

face to face

Sufia Kamal: A Pristine Spirit

Poet Sufia Kamal needs no introduction. She is a rare individual who always stood up on principles of justice, democracy, secularism and rights of the underprivileged. In today's nation full of self-seekers, opportunists and hypocrites, Sufia Kamal is in a position away from all — uncorrupted, true and virtuous. She talks about her childhood, her poetry, her country, the present social, economic and political environment, the spirit of the liberation war, her hopes and the future.

The Daily Star (DS): What was the social, economic, political and cultural environment like when you were young?

Sufia Kamal (SK): For Muslim women, there was no socio-economic environment suitable for creative growth. The upper and upper-middle class women were more rigidly restricted from any external contacts and married out at a very young age. The culture was to keep the women at home, train them in household chores and make them become perfect women — docile, ready to please everyone in the family etc.

Navine Murshid

There was a strong current of anti-British movement and my family also believed that women should stay out of it. But I had an indomitable nature and I crossed my limits to get a taste of all there was. I was allowed to learn Arabic and a little of Persian but not Bengali. I made it a point to learn Bengali from the people working in the house.

DS: What led you to be a poet? What was your inspiration?

SK: I had an urge to express myself since I was very young. Then I listened to the working people reciting Puthis and Kissas. The rhythm in them inspired me to write poetry.

DS: How would you categorise your poems written in different time periods, and different political and cultural environment?

SK: I am basically a romantic poet but with time and changes in the political scenes, I became more concerned with the general socio-economic, cultural and political issues. My poems, especially during the Pakistani rule and since 1952, became poems of social consumers, of protest against the Pakistani rulers and reflected a sense of aspiration of an independent and exploitation-free land. Later women's issues also became a concern of my writings.

DS: Give an account of an incident or event that took place when you were young but had a major influence on your life.

SK: Meeting with Begum Rokeya and Kazi Nazrul Islam was a very memorable experience. The publication of my first poem at the age of fourteen is also very memorable because after that my family confined

me to my house. In fact, it was then that I started to realise what the woman's role in society was.

DS: From when did you find yourself involved in socio-economic issues and fighting for the principles you believed in?

SK: Since 1952 and then more vigorously in 1961 when Rabindra Sangit was banned. In the 1960s, I fought against Ayub's regime and formed Mahila Sangram Parishad in 1967 to demand Ayub Khan's resignation and in support of the six- and eleven-point demands. During the liberation war and after that, I found myself working for the war-affected women and people in general.

DS: What influenced you to take up the cudgel on behalf of the women of the society and fight for a positive role for them?

SK: My own experience as a woman made me sensitive towards the condition of other women of all classes. Be poor or middle class or upper class the violence against women in family, society and in public life was always there. Women were exploited and deprived of opportunities. The experience that I gathered while working with the war-affected women in 1971 also made me stand up for them.

DS: What problems have you faced personally because of the fact that you are a woman?

SK: Many — starting from being confined to my own home as a child, denied of my talents, being used as a token woman and threats from reactionaries and collaborators of the Pakistani Army in 1971.

DS: What are your thoughts on the present socio-economic condition and activities?

SK: Now I am very sick. I cannot go out on the streets and listen to people or talk to them, as I have been doing all my life. What worries me most is the condition of the common people. How are they? Has their situation improved?

I agree that over the past few years a lot has been achieved, like bridges, roads and factories, but have all this really helped our people? With whose money are we doing all these? Is it with borrowed money that we are achieving all these? What will happen if money from abroad stops coming all of a sudden? Have we not become increasingly dependent on foreign aid over the years? I do not know much about economics,

but what I do know is that growth that does not come from my own wealth and resources and is dependent on someone else's help cannot be all that good for me.

I do not understand much about free trade and what not. But today I see even the essentials — eggs, lentil, vegetables, fruits and even salt are imported. How can this be good for us?

Unemployment is increasing all the time. Our young girls and boys are coming out of universities, colleges and vocational institutions but there is nothing for them to do. What have we done to provide our young educated people with jobs? In the old days, when these bridges were not there, people made small business by taking people across. Now we just go across the bridge. The bridge improved a lot of things but what about those who lost their daily earnings?

What alternatives have we provided them with? What I am citing is a small example of how modernisation can lead to a higher rate of unemployment if corrective measures are not taken. Widespread unemployment is a fundamental cause for violence and criminal activities among the young.

Losing touch with tradition is the third thing that worries me. I cannot recall any time in the past and I have lived through many critical times when there was a lot of violence and people were very insecure. This is very worrying indeed. The great tradition of our students is being destroyed by criminal elements that have been injected into the student communities by political parties. I cannot believe and I refuse to believe that a genuine student can raise a gun against a fellow student, let alone kill him. These are criminals under the protection of political parties.

