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# Remembering our sister Simeen Mahmud



Simeen Mahmud

Mirza Najmul Huda and Zareen Huda Ahmed

On the chilling morning of March 26, 1971, Pakistani soldiers kicked open the back door of our Dhaka University bungalow, and violated our residence for the second time. A soldier pointed his bayonet at our father, Dr MN Huda, almost touching his chest. Our mother, Kulsum Huda, rushed to protect him by embracing him from the front. We, the two terrified sisters, stood behind our father in direct view of the soldier's face and were pleading with him. To our horror, the soldier gestured to his partner to pull our mother away so he could complete his mission. Simeen fearlessly walked up to the soldier and defiantly pushed the rifle away from Abba's chest. Confronted with Simeen's bravery, the soldiers were dumbfounded and left with their mission unaccomplished. Simeen's courage and Allah's mercy saved our father's life.

As we come to terms with the reality of Simeen's sudden passing on March 19, 2018 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and her burial in New Jersey on March 23, we are overwhelmed by the support of family and friends from all over the world, many of whom we had lost touch with for decades. We request special prayers for Simeen's intellectual and life's partner for the last 43 years, Wahiduddin Mahmud, our Wahid Bhai.

After graduating from Dhaka University with a First Class First B.Sc. Honours degree in statistics, Simeen pursued higher studies at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and researched as a MacArthur Fellow at the Harvard Center for Population Studies. Subsequently, she changed her research focus from population studies to gender-related development studies. A researcher at BIDS and BRAC University and author of numerous research papers, Simeen has been described as a pioneer in gender studies and women's empowerment. Although her collaborative research required frequent foreign travels, Simeen spent her entire professional career in Bangladesh.

While acquaintances are familiar with Simeen's stellar professional achievements, we want to share some character traits that made Simeen unique. Simeen exemplified the proverb "The apple does not fall far from the tree." She inherited the best attributes of our parents: our father's brilliant intellect, humility, modesty and superb managerial skills, along with our mother's exquisite taste and creativity, generosity and hospitality, unpublicised support of countless charities and the education of needy students, and her tireless energy to diligently pursue numerous passions, including gardening, collecting art and interior decorating.

Simeen was the rock of our extended family, and the custodian of many people's valuables. She was entrusted with varied responsibilities ranging from the sublime (an elderly cousin requested that she perform her final Ghusl) to the mundane (safe-keeping the passports of non-resident family members visiting Bangladesh).

Simeen was a practicing Muslim who embodied one treasured trait—patience. Highly disciplined (she routinely walked along Dhanmondi lake on weekday mornings) as well as a strict disciplinarian (she would admonish anyone deserving a dressing-down), she was simultaneously soft-hearted and empathetic. When her brother-in-law was almost succumbing to dengue infection in 2010 and the rest of us were panicking, Simeen calmly took charge of his treatment, and did not leave the hospital until he was out of danger.

Simeen distributed our Zakat, arranged Sadaquas, distributed food at orphanages and represented our family at weddings and funerals. She took her children to visit elderly relatives and our parents' surviving friends. She financially supported the education of several students, mostly anonymously. During winter, she would carry a couple of new blankets with her during her morning walks and distribute them to the disabled. Often she would give toys to the street children, who would first be taken aback and then reward her with the most gratifying and radiant smiles! Every Friday after Jummah, she distributed food to the hungry.

Simeen was truly blessed that both her parents-in-law who lived with them, and died in their homes. Her father-in-law passed away in 1986 after they set up their first household in Dhaka, while her mother-in-law passed away in 2012. That they all lived together for 34 years is a testament to their mutual love.

Despite her hectic schedule, Simeen took over our mother's role as a trustee of Central Women's University and worked tirelessly with her friends to build on the dream of our cousin, the founding vice-chancellor. She also supported countless educational institutions behind the scene, to avoid publicity.

Simeen learned cooking by experimenting with recipes from our grandmother, mother and of course Siddiqua Kabir. Her “Kacchi Biryani” was a family favourite, and at family gatherings, there were never left-overs of Simeen's Biryani. Among her other culinary classics were green mango pickles, the spicy version which her daughter relished, and the sweet “Kashmiri” Achaar. Most of the time, the batch would be consumed directly from the pot and not make it to the storage jars!

Visitors to Simeen's flat were greeted with the eclectic charm and tasteful décor of her drawing room, which could easily be featured in Architectural Digest. Like our mother, Simeen instantly recognised unique artefacts, which she collected from all over the world. She elegantly displayed souvenirs from all her travels, along with rocks she collected and the decorated small trunk she picked up long before “rickshaw art” was recognised. She restored our grandfather's vintage, intricately carved mahogany furniture and artistically paired them with her contemporary furniture.

Simeen inherited the passion for reading from our mother and passed it on to her three children—Adeeb, Naved and Ayesha. She had a life-long passion for buying books. Her walls are lined with copies of every genre, from classics to contemporary. To escape the boredom when stuck in Dhaka traffic, she maintained a mini-library in her car, which was stocked with prayer books, Agatha Christie novels, and even a few texts on demography.

Gardening was another of Simeen's passions. Unlike us amateurs, she elevated her horticultural interests to the next level by learning how to train bonsais. Within a few years, she had trained a tamarind sapling to a mature bonsai tree, which occupies a special spot in our rear garden.

Simeen was also “hooked” on Sudoku, and was at a master level. Most evenings after dinner she would sit in her wicker sofa, with a sharpened pencil and eraser in hand, and challenge her mind with a new game. She had a special case for the pencil and eraser and everyone had strict instructions to never touch (and God forbid remove) these valuable tools!

Simeen was obsessed with dusting furniture. Everything was dusted daily, sometimes twice! She kept several dust cloths around the shelves. Whenever she noticed even a tiny speck in the obscure corners that the house help had missed, she would start dusting herself, even after returning home from an exhausting day and suffering interminable traffic jams.

The bond with a sister is truly magical, and those who have experienced it are blessed. We were especially fortunate as we had frequent daily interactions while living, since 1987, on different floors of our parent's modest Dhanmondi residence, Shalmolee. Now, the most vibrant member of Shalmolee is gone.

We pray to Allah that He reunites Simeen with our parents in paradise.

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**Mirza Najmul Huda and Zareen Huda Ahmed are brother and sister of Simeen Mahmud, respectively.**