

A fearless voice of reason

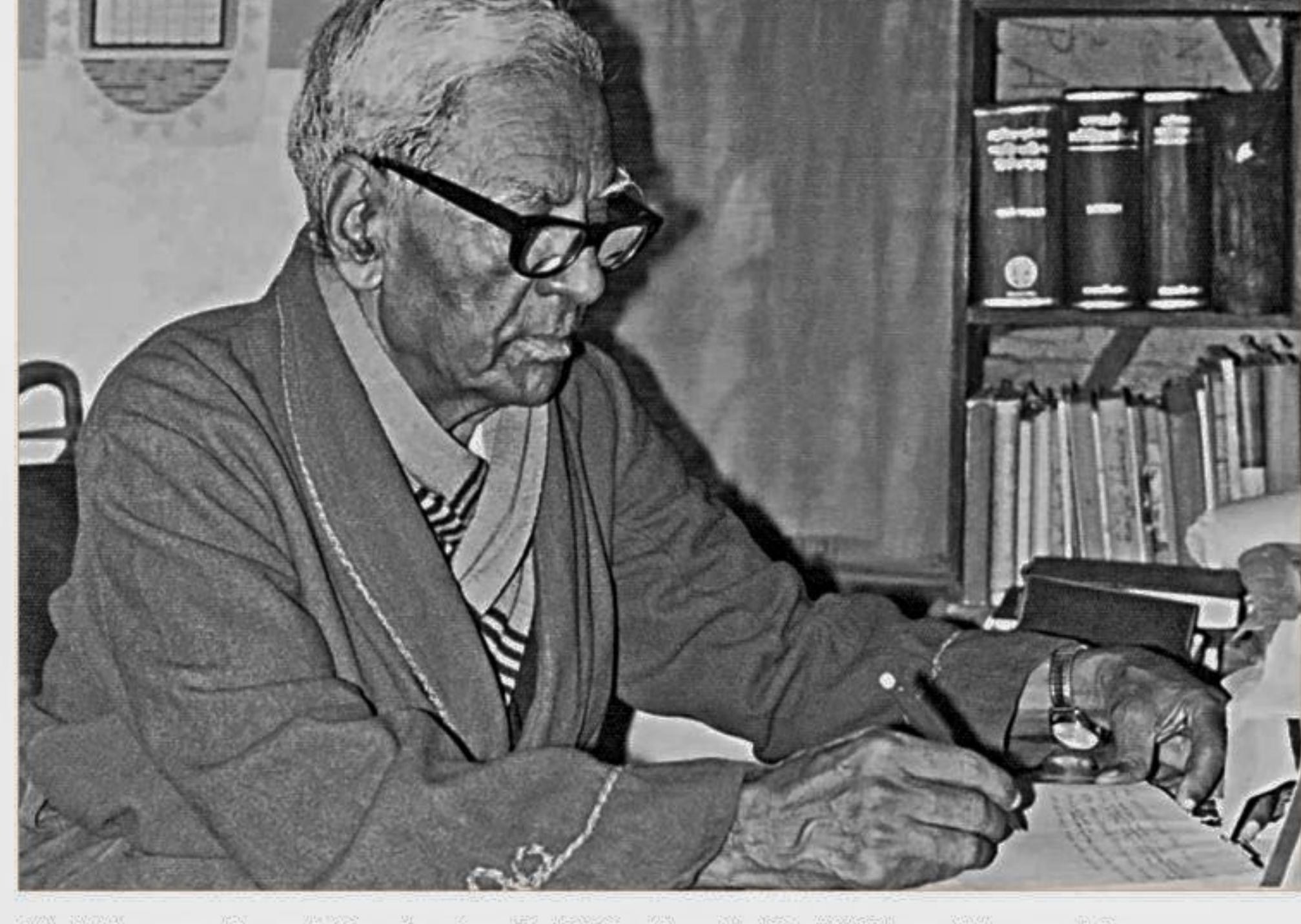
Today marks the 120th birth anniversary of renowned writer-journalist-politician Abul Mansur Ahmad. In this article translated from Bangla, columnist and researcher Syed Abul Maksud pays a tribute to a man whose work still holds relevance for our time.

SYED ABUL MAKSUD

ABUL Mansur Ahmad excelled in each of his professions as writer, journalist and politician, and such was his honesty that he worked without pitting one profession against the other.

He started his career as a journalist after the First World War when he was a student at Jagannath College. Around the same time, he also began to write, and a few of his short stories got published in the monthly *Shaogat*. Encouraged by his friend Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, he joined Maulana Moniruzzaman Islamabadi's weekly *Soltan* in 1923 as a sub-editor. He also worked for some time at Maulana Akram Khan's weekly *Mohammedi*. In 1938, he joined the daily *Krishak*, a progressive and people-oriented newspaper, as its editor. This was the most important time of his journalistic career. But he resigned from that position due to ethical reasons.

Then in 1941, he joined AK Fazlul Huq's daily *Navajug*, as its editor. But he could not stay there for long as well because of political differences. Afterwards, in 1947, he founded and edited daily *Ittehad*, published from Kolkata, which went on to become the most



Abul Mansur Ahmad (September 3, 1898–March 18, 1979) working on his autobiography "Attokotha".

We may not agree with many of his views but we must admit that there was no inconsistency or contradiction in his thoughts—a character trait sorely lacking in many of our progressive Bengali-Muslim intellectuals.

prominent Bengali newspaper of that time. Those who were associated with the newspaper later became renowned journalists. It is because of the progressive and non-communal characteristic of this newspaper that it became the target of the Nazimuddin government after 1947. Abul Mansur Ahmad's journalistic career came to an end with the closure of this newspaper. He was one of the pioneers in journalism among the Bengali Muslims of the twentieth century.

Abul Mansur Ahmad had excellent knowledge about the rural Bengali-Muslim society of East Bengal because he had observed them closely, which was reflected in all his writings. Most of his novels and short stories dealt with the social prejudices and religious bigotry of the Bengali-Muslim society. He was very annoyed at the attitude of the madrasa-educated religious bigots, which was reflected in all his writings. His satirical writings such as *Aina* and *Food Conference* depicted the social

realities and the contemporary political situation of his time. His novels *Satya Mihiya* (1953) and *Jiban Khudha* (1955) were also based on social problems and injustices.

While portraying the life of rural Muslim society, he took special care to use the local dialects and words used in everyday conversation. Although his use of local dialects was not always appropriate, we can at least get a glimpse of the day-to-day life of the people at that time. He also used many Arabic and Persian words in his short stories and novels. Although later, many Bengali writers including Shawkat Osman used Arabic and Persian words in their writings, Abul Mansur Ahmad was a pioneer in this field.

About his satirical works, Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote in *Shaogat*: "The stories of Abul Mansur Ahmad represent the political situation of our time. We must admit the fact that no one has tried to write political satire in Bengali literature up until now. Abul Mansur Ahmad is

the only writer to have done so in our literature."

Abul Mansur Ahmad was an activist and leader of the non-cooperation movement of Congress, Khilafat movement, Muslim League, Swaraj Party, and the Krishak Praja Party. Besides, he also had the experience of participating in the peasant movements that had taken place in the 1920s and 1930s. He was never a big fan of any of the popular leaders before and after 1947. He not only criticised AK Fazlul Huq, Maulana Bhashani and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy but also was never hesitant in criticising Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

We may not agree with many of his views but we must admit that there was no inconsistency or contradiction in his thoughts—a character trait sorely lacking in many of our progressive Bengali-Muslim intellectuals. While speaking as the chair at the East Pakistan Renaissance Conference, held in 1944, Abul Mansur said: "Religion can transcend geographical boundaries, but culture cannot. Culture has its roots firmly planted in a land. This is what separates the East and West wings of Pakistan. East Pakistan is a distinct geographical entity. And its people are different from other races/people in India and even the people in West Pakistan with whom they share a common religion."

Abul Mansur Ahmad believed that East Bengal was not an integral part of Pakistan but a separate entity.

After the Partition of India in 1947, the reactionary and narrow-minded communal leaders of the Muslim League had established their supremacy in East Bengal and a group of hired poets, writers and journalists had joined them. From the very beginning, the progressive-minded intellectuals were shocked and disappointed at the plight of East Bengal. Abul Mansur Ahmad was also disappointed. He was neither ideologically aligned with Delhi-based Congress leaders nor favoured an association with the West Pakistani rulers based in Punjab. He said, "Whatever may be the form of our state—'East Pakistan' or Free 'Bangladesh'—we are totally different from West Pakistan or India in terms of language,

culture and literature. Our language, culture and literature have distinct characters of their own." (*Attokotha*).

Abul Mansur Ahmad was a Bengali first, and a Muslim second—and he emerged as a true Bengali-Muslim through a seamless juxtaposition of the two. But this juxtaposition sometimes created a problem too. Upon studying his writings and his life, it becomes clear that he was not a communalist in any way. He was not anti-Indian, unlike many Bengali-Muslim leaders, let alone anti-Hindu. But certain words and phrases that he used as a writer may give a false impression about him. For example, he called East Bengal "Muslim Bangla." Some may object to this grouping of words because of its perceived communal undercurrent (it is said that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto also used it in the 70s). But anyone who read Abul Mansur well enough will know that by "Muslim Bangla," what he meant was a "Muslim-majority Bangla"—with an emphasis on Bangla, or East Bengal, which was at the centre of his attention. He was troubled by the indifference with which Bengal was treated and the obstacles put in the path of its economic and cultural progress.

For all this contributions, Abul Mansur Ahmad deserves a rightful place among the architects of this land that we now call Bangladesh, the idea of which first emerged during the 1905 Partition of Bengal and took a more mature form after the 1947 Partition of India, eventually culminating with the formation of a sovereign state in 1971. In this transformation, he played roles both direct and indirect—big and small.

Abul Mansur Ahmad may appear to be a little conservative sometimes, but he was never reactionary or anti-progress. On the contrary, he strongly campaigned against prejudices, bigotry and all kinds of injustice, inequality, and fundamentalism. He believed in the spirit of justice, democracy and secularism. Learning from his ideas, wisdom and love for humanity can be a recipe for nation-building and continuous social development.

This is an abridged version of the original article, published in *Abul Mansur Ahmad Sharakgrantha* (2015) and translated by the editorial team of *The Daily Star*.

Politics of climate change, sinking Bangladesh and floating houses

QUAMRUL HAIDER

CLIMATE change is real and it is here to stay. There is no turning around because we have already gone too far. It will only get worse from here. Climate change is, therefore, an existential threat for our children and grandchildren for whom time is running out fast.

Apparently, it isn't a threat for those who abdicated leadership of a warmer world and yet formulate environment-damaging energy policies from the luxury of their cooler world—air-conditioned homes and offices. If they cared even a bit about their progeny, they wouldn't be flying in ozone-layer-depleting private planes or riding fossil-fuel-guzzling stretched limos and SUVs.

A few world leaders led by Donald Trump believe that carbon dioxide makes the earth greener instead of creating climate crisis. Consequently, Trump deleted references to "climate change" from government websites, fired scientists from advisory boards and the Environmental Protection Agency. He seized on the uncertainty in climate models to reverse greenhouse gas emission regulations of the Obama administration and withdrew the United States from the 2016 Paris Agreement on curbing global warming. He

even nonsensically blamed this year's out-of-control California fires on environmental laws. Other climate change deniers are his bagful of deplorables, the well-paid operatives of organisations that take contributions from fossil fuel corporations and a colourful cast of self-styled "experts" who have made a living out of rejecting the scientific evidence of climate change.

They are perhaps not aware that one of the most alarming but reliable projections for global warming has been made by researchers at the prestigious Carnegie Institution of Science in Stanford in California. The results of their research, based on a decade's worth of satellite observations concerning the net balance between the amount of energy entering and leaving the atmosphere, have been published in the December 2017 issue of the high impact, peer-reviewed journal *Nature*. They concluded that if large emissions of greenhouse gases continue unabated throughout the century, worldwide temperatures could rise nearly five degrees Celsius between 2081 and 2100.

It is an undeniable fact that episodes of raging wildfires, high-category hurricanes, ferocious cyclones, floods of biblical proportions, deadly mudslides, severe

droughts, bone-chilling Arctic blasts followed by lethal heatwaves and the melting of Arctic ice at a rate never before seen are effects of a sub-one degree rise in global temperature since 1880. Heaven only knows what will happen if we, as agreed upon by the 2016 Paris Agreement's stakeholders, take the free pass of heating up our planet by two degrees before the end of this century.

Even a two-degree rise in global temperature would most likely set the stage for the greenhouse effect to spin out of control, eventually triggering a runaway greenhouse effect whose impacts would be cataclysmic, to say the least. Nevertheless, scientists at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change believe that there is virtually no chance of a runaway greenhouse effect being induced by human activities, despite the fact that greenhouse gas emissions are still moving in the wrong direction.

What triggers a runaway greenhouse effect? The increase of atmospheric carbon dioxide and water vapour, two of the dominant greenhouse gases, would raise the global temperature which, in turn, would cause more water from the oceans to evaporate and carbon dioxide stored in the soil and oceans to bake out. This would be in addition to the

carbon dioxide produced by burning fossil fuels. The positive feedback of continued emission of these greenhouse gases would ultimately snare our planet into a vicious cycle of a runaway greenhouse effect, which was responsible for raising the surface temperature of Venus to a blistering 480 degrees Celsius—hot enough to melt lead.

One of the countries that is already paying a hefty price for the climate sins of industrial nations is Bangladesh. It is predicted that the two-degree boost in temperature and the subsequent rise of sea levels would sink the coastal areas of Bangladesh, thereby resulting in an unprecedented human tragedy. Already, the intruding sea has contaminated groundwater which supplies drinking water for coastal regions and degraded farmlands, rendering them less fertile and at places completely barren.

Although engineering adaptations to climate change have been successful in other countries, such as the dikes constructed in the Netherlands, they won't work in Bangladesh because the soils are sandy and constantly shifting. Thus, if the country does not want to see millions of her climate refugees migrating inland and ending up in decrepit slums, then the government should take a serious look at

the "Dream House"—a flood-resistant floating house—built by a team of BRAC University students.

The concept of floating houses and floating villages is not new. There are many such villages in the world. They are communities with houses and other amenities of a town built on top of large raft-like structures or on stilts, as in the Tonle Sap Lake in Siem Reap in Cambodia.

Floating houses in Bangladesh's coastal areas could save the lives and livelihoods of millions from the catastrophic effects of anthropogenic climate change. Bangladeshi farmers have already developed techniques for building floating farms, known as "dhaps," with duck coops, fish enclosures and vegetable gardens anchored by ropes to the riverbanks where the water rises at least three metres during the monsoon season.

The arduous life of the people living in the floating dwellings that would gently rock and roll with the ebb and flow of the Bay of Bengal would not only be a paragon of adapting to climate change but also a modern-day example of Darwin's "survival of the fittest."

Quamrul Haider is a Professor of Physics at Fordham University, New York.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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