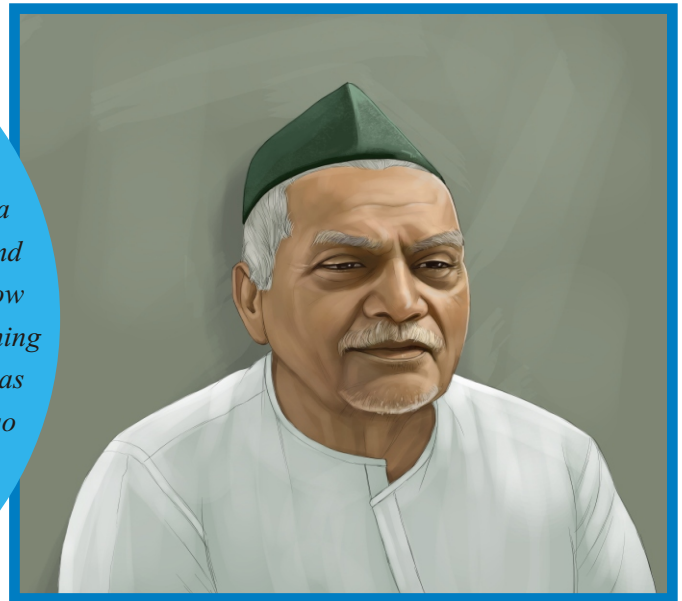


BREAKING THE MARGINS

THE TALES OF THE UNSUNG HEROES

*88 years old **Md Khalil Saheb** lives in the labyrinthine street of Mechhua in Kolkata. He is a fruit seller in the wholesale market of Mechhua and his purpose is to support the needy so that they grow and prosper. Ever helpful, he has established coaching institutes, schools and hospitals for the poor and has provided financial support for their education, also helping them purchase land in rural areas.*



Md Khalil: The Octogenarian Community Leader

Context :

As work on this compendium began and I was assigned to write a profile of Kolkata based social worker Haji Muhammad Khalil, I searched on Google combinations of his name with social worker, Kolkata and the Guidance Guild in English. Except one Facebook post of his presence at a function in 2014 and at the release of a comprehensive study on the socio-economic conditions of Muslims in the state in 2016, 'Living Realities of Muslims in Bengal' that his Guidance Guild partly sponsored, there was hardly any trace of this octogenarian community leader from Kolkata.

Mainstream media, both English and Bengali, may not even be aware of 88-years old Md Khalil Sahib who lives in a small flat on the first floor of an old building in a labyrinth of streets in central Kolkata's Mechhua area.

In an age and time when people post on social media every detail or write patronising posts for helping even one person in any small way, Khalil Sahib largely lives in oblivion despite touching so many lives in different ways.

But talk to any senior community leader from the city, whether Bengali Muslims or the Urdu speaking populace of Kolkata, they all have fond memories to share of different kinds of monetary and other logistical support that he extended to them.

The Urdu speaking 'social workers' of Kolkata are often accused of ignoring the plight of Bengali Muslims. Although his mother tongue is Urdu and he has lived all his life in the central part of the city in the vicinity of the famous Nakhoda Masjid, Khalil Sahib transcended linguistic barriers to reach out to deprived members of the Muslim communities, or anyone who came to him for help.

Generosity and Kindness:

Filmmaker Mujibar Rahman has made a documentary on him titled *Md Khalil: A Common Man*. Khademul Islam, Secretary of Noor-Model School in North Bengal, acknowledged in the film that when he was setting up the institution, many people were not ready to trust him. At that time, Khalil Sahib donated rupees 2 lakhs to him. Around 1200 students study in that school now.

Similarly, he also extended help to Al-Ameen Mission in its initial days and was even a trustee member for a long time. He also funded the purchase of one bigha land for Al-Ameen Mission main campus where a mosque is now being built. On the request of the founder Tahiria Hospital in North 24 Parganas, Abdus Samad Majhari, he visited it and made generous contributions for its development. According to Maulana Majhari, when the trust offered him the post of Chairmanship for his generosity, he quietly refused it.

From starting coaching institutes for poor community children to sponsoring their fees, or extending financial support in helping to buy lands in rural parts to set up schools or hospital, Khalil Sahib was forever willing to help anyone who reached his doorstep.

He has been part of founding members of several initiatives in the last six decades, and has served in different capacities in various organizations. He set up the Guidance Guild to run coaching for poor and underprivileged children. He also supported the publication of several magazines and papers in its initial days. Khalil Sahib has been serving as the Secretary of the Md Ali Library in central Kolkata for 52 years now. Currently he is also the honorary president of Association SNAP.

Due to lack of education and awareness and outward religiosity, many Muslims in India would be happy to provide monetary support for *Jalsa* and *Mushaira*, or to organise some relief in situations of disaster, but they do not really appear enthusiastic in the long term for impactful investments in research or study.

Sabir Ahamed of Association SNAP says, 'When we started working on the completion of data for publishing a report on Muslims of Bengal, we reached several rich Muslims in Bengal for possible help.'

We face very hostile situations as many people saw us as fraud trying to con money from them despite our credentials. Khalil Sahib was one of the rare exceptions who not only understood its importance and generously sponsored the project, but who also went out of his way to convince several others to help us explaining to them patiently its significance.'

Family:

Khalil Sahib's ancestors were one of the *Mansabdars* in the Mughal army from Agra. He says that the area near the Agra Fort and where the railway station now stands once belonged to their ancestors. Like the Mughals, their family too lost their fortunes after the Revolt of 1857.

Their family later turned to trading in carpentry and wooden items, and as the business expanded, many members of the family moved to Calcutta and also to Dhaka from Agra. Many of his extended family members still live in Agra.

While his father late Md. Yaqoob belonged to a rich trading family of Sheikhs, his mother Bano Bibi came from the family of *Naqsha Navishi* (architects of those times), who were descendants of families associated with the construction of the Taj Mahal and other Mughal architecture of the time.

His maternal uncles were highly educated, but all of them migrated to Pakistan during Partition. His grandfather came to Calcutta in 1902 and as he set up his business gradually, he first called his elder son (Khalil Sahib's uncle), and then his second son Md. Yaqoob in 1932.

Khalil Sahib was born on 12 August 1940, but his date of birth in certificates and on record is 7 September 1943, as is common for many Indians (who for different reasons reduce age in school at the time of admission).

He studied in the Presidency Muslim High School at Zakaria Street from Class 1 to 10, and then went to Umesh Chandra College under Calcutta University for I.Com. and B.Com., which he 'somehow completed'.

Remembering the Past:

A naughty smile appears on his face when he talks fondly about his friends, all of whom he remembers by name. 'I had so many friends that my family would be worried for me,' he says, adding that those included all kinds of people, from different classes, many of them 'all rounders', a metaphor for delinquents and hooligans. 'Childhood is filled with innocence, you do not always realise what you are doing', he says.

'I never connected with Agra and rarely visited there and belong to this city alone,' he says, adding, 'All my fond memories, my immediate family as well as all my friends were from Calcutta alone.'

As a young boy, Khalil Sahib loved watching films, and claims to have seen almost all of them when they were released, some multiple times. 'I had seen at least 400 films before I even passed class 10,' He laughs.

He was punished for his behaviour both by his father and teachers, who would either make him stand on the bench or send him outside the class. Once his father beat him but also made him realise the gravity of stealing money and lying when he took some money from his elder sister's wallet to watch a film.

Although he continued watching films, he says, he developed a kind of aversion for people who would lie or cheat, a trait that has stayed with him.

Even at this age, his memory is very sharp as he fondly remembers many small incidences of his life. 'I was very naughty and defiant as a child, and hence did not always have good relations with my family,' he admits.

He in fact seems to have had complicated relations with his father and immediate family members. He has almost isolated himself from his relatives. 'I tried to help everyone in whatever ways I could after the death of my father,' he says. Always forgiving, Khalil Sahib has no qualm or complaints from life.

A Man of Integrity:

He was rebellious and loved to live on his own, he says, and so he started his own independent business and still runs a fruit shop in the wholesale market of Mechhua. As tensions began in East Pakistan, his father sent him to wind up the business in Dhaka at the end of 1969 where he was trapped by circumstances for over two years and returned only in 1972. Owing to his vivid memories, Khalil Sahib is in fact a storehouse of information on 1946 riots when he narrates how his father and other relatives helped guard the locality, Partition, the rapidly changing politics of 1950s and 1960s when some of his friends were even arrested for organising protests against the government. He remembers how during the 1964 riots, locals hurdled together and for days cooked Khichdi and ate together to survive. Those who know the otherwise deeply religious Khalil Sahib consider him, 'The man with simple living and high thinking, the kind of man who is becoming even more difficult these days to find.' Most of the current batch of muslim leaders, social workers and activists of the city are younger by few decades, and they take inspiration from him. Khalil Sahib did not marry and hence whatever he earned he has spent for the Welfare of the people.

'Breaking the Margin: Tales of the Unsung Heroes', an initiative of West Bengal Minorities' Development and Finance Corporation(WBMDFC) , presents examples of inspirations, hopes, and accomplishments. We are pleased to present the the stories of individuals drawn from the minority communities, who fought all kinds of odds and broke the barriers of stereotype. They triumphed over deeply entrenched poverty to set the examples for emulations. The first aim of the series is to capture the journey of different individuals, what were the enabler and triggering points that moved these heroes to embark upon the path travelled by a few people. The second principle guiding our this effort is to tell the stories of these unsung heroes to motivate others, especially those who come from similar backgrounds. One of the common threads running across every profile is the story of grit and determination.

Sustain the stories: Nominate your own unsung hero

There are many such stories of unsung heroes that remain unheard, this is the first attempt of this kind, we urge people to share such stories for another edition of this series. Your little effort can enlighten a large audience of an extraordinary achievers, and encourage a thousand of aspirants to emulate the stories who have cross the hurdles.

For Details visit <http://www.wbmdfc.org/icons>

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