

NON-FICTION

Bengalis in Pakistan: the long ordeal

NURUN NAHAR HASHIM

When the war started, we were unfortunate enough to be based in Pakistan's capital Islamabad. We lived in different countries as part of my husband Syed Najmuddin Hashim's foreign postings. In 1970, he was appointed Executive Director General of Pakistan Council. In that connection, we found ourselves in the official quarters located in the foothills of Margala Hills in Islamabad. Before that we were in Paris, France.

While the freedom movement was gaining momentum in the country, there were a few senior Bengalis in the civil administration. Some of these individuals harboured pro-Pakistani sentiments. They were sent to East Pakistan to gather intelligence on the movement under the cover of office inspection. And those Bengali officers like my husband who did not support Pakistan were deprived of the facility of visiting Bangladesh even for official purposes. At one point they were forbidden to come home, although this was unofficially enforced. Then the war started. All links between the two halves of Pakistan were severed. This is how we happened to get stuck there. Immediately after the war began, it became very difficult for Bengalis to move around on the streets. Apart from the usual verbal harassment, sometimes stones were thrown at us. One day a stone hit my leg. This sort of harassment was a daily affair. But there were exceptions. My neighbours and friends were very concerned about our welfare. I remember our milkman in particular. A poor Sindh, he used to say, 'Mother, you will stay with me if there is any problem. Although I am poor, I will take good care of you.' The government's attitude towards us was very hostile. Government officials and others who did not wish to see this land independent were always suspicious of us.

We were very depressed about the fact that the country was at war and we were stuck in Pakistan and could not return home. We were totally cut off from friends and family. The only way to learn about home was through radio broadcasts. We used to listen to the radio very secretly, having reduced the volume and closed all shutters and windows to the house. Naturally in that state of mind, we were all down mentally, but whenever we learnt of the successes of the Muktiyoddhas on the ground, our spirits were lifted tremendously. Although we feared losing the war, we felt in our hearts that no matter what the cost we must gain independence and free Sheikh Mujib. However, none of us suspected that the war would be over so soon. We were heartbroken when we learnt of the killing of intellectuals from BBC Radio, many of whom were Hashim's closest friends. The heart-rending news of the killing of Dr. Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, Dr. GC Dev and others took their toll on us. I felt helpless about comforting Hashim in any way when he heard of the killing his boyhood friends Shahidullah Kaiser and Munier Chowdhury. Anger and hatred for the Pakistanis grew so strong that we didn't feel like staying in their midst for a moment longer. This is how we spent the nine

months of the war. The country gained independence on December 16. We were unable to express our joy due to our hostile surroundings. The only solace was that we greeted other like-minded Bengalis stuck there with us in secret and congratulated our brave boys at home in our hearts.

The Pakistani government gave the option to Bengali officers. Those who opted to remain in Pakistan would not be removed from their jobs. Naturally, with the exception of a handful of officers, all Bengali officers and families wanted to go home. Those officers who chose to stay were made Pakistani nationals and the others who decided to come back were fired from their jobs on July 11, 1972. All travel links between newly independent Bangladesh and Pakistan were severed. However, many retired Bengali officers escaped from Pakistan and made their way back to Bangladesh in this period. Suddenly we found certain families gone. They never shared their plans with close friends and aides, such as the time then.

women, including myself, set up a make-shift school so that our children might not be deprived of education where the ladies used to teach various subjects.

A few days later, the Pakistani authorities gathered all the Bengali families together from various areas. Two to three families were forced to live in one house. Suddenly one day, we found police patrolling the neighbourhood. The authorities announced that no Bengali may venture out of houses. Around 10:30 pm somebody was banging the door furiously. When we opened it, we found the police who informed us that we were all detained under Pakistani law and would be transported to camps within 30 minutes! We were given the option --- Bengali officers may choose to go alone or with families to the camps. I climbed over the fence to my neighbour's house (Mr. A.K.M. Ahsan's residence) to ask *bhabi* about what we should do. We decided to let our husbands go alone at this moment because it was impossible to gather everything in half an

informed us that the authorities had incarcerated all of them in Kadirabad camp located in Gujranwala district in Punjab, where they had arrived at 3 a.m. in the morning! We ladies started making preparations to join our husbands. My elderly mother who had come to visit us was also stuck in Pakistan. My mother had decided to come and see her youngest daughter after the war broke out, since there was no way to learn of our fate. It was my mother who gave me the strength to join my husband. At this time, my husband's good friend Abdul Baten offered to take me to the camp to visit Hashim. Although he was a Bengali, he taught at the university and so had not been incarcerated with the rest of them. With Mr. Baten's aid, all of us, including the children, moved to Mr. Ehtesham's house which was located near the camp. Mr. Ehtesham and his spouse helped us greatly. The next day we went to visit the camp with a big cauldron of *khichuri* and some cooked chicken.

When we arrived at camp, all the inmates were thunderstruck to see me as no other Bengali had gone to visit them. I found seven or eight of them living in a single bungalow. Their faces unshaven, they were attired only in *lungi* and *genji* with no one to look after them. I was terribly heartbroken to see them in this state. The camp authorities brought their food while I was there - a couple of chapattis and a large bowl of curry with one or two pieces of meat floating around. Thankfully, they didn't have to eat that rubbish on that day. The 20 - 25 inmates all had the food we took with us to the camp.

My sons were ecstatic to be reunited with their father. The little time they had with their father, they wouldn't let him out of their sight, insisting that he feed them, wash their faces and sit on his lap. Soon it was time to leave. All of them stared vacantly after us as we left, not knowing when the next visit would come, if at all. After we returned, all the family members of the other Bengali officers swooped down on us wanting to know of the state of their loved ones.

A week or so after my visit to Kadirabad camp, Hashim astonished all of us by turning up at the house one day! He informed us that the Pakistani authorities had decided to move senior Bengali officers with families to Warsak camp in Peshawar. We were informed that this would take place on 5 June 1973. We only took clothing with us. All of us were put on a bus. At least 30 families were crammed on to that bus! What a situation! Nowhere to stand, sit or breathe! On top of that, the drivers halted frequently for tea and gossip and Urdu songs blasted away loudly all the way to our destination. No consideration at all for the passengers on their minds. We finally arrived the following morning after traveling all night. There began another harrowing experience. The camp was already inhabited by some Bengali air force officers and their families. We shared the stingy accommodation with them. It was terribly hot at that time of the year. My elderly mother was with us and my husband had no job. Whether we would ever be allowed to return to Bangladesh, and the sheer feeling

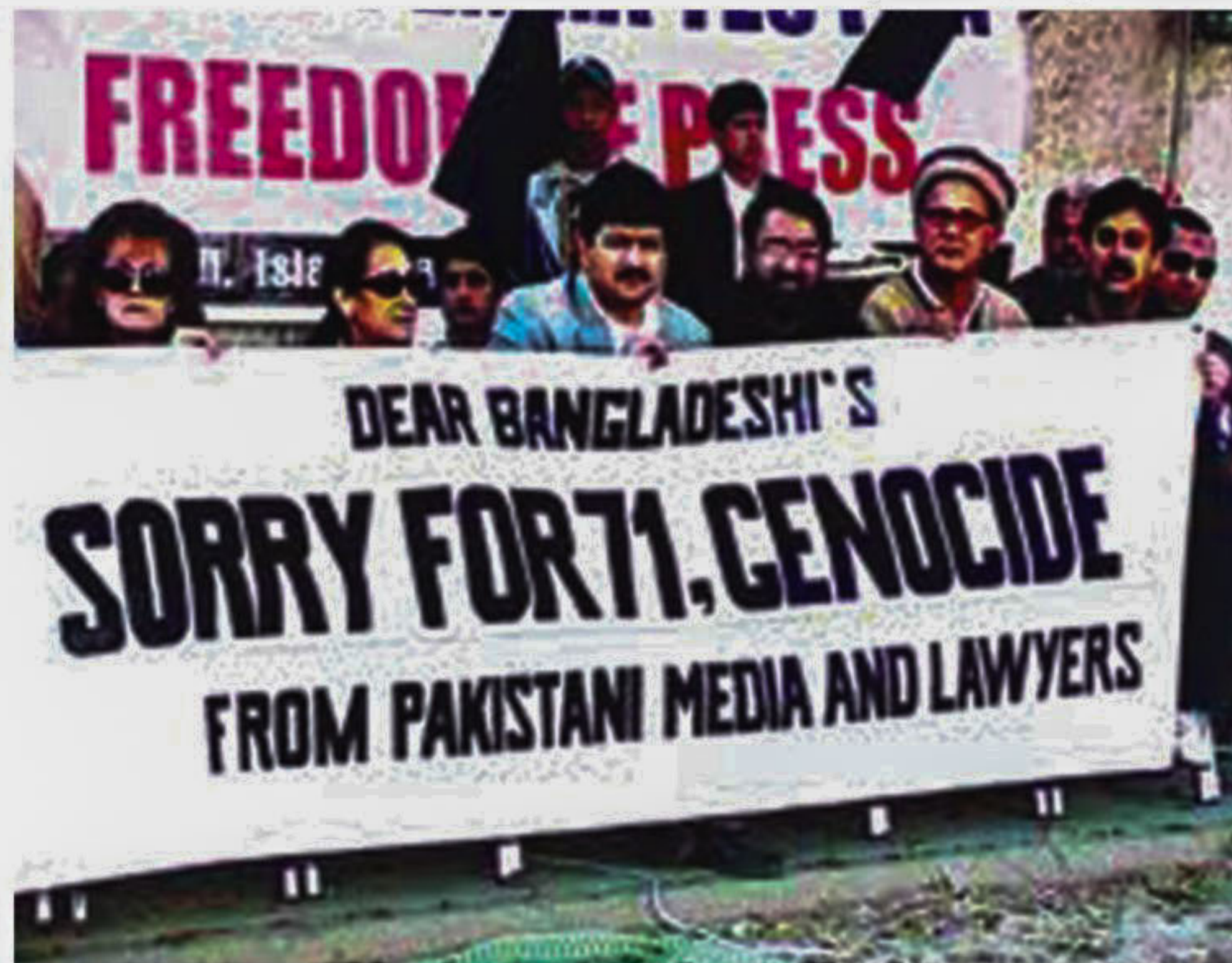
of helplessness that came from the fact that we could be killed at any time - all these uncertainties took me to near breaking point.

