

# **Women Participation in Cultural Activism at Dhaka University: 1952-1971**

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**Abstract:** *Dhaka University has played a pioneering role in the intellectual and cultural movement as well as in the political movement of Bangladesh. The cultural movement that began at Dhaka University through the state language movement remained vibrant until the victory in the War of Independence of Bangladesh. Female students of the University of Dhaka came forward all along in this movement to preserve the Bengali culture defying the social and familial conservatism and institutional restrictions. But despite their courageous participation in cultural activities that surpassed the contemporary social conservatism, their role remained largely unnoticed. Therefore, there is a need to evaluate female teacher's and student's role separately in the cultural movement of Dhaka University during that period. The aim of this article is to explore and analyze the diverse and multifaceted contributions of women in the cultural movement of Dhaka University. This paper presents an analytical narrative of women's participation and performances in the cultural movement of Dhaka University. To do so, the research utilizes both primary and secondary sources. Autobiographies, newspapers, interviews of cultural movement organizers and artists, books and scholarly articles are the basis of this paper. Following a historical research method, the paper concludes with the findings that female teachers and students of the University of Dhaka were significant contributors to the cultural movement against the oppressive Pakistan government.*

**Key Words:** Women, Cultural movement, DUCSU, Sanskriti Samsad, Theatre, Cultural resistance.

## **Introduction**

The foundation of the progressive cultural movement in Bangladesh was established centering around Dhaka University. Alongside the political movements, Dhaka University has played a pioneering role in the intellectual and cultural movement as well. At the beginning of the article, it is essential to clarify what is meant by cultural movement. A cultural movement is an effort to change public thoughts, tastes, preferences, and tendencies to achieve specific goals (Haq, 2018). Like other movements, the core foundation of a cultural movement is the participation of a large number of people. Cultural movement can also be driven by emotions and may aim to disrupt the status quo. At the same time, resistance may arise to maintain the status quo. Nonetheless, cultural movement are crucial for altering public thoughts, aspirations, likes and dislikes, tastes, and wisdom. Therefore, it

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can be said that a cultural movement is an effort to change people's thinking and perspectives to establish a better way of life, society, and state system. However, cultural movement can be progressive, conservative, or reactionary, depending on the time and place. Through the cultural struggle, Dhaka University has become a companion in the advancement of political struggle. Soon after its establishment the Dhaka Biswabidyalaya Chhatra Samsad [Dhaka University Student's Union] was formed (in the 1922-23 academic year), with the aim of conducting cultural activities and enhancing mutual goodwill and cooperation among the various halls and students. This organization was constituted with one teacher and one student representative from each of the three halls of the time Dhaka Hall, Salimullah Muslim Hall, and Jagannath Hall and one teacher nominated by the Vice-Chancellor. In 1953, according to the new constitution of the DUCSU, it was renamed the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU). From the beginning, this union organized various debates and cultural events. DUCSU ultimately served as an open platform for student rights, cultural practices, and intellect development of the students, playing a glorious role later in Bangladesh's cultural movement. However, the first effort of Dhaka University as a center for free-thinking and cultural institution was the establishment of the Muslim Sahitya Samaj, which became the center of progressive thought among the educated Muslim society across Bengal. The Muslim Sahitya Samaj through its mouthpiece 'Shikha' (the Flame), promoted the ideology of the movement for the emancipation of intellect, helping the Bengali Muslim community to advance towards rationality and progress. Gradually various cultural institutions at Dhaka University emerged carrying the legacy of this progressive thought and consciousness. Subsequent cultural organizations made direct contributions to Bangladesh's cultural movement, with significant participation from the female teachers and students of Dhaka University. This paper aims to analyze the multifaceted cultural movement at Dhaka University and the participation and activities of women in this context. It will identify the various initiatives and efforts of women in organizing the movement, their role in its success, and above all, their contributions to preserve the cultural heritage and distinctiveness of the Bengali people.

## **Literature Review**

Several research-based and memoir-based books have already been published on Dhaka University's contributions to Bangladesh's independence struggle, the university's cultural and educational activities, and its diverse role and impacts on higher education. Among these some notable books are: Rahim, M. A. (1981). *The History of the University of Dacca*. Dhaka: Dhaka University Press; Islam, Rafiqul (2003). *Dhaka Biswabidyalayar Ashi Bochor 1921-2001*. Dhaka: Anannya. Islam, Rafiqul (2004). *Swadhinata Sangram e Dhaka Biswabidyalaya*. Dhaka: Oitijhya; Chakraborty, Ratan Lal (2004). *Dhaka Biswabidyalaya e Nari 1921-1952*. Dhaka: Kalyan Prakashan; Chakraborty, Ratan Lal (2015), *Bangladeshher Swadhinata Sangrame Dhaka Bishwabidyalay (1947-1971)*, Volumes I and II, Dhaka: The

Universal Academy; Ahmed, Imtiaz & Iqbal, Iftikhar (Eds.). (2016). *University of Dhaka Making Unmaking Remaking*, Dhaka: Prothoma; Maksud, Syed Abul. (2016). *Dhaka Biswabidyalaya o Bangladesh e Uchasisikha*. Dhaka: Prothoma; Salam, Sheikh Abdus (Ed.). (2018). *Dhaka Biswabidyalaya Sanskritik o Shikha Sahayak Karmakanda: Sekal Ekal*. Dhaka University: Center for Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences; Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Ed.). (2021). *University of Dhaka: History and Heritage*, Dhaka: University of Dhaka; Chowdhury, A. K. Azad & Alam, Fakrul (eds.). (2021). *The University of Dhaka and the Making and Shaping of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: University of Dhaka. Additionally, there are some memoir collections such as: Shahed, Hosne Ara (Ed.). (2006). *Smritimoy Dhaka Bishwabidyalay*. Dhaka: Dhaka University Alumni Association; Ali, Syed Manjur (Ed.). (2010). *Sourabhe Gourabhe Dhaka Bishwabidyalay*. Dhaka: Dhaka University Alumni Association. Due to the necessity of keeping this paper concise, there is limited opportunity to separately highlight the content of each book. However, the titles of the books themselves give an indication of their content. While some of the published works, especially the memoir collections, provide scattered information about Dhaka University's cultural movement and the contributions of female teachers and students in this area, a comprehensive picture of the participation and role of women in the cultural movement at Dhaka University is rare. Given this context, there is scope for research on this topic, which is the impetus for writing this paper.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this article is grounded in the intersection of gender, culture, and resistance within a specific historical and institutional context. It views the cultural movement not merely as an aesthetic expression but as a form of political and cultural resistance against the hegemonic state ideology imposed by West Pakistan. Through the lens of narrative theory, the framework contextualizes the participation of the female teachers and students of Dhaka University in different cultural movements took place there as part of the greater movement against the West Pakistan's colonial treatment to the East Pakistan. This framework explores not only the role of the women, rather aims to uncover the layers of gender perspectives and identity of the tale of those movements. Overall, the conceptual framework situates women's engagement in cultural movement as a crucial component in the construction of Bengali national identity and as a form of gendered resistance against the colonial rule of West Pakistan.

## Research Methods and Sources

This research is qualitative in nature as it demands for an in-depth methodical and comprehensive analysis of relevant literary works. It not only caters to secondary historical narratives, rather it has been a research work based on various ranges of primary sources with gender perspectives. In this research work, contemporary daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly, trimestral reports of newspapers, periodicals,

cultural organization newsletters, magazines, memoirs, documents, letters, diaries have been used as primary sources. Additionally, interviews of cultural movement organizers and artists, narratives, autobiographies used in the movement, have also been utilized as primary sources. However, since it is a research on women and cultural history, the prevalent historical sources are minimally used in this regard. It is noteworthy that the role of prevalent historical sources in reconstructing women's history is less important during the discussed period. Research articles, essays, books, and websites on related subjects have been consulted as secondary sources. This qualitative research article has been produced following historical research methodology.

### **Cultural Activities of the Women at Dhaka University: 1921-1952**

From its establishment in 1921 Dhaka University recognized the idea of co-education. Clause 5 of the Dhaka University Act, 1920, stated, "The University shall be open to all persons of either sex and of whatever race, creed or class." Leelabati Nag and Sushama Sengupta were among the first women to pursue higher education at Dhaka University in 1921. By the mid-1930s, the number of female students began to increase, reaching 27 in the 1936-37 academic year. In 1937, a female student organization named Dhaka Biswabidyalaya Chhatri Samiti (Dhaka University Women Students Association) was formed. Additionally, from the 1936-37 academic year, female students began to be nominated to the Dhaka University Central Students' Union. Female students also became members of the Hall Union, Kamala Gupta being the first member of the Dhaka Hall Union (Chakraborty, 2006). The literary practice of female students at Dhaka University began with their literary magazine *Suparna* which served as the mouthpiece of the Women Students' Association. From its inception, the association initiated various cultural events, dramas, sports, and other extracurricular activities for female students.

The formal start of theatrical activities by female students at Dhaka University occurred in 1936 with the staging of the play 'Vidyapati'. In 1937, Rabindranath Tagore's 'Tapati' was staged, followed by 'Bashori' the next year. The success of 'Bashori' led to correspondence between Charupama Bose, an English Department teacher, and Rabindranath Tagore. In 1939, female students staged Tagore's 'Raktakarabi'. The same year saw the first sports competition among female students. Additionally, there were literary and music competitions among female students. These events were held at the Dhaka Hall, where male students also participated as audience. Female students participated in formal debate competitions with male students. In the 1940s, Anima Naha, Renuka Dutta, and Amita Chowdhury participated in debates with male students (Chakraborty, 2006).

From the 1921-22 academic year to 1951-52 academic year, the total number of female students at Dhaka University was 711. In the 1952-53 academic year, there were 91 female students out of a total of 1299 students (Annual Report:

1952-53). From the mid-1950s through the 1960s, the number of female students at Dhaka University continued to increase. From the 1952-53 academic year to the 1970-71 academic year, a total of 11,762 female students enrolled at Dhaka University (total students 76,440) with 2,800 female students in 1970 (Admission Register:1921-52). Despite their small numbers, the persistent enthusiasm of female students fostered their cultural activities. The Dhaka University Women Students' Association played a leading role in this regard. Since its establishment, the association has been instrumental in developing cultural practices among the female students. Significant contributions to the cultural development of female students were made by Karunakana Gupta, a History Department teacher, and Charupama Bose, an English Department teacher. This cultural practice gave birth to a sense of cultural awareness, which was reflected in every cultural movement and struggle in Bangladesh, starting from the Language Movement of 1952.

### **Language Movement**

The cultural movement at Dhaka University began with the state language movement. The Muslim Sahitya Samaj or Shikha Group, centered around Dhaka University, made invaluable contributions to fostering a sense of love for the Bangla language. One of their key demands was to provide education in the mother tongue Bengali. However, it was Tamaddun Majlish that first institutionally demanded in clear and unequivocal terms that Bengali be made one of Pakistan's state languages. Ferdousi Begum was closely associated with Tamaddun Majlish (Siddiqui, 2002). During the initial phase of the language movement, female students overcame the social conservatism to participate. In the second phase, female students from Dhaka University played a significant role. They actively participated in processions and meetings, encouraged students from various schools and colleges to join, and engaged in activities such as fundraising for the movement, writing and pasting posters, promoting rallies and meetings, organizing marches, and writing leaflets. Among the notable female students from Dhaka University who made significant contributions to the language movement were Halima Khatun, Sufia (Ibrahim) Ahmed (Department of Islamic History and Culture), Shafia Khatun (Department of Economics), Rowshan Ara Bachchu (Department of Philosophy), Sufia Khan (Department of Bengali), Jaharat Ara (Department of Political Science), Kamrun Nahar Laily (Department of Islamic History and Culture), Farida Bari Malik (Department of International Relations), Pratibha Mutsuddi (Department of Economics), Kaiser Siddiqui, Nadera Begum (Department of English), Nurjahan Khurshid, Nurunnahar Kabir, Shamsunnahar Ahsan (Department of Islamic History and Culture), Moslema Khatun, Sara Taifur (Department of History), Laila Nur (Department of English), and Taleya Rahman (Department of Economics) (Patranobish, 2021). Nadera Begum, who played a courageous role in the language movement, was a teacher in the English Department. Later, Halima Khatun and Shafia Khatun joined the Institute of Education and Research at Dhaka University, and Sufia (Ibrahim) Ahmed joined the Department of Islamic History and Culture

as a teacher.

The participation of female students from the University of Dhaka in the Language Movement was spontaneous and significant. From the inception of the movement in 1948 to its climax in 1952, and continuing up to the recognition of Bangla as one of the state languages in the 1956 Constitution, female students actively joined their male counterparts in every phase of the struggle. On February 21, 1952 they played a leading role in defying Section 144 and during the 1955 phase of the movement, several female students were arrested for their protest activities. In the social context of that era interactions between male and female students were neither easy nor socially accepted. To speak with a male classmate prior approval from the university proctor was required, and even then a representative would often be present during the conversation. Moreover, female students residing in hostels were subjected to strict regulations and limitations. Recalling those days, language movement activist Halima Khatun shared in her memoirs:

The hostel rules were extremely strict even harsher than the sunset law. Apart from attending classes, we were not allowed to go anywhere beyond the barbed-wire fence. To leave for any reason, we needed a sealed letter of permission from a local guardian. Speaking with a male student was illegal... Despite all these oppressive rules we managed to maintain contact with the Communist Party, attend Marxism classes at night, and actively participate in meetings and rallies of the Language Movement. Now thinking back, it is astonishing how we did all of it (Khatun, 2012, p. 52).

Institutional restrictions, societal conservatism, and familial discouragement could not deter the female students from participating in the movement. During February and March of 1952, they took part in every rally and meeting demanding Bengali as a state language with remarkable enthusiasm. No form of fear or threat could deviate them from their linguistic and ideological commitment. The environment at the time was far from supportive. Female students faced fines of ten rupees (taka) if they spoke to male students without the proctor's permission. Many also encountered family threats that their education would be discontinued if they joined the movement (Bachchu, 2018). Yet, driven by their devotion to the cause of their mother tongue these young women overcame all obstacles. Their determination, courage, and willingness to risk their lives to participate in the protests inspired female students across the nation. Several research works have been conducted on women's contributions to the language movement, that's why this topic is not discussed in detail in this article. [ For further details see, Patranobish, 2021]

### **The Progressive Cultural Movements of the Sanskriti Samsad**

The inception of the Sanskriti Samsad marked the beginning of the progressive cultural movement at Dhaka University. In March 1951, the Sanskriti Samsad

was founded in Room 38 of Salimullah Muslim Hall. It was later renamed as the Dhaka Biswabidyalaya Sanskriti Samsad (Siddiqui, 2002). Many contemporary progressive individuals were associated with this Samsad. The first president of the Sanskriti Samsad was Khan Sarwar Murshid and the general secretary was Mustafa Nurul Islam. Among the female students involved with the Sanskriti Samsad were Sanjida Khatun, Farida Bari Malik, Kamrun Nahar Laily, Jaharat Ara Khanam, Fahmida Khatun, Maleka Begum, Ferdousi Mazumder, and Sultana Rebu (Anisuzzaman, 1989).

In its early stages, the activities of the Sanskriti Samsad were primarily limited to staging plays. On September 4, 1951, the Sanskriti Samsad staged Bijon Bhattacharya's 'Jabanbandi' at the Mahbub Ali Institute, Dhaka. Until then, co-acting in plays had not been introduced at Dhaka University. In plays staged in boys' halls, boys would play female roles, and in the women's hostel, girls would play male roles. The Sanskriti Samsad introduced co-acting for the first time in 'Jabanbandi' (Hasan, 1970). In 'Jabanbandi', male roles were performed by Kamal Ahmed, Kazi Abdul Muquit, Azizul Jalil, Abu Zafar Obaidullah, and Obaidul Haque Sarkar, while female roles were played by Laila Samad, Rokeya Kabir, and Nurunnahar. However, the inclusion of female students in acting was not so easy. The Dhaka University authorities did not look favorably upon female students acting in the play. However, since the newspapers in Dhaka praised the play, the authorities did not take any action against it (Sarkar, 1992). In a report titled 'New Trends and New Faces' published on September 9 in the *Pakistan Observer*, the performance of the actors in 'Jabanbandi' was highly praised. The report stated:

Mr. Obaidul Hoq Sarkar as Paran Mondal gave us first rate acting. It was, I believe, a little difficult for a University student to be life-like to a peasant who died of starvation in the street of Calcutta. There were other particularly difficult points also. ...Mrs. Rokeya Kabir as the Mother of Benda was probably at her best as also Miss Nurun Nahar who as Benda's wife had little to say but much to do. Kamal Ahmed as Benda, Kazi Mukit as Poda, Obaidullah as the villain and Mrs. Laila Samad as Hashi were also good. (*The Pakistan Observer*, 9 Sep 1951)

*Daily Sambad* also expressed the hope that female students of the university would participate equally in drama performances in university and hall productions. The success of the Sanskriti Samsad in 1951 created such a nationwide sensation that in 1952, it was the only organization selected to perform at the East Pakistan Cultural Conference in Cumilla. The Sanskriti Samsad performed this play again at the cultural conference in Cumilla, receiving high praise. The performance of girls on stage in Cumilla also created quite a stir (Siddiqui, 2015). In 1953 the Sanskriti Samsad staged Tulsi Lahiri's 'Pathik' in 1954, the first act of 'Meghnadbadh' and Banaul's 'Kabay'. In 1956 it staged Bijon Bhattacharya's 'Nabanna', and in 1958 Rabindranath Tagore's 'Raktakarabi'. The cultural practices at Dhaka University

primarily developed centered around the Sanskriti Samsad. Those involved in the Sanskriti Samsad's drama included Lily Chowdhury, Hosne Ara Biju, Sabera Khatun, Rokeya Kabir, Masuda Chowdhury, Syeda Roshan, Munira Khan, Joharat Ara Khanam, and Razia Khan (Islam, 2006). Besides various musical events, the Sanskriti Samsad annually used to celebrate Rabindra, Nazrul, and Sukanta anniversary, literary meetings, discussions, poetic dramas, photo exhibitions, dance performances, etc. It also regularly held recitation programs and competitions alongside staging cultural programs and plays. Among those involved in these cultural events were Jaharat Ara, Masuda Chowdhury, Munira Khan, Jahanara Laiju, Taleha Khan, Rowshan Ara Ranu, Nadera Chowdhury, Rasheda Chowdhury, Jahanara Nur, Masuma, Milia Gani, Bulu, Razia, Tajim Sultana, Irfat Lata, Sraboni, Nargis Sultana, and Kamrun Nahar Laily (Rahman, 2015).

While the Sanskriti Samsad played a crucial role in the progressive cultural movement during the 1950s and 1960s, its influence waned in later years. The Sanskriti Samsad was primarily a Communist Party-supported organization. The division within the international communist movement influenced the East Pakistan Students Union leading to its split in 1965, which also caused the Sanskriti Samsad to divide. Nonetheless, it would not be an exaggeration to say that even without being a province-based institution, the Dhaka Biswabidyalaya Sanskriti Samsad significantly impacted the cultural life of East Bengal. The Sanskriti Samsad could guide the cultural scene of East Bengal effectively during the language movement of February 21, the creation of Bengali nationalism based on the Bengali language, and later, during the movement to preserve Bengali language and culture (Khan, 2006). It can be said that the progressive students and teachers of Dhaka University transformed the university into the center of the progressive cultural movement in East Bengal through the Sanskriti Samsad. The struggle of the Sanskriti Samsad was not just a cultural struggle; it was also intertwined with political and economic liberation movements.

Those involved with the Sanskriti Samsad later led various progressive movements. From its inception, female students of Dhaka University were involved with the Sanskriti Samsad. Even in the 1965 executive committee of the Sanskriti Samsad, several women held important positions. Zenat Islam and Nilufar Ahmed were vice-presidents, Nargis Abed was assistant secretary, Abeda Begum was the cultural secretary, Hasna Hena Bakul was an associate member in the literature section, and Akhtar Jahan Begum was an associate in the drama section (Siddiqui, 2002). Besides the executive committee members, women involved with the Sanskriti Samsad from its inception included Sanjida Khatun, Farida Bari Malik, Kamrun Nahar Laily, Joharat Ara Khanam, Fahmida Khatun, Maleka Begum, Ferdousi Mazumder, Sultana Rebu, Maleka Azim Khan, Bulu, Razia, Tajim Sultana, Irfat Lata, Sraboni, Nargis Sultana, Masuda Chowdhury, Munira Khan, Jahanara Laiju, Taleha Khan, Rowshan Ara Ranu, Nadera Chowdhury, Jahanara Nur, Masuma, and Naila Zaman Khan.

### **Natya Andolan (Theatre Movement) Centered on Dhaka University**

Drama is one of the main streams of Bengali culture, serving not only as a medium of cultural expression but also as a medium of protest. Through allegory, it spontaneously opposes oppression, exploitation, and discrimination. During Pakistani rule, the cultural movement in East Bengal prominently included the theater movement, which began at Dhaka University. When Dhaka University formally started on July 1, 1921, with Dhaka Hall, Jagannath Hall, and Muslim Hall, it marked a qualitative shift in Dhaka's theatrical practices. The Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) and the hall unions played significant roles in this development. The hall unions were instrumental in the initial growth of theatrical practices at the university, focusing on staging artistic plays (Biswas, 1988).

Initially, theatrical activities at Dhaka University were confined to the halls, but the establishment of the Sanskriti Samsad in 1951 accelerated these activities. The Samsad's first staged play was Bijon Bhattacharya's 'Jabanbandi'. This play was notable for being the first in which female students played female roles instead of male students. However at that time, the university authorities, hall samsad, and the university itself had not yet permitted co-acting. In 1954, all hall union and the DUCSU decided to allow co-acting. Official letters were sent to female students guardians for their opinions, and as there were no objections, co-acting was permitted. The university's theatrical season began with a play by Salimullah Muslim Hall. When Obaidul Haque Sarkar was called by the hall provost Osman Ghani, he was told, "Co-acting will be allowed, but SM Hall's play will feature SM Hall's girls." Since the university had few female students at the time, there was no separate hall for them; they were attached to male halls with residents staying in Chameli House. Many female performers like Momtaz, Lily Khan, Monimunnesa, Sabera, and Swapna, all from Fazlul Haq Muslim Hall, acted in plays outside the university. At that time, Jaharat Ara from SM Hall was also an actress was in West Pakistan for three months. In this situation Obaidul Haque Sarkar persuaded students from Chameli House to take on the four female roles in the play. After just twelve days of rehearsal, the play 'Keranir Jibon' by Chobi Banerjee was staged in Salimullah Hall. This was the first instance of co-acting in the university. Farida Bari Malik, Kamrun Nahar Laily, Masuda Chowdhury and Laila Nur performed in this play. Provost Osman Ghani, after watching the play remarked, "I was a student, house tutor, and now seven years as provost at SM Hall, but I have never seen such a beautiful play, and I doubt if I ever will" (Sarkar, 2007, p.103). The play received praise in national newspapers as well. Since then, co-acting became standard in Dhaka University's theater productions. This event is significant in the history of East Bengal's cultural movement as it exemplified the defeat of regressive traditionalism and superstition, creating a progressive tradition in cultural development.

In 1953 the Fazlul Huq Muslim Hall Student Union of Dhaka University staged Rabindranath Tagore's 'Chirakumar Sabha' at Curzon Hall. In September the Salimullah Muslim Hall Student Union presented Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's 'Bandhu' in the hall auditorium. That same year Manoj Basu's 'Plabon' was performed. Lily Chowdhury played the lead female role in this play. (*Dainik Millat*, December 14, 1954). In 1954 the Bengali Department of Dhaka University staged Banaful's 'Koboy'. The Iqbal Hall Student Union presented Askar Ibne Shaikh's social play 'Manchegram' in the hall auditorium. In 1955 the Dhaka University Central Students' Union consecutively staged Munier Choudhury's translated play 'Keu Kichu Bolte Pare Na', Banaful's 'Koboy', Anis Chowdhury's 'Manchitro', and Pramathanath Bishi's 'Porihas Bijalpitam'. Munira Khan a student of the Political Science Department, acted in 'Porihas Bijalpitam' (Khan & Munira, 2006). On October 8 and 9, 1955 the Salimullah Muslim Hall Student Union staged Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's 'Dui Purush'. The Central Students' Union performed Dinabandhu Mitra's 'Nil Darpan' at Curzon Hall on February 12. In 1956 DUCSU staged Banaful's 'Koboy', Munier Choudhury's translated play 'Keu Kichu Bolte Pare Na', and Pramathanath Bishi's 'Porihas Bijalpitam' on September 24, 25, and 26 at Curzon Hall respectively. In the play 'Koboy' Jaharat Ara, a student of the Political Science Department, received praise for her performance. She also performed in 'Keu Kichu Bolte Pare Na'. In 'Porihas Bijalpitam' Syeda Rowshan Ara, Kamrun Nahar Laily, and Jaharat Ara acted. About their performances *Dainik Ittehad* wrote, "Though Syeda Rowshan Ara's performance as Mini was initially stiff, it became remarkably lively towards the end. Both Kamrun Nahar Laily and Jaharat Ara enhanced their previous reputations" (*Dainik Ittehad*, October 25, 1955). In Anis Chowdhury's 'Manchitro' Sabera Khatun and Zulekha Habib acted.

In 1957 Rabindranath Tagore's 'Chirakumar Sabha' was staged at the Women's Hall. The cast included Farida Banu, Hamida Banu and Ayesha Akhtar among others. Following this Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's 'Datta' was performed. The role of Bijoya was played by Mary, a student of the Bengali Department. Ayesha Akhtar played the role of Naren and Bilas Bihari was portrayed by Rozy Majid (Zaman, 2006). In the same year Rabindranath Tagore's 'Raktakarabi' was also staged. Female students played the male characters with a male voice artist providing the voice for the character of the King from backstage (Chowdhury, 2011). The main character Nandini was portrayed by Rowshan Ara. Her performance was so immersive that Rowshan seemed to completely lose herself in the character of Nandini. The play also featured performances by Farida Banu, Rashida Ahmed from the Philosophy Department, Akhtari Khanam from the Economics Department, Selina Bahar from the Mathematics Department and Hamida Rahman, a teacher from the Bengali Department (Firoz, 2012). The Bengali Department teacher Nilima Ibrahim played a significant role in directing the play (Ibrahim, 2019). The provost of Women's Hall Akhtar Imam praised the outstanding performances of the actors and the teachers involved in the production.

In 1958 DUCSU staged Bhanu Chattopadhyay's 'Ajkal'. Salimullah Muslim Hall performed Askar Ibne Shaikh's 'Shesh Oddhai'. Iqbal Hall staged Askar Ibne Shaikh's 'Anubarton' in December. In 1959, Dhaka University Women's Union performed the social comedy play 'Taito'. It was directed solely by Khurshed Begum, the outgoing student of the university's MA final year. She also played a role in the play (Zaman, 2006). That same year students of the university staged Munier Choudhury's 'Rupor Kouta'. The Central Students' Union staged 'Rupantar'. In 1960 Fazlul Huq Hall staged the social drama 'Sayalab'. In 1964 DUCSU performed the social drama 'Maayabhi Prohor'. In 1965 Jagannath Hall staged 'Rupor Kouta', Dhaka Hall staged 'Manchitra', Fazlul Huq Hall staged 'Bindu Bindu Rong', and Iqbal Hall staged 'Kotha Kao'. Dhaka University Women's Union staged Rabindranath Tagore's play 'Shodhbodh' based on his story Karmafal (Biswas, 1988). In 1966 Jagannath Hall Students' Union staged the social drama 'Dayi Ke'. In 1968 they staged 'Abichar'. In 1969 Iqbal Hall staged the mystery drama 'Pathor Bari'. That same year Rokea Hall Students' Union staged Kazi Nazrul Islam's 'Setubandh' (Daily Sambad, 6 June 1969). Female students participated in almost all these plays. Among them were Jaharat Ara, Masuda Chowdhury, Munira Khan, Sanjida Khatun, Pratibha Mutsuddi, Sima Mukherjee, Jahanara Laiju, Taleha Khan, Rawshan Ara Ranu, Nadera Chowdhury, Rashida Chowdhury, Jahanara Nur, Masuma, Kamrun Nahar Laily, and others.

The Drama Circle was formed in 1956 under the initiative of Mir Maksudus Salehin, the then entertainment secretary of DUCSU with the aim of revitalizing theater. The main focus of this group was to stage new genre plays beyond conventional stagecraft. From its inception Syeda Rausan was closely associated with Drama Circle. In her reminiscence she states, "I am ranu of the Drama Circle. No matter how far I spread in the flow of life, we and I are always of the Drama Circle. Drama Circle is our treasure trove of memories" (Morshed, 2017, p. 109). Additionally, Sabera Khatun and Munira Khan were also involved with Drama Circle from the beginning. The Drama Circle staged its first play 'Koboy' at Curzon Hall, Dhaka in November 1956. The main actors in this play were Jaharat Ara, Mahmud Hasan, Taufiq Aziz Khan, Abid Hossain, and Morshed Chowdhury. In 1957 Munier Choudhury's play 'Keu Kichu Balte Pare Na' was staged in Karachi. That same year the group performed Anis Chowdhury's 'Manchitro' in Kolkata and later in Pakistan. The traveling troupe included female students Munira Khan, Rajia Khan, Salma Khan and Syeda Rawshan among others. In April 1958 Drama Circle staged Rabindranath Tagore's 'Raktakarabi'. Syeda Rawshan (Ranu) played the role of Nandini in this play and received acclaim for her performance (Ibid). In January 1961 Drama Circle staged Syed Waliullah's social drama 'Bohni Peer'. The same year as part of Rabindranath's birth centenary celebration, Drama Circle staged 'Raja O Rani', 'Tasher Desh', and 'Raktakarabi'. In the play 'Tasher Desh' Sanjida Khatun sang the song "Gopono Kathati Robe Na Gopone" (Khatun, 2013). Under the leadership of Drama Circle these plays made revolutionary statements profoundly influencing the audience. Besides original Bengali plays Drama Circle

also presented translated and adapted Greek and English plays, rich in music, dance, and aesthetics. However, the organization's activities did not sustain for long. In 1964 when Bozlul Karim migrated to the UK the organization's activities came to a halt.

In the 1950s DUCSU Natyadol was formed to invigorate the theatrical movement of Dhaka University. DUCSU Natyadol was invited by Sunil Sen Gupta, the general secretary of the Kolkata University Students' Union, on the occasion of the centenary of Kolkata University to visit Kolkata University in 1957. Women representatives in this group included Rajia Khan, Salma Chowdhury, Syeda Rawshan, Munira Khan and Ferdousi Begum. For two evenings DUCSU Natyadol presented Munier Choudhury's 'Keu Kichu Balte Pare Na' and 'Keranir Jibon' at the centenary stage of Kolkata University. Kolkata University teachers were amazed to see the joint performance of male and female students from Dhaka University as until then, there had been no such joint performances in the history of Kolkata University (Islam, 2006).

In 1961 the Teacher-Student Center (Chhatra Shikshak Kendra) was established with the aim of fostering latent talents of male and female students through co-education programs. In 1963 under the direction of TSC Director A. Z. Khan, a music and drama group was formed to organize cultural programs. Both teachers and students of Dhaka University were involved with the Dhaka University Drama Group. With the initiative of the Chhatra Shikshak Natya Gosthi Professor Munier Choudhury's 'Danda' and 'Dandadhar' were staged, featuring Munier Choudhury, Rafiqul Islam, and Mrs. Lily Chowdhury, among others (Khan & Aman, 2006). Ferdousi Majumdar acted in 'Danda' and 'Dandadhar'. In 1964 the Chhatra Shikshak Natya Gosthi staged Michael Madhusudan's play 'Krishnakumari'. Lily Chowdhury, Mahbuba Akhtar, Rozy Majid, and Professor Rajia Khan played various characters in this play. In 1967 the Chhatra Shikshak Natya Gosthi, organized a week-long drama festival featuring 'Prachchhadpat' and 'Jhingehol'. In Kazi Nazrul Islam's 'Jhingehol' Syeda Firoza Begum, Saiyida Gaffar, Wasim, Jahir, and Atiqul Islam acted in central roles (Rahman, 2015). In 1968 a half-week-long drama festival was organized by the Student-Teacher Center. In 1969 'Lalon Fakir' was staged by the Chatra Shikshak Natya Gosthi, In 1970 Nilima Ibrahim's 'Duye Duye Char' was staged. In February 1971 Mahbubur Rahman's 'Je Pather Shesh Nai' was staged marking the end of the center's drama activities. Prominent women involved in this organization included Rashida Chowdhury, Farida Bari Malik, Syeda Rawshan Kader, Sufia Begum, Ferdous Ara Begum, Rajia Khan, Lily Chowdhury, Mohua Chowdhury, and Ferdousi Majumdar (Khan & Aman, 2006).

The cultural arena at Dhaka University saw various theatrical movements flourish from 1952 to 1971 including the Sanskriti Samsad, Drama Circle, Dhaka University Central Students' Union, Fazlul Huq Hall Students' Union, Jagannath Hall Students'

Union, Salimullah Muslim Hall Students' Union, Dhaka University Law Students' Union, Charukola Samsad, Dhaka University Bengali Department, Iqbal Hall Students' Union, Dhaka University Students' Union, and Chatra Shikshak Natya Gosthi. These groups staged different plays, contributing to the vibrant theater movement at Dhaka University. In particular the leadership of Munier Choudhury, Nurul Momen and Askar Ibne Sheikh played a significant role in shaping the theatrical discourse, reflecting both political and cultural ideals. Additionally, Nilima Ibrahim, a professor in the Bengali Department, actively contributed to the theater movement by directing various plays and writing scripts that were performed on stage. Under her direction Munier Choudhury's play 'Chithi' was staged at the TSC in 1969 and in 1970, her own play 'Duye Duye Char' was staged there as well. In the years 1962-63 she also served as the president of the Rangam Theater Group. Notable actresses who regularly participated in university theater during this time included Rokeya Kabir, Lily Chowdhury, Hosne Ara (Biju), Laila Samad, Sabera Khatun, Monimunnesa, Jaharat Ara, Masuda Chowdhury, Rajia Khan, Sayeda Rawshan, Munira Khan, Salma Chowdhury and Ferdousi Majumdar among others (Islam, 2003).

### **Celebration of Tagore's Birth Centenary**

In 1961 students and teachers at Dhaka University organized a program to celebrate Rabindranath Tagore's birth centenary as a form of resistance against the initiative of pakistanization of Bengali culture. Following the creation of Pakistan there were efforts to mould the culture of East Pakistan according to the ideals and ideology of West Pakistan. After Ayub Khan declared martial law and seized power in Pakistan in 1958, political repression was accompanied by cultural suppression. Ayub Khan stated that Pakistan shared the same history, ideology and work methods, and therefore, cultures could not be different. The celebration of Tagore's centenary was a manifestation of Bengali cultural identity and it began at Dhaka University. In 1961 while countries around the world were organizing events to mark the centenary of Tagore's birth Pakistan's authorities attempted the opposite. Musa Ahmed, the son-in-law of Khwaja Shahabuddin and Secretary of Information in East Pakistan and the Chief of the Bureau of National Reconstruction, used his influence to intimidate the artists and literary community in Dhaka and threatened them to prevent the celebration of Tagore's centenary (Islam, 2003). Writers and cultural figures such as Alauddin Al Azad, K.G. Mustafa and Anwar Zahid were arrested to instill fear among the cultural activists. In this hostile environment with no official institutional support for the celebration, the Head of the Bengali and Sanskrit Department at Dhaka University Muhammad Abdul Hye organized an informal preliminary discussion in his office (Anisuzzaman, 2003). Another meeting was held at the residence of Professor Govinda Chandra Dev of the Philosophy Department and the Provost of Jagannath Hall attended by Sanjida Khatun (Khatun, 2013). A subsequent preparatory meeting took place in Abdul Hye's office where Nilima Ibrahim was present. A committee was formed with

Justice Syed Mahbub Murshed as the president and Khan Sarwar Murshid as the secretary, with all attendees becoming members. Nilima Ibrahim was one of the key members of this committee (Anisuzzaman, 2003).

Three committees were formed in Dhaka to celebrate Rabindranath Tagore's centenary. The first committee was initiated by the DUCSU. The second was led by Justice Syed Mahbub Murshed of the East Pakistan High Court. The third comprised younger journalists, writers, artists, and students organized by the Dhaka Press Club. Teachers and students of Dhaka University played significant roles with dedication in all these committees. These three committees after discussions, decided to hold a four-day centenary festival from the 24th to the 27th of Boishakh. Additionally, the committee formed by DUCSU organized two meetings on the 11th and 12th of Boishakh (Chakraborty, 2015). The DUCSU committee started the centenary events on the 10th of Boishakh, 1368 (Bengali calendar year), with an inaugural ceremony attended by Sufia Kamal. Following the inauguration the main events took place on the 11th and 12th of Boishakh. The primary event for the centenary celebration was held at Curzon Hall, spearheaded by DUCSU leaders Jahanara Begum and Amulya Chakraborty.

The first day of the combined celebration of Rabindranath Tagore's centenary by the three committees was the 24th of Boishakh. On this day prominent artists and literati of Dhaka recited Tagore's poems and prose. The event concluded with a musical performance at Fazlul Huq Hall. Participants in the musical event included Leila Arjumand Banu, Sanjida Khatun, Farida Bari Malik, Bilquis Nasiruddin, Fahmida Khatun, Jahanara Islam, Bela Roy, Gopa Bandopadhyay, Nasreen Chowdhury, Bhaktimoy Dasgupta, Fazle Nizami, Atiqul Islam, Wahidul Haque, and Zahedur Rahim. Those involved in the poetry recitations included Khurshidi Alam, Husne Ara, Nurjahan Murshid, Selina Chowdhury, Sabia Begum, Golam Mostafa, Rafiqul Islam, Ahmed Hossain, Iqbal Bahar Chowdhury, and Abdullah Abu Sayeed. Self-composed poems were recited by Benazir Ahmed, Habibur Rahman, Ashraf Siddiqui, Mohammad Moniruzzaman, Latifa Hilali, and Latifa Haque (Anisuzzaman, 2003).

The events on the 25th of Boishakh was divided into two segments. The first segment was a discussion held in the auditorium of Fazlul Huq Hall. In the second segment two dance dramas 'Chitrangada' and 'Chandalika' were staged in the evening at the auditorium of the Engineers Institute. The central role in the dance drama 'Chitrangada' was played by Jinnat Gani, while Mandira Nandi played the role of Prakriti in 'Chandalika'. Other participants in the dance dramas included Farida Majid, Fahmida Majid, Hamida Wahab, Shirin Begum, Laila Hasan, Ajit Dey, Kamal Lohani, and Mrinmoy Dasgupta. Songs in the dance dramas were performed by Sanjida Khatun, Fahmida Khatun, Fazle Nizami, Zahedur Rahim, Enamul Haque and Chowdhury Abdur Rahim.

On the 26th of Boishakh, a discussion session was held in the auditorium of Fazlul

Huq Hall. That evening Rabindranath Tagore's play 'Raja O Rani' was scheduled to be performed at the Engineers Institute. However due to a cyclone and storm surge that affected the entire East Bengal particularly the coastal areas, the play was not staged that evening. The play was eventually performed as a charity show on the 27th of Boishakh. The actors included Syed Hasan Imam, Masud Ali Khan, Dawood Khan Majlis, Khondakar Rafiqul Haque, Anwar Hossain, Reshma, Kamela Sharafi, and Hosne Ara Laiju (ibid). The performance of this play marked the conclusion of the main events organized by the three combined committees.

During the period of military rule of Ayub Khan, the country experienced a form of cultural regression. Amidst this the celebration of Rabindranath Tagore's birth centenary stirred the cultural arena. This celebration marked the beginning of a victorious journey for Bengali cultural movements, with women playing an equal part in this new triumph. Nilima Ibrahim, a professor of Bengali Department, was a member of the central committee formed to celebrate Tagore's birth centenary. University female students were actively involved in various musical events, recitations, and plays organized for the occasion. Notable participants included Leila Arjumand Banu, Husna Banu Khanam, Sanjida Khatun, Fahmida Khatun, Jahanara Islam, Nasreen Chowdhury, Mahbub Ara, Akhtar Jahan, Husne Ara, Bela Roy, Latifa Haque, Hosne Ara Laiju, Laila Hasan, and Farida Majid. Additionally, Sufia Kamal and Shamsunnahar Mahmud played significant role in the centenary celebrations. The Rabindra Jayanti Committee organized a symposium at Fazlul Huq Hall between May 9-11 to mark Tagore's centenary. On the second day of the symposium Shamsunnahar Mahmud, among other speakers, gave a speech. She stated, "The life and works of the poet bring inspiration to all people. It is meaningless to consider the poet as Hindu or Muslim. The most important thing is that Rabindranath is the poet of humanity, the world poet." [translated by author] In this manner, women stepped forward to preserve the Bengali identity. Despite all adversities, Bengalis emerged victorious that day in yet another movement similar to the Language Movement. In this struggle women teachers and students of Dhaka University overcame the social obstacles and took a leading role.

In 1967 Dhaka University students and faculty took the lead in protesting the decision to ban Rabindra Sangeet on Radio Pakistan and Television. As soon as Central Information Minister Khwaza Shahabuddin's announcement was published in the newspapers on June 23 various student unions from Dhaka University issued statements criticizing and protesting the government's decision. On June 24 the Dhaka University Cultural Society issued a statement vehemently opposing the government's anti-Rabindranath policy. Both the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) and the Cultural Society organized protest meetings and processions. The Cultural Society held public meetings in key locations in Dhaka city as in Gulistan, Baitul Mukarram and Nawabpur. At these meetings leaders of the Cultural Society described the exclusion of Rabindra Sangeet from Dhaka Radio and Television as an interference in the language,

literature and culture of the Bengalis and pledged to resist this vile conspiracy. Additionally, due to the immediate efforts of several faculty members from the Bengali Department, a statement titled “Statement of Intellectuals Protesting the Decision to Ban Rabindra Sangeet” was published on the front page of all daily newspapers in Dhaka on June 24, 1967. Among the intellectuals issuing this statement were Bengali Department professors Nilima Ibrahim. In response to the ban on Rabindra Sangeet progressive cultural activists organized a three-day event in Dhaka centering around Rabindranath Tagore. The play ‘Tasher Desh’ by Rabindranath Tagore was performed featuring Kazi Tamanna. Sanjida Khatun played a significant role in the movement against the ban on Rabindra Sangeet. The resistance movement against the ban on Rabindra Sangeet significantly shaped the broader cultural movement of the Bengalis, which continued till the Liberation War of 1971. This movement primarily originated from Dhaka University with notable participation from female teachers and students.

### **Bangla Language and Literature Week**

The Department of Bengali at Dhaka University organized Bangla Bhasha O Sahitya Saptaha (Bangla Language and Literature Week) from September 22-28, 1963, at the university library auditorium. The purpose of this event was to introduce students and the general public interested in Bengali language and literature, to the evolution of these fields. To ensure the successful implementation of Bangla Language and Literature Week various sub-committees were formed, featuring a significant presence of female teachers and students. In the exhibition sub-committee, Akhtar Banu and Sultana Begum were members. Saleha Khatun, Maleka Begum and Momtaz Begum were part of the poetry reading sub-committee. Nilima Ibrahim acted as the in-charge professor of the prose reading sub-committee with Bilquis Banu and Mahmuda Khanam as members. Ferdous Ara Begum and Sadika Saeed served in the drama sub-committee while Rowshan Ara Begum, Sufia Begum, Fauzia Parveen, Farida Begum and Saida Khatun were members of the music sub-committee (Hye, 2020).

Evenings on the first, third, fifth, and seventh days of the Bangla Language and Literature Week featured sessions on poetry, prose, drama readings and musical performances respectively. On the first day September 22 Mohammad Moniruzzaman, Nilima Ibrahim, Munier Choudhury, and Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal presented the evolution of Bengali script in the exhibition. In the evening a poetry reading session was conducted by Mohammad Moniruzzaman. During this session Nilima Ibrahim earned acclaim for her recitation of *Annadamangal Kavya* by Bharatchandra in the medieval style (Anisuzzaman, 2019). Mahmuda Khanam recited *Chandimangal Kavya* by Mukundaram. Nurunnahar Zaheda Khanam, Jubaida Khatun and Saleha Khatun jointly recited from Laily-Majnu by Bahram Khan. Kalpana Dash recited from the ‘Mahua Pala’ of *Maimansingha Gitika*. Shamsunnahar recited Ishwarchandra Gupta’s patriotic poetry. Additionally, Maleka Begum and Nasreen Zehera with Helen Sher recited Nabinchandra Sen’s

poem 'Palashir Juddho' and Rabindranath Tagore's 'Madhumoy Prithibir Dhuli' respectively (Hye, 2020).

On the third day September 24 at 7 pm, a prose reading session was held. University teachers and students participated, reading prose from the ancient Bengali of William Carey's time to Kazi Nazrul Islam's 'Bethar Dan'. Nilima Ibrahim, the in-charge professor of the prose reading sub-committee, conducted this session. She also delivered an outstanding reading from Ismail Hossain Siraji's 'Raynandini'. Jahanara Imam and Sadika Saeed read from William Carey's 'Kothopokothon'. Maleka Begum read from Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's 'Kadambari', while Rashida Zaman and Saleha Khatun read from Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's 'Betal Panchabinshati' and Peary Chand Mitra's 'Alaler Gharer Dulal' respectively. Hosna Jahan read from Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Naristhana' and Rowshan Ara read from Mohammad Akram Khan's 'Mostafa-Charit' (ibid).

On September 26 at 7 pm a drama reading session commenced. Munier Choudhury, Rafiqul Islam and Anisuzzaman read from Dinabandhu Mitra's 'Sadhabar Ekadashi' with Nilima Ibrahim reciting. The exceptional recitation and acting by Departmental student Naren Biswas captivated the audience. Jahanara Imam earned acclaim for her participation in prose and drama readings. Other participating female students included Ferdousi Begum, Khurshid Jahan and Hosna Jahan. Several old poems were set to music and performed in a musical session, which an extraordinary effort by artists Abdul Ahad and Abdul Latif. On September 28 at 7 pm a Bengali music session began. Laila Sarwar performed singing 'Aju Rajani Ham' written by Vidyapati. Salma Chowdhury sang the folk song 'Lila Bali Lila Bali'. Sufia Begum performed Atul Prasad Sen's 'Nid Nahi Ankhi pate', and Sara Nilufar Banu sang Kazi Nazrul Islam's 'Bagichay Bulbuli Tui'. In the chorus session directed by Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal, Laila Sarwar, Sufia Begum, Sara Nilufar Banu, Zeenat Ara Malik, Mirza Shahana, Farida Begum, Jamal Ara Begum, Farida Banu, Kishwar Jahan and Sajeda Khatun participated (ibid).

Bangla Bhasha O Sahitya Saptaha, organized by the Bengali Department, inspired and invigorated Bengali nationalism. The role of this event in the emergence of Bengali identity was memorable. It was a significant cultural event of the time attracting thousands daily who came with genuine curiosity and interest to see the exhibitions, listen to the discussions and enjoy the various programs. The quality and novelty of the event were major draws, but it also reflected the emerging sense of Bengali nationalism that drew everyone to the event. The student movement at Dhaka University at that time was greatly inspired by this newly awakened nationalism (Rahman, 2001). Overall, this literature week aimed to spread a clear understanding of the eternal literature, culture and traditions of the Bengali people contributing to the cultural movement in East Bengal and the formation of Bengali nationalism. The participation of female students and teachers including Nilima Ibrahim, was crucial in this endeavor.

## The Cultural Front of the Liberation War

In the context of Bangladesh's liberation struggle cultural movements became a complementary and supportive force to progressive political and social movements. Cultural activities played a significant role during the war by maintaining the morale of the fighters and inspiring the general public to participate in the war. The contributions of female writers, journalists, artists, actors, narrators, and reciters working in cultural organizations such as Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha, Bangladesh Sahayak Shilpi-Sahityik Buddhijibi Samiti, and others are a notable chapter in the history of the liberation war. Both teachers and students of Dhaka University were involved in these cultural activities. The list also includes those who were not students of Dhaka University during the war but became students afterward. Among the Dhaka University students who worked as cultural activists and Shabdo Sainik with Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and other cultural fronts were Sanjida Khatun, Laila Hasan, Quazi Rosy, Nasreen Ahmad Shilu, Bulbul Mahalanobis, Shaheen Samad, Laila Zaman Khan, Aleya Ferdousi, Sumita Naha, Rupa Khan and Dalia Naushin.

The news readers of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra played a crucial role in informing the nation about the widespread genocide, destruction and atrocities committed by the Pakistani invaders, the overall war situation, and the reactions of world leaders to the war. Nasreen Ahmad was involved in news reading at the radio station. In 1971 she was a student of the Geography Department at Dhaka University and a cultural activist of Chhayanaut. In early May she went to Agartala and from there to Kolkata. In Kolkata she auditioned for reading English news at Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and from the next day until the country's independence, she worked as an English news reader under the name Jereen Ahmed. Beyond news reading she also participated in music and drama. From June to December she participated in almost all the collective and also two solo music performance. She also acted in a play directed by Ronen Koshari. In early December 1971 the voice calling for the Pakistani invading forces to surrender from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra was hers (Ahmad, 2016).

Dhaka University's female students were also involved in the poetry recitation program of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. Quazi Rosy, a student of the Bengali Department, was associated with poetry recitation. In 1971 Quazi Rosy went to Kolkata with Sikandar Abu Jafar during the Liberation War. During this time she served as an associate with the freedom fighters at Kolkata's freedom fighter camp. She worked for the liberation war from a house in Ripon Street. She sewed clothes for the freedom fighters, collected medicines and sent them to the camp. Later, inspired by Belal Mohammad, she joined Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. There she recited self-composed poems (Rosy, 2019). Laila Hasan, a student of Philosophy Department, was also involved in poetry recitation and drama section at Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. (Chowdhury, 2011).

One of the prominent Shabdo Sainik of the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra was Bulbul Mahalanobish, a listed singer of Radio Pakistan's Dhaka station. She constantly encouraged the freedom fighters by participating in chorus songs like 'Bijoy Nishan Urchhe Oi', 'Nongor Tolo Tolo', 'Purbo Digonte Shurjo Uthechhe', 'Rokto Diye Naam Likhhechi', 'Janotar Songram Cholbe Cholbe', and 'Krar Oi Louho Kopat'. She also played the role of Begum of Kella Fateh Khan in the Satirical drama 'Jallader Dorbar'. Besides, she acted with Ashraful Alam in 'Banglar Mukh' (Mahalanobis, 2017).

Rupa Khan, daughter of the renowned filmmaker Abdul Jabbar Khan and a former student of Dhaka University, was a regular artist at Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. She soloed in the song 'Chand Tumi Fire Jao Dekho Manusher Khune Khune Raktim Bangla' composed for the Eid, which touched the hearts of listeners when broadcasted during the sighting of the Eid moon in 1971. Besides, she lent her voice to most of the songs broadcasted from the station including 'Purbo Digonte Shurjo Uthechhe', 'Nongor Tolo Tolo', 'Tirhara Ei Dheu-er Shagor', 'Rokto Diye Naam Likhhechi', and 'Muktir Ek-i Poth Songram'. Aleya Ferdousi was also associated with Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. She acted in the popular Satirical drama 'Jallader Dorbar' (Chowdhury, 2011).

Sanjida Khatun, a former student and a later faculty of the Department of Bengali at Dhaka University, played an important role as a cultural activist in the Liberation War. She went to Kolkata and with the support of the Bangladesh Sahayak Samiti, gathered Bangladeshi musicians and created the Geeti Alekhya 'Rupantor Gaan' with everyone's help. The main writer of this Geeti Alekhya was Shahriar Kabir. This musical narrative, detailing the struggles of Bangladesh, was first presented on the stage of Rabindra Sadan. Later, it was performed in various places in India to garner public support for the Liberation War. The funds collected from these performances, after deducting expenses, were distributed among needy artists of Bangladesh staying in India in 1971. She also played a leading role in establishing the Bangladesh Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha (Ibid).

Shaheen Samad worked as one of the prominent cultural activists in the Liberation War. In 1971 she enrolled herself as a student at Dhaka University; but due to the overall situation in the country, she could not attend classes. Later she went to Kolkata via Agartala. There she joined the Bangladesh Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha formed under the leadership of Sanjida Khatun and Wahidul Haque and inspired freedom fighters and the general public through music. Her songs 'Manush Ho, Manush Ho, Abar Tora Manush Ho' and 'Bangla Ma-er Damal Santan' resonated with everyone on the battlefield (Samad, 2017).

Sumita Naha, a student of the Department of Bengali at Dhaka University, also became involved with the Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha led by Sanjida Khatun at Lenin Sarani in Kolkata during the war. She performed songs with this group in various areas including Delhi and Asansol, to raise funds for the freedom fighters.

Besides this she worked as a guest artist with Suchitra Mitra and other artists of the Indian government on All India Radio. Additionally, Laila Zaman Khan, a first-year student of the Department of Economics, was associated with the Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha. Sultana Sarawat Ara Zaman, a faculty members of Dhaka University, also provided various forms of assistance to the refugees and injured freedom fighters (Chowdhury, 2011).

Sheela Das, a first-year student in the Department of Economics, was associated with the Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha. She joined the organization after receiving information from artist Swapan Chowdhury. On behalf of the Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha, 'Rupantorer Gaan' was performed at an international conference in Delhi, and she was one of the prominent members of this group. She was also a part of the group of artists who recorded songs for Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. On December 6, 1971 she performed at a victory celebration held at Navaran Bazaar in Jessore. Additionally, she sang at a cultural event organized at the Bangladesh High Commission in Kolkata when India recognized Bangladesh as an independent state (Momen, 2020).

Women teachers and students from Dhaka University also played a significant role in Bangladesh's Liberation War. The former and current students of Dhaka University who played direct and indirect important roles in the war include Sajeda Chowdhury, Badrunnessa Ahmed, Jahanara Imam, Ivy Rahman, Matia Chowdhury, Maleka Begum, Mahfuza Begum, Ayesha Khanam, Sultana Kamal, Rasheda Khanam, Rafia Akhtar Dolly, Forkan Begum, Momtaz Begum, Farida Akhtar Saki, Rokeya Khanam, Baby Maudud, Aleya Ferdousi, Aroma Dutta, Nilima Ibrahim, Nasimun Ara Minu, Ziaun Nahar Rozi, Kazi Momtaz Hena, Rasheda Amin, Abha Mondol, Rokeya Sultana Raka, Shamsunnahar Ico, Nazneen Sultana, Selina Khalek, Hajera Sultana, among others (Chowdhury, 2011).

## Conclusion

The cultural movement that began at Dhaka University through the state language movement remained vibrant until the victory in the War of Independence. Since the creation of the state of Pakistan in 1947 the language, history, heritage, and culture of East Bengal were under constant attack. When the West Pakistani ruling class's first step of exploitation and oppression targeted the mother tongue, a movement against this began in East Bengal. The language movement of 1952 sparked a strong collective resistance against West Pakistan, with Dhaka University being one of the central hubs. The cultural movement of the Bengalis which emerged from the language movement, gradually turned into a struggle for existence. On the other hand, the pro-Pakistani government of East Bengal continued various official and unofficial efforts to hinder the growth and progress of Bengali culture. The imposition of martial law at the end of the 1950s further intensified the attacks on Bengali culture. Through autocratic rule, the government severely obstructed and attempted to distort the practice of literature and culture in East Bengal.

Notable among these efforts were the imposition of Urdu as the state language, the conspiracy to introduce Arabic and Roman scripts instead of Bengali script, opposition to Rabindranath Tagore, distortion of Nazrul's literature, and creating various obstacles for progressive artists, intellectuals and organizations. In response to these attacks on fundamental cultural elements, a resistance began. However, behind this cultural repression was also active the economic exploitation and political imperialism. This situation created a sense of relative deprivation among the people of East Bengal. Indeed, the sense of being deceived and oppressed led the people's latent anger becoming apparent. This is when the intense collective resistance began, with Dhaka University being one of the principal centers of this resistance. The culturally conscious students and teachers of Dhaka University played a role in awakening Bengali nationalist consciousness by leading the country's cultural movement, with notable participation from female teachers and students.

Female students of the University of Dhaka came forward to join the struggle to preserve Bengali culture defying social and familial conservatism as well as institutional restrictions. It was not an easy task, especially at a time when they even needed the university proctor's permission to speak with a male classmate. On top of that, the number of female students was significantly lower compared to their male counterparts. Initially, teachers like Karunakana Gupta from the History Department and Charupama Basu from the English Department played key role in encouraging the female students to engage in cultural activities. Furthermore, Akhtar Imam from the Philosophy Department made commendable contribution to the cultural development of the residents of the Women's Hall. However, female students first significantly participated in the cultural movement through the language movement. Their involvement in the language movement marked a milestone in women's progress as it brought them out of their homes and onto the streets. At that time there were significant barriers to women participating alongside men, in various cultural mediums such as drama, dance, and music. Female students faced many challenges to perform in university dramas, but once they began acting on stage, they eventually received permission for co-acting. This led to the removal of a long-standing conservative practice in the society. Overcoming these obstacles allowed the drama to become a major medium in the cultural movement of the Bangladesh. From the beginning female students were involved with various cultural organisations at the University of Dhaka, including DUCSU, the Dhaka University Cultural Society, the Drama Circle, and the Student-Teacher Drama Group. Their participation in cultural activities laid the foundation for progressive cultural practices among women. Faculty members like Nilima Ibrahim from the Bengali Department were actively involved in the university's progressive theatrical practices and movement. She was at the forefront of defending Bengali culture against any attack. Professors Razia Khan and Hamida Khanam were also involved in acting. Female students not only played a role in participating in the Bengali Language and Literature Week but also enthusiastically

celebrated Rabindranath Tagore's birth centenary. They protested against controversy surrounding Rabindra Sangeet or Pahela Baishakh. Inspired by these students, many women in Dhaka city overcame familial and social conservatism to join the cultural movement. The female students of the University of Dhaka were also at the forefront of the cultural aspects of Bangladesh's liberation struggle. During the Liberation War, they participated in almost all cultural activities. After the Liberation War Sanjida Khatun, who had played a significant role in various cultural organizations during the war, joined the Bengali Department as a teacher. Professor Sultana Sarawat Ara Zaman also stepped forward to help the refugees and injured freedom fighters in Kolkata. So to speak the truth, the University of Dhaka was the cradle of Bangladesh's cultural movement. It is not only a witness to the history of the cultural movement in Bangladesh but also a creator of history itself. Female teachers and students of the University of Dhaka have had a significant contribution to the making and remaking of this history.

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