

Face to Face

The Torch-bearer

What Noam Chomsky has said about Edward Said who "helps us understand who we are and what we must do if we aspire to be moral agents, not servants of power" is quite true about Ahmad Sharif, the impassioned intellectual of our time. Sharif turns 79 this month. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim.



Q: How do you look at the present political scenario?

A: In a poor state of the Third World there can not be any sort of disciplined life in the public as well as in the government. Here government is corrupt and the public is ambitious because they are poor. They want to assert themselves in practical life, but they get hardly any scope to it. That is why they adopt unfair means and they like to have something through backdoors. It is because of this that in our country we do not find any discipline or law and order in any sphere of life.

Q: Is there any way out?

A: Yes. By adopting Marxism theory and applying it or through liberal bourgeois government which although a bourgeois, feel morally obliged to do some good to the people.

Q: You have just referred Marxism. But how relevant it is after the downfall of communism in Soviet Union and in East Europe.

A: I do not find fault with Marxism *par se*. Communism in Soviet Russia has failed and going to fail in China and even in Cuba it will be impossible for Castro to maintain the communist principle, mainly because the capitalist countries have united to thwart the progress of communism, to do harm to it, to subdue it. In order to do that they have adopted free economy which proved to be a boomerang even for the rich nations. South Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia are examples of its flip side. The capitalist world with determination under the leadership of Clinton is trying to discourage and blackmail communism. It's not the fault with Marxism it is the fault with the people who ruled over Soviet Russia. They wanted to compete with USA in the field of politics everywhere, that is why they had to spend money for that purpose and did not look after the welfare of the people of Russia for the last 70 years. In the beginning during the Lenin's period they spent money to subdue the people of Central Asia which was under Tsar's empire and after some time they involved themselves in World War II. The war over, they began to compete with the US with the aim to rule the world.

Q: At the present critical juncture what is the relevance of thinkers like Amartya Sen?

A: Amartya Sen did not do good to anybody. His ideas are sort of a stunt. Purely because the solution of the problem has already been given by Marx about 150 years ago. It is the responsibility of the government to feed each and every person residing within a particular territory. This is what has been said by Marx. Now seen famine did not occur in communist countries. Since the professor does not like communism, for the bourgeois world he gave a solution, a human solution I would say, it is basically an old theory newly preached: benign to, be kind to, be charitable so that your neighbours must not die of starvation.

Q: The presence of NGOs in the Third World is significant in any respect. Do you think that the NGOs are contributing to our society in any way?

A: Not at all. NGOs are agents of imperialists. It is a form of new imperialism. They send NGOs to serve the people of the poor countries so that they can not grow, can not be self-sufficient and remain prone to live on charity. They are doing much harm to us, and that is at the very root of our national life and national sentiment. It is possible because our government can

not afford to feed them, can not provide them with work and finally because our government is an agent of imperialists, particularly of the United States of America. Our government is under the direct supervision of the US Embassy here in Dhaka. So the government can not prevent the NGOs to do their work, ask the US government to withdraw them. A weak and inane government like us have to compromise with the imperialists and do harm to the people of its own country knowing fully well what they are doing. In our country a government's sole aim is to remain in power, not to serve its people. You can not really depend on the governments of the Third World anywhere in Afro-Asian or Latin-American countries — basically because they act as direct agents of imperialists. In our country the American Embassy always dictates our government in every point.

Q: You have always been a strong voice against fundamentalism. Over the years the fundamentalists have united and organized themselves and started to assert now. What do you think the future holds for us?

A: Fundamentalism is something which is anti-current, anti-people and anti-time. Anything which is anti-people can not grow or spread. It can create havoc in a place for the time being, but can not spread



mainly because of the growth of science and technology. Technology stands against fundamentalism, basically because your life depends on it and is to a great extent governed by it. The daily life of a man in this age is controlled by machine. All educated persons now prefer western style of life. So it is not possible for any man belonging to any religion, caste or creed to follow his religious principles, instructions or code in any field of life. Take the case of us, you have nurses there in the hospitals which is against Islam, you have got radio and television, you have got dance — nothing of there are sanctioned by Islam, Christianity or Buddhism. Up to the early nineteenth century it was not

possible for the Europeans also to play a female role by a lady and in our country up to early twentieth century females were not cast to act in a female role. The world is fast changing. Three persons are particularly responsible in changing our ways of life and thinking. They are Freud, Marx and Darwin. Their findings are against any scriptural instructions.

Q: Very often we use the word Apasanskriti, for which there is no equivalent in any modern language. How do you explain the concept?

