



Akbar Ali Khan (1944-2022)

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Life of service, voice of conscience

Remembering Akbar Ali Khan



Hossain Zillur Rahman is executive chairman of the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and former adviser to the caretaker government of Bangladesh.

HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

AKBAR Ali Khan's passing has come as a sudden shock, although his health issues have been severe and prolonged. Despite his frailties, he has been undaunted in his public engagements, speaking out on critical national issues on a regular basis, always calling a spade a spade, urging the nation's gaze towards a higher ground. Given his personal tragedies – the passing of *Bhabi* and of his beloved daughter, as well as his multiple health complications – Akbar Bhai's willingness to be a fearless voice of conscience has been nothing short of heroic. He traversed many careers: teacher, bureaucrat, freedom fighter, policymaker, writer, public intellectual. But there was one constant thread in this long and eventful life journey: a fierce sense of integrity, dedication to service, and openness to learning.

Akbar Bhai was a seeker of knowledge at heart, but not in isolated ivory towers. From his early book *Discovery of Bangladesh* to the numerous titles that followed, he was both meticulous in his scholarship and keen to connect to his readership. His unorthodox titles, his communicative language through which he explained complex economic issues in ways that both piqued and engaged a wide variety of readers, is testament to his great success as an author. No wonder UPL and Prothoma keep publishing new editions of his books; the long line of interested readers keeps growing longer and longer. His writing career was not a post-retirement story either. He has been intellectually active all throughout his career; two of his major titles – *Discovery of Bangladesh* and *Porarthoporotar Orthoniti* – were published while he was in active service at the highest levels of the government.

Akbar Bhai also exemplified the idea of public service dedicated not to one's personal advancement only, but to service to the public. He was fearless in writing notes of dissent when he could not agree with directives from the higher-ups, no doubt following his belief that a public servant's true vocation is to offer honest and competent advice, and not merely pander to the higher authorities or, worse, blindly acquiesce to

their vested interests. But he was also focused on finding effective solutions to developmental and administrative problems. He was a very successful finance and later cabinet secretary, and after retirement, alternate executive director at the World Bank. I had the fortune of meeting him in Washington, DC at his World Bank office in 2005. He was the natural choice to head the Regulatory Reforms Commission set up by the caretaker government in 2007 to streamline bureaucratic red-tapism and obstructive mindsets. It was a loss for the nation when this body and the other initiative for a government-business dialogue platform – the Better Business Forum – were discontinued by the government that followed.

Despite his personal tragedies, Akbar Ali Khan never really "retired" from his true vocation of public service. As Bangladesh appears to

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have retreated from democratic norms, while governance concerns have intensified, the need to speak "truth to power" in Noam Chomsky's famous formulation has never been greater. Being a "voice of conscience" is not an easy role to embrace, given the increasing turn towards an authoritarian mindset in Bangladesh. Akbar Ali Khan has been quite fearless here, too, becoming one of an increasingly vanishing breed of public intellectuals. His time came. Others must carry on. The promise of Bangladesh must shine bright. Adieu, Akbar Bhai.

Climate loss and damage are clearly visible in south-west Bangladesh

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ASHISH BARUA and SAWKAT CHOWDHURY

THE Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) by Working Group I of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) shows that the sea level, over the last 120 years, has increased by 0.20 metres, and continues rising fast, caused by thermal expansion, glacier ice loss, ice sheet loss, etc. The sea level rise in Bangladesh estimated using gauge data shows varying in different parts of the coastal zone, while

which also acts as an embankment for Paanguchi River that flows near Baharbuniya.

Because of the continuous tidal flow for around a week, the seedbeds for Aman paddy were inundated. Farmers have no hope of recovering the seedlings, so they need to make the beds again, which leads to additional seed, fertiliser, and cultivation costs. Those who cannot afford these additional costs will have to purchase seedlings at a higher price later. "There is no support to cover this type of loss; no one even talks about it. This has been our fate. If we can manage ourselves, then it is fine. Nonetheless, we remain in hunger. But who cares?" said Khalil, one of the farmers who lost his Aman seedbed to the tidal surge.

The standing water damaged the vegetables, resulting in lower household food consumption and income for a

Hence, they hardly expect any repair and maintenance work for the damages.

The spectrum of loss and damage also includes non-economic factors. Most of the schools there remain closed (unofficially) during heavy rainfall as the students can't go to school due to the poor conditions of the roads. As the roads were inundated during the last high tidal flow, most students could not go to school. "When I was on my way to school on July 10, there was water on the road almost up to my knee. But the point near the market was damaged, the water was deeper there, I was trying to cross, but I slipped. I couldn't go to school for the whole week because the road remained under water," said Lamia, a sixth grader in the area.

The infrastructural damage is usually counted as a part of economic losses and damages, while the list of non-economic losses and damages is too long. These



Tidal surges during full moon and new moon in southwestern districts of Bangladesh, which were higher than ever due to sea level rise, caused much loss and damage to the local communities in terms of food production, farming and other livelihood options.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

the coastal areas along the Sundarbans are highly vulnerable.

A higher level of tides during full moon and new moon has become a regular phenomenon in the coastal districts in Bangladesh – mainly in Khulna, Bagerhat, Satkhira, Patuakhali and Barguna – over the last couple of years. This is impacting climate-vulnerable communities at scale and in multiple sectors. During the full moon in July and August in 2022, hundreds of villages were flooded twice daily, at least for a week in each round. It resulted in economic and non-economic losses and damages with both short- and long-term impacts.

Kamala Begum from Uttar Satalori village in Bagerhat's Morrelganj upazila was surprised at the level of the tide. "I got my new house last year as support from an NGO as my old land and house were lost to river erosion. Now my new house is also inundated, and it was built high," she said.

In both the months, the community was almost waterlogged for around seven days. They could hardly cook at home, and dry food items were not available either as the local markets were shut down; only the households owning boats could manage their food from faraway markets. Daily wage earners remained jobless, and the fisherfolk could not go outside for regular fishing. Sufia Khatun, a 42-year-old woman from West Baharbuniya village in the same upazila said the tidal surge was waist-high, breaching the road that connects the community to the upazila,

couple of months. Vegetables that are not water-tolerant were almost lost. They had to root many plants prematurely, and ate whatever was not saleable in the market. This loss of food and income is irreparable, as they cannot reproduce some of the vegetables at the end of the monsoon. On the other hand, July, the driest month in the last 42 years in Bangladesh, had minimal potential to reproduce the crops. This has impacted the overall earnings of families in the community, impacting their food intake and access to other essential commodities.

The fish-farming ponds were inundated, and the owners lost almost all their production. Those who are not financially capable of recovering from this loss are at risk of falling into the vicious cycle of loans, loss of assets, and migration in the short run.

Abdus Sabur leased a pond with three others for shrimp farming using a loan from a local NGO. Their entire shrimp production got washed away during the high tide, and they have no way of recovering from the losses. They don't know how they will repay their loan and manage their families' daily expenses in the coming days.

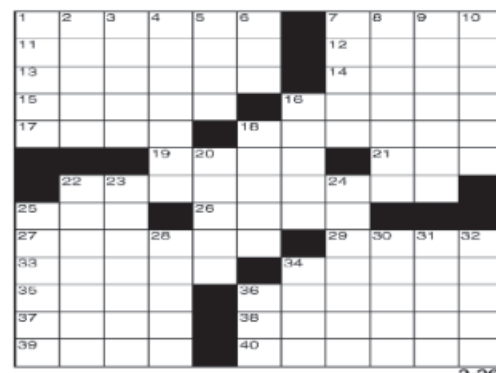
Most importantly, the damage to the roads is not getting noticed either by the government or the development agencies, said Esken Khan, member of the union parishad for this area and the panel chairman. The road construction has been a long-demanded and long-awaited project, but there is no action.

include the immediate health impact of drinking unsafe water from open sources, having limited to no access to sanitation facilities, and menstrual hygiene mismanagement for adolescent girls and women of reproductive age. The saline intrusion in the minimal sweet water sources because of this high tidal flow has been a grave concern that will take a long time to recover, especially since there has been very little rain this year.

There are many more sectors to explore where people often lose their income and livelihood opportunities. People living in the climate-vulnerable areas are already experiencing massive losses and damages because of the intense and frequent cyclones, tidal surges, and floods, which are gradually increasing because of climate-induced factors. Moreover, the higher level of tidal flow has steadily been becoming another concern. This year, they have been sandwiched between high tidal flows and scarce rainfall, which severely affected their crop production and in turn their livelihoods. This must be documented and reported for in-depth research. Most importantly, the government must ensure immediate support to these climate-vulnerable communities so that they can recover from the losses and damages they have suffered, and strongly negotiate in the global arena for the loss and damage fund, which is also a critical agenda for the upcoming climate conference COP27.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Cantina snack
 - 7 Thailand, once
 - 11 Pal of George and Jerry
 - 12 Visitor to Siam
 - 13 Eye part
 - 14 Horse healers
 - 15 Macrame makeup
 - 16 Michener book
 - 17 Big rig
 - 18 Garment with laces
 - 19 Morning's end
 - 21 Pot part
 - 22 Took an evasive coruse
 - 25 Lively spirit
 - 26
- DOWN**
- 1 Bottle parts
 - 2 Without aid
 - 3 Billiards shot
 - 4 Suggesting indirectly
 - 5 Till section
 - 6 Neptune's
 - 7 Rescued
 - 8 Banished
 - 9 Tummy relief
 - 10 Gathered in a group
 - 16 Salad servers
 - 18 Get on
 - 20 UV stopper
 - 22 Ride on a cable
 - 23 Subjects of tarrialls
 - 24 Deteriorate
 - 25 Lowly worker
 - 28 Some swords
 - 30 Love, to Luigi
 - 31 Poet's concern
 - 32 Iron
 - 34 Visibility lessener
 - 36 Bounder



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

ROMAN ASCOT
ARISE POACHER
PASSE IDLER
INS DAN OLE
EGO LUG ROES
REUSES PATS
RUSTLED
SKIM RECODE
CAR VIA REX
AMI EAR ICE
RAVEN NEVER
ALERT EVENTS
BARES DARTS

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



Opinion

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