



reflection

My Experiences as an Editor of a Bangla Magazine

by Noorjehan Murshid

I edited a journal called *Edesh-Ekal* for some years and have indeed a story to tell. Before I start my story I would like to tell you who I am and what was the setting in which I conceived the idea of publishing a journal. I am Noorjehan Murshid, as you have already gathered, and I come from Murshidabad. My surname Murshid, of course, has nothing to do with Murshidabad. My name is not from Murshidabad but from an accident with which I have been living for slightly over four decades now.

I was educated at the Victoria Institution in Calcutta and the Universities of Calcutta and Boston. My first job after my graduation from Calcutta was that of Headmistress of a Girls' High School in Barisal at the ripe age of twenty-two. While I was waiting for the result of my MA examination, I was appointed Superintendent of a Post Graduate Women Students' Hostel in Calcutta known as Mannujan Hall. At the same time, I joined All India Radio as a broadcaster.

With partition I opted for Pakistan which meant for me Dhaka and my destiny. I joined politics in 1954 and got elected to the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly on a United Front ticket by defeating a distinguished Muslim League and educationist, Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmud. Since 1954 I have been actively involved in politics both in and out of power. But with the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the murder in jail of my colleagues Tajuddin Ahmed, Nazrul Islam, Monsur Ali and Qamruzzaman, I lost heart and sort of withdrew from politics. All over the subcontinent there was turmoil. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged, Indira Gandhi was assassinated and we were deeply depressed.

The military in power in Bangladesh formed political parties to get support from the people and gave rise to a kind of politics for which I had only repulsion. During the long night of military rule in one guise or another, which only ended recently, the country was politically debased and economically ruined. Greed, violence and unemployment created a situation of lawlessness and general insecurity which hit women specially hard.

My journal was born in these circumstances and in response to my own need for a worthwhile occupation as well as to the situation in the country. When I brought out my journal I felt that there was a need for it. You bring out a journal at a particular time when you believe strongly you have something special to say and that there are people in society who want it said. Most of our people are poor and without rights and exploited. Even so, women are poorer and more exploited and de-

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prived than men. The idea of social justice was accepted and current but it did not seem to include the notion of equal rights for men and women. The journal wanted to draw attention to this default of long standing and to work for the equality of woman and man. This we thought would be possible only in a sane, civilized and just society, and our aim was to contribute to the creation of such a society. The concept of the journal and its range of interests were expressed through its different sections which were: "The World", "Country", "Society", "Interviews", "Literature", "Miscellaneous Reflections", "Debate", "TV the Theatre and Letter from Abroad."

I recall with pleasure that the first issue contained articles on the origin of the dowry system in Bangladesh, women workers in industry, women's representation in Parliament, a long extract from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in Bengali translation, and a discussion on the subject of women and development. The allocation of space among the various interests reflected the balance we kept in view. We wanted *Edesh-Ekal* to say something to all citizens and at the same time to maintain a strong focus on women and their problems. We hoped thus to avoid giving the impression of representing a female "ghetto". When the journal came out it was indeed very well received. The editor got dozens of congratulatory letters. It was reviewed favourably by the newspapers and periodicals. I used to send my journals to the cities, district towns and even to rural areas. But the actual readership of the journal was limited to a small section of the middle class. I was surprised to notice that I was receiving letters not only from different parts of West Bengal but also from Bengali readers from Bombay and Delhi. I have a few readers in the UK and America as well.

I started the venture without any institutional support. Most of the support came from my family. I created a fund with contributions from my husband and children and my own savings. When I decided to bring out the journal I was optimistic, indeed, too optimistic. I wanted to print 10,000 copies. After a great deal of persuasion by Obaidul Islam, the head of the Bangla Academy Press and by my husband, I agreed to

reduce the number to 5000 and soon realized that even that would be too large a print and scaled it down to 3000 copies with great reluctance and annoyance. The first issue came out in August 1986.

