Rehman Sobhan: A public intellectual extraordinaire

Celebrating his 86th birthday

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

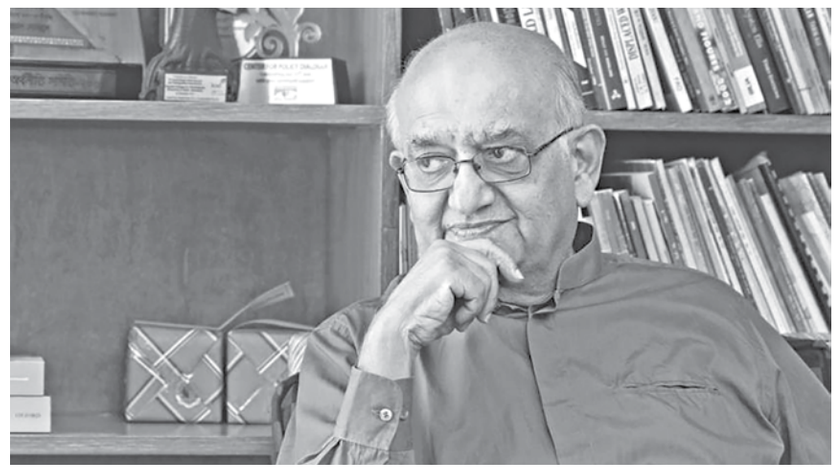
PROFESSOR Rehman Sobhan turns 86 today. Born in Kolkata into an illustrious family, with connections to the Nawab family of Dhaka from his mother's side and a reputed Murshidabad family from his father's side, Sobhan had no business to be a champion of the poor and the downtrodden. His father was trained at Sandhurst and held a senior post at the Police Department in Kolkata, yet in his maturity Rehman Sobhan stood firmly on the side of the oppressed.

Educated at St. Paul's at Darjeeling, where he divided his time between sports and debate excelling in both, it is hard to believe now that once he was a long-distance runner. After finishing college at the Aitchison College, Lahore, he went to Cambridge University where he studied with Joan Robinson and others on the left, who shaped his intellectual orientation. His circle of friends at Cambridge included Amartya Sen, Mahbubul Haque, and Manmohan Singh. Sobhan was elected the president of Majlish, the South Asian students' association, and hosted the Indian Prime Minister and Cambridge alumnus Pandit Nehru.

His privileged and somewhat sequestered upbringing took a toll on his Bengali language proficiency for which he almost paid a heavy price that could cost his life. Shortly after the Pakistani military crackdown in Dhaka on March 25, 1971, Rehman Sobhan, a close ally and confidant of Bangabandhu, was on the run. He was captured at the border by Mukti Bahini loyalists who thought he was a "non-Bengali". His life was spared as a student of Dhaka University spotted and identified him as one of the most important pro-Bengali and pro-Bangladesh intellectuals in the then Pakistan.

Professor Rehman Sobhan joined Dhaka University, freshly minted from Cambridge, at the young age of 22 in 1957. Dhaka University was then a bastion of opposition politics. The professors—with few exceptions—spoke truth to power. Rehman Sobhan was no exception. Naturally aligned with the downtrodden, despite his elite upbringing, Sobhan spoke at a conference in Pakistan in 1961 vigorously presenting his two-economy theory when someone reminded him that Pakistan was under the martial law. Such small inconveniences did not deter him.

His outspokenness and sympathy for the fellow Bengalis brought him closer to Bangabandhu. Along with Professor Nurul Islam and other illustrious economists of Dhaka University, he worked closely not only as a confidant of Bangabandhu but also managing the day-to-day running of the de facto administration in the heady days between March 5 and 25, 1971, when the government functioned autonomously under the leadership of Bangabandhu and his associates.



Professor Rehman Sobhan. PHOTO: **STAR/FILE**

During the liberation war, Sobhan, a superb communicator, was given the responsibility of a roving ambassador to drum up support for Bangladesh and help stymie aid and other economic assistance to Pakistan. In December 1996, when 25 years of Bangladesh's independence was celebrated at Columbia University, New York, I was there to witness Rehman Sobhan's reminiscence about his days in the United States drumming up support for the Bangladesh cause. As he narrated his experience, Dr. Shelley Feldman, a researcher on Bangladesh and a friend who sat next to me, nudged me and whispered: "I wish I could speak like him." What an endorsement! His power of articulation is amazing. Many of us who falter, fumble and grope for the right words while delivering a speech in English were stunned by his power of articulation.

