To invoke Shakespeare and say that Prof. Rehman Sobhan (RS) “doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus” would probably be an exercise in rhetorical over-indulgence. But to merely point out that he remains an iconic presence in the socio-academic landscape of Bangladesh may be slightly trite and, perhaps, a bit inadequate. To put it in the form of a simple declarative statement – RS is one of the most revered scholars and consequential public intellectuals in the country since the 1960s.
The two books in my hand - one mostly a collection of his presentations, newspaper submissions and journal articles in the 1960s and early 70s in which he had boldly and provocatively identified, and challenged, the structural disparities between East and West Pakistan, the other which chronicles the memoirs of his storied and eventful life from his birth in 1935 to his joyous landing in Dhaka on December 31, 1971 –bear eloquent testimony in favour of that contention.

Among other things, his memoirs prove the fact that he possesses a phenomenal memory. Anyone who reads this will be impressed, at times perhaps overwhelmed, by the sheer range and richness of his early recollections even as a child and young adult, and the affectionate and vivid anecdotes and insights he offers. We also become aware of some fascinating aspects about him.

We understand that he was a foodie. He refers lovingly, at times longingly, to many taste experiences, and even associates important events in his life to specific foods he had eaten at that time. We realise that he was an athlete of some intensity and accomplishment. He excelled as a pugilist, ran track, played tennis, ping pong, and cricket, rode horses, and even learned to skate. He also displayed some prowess as a ballroom dancer, preferring the earthier Latin beats and rhythms of the samba and the rumba to the statelier waltz or the more casual foxtrot. He admitted that he still looks for opportunities to practice his moves in dance floors abroad, a prospect that many of his admirers find both charming and alarming. He also admits to his profound gratitude and contentment as a husband married successively to two worthy companions who were as personally talented as they were professionally distinguished.

We also learn of his ancestral origins. He was born to privilege, actually coming in to the world in an elite nursing home in Calcutta with a British doctor in attendance. From his father's side he belonged to the redoubtable Khondkars from Murshidabad, from his mother's side to the illustrious Dhaka Nawab family and the aristocratic Sheikhs of Lucknow. Financial wherewithal, political influence, social standing and an intricate network of supportive connections(including mysterious land grants and sundry sources of revenue),came naturally to this class.
The education he received at St. Paul's in Darjeeling (where he was sent when he was only seven), Aitchison College in Lahore, and Cambridge, was intended to produce a “smart” generalist with dignified manners, sound practical sense and cultivated tastes (in other words, a pucca brown sahib), prepared for suitable service in the upper echelons of government administration, international entities, or family business. The word “destiny” sounds too deterministic, “entitlement” too feudal, but that was essentially the path that was encouraged, if not dictated, by his heritage and training (in fact, most of his classmates, including his younger brother, followed that route). But RS flouted that expectation and, fortunately for us, followed his own calling and inner compulsions.

After completing his economics tripos at Cambridge, he made two crucial decisions. The first was to seek a life dedicated to intellectual excellence and public service, the second, to move to East Pakistan. The first was mildly surprising but could, at least partially, be explained by the fact that he had always been a clever and enterprising student, and had won numerous awards and honours to attest to his nimble mind, lively imagination and fluent expression. Perhaps the giddy environment at Cambridge in the early 1950s, with stimulating professors and dazzling students (which included sub-continental luminaries such as Amartya Sen, Mahbubul Haq, Jagdish Bhagwati, Mammohan Singh, Lal Jayawardena, and others - what wouldn't I have given to be able to eavesdrop on their addas at some local fish and chips?), may well have provided for him the inspiration, and the direction, he needed. Or perhaps the typical career paths appeared to him to be rather drab and, well, too conventional.
But the second decision was bolder, more complex, and much more inexplicable. He was choosing to come to a city he did not know (he had briefly visited Dhaka only once in 1948 when he had stayed at the official residence of his nana, the Chief Minister at the time), a people he was barely familiar with, a language in which he was tentative (at best), a cultural milieu that must have appeared distant if not somewhat alien (he honestly admitted that he never thrilled to Rabindrasangeet or Nazrulgeeti with the same fervor that the Bengali bhadralok classes were wont to do, or relish ilish mach with the same gusto), and a political climate that was troubled and uncertain. And yet, RS made the fateful choice. Refusing offers from the University of Peshawar, as well as a multinational company, he crossed the Rubicon (or the Atlantic, as it were) docking first in Karachi in October 1956, and after a few weeks by train to Dhaka in January 1957. He never looked back.

It is still unclear to me what led to this Eureka moment (there were some family business interests but those, obviously, did not compel the move). Did he have a sudden epiphany triggered by something he felt, read, or experienced? Was he responding to a wise mentor's counsel, a friend's encouragement, a woman's allure? Was it born of a missionary zeal (like Mother Teresa who, as a slight teenager from Albania, decided to call Calcutta her home as she was holding a dying man in her frail arms)? Was there a Freudian subtext to the decision to reclaim his ancestral connection provided by his mother (his parents had been divorced when he was 9), rather than stay with his father in Karachi? Was he simply following his instinctive solidarity with the underdog? Was it an act of whimsy, or naïveté, or defiance, or simply the decision of an impetuous young man (after all he was only 21 at the time), shrugging his shoulders and saying “well, why the heck not?” Or, did he intuitively guess that momentous events were likely to unfold, and he wanted to be part of that adventure and, if possible, be in the thick of the action? If it was the last, he was remarkably prescient, if not prophetic.

The move was complicated by one other factor. Coming to Dhaka would mean that he would have to deal with the political baggage of his ancestors. The Dhaka Nawab family was closely associated with the Muslim League (indeed, the party was born in Dhaka at the behest of his great grandfather in 1906, and his grandfather had stoutly defended Jinnah's ill-conceived remarks about imposing Urdu as the national language of the country), and was known for its attachment to the conservative ethos, instincts and indulgences typical of the traditional landed gentry. The zamindari for the Muslim elite not only signified a source of livelihood, but also a comprehensive lifestyle which emphasised personal decency, social courtesy, a sense of noblesse oblige, and a studied distance from the ordinary people(expressed through their professed pride in their external origins, their ritualised codes of conduct, and their linguistic preferences). RS's evolution towards a nationalist, progressive, populist activism required, indeed demanded, that he confront that very tradition. His journey to Dhaka was not a coming home to his roots, but entailed a reckoning with his familial past, and a struggle against the class and cultural prejudices it represented. Thus, the startling admission in his memoirs that he had made “an ideological decision to proclaim myself a Bangali” (emphasis added) is mildly confusing unless framed within that historical and psychological context because, clearly, it was not merely an ethno-cultural identity he was declaring.
The initial period of his life in Dhaka was spent in the doldrums, his political experiences not particularly reassuring, and his social life uneventful and dull (though the Dhaka Club offered some respite through its tennis courts and swimming pool). It took him almost a year before he could acquire the three most important things in the life of a young man – a bachelor pad, a reliable cook, and a car. He explored employment in the East Pakistan Planning Board - an institution more fulsome in name than in resources or salience. By the time the application procedure could run its labyrinthine bureaucratic course, he became familiar with some of the economists in the Board (particularly Drs. Mosharraf Hossain and M.N. Huda) which paved the way, almost fortuitously, to his appointment as a Senior Lecturer in the Economics Department at Dhaka University in October 1957. The rest, as they say, is history. Or perhaps, it may be more accurate to say that the rest entailed two histories, which informed and engaged the other, and increasingly became one – his own, and that of Bangladesh.
It was probably the confluence of three rising streams that swelled the tide of Bangladeshi nationalism in the 1960s. The first was provided by the struggle for ethno-linguistic respect, prompted by the language movement in the early 1950s, and sustained by the region's confrontation with the sneering and clumsy cultural insensitivity of the Pakistani ruling elite. The second was the legitimate claim for democratic rights and equitable power-sharing arrangements particularly in terms of seeking fair representation in the legislature, and greater Bengali presence in the policy making institutions of the State. The third was the demand for economic justice in the context of the systematic, deliberate and palpable privileging of one “wing” of the country while depriving and exploiting the other.

