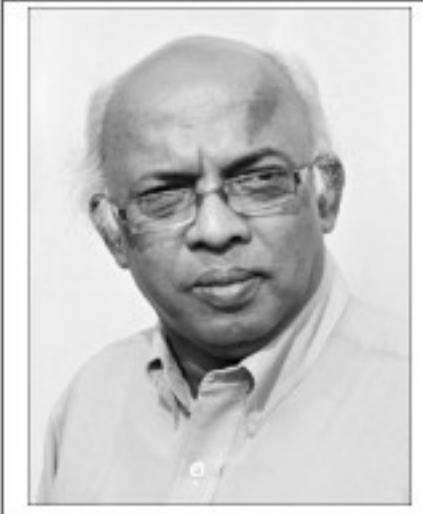


GROUND REALITIES

Kabir Chowdhury and the old ideals



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

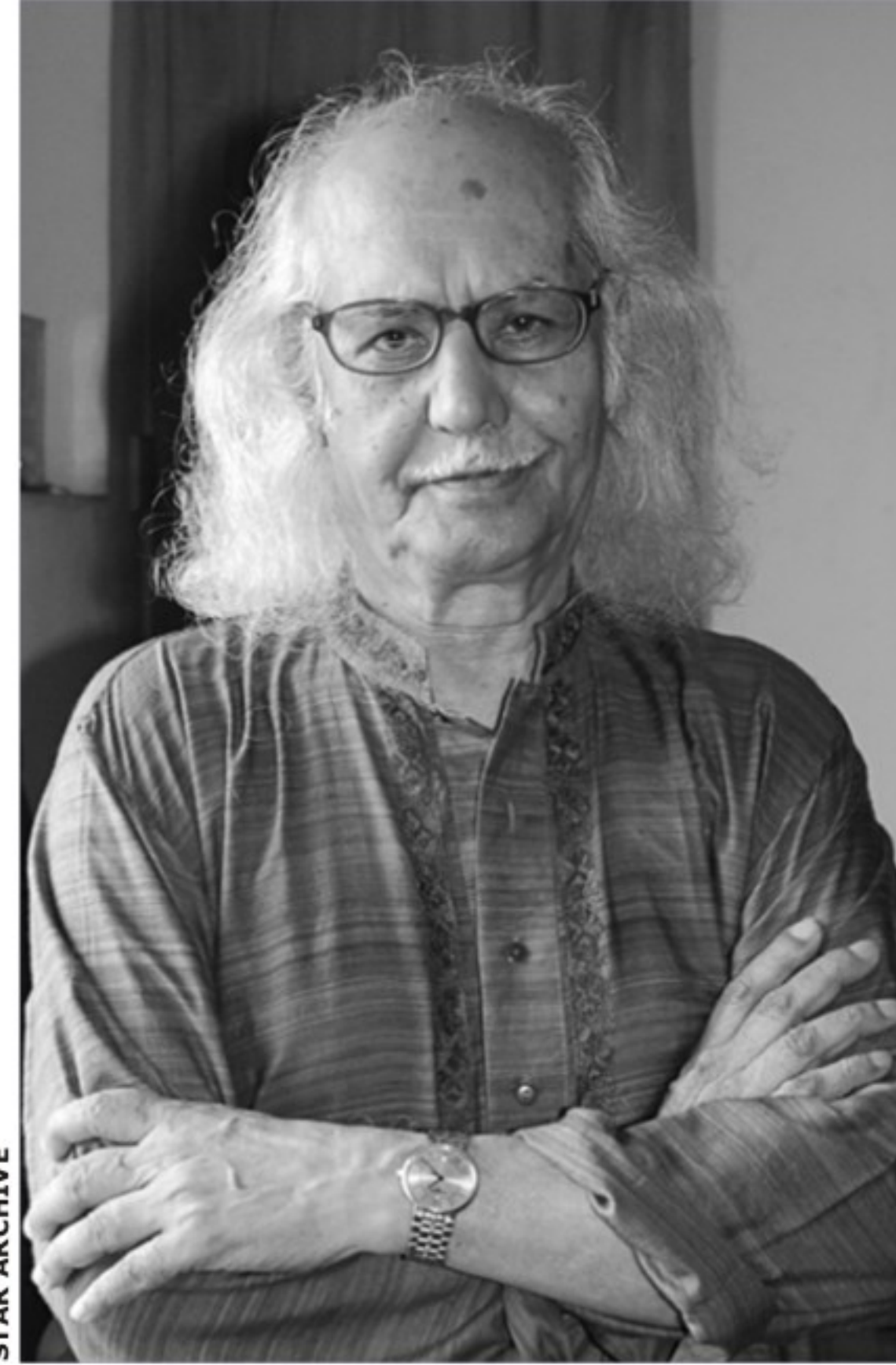
BACK in the mid-1970s, Greek tragedy -- of Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles -- came alive for us at the English Department of Dhaka University. And it did so because Professor Kabir Chowdhury was there to enlighten us on the subject.

