

The Taher I knew

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LAWRENCE LIFSCHULTZ

I first met Taher in 1974 while I was living in Bangladesh. It was year of devastating floods which were causing extensive damage to crops particularly in areas such as Rangpur. With crops having been submerged more than five days, the autumn rice harvest was affected which meant landless and land-poor peasants would have no employment or means to buy rice for their own consumption.

By autumn, thousands of hungry rural folk were drifting into the towns in search of food, work or relief. When I reached Rangpur in October, famine dominated the town and its surrounding areas. It was a scene out of Dante's inferno with thousands of women and children begging for food. Their men folk had long since left for distant towns in the hope of finding work or relief and to send money home. Many had not been heard from.

It was in this atmosphere that I asked colleagues in Dhaka if they knew anyone who had a sophisticated understanding of the issue of flood control. Was there someone out there who understood the issue beyond the stale ideas that were being repeated year in and year out?

A journalist colleague told me there was an interesting army officer who had just published an article in Bichitra where he was

advancing innovative ideas which showed a clear grasp of the problem and factors that had contributed to the exacerbation of flooding by the type of development that had been pursued for decades. The officer's name was Abu Taher.

I sought out Taher at his office. He had recently left the army and was now heading the Sea Truck Unit, an inland water transport organisation. I was fascinated by the man's ideas. He knew there would be no solution to a future of recurring famines without finding a sustainable and durable solution to the country's chronic flooding. Taher had researched the approach that had been utilized during the Mughal period. He had extensively studied the subject and what had happened during the colonial period. Clearly, there were lessons to be learned that modern experts were not even dimly aware of.

During the Mughal period the authorities had extensively mobilized the rural work force during the dry season to dig out an extensive network of canals designed precisely to facilitate "run off" so that a flooded rice crop would never be under water more than five days -- the time threshold until the crop was ruined.

Taher had also concluded that the development of railroads and surface roads since the colonial period had exacerbated the flooding problem by building its trans-

port grids largely on an East-West axis. It was an axis that exacerbated crucial "run off" capability required to lower flood levels before crops were ruined. Moreover, the Mughal canal network that had made Bengal a relatively wealthy province had been systematically neglected during the colonial and post-colonial period. Naturally, the end result was a severe exacerbation of flooding.

Taher argued that the Mughals had organised their land based transport routes on a North-South axis, augmented where appropriate by river transport, which clearly was and had to be the backbone of the country's system of commodity transport. It was precisely for this reason he had taken up the post of Director of the Sea Truck Unit after he left the army.

I have only given the barest sketch of Taher's views. But, what I understood was that I had met a man who was a "scholar soldier" who looked to history to find pragmatic solutions to today's problems. I knew many people in Dhaka. This was my job as a reporter. But, as I got to know Taher, I found a remarkable synthesis of intellect, pragmatism, and commitment to solving Bangladesh's chronic problems of poverty and underdevelopment. I spent many evenings visiting him and talking into the early hours.

Not only did I learn about his

views of guerrilla warfare that he had begun to implement in the 11th sector during the Liberation War but I also learned about the "new paradigm" for an army organisation that he sought to implement when he took command of the Comilla Brigade.

Taher had a view that the Bangladesh Army faced a crossroads. It would either replicate the structures and organisational forms of the Pakistan Army or it would fashion itself into a new type of army not seen before in South Asia. If it ended up simply modeling itself ideologically and structurally on the Pakistan model where nearly all the soldiers had received their training, except for post-1971 Mukti Bahini recruits, then without doubt the Bangladesh Army at a future stage would become the agency of a military or a military-civilian dictatorship in this country.

In Taher's view if the Liberation War was to result in a fundamental change for those among the most impoverished strata in Bangladesh, then an army had to emerge that would identify with the interests of the poor. In his view, it could only do so by a new daily practice shaped around interactions with villagers and ordinary people. It would be an army much more than merely a force that carried arms. At this stage Taher called it a "productive army".

The Pakistan Army like all conventional armies had been an economic drain on the precious resources of the country. Huge budgets diverted funds to defense denying critical resources to schools, hospitals and productive investments. Decades of military dictatorship and domination had insured that Pakistan's Army had maintained a strangle hold on the country's economy. In Taher's view, the army was a giant para-

site which had been an integral element of the process that had kept East Pakistan poor and backward.

