

Memories of Mrs Niloufer Manzur

ZENAT CHOWDHURY

MY first encounter with Mrs Niloufer Manzur was in her office, a tiny room on the ground floor of a three-storied building on Rd 27, Dhanmondi, which housed Sunbeams, a school where I was hoping my ten-year-old daughter Tanweena would be enrolled. We had just moved back to Bangladesh from the UK after ten years, and I was anxious that Tanweena would find the move traumatic—away from the country she knew as her first home, away from her friends, her school. Mrs Manzur was completely reassuring, and Tanweena was taken away by a helper to her classroom.

"She will be fine. She will like it here," were her words to that effect when I was leaving.

When I came to fetch her at the end of the school day, Tanweena was sitting, comfortably, high up on a forked branch of the giant tree just inside the wall of the school compound. The gatekeeper was keeping an eye on her, I could tell, but no one had told her to get off the tree. No one had shouted that she would break her limbs, or the birds would peck her, or it was against the rules.

I knew I had found just the right school with the right person at its helm for my daughter.

Tanweena stayed at Sunbeams for the next two years, and then changed to Green Herald as Sunbeams only went up to Class V then. She now lives in New York, with her husband and young family, working online for DFID-UK. Only two years in Sunbeams—not a long time in her fairly illustrious academic career, but her Facebook profile picture is now the Sunbeams logo.

How do you explain that? It's the Niloufer Manzur spell. Once you knew her, and her school which she seemed to have built brick by brick with her own hands, you couldn't forget.

The years rolled by after that first encounter with Mrs Manzur. Our paths crossed, at first infrequently, then fairly often as I too became a school principal and our students competed academically and on the playing fields. Although South Breeze School was a high school from day one, Sunbeams went up to O' Levels, and then A' Levels, gradually. I took my time opening A' Levels as I was perfectly happy with our students joining Sunbeams after their O's. She was especially kind to our students and praised their manners and behaviour, making me feel proud of them.

"You won't open A' Levels?" she asked me once.

"No," I said and meant it too. I told her why.

I wanted to have time for myself, to read, to listen to music, to write, to watch films, to go to the theatre—there were so many things to do in this one life. A' Levels would be another load eating into my carefully guarded private time.

But I couldn't keep my word, mostly because our parents and students were so insistent, given that we finally had our own premises.

"I thought you said you wouldn't open A' Levels?" she asked me afterwards.

I told her the reasons and I added, this is the one thing I decided to do before I retire. At the word "retire", she smiled. Because she knew, and I knew, we both expected never to really "retire".

We regularly exchanged notes on our

children sang the national anthem and raised the national flag at assembly, that we were not bringing up "aliens"!

Elucidating all and more of the above, a few words in our President's soft, calm, rational voice were enough at the various meetings with relevant government departments where private English medium schools were called. And of course, we would always find more than one person there who would say their child was in one of our schools and how happy they were with the schooling.

Mrs Manzur and I usually travelled together to these meetings to break up the boredom of the traffic-infested journey and we talked. She was a very private person and the one time she spoke of her personal life was on a long

especially at Mindfulness and Mental Health. With equal energy we enjoyed the multiple breaks for tea, coffee, lunch—and finally, the grand closing dinner where she spoke a few words, thanking the organisers for all the learning and re-learning we had done at the various sessions and for the chance to meet educationists from around the world.

Her last meeting with me was in Khelaghor, the free day care centre that I run in Uttara, opposite the South Breeze School building. Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni had come to launch our school programme "Ekshota Bhalo Kaaj—A Hundred Good Deeds" that the students would pledge to do to commemorate the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Afterwards, Dipu Moni visited Khelaghor. In that relaxed, informal surrounding, it was good to exchange viewpoints and the education minister promised Mrs Manzur that she would come to the function that Sunbeams would be organising next.

That was the last time I met her. Then all hell, also known as Covid-19, broke loose. Centenary functions were either postponed or held in small scale, many parents stopped sending children to school, and then schools closed under the directive of the government.

The coronavirus nightmare unravelled in China and then in the Western countries before it made a serious impact in the subcontinent. We were not completely unprepared when the Pearson Edexcel exams and the Cambridge Board exams of April/May 2020 were cancelled. Schools started calculating in various ways the Predicted Grades the UK Boards asked for, based on which certificates would be issued. This was new to us. Much late-night thinking was done, and sleepless nights spent, before we found a reasonable formula to do it, and I forwarded copies of all the letters we had sent to our IGCSE and A' Level candidates, detailing the method of calculating the predicted grades, to Mrs Manzur, at her request; in answer, she sent her thanks and added that the letters would be very useful for reference. It was comforting to know that she approved of our letters.

On Tuesday, May 12, at 8:30 am, I sent her the dates of Eid-ul-Fitr break, dates of the period school would stay open for continued Zoom and Google classes, dates of the summer holidays, with Eid-ul-Azha included. We wanted these dates of our two schools to match as far as possible.