We approached our friends and other sympathetic people for contributions and I must say we were pleased with the response. From the start I wanted to lay a strong emphasis on women and women's issues and contacted almost all women writers in the country. I received some articles, stories and poems from them, but most of my contributors were men and I feel sorry to say that some of our women writers, who of course rightly call themselves writers and not women writers, were rather cool towards the magazine. They promised and never delivered.

My target groups were educated middle class men and women, who form the backbone of our society. Unless they are aware of the causes — personal, social, national and international — behind their backwardness and exploitation they will not be able to overcome them.

Our women are doubly exploited, for being members of an unjust society and for being women. I know cases where husbands and wives are educated and well placed in society and the wives have not only their own income but they have fortunes inherited from their parents, and still the wives are treated like slaves and some times get beaten up by husbands and sons, that is by the male members of the family. What could be the reason? One view is that men are interested in the money of their wives or mothers and not in them. So, you see, education alone cannot help us to protect ourselves and our interests. Intellectually, if we cannot bring ourselves to believe that if necessary we should leave husband and family to save our life and dignity, we can never be equal to men. In a male dominated society this is the worst thing that can happen to a woman. Through my journal, I wanted to reach these types of women and men.

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an interesting personal column. So, I started with one assistant and a chauffeur. For the distribution of the journal, I contacted the "Hawkers Association" and gave them 1000 copies to sell, only to find out later that most of these were destroyed by white ants and rats. When I protested, they said, no one wants to buy this type of intellectual magazine. They showed me some cheap and glamorous magazines of cinema and sex and asked me to bring out something like these; otherwise, it would not sell. So the "Hawkers Association" proved useless for me in the matter of distribution of the journal. Nirmalendu Goon could only assist me for two hours a day in proof reading; he could not help me in any other way. So I appointed a very bright girl called Sabera and a boy named Tareq to help with the distribution of the journal, collection of articles and ads, answering and mailing letters, etc.

Soon I felt the need for an office assistant, who would maintain files, answer telephone calls and record messages, keep an account of the expenses under different heads. To bring out the magazine regularly every month was my headache. Besides, of course, I had to keep an eye on every thing concerning my journal. Soon I found that my overhead expenses were becoming too much for me to bear. Within two years, the resources, with which I had started, were nearly exhausted. I was bad at collecting ads. I noticed from a distance how confidently Dr Mustafa Nurul Islam, the editor of the quarterly journal *Sundaram*, went through the gates of different business houses and organizations and got hold of their chiefs and came back with very lucrative and regular ads. Obviously, I did not have his flair for business, but I know, I was being discriminated against. I was a woman and an ex-minister of a former government whose members were not in great favour in the commercial district of Motijheel in Dhaka.

The first step I took was to reduce my expenses. Printing charges at the Bangla Academy Press were high. So I thought of changing the Press. I tried some wayside printers, but the atmosphere in these places was rather uncivilized unlike at the Bangla Academy Press, where one could have a place to work for hours, have tea, con-

verse with almost everybody present and meet well known literary people. The idea of sitting on a stool for long hours with my back towards a busy road didn't appeal to me. So I bought a small composing unit and hired two compositors. As is evident, the more I tried to reduce my expenditure, the more I put myself in a situation where it increased. But in spite of all these troubles, I never thought of giving the journal up. The journal used to come out regularly but understandably with very few ads. My daughter Sharmeen came forward to help me in collecting ads and she really tried. She and Sabera both worked for the journal with dedication. They never thought any work for it beneath their dignity. One day the poet Nirmalendu Goon left as suddenly as he had come and took his column with him. Tareq also disappeared, probably for reasons of health. I recruited the young poet Maruf Raihan and later Raqib in their places.

After four years I started to feel I was failing. At this moment a young man walked in from nowhere and claimed that he knew the secret of running a magazine and making a commercial success of it — in which respect my record so far was dismal. He said that if I gave him a chance he would bring out the journal on a particular date every month and until he could do that he would not take a penny as wages — that is he offered to give me free service until my paper had a regular income and came out regularly on a particular date. An attractive offer, but I was rather skeptical, and know now that I should have obeyed my instinct. Instead, I saw him draw up an impressive chart, showing the details of his plan of operation; strategies were devised for increasing circulation, deadlines were fixed for the collection of contributions from writers and ads, an uncompromisingly firm date was set for the publication of the journal every month, and as for costing it was impeccably done. He embarked upon an expensive campaign of addressing letters to people all over the country urging them to subscribe to the magazine. In his zeal he distributed all the copies of its back issues, including my office copies, free. He employed hawkers to do the job. I was out of Dhaka at the time for some months. He explained to my office staff that the

journal should reach every educated home where there were people to read it — a laudable idea that was defeated by its originator. When I came back from abroad I found him still struggling with the issue whose printing process had begun five months ago and which was alleged to have got mysteriously lost in the computer. The young man in question eventually brought out an issue but he took six months to do so. On top of everything, it was so badly printed and so full of printing mistakes that, in despair and anger, I literally drove him out of my office. I had the whole issue reprinted but at that point the journal went totally broke.

And what is the moral of the story? I must play down the hilarious denouement to the affair. The switch-over to computer technology need not have been the undoing of the journal — I obviously should not have entrusted the publication to a stranger of completely untested ability. He merely represented an avoidable mischance. The truth is I was weary of the effort to keep the journal afloat as a deficit proposition and of the dependence on ads. I acknowledged earlier that the intellectual support I received was not unsatisfactory. The readers too responded well to the journal, enabling us to maintain the circulation at a reasonable level for some time. The real reason for the failure of the journal to stay alive longer than it did is to be ascribed to certain social and economic factors. I do not know of any serious journal in this country with the exception of *Sundaram* which has sustained itself for long without either institutional support of some sort or commercially or politically motivated financial backing from some source or other. When times are hard the lower and middle classes are not very keen on spending their scarce cash on things like *Edesh-Ekal*. The slump in the sale of the journal, which began with the great flood of 1988, coincided with the growing strength of religious fundamentalists, a group seeking power and control over society, especially educational institutions, with ferocity. I however think, in retrospect, that despite all this, some of the problems I spoke of would not have existed for a person with greater business acumen than I possessed. I also think that the values for which the journal stood are not only valid but basic to our conception of the society we want to build. These values and forces inimical to them are at present engaged in a deadly conflict. What is needed is not surrender but a reincarnation of the spirit of *Edesh-Ekal* as a form of intelligent and assertive group action rather than lonely individual effort.

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fiction

Encounter with Konok Champa

by Ahmed Sofa

Continued from last week

TODAY Ashu's mood is sullen. He feels, some one is whispering in his ears, Ashu you are poor, very poor. The poor people are really sad people. They cannot afford to buy a new lungi. Their sisters cannot sleep in a new cradle. Nobody invites them in a feast. He came to the river bank. The river is wide, its water is flowing and the sky is reflected in the bottom. One boat with painted sail is plying slowly. The oars making splashing sound. Inside the boat, two married girls, perhaps going to visit their parental home. Children making rhyme with the girls.

Oh, parental home visitor brides
Please come to our home
We shall entertain you with
Fried rice and frog legs.

Ashu crossed the sandy part of the river bank. He dipped his two hands in the water. The water of the river is slightly cold. His sad feelings washed away with water. A Brownish big porpoise surfaced from the depth of the water. Its brown body glitters with the sun ray. The porpoise splashed water with its tail, somersaulting twice, dived again into water. Ashu has a feeling, this river, this water, even this diving porpoise understands the groaning of Ashu's heart. Bangshi, the fisherman threw the angling hook to the river. In order to attract fish he is shaking the tip of the angling rod. He is staring at the angling float with his black eyes. He looks like one legged crane. At the wharf of Ballal three boats are being loaded with tobacco. The air is filled up with the pungent smell. Ashu cannot

stand this, he feels like vomiting. The setting sun cast its golden light on the sandy river bank.

Crossing the sandy bed Ashu came near to the dwellings of the barbars. The barbers live together in a cluster of houses. Ashu could not overlook the dilapidated mudbuild house of Rajani barbar. Last year Rajani left for India, leaving behind the lame step-mother, a bunch of green coconut is hanging from the tree. Glow of the setting sun mingles with the green colour of the coconuts. The shivering sari, which the wife of Rajani used to spread on the fence, came to Ashu's mind. One bullock-cart proceeded towards forest office, creating all kind of noises, volume of grey dust hovered around. The bells on the neck of the two white bullocks, visit far, far away. Train comes whistling along the rail lines. From a far it glitters like bright silver. Evening sky looks sullen, like the face of Ashu's mama. Light footed evening is approaching slowly.

Ashu took his seat on the bank of the tank owned by the babars. Rajani's step-mother is plucking Helnecha leaves from the pond, with much difficulty. There is no one to look after her. Ashu felt deeply for the old lame and helpless woman. All on a sudden Ashu found the old slanting big konokchampa tree is silently staring at him. Young children of barbar's do climb upon the tree and play the game of wolf hunting. Ashu tried to recollect the song of the game.

The branches of konokchampa is oily and leaves are thick and flat. On the top of every branch, there hangs a bunch of yellow flowers looking like golden anklets. Its soft smell sweetens the air. Ashu began to stare at the bunches of flowers with utmost attention — so lively, so yellow, so undulat-

ing in the air. The darkness between the spaces of thick flat leaves, have stored up many many stories. Ashu thinks if trees could talk, they could tell many fascinating stories. Standing on the trunk, years after years, trees learned many things, human beings, do not know. The experiences, the trees gathered out of the direct contact of cloud, rain and the sunshine — do those things not have any expression? Ashu feels deep in his heart, yonder this sky, this tree, this golden sunshine, this vegetable creepers, this hanging nests of the weaver birds, are incessantly engaged in talking. The problem with Ashu is he cannot follow that language. He has not learned the alphabets. If he was born as tree or plant, instead of human being? Ashu thinks, why I was not born as jumping grasshopper? Why I did not become a bunch of yellow konokchampa flowers, yellow bosom would be filled up with moist smell. Ashu got scared to see a cast off skin of a snake, near the fissure of the trunk of konokchampa tree, he remembered, Golem Sharif died four months ago, out of the snake bite. Ashu left the place hurriedly.

Ashu came near to the date tree, the top of which was burned by the fire of thunder. He felt sad and sat by the tree many strange and piercing questions came to his mind. This date tree used to yield two full jars of juice every night. Why such a beneficent tree should be killed by lightning strike. Why good people like doctor Bhuvan, should die premature death. Ashu feels, the sullen shalik bird on the top of dead date tree thinking the same. Telegraph wires create variety of sounds. Ashu thinks the telegraph wires are telling the same thing. Ashu, you are poor, very poor.

Ashu cannot divert his eyes from the bunches of konokchampa, so pretty, so fresh yellow, swinging so fast. When Ashu's mama sits a prayer mat, she herself turns soft and tender like a bunch of full bloomed konokchampa. There are many tales concealed within the bunches of konokchampa. When wind blows konokchampa began to speak in whispering language. He feels sorry, he does not understand the language of the flowers, flowers are good, soft, tender — only the sad thing about the flowers — they are very short lived. The bunches of konokchampa swings with the speed of the wind. Ashu feels something is swinging in his mind, Ashu whispers, my dear konokchampa just swing. Without any delay or protest the bunches of konokchampa start swinging. The bunches of konokchampa are sweet tender and very friendly. They understand Ashu's secret moorings. They show respect to his inner desire. In the whole world only the konokchampa flowers are the real friend of Ashu. Sister Foolmoni, is still a clot of blood, Ashu loves her so much takes so much care, even then, she does not bother to hear Ashu. Only the konokchampa flowers understand the secret desire of Ashu.

