

GHAZALA AZAD: AN EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVIST, SOCIAL WORKER, AND HOMEMAKER



On Women's Day 2015, Ghazala Azad was honoured by the Needs Society with the Asif Khan Memorial Award for her outstanding social work. Mrs Shareefa Khan, wife of Asif Khan, the founder of the NGO praised Ghazala's dedication and hard work. She said "Ghazala is one of the most remarkable persons who will help anyone irrespective of gender, cast, community or class with utmost sincerity and without desiring any personal gain. I have rarely come across such a considerate and caring human being." And she related an incident how once when an unknown man was lying unconscious and bleeding on the road while a number of people walked around indifferent to his plight, Ghazala immediately went over to help him: she requested some of the men to put him in a taxi and then she took him to the hospital! I was really impressed.

Ghazala Azad, fair, pretty and demure is indeed a remarkable woman. You would not believe seeing her that she has trained thousands of girls in the combative art of Karate and has conducted numerous workshops for Disaster management and Civil defence.

Ghazala's parents were from Rampur, UP and had settled down in Kalyan. Her father owned a restaurant in Grant Road where he provided Rampur and UP style food which was eagerly sought by many of the migrants from UP living in and around this area. Her mother was a

housewife who wore the hijab and had been educated in a Madrasa but she was keen to educate her three daughters and make them financially independent. Though Ghazala dreamt of being an interior designer, she was also good at craft and had as member of the Kalyan branch of Bazm -e-Niswan, an NGO which ran classes for sewing and handicrafts, learnt to make a number of handicrafts. She therefore took up a craft teacher's training course after completing her SSC and joined the National School as a craft teacher.

But she had to give up the job when she got married to Munnawar Azad, an electrical engineer who worked in Dubai. The next five years she was occupied with looking after her house, and bearing children. Though their life in Dubai was comfortable and her husband was doing well, Ghazala felt a sense of emptiness: the only social gatherings were parties where the wives discussed clothes and jewellery or latest fashion trends. She felt alienated from them. Her upbringing had been very different; her father always believed in taking care of people in need. He regularly gave books to needy students.

Moreover, the children were growing up and she preferred educating them in Mumbai. She therefore decided to return to Mumbai. Her husband reluctantly agreed and she shifted to her in laws house at Mohammed Ali Road and experienced the hassles of getting her children admitted in school. Two years later her husband finding it difficult to live away from his family returned to Mumbai and decided to start his own business.

It was during this time that Ghazala decided to fulfil her dream to become an interior designer. She planned to join her husband and brother in law who was into construction business and took a Diploma in Interior Design from Saboo Siddique Institute. However her husband felt frustrated with the red tape and glitches which one has to face in starting a business in India and went off again to Dubai. By then the children were old enough and with her in laws at home she had sufficient time to pursue her other passion: social work. She joined the main office of Bazme -Niswan at Nagpada. By then the NGO was running many nursery classes in addition to sewing and stitching classes. In the meanwhile she did her BA through correspondence and also took a diploma in journalism. By now she had seen enough of the plight of women and therefore started taking up their cause through articles in the Urdu papers.

Then in December 1992, life took an unexpected turn: arson, looting and riots broke out in many parts of the city. Ghazala visited many riot affected area and realised the need for girls to be trained in martial arts for self defence and she decided to learn Karate and teach them. She had some rudimentary knowledge of it as her younger brother had done a course in it and had taught her some of the steps. She joined the National School of Combat Art run by Guru Arif Sheikh and soon acquired a Yellow and Green belt. Under the guidance of her Guru she started organising training programmes for girls in various schools in Mumbai. Her moment of pride came when nearly 40 girls from Anjuman girl's school graduated with black belts.

But the riots also gave her another opportunity to help a group of distressed girls. Some of the girl students of Imambara D. Ed College were unable to attend the college due to the tense

situation, as quite a few of them lived faraway, in Panvel or Thana area. She therefore arranged for their stay by renting a room, equipping the kitchen and supplying ingredients for cooking. But, thanks to her friends and acquaintances who all pitched in to help, the girls did not have to cook a single meal and they could concentrate on their studies.

“You know looking after these girls was one of the most fulfilling incidents in my life .I was despondent in not having a daughter .By taking care of these girls, I felt that desire was satisfied.”

Ghazala has three sons who have become engineers. Her eldest son has now got married.

“I am really blessed. Bringing up boys is quite a task especially with their father away .But my sons were very understanding. I remember I used to study with them .When my eldest was studying for his 10th and 12th, I was studying for my Masters in Urdu Literature which I did to understand Urdu poetry, which I love immensely.”

After the riots , Ghazala became acutely conscious of the economic losses which many families had suffered and she was keen to help in finding employment .It was then she joined the NGO NEEDS which worked in the area of training youth to find gainful employment . She is also an active member of the Ladies wing of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) whose main objectives is career guidance and holding job fairs to enable Muslim youth to get jobs. Her husband Munnawar Azad, who has now retired and returned to India, also participates in the activities of the Association.

When one meets Ghazala one is inspired by her enthusiasm and dedication :she is so unlike most women in her position who would have sat back and enjoyed the goodies and comforts accruing to an NRI income. Instead she went out of her way to help the needy and disadvantage sections of the society.

And what I found most remarkable was her modesty :She is thankful to God for giving her the opportunity to serve people and grateful to her husband and in laws for supporting her.Ghazala’s mother is proud of Ghazala and her other two daughters, , the eldest who also continued her studies after marriage and obtaining a Doctorate in Urdu and is a Research Associate in Anjuman Islam Urdu Research Centre and her youngest daughter who did her graduation and is now settled in Sholapur with her husband .

