

Face to Face

The Skylark of Recitation

She is sophisticated, gregarious, lively and articulate. Her sensitive understanding of poetry and the ability to recreate it in recitation has in fact lent poetry reading a ground to bloom as a form of art. She is Pragna Laboni, one of the protagonists of the county's recitation movement. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim



Q: Thanks to the dedication and devotion of persons like you recitation today enjoys an exciting renaissance. We would like to know from you the difficulties you have faced in establishing it as a form of art.

A: Poetry recitation has always been treated as a filler in cultural programmes. Golam Mostafa and Hasan Imam particularly are persons responsible for drawing audience's attention to poetry reading. They should be credited for their work in building the infrastructure in recitation.

Q: More recently recitation has taken the form of a movement. And do you think recitation would stand on its own?

A: Well, I myself am critical of what is happening in the name of recitation movement. Unskilled people and unheeded voices are crowding and managing to get albums released. Though I was always with recitation teaching the art to my students yet never been a part of the movement. To speak the truth, recitation is in its infancy in our country and has a long way to go.

Q: So far I know there is no such word as 'reciter' in dictionary even which means it has never been regarded as a serious

form of art.

A: Exactly. Look at the persons — those who have popularised recitation such as Golam Mostafa, Mujibur Rahman or Kafe Khan. They took it as a part-time interest. Today when you think of poetry recitation you will readily be greeted with faces such as Jayanta, Vashwar Banerjee, Kazi Arif or I myself. What I mean to say is that these people are to some extent inseparable from the recitation milieu. By extension, when some artists are identified as special for certain art form, that means there exists a form of expression apart. Back in '72, we formed an association called Aabritti Sangsad. We were all university students then. It was during that time recitation programmes were organised and people paid money to listen to our performances which is a testimony to its being accepted by the audience. Later on when poets began to read their poems the audience also accepted that. What I feel as the rationale for the birth of recitation is the need of the time. Poetry in any culture is the expression of its refined sensitivity. After independence people wanted something to share their sensitive mind. Reciters met that

need. Even we have seen reciters playing significant role in bridging and uniting people to a common spirit during the last days of Ershad's downfall.

Q: But recitation in one form or other did exist in all cultures — in the Greek period in the West and in Bengal in the Middle Ages. So what is new about it when you are claiming it to be the latest form of art?

A: I think the difference lies in approach. We intend to treat reading as an art in its own right, not just conveying poet's message to the audience.

Q: It is said that modern poetry is meant for silent reading. Community reading spoils the way, for example, Eliot speaks to his readers.

A: Yes. Of course. If you look at our favourite Jibanananda Das — his poems are for absolutely silent consumption. So not all poems glow in recitation.

Q: So where exactly a reciter stands between a poet and his creation?

A: To communicate a poem to the listeners in correct pronunciation, punctuation and rhythm and to recreate the mood of its creator.

Q: Is it more of conveying the emotion and ideas in a poem rather than its interpretation? Is that what you mean by recitation?

A: It's both. You can read a poem in five different ways.

Q: What is it in your case?

A: Well, first I try to go deep to capture the essence of a poem. Then comes the vital point — how am I reacting to it.

Q: The latest phenomenon in recitation is group performance. But you have never been in "brinda" performance. Why?

A: Brinda or group performance is still at an experimental stage. For me I do not find it exciting and do not see any valid reasons for group performance.

Q: Who are your favourite poets, or shall I say, the poets you find interesting to recite?

A: I'm an avid reader of Rabindranath Tagore. I think he is one poet who has almost captured all the moods and passions of human character. He is relevant at all time and at all season. Shamsur Rahman, Nirmulendu Goon are also included in my reading list. Among the poets of thirties Vishnu De and Jibanananda Das are my favourite.

When I Was a Teenager ...

IN CONVERSATION WITH NURJAHAN MURSHID

By Sabir Mustafa

MURSHIDABAD district of Bengal may not have been the most liberal place to be in the 1920s, but the quiet village of Taranagar was something of an exception. A fairly prosperous village where Hindus and Muslims lived side by side, it seemed like a place destined to produce men of enlightenment and women of substance.

For Nurjahan Murshid, being the fourth among seven sisters did not sound like the ideal beginning to a life of fulfilment, but she was luckier than most.

