

## AFSAR FAROOQUI: BREAKING THE MOULD

Nagpur , the geographical centre of the country -known as its orange city, , was in the 70's , a green , spacious quite town, its citizen's known for their keen pursuit of academic education , many acquiring a string of degrees like the famous late Shri Shrikant Jichkar . But what was most notable was the number of Muslim girls in schools and colleges who continued to study even after marriage and children .My late maternal aunt had three masters degree and like her there were many other women .But very few of these highly qualified ladies worked , either by their own choice or due to societal and family pressures . And if they did ,it was as teachers or lecturers in girl's school and college .Hence when a slim ,tall, svelte ,Afsar from a traditional Muslim background took up a clerical job in the office of the Mineral Corporation of India immediately after her graduation many eye brows were raised and quite a few openly criticised her .

“But it did not matter, because my parents fully supported me.” Afsar states with a smile and adds: “I however continued by studies.”I

She is now an Associate Professor of Urdu in Yusuf Ismail College in Jogeshwari , a suburb of Mumbai , where she joined in 1986 as lecturer , a post now equivalent to Assistant professor , and has retired in 2012 as a Major in the National Cadet Corps .And she has accomplished it while fulfilling her duties as wife ,mother and homemaker . Her , neat and welcoming home in Haji Ali reflects the time and energy devoted to home and family , especially when she daily commutes to Jogeshwari which is quite a distance away from her residence

“How do you manage to juggle so many roles? And how did you adjust to the Bombay’s hectic life after living in Nagpur?”I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed: “Not very difficult if you aim to achieve something worthwhile in life, you can manage it. But I was also lucky. First to have such supportive parents specially my father , a teacher who retired as a headmaster ,who encouraged me to study further and become financially independent and later ,Ilyas ,my husband who is liberal minded and gives me the space and freedom to pursue my interest .Teaching and research as well as seminars consume a lot of my time and when I was in the NCC ,I used to go on camps across the country . He accepted it and encouraged my endeavours”

Ilyas Farooqui, a Mumbai based business men dealing in Interior Decoration and Tourism ,himself comes from a liberal background .His sisters Sohaila and Zarina are lawyers and have been conducting courses in Human Rights and also take up social causes .

Afsar , was the third among five children –one boy and four girls. She and her two older sisters initially studied at the Municipal school and then the Government high school , very near their home- in Urdu medium .Her older sister’s got married after completing their school education .But Afsar had wanted to study further and her parents respected her wish .

“My parents always gave us the freedom to choose because they knew we would make correct decisions: their upbringing ensured it .Our parents had inculcated in us since childhood, right values and knew we would not stray from the path. Since, I was interested in literature, I studied Urdu; my younger sister wanted to do Medicine and she was sent to a convent school. She however did MSc and after marriage started business in iron fabrication and made a success of it.”

Afsar did her post graduation in Urdu and Persian which she also taught for two years .But her love was for Urdu literature. Her favourite poet was Dr Mohammed Iqbal and her favourite poem his *Shikwa* and *Jawab e Shikwa*.

Afar also met many of the well known authors and poets associated with the film industry during her frequent sojourn in Bombay before her marriage when she stayed with a close family friend who was like an aunt to her .Through the aunt and uncle she was introduced to Tabassum , Ismet Chughtai and other writers .She was so impressed by the personality and the writings of Ismet Chughtai that she did her thesis on the subject of her art and personality for her doctorate .Afsar has considerable literary output to her credit such as book of poetry and critical researches on Urdu Poets .She is also involved in organising seminars and guiding students in research .

“I love organising and participating in literary seminars though it takes much of my time, but it is manna for the mind –it connects me to the intellectual world of our great Urdu writers.”

I could understand her love for Urdu but was not prepared for the vehement reaction when I remarked that Urdu has low value in the job markets. She was touched to the quick

“Your conclusion is wrong! I totally disagree with your view .In the film line it is very much in demand and also in the media and academic world.”

“Yes. But the Songwriters in films and teaching a subject offered in colleges and universities cannot absorb, thousands of graduates qualifying every year .Urdu paper circulation are declining day by day...Banking and the service sector requires proficiency in English not Urdu.”

“But jobs are not the only reason for studying a language.” She asserts fervently  
“Urdu is the language of culture and poetry .Its vast literature encompasses a

world of culture , history ,philosophy which one cannot access in any other language .What is the use of education when one has to forego such a rich legacy of culture and history?”.

“I totally agree with you but feel this can be accomplished by having it as a compulsory subject rather than as a medium of instruction. Many private schools in Hyderabad have Urdu as a compulsory subject with Telugu and Hindi . The language can be promoted by making provision for special classes for teaching Urdu to both Urdu and non Urdu speaking persons. I know many who are keen to learn it as it provides access to its remarkable poetry especially of Ghalib, Mir, Iqbal Faiz and Sahir but there are few courses conducted for adult beginners. Quite a few of my colleagues read their favourite Urdu poets in Devnagiri. Quoting a couplet from the Urdu greats adds a zing to any gathering or party.”

She conceded to my view and I gave a sigh of relief as equanimity returned to our conversation .Urdu has many lovers but few patrons for promoting it ,as it has unfortunately been identified and with a particular religious community: Muslims Talking about Urdu and Muslims , I felt necessary to ask Afsar whose persona and achievement made her a role model for Muslim women , her impressions on the backwardness of the community .

“It is basically lack of emphasis on education .Boys either due to lax upbringing or the economic pressures of taking up employment, dropout from school .Girls do study, but then their high education creates problems in finding an equally qualified match.”

“I didn’t understand your comment on upbringing: why does it hinder boys from studying.”

“Unfortunately in our society boys are given a lot of undue importance – a boy knows that he will always get material and emotional support whether he

strives for it or not ;on the other hand girls have to earn their place of respect and acceptance by excelling at some skill or by acquiring qualification. It's necessary that both boys and girls are treated equally and importance given to education of both, based on their ability. “

Well I felt sorry that Afsar had no daughter, just two sons who are both doing well in life and hoped she would get as qualified, talented and courageous daughters' - in- law as herself .

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