

# The courage and strength within



Shaheen Anam  
is the executive director  
of Manusher Jonno  
Foundation (MJF).

SHAHEEN ANAM

SHE loved Toblerone and KitKat chocolates. At the age of 90-plus years, there was still a twinkle in her eyes when she enjoyed a naughty joke with her beloved grandchildren. Mrs Musleha Islam, known to many as *Buchhu Apa, Khala, Nani, and Dadi*, was born in an Urdu-speaking family in Kolkata. She was married to a Bangla-speaking man named Farukul Islam, from Sirajganj, who only spoke broken Urdu while she spoke no Bangla at all. He was 18 years older than her, and he loved and protected her from the outside world till he passed away, leaving her a widow at the age of 29, with four children to take care of.

Thus started the struggles and triumph of an amazing woman who I am so privileged to call my mother. She was an adored and sheltered housewife, content in running her household and taking care of her family. Cooking delicious meals and entertaining family and friends were her favourite pastimes. The demise of my father in 1959 left her shell-shocked, and she bore the weight of that tragedy with pain and grief till her demise at the age of 93 on August 5, 2021.

However, the tragedy could not break her; defying all odds, she stood up to meet the challenge of raising all four of her children alone and living independently. Her resolve was heroic as she vowed to let nothing come in the way of her children's upbringing, education, and well-being. I remember the many personal sacrifices

unrecognised for the many sacrifices they make for their families. The fact is, women in our society are capable of demonstrating amazing courage and strength when their families need them. These are ordinary women who show extraordinary strength, and are willing to go to any length to protect their children. My mother was one such woman.

She never received a formal education, yet knew what the two most important assets for our future well-being were. She chose sound health and good education. She made sure that we had a balanced diet and insisted on a good breakfast (which I hated); she fed us soup made from bones and forced us to take cod liver oil capsules all winter. Our present health and natural immunity is due to her intuitive knowledge of nutrition. As for education, she sacrificed all luxuries in life, but insisted that we go to the best schools and never compromised on our studies. As part of our overall education, she inculcated in us the values of compassion, honesty, and integrity.

For me, what set my mother apart was her commitment to gender equality. I was the only girl in the family, with three brothers. She never made me feel in any way less important than my brothers; in fact, I was given special treatment for being the "only girl in the family" and was never deprived of any opportunities that my brothers had. She encouraged me to excel in whatever I did. She was indeed the first feminist in my life, who gave me the confidence to believe that being a female, I was equal and important like everyone else. She taught me the skills she thought would give me a head start in life. I enjoyed doing traditional "girl" things like cooking, sewing, and taking care of my younger brothers as much as I did cycling, reading, climbing up trees, and even getting into physical fights with my cousins and brothers.



Musleha Islam (1929-2021).



PHOTOS: COURTESY

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she made to keep us comfortable. This sheltered housewife, with the help of my father's nephew, Moinul Islam, built a house in Dhanmondi, rented it out and raised us. Such was her resolve to give us a comfortable independent life that she even went out personally to buy bricks and rods for the building. She was determined to protect us from the many insults that fatherless children face in our society.

In remembering my mother, I want to pay tribute to the countless mothers in our society who face similar situations and overcome all odds with courage and determination. We have heard about the mother of a famous Rabindra Sangeet singer, who raised 10 children by stitching and selling *kantha* after her husband was killed in 1971. The same story is true of the mother of a famous writer, who was also left a widow during the Liberation War and raised her four children alone. However, there are countless mothers around us who remain unknown and

My mother was deeply religious and believed in justice and standing up for what was right. That is why, during the Liberation War in 1971, she did not hesitate to let us join the war efforts and even assisted us in many ways. Our house at Road 4 in Dhanmondi became a place to store blankets, medicine, etc for our *Mukti Bahini*. It was a sanctuary and a meeting place for urban guerrilla fighters. Members of the famous Crack Platoon were welcomed with her ever warm smile, food, and at least a cup of tea. She even allowed them to store rifles and grenades in her backyard, which the enemy eventually got wind of. She showed such unbelievable wit and courage when my youngest brother Rizwan was taken away by the Pakistan Army for interrogation on the morning of August 30, 1971. Our house was raided as the army came to know our brother Wasif Islam's involvement in the war. She successfully negotiated his release and saved him. I was present at the scene and, seeing her determined face, knew that the Pakistani captain raiding our house would not be able to take my brother away from us.

Another aspect of her personality was her ability to forgive. Throughout her life, many had betrayed her. Close family members and trusted people tried to deprive us of the income and financial security that our father had left behind. Even in the face of immense hardship, she forgave them and taught us the value of forgiveness, and to be grateful for whatever we had.

Such was her positive attitude towards life that she seldom spoke or complained about the many physical challenges she faced during the latter part of her life. On the other hand, she always made an effort to look her best in her ironed cotton saree, greeting her loved ones with her beautiful smile and warm embrace. She was loved and admired by her extended family, sisters, nieces, and nephews, as well as our friends who often sought her company beyond ours. But her unconditional love was reserved for her nine grandchildren and five great-grandchildren, who were her pride and joy till the end of her life.

She faced life and all its adversaries with courage, compassion and wisdom. I want to end by paying tribute to all mothers like her by saying, "Thank you, we are who we are today because of you; you have blessed us with your presence in our lives."



VISUAL: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

## To debate or not to debate

Thoughts on Sajid's and Sourodip's victory



Md Mahmudul Hasan  
teaches English and postcolonial  
literature at International  
Islamic University Malaysia.  
Email: mmhasan@iiu.edu.my

MD MAHMUDUL HASAN

ON July 27, 2022, two students from Dhaka's Brac University – Sajid Asbat Khandaker and Sourodip Paul – made Bangladesh the first Asian country to win the World Universities Debating Championships (WUDC). Since the Serbian capital city hosted this year's debating competition, it was named Belgrade WUDC 2022. At the final phase of the tournament, there were four competing teams – two teams on each side – and each team comprised two debaters.

After all the debaters spoke, the judges ranked the teams based on their performances, and the team comprising Sajid and Sourodip topped all others. On their way to this glory in the eight-day competition, they outranked the debating teams from Princeton, the National University of Singapore, Oxford, Harvard and other prestigious universities. It is undoubtedly a landmark achievement for Bangladesh in university-level debating. Needless to say, Sajid and Sourodip made their speeches in English, which is not their first language.

Unfortunately, as Prof Ali Riaz of Illinois State University pointed out in an essay published in *Prothom Alo* on July 30, 2022, this great cerebral feat has not received adequate media attention in Bangladesh. This was a good occasion of national pride and celebration for us as Bangladeshis. But surprisingly, we were not sufficiently thrilled by this achievement.

Perhaps one reason for this lukewarm reception is that the very concept of debate is antithetical to the sociopolitical order that has developed in Bangladesh in recent years. Debate is a form of dialogue that involves claims and counterclaims, and rebuttals and counter-rebuttals. Freedom of speech and equal opportunity are indispensable elements in any debating exercise. In the Belgrade WUDC, each of the four teams and each of the eight team members had equal amounts of time and opportunity to make and defend their arguments.

This notion of equality seems to have disappeared from, or has become less relevant to, the current political culture of Bangladesh, where dull top-down monologues rather than robust dialogues with the people have become the norm. The country seems to have embraced or tolerated restrictions on free speech. Legislations like the Digital Security Act (DSA) and other pre-emptive and punitive measures against dissent have placed the citizens on the slippery slope of fear and self-censorship. Debate in the public sphere, which is part and parcel of the democratic process of a country, is largely damped or downplayed (if not completely silenced). One may say that, metaphorically, Sajid's and Sourodip's debating verve and vigour overseas represented

the latent, suppressed debating potential of the entire population of Bangladesh. What could not be exercised inside the country found an intensely passionate expression in Belgrade – hence, the success.

In Bangladesh, the establishment narrative dominates the political system. Let me give an example to illustrate this point.

I live outside my country, but the pull of patriotism brings me back home again and again. Therefore, Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport is a common air travel destination for me. The airport is my first and last encounter with my motherland during every visit.

Even when I was teaching at Dhaka University, I was a frequent flyer. I went overseas for research purposes and conference presentations. One day, my teacher and colleague Prof Khondakar Ashraf Hossain (1950-

the Dhaka airport is also the first place that helps foreigners – who work in Bangladesh or come to visit the country – form their opinions about the country, its government and citizens. In other words, the airport and its adjacent areas give them the first impression about Bangladesh, and the monopolistic poster exhibition on the roadside near the airport probably amuses or bemuses them. This visual monopoly will tell them about the presence or absence of democracy, depending on their level of sagacity.

In my opinion, such roadside poster dominance does not give a good representation of Bangladesh as a 21st century nation. It only heightens the egotism and hubris of the affiliates of the ruling party and erodes public trust in the government. It does little in terms of increasing the prestige of the country or the government. What's more, it reveals the absence of public debate, making obvious the suppression of dissenting voices and opinions.

The authorities would have nothing to lose if they ensured a fair and inclusive climate and facilitated diversity of viewpoints. If the ideas and strategies of the ruling party are really better for the country, juxtaposing them against those of

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2013) jokingly said to me, "You should have your residence near the airport!" What I am trying to say is that the Dhaka airport has remained a very important place for me and, in what follows, I would like to describe what I have often seen on the roadside near it.

As one rides from the airport to Tongi, and then to Mohakhali, one sees that the roadsides are full of banners, posters and billboards carrying photos of ruling party leaders and their political propaganda. During my trip to Bangladesh in early 2020, I looked for a single poster or banner of the opposition parties on the roadsides near the airport. There was none. This year, I saw only a few posters carrying images and messages (complaints) of non-ruling parties among hundreds of those of the party in power. The visual or pictorial fodder around the country is not very different.

Now, what do the ruling party people want to achieve through such 'exhibitionist' (visual) dominance on the roadsides? If the target audience is the people of the country, they don't achieve much. This is because most people know all too well which political party is popular in the country and how much freedom of expression they enjoy as citizens.

It is worth mentioning here that

the opposition will only strengthen and further validate them. Conversely, reluctance to allow the opposition to speak freely will surely signal the inherent weaknesses of the government's policies and strategies.

Sajid's and Sourodip's debating success is understandably an outcome of a vibrant debating culture that Brac University has nurtured on its campus. The question now is whether this debating spirit will spill over into the wider society, and whether the victory will inspire full and fair debates of ideas and issues in the public domain beyond the campus of Brac University. Will the citizens of Bangladesh have a democratic space to freely use the rhetorical approach of what Prof Ali Riaz called "ethos, pathos and logos" in popular (political) debate? Is there a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel?

Lastly, we hope that Sajid's and Sourodip's stunning rhetorical feat will spark the spirit of debate in society. It will cultivate a culture of inclusivity which can override parochial concerns and lead us to the grove of free and fair discussions. In any event, we as Bangladeshis will remain tenacious in our hope and unfettered in our optimism, despite the present reality.