

TRIBUTE TO MATIA CHOWDHURY

When personality surpasses politics



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MOFIDUL HOQUE

Matia Chowdhury left the mortal world on October 16, 2024, ending her long journey as a politician with both significant ups and downs, successes and failures, achievements and faults—which are not uncommon for any important political figure. Some may judge these figures based on their political positions, but to understand Matia Chowdhury, one needs to study her life through a different lens; it is her personal commitment and philosophy of life that determined her politics.

Politicians are usually judged not only by the politics they practise, but also by the life they lead. In the past, politicians used to try to project themselves as *goriber bondhu* (friend of the poor), while rhetoric became an essential part of their speeches. Many of them kept a set of clothes specially tailored for meetings with the public to appear as the people's leaders. But Matia Chowdhury was different. Though she may have sounded controversial, harsh and unpleasant at times, she never used any rhetoric. Through her lifestyle, she represented who she was: a

humble daughter of the soil. To understand Matia, it is necessary to comprehend her personality which sustained and nourished her political career. Politics was *shadhona* to her, a lifelong commitment that one has to pursue with devotion. Love for the people and commitment to struggle were two traits she carried deep in her heart, which also explained her plain lifestyle. A biographical note will help us understand how she became a *shadhika* (devotee) of politics, carrying the best tradition of the *Swadeshi* politicians in the anti-colonial struggle of Bangalee people. From her student days to the ministerial positions she held, she always wore inexpensive cotton sarees that reflected her unique personality.

Matia went to various schools in Narayanganj, Jamalpur and Dhaka, moving with her police officer father, and was later enrolled at Eden Girls' College. She had wide interests and a broad vision of life. She was fond of reading and acquired good knowledge of literature. She also practised music. Literature nourished her feelings and music her soul. Her literary skill was reflected in her public speeches, which enthralled the student community in the 1960s. But politics did not allow her to indulge in the arts.

Matia's activism to establish the political,

president of the Eden Girls' College Students' Union. After her graduation, she enrolled at Dhaka University and was elected as the general secretary of DUCSU. As a leading member of the East Pakistan Students' Union (EPSU), she travelled around the country organising and inspiring students as well as the larger community. This was the period when the title *Agnikanya* (Born of Fire) was bestowed upon her.

June 1967, she was arrested again for making an inflammatory speech in Netrokona. She was produced before the magistrate's court in Dhaka and denied bail. A detention order was issued against her under the Defence of Pakistan Ordinance, which in reality meant indefinite prison term. She was transferred to Mymensingh jail, where there was no separate cell for female prisoners and she had to be confined at the *Jenana Fatak*, the

1996 to 2001 and again from 2009 to 2019. Even as a minister, she was no different from the activist on the street. She continued to follow her simple lifestyle, dressing as an ordinary woman. She never sought any acclamation or state recognition; in fact, she consciously avoided the laurels that others chased.

It's worth recalling that she joined the Liberation War from day one and rendered services at refugee camps and hospitals as a trained medical aid. Later on, she toured many places in India addressing meetings and seminars to mobilise public support for the Liberation War. But she never made a claim for any recognition as a freedom fighter or sought any national award.

As an agriculture minister, she will be remembered for many steps taken in support of farmers. Defying the World Bank's dictum, she provided subsidies in the agricultural sector. During her tenure, Bangladesh became self-sufficient in rice production, which was no small feat for a nation that was dependent on food aid and suffered for that.

Matia Chowdhury's account of her prison days was published in 1970, in a book titled *Deyal Deye Ghera* (Inside the Four Walls). The book also depicts the personality and philosophy of Matia Chowdhury, although she wrote very little about herself and instead highlighted the sorrow and joy of her prison mates, the unfortunate women from rural Bengal. All 29 chapters in the book were about the life of female prisoners and their children (who could stay with their mothers till they reach the age of five or six)—of Rahatan, Champa, Fuljan, Chandhi, Nekabonu and many others. Each of the stories was one of passion, pain, suffering, and abandonment told with empathy and love. The narrative showed how deeply she could feel the pain of other people. It was the same spirit which drove Matia Chowdhury, the politician. Occasionally, we saw flashes of her own feelings when she quoted a song, a poem or a line from a novel. After the completion of one year in prison, she quoted from Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*: "Don't grieve dearie/trouble lasts an hour/but life lasts forever."

