

In memory of Prof Anisuzzaman, a scholar of Bengals past and present

AHONA PANDA

I arrived in Dhaka, some years ago, as an outsider twice removed. First, I had grown up in Kolkata; second, I was a graduate student in Chicago. My knowledge of Bangladesh was from books, the fine print of which chafed against my eyes in the sparse light of American winters. When I first read Anisuzzaman's magnum opus, *Muslim Manas O Bangla Sahitya*, the past came alive with startling clarity, not just as something to be described, but as a set of questions to be confronted. These questions were fundamental: who are we, and how has the Bengali language made us who we are today? How can literature—this activity of utter futility and beauty—shape human beings as they evolve through time and through politics?

I still remember my first meeting with Professor Anisuzzaman. I had taken to Dhaka as if it were my own city, feeling at home in the endless traffic jams and periodic *azaans*. A friend had passed on Anis *sir's* number to me, and I had asked him how I could possibly introduce myself to this impossibly famous and elderly scholar. You need not worry, he assured me, Anis *sir* is kind to everyone, and he loves young people. He was right, and I had an appointment.

I arrived to see him in his apartment, simple but warm and beautiful. He had round-the-clock security. By this time, I had reread many of his crucial books, works that are integral to Bengali literary and political history. I was carrying a fountain pen as a mark of tribute and gratitude. He smiled when I thrust it awkwardly in his hands and I stuttered some more. In person, he seemed both towering and yet curiously fragile. He asked me why I wanted to study what I did. I told him that I had a peculiar relationship with the Bengali language. I loved it deeply as the medium of my self-expression, as the language in which my favourite writers wrote. But until graduate school,

growing up in Kolkata meant that I was not entirely cognizant of Bengali Muslim history. I wanted to rectify that. I also told him that, when I wanted to understand how Hindus and Muslims felt towards each other, historically as well as in our own politically turbulent modernity, I had turned to his writing in desperation. One of the first people in Bengal to write a book on *manas* (mind? heart? sensibility? consciousness? mentality?), Anis *sir's* contribution to our divided inheritance of the Bengali language was exceptional in every sense. His scholarship on Bengals past and present connected past identity with present reality like nothing else did, and made a Bengali from the other side of the border understand the lived experience of the Bangladeshi subjectivity.

In the many tributes to this exceptional man that have appeared since his passing, we understand that Professor Anisuzzaman, "national professor" who single-handedly oversaw the cultural life of a nation, was himself an embodied history. Kolkata's beloved Anis *da*, known as Anis *chacha* to the cultural intelligentsia of Dhaka, and Anis *sir* to students, readers and followers, famously came to political consciousness at Dhaka University in the aftermath of the 1952 Language Movement. Intimately engaged as one of the key intellectuals and freedom fighters in the 1971 Liberation War, he was instrumental in both conceptualising and implementing the linguistic nationalism on which Bangladesh has been premised for nearly half a century. In our conversations, I tried—again, as an outsider—to make sense of the fundamental question animating my own generation ("millennials" in American parlance): what kind of national identity emerges out of a deep, intimate connection to language and literature?

For the generation prior to his—made up of the intellectuals who conceptualised a Bengali Pakistani

identity—the very idea of East Pakistan was a renaissance of sorts. While historical records demonstrate that Partition was an electoral process ultimately engineered by the Hindu *bhadralok*, a majority of Bengali Muslims welcomed separatism because of Hindu cultural hegemony. In 1943, for example, the octogenarian poet Kaikobad bitterly remembered the way in which Hindu writers had once expressed amazement that a Muslim poet could write Bengali, even if they



Prof Anisuzzaman gives a lecture on "Muslims in Bengal (up to the 18th century): Plurality of Identity" at Bangladesh National Museum on October 29, 2017.

PHOTO: STAR

praised him. Trailblazing Nazrul was perhaps the only exception who gained absolute acceptance from the Hindu literary cosmos. After 1947, Pakistan brought its own set of problems, language policy being foremost among them. Abul Mansur Ahmad's dream of cultural autonomy gradually became impossible to implement. And, at the moment when language became the site of resistance, reclamation, and innovation—a radical reimagining of what politics could

accomplish in the 1950s and 1960s—Anisuzzaman, studying with greats such as Muhammad Shahidullah, Munier Chowdhury, and Muhammad Abdul Hye, came into being as a unique political phenomenon. He was a political humanist and, in independent Bangladesh, he persisted in this work of interrogation, reconstruction, and radical reimagining of the politics of language.

When we think of earlier humanist scholars in Bangla on both sides

of intellectuals and the destruction of documents—new edifices had to be built, and whatever remained had to be preserved. It was in this context that Anisuzzaman emerged as foremost among a generation of scholars including Ahmed Sharif, Ahmed Sofa, and Serajul Islam Choudhury, figures who saw literature as a constant dialogue between past and present, between Hindus and Muslims, even between Muslim and Muslim. He struck a balance between his own scholarship and myriad other activities, working as a dedicated archivist, anthologist, and editor, preserving historical documents such as periodicals and editing the writing of others. And above all, he engaged himself as a witness of history, even as he turned his attention to his own *manas* in the series of autobiographical writings—*Amar Ekattor*, *Kal Nirabadhi*, and *Bipula Prithibi*. It is apt that the titles of his testimonies refer to Tagore's address to Bangiya Sahitya Parishad—"Not self-interest, not fame; the true end of literature is time endless, and the world, immeasurable"—a vision he carried out in his own life.

It is difficult to think of the Bengali twenty-first century without him, the pillar who outlived many of his generation in order to guide us through the darkest hours of our history. The true end of literature is love and empathy, tolerance and dialogue. It gave all Bengalis a nationalism that transcended borders and ruptures. He ends *Swarupar Sandhane* with a Shamsur Rahman poem from which I quote a line—"Freedom, you are/ the sparkling leaves of an aged banyan tree." The aged banyan tree falls, but the sparkling leaves of his books remain for posterity. As long as we have that, we will continue to have the freedom he valiantly fought for and taught us to value—the freedom of Bangladesh, but also of language, life, and thought.

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Strengthening digital economy is the way to go



CHINA and South Korea were the early frontlines in our pitched battle against Covid-19. Both countries had taken the hardest hit during the initial phase of the outbreak, but both were quick to rebound from the initial shock of it and soon cornered the mortal enemy with the swift stroke of their digital weapons. With a strong technological backbone, they have been able to contain the Covid-19 outbreak efficiently. And the same resilient digital infrastructure has aided these two countries in their attempts to cushion their economies from the aftershocks of the pandemic. For one, the faster they contained the outbreak, the sooner they were able to get their economies back on track towards recovery. While most countries are still under lockdown, China and South Korea are opening up their economic activities and would likely lead the rest of the world in their attempts to revive their economies once they have overcome the initial shock of Covid-19. China, a nation whose path to ecommerce had been paved in 2003 by the SARS outbreak, as suggested by World Economic Forum, was well-equipped to fight the economic challenges posed by the Covid-19 lockdown. While the SARS outbreak triggered a shift in consumer

behaviour—more online shopping, increased digital payments—China's already flourishing ecommerce platforms were better able to align their supply chain logistics to serve the needs and demands of the consumers holed up in their homes. According to a WEF report, "since the outbreak of Covid-19, the new infrastructure has played a critical role in China's overall economy.



Countries like China and South Korea are using their resilient digital infrastructure to cushion their economies from the aftershocks of Covid-19.

Retail platforms based on a solid supply chain ensure that the supply of products accurately matches people's needs. Dependable and fast delivery helps guarantee the stability of tens of millions of families." And China was quick to embrace further innovations that not only

helped the wheels of the economy turn by facilitating commerce, but also assisted in enforcing social distancing: non-contact services and AI robots for delivery. In late January, one of China's largest providers of delivery services for food, consumer products and retail services—Meituan—launched a non-contact delivery service where parcels could be delivered to customers while strictly

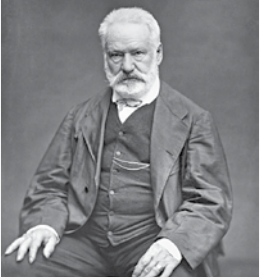
maintaining social distancing rules. Soon, in many parts of China, AI robots were used for package delivery services, security services, disinfection services and so on, putting fewer lives at risk, while at the same time going about addressing the most pressing needs of the people and the time.

