

Obituary: Ayesha Khanam, veteran woman leader in Bangladesh

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Ayesha Khanam, President of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, an active organizer of all the progressive movements including the student movement of 1962, the mass uprising of 1971, the great liberation war, has passed away. She was 74 years old at the time of her death.



This woman leader died at BRB Hospital in the capital today (January 2) morning. She had been suffering from lung cancer for a long time.

Ayesha Khanam, the true guardian of the women's movement in Bangladesh, was devoted to the rights of disenfranchised women at the end of her student life. Her contribution to the establishment of women's rights will be remembered.

Ayesha Khanam was born on 18 October 1947 in the village of Gabragati in Netrokona. Her father's name is Golam Ali Khan and mother's name is Jamatunnesa Khanam.

She entered politics in 1962 by joining the student movement demanding the abolition of the Hamudur Rahman Education Commission during the Pakistan period.

However, she has been actively involved in the student movement since 1966. As a result, she was at the forefront of all the movements and struggles that took place on the path of the War of Independence, including the mass uprisings of 1969, the elections of 1970 and the non-cooperation movement of 1971.

While a student of Dhaka University, she was the Vice-President of the central committee of the Bangladesh Students Union. Besides, she was the General Secretary and Vice-President of Rokeya hall.

In 1971, as the vice-president of the student union, she came down to organize the students in Dhaka in support of the war of liberation. Ayesha Khanam was also in the picture of the procession of female students in Dhaka with dummy rifles.

She also spoke on behalf of the Liberation War from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra as a student representative.

After the independence of the country, Ayesha Khanam joined the movement for the establishment of non-communal, democratic state and women's rights.

She also worked to rehabilitate women who were tortured by the Pak army and their allies during the war of independence and to help the family members of the martyred freedom fighters.

In an interview, Ayesha Khanam said that she crossed the border to Agartala at the end of April. There she stayed in a refugee camp run by the Communist Party and the Camp Crafts Hostel for freedom fighters. The Crafts Hostel was a temporary accommodation for some of those who came to India to take part in the liberation war. She worked in the freedom fighters and refugee camps to keep the morale of the fighters intact, to give incentives and to awaken the consciousness of the liberation war among the refugees.

In an interview with Deutsche Velle Bangla, she said, "In Agartala, I took an initial training on medical services. After that I went to every camp in Agartala and committed myself to provide medical assistance to the war wounded freedom fighters. Besides, before sending the freedom fighters on various expeditions, a short orientation was arranged for them I used to give them orientation there."

In 1972, she became the Organizing Secretary and General Secretary of the Mahila Parishad. She has been the President of the organization since 2008.

Since 2002, Secretariat of the platform of Social Resistance Committee comprising of 68 organizations has been headed by Ayesha Khanam.

She has played an important role in the movement for political empowerment of women, prevention of violence against women, law reform movement, implementation of CEDOW and establishment of women's human rights.

She has been vocal from the beginning on the question of elections through direct voting in the reserved women's seats in the Parliament of Bangladesh.

She also had a strong position in the global women's movement. She attended the Vienna Conference on Human Rights in 1992 and the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

She has also participated in various sessions of the CEDOW Committee and the Commission on the Status of Women held in Geneva in 2011.

She also used to write letters on women's issues in the newspaper.

P.S.

• Translated by Badrul Alam.