

Woman of the Year: Poet Sufia Kamal "The Lady of Light"

THE Daily Star is proud to announce the selection of Poet Begum Sufia Kamal, 84, as the "Woman of the Year" 1995. For life-long service to the nation in cultural, social and political fields, The Daily Star, on behalf of a grateful nation, pays this humble tribute to a person who, in this period of degeneration, conflict, corruption, shortsightedness and moral bankruptcy has become our Lady of Light.

Sufia Kamal, born 20 June 1911, has, through her long involvement in every democratic movement of the nation, become the voice of our people. A rare individual who never compromised on principles of justice, democracy, secularism and rights of the poor and the oppressed. She never accepted office from any government, and always stood by on the side of the toiling masses against oppressive governments.

Two examples of her indomitable courage will suffice to show the steel of a person she is, behind that most humble, self-effacing and loving personality. In early 60s following the remark by Iron Man President of Pakistan General Ayub Khan, in a meeting of intellectuals in Dhaka, that Bengalis were "Janwar" (Urdu for animals) Sufia Kamal retorted: "As our leader you must be the biggest 'Janwar' (see article by Waheedul Huq). After Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who had immense respect for the Poet, who in turn has had the highest of regards for

him, asked her to join BAKSAL and assume a leadership position. Most respectfully, but firmly, Sufia Kamal declined. Recently in a vernacular daily Sufia Kamal directly addressed herself to Sheikh Hasina, whom she loves like a daughter, regarding 'hartals' and strikes that she thinks hurt the people very much.

At every critical point in the nation's faltering progress towards democracy, citizens groups rallied around her to voice support for rights and freedom. For the people of Bangladesh she has been a beacon of inspiration and light of hope.

As we stand today on the threshold of a new year, we salute her for all the values that she stands for, values we consider sacrosanct if Bangladesh is ever to rise above the political, social and moral quagmire in which it is stuck today.

In a nation full of self-seekers, time-servers, opportunists, hypocrites, flatterers, sycophants and yes-men (and yes-women), Sufia Kamal is in a class by herself -- uncorrupted and incorruptible by any thought of personal gain.

At this moment of crisis she stands out as a symbol of light in the darkness that envelops our national life. Tireless in her devotion to public cause, fearless in her fight to achieve it, she is truly our Lady of Light. Editor.

The Daily Star tribute, January 1, 1996

The one and only

WAHEEDUL HAQUE

BY the early sixties most of Pakistan's intellectuals and writers had very successfully been penned into becoming singers of paeans to Ayubiana. But the General had a feeling that the Bengalees were still lukewarm in their acceptance of him and a lot more had to be done to make them recognise his greatness.

Accordingly he flew into Dhaka and invited whoever mattered in Bengali letters and the artists of diverse kinds to meet him at the Governor's House now Bangabhaban.

In his ghost-written Friends Not Masters he had some unflattering epithets for the Bengalee people. In the course of that day's proceedings the dictator in a bit of rare candour (it was a rare feat indeed) upped his earlier insults by declaring that Bengalees were a pack of beasts. Pat came a retort inconceivable and in a soft feminine yet firm voice *tab to aapki janaab haiwanonkey badshah hotay hain*. That was enough for the Pathan from Hazara to loose countenance and work up a rage and end the meeting then and there. The diminutive woman who dealt the historic snub was a study in cold courage.

Sufia Kamal, known and loved universally not only as the top Muslim woman poet but doyen of all poets in Eastern Bengal after partition of India, was all her life more than a courageous person. In her snub she in fact expressed her rejection and open denunciation of the Ayubi regime. And that simple yet great act set a tone for the Bengalee people's political resistance graduating eventually into the Liberation war.

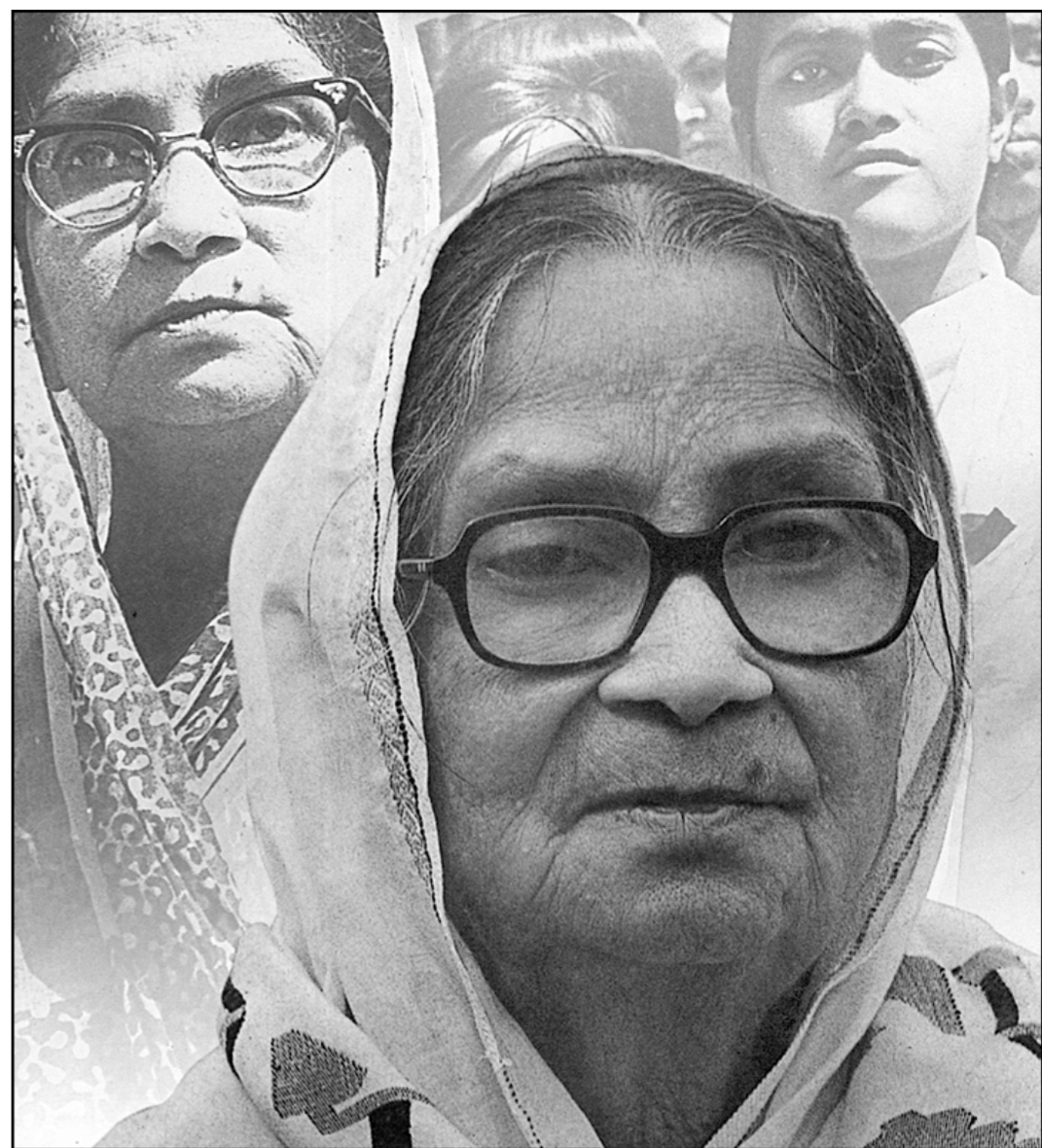
It is a commonplace to heap encomiums on Sufia Kamal for her cultural and literary work and contribution to women's emancipation. But, considered at depth, these are all cushioned on her unerring political positions of almost godly infallibility. Her stature has gained steadily over the years mainly owing to this and by as early as the mid-fifties she had become a truly national figure not only a mere entry on the women's Who's Who. Her assiduous rejection of privilege coming as it did from all successive governments Ayub's to Ershad's has lent her ethereal physical presence a kind of divine touch.

handled the police first and then the relatives of the killed boy. She took great care to see that I, the driver, did not enter into some shock and psychological trauma. And from the moment of the accident till today she had never held it against me. And how did she nurse me to sanity and health, curing me of the sense of guilt that weighed on me? I know but for her, I would only be a broken unbalanced one, never again to stand erect, morally, and perhaps physically too. Khala's greatness was of an infectious nature and the grandfather of the killed boy told police, "they are all honourable people and they have not hit my child knowingly. What will avail my harassing them? He will not return". Let me this chance of honouring where honour truly belongs.

