

BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a young country. It achieved independence in 1971 at the conclusion of a civil war within the state of Pakistan as it was, which, from 1947 to 1971, comprised an eastern and a western portion separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory.

Bangladesh draws upon an ancient civilisational past marked by a distinct language and culture. Prior to the coming of Islamic rulers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD, Bengal was strongly influenced both by Buddhism and by brahminical Hinduism. Separating itself from the Delhi Sultanate in 1338, it remained an independent Muslim-ruled state until conquest by the Mughals in the sixteenth century. During these centuries, the majority of the population converted to Islam.

In medieval times, the wealth of Bengal and the skill of its weavers and other artisans were legendary. With the coming of the British, systematic plunder supervised and directed by the East India Company stripped away this prosperity. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the region was periodically ravaged by famine; millions perished, most recently in the great Bengal famine of 1943.

When the British left the Indian subcontinent in 1947, eastern Bengal became East Pakistan, separated from the politically dominant West Pakistan not only by a vast swathe of territory, but also by language and culture. Tensions, inequalities and imbalances between the two halves of the country generated a secessionist movement in the East, spearheaded by the Awami League. In elections held in 1970, the Awami League, led by the charismatic Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won a majority in the national assembly but was prevented from occupying its seats when the Pakistan government postponed convening parliament. There followed a bloody confrontation at the conclusion of which, in December 1971, East Pakistan broke away to form the new state of Bangladesh.

A new secular Constitution was introduced in 1972 and Bangladesh seemed set on a democratic course. Under the Constitution, a president, elected by popular vote for a renewable five-year term, was to head the government. He or she would form a Council of Ministers from elected members of the unicameral National Parliament. In practice, however, the new state would undergo long spells of military rule. Democratic government was finally restored following elections in 1991.

Since 1991, politics in Bangladesh have been dominated by two women leaders: Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), who served as prime minister until 1996; and Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the Awami League (AL). In 1991, the two women leaders and their parties had worked together to oust the previous government of the Jatiya Party, which had grown out of the former military regime. Subsequently, however, there had been a falling out and a sharp political rivalry between the two parties and leaders developed. After several years

of leading parliamentary and electoral boycotts and political strikes, the Awami League of Sheikh Hasina won Bangladesh's second general election after the transition (held in 1996).

Women in Politics

The two women who currently dominate the politics of Bangladesh both come with strong political pedigrees. The serving Prime Minister and Awami League leader, Sheikh Hasina, is the daughter of the nation's founder, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was assassinated in 1975. And Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of the opposition BNP, is the widow of the late General Ziaur Rahman, the country's ruler in the late seventies and early eighties (he was assassinated in 1981).

As elsewhere in South Asia, the rise to the top of women leaders from prominent political families in Bangladesh may distort external perceptions of women's actual political position and influence. In India, a woman at the top (Indira Gandhi) coexisted with underrepresentation of women at every other level of government. Parent-and-daughter duos such as the Bhuttos in Pakistan and the Bandaranaike-Kumaratunga pairing in Sri Lanka may also have drawn attention away from the difficulties faced by less privileged women seeking to enter the political arena.

This said, it should not be supposed that Bangladeshi women lacking such family credentials have failed to make a mark on politics or that Bangladesh has been insensitive to the issue of gender justice in the political arena. Affirmative action to bring women into national politics was one of the founding principles of the new state. Under the 1972 Constitution, 15 seats for women (4.8 per cent of total seats) were reserved in Parliament. In 1979, the number of seats reserved for women was increased to 30 (or 9.7 per cent of the total). But this provision lapsed in 1987, and for the next three years there were no reserved seats for women in the national parliament. This situation was ended in 1990, when a constitutional amendment restored the 30 seats reserved for women.

