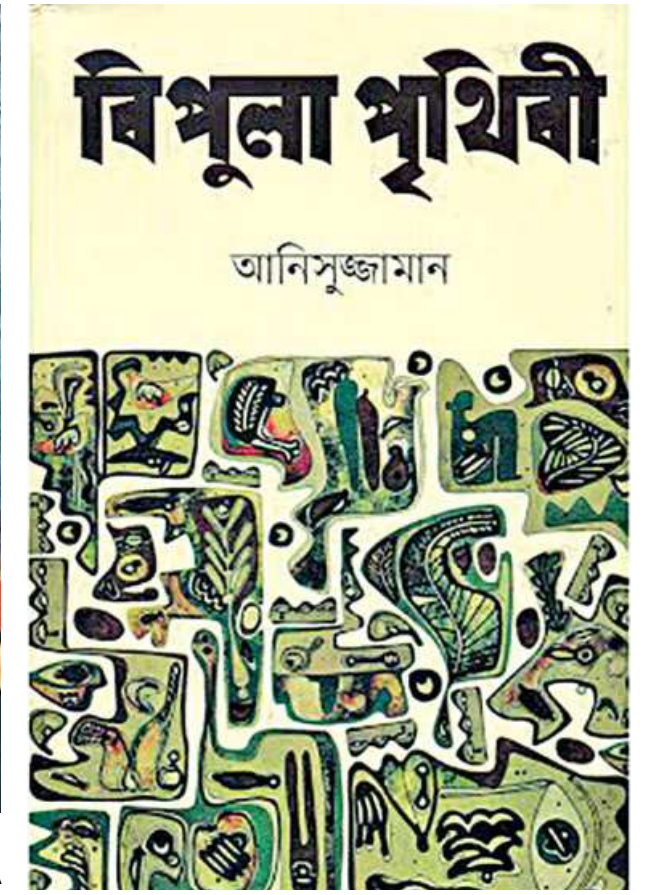


In this undated photo, Prof Anisuzzaman (right) is seen with artist Murtaja Baseer (left) and Prof Abdur Razzaq.

SOURCE: GAYANTAPAS ABDUR RAZZAQ SMARAK GRANTHA



# ANIS BHAI: TEACHER

AHRAR AHMAD

Dr. Anisuzzaman's life was a radiant gift to us, his departure an irreparable loss. The usual metaphors that have been applied (tower of strength, conscience of the nation, a reassuring lighthouse, an iconic intellectual/cultural presence, an institution by himself, a large and shady tree, the embodiment of humanist principles, and so on) may all be applicable. But they would probably be a bit fuzzy and cliché-ist for they could not fully capture the range of his contributions to learning, culture and progressive politics in Bangladesh.

In this brief essay I will focus essentially on him as a teacher, not because other aspects of his life had affected me less, but that this (as Shakespeare would say) had impacted me more.

Thus, I will be ignoring his reputation as an internationally acclaimed researcher with many authoritative and influential publications on aspects of Bengal's literary and social history, particularly the evolution of a Muslim literary imagination and its relationship to the larger context within which it was located.

law's house, near our own, in Swamibagh. As family friends I had easy access to that house. That is probably why I had always referred to Mrs. Anisuzzaman as Bubu (I still do). But I do not remember actually meeting him there.

It is only when I became a student at DU in 1967 that he became a heroic presence in my intellectual and political landscape – the first through his reputation as a teacher, the second through his bold protest note, signed with 19 others, against the anti-Tagore orientations and decisions of the Pakistani authorities. This was followed by a book on Tagore he edited the very next year, which was like throwing down the cultural gauntlet in the face of the authorities. He was no longer a part of the ivory tower professoriate, he had become a public intellectual. He had become one of us.

My relationship with Dr. Anisuzzaman "evolved" because of Begum Sufia Kamal and Prof. Abdur Razzaq. I was hugely fortunate in being close to both of them, and in the warm and lively environment in these homes, he gradually



glorified alter ego, it was Anis bhai who became my role model.

I did not take any formal courses with him because the structure of University education of the period did not provide for that possibility. But I attended some of his stray classes then (and many public lectures later). The lessons I learned went far beyond the content of his presentations.

First, Anis bhai always began and ended his classes on time. In a culture where time is rather abstract and flexible, and remains anchored to its feudal, agricultural and circular rhythms rather than capitalist, industrial, and linear specificities, that fact alone indicated a refreshing change in attitude and practice – one that demonstrated respect for others, an awareness of his accountability to University schedules, and an embrace of modernity. He maintained the same discipline in almost all of his numerous public engagements throughout his life.

Second, he was invariably "prepped" for class. I never remember Anis bhai "winging it". He would be totally ready to deliver a coherent, informative, and intelligible lecture demonstrating his mastery of material. The clarity and richness of these presentations could not have come just naturally. It was clear how seriously he had taken his responsibility, and the sheer industry that made this possible. Good teaching, it became apparent, entailed hard work.

Again, in a cultural environment which usually tends to privilege style over substance, stogy flourish over nimble analysis, where teachers who "performed" with flair and flamboyance were routinely considered more popular, often better, than teachers whose delivery was more restrained, whose language more understated, whose approach more content-heavy, Anis bhai defied the trends. He clearly belonged to the second school of pedagogy, but remained universally respected and well-liked by the students nonetheless. One did not go to his classes for drama or entertainment, one went there to understand and learn. For an aspiring teacher like me, this was the message, and the example, I needed.

Third, like Professor Razzaq, his approach to education, particularly research and scholarship, was framed within some Enlightenment ideals. These included (among other things), the centrality of reason as the basis of all intellectual endeavors; the reliance on observation, experiment, and the "scientific method" to arrive at scholarly judgments; and the

acceptance of the contingent nature of all conclusions that were always open to examination, contestation, and change (when required). Doubt/skepticism was the hand-maiden of rationality, and the enemy of absolutism.

This indicated the rejection of dogma or mandated truths, regardless of whether the source of authority was social convention, popular acclaim, religious canon, doctrinal fiat, or political dictate. Instead he was more comfortable with the principle of "tolerance of ambiguity", the liberal notion that there could be multiple perspectives, theories and answers, from which we would have to choose the best, based on the soundness of its empirical evidence, the consistency of its logical structure, the reasonableness of its assumptions and the transparency of the tests that may be relevant.

Thus, to have scientific and scholarly validity, a statement must be capable of disproof i.e., satisfy the standard of falsifiability that Karl Popper had emphasized. If a proposition cannot be interrogated, the conclusion cannot be accepted as true (personal tastes and private beliefs are exempt because they fall outside the ambit of scientific or public knowledge). The right to question is not merely a free speech issue, it is fundamental to the acquisition, preservation, and enhancement of knowledge.

Of course errors can happen, and people may believe, practice and even fight for wrong ideas. There were some who genuinely believed in a geo-centric universe, or had very imaginative stories about human origins, or assumed the intellectual inferiority of women or Black people, and even established countries based on assumptions that appeared right at one time but proved disastrous later (e.g., Pakistan). The advancement of science, or human progress itself, is littered with the carcass of discarded theories. A mistake is not a problem. The only problem is continuing a mistake when it is no longer supported by reason and reality and, hence, unwarranted. In that situation, a "paradigm shift" (as Kuhn would call it) is not only demanded, it becomes a categorical imperative fundamental to the scholarly enterprise.

These ideas were not very popular in that conservative climate of religious certainties and military conceits. It must be pointed out that Razzaq Sir and Anis bhai were not alone. The Arts Faculty in Dhaka University at that time had some immensely talented and dedicated teachers, who came to our classrooms, and into our lives, in such profound and consequential ways. Some were killed during the war, some left us naturally, and some like Rehman Sobhan, Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Rounaq Jahan, K.A.M. Saduddin, Rafiqul Islam, Abdul Momin, Serajul Islam, and others continue to inspire us today.

Finally, to invoke Razzaq Sir one last time, he would often suggest that the most influential lecture of professors is not delivered in the class, it is demonstrated in the conduct of their public lives. In this regard, Anis bhai (like a few others) was a truly persuasive presence.

In dress, demeanor, habits and instincts he was the quintessential Bangali bhadralok exuding the charm and refinement implicit in that social sub-set, but without the insecurities, pretensions, and artifice sometimes associated with that class. He lived his life like a teaching project.

In a cultural context where bluster and self-merchandising is customary, and class and status hierarchies determine the nature of our inter-per-

sonal interactions, he abhorred both, remained genuinely humble and unassuming, and treated everyone with the same grace and courtesy. Similarly, where "connections" provide various protections and privileges, he never sought to cultivate the rich and powerful, or compromise his honor, for personal benefit. His intellectual honesty was legendary, his integrity unassailable, hence his moral authority compelling.

He taught us the need to remain mindful of our commitments. Whether going to office, attending a meeting, submitting a manuscript, grading a script, or completing a review, we can sometimes be a bit lax, and keep others anxiously waiting. But, Anis bhai demonstrated an incredible work ethic to ensure that he met his scholarly deadlines and professional obligations. He kept his promises.

This sense of responsibility extended to his commitment to help others. This could be in the form of a letter, a phone call, some wise counsel, a quick editorial judgment, simply being present at an event, often preside, because he knew how much it would mean to the organizers and the prominence it would bring to the occasion, or some discreet monetary assistance. I gratefully remember his substantial grant to the Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Bidyapeeth library, even though he had never been approached.

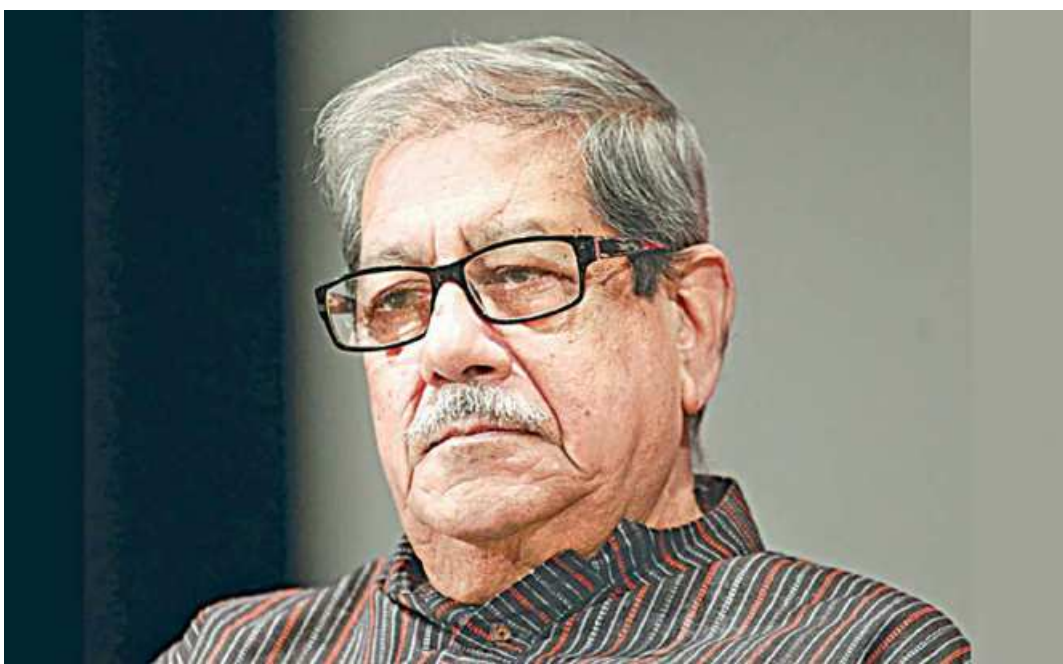
Moreover, in a compulsively oral tradition that Bangladesh represents, where holding forth is a mark of authority and entitlement, and where an indirect and emotional approach to language typically leads to hyperbolic excess, Anis bhai illustrated the precision, elegance and efficiency of the spoken word. Many of us typically take 5 minutes of substance and stretch it to 15 with our usual froth and fluff. Anis bhai would take 15 minutes of material and compress it in 5, without missing anything relevant.

Finally, in Bangladesh, where apparently nobody ever makes a mistake and thus never has to apologize, he taught us the value of admitting our errors, and expressing regrets. He acknowledged the fact that in the process of drafting the constitution, he (and others) had been wrong in being indifferent to the indigenous communities in terms of their language, cultural distinctiveness and history of oppressive assimilation and resistance, and had folded them into the over-arching Bangali identity asserted at that time. This public expression of contrition did not diminish him it made him both human, and exemplary.

Towards the end, it is possible that he had perhaps mellowed with age. His support of free speech was not as energetic as earlier, his critique of the democracy deficits and rising inequalities in the country not as robust as expected, his inability to say "no", and thus make himself available, at times, even to groups and events not always worthy of his support, a bit puzzling.

But they were merely sunspots on the surface of the sun that did not diminish his warmth or light. He remained a hero – a truly enlightened individual, a gentle, sincere, compassionate and humble person, an extraordinary teacher. I feel fortunate, and remain forever grateful, to have been blessed by his affection (sneho-dhonno).

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I will be overlooking his consequential engagement in the socio-political praxis of the country deeply involved in the pursuit of objectives which ultimately resulted in the establishment of Bangla as a State language, the independence of the country, the writing of our constitution, and the hope for a secular, inclusive and egalitarian social order.

I will be disregarding his considerable role in clarifying and encouraging the development of our artistic heritage and cultural traditions, making us not only aware of their variety and richness but also their close and intimate relationship with our lived experiences.

Therefore, this will be a very limited and meager look at a life that was anything but. It is no more than a tiny candle placed at the feet of his large and luminous presence.

It is customary in Bangladesh, in an essay of this nature, to delineate the nature of the relationship between the author and the subject, from its very beginnings to its development later. There are supposed to be references to meetings, conversations, travels, memorable moments, anecdotes, unique experiences, overlapping interests, and so on to buttress the claim of a "special relationship". But, for me, this is rather complicated, and the narrative a bit cluttered.

In fact I am not sure when I first met him. It could have been at his father-in-

law's house, near our own, in Swamibagh. But, he left for Chittagong in 1969, and that, as they say, was that.

I left the country in 1975, and returned more than 40 years later. Our meetings and contacts during this entire period were sporadic and cursory. And yet, I was convinced (one could very well accuse me of being delusional) that I could claim a "special relationship" with him. His affection, encouragement, and support were always genuine, spontaneous, and generous. I do not have "stories", witnesses, or documents to offer. I just believed it, and he let me. Perhaps hundreds and thousands of people could probably make that same claim. But what mattered to me is that I also could.

In late 2016, when I was being considered for a position at the Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Foundation, Anis bhai, as Founding Vice President and "Settler" of the Foundation, had kindly introduced me to the Board of Trustees. I was flattered and, obviously, got the job.

While there were so many other compelling aspects to him, it was Anis bhai as a teacher who was central to my understanding of him, and my admiration for him. The reason for this was fairly simple – all my life I had wanted to be a teacher. Meeting Anis Bhai not only strengthened what I wanted to be, but clarified who I wanted to be. While Razzaq Sir remained my wise mentor, my