

A multi-dimensional teacher

On his 81st birthday we celebrate the remarkable intellectual accomplishments of Serajul Islam Choudhury

AZFAZ HUSSAIN

TODAY, June 23, marks the eighty-first birth anniversary of Serajul Islam Choudhury, the leading public intellectual in Bangladesh. One of the foremost and most productive writers in the Bengali language today, he directly taught me in the English Department, Dhaka University. But he is not only my teacher, not only even a "teacher of teachers," he is also our "nation's teacher," as the poet Syed Shamsul Haq memorably put it last year. Back in the early nineties, while working with Jahanara Imam, I heard her say with a great deal of enthusiasm: "Professor Choudhury teaches us how to remain committed to a cause."

Indeed, teaching for Professor Choudhury was never confined to classroom lectures as such, but was—and is—compassion and cause and commitment all made visible. He is an intellectual above all.

But, then, his classroom lectures themselves were characteristically brilliant, energetic, eye-opening, even moving. And his stylistic signature was immediately and even eminently readable. Even today, more than twenty-five years later, I vividly recall many of his carefully chosen words, his steadily cadenced sentences, his bracing statements, his succinct formulations. His lectures were examples of not only his phenomenal eloquence but also his acute sense of precision. Professor Choudhury is one of the most outstanding teachers of English literature I have ever known.

Professor Choudhury taught us Austen and Dickens as well as his favourite trinity of the novelists—Conrad, Forster, and Lawrence—who are usually taken to constitute the canonical "great tradition" of the English novel. However, Choudhury also remains courageously critical of this tradition, without by any means skimping on the aesthetic dimensions and directions of the novels he had taught us. Very early on, Professor Choudhury understood—and also tried to make us understand—that

neither deification nor demonisation can enhance what is called "criticism." For him, criticism comes to mean the production of non-coercive, emancipatory knowledge, to use Edward Said's idea here. Choudhury is a first-rate literary and cultural critic by international standards.

But Choudhury's multiple roles as a teacher, a critic, a columnist, a commentator, an editor, a public speaker, an activist, an organiser, even a translator, and an intellectual all remain profoundly intertwined, constituting an exemplary whole to which, of course, the question of human emancipation remains integral. Choudhury has written more than a hundred books and authored countless articles in Bengali and English—only incompletely collected in eight volumes now—that traverse a mind-bogglingly wide range of themes and issues. But if I have to identify one overarching theme in his work, it is no doubt the abidingly Marxist question of human emancipation itself. By this, then, Choudhury means the liberation of humanity from class and gender oppression—in fact, from all forms and forces of oppression and exploitation. In other words, for him, emancipation is impossible without fighting against such global and local—glocal—systems of oppression as capitalism, imperialism/colonialism, and patriarchy, deeply interconnected as they are.

It is from the above-mentioned perspective that Choudhury has also long approached the question of our national liberation of 1971, one which, as he argues, has remained decisively unfinished in Bangladesh. I cannot but repeat a point I already made elsewhere, the point being an important one: Choudhury is undoubtedly our major anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-patriarchal writer—and our major socialist writer—one who has been relentlessly advocating the causes of peasants, workers, women, ethnic minorities, while remaining committed to

the three distinctly pronounced fundamental principles of our National Liberation Movement of 1971—equality, justice, and dignity. That these principles themselves also serve as themes in Choudhury's works is evident in his epic journey of interventions and interrogations from his earlier work *Nirasroyee Grihe* (1974) to his relatively recent *Jatiyotabad, Samprodayikota o Jonogoner Mukti* (2015). Indeed, Choudhury is a full-time freedom-fighter in his own right.

I have already written elsewhere about certain major intellectual and critical contributions made by Serajul Islam



Serajul Islam Choudhury

Choudhury, and I don't need to reiterate them here, although I admit I have not been able to do full justice to the quantity, quality, and variety of his writings. And, of course, it is impossible to do this here in this short piece. But I intend to make a few points about one of his major works—his relatively recent, award-winning, massive book called *Jatiyotabad, Samprodayikota o Jonogoner Mukti* (2015). I reckon this work as

his historiographical *tour de force*, exemplary as it is of his rigorous and discriminating scholarship on the entire Indian subcontinent's history of ruling-class politics and people's movements since the nineteenth century. The book forcefully reveals what both nationalism and communalism have come to mean to common, ordinary people at least since the days of the "Partition of Bengal" in 1905.

This work also exposes the contradictory and even anti-people roles of such canonical political figures as Gandhi, Nehru, and Jinnah, among others, who all rolled back the wheels of history before and after the Partition of India in 1947. Choudhury also superbly zeroes in on the relatively progressive but decisively incomplete roles of such figures as Chittaranjan Das and Subhas Bose, among others, thus clinching the point that emancipation itself has remained an unfinished project to which ruling-class nationalism—let alone communalism—can never be an adequate answer. The answer then resides, as Choudhury seems to be suggesting, in the Revolution itself. Again, the unresolved question of people's emancipation informs, inflects, even structures, and textures Choudhury's positions and perspectives. This book is another example of his commitment as an intellectual to naming and questioning systems of oppression and even changing them.

What is also remarkable about this major work by Choudhury is its beautiful storytelling quality, jazzed up by a wealth of detail. It reveals that history cannot be reduced to homophony, yet even the minute and determinate registers of the everyday within the horizon of history itself dialectically throw up both conflictual and converging patterns, ones that Choudhury ferrets out with his labour of love. The historical, the political, the ideological, and the cultural all meaningfully intersect in the book, reminding me of these lines of my favourite Korean poet Ko Won—"To us

already, a birthplace is no longer home./ The place we were brought up is not either./ Our history, rushing to us, through fields and hills, is our home," while also attesting to Choudhury's brand of interdisciplinary, both stimulating and innovative as it is. Choudhury's *Jatiyotabad, Samprodayikota o Jonogoner Mukti* is simply a groundbreaking, matchless intervention in the field of history-writing in Bangladesh. It also permanently establishes Choudhury's place as one of our foremost historians.

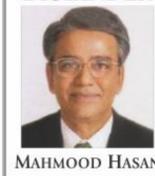
If "life is lived forward but understood backward"—as the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once put it—Choudhury can look back and easily say in the words of the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet: "This is how you must love the earth/so you can say 'I have lived.'" Indeed, he has lived—and lived with a passion for life and hence with a passion for justice. These days when I think of Choudhury's life, I also think of Pablo Neruda's beautiful and powerful poem called "Ode to Age," whose main message can be summed up in Picasso's famous pronouncement: "Youth has no age." Choudhury's permanent youthfulness surely corresponds to his passion for the Permanent Revolution.

Last, a few words about his sense of humour. There is a stereotypical idea that Marxists lack a sense of humour. There are some who surely do, ones who also think—forgetting the humorous Marx himself—that they should not laugh until the Revolution succeeds. But Choudhury's sense of humour never flags in brio. This comes out subtly in many of his works, while it was frequently evident in numerous conversations I had with him. As I have seen over the years, Professor Choudhury lets out loud guffaws, both simple and subversive. On his birthday today, I wish my teacher Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury a long life of more love and light and laughter so that he can write and fight more energetically than ever before.

The writer is currently Summer Distinguished Professor of English and Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts-Bangladesh (ULAB).

Afghanistan and the New Great Game

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

THE security situation in Afghanistan is getting worse by the day. Almost every week there are terrorist attacks on government installations or civilians with large number of casualties. As the civil war continues and number

of deaths rise, Western and regional stakeholders are deeply worried and realigning themselves in Afghanistan.

The casualty figures in 2017 so far are indeed quite worrying. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report released in April 25, 2017 disclosed that in the first quarter of 2017 (Jan-Mar) it documented 2,181 civilian casualties — 715 dead and 1,466 injured. In another report compiled by the Institute for Conflict Management (ICM) at least 240 civilians have been killed in Afghanistan between April 1 and June 9, 2017. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) released figures that between January 1, 2017 and February 24, 2017 at least 804 of the Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) were killed and 1,328 wounded.

Besieged and exasperated Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said at least 20 different international terrorist groups were operating inside the country. The most prominent but opposing groups are the Afghan Taliban and the Islamic State. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) welcomed disgruntled Taliban fighters in its ranks and have become a dangerous force.

ISKP emerged simultaneously as US forces began withdrawing from Afghanistan in 2015. It has drastically changed the strategic landscape and war dynamics in Afghanistan as regional alliances began shifting. What is baffling is that ISKP and Taliban are contesting to gain control of territory. The Afghan government controlled over 71



percent of territory in January 2016. It now controls only 60 percent of the territory. The "contested areas" increased from 23 percent in January 2016 to 29 percent in February 2017. While Taliban-controlled areas are scattered, the ISKP is in control of areas in northern Afghanistan.

The Taliban's declared political agenda is to drive out all foreign troops and regain state power it lost following US invasion in 2001. It does not have any ambitions beyond Afghanistan. But ISKP is trying to expand its fundamentalist contagion in Central Asia and the South Asian region.

Pakistan's ISI created the Taliban and has used it to destabilise the "unfriendly" governments in Kabul. Pakistan, having deep strategic interest in Afghanistan, always played a double game with Kabul through its influence over the Taliban. But now Pakistan

is faced with a bigger enemy — the Islamic State.