In the 1991 elections, 36 women contested for non-reserved seats in Parliament and eight were successful. A subsequent by-election brought in another woman legislator, bringing the total of women members from non-reserved seats to nine. Added to the thirty reserved seats, this raised women members of parliament to 10.6 per cent of total membership. The 1996 elections raised the proportion marginally to 11 per cent. Today, Bangladesh has, besides Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, one woman Cabinet Minister, Begum Motia Chowdhury, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Disaster Management Relief.

The picture from Bangladesh, then, is quite mixed. On the one hand, age-old patterns of discrimination against women – patterns that are to be found through much of South Asia – continue to work against the goal of gender justice and equality. On the other hand, the democratic asser-

tion of their rights by large numbers of Bangladeshi women has been an inspiring feature of the nation's short but chequered history. Women from all social strata came to the fore in the struggle for the restoration of democracy that preceded the 1991 elections, throwing themselves into the politics of protest with energy and commitment. The two women at the top of national politics have proved themselves leaders in their own right, demonstrating tenacity, political judgement and the ability to shield their parties from fragmentation and disarray. And across the political board, surely if slowly, there are emerging women politicians of effectiveness, resolve and sagacity.

SYEDA BEGUM SAJEDA CHOWDHURY

Member of Parliament

Former Secretary-General of the Awami League

Former Secretary, Bangladesh Mohila Awami League

There are many things a politician might remember about an election: the hard slog, perhaps, the rough moments, and with some luck, the exhilaration of victory. For veteran Bangladeshi political leader Syeda Begum Sajeda Chowdhury, the defining moment came during the 1991 elections. Having successfully contested a seat for the Awami League, then in opposition, she learnt that one of her supporters, a woman, had been killed by her husband for the way she had voted. The experience strengthened Chowdhury's resolve to open the political arena to all the country's citizens, women as well as men.

Making progress down this path has not been easy, especially in a context where religious fundamentalism has all too readily surfaced. She recalls how once during an election campaign she was barred from entering the premises of an organisation supported by a local mosque. When the leaders of the locality sought to restrict her movements, she sent them a note pointing out that Bibi Khadija, wife of Prophet Mohammed, had not only been the first woman to embrace Islam but had also, through her earnings and support, made it possible for the Prophet to preach the faith. Chowdhury's note carried the day and she was permitted to enter the organisation's premises.

Early Life

Chowdhury was born on May 8, 1935, in a village called Alokdia in Jessore district of what was then an undivided Bengal: this was pre-Partition India. Her family by tradition were Pirs, or spiritual figures. When she was eight years old, her mother died and she was raised by her paternal grandfather, grandmother and aunts. Her father, a businessman, was a member of the Indian National Congress and was socially progressive. His commitment

to gender equality found practical expression in his attitude towards his daughter, whom he encouraged in such unfeminine pursuits as tree-climbing and rowing boats.

Chowdhury's paternal grandfather was deeply religious and spoke Urdu, a language imposed on the people of present-day Bangladesh following the formation of Pakistan in 1947. But he secretly taught Bengali to his wife, and his daughter, Syeda Motahara Begum, was destined to become a reputed Bengali writer, contributing poems to various publications – an unusual practice for a Muslim woman of her time.

From early childhood, Chowdhury was exposed to the ballads and stories of undivided India's freedom fighters. She was especially inspired by her grandfather's recollections of the Swadeshi movement, an early expression of anti-colonial protest in which British-made goods were boycotted and Indian products and services were promoted in their place. Her grandfather encouraged his wife to follow Mahatma Gandhi's example by producing at home handspun cotton cloth. His support for the Swadeshi movement cost him his job in the colonial police force.

Entry into Politics

Chowdhury's marriage, in 1954, to Golam Akbar Chowdhury, a Chittagong-based businessman, served to reinforce the political awareness generated during her childhood. Her husband and his circle of friends encouraged her to join the Awami League, a party which was to play a crucial role in Bangladesh's struggle for independence and nationhood.

