



Serajul Islam Choudhury.

PORTRAIT: REHNUMA PROSHOON

88TH BIRTHDAY OF SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

Our leading socialist intellectual and our teacher



Dr Azfar Hussain is currently summer distinguished professor of English & Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). He is director of the graduate programme in social innovation and professor of integrative/interdisciplinary studies at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, US.

AZFAR HUSSAIN

Today – June 23 – marks the 88th birthday of Serajul Islam Choudhury. Considered our foremost intellectual, literary critic, and essayist in Bangladesh, Choudhury has authored more than a hundred books and countless articles in both English and Bangla, attesting to a breathtaking range of thematic preoccupations and pursuits while encompassing – and interconnecting – such broad areas as literature, culture, history, politics, and even the sociology of the everyday. Thus, Serajul Islam Choudhury has been described as a people’s historian, cultural critic, social and media analyst, political analyst, columnist, editor, translator, organiser, and activist. Early on in his life, Choudhury even published three novels and two collections of short stories; although he did not pursue his career as a fiction writer. He has been editing the journal *Natun Diganta* for some 21 years now. His overall work can be characterised by his relentless opposition to various forms and forces of oppression and injustice, while he has consistently advanced – in the Marxist tradition – the cause of human emancipation in his work.

And, of course, Choudhury is widely acclaimed as a committed, erudite, exemplary teacher, for whom the praxis of teaching is love and labour made visible. Inspiring stories of his pedagogical performance, his phenomenal eloquence, and his proverbial punctuality continue to circulate in circles ranging even beyond academia. It’s not for nothing that the Ethics Society of Bangladesh honoured Serajul Islam Choudhury as the best teacher of Dhaka University (DU), while the poet and playwright Syed Shamsul Haq once went to the extent of calling Serajul Islam Choudhury “our nation’s teacher!” Indeed, it makes me immensely happy to say that I worked closely with him, remaining associated with the weeklies he edited in the 1990s, while I was his direct student in the English department of DU, where he has taught for about five decades and where he is currently emeritus professor. In his courses, Choudhury introduced us to a remarkable constellation of Russian and English novelists that included Tolstoy, Conrad, Forster, and Lawrence, among others – exemplarily teaching us that literature, as a signifying and sensuous practice, enacts the dialectic of the word and the world in aesthetically special and ideologically and politically suggestive ways that inform, influence, and inspire humanity.

Over the years, I’ve written about different aspects of Choudhury’s critical work and even his transformative pedagogy, profoundly interconnected as they are. But, in this short piece, I intend to dwell on the significance of Serajul Islam Choudhury as an intellectual. I also intend to touch on a few areas of his interventions in the fields of literary and cultural criticism to

account for his significance. Like his contemporaries Noam Chomsky and Edward Said, Serajul Islam Choudhury wrote considerably about the roles and responsibilities of intellectuals themselves. According to him, the role of an intellectual cannot be reduced to that of a specialist. For Choudhury, then, an intellectual is interested in everything – one who tirelessly investigates and interrogates the world and produces transformative knowledge. But that is not all. As Choudhury further contends in his by-now classic piece called *Buddhijbeer Kaajkormo o Daaydayitto (The Activities and Responsibilities of Intellectuals)*, intellectuals share their knowledge with the public, while also questioning the existing order of things or the status quo with the very objective of changing it. For Choudhury, then, Karl Marx’s famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach – “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” – also continues to guide and govern the “becoming and being” of an intellectual, characteristically committed as s/he is to human emancipation.

Now, Serajul Islam Choudhury’s own contentions surrounding the roles of intellectuals are applicable to Choudhury himself. As an intellectual, Choudhury – in his work – continues to challenge, confront, and combat such systems of oppression as capitalism, imperialism/colonialism, communalism, and patriarchy, while demystifying or demonstrating how they affect the practice of everyday life in a language that is immensely readable and even movingly beautiful, and thus making the point that the question of style for an intellectual is not merely an aesthetic one but decisively a political question. But, as an intellectual, Choudhury also significantly *worlds the word*: he boldly took to the streets while taking part in a number of people’s progressive movements in the country. One can readily mention the famous Osmani Uddyan Rakkhya Andolon – the Lalon Akhra Rakkhya Andolon – movements to which Choudhury provided dynamic leadership. Then, in 2019, at the age of 84, Choudhury – along with others (including me) – revived and re-founded Professor Ahmad Sharif’s (1921-1999) activist organisation of socialist intellectuals called Samajtantrik Buddhijeebee Sangha – a remarkable move at a notoriously anti-socialist conjuncture in the country.

