

Face to Face

Shahabuddin: Beyond the Domain of Art

by Navine Murshid

A youth he did water colours. Later he moved to oil. With the change in medium, came the change of subject. Nature became dominant. He loved, and still does, portraying wild birds, animals, trees and different intricacies that natural settings include. Today his paintings reflect force, energy, speed and movement.

"This is the effect of the liberation war. After the war, I subconsciously put in elements of happenings during that time," Shahabuddin Ahmed said while talking to The Daily Star at his Kalabagan residence.

Painting to him is a passion, a passion that transcends social taboos against art and elevates his works to a position envied by many.

From childhood Shahabuddin had an attraction towards painting. He remembers the art school at the Charukala Institute premises. Pakistani and Bihari children dominated the place. They went there to have fun, bringing with them chocolates and ice cream. It was, for them, a picnic of sort. They spoke in Urdu or English, something that little Shahabuddin could not relate to. There was a communication gap and thus no interaction.

"The first day I went there, my mother was with me. Seeing all those children I was nervous. Halfway there, I tugged at my mother's sari, 'I don't want to go,' I wailed. She picked me up and took me in. I felt timid and low. You can say I had an inferiority complex. But, when I saw Hannan Bhai, a clerk at the institute, I felt my nervousness melt away. He spoke in Bangla. It was a sensation of relief and happiness combined together."

Unlike most of the students there, he was very passionate about his paintings. He depicted life the way he saw it. While most drew ice cream parlours and other aspects in the lives of rich and famous, Shahabuddin's paintings were of villages, boats, fishermen and other

elements of the everyday rural life.

Great artists of today like Mahmudul Haq, Quayyum Chowdhury, Safiuddin Ahmed, Mohammad Kibria, and Aminul Islam were students then. Little Shahabuddin was enthralled by their canvases. He would often go over to the main campus for a glimpse of their paintings.

He remembers with great joy the time he won the President Award for art in 1967 during Ayyub Khan's regime. One day the principal of the art school informed him that he had submitted one of his paintings to be reviewed. Little Shahabuddin paid no heed and did not bother to tell anyone as he thought it was quite impossible that he would win.

It was a custom at their home that everyone would have breakfast together. Breakfast hence was something the children never looked forward to because of the very fact that their father would be there, too. They waited for the breakfast to be over. Listening to the radio was also a routine at the breakfast table.

"One fine morning when we were gobbling down our food as fast as we could, I heard that they were about to mention the names of the winners. Suddenly my pulse ran high. 'What if I win?' I thought. With tensed anticipation I waited. Then, I heard my name. I screamed. 'That's me, that is my name that they mentioned.' My parents were at a loss. I guess they thought I had gone mad. The radio was on but they were not exactly paying any attention to it. They were confused as to whether they should believe me or not. Then, on came Hannan Bhai in a rickshaw shouting out with joy. The authorities concerned had sent the news last night by telegram, but by the time it reached them (the school) the radio had already announced the winners. That was one happy day! My father was so proud of me," he reminisced.

As a young boy, he was a good student, but as he grew up his affection for art took

over his academic interests. When he was in Class 1, he stood first, second in Class 2, third in Class 3 and this pattern followed till he was in Class 6. However, in Class 7, he was way down at 27. This was the time when he was certain that he would be an artist and devoted all his attention to it. In his matriculation exams he got a third class. Although his father was not too pleased, he did not mind because he knew what his son was poised to do.

When Shahabuddin took the Art College entrance exam, everybody was sure that he would get through. "Well, I had won the President's Award and that was to them a clear indication," he said.

When the results were out, he along with Hannan Bhai went over to check out the list. He started from the bottom and his name was not there.

"Your name should be at the top," Hannan Bhai told him. But Shahabuddin was right. His name was not on the list.

The selection committee consisted of great artists like Zaimul Abedin, Safiuddin Ahmed, Rashid Chowdhury, Aminul Islam and Mohammad Kibria. When Hannan Bhai told them what had happened, they were surprised — there was no reason whatsoever for that year's President Award winner to miss out. It later turned out that his name had been dropped in the preliminary selection with all other students who had got third division in the matriculation exams. Shahabuddin's name was then included because of his mature art pieces even at that age.

Artists never fought wars. Shahabuddin made a point to make a survey and found out that it was true not only for Bangladesh, but also for the rest of the world. The roles they play during these times are more indirect. However, when he was a vibrant youth of 20, he was the guerrilla platoon commander of Lalbagh thana and areas of Rayerbazar, Dhanmondi, Kalabagan, areas he knew well. He remembers all the

times when they had to hide their arms in fruits and among fishes that were being sold by the hawkers without their knowledge. Those were dangerous times and they were forced to risk innocent people's lives.

December 16, 1971 is a memorable day for him. He vividly remembers the day as though it was yesterday. At 8.00 in the morning, he tuned into the Dhaka radio. There were some sounds, but no news or anything although it was obvious that it was open. He switched on to an Indian station and heard that Mukti Bahini had captured Tangail. At 9.00 the Dhaka Station went mum. He was hiding at their Kalabagan residence with five other guerrilla warriors. His parents were in Agartala. Not even the neighbours knew because it was difficult to know whether they were *rajakars* or not.

At 9.15 am, they noticed helicopters of the Indian *Maitra Bahini* circling above them. Usually this followed by firing, but that particular day, they were simply roaming around as if to inspect. An emotionally charged Shahabuddin with his companions shouted out Joy Bangla (Victory for Bangla) and ran out on to the streets.

"People came out from hiding. We had no idea that there were so many people here. We were ecstatic and we marched along, with a new upsurge of energy, towards Green Road," he recalled.

He suddenly realised that what they were doing was not wise. It could cost them their lives. But it was too late. By that time huge masses of people have joined them and there was no turning back. Ready to sacrifice their lives, they marched ahead. The six Muktioddhas (freedom fighters) were scared because they were the only Muktioddhas in the crowd. They marched up to the Hotel Inter-continental (now Sheraton Hotel) chanting slogans. A friend of theirs, Moufiq, made a Bangladeshi flag and tied it to a piece of wood. With that Shahabuddin went up to the

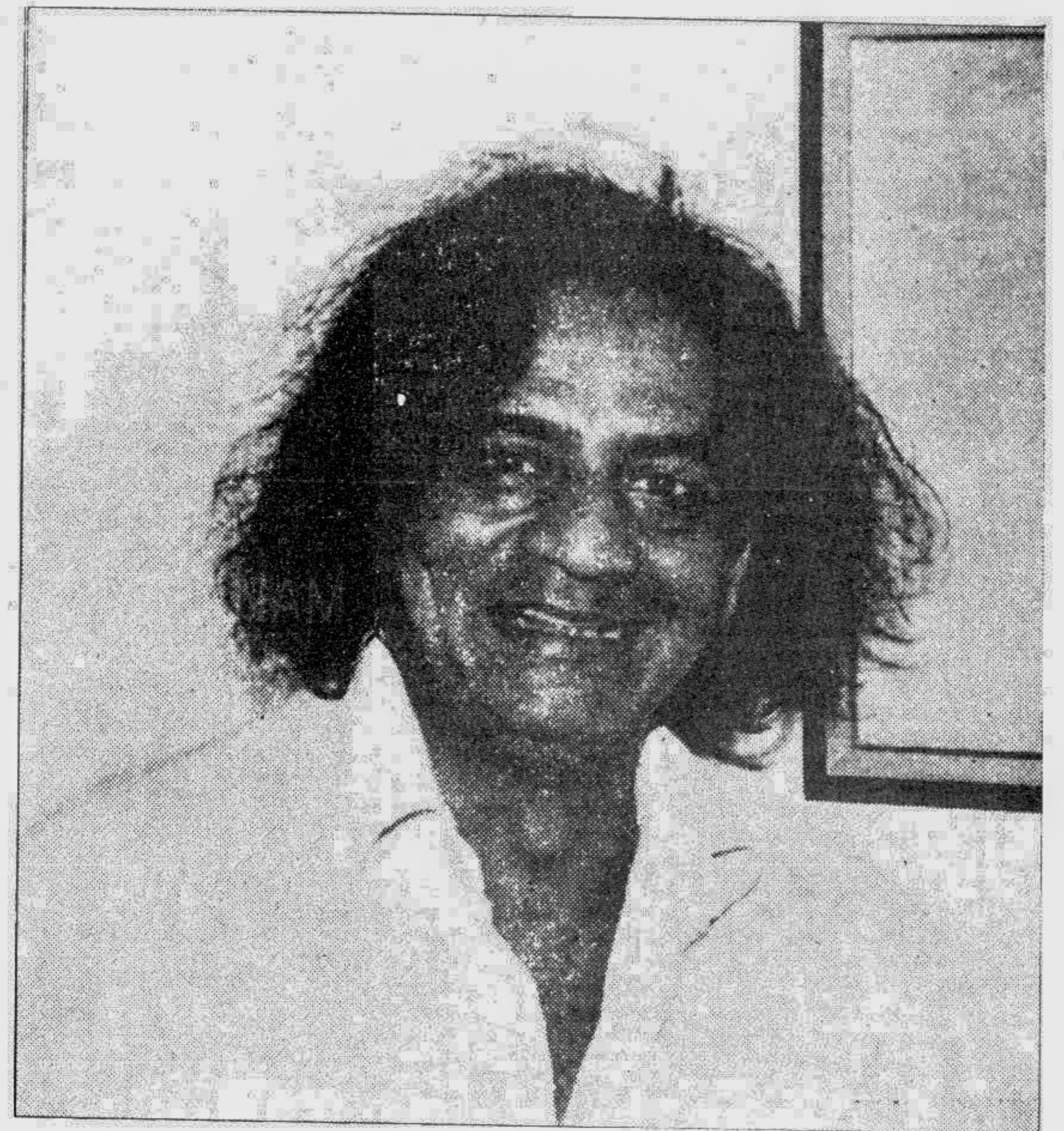
traffic police stand and shouted out *Joy Bangla*. The foreign delegates and journalists who had come to report rushed forward and said, "What are you doing? We have news that you have only six Muktioddhas in the crowd. You'll all die."

"No, we are all Muktioddhas," Shahabuddin lied. The message was passed around and news bulletins all around said that Muktioddhas were all around.

From there, the crowd shifted towards Shahbagh. They did not realise that the Pakistani Army was hiding inside the PG Hospital, the Radio Office and Dhaka Club. Scared inside, they marched ahead with an aim to put down the Pakistani flag that was hanging atop the radio station.

The boundary walls were high and formidable. Shahabuddin was helped up by his friends to look in and see what was happening. What he saw gave him a shock. Thousands of Pakistani soldiers were lying down in position. "What do you see?" his friends asked. He said nothing because he did not want them to panic. Then, he suddenly noticed that the soldiers were shivering and kept looking up as if to see whether they were still alive.

"That made me confident. I climbed over and declared, 'I'm Platoon Commander Shahabuddin. My guerrilla friends and I rushed towards the stairway. A little boy was trapped there, who eventually led the way to the roof. They thought we were all Muktioddhas. We finally reached the roof and brought down the Pakistani flag. The flag Moufiq had made small but it was a Bangladeshi flag nevertheless. Immediately, there were gunfires from the direction of PG Hospital. That was when I realised that all this time the soldiers were hiding there. The bullets killed Moufiq and the little boy who directed us to the roof. Two bullets pierced my shirt. Everybody downstairs thought I was dead. People



started crying out and wailing. I will never forget the expression in the faces of the ordinary people and my friends when I came down. Perhaps it is because it happened on December 16 that I remember every detail so well, but it surely is something that will be my companion as long as I live," he said, nostalgic.

Thirteen people died that day, but considering the thousands of people that were present, this was actually a small number. The people have been the source of all energy.

The effect of the war was so that it still finds expression in his paintings. He feels that even when depicting the harsh realities of life, his paintings always have a bright side, a positive note. This, he feels, is because of the spirit of the war.

He refutes allegations that monetary considerations have got the better of his sense of ethics and that has resulted in low-quality paintings.

"Commercial element is

there, but that does not mean I exploit customers or probable buyers. People buy my paintings because there is a certain value to it. Sometimes we have to mark prices in accordance with the size of the canvas, which is not always a correct measure. Prices vary. It is not like a car or a house. Paintings are expensive when there is a certain quality, there is something new in it, when the value is high. And this phenomenon of 'value' varies as well. So when people say that I've become commercial I would say that it is complimentary because it means that my paintings sell well."

He feels there is nothing wrong in being commercial if he can keep his sense of morality intact. Today there are galleries and they are in business as well. They have put artists in a better position today and are playing a crucial role in promoting art in an area where people are still dogmatic in their views about art arena.

He appreciates and

entertains the formation of the art market in Bangladesh. He feels that people have been able to come out of the social taboos that relate art to poverty. The fact that people are buying paintings in itself reflect that the ordinary Bengali has become aesthetically elevated. Quality and business need not be inversely related.

"Quality cannot be judged in a single year. If people want to say that my quality has deteriorated I would ask you to take a good look, take your time and then judge," he said.

Shahabuddin lives in Paris and has been internationally acclaimed. He had exhibitions at different places around the world and it is time for Bangladesh. He has some surprises in store for the Bangladeshi art lovers this summer that are bound to create ripples in the art world. People have high expectations from this great artist. Time will tell whether he lives up to them or not.

When I was a Teenager

IN CONVERSATION WITH HUSNA BANU KHANAM

by Sonia Kristy

THE name Husna Banu Khanam is associated with the country's music industry from the bygone generation of the 40's and her overall contribution in this category has earned her this year's *Ekushey Padak*. She is also the professor of Arts and Crafts in Home Economics College, Dhaka and has been associated with the 'School of Ikebana' (Japanese art of decorating flowers) from its very inauguration. This reflects her passion and fascination towards art and culture—a passion that took roots at a very tender age.

Hailing from Calcutta, the second child of journalist Abu Lohani and Fatema Lohani, Husna lost her father at a very young age. Her mother then undertook the responsibility of raising three children, Husna and her two brothers Fatch Lohani and Fazole Lohani all by herself. During those conservative days, Fatema Lohani started teaching in a school along with her friend Begum Sufia Kamal and tried her best to give her children the affection of both father and mother. The companionship of the well wishers made this job a lot easier.

"We then lived in Park Circus, one of the decent and sophisticated areas of Calcutta where celebrities like Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Huq, Abbasuddin Ahmed, Mohammed Nasiruddin resided as well. As most of them had been acquainted with my father, they were very affectionate and concern about our well-

being. Mohammed Nasiruddin, who was my father's friend as well as our neighbour, often acted as our moral guardian. Despite his busy schedule, he used to accompany us whenever there was a good movie, musical programme or function going on. Thanks to him, I had the opportunity to get in touch with the cultural circle of that time at quite an early age" recalled Husna Banu while talking to The Daily Star about her adolescence.

During her childhood days, she was very docile and school seemed to be one of her favourite places. And why not, she used to be the student of one of the best schools of those days - Begum Rokeya's 'Sakhawat Memorial High School'.

"It was a great school with the best possible teachers and excellent teaching system. The students were taught almost everything that a child needs to learn. There were Anglo-Indian teachers to teach us English, compulsory religious classes where we learnt to read the holy Quran, drill classes to keep us fit, drawing classes to teach us art and of course music classes where my initiation into music took place. Music was compulsory from kindergarten level to class ten and the students were free to use the room during off time. As I had no *Harmonium* (musical instrument) of my own, I often found myself in the music room trying out my talents. Music seeped into me and soon I got addicted to it. In every school function I



Husna Banu Khanam in early 50s. Source: Family album

was a permanent face and soon became very popular. It appeared that I was quite good at it."

In fact she was good at almost everything. As a student she was a bright one and always among the top of the class. She even secured double promotion not once but twice.

"It was the teaching system and the teachers' attention that made studying very easy. Whenever we were in need of help or failing behind in any subject, the teachers were always there to take special care of us. Such an education system is rare these days."

Besides music and studies, Husna was good at drawing as well. Once in the drawing class they were to draw a brinjal and Husna drew it so well that the teacher exhibited it in all the classes throughout the school.

Acting was another category where Husna revealed her talent. Her elder brother Fatch Lohani, who according to Husna's friends was an Ashok Kumar look-alike, was then very much into acting. Once after seeing the movie 'Sirajuddowla' this young Ashok arranged a stage show where Husna's role was of the *nawab* wife. But there she had to serve the purpose of a play back singer as well.

"The person who played the role of 'Aleya' couldn't sing up to the mark and as listening to gramophone record was one of my favourite pastimes I had already learnt every track by heart. So I was assigned

to playback her. Both my acting and singing received quite an applause."

Husna didn't have to struggle at all to build up a career in music. Earlier, the schoolteachers used to inspire and prompt her to participate in various contests and functions. And when came the question of formal lesson, her luck was again favourable. One of the famous *ustads* of those days Ustad Muhammad Hussain Khasru offered her his teaching. Husna's house soon turned out to be a mini music school because along with Husna couple of other girls also used to take lessons there.

"The most exciting part of my adolescence was my first performance on the radio. Abbasuddin Ahmed, the legendary figure in the folklore music was my uncle's friend and he knew about my singing talent. When I was in class eight he took me to the radio office for an audition and I was selected in no time. I still remember the first day of my programme and the song I sang. It was *tora dekhe ja amina mayer kole*."

Husna's record was also brought out without any initiative of her own. Abbasuddin Ahmed informed a gramophone company about this music talent and the company soon brought out four records of her—one modern Bengali, one Nazrul geeti, one gazal and a mixed one.

Music was no doubt her first love but her prime addiction was undoubtedly movies. Whenever there was a good movie on, Husna had

to go to the theatre and watch it. But sometimes it was mandatory rather than a pastime because almost throughout the year, their house was filled with guests of the village visiting Calcutta and Husna and her brothers were their tourist guides. Ultimately, the 'tourists' were destined to go to the movie theatre and the guides were tagged along as well.

"I had seen a movie named 'Kismet'—a hit one in those days those days minimum forty times. It's quite a record, I think," she mused.

However, Mohammed Nasiruddin utilised this addiction in a constructive way. He appointed Husna to write a movie column in his magazine 'Shaogat'. Later, Husna also wrote a similar column in Nurzahan Begum's magazine 'Begum'.

While recalling her adolescent days, Husna Banu turns out to be real nostalgic. Those were the golden days—listening gramophone records throughout the days and singing along with it; attending different functions in schools and colleges; hanging out with friends in Lady Brabourne college and Bethune college; going to watch football matches with her brothers and those idle afternoons of reading books of Rabindranath and Sharatchandra. She could go on and on.

"Compassion and fellow-feeling is something that has almost disappeared and made this world of today a real complicated place."