Then Baddrunessa Ahmed, a family friend, educationist and well-known woman leader of the Awami League, introduced Chowdhury to the leader of the party, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He advised her to become a member of the party's Women's Committee, and she became involved in various economic and health programmes aimed at uplifting women.

Subsequently, Chowdhury accompanied her husband on a tour of what was then West Pakistan. This visit brought home to her the great disparities between the two provinces, more particularly the relative deprivation of the East.

Meanwhile, her own political profile was growing. In 1964, she led a protest against an attack on two senior Awami League leaders by hired hoodlums of an opposition group. A year later, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman visited Chittagong, she mobilised 500 women for a meeting at which she made her first public speech. At Rahman's request, the up-and-coming woman leader in 1966 moved to Dhaka along with her family in order to become more actively involved in politics. Soon after, Rahman was arrested. Chowdhury gave asylum in her home to a large number of fellow party workers threatened with arrest and also led processions against Rahman's imprisonment. Her activism boosted party morale and helped

raise the status and profile of the Awami League in what were difficult times.

Recognising the valuable contribution women could make, the party encouraged women leaders who had completed the School Certificate Examination to pursue higher studies. Chowdhury eagerly took up this opportunity, enrolling for a Bachelor's degree at Eden Girls' College, an affiliate of the University of Dhaka, in 1966 at the age of 31.

Rise to the Top

In February 1969, Chowdhury led a procession to celebrate the release of Sheikh Mujib from jail. With his encouragement, she went on to form a Women's Wing of the Awami League and became its Secretary. This position gave her the opportunity repeatedly to tour the country, during which she encouraged women to become actively involved in politics.

As civil war loomed, Chowdhury began to make her presence felt in the Bangladesh independence movement. In July 1971, the Awami League declared the formation of an independent state, and Chowdhury joined party fighters at Mujib Nagar, taking charge of training camps for women. Those she trained remember her as a highly effective motivator who emphasised the importance of self reliance.

Following independence, the new government of Bangladesh faced the mammoth task of reconstructing a war-devastated economy. Rehabilitating tens of thousands of women and children uprooted and traumatised by the bloodshed was a particular priority. In view of her experience, drive and efficiency, Chowdhury was charged with this responsibility. As Director of the Rehabilitation Centre for Destitute Women she once again travelled widely in the country, thereby gaining firsthand knowledge of the situation and needs of women.

When the 1972 Constitution reserved fifteen parliamentary seats for women, Chowdhury was nominated by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to occupy one of them. In 1973, Rahman, in a controversial move, imposed a system of one-party rule known by the acronym BAKSAL. The Awami League was dissolved, and Chowdhury became the chief of Baksal's Women's Front. The new system was not destined to last. Just two years later, it was abolished in the aftermath of Sheikh Mujib's assassination. For the moment, however, no one was prepared to raise the possibility of resurrecting the Awami League.

At Chowdhury's initiative, supported by a few other Awami League stalwarts, moves were made to bring the party back into being. In 1976 Chowdhury became general secretary of the revived Awami League, a post she would continue to hold for the next eleven years. Although 30 parliamentary seats were reserved for women in the 1979 elections, Chowdhury preferred to contest a non-reserved seat, one of seventeen women to do so – none successfully on this occasion. This failure she

attributes in part to lawlessness at polling booths, arguing that had the electoral machinery proved more effective and had security been guaranteed, “more women would have been encouraged to participate in the election, thereby boosting support for women candidates.” Her luck turned for the better in the 1991 elections, in which she was among eight women who won in non-reserved seats. She was returned to Parliament again in the 1996 elections.

Enabling Factors

A number of supportive, enabling elements seem to have come together to help elevate Chowdhury to her prominent position in the politics of Bangladesh. One has been a family which, with its scholarly traditions and track record of support for anti-colonial struggle, provided a positive context for the nurturing of political awareness. There was the presence of a father whose socially enlightened views and commitment in practice to gender equality enabled his daughter to look beyond old models of “appropriate” female behaviour. When Chowdhury married, her husband proved supportive of her political aspirations. Throughout her political career, she has been able to count on her family’s support – a resource by no means available to every woman aspiring for political office.

Chowdhury’s political career has also been facilitated by her party’s stand on the position of women. The constitution of the Awami League commits the party to respect for fundamental human rights and to recognition of equality across boundaries of gender, religion, race and ethnic group. The party defines gender equity in terms of social and political rights, commitment to meeting basic needs, and equal distribution of resources to ensure that women are not left behind in the development process.

Affirmative action has also played a role in Chowdhury’s political rise, helping her into Parliament in the first instance. Interestingly, however, she disfavours any extension of seat reservation beyond its initial, first-stage deployment. The system, she believes, lends itself to nepotism and abuse; moreover, “women who enter Parliament through this route are not accountable for their actions.”

On the question of the importance of female role models, Chowdhury emphasises the need for women political leaders to take on an inspirational quality, citing by way of example Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher. These leaders, she believes, rose to the top on the basis of their own moral and personal qualities; as she puts it, “in the political arena a woman leader should keep her unique personality and characteristics intact.”

But what Chowdhury sees as the most potent factor in her political ascent is her longstanding involvement in development-related activities, especially those aimed at the empowerment of women. As we saw at the

start of this story, she has never forgotten the incident of the woman killed by her husband for daring to cast her vote for a fellow woman. This human tragedy, together with others she has encountered in her long political career, has driven Chowdhury to devote great energy to creating awareness among women and encouraging them to be independent and self-reliant. It has sensitised her to the challenge posed by social conservatism, religious fundamentalism, and old ways of thinking. It has impressed on her the need for a deep-going reorientation in the outlook of the electorate. Above all, it has emphasised the need for sustained, patient, hard, committed work. A woman political leader, says Chowdhury, must be in for the long haul.

JAHAN ARA BEGUM

Former Minister of State for Cultural Affairs

Vice-President, Executive Committee of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party

Jahan Ara Begum, a Professor and Senator at the University of Dhaka, has long experience of combining academic excellence with political activism. Involved in politics since her student days, she is today a leading member of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main opposition force within the country. Personally close to the BNP leader, Begum Khaleda Zia, she played a central role in Begum Zia's political education and grooming for party and public office after the assassination of General Ziaur Rahman in 1981. And her experience includes time in governmental office: from 1991 to 1996, she served as Minister of State for Cultural Affairs in the BNP administration headed by Begum Zia.

Life and Entry into Politics

Jahan Ara Begum was born on February 11, 1942, into an educated family with a comparatively liberal outlook. Her father was an officer in the service of the British and her mother was the principal of a government college.

Too young to be aware of the closing years of colonial rule, Jahan Ara came of age politically in the 1950s, a period of growing political fervour in the then East Pakistan. The year 1952 had seen the launch of the Language Movement, an expression of organised revolt against the imposition of Urdu as the official language of Pakistan. Thousands of East Bengali students participated in this movement, which is now recognised as the opening phase of the Bangladesh independence struggle.

It was in this context that Jahan Ara first became politically active. In 1959, she became a student at Eden Girls' College in Dhaka; while she was there, she was elected cultural secretary of the Students' Union. Moving on to study at the Home Economics Girls' College, she was vice-president of the Students' Union from 1961 to 1963. During this period,

she was arrested for two days for participating in a student protest. She was also involved in the setting up of the Young Women's Association, and acted as its Chairperson from 1961 to 1971.

In 1962, Jahan Ara married Ahmed Murtafa, an engineer by profession who encouraged her political involvement. He would be killed during the Bangladeshi war of independence. During the bloodshed, the couple made it a point to provide refuge to those involved in the independence struggle, supplying them with money, medicine and other essentials.

