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## The Realities of Being a Woman-Teacher in the Mountains of Tajikistan

*Sarfaroz Niyozov\**

This article presents the realities of being a woman teacher during the total and radical transition from Soviet to post-Soviet periods. The case of Nigin (a pseudonym) is presented through a dialectical, socio-historical and symbolic inter-actionist approach. This is constructed through (a) the amalgamation of various research methods (e.g., case study, life history and critical ethnography) used throughout data collection, analysis, and representation; (b) the presentation of Nigin's life and work by moving between the larger context (district-village-school) and the classroom (content-methods-relations), and (c) employment of Nigin's life and work as window to understanding the tensions between the continuities and changes in the society (e.g., modernity and tradition, free-market economy and socialism, religious revival and secularism, including incumbent atheism, literacy and education rhetoric and reality). By positioning Nigin's life, educational worldview, instructional practices, and relationships at the center of the study, the case reveals how Nigin's negotiation of her identity is constantly reshaped through the multiple realities and factors.

### Shughnan: the Heart of MBAP<sup>1</sup>

#### *Glimpses of the Site*

Shughnan, the largest district of MBAP in terms of population (36 000 people out of 200 000), leads Badakhshân in its number of political leaders, scholars, artists and poets. Due to its close geographical location and cultural similarity to the centre of the province, this district has benefited most from

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pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet development opportunities. It has the major airport, hydropower station, and some small factories. Shughnanis<sup>2</sup> constitute the absolute majority of the staff in the MBAP government, Khorugh State University, AKDN, and other international organisations. This fact has caused some dissatisfaction on the part of the other groups, who often feel marginalized. The official sources of income of the population<sup>3</sup>, in addition to the above employers, include farming, animal husbandry and small private businesses such as trade and retailing.

The continuing concentration of development opportunities have made and maintained Shughnan as the most modernized district of MBAP. The concentration of these opportunities is related to persistent favourable historical, religious, geographical, demographic and educational characteristics. Whatever the changes, Shughnan was, is and will remain the local “micro-superpower” within MBAP. Historically, the district has been a centre of Ismaili thought, of Russian/Soviet ideology and the post-Soviet blending of Ismaili thought with a local Shughnanî-Pamirian perspective, gradually linked with Tajik nationalism. After the collapse of the USSR, and despite the many subsequent changes, an enthusiasm to sustain and improve the quality of education in Shughnan has survived.

The district’s 56 schools have a total of 10 250 students. Out of the 1 310 teachers, 710 were women<sup>4</sup>. Despite its better environment and its involvement in the post-Soviet reform activities in MBAP since 1994, the life and work conditions of the teachers in Shughnan generally do not differ much in impoverishment from the rest of the province. I was informed that in 1998-99 alone, 56 teachers from Shughnan left teaching; more teachers kept leaving both teaching and the region, some for as close as Dushanbe, others for as far away as Moscow.

*Porshinev: Village of Contrasts and Heart of the District*

Porshinev, where Nigin lives, lies north of the centre of MBAP, on the border with Afghanistan. It is the largest village in the whole province housing about 30 % of the population of the district. Porshinev has the reputation of a trend-setting village. A beautiful spring in the village is believed to have been created by a prominent Ismaili philosopher and missionary of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Nāsir-i Khusraw (1004-1088)<sup>5</sup>. Allegedly Nāsir-i Khusraw, after having listened to the villagers’ complaints about the lack of water, hit the ground with his stick: Water gushed from the Earth. In Porshinev, the Aga Khan has twice met tens of thousands of his spiritual followers (*murids*)<sup>6</sup> during the last seven years. The major influential *pirs*<sup>7</sup> of the Ismaili interpretation of Islam in Badakhshân used to live in the village. Almost 100 % of the people of the village are Ismailis. The villagers think that the heart of the Pamirs’ civilisation lies more here, than in the central town, Khorugh.

Porshinev is overpopulated, and there is a severe dearth of fertile land. In addition to land, the village also suffers a lack of wood, water and electricity.

The privatisation of land in 1995 left out the teachers on the excuse that they are not peasants, but teachers. Further, as with many border villages of MBAP, Porshinev has a reputation as a site of drug trafficking. Even in these times of general poverty, beautiful imported cars move in and out of the village. I personally observed a drug exchange right beside the school's fence. The students explained to me the cautious encounter between a young Afghan man and his local counterpart. In the later stage of my fieldwork, four young men were killed in an alleged trafficking encounter with the border guards. Two of them were graduates of this school. The incident heightened the already tense relations between the village youth and the Russian border guards, who have set up a checkpoint to control movement between Porshinev and Khorugh.

During the civil war, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) used Porshinev sporadically as a base. The UTO soldiers crossed the Panj River from Afghanistan to the village, used the Soviet-built pioneer camps to regroup, and moved north to fight against the Dushanbe Government. Interestingly, all this used to happen while the border was under the supervision of the Russians. The village youth were allegedly well-armed even by 1999. Just a month before my arrival, a large avalanche swept the upper part of the village and destroyed several houses. A family and their livestock were buried alive. The teachers wanted to build a warning system against possible mud and rock slides in future. Their initiative was, however, frustrated by the absence of electricity.

*Shotemur School: Vanguard of Reform from Within*

Nigin works in a school<sup>8</sup> named after a native revolutionary communist-Shirinsho Shotemur<sup>9</sup>. It is one of the oldest schools of the province, with a tradition of excellence. It is a general secondary educational school<sup>10</sup> containing classes from grades 1 to 11. The Shotemur School comprises a preparatory year, primary and secondary sections, a lyceum-internat<sup>11</sup> with its own hostel and kitchen, and a sports hall with an adjacent playing field.

Nigin mainly teaches in the lyceum-internat, which is located to the north of the main building, in the hostel of the former boarding school. The classrooms here are older, less well equipped and with lower ceilings. The establishment of the lyceum-internat<sup>12</sup> is a part of the Shotemur school head's reform initiative. The framework of the national reform strategy allows for the creation of alternative forms of schooling within the Government system<sup>13</sup>. A lyceum-internat is an amalgamation of new and old forms of schooling: lyceum and internat. The lyceum as a concept of schooling re-emerged<sup>14</sup> after Perestroika to respond to the needs of the district's gifted students. Internat, a Soviet-concept boarding school provided opportunities for students from the remote areas and poor families. The Shotemur school's head and several other teachers of the school grew up in Soviet boarding

schools in the 1960s. They recalled that many great renowned scholars, poets and sportsmen of the Pamirs had graduated from the internats.

Fusing these concepts created the lyceum-internat, a boarding school for the gifted children of Shughnan district. Due to the shortage of transportation and boarding facilities, the school, however, has actually taken students only from Porshinev. The concept of internat required that students live in the school as a collective for the whole week, and the school provided for their lodging, boarding and food. They visited their homes on weekends<sup>15</sup>. The community, higher authorities and external agencies did not easily accept the idea of the lyceum-internat. Many parents also resisted, the internat's traditional image was not congruent with their social position.

The MBAP and Shughnan educational authorities used Shotemur school as an example of their ability to innovate and succeed, extolling it as a "School of progressive experience<sup>16</sup>". In December 1999, they organised a provincial seminar with the heads of the district education boards on how to disseminate some of the school's practices, including the ideas of lyceum and streaming. Very little was said about the implications of the lyceum for the social stratification of the society; it was seen as a historical necessity derived from market and independence. The main question was not of why not of how.

Traditionally one of the strongest schools of the province until a decade ago, Shotemur School had then experienced a deep crisis. The students had broken the windows and insulted the teachers. Constant conflicts between the then head and the teachers and amongst the teachers led to anonymous complaints about each other being sent to the higher authorities. The community was angry with the school. In 1991, 55 teachers out of 72 officially requested the head of the school to step down<sup>17</sup>. They urged that Ali, a native of the village, take over as head in order to restore the school's credibility and reputation.

Like Zhukov<sup>18</sup> during the Great Patriotic War, Ali had managed to transform several difficult schools into successful ones. His success rested on several factors. First, he emphasised genuine honesty and transparency: "You cannot fool students and teachers for long. Once you lost credibility, it is hard to restore it. Together with hard work this will bear fruit." Second, he established humane relations between the students and teachers: "I have openly told the teachers that if they hit or insult the children, they will be hit and insulted in response." Third, jointly defining the vision and role of the school towards children and community, he encouraged the teachers to work with the parents to send their children to the school. Fourth, employing the community values and the authoritative sources, he motivated the teachers and school personnel to work and innovate:

"Prior to the Imam's arrival, we had not received our salaries for three years. After his visit we decided to work for the sake of Mawlo<sup>19</sup> and his steps in Badakhshân. What was the use of the nonsense salary that we used to earn?"

Mawlo sent us everything, food, clothes, and fuel, his love and care. He said we were always in his thoughts and heart. The only thing Mawlo wanted of us was to work hard, seek knowledge and teach the children. How could we not reply with something adequate, I asked the teachers<sup>20</sup>? (Field Notes (FN). 1: 12)".

Ali asked his teachers not to work only for a single open lesson<sup>21</sup> or for the sake of inspectors, but "work according to their conscience and be their own judges, not the judges of others." He has also been a dissenter in his thinking and behaviour, strongly committed to education, the school, his teachers and students. He sided with the teachers during the 1997 school strike. He also managed to create a formidable fund for his school within the last three years. For these actions, Ali was taken to court by the official authorities as an instigator of the strike and solicitor of money from the parents. Even worse, he was forbidden to visit his only daughter, a medical student who got typhoid and was near death in Dushanbe. Ali was also rejected for the title of "Honoured Teacher of Tajikistan", and for the award for best school. His monthly salary consisted of 15 000 Tajik rubles only (around \$ 10 US). Spending all his time at school, he lived without additional sources of income.

#### *The School and the Community*

The school has 705 students: 240 in primary, 360 in secondary and 105 in higher secondary. There are 72 teachers, of whom 50 are women. The support personnel comprise 30 people. The students mainly come from the children of the neighbourhood, with a smaller number of gifted children from the district at the lyceum-internat. The first intake of the internat-lyceum into grade 5 was 56 students in 1998-99.

The community appreciates the teachers' hard work, their sacrifice for the sake of the children, and is proud of the school's successes. The affluent villagers, including those who have gathered their wealth in suspicious ways, sometimes make donations to the school, in money and in kind, such as a volleyball, a net and a basketball. In 1998, the community bought slate and covered the roof of the school on a voluntary basis. Since 1991, there has been no theft of school property.

The school is certainly influenced by the forces and events that take place around it. Among the negative forces are drug trafficking, guerrilla activities and the spread of nepotism. Particularly in admission to universities, nepotism considerably reduces the number of university entrants from this school. Due to hunger and lack of heating, the class periods are shortened. By November, the periods are gradually shortened to 40 and 35 minutes from the standard 45. From December until mid-February the schools are closed. The heating season is about six months here. This creates additional problems for the teachers. Even in May, the classes were still cold in all the premises; the students and teachers constantly coughed during the lessons. The cold has

affected the health of the students and teachers. Several teachers, including Nigin, had cold-related health problems. In order to cover the curriculum in the shortened winter term, teachers often skip topics in a lesson in the shortened winter term, compromising their students' learning. In addition, there have been cases when students fainted in the class because of hunger.

Like other schools, this school too receives rhetorical encouragement from the local government<sup>22</sup> and real assistance from the Aga Khan Foundation, the community, and other NGOs. This assistance might include provision of books and stationery, clothes for the teachers and students, and coal and food for the maintenance of the school and lyceum-internat. It may also include training courses, seminars and provision of professional newsletters.

### Nigin: The Journey of a Teacher and Mother

#### *“As if I was a Born Teacher”*

Nigin teaches “History of Tajikistan”, “Human Being and Society”, and “Messages on Ethics.” She teaches the lower secondary grades in the lyceum-internat and higher secondary grades in the general school. Originally from Rushân, her parents moved to Shughnan as part of the Soviet migration policy during the 1950s and 1960s<sup>23</sup>. Her father started as a primary teacher in a multi-grade school and quickly moved up to become the Secretary of the Communist Party unit in the school. For several years, he was head of the school and later on was appointed as Secretary of the Communist party of the kolkhoz, which included several villages. Nigin's father taught her some of the most essential skills of becoming a good teacher and respectful person.

Like the majority of rural female children of the Pamirs, Nigin together with her two sisters did most of the work at home: cleaning, washing, cooking, sawing wood, looking after the animals, sewing and bringing water from the faraway spring or river<sup>24</sup>. She also joined her brothers in carrying wood on her back and head from the surrounding mountains. While so doing, Nigin always carried books with her: “It is hard for me to believe that I could fulfil so many jobs without them affecting my studies and grades negatively” (Int. 1: 4). Nigin loved literature; she read many books of prose and poetry and daily borrowed a new book from the village or school library. Her favourite authors were the poets Hafiz<sup>25</sup> and Lahuti<sup>26</sup> and the novelist Aini<sup>27</sup> whose books she has continued to use as references for her courses. Nigin has used several Russian and Western authors, such as Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Balzac, Dreiser and Reed, from whom she has learnt about important issues of human life.

In addition to her father, a number of other teachers have played impact role in her career choice. The Physics' teacher was so good in explaining the lessons that Nigin could memorise words right from his mouth:

“His language was very sweet and clear and still rings in my ears. Sometimes he used to speak in Shughnanî and request that we do not tell any one about it. During the Soviet times, speaking in Shughnanî or Rushânî in the classroom would have been a big minus. In addition, our Physics teacher often conducted an experiment or a demonstration. He never came to class without equipment. Unlike other teachers, he would question us every day and sometimes more than once in a lesson. This made us always study and be ready to answer his questions (Interview (Int. 1: 4))”.

Nigin graduated from high school feeling more confident in history. Her father accompanied her to Dushanbe, where she passed all the University entrance exams with excellent marks and without any special connections:

“For me it is hard to believe, when my students tell me it is absolutely impossible to get into University without a connection. In our time anyone who studied hard and well could get to a higher educational institution. I wonder why it has become so difficult and corrupt nowadays (Int. 1: 25)”.

However, at moments Nigin compromised the values she espoused. She was asked to sit entrance exams in her cousin’s place. Nigin knew from her friends that such deceptions happened, yet she was scared to death. If caught, she would have been expelled from the University, dishonouring herself, her family and her parents. With a trembling heart, however, she entered the exam and got a high grade for her cousin, which guaranteed the cousin’s admission to the Institute. In this case, Nigin revealed not only some of the “unspoken practices” but also the culturally embedded tensions she underwent:

“I couldn’t say no to my uncle’s wife. I stayed at their place for nearly a year and ate their bread and salt. If I had refused to do that, my uncle’s wife would have ridiculed him for the rest of his life, [saying] that his relatives are useless. My uncle’s head would have been down all the time. You know, I did this for the *arwohen khotir* [the sake of the spirit]<sup>28</sup> (Int.1: 26)”.

Due to their language and culture differences, Nigin and her other Pamirian peers had a hard time orienting themselves to the cultural politics in the higher educational institutions in Dushanbe, especially because their weak and “improper” Pamirian pronunciation of Tajik affected their marks:

“The Tajik<sup>29</sup> instructors constantly made fun of us, especially our male course mates. They were disliked for their hairstyle, for the ways they dressed and spoke Tajik and their accent. Instead of their appreciating our efforts, we were usually considered as not being good Tajiks. As we gradually began to speak their accent, we sometimes would get into other problems. [Even in Tajik] Khujandî teachers and students would not like us speak in a Kulabî accent. Kulabîs would hate us if we spoke like the northern Tajiks. Though our Pamirian youth were very strong in knowledge, due to this our grades were usually lowered (Int. 1: 26)”.

In the first years of teaching in her native village, Nigin stayed late after school and worked hard to prepare visual aids for her next lessons with the graduating class. This was important both for teaching well and creating a



reputation of a hard-working, dedicated, and honest teacher and person. Some of these visuals she kept with her as she moved to other schools. In 1980, Nigin married Sher, someone she had come to know during her university years in Dushanbe: “I decided to marry someone I would like and my father was happy with my decision. My mother wanted me to marry a relative from Rushân” (Int.1: 27).

Nigin’s husband, Sher, was a teacher in the same school until 1997. He taught economics and labour training. As Nigin’s best professional colleague Sher helped her create many of the visual aids for her history/social science classroom. He cooked and looked after the cattle at home when Nigin was busy at school. Their life and work was only about teaching, teachers, school and students: “Coming to school was not like going to a different place. Home and school were extensions of each other. We constantly learned about teaching from each other. I helped him to arrange extra-curricular activities” (Int.1: 62). For more than 12 years, Nigin taught in the neighbouring village. It was there that she met the headmaster of her current school. In 1991, Nigin moved to Shotemur after he offered her a teaching position there.

#### *Ordeals of Perestroika and Glasnost*

Nigin agreed that Perestroika and Glasnost (1986-1991) were a historical necessity, but believed that the way they were carried out was wrong. She felt that the majority of the current problems in Badakhshân, such as drugs, disease, guns, poverty, cold, refugees, hunger and corruption became rampant only after Perestroika and its aftermath. She observed that during Perestroika, the various parties in their struggle for power had manipulated the population and that an excess of freedom had resulted in a chaotic situation. Various narcotics had been used in Badakhshân since the old times, but in secret and by a very few elderly people. In the Soviet times, people chose different paths. Now youth has no alternative opportunities and gets into opium due to lack of other options, Nigin believes.

At the peak of the civil war (1992-94), about twenty-five refugees, each with terrible stories of loss and pain, lived in Nigin’s house. In reflecting on this time of strife, Nigin wonders whether it is possible to teach well in a politically disturbed context. Peace of mind was crucial for Nigin’s serious engagement with teaching and learning:

“Their problems became ours and we all lost rest. I cannot bear mess. You get tired and cannot prepare yourself for the next day. By the midst of 1994 we had nothing except *samotek*<sup>30</sup>. Going to school unprepared was another burden. In the classroom, I could not listen to the students’ answers properly. My thoughts were dispersed. I could see that the students could not leave their home problems at door either. I felt we were in classroom only in the physical sense. You think: how long will this last and how can we survive it (Int. 1:27)”.

By the end of 1994, the majority of refugees returned home or dispersed and Nigin renewed her focus on school and teaching. In 1995, Nigin won the title of the Best Teacher of the district and got second position in the provincial teacher contest. In 1997, Nigin and Sher joined the school strike, which ended with teachers' victory<sup>31</sup>. The psychological aspect of this strike was amazingly powerful:

“The higher authorities got scared of our unity and wanted to transfer us to various schools so as to break us. They threatened all kinds of punishments and manipulations. Our head was taken to court because he openly took our side. We all could leave teaching. That would have been much easier for us. It would have also been a big blow to those who wanted to punish us. But we worked for the sake of the children and the community, not for the sake of the government officials. We could not leave the students to become ignorant and involved in activities harmful for them and the community. We won the strike, but as the winners we have decided to prove to the higher authorities that we are human beings; that we care and that they need to think of us and should not ignore us as “non-existent”; that they cannot rule us anymore the way they had done it before. Since then, the community renewed its respect of us and extended its help to us (Int. 1: 65)”.

In 1997, Sher joined a NGO as a logistics officer. The tensions related to Sher's leaving the school for a NGO revealed that even the most dedicated teachers are vulnerable and cannot stand constant humiliation:

“We were amongst the best supporters of the head and the school. But I forced him [to go], because I could not bear this poverty any more. Due to cold and other concerns, I have developed a kidney problem and each year I go for treatment to hospital. Unlike in the Soviet times, you have to pay for needles, for medicine, and care. There I realised that the hospital staff has a much better life than we teachers do, though the government shouts that teachers get higher salary than doctors<sup>32</sup>. Another reason was my son. On the *Rooze Noor* (Day of Enlightenment)<sup>33</sup> in 1997, he refused to attend the festival, because of not having good clothes in comparison to his peers. People here would rather be hungry, but well dressed. My son said, what is the use of my parents for me, when the children of the businessmen and even unemployed dress better than I do? I cried and felt that if we do not do something for him, he may get into drugs so as to have clothes similar to his friends. Unlike many of his friends, he is a university student, and deserves this. I forced Sher to leave the school. He was very upset when he did it (Int. 1: 62)”.

Extending the experience of her husband to those of other school leavers, Nigin theorised how emotionally painful, hard and humiliating departing teaching might be for those committed to it. She empathised with those who left teaching:

“There is a difference between leaving one's job and being “forced” to leave it. How long can you work with 6 000 Tajik rubles?<sup>34</sup> Even that you do not get for months. Many good teachers left their job because of their own children. Some have left because there was no support, no appreciation. It is also hard to both find a new job and re-adjust to that job. For many teachers,

to work like slaves in Russia<sup>35</sup>, to sell soap and clothes, gum, and sunflower seeds in the bazaar is putting themselves down. It is humiliating for both those who have quit and those who remained in teaching (Int. 1: 67)”.

With Sher’s departure to the NGO their life has become easier. His monthly salary was about \$ 100 US, which was indeed much higher than Nigin’s annual salary. Despite this, because their neighbours are hungry, Nigin could not feel good and enjoy the benefit alone. Life in the village, her background, and the community’s traditions did not allow for privacy and selfishness:

“Sher brought two sacks of wheat flour, but I could not cook bread openly. The neighbours all see what we eat and wear and who visits us. We should not forget that all this might be temporary and one day we will need help. I shared the first sack with them. I felt more relaxed this way than cooking bread in secret (Int. 1: 67)”.

Sher’s departure has also shifted the content and quality of conversations at home from education and particular classroom stories to particularities of his new work. There are new types of guests, including foreigners. Nigin and all her family was impressed with the humility and modesty of an American fellow from the NGO, who lived at their home for the whole month. “As I observed and talked to him via my 14 year-old daughter, I felt a kind of guilt. Americans had been represented as arrogant and hostile, but this man was even simpler and kinder than many of us were (Int. 1: 69)”.

*“Home in the Village is Not for Rest”*

Nigin lives in a Pamirian house (*chid*)<sup>36</sup>, built in 1962-63 through *karyar*<sup>37</sup>. She has a television and watches stations broadcasting from Moscow, Khorugh and sometimes Dushanbe. Like all the teachers here, she has a formidable bookshelf, which comprises Tajik and world classics, journals and professional literature. Since 1992, the additions have been mainly religious booklets. Nigin’s mother-in-law lives with them. They have a very small piece of land, only enough for planting some vegetables.

The recent transformations have intensified both domestic and professional hardships. The multiple concerns have haunted them both at school and home, agreed Sher and Nigin. The rural and mountainous conditions were part of constant and overwhelming concerns, said Sher:

“You cannot rest when you have so many worries mounting at home. In spring, avalanches, landslides, snow slides, rock slides, planting and ploughing. In summer, there are heat, mudslides and lack of water. In fall, harvesting, and collecting fuel and paying debts – too much work in a too short time. In winter, cold, darkness<sup>38</sup>, and snow. July and August are supposed to be for rest. In fact, they are the busiest seasons: building a house or something added to it, renovation after the winter and spring, cutting the fodder, harvesting, and threshing wheat grass. Unlike in the cities, no one renovates and fixes anything here for us. So you need *karyar* to do all these (Int. 1: 112)”.

However, the worries of women teachers were more subtle, introverted, emotionally deeper and more draining. They were also appreciated to a much lesser degree. Interestingly, in the conditions of nothingness and powerlessness, the women took charge of maintaining the *nomus* (honour) of the family:

“We spend hours in cleaning up the mess several times a day. We feel ashamed if some one sees our homes dirty or when we cannot offer a tea or food to the guests. People will gossip that we, wives are *shumi noqobil*<sup>39</sup>. With kindergartens having disappeared, it is very hard to raise small babies, look after the cattle and home, and be a good teacher. But one’s life becomes easier when children, particularly the girls, grow. Unlike hardworking girls, the sons try to live by easy ways and create additional worries for us. As mothers, we have no time for school. I work until 1:00 at night to prepare for the next day’s lesson (Int. 1:112)”.

Living in the mountains is much harder than living in the lowland areas of Tajikistan. Mountains add to the severity of challenges of a rural place. Opportunities become less while anxieties mount, added Gorminj, a colleague of Nigin:

“Unlike the rural area in Leninabad and Khatlon<sup>40</sup>, teachers in the mountains have no land. Unlike them, here we are vulnerable to landslides and snow slides; we are locked in for months. Mountains surround us from all sides. When there are clouds for a long time, we are like in a box or a saucepan, closed from all sides. The roads are not safe and you get exposed to too much humiliation<sup>41</sup>. There is no gas and fuel, no electricity, no radio and television, no papers and journals and no wood. Imagine you getting up in the cold morning to make tea. What kind of a person does one have to be to survive? (Int. 1: 71)”.

Another colleague of Nigin’s revealed the raise of the emotional intensity of the women’s desperate experience as compared to those of male. Their hardship is taken for granted:

“Female teachers in the mountains are *beiloj*<sup>42</sup>. We have no time for ourselves. All our life goes in serving others: my six children, husband, old parents, guests and cattle. When we watch the lives of the women in the West we feel guilty for being born and living here. It is as if we are punished by God to be born here. What have we been punished for? We cannot move out of here. The only way to end all this is to die. Even doing a small job, such as preparing tea makes you go through hell, because every thing is in short supply and very expensive. We get panicked every time we have to do even a small thing (Int. 1: 71)”.

Not only teachers, but also the students in the village were very busy with survival needs. Nigin’s only daughter, who is in grade 9, did 50 % of the work at home. Like his mother, Nigin’s younger son has developed a kidney problem. Nigin believes that she and her son have become sick due to the rapid changes in the society: “Just about 10 years ago, I was a fully healthy person. I believe my body was not used to too many pressures, one

coming after another” (Int. 1: 66). Also due to her sickness, since 1996 Nigin had given up the position of grade tutor, which she had held for many years. In 1999, she participated in a conference on the 1 100 th anniversary of the Samanid State in Khorugh. To that occasion, she wrote a paper, which was to be sent to Dushanbe for possible publication.

This brief sketch of Nigin’s voices provides powerful and rich insights into the complexity and role of Nigin’s biography, family, community traditions and recent transformations in the formation of her identity as a teacher, mother and critical member of her community. Nigin appears to have actively directed her growth as woman in the nexus of a Soviet-Muslim context. Her active and purposeful lifestyle emerges as a response (often paradoxical) to the challenges of integrity, honour, being a wife and mother, and representing a minority.

Nigin’s critique of how Perestroika was carried out raises questions about the implications of change for people’s life and work in society. Reflecting on her frustrations in classrooms, schools, community and home during Perestroika and the subsequent years of independence in Tajikistan, Nigin suggests that change, despite its promise, may not always lead to improvement. Her anger with dishonest politicians who for their own personal interests have broken a whole country and have made people’s lives miserable, provide two interesting lessons: (a) Nigin is a concerned, caring and responsible mother, teacher and citizen, and (b) socially-appealing ideas and concepts are often misused for promoting personal interests. For Nigin this signals that change is not an adventure, but a moral responsibility that carries implications for human beings and society, including the change agents, whose slogans should not be taken for face value.

Yet, the post-Perestroika experiences not only have affected Nigin’s life, health and work adversely; they have also prompted her to an awakening and transformative reconstruction of her identity, her work, her professional relations and practices. Regardless of the relativization of the ideals, Nigin, like many of her colleagues, finds it hard to redefine her values towards a market economy, where money, clothes, consumerism, corruption and pretentiousness have apparently overshadowed the traditional values of knowledge, honesty and community. Despite the radical nature of the changes, Nigin tries to be who she really wants to be – a caring teacher and an involved person in the societal and educational reforms. Thus, Nigin’s life and work experiences in the post-Soviet times (e.g., civil war, strike) call for deep reflection about the ethics of leadership, governance, tradition, continuity and change in the society in which she lives and for the betterment of which she works.

There are not only political and professional challenges. Nowhere else the natural and geographic challenges might speak louder as in the mountainous context. Teachers use images such as cold, hell, saucepan, dark, dead end, box, and share feelings such as hopelessness, guilt and helplessness, to

describe the physical context and their relations with it in the post-Soviet times. Badakhshân is possibly one of the few places where geography is seen as great burden and obstacle rather than as something to be easily controlled and used. This realization, images and feelings appear to be a new phenomenon, particularly striking on the part of the women teachers: mothering and teaching have become more of a burden on each other than something mutually helpful. With the post-Soviet return to ecological realities, the differences between the rural and mountainous contexts have become sharper. Farming, the mainstay of rural life, seems not particularly useful here, the teachers say. The sustainable approach to living in mountains has remained one of adaptation; mountain conditions have intensified the never-ending survival challenges of life at home, in the school and classroom. Added to professional concerns it is no wonder how stressed the teachers of the villages are, how patient they must be, or why they all have chronic illnesses.

### Nigin's Worldview

#### *"Teachers of History Are in Hell"*

Teaching history has been a double-edge sword for Nigin. It has provided her with opportunities to develop herself, educate her students and her own children, help her colleagues, and serve the community. But teaching and history have also been sources of frustrations, anger, denigration and loss of self-esteem.

Nigin's expression, "Teachers of history are in hell in this and the other world" reflects some of the major challenges and tensions that she has undergone as she moved between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Across both periods, as Nigin was asked to manage huge topics as part of the required program, she was also worried about her own and her students' knowledge, skills, readiness and ability to understand the topics properly.

Teaching history has become more difficult, because a new subject, History of Tajikistan, has replaced the previous major subject, History of the USSR. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the history of Tajikistan was nearly ignored in the program. Now it has become central. This change took place without adequate support, materials, and teacher training. Nigin was thrown into deep waters of uncertainty without knowing how and where to swim. She was cautious in expressing her happiness with regard to the change in the title of the subject of history. From her Soviet experience she knew that the title "History of the USSR" had little relevance to the needs of many nations living in the USSR. Below, Nigin relates the "mistakes" of the policy-makers to the political dimensions of teaching and the hidden curriculum:

"During Soviet times History of Tajikistan was a small section within History of the USSR. In fact, we studied the History of Russia from the primitive times until the present. Soviet we said, but Russia's history we taught.

In schools the History of Tajikistan was something like two to four hours within the History of the USSR. Even at the higher educational institutions there was not enough attention paid to teaching History of Tajikistan. I learnt this topic in a hurry, 25 years ago, but never taught it. In selecting the topics from Tajik history more attention was paid to the history of Tajikistan in the Soviet period. Topics that dealt with ancient and medieval Tajik history were rushed or left out from the course... It was perhaps acceptable, because we were united within the Soviet Union. But it was not right to ignore our own history, the history of a whole nation, even at that time. I think our Tajik scholars did not pay enough attention to it. The Soviet system was based upon commands and “you must do it” approach. Everything was decided centrally at the USSR level. The history curriculum was always published in the journal: “Teaching History in Schools” and we used to merely copy and translate it. Tajik scholars have always relied upon the Russians. They did not do anything significant by themselves<sup>43</sup>... They were not particularly strong, as far as the interests and concerns of their nation were concerned (Int. 1: 14)”.

#### *Reconstructing Truth*

Nigin certainly had doubts about the system and the content of her subject with regard to its defence of the Soviet system, including the realization of the relative nature of “truth”. One way of resolving this dilemma was found in the dichotomisation of the “good theory” from the bad practice:

“I had a bit of doubt in the things that I learnt and taught. We talked about the problems particularly in the University hostel. Some of the instructors, such as our professor of History of the Communist Party of the USSR, would start: “I want to tell you something, but make sure it is just between us.” He would praise Stalin and put down Brezhnev. Despite this, in the class and my lectures<sup>44</sup> in the village, I promoted the strength of the Soviet ideology and theory, not its practice. I continue to believe that there was nothing wrong with the theory of socialism. I knew it was people who destroyed the theory because they misused it for their own benefit (Int. 1: 49)”.

Nigin’s trust in Marxism-Leninism was shaken, but not destroyed as she observed the difference between the “talk and walk” of the new ideologies, and as she compared people who operated in the name of various theories across time. Nigin wanted to hold to something constant and certain and found that her held-values may still be valid. She has found that those who denounced Marxism-Leninism have rarely shown a better alternative.

During Glasnost, history was denounced on the ground that its content was totally deluded. In the late 1980s and early 1990s history was excluded from the school program and exams for reconsideration<sup>45</sup>. This was another blow to Nigin’s sense of self-esteem. History and its teachers were criticised for telling lies to people and confusing them. In the village, she has felt awkward when some of her previous students asked her, “Molima<sup>46</sup>, you used to say that communism is inevitable. But what we see is its irreversible

demise. Can you explain what has happened to socialism? I really feel lost and smile. I just shake my shoulders”. In the classrooms Nigin seems to have been experiencing similar emotional tumult. But instead of moving to another extreme, as many had done in the district, she realizes that an honest approach should rather reveal complexity:

“As we read articles about how history was taught incorrectly, I became disturbed and angry. The scholars had fooled us. How could they be liars for so many years? People pointed at us as teachers of history. I had not enough information to believe that things were wrong. I did not see any thing wrong with the communist theory. Lenin, for example, never said you abandon your religion or your traditions. He said that an educated person is one who learns everything of the past and present including knowledge of religion. We had our faith alive during the Soviet times. So I taught theory to people. During Glasnost, everybody looked at only negative points and bad sides. These people blame Stalin for the repression and that he knew everything about the German attack but did not prevent the war (WW II) from happening. Why don't these people acknowledge that he also did not leave Moscow when the Fascists came close? That Stalin did not exchange his own son for a German general<sup>47</sup>. As a mother, I know that children are closest to the parents. These scholars hid from us many things, told us lies and made us tell lies. Now they all have moved to another side. How could everything from that time be wrong, as they claim? I have lost trust in them (Int. 1: 50)”.

The question of the epistemology of history appeared as another challenge Nigin faced in the last decade. Nigin believed that the content of History consisted of a set of scientifically proven facts, events and explanations. Truth, she said was “whatever event is said correctly, without colouring, without any fantasy.” When I reminded her of the recent classification of the Basmachi movement<sup>48</sup> from enemies to freedom fighters, Nigin revealed the continuity of her Soviet- nurtured beliefs. Although she admitted that someone from the Party of Islamic Renaissance would justify Ibrahim Bek (a head of the Basmachi movement), she would firmly hold to her consciously-held values:

“The Basmachis tried to destroy the Soviet system, killed the respectable people, did not let the women be free. They wanted to stop the new way of living. Basmachis were concerned only about themselves. They were against the masses, the poor population. They owned the lands and factories and had the poor to work for them like slaves. We cannot put these Basmachis in the same line with Shotemur and Saifulloev<sup>49</sup> who fought for freedom and against exploitation (Int. 1: 45)”.

#### *Still Too Many Good Reasons to Remain in Teaching...*

Socio-geographical realities, such as remoteness, lack of money, unemployment, political instability and civil unrest, all have kept Nigin in the profession by default: “In Badakhshân nowadays there are only two professional fields that are operating: education and health. There are no plants and



no factories around to work. If we leave teaching where else can we go and work?" (FN. 1: 23). The affection and attachment of her students continued to serve as a powerful intrinsic impetus for Nigin's choice.

Like her experience with Tazarv, her own history teacher, Nigin found her students talking to her about things other than just their lessons. They asked her to be a bridge between them, other teachers and their peers. Nigin made them feel that she wouldn't laugh at or gossip about their feelings and secrets. Sometimes they trusted her more than their parents, and even used her to defend their positions against their parents. Nigin summed up her various roles:

"In the classroom I am an educator, caretaker, friend, sister, mother and father. I am hard on them in their studies and soft in their personal relations<sup>50</sup>. As a mother I love these children, worry about their physical state, about their clothes. I demand a lot from them, and a bit of cursing is not bad too. I work with them as I work with my own kids. I worry a lot when they get involved with bad boys. I believe that *Bo moh shini moh shawi, bo deg shini siyoh shawi* (You sit with the moon, you become like the moon; you sit with a boiler you become dark). I defend my good students as much as I can, even against their own parents (Int. 1: 74)".

Teaching has made Nigin an "educated, expert *mom*". She has prepared her son to become a student of Khorugh State University (KSU) without any *cherez* (connection): "I would not change my profession if I were to start all over again. Unlike some of my colleagues, I cannot imagine myself selling in the market. But I would have changed my subject, history" (Int. 1: 66).

Being an educated woman has been a crucial reason for her remaining in school and in teaching. Teaching has kept her status high, enabled her to earn a salary, and provided her with power, usefulness and the ability to serve the larger community. This has expanded her perspective on her role and vision:

"To be a teacher in the village was an honour. We were in the centre of the society, and led other women. They came to us for everything, from consultation on women's health to borrowing money. As a woman teacher we got good money and a higher education compared with the majority of women who were housewives and sovkhos<sup>51</sup> workers here. Unlike them, we can argue and talk openly with men other than our husbands. It is still more or less like this. The teacher is the first in *sukh at gham* (sorrow and happiness) of the village. People ask us what to do, even if we do not know. This is due to the teacher being more educated. She is the intelligentsia of the village. She knows more than any other woman does and that's the main source of her respect. We feel other women look at us to lead them (Int. 1: 71)".

For Nigin and her colleagues, too many things were at stake to leave teaching. The foundation of their success comes from honour and reputation of teaching profession and community that teachers wish to maintain:

"In 1995 Hozir Imom (the Aga Khan) expressed happiness with the level of education in Badakhshân. We had the first position in the Soviet Union in

terms of higher education. We will be the first in Tajikistan and probably in the Commonwealth of Independent States again, because that is our name and *nomus*. In Dushanbe people bring their children to the Pamirian teachers. The graduates of Khorugh University get jobs in international organisations ahead of everybody. Our children won most of the honestly- held competitions for stipends to study abroad. Soon we will have a new International University of the Imam<sup>52</sup>. It would be a shame, if our Pamirian students were not the majority there (Int. 1: 80)”.

*“Society Rests on the Teachers’ Shoulders”*

There are deep cultural and communal ties in being a teacher in the villages of Badakhshân. Being a teacher means not just sharing the parenting of the students. The school, and with it teaching, have become a force for change with a mission for the whole community:

“We are connected by blood, faith, and language. We see our students and their parents two or three times a day. We actually see their parents more than them. Therefore, when you see students and parents hide and avoid you, something is going wrong. In the village, when you face some one, remember that he is not a single person. Therefore, if relations go wrong, they go bad for a long time and include families for generations. I ask the parents immediately and sort out the misunderstanding. Parents think that we teachers can do everything and their kids’ future is only in our hands. We have to tell them that this is not true. We visit their homes and they come to school and enter their children’s classes. In the pedagogical council<sup>53</sup> we agreed that we have been teaching not only students but also the whole village, even in the Soviet times. But, at that time we did it for the state. Now we do it for ourselves, the school, parents and their children (Int. 1: 75)”.

One of the hardest challenges that Nigin and her school faced were corrupt practices, especially for students seeking places in the universities. She says universities have frequently failed strong students in admission exams and passed weak ones for a bribe or through connections:

“One of my students shamelessly told me to give him a 5 undeservedly to get to university. If you refuse, his parents will hate you and never say to you Salom<sup>54</sup>. So you have to spend time with the parents explaining how wrong it is, and you also negotiate on the grade. We feel slapped in the face, when the university instructors pass our weak students and fail the best students in the entrance exams. I have developed hatred towards those who do such injustice. It is much harder to look our good students in the eye after they have failed in admission. I feel guilty, as if I have not prepared them well enough, as if we missed teaching them something important. The parents know about these practices, but pour their anger out on us. They ask what the benefit of our school is if it does not ensure success (Int. 1: 66)”.

Drugs, guerrilla activities, videos and other street activities have been additional influences from which the teachers guard their students:

“It is hard to explain to children that drugs and guns are temporary. The boys reply that these activities provide food, clothes, jobs, cars and even better education than the school. With dollars in hand, they can hire tutors and buy diplomas of whatever specialty you want. There are homes with five to seven cars, and some of them are foreign-made. Students also reject our assertions that the success of the Narcomafia and guerrillas are short-lived. The guerrillas are receiving high positions in the current government<sup>55</sup> (Int. 1: 71)”.

Nigin and her colleagues considered that the key to Badakhshân’s prosperity is knowledge and education. A veteran teacher, criticizing the current preoccupation with farming, stated, that farming should never replace the traditional value of education in the community. He challenged the new assumptions and claims of the local and external reformers:

“Knowledge is the only wealth and way out for the people of the Pamirs. You can plant seeds on the top of the mountains; you can privatise the land, but none of this is going to rescue us from insecurity and survival. The people who put farming over education are like socialist Utopians. Their ideas are based on good wishes and theory. This theory does not consider the infertility of our land; here nature is stronger than human beings and it shows that strength all the time. Our grandparents had private land and planted all over the mountains. Our population was many times smaller, yet we could not get rid of hunger, cold, and lack of food. The Soviets also realised this and emphasised education. Education enabled us to live anywhere we wanted. Today some people claim they have increased land productivity by two and three times. They wrongly think the Soviets were stupid; they fail to understand that the Soviets did not find that useful as compared to educating us. If the Soviets sent a rocket into orbit, how could they not increase the productivity of land? (FN. 1:98)”.

The current involvement of the teachers with farming for the purpose of making ends meet has affected their bodies and minds, their personalities and outlooks, all important factors for teaching. Good teaching requires time, respect, dignity and decency; the teacher’s personality is equally valid to his knowledge of the subject, added another of Nigin’s colleagues:

“Farming here is hell. It is taking all our time. We run after water, the bulls to plough, and fertiliser. Our land is stony and very hard to work on. At the end we hardly cover the loans we get from MSDSP<sup>56</sup>. Teaching has become the least work we do. Our work in school is left to the end of our daily concerns. This makes us feel guilty and nervous. We need time to prepare for a good lesson. We do not ask that our salary should be 1 000 dollars. But with our current salaries we feel that if we leave farming we are going to be the poorest people in the village. We want to live a normal life and do what we are supposed to do. We come to classes dusty, tired and unprepared. Look at my hands. They look like the hands of a slave rather than the hands of a teacher. Children do not only listen to what we tell them. They also learn from how we look and live. They compare us with others, with the Mafia and with business people (FN. 1: 97)”.

## Nigin as an Ethical Reformer

Teaching history, possessing of societal and educational visions, and being an active woman of the school and community have developed Nigin's critical perspective on the Soviet and post-Soviet approaches to educational and social reform. We have also begun to note that Nigin was not only an educational but also a social reformer. In other words, she connected her educational goals to the kind of society she had in mind. The ethics of caring lied at the basis of her perspective on reform, whether social or educational; indeed it appears that the two were interconnected in her perspective. Similar to social, Nigin believed that educational reform in Tajikistan also lagged far behind the fast-changing realities. Similarly, Nigin contended that education reform had pitfalls in its ethics, purpose, processes; lastly, as an active citizen and caring teacher, she also provides lessons and alternative suggestions for educational and social reformers, which I believe are useful for those beyond Tajikistan.

### *"We Need to Know about Ourselves"*

During her more than 20 years of experience, Nigin has thought not only about how she could better teach the programs sent from above, but also about the gaps in the curriculum and how she could rectify these gaps in order to make her teaching and her subject more relevant and meaningful for her students. Her perspective on what content history should include was grounded in her reflections about the experiences that she, her community and the Tajik society had undergone, why they occurred, and in what ways these experiences were related to history. Through Nigin's critique of the previous and current History curricula, as well as her proposal for what history should also include, a deep and broad goal of teaching history emerges: to start with knowing one's own self, identity, and one's community, and nation from all aspects – historical, cultural, religious, ethnic, and geographical:

"During the Soviet times we learnt about USA, Russia and the Roman Empire, which were too far and too old. But we knew nearly nothing about our neighbour Afghanistan. Ultimately, we came to teach our Tajik history. But, because our scholars did not care, we have so many problems with teaching it now. Maybe they were not allowed to do this... The local education board and some good teachers could develop a program that includes topics from our history. I would include the view of mountains, the traditions of the people of Badakhshân, the needs of Badakhshân and the problems we face today. We have several small ethnic groups and languages here in Badakhshân, which have little respect for and understanding of each other. We need to know about ourselves before knowing others. Why are there so many languages here? There are debates about the meaning of the words Badakhshân and Pamirs and we do not know enough about them. I would talk about our economic and political life. Why are we despite our high level of education so poor? Why did we follow blindly our "promising" leaders? This helps us to have a better life here. I have nothing against the Soghdians and the Bac-

trians<sup>57</sup>, but I want to know about ourselves first and how are we connected to them. The peoples of this place are registered in the Red Book<sup>58</sup>. So many countries wanted to occupy our land, so many people want to come here and we know very little about it. Many people do not even know about how our people are divided between Tajikistan and Afghanistan... (Int. 1: 102-103)".

Nigin's voice about these and other issues has never been addressed: "No one has ever asked me about all these issues, though I have had these questions in my mind for many years. That's why I am telling you as much as I know. I hope your work makes some difference" (Int. 1:103).

*"Is Reform Making Our Society any Better?"*

Nigin taught in the lyceum-internat for the gifted children. But, unlike the head and Gorminj, she was worried about the dividing and sorting out of the students that has occurred as result of the lyceum and streaming. She voiced questions about the purpose of schooling and the role of the teacher:

"I agree that the lyceum and profiling help the gifted students get ahead. But why are we worried about the gifted ones and not worried about the weaker ones? I get more worried about those students that are left behind. There are parents who told me of their similar worries. I myself ended regular school with excellent marks in all the subjects. I have talked about this, but no one listens to me (Int. 1:132)".

