

# A Tribute to Our Lady of Light

The Daily Star named Begum Sufia Kamal the Woman of the Year 1995, calling her the Lady of Light at a time of "degeneration, conflict, corruption, short-sightedness and moral bankruptcy." Today, as the nation mourns her death, we pay tribute to the "rare individual who never compromised on principles of justice, democracy and secularism, and rights of the poor and the oppressed."

## The Poet Speaks

In our January 1, 1996 issue, we carried an interview with Begum Sufia Kamal. Following are extracts from her conversation with Mahfuz Anam:

Q. What are some of the most prominent thoughts in your mind at this critical moment in our history?

A. Now I am very sick. I cannot go out into the streets and listen to the people or talk to them, as I have been doing all my life. What worries me most is the condition of the common people. How are they? Have their situation improved?

One of the things that worries me very much is our increasing foreign dependence. I agree that over the last several years a lot has been achieved, many bridges, miles of roads, some factories and buildings in the cities. But have all this really helped our people? With whose money have we done all this? Is it with borrowed money that all this has been built? What will happen if money from abroad suddenly stops coming? Have we not become more and more dependent on foreign aid over the years? I do not understand much about economics but I have been taught this much that the growth that does not come from my own wealth and is dependent on somebody else's assistance, cannot be all that good for me.

I do not understand much about free trade and what not. But I can see that today even the most essentials — eggs, lintel, vegetable, fruits, even salt, I am told — come from India. How can this be good for us? This leads me to talk about the question of employment.

The other thing worries me

is the rising unemployment, it is increasing all the time. Our young boys and girls are coming out of universities and colleges, and from vocational institutions but there is nothing for them to do. What have we done to give employment to our young educated people? In the old days when we did not have all these bridges there used to be small businesses on both banks of a river for people who would cross. Now we just go across the bridge. I know the bridge has improved many things, but what about those who lost out on their daily earning? What alternative measures have we taken for them? What I am citing is a small example of how modernisation leads to greater unemployment unless we plan carefully. Widespread unemployment is the fundamental cause for violence and criminal activities among the young.

This is the third thing that worries me. I cannot recall anytime in the past, and I have lived through many critical times, when there was so much violence and all round insecurity. This is very worrying indeed. The great tradition of our students is being destroyed by the criminal elements that have been injected into our student community by the political parties. I cannot believe, I refuse to believe that any genuine student can raise a gun against a fellow student, let alone kill him. These are criminals who are under the protection of political parties. These criminals have spread

their wings into the whole society. Every aspect of our civic life is now suffering under their evil influence. Close relations within a neighbourhood does not exist any more because of the local mastaans. People visiting their neighbours, our children going from one house to another — a common feature of life in Dhaka — has all but disappeared. We do not feel safe letting our children move freely within our own neighbourhood anymore. Before every neighbourhood — para, moholla — used to look after its own community, and there was pride and joy in each other's success. Now we stay within our shells. Part of it is the change of times, but a large part of it is due to the criminalisation of our society.

Rising population also worries me. We have such a small country, and there are so many of us. I know now the government and the NGO are giving loans to buy a cow, a lamp or to raise chicken at home. But for the large number of landless, and for those who have a small home within large family members, where will they keep their animals or raise chickens? I think the idea of small loan to raise home based farms of all types is a very good idea. But does it really help our landless? Can they benefit from such loans?

Another thing that worries me is the lack of respect for women these days. Earlier when men and women used to work side by side there used to be tremendous mutual respect. Now it is all gone. It is the age of competition, and I can understand that men may resent women intruding into their world. So let there be competition, but why should it come with lack of respect?

