

Amir Ahmed Chowdhury: An unsung hero

MOFIJUL HOQUE

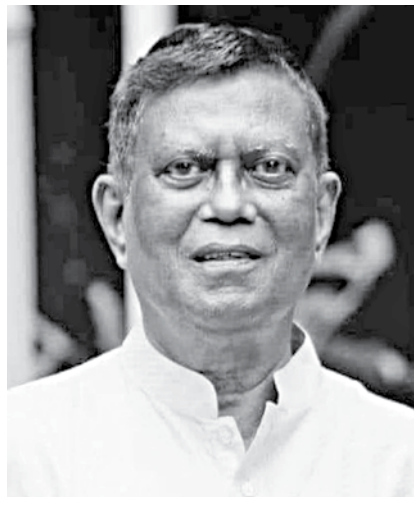
I did not have many opportunities to meet Amir Ahmed Chowdhury personally, but I got to know about him from so many people that whenever we met it felt like we were close friends. He had this strong aura about him. And he was a man of empathy and action.

Amir Ahmed Chowdhury hailed from Feni. He came to Mymensingh with his father, where he got his school and college education and spent the rest of his life. Although life offered him many opportunities to settle elsewhere with better prospects, he had no interest in leaving. That was something rare in post-liberation Bangladesh where social mobility was high, urbanisation was booming and people were easily lured by better prospects. To move from a small town to the cities was the order of the day and success could be measured by one's mobility, which also included moving outside the country to the wider world.

In this backdrop, a small town did not have much to offer to a young man with diverse interests in art, culture and sports, especially as a keen player dedicated to the art of cricket. He completed his MA in history from Dhaka University in 1962 and occupied 9th place on the merit list, and had many opportunities opened in front of him. The Bengali national movement against disparity forced the Pakistani rulers to create more chances for the educated Bengali middle class and Amir Ahmed Chowdhury, popularly known as Ratan, had many to choose from. But

he returned, not to his hometown Feni, where his family had a lot of property and fame; he returned instead to his adopted Mymensingh, a town vibrant with music, theatre, dance and the sports of hockey and cricket.

Repeated riots, especially the one in 1964 and the after-effects of the 1965 war with India had forced many eminent Hindus to migrate, leaving a void in the composite cultural life of Mymensingh. Panditpara Cricket Club with its colonial pavilion and large cricket field was still there and the team opening the game was a sight to enjoy. The eleven players dressed immaculately in white trousers and shirts, with their red ball shining and the mat laid out on the pitch was the



Amir Ahmed Chowdhury.

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epitome of the beauty of cricket. That was also a time of transition. The jute-made mat wicket was getting replaced by the hard pitch prepared by the groundsman.

Ratan Da returned to Mymensingh and engaged himself to retain and carry forward what was best there, the best in Bengal culture. He joined Gouripur College as a lecturer, not very far from Mymensingh, and considered teaching to be a passion, not a career. His other passions, sports and culture, drove him to various other work that he enjoyed. He established "Mukul Fouj", the juvenile organisation in 1969 and made it an active place for physical and cultural development of children. In 1970, he along with his friends, established "Mukul Niketan",

an institution with an alternative educational approach. He was also active in many other ways. When a devastating cyclone hit the coastal area in 1970, he organised a large relief team and led them to provide succour to the people.

When the Pakistan Army launched their genocidal attack on the Bengali people, he organised local resistance. On March 25, when an attack was launched in Dhaka, Mymensingh was a free zone with the people and its local administration in control of the situation. He was among those who greeted Captain Nasim and his troops from the Bengal Regiment when they arrived in town by train from Joydevpur. As the stories of Pakistan's brutality reached the town, certain sections of the population became agitated and launched their attack against the Urdu-speaking community. During this troubled time, he saved the life of 16 Pathans, popularly known as Kabuliwala who frequented various places as small traders and money-lenders.

At one point he was picked up by the Pakistani Army and confined and tortured in the camp. He survived miraculously but others were not so lucky. His younger brother Captain Amin Ahmed Chowdhury joined the Liberation War and fought valiantly. The army raided their home at Feni and his octogenarian grandfather was brutally murdered along with six other family members. In the Pakistani camp, Amir Ahmed Chowdhury was about to be sent to the killing field but his life was saved by the same Kabulis whom he

had once protected.

After independence Chowdhury devoted himself more to building the Mukul Niketan School and in 1983 left his job as principal of Gouripur College to be the headmaster of Mukul Niketan. Over the years the school inspired many teachers and raised generations of students imbued with humanist ideals and life-skills. The school has taken special steps to provide education to those coming from marginalised communities. The students of Mukul Niketan excelled in many ways. During the SAF Games held in Dhaka, students of Mukul Niketan dazzled the audience with their display and physical performance.

The philosophy that Amir Ahmed Chowdhury successfully put into practice was by providing education to develop the potential in every child and helping them to become good humans. He has shown us how one man's dedication and commitment can change many lives. Gradually he became Ratan Da to everyone in Mymensingh.

Amir Ahmed Chowdhury breathed his last on October 15, 2020. The coronavirus pandemic prevented many from paying him their last respects, but he remains engraved in many people's hearts as a man for all seasons, who stood by many people, assisting and guiding them in life. He was a man who found immense pleasure in offering his best for the development of the community—an unsung hero of Bangladesh.

Mofijul Hoque is a war crimes researcher and trustee of the Liberation War Museum.

Bangladesh in the age of Artificial Intelligence

MD ABDUL BARI

ARTIFICIAL Intelligence or AI, which appears to be the newest and most exciting frontier in science and engineering, attempts to emulate humans in performing complex tasks by means of learning, adapting and automation. Alan Turing, who is widely considered to be the father of artificial intelligence, presented his ground-breaking Turing Test in 1950 setting a benchmark for AI. In order to be intelligent, a system needs to have certain capabilities—including natural language processing, knowledge representation, automated reasoning, machine learning, computer vision, and robotics. It was proposed that these six technology branches would collectively form an AI and surprisingly, all six components remain relevant today even after 70 years.

Today we are at the crossroads of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and AI is gradually occupying the centre stage of this unprecedented transformation. It is no wonder that all the tech giants are now involved in a relentless race to surpass each other in acquiring superior AI capabilities, while their non-tech clients and partners are heavily embracing AI to sharpen their competitive edges. *Harvard Business Review* in one of its recent editions suggested that companies should look at AI through the lens of business capabilities rather than a mere collection of technologies. Thus, AI should be integrated as one of the core components of any complex business process instead of being categorised as a supporting tool. Specifically, AI can cater to three important business needs: process automation, extraction of cognitive insights, and cognitive engagement with clients and employees. Interestingly, AI applications are no longer restricted to corporations, but is gradually



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PHOTO: AFP

encompassing a variety of domains, from farming to manufacturing, hospitality to healthcare, public services to professional services, judiciary to defence and others. Innumerable examples of successful AI applications can be cited to demonstrate the and ubiquity of AI and its far-reaching and profound impacts.

It is now obvious that AI has started to fundamentally disrupt the way we live and work. This will continue to happen in the foreseeable future with even greater speed, intensity and coverage. As AI penetrates every sphere of human life, it is imperative for us to formulate a roadmap to see the opportunities and identify its likely threats. Like any other technology, AI is neither an unmixed blessing nor a silver bullet for all our problems. Rather,

AI poses some genuine concerns that must be addressed with appropriate strategies.

Unlike the preceding automation boom, AI is not only taking over the routine back-office roles or blue-collar jobs but also threatening to pervade the cognitive domain that has traditionally been under human control for thousands of years. Now the question arises, what approach is suitable for a developing country like Bangladesh? Should we turn a blind eye to AI? We can't afford to ignore it because the powerful AI-wave generated on both sides of the Atlantic is transcending continents and is not far from reaching Bangladesh. As a matter of fact, an AI-driven world is no more a matter of choice but an irreversible destiny that we are all heading towards.

Nevertheless, we should not blindly follow other nations in adopting AI applications. Instead, we should frame policies and strategies which are commensurate with our own needs, necessities and priorities. For instance, we have a large young population and as such, we wouldn't want a big chunk of the available jobs to be taken over by AI. Hence, we should choose those problems for applying AI at the first phase that we haven't been able to solve with the traditional approaches and age-old systems. For instance, we are now facing serious problems of credit scam and cyber heist in our financial sector, corruption and inefficiency in public service delivery process, rampant violence against women, frequent violation of traffic rules and road accidents, wastage and pilferage in the utility delivery system and so on. Along with fixing some of these pressing problems of our time, AI can also be chosen to perform those tasks which involve a lot of risks and/or very high levels of precision such as firefighting, ship breaking, handling

industrial chemical, predicting natural disasters, diagnosis of critical diseases and so on.

We must revisit our education system and reinvigorate it with soft skills such as critical thinking, creative problem-solving, leadership, collaboration and teamwork, social responsibilities, and ethics along with emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). In this way, we'll be able to convert our young population into skilled manpower, a critical input for realising our AI ambitions. Besides, we should also attempt to develop capability to serve the overseas markets, where AI is gaining ground very fast. Thus, we can diversify our heavily imbalanced export basket and realise our aspiration for economic prosperity. Countries like Taiwan and South Korea have leapfrogged as a developed nation through harnessing the semiconductor revolution, while countries like India and Philippines have enormously benefited from the business process outsourcing boom. Today, another revolution is beckoning that Bangladesh can attempt to exploit for its economic prosperity. If this train is missed, our path to prosperity might be harder and longer.

No matter what technology we opt to develop or which algorithm we choose to apply, fostering social welfare and upholding humanity through the sensible use of technology should be the ultimate goal. Again, no technological development should be allowed to widen the gap between the rich and the poor, or create any form of disparity or injustice. Therefore, a carefully crafted policy should be adopted and implemented to secure our future in the AI-driven global order.

Md Abdul Bari is a civil servant who is currently pursuing his Master's degree at the University of Queensland, Australia.

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QUOTABLE Quote

WALT WHITMAN
(1819-1892)
American poet, journalist, and essayist.

Keep your face always toward the sunshine - and shadows will fall behind you.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Obsessed captain
- 5 Mexican peninsula
- 9 Inferior
- 11 Kitchen come-on
- 13 Seeing red
- 14 Marshy area
- 15 Howl at the moon
- 16 Helped in a heist
- 18 Christmas tree hangers
- 20 Kimono sash
- 21 Rival
- 22 Sports figure
- 23 TV spots
- 24 Scrooge cry
- 25 Bar fruit
- 27 Moved a raft
- 29 Merkel of movies
- 30 Like bodybuilders' bodies
- 32 Hanukkah lights
- 34 Lennon's love
- 35 Bicker
- 36 Rainy month
- 38 Show material
- 39 Key
- 40 Difficult trip
- 41 Says further

DOWN

- 1 Suspect's story
- 2 Roman poet
- 3 Classic carol
- 4 Track act
- 5 Innocent ones
- 6 "I smell -!"
- 7 Classic carol
- 8 One-celled organism
- 10 Domains
- 12 Filer's worry
- 17 Ottoman ruler
- 19 Hand over
- 22 Store event
- 24 Dwarf tree
- 25 Yoda's creator
- 26 Needing change
- 27 Christmas dessert
- 28 Said no to
- 30 Glossy
- 31 Block-heads
- 33 Ranch guest
- 37 Free TV spot: Abbr.

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

H	O	G	S	P	A	P	A	S
O	P	R	A	H	A	R	I	S
M	I	A	M	I	L	E	N	I
E	N	D	P	R	E	S	E	N
R	E	S	E	N	T	S	I	R
T	O	E	S	V	E	E	P	A
L	O	P	E	S	W	A	N	Y
L	O	R	E	A	S	S	E	N
C	O	N	S	E	N	T	V	O
U	N	S	E	R	E	L	I	T
S	T	E	E	R	R	A	T	E
T	O	A	D	S	G	A	S	P

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

GOOD TO SEE YOU, MEN!

GOOD SERMON TODAY, CHAPLAIN

WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT IT?

IT WAS 10 MINUTES SHORTER THAN LAST WEEK'S

LESS TIME TO FEEL GUILTY

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

OKAY, WHAT'S THAT?

MY HALLOWEEN SAVER.

I JAB A PIECE OF CANDY, THEN HOLD IT OUT THE WINDOW FOR THE TRICK-OR-TREATERS.

THERE'S A NAIL IN THE CANDY, DARRYL.

I'LL SANITIZE IT BETWEEN KIDS.