

NILUFAR FAROOQ – 2007



Proprietor of Ikebana

Nilufar Farooq's tiny empire was not built in a day. But her creativity, dedication and commitment to work have helped her dream come true. Gifted with a natural aesthetic sense from her childhood, she had an urge in her mind to do something special. She learned the art of flower arrangement, opened a small business house, and earned name and fame in a span of 16 years.

Nina is Nilufar's nickname. When Nina talked to The Daily Star, she spelt out how her passion for beauty turned into a profession.

In 1992, she along with one of her school friends and her Ikebana teacher rented a small shop at Dhanmondi in Dhaka. They spent even the last penny of their personal savings. Each of her partners contributed Tk 2.10 lakh. They took the possession of the shop at Tk 5 lakh and the rest amount was spent for decorations of Ikebana.

The breakthrough came just one year after the journey of Ikebana. During the seventh Saarc Summit in Dhaka in 1993, Nina, the managing partner of Ikebana, and two other courageous woman entrepreneurs were awarded the decoration work of the Dhaka Sheraton Hotel where the heads of state and government of the Saarc countries were staying.

"Since then, we did not need to look back," says Nina. Her business partner

Inu Shamsuddin echoed the view and said, "Now we are so busy that we have no weekends. Every day we have some work orders."

The third partner was Mrs Zoha who left the country for Japan after being involved in the business for around two years.

Nina has done more than 5,000 projects in 16 years. Some of her significant works are floral decorations during the state visit of some dignitaries like Bill Clinton, Yasir Arafat, Prince Aga Khan, Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Charles, and Princess Anne.

Nina also decorated several prestigious venues that include Bangabhaban, Ganobhaban, state guesthouses, and International Conference Centre at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

Although Ikebana's business turnover reached Tk 1.42 crore in fiscal 2005-06, it dropped to Tk 87 lakh in FY 2006-07 due to the country's difficult political situation. Now Ikebana is housed in a 3,000 sq feet office in the city's posh Banani area and it has drawn a wide range of customers – embassies, banks, corporate offices, industries, etc. Its business has been expanded to landscaping, indoor pot plants, roof gardening, and water fountain.

"Flowers always attracted me since my childhood. I loved to pluck them and make necklaces for my mother, my aunts, and friends. I would make flower arrangements for other people who visited our house."

Nina was born in Kolkata, the working place of her father Luthfar Rahman, a former jute businessman. Her maternal grandfather is renowned poet Golam Mostafa.

"My love for beauty generated in my family. And that love has brought me into the business with the art of flowers. I was a listed singer of BTV and Bangladesh Betar in the 70s. Classical music was my favourite. But the passion for flowers and beauty surpassed my

music career."

But her maternal uncle Mustafa Monwar (famous artist) inspired her to a great extent by giving her a book on Ikebana, the Japanese art of floral decoration, in the early 70s. "That was a major influence to go ahead with the art," she reminisced.

"Many people often ask me whether I am an architect or not." When asked whether her business career does any harm to her personal life, she replied in the negative saying: "I got married in 1969, before my graduation. I had three children who I took care of without any disturbance of my work." In response to another query, Nina said her husband, who is now leading a retired life after his successful career as a chemical engineer, never created any obstacle for her work, rather inspired her.

Nina later took training in the art in 1973 from the Japan Embassy in Dhaka. She received gold medal for exceptional performance in the training. She also acquired advanced knowledge on Ikebana through distant education from famous Japanese school O'Hara.

She taught Ikebana for 10 years at the Japan Embassy in Dhaka and later at a school.

"Ikebana is not an easy task. One should have the idea of architecture for drawing and design," Nina says,

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"My friends and relatives were astonished to see how I could manage my business after taking adequate care of my children," she says. "But business was in my blood as my father was a big jute businessman at that time," she adds.

"I am very disciplined, so is my whole family. I always get up early in the morning and do some work for my family before going to my workplace," she continued.

"Nina is crazy for work. I have seen very few guys like her in my life," Inu, her school friend and business partner said.

Nina takes the least interest in bank borrowing. "We prefer our small personal savings to any bank loans. Because the bank loan may turn into a burden for the organisation," the successful businesswoman said.

The flowers Nina's firm uses for decorations are often imported from foreign countries, such as Thailand and China, on the basis of the demands from customers.

Ikebana believes in professionalism and is ready to render maximum benefits to its employees. "But I can't compromise with the work and quality," Nina says.

Finally, the Ikebana chief could not help expressing her frustration over the new generation's poor knowledge of the flora and fauna, which takes them away from nature.

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