

BREAKING THE MARGINS

THE TALES OF THE UNSUNG HEROES

Aalima Rahman, an 18 year old, is known as the 'hijabi biker' who has broken stereotypes associated with Muslim girls. She works towards creating a safe space for women in the public sphere. She is graduating higher secondary from La Martiniere for Girls and carries herself comfortably and with confidence. She wishes to set up an academy to train girls to learn bike riding and promote women's freedom and free movement.



Aalima Rahman: The Hijabi Biker

It is now common to see women driving cars and scooters, but we rarely see women riding bikes. From the heart of Kolkata, this is the story of brave heart Aalima Rahman, the hijabi biker. A hijabi woman biker on the streets of Kolkata is a rare sight, and Aalima wishes to touch women's lives in more ways than just this one.

The beginning :

The class XII student of La Martiniere School for Girls was a mature and intelligent 11-year-old when she received her first lesson in riding a scooter. 'I knew balancing and was satisfied to be able to pick it up from that day itself. I didn't feel it was that tough,' says Aalima. Her elder brother, a bike enthusiast and avid racer, used to take Aalima for rides on his bikes, and was the first person to accept her pleas of being allowed to ride a bike herself. At 11 one night, Aalima recounts, he took her on her first motorbike ride on his old Yamaha bullet, in a deserted lane near their Elliot Road residence. 'My toes weren't reaching the ground.'

My brother sat on the back-seat, making the bike heavier... I was horrible at it and wanted to go home.'

But her brother kept her at it, never discouraging her for being a girl or as too young. Aalima woke up the next morning a changed woman.

With the encouragement of her family members, she zealously practiced underneath their building on her father's old Bajaj Discover. By the time she was 12, Aalima had taught herself to properly balance a Motorbike.'

People going in and out of our building were surprised to see Haji Sahib's hijab-wearing daughter riding a bike underneath the building!'

Aalima's journey :

Aalima's decision to wear the hijab surprised her family. The Islamic classes she attended as a child inspired her to assert her identity as a Muslim hijabi woman.

She is the only one in her class to wear one, and responds to her friends' queries about her choice with 'Hijab is a part of Islam and Islam is a part of me.' She says that they have been very supportive of her decision.

When on a bike, Aalima transforms her usual hijab into a layered and stylish all-black ensemble of a Loose black jumpsuit, a black knee-length shrug, her hijab, black head scarf, black knuckle-gloves, black socks and even black shoes. Unlike her dark riding-gear, Aalima's sense of humour is bright and cheery.

But it was not always smooth sailing for Aalima. From cars blocking her way and refusing to let her pass to boys trying to mar her efforts with nasty comments, she has faced it all and has now taken it upon herself to give riding instructions to her mother, her friends and even her teacher.

We trusted her... And she was always tall and very careful,' says Aalima's proud mother. Hasn't not having a license been an issue? Aalima remains unfazed by the question.

She has been riding around the city since she was 12 and 'by then I had explored many areas. I knew the Police won't stop me, mostly because they could not recognize me as an underage girl in that attire. I had gone through (Park Circus) Seven-Point and all... The Calcutta Police (at these places) know me.'

But Aalima refuses to let her experience of riding underage on the streets serve as encouragement for youngsters to disavow traffic and road safety regulations. 'I never rode without a helmet. I don't even let people sit behind me without a helmet, and it's not because of the signal.

It has been instilled in me.' Aalima takes pride in her riding, and has neither been charged with rash driving and traffic rule violation nor suffered any serious injuries in bike accidents.

Now a young woman (she turned 18 in October 2018), she will have her license soon.

Her aims and motivations :

Since her ICSE examinations, the bold-spirited Aalima has been volunteering her free time to a wide range of social services. Her mother, whom she credits with being her first role model, encouraged her to volunteer at their schools for underprivileged children, Little Star School and Step Up School.

Aalima went on to work with Indian Pluralism Foundation, Yeh Mera India, All India Dawah Centres Association (AIDCA), The Sirri Saqti Foundation, and The Calcutta Muslim Orphanage, and has co-founded three such organisations Umeed - Hope for a Better Tomorrow, Youth Mascots and We Are One.

Now a student of Humanities, Aalima intends to pursue a career either in Law or Psychology in order to 'be able to give back to society.'

In addition to tutoring underprivileged kids, she has put her social work ahead of an eight-year state-Level Tennis Career which she now wants to resume.

Aalima's enthusiasm for life and living is infectious. On the surface, hers seems like the story of how a girl nurtured

her passion of riding motorbikes, but that barely scratches the surface. There are deeper meanings and motivations to her choices and actions.

The women in her family have inspired her with their pursuit of education, profession and passions alongside Marriage, family and child-birth.

Aalima acknowledges her privilege of having grown up in a financially affluent family and receiving their constant support and encouragement. This has made her, she admits, more determined to extend her support for girls, whether hijabi or not, who do not share her privilege.

Her achievements:

Aalima associates nurturing her passion for motorbike-riding with the growth of her self-confidence: 'I feel the most confident and powerful on a bike.'

In this, one can find in Aalima Rahman a conscious support for and identification with the likes of Roshni Misbah (tagged 'Hijabi Biker' by the people of her native Delhi).

Rahman, following in Misbah's footsteps, has begun to participate in Cause Races, and has already participated in the Golden Quadrilateral Ride organized by Wheels of Change.

She proudly and unequivocally announces her conscious attempts at trying to fashion her identity as a patriotic hijabi biker, a tag which not just proclaims her breaking of stereotypes as a nationalist and Muslim biker but also a woman biker. Such a moniker,

Aalima believes, is a positive step towards women's empowerment and inclusion of all women within the purview of her activism. In ten years from now, this intrepid woman envisages herself as an instructor at abiking school for women.

Her message to women less privileged than herself is clear: 'People say what they have to. If they Have Nothing to say, they will say something negative. That shouldn't affect your motive.'

'Breaking the Margin: Tales of the Unsung Heroes', an initiative of West Bengal Minorities' Development and Finance Corporation(WBMDFC) , presents examples of inspirations, hopes, and accomplishments. We are pleased to present the the stories of individuals drawn from the minority communities, who fought all kinds of odds and broke the barriers of stereotype. They triumphed over deeply entrenched poverty to set the examples for emulations. The first aim of the series is to capture the journey of different individuals, what were the enabler and triggering points that moved these heroes to embark upon the path travelled by a few people. The second principle guiding our this effort is to tell the stories of these unsung heroes to motivate others, especially those who come from similar backgrounds. One of the common threads running across every profile is the story of grit and determination.

Sustain the stories: Nominate your own unsung hero

There are many such stories of unsung heroes that remain unheard, this is the first attempt of this kind, we urge people to share such stories for another edition of this series. Your little effort can enlighten a large audience of an extraordinary achievers, and encourage a thousand of aspirants to emulate the stories who Have cross the hurdles.

For Details visit <http://www.wbmdfc.org/icons>

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