

Abul Mansur Ahmad and the Clash of Histories in Bangladesh

IT'S over two decades since their independence, but the Bangladeshs are still battling over their history, unable to decide if the 1971 liberation struggle was a pluralistic nationalist movement or a single-party-driven radical revolution like that of Russia or China. Both the reading and writing of history in Bangladesh have become a deadly partisan avocation, and one cannot help wondering if the Bengali rhetorical overstatements, and their loquacity made it difficult for them to gaze at their past with verifiable facts, and conceptual reasoning. Sad as it is, no more than a handful of the Bangladeshi politicians were also analytical preceptors who could separate rhetoric from the reality, but few of them are alive now. Mr. Abul Mansur Ahmad belonged to that rare breed of politicians who had the gift of a writer and a logical thinker, and today his thoughts are an important resource to the historiographers of Bangladesh.

A committed Awami Leaguer though he was, Abul Mansur Ahmad did not follow the mantra "My party, Right or Wrong", and rather he was the conscience of his party, and carried the moral sense of the new nation. He did not disown his party but when he wrote on the cardinal state principles for Bangladesh, he transcended partisan politics, and offered the nation the wisdom of a discerning statesman. He was one such mentor who did not sacrifice his intellectual honesty to the "political correctness", and he was one such thinker who had the guts to write what he felt like writing. Whenever necessary, he did not hesitate to plough his lonely furrows without bothering if any one cared to join him or not. In fact, Abul Mansur Ahmad was conspicuous by his absence in the first government of independent Bangladesh, although he was a widely respected Awami League leader who held cabinet positions during the Pakistan period.

To begin with, many ideo-

logues in the freshly independent state insisted that the country's political system and economy should emulate the Soviet and Chinese institutional arrangement. Even today numerous "pro-liberation" activists in Bangladesh feel the same way. They insist that Bangladesh had earned its independence from Pakistan through blood and suffering, which itself embodied a revolutionary accomplishment, and the cumbersome constitutional route offered them no better choice. Still, Bangladesh has the legacy from the past when the Awami League leaders sought to shape the national fate in the light of what was known as Mujibism, a perceived mixture of nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism. Abul Mansur Ahmad was uncomfortable with such an ideological brew guiding the state destiny. Clearly, there was a parting of the ways between him and the purveyors of Mujibism in his party.

Such revolutionary imaginations created a conceptual difficulty in what was an elected parliamentary democracy, but those highly charged questions from the past are still haunting the nation. Bangladesh was very much a divided country in the early 1970s, divided by the trauma of the liberation struggle which was also a civil war. Few had challenged such radical stupa-tion and the historically arbitrary presumptions that started at the dawn of independence, and only a few would rattle those presuppositions even now. To me, Abul Mansur Ahmad was one of the solitary challengers to the revolutionary pomposity that colored the ideological map of early Bangladesh. His insightful analysis of Bangladesh politics is still relevant to the way the Bangladeshis perceive their events gone by, although his sagacity was also among his unfinished dreams.

I am not a literary essayist, and this piece is not a critique of Abul Mansur Ahmad's creative writings of his younger

On the occasion of the 20th death anniversary of the renowned litterateur, politician and journalist, Abul Mansur Ahmad, **Dr Rashiduzzaman** of Rowan University of Glassboro, USA, writes about his post-independence political thinking and about his far-reaching vision of politics in Bangladesh.

years. And this is too modest an effort to cover most of his political ideas extending well over fifty years. My focus here is on his post-independent political thinking, and his far-reaching vision of the nature of politics that he desired for Bangladesh. He wrote a series of columns in the Daily Ittefaq (later published as *Beshi Dame Kena, Kam Dame Becha: Amader Shadhinata*, Ahmed Publishers, Dhaka, 1986) to challenge the impending collision between a parliamentary democracy and the radical proclivities in the newly-independent nation. His fear of the quixotic mixture of a constitutional government with revolutionary semblance was vindicated in his own lifetime when the parliamentary system was scrapped to make Bangladesh a single-party dictatorship, which was called the "second revolution", the first one being the 1971 independence movement.

He conceded that in the Awami League government, Bangladesh had inherited a constitutional regime at independence, since its inherent legitimacy came from the Awami League's unprecedented victory in the 1970 elections. He further argued that the Awami League's claim to the leadership of the 9-month-long armed struggle against Pakistan was also based on same electoral triumph, and that confirms the underlying and continuing constitutional trait of the Awami League government that took over soon after independence. But such a linear prognosis of Bangladesh history has strong opponents. Besides the Awami League's dominant presence in 1971, there were several other minor groups and numerous individuals who had also contributed towards the independence of Bangladesh.



Photo courtesy: Nasir Ali Mamun

Once the Pakistani military surrendered in Dhaka, the non-Awami League actors in the liberation struggle demanded a "national (all parties combined) government" for post-independent Bangladesh. Mr. Ahmad viewed that such an all-party government was unnecessary since the Awami League was the absolute winner of the

1970 election. He reasoned that the AL government had a *de facto* cog-nizance since early March 1971 when the Pakistan Parliament was expected to meet and form a new cabinet with Sheikh Mujib Rahman as the new Prime Minister. But the Yahya regime first stalled it, and then unleashed a remorseless military

crackdown to foil that anticipated Awami League government. He saw the rudiments of an independent Bangladesh in Awami League's 6-point manifesto that swept the 1970 polls. The continuity of that shadowy Awami League authority was maintained through the Bangladesh government in exile located in Calcutta. Mr. Ahmad maintained. However, different groups and individuals have challenged such exclusive Awami League claims to national independence, and unrolled their respective chronicles of the past. The unmitigated controversies that arose over such pleas not only divided the politicians and frayed the civil society, but also hampered the institutional development of the country. And the post-modernist counterfactual historiographers would object to such "retrospective data fitting" to the liberation narratives that favored one single leader, one particular group or a specific event over the other claims and possibilities.

Manifestly, his was not a wobbly commitment to a Westminster type of democracy; he was absolutely clear about its theory and practice, and there was not a shadow of doubt

of what he wanted and what he believed in. The first Bangladesh Constitution declared socialism as one of its objectives; to him, however, that did not necessarily make the Awami League a revolutionary establishment. He was even uncomfortable about declaring Bangladesh a People's Republic upon those who were presumed as the Pakistani sympathizers, and on the suspected accomplices of the 1971 brutalities. Both the ruling party and its supportive activists openly humiliated, harassed and punished a large number of people without fairness and the due process of law. By their rhetoric, scorn and xenopho-

nia, the ruling elite and their protagonists made some people feel like pariahs, not the proud citizens of an independent nation.

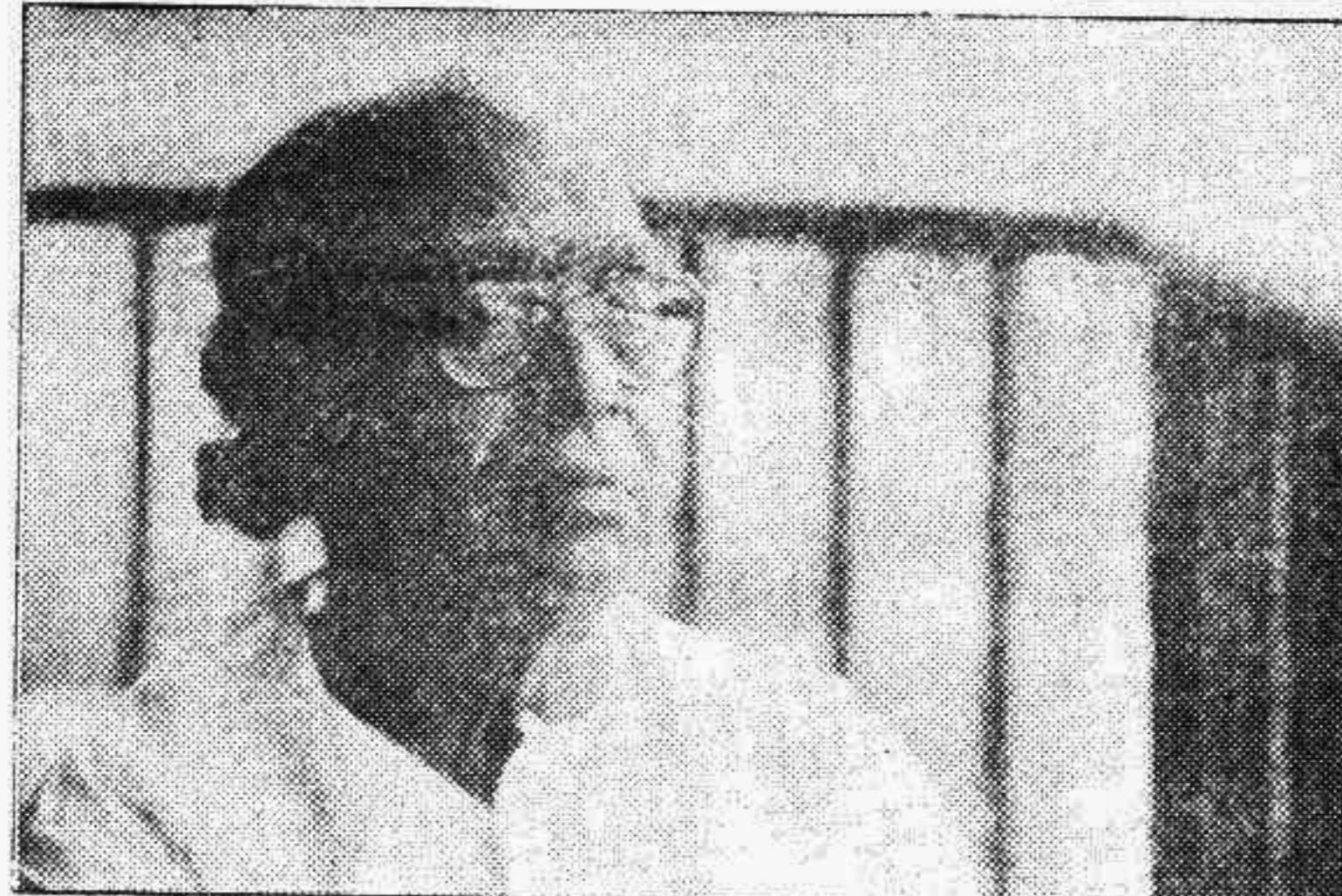
Abul Mansur Ahmad, in his (Ittefaq) column of 8th September 1972, blamed that the Awami League government was wasting its time in the endless pursuit of the perceived Pakistani collaborators. To oppose Bangladesh before East Pakistan became a separate and sovereign nation was not necessarily a treason; Mr. Ahmad put it boldly at a time when it was politically incorrect to say so. It was at best a difference of opinion, an opposite viewpoint, he continued. Soon after the exiled government returned to Dhaka to be at the helm of the new state, all the right wing and Islamically oriented parties were outlawed. Mr. Ahmad opposed such actions of the then Awami League government.

At the time of Indian independence, there were such individuals and organizations that did not want the British to quit India (1947), and on the partition of India, numerous persons and groups opposed Pakistan. After the British had left and Pakistan was a reality, few such people faced treason charges. Mr. Ahmed argued. Not the political divergence of opinion but the absence of loyalty (to the independent country) could be a serious issue, he indicated. On some of those questions that shaped the Bangladesh political history, Abul Mansur Ahmad's views were similar to those of Mr. Ataur Rahman Khan, a prominent Awami League leader and an ex-chief Minister of former East Pakistan.

One could wonder that Abul Mansur Ahmad wrote on different political issues but he did not use any social science methodologies to verify what was essentially his own belief and personal opinion. I feel that his quintessential convictions came from his insight, creative observations, conceptual clarity, and a keen sense of history that are a good enough source for sound political knowledge.

Prof Ahmed Sharif: Death of an Independent Thinker

by Taj ul-Islam Hashmi



PROFESSOR Ahmed Sharif's sudden demise on February 24 signals the end of an era as well as an end of a legendary figure. To many, he was an enigma while to others he was a hero. To the obscurantist, reactionary forces, he was nothing more than a Murtad or apostate, while to the bulk of the liberal democrats and socialists always admired him as their guru, guide and philosopher in this sterile land which has become a fertile breeding ground for reactionary and intolerant thought. To the average Bangladeshi, who knew him personally, he was just an impractical man, a synic pregnant with radical ideas who was never "clever" enough to understand his own mundane interests as he never took any undue advantage of his scholarship, position and influence to become rich, famous and powerful.

We all know how the reactionary, parochial and ultra-chauvinistic forces treated him. While some of them regarded him a dangerous man, others even issued "fatwas to kill" against this harmless scholar for his maverick views, ironically in the name of Islam, a religion of peace. It is equally true that a large section of the so-called liberal democrats and secular intellectuals of Bangladesh again and again deprived this highly educated, sophisticated, honest and above all, brave man, who always sided with the downtrodden masses irrespective of their race and religion, of his due. Let us repay our debt to this great soul for the sake of our conscience.

As one knows, he could have become vice-chancellors of several universities of the region both during the Pakistani and Bangladeshi periods, as several other academics, even with lesser education and talent, have done. He could have been an ambassador, a regular leader of delegations sent abroad by the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh to represent the culture and literature (and what not) of the region, chairman of the University Grants Commission or the Public Service Commission or at least a national professor for his knowledge and very rich contributions to the field of Bengali language, literature and culture, both as a dedicated researcher and creative writer. Alas! none of these happened to our "Sharif Sir" who wrote more than 40 books and hundreds of research articles and essays both for scholars and laymen. He led the life of an active teacher, creative scholar and voracious reader, full of inquisitiveness, dedication and imagination. He

never failed in his duty as a teacher. His students have told me, he never stayed away from his class (lecture), unlike many "internationally renowned" professors of our time. Despite all these qualities, Ahmed Sharif had to retire in 1983 from Dhaka University and neither the Bengali Department nor the University took any serious initiative to reward him and take advantage of his scholarship for national interest.

The reason why "Sharif Sir" was never made "something big" and was never considered for National Professorship or Bangla Academy Award (until it was too late, in 1991), is not far to seek. He possibly knew the art of antagonising the powerful people. There is nothing new about it as so many other eccentric and maverick scholars throughout history had similar tendency and stand vis-a-vis power and authority. One may give hundreds of names in this regard, from Socrates to Voltaire, Mansur Hallaj to Kazi Nazrul Islam. We know, had he wrote an eulogy of Ayub Khan praising his Basic Democracy, like several of his contemporary intellectuals did, or simply acquiesced in to civil or military autocracy, by now he would have been officially established as the number one intellectual and great patriot of the country. As we know, compliance and sycophancy always work, more so in a culturally backward country like Bangladesh, and we also know that Ahmed Sharif's dignity and self respect were too high to be compliant and submissive to power.

Had he wrote a thick volume on some national leaders or wrote poems for a military dictator, he would have become at least the Education Minister of this country. It is a pity, a disgrace to all of us, that while

jealousy of our intellectuals. Let us draw a line between personal liking / disliking and national interest. What does Bangladesh gain by rewarding nincompoops and undermining men like Ahmed Sharif and others?

To conclude, one may point out how grossly misunderstood Ahmed Sharif was during his lifetime among a cross section of Bangladeshi scholars and laymen. I do not think there is any moral ground to portray him as a "Murtad" (apostate) as he never renounced his faith in Islam. He simply asserted the fact that he did not believe in any religion. He told us several times that he believed in Sastha (creator) but not in Sastha or scripture. That does not make him a Murtad again, those who know about Islam know it very well that the Prophet of Islam did never show any disrespect to his uncle, Abu Talib (father of Hazrat Ali), for not accepting Islam. Rather they remained good friends till the death of the former. I never heard "Sharif Sir" condemning Islam or the Prophet of Islam. At times he was critical of contemporary Muslims, not Islam, for their lack of discipline and respect for scholarship. In view of the above, let us do something to honour this legendary, uncompromising, honest and brave scholar, a publicity shy philanthropist, a harmless person and an enemy of autocracy and obscurantism. He was too enlightened and much above parochialism, racism and bigotry. He can be only compared with Socrates and Voltaire for his courage and concern for his students.

However, there is nothing new in denying people's scholarship and talent in this part of the world. One may cite the case of renowned historian Rafiuddin Ahmed (I don't know how many Bangladeshi historian friends of mine will start boycotting me for honouring Rafiuddin Ahmed!) in this regard. Rafiuddin, a former Cornell University professor, who now teaches at another American university, is known and admired throughout the world by his peers and students for his path-breaking work on Bengali Muslims, had his book reviewed and acclaimed from Australia to America and Britain to India. Believe it or not, Rafiuddin is not only undermined and ridiculed by his "internationally renowned" colleagues in Bangladesh, but one of them even refused to publish an eulogy of his book (Bengali Muslims: A Quest for Identity) by an American scholar in a local academic journal out of sheer jealousy and meanness.

One feels that this is high time that we discard this sort of peasant behaviour and vindictive nature. Let Ahmed Sharif be the last victim of bigotry and professional

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Shilu Abed as an Entrepreneur

Shilu Abed is no more with us but her creations are. It was she who took up craft development programmes and virtually revived the crafts, specially Kantha which transformed itself as an enduring craft — a popular life-style product. Last year the National Craft Council introduced "The Shilu Abed Karushilpa Purashkar" on March 5, corresponding her birth anniversary. This year it was in recognition to artisans for their life-time contributions to the development of Kantha.

by Maheen Khan



SHILU Abed was a remarkable individual blessed with an unusual spirit and a vivacious personality. She played many roles but probably she should be best remembered as a person, with a distinct sense of purpose. She was dynamic, with an exceptional energy. Always a focused entrepreneur she worked objectively towards specific goals. A leader with a powerful driving force, she was a natural stimulus who could draw attention, actuate and impel others. She had the ability to arouse, and embark upon projects with an unbelievable gusto.

Her journey in the field of craft development began almost 30 years ago. She launched a retail business to promote hand crafted products of East Pakistan.

Shilu Abed understood the magnitude of our rural resources and involved herself fully in the various craft programmes of BRAC. She committed herself to Aarong to necessitate much needed scaling up programs. Both at its production and retail ends. She was undoubtedly the binding force behind its tremendous achievement and in making commercial accessibility of a wide range of crafts thus far inconceivable in Bangladesh.

her work to the demands of significant new markets. Her efforts and a modest success soon encouraged her to start her own fair trade company.

She was convinced as an entrepreneur that there was considerable work to be accomplished in other areas. Gifts, had already acquired a considerable market niche. Specifically with the onset of commercial interest in environment friendly products there was a demand for natural goods. There was also a revived interest in organic food. She engaged herself as well in the export of various natural produce including beeswax and spice. Today many traders are involved in the export of agricultural, horticultural products such as fish and vegetables. They have found tremendous potential abroad for Bangladesh. A possibility that Shilu foreseen a long time ago.

BRAC with the onset of independence of Bangladesh took up multifaceted development initiatives. Its efforts incorporated the revival of kantha as

an enduring craft industry. Aarong was formed in order to provide the much needed market and other supporting services. It was the beginning of what was to become a pioneering success story in the development of rural crafts in Bangladesh.

Shilu Abed understood the magnitude of our rural resources and involved herself fully in the various craft programmes of BRAC. She committed herself to Aarong to necessitate much needed scaling up programs. Both at its production and retail ends. She was undoubtedly the binding force behind its tremendous achievement and in making commercial accessibility of a wide range of crafts thus far inconceivable in Bangladesh.

Why should it be done? And who are the beneficiaries? A question Shilu answered on many occasions. She was confident from her years of experience that the sustainable development of crafts must be supported with a definite understanding of the need of the cus-

tomers. It should be designed specifically to meet their requirements. She understood that in today's changing time beyond doubt there is little need for purely decorative crafts, as more and more utility is the underlining key for its prolonged sustenance. Should we tamper with the traditional process?

A controversial step Shilu felt she needed to ratify with a certain conviction. Do we validate the reproduction of such a fine form. It so, why? For example kantha was created by individuals as reflections of their life. A very personal art. The beautiful decorative stitches transformed an ordinary fabric into a piece of manifestation. It is a process, a skillful technique, expressed only in Bengal. Here it is cherished by Bengalis and generally appreciated by all. In order to make it accessible to a much greater consumer group it needed to make a transition. That is from a house-hold craft to a collective production. In this way, slowly capacities were built by providing training to artisans. This greatly helped as well to further, income generating activities, for a large number of women. Overtime, kantha transformed itself as an enduring craft, as it is again a popular life style product. Shilu Abed was partially responsible for bringing forward its development process. Today kantha is being used widely. It is applied on a large group of products from saree to finished garments. Thus an unceasing Bengali tradition has found a successful commercial viability.

Today, the National Craft Council has decided to bestow an award. "The Shilu Abed Karushilpa Puroshkar." This year it is in recognition to artisans for their life time contribution to the development of kantha. This will undeniably encourage master craftspeople, who have relentlessly worked throughout their lives. Shilu Abed would be proud indeed. May we all express our gratitude for her strong belief in the wonderful artisans of Bangladesh!

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by Jim Davis

