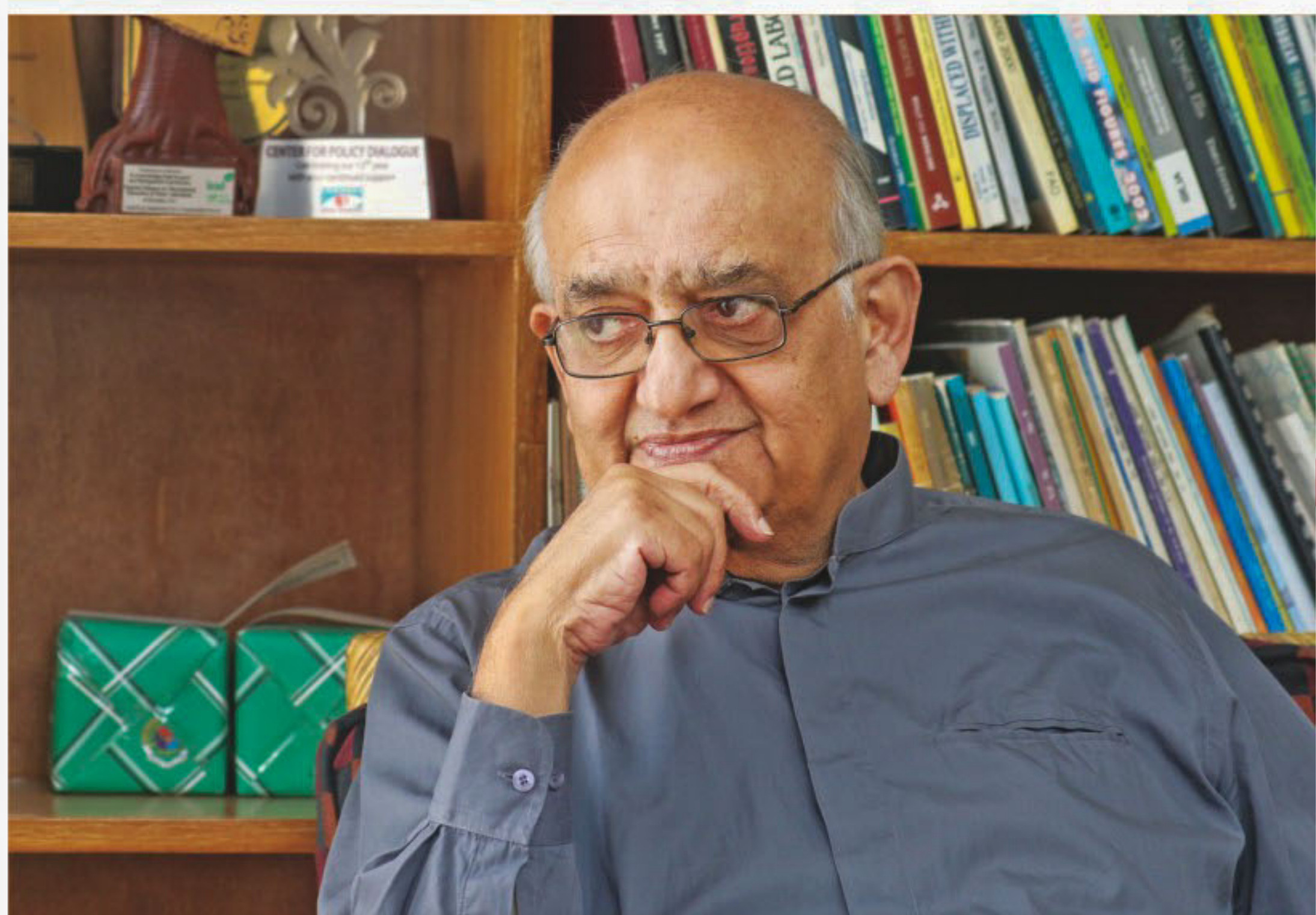


IN CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR REHMAN SOBHAN



# THE ECONOMIST AND THE PATRIOT

AMITAVA KAR

*In an exclusive interview he tells Mahfuz Anam and Amitava Kar of this paper, on the occasion of his 80th birthday, how from being the 'accidental' economist he becomes a crucial figure in the Liberation War of Bangladesh and later sets up the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) to bring policy makers and specialist thinkers together for the country's development*

**W**HEN we request an interview with Professor Rehman Sobhan, he says he would get back to us after the final of the World Cup Cricket is over. When we point out that there are several days gap before the quarter finals, only then does he agree to give us time.

His love of cricket in fact, began in 1945 just after the war when he was a 10-year-old kid going to St Paul's in Darjeeling. "The Australian Services Team was playing India at the Eden Gardens," Professor Sobhan says. "Keith Miller, one of the all-time great all-rounders from Australia, hit seven sixes, one of which flew out of the stadium and landed in the parking lot. I used to play for the school team but I wasn't very good. I excelled in athletics (particularly long distance running) and boxing. I even got my school colours in football and hockey."

On a recent evening at a party, he wondered if he has aged in his taste. "I haven't. I still enjoy eating ice cream, chocolates, watching movies (*Doctor Zhivago* and *A Man for all Seasons* are his favourites), cricket, football, and reading (He was greatly influenced by Nehru's autobiography)—things I enjoyed growing up. The only difference is now I can get a better viewing of the game on TV. And I eat in a rationed way because of health precautions."

He speaks with dry wit, a relaxed cosmopolitanism and a feel for history. After all, born in Calcutta on March 12, 1935, he has sung four different national anthems throughout his life—God Save the Queen, Jana Gana Mana, Pak Sarzamin and Amar Shonar Bangla. "I was only seven when I was sent to St Paul's and those days we had to spend nine months a year up in the hills. After passing my Senior Cambridge in 1950, I went to Aitchison College in Lahore for two years."

His father, Khonker Fazle Sobhan, a graduate of Presidency College, was one of the first Muslims to qualify to go to Sandhurst. Later he rose to become a high ranking officer in the Indian Police Service, respected by colleagues for his liberal and non-communal views. His mother, Hashmat Ara Begum was the niece of Khawaja Nazimuddin, noted politician and statesman from the Nawab family of Dhaka. "She was ahead of her time. She rode horses and roller-skated in the Darjeeling Gymkhana Club."

**A**S a student of Arts at Aitchison, he wasn't particularly interested in economics. It was only when he went to Cambridge—which was by sheer accident—that he decided to study for a degree in economics and became interested in the subject. His father had sent him to London to learn the leather business—something he started after retiring from the police service. But Prof. Sobhan's heart was not in it. In London, he spent much time watching cricket and tennis. It was 1953.

"At that time, my cousin Kaiser Morshed arrived to go to Oxford. And Kamal Hossain, two years my junior, was passing through London to go to Notre Dame University in the US. They both asked me why I wasn't getting into a university even though I had excellent academic records."

Of course the problem was that the university academic term had already started both in Cambridge and Oxford and he wasn't sure if he could get in. All he had was a letter of recommendation from his grandfather Khawaja Nazimuddin who had been elected an honorary Fellow of Trinity Hall, his old college at Cambridge, while he was the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

He sent it anyway. To his surprise, he was accepted. Among his contemporaries in Cambridge were Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, Mahbubul Haq, Manmohan Singh, Nobel Laureate Abdus Salam, Jagdish Bhagwati and Lal Jayawardena of Sri Lanka. "Amartya came from the Marxist-communist tradition of Presidency College. He was superbly intelligent and well-read. I became very friendly with him. Manmohan was a shy fellow who spent most of his time in the library. Mahbub was also like that. One of my closest friends was Arif Iftikhar, the son of the famous left-oriented Mian Iftikharuddin, the owner of Pakistan's leading English daily, Pakistan Times. Arif had inherited his father's left wing views. Thus he became the articulate voice of the left among the South Asians in Cambridge. I was elected the President of the Cambridge Majlis, an institution going back to the nineteenth century, where students from the Sub-continent of India were members."

The young student spent long hours over coffee and dining in the few Indian restaurants (owned by Sylhetis), debating with his peers about politics and discussing what was happening in their respective countries. And yet he managed to get good grades. On his graduation from Cambridge, a Professor of Economics at Peshawar University wrote him a letter offering him a Readership position at a salary of Rs. 800 a month. "I was very pleased. But I decided to make my life in Dhaka."

In January 1957, he came to Dhaka—a city he had visited only once after the partition when his maternal grandfather was the Chief Minister of East Bengal. "Dhaka had a lot of open spaces back then."

He joined the University of Dhaka as a senior lecturer in October 1957 and taught till 1971. "Yunus, Fakhruddin Ahmed, Mirza Azizul Islam were among my first students from among the 1<sup>st</sup> year honours class in Economic History. HT Imam and Ayubur Rahman were among my students in the MA final class."

As a teacher, his approach was to try to get students to think for themselves by writing essays for their tutorial class which were then intensively discussed. This encouraged them to do research, build self-confidence and be articulate in talking in front of the teacher.

**I**N 1961 the young lecturer, with others, organised a seminar on the economic disparities between West and East Pakistan. "Nurul Islam, late Dr Habibur Rehman of the Planning Commission, and I spoke. In the meeting I made the remark—which was not original—that Pakistan consisted of two economies. Ayub Khan happened to be in Dhaka at that time. While he was leaving the Dhaka Airport, reporters asked him about that. Ayub Khan said, "What is all this? Pakistan has one economy."

The next day when the Pakistan Observer brought out its front page—on one side, it had Ayub Khan saying Pakistan has one economy and on the parallel headline Rehman Sobhan saying Pakistan has two economies. "Now what was ridiculous about that was the fact that Ayub Khan was then the President of Pakistan during Martial Law and I was a 26-year-old Senior Lecturer at the University of Dhaka. Later that year, in Lahore, I made a presentation on the two economies of Pakistan—this time through a full-fledged paper which again made headlines in the Pakistan Observer."

All of a sudden, the spotlight was on him. Politicians started seeking him out. Students came to learn here was a teacher who was trying to do something about the economic discrimination faced by the East Pakistanis, an issue that they were also deeply concerned about. Perhaps, that's something that has put him on a different level as an economist. Unlike theorists who often drift too far from the actual world, he believes that theory, to be of use, must keep its feet on the ground.

Professor Sobhan stands at the crossroads where economics meets ethics, much like Adam Smith who saw them not as two subjects but one. A conviction that economists and philosophers are in business to improve the world burns on almost every page of the dauntingly impressive flow of books and papers he has written over 60 years.

**I**N 1962, when Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy was arrested, everything was quiet for a few days. Then all of a sudden there was a huge upsurge on campus. Ayub Khan was coming to Dhaka and he was accompanied by Manzur Qadir, then Foreign Minister and a leading intellectual of West Pakistan. "He said he wanted to address us. He was actually deployed by Ayub to tackle Dhaka University. After he spoke and defended the constitution, the questions from the students started coming in a very aggressive and abusive way. Suddenly a bunch of students started advancing toward him and a student of mine tried to grab him by the collar."

The situation was getting out of control. "Some of us teachers had to escort Manzur Qadir out of the hall to save him from assault but he still wanted to have a debate. So some of us invited him to the more peaceful

environment of the Teacher's Common Room. We argued with him and he defended himself. By the time the evening came, he began to perspire. But he stayed and he debated. I wonder how many politicians would do that today. Then Monem Khan took over as the Governor and appointed Prof. Osman Ghani as the Vice Chancellor. Together they brought in the NSF gang to terrorise the Dhaka University campus. These NSF goons eventually assaulted the then Chair of the Economics Department, Dr. Abu Mahmood."

Rehman Sobhan's first encounter with Bangabandhu was in the summer of 1957. Khawaja Nazimuddin, after being illegally dismissed as Prime Minister of Pakistan by Governor General, Ghulam Mohammed had decided to come back to Dhaka in 1957. He was staying at his brother's place at Baitul Aman. Nazimuddin wanted to open up contact with the then East Pakistan government under the Awami League. So he invited Ataur Rahman Khan, the Chief Minister and Bangabandhu, the then Minister of Commerce, Labour and Industries to dinner at his residence where they both treated him with great respect even though they were politically antagonists.

"I was temporarily staying at Baitul Aman at that time and met Ataur Rahman and Bangabandhu but I do not think I made much impression on them. I met Bangabandhu again a few months later at the Shabbagh Hotel when I was sitting with Mian Iftikharuddin when Bangabandhu came to sympathise with him since he had been injured by some unruly students picketing the inaugural founding meeting of the NAP. Bangabandhu once again demonstrated, in my presence, his sense of courtesy towards his political opponents."

In the early 1960's Professor Sobhan became well known for his newspaper writings on the economic disparity between East and West Pakistan. During the period of Martial Law up to 1962, when politics was banned, H.S. Suhrawardy, one of Pakistan's leading lawyers, returned to his legal practice. He used to visit Dhaka for his cases, where he always stayed at Manik Mia's house at Kakrail. "Kamal Hossain and I used to regularly call on Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy during his visits where we frequently met Bangabandhu. After Suhrawardy died in 1963, Bangabandhu decided to revive the Awami League and contest the 1964 parliamentary elections under its own banner. Bangabandhu wanted to frame an election manifesto for the AL and invited Kamal and me to help in this task. That was when I started to professionally interact with him."

After the fall of Ayub in March Sobhan was much more closely engaged in the political struggle for self-rule for Bangladesh. Along with Kamal Hossain, Nurul Islam and others, he worked closely with Bangabandhu and Tajuddin Ahmed in preparing the AL manifesto for the December 1970 elections and in setting agendas for self-rule. "After 26

March 1971 the Pakistan military came to arrest me but I had already left my house to join the liberation struggle. I spent the next 9 months in the service of the newly proclaimed government of Bangladesh as part of the international campaign to end the Pakistan genocide and secure global support for the cause of Bangladesh."

**R**EHMAN SOBHAN'S commitment to the country remained unshaken in the post-liberation era as well. "When the country was liberated we thought that the possibilities were infinite. Who thought we would end up in such a divided society? Bangladesh's story could almost be written as a Shakespearean tragedy. Everything has become contested where there is no basis for having any such contest. In 1990, when the nation came together to overthrow Ershad, we had a second chance."

In 1996, he was one of the 'G5'—Justice Kamaluddin Hussain, Barrister Ishtiaq Ahmed, Ambassador Fakhruddin Ahmed, journalist Faiz Ahmed and himself—trying to negotiate between Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina over the AL-led opposition's demand for elections under a caretaker government. Despite some initial progress, in the end this effort came to nothing. "But at least both leaders were then willing to meet with this civil society group to explore a negotiated settlement."

Professor Sobhan is concerned that today there is no such scope for civil society, who cannot even find common ground among themselves anymore, to play a constructive role in the political process. "The original premise of CPD was precisely that. I wanted to create a forum in which people of diverse backgrounds and political views would sit together and develop a culture of having intelligent, civilised arguments. For so many years, we managed to bring together, Ministers of the government, the political opposition, development partners, trade unions and the business community. Now many of these participants rarely talk to each other."

Does it mean that he is losing hope after being optimistic all his life? "Despite the political situation the success stories in Bangladesh have continued. But it cannot go on indefinitely. About 95 percent of the great talent of this country is never effectively used to serve the nation. That's heartbreaking. There is still scope for enlightened actions. If we want to take this country to a new level, it has to be done in an environment where people will know what is going to happen tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. People do not want to live with the tension that the existing order is going to be under perpetual challenge. Whoever rules has to be there with an unchallenged mandate. If we can move beyond confrontational politics and democratise our democracy the sky is the limit for this country. I still think rationality will prevail."

At 80, his psyche, like his face, is unlined, and his drives, unconfused.



CPD dialogue with Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel Laureate, 2000



Winning the Marathon at St Paul's in 1950



With his mother Hashmat Ara Begum and brother Farooq Sobhan in Nathiagalli, 1952