These criminals have spread their wings over the whole society. Every aspect of our civic society is suffering under their evil influence. Neighbourly love exists no longer because of the local *mastaans*. People no longer visit their neighbours. Children do not go over to play. Before every neighbourhood — *para, moholla* — used to look after its own community. They took pride and joy in others' success. Now we stay within our shells. It is partly because of the change time entails but mainly because of the criminalisation

of our society.

Rising population concerns me. We have such a small country but so many people. The government and the NGOs are providing loans to buy a cow, a lamb or to raise poultry at home. But the landless and those families with little land and too many people face space constraints. I think it is a very good idea to give small-scale loans to raise home-based farms of all types. But what about the landless people? Can they benefit from such loans?

The lack of respect for women is an issue of concern. Earlier when men and women worked side by side, there was tremendous mutual respect. Now that is all gone. It is the age of competition and I realise that men can resent women entering their world, let them be competition, but why should they disrespect their female counterparts?

DS: What are your feelings on the occasion of Independence Day?

SK: I am very pleased to see that, of late, occasions such as Independence Day and Victory Day are being celebrated in a grand manner. Now, the young people will get to know a little better about our liberation war, what happened at that time and at what cost we gained our independence. Our young people must learn that a country cannot be formed based on religion. That is what Pakistan tried.

There are Muslims all over the world — Arab Muslims, Indian Muslims, Indonesian Muslims, Thai Muslims and Bengali Muslims. Religion is the same for all of us, but we are different nations. Everyone has his or her own religion. A state cannot be built on religion. This, our youngsters must learn, and this was the reason for our war against Pakistan. Muslims of Bengal have always been Muslims and they lived side by side with Hindus for hundreds of years. There was never any friction or fight between them. Everyone must be allowed to live with his or her own religion.

Today, nobody is exploiting us — no Russians, Japanese, Indians or Pakistanis. Today, we Bengalis are fighting against one another and destroying ourselves. It is we who are killing, injuring, abusing and insulting one another. We have become our worst enemies.

Terrorism is doing us immense harm. On the 28th Anniversary of our

Independence, how can I live with the fact that terrorism has engulfed our society completely? This is what you will all have to think about.

I am very hopeful about the ability of the present generation. If vested groups or the so-called leaders do not mislead them, I think our youngsters can build this country and take us out of this shameful poverty and backwardness.

DS: What do you feel towards the present generation in terms of cultural awareness and their attachment to their roots? Do you feel that we have been able to live up to the spirit of 1971?

SK: The present generation has been deliberately kept away from the real spirit of 1971. The whole nation, with the exception of the traitors, *Rajakars* and *Al-Badr*, fought for an exploitation-free, non-communal, egalitarian and above all a democratic society. It was written in the 1972 constitution.

But over the years, the autocratic and military rulers have deliberately erased the spirit of liberation from people's minds for a generation without self-esteem and patriotism is easier to subjugate than people with self-respect and idealism. The present generation is given to believe that Bangladesh is a country they can never live in. No one recognises the responsibility to build this country to make this a liveable place for all. True, they are exposed to wider culture and that would not be something to worry about if they had known their own culture and been in a position to deal with the exposure from a confident position. This is the basis of exchange and not just adopting the external trends that overwhelm them so much that they lose contact with their own culture! Culture is dynamic and will change, but not sweep the original base. These are all linked with internalisation of the spirit of various struggles we had since 1952, the 1960s, the mass upsurge of 1969 and war of 1971. We all must make efforts to see, feel and continuously reflect these in our life and create an atmosphere where the generation gets to know them.

DS: What were the shortcomings for which Bangladesh lagged behind politically over the past twenty-eight years?

SK: The most important reason is that we do not have a courageous leader who can lead us out of this pervasive degener-



"People of Bangladesh have never fallen back from supporting any courageous leader. Our people are even ready to struggle in order to solve the problems that we face today. What we lack is leadership. In Shiekh Mujib's name, our nation plunged into battle with bare hands. Our people are courageous, our leaders are not. Today they recourse to bombastic rhetoric but never take bold decisions because they may be unpleasant. Why? Because they lack courage."

DS: On the threshold of the next millennium, what would your advice be to today's people?

SK: We must bring dignity and respect to our country and our people and reach the fruits of independence to the masses. We must all work together to build our country. We should not allow ourselves to be misled by vested groups in the name of religion and let people exploit our religious sentiments for narrow, political ends. Our young generation must be taught the values of our Liberation War and the ideals for which millions gave up their lives.

The Daily Star thanks Sufia Kamal's daughter for her help in conducting the interview.

When I was a Teenager

THREE consecutive cardiac attacks may have weakened Debdas Chakraborty. Still, a once plain-living-high-thinking man sits like a Victorian-era *babu* with his walking stick lightly placed by his right knee.

His ailment has hit him so hard that Debdas Chakraborty, first, gives a blank but still-glimmering look through the mauve frame of his spectacles, and then, says, "nice to meet you" in English; and doesn't want the shaking hand let off. But it takes a collective effort to squeeze out words from his mouth.

After literally being asked to say some English alphabets (A, B, C etc.), the 71-year-old painter wakes up from his deep contemplation of decaying days. He says very little, and, sometimes, he wrongly utters names of places that need rectification from Debdas's ever-affectionate daughter-in-law Sharmista Sharmin. And when this one-of-the-towering artist of the country's speaks of his past, he says those in a louder-than-usual voice.

The first thing Chakraborty says is the sound of rain, drops on the tin-roofed village huts.

"The sound was so absorbing and full of heartfelt joy that, as a child, I felt drawn into it; it was like music, and that symphony of raindrops still chimes in my heart," says a submerged-into-the-past elderly artist.

This expresses his childhood love for the Nature for which in his mature days he painted quite a number of realistic and semi-realistic pieces related to "rain". Also, as a naturalist, he made his artistic pilgrimage by portraying trees, rivers, water, fishes, clouds, birds, women,

seasons (especially the six seasons of this part of the world) — all from his early consciousness and experience.

"Amar bari Pardipur'e," he says in a louder voice. The village he is talking about is Deobhog village in Shariatpur, now falls under the Greater Faridpur.

Debdas Chakraborty, second among four brothers and a sister, remembers his father — Tarok Brahma Chakraborty — tutoring him with his childhood literacy lessons. He also had some singing experiences from within the family, for everybody entertained the culture of chanting songs.

"Baba also used to inspire me to draw more when he saw my inclination towards making illustrations from the nature, and he was truly the best person for my encouragement. And there were my friends and classmates from who used to marvel while I showed them after sketching something," says Chakraborty.

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But unfortunately and to his own dismay, his memory stammers and then fails when he tries to recall the names of his friends of infant days.

"I was born on the *Boro Din* in 1932, the birthday of Jesus Christ; and then there was a *purnima* (full moon) following my birth, and that's why my parents used to call me with the pet name *Puna*."

Indeed, this retired artist takes pride after the fact that he was born on December 25. And he loves the name his parents used to call him. Even in later days, Chakraborty's nephews

IN CONVERSATION WITH DEBDAS CHAKRABORTY

Sonia Kristy and Ekram Kabir



and nieces addressed him as *Puna Chacha*.

From Chhogaon Madhusadan Biddyalay Deobhog, he went for his matriculation at Calcutta Mitra Institution in 1948, and passed out from Calcutta Government College.

He still entertains himself with the pond-scapes and with the memory of fishing with his buddies like a motion picture, but these days memories are fragmented. "Our family members were all connoisseurs of fishes; as far as I remember, very often our neighbours were invited to taste varieties of fish dishes," he says, his eyes closed.

"I could also cook almost everything," says Chakraborty with a feeble voice, adding that he was his mother's pet. Mother's pet? Yes; and he was never a proverbial runaway type. In fact, he always enjoyed his mother's company, for he found it more peaceful. Well, no wonder that he was quite an expert in kitchen chore, and remembers the in-house 'fish festivals' pretty well!

When he went out, he would roam around looking for the best site of his surroundings. He remembers a *shanka* (bamboo-made bridge) as his first subject to sketch with a touch of seriousness. And afterwards, as long as he spent his nascent days in the village the *shanka* became his favourite place. Sitting on that he sketched boats and boatmen.

Accordingly, later in his professional life as an artist, Chakraborty's mother, Snehatala, as her name suggests, was an idol of

affection. "There was a great famine when I was young, and I saw my mother distributing rice from our barns; and here she exercised her absolute freedom, father didn't say a single word while she was caring for the starved."

Noticeably, although rich to the extent of a *zamindar*, the family members never suffered any headstrong impositions — very rare for the time.

Every child, in his or her babyhood, tried his or her hands in drawing pictures, but Chakraborty found it intriguing and exciting, and that the reason he started his institutional manoeuvre at Calcutta Art College.

Chakraborty's college life was a bit rough. Rough in the sense that he was rusticated from the college — along with Bijon Das and Shomnath Hor — for his active involvement with the communist party at that time. More so, he had been in some financial difficulties at that phase, but he never let his parents know about it.

Scion of a landed aristocratic family, Debdas felt an urge to put the establishment in question, aiming to bring about a change in the society. When he came back to the country after being expelled from the Calcutta Art College, it was not exactly the return of the prodigal son because he never wavered from his progressive line of thinking. He is grateful to Zainul Abedin for admission into the Dhaka Art College.

The element of unwavering against odds still exists, for he has been telling — he still does as his children not to lose hope. Meeting with and talking to Debdas Chakraborty lead one to believe he has still faith on everything he believed.