

TRIBUTE

M N Nandy: Larger than life hero

DR. MANDIRA NANDY

(THIS IS THE CONCLUDING PART OF THE ARTICLE, THE FIRST PART OF WHICH APPEARED LAST WEEK).

On a Friday in 1950 in February, madness broke out everywhere in Dhaka. There was curfew in Dacca town from dusk to dawn from 10-20th February. Thatari Bazaar was set on fire and the flames were visible from the Juginagar house. Panicked Hindu families rushed to the doctor's house for refuge – counting on his fame and his gun as safety factors.

The family remember and are grateful to Abbas Mirza, the famous captain of Calcutta Mohammadan sporting club, a friend of the doctor from their college days, and Mr. Itteza, the then Police Commissioner of Dhaka, for the protection they gave to the Nandy family and all those, over two hundred people, who sought refuge in the house. Santi, escorted by Shamsuddin, left with her children, the eldest being eleven and the youngest, eight, to go and live at her parent's home in Jalpaiguri only to return once again after the riots. It was at this time that Dr Nandy moved to 37, Rankin Street, Wari where his cousin, noted freedom fighter, Sri Bhabesh Chandra Nandy, MLA, lived. This house was purchased by Dr Nandy in 1953-54. It was in 1950 or thereabouts that the Medical Service of East Pakistan decided to transfer Dr. Nandy to Faridpur. This was highly resented by the family and Dr Nandy resigned and for the first time started his private practice. He lived at Rankin Street until the time he was forced out of his homeland in 1965.

At 37, Rankin Street, the doctor appointed Sultan, a cycle-rickshaw puller, to take him around the city on his calls. A man of strict discipline all his life, Nandy would be ready and leave on his calls at 7:30 am every morning, would come back to attend to patients at his clinic and would not break for lunch till all he had attended to all his patients. In the evening he would again divide his time between out calls and attending to patients at the clinic in his house. Most days he could retire for the day as late as 11 pm,

but he would be out again the next morning at 7:30 am. On outcalls within Dhaka he travelled by rickshaw and travelled on boats to distant villages. Later, he acquired a very old second-hand Ford Prefect followed by a brand new Ford Prefect and lastly a Hillman. With an enormous zeal to learn and adapt new findings of medical research in his work, he voraciously read his medical journals in between the calls. He continued to read these and discuss them with young doctors till his last days. The patients who came to his house queued up on bicycles and horse carts (Ghorar Gadi).

Over all the years he lived at 37 Rankin Street, Dr Nandy charged his patients only Rs 5 and did not take further fees for the same illness. He never sold any medicines and, in spite of pressures, he never associated with any medical store or nursing home. He could never be enslaved to the business of medicine.

As a practitioner the Doctor examined and treated every patient holistically. His prescriptions contained instructions on what to eat and when, carried symbols for the prescribed drugs and instructions on how to take these and when.

All his life he was closely associated with the local medical associations. Much later in life he became the President of the Jalpaiguri branch of the Indian Medical Association (IMA). Amongst the doctors in Dhaka he was very close to Dr Toyeb Ali and Dr Nurul Islam. They met frequently. At 37 Rankin street, Nandy set up an operating theatre and when he operated, many students came over from the Medical College to observe. Dr Chandra Madhav Banik of Uttar Malsundi was a pathologist who worked closely with the doctor and assisted with the operations. Then there was Sukumar Bardhan, an LMF doctor who was the doctor's assistant and a constant fixture at the chambers. Sukumar Da was accepted as a family member.

In 1956(/7), Dr Nandy and some colleagues travelled to China in an



official delegation, to see how matters of rural health and public health were being tackled. The doctor was then an active member of the Red Cross Society and St John's Ambulance.

The Nandy household provided, despite the tensions of the time and the busy schedule of the doctor, a hub for left leaning intellectuals and artists. With a lot of encouragement and support from the Doctor, his wife and daughters played an active role in the cultural life of Dhaka at a time when women hardly stepped outdoors. The friends of the family included linguist, playwright Munier Chowdhury, educationist Ajit Kumar Guha, poet Sanaul Hoque, artist Zainul Abedin and many of those who met their tragic death in Rayer Bazaar massacre. Contacts had not been totally severed with the Communist Party which was now a banned organisation. Some times in the dark of the night Khoka Roy, Nepal Nag, Oli Ahad, Md Toha would come. Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed was a very close friend of the doctor. Nandy was also well acquainted with Maulana Bhasani and attended the Kagmari Conference. The doctor was the family physician of Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Huq. At this time Mujibur Rahman too came close to the doctor and addressed him as Dada.

It is still an enigma to the family

what precisely prompted the Government of Pakistan to confer a Tamgha-e-Quaid-e-Azam on Dr Nandy.

Faiz Ahmed has written exhaustively on the days when once again Hindu Muslim rioting broke out in Dhaka. Dr Nandy did not consider himself a Hindu by faith and would not desert his house in Dhaka. After much persuasion he was moved to a safe house. For generations, starting from Mathura Nath, the Nandys have remained atheistically inclined.

In August 1965, the news reached him that his two sons and their families had met with a car accident. The accident was grave and they were in a hospital in Ludhiana, India. Dr Nandy and Santi flew over to Ludhiana. The Nandy sons with their families were travelling from London to Dhaka by car when they were knocked off the road by a truck near the township of Khanna. The doctor at the local clinic gave first aid and said that most of them needed hospitalisation. They were transferred to the Brown Memorial Hospital in nearby Ludhiana. The eminent neurosurgeon Dr Namboodripad diagnosed that the 3 year old granddaughter had suffered a severe head injury and needed an operation. He opened up her skull and

eased the pressure inside the cranium.

It was at this time that war was declared between India and Pakistan. The local Indian police were alarmed that Pakistanis, i.e. the Nandys, were in the neighbourhood. Questions were asked. Dr Namboodripad and Dr Nandy assured them of the legitimacy of their presence. But at the sound of dropping bombs coming nearer, the family after making difficult arrangements travelled by train to Calcutta where they had an incompletely built house.

The political situation between the two nations ran out of control. The Government of Pakistan came to the conclusion that Dr Nandy was a suspicious character. There were two factors that coloured the reasoning – that the Nandys were Hindus and very coincidentally (!) they were in India when the war broke out. Then came the saddest news from friends in Dhaka that the Nandy house and his other properties had been declared to be 'Enemy Property'. Overnight at the age of 55, Dr Nandy lost everything, his medical practice, his friends and his savings, and found himself stranded in India. But he was not one to give up. He decided to start life anew in Jalpaiguri in a remote corner of West Bengal where there were a few friends and relatives.

At this time, Jalpaiguri did not have the facilities of a modern town. It had no piped water – cement containers, filled from lorries, was the principal source of drinking water for the town. The electricity came intermittently from a rickety old generator with light bulbs providing inadequate lighting. Most houses had toilets dependent on night soil removal every morning. There was no direct rail line connection with Calcutta without crossing a mighty river by boat; it was as if the days had improved little for the Nandys since the days of Sreenagar.

In Jalpaiguri, alongside his medical practice he became active locally. He helped to found a students' health home, organised a medical store that sold and still sells medicines at almost

wholesale cost prices; he was in the Governing body of a very old girls' high school – to which Santi went to as a little girl. In Siliguri, he was the nominee of the Governor on the Executive Committee of the University of North Bengal and the North Bengal Medical College.

In 1968, October after the mountain river Teesta ran rogue through Jalpaiguri, he stood at the main cross-road and vaccinated people against water borne disease. He took an active part in the local in the local branch of the Indian Medical Association where he presided for almost thirty years; the association have named a hall after him. In the centenary celebration of the town he and his family contributed articles to the official publication.

During the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence he had friends, neighbours and distant relatives from the other side of the border come and visit him. One of the sons of Samsuddin Kaku came and stayed; unfortunately he was killed on his return to join the freedom fighters. Faiz Da came to stay with Indira, the eldest daughter of Dr Nandy, in Calcutta. In 1972 when Sheikh Mujib visited Calcutta to deliver his speech with Mrs Gandhi, an urgent message came from Bangabandhu that his 'Dada and Boudi' should accompany him to go to Dhaka to his old house and resume his practice.

But Dr Nandy was elderly and felt that he did not have the strength to make a fresh start once more. The eldest son, Vaskar, had joined the Naxalbari movement alongside Charu Majumdar and was living underground for many years.

He slowed down and never fully recovered from the blows that fortune had bestowed on him; he had lost friends and the spirit was ebbing out of him. He lived in Jalpaiguri until his death on 15 March 2005. His ashes were sent down the Karala, then the Teesta; they have probably washed up against the river shores of Bangladesh.

MANDIRA NANDY IS THE DAUGHTER OF LATE DR. M N NANDY.

REFLECTIONS

God's children . . .

AINON N.

I stood up abruptly. Reached out to the invisible child and held him close to my heart. He, who was eight months old, cried continuously for long hours, off and on, hungry and in soiled diaper; and then he was listless. Eyes closed, I held him tighter. The mother, a twenty year old methamphetamine addict, was on a hunting spree for her daily dose. The whereabouts of his father was unknown. Eventually, I looked out the window of my third floor office. This annex was part of the oldest building on campus, the rest were high rising edifices. My vision swept across the rooftop of adjoining buildings; the pedestrian crossing mark on the curved road; a patch of fenced-in green field where the students were kicking a soccer ball; and then stopped on the designated path where dog-walkers were walking their dogs with plastic sacks in hand, ready to scoop up their waste and dump it in marked bins. Beyond was the breeze-way of Wham building. My vision froze on these pets on leash, who were indeed more cared for by their owners than the 'so-real' child I was holding in my mind.

More visions appeared haltingly. . .

I was at a children's home to observe group behavior. A young boy of ten years was trying desperately to find a quiet

corner to make himself invisible. There was a mix of children in that session, all were there to share, or not to share, their pain. Someone walked up to him, smiled and held him in a tight embrace saying, "Don't be nervous." It was not the words but the touch of acceptance, the emotional longing for love, the unspoken assurance of 'all will be ok,' that made him smile and laugh along with the group. Would he survive life? I do not know. The wondrous world of this once curious six-year-old was of consequence and beautiful. His alcoholic parents distorted it into a scary one. His mind always wandered back to that lonely place of rejection; a place of not knowing why he was spanked or why he was deprived of food, or why he was locked out of home. Here he was alone in a room full of people. The simple instinct for him was to be close to someone, to have hope, to endure.

And then on another occasion a five-year old walked up to me and said, "What is this?" A notebook on which one can write. She gave me a blank stare. Eager to talk, she asked, "Do you know Tania?" No. "She calls Rayan's mom grandma." Oh...then there was quiet. "Do you know Sheila?" No. "She is Sam's baby sister, she is younger than me. Her daddy works in a company. My dad doesn't work." Since she decided to include me in her little world she refused to accept my silence

and was determined to gain affirmation. "See my hair clips?" It was then when I noticed the lively face with a set of curious blue eyes, the innocent smile, the smooth light brown skin; her soft short hair held in place by two pink smiley-faced clips, and the burning bruise on her right cheek. A bi-racial child. For a while she sat on a chair, crossed legged, observing me, then got off to see what I was writing, coming close to touch my arm. She put her head sideways on the table, looking straight into my face. I stopped typing. We smiled at each other without saying a word. The childcare worker intervened and she left reluctantly. To me, she remained Sunny who was to be placed in a foster home in a few hours. Was the separation from her parents of significance to her? I am sure it would be in the long run.

