

BREAKING THE MARGINS

THE TALES OF THE UNSUNG HEROES

30 year old Naznin Mullick comes from Andul in Howrah district of West Bengal. She has persevered and struggled hard against poverty to pursue a career in teaching. She has taught Sanskrit in a government school and subsequently in a college, and has broken stereotypes about religion and language through her choice of subject, which is one of the oldest surviving languages and is commonly perceived as a 'Hindu' language.



Naznin Mullick: The Muslim Sanskrit Teacher

'In the politics of discrimination, languages too have not been spared. Certain languages are given religious and ideological colours. Thus, Urdu and Arabic in India have largely become the languages of Muslims while Sanskrit is often associated with the Hindutva ideology. 30-year old Naznin Mullick from Andul in Howrah district has struggled hard to become not just a teacher of Sanskrit first in a government run school and later in a college but also breaks all stereotypes about one of the surviving classical languages.

Family and Early Life

Life has not been very easy for Naznin's family, comprising her, three younger sisters and her mother. Her father remarried and left them to fend for themselves. Her poor mother Shamina Mullick was engaged in odd jobs like making rakhi, doing embroidery in local factories, and such. Often, Naznin and her sisters would help their mother finish her job on time.

Although Shamina was herself barely educated till class IV, she wanted to see all her daughters educated. Naznin and her sister went to the local government run girls' school and studied there till class XII. Their mother hardly made two thousand rupees a month, and there were weeks and months when there was no work. 'Those weeks would become difficult for us, sometimes our younger maternal uncle would help,' she says.

Because she was a meritorious student, Naznin also got minority scholarships from the West Bengal Minority Finance Corporation (WBMFC) since class VI, and her school, considering her financial conditions, would waive off any fees. 'Like average girls in the village, as a child I thought I would study till Madhyamik or so, and then marry and settle down,' she says. But destiny had other plans for her.

A local tutor from whom she was taking private tuitions, Khan Anuruddin Islam, inspired her to study seriously and pursue a career. As it was difficult for their mother to buy books for all her daughters, Naznin found out about the Khudiram Study Circle in Vasudevapur, more than an hour's walk from her house in Andul. Since the 1980s, the Circle has tried to help those who drop out from school due to lack of availability of books. 'I am thankful to the Khudiram Study Circle that provided me books from class VII up to my graduation,' Naznin says. Earlier, she would walk to the Circle to get books, but later she got a bicycle or would go by local public transportation.

It was at this circle that she discovered her love for Science and at one point dreamt of becoming a doctor. But considering her financial constraints, she decided it would be very difficult for her to pursue a career in medicine. Her next option was becoming a school teacher. She had stood first among female students in Arts in the Howrah district in Higher Secondary and was even declared the 'Ideal Student' by her school upon completion of class XII. She was also a district level athlete.

Meanwhile, under the influence of one of the teachers at the Khudiram Circle, she discovered her love for Geography and wanted to study Geography in college. While taking admission in college, she realised that since she did not study Mathematics in her higher secondary, she was not eligible to apply for B.Sc in Geography in many good colleges. In the few where she was getting admission in Kolkata, the admission fees of about Rs 6000 was too much for her family to pay. She therefore pinned her hopes on the Government Girls' College, Howrah, but as an alternative on advice of others, she had also filled the application for BA (Hons) in Sanskrit since she had studied it as an additional language in school.

Sanskrit Calling:

It was fateful that she could not clear the merit list in Geography and thus began her education in Sanskrit. She gradually started enjoying the subject. However, the fees and the college and other expenses were not easy. Despite her application, even the WBMFC scholarship cheques were not coming in for some reason. However, she found good Samaritans every time she faced constraints. A local newspaper had profiled her for topping among girls, becoming the 'ideal student' of her school, and studying Sanskrit in college.

A local activist, Madhusudan Manjhi (Madhusudan Kaku to Naznin), was very impressed with her story and came to meet her. When he learnt of her situation, he helped her write several letters to different authorities, and it finally became clear that due to clerical discrepancies her scholarships cheques were going back every year. He also helped her open her own bank account and finally she started getting the scholarship money once again.

Admission at CU :

After graduating with flying colours in BA she took admission in Masters at Calcutta University, but travelling to Kolkata from Andul everyday was a task. Naznin would come to Andul railway station by her bicycle, park it in the stand, take the local train to Howrah station and from there take the local bus to the College Street passing through the heavy traffic at Burrabazar and MG Road.

'Travelling to the university everyday was an arduous task, it would take me about two and half hours to reach University, and the same amount of time on return journey every evening,' she says, adding that often she would get stuck in traffic and get late for class. As her classes would be over at 5.30 pm, she used to reach home at 9 pm, and sometimes even later if she happened to miss the daily train due to traffic. 'My family and I had to face smirks from the locals who would say all kinds of things about me being away from home all day', she recalls. Many Muslims in her locality were also uncomfortable that she was studying Sanskrit, a language they associated with 'Hindu worship.' She had other worries too. Till college, all the sisters would eat whatever was at home before going for studies, and then eat a meal upon their return. They could not afford to carry any tiffin. Now that she left home early and reached home at night, she for the first time began carrying tiffin as buying lunch every day would have been more expensive.

Visiting Kolkata and studying in the university also expanded her horizon and her aspirations. A senior from the university encouraged her to aspire for higher things and not just limit herself to becoming a school teacher. 'Think and strive to become a college teacher, even if you fail, you will at least become a school teacher,' she recalls being encouraged.

In MA, she applied for the Higher Education scholarship which was higher than the minority scholarships and received it in 2011. After MA, she decided to study M.Phil and later a PhD too. Her M.Phil. dissertation was on Genesis, that is, a comparative study on the creation of the universe in Quran and Vedas. She is writing her PhD thesis on the creation of the Universe in Sanskrit/Indian literature and Iranian literature.

Dreams Fulfilled:

Meanwhile, she cleared both NET-JRF and School Service Commission (SSC) examinations. Teachers and many others advised that although she must pursue a PhD., she should join a teaching job as it is permanent, when compared to JRF which is only for five years. Like many in her locality, the interview board was surprised too at seeing a Muslim girl not just studying Sanskrit but performing well enough to become a teacher. She started teaching in December 2013, but within 10 months of her new job she cleared the college service commission examinations too and is now teaching Sanskrit at the government college in Jhargram.

Throughout, Naznin and her family were living in different rented accommodations, so as she started working in the school, she took a loan from the bank and bought a small piece of land in Andul and gradually they have built their own house. It is likely that her father had left them as he considered Having four daughters a burden. Naznin is not comfortable talking about him, although she did acknowledge that he sometimes now visits them.

When he needed a cataract surgery a few years ago, Naznin was the one who provided the necessary financial support. After graduation, her second sister started working in a mall in Howrah while Naznin was studying MA at CU. Soon upon Naznin's completion of MA, her sister also finished her MA through Distance Learning and she was married last year. She is applying for government jobs. Their younger sister is a trained make-up artist and the youngest one is a school student. Naznin has not forgotten the Khudiram Study Circle, and now serves the Circle as its member. Government schools now mostly provide course books to students for free, so the Circle now focuses on college level books to help other needy meritorious students.

Becoming a teacher may not be a huge achievement for people of big cities and middle class families. Considering Naznin's background, however, this is no mean feat, and she is a role model for young students, particularly female students, in her locality and parents cite her example to motivate their children to do better.

Most girls in her group had started getting married by the time they reached high school. When she reached BA, she did not have any Muslim friend left from her school, but things are changing now. 'I will not claim credit that it is happening only because of me, but now thankfully I see new enthusiasm for education and learning, which was missing two decades ago when we were students,' she says. Most people in her locality are engaged in tailoring work.

The Future:

Naznin is now planning to marry soon and is thankful to her fiancé for supporting her in all her endeavours. She regrets sometimes that the full time teaching job is impacting her PhD research as she is not able to devote as much time as she would have wanted to her studies. But she fondly remembers the constant support of her supervisor Dr. Mau Dasgupta. But more than anything, she still has one wish to live - her love for Geography. 'I hope, after finishing my PhD, I can go back to Geography and study it even if it is in distant mode,' she says. She says that the determination is the key to success. Not just Muslim, but she wants every girl, every human being to strive hard and create their own identity and that would come through economic independence and when done does something meaningful. She says, 'You will only succeed if you are determined to achieve something despite all hurdles that may Come your way.'

'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>

West Bengal Minorities Development & Finance Corporation

AMBER: DD-27/E, Sector-I, Salt Lake City, Kolkata-700064

Phone No. : 033- 4004-7468/4004-7469 Dedicated WhatsApp No.- 8017071714

Toll Free No. - 1800 120 2130 Mail ID - mdfc.wb@gmail.com