

People

Face to Face

Hanif Sanket: Witty all the way

Wit and humour in Bangladesh may bring to mind primitive slapstick gyrations spilt over from our notorious silver screen. One diminutive man has slowly but surely transformed television entertainment over the years. What **Hanif Sanket** has done with wit has not only added a new dimension to the popular perception of comedy but also won him a following of mammoth proportions. The *Ityadi* man had **A Maher** grimacing at the work put behind his laughs

He is a comedian, a playback singer, a musician, a lyricist, a director, an author... the list goes on. Above all, he is the creator as well as the compere of arguably the most popular television magazine at present. Hanif Sanket is a household name in Bangladesh who has carved a little nook for himself in the entertainment industry from which he amuses and amazes, entertains and educates millions. Hugely of *Ityadi* fame, Hanif Sanket is versatile in the true sense of the word, gliding from one creative medium to the other with enviable ease. We caught up with the personality and managed to squeeze some time off his busy schedule. Though reluctant at self-reflection he told us a bit about himself and his work.

Sanket is not too keen on talking about himself. "I am a simple, easy-going person who is very much aware of reality. I have no complex philosophies of life and want to lead it in a natural way."

Was he a person with the time?

"No and yes. I go with the time only as far as my vision and values intersect with it. Trends are followed as long as they are acceptable to me. See if you can understand this. I would not want to be the good person among bad people; but I would be willing to be the bad person among good people. I am also one believing in the

concept of quality and quantity. I would probably produce a single production in several months but it would be quality material as much as possible."

The entertainment industry globally has flourished into a profit-making business with almost everybody who is anybody churning out returns. Sanket eyes these "artists" with a furtive glance; he will not have people bringing together his fame with his fortunes.

"I am not one to make as much money as opportunities present. It does not work for me that way — the position I am in now is one with

wealth just waiting to be embraced; I could have swept millions but I like to keep as much as I need to live happily along with my family."

Profit is there, but as with every venture attracting innovation, there has always been risk lurking in our entertainment industry. It is indeed a risky path to expose an audience of the current standards in Bangladesh to newer and diverse forms of entertainment. Many critics are of the opinion that recreation in the media is either too high a "level" for the masses to enjoy or too cheap and

crude and without substance. So why did Hanif Sanket take this precarious path?

"First of all I don't think it was a risky undertaking. In the late 1970's television was not a usual home appliance taken for granted. It was new and could be seen at a very few places; at this time I started to get into the entertainment arena in our country. The media is a very unique way to appeal to the people and send across messages. Before and during the early years of my career I had travelled to 35 countries, met peoples and cultures and saw what differ-

ences they had with our forms of amusement. Two years of my academic life was also spent abroad so I basically had a broader view and open mind to things. And these opportunities I put into real life; actually what I started out with was not a complex theory or approach or anything like that.

"The trick was to motivate people by using tools which appealed to them. Like the daily events in their lives — they were naturally attracted by it. My purpose was to depict our social troubles humorously so people would take notice and try to correct them. My aim was to bring the people to you rather than go to them. Social issues like water shortages, garbage problems and over-population had people take them seriously when shown in a comical and funny way. Since these were issues they could relate to easily the response was positive; many of my themes involved rural settings like, the countryside, and so villagers had an appeal as well."

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Sanket was an artist in other disciplines even before he began work as a comedian. He was a stage performer, shifting to "natok" (drama) where he lost interest. Films were next but that too didn't suit Sanket due to "differences of principles and clash of views with the directors." He also had a stint in directing and producing which were met with similar fates. There was another reason.

"You see when I was in dramas and films I was always aware of the fact that someone else's views and ideas were expressed through me; I was a mere puppet being told to carry out certain scenes. This was not a way to get my ideas, ideals, thoughts to the other side. So I decided to take up an objective of my own. And it worked! The message got through. As I said earlier the tools were simple. The basic social issues, the problems we face in our daily lives."

And why was the message well received?

"After I had won acclamation for *Jadi Kichhu Mone Na Koren*, people took to me. For example when I was preaching about how we can make a difference to the water crisis by switching off the taps when brushing our teeth, people would actually remember me when they were brushing their teeth! Hanif Sanket had said not to waste water when brushing so I will not."

The comedian warns,

though, that his approach should not be interpreted as lectures or sermon-like, rather it is a learning one through comical instances.

As with all famous personalities who have some sort of yardstick in their chequered careers, we asked Hanif Sanket about the inspiration driving him. Surprisingly the answer was short and distinct.

"First it is part of my conscience. In the beginning it kept telling me to do something for the people and reminding me of the responsibilities an artist has to the society. Also in the young entertainment industry of Bangladesh I noticed a peculiar thing. A section of society (not wanting them printed), particularly those a bit conservative saw wit and humour as a lowly practice and unhealthy entertainment. I had a growing feeling of rebellion against them and worked on my goal. Another inspiration was obviously Fazle Lohani, the eminent journalist who made television reporting popular in Bangladesh, from whom I learnt a lot."

Hanif Sanket is divided over the prevailing standards in the entertainment industry here. It seems to him that there is enough facilities, scope and support for the performers. But among these many are sub-standard and so are their programmes. For audiences who enjoy wit and humour with substance there are glaring infrastructural obstacles. For example, he opined, censorship is unregulated and too harsh for many types of programmes.

Red tapism is the biggest harassment which can kill off budding artists; this sort of attitude in the field of art and culture, especially, is a threat to the healthy growth of a nation, he believes.

Sanket expressed his frustrations at the state-controlled media saying co-operation from the sector was

wanting badly along with a restructured policy to protect interests of the artists.

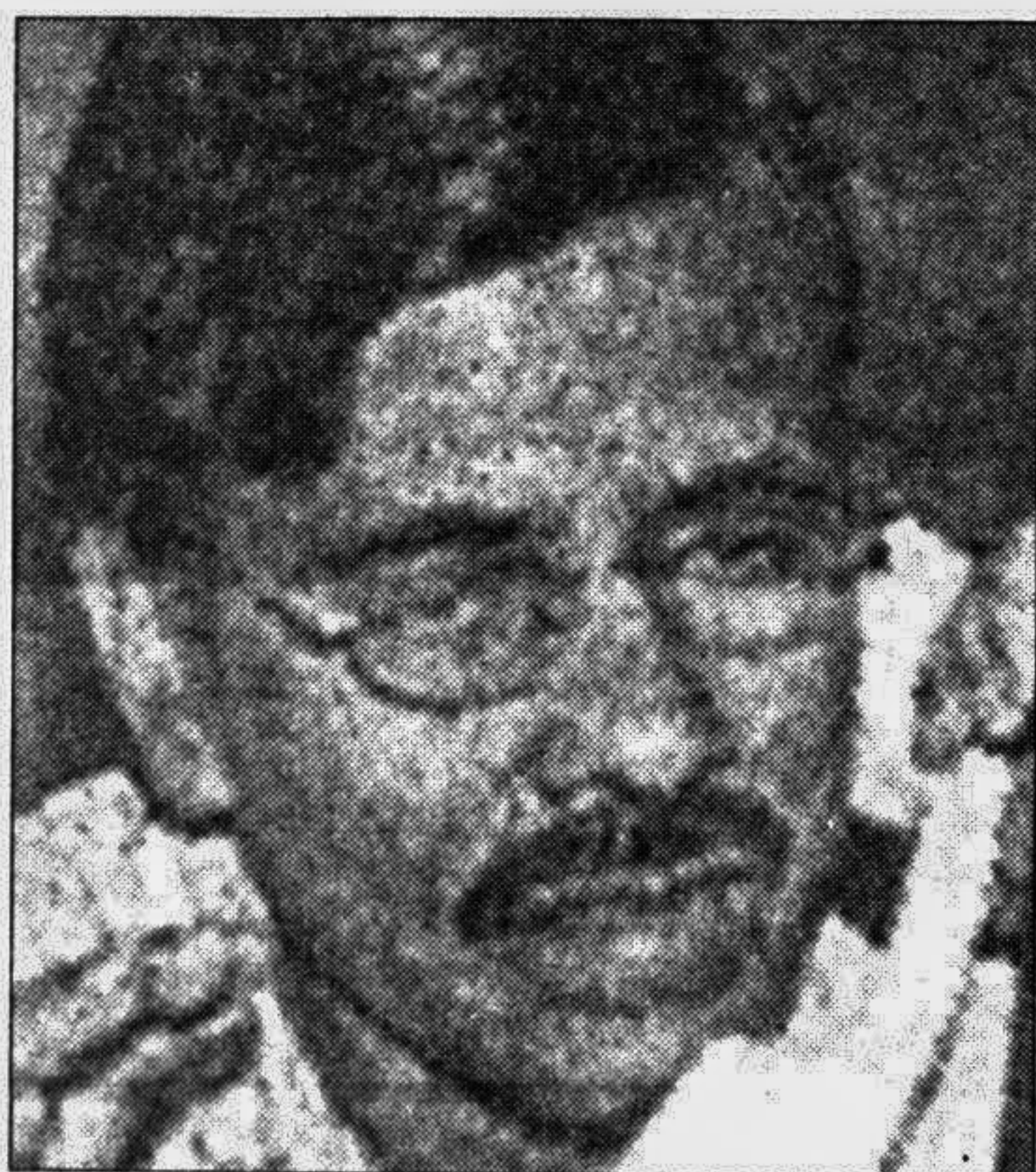
Not having a little discourse about the two productions that made Hanif Sanket what he is would have been injustice indeed. So we braced ourselves and asked him why viewers sometimes allege that present-day *Ityadi* might be a cut-and-paste job of *Jadi Kichhu Mone Na Koren*.

"These 'viewers' in question are either disgruntled competitors or those with a personal grudge. Just compare the two programmes. *Jadi Kichhu Mone Na Koren* had only a few jokes and songs in-between; the number of items on the list was but a handful. But in *Ityadi* you have about 30-35 categories of jokes, parodies, songs, focus stories and role-playing. Here we have to cater to viewers already aware of the other forms of entertainment available on other channels. So we have a harder task of drawing viewers to our show from the other ones. *Ityadi* is different and more diverse."

The discourse was rounded up with a reflection on the advent of satellite channels in the country. Sanket finds most of them, though not all, airing hollow amusement and too much foreign culture.

"Apart from a very few, the other satellite channels that do air Bangla programmes have completely alienated the packages. Plagiarism is the order of the cyberwaves with no protection such as intellectual property rights. Westernised anchors don't even hesitate to groove to adverse uncultural body language. Generally the satellite channels are not heading in the right direction."

And so Hanif Sanket ended with a message to fulfilling his responsibilities to the people who have given him so much affection and support.



When I was a Teenager

IN CONVERSATION WITH QUAZI LATIFA HUQ

By Navine Murshid

A *Aj Putuler Gaye Halud, Kaal Putuler Biye* is one of the most popular children's rhymes in Bengali of all time. Quazi Latifa Huq, the lyricist of this and numerous other songs, is a name almost forgotten. She is a master of Bengali nursery rhymes, a lyricist and a poet.

Her teen years have been the most eventful time of her life because that period shaped her being. Poetry fascinated her from the time she was just a little girl. Where others her age were mostly interested in fairy tales, she was mesmerised by how sentences would rhyme keeping the meaning in tact.

"I was an avid fan of Rabindranath and Nazrul. They wrote about everyday matters in such a beautiful way that I craved to be like them. I wrote my first poem on a stormy day, about the storm," she said while talking to *The Daily Star* at her Dhanmondi residence.

She grew up in Murshidabad amongst her seven sisters and two brothers. She feels that it was her father's inspiration that led her to continue her writings.

"While my elder sisters and mother would complain about me not studying but writing poems, my father would say, 'One day my daughter would write for *Saugat Magazine*. Just see.' At that time there were

hardly any female poets, not to mention those who wrote for children and those who wrote songs as well. My father's inspiration gave me the drive to write and represent women in this field."

However, her father's companionship did not last too long. When she was not even a teenager, at the age of twelve, her father passed away.

"Suddenly, everything changed. My father wanted to educate us. He wanted us to grow up to be worthy human beings. There were

saw her intellectual growth accelerate. By this time she had earned quite a reputation for writing poems for both adults and children. Newspapers and magazines in Calcutta regularly featured her poems. One fine day, Khan Ataur Rahman approached her and said, "You write so many poems, why don't you try your hand at songs?" The fourteen-year-old was astounded. "I can't!" she exclaimed. "Yes you can," he said, apparently more confident than she was! She spent days over

world that day!" she exclaimed.

Some of her songs were supposed to be recorded by HMV under the direction of Keshto Babu, a well-known blind singer of that time. However, that was the time when India and Pakistan got separated and work had to be stopped.

After completing her ISC exam in 1948, fifteen-year-old Quazi Latifa Huq went to Dhaka to visit her eldest sister. Her elder sister's husband was a conservative man who did not approve of

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many suitors who wanted my sisters' and my hand in marriage but my father always said that we would have to complete our Masters degree before getting married. After his death these were forgotten notions."

Her schooling was at Victorian Institution in Calcutta. Soon after her father's death, she was sent to Barisal to her sister. Her sister was the head mistress of Shahidunnessa Girls High School. It was from that school young Latifa sat for her matriculation exams.

Lady Brabourne College was the next destination. It was this time in College that

this. And finally, *'Aaj Putuler Gaye Holud'* was produced. Khan Ataur Rahman himself gave the music. Incidentally, this was the first children's song that was recorded by HMV and was sung by Fawzia Khan. Songs became her passion and she that started another era.

She remembers the time when one of her songs was first played on the radio. She was in the College hostel and she did not have a radio.

"I went over to a friend's house in Taliganj and listened to Sachin Sengupta sing. Jobey Oboshan Hobey Ratey... I was on top of the

girls studying, going out or singing and writing. He was of the perception that girls should be married off early. She tried not to let that bother her too much and concentrated on her writings.

She learnt that there was a local newspaper called 'Kafra'. She thought she could send her writings to this paper and she would be able to spend her time in a congenial manner. She sent one of her poems to the newspaper office. A month went by, but her poem did not appear. This exasperated her. 'Quality newspaper in Calcutta publishes my poems and this paper does-

n't? I have to go and see the editor!' she said to herself. Therefore, taking along her sister's son (who was two years younger than her) she went off in her mission.

At the editor's office, she demanded an explanation. The editor said that it depended on the literature section and he would see to it. Latifa decided that she would keep contact and contribute to the paper regularly. Her brother-in-law stood in the way. 'If you have to work there, you have to get married to him,' he had said. Soon the two were married!

A family at the age of seventeen was not exactly in her plans. She somehow felt she had let her father down, more so, because she could not continue with her education any longer. Her husband, Quazi Najmul Huq, was a vivacious man who loved company. He loved to talk to people and interact. He was a man who was often out for social work. On the other hand, Quazi Latifa Huq, was a quiet person who wanted peace and who wanted to write. She would sometimes tell him that she could not run a hotel! Yet, her husband was very supportive and loving. He inspired her to continue with her work. He was there whenever she needed him. At a time where wives only remained at home, she accompanied her husband wherever he went. His love inspired her to become the founder president of Metropolitan Lioness Club.

The three books (*Geeti Guchho, Chhorar Mala and Konok Lata*) that have been published are only because of his support. He would collect my poems and see how they would go together. He would organise everything for me. Without him I wouldn't have been able to go far. I was lucky to have a husband who was a literature enthusiast who inspired me to do what I did best."



Then in 1951, when she was eighteen, her first son was born. In the following years, three more sons followed. She became a complete housewife whose writing abilities were restricted to the little time she had for herself. Later her

husband died and all of a sudden she was engulfed by responsibilities she never knew before. She could think about herself no more. By the time she finally settled down to start where she left off, she saw that she was no longer in the

scene.

Today she is away from all the hype that once was her everyday companion. Her work with great names is now only a memory. Today she has faded into the background. She still writes, unheeded and lonely.

Erratum

In *The man with the golden hands*, which appeared in our Friday edition on October 29, 1999, we mistakenly attributed the posts of 'corporate executive' and 'CEO of an investment bank' to our interviewee Aladin. We would like to clarify that Aladin's professional experience in the City has been exclusively as an independent management consultant. We apologise for any embarrassment caused to him by this inadvertence.