



ALL IN THE FAMILY, 1937, Calcutta
Sitting (left to right): Sir Hassan Suhrawardy, Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Huq, Justice Sir Zahid Suhrawardy and Dr Syud Hossain. Standing (left to right): Syud Ali Ahmed, Syed M Shafiqullah, Hasan Shahid Suhrawardy, Syud Ali Akber, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Syud Ahmed

PHOTO: BOURNE & SHEPHERD, CALCUTTA
SOURCE: RARE PHOTOGRAPHS OF EASTERN BENGAL (1880-1940), 2003, BY THE WRITER.



A MEMORABLE AFTERNOON OF GOOD-NATURED RAILLERY! GULSHAN, DHAKA, 2004
Clockwise: The writer, poet Sudeep Sen, Nadeem Rahman and Rashid Suhrawardy aka Robert Ashby

The Unforgettable Suhrawardys of Bengal

WAQAR A KHAN

The spectacular socio-cultural efflorescence known by the sobriquet of ‘Bengal Renaissance’ was an extraordinary period from mid- 19th to early 20th century in Bengal. For historical reasons the renaissance was essentially Calcutta based. However, it was an enlightened period when Bengali religious and social reformers, illustrious scholars, literary giants, journalists, patriotic orators, civil servants (ICS), lawyers (barristers and vakils), medical doctors, scientists, public servants and politicians dominated the Indian scene. It was also during this enviable period, that the adage ‘what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow’ resonated throughout the rest of India. This stupendous artistic, intellectual and societal reawakening was initially heralded by the Hindu gentry (Bhadralok). However, there were some notable Muslim luminaries of Bengal, who also played a part in it.

Two families of Bengal in particular, both products of the Bengal Renaissance, are worthy of special mention here for their predominance in the arts, education, public service and politics of that period who have left an indelible imprint in our history. They are the Tagores of Jorasanko and Pathuriaghata of Calcutta, with Rabindranath the fabled Tagore, being the first Asian Nobel laureate in 1913, and the illustrious Suhrawardy family of Midnapore, West Bengal, who were the foremost family of eminence amongst the Muslims in British India. No contemporary Muslim family at that time had produced such an array of outstanding scholars, educationists, lawyers (barristers), public servants and politicians at the same time. The multifaceted accomplishments and preponderance of these two families in the socio-cultural-political milieu of colonial Bengal and by extension of India prior to the partition in 1947, and in certain cases thereafter, was simply unparalleled in the modern history of our subcontinent. It was indeed the stuff of legends! This article is on the Suhrawardys of Bengal with emphasis on Shahid, Shaheed and Rashid. I shall briefly touch upon the salient features of this famous family. Please note that at times, I have interchangeably used the names Shaheed or Suhrawardy to mean the same person.

The Suhrawardys were of Arab descent having originated from a place called Suhraward in Iraq, from where the family takes its name. Their common ancestor was one Shaikh Shahabuddin Suhrawardy (1145-1235) a famous Sufi saint, who embraced martyrdom by incurring the wrath of the Caliph, on a matter of principle. The family was known since medieval times for their piety, learning and forthrightness. A descendant of the martyred Shahabuddin migrated to India. He sojourned in Delhi during the Khilji Sultanate and finally settled in Multan now in Pakistan. A branch of the family ultimately came down and settled in Midnapore, West Bengal. The Suhrawardiyya and Chisthi are the two oldest and most revered Muslim order of saints in our subcontinent. However, Shah Aminuddin Suhrawardy is reckoned to be the last Pir of the Suhrawardiyya order, after which the family involved itself with law, education, public service and learning. But the ‘saintly halo’ around the name of the Suhrawardys persisted in the public imagination for long years, well into the modern age.

The eminent Ubaidullah Al Obaidi Suhrawardy (1832-1885), was a learned scholar, educationist, translator and writer. He was born in Midnapore, West Bengal, British India, once the heartland of the Suhrawardys in Bengal. He was proficient in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and English. He passed the Final Central Examinations in 1857, from the prestigious Aliya Madrasah in Kolkata. He was appointed as the first superintendent of Dhaka Madrasah in 1874, and remained there till his death. The British Raj bestowed on him the title of ‘Bahrul Ullm’ (Sea of knowledge) in recognition for his great contribution to knowledge, education and society. He was the father of Sir Abdullah Al Mamun and daughter Khujesta Akhtar Banu. Ubaidullah died in Dhaka and lies buried beside the Lalbagh Fort in old Dhaka.

Allama Sir Abdullah Al Mamun Suhrawardy (1877-1935), PhD, was the eldest son of Ubaidullah Al Obaidi. An outstanding scholar and academician, he studied at King’s College in London, and in Cambridge University. For his profound learning the Ottoman Turkish Sultan decorated him with the medal of ‘Tamgha-e-Majidi’, whereas, the Shah of Iran invested him with the title of ‘Ifekhar-ul-Millat’ (pride of the Muslim nation).

Lt. Col. Sir Hassan Suhrawardy (1884-1946), MD (FRCS), was a military officer (IMS), politician, public official and the first Muslim Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University (1930-1934). He was born in Dhaka, son of Ubaidullah Al Obaidi. He was married to Sahibzadi Shahbanu Begum daughter of Nawab Syud Mohammad Azad of Dhaka. Their children were Hassan Masud Suhrawardy and Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah.

Justice Sir Zahid Suhrawardy (1879-1949), Bar-at-Law, was born in Midnapore, West Bengal, the son of lawyer Maulana Mobarak Ali Suhrawardy. He was educated in Dhaka and Calcutta. He became an eminent jurist and served as a judge in the Calcutta High Court. He married his first cousin Khujesta Akhtar Banu the daughter of Ubaidullah Al Obaidi Suhrawardy. Their children included the brilliant Hasan Shahid Suhrawardy of multifarious talents, and the fifth Prime Minister of Pakistan, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy.



Maulana Ubaidullah Al Obaidi (1832-1885), Calcutta

Hasan Shahid Suhrawardy (1890-1965), eldest son of Sir Zahid was born in Midnapore, West Bengal. He was educated at the universities of Calcutta and Oxford. He taught at the Imperial University and the Women’s University in Moscow, and the universities of Calcutta and Columbia. He was a regisseur at the Moscow Art Theatre and the State Exemplary Theatre, and a member of the League of nations International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation, the precursor of UNESCO. For a few years he was the chief art critic for The Statesman of Calcutta, and a member of the prestigious Bengal Public Service Commission. After the Partition of India he reluctantly moved to Pakistan and served as a member of the country’s Federal Service Commission before taking up the post of Ambassador to Spain. A lifelong bachelor, after retirement he lived in Karachi where he died in 1965. He is regarded as a foremost modern poet of South Asia writing in English with some memorable publications.

When Tagore was awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature in 1913, Shahid was in Oxford. He recounted, “it is difficult now for me to recapture the elation and the ecstasy of those days, but I remember distinctly that look of awe which was in my landlady’s eyes when she brought in the breakfast with the morning newspaper containing the scoop.” Shahid’s first impression of Tagore in London was one of exalted adoration. He had gone to invite Tagore to grace their Oxford Majlis, a forum or club run by some progressive Indian students at Oxford University. Shahid captured his first

‘darshan’ of the Nobel laureate memorably, “I was introduced into a large-sized room where I first saw the Poet. He was sitting on a divan and along the walls there were many chairs occupied by men and women, Indian, British and continental, who sat in rapt silence, as in a prayer-hall. In the corner of the room an Englishwoman was modeling the Poet’s head in clay whilst in another a fierce young man, a Pole perhaps, was sketching, as I saw from the corner of my eye, the fine folds of his robe. The windows were wide open on to the Embankment and I do not now remember if incense was burning in that room, but if it was not, it ought to have been because the atmosphere was so charged with awe and admiration.”

Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1895-1963), the bright, mercurial and colourful youngest son of Sir Zahid, attended the prestigious educational institutions of Aliya Madrasah, St. Xavier’s College and the Calcutta University in India. He then joined the Oxford University in England from where he received a BCL degree and was called to the Bar from Grey’s Inn in 1918. On return to Calcutta, he married Begum Naiz Fatima in 1920, daughter of Justice Sir Abdur Rahim of the Calcutta High Court. She died young in 1922, leaving behind two children son Shahab and daughter Akhtar Jahan. By this time Shaheed had embarked on a successful legal practice as a lawyer at the Calcutta High Court. However, politics and public



Khujesta Akhtar Banu alias Suhrawardia Begum (1889-1919), Calcutta

service was his calling, and he soon came under the captivating spell of the towering personality of Deshbandhu C R Das. In 1921 Shaheed was elected to the Bengal Legislative Assembly. C R Das appointed him as the deputy in his Swaraj Party and also made him the first Muslim Deputy Mayor of the Calcutta Corporation under him, as per the stipulation of The Bengal Pact of 1923. After the most unfortunate and premature death of C R Das in 1925, The Bengal Pact which was established to foster Hindu-Muslim harmony and political power sharing, was repudiated by the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha.

A gravely disappointed Shaheed then gravitated towards the politics of the Muslim League and held ministerial portfolios in undivided Bengal. He was a phenomenal organizer and made Calcutta the nerve center of Muslim politics in British India. However, during his tenure as the Civil Supplies Minister in 1943, the terrible Bengal Famine occurred during the WWII period. In 1946, under Suhrawardy’s unique leadership the Muslim League triumphantly won the only provincial election in Bengal, given the failure of the Muslim League to win any other Muslim majority provinces in British India. This was a decisive factor which made Pakistan possible. However, as ill luck would have it, Suhrawardy’s eventual assumption of office as the Prime Minister of Bengal in 1946, was marred by the apocalyptic ‘Great Calcutta Killings’ on Jinnah’s unwitting inflammatory clarion call for ‘Direct Action Day’ on 16 August, 1946 in Calcutta, following the impetuous utterance of Nehru which led to the

failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan. It aroused primordial sentiments amongst Hindu and Muslim troublemakers to a fever pitch, leading to a horrifying conflagration of communal rioting and unprecedented carnage. It sealed the fate of a united India and made the partition of 1947 inevitable. However, detractors of Suhrawardy have vociferously accused him of ideological ambivalence, chicanery and political opportunism during this period.

After the partition Suhrawardy finally came over to Pakistan and became one of the co-founders of the progressive Awami League political party in Dhaka, in 1949. He went on to become ministers in successive federal government ministries, eventually becoming the short lived fifth Prime Minister of Pakistan (1956-1957), before voluntarily resigning being aware of the nefarious designs afoot to unseat him. His resignation practically dealt a fatal blow to the unity of Pakistan, and the last chance to promote and practice parliamentary democracy in the unfortunate country. Shaheed Suhrawardy died a disillusioned man in Beirut from a heart attack in 1963.

In the winter of 1995, I had the pleasure of meeting with Begum Shaista Ikramullah and her nephew Rashid Suhrawardy, the son of Shaheed Suhrawardy at Salma Sobhan’s house in Gulshan. They were both visiting Dhaka. I was keen on meeting them and Salma Apa most graciously made it possible for me to



Begum Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah (1915-2000), COURTESY: RASHID SUHRAWARDY

meet her elderly mother Shaista and cousin Rashid. I wanted to know more about Shahid and Shaheed, from Begum Ikramullah and Rashid. During our interesting conversation I praised the Suhrawardys’ phenomenal gift of oratory, whereupon, Salma Apa gave me a quizzical look and quipped, “how true! But you see, Waqar, the Suhrawardys always had the gift of the gab, but never any money!” Then looking at Rashid who was sitting beside me, she added with a twinkle in her eyes, “right there is a good example of it.” Rashid went ruddy on the face and we all burst into laughter. He then picked up where Salma Apa left off, and added with an amused expression, “How true my dear cousin, actually when Pappa died in Beirut, all I inherited were his boxes of books, unfinished diaries and letters, but very little money and no property.” That said it all about the Suhrawardys, none of whom regardless of their enviable eminence and status in life, were ever wealthy enough. They were not exactly acquisitive by nature.

