

Humayun Kabir: Remembering a good man

Rehman Sobhan

A great and good man, a close friend and relation has passed away. Let us not mourn him, but celebrate his life -



Humayun Kabir was my first cousin. His mother, Sara, was my father's sister. However, our family circumstances were such that we did not know each other too well while we were coming of age or in our early working lives. Strangely enough, I came to know more of Humayun's father, Syed Gholam Kabir, after my return from Cambridge in 1957. Kabir phupa was a civil servant of great competence and integrity who had attained considerable expertise in agriculture where he had served as secretary, agriculture in the East Pakistan government, and later on as a member of the National Commission on Agriculture set up in 1959.

I used to drop in on him at his house at Eskaton Gardens to pick his brains on agricultural issues. At that time, Humayun was working in the tea gardens so I hardly met him. I saw a bit more of Humayun the years just before 1971 when he moved to his new home in Banani after he took over as the plant manager of Pfizer in East Pakistan. However, even at this stage, I did not see much of him. In the immediate post-liberation period, when I was a Member of the Planning Commission and he was the Managing Director of Pfizer, Bangladesh, we saw little of each other.

It was only in 1979, on my return to Dhaka, after spending a few years at Oxford, that I really came to know Humayun. He and his wife Sajida, known to all as Nanni, were then living in their new home on New Bailey Road, next door to Kamal Hossain. For reasons which I cannot recollect, I took to dropping in at his residence, usually without notice, on my way home from BIDS, then located at Adamjee Court, Motijheel, just to chat with him.

Around that time, Humayun had been elected the president of the MCCI while my own views on the public and

private sector were viewed with some trepidation by the business community. This meant that, initially, we had much to argue about. Humayun was no hard-core believer in the virtues of capitalism but he was even less enthusiastic about the public sector, so we could engage in lively but amicable disputation.

When my 600-page book *Public Enterprise in an Intermediate Regime*, co-authored with Muzaffar Ahmad, was published, I passed it on to him more as a courtesy than with any expectation that he would have the time to read this door-stopper of a volume. Much to my surprise, he called me up after a couple of weeks to inform me that he had carefully read the whole book and wished to discuss it with me. I was quite overwhelmed since I expected few people to read through the volume, except those who actually reviewed it, since the size and unappealing publication format were sufficient to discourage any prospective reader.

I was more than overwhelmed when Humayun told me that it was one of the best books he had read related to economics and politics. Even though he disagreed with aspects of the argument, he had learnt much from the volume which discussed the political economy underlying the post-liberation nationalisation policies and their operational outcome.

Muzaffer and I had invested much time and effort on this volume, which drew on both first-hand experience and intensive research, so it was gratifying to have someone read such a book carefully enough to sustain two or three protracted evenings of intensive discussion. I do not recollect anyone else having studied this work with such care, nor did I have an occasion to engage in such enriching discussions on it.

After that experience, I found Humayun to be a ready audience for my writings, where he again read my next work on foreign aid, *Crisis of External Dependence*, with similar care. I thus took to passing on to him papers and the occasional books written by me, which he invariably read. He also read my columns in *The Daily Star* with great interest and called me up when one of my writings particularly provoked him.

I have, thus, lost one of my most avid readers, in a day and age where few people read any serious work, though they may be happy to pontificate about subjects based on only the most casual knowledge. Humayun remained a voracious reader of books on a variety of subjects and would insist on discussing a particular work if it excited him,

which made my visits to him all the more enjoyable, since it is rare in Dhaka to find readers with any enthusiasm for academic discussion, least of all in their living room.

I dwell on my intellectual relations with Humayun to provide some insight into the kind of person he was. To read books of a more academic persuasion requires not just an enquiring mind, but also the willingness to invest time in such an enterprise, an increasingly scarce commodity in this electronic age. After a hard day's work, most Bangladeshis of Humayun's background would spend time attending cocktail parties and other such forms of socialisation.

Humayun abhorred such social engagements and was rarely to be seen on the social merry-go-round. His idea of socialising was to play a round of golf at the Kurmitola Golf Club, which kept him in better shape than I have managed to attain. The deterioration in his health over the last decade of his life was, thus, all the more incomprehensible and painful to witness.

Outside of his golfing excursions, Humayun was the quintessential family man who preferred to spend most of his leisure time at home with his immediate and extended family. Those outside the family who wished to meet him needed to drop in at his home where he was usually available, with time to chat with you. You were as likely to run into younger members of his family who enjoyed the company of their nana and dada.

In those days, when traffic in Dhaka was so much more manageable, such casual socialising was possible. Nowadays, it may take as much time to get from Gulshan to Bailey Road during a weekday evening as it takes to fly from Dhaka to Bangkok. My encounters with Humayun progressively declined once BIDS moved from Motijheel to Agargaon so that visits to Bailey road became a more time-consuming affair and traffic became more forbidding. Our encounters were, then, limited to occasions when I was having a meal with Kamal and Hameeda where I usually came in an hour earlier to spend time with Humayun.

My engagement with Humayun over the years established that he was not just a person of exceptional capability as a business entrepreneur, but that he was willing to reflect on the general human condition outside his own working world. He was highly principled and held strong views on particular issues, but he was willing to discuss alternative view-points with some detachment. He had a genuinely sceptical mind, which enabled him to dissect ideas, but

where the argument went over his head he was not embarrassed to say so and to seek clarification from you. He shared his disagreements with me in a relaxed frame of mind, lacing his scepticism with a laconic sense of humour, so you found it difficult to enter into any fierce disputation even when your positions were sharply contradictory.

My encounters with Humayun served as one of the inspirations to me in setting up the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) at the end of 1993. That was a time when public debate was becoming increasingly confrontational, and few fora existed for serious academic discussion. My idea was to create a space where people of varying opinions and political positions could sit together to discuss the issues of the day dispassionately yet constructively, in the way that I had spent so many evenings in conversation with Humayun.

Sadly, after 20 years of CPD dialogues, I have learnt that the Humayun Kabirs of the world are a vanishing species. While there may be many from various persuasions who are happy to engage in constructive dialogue, their voices are being drowned out by the mindless and one-sided disputations which are widening the fissures across our society.

When CPD was eventually established, I invited Humayun bhai to become one of its founding trustees where he served as a member till he chose to leave the world. He regularly attended our meetings, sat in on some of our dialogues, and offered constructive advice throughout his tenure with us. In the last years of his life, as his health deteriorated, he became increasingly home-bound so we saw less of him.

Yet, on the occasion when CPD was celebrating my 80th birthday in March this year, with a dinner at Flambé Restaurant, Gulshan, he turned up on a wheelchair to share this occasion with me, which deeply touched me. As it transpired, that was the last time I could speak with him.

I have spoken of my personal relations with Humayun, but wish to share some further thoughts on his ultimate claim to immortality through the establishment of Sajida Foundation. Humayun had been one of Pfizer's most successful CEOs in their global business empire. When Pfizer decided to wind up their operations in Bangladesh, they had no hesitation in handing over their stake in their local enterprise to Humayun, which was reconstituted by him into a Bangladeshi company, Renata Limited.

Any person with Humayun's track record of managerial

excellence could have used this inheritance from Pfizer to transform himself into a multi-millionaire. Humayun, instead, took the unique step of vesting the majority share in the equity offered to him by Pfizer, with Sajida Foundation, a specially designed NGO committed to improving the conditions of the lives of the more deprived segments of the population.

As a result, the Sajida Foundation, not Humayun and his family, remain the majority shareholders in the reconstituted company, Renata. The residual stake is held by share-holders, where Renata is listed on the stock exchange with a capitalisation worth Tk6,400cr (\$800m). Renata has, since its inception as a Bangladeshi enterprise, emerged as the fourth largest pharmaceutical company in Bangladesh, with a turnover of \$60m, which grows by the year. When Humayun stepped down as CEO, his successor, Dr Sarwar Ali, maintained its growth trajectory.

This upward trend had been sustained by Humayun's son, Kaiser, who is today the CEO, and has taken Renata to new heights, not just at home, but as an exporter abroad.

What is more remarkable is that, as a majority owner of a highly successful company such as Renata, Humayun and his heirs could have lived the lavish lives we now witness being lived by the nouveau riche of Bangladesh. But the Kabir family continues to maintain the middle-class life style established by Humayun and Nanni in their modest Bailey Road home.

This lifestyle has also been maintained by Kaiser and his sisters, Fiza and Farisa -- the youngest of them a highly promising barrister -- where they, along with their parents, live in four modest apartments located in the same building in Banani.

Humayun was a deeply religious person but never flaunted his faith. Sajida Foundation served as a manifestation of his belief in the true meaning of his faith that all wealth is but a trust, which should be invested in doing good for the less privileged.

Humayun was no enemy of capitalism or a believer in progressive ideologies, but he did believe that he should contribute what he could to constructing a more just world, not just by writing about it but actually doing what was in his power to do. Others such as Professor Yunus and Sir Fazle Hasan Abed have also engaged themselves with such endeavours, to serve the deprived, and have elevated their organisations into globally-recognised institutions.

But all such endeavours have initially raised funds from external sources to initiate their multi-faceted programs, though many of these entities have, over the years, become self-financing. Few, if any, such enterprises have invested their private wealth in such projects, and none that I know of, even Bill Gates or Warren Buffett, have invested their entire holdings in their income-generating corporations, and into their charitable foundations.

In spite of having established the world's largest charitable foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates remain at the top of Forbes's global list of wealthy families. In contrast, the Kabir family would not be listed in the first 1,000 among Bangladesh's fast-growing class of wealthy people. Need I say more to put Humayun Kabir's contribution to serve the underprivileged in its wider perspective?

I will not say much about the work of the Sajida Foundation, which includes initiatives in education, health, and micro-credit. One of their most innovative and lasting contributions has been their program of health insurance for the poor backed by dedicated hospitals offering quality healthcare for the insured. The foundation, which was dedicated to Humayun's beloved wife Sajida, who had herself spent her own life working with the intellectually-disabled, was initially managed by her with great competence. It is now led by their daughter Zahida Fizza Kabir with professionalism and dedication, who has elevated the foundation into a major social organisation.

Humayun and Nanni were a beautiful and unique couple who provided as close a model of marital bliss as we are likely to find anywhere.

Humayun leaves uncounted numbers of people to mourn him, not just from his extended family and wide circle of friends, but those thousands who have been given opportunities to live better lives through the Sajida Foundation and the many more who will continue to benefit from Humayun's legacy.

It is truly a fortunate and good man who can be remembered, long after he has gone, by his deeds, and not just his words.