

Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1996)



Ken Saro-Wiwa: Portrait of an executed man

In May 1995 in a presidential letter published in the *Mail & Guardian* Ken Saro-Wiwa, the famous Nigerian writer and environmental activist wrote from his prison: "Whether I live or die is immaterial. It is enough to know that there are people who commit time, money and energy to fight this one evil among so many others predominating world-wide. If they do not succeed today, they will succeed tomorrow. We must keep on striving to make the world a better place for all of mankind - each one contributing his bit, in his or her own way".

The story of Ken Saro-Wiwa presents an ideal, though sad, case study of the collusion between the military dictators and the MNCs and the grass-root protests. The Royal Dutch Shell Company, popularly known as Shell Oil, had been extracting oil from the fertile, swampy lowlands of the Ogoni's 400-sq-mi homeland in south-eastern Nigeria since 1958. The company offered a few benefits to local communities, and their sloppy practices contaminated the water and land, reducing fish and crop yields.

In 1990 a group of Ogoni traditional leaders formed the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People. Ken Saro-Wiwa joined the movement convinced that success depended on both high-profile protest actions and international support. In order to win the support of environmentalists in England and the United States, Ken Saro-Wiwa filmed the degradation of Ogoniland and distributed the footage abroad. His efforts caught the attention of environmental groups such as Greenpeace as well as the international media, which further publicised Shell Oil's activities. In 1992 Saro-Wiwa travelled to Geneva, where he addressed the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations; later that year he spoke before a committee of delegates at the United Nations in New York.

In the same letter mentioned earlier, he also wrote: "It is the British government, which makes noises about democracy in Nigeria and Africa but supports military dictators to the hilt. It is the British government which supports the rape and devastation of the environment by a valued, tax-paying, labour-employing organisation like Shell. I lay my travails, the destruction of the Ogoni and other peoples in the Niger delta, at the door of the British government".

On May 21, 1994, Ken Saro-Wiwa was arrested along with 14 colleagues, allegedly for involvement in the murder of four pro-government Ogoni chiefs. He was awarded prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, given annually to one environmental activist from each continent. Despite such publicity and lobbying efforts by numerous international groups, Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged along with eight other environmentalists on November 10, 1995.

The execution took place under one of Nigeria's harshest dictatorships of General Sani Abacha whose brutal rule ended when he died in 1998. Ken Saro-Wiwa led the protests of the Ogoni people against the exploitation of their lands by Western petroleum companies. Shortly after his hanging, Anthony R. Guneratne, a colleague from Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore wrote: When do we stop putting ropes around the necks of our writers so that the oil pipelines (of the Western companies) are kept clear?

Ken Saro-Wiwa was born at Bori on 10 October, 1941. He studied English at the Government College Umuahia which also produced Chinua Achebe and Elechi Amadi, and at University College Ibadan, and then worked as a teaching assistant at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka and lectured at Lagos University. He was always proud of his cultural roots. He showed a flair for writing from his school days. His major works published when he was in his 40s. They are: *Songs in a Time of War* (1985), *Sozaboy* (1985), and *A Forest of Flowers*, short stories (1986).

In the same letter from prison, he also wrote: "When, after years of writing, I decided to take the word to the streets to mobilise the Ogoni people, and empower them to protest against the devastation of their environment by Shell, and their denigration and dehumanisation by Nigeria's military dictators, I had no doubt where it could end. This knowledge has given me strength, courage and cheer - and psychological advantage over my tormentors".

For the environmentalists around the world, Ken Saro-Wiwa will always be remembered as a martyr, as a symbol of principled protest and sacrifice.

Habib Khondker
Singapore

A Mawaz
Dhaka

BNP mark sheet

This refers to the BNP and the coalition government's 100-days misrule published by Bangladesh Awami League (February 11).

The left side of the publication appears like a mark sheet. The subjects are highlighted followed by the remarks of the media. But how come the media missed out the major subject 'corruption'? It would have been interesting to see where the tick mark would have fallen?

On perusal of the publication it seems unfair that BNP and the coalition government has been accused of having failed miserably in governance.

Coming to the text version of the address, it only sings its praise, it would also be unfair to mention that some of the achievement of Awami League are undoubtedly praiseworthy, but it would have been a fair play rather than one sided as per the publication, had Awami League also admitted its failures, misrule and corruption.

Billy Ahmed
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

The chandabazi culture

The DS has done a public service by spotlighting the toll collection culture (Feb 11). This racket is plaguing the society since democratic regimes came into operation since 1991. And now the situation has gone out of control due to indifference and callousness of the government. Direct or indirect support of the political parties and godfathers cannot be ruled out. It is amazing that the social problems are due to political reasons.

The elected regime has to issue firm and clear regulations without any exemption. Some examples are noted below.