Rashid once regaled me with some riveting anecdotes. He was an engaging raconteur as many British stage actors are habitually wont to be. His father, Shaheed Suhrawardy, was then convalescing in exile from a chronic heart condition, in Beirut in 1963. He had told his son an interesting incident which took place in 1914. There was a cocktail party followed by dinner hosted by poet Robert Bridges at his home in Oxford, where the brothers Shahid and Shaheed, both students at Oxford were invited to. Shaheed had arrived in 1913 to study law, was new to England and a bit shy.

There was a wonderful mix of people at the party with Britons, Asians and continentals. Therefore, there was instant bonhomie over hors-d’oeuvres and drinks. Shahid was proudly introducing his younger brother to make him feel comfortable. His friends and admirers: D H Lawrence, Robert Trevelyn, Bertrand Russell, Hugh Kingsmill, Basanta Kumar Mullick, Kiran Shankar Roy, Apurba Chanda, Sri Prakash, S K Gupta, Surendra Kumar Sen, Syud Hossain et al were there. Guests came from London and elsewhere. Soon a London socialite, a buxom middle-aged lady with an elaborately curated coiffure, and a heavily made up face took fancy to the Suhrawardy brothers, whom she profusely complimented for their impeccable deportment and for speaking such good English. However, she got into trouble while trying to pronounce their names, Shahid and Shaheed. It was all rather confusing to her. Exasperated, she fluttered her thick eyelashes, rolled her eyes heavenward, pouted coyly and exclaimed, “Oh! No, no, gentlemen, I shall never get this right!” Saying so, she pulled out a small notepad and pen from her sequined vanity-bag and had Shahid and Shaheed write their names for her, to the great amusement of their Indian friends. Out of the corner of his eye Shahid saw the lady jotting underneath their names ‘Shahid’: taller, dusky and slim, and underneath ‘Shaheed’: short, rotund and dark. Incidentally, the brothers met the lady couple of times more, and every time she would take out the little notepad look at them with twinkling eyes and intone, “hmmm...now, let me see if I have your names right this time.” The dear lady finally did get it somewhat right, but not without the help of her jotted description of the brothers.

Rashid Suhrawardy (1940-2019), was the only child (son) of Shaheed Suhrawardy from his second wife a former Russian actress Vera Alexandrovna Tiscenko, whom he eventually divorced in 1951. Rashid was a Bangladeshi British actor based in London. For all practical purpose he was an Englishman, but with Bangladesh enshrined in his heart. He was a respected and a well regarded actor under the stage-name of Robert Ashby. Educated in the UK at Charterhouse School and Oxford University, he trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and is remembered for his time in the Shakespeare Company as well as his role in feature films such as Jinnah (1998) and Legend (2015). However, because of the fact that his father was always busy with his political life and his Russian mother was divorced and away, Rashid grew up alone and rather lonely. He never married. He was fond of the good things in life: gourmet, food, choicest drinks and an enjoyable tête-à-tête. A writer, a quintessential theatre actor and critic, he was a popular figure and moved with panache in the literary circles and elite society of London. He admired his father. However, the London theatre was his first love. He could effortlessly declaim whole passages from Shakespearean plays to my amazement.

He passionately championed the cause of Bangladesh in London during the fateful days of 1971. He severed all connections with Pakistan including his half sister Begum Akhtar Sulaiman in Karachi, who had sided with Yahya Khan’s regime. Between 1995-2004, we met quite a few times in Dhaka. With age he had started to resemble his famous father. He was really one of a kind, the likes of which you don’t come by any more these days. In many ways he belonged to the old school. He was close to Bangabandhu and his family. Rashid Suhrawardy was found dead on 7 February, 2019, at his house in London. He was 79 years of age. He was mourned by his friends, colleagues and admirers, especially by the British Actor’s Guild of Great Britain, and in the select circles of Bangladesh. My last mail to him was in 2017. We had wanted to meet again. Alas!

I can still see Rashid clearly in my mind’s eye, with that lingering half-crescent smile, the condescending Suhrawardian look in his eyes and the inimitable baritone voice. He was truly the last in the long line of distinguished Suhrawardys. Unforgettable, that’s what you all are!

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