

Syud Hossain and his times

ENAM AHMED CHOUDHURY

Scion of an illustrious family, Syud Hossain was born in Armanitola, Dhaka in 1888. His great great grandfather was Mir Ashraf Ali, whose great grandson, Nawab Syud Mohammad Azad (Syud Hossain's father) wrote a book on him and his family. Mir Ashraf Ali was mentioned as "the premier nobleman of Eastern Bengal" by Reginald Heber, the Lord Bishop of Calcutta (Kolkata) in his well-known book 'Narrative of a Journey' written after his visit to Dhaka in 1824. Syud Hossain's mother was the daughter of Nawab Abdul Latif, another distinguished and enlightened social reformer of Bengal.

Syud Hossain passed his Entrance Examination in 1904 and E.A. in 1906 from the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College of Aligarh. He then joined the Bengal Civil Service for a very short period. However, he didn't continue the government job. Syud Hossain went to England to pursue further education in 1909.

Initially, he got admitted to Cambridge to study political science, English, and history. There he got to know Jawaharlal Nehru who was two years senior as a student. Formal education, however, did not attract Syud, and in Cambridge he became interested in debates, writing essays and studying diverse subjects. He left Cambridge without completing his degree course and joined Lincoln's Inn in London to become a barrister-at-law, whereas Nehru passed his Cambridge Tripos from Trinity, got a second class and went to London and joined the Inner Temple to do his bar-at-law.

Asaf Ali, the first Indian ambassador to the USA and, later on, the governor of Orissa, wrote about Syud Hossain, 'we met for the first time in the Common Room of Lincoln's Inn in 1909. It did not take us long to become fast friends for life. Even in those early days of his venture abroad he attracted much notice and was quickly recognised by the Indian residents of established position and reputation in England as the star orator of the younger generation. His forte lay in extempore speaking, but he never used notes. His speeches when taken down verbatim read as if they had been prepared with meticulous care'. In later life also, he maintained this practice, and during his long exile in USA and England he became known as an exceptionally brilliant orator and the greatest exponent abroad of the cause of India's independence. The March of India, Delhi described him as 'the unaccredited Indian ambassador to the USA for 25 years, fighting imperialist propaganda on the foreign front' while the London Times commented on his 'remarkable gifts of exposition'.

Syud Hossain was a much sought-after contributor to many well-known newspapers and periodicals. In an open letter to the visiting British prime minister Churchill, (printed in the Evening Star, Washington DC on September 22, 1944, and a few other newspapers) as the chairman of the US National Committee for India's freedom, he wrote, "I suggest the time has come for you to shed your antiquated and nostalgic inhibitions, and face the dawn of a new day with realism and candour...you have cried to high heaven against the Axis, and summoned the whole world to liberate their captives. What about the 400 millions of a great and ancient people held in British bondage? Your specious and ignoble pleas debase the moral currency of the world."

HG Wells commented on Syud Hossain's book *What price tolerance?* as 'magnificent'. The following words, written by Blanche Watson, published in an essay titled 'Syud Hossain: Friend of Gandhi and spokesman for India' in the Pearson's Magazine New York (July 1922), aptly describes Syud Hossain: "Kipling has said that the East is East and the West is West, and never the twain shall meet but in Syud Hossain, friend and co-worker of Mahatma Gandhi of India, we have a man, now in our midst, who embodies a denial of this widely accepted dictum, and one who most effectively symbolises the intellectual concord and spiritual community of mankind."

In London, Syud Hossain did not complete the professional requirements to become a barrister, but even that early in life, his achievements in oratory, journalism, politics and literature were stupendous. His fame spread far and wide. In 1916, the editor-in-chief of the Bombay Chronicle (a leading newspaper of India those days) BG Horriam invited him to join as his associate. Hossain accepted the offer. In Asaf Ali's words, "many of the most pungent 'leaders' which appeared in the Chronicle and were priced by the readers of the day were from Syud's pen...."

When in 1919, Pandit Motilal Nehru decided to have in Allahabad an English daily newspaper, the Independent, "to promote the political thought of which he was the most distinguished and vigorous exponent, Syud Hossain was selected as its first Editor." Within a very short span of time, Hossain earned great name and fame, and became 'a champion of Indian cause'.

However, here something happened which changed the course of his life. I would like to focus on this, as the incident has been occasionally misunderstood and misinterpreted, sometimes wilfully. The incident even figured in the discussions in the British Parliament, as reported in Hansard, the official record of proceedings of the House of Commons, on April 15, 1920. (Syud Hossain by Hashem Sufi, Director, Dhaka History research centre, pp. 15-16).

This was his marriage with Vijaya Lakshmi.

Madam Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, in her autobiography titled *The Scope of Happiness* — A Personal Memoirs, mentions: "A couple of years earlier, while still in my teens, I had become attached to a young man, Syud Hossain, whom my father had appointed editor of a newspaper he had just started, *The Independent*. In an era that proclaimed Hindu-Muslim unity and belonging to a family which had close Muslim friends, I must have thought it would be perfectly natural to marry outside my religion." As a matter of fact, the marriage was short-lived, but the romance and attachment were lifelong.

On arrival in Allahabad to take charge of *The Independent*, Hossain initially was accommodated in Anand Bhaban, the Nehrus' residence. Within days Syud Hossain left Anand Bhaban and moved out to a beautiful marble floored bungalow in Katra, opposite Muir Central College. Young Vijaya Luxmi (her nick name was Nan) fell in love with, as Stanley Wolpert describes in his book 'Nehru', "a Muslim, the handsome brilliant, English educated Syud Hossain, hired by Motilal to edit his nationalist newspaper, *The Independent*. What did it matter to the young lovers that he had been born a Muslim, and she a Kashmiri Brahman? Weren't Bhai (Nehru) and Gandhiji always saying that 'Hindu-Muslim unity was the first prerequisite to India's freedom? What better antidote to communal hatred and conflict than love? But to Motilal and Swarup Rani (Nan's mother) Hossain's being Muslim mattered as much as Jawahar's wanting to marry a British barmaid. All of them, including Jawaharlal, tried talking sense into Nan. Nothing they said, however, brought any response, but silence and tears."

of the daily Independent and CS Ranga Aiyar became the new editor. The next day's editorial on Syud Hossain said, 'Unflinching in his adherence to the Nationalist programme, unflinching in his efforts to serve the cause, it is no exaggeration to say that Mr Syud Hossain has worked for India's freedom with honesty of purpose, frankness of utterance and passionate purposefulness which have commanded the admiration of friends and foes alike. He has been a fierce fighter, it is true; but he always fights with clean weapons.' Written by the new editor, the words obviously carried the sentiments of the Nehrus who disapproved the marriage but knew Syud's worth.

Syud then went back to Bombay (Mumbai) and immediately thereafter joined the specially selected three-man delegation to Britain and Europe, representing the Khilafat movement. On the other hand, Nan's ashram life was quite painstaking and rigorous, and in her own words: "My heart sank when I first saw the place. Everything was so utterly drab and so unpleasing to the eye. I wondered how long I would survive there. Life in the Ashram was austere beyond belief."

She appeared to be keen on escaping this ordeal, and this is what was perhaps anticipated by the organisers. As Stanley Wolpert writes, "Nan's ashram therapy was, of course, meant to dampen her desire for Syud, and even though she never completely forgot him, she returned home in less than a year prepared to accept the Hindu Brahman, Ranjit Pandit, whom her mother and father and Mahatma Gandhi had found, and arranged for her to marry."

And Syud? He never married and, except for a brief visit to India in 1937, he did not return to India or Bengal for about two

decades and a half. Quite a price both the lovers paid in their personal lives for the unconventional but deep love that had blossomed between them. Ranjit Sitaram Pandit passed away at 51 and Vijaya Lakshmi came to the USA in 1945, where Syud lived, for a year-long visit and their reignited loving intimacy persisted till Syud's sudden death in 1949.

Before he was sent out in 1920 (after the dissolution of marriage) to England on the Khilafat mission, Syud Hossain, in 1918 was supposed to go to England as secretary of the Home Rule Delegation, led by Lokamanya Tilak. But the British government stopped him at Gibraltar and he was interned there for a few months before he could return home. But this time, he reached London with the Khilafat delegation and after completing his work, continued to be there as secretary of the British Committee of the Indian National Congress. He also edited its mouth piece — *India*. He went to Washington in 1921 to cover the Arms Conference, and except for a few months in 1937, continued to stay in the USA as a champion of Indian Independence till 1946, covering a period of about 25 years. As Asaf Ali wrote, "He (Syud Hossain) took his audiences by storm and was regarded a genius by them. He was readily recognised as the most leading personality by the Indian residents in the USA."

Dr Hilda Wierum Boulter, an eminent US South Asia expert wrote, "During his years in America Dr Hossain has not only lectured on Indian politics, but on cultural subjects as well, and was for ten years Professor of Oriental Civilisation at the university of Southern California, in addition to which he founded and edited the magazine — 'The New Orient' in New York City. It is not often that any person covers so wide a range of subjects as Hossain, and with such deep and varied knowledge. But it is perhaps in the field of political debate that he is most outstanding."

