

# Requiem for an educator

In Memoriam: Sebia Sulaiman



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

**S**EBIA Sulaiman, a pioneer in the field of early childhood education and a lifelong social worker passed away at 5:30 AM on September 19, 2020 at a city hospital in Dhaka. She was laid to rest

after Zuhr prayers the same day by her two sons, Habib Sadat Choudhury, MD and professor Dr Habib Numan Choudhury, at the Shaheed Buddhijibi Graveyard in Mirpur. Sebia Sulaiman was 85 and is survived by the two sons and two daughters, professor Dr Parsa Choudhury and Arifa Choudhury, MD who due to the suddenness of their mother's demise and the Covid-19 restrictions in the USA, were unable to be at her bedside in the last few days of her brief illness.

Sebia and her four children followed the footsteps of her father and father-in-law. Her father was Abdul Mumith Choudhury of Sylhet, a civil surgeon, and she married Sulaiman Choudhury, son of Habibur Rahman Choudhury, principal of Government Aliya Madrasa, Sylhet. During her rich career life and thereafter, she dedicated herself to the cause of education and social emancipation of the underprivileged. In an article entitled "Glimpses of Education in America" published in *Bangladesh Observer* she wrote, "In the farthest corner of my mind lies a fountain of aspirations for the movement to the higher world of studies. I reveal here the story of my teaching as a volunteer teacher there in America as a humble gesture to all devotees of knowledge in the field of teaching". (July 2, 1983)

Sebia began her teaching career in 1960 after receiving her Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree from Mymensingh Teacher's Training College. She taught at Cantonment Modern School (renamed Shaheed Anwar School) and then transferred to Vigarunnesa Noon School (VNS) in 1964 where she taught both in the Junior and Senior Sections. After eighteen years at VNS she joined Purana Paltan Women's College where she taught for five years. In the interim, in 1974, she earned her MA (English) from Dhaka University.

As the eldest of five sisters and a role model from her early life. Her father, a physician, was posted at different locations before and after the partition of India in 1947 and she took upon herself the task of looking after her younger siblings which she continued after marriage in 1954 to the illustrious banker, Sulaiman Choudhury. Sulaiman lost his father at the age of 16 and was at the helm of his family, led by his mother Hifzunnesa Khanam who moved to Maulvi Bazar to be with her father Syed Sikander Ali and her three brothers (Syed Mustafa Ali, Syed Murtaza Ali, and Syed Mujtaba Ali). After their marriage, Sebia and Sulaiman nurtured his four younger sisters throughout their entire life.

I learned a lot about Sebia Sulaiman and her values in life after her family took me in during my SSC years in their residence in Bank House, Minto Road. While in her personal life, she was a quiet and silent worker with a house full of children from her own and those of her four clamorous sisters-in-law, she managed to juggle many balls at the same time as a school teacher, mother, and an essential cog in a well-oiled machine known as the extended family.

Good educators like Sebia Sulaiman create new opportunities to grow and work with their colleagues to do the



Sebia Sulaiman with her family.

PHOTO: COURTESY

same. At VNS, she came in contact with other great teachers including Alia Amin and Siddiqua Kabir, wife of Syed Ali Kabir, who like Sulaiman started his career at the State Bank of Pakistan.

A well-loved personality in the USA, Mr Rogers, creator of "Mister Rogers' Neighbourhood" once said, "I think silence is one of the greatest gifts we have." If that's true, Sebia had a lot to

give. In her classroom, she encouraged her students to reflect during quiet time. Her favourite quotation was from Henri Nouwen who said, "As an educator, I hope that students gain the confidence to express themselves and the strength to ask for help. At their age, students can sometimes struggle to find their voices and hear those of others."

It was my privilege to know this

great educator closely when she married my only maternal uncle, Sulaiman Choudhury, a banker and philanthropist. When I was in Class X in Government Laboratory High School, my father was transferred from Dhaka to Dinajpur as the District and Sessions Judge of Dinajpur and Bogra. I would have been a homeless student if my *mami* did not invite me to share their two-bedroom flat in Bank House, Minto Road, with her family of six, including her mother-in-law. During the next year when I stayed with the family, I saw multiple examples of her dedication to her students and family, particularly her extended family. When the results of my SSC exam came out a year later in June 1967, my *mami* was the first to congratulate me for topping the Combined Merit List as a student of Humanities in the Dhaka Board. "Shibli, you are only keeping up with your family tradition!" she said in her soft, measured tone.

In her autobiographical book "Jeeboner Kotha" (Stories from My Life) she talks about the time in the early 1950s when she was enrolled in Victoria College of Comilla as a BA student. Akhter Hamid Khan, the founder of Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD), was then officiating as the principal of Victoria College and gave a memorable speech to the students. AH Khan encouraged them to engage with the underprivileged and was a source of inspiration for Sebia during her lifelong work as an educator and for social welfare. She worked with Rotary Inner Wheel and was a life member of Assistance for Blind Children (ABC) and Underprivileged Children's Educational Program (UCEP), two non-profit NGOs.

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and currently works in information technology. He is also Senior Research Fellow, International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank in Boston, USA.

## The world's most blighted minority

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

**A**S the plight of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority numbering nearly 1.2 million stranded in Bangladesh crosses the third painful year, one is reminded of the

most blighted ethnic minority in Asia. Their miseries have long been known to the international community but real relief and rehabilitation is not in sight. The names of these hapless Rohingyas have been removed from Myanmar's draconian household registration system that keeps track of people's movements and they are often handed stiff fines.

The Rohingyas inhabit the worst position in Myanmar's dreadful human rights landscape. The men and young boys risk the dangerous journey across the Andaman Sea to seek employment and to send money back to families barely surviving in their homeland. The difference between a refugee fleeing persecution and one seeking a better life does not mean much to the Rohingyas because both are true. They have borne the brunt of the Myanmar military regime's brutal State building for decades.

Myanmar's treatment of its Muslim minority has generally been characterised by neglect punctuated by scapegoating. The Rohingyas have been subjected to particularly harsh treatment, possibly more than any other ethno-religious minority in Myanmar. Despite not having staged any armed rebellion of substance against the central government in the past, successive military governments have harboured a uniquely vicious aversion to the Rohingyas.

For the Rohingyas, centuries of co-existence with the Arakanese Buddhists was bifurcated by British colonialism, when the boundaries of India and Burma were demarcated. As a result, the Rohingyas became a people caught between States, with the majority situated in newly independent Burma in 1948. It would be relevant to recall that in 1978, the Burmese army mounted a murderous ethnic cleansing campaign they called Operation Dragon King (Naga Min) that drove 200,000 Rohingyas into Bangladesh. Again in 1991, the Burmese army repeated the pogrom. More than a quarter million Rohingyas were driven out of Arakan into Teknaf and Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh.

In Myanmar the Rohingyas are officially an alien and illegal community, not listed as one of the 135 recognised "ethnic nationalities" in Burma and thus the majority of them are not entitled to national identity cards. This Stateless status has provided the security forces with impunity to perpetrate routine abuses against Muslims in Western Burma.

The Myanmar military's routine abuses of the Rohingyas aggravate the chronic poverty. They are denied travel permission between villages, which limits employment opportunities, education and trade. Permission for even limited travel from local military units is most often denied. The

military seize their land for military-connected business projects. Forced labour and expropriation of property is a daily reality. Religious persecution is widespread, with many mosques destroyed or ordered to be emptied. Extrajudicial killings are common. In fact, there is an unofficial policy of discrimination whose ultimate aim is the forced removal of a minority group.

The hatred towards the Rohingyas, beneath the excuses of national security, legal measures against illegal immigration, or even nationalism can be traced to racism. South Asians are derogatorily referred to as Kala (foreigner) in Burma by every other ethnic group, but the Rohingyas are even

beneath this level of disdain. Muslims in Myanmar are more likely to be terrorised by the Myanmar military than to be terrorists.

The Rohingyas are more a foresworn people. No one wants them, even though the world is well aware of their predicament. Their persecution has been a litany of horrors that the international community has been well aware of, but helpless or unwilling to rectify. There is a collective failure to address the root causes of the flight of the Rohingyas from the Myanmar resulting in their continued misery.

The cause of an oppressed Muslim minority is given short shrift. Western governments claim to champion oppressed Christians but by downplaying much larger-scale violations against Muslims, they are jeopardising the remainder of the west's human rights credibility. Their passivity reinforces the global shift to the so-called religious nationalism that allegedly commenced in the Muslim world.

Since Muslims are resented more than other minorities, their plight tests whether liberal democracy means what it claims to mean. Sadly enough, the silence of Muslim countries, particularly of the Arab world, about the plight of large chunk of Muslims in Asia underlines the loneliness of Muslim minorities.

It is significant to note that at present the largest countries of the world by population are to varying degrees hostile to Muslims. The big powers of Asia are uninterested in the fate of Myanmar's Rohingyas who have been the world's biggest victims of ethnic cleansing in recent years. Broadly speaking, we are in a world that is largely callous about the fate of Muslims where they are the minority. No wonder that the miseries of the Rohingyas persist unabated.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP.



Rohingya refugees wait after crossing the Naf river from Myanmar into Bangladesh in Whaikhyang, October 9, 2017.

PHOTO: FRED DUFOUR/AFP

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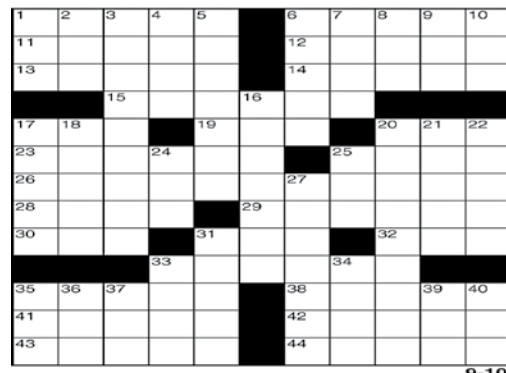


TERENCE MCKENNA (1946-2000) American ethnobotanist, mystic, lecturer, author.

The imagination is the golden pathway to everywhere.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| 30 Chess pieces                 | 8 Dedicated verse        |                              |
| 31 Do something                 | 9 Army address           |                              |
| 32 Devious                      | 10 Stroller user         |                              |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

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