

A camaraderie thicker than blood

The legacy of Ayesha Khanam

SEUTY SABUR

OUR comrade Ayesha Khanam, president of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, left us on January 2, 2021. Like everyone else, I had been convinced that she would defeat cancer and come back strong. She had always fought a good fight, after all, be it during the 1962 student movement, the mass uprising of 1969, or in 1971, raising awareness across India along with the members of WIDF and forcing the transnational community to acknowledge the oppression and genocide that was underway in then-East Pakistan. She invested her whole life into movements, be it with the Chhatro Union or Mahila Parishad, always standing tall, relentless and indomitable.

Ayesha Khanam was my *shero*—a fighter, mother, comrade and leader. She was part of the matriclan that I would watch in awe from a distance as a child. They were so powerful, so full of life—a force to reckon with. They made it look like anything was possible to achieve if one would only commit, and I wanted to hold that fire in me. It was an inevitable rite of passage for me to join Mahila Parishad in 1993, when I was only sixteen; I was ushered in by Begum Sufia Kamal, our founding president. I have grown up as a person and an activist over the past 27 years. My love for the organisation met my academic curiosity; I felt an urgency to record everything before it was too late, and I did, in my own small way.

I had the privilege of interviewing Ayesha Khanam for my research. She had read my earlier piece and admonished me for my concern with the deradicalisation of the women's movement, even bringing up the article and the discrepancies between activist and academic narratives in one of our national council meetings. And there I was, face to face with the Ayesha Khanam, the giant of the

women's movement on whose shoulder I stood. I told her politely why such an articulation was necessary for our generation, and her engagement was crucial in rethinking my own arguments. We both agreed that "dissidence with love" was the only way to grow, and that both of us should work toward creating such an enabling space. With that hope and promise our conversation continued, until our last meeting.

Ayesha Khanam was an activist first, but she was also a trained social scientist. She may have declined a university teaching position but she sharpened her scholarship throughout her life, and her strategies always reflected her insatiable appetite for reading. She would always remind us that the women's movement has been, and will always be, part of something larger. Like a true Marxist at heart, she would always emphasise the material conditions in which movements thrived and focus less on individuals. She said, "The role of individuals is important, but the process is equally important. Socio-economic and cultural realities contribute to the process, and in that process many individuals come and events take place. So, if we think of women's movement as food, then lots of ingredients and recipes have gone into that food; and there are different schools." This very consciousness had led her to champion major coalitions within the women's movement.

She never wasted a single second worrying about the future of the women's movement. She showed up every day in the office, on the street, and in the forums, even instructing her fellow comrades while she was critically ill, because she did not think that she had the luxury to take a break until her job was done. She once reminisced, "Politically, the 1960s and 1970s were the turning points for us. Many of us were part of the Students Action



Ayesha Khanam (1947-2021)

Committee and witnessed our seniors organising very closely. There was a hunger within society for a progressive women's movement, and East Pakistan Mahila Parishad (later Bangladesh Mahila Parishad) just responded to that call. Sufia Kamal, Nurjahan Murshid, Nilima Ibrahim and all the other progressive women guided us to establish Bangladesh Mahila Parishad regardless of their political positions. Yes, it is true that many of us had a Left lineage, but it was truly an organisation for women's emancipation regardless of their politics." She went on to say, "We envisioned a 'new woman' who would be independent economically and socially, and fight against all forms of oppression." Five decades later, however, that dream has yet to materialise.

The most radical forces within the post-independence women's movement invested their energies in rebuilding the war-torn nation in the 1970s, working

closely with the state to secure women's rights as full citizens, placing them in a powerful but ambivalent position. The subsequent autocratic/military regimes saw numerous mass mobilisations targeting the state, a clearly identifiable "enemy" for both civil society and women's organisations. The state had to present itself as promoting "women empowerment" to the UN and donor agencies. Women's organisations had no choice but to reckon with these neoliberal forces and align themselves with UN agencies. Ayesha Khanam became the general secretary of Mahila Parishad in such challenging times, steering the organisation through these transitions. Local needs and the requirements of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action drove the women's organisations to register as NGOs, and post-Beijing administrative feminism became the way forward. Despite these challenges, Mahila Parishad only allied with donor agencies when they had the liberty to pursue their agenda, and Ayesha Khanam along with her fellow activists managed to retain the voluntary, movement-based character of the organisation. In fifty years, we have won many battles, and lost some as well; but whatever we have achieved has been possible because every member poured their heart out for the cause.

