

*Dhaka Tribune*, June 2, 2022

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/op-ed/2022/06/01/in-memory-of-uttar-gorans-grammarian>

## In memory of Uttar Goran's grammarian

The life and legacy of Shah Abdul Hannan



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June 2, 2022 12:21 AM

Shah Abdul Hannan (1939-2021) was born in Mymensingh. Owing to the nature of his government officer father's job, he grew up in different districts of Bangladesh. During his own long public service career, he lived in government quarters in Dhaka and in other parts of the country.

Upon retirement from public service as secretary and as Chairman of the National Board of Revenue (NBR) in 1998, he rented a flat in Shegunbagicha and continued to live in the centre of Dhaka for reasons of transportation convenience. However, he always felt attached to and proud of his parental residence in the capital's Uttar (north) Goran, where he

spent the last years of his life. He didn't own any house or flat other than the property in Goran that he inherited from his father.

This biographical sketch is a testament to Shah Abdul Hannan's honesty. He lived a simple life and focused on serving his country, not on making instant money or accumulating wealth through unlawful means.

Given the endemic venality that has gripped our country, it is important to remember bureaucrats like Shah Abdul Hannan. His life serves as an example of honesty, integrity, and efficiency for our current and future generations. People like him are oases in a desert of mediocrity, sleaze, and hypocrisy. The country desperately needs people like him, with his consummate honesty, impeccable propriety, and unflinching courage.

I first met Shah Abdul Hannan in November, 1994. Soon, I started attending his weekly classes on Monday evenings that he used to run at his residence. Cutting across various ideas and texts, he helped broaden our understanding of religion, culture, and other subjects, more specifically contemporary debates on Islam and gender.

Around that time, as a student of English at the University of Dhaka, I was studying Victorian literature. Professor Khandaker Rezaur Rahman was teaching us Victorian poetry and Professor Kashinath Roy (1947–2021), Victorian novels. The former taught us poetry by Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold.

Rezaur Rahman Sir explained to us that Browning, Tennyson, and Arnold represent three shifting cross-currents of Victorian life and thought: Browning is a poet of unwavering faith and optimism; Tennyson shuttles between optimism and pessimism; and Arnold's poetry is characterized by Victorian melancholy (he struggles between hope and despair, with the latter predominating).

He taught us Robert Browning's vivid, powerful poem titled *A Grammarian's Funeral* (1855) at a time when I was newly amazed by the personality of Shah Abdul Hannan. During Browning's time, the word grammarian "signified a student in the wider sense, one devoted to letters or general learning." Accordingly, the poem is often interpreted as Browning's celebration of learning as well as affirmation of his belief in the afterlife.

My recent study of the poem has familiarized me with its various interpretations which vacillate between admiration and condemnation for the grammarian. Some critics go to the extent of regarding Browning's grammarian as "a fool or a failure." However, what I am considering here is based on my first encounter with the poem, not necessarily in the light of my latest exposure to its critical reviews and reflections.

Under the tutelage of Rezaur Rahman Sir, we perceived Browning's grammarian as a noble and truly learned man. The grammarian was wedded to the pursuit of knowledge and was driven by love for learning. He was the type of "high man" who "decided not to live, but know." We read the poem as an expression of Browning's unequivocal admiration for the grammarian's scholarly zeal.

The grammarian was preoccupied with learning to the exclusion of mundane cares and concerns. After his death, some of his intensely loyal students took charge of his funeral arrangements. In commensurate with his lofty ideals and intellectual standards, they looked for an elevated spot and wanted his tomb to be:

*On a tall mountain, citted to the top,*

*Crowded with culture!*

*All the peaks soar, but one the rest excels.*

When I was studying *A Grammarian's Funeral*, the then living example of Shah Abdul Hannan kept coming to my mind. I was struck by the similarities between him and Browning's grammarian. Both were tenacious in their search for knowledge, and devoted to rigorous study. As was the case with the grammarian, there was "no end to learning" for Shah Abdul Hannan.

On an ordinary weekend with less public engagement, Shah Abdul Hannan would read hundreds of pages. There were reading materials in his office and house, and he carried something to read in the car (he didn't drive). All this had a lasting impact on my intellectual growth, interest in scholarship, and academic life.

I kept borrowing from him (mostly English) books and magazines, and became an avid reader. My reading bonanza under his guidance was so

wide and diverse in scope that, I find some of the books I read at that time useful for my teaching and research to this day.

He advised us (his students) to carry a bag (with reading materials in it) while traveling near or far, so that we can read if opportunities arise. He used the refrain of "read, read, and read" in order to encourage us to develop an ongoing habit of study and learning.

In Browning's poem, people questioned the grammarian's dogged determination to seek knowledge, saying: "But time escapes: Live now or never!" The grammarian replied: "What's time? Leave now for dogs and apes! Man has forever."

Honestly, seeing Shah Abdul Hannan's selfless altruism and aversion to material aggrandizement, initially I wondered if that was at all wise or practical. A question that I often asked myself was: How can someone remain so impervious to greed and worldly gains? I now vaguely remember that one day I asked him: Is it wise to be so indifferent to mundane, monetary concerns?

In his characteristic tone of composure and self-possession, he replied: Wealth does not bring happiness. Neither he nor I wanted to elongate that discussion. I realized that he was not a man to trade his soul for power, position, ill-gotten wealth, or worldly gratification. He occupied a higher moral ground and was not stirred by the temptations of the glittering, transient world.

Shah Abdul Hannan was a religious man and, like Browning's grammarian, believed in rewards from God for honesty, sincerity, and hard work. Therefore, it is perhaps apposite to end this essay with a statement Browning once made to the writer John Ruskin: "A poet's affair is with God, to whom he is accountable, and of whom is his reward; look elsewhere, and you find misery enough."

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