

# Doklam standoff, Bhutan and its quest for greater freedom



**T**HE ongoing border standoff in Doklam between India and China could escalate further. China has already issued some strongly worded statements, including warning India not to test Beijing.

The standoff began in mid-June this year when China attempted constructing a motorable road in the disputed Doklam region—at the tri-junction of India, China and Bhutan—considered by India as Bhutanese territory, and viewed by China as its own. India sent its troops to the region in a bid to halt China's construction of the road, and there has been a military standoff between the PLA and the Indian Army ever since.

India claims that China's road construction is an effort to get close to Doka La—which lies on the western edge of the Doklam plateau and is the last Indian military post on its border with Bhutan and China. This poses huge security concerns for India because if China successfully builds the road, it will shorten China's route to India's sensitive "Chicken's Neck", aka Siliguri Corridor, that connects seven northeastern states with the rest of the country. Siliguri Corridor is also vital for India's military formations in the northeast and so, the corridor, if isolated, would lead to supplies and reinforcements to the military being cut off.

China has put its foot down and demanded that Indian troops be immediately withdrawn to end the military standoff. China, through its official state news agency Xinhua, has unequivocally stated that "Doklam is Chinese territory and there is no doubt or dispute about it." China is adamant about its stance on Doklam—make no mistake about it. China's Defence Ministry has warned India to not "push its luck" and "harbour any illusions." China has said that its "restraint has a bottom line" and is ratcheting up rhetoric and ramping up pressure on India to remove its troops from the Doklam region, saying that India—under the pretext of security concerns or protection of Bhutan—has no legal basis to station troops in another's territory.

A great deal of words have already been exchanged between high-level officials of the



Foreign policy independence of the sovereign nation of Bhutan (pictured) remains a far cry as the tiny kingdom finds itself not only landlocked between the two nuclear-armed Asian giants India and China but also at the centre of the latest standoff in Doklam.

two Asian giants, but there doesn't seem to be any solution, at least in the very short term, to the border impasse. Neither India nor China is going to back down anytime soon—neither one of them wants to throw up its hands and look weak. Backing down this early would only embolden the other to encroach on its territory or sphere of influence.

But things are much, much more complicated than that. Amidst the ongoing crisis between the two countries who are no strangers to border disputes, China has repeatedly invoked the 1890 China-Britain treaty which, the Chinese Foreign Ministry recently said, clearly defines China-India boundary in the Sikkim part of the border. And India has been citing a non-public 2012 agreement according to which the tri-junction boundary points would be finalised in consultation with the concerned countries (including Bhutan); so any unilateral move to determine these points

would therefore be a violation of this understanding.

Beijing sees a clear demarcation of borders according to the 1890 treaty—claiming 89 sq km in the Doklam plateau south of where India sees the China-Bhutan border—but Delhi thinks Beijing is mistaken. According to India, China is misinterpreting their previous agreements which take into account unresolved boundary issues at the tri-junction and India has affirmed the 1890 treaty on "the basis of alignment" of the India-China border in Sikkim based only on watershed, and not the treaty's other aspects.

As the turf war between India and China unfolds, all eyes seem to be (as expected) on the future course of relations of the world's two most populous countries. But what has evaded almost everyone's attention is Bhutan. Has anyone asked what Bhutan—the tiny kingdom hidden in the folds of the eastern Himalayas—has to say?

Bhutan in its official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement saying "the construction of the road [by China] inside Bhutanese territory is a direct violation of the agreements and affects the process of demarcating the boundary between our two countries. Bhutan hopes that the status quo in the Doklam area will be maintained as before 16 June 2017." This is a reference to the 1988 and 1998 agreements stating that Bhutan and China "agree to maintain peace and tranquility in their border areas pending a final settlement on the boundary question, and to maintain status quo on the boundary as before March 1959."

While China has asked India to back off and said that it is a matter strictly between China and Bhutan, it has not issued a statement on Bhutan's discontent with China.

Bhutan, since issuing a demarche to Beijing, has kept mum. It does not want to rile up tensions with China with whom it has several

border disputes and has had 24 rounds of border negotiations. But Bhutan's official statement isn't to say that it does not wish to resolve border disputes with China. In fact, it has been said that the prevailing sentiment in Bhutan is quite the opposite. Bhutan wants to settle the Doklam boundary issue with China once and for all, without giving in to India's interests, so that it can exist peacefully alongside its neighbours. China too has shown an inclination towards establishing diplomatic ties with Bhutan (currently there are none).

But given Bhutan's historical relationship with India—which was in charge of guiding Bhutan's foreign policy as per the 1949 Friendship Treaty up until 2007 when the treaty was updated freeing Bhutan from seeking India's guidance on foreign policy and getting permission for arms imports—Bhutan cannot easily shake off India's sway over the kingdom's policy interests, particularly when China is in the mix. Not to mention Bhutan settling border disputes with China, which could mean Bhutan ceding Doklam plateau to China, is highly undesirable for India.

The Doklam standoff (and Bhutan in turn) has turned into yet another flashpoint of power play between the two giants. As the world keeps a close watch amidst fears of the latest conflict between India and China boiling over into an all-out war, it is easy to forget that what is also at stake here is the sovereignty of an independent nation—Bhutan—caught in the crossfire. Bhutan, like any free country, wants to wield control over its own affairs free of the influence of either Delhi or Beijing. But that is, for Bhutan, merely a fantasy, at least for the time being. For Bhutan, which is physically sandwiched between India and China, charting out its own path would necessarily mean keeping Indian interests at bay and prioritising its own.

Caught between two bigger powers flexing their muscles, the time will come sooner or later when Bhutan will have to take some calculated risks: establish ties and solve border disputes with China and face the wrath of its longtime ally India, or let border issues with China linger, increasing the likelihood of China overstepping its boundary, and let India do all the heavy lifting (to keep China in check) when push comes to shove.

Nahela Nowshin is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

# Remembering Gazi Shahabuddin Ahmed

GAZI NAJAF AHMED

**G**AZI Shahabuddin Ahmed was a pioneer and a great human being. He still had much kindness left to give to the world when he suddenly left us on June 9, 2017.

Hailing from the renowned Gazi family, the descendant of Fazl Gazi—Zamindar of Bhawal Estate (now Gazipur, named after the family)—and one of the Baro Bhuiyas of Bengal, Gazi Shahabuddin Ahmed was born in Dhaka in 1939.

He was a quiet and unassuming person, never interested in the limelight. He found the pleasure in his life through the company of friends and family, by inspiring the young people to engage in literary pursuits, and giving them growth opportunities.

While studying in Notre Dame College, Gazi Shahabuddin started publishing and editing a literary-cultural magazine called *Sachitra Shandhani*. This magazine was the brainchild of a group of Dhaka-based young arts enthusiasts, led by him, and emerged as a movement of sorts. The aesthetes-led campaign was unlike any other.

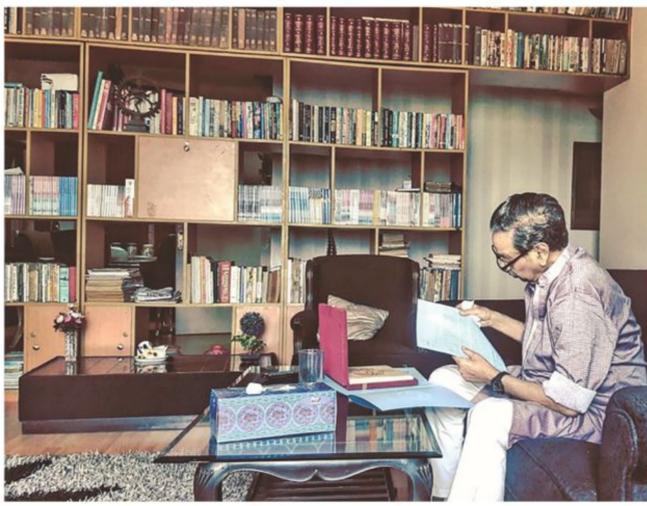
From a very young age, Gazi Shahabuddin was a voracious reader. He would read whatever he could lay his hands on. Whenever

possible, he would get books and magazines from abroad. Apart from reading books, he was interested in the aesthetics behind the publication, and wondered why we didn't have publications like that here.

So at 17, he took it upon himself to start a magazine himself. He gathered some friends and converted two rooms in the house into an office. However, it was easier said than done. The biggest challenge for the teenagers was finance, naturally. Initially, they started collecting funds from relatives. Later, they rented a cinema to show movies for money. Every day, they would go out with a microphone on a horse carriage to promote the special show. Eventually they collected enough funds. One thousand copies were printed for the first issue of the magazine. Next morning, all copies were sold out.

Hitting the market in 1956, this lavishly printed colour magazine would in later years be considered a turning point in the publication history of the country. It not only dedicated pages to literature, movies, humour and satire, but also played an important role in promoting women's empowerment, gender equality, child rights and other pertinent issues with its cover stories.

As a child, it was a wonderful experience for me to watch the magazine take shape from close



Gazi Shahabuddin Ahmed (1939-2017)

quarters. I was enchanted by the processes of manual composition that used tiny cast metal alphabets, printing, and binding. That monotonous hum of the machines and the distinct scent of pasting gum and printing ink are still etched in my memory today.

Many renowned names of Bangla literature started their journey with *Sachitra Shandhani*. This monthly was witness to the birth of a new generation of creative people

involved in different branches of the arts.

The early editorial team of *Sachitra Shandhani* included luminaries such as Qayyum Chowdhury, Zahir Raihan, Ataus Samad, Humayun Khan, and Sharfuddin Ahmed. The magazine ceased publication after an eventful 10-year run, but has had an impact that extended far beyond Bangladesh's independence.

In 1977, once again under his

guidance, it was reborn as a weekly, kicking off a new journey as the mouthpiece of the literary minds of the newly independent country. He found himself with a new team of post-Liberation War poets, short story writers, and film society activists.

Some of the best literary works by Bangladesh's renowned writers have been published in the magazine, including Jahanara Imam's famous wartime diary *Ekattorer Dinguli* which was serialised. Afterwards, the issues of the series were compiled and published as a book from his publishing house Shondhani Prokashoni.

Shondhani Prokashoni also published works by many celebrated writers like Zahir Raihan, Shawkat Osman, Syed Shamsul Haque, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, Shamsur Rahman, Sayeed Atiqullah, Al Mahmood, Nirmalendu Gun, Mahadev Saha, Selina Hossain, Pranab Bhatta, and Sushanta Majumder.

From West Bengal, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Mahasweta Devi, and Sagarmoy Ghosh (editor of *Desh*) were frequent guests of Gazi Shahabuddin. In 1985, Sunil Gangopadhyay dedicated his book *Bhalobasha Nao, Hariye Jeyona* to him and his wife.

East Bengal in the 1950s and

1960s was a land of awakening, with its political dynamism and cultural-literary activities. Gazi Shahabuddin and his friends, ranging from progressive authors, critics, artists to filmmakers, helped build a cultural front that would later put up a strong resistance to the exploitative reign of the Pakistani rulers.

A social renaissance happens through the many multifaceted activities of many people. Even with their unique and significant contributions, not everyone comes to the spotlight. Gazi Shahabuddin was one such giant who, in his own unassuming way, played a remarkable role in this movement with his imagination, determination and creativity.

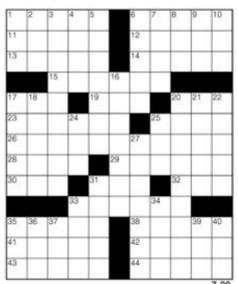
His dreams were sky high and his heart was big as the sea. He never cared much for worldly matters, but opened horizons for a whole generation. Throughout his life, he selflessly helped people and never asked for anything in return.

He might have not received the recognition that he deserved. However, we need to make sure that his dream of a progressive nation and an enlightened culture stays alive and future generations continue to thrive in literature.

Gazi Nafis Ahmed is the nephew of Late Gazi Shahabuddin Ahmed. He is a visual artist and fellow at the Center for the Study of Social Difference at Columbia University.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Relish
  - 6 Oilcan part
  - 11 Burger topper
  - 12 Tenant's form
  - 13 Designer Karan
  - 14 Consumed
  - 15 Ear item
  - 17 German cry
  - 19 Alley --
  - 20 Obtained
  - 23 Soldiers
  - 25 Duplicate
  - 26 Rifle range target features
  - 28 "Zip" -- Doo-Dah"
  - 29 Brad of "The Client"
  - 30 "You bet!"
- DOWN**
- 1 Mars, for one
  - 2 First numero
  - 3 House swallows
  - 4 Musical sound
  - 5 Like some soap
  - 6 Go under-cover?
  - 7 Ring out
  - 8 Horse bit
  - 9 Purpose
  - 10 Kayo count
  - 16 Facial feature
  - 17 Cornered
  - 18 Vulgar
  - 20 Course features
  - 21 Puccini creation
  - 22 Boxer Mike
  - 24 Bullring cry
  - 25 Swindle
  - 27 Pencil cross-section
  - 31 Tag numbers
  - 33 Ship pole
  - 34 Ship of 1492
  - 35 Cigarette substance
  - 36 Raw rock
  - 37 Sewing aid
  - 39 Back muscle, for short
  - 40 Wily



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A O R T A C R O V O  
 B R E E D P R O V O  
 T I D L E D L A Y U P  
 D E E M T A M A L E  
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 N E A R I O T A  
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