

CENTENARY

# Faiz . . . in the light of the moon

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

The poet and lyricist Javed Akhtar speaks for many when he links Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry to lunar gleam. There is magic in the moon, says Akhtar. Wherever its light falls --- on ponds, on deserts, on homes, on flowers, on fallen twigs --- it envelops the object of its brilliance in beauty. And so it is with Faiz's poetry. It acts as a transformational force on the themes it deals with. It underscores the power of poetry to create the sublime and then bring it into the lives of people. It is just as well. In this centenary year of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's birth, it becomes necessary to recall the fervour and the commitment he brought to Urdu poetry and in the process enhanced the quality of a genre that in earlier times was enriched at various points by Mirza Ghalib, Mir Taqi Mir, Bahadur Shah Zafar and Allama Iqbal. And, of course, by so many others.

The difference between Faiz and his predecessors, if one might so employ the term, was the radicalism, the political consciousness he brought into his poetry. For Faiz was a lifelong believer in socialism, in the power of Marxism to raise the quality of life. Not for nothing was he awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in the 1960s. And, in equal measure, not for nothing did successive Pakistani governments harass him, hounding him into prison (as in the aftermath of the Rawalpindi conspiracy case of 1951) or out of the country (as in the darkness of the Ziaul Haq years). Faiz constantly held out the truth that while his poetry could be reflective of the general human passions of love and romance, it was also a formidable weapon he was ready to use in defence of political causes. In his lifetime, he saw bad politics drill deep holes in his heart at frequent intervals. Observing the bloodletting which accompanied the partition of India and the creation of a country of which he would be a citizen, Faiz lamented the absence of dignity which came with that fractured freedom:

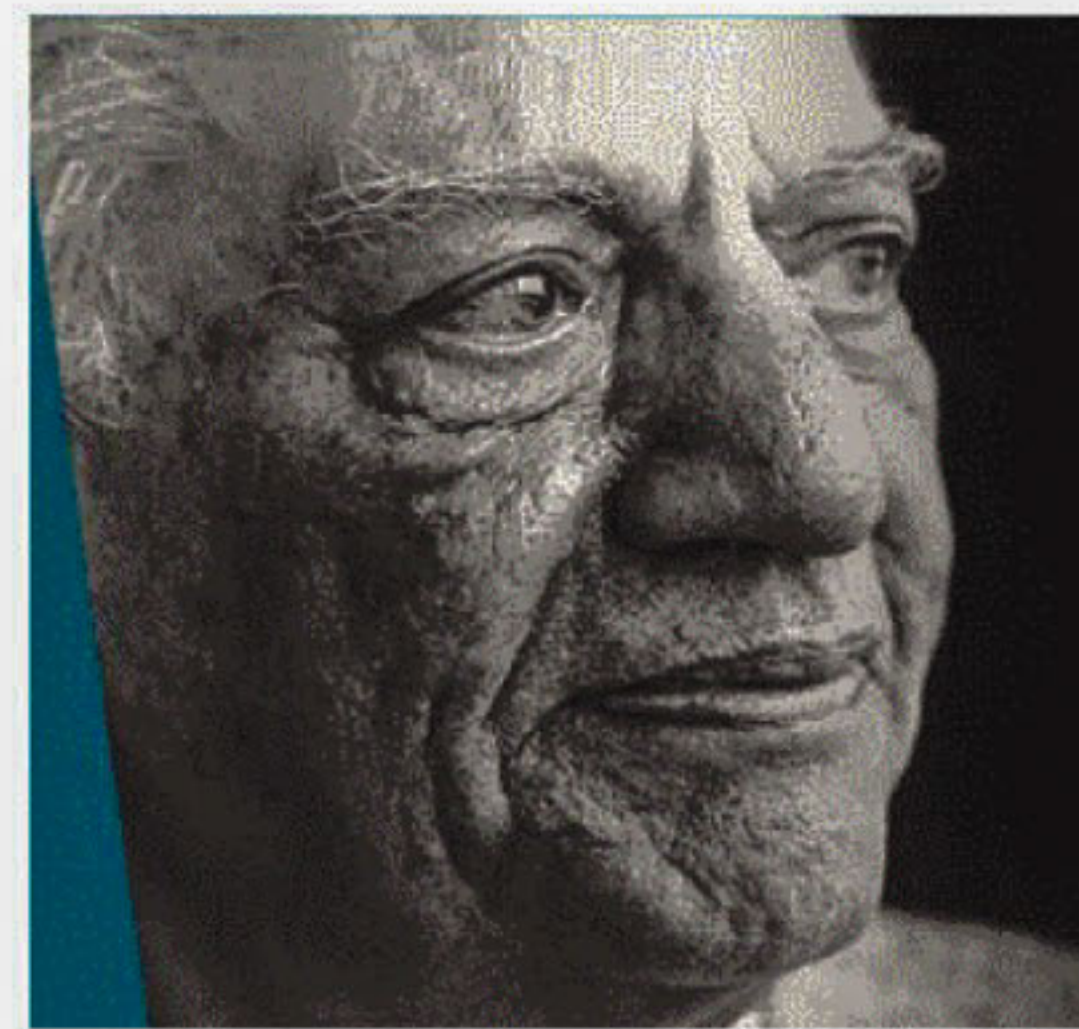
*Ye dagh dagh ujala ye shab guzeeda sahar / wo intezar tha jis ka ye wo sahar to nahin / ye wo sahar to nahin jis ki arzoo le kar / chale the yaar ke mil jaayegi kahin na kahin / falak ke dasht mein / taaron ka akhri manzil / kahin to ho ga shab-e sust mouj ka sahil / kahin to ja ke ruke ga safeena gham-e dil . . . najat-e-deeda wo dil ki gharhi nahin aayi / chale chalo ke wo manzil abhi nahin aayi*

