

Everyone's Sufia Khalamma

SARWAR ALI and ZIAUDDIN TARIQ ALI

JUNE 20, 1911 is the birthday of Poet Sufia Kamal, who has played more than a defining role in the history of Bangladesh. In a lifetime dedicated to creating an open and democratic society, she championed the cause of the underprivileged, especially women and minority communities. Her diminutive figure, in fact, belied the energy and resolve that characterised her life and struggle. Despite the dangers of courting the wrath of the Pakistani ruling machinery, whose stridently nefarious objective was to weave the two-nation theory and the Urdu dominated UP culture into the minds of the Bengali people, she dedicated her life to etch out a separate identity for the Bengalis. We see the same values championed by Bangabandhu—from his memoirs and other more recent publications.

It was a difficult war that she waged. Her modest home in Tarabag—where they had taken up residence after they moved from Kolkata and which came to be known as “Khalamma Tarabager basha”—was a beehive of activists from the world of literature, art, politics and social work, including Zainul Abedin, Dr Dani, Dr Q Motahar



Sufia Kamal (June 20, 1911–November 20, 1999)

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Hossain, Quamrul Hasan, Wahidul Huq, Sukhendu Dastidar, Shaheedullah Kaiser, Rokonzaman Khan, Abul Hashim, Nurjahan Murshid, Anwara Bahar Chowdhury and the like. There they would debate issues relating to the unfolding battle for the Bengali language, succour for the minority communities displaced by the mindless violence of Partition and most importantly, guide the journey that women would have to undertake in this “wonder world” called Pakistan.

She had been the editor of the women's weekly *Begum* from its inception in Kolkata, which had created a space for women in East Bengal to cultivate their literary skills. When *Begum* moved from Kolkata to Dhaka, so did she. The void that had been created when personalities such as Leela Naag and Ashalata Sen (the vanguard of the women's movement in East Bengal) were forced to leave Dhaka under the stresses of Partition, was filled by Sufia Kamal with an ease that has characterised her leadership in all the institutions that she led. She drew her

inspiration from having worked, in the early years of her career, with Begum Rokeya. She was the moving force behind the “Kachi Kanchar Mela”, a movement that has shaped the minds of the next generation of cultural activists. She was elected as the President of Mahila Parishad, a women's group fighting for women's rights.

Throughout the late fifties and sixties, the Bengali aspirations for democracy and self-rule continued to be dealt with a heavy hand by a bludgeoning Pakistani Army and its chief, Ayub Khan. In one famous encounter, where the General had invited the Bengali intellectuals to harangue them, and went so far as to refer to the Bengalis as being no better than *haywans* (Arabic for animal), a lone frail figure stood up to tell him that as the *Badsha of haywans*, he in turn, also was a *haywan*. Aghast and speechless, Ayub left the meeting.

The democratic aspirations of the Bengalis and their natural tendency towards tolerance in a secular space, which had so permanently been imprinted into the Bengali psyche by

the towering traditions that Tagore and Nazrul left behind, made the Bengalis sufficiently immune to the Junta's false cries of “*Islam khatrey me hain*” (Islam is in danger). The Pakistanis tried to make use of it in 1964 to churn up communal tensions, but the Bengalis responded unequivocally to the call by political parties and cultural activists under her leadership, of “*Purbo Pakistan Rukhna Darao*” (East Pakistan stand together), and frustrated Pakistan's evil designs. She was a devout Muslim, proving that being deeply religious did not nullify cohabitation with other religions, as is unfortunately interpreted in society these days. She did not confine herself to merely issuing statements against the divisive intentions of the Pakistani state, but actually took to the streets to root them out from society. In all these efforts, she received unstinting support at the home-front from her husband, the self-effacing Kamaluddin Khan.

In the early sixties, at a time when politicians were barred from their professions by an ill conceived Act called the Elective Bodies

Disqualification Order (EBDO), it was the tireless effort of cultural activists, student bodies adhering to different political leanings, and a dedicated band of teachers at the universities, that kept the flames of democracy alive in the minds of the Bengalis. When the mass Six Points Movement gained strength in 1969, their common meeting place was the verandah of Sufia Khalamma's home. After the Tagore centenary in 1961, when Chhayanaut was formed, she was elected as its President and remained so till her death in 1999. She was a family-friend of Bangabandhu and he is reported to have told his daughter, our Prime Minister, that if ever something should go wrong, her first destination should be her “Phupamma's” home.

