

123RD BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF ABUL MANSUR AHMAD

Abul Mansur and his political wisdom

MORSHED SHAFIUL HASAN

ABUL Mansur Ahmad was a polymath well-known for his work as a writer, journalist, editor, legal expert and politician at the same time. Few others possessed such a diverse set of talents—in that he remains unmatched in contemporary history. He cemented a permanent place in our literature with his satirical pieces, but he achieved monumental success in other areas as well. He authored the historic 21-Point Programme of the United Front in 1954. He served as a provincial minister of East Pakistan and also a minister for the central government of Pakistan. He briefly assumed the role of prime minister when Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy went on foreign trips. His books, including “Amar Dekha Rajnitiir Panchash Bachhar” (1968), “Sher-e-Bangla Hoite Bangabandhu” (1972), “End of a Betrayal and Restoration of Lahore Resolution” (1976), and “Atmakatha” (1978) are important documents of the socio-political history of this land, especially in the last 100 years or so.

In 1958, when martial law was imposed in Pakistan, Abul Mansur was arrested along with many other politicians. Eventually, he was banned from active politics in accordance with the Election Bodies Disqualification Order. During this period, he had to endure jail time twice, with a total duration of three years. After he was released from jail, he did not return to active politics, focusing principally on writing instead. He authored the aforementioned books and others as well as a host of political articles. After the liberation of Bangladesh, he wrote another book titled “Beshi Dame Kena Kom Dame Becha: Amader Shadhinota” (1982).

Though not a political scientist per se, he was a keen observer of political developments and poured out his thoughts

and ideas on the pages of newspapers, which showed his deep political insight and foresight. Abul Mansur equally supported the ideologies of democracy and socialism as enshrined in our constitution, and emphasised that neither should contradict or substitute the other as the sole political objective. He called socialism the “fairest” of all economic theories, in that it promotes equitable distribution of wealth and equal justice in society. He also acknowledged the necessity of going through class struggle to enact socialism or build a society free of oppression. In his view, it is possible to channel and reap the dividends of a class struggle in a “systematic, democratic and peaceful” manner.

In addition to supporting constitutional commitments towards socialism, he also mentioned the need for the public and private sectors to coexist and for foreign investments in the industrial sector. But he was clearly opposed to the post-independence expectation of some people to see a revolutionary government undertaking revolutionary steps or reforms, bypassing the imperatives of a democratic system.

He rejected any idea for government formation without an election. “I do not support revolution as a means of forming a government,” he said. “When a government is formed through a revolution, it takes another revolution to change it. In contrast, to change an elected government, all one needs is another election. During a revolution, power changes hands on a few people’s whims. In an electoral system, power changes hands because of the collective will of the people.” Clearly, not only did he not support using violence to form a new government, he also claimed himself to be a Gandhian in principle.

However, Abul Mansur was aware of the fact that within a bourgeois economic system,



Abul Mansur Ahmad (1898-1979)

even democracy can be used as a tool to serve the interests of the rich.

Despite criticising the post-independence Awami League government for its mistakes and failures, he espoused its continuation of power for the sake of having a stable government at the helm. But he wanted that continuation to come through a democratic means, through elections where people’s expectations are reflected.

While commenting on the newly formulated constitution of Bangladesh after independence, he said as people and their representatives—who are a mixture of good and bad like any other people—devised this constitution, it might not be absolutely faultless. But, as a whole, he considered the constitution to be acceptable. But he emphasised more on the application of the constitution than on the questions of its

accuracy. He lauded the constitution for its insistence on rulers coming to power with the support of the people through elections. But he mentioned two major risk factors for democracy: 1) Lack of a proper election, and 2) The possibility of power being usurped by the military. He likened the obligation for holding fair elections for a democratic state to the necessity of breathing for human beings. “Even when Hitler’s forces were raining bombs upon them, the English still conducted their election,” he reminded us.

“To reap the benefits of democracy, we have to walk the path of democracy,” he said. He emphasised on the importance of a democratic culture and mentality within the political institutions—not just in the ruling party, but the opposition as well. When it comes to elections, he said: “The ruling party’s responsibility will be to refrain from using government power, vehicles and instruments of publicity and to build confidence in the minds of opposition parties about impartiality, fairness and neutrality in the election.” The opposition’s responsibility, he added, will be not to indulge in unfair means to disrupt the electoral process or unseat the ruling power.

We know that in his long illustrious life, Abul Mansur Ahmad always believed in the distinct linguistic and cultural identities of West and East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh). Not surprisingly, he saw the emergence of the state of Bangladesh in 1971 not as a negation of the two-nation theory leading to the Partition of India, but rather as a delayed execution of the Lahore Resolution of 1940. But in politics, he was a democratist through and through. And he always considered secularism as an essential prerequisite for democracy. In that regard, he cautioned against any kind of compromise or exception.

While discussing the importance of having

a strong opposition party coexisting beside the ruling party, and playing an active role in order to ensure the overall success of democracy, Abul Mansur Ahmad compared both camps with the “positive and negative charges of electricity”, or “two peas in a pod”, or the two feet of a human being. One cannot function without the other, he said. It is expected that in a parliamentary system, there will be lively discussion and heated debates in parliament regarding the government’s policies and activities. Noticing the absence of such discussion in the sessions of the first post-liberation parliament, he lamented: “Our parliament is almost a one-party parliament, and hence there are no lively, detailed and illuminating debates. It’s a lamentable situation for parliamentary politics.”

He also regarded freedom of press as an essential precondition for the development of democracy. “Just like the opposition is an inseparable part of the government in a parliamentary democracy, a free press is also an essential requirement, along with the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the state,” he said. A newspaper must ensure that its readers and people in general can trust the truthfulness and accuracy of the news items that are published. If such a trustful environment does not exist, that newspaper cannot extend any help towards the betterment of the country or the government. And also, in his words: “if a credibility gap is created between the people and the press, then it does not matter whether the media continues to exist or not.”

Abul Mansur Ahmad’s thoughts on democracy and what it needs to survive and flourish can offer many important lessons for us today, and we need to pay attention.

Morshed Shaful Hasan is a researcher, book editor and political analyst.

INTERNATIONAL CEDAW DAY

Positive discrimination needed to protect women’s rights



A CLOSER LOOK



TASNEEM TAYEB

WOMEN face discrimination every hour of every day, in various forms. From a greater lack of access to equal opportunity and payment in workplace, educational institutions, social discourses and household decision-making, to the more specific instances of intimate partner violence, domestic abuse, sexual violence and an apathetic lack of acknowledgement for caregiving and household contributions—women are undermined in every sphere of life.

This, unfortunately, is not a new phenomenon. From the dawn of civilisation, women have been looked at through a male-oriented lens—except for perhaps a few communities, which followed a matriarchal structure.

The world has made significant progress in the last century to drive equality for women, including ensuring their right to vote, own property, have better access to literacy, healthcare and livelihood opportunities. But the problem at the root remains: the patriarchal worldview that sees women as the lesser being, unequal to men.

As the world gets ready to observe the 40th anniversary of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) today, we face new challenges posed by Covid-19, which have further exacerbated the discrimination against women.

According to “Policy Brief: The Impact of Covid-19 on Women,” a report published by the UN in April 2020, “Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of Covid-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by

virtue of their sex”.

The policy brief elaborates on the economic, social and health impact of the pandemic on women and girls. “Compounded economic impacts are felt especially by women and girls who are generally earning less, saving less, and holding insecure jobs or living close to poverty,” it says. While early reports reveal more men are dying as a result of Covid-19, the health of women generally is adversely impacted through the reallocation of resources and priorities, including sexual and reproductive health services.

“Unpaid care work has increased, with children out-of-school, heightened care needs of older persons and overwhelmed health services. As the Covid-19 pandemic deepens economic and social stress coupled with restricted movement and social isolation measures, gender-based violence is increasing exponentially. Many women are being forced to ‘lockdown’ at home with their abusers at the same time that services to support survivors are being disrupted or made inaccessible.”

The situation is no different in Bangladesh where women are facing discrimination due to the pandemic. With lifestyles changing, women now have to manage work-from-home, household chores, children’s education during online classes, and provide care to the sick. While men do participate, due to the prevailing patriarchal social mindset, it is the women who are shouldering most of these added workloads.

Similarly, women are increasingly becoming trapped with abusive husbands due to restricted mobility. A research jointly conducted by the NGO Manusher Jonno Foundation and James P Grant School of Public Health of BRAC University on 65,000 women and children in 53 districts, titled “Life in the time of coronavirus: A gendered perspective,” revealed that 30 percent of those who survived domestic violence had

first encountered such violence during the pandemic. The forms of violence range from sexual and physical torture to economic and mental abuse.

The research also found that, trapped at home, the husbands demanded more frequent sexual intercourse from their wives. In one instance, when a wife—tired from her household chores—refused to entertain her

The problem is we take discrimination against women for granted. We take it for a fact that the role of a woman in a household includes household management, performing daily chores, cooking, caregiving—all for free, of course. Thus the women are engaged in both productive and reproductive roles within the household.

husband’s overtures, she was subjected to physical and mental torture.

And this problem is not unique to women. With child marriage increasing sharply in the country, this problem is also being faced by many underage girls. Data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics indicate that child marriage increased by 13 percent—the highest child marriage rate in the country in 25 years.

These young girls—who should be in school, learning, growing, finding their own feet—are now trapped in the homes of their in-laws, engaged in caregiving, household chores, and giving in to the sexual needs of their husbands, and in the process becoming pregnant at a tender age, often damaging their sexual and reproductive health.

Not that these problems were not there before the pandemic, but there is no denying that Covid-19 has created multi-layered opportunities to exploit women and further discriminate against them. And this problem cannot be addressed in the short to medium term, because we are perhaps not assessing the problem from the right perspective.

The problem is we take discrimination against women for granted. We take it for a fact that the role of a woman in a household includes household management, performing daily chores, cooking, caregiving—all for free, of course. Thus the women are engaged in both productive and reproductive roles within the household, while the men are only engaged in productive roles.

We also take it for granted that women as employees are less efficient than their male colleagues. And women are often systematically overlooked in their workplaces to reduce their visibility. An article by Harvard Business Review, titled “Why Women Stay Out of the Spotlight at Work”, says: “On the one hand, women’s contributions are systematically overlooked at work. This limits their professional advancement and helps to explain why the senior levels of organizations remain overwhelmingly male. Yet when women try to make themselves more visible, they can face backlash for violating expectations about how women should behave, and risk losing their hard-won career gains.” Under pressure, women have to “over-invest”—work harder in order to get equal opportunity at work.

However, since these predominant social perspectives and patriarchal views are not

going to change anytime soon, there is no point in simply talking about discrimination against women. We need to leverage these discriminating tendency of the society and turn it into a driver of positive growth for women; in short, we need to actively work on positive discrimination of women.

In the household, we need to acknowledge women’s contributions and make way for rewarding them financially for the services they are rendering. We also need to provide them with economic empowerment opportunities—access to skills development, access to finance—so that they can work, be financially independent. And have an equal say in the family.

In the workplace, we need to actively look out for the women performing well and reward them for their performances. There can also be women-friendly promotion policies. These days, many international organisations have certain reserved places for women in leadership positions. This can also be arranged for mid-level female employees. In fact, every organisation must have a minimum requirement to employ women workers as part of HR compliance so that women have better access to work opportunities.

These can be the starting points.

Since as of now, there is no way to end discrimination against women, we have to turn this discrimination into an opportunity for women’s growth, otherwise there would be no positive outcome.

There is clearly no point in just talking about the prevailing discriminations. Women need to step up, actively fight for their rights, turn these discriminations into opportunities and pave way for their own growth. This won’t be an easy fight, but without this approach, eliminating inequality and discrimination would become very difficult, even in the long run.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle: @tasneem_tayeb



QUOTABLE
Quote



AI WEIWEI
(born August 28, 1957)
Chinese artist

The only way to avoid misunderstanding, war, and bloodshed is to defend freedom of expression and to communicate with sincerity, concern, and good intentions.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Improvise musically
- 5 Timber wolf
- 9 Silver or gold
- 10 Take on
- 12 Bakery come-on
- 13 Conductor's concern
- 14 Book genre
- 16 “— appetit!”
- 17 Singer DiFranco
- 18 Book genre
- 20 Add
- 22 Looks over
- 23 Stand
- 25 Ready for customers
- 28 High-collared jackets
- 32 Book genre

DOWN

- 1 “Romeo and Juliet” setting
- 2 Like some clocks
- 3 Baby's call
- 4 Anticipate
- 5 Grow toward
- evening
- 6 Keats work
- 7 British East India Company base

ACROSS

- 34 Heater
- 35 D.C. player
- 36 Book genre
- 38 Delight
- 40 Kind of kitchen
- 41 Hamper
- 42 “Survivor” team
- 43 Turn down
- 44 Lushes

DOWN

- 8 Stand against
- 9 Victim of Corday
- 11 Theater awards
- 15 “Let me give it a go”
- 19 Freshman, usually
- 21 Philosopher Immanuel
- 24 Romantic sights
- 25 Held title to
- 26 Rang
- 27 Will topic
- 29 Words of understanding
- 30 Antilles natives
- 31 Song writer
- 33 Abrasive powder
- 37 Poi source
- 39 Decimal base

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