It was in developing the economic argument that RS made his mark. He was not the first one to broach the idea of the existence of “two economies” in Pakistan. Drs. Habibur Rahman, A. Sadeque, Akhlaqur Rahman, Mosharraf Hossain, M.N. Huda and A.F. A. Hossain had all referred to it, and some such as Dr. Nurul Islam, and later Dr. Anisur Rahman, had dealt with it at some length (all duly acknowledged in his Memoirs). However, it was his name that became most indelibly linked to it.

It is possible that this happened because he had addressed this issue with more sassiness, urgency and tenacity than perhaps the others had; or because the media focused on him while reporting on various seminars in which he had participated (e.g., even though Drs. Nurul Islam and Habibur Rahman had also addressed a seminar on the issue at Curzon Hall in June 1961, the press report carried only his name in the headline); or that he himself wrote in the local newspapers thus giving his ideas wider currency and popular accessibility. Or, it could be because some of the policy makers of Pakistan (including General Ayub Khan), some “establishment” economists (and there were several), or Harvard advisors to the Ayub regime, singled him out for special attention, and sparred with him on different institutional and public platforms. If enemies make a man, RS had chosen well.

But perhaps there is another reason why he became more associated with the nationalist message that the “two economies” thesis had implied. Unlike most others, he began to evolve in a deliberately political direction. This was facilitated by some external events and personal experiences. First, Ayub Khan's declaration of Martial Law in 1958, the abrogation of the constitution (which had taken nine years to prepare), and the new “basic democracies” system that he launched, were deeply offensive to RS's enlightenment ideals. In fact, his first book called Basic Democracies, Works Program and Rural Development in East Pakistan, published in 1966, was a stinging critique of the corruptions and inefficiencies inherent in the Ayubian development model as it specifically applied to East Pakistan.

Second, the return of Dr. Kamal Hossain, his first cousin, trusted friend and comrade-in-arms, from Oxford to Dhaka in 1960, facilitated the building of a network of connections and opportunities that were substantial and far-reaching. He had meetings with many key leaders which included substantive conversations with H.S.Suhrawardy, and was introduced to Bangabandhu with whom he developed a trusted and mutually respectful relationship. Quite remarkably, Bangabandhu requested both Dr. Kamal Hossain and RS for input in drafting the 1964 election manifesto of the Awami League, and respond to Ayub Khan's boastful recitation of government successes during his tenure in office. I should point out that RS clearly indicated that he was not the author of the 6 point charter that launched the movement in 1965, though, I suspect, that his indirect influence must have been considerable.
Finally, his experiences in DU, particularly the rise of the NSF (pro-government student group) in the University, its clandestine and mischievous connection with some teachers (e.g., Prof Newman of Political Science), the vicious physical assault on Prof. Abu Mahmood, and the environment of intimidation and thuggery that was initiated on campus (even though all NSF supporters were not of the same ilk), caused him more disgust than dread, and further fortified his anti-government sentiments. In a meeting with economists and planners in Lahore in 1970, when one of his West Pakistani colleagues complained that he was no longer a student of political economy but had turned into a “politician economist”, he took it as a compliment.

It is in this context that most of the essays in From Two Economies to Two Nations were written. It contains his initial foray into the fray through his presentation at a seminar organised by the Bureau of National Reconstruction (of all places) in October 1961, which would probably have gone unnoticed had it not been carried by the Pakistan Observer in its entirety. This was followed by a more “academic” publication in the pages of Asian Survey (published from the University of California at Berkeley) where he discussed the regional peculiarities and imbalances inherent in the Pakistani state.

A slate of journal articles and newspaper submissions followed in which he elaborated on the “two economies” argument, and gradually went on to imply that the underdevelopment of one was a precondition for, and structurally related to, the development of the other as a form of internal colonialism. Though he did not appropriate the Core-Periphery language popularised by Andre Gunder Frank/Wallerstein/Samir Amin in the late 60s, it is clear that he was almost anticipating it. The corollary to this line of reasoning, which began to be expressed with greater conviction and confidence, was that some degree of provincial autonomy would probably be the only logical and morally justifiable means to ease the growing stress on the integrity of the country. He was not advocating secession. But he clearly sensed the growing impatience in the land and was able to see that unless East Pakistan was given some political “space” and allocative parity, the relationship was doomed. Like Marquez, he was narrating the Chronicle of a Death Foretold, and the Pakistani elite studiously ignored the obvious writing on the wall. It is frequently said that Pakistan broke up because its leaders lacked vision. Well, that was proven true in more ways than one.

What is clear in the subsequent essays included here is the gradual radicalisation of his ideas and opinions. This not only meant a greater aggressiveness in terms of demands regarding provincial autonomy, but in extending his concerns and commitments to include issues relating to social justice. He began to write about land reforms (including the “economic emancipation of the kisan”), the nationalisation of large industries, redistributive imperatives, arresting the “gangrenous growth” of corruption in society, and ensuring the civil liberties and human rights of people in the country. He went to the LSE for his Ph.D. in late 1966. But so compelling was his desire to contribute to the political discourse emerging in the land that he aborted his doctoral programme and, much to the chagrin and disappointment of his wife (who was the mother of three young boys by now), returned to Dhaka in March 1969 after the fall of the Ayub regime. He had become a man of the people.

On the aftermath of AL’s victory in the 1970 elections, he was declaring: “In the exhilaration of electoral victory we must never fail to remember that autonomy is only a means to an end. The end remains social revolution. All of
our struggles will be rendered meaningless if we see this historic victory as no more than a change in the balance of power between alien and indigenous exploiters”. This voice, dedicated to social change and reform, had begun to be expressed with sharper focus in the pages of Forum (the magazine he helped to found), and was even reflected in the AL election manifesto of 1970 which he, along with several others (such as Drs. Kamal Hossain, Nurul Islam, Swadesh Bose, A.R. Khan, and Anisur Rahman, all working closely with the intellectually agile and politically astute Tajuddin Ahmed), had helped to prepare.

It should be pointed out that by the late 60s and early 70s (our batch entered the University in 1967) both Enayetullah Khan's Holiday and RS's Forum were the standard staples in our intellectual diet, and provided much of the “source materials” for our stormy exchanges in Madhu's canteen at DU, or Sharif Mian's rickety dhabba behind the library.

At that time we had no idea that the Forum was a project on a desperately meagre budget, held together by the sheer determination of Hameeda Hossain (Dr. Kamal's wife), the activist zeal of RS, and the dedication of some die-hard believers. We also did not know that RS was frequently writing under a pseudonym (a precaution that was probably wise). Nor did we know that Bangabandhu was the first (among only a handful) to become a life-long subscriber.

The frenzied events after the elections in 1970 exposed the fragility of Pakistan and the fecklessness and conceit of the ruling junta. The signs were ominous. But nobody was prepared for the orgy of slaughter and decimation that was let loose by the Pakistani military on March 25, 1971. The War of Independence that began immediately involved three components – military confrontation, political organisation, and international mobilisation. The last consisted of gaining world attention, support and legitimacy in favour of Bangladesh, and countering Pakistani propaganda. This is where RS found his natural niche. As he met up with some Bangladeshi leaders in Delhi in early April (who had all managed to escape the murderous clutches of the Pakistani military), he was named an envoy of the Government of Bangladesh. It should be pointed out that the lucky presence of Amartya Sen in New Delhi helped to open up doors and access that would have been most difficult otherwise, more so because high Indian officials had little knowledge about Awami League leaders other than Bangabandhu.

His task was challenging for two reasons. First, he had to contend with the formidable diplomatic resources of the State of Pakistan. It was recognised by almost all countries of the world, was a member of the UN, had a professional and sophisticated Foreign Service establishment, had the advantage of legal bias (the territorial integrity of sovereign states is an article of faith in international law), and was enjoying a particularly cozy relationship with the US at the time as it was facilitating Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing in July 1971.

