

FOCUS

Shazneen's Second Death Anniversary

Two years on ...
Still waiting for justice

Recalling an Incomprehensible Tragedy

By Shaheen Anam

ON this day, exactly two years ago, we were confronted with one of the most brutal, meaningless and horrific example of bestiality committed against a child. On April 23, 1998, Shazneen, who was only 13, was murdered and defiled in the safety of her home.

Dhaka was numb and for days no other discussion or conversation took place anywhere. This heart-wrenching incident left us all stunned and overwhelmed with grief and shock. Even today I remember so vividly the reactions of friends, relatives and even complete strangers on hearing the news. I especially recall the bewildered looks on the faces of children, her friends as they tried to understand why their sweet and ever loving friend had to meet this meaningless tragedy.

Yes, there is no doubt that the force of life is far stronger than death. Much as we mourned we have all gone back to the normal rhythm of life. Friends and relatives have dealt with the tragedy in their own ways. Even the Rahman family has, on the surface, gone back to, at least, the rituals of normal life. Yet, deep inside, somewhere in our psyche the incident has left an indelible impression. It is almost a feeling of guilt that we should have done more, we should have tried harder and we should have prayed longer to do something about it.

The tragedy has certainly had taken its toll on all of us. For a long time afterwards fear gripped our every day life. Suddenly children were faced with fact that what happened to their dear friend could happen to them as well. Thus even the most normal event became an exercise in security. The grim realisation that they were not

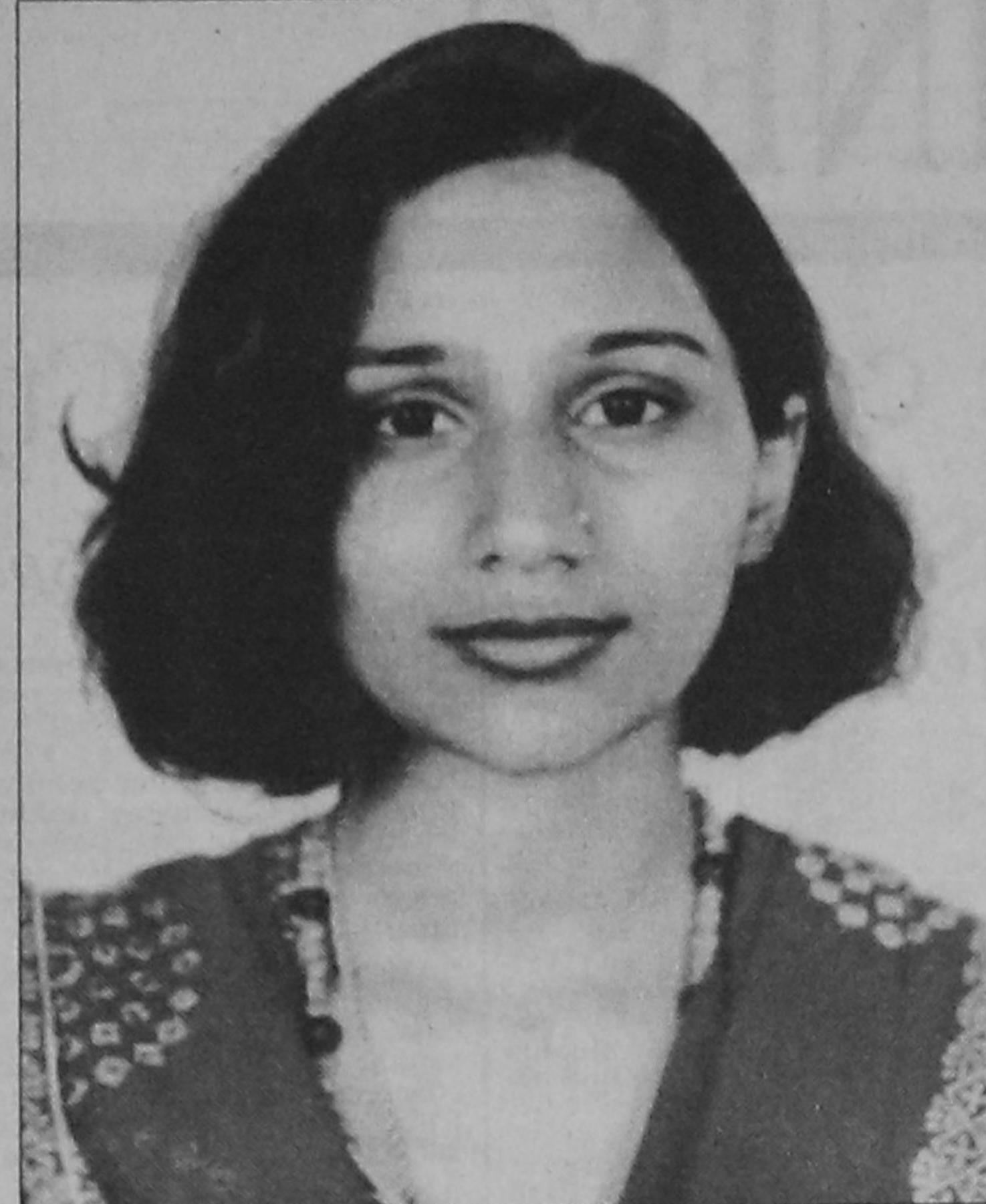
safe, even in the sanctity of their homes wrought havoc in the day-to-day existence of Dhakaites.

