

# Historic Photos Related to Cardiac Surgery in Bangladesh

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A photograph is more powerful than a thousand words. Historic photographs are invaluable assets depicting some important aspects of an age. Performing the first open heart operation is an important event in the history of any nation. The first open heart surgery of the world using heart lung machine was performed by John Gibbon on May 6, 1953 in Philadelphia, USA.<sup>1</sup> To commemorate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that glorious event in 1963, a beautiful photograph was taken portraying surgeon John Gibbon, his patient Cecelia Bevolak and an artificial iron lung used for open heart surgery in those days.<sup>2</sup> Twenty-eight years later, the first open heart surgery of Bangladesh was performed by a joint team of Japanese and Bangladeshi surgeons on September 18, 1981.<sup>3</sup> This was a historic event in the history of medical science in Bangladesh and should have been well recorded. Unfortunately, no proper photographs concerning this event is available. This first became evident to me in 2017, while drafting an article titled 'The Early days of Cardiac Surgery in South Asia: History and Heritage'.<sup>4</sup> Looking for the photographs of the pioneering team of the South Asian nations, I could find the Photographs of India (1961), Pakistan (1970) and Nepal (1999), but no photographs of the Bangladeshi team was available. After days of interviewing all the persons present during surgery and still alive in 2017, along with manual and internet search, no photograph of the pioneering team could be found. Nobody even could provide any photograph of the Japanese members of the team. So, I had to conclude that no photograph of the pioneering team survives and my article published in the Annals of Thoracic Surgery portrayed a photograph of Brig. (Rtd.) Dr. Abdul Malik along with the patient from reports collected from the archive of a 1981 issue of the Daily Observer.

With my kin interest in medical history, this was a sad finding. Despite initial disappointment, I

continued systematic searching. From NICVD documents and the then working doctors, I came to know the names of the Japanese surgeons. The main Japanese surgeon was Dr. Komei Saji. I could figure out a Japanese surgeon named Hishashi Saji from the CTS network. I also contacted Japan Circulation Society in search of him. With the help from these two, finally I could find out Dr. Komei Saji. On 10<sup>th</sup> August 2021 he sent me a reply email. Now in his late 80s, Dr. Saji is leading a retired life in the Northern Japanese prefecture of Sendai. He was very excited being contacted by a Bangladeshi cardiac surgeon inquiring about those historic events after all these years. He has sent me some old photos from his collection. To the very best of my knowledge, these photos have neither ever been published nor are in possession of anyone in Bangladesh. It appears essential to me publish these photographs before these are lost. I wanted to take a telephonic interview, he humbly declined because of his ailments and also for the fact that he hasn't spoken in English for many years.



**Fig.-1:** *Some members of the pioneering Bangladeshi open heart surgery team with a few visitors. Front Row: Dr M Amanullah (cardiologist), Dr Komei Saji, Dr Tomino, Unidentified Japanese, Behind: Dr Khalilur Rahman, Dr Abdul Hadi, Dr Abdul Kader Khan (general surgeon), Dr Nurul Islam, Dr M Nabi Alam Khan and Dr Fazlur Rahman.*

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The first photograph could be described as hosting the pioneering Bangladeshi cardiac surgery team, had not the other Bangladeshi pioneer cardiac surgeon Prof. S R Khan been missing from it. Despite being long time colleagues, Late Prof. M Nabi Alam Khan and Prof. S R Khan have rarely been photographed in the same photo frame. Moreover, Prof. S R Khan avoids taking photograph on religious grounds for many years. They were known for their professional jealousy and personal friendship.



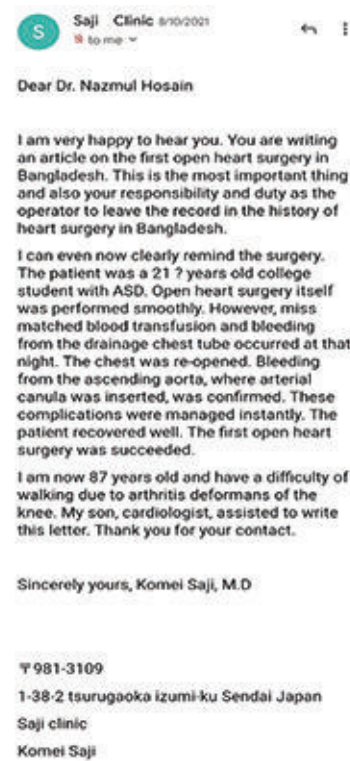
**Fig.-2:** Prof. M Nabi Alam Khan and Dr Komei Saji with two others.



**Fig.-3.** Prof M Nabi Alam Khan, Prof KHMS Sirajul Haque with Dr Komei Saji.

Prof. M Nabi Alam Khan and Dr Komei Saji are with two others in this second photo. This seems to be a 1980-81 photograph. The location of this photograph appears to be Miford Hospital campus with the historic King Edwards Building showing up in the background.

The third picture portrays Dr Komei Saji with Prof M Nabi Alam Khan and Prof. KHMS Sirajul Haque. This phot appears to be during Saji's



**Fig.-4A & B:** A recent photograph of Dr Komei Saji and his email to me.

second visit in 1986. The location appears to be the Shahbagh building hosting IPGMR Block B. The under construction building behind appears to be the Block C building of BSMMU

Four decades ago, a team of Japanese surgeons, anesthetists, nurses and technicians came to Bangladesh to help establish cardiac surgery here. We are grateful to Dr Komei Saji and other Japanese members of the pioneering team for their dedication and sacrifice. Unfortunately, the photographic evidence of those early days of cardiac surgery was lost. We express our very special thanks to this elderly Japanese surgeon

for donating these historic photographs from his personal collection.

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