



# Remembering Zahir Raihan A Language Activist and Trailblazer

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MAHMUD SHAH QURESHI

In 1954, when I was admitted into the Dhaka University Bengali honours course after an interview with Dr Muhammad Shahidullah, a host of talented fellows were to be my friends in the next four years. They are Abdul Gaffar Choudhury, during the most part of the first year, Abu Hena Mostafa Kamal and Anwaruddin Khan (of the department of Economics) for a good part of the second year and Zahir Raihan for many afternoons in the third and fourth year.

Even from the outset, it was well known that Gaffar and Zahir were the heroes of the 21st February movement in 1952. However, in 1954, Zahir spent most of his time at Modhu's Canteen, foretelling the future of the senior student leaders. He was very serious and talked very little but soon became more famous for his first short story book publication *Surjagrahan*. Upon being insisted by Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Zahir assisted me in participating at a Sahitya Sangsad soiree. Under the leadership of the young teacher A K M Aminul Islam, Zahir then organized



Zahir Raihan is standing at the door along with Mahmud Shah Qureshi and others during their tour of India and Pakistan.

the students to seek help from the Chief Minister Ataur Rahman Khan for a donation to support our Indo-Pak tour.

We were offered 3 or 5 thousand rupees for a tour covering Calcutta, Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Pindi and

Peshawar, with Dr Ahmed Sharif and his wife accompanying us. Zahir, Anwarul, and I were the senior-most male students, and we were accompanied by five young ladies from our class on the trip. To augment our funds, we arranged a charity film show

at the Gulistan Cinema Hall, and I had a good experience working with Zahir during this show.

Upon our return, Zahir did not join the university class, as he was working for a Lahore film called "*Jago Hua Savera*" in an office near the Gulistan Cinema Hall. During the afternoons, I would visit him and then we would go to the Kasba restaurant, which was a place that Syed Shamsul Huq often frequented. Zahir would sometimes leave us to talk to Syed Huq, and we had some wonderful moments of friendship with some of our male and female class friends. As Zahir did not finish his studies, I left most of my notebooks with him for a future attempt at the examination.

In 1965, after receiving my doctorate degree from the Sorbonne in Paris, I spent my summer vacation at home. During this time, I was invited to Zahir's home for tea, and later he took me to my residence in his car. We discussed his future film project on world peace, and he asked me for help with the project's French version.

After returning to my home in 1968, I joined the newly-formed University of

Chittagong. In December 1970, I met Zahir at the film studio while being escorted by my friend, Professor Nurul Alam. I went there to hand over a letter of invitation to my wedding ceremony. Zahir was in the company of the film actor Razzak.

Zahir was too busy at that time and he could not leave for Chittagong.

In 1971, we met at the Deputy High Commission's Bureau in Calcutta. He asked me to take special care of Professor Syed Ali Ahsan and to inform him of any help. Later, I visited his Calcutta residence once to discuss getting an appointment for rent. On returning to our independent homeland, Zahir remained busy trying to find his older brother, Shahidullah Kaisar. But eventually, he himself got lost. I still cannot forget that tragic event. Zahir is remembered well by our countrymen, and there are monuments or marks of remembrance for him everywhere.

**Dr Mahmud Shah Qureshi is an eminent Bangladeshi scholar. He has been honoured with numerous accolades, including Ekushey Padak and France's Légion d'honneur.**

## Bengali as a vehicle of abstract thought

FROM PAGE S1

It is when a writer faces such a crisis of self-expression that the native capacity of the language is on test. Something of the excellence, in abstract writing that results from a close penetration of the subject by an alert sense of beauty, is occasionally in evidence in the literary criticism of Syed Ali Ahsan. He is a conscious craftsman and is anxious to inform his style with what is distinctive in his thought. By a turn here and a twist there he unexpectedly changes the effect of a word or syntax worn with familiarity. Sometimes it does lead to the exhibition of needless virtuosity; but it often sharpens the awareness of a lazy reader or gives pleasure to an attentive one. This has been made possible by Ali Ahsan's close familiarity with the whole exciting course of evaluation of Bengali prose. The same knowledge of the past heritage of the Bengali language enables Abdul Hai to lend to his translation of M N Roy's *The Historical Role of Islam* the charm and readability of an original work. The mass of material in Hasan Zaman's *Dharma Neropeksho Rashtra O Islam* (*The Secular State and Islam*) demonstrates his painstaking scholarship but the truth which emerges from them does not anywhere shine. In this connection, I must mention Syed All Ashraf's *Kavya Parichaya* (*On Aesthetics*) and Abdul Hai's *Sahitya O Sanskriti* (*Literature and Culture*). Whatever one might think of them as research documents their style has a grace and lucidity appropriate to the subject. It is in this sense that Abdul Wadud's *Muslim Manisha* (*Muslim Genius*) too deserves praise. Many useful facts have been presented by the author in a not unpleasing style, but nowhere does his thought attain the level of abstraction which could be said to test conclusively the limits of the expressiveness of the language he uses. I should like to emphasise this. It is possible to illustrate my point from other works equally valuable, but there is really no need for it. The truth is that we have not done with any absorption, any serious philosophical or conceptual thinking whose subtlety, complexity, depth, or imaginative sweep is beyond the expressive capacity of our language.

The fault lies deep. Our thought is relatively shallow. It does not have its roots in the total being of the writer and for this reason radiates no life-giving energy to the mind of the community. The claim that we have experienced a deep awakening in our minds owing to the cataclysmic realisation of an ideal demanding urgent expression cannot, I fear, be taken seriously. Even where there are signs of such an awakening, it has not found utterance in adequate terms because of the refusal to take pains. Our vanity, the home spun notions of our provincial minds, our faith in convenient digests of western thought are among our banes. Our debt to sources other than indigenous is well known, and yet we have not assimilated a fraction of it. A comparison of this creative poverty of a politically free people with the many pointed richness of the Renaissance experienced by a politically enslaved Bengal in the nineteenth century would make the cause of the discrepancy between the two phenomena apparent.

We must not seek the cause of our misfortune in language alone. The Hindu mind, having at its disposal the massive resources of Sanskrit, heir to the versatile tradition of its philosophy and logic, encountered western thought with confidence despite its unfamiliarity, and absorbed it without

any consciousness of a permanent linguistic handicap. This source of strength is no longer available to us. While the revival of Sanskrit in the context of our national culture is not possible, to many not even desirable, we are ignorant of the intellectual riches of Arabic and Persian as languages. What is worse, we failed even where it was possible to accomplish something. In other words, we have not taken the trouble to study the Bengali language deeply or carefully enough. None need be surprised that Bengali is deficient as a vehicle of conceptual thinking.

In the essay referred to earlier in the paper, Buddhadeva Bose holds that "our prose shines naturally in short and simple sentences... long and complex ones with involutions, parentheses and periods are comparatively hard to achieve. Not pestered with too many prepositions, and able to dispense with conjunctions, genders, plurals, articles and often with verbs themselves (sometimes the verb is just left out and sometimes it is better so), it has an eminently desirable lightness as well as (for one cannot, it seems, have something for nothing) a capacity for looseness that can at times be quite distressing." These limitations, according to him, render Bengali unsuitable as a medium of conceptual thought. Again, I differ from Buddhadeva Bose. I can easily illustrate from Bose's own writings and those of Pramatha Choudhury and Annadasankar that it is possible to convey serious thought without the least loss of dignity in a light manner supported by short sentences. According to modern linguists, the grammar or structure of no language is either favourable or unfavourable to the expression of conceptual thought. Compared with the complex grammar, now committed to writing, of the language of some American Indians, the grammar of Arabic and Persian would seem child's play. The subtlest and the most ancient philosophical thinking in the world was done in classical Chinese which is virtually a language without grammar. Verbs in the speech of the Hopi Indians do not divide time into past, present and future. While describing action, they convey the sense of times continuity as well as its relativity. Had Einstein been born into this community he would have arrived at his theory of Relativity far sooner and expounded it better. In the light of modern linguistics, it is unscientific to seek to determine the range of expressiveness of a language on the basis of its formal features.

I do not see why anyone should grieve because an English phrase cannot be exactly translated into Bengali. Who would deny that rendering a Bengali phrase in other languages is at times impossible or equally difficult? To say that the Bengali word *niti* is faulty because it has more than one meaning is naive. No word, much less an abstract word, has in any language but one meaning. The word 'principle' in English means a variety of things in different contexts: 'he held water to be the first principle of all things'; 'moral principles'; 'he has ability but no principle'; 'in all these instruments the principle is the same' etc. There are other meanings of the word which it is not necessary to illustrate.

*This article is taken from the book titled 'Contemporary Bengali Writing', which was edited by Khan Sarwar Murshid.*

**Munier Choudhury was a prominent Bangladeshi writer, playwright, and educationist.**

## The tale of Bangla College

FROM PAGE S3

Abul Quasem, an educator, served as the unpaid initial principal of the college. At the time of Bangla College's establishment, there were no Bengali textbooks available for higher studies. In order to promote Bengali as a medium of education and simplify the teaching of science, Mr. Quasem authored several Bengali Science textbooks and created more than a thousand new, easy-to-understand terms, which is a testament to his dedication and passion towards this cause.

In his book 'Amader Bhashar Roop' (The nature of our language, 1968), Abul Quasem's idea behind such an arduous effort is well-reflected, where he emphasizes that presenting knowledge and science in a simpler way makes them easier to understand. He also highlights



Principal Abul Quasem while teaching at Dhaka University, 1956. Source: 'Principal Abul Quasem o Bhasha Andolon' by Mustafa Kamal

the importance of avoiding unnecessary decorative language in books on science, as using such language can make the subject unclear and confusing, rendering the book ineffective. Science is meant to be comprehended, not just enjoyed like art and fiction. However, writers must still ensure that the language is straightforward, and the presentation is appropriate.

The establishment of 'Bangla College' was a challenging journey. In the initial years, the college principals, vice-principals, and professors had to teach without any pay. A few received minimal compensation, but most served without any remuneration. Abul Quasem, who played a significant role in the language movement, served as the college's principal for eight years without any pay. When the college authorities requested the allocation of a house from the government, the government agencies did not directly provide a suitable house. Abul Quasem searched for abandoned houses. However, the authorities rejected the college's request for a house in Dhanmondi, stating that the government had other plans for it. The college's request for a second house in Azimpur was also turned down, as it was intended



(From right to left) Principal Abul Quasem, Md Toaha, and Dr Nurul Haque Bhuiyan pictured at the historic Amtala, a memorial to the Language Movement. Source: 'Principal Abul Quasem o Bhasha Andolon' by Mustafa Kamal

to be purchased by an officer of the Agriculture Department.

After multiple unsuccessful attempts, Mr. Quasem eventually turned to his friend Abdul Mannan, who was the headmaster of Navakumar School in Bakhshi Bazar, for help. With Abdul Mannan's persuasion, the school administration agreed to allow "Bangla College" to operate as a night college in the Navakumar school building. The college officially began its activities at the Navakumar Institute in June-July 1962, and the first class was inaugurated in October of that year. The Science Department opened in the first year, followed by the Commerce and Humanities Departments in the second and third years, respectively.

Since there was no office space available in the Navakumar school building, Abul Quasem, who was the college principal, rented a furnished office on the ground floor of his apartment at 32/2 Azimpur for several years. Furnishings for the college were acquired through the help of friends, employees of the Majlis, and Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, among others. After much persuasion, the college was granted the board's consent and university affiliation. However, the university administration denied the postgraduate degree.

According to Abul Quasem's memoir, the government was appealed to purchase a suitable location for the construction of Bangla College and Bangla University. However, after several fruitless attempts to find a site in Dhaka city, the decision was made to go for a dilapidated building in the then-forested area of Mirpur. The government was requested to obtain this property, but despite opposition from Bengali officers, the highest government committee during the Pakistani era approved the acquisition request in 1964. The university was allocated approximately 12 acres of land.

Assistance was sought from Mr Ferdaus Khan, a highly regarded mentor of Mr Quasem and then-director of the education department, to pay for the land and plan for the construction of Bangla College's campus. Mr Khan's

efforts led to the government approving a significant amount of funding for the college's development. This funding was used to pay for the land in instalments and complete the construction of two floors of the main building, a portion of the dormitory, and a portion of the laboratory for the degree program. In 1969, after the partial completion of the college building, the day section was inaugurated, and classes began. B.Sc. and B.Com. classes commenced on October 4, 1969.

The establishment of Bangla College was supported by prominent newspapers of the time, such as Daily Ittefaq, Daily Azad, and Pakistan Observer. During this period, the Bengali-medium education system gained popularity and was implemented in many educational institutions.

Initially, some Bengali scholars



Foundation stone of Bangla College

strongly opposed the creation of Bangla College, arguing that students who learned through the Bengali medium would be at a disadvantage in the job market. Some even ridiculed the idea of establishing a "Bangla Maulbi." Despite this, the Bengali medium of instruction gained popularity quickly, and the performance of Bengali-medium students was quite satisfactory, with a pass rate significantly higher than that of government colleges at the time.

During the War of Liberation in 1971, the college was occupied by Pakistani forces and their non-Bengali Bihari collaborators, who replaced the college's signboard with another inscribed with "Urdu College" and closed it for the entire period of the war. After the war, the college started anew with fresh initiatives. In 1985, it was nationalized, and in 1997, Honours and Masters courses were introduced under the National University.

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