

85TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

'The state has always deemed universities hostile to its interests'

Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury, Bangladesh's leading public intellectual, turned 85 this June 23, 2021. On this occasion, he talked to Badiuzzaman Bay of The Daily Star about his motivations for writing, the rivers of his life, his lifelong association with Dhaka University and its imminent centenary, and other issues. Here are selected excerpts from the interview:

In your long illustrious career, you've written extensively on many issues, but I find your enduring interest in poverty, rights and justice fascinating. Has there been any personal motivation for pursuing what has been your lifelong crusade against the forces feeding off people's sufferings?

I remember two incidents that profoundly impacted me. These incidents took place about seventy years apart. The first occurred when I was only seven, in 1943. It was the year of the great Bengal famine. People were dying in droves, starved and without help. We lived in our village then. One day, a neighbour who lived across our pond killed himself by hanging from a tree. He had a wife and child to feed but he relented under the suffocating pressure of the famine. I still remember the sight of his hung body moving sideways, nudged by the wind. It still haunts me. The second incident occurred in 2013, again in our village, of which I learned from a news report. It was also a suicide case. A man who had a wife and daughter mixed poison in their food and they all died together. His reason? Microcredit. The family had gotten itself entangled in what we call a debt trap. As the noose around its neck kept tightening, the man decided to end it all.

Each day, I am reminded by the sufferings of ordinary people like them that there may have been a lot of change in the last 70 years, but poverty and inequalities live on like an albatross around our nation's neck. From the British colonial period to Pakistan's semi-colonial period to post-independence Bangladesh, our journey as a nation has been transformative, but in essence, the same exploitative apparatuses of the bureaucratic, capitalist state remain firmly in place. As a result, all the economic development, GDP growth and per capita income increase of the past decades couldn't give us a country free of poverty and inequalities.

Why is poverty so hard to combat?

There's no short answer to that, and I cannot

attempt one without risking generalisations. Suffice it to say, poverty doesn't produce inequalities. Rather, inequalities are responsible for poverty. When you try to combat one and not the other, you end up treating the symptom, not the cause. Any well-meaning poverty reduction policy would, therefore, first target inequalities—inequalities between the ruler and the ruled, the haves and the have-nots. At the centre of this imbalance is the method in which wealth is transferred—through private ownership—following the capitalist model of development. We must move to a system of social/collective ownership if we want to reduce inequalities.

You grew up around rivers. Tell us about the rivers of your life.

Three rivers have had a profound impact on my life and thought process: Padma, Ganga, and Buriganga. Padma—I lived a part of my childhood in Rajshahi. Ganga—I lived for a short period in Kolkata. Buriganga—I moved to Dhaka after Partition. To me, the transformation of these rivers over the years also symbolised the historic transformation of these regions. Padma was once fierce and mighty like the sea. It's all but dried up now, and a once-vibrant riverine culture of which I was a part now lives only in memory. After the Partition, we lost Ganga, and Kolkata along with it. For many of us, Ganga was Kolkata, a city full of life, creativity and activity—cultural, economic, academic. Being detached from it was an irremediable loss for us. And Buriganga, which shaped and in turn came to be shaped by Dhaka, is now dead. So, of the three rivers of my life, one got dried up, one was lost, and one died. In their fascinating yet tragic transformations I see an instantiation of the inevitability of change, but also of unmet potential. Their plight makes me sad.

You spent most of your adult life at Dhaka University. As a student and later as a teacher, what fascinated you most about it?



Serajul Islam Choudhury. TDS FILE PHOTO

In a word: a vibrant social/cultural life and the library, both of which are extremely vital for the all-round development of a student. I joined DU as a student in 1952, the year of the language movement. I was attached to the Salimullah Muslim Hall and, in subsequent years, very much involved with the university's cultural and political activities. I have always loved reading, and the opportunity to read, write and grow as a thinker was in part my motivation for joining DU as a teacher later.

What's your most memorable experience at the university?

Of course, living and surviving 1971. The events of those days are still vivid in my mind—the March 25 carnage, the intermittent firing, students fleeing the dormitories, some taking shelter in our house, graves being dug at the Jagannath Hall playground and people being shot and their bodies thrown into the graves. Personally, I was fortunate to have escaped the military dragnet, with a bit of help. A relative of

mine was involved with the police. So when the Pakistan military sought the addresses of ten teachers in the first week of April, he saw that my name was fourth on the list and warned me. I understood that it was not safe for me to live on the campus until the country was liberated. I was on the run. Then on September 1 when Tikka Khan left East Pakistan, he left behind a letter for six of us teachers warning us against "subversive" activities. After the surrender of Pakistan army on December 16, when we came out in the open, a colleague was surprised to see me alive as he thought I was among those killed on the 14th. Later, it transpired that my name had been on the list prepared by Rao Farman Ali, the architect of the killing of Bengali intellectuals, but the absence of a traceable address proved to be a blessing for me. Many of my colleagues weren't so fortunate.