The stains of blood have made a violent carpet of the new dawn. It is not the dawn Faiz had waited for. That moment of freedom, carried on the wings of enlightenment, has not arrived. The cherished destination, says Faiz, has not been reached.

It is the liberal individual in Faiz we recall. Born in Sialkot in a year when the British colonial power eventually bowed to public opinion to annul the partition of Bengal six years after it had knifed through the heart of the province in 1905, Faiz showed academic and intellectual promise through the mastery he attained in Urdu, Persian and Arabic at the school. He

would soon obtain a bachelor's degree in Arabic, followed by a masters in English from Government College, Lahore. And then came a second masters, this time in Arabic, from Oriental College, Lahore. In an era when teaching was a noble calling, Faiz soon found himself on the faculty of M.A.O College in Amritsar and then at Hailey College of Commerce in Lahore. In 1942, even as India seethed in political agitation, Faiz joined the British Indian army and saw action on the battlefield.

And then 1947 changed life, for Faiz Ahmed Faiz, for every single individual in India. On the dawn of pockmarked freedom, as he would describe it, the poet found himself editing *The Pakistan Times* as well as the Urdu newspaper *Imroze*. Those were days, despite the fratricidal communalism involved in the vivisection of India, when an avowed Marxist such as Faiz could be trusted by the Pakistani state to administer significant segments of its newspaper establishment. But that liberal climate was not to last, not after the death of Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Implicated in the Rawalpindi con-



spiracy case, Faiz would be sentenced to death but would not be hanged. The four years he spent in prison were to be a time for him to refine his poetry, to reactivate the politics he believed in. Observe, in the poem 'Prison Evening':

*Each star a rung / night comes down the spiral / staircase of the evening / the breeze passes by so very close / as if someone just happened to speak of love / In the courtyard / the trees are absorbed refugees / embroidering maps of return on the sky.*

When he emerged free of prison, it was Mian Iftikharuddin the politician and Noor Jahan the melody queen who welcomed him back to light. And light was consistently at play in his love poetry. His verses would find immortality in the voices of the artists who sent them out on the ether. Noor Jahan's memorable rendition of *mujh se pehli si mohabbat mere mehboob na maang* remains a poignant reminder of the tranquil passion, of the twilight sadness which Faiz brought into his study of romantic agony. Read this English language

translation of that song:

*Do not ask, my love, for the love we had before / You existed, I told myself, so all existence shone / Grief for me was you; the world's grief was far / Spring was ever renewed in your face / Beyond your eyes, what could the world hold?*

Recall that last line, *teri ankhone ke siwa iss duniya mein rakkha kya hai*, and feel that old tremor coursing through the crevices of the heart yet once more. And while you do, there is the certain possibility of the undying lyrics of *gulon mein rang bhare / baad-e-nau bahar chale / chale bhi aao ke / gulshan ka karobar chale* returning to remind you of the early 1960s when Mehdi Hasan sent them wafting into homes all over Pakistan, indeed all over the Urdu-speaking world. Faiz would sometimes note jocularly that his songs were not his any more; they now belonged to Noor Jahan and Mehdi Hasan. But who could argue that it was Faiz's energy which kept his poetry going in the hands of others? Reflect on these lines from a ghazal:

