

# The Daily Star

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## Six months into the pandemic

*Are we heading in the right direction?*

IT has been six months since Bangladesh was struck by the worst disaster of the century by any definition, and it is time to assess if we are heading in the right direction and how we have fared during this rather traumatic period.

Bangladesh is the 14th worst affected country in terms of total caseload, with a total of 329,251 confirmed cases as per the data till September 8. The number of casualties is comparatively low at 4,552, according to DGHS, and there were 36 new deaths in 24 hours till the morning of September 8.

It would appear, given the way the people are going about, that Covid-19 is a past phenomenon, and we are out of the woods. Experts believe otherwise. Presumably, statistics might have something to do with the country assuming the business as usual mode, except for the educational institutions, which remain closed. But statistics can often be misleading, more so when we are dealing with a matter such as Covid-19 where inferring a positive indication based on the daily counts of infected cases and coronavirus related fatalities does not give us the true picture. One has to look beyond the statistics to get the real picture, as per the experts' advice.

We have commented many times on the manner the administration handled the situation since the first cases were reported on March 8. It is not necessary to recount those except to say that the handling of the pandemic should have been much better than what it was. What we are more concerned about today is the direction we are proceeding in.

The lowering number of infections should not give us much comfort, not only because a large number of cases remain undetected and people have given up on the hospitals, but also because the positivity rate, 12.68 percent, is still high compared to the global trend. The World Health Organization recommends achieving a positivity rate lower than five percent for two weeks before going back to the normal routine. But all restrictions have been lifted already.

With the daily number of tests still being very low, the much-needed antigen-based rapid testing has not been launched as of yet. Neither has the government approved the antibody-based rapid testing. Considering the very large number of people not tested for the virus, rapid testing is essential to identify and isolate the infected. And that is the only way to contain the outbreak and eventually snub the virus.

At the risk of sounding bleak, the worst is not quite over. Warning from the experts that Bangladesh is now heading towards an unpredictable destination may well come true unless the past mistakes of procrastination, poor coordination and lack of control are not corrected.

## Stronger commitment needed to address adult illiteracy

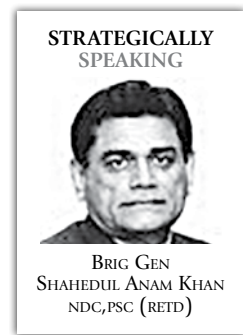
*Govt's literacy campaign marred by lack of efficiency, proper planning*

IT is disheartening to know that the government's literacy campaign targeting people aged 15 and above has been consistently failing to deliver results, despite several deadline extensions. According to a report by *The Daily Star* published on World Literacy Day, the government project in this regard has failed to meet its target for the third consecutive year. More than 21 lakh people in the target age group are still functionally illiterate, although the project was supposed to provide literacy skills to 45 lakh people in 64 districts by June 2018. Three deadlines had to be renewed to bridge the gap, and there is still no guarantee that it can be done in time. The excuse given by the officials—coronavirus-induced shocks—is totally unconvincing as the pandemic is a recent phenomenon that doesn't account for all the poor planning and lack of efficiency bedevilling this project since its undertaking in 2014.

The importance of adult literacy cannot be overestimated. Before coming to power in 2008, the ruling Awami League recognised this by pledging, in its election manifesto, to achieve 100 percent literacy in the country by 2014. The literacy rate then was 48.8 percent among those aged 15 and above. Twelve years later, that rate stands at only 74.7 percent. The gap between the target set and the reality can be explained by a lack of strong commitment at the policy level. This is reflected in the way formal, degree-based education is still promoted as the panacea for all our socioeconomic problems including poverty, disregarding other means of education including vocational training and adult literacy programmes. Adult literacy projects undertaken by previous governments were also marred by the same lack of vision as well as allegations of irregularities, corruption and poor planning. The consequences of this could be profound, experts say, as adults with poor literacy skills not only suffer economically; they are also more likely to have shorter life expectancy, be socially isolated and lack self-esteem. They are also unable to help their children with schoolwork, thus reinforcing a cycle of illiteracy and intergenerational poverty. A large section of society will remain cut off from the opportunity to lead a healthy life unless the government undertakes targeted, sustained and well-planned interventions to eradicate adult illiteracy.

There is no denying the impact of coronavirus on all existing projects and their future. We may have to face its repercussions for at least several years. The adult illiteracy campaign is no exception. However, there can be no excuse for lack of vision, inefficiencies and consistent failures, especially given their far-reaching effects on the wider society. Those at the government's literacy project must understand this.

# How goes the Sinha killing inquiry?



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN, NDC, PSC (RETD)

ONE would like to know more than what one has come by so far about the killing of Major Sinha. There were two ongoing investigations of the murder—a rare thing—and

the report from one, instituted by the home ministry, has been submitted. Usually, one would hear very little of a criminal investigation till the framing of charges. Thus, very little of the Rab investigation has come to light.

However, the very little but useful information emanating from the home ministry inquiry, makes one wonder whether deliberate attempts are being made to keep as many holes as possible in the investigation to divert the focus of the case. What good is an inquiry, for whatever purpose it is set up, if it is incomplete and encumbered with "limitations", as the home ministry's inquiry is? The chairman of said committee has admitted as much. However, even if the inquiry has no *locus standi*, one would hope that its findings would be of help to the investigating officer of the case, including the fact that the killing was motivated by ill intention, according to at least one newspaper.

Unfortunately, there are also subtle attempts being made through most obfuscatory statements from certain officials to infuse such elements in the investigation process as would create doubts regarding the role of some of the accused in the killing of Major Sinha. It is surprising the way senior police officers, unrelated to the inquiry or with the local police administration, and sitting in Dhaka, are making statements that appear to paint ostensibly exculpatory circumstances in favour of the officer-in-charge (OC) of Cox's Bazar police station.

It has been more than a month since Major Sinha was brutally murdered in a preplanned manner by the police in Teknaf. And it is more than apparent from what one has learnt from the news in the media on the killing that the top cops of the Cox's Bazar police station were either present on the spot or aware of what was going to happen. There is much more than had met our eyes initially as to the motives behind the killing. The argument being offered is that the main accused was not present at the place of occurrence, as if that is enough to exonerate an accused

from his complicity in and abetment of the crime. Does one have to be present in situ, to be involved in a crime?

That is what instigates one to ask whether Major Sinha's case demands a judicial inquiry. Although the issue of judicial inquiry in this case is infructuous, since the court has taken cognisance of the case and the investigation is in the hands of Rab, a judicial inquiry would have been in the hands of a magistrate, who would have been independent of the agency whose personnel are the alleged

along the border near Benapole in July or August 1974. I cite this "insignificant" instance to show that the law holds that the life of a pauper is as valuable as that of a prince, which no state, let alone a state agency, can forfeit without the proper legal process. The said inquiry demonstrated the commitment to law by the administration of that time. How very far we have drifted from those values and principles!

Unfortunately, extrajudicial killings have become such a regular phenomenon



PHOTO: COLLECTED

culprits. And police investigations, one cannot discount, are more likely than not to be heavily weighted by subjectivity if the accused happens to be policemen. Besides, there is always the slip between the process of police inquiry and the charge sheet, and the exact formulation of the charges. This is not just any other police inquiry, since those accused of perpetrating the preplanned murder are policemen.

I am ill-informed as far as legal matters are concerned, but I understand that every killing which involves a state force has to be followed up by a judicial inquiry, to determine the circumstances and ascertain the justifiability of that action. I recall that a judicial inquiry was held in the death of a smuggler (a head load carrier) who died while being chased by the law enforcers

that judicial inquiry would be a waste of time, a cosmetic effort at best. However, there is at least one recent example of judicial inquiry into an extrajudicial killing that may not starkly resemble the case of Major Sinha, but it involved the law enforcing agency. It was the case of one Arzu Miah who was, allegedly, killed in what Rab described as a gunfight in mid-August, 2015.

Arzu Miah was summarily done away with, as was Major Sinha, allegedly, after being picked up by Rab. Furthermore, about a week into the alleged gunfight, the commanding officer of the concerned Rab battalion was withdrawn from command. The move, according to Rab, was to ensure a fair probe into the allegation raised against said commanding officer. Never before the

Arzu Miah killing did we have a judicial inquiry on crossfire killings, and hardly has a case been registered before this particular incident on this count, let alone leading to the commanding officer of a Rab battalion losing his command because of it. And at last there was an acknowledgement, at least from one Awami League MP, that innocent people do get killed in "crossfire". Arzu happened to be a Bangladesh Chhatra League leader.

The above illustration reinforces the logic of withdrawing the superintendent of police (SP) of Cox's Bazar from his current post since there is alleged complicity on his part in the killing, and his continued presence in his current appointment is likely to influence the probe, leaving aside the very real possibility of tampering with evidence. The home ministry report, according to the same newspaper that reported on the SP, validates this apprehension. Some of his actions create doubts in one's mind. The roles of some low level police officials of the police station is questionable too. Hiding or destroying evidence equals to abetment of the crime, and there are reasons to believe that some incriminating evidences have been removed or destroyed. We would hope that the investigation officer would be able to dig those out. We hope too that he would be able to access the calls unless of course the calls have, by some act of Providence, ceased to exist. One cannot put such possibilities aside.

The obvious lackadaisical approach in handling the case indicates the questionable motives of the local police. It is a case between the "State and the Accused" (who happen to be former police personnel), and one would expect that the police administration would have nothing more to do with the case except to play the role they would, i.e., assist the State, and only the State, in the legal process. Is this the case? One is not sure.

We believe that lies and fabrications, distortions and deceptions have a very short shelf life, but only if the process of the inquiry is not deliberately tampered with.

The army chief's call for exemplary punishments reflects the sentiments of the people at large. But much would depend on the investigation. This being a test case, it is important for the administration to ensure that evidence is not tampered with, witnesses are not intimidated and nothing new is cooked up to deflect, distort or misdirect the legal process. The truth must prevail, and the guilty meted the severest punishment.

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## ABUL MANSUR AHMAD

### Still relevant for his diplomatic wisdom

KAZAL RASHID SHAHEEN

ABUL Mansur Ahmad, a man of versatile genius, is still remembered and revered by all as a litterateur, politician and journalist. A reputed lawyer, he was well-known for his people-friendly role as well. However, one of his qualities that remained hidden or was hardly discussed is his diplomatic wisdom, which is still relevant today.

We can try to understand his diplomatic wisdom and skills in light of his India tour, which he described in his book *Amar Dekha Rajneeti Ponchash Bochor*. Under the chapter titled "India Tour", there are six sub-chapters: 1) Indo-Pak trade agreement, 2) New developments in Indo-Pak relations,

to exaggerate or take refuge in cleverness. For instance, a) he explained to the Nehru government the basic difference between Muslim League and Awami League in their stance on Indo-Pak relations, and b) he logically explained why some of the Indian Hindu's ideas about Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy were wrong. He was sure that Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru had a completely different opinion about Suhrawardy. Nehru clearly mentioned that there was a possibility that both India and Pakistan would have a realistic outlook about their bilateral relations under the leadership of Suhrawardy.

During that time, the Hindu community had an "extremely adverse" attitude towards Pakistani Prime Minister Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. And Abul



Abul Mansur Ahmad (1898-1979)

Indian Muslims would have faced any problem if Pakistan was not created. But since Pakistan has been created, it must last and become a strong state. If not, not only the Pakistani Muslims but also the Indian Muslims' future will be bleak. You Pakistanis should always remember this. To this end, India and Pakistan must come to a respectable and realistic understanding."

From the sub-chapter "Protest of a fool", we have come to know that Abul Mansur Ahmad took two pots of honey from Madhupur for India's President Dr Rajendra Prasad and Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. In a speech given there, Abul Mansur Ahmad said: "This honey symbolises the wish of the people of Pakistan to have a friendly relationship with the people of India. India and Pakistan are the twins of Mother India, they are like two siblings."

There were mixed reactions in the newspapers about this honey episode. While some Pakistani newspapers such as the *Morning Sun* and those associated with the Muslim League published hostile criticisms of the event, the Indian newspapers published statements like "we have warned the government beforehand that although Abul Mansur Ahmad has brought honeyed words, there is poison hidden underneath in his thoughts... The Indian leaders were so confused having received the honey Abul Mansur Ahmad had brought for them that they could be easily tricked into giving in to all his demands..."

Abul Mansur Ahmad realised that these people did not want friendly relations between India and Pakistan. Although

*Abul Mansur Ahmad's opinion was, it would be easy to solve a diplomatic problem if we could adopt the approach that we resort to in solving our personal and family problems. He believed that there could be many conflicting issues that needed to be resolved. However, if we cannot resolve all of them together, we have to solve them one by one and use our "common sense", which means we have to solve the simple problems first.*

3) Deshai's dinner, 4) In the service of Maulana Azad, 5) Protest of a fool and 6) Three private hours with Nehru.

What we get to learn from the sub-chapter "Indo-Pak trade agreement" is that the purpose of his India visit was successful. In his own words: "India showed a very friendly gesture towards us."

In the sub-chapter titled "New developments in Indo-Pak relations", it is important to note Abul Mansur Ahmad's attitude, observations and realisation of the overall events of that time. He wrote that there was not only diplomatic friendliness but also actual sincerity, which acted as an ice-breaker to their discussions on long-standing issues. As Abul Mansur Ahmad believed, he was able to give some clear and logical idea to the Nehru government about some important issues. He didn't have

Mansur Ahmad was able to draw the attention of Jawaharlal Nehru towards the difference between Suhrawardy's approaches before and after the creation of Pakistan and also towards Suhrawardy's logical, accurate and democratic thoughts.

In "Deshai's dinner", we get an idea on how the diplomatic relations between the two countries could get stronger only through an informal and friendly dinner.

In the sub-chapter "In the service of Maulana Azad", we see how an informal meeting had raised hopes for friendship and brotherhood between the two countries. It was in this meeting that Maulana Azad had said: "Once I had opposed the creation of Pakistan with all my heart and strength. Likewise, today I wish Pakistan's stability and success with all my heart. If I had the strength, I would have participated in this work. I never believed and still do not believe that

time and circumstances have changed and East Pakistan have become independent Bangladesh, have people's mindsets changed at all? Still, some newspapers look for opportunities to provoke people towards division and create instability in society. Politics still spreads the poison of hatred. Instead of being sincere in solving the problems of the past, they are made to linger for political gains, and the common people are the victims of this. Such practices hurt Abul Mansur Ahmad and he wanted to see an end to these. He used his diplomatic wisdom to remove this darkness from society.

In "Three private hours with Nehru", Abul Mansur Ahmad tried to understand the complexities and contours of the India-Pakistan relations through Nehru's statements. About the no-war pact, he shared the same thoughts with Nehru.

"I also believe that India and Pakistan can reach a no-war pact keeping the Kashmir issue unresolved," Abul Mansur Ahmad said.

As time passed, it has become clear how realistic that understanding was.

Abul Mansur Ahmad's opinion was, it would be easy to solve a diplomatic problem if we could adopt the approach that we resort to in solving our personal and family problems. He believed that there could be many conflicting issues that needed to be resolved. However, if we cannot resolve all of them together, we have to solve them one by one and use our "common sense", which means we have to solve the simple problems first.

Abul Mansur Ahmad believed that the Kashmir issue should not be left behind but considering it as an unresolved issue, other small issues of the two countries needed to be solved first. Abul Mansur Ahmad's diplomatic wisdom is hidden in this realisation, which is still relevant but remains unpracticed.

While it is true that there are many unresolved issues in India-Pakistan relations, if the kind of diplomacy that Abul Mansur Ahmad had introduced during his single tour to India could continue for some more time, and if Pakistan had not been continuously ruled by the military, there is no doubt that Indo-Pakistan relations would be very different from what it is now.

Dr Kazal Rashid Shaheen is a journalist, writer and researcher. This is an abridged version of an article that was translated into English by the editorial desk at *The Daily Star*.