

# Ferdousi Priyabhashini

## An artist and a social activist

SELIM JAHAN

I know of Ferdousi Priyabhashini, but I did not know her. We met a few times in Dhaka either at a seminar or a conference, or at the residence of late National Professor Kabir Chowdhury. She used to come to Professor Chowdhury's residence either to attend the Executive Committee meeting of the Ekattorer Ghatok-Dalal Nirmul Committee (Committee for Resisting the Killers and Collaborators of 1971) or to wish him on the occasion of his birthday. I remember exchanging pleasantries with her. I told her how I appreciated her work—both as an artist and as a social activist. And she surprised me by mentioning that in the 1980s, she used to enjoy my column *Kori-Korcha* in the literary section of the *Daily Sangbad*. Our exchanges did not go beyond that and thus, I cannot claim that I knew Ferdousi Priyabhashini.

But all through the years, I was an avid admirer of Ferdousi Apa's artwork. I think I first saw some of her sculptures at the house of a friend, who collected a few of her works. Next, I had the good fortune of attending one of her exhibitions, which, as far as I remember, took place at Bengal Foundation. In the ensuing months, I found that Ferdousi Apa's artwork had become a keenly sought-after item in the elite homes of Dhaka. I am no art connoisseur, yet whenever I saw any sculpture created by Ferdousi Apa, I could not turn away. When I contemplate on this, I realise that Ferdousi Apa's artwork impressed me for three reasons.

First, her choice of ingredients was unique. I could never comprehend how

simple things from nature and waste materials all around us could be used so artfully and skilfully and turned into such impressive artwork. She used old tree branches, dead twigs, tree trunks, simple bamboo, fallen leaves, and discarded clothes to make beautiful sculptures. Once, she told me how she used to look for parts of tree trunks, hour after hour, that had been washed onto the beaches by tides. "Making art out of waste" was the innovative key to Ferdousi Apa's artwork.

Second, Ferdousi Apa's artwork is humane and human-centric. Our country, its land and people, our Liberation War and victory, and the lives of common people are the inspiration as well as the centre of Ferdousi Apa's sculptures. As a result, the landscape of Bangladesh, our freedom fighters, and the struggles of our common people, have again and again become the subject of Ferdousi Apa's artwork. All her work reflects her love for her country and her people. Of course, this is expected of a freedom fighter. It also depicts her social awareness and commitment.

Third, her forms are simple, closer to life. As a result, no one should face any significant problems in appreciating her work and understanding its basic messages. She did not make her sculptures unnecessarily abstract, beyond the comprehension of common people. Simplicity is her trademark and looking at her artwork, it has always dawned on me that simple was not only beautiful, but it was powerful as well. She has also shown us how, with minimum costs, we can decorate our homes beautifully and elegantly.



Ferdousi Priyabhashini (1947-2018).

PHOTO: STAR

We all know that artists have a social responsibility. Most of the artists exercise that responsibility through their artwork. Ferdousi Priyabhashini was no exception. But she went beyond her artwork to carry on her social responsibility as an artist. The Muktiyuddho or the Liberation War of Bangladesh was too personal for her and she made the dearest sacrifices for it. Naturally, she could never forgive the people who committed genocide, rape and murder during the nine months of our Liberation War. Ferdousi Apa hated the people who opposed the birth of Bangladesh, who could not accept the new country and were against

all its basic principles.

So, when the Ekattorer Ghatok-Dalal Nirmul Committee was formed through a civic initiative under the leadership of the *Shaheed Jononi* (mother of a martyr) late Jahanara Imam to try the war criminals, Ferdousi Apa was at its centre. She worked around the clock with other eminent citizens of the country in establishing a People's Court to try them. She was relentless in mobilising evidence against the killers and collaborators and helped build cases against them. Because of the efforts by personalities like Ferdousi Priyabhashini, in due course, the killers and collaborators of 1971 were

# The real and intangible threat of online child harassment



AFIA JAHAN

ENOUGH time has finally passed for us to collectively reflect on how much, and in what ways, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed our usual lives. Students, in particular, have encountered a

drastic shift in how they experience their education—and as a result, the internet. With classes slowly moving into the cyber sphere last year, students, teachers, and parents/guardians had to try—and often failed—to adjust to the uncharted territory of online education.

Many students have been deprived of online classes, mainly due to lack of access to necessary digital devices and poor or no internet connectivity in certain areas of the country. But those who have had access to these classes have also faced a host of new issues, not the least of those being online harassment.

With children (and this includes all under the age of 18) spending more time online, and on a greater number of social platforms, they have become increasingly more vulnerable to unwanted sexual advances. This can be in the form of being sent inappropriate texts and photos/videos (of the pornographic sort), receiving derogatory messages (either from peers or strangers), or even being blackmailed with their "own" photos (real or doctored).

A survey conducted last year by rights and legal aid NGO Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) in five districts (Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, Cox's Bazar, and Satkhira) found that a large number of young students had faced harassment online during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, of the 108 children (61 girls and 47 boys) surveyed, a whopping 30 percent reported having faced abuse online. Of them, at least 56 percent were girls, and 88 percent had been harassed by complete strangers. "Harassment"



PHOTO: COLLECTED

here entails disclosing of private and/or sensitive information on the internet, online sexual harassment and abuse, cyber bullying, blackmailing, and being exposed to pornography or sexual content, to name a few.

It should be noted that the number of girl children who faced such abuse online was found to be 8.39 percent in a similar pre-pandemic survey (conducted in early 2020) by the same organisation.