Her father, Mohammad Ayub Hossain may have been a police officer, but he understood the need for education and freedom for his daughters. The conservative environment in which he grew up succeeded, at times, to rein in his more progressive thoughts. Like the time when he was compelled to marry off his eldest daughter at the age of 11. But he was not prepared to allow "tradition" to deprive all his daughters of the formal education and fulfilled life that he cherished for himself.

"My father was simply adamant that his daughters should all get proper education. He didn't always succeed, but he pursued this goal throughout his life", recalls Murshid as she talks to the Daily Star at her Dhanmadi home.

Still, some tradition had to be maintained.

The 1920s '30s were a time when women's place was emphatically "indoors". People took a very dim view of men other than family members coming close to women. For Shashi Master, Nurjahan's private tutor in her early childhood, the barrier of tradition came in the form of a window.

Nurjahan was around 10 or perhaps less, when Shashi Master guided several of the seven sisters through early learning. He used to sit on a chair in the verandah, next to a window. On the other side of the window inside the house, Nurjahan and her sister sat, books in hand, learning as the teacher spoke through the grills.

While stories of Shashi Master and Osman Pandit, teacher at her local primary school, flood back to cheer up a chilly evening, other memories, more painful ones, remain imprinted on her mind.

The death of the only son in the family at the age of one — when Nurjahan was still an infant — was a terrible blow, but it made her stronger to face the harsh world out there; and to appreciate whatever life had to give her.

"I was never deprived of the love of my parents even though I was fourth among seven

sisters", says Murshid who is married to Khan Sarwar Murshid, former vice chancellor of Rajshahi University. "The death of my only brother was a terrible blow for my parents but I felt I had to make up for that loss".

More than three decades later, Murshid may well feel that she has lived up to the standard demanded by her late father. After a long career in teaching including Vigarunnessa Noon College and Holy Cross College, Murshid entered politics in 1954. In 1970, she was elected to parliament along with Razia Banu. A freedom fighter in 1971, Murshid joined Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's cabinet in 1972 as a state minister.

While village life was quite heavenly for the child

walls, and watch the boys walk around, go for swims in the nearby ponds. I used to envy the freedom they enjoyed".

By the time she was a teenager, she was at Calcutta. Throughout the rest of her education life, she lived in girls' hostel, but not even the strict discipline of the school made her feel deprived of the freedom she relished. She was enrolled at the Victoria Institution, a school run by members of the Brahma faith, a religion originally propagated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy.

The Brahma believed in the unity of all religions and the convergence of all faiths held by mankind. Not surprisingly, the school preached highly progressive ideas and shielded the students from the communalism that was brandishing its ugly self in

called Paul. He used to take us to the Gader Math, the famous open field in the middle of Calcutta, to play field games and athletics. Then, every time a noted personality such as Rabindra Nath Tagore came to Calcutta, the school would take us to their functions. We were also allowed to go to the cinema every now and then, provided our local guardians came and took us", Murshid says.

Ayub Hossain chose the school after a lot of thought and comparison with other schools. But perhaps it was the progressive intellectual environment offered by the Brahma school that finally persuaded him to enrol Nurjahan at the Victoria Institution. And the school was also repaid the compliment.

Murshid recalls a time when she and her roommates decided to complain against the teachers for giving them poor living quarters in the hostel. The letter was opened by the school authorities but forwarded to Murshid's father's address without any censoring. When the reply from Mohammad Ayub Hossain arrived, the school opened it, called Nurjahan to the head mistress's room and asked her to read it aloud.

In the letter, Nurjahan's father severely admonished her for showing such disrespect to her teachers. Her father compared the teachers to parents, and said that they could never do anything that would harm the students. "My father then said that, if education had taught me to be disrespectful to teachers, then there was no need for such education", Murshid recalls.

In the end, it was the Brahma school's and her father's teachings that stood between Nurjahan and the demon of communalism that swept through Calcutta in the mid-1940s. The riots of 1946 — by when Nurjahan was well past her teenage and made acquaintance with the likes of Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy — tore the heart out of Bengal. And this tearing of the heart came home to Nurjahan when she walked through the burning streets to visit her university dormitory, the Monnojan Hall.

"I could not believe that human anger and hate could be reflected with such venom on a building", she says, as she recounts the destruction that was wrought on the hall. Doors were smashed and burned, windows broken, switch sockets pulled out.

For the Bengalees, it was the end of a dream. For Nurjahan, it signalled the beginning of a new life in Dhaka, but with all the values and teachings of her father and the Victoria Institution guiding her still.



