

The Gatherer

Remembering Nigar

By Pervez Hoodbhoy

WHAT YOU AND I ARE today we cannot be tomorrow. And, yet, how long does it take to return to yesterday? For me, the blink of an eye was enough to see beyond the Nigar who lay before me in the intensive care unit—*asleep* and still breathing peacefully but prepared for her final exit—and to instead see the Nigar that I once knew. Overwhelmed, I kissed her hands and feet, and left quickly lest the nurses notice the excess moisture in my eyes.

The Nigar I flashed back to was not the Nigar of the Women's Action Forum or of Aurat Foundation or after she eventually "mainstreamed." Instead it was of the early 1970s, perhaps 10 years earlier than any of these. That's when she was a real fighter. Lean, wiry and beautiful, her determined face spoke of an upper class young woman in her late 20s in open revolt. Freshly returned to Pakistan after her B.A. from Cambridge, she was determined to fight the very system that had so privileged her but, at the same time, was monstrously cruel, unjust, and oppressive for the ordinary and the poor—and, of course, crooked to its very core.

My first encounter with Nigar was in October 1973 at Islamabad University (later renamed Quaid-e-Azam University). There she had been a lecturer for around two years, teaching Marxist economics. At 23, I had graduated from MIT to join the university's physics department, and had just arrived from Karachi on campus with a small suitcase. The university gave me accommodation in Boys Hostel No. 1, but this didn't work out well. My host, the hostel's warden, was also a university teacher. He regularly used the university's ambulance in

the evenings for gallivanting around Islamabad (then a small town). Around dinner time he would join up with the warden of Hostel No. 2. Together they would lewdly remark on the girls of Hostel No. 3 and snicker away, all of which I could not avoid seeing and hearing, and hating. A week later I found myself out on the street.

That's when Nigar took me into her house, a large spacious bungalow with a guest room in F-6/2, Islamabad, where she lived with her parents and sister Shehnaz or Munni Behan. Remarkably, this happened upon our very first meeting—a chance one—at the university's *khokhas*, where Faheem Hussain and I had just sat down for tea and Nigar walked by. Faheem introduced me as a new physics colleague who had arrived a week earlier.

Faheem, who died in 2009 of cancer, was a physicist who had returned from the University of Chicago around 1967. Married to Jane Steinfelds, he was a colorful, exuberant man fully immersed in the outstanding political causes of the times—protesting against the Pakistan Army's actions in East Pakistan, secretly raising resources for Baloch insurgents fighting the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto regime, and building up a labor movement in Pakistan.

Nigar was in awe of Faheem. A mere hint from him that a comrade needed shelter was enough. And so I stayed at her house for something like 10 days until I could move elsewhere. Her impeccably dressed, well-heeled parents were polite to me but they must have been somewhat embarrassed to have as guest a disheveled, bearded young man with shaved upper lip who wore only *shalwar kameez* and *chappals*—one who unwittingly fitted the appearance

of a Jamaat-e-Islami worker.

In those days the university's vice-chancellor was a phony progressive, steeped in corruption, and given to whimsical decisions. Appointed by Bhutto, she had in her all her political boss's deviance, authoritarianism, and vengefulness. Nigar, as a member of the university's syndicate, led the charge against her. Trudging from department to department, she made friends and allies, and compiled a dossier of the V.C.'s misdeeds. Nigar succeeded in getting elected as the president of the Academic Staff Association in spite of the administration's interference. Eventually the V.C. was fired, but only after Bhutto's grip on power had somewhat weakened. The "White Paper" by Nigar and her associates served as the basis for the V.C.'s removal.

From the time of our initial introductions, it took but a couple of weeks before a group of university teachers and students, and others outside as well, gelled around Faheem and Jane. The goal: socialist revolution. Work was cut out for different members; some were to organize workers inside and outside trade unions and others to the countryside to raise consciousness among peasants. Nigar and others were assigned the task of creating a women's group that would support trade union workers. This frequently required persuading the wives of workers that their husbands, who were often threatened with abductions and punishments by the establishment, were actually revolutionary heroes.

With time and experience, the women's group decided that it was more important to engage with working women in local *bastis* than to preach socialism. I think this is how Nigar found her real calling—the need to reach out and change the lives of those women who were forced by circumstance to be poor, illiterate, and subservient. Toward this goal she eventually created a nucleus of dedicated young workers, mostly educated and middle class women, who sought to change the culture of female

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