Rehman Sobhan, an economist who writes without complicated equations and algebraic symbols in plain but elegant prose, is accessible to a wider audience. This is the hallmark of a true public intellectual. Michael Burawoy at the University of California, Berkeley, USA, a leading proponent of public sociology, advised me to write for the popular media to share sociological knowledge with the public. Sobhan has been at the service of popularising economics to the public since his publication of the Forum in the late 1960s. As a college student, I would save money to buy Weekly Forum to read his penetrating analyses of the political economy of Pakistan. His fellow travellers in those days were Hameeda Hossain, Dr Kamal Hossain and other luminaires of the time. The magazine set the intellectual agenda of that time, bringing deep analyses backed by evidence at the heart of the public debate.

Following the independence of Bangladesh, Sobhan was invited to join Bangladesh Planning Commission. Following the tragic murder of Bangabandhu and most of his family in August 1975, Professor Sobhan was in exile for a number of years. After his return to Dhaka, he found himself at the helm of Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies (BIDS), and later he founded the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), where he was able to bring pro- and anti-government politicians, civil servants, and academics around the same table to debate and deliberate on issues of national importance, an astounding feat in a fractious society like that of Bangladesh.

He has been an institution builder all his life, shaping the minds of thousands of students in his long career as a professor of economics and through BIDS and now CPD. Once a marathon runner at St. Paul still continues to run. May the Almighty give him strength to continue to serve Bangladesh.

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Building on Bangabandhu's education vision

MANZOOR AHMED

ON October 28, 1970, in his address to the nation on national TV and radio channels prior to the 1970 parliamentary elections of undivided Pakistan, Bangabandhu enumerated the continuing disparities in education. The number of primary schools had not increased in East Pakistan since 1947. Eighty percent of the adult population remained illiterate in 1970 and a million people were added to the ranks of the illiterate every year. Half of the country's primary school age children did not enrol in school. Only 18 percent of boys and 6 percent of girls completed primary education.

What was Bangabandhu's plan to turn this around? He made specific pledges. Presciently, he said four percent of the GDP should be spent for public education, a demand that is still being raised today in 2021. Illiteracy had to be ended, he affirmed. He promised a crash programme of compulsory and free primary education to bring all five-year-old children to primary school. The numbers of primary and secondary schools and colleges had to be increased. New medical colleges and engineering and general universities had to be established as a priority. It must be ensured that poverty should not prevent anyone from receiving quality education, he said.

An early action in free Bangladesh was to establish, on July 26, 1972, the National Education Commission, headed by the eminent scientist/educationist Md. Qudrat-e-Khuda (QK Commission). While inaugurating the work of the commission on September 24, 1972, Bangabandhu urged the 18-member commission to carry out its task independently and conscientiously to rebuild the education system of the country. The commission formally presented its report to Bangabandhu on May 30, 1974 and asked for his advice and guidance. Bangabandhu's response was that it was the job of the educationists to examine the report's pros and cons—his job was to see what could be done to realise the goals of the policy proposed by the educationists.

Bangabandhu's remarks showed his understanding of the respective roles of political leadership and expertise and specialised knowledge as well as his typical humility. Nonetheless, the QK Commission report was an expression of the spirit and philosophy that had inspired the birth of the new nation. This ideology was enshrined in the Constitution of the country formulated and adopted in record time under Bangabandhu's vigilant watch, and guided by his vision of the new state and the nation.

In stating the goals and purposes of education, the commission asserted, "Based on and adding to the four fundamental principles of the Constitution, education must serve the goals and purposes of nationalism, socialism, democracy, secularism, patriotism and good citizenship, humanism and global citizenship, moral values, and be the tool for transforming society." (Commission Report, p. 4) In the 36 chapters of the report, it laid out how the purposes could be realised.

The political change after the assassination of the Father of the Nation in August, 1975 put an end to any action on the QK report. The various regimes that followed—the authoritarian military ones until 1990, and the democratic ones afterwards—set up at least eight bodies to look into education reforms. The common feature of these was that few of the substantive recommendations were implemented.

PHOTO: **COLLECTED**

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2010 was approved by the parliament in December 2010. Its remit was to provide a framework for the role of education in the nation's development in light of the 1974 report and subsequent recommendations.

With the hindsight of over a decade, we can say that NEP2010 strayed from the QK Commission on several counts opting for compromise on some basic points. Some compromises were consequences of the political shift and the lingering influence of post-1975 political legacy, rather than being a response to the changing contexts of educational needs.

QK Commission, for example, proposed that all institutions including madrasas should follow a common unified curriculum up to grade 8. Beyond that, madrasas should provide vocational education to meet the demand for services such as Imams and Muezzins of mosques, instructors for maktabs or family-based religious instruction, and registrars of Muslim weddings and so on. It was not to be a parallel education system from pre-primary to tertiary.

NEP2010 had to accept the reality of a post-1975 surge in government-supported Alia madrasas. A new category—Qawmi madrasas outside the scope of any government regulations—also had emerged and mushroomed in number. Over a third of secondary-level students now are in these madrasas. They do not prepare young people for life and work in a modern society. The way to resolve the dilemma of faith-based education and a secular system could be to improve the outcomes and attractiveness of the mainstream so that students and parents would make the choice in favour of the main stream.

The QK Commission foresaw Bangla as the medium of education at all levels. It accorded a high priority to English as the window to the world of science, technology and research. It saw secondary education as the stage for acquiring English proficiency, enabling all students completing secondary education to become bilingual. Populist decisions were taken by a military ruler in the 1980s to teach English from grade one although there were no English teachers in primary school (still largely the case). NEP2010 went along with the populist compromise.

Today, more than half of the children after completing primary education cannot read and write at a functional level even in Bangla. A paper of a hundred marks for English and Bangla is taught at the university undergraduate level. It is difficult to fathom what purpose it serves, if students came to the university without required language skills.

Apart from the compromises in policy, a serious effort was not made to implement the 2010 policy. The reason lay in the absence of a strong and visionary leader at the helm in education, and in the decision-making being left to administrative officials who lacked commitment and capacity. School education being divided under two ministries (unlike anywhere else) did not help. There is government silence on the 2010 Education Policy recommendation for a permanent education commission as an oversight body for monitoring education reforms. There has been little progress on a unified curriculum and common standards for all children in primary and secondary education. There is no comprehensive education law that recognises and fulfils the right to equitable education. Promises to decentralise education governance have not been acted upon. New thinking about teachers' professionalism, status, role and means of attracting the brightest into the profession is yet to become a national agenda.

On the occasion of the 50th year of independence, the imperative is to rededicate the education endeavours of the country to the four fundamental principles of the constitution—the "high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism"—and to fulfilling the "fundamental aim of the State to realise through the democratic process a socialist society, free from exploitation, a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens". (The Constitution, 1972)

Abiding by these principles reflecting Bangabandhu's vision remains a continuing challenge for the education system.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is emeritus professor at Brac University.

QUOTABLE *Quote*

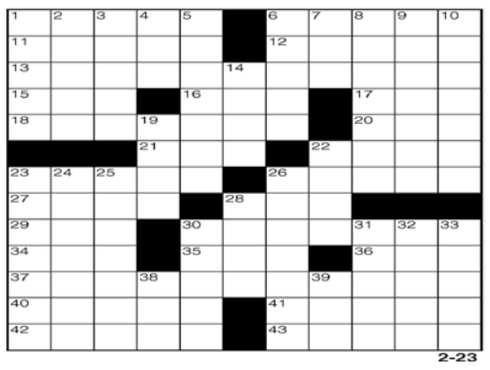
THOMAS HENRY HUXLEY
(1825-1895)
Biologist

Try to learn something about everything and everything about something.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Like Superman
6 Windshield clearer
11 Make a speech
12 Singer Lena
13 They get spots out
15 Long, long time
16 Building wing
17 Second person
18 Honey
20 Total
21 Agreeable answer
22 Carryall
23 Gives a hoot
26 Trees with needles
27 Beame and Burrows
28 Game cube
29 Convoy member
30 Biting, as humor
34 Chicken – king
35 Historic time
36 Garden tool
37 Party poopers
40 Paid for a hand
41 Body pump
42 "In the Seven Woods" poet
43 Peruvian peaks

DOWN
1 Message systems
2 Quiver item
3 Golfer Stewart
4 Series-ending abbr.
5 Edits out
6 marine mammal
7 Charged particle
8 Makes a victim of
9 In transit
10 Begins anew
14 Yale students
19 Looks over
22 Even, as a score
23 Seed for rye
24 Ike's boyhood home
25 Yacht contest
26 Voracious fish
28 TV explorer
30 Picochle scores
31 In the lead
32 – Dame
33 Lab activity
38 Track act
39 Boxer Norton



2-23

YESTERDAY'S **ANSWERS**

A	S	T	E	R		B	O	A	R
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A	X	I	O	M		S	E	R	V	E
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E	N	D	O	R	S	E	M	E	N	T
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BEETLE BAILEY — BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES — BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT