

Salma Sobhan: 1937-2003

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Messages, articles, memorials and biographical notes on Salma Sobhan.

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WLUML saddened by the loss of Salma Sobhan

31/12/2003: It is with the greatest sadness and profound shock that we are informing you that our dear friend Salma Sobhan of Bangladesh has died. (WLUML)

Salma passed away suddenly late on Monday, 29th December at her home in Dhaka after suffering breathing difficulties.

Salma apa, as she was affectionately known to many of us in the network, was one of WLUML's most dynamic analytical minds, someone to whom we always turned when faced with difficult questions of policy and strategy. Our loss is beyond measure.

But Salma did not just bring us her superb sense of justice and commitment to women's rights. She also enriched us all with her wonderful sense of humour, her cheerful willingness to take on the most difficult and delicate of tasks, and her great humbleness. Of her many special qualities was her ability to reach out to all generations and form real friendships with younger activists linked through WLUML and beyond. All this in spite of the fact that she occupied a position as one of Bangladesh's foremost human rights activists, a Barrister and former Executive Director of the legal aid and human rights organisation, Ain-o-Salish Kendra.

Our thoughts are with Salma's husband and soul-mate Rehman, and two sons Babar and Zafar.

Condolence messages can be sent via ASK at ask@citechco.net

In sorrow,

Women Living Under Muslim Laws

International Coordination Office

Eminent HR activist Barrister Salma Sobhan passes away

The Daily Star, December 31, 2003

Staff correspondent

Barrister Salma Sobhan, a lawyer, social worker and human-rights activist, died of a cardiac arrest at her Gulshan residence in the early hours of yesterday. She was 66.

Salma, wife of Professor Rehman Sobhan, an economist and former advisor of the caretaker government, fell sick while reading a book in her room at around 1:00am. She was rushed to Sikder Women's Medical College and Hospital at Dhanmondi, but doctors declared her dead on arrival.

Salma Rasheeda Akhtar Banu, known as Salma Sobhan, was born on August 11, 1937. Her father Md. Ikramullah was the first foreign secretary of Pakistan and mother Begum Shaista Ikramullah, one of the first women lawmakers in Pakistan, served as Pakistan ambassador to Morocco.

Salma was educated at Westonbirt School in England and studied law at Girton College, Cambridge, in 1958. She was called to the Bar from Lincoln's Inn in 1959 and became one of Pakistan's first women barristers.

She started her career as a legal assistant with M/S Surridge & Beecheno from 1959 to 1961 in Karachi. She came to Dhaka after her marriage with Prof Sobhan in 1962.

Salma taught law at Dhaka University from 1962 to 1981. She lost her eldest son Taimur in an accident in 1981.

She worked with Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (Bilia) from 1981 to 1988, and served as editor of the Supreme Court Law Reports (SCLR) for several years.

In 1982, she co-founded the human rights

organisation, Ain-O-Salish Kendra (ASK), and was its first executive director until her retirement in 2001.

Salma also helped establish Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (Blast) and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (Brac).

She was on the boards of many organisations working on human rights and social justice including Brac, Blast, Bilia, the international network Women Living under Muslim Laws and UNRISD, Geneva.

In 2001, Salma was honoured by the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights in New York for her contribution to protecting human rights.

Her major publications are Legal Status of Women in Bangladesh, 1975, Peasants Perception of Law, 1981 and No Better Option-Women Industrial Workers (co-authored), 1988.

"She was a wonderfully warm person, with a great sense of humour," said Dr Hamida Hossain of ASK. "She had a lot of friends all over the world and used to spend time mailing to them. She was very keen in swimming and loved sight-seeing," she added.

"This sitar enthusiast woman had keen interest in politics, but had no desire to be a politician," said Val Arnold-Forster, a journalist and a family friend who knew her since 1947.

Salma left behind her husband Prof Sobhan, sons Babar and Zafar, brother Enam and sisters Naz and Sarvath.

Her namaz-e-janaza will be held at Gulshan Central Mosque today after Zohr prayers.

Qulkhwani for Salma will be held at her Gulshan residence on January 2 after Asr prayers.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina expressed deep shock at the death of Salma Sobhan.

Brac, Odhikar, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha, Karmajibi Nari, Nagarik Uddog, ASK also mourned.

Salma Sobhan passes away

The New Nation, Dec 30th, 2003

By Staff Reporter

Noted lawyer and human rights activist Barrister Salma Sobhan died of a severe heart attack at her Gulshan residence in the city in early hours yesterday. She was 66.

Family sources said Barrister Salma Sobhan, one of the country's first women barristers, died at about 2 o'clock after midnight at her residence at Gulshan in the city.

She left behind her husband, renowned economist Professor Rehman Sobhan, two sons—Babar and Zafar, brother Enam and two sisters, Naz and Sarvath, a host of relatives, friends and well-wishers to mourn her death.

Her namaj-e-janaza will be held at Gulshan Central Mosque at Gulshan Avenue after Zohr prayers tomorrow (Thursday). The Qul-khawni will be held at her house (No. 9, Road No. 69, Gulshan-2) after Asr prayers on Friday. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia yesterday expressed deep shock at the death of Barrister Salma Sobhan, wife of renowned economist Prof Rehman Sobhan.

The Prime Minister, in a message of condolence, prayed for eternal peace of the departed soul and conveyed her sympathy to the members of the bereaved family.

Receiving the news of death of Barrister Salma Sobhan, many of her relatives, friends and well-wishers rushed to her house at Gulshan yesterday morning. They included politicians, lawyers, academics, economists, women and human rights activists and journalists.

Barrister Salma Sobhan was the daughter of Md Ikramullah, the first Foreign Secretary of Pakistan and Begum Shaista Ikramullah, who served

as one of the first woman parliamentarians in Pakistan and its Ambassador to Morocco. She studied at Westonbirt School in England, received her Bachelor's degree in Law from Girton College, Cambridge, UK and was called to the Bar from Lincoln's Inn in 1958. She became one of Pakistan's first women barristers.

Barrister Salma Sobhan practiced law in Karachi, and after her marriage, followed her husband to Dhaka and taught law at Dhaka University for 20 years. She was the Editor of the Supreme Court Monthly Reports and a member of Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA) and a member of the four-member advisory council of Bangladesh Mohila Parishad.

She was a member of the BRAC's Governing Body and the founder member of Ain-o-Salish Kendra, established in 1986 and was its first Executive Director till her retirement two years ago.

Barrister Salma Sobhan was a Trustee Member of the Bangladesh Legal Aid Society's Trust. She wrote and lectured widely, with a special emphasis on the legal and human rights of women. In 2001, she was honoured by the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights in New York for her contribution to protecting human rights. Meanwhile, different human rights and socio-cultural organisations and individuals yesterday issued condolence messages expressing their profound shock and deep grief at the death of Barrister Salma Sobhan.

In a joint statement, Chitra Bhattacharya and Ayesha Khanam, Acting President and General Secretary of Bangladesh Mohila Parishad said their organisation had lost a great human rights activist with the death of Barrister Salma Sobhan. "We are deeply shocked by losing Salma Sobhan and pray for eternal peace of her departed soul."

They also conveyed their deep condolence and sympathy to the members of the bereaved family. In another message of condolence, BRAC said the contribution of Barrister Salma Sobhan, a long term member of BRAC's governing body, to BRAC and the society at large was immense. "She will always be remembered for her dedication and fight in bringing human, specially women's rights, to the forefront."

The message said that the BRAC community offered

its condolences to her husband, Prof Rehman Sobhan, and her two sons—Babar and Zafar. In a condolence message, Odhikar, a human rights organisation, expressed its deep shock at the death of Barrister Salma Sobhan.

"All the members of Odhikar are deeply shocked at the death of Salma Sobhan, and the whole nation has lost a dedicated human rights organiser with the death of her," said Odhikar.

Describing Salma Sobhan as one of the pioneers in the country's human rights movement, Odhikar said she involved the new generation in human rights movement and also inspired her students in that movement as a teacher of law. She also made a significant contribution in the national level to strengthen the struggle for protection of human rights through establishing different human rights organisations.

Bangladesh: Salma's journey into activism

10/01/2005: Salma Sobhan never wanted to be an icon. In fact, she avoided stage lights, but ironically she has become a public figure and now, a year after she left us, she is remembered not only by family and friends, but nationally & internationally by many others. (South Asia Citizen's Wire)

An award for journalists has been established in her name by Professor Amartya Sen's Protichi Foundation, a volume containing some of her writings has been published by ASK, and at several commemorative meetings, she has been held up as an example of a selfless human rights worker.

The reasons why have been brought out in the commemorative meetings. In her personal life, she was clear about rights and wrongs, and while she had little time for hypocrisy, she was tolerant of the views of others and didn't make value judgements. She was able to discuss issues honestly, and talk about events or people she knew with humour and without rancour. These were qualities that endeared her personally to all those who came into contact with her. She had a large number of personal friends not only in Bangladesh, but in the UK where she studied, and indeed in many other countries. Even though her parents were both public figures, her father having served as Pakistan's Foreign Secretary and her mother having been a member of Pakistan's first Parliament, Salma avoided the public glare.

Her active public engagement emerged later, and more by chance than a determined decision. In commemorating her life, we remember these qualities, but more than that, we chart her journey as a humanist who became an activist because she translated her personal values into a public struggle for justice.

She became the first woman barrister in Pakistan in 1959, but unlike other lawyers who pursued their profession single-mindedly, she had a wide range of interests. She was well versed in literature, particularly in Urdu and English, and would quote verses extensively from memory. She was also addicted to thrillers and children's fiction.

Her traditional upbringing didn't make her illiberal. Even though she was deeply religious and grew up in a relatively conservative, social environment she didn't hesitate to speak out against religious injustice or sham religious practices. When she designed the BRAC legal literacy programme, she was able to reach out to ordinary village women, to make them understand what their rights were in inheritance or marriage. With her ability to communicate, she was able to demystify the laws so that women could learn to defy unfair decisions that are often forced upon them in the name of religion. With her knowledge of religious texts she was able to challenge religious bigots, who thrived on people's ignorance.

Dhaka in the 60s

Salma came to Dhaka in 1962 after she married Rehman Sobhan. She decided not to practice and instead she started teaching at the university. She had a great way of reaching out to her students, and often valued their understanding of reality over her theoretical knowledge. Although she was flummoxed on reading a student's answer to the question "Name three means by which property is acquired" that "Property is acquired through forgery, theft, and other means" she decided that the hapless student deserved at least some points!

The political situation in the latter part of the sixties became quite tense. Rehman Sobhan became involved with the political opposition. He had written the definitive article on "two economies" and although Salma shied away from political involvement, she did engage with the current intellectual debates. In the sixties, she was part of a group of university professors and other professionals who brought out pamphlets to explain the reasons for disparity between East and West Pakistan, on absence of democracy, and so on. These pamphlets published under the name of NACEP were popular amongst university students. Later she was part of a small group that published a political weekly Forum from 1967 until it was closed down in March 1971.

1971 and after

She could not escape the impact of political events and when March 25 happened, she was left to cope alone. The Pakistan military came to her house asking for Rehman, who fortunately had left the house earlier and sought shelter elsewhere. Salma managed to fly with her sons to Karachi, from where her sister Princess Sarvath of Jordan arranged her onward flight to England. She lived in Oxford, teaching and caring for her sons Taimur, Babar, and Zafar, while Rehman was busy lobbying for Bangladesh in different capitals.

Homecoming in 1972 was more than traumatic for everyone. Salma returned and picked up the strands of her life in the university, with friends who had survived the genocide. She shared the exhilaration, but was sensitive to dangers her friends had lived through and the sadness in the entire country. She was concerned about the symptoms of populism, of charisma lending itself to a personality cult.

She had said, very presciently, "What will come after the euphoria? Authoritarianism?" She often expressed her disappointment at undemocratic tendencies, which prevailed even after the massive resistance to the military rule and autocracy. She did what was characteristic of her, and what few others could bring themselves to, which was to refuse to sign the BAKSAL membership, even though she had been urged to do so by her university colleagues, and had herself supported the Awami

League.

With the assassinations of August 15, she and her family became nomads again and lived in Oxford for five or six years, looking after the children and leading a peaceful life. When she returned in 1980, she gave up academics and joined Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs. She edited the Bangladesh Supreme Court Reports and co-authored a volume on women industrial workers. At around this time she published the first overview volume of women's legal status and rights in Bangladesh. But she was not satisfied with authoring these pieces of non-fiction, and her one ambition was to author her "deathless novel." Indeed, she has left several unfinished manuscripts which now need to be published.

In the nineties

During the movement against Ershad's dictatorship, Salma was particularly concerned that the end to military rule might lead to elections and a civil government but not to the end of autocratic tendencies. While we marched on the streets shouting slogans against Ershad's military dictatorship in the eighties, we were conscious that elections would not bring the end of the day, since the powerful would control the state, communities would remain hierarchical, and the family would still be a major site of injustice. She started to think about more practical ways to support people's struggles and became the main mover amongst nine of us who discussed how best to support people's struggles for their rights through legal aid — a fairly new idea for Bangladesh.

Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK)

That was the beginning of ASK. Since she had resigned from BILIA, and was in any case most qualified to do so, Salma was requested to start the work. Little did she realise that it would be so absorbing. She was able to attract a nucleus of young lawyers and others who became human rights activists. Legal aid was not restricted to purely technical legal help. On the contrary, as the result of its deep interaction with clients — mainly women, workers and even working children — the centre developed a more holistic support for the disenfranchised, to support them in their struggle for rights. Many of the support systems were very innovative and have become role models.

Today ASK is a far cry from when it first began in Nurjehan Murshed's garage on Satmasjid Road, waiting for needy clients, who had never heard of such a thing as free legal aid. The office then moved to two rooms in Inner Circular Road where it was set up with old, borrowed furniture. Even though the staff turned to her for advice and guidance, and she supported all the innovative ideas, she kept herself in the background.

Setting up and running an organisation and getting disparate people to work together is no joke in Bangladesh. ASK has now acquired a reputation as a leading human rights organisation. It wasn't easy going, and Salma may not have known what she was getting into when she started, but her inimitable sensitivity to other people's problems helped her provide leadership.

She decided quite wisely, that ASK would have to be non-traditional, lawyers would have to reach out so people could understand their rights before they would challenge their subordination. Slowly, as ASK supported individuals in their personal struggles — the many women with stories of marital disputes and violence, workers who weren't paid even after working 14 hours, children working in middle class homes unable to experience childhood — she came to understand that behind the endless tales of domination, control, and violence lay a more systemic abuse of power.

The problems needed more than band-aid measures. ASK began to broaden its struggle for rights. One morning in 1989, Susan Davis (then with the Ford Foundation) called to say she had seen

bulldozers literally tearing huts apart in the Taltola bosti. Salma immediately called Tahmina Rahman and other lawyers, and we rushed to the site. Barrister M. Amirul Islam argued the case, and obtained a stay order from the courts. As a result, the people still live on this site, without permanent housing, but surviving and with some kind of shelter. This was the beginning of ASK's engagement with the right to housing.

Subsequently, ASK has continued to raise eviction as a human rights issue and in some cases the court has recognised the primary responsibility of the state. But governments are harder to impress, particularly as they become beholden to business interests. And whether military or elected governments, property development and profits rather than the right to housing has become the main mover of urban development policies. With so many other incidents catalysing ASK into seeking more in-depth solutions, Salma began to act not merely as a lawyer offering technical help, but as a humanitarian person and real human rights lawyer, providing solidarity for and supporting struggles all the way through.

In 1993 and 1994 when there was a sudden epidemic of fatwas issued against women, and religious extremists were holding demonstrations against writers, journalists, and NGOs, and calling for them to be silenced, ASK took a strong stand. Although ASK was criticised (by other women's rights activists as well) for defending Taslima Nasreen, Salma remained strong in a commitment to her freedom of speech, and that of others, even though she may not have agreed with what was said. This involvement led to the making of the film Eclipse by Shaheen Akhtar and Shameem Akhter. Salma received an award in Los Angeles and acknowledged it graciously on ASK's behalf.

By the turn of the century, Salma felt she had done her bit. She decided to retire officially and allow a transition in the organisation. It is a tribute to her leadership that ASK has continued to work independently and courageously even without her. On December 29 last year, Salma made a special effort to come to ASK for some legal negotiations. She was able to represent both sides fairly with a win-win option because of her sense of fair play. She was at her professional best that afternoon, working out with such clarity the complex details of who would benefit from what, and what needed to be done. The next morning we heard that she had died of a heart attack.

Salma used to describe ASK as a jazz combo, where players improvised together, unlike hierarchical organisations, which were more efficient, but where the orchestra would have to respond to the conductor. An apt analogy. I think the best tribute we can pay her is to say that she succeeded in inspiring a collective spirit amongst all those with whom she worked. This included not only ASK, but the many other organisations inside and outside Bangladesh that she worked with intimately.

Dr. Hameeda Hossain is a human rights activist and founder member of Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK).

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Bangladesh: In Memorium: Salma Sobhan - a human being extraordinaire by Habibul Haque Khondker

8/01/2004: I often wondered what kept many of my compatriots from knowing some of the true heroes in their own midst. Is it because we are less enthusiastic about knowing the achievements of a fellow citizen than finding about their scandals? (The Daily Star - Dhaka)

Upon reflection, I realised that this could also say something about the personality in question.

Some people are reluctant to bask in the glory of success or media attention, they carry on with the jobs they have committed themselves to. Salma Sobhan, who passed away shortly after the midnight between December 29 and 30, 2003 was such a person. I often wished to see her as an ambassador of Bangladesh for the simple reason that apart from her enormous talents and brain, she was a rare person whose both parents were ambassadors. I cannot think of another such example.

Salma Sobhan's father was Mr. Ikramullah who was the first foreign secretary of the newly independent Pakistan and subsequently represented Pakistan as an ambassador. Salma Sobhan's mother Begum Shaista Ikramullah too was Pakistan's ambassador to Morocco. Her father-in-law too was once Pakistan's ambassador. It would be an understatement to say that Salma Sobhan was unobtrusive. She never told me that she was the recipient of the famous Human Rights award from the Lawyers' Committee in USA in 2001. It was Ms. Sigourney Weaver who presented the award to her in person. I had to find it out the hard way — a search through Internet — as I was preparing a brief resume on her. Salma Sobhan's maternal uncle was Hussain Shahid Suhrawardy and her paternal uncle was Justice Hedayetullah who later became the Vice President of the Republic of India. Her younger sister is married to Hasan Bin Talal, the uncle of Jordan's Monarch.

Such illustrious family background fades in comparison with her personality, which is full of wit and wisdom. A social activist driven by a conscience and a commitment to the causes of the disadvantaged, she was one of the founders (along with Dr Hameeda Hossain) of Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK). She left her teaching career in law at the University of Dhaka to commit herself fully to this organisation of legal aid to the poor women and became a champion of human rights, especially of women and children and other disenfranchised communities in Bangladesh.

Once I received Salma Sobhan at Changi airport of Singapore shortly after the assassination of Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi and as we were heading to city she was discussing the tragedy and how shocking it was to her sister (at that time wife of the Crown Prince of Jordan) who knew both Rajeev and Sonia from her Cambridge days. As we were discussing the implication of this murder for Indian politics, our English-speaking taxi driver took part in our discussion. He said — with a characteristic elitist bias — why kill a Prime Minister, why not an ordinary peasant? Salma Sobhan interjected: "Why a peasant? His life is as precious as that of the former Indian Prime Minister", she argued. The exasperated driver then said: "Ok, if you have to kill someone, kill a dog". Salma Sobhan retorted, human beings have souls and according to many religions there is resurrection or transmigration of soul but the poor dog, many believe, has no soul; once it is dead, it is gone forever. Our friendly driver, at that point gave up. Little did he know that his passenger clad in a cotton sari with unkempt hair from a red-eye flight and an unassuming look was a barrister and a humanist. I asked her later whether she knew anyone in Singapore. Salma Sobhan told me casually that she once met the wife of Singapore's founding leader Lee Kuan Yew, Mrs. Lee. Before she was Mrs. Lee and a senior at Cambridge invited Salma Sobhan to a tea party organised for a handful of female Asian law students at Cambridge. Salma Sobhan quipped: you can imagine how small that group was. I did not press her for any statistics. Salma Sobhan was in Cambridge from 1955 to 1957 and in 1958 was called to the Bar at the tender age of 21.

In another occasion, Salma Sobhan was in Singapore along with Ms. Kamal (Lulu Apa). They gave a talk at a Singaporean NGO dominated by lawyers and other female professionals. The Singaporean feminist activists came to the talk but were milling around as they were not apparently impressed by the diminutive Salma Sobhan with her ordinary looking sari and less ordinary-looking mannerism. However, once she started her speech, I saw a gradual change in the audience behaviour. Those who were milling around stilled, those who were standing began to sit. In a few minutes, some of the Singaporean lawyers were sitting on the floor with rapt attention to her deliberations. What an

engaging speaker she was! The audience was spellbound. After the talk, the documentary film “Eclipse” was screened to the feminists in Singapore.

Salma Sobhan, a personality extraordinaire is no more. I had the great privilege of dining in the company of some extraordinary individuals who glowed in their own light some years back. It was a small gathering where Begum Shaista Ikramullah (deceased), Mr. Obaidullah Khan (deceased), Dr. Rahmatullah, his daughter, Dr. Mehraj Jahan and myself sat around a Japanese styled table for a simple but sumptuous dinner hosted by Salma Sobhan and her husband Rehman Sobhan, a legend in his own rights. In that dinner, I reminded Begum Shaista Ikramullah of her essay published in the Reader’s Digest on a promise that Mr. Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan made to her. The essay was a recollection of a conversation Begum Ikramullah had with Mr. Jinnah prior to the birth of Pakistan. For a moment, I felt I was talking to history. Like her mother, who authored the famous book *From Purdah to Parliament*, Salma Sobhan was an intellectual of great calibre and an unparalleled moral integrity. Salma Sobhan wrote a letter defending the publicity of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the pages of *The Daily Star* — only when Awami League was out of power.

Salma Sobhan is survived by her loving husband Professor Rehman Sobhan and two adorable sons Baber, an economist and Jafar, who spurned a cushy lawyer’s career in New York to choose a career of journalism in Dhaka. Such a move does not surprise me for both her parents Salma Sobhan, a personality extraordinaire, and Rehman Sobhan stuck it out in Bangladesh amidst adversities. For Salma Sobhan, Bangladesh was her base. She lived here and now she will be in eternal peace here forever. She will remain a hero for all those who share her empathy for humanity, especially for those who are socially excluded and disadvantaged. She was a voice for those needed it most. As a human being she was a personification of humility and decency, qualities we can collectively emulate.

Habibul Haque Khondaker is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore.

Following is a letter Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy wrote from jail to his niece Salma Sobhan reproduced from her mother Begum Ikramullah’s book Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy — A Biography

Appendix XI

Central Jail According to the Newspapers

today is 8 May 1962.

Hello my Junior-never-to-be Congratulations to start with,

And now as an ancient relic I am expected to offer you some sterling advice — as you are about to be hitched or nitched. Having made a mess of my own life, and still in the further process of doing so, I am the most competent person to guide others, particularly in the province of Dont’s. What do these persons know of the shape of things who have lived a sheltered life, embosomed in the service of a providing government — other than they know everything, they know and know what they will know. So I, am an outcast, I am certified.

Now let us start with a non-controversial premiso. You are preternaturally transcendently

intelligent. It just oozes from you and you can't conceal it. The above adverbs you have inherited from your mother and the adjective from your parents. Now the young man is also intelligent, and sound and well-versed in his subject. Let there be no conflict of intelligences. You may scintillate in your arguments, but he is sounder in his deductions. So learn how to give in and try to conceal the spark under a bushel.

Item number two — you will have to mix with other people, relatives, friends, wives of friends, take a place in society — such as will enhance the young man's prestige. But now — the other people. Normally they resent intelligence. They happen to be normal, and have an inferiority complex in the presence of better-equipped people and they resent it. You will not realise it. You will go in your own way — a little introverted — and they will call you arrogant and proud, although you really are a very humble little creature, anxious to please dreading to hurt people. Hence, what are we to do! We cannot make them more intelligent, we can't go on defending ourselves. I am afraid that it is a little cross we have to bear. Afraid of you, they suspect you before you open your lips. Now I cannot ask you to shut your mouth — it will be impolite to do so and equally impossible for you to comply — heredity stands in your way. But it is best to let the other chatter and their talks will be inane. The female, the modern one — thank Heavens, when I look at sundry females of our family I find that that they have a higher sense of dignity and social behaviour and harbour no ill-will — thinks it clever to talk ill of other females — slyly, by innuendoes. Do not fall into the trap, never speak ill of anyone, however much that anyone may deserve being spoken ill of — this of course, I have not understood, why does one deserve to be libeled. If X is bad, well it is none of your business. In fact, speak well of everyone — or not at all. Best is, to treat them as elder sisters, and give them a sense of superiority, at least in the social aspects.

Next item. Set your own house in order, before you start the social rounds or embark on social service. Most important you may even learn how to cook. Strange as it may sound it is a tradition of Midnapur and of your family, to cook well from the lowly pietha to the best qorma, qofta, pulao, biryani (kutchi and pucci), seekh kabab (I have never tasted anything equal to what my sainted mother used to cook), shami kabab (pharaira) murgh-i-musallam paratha (with several parads, and at the same time khasta, on top, and narm inside), feerni (sounds easy, but can be very tasty), meetha tookra (rich and poor), and I nearly forgot the exquisite (I am tasting it in imagination, and drooling, but I have forgotten the name, sign of sure senility — I wish people would realise I am senile and played out) something sweet and sour with curd and onions and you can have meat, fish (very good) fowl, (very, very good) even shisah-rangea, nargisikabab, ananas, and kabule pulao: and chutnis of all kinds and bhartas (potatoes, brinjals, sutki, chingri, fish, etc. etc).

I know of a person who is doing so much social service that she is neglecting her home, allowing the expenses to outstrip a fairly comfortable income, and in her zeal, making enemies — her sole satisfaction being that she is really doing good work and will go to heaven — setting an example that others can't follow and hence they dislike her (inferiority complex I hope disillusionment doesn't await her to break her spirit). Begum tomatoes make excellent Chatnis. In fact, I think you should not think of social service now time is when you are a matron, and your sympathies need bestowal on a wider circle and here comes the crux (don't pronounce it as crooks) of life. I think firstly, it is absence of hate: and secondly, the positive feeling of love. I do not know why I have never been able to hate — I almost think it is a weakness. Or it is perhaps a streak in me of always trying to see the other man's point of view and find justification for him. I think was born with it, and it has developed with legal training and a judicial sense. Even in my childhood days I always fought for anybody absent who was attacked. I find that there are a few, very few, I cannot think of but one or two who are just intrinsically spiteful and vindictive, but they can't help it, if God endowed them with a fiend's nature. Others — and this is true of nearly all people seek to justify their actions by arguments, or by principles, which, however warped they may be, satisfy their conscience. Hence,

even when I was in power, and I have been so for years together, with power to do harm to my enemies, I have never victimised them. Indeed, my party men, who understand more the ruthlessness of politics, have always blamed me for what they call my softness. Have I made friends by my leniency and consideration! I have yet to see. Unhappily it is those persons on whom you confer benefits who are apt to stab you in the back. Still, not to hate is morally satisfying, and then, to love I think I do, and would like to love everyone.

Only some won't have it. However, this is not the proper occasion to deal with a subject so abstrusely psychological it may have something to do with senile decay. The reason why I have digressed is that, I think that when one steps into society one is apt to like and dislike and it is more satisfying to like, and not to dislike. And as an outer sign do not backbite, there is nothing which I dislike more, and never hit a person who is down. They must have your sympathy, whether they deserve it or not.

Now, I think that is enough of sterling advice; I hope it is not dross. But it is quite heavy. It could be gold or lead. If lead, transmute it into gold. I hear you can now spout French. Let me see how far you have progressed when we meet. I took it up after my detention; I have eased off considerably: I find it easier to pass time being lazy than being-industrious for nothing. I have started Monte Cristo in French — to discuss common experiences when I meet him in the next world.

I have received your mother's letter. She is always worrying and explaining that she has always replied to my letters etc, etc. Just ask her not to worry. I do receive her letters and they are as balm in Gilead or nectar to a thirsty soul I would love to hear from her if she will stop worrying about — having written, or not having written etc....

Now Salma, behave yourself, be a good girl and accept my cordial felicitations.

Lots of love.

Shaheed Mama

Bangladesh: Salma Sobhan Fellowship Programme

10/01/2005: Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen flew into Dhaka just to award certificates to 32 bright, young women aspiring to come journalists through a programme called the Salma Sobhan Fellowship in Journalism for Women taken up by BRAC and Pratichi Trust. (BRAC)

Trainee fellows from 32 districts of Bangladesh received certificates today at a simple but eventful ceremony held at the Spectra Convention Centre with Amartya Sen as Chief Guest.

Besides Mr. Fazle Hasan Abed, Professor Rehman Sobhan, Prothom Alo Editor Matiur Rahman and BRAC Public Affairs Chief, Minhaz Uddin Anwar, eminent guests included Dr. Kamal Hossain, Ms. Naz, sister of Salma Sobhan, Professor Hamid Hossain, Dr. Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, Vice Chancellor, BRAC University, Syed Humayun Kabir, Mr. Mahfuz Anam, Salma Sobhan's friends and family members, Abdul Mueyed Chowdhury, Executive Director, BRAC, AMR Chowdhury, Deputy Executive Director BRAC, Manzoor Hassan, Deputy Executive Director, BRAC, M Tajul Islam, Director, Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh, Aminul Alam, Deputy Executive Director, BRAC.

The 32 trainee fellows selected from 32 different districts of Bangladesh, received their certificates from the hands of Amartya Sen upon completion of the first module of the one-year residential training programme which started on December 15, 2004 at the BRAC Training and Resource Centre (TARC) in Savar.

"We have had but a few days for all of us that represent 32 districts to come together, but already we have started to demonstrate the courage to proclaim that with our pens we will overcome the many disparities within the society. Each of us will be soldiers of the pen who will be the future forces against corruption, wrongdoing, suppression and injustice," said Ms. Selina Kabir Chowdhury, Mymensingh, recipient of the certificate. Mr. Fazle Hasan Abed in his speech, said, "We will only be successful when the girls will really begin to contribute in making our mass media stronger and more effective." Editor of Prothom Alo, Mr. Matiur Rahman, congratulated all the participants and said, "This is an initiative that we should have taken a long time ago. Thanks to BRAC and Pratichi Trust for taking it, finally." Professor Rahman Sobhan spoke of his wife, Salma Sobhan, saying, "Salma would have been the happiest person today for it was her vision to see women venture into non-traditional professions".

Professor Amartya Sen said that the expectations that he had of Pratichi Trust could not be fulfilled in any better way than by having programmes such as the Salma Sobhan Fellowship in Journalism for Women. In his memorial lecture on Salma Sobhan, he described his first encounter with Salma Sobhan and registered the memory as one where he recalls Salma Sobhan to be a woman of great beauty and insight. "Mixed with the great happiness I feel today, I cannot deny the great sorrow upon the profound loss over the death of Salma Sobhan" said Professor Sen. "She was a person who knew how to make something difficult very easy." Professor Sen spoke of Salma Sobhan's lifelong work towards enforcing human rights, and said, "She should be studied in comparison with the proponents of human Rights. Her Philosophy is closer to Mary Wollstonecraft's, as both believe that there is no quarrel between the rights of men and women." "There are more than one ways to uphold human rights," Professor Sen acquiesced, speaking of Salma Sobhan's own convictions.

Professor Sen further spoke of Salma Sobhan's deep knowledge of society and also spoke of the role of media, saying, "Everywhere in the world the role of the newspaper is indisputable."

The participants also had the opportunity to interact exclusively with Professor Amartya Sen following the awarding of the certificates where one vibrant novice journalist said, "When one person has a vision it is yet a dream, but when everyone sees it, it becomes a new reality."

The first module of the training programme, titled the Salma Sobhan Fellowship in Journalism for Women was designed by the BRAC Training Division in consultation with Pratham Alo, Holiday and Dhaka University, Department of Mass Communications and Journalism. It combined the sensitization of various issues (including gender, development etc.) in the Bangladeshi context with practical journalistic treatment of those issues. The first half of the course was conducted by the BRAC Training Division and the daily Pratham Alo provided resource persons for training in journalistic treatment of issues. Resource persons for the training include Mr. Faruq A. Choudhury, Advisor, BRAC, Mr. Shahidul Alam, Managing Director, DRIK, Mr. Tajul Islam, Director, Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB), Mr. Matiur Rahman, Editor, Pratham Alo, Mr. Minhaz Uddin Anwar, Communications Coordinator, BRAC, Dr. Nasima Akter, Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC, Dr. Atiur Rahman, Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), Dr. Mostafizur Rahman, Research Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Dr. Abdul Barakat, Research Director, HDRC, Ms. Sheepa Hafiza, BRAC, Dr. Uttam Kumar Deb, Dr. Imran Matin, Director, RED, BRAC, and Ms. Sultana Kamal, Ayn o Shalish Kendra (ASK).

Fazle Hasan Abed, Founder and Chairperson of BRAC, who conceptualized this fellowship

programme, initiated the Salma Sobhan Fellowship in Journalism for Women in the name of the late Barrister Salma Sobhan in conjunction with Pratichi Trust, Bangladesh, established by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, to promote and support women in building a career in Journalism. The programme is affiliated with the daily Pratham Alo who, in addition to providing consultation and resource persons regarding the practical journalistic aspect of the training, will also support the participants in the post-training period. The 32 participants were chosen through a rigorous selection process from a pool of 64 applicants from all 64 districts of Bangladesh. Following the initial training phase, selected participants demonstrating satisfactory performance will receive a stipend to continue on in the field of journalism through critical observation and penmanship and daily Pratham Alo will serve as a medium to channel the work of the nascent, future journalists.

See also: Amartya Sen, Salma Sobhan Memorial Lecture: [Agency, Inequality and Human Rights](#)

P.S.

* From WLUML website.