In quiet hours at the office, as I go through the case histories, a bit of my heart gets chipped away, never to be put back again. These children are removed from homes where there are no fairytales, no make-believe magic, no cotton candies, no running through the meadows. For them the sky is never of pristine blueness; a home empty of hugs and assurances. Instead, there is abandonment, children with controlled substance in their system, deprivation, and abusive circumstances --- their lives in the shadows of addiction, substance abuse, and violence. Home, for them is an elusive concept.

These children are homeless at home.

Often for hours I forget to laugh and question the offerings of beauty in life. I breathe slowly, imprisoned in these live stories. And then, so-very-often, I call my children, ending with many versions of love you(s). Thus affirmed, I pick up my coffee mug and move on to the next set of record. Beyond these trimmed accounts are the tales of untold horrors faced by children who are removed from their parents and placed in custodial care. My job is to remain ever vigilant to the challenges in the system so I can recommend better services both for the children and their families. In spite of my rational approach to patchworks of healing: counseling, psychotherapy, mental health assessments, the how(s) of ridding grief, anger, isolation, shame, guilt; reestablishing primary relationships. For me the question persists: Distancing from the pain, how one can heal the broken young hearts? Resilient though they may be? How do I find that inner child in each?

For these children the following remains a blank verse. . .

"This seems a Home / And Home is not / But what that Place could be

Afflicts me – as a setting Sun/Where Dawn knows how to be"....

AINON N. WRITES FROM DHAKA.

SILENCES

A niece remembers

ADIBA RAHMAN KHAN

The one person who served as my role model, was my beloved uncle Mohammad Ali Syed. His contribution in our lives is truly incomparable. The virtues and qualities that we adopted from him play a vital role in our lives.

Even though he lived far away, in Great Britain, he would always manage time every year to visit Bangladesh. The main reason behind his visit was to be able to keep in touch with all his relatives. The love and care he had for his family were extraordinary. His virtuous qualities and charming character won everyone's heart.

I was very young when I met him. He used to come to our house in Bangladesh once every year with my aunt. As soon as he came to Bangladesh he always enquired about all our relatives and visited everyone as soon as he got the chance. He especially visited those who were ill first. He was a man of many ideas. He was the type of man who was loved by anyone who got the opportunity to know him. He was a very friendly and jolly man. He was like no other. He was a man of great knowledge and virtue. He had a personality that was respectable and yet adorable. I had always felt his love and affection. I always found him to be well mannered and humble. He could make people laugh easily with his simplicity. He loved to talk as well as listen to what others had to say.



He had a huge collection of books on several topics; and he also thought about who would put the books to truthful use after him. He also wrote some books of his own.

He had great knowledge of religion and could embed the correct ideas in people's minds. He had such a personality that he could minimize the gap between the young and the elderly. He loved and helped orphans and the autistic people.

As he was a Barrister at Law, he fought for justice constantly. He thought about his country and wondered how he could create a beautiful Bangladesh. He not only gave ideas but he did the work himself. He served people with open hearts. He had a great contri-

bution to the language movement of 1952. He was a student at the time and played a positive role for the country. Similarly during the 1971 war he performed with great perseverance and dedication. He was honest till his last breath.

We used to plan trips to places around the country whenever he and my aunt visited to get out of our tedious regular life. I never noticed him to be tired for once. He was bright and energetic every hour of every day.

We lost a great mentor when he left for his eternal life on the other side of the grave. We all, forever, will cherish the moments we spent with him and hope to someday be like him.

ADIBA RAHMAN KHAN LIVES IN DHAKA.

MUSINGS

Remembering, on starry nights

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

One should always trying singing at times. It does something good to the soul. It elevates the senses, it rekindles the dying embers of lost romance and it makes one feel young, sort of, again. Now, these are some of the reasons why I have lately lost myself in song. No, let me not delude myself. I have never played any musical instrument, though I have since childhood wanted to be a pianist or a cellist, preferably the former. I never got around to doing anything of the kind, though, for reasons that have had to do with family economy. Being poor or being insufficiently strong where money is concerned is a reality not many of us can easily run away from.

But, of course, I am digressing. The point now is that in this past fortnight I have given myself over to singing loud and perhaps hoarse because of the sheer joy remembrance of old songs causes to arise in my soul. There were certainly the moments when I lost the tenor of a song, the scale of it, especially when I recently went for a duet with my friend the Mongoose (I call her that, but she is a real sweet girl, though). We started off with a rather ancient Bengali duet and it seemed to go along rather well, until somewhere I forgot the tune. That was heartbreaking, but the point is that we both burst out laughing even as the rays of the declining sun landed soft and silent on the fiery beauty of her ageless cheeks. The sheer spectacle of unalloyed feminine charm egged me on, into Nazrul's *tumi shundor tai cheye thaki priyo* . . . She closed her eyes. When she opened them again, dusk had already tiptoed into the room.

Songs bring back memories, often those that relate not just to you but, as well, to the generation that preceded yours. In my early years, my mother and my aunt both fell in love with *maa amar shaadh na mitilo*. They sang it over and over again, which is why every time I hear it these days it is those days of raw innocence, of black and white I go back to. Much the same thing happens when I sing, or hear someone else hum Hemant Kumar's *hai apna dil to awara*. A young fellow, a full-blooded Bengali who worked as domestic help in the family, went shopping for vegetables and fish in the morning with a long face but when he came back, he was singing, however little he knew of it, that Hemant song. It is an association I have not quite been able to shake off. Neither have I forgotten that early February morning in my mother's village on the banks of the Sitalakhyia more than forty years ago when my uncle broke into a rendition of the Rafi number, *mohabbat choome jin ke haath / jawani paaon parhe din raat / sune phir hai wo kis ki baat*. A few nights ago, it was a prolonged shower I indulged in --- because I kept singing that song, trying to bring the right feel into it. I did the same with another Rafi song, *yaad na jaaye beete dino ki*.

It is thrilling, this thought of discovering yourself anew through old songs. S.D. Burman's *banshi shune ar kaaj nai shey je dakatia banshi* is redolent of melody you once tried seducing the neighbourhood girl, she with the long tresses and the dark eyelashes and the rose-tintured lips, with. And then there are the moments of sadness as well; and they come when you find yourself staring wide-eyed, disbelieving, into old television footage of

Mahmudunnabi singing some of his wrenchingly sad songs. Some nights ago, it was *mone to porhe na kono din aami-o je shilpi chhilam*. Try humming it. You will likely cause scratches to run wild across your heart. It was a decade ago when, headphones in place, I heard the song, endlessly and as long as the flight I was on from London did not land in Dhaka. I have not forgotten that song. Now my little niece Binita has it recorded on her cell phone and lets me listen to it any time I am in the mood for some delicious sadness. By the way, another niece, the shy Suhani, sings on the harmonium when I am away.

My parents both sang in their moments of happiness when they were home. My father was obsessed with Jogonmoy and Talat Mahmood. My mother was more into Suraiya and Shamshad Begum. Which is why many of the songs I sing these days have their roots in my ancestry, the immediate part of it. But let me make note of one song I would not have known about had I not heard M. Asafuddoulah sing it. It was *ik bar muskura do/honton ki ik ada se sau bijlian gira do*. It was moving. The year was 1991. When in November of that year I travelled to Delhi for a media conference, the song played on my lips nearly the entire day. But as yet I had little idea who had sung the original. It was again Asafuddoulah who enlightened me, this time on a June evening in London. Jogonmoy's was the original voice.

Let me sign off now? Ah, just remembered. Have you heard Abdul Jabbar's *taara bhora raate / tomar kotha je mone porhe bedonaye go?* Pain seeps, drop by drop, into the cold, desolate gardens of memory.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR