

76TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF SYED ABUL MAKSUD

A man of great integrity



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SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM

My first personal interaction with Syed Abul Maksud was at the office of *Sangbad* in the 80s. He seemed rather solemn, but very soon I found hiding underneath that mantle of gravity a cheerful, humorous and accomplished human being. He was a principled man, with no discrepancies between his actions and beliefs – something that cost him, but never unsettled him.

Of course, it wasn't possible for me to find out so much in the half hour that we spent there. All this I understood in the almost four decades during which I knew him. But from that day in *Sangbad*, I started to address him as Maksud Bhai, and I quickly found him to be a man of talent, refined tastes and rationality, who accepted the joys of life alongside its troubles, and was always ready to help others.

The more I read his writings, the more I learnt of his scholarliness, grasp of history, political ideology and sense of justice. He was a hard-working researcher and intellectual, who never gave in to despair even during the country's worst crises. His belief in the capacity of the masses, his faith in socialist politics, and his hope in time's ability to take impossible turns aided this. His latent sense of humour and measured but sharp use of sarcasm greatly added to his considered opinions, and it was clear he thought of words as a weapon of change.

He believed that no matter how heavy the darkness, it will end with the younger generations. In a 2004 interview in the weekly *Ekota*, he said, "The youth will be successful where we have failed." I don't believe this was said as consolation; rather, there was conviction behind these words. He also said, "We have our own language. We have our own philosophy, thoughts and consciousness. An incredible harmony between Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim cultures exists here... But we cannot just stand in one place. We must move forward."

This notion of progress was extremely important to him. He held a deep conviction in shifting the status quo and not just being with the times, but a few steps ahead of it. He respected Maulana Bhashani and his politics, and although I never heard him support any party (he rarely spoke of himself), his writings make clear he leaned towards Left politics. He disliked those who had destroyed the unity of the Left but was hopeful of its resurgence, and once said that there was no other alternative in taking Bangladesh forward.

Syed Abul Maksud spent his student years in his village, Elachipur, in Manikganj, and then in Dhaka University. Although he was involved with Chatra Union, which was his introduction to the Left, as a professional journalist he stepped away from participating in politics. In 1971, he took part in the Liberation War and also became a correspondent at *The Jai Bangla*. However, I never heard him introduce himself as a freedom fighter. To him, it was natural for a young person in 1971 to have joined the war, in the same way that it was natural for politics to be pro-people and progressive, based on justice and equality.

Integrity was another subject that

held his attention. Even though such integrity is increasingly becoming rare, Syed Abul Maksud was not despondent, and identified this inadequacy as a direct result of capitalism and corporate culture. He believed that if we could stand up to capitalism, or at least resist its influence with education and culture, then it would be possible to recover – but this had to happen in institutions, within individuals and, at some point, in politics.

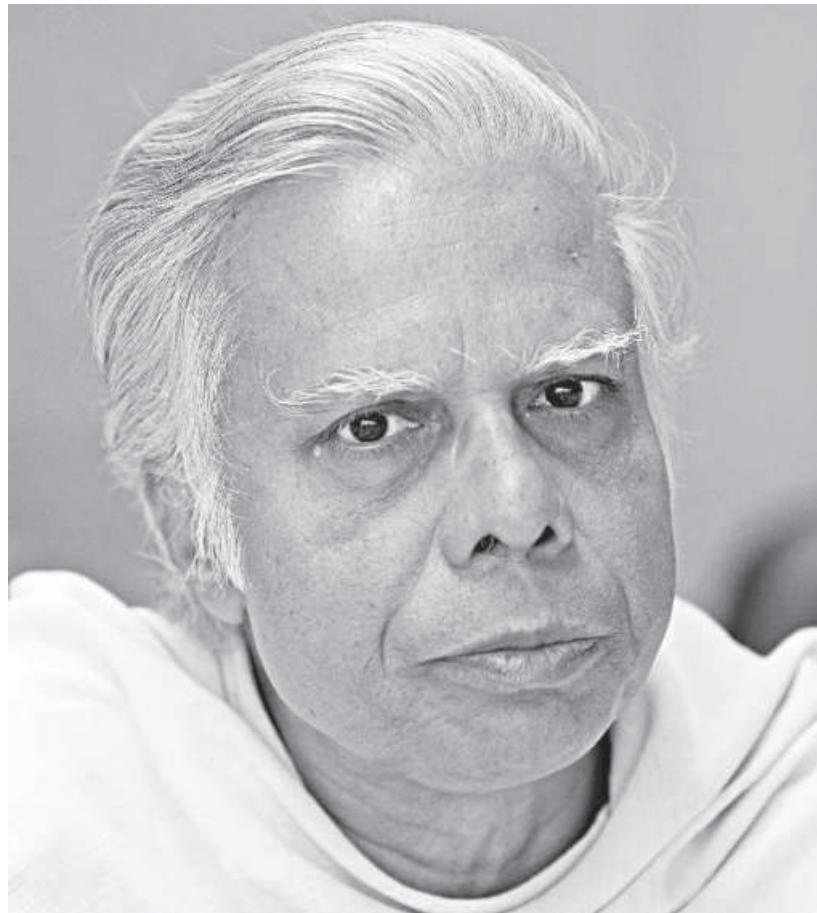
Two instances of his own integrity were witnessed by us all. After the militant attack on Professor Humayun Azad, Syed Abul Maksud wrote about BNP-Jamaat's patronage of extremism in his *Prothom Alo* column (no government liked his ability to look power in the eye and tell the truth, which is why he never received any state awards). At the time, he was working at the Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha, where he was ordered to submit an apology. He refused and resigned, creating an example that was admired but not followed.

The second example is his *Satyagraha* against the 2003 US led invasion of Iraq by Western forces. As a part of this, he boycotted Western clothing and started wearing an unstitched white cloth. Although

Quite a few of these are research books where he maintained high standards, and included archival work, field research, interviews and published (or completed but unpublished) books, etc. However, the success of all research depends on fundamentally creating or uncovering something. For example, you can find quite a few books on DU in the market, but Syed Abul Maksud's *Dhaka Bishshobiddyaloy o Bangladesh Ucchoshikkha* – which received *Prothom Alo*'s best book of 1422 award – is unique.

In it, alongside the history of establishing DU, he wrote of the deprivation of Muslims in East Bengal during the British colonial period, the reasons behind their anger and dissatisfaction, and how DU helped middle-class Muslim society and played a role in women's education. The book didn't just focus on DU; the political history of this region, Hindu-Muslim relations, conflict and communal harmony, the evolution of Dhaka city and its transformation into a centre of education, the turbulent times before Partition and a number of important events from that time were also reflected in it.

Syed Abul Maksud's favourite subjects were individuals, society, state, politics and thought. He believed people's connection to the land, culture and public life was unquestionable, especially in a country like ours. This is why he wrote against divisive forces in the West and warned citizens to not get lost in consumerism. He stressed on the relationship between individuals and society and kept his faith in the masses, but he also



Syed Abul Maksud (1946-2021)

PHOTO: STAR

he faced ridicule at first, he did not change his position.

I never found out which of his fields of work Syed Abul Maksud liked to be known for. But he found happiness and satisfaction through writing. He wrote poetry, travelogues, literary critiques, and on the life and works of writers and philosophers; he wrote on the history of newspapers and periodicals, on Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, and on the politics of Rabindranath; he wrote numerous books on Syed Waliullah, Maulana Bhashani and Mahatma Gandhi, and he wrote on Dhaka University (DU).

prioritised individual freedom. He believed in free thought that is creative, farsighted and rational, and lamented over our educational system's and institutions' inability to establish this.

Syed Abul Maksud was himself an activist, and he inspired others to follow the path of activism. We lost him at a time when our society needs someone like him the most. His loss will be felt most in the world of thought. We are lucky that at least his writings will, to some extent, fill the emptiness he has left behind him.

Translated by Shuprova Tasneem.



PHOTO: MOHAMMAD RAKIBUL HASAN

Are 'open spaces' really open?

Public spaces must be people-centred and democratic



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Open spaces are an integral part of an ideal living environment. According to the Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP), any portion of a zoning plot that is essentially free of structures and serves the purpose of visual relief and buffering from buildings and structural mass is known as an open space. And with the gradual increase in population and rapid urbanisation, the number of open spaces in our megacity is drastically decreasing.

To combat this, Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) has taken the Jol-Sobujer Dhaka Project. Parks and playgrounds have been refurbished under the Dhaka North City Corporation's Green Dhaka Campaign as well. Certain publications have mentioned how the design decisions were taken by prioritising the opinions of different users' groups. But the question is: who is defined as a user group here, and by whom?

Take for example the reformation of Justice Shahabuddin Park. One of its prominent features is a fenced wall that controls access to the park via two gates, along with guards. There is a restriction of entrance for hawkers and beggars. For those who have grown up munching on peanuts while taking a stroll in a park, this activity now becoming an established restriction in the name of security can be rather questionable.

Every element of the built environment has psychological effects and we, as users, seek connection with them for comfort.

As celebrated Iranian-British architect Zaha Hadid puts it, "Architecture should be able to excite you, calm you, and make you think, do the spaces around you have a conversation with you, or do you enter a space, and it affects your mood."

Unfortunately, most contemporary

design elements in our country's architectural practice are replicated directly from the West, with little thought put into its context/background, and its psychological effect. We forget that architecture, with its powerful abilities, can sometimes exclude. And claims that people's opinions are being included in decision-making with regard to open spaces is certainly debatable.

The field of Banani Chairman Bari, which was left abandoned for years and lacked proper security and accessibility, is another example. After its reformation, the local community has been revived and all sorts of events are now held there. The park is monitored by security guards and access to it is controlled using two gates. However, the same provision that is ensuring security is also misusing it. The security guard and the maintenance team is seen keeping only one gate open most of the time, that too in a way which makes it difficult for a new visitor to find it. Also, visitors belonging to the nearby informal settlement routinely receive stares, and are made to feel out of place and uncomfortable. Such practices in public spaces continue to stigmatise and exclude certain social classes.

Recent renovation projects have also led to abandoned fields being replaced with artificial turf to accommodate different sports and related competitions. However, this has made their maintenance a little expensive, and many powerful local clubs are exploiting this, and at times appropriating the facilities for themselves only. This has made other community members question the motives behind the fields' renovation. When a piece of public land can be locked away from a community, it represents the disparities in our democracy, and implies a poor sense of community bonding and ownership.

On the other hand, many open

spaces, even after going through such transformation and security control, still see plenty of malpractices such as drug use, takeovers by local goons, etc. As a result, people are forced to avoid the only open spaces in their neighbourhood. Children are seen playing on the roadside and not using park spaces.

Our built environment is a negotiation between humans and non-humans. The openness of a place doesn't only comfort users visually, but psychologically as well. As professionals, we should have a vision for a good placemaking approach – where a comfortable relationship is established between the place, its visitors and their activities – rather than just following design trends insensitively. While city corporations taking the aforementioned initiatives to make

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a "place" out of abundant land is a positive step towards a better living environment, the willingness to adapt and change is what can lead to them being successful.

Every area has its community, culture, and ability to make a place out of its surrounding. Rather than just trying to beautify a piece of land and keeping it as a piece of artwork, the initiative should be to create more people-centred spaces. In the bigger picture, if the usability of the place is not as significant as its financial expense, it will be a waste of the valuable wealth of the country and its people.

Opinion

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Go bad
6 Clutter
10 River through Nantes
11 Like a dunce cap
12 Portion out
13 Apres-ski spot
14 Birdbath spot
15 Cooling season
16 Mine material
17 PD alert
18 Light touch
19 Balm
20 condition
22 Thin board
23 Pearl Harbor setting
26 Indiscriminate
29 Friend of Frodo

32 Frilly wrap
33 Dull life
34 Camera support
36 Tedious fellow
37 Gawked at
38 Rubbish
39 Tending to bleed
40 Casual eatery
41 Acute
42 Future flowers

DOWN

1 Downhill course
2 Sailor's star
3 Derrick setting
4 Wrinkle remover
5 Rented out
6 Pointless

7 Finish
8 Letter before tau
9 Fragrance
11 Bar mixer
15 Clumsy galoot
17 Virus fighter
20 River stopper
21 Mule of old song
24 Jane Eyre, for one
25 Took by force
27 Silent assent
28 Takes the wheel
29 Wading bird
30 Bicker
31 Piglet's creator
35 Ivy League school
36 Gooley cheese
38 NFL scores

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FRIDAY'S ANSWERS

A	H	E	A	D	H	A	G	A	R
P	O	S	S	E	I	R	E	N	E
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OPINION on facebook

Q: How can Bangladesh prevent its brain drain?

Make the country livable, establish rule of law, stop corruption, create a space of safety for families to thrive in.
-- Salman Zahir

Lack of postgraduate opportunities in job sector and universities' research departments must be addressed. Creating more jobs, allowing private sectors to thrive, and giving private universities the power to grant research degrees.
-- Ismail Syed

By making the country more business-friendly and innovation-friendly, and showing zero tolerance towards corruption by establishing a proper mechanism for safe whistleblowing in every sector.
-- Nilima Tariq