Second, his own position, mandate and mission were all too ambiguous. In a world where credentials and protocols drive most diplomatic interactions, his status and charge were both abstract and mystifying. What does the “envoy” of an unrecognised entity really mean, and what authority can he claim? This was compounded by the financial difficulties he faced (he had only $30.00 in his pocket when he first went to the UK in April, and relied on borrowed clothes), and the psychological anxieties of not knowing, for several months, about the safety of his wife and children left behind in Bangladesh.
But things began to improve. The Bangladeshi case was helped by the growing coverage in the Western media about the sheer brutality of the Pakistan military, the desperate conditions in the refugee camps in India, and the pluck and resilience of the Freedom Fighters. The defection of many Bengali diplomats who were working in the Pakistani Embassies and High Commissions abroad (including other high ranking officials, such as the highly respected Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury who happened to be abroad at the time) provided some “formal” ballast to the argument. The rallying around of the Bangladeshi diaspora abroad, numerically small but emotionally expressive, also proved to be critical in providing political and logistical support.

But, it must also be admitted that RS's family connections, early friendships, professional links, journalistic acquaintances, academic associates, ex-students, and serendipitous contacts that were all mobilised for the good of the cause, as well as the expertise, energy, and media-savvy instincts that he brought to his task (which consisted of many meetings with US Congressmen, MPs from the UK, officials at the UN, editors of newspapers, university professors, Bengali personnel at Pakistani embassies and other relevant individuals and groups), also played a seminal role in that gradual turn-around.

Moreover, his personal life also changed for the better. Much to his relief, his wife was able to join him in London (thanks to her younger sister who was married to Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan). There were small pleasures. For example, even though he had to live in an inexpensive (read shabby) motel in NYC, he reported, true to form, that Nathan's frankfurters (“the best he had ever eaten”) was available just down the road. And, there was humour. The description of his negotiations with Phizo, the separatist Naga leader from India, in his “office” (really the provisions room of the Ganges Restaurant in London), was simply hilarious.

But nothing could compare with the sheer joy of coming back to Dhaka on December 31, 1971. The brash youngster who had begun his passage in East Pakistan in 1957 at the age of 21, was coming back “home” to Bangladesh, victorious and vindicated, at 36. His “Untranquil Recollections” is a testament to that remarkable and, in many ways, quite improbable, journey.

Memoirs are tricky projects because memories can be treacherous, selective, self-serving, and the tendency for self-promotion (in extreme cases, self-delusion) is most seductive. But the exquisite wit and warmth of his style, the subtlety of his insights, the objectivity of his judgments, the richness of his experiences, the graciousness of his acknowledgements, and the authenticity of his voice, carries this forward, and makes it work. There are no scores to settle, no personal trumpets to herald, no lurid secrets to spill, no windmills to tilt at, no hypotheses to test, and no agendas to advance. What remains at the end is a story of an enlightened, engaging and ethical human being who never cringed from speaking truth to power, who fought the good fight, and kept the faith, and made a difference, and stopped to smell the roses along the way. What is quite extraordinary is that he does all that even today, and we sincerely hope that he continues to do so long into the future.

But, the reason these books have such a powerful appeal is not only because of their historical relevance, but that they also capture our own collective memories and struggles, chart our own political biographies, and blend seamlessly into our own narratives. Even though our journeys began in different places, we were buffeted by similar forces, and sought the same destinations. As we read these books we wallow in nostalgia, relating to the insider's
account of one who was not only a close witness to that shared history, but also a fiercely committed participant. We compare mental notes, nod in recognition of this event or that person, and find both delight and assurance in the detail, clarity and elegance of his exposition.

More importantly however, his books remind us of what we had dared to dream, and the yawning disjuncture between our goals and our achievements, between the enormous possibilities inherent in that “golden age” (as Tahmima Anam calls it), and the less lustrous realities we settled for later. As Eliot had noted in The Hollow Men, “Between the idea and the reality … the motion and the act … the conception and the creation … the emotion and the response … the desire and the spasm … the potency and the existence … Falls the Shadow”. In the case of Bangladesh that Shadow has been long, and fraught with inner tensions. Perhaps, in subsequent writings, RS will shed some light on that area of gray futility through which our expectations and visions were refracted, which left our hopes only partly fulfilled, and the sacrifices of many only partially redeemed. We await the second volume in eager anticipation.

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