

People

face to face

Anu Muhammad: Symbol of Intellectual Honesty

Anu Muhammad belongs to the rare breed of thinkers who talks sense and can analyse his time dispassionately. Each of his 13 publications makes its own particular intervention into current debates, arguing provocatively for a committed political and theoretical criticism. His interest moves back and forth from economics to anthropology and from anthropology to history. Anu teaches economics at Jahangirnagar University. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim.

Q: Back at the helm after 21 years, how do you think the Awami League government has performed so far?

A: Optimism was there among the Bengali intelligentsia. Especially, secularists assumed that with the AL back in power there would be a significant contribution to the field of education and culture for the party has a long political background which dates back to the pre-independent era and beyond, and most importantly, it has its base at the grass-roots level. But the optimism was not well-grounded in logic and, while expectations ran high, it left out of consideration a very important element of social history as regards the nature of class formation in the post-independent era. We follow that we will arrive at a conclusion that the optimism stems from emotion and lack of understanding of the changing pattern of class formation.

Q: Would you please elaborate.

A: When the Awami League assumed power after independence Bangladesh was a small ownership society. You may call it *petit bourgeois* dominated society. But things began to change very fast. The new-born country acted as a spring-board to the rise of a new rich class and rapid integration with the capitalist economy. By 1973, global capitalist lords such as World Bank and IMF strengthened their position in Bangladesh. The Bengali ruling class, which was just beginning to look growing after independence, flourished during the military rule between 1975-90. Using a short term, we can call this emerging class as *lumpen bourgeois* who have hardly had any direct connection with production, who are either bank defaulters, or smugglers. This is the class that has flourished over the years. The major political parties of the country have direct links with these *nouveau riche*.

Q: But what were the social conditions that provided the seeds to the growth of this rich class?

A: To understand that we have to look back and see who took over power of the

independent Bangladesh and what was their class character. For example, socialism from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with his social background has to be mere rhetoric. He was basically a bundle of contradictions. On the one hand, when Sheikh Mujib tried to advocate socialism he lost the confidence of the fledgling rich class, and on the other, when he couldn't implement socialist ideals he began to lose the support of the mass. The new ruling class of 1975 basically emerged by making most of this confusion. Since the new ruling class that was born in 1975 had no specific agenda to latch on to, except plundering wealth, they began to behave more or less as junior partner of IMF and World Bank. Now look at the faceless bureaucrats and policy-makers who control our life. They don't have any agenda. What really interests our bureaucrats most is floating new projects and attracting more foreign aid. Their future, development and existence depend largely on foreign aid. The Bengali ruling class and its components, civil and military bureaucracy, have not had any agenda for capitalist development, either. What we have now is a shop-keeper's economy where you will see mushrooming of shopping malls and centres rather than industrial growth.

A foreign journal once wrote that the living standard of Bangladeshi rich people is comparable to any western business tycoon. Their luxury in living comes from plundering of our national resources. Now, our major political parties are based on this class formation. Naturally, these parties will represent the class that grows within this class formation. Mainly because of this, it is quite impossible for our leading political parties to come up with any fresh agenda to change the existing social system.

Although it seems that there exists a yawning difference between the BNP and the AL, in actuality, there isn't much of a difference between the two which would surface if we take a closer look at their major economic programmes. For ex-

ample, in signing of GATT treaty or making oil and gas contracts or faithfully following the agenda of World Bank, IMF and WTO, there is no difference between the Awami League and the BNP. What is interesting is both parties are in a competition to prove that they are worthy of implementing the agenda of the donors. Donor is not the correct word, though. It has gained popularity through media. I should say global lords or, more specifically, the global partners in ruling Bangladesh. The main dispute between two parties lies in their contribution to the political history of Bangladesh and, in cultural firmament, each party has their own choice of words to express their idea about culture. That's it. Other than these, there is no difference between the two.

When the Awami League assumed power the areas where it could have made the difference was in trying the collaborators of 1971. They couldn't bring about any perceptible change in education policy and they virtually retained the BNP's outlook about the political use of religion.

In oil and gas, the contracts that were signed by the BNP, AL's main task is now to implement those.

On the whole, I don't think that the AL has, in any way, brought about any changes in any sphere of life.

Q: How do you look at the share market scam? Incidentally it followed AL's assumption of power.

A: If we take a closer at it, we will be able to identify quite a few reasons. Look at the mobility of capital internationally. Now, globally we can see that financial sector draws more investment than any other sector. Businessweek once termed this as money for money economy. We may call it even a casino economy where there is no scope for productive economy but profit margin is abnormally high. If we look at foreign investment we will see a huge amount was made available in the share market.

After KAFCO, the investment at the share market was the largest. KAFCO is a tragic case. After KAFCO, the investment at the share market was the largest. KAFCO is a tragic case.

so was the share market. Another factor was the national election. We know that black money comes out of its caches during elections. This black money found share market as a fertile ground for multiplication.

And the third one was management problems of the AL government.

Over the past three years the Finance Minister has only fed us with rhetoric. The biggest was with share market where he saw no problem. Even when share market was embroiled in crises we haven't seen him efficiently handling it. These three factors together intensified the crises in the share market. The result is what *The Economist* termed 'slaughter of innocence'. This is one kind of genocide and it will take a long time to heal the wounds of the innocent victims.

Another aspect of this high-pitched drama is a group of local investors who, in a very well-organised manner, siphoned money from the market. We know their names from the case filed against them by the government. Even if we follow this case it will lend us insight into not only the class formation of the country but also the relations of government with this rich class.

Look at the way government filed each case. These lost weight at the very outset. Now, I think the case itself is an interesting subject for study. It reveals that in a class like ours rule of law is only a farce. Moreover, the way Bangladesh Bank is dealing with defaulters

speaks of one basic truth about this class system — that power is not only limited to elected members of the parliament but rich people also have the taste of it.

Q: How do you look at the degeneration of police? Is it a reflection of our class system?

A: The image of police as protectors is a myth. They protect the interest of the ruling class. A nation stands on the belief that it is for the people, a government tries to project its source of power is people, and police stand on the image that they are the protectors of the common mass. To protect these images, a certain level of

efficiency or administrative skill is needed which neither the present government nor the ruling class possesses. The testimony to their inefficiency is the problems of police. We have seen Ansar rebellion few years ago. They were brutally silenced. Now, it is really difficult to identify different between a criminal and a police except for the uniform. The government has failed to manage and control their important instrument, police.

Q: Let's change the subject and look at development issues. NGOs claim that they have made significant contribution to liberate womenfolk and help them lead a life of dignity.

A: I don't subscribe to the idea that NGOs are trying to liberate downtrodden women of Bangladesh. NGOs use this slogan as a strategic move to gain social acceptability. In any society when the womenfolk come out of traditional boundary it happens so because of some social factors. When market or capitalist activities starts to grow or when pre-capitalist society breaks down the socio-economic conditions to keep women into the traditional life of drudgery also falls apart, to meet the demand of reality and also because of social changes women come out of their traditional boundary.

After the independence we have witnessed the growth of women workers in different arena of life. In the eighties garment industry absorbed a significant number of women workers. Before women were not as visible a human entity as we see them now. Is there an NGO involved in employing women workers in garment industry?

No. Women are working as labourer at construction site, selling rice cakes at road side, or at various job to sustain themselves; no NGO has a hand in it. It is happening because of the changing reality. Rather NGOs make micro-credit available to the traditional household work of a woman.

Their productivity or mobility as raising cows, forming and producing puffed rice is basically keeps them within their traditional household boundary. If there had been

proper industrialisation in Bangladesh, women's mobility would have been greater and socially they would have been more respected.

Q: How do you perceive micro-credit as a system?

A: In our country the research works done on economic issues, or journals and periodicals that carry stories on business and economic development are not at all objective and mostly dense with emotion rather than logic. At times, particularly the newspapers, glorify a myth or even construct one. Micro-credit is one such myth. The Bengali middle-class always suffers from inferiority complex which is why when foreign media bring something in focus they want to clutch on to that.

If we look at micro-credit in plain eyes the claim that this credit is a force to alleviate

poverty would appear a myth. If it had acted as such a force there would not have been a continuous influx of people from the rural areas to the city.

If 50 per cent of the rural Bangladesh has been covered by micro-credit then how come the volume of migration from villages to cities is still so great. Secondly, we will analyse some of the data found in different surveys done by the government such as household expenditure survey between 80s and 90s when micro-credit flourished.

Micro-credit is no longer limited with the NGOs. It is very much a GO programme.

For example, the PKSF, a government organisation, is giving funds to small NGOs to disburse micro-credit. Finance Minister now emphasises on the fact that 50 per cent of the development budget has been devoted to poverty alleviation.

A major share of this 50 per cent goes to micro-credit schemes that is providing people with small loans. Now what is the net result of all these loans disbursed during the past twenty years. If we look at the rate of poverty alleviation as figured in the household survey it will take 909 years to alleviate rural poverty provided there is no major disaster during that time frame. The latest household survey (1994-95) says growth rate in rural poverty is the same as it was in the previous years but progress rate in urban poverty has deteriorated. It now

seems that it would take more time than 909 years. The way micro-credit has been associated with poverty alleviation programme we can say it is all bogus and from data we can say it has no foundation whatsoever to change the lot of the downtrodden.

When I was a Teenager . . .

NURJAHAN Begum, litterateur, journalist and the editor of *Begum*, country's first illustrated women magazine, was born in an age when women in this country were struggling to break the fetter of tradition and breath the air of liberty and freedom. It was an uphill battle, especially because the stiffest opposition came from the family. Nurjahan Begum was indeed fortunate in this regard. Her father, Mohammed Nasiruddin, himself was an iconoclast in the true sense of the word. He was the first Muslim to publish illustrated Bengali magazine, *Shaogat* and *Begum*.

There is a controversy about my father's educational background. People say his education did not go beyond the *pathshala* (primary school), but the truth is, during those days Muslim boys had to study in madrasah and not school. But my grandfather broke that rule and put his son in a *pathshala* along with Hindu boys. And from there my father was admitted to Harin High School but couldn't complete the entrance (matriculation) exams because, by that time, my grandfather had died and as the eldest son, he had to support his family."

Those were the days of great struggle. Nasiruddin was ready to do anything for the welfare of his family. The small amount of cultivable land he had was not sufficient, so he started supplying books, magazines, and notebooks to different schools.

One of his friends introduced him to a ticket checker of the launch *ghat* (jetty) who was on leave for two months and Nasiruddin took his place. "But another friend of my father gave him the greatest break. When that friend, a rich Hindu in insurance business, found that my father was basically doing nothing, he offered him a job. During those

days making insurance or using money in banks were restricted for the Muslims. But that friend convinced my father and took him to Oriental Insurance Company in Chandpur. There the authority was impressed to see a Muslim interested in such a business and encouraged him to join the company. My father was the first Muslim in insurance business and became very successful for he was a very handsome man and could easily convince people. This insurance business was the turning point of his life."

Nasiruddin had always harboured a latent desire — bringing out a Bengali illustrated magazine for the Muslim. Everybody discouraged him, for in those days, no Muslim magazine had pictures. But Nasiruddin was determined and started looking for press. But when he actually found one publisher interested in his venture, there were problems on another front. The press, owned by a Hindu gentleman, did not have Arabic font, therefore, was unwilling to take the job.

Nasiruddin had other plans. He wanted his magazine to be truly Bengali. And thus in 1918, with Begum Rokeya's poem in it, *Shaogat* saw the light of the day. The magazine created a sensation among the Bengali Muslim and inspired the young generation immensely. Rabindranath Tagore also praised Nasiruddin for taking such a timely step.

Nurjahan Begum early childhood was spent in Chaltiajoli with her mother, Fatema Begum, and her uncles. Her father was always away in Calcutta and couldn't afford to take his family along. Things had to change, however.

"I was only three. I was so restless that my mother used to tie me up with a long rope, the other end tied up with a khuti (pillar). One day, after having

IN CONVERSATION WITH NURJAHAN BEGUM



by Sonia Kristy

my meal when I fell asleep, she let me loose and went to attend household chores. A few minutes later, I woke up and went to a nearby pond with a friend named Amina. I was a real healthy child and as I bent to see water suddenly I fell down into water. Amina ran to my mother and started screaming 'Maleka (my nick name) is sleeping in the water.'

Every morning I hurried and rescued me. I was senseless. Someone held me upside down and started spinning me around holding my ankle until I threw up. My father became very angry with my mother when he heard of the incident.

"When I was about four years old, I fell into water again. One day all my uncles were going to the *haat* (village market) and I started nagging to go with them. Then, even the little girls were not allowed to go to market places. So my uncles said no and told me to go inside the house. Depressed and angry, I went on an errand. I was pensive and before I could realise where I was, I slipped, fell over into the water of a canal flowing through the village. The current was really strong and I was about to drown when fortunately a man spotted me. He started screaming, jumped into water and rescued me. Then it was the same story. Someone held me by the ankles and spun me to get the water out of my stomach.

When my father heard of the incident, he didn't want to take any more risk and wrote to my mother that he had made all arrangements for us to live with him in Calcutta.

"All my uncles were opposed to the idea, for no female member of the Sheikh family had ever lived in Calcutta for fear that she would become a Christian. But my father didn't pay any attention. On the first day I was really excited, got up early and was all dressed up long before the school bus came. The school was really excellent. The teachers were so nice. Every morning after the assembly, Begum Rokeya used to visit our class. I still remember her, dressed in white and with a kind smile on her face. One look at her used to fill our little heart with respect. There we had to stay a long time; from ten in the morning to four in the afternoon. After lunch, all the students of the baby class were sent to take rest. They had this beautiful little canopy made for us and those who had fallen asleep were not allowed to sleep as long as they wanted. It was fun all the way."

Nurjahan and her family started living on the top floor of the *Shaogat* building. There she enjoyed a real cultural atmosphere as there used to be a regular gathering of writers, artists and poets. She had the opportunity to meet Kazi Nazrul Islam quite often. Nazrul was a regular contributor of *Shaogat* and attended the gathering almost regularly. Even though Nasiruddin's mother didn't wear *burkha* (veil), she never came in front of anyone. So in the absence of servant, Nurjahan took tea and betel leaf for the poet.

"When I was seven years old, the *Shaogat* arranged a reception for Nazrul in the Albert Hall. On the day of the reception, a huge car was decorated with lots of roses and I saw the poet, dressed up handsomely, getting into the car with a broad grin. But besides all this, the beautiful decoration of the car struck me most."

Nurjahan's schooling began when she was only four at Begum Rokeya's Sakhawat Memorial Girls High School. Begum Rokeya was attached to *Shaogat* and even though she never came in front of many, she used to keep in touch with everyone over phone. So when Begum Rokeya heard that Nasiruddin had a little

daughter, she requested him to put Nurjahan in her school.

"My mother raised serious objection for I was too young but my father didn't pay any attention. On the first day I was really excited, got up early and was all dressed up long before the school bus came. The school was really excellent. The teachers were so nice. Every morning after the assembly, Begum Rokeya used to visit our class. I still remember her, dressed in white and with a kind smile on her face. One look at her used to fill our little heart with respect. There we had to stay a long time; from ten in the morning to four in the afternoon. After lunch, all the students of the baby class were sent to take rest. They had this beautiful little canopy made for us and those who had fallen asleep were not allowed to sleep as long as they wanted. It was fun all the way."

"But Nurjahan left school when she was in class three. She had to learn Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Bengali and English in the early class and her father felt it was too much a pressure for a little girl like her. She then got admitted to Belatal Girls High School. It was also a nice school and she studied there till class five."

"Once again, I returned to my first school, for Begum Rokeya had requested my father before her death and convinced him that the atmosphere of the school had changed. The principal then was an English woman. Some of the teachers were also English. It was more of an English medium school. So I returned and studied there till matriculation."

"Besides academic subjects we had sewing and painting classes. In the music class, we had to play different musical instruments. Our school used to hold various functions, musical programmes, staged *ekanika* (one-act play), arranged different exhibitions on sewing, painting and so on."

Nurjahan passed her matriculation in 1942 and got admitted in Lady Brabourne College.

"I entered into a complete world of freedom — a freedom I had never had before. But we knew our limits and never tried to cross it. We never bunked classes or went outside the college. If there was an emergency, we sought our seniors' permission, not the principal's. When I became a senior, I helped some junior students in their mischievous deeds like meeting with boyfriends and something like that. It was in my college life, I felt attracted towards staging drama from Sharatchandra and others. We had a group and we staged a couple of plays. Our teachers used to help and inspire us. The relation between teachers and students were healthy. They used to invite us over their place and we could talk about anything with them."

Nurjahan Begum spent an exciting teenage life.

"I had a liberal father who used to bring home various books and magazines for me. I still remember a geographic journal with beautiful pictures. But I loved novels more than poetry. Sharatchandra was my favourite."

"I had my initiation in editing, retouching etc. from my father. Sometimes he would ask me to bring a particular file and when I did bring the right one he congratulated me and it made me happy."

"With every good movie released, my father used to take me and my friends to the theatre. But my favourite was *Deudas*, which took me to tears."

She expects liberal family atmosphere for this generation to bloom, because she thinks without openness, nothing comes the way one wants.