

105TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF SUFIA KAMAL

A Fierce Champion of Justice

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EMPowerment has become an empty word now, used for vague causes, or to carry out self-aggrandizing agendas. 'Female empowerment' has especially been applied so broadly (whether to describe omnipresent seminars targeted for women, or as an adjective to describe pretty much everything a woman chooses to do - starting from eating at a restaurant to choosing a particular shade of lipstick) that it has become a catch-all phrase, traversing far from its original purpose of providing "autonomy and strength" to marginalised groups. Yet, when talking about the life of revolutionary poet, writer, activist, feminist, Sufia Kamal, no other seems to fit as perfectly as 'empowering'.

While almost every woman in the country will cite her as their 'ideal', without necessarily knowing or having much idea about her immense contributions and sacrifices for the emancipation of women and marginalised groups, Sufia Kamal's life - one of constant struggles and obstacles - has, to use a glib phrase, been truly inspiring. Born on June 20, 1911, to a *nawab* family in Barisal, Sufia's mother had to move to her conservative parents' house with her two children after her father left home in search of the divine, never to return. Despite the presence of an expansive library and a 'progressive' attitude that encouraged schooling and reading, the girls of the family were denied formal education. While she was enrolled in a *maktab* as a child, after a short while, even that was discontinued as she was considered "to have grown up."

With her curious, uninhibited penchant for learning, Sufia, thanks to the encouragement of her mother, brother and uncle, began to gulp down every bit of knowledge that came her way. Her mother taught her to read and write Bengali, and thus began her journey into the world of non-formal, unorganised education. Even as a child with limited resources and a tight leash on her dreams and aspirations, Sufia was determined to be a writer. Books of writers like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Sara Taiful and Motahera Banu, which she would sneak under her bed, possibly helped fortify the resolve. In her own words: "I used to get information about the outside world from my uncle. After our prayers at night, all my aunts and I used to sit around him and he would read aloud excerpts from Bengali novels. He also knew Sanskrit quite well. He used to render in Bengali translation the stories from Sanskrit classics like *Agni Vamsa*, *Meghdut*, *Rajtarangini* etc. I was a little

child at that time, but I still carry in my heart the pleasant sound of his reading."

It's interesting how closely her life resembled that of her idol, Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain. While still a child, she was married off to her cousin Syed Nihal Hossain. As fate would have it, her husband encouraged her to be involved in various literary and social activities, and she was finally 'allowed' to step out of the boundaries of her home to engage in social work, albeit in veil. During the anti-cooperation movement against the British Empire, Sufia wholeheartedly wove threads on a *charka* as a show of support to the call by Mahatma Gandhi. She began her literary career with the short story *Sainik Badhu* which was published in a literary journal. However, her

upcoming writer in her own right. That's where she was introduced to the rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (who eventually took on the mantle of her mentor), and Mohammad Nasiruddin, the editor of *Saogat*, with whom she had a long, fruitful professional relationship.

After the sudden death of her husband in 1932, Sufia took the difficult decision of bringing up her six-year old daughter on her own, choosing to live in Kolkata instead of returning to Barisal to a life of dependence and patriarchal suppression. If it's complicated being a single mother in this age, imagine how much more difficult it would have been for a woman to work for a livelihood and bring up her daughter at a time when outside jobs for women were confined to domestic work,

success as a writer when she was overwhelmed with depression and ill-health, that she met and married Kamaluddin Khan, her partner for life who further inspired her to pursue her literary and social activism. After the Partition of 1946, Sufia Kamal and her family moved to East Pakistan, and eventually took charge of the Peace Committee, which worked with the victims of communal riots and helped their rehabilitation, when its founder Leela Roy had to shift base to the newly partitioned India.

Her activism during the Liberation War is well-known. Despite her conservative upbringing behind the *pardah*, she unhesitatingly spoke up against the injustice of the Pakistani regime, so much so that she staunchly rebuked then military dictator Ayub Khan when he openly abused the Bengali community in front of her. Tamanna Khan writes in her "A Voice of Conscience" (published in The Star Weekend Magazine, July 1, 2011), "At a meeting, with artists and intellectuals of Dhaka, Ayub insulted the Bengalis as "haiwan" (beasts). Sufia lost no time in retorting back, "Tab to aap bhi janaab haiwanon ki badshah hotey hain" (Then, sir, you are the leader of the beasts)."

While she was under house arrest for most of the duration of the Liberation War, she helped the persecuted in every way that she could, ignoring the heavy risks she had undertaken by going against the regime. She was so well-respected both nationally and globally that the Pakistani administration was inundated with demands to prove that she was well and had not been executed by them. They were thus forced to air a 90-second interview of her, where she essentially assured well-wishers that she was "not dead," without allowing her to show her face or answer any other question.

After the Liberation War, she quietly continued to bring about change through her writings and welfare work. Criticisms and accusations did not deter her from her commitments to truth and her fight for the oppressed. At a time when women, notwithstanding their talents or skills, were indiscriminately and firmly restrained within the four walls of the so-called *zenana*, Sufia Kamal showed the courage to pave her own path, thereby making way for thousands of women to follow in her wake. If we are to truly pay homage to this incredible woman, the least we can do is honour her ideals and her dream of seeing a world that treats its people equally, irrespective of their race, language, status or gender.

The writer is a member of the editorial team.



Poet Sufia Kamal's spectacles lie forlorn on her reading table.

PHOTO: ZAHED KHAN

aspirations were forcibly held back when a member of her family discovered her writings. Mofidul Hoque, cultural activist and founder trustee and Member Secretary of the Liberation War Museum, writes, "Seeing Sufia's writing in print, her uncle became furious as it violated the norms of Muslim aristocracy and took Sufia back to Shaistabad. Such was the beginning of Sufia Kamal's literary career." This intimidation was short-lived, however, as when her husband moved to Kolkata for higher education, he took his partner with him, thereby giving her the opportunity to flourish and be regarded as an

midwifery or prostitution. Fortunately, despite the lack of a formal education, she got the job as a school teacher with the Calcutta Corporation, which while providing her the much needed employment, also turned her into a pariah within her family. She was firm in her resolution but the pain of being rejected by her family was reflected in her writings: "Those who used to kiss me with love/ Now no longer want to see my dark face."

Finally, her first collection of short stories *Keyar Kanta* was published in 1937, which was followed by a book of poems, *Saanjer Maya*. And it was during this juncture of her life, where despite her

"I would rather die than sign any false statement"

Sufia Kamal was confined to her residence in Dhanmondi during the whole nine months of Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971. When news of the 'killings' of Sufia Kamal and Dr Nilima Ibrahim by Pak Army after the crack down on March 25, 1971 was broadcast on Akashbani, a radio station of the Indian state West Bengal, it drew criticism internationally and countries across the world put diplomatic pressure on the then Pakistani military government for clarification. The Pakistani government was forced to broadcast an interview of the poet on radio only to prove that Sufia Kamal was still alive.

In an interview with now defunct 'Weekly Bichitra' on December 7, 1991, Sufia Kamal recalled her memories of 1971.

We publish excerpts of that interview taken by Selim Omrao Khan.

BICHITRA: How did you pass the nine months of house arrest during liberation war?

SUFIA KAMAL: I was confined in my house during the whole liberation war. Nobody was able to come to my house on 26, 27, 28th March due to military presence in front of my house. One night Pakistani army came to the residence of Wing Commander Hamidullah, which was close to my house. Immediately after I heard that Pakistani army arrested Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and seized the belongings of his house.

At the beginning of April, I heard liberation war had started. I tried to gather news about the war in many ways. Pakistani army kept strong watch on my house by setting up a permanent camp in front of it. Everybody used to visit my house through the back door. Pakistani army started arresting people from the month of April. An unknown silence gripped the whole Dhaka city. Borhan Uddin Khan Jahangir, now a professor of Dhaka University, came to my house through back door. He told me, "They (army) are torturing the women. Where can we keep them?" Though I couldn't go out but we tried to make arrangements to keep some girls in a safer place.

In May, Shahadat Chowdhury, now editor of the 'Weekly Bichitra', Jewel and Rumi came to my house. Rumi used to call me mother. He hugged me and said, "Ma, I will go to the war." I told Rumi's mother Jahanara Imam that his son wanted to join the war. She replied, "Since he wants to, let him go."

In the month of May, many families around my house left Dhaka in search of a safer place. They gave me their ration cards and I collected food from shops with those cards. Prof. Giasuddin and Shahidullah Kaiser would come to my house through the back door and take the food for the freedom fighters. Pakistani army continued their atrocities in the month of June. I made an arrangement to send Lulu and Tulu, my two daughters, to Agartola. I was not getting any information about them. One evening, a rickshaw pulled



Sufia Kamal

came to my house and gave me a small letter. It said, "They have safely crossed the border". I was relieved.

I started going out from July. I would go to the hospital with food and medicine for the injured people. At that time there was an acute crisis of food and medicine in the hospital. I used to give those food and medicine to certain rickshaw pullers at Science Laboratory. They would take the food and medicine to the freedom fighters.

I was able to establish closer contact with the freedom fighters in August. As Pakistani army kept their strong watch on me, I would try to help the freedom fighters in different ways ignoring the

risks.

Many freedom fighters were caught in the hand of Pakistani army in August. They arrested Shaheed Altaf Mahmud and some of his relative and artist Abul Barak Alvi. Shafi Imam Rumi, Masud Sadek Chullu and Jewel were also arrested. After four days Alvi was released from concentration camp and came to my house. He had marks of atrocious tortures all over his body. I became emotional and hugged Alvi tightly. But Altaf Mahmud, Jewel and Rumi never came back.

The rest of the three months I heard only the news of freedom fighters taking control of many parts. I spent

the whole October in anxiety.

In the month of November we came to know that Al-Badar and Razakars were killing many people. Pakistani army increased their vigilance on my house. On November 15, I heard a sad news from Chittagong that Pakistani army killed Kahar Chowdhury, my son-in-law. They killed him because they were very angry with me.

At the beginning of December, I heard that many parts of the country were freed from the grip of Pakistani army. After hearing these news, I had mixed feelings. I was excited and at the same time filled with sorrow. We were getting freedom at the cost of bloodshed of so many people. On December 13, freedom fighters began to gather at my resident.

On December 15 Pakistani forces fled from many parts of the city and took shelter inside the cantonment. Pakistani army encircled the house of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman till the morning of December 16.

On December 16, Dr. Dora was shot dead while passing a house of Dhanmondi where Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana and Mujib's wife Fazilatunnesa were kept under house arrest for the nine months. I rushed to her house after hearing the news. After few hours we received information that Pakistani occupation forces would surrender at the then Racecourse Maidan at 3 pm. I was filled with emotions. Thousands of people took to the streets after hearing the news. Freedom fighters shot blank shots in the sky to celebrate the freedom.

BICHITRA: What was the most memorable event in those months?

SUFIA KAMAL: On December 7, Shahidullah Kaiser came to my house. I asked him to leave immediately because there were rumours that Pakistani military was killing the intellectuals in Dhaka. They had prepared a list of intellectuals and other important persons. Shahidullah Kaiser said, "I would not leave Dhaka. If I

leave Dhaka then who would work?" At that time Dr. Fazle Rabbi told me over the phone, "I heard that the Pakistani army will kill us and your name is also that list. Why are you not leaving Dhaka?" At that time Dhaka was a city of rumours. After few days I heard that many of my acquaintances were missing. I heard that Pakistani army and their collaborators picked up many noted persons including Shahidullah Kaiser, Munir Chowdhury and Dr. Fazle Rabbi from their houses. They cautioned me to leave Dhaka but they themselves did not leave and got caught. They proved their patriotism to their motherland by sacrificing their lives. All of them helped the freedom fighters during the liberation war in different ways by taking risks. And that's why they became the target of Pakistani army.

BICHITRA: "In 1971 no massacre took place in Bangladesh." Some intellectuals in Dhaka signed a statement of the then Yahya government which contained the above title. How did you refrain from signing the statement?

SUFIA KAMAL: I could never sign a statement which was not true. Zillur Rahman, the then regional director of Radio East Pakistan, came to my house and forwarded a paper to me to sign. I got angry after reading the paper. I refused to sign it because it said that the Pakistani army committed no crime in the then East Pakistan. I got furious with Zillur Rahman and asked him how I could expect me to sign something which was a lie. Zillur Rahman became angry too and said, "If you don't give your signature then it might create a problem both for you and your son-in-law Kahar Chowdhury." I told him that I didn't care for my life. I said, "I would rather die than put my signature on a false statement."

Translated by Akbar Hussain
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