

41ST DEATH ANNIVERSARY OF ABUL MANSUR AHMAD

A revolutionary name in our literature

MOHAMMAD NASIRUDDIN

ABUL Mansur Ahmad is a revolutionary name in the history of our culture and literature. A star in our literary firmament, he emerged at a time when society was plagued by ignorance, bigotry and superstition, and his bold messages of social reform and intellectual freedom were largely a response to that time. Apart from being a writer, he was also a towering figure in journalism and politics. The first time I “met” Abul Mansur was through his writing. He was a student then, living in his village home in Mymensingh. He posted his first short story to *Saogat*, titled *Nimak Haram*. It was published in the ninth issue of the magazine. The Bangla year was 1326 (1920), and the month was Sraban. The story drew a huge amount of attention from literary enthusiasts. Reading the story, I felt that the writer had thought deeply about the issues affecting our society. Portraying the picture of a society so skillfully and in such wonderful language was a testament of his talent as a new writer.

Subsequently, he wrote three other stories—*Kurano Bhai*, *Sharthapar* and *Adhikar*—for *Saogat*, all of them portraying the lawlessness prevailing in society.

I was once thinking of forming a group of young, progressive writers who would write boldly about social issues. During that time, it was dangerous to write against the established social systems because superstitious beliefs and practices were validated in the name of religion, and tension and division would often be created among people by the religious bigots. In 1333 (1927), we could finally form such a literary group with a number of progressive writers to speak up and fight against all kinds of ignorance and superstition in our society. Kazi Nazrul Islam was given the responsibility to lead the group.

By that time, Abul Mansur Ahmad came to Kolkata and got involved with some newspapers. However, because of the conservative policies of the newspapers, he could not express his thoughts freely. Mohammad Wazed

Ali, one of the writers of this newly formed group, said, “I find Abul Mansur Ahmad’s writings very thought provoking. Why not bring him into this group?”

Abul Mansur Ahmad and the rest of us used to think in a similar vein; we all wanted to fight against bigotry and superstition through literature. His response to our proposal was: “My writings would definitely infuriate the conservatives of this society. No newspaper or magazine will publish my writings. If they do, they will suffer.”

I replied: “We must awaken this society from its deep slumber. No matter how revolutionary your writings may be, no matter if they go against the interests of the conservatives, we will definitely publish them in *Saogat*. If the voices of writers are stifled, how will we awaken the nation?”

Kazi Nazrul Islam said: “We have to shake those who are in deep sleep out of their slumber. I have already tried to do this through my poetry and was also targeted by the conservatives.” At this, Abul Mansur Ahmad said: “I will write, on the condition that no part of my writings will be edited out. I will not compromise against social evils and superstition.”

After we came to an understanding, he first wrote a satire called *Dhormorajyo*, which was based on sectarian violence among Hindus and Muslims. The story was published in *Saogat* in its Ashar issue in 1333, and Abul Mansur Ahmad was finally convinced that he could write for *Saogat* as its editor had the courage to publish his writings. A month later, he wrote *Go-Deokata-Desh*. It focused on the movement of Aryan monks who wanted to stop cow slaughter and protect them.

One by one, a series of satires by Abul Mansur Ahmad were published in *Saogat*, which created a huge impact in literary circles. Everyone was fascinated by his satire *Hujur Kebla*, which was an extremely bold short story on religious bigotry. Among his other satirical works were: *Nayeb e Nabi*, *Lidare Kuam*, *Bidrohi Mujahadeen*, *Scientific Business*, *Grow More Food*, *Jonosheba University*, *Honourable Minister*, *Sahi Boro Ojarat*



Abul Mansur Ahmad (1975)

PHOTO: NASIR ALI MAMUN

Nama, and *Change of Heart*, to name a few. He soon earned a reputation for these stories and fully devoted himself to writing more satire through which he could present to his readers the social realities of his time. According to him, ordinary people were more interested in reading satire than other forms of literature.

However, it is not at all easy to paint the picture of a society through this kind of satire. Only very powerful writers can take on such endeavours.

When progressive young writers were coming in to join *Saogat* Shahitya Majlish under the leadership of Kazi Nazrul Islam, Abul Mansur Ahmad also played an important role in bringing them together. He wrote in one of his articles: “...During this time, we,

the young journalists and writers, were faced with a big challenge. Of course, we thought about the social and economic challenges society was facing, but we were struggling to express our thoughts on how we could free society from social and religious superstitions, and enlighten the Bengali Muslims and turn them into a modern and educated community. We were desperate to do something positive for society and *Saogat* created that scope for us. Kazi Nazrul Islam took a job in *Saogat* and started living in a flat on the ground floor of its office, along with his family. I used to write regularly for the magazine. All the short stories of my book *Ayena* had been written during that time and were published in *Saogat*.”

“In the *Saogat* office, we would spend time from the evening till late at night, sharing our revolutionary ideas with others. We were all so motivated by the wisdom of Kazi Nazrul Islam and were all brimming with new ideas and thoughts. As we didn’t have the freedom to express our thoughts in the newspapers we used to work for, we started a movement for the freedom of the Bengali Muslims through *Saogat*.”

Abul Mansur Ahmad’s passion for literature was revealed during his childhood. The humour and skills with which he used to tell stories would fascinate everyone who came in contact with him. Naturally, he later became famous for his short stories, particularly for satirical writings. A big fan of *Puthi*, he not only used to read *Puthi* but also wrote some himself. When it comes to writing satires, no Muslim writer, till this day, can claim to be in his league. He had a unique style of writing which manifested in all his literary works.

Abul Mansur Ahmad was never afraid to express his thoughts, despite the barriers he faced from the powerful quarters. Had he cared about them, he couldn’t have created such great works. He wanted to reform the Bangla language and turn it into a people’s language. When we started a movement in *Saogat* about our language, he wrote a very important and thought-provoking piece.

Some of his most mentionable books include: *Ayena*, *Food Conference*, *Shotto-Mittha*, *Jibon-Khudha*, *Rajneetir Ponchash Bochor* and *Sher-e-Bangla Hoite Bangabandhu*. *Attokotha*, his last book, is not only an autobiography but also an important historical document which was written in his own unique style, with the skillful use of the Bangla language and his own experiences.

Abul Mansur Ahmad was a litterateur, a social worker and a politician. But I believe, he gave his best service to society through his literary works.

The above is a speech given by Mohammad Nasiruddin, a writer and editor, *Saogat*, at the launching of Abul Mansur Ahmad’s memoirs, *Attokotha*, in 1978. It was taken from *Kaler Dhoni*, a collection of articles on Abul Mansur Ahmad.

It was translated from Bangla by Naznin Titithi, a member of the Editorial team.

Tackling the coronavirus crisis

Success or failure of China's governance?

ANU ANWAR

COVID-19 has now spread over 100 countries across all continents, except Antarctica, and has been classified as a global pandemic. This novel coronavirus has created the direst public-health crisis in generations, forcing lockdowns of countries, disrupting the global economy and restricting travel—all in just a few months since the disease began to spread outside of China. Bangladesh also reported its first few cases of coronavirus—all of which were imported from outside. As countries are struggling to prevent a similar outbreak, analysing China’s response could show the world a path to follow.

China’s response is particularly relevant at a time when Beijing is placing emphasis on the superiority of the “China model” that prioritises government control over individual freedoms. Such a model has become more evident in the era of President Xi Jinping. In contrast to paramount leader Deng Xiaoping’s “hide and bide” doctrine—which essentially means waiting for the right time and not taking the leading role—Chairman Xi portrays China as a global power that is willing to lead this world with Chinese solutions, an alternative development model to western-style democracy. Therefore, the world is watching

China’s moves very closely as the situation evolves, including with regard to the latest episode of Covid-19.

This pandemic reveals the remarkable dynamics of China’s governing system. China has been rebuked for its intolerance of dissidents, suppression of truth and controlling of information. Nevertheless, this pandemic has also revealed the strength of the Chinese system in mobilising resources and capabilities at an unprecedented level, in a way that is needed to rein in the virus.

Experts opined that to tackle a pandemic, the best solution is to share information with the public and take swift measures on the eve of the outbreak. In the Chinese style of governance, the decision is made via a top-down approach. At the earlier stage of the outbreak, Wuhan local government reported the presence of a SARS-like virus to the relevant department, but the higher authorities decided not to make the information public as an important annual political programme known as “two sessions” was due soon.

Despite the urgency to save thousands of lives, the local government was not allowed to disclose such sensitive information without the authorisation of the central government. Furthermore, China’s giant, opaque bureaucracy slowed the

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back and forth of communication between provincial and central governments. Ultimately, the Chinese system failed to take any substantial measures after a month since the first case was reported, as early as mid-November.

Wuhan is a city of 11 million people—a larger population than that of Greece or Portugal, and centrally located in Hubei province, which is the gateway for China’s rail, road, and waterways. The outbreak happened on the eve of the Chinese New Year—an event that leads to the world’s largest annual human migration when Chinese people travel to visit their family and friends during this auspicious celebration. The news

agencies reported that almost five million Wuhan residents traveled out of Wuhan before the lockdown, some even abroad. Consequently, long before even knowing of the existence of the virus, it is possible that many carriers spread it all over China and other parts of the world.

A doctor in Wuhan in his 30s shared the presence of an unknown disease with his colleagues via a WeChat group. China’s digital surveillance system did not take long to detect the doctor’s message and brought it to the notice of the authorities. Soon after, police arrested Dr Li Wenliang for an allegation of spreading rumours and forced him to sign a letter denouncing himself for doing so. He was released soon after, but Covid-19 had become a reality by then. The doctor himself was infected and did not survive the virus. His death, and the unfair treatment he received for a warning that could have potentially saved thousands of lives, led to a wave of protests in Chinese social media. Despite the tight digital surveillance, the public outcry over Dr Li’s death went viral as millions of Chinese netizens from all walks of life posted this quote—“A healthy society should not have only one voice.”

This crisis posed an unprecedented challenge to the Chinese authorities and forced the ruling Communist

Party to take draconian measures. The gravity of the pandemic was later recognised by the high command of the party leadership, who sought to make all-out efforts to contain the spread, designating their efforts as a “people’s war”. Soon after, hundreds of millions of people were put under lockdown for weeks, hospitals were built within a few weeks, the military was deployed, party cadres were mobilised at the grassroot levels, several local officials were sacked for their negligence and medical supplies were sourced on an emergency basis.

The pandemic has now hit Europe, North America, Asia and beyond, but this public health crisis has also revealed the shortfall of western governance in replicating the China style measures, however drastic and draconian, that have been identified by the WHO as a model to tackle this pandemic. China, due to the centrally controlled one-party state, was able to implement such measures effectively. As a result, new cases are declining drastically in contrast to many parts of the world. However, one question remains—would the world even be facing this crisis if China had allowed the free flow of information and took action at the beginning?

Anu Anwar is an Affiliate Scholar at the East-West Center, US, and a Visiting Fellow at the University of Tokyo, Japan.

NEIL DEGRASSE TYSON
(1958)
American Astrophysicist

The good thing about science is that it's true whether or not you believe in it.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Boxcar rider

5 Bandage material

10 Swift horse

11 Rabbits' home

12 Corridor

13 Changes, in a way

14 Jokingly

16 "Time to split!"

20 Useful skills

23 Early hour

24 Informal

25 Dries, in a way

27 Silent

28 Los --, New Mexico

29 Scuba weapon

32 Sweetie

36 Oregon city

39 To boot

40 Thais and Tibetans

41 Oboe part

42 Lustful

43 Clothing

DOWN

1 "Very funny!"

2 Vaccine type

3 Ump's call

4 Accommodates

5 Full range

6 Game place

7 Coffee dispenser

8 Last letter, in London

9 Print units

11 Floats on the breeze

15 Staff symbol

17 Hotel offering

18 "Do -- others..."

19 Capone's foe

20 Some charity

21 Diner order

22 One or more

25 Depressed

26 Nautical rope

28 Dance's de Mille

30 In the lead

31 Actor Cox

33 Cheese choice

34 Not new

35 Auction bids

36 Stirrup setting

37 Much of N. Amer.

38 Collins base

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	A	K	E	S	J	A	M	B
C	R	A	G	S	S	E	P	A
R	I	N	G	O	P	R	I	C
U	S	S	B	E	A	K	E	R
B	E	A	R	E	R	S	C	O
S	N	O	R	E	H	E	N	
S	E	T	U	S	A	G	E	
A	L	L	B	E	A	T	E	R
B	E	A	V	E	R	S	L	A
B	E	T	A	S	P	R	I	D
O	V	E	N	S	S	I	N	E
T	E	S	S		B	E	D	S

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott