

In memory of 'Magic Uncle:' Ulfat Kabir

I knew him by his household name, 'Babul,' and his friends knew him as 'Ulfat,' but the vast majority of his viewers knew him as 'Magic Uncle.' Even my children called him 'Magic Chacha' from childhood. At that age, they did not even know how he was related to them.

All his life, he performed his shows mostly for underprivileged children in Bangladesh. Organised by Kazi Shakil Foundation and several NGOs, he travelled to the remotest corners of Bangladesh, including refugee camps to perform his shows. He even once performed his show on the air. One of the NGOs chartered a plane for a free ride for such kids. They had never flown on a plane. Their favourite Magic Uncle was there to entertain them — a double treat.

During his primary school days in the Dhaka Cantonment of Kurmitola, the school caretaker, who lived on the premises, once showed him a few magic tricks. That's when Magic Uncle fell in love with it, like how a buried seed sprouts from the soil. His love for magic grew into a yearning, and then it became his lifelong passion until he drew his last breath on 4 March, 2023.

I spent most of my career overseas and

every time I visited Bangladesh, I would always see him and occasionally stayed with his family. For hours, he would tell me his stories, and I loved to listen. I could fill pages with his stories but would only share a few with the readers.

He goes to a village school to perform his show. At the end of his performance, the headmaster hands him an envelope and explains, 'It's not much, but this is all the school could raise from what the children could offer.' Magic Uncle feels sad, returns the money, and says, "Please buy sweets for the kids on my behalf."

On another occasion, he receives a phone call. The gentleman requests a show to be performed in his home for his daughter's birthday. When Magic Uncle arrives at the apartment, to his

bewilderment he finds no guests, no children except his daughter and his wife. The gentleman explains that when he asked his daughter what she wanted for her birthday, she requested Magic Uncle to come and show her his magic.

Another story he told me was that while travelling on a rickshaw passing by a slum, he heard loud shouts from behind. A group of children spotted him and ran behind his rickshaw, shouting, 'Magic Uncle, Magic Uncle.' He feels that he is no longer a magician, but has become the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

During my Dhaka visits, he would often ask me to join him for his shows in and around Dhaka. I have been to many of the slums and school shows. This is the one I remember most.

The show was in a remote part of Munshiganj. We travelled mostly by car and then had to take a rickshaw for the narrow gravel road to reach the primary school. The lanky headmaster explained that the children would be seeing magic for the first time in their lives.

The classroom was filled with some hundred boys and girls. I stood at the

back so that I could have a full view of the packed room. There was pin-drop silence in anticipation. It was already magical!

Magic Uncle brought a rabbit out of an empty hat. I have seen this many times, but never had I heard such deafening, thunderous applause in my life. For the next half-hour, all I could hear was the same deafening, thunderous ovation every few minutes. I became emotional, for I could not believe that a simple man of no great means could bring such joy to the lives of children who had probably never travelled outside their villages.

When we were small, and living in Chattogram, one of our uncles (Siddiq mama) visiting from Dhaka took us to the Cox's Bazar Sea beach. The roaring crashing waves, one after another, frightened us and made us run away from the waves.

It looks like Magic Uncle has now gone on a long voyage across that vast, stormy ocean.

By Tohon

Photo: Tohon

Tohon is a short story writer and author of My Tormented Soul.

