

Remembering our sister Simeen Mahmud

MIRZA NAJMUL HUDA and ZAREEN HUDA AHMED

ON the chilling morning of March 26, 1971, Pakistani soldiers kicked open the back door of our Dhaka University bungalow, and violated our residence for the second time. A soldier pointed his bayonet at our father, Dr MN Huda, almost touching his chest. Our mother, Kulsum Huda, rushed to protect him by embracing him from the front. We, the two terrified sisters, stood behind our father in direct view of the soldier's face and were pleading with him. To our horror, the soldier gestured to his partner to pull our mother away so he could complete his mission. Simeen fearlessly walked up to the soldier and defiantly pushed the rifle away from Abba's chest. Confronted with Simeen's bravery, the soldiers were dumbfounded and left with their mission unaccomplished. Simeen's courage and Allah's mercy saved our father's life.

As we come to terms with the reality of Simeen's sudden passing on March 19, 2018 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and her burial in New Jersey on March 23, we are overwhelmed by the support of family and friends from all over the world, many of whom we had lost touch with for decades. We request special prayers for Simeen's intellectual and life's partner for the last 43 years, Wahiduddin Mahmud, our Wahid Bhai.

After graduating from Dhaka University with a First Class First B.Sc. Honours degree in statistics, Simeen pursued higher studies at the London School of Hygiene and

Tropical Medicine, and researched as a MacArthur Fellow at the Harvard Center for Population Studies. Subsequently, she changed her research focus from population studies to gender-related development studies. A researcher at BIDS and BRAC University and author of numerous research papers, Simeen has been described as a pioneer in gender studies and women's empowerment. Although her collaborative research required frequent foreign travels, Simeen spent her entire professional career in Bangladesh.

While acquaintances are familiar with Simeen's stellar professional achievements, we want to share some character traits that made Simeen unique. Simeen exemplified the proverb "The apple does not fall far from the tree." She inherited the best attributes of our parents: our father's brilliant intellect, humility, modesty and superb managerial skills, along with our mother's exquisite taste and creativity, generosity and hospitality, unpublicised support of countless charities and the education of needy students, and her tireless energy to diligently pursue numerous passions, including gardening, collecting art and interior decorating.

Simeen was the rock of our extended family, and the custodian of many people's valuables. She was entrusted with varied responsibilities ranging from the sublime (an elderly cousin requested that she perform her final Ghusl) to the mundane (safe-keeping the passports of non-resident family members visiting Bangladesh).

Simeen was a practicing Muslim who embodied one treasured



Simeen Mahmud

trait—patience. Highly disciplined (she routinely walked along Dhanmondi lake on weekday mornings) as well as a strict disciplinarian (she would admonish anyone deserving a dressing-down), she was simultaneously soft-hearted and empathetic. When her brother-in-law was almost succumbing to dengue infection in 2010 and the rest of us were panicking, Simeen calmly took charge of his treatment, and did not leave the hospital until he was out of danger.

Simeen distributed our Zakat, arranged Sadaquas, distributed food at orphanages and represented our family at weddings and funerals. She took her children to visit elderly relatives and our parents' surviving friends. She financially supported the education of several students, mostly anonymously. During winter, she would carry a couple of new blankets

with her during her morning walks and distribute them to the disabled. Often she would give toys to the street children, who would first be taken aback and then reward her with the most gratifying and radiant smiles! Every Friday after Jummah, she distributed food to the hungry.

Simeen was truly blessed that both her parents-in-law who lived with them, and died in their homes. Her father-in-law passed away in 1986 after they set up their first household in Dhaka, while her mother-in-law passed away in 2012. That they all lived together for 34 years is a testament to their mutual love.

Despite her hectic schedule, Simeen took over our mother's role as a trustee of Central Women's University and worked tirelessly with her friends to build on the dream of our cousin, the founding vice-chancellor. She also supported

countless educational institutions behind the scene, to avoid publicity.

Simeen learned cooking by experimenting with recipes from our grandmother, mother and of course Siddiqua Kabir. Her "Kacchi Biryani" was a family favourite, and at family gatherings, there were never left-overs of Simeen's Biryani. Among her other culinary classics were green mango pickles, the spicy version which her daughter relished, and the sweet "Kashmiri" Achaar. Most of the time, the batch would be consumed directly from the pot and not make it to the storage jars!

Visitors to Simeen's flat were greeted with the eclectic charm and tasteful décor of her drawing room, which could easily be featured in *Architectural Digest*. Like our mother, Simeen instantly recognised unique artefacts, which she collected from all over the world. She elegantly displayed souvenirs from all her travels, along with rocks she collected and the decorated small trunk she picked up long before "rickshaw art" was recognised. She restored our grandfather's vintage, intricately carved mahogany furniture and artistically paired them with her contemporary furniture.

Simeen inherited the passion for reading from our mother and passed it on to her three children—Adeeb, Naved and Ayesha. She had a life-long passion for buying books. Her walls are lined with copies of every genre, from classics to contemporary. To escape the boredom when stuck in Dhaka traffic, she maintained a mini-library in her car, which was stocked with prayer books, Agatha Christie novels, and even a few texts on demography.

Gardening was another of Simeen's passions. Unlike us amateurs, she elevated her horticultural interests to the next level by learning how to train bonsais. Within a few years, she had trained a tamarind sapling to a mature bonsai tree, which occupies a special spot in our rear garden.

Simeen was also "hooked" on Sudoku, and was at a master level. Most evenings after dinner she would sit in her wicker sofa, with a sharpened pencil and eraser in hand, and challenge her mind with a new game. She had a special case for the pencil and eraser and everyone had strict instructions to never touch (and God forbid remove) these valuable tools!

Simeen was obsessed with dusting furniture. Everything was dusted daily, sometimes twice! She kept several dust cloths around the shelves. Whenever she noticed even a tiny speck in the obscure corners that the house help had missed, she would start dusting herself, even after returning home from an exhausting day and suffering interminable traffic jams.

The bond with a sister is truly magical, and those who have experienced it are blessed. We were especially fortunate as we had frequent daily interactions while living, since 1987, on different floors of our parent's modest Dhanmondi residence, Shalmolee. Now, the most vibrant member of Shalmolee is gone.

We pray to Allah that He reunites Simeen with our parents in paradise.

Mirza Najmul Huda and Zareen Huda Ahmed are brother and sister of Simeen Mahmud, respectively.

India's ode to Africa

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

IF there has been one segment of India's foreign policy on which there has always been a multi-party consensus all along, it is the ties with Africa. Over the decades, India has provided diplomatic and material support to the struggle of African countries to get rid of colonial rule and the apartheid, which has helped ground the ties between India and Africa on a firm emotional foundation. It is this foundation from where India's outreach to Africa has expanded over the decades without ever becoming a victim of ideological differences at home among Indian political parties, as say in the case of ties with the United States, the former Soviet Union, Russia and China.

India's African journey has resonated across the spectrum.

There has been a frequent exchange of high-level visits of Indian and African leaders in the last ten years culminating in India hosting a mega-summit of top leaders from 40 African countries in 2015. India's relations with African countries have progressed at a steady pace with New Delhi entering into a structured engagement with them with the launch of the first India-Africa Forum Summit in 2008 in New Delhi. This was followed by the two more India-Africa Forum Summits in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2011, and in New Delhi in October 2015. Indian President Ram Nath Kovind, Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi have visited Africa in the last 3-4 years and are likely to visit that continent again this year.

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gauged from the fact that over 40 percent of New Delhi's soft loans has been to African countries, and Indian companies have substantially increased their presence in Africa. On March 21 this year, the Indian cabinet approved the setting up of new Indian diplomatic missions in 18 African countries over a four-year period between 2018 and 2021. The new missions will be opened in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mauritania, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Swaziland and Togo, thereby increasing the number of Resident Indian missions in Africa from 29 to 47 in one stroke. The decision will not only ramp up India's diplomatic outreach in the African continent but also allow engagement with the Indian diaspora in African countries.

Of late, the two sectors that have received a good deal of attention from India and Africa are trade and security cooperation. As Indian Commerce Minister Suresh Prabhu said at a recent conclave in New Delhi, India would negotiate a free trade agreement with the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) which he said will be unique in nature and will be beneficial to Africa's requirements. Trade between India and Africa was estimated at USD 53 billion which New Delhi considers far below potential. So, it wants efforts to not only increase the volume of trade but also diversify the trade basket. The Indian Commerce Ministry is revamping export insurance and the Project Export Promotion Council to give boost to India's exports to Africa.

Besides, India is seeking to set up a new India-Africa Development Fund which would seek to synergise the Lines of Credit as well as other export promotion and development programmes to bring about a more holistic development of the continent. India and Japan are in talks to set up the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, which is considered a strategic response to China's Belt Road Initiative.

On the security front, India's single biggest contribution towards peace and conflict resolution in Africa is best evident in its expansive participation in the UN peace keeping efforts in African countries over the last six decades. More than 6,000 Indian peacekeepers are today deployed in five peacekeeping operations in Africa, including in

South Sudan and Democratic People's Republic of Congo. India has defence and security cooperation with all littoral states in the Indian Ocean region, including South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya, Seychelles, Mauritius and Madagascar as well as with Nigeria, Tanzania and Egypt. The range of bilateral security cooperation includes training, infrastructural development assistance, peace-keeping, defence agreements, joint naval exercises and defence equipment transfers.

Terrorism and other conflicts in Africa have time and again thwarted economic progress in Africa. Piracy, cross-border threats, and transnational crimes, including narcotics, trafficking and cybercrimes, have lent a new dimension to the problem, fuelling instability in the region. What is

needed is not just deepening but also widening of security engagements between India and Africa. This may call for looking at a security paradigm that goes beyond the existing one. Behind India's courtship of Africa lies India's quest for a seat in the UN Security Council and Africa, with a strength of 54 countries, is important in New Delhi's calculus.

It is often tempting to compare India's foray into Africa with the much more aggressive push by China in that continent. Armed with much bigger financial muscle, China has set its economic footprints in Africa much ahead of India. But there is a fundamental difference in the approaches of India and China towards Africa. In undertaking big infrastructure and other economic projects in Africa, China's eyes are firmly on its rich mineral resources and transporting them for factories back home.

More importantly, China brings its own workers for the projects in Africa, thereby ruling out any scope for generating local jobs. This has often led to resentment among locals in several African countries. By contrast, India's approach is non-prescriptive and allows African countries to decide their own priorities in choosing projects funded by soft loans from India. Secondly, India also helps skilling African workers by providing them training before involving many of them in those projects. It is a difference between the hard-nosed commercial approach of China and use of less than transactional approach of India.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent of The Daily Star.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



April 1, 1976

STEVE WOZNIAK AND STEVE JOBS
FOUND APPLE COMPUTER

Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs found Apple Computer in the garage of Jobs' parents house in Cupertino, California. Apple Computer is now known as Apple Inc. and one of the biggest companies by revenue in the world.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

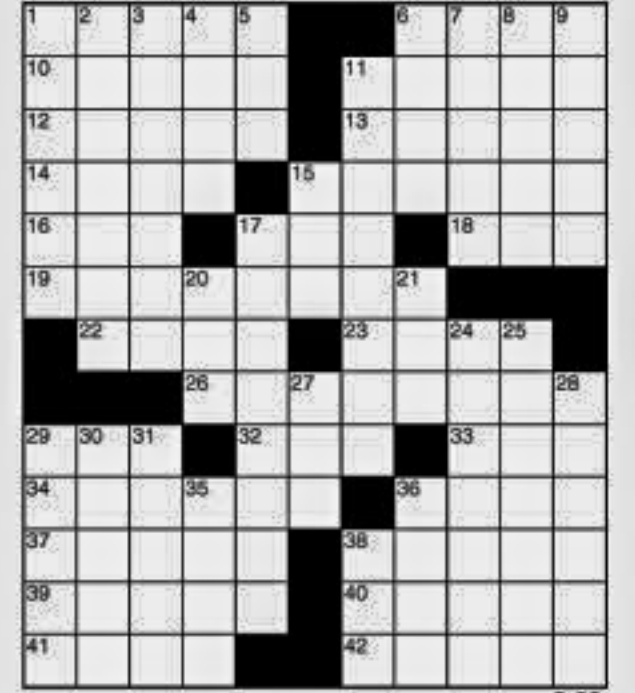
ACROSS

- "Ivanhoe" author
- Pinochle score
- Movie barbarian
- Sun-powered
- Segregated
- Chilled
- Singer Coolidge
- Stuns
- Heady brew
- Decline
- Cart puller
- Paying house-guests
- Trolley's kin
- Sunrise spot
- Pack rats
- Slapstick weapon
- Sgt., e.g.
- Gullet

- White Rabbit's cry
- Calf-length skirt
- Capital on the Nile
- Pollster Elmo
- Utah city
- Rainy month
- Casual tops
- Fragrant flower

DOWN

- Sacred beetle
- Cockpit worker
- Carousing
- Scarlett's home
- Blasting stuff
- "— Lisa"
- "My Fair lady" lady
- Oxford parts
- Attire
- Tijuana topper
- Japanese prime minister
- Home of the Oilers
- Bleachers cry
- Blue
- Part-time player
- Car price reducer
- Expert
- Going around and around
- Lace loop
- Mirror sight
- Omit phonetically
- Son of Hera
- Act sullen
- Drake's music



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

LAMAS LANCE
EBOOK ASIAN
WORKINGHARD
IRS LEE GAL
STEELER AWE
TED BRAS
FLIRT SLAYS
LANE GNU
ASS COURAGE
PAT HOG POL
PLAYINGCARD
ELLEN LARGE
DELTA ENTER

BEETLE BAILEY



BABY BLUES



BY MORT WALKER



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

