

# The Daily Star

Tuesday, July 6, 2021

YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW

Home » Views » Opinion

12:00 AM, July 05, 2021 / LAST MODIFIED: 01:19 AM, July 05, 2021

## Remembering my teacher Shah Abdul Hannan



Shah Abdul Hannan (September 23, 1939 – June 2, 2021)



**Md. Mahmudul Hasan**

Sometime in October 2001, I attended a discussion programme at Markfield Conference Centre in Leicestershire, UK. There was a lively debate on Islamic banking

over lunch, involving Murad Wilfried Hofmann (1931-2020) and Shah Abdul Hannan (1939-2021). I had the opportunity to meet Murad Hofmann several times in the UK. I knew Shah Abdul Hannan for nearly 27 years and immensely benefited from his erudition, affection and encouragement.

In the debate, Murad Hofmann expressed misgivings about Islamic banking to which Shah Abdul Hannan responded, at times quite passionately. The rest of us were enthralled by the scholarly exchanges between these two seasoned bureaucrats and intellectual stalwarts. It was a debate between equals and a stimulating intellectual experience for the audience. When we reached the time limit, the host Manazir Ahsan intervened in a tongue-in-cheek manner and concluded the session.



---

**For all latest news, follow The Daily Star's Google News channel.**

---

After the informal session with Murad Hofmann, on the way to the guest room, Shah Abdul Hannan told me retrospectively that he was perhaps too strong in expressing his opinions. I assured him that it was fine. His passion for the Islamic banking system is understandable, as he was deeply involved in the Dhaka-based Islamic Economics Research Bureau which was at the forefront of the Islamic banking movement in Bangladesh. He served as the Chairman of Islami Bank Bangladesh Limited (IBBL) after retirement from government service.

Born in Mymensingh on September 23, 1939, Shah Abdul Hannan was a political science graduate of the University of Dhaka where he stood first in his master's degree exam in 1961. After a teaching stint and working as a journalist for some time, he joined the Civil Service and built a long career. Among the important positions he held are Director General of the Bureau of Anti-Corruption (now renamed Anti-Corruption Commission), Deputy Government of Bangladesh Bank, Member of the National Board of Revenue (NBR), Secretary to the Ministry of Social Welfare, Banking Division, Internal Resource Division (IRD) and concurrently Chairman of NBR. Two of his foundational professional contributions are structuring the value-added tax (VAT) system and reforming the banking sector. He authored dozens of books and regularly wrote for the media.

In addition to his widely acknowledged reputation for integrity and as one of the finest and most astute civil servants in the history of Bangladesh, tributes are often paid to him. However, the various important positions—both in government and the private sector—that Shah Abdul Hannan held and that brought him prestige and high repute are secondary to me. I knew him primarily as a good human being and my teacher.

When I first met him in 1994, I was a second-year university student, and he was a senior civil servant well known for his honesty, efficiency and sincerity and for his

important roles in the government. I was not then (or now) an illustrious person. However, right from the beginning of my acquaintance with him till the end, he made me feel honoured as a human being and as his student. I had hundreds, if not thousands, of interactions with him—face-to-face or otherwise. I travelled with him in Bangladesh and in the UK; I spent long hours with him to learn from his immense knowledge and insight; and I attended his weekly classes (that he ran at his residence and elsewhere) and lectures that he delivered at various events as an honoured guest. Not even on one occasion did he impose his views on me or stop me from expressing mine. I had first-hand knowledge of how respectfully he treated his subordinates in office and domestic helps at home.

He was a staunch promoter of bureaucratic honesty and efficiency. I remained awestruck by his uprightness, simplicity and humility. On February 15, 1998, he made a courageous and principled decision to resign from his positions as secretary to the government and chairman of the NBR. Upon retirement from government service, he was without a personal car or a house of his own. After living in a rented flat at Shegunbagicha for a number of years, he moved to his ancestral homestead in the capital's Uttar Goran which was his address till his death.

One day I went to see him in his office at NBR. An officer came to present a self-authored book to him. After receiving the book, he looked the man in the eye and said: *Lekhokra kokhono osot hoi na* (writers should never be corrupt). Later I came to know that the man concerned was involved in corruption cases, hence the remark.

Shah Abdul Hannan lived in a part of Dhaka where traffic congestion is a major problem. Travelling even a few miles in any direction from that part of the city took (still takes) hours. While traffic jam is a common excuse for delays, I never found him late for any appointment—social or work-related. He always anticipated traffic conditions and planned his journeys accordingly.

In Bangladesh, people are usually attracted to the power, pomp and outward glory of public servants. It is often their stature in society that sparks interest among university graduates in choosing Civil Service as their career. None of the various perks conventionally associated with bureaucrats was salient in Shah Abdul Hannan. What attracted me to him was the depth of his knowledge, intellectual rigour and uprightness. Before meeting him, I had actually aspired to be a civil servant. It is an irony that a bureaucrat further ignited my urge for knowledge and motivated me to become an academic, and thus helped change the course of my life.

What I have described above is largely based on my personal interactions with Shah Abdul Hannan. There are innumerable people whom he influenced in public and academic life in a way that many of them remember and acknowledge. After his passing on June 2, 2021, many wrote and spoke to express their gratitude to him for

what he did for them. In a personal communication, his long-time friend American economist Forrest Cookson wrote to me: "Even in my old age I am taking a little time to see how I can live closer to the ideals and standards that Shah [Abdul Hannan] set and stood for."

The sorrow over his death reached beyond me to all those who were blessed with his mentorship, advice and support. All of us miss his example and tutelage. Personally, I am deeply indebted to him for being a luminary and a role model for me as a dedicated learner and passionate teacher; and in so many other ways he remains a source of inspiration for me.

How much knowledge and scholarship other students of his weekly classes were able to receive from him depended on the degree of their intent and their receptive abilities. I can say with certainty that the knowledge and inspiration that I gained from him has been a great treasure in my academic life.

**Md Mahmudul Hasan teaches literature at International Islamic University Malaysia. He is the editor of *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*.**

**Stay updated on the go with The Daily Star Android & iOS [News App](#). [Click here](#) to download it for your device.**

**The Daily Star Breaking news alert on your phone**

Grameenphone:

Type START <space> BR and send SMS it to 22222

Robi:

Type START <space> BR and send SMS it to 2222

Banglalink:

Type START <space> BR and send SMS it to 2225

*Find more information on SMS subscription*

---

**LEAVE YOUR COMMENTS** COMMENT POLICY

---

0 Comments

Sort by **Newest**

Add a comment...

[Facebook Comments Plugin](#)

---

## TOP NEWS

---

**Curbs to stay during Eid**

**Covid deaths climbing fast**

**Vaccination Age Bar Relaxed: 35yrs and above become eligible**

**Plane graveyard to go**

**UK PM Johnson outlines end to England's virus restrictions**

**Brazil beat Peru to make Copa America final**

**VIEW MORE**

---

## MORE FROM OPINION

---



## Our disturbing apathy towards domestic worker abuse

### LATEST FROM STAR LIVE



**Why does Dhaka get flooded after every rainfall?**



**Disparity in already inadequate testing capability**