Nurjahan Murshid survives the chill of an English autumn in early 1980s

Nurjahan, the entry into teenagehood had to pass through two difficult years in Barisal. Her uncle was a professor of Arabic and Persian at the Brojo Mohan College and he took on the role of guardian for couple of years while Nurjahan went to the local Sadar Girls' High School. The first whiff of communalism bothered the young girl as she struggled to come to grips with the conservative environment of the town. But the strict discipline imposed by her uncle made her yearn for the freedom she had enjoyed in Taranagar in Murshidabad.

"We could not go out of the house, and we had to travel to school in a shuttered-off horse carriage", Murshid says. "We used to peep outside the house through cracks in the cane

society at the time.

"At school as at the village, most my friends were Hindus", Murshid remembers. "At school we even shared our food, and ate from each other's plates", she says. This was no small matter during those times, when the division between Hindus and Muslims had been given such a shape that even roadside tea-stalls kept separate sets of cups and plates for customers belonging to different religions.

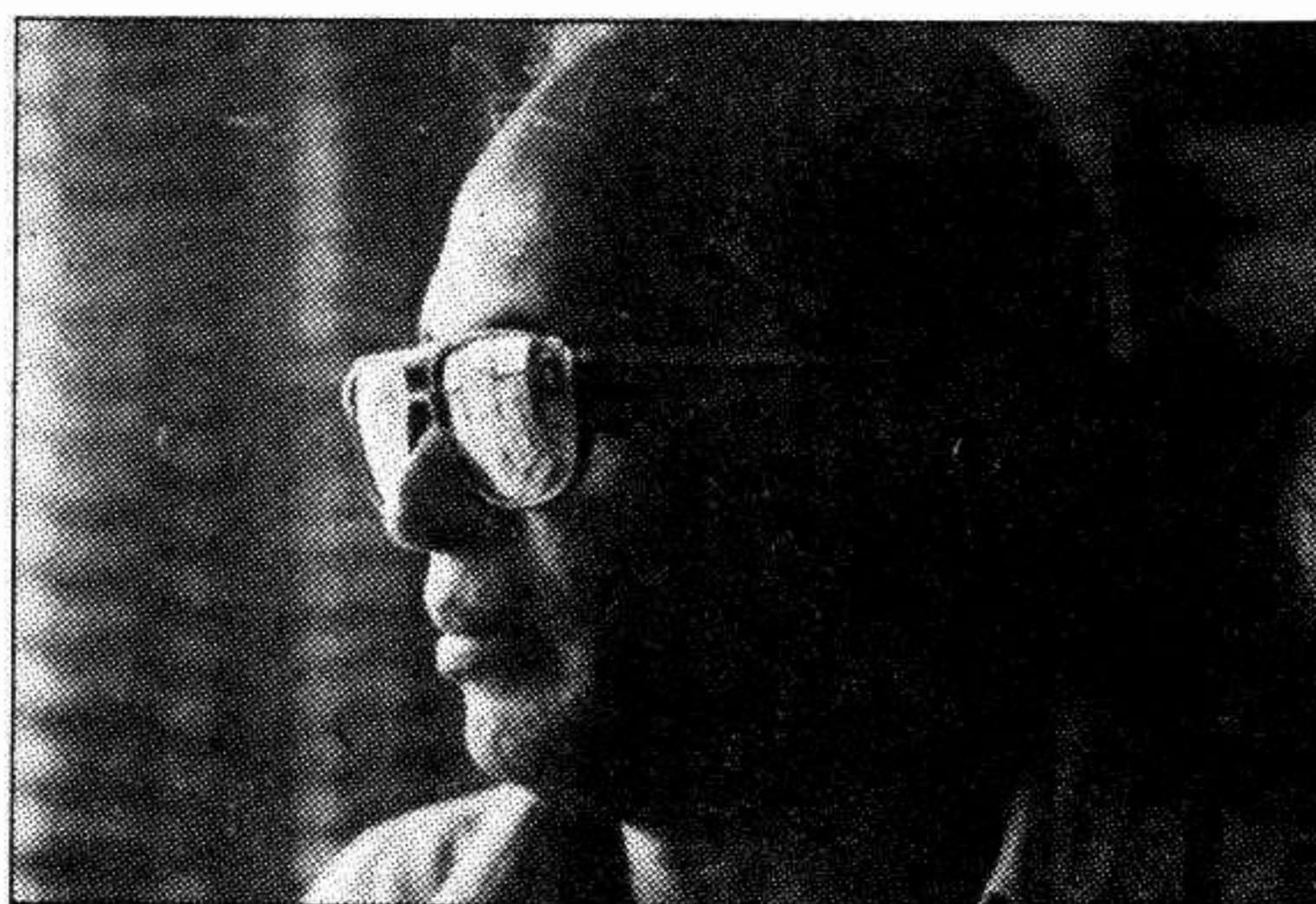
The school preached discipline almost as a religion to its students. So much so that, every letter written by students and addressed to them used to be opened by the hostel authorities. But the school gave them plenty of opportunities to develop both their intellectual and physical faculties.

"We had a PT instructor

"Soul Search"

Farhad Mazhar

Poet and Critic



you?

A: It is so important that I can easily live without it. I need money for doing my work, but I do not desire it. Money follows my need, but my desires do not follow money. Money is important only to the extent that it is one of the various means of doing a work. It is certainly not the only means. In my professional career I have changed my life couple of times and lived literally without any money for a long time. Lived with the support of relatives and friends. I have a deep sense of guilt to my children for my callous attitude to money. Actually they suffered a lot. Sometime, quite unnecessarily.

Q: What is more important to you, your personal or professional life?

A: I do not feel any difference between personal and professional life, and indeed there is difference, I do not believe in such demarcation. Although I do have the

professional background of a Pharmacist, it was always part of my personal life as well. My poetry writing or singing is not separate from what I do in my professional life as Managing Director of UBINIG, a policy research institution in Bangladesh. When I am working with the farmers of Nayakrishni Andolon — an interesting ecological agricultural movement — my knowledge on the genetic resources and biodiversity becomes a part of my aesthetic adventures that informs my poetry.

One thing is clear. I can not live in a situation where there is contradiction between my professional and personal life. I can not treat my ethics, cultural values, aesthetic perceptions as something personal and maintain a professional life that is contradictory to my moral position, perceptions and values. I simply can not say they are "personal". This is hypocritical. I even had to quit

jobs couple of times when I felt like that. When I was young, I did not hesitate to quit high paid job in a transnational pharmaceutical company, when I felt it is against my political position. I left USA to work in Bangladesh, although I was doing very well as a pharmacist and economist in New York. I felt it hypocritical using my talents for the service of another country, when my duty is to serve the people of Bangladesh.

Q: Are you afraid of death?

A: No. I am only curious how I will feel when I will be dying. I have no wish to live long. I do not wish to burden my families and friends in old age, when I won't be able to take care of myself.

A: However, I think culturally it is important to get ready for death as a celebration of a transformative moment, not as the end of life. I am sure I will be reborn. I would prefer to be a tree. That is why I have already planted a banyan tree and identified a place to my friends and family to bury me there. I do not want any funeral, and absolutely no religious rituals. I am a very "religious" and spiritual person. But I want no one to plead for me to Allah to provide me a place in heaven. I will be very happy and comfortable if I am sent to hell.

I would rather plead to my friends and families now that if they indeed love me then they should sing for me as long as they want after I die. I prefer Lalou songs. However, any songs would do. I wouldn't mind raw and often very unsophisticated love songs of young bands, as long as it is

youthful, full of joy and happiness.

If not, they should simply dump my body under any available ground, and I assure everyone in the name of Allah that I have learnt the secrets how to reappear as plants and grasses. May Allah help me.

I do not want to donate my body to any medical school because I distrust "modern" medicine. I am afraid my skeleton will be abused to increase the profit of the transnational corporations. However, my body can be used as organic fertilizer to the land, if any one wishes for a better use.

I have taken the liberty to say all these matters here in order to record my wishes publicly for the future.

I think death is beautiful.

Q: Which book has influenced your life most?

A: Difficult to say if you want to know which has influenced me most. However, the *Principia Mathematica* by Bertrand Russel and Alfred North Whitehead, which I read while I was a student of Chowmuhani College, had a decisive impact in my philosophical thought. Perhaps it came into the college library as a donation from some foundation. When I reflect back, I can trace that my interest in Marx grew from my interest in analytical philosophy.

Q: If you were given a chance to start all over again from zero what would you want to be?

A: I would be a Chef and will cook for my mother and all the people of my village where I grew up as a young child. I think cooking is the most

fascinating of the arts of human civilization. We live in a civilization dominated by one, or at best, two sense organs: eyes and ears. I do not like it. I think some of the fundamental problems of civilization is this unequal development of the human senses and faculties, of which we are largely unaware. That is why I am fond of olfactory and culinary senses. I would love to be a Chef.

Q: What worries you most as we are standing at the threshold of the 21st century?

A: I am very worried about the young generation who are going to live in a polluted world with unsafe food, poisonous environment, insecure life and dehumanized relationships.

Q: If you have to sum up the philosophy of your life in three sentences, what will that be?

A: There is no distinction between matter and consciousness, this is a bizarre philosophical illusion of our time.

B: Since there is no individual outside community, community is over and above individuals and therefore first comes the responsibility and then the individuality; the rhetorics of the so-called "freedom" or "democracy" is nonsense simply because it denies implicitly or explicitly the foundational role of individual responsibility in our actions.

C: A society based on the logic of monetary profit is a blind society, ability to see depends on our ability to look at horizons beyond capitalism.

Interviewed by Ziaul Karim

Q: What gives you the greatest pleasure?

A: To see myself humiliated. When my false prides and pretensions are revealed I find myself as immensely human — a very interesting character, vulnerable and fragile. These are transparent pauses of life one can use profitably to reflect again and reconstruct oneself. It helps me to reclaim my innocence. It can be very depressing for more serious minded people. Who, I think, lack sense of humour in life. For me these are the best moments, when I authentically realize how stupid I could be. I enjoy the idiot in me.

Q: Do you have any recurring nightmares?

A: I have no nightmares. Eliot Dreams, of course. I love dreaming. Although I went through many traumatic experiences in life, I never had bad dreams. Perhaps because I had a very happy childhood, and I grew up in a village where I was brought up as a child of the village. That is also the reason why I love and trust people a lot. If you trust people you can not have fear. So I have no fear. Consequently, I have no nightmares.

Q: What do you dislike most about yourself?

A: That I am not at all good at time management. I get carried away with issues and forget that it has to be completed within a certain time. I completely lack any sense of time. I take it for granted that I live in eternity and my life is eternal. This is ridiculous. But what can I do? This is me, I keep on imagining that may be I am right. May be time never

ends... It depends...

Q: What is your greatest fear?

A: I have no fears.

Q: What has been the biggest mistake in your life?

A: Learning to read and write and get educated. It has destroyed my ability to use my senses and faculties in a more primordial way in search of knowledge and wisdom. I dream a pre-literate and unmediated state of my senses in order to connect myself with my internal and external Nature. I strongly believe that literacy destroys human faculties and makes one a product of existing culture. We are more open to manipulation. I am not wise because I am literate. If I ever get any taste of wisdom I also instantly realize that I have been able to avoid the so-called literate world and succeeded in thinking beyond the hegemonic paradigm of the elite. Literacy is a hindrance to original reflection. If I had the choice I would not go to school.

Q: What makes you cry?

A: Anything and everything. While I was young my mother taught me not to cry, because I was a boy. The day she told me I cried over the death of an earthworm. It died because I was trying to chase it with a stick. I did hide the crying incident from her, and kept the pretensions of a boy. One day one of my friends taught me to catch jonakis (firebugs) in order to keep them in glass bottles, so that they can glow at night. One day I did the experiment. But in the morning, when I woke up, I noticed all the jonakis were dead. That was the biggest

shock of my life and I cried almost the whole day. I could not eat. I felt terrible. This time I could not hide from my mother. She was a bit surprised, but allowed me to cry. When I grew a bit older I asked my mother about the day and wanted to know why she did not stop me. She looked fondly at me and said, I had a woman in me. So although I was a boy, she felt it was alright for me to cry. However, she told me not to reveal this secret to any one, even my father. I heeded her advice. I took her comment as a compliment because I love my mother so much that I resolved early in my childhood that women are better than men, no matter what is the prevailing opinion. The best of feminine virtue is the ability to cry. The more I grow old I feel overwhelmingly happy and feel like crying out loud when I see two young lovers intensely in love with each other, or hear any such relation. I do not know why it happens. In a newspaper, I read that two young lovers committed suicide because their families did not approve their relationship. I cried for days, I feel a sense of grief in human relations or reciprocity and togetherness.

Q: Who is your role model?

A: It's me. An imaginary Farhad Mazhar in a dream world. Indeed, none. I respect the integrity of each and every person and their right to be different. I consciously avoid being like some one else. That would be very embarrassing. I love and like lots of personalities, but never thought of being one of them.

Q: How important is money to