*I am being accused of loving you, that is all / It is not an insult but a praise, that is all / my heart is pleased at the words of the accusers / O my dearest dear, they say your name / that is all . . .*

Faiz Ahmed Faiz's distress at the genocide committed in occupied Bangladesh by his nation's army in 1971 exposed the horror which laid intellectual Pakistani circles low --- opening, after 1947, a second phase of terror for them. The poet would weave his dirge in terrible imagery:

*The moon erupted with blood, its silver extinguished / the sky promised a morning of blood / and the night wept only blood / the trees hardened into crimson pillars / all flowers filled their eyes with blood / and every glance was an arrow / each pierced image blood / this blood --- a river crying out for martyrs --- / flows in longing / and in sorrow, in rage, in love / let it flow.*

In 1974, Faiz travelled to Bangladesh with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, met old friends who were now strangers, saw a land no more his own. Back in Pakistan, sorrow dripped from his poetic sensibilities as he wrote:

*Hum ke thahre ajnabi itni mulaqaton ke baad / phir banenge aashna kitni mulaqaton ke baad / kab nazar mein aaye gi be-daagh sabze ki bahar / khoon ke dhabbe dhulenge kitni barsaton ke baad . . .*

Strangers after so many meetings? How many more meetings before we become friends again? How many monsoons before the thick stains of blood are washed away?

The question was Faiz's. He did not have an answer. Every poet waits for answers . . . and then dies. Ten years after that plaintive poetry, Faiz Ahmed Faiz shut his eyes to life, to the world --- for all time.

(Faiz Ahmed Faiz, born on 13 February 1911, died on 20 November 1984)

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RUMINATIONS

# Bohemian memories

AINON N.

Was it the spirit of good people or the good spirit that allowed for celebration of goodness in people? Whatever it was, the harmony between laughter and Chopin's *Fantasia Impromptu* was blending well. She was sitting under the blue sky in the middle of verdant green of a winery cleansed and freshened by the previous day's rain shower. The twilight was fused with amber warmth. The hint of slight fragrance in the air came from the south side of the pond where the dense foliage of honeysuckle was growing wild and left untouched. It was empyrean beauty. She sat still, closing her eyes, while savouring the blended crescendo of wind, music and laughter, but not words. Hers is the boundary that crosses speech into silence. In it she finds an outpouring of self through the compulsion to reach within, a kind of oblivion to her history of becoming. It is a terrain on which she has come to depend as some kind of transcendence to the sprinklings of finding her real self.

And then, for a fleeting few seconds, she lingered over a set of recent palaver.

*"Are you awake? Where hast thou gone missing?"*

"Ah, what a delicious idea to go missing! But why do you do this? It's too early for a call. *Dakle keno?*"

*"Daak diyechhi tomar hashi upobhog korar jonno. Je ankhite te ato hashi lukano shei ankhite shopno kurhabar jonno. Listen. Listen gently. Can you hear the bird songs?"*

"Yes. Beautiful. What a magical way to begin the day."

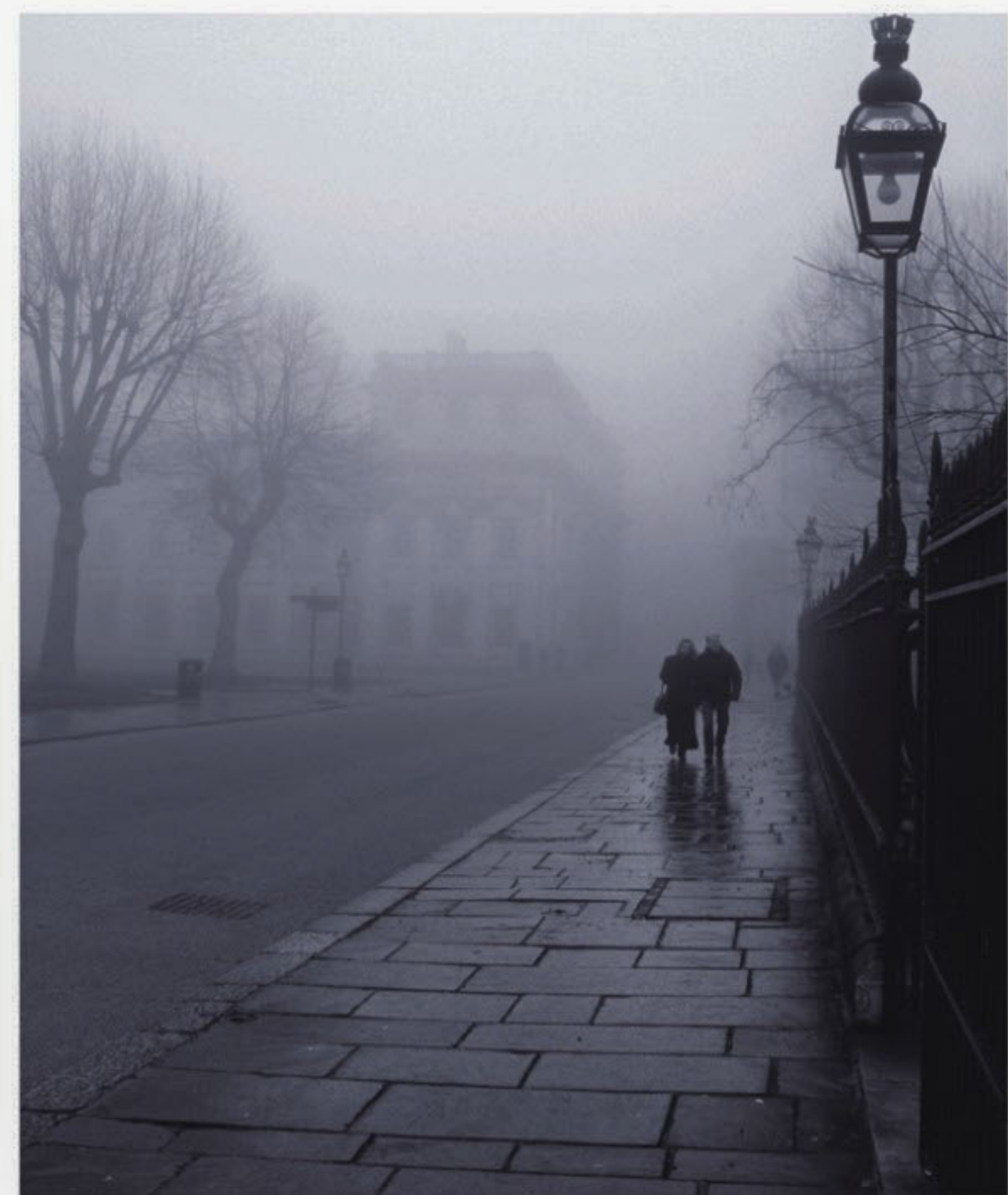
*"Enjoy this offering as much I enjoy hearing your morning voice. It lights up a whole world!"*

There was in his prose some signal of sensitivity and empathy that she sensed as a kindred spirit in some way. Someone who might understand, hear. When it was time to speak, in him a listener appeared. In silence she contemplated: in you, through you, for me there are moments to understand, to balance. Yet, you are not a friend who can hold caringly in times of need. I speak with you as an existence out there somewhere. Thus you take a form and become real. She wanted to give herself permission to be friends. How do I outlaw this feeling? A feeling just is; it is not right or wrong. 'Nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. It is a prison.' She smiled while affirming with Shakespeare's Hamlet! For her, it was an aesthetically valid self-realization.

She wanted to be unbiased, to commit to herself, to her own rights. In her there was a constant need to remove her subjective self from happenings. She felt a lack of some things, a strange sense of being lost in the soul; a sense of some things she needed. Overall, hers was a happy story, yet tucked away somewhere were gray days. When she looked closely at the context, the sequence, a story not of a day but of a lifetime, she asked what was the price of happiness. Was she a prisoner of her own predilection?

She opened her eyes and tried to reconnect with the argument Barkha was pursuing so passionately.

*"In the scheme of life we all do the needful. Is that not normal? With the coming of age and experience a sense of vacuum, a challenge always remains. No matter how we arrange words to rationalize commitments, it is after all our interpretation when it comes to relationships. The parameters we define*



*for ourselves; is it really self-imposed or is it the unconscious acceptance of the prescribed?"*

"It is intriguingly elementary. In naturalness of living I discovered beautiful nuances in many, some carried dialogues well, a few had melodious voice, others recited well, others were well read, and yet others carried themselves well. I appreciate these qualities, to the discomfort of many and mine. And yet neither did I love nor make love to any. When I am closer to my truth, I am me. When one dissociates from such figurations there is less pain, but also less joy. One only half lives. We are equal to life's givings. Why not live the fullness of life?"

She laughed, adding, "And so I live in the midst of a paradox: am my passions, my desires, acts of an amateur? Someone whose best attempt at living life never exceeds the payoffs of mere dabbling...is it ever enough to discover oneself? And so, should I curse or laugh at myself and life?" Coming down the slope, balancing a tray filled with ambrosial delicacies, Pawan interjected.

*"Ah, yes! Do I hear the rhetoric of self and I? Remember the tidings of D. H.: 'This accidental meeting of possibilities calls itself I. I ask: what am I doing here? And, at once, this I becomes unreal.' My dear, this I is not yours! Our frames of assumptions are constructed. What self wants I cannot get, because of that invisible reach of impositions."*

To which Barkha added, *'Eloquently put. Now let me borrow from him, 'My real self wanders elsewhere, far away, wanders on and on invisibly and has nothing to do with my life!'*

Sipping the aged Porto Tawny she made a mental note: these two are a pair in their thoughts and deliberations. "So, let us continue. Here is to incredible life. Cheers!" Pawan's vigorous gesture of *Cheers* caught her by surprise.

Streams of memories are like pearl hyacinths. In spite of a tempestuous touch they persist in stubborn constancy. *Cheers, my Lady* is what he ended his conversations with. The same words wove a different story, for another time, for another instance. At this moment it was the unsayable for her. She reached for the invisible mien within and said quietly, 'Cheers!'

Ainon N. writes from Carbondale, Illinois, USA

TRIBUTE

# Sydur Rahman: a voice for secular thought

HASAN TARIQUE CHOWDHURY

The death anniversary of eminent philosopher and educationist Professor Sydur Rahman passed on 28 August. He was an uncompromising voice for secular thought. He was among the vanguard of those who espoused freedom of thought in the hard communal ambience of the Pakistani days. Through the golden period of life he struggled with his sharp pen to establish secular and progressive ideas in this country as well as in the erstwhile Indian subcontinent. Despite being born in an ordinary peasant family of Rasullahbad, a remote village in Brahmanbaria district, on 15 May 1909, Sydur Rahman obtained excellent positions of merit in every sphere of his educational career. In 1931 and 1932 he passed BA (Hons) and MA with first class in philosophy from Dhaka University.

In his vibrant professional life Rahman served as a professor at Dhaka College, Eden College, Sylhet MC College, Chittagong College and Jagannath College. He was also professor of philosophy at Dhaka University. As an educationist and social worker he closely observed the Second World War, the famine of 1943, the agonizing communal riots of Kolkata in 1946, the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the 1952 language movement, and the founding of independent Bangladesh in 1971. These historical events strongly influenced his psychology and thinking and finally drove him towards secularism and socialism. But he recited the Holy Quran from his childhood and had even served as an imam in a mosque in Dhaka for a few days. And yet he was condemned as an atheist and communist by some because of his progressive ideas. Today secularism is being trifled with in the nation's constitution and Islam continues as the state religion. The fifteenth amendment to



the constitution has undermined the ideal of secularism. If Professor Sydur Rahman were alive today, he would again write and speak against this distortion of the spirit of our great Liberation War. As an activist for a secular Bangladesh, he had been harassed by the state of Pakistan. He was even forced to resign from the chair of principal of Jagannath College due to political differences with the despotic East Pakistan governor and Ayub loyalist Monem Khan. In Bangladesh, religious extremism has emerged as an immense danger for the nation. The serial bomb blasts of 17 August 2005 and other acts of sabotage in recent times have revealed the cruel face of religious extremism. At such times we feel more the need of people like Prof Sydur Rahman, who never compromised in his struggle against the forces of darkness.

Professor Sydur Rahman was a prominent scholar from the Muslim community who explained the nature of religions in their secular and humanitarian underpinnings. His writings always included the concept of modern science and logic. His reputed work, 'An Introduction to Islamic Philosophy', has widely been known to society. A thoroughly modern man, he felt pain observing the backwardness of our society and especially in the case of the Muslim community. He wrote, "In many cases Muslims have not changed their 'old value' following, have not adopted modern science and the inherent query of philosophy, have not awakened the questions sleeping deep in their hearts. So they become blind, irrational and reactionary. In many countries of the world they are under the spell of superstitions, poverty, idleness, anti-development and democratic conditions. For this reason they often turn themselves into a people without hope." He wrote further, "We should not push our society a thousand years back." His remarks were justified. And when religious extremism is striking at the very existence of our civilisation with renewed ferocity, his writings become more relevant today as we try to combat this danger. Professor Sydur Rahman was in constant touch with many of our national leaders, among whom were Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Comrade Moni Singh and Professor Muzaffar Ahmed. They all esteemed him for his intelligence, for the scholar in him. Twenty-four years after his passing, we deeply feel his absence, especially at this point of time. We believe his memory will remain our inspiration as we move into the future.

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