With Ayesha Khanam's demise, many have asked: Can Mahila Parishad recover from this loss? Is the women's movement coming to an end? The answer, of course, is that while Ayesha Khanam is irreplaceable, her spirit will certainly live on. Mahila Parishad anticipated these crises in leadership in the 1990s; I still remember our seminar in the old Liberation War Museum where we discussed the future of the movement. Organisationally, every vice-president and general secretary is trained over the years to step up and fill the void when needed. Politically, she

had invested her own time and effort to nurture future generations of activists who will carry the baton forward. When we were in our early twenties, we had demanded for study circles; now we have a full-fledged certification course, engaging like-minded academics and young activists, with hundreds of programmes engaging with school, college and university students across the country. Something is bound to emerge from all this.

Yet I am also keenly aware of the fact that our generation cannot invest as much time as Ayesha Khanam and her generation were and are still capable of. Time is the capital that is fundamental in sustaining such a massive organisation. Ayesha Khanam understood that. She would listen to us carefully in every meeting, and allowed us to work as much as we could. No, I am not yet ready to walk in her shoes; but some of us still hold the fire our predecessors lit, and we will keep walking along, holding their hands.

Personally, I have lost one of my mothers of the matriclan. Our camaraderie has been and will always be thicker than blood. The Left lineage that bound all our grandparents, parents and us together provided an alternative family, enveloping us and shielding us from individual and collective loss. Movements are not only about transforming the outside world—they push us to live up to certain ideals in our personal lives too. My beloved Ayesha *khalu* did that. She offered us a home, enabled us to be our own person. To take part in her last rites along with Urme, my sister, is the only solace I have right now. I have held her face for the last time, and I wish I could have a last hug and tell her how much I loved her, and that her fight will not go in vain. Rest in power, my comrade!

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This American Carnage

IMRUL ISLAM

FOUR years after newly elected President Donald Trump vowed to stop "an American carnage," insurrectionists rallied by his lies stormed the US Capitol in an attempt to overthrow the results of the November 3, 2020 presidential elections. On Wednesday, January 6, while Congress prepared its largely ceremonial certification of President-elect Joe Biden's victory, Trump urged his supporters—many of them flying hate flags—to march up to the Capitol in order to "give our Republicans the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country."

And so they did. On the day Raphael Warnock—pastor of Dr. King's church—was elected as Georgia's first Black senator, a white mob stormed the US Capitol intent on taking back power. They did so at the call of a president who has repeatedly lied about election results, and stirred a slurry of paranoia, white supremacy, and populism since his first campaign speech.

But we would be wrong to blame just Trump for what happened on Wednesday. Over the past four years, a dangerous and deeply narcissistic president has been enabled by a rotating cast of far-right ideologues. Together, this cabal of connen have taken a sledgehammer to the US immigration system, packed the courts with presidential appointees, passed draconian legislation targeting racial and religious minorities, and sought to restrict reproductive and LGBTQ rights of Americans. Overwhelmingly, the president has been allowed to act with sustained indifference toward inclusive governance and a dictatorial disregard for opposing viewpoints.

As lawmakers were escorted to safety



Members of the violent pro-Trump mob in the Capitol building. Police fired teargas as the rioters pushed inside the gleaming white edifice.

PHOTO: ROBERTO SCHMIDT/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

after pro-Trump rioters invaded the Capitol, some Republicans called into TV channels to condemn the violence. And yet, for the last four years, these were the same people who stood guard in defence of the indefensible. On FOX, through Twitter, across airwaves dominated by alt-right mouthpieces, Trump's yes-men echoed the president's message—telling white America

that they were under attack. When the president fraudulently claimed victory on election night, Republican lawmakers largely remained mum. When Trump continued to lie brazenly, and his legal team suffered ignominy after ignominy, the likes of Ted Cruz continued to stand behind him. The result? When polled, almost 62 percent of Republicans said they did not believe

Joe Biden won the elections. Let us not mistake necessity for courage. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell attempting to put the genie back in the bottle does not negate his mollycoddling of autocracy. At best, this is a Republican party that has located the remnants of a backbone it lost a long time ago. There are some who are comparing

the events in Washington, D.C. to conflicts in the Middle East, or political upheavals in the Global South. They are wrong. Unlike in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Venezuela (the list is endless), there are no foreign forces instigating violence in Washington, D.C. This is all our doing. This—this terror marinated in that great national tradition of structural racism—is as American as it gets.

