

80TH BIRTHDAY OF SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

Bangladesh's foremost oppositional intellectual

AZFAR HUSSAIN

TODAY - June 23 - marks the 80th birthday of Serajul Islam Choudhury. He was my teacher in the English Department of Dhaka University. True, I first saw him from a distance, and then in our own classroom where his brilliant and eloquent lectures on Tolstoy and on quite a constellation of novelists from Austen to Dickens, to Forster to Lawrence seemed to us nothing short of 'epic' events.

A literary and cultural critic, social and political analyst, historian, educationist, editor, translator, columnist, activist, and even organiser, Serajul Islam Choudhury has been writing productively and tirelessly for more than five decades now. He is the author of nearly a hundred books and countless essays in Bangla, while he has also written a number of books in English. By now his published works have been only incompletely collected in eight volumes. Indeed, Choudhury's range of preoccupations has hitherto been simply staggering.

I think Choudhury's primary identity is that of an intellectual. He is our foremost oppositional intellectual in Bangladesh, one whose words and works continue to speak to the emancipatory struggles of the oppressed around country and the world. Indeed, some exemplary intellectuals themselves have written about the roles of intellectuals - the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, the American linguist and political analyst Noam Chomsky, and the Arab-American cultural theorist Edward Said, for instance. It is in this tradition, it seems, that our own Serajul Islam Choudhury has also considerably written about the responsibilities of intellectuals, particularly in his thought-inspiring and stylistically coruscating *Buddhijeebider Kajhormo o Daaydaayitto*. Of course, all of them, their different approaches notwithstanding, distinguish a committed, engaged, and oppositional intellectual from his or her "traditional" counterpart.

For Choudhury, then, an intellectual is one who questions not only received wisdom but



also the dominant, oppressive system. But the intellectual - as Choudhury tells us in the vein of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach - does not merely question the system as such, but also wants to change it. It is then in the interest of change that, as Choudhury further maintains, the intellectual tries to reach others - the people - with his questions, inquiries, thoughts, ideas, and so on. For Choudhury, the intellectual is in total solidarity with the cause and struggles of the oppressed. The intellectual may not directly represent the oppressed as such, but he or she works for and with them. As Paulo Freire rightly puts it, "This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side."

Indeed, what Freire says above, and what Serajul Islam Choudhury himself says about intellectuals in his own work, can easily be applied to Choudhury himself - one of the foremost intellectuals of our times, committed as he is to nothing short of the total emancipation of his own country's people, the majority of whom are peasants and workers. Their aspirations and struggles abidingly remain at the forefront of most of

his work. It is here where Choudhury's Marxism and humanism effortlessly come together. He remains not only a partisan of the cause of justice for the oppressed, but also a transformative figure at the front line of emancipatory knowledge and action in Bangladesh.

Organically rooted as he is in his own country - one who has decisively chosen to write in Bangla, evolving a unique prose style that makes his work infinitely readable - Serajul Islam Choudhury remains acutely responsive to and thoroughly informed by liberation struggles, class struggles, and other forms of struggle in his own homeland. Choudhury in his capacity as a critic and an intellectual has long been questioning the political, literary, and cultural establishment all at once in Bangladesh from the perspectives of the emancipation of the people. The category "people" for him is no mere abstraction, though. Abandoning - and remaining fiercely critical of - the liberal rhetoric of Western humanism that erases the questions of class, gender, race, and nation in the name of the love of the people, Choudhury clearly identifies the people he has been writing and fighting for, as he also identifies the very systems that oppress them, unlike many of his counterparts and

contemporaries in Bangladesh, ones who use euphemisms and other discursive detours to obscure or ignore both the people and the systems of oppression at work.

For Choudhury, then, the people are the toiling masses themselves - peasants and workers - including women as well as ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities. And the systems of oppression Choudhury has long been writing about and combating include capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchy, profoundly interconnected as they are. Indeed, Choudhury is our major anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, and anti-patriarchal writer-activist. His work does not, however, remain confined to opposition only, but he openly and ardently advocates the cause of socialism, while remaining faithful to the three fundamental principles of our Liberation War of 1971 - equality, social justice and human dignity. Choudhury's thematic preoccupations in a range of works from his earlier *Nirasroy Grihee* (1977) to *Swadhinota Sriha Sammyer Bhoy* (1988) to *Pitritrantrikotar Bipokkhe* (2007) to *Bicchinnotay Osommoti* (2014) all amply attest to the points I have made above. Exploding media-circulated stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding socialism, Choudhury unequivocally asserts that *genuine*

democracy (not mere electoral or bourgeois democracy) and socialism are by no means mutually exclusive, or antagonistic to one another. To be socialist is to be democratic and vice versa, as Choudhury firmly believes.

Now a few words about Choudhury as a literary-cultural critic. Serajul Islam Choudhury has almost single-handedly inaugurated a school of socially and politically engaged literary and cultural criticism in Bangladesh. He has written about every major, canonical figure in Bangla literature, identifying their particular contributions, without, however, letting them off the hook. And he has done all this from the perspectives of the people's emancipation, particularly in a star-struck culture of the uncritical, even blind celebration of literary and cultural giants. His oppositional, politically engaged critical readings of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Madhusudan Dutta, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, even Rabindranath Tagore, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay are only a few compelling cases in point. For Choudhury, however, the exemplary revolutionary figure in literature is Kazi Nazrul Islam on whom, of course, Choudhury has written commendably and profusely. Choudhury is also the first one to have questioned the ideology of the modernism of the thirties - particularly that of Buddhadeva Bose. Also, at a time when English professors were busy adorning such canonical Irish-Anglo-American modernists as Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, and Joyce, it is Choudhury in Bangladesh who first provided devastating critiques of those figures in his groundbreaking work called *Protikriyashilota Ingreji Shahititye*, while of course acknowledging their strengths and contributions. Indeed, one can go on talking about many things he did first in the country, while it is true that we have not yet been able to evaluate Choudhury's work properly and thoroughly.

On a relatively personal note: I had the honour and privilege of working and seeing my teacher Serajul Islam Choudhury closely for several years, as we collaboratively edited the national views weekly called *Somoy* back in the nineties, and I learned from him way more than he knows. On his eightieth birthday, I wish him more productivity and more youthfulness in the interest of our struggles against all forms and forces of oppression and injustice.

The writer is Vice-President of US-based Global Center for Advanced Studies and Associate Professor of Liberal Studies/Interdisciplinary Studies at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, while he is currently Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Liberal Arts-Bangladesh (ULAB).

Appointment of NHRC Members

Does no news mean bad news?

SAYEED AHMED

THE Chairman and members of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Bangladesh has completed their tenure on July 22, 2016. They all have wrapped up and spent their last day at the office. However, we don't know anything yet about the new appointees, and - even at the minimum - about the steps taken or process initiated to select their successors.

According to the National Human Rights Commission Act, 2009 (the founding Act for the NHRC), a selection committee headed by the Speaker of the Parliament selects the NHRC members to be finally chosen and appointed by the President. Other members of the Committee are: the Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister, Home Minister, Chairman of the Law Commission, Cabinet Secretary and two lawmakers (one of them from the opposition party) chosen by the Speaker.

Unfortunately, neither the law has a provision to include members of the civil society in the selection committee nor has the

selection committee practiced any formal process to consult with the civil society in previous occasions. The international standard on national human rights institutions, known as the 'Paris Principles', emphasise on the representation of civil society members in the selection committee.

This is what the International Coordinating Committee for National Human Rights Institutions (ICC), the global body under the mandate of the United Nations, which accredits national human rights institutions, also noted when it ranked NHRC, Bangladesh, as a 'B' category institution - first in 2010 and retained the same status when they reaccrated in 2015. It observed that "the NHRC, Bangladesh could not be conferred 'A' status as the government's control over the Selection Committee was obvious and it had no representation of the Civil Society."

Apart from the selection committee, the Paris Principles also provide guidelines for the selection process, which states:

"It is critically important to ensure the formalisation of a clear, transparent and



participatory selection and appointment process of the National Human Rights Institution's decision-making body in relevant legislation, regulations or binding administrative guidelines, as appropriate. A process that promotes merit-based selection and ensures pluralism is necessary to ensure the independence of, and public confidence

in, the senior leadership of a National Institution. Such a process should include requirements to:

- a) Publicise vacancies broadly;
- b) Maximise the number of potential candidates from a wide range of societal groups;
- c) Promote broad consultation and/or participation in the application, screening, selection and appointment process
- d) Assess applicants on the basis of pre-determined, objective and publicly available criteria;
- e) Select members to serve in their own individual capacity rather than on behalf of the organisation they represent."

According to the founding law, the selection committee is supposed to propose two candidates for each position, and the President would finally appoint one among them. During the previous selection of the commission members, we were kept in the dark about which candidates the selection committee had considered, why they were considered, and also the names recommended to the President. We only

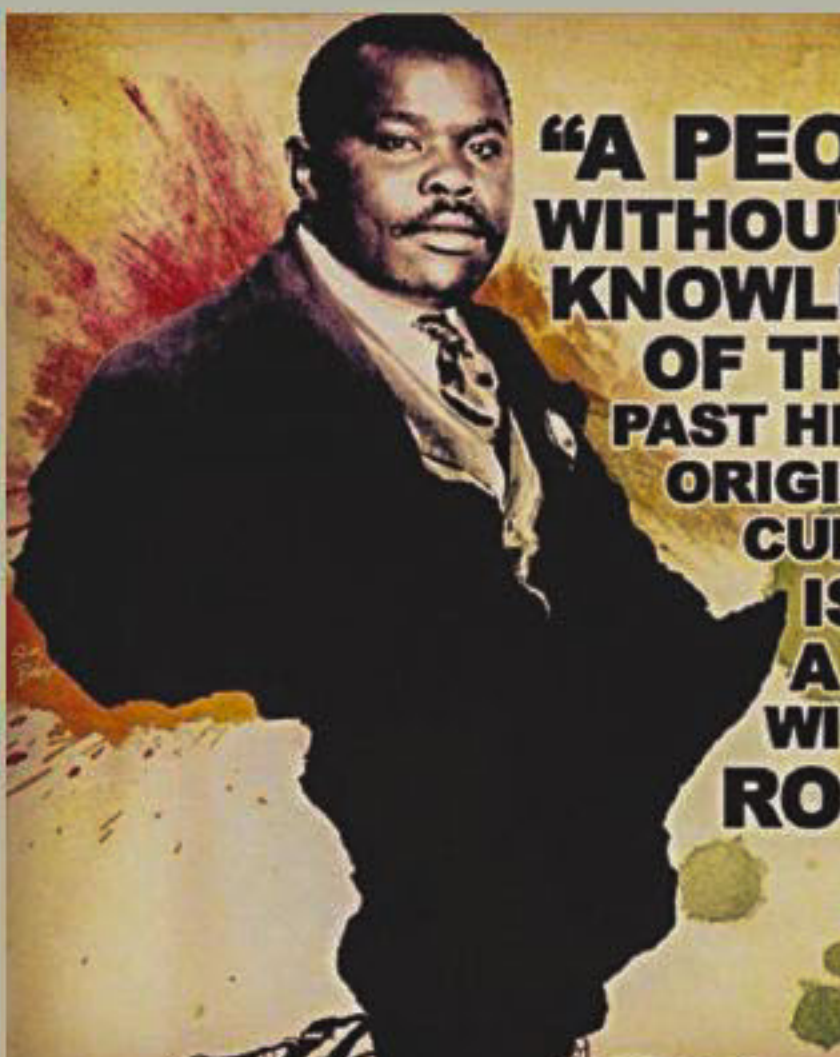
came to know about that after the final appointments were made.

We were hoping for some changes in the law, or minimum in the practice. Before the reaccreditation process, in 2015, the NHRC themselves made a proposal to the government to increase the number of the selection committee members, including the provision of civil society inclusion in the selection committee. However, we did not see any progress to that end. Furthermore, to our utter dismay, the selection process seems delayed, thereby currently putting the NHRC in Bangladesh, in a vacuum without its chairperson and members.

Civil society members have urged time and again to start the selection process well ahead of the time and called for initiating an open and transparent process for that. The delay in appointing new chairperson and members will certainly weaken the institution and may be seen as the government's lack of willingness to make the NHRC an effective and functional institution.

The writer is a human rights defender.

QUOTABLE Quote



"A PEOPLE WITHOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR PAST HISTORY, ORIGIN AND CULTURE IS LIKE A TREE WITHOUT ROOTS"

MARCUS GARVEY

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Matching
- 5 Foe of Rocky
- 10 Treasure stash
- 12 Met work
- 13 Take it easy
- 14 Highway sights
- 15 Pig-poke link
- 16 Chapel figures
- 18 Sitting room
- 20 Low digit
- 21 Make ready
- 23 Linking word
- 24 Talk craxily
- 26 Snaky swimmers
- 28 May honoree
- 29 Sweeping story
- 31 Cut drastically
- 32 Forgive
- 36 Chatty birds
- 39 "Norma..."
- 40 Gibson gamish
- 41 Bring together
- 43 Surrendering cry
- 44 Was frugal
- 45 Diving ducks

46 Quite

DOWN

- 1 Vegas area
- 2 Fight site
- 3 Back biter
- 4 Juan Peron's wife
- 5 Sow's mate
- 6 Creative work
- 7 Check the addition
- 8 Some patches
- 9 Was pert with
- 11 Sends overseas
- 17 Verb for you
- 19 Hosp. worker
- 22 Bellerophon rode him
- 24 Steve Martin film
- 25 "West Side Story" song
- 27 Cochlea setting
- 28 Plan in detail
- 30 Gifted
- 33 Impetus
- 34 Hoop opera
- 35 Poor
- 37 Bakery buy
- 38 Till section
- 42 Fleet-related: Abbr.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

H	U	N	T	E	R	S	W	A	P
E	S	C	A	P	E	O	H	I	O
Y	E	O	M	E	N	V	I	L	E
P	E	T	S	I	T				
A	B	B	A	T	E	E	N	S	
T	E	L	B	E	A	T	C	O	P
B	E	A	L	A	V	E			
A	R	C	H	E	R	S	P	A	W
T	Y	K	E	S	A	S	K	S	
H	I	S	S	E	S				
S	T	A	G	E	X	T	R	A	S
O	A	T	H	A	P	I	E	C	E
B	U	S	T	S	O	R	B	E	T

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

