

Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury: His journey towards ‘immortality’ began at 17



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MAMUNUR RASHID

ON February 21, 1952, police opened fire upon the Bangali population that sought their birthright—a right to use their own mother language. A boy of 17, and a Dhaka College HSC student at the time, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury had rushed to the hospital to visit the injured.

In the OPD of Dhaka Medical College, he came across the decapitated corpse of language martyr Rafiq. The adolescent Abdul Gaffar felt waves of strong mourning; it was as if he had lost his own brother. This sorrow is what is incarnated in the timeless verses of “*Amar bhaiyer rokte rangano Ekushey February*.”

Around the same time, this poem ended up in a manifesto; published through a clandestine meeting that took place in the capital's Gendaria area. Initially, in 1953, the poem was given a tune by Abdul Latif. In that same year, the song was performed for the first time at the Britannia Hall in Gulistan, during the inauguration ceremony of the recently elected Student Union of Dhaka College.

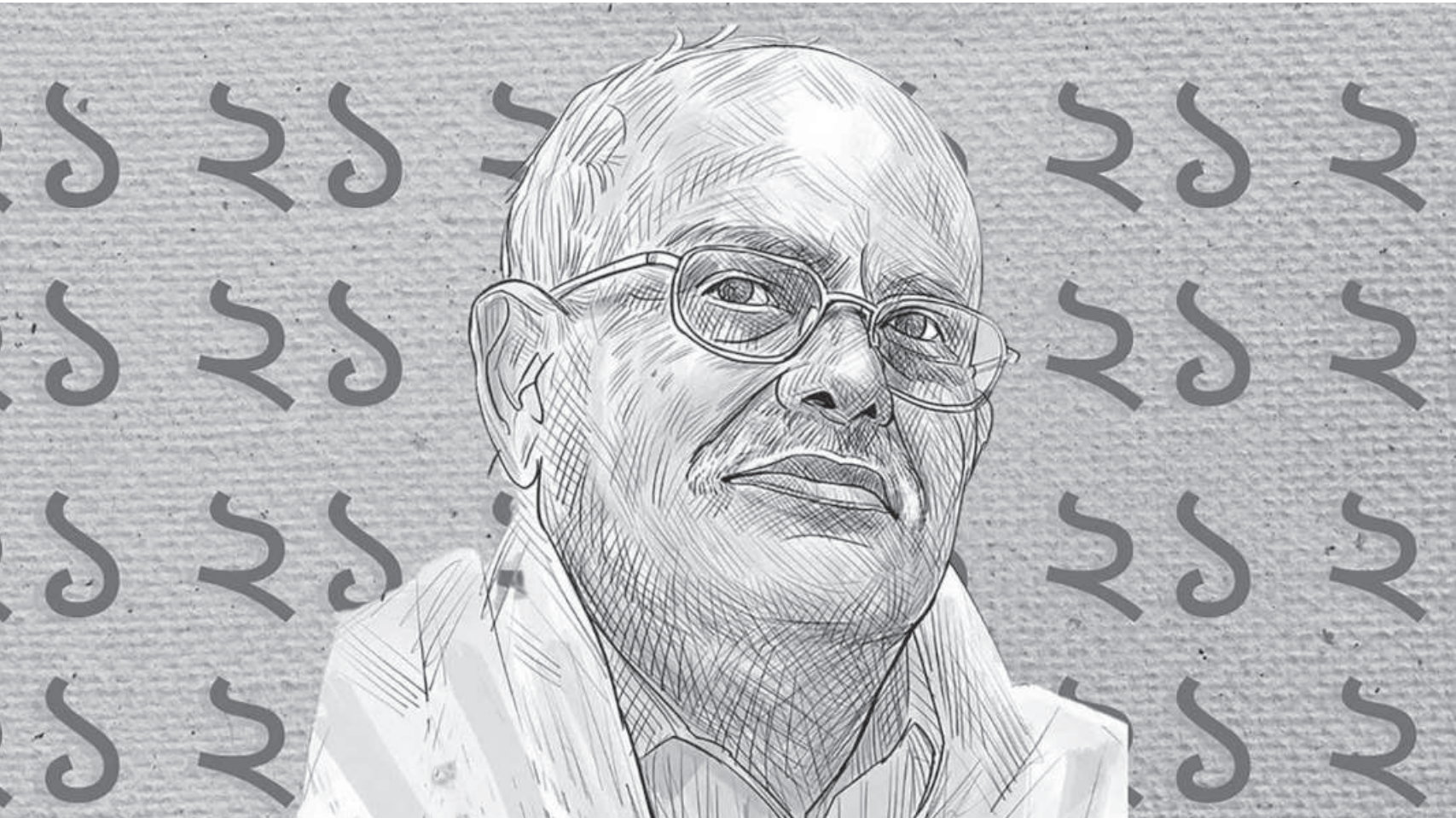
In March of that year, the poem was published in “Ekushey February,” a historic collection edited by Hasan Hafizur Rahman. Later on, it was again given a tune by Altaf Mahmud. This tune was used for the first time when the song was performed during 1954's probhat ferry.

Since then, every year on February 21, countless Bangladeshis have sung this timeless tune while attending the probhat ferry to pay their respects to the martyrs of the Language Movement—a practice that has now spread worldwide. Later on, this song was voted the third best Bangla song in history during an audience poll by BBC Bangla.

Many consider the Language Movement to have been the first step towards the eventual struggle for freedom in Bangladesh. And Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, who actively took part in each and every step of the Bangali nation's struggle for freedom, including the Language Movement, is said to be an ardent witness to the different twists and turns in the nation's history.

This renowned journalist and the founder-executive editor of the first registered newspaper of independent Bangladesh (established through Mujibnagar government) “Joy Bangla,” passed away in a hospital in London on May 19, 2022, at the age of 88.

Even though he had lived in London since 1974, Abdul Gaffar's pen never ceased to uphold the spirit of our Liberation War and secularity. Despite being a non-residential Bangladeshi, he



COLLAGE:
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continued writing commentary pieces on politics and various other contemporary topics for national dailies. He also wrote poetry, novels, stories, dramas, memoirs and articles.

Abdul Gaffar's write-ups were especially popular amongst the country's politically-conscious readers during the entirety of the 1980s, when the dictatorial government of General Ershad was in power.

This is how he became a household name in Bangladeshi media, and within the country's cultural, political, and intellectual spheres.

However, there is no doubt that Abdul Gaffar will be remembered most vividly for penning the timeless song that has immortalised the memories of our language struggle. Whenever and wherever this song is pronounced, speakers of the Bangla language will be reminded of him.

As lyricist Gazi Mazharul Anwar has said, “As long as Bangladesh exists, this song will exist alongside it.” He adds, “This (song) had unveiled new ideological standards. (Abdul Gaffar) had fulfilled our need of the hour—which was to retaliate—through his song.”

Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury was born in Ulania under Mehendigonj thana on September 12, 1934. Despite being a *zamindar*, his father, Wahed Reza Chowdhury, was more prominently known as a freedom fighter and a member of the All India Congress' Working Committee within British-ruled India. He

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had even worked as a secretary to the then Congress minister, Motilal Nehru.

Abdul Gaffar graduated from Dhaka University in 1958. In 1950, during his student life, he joined the *Daily Insaaf* newspaper. Later on, he took charge of Mohammad Nasiruddin's monthly *Saugat*. He became the assistant editor of *Daily Ittefaq* in 1956. Two years later, he took charge of Tofazzal Hossain Manik Miah's political magazine, “Chabuk.”

Afterwards, Abdul Gaffar worked for the *Daily Azad*, the *Monthly Mohammadi*, *Daily Jihad* and eventually became editor of the weekly *Shonar Bangla* in 1963. As the spokesperson for the six-point movement, he published the *Daily Awaaz* in 1966. He returned to *Daily Azad* in 1967, and subsequently re-joined *Daily Ittefaq* in 1969. After Manik Miah's passing, he joined the *Daily Purbodesh*.

Post-liberation, in 1974, he went to London with his family in order to acquire treatment for his ailing wife. There, he released a magazine named “Notun Din.” He continued wielding the pen in both Bangla and English languages.

For senior journalist Abed Khan, Abdul Gaffar was the “heart” of the spirit of our Liberation War and non-sectarian beliefs. According to him, Abdul Gaffar was the “most reliable” pillar of Bangladesh's history, the history of the Liberation War and the political movements of Bangladesh.

Many literary critics also opined that, if Abdul Gaffar had focused more on literature instead of politics and column

writing, Bangla literature would have become much more enriched.

Professor Abul Quasem Fazlul Hoq was the convener for the “Rastrobhasha Bangla Rokkha Committee,” formed against the backdrop of the Language Movement in 1952. According to him, “Ekushey February is our path, it's the people's path of struggle. Abdul Gaffar walked this path through his writing about Bangalis and the spirit of being a Bangali. He could have achieved fame solely as an author. However, penning the Language Movement anthem took him and his oeuvre to an unparalleled height.”

Abdul Gaffar received recognition for his work in the form of the Bangla Academy award (1967), Ekushey Padak, UNESCO literature prize and the Shadhinota Padak (2009). He also received countless other prizes and awards throughout his life.

In 2014, while collecting the Sohel Samad Memorial Prize in Bangladesh Press Institute's auditorium, Abdul Gaffar had lamented about the commercialised nature of contemporary journalism. The legend had reminisced about the “ideology-based” journalism of his time.

It is undeniable, thus, that not only in the context of Bangladeshi journalism or of contemporary history, but whenever or wherever the indestructible tune of Ekushey February—mired in the memories of martyred Bangalis—is repeated, it will also be accompanied by the remembrance of the indelible Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury.

Will Ankhi be able to take the SSC exam this year?



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AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I have known Ankhi since she was two-years-old. She is the daughter of Ali and Kohinoor who have struggled their entire life to support their children as they climb the steps to get out of poverty through education. As a child, she was extremely curious and had a twinkle in her eyes. Ankhi started her early education in the free primary school run by the Dhaka Ladies Club in a tiny space of a garage. As a two-year-old, Ankhi would ask me questions about America and would always ask before I headed for the airport to return to Boston: “Where are you going?”

Ankhi's father took care of my bed-ridden father-in-law until he passed away in 2013. Her mother, Kohinoor, worked for my mother-in-law even after that but her health conditions prevented her from working as a cook in the latter's household. They moved to their ancestral home in a village of Alfa Danga in the Faridpur district, and I lost touch with them after that.

I recently heard that Ankhi travelled from her village to my mother-in-law's apartment in Dhaka in search of her father, because she needs a copy of her

father's NID which is required to register for the upcoming SSC exam.

Ali moved from his hometown in Sylhet to Dhaka in the 1980s in search of better opportunities. He was a pre-teen then, and connected with my in-laws and started working for them as a jack-of-all-trades. Ironically, he never got an NID even though he was one of the smartest operators I have known in the past 25 years.

Unfortunately, Ankhi needs a copy of both her parents' NIDs to register for the SSC exam. According to the government's rules, a candidate needs, among other documents, a birth certificate and both parents' NID cards. Her birth certificate was never issued even though her mother gave birth to her only daughter at a Dhaka clinic.

Ali worked hard as a young boy and in all subsequent years. After a few years of working as a handyman, caretaker, and night guard, Ali decided to seek a more lucrative job in the garments industry. He abandoned his family, and Kohinoor was left to raise her young children as a single mom. A few years ago, Kohinoor moved back to her ancestral home in Faridpur and was able to eke out a living with the assistance of her stepmother and other relatives. But, life was always tough for this frail woman who had bouts of diabetes and other illnesses. Nonetheless, she was able to garner all the resources needed to send her children to schools and penny pinched to send her children to the schools in the



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STAR

Ankhi's birth certificate was never issued even though her mother gave birth to her only daughter at a Dhaka clinic.

villages of Alfa Danga.

Mohsin, the eldest son, finished his SSC and HSC and moved from Faridpur to Dhaka to look for a job. He worked as a delivery man for an online grocery store in Shahzadpur, near Gulshan, but the hard routine of riding a bicycle for long hours got to his health. He left the job in Dhaka and went back to live with his mother for a few months in 2021. Now he is seeking employment again. Shakil finished high school and passed the SSC examinations. He was looking for a job that would not be very physically demanding, and without finding one, began to work on a ship as a loader for a

navigation company.

Ankhi managed to finish high school in the village and was successful in evading the eyes of “big brothers”, rural morals and potential matchmakers and plans to take the SSC examination beginning in June. But, her registration is not complete yet. She still faces many obstacles. Her father Ali now works as a “darwan” in Dhaka but has neither the resources nor the connections he needs to get an NID in such a short time. So, Ankhi is going back to her village where the headmaster might be able to pull strings to get her registered for the SSC exam. The cost of these back-channel methods is beyond the family's reach, and they still might not be able to get all the paperwork finished to complete the registration process on time.

It's a familiar story for the underprivileged classes in Bangladesh. There are many Ankhis who have to overcome all the hurdles as they seek to better their lives. Even a birth certificate costs Tk 1,800 and the going rate for an NID is Tk 5,000, including the fees and middlemen's commissions. Obviously, these documents are necessary in a modern economy to buy land and for voter registration. However, there are many individuals who cannot afford the expenses and might decide to forego these perks of life. Fortunately, the backdoor channels and informal administration structure might still provide an escape route for Ankhi and others like her.