Taking the First Step

It was 1947. The British were leaving the then Indian subcontinent. The political stage was full of tension and uncertainty over the coming partition between India and Pakistan. People were crossing over borders in the thousands leaving their ancestors' homes. The bloody Hindu-Muslim riots that raged through the subcontinent also deeply affected people's life in this region.

It was at this juncture that "Begum", the legendary Bangla weekly was published, just one month before the partition.

While women's working outside the four walls of the house is still frowned upon by the society, it is not difficult to imagine the formidable obstacles faced by women wanting to go out of the house in search of stories at that time. It was especially difficult for Bangali Muslim women of the time for whom social stricture was compounded by religious sanction.

But Nurjahan Begum, the editor of the weekly, was extremely lucky on that count. Her father, renowned journalist and editor of the monthly Shawgat, Mohammad Nasiruddin, was a progressive, forward-thinking man and wanted her daughter to be the same. He also did not believe in the social customs like observing purdah. "When I came to Kolkata," reminisces Nurjahan Begum, "my father, to the utter dismay of my mother, had my nose-pin taken off and my hair sheared into a 'China bob' cut!"

Nasiruddin also made sure that his daughter got a good, well-rounded education.

Nurjahan Begum went to Begum Rokeya's Sakhawat Memorial School. Nurjahan loves to reminisce her days in that school. "I had a wonderful childhood," she says. "We did everything, from singing and dancing to acting." She even wrote, directed and



Nurjahan Begum- a pioneer in getting women's voices heard.