

89TH BIRTHDAY OF BADRUDDIN UMAR

Badruddin Umar: Our leading Marxist revolutionary

AZFAZ HUSSAIN

DECEMBER 20 marks the 89th birthday of Badruddin Umar. Bangladesh's foremost Marxist revolutionary—one who has been speaking truth to power for more than six decades now—Umar is the author of more than a hundred books and countless articles. His three-volume work on our Language Movement of 1952 called *Purba Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Tatkaleen Rajneeti* (The Language Movement in East Bengal and Contemporaneous Politics; 1970, 1976, 1981) is trailblazing, while his *tour de force* also includes his two-volume work titled *The Emergence of Bangladesh* (2004, 2006), published by Oxford University Press.

Indeed, we are yet to assess the entire range—staggering as it is—of Umar's contributions to studies of politics, culture and history, among others. I had the privilege of working with Umar closely for several years in the 1990s, as I worked as the General Secretary of Bangladesh Lekhak Shibir—the country's oldest national organisation of writers, artists and activists on the left—an organisation that Umar had led as its president for many years.

Theorist, historian, columnist, essayist, researcher, educationist, editor and political activist, Badruddin Umar studied at the University of Dhaka (DU) and Oxford University. He received his Honours degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from Oxford. He first taught philosophy at DU, and at only 32, Umar joined Rajshahi University as the founder-chair of the Department of Political Science. He also founded the Department of Sociology there.

But in 1968—being in conflict with the government of Pakistan—Umar willingly abandoned his extraordinary academic career and turned to full-time political activism dedicated to the cause of peasants and workers. He has since been involved in communist

politics while playing the role of a combative intellectual, for whom “writing is fighting.” Umar is currently President of the National Liberation Council in Bangladesh and an active member of the Anti-Imperialist and Anti-Fascist Committee in the country. Also, he has been tirelessly editing the left magazine called *Sanskriti* for more than four decades now.

Given space constraints, I can barely even scratch the surface of Umar's massive *oeuvre*. But I should point out that Umar made his interventions as a historically grounded and politically engaged writer with the publications of his unparalleled trilogy—*Sampradayikata* (Communalism, 1966), *Sanskritir Sankat* (The Crisis of Culture, 1967), and *Sanskritik Sampradayikata* (Cultural Communalism, 1969). They are all groundbreaking interventions that for the first time acutely theorise in our contexts the dialectics of culture and politics *vis-a-vis* the phenomenal forms of “communalism.” Indeed, no other writer has broached the question of communalism—while accentuating a historically specific interplay between colonialism and communalism itself—in ways in which Umar has done.

In short, Umar is a first-rate, indeed an outstanding, theorist of communalism in our part of the world. But to say that Umar is just a theorist of communalism is by no means adequate. When there was a strong need in the 1960s for a theoretical framework within which Bengali nationalism could be grasped in all its possible configurations and contours, Umar's trilogy made significant intellectual contributions to the growth of Bengali nationalism itself. To call him an early theorist of Bengali nationalism is certainly a right move in the direction of characterising part of his work.

Despite his extensive body of work, one may tabulate at least some of Umar's characteristic theoretical and thematic preoccupations pursued to varying degrees



Badruddin Umar PHOTO: COURTESY

over the last six decades, during which he has been exemplarily steadfast in his commitment to the democratic and socialist transformation of class society. Some of those preoccupations, then, encompass the class question and for that matter the historical formations of the ruling classes and other classes in Bangladesh; the questions of realpolitik itself, informed as they all are by Marxism-Leninism as a rich body of dialectically engaged and interventionist analytic apparatuses and practices; the “political physics” of mass movements, including peasant, working-class and national liberation movements themselves; the rise of a historically determinate form of fascism in India and Bangladesh; and the demystifying and devastating ideology-critiques of the *lumpenbourgeois* political culture in Bangladesh, among numerous other topics.

Let me now briefly return to Umar's three-volume work on our Language Movement. It is here where one can underline Badruddin Umar's contributions as a historian. But

to say that Umar is an important historian of that movement is only a slender acknowledgement of his actual achievements. Umar's contributions primarily reside in mobilising, for the first time in our country, a particularly radical and sustained approach that views *history itself from below* or that recognises the people themselves—workers and peasants in particular—as the true protagonists of history. Running against the grain of traditional, bourgeois, elitist and colonialist historiographies, Umar's work for the first time—empirically, historically and analytically—reveals that the Language Movement is not just a movement of some middle-class leaders or enthusiasts, but a movement of the masses, a movement in which their liberationist and emancipatory consciousness manifested itself in some form.

On January 12, 2016, the poet Alfred Khokon and I visited Badruddin Umar at his residence in Mirpur, Dhaka. That evening was full of Umar's energetic and spirited presence, accompanied by his unflagging verbal zest. He recounted many stories of his life, including the ones that are not probably covered in his multi-volume autobiography *Amar Jeebon* (My Life). I did not know until then that Umar could recite so wonderfully well! He recited verses first from Madhusudan Dutta and then from Rabindranath Tagore. And, finally, from Ghalib and the great Urdu Marxist poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

Umar recalled his meetings with Faiz himself, while telling us how he felt when he received a lovely letter from Faiz at a time when the poet was visiting Algeria. Umar also fondly recalled his conversations with the world-famous Marxist Ernest Mandel—the author of *Late Capitalism*—and the American Marxist political economist Paul Sweezy. Both of them respected Umar for his work, although Umar did not always concur with them.

Let me conclude with a few words concerning Umar's character and

disposition. Unusually courageous and uncompromising and principled as he has always been, Badruddin Umar has never in his life sought power in the establishment and cheap comforts in his life. Simplicity, straightforwardness and honesty are the hallmarks of Umar. Further, it is none but Badruddin Umar who could reject, as he did, prize after prize— and the most “prestigious” ones at that—including the Bangladesh Itihas Parishad Prize, the Bangla Academy Prize, and even the Ekushey Padak, telling us rightly that prizes are never innocent *vis-a-vis* the power of mainstream institutions. In this respect—as in others—Umar has simply no parallel in the history of Bangladesh. It's not for nothing that Ahmed Sofa said once: “I'm proud to be alive in the time of Umar.” Indeed, Umar represents a paradigmatic combination of oppositionality, integrity and dignity in a society where compromise and opportunism continue to be deemed the qualities of the “fittest” and the “smartest”.

On the occasion of his 89th birthday, I dedicate to Badruddin Umar a short poem by his own favourite poet and comrade Faiz Ahmed Faiz—a poem that I myself translated into English, a poem whose injunction is already realised in the life and work of Umar:

Speak, your lips are free.
Speak, it is your own tongue.
Speak, it is your own body.
Speak, your life is still yours.
See how in the blacksmith's shop
The flame burns wild, the iron glows red;
The locks open their jaws,
And every chain begins to break.
Speak, this brief hour is long enough
Before the death of body and tongue:
Speak, 'cause the truth is not dead yet.
Speak, speak, whatever you must speak.

Azfar Hussain teaches in the Integrative, Religious, and Intercultural Studies Department within the Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Grand Valley State University in Michigan, and is Vice-President of the Global Center for Advanced Studies, New York, USA.

Priorities in the post Covid-19 era

MANMOHAN PARKASH

THE coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has caught almost every country off-guard, requiring painful adjustments to the new reality. Bangladesh is also not an exception. However, Bangladesh has relatively well-managed the acuteness of the pandemic, and its impacts on economy and society are less severe than many other economies, including developed ones in north America and Europe, and other neighbouring countries in South Asia.

A key factor behind the relatively less severe economic impacts in Bangladesh is the recovery of domestic consumption, fuelled partly by remittances from abroad. In addition, stimulus and social protection packages and pragmatism shown by the government in gradually loosening the lockdown and ensuring continuation of economic activities, have helped maintain a moderate pace of economic growth. The recent progress of the Covid-19 vaccine development raises hope that economic activities in major export destinations of Bangladesh will return to normal by mid to late 2021.

The experiences during the pandemic, however, give an opportunity to reflect on key development strategies and see how these can be recalibrated to deliver a more inclusive, resilient and sustainable future.

The pandemic highlighted significant inadequacies and inefficiencies in the healthcare sector and social protection schemes. Public healthcare spending in Bangladesh is among the lowest in the world and has resulted in severe under-investment in public healthcare facilities. In the post Covid-19 era, public expenditure in the health sector should be significantly increased. The introduction of a universal healthcare system will be a key priority. A leaner and more capable administrative structure of relevant agencies will help in effective management of the expanding health expenditure. A more efficient healthcare administration would



PHOTO: COLLECTED

also help with prudent utilisation of funds for various emergency projects taken during the pandemic.

There are about 125 social protection schemes currently managed by the government in Bangladesh. However, various temporary social support measures were introduced to fill the gaps in the face of prolonged lockdown. In a post Covid-19 era, the social protection schemes can be mainstreamed with increased budget allocation, wider coverage, better targeting, and strengthened administration and effective delivery to the beneficiaries using digital technologies.

Informal businesses faced severe challenges during Covid-19. Appropriate policy measures should be developed to encourage formalisation of the informal businesses, including easier access to finance and incentives for cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises to create employment opportunities and jobs.

Supply chain disruptions has created a desire among major trading economies to diversify their supply chains. In the post Covid-19 world, Bangladesh can capture such opportunities by focusing on improving

the business climate, simplifying business regulations, and aggressively marketing its endowments such as more affordable skilled labour, strategic location and new economic zones. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of e-commerce. Development of new startup ventures in e-commerce should be encouraged with appropriate policy and financial support for the seamless flow of commodities.

