

ANISUR RAHMAN

Farewell to a fellow traveler

REHMAN SOBHAN

Coming of age

Anisur Rahman and I have traveled together across the troubled landscape of Bangladesh's history over many years. We first came together in October 1957, when we were recruited as teachers by Professor M.N. Huda, then the Chairman of the Economics Department at Dhaka University (DU). Amongst his contemporaries, Anis was clearly the best-equipped to be an economist of distinction. He commanded formidable theoretical skills, underwritten by a creative mind, which enabled him to produce academic work of considerable originality. His Ph.D. thesis was a theoretical work dedicated to addressing the issue of regional disparity, which was deemed by his supervisor at Harvard to be of a level worthy of publication as an article in one of the profession's most prestigious journals, the *Quarterly Journal of Economics (QJE)*.

From an early age at the Economics Department, Anis engaged himself with social and political issues where he could use his skills as an economist to add value and quality to the public debates on regional economic disparity, which dominated the public discourse. When Anis returned from Harvard in 1961, equipped with a Ph.D., he was elevated to a Readership in the Economics Department.

In those days, along with Nurul Islam, Anis, Abu Mahmood, and me, the Economics Department served as a major source of comment and dissent on the issues of regional disparity, social injustice, and the political economy of policymaking under the cantonment-based regime of Field Marshal Ayub Khan. Nurul was invited to be a member of the Finance and Price Commissions set up by the central government, while Abu Mahmood, Anis, and I wrote on a variety of issues in the newspapers of that period. It was not surprising that the Economics Department of DU was viewed by the Ayub regime and its local satrap, Monem Khan, as a hotbed of subversion against the Pakistani state. The regime's hostility to the Economics Department culminated in a physical assault on its then Chairman, Abu Mahmood, by a group of hoodlums associated with a government-patronized student party, the National Students Federation (NSF).

Anis believed that there was little scope for serious academic work within such a poisonous atmosphere in DU and so moved abroad on a fellowship to Yale University and eventually resigned from his position at Dhaka University. When Anis chose to return to Pakistan, he was not inclined to return to Dhaka University. Along with Professor Wahidul Haque, who was then teaching at the University of Toronto, Anis accepted a position as a Professor of Economics at Islamabad University, where he and Wahid together built the Economics Department into a faculty of recognized quality.

In this position, Anis could reach out to some of the brightest graduates of the Economics Department at DU, such as Wahiduddin Mahmud, S.R. Osmany, and Atiqur Rahman, among others, who moved to Islamabad to study for a master's degree in Economics under his tutorship.

Political engagement

During the last days of the Ayub regime, at the fateful Round Table Conference (RTC) in Islamabad in February 1969, which was attended by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, he invited Anis, Wahidul, and Nurul Islam to advise him during the negotiations. This was perhaps Anis' first encounter with Bangabandhu and, through him, with national politics. While some of us economists wrote and spoke on the politically incendiary issue of regional disparity, we remained academics. I had been more engaged with the political process through my relationship with H.S. Suhrawardy and, through him, with Bangabandhu, who had eventually invited Kamal Hossain and me to contribute to the preparation of the AL manifesto for the National Elections in 1964. But this was an episodic occasion. My more substantive engagement in the political process really dates from 1969, when Nurul Islam, Anis, and I were invited by Bangabandhu and Tajuddin Ahmed to become more directly involved with the democratic and nationalist struggle.

Whilst still teaching at Islamabad, Anis joined Kamal Hossain, Nurul Islam, and me to prepare the election manifesto of the AL for the 1970 elections. Anis and Wahidul Huq eventually moved to Dhaka University to join the Economics Department as Professors, where Anis could more actively engage himself in the struggle. He wrote a number of influential articles in *Forum*, a weekly set

up by Kamal, Hamida Hossain, and me, where he discussed the economic policy options for a forthcoming elected government in a self-ruled Bangladesh.

In the post-election period, Bangabandhu again invited Anis, Nurul, me, Sarwar Murshid, and Muzaffar Ahmad Chowdhury to advise him on how to incorporate the Six Points into the draft of the constitution being prepared by AL, which would underwrite the agenda for self-rule for the Bengalis, for presentation at the forthcoming meeting of the Constitutional Assembly scheduled to be convened in Dhaka in March 1971.

The sine die postponement by General Yahya Khan of the convening of the Assembly provided a clear signal that self-rule could not be attained peacefully within a United Pakistan and set the stage for the liberation war. The month of March 1971 witnessed a massive political mobilization across Bangladesh, which had few equals across the post-colonial world in contemporary history. Not only did all segments of the population in Bangladesh—public, official, and business—withdraw their cooperation from the government of Pakistan, but they pledged their allegiance to Bangabandhu, entrusting him with the responsibility to run the government. During this historic month, Bangladesh emerged de facto as an independent nation-state under the leadership of Bangabandhu.

Whilst negotiations were eventually initiated between Yahya and Mujib to seek a peaceful resolution to the crisis,

Anis was convinced, along with many others, that during the month of March, the Pakistan army was preparing for an impending massacre of the people of Bangladesh. He wrote letters to his many professional colleagues abroad, alerting them to such a prospective genocide and encouraging them to speak out against this impending atrocity.

Both Anis and I have written, in our respective memoirs, of our adventures in traveling out of Bangladesh following the military aggression on an independent Bangladesh, our encounters with the Indian leadership and Tajuddin Ahmed, the first Prime Minister of an independent Bangladesh, and our eventual engagement with the liberation struggle in 1971. During this period, Anis moved to the US, where he had been invited by Williams College in Massachusetts to serve as a visiting Professor. During this time, he periodically took time off to campaign for an independent Bangladesh along with the entire probashi Bangali community then active in the US. I was assigned by Tajuddin Ahmed to campaign for stopping global foreign aid to Pakistan, which engaged me throughout 1971 in the US, UK, and France. During this period, Anis invited me to give a lecture at Williams College on the Bangladesh liberation struggle. He then informed me that, as an act of solidarity with the freedom fighters, he slept on the floor throughout the war.

Planning for the people

Following the liberation of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971, Anis immediately opted to return to Bangladesh and expected to resume his teaching position at Dhaka University. Bangabandhu frustrated this idea by insisting that Anis join Nurul Islam and me in setting up the Planning Commission and work with him in the challenge of constructing a 'socialist' Bangladesh committed to building a just and inclusive society. In this task, we were joined by Mosharraf Hossain. Both Mosharraf and Anis were skeptical about the idea of building such a progressive society within the prevailing political dispensation, but they decided to accept the challenge.

I have written in the second volume of my memoir, *Untranquil Recollections: From Dawn to Darkness*, about the varying approaches of the four Members of the Planning Commission toward their responsibilities in government. Among the four of us, Anis was in many ways more emotionally involved with the idea of social change and was perhaps the most idealistic of his colleagues. He came into the Commission with misgivings, as he was not fully convinced that the ruling party really wanted change. However, once inside, he believed that they could be educated to take up the most radical positions.

He strongly believed in the importance of our leaders practising austerity in their lifestyles to set an example to the people who were themselves facing hardships. Among other suggestions, Anis proposed that the Prime Minister and his colleagues, including the Members of the Planning Commission, should get rid of their official cars and ride to their offices on bicycles. This may have been a good idea since the cars made available to the Ministers and the Planning Commission were hardly roadworthy. My own official

vehicle, an ancient Land Rover, periodically broke down at public functions, much to my embarrassment. The Planning Commission declined to allocate public

funds for purchasing new cars for official use due to the need for budgetary austerity.

Anis argued that the Planning Commission should present the Cabinet with broad policy guidelines for constructing a more just society and should secure their commitment to these positions. Since the Ministers were rarely inclined to put themselves into confrontation with their rhetorical radicalism, it was hardly possible for Anis to secure categorical responses from the Cabinet or PM to such generalized proposals.

Anis, however, lacked the inclination to work out his policy recommendations in detail. The process of studying the files or holding inter-ministerial consultations needed to prepare projects to operationalize his ideas was something he found profoundly tedious. In the first six months, as the Member in charge of the General Economics Division, he involved himself in much of the detailed work associated with budgeting, including the preparation of the First Annual Plan. He prepared a document that was both informative and self-critical, which is today unusual for a government publication. He was also associated with the work of the Committee on Agrarian Reform, set up by the Planning Commission under the leadership of Mosharraf Hossain, and helped in the drafting of the final report. Little came out of this progressive initiative by the Commission, but we received an education on the political economy underlying such reforms. Such a lesson may need to be learned by the Interim Government, led by

government titled, *The Lost Moment*.

Frustrated by the lack of response from the regime to

his ideas, Anis began involving himself in an initiative to engage his students at Dhaka University in village uplift work, which gradually took up more of his time. When he eventually resigned from the Commission in November 1973, he had for some time before virtually ceased to be a Member. He, however, did associate himself with the First Plan, which was prepared by the Commission in a record time of one year. Though he did not participate in its formulation, he made a number of useful

comments on various sections, which were incorporated into the Plan. The document, which was finally presented to the Cabinet in the last quarter of 1973, had his approval and carried his signature. The First Plan remains a landmark document on the possibilities and preconditions for social change in Bangladesh at that time.

Following the publication of the Plan, Mosharraf Hossain resigned from the Planning Commission at the end of 1973 and joined the Economics Department of Dhaka University as a Professor. I resigned from the Commission in September 1974 and took over as President of BIDS. Nurul Islam took leave from the Commission in 1975 and moved to Nuffield College, Oxford, where he remained until he joined the FAO in 1976.

The tensions within

Some months prior to the assassination of Bangabandhu on August 15, 1975, Anis was invited to participate in a research project at the Asian Development Institute (ADI) in Bangkok. He was, thus, in Bangkok on August 15. Whatever his differences with Bangabandhu on policy, he remained a great admirer and was deeply shocked at the

pantheon. However, he discovered from his field experience that the fate of the disenfranchised could hardly be changed by UN advisors, however deeply motivated they were. He recognized that he needed to be engaged on the ground, accepting all the risks and discomforts associated with any enterprise for social change if he was to have an impact on improving the lives of the disempowered.

By the time Anis retired from the ILO, he had become disenchanted with the discipline of economics and refused to be categorized as an economist. Back in Bangladesh, now in his 60s, Anis joined one of his close friends and colleagues in the UN, Shamsul Bari, to establish Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB), where he could propagate the philosophy of PORP by encouraging self-directed research on and among some of the least privileged communities in Bangladesh. However, this was no substitute for fully re-engaging himself with his earlier aspirations of changing the lives of the underprivileged.

This contradiction within Anis—of wanting to work for and with the *shorbohora* but never being able to sacrifice his middle-class compulsions to prioritize his family needs and to continue to live a life, however austere compared to the new middle class of Dhaka—could never be reconciled by him. Sadly, such contradictions are not unique to Anis and apply to a wider constituency of left-wing intellectuals in Bangladesh, who have moved away from the austere lifestyles once practiced by the left in South Asia in an earlier era.

Fortunately, Anis could redirect some of his frustrations as a social reformer through his passionate commitment to the works of Rabindranath Tagore, particularly *Rabindra Sangeet*. In Geneva, Anis served as the cultural guru who brought the resident Bengalis together every Sunday to enjoy the practice of *Rabindra Sangeet* and to preserve links with their cultural roots. Anis retained his commitment to the Bard, continued to practice *Rabindra Sangeet* at a level where he could periodically give public recitals, and eventually wrote a scholarly volume of some originality on modes of singing *Rabindra Sangeet*, which put him into fierce contestation with traditionalists at Chhayanaut, such as Waheedur Rahman and Sanjida Khatun. He was eventually associated with and co-edited a scholarly volume with Muchkund Dubey and Imtiaz Ahmed, commemorating the birth centenary of Tagore.

A sad farewell

Anis lived a highly disciplined life wherever he was. I had the occasion to experience his lifestyle when I was invited by Dr. Manmohan Singh at the end of 1989 to spend two months with him in Geneva at the South Commission, working to prepare a report on reforming the global economy from the perspective of the South. During my time in Geneva, Anis insisted that I stay with him in his small apartment outside the city. His wife, Dora, was away in the US with her daughters but had carefully packaged and labeled meals for us to last two months.

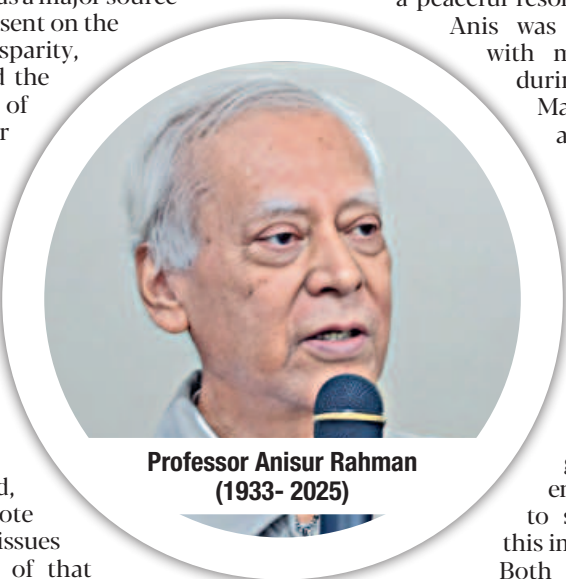
During my stay, I shared Anis' disciplined lifestyle, which meant rising at 6:00 am, departing for work in Geneva at 7:00 am, taking an evening walk with him along the lakefront—where I could never keep up with his brisk pace—having an early dinner, and retiring to bed by 10:00 pm. Saturdays were devoted to marketing, and Sundays to *Rabindra Sangeet*. I cannot claim to have faithfully adhered to this monk-like lifestyle, as my own way of life is constructed on more anarchic terms. However, I can certainly say that I emerged in better health after my two months with Anis, during which I came to more fully appreciate his disciplined and principled approach to life.

Ironically, such a disciplined and healthy lifestyle should have rewarded Anis with a long, healthy, and comfortable life. But, sadly, Anis developed a severe case of diabetes. This required an even more disciplined lifestyle and dietary pattern, but it did little to contain the seriousness of his disease.

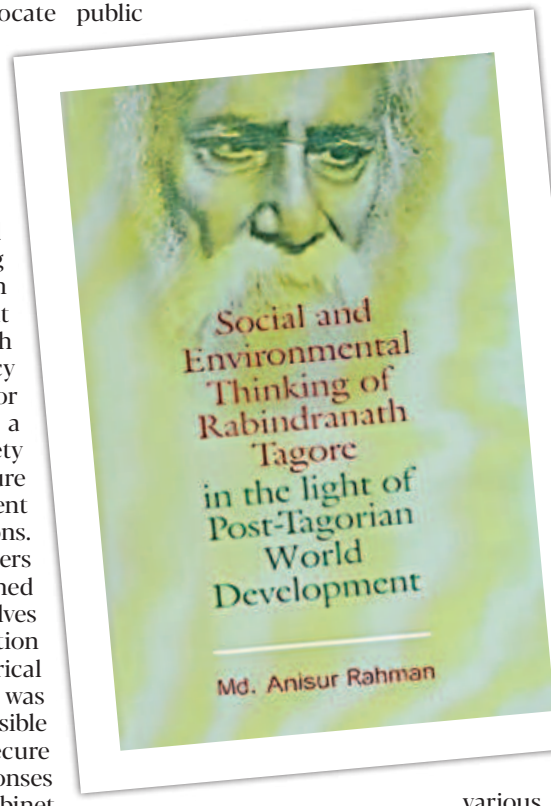
The stroke that silenced and immobilized his wife, Dora—also a dear friend of Rounaq and me—appeared to have had a life-changing impact on Anis. Dora was Anis' great love and life support. He spent the last few years of Dora's life sitting by her side, but she never recovered from her stroke. When she eventually passed away, Anis went into a state of decline and eventual withdrawal from the world. His last years, lying silently in bed in his apartment in Segun Bagicha, cut off from the world, with no family members around and looked after by aides, provided a sad end to one of Bangladesh's most committed and talented sons.

I hope that the memory of Anisur Rahman can be revived and immortalized through the compilation and publication of his diverse body of work across disciplines, and that an accurate and insightful account of his services to Bangladesh and Bengali culture can be faithfully recorded and shared with posterity.

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Professor Anisur Rahman (1933-2025)



Prof. Yunus, in setting out to implement its reform agenda.

Anis remained frustrated with the details of administration. The lack of response to his policy guidelines, his own growing unease at being involved in a regime that he believed to be indifferent to the compulsion for social change, led to his progressive withdrawal from the day-to-day work of the Commission.

From February 1973, Anis returned to his job as a Professor of Economics at Dhaka University, but he continued to remain a part-time Member of the Planning Commission. In this position, he attended meetings of the Commission, Cabinet meetings, and meetings with the Prime Minister, who was now Chairman of the Commission.

Anis eventually took to writing a series of policy papers designed for the eyes of the Prime Minister. In this task, he had the concurrence of the Commission. In these papers, Anis gave expression to his philosophy and expectations for promoting change through the government. Whenever he prepared one of his visionary papers for giving direction to the economy and society, he requested Nurul, as Deputy Chairman, to pass it directly to the Prime Minister. Anis occasionally sought a bilateral meeting with the Prime Minister to persuade him to move on his proposals. It is not clear to what extent the Prime Minister responded to these ideas, but from the revealed actions of his regime, it would appear that little was done on Anis' recommendations. Anis has put all his missives to the Prime Minister on record in a volume published by him about his days in

killings in Road 32. He was further disturbed by the jail killings on November 3 of the four leaders of the Mujibnagar government of 1971—Tajuddin Ahmad, Nazrul Islam, Mansur Ali, and Qamruzzaman—and took the fateful decision not to return to Bangladesh. He moved from Bangkok to the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in Sussex on a fellowship but eventually took up a more permanent position at the ILO in Geneva towards the end of 1976 and remained in Geneva until his eventual retirement in 1990. Mosharraf Hossain and I joined Nurul Islam in Oxford at the beginning of 1976, but we eventually returned to Dhaka in 1979.

In effect, Anis remained in a state of self-exile from Bangladesh for around 15 years. As with Nurul Islam, who also permanently exiled himself from Bangladesh after August 1975, Anis was never comfortable with his status as an exile because his heart remained in Bangladesh. However, both Nurul and Anis felt obligated to their respective families and particularly their children to ensure them a stable, tension-free life with prospects for a good education.

Anis never quite exorcised the tension from his consciousness over his abandonment of Bangladesh in favor of living a secure family life abroad. At the ILO, he did not occupy a very senior position worthy of his talents but sought to assuage his conscience by working on issues related to the self-empowerment of the resource-deprived all over the world. His pioneering work at the ILO on people-oriented research programmes (PORP) earned him a niche in the ILO policy