Besides, there were other discomforts like cooking and eating in the same room, and that too on a single kerosene stove. Once in a while meat and vegetables used to come to the camp for which we had to stand in a long queue and if one was late then everything would be sold out. At first, these conditions seemed unbearable. As time went by, I guess we all became used to it. This is how we spent a couple of months. All the while, thoughts of home and loved ones always hovered at the back of our minds. Who was alive, who had been killed, how long we would be stuck in this God forsaken land, all these issues made life a living hell. While the rest of us suffered from depression, Hashim became more and more indignant. He used to say, if and when we return, we shall return with all Bengalis as heroes. I never thought of leaving my husband behind and fleeing with my children. All the time, I believed in the notion that when we returned, we would all come back together. The worst pain during that period was emotional, something that I cannot put into words. Living from day to day was a pain. For relief, we organised regular prayers, *qul khwani*, etc, praying to Allah for a swift and safe return home and for the safety of those at home. Finally, under international pressure, the Pakistanis were forced to release us on 22 October 1973. Under the supervision of the International Red Cross, planes chartered from Ariana Afghan Airlines repatriated the Bengalis stuck in Pakistan.

How can one describe one's feelings at that time, especially when the plane was touching down at Kurmitola airport in Dhaka? It was impossible to let anyone know who would be coming home and when. Even then, some anxious relatives of compatriots stuck in Pakistan always used to wait at the airport in case they were on board. Thus, we too found some of our relatives waiting for us. Najmuddin Hashim found his close associate and friend Mr. Enayet Karim, the first Foreign Secretary of independent Bangladesh, waiting to receive us, and it was a very joyous reunion. We felt that a great weight had been lifted from our chests when we breathed in the fresh air of Dhaka. Then we went home.

Seeing and meeting so many after such a long time, was an occasion of endless joy and relief. Besides the exhilaration of being free, I also experienced how greatly we had come to hate Pakistan. That is why even after our release from the camp, I didn't feel like going back to our house in Islamabad to gather our things. The abhorrence was so great that we chose to leave everything behind and come home to our dear and beloved sovereign Bangladesh. The relief of having survived the ordeal was overwhelming and cannot be described in words.