He asked himself whether so many lives had been sacrificed to recreate this monster in an independent Bangladesh. His answer was "no" and it certainly would not happen with his participation as an army officer. He would try to show the way to a new paradigm and ally with forces in Bangladesh that saw a greater promise than merely "independence" in a war that his men referred to as the Liberation War.

In the Comilla Brigade, Taher organised his soldiers to be "productive soldiers." The Brigade had to grow its own food and become as self-sufficient as possible so it would not be an economic burden on society. Members of the Brigade had also to go out into the surrounding villages and help local farmers with planting, harvesting and work on irrigation systems. They became known in the rest of the army as the "Plow Soldiers." Some thought this amusing but others saw a serious purpose.

Taher viewed such daily interaction between soldiers and ordinary people as being critical to changing the culture within the army and the "mentality of domination" that is the psychological bedrock of an army en route to becoming a military dictatorship. This is what Taher would ultimately mean by his concept of a People's Army in the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Taher explained to me that he had left the army because like minded officers like himself who were uncompromising against nascent forms of corruption and favoured a movement towards a new structure were losing ground.

Conventional patterns were resurting themselves. Increasingly, officers being repatriated from Pakistan who had been untouched by the ideological influence of the war, were assuming a greater role.

In a meeting with Taher, Mujib was patronizing and simply didn't grasp how serious the stakes were. The seeds of authoritarianism and military dictatorship were taking root. Mujib could not see this. In good Pakistani tradition, a military coup would happen. Taher intended to be outside the army preparing an alternative when that day came.

Mujib would pay a heavy price for not understanding what Taher had tried to describe to him in their last meeting.

In late 1974, I left Bangladesh to become South Asia correspondent for the Far Eastern Economic Review which meant I would be based in New Delhi with responsibility for covering all of South Asia. When I said farewell to Taher, I had no sense whatsoever that he was secretly a member of the JSD or was involved in organising units inside and outside the army who were preparing themselves for the moment when the most conservative elements in Bangladeshi society would assert themselves in a military coup that would threaten to bury democratic rights.

What I did sense from Taher was that he had evolved over the years into a "revolutionary socialist." He had occasionally asked me to bring him a specific book or journal from abroad. He clearly had an interest in socialist economic debates and economic planning as a tool in development. Our discussions reflected an insightful, critical and thoughtful man.

It was only after the November 7 Uprising in 1975 that I saw Taher

again. I was surprised to find that he was the military commander of the Uprising. While surprising to me, it was also logical to me. It was Taher's attempt to put his ideas into practice.

My relationship with Taher remained absolutely professional. When we met in the third week of November, he was already underground. Although he had saved Zia's life on November 7 (according to Zia's public claim at the time), Taher and the JSD's assessment of Zia's position had been wrong despite Zia's claims in private that only socialist policies could end Bangladesh's desperate poverty.

I managed to meet him after making elaborate arrangements. I was guided to a rendezvous by Taher's elder brother, Abu Yusuf Khan. We met for about ninety minutes where I heard Taher's side of the events surrounding November 7. As I was preparing to leave, he said I would be welcome back. He was hopeful. He implied their day was coming.

I reminded him that I would always be standing far back in the crowd watching him and his colleagues if they came to power. I said, depending on how they acted would determine whether or not I would be "welcome." I told him if there were arbitrary arrests or worse, I would be the first to report it. In such a situation, I said I may not be welcome. I reminded him that I was a critical skeptic of all power. He nodded, smiled and said he understood my point. I said, if you implement your dreams, I will also be there to report it. Create the New Army. Solve the flood control issue. Help the poor cease to be poor. I will describe it all.

We parted it was the last time I would ever see Taher again. My



next encounter with him would be at a distance. I would be standing in front of Dhaka Central Jail the day his secret trial began.

Lawrence Lifschultz, a world-renowned journalist and writer, is the author of Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution.

July 21 was the 30th anniversary of the execution of Colonel Abu Taher. Today we carry a remembrance written by renowned journalist Lawrence Lifschultz who covered Taher's trial. Tomorrow we will carry Lifschultz's 3,000 word reflection on the secret trial by special military tribunal in Dhaka Central Jail that concluded with Taher's execution.

A place in the sun

LIGHTEN UP

One can think readily of at least two Indians, who would make credible candidates for the post of UNSG, and to whom the constraints in respect of Tharoor would not apply. Amartya Sen enjoys a global and moral stature that is rare. He has written extensively about issues that fall within the purview of UN activities. He would surely give priority to development issues in the UN agenda. Development is a worthy end in itself, and is also the most effective means to underpin peace and security. There is also the liberal, Cambridge-educated Mani Shankar Aiyer, who opted out of the coveted Foreign Service for a career in politics. He would bring to bear 26 years of experience in diplomacy and the political gravitas of a Union Minister. His writings -- columns and books -- would suggest that he is as committed as anyone to the ultimate aims of the UN "a new comradeship, a universal fellowship, a world communion, a deeper understanding and the peace that passeth all understanding."

MEGASTHENES

THE late BK Nehru's was a long, eventful, and success-studded career of public service, at home and abroad. He was a product of the London School of Economics, where he was reportedly a favourite of Harold Laski. He qualified for the ICS, batch of 1934, in his third attempt, and went up to Oxford for service training. He also qualified as an Inner Temple barrister. He headed at different times the two highest profile Indian diplomatic missions, and held three gubernatorial assignments at home. He was perhaps fully deserving of the honours and high offices that came his way. Certainly his surname was not exactly an encumbrance to his career. He was not without a tincture of vanity in this respect either, and on one occasion, famously and nonchalantly, observed to Mrs. Vijayalaxmi Pandit, that the "Nehrus had much to be arrogant about." Mrs. Pandit presumably concurred.

There are varying versions of a story concerning BK and a very coveted international position, which he either declined or was dissuaded from accepting. He has recounted his own version or recollection in his very readable memoirs. The differences or details are perhaps not important. Very simply the bare facts, according to one version, are as follows.

When Dag Hammarskjold was so tragically killed in a plane crash in September 1961, the Americans had virtually offered the position of UN Secretary General to BK, or at any rate broached the matter of his possible acceptance of the position. BK declined and recommended instead to his government, any one of the two Sahay brothers -- Vishnu and Bhagwan, both eminent civil servants. India

apparently did not attach priority to the issue and the appointment went to U Thant of Burma. Frederick Boland of Ireland, President of the 15th UNGA and Mongi Slim of Tunisia, President of the 16th UNGA were among the contenders for the post.

BK, by his own admission, later regretted turning down the post. One aspect of this story puzzled me; how could the Americans make an offer of a post, which was not in the gift of the US administration? An Indian friend, who had worked closely with BK in some national committee or other, clarified the matter some years back. Those were Cold War times, he explained; China was not on the Security Council, and relations between the USSR and India were extraordinarily close. It was a fair assumption thus that an Indian candidate, endorsed by the US would not have faced a veto.

At the time of independence, Pandit Nehru, delivered one of his best remembered and most impassioned speeches in Parliament, in which he spoke of India's tryst with destiny and that a pledge made years earlier was being redeemed, "not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially." Nearly six decades on, India has come a long way. It has made phenomenal strides in the spheres of economic and scientific development, and has acquired nuclear capability. What is more to the point India has received US recognition of its nuclear status, something the US has been loath to accord to its long time ally and friend of "immediacy and constancy." Pakistan. India is also seeking a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

It is expending every effort, considerable goodwill and resources in pursuit of the very position, which it disdained to

accept when it was offered on the proverbial platter. Why should this be so? Is it, in effect, a signal that India has arrived and is prepared to assume its rightful place in the sun?

The Indian candidate for UN Secretary General, Shashi Tharoor, has very persuasive credentials. He is a Kashmiri Brahmin married to a Bengali. He studied at St Stephen's College, which produces the bulk of India's elite corps of administrators and diplomats, where he won the Rector's Prize for the best undergraduate student at Delhi University in 1974. St. Stephen's list of distinguished alumni, incidentally, includes the late President Ziaul Haq of Pakistan.

Tharoor's stay at St Stephen's coincided with the aberration of Mrs. Gandhi's emergency rule in India. It was not an easy time and not too many civil servants distinguished themselves during what was for many a most harrowing ordeal. Tharoor decided at that time that a career as a civil servant was not for him. From Delhi Tharoor went to Fletcher's School in the US, where he continued to excel academically, winning the Robert Student Prize for the best all-round student. His meteoric rise in the UN system owes largely to Kofi Annan's patronage.