Right from the Tagore centenary in 1961 Khala and a host of us were thickly involved in forging a cultural resistance gradually took the shape of Chhayanaout of which Sufia Kamal was the founding President. And she continues in that capacity to this day.

Come crackdown of March 25, 1971, gathering a five-member batch of freedom fighters I reached Calcutta on April 4. After we had completed our political and military missions with three of us fighting on the front I returned to Dhaka to take my family to Calcutta from a Sabhar hideout. Lodging the four of them at the residence of M K A Dewan, the income-tax chief, I headed for Khala's house on Dhanmondi Road 32. Right on top of the bridge on that road sat a four-storied building overlooking Sufia Kamal's single-story residence. A number of Pakistani Air Force officers were billeted there and as such there was a constant fierce-looking massive guard there. And while passing it with a thumping heart very natural for a returnee from Calcutta I got the impression that all of them there knew high treason dwelt at the humble house across the street. And while keeping an unrelenting watch on that house, they were feeling snug at their quarry's waiting, even as a clay pigeon, for a potshot.

I told Khala without much of an introductory pleasantries, I have come to take you to safety across the border. It is wise to hurry things up and get Dula Bhai (for strange reasons I always called her husband a brother-in-law) and her daughters and a minimum of travel



The poet in front of her own portraits from two earlier periods.

stubborn, yield to his superior knowledge and unsurpassed patriotism. As I walked up their terrace I found Dula Bhai pacing to and fro with all the world's anxiety and vexation. I knew at once both he and the women leaders felt in their hearts they did not trust Sufia Kamal to do their biddings against the dictates of her own conscience.

They also knew that their ideas about the needs of the hour could well be different from Sufia Khala's. Dula Bhai confided to me I am a small man. This woman has all her life brought honour to me an unending act of bestowal. But she is stubborn, that one. And I am all terrified if she wouldn't negate her life's good work by a single act of foolishness.

refusal of Sheikh's offer. I only hope the greatest regard for him.

Years later in the late eighties Sufia Kamal was confronted with a very hard decision even by her standards to make within some three or four days of the crisis coming to a head. Ershad, as counselled by the then culture secretary Dr Enamul Huq of the National Museum fame, went the whole hog to celebrate Ponchishey Baishakh the Tagore birth anniversary, as an important state function. He even accepted that the celebration could be dominated by sworn enemies of the Ershad regime Sufia Kamal to Sanjida Khatun to all of the faces unpleasant to the administration. He volunteered to personally meet Sufia Kamal and get her consent to inaugurate the Tagore Festival at Shilaidaha. Two elements in this proposal made Sufia Kamal almost to give in to it. First, she well knew as the founder-president of Chhayanaout and as the supreme leader of cultural resistance how things stood between Rabindranath and this state fast changing into a thoroughly communal one committed to undermine national culture and its best expression Rabindranath. Now the state, as represented by Ershad was spontaneously, nay eagerly too, wanting to make Tagore the best state mascot of Bangladesh. Much of the sin Ershad, had committed by circumcising the state stood to be atoned for by a very positive, progressive and culture-friendly initiative that Ershad was poised to take. All good people must need support him in this. This was an irresistible argument for her blessing the state Rabindra Jayanti.

The second element was her excessive love for the man who was nagging her to get into the wagon. Dr Enamul Huq had earned her affection through a lifetime's adulation and abiding loyalty to her and, of course, also through his many sterling achievements in the field of Bangla musicology in particular and Bengali culture in general.

Leaders of our cultural resistance, led by that relentless fighter Fayez Ahmed went to her in a body to make her stay away from the Ershad Jayanti the latest gimmick to sell Ershad to his detractors as also to weaken resistance to him.

She, however, was not at all convinced by their negative talk and they retired dissatisfied from the meeting.

Sufia Khala knew no answer to this. But then the historic event awaiting materialisation at Shilaidaha could not as well be allowed to go by default. Providence saved the situation, Sufia Khala developed some acute cardiovascular complication and was cocooned inside the intensive care unit of the Suhrawardy Hospital. The ICU became the pilgrimage where opposing roads met. Both Ershad himself and the resistance diehards kept a daynight vigil there.

A suspicion always lurked at the back of the mind of all who know her well. Perhaps her disease was not as strategically inspired as Mahatma Gandhi's or Moulana Bhashani's. But it may quite well be that she wanted exactly such a way out of the dilemma and the force of her will made her body yield to her wish.

The meek will inherit the kingdom of God, so said Jesus. Nirad C Choudhuri is not exactly the picture of meekness. But physically he is as unassuming as a doormouse. He believes that his frail and constantly failing five-foot body is at the root of his extraordinary longevity he is now 99. Sufia Khala beats Nirad Babu by a thousand miles in the meekness of the personality. And even physically she is far sparser than that unsparring Methuselah. May this be a key to her competing with Nirad Babu for the elevated place of the best serving Bengali centenarians. So much in Bangladesh needs her personal interest and care that she cannot leave us in another quarter of a century.

She will be faltering every so often but there hasn't ever been a more steadfast human being, her whole being focused on keeping her soul pure as it ever was and close to the heart of her people.

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The legendary poet

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

WE pay solemn tributes to the departed Poet Sufia Kamal on the occasion of her ninety-first birthday. Born with a silver spoon in her mouth on 20 June 1911 at the residence of her father Syed Moazzem Hossain at Shaiyestabad in Barisal, Sufia Kamal had lived a very strict life as she was born in an orthodox aristocrat Muslim family. In spite of liberal attitude of her husband she had to pass through a veiled life. During those old days young Muslim girls were forbidden to attend school. Therefore, Sufia Kamal was deprived of schooling, but she had the privilege to study at home.

In her teens she established contacts with Editor Nasiruddin of the monthly Shaogat, which started publication in 1918 from Calcutta and she was inspired by him to write for. As a matter of fact, Shaogat was the only literary journal, which provided platform for the writers from the Muslim community to groom. Both young male and female writers had made contributions to Shaogat. Nasiruddin took pains to encourage Muslim women writers. In this connection, one is tempted to recall a letter from Sufia N. Hossain in response to the Editor's invitation where she expressed her regret as she was not accustomed to write article but she was amazed to see the names of a very few Muslim writers. The letter was dated 23 July 1929. Till then poet Sufia Kamal used to write as Sufia N. Hossain. That was her first letter to the Editor, which was printed in that name.

As a result of the inspiration of the Editor Shaogat Poet Sufia Kamal started to contribute poems

and short stories to Shaogat regularly. A separate weekly for women was brought out by Nasiruddin in July 1947. The weekly Begum was published from Calcutta and Poet Sufia Kamal was made its Acting Editor.

During 90 years of her life Poet Sufia Kamal presented 16 books to the society of which eight are of poetry. Her diary of liberation war 1971 is a significant document of the tragic events. She wrote her autobiography also.

Apart from her contribution to the establishment of the rights of women of this country during Pakistani period and after liberation of Bangladesh as well, her association with the birth of the biggest national children's organization, Kachi-Kanchar Mela, remains a milestone in the movement for emancipation of the children. Members of Kachi-Manchar Mela feel proud to recall with deep sense of gratitude the contribution she made towards establishment of this organization. The foundation stone of this organization was laid at her Tarabagh residence on 5 October 1956. Poet Sufia Kamal became part of Kachi-Kanchar Mela as its Founder-Advisor. In fact she was the inspiration for flourishing this organization all over Bangladesh. On many occasions Poet Sufia Kamal joined the caravan of the Central Kachi-Kanchar Mela to travel to different district and subdivision branches of the Mela as part of organizational tour. To three generations of members of Kachi-Kanchar Mela Poet Sufia Kamal was known as Khala amma.

It was a matter of honour and privilege to come to contact with such a personality who was so

humane by nature. I met her first in 1961 at her Dhanmondi residence and almost became a member of her family by virtue of my association with her son, Shoiab, who was also associated with Kachi-Kanchar Mela. The is last time I spoke to Poet Sufia Kamal was on 20 June 1998 to congratulate her on her birthday from my official residence at Bonn where I was then serving as a Bangladesh diplomat.

Her voice was readily heard when even there was oppression against women and children in the country. She was an uncompromising lady as far as basic values of human dignity were concerned. Pakistani authorities could not succeed in obtaining her signature on the statement issued by so-called intellectuals of the former East Pakistan during the period of liberation war. Her two daughters Sultana Kamal and Syeda Kamal participated in the liberation war.

Poet Sufia Kamal was the Founder-President of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad.

She was soft-spoken, but maintained a determined and strong personality. She became a legendary figure during her lifetime, as she was the voice for progressive movements in the country, both in social and cultural arena.

Her death on 20 November 1999 was a blow to the nation and particularly to the founder-director of Central Kachi-Kanchar Mela, Rakanuzzaman Khan Dada bhai, who also followed her footprint on 30 December the same year.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former diplomat, is associated with Kachi-Kanchar Mela.



With National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam

Her life is an open book for all to read and react. All her work is public and subject to scrutiny which she passes. Deep in my mind I thirsted for an extremely personal and first hand feel of her greatness ever since in the late forties her eldest child, the unmanageably naughty Shahed now a senior journalist-attracted me by his unflinching friendship. Of a hundred glimpses into her greatness not as a writer or as a leader but as a human being bereft of all social trappings I feel impelled to talk of only one or two.

In the late sixties Sufia Khala wanted to go to Pairaband, Rangpur the ancestral home of Begum Rokeya to attend some commemorative function. I had a programme of my own to go to Dinajpur with Bula Ahmed, the younger sister of the Toru Ahmed who was to become a legendary figure in three or four years she was destined to live. My own mother-in-law Mrs Qazi Motaah Hossain and Mrs Jafar, wife of the famous architect were to accompany Khala. I requested them all to honour me by travelling in my cozy Italian car.

I was dog tired when we set out from Dhaka. Dusk fell when we reached Nagarbari. And a nagging drizzle started. Before getting past Mahasthan I passed out for a moment and hit an overloaded rickshaw coming up on the wrong side of the road. All five of us were injured and a rickshaw passenger was dead.

things in a jiffy. I shall come to collect them the next day.

My air of urgency had no effect on her. She was her usual self of saintly composure as she told me it is good you feel such concern for us. Lulu's father (My Dula Bhai) is against moving out of this house come what may. You know him well enough one resigned to fate, eternally. How can I move if he doesn't?

I came back hurt but yet touched by her resolute and fearless decision. That was on April 30. And at the end of May 1 again returned to Dhaka to collect more of my people. I got everyone I targeted except Iqbal, the singer. And except Sufia Kamal and her family. The risks in the meantime had multiplied. But Khala was the same unruffled wife about the house, busy doing her chores. Thank you for your taking so much trouble, but there is indeed no way we can oblige you she said without using as many words.

In 1975 shortly after Bangabandhu had floated BKSAL, he sent for his dear Apa to please come and have a chat with him. Sufia Kamal walked down the few buildings that stood between her residence and the great Sheikh's. This was the shortest walk in my knowledge that generated the greatest trepidation not in Khala's mind but in Dula Bhai's and some young firebrand leaders of women's action. They all advised and entreated Khala to accept whatever Bangabandhu would say. The leaders spoke of the dictates of political correctness to justify their advice. Dula Bhai's was, however, more an admonition. Do not be



The reminiscing poet.



Poet Sufia Kamal at Editor Nasiruddin's birthday celebrations.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

FILE PHOTO: STAR