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## At Heidelberg with Moudud Ahmad

by [Md Mahmudul Hasan](#) | Published: 00:00, Mar 20, 2021



Moudud Ahmad. — *New Age*

DURING my tenure at Dhaka University, I went to Germany for a postdoctoral research stint at the University of Heidelberg in 2009–10. The late prime minister of Bangladesh barrister Moudud Ahmad (1940–2021) was there too, as he had a three-month professorial fellowship to complete a book project. He was working on a manuscript he had written during his 2007–08 imprisonment by the 1/11 government in Bangladesh. I believe his book *Bangladesh Emergency and the Aftermath 2007–2008* (2014) is a product of that fellowship.

My office was at Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies. It is not far from Iqbal-Ufer, a prominent thoroughfare on the bank of the River Neckar and named after poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938). Moudud Ahmad's spacious office was housed in the university's South Asia Institute situated on the other side of the river. That is to say, in between

the Karl Jaspers Centre and the South Asia Institute is the splendid River Neckar that divides the city as well as the university into two parts.

I met and made friends with a number of Bangladeshis, including those who were doctoral, graduate and undergraduate students at the University of Heidelberg. Among them, Dr Md Aminul Haque of the department of population sciences (DU) and Dr Md Harun-or Rashid of the Bangladesh Institute of Nuclear Agriculture in Mymensingh were studying for doctoral degrees; and Dr Mohammad Nazrul Islam of the department of mathematics (Jahangirnagar University) was pursuing a master's degree. All three became very good friends of mine. Dr Harun-or Rashid later made a name for himself by identifying a strain of the bacteria rhizobium, namely *Rhizobium bangladeshense*. Through his research at Heidelberg, Ghent and York (UK) universities, he proved that there are new bacterial species in Bangladesh.

The university arranged my accommodation at a residential building at Bonhoefferstrasse 17 in the midst of some facilities of SRH University Heidelberg. Most of my Bangladeshi friends were staying at dormitories on the other side of the river where the South Asia Institute is located — not very far from Moudud Ahmad's office.

For reasons of enthusiasm and proximity, my fellow Bangladeshi students met and had long chats with the lawyer, politician and writer. They seemed very pleased to have had the opportunity to meet such an important person and suggested I also pay a visit to him. Because of my characteristic reluctance to associate myself with famous people for no good reason, I did not show much interest in visiting him.

From my residence, I usually took Mannheimer Street on the bank of the River Neckar to cycle to my office. However, one day, I rode my bike along Eppelheimer Street (which runs through the city) to get to my office. While riding my bike, I saw Moudud Ahmad and his son waiting at a traffic light ahead.

I dismounted at the traffic signal and greeted Moudud Ahmad with 'Assalamualaikum'. With a broad smile on his face, he answered my greeting in a most affectionate and cordial manner. Once I introduced myself, he said, 'Oh... tomar kotha onek shunechi' (I have heard much about you). I guessed my fellow Bangladeshi students who met him earlier spoke to him about me. During that brief conversation on the street, he invited me to visit his office and gave me his address. His free-flowing smile and true gentlemanly bearing had a spontaneous geniality. I felt obliged and promised him that I would.

During his research stay at Heidelberg, I visited him in his office a few times. On my first visit, after greetings and detailed introduction, he told me about the book project on which he was working and asked me about my research.

I was working on a project on South Asian Muslim feminism, the initial title being 'From Rokeya to Taslima: Trends in One Hundred Years of Muslim Feminism in South Asia'. However, later I broadened it a bit to include Nawab Faizunnesa (1834–1903) as well.

Around that time, I was writing a paper on Taslima Nasrin which was later published in Routledge's *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* under the title of 'Free speech, ban and "fatwa": A study of the Taslima Nasrin affair' (2010). So I told him that I was working on a project on the feminist writer. Hearing that, with sparkling eyes and bubbling humour, he laughed and said to me: 'Ar kono kaj paila na!' (You have no better work to do!). Both of us laughed.

Within moments, I realised that he made that remark to indicate something else. He said, 'Look! Irrespective of whatever feminists like Taslima Nasrin and others say, you need to understand that Islam has honoured women and given them their rights. If what Islam has given them can be realised, true gender justice will be established.' He mentioned the example of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) wife Khadija and lauded her personality and independence. I nodded in agreement.

I knew that he had been a visiting fellow at Harvard University and a visiting professor at George Washington University; but that was my first real, in-person intellectual interaction with him. I came to know his stance on Islam in relation to feminism.

While describing his book manuscript, he said to me: 'I am writing this to record history with the hope that it will benefit posterity.' He was categorically optimistic about Bangladesh. He gave me the example of the US fleet heading towards the region to prevent the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan during the 1971 war. But the people of the country fought unitedly and thwarted that move, he said. Moudud Ahmad bore no trace of pessimism about the future of Bangladesh.

The impression that I formed from my Heidelberg rendezvous with him is that the man was a true patriot and a believer in Bangladesh and in his religion. Those meetings left an incredible mark on me and increased my respect for him. I was in my early 30s at that time, and he was one of the top brass political élites of Bangladesh. His broadmindedness, self-esteem and esteem for others made it possible for him to be friendly with me and with those students at Heidelberg. His kindness and generosity struck a chord with me and have remained unforgettable.

At a time when various types of fear have gripped the nation, we have also been losing guardian figures like Moudud Ahmad one after another. In his streak of optimism, I believe these gaps will be filled sooner or later. May God bless his soul!

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