

# The life and legacy of Dr Ashraf Siddiqui: Reflections of a grandson

C RASHAAD SHABAB

**A**N incredible man just passed away. Growing up, I always knew my grandfather, Dr Ashraf Siddiqui, was something of a big deal. He was always being called away to address hundreds of people in events across the country. And whenever he was home, visitors would flock to him with an air of deference and respect. But it wasn't until my class at school studied a poem written by him that I truly began to grasp exactly how big a deal he was. For a fifth grader, it was an amazing feeling: my entire class was memorising a poem that my grandfather had penned! And it wasn't just my school or my year either—throughout much of living memory his work has been a core part of the national curriculum, in our nation of more than 160 million people. Many years later, I learned that his work had been translated into 11 languages, and that it had even been on the primary school curriculum in parts of the US. How that came to be is also quite a story.

My Nanbhai, as I called him, went to the University of Indiana at Bloomington in the US in the 1950s to do his Ph.D. Imagine that. Imagine what it took for a boy from an agricultural household in rural Tangail to get so very far in the 1950s. His work, as I understand it, committed the oral folk culture

of Bengal to the written record. Our tales, our fables, our stories: these are the things that make us who we are. And much of what our people—the people of Bengal—know of these aspects of themselves is due to his lifelong dedication to the scholarly journey that he embarked on during his doctorate. While he was still a student in the US, on top of his scholarly work, my grandfather also landed a book deal. The leading international publishing house, Macmillan, published the children's story, "Bhombal Dass: The Uncle of Lion", which went on to become a best seller that landed him on the curriculum in parts of the US. President John F Kennedy thanked him for it.

Upon his return to what is now Bangladesh, he earned too many honours to mention here, though among them, the "Ekushey Padak" for Bengali literature is notable. Of the numerous festivals and associations which he initiated and patronised, the accomplishment that I as his grandson am most proud of is that as the Director General of Bangla Academy, he was the intellectual and administrative force behind establishing the Ekushhey Boi Mela, the annual literary festival which draws tens of thousands, or perhaps even hundreds of thousands of people a year.

If I had to pick one principle, one overarching force that governed my



Dr Ashraf Siddiqui (March 1, 1927 — March 19, 2020)

Nanbhai's life, it would be a sustained and assiduous dedication to his vocation. Growing up, my cousins and I would often converge at his house for an afternoon, to spend some time with our grandparents. But

often during these jubilant family gatherings the writer at the heart of the family was nowhere to be seen. At some point in the afternoon, my cousins and I would peer through the door to his study to find him hunched over his table, with his back turned to us, and all his energies focused on the manuscript taking shape before him. In my mind's eye, that image is the definition of dedication to one's calling.

It is a small part of the dedication that I learned from Nanbhai that enabled the completion of my own Ph.D. When I found myself running out of funding and time, my wife and I made the agonising decision that she and our children would return to Bangladesh while I remained in the UK. During my year as a long-distance father I gained a painful insight to the sacrifices that Nanbhai must have endured to earn his doctorate, over half a century prior. His five children had remained in Bangladesh for the many years of his stay in the US. Even I cannot imagine the emotional toll this must have taken on him, as my own experience of remote fathering was far shorter and eased by the many amenities of our modern, digital age. Despite the many advantages that I enjoyed as a Ph.D. candidate relative to Nanbhai, I must confess that I am yet to pen a bestseller, land a book deal, or come to the attention of a US president.

In addition to these many academic and professional achievements, Nanbhai raised and was supported by a wonderful family. His wife, Mrs Sayeeda Siddiqui, was the keystone on which he built his world, and they loved and admired each other dearly. She was a writer in her own right, publishing several books and rising to the rank of head teacher at Azimpur Girls High School. She counted among her students many people who have gone on to illustrious success, including Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. While excelling in her own profession, Nanbhai (as she was to me) managed the day to day administration of their household but perhaps even more importantly, she provided an anchor to the life of the fervent poet and academic in social and familial bonds. Yet, when she passed away, through his immense fortitude, Nanbhai adapted to the reality of an existence without her and went on to enrich all lives for over two more decades. In the end he was doted over by five children, 12 grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren (with more on the way).

As I reflect on his passing, all I can think is that it was a life well lived. May we all be so sincere, so diligent and so fortunate.

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## Can quarantine be a solution in a country like Bangladesh?



NAHELA NOWSHIN

**T**HE words "quarantine" and "isolation" have now become synonymous with the coronavirus outbreak. Social media has exploded with status updates, pictures and videos related to "self-quarantine"; some poking fun at the absurdity of it all, while others are more optimistic, highlighting how we should use this opportunity to spend much-needed quality time with our parents, spouses or children, and take a breather from our fast-paced, robotic lives. I couldn't agree more with the latter.

It has been interesting, to say the least, to see how the pandemic has been unfolding in Bangladesh in particular. As a people living in a country that is in perpetual crisis mode (natural disasters, mosquitoes, onion prices, you name it), we are used to putting up a brave face and weathering the storm—whatever it may be.

But the novel coronavirus has put us in a wholly uncharted territory. We haven't quite seen anything like it before. Unlike other more "familiar" viral infections like dengue—caused by a visible carrier of the disease, i.e. mosquitoes—COVID-19 transmission is invisible to the naked eye.

Much like the virus itself, the preventive measures for COVID-19 too are unheard of, and even unthinkable, for us Bangladeshis—particularly the concept of "quarantine". It raises the important question: how realistic and effective is "quarantine" in the context of Bangladesh in tackling COVID-19?

It's highly likely that the term itself is completely alien to a huge proportion of the population, let alone having adequate knowledge about what "quarantine" means and entails. Many are already expressing scepticism about the viability of quarantines in Bangladesh, given the fact that some migrants have blatantly violated instructions to keep themselves in isolation and at least two men in Dhaka and Brahmanbaria have escaped hospitals.

More than 2,000 people are in home quarantine, and at least 42 in institutionalised quarantine, according to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR). It is not



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Italy returnees stage protest inside the Ashkona Hajj Camp on March 14 after they had been quarantined upon their return.

clear on what basis or criteria the cases of home and institutionalised quarantines have been differentiated. But it seems that those showing symptoms of COVID-19 have been put in institutionalised isolation and those who have returned from COVID-19-affected countries, among others, have been told to remain in self-isolation.

It is understandable why health authorities are urging people to stay at home. They are rightly focusing on prevention. Because should the number of infected patients who will need to be institutionally quarantined increase greatly, our overburdened healthcare system will simply not be able to cope. But when it comes to home quarantine, or self-isolation or self-quarantine—whatever you want to call it—there are a number of

reasons why it might not be as effective in Bangladesh, compared to many other countries.

Firstly, the option of home quarantine is itself a luxury for most. Think of the farmers, the part-time housemaids, the rickshaw-pullers, the roadside tea stall owners. For these groups of people, stepping outside the home is a necessity if they are to put food on the table. For them, not only is the concept of "home quarantine" unintelligible, but also akin to financial suicide.

Secondly, has anyone at the policy level thought about what home quarantine would look like for slum-dwellers, who make up around 40 percent of Dhaka's population? How does "home quarantine" fit into the picture of the capital's sprawling,

overcrowded slums, where families are cramped in single rooms, and live in the most unhygienic conditions?

It's obvious that urban slums are a safe haven for infectious diseases like COVID-19. The structure and conditions of these slums make "home quarantine" in these spaces an impossibility. But it seems that in the media and political circles alike, slum-dwellers and the lower economic strata in general have conveniently been overlooked. Some news outlets have the following tips related to home quarantine: "watch a movie, listen to music or read a book". Slum-dwellers are clearly not even part of the conversation.

Thirdly, home quarantine is self-enforced. This means it is up to us, as individuals (those of us who can afford the luxury of

staying at home), to remain indoors and maintain "social distancing". But some have unsurprisingly taken it upon themselves to utilise this opportunity to go on family vacations. Hundreds of tourists reportedly flocked to Cox's Bazar from different districts following the closure of educational institutions. As a result, authorities in Cox's Bazar and Chattogram rightly banned public gatherings at beaches on March 18.

The element of "self-enforcement" in "home quarantines" can be misleading, ineffective and even dangerous, when we are dealing with a population that severely lacks health literacy and has a general neglect for wellbeing and personal hygiene. The concept of preventive measures is alien even to a large chunk of the middle class in Bangladesh, as the Cox's Bazar episode shows.

With the exception of the minority of urban elites, who have the awareness and financial stability to choose to stay home, home quarantines are not appealing or realistic for the majority of the population.

Putting aside the economic factor and our general negligence towards public health, there is an important social element we simply cannot overlook. We are a breed that revels and thrives in mass gatherings—be it big weddings, joint families, festivals or public holidays. The need for social gatherings is engrained in our collective DNA. But quarantines require of us the exact opposite. One cannot expect millions of people—especially those who do not possess the requisite educational literacy and health awareness—to suddenly exhibit behavioural change.

The truth is that the very idea of "quarantine" goes against the social nature of human beings. As Neil MacFarquhar astutely points out in an article in the *New York Times*, quarantines have historically exposed the conflicts between public health and individual rights.

If there is one thing that the coronavirus pandemic has made clear, it is that there are countless complexities in containing infectious diseases in populations. It, once again, goes to show why people-centred development—investing in quality education and health and closing the gap between the rich and poor—is crucial for the prevention of public health catastrophes.

Nahela Nowshin is a graduate student of development studies. The views in this article are of the author alone, and do not represent those of any organisation(s) she is affiliated with.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**LEO BUSCAGLIA** (1924-1998)  
American author and lecturer.

*The fact that I can plant a seed and it becomes a flower, share a bit of knowledge and it becomes another's, smile at someone and receive a smile in return, are to me continual spiritual exercises.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Pitching no-no
- 5 Group of actors
- 9 Stylist's spot
- 10 Coldly distant
- 12 Tag info
- 13 Captain Nemo's creator
- 14 Utah national park
- 16 Game cube
- 17 Some Father's Day gifts
- 18 Morality topic
- 21 Sinking signal
- 22 Teams
- 23 Tennis setting
- 24 Styx ferryman
- 26 Director's cry
- 29 Asian capital
- 30 Road crew marker
- 31 Noah's boat
- 32 Maine national park
- 34 Cloth fold
- 37 Leaves out
- 38 "Semper Fidelis" composer
- 39 Zellweger of "Judy"
- 40 Ship pole
- 41 Bassets and beagles

**DOWN**

- 1 Spanish neighborhood
- 2 "—Restaurant"
- 3 Highland lakes
- 4 Patella's place
- 5 Cleveland player, for short
- 6 Hoppy brew
- 7 Dishonorable
- 8 Invigorating drinks
- 9 Petty quarrels
- 11 Pros' charges
- 15 California national park
- 19 Rotate
- 20 Bowler or boater
- 22 In need of a massage
- 23 Beanie or beret
- 24 Music's Santana
- 25 Lift
- 26 Programmer's work
- 27 Joins forces
- 28 Make fun of
- 29 Lights-out tune
- 30 Unbilled role
- 33 Parachute pull
- 35 Dry — bone
- 36 Road gunk

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**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

A	M	O	S	F	L	O	S
B	A	R	O	N	L	A	B
A	R	E	N	A	A	B	I
S	I	L	M	E	T	W	A
E	A	S	I	E	R	V	A
N	E	C	T	A	R	I	N
T	A	N	G	E	R	I	N
C	A	R	S	R	E	T	O
E	M	O	U	S	A	D	E
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