

# In memory of Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

## The legacy of a powerful writer

ABDUL HANNAN

MOHAMMAD Badrul Ahsan, the inimitable author of the sparkling “Cross Talk” column in *The Daily Star* and Editor of the now defunct biweekly “First News” is no more, his life cut short abruptly at the age of 60, when his full potential as a writer was yet to blossom. Such is the inscrutable dispensation of the mysterious and capricious Creator. Nevertheless, Badrul will live forever as a renowned and powerful writer.

I came to know Badrul—26 years my junior in age but infinitely senior to me in writing talents and accomplishments—through his column, which was a rare treat and a must read. I was frankly mesmerised by the profundity of his wisdom, his sharpness of intellect and the exalted quality of the writings displayed in his column. His command over the English language was superb and astounding. The style of his writing was intoxicating. When I told him that his essays could very well be placed in

the ranks of the greatest essayists such as William Hazlitt, G K Chesterton, Francis Bacon, Charles Lamb and Samuel Johnson, he smiled and said he felt flattered by the abundance of my love for him.

Soon our acquaintance expanded and morphed into an intimate and deep friendship, in spite of the age difference between us. He was not an infrequent visitor to my home in Dhanmondi, invariably accompanied by our common Mamu, M A Noor, a supreme court lawyer by profession, and a colourful character with an indefatigable zest for life. We enjoyed small talk and discussed politics, poetry and passion. Badrul was fond of my food and culinary skills, acquired of necessity due to the perpetual illness of my wife. He of course never failed to reciprocate my hospitality, and took us out for lavish lunches and dinners to Hotel Sonargaon and Intercontinental.

Badrul studied Economics for six years in Georgetown University, Washington, took up a lucrative job in Standard Chartered Bank in Dubai

and later returned home to pursue his passion for writing. He wrote about everything on earth. He was deeply suspicious of the so-called development bubble, and the related growth index and progress. His basic assumption was that Bangladesh lost its innocence and sense of fundamental values the moment it leaped onto the development path, spiraling into a vicious circle and becoming part of a superstructure that is a promiscuous mix of disconnect and delinquency, greed, graft and chaos, aggrandisement, expropriation and forfeiture, the promotion of oligarchy, exploitation and inequality, stalemate and stagnation, violence and hatred and a denial and distortion of democracy and human rights. Development lapsed into decadence, a victim of its own success.

He was a rebel and an iconoclast, ridiculing and shattering the images of so-called important individuals and institutions who have power and authority in our society. His columns, published in three volumes by UIPL, are



PHOTO: COURTESY

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

an eloquent testimony of his abiding passion for democratic values, rule of laws, human rights, principles of truth, and justice and fair play in our society, and a hatred of abuse of power and lack of accountability.

Badrul was a confirmed bachelor, remarkably without any vices. He lived a solitary life and died quietly. He

was an extremely sophisticated and private person. While I was not privy to his private life, there is no doubting that beneath his exterior of calm equanimity, there was an unmistakable streak of sadness and the deep tragedy of frustrated love in his life, as reflected in comments such as “heartbreaks leave behind bruised souls, forever licking the wounds”, and “Love is the first casualty of almost all the marriages” in his essays.

Badrul was in a hurry to finish his 300 page English novel by Penguin Publishers. I am absolutely certain when the book is published posthumously, it will make him the first Bangladeshi English novel writer in the ranks of Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, R K Narayan and Naipaul and others.

With the passing away of Badrul, eternity has lost a speck of dust, the world a headcount, and the country a worthy son. But I have lost a friend who was very dear to me.

Abdul Hannan is a columnist and former diplomat.

# Preparing for the next cold wave



KAZI AMDADUL HOQUE

colours formed by sun rays on spider webs, marigolds, dahlias and mustard flowers, and the singing of thousands of migratory birds in the *haors, beels* and lakes.

Unfortunately, our charming, sunny winters have turned grey and gloomy nowadays, and much of the blame falls on climate change. The climate of Bangladesh is subtropical in the centre-north and tropical in the south, and we are supposed to have pleasantly warm winters from November to February, a short hot spring between March and May, and a long rainy season from June to October due to the summer monsoon. The actual winter usually begins in December and is characterised by warm and sunny days, followed by cool nights. Frequent cold waves, as we have been experiencing in recent times, are out of the usual pattern that our winters follow.

There are quite a few things to be noted in recent years about these cold waves. Of them, two are obvious. For one thing, it has been relentless in its pattern, and therefore, cumulative and gripping in its chilling effect. The other more weighty, record-breaking feature is the lowest temperature registered in seven decades. The mercury dropped to 4.5 degrees Celsius in December 2019, and it was 2.6 degrees Celsius at Tetulia and some other places in January 2018. The cold wave swept through the whole of this small country, causing immense suffering for the people not accustomed to such low temperatures. Not only is Bangladesh trembling in the grip of the cold, the western world and Europe, which is used to snow, is also going through extreme weather episodes. At least 62 people died due to cold related illnesses and fire incidents in Bangladesh this winter; the latter occurring because of people trying to keep warm by setting fire to twigs and garbage, in the absence of warm, winter clothing.

The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief in Bangladesh,

humanitarian organisations, NGOs, the private sector and well-off individuals normally distribute warm clothes, blankets, and food among poor people in different parts of the country to reduce their suffering. However, the cold waves tend to appear unpredictably and require comprehensive preparedness and response plans similar to the plans prepared during floods and cyclones. Bangladesh is now recognised for being quite efficient and advanced in disaster preparedness, particularly for

to be used and distributed via one, uniform channel could be a lifesaving effort in Bangladesh. The Ministry of Housing and Public Works could also explore better household design and materials, since heating systems do not exist and are rarely required in our houses. In addition, the Ministry of Disaster Management could aim for shelter arrangements if the situation deteriorates. These shelters should be made available to impoverished populations who live in makeshift homes. In addition, special assistance

month in Dhaka, Bangladesh. But when the temperature falls down to a single digit, the cold wave turns into a disaster like situation. It can paralyse normal life, and is especially difficult for children and the elderly, who can be affected with various cold-related diseases. Crops, especially potato, wheat, Boro seedlings and vegetables, are vulnerable, particularly to long lasting cold waves. Farmers and day labourers cannot work in the field due to the cold. Thick fog, together with the harsh cold, disrupts movement

Cold waves might come again and again in the coming days, particularly in the winter season, due to the negative effects of climate change. It is high time to undertake country wide mapping to identify extremely vulnerable communities, asses the suffering caused in recent times and formulate the responses required for such situations.



Day labourers sleep on a pavement in the capital's Karwan Bazar in December 2019, wrapped up in plastic sacks and whatever else they could find to try and protect themselves from the cold wave.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

these two disasters. The government, based on recent experiences, could strengthen the preparedness and response framework for cold waves, along with NGOs, the private sector and affected communities. The precautions that need to be taken for health, crops, livelihoods and stocks, as well as the availability of warm clothes and blankets, can be planned far ahead of the cold wave. Region wise mapping through assessment, responsibility and distribution plans, engaging departments and volunteers, and mobilising resources

through local government for livestock and crops are needed.

A cold wave is a weather phenomenon that is distinguished by the cooling of air. It is a rapid fall in temperature within a 24-hour period, requiring substantially increased protection for agriculture, industry, commerce and social activities. People of Bangladesh are used to facing normal winter seasons where the average high temperature is 25.4 degrees Celsius and the average low temperature is 12.7 degrees Celsius, and where January is the coldest

of all modes of transport across the country, causing accidents.

Winter cold waves that are not considered cold in some areas, but cause temperatures significantly below average for another area, are also destructive. Areas with subtropical climates may recognise unusually cold, but perhaps barely freezing temperatures, as a cold wave. In such places, plant and animal life is less tolerant of such cold. Likewise, unusual cold waves that penetrate into tropical countries in which people do not normally insulate houses or have reliable heating may cause

hypothermia. Occurrences of extreme low temperatures, in association with the incursion of dry cold winds from the north into the Indian subcontinent, are known as cold waves. Bangladesh has currently been experiencing severe cold waves in winter for the last few years.

These cold waves, which have the potential of turning into disasters, need to be addressed under a special preparedness programme of concerned authorities and organisations. Cold waves might come again and again in the coming days, particularly in the winter season, due to the negative effects of climate change. It is high time to undertake country wide mapping to identify extremely vulnerable communities, asses the suffering caused in recent times and formulate the responses required for such situations. It is necessary for the government, NGOs and the private sector to come up with long term plans that take into account the chronic vulnerability of people, particularly in the most poverty-stricken area of the country, due to cold waves. These programmes should not just aim to construct shelters and provide immediate relief; long term programmes are required to reduce vulnerabilities through improving livelihoods, increasing income and providing soft loans to buy winter clothes and medicines. Inclusion of cold-affected communities in the development programmes of the Government and other agencies with a proper vulnerability and capacity analysis could be a significant step towards improving their resilience. A comprehensive approach, instead of the sporadic “blanket distributions”, is urgently needed to increase the capacity of the most vulnerable sections of society, in both urban and rural areas.

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QUOTABLE  
Quote

**KURT VONNEGUT**  
(1922-2007)  
AMERICAN WRITER

True terror is to wake up one morning and discover that your high school class is running the country.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Blueprint number

5 Satchel part

10 Ring of light

11 Longs for

13 Baldwin of "30 Rock"

14 Eye part

15 Cravat

17 Braying beast

18 Reverses

19 "My country – of thee"

20 Puppy sound

21 Another name for Jupiter

22 "Iliad" author

25 Tender areas

26 Corrosive stuff

27 Bird of myth

28 Neither follower

29 Lab containers

33 Some crime evidence

34 Put in danger

35 Make unreadable

37 Exercise choice

38 Lounged around

39 Genesis garden

40 Slender

41 Shoulder muscle, for short

DOWN

1 Classic 1953 Western

2 Loses color

3 Vote in

4 Half-baked

5 Be frugal

6 Forest sights

7 Lab animal

8 Pilot

9 Deep in thought

12 Talks back to

16 Eye drop

21 Maneuvered

22 "Messiah" composer

23 Justice Sandra

24 Sainthood prerequisite

25 Shower need

27 Cure

29 Waited

30 Wear away

31 Star in Orion

32 Incline

36 Bullring cry

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50

BEEBLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott