

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

The Daily Star (DS): What was it like in your days to be a writer and what was your initial experience?

Begum Sufia Kamal (BSK): Personally speaking, we had no connection with the outside world. We were always in 'purdah'. It was ages back since I started writing. My husband took for printing. A few of his friends published a magazine. That is where my husband took my writings. They only knew how it was printed. When I wrote in those days, I had no direct connection with the press.

This was a monthly magazine, published from Barisal which printed our articles. Since my husband's friends were involved with this magazine, the question of me going there did not arise. The reason being, we were in the strict rule of 'purdah'.

When my husband's friends learnt that I wrote, they insisted that I should regularly contribute for their magazine.

In the early days when I wrote, I was totally unaware of the technicalities of a press and the printing world.

It was a time when one had to go through a very difficult time being a writer. Because writing alone could not provide their livelihood. Writers then had to go through serious financial constraints. But it is good to see, that now time has changed for the writers and all other personalities involved in creative profession.

Even in this improved situation writers undergo various social and financial constraints. Of course, there are few fortunes who manage to earn their living solely by writing. Even now the atmosphere demands much improvement. Although the printing and publishing sector has undergone a positive change through the years.

Now it is not such a hassle to find a willing publisher for any writer who writes well.



At home, in her study.

—Photo: Pavel Rahman

DS: At the time you started writing, Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam were in their peaks. Did you have any contacts with them? Who inspired you most?

BSK: At the time when I started writing, it was virtually impossible for me to get in touch with the literary giants like Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam; as the 'purdah' system held us back from the world outside.

The language in practice in those days amongst the upper middle class and middle class Bengali muslim families was urdu. And the same goes for my family. Learning or writing in Bengali among the women members of the family was a social taboo. I learnt Bengali from my mother, who had her lessons from her husband.

One of the first writings of Tagore that I read was published in 'Probashi', and Nazrul's in the literary journal, 'Muslim'. Their writings inspired me to write in verse and occasionally prose.

Another was 'Hena', a novel by poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, which was printed in the 'Muslim'. These two writings influenced me beyond measure, and I perceived the essence of literature in a different light.

As I saw a few women writers at that time, I felt the urge to write, too. Then I wrote many things which probably did not make much sense. But it kept the habit going. Since I was young, and there was serious family constraints, this was the most I could do.

When my first writing was published I was hardly 13 year old. It was a short story. And the next one was a poem. I mainly concentrated on poetry rather than prose.

DS: How did you divide your time between your household works and writing and later your work as an women activist?

BSK: Even at this age I still write. But I do not have a set time for writing. Previously my time for writing was at night. But now, since I have grown old and my eye sight feeble, it holds me back from working at night. In the early days I used to write at night, because during the day I had to take care of many household responsibilities. Sometimes it so happened that I composed a line or two in the midst of my work, during the short intervals. I went on writing in this manner, without facing any problem. The mundane realities of family life could not hamper my interest for writing. So it went on.

Even now I do not have a set time for writing. I write whenever my health and time allows it. I always maintain a strict balance between my social and family responsibilities



On her 82nd birthday.

—Photo: Pavel Rahman

DS: How and when did you start your work as an women activist?

BSK: In my time there was not so much oppression and injustice on women. But there was a degree of confinement. We were always in 'purdah', which I mentioned earlier. We were always kept away from the world outside.

I started my work as an ac-

tivist only after I came to Barisal. This was after my marriage. At that time, Ashini Dutta's brother's daughter-in-law, Basanti Di, set up an institute — 'Matri Mangal'. I joined her.

We were still in the restrictions of 'purdah'. We went in cars wearing our 'burkhas'.

This institute was mainly for young mothers and children, who were extremely neglected. It was a time when very few women went out-

doors. In fact, even if women from the Hindu community were seen in the streets, they were criticised and slandered. Even when Basanti Di went out, people would make taunting remarks. Of course, it was completely unheard of in the Muslim society. I was the only Muslim woman who went with them. It was in this 'Matri Mangal' where I realised that there was so much to be done for women. Women's contribution were limitless, but their sufferings were parallel.

I was touched to see these poor women, — how they gave birth to babies and what miserable conditions they had to rear them up! They never had the time or scope to take care of themselves or the children

methodically. They worked from morning till night for the family.

I now feel proud and happy to see the revolution of peasant women. Young girls, like you are now educated. But women have, for ages, worked for their family and home, without any recognition for their labour either at home or in the society.

They were rather machines! At times it so happened, that these women did not have the chance to feed their babies and even they themselves went without a meal, only because of the immense pressure of work.

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Leading an anti-autocracy procession in October 1990.

—Photo: Pavel Rahman

DS: You had great contribution for setting up 'Chhaya Naut'. Do you think it is going in the right direction?

BSK: In those traumatic days I was not the only one to initiate and organise 'Chhayanaut'. There was a host of others who helped me to set up this cultural institution. We had to fight against all odds, especially that of the Pakistani oppression. So 'Chhayanaut' emerged at a time when the atmosphere was completely unfavourable. But then we formed this institution and inaugurated it on the day of Tagore's centenary. Amongst others Sudu Miah, who is no longer with us, made great contributions.

'Chhayanaut' has to synchronise its rhythms with the evolution of society. Every generation has to re-invent its culture in new material.

This cultural institution from its inception till today have produced a handful of talented artists through out the country. And it has contributed to universalising Bengali culture.

The yearly programme that 'Chhayanaut' organises each year on Pabla Baisakh, the Bengali new year's day at 'Baut Taala' of Ramna Park, have definitely contributed to uphold our tradition and way of life. Before this we had a rather dull way of beginning our new year, devoid of any cultural activities or programmes. I think, this is one of their biggest contribution, which motivates many of us all the year through.

DS: There are certain controversies over the fact, we do not need a ministry of culture. It is said, that this ministry can be merged with some other ministry. What is your opinion?

BSK: I cannot make a definite comment about the merging of ministries. But I have doubts, whether these bureau-

crats in the present ministry of culture have any sense what so ever of our Bengali cultural heritage?

DS: As we are running out of time, I would quickly want to ask you one last question. Now what can we do to establish women's rights?

BSK: It is said, recently democracy has been established. Even at this age, I led processions and have been chased by police — all this, for demanding a democratic form of government. I am still an activists, though my age and health conditions prevents me to be as involved as I would like to be or want to be. We really have not yet been able to get the essence of democracy.

I am very upset today for the brutal attack on the journalists in the Press Club last night. Though I am talking to you, but my mind is elsewhere.

It is a question of transformation, not just a transfer of images from the past. In this situation, I do not want to refer solely on women. The way people are being oppressed even now, is this an example of democracy? The Nur Hossain Square was built after Nur Hossain was shot dead. And now there is regular bloodshed at that Square. My question is — what sort of democratic government do we have?

DS: Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with us.

Conversation

Poet Sufia Kamal Still an Activist

by Rahat Fahmida

One of the main reasons I called at the house of Begum Sufia Kamal, was to wish the poet a happy birthday — her 82nd.

Begum Sufia Kamal is a versatile personality who, all her life has been driven by a quest for calm beauty, zest for life and an innate struggle to realise the just. She has been remarkably heedless of the vicissitudes her strivings landed her in. She cast herself in the heroic mould — a lady who built ideas and followed inner compulsions — sparked new lights and inspired strong passions in whatever she did.

This remarkable lady is a creator, a revolutionist in her own inimitable way. For her and her doings for women and the politics in general of this country, the toy trains of times past may veer off-track occasionally. But the destination has been a right one. And usually a noble one.

She may have been the most delicate creature in our century who has, without extending herself, stood up to dictators and bullies of kind as possibly no one else has done. Her first writing was published in 'Shaugat', a magazine, sometime around 1924, when she was only 14 years old. It is the poet in her that has sustained her in all her gritty manifestation of character and abidance by the good of the society.

The morning was overcast when I went to meet her June 22nd. Her two-storied house, where she lives with her younger daughter, is serenely set, over-looking a beautiful garden. Surrounded by greenery all around, the house has a pristine beauty, one only dreams about.

The interior was neatly set too, with limited furnitures and collections. A number of cats of all sizes and colours could be seen, which roam about or idle away their times on beds or book shelves. Slim and fragile, with well tended silvren hair, Begum Sufia Kamal seemed of an ethereal and saintly figure, as she waited on a cane-chair in her shaded verandah. The poet, who is rather fit for her age, was quite upset and withdrawn for the previous night's inhuman police rampage at the Press Club. Her 'paan' stained mouth, which at other times beams with smile, did not however betray her feeling so much. Her eyes were swollen with the tears of sympathy for the wounded journalists.

We moved on to her bed-room for an undisturbed conversation. In quiet and informal atmosphere of her room, we talked over a cup of tea, while she chewed her 'paan' as usual. Begum Sufia Kamal spoke quite at length. Her words, each of them, spoke of a life fully lived, lived for others and in trueness to her conscience.

Pangs of Making a Film

Obaidul Huq, the first Muslim film-maker in the then Bengal, who later switched to journalism narrates his experiences to Fayza Haq of The Daily Star.

books on film making. At the same time he used to write poems, short stories and plays for 'Saugat', 'Mohammadi' and 'Bulbul'.

The immediate cause that stirred me up was the Bengal Famine of '43. This took a heavy toll of life — five million people. I was so deeply touched by it that I wrote a story about it. It was a man-made famine with greedy holders, black-marketeters and profiteers who took advantage of the situation in the Second World War. The British were unable to take the antisocial criminals to task. Zainul Abedin, at this time, also expressed his disgust in his fa-

mous sketches and paintings. In my humble way I displayed the villainy of the people. I thought I should tell the intelligentsia as well as the people in general. I felt the best medium was a film. If I made a film, even the illiterate would get the message I wanted to present. In 'Dukhey Jader Jibon Gara' I depicted people who were born in misery, lived in misery and died in it. These people were at the mercy of



Obaidul Huq

intriguers. Food was being smuggled out. Famine was man made and it was man who overcame it. I showed scenes where people were dying although a lot of food was available. I used the characters to project my theme," he explained.

When he decided to picture the film the first problem was finance. He sold some land and sought the help of a sister who was solvent. When he went to Calcutta he came into contact with several studio people because they could

provide camera and sound, services. But as he was an unknown Muslim, the film world turned him down, as they did not believe that he could make a film at all. Luckily he was in touch with the private secretary of the 'Indropuri Studios'. Through him he met Rafi Bahadur Sukhlal Karnani and the said that if Mr Obaidul Inque could help in the speedy disposal of some rent cases he would be helped out in the studios. Thus the contract by both the parties were made.

Indro Kumar, the grandson was so pleased that he let him work on credit. He provided him raw films and camera service. The actors had to be paid separately. "another problem during the war was that there was a rule that someone who had not made a film before the war could not make a film now. Sir Azizul Huq who had the portfolio for films asked me to see the Under Secretary Mr. MA Mohammed. He in turn told me he could not violate the act but that the act itself would be lifted in two months. I approached Eastman Kodak. I wrote to Mr Mukharjee, who was in charge. But I was dismissed outright."

However, many film-makers came to help. He came into contact with Nolini Babu of Variety Films and he helped him to get acquainted with the people in the line. He watched

the shooting of films. "That is how I acquired practical knowledge. I appointed Atul Das Gupta as assistant. He was not a learned man but he knew ordinary rules of film-making."

I had the problem in selecting artists. As I had selected top-notch artists they demanded more than I could pay. Jahar Ganguli was the hero, Renuka Roy was the heroine. I took in Ahendra Chowdhury, Kanu Banerjee, Nabadweep Haldar and Robi Roy. I hired Fateh Lohani, who used the name, Kiron Kumar, and who later became a big film personality in then East Pakistan. I gave him an important role, although others objected as he was not experienced." Mr Huq told me.

"For the music I selected Abdul Ahad, who had just come from Shantiniketan. I got the help of Hemanta Mukherjee and Bela Mukherjee who were noted singers of the subcontinent. I got hold of Supritree Ghosh and Santi Dev Ghosh. I had also to apply to Biswabarathi that controlled the commercial use of Rabindrasangeet. You had to submit the synopsis, dialogues preceding and following the situation in which a Rabindrasangeet was used. After recording the songs an expert from Biswabarathi had to approve of it. I asked Shanti Dev Ghosh to train Preeti Dhar, the dancer. He did this on a condition that his name would not be included in the title. Though a private understanding I paid him for the

shooting of films. "That is how I acquired practical knowledge. I appointed Atul Das Gupta as assistant. He was not a learned man but he knew ordinary rules of film-making."

This was the time when I felt there was a great deal to be done for women. Not only were they uneducated, they were totally ignorant of a world outside their home and family. All they did was, slog their lives away. This made me aware of the deprivation women faced, and only then I started my work as an activist.

DS: What are your views on the new generation of writers?

BSK: It is indeed good to see that a new generation of writers have emerged. Those who wrote in our times are no longer here. Our contemporary writers have all passed away. Some of the powerful writers of our time, Sikander Abu Zafar, and Shahidullah Kaiser are no longer with us.

Among the writers who emerged a little later, poet Shamsur Rahman stands very prominently. Syed Shamsul Haq has made his place in the field of drama. They definitely write very well.

The women writers too, are writing very well now. I think it is an inspiring fact that a considerable number of women are involved in literary endeavor. Their writings reveal a sense of patriotism.

I feel that women writers should come forward and face the odds with added zeal and vigour. At this stage, literature demands not only its aesthetic values but also an essence of freedom and liberty should be infused into it.

BACK in 1946 even local Muslims of West Bengal found no inroad into the Tulligunge (Calcutta) film world. At that time a young aspirant from Feni, a small town in East Bengal, sold all his worldly belongings ran into debt, and ventured to make a film and even succeeded. This was a film based on the Bengal Famine.

Making the film was like falling in love or like writing a poem or drawing a picture. When I think of the obstacles that I had to overcome with superhuman efforts I wonder myself why I ventured into the line," says Obaidul Huq, the first Muslim in Bengal to make a motion picture.

"What made him go into the film line? Some of the clue must be found in the 30's when I was a regular movie-goer in Calcutta and Dhaka. I hardly missed an MGM, 20th Century Fox, Universal, RKO Radio, the French nouvelle vague or the Italian neo-realists. I also watched a lot of the Hindi, Bengali and Urdu productions. I was strongly influenced by Frank Capra, Rouben Mamoulian, Carl Sandberg, Jean Cocteau, Rosellini, and Godard," he informed me.

"In my youth I took more than a casual interest in the works of Promothesh Borua, Nitin Bose, Deboki Bose, Niren Lahiri, and Mehboob. I used to operate a still camera," he added.

"Although he did not know the mechanism of film-making he tried to acquaint himself by reading trade journals, and



Renuka Roy and Fateh Lohani in 'Dukhey Jader Jibon Gara'