

International Women's Day

At work. Set for the goal...



Qamrun Nessa Hasan

Woman on top

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

QAMRUN Nessa Hasan, the new Deputy Director General (DDG) since March 1, 2007, is the new face of the top management team at Bangladesh Television (BTV), the state-run key media platform.

With more than 10,000 enlisted artistes and the largest viewer base of approximately 100 million in the country alone, BTV has always been the centre of a spectrum of discussions. Whether it be praise for nurturing the creative talents -- directors, performers, writers -- or its role in maintaining neutrality, BTV has been the centre of attention since its inception 42 years ago.

Qamrun Nessa Hasan or Menoka as she is known to her peers, has been an integral part of BTV for over 25 years, and is well aware of the challenges facing her in her new role. Qamrun recalls her days as an announcer at Bangladesh Betar (Radio) and TV. Her career took a turn in 1980 when she was selected as a producer from a competitive exam amongst thousands (only nine candidates were selected). She smilingly recalls that she was one of the two women in that group.

Continuing in the same vein, Qamrun can now claim to be the first woman in the top administrative position at BTV -- shouldering the overwhelming administrative responsibilities of telecasting 15 hours a day in addition to the 24/7 international telecast launched by the satellite channel BTV World. How times have changed she muses, compared to the 1970s when her predecessor, Khaleda Fahmi (GM from 1977 to 79) was required to manage five hours of programming per day only.

Why media? "Media offered the gateway to creativity," she says. "In a country where the majority of the population is illiterate, the visual media is the ultimate eye opener, unlike print media which caters only to the lettered," says the charming Qamrun.

She pushes aside any debates regarding obstacles for women in the top professional jobs. "It's survival of the fittest. Hurdles can



Qamrun Nessa Hasan, Deputy Director General, BTV

surely be overcome as everything depends on calibre and not solely on gender," she says.

"Women have crossed barriers. Female counterparts now work shoulder to shoulder in different professions in our country as well. An interesting addition at BTV is the female camera crew, staff musicians; set designers and make up artists have been there for long. The number however is still negligible."

How has she contributed? A strong believer in women empowerment, Qamrun has always tried to highlight women's issues. "In 1980, I developed a magazine

programme *Ghorey Bairey* on discrimination against women that stretched from grassroots to the top level in the society. In one of the programmes, eminent gynaecologist, Dr Feroza Begum, narrated how her father, fought against all odds to let her study medicine. "The women folk of the village would benefit the most," said her father, "as they would not have to be treated by men," -- to which the villagers agreed happily.

"In another exclusive interview, Dr Neelima Ibrahim advised the women to 'love thyself first and shun the path of self-sacrifice'. 'If you cannot take care of yourself how

would you love others?' she asked." After the horrific event when Nurjahan was stoned to death by the *fatwabaj* (bigots), Kamrun featured several women activists, creating a public outcry against the barbaric superstitions shrouding many parts of the country even today.

Qamrun, was once more at the centre of a nerve-racking news episode at Pairaband village. Despite being the birthplace of Begum Rokeya, the progressive personality behind women's education, the locality was crippled with archaic beliefs. In an exclusive interview she featured a girl, who was hardly 11 getting married to a man in his 80s. She could hardly get a glimpse of the girl's face -- covered with her *anchal*. When asked why she chose to marry a person with one foot in the grave, her innocent reply was that she would gain *sawab* (divine blessing) if she fetched *ojur pani* for her husband.

On other social issues, Qamrun had launched several episodes that focused on inter-personal relationship amongst couples and how they resolved it. She has fond memories of how many such couples, would write to her after the show, to let her know of the happy endings.

At one period in her career, she was invited as a guest to NHK TV of Japan during a special training programme that ran for three months. The *Japan International Magazine* ran a cover story on her. She was especially touched, as she posed for the cover in a Bangladeshi *jamdani*. "To me, my culture and heritage are my identity. Being on the cover of an international magazine was a major achievement and I wanted to represent our national identity."

What is the road ahead? After her recent promotion from programme manager to GM and more recently the DDG of BTV, Qamrun appears unruffled and plans to bring about systematic change to satisfy a bigger chunk of non-resident Bangladeshi viewers as well as cater to the international audience with informative programmes. "I love the challenge!" says an enthusiastic Qamrun.

Alieya Ferdowsi

Woman power votary

KAVITA CHARANJII

Ferdous Ara Khanam (Alieya Ferdowsi) is an icon of woman power. The dynamo of energy dons multiple roles effortlessly -- as headmistress of Ankur Tutorial School (pre-school), sports organiser, TV artiste, writer and drama director.

What's her view of International Women's Day? Alieya responds, "Women all over the world juggle many roles for the betterment of their families -- as employees, care givers, homemakers and close friendships. They are also politically aware. So I don't think that one day is sufficient recognition for women; everyday should be observed as women's day."

As for the progress of the women's movement, Alieya believes that signs are encouraging. Citing the case of rural women playing a major role in income generating activities and improved female literacy rates, she asserts, "Our women are becoming more vocal in every respect and successfully entering into a globalised world. With a proper platform, they can be effective catalysts for change among the future generation."

Alieya's is a powerful voice in Bangladesh. To her credit, she has acted in nearly 300 radio, TV and stage plays. In addition, she is also founder and guiding force of a drama group for children and adults, named Gharay Bairy. The group participated in the International Children Drama Festival held in Turkey in 1997. Prior to that she had participated in the Pakistan Folk Drama Conference in Lahore.

As chairperson for the Radio Drama Artists' Association, she has been the driving force behind a book comprising 15 radio plays, called *Betar Natak Bibortaner Dhaka*. The book includes a translation of Daphne Du Maurier's



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Rebecca from English to Bangla. Alieya has also essayed a role and directed Tagore's stage plays *Natir Puja* and *Dak Ghar*. She has also written, acted and directed the

stage play *Padda Patar Pani*. Likewise, she has written and directed six plays for children, among them, *Hashu* (which won the best drama award in the Agrani

Bank Child Drama Competition) and *Rang Shagarer Mela* (for which she was adjudged best child drama director).

More offbeat is her premier role as a sports organiser. A former physical education teacher, she has many achievements on this front. She is International Olympic Council award winner for 2004, Asian Shooting Confederation Women Committee Member, joint secretary National Shooting Federation, and founder president of Bangladesh Women Sport Leaders' Association. In her capacity as a former general secretary of the pioneering Bengal Women Sports Federation, she developed training programmes for girls in swimming, chess, gymnastics, handball, volleyball and athletics all over the country.

Now she is eager to see the growth of women's cricket in Bangladesh. "If we can work at the grassroots level, we will certainly achieve our target -- with continued financial support from the Bangladesh Cricket Board," she says.

Yet women's sport, believes Alieya, has to contend with opposition from religious and social quarters. "My contention is that if women can work outside, then why not in sport? Along with physical fitness, they have the potential to be earning members of the family... Now we are working for awareness at all levels," she asserts.

One question that comes to mind is whether Alieya has faced obstacles in her numerous endeavours. She believes that she is fortunate to have had a supportive family environment and helpful male colleagues. However, there is a caveat: "Sometimes when women prove better workers than men, the latter become envious. If they can adopt a more supportive role, women can make rapid strides. My message: The world is not meant just for men, but for both sexes."

Living life to its full potential

In conversation with Dilruba Haider

CULTURAL CORRESPONDENT

Dilruba Haider has made waves as host of the popular talk show *Na bola kotha* (untold words) on Channel i. The show covers a gamut of issues, particularly those relating to women. Over the course of the last eight years, the programme has featured off track

subjects such as extramarital affairs, love, relationships, lack of romanticism in marriage, love affairs after the 60s, old age, women's liberation and whether we have to marry the person we love. "The objective is to bring social issues out in the open and get people to start thinking about them from a different angle," says

the attractive Dilruba, who is also director of Oracle Communications. "As a predominantly Muslim society, we are hesitant to speak out. Through the show I wanted to give people a platform to air their views."

What does she feel about the hullabaloo surrounding International Women's Day? Pat comes the response: "Personally I am not a big fan of marking any one day for such an issue like women's empowerment, equality or liberation. It is getting even worse for the last few years with multinational companies trying to commercialise the day. Women's Day is being portrayed as a day for confidence building by becoming physically beautiful!"

Dilruba's greatest reward is the positive feedback she receives for *Na bola kotha*, particularly since it went live. Among the notable episodes is that on age differences between husbands and wives. One woman phoned in to say that her husband was much older than her and she was not particularly attracted to him. Meanwhile, she had fallen in love with another man. When the husband realised the distance creeping into the relationship, he began to woo her once again. "The woman had the guts to call us live on television and talk about such hitherto hush hush subjects," points out Dilruba.

Another breakthrough was a discussion on the inheritance law. One lady tearfully phoned in to say that her brothers had browbeat and tortured her to grab her share of the family property. Professionally and by training

, Dilruba is a disaster management specialist. A former assistant resident representative and team leader of Disaster Management and Crisis Prevention Team, UNDP Bangladesh, she hasn't left her profession. She is currently a teacher in BRAC University's post graduate Disaster Management Programme. At the international level, she is vice president of an international Forum for Disaster Reduction.

Truly Dilruba, through the sheer dint of hard work and confidence has surmounted many a hurdle. It is this confidence that has enabled her to leave a very good job at the peak of her career and decide to pursue a career in business where "I would be able to unleash my potential and nourish my soul."

Dilruba's yardstick of success is the extent of change she can bring about in society, be it through a write up, talk show, income generating activity for the poor or her lifestyle "which might instill confidence in another woman to live life to its full potential," she asserts.

As for the future, she is abuzz with ideas. One of Oracle Communication's objectives is to highlight talented singers such as the Bauls and the genre of spiritual music (Moromi Sangeet) in a programme called *Aadi Aukritrim*. Another project is a social satirical programme.

KARIM WAHEED

On International Women's Day, the debate again surfaces: "Why celebrate womanhood on one day out of 365?"

TV personality turned filmmaker Samia Zaman says, "Why not? Sure, the idea of celebrating womanhood 365 days would be every feminist's utopian vision come true but that's not the reality."

"There are both positive and negative aspects of marking a day for women on the calendar. I'm content with the positive aspect: women's issues are highlighted on the media, success stories are brought to light. Even if the focus lasts a day, I consider it to be affirmative."

"Of course there's the issue of commercialisation. However, when media is concerned, commercialisation is just an unavoidable by-product."

Going over the predominant trends in cinema, the filmmaker, who made her debut with an out and out commercial project, addresses the popular belief that "mainstream cinema, worldwide, is a man's domain."

"One way or another, it still is, if one must label it. But I don't have horror stories of how I faced discrimination as a filmmaker because of my gender. I did experience certain hurdles but not because I'm a woman. All the impediments I faced had to do with being a first-time filmmaker. In our country, to thrive one needs to be skilled in crises-management. This is true in regard to every sector, not just films," says Zaman.

She adds, "A film can be a director's statement but when it

comes to mainstream cinema, gender of the filmmaker is never a defining factor. Subjects, stories and treatments are characterised by mass taste. As it is believed that males make up the majority of moviegoers, it's not a surprise that women-oriented films are treated like pariahs by big time production houses. Take the barrage of Indian soaps on the eternal clash between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Obviously there is a demand for that."

"Hollywood is a blazing example of the conformist industries. Interestingly enough, films that try to be true to its female protagonists, have surfaced (though not many in number) in Bollywood (the Mumbai-based film industry) that our elitists often sneer at."

"Some of the most provocative and riveting films with women-centric stories have been made by men. Now, that is a beautiful paradox. Consider the way Rituporno Ghosh has treated his characters with utmost conviction in *Dahan*. That goes on to prove you do not have to be a woman to understand and sympathise with your subject."

"Cinema is a world of anomalies and contradictions. Why look further? Bangladesh is an epitome of paradox. Our mainstream films are considered to be male-oriented. Yet the central role in one of the biggest hits in last couple of years -- *Mollah Barir Bou* -- was a woman. In the film which is full of clichés and commercial to the bone, the protagonist was treated in such a way that no one probably noticed it rested on the delicate shoulders of an



Samia Zaman, filmmaker

actress.

"Throughout the '80s and early '90s, Anju Ghosh pulled off many an absurd *masala* film all by herself. Currently the

highest paid actor in our movie industry is Shabnoor," says a grinning Zaman.

A beautiful paradox indeed.



Dilruba Haider, talk show host