

Sofia Khan: Resolute in her fight against oppression

M R MAHBUB

Sofia Khan showed a keenness in politics and patriotism from a very early age. She was initiated into politics by the revolutionary Santosh Chatterjee. At age nine, she became involved with the women's movement. She was involved in leftist movements as a member of the Chhatra Federation during her years in college. Thus, it was only natural that in 1952 when students started a movement to protect their mother tongue and hence their cultural identity, Sofia, then a teacher of a public school, readily participated, risking arrest and losing her job.

Sofia Khan was born in June 16, 1928 in Digholkandi village of Ghatail thana in Tangail to parents Advocate Abdul Karim and Hamida Khanam. Sofia Khan completed her matriculation exams from Tangail's Bindubasini High School in 1942, finished her Intermediate in Arts (IA) and Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree from Kolkata's Lady Brabourne College. In 1948, she enrolled herself in Dhaka University for her Master's. In 1953, Sofia applied for a teaching position in

public school for girls in Sylhet, before joining the Mymensingh Bidyamoi School. There, she lost her job because of her involvement in the Language Movement. Later in 1954, she joined the Mymensingh Muslim Girl's School as a teacher, where she served for 37 years.

During the ongoing strikes of March 11, 1948, Sofia protested in front of the strike enforcing committee. She shares, "Nadira and I went from school to school, collecting girls to form groups. After 1950, we found Halima Khatun, Nurunnaher as well as Rowshon Ara Bacchu. Nadira was jailed frequently. Hence, Rokeya and I had to take leadership of the girls."

In 1952, Sofia Khan actively participated in the movement and also participated in the meeting-rally organised by the Sharbodolio Sangram Parishad. She also organised girls from schools and colleges and carried out protests. Sofia Khan was part of a protest and student assembly on February 4, 1952 in front of Dhaka University.

After the massacre of February 21, she started collecting donations for a fund to treat those who had been injured during



ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

the movement and for the construction of the Shaheed Minar. In her words, "Many mothers and sisters came forward and helped us out of sheer emotion. Aside from money, many had also donated their jewellery to us."

While teaching at Mymensingh Bidyamoi School in 1953, the headmistress had gathered evidence against her prior to the movement and terminated her from the job. In this

regard, she recalls, "At the time, the Dhaka University Language Movement carried out by students was under much scrutiny from the authorities. One day, Nadira and I went to fetch the students from Muslim Girl's High School. The head teachers closed the main gate and informed the police. Upon learning this, we climbed over the school walls and sought refuge at the house next door."

"After this, we were always on the run. When I first joined Mymensingh Bidyamoi School, the head mistress there recognised me instantly. Later she called to inform me that I would have to go through police verification. Eventually one day, the police came over and asked if I was involved with the Language Movement. And I said yes. I lost my job after a few days."

Sofia Khan—the brave woman who fought for her mother tongue, passed away on February 14, 2008.

Excerpted from MR Mahbub's Jara Amar Bhasha Shongrame (2012).

Translated from Bangla by Rubab Nayeem Khan. Modified slightly from the original for clarity.

Jobeda Khanam Chowdhury: Rallying the women of the north-east

M R MAHBUB

Jobeda Khanam Chowdhury was a prominent figure in the language movement in Sylhet. She is one of the first Muslim women in Bangladesh who joined politics overcoming social barriers.

Jobeda was born in 1901 at Jorhat, Assam. Her parents were Khan Bahadur Sharafat Ali and Nurjahan Begum. Sharafat Ali was an officer in the British Police.

Jobeda started her education in 1906 at her father's work station at Dibrugarh, Assam. Later she was admitted to Eden School. She was the first female student of this school.

Jobeda was married in 1919 to Dewan Abdur Rahim Chowdhury who was elected as a member of the Assam Assembly.

In 1928, a conference of Muslim students was organised in Sylhet. Among the participants were Kazi Nazrul Islam, Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq, and



ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah. Jobeda Khanam attended this conference where she didn't wear a burqa, and it created an uproar in Sylhet.

Initially, Jobeda Khanam joined Congress and was elected president of the District Women Congress. Later

she joined the Muslim League. On February 22, 1948, Jobeda Khanam along with some other women leaders sent a memorandum to Khawaja Nazimuddin, Chief Minister of East Bengal. Language movement veteran Principal Abul Kashem wrote a letter to Jobeda Khanam congratulating her on this bold initiative. It inspired Jobeda and she actively joined the language movement. Her female comrades in the movement were Syeda Lutfunnesa, Syeda Shahrebanu Chowdhury, Rabeya Khatun, Rokeya Begum, Nurjahan Begum, Mahmuda Khatun, Sushmita Khatun, Shamsunnesa Khatun, Begum Jahanara Matin, Shamsi Kaiser Rashid, Sofia Khanna, and others.

At that time, a strike was called in Sylhet demanding recognition of Bengali as a state language. Jobeda Khanam actively participated in the programme. Under her leadership, a significant section of Sylhet's women participated in the language movement. Later in

1952 when a regional all-party language working committee was formed in Sylhet Jobeda Khatun became a member of the committee and organised various programmes in support of Bengali language.

Jobeda Khanam was also involved in various social work. She was the general secretary of Sylhet District Red Cross for seven years. She was awarded Queen Elizabeth Prize twice for her contribution towards society. During the mass uprising in 1969, a procession of women was brought out under her leadership against Ayub Khan. She also played an active role during the Liberation War and organised freedom fighters in Sylhet.

Jobeda Khan was the mother of five sons and four daughters. She died on January 26, 1986.

Excerpted from MR Mahbub's Jara Amar Bhasha Shongrame (2012).

Translated from Bangla by: Shamsuddoza Sajen