

ABDULLAH ABU SAYEED

If I can educate the best,” says Abdullah Abu Sayeed, “they will take care of others.” Sayeed has been carrying out this mission since 1968, when he started “study circles” to promote book reading in Bangladesh—one of the ten most populous countries in the world and also one of the poorest.

Bangladesh was still part of British India when Abdullah Abu Sayeed was born in 1939. His family was staying at the time in the village of Karatia in the Tangail district, some thirty-seven miles from Dhaka. When Sayeed’s mother was about to give birth to him, Sayeed’s grandmother took her to Kolkata (Calcutta), the great Bengali metropolis and capital of West Bengal. He was born in Park Circus, a predominantly Muslim enclave where his maternal grandfather lived.

Sayeed was born to a professor who was also a writer and playwright, and to a “very cultured” lady who, he says, was “not that educated.” His father taught English and Bengali literature and held a master’s degree in both languages.

In Karatia, the hereditary landlord or *zamindar* was a generous person who set up an educational complex. At the time, many were inspired by the ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who believed that a Western education would be better than a traditional Islamic one in enabling Muslims to improve their social and economic lot. In 1875, Khan founded a college in northern India that later became Aligarh Muslim University. Sayeed’s father, Azimuddin Ahmad, quit his temporary government job at Islamia College in Kolkata and joined the new school in Karatia, settling there in 1930 and remaining until 1946.

It was because of this job that Sayeed’s father came to marry his mother, Begum Karimunnisa. “There was a famous person by the name of A. K. Fazlul Huq,” he says, “who was very renowned in Bengal politics. He was the chief minister for seven or eight years during British rule. When there were [marriage] proposals from different persons for my mother, Fazlul Huq told his friend, my grandfather, that if he were in his place, he would marry his daughter to this man, who was giving up his government job to serve the nation.” This is how the marriage was arranged. In Karatia, Sayeed’s family home was a humble hut roofed with corrugated tin rather than the traditional straw. Something else set it apart from most other homes. It housed piles of books.

Sayeed was the third oldest in the family of Azimuddin Ahmad and Begum Karimunnisa, but the first son.

Sayeed has sweet and bitter memories of his childhood: “In Karatia, there were huge fields, so I could go anywhere. My mother swam well. She made me swim as well. When I was just four years old, she forced me to swim by throwing me into the knee-deep water of a shallow river flowing by our house. As kids, we liked meeting bad boys. We loved roaming around and not reading much. This upset my mother very much. Being unwell, she worried about dying with no one to care for us. Our escapades made her furious and she even beat me with a cane stick. Once, she beat me so badly that, for a couple of days, my hand turned blue and had scars. My feelings for her diminished. But when she died, I realized what I had lost. I discovered that there was no mother left to me now, even to dislike.”

When Sayeed was six, another incident occurred in school that influenced his outlook. He recalls: "There was a yearly prize-giving ceremony and cultural program. Some students would sing, some would dance, but we had no part. The teacher-in-charge decided to accommodate us in the program somehow. He said that we all would cross the stage in three rows. That would at least ensure our presence on stage and our parents and the audience would be able to see us. I was excited. I thought that when I walked onstage, I would at least be watched by the huge crowd. That would be great. I was so obsessed with this excitement that I forgot to take my midday nap. This took its toll in the evening and I felt extremely sleepy during the program. I hurried back home and went to bed requesting my mother to wake me up in time for the show. But when I woke up, it was past ten at night; there was silence everywhere and everything was over. So my first attempt to be onstage was ruined. I was sad, helpless, and lonely, and all because of my mother!" Decades later, he became a television celebrity. "I think I have sufficiently compensated for that day," he says.

His mother was sickly. Childbearing had taken its toll on her body. "My mother was suffering from a disease. I don't know the English term for it, but it used to be called *shutika*. In those days it normally befell women who bore many children over a short period of time. It normally caused indigestion, and women [who suffered from it] used to become weaker and weaker and eventually died. My mother was extremely weak. But there was an upside. Because my mother had no control over us, it was a matter of great joy for us. We enjoyed great freedom. We could do anything we liked because my father was in the college all the time. It was a great opportunity for us to do anything. Naturally, we really tried to go astray."

When his mother's health was better, the house used to come alive. "In Karatia, every month, we had functions in our home, organized by my father and my mother. Local singers came from different areas. The programs used to be very lively. Father was a playwright, so he had his plays staged. I was with him all the time, helping him as much as I could. Father wrote contemporary dramas as well as dramas on folk traditions, and he also focused on local problems of the villages and many other topics."