As for the family, life became a living nightmare as they started to piece together their shattered lives. Yet, they have borne the loss with an amazing dignity and grace. Their conduct in public has been nothing short of super human and heroic. Unbelievable as it may sound it was their courage and fortitude that encouraged us all to regain faith once more. I recall how people from all walks of life — children, women, friends and strangers — rose to protest against this tragedy. I also recall the promise we all made to Shazneen. That promise was to make her death meaningful, and worthwhile.

To use this tragedy to prevent occurrence of such violence and seek justice for the victims. We had also vowed to push for a speedy trial and the upholding of the law of the land in the best possible manner. We wanted to see that the guilty punished, not out of any sense of vengeance but to uphold our promise to Shazneen and to all young women of her age. How much of that promise have we been able to keep?

Unfortunately, not even one. There is no doubt that from the family's side no stone has been left unturned to take the case towards completion. Yet after one year what do we see? First, it took eight months to frame charges against the alleged murderers. As a reader, all we can see is that Mr. Rahman is going through the ordeal of endless cross-examinations. We believe that many more will be cross-examined.

However, the question is: when do we see an end to this? The famous saying — "Justice delayed is justice denied" — has no longer any meaning in our justice system.



However, what is most alarming is if such a family is helpless in hurrying up the process, one can only imagine what ordeal an ordinary family with little resources goes through.

Most people cannot even imagine hiring the expensive lawyers and sustaining the cost for such a long period of time. Most people do not even attempt to seek justice for the rape, murder, assault, acid attacks on their loved ones. No, they don't.

They just resign themselves to fate and go through life, their lives shattered, their dreams broken as they watch most offenders walk away free. It is not that there is no awareness of the loopholes in our justice system. For many years Women and Human Rights groups have been lobbying and advocating for a justice system that is accessible to the common people, that is sensitive to their needs and one that delivers justice to the victim and punishes the offenders.

However, what we come across is just the opposite. As acts of violence escalates to an all-time high, terrorists and gangsters roam the streets and terrorise ordinary people. Political patronage, corruption and total disregard for the rule of law often makes a mockery of our justice system. When it comes to lodging a case against alleged offenders, the victim is either terrorised, does not have the resources nor the moral and social support to do so. To this grim scenario is added police misconduct, brutality and corruption. Time and again they have been responsible for many acts of violence against women and children.

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This piece, carried in the April 23, 1999 issue of The Daily Star, is reprinted with slight modification

in the book industry, and the production and consumption of cultural paper. Reading promotion amongst children and young people as well as disadvantaged groups also continues to receive special attention under this programme.

Among these issues are those relating to book as a social force, as an instrument and an indicator of national development, as an industrial product, and as a link between cultures and peoples; ways of increasing the free flow of books, particularly questions of copyright and translation, and the provision of books for new readers in both industrialized and developing countries, especially reading materials in the fight for literacy and for rural populations as well as textbooks; the new technologies, the mass media and new factors in publishing and distribution that will have significant repercussions on the book in the future.

During the last 30 years, we are proud to note that Bangladesh has responded well to the issues mentioned here. The Bangladesh National Book Policy formulated and announced made 34 provisions for book development which essentially covered development of authors, reading promotion, import and export of books, fairs and exhibitions, information and database, creation of a book development council, provision for tax relief to writers, translators and illustrators.

The policy made extensive provisions for library development, which were spell out in as many as eight clauses in anticipation that even if a library legislation was not enacted by the government, the book policy would provide adequate support

to library development.

The Bangladesh book policy which has already incorporated the provision to absorb the benefits of new technology was able to anticipate that modern technology would form an important part in the development of the book industry. The policy provided for easy access to information highway. There is a broad provision in the Bangladesh book policy to accommodate new changes and necessary updating. Bangladesh is preparing for an Information Technology Village.

The protection of intellectual property has assumed great importance with the prospect of market economy, which is knocking at our doors. With the globalisation process already set in motion, trade related intellectual property (TRIPS) was being strongly emphasised by the developed countries. It was therefore necessary that developing countries like Bangladesh take steps to educate the users of intellectual property so that they will be able to function in the global market.

In a recent book launching ceremony at the Osmani Memorial Hall, President Shahabuddin Ahmed had urged upon the government and the opposition parties to work for a "Reading Society". In Bangladesh, by working for a Reading Society we can be able to function in the global market.

On this World Book Day 2000 let us all vow to work for the future of Bangladesh.

The author is the publisher of the University Press Limited

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Justice yet to be delivered

By Aasha Mehreen Amin

IT is strange how easily we forget what is tragic and fearful. Perhaps, it is the only way to survive. But for Shazneen Rahman's family, there is no forgetting; no solace from the cruel fact that one of them is gone, never to return. Yet, what makes their anguish more unendurable is the fact that two years have passed, but virtually no progress has been made in the legal procedure to try the accused.

The brutal rape and murder of fifteen-year-old Shazneen on April 23, 1998 left the entire nation in a shock. The daughter of a well-known industrialist, Latifur Rahman, Shazneen was in her bedroom when a group of assailants came in and murdered her in cold blood. She was stabbed 22 times, raped and then killed while her parents were upstairs having dinner with guests. The chilling tragedy shattered whatever little sense of security we had.

All the accused in the murder were trusted employees of the Rahman household —

Hasan, the contractor who was treated like a family member and who allegedly masterminded the murder; Badal, Hasan's assistant who is suspected of tampering with security lights and assisting in the crime; Humayun Kabir, the security guard who was found in the toilet that night, long after his shift had been over; Shahid, the cook's helper, who confessed to the killing; Shaniram, a carpenter who allegedly supplied one of the murder weapons and an abettor; and, Parveen and Minu, the two maids. The motive behind the killing is yet to be established. Was it an act of senseless revenge, was it to prevent Shazneen from divulging something, or was it an assassination carried out for some extra cash? One can only hope that truth will come out after a fair and impartial trial.