As DU approaches the centenary of its birth, it's an opportune moment to reflect on why, despite its glorious history, it is failing so miserably to perform as expected. What's your take on this?

There are a number of reasons for its declining health. First, politicisation of the university and its many attendant problems. Second, the unobtrusive interference of the state. The state has always deemed universities hostile to its interests—it was true in the Pakistan period; it is true now. Third, the value of knowledge in general has declined in our society, which has had a deleterious effect on DU as well. If we analyse the 100-year journey of this institution, its main contribution has been to facilitate social development through academic activities, in other words, academically advancing social development. This has been, in my view, its most enduring legacy, one that, sadly, lies in tatters now.

How would you assess yourself as a writer?

First of all, I must say I am more of a reader than a writer. I have always loved reading and

I am fortunate that I can read even at this advanced age. Reading and writing happen simultaneously in my case. I read for about five hours a day. For me, it's not reading for pleasure; it's utilitarian reading, reading for the sake of writing.

I wanted to be a creative writer early in my life. It didn't materialise. I guess my interest in critical writing is both a cause and consequence of my professional life (teaching). My experience has been very limited because of my professional life, and because of the same reason, my mind turned more analytical. You need synthetic imagination for creative writing. Analysis is more the stuff of critical writing. I am also a writer who is an editor at heart. I love editing. I also pseudonymously wrote a column titled "Somoi Bohiya Jai" for the Songbad newspaper for 14 years. I used the pseudonym "Gachh Pathor" for this column—inspired by Charles Lamb's "Essays of Elia"—where I tried to bring a deeper, historical perspective to contemporary issues, connecting the classical with the current.

Do you think of death?

Actually, I don't think of my own death per se. Sometimes I think of the people I have lost, those I will never see again, but not so much of my death. I think every day is an opportunity for me and I want to utilise it as well as I can, in my own way. I keep busy, following a routine. I don't count my life in terms of years but of days, of how well each day is spent. Health permitting, I want to die in harness. Writing and reading till the last day of my life.

What are you working on at the moment?

I am currently working on a critique of the prospects and expectations of the 1969 mass uprising. At the centre of this uprising was an expectation for a social revolution. What happened to it? I am also planning to write my autobiography which will be less narrative but more analytical.

Humanity should not be separated by borders or water



SHAHIDA RAHMAN

WE all share one planet, and so essentially we are all neighbours, yet the inequality between affluent nations and impoverished countries is stark.

From the 350,000+ people at risk of famine in Ethiopia's Tigray, for example, to people displaced by conflicts in regions such as Myanmar and Burkina Faso, it is estimated that this year, 235.4 million people will need humanitarian assistance and protection. This equates to an astounding 1 in 33 people worldwide, a situation that can't be ignored. As the Amnesty International says: "Governments have a duty to help them, but most rich countries are still treating refugees as somebody else's problem."

Despite this, the UK government has cut aid by 42 percent leaving approximately 70,000 people without healthcare services and 10,000 without water in the world's largest refugee settlement in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Add Covid-19 to the equation and you have a dire situation that is only worsening, as this virus does not respect borders. The refugees, many of them suffering from poor nutrition, are already more vulnerable to illness, and the virus has the potential to spread rapidly in such intensely cramped, squalid conditions. The persecution of innocent Rohingya Muslims perpetrated by the Myanmar military had shocked many around the world, and yet when it is not at the forefront of the news, these people and the abysmal conditions in which they live are forgotten.

Andrew Mitchell, former British secretary for international development, said that the foreign aid guarantee to spend 0.7 percent of national income was a small amount of money that had a "great" impact, and that cutting foreign aid is bad for Britain's reputation. The news of the UK's foreign aid cuts was not welcomed by other nations attending the recent G7 summit in Cornwall. Not only is the UK the only nation to have cut its commitment while other countries have increased their aid budgets, but politicians from all parties have also criticised Prime Minister Boris Johnson for this decision.

The "Statistics on International Development: Provisional UK AID Spend 2020" show that the UK spent 14.5bn pounds on overseas aid—a decrease of 712m pounds on 2019. However, the 2019 figure still met the 0.7 percent of gross national income target, whereas in 2021/22, the government plans to allocate just under 10bn pounds to aid.

Justifying the need to cut aid, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said that it was an "extremely difficult" but necessary decision as a result of the cost of dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, while Home Office Minister Victoria Atkins said that the cuts were a "small temporary reduction." The truth is, what may seem like a "small temporary reduction" could have a significant impact on those who rely on foreign aid.

The question of corrupt governments was raised by Ian Birrell, contributing editor at The Mail on Sunday, who argued that the UK aid budget should be cut as it is "propping up some of the worst governments in the world". The argument was that giving aid to a country with high levels of corruption is the same as giving aid to that country's



'Everyone is someone's son or daughter, and everyone should have the right to enough food, water, shelter and healthcare.' FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

government, yet the DFID says UK aid always works with trusted partners on the ground, not through the governments directly. A DFID spokesperson said: "UK aid only goes to trusted partners to help those living in extreme poverty, not directly to the governments of the most corrupt countries. DFID has strict measures in place to protect taxpayers' money including regular audits and fraud assessments."

The fact is that aid saves lives. It is not just about handing money over, but involves food aid and distribution; water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives; healthcare; agricultural training; climate resilience support; emergency response; economic development;

environmental protection; infrastructure projects; vaccination programmes; and peace-building activities.

There is, then, the fundamental principle that humanity should not be separated by borders or stretches of water. The only way to live and survive is by co-existing alongside people of different faiths, religions, cultures and socio-economic circumstances. We should not view the underprivileged and persecuted as any different to the members of our own families. Everyone is someone's son or daughter, and everyone should have the right to enough food, water, shelter and healthcare.

Other people may quote the old saying

that charity begins at home, but we do help people at home. We have a social security system, shelters for the homeless and a public healthcare system for everyone. And whilst this may not cure all problems, the situation here cannot be compared to that in other parts of the world.

Over the past year, the pandemic has changed many aspects of our lives—some for the better and some for the worse, but it has certainly made us less likely to take anything for granted.

The arrival of Covid-19 presented additional threats to refugees and the vulnerable, which impacted—but did not prevent—response efforts. The theme of last year's Refugee Day on June 20—Every Action Counts—promoted the message that we can all make a difference in creating a more inclusive and equal world. This year, the theme of "Together we heal, learn and shine" has even more significance as we reflect on the previous year of sacrifice, loss and appreciation of the smallest of blessings in our lives... a year that brought out people's altruistic side and united people in efforts to help others and look out for our neighbours. It made many aware of how fortunate we are compared to refugees and displaced people in other regions around the world.

Regardless of how much the UK government contributes, we can all do our bit by contributing to charity, volunteering, creating awareness campaigns and undertaking our own fundraising efforts. Above all, it is intrinsic in human nature to show empathy for our fellow humans in the knowledge that, one day, we or our families too could be in a situation where we rely on the generosity and compassion of others.

Shahida Rahman is a British-Bangladeshi writer.

QUOTABLE Quote

JOHN RUSKIN
English writer (1819-1900)

There is really no such thing as bad weather, only different kinds of good weather.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Long swim trunks
- 5 Insurance agent's number
- 10 Heaps
- 11 Divide
- 12 Heart
- 13 Roofer's need
- 14 Avoid falling behind
- 16 Picnic contest
- 20 Endangered
- 23 Cleveland cager, for short
- 24 Horse controls
- 25 Racket
- 27 300, in Rome
- 28 Fireplace bit
- 29 Oxford feature
- 32 Book designer's

choice

- 36 Time to come
- 39 Test type
- 40 Battery ends
- 41 Sty cry
- 42 Boxing ring border
- 43 Skin art, slangily

DOWN

- 1 Face card
- 2 Lotion additive
- 3 Extra amount
- 4 Intervenes
- 5 Drake sound
- 6 Lower than
- 7 Strange
- 8 Casual top
- 9 Mess up
- 11 Not taut

- 15 Fail to fail
- 17 Corrosive stuff
- 18 Wine buy
- 19 Continually
- 20 Curving paths
- 21 Computer pro
- 22 Rodriguez of "Modern Family"
- 25 Pleasant
- 26 Ruler measure
- 28 Targets for bulls
- 30 Piano piece
- 31 Old harps
- 33 Diva's piece
- 34 Jargon
- 35 Fraternal group
- 36 Way off
- 37 First numero
- 38 Pinnacle

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

B	A	T	S		B	A	B	A
A	W	A	K	E	P	E	T	A
M	A	R	I	A	L	E	T	G
B	I	Z	S	P	A	N	I	S
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U	R	I	A	H	S	A	L	V
P	E	N	T		F	E	E	T

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT