

# An intellectual by instinct, a revolutionary by choice



AHRAR AHMAD

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**B**ADRUDDIN Umar may not necessarily be a very popular person. That statement is a little ironic for two reasons. First, he is the pre-eminent “popular” (people’s) scholar and second, given his tastes and preferences, he would probably wear that judgement as a badge of honour.

However, he is certainly one of the most revered intellectuals in the Bangla-speaking world—and perhaps beyond. This was made possible both by an oeuvre of research and publications that is celebrated for its lucidity of exposition, sophistication of analysis, and richness of substance, as well as by the life of moral clarity and ideological consistency that he exemplified. This essay will briefly refer to a little of his early academic contributions, a few of his political engagements, and some personal qualities.

His first book, titled “*Samprodayikota (Communalism)*,” published in 1966, followed by “*Sangskritir Songkot (The Crisis of Culture)*” in 1967, and “*Sangskritik Samprodayikota (Cultural Communalism)*” in 1969, heralded the arrival of an iconoclastic thinker—unambiguously progressive, fiercely independent, and totally unafraid to speak his mind.

In this trilogy, he argued that “communalism” was a manufactured construct. It was deliberately contrived and manipulated by those in power to divide and distract the public as part of its strategy to protect and advance their interests. If, as Marx had said, religion was the “opium of the people,” then communalism in Bengal, in Umar’s reading, would be the drug cunningly peddled by the ruling classes.

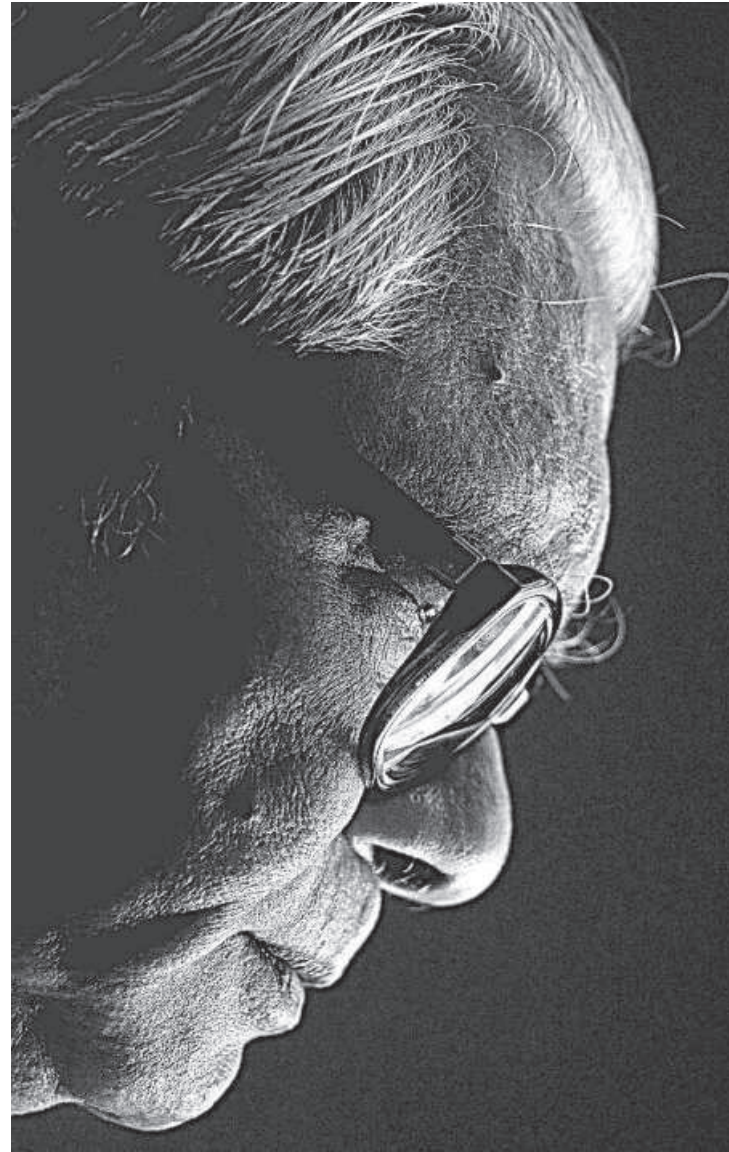
He made no judgements about faith or religiosity, but referred only to the cynical uses and abuses to which they were put. Indeed, he pointed out that there was no relationship between religion and communalism; while the first could be individual, ritual-oriented, and other-worldly in its objectives, the second is reductionist (human beings identified merely in terms of a narrow group membership), self-consciously judgemental, and this-worldly in its ambitions. He also noted that some of our national identity issues—particularly the false dichotomy between being a Muslim or Bengali that continues to haunt us—are not only irrelevant, but mischievous as well.

While these books certainly gained him recognition as a scholar with a nimble mind and a radical orientation, it was “*Purbo Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Totkalin Rajniti (The Language Movement in East Bengal and Contemporary Politics)*” published in 1970 that established his presence in the intellectual and cultural landscape of the country. The crisp language, the keen analysis and, beyond everything else, the evidentiary scaffolding of citations and references on which it rested, made this the most substantive and indispensable “intervention” in terms of explaining that consequential “moment” in our history.

Moreover, on the assumption, if not the argument, that this “moment” was neither sudden nor isolated, he provided the larger context of popular struggles and debates within which the “language question” was situated. As National Professor Abdur Razzaq had noted, if he

incorporated materials from various interviews with people directly involved in the movement, and thus partially relied on memories and recollections that, researchers well know, can often be selective, tricky and treacherous. But he navigated through this terrain with admirable skill and methodological integrity, and made sure that all claims and assertions were verifiable.

In 1972, the publication of “*Chirosthayi Bondoboste Bangladesher Krishak (The Permanent Settlement Act and the Bengali Peasants)*” solidified his standing as a scholar firmly grounded in



the framework and categories of Marxist historiography. He pointed out that what was ostensibly an effort in 1793 to systematise and enhance land revenue collections by the East India Company (it had received the *Dewani* in 1765), had a profound impact on the condition of the peasantry, the formation of classes, and the political forces that evolved.

First, the peasants faced cruel, often inhuman, exploitation because of the arbitrary rack-renting practices of the new landowners (*zamindars*) and various layers of middle-men who became part of the colonial apparatus. Second, new class formations evolved not through the organic unfolding of historical phases, but as an abrupt and artificial consequence of colonial exigencies and interests through the new layers of landed and comprador dependencies it created. Third, it led to periodic revolts of the peasants against the practices and prejudices of the oppressors, and also presaged a communal divide in the population, because most peasants tended to be Muslim, and landowners Hindus. This presumably led to different strategies of mobilisation and organisation that both confused and corrupted the crystallising of political solidarity among the people, and distorted the region’s future.

Thus, in just six years, between 1966

1984 and 1985). The first book was also significantly expanded both in terms of historical scope and analytical focus, and eventually came to occupy three substantial volumes: the second published in 1975 and the third in 1986. There were several other collections of essays and reflections around related themes published in the 1970s and 1980s.

Since then, though there were some commendable academic efforts that carried the impress of his research instincts and erudition, he gradually began to veer towards commentary and criticism and emerged as a feisty polemicist and an astute observer of contemporary society and politics. He never abandoned his scholarly roots, but this newer manifestation was compelled by two factors.

First, it was consistent with the theoretical position that pedagogy can never be ideologically innocent, and that the disinterested pursuit of knowledge is located within a “false consciousness” based on (perhaps unintended) myths and mystifications of the Enlightenment project. On the other hand, activist scholarship rests on the proposition that knowledge must be deployed and practised as part of a repertoire of engagements, with the purpose of raising the emancipatory consciousness of the masses, as well as in ensuring that the communist “line” does not suffer from drift and deviation (as Lenin had done so adeptly).

Second, on a more practical level, Umar became directly involved in organisational activities. He had joined the CP ML in 1968, became embroiled in intra-party tensions and debates, led the formation of the Committee for Civil Liberties and Legal Aid in 1974 (which challenged the government’s decisions and won the release of some activists who had been incarcerated and tortured) as well as the Famine Resistance Committee formed to combat the devastations of the famine in 1974. He presided over the platform of progressives assembled under the Leikhok Shibir (1981-86), edited the communist weekly *Gonoshokti* (1970-71), *Naya Padaddhani* (1980s) and started to edit the progressive journal *Sangskriti* in 1974 (and continues to shepherd it even today) and, for very small remunerations, was a regular contributor to the weekly *Holiday* and the daily *Pakistan Observer/Bangladesh Observer* for several years. All this demanded his time and attention.

While society did not completely lose a scholar, it did gain a dedicated activist. He was willing to sacrifice his academic future, his material security, and even the comforts of his family life for the purpose of advancing the cause of establishing economic justice and human

people.

Unwilling to accept any salaried position after that, he also decided to reject any honours and recognitions that could have given even the remotest impression that he had compromised or “sold out.” Thus, he refused *puroshkar* from Adamjee, Phillips, Bangla Academy, and Bangladesh Itiha Parishad, and the Ekushey Padak from the government. There were significant monetary components to these awards apart from the high prestige they carried. But preserving his autonomy and upholding the courage of his convictions were obviously more important to him.

These choices also generated some criticism in certain quarters. Weren’t all these decisions a bit selfish, irresponsible, and unnecessary? Did he think of his family (after all he had several children), and didn’t this impose some uncertainties and privations on them? Was he mocking those who continued to teach, or who accepted various awards and recognitions, and claiming some kind of a superior virtue? Is choosing to embrace relative poverty a necessary condition for participating in progressive activism?

Some people simply failed to understand—let alone appreciate—the sheer honesty of his position, the selflessness of his actions, or the high values and ideals that he was trying to uphold. It is important to realise that he was not flaunting his sacrifices for others to see, or setting an example for others to emulate. He was doing all this for himself, his personal dignity, his stern moral discipline.

In this context, it is absolutely necessary to emphasise the importance of the support of his wife throughout his life. Suraiya *chachi* (as I called her) was an elegant, gracious and infinitely patient lady who remained the one constant in his life of professional and intellectual turbulence. They were married in 1959, but instead of being the spouse of a university teacher with the creature comforts and social status it provided, in less than 10 years, she became the partner of a man who did not have a steady source of income, or the hope of ever finding one. She joined Eastern Banking Ltd, became its first female executive, and eventually the manager of its Ladies Branch. She fulfilled her professional responsibilities, tended to all her duties as a wife and a mother, and met various family obligations, with quiet grace and humour.

It is possible that some people probably perceived Umar to be rather prickly and forbidding, and some of his pronouncements may have been construed to be a bit too “candid,” alienating or impolitic. It is perhaps correct that he did not suffer fools gladly, and was seldom restrained by the ancient Hindu wisdom which had advised that while everything that is said must be true, not all true things must be said. Hence, he did not hesitate to speak truth to power, or gleefully slay sacred cows and puncture self-inflated balloons, even at the risk of being “politically incorrect.”

And then, there was the “other” Umar that could be witty, sensitive, playful, warm and charming, a delightful raconteur, and a Renaissance man with a wide range of interests and curiosities. He was as comfortable reciting Eliot, Shelley, or Langston Hughes, as Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bishnu Dey, or Faiz Ahmed Faiz, as easily conversant with the pretensions and decadence of the *bhadralok* classes in Bengal as he was with the history of Roman architecture, as eager about the communist movement in Albania as he was with Sukumar Ray’s “*Abol Tabol*.”

Some may have found his presence to be a bit intimidating. But he could also giggle like a small child, find delight in a butterfly, or be overwhelmed at seeing the Barakor dak bungalow after many years as an adult (a building in Bardhaman which carried fond childhood memories). He would genuinely enjoy those around him—not merely political friends and followers, but members of his extended family whom he remembered and embraced in much tenderness, pride and gratitude (as abundantly revealed in his five-volume memoirs). Also, for a person who usually expressed himself with such confidence and authority, it is remarkable that he pursued the dialectics of personal growth and discovery through a process of constant questioning and self-criticism.

He has lately lamented the fact that he has been ignored in Bangladesh. Not everyone will necessarily agree with that characterisation. It is true that the mainstream media and the dominant patterns of discourse and narration that has developed around current political realities may find him a bit of an irritant. But all truth-tellers are annoying to any insecure person or regime.

On the other hand, many students, fellow travellers and comrades, and a substantial part of the educated public in Bangladesh today have been enlightened by him, inspired by him, and grateful to him. I was in awe of him as a child. I remain so even today.

## Badruddin Umar

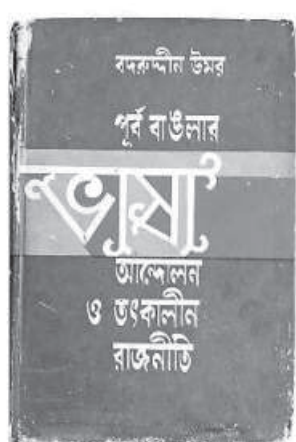
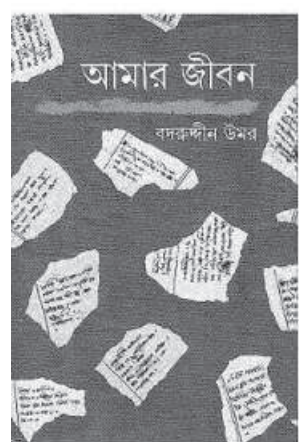
PHOTO: NASIR ALI MAMUN/PHOTOSEUM

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freedom, which would be impossible within the constraints and contradictions of capitalist production and exchange relations. The only hope, therefore, would be to expose and defeat that order, and he remained steadfastly focused on that objective. As the old spiritual goes, he kept his “eyes on the prize,” and never blinked.

To that end, he arrived at a dramatic decision. He chaired the departments of political science and sociology at Rajshahi University (which he had joined in 1957), where he was known as a charismatic, articulate and organised classroom instructor, and deeply committed to improving the academic quality of the departments—particularly through expanding course offerings and infusing new and progressive content into the syllabi. He was admired by his students and colleagues, and respected by the university administration. The path to professional success was guaranteed and beckoned seductively. But he decided to forsake it all. He resigned from the university in 1968 to devote himself to “full-time” party work and attendant engagements. He climbed down from the proverbial “ivory tower” and joined the



(Umar) published nothing else in his life, he would stand tall as a scholar based on this book alone. Happily for us, Umar did not heed that advice.

Free of sentimental froth, rhetorical hyperbole, and hero-worshipping sycophancy, this book was remarkable for the tone of detachment and objectivity it displayed. This was difficult to maintain for two reasons. First, he himself was a participant observer and, thus, emotionally exposed (he obtained his MA from Dhaka University in 1955). Second,

and 1972, he had published five hugely influential and widely acclaimed tomes of research and scholarship, and justly earned his well-deserved reputation as one of the most productive and provocative scholars in the country.

He continued his explorations on the language issue and assembled extensive documentation relevant to it, mostly official and public but some personal (such as diary entries, most notably of Tajuddin Ahmed), which were also published later in two volumes (in