In 1945 Vijaya Lakshmi arrived in the USA to attend the San Francisco conference on UN. She attended quite a number of meetings and gatherings. She was given big receptions by the Indian community, and all these were mostly chaired or organised by Dr Syud Hossain,

the chairman of the National Committee for India's freedom. The visit actually became a reunion of two old lovers. Mostly, in meetings Hossain introduced Vijaya to the audience and was her constant companion. Her 12 months long mission in the States, from all points of view, was a big success. She returned to India in January 1946 and Dr Syud Hossain also returned to India shortly thereafter.

Political developments in India in 1946-47 greatly saddened Dr Syud Hossain. He found that the possibility of free unified India was receding fast. Dr Krishanlal Shredharani wrote in the *Amritabazar Patrika* on December 10, 1947, on Hossain's appointment as 'free India's first ambassador to Egypt' that "he is one of the most vocal and outspoken and even belligerent spokesmen India has produced... One high note of his (Hossain's) public life has been the unity of India and the unity of Indian culture, which according to him, is neither Hindu nor Muslim but Indian. As years went by, it became particularly difficult for a Muslim to stick to this ideal, but Syud was unflinching. He had to part company with many old friends, not the least among them Jinnah, in pursuit of this high ideal. Now the dream is lost and Syud feels a psychological void."

To Syud Hossain, India was inviolable. The question of having separate regional entities on whatever grounds, could not arise, be it Bengal or the Punjab. In this matter he was completely in union with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. As a matter of fact, Jinnah was not averse to the idea of a unified independent Bengal. He even supported the proposal brought to him by Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy and Sarat Chandra Bose. So keen was he (Jinnah)

soon afterward "death put an end to an unhappy and tortured life." (Mathai) "I had no desire to be sent abroad" Nan recalled, after learning of her brother's decision. "For some still unknown reason I was to leave for Moscow before the day on which the transfer of power was to take place ... If Bhai (Nehru) realised how little importance the Soviet Union attached to this day, we might have been permitted to celebrate it at home." (Vijaya Lakshmi's autobiography). Nehru's "unknown reason" for rushing his sister out of Delhi had more to do with the Imperial Hotel, however, than with Moscow" (Wolpert). Vijaya Lakshmi and Syud Hossain's posting in two different capitals in two continents ensured that they could not meet as easily as they did while in Delhi. Even then, Vijaya Lakshmi came to Cairo to see Hossain briefly in January 1949.

Hossain was India's first ambassador to Cairo and within about a year he created great impression in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East. As a diplomat, his success which was noticeable in merely one year was stupendous, simply unparalleled. His sudden death on February 25, 1949 came as a rude shock and was mourned internationally.

The government of Egypt gave him a state funeral and the road in the area where Syud Hossain was buried was named after him 'as a mark of the esteem in which he was held by the government and the people of Egypt'.

Newspapers like the New York Times, New York Evening Post, San Francisco Call, London Times, the Bombay Chronicle, The Statesman, Amrita Bazar Patrika, Hindustan Times, Civil and Military Gazette in Pakistan, National Herald, Lucknow, all Cairo newspapers and scores of newspapers in many countries paid rich tributes to late Dr Hossain. The Dawn,

carried the news on March 2, 1949 as quoted below.

"On hearing the death news of the Indian Ambassador to Egypt, Dr Syud Hossain, the Pakistan Ambassador Haji Abdus Sattar Seth, hurried to the Hospital and afterwards visited the officials of the Indian Embassy. The Pakistan Embassy announced that their national flag will fly at half-mast and the work in the Embassy offices will be stopped till the funeral ceremonies were over."

The Bharat Jyoti (Free Press Journal) Bombay, in its March 6, 1949 issue pointed out that even important people who held views other than those held by Dr Hossain appreciated and valued his wisdom and understanding. Bharat Jyoti carried a report about a meeting chaired by Jinnah in Lucknow in 1937 where Dr Syud Hossain was invited to address. As Hossain spoke someone at the meeting got up to register his dissent, Jinnah, who was presiding, intervened and said 'Mr Hossain was asked to give us his views and we all know he is one person who has the courage of his conviction. Everyone is entitled to agree or disagree with his opinions, but he also has the right to express his own ideas.'

Indian prime minister Nehru went to Cairo shortly after Hossain's death, and accompanied by the entire embassy staff motored 15 miles to the cemetery to lay a wreath on the tomb of Dr Hossain, 'the last of the great gentlemen' in the words of his good friend, Sarojini Naidu.

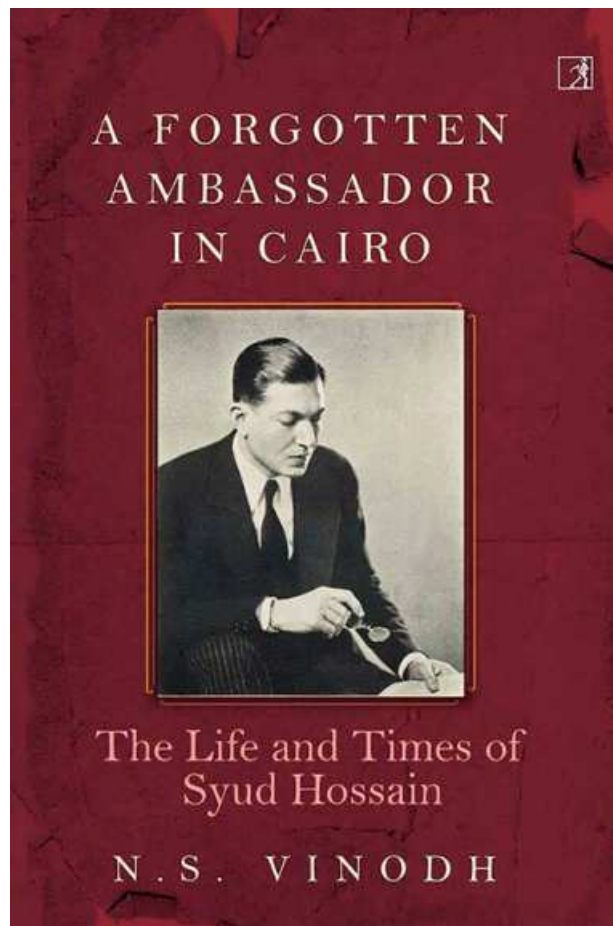
Unfortunately, decades after his death, liberal democracy and secular nationalism, the ideals that Syud Hossain stood for, are on the wane. Even the country that he so passionately represented and effectively served shows signs of sliding towards communalism, where religious intolerance and hatred are on sharp rise, causing a sense of grave insecurity for the minorities, particularly Muslims.

Efforts for a re-discovery of the life of a patriot and to uphold his secular ideals are indeed timely and worthwhile.

Enam Ahmed Choudhury is a former chairman of the Privatisation Commission.



Syud Hossain



Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit

Finally Vijaya and Syud decided to get married as secretly as possible. In an autumn forenoon in 1919 Vijaya came over to Syud's bungalow, and the marriage took place there.

Nehru's private secretary MO Mathai in his *My days with Nehru* writes, "After Syud Hossain eloped with Swarupa Nehru (later Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit) and returned, he was advised by his friends and foes to leave the country."

But actually, they did not quite elope. That morning, the two lovers gathered at Syud's bungalow at Katra. Maulana Rashid Fakhri, himself a Congress leader, administered the marriage. Vijaya conscientiously recited the Kalema and became a 'faithful'. Syud uttered his proposal for marriage and Vijaya accepted this. The witnesses were Nawab Sir Mohammad Yusuf, and Syed Asghar Hussain. HM Abbasi (subsequently a renowned journalist and editor) was also present there.

"Pandit Motilal Nehru was then presiding over the annual session of the Congress at Amritsar. The official proceedings of the Amritsar Congress of 1920 mentions that 'at this stage a telegram was delivered to the President. Having read this, Mr Motilal Nehru left the dais and went away'. This telegram had informed the father, as it is reported, that his daughter had married his editor on the sly." (HM Abbasi)

This incident created quite a stir in Allahabad. Nan's family, particularly brother Nehru, strongly opposed this. Many leading citizens of Allahabad and a few top congress leaders of India, both Hindus and Muslims, even the Ali brothers, got involved in their otherwise private affair. Finally, Gandhiji came and counselled. He called the couple and told them "if it is a great love then it could be put to a test". They were prevailed upon to dissolve the marriage. They were told that if their strong passion persists even after a cooling period, they can subsequently rethink about their reunion. This is how they were persuaded to get separated.

Stanley Wolport writes, "Finally, Motilal called in Gandhi, who came to Anand Bhaban in 1920 to take Nan (Vijaya Lakshmi) with him to his Gujarati Ashram in Sabarmati, on the outskirts of Ahmedabad'.

Syud Hossain resigned from editorship

of the daily Independent and CS Ranga Aiyar became the new editor. The next day's editorial on Syud Hossain said, 'Unflinching in his adherence to the Nationalist programme, unflinching in his efforts to serve the cause, it is no exaggeration to say that Mr Syud Hossain has worked for India's freedom with honesty of purpose, frankness of utterance and passionate purposefulness which have commanded the admiration of friends and foes alike. He has been a fierce fighter, it is true; but he always fights with clean weapons.' Written by the new editor, the words obviously carried the sentiments of the Nehrus who disapproved the marriage but knew Syud's worth.

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