Q. What are your feelings on the occasion of the 25th Victory Day?

A. I could not attend this year's Victory Day celebrations. But I have been told, and I also read in the newspapers that it was a grand celebration. I am very pleased to hear it. Now the young people will get to know a little better about our Liberation War. What happened at that time and at what cost we gained our independence. Our young people must learn that a country cannot be formed on the basis of religion. That is what Pakistan tried. There are Muslims all over the world — Arab Muslims, Indian Muslims, Indonesian Muslims, Thai Muslims, and Bengali Muslims. Religion is the same for all of us, but we are different nations. Everybody has his or her own religion. A state cannot be built on religion.

This our young people must learn, and this was the reason for our war against Pakistan. Muslims of Bengal have always been Muslims, and they lived side by side with Hindus for hundreds of years. There was never any friction or fight between them. So everyone must be allowed to live with their own religion.

Today nobody is exploiting us — not Russians, Japanese, Indians or Pakistanis. Today we Bengalis are fighting against one another and destroying

ourselves. It is we who are killing, injuring, abusing and insulting one another. We have become our worst enemies.

The present widespread terrorism is doing immense harm. On the 25th anniversary of our Victory, how can I live with the fact that terrorism has engulfed our society completely? Who will save us from this? That is what you all will have to think about.

Q. Why have we not been able to build our country better in the last 25 years?

A. The most important reason is that we do not have a courageous leader who can lead us out of this all pervasive degeneration. We may have committed leaders today. But none of them are courageous enough to take sweeping and visionary decisions — decisions that go far beyond their partisan or coterie interest. Our leaders lack courage. People of Bangladesh have never fallen back from supporting any courageous leader. Our people are ever ready to undertake whatever struggle necessary to solve all the problems that we face today. What we are lacking is leadership.

In Sheikh Mujib's name our nation plunged into battle with bare hands. So our people are full of courage, our leaders are not. Today they take recourse to bombastic rhetoric but never take the bold and unpleasant decisions — because they lack courage.

Q. Lack of leadership is one reason, what about other reasons for our present problems?

A. Lack of leadership is the main reason. Nobody is thinking of the country today. Some are thinking about staying in power, and others are thinking about coming to power. The country does not figure in their thoughts. Absence of leadership is the uppermost thought in my mind. But I am hopeful that out of this present crisis there will emerge a patriotic, visionary and courageous leadership. We will, once again, hold up our head in pride and dignity of an independent nation.

Q. Do you see any sign of hope or only of failure?

A. Of course I am tremendously hopeful about the ability of our new generation. If they are not misled by vested groups or the so-called leaders, I think our young people can build this country and take us out of this shameful poverty and backwardness.

Q. What are your views on the current political crisis?

A. I have read in newspapers that Sheikh Hasina said that she will talk with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia after she resigns. My view is, once Khaleda resigns then she will not have any power to implement whatever decision they both may arrive at. Out of power Khaleda Zia's words will carry far less weight, and they will make less impact on the course of events. So the talks should be held when Khaleda remains the Prime Minister to enable her to implement the outcome, and take follow up actions. Therefore I suggest, they should sit immediately and start talks on

solving the present crisis.

During my meetings with Hasina I asked her why she left the parliament. She said that opposition was not given due opportunity to play its role. Whatever may have been the situation it was wrong of Hasina to have left the parliament. Parliament belonged to us, and it was our place to keep the government in check.

Q. Did Khaleda Zia ever come to see you?

A. Only once a long time ago may be sometime in the mid eighties.

Q. She did not visit you during your last illness?

A. No. Hasina came to see me. She comes now and then. If she comes again, she has not come for sometime now, I will tell her that she must sit for talks immediately. She should not insist on Khaleda's resigning.

There is another thing I feel strongly about. Isn't there a single person, a single intellectual in our country who is acceptable to both sides, somebody who can mediate between these two groups? Why do we have to get a foreigner to solve our problems? It is a shame for us. When Mr. Shahabuddin (former President) came to see me during my illness, I asked why he did not try to mediate and resolve the crisis. He said, "Did you not hear that PM thinks that only a child or a mad man is capable of being neutral. Since I am not a child, neither am I mad, how can I be neutral enough to be able to mediate? Please excuse me, I do not think I can do anything to resolve this crisis." If I was well, I would have invited them for talks in my house. I would have appealed personally to both of them to come to an understanding.

Probably Khaleda Zia would never come to my house, but I nevertheless would have tried. I cannot see the suffering of the common people any more.

I am very much against these hartals and strikes. These actions do not hurt the government, it hurts the people. The more poor one is, the more strikes and hartals hurt. The widespread violence, random breaking of cars etc. pain me very much. These activities are pulling us backward further. The middle-class and the small business people are especially affected by these strikes — the small entrepreneurs, the shopkeepers, the roadside vendors, daily workers, hawkers etc.

Q. What would be your message to the nation on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of our independence?

A. We must bring respect and dignity to our country and to our people, and reach the fruits of independence to the masses. We must all work together to build our country. We should not allow ourselves to be misled by a vested group, in the name of religion, and let people exploit our religious sentiments for narrow political ends. Our younger generation must be taught the values of our Liberation War and the ideals for which million gave up their lives.



## A Pristine Spirit

On the occasion of the Independence Day this year, Navine Murshid interviewed Begum Sufia Kamal. Sadly, it was her last interview to The Daily Star. Extracts from that conversation:

DS: What are your feelings on the occasion of Independence Day?

SK: I am very pleased to see that, of late, occasions such as Independence Day and Victory Day are being celebrated in a grand manner. Now, the young people will get to know a little better about our liberation war, what happened at that time and at what cost we gained our independence. Our young people must learn that a country cannot be formed on the basis of religion. That is what Pakistan tried. There are Muslims all over the world — Arab Muslims, Indian Muslims, Indonesian Muslims, Thai Muslims and Bengali Muslims. Religion is the same for all of us, but we are different nations. Everyone has his or her own religion.

DS: What do you feel towards the present generation in terms of cultural awareness and their attachment to their roots? Do you feel that we have been able to live up to the spirit of 1971?

SK: The present generation has been deliberately kept away

from the real spirit of 1971. The whole nation, with the exception of the traitors, Rajakars and Al-Badr, fought for an exploitation-free, non-communal, egalitarian and above all a democratic society. It was written in the 1972 constitution. But over the years, the autocratic and military rulers have deliberately erased the spirit of liberation from people's minds for a generation without self-esteem and patriotism is easier to subjugate than people with self-respect and idealism. The present generation is given to believe that Bangladesh is a country they can never live in. No one recognises the responsibility to build this country, to make this a liveable place for all. True, they are exposed to wider culture and that would not be something to worry about if they had known their own culture and been in a position to deal with the exposure from a confident position. This should be on the basis of exchange and not just adopting the external trends that overwhelm them so much that they

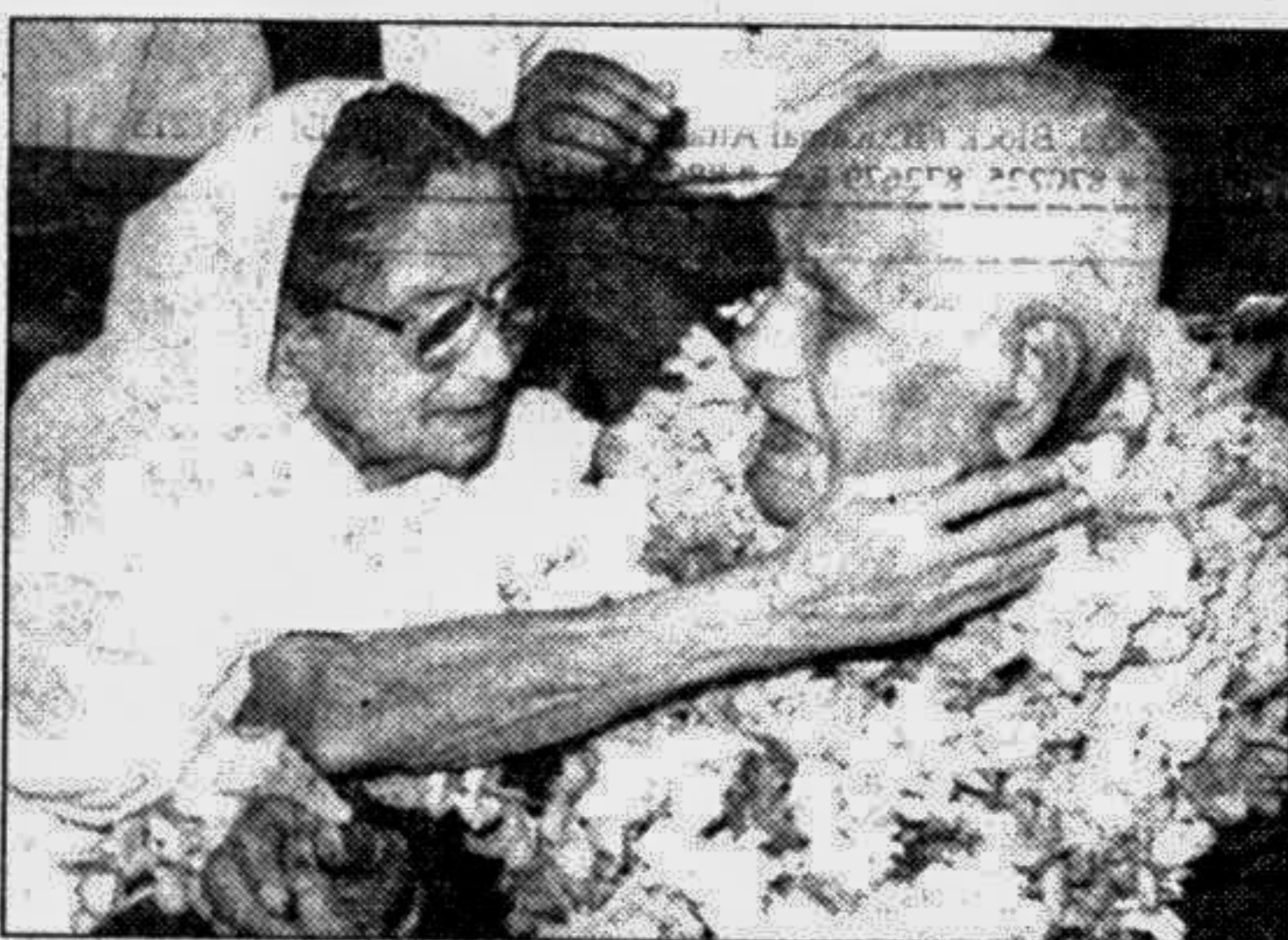
lose contact with their own culture! Culture is dynamic and will change, but not sweep the original base. These are all linked with internalisation of the spirit of various struggles we had since 1952, the 1960s, the mass upheaval of 1969 and war of 1971. We all must make efforts to see, feel and continuously reflect these in our life and create an atmosphere where the generation gets to know them.

DS: What do you see in Bangladesh's future?

SK: Bangladesh is one of the most resourceful countries of the world in terms of its people, natural resources, its beauty and above all its spirit of freedom. Though the country is going through a very difficult time, I have no doubt about its bright future. I am hopeful that out of the present power struggle there will emerge a patriotic, visionary and courageous leader. We will once again hold our heads high in pride and dignity of an independent nation.

## The Immortals

Begum Sufia Kamal with ...



