



# THE NIGHTINGALE SPEAKS

*In an exclusive interview with Rafi Hossain, the queen of melody shares stories of her journey of successes, achievements and passions.*

**Rafi:** How did you begin your journey with music?

**Runa:** The journey began when I started learning classical music at a very early age. I was born in a family of music lovers and my sister Dina Laila was the one who was actually learning classical music and I just used to sit beside her. Dancing was my hobby, but when my sister used to learn music I used to pick up whatever she was taught quite easily so Ustadji told my mother and decided to teach me too. Later at an inter-school singing competition in Karachi, I represented my school Saint Lawrence Convent and won the first prize.

**Rafi:** Who was Dina Apa's Music Ustad?

**Runa:** Ustad Abdul Kader Peyarang and Ustad Habibuddin Ahmed, even I was trained by them. When I was 12 years old, a music director and producer from Lahore was looking for a singer in Karachi for a male child artiste in a movie. They approached my father through Karachi radio, the organizer of the interschool competition. He refused them saying the competition was a onetime gig and singing was just a hobby. When my father was sharing this with my mother I overheard them and I always had this dream that people will hear me over the radio. There was this perception during that time that singing professionally will harm the family image, but my cousin Anjumara Begum was already a well established singer. So finally my mother convinced my father by saying, "Let her do it once and let's see where it goes." The directors heard me and liked my voice; however they mentioned that I need to be trained to become a playback artist for the movie. For a month I went through rigorous training and I was prepared for the movie. After that I was taken to rehearse with the musicians before the final take and the final result was very satisfying. All the hard work paid off. After finishing the project I was handed an envelope which had Taka 300 (laughs); being young I did not understand the concept of getting paid for work so I got upset. I thought I am from a good family then why am I being paid. Anyway this was the beginning and a good memory to cherish.

**Rafi:** Do you remember the song that you sang for the movie?

**Runa:** Yes, it was an Urdu song for a Pakistani film called *Jugnu*. The actors for the movies where Sawkhat Akbar and Shormili Bhabhi, I think it was a joint venture. After that many offers started to come and my journey as a singer began.

**Rafi:** What was your father's reaction on this?

**Runa:** Well, he could not stop them all so he started to accept the fact but I had to continue my studies side by side. It was very difficult to manage this at a young age but my family supported me a lot.

**Rafi:** Where is your hometown?

**Runa:** Rajshahi from my father's side, and Chittagong from mother.

**Rafi:** Do you have any relatives there?

**Runa:** Yes. In Rajshahi I have a few, but none in Chittagong; they all shifted to Kolkata after the partition.

**Rafi:** How many siblings do you have?

**Runa:** We are 3 siblings, 1 brother and 2 sisters. My sister passed away in 1976. Now I only have one brother, Murad.

**Rafi:** When did you come to Bangladesh?

**How did you start your career here?**

**Runa:** We came in 1974. Well, I was already established and recorded over 1000 songs, so I was given a warm welcome into the industry.

**Rafi:** Do you have all those collection of songs?

**Runa:** No, not really. It is hard to collect so many songs and due to transitions many of them are not in my collection.

**Rafi:** What was the song that you did in Bangladesh for the first time?

**Runa:** O *Amar Jibon Shathi* for the movie *Jibon Shathi* composed by Satya Saha. It was a duet track with Khondokar Faruk Ahmed sir.

**Rafi:** When did you start to feel a

**Many think that I preplan the performance and then sing, but in reality it is something that comes from within...**

**uniqueness to your singing style?**

**Runa:** I realized that from the very beginning and I think it happens spontaneously. Many think that I preplan the performance and then sing, but in reality it is something that comes from within according to the mood of the song. For example, in *PTV* I had a show called *Bazm E Laila* where I used to perform 5 different songs. I had different attire, makeup



and performing style for each of them and during that time something like this was completely new.

**Rafi:** So was this your idea?

**Runa:** Yes, I enjoyed it and brought this concept to the Asian subcontinent. I watched a lot of western singers and adapted some ideas. This is how my style evolved. Later in 1974 I was invited by ICCR to perform in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata. In Bombay Lata Ji, Salil Chowdhury and many others came to see me perform and gave me a warm welcome with open arms. Lata Ji gave a speech, presented me a garland necklace and stayed for the entire performance which was a very big thing for me! The organizer asked me if I wanted someone to be at the event, I mentioned that I wanted Lata Ji. They told me that it is very hard to manage her because she does not attend many events. So I had very little hope that this would happen. I was rehearsing back stage, when I saw a woman in white sari with a rose at a far distance. I

felt it was her but was not being very hopeful, because the organizers would have mentioned to me if she came. Later, when she actually came closer I could not believe my eyes. I ran up to her and greeted her by touching her feet. She held me and gave me a hug and photographers were taking pictures. The next day that picture was on the front page of many newspapers with the title, "One nightingale meets another." Then we chatted for a long time where she said she heard me in a lot of Pakistani songs. In reply I said that I could not believe that she heard me. It was an honor for me that she came to my show. Since then we share a beautiful bond. Even now, Lata Ji calls me whenever she hears that I am in town. We have become so close now, she gives me gifts on birthdays and I send her sarees on Eid and other occasions. She is a very lovely person. People think that she is a serious person, but she likes sharing jokes and can mimic so good that you will have a good laugh. I was even in the judge panel

with Asha Ji in a show called *Sur Kshetra*.

**Rafi:** Which year did you do this show with Asha Ji?

**Runa:** 2 to 4 years back, it was telecasted on *Colors*, *Shahara* and Pakistani channel *Geo TV*. It was a collaborated show where Pakistani contestants were also part of the competition. One judge was from Pakistan, Asha Ji from India and I was the neutral judge to handle the tiffs between them (laughs). But it was a very good experience and it was a good bond. Asha Ji loved to chat, so during breaks she used come up to my van and knocked "Main Aun?" I replied "Ap ko puch ne ki zarurat nehi hein. Ap jab chaye a shakti hein". Then we used to talk for hours during the breaks, like friends.

**Rafi:** Which was your first song in Hindi Film?

**Runa:** The title song of *Ek Se Badhkar Ek* with Kalyanji-Anandji for Helen. Then many more with various artists like Bappi Lahiri. I did some for movies in Kolkata as well.

