

Women on the Move

Caring for the Mentally Retarded

Achieving More than Envisaged

by Lamis Hossain

SHAH Banu Salam has been tirelessly trying to change society's attitude and approach to the mentally retarded for the last 23 years. Although she admitted that the situation has improved a lot, the mentally retarded nevertheless continue to be pointed out as pagols or mad people. Even middle-class families prefer hiding their mentally retarded children at home instead of sending them to school.

Salam is a founder and senior member of the Society for the Care and Education of the Mentally Retarded (SCEMRB) and is the president of the 14 country Asian Federation for the Mentally Retarded (AFMR). Mentally retarded persons are at a lower intelligence level, Salam clarified. They are not "mad" or mentally imbalanced.

The SCEMRB was started by parents and professors in Dhaka to provide education and care for the mentally retarded. The purpose of the education is to teach them as much as possible according to each person's ability. The society currently has 30 branches and gives self-help skills to the mentally retarded to help them stand on their own two feet. Apart from simple reading and arithmetic, the students are also given vocational lessons in areas such as baking, woodwork and sewing.

The situation of the mentally retarded tends to be worse in the urban areas. In the villages, the mentally retarded can work in the fields or perform simple tasks and

be cared for in a joint family. In the cities, where most people are educated up to a certain extent, it is hard for the mentally retarded to find a place in society.

"Our aim is any type of improvement for the mentally retarded," Salam said. The Society has eleven schools in Dhaka which take mentally retarded children. "We do not create separate schools," Salam explained. "We integrate them with ordinary children, so that these children learn to accept the mentally retarded." Home visits are also made by social workers so that a child's progress at school is followed up at home.

Integrating the mentally retarded into ordinary schools is problematic when the other parents become nervous about the effect on their children. Social workers of the SCEMRB have to explain to these parents that mental retardation can affect any family. Even John F Kennedy had a retarded sibling — there is no guarantee that this will never happen to your family. Conferences and workshops are held to discuss such issues openly.

Salam has been an active contributor to the SCEMRB. She has organised training workshops for parents, organised national sports and cultural competitions, secured a government order to give salary support for teachers of the society, and arranged a special teacher



Founder of SCEMRB: Shah Banu Salam

training programme with experts from abroad.

Personal circumstances nudged the unassuming woman towards this line of work. "My own daughter is mentally retarded," Salam revealed. At first the college professor and mother did not understand that something was wrong with her child. The only thing out of the ordinary was the girl's delay in learning to speak. Although Salam did not find this alarming, her sister told her to pay attention. Following a hearing test, the doctor informed that there was nothing wrong with the child's ears, but that she could be retarded. Further

examinations indicated that Salam's child could be a "Mongoloid Baby," the term then used for the Down's Syndrome.

In 1977, Salam's husband, a Dhaka University Professor, fell ill and she accompanied him to London for the treatment. This was also an opportunity to take her daughter to a foreign doctor. Salam was informed that Down's could not be cured, but the child who was not severely retarded, could be taught with patience. Salam's husband died in London, and upon her return to Bangladesh she became involved with the SCEMRB which was in its nascent

stages. "I linked up with the Society as it was confirmed that my own daughter was mentally retarded. Before this I didn't even know about it (mental retardation)."

Salam said that whereas other people would hide their mentally retarded children, she would never do so. Instead, her daughter would accompany her wherever possible. Improvement in such cases is very slow and others would tell her that there was no point in trying, but Salam used to say: "My daughter is going to school. This in itself is a big achievement." Her 24-year-old daughter has in fact won a gold and a bronze medal for badminton at the Special Olympics held in the USA recently. Athletes from Bangladesh had to bear their own expenses, though Biman did give a special discount.

The work done by the SCEMRB has not gone unnoticed. On September 8, the flag of the Asian Federation for the Mentally Retarded, was formally handed over to Salam at the concluding session of the 12th Asian Conference on the Mentally Retarded in Sri Lanka. This is a great honour not only for her but for Bangladesh since the country has thereby earned the privilege of hosting the 13th Asian Conference in 1997.

"Specialists from the whole world will be here. Not every Bangladeshi can go abroad so it is an honour to

have these experts here. Parents of the mentally retarded can attend the discussions and share their experiences. It is a step forward for the mentally retarded."

Salam was first elected as the 3rd Vice-president of the AFMR in 1989. It was the first time that she had attended the conference and had flown to Bangkok on behalf of the society at her own expense. In 1991, she became the 2nd VP and in 1993 the first VP. She has thus gathered valuable experience on the executive board.

The deliberations and recommendations of the conferences are publicised by the different organisations in the respective countries. The AFMR applies pressure on the international level on organisations such as the UN and the International League. This kind of lobbying with other groups resulted in the specific mention of the mentally retarded in the Rights of the Child Convention, for example.

At the national level, the SCEMRB tries to put pressure on the government and society at large. Salam feels that the government is doing what it can considering that we are a developing nation, but more can still be achieved. "There are greater than 33 lakh mentally retarded persons in our society. We want a number of them attending each school," Salam asserted. "We want the government to come forward. We want elite persons and society as a whole to come forward."

NEWS BRIEFS

Violence Against Women

The Daily Ittefaq 1.11.95: A young wife, Zaheda (24), poisoned herself in Narsingdi yesterday. Zaheda, wife of Munir Mia, was reportedly beaten for dowry and sent off to her father's house. After failing to collect the money from her father, she committed suicide there. The dead body was sent to morgue for autopsy.

The Daily Ittefaq 2.11.95: A group of young men forcibly entered the Guide House at Bally Road yesterday. They made threats and behaved offensively towards the female officers and workers there. They also damaged the office furniture in different rooms.

According to the Guide House Association in a press release, a group of students along with their parents and outsiders under the leadership of their principal brought out a procession saying objectionable slogans and headed towards the Prime Minister's residence. One hour later they returned to the Guide House along with Mr Fazlul Haque Milon and Ariful Islam (commissioner of ward no 53) and forcibly entered the training room where they scuffled with the female officers. A case has been filed against them.

The Daily Janakantha 3.11.95: A college girl was assaulted by two police-constables named Alamgir Hossain and Maqbul Hossain at Savar last night.

At around 10.00 pm, the girl was returning home from the market with her sister-in-law in a rickshaw and the constables started dragging them. At one point, the girl managed to slap the constables on their faces.

Hearing them cry out for help, members of the public came to their rescue and beat the constables up. After the investigation of the case the constables, who were usually engaged in various other misconduct, were stand-released.

The Daily Janakantha 5.11.95 (Barisal): After a week-long fight against death, Marium finally breathed her last last Friday. She was burnt to death by her in-laws because she was incapable of giving birth to any children during the five years of her marriage.

On Oct. 25, while she was still asleep in the morning her in-laws poured kerosene on her body and set her on fire.

She expired on Friday night at the Barisal Sher-e-Bangla Medical Hospital. After the autopsy, the body was handed over to her husband Mafiz Uddin Sikar and

her parents. Legal Aid and Services Trust has filed a case at the Bauful police-station.

Bhorer Kagoj 4.11.95: reports the case of Mahida Khatun who came victim of fatwabaaz men who have threatened to bury her alive and throw out her family from their home. Her 'crime' was to give birth to an illegitimate daughter.

With the promise of marriage one Nasiruddin seduced Mahida who gave birth to a baby girl last month. The baby did not survive. Human Rights organizations and five members of Women's Lawyers' Association have visited the scene and are looking into the matter.

Bhorer Kagoj 4.11.95: reports on October 16th, 22 year old Mumtazmahal Parveen was burnt with acid by miscreants who came into her room through the window. A primary school teacher, Parveen is now in Sreepur Hospital. No case has been filed.

Shangbad 3.11.95: On 9th August Smriti Rani Biswas, a student of Women's College in Barisal was gang raped by a group of men who took her to a campus building that was under construction. Workers at the building hearing her cries informed a college official who rescued her. Moreover, to cover their crime the culprits forcibly undressed Smriti Rani and her friend and took pictures of them with a camera.

Bhorer Kagoj 13.11.95: On 12th June this year, a sixteen year old girl named Tahera Begum was gang raped by four men in Potia thana. Tahera, who was visiting her grand mother, was forcibly brought out of the house late at night and taken to a paddy field where she was repeatedly raped by the four men.

Realizing that the men intended to kill her, Tahera managed to convince them that she would not tell anyone of the incident and told them to forget it as well. The rapists asked for her forgiveness and fled the scene.

Later, Tahera informed her relatives of the incident. A village shiksha socala of 500 Taka to each culprit but Tahera did not accept the money or the judgement. She filed a complaint at Potia thana and her case was presented in court. Tahera was also given a medical examination. Investigation of the case is still going on.

Bhorer Kagoj 13.11.95: At 7pm this Sunday (12.11.95) a group of armed miscreants kidnapped and raped a young girl who was travelling with her father in Jahangir Nagar campus.

Army Doctor Puts Her Faith in the Firing Line

Tony Samphier writes from Tuzla, Bosnia

As the "long, hard negotiation," in the words of British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind, on the future of Bosnia gets underway, a Gemini News Service correspondent visits the battlefield and talks to one of the increasing number of women who have signed up for the defence of their new country.

BOSNIA is in my heart, in my genes and in my blood," says Dr Amila Azapagic, a camouflage combat jacket slung over her shoulders. "That is why I joined the Bosnian Army."

But Dr Azapagic is no ordinary soldier. She was one of the first women to jump to the defence of her country and join up.

"More and more young women are having a gun in their hands," says Dr Azapagic. "The aggressors attempt to divide our people, but they cannot split the patriotic men and women in Bosnia."

Though Dr Azapagic is Tuzla born, bred and educated, she was living in Zvornik — where she had gone to find work — when the Serb nationalist-controlled Yugoslav army invaded Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992.

Her medical career ruined by the advance of war, she made her way back to Tuzla and volunteered for military duty. She immediately found herself working under direct fire at the front-line. The worst attacks came in July 1992. No medical textbook could have prepared her for this experience. "I still find it very hard to talk about this period of the war."

She recalls the plight of two young civilians caught up in the fighting. "The girl was taken to a house where she was raped by nine men. The psychological scar in that girl was very deep. Her 12-year-old brother was hit in the

chest. We patched him up and got him to Tuzla where he died 20 days later."

Caring for rape victims put Dr Azapagic under extreme emotional pressure: "As a woman you feel the humiliation. Every woman in the world feels it."

The 12-year-old boy also made a lasting impression on her. "In his eyes, I never saw hatred," Dr Azapagic says. He was always saying that in the enemy forces there are good men, all of them are not the same."

Do you hate the people who have committed war crimes against your people? "Yes, of course," she replies. "But, in the end, we must accept those whose hands are clean. In Bosnia, we must live together because we always have and because it is our only option in the future."

After witnessing the agony of war and the torture of ethnic cleansing, it is easy to become war-weary. But Dr Azapagic is confident that right is on her side. "Victory and freedom," she affirms.

She is spurred on by the memory of her former army commander who was killed in battle. "He was a man of honour and knowledge, a professional soldier who

knew what war was really like," she recalls. "Because of his death, we are trying to do our job even better, to liberate our homes and towns."

Today Dr Azapagic combines military service with building her career as best she can under war conditions. She works one week with the Bosnian Army in Tuzla and the next in a local clinic which specialises in skin problems, her chosen medical field.

But this is not simply home-front hospital duty. Though Tuzla is free territory — not under Bosnian Serb nationalist control — Dr Azapagic still deals with the wounds of war on a day-to-day basis. She recently organised two mobile medical teams to provide on-the-spot care and emergency surgery for thousands of incoming refugees and fighters from Srebrenica.

Back in her small apartment, family history is her main interest. She comes from one of the oldest families in Tuzla. "All my ancestors were military men," she says with a glint in her eye.

She launches herself towards the bookshelf and dusts off some documents which are old but in pristine

condition. "Here is my uncle," she enthuses, pointing to a fading photograph. "He fought the Nazis in the Second World War. He was a famous officer in Tito's Partisan army."

"One of my ancestors was the first Mayor of Tuzla, another was the head of the Islamic community here," she adds.

Islam is her guiding force. The Koran has pride of place on the bookshelf next to her ancestral research.

She is visibly proud of her culture, but she does not neatly fit the stereotype of the "Bosnian Muslim". She scoffs at the idea of "Islamic fundamentalism" in her country.

"Liberty, progress and democracy are what my faith has taught me," she argues. "Is that fundamentalism?"

