

# SUFIA KAMAL THE CHARMING REBEL

*A torchbearer of justice and equality, Sufia Kamal continues to be one of the most inspirational personalities of our time. On her 104th birth anniversary we remember this luminous figure who enlightened our society with her rebellious spirit and enriched it with her gracious, warm presence. Here we reprint an interview titled 'The Poet Speaks', of this visionary taken by The Daily Star's Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam and published on January 1, 1996.*



PHOTO: ZAHEDUL I KHAN

**I** have been to this house many times since my university days. There was always something going on in that squarish open verandah overlooking a garden. It may not be an exaggeration to say that anybody who has been linked to some sort of democratic, cultural, social or progressive movement, has sat in that verandah at some point of time. This space seemed to belong more to visitors than to the members of the household themselves.

Today the meeting place has moved deeper inside the house. Her recent illness has taken its toll compelling her to lie in bed for most of the time. Interviewing Sufia Kamal was for me both an intellectual and emotional affair. Within moments in her presence one becomes aware of the magical attraction of this frail little lady. Love and warmth overflow her every gesture as she tries to answer my questions about the country, its people and the present day crisis. A deep concern underlines her every response. She opens her heart and tells us about her anxiety, her disappointments and her faith in the younger generation. She expresses her faith in the common people and reminds us never to lose hope.  
— Mahfuz Anam

would cross. Now we just go across the bridge. I know the bridge has improved many things but what about those who lost out on their daily earnings? What alternative measures have we taken for them? What I am citing is a small example of how modernisation leads to greater unemployment unless we plan carefully. Widespread unemployment is the fundamental cause for violence and criminal activities among the young.

This is the third thing that worries me. I cannot recall anytime in the past and I have lived through many critical times, when there was so much violence and insecurity all round. This is very worrying indeed. The great tradition of our students is being destroyed by the criminal elements that have been injected into our student community by the political parties. I cannot believe, I refuse to believe that any genuine student can raise a gun against a fellow student, let alone kill him. These are criminals who are under the protection of the political parties.

These criminals have spread their wings into the whole society. Every aspect of our civic life is now suffering under their evil influence. Close relations within a neighbourhood does not exist anymore because of the local mastans. People visiting their neighbours, our children going from one house to another a common feature of life in Dhaka- has all but disappeared. We do not feel safe letting our children move freely within our own neighbourhood anymore. Before every neighbourhood - para, moholla- used to look after its own community, and there was pride and joy in each others' success. Now we stay within our shells. Part of it is the change of times, but a large part of it is due to the criminalisation of our society.

Rising population also worries me. We have such a small country and there are so many of us. I know now, the government and the NGOs are giving loans to buy a cow, a lamb or to raise chicken at home. But for the large number of landless and for those who have a small home within large family members, where will they keep their animals or raise chickens? I think the idea of small loans to raise home-based farms of all types is a very good idea. But does it really help our landless? Can they benefit from such loans?

Another thing that worries me is the lack of respect for women these days. Earlier when men and women used to work side by side, there used to be tremendous mutual respect. Now it is all gone. It is the age of competition and I can understand that men may resent women intruding into their world. So let there be competition, but why should it come with lack of respect?

**MA :** What are your feelings on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> Victory Day?

**SK:** I could not attend this year's Victory Day celebrations. But I have been told and I also read in the newspapers that it was a grand celebration. I am very pleased to hear it. Now the young people will get to know a little better about our Liberation War, what happened at that time, and at what cost we gained our independence. Our young people must learn that a country cannot be formed on the basis of religion. That is what Pakistan tried. There are Muslims all over the world— Arab Muslims, Indian Muslims,

Indonesian Muslims, Thai Muslims, and Bengali Muslims. Religion is the same for all of us, but we are different nations. Everybody has his or her own religion. A state cannot be built on religion. This our young people must learn, and this was the reason for our war against Pakistan. Muslims of Bengal have always been Muslims, and they lived side by side with Hindus for hundreds of years. There was never any friction or fight between them. So every one must be allowed to live with their own religion.

Today nobody is exploiting us -- not Russians, Japanese, Indians or Pakistanis. Today we Bengalis are fighting against one another and destroying ourselves. It is we who are killing, injuring, abusing and insulting one another. We have become our worst enemies.

The present widespread terrorism is doing immense harm. On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Victory, how can I live with the fact that terrorism has engulfed our society completely? Who will save us from this? This is what you all will have to think about.

**MA:** Why have we not been able to build our country better in the last 25 years?

**SK:** The most important reason is

solve all the problems that we face today. What we are lacking is leadership. In Sheikh Mujib's name our nation plunged into battle with bare hands. So our people are full of courage, our leaders are not. Today they take recourse to bombastic rhetoric but never take the bold and unpleasant decisions -- because they lack courage.

**MA:** Lack of leadership is one reason, what about other reasons for our present problems?

**SK:** Lack of leadership is the main reason. Nobody is thinking of the country today. Some are thinking about staying in power, and other are thinking about coming to power. The country does not figure in their thoughts. Absence of leadership is the uppermost thought in my mind. But I am hopeful that out of this present crisis there will emerge a patriotic, visionary and courageous leadership. We will, once again, hold up our head in pride and dignity of an independent nation.

**MA:** Do you see any sign of hope or only of failure?

**SK:** Of course, I am tremendously hopeful about the ability of our new generation. If they are not misled by vested groups or the so-called leaders, I

Khaleda Zia's words will carry far less weight, and they will make less impact on the course of events. So the talks should be held when Khaleda remains the Prime Minister to enable her to implement the outcome, and take follow up actions. Therefore I suggest, they should sit immediately and start talks on solving the present crisis.

During my meetings with Hasina I asked her why she left the parliament. She said that opposition was not given due opportunity to play its role. Whatever may have been the situation it was wrong of Hasina to have left the parliament. Parliament belonged to us and it was our place to keep the government in check.

**MA:** Did Khaleda Zia ever come to see you?

**SK:** Only once, a long time ago, may be sometime in the mid eighties.

**MA:** She did not visit you during your last illness?

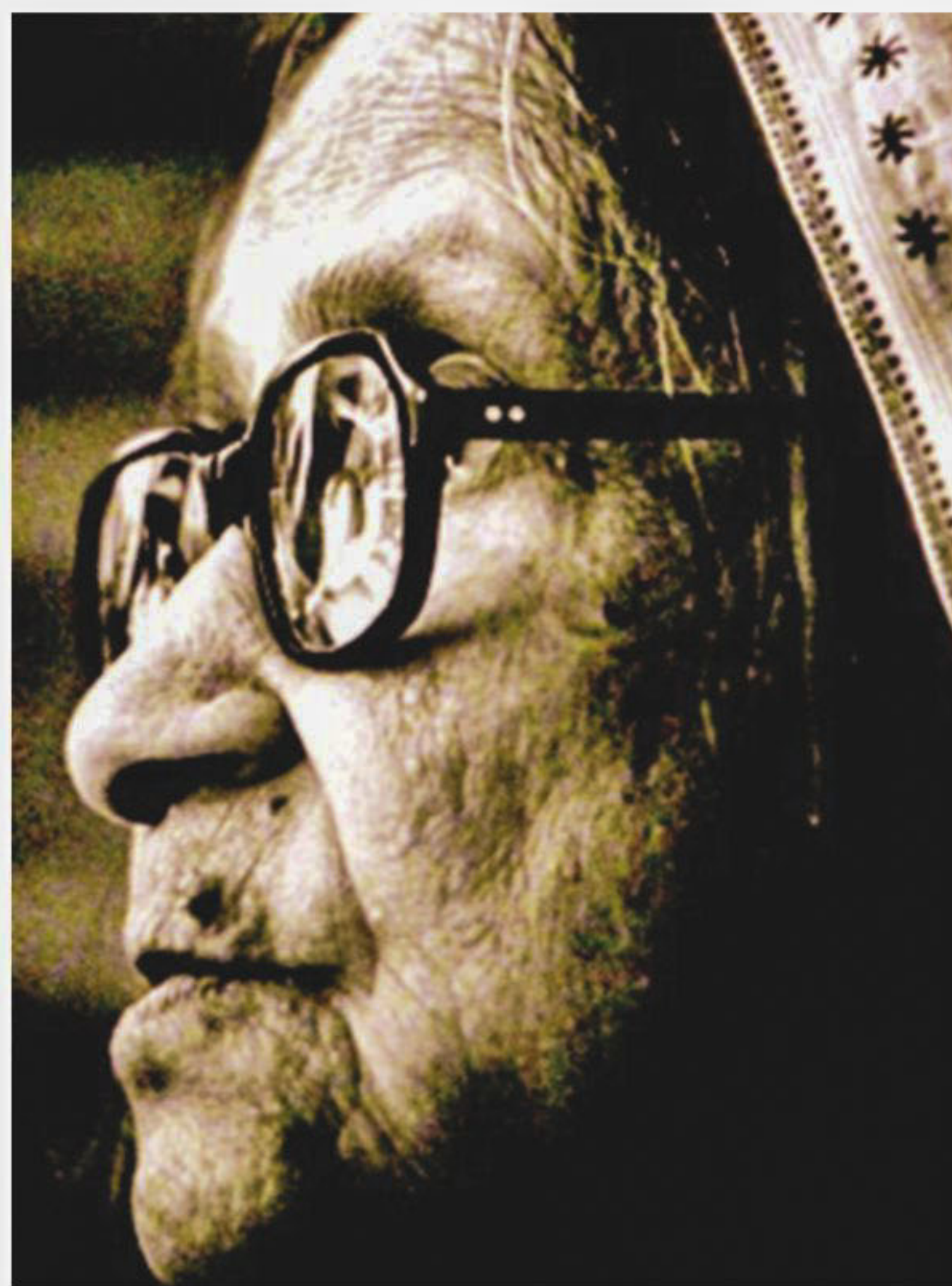
**SK:** No. Hasina came to see me. She comes now and then. If she comes again -- she has not come for sometime now -- I will tell her that she must sit for talks immediately. She should not insist on Khaleda's resignation.