When the historic Babri mosque was wantonly pulled down, in the presence of law-enforcement personnel and the media, Tharoor wrote a thoughtful and civilized op-ed article that was carried by the New York Times. He recalled his boyhood days, when a sense of tolerance was so integral to the Indian psyche and ethos. Tharoor clearly has many sterling qualities. And yet there should be reservations about his candidature.

Article 97 of the UN Charter describes the Secretary General

as the chief administrative officer of the Organization, who shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council. The use of the word "appointed" and not "elected" was deliberate, although the process of appointment is indistinguishable from an election. Perhaps the intention was to keep the post secluded from the less savoury and divisive aspects of "electioneering."

Some big names were mooted - Paul-Henri Spaak, Anthony Eden, Lester Pearson and Eisenhower -- before the choice for the post fell on the lower profile Foreign Minister of Norway, Trygve Lie. Since then a convention of sorts has evolved that a major power should not seek the office. The first three Secretaries-Generals, Lie, Dag and U Thant, were appointed without canvassing or campaigning, at least of an overt nature. U Thant was the most apolitical of the three and had a modest vision of the Secretary General's role. He was nevertheless held in high esteem in the UN. In 1965, at the UN's 20th anniversary celebrations, the British PR to the UN, Lord Caradon paid him an extraordinary tribute.

Caradon conceded that none could rely on the infallibility of any individual; U Thant was a person though, on whose total integrity one could rely. U Thant's relative lack of political savvy or guption, however, may have led to one mistake, the consequences of which are being felt even today. But more on that later.

After U Thant, there was a radical change in the process of appointing the UN Secretary General. There was no longer a discreet search for an acceptable candidate, or a quiet vetting of his credentials. Instead, candidates, duly endorsed by their respective countries, openly canvassed for the job. Waldheim bested Max Jakobson of Finland and Carlos Ortiz Rojas of Argentina, to succeed U Thant. In retrospect, few would disagree that the job did not go to the best candidate, and it is an irony that a former UN Secretary General does not qualify for a visa to enter the US. Of those who followed Waldheim, Perez de Cuellar was quietly competent, if also somewhat nondescript, Boutros-Ghali did not get the customary second term, and Kofi Annan will probably go down as a forgettable Secretary General. He means well, but as Theodore Roosevelt once said of his successor, in a feeble sort of way. If Annan is at all remembered, it will be for the opprobrium of son

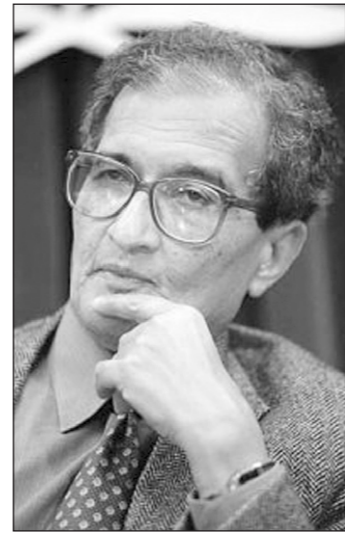
Kojo's financial shenanigans. All this does reflect, and not favourably either, on the "quality and spirit of the appointment process."

Elections are assuredly indispensable for any functional democratic polity. It may not be the ideal method though for the appointment of the UNSG. Sir Brian Urquhart started his career with the UN at the time of the Organization's inception, and retired decades later as an Under Secretary General. In an article in the Foreign Affairs in 1995, he forcefully argued that a selection process without an open search procedure, with a list of aspirants restricted to those who had declared themselves, was anything but satisfactory.

In any serious institution in the private sector, such a procedure would be considered a bad joke. A candidate's stature, leadership and administrative qualities, negotiating skills, diplomatic finesse and integrity should take priority over political expediency, power and influence. Sir Brian thought it a miracle that the existing process had not produced an outright disaster. He might not be alone in desiring change in the selection process; it would be unrealistic though to imagine that any change is round the corner. This aspect, however, deserves to be included in any agenda for UN reforms.

Political gravitas is an asset, almost a requisite, for anyone holding or aspiring to high office, whether at the national level or at the apex international organization, the UN. Two instances would underscore this point. The Prime Minister of India is possibly the most academically accomplished of all heads of State or Government in the world. And yet the imagination boggles at the thought of his leading the struggle against colonial rule, in the manner of the Mahatma, Motilal, CR Das, Maulana Azad, Mohammad Ali, Jawaharlal, Subhas and even the unabashedly communal Vallabhai.

U Thant, as mentioned, was the most apolitical of the first three UNSGs. His achievements though were considerable. He ended the UN involvement in the Congo, played constructive roles during the missile crisis of 1962, and the Indo-Pak war of 1965, and, on his own, made "spirited efforts" to end the Vietnam War. Justly or harshly, however, he has been blamed for precipitating pulling out the UN peacekeeping force from the Sinai in 1967, a decision that led to the Six Day War. The UN peacekeepers were placed on the Egyptian side of the border with Israel after



Amartya Sen, Shashi Tharoor, Mani Shankar Aiyer.



the Suez War. It was the first UN peacekeeping operation proper and had kept the peace for a decade. In 1967, President Nasser demanded that the peacekeepers be pulled out. The situation was grave, and U Thant went personally to Cairo to urge Nasser to reconsider. Nasser was adamant and U Thant complied; war followed soon after.

To U Thant, moral considerations were paramount. Peacekeepers could only stay with the consent of the host country. Israel had refused UN forces on its side of the border. Troop contributing countries were anxious for their nationals not to be placed in danger. No group or bloc of countries took the initiative to involve the Security Council or the General Assembly. U Thant did report matters to the UNSC but without response. According to his close colleagues, Sir Brian and CV Narasimhan, U Thant had no option but to act as he did. And yet doubts persist. Could a UNSG with greater political weight have been able to dissuade Nasser from his decision? Could he have delayed matters till the situation was defused? When disaster, in the shape of war, looms, surely legal niceties or norms should not be an impediment to attempts to avert it.

U Thant's example would suggest perhaps that only a person of sufficient stature could work to enlarge the role of the UNSG. As envisaged by Dag, he may 1) function to fill up the gaps that exist in the Charter, and 2) working at the edge of human society, promote the creative evolution of human institutions. Hence the importance of political gravitas, an attribute not usually associated with a civil servant, national or international. This is an area where Tharoor is untested and untried, an unproven quality. Article 100.1 of the UN Charter

is very specific that the SG and his staff, in the performance of their duty, are not to receive or seek instructions from any authority external to the UN. They are to refrain from any action, which might reflect on their position as international officials answerable only to the UN. Article 100.2 stipulates that Member-States would respect the exclusively international character of the responsibilities of the SG and his staff.

Did Tharoor directly broach with India his nomination for SG? Or did he perhaps merely send a discreet feeler, in the manner of "Barkis is willin"? Would such conduct be consistent with the letter and spirit of article 100.1 of the Charter? Tharoor's nomination may also have been purely an Indian government initiative. Would this conform to article 100.2 of the Charter? To be sure Kofi Annan himself was an Under Secretary General when he was appointed SG. There are other similar instances in some of the UN Specialized Agencies. Flawed precedents, however, do not make good law or practice. The question is does an international civil servant by soliciting or accepting the nomination of his country for a higher and virtually elected post compromise his neutrality? And more so when the nomination involves canvassing for support from other States, and attendant expenses that may be defrayed by the nominating country.

At the national level, permanent civil servants in most countries are expected to be politically neutral and may not seek elective office unless they resign as civil servants. In 1969, when President Zakir Husain passed away, the Congress nominated Sanjiva Reddy to succeed him. Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi broke with the official nominee to support

Vice President VV Giri for President. Giri had assumed the responsibility of Acting President, but promptly resigned -- something he probably did not need to do -- to contest the election. The British, incidentally, conferred a knighthood on Sir Brian only after his retirement from the UN.

One can think readily of at least two Indians, who would make credible candidates for the post of UNSG, and to whom the constraints in respect of Tharoor would not apply. Amartya Sen enjoys a global and moral stature that is rare. He has written extensively about issues that fall within the purview of UN activities. He would surely give priority to development issues in the UN agenda. Development is a worthy end in itself, and is also the most effective means to underpin peace and security. There is also the liberal, Cambridge-educated Mani Shankar Aiyer, who opted out of the coveted Foreign Service for a career in politics. He would bring to bear 26 years of experience in diplomacy and the political gravitas of a Union Minister. His writings -- columns and books -- would suggest that he is as committed as anyone to the ultimate aims of the UN "a new comradeship, a universal fellowship, a world communion, a deeper understanding and the peace that passeth all understanding."

ASEAN has a convention by which all members rally to an ASEAN candidate in any international election or appointment. Countries of South Asia, it would seem, have some way to go before it can catch up with ASEAN in this respect.

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