

Face to face

Militarism means poverty and lack of dignity

Internationally acclaimed human rights activist Asma Jahangir tells M Anwarul Haq

INTERNATIONALLY acclaimed human rights activist Asma Jahangir feels that popular rule has to be backed by a strong judicial system in order to protect human rights, safeguard multi-ethnic groups and preserve democracy.

"Just to have a multi-party system does not mean fundamental human freedom and rights will be ensured," Asma said in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star.

Asma Jahangir is the former chairwoman of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and special co-ordinator of United Nations Commission on Genocide. She is the daughter of Malik Golam Jilani, who, being a Pakistani, protested strongly against the military crackdown in the then East Pakistan.

Asma, who has emerged as an icon of human rights in South Asia, was in Dhaka recently to deliver her address at the Aminul Huq Memorial Lecture, organised by BLAST in memory of the late Bangladesh Attorney General, a crusader against military rule and a staunch believer of human rights.

During her three-day stay, the Pakistani lawyer, known for her unflappable commitment to human, women and children's rights, addressed a citizens' rally at the Muktijuddha Jadughar (Liberation War Museum) and a press conference where she reaffirmed her position of condemning her own country's role in 1971.

Asma has always raised her voice and again did so following the release of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission report condemning the atrocities committed in Bangladesh by the Pakistan occupation forces. She reiterated that the people of Pakistan should condemn the brutality perpetuated in 1971.

"Democracy does not mean elections, it is a whole process, a whole way of living and culture. Whenever there is a crisis of the state, then extremist forces take advantage of it. Even in India where there is a mature democracy, whenever the polarisation between the political forces come to the fore and there is a deadlock, advantage is taken by more extremist groups. And religion if it is politicised could create combustible situations.

"In my own country (Pakistan), we have many agonies which you do not. There is a proxy war between the Shiite and Sunni - I mean (by the influence) of the Shiite and Sunni states which funnel in money to militant groups. They (the groups) are seen to be doing something. Once you are in militancy, then you are not part of the civil society. Whether it is in name of religion, or ethnicity, or national survival or

security, you are a militant," she said.

She feels that it is important to raise the voice of the South Asian community to protect the rights and dignity of all human

the thinking of the people of Pakistan because of the freedom of information and following release of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report," said Asma.

process she said that inaction and compromise by the judges has stunted the growth of democracy in her country.

"There is doubt in Pakistan whether he or she will get justice

but it is not backed by certain norms that society has to live with, in which case the judiciary is the arbitrator.

"Your having a non-partisan President and people like the two judges who banned fatwa through their judgement are also matters of inspiration for the people of Pakistan," said Asma.

Bangladesh, she said, has established itself as a model not only for championing democratic movements, but also for establishing women's rights.

Asma however had a word of caution. "Bangladesh needs more democracy to check the rise of fundamentalism."

Regarding Indian democracy and society, she said, "The BJP is losing ground in the centre. There are pockets of Indian society that are bigoted. A lot of violence happens in the name of security. Indians have a romance with nationalism." She felt that the hawkish leaders in Indian politics would be sidelined.

Would Pakistan tread the path of Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan?

"Pakistan is different from Afghanistan. It is not a war-ridden country. We have a rural population dependent on the work of women. We do not think we can ever replicate them. Our women are Indo-Pak women."

"However, once you derail the system, the field is left open."

Referring to the present political situation in Pakistan, she said: "Anarchy is on the rise. In many cases the government has conceded to the demands of the military. They appeased the militants on a proposed march to Islamabad. They stick with the laws of blasphemy and have done nothing to stop the honour killings."

She said there are regular sectarian fights and people do not invest and there is tremendous brain drain from Pakistan.

"The foreign policy of jihad suits the military and the militants in Pakistan. It keeps the military alive and kicking. Very little attention or money is given to the social sectors."

"There is no freedom of thought, freedom of expression. Militarism means poverty and nothing else," she said.

However, she added that the press in Pakistan is free and carried bold writings.

Going back to the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report, Asma said, "It did not reveal many things. But people of Pakistan got disgusted. Editorials and columns were written. After the supplementary report was out, it there were meetings in all major cities of Pakistan."

In the countries backed by a strong and independent judiciary, democratic process has a better chance of survival. Otherwise, she said, when there is no difference between a popular rule which can turn fascist to democracy, because the majority may say something



'Democracy does not mean elections, it is a whole process, a whole way of living and culture. Whenever there is a crisis of the state, then extremist forces take advantage of it (the Hamoodur Rahman Commission report) did not reveal many things. But people of Pakistan got disgusted. Editorials and columns were written. After the supplementary report was out, it there were meetings in all major cities of Pakistan. People expressed their remorse and regretted. It should have come out earlier.'

beings including women and children so that whenever there is a crisis, extremist groups cannot take advantage.

Asma said that people of Pakistan were increasingly recognising the scars left behind by the atrocities committed by the military in Bangladesh during its War of Liberation in 1971.

"It is the military that is primarily responsible for the atrocities. The civilians have not been allowed to take major decisions. There is now a great change in

She said the people of Pakistan have been the victims of years of dis-information and years of repression.

