THE CANDLE OF BANGLADESH:
The Life and Work of Shinjita Alam

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2008 Women PeaceMakers Program

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated and reflected on by the peacemaker during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the table of best practices if you are interested in peacebuilding methods and techniques, or go to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemakers' own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemakers' work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

Made possible through a generous grant from the Fred J. Hansen Foundation, the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights – as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories. Selected peacemakers join the IPJ for an eight-week residency.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. The peacemakers' stories are also documented on film by the IPJ's partner organization Sun & Moon Vision Productions. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women – those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation – must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.[1]

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER – SHINJITA ALAM

Photo Credit: Patricia Rogers

In one of the poorest countries in the world, Shinjita Alam has dedicated much of her life to highlighting the connection between poverty and conflict, especially regarding the treatment of women in the domestic sphere and its repercussions for development. While studying for a degree in social welfare from the University of Dhaka, Alam worked with impoverished women in the slums of the capital, counseling them and providing primary-level education. She then went on to work for the nongovernmental organization Families for Children, conducting home visits to 100 women marginalized from their communities because they were widowed or divorced. Alam raised their level of education and awareness of their rights as citizens, while also providing skills-building trainings for employment.

After working for several years in the agricultural and job creation programs for the Bangladesh office of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) – where she managed income-generating projects for women and mediated many domestic disputes within families – Alam initiated and oversaw their peace program, the first of its kind in Bangladesh. The program trained representatives from local organizations in traditional modes of conflict resolution and developed peace education curricula for use in schools across the country. Alam has also worked on behalf of the Garo people of northern Bangladesh, whose culture is distinct from the rest of the Bengali population. The largely Christian Garos often clash with Muslim Bengalis over land rights. With the Garo leadership, Alam formed a peace committee which could identify underlying causes of conflict and formulate how to resolve them. She also organized forums for interfaith dialogue between the Garo and Bengali, and opened lines of communication between the local government and the Garo people for resolution of land disputes.

CONFLICT HISTORY – BANGLADESH

"When the sun sinks in the west, die a million people of the Bangladesh," wrote American folk musician and peace activist Joan Baez in her "Song of Bangladesh." It was her response to the price paid by the Bengali people in 1971, the year of their struggle for independence from West Pakistan – a war that some have classified as a forgotten genocide of the 20th century.

Today, political instability, corruption, extreme poverty for more than half of the population, rising population density, natural disasters, occasional Islamic fundamentalist attacks, impunity and increasing numbers of extrajudicial executions are the reality for over 160 million people.

Independence and Political Developments

When British colonial rule over India ended in 1947, the area was partitioned into India and East and West Pakistan. Tensions were high between East and West Pakistan, technically one country but physically divided by India. Though both had largely Muslim populations, economic and political power was concentrated in the west. Leaders of the secular Awami League in East Pakistan declared independence in 1971, leading to a bloody war in which West Pakistan's military targeted specific populations in Dhaka, including the intelligentsia at Dhaka University, and later the cities of Chittagong, Comilla and Khulna. The 9-month war may have left over 200,000 raped and sexually violated women, 40 million people displaced and 3 million dead.[2]

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became the first leader of independent Bangladesh, but was assassinated by army officers in 1975 – ushering in 15 years of military rule (with one interruption in a 1979 electoral victory for the Bangladesh National Party). Since 1990, Bangladeshi politics has been dominated by an intense rivalry between two women: current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed (the daughter of Sheikh Mujib) and Khaleda Zia (the wife of former president Zia Rahman).

A state of emergency has been in effect since January 2007, which grants arrest powers to paramilitary forces such as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and Bangladesh Rifles. The military-backed caretaker government took office in October 2006 and was initially welcomed for its attempts to secure public order and bring corruption charges against high-level political figures. But internal security and rule of law have been increasingly endangered and undermined. Arrests are carried out without warrants, based on the grounds of reasonable suspicion, and prisoners are subjected to lengthy periods of detention and restrictions on the right to seek release on bail.[3] Many of the arrests during the state of emergency are viewed as politically motivated.

Population Density and Poverty

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world – a major challenge for sustainability and resolving land issues, such as what to do with hundreds of thousands of non-Bengali Muslims (known as Biharis) who have been in impoverished refugee camps along the borders of Bangladesh for over 30 years.

Extreme poverty is widespread in Bangladesh. It is estimated that almost half of the population lives on less than a dollar a day. Due to the constraints of patriarchal norms embedded in

a narrow interpretation of the Quran by traditional religious leaders, especially in poor and illiterate communities, women are often prevented from earning any income.

Minorities and Islamist Extremism

Though the country adopted a secular constitution upon independence, Bangladesh is predominantly a Muslim nation. Nearly 83 percent of Bangladeshis are Muslim, 16 percent Hindu and the remaining 1 percent Buddhist and Christian.[4] Discrimination against religious minorities became a regular practice immediately after independence. For the Hindu population, the most contentious issue is property ownership. Due to the country's Vested Property Act, many Hindus have lost their land holdings. Discrimination is also evident in access to government jobs and political offices.[5]

Tribal and indigenous communities also suffer harsh discrimination. The Jummu people live in the southeastern Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) area of the country and are predominantly Buddhist. Under British colonial administration, the indigenous Jumma were given substantial autonomy. In 1972, they petitioned the newly formed government of Bangladesh to preserve that autonomy, but it was rejected and a government-sponsored program of Bengali resettlement commenced in the CHT. Tribal leader Manabenddra Narayan Larma formed the Chittagong Hills Tract Organization for People's Solidarity, with a military wing known as Shanti Bahini, and launched a 25-year armed struggle against the government of Bangladesh. The conflict ended with a peace agreement in December 1997, but it lacked any constitutional safeguards or guarantees for implementation.[6] Low-level violence continues in the area.

Islamist militants are active in Bangladesh, especially in Rajshahi, 350 kilometers from the capital. The police forces claim that remnants of the two outlawed Islamic groups, Jammat-ul-Mujahideen and Jagrata Muslim Janata – together with other organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahir – are regrouping and were behind an assassination attempt on Sheikh Hasina which killed 22 people.

Natural Disasters

Bangladesh is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, with monsoon floods striking the country annually, and cyclones a constant fear. About 130 Indian rivers enter Bangladesh to find their way into the Bay of Bengal. The impact of climate change is evident in Bangladesh: Since 1973, at least 19 districts have lost cropland that is submerged under the Jamuna and Padma Rivers,[7] and a disputed island between Bangladesh and India has disappeared in the Bay of Bengal.[8]

INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in Bangladesh and *Personal History of Shinjita Alam*

1200 Muslim invaders convert most of the east Bengal population to Islam, on their way to defeating Hindu and Buddhist dynasties.

1341 Bengal achieves independence from Delhi. Dhaka is established as the capital.

1526 – 1530 Bengal is conquered by the Mughal Empire, which would rule the India subcontinent until the mid-19th century.

1757 The British East India Company gains control of Bengal at the Battle of Plassey.

1859 The British Crown assumes administration of the area from the British East India Company after the Sepoy Mutiny.

1947 British colonialism of India ends. Strife between Hindus and Muslims leads to its partition into Hindu India and a Muslim state comprising East and West Pakistan, established on either side of India and separated by more than 1,000 kilometers.

1949 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman establishes the Awami League in East Pakistan to campaign for autonomy from West Pakistan.

1952 West Pakistan announces that Urdu will be the official language of West and East Pakistan, leading to the first public protests and direct conflict between West and East Pakistan.

1967 ***June 29 – In Gandhabbapur village in Lakshmipur district, Hasina Akter (later known as Shinjita) is born to the Muslim family of Fashi al Alam.***

1970 The Awami League wins elections in East Pakistan, but the government in West Pakistan does not recognize the results. A cyclone in East Pakistan kills 500,000 people.

The family house of Fashi al Alam is torn apart in the cyclone. They survive by hiding under a bed frame and holding onto a piece of tin roof.

1971 Sheikh Mujib is arrested by the government in West Pakistan.

March 26 – While in exile, Awami League leaders proclaim the independence of East Pakistan. Ten million Bengalis flee to India as war begins.

December – Bengali armed forces receive support from the Indian Armed Forces in their war with West Pakistan and proclaim victory, taking over 90,000 prisoners of war.

1972 Sheikh Mujib becomes prime minister.

1974 A national state of emergency is declared when severe flooding ruins significant amounts of crops and causes about 28,000 deaths.

August 14 – Hasina's father Fashi al Alam dies. A few months later, her brother Faruk dies of dysentery. Hasina drops out of school and leaves her mother's house, together with her elder sister, to live with her second eldest brother in Comilla district. After six months they move to Dhaka to live with the oldest brother's family.

1975 Sheikh Mujib is assassinated during a coup by the military.

1976 General Ziaur Rahman becomes the chief administrator of martial law.

Hasina begins attending school in Dhaka.

1977 General Zia secures his presidency in a referendum with 98.9 percent of the votes. Islam is adopted in the constitution, and Zia forms the Bangladesh National Party (BNP).

1979 The BNP wins elections and martial law is lifted.

1980 ***Prior to entering the ninth grade, Hasina Akter changes her name to Shinjita. During registration for her secondary education exam, she is assigned a new date of birth by the school's administration.***

1981 General Zia is assassinated during a coup. He is replaced by Abdus Sattar.

1982 General Hussain Muhammad Ershad assumes power in a military coup. He forms the *Jatiya*, or Nationalist, Party and names himself president.

Shinjita receives her certificate of secondary education.

1983 ***Shinjita enrolls in Holy Cross Girls College, but cannot afford to complete her studies there.***

1984 ***Shinjita graduates from Noakhali Night College and enters the bachelor's program of social welfare at the University of Dhaka.***

1986 Ershad is re-elected to a five-year term.

1987 A state of emergency is declared as opposition parties demonstrate against Ershad.

1988 Islam is declared the state religion. Severe flooding affects the country.

1989 ***Shinjita takes her final exams and enters an M.A. program in social welfare at the University of Dhaka.***

1990 Ershad leaves office due to mass protests against his governance.

1991 Ershad is convicted of corruption and put in jail. The widow of General Zia, Khaleda Zia, becomes prime minister. She changes the constitution to give the office of prime minister full executive power. A tidal wave kills 138,000 people.

1992 ***Shinjita graduates from the University of Dhaka with an M.A. in social welfare. She joins the nongovernmental organization Families for Children to work with divorced women and widows.***

1993 ***Shinjita starts working for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).***

1994 ***During a visit to a rural community to discuss the establishment of a women's group, Shinjita is locked in a room and threatened by some of the women's husbands.***

Shinjita marries Ziauddin Ahmed.

1995 ***November 16 – Shinjita's son, Rishov Ryan, is born.***

1996 The Awami League returns to power. Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the daughter of Sheikh Mujib, becomes prime minister.

1998 The largest flooding in modern recorded history devastates two-thirds of the country.

2000 Bangladesh's relationship with Pakistan deteriorates over a leaked Pakistani report on the war of independence in 1971. The report cites low numbers of victims and diminishes the role of the Pakistani Army in the killings. Bangladesh demands an apology from Pakistan.

2001 July – Sheikh Hasina Wajed steps down as prime minister.

October – Khaleda Zia, widow of General Zia, wins elections.

2002 March –With the rise of acid attacks against women, a law is introduced that makes the practice punishable by death.

July – Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf expresses remorse over the conduct of Pakistani troops in 1971.

September - Iajuddin Ahmed becomes president.

2003 ***Shinjita's mother dies.***

2005 August 17 – Approximately 350 small bombs go off nationwide, injuring more than 100 people and killing two. An Islamic fundamentalist group banned by the government claims responsibility.

2006 ***Beginning in June and continuing until April 2007, Shinjita works with the Christian Garo people who live in northern Bangladesh.***

October – A caretaker government is installed due to violent protests.

Bangladeshi Muhammud Yunus and his Grameen Bank are awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their work on microcredit.

December – An opposition alliance that includes the Awami League announces it will boycott election day in January.

2007 ***Shinjita, while working with the MCC, engages the Centre for Community Development Assistance in her work with the Manipuri people.***

January – A state of emergency is declared and elections are postponed because of violence. The caretaker government adopts emergency power rules that grant arrest powers to paramilitary forces such as the Rapid Action Battalion and the Bangladesh Rifles.

November – Cyclone Sidr strikes Bangladesh. Four thousand people are killed and 1.5 million homes destroyed.

2008 ***March – Shinjita ends her work with MCC.***

September – Shinjita travels to the United States to take part in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF SHINJITA ALAM

The Sound of Peace

After summer break in 1980, Hasina Akter, daughter of Fashi al Alam, returned to her school in Dhaka city. The first thing to take care of was registration for the final exams of secondary education. Registration always took place prior to entering the ninth grade. For Hasina, this was not just another meaningless formality on the first day of school; it was a moment of great significance.

Following her classmates, Hasina found her way to the school's administrator. The line was short and soon it was her turn to register. She approached the table and handed in the registration form she had filled out while waiting. Hasina was ready to answer as soon as spoken to. From her side of the table she could see the opened registration journal. The first column was for date of birth and the second for name. When the administrator got to the second column, Hasina Akter, daughter of Fashi al Alam, spoke bravely but with a slight tremble in her voice: "My name is Shinjita. Shinjita Alam. Please write it down: Shinjita Alam."

There was a moment of silence as the administrator hesitated. He glanced at the daughter of Fashi al Alam and then filled in the empty column. The words written in fresh ink were blurry, but they resembled lines of a name she had memorized and nurtured for so long: Shinjita Alam. Her own chosen name.

In front of the administrator she didn't dare look at the piece of paper pushed in her hand. She rushed out with a heart beating slightly faster than usual. As soon as she turned the corner, she looked down and read – Date of Birth: Nov. 22, 1966.[9] Name: Shinjita Alam.

It had happened. Shinjita had raised her voice to determine her own identity, replacing the name given by her parents with her own. Hasina is a traditional, common Muslim name meaning "beautiful woman." But she didn't want to be known as that. To her, beauty was not a personal quality and not mastered by human will. It was God's gift and did not represent any personal effort whatsoever – in other words, it was nothing to admire. "Shinjita" in Bangla, the language of Bangladesh, refers to the sound made by jewelry, a sound that cannot be hidden or silenced.

Her Arabic teacher disapproved of her name change and tried to shame her. "It is your identity as a decent Muslim woman. You can't change it like that!" Shinjita's mother and family members learned of the change only after it had happened and didn't say much. Besides, her mother and siblings always called her Ratna, her nickname, which means "jewelry." But that didn't fit either: You can hide jewelry from sight and ears, or use it to dress up. Shinjita didn't plan to hide or be hidden, and had no intention of being someone's decoration and property. To her, the new name was her own sound of peace.

Last Breakfast

Fashi al Alam led a very busy life and was always surrounded by people. Those few times when little Ratna had a chance to enjoy his presence were her favorite moments of childhood. He lovingly called her "my *jongli,*" or "my sweet, naughty girl." He joked with her about her antics: "You can't be my daughter, where have I borrowed you from?"

Ratna was different from her other sisters, and different from most Muslim girls. She had a voice – and a determination to use it according to her own wishes and thinking. She was brave and stubborn. Her father noticed that too, and little jongli, of all his daughters, captured his heart. As a college teacher and *shalishdar*, or a traditional conflict arbitrator, he was a good observer. He saw Ratna with the neighborhood boys – Kaokon, Alam and Babor – playing the "ha-do-do-do" game,[10] sneaking to the market for sweets, learning to read over her elder brothers' shoulders or listening to the sounds of Rabindranath Tagore's monsoon songs. Fashi al Alam had told his wife: "Our daughter Ratna is different. If you can, give her education."

Shinjita's father came from a conservative Muslim family. He was wise, and his mind and heart were not blinded by traditional religious and cultural norms. Even though his wife, Tuni, lived in absolute devotion and service to him, as was befitting a good Muslim wife, he loved her and his daughters as much as his sons.

The morning of August 13, 1974 was an ordinary day with the usual, but nevertheless special, egg-eating ritual breakfast for Ratna and her little brother Faruk. They sat in the kitchen waiting for their father to cut the boiled egg into three pieces and share with them. Soon after breakfast, Fashi al Alam left for his work in the city.

In the afternoon, Ratna's father was brought home in a boat. He had had a heart attack at work, and his colleagues had taken him first to the doctor and now home. He lay in bed, his body still, not moving. He couldn't speak. Normally he was always smiling; even his eyes would smile, but not now. They were wide open – calm and filled with sadness.

Later in the day, Ratna was in front of the house with her little sister Panna when they heard the voices of their elder sisters crying very loudly. The girls ran into the house and found their sisters surrounding their mother, who was kneeling next to their father and holding her forehead against the knuckles of her fingers. A stream of silent tears flowed down her cheeks onto her pink sari.

There was no other way to inform relatives other than to walk to their house and deliver the news of Fashi al Alam's death. Someone had to go. None of her siblings were home. Little Ratna had to carry the heavy burden of her father's death to her uncle's house, half a kilometer away.

The 7-year-old Shinjita lost the innocent joy and ease of childhood during the walk to her uncle's house that day. Though she would choose to take his last name, Alam, meaning "wise man" in Arabic, that walk was the beginning of a long and scabrous journey toward her own self.

The Price of Ignorance

Shinjita's mother, Akter Mohol Begum, gave birth to 15 children, but buried six of them and became a widow at the age of 47. Her husband's death marked the beginning of three long decades of loneliness and survival at the mercy of her sons.

When a husband dies in Bangladesh, the wife loses her only financial support and is doomed to poverty and an endless struggle for her own and her children's survival. Traditional religious norms dictate that the loss of a husband means the widow returns to her father's family. If her father dies, it is her sons' or brothers' responsibility to take care of her. Many times, however, the responsibility to care for a woman doesn't result in a warm and loving embrace by her male relatives – quite the opposite. The widow is seen as a burden, another dependent female joining the family.

Fashi al Alam's death trapped Shinjita's family in poverty. A great famine had spread nationwide and soon reached Shinjita's home.[11] Malnutrition and the sickness of her children became her mother's curse. During the daylight Shinjita got used to the loud groaning and hunger pangs in her belly. Tuni (meaning "bird" in Bangla, a nickname Shinjita's father gave to his wife) could not provide food for her children three times a day. The sounds of hunger most often were silenced with a piece of bread in the morning and a bowl of rice and sometimes vegetable curry or fish late in the evening. Shinjita's elder brothers were just finishing their studies at the university, so the money they could provide was very little. In addition, Shinjita's grandfather was never loving or concerned about his daughter's destiny. Several years before, he had distributed his land among his sons, depriving Tuni of her just share. According to Sharia law, the daughter is entitled to receive half what the father gives to a son. Tuni received nothing.

Poverty was not the only hardship visiting Shinjita's family. Soon their lives were overshadowed by a veil of ignorance stitched by traditional and religious beliefs. A few months after Fashi al Alam's death, Shinjita's brother Faruk got sick with dysentery. The family couldn't afford to buy medicine. But worse, Tuni didn't give her young son enough food, believing that a sick person only needed milk with some rice powder dissolved in it. A traditional belief propagated by village doctors and imams is that nutritious food is too difficult to digest for an ill person.

Faruk wanted to eat. He asked for rice, but their mother replied only, "I'll give you some when you get better." By the end of the day, Faruk was dead. He was 6 years, 6 months and 4 days old. They buried him next to his father.

With improvement of health care and some basic knowledge in the home, Faruk could have been saved. His story was shared by thousands of families in rural Bangladesh 30 years ago.[12]

After Faruk's death, life only got worse for Shinjita's family. Her mother suffered silently, her eyes filled with sadness as she sat chewing pan[13] and staring into the emptiness at dusk. As Fashi al Alam's wife, she had carefully placed a bit of lime, bitternut and tobacco onto a bitter leaf and then rolled the pan tightly for her husband. Now she rolled only for herself, and recalled the long conversations they shared as they chewed and enjoyed each other's company. Only silence surrounded her now and she thought these moments of sadness belonged only to her. But little Ratna observed everything.

In Bangladesh women lack even the freedom to grieve. Tuni's sadness had to be silent. When her husband died, she was not even allowed to bid farewell to his body, as it is believed that the soul departs the body immediately upon death and it becomes the body of a stranger, inappropriate for a widow to see.

Shinjita had seen how easily a woman can be deprived of her name and voice in Bangladesh. First, a woman is identified as someone's daughter, wife or mother. Then she is silenced and told what to wear, how to sit, what to think, how to serve, who to please, how to vote and how to grieve. Even a 10-year-old boy received more respect and freedom than his mother or elder sisters.

Not long after Faruk's death, Shinjita's eldest sister Jhorna turned 13 and was now considered mature enough to be given as someone's wife. As soon as their brothers announced word that they were going to marry off Jhorna, the first group of men – the potential groom's maternal and paternal uncles, an elder brother and three community leaders – was on their way to the house. Tuni was soon obeying the orders shouted by her sons to get everything ready for the visitors. Shinjita's *apa*,[14] Jhorna, was dressed in a beautiful sari and decorated with bangles, jewelry and lipstick. Her mother and other sisters were cooking, cleaning and decorating the house while her brothers dressed smartly and practiced their serious looks for the serious occasion.

The strangers soon arrived. As Ratna was too little to be considered for marrying purposes, she could observe and mingle around freely. Jhorna entered the room and slowly approached the group of men. She had to show respect to each one of them by kneeling down, her fingers touching the ground and then her shoulders each time. Soon, the men had created a bazaar, making Jhorna stand, walk, kneel, bend down, stretch her arms, open her mouth to show her teeth, and measuring the length of her hair and straightness of her legs – all as if she were up for sale, like cows at a market.

The physical inspection was followed by questions: "What can you cook? How do you clean the house? How would you treat your husband?" Everything was noted. As the flow of questions slowed down, Jhorna was standing in the middle of the room, paralyzed and staring at the floor. The only movement was her uneven breath and two big tears forming in the bottom corners of her eyes, trying to squeeze through her long, dark eyelashes.

The men continued the bargain over a meal prepared by Tuni. As the meal ended, the agreement was settled upon. After two days, the groom's family would confirm the arrangement, and five days later he would arrive to take Jhorna as his wife. There was no questioning of the groom; the only thing that mattered was the weight of his purse.

They returned after the allotted time, and Jhorna saw her husband for the first time. According to Muslim tradition, the first night the newly married couple stays in the wife's parents' house, but the next day they go to the husband's home. The first stay at the husband's house is three days, and the new wife can have someone from her family to accompany her. Being so unusually brave – and talkative – Ratna was chosen by her brothers to go with Jhorna. The new wife could not be seen alone or heard talking – it was perceived as shameless and inappropriate. During the day even her husband would not approach her; they would meet only at night, when the woman entrusts her body to a stranger now her husband.

After three days at her husband's house, Jhorna could return for the last time to her parents' house before the final permanent departure to her new home. She had already determined she did not like her husband. For three days she had held her tears and suppressed her despair, but now in front of her mother and sisters, she collapsed and gave in to her despair.

Her mother's attempt at comforting words fell flat, with their religious and fatalist tone: "It's God's will, my daughter! It's your destiny. Accept it, you can't resist it!" Feeling her heart sinking deeper in her stomach the more she watched her sister cry, Ratna choked for breath as she couldn't swallow all her tears. She promised herself: *I will cry now, but I will not cry for the rest of my life!*

Seeds of injustice and anger started to grow in Shinjita as she observed her mother and sister accepting their situation. Like the other villagers, her mother never questioned the local imam's words, and accepted social cultural norms as natural and incontestable. The uneducated villagers didn't know what the Quran said because it was written in Arabic. They just repeated prayers and recited the text without knowing the meaning, relying on the local religious teachers for translation and guidance. They accepted their situations, no matter how desperate, as God's plan for their lives. The blind adherence to this brand of conservative Islam was unacceptable for Shinjita, even at this young age.

A few months after Faruk's death and Jhorna's wedding, Shinjita was desperate to leave. Her mother was not able to help her. Due to the financial burden of her father's death, Shinjita had to drop out of school. She realized that her only chance to grow was if she was away from her family, away from her village, away from the strong grip of conservative Islam. She and one of her elder sisters left for their brother's house in Comilla district. After six months at his house, Shinjita's childhood dream of tasting and smelling the big city – Dhaka – became a reality as her eldest brother agreed to open his family house to her. And with her thirst to return back to school and escape the prospect of an arranged marriage, leaving her mother, sisters and the playgrounds of her home village was a price she was willing to pay.

Schooling

Young Shinjita, only 8 years old, entered Dhaka with a determination to fight for her freedom from traditional constraints imposed on Muslim girls and to carve her own destiny. Memories of Jhorna's and her mother's surrender to their fates in a conservative brand of Islam was a constant alert for her. Their stories manifested the reality of millions of women living in the southern part of Bangladesh. They were stories of suppressed dreams, broken relationships and daily abuse. But even the young Shinjita believed that as long as the owner of the story was alive, there was hope. She planned to return one day to her home area to bring light to these women's lives, homes and villages.

After the first few months at her brother's house in Dhaka, Shinjita realized that she would have to cling to her aspirations as dearly as to her life. Her brother had opened his door that first day anticipating using Shinjita and her sister as maids to do household tasks and look after his children. He had not planned to support his sister's thirst for education.

At the same time, Shinjita was feeling grateful even for the opportunity to stay with him. She cleaned and cooked, trying to live up to her brother's and his wife's expectations. She even stopped attending classes for one year to care for her niece – though she never missed a single exam. Often, Shinjita had to borrow books from her friends because she didn't have enough money to buy her own. Despite all the obstacles, Shinjita was always the first in her class and president of her class for several consecutive years.

Despite her good grades and recognition, Shinjita didn't receive her family's support. In fact, the better she did at school and the more she engaged in various cultural and sports activities, the more beatings she received from her brother. "A decent Muslim woman doesn't sing and does not dance on the stage," he would claim. He made sure Shinjita heard and felt his disapproval. In Bangladesh, physical and psychological violence as a means of punishment and a method of achieving discipline were common in all levels of society: home, school and public spaces. In Shinjita's school, *Adarsha Ucha Balika Biddaloy* or the "Ideal Girls School," religious teachers used cane or bamboo sticks for beating their students.

Shinjita was an outcast in her new home; every time her brother would leave with his family to visit relatives, they would leave her home alone. The sense of abandonment and loneliness wounded Shinjita, who caught herself many times longing for her father to be alive – he would never do that to her. As strong as she was, and as much as she tried to hide her hurt and tears, lonely hours on the bathroom floor spent crying wounded her deeply. Rabindranath Tagore's powerful words – that one grows stronger through the tears – which normally comforted Shinjita's heart so deeply, were not strong enough to shelter her.

Despite the pain and loneliness, Shinjita's outstanding devotion to her studies was recognized by her teacher, Kefatiet Hossain. Kefatiet and his journalist friend became Shinjita's guardians and advisors all through her studies. She used the term of endearment *bhai*, or brother, when she called him, and he named her *tui*, the little, youngest one.[15]

Bhai was a teacher of the Bangla language and sports. He had noticed the spirited Shinjita and wanted to help her discover and develop her full potential. He would take her to music school and then back home. Bhai knew what Shinjita was facing at home, and he tried to divert some of the

direct attacks to him. He accompanied her when they returned from a sports competition or cultural performance, each time standing in front of the house entrance, guessing who would open the door and what would be the consequences. Shinjita was embarrassed as each time her brother and sister-in-law spewed rude remarks at him. They despised Kefatiet for giving Shinjita so many opportunities. But it didn't seem to bother him, and he always repeated, "If only your family was a liberal Muslim family, you would have so many opportunities!"

The Ideal Girls School had strict rules. When Shinjita began attending, it was the first year girls and boys were not sharing their classroom together. The school district administration decided that the correct response to the increasing number of female students would be the creation of two separate schools for girls and boys, with the boys enjoying much more freedom and respect from the teachers than the girls – though not for long.

After once receiving a poor grade on a science exam, Shinjita tore it up and threw it out the window. She had prepared for this test by reading books from classes two levels higher than her own. She knew she had done well, and soon she was on her way to the headmistress' office. She asked her assistant to pick up the pieces of the exam so she could see it for herself. Indeed, the grade was incorrect. She promised to revise it, but before excusing Shinjita, she warned her to calm her temper.

But it was still not enough. Shinjita and her friends discussed the incident: "What if Sir Kafi has graded others unjustly as well?" The girls agreed: "We don't want him in our class any longer." The girls boycotted his class and in a week's time, Sir Kafi was dismissed as a teacher.

Encouraged by the little revolution, 13-year-old Shinjita decided to tackle the school's discriminatory policy toward girls. She established a *Mohila Porishod*, or "Girls' Committee," to unite girls from grades 6 through 10, and was then elected president. Tomi, a 10th grader and one year older, was her assistant. The committee consisted of two representatives from each class.

Shinjita and other girls had been experiencing day-to-day discrimination from their teachers and the school's administration. Boys were able to leave their classrooms, play in a nice outside playground and were provided toys, musical instruments and sports equipment. But above all, only boys had a chance to attend national celebrations.

In 1978 during the presidency of General Zia Rahman, President Suharto of Indonesia and his wife were visiting Bangladesh. Shinjita heard on the radio that it was to be a very large and colorful welcoming. All school children were going to receive new uniforms. With these thoughts in her mind, Shinjita was determined to participate. But right before the buses were supposed to leave for the site of the parade, Shinjita and the other girls learned they would have to stay behind. Teachers were alleging that most of the parents prohibit them from taking the girls away from the school, and that the school was trying to change it. The Girls' Committee wrote a petition with concrete demands for a playground, musical instruments and the right to participate in public events, among others. Shinjita, as the president of Mohila Porishod, submitted the petition to the headmistress. They were promised a hearing in two weeks. Meanwhile Shinjita and Tomi approached one of the members of the school's advisory board, who was impressed by their determination and promised to step in. As the result of joint effort and good leadership, the committee's needs were met one after another.

In addition to the punishments and daily violence inflicted at home and school, Shinjita was growing up in the midst of political instability. During her primary and secondary schooling, there were three changes of political power, all by means of assassinations and coups. On August 15, 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – "the father of the nation" – and 21 members of his family were assassinated. Only two of his daughters, who had temporarily left the country, survived. Shinjita was staying with her second eldest brother in Comilla district. It was past midnight, yet the roads filled with large crowds of people, joyful over his death, as many believed he had failed to live up to the promises he made during their liberation struggle.

After Sheikh Mujib's death, General Zia became chief administrator of martial law, and in 1977 secured the presidency in a referendum. Four years after becoming president, he was assassinated during a military coup. Shinjita's class had just finished for the day when there was a public announcement about the assassination in Chittagong. The students were dismissed and the school was closed for the day.

Her brother had taken that day off, and Shinjita raced home to deliver the news to him before he heard for himself. He immediately turned on the radio once his little sister told him, and together they weighed the possible scenarios for the future political climate of their country. The young Shinjita was full of pride that her brother acknowledged her intelligence and listened to her, if only for a moment.

The next 11 months after Zia's death were uncertain and filled with political turmoil. Shinjita's brother – a freedom fighter during the independence struggle – was so preoccupied with following the political drama and drafting and discussing the prospects for Bangladesh's future that he neglected overseeing Shinjita's endeavors.

Zia was replaced by his vice president, Abdus Sattar, but his presidency was short-lived. On March 24 of the following year, another military coup, initiated by Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, overthrew Sattar. Hopes for democracy were tarnished as Ershad suspended parliament, abolished all political parties and established martial law.

Away from the alarming political events, and without disturbances at home, Shinjita completed her secondary schooling in April. But the army coup had instilled fear everywhere. No one knew what to expect, and people were anticipating further bloodshed, like that of the war with the Pakistani army. The memories and wounds of that bloody war were still fresh and vivid in people's minds and hearts, as only a decade had passed since its end.

Shinjita was looking for ways that she as a woman could engage in bringing democracy to Bangladesh, and she even approached her brother about the issue. Her voice was ignored.

The political uncertainty and the prospects of military rule under Ershad only strengthened Shinjita's conviction to take the next step and enroll in college. In the fall of 1982, Shinjita started her schooling at Holy Cross Girls College,[16] an expensive and well-respected college. She was accepted due to her good grades, but obstacles arose when she had to pay exam fees. Her family would not pay for anything, and the money she was making tutoring was not enough. Shinjita had to leave the college and find another way to proceed with her education.

In December 1983, Ershad assumed the presidency and his actions indicated he would remain despite public protests. By then, her brothers had noticed that Shinjita had moved on with her schooling. Instead of getting support to continue her studies, Shinjita received a marriage proposal from one of her brother's friends.

She refused. The thought was terrifying to Shinjita. This time her mother did not call upon destiny and God's will; she remained silent. This only served to infuriate Shinjita, who had seen the price of silence and couldn't accept her mother not saying a single word to her sons to stop the marriage. In response to Shinjita's refusal, her brother threw her out of his house: "Go on! Leave and live on your own! You are not abiding by our decision! You are not our responsibility any longer!"

Shinjita left, and for a while stayed at her childhood friend Muni's home. Muni and other friends helped Shinjita find students to tutor, whose families would often offer food and a place to stay in return. She felt she was liberated now, living on her own, making ends meet, and though she couldn't afford to continue at Holy Cross Girls College, she studied and took her exams at Noakhali Night College, which then led her to the University of Dhaka.

During her college years, Shinjita polished her writing skills and developed a strong passion for poetry. She had first published poems in a national children's magazine, *Children's Voices*, with the help of her teacher Kefatiet, and later at the university she wrote poems and articles for two daily newspapers. Writing also helped her to secure more money for studies and food.

The years of Ershad's military rule coincided with Shinjita's years as a student – and her most active political engagement. During Ershad's reign, the resistance movements and organizations for political protest were born and developed by students at the University of Dhaka. In February of 1983, the first student protests manifested the public opposition to Ershad's martial law administration. As Shinjita started her studies in social welfare at the university, soon she found a way to contribute to the overall struggle by becoming a member of the Students Socialist Party. She believed that the only means to change the society and do something meaningful was by being actively involved in politics.

Her voice became louder as her poems and slogans reached larger groups of people on national radio and TV stations. Freedom of speech was limited under Ershad, so Shinjita had to be careful. Her poems were for those who could read between the lines.

Ershad reacted to the sweeping condemnation of his government by establishing his own party, the *Jatiya*, or National, Party and bringing in people from the other political parties in order to secure his reelection in 1986. The Jatiya Party also had its student branch, like other political parties. For Ershad it was crucial to have his trusted people in the university, the heart of the opposition.

As a result of Shinjita's activities and the recognition brought by the power of her written words, the student branch of the socialist party nominated her as their next presidential candidate. But just as soon as the decision was made it was withdrawn. Shinjita was receiving direct and indirect threats, and a close friend, Muslu, from Ershad's student party, warned her of the seriousness of the situation: she was on a list of those to be targeted for their political actions.

From her enrollment in the B.A. program to the completion of her M.A. in social welfare in April of 1992, Shinjita spent four extra years in school due to the instability of military rule. Her studies were constantly interrupted. On November 11, 1987, a two-day mass demonstration known as "Siege Dhaka" brought together opposition parties against Ershad's rule. In response, Ershad tightened his grip and dismissed parliament. The following March, Ershad's Jatiya Party gained control of the parliament in fraudulent elections. The capture of legislative power was followed by more restrictions. On June 7, 1988, Islam was declared the state religion, leading to more and more student and civilian protests. In 1989 several left-wing student parties joined in a demonstration; Shinjita was among them.

The students marched toward the secretary building, which was firmly guarded by the military. As the first lines of students approached the front of the building, gunshots were heard. Shinjita and other female students were in the middle of the crowd – the standard practice by the students to protect their female colleagues. But their leaders urged them to run as the gunfire continued and teargas filled the air. Shinjita made it to the girls' dormitory, but not all found shelter. Student leader Noor Hossain, who had been walking in the front line wearing a T-shirt with *Gonotantra Mukti Pak* ("Freedom to Democracy") written on his back, was shot and killed.

The mass protests continued as Noor Hossain's death evoked more resistance and solidarity against the opposition parties. Finally Ershad gave up, leaving office in 1990.

The end of Ershad's era also marked an end to Shinjita's political career. Before she received her master's degree, she had plenty of time to revise her earlier commitment to herself – never to marry anyone. She feared that the men in her life would stand in her way to fulfill her dream of bringing about change in the lives of the women in her childhood village and elsewhere. Despite her caution and distrust, Shinjita met a man who enhanced her light and strengthened her commitment. As she graduated as the first woman in her extended family to earn a master's degree, Shinjita both met a life partner and found an organization to work with in her home region. It was time for her to take her light back home.

Bringing Light Home

While working for the nongovernmental organization Families for Children in the slums of Dhaka, Shinjita was eager to return to her home district, where women were facing violence and oppression in the place they should feel safest – their own homes. Questions were constantly in Shinjita's mind: *Who protects them? Who speaks up for them? Who voices their needs?* She needed an opportunity and reason to return to her home. It finally came in an advertisement in the daily Dhaka newspaper: "Mennonite Central Committee is looking for a program coordinator in Noakhali district. Preferably a local."

The selection committee was impressed with Shinjita, though some wondered whether this young, Dhaka-educated, city woman could adapt to the pace and nature of village life. Shinjita set off for Noakhali with the determination to prove the doubters wrong.

Having been away so long, it was true that she needed to learn village life again. Her first assignment with MCC was a 15-day assessment visit to the villages of Noakhali. She'd wake every morning by 5 to wade kilometer after kilometer through muddy roads. She had replaced her city clothes with a sari or burqa, with a spare in her shoulder bag when the mud came too high. Oftentimes she had to cross canals that separated the road from the houses. The only way to cross was to place bamboo sticks down and maneuver across.

Once in a village and moving from one *bari*, or house, to another, she was grateful for every invitation to step inside and share a conversation. Women – and sometimes men – were willing to open their homes to her, as Shinjita introduced herself and addressed them as "auntie" or "uncle" to show respect. No matter how poor they were, the villagers would offer her tea or pan, often borrowed from neighbors. And though she didn't want to take their precious few resources, Shinjita politely accepted, not wanting to offend them by rejecting their hospitality.

Shinjita was initially hired to implement an agricultural project, but she quickly saw the need for a more holistic approach to development. "Wait, Shinjita. Wait," her boss told her, wanting her to learn to cultivate vegetables first and teach them to the village women's groups. So she did, all the while preparing the ground for new seeds to be sown.

There were 38 villages that Shinjita was working with in Noakhali district, with 25 to 30 women in each group. The women were taught to save money in the group's account so they could eventually start a collective income-generating activity, such as purchasing a cow or a chicken to sell its milk or eggs. Slowly, by saving just 5 taka per week, they were dismantling poverty.

After a year of the constant "Wait, Shinjita," her persistence earned her some support from the MCC leadership. She was able to expand her work beyond cultivating vegetables and teaching the women how to save money. She started addressing health and sanitation issues – incredibly important topics in the district. In Noakhali, roads get flooded during the rainy season, and most communities have no sewage systems – or toilets even. Residents use open spaces under trees or near bushes, and as the flood waters rise, the roads turn to sewage pathways.

Shinjita needed help covering all the people in the villages, so she recruited 16 local women to help her build relationships with the locals and introduce them to new concepts of community and family wellbeing. These 16 women became known as home state development facilitators and

would meet with the village group's every week to discuss sanitation and health issues. But when there was a conflict between wives and husbands, they would call Shinjita.

In the conservative villages of Noakhali, the women often needed to get permission from their husbands or other male family members to attend MCC trainings and women's group meetings – and even to talk to Shinjita. Men often saw Shinjita and her work as a threat to their power, and they doubted her intentions of meeting with the women.

On one visit to a village, Auntie Modhumita and Alima[17] invited Shinjita into their home. They asked her to wait while they prepared tea and informed Modhumita's husband about their guest. Shinjita soon heard male voices approaching the room and caught a glimpse of dark eyes peering at her through a crack in the door. The door then slammed shut, and she heard the sound of a key in the door.

"You walking disgrace! How dare you step in our house! You sinner! You will burn in hell!" the men shouted behind the locked door. Shinjita could hear Modhumita trying to calm them down, but they simply yelled louder: "You are an indignity to your husband! We will punish you for breaking the *purdah*!"

Shinjita's fear at being locked in a room turned to anger at the mention of purdah, literally "curtain" but describing a state of social isolation practiced in traditional Muslim and Hindu families in rural Southeast Asia. Local imams in Noakhali had made the men believe that their task is to protect the purdah – keep their wives out of public spaces – otherwise they will be sent to hell along with their wives. Shinjita, however, viewed it as an absurd system created to keep women suppressed and secluded at home.

She managed to choke her anger though, and waited for the voices on the other side of the door to calm down before she asked them to let her explain the purpose of her visit. But that only sparked another round of shouting. The men soon left, and Shinjita was left alone.

After three hours, the men returned. Shinjita risked speaking again: "I understand you are upset, and I'm sorry. Please, please let me explain to you why I'm here." She was determined to convince them that she was not there to instigate the women to rebel against their husbands. In a calm, respectful voice, Shinjita offered to tell them where her husband was so they could bring him over if they wanted to after hearing what she had to say. They opened the door and sat in front of her without a word. She was calm and confident, not lowering her eyes or letting her voice tremble, as she told them about herself, her life in Dhaka, the MCC, the 38 villages she was working with, the family health and nutrition programs, vegetable cultivation and the other income-generating activities.

Her monologue turned into a conversation that lingered until lunchtime, when Modhumita's husband invited her to stay for lunch. He followed the invitation with acceptance: "Bring your vegetables here. We could use your group here."

And upon the graduation of the women's group eight years later, the men who had first locked her in a room surrounded her this time to say "*Apa Maf korben*" – "Sister, we apologize."

Tethered

It is early morning in Ramwallobpur. The sun is warming the soil and drying the lawn in front of the house. Lilies are slowly lifting their heavy heads to greet sunbeams. No human sounds are disturbing the whisper of the summer breeze. Mahmuda Khatum wishes to hold on to the tranquility, and hesitates to lift her head. She knows that in a few hours the sun will drift to the middle of the sky – and unavoidably, the bank employee will arrive.

For the third week, she has not been able to gather her *kisti*, the weekly installment she owes for the microcredit loan she received. Her last hopes to hear from her husband had slipped away two days ago, as did the last rice grains through her fingers into the pot for her children's breakfast.

"No time today! I have my kisti!" the women on the street shout to anyone who approaches them. It takes Fatema, Rahima and Noorjahan a blink of an eye to know if you are serious about buying their old pot, worn out sari or chirping chicken – and if not, they are gone in another blink.

Once a week, employees from microcredit organizations visit the village to collect the weekly installments from the women borrowers. There is nothing left to sell or sacrifice. Husbands have left with the loans. For many women, the burden of the loan is too heavy, and the failure to repay drags a shadow of hopelessness over their lives.

Mahmuda Khatum had lived her whole life in Ramwallobpur village in Noakhali district. Unlike her husband, Nurul Ami, she had never left her home village. She was a mother of three children, the oldest only 4 years old, and her husband would be gone for two to three months at a time. He worked in Chittagong where it was easier to find a job after the harvest season was over. Earlier that year, Nurul insisted that Mahmuda take a 10,000 taka loan from the Grameen Bank, the microcredit organization started by Muhammad Yunus.[18] Soon after, Nurul took most of the money and left Ramwallobpur. For six months Mahmuda didn't hear a single word.

As soon as she took out the loan, Mahmuda fell victim to an unyielding pattern of payments: the first installment was due the week after the loan was taken. There was a fixed weekly payment of 278 taka, not including interest, for 36 weeks. Interest was calculated based on the initial sum and not reduced as payments were made.

Mahmuda's husband used to send her money from Chittagong that would help her survive and feed the children, but not after he left with the loan. For the first month Mahmuda paid her kisti from the little bit of money she had left. Then she sold her gold earrings, her father's wedding gift, and her new sari for the Eid festival.

Still hoping to hear from Nurul, she decided to approach her Grameen Bank group members for help. "Unity, discipline, hard work is our way of life," is the slogan of the women's groups at Grameen Bank, the unity translating into other members helping those unable to pay their weekly share – which the women did for Mahmuda the first time. But the week quickly passed and the next kisti was around the corner – and there was no news from her husband.

Next, Mahmuda mortgaged the little patch of land behind her house, and not long after mortgaged the house. She walked to her father's house to ask for help. Upon seeing that she no longer had her golden nose stud – what every decent Muslim woman wears,[19] but which Mahmuda was forced to sell – her father refused to help her.

Three weeks had passed with no kisti.

Shinjita, meanwhile, was holding a meeting with an MCC women's group in Mahmuda's village. She visited the area often, but on this day Shinjita noticed an unusual anxiety among the women. As they welcomed her and offered her a cup of tea, one woman began describing the situation of her neighbor Mahmuda, a mother of three with a husband working in Chittagong – and a growing debt to the Grameen Bank. Shinjita quickly closed the meeting and asked to be taken to Mahmuda's home.

Mahmuda was surprised, and embarrassed, for the unexpected visit. From long sleepless nights accompanied by cries of her famished children and worries about her unpaid installments, she was exhausted, her movements weak and aimless. She placed an empty cup in front of Shinjita and was about to prepare tea when she realized she couldn't. She had not had tea in her home for weeks. Her grief came pouring out.

Shinjita spoke with Mahmuda and encouraged her to find out the truth about her husband. Her cousin accompanied her to Chittagong, where Mahmuda quickly found that Nurul had married another woman.

She felt now that there was no way forward. He had no interest in Mahmuda or his children any longer, and had no intention of moving back to Ramwallobpur. Shinjita arranged to meet with family members in order to convince Nurul to pay a visit to the village and meet with Shinjita. He had recently acquired his father's land in Ramwallobpur, so he agreed to meet Shinjita when he returned to take care of the land. He felt comfortable with Shinjita's style of mediation, and agreed to meet again, this time with Mahmuda and other family members present.

Shinjita was intent on ensuring that everyone was heard – the men and the women. At the beginning of the meeting, the women were reluctant to speak in the presence of men, and the men just as uncomfortable listening to the women. But soon the stiffness melted and conversation moved forward freely. They agreed that if Nurul was determined to stay with his wife in Chittagong, he needed to send money to Mahmuda so she could repay the loan and mortgages on her land and house – and be able to feed her children.

It was just one story for Shinjita in a litany of sagas about microcredit. In her work with the MCC, she provided an alternative approach to income generation – and ultimately the breaking of the cycle of poverty.[20]

Once-Bitter Neighbors

Father Hombric, a gentle and lighthearted man, was a Christian missionary among the Garo people – whose name means the "hill people," a group neglected by most of Bangladeshi society. While living in the communities for over 40 years, he sought to protect the Christian minority Garos from attacks by Bengali Muslims and discrimination by the government. Once Shinjita heard about Father Hombric, she was soon on her way to meet the hill people.

After just a short time, Shinjita decided to stay in their community for six months to learn about their daily challenges and how they might address them. She formed a local committee composed of five Garo leaders and five Muslim leaders from the area, and spent several months meeting with each group separately, learning their problems, perceptions of the other group and their grievances.

For the Garo, it was about the land. They mostly lived in the forests where the land was fertile. In Bangladesh, if you could prove that your family had lived on an area of land for a long time, it can be registered as your property. The combination of poverty, no formal education and poor knowledge of the official language, Bangla, meant that most Garo people were unable to officially prove they were living on their ancestors' land. When neighboring Muslims or the national forestry department coveted their land, the Garo were the last ones to learn about it.

Unlike with the Garo community, which is a matriarchal society, Shinjita's encounter with the Muslim leaders meant she only met with the men. Her first meetings were harsh: "Those pork eaters and drinkers, they stink!" "They are not good for my nose – I can smell them from afar." With such strong opinions being hurled, Shinjita asked if any of them had ever visited the Garo community. None had. "I know them. They are very nice people," Shinjita assured them and invited them to find it out for themselves. None accepted.

After some time, Shinjita brought it up again. "No, I can't go. What will the others think of me and say about me?" some responded.

"Tell me who will judge you. I will meet with them and make sure they support you," Shinjita responded.

To everyone's surprise, when Shinjita approached them, several agreed to come along to visit the Garo community. The first joint community meeting was held in April 2008.

The beginning of the meeting – with Muslim men and Garo women and men – was awkward: everyone sitting stiffly and staying silent on opposite sides of the room. Shinjita was confident though – she had worked hard for so many months to bring the two groups together and she was sure she could manage any heated arguments during the course of the dialogue. But even after the introductions, everyone was stoic and were avoiding eye contact with one another. Shinjita took a risk. She asked them to find someone from the other community who had the same color in his or her clothes, and then engage in a dialogue about their children, family and life in general.

To Shinjita's relief, it worked. She observed Muslim men chuckling with the Garo. And after 20 minutes of finding common ground, they were comfortable enough to move on to conversations about religious values.

Shinjita began this part of the dialogue by asking them to share the key values of their religions and how they practice them. They realized they share several of the same: honesty, peace, compassion and truth. The Muslims also identified brotherhood, stressing that all Muslims are brothers. But the Garo didn't accept that: "All human beings are our brothers." Shinjita stepped in: "Well, in that case all Muslims are still your brothers even though they might not see you that way."

The Muslims brought up something else: "Yes, these values are good, but they eat pork." Shinjita then asked if all the Muslims present ate beef. One said he didn't because he was allergic.

"Well how do you feel about those who eat it?" she asked.

"That's their problem not mine," he laughed.

"Perhaps one can feel the same about the Garo people who eat pork?"

From there they expressed the difficulties they encountered and a joint exploration of possible ways to address them. They all admitted they had not really talked so openly before, and that they felt inspired to address future problems by getting together and talking through them.

After months of hard work and dedication, Shinjita was facilitator and witness to a unique day in the lives of the participants: an open dialogue between once-bitter neighbors. She knew her work had made an impact when she, a Muslim, was invited to a Garo, Christian, family wedding.

1971: An Unresolved Year

"*Khalama*, I brought you some pan." Shinjita approached Arushua's hut in the slums of Dhaka, calling the old woman "auntie" as she offered her some bitter leaves to chew like candy. Arushua had been rude and angry at first, tired of researchers with their survey questions and promises of change.

But Shinjita didn't want anything from the older woman. "I just came to see you because I know how hard a life you live," Shinjita answered when Arushua inquired about the purpose of her many visits. "I could teach you some basic reading skills so you can attend hospitals or other places you need. I can't do much more than that."

Shinjita soon became a regular guest. Chewing bitternut leaves and sitting in comforting silence, and at ease in Shinjita's radiant presence and unceasing patience, Arushua let her walls of numbness slowly crumble.

One evening, Shinjita asked, "Why are you here? You have a son living with you?" Arushua put aside the pan she was lifting to her mouth, then dropped her head. The silence lingered. Slowly lifting her head after a few drawn out breaths, Arushua sat up straight and looked at Shinjita. "Promise me you won't tell it to anyone here," she calmly demanded. "Otherwise I will have no life here."

The night of March 25, 1971 marked the beginning of a 9-month long bloodshed across what was then East Pakistan. The *Mukti Bahini*, or liberation fighters, learned quickly after their first losses to West Pakistani soldiers that they needed to change their strategy. They adopted guerrilla warfare, and the fighting moved from Dhaka and larger cities to the villages, exacting a devastating price. The West Pakistani army systematically killed civilians, mainly Bengali Hindus but often also fellow Muslims, and demolished entire villages.

Arushua, who had just reached marriageable age, was living in Jessore district in the southwest of the country, along the border with India. The West Pakistani army set up camps and attacked the border repeatedly to prevent people from crossing. In the evenings, however, they needed entertainment. Along with *rajakar*, or local collaborators, the soldiers raided villages for women – old and young alike. One night Arushua awoke to Pakistani soldiers and rajakar slaughtering her neighbours and dragging women out of their homes. She was soon one of them.

At the army camp all the girls were kept in a single room. There were a few there already when Arushua and five others from her village were brought in. Each night, one or two of them were chosen randomly and taken to a separate room. Three to seven men took turns, one after another raping them. Arushua was too young to understand what was happening. The first time they took her, she was so afraid she lost consciousness. She woke to piercing pain, blood flowing down her legs and from her breasts where they had bitten her like animals.

After each round of rape, the soldiers would give them some food and leave them alone for a few days. But then another group would take them and it would all begin again. The girls were too weak to try to escape, and some, including Arushua, were so desperate they tried to kill themselves.

But after three months, the military closed its camp and moved from the area, releasing the girls. They returned to an empty village. The villagers who had survived the many attacks had fled to India or were in hiding. Arushua took refuge in her home, though her family was nowhere to be found.

After the war ended at the close of 1971 – leaving 1 to 3 million dead, 40 million displaced and over 200,000 women raped[21] – Arushua's mother, two brothers and a sister-in-law returned to their village to find Arushua. Rather than a joyful reunion, they refused to accept her, knowing she had been taken to the army camp. Families viewed rape as a blemish to their honor and that of the community. Women who were carrying the enemy's child faced even harsher situations.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first leader of independent Bangladesh, attempted to remove the stigma on raped women and girls, naming them *biranganas* – "war heroines." He even offered rewards to men for marrying these young women. But for most, the disgrace could not be erased.

Arushua's hips were expanding, a reminder of the new life growing in her womb. While some women – and girls as young as 12 – gave birth and then abandoned their newborns, or chose abortions, Arushua resolved to keep her child. When her brothers learned of her decision, they threw their "war heroine" out of the house. She set foot on the road to Dhaka, knowing her survival depended on living with her child out of sight of everyone she had ever known.

"What could I do?" Arushua lamented to Shinjita. "I could have killed myself. But when I felt that there was something growing in me, I couldn't. Even though this child was from the enemy, he was innocent. I was slowly starting to love him."

The strangers of the slums of Dhaka didn't know Arushua's story. "I gave birth here, and everyone thinks that my husband was killed. Even my son still thinks that. He will never know."

Side by side with her love of her child was a bitter anger at the Bangladeshi government. "I'm all right, I survived. But there are women who were raped, tortured, beaten and mentally broken. They aren't living; at least I am, but nobody knows."

Shinjita went on to hear – and carry with her – many stories like Arushua's that bear witness to the founding of Bangladesh, a past still not reconciled.

A CONVERSATION WITH SHINJITA ALAM

The following is an edited compilation of interviews conducted by Ilze Dzenovska between Sept. 10 and Oct. 31, 2008.

Q: How do you identify yourself? As a Bangladeshi? A Muslim?

A: My identity is very clear to me. I think about myself as a candle. The role of a candle is to burn but also to give light to others. Yes, there is warmth – but especially light. Especially in a dark place, a candle will burn but give light to others. This is how I feel about myself. If you ask me my identity, first I say I'm a social worker, or you can say I'm a peace worker or peace activist – this is my first role, to change something in the society, in the structure. The first thing I want to do is change my own society. I don't believe in religious identity, regional or national identity. I don't believe in that. I believe that religious and regional identities are all barriers.

Q: Tell me about your family.

A: My son is 12. In March I left my job at the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), where I worked for many years. Then I stayed at home for some time, but I engaged in some volunteer work: I helped some national organizations to develop some peace activities and I also did some consultancy work. But it is not a regular job. So most of the time I stayed home, and when I did and my son saw that I was doing some cooking, washing, cleaning, he tells me, "Why are you doing these kind of things?" This is surprising for him. And when I tell him I'm staying home, he says to me: "No, you don't do this. You go work outside." I think he is proud of me doing things outside the home.

My husband is very influential in my life. He told me, later after we got married, that when I was visiting my brother's wife's home, he observed me and saw that I'm not an ordinary girl, I'm different. And he thought that if I had support from others I could do so many things. He saw my potential.

When I was struggling for my chance to study during college, I developed a friendship with him. He supported me and encouraged me, but it was pure friendship. I chose to study social welfare to work in the development sector, and I felt that I would never get married. So I made a decision that I would be by myself. I would just do social work.

In university I was involved with a political party and also with a cultural club. Through songs we would raise awareness about socialism. So political parties and cultural clubs were connected. All cultural clubs were leftist. I also volunteered to support people who were living in slum areas. During holidays many times I stayed at university to work with these people. We would educate them about health issues, family planning, contraception.

So I thought if I get married I will not have opportunity to do the work I want. But when I met my husband I found that he is a very different person. He encouraged me to do everything that I did and even more. He was also very different from his other sisters and brothers. He was involved in the same party and he did a lot of social work. He spoke for progress.

And another important thing: He never stressed my identity as a girl or woman, he saw me as a person – a human being. In my country when we go for movies, men and women stand in separate lines to buy tickets. Then there would be separate areas assigned for single men, women and married couples for watching the movie. He would always say, "Stand with me," while we were buying tickets. "I will buy us tickets."

We always talked about literature, society. We didn't talk much about our personal life. Rabindranath Tagore is my favorite poet and also his, so we would exchange books, music. Sometimes he would sing for me; he has a wonderful voice. We would also explain the meaning of the songs to each other.

He said, "I want you to have a better future. If you want to be with me, I will be with you and support you. If you just want me to support you, I will do it also." So I made a decision. I talked with some of my friends, schoolmates. They all encouraged me and they liked him. One of them said, "If you will not marry him, I will."

I told him everything I want to do; I told him about my struggle, that I want to see myself as a human person not just as a woman at home. There is one sentence from Tagore: "I spent my life without doing any good thing, because I spent my life in my house." He made a commitment that he will support me in anything I'll do.

Q: Rabindranath Tagore has been very influential in your life. Can you describe that influence in more detail?

A: I love Rabindranath Tagore. Sometimes I feel like I miss him. I feel sorry that I was not born during his time. I just love everything about him – his poems, stories, songs. It is interesting, when I read any of his work it feels like he has written particularly for me.

"I see outside in the light of my eyes, I don't see inside of me." He is explaining that we normally don't discover the potential we have, what we need, what we have. That's the whole meaning of the song.

Another of his songs is about how we love to see other places. We go far, to China, India, to see beauty – but we don't see our own beauty, what is next to us, around us. We always search for beauty far from us. He also talks a lot about development of the individual and of humanity. He says we don't see outside the box, so he encourages exposure to new things, to see things in a new light. He expands one's mind.

"We go far ... to see beauty – but we don't see our own beauty, what is next to us, around us. We always search for beauty far from us."

My family members like his work. My mom and father loved reading books. All of my brothers liked reading. Now I also have a big library. When I was little I would hear his songs at home and we

would have lots of his books. My husband is a great singer and sometimes we both sing Rabindranath songs together at home with our friends and relatives. He really has a wonderful voice. My son doesn't like Rabindranath that much. His songs are too slow for today's youth. They don't like him as much as we do.

I love him also because he broke a lot of traditions. Rabindranath Tagore proved that if a person wants to do anything, he or she can. He came from a rich family but he didn't want to gain more wealth; he didn't crave to be richer. He is the only person whose songs are national anthems for two countries: India and Bangladesh. Both people of India and Bangladesh consider him their poet. He didn't have any boundaries.

Q: What are your thoughts on the Grameen Bank and microcredit organizations? Muhammad Yunus has said that poverty in Bangladesh will soon be in the museum.

A: We will sooner put the whole of Bangladesh in the museum. When I started work, I learned that I can't address financial issues only. If women have no awareness about their health, they will spend all their money on treatment. Therefore I included a health component in the work. I also had to address family conflicts because they paralyzed everything in that family.

The Grameen Bank has grown and changed – the money lending is no longer paired with skills training sessions and assistance to women. In many cases women are beneficiaries of four to six organizations, but sometimes even ten. They don't invest money in income-generating activities, but use it for everyday survival and then take a next loan to pay off the previous and buy some food for their family.

Microcredit organizations choose only to show the success stories. They show the same people over and over again. If you go through them [to learn about microcredit], they will take you to the people who already have been prepared to say certain things. I have talked with employees of large microfinance organizations in Bangladesh. They say it is a very small percentage that is suffering. But my colleagues and I, we have observed that it is a few who are benefiting but the vast majority is suffering. Local people don't trust the organizations, but internationally they are very famous.

I see a lot of short-term improvements, but I see a lot of harm being caused too. The only long-term positive impact I find is the fact that the Grameen Bank credit policy for the first time opened the doors of the home and invited women into the public space.

Q: Working almost 24 hours a day, and identifying yourself as a candle that burns to give its light, how do you prevent from "burning out"? What keeps you going?

A: Yes, that's how I feel and why I serve as much as I can. When I was with MCC, I worked almost 24 hours a day for them. But I didn't feel tired. In my mind, I wasn't really working for MCC; I felt I was serving my people. It was real – every day was different and felt meaningful. I was never bored. I gain energy when I see that there are some results for my activities. The change in the community gives me energy.

Q: What changed during the eight years when women participated in the MCC groups? How were the women affected individually, and how were their families affected?

A: Many things changed. We had a development plan for them. We established a committee with three people: writer, cashier and president. During every group meeting there would be a lesson we provide about health, balanced diet – many, many things. For example, some [pregnant] women think that they should resist eating food so that the baby doesn't grow big, so it is easier to deliver the baby. As a result, the baby and mother are weak and there are high infant mortality rates.

We also established bank accounts in their name, and we take them to the bank, clinic and local administration offices. We taught six-month adult literacy courses so they can read simple things and do simple math. Their children go to school and read at home, and their parents normally don't know how their children are doing. But after these literacy classes, they can help correct their children's mistakes.

Q: In the villages of Bangladesh, how difficult is it to bring Muslim women into public spaces?

A: They are not even allowed to go to the market. One of our groups was ready to buy a cow. So these women would hide behind the tree, stand and wait until they saw someone coming with a cow. They would call them aside and make the purchase.

Another group was cultivating fish. That was a challenge that I decided to take because this is usually a men thing. We had to go to the market at 4 o'clock in the morning to sell, and I had to take them there. We did it for five years, starting in 1995. I know everything about fish, just ask me. Every day I would travel to the village, about 10 to 20 kilometers from my home. I had an MCC vehicle with a driver. I would go in the morning and stay until the evening.

There are so many women in the village who want to do different things, they just need support. I said, "I will give it to you." When we bring women for training in leadership or livestock training, at first we had to bring their husbands and fathers. So they stay and see what we do with them. They would object at first. We were very open; we invited all the community people who were curious to come. When we finished our work after eight years, so many groups and individuals continued their income-generating activities.

Q: Did people manage to make a step out of poverty?

A: There was improvement of their financial situation. When we left, some of these groups received back their savings, up to 24,000 taka. So they had cash to use. They were saving little by little. They decreased their pan-chewing habits or other things, and put the money in their group account. For those who wanted to break from the group, we gave them money, but those who wanted to stay, they continued their savings. They had also learned basic reading and writing skills, so they could take their children to hospital if needed, and have easier access to services.

Q: You were the first to start the peace program – peace awareness committees – in MCC. What inspired you to implement this initiative?

A: Officially the program started in 2006, but in reality I had started it in February 2001. I prepared five-year peace project plans for other organizations: the Centre for Community Development Assistance, in Comilla, and Taize Brothers, a Christian group. Through the peace awareness

committees, I started to work on this peace program with a focus on conflict transformation. The aim of the committee was to educate.

When I started to have problems with women's group in the villages, I started counseling them in order to resolve the conflict. Those were the skills I acquired during my studies. I didn't have much experience – I had only heard one lecture – so I prepared myself with the help of one North American colleague. Then I started talking at MCC about my idea. They agreed to send me to MCC in India, which had already started a conflict resolution program. My supervisor was very impressed with my work, so he helped me. After I returned, I started more intense work with the groups, and after my second training in India I started to involve the community leaders.

When I started talking about people, even MCC people refused me. Then I talked to my supervisor and we decided to first provide training for MCC staff, which at that time was over 200 people. A group of us developed a curriculum, and we had three training modules. Our people were highly appreciative of this training, so we provided it for organizations outside. The main components were training to the MCC staff, partners, community leaders and beneficiaries, and the final component was cooperation with Dhaka University – they had just started a department of peace and conflict studies. They were mainly providing theoretical knowledge; hence, the role of our relationship was to provide practical experience to them. Later I also added the interfaith dialogue component to their program.

Q: How did you approach the community leaders and manage to get them on board?

A: I knew that I needed to share this with men, otherwise it would not work. So I did counseling with them. I first did the training to women and then they convinced their husbands. I also had to establish the relationship with the communities. I had to find a way for common ground. Some of the community members knew my husband and my father-in-law, who was a senior police officer – a very respected man. So I found entrance into the communities through that introduction – "I'm the wife of … ." I did feel bad about it, but I had no choice.

We would go to a home, meet with the family, talk with them once, twice, three times. First was just to learn about their lives, and then slowly introduce the subject after I had created some trust. If I can establish a relationship with one family, then they help to establish a relationship with the next. Usually several relatives live together, so they would introduce me to other members of their family. Sometimes before forming the group, I take them to the office or to other established groups. This group exposure is helpful because they learn direct experiences of other villagers.

Q: Can you discuss your work with minorities in Bangladesh?

A: The Garo and Chakma people are very different from the rest of Bangladesh. They even differ from each other. For example, Garo people are matriarchal but Chakma is a patriarchal society. Normally we don't consider indigenous people as Bangladeshi; I do include them, but the majority doesn't. They are referred to as tribal people – they look and dress differently, they have their own culture.

Another group with which I just started to work with is the Manipuri people. They are originally from Manipur in India, and in Bangladesh they live in Sylhet District. I started to work with the Manipuri in 2007, and we started joint groups for Manipuri and Bengali. First I provided them basic

conflict resolution training and active listening in the course of two days. Manipuri people have land issue problems because Bengali Muslims are taking their land. They typically have only a house and a little land in front of it for vegetable cultivation and pig rearing. Another problem they face is low and unfair wages for tea leaf picking in plantations, so I initiated talks with the owners of plantations.

We brought together Bengali Muslims and Manipuri people so they start listening to each other. These activities started under MCC. I involved a national organization, the Centre for Community Development Assistance (CCDA). I now volunteer for CCDA and help to develop some training curriculum.

Q: In your family growing up, what was the approach to education?

A: In my family it was traditional for men to get education. My grandfather was educated, all my uncles were educated – one of them even studied in England. My father studied in Calcutta. All my brothers followed in the footsteps of their ancestors. They belonged to the only highly educated family in the village, so they viewed themselves as aristocrats, superior to their neighbors and to their family women. Even my mother encouraged them to study, while on the other hand none of my elder sisters received any support. Espousing them was the first priority. After father's death it became my brothers' responsibility. Then and still now they are convinced that God gave less intelligence to women, so it's the right thing to do to put them in place.

In terms of real education, I feel that if I get a skill to analyze society, to understand it, then I can understand the root causes of the social problems. And if I see them, then I need in my own way to contribute to changing these root causes. But if a person just focuses on the personal benefits of education, in a very self-centered way, I don't call it education. I would not call them an educated person. When you are educated you have power to change things, you have leadership potential. If my brother's wife wanted to change things in my family she could have, but she didn't do anything.

"Real education makes a person a compassionate human being who cares for the betterment of us all … . Education gives us power to change things."

Real education makes a person a compassionate human being who cares for the betterment of us all, one who has the skills to analyze social problems, identify their root causes, and the willingness to address them. Education gives us power to change things. I believe that change begins within me, my family and then my community.

BEST PRACTICES IN PEACEBUILDING

ACTIVITY	GENERAL CATEGORY OF PEACEMAKING	DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION
Income-generating activities to improve the quality of life of women in rural areas of Bangladesh	Economic empowerment; health awareness; adult education for rural women and men	Because of traditional, cultural and religious norms, a holistic approach is necessary to improve the quality of life for women in rural Bangladesh. Entry into the community requires relationship building to build trust. To encourage transparency, Shinjita often invites all interested community members to observe a training site. Both women and men receive skills training and education regarding income-generating activities, agriculture, health and family planning. Men must also be involved in the process to realize the benefits these skills bring to the family and entire community. Women form groups of 20 to 25 members; members cannot be part of microcredit organizations. The group collectively saves money in order to have the starting capital to invest in vegetable cultivation, cattle-rearing or a fishing business. The MCC does not give out loans, in order to avoid putting women in debt.
Role plays and workshops to raise awareness of gender-based and domestic violence	Elimination of violence and discrimination against women	An element of the above holistic approach, Shinjita gives trainings and workshops on gender-based and domestic violence to both men and women. Some of these discussions are facilitated by men, so that liberal and conservative men can engage in dialogue. In some trainings, men are asked to play the role of women in various situations at home or in public life – including for example playing the role of a young girl forced into an early marriage.

ACTIVITY	GENERAL CATEGORY OF PEACEMAKING	DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION
Dialogues on the history of women's roles	Education	Shinjita facilitates discussions with groups of six to seven women. They reflect on what their grandmothers and mothers did, both inside and outside the home, and what they currently do as wives. This encourages reflection on how gender roles change and are not static or necessarily God-given.
Job creation programs for rural women	Economic empowerment of rural women	Shinjita provides skills development and training on the production, marketing and exporting of handicrafts. The groups of between 60 and 100 women sell their products to the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), and then receive their share of the generated profit. Each group functions as an enterprise, with different women assigned to marketing, design, financial management, etc.
Family and community dispute resolution	Conflict resolution and prevention	Shinjita facilitates trainings on conflict awareness, cultural awareness and mediation skills for group leaders, both men and women. Groups of 25 help resolve disputes between parties in a community, rather than seeking an outside arbitrator or relying on traditional modes of arbitration, which can be discriminatory against women.
Peace awareness committee within the MCC	Peace education	Believing that employees in the field of development and social welfare need skills to recognize conflicts and resolve them in non-violent ways among themselves, Shinjita initiated peace awareness committees within the MCC. These skills can then be transferred to the local communities they serve.
Interfaith dialogue	Education and dialogue across religious lines	Respected religious leaders at the national level convene for a dialogue co-facilitated by Shinjita and the MCC. The goals are to learn the values and principles of other religions and prevent the escalation of conflict based on stereotypes that intensified after Sept. 11, 2001. The dialogue consists of identifying common values and engaging in various activities intended to break down barriers and dissolve assumptions.

ACTIVITY	GENERAL CATEGORY OF PEACEMAKING	DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION
Interethnic dialogue	Education and dialogue across interethnic lines	Shinjita initiated and implemented a series of workshops for communities divided along ethnic lines, particularly minority groups discriminated against by the Muslim majority. People from both sides come together to identify common values and form a leadership committee that will facilitate further dialogue between both sides, with the goal to prevent future conflict.

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BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER – ILZE DZENOVSKA

Ilze Dzenovska, a Fulbright scholar and 2008 graduate of the M.A. program in peace and justice studies at the University of San Diego, was born in Riga, Latvia. Growing up during the time of Latvia's struggle to regain independence and its journey of democratization, Dzenovska developed a passion for human rights and cross-cultural understanding. She received her B.A. in political science from Riga Stradins University, Latvia, and a law degree from the University of Latvia. Prior to her studies in San Diego, Dzenovska's work and research encompassed areas such as victims' rights advocacy, gender equality, restorative justice and police reform projects at the Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS in Latvia. She is an accredited mediator by the School of Psychotherapy and Counseling at Regent's College, London, and a member of the European Forum for Restorative Justice.

Photo Credit: Patricia Rogers

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. Through education, research and peacemaking activities, the IPJ offers programs that advance scholarship and practice in conflict resolution and human rights. The institute, a unit of the University of San Diego's Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, draws on Catholic social teaching that sees peace as inseparable from justice and acts to prevent and resolve conflicts that threaten local, national and international peace.

The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the University of San Diego to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice. Programming began in early 2001 and the building was dedicated in December 2001 with a conference, "Peacemaking with Justice: Policy for the 21st Century."

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In Nepal, for example, for nearly a decade the IPJ has been working with Nepali groups to support inclusiveness and dialogue in the transition from armed conflict and monarchy to peace and multiparty democracy. In its West African Human Rights Training Initiative, the institute partners with local human rights groups to strengthen their ability to pressure government for reform and accountability.

In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute has several ongoing programs. The Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series is a forum for high-level national and international leaders and policymakers to share their knowledge and perspective on issues related to peace and justice.

WorldLink, a year-round educational program for middle school and high school students from San Diego and Baja California, connects youth to global affairs.

Community outreach includes speakers, films, art and opportunities for discussion between community members, academics and practitioners on issues of peace and social justice, as well as dialogue with national and international leaders in government, nongovernmental organizations and the military.

In addition to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies includes the Trans-Border Institute, which promotes border-related scholarship and an active role for the university in the cross-border community, and a master's program in Peace and Justice Studies to train future leaders in the field.

UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

Chartered in 1949, the University of San Diego (USD) is a Roman Catholic institution of higher learning located on 180 acres overlooking San Diego's Mission Bay. The University of San Diego is committed to promoting academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse community and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical and compassionate service.

The university is steadfast in its dedication to the examination of the Catholic tradition as the basis of a continuing search for meaning in contemporary life. Global peace and development and the application of ethics and values are examined through campus centers and institutes such as the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Values Institute, the Trans-Border Institute, the Center for Public Interest Law, the Institute for Law and Philosophy and the International Center for Character Education. Furthermore, through special campus events such as the Social Issues Conference, the James Bond Stockdale Leadership and Ethics Symposium and the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series, we invite the community to join us in further exploration of these values.

The USD campus, considered one of the most architecturally unique in the nation, is known as Alcalá Park. Like the city of San Diego, the campus takes its name from San Diego de Alcalá, a Franciscan brother who served as the infirmarian at Alcalá de Henares, a monastery near Madrid, Spain. The Spanish Renaissance architecture that characterizes the five-century-old University of Alcalá serves as the inspiration for the buildings on the USD campus. The architecture was intended by the founders, Bishop Charles Francis Buddy and Mother Rosalie Hill, to enhance the search for truth through beauty and harmony. Recent additions, such as the state-of-the-art Donald P. Shiley Center for Science and Technology and the new School of Leadership and Education Sciences building carry on that tradition.

A member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa, USD is ranked among the nation's top 100 universities. The university offers its 7,500 undergraduate, graduate and law students rigorous academic programs in more than 60 fields of study through six academic divisions, including the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Business Administration, Leadership and Education Sciences, Law, and Nursing and Health Science. The Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies opened in Fall 2007.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

BNP	Bangladesh National Party
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tract
IPJ	Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
MCC	Mennonite Central Committee
RAB	Rapid Action Battalion
USD	University of San Diego

ENDNOTES

[1] A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article "'Women Cannot Cry Anymore': Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict," by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

[2] The exact number of casualties of the war is under much dispute.

[3] Human Rights Watch press release. "Bangladesh: End Mass Arrests, Release Detainees." June 5, 2008.

[4] McTernan, Benedict F., ed. *Central and South Asia 2008: Political Risk Yearbook, Volume 8*. East Syracuse, NY: The PRS Group, 2008: 19

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid*, 32.

[7] "Bangladesh: Early Monsoon Floods Point to Climate Change." *IRIN*. June 25, 2008. www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportID=78925.

[8] "Island claimed by India and Bangladesh sinks under waves." *Guardian*. March 24, 2010. www.guardian.co.uk/world/cif-green/2010/mar/24/india-bangladesh-sea-levels

[9] In the absence of birth certificates, the majority of Shinjita's schoolmates were registered with the same birthday in 1966. It was part of the national education requirements that only those children who had reached the age of 15 on the day of the exam would be allowed to participate. Since that entry in the school's journal, Nov. 22, 1966 became Shinjita's official date of birth. However, with her family and friends, Shinjita would still always celebrate her real birthday during the monsoon season, on June 29, 1967.

[10] Ha-do-do-do was a popular game in Bangladesh. Players stand on two lines and a person from the other line has to take a player over to their line. While they try to do that, they have to continue saying "ha-do-do-do" with one breath. Shinjita and her friends enjoyed playing it during the monsoon season and rainy days because then there is mud on the ground, making it slippery and more likely that the players fall. Due to the overpopulation of Bangladesh today, there are not many playgrounds left for playing ha-do-do-do.

[11] Only later would Bangladeshi people remember the year 1974 as the year of great famine.

[12] In 1982, the infant mortality rate was 121.9 deaths per 1,000 live births. According to the official government statistics in 1985, approximately 56 percent of infants suffered from chronic malnutrition.

[13] Pan is tobacco wrapped in bitter leaves. It is very popular in the villages of Bangladesh.

[14] Bangla for "older sister."

[15] They stayed close and preserved their friendship until his death in 2006.

[16] College years in Bangladesh are equivalent to the years of high school. Two years of college are required prior to enrolling in a B.A. program at a university.

[17] These are pseudonyms.

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[18] The Grameen Bank is based on Yunus' philosophy that poor women have important skills and ideas for what to do with money, they just need access to it to raise themselves and their families out of poverty. Making women responsible for borrowing the money and repaying it, Yunus and the bank believe this guarantees more benefits to the whole family, a high return rate and a shift toward more freedom and respect for women from their male family members. Shinjita's organization, the MCC, on the other hand followed a different operating principle: Teach women the practical skills, provide knowledge on health, basic education, women's rights and conflict resolution – but above all include their husbands in these decisions and skills – so that together they could lift themselves out of poverty. The involvement of the men is crucial, as it preempts any attempts to claim they were left out of the process.

[19] It was believed that nose studs bring happiness and success to the husband when his wife's breath flows past the stud and then touches him in his sleep.

[20] This work is discussed more in the Best Practices in Peacebuilding section.

[21] There are no precise casualty numbers available; depending on the source the accounts vary from 200,000 to 3 million murdered.