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Hasanuzzaman

Memories of Bangabandhu's sister

August 18, 2010

The month of August is a time when millions mourn. There is, nevertheless, only a select few who remain shackled and continue to be haunted by the horrifying memories of August 15.

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A couple of days before the darkest dawn in Bangladesh's history, I interviewed the last surviving child of Sheikh Lutfor Rahman to learn about the August 1975 consequences, from a sister's point of view.

Ms Khadija Hossain (Lily) is 80 years old and upon entering her home, I feel a sudden chill. After all, not everyone gets to sit opposite to the youngest sister of Bangabandhu. I had so many questions: Where was she on August 15? What happened to her the next day and the years that ensued? How does she feel today about being called Bangabandhu's sister? And many more.

But her frail physical state did not permit me to be a professional interviewer.

On August 10, 1975, Ms Hossain's daughter (Ms. Habiba Zaman) got married to Shahiduzzaman, an engineer, and as rituals dictate, following the wedding reception on August 12, the newlyweds were living at her residence in building 7 of Sobhanbag Government Colony.

Had she known what tragedy was about to befall the family within the next 72 hours, Ms Zaman would have surely chosen to die with her family than getting married in the month of August.

On August 15, at early dawn, the phone rang. "Jamal called me!" a voice screamed from the other end. "They have killed Moni bhai (Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni) and now we are under attack! Get Abba (Syed Hossain) immediately to the third floor," the phone cut-off and Ms Shelly Zaman, Lily's eldest daughter, was left in a daze.

Ms Hossain, with her eyes on the floor, almost whispers: "Time has stood still for me since Jamal called up Shelly that dawn. I would have preferred being assassinated with Bangabandhu instead of hearing that I lost my father. Yes, on August 15, I lost the very root of my existence."

Wiping her tears, she continues with a deep breath: "*Miya Bhai* (elder brother) used to often say to *Bhabi* (Sheikh Fazilatunnessa), 'Renu, what Russel is to you, Lily means the same to me. Take care of her', and she did, perhaps more than what my own mother would have done for me if she was alive."

I do not have the capacity to capture a brother's love for his sister, who could not even walk past a needy person without offering something. To describe the depth of love that Bangabandhu had for not only his family members but all his brothers and sisters, and also their children, is certainly beyond the scope of my vocabulary.

On the morning of August 15, when Ms Hossain was already in a state of trauma, another blow

was awaiting her — the army, wearing black uniform, lined up her new son-in-law alongside other men and women living in the house, ready to shoot at point blank.

Her sister-in-law (Ms Moni) ran to their aid and after much havoc they decided to let the groom off the hook. They returned the following morning and arrested the then additional secretary of the establishment ministry, her husband, Mr Syed Hossain.

For one year, Bangabandhu's sister was put under house arrest but this was no problem. She was neither emotionally fit to fully comprehend what was happening around her, nor physically able to pay visit to her imprisoned husband. After two and a half years, on release, knowing that it was physically impossible to identify the deceased of August 15, Mr Hossain demanded to know where his daughter (Rosy) and her husband (Jamal) were buried.

Ziaur Rahman, forced by this well-calculated move, informed Mr Hossain about the location of 18 bodies, and following his approval, Mr Shahiduzzaman visited the Banani graveyard early one day to put up a boundary (made of bamboo shoots initially, later replaced by a brick wall in 1979), in order to mark the graves.

Needless to mention, life has changed drastically for Ms Lily. Being with her, I realised how fortunate I was to be seeing the woman who was not treated as any less than a member of a royal family, and who received much love from the man who would have happily carved his heart out just to provide a shelter to the homeless.

With tears filling in both the corners of her eyes, she boldly affirms: "I am no VIP. Neither do I hope to be. Before August 15 I was a princess, and today I am happy to be living a life that my brother would have been really proud of, as an ordinary citizen."

Looking at a portrait of her late husband with a small smile on her face, she confesses: "He was a very patient man and had to regularly put up with the tantrums of Bangabandhu's youngest sister. Today, I consider myself lucky to have people who always support me regardless of my ability to do anything for them. I guess I am also one of the free riders, enjoying the fruits of my brother's good deeds."

I did not know whether to proceed any further. A part of me felt a bit nervous with the sudden zeal in her eyes. I dared to ask her one final question that perhaps a few may also have also pondered on: What would be life like, if Bangabandhu could have escaped the assassination?

Though she looked weak, she responded with the confidence of a leader who was about to make a public speech. "Do you really think you have the ability to write on what would be Bangladesh today if my brother were alive? I will not answer that question. I will tell you instead what I will ask Bangabandhu when I meet him once again: *Miya Bhai*, on earth, I was with you almost everywhere you went, then why did you not take me with you to heaven?"

Being her grandson, I feel privileged as not only one of the many members of this prestigious family-tree, but, more proud to be called a Bangladeshi. Though my nani has never expressed her deepest sorrows, I have often seen a dark cloud blocking the princess-like smile on her face which, perhaps, can only be brought about and sustained by her brother — the bravest Bangladeshi of all time, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

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






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