

SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

Our Leading Intellectual and Inspiration

AZFAZ HUSSAIN

He confronts, challenges, and combats the world with words. But his words become more than words. They morph into weapons in our struggles against oppression and injustice. For him, of course, writing is fighting. But, then, he is more than a combative writer. He is, first and foremost, an intellectual—our leading public intellectual in Bangladesh—one whose entire work is deeply informed by the question of social revolution in the interest of people's emancipation. And, for him, it's "the people, the people alone," who constitute "the motive force in the making of world history." I'm speaking here of none other than Serajul Islam Choudhury, one of the most productive and prominent writers in the Bangla language today. And I cannot resist saying with pride that he was my own direct teacher in the English Department, Dhaka University. Today—June 23—marks his 82nd birthday.

Serajul Islam Choudhury has already been known in a number of ways: as a literary and cultural critic, historian, sociologist (of the everyday), political commentator, essayist, columnist, translator, even as a fiction writer, editor, organiser, activist, and, of course, as an educationist, as an outstanding teacher of English literature, even as our "nation's teacher." The range and richness, the scale and scope, of his work are simply phenomenal, even dizzying. He has authored more than a hundred books and countless articles, hitherto collected only incompletely in eight large volumes. Yet one may chart out the broad but interconnected terrains

of Choudhury's work thus: society, history, culture (and literature), and politics.

But, regardless of how Choudhury is identified and whatever his area is, in almost every instance, it's the task of the intellectual that he has carried out with exemplary force and fervour, with commitment and conviction. In other words, over more than five decades now, he has continued to intervene, investigate, and interrogate, fiercely mobilising his knowledge and intellect and passion, all in the interest of radical social transformation. As an intellectual—whose rootedness in his own land remains connected to his robust internationalism—Choudhury characteristically speaks the truth to power, while urging us to say "no" to the vulgarity and violence of the existing system—to the tyranny of capital in particular. He thus turns out to be a veritable voice of social conscience.

Like the great Latin American intellectual and writer Eduardo Galeano—one of whose ground-breaking works is instructively titled *We Say No*—Choudhury fervently relays the message that reality is not our destiny but a challenge. His latest collections of essays—*Paa Raakhi Kothay* (2018) and *Oggogotir Shartapuram* (2018)—are superb examples of an intellectual's power of negation and affirmation as well as his vision of a world where private ownership is decisively replaced by social ownership. In these engaged and politically charged cultural works—acutely attentive as they are to the otherwise-ignored details of our everyday social life—Choudhury once again appears as our major anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, anti-



Serajul Islam Choudhury

communal, and anti-patriarchal writer, committed as he is to the cause of socialism and human emancipation.

Serajul Islam Choudhury has broken ground in numerous areas. It's impossible to evaluate the entire range of his contributions in a short piece like this one. One can only touch upon a few areas of his interventions. Indeed, he has almost singlehandedly inaugurated a mode of contemporary Bangla criticism in which the literary, the ideological, the political, the social, the historical, the economic, and the cultural vibrantly intersect, making the point that nothing human is alien to his work. As a natural inter-disciplinarian—matchless as he is—he expands the horizon of our engagement with the word and world in order to change it. All this is evident in his treatment of some of his favourite themes such as the

questions of nationalism and national liberation in Bangladesh; our bankrupt mainstream political culture; the culture of our middle class; the pitfalls and possibilities of left politics in the country; the question of class struggle and the burning need for revolutionary politics against capitalism and imperialism; the questions of gender and minorities in Bangladesh; and, above all, the questions of equality and emancipation. Choudhury's own journey as a writer from his relatively early work *Swadhinatar Sriha o Shyammer Bhoj* (1988), through *Bichinotay Ossomoti* (2014), to *Oggogotir Swartopuran* (2018) has been that of a passionate intellectual dwelling on the aforementioned themes, an intellectual who thereby has also been tirelessly fighting for the cause of the oppressed in the country—peasants, workers, women, and minorities.

Not much has been written about

Choudhury's powerful interventions in the field of what is called "world literature." His readings of Indian epics, Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*, Greek epics and tragedies, Shakespeare's tragedies and his women characters, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, eighteenth-century English novels, the nineteenth-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*—not to mention his readings of the trinity of the modern novelists such as Conrad, Forster, Lawrence—have all been landmark interventions that exemplify the power of observation and analysis as well as the commitment of an intellectual to raising questions about unequal power relations and oppressive ideologies that variously play out in the field of literature itself. One can, I think, say the same thing about his sustained discussions of every major Bengali literary figure, ranging from Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Vidyasagar, to Madhusudan and Bankim, to Rabindranath and Sharatchandra, to Jibanananda and Nazrul, to mention but a few. Indeed, no one has so powerfully and consistently questioned the literary establishment as Choudhury has done, running against the grain of today's dominant culture of both deification and demonisation.

The works I've mentioned above can certainly be reckoned as Choudhury's political works of culture. And, for him, culture—by which he designates the totality of lived human experiences and practices—constitutes one of the most fundamental sites of class struggles, antagonisms, and resistance. Without recreating it in favour of the oppressed, politics itself

remains vain and empty and surely anti-people, as Choudhury suggests in many of his works.

Finally, on relatively personal registers: I have not only been Serajul Islam Choudhury's direct student but have also worked closely with him over the years. I've seen how he has come to embody and exemplify the three beautiful human qualities I myself value the most: sense of compassion, sense of justice, and curiosity. And I've seen how he has lived fully, intensely, creatively. Even at 82, he tirelessly writes and publishes, edits, lectures, gives interviews, organises events, and interacts with students and writers and activists from around the country. Last year, his role in commemorating at the national level the bicentenary of the October Revolution of 1917 simply proved to be exemplary, while it is well-known that he was actively involved in a number of progressive social movements in the country. Work for him is both love and struggle made visible. On his 82nd birthday, I dedicate to him these lines by none other than the great Marxist playwright-poet Bertolt Brecht: "Canalising a river/ Grafting a fruit tree/ Educating a person/ Transforming a state/ These are instances of fruitful criticism/ And at the same time instances of art." I think my teacher Serajul Islam Choudhury is also an "artist" in the revolutionary sense, and he continues to remain an inspiration in our struggles for creating a world better than this one.

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

Politics of "base" and its victims

SHAFIQ RAHMAN

IFA World Cup is undoubtedly the most covered media event throughout the world. While American media covered football matches here and there, one particular story dominated the media for the past few weeks: separation of children from their parents in the US-Mexico border. Most of those parents came to seek asylum in the United States, fleeing from desperate conditions in countries like Honduras and El Salvador. They were separated from their children as they waited for their cases to be heard. In some cases, parents had already been deported to their countries while their children remained in the US. This practice has been going on as President Trump adopted a "zero tolerance" policy on people crossing the border. Most Americans, including influential politicians of Trump's own party, opposed the practice of splitting children from their parents.

This is a cruel and inhumane practice and it was implemented without much forethought and preparation. This is reminiscent of Trump's botched attempt to ban Muslims from entering into the United States. Like the way Trump had to back down on the Muslim ban policy, he had to sign an executive order to stop the practice of separating children from their parents as the opposition to this policy grew louder. So, the question is: why has Trump pursued these sorts of policies and practices in the first place? Most observers believe that the Muslim ban and separation of children did not protect American interest in the long run. The objective of those policies and

practices was rather political. Trump moved forward with those policies to rile up his political base, many of whom showed anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim bias. The xenophobic rhetoric to cater to people's base emotion is nothing new in politics but we saw a dramatic increase of this practice after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

When I came to the United States in the fall of 1999 to pursue my education, I never thought I would spend much time thinking about my immigrant and religious identity in this country. But in retrospect, I think the 9/11 terrorist attacks changed so many things for me, for my family, and for people like me, precisely because a good number of American politicians began a practice of demonising immigrants and Muslims to cater to their political base. I do not blame common folks for harbouring negative attitudes toward Muslims because the 9/11 attack was a traumatic experience for them, making them fearful of the unknown. But politicians and media cannot escape their responsibilities.

Many Bangladeshi-Americans whom I talked to for my research felt that America drastically changed after 9/11. I mentioned in another essay in this publication that I conducted my dissertation research and eventually published an academic book on the effects of 9/11 on Bangladeshi-Americans. I did not have any intention to think about me being a Muslim, let alone write a book about the ordeal of Bangladeshi Muslims like me who made United States their home. I remember I consumed volumes of television news in the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. One can go



Demonstrators gather outside the US Supreme Court demanding US President Donald Trump reverse hateful anti-refugee and anti-immigration executive orders in Washington, DC, January 30, 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

ahead and sift through the archives and find how much television news talked about Islam and Muslims during that period. And they were not kind to Muslims. America was attacked in the most audacious way in its soil and Americans were trying to figure out and find their enemy. No matter how some politicians sugar-coated it, America largely thought it was Islam that attacked them.