There is another thing I feel strongly about. Isn't there a single person... a single intellectual in our country who is acceptable to both sides, somebody who can mediate between these two groups? Why do we have to get a foreigner to solve our problems? It is a shame for us. When Mr Shahabuddin (former President) came to see me during my illness, I asked why he did not try to mediate and resolve the crisis. He said "Did you not hear that PM, thinks that only a child or a mad man is capable of being neutral. Since I am not a child, neither am I mad, how can I be neutral enough to be able to mediate? Please excuse me, I do not think I can do anything to resolve this crisis." If I was well, I would have invited them for talks in my own house. I would have appealed personally to both of them to come to an understanding. Most probably Khaleda Zia would never come to my house, but I, nevertheless, would have tried. I cannot see the suffering of the common people anymore.

I am very much against these hartals and strikes. These actions do not hurt the government, it hurts the people. The more poor one is, the more strikes and hartals hurt. The widespread violence, random breaking of cars etc., pain me very much. These activities are pulling us backward further. The middle class and the small business people are especially affected by these strikes-- the small entrepreneurs, the shopkeepers, the roadside vendors, daily workers, hawkers etc.

**MA:** What would be your message to the nation on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our independence?

**SK:** We must bring respect and dignity to our country and to our people, and reach the fruits of independence to the masses. We must all work together to build our country. We should not allow ourselves to be misled by a vested group, in the name of religion, and let people exploit our religious sentiments for narrow political ends. Our younger generation must be taught the values of our Liberation War and the ideals for which millions gave up their lives.



Sufia Kamal (June 20, 1911- November 20, 1999)

PHOTO COURTESY: SUFIA KAMAL JONHOSHOBORSHO UDIJAPON PORSHOD

that we do not have a courageous leader who can lead us out of this all pervasive degeneration. We may have committed leaders today, but none of them are courageous enough to take sweeping and visionary decisions; decisions that go far beyond their partisan or coterie interest. Our leaders lack courage.

People of Bangladesh have never fallen back from supporting any courageous leader. Our people are ever ready to undertake whatever struggle necessary to

think our young people can build this country and take us out of this shameful poverty and backwardness.

**MA:** What are your views on the current political crisis?

**SK:** I have read in the newspaper that Sheikh Hasina said that she will talk with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia after she resigns. My view is, once Khaleda resigns then she will not have any power to implement whatever decision they both may arrive at. Out of power

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**Mahfuz Anam (MA):** What are some of the most prominent thoughts in your mind at this critical moment in our history?

**Sufia Kamal (SK):** Now I am very sick. I cannot go out into the streets and listen to the people or talk to them, as I have been doing all my life. What worries me most is the condition of the common people. How are they? Has their situation improved?

One of the things that worries me very much is our increasing foreign dependence. I agree that over the last several years a lot has been achieved, many bridges, miles of roads, some factories and big buildings in the cities. But have all this really helped our people? With whose money have we done all this? Is it with borrowed money that all this has been built? What will happen if money from abroad suddenly stops coming? Have we not become more and more dependent on foreign aid over the years? I do not understand much about economics but I have been taught this much that the growth that does not come from my own wealth and is dependant on somebody else's assistance, cannot be all that good for me.

I do not understand much about foreign trade and what not. But I can see that today even the most essential items -- eggs, lentils, vegetables, fruits, even salt -- I am told -- come from India. How can this be good for us? This leads me to talk about the question of employment.

The other thing that worries me is the rising unemployment. It is increasing all the time. Our young boys and girls are coming out of universities and colleges and from vocational institutions but there is nothing for them to do. What have we done to give employment to our young educated people? In the old days when we did not have all these bridges there used to be small business on both banks of a river for people who