Afghanistan-Pakistan-India relations are an extremely complicated narrative. India has always tried to reach Afghanistan over the head of Pakistan and develop close strategic relations with Kabul. In May 2017, Delhi offered USD 1 billion to Kabul as economic assistance. However, India is the only major power that does not have any communication channel with the Taliban or ISKP.

Tentative US attempts to contact the Taliban in the past have not produced any positive results. Even after 16 years of Operation Enduring Freedom there is no peace in sight. Despite all the talk President Donald Trump has not come out with a strategy on resolving the Afghan conflict. At a Senate hearing on June 13, 2017 US Defence Secretary James Mattis said, "We

are not winning in Afghanistan right now." US Commander General John Nicholson described the situation in an Orwellian phrase, "The war in Afghanistan is at a 'stalemate'." Trump however, authorised Mattis to increase the level of troops and US is sending additional 4,000 troops to break the stalemate.

Russia, after being ousted from the country in 1988, has developed links with the Taliban. Moscow has always called Taliban a terrorist organisation and supported the Northern Alliance. But now with the presence of ISIL, Russia has changed its position, primarily because it does not want Central Asian Republics to come under the influence of ISKP extremism. Russia is said to be supplying arms to the Taliban. One wonders whether these are to undermine US mission in Afghanistan or to contain ISKP. Evidently,

Moscow does not want to lose out in case the Taliban capture Kabul.

Though (Shiite) Iran supports the Ashraf Ghani government, it has also developed clandestine links over the past few years with the Taliban. The presence of (Sunni) ISKP on its borders is bad news for Tehran. Besides, Iran has always opposed US presence in Afghanistan, but since the Taliban fights US forces it is only natural that Tehran would maintain links with the Taliban.

China while assisting Kabul in fighting terrorism has maintained links with the Taliban. China certainly does not want ISKP's fundamentalism spreading to the Xinjiang province bordering Afghanistan. China wants to help resolve the conflict as it has invested billions of dollars in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

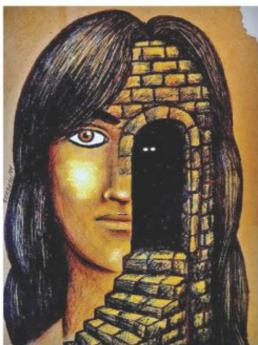
Saudi Arabia which has been deeply involved in Afghanistan maintains dual tracks — supporting President Ashraf Ghani and funding the Taliban.

The National Unity Government with two heads — President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah — has made it weak, ineffective and corrupt. Taliban has persistently refused to talk to the Ghani government. The economy is in a poor state. The country has been plagued by large-scale looting of mineral resources by all the major powers involved in Afghanistan. This mineral looting, amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars per year, denying royalties to the government and illegal drug trade have created widespread corruption, entrenched warlords and have encouraged Taliban to grow stronger.

All the powers know that there is no military solution to this conflict. Peace will not come to Afghanistan as long as the stakeholders pull Afghanistan in different directions. The fear is with major powers playing the Great Game and Taliban and ISKP growing stronger, will Afghanistan become another Syria?

The writer is former Ambassador and Secretary.

A WORD A DAY



ARCANA

noun

Secrets or mysteries

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- | | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| ACROSS | 39 Finger feature (cakes) | 15 Young girl |
| 1 Coin, essentially | 40 Suspect's stories | 17 Flaring star |
| 5 Rise to the surface | 41 Music's Puente | 18 Love song, often |
| 10 Manual reader | 42 Gold-loving king | 19 Swift horse |
| 11 Third World worry | 43 Over again | 21 Second letter |
| 12 Pooch pest | | 22 Tavern order |
| 13 Portland setting | DOWN | 25 Sticky stuff |
| 14 Remote | 1 Backside | 26 Falcons' home |
| 16 Bitumen source | 2 Madonna's "La -- Bonita" | 28 Tiny holes |
| 20 Convent head | 3 Crystal gazer | 30 Diving gear |
| 23 Arles answer | 4 Produced with care | 31 Fare carriers |
| 24 Marsh plants | 5 Farm sights | 33 April forecast |
| 25 Court rapper | 6 Last letter | 34 Toy with a tail |
| 27 Had breakfast | 7 Sizable | 35 Deliberate |
| 28 Masher's target | 8 One, for Juan | 36 Block up |
| 29 Saloon seat | 9 Stock holder | 37 Yale player |
| 32 London lots | 11 Petits -- (small) | 38 Pot part |
| 36 Posh | | |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

