

Remembering my brother Munier

KABIR CHOWDHURY

WE were fourteen, eight brothers and six sisters. Sometimes we were asked, all of the same mother? The answer was, yes. Now we are no longer fourteen. We have lost two brothers and one sister. One brother succumbed to a massive heart attack and the sister died of kidney failure. It is, however, the death of Munier, my immediate younger brother, that haunts us relentlessly and causes us the cruellest pain.

Munier was picked up from Darul Afia, our family residence at Dhanmandi Central Road on December 14, 1971 at noon by some members of the Al-Badr, the Bengali collaborators of the Pakistani occupation army. He had just taken his bath and was about to sit for launch. Our mother was standing by the dining table waiting to serve him.

Just then Rousseau, another younger brother of ours, came

up and told Munier that some young men introducing themselves as Munier's students wanted to have a word with him. When Munier was about to go towards the front door mother said, "Munier, let them wait a few minutes. You have your lunch first and then go and see them." My brother told mother that it would take only a minute or two. He would see them first and then eat. He went to the door when two young men walked up to him and said that they wanted to ask him some questions. It won't take long. They would bring him back in no time. Munier did not know them. They looked neither hostile nor friendly but appeared very determined. Munier's wife Lily, who was watching them from the door, did not like their looks. They led Munier to a waiting microbus and disappeared. Mother stood by the window vaguely alarmed and sad and looked at her son who

left so suddenly without taking a single bite at the food she had laid on the table. She did not see Munier ever again. No one did.

Bangladesh was liberated on December 16. Only then did we come to know of the incredible brutal killings of our intellectuals. A number of dead bodies were discovered in a mud and water-filled ditch at Rayerbazar. Most of the bodies were mutilated in one way or another. They included our most distinguished writers, teachers, journalists and doctors. But Munier's body was not there. It was never found.

As a young boy Munier was impulsive, boisterous, indifferent about his studies, although he was very sharp and intelligent. Munier and I were very close. He was a great lover of English films made in Hollywood. In the barren sprawling field of Paltan of the late 1930s, there was an odd-looking tin-shed cinema hall by the grandiose name of Britannica. Only foreign films were screened there. Munier hardly missed a film-show and often dragged me along. I, too, was a lover of films in my own way, but I was more of the studious type even in those days of the late 1930s, and the early 1940s.

One afternoon as I was busy studying in my room behind a closed glass door Munier came up and knocked at the door. He wanted to come in and talk to me. I told him in sign language that I was preparing for my class tomorrow and couldn't talk to him then. I was a student of class X and Munier of class VIII. My gestures were of no use. He went on knocking at the glass door. Suddenly I heard an ear-splitting noise of shattered glass. On looking up from my home-work I was horrified to see a deep cut on Munier's

wrist with blood gushing out of it in a rapid flow. I screamed, but Munier stood behind the shattered glass door with a wide grin on his unperturbed face and a defiant glint in his twinkling eyes as if he was telling me: 'Look, what you have done! If you had opened the door the first time I knocked nothing like this would happen.' In the meantime the noise made by the shattered glass and my scream had brought mother up. She quickly bandaged Munier's wrist with a clean strip of cloth and sent him to a hospital close by. It was a pretty deep cut. The doctor had to close it with six stitches. He said that if the cut went a little deeper it would have severed Munier's veins and then his life would have been at stake.

As I remember my brother a host of memories come crowding into my mind. After passing his Matriculation examination in 1941 he went to Aligarh to study there according to our father's wishes. Father himself was a student at the Aligarh Muslim University in his day. Munier didn't like Aligarh much. He came back to Dhaka two years later and got himself admitted into Dhaka University. However, he came back from Aligarh considerably changed in many respects. He had become a voracious reader, developed a keen wit and a rich sense of humour and an amazing fluency in English and Urdu. Soon he became a fluent speaker in Bangla, too. In no time he became a great favourite of his fellow students as well as of his teachers. He excelled in the various co-curricular activities, grabbing most of the prizes in the competitions organised by the different residential halls of

Dhaka University. He was particularly brilliant in the sphere of extempore speech and debate. In those days the annual cultural competitions of the various residential halls were held at about the same time. It was a familiar sight to see Munier cycling fast towards another hall anxious to participate in some event there after participating in the competition in one hall. I also vividly remember his role during the University's annual sports events. He was always the first choice of all concerned for giving the running commentary, both in English and Bangla, as the sport continued from one item to another. He was full of wit and humour. He never fumbled for words and kept perfect pace with the events that were being enacted on the field.

Munier passed his MA examination in English literature in 1947. It was about this time that he was attracted to communist ideology. In 1952 he was arrested for his involvement in the 21st February Language Movement. And it was in jail that he wrote his celebrated play "Kabar". And it was also from the jail that he appeared at the MA examination in Bangla and came out first in the first class. My wife and I used to visit him in jail once in every month. We took with us some tid-bits for him to eat and a number of books for him to read. He appreciated the books more than the snacks. However, everything had to be strictly examined first by the authorised prison officials before Munier could lay his hands on them.

My memories of Munier are endless. They are also very vivid, as if the events concerned had happened only yesterday. In 1950-58 Munier was studying linguistics at the

Harvard University in the USA on a Rockefeller Foundation Scholarship. My wife and I were also in the States about that time, both of us on Fulbright fellowship. My wife was in South Dakota while I was in Minnesota. But we got together during a break in our programmes and visited Munier in Boston. We spent a very pleasant week with him, his wife Lily and his young son Bhashon. One afternoon Munier and I walked along the Charles river. He presented me a copy of Eugene O'Neill's famous play 'Long Day's Journey into Night'. He had the book with him, and as he handed it to me he expressed a hope that I might like to translate it into Bangla. This was in 1958. Nearly ten years later my translation of the O'Neill play was published in 1966 which gave my brother immense pleasure. Oh, how many plans we had made that afternoon of 1958 as we sat on the grassy bank of Boston's Charles river and saw its waters smoothly flow along.

During the dark frightful days of 1971 Munier was staying at Darul Afia. He had moved there with his family from his university residence in Ramna after the Pak army's killings in that locality on the night of March 25. I lived in my Gulshan residence for the better part of those unforgettable nine months of pain and terror. But in early December 1971 I had a feeling that it was no longer safe for me to stay there. I quietly moved out of Gulshan and went to an address which only a few persons very close to me, including Munier, knew. Events were moving very fast in December of that year. Our valiant freedom fighters were gaining ground in many places routing ignominiously the much vaunted Pakistani soldiers.

On 12th December I got a phone call from Munier. He softly said over the phone, "Manik Bhai, it seems that our victory is very near. I can see it just round the corner." His voice quivered with suppressed emotion. I seemed to see before me his eyes lighting up with joy and hope. But, also, I was not destined to see him in flesh and blood ever again.

As a scholar, as a playwright, as a family man, as a friend and as a son and brother he was incomparable. And he gave us and his country a great deal: a large number of scholarly books; some superb plays, original, adopted and translated; a typewriter, the Munier Optima, with an advanced keyboard; and the dream of an enlightened Bangladesh free from religious bigotry. But the Al-Badr killers snuffed out the light of his life when the country needed him most. Those killers and their godfathers were nothing but hard-core war criminals. Currently there is a wave all over Bangladesh for trying those war criminals by setting up a special tribunal. The present caretaker government will do well to heed the mood of the country and take necessary steps to try the war criminals without any further delay. It will not bring back Munier and others like him but it will serve, to some extent, the ends of justice.

We have wasted thirty-six years; we must not waste any more. Let the following well-known adage be proved true with regard to the war criminals of Bangladesh: "Though the mills of God grind slowly yet they grind exceeding small."

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Munier Chowdhury (first from left) with his brothers and sisters.

Recollecting Professor Santosh Bhattacharjee

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I have been interested in history/historiography since I had barely stepped into my teens. Part of the reason was my father, who was a student in the History department of Dhaka University in the late 1930s. He was a history buff, and never lost an opportunity to instill in my formative mind the mysteries, revelations, conflicts, rise and fall of civilizations, and other fascinating events that had taken place down the ages (he never mentioned the amorous escapades of kings and queens, and other historical personalities, though). As I was about to begin my own life as a university student, he ended his oral education. It was at Dhaka University, though, where my fascination for history was finally gelled for life.

A particular person was largely responsible for my eternal tryst with history. This account, mostly from personal memory, is a tribute to that man. Professor Santosh Bhattacharjee was that person. Strictly, he was a Senior Lecturer (now known as Assistant Professor) in the History department, even though, when I was his student, he was in his mature years. There was a premium on the number of Professors and Readers (now called Associate Professors) then in every department, and for some reason or the other (not having a Ph.D. comes to mind), Senior Lecturer Bhattacharjee did not advance beyond the position that he

held. For me, however, he will always remain Professor Santosh Bhattacharjee.

One can only indulge in conjecture to figure out if he would have been eventually elevated to a full professor's position with the creation of Bangladesh. But he was an exemplary teacher, all right. In consonance with the flow of my academic life, I selected General History as one of my subsidiary subjects. And Indian History was one of the topics I had to study. Professor Bhattacharjee taught this subject, or, to be exact, taught the sub-continent's ancient history. It was a riveting fifty minutes or so, as the man's erudition came through, delivered in English, and as far as I can remember, without the aid of any lecture notes. The people, society, civilization, dynasties, wars and conquests relating to this old country, many nations were recounted in rich, variegated colours.

There was this one occasion, though, when, with the approaching Ekushey February in mind, one student requested him to deliver his lecture in Bangla. And he did, and, again, if memory serves me right, not one word of English broke the linguistic harmony of the entire lecture. I hope any student reading this does not get the wrong idea, but I had the habit of playing truant in class. But I never failed to attend any of Professor Bhattacharjee's, and not because the sword of punishment for attendance missed beyond a fixed per-

centage hung over our heads (I had to do a penance of copying some two hundred foolscap pages for missing more than the acceptable number of classes at Notre Dame College).

Simply, I enjoyed Professor Bhattacharjee's lectures. He was a rather short man, with an almost entirely white head of hair brushed back, a quizzical, sardonic glimmer in his eyes, and usually wore a white shirt. He looked unassuming; he was unassuming, but he had at least one amusing idiosyncrasy that I, and many others, was aware of. He was an inveterate smoker. That, in itself, was not amusing, not to say, unusual, in those days (or, these days, either). Neither was the way he inhaled and exhaled. The glowing white stick (filter-tipped cigarettes were both rare and expensive in Dhaka) was puffed down with a reflective air and, no doubt, great pleasure. That is, as one caught him in the inhaling state when he had all the time in the world. Which situation, I suspect, he was in more often than not. But, then, there were those frenetic times, just as the hourly classes were about to begin, when Professor Bhattacharjee's antics would be on splendid display. He would lounge around the front side entrance to the large lecture hall, and wait for the bell announcing the commencement of classes to ring (that is

right, ring, not clang an unholy cacophony) before traversing the short distance to his pulpit.

And he made it a point of making a beeline for the lectern almost as soon as he heard the first few trilling notes of the bell. Invariably, however, he had a cigarette dangling between his lips, or positioned between scissored fingers when the bell rang. And he would frantically drop



those glowing sticks, whatever the state of their burning down process, to his feet, brutally crush and grind them under ferociously sliding heels, and then walk through the doorway. I would not have blamed any poor soul in the vicinity who might have cursed his receding back. You see, sometimes the cigarette would be dropped at his merciless feet only half-smoked or after only one or two puffs, but

their utter decimation rendered them totally unfit for a second life!

Once in front of the class, to reiterate, Professor Bhattacharjee became transformed, from a mild-mannered, (probably) chain-smoking, relaxed individual to a superb lecturer who held his audience in thrall, and even amusement, as he did when he spent the better part of two lectures explaining the latrine system of the Mohenjodaro civilization. But human nature being what it is, not all the students found his lectures as fascinating as many of their classmates did, or those who did, uniformly compelling. The uneven interest gave rise to a hilarious incident, and a poignant coincidence.

One afternoon, not long after class had begun, we were treated to the rare sight of two of our classmates, otherwise attentive and conscientious, rapidly making their way out of the hall, and Professor Bhattacharjee, momentarily bemused at the sight, staring after them with mouth slightly agape. Many of us saw that part, and some of what followed till the bizarre scene's denouement, but I actually filled in the gaps when I paid Professor Fakrul Alam a visit shortly after I received the request for carrying out this assignment. Dr. Fakrul Alam, Professor of English, Dhaka University, thoughtful writer and literary critic, and my

friend since we were schoolmates at St. Joseph's High. I went to see him because he was one of the two escapees. The other was another of our schoolmates, Nasim Mohsin, at that time a student in the English department. As Fakrul related, Nasim told him that he was not in the mood to sit through the period, and that he was going to take off. And proceeded to do so, with Fakrul, probably thinking it a rather rummy idea, in tow. As they were making their way out, the good professor swung into action. He first yelled at them to stop, but, then, they were (prudently, under the circumstances) in no mood to do so. This part we all witnessed with growing mirth.

The rest was narrated after all these years, with his personal stamp of authority, by Fakrul. The two decamping students quickly reached the top of the stairs that would take them down to the first floor and --- freedom! By this time they were relaxed, certain in their assumption that they had given the good professor the slip. Imagine their shock and surprise when they heard themselves being hailed and Professor Bhattacharjee coming along the corridor towards them! The sound and that sight were enough to galvanize the two into scooting down the stairs, but still feeling the presence of their determined pursuer, finally lost him by dashing down the corridor, shooting up another, different, flight of stairs, and ending up on another side of the cavernous classroom! That part I heard. What I saw was Professor

Bhattacharjee returning, looking rather crestfallen, huffing and puffing with his exertion, and regretting that he could not nab the two naughty boys!

Professor Bhattacharjee stayed inside Bangladesh for the most part during the liberation struggle. That was ironic, considering that so many of his countrymen and women, the vast majority of whom were Muslims, had sought sanctuary across the border in India, but he, an upper-caste Hindu, chose to stay back in an environment clearly fraught with great danger for his co-religionists. Maybe he thought that he would not come to any harm, or maybe he just could not tear himself away from his motherland, especially if he had thought he could not, for some reason, return to it from his sanctuary. Whatever the reason, he could not have known that he was dancing with death. And so he was killed, inside occupied Bangladesh, on the eve of its emergence as a sovereign independent nation-state, a mild-mannered academic who, for whatever grounds, could not tear himself away from his motherland. He died not too long after Nasim Mohsin, captured on his way to joining the freedom-fighters across the border, and then executed. The chaser and the chased were finally united through sacrificing themselves for the freedom of their nation.

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