During the harrowing days of 1971, her stoic stand against giving the marauding Pakistani army any legitimacy was demonstrated by her refusing, time and again, to issue statements to the effect that life was normal in East Pakistan. She was, again, the first to condemn the killing of Bangabandhu in 1975 and was a supporter of the trial of the killers. She was the pillar that we leaned against during the heady days of demand for the trial of war criminals by a public tribunal in 1992, which paved the way to putting the war criminals on trial during the Awami League government, under the International War Crimes Tribunal, 1973.

The first journey of *Muktijuddha Jadughar* (Liberation War Museum) was taken only after its trustees went to her home in 1996 to seek her blessings in this endeavour. Her journey from darkness to light may be summed up by the *shloke* from the Upanishads: “*Asattyo maa sadgamaya, Tamaso maa jyotirgamaya, Mrituru maa amritangamaya, Om, Shanty*”. Lead me from the untruth to the truth; keep me not in darkness, but lead me towards spiritual knowledge, hold me not in the world of mortality, guide me towards self-realisation.

This was Poet Sufia Kamal, everyone's Sufia Khalamma. She epitomised all that is great in the Bengali mind—a humble mother figure, and yet a life dedicated to championing the cause of democratic expression, especially that of the underprivileged.

Dr Sarwar Ali and Ziauddin Tariq Ali are trustees of the Liberation War Museum of Bangladesh.

Begum Sufia Kamal: A moral hero

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

TODAY, after a period of hiatus, I have once again taken up my pen (metaphorically) to remember and celebrate a hero—a woman of courage and integrity who

changed the world, not with fire and fury but with her soft touch. As I began to write this piece on the birth anniversary of our dear Sufia Khalamma (writer and activist Begum Sufia Kamal to the world), I was conflicted over a question that I have been asking myself of late. Can one person spark a social change with far-reaching and long lasting implications?

I found my answer in the sad death of George Floyd, killed mercilessly by a policeman in Minneapolis, USA. One black life ignited not only countrywide protests, but its reverberations were felt around the globe. However, there are many silent heroes who also make a difference. They live ordinary lives—they are loving parents and spouses, dutiful siblings and sincere friends, yet they leave their indelible mark on communities, societies and countries. I call them our “moral heroes”.

For me, Begum Sufia Kamal was one such moral hero. Being a close friend of the family, I spent many evenings on her front porch with her daughters, consuming numerous cups of tea and

snacking on *samosas* and biscuits. Her kind demeanour and simplicity touched my inner core. I was never overawed by her persona as a notable author or a national leader, because Sufia Khalamma never created a distance between her and “us”. This to me was her greatest quality—she was extraordinary in her “ordinariness”.

Reflecting on the time that I spent with her, I wonder why I never asked her to share her experiences of how she evolved from a simple girl born in Barishal to an agent of change who espoused women's rights and social equity for all. I regret that I did not learn the many lessons she could have taught me. But then, she was the kind of person who impacted others through her precept and stoic lifestyle. I marvelled at her simple manner of dressing in a white cotton sari. She once mentioned casually that this was the result of her short meeting with Mahatma Gandhi. I also wonder how she acquired that vast sea of knowledge about English and Bangla literature, despite the fact that she never attended formal school. Was it her association with Begum Rokeya that inspired her to be a self-learner?

These are questions I never asked because there was so much about Sufia Khalamma that I took for granted. In many ways, I also think the answers to these questions may be irrelevant because she was not of the brand of leaders who choose their path—she was chosen by destiny. She worked for Hindu-Muslim unity during the Partition of India. Her activism

continued in 1952, during the Language Movement and in 1961, when the Pakistani government banned the songs of Rabindranath Tagore from the media. She led the women of East Pakistan during the mass uprising against the Pakistani military in 1969. Later, she made women's rights her top priority and headed Bangladesh's largest women's organisation, Mahila Parishad, for many years. And yet her social work was only a part of her life, for she was known to the world as a writer, having published several short stories and poems, as well as her memoirs.

Khalamma's many achievements, if I were to list them, would take up this entire column. But my intention is to highlight her humane side, which



PHOTO: COLLECTED

What struck me the most was the simplicity of her moral response to a true cause. She never weighed the costs and benefits or entered into useless debates—she just plunged into the movement if she believed in it.

I experienced intensely—so much so that it changed my entire perception of feminist movements and freedom struggles. What struck me the most was the simplicity of her moral response to a true cause. She never weighed the costs and benefits or entered into useless debates—she just plunged into the movement if she believed in it. But once she became a part of it, she gave it her all. Risks were ignored and consequences went unweighed. It was done with an effortless elegance that is hard to explain. She embodied what Mother Teresa once said of her own work: “What I do is as simple and common as the laughter of a child.”

When Khalamma chatted with us, her self-identity was fused with ours, yet

she was perfectly at home in performing great acts that we would hesitate to take on. I saw her walking in protest marches and sitting in musical concerts with equal ease. She would be frying pieces of *hilsa* fish in her kitchen one moment and within minutes, she would be sitting on a cane chair on her front porch with a national leader, the two discussing an emerging political crisis. The transition was so seamless that I never questioned how she did it.

As I remember Sufia Khalamma on her birthday, I salute her in humble recognition of the fact that we gave her so little in return for what she gave to our nation and to the cause of women. But then, that is how she wanted it to be—her efforts were built around “healing some rupture in society, reconciling differences, bringing the unlike together, a move from fragmentation to wholeness”. And never expecting anything in return. Her reward was to see that humanity remains connected in empathy—a message that has become so relevant in the time of the coronavirus.

Khalamma, let me end by saying that you were not part of a struggle. You were the struggle. You were so human, yet you created a feeling of innate humanity in those around you. At a personal level, you touched me at a very sensitive stage of my life and did to me what “spring does with the cherry trees.”

May you rest in eternal peace.

Milia Ali is a Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

QUOTABLE Quote

RABINDRANATH TAGORE
(1861-1941)
Bengali poet, writer, musician and painter.

Everything comes to us that belongs to us if we create the capacity to receive it.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Hits with the palm
- 6 Sports figure
- 10 Infant's ailment
- 11 Tennis setting
- 13 Heartburn
- 14 Canadian lout
- 15 Drill part
- 16 On the – (fleeing)
- 18 Letter before epsilon
- 19 Ballpark fixtures
- 22 Co. abbr.
- 23 Mob revolt
- 24 Lower in esteem
- 27 Chili need
- 28 Rescue
- 29 Swindle
- 30 Movie planning sketches
- 35 List shortening abbr.
- 36 Snaky shape
- 37 Lyricist
- 38 Closes with a bang
- 40 Kind of pool
- 42 Car type
- 43 Happening
- 44 Extinct bird
- 45 Office sights

DOWN

- 1 Strike defiers
- 2 Deductive thinking
- 3 Justice Samuel
- 4 Deep hole
- 5 Triangle type
- 6 Doofus
- 7 Overly
- 8 Vienna setting
- 9 Trample
- 12 Has faith in
- 17 Alphabet start
- 20 Start part
- 21 Sports setting
- 24 Rate
- 25 Fought
- 26 Guacamole base
- 27 Increased
- 29 “60 Minutes” network
- 31 Like some questions
- 32 Carnival attractions
- 33 Guzzled
- 34 Sea dogs
- 39 Seething
- 41 “Now – seen everything!”

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

B	O	S	S	B	E	A	D		
L	E	R	O	I	L	A	N	E	S
A	W	A	R	D	A	R	O	S	E
B	A	T	T	E	R	S	D	I	N
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R	E	D	C	A	P	I	S	E	E
A	L	A	S	A	R	T	I	E	A
B	I	T	T	E	R	S	M	I	A
A	P	E	B	E	T	T	E	R	S
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H	O	S	E	R	A	L	G	E	R
N	E	A	T	D	E	E	R		

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT