

# A warrior scholar and his final prayer

BADIUZZAMAN BAY

GR EAT names are formed by great events. It's a truism that applies as much to the leaders and revolutionaries as to the pundits and intellectuals. Let us keep this in mind as we bid farewell to one of the best minds of our nation, Professor Anisuzzaman, 83, who died at the Combined Military Hospital in Dhaka on May 14, 2020. Newspaper headlines will tell you that he is the most high-profile victim of the coronavirus in Bangladesh till date. Personal tributes will offer little-known tidbits about the man behind the mountain that he was to everyone else. But history will remember him as someone whose superior knowledge could only be rivalled by his fierce love for his country, tested as it was by his activism during the great events that shaped his life as well as the course of the history of the land.

As a scholar, Professor Anisuzzaman could rightfully claim to have realised his full potential—as an activist, he was in the same ballpark as many great sociocultural reformers of his time. In the end, his was a life lived to its fullest. In his own words: "I wanted to be a teacher. In that I've achieved more than what I deserved. I wanted to be a lifelong learner. I tried to learn as much as I could. There were unexpected turns every now and then, but those were nothing compared to the love that I have received. I have no regrets with my life," he wrote in a column for Prothom Alo on the occasion of his 80th birth anniversary in 2017.

Professor Anisuzzaman was part of what many consider as Bengal's Golden Age, which produced some of the most defining moments of its history. He led a very active life, teaching, researching, writing, editing, attending seminars, and spearheading social and intellectual campaigns. He wrote profusely on the identity issues of Bengali Muslims and the Bengali community in Bangladesh, as well as language, politics, culture, education, religion, and society. He was also one of the individuals who played an instrumental role in creating the "grand narrative" of the nationalist history of Bangladesh. From a broader perspective, three of his achievements stand out: his participation in the Language Movement in 1952, his role as a member of the Planning Commission of the government-in-exile in 1971, and finally his leading role as a member of the committee that drafted the Constitution in Bangla, which was adopted as the official version on November 4, 1972.

Born on February 18, 1937 in Kolkata, Anisuzzaman moved to Khulna after the 1947 partition. He grew up in a

family that nurtured writing. His father, Dr ATM Moazzem, was a homeopathy practitioner who loved writing while his grandfather, Sheikh Abdur Rahim, was a journalist and writer. In a way, the transformation that the three generations of the family went through could be seen as representing the transformation of the Bengali Muslims in general—the grandfather supported Islamic exceptionalism and the 1905 Partition of Bengal, the father supported the movement leading to the creation of Pakistan along religious lines, and the son, disillusioned by its bloody fallout and the divisive politics promoted by the then government, resisted it.

As he grew up, during those tumultuous years of the newly carved out country, he actively campaigned for the recognition of Bangla as a state language, and shortly afterwards, became involved in left-leaning politics which played

1985-2003, 2005-08) and Chittagong (1969-85), and was involved in various capacities with a number of universities outside the country.

As a researcher, he was disciplined and methodical, so much so that his mentor Professor Abdur Razzaq, who had an abiding influence on him, once reportedly described him as the most disciplined researcher he had ever known. I remember attending a seminar at the Bangladesh National Museum where Professor Anisuzzaman delivered a lecture, on October 29, 2017. In simple, clearly articulated words, he presented a paper on "Muslims in Bengal (up to the 18th century): Plurality of Identity"—a subject that he explored in many other books and articles as well.

The paper was based on the premise that the idea of identity is more fluid and multi-layered than we generally tend to think. An individual has multiple

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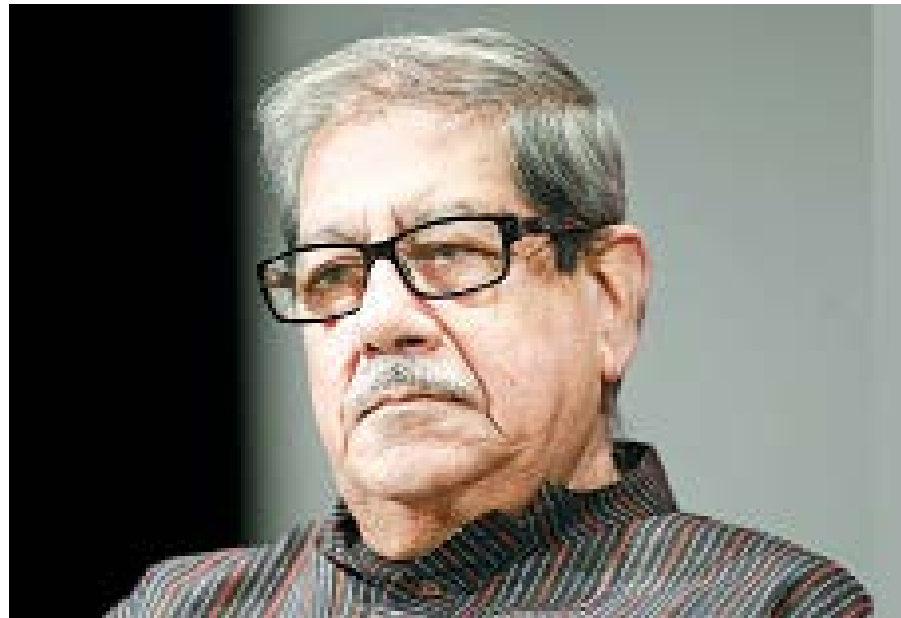
I remember listening in awe as he talked, standing on the dais for nearly an hour, showing a captivated audience why he was held in such high regard. The paper, preceded by a note on Professor Abdur Razzaq, was presented without so much as a brief interlude, a remarkable feat given his age and failing health at that time.

Professor Anisuzzaman's canon includes books of different genres but the bulk of his work consists of research books and scholarly articles, as well as books that he had edited, sometimes along with co-editors. Among his research projects, two deserve particular mention: *Muslim Manash O Bangla Sahitya* (1964), an assessment of the position of Bengali Muslims and the nature of their contributions in Bengali literature and Bengali history in general, and *Purono Bangla Gadya* (1984), an assessment of the grammatical, orthographical and literary conventions of Old Bangla prose as well as emerging literary trends and conventions. There is no denying that it was partly because of his exceptional academic prowess that he had been so popular with his students and fellow researchers.

After all that he achieved in his long life, could there still be something that he craved? There was one, and he said that himself: "I wasn't born on this land of Bangladesh but I do want to die here. This is my final prayer."

He would be happy to know that his final prayer was answered. There can't be a more befitting end to the life of a warrior scholar who gave his nation so much, in so many ways, only to get so much love and respect in return.

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Professor Anisuzzaman (1937-2020)

a vital role in shaping his progressive worldview. This was evident in the subsequent years when he fought against Pakistan's sinister campaign against indigenous culture, took part in the 1969 mass uprising, the post-war movements against the war criminals, the 1990 anti-autocracy movement, and pretty much all the major sociopolitical developments in between.

But any obituary of Professor Anisuzzaman will be incomplete without an acknowledgement of the fact that, before he died, he was regarded as among the most well-known and respected Bangladeshi academics in international academic circles. His records as both a teacher and a researcher are enviable. In his long career, he taught Bangla in both universities of Dhaka (1959-69,

identities although he or she may choose one over the others. Likewise, he argued, the identity of the Bengali Muslims is complex and multi-layered. "When we identify a group of people as Bengali Muslim, we highlight only one aspect of their self-identity. But if we observe closely, we'll see that they contain multitudes," he said, stressing that plurality is an essential feature of our identity. He then drew on historical documents, accounts by contemporary writers, and literary sources to present a compelling picture of the diversity of Bengali Muslims in different ages in terms of their preference for language, attire, occupation, customs, and religious and political beliefs—which made them different not only from their Hindu counterparts, but also from each other.

