists joined forces with women's groups in West Pakistan to protest the second marriage of Prime Minister Muhammad Ali Bogra. The 46 year-old Bengali prime minister had married his Arab-Canadian secretary Aliya Saddy at a quiet ceremony in Beirut, Lebanon, in April 1955, while his first wife Hamida and two sons were in Pakistan. The national women's campaign against this publicly flaunted male right to polygamy would ultimately lead to important legal reforms in the form of the 1961 Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (MFLO), which remains a significant piece of legislation in both Pakistan and Bangladesh to this day.

In 1958, General Ayub Khan led a bloodless coup and declared himself chief martial law administrator, and later, president. Pakistani scholar-activists Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed have argued that women were able to make significant progress during his rule – in their struggle for rights, in their entry into the paid labor force and into new professions – because of the "liberal, modernist" though of course undemocratic, attitude of the military government and the highest ranks of the civil service (1987: 57). To quote historian Ayesha Jalal, the government's support for the "proposed reforms were an expression of the self-assurance of a military ruler eager to be seen in



the role of 'moderniser' not only by his Western patrons but also by a small yet vocal 'modernist' constituency in Pakistan" (Jalal 1991: 96). Still, compromises had to be made with religious and political opponents. In the end, the main accomplishments of the 1961 MFLO were to discourage, not outlaw, polygamy, make divorce easier for women, and require the registration of all marriages (Mumtaz & Shaheed 1987: 57-8).

Cold War and Development

The simultaneous independence of India and Pakistan in 1947 coincided of course with the start of the Cold War. Despite the region's location "on the periphery of the American consciousness," the departing British were soon replaced with competing American and Soviet interests (McMahon 1994: 5; cf. Rotter 2000). As the Soviet Union began to project itself as an ideal model for new states and to follow up with generous aid to countries like Egypt and Indonesia, the United States felt compelled to demonstrate that "development along liberal, capitalist lines could alleviate poverty and raise living standards at least as fast as revolutionary and Marxist alternatives" (Latham 2000: 27-8).

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Even while recognising democracy as a primary marker of modernisation, however, the US administration repeatedly identified Third World military leaders as best positioned to lead their societies from tradition to modernity. In October 1958, Pakistan came under formal military rule under General Ayub Khan. A coup in Iraq just a few months earlier had already alarmed the US administration of the threat that Soviet influence posed to the Middle East, so the US rushed to bring Ayub Khan into its camp, leading to Pakistan's meteoric rise as a strategic US ally and a "front in the war against communism" (Toor 2011: 81-2). A team from the Harvard Advisory Group on International Development (which later became the Harvard Institute for International Development) led by economist Gustav Papanek came to Pakistan to advise the Planning Commission and help it formulate its economic policy. American policy makers and modernisation theorists, including political scientist Samuel Huntington, hailed Ayub Khan as a great reformer, even as his decade of rule was marked by repression and rising inequalities. Increasingly aligned with the American Cold War agenda and foreign policy, Ayub Khan brutally suppressed the progressive left position within Pakistan as well as demonstrations of popular solidarity with the liberation struggles in various countries



from Algeria to Vietnam (Toor 2011: 81-2), with negative implications for local alternatives to the US-led development model (cf. Franda 1970).

The Comilla Academy

It was in this larger context that the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development was founded – in Peshawar, West Pakistan, in 1957, and in Comilla, East Pakistan, in 1958 – with technical and financial support from the Ford Foundation, Michigan State University, and USAID. In 1961, the Comilla Academy took what its director Akhter Hameed Khan recognised at the time as “a truly revolutionary step” in launching a pilot program for and with women (Khan 1964: 11). This was no exaggeration. It is important to recall that the UN declaration announcing the First Development Decade (1961-70) had had no specific reference to women, while only a little more on women would be included in the International Strategy for the Second Decade (Kabeer 1994: 1-2). Indeed, there would be little formal academic or policy interest in women and development until the 1970 publication of *Women’s Role in Economic Development* by the Danish economist Ester Boserup (1970). After all, modernisation theory relied on the assumption that the benefits of development would trickle down from the wealthier to the poorer, from men to women (Snyder 2006: 29).

In 1961, the Comilla Academy brought in three women government workers to work on the women’s program. They joined the only woman on the staff at the time, Juliane Heyman, an American librarian who was there as part of a contract with Michigan State University and the Ford Foundation. In May of that same year, Sargent Shriver, President Kennedy’s brother-in-law and the founding director of the Peace Corps, visited the Comilla Academy as part of his world tour to launch the Peace Corps (Stossel 2004).¹ In his meeting with Shriver, Director Akhter Hameed Khan expressed his need for volunteers. In October, just a few months later, Florence or “Kiki” McCarthy arrived in Comilla, a member of one of the very first cohorts of Peace Corps volunteers to venture out into the world.

Shriver had worked hard to ensure that the Peace Corps would maintain its “independence of strategic concerns” (Dean 1998: 60), but in the end, “the Peace Corps, like other elements of Kennedy foreign policy, defined a need and a method for the renewed projection of American power during an era of formal decolonization” (Latham 2000: 112). Modernisation theory factored into its design and



practices, most visibly in the Corps' notion of community development to help reform "traditional societies." The youthful, energetic Corps volunteers also proved a valuable weapon in the struggle against communist rivals for the hearts and minds of the Third World poor. Modernisation theorists advising the administration were confident that by meeting the dire need for "technically skilled personnel" in under-developed nations, the volunteers would in fact help accelerate the catching-up process (Latham 2000: 115). In addition, volunteers could "remedy cultural deficiencies" in "impoverished, fatalistic societies" that desperately need to learn how to build "governmental, educational and industrial institutions" (ibid.: 117). That most volunteers were "B. A. generalists" or liberal arts graduates by training was not a problem; "simply by virtue of being Americans, [they] could transform 'traditional' worldviews" (ibid.:123).

And thus it was that Florence "Kiki" McCarthy, a young graduate from the University of California, Berkeley, arrived in Comilla to help village women, in her own words, "to learn techniques and acquire knowledge which would enable them to become more effective in the areas of their responsibilities; i.e. their homes and families." This included "child care, home sanitation, kitchen gardening, poultry raising, sewing, literacy, the cooperative movement, handicrafts and so on" (McCarthy 1967: Preface). After completing her two years of service as a Peace Corps volunteer at the Comilla Academy 1961-63, McCarthy would enroll at Michigan State University for a Masters in sociology that would bring her back to Comilla for fieldwork and she would continue to write about Bangladesh well into the 1990s.

McCarthy was, of course, only one of many women who were eagerly sought out for service in East Pakistan. In a June 1964 interview for the East Pakistan Peace Corps Newsletter (later reprinted in the international Peace Corps magazine *Volunteer*), Director Akhter Hameed Khan explained why he thought it was "a most splendid idea" that the Peace Corps send women to East Pakistan. He believed:

[T]he people of East Pakistan like American girls. We need to emancipate our women. A certain amount of emancipation is taking place. Having brave American girls here is a great help... Take a village girl the first time out [sic.] and she sees Alberta Rosiak living in Faizunnessa with all the hardships so far away from her parents; and she will think you are brave. How would she think of this? Here is a girl not afraid of anything. I think they should send more women to East Pakistan. (Rosiak 1964: 6-7, 24)



Producing the New Woman in a Post-WWII World

In the early 1960s, women in the developing world entered modernisation discourse primarily in relation to purdah and population control. For example, in his foreword to a 1960 book about *Women in the New East*, Bayard Dodge, former president of the American University of Beirut, noted that given his extensive travels and observations in the East, he had “come to believe that the one [change] that will have the greatest impact upon the life of the East is the emancipation of women. In fact,” he continued, “it may not be an exaggeration to say the most fundamental movement of the twentieth century is the freeing of the women of Asia and Africa from *purdah* and the harem” (Dodge 1960: i). Population control, for its part had been on the agenda since 1944. By the 1950s, alarmed by the geopolitical threats posed by unchecked population growth, the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, the Population Council and other agencies had folded birth control into the larger development agenda for what had come to be called the Third World. It would not be until the 1994 Cairo Population Conference that these organisations would concern themselves with the broader issues of women’s health, well-being and reproductive rights (cf. Petchesky 2003).

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On the Ground

Florence McCarthy’s 1967 MA thesis has proven to be a rare and precious resource for discourse around women in rural development in East Pakistan in this period. (This is quite startling to realise given how much has been written on the subject in the last three decades!) In the preface to her thesis, “Bengali Village Women: Mediators Between Tradition and Development”, McCarthy described that her goal had been to study village women “in the throes of meeting and coping with the rapidly changing world that is impinging on their level of consciousness as well as on the structure and life of their villages” (McCarthy 1967: Preface). In addition to a “rapidly exploding population,” she identified purdah as the primary obstacle to women’s advancement. The strict practice, she wrote, affected all aspects of women’s lives “as they are less educated, less able to go out and experience the outside world, or contribute to the family income, or have the positions and rights in regard to inheritance and property that women have in most other cultures” (ibid.: 2).

Yet, although she invoked the categories of modern and traditional throughout the thesis in discussing how the women in the program



mediated between the two, she also recognised that the women did *not* hold up western women such as herself as the ideal. Rather, she concluded, the changes the women in the program sought were to approximate the ideal Muslim woman – greater mobility, access to education, work opportunities, but all within the bounds of modest dress and behaviour (McCarthy 1967: 167-8). These views were echoed in the pages of the weekly women’s magazine *Begum*.

From its earliest days, the magazine actively encouraged articles and letters from women on a wide variety of topics – and they wrote with enthusiasm. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, as I mentioned earlier, many Bengali women were preoccupied with family law reform. But the subject of *purdah*, specifically the strict form practiced by middle- and upper-class Muslim women, was also discussed heatedly and at length in *Begum* especially throughout the 1950s; the debate concluded with the position that the practice needs to be modified but not discarded (Akhtar 2013: 115). What women favoured then was some form of modesty that permitted access to educational and employment opportunities rather than strict seclusion. There were also regular pleas to ameliorate the plight of oppressed village women; for instance, a letter from November 1959 reminded the “educated sisters” of their responsibilities vis-à-vis the less fortunate rural women (Begum 2006: 1008).

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It is important to remember that women’s rights activism in East Bengal or, for that matter, anywhere in the world, “did not exist in a vacuum.” As Cold War gender historian Francisca de Haan has observed of the post-Second World War period, it is necessary to explore how “national and international women’s organizations [...] were both shaped by and contributed to the dominant political frame of that period, that is the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the global Cold War” (de Haan 2010: 550). In the context of the Cold War, women’s rights activists in East Pakistan did not, of course, contend only with the United States. Despite Ayub Khan’s efforts, with US backing, to minimise sympathy for internationalist causes and to curb relations with the Soviet Bloc, East Bengali women attended the Fifth World Congress of Women meeting in Moscow in June 1963, organised by the Women’s International Democratic Federation (then based in East Berlin).

Historian Anna Kadnikova has argued that the Congress was an “exercise in public diplomacy” by the Khrushchev administration in the sense that the Soviet authorities decided to send Valentina



Tereshkova, the first woman cosmonaut in the world, into space just days before the Congress. This was very deliberately timed to coincide with the Women's Congress in order to be a very clear message to the world about the elevated status of women in the Soviet Union:

Tereshkova's flight was a 'gender victory' rather than a technological victory of the Soviet Union in its struggle for ideological supremacy over the United States. Convening the Congress on its territory, and in that period of time, provided the USSR with an opportunity to demonstrate its profound interest in advancement of women's rights, with Tereshkova serving as the 'living proof' of this commitment. (Kadnikova 2011: 2)

While the immediate impact of a Soviet woman in space on Bengali women is unclear, there was a generally positive response in East Pakistan to overtures from Moscow. Sufia Kamal herself was elected president of the Pak-Soviet Friendship Society in 1965 and visited the Soviet Union twice, once before and once after 1971. In 1968 she published her memoirs of her first visit, *Soviet-e-dinguli*, and in 1970 received the Lenin Centenary Jubilee Medal (1970) from the Soviet Union.

Even though Bangla was given state language status alongside Urdu in 1952, the Punjabi-dominated central government continued its hostile attitude towards the language and culture. Thus Bengali women activists remained involved in cultural resistance to the West Pakistani authorities even as many also worked with West Pakistani activists to further women's rights. Women like Sufia Kamal and Sanjida Khatun were involved in the founding of iconic cultural institutions like Chhayanaut Music School in 1961 which, within a few years, would start organising the early morning Pohela Boishakh ceremony in Ramna Park, celebrated to this day as quintessentially secular and Bengali (Khan 2007). The middle-class Bengali devotion to Tagore and the practice of daughters being trained in singing, dancing and drama, of performing publicly, and wearing a teep or bindi [the colored dot on the forehead] "became acts of political dissent because they conflicted with the values of official Islam" (Kabeer 1991: 121; Ahmed 1985).

Women also continued to play an important and visible role in the annual commemoration of ekushey (21 February), with their processions in white sarees (the color of mourning) and participation in public singing, contributing to the role of that date as "an annual affirmation of Bengali identity" (Kabeer 1991: 121). In 1967, when the state decided to ban the singing of Tagore songs on state-run radio,



women and men singers and musicians alike went on strike. The ban backfired on the central government since, as novelist Tahmima Anam describes it, “[o]vernight, Tagore's poetry and music became the emblems of the separatist movement, his songs sung in protest at every rally and meeting.” Indeed, Tagore would become “the soundtrack of [the] revolution.”²

Conclusion

With the strengthening of the relationship between the governments of Pakistan and the United States in the late 1950s, American academics, organisations and policymakers came to have an inordinate influence on Pakistan's plans for development. However, activists in East Pakistan were able to maintain fruitful relationships with organisations deemed suspect and ‘communist’ by the United States.

Although modernisation ideology seemed to permeate all aspects of the US-Pakistan relationship in this period, from support for the military central government down to the Peace Corps volunteers sent to Pakistan, American efforts targeting Bengali women in the early 1960s were significantly different from the civilising mission discourse of the colonial period. The goal was no longer to destroy the local culture – through religious conversion or imperial pillage – in order to save the women. Because the priority of the US at that time was to distance itself from the old European colonial powers by celebrating the new sovereignty of the recently decolonised states and also to nurture Islam as an effective bulwark against the communist threat (Toor 2011: 85), American representatives such as Peace Corps workers like Florence McCarthy were careful to display an unexpected cultural sensitivity in their work.

Also, in contrast to current practice, the Muslim women of East Bengal in the 1960s were identified as – but generally not targeted as – *Muslim* women. In other words, in this period, being Muslim was regarded as no greater obstacle than being of any other ‘traditional’ culture and the assumption was that with modernisation would come secularisation. This is in sharp contrast to French policies in Algeria in that same time period as well as the rhetoric about ‘saving Muslim women’ that has accompanied the revival of modernisation ideology in the last decade with the US invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.



It is clear that in the 1950s and 1960s, women in East Bengal actively participated in both the nationalist movement against West Pakistan *and* in a movement for women's rights. East Bengali women activists did not perceive a contradiction between their demands for democratic and cultural rights and their rights as women and fought on these different fronts at the same time. Inevitably, however, the struggles shaped each other. Thus, while the larger Cold War context helped determine what material and intellectual resources were available to the activists, a preoccupation with resistance to what was perceived as a form of cultural imperialism by West Pakistan meant that there was less interrogation of overtures from the United States or the Soviet Union, less contestation of ideologies of modernisation and secularisation.

In other words, East Bengali activists saw the primary cultural threat as emanating from West Pakistan rather than the superpowers. The educated urban elite sought to "develop" and "modernise" the women languishing in the "darkness of illiteracy" (Begum 2006: 1029) in rural Bengal in much the same manner that ideologues based in Washington and Moscow sought to "enlighten," "develop" and "modernise" the so-called Third World. Taking a transnational approach to the history of this period allows us to move beyond the familiar narratives and focus on the connections between and mutual influence exerted by individuals and organisations in different parts of the world.

Endnotes

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