For proof, we need only look at how insurrectionists were treated. There are videos of law enforcement officials taking selfies with rioters. There is footage of them escorting crowds into the building. Where were these niceties during the anti-racist protests this summer?

And if we must look for individual perpetrators, we need not look far. The main instigator of this senseless, completely unnecessary chain of events, during which four people died, has a verified Twitter account. He lives on 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. He thinks the mob that has overrun the Capitol is "very special."

In D.C., as night set in, a curfew was imposed. There were still rioters out, but the crowd seemed to be dispersing. Lawmakers stuck inside the Capitol Building expressed their wish to return to certify results once the building was cleared (and they did). The National Guard has been mobilised. When the dust settles, Democrats will control the House, the Senate, and barring a power grab, the Presidency.

But for now, all is uncertain. Across the District, there is an eerie sense that the Pandora's box is open. In the US, democracy is now a negotiation with chance.

Imrul Islam works for the Bridge Initiative, a research project on Islamophobia in Washington, D.C.

QUOTABLE Quote



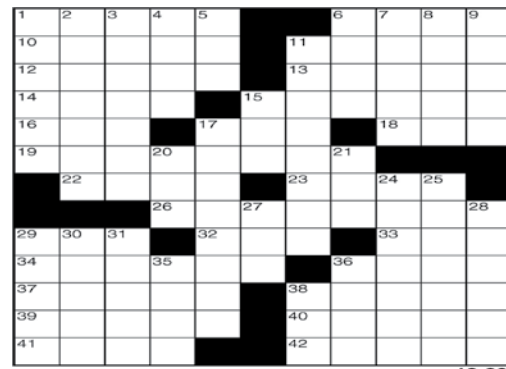
ALBERT CAMUS (1913-1960)

French philosopher, author, and journalist.

Sometimes, carrying on, just carrying on, is the superhuman achievement.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | 34 Asimov book | 9 Unkempt |
| 1 Goalle's stat | 36 Long story | 11 Flower of the Rockies |
| 6 Quick cut | 37 Parting word | 15 Sheltered side |
| 10 Friendly seniorita | 38 Indian lute | 17 Roomy |
| 11 Paris river | 39 Takes a breather | 20 Guitarist Paul |
| 12 Viper's poison | 40 Japanese cartoon genre | 21 Easy mark |
| 13 High homes | 41 God of war | 24 Jiggly dessert |
| 14 Refinery input | 42 TV's Leary | 25 Folding art |
| 15 Solitary sorts | | 27 Drama division |
| 16 Equip | DOWN | 28 Rude looks |
| 17 Put in stitches | 1 Relishes | 29 Pageant crown |
| 18 Singer Orbison | 2 Word on a dime | 30 Pick from the menu |
| 19 Surgery tools | 3 Chutney ingredient | 31 Sleep disturber |
| 22 Region | 4 Big heads | 35 Wagers |
| 23 "Othello" villain | 5 Frodo's friend | 36 Coscant's reciprocal |
| 26 Sellers of pricey tickets | 6 New driver, often | 38 Feeling down |
| 29 Cargo unit | 7 Stair part | |
| 32 Frozen over | 8 Foreword | |
| 33 Set fire to | | |



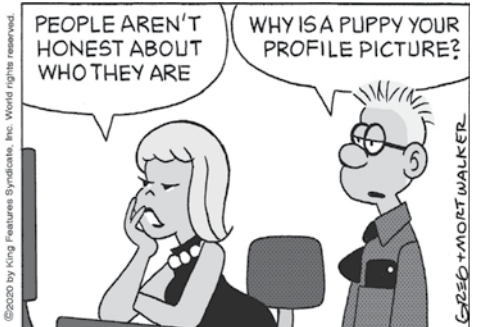
YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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