

An army man is overcome by grief when entering the scene of the carnage. Photo: Shawkat Jamil

bunch of mutineers, Lieutenant General (retired) Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury and I spoke of Shakil Ahmed's intellectual brilliance. Whenever he needed a word or phrase in English, said the chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission, he would consult Shakil, who served under Chowdhury when the latter was chief of army staff. And prompt and appropriate would be Shakil's response.

There have been the many occasions when I would, on my way to work, join Shakil at his BDR office over coffee. We spoke of national politics, of geopolitics, of the so-called war on terror. And we dwelt at length on literature and history. Shakil Ahmed possessed an unambiguous comprehension of national politics. There was an intensity of patriotism in him. He never lost sight of the principles upon which the Bengali nation had gone to war against Pakistan in 1971. In his negotiations with senior officials of the Indian Border Security Force, he demonstrated skills that were evidence of the thorough homework he had done. In a society where not many have been able to create an impact while dealing with people from other countries, Shakil made a difference. Throughout the duration of the BDR's Operation Daal Bhaat programme, he managed things with finesse. Sometimes he joked that he had been reduced to being a shopkeeper. We both knew, though, that beyond the humour there were the ground realities the country was confronted with.

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Shakil and I spoke when he called a few days before his murder. He wondered if we could meet and share thoughts on the direction Bangladesh could take now that democratic politics was back in place. I promised to call him back and arrange to meet. That meeting was not to be. On the morning the murderers struck, I tried contacting him on his cellular phone. The line was busy. I tried twice more. The line was still busy. Now I know he must have been trying desperately to get things back in order. When I tried calling him a fourth time, the phone went on ringing. He did not pick it up. He was probably dead by then.

Major General Shakil Ahmed, soldier par excellence, scholar past compare, lived honourably and died bravely. I salute the man of integrity he was. In the grey of twilight, I will think of his soul, carousing amidst the stars. ■