Speaking about democracy, she said, "Popular rule is to be backed by a strong judicial system. You (people of Bangladesh) have done better because your judiciary is relatively better. Your people are far more politicised. There is more participation of women. Feudalism is not here as in Pakistan."

About Pakistan's judicial

if one goes to Court," said Asma.

There is not a single instance of a general's son being convicted but there are instances of politicians' sons being punished in Pakistan, she said.

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Tribute

Growing up with Tawfiq Aziz Khan

NASHID KAMAL WAIZ

NO, as the title suggests Tawfiq Aziz Khan was not my relative. I and many others like me grew up with him. By others I mean those who listened to the radio, who



had an active interest in sports, who wanted to take part in national events. For us, Tawfiq Aziz Khan was the 'daily star.'

I had not known Tawfiq Aziz Khan at all as a person and had met him only once in the late 1970s when the Shishu Academy was newly founded. Begum Jobeda Khatun had asked me to compete a show for the Academy at the Dhaka Stadium. No one had introduced Tawfiq Aziz Khan to me, but I saw him seated in the row of reserved seats during the programme. I came back home and narrated to my sister that today I had met the man who said "majh mathe khela!"

I have always had this terrible habit of picking up pieces from the radio and mimicking it to my friends. I was never interested in any sports, least of all football. I had sometimes showed some feigned interest in cricket, where I would accompany my friends to the stadium. My main target was the company of my friends garnished with the aroma of freshly made parathas and chicken bhuna. As we lived closest to the stadium, often I would ask my friends to come home and use the convenience, in the middle of which my mother would ask me if I had completed my assigned task. The secret is that while they watched the cricket game, I read my prepositions or homonyms or whatever I had assigned for the day and my work was done. As we say in Bangla the snake died but the stick didn't break. Yet I was able to entertain my friends with my instant commentary of last evening's match between Mohammedan and Abahani. I would be off like "ebare bol korchon Chunnun, Paltan pranto theke."

After 1971, the Dhaka Stadium was updated. Floodlights were installed. In our two-storied house, I lived upstairs and the door next to my table where I studied would open into the sky fully lit with the

floodlights. It was almost like a bright sunny day. We were in our teens and it was not a time for us to be mature or worldly, we were emotional, jubilant and sparkling. With us sparkled the spirit of Tawfiq Aziz Khan. For me, every evening I listened to his commentary, as it would be relayed to viewers outside the stadium in loudspeakers. Alternately, someone or the other would also turn on the radio and inevitably this would be the background music for my studies. Obviously, sometimes the essay on Srabon megher din (rainy day) would merge with cow is a domestic animal but soon I had mastered the art of treating the excitement of the game and the commentary as an inevitable part of the ongoing in this place.

Very often I would listen to Tawfiq Aziz Khan's commentary, his side-talks with fellow commentators and very soon could mimic those as well. This was the time for events like "tie-breaker" and the excitement and energy would flow from his voice to the ethers of the radio.

Sometimes there would be a riot where supporters of the two sides had picked up bricks or lathi or tear gas had dispersed them. Still in the background, the radio would go on with Tawfiq Aziz Khan analysing the day's game and having admonishments for this kind of unsportsman-like behaviour in the field. As I read Mahfuz Anam's tribute after his demise, I learned that he himself was sportsmanlike in his behaviour. One could have guessed from his commentaries, because as one is commenting on the game, it is not only the game that he is talking about, a lot of his own values, philosophies and viewpoints were seeping into the blood of the new generation.

For me, this mentoring continued until 1980 and every time I close my eyes I can hear his voice narrating matches with his humorous anecdotes, unusual memory serving as a natural data bank what we find today being supplied by computer outputs in reference to other games and performances. Tawfiq Aziz Khan continued to inspire his listeners not only with his voice but also with his merit and his spirit and his enthusiasm.

During one of the programmes on the child contest at Notun Kuri which I hosted, I remember a child artist winning the laurels for his outstanding performance mimicking Tawfiq Aziz Khan's football commentary. We will all Tawfiq bhai - we who grew up listening to him and never tiring of the youthful, lively voice. Wherever you have gone Tawfiq bhai may you rest in peace and you will always be our inspiration.

When I was a teenager...

Growing in a poetic ambience

ZIAUL KARIM

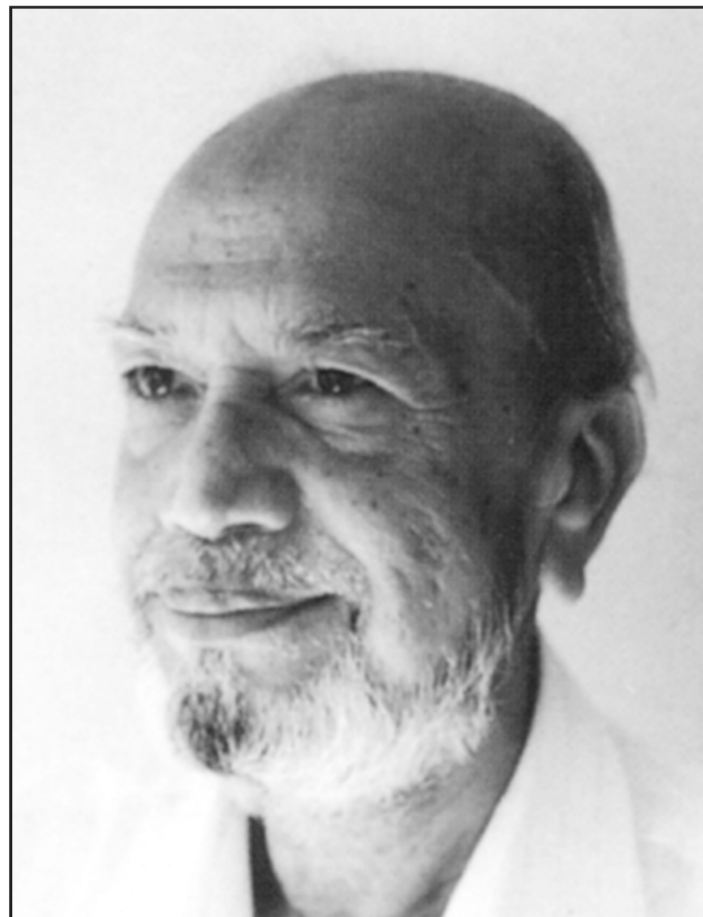
THOUGH I was born in a pious family I remember seeing works by Tagore and books on Islam huddled in the same shelves," says Al-Mahmud, one of the finest voices in contemporary Bangla poetry as he has been traveling down his memory lane.

A fecund writer with an ever-expanding breadth of vision, Al-Mahmud has constructed a vocabulary of his own where religion, tradition of common man and translucent world of spiritualism are distilled to form a Mahmudian cadence.

Al-Mahmud was born in 1936 at Maurail in Brahmanbaria district. "Ours was one of the oldest families of the district town. They were businessmen and traded in clothes. The family elders were also respected as religious leaders of the area. They preached Islam and had a very good command of Arabic,

Persian and Bangla. I remember my grandfather and grandma speaking fluent Persian and quoting from poets like Hafiz, Omar Khayyum and Rumi. There were places for Nazrul and Rabindranath as well in our family. My interest in poetry was almost come as fruits to a tree."

In volumetric analysis Al-Mahmud is one of the most prolific writers of contemporary Bangla literature having an astounding number of books to his name-somewhere between 60-70. Awards are also plenty in a long writing career of 40 years. Still active as ever Mahmud slips between poetry, fiction, and essays to express him. He is the recipient of the country's highest civilian award the Ekushey Padak, and a host of prestigious literary awards such as Philips Literary Award, Agrani Bank Children Literature Award, Sufi Motaher Hussain Gold Medal, and Jibananda Memorial Award. He is also a recipient of the coveted Bangla Academy



Mahmud confirms that his first love poems were written when he fell in love with a Hindu girl Sita (not her real name). "Sita was few years senior to me. She took a keen interest in my writing and I was emotionally moved. Poems began to flow from my pen as spontaneously as a fountain."

Purasker.

Mahmud remembers the communal harmony existing in the early 50s. "Sitting in the verandah of the mosque of our locality my grandfather greets his Hindu friend to have a chat is an image still vivid in my heart. Can you imagine anything like that today? What we are fundamentally missing in our life today is tolerance, respect for other's views. I have been variously branded as a fundamentalist, as a friend to fanatics. I'm pretty sure that you won't be able to quote any single stanza from my oeuvre that is biased and has the twists and turns of the fundamentalist doctrine. But if you ask me whether I'm pious or not I will say 'yes I am a devout Muslim'.

My critics say that I use a lot of Muslim myths and legends. What is wrong in it? When a Christian poet or a Hindu poet uses myths from his religion you don't criticize him for that. I use the myths and legends as poetic elements since I grew up with those stories around me. For me Muslim myths and legends are natural."

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Mahmud began composing poems in the mid-fifties. He did not sweat much to publish his poems. "I came in contact with contemporary poetry through different journals my parents subscribed. I felt like writing my own poems and sent a few of the scribbling I did in my notebook. To my utter surprise they were published. So, that was the beginning."

Mahmud's works have been translated into more than ten languages including English and French. His best known book of poems include Loklokantar (World and World Beyond), Sonali Kabin (The Golden Marriage Contract), Mayabi Parda Dule Otho (Swing, Magic Curtain), Audristabadider Ranna Banna (

Feast of the Fatalists, Pakhir Kachhe Fuler Kachhe (Close to the Birds and the Flowers), and Bakhtiyarer Ghora (Horse of Bakhtiyar).

"I think a pious man can also be an open-minded man. My childhood, spent in a communal harmony, teaches me how to accommodate in our life people from other religious beliefs."

"My grandfather used to compose jarigan. I found my grandfather's ability to compose songs amazing. I think I owe my poetic ability to my family and the Sufism that now is undercurrent in my poems is also due to them."