MEMOIR

Tribute to My *Polestar*

A first-generation learner remembers the teacher who kept her on course.

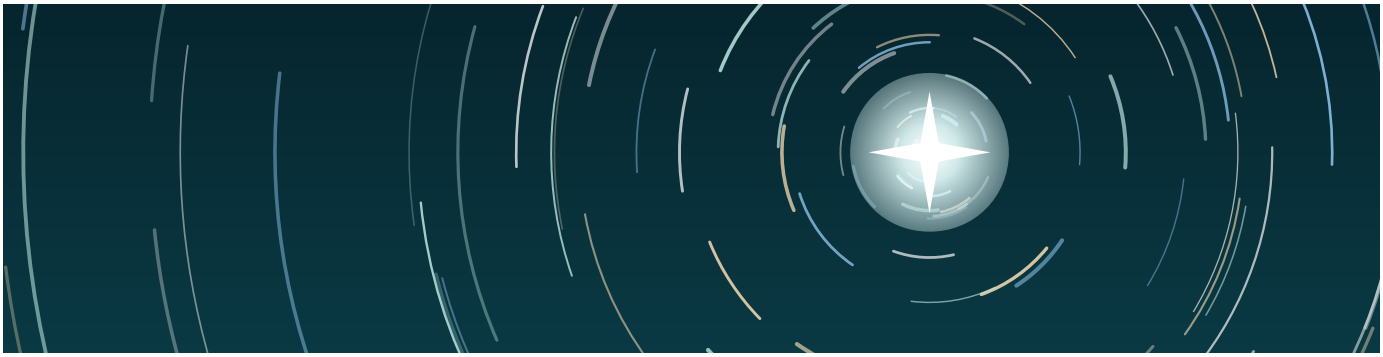


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ABSTRACT

A former student's tribute to Soma Bharati, the school teacher who guided her from a Class XI classroom in Bhangamora to a first-class degree and a teaching career of her own. Through memories of shared books, advice and encouragement, the essay argues that the compassion of a true teacher cannot be replaced by any machine.

KEYWORDS Teaching · Mentorship · First-generation learners · Bengali literature



The pole star stays fixed while the sky turns around it. Illustration: U-Talk.

In this era of digital technology and artificial intelli- gence, overshadowed by educational corruption, cycles of question-paper leaks, uncertainty and hopelessness, Soma Bharati Madam remains one of the very few people I consider my role model. I first met her in 2011, in my Class XI classroom at Bhangamora School. Instead of emphasising rote memorisation, she always encouraged us to write answers independently. From her I learned an elegant way of understanding literature with emotion, of explaining difficult grammatical rules, and of bringing individual creative thought into writing.

We all agree that school life is the formative stage of our lives. Her prudent, motherly warnings about the usual temptations of adolescence protected me and never let my focus drift from my studies. Even then, she advocated the economic independence of women as the most important foundation for their empowerment and status in society. Her wise counsel, imprinted on my mind since school, continues to help me in my professional life.

When I took admission in a lesser-known village college in 2012, the whole world seemed to turn against me. At that time she stood beside me, saying, "The institution does not matter if you keep your focus on your studies." I am happy that I proved her words by securing a first class and second rank across the entire University of Burdwan. Entering the vast sea of English literature, I first felt like a fish out of water. She then guided me to approach my studies fearlessly.

She instilled a love of literature in me from my school days and introduced me to the rich repository of Bengali literature and the classic works of Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Buddhadeb Guha and Narayan Sanyal. Her suggestion that I read cult texts such as Madhukari, Purba Paschim and Aranyak changed my outlook on life. She lent me her books, and we discussed them in a

homely literary adda (discussion). This nurtured my literary sensibility and paved the way for my further study of English literature.

She played a crucial role in my voyage of education and self-exploration. Stepping forward in education is not easy for a first-generation learner like me in our country. She always advised me on how to overcome economic struggle and fight social barriers. My parents gave me life and support, but she gave me the inner strength to face every adversity with courage and a silent smile. When I look back on the days from 2011 until now, I remember visiting her house innumerable times and calling her through thick and thin. She never gave up on me and always believed in my capabilities, even when I myself had abandoned hope. Her words **"You can definitely do this" ("Tumi parbei")** urged me to do the impossible. Her heartfelt blessing, "May success kiss your feet," became magical words that helped me move ahead. Her encouragement consistently lit up my "half-asleep" possibilities. Her philosophy resonates with Kahlil Gibran's words on teaching in The Prophet:

> *"No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge. The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness."*

"Tumi parbei"

You can definitely do this.

The words that urged a first-generation learner to do the impossible.

Now let us leave the academic realm behind and step into life. From her I have learned how to live fully and joyfully, how to respect another's private space and where to stop, and how to balance emotion and reality, joy and sorrow. She teaches me to move forward without wasting precious time in the conundrums of the past, and to let go of painful episodes by forgiving people. Her lesson of compassion and forgiveness is perfectly aligned with Alexander Pope's famous line in An Essay on Criticism: "To err is human, to forgive divine." She is a powerhouse of positivity whose fragrance spreads to everyone around her. A person of diverse talents, her engagement with theatre, music, poetry, cultural programmes and travel makes her all the more dynamic and energetic. My only regret is that I have not been able to bring that kind of positivity into my own life; it would have made life easier.

Although I am an established introvert, I can discuss anything with her without hesitation—literature, politics, culture, love, marriage. I share everything with her in the firm belief that she will never judge me, yet she always corrects me when I make mistakes. She gives me a safe shelter, and I see her care and concern whenever I am in trouble, distress or ill health. Like a skilled boatman, she has steered my life's boat through every storm of darkness and fog of uncertainty. To this day I share with her not only news of success and joy but also moments of failure, depression, emotional turmoil and dilemma. She encouraged me to embrace Rabindranath Tagore's maxim in the poem Bojhapora —"Bhalo mondo jahai ashuk, / Shottere lao shohoje"— as my personal credo, and to keep up the spirit of Rudyard Kipling's If: to remain calm and patient in the face of adversity. Her motherly affection and patience never fail to read my mind and feelings from my face, without my saying much. She appears like an angelic solution bank for all my questions in life; in a word, she is a panacea for all my worries and doubts, personal and professional.

"Be honest to yourself." — the advice she wrote in my diary in 2013"

I always try to follow her golden advice, "Be honest to yourself," which she wrote in my diary in 2013. Crossing the boundary of a mere teacher, she has become my friend, philosopher and guide. She has not only extended a loving hand to enrich me academically but has also helped me become a better human being.

Although the world progresses with AI, **the genuine compassion and concern of a true teacher cannot be replaced by any machine**. I know the debt to a teacher cannot be repaid in a single lifetime. So I pray to God that our cordial bond remains intact forever, and that I may one day give her a proud moment and make her name shine as her student. That will be my only offering to my real-life guide. ■