

A Pioneering Educator

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It was that time of the year again; Ordinary Level GCE examinations results had been released. Thousands of 15-16 year olds streamed into the British Council to pick up their results, their hearts bursting with excitement, nervousness, hoping for the best and trying to be prepared for the worst. In a house on a peaceful street in Dhanmondi, for over twenty years, this same day was met with a sense of eagerness, anticipation and excitement. Atia Huq, Bengali teacher at Maple Leaf International and Dhanmondi Tutorial, waited eagerly for the first throng of her students to come to visit her with the good news of their Bengali GCE O Level grades.

One by one as students streamed into her home to share news of their "A" in Bengali, she received them with eyes gleaming, filled with pride. "Joog joog jiye thako" (May you live for a long time), she would say, touching her student's head affectionately. Nothing brightened her day more than a visit from one of her former students to share their success stories with their former teacher. In the course of her teaching career spanning 60 years from East Pakistan to West

Pakistan, these moments were the hallmark of Atia Huq's teaching career.

Born in Kolkata in 1925, Atia came from a family where education was given top priority. From an early age, she showed great promise as a student, with consistent good grades throughout her secondary education. She received First Division in her Matriculation and Intermediate exams attaining record marks in Logic from Calcutta. Her father saw her potential and encouraged her to pursue higher education up to a Masters degree which was rare for women at the time. Atia went on to complete her Masters in Philosophy from Calcutta University in 1945.

In 1946, she married Aminul Huq from Comilla. Immediately after partition of India, there was a lack of qualified Muslim educators in East Pakistan. Here was Atia Huq, barely in her mid-twenties, with a Masters degree, in the right place at the right time. He much-sought after qualifications helped her secure the position of Assistant Headmistress at Nawab Faizunnessa Girls School in Comilla where she taught Bengali and Mathematics. Because of his

wife's needed skills, her husband Aminul was able to secure a position as Deputy Magistrate in Comilla, his home district. At the time, postings in one's home district was uncommon, but Atia's unique qualifications were in dire need in the area, thus the appointment was allowed.

From there, a long illustrious teaching career began for Atia as she moved all over East and West Pakistan with her husband. She worked in Residential Model School, Adamjee Cantonment School Dhaka and was headmistress Cantonment Girls School (later named as Shahid Anwar Girls School) from 1967-1976. From 1976 to 2007, she was the Bengali teacher Maple Leaf International School Dhanmondi Dhaka.

Atia loved to teach and was a very popular and highly respected teacher. She relished the role of being the one to introduce her students to famous literary works from Tagore, Tennyson and Frost. Beyond the lessons that were part of the curriculum, she took her role as a mentor in other aspects of her students' lives very seriously. Punctuality, discipline, neatness, prioritisation of education were core

values she worked hard to impart to her students. Ms Alam, who was her student at Shahid Anwar, recalls being scolded for being late for class. "My friends and I were all outside the classroom listening to a group of students protesting a tuition increase. Atia Madam saw that we were not in class, and calmly walked towards us and asked in her stern voice, 'What is happening here?' Within seconds, we scrambled to get into the classroom. We were so used to her gentle demeanour, we did not want to know what she was like when she was angry!"

Always neatly dressed, punctual and putting her role as educator first, Atia embodied the values she preached to the very end of career in 2008 when she retired. Her former student Rakib recalls his classmates being on the receiving end of a few stern words when they came to class with untucked shirts or the submitted an assignment that was not particularly neatly written. "I remember submitting

an assignment that had a lot of scribbles and crossed off multiple sections, making it quite illegible. When she saw the assignment, she used a strict tone to admonish me that stuck with me. She asked me to redo the assignment-it was definitely a lesson learned in the importance of neatness," recalls Rakib.

Most of all, her students remember the passion with which she taught. She was able to recite passages from great literary works of Charles Dicken's, Robert Frost, Tagore, Bonkim Chandra Chottapathy or Sharat Chandra like she had memorised them yesterday. When she taught them Literature, the enthusiasm in the way she described the emotions of the writer and the importance of that piece of literature were electric. "It is hard for us all to remember famous literary pieces without Atia Madam and her exuberance also coming to mind," says Ms. Rahman, who was her student at Shaheed Anwar.

Atia's extensive knowledge of Bengali and English literature, and experience in translation between the two languages established her reputation as a respected translator in the country. Not only had she mastered the art of translating between the two languages without

losing its meaning, her familiarity with literature in both languages, earned her great renown.

Her philosophy of hard work and ability to balance work and family effortlessly, inspired many of the women in her family and husband's family to pursue higher education beyond the intermediate level exams. Among her family and friends, she was known for her kind, generous nature, always willing to help those in need, going above and beyond to help those in need to find employment.

Atia Huq passed away peacefully in her residence in Dhanmondion February 10, 2013 from old age complications. With a teaching career spanning over 60 years, she leaves behind a legacy of lessons that she taught both inside and outside the classroom that will be cherished by her students, colleagues and family.



Atia Huq