

Mrs. Anowara Jahan

Age: 67

Interview date: 04 \_ Jul \_ 06

Interviewed by: Jamil Iqbal and Ansar Ahmed Ullah

Mrs. Jahan is one of the founding members of Bangladesh Women’s Association. She personally handed in letters to different MPs in the House of Commons for support of the War of Liberation. She was closely linked to Michael Barnes (MP) and John Stonehouse (MP). She wrote letters on behalf of the BWA to different world leaders and attended the Labour and Conservative annual party conferences raising awareness among political leaders about the genocide in Bangladesh.

I came here in (the) UK to study in the London School of Economics in the year 1967, I had three children then. I was not aware that, bringing children with me to the UK will create problem in my study. So my study was interrupted and I was unable to continue my study. I continued my study later but my primary educational objective in UK was not completed. My husband was already in the UK, he came to study here in 1962, but during the war between India and Pakistan the currency got devalued and he was also bound to work.

I knew then about the Agartala Conspiracy Case. I had some friends like Taufiq Imam, Asad-Uz-Zaman and so on. We were keeping up-to-date information and in some point I wanted to go back to Bangladesh also. My father-in-law advised us to observe the situation and then take the decision. We were observing and the war began and we were unable to go back.

Mrs Jebunnessa Baksh was my classmate, she was a student with me in the later part of my student life. She asked me to attend a programme. I was a civil servant and I had difficulty getting time off from work. So when I went to the meeting, it was already over, so I missed the meeting on the first day. Then Bangladesh Women’s Associations in Great Britain (BWA) was formed, that was participated by Lulu Bilkis Banu, Jebunnessa Baksh, Ferdaus Rahman, Munni Rahman, Shefali Huq, Khaleda Uddin and some of the younger women. We decided that, we will have a demonstration on 2nd April 1971. It was attended by 300 women. I was never certain that I could play a crucial role in these programmes, because I had three children and I was a full time worker. My husband supported me but he was not into politics. Later on I got very much involved with the BWA. Sofia Rahman was the secretary of the organisation for three months, however, she could not continue because of family reasons I was then made the secretary. Jebunnessa Baksh was the chair. We got involved in all the activities. We knew we could not physically participate in the war nor were we in a position to get name and fame by doing something. We participated in the movement for our mental satisfaction. May be some people had their interests in it.

We were writing letters to the leaders of the nations of the world, and to their wives as well. We also personally handed over letters to the leaders of the UK, some accepted us and some did not. We used to keep contacts with the different organisation in the UK. I was a bit of an out going type of person, so I used to go to those meetings. We had some hand written documents and I used to keep connection with those as well. Sometimes we use to collect money singing and arranging different types of programmes. We had arranged a huge mela at that time, and we raised £700 in a day. Today £700 is nothing but in those days it was a huge collection. For example, you can’t get on a bus without 70 penny now, but it would take 4 penny then.

One of our women went on hunger strike in front of the Pakistan High Commission here. We used to keep liaison with the student organisation formed then, people like Shamsuddin Manik, Bulbul and Mosharaff were involved with the organisation. I think it was called Bangladesh Chattro Shanga. Lulu Bilkis Banu played a very big role when Justice Abu Sayeed Choudhury came here, people, especially men, were debating who would chair the session, some one proposed her name and all agreed. I could not attend that session because I had to take care of my children that day. So a dispute was solved by her presence. Until then she was not involved with politics here because she had her two daughter(s) was in Bangladesh then. People were afraid to get involved in liberation movement here in the UK when they had family members in East Pakistan.

Lulu Bilkis Banu was with us all the time and she had to be credited for her works. Jebunnessa Baksh was also with us and we all were dedicated to the independence movement. Doctors Association used to contribute £50 every week, but we were not that rich and knowledgeable. We were travelling in London with our own expenses. It is a kind of contribution as well. We had 300 members, we used to write letters to them every month, it used to cost us £4 and we had to pay for it from our pocket. In the later stages we were getting some grants and funds but we were not spending them for these kinds of purposes. I have not given any money directly but I was bearing the everyday expenses.

We thought the war would last for ever, but it did not. We used to go to the House of Commons and used to see the Members of Parliament (MPs). We were asking them to support Bangladesh. We used to tell them the stories on the war and atrocities that was going on. We asked them to recognise Bangladesh and we also attended the annual conference of parties like the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. Most of them listened to us with interest and helped us a lot. I worked with Michael Barnes, John Stonehouse and with some one else, I can’t remember his name now. We used to have meetings every week, and we used to attend the meetings after our regular jobs.

I had no reason to take part in these activities, because I was not expecting anything from all these and we were not directly affected by the war. But we were anxious of our friends, family and for the love of our homeland.

We are thinking of publishing a book from the Bangladesh Woman Association in Great Britain, were we will write all the stories. We carried on event after the war ended, because we thought, we need to fight and take arms in our hands to get the women in the front, so we didn’t stopped our work even after the war ended.

Q: Do you remember any memorable event in the 71?

It is all memorable, but I have two memorable events; one was, I had three young children of 6, 9 and 10 years. When I went out for any programme, I used to take my two younger ones along with me and sometimes I used take elder one with me. Usually he used to stay at home with his father.

Once I went to Bradford for some programme, my husband and my youngest son went to see me off in the station. My son took the advantage of the situation and made me buy a Ben Sherman shirt for him. It was very late when I reached home after the meeting. My husband was asleep and all the doors and windows were shut and I was thinking how to get inside the house. I suddenly found my youngest son waiting beside the window for me, he was too little to open the door but he was still waiting for me. He was 5 and half or 6 years old then.

Q: Do you used to take part in the demonstrations?

Yes, the first demonstration we organised was on 3rd April 71. We took 300 women to the Hyde Park corner and we met many people on the way. That was our biggest gathering on our own. We were also part a big demonstration where we took our children with us. This was organised by group of which Princess Anne was the trustee. Our message was, children like them were being killed by the Pakistani army, and children like them in East Pakistan are getting homeless and orphan.

Our view was, we can’t actively take part in the war, but if we can motivate people’s awareness about the war it will create huge pressure on the Pakistani authority. We went to France for a demonstration. I took part in that programme. We went there to demand suspension of aid to Pakistan.

Q: How did you get information about the war?

We used to get letters from India, as the postal service was suspended in the later part of the war. Our relatives used to send us letters posted across the border of Bangladesh, our home was near the border. Our younger relatives used to cross the border and post the letters to us.

The Bengalis from Pakistan used to write letters to us and request us to redirect them to their relatives in East Pakistan. Everyday we used to receive 7 to 10 letters. The expenses of sending these letters were borne by us. It was a big expense for us. We used to send mainly the information to them. One of my friend’s grandsons was killed by Pakistani fire while he was trying to cross the border. BBC some times used to provide us with news. BBC used to broadcast news when something big use to happen. It wasn’t effective in the sense of broadcasting it regularly about the problems in East Pakistan.

Q: How was your feeling, when the country was liberated?

During the movement we were actively doing things for the cause and when we got the first message about the independence, it seemed everything suddenly stopped around us. We were in a jubilant mood. After work in the evening we use to spend time with friends and relatives. In the weekend people organised late night occasions. When the country got independence, I used to work in the post office and my husband was in a full government job then. After Bhutto boycotted the Commonwealth, my husband got a letter form the British Government, they mentioned (1) you can leave the job as a Pakistani (2) you can continue your job as a Bangladeshi or (3) you can continue as a British citizen. It was a critical situation, we went to the Bangladesh mission for the Bangladeshi nationality, they showed us documents that, in 16th December 1971, people who were living in East Pakistan will be the citizen of Bangladesh. So my husband decided to get British citizenship or otherwise he had to quit his job. And I personally didn’t want to get any other citizenship then the Bangladeshi citizenship. So I retained my Bangladesh identity. After one long year of discussion I took the British citizenship. I regret very much that we need passport to go to our home. We need to apply to the authority and they provide us with ‘no visa required’ seal. Being British citizen we don’t need visa to go to many European and other countries and also America, but we need to get the certificate that we don’t need to have the visa for Bangladesh, and I consider it as the visa itself.