All these have been enabled by the political will of the Chinese policymakers and private-sector leaders in strengthening their digital economy through investing in advanced and resilient digital infrastructure. The country, however, did suffer from economic shocks, with its GDP contracting by 6.8 percent year-on-year during the first quarter of the year. But with faster suppression of the Covid-19 outbreak with the aid of its cutting-edge digital innovations, it is now able to accelerate its economic activities again. For countries such as Bangladesh, who have already invested in digital technologies and have the basic digital infrastructure in place—4G internet, ICT substructure, a flourishing ecommerce industry, multiple digital payments platforms, etc.—they can now consider working on these foundations to gear up their economic activities in the medium to long run to achieve their economic ambitions. Consumer behaviour is undergoing a shift in Bangladesh in response to the pandemic. According to E-Commerce Association of Bangladesh (E-CAB), nearly 100 ecommerce operations dealing mostly in healthcare supplies, groceries, and essential commodities have witnessed a rise in demand, as more consumers, who had previously not considered online purchase, had to opt for it during the shutdown. But with increased ecommerce and digital payments demands, the regulators, industry leaders and business owners have to work together to ensure an environment in which the trust that consumers place in ecommerce businesses, digital payments platforms and

smart suppliers is not shaken. All the stakeholders in this ecosystem need to work together to make sure that the system becomes sustainable in the long run. For this to happen, the retail supply chains have to be made smart, digital logistics need to be further strengthened, and the political will of all concerned needs to be demonstrated through meaningful action. With Covid-19 continuing to wreak havoc worldwide, economies will suffer tremendously—there is no way out of it. And countries such as Bangladesh whose economy is heavily dependent on exports earnings will have additional obstacles to overcome in the next few months, due to the declining global demands for apparel. Moreover, with the global oil prices plummeting, the fate of the Bangladeshi migrant workers—whose remittance keeps its forex reserve strong—looks pretty uncertain right now. This will be an added burden on Bangladesh going forward. But with strategic investments in strengthening digital economy, the country can bolster domestic demands and keep the wheels of the economy turning faster. But exactly how fast the country's economy can and will recover is up to the policymakers, regulators and industry leaders. What is needed is an open-minded approach to embrace digital innovation and transformation. This is one challenging goal, but it is achievable. We can look to countries that are on the road to economic revival and take the cue from them.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem

QUOTABLE Quote



VICTOR HUGO
(1802-1885)
French poet, novelist and dramatist

Certain thoughts are prayers. There are moments when, whatever be the attitude of the body, the soul is on its knees.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Humor, casually
6 Fashionably dated
11 In the know
12 Ordered display
13 Advancing
15 Chart model
16 Hoppy brew
17 Flying mammal
18 Low, flat cloud
20 Ram's mate
21 Guest's bed
22 Surgery memento
23 Pollster Elmo
26 Does in
27 Burden
28 Spike of film
29 Einstein's birthplace
30 Time of delivery,

perhaps
34 Fall mo.
35 Linking word
36 By way of
37 Going out of one's way
40 Boot out
41 Missouri tribe
42 Zellweger of "Judy"
43 Copenhagen natives

DOWN
1 Household lights
2 Look forward to
3 Imposter
4 Work wk.'s end
5 Capitol worker
6 Is furious
7 Pitching stat

8 Manhattan area
9 Fled
10 Raw bar selection
14 Over-supply
19 High cards
22 Winter glider
23 Dock worker
24 Taking a sabbatical
25 Halloween decoration
26 Bean container
28 Breathing organ
30 Inferno describer
31 Bird-related
32 Hint of color
33 Alleviates
38 Rink makeup
39 High -- kite

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

B	A	S	S	I		A	C	A	D	S
A	S	T	I	N		L	O	B	O	S
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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT