

Many happy returns of the day

Prof. Rehman Sobhan has been a dedicated public scholar for over 50 years since beginning his career as an economics lecturer at Dhaka University in 1957. Among numerous other distinctions and positions he has held, Prof. Sobhan, who retired from DU as professor of economics in 1977, served in Bangladesh's first Planning Commission, and was the founding chairman of the Centre for Policy Dialogue and chairman of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. He received the *Bangladesh Shadhinota Purushkar* in 2008.

Today, to mark the 75th birthday of Prof. Sobhan, *The Daily Star* editor & publisher, **Mahfuz Anam**, sat with him for a fascinating first-hand account of the turbulent years of the 1960s and the liberation war and to hear his thoughts on the state of the nation 38 years after independence.

Mahfuz Anam: What have been the defining events in your working life?

Rehman Sobhan: My three years at Cambridge (1953-56) were crucial to my intellectual development and served to influence my views on public policy. In those days progressive thinking was encouraged and teachers on the economics faculty, such as Joan Robinson, who was one of my tutors, influenced my thinking.

My contemporaries, particularly from South Asia, such as Amartya Sen, Manmohan Singh, Jagdish Bhagwati, Mahbubul Haq, Dipanker Ghosh and Lal Jayawardena, were exceptional people who all went on to make a name for themselves in their various fields, contributed to making Cambridge a learning experience for me.

Dhaka University, where I began my professional career in October 1957 and worked as a teacher of economics up to the liberation of Bangladesh, was another decisive factor in my life. It was there that I became involved with the issue of disparity and the struggle for self-rule for the Bengalis.

However, the most defining influence in my life has undoubtedly been my involvement in the struggle for self-rule and its culmination in the war of liberation. The period from March 1969 to December 1971, I would rate as the high-water mark of my life, where every event of that period I was personally involved in remains to this day sharply etched in my mind.

For me, and perhaps many of my generation, we have never felt more

Who are the people who have played the most influential role in your working life?

A variety of people, have in various ways influenced my life and work. I would, in the course of my intellectual development, certainly want to recognise my debt to Amartya Sen, who I regard as perhaps the most intelligent and intellectually versatile person I have ever known. His own thinking was then very much to the left and is reflected in his life-long commitment in his writings, to challenge poverty and injustice. He was a close friend at Cambridge and influenced my thinking there. We have remained close ever since so that I have continued to benefit from our encounters over the years as much as from his fertile and inspirational writings.

In a quite different way I also acknowledge a debt to Prof. Abdur Razzaq, "Sir" to all of us, who provided me with a sense of history, inspired me with his erudition and blessed me with his friendship.

My lifelong friends and colleagues, Nurul Islam, Mosharraf Hossain, Anisur Rahman and Muzzafer Ahmad, who were my fellow travelers on the way to Bangladesh and the days after, have stimulated me and shared in some of my works. I have had a lifetime's association, with Dr. Kamal Hossain, my cousin, where we have influenced each other's political development and social philosophy ever since our student days.

The two women in my life, for 42

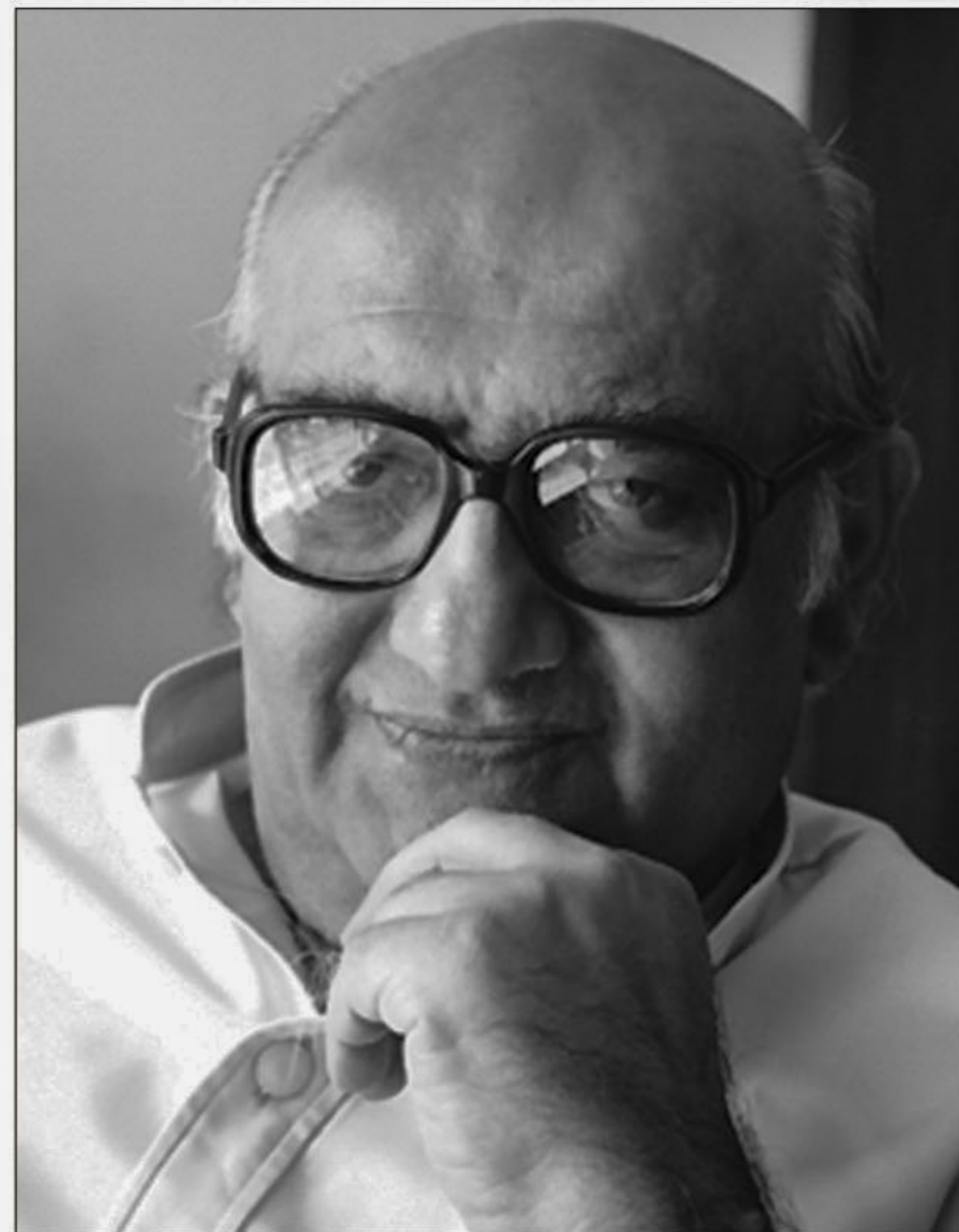
matters of policy and constitution making, argue with us, and educate us about the realities of politics and people.

Bangabandhu, in the crucial period of 1969-71, was greatly benefited by having Tajuddin Ahmed at his side. It was a unique partnership of a charismatic leader with a person of extraordinary political intellect and integrity.

Amongst the large number of political figures and thinkers I have met through my life and around the world, few could match the political intelligence and insights of Tajuddin Bhai. It was one of Bangladesh's greatest political tragedies, with fatal outcomes for all, that Tajuddin could be distanced from Bangabandhu, when he most needed him.

You have indicated that your involvement with the Bangladesh liberation struggle was the defining period of your life. Please tell us something about this involvement. Where were you on the night of March 25, 1971?

Mazhar Ali Khan (the father of Tariq Ali) had once been the most eminent English language journalist in Pakistan, the editor of Pakistan Times, but he had been shut out from journalism when Ayub Khan closed down the Times. When we launched the weekly Forum in November 1970 with Bangabandhu as our first subscriber, one of our major achievements was that we brought Mazhar Ali Khan back to journalism through his weekly column in Forum.



Now, it never occurred to me that I would be seen as a combatant or a target. But just after curfew was lifted on the morning of March 27, my friend Muyeedul Hasan came to my house and insisted that I move to some place safer. I didn't take it seriously, but Salma did, and so eventually it was decided that I would spend the night in a safe house.

That afternoon, Muyeedul came to see me again. He had been to the university to check on Prof. Razzaq. This was the house in which Prof. Guhathakurta also lived. Muyeedul reported that he had been there and the whole staircase was covered in blood. We assumed that Prof. Razzaq had also been killed. This was the first time that it struck me that teachers were being targeted.

Pak paratroopers. It had become a people's war and it was clear that the people were going to fight.

When I arrived in Brahmanbaria, I was taken to the Titas Guest House where I met Khaled Musharraf. We have taken over Brahmanbaria. He told me. I have captured my commanding officer and we are now in control of Brahmanbaria.

He was getting ready to fight the liberation war. It had become a spontaneous movement where people from all walks of life had taken up arms to fight for preserving our independence. He took me to a nearby tea estate which was his headquarters. It was dusk. Everything was blacked out in case of an air attack.

You must go abroad, he told me, and mobilise the Bengali community

of Amartya Sen who was then a professor at the Delhi School of Economics and called him up. He and his wife Nabonita immediately drove from Old Delhi to pick us up and take us home, where we had the first decent night's sleep in a long time.

The next day Amartya took us to see Ashok Mitra, an economic advisor to the prime minister, who was the highest level contact we had. He connected us with P.N. Dhar who was working in the PM's secretariat as her economic advisor. Dhar took me to the residence of P.N. Haksar, the principal secretary to the prime minister and reportedly the second most powerful person in India. Probably the very first briefing from that period given to the highest level of the Indian government was my briefing of Haksar. He was amazed and appalled by what I told him. He became quiet emotional.

I realised then that contrary to the Pakistani allegations that the Indians had been conspiring to break up Pakistan, they had no clue about what was really going on in Bangladesh.

The next day I was taken to a house somewhere in Delhi. When I got there I found Tajuddin and Amirul Islam who had only at the time just reached Delhi. I had possibly been brought there to vouch for Tajuddin's identity! The Indians seemed to know very little about our leaders except for Bangabandhu who by then had already become an iconic figure across the globe.

I was very happy to see him. He was the closest confidante of Bangabandhu and was then the senior-most representative of the Bangladesh political leadership to reach Delhi.

As far as I knew, he was Bangabandhu's most intimate and trusted associate. In his absence he could speak with some authority with the prime minister of India.

I felt that here was a person who had the capacity. He was then taken to meet Indira Gandhi, and the rest, in a way, is history.

I told Tajuddin that there were two things he needed to do: The first was to make a formal declaration to the world explaining the circumstances in which



Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and Prof. Rehman Sobhan in 2002.

alive and engaged then we did during the liberation struggle and its prelude. We had an inspirational leader in Bangabandhu and a cause to which we could pledge our lives without qualification.

During the last three decades, I have, of course, been actively involved in the rebuilding of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (1983-89), the founding and building of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (1993-99), and then the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (2000-2005), which have been an important part of my recent life.

It is a matter of some pride for me that my successors at CPD, Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya and Prof. Mustafizur Rahman, have further built up the organisation, so that it is widely recognised both in Bangladesh and around the region. Similarly, Saceps, which has, since 2005, moved to Kathmandu, is flourishing under the leadership of Prof. Sridhar Khatri.

It is highly satisfying to build up institutions but the greatest satisfaction is realised when these organisations can be sustained by a new generation of leaders. Given the personality-centred culture of institutions in Bangladesh and indeed much of South Asia, unless an organisation can survive and prosper beyond the transition in leadership from its founder, it cannot really claim to be a viable enterprise.

years between 1961 and 2003, Salma, and since 2005, Rounaq Jahan, have perhaps been my most important influences. They have given me exceptional companionship, affection, care, courage, and intellectual stimulus which none else could provide, particularly when I most needed it.

Politically, however, I have, along with many of my generation, been most inspired by the charismatic leadership of Bangabandhu. He was an exceptional leader who perhaps for the first and last time in history, could bring and keep the great majority of Bengalis together for just long enough to fight for and attain the independent nation state of Bangladesh.

Between March 1 and March 26, 1971, he invested us with a national identity which was projected before the world as Bangladesh. In this period he mobilised 75 million people, peasants, workers, students, professionals, civil servants, and serving soldiers, to come together to fight to preserve the independent state which had been forged under his leadership. I can think of few other national leaders who have exercised such a formative influence in the creation of a nation state.

Between March 1969 and March 1971, I came to know Bangabandhu at close quarters, where he was willing to listen to academics like me on



Winning the St. Paul's marathon, 1950.

Anyway, on March 25, he was in Dhaka and staying at my house. On the eve of the crackdown, I took him to see Bangabandhu, who, of course, knew him very well. We must have gone to Road 32 at around 6 in the evening. It was twilight. The place was milling with journalists, tension in the air. The Pakistani political leaders who had come to Dhaka had all been told to go back. By then we knew that some major confrontation was brewing at that time.

The moment we got there, Bangabandhu caught Mazhar by the hand, took us into the living room, shut the door and said: The generals have decided to go for a crackdown. They think that by killing me they will suppress our movement, but I tell you an independent Bangladesh will be built on my grave.

He told us of the liberation struggle, that the crackdown would be the catalyst for the next stage. In the event that the military decided to go for a crackdown, that was to be the trigger for a full-blown liberation war.

On our way home that night, we noticed that AL workers had started putting up blockades on the streets. The crackdown was imminent. That night it started. I took Mazhar on to the roof of our house where we could see the tracers and other signs of attack in the night sky from where Pilkhana and the Razarbagh police lines were being attacked.

The next morning, I learned that the day before, just after curfew was resumed, a whole team, led by Col. Syeeduddin, the officer who had arrested Bangabandhu, had come looking for me, but only found my wife, Salma, and three sons, eldest aged 8, the youngest less than a year.

They were surprised to find that I had been there until the morning and thought that I might not be far away. They proposed to take Salma to the cantonment to try to flush me out. Our neighbour, Ameneh Ispahani, came to the rescue at this point. It was she who persuaded them not to take Salma away to the cantonment. When I heard that she was under threat, I wanted to return. But Salma refused: she insisted that the only security the family would have would be if I got out of the country.

It was decided that I should cross the border. Through the help of Matin Sahib, a veteran political figure whose village home was in Baraid across the river from Gulshan. I crossed the river and made my way to the border in careful stages. I went with Prof. Anisur Rahman who told me about his ordeal at Dhaka university and Mustafa Munawar. Our escort was Rahmatullah (now an AL MP) and a young teacher by the name of Rashid.

Up to the river, everyone was in retreat. Beyond the river, it was liberated territory. The Bangladesh flag was flying. Peasants with sharpened bamboo staves awaited the arrival of



Presiding over a roundtable with the late Abdus Samad Azad and Pranab Mukherjee.

to get us arms, how can we fight this war otherwise? At that point he started preparing a shopping list of arms I was supposed to give the Bengalis in London and the US.

Then he made an interesting point. He said that right now we are just mutineers and we will remain as such until an independent Bangladesh government formally commissions us into their army. So, if you meet leaders, tell them to immediately constitute a government, which will commission us as formal soldiers of independent Bangladesh.

The next morning he had us escorted into Agartala. The first thing we did was to meet the DC. He was confused. All these people were coming across the border, wanting food, shelter, arms. What am I supposed to do, he asked. I have no authority to act here and need instructions from Delhi.

He directed us to Agartala stadium where the Bengalis who had come across the border were assembling. The senior-most person was M.R. Siddiqui, the Chittagong district president of the AL. The chief minister of Tripura was taking him to Delhi to meet the Indian leadership. Siddiqui decided that I and Anis should accompany him to Delhi since we knew more people there than he did.

The moment we got to Delhi, we were taken to the Tripura state guest house. I got hold of the phone number

our liberation war had been launched. The second was to issue a formal proclamation of independence. The one input I could give him on this second point was the need to pass on Khaled Musharraf's advice to me that in such a proclamation, the Bangladesh soldiers who had taken up arms against Pakistan should be formally commissioned as the army of Bangladesh.

In the end, I sat down and prepared the draft of the narrative events of the launch of the liberation war. The actual formal proclamation of independence was prepared by Amirul Islam and other senior lawyers in Calcutta. Mine was the narrative account, the preamble, what Tajuddin presented to the world in his first public statement on April 14 at the mango grove which is now known as Mujibnagar.

When I was with Tajuddin, we heard on the radio that M.M. Ahmed (Pakistan's economic czar) was flying to Washington to seek aid for Pakistan in its moment of crisis. Tajuddin was firm that we needed to counter this. He told me to spearhead a campaign to stop aid to Pakistan. That was how I was mandated to go to Washington. I was also instructed by him to request the senior Bengalis in the Pakistan embassy in London and Washington to defect and become part of the liberation struggle.

THE CONCLUDING PART OF THE INTERVIEW WILL BE PRINTED TOMORROW.