

A mother and son reunion

Syed Shamsul Haq (December 27, 1935 – September 27, 2016) died on September 27, aged 81.

IN OTHER WORDS



AMITAVA KAR

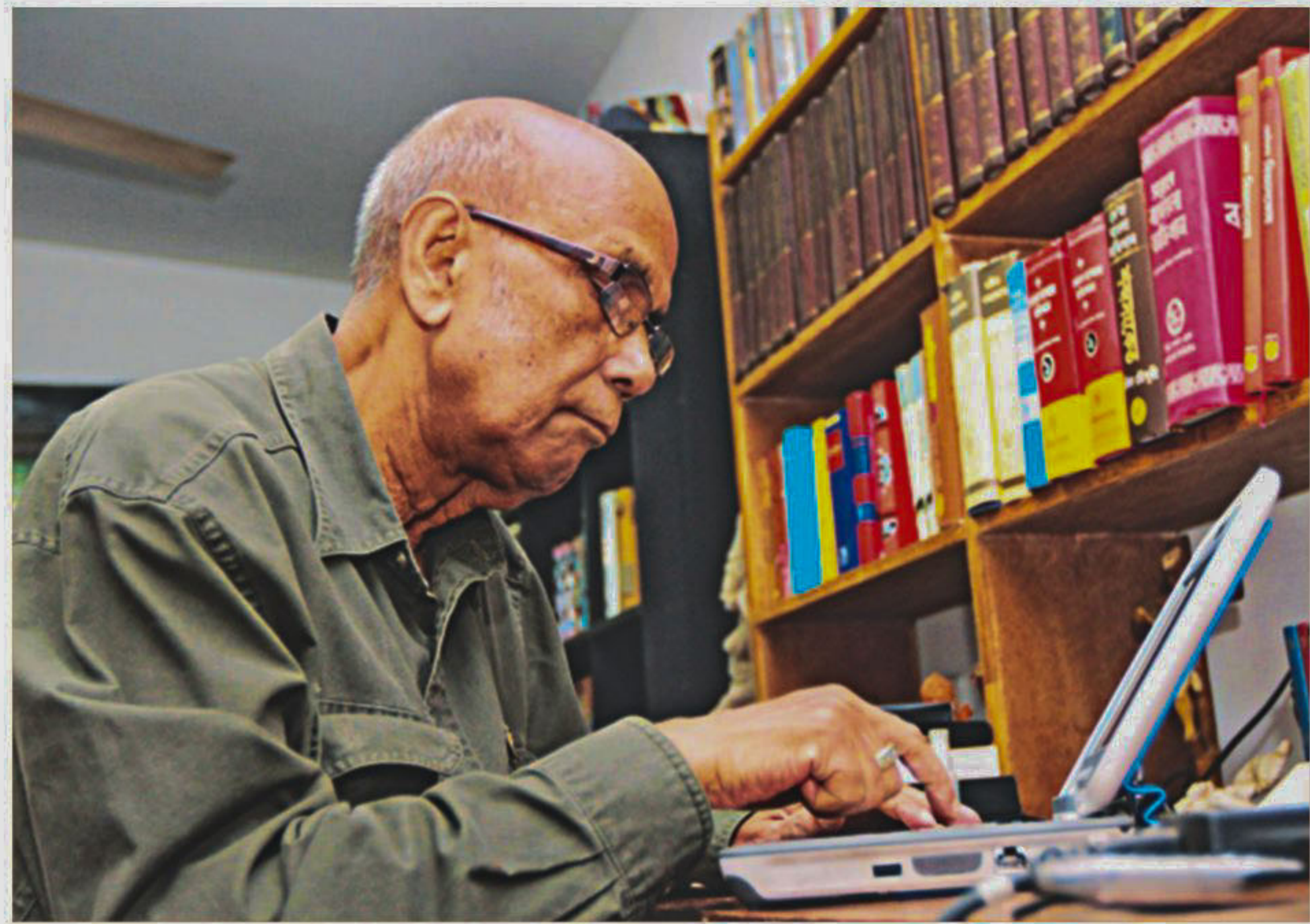
I will never forget the day I met Syed Shamsul Haq at his residence. It was a warm morning in August 2013 and my heart was full of anticipation. I felt like I was

going to see the largest tree I had ever seen. After all, here was the polymath whose equal Bangla literature had not seen in ages. He wrote magical verse plays, straight-from-the-heart poems and novels and stories about love and honour, pity and pride, compassion and sacrifice and peace and war.

With words he could take the dark out of the night as well as paint the daytime black. His deepened awareness of his time in the depiction of the human condition won him every major literary award of the country. He was analysed, categorised, defined, dissected, detected, inspected, and even rejected by a few, but never completely figured out.

I asked him why he wrote. There was a valid reason behind this seemingly simplistic question. Great writers have different motivations for writing. Orwell identified four explicit motives: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse and political purpose. Hemingway's aim was to put down on paper what he saw and what he felt in the best and simplest way. Writing was 'the supreme solace' to Somerset Maugham.

At first Syed Haq looked at me as if to see if I understood the meaning of the question. Then in his sonorous voice he said, "I write for myself. I have things to say. I respond to my



"If I don't write I don't feel well" -- Syed Shamsul Haq

surroundings and my time. Words come to me. They come to me in the form of a poem, a story, a play or a novel. If I don't write, I don't feel well. If you like it, keep it in your heart. If you don't, forgive me. I will still go on."

Why should we read poems at all? I wasn't prepared for his reply which came in the form of a counter question. "What difference would it make if newspapers stopped publishing poetry for six months? Will people march to the streets and demand the return of

poetry?" he said casually, sipping from a cup of coffee. "Once in Chandrima Uddyan I saw a boy reciting a poem of mine while a girl sat transfixed listening to him. That's the power of poetry. It can bring two people together."

I wasn't satisfied with the answer. I wondered if that's all there is to poetry. Aren't poems like love, expressive of something greater and yet mysterious? Then he gave me the answer I was expecting. "It gives shape to your experience and unformulated words. It

gives you wings to fly. You understand yourself and the world a little better. Or, you get another perspective of looking at things."

Did he think poets were becoming silent? "I do not think so," he said in an unswerving tone. "Poets have always been in the centre stage in Africa and Latin America. And it is very much so in Bangladesh as well. They are always in the front line of protests against social injustice. One example is the national poetry festival where poets

share their political opinions and views loudly defying the softness that is often labeled to them. Now you can say that a great voice in poetry is not emerging. You cannot order a great poet from a tailor shop. You have to wait."

Now with him gone, who knows how long we will have to wait for another one like him.

His timeless work—much has been written and talked about them in newspapers and the electronic media—has made him immortal. But his greatest strength probably lay in the immense faith he put in humanity. The Liberation War remained a central theme of his plays, novels and poems. "In every conflict we see some people siding with the oppressors. But I know that people will choose the right path once again. I say this with a conviction that comes not from my imagination but from history."

Syed Shamsul Haq walked taller than many of us. That's because he left no room in his heart for anything but the old verities of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any work of art is ephemeral and doomed. Even cancer could not kill his desire to express himself. He still had a lot more to say. "I am in great spirit. I am writing," he said over phone a few days ago, from his hospital bed. He, in fact, finished translating 'Hamlet' while receiving treatment in London.

After being diagnosed with cancer, Syed Haq went there for treatment in April but returned in September to spend the rest of his life in his beloved country. His mother is long gone but must be immensely proud of his son.

So is his country, a higher mother.

The writer is a member of the Editorial Team at The Daily Star.

Why Copenhagen Consensus is wrong on cash transfers

NICK BERESFORD

THE think tank Copenhagen Consensus Centre is currently publishing a number of studies under its Bangladesh Priorities project, with the purpose of identifying the smartest solutions for the country, informed by Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) rating. The research aims to help set priorities for Bangladesh, giving planners and policy makers a tool to select best value for money options. The options are ranked solely based on BCR, with the general idea "to give a tailwind to the

good ideas and a headwind to the worst", according to Bjorn Lomborg, who runs the Copenhagen Consensus.

Cash transfers, which are the backbone of the social safety net system in Bangladesh, have been rated as a bad idea in the summary findings shared internationally in The Economist by the Copenhagen Consensus. BCR offers a measure of how large the benefits are relative to the costs. Cash transfers are shown to have a rock-bottom low BCR, with the investment of Tk. 1 giving a return of only 84 paisa; that is, costs exceed expected benefits.

However, even the authors of the BCR study covering cash transfers may disagree with this simplified conclusion. As a matter of fact, the poor BCR rating recorded for cash transfers is based entirely on evidence from other parts of the world and not from Bangladesh. The authors also clearly state that their study does not set out to come up with a conclusion that one approach is better than the other. They point to the lack of robust evidence of benefits and recommend generating better data on benefits of cash transfers. No data on costs and benefits of cash transfers in Bangladesh were used.

The Copenhagen Consensus has failed to measure much of what it needs to measure, and what it measures, it measures badly. The household benefit from cash transfers is assessed only as consumption gain, due to lack of data on gains in household assets and savings. This not only underestimates the material wellbeing benefits, but entirely misses other relevant benefits like empowerment, self-respect and the ability to make choices.

Such benefits are hard to measure by any yardstick and the BCR is more demanding; it requires monetised discounted values. Destitute recipients of Old Age Allowance and Widow Allowance in Bangladesh bear testimony that even if the allowance amount is small, it has given them new dignity in family and society. What is the monetised discounted value of a poor woman or man being able to "go about without shame"

(an irreducible core capability in leading a fulfilled life according to Amartya Sen)?

The Copenhagen Consensus stopped at measuring material household benefits. But the impact of cash transfers is not limited to the wellbeing of recipient individuals and households. There are macroeconomic redistribution effects of public policies, including cash transfers provided by the state. Cash transfers also carry a potential to overcome structural barriers. They can be seedbeds of social change. There are second-round multiplier effects in the local economy as a result of increased demand for goods and services from households receiving the cash transfers. In short, cash transfers generate impacts that can contribute to attaining wider development goals.

The BCR, seemingly so precise, has many limitations. Benefit-cost analysis reflects costs and benefits as outcomes of market activities. Such analysis is not recommended when market prices are unavailable. Many impacts of cash transfers are not valued at any market. They are hence difficult to measure in monetary terms.

Looking at the wider macroeconomic impacts of cash transfers – which were totally overlooked by the Copenhagen Consensus study – what is the market price of inclusive growth with equity? Of attaining social cohesion or avoiding social unrest? Of reversing social exclusion and marginalisation?

Such benefits need to be monetised for the BCR. Omitting them distorts the benefit-cost analysis. Cash transfers might not easily lend themselves to crude BCR measurement.

Still, planners might be swayed by the Copenhagen Consensus conclusion to play down cash transfers as an uncertain investment. It is then important to recognise that BCR results need to be interpreted alongside social and political imperatives. Why are social cash transfers used in the first place?

Experience over the past few decades has shown that people are vulnerable to market volatilities, natural disasters and other shocks and stresses in a way that markets fail to deal with, especially as regards to the protection of the poor. Worldwide, there is now strong awareness of the critical role the state has to play in providing social assistance to citizens in need. Only the state has the capacity, the required outreach and the mandate to provide comprehensive social protection. Predictable provision of social transfers to vulnerable people in the face of hardship is part of a social contract between citizens and the state.

Cash transfers are, therefore, a matter of constitutional entitlement, rather than a proposition to be negotiated by benefit-cost analysis.

The writer is Acting Country Director, UNDP Bangladesh.

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The above mentioned cell of NSU invites application on a completely temporary basis for the position of "Office Manager". This cell is funded by the University Grants Commissions, Bangladesh under "Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP)". The appointment is valid only for the duration of this sub-project (up to December 31, 2018).

Office Manager: 01 Position

Qualifications:

- Bachelor's degree with minimum 2 years of experience in office management or Master's degree in Education/Accounting/Management or any relevant subject from a reputed university.
- Proficient in writing and communicating in English.
- Proficient in MS Word, MS Excel, and MS Power point.
- Able to work in a team environment and to work under stress in meeting deadline.
- Possess pleasant inter personal skills.
- Working experience in similar job will be given preference.

Job responsibilities:

- Work under the guidance of the IQAC Director and provide secretarial support.
- Manage routine administrative activities of IQAC.
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- Provide necessary support in procurement, inventory of goods and record keeping.
- Coordinate administrative and technical programs like meeting, seminar, workshop and other similar programs.
- Prepare agenda (working papers), meeting minutes and relevant documents.
- May need to travel to UGC when necessary.
- Any other relevant responsibilities as directed by the Directors of IQAC.

Consolidated Salary: BDT 36,000

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