The theme of tragedy as it had come to be shaped in ancient Greece, as indeed it would someday percolate down to the world of Shakespeare, was what Professor Chowdhury educated us on.

There was a perfect gentleman in him, a smile that never ceased to have its infectious effect on his pupils. We were young, we were in search of meaning in life, especially in that part of it which was increasingly coming to be associated with the world of English, indeed western literature. Kabir Chowdhury persuaded us into thinking that we were on the right track, that poetry and tragedy were what we needed to add substance to our lives.

And now that he is gone, this world of ours threatens to become rather hollow. For he was much more than an academic. There was the fullness of a being in him, one who had his pulse on the times he lived in. For me, it has always been a critical question of how much he must have missed his younger sibling, the martyr Munier Chowdhury who was done to death by the goon squads of the collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army in a season which is upon us again forty years after we fought our way to freedom.

In all this long time, Kabir Chowdhury remained constant in his defence of the ethos of this land. He remembered his brother as much as he remembered all the three million who perished in that war. And having remembered, he made it a point to argue, every day of his life, that those who had caused so much of tragedy in the life of the Bengalis would need to be brought to justice if decency, if the idea of Bangladesh was to prevail. He linked up with other brave souls -- Sufia Kamal, Jahanara Imam, et al -- in a crusade that would become a defining point in our collec-



STAR ARCHIVE

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tive national life.

The war criminals of 1971, Professor Chowdhury would not let anyone forget, ought not to be let off without punishment. In that broad sense of the meaning, Kabir Chowdhury became the voice of the country. He spoke for all of us, for everyone who believed in a Bangladesh which we first experienced on the day the enemy capitulated on a December afternoon forty years ago.

In a condition of often asphyxiating conservatism, Kabir Chowdhury did not waver in his belief that for Bengalis to have a place in the world it was necessary to have their idealism founded on secular politics, for secularism was what guaranteed men a right to dignity, to a needed sophistication as it were.

As a teacher, as a social activist, as a defender of the old values upon which we have tried to base our societal existence, Kabir Chowdhury never for a moment gave in to the idea that compromise could sometimes be an option. His faith in Bangabandhu's politics was phenomenal. And it was his belief, as it is of so many of us, that with Bangabandhu's daughter in charge, Bangladesh could look ahead to recovering the principles which went missing between August 1975 and June 1996 in this sad country.

The degree to which Professor Kabir Chowdhury was willing to go in his adherence to the old ideals came forth in February 1976, only months into the assassinations of Bangabandhu and the four national leaders, when he defied taboo to inform a subdued audience at an Ekushey gathering at Bangla Academy that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman mattered. It was a season of darkness when

Bangabandhu's loyalists groped for a way out of the dark, when fear was all-encompassing. But for Kabir Chowdhury, courage was all. Truth was the idea that mattered. Conviction was a necessary condition of existence.

Professor Kabir Chowdhury was my teacher. More crucially, he was an individual who taught a hapless nation of the virtues of decent, brave and purposeful living. He instructed us on the substantive nature of tragedy. And then he lived, along with the rest of us,

through tragedy sweeping across this land. The death of the great and the glorious has always accorded meaning to our lives, through reminding us of the illuminating nature of purposeful existence. Kabir Chowdhury's life had a purpose. We recall it this morning, as he passes into the ages.

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Stock market freefall

Weed out shady elements to stem it

IT is almost a month since the prime minister met in an emergency meeting with all stock market stakeholders to think a way out to stymie the continuous plunge of the index. A week thereafter, a number of decisions were taken whereby it was thought that these would be able to stop the freefall. The market rose a little and then the downfall began again.

The meeting had failed to distinguish between the cause and the effect of the stock market situation. It was not a factor of shortage of fund but of confidence.

The same theme was echoed yesterday at a Centre for Policy Dialogue discussion by Khandker Ibrahim Khaled who had led a probe into the share market manipulation earlier this year. His team came up with a comprehensive report. And then what?

No action was taken on his report. Rather the man was vilified. The people who were in perception behind the manipulators took up the sacred task of 'fixing' the market woes. However any action was taken against the chief of the Securities and Exchange Commission.

So what the government was skirt the real problem of confidence building and rather thought of pumping in money. No questions will be asked for investing black money. Banks will not have to account for the loans given to their subsidiaries for stock operation, and so on. And now, Khaled has said the government is highlighting the so-called liquidity crisis to hide something.

There is no liquidity dearth in the market as reflected in the over-subscription of primary shares. So if the market is to be put on track, one has to look elsewhere -- implementing the recommendations of the Khaled report, taking actions against the manipulators and not allowing people carrying scam perception to indulge in stock matters. Unfortunately we have seen some such shady people talk to the regulator as lately as this week.

So unless actions are taken with sincerity it would be unwise to expect the market to stabilize. And there would be no guarantee that another scam would not happen in future.

We mourn

Kabir Chowdhury is no more

In the passing away of Professor Kabir Chowdhury, the nation has lost a leading light, who wielded considerable influence on the national thought process by his writings and spoken words. Living to the fullness of his life, he spent his waking hours productively, creatively and compassionately leaving a versatile legacy in scholarship, literary output including translation, and above all, as an articulate voice against orthodoxy and communalism in any shape or form.

Soft-spoken, amiable in disposition and his face always beaming a smile, he was enormously endearing as a person.

Teacher and educationist by profession, he went on to receive the highest accolade of being elevated to national professor in 1998. As director of Bangla Academy, he championed secular values during the mass movements in 1969-70. He was member-secretary of the first national education commission after independence. He authored as many as 250 books.

For his contributions to education, literary and social movements, Kabir Chowdhury has been honoured nationally and internationally. Among the numerous awards he received are the Bangla Academy Literary Awards, Ekushey Padak, Shadhinota Padak, Bangabandhu National Award, Mohammad Nasiruddin Literary Award, Sher-e-Bangla Award and William Carey Award (India).

With him, ends an era of men of letters and action, a rare breed that has all but vanished. They lived by and for principles they believed in and upheld with a force of conviction that will remain a beacon to guide us through the travails of life.

As we mourn his demise in the full knowledge that his works remain as a valuable reference point, we express our profound condolences to the members of his bereaved family hoping that they will bear the loss with

| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Will China stumble? Don't bet on it

STEVEN RATTNER

HARDLY a day goes by without news of yet another economic problem facing China. A frothy real estate market. Quickly rising wages. A weakening manufacturing sector. Tightening lending standards. The list can seem endless and frightening.

But after a recent visit to China, I remain staunchly optimistic that it will continue to be the world's greatest machine for economic expansion. While developed countries bump along with little growth, China's gross domestic product is expected to increase by 9.2% in 2011 and an equally astonishing 8.5% next year.

The country pulses with energy and success, a caldron of economic ambition larded with understandable self-confidence. Visit the General Motors plant on the outskirts of Shanghai and watch Buicks churned out by steadily moving assembly lines almost indistinguishable from those in plants in Michigan.

That shouldn't surprise, as G.M. strives for uniformity across its Chinese facilities. Perhaps more startling is that G.M. achieves American levels of productivity, quality and worker safety -- with pay that is a small fraction of levels in the United States.

This illustrates China's great strength: its ability to relentlessly grind down costs by combining high labour efficiency with wages that remain extraordinarily low. At Foxconn's largest plant, in Shenzhen, 420,000 Chinese earning about \$188 per month assemble electronic components for megacustomers like Apple, Hewlett-Packard and Dell.

Often criticised for just being a nation of "assemblers," China has been increasing the value it adds to exports as more components are produced there. G.M., for example, uses 350 local suppliers.

China's economic success is coloured by its opaque political system, repressive and riddled with corruption. But the unusual mix of authoritarianism and free enterprise should continue to work because of its ability to deliver rising incomes, satisfying a populace that appears more interested in economic advancement than in democracy.

China has a plethora of tasks on its economic to do list, but none are impossibly daunting. Just as in the United States a century ago, jobs are needed for vast numbers of rural migrants moving into cities. Inefficient state-owned companies must be restructured (as they were in recent decades in many European countries). The other evident stresses, like the indisputable property bubble, are manageable and far short of what brought down the American economy.

Meanwhile, an opportunity lurks in China's seeming inability to create innovative products with international identities. In an era of global corporations, a country that reveres brands,

especially luxury ones like BMW and Louis Vuitton but also Starbucks and Häagen Dazs, has yet to give birth to its first.

Lenovo, one of the best-known Chinese companies, has achieved limited success with its 2005 acquisition of IBM's personal computer business. Astonishingly, Chinese auto companies have the lowest share of their home market of any major country. So China has emphasised building products like ships, where brands don't matter.

Not unlike the United States in the 19th century, China's early stage of industrialisation has brought with it an unsavoury Wild West flavour, from cronyism to fraudulent accounting, that justifiably worries investors. But behind those distractions is a country that is investing substantially in its future -- about 46% of its gross domestic product, compared with 12% in the United States.

And while total government debt in China is high -- by some estimates, higher than in the United States -- much of the Chinese debt was incurred for investment rather than consumption, far better for longer-term growth. Notwithstanding accounts of "roads to nowhere," China has vastly improved its core infrastructure. Its government arguably does better than ours at allo-

cating capital.

The antipathy of Chinese households toward personal debt (a quarter of homes are bought with cash) has resulted in a savings rate of nearly 40% of income, compared with less than 5% for Americans.

Underpinned by a reverence for entrepreneurship, China has made starting new businesses easier, paving the way for the accumulation of vast fortunes; there are more billionaires in China than in any country except the United States. (China's income inequality also rivals that of the United States.)

A gradual move toward reform appears evident. Controls over interest rates, foreign exchange, cooking oil and gasoline, to name a few, are being liberalised. There is even attention to the environment, with tax subsidies for fuel-efficient autos and limits on new-car purchases in the largest cities.

The frustrating mercantilist approach taken by China -- it manipulates its currency and trade rules with abandon -- has served it well. It has accumulated vast foreign currency reserves (\$3.2 trillion and rising) while blocking access to its market and gaining competitive advantages internationally in everything from solar panels to toys. Congressional sabre rattling notwithstanding, China is likely to continue to get away with reforming only slowly.

While China hardly lacks challenges, I am betting on its continued success.

The writer, a contributing writer for Op-Ed, is a long time Wall Street Executive.
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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 14

1825
Advocates of Liberalism in Russia rise up against Tsar Nicholas I and are put down in the Decembrist Revolt in St. Petersburg.

1903
The Wright brothers make their first attempt to fly with the Wright Flyer at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

1939
Winter War: The Soviet Union is expelled from the League of Nations for invading Finland.

1946
The United Nations General Assembly votes to establish its headquarters in New York City.

1955
Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Laos, Libya, Nepal, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Sri Lanka join the United Nations.

1981
Arab-Israeli conflict: Israel's Knesset passes The Golan Heights Law, extending Israeli law to the area of the Golan Heights.

2003
President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf narrowly escapes an assassination attempt.