

Halima Begum: On the frontline

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"On February 20, the government invoked Section 144. During the meeting organised by us university students the next day, there were some disagreements on the next steps. Surprisingly, it was the youngest girls, especially the ones from school, who were the most vocal about wanting to break Section 144. They started chanting slogans—we will break the curfew, a thousand times over. Bangla must be our state language. Political prisoners must be freed."

These words, written by the late Language Movement veteran Dr Halima Khatun in her memoirs titled *Smriti Godyo*, are a striking reflection of how important women were in the Language Movement of 1952. This includes Dr Khatun herself, who was among the first women to break the barricades of the Pakistani police force and walk on the now-fabled road that led to the Language Movement of 1952, the assertion of Bengali national identity and the Bengali nationalist movements that ultimately led to the creation of Bangladesh.

Those who knew Dr Khatun, who passed away on July 3, 2018 at the age of 86, spoke of her quiet yet fiercely independent spirit, an unwavering positivity towards life, and a smile that never left her face. Born on August 25, 1933 in Bagerhat—the eighth child in a family of eight daughters and four sons—she wrote of an idyllic childhood in an isolated village, playing next to a bamboo forest, roasting sweet potatoes over fires and voraciously reading everything she could get her hands on. She

was the first to acknowledge the privilege that allowed her, as daughter of the local school headmaster, to not only finish her education in a place where locals actively campaigned against Muslim girls walking unattended to school, but to complete her undergraduate degree in PC Chandra College—where she was the only girl in her advanced Bangla class—before beginning a Master's degree in English at the University of Dhaka (DU). This was in late 1949.

"When I reached Dhaka, I found a tempestuous city, and an agitating student community. In 1952, every corridor and classroom of the university was resonating with the chants and slogans of protest. Not only had they said that Urdu would be the official language of the nation, but that we would have to write Bangla in Arabic letters too! And so started our campaigning. Everyone decided to stand up and protest—we would not give up our language so easily."

Thus began Dr Khatun's involvement in the Language Movement. Her interest in political affairs had been stoked during Partition—she wrote of how the speeches of Subhas Chandra Bose "ignited the fires of revolution within me"—and she went on to take part in picketing, protests and



ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

meetings at DU. She maintained a close relationship with Nadera Begum, a leftist leader and one of the pioneering activists of the movement, as well as Nurjahan Murshid, who later went on to become one of only two women to be directly elected to the Provincial Legislative Assembly of East Bengal in 1954. On February 20, after the Pakistan government imposed Section 144 forbidding any strikes, meetings or processions, she went to Begum's house and received orders to encourage students from her hostel, the Women Students Residence, to join the meeting the next day at Aamtol.

As Begum had an arrest warrant issued in her name, she was unable to do this work herself. Dr Khatun was also put in charge of bringing together the women from Mitford Medical School (now Sir Salimullah Medical College) and the schoolgirls from Muslim Girls' School and Banglabazar Girls' School who were interested in participating in the movement.

At this meeting, a consensus was reached—the students would break Section 144 and bring out a procession. She wrote, "it was the women who first came out on to the streets at the head

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of this procession. To save our mother tongue, it was the women who overcame the obstacles and led the charge. It wasn't just university students; schoolgirls and young girls from college, who made the campus reverberate with their

fiery slogans, were at the heart of this movement. Yet, this is something that is often forgotten."

The first students at the head of this procession, who walked past the barricades set up at the Arts building (currently part of Dhaka Medical College), were Sufia Ibrahim, Shafia Khatun, Rowshon Ara Bacchu, possibly Suraiya Hakim (the writer's memory is hazy on this) and Dr Halima Khatun herself. These brave women pushed past the nozzles of the Pakistan police, and Shafia Khatun jumped the barricade. Dr Khatun and the others went under the barricade, except Rowshon Ara Bacchu, who started pushing against it. Other protestors joined her, and that is when the police started firing tear gas, but no avail—the barricades gave way, and the students broke through.

"At one point, to avoid the *lathi* charge of the police, we went into the Medical College building. Shafia was arrested but released later, and Rowshon Ara had been injured. That's when we heard the gunfire. They brought in the injured students on stretchers. I can still hear the screaming. It was chaos. We heard later that the police had taken away the dead bodies outside. When the gunfire finally stopped, we saw that the streets were flooded with blood, at the spot where the Shaheed Minar is now. I had never seen so much blood before. There were blood-soaked clothes there as well. We heard that someone had been shot in the head."

These events have now become a part of history, and what happened next doesn't require repeating. Dr Khatun spent the rest of that time raising funds for the treatment of injured protestors. But the bloodbath of 1952 was not the only one she witnessed. On March 25, 1971, she was living in the Iqbal Hall (now Zahirul Haque Hall) teachers' quarters at Dhaka University, where one of the massacres occurred and student leader Chisti Helalur Rahman was killed, among many others. Over the next two days, she and her daughter were trapped there. When they were finally able to leave, there were still pools of blood there. It was a nightmare she would never forget.

Dr Khatun spent her life as an academic, a prolific writer (she wrote approximately 100 books during her lifetime) and a voracious reader. She played the *esraj* and was a passionate gardener. At a time when the role of women in traditional societies was constantly under scrutiny, she was a divorced, single mother who made her way to the US to pursue a PhD on a scholarship after achieving three Masters degrees. Her daughter Progga Laboni spoke of how there was always a steady stream of people from her village in Bagerhat constantly coming to their house.

"Amma never said no to paying anyone's school fees, nor to putting a roof over a young student's head during exam season. She believed in education, in freedom and most importantly, in the fact that a nation must serve its people. She never complained, but in the end, I think she was unhappy with the way things had turned out. She thought she would leave a better country for the next generation, including her four grandchildren."



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