



THE POET AND HER WORLD

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Undoubtedly celebrated bilingual poet, storyteller and writer Shamim Azad is one of the best known Bengali poets in England. Also her sincere interest to work for the Bengali community through the development of Bangla language and literature has been remarkable, which sets her apart among her peers.

Many of us have seen her writing and working for the community as much a part of her life as she does breathing, eating or listening to music. People who have had the privilege to know her and had worked with her knows that how charming persona she has apart from being a reputed poet and author. She has been like a mango tree on which many have found support to bloom like orchids. She is one such person who believes in sharing knowledge and wisdom.

She did not dwell silently in her creative world only to win name and fame like many acclaimed poets and writers. Thus it was no big surprise for the Bangladeshi community living in England when Shamim Azad's name was announced for the 'Syed Waliullah Literature Award 2016'. For the Bengali community it was a long awaited honour which they felt their household poet rightly deserve. The 'Syed Waliullah Literary Award' is conferred by the Bangla Academy, Bangladesh in recognition of creative genius in progression and overall contribution in the realm of Bangla language and literature in distant land. It was very exemplary initiative of Bangladesh High Commission, London, that they have given an august reception to poet Shamim Azad on November 6, 2016 at a fine bistro in Brick lane, East London. Nadeem Qadir, Minister Press, Bangladesh High Commission, London, who is an aesthete of literature, art and culture had organised the soirée for poet Shamim Azad in recognition of her outstanding contribution in Bangla language and literature in Great Britain and winning the 'Syed Waliullah Award 2016' by Bangla Academy.

Azad has more than 30 publications of books comprised of novels, short stories, memoirs and collections of poetry in English and Bengali by well-known publication houses of Bangladesh and India. Her ongoing memoirs on 'Shahid Jononi Jahanara Imam' and 'Mone Pore' have able to depict different vibe of writing style of a biographical journal writer. She has also written two plays for Half Moon Theatre and worked with composers Richard Blackford, Kerry Andrew, choreographer Rosemary Lee, visual artist Robin Whitmore and playwright Mary Cooper. Her work ranges from Bangladeshi to European folktales. Her performance blends the lines between education and entertainment. Most of her workshops are rooted in Asian folk, oral traditions and heritage.

She aims at promoting language, literature and culture in true sense of Bengal in the very heart of cosmopolitan London being the chairperson of Bishwo Shahitto Kendro (World Literature Centre). Under her intriguing leadership since its inception in 2002, Bishwo Shahitto Kendro, London (BSKL) has been organising Boishakhi Literature Festival (BOI-LIT Festival) along with many enlightening and heritage based programmes to nurture Bengali ethnicity and aesthetics in London. She also is an executive member of the Exiled Writer's Ink, that brings together writers from repressive regimes and war-torn situations and it equally embraces migrants and exiles.

Poet Shamim Azad has always gathered some of the most innovative and fascinating ways to share her thoughts and creative work with the community. The east-end based storytelling group, 'EAST', which is co-founded by Ms Azad, along with Dadaeius theatre invites local residents to join in sharing some of the stories brought together by the East-end's rich, diverse history of migration. Ms Azad is one of the core artists of the unit 'Bards without Border'. It's has been a year that twelve artists from different regions worked on this unique literature project of Shakespeare to commemorate his 400th anniversary of death. Being a part of the unit she has explored a scene from Shakespeare's Henry VI through drama and creative writing exercises. The unit created joint literary creative words in response to Shakespeare's and his vast work, an event which has brought an appreciation to all edges of cultural sphere.

Being a poet herself she genuinely felt the need to bring British Bangladeshi poets under one umbrella. British Bangladeshi poetry collective (BBPC) is such an exemplary initiative of poet herself. At present she is working with a group of British-Bangladeshi poets to bring out an anthology in the forthcoming Ekushe Book fair. What she dreams today, she makes sure to fulfil the dream into reality tomorrow.

Poet Shamim Azad has not confined her creative world of thoughts to herself only. She has disseminated her thoughts, time and knowledge in multiple forms for the enhancement of Bangla literature and culture in far-off land. We believe she will continue to rediscover herself through various forms of creativity and society would benefit from her genuine contribution as always. Surely winning the 'Syed Waliullah Award 2016' has been another glory to her crown which would act as further inspiration for her as she continues to reign in her world of words and wisdom.

MEGHMALLAR

BIBHUTIBHUSHAN BANDOPADHAYA

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI: SOHANA MANZOOR

(Concluding part) Jamunacharya, the renowned philosopher of Takshashila, was grinding away on a complicated version of mimamsha, an orthodox school of reading the Veda. But he had failed miserably and had started reading the Vedic grammar from the very basics.

The artist teacher Basubrata of Mahakotthi had been working on a piece titled "Buddha and Sujata." However, the end results were totally disheartening. And these days he was showing more interest in astrology than art.

Then one day Prodyumna heard about a veterinarian living somewhere near the village of Urubilwa. The description of his appearance fitted with Gunadhya. He immediately went there and asked around. But nobody could direct him to where the veterinarian lived.

After observing her for sometime Prodyumna felt unsettled. He had left the bihar in search of Suradasa, but had not really expected to come across him. Now seeing the Devi here, he was certain that the man in question was also somewhere around. But what was he supposed to do now? After watching her for some time he went away, only to return the next day.

She asked shyly, "Do you think you could get that one for me?"

"Yes, of course," he said. "But only if you would give me something to eat. I have not eaten anything today."

The Devi's large eyes filled with tenderness, "Why didn't you say so? Come over to this side. Don't worry about the flower."

Prodyumna waded into the water and picked up the lotus anyway and then

if he was not dreaming, then here was an immortal goddess—the very goddess Swaraswati. He wondered what she thought of herself.

"Where did you live before coming to this place?" he asked. "Where is your home?"

Devi was preparing rice and soup in a large wooden bowl. She looked up at him in great surprise. "Home? I do not know. The hermit found me in an abandoned temple near Vidisha. I was lying unconscious, and I, too, cannot remember anything beyond that. Since then I have been living here."

Prodyumna's eyes stung. Oh, the beautiful, immortal goddess lost in self-oblivion, all the riches of the Emperor and his courtiers of Vidisha are not near enough to hold you in this land. What great feat have we accomplished that you have deigned to live among the mortals?

After finishing his meal Prodyumna wanted to leave.

The Devi looked crestfallen. "You won't stay tonight? I wanted to cook payesh for you."

Prodyumna asked, "Are you afraid of being here alone at night?"

"I am. You don't know, but something moves in that cane forest over there, and I don't dare to open the door. I stay awake the entire night."

Prodyumna almost laughed out aloud. Poor Devi! She was tempting him with payesh to make him stay the night because she was afraid. He smiled and said, "Okay, I will stay."

At once the goddess's face lit up.

He sat outside the hut through the night. It was windy but pleasant, and the

went pale at the sight of Prodyumna. "You? Here?" he asked.

Prodyumna replied, "You shouldn't be so surprised."

Gunadhya said, "It's not because you're saying so, but I realized right after that night that I have made a huge mistake. I've been repenting and have terrible nightmares—voices telling me that the punishment of this task is eternal damnation. I went to my guru, the Ajivikahermit, to see if there's any way to undo what I have done. That's where I have been for over a fortnight. I learnt the mantra from him, you know; it's so powerful that I can bind anyone I want, but I cannot hold them to me. That's why I found you; I have some basic knowledge of music, but you're an expert. I used you to bring the Devi in and when she came, I bound her. I didn't quite believe that such a thing was possible. I did it more out of curiosity than anything else."

"What now?" asked Prodyumna.

Gunadhya said, "I'm just back from my guru. He has taught me a reverse mantra. If anyone can throw water that has been purified with this mantra, she will remember everything. But I cannot do it; it's impossible."

"Why is that?"

"It will free her, but the person who does it will turn into stone. For me it's the same. I mean, I would rather have her as my prisoner. Don't be mad, Prodyumna. There is another world even after eternal damnation; but turning into a stone, body and soul—I don't dare."

Prodyumna recalled the beautiful, self-oblivious eyes of the Devi. Will she be locked in this world forever?

of them.

Prodyumna turned to his companion, "Well, the water?"

Gunadhya said, "So you're really prepared to do it?"

Prodyumna replied, "Don't say anything further; just get me the water."

Devi called the two of them inside.

When they were done with dinner, it was almost evening. There were shadows in the cane forest, and the bright red sun was reclining over the Urubilwa village. The Devi's face appeared wraithlike in that light.

Then she took up her water pot to fetch water as usual and went down to the tarn.

Gunadhya said, "Let me leave this place, and then sprinkle the water of this pot on her."

His eyes filled with tears. He embraced Prodyumna, "I am a coward; I don't dare to do this, or else..."

He collected all his things from the hut and then took to a narrow path by the cane forest, and soon disappeared beyond the hills.

Prodyumna sat there waiting. Prodyumna felt tears in his eyes.

And he saw the Devi coming up the hill. He had put down the pot of enchanted water on the ground. He picked it up. The Devi came nearer; she had a pile of lotuses in hand. She asked, "Where did the hermit go?"

Prodyumna said, "He left. Won't return today."

Then he went and knelt down before the goddess and said, "O mother, I committed a sin against you unknowingly. I am atoning it by what I am about to do. I am not the least bit sorry about my punishment. I will be only too happy that I have had the honor of returning the beautiful spirit of this world to her rightful place."

The Devi stared at him wonderingly. Prodyumna went on, "Listen, try to remember who you are, and where you came from."

The goddess said, "Why, I was lying by the roadside in Vidisha..."

Prodyumna sprinkled some water over her, and the Devi shuddered like one awakened from a deep slumber.

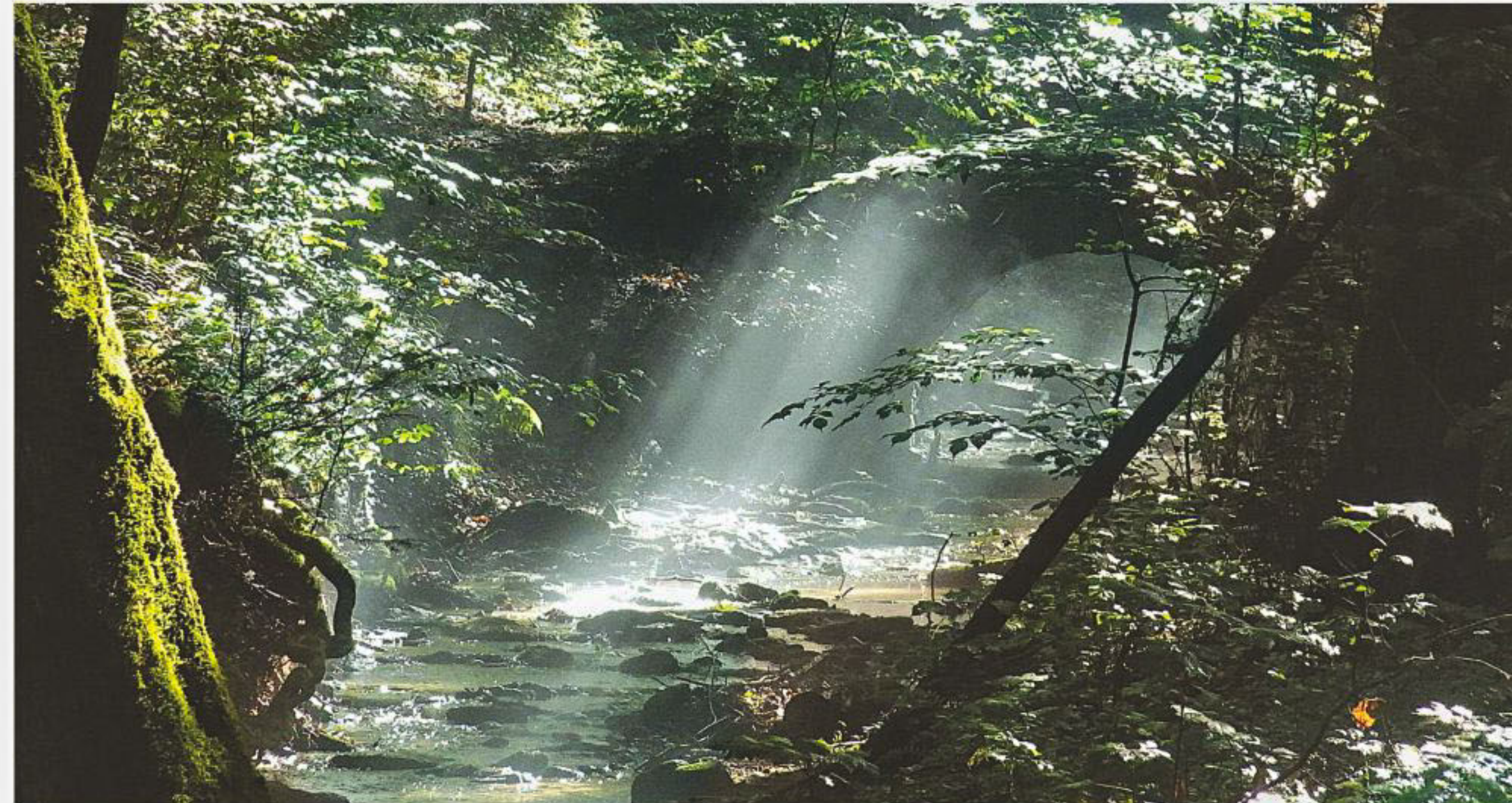
Prodyumna got hold of the water pot in one hand and steadily sprinkled more water with his other hand. For a moment he thought he saw a gloriously divine form standing before him. His body and mind were consumed by a sense of intense pleasure; and then he remembered his mother waiting by the window.

A woman took her vows at a very early age at the Kumarsreneebihar before the monk Shilabrata. He name was Shunanda, she was the daughter of the opulently rich merchant Shamantadas. She had refused to get married even at the most earnest entreaties of her parents. Since she took vows at a very early age, she earned respect from all quarters. But she associated with very few, spending time alone, and always unmindful.

On moonlit nights, she would stand on the stone balcony of the bihar and meditate. Sometimes she would stare at people approaching the bihar late at night, as if trying to find the beloved who had left her with the promise of returning soon. She waited for him every morning, the morning turned into afternoon, and then evening came, and she would think that he would arrive a little later. Day after day, month after month, she waited. She shivered at the rustling sound of leaves; was that him at long last?

On some nights she had this strange dream! Somewhere in an unknown alpine region, a half-broken statuette stood hidden in the cane and bamboo forest. On silent nights, wind played with the bamboo leaves that hid the face of the statue making swishing noises. And in the dark night, in that no man's land, the wind played the Meghmallar...

Shunanda would wake up early at dawn and wonder where was it all? The hills and mountains? What cane forest, and whose statue was it? Why did she have such strange dreams— frolics indeed of her vagrant mind!



crossed over to the other side.

"I have seen you sitting under that big tree before. You come here everyday, don't you?" she asked.

Prodyumna gave her the flower and said, "Yes, I have also noticed that you come to fetch water at dusk."

She smiled and said, "Yes, we live on top of that crag. Come, I will give you something to eat." ***

The Devi suddenly looked around her in utter confusion, as if she did not recognize where she was. Then she started climbing the foothill with Prdyumna following her. Soon they reached a clear space and a small hut. Devi opened the door and welcomed him inside.

Prodyumna saw that there was nobody else in the hut. So, he asked, "Do you live by yourself?"

"No, there is a hermit who lives here as well. He is the one who brought me to this place. I don't know what he does, but he goes away often and comes back after five or six days. Come, sit here."

She offered him malted drink in an earthen glass. Prodyumna could not recall drinking anything so good; it must be what manna tastes like, he thought. If the Acharya Purnabradhana was correct, and

Devi sat with him. She said, "It's so gorgeous in the moonlight, but I am so afraid to stay out by myself; I stay inside through the night."

Prodyumna was amazed at the power of the mantra. How was it possible to be so completely oblivious? It seemed unbelievable.

They chatted on different topics and at dawn Prodyumna took his leave. The Devi told him to visit when the hermit returned.

Since that day Prodyumna went and sat under the foothill guarding the Devi at night. She never knew, of course. But his young, chivalrous heart refused to let an unprotected woman alone in the woods.

After about two weeks Prodyumna heard the Devi singing at night—but it was no mortal human song! It was the song of the eternal soul, the song of nebulas, sung by some lost star in the galaxy.

One midday afternoon someone told him that the veterinarian he was asking about was seen bathing in the roadside pond. Prodyumna ran toward the pond immediately. He saw that Gunadhya had just got into the water leaving his dried clothes on the shore. He sat there and waited for the man to finish his bathing.

After a while Gunadhya came up and

Prodyumna was suddenly consumed by the high ideals that lead young spirits to do the impossible. He thought, what is in this life? I can die a hundred times to pull out a thorn from her divine feet.

He looked at Gunadhya and said, "I will do it; give me that water."

Gunadhya stared at him in amazement. "Think carefully, Prodyumna. This is not child's play; it is a matter..."

Prodyumna said, "I'll do it."

Together they walked toward the cottage, and Gunadhya said again, "Prodyumna, think again, don't fall for any false hope. Nobody can save you from this; not even the Devi. The mantra is so powerful that it will turn you into stone—body and soul. Try to understand, it won't spare anyone."

Prodyumna replied, "You think, I care? Let's do it."

It was late afternoon when they reached the hut. The Devi was sitting outside on the grass unmindfully. Her face showed delight at the sight of Prodyumna, and she said, "Oh, it's you! I often think of you, you know. I felt bad that I could not give you much to eat the other day. Now, come and stay here for a few days."

She went inside to get food for both

A COURAGEOUS MARTYR

MAHBUB NEWAZ CHOWDHURY

Faraaz is our proven brave heart
We are proud
We are bleeding, still heart-broken,
Unable to accept his loss
Such a young brave heart.

Faraaz is in our heart
With our love for him
We cannot bear such a sad demise.

Forgive us, Faraaz, you gave us your life

We could not save you
But we will save your values
Your martyrdom will not be forgotten.

Long live the memory of our valiant Faraaz.
Let us all gather to salute his heroism
to uphold human values and highest moral.
We are filled with pride and uplifted
by his unparalleled valour and compassion
to save his friends from savage militants.

Faraaz raised the banner of righteousness
in our country and our world.
An icon of chivalry and altruism
A knight in shining armour
in our resolve to resist barbarism.
Let his spirit light our minds and hearts
in gratitude and remembrance of his supreme
sacrifice.

The poem is a tribute to Faraaz Hossain, whose martyrdom heralded a reawakening of humanity amongst us.