## Reducing vegetable growers' anxiety

*Storage facilities can help them save their produce*

SINCE the beginning of the countrywide shutdown on March 26, vegetable growers across the country have been incurring huge losses as many of them have not been able to sell their produce due to a lack of buyers and transport facilities. Those who could manage to sell their produce, had to sell them at very low prices. It has become difficult for the farmers to negotiate a fair price under the current situation, as buyers are not visiting the vegetable producing zones like they used to at normal times.

According to the Department of Agricultural Extension, our farmers have produced 54 lakh tonnes of vegetables so far this fiscal year. Unfortunately, while vegetable production has increased in the country over the last few years, the much-needed storing facilities have not been developed. In a proper cold storage, vegetables such as pumpkins, tomatoes, brinjals, green chilies etc, can be stored from three weeks to three months. Therefore, increasing our storing capacity is very important to ensure that all the hard work of our farmers do not go in vain. With proper cold storage facilities in place, farmers would never have to sell fruits and vegetables at throwaway prices. If they do not get a fair price, they can store their produce and sell them in the lean season when the demand and price is high.

It is good to know that the Department of Agricultural Marketing (DAM) has placed a project proposal to government to build 15 storage facilities in various parts of the country to solve the problem. We hope the proposal gets the government's approval. At the same time, private initiatives to build cold storages should also be encouraged. Besides, online platforms should be developed so that marginalised farmers can sell their produce at better prices. Since building cold storage units will need some time, what the government should do now to save the farmers from counting losses is to ensure transport facilities for them so that they can bring their produce to the big cities and sell them. It will also ensure a steady supply of vegetables, which are a crucial part of people's daily diet.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Sexual violence still rampant

It is indeed disheartening to know that as the pandemic continues to spread, many innocent girls and women are falling victim to sexual violence. Though the virus was successful in limiting numerous things, it barely had an impact on sexual violence. There are plenty of reports that shed light on the growing number of rapes taking place across the nation. What is even worse is that many of the victims are minors. At a time when most of humanity is taking a blow from Covid-19, how can these perpetrators commit such atrocities? Apart from the rapes, domestic violence is also on the rise as many women are being tortured mentally and physically amidst the lockdown. It seems that our existing laws are not helping prevent such abuse. The authorities need to take stringent measures if we are to reduce the rate of violence against women.

Nadira Khan, Dhaka



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

REMEMBER getting caught by your parents for trying out roadside pickles or tawdry coloured crunchy ice outside your school? Better even, remember getting caught by your spouse for devouring the

dessert despite your rising sugar levels, or for savouring the second serving of *kachchi* at a wedding despite your cholesterol? And remember how you tried to wiggle out of trouble by shifting the blame on someone else? In response, you must have heard the age-old taunt that haunt generations throughout the ages: "if someone else jumped off a building, would you jump too?" This psychology of following the mob—or "herd mentality"—is an evolutionary survival instinct that has helped mankind huddle together and avoid dangerous situations by running away or hiding from a common threat. Herd mentality is our inclination to remain in social groups. Hence when a new gadget hits the store, we desire to own it—not because it is the greatest gadget ever, but because everyone else is buying it. Does it mean we do not have individual choice while making decisions? History tells us, using the actions of others as the only guide without seeking information on our own can be very dangerous. Whimsical investment in shares following the mob is a case in point.

The last example also suggests that not all herding is a manifestation of cooperation. In biology, there is a concept called "selfish herd". A group of guppies will stick together thinking the predator will eat those in the periphery. A herd is formed completely out of the selfish desire of individuals, with no regard for the collective entity. Herding also benefits us as we can gather information about potential threats from one another.

The government decision to impose a lockdown herded us. We listened to the doctors, experts and lawmakers during this pandemic. We remained home under voluntary isolation or relaxed lockdown.

We were told that we are all potential vectors, carriers of the virus. If we come in contact with others, we will harm each other. Collective fear was instilled in us to stimulate our herd instinct. We became angry at those who are not deemed our own. We disowned the non-resident Bangladeshis coming from affected countries. We saw them as threats to our compact social grouping. In fact humans, unlike sheep, need two flocks: "one to belong to and make them comfortable and another to blame all of society's problems", according to author James Rozoff.

In the last two months, we have learned to readjust life, migrating some of our social activities online. We went live on Facebook, chatted using apps, found

go to a store, you get mobbed as if you are witnessing scenes from *Les Misérables*. Some of us heard it, and tried to reach out. Some of us pretended not to hear it, and tried to hoard essentials to secure our own.

As the disease gnaws away at our resources and reduces us to our bare selves, a new mantra is heard: "money before lives, lives before money." First, the garment workers were allowed to break the herd protocol. "If we don't open now, businesses will go away for good," we heard. The selfish herd at the core allowed the peripheral ones to become vulnerable to the disease that is zeroing in on us. Then other business houses followed. "Eid is the only time we make money," we heard. We allowed another

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lost friends on web groups, binge watched movies, surfed channels, read stuff, and, last but not least, worked from home—while trying to pass our time in the best possible way.

Not everyone has the luxury of working from home or becoming screen addicts though. There are essential workers who have to be out there. We used blue thumbs on social media to show empathy for doctors, nurses, police, emergency service personnel, bankers and administrators, preferring to use dumb emoticons to keep enemies at bay.

We do not go to the balconies because the cry for food from the streets is just too much. And there are so many of them out there, and there is very little that you can do. There is a muffled cry for food in the pack that surrounds us. The moment you

chunk of the herd to break away.

Suddenly we are attacked by the apparent randomness of a chaotic complex system. There is a shopping frenzy out there, while others shrink in fear behind their masks. What happened to the lockdown: is it there or not? You cannot be half-pregnant: you are either pregnant or not. What is going on?

Then you start seeing underlying patterns, fractals, and loops that help you understand the hard fact, the chaos theory. It is impossible to feed 160 million people for an unseen period of time without making the production line active. Some of us must be out there to make sure that the rest are fed. The government is posed with the trolley problem. The driver of a runaway trolley sees five people tied up on the track. If he

swerves now he endangers everyone on board, and if he does not, he will kill five people for sure.

I heard the Home Minister explaining the absence of police monitoring. He sounded rather helpless: "if people want to dive into water and drown, what can you do?" Yes, people want to feel alive before they die again. Wasn't it Freud who talked about death drives? If we are vectors like insects, we might as well jump into the fire. Besides, they want to be out there in the open; honk, shout, gibe at others. They want to breathe in polluted air or remain stuck in traffic jam to be alive.

If you think hard, you will see how a part of the herd is being driven to jump off the cliff. The selfish herd will stick to the core. The peripheral ones will attend funerals, take selfies in malls, or ride a bus. The chances are, if we allow some of the group to be exposed to the disease, then we may even attain herd immunity. The World Health Organization has let the secrets out: this disease is here to stay. It will be an endemic like HIV. The vaccines that are in the making will not reach a country like us before 2022. Even if they do, they will be exuberantly expensive, therefore not affordable. The logical thing to do is to let the body create its own antibody. Given the low mortality rate, the better option is to create self-resistance. Imagine how many of us will starve to death if there is no money to buy food. "Lives before money, or money before lives?"—that is the question. So what do we do? Sacrifice a certain part of the herd and buy time for the uncertain future or sacrifice uncertain amounts now, hoping for a certain recovery later? The trolley trouble returns.

The fear is collective. We are angry at the mob who have dared to break the lockdown because they are putting us all at risk. The fear is also individual. We at the core of the herd are selfish herding, hoping that the predator virus will get those who are out there. The situation is not unique. You see it unfolding in every country. Every leader is posed with the same dilemma.

At times, it is better simply to follow the herd.

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