NURUN NAHAR HASHIM IS A SOCIAL WORKER AND WIFE OF THE LATE SYED NAJM UDDIN HASHIM. THE ARTICLE IS A TRANSLATION BY SYED MANSUR HASHIM FROM THE BENGALI VERSION PUBLISHED IN WEEKLY RUPANTAR.



There was no question of remaining there since Bangladesh had become independent. But running away secretly was not a mentality shared by my husband and our friends. Besides, there were many Bengalis there who did not have sufficient financial resources to take the long road home. These included servants, gardeners, fishermen and many other classes of people with dependents. To help them, Hashim and others had formed a committee during the war to give protection, financial aid and help on their return to the homeland. The committee members included A.K.M. Ahsan, Shafiqul Azam, Anwar Uddin Khan and others. Leaving all of them behind and running off into the night was not a notion we entertained. With the expulsion of Bengalis from the civil service, their children were banned from attending school. The

hour and the children were small. We were totally unprepared to move at this juncture, so we stayed.

The authorities assured us that the families who stayed behind would be kept together. They took our husbands away in the dead of night. Where they were being taken, how long they would be imprisoned, what would be done to them, when they would be released, if at all, when would the families be reunited were all unanswered questions. Next morning when my two children, Tonmoy aged 7, and Snigdho aged 4, woke up to find their beloved father gone, they showered me with a thousand questions to which I had no answers. After they were taken away, the families were free to move around, but felt no peace of mind. After three or four days, I received a letter from Hashim. He

TRIBUTE

Razia Khan Amin: teacher, poet, novelist

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

Razia Khan Amin taught us English literature at the University of Dhaka in the mid-seventies and early eighties. She died at seventy five in a Dhaka hospital of old age complications on December 28, 2011. Kaiser Haq, one of her best students and Bangladesh's premier English language poet, SMS-ed me the news of her death. I was dumbfounded. I didn't even know that she was in a hospital.

Winter has always brought death with it. This year's winter is getting unbearable. First, novelist Rashid Karim. Then Prof. Kabir Chowdhury. After that Abdur Razzak, the Awami League's popular leader. We had to wait for his death to find out that the good man in politics was still loved by the people. Abdur Razzak was a very healthy man in his thirties and forties. When I used to attend my DU classes in 1980 or 1981, he used to take his seven-year-old daughter to school in a rickshaw through Dhanmandi Road No. 2. The little girl certainly got his company less than she needed. She talked to her heart's content all the way. I affectionately looked at the father and daughter duo every day. I was shaken to my roots when I later learned that the cute girl had died of cancer and Abdur Razzak had wept like a child for her. Thirty years later the nation wept for him. December 2011 also snatched away Brother Thomas More, my elegant and learned headmaster at St. Gregory's High School. Finally Razia Khan Amin, one of our favourite senior teachers at Dhaka University and a creative person of rare merit.

O Winter, I would love you to leave quickly. I need spring. I don't need any more death. I love life. I am utterly depressed as I write one obituary article after another.

Shahnaz Munni, a brilliant writer of fiction and poetry of this generation, informs me that she interviewed Razia Khan Amin as a young writer/journalist in 1997 or 1998. The lady was

very, very affectionate to her. In fact, she hasn't seen a more affectionate senior writer/academician. I told her that Prof. Amin might have liked her polite and respectful behaviour a lot. Shahnaz is famous for her modesty and nice manners. On the other hand, the late professor/writer occasionally complained that the present day youngster was not well-behaved or thoughtful. Razia Khan Amin, my respected teacher, was a gifted person, a little whimsical but very affectionate.

In 1992 a student leader friend of mine took me to her Gulshan residence. She was in an apron with a broom in hand. She was cleaning her drawing room. An Oxonian, senior professor, bilingual poet and brilliant Bangla novelist! Typical of her, she told us point blank, 'Fine that you have come to see me but I am busy. I can't let you eat anything. Don't be offended, okay?' We assured her that it was okay with us. We listened to her. I told her of an incident or two that I remembered from her classes. I one day liked the word 'phillistine' used by her. She was regretting that the world was getting full of them. Another day only I in the class could name Laura, Petrarch's sweetheart, on being asked by her. We were learning sonnets and we were barely out of our teens then. She was perhaps fed up with seeing meritorious students with no love for or little knowledge of literature. She was so happy that she praised me in superlative terms. 'Full marks to the young man,' she gladly announced. I was instantly a hero of sorts.

Suddenly, in her drawing room in 1992, she looked smilingly at me, threw away the broom and got rid of her apron. 'Sit quiet. Let me see what is there in the fridge.' I smiled quietly at my friend. I knew I had struck the right string in her heart. She came back with sandwiches, sweets, seven-ups and what not. 'All my life I wanted to teach students like you, Junaid. How gratifying that you remember so much from my class

lectures even after all these years!' For an hour or so she gave us her wonderful company and undiluted mother's affection. She was only a couple of years younger than my own mother. I also saw an innocent child in her. She called Asha Mehreen Amin, her daughter, and proudly introduced us to her. The polite, soft-spoken girl had just stepped into her twenties but was already working for The Daily Star.

My friend Syed Badrul Ahsan also wrote about Prof. Amin's innocence in his wonderful tribute to her in this page last week. She once chose the wrong wife for me too. It was the marriage ceremony of a friend. He was getting married to another friend's sister. Prof. Amin saw me talking to the bridegroom's older sister, two or three years senior to us. 'You have got a truly beautiful wife, Junaid.' She looked very happy. Apa took it easy, so I was not embarrassed. But I promptly brought my own wife to her. She was very affectionate to her too. After that visit to her residence she was quite fond of me. So, she grabbed the hand of the prettiest lady at the gathering and wanted her to be my wife!

She was a brilliant English poet and a wonderful Bangla novelist, one of our very best. Yes, she was bilingual in the Serajul Islam Choudhury and Syed Manzoorul Islam mould. Or she was a combination of Kaiser Haq and Syed Manzoorul Islam, two of her favourite students. It is sad that both her volumes of English poetry, *Argus Under Anaesthesia* (1976) and *Cruel April* (1977) are out of print. She has a wonderful diction and her images are brilliant. She deals with time, love and her own spiritual conflict. She records for posterity the brutal genocide of 1971 and the horrifying and tragic murder of our intellectuals. It is doubly sad that her Bangla novels are also mostly out of print. She wrote beautiful Bangla prose and her ideas were well ahead of her time. In her handling of the man-woman relationship, she was bold and

unconventional. She had love for the poor too. *Chitrakabya*, *Bot Tolar Upanyash* and *Anukalpa* are very good novels by any standard.

She was a brilliant student with degrees from home and abroad. She liked Dr. Jyotirmoy Guha Thakurta as her teacher. She was a bold and affectionate teacher herself. She detested the banal and the uncouth. She was very happy with intelligent and imaginative students. She had the guts to accuse T S Eliot, of all people, of making sweeping remarks while teaching us 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. She admired Dr. Khan Sarwar Murshid, Prof. Kabir Chowdhury and Dr. Serajul Islam Choudhury among her colleagues. She was very fond of her students. Girls worshipped her. She was very upset when an anonymous letter ordered her to force her girl students to wear burqas.

If Kabir Chowdhury was very fond of his daughters, Razia Khan Amin deeply loved and respected her father, Moulvi Tamizuddin Khan. It is for her that I researched a bit on him. My generation was not exactly fond of Muslim Leaguers but this gentleman was learned and patriotic. He loved democracy and had the courage to file a High Court case against Ayub Khan for 'killing' democracy by proclaiming martial law.

As for myself, although shy and melancholic, I was quite at ease with Razia Khan Amin. I liked her as a teacher and enjoyed her lectures. I admired her brave, patriotic and wise utterances. I liked to read her novels and poems too. My deep love for literature and the fact that I was a budding bilingual writer myself helped me to impress the affectionate mother in her. It makes me sad that she wrote so little during the last years of her life.

May her great soul rest in eternal peace.

JUNAIDUL HAQUE WRITES FICTION. HE IS ALSO AN ESSAYIST

POETRY

Farewell to lovely time



RUBAB ABDULLAH SHUKLA

A wintry breeze is towing my soul somewhere I go out for a drive to see
How my city looks when winter emerges
And roll down the window glass of my car
To feel the chilly light wind beat in . . .
It makes me see in my mind's eye
And whispers in my ears:
'Let go. Let go, my love
You suffer desperately,
weighed down
By the parting with
your beloved
Somebody belongs to none
Who you love is only destiny's child!'

RUBAB ABDULLAH SHUKLA IS A TEACHER AND POET.