Strangely, she did not respond. This was

very unlike her. Usually, she would reply within minutes to any text I sent.

There was no reply that day (May 12th). There was none on the 13th either. On May 14, at 3:55 pm, I wrote: "Everything going well I hope. Silence is a bit worrying."

At 4:29 pm, three words came: "Under the weather."

Feeling somewhat reassured—she may just be tired, perhaps a bit of a cold, perhaps a sleepless night—I wrote: "Ah. Get well soon. Prayers."

Frightening news started to arrive and ring ominous bells. Dengue, then pneumonia, then breathing problems, then Covid-19, then coma, and then the early morning news that shattered hearts around the world.

Facebook accounts became a sea of the Sunbeams logo. Not just the accounts of the former and present students, but also others, such as the BIT school logo, which was changed to the Sunbeams logo for three days. Ms Lubna Choudhury had lost her son, the promising author Numair, just over a year ago and remembered the kindness Mrs Manzur had shown her during the aching days that followed. I myself was called from different parts of the world, and not least among them was a call from my driver Wahid, from his village. He registered his shock and sorrow and said how gently and kindly she had always spoken to him.

As I sit writing this, outside my window a golden morning shines. I can see newly washed tree tops, a bird that hovers and flies off, a cloudless sky. What was the end like for her? Did she wonder where she was? Did she want to see the greenery outside the windows of her beautiful sitting room, the paintings on the walls, the statuettes in the glass showcase?

I now cede to Anita Brookner, the Booker Prize-winning author, to say the dark words that I wish were not true for this perfect role model.

"Nature, the great benefactor, exacts its punishment for all bounties hitherto enjoyed, without a thought of worth or entitlement, and all life ends badly... it is the gods who are in control and their indifference can be visited on any life, no matter how exactly that life has been lived."

Yet, hope is eternal. Time will surely see to it that the desolation of her last days will be outshone by the vibrant memory of her life.

Zenat Chowdhury is the founding principal of South Breeze School.



Niloufer Manzur, founding principal of Sunbeams School.

school calendar and events dates, and once ten established schools got together to form Bangladesh Private English Medium School Forum, she was the guiding light and presided over our meetings. We needed to have one voice to assert that private English medium schools were filling a need, that our students were being brought up to be loyal citizens of Bangladesh, that we celebrated all the national events from Ekushey February to Pahela Boishakh, from Victory Day to Bangabandhu's birthday (Jatiya Shishu Dibosh), that our children read Bangla Board books in their Bangla class, that Bangla was a compulsory O' Level subject, that Bangladesh Studies was also a compulsory O' Level subject, that our

journey back from the Secretariat, when she said she had lost her mother when she was a young university student. The relatives had thereon elected themselves to give her constant advice, but "Manzur was there," she added. From the sudden changed tenor of her voice and a look in her eyes, I realised she had said a lot. In just three words.

Her knight in shining armour was there to rescue her.

The longest stretch of time we spent together was in last October, in Windsor, the UK, both of us invitees at a conference—Leaders in Education—organised by Pearson. The two-day conference was packed with interesting sessions, with both of us engaging energetically,

PROJECT SYNDICATE

America's Mis-Police State



JEFFREY SOMMERS

GEORGE Floyd's death at the hands—and under the knee—of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin has triggered a wave of peaceful protests and violent rioting in most major cities across the United States.

Caught on video

for the world to see, the incident has driven home the perception that African-Americans are excluded from America's grand narrative of progress, in which conditions supposedly improve over time.

The data bear out that perception. According to a recent Brookings Institution study, as of 2016, "the net worth of a typical white family is nearly ten times greater than that of a Black family." And though the US accounts for just 5 percent of the global population, it is home to 21 percent of the world's incarcerated people, one-third of whom are African-American.

Scarcely a week goes by without a new story about African-Americans dying at the hands of police or vigilantes. Each episode is met with media handwringing and calls for reforms of police procedures. But the problem is never resolved, in part because it is actually many problems.

For starters, many Americans have accepted that they live in a winner-takes-all society of deepening inequality. While the wealth and incomes of those at the very top continue to grow, tens of millions of Americans struggle to afford health care, childcare, and other basic goods. This story has been told many times over. But what often goes unremarked is that the responsibility for managing the social costs of this system has been offloaded onto

the police.

Generally speaking, most police in urban areas are white and have little or no experience interacting with the populations within their jurisdictions. The familiarity gap is compounded by the fact that one in five police officers is a military veteran who previously conducted violent pacification efforts in Afghanistan or Iraq. These former soldiers have been primed to see the urban populations they police as threats to their own safety, at best.