The stage plays were written and presented for free. "In our society there was no money, especially in those days." In fact, he adds, "Money was not a concern at all. Even when I was working in television, money meant nothing to me. That it pleased people when I was on screen was my inspiration. Our society has changed over the last fifteen years. People are now always talking about money. But for us, the old generation, we still don't have the feel for money."

Sayeed's mother died when he was six years old. Her death was devastating. "My younger brother, who was very clever (unlike me) was dear to me. But everyone changed with my mother's death. My younger brother became more selfish, as he felt the pangs of insecurity. My elder sister took to reading books all the time and performed brilliantly in her examinations. After Mother's death, we were a completely disturbed family." Sayeed himself was so depressed that he developed an inferiority complex that remains until now. Throughout his public career, which includes considerable public exposure in the television industry, he has always had a fear of people. "Every time I face an audience," he says, "I sweat and try helplessly to hide myself in some corner."

Reading was healing, not just for his elder sister but for Sayeed as well. "I started reading very early because my elder sister was a voracious reader and she used to bring home two books every week from the library to read. She made me read and recite the poems of [Rabindranath] Tagore in Bengali."

The Bengali language was a birthright treasured and polished by the family. “Bengali is possibly the most known of the modern languages of India and the richest of modern Asian languages,” Sayeed says. “It’s very expressive. We have great writers. One of them won a Nobel Prize for literature. And I think that if we had been economically prosperous and had more international exposure, at least another five writers would have won the prize in the past several decades, considering the people who get it. We have a very rich cultural tradition, although our people are poor.” The writer who won the Nobel Prize was Rabindranath Tagore, who, in 1913, became the first non-European to win the award and was subsequently knighted. (Sayeed says that, in the West, “only Goethe can be compared to Tagore. He covered so many areas and has touched every aspect of human life and every aspect of Bengali culture. What Bengalis speak today, in reality, is the Bengali of Tagore.”)

Sayeed saw his father as “a very happy husband” whose happiness faded with his wife’s demise. Sayeed notes, “Father became very lonely. He had no one to go to, no one to talk to, no one to take care of him, and he was always reading. So he married again, just three months after Mother died. It was a shock to all of us when Father came home in a carriage with a new woman sitting by him. I asked who she was and I was told, ‘It’s your mother returning in a new form.’ And I believed that. I was so naïve. Yes, she was young, younger than my mother, who was only thirty-four when she died. We called her Stepmother. She was very nice to us and still is.”

The arts ran in Sayeed’s family. A great-uncle known as Baba Haridas (Father Haridas) was legendary for his captivating Hindu religious songs. His grandfather, too, was a great poet and a singer. “He was a renowned person,” says Sayeed. “There wasn’t a high school within miles. One day, just a kid, he left the area. He came home after ten or fifteen years with a grand degree. He could speak English well. In our society, there were competitions between poets. They sang spontaneous rhymes, poetry, and music together. Huge numbers of people would gather to listen to these poetic battles. The oral jostling excited us. My grandfather was a singer of Kirtan, the most popular and famous Bengali folk song. This is a somewhat religious song in the Hindu tradition, but it’s so popular that everybody sings it, both Hindus and Muslims. It’s all about the love between Lord Krishna and his devotee Radha. Love is universal and common to all, so everybody sings it.” Sayeed says that his grandfather sang Kirtan in such a way that the music would put him in a trance and keep his listeners spellbound.

As legendary as his paternal grandfather was, Sayeed considers his father as his role model. “My maternal uncles and aunties were all highly educated, as was my father. He had his MA in English and an MA in Bengali, and he was very interested in mathematics and philosophy. He was a very renowned professor. Students were full of praise and admiration for him. They used to talk of him as if they were talking of some god. So I thought that nothing in the world could be more respectable than being a good professor. When I was growing up, the civil service was the most lucrative of all jobs; teaching was not that important. Normally, bright students did not want to be in teaching. But my father’s image inspired me so much that I decided in my childhood that I would become a teacher someday.”

In 1946, Sayeed’s family left Karatia for Jamalpur, another district where Sayeed studied. His father became the founding principal of the Jamalpur College, on the outskirts of the town. Sayeed recalls: “In Jamalpur there was a river flowing by the side of my school and there were huge rain trees on the bank. I used to sit beneath the rain trees and hear the river passing by. I spent hours and hours there listening to the music of the river and the water going past. All this attracted me. I developed the mind of a poet.”

“And I used to endlessly walk and walk on the fields and rail lines by the side of our village, even in my dreams. Step, step, step. There was a man who lived in a small room made of red bricks at the rail crossing there. He was mysterious and his house was not like ours. These are some of the fantasies that I can remember from my childhood.”

Sayeed’s family was in Jamalpur when India was partitioned largely along religious lines in August 1947. Jamalpur, like Karatia, went to the predominantly Muslim East Pakistan side of the partition. Kolkata, the center of Bengali culture, remained in predominantly Hindu India. It was a time of great and violent upheaval, as millions of people relocated according to the new borders. Although he was born in Kolkata, Sayeed never actually lived on the Indian side of the border.

In 1949 the family moved more than a hundred miles from Jamalpur to Pabna, also in East Pakistan. There, Sayeed’s father became the principal of a better institution, the renowned Edward College, one of the top five colleges in the country. It was there that Sayeed finished his elementary and secondary education.

“In Pabna,” he says, “the Hindus were better off and culturally superior. Pabna was part of the Bengal Renaissance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so there were many enlightened Hindus and enlightened Muslims as well. But the Hindus were larger in number. It was a highly cultured society. There were many writers and musicians in the town. In the evenings, from every house you would hear something musical accompanied by a harmonium.” Sayeed loved his school days in Pabna. “Our teachers were full of values and idealism,” he says. “The influence of the teachers, other than my family, was to me the most important of all.”

Although India had been part of the British Empire until 1947, Sayeed did not meet any of the British overlords as a boy. “We had great regard for the British people,” he says. “But I didn’t have any interaction with them.” Nonetheless, Sayeed studied English beginning in Class 1 of middle school. “We had English grammar, English translation, and English books.”

“Many teachers inspired me. There was the *zamindar* of the locality who established our school. He had many sons and the worst was sent to this school to teach. His name was Ghatiram Babu (Mr. Ghatiram). I didn’t know the meaning of Ghatiram then. Later I looked up its meaning in the dictionary and found out that Ghatiram means ‘great fool!’” Ghatiram Babu nevertheless affected him deeply. “Ghatiram was not a very good teacher,” he says. “But one day, he suddenly got inspired while talking of Swami Vivekananda, a great personality throughout India and a Bengali who went to the United States in the late nineteenth century to attend a world religious conference. He lectured there and was a tremendous success. He was only twenty-eight then. Afterwards he went to England and European countries where the most illustrious men came personally to meet him.” French writer Romain Roland wrote his biography. Ghatiram Babu regaled his students with the story of the day Vivekananda rose to speak before a world religious convention. “He didn’t know what to say,” says Sayeed, recalling his teacher’s story. “But then he felt that Kali the Goddess was standing behind him, stretching her hand out to his head, saying, ‘Go ahead, my son. Whatever you say is my speech through you.’” Then, Teacher Ghatiram narrated the life of Vivekananda, his struggles, sufferings, and sacrifices.” Hearing this, Sayeed was “set ablaze with inspiration.” He longed to be someone like Vivekananda.

“In our country,” Sayeed says, “Bengalis confronted the British intellectually. We Bengalis are short, unhealthy people, mostly. But we are a thoughtful people with immense creative energy. When enraged, we are dangerous. When inspired, we fight great battles. In those days, Bengal was a land of inspiration.”

Religion had a less profound impact on the young Sayeed than did the English and Bengali languages and literature. “I received religious education in school, but religion had very little influence on me.” The family did not practice daily Muslim prayers, for example. “Father was actually an agnostic. I saw him pray only once when he was in acute financial trouble. My second mother was a religious lady who prayed five times a day. But she was also very liberal. She had no issues with modernization.”

What troubled the young Sayeed was the religious strife that divided India. “I started thinking about religion and I thought that if there was only one God, why were there so many religions?” He wondered, “Why has God set so many people fighting each other, with everybody claiming that his is the true religion?” One day, Sayeed confided these doubts to a friend, begging him not to tell Moulana Shahib, the religious instructor at school. “The next day when I went to school, the Moulana confronted me, boxed my ears, and I was caned fifteen times on each ear. From that day, I have abandoned religion.”

When he was seventeen, Sayeed proceeded to the highest level of secondary education, which meant two additional years of high school. That was the period when he met the best teachers of his life, whom he calls “hypnotic.” He recalls: “We had an Urdu teacher, Kasimuddin, who was a *moulana*, or religious man. He wore the Jinnah cap but not the traditional long dress that religious people normally wear. In one of his classes, he recited an Urdu poem with such emotion that I was simply enchanted. He made me love Urdu poems. There are at least three hundred lines from Urdu poems that I still remember and often recite. He was killed by the Pakistani army in our war with Pakistan in 1971.”

Then came the time for university and time to select a career. Sayeed’s maternal uncle, the family’s pride, with a Ph.D. from London University from the 1940s, wanted Sayeed to become a chartered accountant. “A fortune-teller saw my hand and said, ‘Oh, you are going to toss bank notes and money.’ So I thought that I would become a rich man. I went to study commerce, not literature.” He matriculated at Dhaka University and, subsequently, earned both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees there.

The Dhaka of his university days, he recalls, was just a small town with three hundred thousand people. “There were still carts driven by horses, and almost no motorcars. In the university, only three persons used cars. One was the dean of faculty of arts. Another one was a professor of English, and another one was one of my friends. It was a very peaceful, green, homely town.”

At first, Sayeed was spellbound by an eloquent economics professor. But when the professor departed for Kolkata, Sayeed succumbed to his real love. “I was obsessed with Shelley and Keats and Shakespeare and Dante and Milton,” he says. “Becoming a chartered accountant was no longer possible for me.” Indulging in a life of reading, he says, was like “living in paradise.”

Shakespeare was his favorite. He attributes his love for this English playwright to his father, who gave him his own Shakespeare collection after he finished high school. “He said that I didn’t have to read the difficult lines, ‘You just read the best lines because in the best lines, the poet is most beautiful and most understandable.’” Sayeed read all thirty-seven plays. Today, he says, “Everything Shakespeare wrote is my favorite. Some authors are brilliant in the entire book; some are brilliant in a chapter; some are brilliant in stanzas. Shakespeare is brilliant in every word.”

Despite his love for Shakespeare and other English writers, Sayeed chose to focus his studies on Bengali literature. This decision arose from cultural pride and from nationalism. Urdu had been declared the state language of Pakistan. But, as Sayeed explains, “Urdu was not spoken

by anyone—not by Bengalis, not by Punjabis, not by anyone. It was nobody’s mother tongue.” The imposition of Urdu upon East Pakistan had prompted a student revolt in 1952, during which some university students were killed. “It was a great event of our national history,” he says. “When I went to study at the university in 1957, the inspiration of a ‘mother language’ was burning in my heart, so I decided not to study English.” His father, who had master’s degrees in both languages, asked him why he did not do the same. “You were a subject of the British Empire,” he answered. “I’m a man of a free nation. My mother language is more important to me.”

The talented Sayeed led a busy collegiate life. “I was in very good health. I used to go to the gym; I could box in the ring; I was a good football player and a swimmer.” He remembers fantasizing about becoming a gangster or a driver for the North Bengal Express train. These romantic yearnings were but the “wild imaginings” of youth, he says now. Sayeed became a star student, winning prizes in literary competitions. He won honors in Bengali literature at twenty-one. “My inner dream was still to become the train driver. But after doing my MA,” he says, “I realized that I was going to become a teacher.”

He began teaching immediately after graduation, finding a job in a college where his father was principal and later moving on to a girls’ college and then to Rajshahi Government College. Beginning in 1962, he taught at Intermediate Technical College (now Science College) in Dhaka.

These days, Sayeed laments the decline in the status of teachers and the decline in the value attached to education generally. “During British rule,” he says, “teachers were the most respected [people] in society. They were the intellectual leaders in the fight against the British. In every locality during British rule, there were two things. One, a library. Second, a gymnasium. A gymnasium meant we would have better health for the fight. A library was needed because we were going to fight a knowledgeable nation; we must equal the enemy in knowledge. So education became very important in those days. But when Pakistan was born in 1947, society changed. Education became less and less important. Now, it has almost vanished.”

The 1960s was an intense phase in Sayeed’s life. While busy teaching at Intermediate Technical College and later Dhaka College, he also threw himself into literary activities. He became a leader among upcoming young writers as editor of a literary magazine called *Kanthashar* (The Voice). “Ours was an individualistic and aesthetic movement,” he says. Purity in Bengali was their priority, but they were also drawn to the Western literature of individualism, being avid readers of American and French as well as British literature. “Almost every [modern] Western author influenced us,” he says. *Kanthashar* had no big writers then, although a decade later it would be credited for producing some of Bangladesh’s most important new literary figures. Sayeed’s editorial and teaching responsibilities—not to mention a foray into television beginning in 1964—left him little time and energy for his own creative writing. It was during this period, in September 1965, that he married Roushanara Begum. (The couple had two daughters—Luna Sayeed and Ranjana Sayeed—both of whom eventually became teachers.)

Sayeed taught at Intermediate Technical College for five years before he agreed in 1967 to accept a position teaching Bengali literature at prestigious Dhaka College, which attracted a high percentage of the country’s finest students. Sayeed felt energized and challenged by working with many of the country’s best young minds. “I thought that was my place,” he says. “If I could inspire them, I could vitally influence the upcoming generation.” Sayeed would teach there for twenty-five years. During his early years at Dhaka College, Sayeed became concerned that intellectual life in East Pakistan was failing to reach the heights of earlier periods. He thought back to the Bengali literary movement of the 1930s and its many famous writers. “We in the

1960s couldn't succeed like them," he says. The reason for their partial failure, he decided, was that his own generation had been "born from the background of Bengali literature," whereas the earlier writers had been "born from the background of world literature." Sayeed began to think of ways to reintroduce the study of world literature to East Pakistan. In 1968, he gathered some of his best students to participate in a world-literature study circle.

But that first study circle was short-lived. In December 1969, Dhaka was rocked by student-led protests against President Muhammad Ayub Khan, who had ruled Pakistan since 1958. To control the worsening civil strife, Ayub Khan placed most cities under the control of the Pakistani army. But the strife continued as mobs rampaged. The resignation of Ayub Khan in 1969 provided scant relief, as the Bengalis of East Pakistan demanded independence. War followed. Eventually, India came to the aid of East Pakistan and, on December 16, 1971, East Pakistan was liberated and became Bangladesh, the land of the Bengalis. The cost of independence was high: three million people had been killed; five million houses had been destroyed; thirty million people had been rendered homeless; and hundreds of schools and bridges were gone.

Sayeed remembers the independence war, which had been keenly anticipated and which almost cost him his life. "I never believed in Pakistan personally," he says. "And I never wrote the word 'Pakistan' in any of my writings of those years." During the war, everyone became a refugee. Sayeed's wartime brush with death ended with a serendipitous reprieve. "I was arrested in Narayanganj, just ten miles away from the center of Dhaka," he says. "Some liberation guerrillas had killed two Pakistani soldiers. The Pakistanis suspected that I was one of the guerrillas. I was tortured the whole day. At ten o'clock that night, an army major came to take a look at us. He recognized me and said, 'You are that person [on television].' And I said yes. 'And why are you here?' he asked. I narrated what had happened. So I was saved."

Sayeed was first drawn to television in an attempt to ward off his childhood shyness. He resolved to be seen by as many people as possible, and television offered that exposure. After he repeatedly won university literary and elocution contests, television producers in Dhaka took notice of him. In 1964, he was offered a television hosting job. At the time, he says, "there were not many television sets in the country. But Dhaka City was full of televisions." By 1970, his was already a well-known face on East Pakistan's government television station—the only one—which, with independence, became Bangladesh Television. (Private television stations began broadcasting only in 1998.) By 1973, he had his own continuous show and was a national figure.

Sayeed loved television. "Day and night," he says, "I was so absorbed by television work that I thought that if I were to die on the stage while doing my program, that would be the most glorious day of my life."

He specialized in quiz programs and personally invented 148 quiz types. His most popular show was called *Saptaberma* (The Seven Colors). "It was a tremendous success," he says. "So far, no other television program in Bangladesh has surpassed the popularity of that program. I myself wrote the quiz questions. With my background of culture and teaching, I tried not only to entertain people but also to give [viewers] something to think about. So it provoked the imagination of everyone, both the baccalaureates of the university and the home workers."

To maintain full control over his programs, Sayeed took no sponsors. And despite his stardom, he earned very little money. Once, after winning a national award for his show, he was sent to Australia. He remembers that his television counterparts there—who were earning up to fifty thousand Australian dollars a week—were stunned to find he made no more than twelve dollars.

Like many Bangladeshis, Sayeed thought that independence would bring better times. People talked euphorically of a Golden Bengal. But in 1975 Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated. Between then and the 1981 assassination of President Ziaur Rahman, there was chaos in Bangladesh. Sayeed says, “New plunderers came out to loot everything we had. It was then that I felt that Bengal was not made of gold. It was made of mud and clay.” During this turbulent period, he brooded about how “to turn this clay into gold.” His new country needed “knowledge, competence, wider mental horizons, and higher ideals,” he says. With this in mind, Sayeed decided to open a new study circle with twenty-five students.

“They were brilliant,” he recalls. The new circle lasted for five years and read some two hundred books of world literature. “We bought the books from the market. Every week, each circle member took one book home to read—everyone the same book.” This was followed by a brainstorming session the next week. Sayeed persuaded an acquaintance who directed a government office to provide the group a place for their weekly meetings. To pay for the books, he astutely secured a large donation from the third wife of a contractor in exchange for putting her on his television show.

To sustain and expand the work of his new reading circle, in 1978 Sayeed founded the World Literature Center (Bishwo Shahitto Kendro) in Dhaka. Originally a library, the center became a meeting place for a growing number of study circles and, eventually, the headquarters of a wide web of Sayeed-led cultural activities.

Inspired by the success of the study circle, Sayeed decided that it was time to bring more people into his reading program, especially younger people. The university students he had started out with, he says, “became very bright—their level of expression, thinking ability, everything. But I found that I was not able to change their hearts. Most of them were always looking after their own personal interests. I thought that I had dialed the wrong number.” He began meeting with seventeen- and eighteen-year-old students. “They were tender, more sensitive, more eager, more impressionable,” he says. “Then I tried younger school groups and I found virgin soil. You plant anything here, it grows automatically. So I concluded that middle and high school students were my best targets.”

Sayeed now strove to move his reading program from the World Literature Center directly into the country’s schools. He went around Bangladesh talking to headmasters, persuading them to set up the reading program in their schools. To raise money, he called upon the contacts he had developed as a teacher, writer, and television personality. “I told the district magistrate of Dhaka City, who was a friend of mine, that I needed 200,000 taka. Give me this, I said, and I shall include 3,500 students of the district in this program.” Somehow, he raised the funds. “How?” asks Sayeed. “I don’t know. He was a book-lover himself. He must have plundered the money from somewhere. For a district magistrate, it was really difficult to organize that amount of money. When the program was being inaugurated, he came with cash and checks—200,000 taka—and I started the program in many schools.”

Sayeed refused money from foreign donors. “This had to be an indigenous thing,” he says, “a cottage industry.” Sayeed believed that a new, literate generation of Bangladeshi young people “was going to save the country.” They had to be “brought up with honor and dignity, and not be beggars.”

“Today we have five hundred branches,” Sayeed beams. “A branch is like an enlightened family, headed by a guru, a mentor. Without this mentor there is no branch.” Sayeed personally scoured the country to find the best possible mentors for the reading circles. Being known everywhere through television helped immensely. “From the president to the streetwalker,

everybody knew me, so I had no problem.” To identify candidates, Sayeed worked through district magistrates. “Give me the names of five persons whom you think fit for this,” he would say. Then he would discuss the nominated persons with a small group of knowledgeable local people. The elected person would then be invited to launch the program in the locality. After that, he says, “year after year, their prestige is at stake, so they can’t stop anymore.” Decentralization has made the program’s expansion possible. Sayeed has only to take care of the mentors. They take care of the rest. Otherwise, he says, “We have no offices. No infrastructure. Only a basket full of books in the branches.”

The World Literature Program today enrolls students from middle school (Class 6) through high school and college. Each mentor, or guru, scouts the local schools to find what Sayeed calls “the most talented, sensitive, inquisitive, and enthusiastic girls and boys.” They get together every week; they take books home, read them, and then come back together. High school students meet on Friday mornings, college students on Friday afternoons. The participants are awarded prizes for reading all the assigned books—ordinarily sixteen in each program sequence—and further prizes for reading more. There are cultural programs, literary competitions, guest lectures, and outings. “We need to tie them together,” says Sayeed, to foster “the friendship of good people. We are getting them together everywhere.”

Getting “good people” together—people with liberal, humane, and democratic values—matters dearly in Bangladesh, Sayeed says, because such people are in short supply. He believes that the future of the country depends on nurturing and empowering this group. Among the enemies of progress in Bangladesh, in his view, are religious fundamentalists. “Fundamentalists are my enemies,” he says. Even so, Sayeed does not confront them directly. He asks them to read books, books with positive messages expressed in elegant Bengali: “Let us be good, let us be kind, let us be modern, let us be secular.” Approached in this way, he says, “The fundamentalists don’t know me to be their enemy. They don’t realize that the books I recommend would never turn people into fundamentalists, but into liberal persons with democratic values.” Sayeed emphasizes that the nation’s war against the fundamentalists “is not a political one but a cultural one. We are trying to change minds the cultural way.”

Sayeed’s infectious movement has crossed mountains and oceans, with branches in the United States, England, and Japan. “In London, it is Bangladeshi and British combined together. Books are read normally in English and Bangla translation; they hold discussions bilingually. In New York there is a very active branch.”

Some of the most popular and most influential books for students to read are *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Les Misérables*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Invisible Man*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Time Machine*, and the *Mahabharata*. While Sayeed is eager for his readers to imbibe values such as justice and compassion, he acknowledges the equal importance of giving aesthetic pleasure, without which no real learning can take place.

Bangladesh has over 140 million people, and Sayeed knows that it will be impossible to reach them all, so he is focusing on reaching only those most likely to read and to influence others. By his reckoning, that comes out to about 168,000 people every year, still a formidable figure. Thus, Sayeed has embarked on a new phase of his literacy program: the use of mobile libraries to spread the magic of the printed word. The World Literature Center’s mobile libraries are actually buses or vans that carry from four thousand to seventeen thousand books as they move from site to site around the country.

“Before a mobile library enters into a locality,” Sayeed says, “it plays music, Tagore’s music—*The world is full of light and my eyes are washed with it*—a beautiful song that can be

heard half a mile away. We go everywhere, to every door, every house, and give leaflets to people, telling them ‘this is your library. It will come to your doorsteps. Be a member and start the reading habit. Bring your children. Bring young people.’”

Sayed’s vans bring mostly children’s books, for he is pinning his fondest hopes on the young. He dreams of reaching more and more of them, especially the poor. This is not a symbolic gesture. Public libraries are a rarity in Bangladesh. Dhaka’s ten million people have no lending library to serve them, except for the university and government libraries where lending service is restricted.

In addition to the study circles and the mobile libraries, the World Literature Center now has a publishing program. “We publish not only Bangladeshi authors but also Bengali authors of India. Now we are emphasizing the translation of the great world writers, because people should be acquainted with the great writings of all ages. We have many translators who were born and brought up in foreign countries like the United States, Australia, and England, who know good English and Bangla as well. We have targeted 750 books to be translated—not in my lifetime, perhaps, but it will continue for twenty-five years so that it can be completed.” Another massive project is called *Thoughtful Writings of Bengali Writers*, a compendium of Bengali thought for the past two hundred years comprising 104,000 pages in 207 volumes.

Sayed left Dhaka College in 1992 to devote himself fully to the World Literature Center. Since then, he has diversified his interests from books to environmentalism. “My becoming an environmentalist started in 2000, when there was a terrifying outbreak of dengue fever in Dhaka. The terror was magnified in all the newspapers: 300 people affected, then 600, now 2,500, and finally 30,000, with so many dead. It was a new disease to us and nobody was doing anything. So I came out with a call to all the newspapers and all the TV channels: Let us fight it.” That fight ignited a passion that has yet to flag, pitting Sayeed against land-grabbers whose claims have clogged Dhaka’s Buriganga River, against industrial polluters, and against polluting taxis with two-stroke engines.

Abdullah Abu Sayeed has realized his youthful fantasy, although without driving a real locomotive. “I have been a ‘driver’ all my life,” he says. “I have always been driving engines. In the 1960s, we had a literary movement, which I led, so I was a driver. In the World Literature Center, I became the driver again. In the environmental movement, too, where I am fighting the miscreants and the plunderers of our society face to face, this is also driving an engine.”

Having done all that, Sayeed wants to do something for himself, returning to another old love of his: writing. “My obsession now is writing,” he says. “Over the last five or seven years I have written nineteen books, and I have already completed four more. Although I am very tired at night, I continue writing. I usually don’t stop until I am completely exhausted. I think I was meant to write. I think, too, that people like my writings.” For most of his adult life, says Sayeed, “other considerations led me to become the engine driver that I once fantasized about. Now the identity that I want to focus on is that of a writer.”

Jose Dalisay Jr.

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