

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

DAILY STAR (DS): You have weathered away a century or more and witnessed all that has happened from the days of pre-partition India to the emergence of independent Bangladesh. Could you tell us something about the time when you first started your career in journalism by publishing *Shaugat*?

MOHAMMAD NASIRUDDIN (MN): I was born and brought up in a declining period for Bengalee Muslims. They had the least involvement in literary and cultural fields. But I had a knack for literature from my early childhood and *Shaugat* my literary magazine was a fruit of my childhood inspiration.

In my growing years I saw the painful existence of superstitions and bigotry throughout our society. One of the reasons why I wanted to bring out a literary magazine was to try and to illuminate the darkness in which our people lived at that time.

Literary practice was neglected in those days. A very few Muslim writers used to write. But it was a constant source of pain to me that the Muslims of Bengal had no literary publication. All the publication was controlled by the enlightened Hindus of Bengal. They also prompted me to publish *Shaugat*.

My financial condition at that time was quite well as I was a representative of a leading insurance company. But I gave up my job in the insurance company which provided me a handsome livelihood and left Chandpur for Calcutta to publish *Shaugat*.

When I came to Calcutta I found that there were hardly any Bengalee Muslim businessmen, academicians or writer who could patronise my endeavour. I found myself in deep trouble. But still I did not give up hope.

Desperately, I kept on looking for a person who had a leading role in the Muslim society in Calcutta and who could also back me up in this venture. One of my well-wishers informed me of such a person. His name was Barrister A Rasul.

When I went to him and told him what I wanted to do, he praised my courage and determination, because he thought it to be a desperate attempt for me to publish an illustrated literary magazine in Bengal by Muslim writers in Calcutta.

He encouraged me by saying that a 'literary magazine such as yours should have been published at least 50 years back, then our society would have benefited from it as it surely will be by yours'.

Barrister Rasul promised me all sorts of cooperation which was a lot to me at that time. Then I started to look for Muslim writers.

It was really hard to find great writers among Muslims who could be compared to their Hindu counterparts, such as Sattendra Nath Dutta and others. But I began to search and made a list of the possible writers who could contribute to my magazine. Some of these writers sent their pieces, but I found that many of these pieces were not really suitable for a progressive journal which I had in mind.

So I decided to go to some Hindu writers and ask for writing. But I went only to those who were not communal and did not feel disgraced by contributing to a magazine published by Muslims.

I went to Rai Bahadur Jaladur Sen who at first seemed unwilling to accept my presence but later offered me to have a seat before him. I told him that I had a liking for the paper *Bharat Varsha* founded by him and also that I had an intention of bringing out a literary magazine mainly by Muslim writers of our society.

After he heard me, he confessed his disgust over the communal disharmony in India and also said that Indians could never win freedom until they learnt to work side by side. He told me that he mostly wrote travel stories, but he at once promised me that he would contribute a story to my magazine, which he did in a short while and it inspired me immensely.

Then I was informed about the famous historian Birendra Nath Bandopadhyaya, so I went to him. He regretted that there was no publications by the Muslims and inspired me by saying that he would also contribute without any honorarium of any kind.

Then I went to the eminent poet Sattendra Nath Dutta. The poet regretted that his eyesight was gradually betraying him and for this he had stopped writing poems.

But he told me that he had done some translations from Persian poems, from which he could send me one in a day or two.

Then he sent me a translation of a Persian poem by Zebunessa. Along with the pieces I received from the Muslim writers such as Kaikobad and Ismail Hussain Shitrali the storage of materials seemed enough to publish a magazine.

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DS: One of the major contributions of *Shaugat* was to bring the Rebel, Kazi Nazrul Islam, to the limelight. Can you tell us something about the man?

MN: Nazrul Islam the great rebel poet was primarily a miscast in both Hindu and Muslim societies alike. To the Hindus he was another 'Mullah' and to the Muslims he was a 'Kafir'. So he found life and career very difficult in Calcutta.

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The '*Shaugat* Majlish' soon turned into an ideal place for ado parley and rendezvous of the poets. Nazrul used to sing there. Music of course was a forbidden thing at that time. By this time Nazrul had become a prominent figure both in music and poetry.

I recommended that we should give Nazrul a National Reception. Reaction to that suggestion was a mixed one. Some people (especially Muslims) seemed overjoyed at the fact that a Muslim poet was to be accorded a reception and on the other hand some among

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Many female Hindu writers such as Asha Purna Devi contributed in '*Mahila Shaugat*'. Again I had to face severe public opposition. But I believed that a society where male and female alike could not think progressively was doomed to fail.

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DS: Through *Shaugat* you managed to patronise writers and in a sense it cultivated writers. What is the reason behind the fact that in independent Bangladesh there is not a single paper that can play a pioneering role in this connection?

MN: When I came to Dhaka in 1950 and I was completely taken by surprise to find how dominating the use of Urdu, rather than Bengali, was here. Even shopkeepers spoke to me in Urdu which completely baffled me.

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writers of the region as I did in Calcutta.

I readily accepted the offer and let them use the *Begum* office as their meeting place. In here also came renowned poets of today such as Shamsur Rahman, Syed Shamsul Haq.

Any such female writers' organisation as the '*Lekhika Shanga*' did not exist then. Nowadays there are numerous organisations as these, but in my time it was unthinkable.

Practice of music and songs were prohibited in those times. But I saw no harm in it. So I look around for female vocalists. Laila Arjumand Banu along with two of her sisters volunteered in this effort. There was no stage for performing, but we managed to convert some wooden 'Chauki' into performing stages and incredibly enough in a short time I also found some women who were eager to dance. Laila Hasan, Ferdousi who were little girls at the time sang in those '*Majlises*'. Anjana Shaha used to dance there. This is how we revolutionized female participation in cultural fields in Dhaka. At least it was a trend setter which made the

time.

Since the fall of Ershad, all those good writers who became part of, his camp are now boycotted by the others. They can't show their faces in public and I don't know where they are. In future, there might be another change and writers and poets who are active now may get pushed into the background. But this kind of changing of places is not desirable in the field of literature. I only know that writers and poets should never bow to pressure and should only write what is true.

DS: You have battled all your life against superstitions and bigotry. Do you think that writers and poets of today are doing enough to fight bigotry in the way you did in your time?

MN: In my time, we did not have many highly-educated writers. We had to work with limited resources. But the things they produced at the time like Abul Mansur Ahmed's '*Hijure Kebla*' in *Shaugat*, worked like swords against bigotry. Abul Kalam Shamsuddin and others wrote powerful columns, but only *Shaugat* published them, others didn't or couldn't.

Today's writers are well-educated and they are much stronger today than their counterparts of yesteryears. But today's writers are not at all vocal against all the superstitions and ignorance that exist in society. They are more interested in experimenting with the style of their writings, putting more ornaments on them etc.

Now, we had a president who regularly went to Atrosi or some other place to pray; then others sat around mazaars of grave-sites and worshipped. If leaders of the country get up these kind of things, then what would the ordinary people do? Nowadays, many people sell their cattle, goats etc. to go to various orsh or Waaz *Majlises* without really knowing what these things are all about. They think they will be blessed if they go to these things.

The situation is such that, even the educated section of society, instead of fighting against these things, is actually encouraging them. This is very sad.

DS: Finally Mr. Nasiruddin, are you personally content with all that you have done, and with what you are still doing at the age of 104?

MN: It gives me an ecstatic pleasure to see the gradual growth of intellectuals and writers in our country. And because of my undying interest in literature and literary pursuits, I try to attend all the cultural and literary functions that I am invited to, even at this age!

I am proud to say that I have set a trend in something, in which all others, be it our countrymen or foreigners, are lacking far behind. From 1976 I have been giving awards to writers, poets, journalist people who roam in the cultural arena at my own expense each year. The nominees are selected irrespective of any colour, race or party affiliations. I have been continuing this endeavour for the last 16 years and I am proud of it and I have formed a Trust which will enable to operate the system even in my absence.

Let alone the people who were shot and killed in the Language Movement I have made path much easier for the host of writers who wanted to write and publish their script in Bangla through my magazine. I think this was my positive contribution to the Language Movement and the cause of language. I formed a literary society called '*Purba Pakistan Shahitya Sangshad*' from which came out some illustrious writers of today, such as, Shamsur Rahman, Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Alauddin Al Azad, Fateh Lohani, Fazle Lohani who were young and progressive writers of the time.

Abul Mansur Ahmed was a brilliant satirist of his time. It amazed me to see his insight into the faults and shortcomings of our society, with which he venomously dealt in '*Hijure Kebla*', Ayna, Asmani Parda and various other books.

Social satires as forceful as those are hardly noticeable in the writers of the present time. But there should always be someone like him to point out our wrongs.

DS: Thank you Mr. Nasiruddin, for your time.

Conversation A Centurian Still Battling for a Progressive and True Literature

A pioneer, in the true sense of the word, of progressive journalism in Bengal, **MOHAMMAD NASIRUDDIN** has fought more than his fair share of battles against religious bigotry and superstitions. A sprightly 104, going on to 105, Nasiruddin has lived through British colonial times, break-up of Bengal, Pakistani rule over East Bengal and the emergence of independent, sovereign Bangladesh. His literary journal *Shaugat*, a sensation at the time of its launch in the early part of the century, not only hammered at all the medieval-type superstitions with which the Muslim Bengali society was shrouded, it also gave rise to some of the finest poets and authors produced by the Muslim Bengali community this century. Kazi Nazrul Islam, Abul Mansur Ahmed, Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, Begum Sufia Kamal to name but a few. Even Rabindra Nath Tagore was impressed enough to write a poem especially for *Shaugat*. Recently, Nasiruddin spoke at length to The Daily Star Executive Editor Mahfuz Anam and Assistant Editor Sabir Mustafa about his life and times:

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