

PROFESSOR ANISUZZAMAN

The man and the academic

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Few intellectuals can claim to have reached their full potential in their life. Great names are formed by great events. This is also true for the intellectuals who, besides their contributions in their respective fields of work, must also be judged against their response to the great events that occur during their lifetime. Professor Anisuzzaman is one such intellectual who can claim to have been able to exhaust his full potential both as an academic and as a witness to, and participant in, the events that have profoundly impacted a broad swath of our national life.

The professor, whose books, research, activism, and public appearances have made him quite a celebrity in Bangladesh, turned 80 early this year. By his own admission, it has been a life lived to its fullest.

"I wanted to be a teacher. In that I've achieved more than what I deserved. I wanted to be a lifelong learner. I tried to learn as much as I could. There were unexpected turns occasionally, but those were nothing compared to the love that I have received. I have no regrets with my life," writes Anisuzzaman in a column marking his 80th birth anniversary. (*Prothom Alo*, October 29, 2017)

How does one build a life like this—a life without regrets? I guess you need to be really lucky to spend a life on your own terms and look back with satisfaction. For Anisuzzaman, however, it was more than luck—a combination of good schooling, a long active life characterised by hard work and dedication, the opportunity to be a part of what many call Bengal's Golden Age, which shaped the future for this region, but also a profound sense of responsibility that led him to dive headlong in the thick of things, unafraid of the consequences, as well as the love and support of his family and friends.



Professor Anisuzzaman (right) with Martuza Bashir (left) and Professor Abdur Razzaq.

SOURCE: GAYANTAPAS ABDUR RAZZAK SMARAK GRANTHA

The fact that he has been blessed with an active life spanning six decades—teaching, researching, writing, editing, attending seminars, and spearheading social and intellectual campaigns—also contributed to his rise as the nation's leading intellectual.

From a broader perspective, three of his achievements stand out: his participation in the Language Movement in 1952, his role as a member of the planning commission of the government-in-exile in 1971, and finally his leading role as a member of the committee drafting the Constitution in Bangla, which was adopted as the official version on November 4, 1972.

Mohammad Azam, an associate professor of Bangla at the University of Dhaka, in an article on his career, further mentioned four of his achievements:

Firstly, he said, Anisuzzaman was one of the individuals who played an instrumental role in creating the "grand narrative" of the nationalist history of Bangladesh. He wrote profusely, among other things, on identity issues related to Bengali Muslims and the Bengali community in Bangladesh, as well as



Prof Emeritus Anisuzzaman gives a lecture on "Muslims in Bengal (up to the 18th century): Plurality of Identity" at Bangladesh National Museum on October 29, 2017.

PHOTO: STAR

language, politics, culture, education, religion, and society.

Secondly, he has been an advocate for the standardisation of Bangla language, and involved in almost every activity geared to that end. Thirdly, he has been an activist, albeit of a kind different from what is generally understood, fighting in his own way for what he believes in. Finally, he is an accomplished writer and editor, both in Bangla and English.

The thing about his illustrious life and career is that it is possible to

became involved in left-leaning politics which played a vital role in shaping his progressive views about life. Without the lessons learnt from those five years with the Communist Party, he says, "I couldn't be what I am today." This was evident in the subsequent years when he fought against Pakistan's sinister campaign against indigenous culture, took part in the 1969 mass uprising, post-war movements against the war criminals, the 1990 anti-autocracy movement, and pretty much all the major developments in between.

Meanwhile, as a student, he was well on track for the academic excellence that was going to be his legacy. After obtaining his BA Hon's (1956) and MA (1957) in Bangla from the University of Dhaka, he got his PhD degree in 1962, at the age of only 25. His choice of Bangla as a subject of study, one may assume, was a symbolic protest against the state's loathing of the language and a reflection of the brewing nationalist sentiment.

He took up teaching as a profession, which was only natural. His studies and sporadic teaching stints at foreign universities acquainted him with the international trends in research, which was of great help both in his work for international academic projects and his own research on what a scholar called his "search for roots"—an allusion to his famous book *Swarupar Sandhane* (1976).

In his long life, Anisuzzaman has received many awards and held many important positions in cultural, literary and social organisations. But it's not his recognition or his successful career that made him a household name in Bangladesh. It's his unceasing activism on social and cultural issues—through a mix of persuasive speech, lucid writing, and organisational capability—that endeared him to the activists and the general public alike.

Today, the educated middle-class looks up to him as a guardian, a lighthouse beacon to guide them away from the dangers of radicalism and bigotry, through what the late writer-scholar Ahmed Sofa called his "intellectual beauty." They also expect him to lead the nation's cultural discourse, which he has been doing quite faithfully for as long as we can remember.

THE ACADEMIC

Anisuzzaman is perhaps the most well-known and respected Bangladeshi academic in the international academic circles at this moment. His records both as a teacher and a researcher are enviable. In his long career, he taught Bangla in both universities of Dhaka (1959-69, 1985-2003, 2005-08) and Chittagong (1969-85), and was involved in various capacities with a number of universities outside the country.

As a researcher, he is quite disciplined and methodical, so much so that Professor Abdur Razzaq, who has had an abiding influence on him, had once reportedly described him as the most disciplined researcher he had ever known.

I remember attending a seminar at the Bangladesh National Museum

where Professor Anisuzzaman delivered a lecture. It was on October 29, 2017. In simple, clearly articulated words, he presented a paper on "Muslims in Bengal (up to the 18th century): Plurality of Identity"—a subject that he explored in many other books and articles as well.

The paper was based on the premise that the idea of identity is more subtle, fluid and multi-layered than we generally think. An individual has multiple identities although he or she may choose one over the others. Likewise, he argued, the identity of the Bengali Muslims is complex and multi-layered, although often we tend to generalise.

"When we identify a group of people as Bengali Muslim, we highlight only one aspect of their self-identity. But if we observe closely, we'll see that they contain multitudes," he said, stressing that plurality is an essential feature of our identity. He then drew on historical documents, accounts by contemporary writers, and literary sources to present a compelling picture of the diversity of Muslims in different ages in terms of their preference for language, attire, occupation, customs, and religious and political beliefs—which made them different not only from their Hindu counterparts, but also from each other.

I remember listening in awe to his speech as he, standing on the dais for nearly an hour, showed an equally captivated audience why he is held in

such high regard. The paper, preceded by a note on his mentor Professor Abdur Razzaq, was presented without so much as a brief interlude, a remarkable feat given his age and failing health. As for the merit of his arguments, it is enough to quote Bangla Academy Director General Shamsuzzaman Khan, who presided over the seminar: "There could not be a more inclusive study of the social history of the Bengali Muslims."

Professor Anisuzzaman's canon includes books of different genres but the bulk of his work consists of research books and scholarly articles, as well as books that he had edited, sometimes along with co-editors.

Among his research projects, two deserve particular mention: *Muslim Manash O Bangla Sahitya* (1964), an assessment of the position of Bengali Muslims and the nature of their contributions in Bengali literature and the Bengali history in general, and *Purono Bangla Gadya* (1984), an assessment of the grammatical, orthographical and literary conventions of Old Bangla prose as well as emerging trends and conventions.

Mohammad Azam highly praised the two books, which he said have been immensely helpful for the students of Bangla literature. It's partly because of his exceptional academic prowess that he has been so popular with his students and fellow researchers, who found him willing to help whenever they approached him.

But the ever courteous and soft-spoken professor says it is his students as well as a host of his friends, colleagues, and teachers—not to mention his family—that he feels indebted to because of their support in his life. "When I look back at the long life that I have left behind, I cannot help but feel a debt of gratitude to the many people who have enriched me," he admits, quite candidly, in his column.

After everything that he has achieved, is there still anything that he craves? His answer is rather simple: "I wasn't born on this land of Bangladesh but I do want to die here. This is my final prayer."

Anisuzzaman, it seems, may not be all that different from the subjects of his study on identity. He, too, is not unidimensional. Despite having multiple identities within him, however, he seems to place his linguistic and nationalistic identities above everything else. Love for Bangla and the land that he came to call home is, and has always been, the most defining part of his existence.

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Professor Anisuzzaman in Amsterdam (1982).

SOURCE: BIPULA PRITHI