American Muslims could not escape the thought that they were living in a country that considered their faith a breeding ground for terrorism. And they were deemed as enemy population, and, therefore could be subjected to extra scrutiny and discrimination. Americans, who were largely ignorant about the Islamic faith were learning about Islam through television and other popular media. No

wonder their perception of Islam and Muslims took a predictable turn. Hate crimes against Muslims went up in the wake of 9/11. Open public spaces, especially streets, became lethal for poor minimum-wage earning working Muslims as many experienced hate crimes routinely. More well-off and educated Muslim-Americans were lucky not to be subjected to hate crimes, but they realised that they were becoming second-class citizens in a country where they were settling down and integrating into the mainstream society. They were fearful that their children would be discriminated in a country they would call home. There was a respite of this unsettling thoughts during the Obama presidency. When Donald Trump began his presidential campaign, Muslims in America felt that the relief was short-lived; they found their faith and

community in the receiving-end of an assault again.

We still remember that Donald Trump began his campaign on two promises: building a wall along the Mexican border and banning Muslims from entering the United States. Those were, as political commentators identified, "red meat" for his base. He repeated those promises in his campaign rallies amid his enthusiastic supporters' chant of derogatory remarks about Islam and Muslims. He claimed that Muslims in New Jersey celebrated the 9/11 terror attacks saying that he had video evidence to support his claim. No such video ever existed but Trump never apologised for that. He surrounded himself with people who uttered derogatory remarks about Islam and Muslims. His pick for National Security Advisor, (Ret) General Michael Flynn, has publicly said that Islam was not even a religion; it's a cult.

Not only Muslims, immigrants in general sadly saw Trump ratcheting up his rhetoric against them to cater to his political base. He called Mexicans rapists. In the midst of the recent border controversy, he said that immigrants were infesting America. Trump should remember that his words bear real consequences, especially for minority immigrants and vulnerable Muslim Americans. He and other politicians need to find a way to talk about terrorism and national security without disparaging Islam and Muslims. Meaningful policy discussion on immigration can be carried out without dehumanising immigrants.

Shafiq Rahman is a Professor and the Chair of Communication and Social Sciences Department at Chadron State College, Nebraska, USA.

I do not blame common folks for harbouring negative attitudes toward Muslims because the 9/11 attack was a traumatic experience for them, making them fearful of the unknown. But politicians and media cannot escape their responsibilities.

ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

June 23, 2016
UK VOTED FOR "BREXIT"

United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in their "Brexit" referendum

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Mascara target

5 Enjoy a book

9 Viola's cousin

10 Fancy neckwear

12 Heavenly being

13 Copycat's cry

14 Thingamajig

16 Little rascal

17 Screws up

18 Relish tray

items

21 Golfer's peg

22 Drenched

23 Corduroy

feature

24 Army exercises

26 Cloth scrap

29 Not too hard

30 Greek cheese

31 Decay

32 1950s singing style

34 Following

37 Unmanned flier

38 Oklahoma city

39 Fairy tale monsters

40 Fall mo.

41 Fishing poles

DOWN

1 Poe's love

2 1990s weep

3 Winter gliders

4 Spanish greeting

5 Lamb's father

6 Language suffix

7 Busy

8 Sure to fail

9 West Point student

11 First-rate

15 Drew aimlessly

19 Falls behind

20 Mamie's mate

22 Window part

23 Chest bone

24 Bonehead

25 Baby's toy

26 Put another way

27 Makes amends

28 Stares in shock

29 "Blast it!"

30 Do without

33 Freshener target

35 Sixth sense, briefly

36 Sewer rodent

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to
dsopinion@gmail.com.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41

6-11

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

P S A T C L A R A
A T R I A L A M E D
P A L A U A B A S E
E Y E D A Y Z I P
R U N G U P F O N T
P E A B R A I N S
L O O S E
B E A N P O L E S
H A N S O N D E C K
A N T U S A Y E N
B A R E S N O O N E
I N A W E T O R T E
T A P E S T H E S S

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

LOOK AT OTTO! HE'S OUT OF UNIFORM!

C'MON! GIMME A BREAK!

THIS IS SATURDAY!

SATURDAY'S AN "ESCAPE FROM THE OFFICE DAY!!"

1-2

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

C'MON... C'MON...

AH-HA! THERE'S THE PROBLEM!

WHY IS BATMAN IN OUR TOILET?

I GUESS THERE'S CRIME EVERYWHERE THESE DAYS.