

## face to face

## Ahmed Sofa: An Iconoclast

Ahmed Sofa belongs to that rare breed of Bangladeshi intellectuals who talks sense and writes with formidable brilliance on almost about everything. He is a unique amalgam of scholar, poet and fiction writer and an iconoclast who challenges and stimulates our thinking in areas of culture and politics. His works have been widely published and translated into the major languages of the world including Japanese, English, Hindi and his work in German is due in April this year. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim

**Q:** You wrote an interesting piece as I remember for a vernacular daily about the role of NGOs in Bangladesh. Would you please tell us how do look at the whole NGO affair?

**A:** You know Robert Macnamara in the decade of 60s wrote a book called "Assault on the Poverty of the World." At that time Macnamara was the president of the World Bank. In the book he spoke on behalf of the America: "We are helping the poor countries but what do we find poor are becoming poorer and rich are becoming richer. Gap between poor and rich is only widening. So with our own cost we are creating our own enemies. We are helping the poor countries with an aim to oppose communism, but we are paving the path of communism. Since we are world leader and facing Soviet Union we can't avoid giving help to this people. The tragedy is this help doesn't go into the deep of the society. The upper layer of the society swallows it. We have to find out a way to reach the grassroots level. So this was basically the idea that led him to conceive and design the concept of NGO. Before communism was liquidated NGOs had a particular role to play:

Their only business was to resist communism. But after the debacle of communism the NGOs have changed their role. Just think of the role of the NGOs in our own context. When they first came they came with the idealism to alleviate poverty and they did some work that created social mobility, that resurrected our traditional crafts that created employment. And most importantly done tremendous work to promote women's cause. But after that phase is over, they no longer talk about alleviation of poverty. Now they do not bother about what happens to the poor. Their only business is now to give loans to the people. What they are doing is giving loans and

taking interest that also with high interest. They are playing the role of a *Kabuliwala* or an indigo planter of the nineteenth century. Think of BRAC, Grameen Bank or Proshika they have now entered into the arena of capitalist development. They are investing in industry and in business. The irony of it is that I can deplore or condemn Salman Rahman as a loan defaulter but I can't condemn Prof Yunus. The employees at the NGOs can't form unions. Remember the NGOs don't pay taxes and now that they have accumulated wealth

control over them rather the state is controlled by the NGOs. And by doing so they have created anomalies in the society. World Bank last year published a report on GO-NGO cooperation. The report says there are 19000 NGOs operating in Bangladesh alone. Of them, 786 NGOs are member of ADAB. And the startling information is 86 per cent of the resource is controlled by six NGOs. But the big question is can the NGOs be the alternate of the government? If not, then the way they are operating this should stop. It can't run like

from taking control over the society. Indians are now raising voice against WTO but we are silent about it. Coming to FEMA, how come they declare an election fair. Do you think where the peasants cannot choose their representatives is a fair election? Look at India people from the lower caste even get elected. Can you imagine it here. Then how come our elections are fair where people are bribed to or intimidated to vote.

**Q:** What do you think is the future of Marxism after the debacle of communism in the world?

**A:** I think it is because of Marx that we have seen welfare state. It is basically devised to resist communism. So Marxism has helped change non-communist societies also. Apparently it seems that capitalism has own a long-standing battle, but I think this is completely a wrong way to look at the whole affair. The world has now entered into a new order. I don't know what is that exactly since its edges are not defined yet. We are living in a void and vacuum. Now the capitalists are not sure whether they would be able to run the world with their economic theory and the communists are not also sure about the revival of Marxism. In this twilight zones thinkers like Amartya Sen is creating new thought weave which is very significant for the world.

**Q:** What do you think is Sen's original contribution in the field of economy?

**A:** In the history of western economics ethic has never been a subject for any consideration. Economics has always been looked upon as an impersonal subject. This is the area where Sen attached humanism and raised the question of morality. In order to do that he has to become a philosopher because only a philosopher could discuss such issues of morality.

they want to have a share in the government. This they need to protect their wealth. They now talk about civil society. Just look at how the whole thing works. If World Bank works as air force, let us take the metaphor from modern warfare. NGOs' role is that of the infantry soldiers. NGOs are now working in China and India. Countries like Russia and East Europe are not out of the reach of the ever powerful NGOs. But there is a qualitative difference in the role of the NGOs there and in Bangladesh. Here NGOs are running a parallel government and the state has no

that because the society is not only a place for women and their cause and the tribals. A society is an organic whole. Since the society lacks a holistic approach to address its problem NGOs shouldn't take advantage of it.

I want to hold the NGOs responsible for the deterioration of the standard of education at the universities. The professor who gets Tk 8000 a month can earn more than 4 times of it if he signs a report for the NGOs. Why he would be interested in taking classes. I think this is high time to take a drastic measure to stop the NGOs

and the state has no



At the writing desk: Though Sofa is not an eloquent speaker and coughs frequently, punctuates his sentences with brief pauses, his non-conformist thoughts can be laughed at or condemned but can not be ignored

—Star photo Zahedul I Khan

## When I Was a Teenager

## IN CONVERSATION WITH DR HALIMA KHATUN

DR Halima Khatun, mostly known for her contribution in children's literature, used to wander off into the horizon as a child, in her dreams. This dreamy child found herself far away from home and closer to nature as she imagined herself to be one of the characters she read about in her storybooks.

"I remember a time when I was going somewhere with my parents, the sky was dark: lightning and thunder broke into the calm silence once in a while; the frogs were gloating. I was very young, but the beauty of nature mesmerised me. Perhaps, it is after that that I gave nature a special place in my heart," she said remembering. "But it could also be a figment of my imagination," she added smiling.

The little Halima had to go through the agony of losing an elder sister and three younger brothers within a short span of time. Those days may have been hard and gloomy, but it made the family grow closer, made them unite in the bond of love and value life more.

"After the death of my sister, I felt the agony and the pain of the poet who wrote 'KaaJla Didi'. It was as if it was written with me in mind. When I think of my sister, I see a female figure wearing a red bordered saree walking on mud, with 'alta' decorating her delicate feet. That image has been ever imprinted in my heart. My brothers, I hardly remember because I was very young

then. But, as I wrote in one of my poems, they had a god-like effect on me. After this, my parents became very protective over us. They were in constant fear of losing us. We were not allowed to bathe in the pond anymore and elders accompanied us wherever we went. I can't begin to comprehend the pain they went through," she said while talking to the Daily Star in her Indira Road residence.

Dolls never attracted this young dreamer. Counting birds as they flocked to-

gether interested her more. And of course, there was music.

"My uncle had a gramophone which he used to bring over at times. I cherished those moments very much. Folk songs, especially those of Abbasuddin, were my favourite. These songs were also responsible for the creation of my dream world," she said.

Her family was the biggest inspiration in her life. They taught her to be

open minded and created such an environment at home that all the eight brothers and sisters were studious and intellectually aspiring.

"Since I was younger than most I was a very pampered and spoilt child. I called everyone by his or her names and wouldn't tolerate it when anyone scolded me. I was basically my father's pet. Whenever he quarrelled with my mother he used to say 'I'm taking my one and

leaving!'

Because I was so young, my sisters and their husbands always got me gifts, which were mostly books. That way I got addicted to books. Starting from Sharatchandra to Rabindranath, I read all these books before I was fifteen. 'Pather Dabi' was Sharatchandra's banned book. I read it standing behind my brother when he was reading it, and he never knew! There was many a time when I walked miles after miles just to borrow a

book from a friend. Today I realise how important such habits are," she said.

Along the same lines she continued, "Books were our escape from the harsh realities of life. We read in abundance, let it be travel, adventurous, revolutionary or fiction. Today, the reading habit is out of fashion and as it seems, it will never be in fashion again. As a matter of fact, nothing that was supposed to be good and virtuous in our days is not so today. People are only bothered about themselves. Luxury is the main aim in life while there is no such thing called family values.

"The world is changing so fast that it is hard to grasp the pace. While I agree that one cannot just ignore the changes time entails, it is important to keep one's feet on the ground. Not only have we forgotten Mother Nature, we tend to forget that we are human beings. We forget that this is our greatest identity and we are humans above all.

"The earth is my mother I am her child. The flowers are my cousins, The trees my brother, The grass my children, Animals my friends. I am their, And I am their own. Mother Earth give me power And give me desire To save you And your family of lives.

>From the atrocity of your offsprings." Reciting one of her poems and inviting all to come back to nature, the interview came to an end.



Zahedul I Khan

## "Soul Search"

A Z M Obaidullah Khan

Poet

Q. What gives you the greatest pleasure?

A. Listening to the voice of my daughter, warm and gentle like the sun contained in a globe of crystal dew.

Q. Do you have any recurring nightmares?

A. A city of graves expanding its acre.

Q. What do you dislike most about yourself?

A. Not being able to express my emotions.

Q. What is your greatest fear?

A. The dread of death which is in the faces I love: The dread of my dying or theirs.

Q. What has been the biggest mistake in your life?

A. My life is full of incredible errors. The biggest has been my betrayal of poetry for material comfort.

Q. What makes you cry?

A. Ecstasy of both joy and despair.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. My mother.

Q. How important is money to you?

A. Enough to be comfortable.

Q. What is the quality you most like in a man?

A. Integrity and compassion.

Q. What is the quality you most like in a woman?

A. Love and warmth.

Q. What is more important to you, your personal or professional life?

A. Personal life.

Q. Are you afraid of death?

A. Yes. It is the fear of the infinite beyond the horizon.

Q. Which book has influenced your life most?

A. *Sanchita* by Rabindranath Tagore.

Q. If you were given a chance to start all over again from zero, what would you want to be?

A. A poet and just a poet. Poetry is still treason because it is the truth.

Q. What worries you most as we are standing at the threshold of the 21st century?

A. Death of the heart in the tyranny of material things.

Q. If you have to sum up the philosophy of your life in three sentences, what will that be?

A. All that I require is an acre of sunlight, the wet cheeks of rain, the whir of the wind reading the palms of leaves, the trees serenely resting in the fading light and the new moon pinned to the sky like a night moth. "One acre only and nothing beyond that with my own version of the world beyond."



Interviewed by Ziaul Karim