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A subdued, introspective Eid

Let the spirit of community touch us all

THIS will be a different Eid that we will be observing after the holy month of Ramadan. For most of us, it will be within the confines of our home and deprived of the usual pleasure of seeing many loved ones. It will be different because our lives have been turned upside down by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. It will be bleak for thousands who have lost their livelihoods and are in acute uncertainty about where the next meal will come from, how they will pay rent, how they will survive. And for more than a million people in nine districts, it will be a day of coping with the reality of lost homes, crops they grew and food they had stored destroyed by a devastating cyclone in the country's coastal areas. While the celebratory mood of Eid will be significantly dampened, let us not forget the spirit of Ramadan and Eid which is all the more relevant in the current scenario of despair, grief and uncertainty.

Eid is the time of giving generously to all those in need. And in no other time have there been so many people in such desperate conditions. The necessity to maintain social distancing and living in a semi-lockdown situation has made it difficult to be physically there for people, to distribute clothes or do any of the other altruistic activities associated with Eid. But that should not stop those in more privileged positions to give monetary assistance more generously to those in need. It is a great opportunity to donate to the numerous organisations and groups that, with their dedicated volunteers, have been working relentlessly throughout this crisis, providing food, medical help, even giving dignified burials to Covid-19 victims. These noble souls will continue to carry out their selfless acts and they should be supported in every way possible. While the government is trying to tackle the huge challenges posed by Covid-19 and Cyclone Amphan, providing financial support and other relief endeavours, we must all try to do our bit as best we can.

The regular camaraderie associated with Eid congregations and get-togethers may not be there this time around but this does not mean we cannot express our love for our fellow human beings with equal sincerity. This occasion warrants a renewed pledge to serve and support our community better and come together as a people fighting the worst odds we could imagine. For the frontline workers—the doctors, nurses, pathologists, cleaners, police, garbage collectors, security guards, and many others who are working round the clock and many will continue through the Eid holidays—we express our deepest gratitude and respect. Our thoughts and prayers for all those bravely fighting the virus in hospitals or at home as well as for those who have lost their loved ones during this pandemic.

We thank our dear readers and patrons for staying with us and supporting us during this crisis. Wishing everyone a safe and heartwarming Eid.

Hospitals turning away patients

Countless lives at risk

IT is a matter of grave concern that the ongoing pandemic has left hospitals overwhelmed, and in many cases patients are being denied vital medical attention, sometimes resulting in deaths. There has been an alarming number of such instances over the past few weeks. A recent report published in this daily sheds light on the sufferings caused as a result of private hospitals not taking in routine or serious patients with various ailments, especially if they appear to have symptoms associated with Covid-19. In such cases, a patient is required to do the necessary test to prove that they are Covid-19 negative before being able to get any treatment in the hospitals. Otherwise, the only remaining option is to risk going to the already-overcrowded public hospitals, which can treat only 30 percent of the country's population seeking healthcare services, a notoriously time-consuming process and not feasible for most emergency cases.

According to the report, a man suffering from a degenerative disease was another victim of this cruel practice of hospitals turning away patients. At least three private hospitals refused to treat him as he had a high temperature (he was yet to get his test results from IEDCR). The fourth hospital initially agreed, and upon observation, reported that the patient had a heart attack. But being a coronavirus-free hospital, it denied admittance as he had fever and breathing difficulties. Despite the family's request to provide him with emergency care while looking for an alternative, he was turned down. After an agonising 10-hour effort by his family to provide him with CCU support, the patient succumbed to his death. The next day, they received a text message from IEDCR confirming that he was COVID-19 negative.

Despite the health ministry's recent circular stating that all private hospitals and clinics should have separate arrangements for treating suspected Covid-19 patients—and that they cannot refuse any patient if they have the particular treatment facilities, and that failure to comply with the order will result in legal action—numerous patients continue to be treated with such callousness. Healthcare is a fundamental right. Such blatant refusal by hospitals and clinics to comply with the directive violates all ethical codes that healthcare professionals and hospitals must abide by. The government, therefore, must deal with this issue urgently and ensure uninterrupted delivery of healthcare services to ordinary patients. Hospitals and clinics providing regular critical services such as kidney dialysis must accept patients requiring such medical procedures. They must not be allowed to refuse critical patients.

Good night, sweet prince



REHMAN SOBHAN

THE passing of Anisuzzaman has taken from our midst one more close friend and comrade from the generation which participated in the struggle for national liberation and held steadfast

to its values.

I can think of few people who embraced and embodied the four foundational pillars of our constitution—democracy, nationalism, secularism, and socialism—with Anis's tenacity.

Anis and I had been friends and colleagues for 63 years, ever since we first joined Dhaka University as young teachers in 1957.

I remember him from those early encounters in the Teachers' Common Room of the Old Arts Building of Dhaka University as a rather shy, soft-spoken young man who concealed his exceptional intelligence and erudition behind an exterior of great modesty and gentleness.

Prof Abdur Razzaq—"Sir," to all who knew him—was my point of contact with Anis, and was to be our "guru" for the remainder of his life. Sir had the unique capacity of bringing together people from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and walks of life whom he presumed shared his liberal enlightenment values.

Sir always viewed Anis as one of the jewels of our academic community. Anis's own reticence inhibited him from proclaiming his exceptional scholastic qualities. But this was, in time, made apparent through his extraordinary capacity for serious research, his creative mind, fertility of his publications, and his lucidity and brevity of expression, whether in his writings or his public presentations, characterised by his self-deprecating humour.

A measure of his scholastic achievements is provided by the prestige he commanded in the academic community outside Bangladesh and particularly in India, where his work was widely recognised through prestigious awards, including the presentation of the Padma Bhushan by the president of India.

Anis was much more than a distinguished scholar. He was a born teacher and remained so throughout his life where he inspired generations of

students at the universities of Chittagong and Dhaka, who remain in his thrall as their mentor, guide, philosopher, and friend.

It was appropriate that at the end of his life, his work should be recognised through his appointment as national professor, to go with his awards of the Ekushey Padak and the Swadhinata Puraskar.

Anisuzzaman's contribution to our society extended well beyond his academic domain. His path-breaking scholarship provided the intellectual foundations for constructing and understanding our national identity.

His engagement with the issue of

government in exile which directed the Liberation War.

Its prime minister, Tajuddin Ahmed, recognising the precision of his mind and the expressiveness of his pen, drew upon him for the preparation of his public presentations.

When I involved myself in the move to establish a planning board to advise the Mujibnagar government, we immediately sought out Anisuzzaman, along with Prof Musharraf Hossain and Prof Sarwar Murshid, among others, to play an active role in planning policy agendas for an independent Bangladesh. In this capacity, he also travelled across India to educate the Indian academic community



In this undated photo, Prof Anisuzzaman (right) is seen with artist Murtaja Baseer (left) and Prof Abdur Razzaq.

SOURCE: GAYANTAPAS ABDUR RAZZAK SMARAK GRANTHA

national identity inevitably drew him into the defining political struggles of our generation, from the Language Movement of 1952 to the struggles to project our cultural identity and the asserting of secular values in the 1960s.

His views and political involvements eventually drew him into embracing democratic struggle for self-rule for the Bangalis under the leadership of Bangabandhu.

In the final phase of our struggle for national liberation, Anisuzzaman remained an active participant. In 1971, he actively associated himself with the

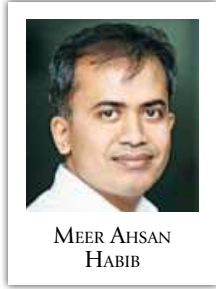
about the emergence of Bangladesh.

In the immediate aftermath of liberation, when Bangabandhu entrusted Kamal Hossain, as law minister, with convening the drafting of the constitution for an independent Bangladesh, Kamal immediately reached out to Anis, who had returned to Chittagong University, to play the lead role in preparing the Bangla draft of the constitution.

Anis not only played a critical role in the translation process, but sat in on deliberations of the drafting committee where he could give expression to his own deeply held values.

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Understanding the Digital Security Act



under the limelight. But the organisation and its founding chairman have also become the target of vicious hate crime and racist attacks in social media. The chairman is a member of a religious minority group and the haters alleged that he was messing with the religious belief of the poor.

Surprisingly, no one from the authorities cared to do something about these vicious attacks. But the foundation and people in general stood by him. In this connection, one commented on social media that "as usual, dishonest people get the accolades, while good people are discredited on baseless issues."

Similarly, we often see that journalists, free thinkers and activists who nurture the principles of democracy are accused of spreading rumours and defaming individuals. The tool that is most commonly used against them is the Digital Security Act 2018, which can lead to arrests without a warrant and proper investigation. Since its enactment in September 2018, it has been termed as a "draconian" act, particularly in reference to its sections 8, 21, 25, 28, 29, 31, 32, 43 and 53. In addition, the act reinstated the colonial-era Official Secrets Act of 1923 that makes investigative journalism almost impossible. One may recall that while praising the act, one ruling party lawmaker had called it a "heavenly law" and claimed, bizarrely, that the world would follow Bangladesh after the passing of such a law!

Indeed, this "heavenly" act was used recently to sue eleven individuals. Two of the accused, cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore and writer Mushtaq Ahmed, landed in jail for posting cartoons in social media. This incident took place against the backdrop of the disappearance of photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol on March 10. On the same day, Editor-in-Chief of daily *Manabzamin* Matiuur Rahman Chowdhury and 31 others including Kajol were sued under the Digital Security Act for "publishing false news and circulating it on social media". The trend then continued with the filing of cases against Editor-in-Chief of bdnews24.com Toufique Imrose Khalidi and Acting Editor of jagonews24.com Mohiuddin Sarker. In these confusing times of Covid-19 pandemic, when

the free flow of information is vital to save lives, the opposite is happening in Bangladesh.

If hatred and racist propaganda on digital platforms is not a crime, then how can posting or sharing of cartoons, critical status and news links be deemed offences under the Digital Security Act? Since when have these activities become a crime in a democracy? Those who are bestowed with the authority of exercising power must understand that criticism is not sedition or defamation. It is logical for an aggrieved person to be critical of any action by any state functionary and the people within it.

The recent trend of filing cases under the Digital Security Act and the swift arrests of the alleged defendants have drawn sharp criticism both within and outside the country. The Editors' Council termed the trend as a clear threat to freedom of the press and freedom of expression and demanded its immediate revocation. Commenting on the development, seven ambassadors in Dhaka in separate tweets emphasised that press freedom was more important than ever. International human rights organisations have urged Bangladesh

and freedom of expression. Digital security is all about securing personal identity from theft as well as protection of assets and systems by using tools like firewall, anti-virus, biometric verification of identity while accessing a system, etc. It has nothing to do with tarnishing one's image in the cyber world. Unfortunately, we have knowingly or naively mixed up Cyber Security with Digital Security. As defined by the world's leading anti-virus enterprise, Kaspersky, the so-called crimes in question here in Bangladesh fall within the bigger purview of cyber threats and, if narrowed down, within the purview of cyber-attacks. Our ignorance made us so vulnerable to cybercrimes that cybercriminals looted USD 81 million (later only USD 18 million was recovered) from the national exchequer in February 2016, just by sending some phishing emails. Surprisingly, despite having clear provisions for trying such crimes under the Digital Security Act, no case has ever been filed in Bangladesh.

The act seems to be a weapon of mass destruction for press freedom and freedom of expression in Bangladesh. Instead of combatting cyber fraud and cybercrimes, it is being frequently used by

Bangabandhu eventually invited Anis to join his administration as the secretary of the Ministry of Education, but Anis persuaded Bangabandhu that he could best serve him by remaining a university teacher at a time when the universities of an independent Bangladesh badly needed the services of such academic scholars.

For the remainder of his days, at Chittagong University and then Dhaka University, Anis remained fully committed to teaching and scholarship.

In this time, particularly through the dark days of cantonment rule, Anis remained committed to protecting and perpetuating the values which he had helped inscribe in our constitution.

This engaged him in struggles to challenge departures from the national commitment to democracy, social justice, and secularism, which were so inherent to the spirit of the Liberation War. He accordingly played a vanguard role with Jahanara Imam in the movement to bring collaborators in the genocide of 1971 to justice.

In the early years of the life of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), around the mid-1990s, I persuaded Anis to become a member of our board of trustees. Over the last 25 years of his life, Anis remained an active and treasured colleague in CPD's programmes which were calculated to perpetuate the principles underlying our constitution.

In our endeavours, Anis remained an invaluable inspiration whose very presence in our midst ensured we did not distance ourselves from our foundational values.

Not all great scholars or public figures are also great human beings, free of conceit and notions of self-importance. But Anis was always available to all who sought his time and assistance. His generosity of spirit kept him involved, even in the final years of his life when his health had deteriorated, in attending public programmes when he could.

The departure of this great scholar, true patriot, and exceptional human being has left the nation impoverished. We will not see the likes of him again. I do not command adequate words to bid him his farewell, so let me borrow from Horatio's valediction in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

*Good night, Sweet Prince
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.*

Professor Rehman Sobhan is Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). The article was first published in Dhaka Tribune on May 19, 2020, and is being reprinted with the author's permission.

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Journalists demanding repeal of the Digital Security Act in front of Jatiya Press Club, Dhaka.

STAR FILE PHOTO

authorities to repeal the act. The Guardian reported quoting Odhikar that there have been 1,000 cases filed under the Digital Security Act which has been used largely by politicians and businessmen. This is quite frightening: can an act serve only the powerful section of society?

Those who advocated for the act either had no understanding of digital security or intentionally planned it to gag media

a section of people to hide various forms of transgressions. Although article 39 (2) (b) of the constitution of Bangladesh guarantees the freedom of the press, there have been numerous acts and policies that are not only jeopardising press freedom but also serving the interests of a vested quarter. State functionaries that are supposed to govern the press have been made ineffective.

For instance, Bangladesh Press Council is mandated to preserve the freedom of the press and to maintain and improve the standard of newspapers and news agencies in Bangladesh. It was established as a quasi-judicial body in 1979 under the Press Council Act, 1974. It was the outcome of a consensus that an independent authority should exist for safeguarding the freedom of the press and protecting individuals and institutions from excesses by the media. But in reality, the council has neither the authority to govern the press and ensure its freedom nor has any stake in the bureaucracy-led policy formulation process, a process that gave birth to the Digital Security Act—no other country in the world perhaps has so many acts and policies directly or indirectly limiting press freedom.

So contrary to what the lawmaker had hoped during the birth of this act, the world is not following Bangladesh. It is rather shocked to observe what is going on in the name of digital security, and how the freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and press freedom are being violated randomly. The act denies the very basic principles of the constitution of Bangladesh. Let us take a cue from the famous letter of Martin Luther King, Jr. that he wrote from the Birmingham City Jail—"I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. ... Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

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