

FOCUS

Abul Mansur Ahmad and the Clash of Histories in Bangladesh

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.

ITS over two decades since their independence, but the Bangladeshis 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 League 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 ideol-

ogues 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 stupefaction 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 unfulfilled dreams.

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

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-independence 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 Shadinata, 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.

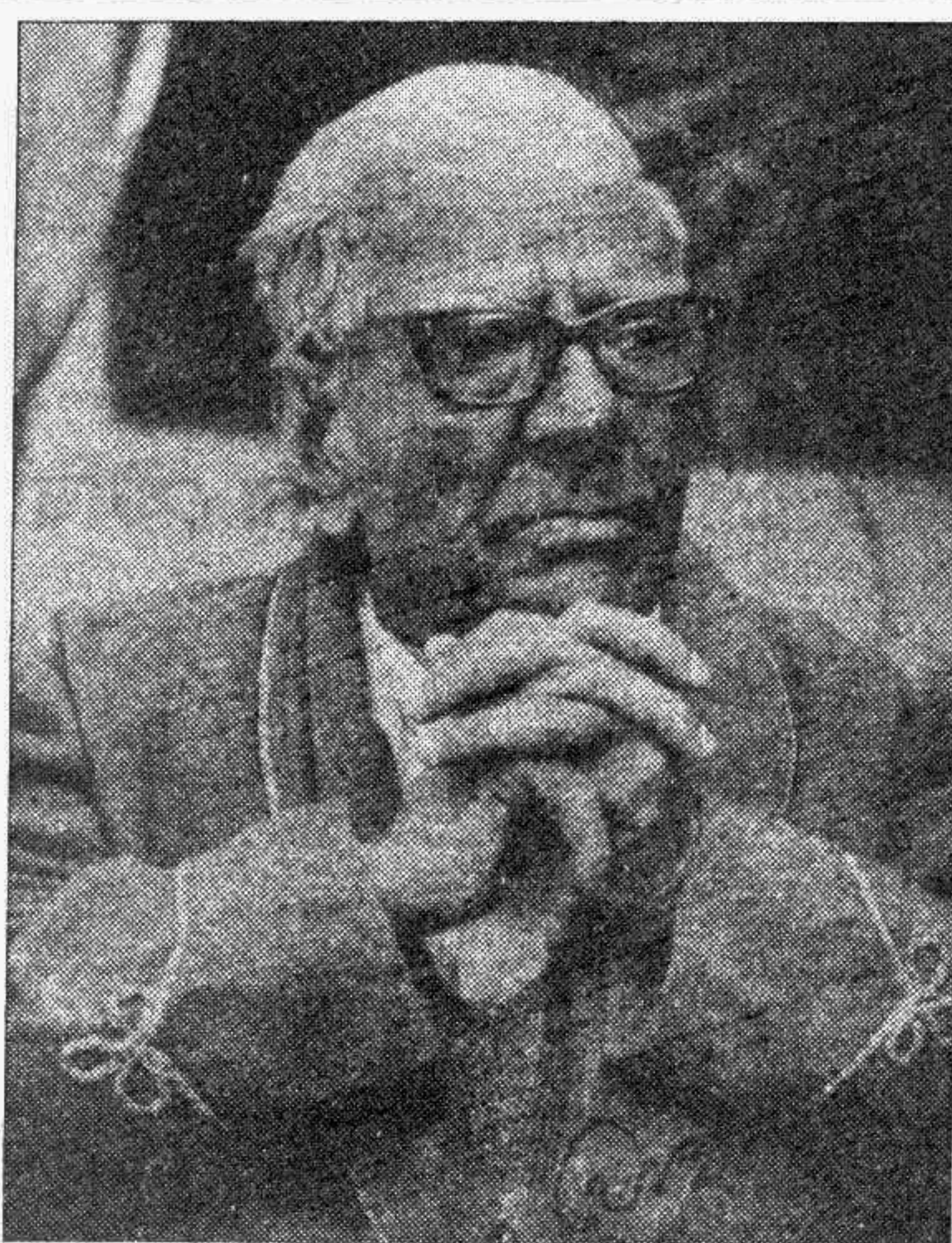


Photo courtesy: Nasir Ali Mamun

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* cognizance since early March 1971 when the Pakistan Parliament was expected to meet and form a new cabinet with Sheikh Mujibur 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 also 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 unraveled 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 in the Constitution; he thought that the delineation of the new state as the Republic of Bangladesh was adequate for a parliamentary government that the nation was committed to accomplish. Conceptually, he was correct since the Communist countries usually styled

themselves as the People's Republics, but Bangladesh was far from being a Marxist monolith.

The junior and relatively inexperienced officials who enjoyed the political backing readily replaced many senior civil servants who, instead of fleeing to India, continued working under the then East Pakistan government in 1971. It deeply hurt Mr. Ahmad for it was a breach of the non-political bureaucratic tradition that goes with the British form of parliamentary democracy. It's suicidal to divide the bureaucrats along the political aisle; he pounded through his column dated 21st August 1973. To use the participation in the 1971 election as a criterion, and to judge the bureaucrats with that political criterion constituted a danger to the nation, he warned. The radical exponents stretched their imagination to claim that in a socialist country like Bangladesh, bureaucracy was unnecessary! In his evident frustration, Mr. Ahmad depicted such activists as the so-called revolutionaries. He demanded that a bureaucrat's honesty and ability should be the exclusive measurement for judging his/her performance. He did not hesitate to swim against the political tide and urged the then government to be pragmatic in dealing with the public officials; otherwise the government machinery would collapse, he further cautioned. Politicized civil bureaucracy, over the years, has become the new faultline of Bangladesh polity!

Partly impelled by the tormented memories of the 9-month-long military atrocities, the anguished vengeance in the newly independent nation fell 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-

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

Abul Mansur Ahmed, 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. Ahmed 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. Ahmed 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 Ahmed'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 Ahmed 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 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 Bangladeshis, who knew him personally, he was just an impractical man, a cynic 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.



never failed in his duty as a teacher. His students have told me, he never ever 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 Nazim Islam. We know, had he written 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

lesser renowned and mediocre scholars (and even Pakistani collaborators) have enjoyed lucrative positions in this country, the Bengali Department of Dhaka University, run by several former students of "Sharif Sir", deliberately denied him the honour of serving as an emeritus professor in the Department. I wonder, how those people who did not consider him for emeritus or national professorship and delayed his Ekushyer Padak until 1991 (which he deserved at least as early as 1972) sleep without any prick of their conscience! I find it very distressing to accept that their conscience is dead.

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 boy-cotting 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 pathbreaking 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 undervalued and ridiculed by his "internationally renowned" colleagues in Bangladesh, but one of them even refused to publish an eulogistic review 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

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 Srasta (creator) but not in Sastra or scripture. That does not make him a Murtad, again, those who know about Islam know it very well that the Prophet f 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 the downtrodden.

I had no problem in spending hours with him arguing, agreeing and disagreeing with him during the last 25 years. I learnt a lot from him, including the art of praising and admiring others' scholarship. It is noteworthy that neither I did ever try to convert him into a Muslim nor did he ever ask me to renounce my faith in Islam. Last but not least, Ahmed Sharif was simply much ahead of his time and his ideas were too radical for his people. Hence the cloud of misunderstanding shrouding his stature. We should do something for this man who never asked for anything but courage and integrity from us. We should never forget that he even donated his eyes and body for the benefit of mankind. Is it too much to expect from the authorities that they rename Fuller Road after our "Sharif Sir", who was simply a giant (gentle or Sharif) among pygmies?

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by Jim Davis



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