A parent pointed out that the public schools are becoming useless. Parents don't believe that their children can ever compete with the students of the lyceums. Those whose children are in the general stream have got a fear of the loss of hope, and a sense of inferiority: "The children of the lyceum are going to be our masters and our poor children are going to be their servants", predicted a parent (FN. 1: 21). Further, Nigin added that streaming, though aiming at providing a high level of knowledge, has in fact promoted one-sidedness, disrespect for other subjects, and devaluation of the students' talents and natural inclinations. It has also created problems for further studies:

"Many of our students do not understand biology, their own body, let alone history. They do not pay attention to the other subjects, though these are on the timetable. When a student tells me we do not need history and you better just give me a five, it is like a knife in my heart. Everyone wants to study English. But as they reach grade 11, they ask for consultations on history. I openly say that now I cannot guarantee their strong knowledge of history. Some study one stream here and join another stream at university. They create problems for the instructors, for themselves and their own parents. Our students choose what is fashionable and what provides them with money and a job, not according to their talents. Hozir Imom has said we should learn English. This is not only for students but even for me if I want to improve my own teaching. But here people understood it in their own ways and everyone rushed to become an English teacher. The girls saw Robiya<sup>59</sup> and all wanted to be like her. I don't think Hozir Imom said that you should all be English teachers and leave other subjects. When we question the students and their

parents, they say I am jealous because of the students' lack of interest in my subject. They charge that with studying history our children "won't go further than the airport"<sup>60</sup> (Int.1: 5)".

Revealing the politics of the rhetoric of reform, Nigin does not see the reform activities as clearly connected to the current realities. She asks whether developing a market economy means openly giving education to a fewer number of students, or selecting and sorting the students into good and bad ones. Nigin wanted the heads of the schools to question the idea of reform rather than:

"...speak like Brezhnev, as if they are in a session of the Congress of the Communist party. Everyone supports the idea because it is fashionable. Some heads said streaming is the demand of the time and market economy. I honestly do not know how streaming is connected to the demands of the time, democracy and a market economy (Int. 1: 132)".

*"Teachers are Cleverer than You Think!"*

Nigin suggested that reformers have to consider that changing teachers' practices implies changing their lives:

"The reform has come on us and moved ahead and we are running after it. But, why should we imitate others? We need to look at what we have here. Don't you think that the reform should consider our lives too? What have you done for us? How long can we sacrifice our lives for the good of the others? The reformers are concerned about showing that they are making many changes, not how and what the students learn. Like the Soviet times, they want to report that they have changed this and that. That this has become more and that has increased. The students have become like experimental mice As a result, the students complete grade 11 and are confused. Next, how can we reform history with no salaries, no textbooks, cold classes and hungry kids? Our reform is again coming from the top, "you must do it". No one listens to teachers. In our school we have so many reform ideas but we have no support and resources to put them into practice. We say lets do this and that and find that there is no money for all the activities (Int.1: 21)".

Nigin has seen how teachers react to reform and how they can make the reformers happy with the mirage of reform. Real reform implementation requires honesty, trust, realism and reflexivity, she argues:

"In the school teachers are as knowledgeable and clever as the reformers. As you ask me these questions, I too assess you. I, for example, could have talked to my students, developed materials and visuals and you would have witnessed wonderful classes and would have written all the lies. But I am not a boasting person and agree that we need to demonstrate our usual practices. But we do show unreal things to the inspectors; they take our shows as true. The next day we return to our own ways. We can show that we are with reform, but in reality we keep searching for the basic needs. Many teachers will leave in the case of any employment opportunity (Int. 1: 53)".

Nigin believed that real reform is personal and contextual. It is not based on a populist imitation and impressing others with famous names and high-flying words, but on a humble assessment of what facilities one has, where one lives and what the needs of the people in the context are. Real reform is not only about successes, but also about challenges. Reform needs support not just words:

“This is Pamir and a blind imitation of Amonashvili and Shatalov<sup>61</sup> won't work. When I try to follow them I find my lessons boring. We need to look at what we have. As teachers we do not need to be told what to do and how to do it. Teachers have got special conscience. You improve our living conditions and we will work and can create new ideas by ourselves (Int. 1: 28)”.

Interestingly, the idea of teachers being able to innovate was confirmed by a senior education officer at the Ministry:

“I have travelled Tajikistan back and forth and have visited some of the best schools in many other countries and compared their teachers with ours. I believe our Tajik teachers are the poorest teachers in the world. Yet they are as good as those with better living and teaching facilities. They have wonderful ideas, are very dedicated, and can be very creative (FN. 1: 142)”.

Nigin and her colleagues questioned the approach of the local authorities, the outside reformers and their translators who do not pay enough attention to the views of local teachers and fall into making uninformed assumptions. They suggested that the reformers:

“Look at the availability and quality of the material and technical basis: the classes, teaching aids, technical facilities, heating, whatever a teacher needs for teaching well. You ask us about our lives and do something for us before asking to change. You should ask about my life before my classroom. Not like that education officer who went to Buni<sup>62</sup> and ridiculed the poor teacher and talked about this teacher in all the conferences and meetings. The poor teacher stopped teaching and was nearly ready to kill herself. I would as someone from above first ask about the teacher's situation and then about her English. We have this saying: *Rang binu hol pors* (See the colour of my face and ask my business). I do not consider this kind of person as an educator at all (Int. 1: 66)”.

A veteran teacher suggested that any reform should start with asking whether a similar idea has existed and comparing it with what the reformers suggest. He suggested that external reformers should avoid making wrong assumptions and employing unwarranted generalisations. They also need to check their translators' abilities in understanding educational concepts:

“Some of the foreigners with their translators assume that their ideas are absolutely new and make conclusions about the existing system. Last year in a workshop, we were told that the Soviet system was scholastic, abstract and did not develop the students' thinking. I wonder which book they have taken this from and who has told them this. I also feel as if some of the translators either do not understand what we say, or do not convey our ideas well. I have been doing so-called problem- posing teaching for the last 30 years. Years ago I told an inspector: let me teach it this way and you ask the students at

the end of the lesson. I wrote the following poem of Rudaki<sup>63</sup> on the board:

If you are the ruler of your own desires, you are a man.  
If you don't look down at the blind and deaf, you are a man.  
Being a man is not kicking the fallen and disadvantaged.  
But if you take the hand of the fallen, you are a man!

Then I asked the students to tell the meaning of each word, the meaning of the poem and what they learnt from the poem. I did not tell them but let them speak. The inspector was puzzled with how well the students expressed their thoughts and understood the topic and its purpose without me lecturing it at them. Then he spoke about this lesson everywhere (Int. 1:67)".

## Nigin in the Classrooms

We will focus here on Nigin's pedagogy, on how her worldview, including her educational and societal vision, her rationale for teaching, intentions, role perception, her views on History, and her perspectives on change have been enacted in her classroom activities. Nigin's relations with her students, their parents, and the structures will be described as well as the methods and resources that Nigin uses, the ways she handles her students' answers and her perspectives on how her students learn. Nigin's classroom practices, affected by her personal experiences and the changing contextual realities are fundamental to further exposing the tensions and dilemmas she encountered as she tried to put her worldview into practice. The tensions are informative of not only classroom complexity but also the societal and systemic contradictions. As such they disclose not only constraints, but also possibilities for change.

### *"Simple, Short and Concrete"*

Though Nigin stated that there were no formulae in teaching history, from her lessons one could infer a pattern, which she had developed in her pedagogical practice: *Soda, kutoh, wa konkret* "Simple, short and concrete":

"By «short and concrete» I mean reducing and organising the information to explain it briefly, shortly and connect it to their life. The program is too large. If I tell the students everything, they will be confused. So, I select the major points from the textbook and summarise them... By «simple» I mean to teach the material in a language that is easily understandable to the children. Tajik, although it is the national language, is not our mother tongue. When I was a student, some students could not make any sense of what the teacher was telling in Tajik. They just kept quiet all the time or spoke like parrots. I try to make the language simple, because the history by Ghafurov<sup>64</sup> is hard even for me to understand (Int.1: 17)".

This approach required the further prioritisation of the major parts of the lesson into primary and secondary significance. This she based on her students' ability to perceive and understand the topic:

"For example, the emergence and development of the Kushans' economy and culture could be of primary importance, because students may



have never heard about them. I will tell them these things. The importance of the Kushans could be of secondary importance, because as I talk about their emergence, development and fall, the students should be able to make conclusions about the importance of the topic by themselves (Int. 1:17)".

*Telling as Warning and Advising*

Her lecturing (telling) did not simply impart knowledge; it warned and reminded, and was full of subtle messages. In essence, she was telling the students more about what not to trust and avoid, rather than letting them think about and figure out the worst implications of the things by themselves. Nigin used this approach to teaching the civil war in Tajikistan:

"I would open the topic: How did it start? What were the reasons? I would tell them that the reasons were thirst for power. They used the slogans of democracy, communism and Islam for their own interests. How the new parties and groups emerged and what were their mistakes. Instead of dialoguing, these parties went in different directions to capture power. None of these parties had a sense of responsibility. The outcomes were harmful for the poor people. The fighters escaped and the innocents got killed. Those whose languages and religions differed also suffered. Because of this, I have problems with these ideas of independence and democracy. I will tell this to the students. I don't care if the commission does not like it. I lived all this and I do not know if the position-seekers care about people. It should be not who they are and what position they hold, but what have they achieved and what have they done for us, for the people and the society? My students should know all this so that they are not cheated. I wondered why all our youth went after few populists during 1991-1992 stand-off in Khorugh and Dushanbe<sup>65</sup>? We claim that we have got the best education here<sup>66</sup>. Why could not these educated people see where the position seekers led? Maybe because we, the history teachers, hid the truth from them. I will tell my students to be aware of these people. They should watch what one does, not only what one says (Int.11: 45)".

These comments divulge Nigin's rationale and goals for teaching. They also signal that she will try to teach what she wants regardless of any control. She connects the classroom with the societal realities. Nigin asks formidable questions about the purpose, methods and ethical implications of the actions of the political reformers during the civil war in Tajikistan. She deconstructs the claims of excellence of Soviet education and suggests that limiting the issue simply to the availability of education and educated people, to pure facts without ethics, responsibility and critical consciousness about the implications of people's actions (particularly those of power-holders), would not be real education and bring negative consequences to the people and the country. To avoid this, Nigin offers an approach that looks both good and bad; she makes the students aware of the larger forces and political agendas of those who call for change. This approach extends beyond technical literacy to raising socio-political consciousness.

Despite her personal critical consciousness, Nigin, in her teaching, remained faithful to her “telling” and imparting method, which in some ways undermined her enabling agenda. Her approach suggests a continuity that simultaneously embodies change: Telling has continued as a method but its nature has become critical telling, coloured with warnings, where the emphasis is on revealing the negative implications of a statement. Observations of Nigin’s lessons exemplify the prominence of telling, through the short, simple and concrete approach (e.g., Box 1):

**Box 1: Human Being and Society, Grade 11, May 12, 1999**

[The lesson was in the history/social science classroom. Ten students were present and all were girls. The only male student was missing. The desks were arranged in square configuration. The girls were sitting far from each other. I sat on a chair that did not have one leg].

N.: Today we talk about things related to our lives. I want you to know that I am interested in your opinions (She writes on board: Family).

N.: Can anyone tell me what a family is? Let’s close our books. Do not worry. Tell me what you think.

St.: Man, woman, and children living together.

N.: Good. Also love and care among the family members... What is love and care? Sit down. Take it easy do not stand up. Talk the way you wish. How does love and care emerge?

St.: Good intention

St.: Loving each other

N.: Also liking each other, respecting each other, and looking at each other ethically and with human feelings. Good. So what do we consider before creating a family?

N.: What are the conditions necessary for creating a family?

St.: Voluntarism.

St.: Age relevance...

N.: What do you mean?

St.: Reaching the age of puberty.

N.: Yes, also mutual understanding. How do you know all this? We know it from life, from our families. Why, for example, the marriage age in Ukraine is 16, in Belarus 17, and here it is 18?

St.: Depends on nature, food.

N.: [Takes up] ...and economic life. Now, you tell me what is reaching the age of maturity? Is it getting the certificate of maturity<sup>67</sup>? [Everyone laughs and smiles]. Or is it a biological term?

St.: We are not studying biology [The students said this in Shughnanî. Nigin interrupts them]:

N.: Speak like me, in literary Tajik... What does voluntarism mean?

St.: It is not giving in to the pressures of parents and relatives.

N.: What is parents’ pressure?

St.: [Silence].

- N.: It is when you are forced to marry according to what your parents want and tell you do. Not the way you yourself want. When your views are not heard... Good, can anyone tell me what is *nikah*<sup>68</sup>?
- St.: The basis of the family.
- N.: Why? There are people who go and live together without being *nikahed*.
- St.: But they are not married.
- N.: How do people know they are in love?
- St.: Love feeling
- N.: What does it mean?
- St.: [smile... some feel shy, look down].
- N.: Good... Now listen to me. I will tell you everything. First how they look at each other, second, how honest they are with each other and third how consistent they are in their relations... [She uses the board for teaching all this, where she briefly writes each of these points. She looks at the class and says]: Look, if I am wrong you correct me. I think students find it hard to talk about this openly in front of all their peers. [She moves forward]. Good, the partners also need to think of each other, for their relations everything is important... [Next, she wrote “maturity”] Soon you get the certificate of maturity, can create families, go for further studies, go and work in any field you want... [Goes further]: Reaching maturity means physically, spiritually, and ethically. [She makes some hand moves to show that one becomes tall and develops bodily, points to her brain in the sense of becoming mature]. Why is the age of maturity in Ukraine 16 years old and in Belarus 17 years old and here 18. What influences this? [She goes further and names the factors]. Economic, what does this include: food... what happens when kids get married before they reach 17? Nature also affects the growth of the kids and their ability to produce children [she uses Shughnanî language]. *Shirchoy*, our main food, is very poor in nutrition... What types of *nikah* do we have: Religious and civic. Which is better?
- St.: We are Ismailis so we do religious *nikah*.
- N.: Can you tell me about the details of *nikah*.
- St.: There is special water to be drunk.
- N.: What does the water mean?
- St.: Joining together. [Nigin takes over]...
- N.: Purity. Indeed we may need to invite a *khalifa*<sup>69</sup> to the class. [Nigin shows a civil “certificate of marriage”]. What is the difference between religious and civil marriages?
- St.: In one you drink water, in the other you get a document.
- N.: Which one is better?
- St.: The state one, because it has got a document.
- N.: Do we need to have religious *nikah* then?
- St.: Yes.
- N.: Why... In the constitution there is a saying: Family is under protection of the state and state guarantees the rights of the members of family as it does guarantee the rights of the whole family.
- St.: Are there people ready to have family?
- N.: Good. Let me put the question back. When does one get ready to have family? When do you think you will be ready?

St.: Get higher education.

St.: Get profession.

N.: Why?

St.: To know how to live and educate the children. [Mostly, the same two to three girls answer her questions].

N.: Be able to look after the children and be able to feed the family... So what else do we need to consider? [She goes on]. Education: Am I educated enough to help my family and look after my kids? Economic: Can I feed the family? Can I educate my husband ethically, culturally and economically? To be able to tell my husband: Look *khujain*<sup>70</sup>, look this is good and this is bad for the family. These clothes are better. Can we go and visit our kids? [Here bell rings. Nigin goes on] I want you to think at home about the principle of independence in decision-making and selecting life partners. We know that a lot of us are being forced to marry. The next question for you to think about is, how do I imagine my future spouse? [She repeats the question in Shughnani].

The above lesson shows a scene where Nigin is juggling with multiple realities. She tries to elicit and impart, ask the students to participate, acknowledges the significance of their views and yet tells them everything, which is more or less, saying differently what they already have said and also adding here and there. However, over the course of this lesson, the students' participation decreased and Nigin moved to advise and tell all the "truth." When I later pointed out that Nigin, contrary to her own statement on letting students think, had done all the speaking for the students even in the higher grades, she justified it on the grounds that (a) these were students not interested in the social science stream and shy to talk about such life issues in my presence; (b) their Tajik language was too weak and they did not want to look stupid in front of me, while they could not speak in Shughnani<sup>71</sup>; and (c) students do not freely talk in Tajik in order to avoid making mistakes and being ridiculed by their peers. Nigin also admitted that she may have not organised the lesson properly and that she should have encouraged the students to speak up more (Int. 1: 53).

The next observation, from a history lesson in grade 9 about Perestroika, both confirms and contradicts her statements about preparing herself and doing most of the telling. This lesson illustrates of her warning, criticising and advising, which in turn reveal her angry and frustrated voice (Box 2):

**Box 2: History of the Tajik People. Grade 11. May 19, 1999**

[This lesson took place in the history classroom. With two absent, there were only 11 students in the classroom. Out of these, 10 were girls. The students' coughing constantly interrupted the lesson]

N.: At the time of Perestroika you were in grade 6 or 7. [In fact, Nigin got confused here. These students at the time of Perestroika were rather 6 or 7 years old. They were silent... She went on]... This is an open

session and I would like you to speak and express your opinions. We are going to talk about the following major points. [She writes on the board]: Reasons for Perestroika; Purposes of Perestroika; Results of Perestroika. [Then she turns to the class]:

N.: What is Perestroika?

St.: Change of the society.

N.: Why was it needed?

St.: Wrong doing...

N.: Speak fully. Speak like this: There was wrong-doing in the state administration of affairs.

St.: [repeats the way Nigin said]

N.: What was that wrong-doing about?

St.: [Silence]

N.: Was there another reason?

St.: People were not provided with the necessary things.

N.: When did the Perestroika start?

St.: 1985.

N.: Were you hungry at that time? Were you unclothed?

St.: No, there were enough clothes in the shops. [Silence]

N.: I see your knowledge is limited. Maybe you are shy to speak Tajik. You need to speak Tajik, because otherwise your grades are going to be lowered. When you go to Dushanbe to university, you will have a hard time, if your language is weak. People there will make fun of you. Let me tell you all about the topic [Here she started her lecture, which took almost 20 minutes]. In 1985-86, the leaders wanted to change... [she went on breaking the reasons for Perestroika into three parts: economic, social, and political. As she talked about the topics, she asked the students immediately after each point (e.g., economic reason) if they understood what she had said.] For example: The quality of life went down. What is meant by quality? Listen to me, because I am going to ask you. Yes, there were goods, but most of that was external. The local production was of a very low quality. Certainly there was bread. Brezhnev said: "If there is bread there will be song." [She went on.] Every one was giving orders. Orders became so many that no one cared for their implementation. No one cared whether they were fulfilled, both at the top and more so at the bottom. Then, misuse of position and corruption was another factor. The Party leadership had its own restaurants and special shops. If any good clothes came, the first people to get them were the leaders of the Party and Government. Their children were better dressed than many others. They had all imported clothes for themselves. Cheating and paper-work became too much. For example, Uzbekistan would always add about 50, 000 tons of cotton to its real annual production of cotton... Corruption and nepotism was another factor. Everyone was thinking only about his or her own pocket and about their own relatives. If there were a leader from Shughnan or Rushan, he would not care about the others. In Tajikistan, most of the positions were in the hands of the Khujandis<sup>72</sup>. Encouragement and recognition both disappeared. Hard work was not

encouraged. Thus the production went down year by year. The quality went down too. [Here Nigin paused and asked some questions like]: What were the reasons, Soiba? What were some of the malpractices in the economy? [She pointed to another girl, sitting beside me. After the girls re-told what she had said and she joined them in responding to her questions, Nigin provided her own version of the results]: Results were destructive. The main principles of governance were not clear. For example, democracy and Glasnost were misunderstood. I think it should have been done more slowly and with one field first... As with every country, there were external forces. Countries such as America and England further deepened the internal feuds between the leaders. All this ended our state.

St.: Unfortunately

N.: [agreeably]: Sorry about that. [Nigin ended her lecture and turned to asking questions such as]: Have you understood something? Is there any question? So what were the outcomes? What were the reasons? [Here the bell rang. She went on]: For the next session, please ask your elder relatives and get ready for the session about Perestroika. You should talk more about this topic, because you know a lot about it. Dress warmer; look, you are all coughing. Wear *jireeb*<sup>73</sup> under your shoes.

Though acknowledging her failure to notice that these children, even at the end of Perestroika, were only 10 – too small to have noticed what was going on then – Nigin reiterated: “This is an actual lesson and these children know a lot about Perestroika from the conversation in their homes” (Int.1: 40). Nigin originally had a different plan for the lesson. She wanted the students to teach it and she would have just added comments if they got stuck. “I ended up lecturing, because they did not speak and the time was passing” (Int.1: 40).

#### *“Children Can Take Knowledge”*

Nigin’s understanding of how children learn moved between social, psychological and linguistic assumptions:

“Students’ learning is dependent on their ability to perceive (*qobiliyati dark kuni*), biological growth and development of their thinking. How much a child can learn from and understand what I say? Depending on their consciousness, the students are not the same as five fingers. It is the biological aspect of the students, their ability to think and ability to perceive. We can still add economic dimension too. That would not be wrong too. Also I have mentioned to you the language. If I use Shughnanî, they learn better. You know some of our students never master Tajik. But Shughnanî is also not useful. It does not work beyond the airport<sup>74</sup> (Int. 1: 110)”.

Further she also added another cultural assumption – *zot*, a belief that some families are genetically or divinely gifted in certain fields of knowledge or craft. It becomes a traditional *nomus* (pride) for the family; thus anyone

from that family is perceived to be good in that activity. A whole family could have *zot* in math, languages, wrestling, or drawing, for example. Though admitting this as “not easily explainable” factor, Nigin still saw a place for the teacher: “The teacher shows the way for the gifted too. The child is quick to think about a problem, to understand and to perceive. But before this, he has to be guided by the teacher. A teacher throws a problem to them” (Int. 1: 96).

#### *Handling Student's Answers*

Nigin's beliefs about the existence of truth in history, about what the students know and how students learn strongly influenced how she handled her students' responses. The students' linguistic ability, time pressures and the need to cover the curriculum also influenced her approach to teaching. Nigin allowed for some variety in how the students expressed their answers, but she firmly controlled the substance of the “truth.” She agreed that students might say something that is in the books in a different way:

“I mean, in language that is a bit different. He may use words that are simpler, and sentences that are shorter. Because he tries to speak in Tajik, he has a hard time to express himself. Many students' grades are lowered due to this. No one even wants to listen to when we speak about the students' language problems. They blame us that we have not taught the children good Tajik. But that is not my job. I am a history teacher. So, I help him to become a bit closer to the path. I need to provide more explanation to the student, to correct him. I would not ridicule him, if he expresses his opinion, if his views are right (Int. 1: 62)”.

Expecting truth in the form of the right answer, Nigin made decisions about interrupting her students or letting them go ahead. At the same time, she consciously and carefully ensured that the students did not get offended. To have a good relationship with students was essential. A good relationship helped Nigin convince the students to “take knowledge” from her; that her intentions were good and that they could trust her. Therefore, the knowledge she imparted would be useful. Relations served as a means to an end for her. Making the students accept knowledge became an acute issue, given the post-Soviet poverty of learning materials, and the abundance of contradictory interpretations that might confuse the students:

“Sometimes I ask a student and do not give her a chance to speak fully because she moves around, but never says exactly what is required. Due to the shortage of time, I interrupt her. I sense when she says something too far from the point. I have talked with her. See, when I talk to them on an individual basis I use Shughnanî. That makes it less formal and students also tell me what their real problems are. I usually use Shughnanî to encourage them. So the girl realises why I interrupted her. She does not get upset. I do not put her personality down... I agree if she expresses her opinion. I wish my students to be fast thinkers and speak good Tajik (Int. 1: 37)”.

*“I Have no Problem with Theories and Authorities...”*

Despite the de-ideologization of schools in the former USSR<sup>75</sup> several ideologies surfaced in Nigin’s lessons, Marxism-Leninism being the most prominent. Nigin used Marxist terms and concepts, such as class, state, feudalism, imperialism, masses, and ownership of the means of production to explain her lessons. Nigin’s nostalgia for the Soviet Union was expressed in the words “unfortunately” and “sorry”, in the conclusion of a lesson. She reasoned as follows:

“In the Soviet Union we had food, clothes. We did not spend days looking for food. The queues were after posh clothes and goods, not the basics. Here in the village, there were no queues. I feel sorry about the Soviet collapse. Because we were not grateful, we even lost the basics. I think this democracy has so far been no match to that. Neither are we free to express what we want (Int.1: 40)”.

Islam had a minimal influence on Nigin. A faithful person, in her view, was one of good deeds, not boastfully performing prayers. Her lesson “Family”, for example, hinted that she prioritised the secular marriage contract over the religious (Box 1). Nigin avoided discussing the tensions between the various manifestations of Communist and Islamic ideologies:

“During Perestroika and Independence I was a bit worried about the excess of talk about Islam, but then I realised that the major principles of the «code of the constructor of communism»<sup>76</sup> are similar to those of *javonmardi* (chivalry<sup>77</sup>) in Islam. The problem is how to apply them in practice. I don’t see that happening with either of them (Int. 1: 103)”.

Nigin rarely used the Imam’s name and image in her classroom. Though a social science teacher, she – unexpectedly for the school – did not volunteer to teach Ethics and Knowledge. She referred to herself as not feeling well enough physically and prepared enough intellectually to teach this “very serious subject”. Further, unlike many people, who viewed the AKDN as a body that had replaced the old Soviet sources of supplies, Nigin felt disturbed at being a receiver of free supplies for such a long time. Powerlessness deeply hurt her self-esteem and honour. Nigin was cautious and caring about her society, as usual:

“I eat this humanitarian food, wear these clothes and am worried. Why is it all so free? Is this really without any conditions? How are we going to pay it back? What is going to happen to our country? What is wrong with us that we do nothing and every thing is brought to us freely? I do not enjoy all this for such long time. I feel pity for the people around eating all this without a feeling of shame (Int. 1: 67)”.

Similarly, despite her anger and frustration with Tajik and Soviet scholars for providing a “distorted version of reality” during Soviet times, Nigin promoted the new and officially-endorsed interpretation of the term “Tajik” (i.e., “crown holders”). She ensured that the students recited the national anthem, and knew the symbols of the Tajikistan crest. At the same time, she hoped that this official ideological interpretation would be challenged later



in the higher grades as well as on the street: “The good thing about this new era is that we cannot stop information and people from coming and going. If the powerful Soviet Union could not do that, how can poor Tajikistan do so? (Int. 1:55)”.

## Conclusions

This commentary draws together the major points from Nigin’s classroom life and highlights several fundamental qualities of her teaching. In so doing, it links all the previous parts of this study together.

Nigin’s teaching largely relies on telling and lecturing, particularly in her presentation of new topics. Telling constitutes her response to the layers of internal and external challenges that she faces: perspective of truth, time pressure, ideological correctness, coverage of program, lack of resources, huge and often detached topics, annual examinations, possible inspections, students’ weak language, students’ learning process, their passivity, and the general post-Soviet uncertainty and crises of values.

Although telling has persisted in Nigin’s practice, its warning and critical aspects are new. These new qualities derive from her experience as a mother, a teacher and a person who has witnessed dramatic transformations. She feels the most worthwhile things that the students could take from her lessons are that leaders and politicians have to be approached with doubt, that talk and walk do not necessarily go together, and that feuds, personal greed, lack of understanding of one’s history and subjection of societal interests to individualistic ones harms the whole society, as does involvement in activities such as drugs and violence. Her critical telling, thus, unleashes the positive and negative aspects of a topic, but also makes suggestions, provides alternatives and exhibits and implants doubts.

Shortening, simplifying and concretising historical information constitute other continuing qualities of Nigin’s pedagogy of telling. They embody her resolution of the program-student-time dilemma. Nigin disregards history’s complexity, controversy, tentativeness and mutability, not because she does not know them, but because they can confuse the students, who then miss the point. She feels the students would do better to be clear rather than confused, to have one perspective rather than get lost in many, at least at this young stage. Thus, Nigin conveys a simplified version of the information in the history books.

Like telling, concretising, shortening and simplifying arose partly in response to her students’ weak command of Tajik. This required medium of instruction is not the students’ mother tongue. Nigin uses Tajik because she knows its importance for students’ success in life, for their success in exams, and for avoiding clashes with the inspectors. On the other hand, having to use Tajik weakens the students’ participation in her lessons, and thus impedes their learning. If they make a mistake in using Tajik, their peers, and someti-

mes their teachers, even including Nigin, ridicule and label them. In addition, proficiency in English and Russian is becoming more important to success than skill in Tajik. These factors discourage students from speaking Tajik and disengage them from active participation in the learning process, compelling Nigin to do more telling. For Nigin, it is a challenge to enact her transformative perspective when she cannot use the children's first language.

Nigin's telling is further exacerbated by her controlling tendency, which has deep roots in the Soviet times, when the whole system worked to control one's thinking to justify the Soviet system, perpetuate existing social relations and enforce Communist party's rule. Further, Nigin continues to believe in the existence of an objective historical truth, which she deduces from the facts in history books and from the lessons of history itself. Thus, Nigin talks about freedom of expression, creativity, letting children speak, building good relations, and winning the children's hearts, but in practice controls and channels the children's thinking and expressions and turns the children into receivers of "truths." But Nigin hopes students will get alternative views from other sources.

Fundamental to Nigin's success are her relationships both in and outside the classroom. Relationships guarantee the success of her telling, controlling, advising, warning and even assessment procedures. Relations are more important than methods and knowledge and constitute the major element of her approach. For Nigin, teaching is grounded in mutual care and love; getting students' love and trust constitutes the major challenge of both good teaching and peaceful living in the community. For Nigin, it is not only how much you know, but also equally how much you care that matters. Once children believe that Nigin cares for them, their minds and hearts open up to accept knowledge and to forgive her even if she becomes angry or rude. Nigin's good relationships indeed saved her from total devastation as a result of the collapse of the truths she used to impart. Teaching for Nigin is not simply about possessing a diploma and knowing more about some topic; it is about taking and meeting of perspectives, and as we shall see further, about building and sustaining relationships. Similarly, Nigin realises that children's views about and attitudes toward the teacher and her subject are the best indicator of teaching quality and potential supporters of teachers' cause in the rural community.

Several other important qualities/aspects define Nigin's life and work. They are rooted in the various contexts of her experience: biography, community, and classroom, home and school. First is the use of the local culture. For example, she employs stories, poetry, metaphors, images, proverbs, and examples from classical literature and present realities. She switches to speaking Shughnanî, uses familiar cultural-linguistic and educational expressions and metaphors, and, lastly, employs local music, religion and history in her lessons. The particular quality of the local culture (i.e., patriarchal system) also surfaces in Nigin's use of gender in her language. Nigin always uses

the male pronoun when referring to a teacher as an illustrative generality. Although the profession has become feminised, the traditional image of teachers as male has persisted.

The second overriding feature of Nigin's professional life is the inevitable ideological presence. The presence is not simple, but very complex. It is reflected in Nigin's views on the nature of her subject, in her classroom actions, and in her statements about the increasing diversity of the ideological landscape in MBAP. Nigin struggles between actively reconstructing her own ideological position from the various frameworks and theories and finding herself entrapped by some of them. Thus, she promotes neo-Tajik nationalist ideology through the textbooks, anthem, language, crest and wall decorations in her classroom; socialism through old textbooks, her dispositions to class-based explanations of topics, and the portraits of the classics of Marxism-Leninism in her history office; Islam (particularly Ismailism) through her ethics, critique of the leaders, belonging to the Ismaili community, usage of Nasir-i Khusraw's poetry and service, devotion and care for the Aga Khan; and a local ethnic agenda through her extra-curricular activities, the usage of the locality and its language. In her active symbolic interaction with these narratives, Nigin does not bother about their ontology and epistemology; she is worried about the ethics of their application. Witnessing the manipulation and misuse of the newly emerging narratives, she resorts to dichotomising between democracy and "so-called democrats", Communism and "so-called communists" and, between Islam and newly minted "real Muslim leaders."

The third major quality of Nigin's teaching is her comparative thinking. Nigin compares the Soviet with post-Soviet, socialism with Islam, Tajik nationalism with democracy, leaders' "talk with their walk", the history of Tajikistan with the history of the USSR, the past with the present, the program (curriculum) with the instructional realities, the students with each other, and the students and teachers with those in urban contexts and foreign countries. She contrasts her method with her students' learning, her own childhood with those of her students. This constant comparison reveals the elements of continuity and change in her perspective and practice.

But, each change has embodied continuity; nothing disappears in a complete sense. Ideas and forces shift; some become prominent and others secondary. In her approach to teaching history, her assessment practices, and her lessons in general, Nigin has changed the nature, content or intensity since the Soviet times, while leaving the Soviet lesson structure intact. The presentation of new topics remains, but the lack of textbooks has driven Nigin to do additional research, summarise the information herself, concretise the content, and simplify the language. On top of this hard work lies the complication of several interpretative frameworks. Curriculum has openly become a battlefield of the various forces and stakeholders, each of which blames teachers for not only their personal shortcomings, but also for the

faults of the educational system. Teaching has become a navigation and negotiation between various challenges, which make both Nigin's already tense life and work and her students' learning harder.

Related to the above, there is another fundamental feature of Nigin's experience – that is its contradictory and paradoxical nature. Nigin loves teaching, cannot imagine herself as anyone except a teacher, yet does what she hates and serves those she criticises. She is caught between: hating lectures and doing lectures; interrupting and ridiculing students and saying that she lets them say what they want; caring for students and giving priority to the program; cursing the scholars and promoting their views; prioritising social and character development and promoting and evaluating her students' academically; criticising one-sided representations of history and not allowing a variety of perspectives to emerge. In addition, similar paradoxes play out in her personal and social life. For example, she has to navigate between: feeling strongly about principles and ethics yet getting a false grade for her cousin; loving and caring for the school and asking her husband to leave it; stating that children in the city are brighter and admitting that the majority of the famous people of Badakhshân come from villages. These contradictions and paradoxes are not simply a teacher's problems with mentality, biography, lack of ability to think or lack of courage. These are windows to the tensions and contradictions in the society and education system. They do not only depress and frustrate, but also provide hopes and possibilities for hope for a better education and society in Tajikistan.

In this endeavour Nigin and her colleagues exhibit leadership qualities, willing to be partners in societal and educational reform. Nigin and her colleagues suggest the need for a forum on the implications of reform and on how reform connects to the type of society in question. The lack of dialogue and debate about reform persists as a result of the Soviet inertia of a silencing, control-and-command approach. The current reforms, not well prepared, pay not enough attention to the relevance, or ethics of reform. A reform should integratedly consider the human, material, technical and other kinds of resources. To be able to comprehend all these changes and their challenges depends on Nigin's growing critical abilities. Her critical knowledge often focuses more on the negative than positive side. But this critical quality of her voice and vision also suggests alternatives and possibilities, and unravels contradictions in teaching practices, educational systems and policies. Her critique contains a warning, based on ethical caring, about the kind of society that may lie down the road. Nigin's critical, even negative, stance perhaps makes up the most valuable quality of her knowledge in terms of change and improvement; it is this quality of Nigin's knowledge that needs to be looked for. Nigin is a profoundly thoughtful teacher. She is a formidable learner, courageous woman, confident and transparent person with a deep sense of *nomus* (honour) and integrity. She is not ashamed of herself as a teacher of

History, a person, a mother and a member of the community, whatever these might be.

