

90TH BIRTHDAY OF SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

# Interrogating power, envisioning emancipation



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**AZFAR HUSSAIN**

Serajul Islam Choudhury turns 90 today. "Life is all about enjoying work," he said on his eightieth birthday, a deceptively simple line from a man whose lifelong labour—epic in both dimension and direction—has been nothing short of monumental. At 90, he is still remarkably active, while standing out as our foremost intellectual and literary-cultural critic—one whose productivity, passion, and political commitment have few parallels in the country. As a teacher, writer, editor, columnist, historian, translator, activist, public speaker, and even organiser, Choudhury has sustained an intellectual—and politically engaged—struggle that is as rigorous as it is radical. He has authored as many as 115 books and countless articles in both Bangla and English. His work does not merely interpret the world; it is involved in the struggle to change it.

A direct teacher of mine in the English Department at Dhaka University, Choudhury shaped my intellectual formation in more ways than I can count. But beyond the personal, he continues to serve as a committed thinker and writer rooted in the

formalist insularity of New Criticism and instead insisting that literature is never autonomous from the material world. Literature, in his view, is a contested site—a space of ideological struggle, shaped by and shaping the socio-political forces of its time. Choudhury is perhaps the first Bangladeshi critic to propose and practice what he himself calls "the social grammar of literature"—a formulation that draws simultaneously on the dialectics of the social and an acute sense of historical specificity.

What makes this approach so generative is its commitment to interdisciplinarity—not as academic fashion but as an intellectual and political imperative for understanding and transforming the world. Drawing on history, culture, social studies and politics, and even political economy, Choudhury has exemplarily demonstrated how literature emerges from, and participates in, the dense and often antagonistic textures of lived experience. His readings of canonical figures like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra

rather, he interrogates. Even when criticising canonical giants like Rabindranath or Sarat, Choudhury recognises their brilliance and contributions while subjecting them to rigorous ideological scrutiny. He politicises the aesthetic without aestheticising politics.

In many of his seminal works—such as *Bangla Goddyer Samajik Byakaron*, *Sreni Somoy Sahityo*, and *Rabindranath Keno Joruri*—Choudhury compellingly

distorts of developmentalist rhetoric, the failures of our colonial education system, the indifference to political responsibility, and the legacy of the October Revolution. These essays also unmask the cultural contours of capitalism—its capacity to uproot people, commodify life, destroy environment, and normalise violence. Choudhury sees clearly that capitalism is not only a global economic system but also a cultural regime—a way of

cultural erasure—that structure them. He has been anti-fascist precisely because he is anti-capitalist, having long recognised the fascist tendencies of capitalism pushed to its extremes. He views the liberation struggle of 1971 as our most defining and most glorious achievement without diminishing the significance of the unprecedented July uprising of 2024 in Bangladesh.

And for him the question of style is not merely an aesthetic but a political question. His prose is lucid, forceful, evocative—at once intellectually substantial, immensely readable, and thus widely accessible. He does not write for a small coterie of academics; he writes for the people. His language grips, moves, and provokes. It is, in the deepest sense, a democratic language—one that makes knowledge available, not arcane.

Despite the sheer breadth of his work—from the ancient Greeks to Bangladesh's working-class and peasant struggles, from Socrates to Sophocles to Shakespeare to Said, from Beowulf to Bhasani—Choudhury's focus remains unwavering: the production of oppositional knowledge for the purposes of liberation. In his magisterial *Jatiyotabad*, *Sampradayikata o Janoganer Mukti*, he surveys vast historical terrain only to return again and again to one central question: How do we free ourselves—from communalism, from capitalism, and from its highest stage, imperialism?

Even now Serajul Islam Choudhury continues to teach, speak, write, and organise. He already initiated a forum for socialist intellectuals in Dhaka—a powerful reminder that the work of liberation is never done—as he's a convener of Bangladesh's National Palestine Solidarity Committee. In a world where the tyranny of capital is as much economic as cultural, Choudhury remains among the few who persistently connect the dots—between aesthetics and ideology, between language and labour, between everyday life and planetary injustice. Serajul Islam Choudhury is, in the truest and fullest sense of the word, an intellectual—one who intervenes in the world with the intent to remake it. And for those of us who have learned from him, worked with him, or merely read him with care, Choudhury remains not only a teacher but a source of inexhaustible inspiration. As the Latin American poet Otto René Castillo put it, it is beautiful "to love the world with eyes that have not yet been born." Serajul Islam Choudhury's work continues to help us imagine those eyes—and the worlds they might one day see. I wish my teacher a happy birthday and a life ever more filled with love and light and laughter.



**Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury.**

FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

**Serajul Islam Choudhury redefined the very act of literary criticism in Bangladesh. He did so by emphatically eschewing the formalist insularity of New Criticism and instead insisting that literature is never autonomous from the material world. Literature, in his view, is a contested site—a space of ideological struggle, shaped by and shaping the socio-political forces of its time.**

people's struggles, offering a steady stream of critical interventions across literature, culture, history, and politics, all while persistently aligning himself with those cast to the margins—peasants, workers, women, indigenous communities, and the oppressed in all their forms. Indeed, to read Choudhury's writing is to encounter a relentless resistance to different forms and forces of oppression, and a deep, unyielding belief in the possibility—and necessity—of human emancipation.

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Chattopadhyay, Kazi Nazrul Islam, and Jibanananda Das—to mention but a few—are not just literary interpretations; they are ideological engagements, full of contestations over class, culture, gender, and power.

In this regard, Choudhury's work has inaugurated an entire school of what we might call *oppositional criticism*—criticism that neither genuflects before literary canon nor shies away from exposing the reactionary undercurrents within otherwise celebrated authors. Yet he is never dismissive. His critical gaze is sharp, but never cynical. He does not unthinkingly deify nor hastily demonise;

demonstrates how literary texts encode the contradictions of their historical conjunctures. These texts not only reveal the deep imbrications of culture with class but also indicate literature's potential role in building emancipatory consciousness. For Choudhury, literature is, of course, to be enjoyed or admired; but it is also to be mobilised.

But literature is only one of Choudhury's many battlegrounds. His literary criticism consistently morphs into cultural criticism, and here again, his project is avowedly political. In Choudhury's analysis, culture is never confined to the arts—it encompasses the totality of lived human practices, from everyday rituals to structures of feeling. And this culture, too, is a terrain of struggle—a site where ideologies contend, where the dominant seeks to naturalise itself, and where the oppressed also resist.

Take, for instance, his collection *Pa Rakhi Kothay*, in which Choudhury turns his attention to issues as varied as the

organising desire, aspiration, perception, and language. In response, he calls for a culture of resistance, one that not only criticises the existing order of things but envisions alternative futures. For him, the alternative is socialism. He is our major socialist writer.

Choudhury must also be acknowledged as a sociologist of the everyday. Through his once-nationally-popular columns such as "Somoy Bohiya Jay" and his editorial work with journals like *Notun Diganta* and—earlier—*Saptahik Somoy*, Choudhury brought intellectual rigour to the seemingly ordinary. He has a remarkable capacity to zoom in on what may appear trivial—a conversation on the street, a piece of political rhetoric, a ritual at home—and extract from it insights into the structures of power that shape our lives. He understands that the truth of a society often lies in its smallest ostensibly insignificant details. And in exposing those details, he never loses sight of the larger systemic forces—class exploitation, state repression, patriarchal domination,

## Can Bangladesh feed its projected 22 crore population by 2050?



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**MOHAMMAD KAMRUZZAMAN MILON**

Rice is at the heart of Bangladesh's economy, culture, and food system. It is not just a staple food, it is the very foundation of national food security and rural livelihoods. With more than 40 million tonnes produced annually and consumed by nearly every household, rice is woven into the social and economic fabric of the nation. Over the past five decades, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in ensuring rice self-sufficiency. From 9.77 million metric tonnes in 1971-72, production surged to 40.6 million metric tonnes in 2022-23 due to advances in varietal development, irrigation, and farm-level extension.

But as the country looks ahead to 2050, this success story faces serious threats. Climate change, a shrinking labour force, land degradation, and rising demand from a projected population of 22 crore—all point towards a future where business-as-usual will no longer suffice.

To meet these challenges, the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) has developed a bold and forward-looking Perspective Plan 2050. This strategic vision lays out a comprehensive approach to secure Bangladesh's rice sector for the next generation. It recognises that sustainability, resilience, and innovation must drive the future of rice production—not just yield and acreage. The core message is clear: if Bangladesh is to continue feeding its people and supporting its economy, it must radically transform how it produces rice, starting now.

