

BREAKING THE MARGINS

THE TALES OF THE UNSUNG HEROES

Tahrina Nasrin Born in a small village in Uluberia, Howrah, she is the only Muslim woman to have crossed the English Channel (2015). She works at the Income Tax Department in Kolkata during the day, and practises swimming in the evening. She has also crossed the Bangla Channel at the Bay of Bengal and hopes to swim across all famous channels on earth.



Tahrina Nasrin: Swimming through the Tides of Deprivation

If you search for Tahrina Nasrin on Google, you will realize that the international cognizance of her achievements seems more than her national prominence in the mainstream media. Her name features on the official site of the Channel Swimming Association. Born in a small village in Uluberia, Howrah in West Bengal, Tahrina showcases a great deal of inner strength and will as she says, 'The sea is always unpredictable and that is what I love about it'.

Making of a Swimmer:

Tahrina's first dive into the waters of the nearby pond and learning the art which she has mastered began at the age of two and a half years, holding her mother's fingers. At the age of 9 she joined the formal swimming learning school where she was guided by a pool of mentors, namely, Shankar Chakraborty, Moloy Saha, Bulbul Saha and Ashish Banerjee. A club game after one and a half months gained her prominence in the eyes of her coaches.

Within few years, when she was only thirteen and a half years old, she represented the country in the Indo-Bangla games held in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She won the second position in the 50 meter backstroke, followed by two other medals that added to her first international laurels.

Since then, there has been no looking back although she has faced many hurdles, mostly concerning finances and logistic issues. While swimming became the young Tahrina passion, she did not ignore her studies as well and in 2012 she achieved yet another success in the income tax department examinations, in the sports category.

A Supportive Family :

Tahrina is fortunate to have a supportive family. Her father Sk. Afsar Ahamed was himself a footballer. His son and Tahrina's brother is a shooter and is also pursuing a PhD in Chemistry. While the father wanted his daughter to follow his footsteps and reach heights that he could not due to family's compulsions and knee injuries, her mother wanted her to become either a singer or a swimmer.

The family soon realized that their daughter was born to grow in water and swim across the world. As they come from a small place beyond city fringes, neighbours and other local people of the community often mocked not only Tahrina but the whole family for investing so much energy and money which they thought was futile. Her father, however, had unflinching faith in the talents of his children and went all the way to support them. When young Tahrina got upset with such harsh criticisms, her father consoled her, 'Your achievements will be the answers to such criticisms.' He urged her to not get distracted and focus instead on honing her talent and focusing on her fitness.

Her father was proven right as Tahrina has become a role model in her locality, not only for sports-enthusiast youngsters but also for educationally deprived girls. As she looks back, Tahrina remembers various sports related infrastructural bottlenecks which she swam across, but considers herself fortunate to have such a supportive father who doubles as her physical trainer and coach now and takes care of all the needs of a sportswoman. She jovially recalls, 'I was a mediocre student. Moreover, I did not get much time to study but the to and fro journey time from my practice sessions was dedicated towards my study.' She completed her graduation from Calcutta University in English Literature, and her post-graduation with English major was from Vidyasagar University.

High Dreams, Temporary Setbacks:

In 2009, by creating records in the Bengal games she grabbed the attention of her foremost coach, Masudur Rahman Baidya, who would lead her to her greatest accomplishment so far, crossing the famous English Channel. From 2013 onwards she started practicing towards this dream in the waters of Belehata Subhas Sarobar Lake under his mentorship. As the training was still underway, as luck had it Baidya had an untimely death in 2015, halting her dreams. Later, her visa application was also rejected on the grounds of insufficient bank balance in the accounts of her guardian.

Tahrina still gets emotional when she remembers those hiccups. 'My father sacrificed his own work schedule as well as football time to help facilitate my dreams which again led to a financial crunch because of which entire family suffered,' she says with a heavy heart. She also acknowledges the support her office colleagues and senior authorities in the IT Department extended towards realising her dreams by allowing her the time to practice. A typical day for Tahrina begins at 5:30am when she first does training with her father, followed by a 9:30am Uluberia local train to her workplace. After completing her work related commitments, she rushes to the Beleghata Subhas Sarobar Lake. Her father, who is now her full time trainer, often travels with her, waits for her at her office and then goes with her for training at Beleghata.

Recounting those hurdles and the distance between her home and office that wasted a lot of her time, Tahrina says, 'It was my strong will that always stood strong which kept me swimming smoothly through All the tides of crises and setbacks.'

Accolades, Finally:

With the flames of her and her deceased mentor's desires burning wildly inside her and bypassing all hurdles, Tahrina finally arrived at Dover (England) in August 2015. It took her a while to adjust to the cold weather conditions from where she would begin her swimming dream in the Shakespeare beach at Kent. With great rejoice she recalls her father's companionship in this journey too, with her recollecting the 5 Pound membership in the swimmers association and a red cap which facilitated her 16 days practice before the final lap in the waters of her dream.

During her training sessions, the observer placed by the association was delighted with her speed, and had confidentially reassured her that she would swim through, be it in the spring tide or a neap tide. Finally, on 3 September 2015, Tahrina created history when she swam across tides raging above 6.9 meters in height and covered a distance of 55 kilometers completing her dream swim across the English Channel, making her the only Muslim female to do so.

Who would tirelessly coach her for 12 hours a day, and also intense practice sessions of 13 hours a day, without any over the water break that she had in Puri, Orissa, before leaving for England. Besides her father's consistent support, she also acknowledges the new techniques and guidance she received during her training sessions abroad, but thanks her mentor for the support he had extended. The laurels did not come easily, though. After facing visa rejections and other hardships, when she finally prepared to try her luck again, she realized she needed at least ten lakh rupees. She wrote to the Department of Youth Services and Sports, Government of West Bengal, that granted her a total of Rupees One Lakh only towards her foreign endeavors.

Inspirations and Support:

Tahrina attributes her accomplishments at the English Channel to her mentor Baidya, Her father spent all the savings he had made for his daughter's marriage and other emergencies. However, still short of the money, she also had to borrow. She lamented that even after achieving such a feat, the state government has not given her any recognition or financial support till date. Adding laurels to her garlands she later swam across the Bangla Channel at the Bay of Bengal (a sea route from Teknaf to the Saint Martin's Island, a distance of 16.1 Kilometers, part of Bangladesh). Although she considers it another feat, she received several demeaning remarks for choosing the Bangla Channel after English Channel that her critics believe lowers the benchmark she had set for herself, being unaware of the dangers of this sea route.

Next on Radar: Turning a deaf ear to such criticisms, she appears determined in her goals.'My ultimate goal is to swim across seven channels of the world.' Despite becoming a reputed athlete, Financial constraints - possibly also her Muslim name - keep coming in her ways. Even last year, her Gibraltar Channel endeavors received a setback when her visa was rejected once again, this time citing the reason that she might not return from her host country and stay there as a migrant. These do not deter Tahrina anymore, though, who is at the pinnacle of enthusiasm. She is planning to go back to the Bangla Channel in a few months, this time doubling the distance (to and fro distance of 32.2 kms), which again no woman has accomplished till now. While preparing for swimming across different Channels, she also conducts a basic research acquiring knowledge through online videos of successful swimmers, their constraints as well as taking note of the difficulties of the sea route. Although Tahrina's mother is proud of her daughter's achievements, she is also worried about society and the fingers that they keep pointing. Her parents attribute the challenges that particularly girls face to the backwardness of the community. But Tahrina's success, both in the swimming pool and her landing a government job, has nudged the local community too towards a silent change. Her father Afsar Ahamed recounts that till few years ago most people in their locality would frown upon him sending his daughter for playing or higher education, but now they send their daughters for higher studies, and footfalls of girls in the local Ulberia Club have Also increased manifold.

'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. 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.

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