

# BREAKING THE MARGINS

## THE TALES OF THE UNSUNG HEROES

*45 year old **Mujibur Rahman** is from Mushidabad in West Bengal, but has been settled in Kolkata for over 15 years. He is a filmmaker and has created documentaries on the lives of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Begum Rokeya, among other eminent personalities. He is currently working on a film on Swami Vivekananda. He has previously worked in Mumbai in the production division of several serials.*



### **Mujibar Rahman:** The Filmmaker from Murshidabad

At first glance, the 45-year old Mujibar Rahman appears to be a teacher, with his curly hairs and spectacles. The man from Murshidabad, based in Kolkata for over 15 years, is behind the important and exhaustive documentaries on Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Begum Rokeya, and is currently working on Vivekananda. It was the necessity of doing difficult calculations at the small grocery shop that made Rahman's father determined to send his son to school. As teachers found him hardworking and intelligent, they encouraged his father to not let him drop out of school. 'Even then education was secondary to supporting one's father at a shop or in farming. During lunch break, I would come to the shop so that father would be able to have lunch,' says Rahman. Life in the small village under Beldanga block of Murshidabad was very simple in those days, and there seemed little perks of higher education, let alone job opportunities. Rahman knew his calling was somewhere else and went to take admission in BA (Honours) in English Literature at a local college after completing

higher secondary. 'I loved reading stories and novels, and was also part of the Drama clubs, so I thought of studying English Literature,' he says. But within months, he realised it was not a right decision as the environment at the college or even the teaching standards were not up to the mark.

### **Move to Kolkata:**

One fine day in January 1993, he decided to move to Kolkata and took admission in the Bangabasi College under Calcutta University. The first few months in Kolkata were not easy, with little money in his hand. He stayed in the Colootola area with distant relatives from the village. Some kind souls also arranged for him to give private tuitions, which supported him financially for the next four years. Since the environment at the college in Kolkata also was not very conducive to studies, he used his time in honing his inner talents. He started doing theatre and worked with many groups in different roles. It was a workshop on filmmaking in the year following his BA that changed his life forever.

### **Living Mumbai Dreams :**

Rahman was determined now to make films, and as he got his monthly salaries from different tuitions he was conducting, he picked his bags and boarded a train for Mumbai on 16 December 1997. Once again, he stayed with a distant relative in a slum at Ghatkopar who was working at a local factory. 'The first year in Mumbai was very difficult as I shared the room with about five people and stood in long queues to answer the call of nature in the morning,' Rahman says, adding, 'But Mumbai was very welcoming too in the sense that on the very first day, I saw a glimmer of hope.' His distant relative took him to his boss who recommended him to a businessman in Goregaon. He got the job offer in first few days itself to maintain account books and compose letters. He used the weekend to satisfy his inner calling. 'I would work for five days and on Saturday and Sunday, I would visit the Film City in Goregaon and spend the whole day there observing the shooting and production, even though from a distance.' The Aamir Khan Starrer film *Mela* was being shot then, and he would register himself in the morning for junior artists to become part of the huge crowd needed for the shooting. 'I would look forward to the weekend as those were the happiest moments for me in Mumbai. Besides seeing film production from the closest I could reach, we would also get a sumptuous lunch on the sets for free.'

He would not take the daily wage for the work of junior artist, however. 'To enter the sets we needed to stand in long queue for registration and after exiting there was another line for collecting the daily wage. I would skip the wage every day, and then one day the agent responsible for junior artists noticed, and stopped me to ask why I am not taking money since it had accumulated into a handsome amount.' Rahman says that somehow he was not comfortable in taking money for working as a junior Artist. On weekdays too Rahman did his work patiently and the best he could, and the factory owner was happy to give him a raise after a year. But the day he got the hike, he decided it was enough, and put in his papers. 'My boss thought I was mad, but I had not come to Mumbai for doing odd jobs, I had come here to work in entertainment industry, to make films, to become part of the crew at least.'

During his weekend tours, Rahman had made few contacts, and one of them directed him to the scriptwriter Shobit Jaiswal, who wanted his story to be translated in English for a Singapore based Production. The scriptwriter wanted him to shift to a room near his house 'A lone bag was all I had in Mumbai, and so I was happy to move from Ghatkopar.'

This was the first major turning point for him in the entertainment industry. 'When I got rupees twenty thousand in my hand for the work, the happiness I felt that day is unmatched. That day I told to myself, "I will live for film",' he says. Jaiswal was impressed with his work and recommended him to Nimbus Production where he got a job as an assistant director and was soon promoted due to his dedication. Later, he joined Balaji Productions. He worked on three TV series in the following years *Nyaya* for DD Metro, *Kadam* for Sahara TV and *Kanyadaan* for Sony. But why did he choose Direction? Did he never want to try Acting? He says this was more of a practical and conscious decision considering his background.

'In front of camera, there is just one option, you can only become actor. You either become a star or you perish. Behind the camera I saw that the scope was immense, from spot boy to director,' he says. When he saw actors like Nawazuddin Siddiqui struggling for years, he was even more determined to be part of the direction, he says. Rahman has happy memories from Mumbai that offered him new opportunities. He did not have a place to stay of his own and so he, along with few other crew members, slept at the production office or studio. 'The Director's chamber was my bedroom at night, and my bag would lie under his table,' Rahman laughs. He also shared very cordial relations with his crew members, many of whom were from different parts of North India. 'I don't remember ever discussing religion or politics, we were all engrossed in our work,' he says. He also worked on the script for a Bengali serial for a newly launched Channel Zee Bangla, *Bideshi Badhu*. 'I was not sure if I could write scripts as by then I was working full time as assistant director, but I needed money at that time. And the director had confidence in me, so I went ahead with it.' Moreover, the serial was being shot in Odisha and so it required him to travel regularly. His village house was severely Damaged by flood. 'I got Rupees 1.5 lakh from this serial that I gave to my father, and he added some money he had saved to rebuild the house in the village.'

### **Unexpected Return :**

In October 2002, as he wound up the work on the Bengali series, he thought of taking a break for few weeks before taking up another assignment. His younger brother, now a school teacher, was studying in Kolkata. So, after spending a few days in Murshidabad, he came back to Kolkata. His father somehow convinced him to marry and unsure where to take her in Mumbai, Rahman decided to try his luck in Kolkata now. This was the time when Bengali TV channels were also spreading, and he already had some experience. Kolkata, however, did not appear as welcoming to Rahman as Mumbai was. He says he got some work offers from ATN World and their Bengali channel in 2003-2004, but those were mostly related to current affairs. Luck did not favour him in the Bengali entertainment industry, although he did make a few telefilms during that time. He now had a family and to support them, he needed to earn well. Rahman still lives in the same rented flat on the ground floor in Park Circus with his wife and two children.

'I was sure that whatever I do, it will be related to films.' That's when he turned to making promotional and corporate videos. During this time, he thought of buying a camera for himself, and applied to the West Bengal Minority Finance Corporation (WBMDFC) for financial support. WBMDFC sanctioned him rupees one lakh and he added fifty thousand from his pocket to buy a camera (PD 170).

**Documentary Filmmaking:** As he was already making short films and documentaries for different NGOs and organisations, he got the financial support from the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (now KMC) to make a film on Begum Rokeya in 2007. The Corporation funded him to make another film on Hind-Urdu writer Munshi Premchand. He later did a series of 12 documentaries on classic Indian artists produced by Academy of Indian Culture, including Ustad Fayaz Ahmad Khan, Ustad Allah Rakkha Khan, Gyan Prakash Ghosh. In 2008, he decided to make a documentary film on Rabindranath Tagore that was finally released in 2011. The film received appreciation from several quarters and was even included in the UG Diploma course of the Rabindranath Studies Centre of Jadavpur University. The film was screened in London, Edinburgh and almost every major event or film festival on Tagore in next few years all over the world and in India. It was included in the UG course of Literature at Edinburgh University as well. 'That movie has changed my life and my image in many ways. I got recognition in the intellectual circle of the Kolkata as a filmmaker, and was also introduced to the outside world,' says Rahman. Since then, he kept receiving work from different quarters. He later received a fund from the central government to make a film on Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray. His next major film was on Kazi Nazrul Islam which is almost two hours long. This film too has been widely screened in India and the world. It was screened at the Kolkata International Film Festival and was among the five shortlisted films in the mainstream category. He has also made a short film on the life of Kolkata based social worker Md. Khalil, and is currently working on the life of Swami Vivekananda. Meanwhile, his one unfulfilled dream is to make a feature film on which he has been working for 10 years now. The story, he says, is based on the background of the socio-economic challenges that the contemporary Muslim society is facing. 'Even the script is ready, but due to paucity of funds, I have not still been able to proceed. Once it almost reached the Mahurat stage, but was suspended due to lack of funds.' He hopes it sees the light of day soon. Majority of Bengali Muslims live in rural Bengal and hence lack the cultural capital in big cities like Kolkata, and thus you do not really find many Muslims in the Bengali film industry. Rahman, however, wants youngsters to work hard and prove their merit so the world is forced to recognise them.

'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 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.

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