One of the most immediate and pressing threats to rice production is climate change. BRRI's Perspective Plan outlines in stark terms how rising temperatures, unpredictable rainfall, and extreme weather events will increasingly disrupt the country's agricultural calendar. Climate models project that by 2050, Bangladesh could experience between 120 and 150 days each year with maximum temperatures exceeding 35 degrees Celsius. Similarly, the number of tropical nights—when the minimum temperature stays above 26 degrees Celsius—may rise to more than 200 nights annually. These conditions are highly detrimental to rice cultivation, particularly during critical growth stages. High daytime temperatures during panicle initiation and flowering can cause spikelet sterility, leading to yield losses of up to 50 percent. Night-time heat, on the other hand, interferes with the plant's ability to transfer energy, increasing respiration and reducing grain filling. According to studies cited in BRRI's plan, a single-degree Celsius increase in night temperature can cut rice yields by seven to 10 percent.

These alarming projections underscore the need for climate-adaptive strategies. BRRI's plan proposes a range of interventions, including the development of heat, drought, and salinity-tolerant rice varieties; the introduction of early warning systems and crop advisory tools; and the improvement of water management practices to help farmers adapt to erratic rainfall and rising temperatures. Such

adaptation is not optional—it is essential for preserving national food security in the face of environmental uncertainty.

But climate change is not the only factor that will shape the future of rice in Bangladesh. Demographic and economic trends are also reshaping the agricultural workforce. As of 2024, approximately 35 percent of the country's labour force remains engaged in agriculture. However,

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this share is projected to fall dramatically to around 8 percent by 2050, as more young people migrate to cities and take up jobs in manufacturing, services, or abroad. This demographic shift poses a significant risk to traditional, labour-intensive farming systems. With fewer hands available in the field, productivity may decline unless urgent steps are taken to mechanise and modernise rice production.

To address this challenge, the BRRI Perspective Plan sets an ambitious target: 80 percent mechanisation of rice cultivation by 2050. This transformation would cover all major operations—from land preparation and seedling transplanting to harvesting

and drying. Mechanised farming can dramatically reduce labour requirements, cut production costs, and improve timeliness—all of which are essential to remain competitive and sustainable. But mechanisation must be inclusive and accessible. For that, policies must support smallholder farmers in acquiring or accessing machinery, either through credit schemes, farmer cooperatives, or rural service providers. There must also be investment in training programmes to build the skills of machine operators, technicians, and youth entrepreneurs in rural areas. Mechanisation is not just about technology—it is about creating a new ecosystem for modern, efficient agriculture.

Another pillar of the Perspective Plan 2050 is genetic innovation. BRRI's plan emphasises the need to accelerate breeding programmes through speed breeding, genomic selection, and digital phenotyping. These advanced tools can shorten the breeding cycle and deliver high-yielding, resilient varieties tailored to specific ecologies. BRRI has already released 115 modern varieties, including 27 that are nutritionally enhanced with zinc, iron, and antioxidants. These varieties offer not only yield advantages but also public health benefits, helping to combat micronutrient deficiencies that affect millions of Bangladeshis. In a future shaped by climate extremes and dietary transitions, nutritional security will be just as important as caloric security.

In addition to innovation in genetics and machinery, the Perspective Plan identifies opportunities to expand rice production by improving cropping intensity and utilising underused agroecological zones. Large tracts of land in coastal, char, and fallow areas remain underutilised. BRRI proposes that by adjusting cropping patterns—introducing short-duration Aus rice between major seasons or integrating rice with pulses and oilseeds—Bangladesh

could harvest an additional four million tonnes of rice annually. This increase would not require more land, just smarter use of existing resources.

Post-harvest management is also a key focus of the plan. Significant quantities of rice are lost each year due to inefficient harvesting, drying, and storage practices. These losses represent not just wasted food but lost income for farmers and higher prices for consumers. By investing in post-harvest mechanisation, improved milling technology, and cold storage facilities, Bangladesh can reduce losses, improve grain quality, and strengthen the entire value chain. Moreover, developing branded, value-added rice products—such as aromatic or fortified rice—could open up new domestic and export markets, improving farmer profitability and consumer nutrition alike.

A major strength of the BRRI Perspective Plan is its recognition that resilience must be embedded throughout the rice system. The plan anticipates not only climate variability but also shocks such as cyclones, floods, market disruptions, and pandemics like Covid. Building resilience requires strong seed systems, farmer safety nets, crop insurance, and decentralised supply chains. It also means developing institutions that can respond rapidly to emergencies, communicate effectively with farmers, and coordinate action across different sectors.

None of this will be possible without cross-sector collaboration. The Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Planning, and the Ministry of Finance must align their strategies and investments with BRRI's vision. Development partners, NGOs, and private firms must be brought in to scale technologies, deliver services, and invest in rural infrastructure. At the heart of it all, farmers—especially smallholders, women, and youth—must be engaged not just as beneficiaries but as co-creators of change. The road to 2050 is long, but the time to act is now.