



My memories with Dr. Zafrullah Chowdhury.

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It was November 1976, just our final MBBS exam was over. We were hanging out with some friends in the green square of Dhaka Medical College. It was on a weekend suddenly someone came up and stood looking around in the corridor. It was Dr. Zafrullah Chowdhury. Me and my friend Akik both got startled and ran towards him.

He shouted: "What you guys are doing? Don't you have any classes?"

We answered docilely: We just finished our final professional exam. We got thrilled hearing him say, 'Great. Then come with me to Gonoshystho Kendro till your results are announced"

Sure, we will. Akik answered on our behalf. We were involved with a party named Agrogami' when we were at DMC. He was one time leader of that party. Because of that connection we worked in Bangladesh Hospital at Eskaton, Dhaka since 1972. He established this hospital to help wounded freedom fighters in India. Gonoshystho Kendro is the continuation of that hospital.

We took two days' time to mull it over. Two days later, We four including one female classmate landed at Savar Gonoshystho Kendro. We all four (Aqikul Alam, Nazneen Begum and Mominul Alam) were from K-29. By the time we reached there it was dark. So, we went to the dorm. The following early morning we found to our amazement a darwan (caretaker) knocking at our door. He mentioned it is the time to go the land for agriculture work. With some hesitation and annoyance, we walked toward the agricultural land. We found everybody was already working in the land. It was November and we were supposed to work in the marshy land.

During the wheeling and dealing and in great disbelief we noticed that everybody was busy working including Dr. Zafrullah Chowdhury was working there. Not only that, a tall Caucasian lady and another white gentleman was also working. The white lady was a Nurse practitioner from Australia and the white gentleman was from Norway or Denmark who was the president of European pharmacopeia. I need to mention that he was planning to establish the Gonoshaystho Pharmaceutical at that time. More surprise was waiting for us.... After the field work we went back to the dorm. After shower we went to cafeteria for breakfast.

With great disbelief we found that everybody was standing in a queue with a tin plate in hand and a couple of people were distributing breakfast through the kitchen window. We did the same. I found the darwan who knocked on the door in the morning was behind me. Also found

Dr. Chowdhury standing behind that darwan with the tin plate in his hand. When I looked back, he threw a gracious smile at me. At that time, in Bangladeshi sociocultural context, it was impossible for a peon or a darwan to be standing in the same line let alone standing in front of a director or his boss of the institution. Because of that inherent ritual it surprised us but formed huge respect for Zafrullah Chowdhury. We thought that we are in the right place where we can learn something and mold and build our character of humanity and generosity.

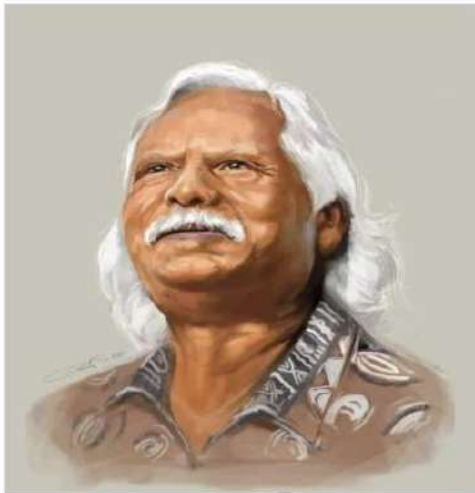
It was perchance the second week of our stay there. One morning when we were getting ready to go to the remote clinic in a mobile clinic van, we were asked to rush to Zafar bhai's office. We four went there and found a white journalist with his camera, tape recorder with a batch from BBC. Zafar bhai introduced the journalist team to us as BBC reporters who landed in Dhaka from UK the night before. The journalist was interviewing Zafar bhai and we witnessed the entire interview. At this time Gen. Ziaur Rahman was the chief martial law administrator. Later on we four were discussing among ourselves that Zafar bhai was such an important personality that BBC reporter rushed to him leaving president or prime minister aside.

This is the time when population growth was a huge challenge for newly born Bangladesh. Beside birth control pill both vasectomy and tubal ligation were very popular. So, he trained paramedics to do these two surgeries. One day we found our Gynae professor Muklesur Rahman there. He told us that he came to observe the surgery conducted by a paramedic as Lancet published an article on her with a full-page picture. So, we watched the surgery of that village girl who has not even completed her SSC exam. She did surgery in front of us with no hesitation. Prof. Muklesur Rahman sir was so surprised and told us that that girl didn't show any wobbliness performing surgery in front of a professor.

Every night after dinner Zafar bhai would sit with us and discuss his plan, different obstacles to make that plan successful. During that time Gen. Zia was forming Mukthijoddyasangshod. Zafar bhai was attending those meetings and was very vocal. Gen. Zia was impressed and asked him to join in his cabinet. We were very excited and coerced him to accept the position. We told him that this would give you the opportunity to fulfill his dream. He said that he already said no to Gen. Zia. I asked him why did you do that. He answered that the corrupt system of the health department would make him a failure and throw him into the Bay of Bengal (metaphorically speaking). We questioned then how you would materialize your dream then. His answer was that "when his followers like us and will be behind him, then it will happen".

He was the first person to start the Health insurance program in Bangladesh during 1974-1975. As far as I can remember it was Taka 20 taka per month per family. It all started in a remote village and we had four mobile clinics given by Australia. Each mobile clinic had four rooms. One is exam room, one pharmacy, one Lab and another for the physicians. Dr. Abul Quasem Chowdhury (DMC) was second person next to Zafar bhai. One- or two-year junior to him. Dr. Laila Begum from Rajshahi Medical, Dr. Kamal Ahmed from Mymensingh medical college and Dr. Morshed Chowdhury from Mymensingh medical college. (brother of Shahadat Chowdhury, editor of weekly Bichitra) were the pioneers of this of Gonoshystho Kendro.

He was a true patriot, a freedom fighter, an ideal man, a servant of the masses and a guardian of patriotic politicians. The nation will forever be indebted to this great man who was accustomed to living a very ordinary life. Zafrullah Bhai was one of the best and bravest son of Bangladesh, a friend of oppressed people, a selfless patriot, vocal against injustice, a humanitarian with a big heart. He was an excellent example of how a simple and honest man who used to live a very simple life can walk like a lion with his head held high and his spine upright strong like steel.



Zafrullah Chowdhury in early 1977 examining a woman patient at a mobile clinic run by Gonoshasthya Kendra. (Photo: Steve Jones.)



He was born at Raozan in Chattogram on Dec 27, 1941, Zafrullah passed intermediate (high school) from Dhaka College after matriculation from Nabakumar School in Bakshibazar. After doing his MBBS from Dhaka Medical College in 1964, he travelled to the UK to pursue higher studies. As the war started in 1971, Dr, Zafrullah along with Dr MA Mobin and some other Bangladeshis burnt their Pakistani passports at Hyde Park in London during a protest against Pakistan. Zafrullah and Mobin then collected Indian travel permits and boarded a plane to Delhi just a week before their final exams, abandoning their hope of getting the degree for which they studied for four years. Late Jahanara Imam, widely revered as 'Shaheed Janani' (Martyr's mother) who started the movement for war crimes trials in the 1990s, described in her autobiography 'Ekattorer Dinguli' how Zafrullah and Mobin tricked a Pakistani colonel in Damascus to evade arrest.

They reached the battlefield in Bangladesh via India. Zafrullah took guerrilla training at Melaghar in Agartala where he founded a field hospital to treat injured freedom fighters. Gonoshasthaya Kendra's founder and Trustee Zafrullah Chowdhury speaking to the media after visiting the victims of Narayanganj mosque AC blasts at the Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery in Dhaka on Sep 6, 2020. After independence, he built a health center in Dhaka's Eskaton and relocated it to Savar with an aim to make rural Bangladesh the center of development and other activities. Half of the workers of the center, named Gonoshasthaya Kendra, were women as part of the organization's efforts to ensure women's empowerment.

Dr Zafrullah became a member of the national committees on education and women in 1979. He played a role in making Bangladesh's National Drug Policy in 1982. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr Zafrullah helped Bangladesh tackle the situation. Gonoshasthaya Pharmaceuticals took an initiative to mass produce a coronavirus testing kit, but the attempt failed.

He won the Independence Award in 1977 and the Ramon Magsaysay Award, known as the Nobel award of Asia, in 1985. The Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation said it recognized his engineering of Bangladesh's new drug policy, eliminating unnecessary pharmaceuticals, and making comprehensive medical care more available to ordinary citizens. The University of California, Berkeley honored him with the International Health Hero award in 2002.

Dr Zafrullah, the winner of the highest civilian honor Independence Award, recovered from COVID-19 after he had taken convalescent plasma therapy and kidney dialysis at home but later moved to the Gonoshasthaya Nagar Hospital for more dialysis and oxygen support.

Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury, the founder of Gonoshasthaya Kendra, died at a hospital of the organization in Dhaka at the age of 82. He had been suffering from kidney complications for a long time. After catching COVID-19 in 2020, he developed liver problems. Doctors said he had also been suffering from malnutrition and septicemia, or blood poisoning by bacteria.