Voluntary contributions solicited must be based on appeals, without threat or discrimination. Toll-collection points should be banned, even if voluntary collection is permitted.

All voluntary donations, in cash or kind, must be made at the charity office concerned, never directly to the field workers. Publicity campaign and cash collections are different activities, and should not be mixed up. No pestering-- it is a nuisance. The ID cards must be genuine. The government inspection

methods have to be introduced to bring down the cost to the level of the middle class and lower levels of shoppers. Some bags were priced as several hundred taka (fashionable and exotic), and most of the handicrafts were export-oriented.

To capture the market jute products must be turned into essential items of daily use. It is possible, if the JRI offer free or subsidised R&D and pilot experiments to the entre-

Dhaka Zoo



Future zoo?

Dhaka Zoo is a disgrace and probably in contravention of all international norms and accords regarding the treatment of caged animals.

The Zoo authorities keep on needlessly expanding their built up area catering to noisy undisciplined visitors while doing almost nothing to benefit zoological knowledge or the animals.

This experiment is disgusting and depraved.

Bastiat
Dhaka

difficult to establish the credentials of such roving groups in a single particular locality.

It is a nuisance, and the government is aware of it, but the regulators are tardy. One just cannot knock and ask for money. It is becoming a culture. Collecting cash should not become so easy. Now this has turned into armed terrorist raids at business places, and to kidnapping for ransom. Should not we cultivate the right attitudes for hard work and honest living?

A citizen

Dhaka

"Tab on tele-talk"

I refer to the news "Tab on tele-talk" (February 19). According to the news the government has decided that there would be a certain reduction in the price for each call, Tk 0.20 to be precise, but the policy does take an excellent twist by metering the telephone calls thus increasing the total cost per call, by a considerable amount.

The decision may be a good one taken by the great think tanks of our country, but through the point I see it, this decision will have a rather negative effect on the already battered information system of our country. As we all know, we get extremely slow data transfer speed when we connect to the Internet through our BTTB telephone connections. What would take one minute to download using a standard Internet connection (ones used abroad) take at least 8-10 minutes through the present dial-up Internet connections due the telephone wiring. When looking for certain information on the Internet we need to stay online for prolonged period only for this problem.

Now according to the new billing system the Internet users will be awfully inhibited, as they will have to pay a greater amount of money for their time on the Internet. It is already a burden for the Internet users, who are using their telephone lines to connect with their Internet Service Provider, to pay their Internet and Telephone bills simultaneously just for connecting to the Internet and this new system will only add more difficulties to their cause.

The Internet using population of our country mostly consists of students and it is very difficult on their part to pay this increased

expense and this will gradually result in the holding back of the communication system through the Internet, which is already in quite a terrible condition.

I would suggest the government to take an alternative process, such as promoting Broadband Internet Service Providing, for the people to

the long run. The present world is of Information Technology and without Internet we are nowhere in the race.

Abdus Sami Chowdhury
BRAC University,
Dhaka

Increasing telephone call charge

I am surprised to see that BTTB has decided to levy a per minute charge on telephone calls. Not only will this decision have a negative impact on the IT sector, you do not have to be a rocket scientist to see that one can question the legality of this decision.

As per the new Telecom Act, BTTB has to seek approval of such decisions from BTRC. Since BTTB has not done so, this new rule is Ultra Vires of the Act. I urge the local ISP's to take this matter to Court immediately, as they are the one's to be worst hit by this.

Ariful Islam
SOAS, University of London
(Tele-metring has been suspended for the time being. The matter is with the Law Ministry now -Editor)

CARE staff assault

I am horrified to read about the physical assault and harassment of a CARE Bangladesh female field officer. A BNP leader Ahsanul Taiyab Zakir has been accused. It is also alleged that the victim was so badly assaulted that she had to undergo an abortion following the incident.

This is an outrage! We demand capital punishment for this incident from the government. I recommend the guilty be punished in open public.

Swift and ruthless action in this incident will nip any future occurrence of such incidents. I urge the government to act on its promise

Internet in higher education

The Internet has become indispensable for higher learning and research and its restricted use will cause serious repercussion on the quality of education in all institutes of mid level and higher learning. If we do not keep abreast of the rapid advances that are taking place, we won't be in a position to help ourselves and our country. Neither can we hope to even speak from the same platform in negotiations in this era of globalisation.

At a time like this, the government slaps telephone metering which will spiral Internet costs and a huge amount of annual fees for ISP providers, thus also stopping educational institutes from using broadband facilities which does not use a telephone line. In my Department at Dhaka University, we are using the Internet continuously and daily during office hours for downloading scientific literature, data and software for a lot analyses that we regularly need for research and teaching purposes. Does the government ever think of educational institutes of higher learning when introducing policies that severely affect academic interests of an already endangered science and research culture?

Zeba I. Seraj
DU

Homeopathic economics

When a homeopath doctor treats a patient with allopathic medicine-- it becomes too dangerous. Just like that an accountant should not handle economy of a developing country. The former Awami League government's Finance Minister streamlined systems that forced to increase revenue by 10 per cent yearly for the last 5-years. Bangladesh Bank's report on DS dated 11-02-2002 disclosed revenue-earning target missed by 1.45 per cent only i.e. target of 10 per cent increase not

achieved but 8.25 per cent achieved.

The present Finance Minister increased fuel, gas, electricity prices, so there will be no shortage of money for ADP of FY-2001-2002. Instead huge surplus is expected at poor peoples cost. Again Bangladesh needs about \$12B for import yearly. Garment sector and other sectors' export fall have been covered by increase in remittance by

workers abroad.

Further increase in remittance is possible if hundi business is stopped and PSI is made stronger and ban Indian cows and clothes.

Now if Mr. Saifur Rahman shuts down SOEs, 800 bank branches as per order of IMF, a huge number of people will be jobless. Already five million people are without jobs in rural areas for not implementing Food for Work programme due to delay and mismanagement. Mr SAMS Kibria's assessment published in DS 10-2-2002 may be noted. A huge number of unemployed people will have malnutrition

per cent till the problem is over and that will correct import of luxury goods, fall of eating Indian cows, use of Indian goods.

AKM Khairul Anam
Banani, Dhaka

Popularisation of jute bags

I visited the exhibition of jute shopping bags and other goods at the NAM centre, and came back with the impression that it was hurriedly called to create awareness. These are existing products at the handicraft stage, for which mass produc-

tion methods have to be introduced to bring down the cost to the level of the middle class and lower levels of shoppers. Some bags were priced as several hundred taka (fashionable and exotic), and most of the handicrafts were export-oriented.

To capture the market jute products must be turned into essential items of daily use. It is possible, if the JRI offer free or subsidised R&D and pilot experiments to the entre-

preneurs. The role of the government as a facilitator has to be enhanced, with higher priority. A stage might come later when the jute sector could be declared a thrust area. With dwindling RMG exports, this is a good potential substitute.

The next phase is some hectic activity by the designers for products at popular prices, and the incentive for investment for mass production, as also encouragement of the cottage industry sector to generate more employment. Hundreds of products can be made of jute fibre and can be exported.

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"Wrong wording in a Rabindra Sangeet"

Unfortunately what started out as a fairly innocuous pronouncement by Mr Karim (February 6) about the wrong wording in a Rabindra Sangeet has now come perilously close to a mud-slinging match. The purpose of my letter (February 15) was to clarify certain points raised previously, not to add flames to what was fast becoming a heated debate. Enough has been said on the matter in my opinion, so I will limit myself to two points raised in two letters regarding this issue.

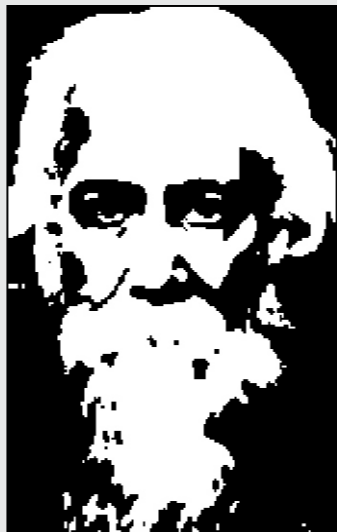
Firstly re-reading my letter now I realise that the term 'gharana' may not have been the most ideal choice of words to describe the Shantiniketan 'school' of singing. However this term 'Shantiniketan gharana' was coined by a Kolkata journalist in a review of a concert some years ago, not by me. What I think he meant by the term 'gharana' in this context was the style of singing that has developed over the last 50 years in the hands of a small band of singers and teachers who, after Rabindranath's death, were left with the difficult task of running the *sangeet bhavan* and to continue teaching the songs of Rabindranath in the most authentic and accurate manner. That Rabindranath himself often used to forget the tunes of his own songs is well attested to by many (which is why even today in some of the *swaralipi* too there are differing versions of various songs - where either the tune or the rhythm or both have been altered). For example the version of '*tohu mone rekho*' sung by Dinedranath in the 1930s bears little similarity to the *swaralipi* by Dinedranath Thakur several years earlier.

The system of notating Rabindranath's songs only really started to take off in the late '20s at the instigation of the poet, and indeed by the time of his death in 1941 only a handful of *swaralipi* books had been published by *Viswa-bharati*. In the meantime it was left to this group of singers in Shantiniketan to disseminate and consolidate what resources they had amongst themselves for the purpose

of preserving and teaching these songs. Many claimed that they had committed various songs to memory perfectly and offered to teach and pass them onto those who wished to learn them. It was at this time that these differing versions came to light, and it was the job of people like Shailajaranjan Majumdar, Prafulla Kumar Das and others to sort the bad from the good for the sake of preserving the most authentic of these in a *swaralipi* form.

The entire system of notation and *swaralipi* was developed by Dijendranath Thakur, adopted by Jyotirindranath and Dinendranath Thakur and strictly followed and adhered to by such eminent mentors as Shailajaranjan Majumdar and Anadikumar Dastidar. There was more freedom in the way Rabindra Sangeet could be sung in the days before the *swaralipi* was eventually made the 'standard', and it is these 'freer' versions of some songs that are still around today, and have been immortalised by such singers as Kanika Bandopadhyay and Nilima Sen, both gurus of Rezwana Bannya Chowdhury.

This is why in songs like 'Anandadhara bohiche bhubone' one hears two quite distinct versions of the song depending on whether you come from the Kanika/Bannya School (read Shantiniketan) or choose to follow the *swaralipi*, which was done by Indiradebi Choudhurani. Now who is to say which is right and which is wrong? Certainly we hear Rezwana Chowdhury Bannya's version more often, but that is not to say that that is the only version worth listening to! Certainly in listening to recordings of Kanika Bandopadhyay



Tagore debate: To be continued...

she has taken more liberties with the tune than would be allowed today perhaps, but this does not make them wrong - they are unique - but that is all. They should not necessarily be copied 'note for note'. After all it is the spirit of the words, as someone wrote earlier on, that needs to be expressed.

When I referred to this school of singing as a 'gharana' there was absolutely no intention to slight the poetic or musical reputation of Rabindranath. Indeed it would seem strange to suggest that Rabindranath be held responsible for the quality of teaching at *Viswa-bharati*.

Secondly in the song '*ki dhoni baje*', of which there are two *swaralipis*, towards the end of the '*bol tan*' section which Bannya sings there is only ever the *kori 'ma' of purbi rag* used in the notation, however just at the end of the '*ba-je*' she reverts suddenly to *shuddho ma* without reason. Whether this was just an oversight I do not know, nevertheless it was passed by *Viswa-bharati* music board a few years ago I believe.

Finally I would like to say that the intention of my last letter and equally this letter was not to defame either the integrity or character of Ms. Rezwana Chowdhury, nor to criticise her singing out of hand. Ms. Chowdhury is indeed very lucky to have been blessed with such a mellifluous and melodious voice and also to have received her training from such distinguished gurus at *Shantiniketan*. However for those of us who have not had such an opportunity, it is necessary to rely on the considerably more scientific and reliable notations that exist, so that they may guide us through the many treasures of Rabindra Sangeet.

Samir Khan
London, UK

I am referring to the discussions that started immediately after a letter from Mr. Nazmul Karim, where Mr. Karim asserted that Bannya used a wrong word in her song '*Jokhon porbe na mor paer chinno ei bate...*'.

I have seen all the letters that chased Mr. Karim's claim. There were no altercations but diverse views. No one wished to fight a war against the singer or Bangla culture. No one even indicated that Ms. Bannya should be publicly condemned. In no letter I saw the writers crossed their limit. All the writers wanted to do is to express their opinion.

I wonder how Ms. Shamilee Banerjee (February 17) call these opinions of so many readers across the world as a 'mess' and 'screaming' and suggests that you should stop publishing any more letters on this subject, just because she does not agree to those opinions.

Ms. Banerjee's letter also expressed her personal opinion and I personally do not agree with her. But still *The Daily Star* has published her letter. Thank you for publishing her letter where you were criticised. This shows your integrity and reliability, as a newspaper and that you are equal to all the readers even if someone is accusing you or attacking you.

Suraya Karim
New York, U.S.A.

A good cup of tea!



Its Orange Pekoe time

For tea drinkers there is good news. For the first time in history, FOP or Flowery Orange Pekoe tea has been auctioned in the market. Although the quantity was small, it is hoped the trend will continue to market high quality local blends for the table.

The initiative taken by the Bangladesh Tea Research Institute (BRTI) is to be appreciated, as the local drinkers can now enjoy the flavour of Darjeeling tea. At the same time, the government is finalising a development project for the BMRE of the local tea industry.

I had always been complaining in the drawing rooms that I have to go out of the country to enjoy a really good cup of tea, the drink that cheers but does not inebriate.

Alif Zabr
Dhaka

connect to the Internet. The government could provide all the necessary facilities for starting up a Broadband Internet Service and distributing the services at a reasonable price. This will not only help the people but also help the country in

that no terrorist will be spared regardless of their political affiliation.

AA
California, USA