The snail's pace of the trial process, however, is a disconcerting reminder of how difficult it is for the victims and

their families to seek legal redress in this country. Two cases were filed in 1998 — a murder case by the victim's father at the Additional Metropolitan Session Judge Court, and a rape case under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 1995 by Additional SP, CID, Mujibur Rahman while he was investigating the case. Since then the trial has been postponed due to absence of some of the accused including Hasan and appeals made by the defence lawyers. Latifur Rahman, the principal witness, has been cross-examined, a process that has still not ended and may drag on for months. Moreover, the court has decided to allow the two cases to be tried one after another and not simultaneously. First, the rape case will be tried under Section 6.1, 6.2 and 14. All the six accused (one of the accused, security guard Humayun Kabir died mysteriously while in custody) will be charged-sheets as late as May 4, 2000. The murder case can only begin after the first

trial is over. Maximum penalty for both cases is death by hanging; a sentence, if carried out, will give hope that such acts of depraved violence are not just punishable but indeed punished by the law.

As Shazneen's family struggled to deal with the terrible void in their lives and battle with a harrowing process to seek justice, we, as citizens, must keep the pressure on our legal institutions for a speedy trial. Everyday young girls are tortured, raped and mercilessly killed and their assailants are protected by influence, money and legal loopholes. Unless cases like Shazneen's murder are tried speedily and effectively, the very objective of the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 1995 will be nullified. Delayed justice may encourage many more criminals to rape and murder, and many more families like the Rahmans would be made to wait indefinitely for the criminals to be punished.

For How Long?

By Ziaul Karim

THE brutal rape of the fifteen-year-old Shazneen on April 23, 1998 remained a painful memory deeply etched in our collective consciousness as we remember today her fearful exit from the rhythm of life and the cushion of her parents' affection. Our mental composure is still fundamentally disturbed by the fact that the perpetrators of the demonic incident has not yet been punished by law.

As we remember her today our heart aches and bleeds profusely not only because her family has to cope with a recurring nightmare of loss and unbearable pain day in and day out, but also because we, as a society, cannot be at their side to give solace.

A philosophical question it

may be, but let us try to answer this question: if the hyenas that carried out the gruesome murder in cold blood are punished, will that erase the emotional scar that the bereaved family is carrying with them? The answer is not so simple as to be given in just a yes or no. A loss may be personal but the punishment is vital for the society. Why? A society is like a well-knit fabric and any monstrous activity sends shock waves through the whole design of the fabric. To restore the equilibrium of the society a monster must be punished, or else the society begins to rot.

When our heart goes with the family whose emotional wounds we do not hope to heal,

we cry out for justice that has been to-date proved mysteriously elusive.

Shazneen is now a symbol of justice indefinitely denied. But why? That a teenage girl, who had a passion for poetry, a magnanimous appetite for life and a smile that was angelic, became victim of a chilling tragedy is something we will never forget. Time is the best healer; it may not be always true, especially not in the case of Shazneen who was butchered away from a life that was about to bloom.

The shock that jolted the nation in 1998 was a testimony to how people reacted to the news of Shazneen's murder in her bedroom by a group of as-



Shazneen's murder triggered impassioned protests... people refuse to take any more of such violence against women and children. (Star file photo)

Thoughts on World Book Day 2000

In a recent book launching ceremony at the Osmani Memorial Hall, President Shahabuddin Ahmed had urged upon the government and the opposition parties to work for a "Reading Society" in Bangladesh. On this World Book Day 2000 let us all vow to work for the future of Bangladesh by working for a Reading Society despite all our limitations from

By Mohiuddin Ahmed

APRIL 23 is the World Book Day. This is the second year of the World Book Day. This day holds a special significance to book lovers and readers of the world. The World Book Day 2000 has come at a time when UNESCO has also declared Twenty-first of February as the World Mother Language Day and which had been a great honour to Bangladesh and to the Martyrs of the Language Movement of 1952.

It was a strange coincidence that the history of UNESCO's efforts for intensifying book development is as old as the history of Bangladesh. The UNESCO General Conference at its 16th session (1970) decided by acclamation to proclaim 1972 as International Book Year (IBY). That was the time Bangladesh was reconstructing itself from the ruins of a Liberation War. The 70's was a decade when UNESCO emphasised the need for access to books. That was a time when Bangladesh was even unable to provide textbooks to its students. For UNESCO, it soon became evident that availability of books was not sufficient and that there must be continuous incentive to read as well. Thus "Towards a Reading Society" became the call of the 80's. Bangladesh responded to the call and our publishers came forth to produce books.

Wherein reading was perceived as an indispensable pre-requisite to personal and national development, Bangladesh did not produce enough books to create a reading society because increased book production must be accompanied by vigorous efforts to promote reading among the

Savouring the Mother of All Visits

India has removed import restrictions on 714 goods as part of sweeping economic reforms in the aftermath of the 20-25 March visit by United States President Bill Clinton. The visit has come as a shot in the arm for Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee despite continuing disagreements between New Delhi and Washington.

D K Joshi writes from New Delhi

U.S president Bill Clinton's recent South Asian sojourn has come as a timely relief for the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's beleaguered Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Emerging distinctly jaded from a series of political crises in the states of Gujarat, Bihar and Jharkhand, where a fierce opposition upstaged a BJP ally, Vajpayee lost no time in making clever political use of the extraordinary euphoria generated in India by the Clinton visit.

He used it to ward off pressures on his government from the opposition parties, his coalition partners and also Hindu hardliners, particularly on the issue of second generation economic reforms.

He took the first opportunity after Clinton's departure to meet the newly-appointed chief of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which gives ideological sustenance to the BJP and is seen by critics as the fountainhead of Hindu militancy. Kuppala Seetharamayya, Sudarshan followed the meeting by issuing a statement saying he fully backed the BJP government.

The RSS chief went a step further to say Vajpayee was "a source of inspiration" for him and that the RSS fully understood the compulsions of the government and wanted it to

make progress. The reason for Vajpayee's keenness to enlist RSS support is that Sudarshan, a known hardliner within the group, has earlier been making loud noises against the government's liberalisation and economic reforms agenda. He had cautioned the BJP government against falling prey to the dictates of the World Trade Organisation.

"We (the BJP) will forego power than compromise on national interests," he declared in his angry speech, adding: "We will not have relations with any country if that meant compromising on the interests of our people."

To further clarify matters, BJP president Kushabhai Thakre said the BJP and RSS were two "distinct" and "independent" organisations. What one said was not binding on the

other. Clinton's feel-good visit also helped Vajpayee ignore the pressure of his alliance partners to roll back cuts in food, fertiliser and other subsidies proposed in his government's budget — an essential pre-requisite for the reforms agenda.

His government depends on coalition partners for its survival. Ironically, a cyber-savvy southern Indian chief minister, Chandrababu Naidu, who played host to Clinton, is in the forefront of this populist demand.

Opposition parties too appeared to have been stumped by the Clinton visit. The main opposition party, the 114-year-old Congress, was muted in its reaction, not wishing to be seen as either anti-reforms or anti-US. It was only the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and some other left-wing parties which opposed the visit. The CPI asserted the government's pro-US stance "has serious implications for India's sovereignty and foreign policy."

And its leader said the hype over Clinton was "a sign of servility."

Certainly, Clinton's conversation pieces in India and Pakistan generated a new popular mood markedly different from the past, when Washington tilted toward Pakistan, its firm US "natural allies."

However, a reality check on India-US dialogue shows that some substantive strategic issues the two were far apart.

Washington refused to lift sanctions imposed after India conducted nuclear tests in May 1998 until New Delhi signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. India made it clear that the aim of its nuclear programme was to achieve what it called a "minimum credible deterrence."

The question is whether the US' "minimum credible deterrence" had been reached, India said.

Vajpayee has rhetorically characterised Clinton's visit as "the beginning of a new voyage in a new century." And his government has been trying to portray the US president's utterances as signifying a tilt toward India that marked a watershed in South Asian history — in an obvious bid to boost Vajpayee's political image.

But senior US officials such as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and her assistant Karl Inderfurth have denied any such tilt, which makes it clear that a strategic partnership is a distant dream.

— Gemini News

The author is a journalist who formally worked for the *Bombay Free Press Journal*.