## NOTES

1. MBAP stands for Mountainous Badakhshân Autonomous Province of Tajikistan. Throughout this article, I also refer to Mountainous Badakhshân Autonomous province as Badakhshân and the Pamirs.
2. In addition to Shughnanîs / Shughnîs, there are seven other linguistic groups in Badakhshân. These include Rushanîs, Bartangîs, Ishkâshimîs, Wakhîs, Yazghulâmîs, Kyrgyz and Tajik/Persian-speaking peoples.
3. As in the rest of Badakhshân the official sources of income have radically decreased as result of the Soviet collapse. For many reasons, including meeting of survival needs and maintaining the honour of the family, many people have become involved in unofficial and illegal ways of making money, including drug trafficking and guerrilla activities. For more on ways of living and sources of income in post-Soviet Badakhshân, see Keshavjee 1998.
4. Kuder 1996.
5. Browne 1967; Hunsburger 2000.
6. *Murid*, from Arabic, in this case it means students or followers. The term was used in Sufism and other esoteric interpretations of Islam, including Ismailism.
7. *Pirs* were local religious leaders, said to have been appointed by the Imam and to originate from the Sayyids, i.e., the prophet Mohammad and Imam Ali.
8. There are six other schools in Porshinev, of which three are full secondary and three are incomplete secondary (i.e., grades 1 to 9). There are also drawing and musical schools in the village.
9. Shotemur was one of the founders of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. He also argued that Samarkand and Bukhara, as major Tajikistan cultural and historic centres, should be part of the Tajik republic, see Masov 1996. Shotemur was killed during Stalin's terror at the age of 38. His home has been transformed into a museum.
10. General secondary educational school, a Soviet concept, resembles comprehensive schools in the West. For more, see Webber 2000.
11. A public boarding school for gifted children.
12. For more on alternative forms of schooling in the former Soviet republics, see Webber 2000, Zajda 1980.
13. *Law of Education of Tajik Republic*, Dushanbe, Irfon: 1994.
14. The head of the school mentioned that *lycées* were opened during Khrushchev's rule but quickly closed due to their incongruent with the egalitarian principles of official Soviet ideology.
15. The school weekend is Sunday only. The one-day weekend comes from Soviet practice.
16. Various titles like Experimental School, School of Advanced Experience, and School of Progressive Experience, used to distinguish schools' culture and ethos have existed since Soviet times.

17. This unusual practice of teachers deciding the fate of their school was perhaps possible only during Perestroika. Since 1994, school heads are no longer elected, but rather appointed.
18. Zhukov, Soviet general during World War II, led the Soviet Army in the most difficult fronts. The head mentioned being called Zhukov by higher education authorities.
19. *Mawlo*, from Arabic, is a synonym for Imam in this text. The participants used terms such as Imam, Hozir Imom and Mawlo interchangeably for the Aga Khan.
20. Ali, the head of the school here refers to the *farmans* of the Aga Khan made during his usually mass meetings with the members of his community. *Farmans* and *irshads* (literally guidance or order) are major private instruments of the Aga Khan for guiding the Ismailis. They are defined by the 1986 Ismaili Constitution as any “pronouncement, direction, order or ruling given by the Imam [the Aga Khan]” (Aga Khan 1987, p. 7, quoted in Keshavjee, 1998, p. 47). *Farmans* and *irshads* can pertain to both the secular and religious concerns of Ismailis. According to the current 1986 Ismaili Constitution, “by virtue of his office and in accordance with the faith and belief of the Ismaili Muslims, the Imam enjoys full authority of governance over and in respect of all religious and social matters of the Ismaili Muslims” (Aga Khan 1987, p. 5). I witnessed several of the *farmans* and *irshads* as a member of the audience and on some occasions acted as the official translator of the *farmans* and *irshads* from English to Tajik.
21. Open lesson is a Soviet pedagogical construct. During the academic year every teacher was obliged to present a lesson open to observation and scrutiny for the whole school. Gradually such lessons from the learning moments turned into sites of evaluation and judging teachers, subsequently turning them into show-off cases.
22. In the fall of 1999, when I was collecting data at another site in the province, the school celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shotemur and the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the school. To carry out these celebrations at a national calibre, the school was given a reasonable amount of money by the Government.
23. Fireman 1991; Glen 1999.
24. Keshavjee (1998) acknowledges the hard work of Badakhshâni women. He provides an elaborate description of the status of women in Badakhshân (p. 255).
25. Hafez, a famous Persian poet, lived in 13<sup>th</sup> century.
26. Lahuti was an Iranian dissident-communist poet who migrated to the USSR in the early 1920s and lived in Tajikistan.
27. Aini, a prominent Tajik scholar and writer, sided with the Socialist revolution in 1917. His books are vivid descriptions of the life of the Tajiks before the Socialist revolution.
28. “Sake of the spirits” is a cultural-familial concept that means that the living would harm the spirits of the dead members of their family by not helping their relatives.
29. Interestingly the Pamiri students, who are considered as Tajik by nationality, were distinguished from the rest of the Tajik-speaking students and teachers by being called “Pamiri”, by which they also identified themselves vis a vis the rest of the Tajiks. While the Pamiris used to be at least happy with this name, among the

- non-Pamiris it was conceived derogatorily, i.e., as people of lower culture, narrower outlook, unruly emotions, undeveloped mentality and physical rudeness.
30. *Samotëk* is a Russian word for a type of food that emerged as result of the Post-Soviet hunger. *Samotëk* consists of mixing hot water with wheat flour and oil, if available. In 1999, this type of food still was often eaten in Murghab. I was offered it in several homes.
  31. Similar strikes were launched in other parts of the province where the teachers prevailed in gaining some of their demands.
  32. Nigin referred to the practices of paying for everything in the hospital, though not legal, which effectively increased doctors' incomes higher than teachers'.
  33. *Rooze Noor*, Day of Enlightenment was the day when the Aga Khan arrived in MBAP for the first time; it is now celebrated as one of the holy days across the Ismaili areas of MBAP.
  34. Equivalent of \$ 4 US in 1999.
  35. Nigin referred to the departure of thousands of people from MBAP and Tajikistan, including teachers to Russia, wherein they worked as cheap labour in Russian factories, firms and stores.
  36. Pamirian *chid* (also *chod*) is an environmentally adapted house with a long history. Shokhumorov (1997) suggested that the Pamirian house contains the worldview of the Aryan people, which was later appropriated by the Zoroastrian religion (Boyce, 1985) and further by the Ismaili branch of Islam. For more on the Pamirian house, see also Keshavjee, 1998.
  37. *Karyar*, literally "friend in work", is a cultural concept, like the traditional North American "bee", where several people in the village, or all the villagers, get together to do some major work for a member of the community. Usually the work is done free, except that the recipient provides food and tea during the day.
  38. Nigin referred to the absence of electricity. In the village, beginning from November and until May there was electricity.
  39. An expression describing some one who is incapable and inactive to fulfil the jobs expected from her/him. If spread, this could be quiet damaging for female's reputation in the rural community.
  40. Leninabad (renamed into Soghd in 1999) and Khatlon are the two other provinces of Tajikistan.
  41. Gorminj refers to the new roads between Dushanbe, Khorugh and Osh, where paramilitaries harass the drivers' and passengers' money and property and harass them physically and verbally.
  42. Literally means "powerless", a person who is desperate and has no solution at hand.
  43. Many scholars, particularly historians, would disagree with Nigin's comment, because some of the most important histories of the Tajik people were published exactly in Soviet times (e.g., Ghafurov 1972; Masov 1996; Ne'matov, 1989). Nigin might be right in that, whether there were books or not, the subject was denigrated in the school and university curricula.
  44. Like the majority of the teachers, Nigin was a "lecturer propagandist", whose job was to educate the community through Marxist explanations of events.
  45. Davies 1988; Karlsson 1993; Mehlinger 1993.

46. *Molima* is a local version of the Arabic word *muallima*, which stands for teacher.
47. Nigin refers to the case when Stalin is said to have refused to exchange his captive son for a German general captured by the Soviets during World War II.
48. Basmachis were the Islamic guerrillas who fought against the newly established Soviet system in the 1920s.
49. Revolutionary communists; both were born in Shughnan and fought for the establishment of Socialist Tajikistan.
50. Ironic statement, meaning that she is too demanding in the academic sense and too soft in her personal relations.
51. *Sovkhoz* stands for Soviet form of state farm. Unlike *kolkhoz*, its members were considered state employees.
52. Nigin referred to the envisaged University of Central Asia to be established in MBAP/Tajikistan. The University will specialise in studying problems of mountain societies. The medium of instruction is going to be English.
53. Each school has pedagogical soviet-council that addresses pertinent questions of schooling.
54. This is an important cultural construct. Thus greeting a person is considered a duty in front of God. Therefore, not greeting would be a sign of deep disrespect and animosity.
55. Nigin refers to the peace treaty between the United Tajik Opposition and the Government in 1997, according to which a great share of the country went to the opposition and was occupied by guerrilla commanders.
56. Loans given by the Mountain Societies Development Support Program. According to the agreement, the loaners are to pay back the loan plus 10 %.
57. Soghdians and Bactrians: peoples of the area in the days of classical era Persian Empire. Soghdians and Bactrians are seen as predecessors of the current Tajiks.
58. Red Book, in the Former Soviet Union, was a book that contained the names of endangered species.
59. A woman translator who was amongst the first translators for the Aga Khan during his visits to Tajikistan.
60. A local proverb meaning that you won't go far and won't achieve much.
61. Shatalov and Amonashvili were amongst the innovative educators who lead the trend of "Pedagogy of Cooperation" during Perestroika. For more on Pedagogy of Cooperation, see Long & Long 1999 and Suddaby 1992.
62. Buni is a village in the district. Nigin referred to a case where an official from the Ministry of Education is allegedly said to have publicly ridiculed a teacher as not knowing English.
63. A Persian-Tajik poet who lived and worked in the court of the Samanids in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. He was blinded and expelled as a result of a coup d'état. One of the major allegations against him was his affiliation with Ismailism, see Daftari 1990.
64. Nigin refers to a scholarly monograph written by the Tajik academician Ghafurov, in 1972, called *Tadžiki* [The Tajiks]. It is used as a reference book for university students.
65. Nigin refers to the post-Soviet stand-off between the pro and anti-Communist forces in Dushanbe in 1992.



66. Nigin refers to unofficial statements about MBAP having the highest number of higher-education degree holders per 1000 people in Tajikistan.
67. *Attestat zrelosty*, from Russian, is a Soviet certificate of maturity, i.e., high school graduation certificate.
68. *Nikah* from Arabic, stands for religious legislation of marriage.
69. *Khalifa* is a religious leader in the Ismaili community in Badakhshân.
70. *Khujain*, from Tajik, literally means lord, chief, head of a field. The term *khujain* is used for husband as the master of the house.
71. This is an important factor. Essentially, the majority of the students in MBAP do not use Tajik anywhere except school. Due to their weakness in the language, they keep silent to avoid ridicule from their peers.
72. Khujand is a provincial capital in North Tajikistan.
73. *Jireeb*: woollen colourfully decorated Pamirian socks.
74. “Not useful beyond the airport” is a local proverb that means not useful except within the immediate region.
75. Ekloff 1993; Long & Long 1999; Webber 2000.
76. Code of ethics of the constructor of communism was a document regulating the principles upon which the ethics and behaviours of the Soviet citizen communist were to be grounded, see Long & Long 1999.
77. Nigin referred to parts of the book *Pandiyati Jawonmardi* [Messages of Chivalry], see Ivanov 1953.

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