A: There is nothing as Apasanskriti. Everything is sanskriti. There is a demand of time and the generation. You must satisfy their demand and their

need. From generation to generation ways of thinking and ways of life differ. You must fulfil the new demands of the situation. Since it is new, it looks like Apasanskriti in the eyes of the conservatives only. Usually, conservative people can not accept new thing, new method, new ways of life. So they stand against it, protest it and try to resist it, but they can not. Basically in the eyes of the conservatives every new thing is bad. Take the case of our young people now. They are prone to love. But in our society it is prohibited. In every scripture love between opposite sex is not encouraged, neither in Christianity, nor in Hinduism, nor in Islam. So religious people can not encourage courtship, free mix-

ing, co-education or co-working. And it is not Apasanskriti. Take the case of past 14 February, the Valentine's Day, it is new something in our country. Although it was prevalent in Europe for over three hundred years it is introduced here only this year. Day by day the number of educated people are increasing, people are travelling far and wide. Now these are the people who are influencing our younger generation. You can not prevent them observing Valentine's Day. Can you? And they will observe it, I presume, every year in an increasing number. It will go up to village level. What will you do then? The conservatives can not accept it. It is Apasanskriti in their eyes.

When I was a Teenager

IN CONVERSATION WITH RABIUL HUSAIN

By Navine Murshid

"If we met the teachers on the road while cycling, we would get down, greet him and then continue on our way. Even today, if I see one of my teachers, I touch their feet to pay my respects, although many of them have died and I am an old man,"

Rabiul Husain, a name associated with architecture, literature, poetry, art criticism and at times, music. Born in Jessore, little Rabi and his family settled in Kushtia when he was in Class 3, and it was there that he spent a good part of his life.

He first saw a political rally during the 1956 general elections. "I watched people like Bhashant and Dr. Mohammed Shahidullah make speeches on the school field, as many crowded around them," he recalled.

He remembers not what they said, but bears in mind the image it created. As a student of Class 9, Rabiul Husain remembers the time of Ayoob Khan's Marshall Law, when people were beaten up here and there and projects were undertaken to keep the city clean.

"Some of my friends and I were going somewhere with a teacher of ours. All of a sudden some military people stopped us and commanded us to clean up some garbage littering the road. None of us dared to protest. We simply did what was asked from us and quietly left," he said while talking to the Daily Star.

Teachers were the people students respected most and the teachers too loved them like their sons and daughters. His teachers always felt responsible for them and they always had an open invitation to go to them for help in any matter whatsoever. He feels that their help was a major boost in his life.

"If we met the teachers on the road while cycling, we would get down, greet him and then continue on our

way. Even today, if I see one of my teachers, I touch their feet to pay my respects, although many of them have died and I am an old man," he said.

Rabiul Husain respected his parents as well, although he was extremely scared of his father. His anamnesis of his father is that of the time when he was about to take his Matriculation. The school just introduced the game of hockey and they were very excited about it. They were playing on the field one day, when suddenly the ball came and

hit his mouth. He fainted immediately. When he opened his eyes, he saw blood all over and his front tooth missing.

"Disheartened, I went home, only to be slapped by my father. 'You have your exams up front, how dare you go out to play like this,' he yelled. I felt very bad, but my mother was on my side and she would not talk to him because he slapped me," he recalled.

Being the eldest among five brothers and four sisters, he always felt a sense of responsibility and duty to-

wards his siblings. They often complained of him being over protective. Yet, he felt this was to be done in order to make each individual prosper in his or her field. Young Rabi saw his father die when he was a second year student. Then, he took it upon himself to look after his brothers and sisters. Today, he is satisfied to see all his siblings as professionals: one is a pilot and others, doctors and engineers.

His literary practice started as a schoolboy, where he made a regular contribution to the school

magazines. The young man was very much into drama; music, religious discussions, literature and he often sent his writings to magazines in Dhaka to be published. He waited but his poetry never got into the pages of the magazines he sent them to. Then he got an idea.

"I started to use the name of a cousin of mine - Laili Hassan. Surprisingly, from then on my poems were published regularly in magazines like Begum! And then, to my astonishment, I found love letters directed to

me!" He did not know whether to cry or laugh!

He still cherishes his childhood friends. He was among the few who had friends of both the sexes and this was quite rare especially in those orthodox times, where people did not believe that boys and girls could simply be friends without falling in love with each other.

The family shifted to Dhaka in 1961 and Rabiul Husain started his studies in architecture. A few years later, in 1964, he brought out a little magazine called 'Na', which had articles and poems that they called 'concrete poetry'. Rashid Chowdhury made the cover by weaving jute and the magazine became an instant success. Little did he know then, what Rashid Chowdhury would mean thirty five years later. At the threshold

of the twenty first century, the man who lives for architecture and literature is very optimistic about what the future holds for the people of Bangladesh.

"The bygone days are always special. Memories are always beautiful, even if we did not think so then. And so, the days gone by will always seem better than today. Today, life is very fast paced; time simply flies.

Today we live in a very advanced society of new technology, communication and lifestyle. I believe we have a very enlightened future. My only advice would be to keep in touch with human values and morals, so that with the race against time, we do not forget that we exist and other humans exist too." With these words, the interview came to an end.