Saugat Editor Mohammad Nasir Uddin



Professor Dewan Mohammad Azraf



Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam

Source: Star photo archive

## Highlights of an Eventful Life

- 1911 : Born on Monday, June 20, at Rahat Manzil, Shaistabad, Barisal. Her father was Syed Abdul Bari and mother Syeda Sabera Khatun.
- 1912 : Her father gave up family life and became a member of Isme Azam Group.
- 1918 : Met Begum Rokeya for the first time in Calcutta.
- 1923 : Got married to maternal cousin Syed Nehal Hossain. Left Shaistabad for Barisal town. Published first story *Sainik Badhu* in a magazine from Barisal called *Tarun*. Poet Kamini Roy visited Barisal and encouraged Sufia N Hossain to continue writing.
- 1925 : Started doing social work in Barisal's *Matri Mongol's*. She was the lone Muslim member of the society. When Gandhiji came to Barisal, she gave him home spun thread in a public gathering.
- 1926 : Her poem first printed in *Saugat*. First child Amena Khatun born.
- 1927 : Wrote a letter to Md Nasiruddin, Editor of *Saugat*, to help distressed Nazrul.
- 1928 : Got the credit for being the first Bengali Muslim woman to fly in an aeroplane, for which she was congratulated by Begum Rokeya.
- 1929 : Started working as a member in Begum Rokeya's *Anjuman-e-Khaouatun Islam*. Sent poet Rabindranath Tagore a poem on his birthday. Met the poet on his invitation at Jorasanka. He gave a copy of *Gora*.
- 1930 : Write-up published along with photograph in *Saugat's* first women's issue.
- 1931 : Nominated as the first Muslim women in Union Women's Foundation.
- 1932 : Husband Syed Nehal Hossain died.
- 1937 : Started career as a teacher in Calcutta Corporation School (1933-1941).
- 1937 : First collection of stories *Keya Kata* was published. Wished Rabindranath Tagore on his birthday through a poem which was replied in the same manner by the poet from Almora.
- 1938 : First collection of poems *Shajher Maya* was published. Sent Tagore a copy of the book and received blessing.
- 1939 : Married again to Kamal Uddin from Chittagong.
- 1940 : Participated in the movement against the British. First son, Shahed Kamal, was born.
- 1941 : Mother Syeda Sabera Khatun died.
- 1943 : Second son Ahmed Kamal was born. Moni Kuntala, an activist from Burdwan, was introduced to her.
- 1944 : Third son Sajed Kamal was born.
- 1946 : Conducted a relief centre at Lady Brabourne College during the communal riots. Met Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for the first time. After the riot she along with Md. Modabber, artist Kamrul Hassan, his brother Hassan Jan and many other members of Mukul Fauj started a kindergarten

- school named Begum Rokeya Memorial in Congress Exhibition Park.
- 1947 : Before the partition, worked as Editor, of the first weekly *Begum*. After partition came back to Bangladesh with husband. Met famous women leaders like Lila Ray, Juiful Ray, Asha Lata Sen and joined them in *Shanti Committee*.
- 1949 : Bought our *Weekly Sultana* jointly with Jahanara Arzoo.
- 1950 : Daughter Sultana Kamal was born. Revolted against the communal riots in Dhaka, gave leadership to the resistance movement and worked as a relief worker.
- 1951 : Collection of poems *Maya Kajol* was published. Elected president of *Dhaka Shishu Raksha Samity*.
- 1952 : During the language movement gathered women to organise a procession. Played active role in the movement beside giving leadership to the procession. Daughter Syeda Kamal was born.
- 1954 : Established *Wari Women Samity* and elected first President of the Samity.
- 1955 : Led the first women *gherao* resistance, on the streets of Dhaka, because of the price hike of commodities.
- 1956 : Participated in a *Shahitya Sammelan* in Delhi. Established a national children's organisation *Kachi Kanchar Mela* at her own residence.
- 1957 : Published *Mon-o-Jiban*, a collection of poems.
- 1958 : Published *Shanti-o-Prathana*, a collection of poems.
- 1959 : Received BAF award (Bulbul Lalitkala Academy).
- 1960 : Established Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Smriti Committee and proposed naming of Dhaka University's first women's hostel after Begum Rokeya.
- 1961 : Elected president of cultural organisation *Chhayanot*. Received *Tangha-e-Imtiaz* award from Pakistan government.
- 1962 : Received Bangla Academy Award for poetry.
- 1963 : Son Ahmed Kamal killed.
- 1964 : Received Begum Club award. Published collection of poems *Uddatta Prithibi*.
- 1965 : Published collection of nursery rhymes *Ethol Bethol*. Elected president of *Nari Kalyan Sangstha*. Elected president of Soviet-Pakistan Maitry Samity.
- 1966 : *Divan* (collection of poems) published. Went to Soviet Union to join International Women's Day festivals in Moscow. Second edition of *Shajher Maya*.
- 1967 : Second edition of *Keya Kata*.
- 1968 : Published *Soviet-e-Dinguli*, a travelogue.
- 1969 : Published collection of poems *Abhijon Trokik*. Elected Chairperson of *Mahila Sangram Committee*. Took active part in mass uprising against Ayub. Renounced *Tangha-e-Imtiaz*.
- 1970 : Received the prestigious Soviet *Lenin Padak*. Established *Mahila Parishad* and became its President. Worked as relief worker during the 1970 cyclone. Elected president of

- Samaj Unnayan Sangstha*.
- 1971 : Led the women's rally during the non-co-operation movement in March. During the Independence War she stayed back at her Dhanmondi residence and continued helping the *muktijoddhas* (freedom-fighters). Prepared the manuscript of *Ektattur Diary*. Inaugurated the first television programme of independent Bangladesh.
- 1972 : *Mor Jadurer Shamadhi Pore*, collection of poems published. Visited Bulgaria, West Germany, Soviet Union as President of *Mahila Parishad*.
- 1975 : Awarded *Ananaya Nari* by the Bangladesh United Nations Association on the occasion of International Women's Decade. *Mor Jadurer Shamadhi Pore* was translated in English from USA — *Where My Darlings Lie Buried*.
- 1976 : Awarded *Ektattur Padak* by Bangladesh Government, and *Nurunnessa Khatun Bidya Binodini* award.
- 1977 : Husband Kamaluddin died. Received Nasir Uddin gold medal and Sher-e-Bangla National Literary award.
- 1978 : Received Comilla Foundation award. Visited USA.
- 1981 : *Noatal Kishore Darbar* collection of poems published. Received *Dhaka Ladies Club* award and *Czechoslovakia Saman Nari* award.
- 1982 : Received *Muktodhara Mahila* award and *Phulki* (Chittagong) children award. Elected president of *Rabindra Sangeet Sammelan*.
- 1983 : Received Begum Zebunnissa Mahabullah Trust Award, *Kathakoli Shilpi Goshithi* Award and *Pata Shahitya Padak*.
- 1984 : *Shanjher Maya's* Russian translation published.
- 1985 : Received Shaheed Nutan Chandra medal (Chittagong) and *Kattala* (Khulna) award.
- 1986 : Received Dhaka University award.
- 1988 : Elected president Bangabandhu Parishad. Awarded *Ruma Smriti* Award (Khulna). Published *Akale Amader Kal*. *Bango Shahitya Sammelan* and Bangladesh Association of New England invited her to USA, her second visit.
- 1989 : Published *Ektattur Diary*. Received *Jasimuddin Padak* and was made Member of Congress (USA) of Bangladesh Society of New York.
- 1990 : Denounced curfew and led the silent procession during the historic movement against autocracy.
- 1991 : On the occasion of her 80th birthday received a civic reception. Received *Business and Professional Women's* award, *Mukti Juddho Sanghati Parishad's* Mujib medal.
- 1992 : Third publication of *Keya Kata*. Joined London's Bangla Literary Parishad organised literary conference and was awarded *Bango Janani* decoration. Awarded *Begum Rokeya Padak* of Nari Kalyan Sangstha.
- 1993 : Received *Shahidullah Kaiser Smriti Medal* on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of *Kendriya Khelaghar*.
- 1999 : Died on November 20.