Advancement of Women in Journalism

Dr. Helal Uddin Ahmed

Women from Bengal appeared on the scene of journalism by editing periodicals during the British colonial era. The fortnightly ‘Bangamahila’ was the first periodical edited by a Bangali woman, which was published from 1 Boishakh 1277 BS (April 1870). Its editor was Mokshdayini Mukhopadhyay. The first gender-based monthly magazine run by women was ‘Anathini’, published in July 1875 (Sraban 1282). The first weekly magazine edited by a Bangali woman carried the name ‘Bangabashini’ that was launched on 28 September 1883. The first monthly magazine edited by a Muslim Bangali woman was Begum Safia Khatun’s ‘Annesha’. It was published from Boishakh 1328 (1921 CE).

The first periodical edited by a woman from East Bengal or present-day Bangladesh was ‘Banganari’. It was brought out from Mymensingh in Ashwin 1330 BS (1923 CE) with Chinmoyee Devi as its editor. ‘Papya’ from Dhaka was the first quarterly magazine edited by a woman named Bibhabati Sen. Meant for children, this illustrated periodical was launched in 1334 BS (1927 CE), and later converted into a monthly from Ashwin 1335 BS (1928 CE). ‘Tripura Hitoyishi’ edited by Urmila Sinha used to be published from Cumilla and she was in charge of editing it from 1331 BS (1924 CE). The illustrated monthly ‘Jayasree’ edited by Leelabati Nag was first published from Dhaka in Boishakh 1338 BS (1931 CE).

Edited by Shamsunnahar and Mohammad Habibullah, the inaugural issue of the periodical ‘Bulbul’ was launched in 1340 BS (1933 CE). It was brought out thrice a year, but was later converted into a monthly from 1343 BS (1936 CE). Kamolbashini Devi was the principal editor of fortnightly ‘Asrami’ launched from Rangpur on 1 January 1941 CE. The first weekly edited by a Muslim woman was ‘Begum’, which was brought out on 3 Sraban 1354 BS (20 July 1947). Nurjahan Begum and Sufia Begum were responsible for editing it, but the former edited it single-handedly from the 12th issue onwards.

‘Sultana’ was published on 14 January 1949 as the first weekly for women from the then East Pakistan. Its editors were Sufia Kamal and Jahanara Arzoo. The ‘Naobahar’ was brought out from Dhaka in Bhadra 1356 BS (1949 CE) under the editorship of Mahfuza Khatun. The ‘Manashi’ was published in Ashwin 1357 BS (1950 CE) from Pabna with the announcement that it was a monthly magazine from East Bengal. Its editor was Kumari Jyotsnarani Datta while the assistant editor was Anima Gupta.

Although the female journalists of Bangladesh were initially involved in editing periodicals only, they gradually entered other domains of journalism as well. The illumined presence of Bangladeshi women today in all branches of journalism is merely a continuation of their efforts since the nineteenth century. However, the entry of women in journalism was rather slow in this part of Bengal during the Pakistani era following the partition of the Indian subcontinent, and not many names of female journalists can be picked up from that era. Prominent among them were Laila Samad, Noorjahan Begum, Jahanara Arzoo, Mafruha Chowdhury, Mahfuza Khatun, Hasina Ashraf, Selina Parvin, Selina Hossain, Baby Moudud, Tahmina Sayeed, et al.

The scenario has changed a lot since the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971. Now, many educated women are entering the profession of journalism and their numbers and proportion are both increasing day by day. This is true not only for the print media but also for the electronic media.

According to a survey conducted by the Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) in 1990, the representation of women in the print and electronic media of Dhaka was around 5% (4% in newspapers, 5% in Radio, and 6% in Television). Most of the women employed in newspapers were working in the editorial section, with a handful few involved in reporting assignments. It was found in the survey that although there was less discrimination between males and females in communication courses at the universities, opportunities for women to enter the profession were not equal or equitable.

The recruitment policies usually did not favour women, and not all jobs in journalism were open for them. Due to social and cultural constraints, the tasks of reporting and field-work were often not considered suitable for women. Therefore most of them were found to be engaged in desk-work in editorial sections.The situation in the electronic media, i.e. radio and television, was a bit better than newspapers in the sense that the proportion of female staffs was higher. This was mainly because of the existence of reserve quota for women in many jobs.

However, according to the latest figures furnished by ‘Bangladesh Nari Sangbadik Kendra’, there are at present around 1 thousand female journalists in the country. A report published by the ‘Global Media Monitoring Project 2015’, based on information collected from 144 countries including Bangladesh, reveals that 16 percent among the journalists of Bangladesh are women. The age of half the female journalists here range between 19 and 34 years, and none above 65 years could be found in the mass media outlets including television.

Female journalists numbering 102 were interviewed during a survey conducted by PIB in 2017 titled ‘How satisfied professional journalists were, a research evaluation’. Around 18 percent among them were concerned about safety in the workplace, while 56 percent respondents said they were neglected or ignored in office. Around 50 percent mentioned about discourteous behaviour by their male colleagues and 7 among the respondents claimed they were sexually harassed at the workplace at different junctures. Around 10 female journalists disclosed they did not get maternity leave during pregnancy.

There were only about 12 to 15 female journalists in Bangladesh during 1973 following the country’s independence in 1971. This number got stuck at around one hundred towards the end of 20th century. But the number has now risen to over one thousand in a matter of mere two decades. Previously, the presence of women in newspaper offices was considered to be detrimental to a congenial working environment. But that attitude has now undergone a sea-change, as women are increasingly proving their worth in all areas of this profession including reporting, editing and photography. However, the speed with which women’s involvement in journalism has been increasing is not yet commensurate with their productive potentials. But the trend-line shows their participation in the journalistic profession is bound to gather pace in the days and years to come.

-00-

(PID- Project Feature)