The pandemic has also exposed the inadequacies in the education sector to utilise technology for online education. Improving the delivery and quality of online education should be a key priority in the post Covid-19 era with particular attention to rural and lagging areas. Enhancing the quality of education at all levels starting from primary to tertiary level, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) to improve skillsets of its workforce, should be pursued vigorously. A quality labour force with appropriate skills will be an essential conduit of a competitive and drastically changing business climate in the post pandemic era.

The pandemic has also outlined the need for quality infrastructure investments, particularly in urban areas. Developing

smart public transport systems in large urban areas should be a key priority. Reliable, uninterrupted electricity supply and internet connectivity are prerequisites to provide essential services such as work from home, education, healthcare, food supply services, online businesses and social protection services. Adopting a national grid code, together with upgrading the transmission and distribution infrastructure and increasing the internet bandwidth through better digital infrastructure, should be key priorities. Increased focus should be directed towards clean water access and modern sewerage facilities in urban areas.

Reshaping rural areas as economic centres is an important lesson from the pandemic. Localisation of growth can facilitate equitable economic growth throughout the country. Launching of programmes such as One Village, One Product (OVOP) or One District, One Product (ODOP) could create local employment, strengthen rural ecology and rejuvenate local economies. Accelerated implementation of the government's “My Village My Town” programme will bring urban amenities to the doorsteps of rural dwellers.

Agriculture and rural non-farm sectors should be given more importance in light of the recent reverse migration caused by the pandemic as well as a risk of food scarcity. Modernisation of agriculture for increased productivity and developing robust supply chains for agricultural products should be key areas to focus on. Agricultural logistics systems should be strengthened to directly link the farmers and small agri-entrepreneurs to the consumers, curtailing the influence of the middlemen. Focus on research and development (R&D) in agricultural products can pave the way for increased food security and export potential.

The private sector will play an important role in the post-pandemic era. Prudent fiscal and monetary policies should be formulated so that they benefit the sectors that fit in the new norm after the pandemic.

Enough liquidity should be provided to those sectors with proper regulatory reforms. Borrowings from international financial markets and multilateral institutions should be wisely planned so that the sectors with strong investment needs can be adequately supported. Reforms in the financial sector will be critical to enhance resilience of the economy.

Building economic resilience, diversifying trade and production networks, and enhancing business competitiveness and agility are at the core of economic recovery in the post pandemic era. Assessing economic vulnerabilities through risk assessments and preparing policy responses such as easier access to finance, incentives for new industries, trade agreements for deeper linkages to regional and international markets, and improved trade facilitation and international logistics can all help make the economy resilient to future shocks. Adopting agile management practices, connecting to digital platforms, digitalisation of value chains for enhanced quality, traceability and compliance are other actions that will help businesses compete, sustain and prosper in the new normal.

Although the pandemic is still on, and the second or third wave is raging in many countries and regions, the development of vaccines is progressing well and recently reported successes provide hope for the new year. As the world cast its sight towards a post Covid-19 era, Bangladesh needs to prepare for a new normal based on lessons from the pandemic. With relatively less fatalities and economic damage from the pandemic, Bangladesh is well positioned to move forward vigorously with reforms. The once in a century pandemic can open up once in a century opportunities for a young, resilient and vibrant nation like Bangladesh. Prioritisation and pragmatic policy shifts are the needs of the hour.

Manmohan Parkash is Country Director for Bangladesh, Asian Development Bank (ADB).



QUOTABLE
Quote



BOB DYLAN
(Born on May 24, 1941)
American singer-songwriter

No one is free,
even the birds
are chained to
the sky.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Fall quaff
6 Butler's love
11 Love, to Luigi
12 Disconcerted
13 Bowler's challenge
14 Candle sight
15 Farm machines
17 Gloss spot
18 Imitating
19 Most spooky
22 Laugh sound
23 Sports spot
24 Adhere
25 Show up
27 Blue
30 Sewing machine part

31 Pitcher's stat
32 Do something
33 Game trip
35 Intense beam
38 Breaks, in a way
39 Scoundrel
40 Clear
41 Completely full
42 Cars' scars

DOWN
1 Algiers section
2 Gazelle's cousin
3 Buck
4 Pennsylvania city
5 Fell back
6 Not running
7 Movie computer
8 Flowery shrub

9 Negligent
10 Skilled
16 Soaps
20 Brought to life again
21 Squid's squirt
24 Spring site
25 Secret stuff
26 Watched Rover
27 Tar
28 Haul in
29 Speakers' stands
30 Mediation events
34 Flight cost
36 Time of planning
37 Spectrum end

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO
dsopinion@gmail.com.

12-12

11	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
13					12				
15					14				
18				19		20	21		
22				23					
	25	26					27	28	29
30							31		
32				33		34			
35			36	37		38			
39						40			
41						42			

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT