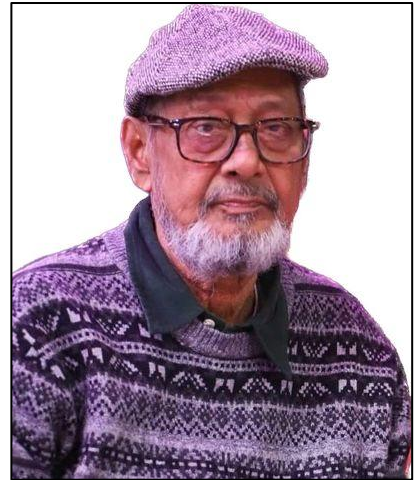


## My Baba, My Personal Hero

“Forgive me for any hurt I may have caused you” — these were the last words my father ever spoke to me. There was nothing unusual about it; this was how we always parted ways when months separated our next meeting. I responded with the same words, “Forgive me for any mistakes I have made.” But then he said something that deeply upset me, in a voice lower than usual: “I may not see you again.” I immediately lost my composure and replied, “Oh come on, don’t be so dramatic! I’ll be back in two months to see you.” Without waiting for a response, I walked out to the parking lot, headed for my ride to Dhaka airport. It was February 14, 2024. My father passed away on February 27, 2024, after being unconscious since February 21, following a brief episode of aches and pains we didn’t take seriously.



I’ve replayed the events of that day, and the next 13 days, in my mind countless times. I can recount them minute by minute, hour by hour: every diagnostic test, every conversation with family, doctors, and friends, the alert hours during flights back and forth, every agonizing breath I took. But this story is not about that. This is a celebration of my father, Muhammad Alfaz Uddin— a man both remarkably ordinary and extraordinarily exceptional at the same time. He was a hero of the 1971 Liberation War, a respected community elder, and a stylish old man who embraced life fully despite its many disappointments.

My father, Alfaz Uddin, always felt like a refugee. His family had lived through the upheavals of 1947, 1952, and 1971. Born in Murshidabad, West Bengal, he resettled with his family in Godagari, Rajshahi, after the traumatic partition of the Indian subcontinent. His father, Riaz Uddin Ahmed, was a prominent political figure in the Muslim League and often a target of rival groups. Baba survived several violent episodes during his childhood in British India. Later, Riaz Uddin Ahmed became an elected member of the 1970 Pakistan election as part of the East Pakistan Awami League and served in the Gono Porishod for newly independent Bangladesh until 1972. Alfaz Uddin, the third of six siblings, studied at Pabna Edward College and Jagannath University before becoming a science teacher at Godagari High School. He worked for the Pakistan Atomic

Energy Commission until the war began, and, like his father and older brother, joined Sector 7, Sub-sector 4, in the Liberation War. My parents married the following year in newly independent Bangladesh.

The excitement of a new nation couldn't erase the trauma experienced by both freedom fighters and civilians, nor did it offer many financial opportunities for ordinary people. After a few years at the Atomic Energy Commission in Dhaka, my father left for Qatar in search of better economic prospects. He worked there until retiring in 2000, the same year I began my own journey in the US.

In 1979, when I was three and my brother was four and a half, our memories of our father were shaped by the annual trips he made to Bangladesh before 2000 and after his retirement. In many ways, we only truly learned to live with him once we were adults. And that became our story: learning to live with him—an unpredictable, fun-loving, and gentle soul burdened by questions about his identity. He often said, "I don't know where I belong. I left my birthplace in India, lived for 28 years as a Pakistani, fought for Bangladesh, and worked in Qatar all my life. Why do I still feel like a refugee? I couldn't assimilate anywhere. I lost my birthplace." This sense of displacement stayed with him and would sometimes surface in heated arguments.

But this story is about the love and lessons I received from my father. One of my earliest memories is of him jumping off a rickshaw to push it over the railroad tracks we were crossing. The rickshaw puller protested, "Sir, you don't have to," but he wouldn't listen. He got down and helped. That image remains vivid in my mind. Throughout my own struggles, I've often imagined my father pushing me over my hurdles, and much of my work revolves around giving others a little nudge when they need it. This is my inheritance of love.

We continued learning to live with him as adults. Since 2018, I had nearly forced my parents to spend half of each year with me in the US. After a long pandemic-induced break, they were back with me again. In those few years, I discovered my father's love for Sandhya Mukherjee's songs. "Didi is the best," he would say. "As teenagers, we used to walk to the only store in the village that had a radio to listen to her." I also witnessed his passion for sports—football, cricket, gymnastics, athletics, and more. We bickered about everything. Unkindly, I often reminded him of my missing childhood memories, saying, "You were never there."

We traveled to Dhaka at the end of January, much to my father's dissatisfaction. He had wanted to travel earlier so he could vote in the already doomed election. "I want to go to the polling booth and cast my vote, no matter what," he insisted. But my brother and I didn't agree, knowing the election was a lost cause. He knew it too and reluctantly gave in. We arrived in Dhaka amidst unprecedented air pollution. Then came February 2024.

February had always been a special month in our household. Baba often returned from Qatar in February, and on the eve of Ekushey February, he would join my maternal uncle Abdul Baten in the midnight Provat Feri procession. The excitement and preparation were always palpable—I can still remember the anticipation of those nights. Another highlight of the month was the Boi Mela at Bangla Academy. An avid reader, Baba would gather enough books at the fair to last him the year, taking them back to Qatar. Even then, we would send him the special Eid and Puja editions that were published later in the year. Our home library still holds many of those collections. It has since grown, continuing a family tradition now in its third generation. February had always been my favorite month. I've embarked on many creative journeys during this time and even became a mother for the first time in February. I'm not sure how it suddenly became the month that shattered my heart. Did my father know? Was that why he rushed to return to Bangladesh from California in January? This time, he didn't make it to the book fair. He had been reading the books I brought back with me. The last one was a novel by Asif Nazrul titled \*Ami Abu Bokor Bolchi\*. "This isn't for everyone," he told me. I took it as an average read since Baba's standards for books were high. After I left him on February 14, he never picked up another book.

He was a proud war hero but couldn't talk about the war without being triggered by memories of the violence faced by the Biharis after victory. We avoided discussing it as much as possible. He never tolerated negative comments about war heroes, often saying, "It was sometimes a hair's breadth between killing or being killed. Even if you can't salute them, never dishonor them." Baba celebrated everything about Bangladesh—the games, the elections, even when they were rigged—and he protested the injustices, whether political violence or rising commodity prices. In our household, December 16, Victory Day, was always the most joyous celebration.

Now, my father has claimed February as his own. We took him to Godagari, Rajshahi, and laid him to rest near his beloved parents. There was a National Guard of Honor before his Janazah. For much of his life, he felt like a refugee, moving from place to place, but at last, his journey brought him home.

For the rest of my life, February will mark the month I lost a part of myself. These days, I'm often transported back to a scene I've heard described countless times: a three-year-old me clinging to my Baba's legs as he tried to reach the departure gate at the Old Airport in 1979. With tears in his eyes, he pried my fingers loose and walked out. On February 27, 2024, he once again defeated my stronger fingers and even stronger will to keep him from leaving, but this time, he left forever.

***May the Almighty grant my Baba the highest place in Jannat.***

- September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024