More concerning is the fact that less than half the children (41 percent) had reported such abuses to their parents or family members, and a mere six percent had pursued any legal actions against the offenders. Many children also reported facing multiple types of harassment at the same time.

While these findings are quite unsettling, they are not altogether unfathomable. Violence—of any kind—against children is

perpetually prevalent, no matter what the setting is. Of the 26,124 children interviewed by Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) during August and September of last year, 1,081 reported having faced violence, with 77 percent being victims of domestic violence. In January of this year alone, ASK found that 75 children had faced sexual violence of some kind, with the majority of the cases involving rape.

It should come as no surprise, then, that people have found ways to harass and exploit children on the internet too, as they do in real life.

The common perception still seems to be that events taking place online do not really "exist". That those events are not carried forward into the physical world, and that the consequences of actions taken on the internet cannot manifest in our daily lives. As comforting as the veil of anonymity provided by the digital space is, that's all it really is—a

veil.

In reality, for those who do face harassment online, it is as real as any they encounter in person. Not being able to confide in anyone about these instances causes them to feel depressed, isolated, anxious, and trapped—with the sense of humiliation being both external and internalised.

Most toddlers nowadays are well-acquainted with the workings of handheld digital devices, and will gladly spend all their time playing with them, resulting in the child essentially growing up in the company of a screen. But what happens as they grow older and their interactions with others on the internet—even strangers—increase?

According to UNICEF, at least 32 percent of children over the age of nine (and under 18) are vulnerable to online violence, harassment, and cyber bullying in Bangladesh. For all of us, including with regard to the law, this is a newer sphere of child abuse to navigate. As the nation becomes more digitised by the day, it is difficult for the average person to stay updated on how they can be safe on the internet. For children, it's almost impossible in the current atmosphere.

While the Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018 protects certain members of our society (mainly the political elite) diligently, there are clear lackings in it when it comes to protecting children on the internet. For one, as Quazi MH Supan, associate professor of law at the University of Dhaka, has pointed out in a report by *The Daily Star* regarding the ASK survey, there is no specific provision in the DSA concerning paedophilia. And while the Pornography Control Act 2012 addresses child pornography, there is also no legal provision for cases where both the offender and the victim are children.

But even when making use of the laws that are in place, legal procedures move at such a sluggish pace that it discourages victims and their families from pursuing any legal actions against online harassers.

Many children also hesitate to inform

their parents or guardians when faced with harassment online, in fear of being punished, or blamed for the incident, or because they don't want their devices taken away. Children may not even recognise such harassment for what it is, and may brush it off as something that is normal. But, as with any sort of abuse, the effects and trauma of these incidents stay with the child as s/he grows, hardening their worldview and affecting how they interact with others.


One would think that turning on the parental control option for each software and application that the child uses would be the go-to fix for this problem. But many argue that such restrictions may hamper trust-building between parents and children, especially if the latter do not know exactly what they are being protected from.


As such, awareness may be the key to making the internet a safer place for children, since their existence in it (alongside that of offenders) is decidedly unavoidable.

While the introduction and implementation of appropriate legal procedures to combat online child harassment will take time to reach fruition, parents may start by having open discussions with children regarding safety on the internet. Complete transparency during such discussions will cause much less discomfort than if the child does face harassment online, not seeing it for what it is. It is also necessary for schools to incorporate guidelines for cyber security into the syllabus, and to make such awareness the norm.

Keeping children in the dark regarding the dangers of the internet, in fear that knowing about them will cause them to lose their "innocence", is a futile practice. Especially since it is certain that facing such incidents and being clueless about how to seek help is infinitely more harmful for them in the long run. Only thorough and open communication (between children, parents, and educators) about online child abuse can help to prevent it to a great enough degree.

Afia Jahan is a member of the Editorial Team at *The Daily Star*.

**QUOTABLE**  
*Quote*



**ALEXANDER PUSHKIN**  
Russian Poet (1799—1837)

*Don't be sad, don't be angry, if life deceives you! Submit to your grief—your time for joy will come, believe me.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**  
1 Tea serving, to Brits  
6 Limbo residents  
11 Underway  
12 First odd prime  
13 Carpentry needs  
14 "Tomorrow" show  
15 "Get a move on!"  
17 Beatles descriptor  
19 Had supper  
20 Obtained  
23 "Seward's Folly"  
25 Soda choice  
26 They may be served at the beach  
28 Just  
29 Considered wise  
30 In medias-  
31 Minivan

**alternative**  
32 Flower visitor  
33 Llama's cousin  
35 Text adornment  
38 Bakery buys  
41 Egypt's Anwar  
42 Cove  
43 Jury makeup  
44 Test for purity

**DOWN**  
1 Purr producer  
2 Sky sighting  
3 They may be in pockets  
4 Warsaw native  
5 Being risked  
6 Play place  
7 "Dear me!"  
8 Coffee dispenser  
9 Island memento

**10 Take in**  
**16 Doesn't go to bed**  
**17 Smile upon**  
**18 Unaccompanied**  
**20 They have dimples**  
**21 Skateboarding jump**  
**22 Critical asset**  
**24 Crafty**  
**25 Crow call**  
**27 Munich setting**  
**31 Narrow cuts**  
**33 Open a bit**  
**34 Takes in**  
**35 Sixth sense, briefly**  
**36 West of films**  
**37 Exalted verse**  
**39 Pasture**  
**40 Pig holder**

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L A S  
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H I T  
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M E A N S

**BEETLE BAILEY**  
BY MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES**  
BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT