

A SCHOLAR, A HUMANIST: A MASTER STRATEGIST

Vina Mazumdar

**Centre for Women's Development Studies
New Delhi**

I met Prof. Nurul Hassan in 1947 when I was a fresh undergraduate at Oxford. He was a very senior research scholar, and was also completing his term as President of the Oxford Majlis - the association of Indian students at the University. The Majlis had just suffered a major blow: - a group of members had separated to form the Pakistani Students Association. At the very first meeting of the Majlis that I attended, Prof. Hassan welcomed and informed me that I had been elected Treasurer of the Majlis. My surprised protest that I was a newcomer, and had not sought any position were brushed aside with a charming smile, and some remark about members' finding it more difficult to delay/evade paying subscriptions on time to a woman treasurer. I was left dumb holding a responsibility I had never sought.

The next occasion when I saw his particular brand of leadership in action was on 30th January 1948. The news about the assassination, of Mahatma Gandhi reached us by late afternoon. Prof. Hassan led a team of Indian students to All Souls College to seek advice from Prof. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan - on what we should do. The College Porter told us that S.R. had locked himself in his room, with instructions that he was not to be disturbed. "Oh, he will see us, please inform him that we are on the way". The door was open by the time we reached, and we all entered, along with Prof. Sumner, Warden of All Souls.

There was little talk. All of us were too stunned - but somehow a decision was taken to hold a meeting two days later, to be addressed by Prof. Gilbert Murry and S.R. The Warden offered the All Soul's Library as a venue. The 500+ persons who came to pay homage sat on the floor in silence, listening to moving tributes. The Majlis' handwritten notices, announcing the meeting had been spread to a far wider circle of people by many student volunteers who were neither Indian nor members of the Majlis. The Majlis executive committee held no formal meeting to plan this event, though a few of them accompanied Prof. Hassan in that initial instinctive rush to Prof. S.R. None of the Majlis members - present in full strength at the meeting, thought of playing any formal role - to introduce the speakers or thanking all those who came so spontaneously.

These few memories from my student days, only strengthened my later assessment of Nurul Hassan as a person who was at his best playing a leadership role behind the scenes - rather than by putting himself forward before the public - as the key figure. He was also a past master at manipulating friends whom he trusted into major responsibilities without any prior consultation. The challenge would be weighted with a burden of guilt if the friend attempted to wriggle out of the unexpected, often unwanted responsibility.

The early acquaintance as students was renewed two decades later, when as a newly recruited officer of the UGC I was asked to work with a Review Committee on History -

which basically meant functioning as its record keeper, calling timely meetings, and assisting the Committee to produce, eventually, a report. A series of events, some anticipated, some unexpected, expanded and transformed the functions of this Committee far beyond a review of the History Curriculum in India's fast expanding University system. The Committee wanted to stimulate more dynamism in teaching/research, to attract more serious and questioning students. It also wanted to respond to the challenges thrown out to the University system by the Report of the Indian Education Commission (1964-66) and hoped for a positive response to its new ideas from Prof. D.S. Kothari.¹ At the international level, the widespread youth revolts - led very often by university students had found echoes in India's campuses, stirring considerable sympathy and hope among members of the History Committee.

Against this backdrop the UGC received a proposal from the British Council - to collaborate in organizing a series of study seminars on historical methodology, for which the Council would invite a few British historians, who had specialized on Indian History. The UGC had an on-going collaboration with the US National Science Foundation - for organizing Summer Institutes for young science teachers in India, with a view to giving them an opportunity to acquaint themselves with the most recent developments in scientific research and teaching in the West. The British Council's offer drew on this analogy.

Prof. Kothari asked me to comment on the proposal. After a discussion, I was asked to prepare the note to be placed before the full meeting of the UGC. The Commission decided that the offer should be welcomed, but as in the case of the Science Summer Institutes, the details of each would be decided by the UGC's own Committee on History, which may, if it thought it necessary, consult the Director of the British Council.

Fortunately, the Director of the Council was himself a history scholar, and knew that the proposal that he had sent was not exactly diplomatic. He appreciated the History Committee's decision to give the Study Seminars a comparative framework - in which British and Indian historians could present their research on common themes (e.g. the concept of time) undertaken in the West and in India. The first seminar, very successful and stimulating, was held at Delhi University.

The manoeuvre called for a degree of diplomatic and persuasive skills. Prof. Kothari was a past master, but he also banked on the stature of the members of the History Committee. Prof. Hassan played the leader through the entire episode, and in following it up with a seminar in Aligarh. But within the circle of some members of the History Committee who were friends and observed no formalities, he liked to refer to himself as "Vina's Stooge". In reality, I was ordered by him to receive Prof. Eric Hobsbawm who came for the Aligarh seminar and then escort him to Aligarh - as Hassan himself would be in Aligarh organizing the entire function.

1. Who served as the Chairman of the Education Commission as well as the UGC.

The twenty years lapse since our first acquaintance had certainly reduced the maturity/inequality, gap between us. I had put in more than ten years teaching, completed a D. Phil thesis, and acquired some reputation among students and teachers in Patna before coming to the UGC. I had also managed these while becoming a mother of a sizable family - which inspired some awe among the Committee's members, all male. I was certainly not their equal in scholarship, but it was easy to accept me as a friend and fellow conspirator. When Prof. Hassan needed a personal discussion with DSK to register a protest against some efforts of the Education Ministry to restrict/control international travel by scholars from Central Universities - he would call me to fix an appointment. I came to know Mrs. Hassan and enjoyed their hospitality.

I had returned to teaching (at Berhampur University, Orissa) in 1971, when Prof. Hassan joined the Government as Minister of State for Education and Social Welfare. In January 1972 when I was taking part in a Selection Committee for Commonwealth Fellows on the invitation of the Ministry, I received a quiet message from an officer that the Minister would like to see me, after the selection was completed. While complaining at my decision to go to "the back of beyond", he said persons like me needed to be more mobile. He also called his Special Assistant to say that my name (with full designation as Professor and Head of the Department of Political Science) and address should be placed on some list. When I asked for details, he murmured "confidential" and looked rather mischievous. A few days afterwards I received a letter from the Secretary, Social Welfare informing me that I had been appointed a member of the Committee on the Status of Women in India.

It was only four months later, when I had returned to the UGC, that I learnt from Naik Sahib² that my appointment as member to the Committee was "to ensure that a decent report was delivered". The Committee had apparently run into some difficulties. Prof. Hassan had had nothing to do with the original composition of the Committee, constituted several months earlier.³ It was only after the departure of Sri Siddhartha Sankar Ray, the Senior Minister for Education and Social Welfare (to take up the Chief Minister ship of West Bengal) that the responsibility for the CSWI descended on Prof. Hassan. Some additional members had to be found - hence the list that was being compiled in January.

I had major responsibilities in the UGC, and could do little to assist the Committee. I was not even able to join other members on occasional tours, till the Summer of 1973, when I participated in the tour of Himachal Pradesh - which was an eye opener. The Committee's two year term was about to end in September. In August, we (the Delhi based members) were informed that the Member Secretary had gone abroad. The Chairperson, Dr. Phulrenu Guha came from Calcutta to take charge of the office. We (Prof. Lotika Sarkar, Mrs. Urmila Haksar, Prof. Leela Dube, Prof. Sakina Hassan and myself) decided to talk to Phulrenudi - that we had decided to resign from the Committee, as we could not justify seeking extension of the Committee's term in the existing circumstances. She decided to join us.

2. Prof. J.P. Naik, Member-Secretary, ICSSR and Hony. Adviser to the Minister of Education. Had earlier (1964-66) been Member Secretary of the Education Commission.

3. The original list of members, decided in the PMO, had not included either Leela Dube, or myself. Our addition was entirely due to Prof. Hassan's suggestion.

When (29th August 1973) we met Prof. Hassan to submit our joint resignation, it appeared to me that he was not surprised. All that he would say was that he needed some time, request that we should not publicise our decision, and that Phulrenudi should remain in charge of the office, which was being shifted to new premises⁴ at her suggestion. On the evening of the 10th September I was informed by an officer in the Ministry that the Committee had been reconstituted, and the Minister had written to the Chairman, UGC to release my services for one year to take up the position as Member Secretary of the CSWI. The officer had taken it for granted that I knew about it, and was surprised at my request for an appointment with the Minister the next morning.

To my question why was I not consulted, he had a simple answer. He had to get a Report, because it had to be sent to the UN, and depended on "a friend" to save his and the nation's face! I still asked - how did he know that the change would be acceptable to other members of the Committee? I was told that most of them had met him independently to say so, including all the rest who had resigned.

When I met the Chairman, UGC, Prof. George Jacob⁵ he realized that the news had come to me as a shock, and told me to take a few hours to think things through. "If you still feel reluctant, I will say a 'no' to the Minister. But he does say it is work of national importance, and that all the other members feel you can do the job. That is an opinion which I confirm as I have known you for a far longer period". The conversation ended with my acceptance, but I should be allowed to finish a few important tasks in the UGC, before joining the new position.

The manouvre, or politico-administrative strategizing did not end there. By October 1974, i.e. a year after I joined the Committee as its Member Secretary we were in the throes of finalizing our Report. We had been given time till 31st December, and were determined to complete - so the drafting team of four (the Chairperson - Phulreu Guha, Lotika Sarkar, Urmila Haksar, and myself) worked for 12 hours a day, including holidays. Apart from these four and two or three members of the staff closely associated with the drafting, a few others, especially Naik Sahib and the Minister had become aware that the Report was going to be uncomfortable as well as unexpected - and the Prime Minister's reaction was unpredictable. Two master strategists set to work. Two decisions of November '74 of which we (CSWI members) remained unaware - were (a) The Indian Cabinet's acceptance of Nurul Hassan's proposal to table the CSWI's Report before Parliament, well in advance of the UN's World Conference on Women: Equality, Development and Peace⁶ (scheduled for June - for which the Prime Minister was a Special Invitee); and (b) ICSSR's resolution to publish a Summary of the CSWI's Report for wider public awareness and appoint me as Chief Editor to publish a series from the research supported by the ICSSR for the CSWI.⁷

4. The ICSSR, which occupied the major part of the building, was making part of one floor available to the CSWI.

5. He succeeded D.S. Kothari in 1972. He had been Vice Chancellor, Patna University in my last few years there, and had been very kind to me always.

The Report, *Towards Equality* was tabled before Parliament on 18th February 1975 and there was a full scale debate, spread over the next three months. The same day, Phulrenudi and I were asked to address a Press Conference in the Ministry at 3 p.m. National and International press were well represented. By the next week CSWI's most glaring/unexpected findings had achieved unprecedented publicity. The national press continued to write for the next few months - until the declaration of Emergency (June 26th) silenced them. Earlier, in May, the full Report (*Towards Equality*) and the ICSSR's Summary came out in print. By the end of the year the ICSSR's publisher reported that the initial issue of 7000 copies were finished. Translations of the Summary subsidised by the ICSSR came out in Malayalam, Telugu and a few other Indian languages - Susheela Gopalan informed me years later that every Mahila Samajam in Kerala had read the Summary. In comparison, the full Report, published by GOI did not get around that fast, undoubtedly an impact of the Emergency. It was however reported by friendly bureaucrats that MEA had taken many copies to meet demands facing Indian legations abroad. Senior officers in the Home Ministry, about to use the Report to prepare a brief for the PM's Address at the UN's International World Conference on Women (Mexico, 1975) were however warned off by other colleagues.

Razia Ismail (Indian Express) reported from Mexico that the Indian delegation was so unprepared that it sought a postponement by several days to make its presentation. Parvati Krishnan, M.P. - a member of the delegation informed me later that the draft statement prepared by the Secretary, Social Welfare had to be discarded. Since Parliament had already debated and adopted a Resolution on the CSWI's Report - their presentation could not be a rosy one. Eventually, the modest Indian presentation - emphasising more what still had to be done - received great applause - and earned many allies for us within the international women's movement and the UN system. After the Delegation's presentation - participants and organisers of the parallel non-official conference - the Tribune - grabbed the 25 copies of the Report carried by the Joint Secretary (Social Welfare) and for months afterwards the Tribune's Newsletter carried data/quotes from *Towards Equality*. It took me all that time to appreciate the historic role of the Conspiracy of Silence of the master strategists.

Recently I asked Anil Bordia, who had represented the Education Ministry (of which he was a Joint Secretary then) on the ICSSR, if he remembered why the Council decided to bring out a Summary of *Towards Equality*, weeks before it was submitted to the Government of India. He remembered Naik Sahib expressing a fear that the Report might not be published -like the Report of the Committee on Unemployment.

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6. Mexico, June 1975. The Conference also signalled the adoption of the International Women's Decade (1975-1985).
 7. I was informed by JPN on 2nd January '75 that instead of returning to the UGC, I would take up this office on 7th January, after winding up the CSWI Secretariat, and that the UGC (my original employer) had agreed to this move.

Prof. Hassan's role in ensuring the publication went far beyond the decision to place it straight before Parliament - in a cyclostyled form, and the Press Conference on the same day. The cyclostyling was done in the ICSSR, under my supervision. Only three typed copies were given by us to the Minister on the 1st January 1975. One stayed with him, one with a Joint Secretary, and the third was given to a brand new Under Secretary, to prepare a Press Note. The officer's special qualification for the task, according to the Minister, was that he had been my student. B.B. Sahay, the Under Secretary, informed me that the Minister had "trusted" him "not to tamper with the nuances of the Report" - since the primary author had been Sahay's teacher.

A few weeks earlier, delivering the Convocation Address at the SNDT Women's University, Prof Hassan raised a question about the "special role of a women's university in relation to the status of women in the country as a whole", The University responded by establishing a Research Centre on Status of Women under the direction of Prof. Neera Desai, who had played a leading role in the CSWI's Task Force on Social Aspects. The Research Centre acquired an Advisory Committee which included some members connected either with the CSWI or the ICSSR's Programme.

Krishna Patel, working in the ILO through the 1970s and beyond - reported a conversation with Prof. Hassan years later, when he admitted that but for the Cabinet Resolution to place the CSWI's Report before Parliament, the document "would never have seen the light of day".

I have tried to inform various participants in the twin movements of Women's Studies/movement of the contribution this great scholar and humanist made to their struggle. To me personally he remained a good friend, who always took the trouble to enquire about the state of my concerns on the rare occasions that I met him in later years.

The Editors of this volume expected perhaps a scholarly paper from me. But trends in my life towards which Nurul Hassan made a certain contribution have turned me into an activist. I chose to pay my tribute by drawing on my memories of the individual.

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