Given that Choudhury is a combative intellectual, the problems and struggles of common, ordinary people remain at the heart of his overall work. Although he is noted for his extraordinary critical examination of the Bangladeshi middle class – exemplified particularly, if not exclusively, in his English book called *Middle Class and the Social Revolution in Bengal: An Incomplete Agenda* (2002) – he never conflates

“people” with the middle class as such, as has been the case with many writers and politicians in Bangladesh. For him, then, “people” come to include the toiling masses – peasants and workers – or “people” come to include what the Caribbean anticolonial revolutionary Frantz Fanon once called “the wretched of the earth” that would include – in the context of Bangladesh – women and indigenous peoples, including ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities. It is characteristic of Choudhury to pay attention to what is left out or what is rendered invisible in history, and thus to the neglected, the marginalised, the downtrodden, and the oppressed, while he always radically redefines democracy itself – to use his own words – as “the equality of rights and opportunities.” Choudhury has written at least six books that deal with the topic of democracy, while suggesting that there is no socialism without establishing and radicalising democracy itself.

Serajul Islam Choudhury’s role as an intellectual remains organically tied to his role as a literary and cultural critic. His massive work of literary criticism involves not only Bangla literature but also English literature and what is loosely called “World Literature”. He has proven to be an excellent comparatist – one who revealingly and even stimulatingly compares and makes connections among different literary figures, while underlining both convergences and conflicts at both aesthetic and ideological levels. He has written profusely about such canonical figures in Bangla literature as Vidyasagar, Madhusudan, Bankim, Rabindranath, Sharatchandra, Jibanananda, Nazrul, Buddhudev, among many others. But his criticism is not merely aesthetically evaluative but socially and politically engaged in ways in which literary criticism itself turns out to be a site of the production of emancipatory consciousness, while, of course, Choudhury continues to question the literary establishment at every turn. Among his numerous works, his 1980 book called *Unish Shotoker Bangla Goddyer Samajik Byakoron (The Social Grammar of Bangla Prose in the Nineteenth Century)* can be cited as a compelling case-in-point. In fact, Choudhury almost single-handedly inaugurated a distinctive school of socially and politically engaged literary criticism in Bangladesh, while he also exemplarily expanded the very meaning of culture, placing it in the materialist tradition and reckoning with it politically such that he could instructively discuss our dominant and subjugated political cultures in the country, for instance.

There is far more to be said about Serajul Islam Choudhury’s significance as an intellectual and literary-cultural critic, but I’ve only had space to scratch the surface in this piece. In closing, on his 88th birthday, I wish my teacher a long life of continued productivity – a life full of light and laughter and love. And I wish to dedicate to my teacher these beautiful lines by the great revolutionary Guatemalan poet Otto Rene Castillo in their English translation: “The most beautiful thing/ for those who have fought a whole life/ is to come to the end and say:/ we believed in people and life, / and life and the people never let us down.”

Indeed, our teacher has fought a whole life, believing in people and in life itself.

The global conspiracy – against women



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

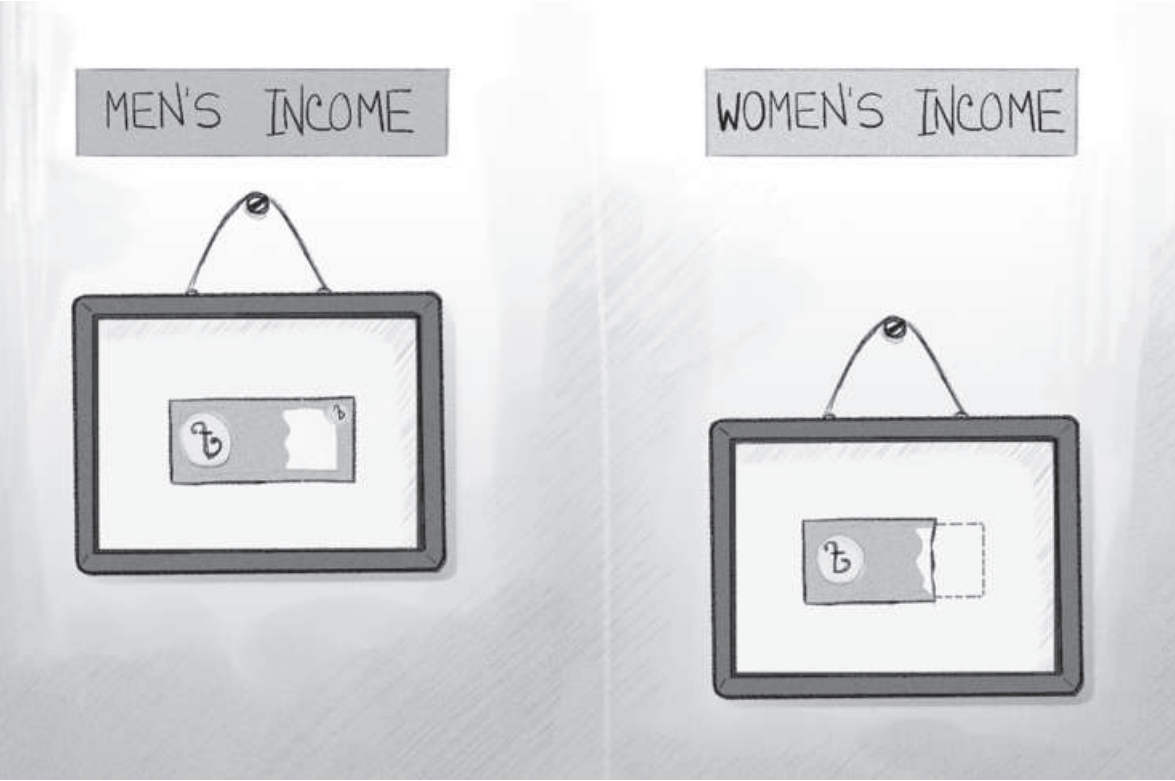
When I read that countries led by women had “systematically and significantly better” Covid -19 outcomes such as earlier lockdowns and much fewer deaths compared to countries led by men, it wasn’t such a great revelation. Women are crisis managers by nature – just see how our mothers respond to any sickness in the home or when the family is faced with a calamity. But I was pleasantly surprised that researchers had bothered to gather empirical evidence to prove that women did a better job than their male counterparts in dealing with the pandemic and that it was broadly reported in the media. Let’s face it, we rarely get thanked for any of the work we do to keep the world – yes, the world – running.

This is because a) we live in an obstinately patriarchal, capitalist world where women are kept in the lower rungs of the hierarchy; and b) our unstinting nurturing and persevering is taken for granted

in education – higher enrolment of girls and more women with advanced education degrees – but women are still not getting the expected economic opportunities: “Even in the 59 countries where adult women are more educated than men, the average income gap is 39 percent.”

So, in the era of uber-technological-advance (maybe ChatGPT is writing this tirade) and progressiveness, how is this irrational practice of unequal pay still thriving? Clearly, deep-rooted biases and stereotypes are at play. UNDP’s report refers to a “child penalty” that is at work and that arises from the social expectation that women devote more time to childcare than men.

It’s about time we change this social expectation. Men should not be applauded and made a fuss over when they take on household chores or look after the kids while Mommy is running a company



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

and considered part and parcel of our role in society.

If anyone deludes themselves into thinking that this is old news and applies only to the “backward”, “poor” or Muslim-majority countries, please think again. Stereotypes of what a woman should be like and how capable she is are alive and kicking all over the world. This is not just a “typical woman’s rant”. This is actually the conclusion of a massive survey by the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Gender Social Norms Index, which has found that, globally, almost 90 percent of men and women (unfortunately) have fundamental biases against women.

So, half the people (both men and women) of the world still believe men are better political leaders and 43 percent think men make better business executives. If you think this is alarming, get this: more than one out of every four people believe it is justified for a man to beat his wife, according to this survey. Now, does it not make sense why the boardrooms across continents are predominantly filled with men and why one in six women in the US has been sexually assaulted or raped as a child or adult?

And let’s come to the biggest area of discrimination: the amount of money we get compared to men for the same work, using the same skills, and putting in the same number of hours. A female labourer carrying the same number of heavy loads at a construction site in Bangladesh working the same hours gets much less than a male labourer. Ironically, this applies to a woman vice-president of a multinational company, a woman broadcaster at the most popular international broadcasting company, and even a top-ranking female actor in Hollywood.

The UNDP report has found that even education has not been able to reduce the income gap. Over the decades, many countries have adopted policies that have successfully reduced gender gaps

or has to go on a business trip. Sharing all those tedious tasks of figuring out what to cook for dinner, helping with the homework, or buying Eid clothes for the household staff should be routine activities for men as well. Once we have been absolved of the guilt of “neglecting” the home because our partners are taking care of it, chances of us getting the same pay as our male colleagues will be higher.

Stereotypes of what a woman should be like and how capable she is are alive and kicking all over the world. This is not just a “typical woman’s rant”. This is actually the conclusion of a survey by the UNDP’s Gender Social Norms Index, which found that, globally, almost 90 percent of men and women have fundamental biases against women.

While this may be the ultimate income equaliser, there are cases where, even when the organisation recognises the worth of a female employee’s work, they may still pay her less – mainly because they can get away with doing so. Most women don’t know what their male counterparts are getting and many are too embarrassed to speak up about it even if they do. Women, moreover, seldom bargain for a raise or promotion. So it is up to the employers – male

or female – to ensure that there is no discrimination in pay between men and women employees with the same credentials.

But what about politics? Why is it that only 10 percent of heads of state are women and 22 percent have ministerial posts? Again, it is a question of perception and social norms. Which is why there are so many women at the highest seats of power (member of parliament or prime minister) in countries such as Sweden, Slovenia, and Norway with lower biases or gendered social norms.

Bangladesh seems to be quite a conundrum when it comes to political empowerment. We have had a woman in the highest seat of power for the last three decades and dozens of women ministers, along with the selected 50 seats for women members of parliament. Clearly both men and women in Bangladesh are quite comfortable about having a woman at the highest seat of power, something that is not present even in some of the most advanced countries. But when it comes to women in local government (in Bangladesh), even for the few who are elected, their power and resources are nowhere near that of their male counterparts. Gender biases and social norms are at play here, creating roadblocks for women

politicians at the local government level.

Overriding all these impediments to realising our potential is violence, which is a direct consequence of this secondary status of women. Violence is used to “control” women and keep them in their place. In Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, the high rates of sexual and physical violence against women and girls are a result of this desire to keep women oppressed. In these countries, age-old cultural norms have been incorporated into religious practices, thus accentuating the secondary status of women and emphasising their role as primarily mothers and homemakers. Often, religion is conveniently interpreted to deprive women of employment, financial independence, and education, and prevent them from escaping violence. Thus, despite the efforts of governments to adopt pro-women policies, a patriarchal culture and interpretations of religion dominate and nullify endeavours to empower women. In Bangladesh, despite its advances in enrolment of girls in schools, there is a high dropout rate at the secondary level because many female students are married off early as child marriage is a part of our cultural norms.

There is enough empirical evidence from all over the world to show how a society benefits when women are granted equal rights and equal access to opportunities. Women bring to the table greater empathy, communication skills, ability to endure and survive the most devastating realities; they are good at diffusing conflict, they are more intuitive, and great at crisis management. In a world that is haunted by apocalyptic fates due to uncontrolled climate change, unrelenting pandemics, and constant armed conflicts that massacre millions of people, it is time men shoved aside their irrational fear and let the women in – to share both their burden and their power. It is the only way to heal the battered, wounded world we live in.