

# REMEMBERING BADRUDDIN UMAR

## An inspiring scholar



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I had the privilege of getting acquainted with Badruddin Umar through the courtesy of Prof Abdur Razzaq. Our initial interaction was through writings. I remember in 1964 when my MA results came out, though I secured a first class and the year before I also earned a first class in my BA (Hons) examination, I had no prospects of immediate employment as I was told that there was no vacancy in the Department of Political Science at Dhaka University. Prof Razzaq then asked me to write to Badruddin Umar, who was then trying to set up the Department of Political Science at Rajshahi University. I wrote to Umar and he immediately wrote back to me, offering me a lecturer's position at Rajshahi. His letter was a great morale booster for me as my sense of self-esteem was fast eroding after months of unemployment.

But before I could depart for Rajshahi, another piece of good news came. I was selected as one of the five students of the then East Pakistan as a recipient of a three-year state scholarship for higher studies abroad. I decided to accept the scholarship and went to Harvard for my PhD. Though I did not join Rajshahi University, Badruddin Umar's kind offer of a position in the faculty restored my self-confidence, which was very much needed before I embarked on my challenging journey in pursuit of higher studies abroad.

My next encounter with Umar was, again, through his writings, this time his three books—*Sampradayikata* (1966), *Sanskritir Sankat* (1967), and *Sanskritik Sampradayikata* (1968). These three books, which I collected when I came to Dhaka in 1968 for field research, helped me greatly in understanding the evolution of the Bangalee nationalist identity in the 1950s and 1960s. I used Umar's arguments when I wrote my

that facts and figures are not simply neutral, that they should be looked at through a class lens. I have tried to keep this message in mind. In my own writings, I have tried to explore the influence of economic and social factors on determining the course of political developments.

After I returned to Bangladesh in 1972, I was asked to write the year-end review of the newly born nation-state for the journal *Asian Survey* for 1972 and later 1973. Again, I found Badruddin Umar's writings to be very instructive. In the year-end review of 1972 published at the *Asian Survey* in February 1973, I wrote about the critiques of the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh. I used arguments from two of Umar's writings published at the *Holiday*. The first article was titled "The Proposed Constitution: A Fundamental Measure Against Socialism, Democracy, Nationalism and Secularism" (*Holiday*, October 22, 1972). The second article was titled "A Constitution for Perpetual Emergency" (*Holiday*, October 29, 1972).

In my review of Bangladesh's politics in 1973, which was published in the *Asian Survey* in February 1974, I again used one of Umar's articles to elaborate the various critiques of the Awami League (AL) regime. This article was titled "The Political Significance of the Emergency Provisions," (*Holiday*, September 23, 1973). At that time, Badruddin Umar was the most vocal and articulate critic of the AL regime. I always looked forward to reading his commentaries on current events and used some of his arguments in my own writings.

In 1970, Umar published his path-breaking book on the Language Movement titled *Purbobanglar Bhasha Andolon O Totkalin Rajniti*, which was an eye-opener to all of us. His detailed and meticulous research and especially the innovative method of using Tajuddin Ahmad's diaries showed us how research on our history can be undertaken. What is amazing is that Umar did this monumental research alone, without any financial support or support of any research assistant.

source of research for other scholars.

I had the pleasure of meeting Badruddin Umar personally for the first time in 1972 at a lunch at Prof Razzaq's house. Between 1972 and 1975, and later between 1977 and 1982, I used to meet Umar and his wife Suraiya frequently at lunch either at Prof Razzaq's or at Prof Mosharraf Hossain's house.

Though Umar was a fierce critic of people and ideas in his writings, on social occasions, I found him to be a delightful company, full of jokes and good humour, tolerating people with different political views or social backgrounds in a very civil manner. He liked good food and good conversations, which were plentiful both at Prof Razzaq's and Prof Mosharraf Hossain's lunches.

In the early 1970s, I used to regularly visit Umar, who was living in Shantinagar then, to talk about research. In addition to research on the Language Movement, Umar was also doing research on Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Since my knowledge of the history of Bengal in the 18th and 19th



Badruddin Umar (1931-2025)

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centuries was very limited, I learnt a lot about that part of history from Umar. He always had a new perspective, a new way of interpreting events. I found our conversations thought-provoking because, though I had known about the events we talked about, I had not looked at them from Umar's perspective. I came away from every visit much enriched and energised. I do not know how many people have read his two other books written at that period—*Chirosthayee Bondoboste Bangladesher Krishak* (1972) and *Ishwar Chandra Bidyasagar O Unishshotoker Bangalee Samaj* (1974). I feel these two books should also be on the must-read list of our historians.

In 1982, I left Dhaka first to work for the United Nations, and later in 1990, I joined Columbia University. From the early 1980s onwards, apart from a few selected people such as Prof Razzaq, Kamal and Hameeda Hossain, Rehman and Salma Sobhan, and Mosharraf and Inari Hossain, I gradually began to lose touch with other friends and colleagues in Bangladesh, including Badruddin Umar.

walking in Harlem, I took Umar for dinner at a restaurant which was a favourite of Columbia faculty because from there one could see the whole of the Manhattan skyline. Umar was equally pleased and at home with the refined ambience of the restaurant and took it all in his strides.

Unfortunately, in the last 20 years, when I began to spend more time in Bangladesh, I did not get to meet Umar regularly. When Prof Mosharraf Hossain was alive, he promised to take me to see Umar, who was then living in Mirpur. But somehow the visit never materialised.

Suddenly, in the last two years, I had the pleasure of meeting Umar again three times. In 2024, I met him twice, the first time at the board meeting of Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Foundation. As soon as he arrived, Umar declared loudly that he could not hear well. Hameeda Hossain, who was standing next to him, immediately said that she could not see well! Anyway, we found that Umar's mind and tongue were as sharp as before. So, we kept him busy sending written questions and he answered at length loudly and clearly. He was in a good mood and at the end of the evening he started reciting poems in English, Bangla and Urdu! It was a great and memorable evening.

I again met him at another event, which was organised by Bengal Foundation to pay tribute to Prof Razzaq. While many of us spoke seriously about Prof Razzaq, which

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PHOTO: ARCHIVE

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Harvard PhD thesis in 1969, which was later published as a book titled *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* by Columbia University Press in 1972. In my book, I acknowledged my intellectual debt to Umar's article "Mussalman Swadeshi Pratyabartan" in illuminating the role of the Language Movement in the creation of our fast-evolving nationalist movement. Umar argued that the Language Movement was not simply an elite issue, but it was a universally popular cause which helped bridge the elite-mass gap that broadened the constituency base of our nationalist struggle over two decades.

In these three groundbreaking books, in fact in all of his writings, whether on culture or on politics, Umar never failed to ground his arguments on the social and class bases of origin and development of ideas and politics.

I am not a Marxist scholar, nor do I use Marxist framework of analysis. But I have always benefited from reading Umar's writings because he has always reminded me

especially the innovative method of using Tajuddin Ahmad's diaries showed us how research on our history can be undertaken. What is amazing is that Umar did this monumental research alone, without any financial support or support of any research assistant. He also did this research when he was very actively involved in left party politics. He published three volumes of his research on Language Movement in 1970, 1975 and 1985. In his five-volume memoir titled *Amar Jibon*, published in 2004, Umar noted that he had the capacity to sit down and write in between various activities whenever he could squeeze some time. He further mentioned that perhaps spending many months in underground politics in hiding helped him to write these volumes! Umar is yet another example of a handful of South Asian political leaders who used their prison time or underground time productively to write narratives of history or personal memoirs, which can serve as an important primary

However, in the mid 1990s (I forgot the year), I heard that Umar was going to visit the US. I then invited him to give a seminar at Columbia University. Though in Bangladesh, Umar was known more as a left political party activist, internationally, he was more well-known as a researcher and writer. My historian colleagues at the South Asia Institute of Columbia University were admirers of his writings. So, we had a very lively seminar when Umar spoke.

After the seminar, I asked Umar whether he would like to see or go some places in New York. He asked me whether I could take him to see Harlem. Generally, many visitors tend to avoid going to Harlem, an area dominated by African-Americans, because of potential security risks. Since Harlem was close to Columbia, I took Umar on a walking tour to see the houses, markets, churches and the Apollo Theatre, which is a historical place for African-American entertainment. Umar was very pleased with the tour. After hours of

bored the audience and almost put them to sleep, Umar was very amusing. He woke up the audience by talking about various humorous anecdotes about his time with Prof Razzaq.

The last time I met Umar was in April 2025. We invited Umar to Rehman's 90th birthday celebrations at our place in March 2025. He could not come because of a sudden illness, but later he came to visit us with his son Sohel. We found Umar as he was before: argumentative, funny and full of humour. We wrote many questions and he answered lucidly. Among many of his comments, I still remember very clearly three things he said that evening. First, he observed that throughout his life, he had received more abuse from people of leftist orientation than those of the right! Second, he wondered about the philosophy of the new student forces who are now emerging and who had proclaimed that they were neither left nor right, but believed in the middle road. Umar said he understood what is left and what is right, but he did not understand the meaning of the middle road! Third, he told me in good humour that after spending years at Oxford, when he returned to Pakistan, two things struck him immediately, which he was not used to seeing in England. First was the abject poverty and the second was the uncivil behaviour of people on the streets!

I will miss Umar but will always remember him as a true scholar, a delightful conversationalist, and an uncompromising social activist.