

## The Muslim World conundrum

We need to demonstrate by word and action that we share a common faith with fifty other countries, but that is not our common identity. We are a nation that was born on our language and culture as Bangladeshis. Our needs are based on our unique identity, and have to be viewed separately from others.

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

AMONG the topics that President Obama touched in his inaugural speech was his message to the "Muslim World," where he asked for "a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." The media in US, as well as the rest of the globe, not only highlighted this as a major point of departure for a US presidential speech, but also reported the reactions of the "Muslim World."

But the countries that the "Muslim World" reactions were reported from were invariably those in the Arab peninsula, or the Middle East, which of late seems to have extended to Afghanistan. I say invariably, because, countries in these regions have attracted public attention either due to their egregious oil power, or catastrophic events. And invariably the denizens of these habitats are identified with Islam.

It is no wonder when Obama utters the words "Muslim World" that the average person in the US thinks of that geographic area alone without realising that the Muslims are dispersed globally, and they do not necessarily constitute a single "Muslim World."

The expression "Muslim World" is as much an oxymoron as "Christian World." The Muslims, globally, do not form one community, similar to the Christians around the world. In their eagerness to zero in on one group of Muslims, leaders

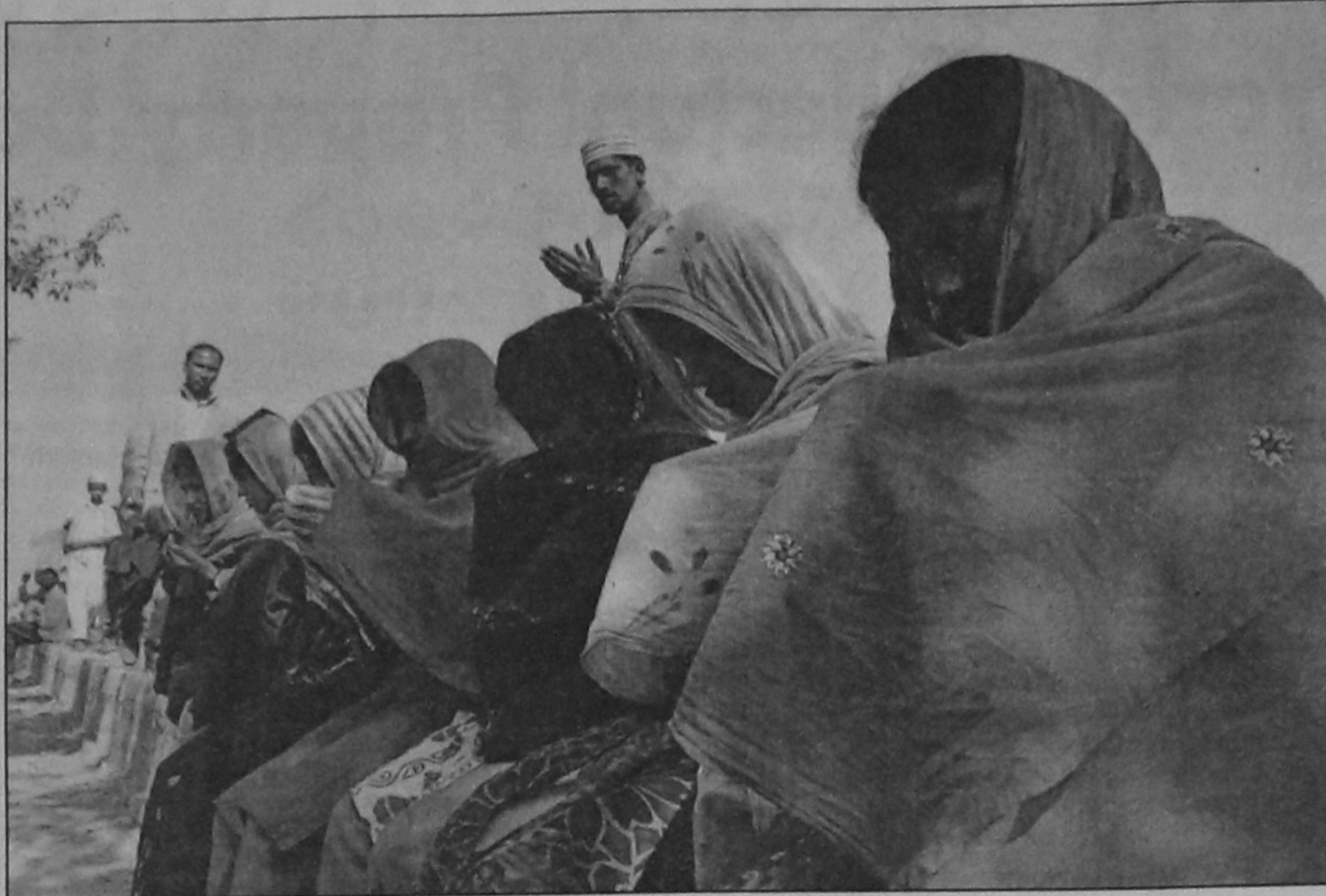
and media in the west unwittingly overlook the fact that the Muslims, globally, are ethnically as diverse as followers of other major religions.

Islam is quilted by hundreds of ethnic and national groups. The diverse Muslim groups may practice a common faith, but they also cling to their ethnic cultures as steadfastly. Yet, the image of a Muslim here is often of a bearded man in *thobe* (long shirt) or a woman clothed in *abaya* (cloak), a dress of the Arab culture. Few can visualise that a woman in sari or another clad in a sarong could be as much a Muslim as the *abaya* wearing woman from the Middle East.

But how can we educate others that we Muslims do not form a single world, or that our needs are different? How can we tell that the root causes that afflict the development of Sudan are very different from those in Bangladesh, when we have seeds of political movement growing in our soils that propagate formation of one Islamic ummah globally?

Sadly, the Muslims themselves often contribute to this knowledge gap in the Western mind. We have zealots who, in their fanatic propagation of pan-Islamism would have us believe that Muslims all over the world think and act as one community.

They foster an illusion that the Muslims form a commonwealth of nations. They confuse national identity with the avocation of a common religion, and try to subjugate their national individuality to their religious affiliation.



Islam is practiced in different ways in different countries.

There is a cost to this confusion of identity, of attempts to subjugate national identity to religious affiliation.

Domestically, it undermines national aspirations; it negates national heritages, and masks the wide differences in levels of development and prosperity among the Muslim countries.

Internationally, it leads to a broad-brush image based on religious affiliation, and attributes a common cause of resentment of the west in all these countries based on a sample representation from only one nationality group.

Recent Muslim history is replete with

instances of such fanaticism. An ayatullah in Iran denounced the country's thousand years of Persian inheritances, because they are not "Islamic." A Mullah in Afghanistan destroyed invaluable icons of the country's ancient civilisation because they represented faith of the "infidels."

Most recently, the Sharia enforcers in the north-west of Pakistan nearly flogged a girl to death for an alleged affair, because they think the "religion" dictates it. All in the name of Islam.

Is there a way out of this conundrum? Is there a way to separate national identity

from religious affiliation? The answer lies primarily with the Muslims and the countries they belong to. They need to grasp reality, that nationhood and religion are two distinct objects. The Spaniards are no less Catholic than the Italians.

The Muslims need to know that it is not necessary to have one common language to profess and practice the faith. Three-fourths of the world's Muslims do not speak this language, and they are no less Islamic than others who speak it.

The concept of one Muslim community is as unreal as the concept of one world

community. If all Muslims were actually one community, the map of the world would have been redrawn a long time ago. If they were actually a commonwealth of nations, two-thirds of the world's poor would not have been in Muslim countries. If all Muslims were one community, they would have benefited equally from the wealth of their more fortunate oil-rich brothers.

Muslims need to take pride in their diversity and draw strength from it. They need to learn that affinity with other Muslim nations need not translate into subjugation of national identities to religious identity. God makes it explicit:

"And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: verily in that are Signs for those who know" (Sura: Al-Room - Verse-22).

"And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you (Sura: Al-Maida: Verse 48).

It will serve us well as Muslims, if we pay heed to what the Koran has to say on diversity.

Nationally our political leaders need to take a united stand, and take positive steps to thwart any movement that may misguide our youths to a bigoted path in the name of establishing a religion based society.

Internationally we need to demonstrate by word and action that we share a common faith with fifty other countries, but that is not our common identity. We are a nation that was born on our language and culture as Bangladeshis. Our needs are based on our unique identity, and have to be viewed separately from others.

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## The Tibetan paradox

Tibetan paradox is embedded in finding equilibrium between economic aspirations unleashed by development that has taken place under Chinese rule and the spiritual respect that the Dalai Lama enjoys.

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TIBET continues to generate a debate around the world for many reasons. Starting from plight of the Dalai Lama to economic development that has taken place during the Chinese rule, Tibet remains an enigma as well as one of the most serene and tranquil piece of land in the world.

Tibet came to limelight again prior to Beijing Olympics due to unrest and resulting reaction from different corners of the world. The author looks into some of the historic facts as well as recent developments, which hopefully will help readers develop an objective perspective of the Tibet paradox. Given the geographic proximity of Tibet to Bangladesh, it is important to have a good understanding of the socio-economic, political, religious, and cultural facets of this land that intrigues many.

In early 20th century, Tibet remained a society of feudal serfdom under theocracy. The theoretical social system of Tibet ensured that upper religious strata and monasteries together were holders of political power and biggest serf owners. They possessed political and economic privileges and powerful influence over

material and cultural lives of Tibetan people.

The ecclesiastical serf owners, though accounting for less than 5% of population of Tibet, controlled personal freedom of serfs and slaves who made up more than 95% of the population. The serfs had no means of production or personal freedom, and depended on tilling plots for the estate-holders.

Since the founding of the regional government in 1965, Tibetans have exercised their rights bestowed by the constitution and laws to elect and be elected. The organ of self-government of the Tibet Autonomous Region has been elected and led mainly by Tibetans and people of other ethnic groups. There has been greater involvement and representation of Tibetans in the local government.

Tibet's development over the decades has seen the society progress in economic development and modernisation. Tibet economy has been growing at an annual rate of 12% or more over the past seven years. Average life expectancy of Tibetan has increased from 35.5 years in 1959 to 67 years now.

Illiteracy rate among work-aged people has dropped from 95% to 4.76%. Nearly all

Tibetans live in permanent houses, except for nomads in pasture areas. One in every 20 Tibetans has an automobile and telephone popularization rate reached has 55 per 100 persons. By the end of 2007, 612 townships had been connected by roads, accounting for 89.6% of all townships in the region.

Economic development of any society leads to growing desire for political empowerment whereby people want to have a bigger role in the development process. This is a reality that the Chinese government will have to find ways to address. Reforms and liberalisation that took place during Chinese rule has resulted in better living conditions for Tibetans freeing them from feudalism. Similarly economic prosperity has fueled political aspirations. Challenge for the Chinese government is to find an equilibrium that addresses political aspirations without negating economic benefits that has enriched the Tibetan society.

People with political empowerment can affect the nature of economic development -- both positively and negatively. We see the case of India, where the government faced opposition from local residents during construction of the Narmada/Sardar dams.

Similarly political provocation can negate potential economic welfare, as was the case of Tata in West Bengal where the state lost significant opportunities for employment, industrialisation, and regional development when Tata moved Nano manufacturing plant to Gujrat. Roots of US economic crisis were in the

need for greater regulation of financial markets.

The reason that no such legislation ever came through is because it would have been unpopular with financial lobby groups. Hence, even in a free market economy driven by individual innovation and self-interest, there needs to be some degree of government involvement to protect economic welfare of the society. This has been the most important lesson of the current global recession.

In the case of Tibet, the centrally planned economic programs have provided necessary infrastructure and social services to innovate and exercise self-interest. However, there needs to be greater input from Tibetans at micro-level and greater decentralisation in the planning process. Andrew Fischer of the Canada Tibet Committee observes that one of the concerns involving current Tibetan government is that most Tibetans in the TAR live in rural areas while most Chinese immigrants and government personnel reside in or around urban centres.

This explains need for greater decentralisation of Tibetan government. Village-level governments such as "Punchaits" in India could help the government in development programs that address immediate needs of people of the region.

Despite the greater economic benefit that Tibetans enjoy, in their mind Dalai Lama represents holiness. They depend on Chinese Central Government for liberation from serfdom, help them feed themselves, construct roads, and facilitate



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transport. They desire return of the Dalai Lama for religious identification, and in the meantime want to enjoy economic prosperity brought by the Chinese Central Government.

Tibetans are down to earth ordinary people, who don't think based solely on either religious beliefs or knowledge of modern science; rather a combination of both seems to work. For example, while they consult doctors and access health services made possible by Chinese authorities, they also seek divinations from lamas in their

village. This is the ground reality of Tibet.

Tibetan paradox is embedded in finding equilibrium between economic aspirations unleashed by development that has taken place under Chinese rule and the spiritual respect that the Dalai Lama enjoys. Treating each in isolation may not yield the outcome that ordinary Tibetans, particularly the majority who have been freed from serfdom, either desire or seek.

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## Reminiscing Osman Ghani Khan

ISMET ZERIN KHAN

SOON after the liberation of Bangladesh and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's return from prison in Pakistan, he appointed my father Late Osman Ghani Khan as the first Secretary of the Ministry of Defence in 1972. It was a time when vital issues remained to be resolved and the tasks ahead for the new defence secretary were critical.

The first priority was to set up the Ministry of Defence. Mr. Khan made significant contribution in planning and setting it up, almost single handedly, essentially from scratch.

It was a tremendous challenge my father rose up magnificently to. I remember him working very hard to establish the armed forces necessary. The support and cooperation he received from General M.A.G. Osmany deserves a special mention too.

Initially, Mr. Khan was assisted by Dr. Towfique-e-Elahi Chowdhury, Bir Bikram and Mr. Mahub Ahmed, who were working as Deputy Secretaries in the Ministry at that time. I vividly



Osman Ghani Khan

remember the time when my father's friend, late Syed Hossain, who was then Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Establishment, came to our house one evening and offered him two alternative options to set up the office of the ministry, one of which was the old High Court Building. My father's preferred choice

was the old High Court Building. The Old High Court premises still bears the memory of those days through two majestic trees whose saplings were planted by Bangabandhu and my father.

My father and General Osmany were very good friends since early days in their respective careers. They made a perfect team until General Osmany resigned as the C-in-C of the armed forces to become a Minister in Bangabandhu's cabinet.

My father broached the idea with Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that the government should promote him to the rank of a full General as a mark of tribute of his services to the war of liberation. As was to be expected, Bangabandhu was very pleased with the idea.

Bangabandhu had an immense liking for my father for his courageous initiatives. It was my father who persuaded Prime Minister and Defence Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of the strategic importance in a democratic set-up of having the Director of Forces Intelligence (presently DGFI) and the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR)

directly under civilian control in the Ministry of Defence.

As the Defence Secretary, Late Mr. Khan was also assigned the crucial responsibility of leading the Bangladesh delegation for official talks on vital bilateral issues with India such as the withdrawal of the Indian army from Bangladesh, return of weapons and ammunition captured from the Pakistan army by the Indian army, etc.

I remember the frustrations of my father when after three days of lengthy discussions at the Old High Court Building, the talks remained inconclusive and reached a stalemate. Bangabandhu finally advised him to discontinue the discussions, and told him that he would personally take up the contentious issues directly with the then Indian Prime Minister, Late Indira Gandhi.

Soon thereafter, the Indian army organised a parade in the Dhaka stadium to bid farewell before leaving the soil of Bangladesh. Later on, he led another delegation to India for bilateral discussions with his Indian counterpart.

He also led the first Bangladesh dele-

gation to Moscow as the Defence Secretary to negotiate a deal for MIG-21 fighter planes, which were given free of cost by Russia to form the air force of independent Bangladesh.

Late Osman Ghani Khan also contested the elections after his retirement from the constitutional position of Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh. He was elected a Member of the Fifth Parliament, after winning an overwhelming majority from Pabna 2 constituency in 1991, and appointed a Minister for the Ministry of Establishment.

While holding the constitutional position of Comptroller and Auditor General, Osman Ghani Khan played a crucial role in getting Bangladesh elected by the United Nations General Assembly as a member of the United Nations Board of Auditors during 1980-1982. He served as Chairman and a Member of the United Nations Board of Auditors for two successive terms.

Late Mr. Khan became a prolific writer after his retirement, focusing on issues of development and good governance. Quite often, the writings and delibera-

tions of Mr. Khan provided cautionary notes on flawed policy, which indeed emerged as stumbling blocks in the bureaucracy in later years. He never faltered to pronounce what he felt was right and the truth.

He deliberated on reducing defence expenditure to enhance development funds; he pointed to the need for downsizing the administrative bureaucracy; he warned of the consequences of unfettered promotions where posts were limited in the government; he analysed annual budgets and criticised lax financial discipline, stressing on the importance of expenditure control.

Osman Ghani Khan passed away on April 26, 2000 at Mount Elizabeth Hospital in Singapore at the age of 77 years. Today, with deep respect, we remember him and the imprint he left behind in his work, writings and ideology.

The writer is a former senior official of the Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA), the UNDP and the World Bank. She is also a renowned English newscaster of Bangladesh Television and radio.