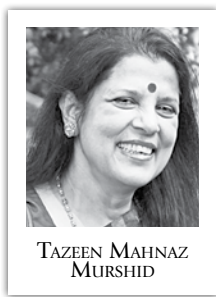


IN MEMORIAM

# The intellectual journey of Khan Sarwar Murshid



TAZEEN MAHNAZ MURSHID

**I**n the black-and-white cultural milieu that often engulfs us, we are frequently unable to grasp a man's intellectual worth when neat categories cannot pin them down. But man is a many-splendoured being. I have tried to understand what had made the man, my father. I delved into family history, and in his activist and teaching roles. I knew him to be detached from any ostentatious show of religious affiliation, a man who questioned all assumptions and yet continued to search for moral order and spiritual certainty. For him, truth and beauty were integral elements of that quest. Intellectually, at one level, it led him to explore philosophy and study the great literary minds of the early twentieth century, both Eastern and Western. At another level, he came to appreciate refined culture, arts, manners, and etiquette. Gradually, he evolved into an aesthete.

An unexpected finding has enabled me to explore some of these dimensions of his intellectual world when I chanced upon his moth-eaten thesis with a letter of recommendation for its publication by his external examiner, Professor Bullough of the Department of English Language and Literature, University of London's King's College. *Indian Elements in the Works of W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley* is now awaiting publication by the University Press Limited. The following ruminations follow from my many readings of the manuscript

as I prepared it for its publication in 2020. I hope that my father will forgive me for this audacious task. Being a perfectionist, he only brought out one or two articles from this work. When he undertook this study, it was an uncharted field. It was many years later that the theme of Indian elements was touched upon by other scholars. The work remains relevant for us today because it touches on issues of moral responsibility, right conduct and social order.

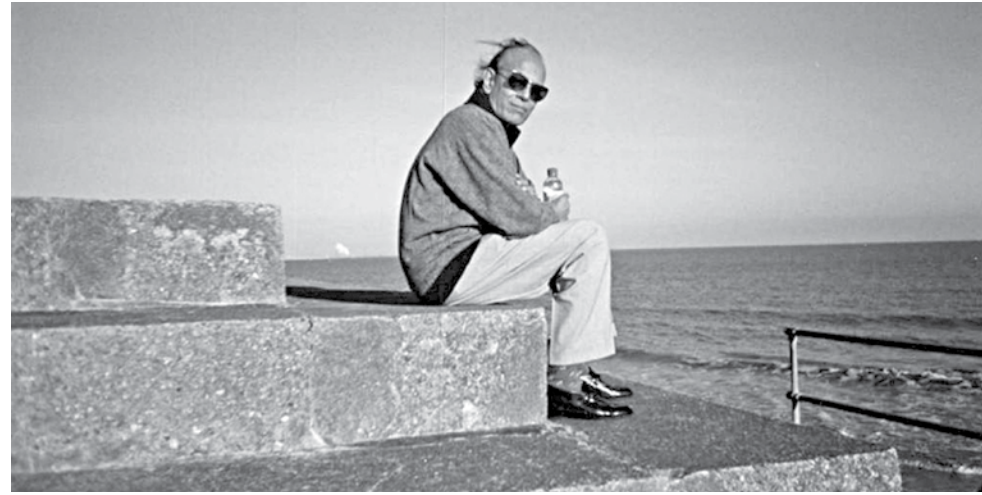
West. The western intellectual milieu had been changed forever.

Through this study, along with what we know of Murshid's life and other interests, we can picture the image of a more complex and nuanced human being than what we had supposed. It provides the missing link that helps us understand his own development better, for the impact of his study on himself had been no less profound than it had been on his subject matter: the intellectual worlds

after Gautama Buddha! But the manuscript reveals how that connection manifested itself.

Reading his literary treatise, it struck me that some of the basic values he sought to inculcate in us were, in fact, Buddhist in origin, particularly the ideas of *sangha* and moral responsibility. Young Murshid shared Huxley's idea that a minority of individuals can "attain enlightenment" and make a difference. His life and works came to embody that value. He championed the values of right conduct, followed a path of legitimate action in its defence, and sought the company of like-minded people in its pursuit. He painstakingly promoted the selection of suitably qualified persons for given tasks in the interests of an orderly society. His passion for teaching to train young minds in critical thinking was an aspect of promoting that ideal.

Like Eliot, Murshid was fascinated by the idea of the "Eternal now"; and like Yeats, the concept of the "unity of Being" exercised him. However, the Buddhist concept of *anatman*—that there is no soul, but there is rebirth—left a sense of uncertainty. Surely this is the only life we know, and this was the only life to be lived. Beyond death was the realm of the mysterious unknown. Like Rilke, he found it slightly fearful.



Professor Khan Sarwar Murshid (1924-2012)

What transpires are the musings of a young man navigating the crossroads where the great minds of the West meet those of the East. It required considerable courage for a young man to tell the Occident, in the immediate aftermath of the end of empire, that the East had exacted its revenge on the

of Yeats, Eliot and Huxley.

