

Begum Sufia Kamal, as I knew her

Remembering the poet, champion of women's rights, pioneering cultural icon in the Bengali nationalist movement and Liberation War activist on her 108th birth anniversary

ZEENAT REZWANA CHOWDHURY

BEGUM Sufia Kamal became "Khalamma" in a few swift seconds of her introduction to me the first time I was in her house. Her daughter, Sultana Kamal, familiarly known as Lulu, and I were close friends at the English Department of Dhaka University—a friendship which had already crossed the barrier between the science faculty where I was a student and the arts faculty where Lulu was, at Holy Cross College, and now had taken strong roots with both of us being in the same department at DU.

Their house was unlike any other. You got off the rickshaw at the end of Road 32, Dhanmondi, entered through a bamboo gate into a garden always in flower. The first time I went, it must have been early winter—the garden was alive with a colourful storm of cosmos on top of delicate green-fringed leafy stems. On all my regular visits afterwards, the *sheuli*, the tuberose, the *hasna hena*, the gardenia, all marked the various seasons with their scent.

The *veranda* was the next stop. Usually, Lulu's father would be sitting on a cane armchair reading. He would look up and nod at our shy salaam. We made our way in between the wicker chairs and stools which dotted the veranda to the living room where the cane bookcases tottered under the weight of the books and where the cane table lamps remained lit sometimes even when it was day.

If Khalamma had not come out to greet us in the veranda in her white cotton *sari*, the end of it neatly circling her lovely face, she would be found in the inner precincts, always busy. She would be writing or reading or cooking or sewing or saying her prayers or giving instructions or advice to

someone or the other. But whatever she was busy with, in a little while she would be with us, listening and talking.

Tea would come—she knew we were always hungry—and the *cha* would come with *muri bhorta* or *shingara* or toast biscuits. Always something delicious. On some occasions, she cooked especially for us. I still remember her creamy *firni* and fragrant *ilish pulao*.

I also remember the tribe of cats which weaved in and out between our legs under the table. There were 11 at that time, and each had a name, the latest being Aleya, which made me laugh as much as Lulu was laughing telling me its name. Khalamma didn't seem to be bothered by the number of them. They were clearly as much a part of her family as the long line of people of all creed, class and age who walked in and out of that unusual house.

From a strict all girls' convent school and missionary college, I was now in the heady atmosphere of Dhaka University. The ambience was magic. Walking to the British Council to read, to the TSC to rehearse for plays and debates and to eat in the company of friends, to New Market in search of books, to the classrooms through the innumerable corridors—all spelled freedom, the greatest freedom being of course the freedom to spend time as we pleased with whoever we pleased, which meant often with our batchmates of the opposite sex.

Most of us couldn't take any of this back home—our parents did not want to know and we did not want to tell. But Khalamma was a different story. She was ready to listen and to encourage and to applaud and to scold and to laugh.

We had so much to tell. About the



Begum Sufia Kamal (June 20, 1911 – November 20, 1999).

luminaries who taught us: Dr Sajjad Hossain, the Anglophile professor who brought the battlefields of *Iliad* into the classroom and who also made us don black robes and march through the campus to observe a matriculation ceremony while our friends in the other departments laughed and jeered; Dr Munir Hussain; Dr Serajul Islam Chowdhury; Dr Jyotirmoy Guhathakurtha; Ms Hosne Ara Huq; and Dr Sarwar Murshid, in crisp white *kurta* pyjamas and his signature dark sunglasses even in the classroom, reading metaphysical poetry and all of us in a state of fevered ecstasy listening to Donne, "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love."

We could share all this so easily with Sufia Kamal. Not only did she listen, but she also brought out Bangla poems to match the English ones we were reading, read and rated the poems and

articles we were writing, commented on the weekly column I wrote for the *Morning News*, was disappointed if we didn't speak out in class when we had an opinion different to the one being asserted by the lecturer or by the majority, and never, ever, not one single time did she say that our university days were only a waiting period before we would be married off to live happily ever after. Which was what many of us were hearing at home.

There was another quality I found magical in that house. Everyone was allowed to be what they wanted to be. Lulu's eldest brother seemed to be a student of various subjects, her second brother had gone to America to work, Lulu was studying English literature and her sister was in Art College. Their future was theirs to plan, enjoy or suffer, whatever, with one condition—that they become independent with

education as the base.

With Sufia Kamal, no subject was out of bounds for discussion. She asked us once why Lulu and I didn't have boyfriends, when we were discussing in a very judgmental way some girls who had them. Struck dumb by this question, I stayed silent wondering if Lulu would be able to answer. Sufia Kamal herself did. Because you two have such sharp tongues, she said.

We wondered whether we would become more loveable if we listened to Donne's plea and held our tongues. But our friends laughed and said it was too late. They tried to console us listing some of our more attractive qualities but we felt, to quote TS Eliot, "After such knowledge, what apology", and would not be consoled. For a little while.

I realise as I write that this seems to be more on me and my time then, than about Begum Sufia Kamal. But then, this was her unmatched gift, that she could make you see yourself better, examine yourself and decide that you meant something of value.

She was a true embodiment of the "Spirit of the Age", showing us the best way to exist when the worst of times was upon us. There will not be a second Sufia Kamal but her lesson was not to be a second anyone, no matter how bright a star. "Be yourself and be the best of yourself" was her lesson.

When young, we admire many people who lose their shine once we grow older and wiser. The truly admirable are the ones for whom the admiration remains and continues to grow. Begum Sufia Kamal is such a person for me and as I write this I am again inspired, enkindled and touched by everything she was.

Zeenaat Rezwana Chowdhury is the principal of South Breeze School.

I realise as I write that this seems to be more on me and my time then, than about Begum Sufia Kamal. But then, this was her unmatched gift, that she could make you see yourself better, examine yourself and decide that you meant something of value.

The worrisome delinquency of law enforcement officials



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

STRAIght LINE
In recent times, offences and excesses committed by some police officials have become a matter of grave concern for the citizens as well as the controlling authorities. The media amongst others has been demonstrably forthright in pointing to the illegality of actions of officials and the ominous

precedence being set in the process. Take, for example, the arrogance and impertinence of DIG Police Mizan who, despite being withdrawn from active duty consequent upon accusations of malfeasance and moral turpitude and remaining subject to an inquiry by the Anti-Corruption Commission, continues to talk to the media, thus clearly violating the provisions of government servants' conduct rules that prohibit him from such actions.

It needs to be understood that the media, quite clearly, is not the principal forum to brag about one's innocence or victimhood as displayed by the above officer's indiscretions. The deviant officer forgot that in offering bribe or illegal gratification to a public official during the course of an official inquiry, he was exposing himself to a criminal charge. The prime minister has pertinently pointed to the equal culpability of both the bribe offerer and the taker.

If indeed the officer under inquiry really wanted to trap the bribe-demanding officer, as has been claimed, it would be prudent and proper on his part to involve designated official agencies in this venture, bearing in mind that he is a suspect in a complaint of gross highhandedness and moral turpitude. In fact, as per disciplinary rules, when an official is found to be guilty of moral turpitude, the punishment mostly is dismissal from service. The gravity of



DIG of Police Mizanur Rahman has made the headlines once again for all the wrong reasons. The home minister has reiterated that action will be taken against the disgraced police official.

the situation needs to be understood. It needs to be stated here that while a proper investigation is expected to reveal the actual culpability of both the inquiry officer and the officer inquired upon, a worrying factor is the inordinately long time taken to conduct the inquiry. Since the subject matter of the inquiry pertains to a serious indiscretion of a highly placed law enforcement official, it is only proper that the matter is expeditiously disposed of. Quite clearly, a time length of six months was sufficient to complete the inquiry. Procrastination in such a scenario should not be expected.

Another concern relates to the serious offence allegedly committed by Police Inspector Moazzem, former officer-in-charge of Sonagazi Police Station, who thankfully has now been

arrested by police though after some regretful delay. This officer's inactions and omissions coupled with partial conduct led to the very cruel murder of a young girl. He has been made accused in a case under the Digital Security Act due to the proactive role of a lawyer of the Apex Court. The point to note here is that the delinquent officer's illegal acts and indiscretions in harassing a young girl victim were no secret to the supervising police officials of Feni District Police.

In the above case, the senior police officials of Feni District utterly failed to take both administrative and legal actions. From facts and circumstances that have surfaced during the investigation of the murder case that has finally led to a charge sheet, it is clear that the accused officer-in-charge stood guilty of gross

dereliction of statutory duty and was liable to be suspended as his continuance in office was no longer necessary in public interest.

It is pertinent to note that like the delay in conducting the ACC inquiry against DIG Mizan, there was an unfortunate delay in initiating action against Inspector Moazzem soon after the brutal murder of Nusrat despite the existence of credible evidence. The police department should have acted on its own volition, thereby proving their bona fide in promptly taking legal and administrative action. That the police organisation will, under no circumstances, act as a protective shield for its bad hats would have been aptly demonstrated if prompt action followed in time.

The delay in taking action against DIG Mizan also raises concern because he was withdrawn from active duty in public interest long before and, subsequently, the police headquarters reportedly sent the required report to the Ministry of Home

Affairs. The ministry may wait for the ACC report on other allegations before taking action although there is no bar in taking disciplinary action against the concerned official should the police headquarters' report contain materials warranting action.

It would appear that the ethos of public service has unfortunately been dented warranting corrective actions for ensuring good governance. What is needed is to make improvements in the quality of law enforcement a permanent and integrated part of the national agenda, regardless of which party is in power.

The misdeeds of a few officials cannot be a cause of embarrassment for a democratic government. Rather it is time to promptly demonstrate that the law is no respecter of rank or position and the degree of suffering should be much higher when lawmen resort to lawless actions.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former Inspector General of Police.

QUOTABLE Quote

ANGELA MERKEL (b. 1954)
German politician serving as Chancellor of Germany

Climate change knows no borders. It will not stop before the Pacific islands and the whole of the international community here has to shoulder a responsibility to bring about a sustainable development.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Genie's offering	number one	7 Play division
5 Brooch part	33 Maiden name	8 Delivery company
10 Singer Guthrie	label	9 Pored over
11 Wealth	34 Supplement	12 Flower parts
13 Accomplishment	35 Printer's goofs	16 Edit menu choice
14 Whole	37 Milky stone	21 Nasty practical jokes
15 Get excited	38 Fragrance counter bottle	22 Mercury, for one
17 Baby beagle	39 Gentle pulls	23 Snow White's sister
18 Bristles at	40 Title documents	24 Malign
19 Free TV spot:	41 Proofing note	25 Chilly

DOWN

20 Pitches	1 Thin cookie	27 Lebanon trees
21 Shoe part	2 Tony winner	29 Completely full
22 Madrid museum	Worth	30 Advice
25 Appliance parts	3 Louver parts	31 Play setting
26 Defeat	4 Rash people	32 'The Planets' composer
27 Rollaway bed	5 Waves' peaks	36 Had supper
28 Nile serpent	6 Queues	
29 Looking after		

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	A	P	P	E	R	I	C	E	S
A	B	R	A	D	E	D	O	N	T
S	O	U	R	E	D	E	R	G	O
A	D	D	O	N	C	A	N	A	L
S	E	E	D	A	L	L	E	G	E
M	O	C	K	T	A	I	L	S	
S	O	N	I	O	N	S			
E	V	E	N	T	S	R	A	M	S
D	E	M	O	S	L	A	P	A	T
E	D	I	T	P	I	E	R	R	E
R	U	L	E	O	N	L	I	N	E
S	P	E	D	T	O	I	L	E	D

OPENS TODAY

Visit the International Tradeshow on **Building & Construction Equipment, Machinery, Materials, Products, Wood & Woodworking Machinery**

5th BANGLADESH BUILDCON — International Expo 2019 —

JAT PAINTS TRANSFORMING SPACES™

BANGLADESH WOOD INTERNATIONAL EXPO 2019

• Materials • Products • Technology • Equipments

20 - 22 JUNE 2019

International Convention City, Bashundhara, Dhaka.
(Show Timings : 11am - 8pm) **ENTRY FREE !!!**

Visit and source latest products from International Suppliers of Building & Construction Equipment, Machinery, Materials, Products and Wood Working Machinery, Materials, Tools & Equipment under-one-roof Spread over 4 Halls.

4 HALLS **10 COUNTRIES** **200+ EXHIBITORS** **3000+ PRODUCTS**

Jointly organised by: **ASK Futurex** Supported by: **CII** Co-Sponsor: **IPMA** Powered by: **MAYA PLY** **WTS**

ASK Trade & Exhibitions Pvt. Ltd. Futurex Trade Fairs & Event Pvt. Ltd. Confederation of Indian Industry

Contact : 01711340056 / 01678447820 info@asktradex.com