



Editor's Note: Strictly speaking, this article is not on Ekushe February. However, the Language Movement is not a separate incident but a significant point in the history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. On the 50th anniversary of our Independence, the Star Literature page has invited Dr. Nusrat Rabbee, the daughter of Dr. Fazle Rabbee, the talented cardiologist and renowned humanist who was murdered in the intellectual killing of 1971. In her first instalment, Dr. Nusrat Rabbee writes on her parents Drs. Fazle Rabbee and Jahan Ara Rabbee.

## The Spirit of 1971 – The Beginning

NUSRAT RABBEЕ

The intellectual killing had left the country with severe brain injury in December 1971. We were devoid of cultural, moral and professional leadership all at once. The injuries affected our growth in a meaningful way as a nation. There was no accounting for the Rajakars – or for Pakistani army. In the 70s, several Rajakars were reinstated in society – even getting appointed as Ministers under various political regimes. We lost pride in our cultural heritage, language and identity – things we bravely fought and paid dearly for. We witnessed those who took shortcuts in jobs and professions to rise to positions of power in business and other sectors. Ordinary citizens suffered from cultural dissonance, and lack of opportunities – which threatened to derail the new nation of Bangladesh.

The devastating impact of the economic exploitation of Bengalis during 1947-1971 by the Pakistan government has been discussed and documented well. But, along with economic progress – there needs to be a social, cultural, moral and ethical backbone of a nation. This is where the loss of the intellectuals matters still today. Our intellectuals firmly believed in religious tolerance, pride in Bengali language and cultural heritage, gender equality, economic upliftment of the poor, and nationwide access to medical care and education. But after 1975, with the assassination of the father of our nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – these values were all but lost. In this vacuum of leadership, diverse foreign influences infiltrated the culture of Bangladesh in the 80s and 90s – taking us farther away from the values of our founding intellectuals.

As poet Maya Angelou states, "You can't really know where you are going - until you know where you have been." What makes a Bangladeshi person distinct from other nationalities? It is the founding values and spirit of 1971. In these monthly columns, I intend to talk about Dr. Mohammed Fazle Rabbee and Dr. Jahan Ara Rabbee whose lives embodied that spirit. My parents were

nation builders with their pursuit of excellence, defiance of the limits put on them, and their bravery in standing up to the tyranny of the government at that time. They infused the unique values of excellence, integrity, public service and cultural pride into a new nation of South Asia and the world.

Both my parents had graduated with medical degrees from DMC in 1955 and 1957 respectively. My mother was a beautiful young woman with brains. On the first day of her class in 1952, of which there were only two females out of about a hundred students, the male students had drawn an elaborate picture of mother on the blackboard. My mother was not in the least bit interested in starting a relationship during her medical studies. She was drawn, however, to the young Dr. Rabbee, because he was undoubtedly the brightest product of DMC and everyone wanted to read with him. Due to my father's pursuit, my mother relented and fell in love with him. They got married on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1957.

**My parents were nation builders with their pursuit of excellence, defiance of the limits put on them, and their bravery in standing up to the tyranny of the government at that time.**

They lived in my mother's ancestral home and my brother was born there. Later, my father returned from London with postgraduate degrees in internal medicine and cardiology on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963. In this happy and blessed time, I was born. From this point onwards, Abba built a career that took off like gangbusters. His name was synonymous with cardiology in East Pakistan. He advanced the disciplines of internal medicine and cardiology through his leadership in both departments, his training of generations of medical doctors, and his prominence in



national and international medical organizations. In 1968, he was simultaneously appointed professor of medicine and cardiology at DMC. The student residences bear the name Dr. Fazle Rabbee Hall in honor of his unparalleled contribution to DMCH.

My father had loyal and devoted patients from all walks of life. They came to see him from all over the country – and he treated each patient as a human being who needed the best possible medical treatment. He made house calls for all – especially for children and poor patients. He saw that many of his poor patients not only suffered from diseases, but lacked money for the basic transportation, accommodation and medical costs. So, he paid for all those costs out of his pocket.

At this time, the central government treated Bengalis differently than citizens in West Pakistan. West Pakistanis were given most of the fellowships, scholarships, and opportunities for promotion and raise. The W. Pakistani government officials praised my parents for their

contribution, but my parents, aware of the systemic discrimination, were not pleased by the platitudes. The oppression and suppression were undeniable. First, in the economic aspect: East Pakistan received only 25% of the country's industrial investments and 30% of its imports, despite producing 59% of the country's exports. Second, despite winning elections, we were not allowed to assume parliamentary seats. Third, the government considered Bengalis as culturally and ethnically inferior and not Muslim enough.

Despite the discrimination, my parents' careers soared in the 60s. In 1967, my mother was selected for international training in the Population Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, U.S.A. It was a great honor to be going to the United States, especially as one of the first female physicians from Pakistan. With her father's and my father's encouragement, my mother began her journey abroad. Even though I didn't understand the gravity of the moment,

later I would realize that our family destiny changed then as well.

At this time, we were living at the center of social and cultural life in Dhaka. There was not a time I remember when my parents were not invited to a gathering every evening. They were in the exclusive roster of Bengali elites in East Pakistan. It seems surreal even today thinking about how my parents were courted in the vibrant cultural and professional scene of Dhaka at that time. My parents exuded an openness and excellence and their positive energy was contagious.

The situation was tense in E. Pakistan during 1968-1969 – with civil unrest and protests growing in response to the false charges brought under the *Agartala Conspiracy Case* against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and 34 others. Despite the political turmoil, my childhood was like a movie from my birth up until 1970. I had a wonderful, attentive father who was also very handsome! That's the first thing everyone noticed about him. The good looks were coupled with a great personality. Abba had a

wonderful voice too and recorded the Tagore song, "Mone Ki didha rekhe gele cholay" one night in 1970 with us sitting all around him! As it turned out, the lyrics foretold what would be his last message to my mother.

Dr. Fazle Rabbee was compassionate, a humanist – who worked ardently as a socially conscious medical scientist. He had a 30,000 feet view that went beyond treating individuals with diseases. He surmised the nation needed to make substantial health investments in E. Pakistan. The face of systemic poverty was at the root of the chronic diseases. In 1969, he was invited to give a speech at the PG (post-graduate) hospital at a gathering for all medical faculty of Pakistan. In this speech, he made the case for making medical treatment available to all at no cost. His vision for socialized medicine – where there would be government-funded, universal health care for each citizen – shook the lecture hall. The newspapers carried the speech prominently the next day.

Soon, thereafter, my father was picked up and interrogated by the Pakistani army. He was asked why he was so popular. Did he teach the love of Bengali language to his students? Did he believe in Pakistan as a state? Abba returned from the cantonment unharmed – but my parents knew that we were marked by the army. My mother was harassed on the streets by soldiers too. These incidents of harassment were becoming common in Dhaka against civilians of the uppermost echelon.

In 1970, my father was chosen as the best national professor by the Pakistan government, but the 1969 interrogation had left a bad taste in his mouth and he refused to accept this accolade. My father's ideology, popularity, and success earned him the wrath of the Pakistani military regime. My parents knew and accepted it but we could not anticipate the terrors they would unleash on us all the following year.

*Nusrat Rabbee is the daughter of Shaheed Dr. Mohammed Fazle Rabbee and Late Dr. Mrs. Jahan Ara Rabbee.*



A Translation of Ajit Guha's short story

## Hossain's Mother

MOTIUR RAHMAN

We reached the crematorium on the riverside that takes a mischievous turn near a local market. The hushed night was deep and dark. An utter blackness shrouded everything around. Only the kerosene lamps plying away in the riverboats kept glittering like mysterious inklings amid this meandering midnight. One could only



hear the murmur of the water.

The glint from a dimming light came from an aged hut at the end of that road by a now deserted marketplace. We proceeded a little and sneaked a look into the hut. It was a strange sight, I must admit. A gaunt skeletal old fellow wrapped in ragged quilts was asleep on the floor. A young girl was grinding

dal sitting by his side. In an earthen pot ahead were sliced onions and green chilies, a kerosene lamp flickering closely.

All of a sudden Monju called from behind, "Hurry up, *dada!* The boat is here."

Monju, Shafi, Ahad, and I – we all got on the boat as stealthily as we could. The boat had been hired beforehand of course. It was February in 1952. We were on the run. The policemen decided to bring out a warrant against us, for we were actively involved in the Language Movement. They were following us like shadows. This is why we decided to leave Dhaka. But their sense of predation was as sharp as that of hungry wolves. It was impossible to hide even in the middle of nowhere. Our urgent escape plan was to cover up for a few days on the other side of the river at Shafi's village.

Once the tiny vessel hit the ground and we felt safe, our small group proceeded quietly. The earthen narrow walkway was hardly visible in the pitch-black night. A little away in the paddy field we could hear the light thuds of late-night dewdrops.

We crossed the village ahead and reached a small field covered in grass. Right then, we got startled by the sound of the footsteps of some people from far distance.

"The rogues have sensed us here. Be very careful now!" whispered Shafi.

Beside the field was a shabby hut built from palm leaves. Shafi hurried towards that last available beacon of hope and

got inside. We followed him immediately one after another. Upon our entry into the hut, an old woman started shouting from one of its dingy corners, "Help! Help! Someone help me! There are robbers here! I am done for!"

Shafi jumped onto the old woman and silenced her with his hands.

"Hush! Hush you mad woman! This is me, Shafi! Shut up right now! The police are chasing us!"

She finally stood still hearing of the police. We understood that they knew each other.

We squinted through the gaps of the cracked wall of the broken house. We could see a few people in white dresses passing the road nearby. They were the village people returning home from the town at these dead hours of the night for some reason. We all sighed in relief.

To our horror, there were footsteps again a little later. The woman started shouting again,

"What have you done, you devils? I will surely tell on you. You bunch of creeps, I will tell on you to the police!"

It was then we could see the woman properly. The first impression came off as a shock. Her hair was greyish – her eyes brown and dangerously sunken – her fragile frame covered with wrinkled skin. She looked like an evil witch with no shred of mercy and kindness left inside. She was known as Hossain's mother in the village. Her only son Hossain worked in a railway factory in the city. He was shot dead by the police during a strike by the factory workers. The woman went

mad after that. She collected this and that from here and there and begged from the villagers to carry on with whatever that remained of her life.

We were about to silently ponder over this entire scenario while Ahad made an abrupt move. There was some puffed rice inside a pot in one corner of the old lady's room. Without any delayed inhibition, he started devouring from the pot. We all were famished and the rest of us joined him in no time. The woman got furious at this and started screaming for the third time in a row,

"Alas! Goodness gracious! You are eating away all I have left to eat. You bastards! You devils! I will have you all murdered. Just wait and see!"

In an attempt to get some water, Monju broke the earthen pitcher into pieces. We all were thirsty, but there was not a drop of water left to drink. The lady yet again lost her mind as her shouting got louder and fiercer,

"I will most definitely have you all caught!"

Meanwhile, the footsteps were even closer than before. The fate was inevitable – with the deranged woman ramping about the house and the police not so far out there. We were standing in that dark corner holding our breath, helpless and crushed.

Amid this chaos, suddenly the woman stormed outside. We were sure that she would return with the policemen. Every little second ticked us by with great suspense and our team of four was trembling with fear in a ghastly

loop of dreadful anticipation.

Nothing could save us now. A few minutes went by. Nothing happened. No one showed up! "What is the matter?" I thought. I tiptoed to the door and looked outside. To my surprise I found the woman standing on the road, alone! I thought the policemen might be hiding somewhere around.

I left my friends in that room and slowly stepped towards the confused woman. Once I moved closer, I could hear her murmuring something stretching her hands towards the sky, as if embracing the vastness of the universe itself and all that it carries within. The almost inaudible words gradually made sense to me,

"Allah, forget my mistakes. I lied to them. I led them in the wrong direction. My Hossain was shot dead by the police. Allah- I couldn't make them face the same fate that my son did. Forgive me! Forgive this sin I've committed, Allah!"

I stood there, astounded. It was yet to be dawn, you see. Only a soft glow was taking over the realm of petty humans from the eastern horizon in the likeness of a *kajla* bird and its airy feathers. The grassy field ahead was soaked with morning dews under a once-starlit sky as the much awaited epilogue of that one February night approached us, slowly but surely.

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