

Interview: Shom Das Gupta

'So that I may sing your songs:' A tour of Bangladesh through Jarigan

**AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY FRANCES DUNHAM: MARY FRANCES DUNHAM, A
JARIGAN SPECIALIST**

1. Jarigan specialist, Mary Frances Dunham

This is a tale of another time; a time when familiar characters appear different in the light of those days. Some of the characters are probably not quite known to all, but those of our countrymen who have been introduced by an American scholar, already over 70, it had been done with a lot of tender loving care. (2) This scholar, who divided her time between China and New York, is none other than Mary Frances Dunham. This is in fact an interview, though the subject of this interview, this shy, modest, polite and gentle lady, has mainly talked about others. That an autobiography is, in reality, the influence of others upon oneself, and an interaction with people, can be learnt from this interview with Mary.

Who were the types of people whom Mary came across? Through this interview we will discover that they were Ravi Shanker, Jasimuddin, Satyajit Ray, Mustafa Zaman Abbassi (son of Abbasuddin,) Prof. Shahidullah, Prof. Lutfur Rahman (Chairman of the Bangla Dept. of Dhaka University,) Prof. Jamil Ahmed (Dramatics teacher of Dhaka University,) the late author, philosopher and activist, Ahmad Sofa, the Spanish Prof. of Music from Columbia, Prof. Israil Cartz, specialist of (culture (3) and Pali, Ted Riccardi, late Prof of Bangla, Coward Dumac, Ralph Marta Nicholas (Prof. of Music, at Chicago Univ, who has done excellent research on (charas (4) and ghazal,) and many more outstanding characters.

Achievers somehow, find other achievers, and when two of them meet, they create a heavenly light! From the interview we discover how Mary became familiar with (the above-mentioned) famous people, and how she brought forth such unexpected creative work being in their company and vicinity.

I first met Mary in 1995 at a conference on Bengal Studies, in George University. I mentioned this conference when I interviewed Clifton Steele at a meeting of poets (Shahzadia, 2006.) I was already in my seat even before the event began. I saw that Mary was writing on the blackboard, the categorical divisions of Bangla folk music (such as Jari, Shari, Bhatiali etc.) in her wonderful, Bangla script (formed in pearl-like shapes,) in preparation for the speech she was to make during that session.

The next time I met her was when I was in Dallas in 1999. Some culturally inclined volunteers who had formed the Academy of Bangla Arts and Culture, organized a conference on International Bangla Literature and Culture. They invited her, but Mary could not attend the conference as she had planned to visit China to be with her daughter. Soon after this, in 2000, we arranged a lecture programme for her. Along with her slide show, our enthusiastic volunteers, had arranged a concert on Jarigan. The responsibility of making the arrangements was taken by Anisuzzaman, Manik and other co-workers.

After this, I hardly ever met Mary as she was either in New York, or with her daughter Katherine, in China, where she went to fulfill her responsibilities as a grand mother. (Her daughter had been born in Bangladesh and, when she started school in the USA, she had a notice hung from her neck which said that, though she couldn't speak much English, she could speak Bangla!) When Mary visited America she would live with an illiterate family whom she had helped to go to the USA. Later, we will hear the story of Ruplal, the person she helped. Whenever she came here (to the US,) we would telephone and talk to her at Ruplal's home. At that time she was busy collecting Spanish music, but if we called with queries, she would always respond with carefully thought-out answers, no matter how busy she was with her own work.

While I was preparing to write this article I sent her the manuscript several times to get her opinion and comments on how the interview sounded. I have to say that she approved of its content (as she herself was the source.) However she disapproved of the adjectives we used to describe her (which objection we can ignore!)

2. The Works of Mary Frances Dunham:

Mary Frances Dunham was born on March 26th, 1932. In 1954 she graduated in Romance Language and Literature from Harvard (University.) Some years later, in 1959 she did a diploma course on Music Composition from the Fontainebleau School of Music in France. She also obtained a Certificate from the Barisal School of Music, after her training in Indian Classical music in 1965. (This fact is important and has a bearing on this interview.) She lived many years with her (recently departed,) husband, Daniel, who was an architect. Dan (short for Daniel,) had seen the fall of East Pakistan and formation of Bangladesh, and she was there with him. When she returned to the USA she did another Masters, this in Indian Education. She had wished to do a PhD. and, seeing her devotion to her work, everyone had encouraged her. But Mary let them know that she would be joining Dan for his work in different countries. Also she had to look after her daughter till she grew up. She had always done a lot of practical research, whenever she found the time and whenever she felt it to be possible. This is why she felt her education to be complete, and she didn't feel the need for a PhD.

The most distinguishing (??) notable work of Mary Dunham was her book on Jarigan, which was published by University Press Ltd. (Dhaka,) in 1997. This book, in English, is on Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh, and has 370 pages of very important information and documentation. It contains the text of the original songs, translation, notes, directions and musical notation, plus a cassette; all of it invaluable. Her prolonged tour in Bangladesh was an enriching experience for her, and gives a clear picture of Bangla society. At the same time, she brought to height (the forefront,) a special group of people representing folk culture. She incorporated into her book the history of the practice of their art, the contribution of religion, discussion of culture, musical analysis, human philosophy and many similar ideas. She never used guesswork or imagination to fill in the blanks whenever she found it difficult to get authentic information. Though it was not her job to do research she believed that the beauty of a text lay in its authenticity.

Beside this book, she did other research. Among her more notable works was 'The Meaning of Dhua' which was presented in 1996 at the Bengal Studies Conference (why semicolon?) the Association for Asian Studies. In 1998, the papers presented were on 'How songs of Moaning have become sources of entertainment,' and, 'How to give a proper definition of Jarigan,' and a lot of other research on this topic.

Mary had done some memorable work on Logol (with Lisle Barnett 1979). They made use of the Western method of the notation of music in a recording for teaching Indian Music. You will come to know of that experience in this interview.

In collaboration with Prof. Chelchowsky of the Department of Dramatics, Barnard College, Mary's pictorial lectures became very popular in 2000. Her lectures on how the Persian and Arabian world entered into Bangla (at the Academy of Bangla and Culture, in Dallas,) are still bright in the memory of the audience. In 1976 she gave lectures on the method of classical music on Northern India, at The Asia Society in New York. At Columbia University, she lectured on Music and Dance of Bangla.

Beside English and bangle, she knew four other languages – French, Ancient Greek, Latin and Sanskrit. It is a great privilege to be a multi-linguist, as they can climb over the walls of cultures and view the compounds (??) of many other cultures! We can find many examples of globalization in the field of business, but we rarely find examples of people, who, knowing ancient languages, or knowing their grand parents (??) ancestors, can go to their cultural roots, or sources. At the beginning of this year I had to visit Sweden, Germany, France and England thrice. I noticed that people of many nations had gone there to live but there was hardly any inter-exchange (??)/intermingling of cultures. Therefore, one can easily become aware of the distance between the culture of the USA and Bangla. All of Europe can fit into India twice! My readers, the term 'Cultural Distance,' is very delicate and I am saying this very cautiously, so you don't get puzzled and think of it as a call-centre, or a BPO culture. (??)

Which were the countries Mary had lived in? She spent 20 years in Bangladesh, 5 years in France, a year in England, and a few months in each of these countries: India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Mauritania, China. Her life and work, were both full of variety and we now have an opportunity to know more about her life through this special electronic interview.

3. Interview

Question: Tell me about the lady who brought you up.

Dunham: When I was eleven, and my brother four, my mother died of pneumonia. Penicillin was not in use then; also she was extremely fatigued from the voluntary service she rendered during the Greek war in 1943. After she died a governess was engaged for us. She had been trained in the British way where she had worked previously. She lived with us as a substitute of a mother, and also as a stewardess of our house, till my brother left for college. As a result, though we lived in New York, we were raised to have the etiquette of the British!

What is interesting is that Amy (which is how we addressed our governess whose name actually was Mary Florence Emerson,) was born in Kolkata! Her father used to work in a shop, Francis Harrison Hathaway and Co., which was located opposite Raj Bhavan. She used to tell us a story of her being taken to Eden Gardens, together with her five siblings. Many years later, when my husband Dan was in Dhaka, Amy came to visit us, and we all went to Kolkata and Darjeeling. She really broke down when she saw the dilapidated condition of the shop where her father used to work. The store was divided into numerous small shops but the name 'Hathaway,' was still to be seen, carved above the entrance.

We visited Dharamtalla where her childhood Sunday church was. Even though the church was now turned into a private girls school, her fathers name was still to be seen on its signboard. Amy's nephew still gives support to a poor student in memory of his grand father.

We visited a graveyard in Darjeeling, where Amy saw her childhood friends' names on the gravestones. Her friends had died, crushed under an avalanche. During our discussions Amy told us about the trains from Kolkata to Darjeeling that used to go via Dhaka.

Question: When did you develop an interest in Bangla culture?

Dunham: In 1960, the moment I stepped on the soil of Dhaka, with my husband. I did not know then that I would live at a stretch of seven years in Dhaka, and that I would also live in Dhaka at different times.

We came because an American firm, Berger Engineers, brought my husband (in partnership) to set up an architectural firm in Dhaka. Apparently, in the new country (the then East Pakistan,), this was the first private architectural engineering firm to be set up in East Pakistan. After a year and a half, a team of professors from A & M University (in Texas,) gave my husband the responsibility of setting up the first Architectural Department of EPUET (East Pakistan University of Engineering and Technology.) (This was the precursor to BUET.) After setting up the Department, he taught there for six years. At the same time he worked on various architectural projects, like Kamalapur Railway Station, Rajshahi University, Mymensingh Agricultural University, and several extensions of BUET (EPUET.) After we returned home in 1967 my husband came back several times and worked for the cyclone rehabilitation project, run by UNDP in Dhaka. In 1970, after the devastating cyclone, he again returned to Dhaka. He worked in several project with CARE and Save the Children. Besides these, whenever my husband came to Dhaka I always accompanied him. When I was busy writing Jarigan, between 1993 and 1996, I came with him for that purpose. For a variety of reasons I lived in Bangladesh for over 15 years and, I believe those to have been the happiest years of my life.

Before we got accommodation, we used to live in the Shahbagh Hotel, which was considered to be the most luxurious hotel in Dhaka. The hotel attendants used to bring (hot) bath water in buckets to our rooms. In my uncontrollable urge to learn Bangla I bought a bicycle and found my way to the Bangla Department of Dhaka University, and went straight to the Head of the Department and asked for a Bangla teacher. He introduced me to a young lecturer, Ahmed Sharif, who had already established his reputation as a promising teacher.

As I stayed in the hotel for a long time I learnt the Bangla letters and alphabet with the help of the room boys. In those days there was no Department of Bangla Linguistics at the University. During my stay in France in my childhood, I had the experience of learning French, and later, in school and college, I learnt Latin and Greek. Therefore, I myself knew the process of learning a language, especially an Indo-European one. I had to learn the sounds of the letters. I also wanted to read the literature. Ahmed Sharif

was a most appropriate teacher for that. He had no problem in dealing with my method of learning. When he read to me, I remember that I especially loved the part he read out from the description of the writer comparing his visit to the Alps, in Switzerland, to the visit to a peak in Darjeeling from where Everest could be viewed. Ahmed Sharif also introduced me to Tagore's poems. This extraordinary person died recently. Till the day he died we remained in close contact.

Question: How did you spend the first seven years of your stay in Dhaka.

Dunham: As soon as we found a small house and got settled, we started working on various small projects. Out of these, a noteworthy work was to teach French at the University, to teach English at the College of Home Economics, and to teach Music at the Holy Cross School (to enable them to communicate with their local patients.) They would send a car early in the morning, and as soon as I would reach, they would send for a Bangla-speaking boy, who would say in Bangla whatever I would teach in English. We would go to Dhanmondi where the new residences were being built, and where most foreigners and doctors lived.

Most interestingly, the doctors found it more interesting to read Tagore than construct sentence after sentence in Bangla.

As a result our early morning hours were spent enjoying, in an off-beat way, reciting and discussing Tagore. I also helped the doctors to communicate with the cholera patients. This was the time when the research of the doctors made a breakthrough which helped the entire world.

I helped the French teacher at Dhaka University, Monsieur Rouch (sp?) to establish the Alliance Francaise in Dhaka, and later, in Chittagong. Along with giving lessons in elementary French I was also helping a friend to teach Western Music. While I would play the music of a certain period on the piano, my friend would do a slide show on some painting. It was possible for us to carry on these amateur lectures because the Bengalis had an immense urge for learning, and whatever was in easy reach, they would learn.

When I told Ahmed Sharif of my desire to learn music, he suggested I go to Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA,) located very far, in Old Dhaka. He had a relative, Huda Bhai, who was a director there. Mr. Huda was very proud of the fact that he had been arrested during the struggle for liberating the revolutionaries who had fought against the British. After many repeated visits to the Academy, Mr. Huda finally permitted me, and two other foreigners to join the primary dance classes. Early, every Sunday, Madame Rouch, Saunante, (sp?) (wife of the attaché of the French Embassy,) and I, would cycle to the gorgeous Victorian mansion in Old Dhaka, which housed BAFA. We three ladies tried to imitate the dance steps and postures, with our teacher, but completely missed the beat, and were out of rhythm, and looked like elephants amongst nimble, dainty deer. We stood in the last row and tried to copy the steps and postures of the Bharat Natyam and Monipuri dances.

A few years later, around 1962, an American couple gave us tickets to a music conference in Kolkata. We went there eagerly even though we didn't know what we were in for. This day-long event had a great and long-lasting impact on my life abroad, while I lived in East, or West Bengal, or even when I returned to my New York work.

In 1966 I joined a six-week music session in Barisal at an Indian classical music school, which had been established by a Canadian nun, Rita Butcher. She played the sitar beautifully, and also managed a good rendition of the raag 'kheyal,' for which she had been trained intensively in Delhi. I learnt singing for over a year, and also learnt to play the tabla. I had learnt to play the piano in my childhood, and in the summer of 1951 I studied at the Fontainebleau School of Music. This helped me to learn a new kind of music. I realized that I was a bit too old to learn the basics of Indian music. What I learnt were the roots, or sources of music, and later on, this helped me a lot to do representation of music with notation, for poet Jasimuddin (of East Pakistan.)

While making visits to BAFA I became a close friend of Selina Bahar who was Mr. Huda's niece, and worked very hard as his assistant at the school. Her father, Habibullah Bahar, was a well-known poet, composer of articles and a revolutionary. She inherited her father's appreciation for music, and also his pragmatic characteristics. Her leadership role in the movement for women's rights deserves to be recognized. Later, she became a Lecturer of Mathematics at the University. Her mother was also a noted educationist who played an important role in the development of education in Pakistan. Her two

sisters, and brother, lived near us in the Ramna area, and, carrying my little daughter, I often visited them. Selina's sister, Dolly, had a place among the top three students of the Architecture Department established by my husband. The Queen of England gave her a special award in recognition of her contribution in the development of their society. Selina's brother, Iqbal, worked for Voice of America in Washington, D.C. Selina was a prolific writer and had written many children's books. Two years ago she suddenly passed away.

Together, with two other ladies I wrote a guide book in English, 'Living in Dacca,' (which is how 'Dhaka' was spelled in those days.) It was quite a complicated work as Dhaka was changing and new building, new organizations, new cultural events and activities were all taking place, and keeping abreast of the changes was difficult. This book has been revised thrice since it was written in the 1960's. But the project which left the deepest impact on me was one I started as a result of my meeting with the poet Jasimuddin.

Question: Why is this incident so important in your life?

Dunham: I am astounded, amazed and ashamed to think that I forget to mention the interview with the chief poet in my book, Jarigan. In the 1960's the concept of dance-dramas was becoming popular all over the world, and poet Jasimuddin was my major inspiration in this art. I had heard about him but never imagined that I would ever get to meet him.

In 1962 or '63, one morning he turned up at our house in Siddheshwari, and declared that he wanted to record jarigan, which is why he needed to provide musical notations in the western way, and was looking for someone who could help him. At that time I had doubts about my ability to give musical notations to a new kind of music.

This did not discourage Jasimuddin, and, in fact wanted to know if I could get a renowned singer from Faridpur to record his songs. I had a friend with a recorder-machine (a huge and heavy one, compared to the ones available nowadays.) She lent me the machine and after many recording sessions with the singer from Faridpur, we collected 2 dozen jarigans. From these, Jasimuddin chose twelve, and asked me to give them musical notations.

At first, he made his wife write the lyrics in English, and would bring over a few lyrics at a time and ask me to do the notations. The beat and rhythm of the songs was absolutely new to me and I worked very slowly on my spinet harpsichord. This instrument was especially ordered from Germany by my husband so that it could withstand the rapidly changing humid weather, and I could, myself, tune it, without the need of sending for a tuner (who was essential for tuning a piano.) (A few years later, when I visited Satyajit Ray at Kolkata, I saw an instrument exactly like mine.) I frequently explained to Jasimuddin that I found the work difficult, and wasn't even sure that I was doing it correctly. He often said that someday I would thank him for making me do it. Much later, in 1972, that moment arrived, when I felt that I should thank him because he had introduced me to Jarigan. I had the opportunity then to select an unprecedented, and controversial topic, for my M.A. thesis at Columbia University. Later, from 1993 to 1996, Ford Foundation provided me funds to come and to stay in Bangladesh and research, and write the book, Jarigan.

In order to consult about musical notation with Jasimuddin I often used to visit his home, 'Polash Bari,' and also meet his family. It was a farmhouse in the south east of Dhaka, in an area called Kamalapur, where the railway station, designed by my husband, was situated. His wife used to offer me yoghurt made from the milk of their cow. Soon the area they lived in got crowded with numerous buildings coming up. At that time the road to their house was named Jasimuddin Street.

In 1968 Jasimuddin's book, Jarigan, was published. During his student life he worked with scholars like Dinesh Chandra Sen, but never admitted to being a scholar himself. His book is a wonderful, compassionate presentation of the history of the glory and heritage that is Jarigan. This book is not a source of historical information and structural analysis of music. If such information is required then one should refer to Dr. Lutfur Rahman's book, which was published in 1986.

Question: There is mention of Jamil Ahmed's work in many of your literary works. Will you say something about that?