

THROUGH THE EYES

MY SHELTERED EXISTENCE

ZEENAT BARKATULLAH

Zeenat Barkatullah is an internationally renowned dance icon. She is a recipient of the prestigious BACHSAS Award for her contributions to the field of dance. In a candid interview with Star Showbiz, the elegant dance artiste remembers her momentous and eventful journey that has made her the person she is today.

alternatively. My journey with *Shilpakala Academy* was twenty seven year long. Memories of fourteen years of travelling across the country and channeling dance workshops that emerged from the resolution of helping the dance enthusiasts flourish, inspire me till date. I am still associated with *Shishu Academy*. The participants from different districts, suburbs and even from remote regions leave me enthralled with their amazing performances and their sense of fulfillment. They sometimes learn things so fast that a workshop or training of 15 days is more effective than years of formal learning. To be honest, time is not the measure of art, devotion is. The children of Dhaka are highly privileged yet very reluctant about

doctors, some are engineers, some are professors of renowned universities. But each one of them had some cultural inclination. My parents always wanted me to live my dream. They never restrained me from embarking upon the ostensibly difficult world of the dance fraternity. When I came back home after performance at late hours of the night, my parents would be waiting for me. Even after my marriage, my exceptionally encouraging husband was always there with me like a shadow. He was rather solicitous about my success since he himself used to dance while studying in Dhaka University. Later on, he became a producer in Dhaka and then went to London to work in BBC. He never imposed his wishes on me. I gave birth to my daughters at quite

tives so that I could realistically portray Maria. It earned me commendation and recognition as an undaunted and uncompromising artist afterwards. I acted in a television serial called *Ghore Baire* which became very popular at that time. *Asthayee Nibash*, *Boro Bari*, *Kotha Bol Moyna* were my other notable television dramas.

WALKING WITH ORGANIZATIONS

I am associated with multiple organizations. I am one of the advisors of *Bangladesh Nrityo Shilpi Songstha*. *Nrityanchal* has close association with me. As an advisor I am also involved with *Bangabandhu Shishu Kishor Mela*.

REVERSALS OF FORTUNE

My husband and I were both government employees. I have been honoured with multiple awards from time to time including the one of *Shilpakala Academy* immediate after my retirement. But a national award remains untouched so far; whereas many of my associates who could not get even a supporting role at that time have been showered with national awards. The selection process is dominated by nepotism and one cannot expect any rewards without suborning the authorities.

MY BREATHING SPACE

I have an irresistible hunger for work. My husband and I are both worn-out these days. My students and disciples take me to different programmes and drop me home. My dilapidated health and a thousand other physical complications do not allow me do everything that I want to do. Even a couple of years back, I used to spend hours just reading books. These years I am more attracted to television serials. My family and I never miss out on my son-in-law Dinar's tv dramas. My three grandchildren absolve me of the sense of anility. Their success and brilliance bring about the best times of my life. Though I have travelled round almost half of the world, still the family tours are unmatched for obvious reasons.

A RESPITE FROM THE REALITY

Dance is the master of all arts. Despite the dearth of patronization, Bangladesh is incessantly progressing in the field of dance. Our successors are carrying the legacy to greater heights. They have a thirst for learning the art and artistry of dance. But we need more sponsors. *Nrityalok* of Ratan, *Nrityanchal* of Nipa, *Bharatnatyam School* of Hiru, *Kathak School* of Munmun and Tamanna's *Monipuri Dance School* shimmer in the light of hope and embolden all the dance aspirants out there. I won't deny the fact that the evolution of dance in our cinemas is yet bereft of standard. We have lack of trained choreographers, hence the choreographies in cinemas are sometimes very obscene and unpolished. We need to refine our dance moves. Dance as an aristocratic form of art is a dear-bought treasure. Dance creates a respite from the reality for a while.

THE MAINSPRING OF DANCE

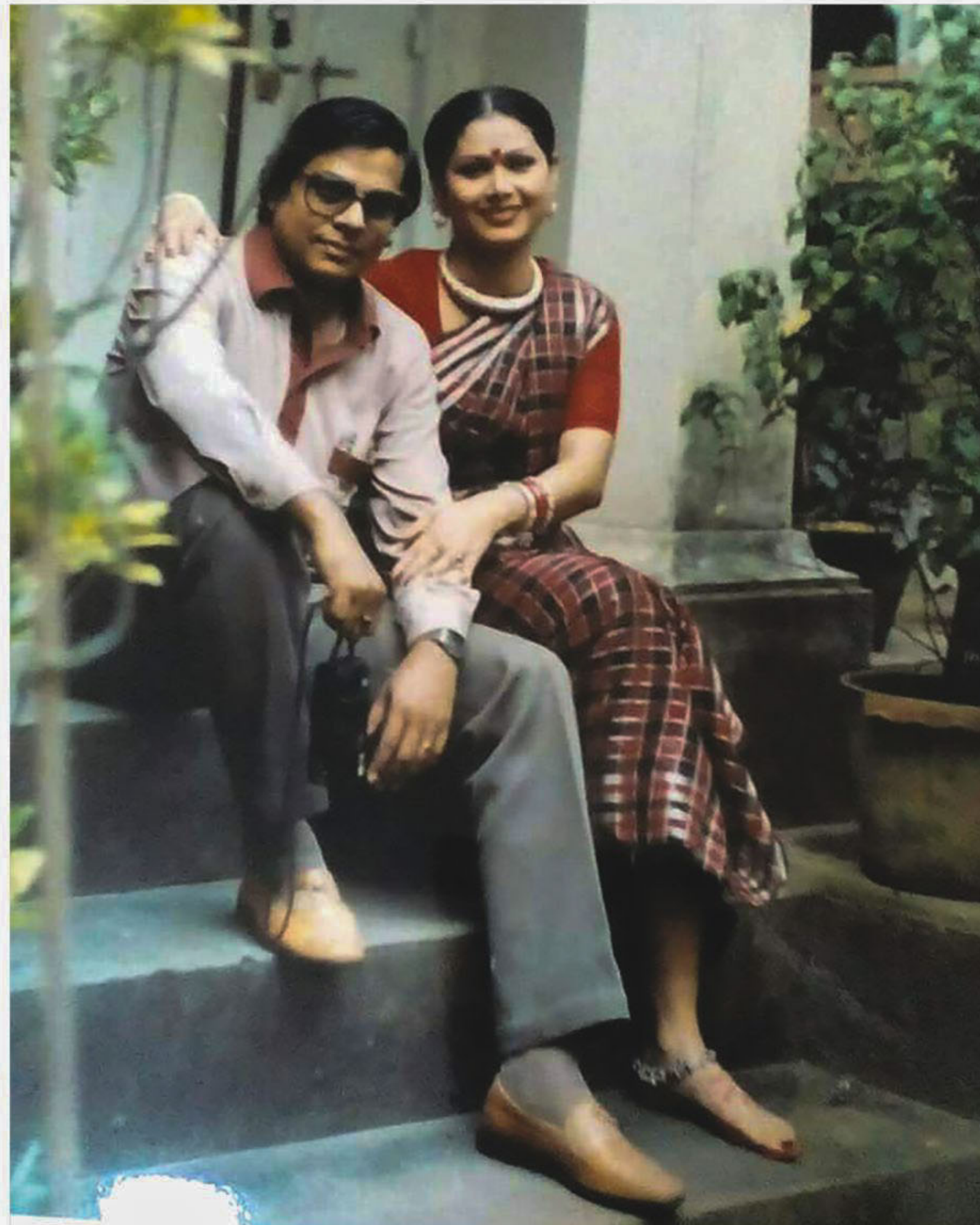
I was always an ambitious child. Dolling myself up and looking at the mirror for hours was a daily round for me. In my childhood, we used to have a magazine called *Filmfare* at our home in which I could get a glimpse of the gorgeous female actors and dancers. Those luminaries had an inevitable influence on me and I began to dream of becoming a star. I danced on the stage for the first time at the age of four. Sir G A Mannan was looking for performers for his dance-drama *Nakshi Kathar Maath*. I missed on it because back then I was in Jamalpur with my father who was a deputy magistrate and had a transferable job. Later on, we got settled and started living permanently in Dhaka. I took my admission in BAFA. I never had to look back from then onwards. My top position in the certificate exam of BAFA and performance in the lead role in several dance dramas ignited my affinity for art and dance.

A LIFETIME COMMITMENT

My devotion to dance is a resolute journey. In our time, seeking out a mentor who has specialized in a specific genre was very painstaking. I still learned *Kathak* from *Kathak* dancers, *Bharatnatyam* from *Bharatnatyam* dancers and so forth. My *Manipuri* dance mentor was Babu Ram Singh. I was offered a three year Indian scholarship for getting training in different genres of dance which I had to decline as to both my daughters were very young then. In the following years I predominantly persisted with *Folk*. It was not a respite from the arduous forms of dance; rather it was my professional integrity because I, as a dancer, could never indulge in remissness. I chose to continue with *Folk* dance because in my extremely occupied routine, it was almost impossible for me to invest ample time in practices. An artist is supposed to cultivate their mastery,

CAREER FLIP-FLOPS

I did my masters in Sociology from Dhaka University and joined the *Performing Arts Academy*. Then I switched to *Shilpakala Academy*. I was designated as the director of the *Production Department* as well as the Dance and Music departments there. I used to look after both the departments



utilizing the sources available to them. It has been more than nine years now since I retired from *Shilpakala Academy*.

MY FAMILY, MY MOTIVATION

I was born in a family which appreciated the arts and culture. My *Boro Baba Khan Bahadur Syed Mir Muhammad Hossain* was a minister at that time. The whole family has a history of imbuing the arts and culture. Our parents had prioritized education over everything else. All of my siblings are highly educated. Some are

an early age. I often had to go abroad for my international shows. Both of my daughters were so gentle and self-effacing and they never caused me any stress.

GROWING UP IN DRAMAS

I have acted in more than fifty television dramas. In the year of 1980, I acted in a drama called *Maria Amar Maria* where I played the center character Maria, a young and beautiful Italian woman. Back then, I wore skirts and trousers on television screen ignoring the criticism of conserva-