That, too, is borne out by the data. For example, in Boston between 2010 and 2015, there were 28 complaints of excessive use of force for every 100 police officers with some military service, compared to 17 complaints for every 100 non-veteran officers. And Boston is hardly alone. America is obliged to place veterans in meaningful work. But, clearly, only individuals with a demonstrated record of effectiveness in de-escalating tense situations should be permitted to serve as police in urban communities.

Chauvin is not a military veteran. But with 18 prior complaints filed against him, he embodies much of what is wrong with America's policing system. After all, America also has obligations to its urban poor. African-Americans in Detroit, Milwaukee, St. Louis, and many other de-industrialised urban areas live in conditions that are closer to those in South Africa and Brazil than to other rich countries.

In poor and economically insecure African-American communities, a multigenerational vicious cycle ensues. Children are born into an environment where interactions with police have long been confrontational rather than cooperative. And the police, in turn, conflate suspicion and hostility with criminality. All too often, police assume that black males are suspects, and treat them accordingly. In

response, many African-American men are primed to assume a suspicious and hostile attitude toward the police.

The structures underpinning America's racial disparities are the products of both negligence and design. Fixing them will require a multi-pronged strategy.

The first step is to heed Martin Luther King, Jr., and establish full employment as a core principle of economic policy. US Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell has indicated that the Fed faces no effective limit on its ability to fund public investments. In that case, it should take up spending proposals such

as those in the Green New Deal and employ disadvantaged workers at good wages to drive advances in clean-energy and other key sectors of the future economy. Those without work records could be directed to public beautification projects at entry-level wages, which would enable them to start developing basic skills.

The Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated that much of what was previously considered unimportant work is, in fact, essential. From health-care facilities and food services to transport and sanitation, African-Americans disproportionately hold jobs that we consider

least and, ultimately, depend on most.

Yet, taking the federal minimum wage as a baseline, America's essential workers are the lowest paid among high-income countries. Although US GDP has increased by several multiples over the past 70 years, the federal minimum wage is a mere USD 0.75 higher than it was in 1950, after adjusting for inflation. The message to America's essential workers has long been: "You don't matter." Clearly, that must change.

Finally, Americans are grotesquely over-armed, and this problem has grown worse since the Tea Party takeover of many state governments during President Barack Obama's administration. In a country with almost 400 million civilian-owned firearms, regulations on gun sales in many states have nonetheless been loosened. As a result, a city like Chicago, despite having a reasonable level of gun control, is awash with firearms, because one need only drive an hour north to buy from Wisconsin's under-regulated markets.

For obvious reasons, America's gun problem contributes to its violent crime problem. It also places significantly more stress on the police. Progressives and police organisations should recognise that they have common ground on the issue of gun control.

There are clear measures that could be taken to reduce the pressures on both our urban communities and those tasked with policing them. It is well within our power to strengthen the economic and social health of our cities while reforming police methods to encourage conflict de-escalation and resolution. There is no longer any excuse for inaction.

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PHOTO: REUTERS/LUCAS JACKSON

A man recites spoken word poetry at a makeshift memorial honouring George Floyd, at the spot where he was taken into custody, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, on June 1, 2020.

QUOTABLE Quote

MUHAMMAD ALI
(1942-2016)
American professional boxer and social activist.

Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Prepares for battle
- 5 Bill collector, of a sort
- 11 Ring event
- 12 Baltimore player
- 13 Easter symbol
- 14 Like some prunes
- 15 Building wing
- 16 Galileo's home
- 17 Pasta topper
- 19 Pussy foot
- 22 Concise
- 24 Diver's gear
- 26 Bee's home
- 27 Baseball's Rodriguez
- 28 Perfect
- 30 Colt's counterpart

DOWN

- 1 Skilled
- 2 Muddy up
- 3 Thinks about
- 4 Pig's place
- 5 Subject
- 6 Van Gogh work
- 7 Falafel holder
- 8 Write hastily
- 9 Hoppy brew
- 10 Spectrum color
- 16 Place
- 18 Open space
- 19 Stops for speeding
- 20 Third person
- 21 Like paraffin
- 22 Pack and send
- 23 Conceal
- 25 Fourth person
- 29 Hotel area
- 30 Mideast topper
- 33 Tightwad
- 34 Campus part
- 36 Latest fad
- 37 Different
- 38 Brief drop
- 39 Earth-friendly prefix
- 40 Golfer Hogan
- 41 Make a choice

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

RAUL, EMMET, SUPERSTORES, ELI, TERESA, TEXTS, USHER, CHAD, LACE, ONA, UNDER, DAILY, SHAMS, BABAR, AGATE, HAT, POSE, APED, OVERT, RIDEON, ARE, CORES, EVERET, ADOS

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

THAT'S YOUR THIRD DRINK, SIR. WHO'S COUNTING? YOUR WIFE, SHE TOLD ME TO TEXT HER AFTER EACH ORDER.

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

POPCORN. POP... CORN. THAT'S IT! POPCORN! POPCORN! COP PORN! WHAT??