"I am Bosnian, a woman and a European democratic Muslim. My fight is to defend democratic and multi-cultural Bosnia from fascist aggression... with the help of Allah," she adds with a broad smile.

When peace comes to war-torn Bosnia, Dr Azapagic is not prepared to "just get dressed and sit at home."

"I am a modern woman," she says. "I know who I am, I know what I want and I know what the future will be."

Does she fear that she might not make it through the war? "I am very cool under fire," she replies. "I just get on with the job and think 'kill me if you can'."

— Gemini News



Dr. Amila Azapagic: 'Cool under fire'

A Story-telling Creative Therapist

TEN minutes is good enough to make a child relate to you," sto-ryteller and creative therapist Fahmida Monju Majid believes. She connects with youngsters through stories, dance, art and hugs doses of affection. Her kajolined eyes light up when she speaks about children.

Monju Majid is the only Bangladeshi storyteller professionally registered in the UK. Her stories are more than straightforward recitations. She uses facial expressions, varied rhythm and different intonations to draw children into her world. Improvising is important. It's instant — every child is different," according to the storyteller. She wears bangles and keyrings for her audience. Children like the noise. They like the personal touch," she explains.

Monju Majid is a proponent of education through entertainment and is strongly against the didactic system of teaching. She does not think that children are miniature adults who can be taught to understand the world in the same way as adults. Stories are like a "spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down," she says.

"While a child tries to understand the meaning, the fun, the connecting ideas of the story, he subconsciously learns to relate one point with another in relation to his own original conceptions and interpretations so that he eventually creates a coherent picture of his own. It is suggested that interest in a new story is an expression of the highest intellectual function," Monju Majid wrote in a research proposal prepared a few years ago.

Storytelling, however, is only one of the many ways with which she approaches children. Monju Majid has been working with children for the last 25 years and her broader aim is "to raise the

quality of life for distressed kids." She has not left many stones unturned to achieve this goal. She hosts a children's TV programme called "Shabar Shatey" on BTB which now airs once a month. She has also written a book of fun nonsense rhymes poking fun at adults from a child's point of view.

Most importantly, Monju Majid is a creative therapist and a psychologist (clinical) specialising in children. Paintings by youngsters lie around her house-cum-chambers. She works mainly with handicapped children or children with special needs as she prefers to say. "We have to utter the world 'children' first," she explains. We are all handicapped in some way according to Monju Majid. "Instead of calling myself a psychologist, why not say 'not a lawyer'? Why focus on what we can't do?" she asks. Monju Majid began to work professionally in this field partly out of sheer gratefulness for giving birth to healthy children herself. She believes that society including the mass media, should focus less on what

children with special needs cannot do and look more towards what they are capable of.

I believe strongly that children's upbringing has everything to do with how adults behave and how nations behave," Monju Majid asserts. An unhappy child according to her belief, grows up as an unhappy adult who works towards violence.

Her own childhood is one she cherishes dearly. Memories from the past are preserved almost religiously. As the grand-daughter of renowned poet Golam Mustafa, Monju Majid's childhood was already set apart from others. "Before holding a pencil I held a brush. Before talking I learned to sing. I grew up in that kind of family," she explains. She recollects getting her first poem published in a paper at the age of seven. The Holy Cross College yearbook has photos of Monju in a drama as *Tagore's Shyama* and in a college production of *Midsummer Nights Dream*. The yearbook artwork are all the work of a young Monju.

Monju Majid was married

off early in what she said was a "200 per cent arranged marriage" but the young woman wanted something for herself. In 1970 she received a first class first for her masters in General Psychology. She worked as an assistant psychologist in London and did post graduate research in Neuropsychology at the Institute of Neurology. Monju Majid completed several other courses out of her own interest including those on movement therapy, art therapy, music therapy, down's syndrome, counselling and emotive psychotherapy among others. She has also travelled much on work related to promoting peace.

Monju Majid aspires to introduce storytelling as a new profession here, especially for women who can take in up and visit schools, hospitals and so forth. "I have amalgamated my experience, my childhood artistic interest and my academic qualifications. Luckily I can put them all together to help children, which is my aim in life," Monju says.

Lamis Hossain



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by Jim Davis



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