

People

Face to Face

Fazal Shahabuddin: A Poets' Poet

Fazal Shahabuddin has from the beginning been a poets' poet having a dense, compressed body of work. His complex rich, multi-layered sequence of prose poems, *Kabi* (poet), are probably the summit of his considerable achievement. Precision of language and mysterious sense of loneliness combine to make a transcendental purity. In the fifties when Bangladeshi literature was in the making Fazal along with Shamsur Rahman and Al-Mahmud constructed a fresh language for a new nation to pursue their dreams. He is also the founder-editor of the longest serving poetry magazine *Kabikantha*. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim.

Question: After the fall of Ershad you were branded as a *dadal* (aide) of the ex-president. Now with the passage of time your *dadal* title has been replaced by the epithet *Bandhu* (friend). We would like to hear from you about the whole thing.

Answer: I find the question quite amusing for various reasons. Many of my friends have served under the Ershad government. For example, Shamsur Rahman was the editor of the state-run *Dainik Bangla*. He, as the editor, approved the state-sponsored news and views. Moreover, as you all know, it is Shamsur Rahman who promoted Ershad as a poet in the pages of *The Dainik Bangla*. I haven't served Ershad in any way that I can be blamed of and haven't written anything eulogising Ershad's poetical achievements.

All my activism is directed to poetry. I am one of the founders *Kabikantha*, which first came out way back in 1956. In the 1980s, I initiated the spring poetry festival. Irregular though, the event provides a platform for the poets to unite. It is a union of creative minds and poetry is their mode of expression. Hours after hours, it is

I have a strange relationship with Shamsur Rahman. When the *Kabita Kendra* came into being, he was one of the founders, to be precise. I still don't understand why Rahman deserted the *Kendra*, under what political pressure.

We had planned to hold an Asian Poetry Festival. The idea was to bring Dhaka under limelight as the capital of poetry.

You know the hassle of organising event of such magnanimity. I was moving like a ping-pong ball from one office to another but of no avail. Wherever I went I received cold reception. Frustrated and dejected, I planned to meet the president, then General Ershad, to give it last try. Syed Ali Ahsan, the then president of our *Kendra*, tried to dissuade me. "It is never going to work," he said.

I was adamant. "If it doesn't I will not pursue the

idea anymore," said I. The same day upon returning to my office I rang Ershad's press secretary Tajul Islam and conveyed our intention. He asked me to call back the next day at around eleven in the morning. The next day while I was waiting anxiously for the clock to tick 11, I received a phone call from Tajul Islam. He said that the president was quite excited about the idea of holding an Asian Poetry Festival and would like to meet the *Kendra* representatives.

We, a team of eight including Syed Shamsul Haq, Syed Ali Ahsan and myself, met Ershad. He appeared very enthusiastic about the whole thing and assured us of all possible co-operation. But before meeting him we all discussed among ourselves that we were not going to seek financial assistance from him. Because once we had the pecuniary cushion, it would be rather obligatory which was not what we wanted. That is the first time I met Ershad, but as an editor of a state-run daily Shamsur Rahman must have come in contact with Ershad much earlier than that.

My relationship with Ershad basically is through the Asian Poetry Festival. But, suddenly I began to experience a fair amount of neglect and cold shoulder from my friends who termed me as a *dadal* of Ershad. After the fall of Ershad regime there were at least two attacks on my life. I know the people who engineered the attempts on my life. A poster was published right after the fall of Ershad in the face of mass upsurge naming 13 persons including Syed Ali Ahsan, Al-Mahmud and myself as *dalals* who were destroying the nation.

On December 12, 1990, Al-Mohammed had just entered my residence at Sabujbagh when a rain of brickbats started crashing against the windowpanes and roof tops, and we heard somebody shouting obscene words targeting Al-Mahmud and myself.

Terrified, we helped Mahamud escape the scenes through the backdoor. A few

minutes later three young men broke into our house brandishing automatic pistols. Hurling abuse, they inquired about Mahamud and me. At this stage, my 70-year old mother faced the maniacs and said, "Do you think that we will keep Mahmud here to get him killed by you. I have let him escape."

My mother's almost cinematic move thwarted them and they left the scene.

Q: Do you still have relations with Ershad?

A: Yes I do. We were out of touch after he had been sent to jail. After he was set free, Ershad took the initiative to restore the relationship. One day, Ershad was under house arrest then, my phone rang and the voice on the other side of the phone said, "An old friend is calling." At first I could not recognise the voice but when he said the he had come of jail and was now under house arrest, I realised who it was. He expressed his desire to meet me and I did not say no.

Ershad often lament over one thing.

"Did I do any harm to Shamsur Rahman. I consider him to be a great poet but fail to understand why he is vociferously against me."

Q: Let us change the subject and switch to the area of your interest and work. Your name is associated with *Kabikantha* which first came into being in 1956. From the platform of the magazine you have also successfully organised eight poetry festivals, and also you are the only person to dream of a poetry festival at the Asian level and materialised it in the eighties. Do this kind of activism somehow comes between you and poetry?

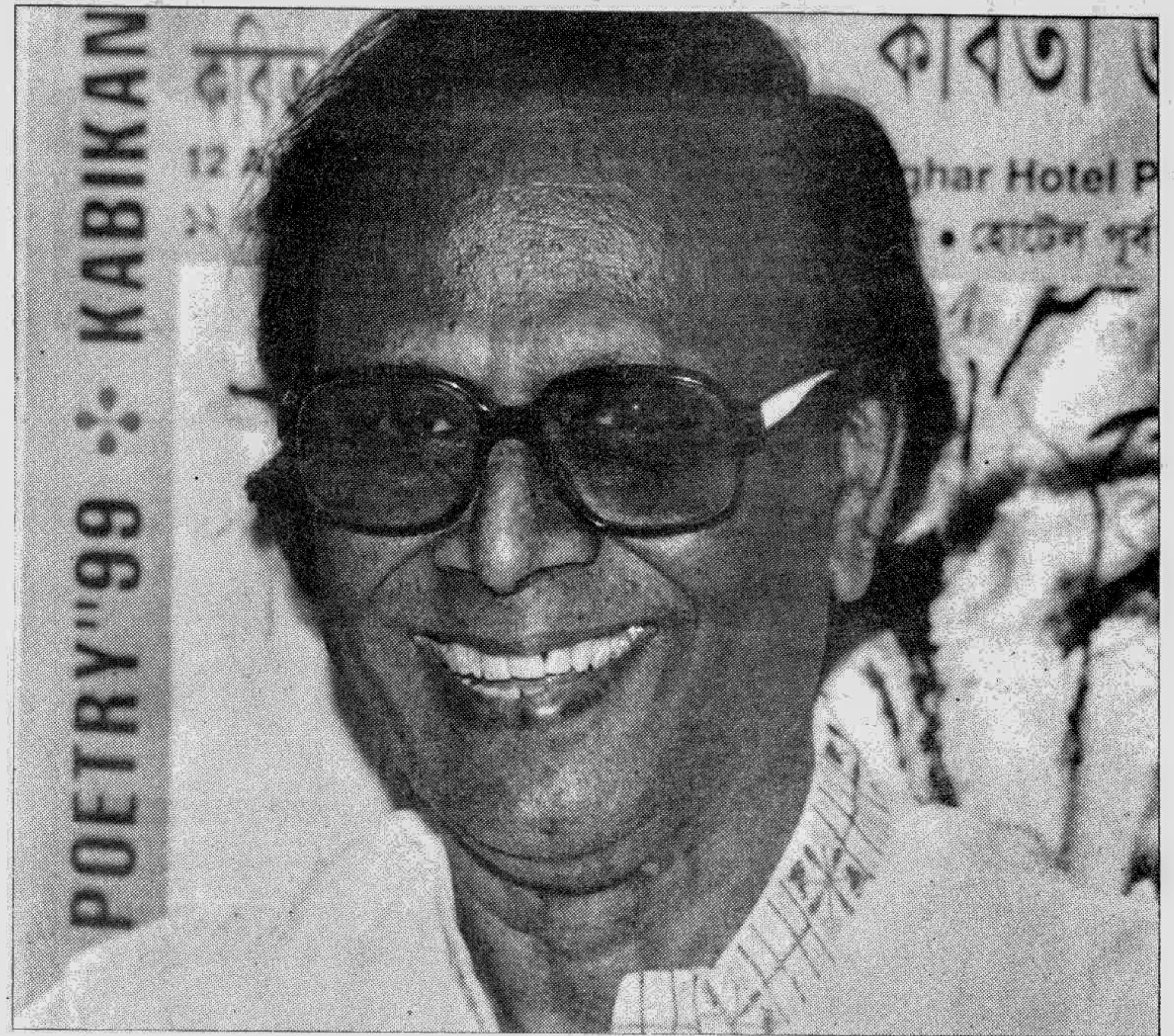
A: If one is involved in poetry-related activities, then I would say he is living in poetry. Forgetting everything his immediate realities, not even Tagore composed his poems. True, writing poems is an act in the loneliness of a heart, at the same time it is an act where a poet is never alone, intellectually and emotionally communicating with silent readers. Since 1956, I am with the *Kabikantha*. This

is part of my addiction to poetry. I had to suffer mental tortures and receive pains but never left it. The *Kabikantha* is part of my existence. We have a glowing example before us in Bangla literature about meaningful editorship.

Buddhadev Bose ran the most successful poetry magazines, *Kabita*, in the history of Bengali literature for over twenty years. Do you think his own writing has suffered for that? No. He has written exactly what he would have written had he not been involved in *Kabita*. We all know the influence *Kabita* had on poetry during its life-time. Almost all the significant poets of 40s and 50s were product of the magazine. *Kabikantha* may not be as successful but many a poet of the 50s and 60s began their literary career in the pages of *Kabikantha*. And in the 50s, it provided an alternative platform for the Bengali Muslim poets, away from Calcutta, the traditional capital of art and culture of Bengal. We thought we needed our own vehicle to express ourselves. *Kabikantha* is the outcome of that realisation. I personally feel that any activity that leads one to the realm of poetry is not harmful to a poetic soul.

Q: In the 50s and 60s we have seen poetry magazines such as *Kanthaswar*, *Samakal*, and, of course, *Kabikantha* shaping the Bengali sensibility and acting as a source of literary movement. This tradition it seems has gone with the wind. Today, we don't have a literary magazine as influential as the *troika* just mentioned. And what is most alarming is readership has hit the rock bottom. Would you please shed light on this matter?

A: Don't take me amiss. I'm not against independence. But you have to agree that after we have achieved independence everything is being politicised. Today nothing is beyond the grip of politics. If you are a poet and don't have the blessings of a political party you have no place in the society. It was not like that even in the time of military governments in the erstwhile East Pakistan. We were conscious



"We were basically a bunch of precocious lads — Samsur Rahman, Al Mahmood, Shahid Kadri, and myself — started writing at a very early age. At the age of seventeen my poem was first published and when my work first appeared in the pages of Buddhadev Bose's famous poetry magazine *Kabita* I was only twenty. I don't know how we were lured into poetry, but after being emotionally into it I only knew there was no getting away from there: We were under the spell of the Muse and that was our destiny."

about politics which is exemplified in the language movement of 1952. But the present literary scene is in a real bad shape. Poetry or for that matter any form of writing as such is controlled and guided by party interest. Political party now promotes a poet or a writer. See the centenary of Nazrul's birth is being celebrated by the ruling party and the opposition separately. This is an ominous sign.

Q: But writers and poets are not involved in party politics.

A: Yes, they are not in active politics. But what I'm trying to say is that they are victims of petty party politics. The result: some unwanted persons have become big brothers of poetry. I remember when we — Shamsur Rahman, Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Mahfuzul-lah, M Humayun — used to write for *The Daily Pakistan*, we did it with open mind and there was no attempt to control us. But in the independent Bangladesh where we have expected an unhindered flow of creative

energy, it has lost all its fire in the face of bad politics.

When I was the editor of weekly *Bichitra* I have seen how political forces wanted to manipulate the magazine. I couldn't cope with it and eventually resigned from *Bichitra*.

I don't believe that there is a shortage of competent bright young men to bring out quality literary magazines but the problem lies elsewhere. Before they could dream of something, pursue their idealism they are victims of dirty political game.

Q: Let's move close to poetry which is a territory deep inside of your heart. How have you taken to poetry?

A: It's like asking a lover how he has fallen into love. One can't really answer this question satisfactorily. We were basically a bunch of precocious lads — Samsur Rahman, Al Mahmood, Shahid Kadri, and myself — started writing at a very early age. At the age of seventeen my poem was first published and when my work first appeared in the

pages of Buddhadev Bose's famous poetry magazine *Kabita* I was only twenty. I don't know how we were lured into poetry, but after being emotionally into it I only knew there was no getting away from there: We were under the spell of the Muse and that was our destiny.

I was supposed to take my intermediate exams in 1952. But with emotional waves of 52's language movement crushing on the shores of our mind, I preferred to work for the movement rather than sat for the exams. My father who was a disciplined man was gravely shocked at my move not to appear in the exams. He wanted my mother to convey his disappointment to me and tell me that if I continue to lead an aimless life I must leave the house. I said my mother that I require a seven day's time to decide upon which way to go. After the week was over I for the first time faced my father. I remember his weighty voice: "What have you decided? In reply I said, "You may not

like it, but I have decided to opt for poetry."

Visibly upset he just said, "Buddhadev Bose was a brilliant student and I presume was not a lesser poet than you are. What you have decided is your decision. And there ended our brief conversation."

Q: At present you are working on your collected poems which is about 600 pages. Interestingly you haven't publish a collection of your best poems as there is a Bengali tradition of doing so. I remember Buddhadev Bose in the introduction of his best poems wrote quoting Rabindranath Tagore: "Nature abhors superlatives". Is it something of that sort worked in you or what?

A: Look at the tradition of the West. You wouldn't see anything as best poems rather you would see such anthologies as selected poems or collected poems. The idea of best poems is a commercial invention of Calcutta's Ananda Publishing Group. I find it absolutely funny.

When I was a Teenager

"MY teenage days were simply out of this world," said Rowshan Jamil as she took a trip down memory lane. "People of this generation cannot even imagine how exciting those days were. Mine was extra special. I really miss those days... our palatial house where each day was like a picnic, taking dancing lessons from a *bajji* (professional dancer) without knowing who they really were, performing at different functions as an amateur songstress in a conservative society."

She was born in an affluent business-oriented family with a *nawabi* link on her mother's side and spent her early life in her father's grand *Karim Cottage* in Rokonpur of the old town. Her father, Abdul Karim, was a businessman, "a real busy man." His third wife, Rowshan's mother, Hosne Ara Begum, was a typical housewife and a loving mother.

"There was a huge age difference between my parents. I was my mother's first child for twelve long years. We were like friends," Rowshan Jamil said. "She was the one who inspired in me the passion for dancing."

Going to movies was an obsession for Rowshan's mother and she was her escort.

"Whenever a new movie was released, she made sure that she didn't miss it.

Sometimes, she would send the maid to my school, Quamrunnessa Girls School, to tell me that she was very ill and I had to go home. As I rushed home on the *tom-tom* (a phaeton of sort), my heart pounding in apprehension of something serious, I would find her waiting with an impish smile. A great movie was on and she wanted me to come along, and therefore the trick.

"I was quite young then and could never watch the entire movie. Often, I fell asleep. But whenever there was a singing or dancing scene, I couldn't simply take my eyes off the screen. It just entranced me. 'How lucky the actresses are,' I used to tell myself. I was ready to trade the whole world to learn to dance like them. It wasn't possible in those days, for the society was extremely conservative."

But that didn't stop Rowshan. Everyday she would lock her room, played a gramophone record and danced on her own throughout the day. Soon Hosne Ara Begum came to know about her daughter's passion. She was quite enthusiastic. She told a few of her relatives about it and soon Rowshan found herself performing at different family gatherings.

"I was good. I could tell that from the overawed looks."

She was tireless as well in her creative pursuit.

IN CONVERSATION WITH ROWSHAN JAMIL

By Sonia Kristy



This photograph was taken in the early 50's

Photo: Zahid

Sometimes, when there was no gramophone, she would just sing herself and dance to it.

"Whenever I went to *nana-bari* (grandpa's place), I would have a big audience. People in the village would insist on taking me along whenever my mother went

there."

Naturally, one day her father came to know about her daughter's passion. Instead of imposing any restriction, which might have been the normal response, he ordered his manager to appoint a tutor for her daughter.

"It was a very difficult

task. There were very few dancing tutors then. So, the manager employed a *bajji sardar* (leader of a professional dancing troupe)."

Rowshan's dream came true. The sardar was extremely impressed to find such a talented and devoted student. As he thought that

her parents wanted her to become a professional dancer, soon he started to teach her how to impress the audience with different moves and how to collect money from them offering a silk handkerchief in front of them. Rowshan's naive father often took delight in watching his daughter's interesting performance but had no idea what it was all about. But when her mother came to know about the handkerchief part she became suspicious.

"After all, she came from a *nawab* family. She was quite familiar with such dance. The sardar had to leave."

Little Rowshan was upset and she started to cry her eyes out. Then one of her stepbrothers consoled her by saying that the *sardar* was actually a dacoit leader.

"He said, 'The sardar was actually waiting to rob the house.' I was so relieved."

Meanwhile, her parents were contemplating to marry their daughter off. "I was fifteen, then. The 'ripe' age, as people would say, to get married."

With the thought came lots of restriction.

"No more dancing," or-

dered my mother. There were more restrictions. I was confined to the boundaries of home and school. Then, one day, one of elder sisters started taking lessons on music and I joined her."

Soon she became her teacher's favourite.

"I had a sweet voice. In no time I started performing at different functions as an amateur artist and became quite famous. Organisers would come to hire me from far and wide. It seemed that singing would be my career."

That was not to be, though.

"In a cultural function at school, for the first time in my life, I saw a girl performing classical dance. She was so good that no sooner had the programme ended, I ran to the girl to know where she had learnt to dance like that. Her name was Tapati. She told me that at their house in Rankin Street, two persons had opened a dancing school and she was a student there."

So, the very next day she went to visit the school.

"One of the instructors was Bulbul Choudhury and the other was... Gawhar. I was ready to sacrifice anything to get admitted in that school but my mother wouldn't allow me."

So Rowshan figured out an alternate way. She took her parents' permission to admit her younger sister. Everyday she used to go with

her, watched their dancing lesson attentively and practised at home. When Bulbul Choudhury came to learn about her dancing skill, he inspired her and influenced her to attend different functions on behalf of the school.

"At about that time, Gawhar and I fell in love. He was a very handsome young man and many of his students were his admirers."

But it was Rowshan who stole his heart.

"It was no less than a romantic movie. When my brothers and cousins came to know about our emotional attachment, they got furious. Gawhar had to run away to escape their wrath. As far as I was concerned, it was restriction again. I had to promise that I would never ever think of him."

The major obstacle was the fact that Gawhar was a Hindu and came from a poor family.

"However, we managed to convince my parents. Gawhar told then that he would change his religion. Finally, it was a happy ending. We got married in 1952."

Life has changed a lot over the years. She is aware of the changes. However, she believes that something never changes.

"Determination and strong desire to pursue your dreams hold the key. That is true for anybody of any age, of any time."