Ashu made a silent bet. If the bunches of konokchampa swings this time, there shall be a beautiful flower decorated cane cradle for his sister Foolmoni. Ashu gave full concentration on the bunches of konokchampa. Just after a few minutes a flash of soothing air arrived from the bottom of the sea. The air spoke something in the ears of the flowers, and the konokchampa began to swing. Ashu became overjoyed. He did not make any mistake by believing konokchampa. He got emboldened and made another bet, if you swing again konokchampa there shall be a new lungi for me. As soon as he expressed his desire in language, the spring breeze of falgoun gently swing flowers along with the bunches, branches, leaves and foliages. Ashu clapped his hands and shouted out,

konokchampa you are my real friend. I have none except you, who can fulfil my wishes. Twice I have given you trouble. Once more, I shall give you trouble. You enjoy swinging, I know. It gives you pain too. Your floral body is too tender. Slightest wrong movement hurt you gravely. I request you for the last and final. Please do swing again. If you kindly swing this time, my papa will have three acres of land and there shall be no want in our family. Please swing once more. Then I shall go home.

Ashu began to wait, silently he is inviting, the wind which moves within thick leaves like mother fish among its young. Oh wind please do come quickly and swing the bunches of konokchampa. Evening is not far. This is time about I should back home. If I am not at home, my mama cannot cook. Foolmoni developed the habit of sitting on my lap. If I am not at home, she will cry violently. Please do come wind and make the konokchampa swing. But there is no wind. This time konokchampa did not comply with Ashu's request. Ashu again requested fervently. There is no reply from the silent tree. Ashu said it is my last and final bet. Bunches of konokchampa. If you swing this time my papa will have three acres of land. This much land is enough for the upkeep of our family. Twice you have responded at my request. Many times mad wind forced you to swing against your will, caused the destruction of your branches. Just comply with the request of a child. Swing once more, if you do not swing then worries of my papa will not go. Then have kindness for my mama and papa. Requests went in vain, konokchampa remained stubborn.

It is already evening, Ashu's voice sounded like prayer. But there is no response from konokchampa's side. Ashu said imploringly, konokchampa flowers you all are soft and tender, it is true. But your heart is hard like stone. You do not understand the sufferings of poor people. They do not have the means to procure square meals. People do not

invite them in feast. Most often they starve. Even Allah is hostile towards them, please do remember my request. Tomorrow at about this time I shall come again. In the meantime you will take your full rest. When I shall come, please do not forget to swing.

While Ashu was returning, he saw one ugly large size crane flew from where, Ashu do not know, swooped on a branch of the tree and forcibly placed its huge body. The intrusion of the crane caused shaking to that particular branch of konokchampa. The leaves, the branches cannot remain in different. They began to swing in violent speed.

Ashu clenched his teeth and said in a determined voice, now I have understood konokchampa, what is the secret. You will not swing on request. I will have to make you swing. He tied the lungi tightly round his loin and started climbing on the tree. After reaching middle portion, he started jerking the whole tree with the all amount of his strength. There came a tremor in the body of the konokchampa. Ashu did not stop. A mad urge prompted him to jerk more and more violently. A branch broke down. This time Ashu stopped. He came down from the tree. But the off konokchampa is swinging incessantly. Darkness is gathering all around. Ashu said with proud voice konokchampa, I made you swing. This time Foolmoni will have a new cradle, and a new lungi for me. My papa will have three acres of land. We shall not be hard-up any more. He felt the presence of soft tender fresh yellow swinging konokchampa in his mind. His body is covered with sweat. Never in life Ashu felt such intense pleasure. Ashu saw some rough thing is attached with his leg. Bending slightly he picked it up. It is the cast off skin of the snake. This time he did not scare at all. Stars began to appear in the sky. Gazing to the stars, Ashu remembered, his dead brothers and sisters. They must be some where there in the sky in the form of stars, Ashu feels sad, very sad. He started for home.