Matia Chowdhury's lifelong *shadhona* for the welfare of the people will remain a legacy from which the youth of today can learn and take inspiration, keeping in their heart the intense love for the downtrodden and the work and sacrifices it takes to bring meaningful change.



Agnikanya Matia Chowdhury during one of her fiery speeches.

PHOTO: ARCHIVES

She had to pay the price for her baptism of fire. She got arrested in July 1964 in Rangpur and was released after three weeks. Months before her arrest, she married Bazlur Rahman, a promising young journalist and comrade. The newly married couple knew what challenges they had to face in life, and they were ready to embrace that, come what may.

In 1966, the EPSU got divided on nationalist and internationalist positions. Rashed Khan Menon became the president of one faction and Matia Chowdhury of the other. The EPSU under Matia's leadership became a major student organisation. She travelled to many places, giving fiery speeches, and became an icon of the student movement at that time. In

general ward for female inmates, mostly petty criminals from the marginalised community. After almost two years of imprisonment, she was released in February 1969 along with other political prisoners after the ouster of the Ayub regime by the mass upsurge.

Matia Chowdhury remained almost the same all through her life. She worked at the grassroots level during the early and middle phases of her political activism. From leftist politics, she shifted to the mainstream nationalist party politics, being fully aware of the criticism she would face. The shift in politics didn't mean a shift in her commitment to serve the people, however. This was poignantly reflected in the service she rendered as agriculture minister from

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economic and cultural rights of the Bangalee people flourished during her student days, when she leaned towards socialist ideals. Soon, she became an important figure in the student movement and was elected as the vice-

FROM CLASSROOM TO MARTYRDOM

A tribute to the fallen HSC examinees



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Every year, as the results of the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exams get published, the media features bright-eyed successful students with their proud parents and/or teachers. This year, it was different. HSC examinees who lost their lives during the July uprising made the headlines. The studies that defined them as students or university applicants bore a broader meaning. They are the young revolutionaries whose sacrifices have made changes possible and led us to reflect on the paradoxes of life and death.

These martyred students achieved more in the years that they lived than many of us would do in decades. The breadth of their lifespan does not include the depths of their dying or the meaning they gave to their own lives. Their purposeful existence, though not long in years, was rich enough to defy death's physical limits. Their deaths strip away the triviality often associated with examinations and youthful aspirations, as their academic successes serve as reminders not only of unrealised potential but also of poignant sacrifices that lend new weight to the freedoms we may take for granted. Their GPA scores now stand as symbolic markers of their existential struggle against a system they deemed unjust. These students have become part of a larger narrative that transcends individual loss. By reflecting on their contributions, we can understand how death both shapes and defines life—both now and in the future.

into an act of spiritual victory. Similarly, Hinduism and Buddhism view death within the larger cycle of *Samsara*, where life and death are interwoven in an endless sequence of births, deaths, and rebirths. This circularity allows death to be accepted as a form of transition. Conversely, to think of death transformed into something beyond its inherent finality is central to *Bardo Thodol*, or the Tibetan Book of the Dead. The transitional state, *bardo*, is where the soul wanders through various stages of consciousness before reaching rebirth or liberation. In *bardo*, reality becomes fluid, subject to distortions and projections



VISUAL: STAR

The omnipresence of death is a core belief in almost all religions. Without an awareness of the inevitable end of our physical life, the metaphysical union with our maker would lose its significance. The Islamic belief regards martyrdom as a sacred act, granting the departed a special place in paradise. This glorification of death eases grief by transforming a loss

shaped by the mind's own fears, desires and attachments.

The HSC results of those who have left us can be interpreted as a type of *bardo* for the living—the families and communities still grappling with the loss. No words are enough to console the grieving parents and loved ones. The pain of separation for them is excruciatingly real and concrete.

Yet, the meaning of these students' lives is paradoxically illuminated through their deaths. While their near ones look at the vacant chair at the dinner table or the absence of sibling rivalry, we look at their unfulfilled dreams and grant their stories an eternal quality, glorifying their defiance against formidable opponents.

The posthumous announcement of the exam results functions as a simulacrum—a representation that hints at a reality that is no longer accessible. The young ones are not with us to claim their achievements. Their successes have become a kind of "hyperreality," where the meaning of their education and potential is magnified by the tragedy of their deaths. It is as though they died to give meaning to the very concept of life itself, asserting that life's worth is not measured by longevity or conventional milestones, but by the depth of one's commitment to an ideal, even at the cost of one's existence.

Then again, the crest of their success rests on the trough of a revolutionary wave that forms our political history. A revolution needs many waves to reach

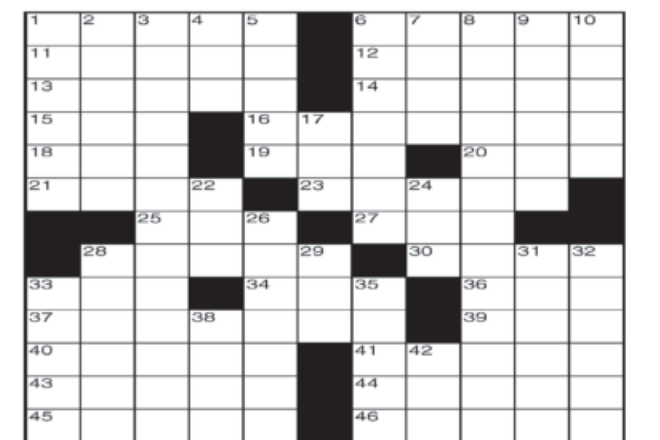
These martyred students achieved more in the years that they lived than many of us would do in decades. The breadth of their lifespan does not include the depths of their dying or the meaning they gave to their own lives. Their purposeful existence, though not long in years, was rich enough to defy death's physical limits. Their deaths strip away the triviality often associated with examinations and youthful aspirations, as their academic successes serve as reminders not only of unrealised potential but also of poignant sacrifices that lend new weight to the freedoms we may take for granted.

receiving due recognition, we overlook her contribution to "Bangladesh 1.0". By denying her the honour of being buried as a national hero, we falsify our history.

We have pressed a "reset button" as if to suggest that history (re)originated on August 5, 2024. If we forget the leaders and the dates that defined the foundation of our nation, we are denying the sacrifice of those who gave us our national flag and territory. If we pick only our recent heroes, then we risk picking up dead flowers to place in the vase of our history, disconnected from the tree that birthed many such flowers throughout the twists and turns of our history. "Reset" is a term more applicable to machines and artificial intelligence. For organic life or human intelligence, we need to be appreciative of the nuances of both life and death. Erasing history is a crime for which the fallen government has paid heavily. There is no sense in repeating the same mistake. I look at the pictures of those bright-eyed faces who had the potential to become so many things. Yet they became the guiding lights for us so that we don't lose our way in blind hatred and revenge.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Beer amounts
6 Pet store buys
11 Birth-related
12 Calendar entry
13 Texas landmark
14 Joyful
15 Under the weather
16 Underwear type
18 Maui souvenir
19 Naughty act
20 Wisdom bringer
21 Headliner
23 Sculpting medium
25 "Platoon" setting
27 Bro's sibling
28 Moving about
30 Endure
33 Nest egg acct.
34 Bashful pal
36 First numero
37 MIT rival
39 Boar's mate
40 Michelle or Malia
41 Blown away
43 City of southern France
- DOWN**
44 Striped cat
45 Virtuous one
46 Goes downhill
1 Slow movers
2 Bill holder
3 Suppressata, e.g.
4 Whale group
5 Casino machines
6 Sticks
7 Declare
8 Knackwurst, e.g.
9 Incense
10 Fashion
17 That guy's
22 Maze runner
24 Motor need
26 Home of many OPEC nations
28 Mecca setting
29 Bird of myth
31 Deceived
32 Castle parts
33 Pics to click
35 Vouchers
38 Govt. agents
42 Goose egg



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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

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