



A Tale of Two Different Sisters

by Zaheda Ahmad

Imbued with a deep sense of patriotism and a fervent belief in the basic equality of the sexes, Faizunnessa and Preetilata were profoundly distressed by the sad plight of our womenfolk. They had their own way of serving the cause of their motherland and that of their fellow sisters in distress.

unjust society? No, that was not to be. Against Faizunnessa's own wishes, her widowed mother married her off to an already married distant cousin. A few years' married interlude ended, not unexpectedly, in bitter separation about the exact causes of which she never gave us much of a clue. The estranged couple, taking one daughter each, parted company with a vow never to see each other again. Though hurt beyond redemption by the breakup she bore her "misfortune" with exemplary dignity never opening her heart to anyone except occasionally into the pages of literary output.

With her retirement to her ancestral home began a new chapter in her life — a life full of active involvement in creative writing, estate management and much social and public work outside the four walls of a conservative rural household. She established, in her estate and even outside it, a library, several makhtabs and madrasahs, a girls' school, mosques, roads and a female hospital, excavated ponds — all in the span of some thirty years. Besides, she was reputed to have helped destitute people — men and women — and poor students with regular monetary allowances. Towards the end of her life she gave away her whole property in the form of a *wakfnama* for charitable purposes. But even more remarkable was her literary endeavour in Bengali — an activity for which upperclass Bengali Muslims of those days

rarely, if ever, felt any fascination. By today's standard her literary output — most of it now extant — may not be of much value but she was a pioneer nonetheless. It was a masculine unfamiliar and unforgiving world that she was daring, innovative and successful enough to venture into and create for herself a room of her own. It was not without significance that she refused to accept the honorary title of "Begam" offered by the then colonial government in recognition of her services to her society. Instead she preferred the masculine title of "Nawab" — an example that speaks a lot for the person that Faizunnessa was, out of the ashes of a broken marriage we see her emerging into a hostile male world — a new woman in charge not only of her own family estate but of her own destiny too. That was not a mean achievement by any standard.

By contrast Preetilata's world was far removed — in time, texture, attitude and environment — from that of Faizunnessa. Born in 1911 in a Hindu middle class family Preetilata had the advantage of a formal school and college education. She passed her BA examination with flying colours standing first among the girls and third in the combined merit list. With that academic record she could easily have settled down into the cosy, comfortable life of a middle class housewife. But the fierce fire of patriotism and the in-

tense hatred of the alien rulers that she nursed within her prompted Preetilata to seek a path miles apart from that chosen by millions of her fellow citizens of both sexes. But she was a rebel not just against the oppression of foreigners only but also against male chauvinistic social norms devised and imposed by the patriarchal society of her own. It was a challenge which struck at the very foundation of the established social order built on the accepted idea of male superiority. Faizunnessa could never think of throwing up such a challenge — the objective conditions were so utterly different.

Preetilata, by contrast, was a pioneer in her own right. She was barely out of her teens when, by responding to the call of her country, she decided to join the underground revolutionary movement that was at that time in full swing in Bengal. Again it was almost entirely a male world where Preetilata and her female friends had to operate against heavy odds. But nothing could keep them away from the path chosen so determinedly and deliberately by these handful of courageous women. They received training in underground and guerilla warfare and prepared themselves for a fight to death for the sacred cause of liberation of their motherland. On 14 September, 1932 Preetilata, while leading an armed raid on a colonial establishment at Chittagong, she found herself trapped by the defending government forces. Preferring death to surrender she took her own life. By consciously rejecting the role model fashioned by a male-dominated society she created a new one for herself and for others who wish to forsake the beaten track.

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Pritylata: An Immortal Freedom Fighter

by Binod Dasgupta

PRITYLATA, one of the legendary woman freedom fighters and the first woman martyr of the Indo-Pak subcontinent, sacrificed her life on Sept 24, 1932. Her full name was Pritylata Waddader, generally known as Birkanya Pritylata. She was born in 1911 or 1912 (not exactly known). Her father was Jagadbondhu Waddader, the then Head Clerk of the Chittagong Municipality. Her mother's name was Pratibha Devi. She was their second child. Though belonged to a lower middle class family they had a small house at Chittagong town (near Askerkhan's Dighi). Their native village was near Dhalghat, politically one of the very famous villages of Chittagong under Patiya Police Station. Prity herself was born in this village (i.e. Dhalghat). But they were settled at Chittagong town.

Prity had her education at Dr Khastagir's Girls' High School, the only government girls' high school of Chittagong at that time. She read in this school from class III to X and passed Matriculation Examination from this institution. She was always very good in her study and stood first, second or third in the class examinations. But she had a great attraction to and regard for the Swadeshi, the radical freedom fighters who wanted to achieve independence through violence or armed means. Without the knowledge of her father and mother and other members of her family she started reading political books even when she was in class VI or VII.

But she might not have been able to quench much of her political hunger without the help of Purnendu Dasgupta, who became a famous communist leader and a litterateur afterwards.

In 1927 Prity passed her Matriculation. She then went to study in the Eden Girls' College, Dhaka. In Chittagong she had a distant link with the revolutionary group of Surya Sen. But in Dhaka she got an opportunity to make contact with another revolutionary political group named Srisangha, which was very active in Dhaka and had both open and underground activities. It had also a women branch called Dipali Sangha. One of the lecturers of Eden College was an active member of Dipali Sangha. She was very pleased to see the behaviour and educational performance of Pritylata. She asked Prity to become a member of Dipali Sangha and gave her a form of the Sangha. Prity took the form with her and at the time of her visit to Chittagong during the Puja vacation she sought the opinion of Surya Sen about her taking a membership of Dipali Sangha. Masterda knew all about her and let her know that first of all she had been given the

membership of the Chittagong revolutionary party (Indian Republican Army, Chittagong branch) and, secondly, that she was permitted also to become a member of Dipali Sangha, Dhaka. So Prity was associated with the revolutionary group of Dhaka too during her short stay there.

In Calcutta

In 1929 she passed her I. A. Examination and stood first among the girl students of Calcutta University and got a

dence of the country. She became more impatient after getting the news of the armed revolution of Chittagong group and their direct fight with British troops at Jalalabad Hill. At such a state of her mind she became so much restless that she was about to give up her studies. Though persuaded by all well-wishers she agreed to appear in the B. A. Final Examination, she decided not to go for Honours any more.

Just after appearing the B.A. Examination she came back to Chittagong and started a con-

in the darkness there was sound on the dry leaves. The police firing followed the sound and Apurba Sen fell victim there. Nirmal Sen was also killed after a direct fight with the police for a while. Masterda and Pritylata could anyhow manage to get rid of this great danger by taking shelter in a nearby ditch full of hyacinth. After a few days, Masterda sent a message to Prity to go underground and within a short period she was again taken to the top leader who gave her the responsibility of launching an armed attack on Chittagong (European) club. Though very much eager to take part in such an armed operation she was not ready to take leadership. But she did not lack courage and agreed to abide by the decision of the leader.

She was given a short and essential armed training before the date of operation which was decided to be made on Sept-24, 1932. All the preparations were made properly and on the fixed date she was fully dressed like a high ranking military officer and none could understand that she was a woman. At about 9 pm she along with her seven assistants started for her long desired operation by taking the blessings of Masterda. They reacted in time the predetermined spot near the European club and waited for the necessary signal to be given by the head cook of the club. The signal was also received duly and Prity with her party immediately attacked the club. Haunted by the fear of death all the European members of the club tried to run away in whatever direction they could. But a considerable number of them could hardly escape and some of them were either dead or seriously wounded. Of course many of them could perhaps manage anyhow to save themselves. As everything was performed smoothly and properly their armed operation did not take much time. So Prity completed a great job within a very short time and ordered all the members of her team to come out of the club to go back their destination. As per military custom she being the leader of the team was in the back of all on their return journey. A British member of the club saw them from a nearby drain where he was hiding during the attack on club and from there he fired a bullet. Prity fell down in a moment. As she was not ready to be caught by the enemy in living condition she took potassium cyanide (strongest poison) and then and there embraced death on the night of Sept 24, 1932. We pay our great respect to this great woman who played a remarkable role in our fight against the imperialist rulers.

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scholarship of Rs 20 per month. She then went to Calcutta to read in Bethune College where she was admitted in B. A. class with Honours in Philosophy. At the time of studying in this college she gradually involved herself in much more revolutionary activities. Besides performing various underground political works of Chittagong revolutionary party she was also associated with some other revolutionary groups in Calcutta. She had been doing different kinds of technical and hidden jobs which included reading and distribution of proscribed books, collection of subscription (in cash or kind) for underground revolutionary parties, stealth printing of the leaflets and statements of these parties, making or collecting container and gun-cotton for use in bombs etc.

But Prity could not be satisfied by doing these works only as she was eager to perform serious jobs for the indepen-

How 'Crane Bedi' Lifted Prisoners' Spirits

Atiya Singh writes from New Delhi

KIRAN Bedi is a police officer imbued with a crusading zeal. She needed it when she set out to transform Delhi's notorious Thar jail from a den of vice to a unique reform institution.

Bedi, the first woman to join the Indian Police Service (IPS) and now Inspector General of Prisons (IGP) in Delhi, has won this year's Ramon Magsaysay Award for her efforts in Asia's largest jail. "I instructed my officers to transform themselves into Shikshaks (educators) from rakshaks (protectors)," said 45-year-old Bedi after netting Asia's most prestigious award. "That's how the change came about."

When she took over as IGP in May 1993, conditions for Tihar's 9,100 inmates were appalling. Hardened criminals and terrorists jostled shoulders with innocent people awaiting trial. Drug-taking flourished. She started changing things from day one. She made education compulsory for prisoners, introduced yoga, and encouraged inmates to take part in out-door sports.

Above all, she began treating the prisoners as human beings with dignity. Soon her enthusiasm infected even hardened jailbirds — and the equally tough officials.

Instead of being feared, Bedi is respected and loved by inmates as well as staff. The entire prison erupted in cheers when news spread that she had won the \$50,000 Magsaysay Award.

Bedi calls Tihar an ashram (abode) rather than a prison. "The (people) are not saying that the inmates are coming from a den any more," she says. Her modes response to the award sums up her passionate involvement in her work: "The credit goes to all those in Tihar and outside who have helped me realise the dream of reforms in the jail. It's God's grace. I couldn't have asked for more."

Named after a former Philippines President, the awards made by the Ramon Magsaysay Foundation cover five areas. Bedi's is for community service.

"No social relationship in Asia is more fraught with ambiguity than that between the police and the people," the Foundation said, citing her work in crime control, prison reform and improving the image of law enforcement.

For Bedi, the award comes on top of a string of achievements, including the president's Police Medal for Gallantry. Before joining the IPS in 1972, she was Asia's



Kiran Bedi: 'I couldn't have asked for more'

Lawn Tennis Champion.

But controversy has dogged her career. Bedi is far too assertive not to have got into trouble with her bosses. In 1989, demands for her head were made by opposition parties in Parliament when she ordered shooting to control a violent mob in which a boy was killed. In the late 1980s, her order to handcuff a lawyer sparked off a long strike in Delhi courts.

Delhi denizens nicknamed her "Crane Bedi" for the ruthlessness with which, as Deputy Commissioner of Traffic Police, she used a crane to tow away vehicles from "no-parking zones" regardless of the owners' status.

But she says the most satisfying job was managing the traffic during the 1982 Asian Games. She trained a 2,000-strong police force for a year ahead of the event, planning and rehearsing every move.

Later, her brief but untiring tenure with the Narcotic Bureau (she holds a doctorate degree for research in nar-

cotics) raised the country's image in international forums. She also founded a non-government organisation, Navjyoti, to work for the rehabilitation of drug addicts.

One image which stands out sharply in the minds of admirers is of dare-devil Kiran Bedi leading her men from the front with only a baton in her hand against a mob of sword-wielding agitators in 1980. This earned her the sobriquet "Danda Bedi" (Baton Bedi).

Once considered an ambitious and pushy officer who would stop at nothing to get the job done, she admits that "I want to be on top of things, to be in command of the situation, to be on the top of my high and lows." But she adds, "I've learned myself and been taught by seniors through good and not-so-good experience and can now offer alternatives."

She has travelled beyond most myths about feminine weakness, inspired TV films on courageous policemen, even lent a certain charm to an otherwise ill-reputed force.

A dotting mother of her only daughter, Bedi lives an independent life away from her industrialist husband. "He lives in one town (Amritsar) and I in another," she says. "We both have entrenched establishments. I can't get back there and he has not decided to move out." A vegetarian, non-smoking teetotaler, Bedi is not a socialiser. "I get all my satisfaction from my work."

Born to middle-class parents, she says she owes everything to them: "They have been my influence and my inspiration, they are everything to me." Seldom has an award caused so many people so much pleasure. Kiran Bedi has shown that even police officers can be kind, considerate and innovative.

— Gemini News

To be a woman entrepreneur nowadays is no big deal. At least not in other parts of the globe if not in Bangladesh. It is not that women here are not thinking of taking challenging jobs or settling up independent business but there is still a gap, and quite a big one in actually translating their aspirations into action.

Shamsun Nahar Khanam, when she came back to her country, Bangladesh, after spending many years in foreign lands, did not exactly know what she would do with her money. "But one thing was certain that I would set up a business house here. As I was out of touch, I did not know where to look for advice or help," she reflects on the days when she literally walked from one bank to another to make them convinced of her capability.

It was at the point of total frustration that she approached Agrani Bank, a fully state-owned bank. "We believe that age-old ideas of keeping the house or other valuables in mortgage, before signing any new transaction with any bank should simply be avoided," starts Naziruddin Ahmed, General Manager Agrani Bank.

Bankers must first sit with a client, days at a stretch and understand his or her plan, survey the market viability of the project and learn to trust the client's ability and confidence, "only then people who are small entrepreneurs could approach us and in the process set the economy going," feels Ahmed, for whom aggressive banking is the rule of the day.

Recently this bank, which is holds the number one country rank in the Banker's Almanac '94, has started encouraging woman entrepreneurs in the industrial sector. This is at an

Giving Women the Green Signal

by Raffat Binte Rashid

experimental stage but Agrani bank, as the name suggest it to be progressive, believes that women who constitute a substantial portion of the educated class, should break loose of the conservative shell, and come forward. These business women should be encouraged.

Jobs are out there, business prospects are many for women, baby-sitting, fashion-wear designing, making herbal cosmetics, food items like jam, jelly, and pickles are some of the areas. "Our women are dependent, they lack leadership qualities and are yet to come out of the narrowness of this male dominated society,"

says Ahmed, who has recently been awarded Zia Parishad gold medal as best banker '93. Ahmed has so far earned nine medals among which six are gold, for his outstanding banking career which started in the early sixties. He believes that now more vibrant young people with good academic background are selecting this as their profession. Banking should be more aggressive and professional.

If a woman is seen walking on the footpath of Motijheel or walking into a bank and talking about business, she is surveyed

not as a prospective client but just as a female. "Women should take the initiatives and break free of the society's prejudices," he points out.

"The sky is our limit and we are here to listen to any proposals and help entrepreneurs including women," he elaborates the bank's scheme.

Agrani Bank, which is a pioneer in independent decision making, is also a pioneer in taking up social responsibility. DABIK, their unique poverty alleviation people financing project is only for the down trodden of the grassroot level. "Our DABIK project is not for rich women who are already



Helping women to overcome the social and financial barriers. Photo — Courtesy — Rafiqur Rahman

trying to come up, but for the poor women. This is a sort of family cooperative, each member guaranteeing the other," informs Mustafa Aminur Rashid, Managing Director, Agrani Bank. The Krishi Bank is for Krishi (agricultural) loans. Shilpa Bank for industries, House Building for constructing houses yet these down trodden people come to us, the nationalised commercial banks," Rashid says.

Agrani Bank, which without having a foreign branch, is the largest foreign exchange business earner, is mass oriented. "Private banks are not any competition for us. They have a total of 25 per cent of business mostly trading and their target group includes well-to-do people but ours is multi-dimensional," Rashid says with conviction.

Agrani Bank, which is larger than others business-wise, has the maximum number of computerized branches and occupies the top slot on the banking list because of its larger involvement in the industrial finance, foreign transaction, poverty alleviation and profitability.

The bank with an initiative to bring out the better entrepreneurs in women, irrespective of class, is also planning to take effective measures which would, like their many already ongoing schemes, help women financially and therefore improve the socio-economic condition of the country.

"Agrani Bank's scheme of encouraging women to come forward in the industrial sector is definitely helpful, especially for women, who have the capital and are eager to invest here," concludes Shamsun Nahar.