After the birth of Bangladesh (and the loss of her husband), Jahan Ara resumed her academic career by studying for a master's degree. She continued to be actively involved in programmes aimed at advancing the status of women. Then, in 1978, she took her political interests a stage further by joining the Jatiyotabadi Gonotantrik Dal, a party better known by its acronym, JAGODAL. This was formed under the patronage of the then ruler of the country, President Ziaur Rahman; its convenor was Justice Sattar, who would become president after Ziaur Rahman's assassination in 1981. Jahan Ara went on to become a member of the party's executive committee.

Rise to the Top

Following the formation of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jahan Ara became President of its women's wing, Vice-President of its Executive Committee and, in 1985, joint secretary of its National Standing Committee. She is credited with having played a key role in the grooming of Begum Khaleda Zia, widow of the assassinated President Ziaur Rahman, for the position of party leader. She emphasised that while Begum Khaleda would be entering politics on the basis of kinship, she would have to pass the test of competent political leadership.

In the General Elections of 1991, that followed the restoration of democracy, Jahan Ara was nominated to occupy one of the seats reserved for women in the National Parliament. Following the victory of the BNP, she was appointed State Minister for Cultural Affairs and remained in the post until the defeat of the BNP in the 1996 elections.

Perspective on Women in Politics

Jahan Ara attributes her successful political career to a range of factors. Among them, the support she has received from her family ranks high; she is particularly appreciative of the encouragement she got from her late husband. She also highlights the impact of belonging to a party which is openly committed to women's advancement and is prepared to help women cadres overcome financial constraints.

Although Jahan Ara came to Parliament through the reserved seat route, she is by no means an advocate of this as a strategy for getting more women into politics. "Women who come into Parliament this way," she

argues, “are severely restricted in what they can do by their political parties. For another thing, the system gives the impression that women are not fit to contest for the general seats.” Instead, she believes political parties should fix quotas for women candidates, who would then contest elections along with men.

What she does believe is important for women aspiring to political office, is to be immersed in grass roots activity. She has made it a point to keep in close touch with her electoral constituency, Rajbari district, and the various development projects taking shape there. Another vehicle that has helped her keep in touch with her constituents, especially women, is the Association of Women’s Rights Implementation, which she helped to establish. Such practical activities, she says, are the most effective way not only of keeping a finger on the grass roots pulse but also of marginalising fundamentalists.

Jahan Ara also stresses the importance of linking the political empowerment of women with their economic status and demands. In her own career, she has worked closely with trade unions, and is currently secretary of the Jatiyotabadi Sramik Dal, the workers’ front of the BNP. She is in this way directly involved in the challenge of sensitising a male-dominated organisation to the need for gender parity and gender justice.

MOTIA CHOWDHURY

Member of Parliament (Awami League)

Minister of Agriculture, Food, and Disaster Management and Relief

Motia Chowdhury, a veteran of Bangladeshi politics and currently a minister in the Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina, keenly remembers the reception which once greeted her at a public meeting in Noakhali, a conservative part of the country. In the middle of her speech, a male party colleague pointed out a small group of men sitting in the audience, with their backs firmly turned to her. After the meeting, she learnt that the men were Islamic fundamentalists who refused to countenance a woman making a public appearance. Yet at the same time they were deeply curious to hear her speech. The solution, as they saw it, was to sit face backwards!

But what really impressed Motia Chowdhury was the fact that they had come to her meeting at all. Times, it seemed, had begun to change.

For Chowdhury, whose spirited political career has earned her the sobriquet “Daughter of Fire”, the story offered vindication of her basic view on women in politics: that women must get on with the job of challenging stereotypes and breaking down barriers – irrespective of whether men react by facing them or turning their backs.

Early Life and Entry into Politics

Chowdhury was born on June 30, 1942, in the district of Pirojpur, southern Bangladesh. She was only a five-year-old at the time of Partition, but distinctly remembers the 1952 Language Movement in what was then East Pakistan. Her family, especially her parents, taught her to speak out against injustice in all its forms.

As a student at Eden Girls' College in Dhaka, Chowdhury involved herself in student politics, becoming Vice-President of the Students' Union in 1963. This was despite the fact that University Ordinances introduced in 1962 had placed a ban on students taking part in politics, threatening those who did so with the rescinding of their degrees. Chowdhury in fact strengthened her resolve to remain politically active: she was conscious of living under a martial law regime (that of General Ayub Khan) that had brought economic disintegration, political confusion and an increasingly repressive atmosphere. In her view, martial law was an extension of colonial rule and had to be resisted; as she puts it, "the political situation of the former East Pakistan led one to fight against injustices, for the removal of darkness."

Chowdhury also recalls how, during her days of student political activism, she would come back from meetings with her male colleagues at night – in defiance of the prevailing norms. As a result of her political activities, Chowdhury was arrested in July 1964 under the Security Act and was detained until September of the following year. While some women political prisoners signed bonds for their release Chowdhury refused to do so. While in jail, she was elected General Secretary of Dhaka University Central Students' Union and later became its President. After her release in 1965 she obtained a Master's degree.

Rise to the Top

In 1967, Chowdhury, whose fearlessness and commitment to justice had already won her the title "Daughter of Fire", joined the East Pakistan Awami Party and became a member of its working committee. Between 1970 and 1971, she was an active participant in the Bangladesh independence struggle, campaigning, lobbying and nursing the wounded. In the process she undertook extensive travel within the country, including remote border areas, and gained experience of interacting with a broad range of people, listening to their problems and inspiring them to action.

In 1971 Chowdhury became organising secretary of the Awami League. Two years later, the party was dissolved by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and was replaced by the one-party system known as BAKSAL. Chowdhury became a member of the central committee of the new organisation, which proved to be short-lived. By 1979, she was back in the reconstituted Awami League, where she won the post of agricultural secretary.

Under the regimes of Ziaur Rahman and Ershad, Chowdhury was

arrested several times. Her longest period in detention was two years.

Chowdhury's first bid to enter Parliament, in the 1989 Elections held under a caretaker administration, was not successful. With the full restoration of democratic politics in Bangladesh in the early 1990s, she tried again, and in the 1991 elections she was one of the few women to win a non-reserved seat. Following the victory of the Awami League in the 1996 elections, she was given a major portfolio in a subject area not traditionally linked with women: that of Agriculture and Food, with the additional responsibility of Disaster Management and Relief.

Motia Chowdhury's public career has been noteworthy for its ability to combine political activism with philosophical contemplation. This woman leader has made it a point to read as widely as possible in such areas as political thought, political biography and international affairs. She has also contributed publications of her own, including a book titled *Deaal Deea Ghera (Closed by Walls)*, published in 1970.

Perspective on Women in Politics

Drawing on her own experience, Chowdhury stresses the importance for a prospective woman politician of making a wise choice of life partner, of selecting a husband who is in tune with her ideological perspective and who is ready to support her work. She also emphasises the need for women to align with political parties that have a firm, unambiguous programmatic commitment to gender justice and women's equality.

While she supports the principle of reserving seats in parliament for women, she believes that this practice should be time-bound, since the current system of patronage "has a tendency to make women parliamentarians politically dependent."

She is a strong believer in the power of education to raise awareness and transform popular perceptions. To a certain degree, this is already making its impact felt in Bangladesh where, she says, "Women are receiving much greater exposure as they deliver speeches at public meetings and work side by side with their male counterparts." However, much remains to be done within the formal educational systems, where stereotypical notions of the "fair sex" are still given credence.

But the best way of demolishing stereotypes, affirms Bangladesh's "Daughter of Fire", is for women simply to go ahead and dare to be different – just as she, in her student days, defied "propriety" by travelling with male comrades late at night. "I was never ostracised or teased," she remembers. "I simply got on and did what I had to do."