



Akbar Ali Khan – A versatile scholar bureaucrat

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By *Dr. Zaidi Sattar*

Akbar Ali Khan is no more. His passing leaves a deep chasm in the intellectual firmament of Bangladesh. He served this nation for some 40 years as a civil servant, with uncompromising adherence to the fundamental principles of advancing public interest. Throughout his career, he was committed to maintaining the highest sense of honesty and integrity in public service. When the call came in 1971, he joined the freedom struggle as a young civil servant without batting an eyelid.

Dr Akbar Ali Khan may not have been tall and imposing in physical appearance. But his intellectual acumen and professional accomplishments more than compensated for such minutiae. No doubt, he stood tall amongst his peers.

To his friends and acquaintances, he was known to be a man with exceptional qualities of head and heart – being an author, historian, economist, bureaucrat, and professor in retirement. Though I did not have personal contact with him early on, I had known of him for almost 50 years, first as a co-resident of Salimullah Muslim Hall, and then as a former colleague in the civil service. He was only two years my senior in the service, but far too accomplished in thought and experience. It is in the past 30 years, when I got to know and even work with him closely, that I was able to fathom the intricacies of this extraordinary personality. I found him a man who chose not to believe in conformity. That is what made him unique in his own way.

From humble beginnings, having studied in a village school in Nabinagar (in Brahmanbaria) far away from the cities and towns, he climbed the steepest ladders of scholarship by achieving top honours (first class first in BA Honours and MA in history) from Dhaka University. In his civil service career, he started as an Assistant Commissioner in Rajshahi, then became SDO of Habiganj, from where he left to join the independence movement across the border. During the nine months of struggle, he wrote in his memoirs that every time he thought about his decision, he felt in his soul he had done the right thing by joining the War of Liberation.

After independence, he was posted as Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet, a position he declined after careful thought because the powerful MP of the district instructed him to do his own bidding while nullifying any requests from his political opponent. So early in his career, he took a stand for the principles of neutrality without fear or favour – a fundamental tenet of service all civil servants were enjoined to adhere to.

In his long civil service career, he held just about all the distinctive posts in Government – Chairman, NBR; Finance Secretary, Cabinet Secretary, World Bank Alternate Executive Director, and, finally, Finance Adviser (Minister) to the Caretaker Government of 2006. With a quiet and unassuming demeanour, he never succumbed to the common folly of a civil servant – the arrogance of power. Humility was the quintessential feature of his being. Simple living and deep thinking remained his inimitable style, driven by a relentless thirst for acquiring knowledge, from his early days as a schoolboy till his days of retirement. Gifted with an inquisitive mind, never for once did he give up the pursuit of knowledge, not while he was a civil servant, and not in retirement either, when he chose to devote time as a Professor

of Economics at BRAC University, inspiring new generations of youth.

From what I know of him, he never stopped being a voracious reader, until old age disabilities of sight and mobility caught up with him. In childhood, he had concluded that any reading of printed material was the ultimate source of knowledge. In his school days, just to read and acquire knowledge, he had a habit of rummaging through *thongas* made of newspapers and other printed materials that he would find in the *mudir dokan* of old times. To ordinary folks, that would truly fit the definition of a bookworm.

To those acquainted with his published materials, it takes little imagination to realise he is an extremely skilful writer of non-fiction. Though his busy schedule during his working life left him little time, he never failed to stock up his inventory of unfinished writings that ultimately saw light of day many years later. As a result, many of his books were actually published several years after he had completed research (often with deep insights) on the subject matter. Readers must credit him for preserving the material with care so that his views on many vital aspects of life and society could be discerned.

Thanks to his wry sense of humour, which you find laced in his writings in several books such as *Humpty Dumpty Disorder* and other *Essays, Gresham's Law and Beyond, and Ajab O Jabar Ajab Orhoniti*, readers of non-fiction will find no dearth of amusement. Like Amartya Sen wrote in his memoirs that as an adolescent growing up in Calcutta he took nothing for granted, Akbar Ali Khan followed similar principles of inquiry, always raising questions and offering his own views to share with the public on matters as diverse as history, economics, public administration, good governance, politics of the country, literature, and even not shying away from presenting his own critical insights on what was wrong with water resource management in the country. He wrote in his memoirs what his mission in life was: just living cannot be the be all and end all of life; you must learn from life. He felt that life experience was your best teacher. That is instructive for all humankind.

Akbar Ali Khan graduated with a high distinction in history, but surprisingly, he seems to have found greater interest in economics, a subject the Scottish historian, Thomas Carlyle, had sardonically dubbed the dismal science. To be transformed into a scholar and practitioner of economics and economic policy from a scholar of history is no mean achievement in a lifetime. Those of us who went through the complexity and rigour of mathematical economics

and econometrics to earn a PhD in Economics would have thought it highly improbable that a history graduate from Bangladesh could do the same. Not so for Akbar Ali Khan who, with a steely resolve, dug in the libraries of Queen's University in Canada and eventually crossed all hurdles to complete a PhD in Economics.

His grasp of economic policy became apparent when he was entrusted with the challenging responsibility of steering the National Board of Revenue (NBR) out of the economic crisis that the nation faced at the close of the 1980s. He took over as Chairman, NBR, in 1993 from his predecessor, Dr Mashiur Rahman, now the Economic Adviser to the Prime Minister, who was instrumental in launching trade policy reforms but did not stay long enough to complete the complex tasks. In 1990-91, the Bangladesh economy was coming out of a growth and balance of payments crisis. Multilateral institutions, World Bank and IMF, came in to support Bangladesh launch the deepest and most consequential economic reforms in its history – the most drastic phase of trade liberalisation.

Prior to 1991-92, the economy was not only following an inward-looking import substituting trade policy, but was burdened with some of the highest tariffs to raise revenue and shore up industrial protection. NBR was essentially the gateway for international trade, with its Customs department controlling it via regulatory and tax regimes. No matter what the Bretton Woods institutions had in mind, from his own training in economics, Akbar Ali Khan was unconvinced that the status quo in trade taxes was the right path. The goals of growth, poverty reduction, and industrialisation were going nowhere. Export-led growth, which had become the most popular development paradigm at the time, was nowhere in sight. Few people know that it was Akbar Ali Khan who steered the deepest and most radical trade liberalisation episode in Bangladesh's economic history. Following the 90s, Bangladesh was dubbed a "globaliser" among developing economies, growing faster than non-globalisers. The Bangladesh economy is still harvesting the benefits of those reforms to this day.

Akbar Ali Khan recognised, rather quickly, that it was time for radical, not cosmetic, change. It was during these crisis years that, as an international adviser, I was able to work closely with him in identifying the problems with the existing tariff structure and chalk out a road map of rationalisation for the medium-term. Though not a trade economist by specialisation, I found him sharp and quick in grasping the problem, and even quicker in coming to a decision. During his tenure at NBR, FY1993-1996, the economy experienced the deepest cut

in tariffs together with rationalisation of the tariff structure, which brought in a significant degree of uniformity and transparency so that malfeasance of customs personnel associated with a non-transparent tariff structure could be minimised. Regardless of what the critics said about “too much, too fast” trade liberalisation and the consequent loss of revenue, he remained adamant in his belief that tariff reduction was needed to open up trade that would in turn boost exports and stimulate growth, *a la export-led growth* paradigm. It is a matter of record that throughout the period of significant tariff reduction in the 1990s, customs revenue growth remained unabated. Tariff rationalisation was supplemented with a host of other measures that contributed to “trade openness” as the strategy for export-led growth.

Much of the export dynamism that the economy experienced during the past 30 years may be attributed to the radical trade reforms of the 1990s. To a large extent, rapid economic growth, poverty reduction, export growth and job creation in subsequent years had their origin in the reforms of the 1990s. Although tariff reform was only one part of the overall trade liberalisation episode that included reduction of quantitative restrictions on imports, exchange rate flexibility, current account convertibility, and so on, it was undoubtedly the most critical component.

Today, tariffs still remain high and WTO recognises Bangladesh tariffs and para-tariffs as principal instruments of trade policy. It now seems impossible to get any traction in reducing average tariffs even by a few percentage points, a measure that would reduce anti-export bias of policy and incentivise exports over domestic sales. In hindsight, I can vouch with a lot of confidence that those tariff reduction episodes of the early 1990s would not have happened sans Akbar Ali Khan. That surely makes him one of the principal architects of trade liberalisation in Bangladesh, a policy that eventually opened up the world economy to cost-competitive exports from the country, triggering an export momentum that lives on to this day, not only producing high growth but, more importantly, lifting millions out of poverty.

A principled man with the highest sense of honesty and integrity, I recall how Akbar Ali Khan struggled inwardly to find himself as head of an institution like NBR, whose personnel had earned a dubious reputation when it came to matters of honesty and integrity. He once remarked to me that it was impossible to “Repair this institution through reforms; it needed complete overhaul... better still, replacement by a completely new institution.”

Anyone who has known him knows very well that he had many distinctive humane qualities that made him unique. He was not just a scholar bureaucrat but a family man who gave a lot of time to his small close-knit family, comprising his wife, Hamim Khan; only daughter, Nehreen Khan; and his mother-in-law, likely centenarian Jahanara Begum. Sadly, he had to suffer the trauma of losing both his wife and daughter within a span of two to three years. Despite his physical disabilities and the loss of family members, he continued to write and share his deep insights about a versatile set of issues through book publications, one after another, which readers found so engaging that all of them went through multiple editions. Alas, perhaps it was his loneliness that brought down the curtain on a life so full of productivity.

The first phase of his memoirs which was recently published, titled *Purono Shei Diner Katha*, covers his life from childhood to the first few years of his civil service career – some 30 years. I believe, for the inquisitive observers, the later years (Phase 2) will contain more insight and descriptions of events of national importance, given that he held so many positions at the highest levels of government. He had even hinted that he might not reveal in his lifetime many of the events of which he had direct knowledge because of the sensitivities involved. So, like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad keeping *India Wins Freedom* under lock and key until his death, we might have to wait some time for exclusive details about certain happenings of national importance that he was unwilling to reveal. We await with baited breath to learn from his recollections of some of the best moments of his life and long career.

It has been my good fortune to have known such an outstanding personality closely for several decades and to have had the privilege of calling him Akbar Bhai for all that time.

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