We had always sensed that the Buddha had a special place in his heart: not only was the bust of the Buddha one of his two most cherished possessions, next to that of the ancient Greek goddess, Venus, but he had also lovingly called his first-born Gautam Firdous,

He identified most with Yeats. Both opted for a this-worldly approach to life, where love, beauty and delight have a place. Eliot and Huxley chose detachment but fell short due to their excessive loathing of the body and preoccupation with negativity, such as with "dung and death", possibly due to their traditional Christian upbringing centred around concepts of original sin and guilt. They missed the cue of the ancients that

life is to be delighted in even as we separate ourselves from its attachments.

At the core of Murshid's world view had already evolved the concept of values. It included ideas of order and moral responsibility, justice and right conduct, truth and beauty as the measure of such an order. He summed these up in his concept of values. To him, values were what made a man, and those values are what held society together. He had already come to call these new values when at the ripe age of 25 years he began to publish a journal from Dhaka in 1949, called *New Values*, several years before he embarked on his spiritual journey into ancient Indian philosophy in the context of his literary studies. The influence of the Buddhist Mukti Andolana of the 1930's in Bengal can be traced to the secular appeal of the journal. Some may even venture to relate this stance to the values of the European Enlightenment. He had also explored other spiritual systems focussed on the Qur'an and Sufi thought, his interpretations bringing out their hidden wonder and depth.

With hindsight, it would appear that his intellectual pursuit for an orderly society based on the values of right conduct, truth and beauty found a spiritual counterpart in his quest to understand the nature of man's relationship with God. In essence, one could conclude that these two journeys—the intellectual and the spiritual—that compelled him to action all his life were one and the same. Notably, however, he was the living embodiment of the values he upheld and the world view he adopted.

Professor Tazeen Mahnaz Murshid is a social scientist and historian, and daughter of Professor Khan Sarwar Murshid, who died on this day eight years ago.

## 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

# Masculinity, toxicity and 'bro' culture: Learnings from the locker room



SHAER REAZ

**L**AST month, amidst a seemingly sudden uptick in the number of rape cases across the country, the Brac James P. Grant School of Public Health released a study that showed 63 percent of participants—11,102 male respondents aged between 15 and 24, from all 64 districts (81 urban and 289 rural clusters)—believed that beating their wives is justified if they are denied sex.

What's interesting is the response to studies like these. To some men, studies like these are an attack on their upbringing, their social contexts, on the masculinity they have relied on as a crutch for most of their lives as a way to cover their weak personalities and even weaker coping mechanisms. Some men try to distance themselves from the participants of the study—they would never be capable of such malice, they tell themselves—without realising that they are just as likely to resort to similar measures of getting what they want if the situation called for it. The subtle microaggressions and a quiet hostility towards women continue to persist in their personal spheres, unchecked and unrecognisable to themselves.

It doesn't take long for a young male to fall into the trappings that produce toxic masculinity—one could even get David Attenborough to narrate the sequence of events and accurately describe, to a tee, the environments and the actions that contribute to a manifestation of toxic behaviour in human males. It is, unfortunately, that predictable—across social classes, educational backgrounds and religions.

For a large part of my life, I have been witness to the ways different social, cultural and economic settings produce toxic males. In hindsight, I can see my own instances of

toxic behaviour at various stages of growth, each strain requiring dedicated effort and guided unlearning to address. But the more I learned—of consent, mutual respect, of the fine balances of equity and justice and access—the more I found myself to be at odds with the environments that had shaped me into the person I had become.

I remember warm summer evenings in the Dhaka University teachers' quarters on Fuller Road, where, as a child, I had gleefully run around collecting leaves and branches and dirt for some make-believe cooking with my friends in miniature *haari-patil*. I also vividly remember the jeering, mocking tone with which a slightly older girl had called me "half-ladies" for playing a home-maker with the other children. Children don't form these opinions by themselves; these are fed to them by their parents and relatives, and even in the case of university professors and highly educated academics at the country's premier educational institution, that holds true.

I remember the hallways and playgrounds of my school—an elite English-medium school where the children of industrialists, civil society actors and people of national importance ran around, displaying what they had learned at home and within the classrooms themselves. I remember how, in my early teenage years, I was mocked for having more female friends than male ones, and how the cooties contagion had propagated thanks to me and my non-masculine ways.

And so I toughened up. I left behind the *haari-patil* and my books for football and video games, receded into a shell where I had to convince myself that if a girl talked to you, it must mean she liked you romantically, and learned to bottle up my feelings and my views when "kicking it" with my "bros". Conversations quickly veered to manly things like sports, rock and roll, teenage rebellion and getting girls. I was an active participant, and eventually it became second nature to crack sexist jokes at the expense of my female friends, to pursue the romantic interests of women, and



essentially perpetuate the accepted nature of what it means to be a man.

The unlearning did not start until the grim realities of the world caught up. I was in Dhaka University then—another institution teeming with the frenzied masculine rage that enabled thousands of young men to project their power outwards, be it with cups of tea and lit cigarettes on the roadside or hockey sticks and flaming torches at political rallies. I met quietly brilliant poets from the *chairs* of Barishal who denounced conservatism in society, yet wrote sleazy love letters for unwilling classmates because they didn't know how else to woo a woman. I came across the ex-cadets who were seemingly brilliant at everything from academics to inter-department basketball, but wilted under the female gaze and often resorted to misogynistic rants to counter their inability to handle an ounce of desire from the opposite sex. All the while, I had by my side a friend and a partner who would teach me—in the context of my relationship with her—the countless ways in which patriarchy had robbed her of her dreams and her agency. By the end of my university career, she was no longer a

part of my life, and the effects of coming from a cracked and ultimately broken home had started to bear down on me and my views.

Even in a professional setting, the dichotomies were ever present. Engaging male co-workers meant suffering through endless sexist jokes and off-handed comments that the oblivious men had passed on their female colleagues. In maintaining professional relationships with other men, the constant berating of the work ethics of women was unbearable, the ludicrous comments often devoid of the context that they probably had to take care of their own man-children at home through cooking and cleaning as their unpaid wives, in addition to working in an office. Winding down from work meant game nights with friends who revelled in locker room talk—extended soliloquies centred around the intern's breasts, the latest measures enforced by the HR manager in trying (and failing) to stop their advances, and how the New Year's office parties would be prime hunting grounds for some "action". Even after #MeToo reached our shores, men still found a way to doubt accounts, call the characters of victims into

question, and generally sided with the greater enclave of their own gender whether or not they knew any of the details of an incident.

These few examples aren't excuses for the way men behave. They are a depiction of the environments that breed the kind of behaviour that permeates every layer of society and ultimately creates an atmosphere that suffocates women and men who identify as feminists. These microaggressions end up creating a culture of intangible violence, till it manifests in tangible harm.

To the men who identify with my words, I implore you to keep calling out harmful, predatory, toxic behaviour. It will seem like an uphill battle, but it is of the utmost importance that you continue to confront, correct and guide your fellow men. You are far outnumbered, but letting that dull your edge in standing up for women—not just in your lives but everywhere—is akin to admitting defeat.

To the men reading this, I would like to say that I've been there. I know how you got where you are. I know how much of a sense of belonging you get when you're part of a group of red-blooded men. But know this: the sense of camaraderie you feel also makes you the biggest part of the problem. You may pass off the raping and the torture of women as a socioeconomic issue and try to absolve yourself of any responsibility, but having been a part of the "in-group" and seeing the kind of conversations you have in your elite, corporate and personal circles, you are just as much a part of the problem as your lower-income brethren. Unlearning the traits of being a toxic male takes time and effort, and going down that path means finding the courage to admit that you have a privilege that you'd like to upend to make society more liveable for the women around you. Having the basic empathy to recognise women's suffering is ultimately one of the truest tests of masculinity—not how it is currently defined, but how it should be.

Shaer Reaz is currently serving as Deputy Editor of the Digital section of *The Daily Star*. He can be reached at shaer@thedailystar.net.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**WILLIAM JAMES**  
(1842-1910)  
American psychologist and philosopher.

*A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Bridges
- 6 Julia of film
- 10 "Cats" poet T.S.
- 11 Reach
- 12 Writer Eudora
- 13 Caesar's language
- 14 Matching
- 15 Volcanic rock
- 16 Try out
- 17 Diamond club
- 18 Sedan or SUV
- 19 Necklace features
- 22 Recipe instruction
- 23 Musical work
- 26 Small flags
- 29 Combat

**DOWN**

- 1 Finishes
- 2 Gratifies
- 3 Clinic concern
- 4 Staff symbol
- 5 Pig's place
- 6 Paper pack
- 7 Top story
- 8 City on the Mohawk River
- 9 Solitary sort
- 11 One of the deadly sins
- 15 Scathing review
- 17 Unshod
- 20 Brief drop
- 21 Hotel amenity
- 24 Come apart
- 25 Class member
- 27 Pay stub line
- 28 Fashion page topics
- 29 Lowest
- 30 Less than right
- 31 Explain away
- 35 Script unit
- 36 Collected stories
- 38 Tiny taste

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

L	I	M	A	S	R	E	L	A	Y	
I	N	A	N	E	I	R	A	T	E	
B	A	T	T	E	R	F	R	I	E	S
E	W	E	H	A	T	D	I	D		
L	E	S	S	E	N	S	O	N	E	
S	A	R	G	E	R	O	T	O	R	
I	R	O	N	P	E	G				
D	U	B	B	O	B	S	L	E	D	
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A	L	I	E	N	F	O	R	C	E	
R	A	C	E	D	S	T	E	T	S	

**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT