Shakil Ahmed
my scholar-soldier friend

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My friend Shakil Ahmed was a soldier who knew the myriad ways in which history worked. He read voraciously, spoke with eloquence and thought of the future of his country in a manner that marked him out as a scholar. But then, he had always been a scholar. When we met for the first time --- and that was at St. Francis Grammar School in Quetta, Pakistan, in 1970 --- we knew we would be good friends. I was in Junior Cambridge and he was in class nine. That made him, academically, a year junior to me. There was something about Bangali students in that overwhelmingly Pakistani school that singled them out for their brilliance. I was always ahead of everyone else in my class at every examination. There were others, younger than me, in similar conditions in other classes.

And then came the day when some of my classmates informed me that another Bangali had arrived and had beaten everyone else at his very first monthly examinations in class nine. My happiness and my curiosity led me into seeking this fellow Bangali out. It was tiffin recess when we met. That first meeting went off well and we certainly hit it off. For the next year or so, until I came home to occupied Bangladesh in mid 1971, Shakil and I regularly met in the school library. He had a passion for books, a quality that I was proud to share with him. Like me, he was a diminutive schoolboy. He borrowed serious works on history and literature from the library. So did I.

And then we lost touch. His family was stranded in Pakistan and would not return to Bangladesh until after liberation. When Shakil came back from Pakistan, we did not meet. There was a simple enough reason: neither of us knew where the other was. It would not be until early 1997 that we would link up once more, almost in the manner of a miracle. On a cold February day, I walked into the Bangladesh High Commission in London as the new minister (press); and Shakil was preparing to return to Dhaka after having served as assistant defence advisor there. When we met, we both tried to recollect where we had interacted with each other earlier. His face looked familiar to me and mine to him. Within seconds, we remembered the old grammar school days. It was a grand reunion.

In these nine years, since I came back home after my diplomatic stint in 2000, Shakil and I kept in regular touch. I made note of the way he was rising in the army; and he kept reading my articles and letting me know what he thought of my opinions. When he rose to the rank of a major general and then joined the Bangladesh Rifles as its chief, my happiness was indescribable. I called him, to tell him that it was my pride, my hubris if you will, to be his friend, to know that the Bangladesh army had in its midst a scholar-soldier of his stature. He laughed. He was too sophisticated, too humble to admit he was that. But he was. Three days before he was gunned down by a