Q: Please tell us more about the women demonstration, you arranged in 1971?

Jebunnessa Baksh had her residence at Ledbury Road. She invited us to meet at her home. I was absent the first day. We then decided over telephone conversion that we will bring out a procession. The information spread to all of us like fire. Everyone spread the message to others he or she knew. We found that about 300 women gathered along with some of men and children, they helped us a lot. Monwar Uddin wrote the first constitution for the association, though we edited it later.

Our procession started from Charing Cross Station near the river embankment and ended at Hyde Park corner. We had a meeting at Hyde Park corner. MP Michael Barnes, John Stonehouse and one junior minister Alex Lyon were present. They all helped us generously. The next day we handed over a memorandum to the authority. Ferdous Rahman and his husband Habibur Rahman were actively involved with us. Habibur Rahman was working in the Pakistan High Commission and he was sacked from his job.

Q: What was your reaction when you first visited Bangladesh as an independent country?

I went to Bangladesh in 1979, eight years after independence. I had three children and we were in a dilemma-- should we go back home for good or stay in the UK. We were also short of money and thought that going back home might affect the children’s education. I was determined that I will go back, but my husband was willing to stay in this country. My father-in-law told us to consider many things and observe the situation and then to take the decision. I went to Bangladesh after 13 long years and I took only my daughter with me. I could not believe that I was in Bangladesh when the aeroplane landed. I couldn’t realise a huge change in the country, but the amazing thing was all the little boys and girls knew the slogan, “Joi Bangla”, our children also knew the slogan. Our children also love Bangladesh.

Q: What did you do to raise money for the cause?

We used to sell calendar and neck tie with the map of Bangladesh on it to raise money. In big gatherings and meetings the younger ones use to sell the items.

Q: How is your relation with Bangladesh now?

I usually go to Bangladesh every year now, as my children have grown up and they are also married now. I have a house in Dhaka, and my sisters have their houses in Shirajgonj. I am a college mate of Khurshid Jahan Huq, who was a minister. I wanted to meet her last time but for some reasons, I failed to meet her.

Q: Were you involved in any politics, before 71?

I was not involved in any politics before or after the war. General women had no chance of getting involved in politics.

Q: How was your feeling towards the Pakistani people before the struggle began?

I had very bad relationship with them. We had a conference in the West Pakistan before the war, when I was working in EPSIC (East Pakistan Small Industries Corporation). I was invited to give a lecture. I still remember, I was there in West Pakistan for 18 days. As soon as I started to speak, I started speaking in English, some of the people asked me to speak in Urdu, but I got angry with them and started to speak in Bengali.

Another thing was, when I was flying to the UK, they didn’t allow me to carry more than £ 5.00. I boarded on the PIA (Pakistan International Airlines), with my children. They served food for only one child, when I asked them to serve all my children, they told me, what they are doing is right. The Pakistanis treated us badly right from the very beginning.

Another example of the oppression was, value of gold was 120 Taka per bori in East Pakistan and 90 Taka per bori in West Pakistan, although we were part of one country. Paper was also highly priced in East Pakistan. Thus we understood the process of subjugating us economically. Saris from Rajshahi were cheaper in West Pakistan, to which I could not understand why? The shop owners (Urdu speaking Biharis) in Mirpur were unwilling to answer us when we were talking in Bangla.

One girl was working under me, and I had to talk to her in Urdu. She used to speak in Urdu, and I used to talk in English.

I had a driver at EPSIC named Hafiz Ali. He used to look down on me and used to ignore my presence because he was from West Pakistan. Even children from West Pakistan origin were taught that they are the owner of Pakistan as Mohammed Ali Jinnah established Pakistan.

Q: What do you have to say to the young generation of Bengalis here in UK, about 1971?

They don’t think Bangladesh as their homeland. They don’t have the (same) feeling. They sometimes go to Bangladesh and feel well. My younger son love Bangladesh very much, and my daughter say, “it’s alright for holiday but UK is our country”.

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