

The case of Uttaran's Shahidul Islam

Shahidul Islam and Uttaran are nothing if not the friends and advocates of the poor and the marginalized, of the landless and the distressed. He is still in jail, with the Damocles Sword of two trumped-up cases and attendant police remand/s hanging over him. It would not only be pro-poor-people policy in action to initiate measures to save him from further torment, but also an affirmation that the powers that be are indeed sensitive to the potential problems that lie before us on the rocky road to becoming the nation we want to be.

KHADEMUL ISLAM

THE court building and its premises in Satkhira are something out of Upamanya Chatterjee's novel English, August: peeling paint and bustling tea stalls, typists, petitioners, families with children, and adda-loving lawyers swirling amid the frayed hum of a hundred separate conversations. In a small ground floor office our group settles down with the local lawyers to review the outlines of the case.

It isn't pretty. We, Sara Hossain as part of the legal defense team and I from The Daily Star, have come to Satkhira to attend the bail hearing of Shahidul Islam. He is the founding head of Uttaran, an NGO in Satkhira that has been involved with water-logging, flooding, and landlessness issues.

The southwest coastland of Bangladesh is a mare's nest of

conflicting interests and deadly political rivalries. Shrimp farms, many of them set up by powerful business-cum-political interests, have uprooted families and increased landlessness, bringing in their wake social instability and heavy-handed attempts by the state at restoring order. The area is wracked by various factions of the Sarbahara party/ies involved in political brigandage. MP nomination struggles for the two main parties had given rise to bitter, long-standing rivalries, muscle politics, and violence.

It is in this context that Uttaran has been conducting its advocacy programs and services, distributing khas land to the landless in close co-operation with the relevant government agencies, at first opposing but eventually partnering with the Asian Development Bank to revise mega-project plans in order to prevent further water-

logging and homestead uprooting, and providing food and succor to flood victims. Most importantly, it works to give hope to the luckless.

By virtue of working in this volatile nexus of business, land politics, political power and radical re-organization of social/economic power, Uttaran, and by extension Shahidul Islam, has attracted unwelcome attention over the years. Starting as a village school, Uttaran has grown in size and reach, making it a player in the social and economic life of the community and an object of envy. A price was put on Shahidul Islam's head by the sarbaharas, extortion and toll demands by mastans became almost a way of life, house confinement for long periods necessary and police protection needed and provided. Various innuendoes in bazaar talk and newspapers controlled by vested land interests/groups were made in

attempts to link him to murder cases, or tie his organization to political radical movements. But Shahidul Islam carried on with his work.

Which came to an abrupt stop when on January 27 he was picked up in the morning from the Uttaran Training Center in Mobarakpur village, Tala Upazila by army personnel, taken to Tala Government B Dey High School where an army camp had been set up under the charge of a major, blind-folded, his hands tied behind his back, allegedly shoved into a toilet and beaten brutally. People gathered outside the school gates could hear his screams. There was no official case against him at that time. Then two doctors called in hastily provided medical assistance and probably saved his life. He was then handed over to the police thana.

On January 28 the local authorities ordered him detained for one month under the Special Powers Act on the ground that he was likely to commit a "prejudicial act" by disrupting the maintenance of law and order and causing harm to the economic and financial interests of the state. Shahidul Islam was transferred to the medical unit of the district jail. He was later transferred to Satkhira Sadar Hospital on January 29 when his condition worsened. Two days later he was

taken back to the district jail. He is still there, in the medical section.

Shahidul Islam's case aroused widespread concern and attendant media coverage. We at The Daily Star have been publishing news items relating to him since January 28. Both national and international NGOs rallied to his support. Prominent civil society members and intellectuals signed a petition protesting the incident. International and national human rights groups, associations and organizations have made their deep concern evident. This combined pressure resulted, to the army's eternal credit, in an internal investigation by the army into the tragedy, at the end of which neither Shahidul Islam or Uttaran were charged with any offences. There are no arms hidden beneath its buildings, there are no underhand financial dealings, there are no links with radicals.

The outcome of this clean bill of health resulted in a small mercy: the original detention order was not extended. Shahidul Islam, in theory, at the end of his detention period was free to go -- true, with a plaster cast on his foot, but free to go. But, in a cynically-used pattern of extended prisoner incarceration that human rights advocates in Bangladesh have become dismally familiar with, an old murder case

involving an ex-BNP bigwig was resurrected and Shahidul was forthwith charged by the local police with involvement in it. Shahidul Islam was now being subjected to a different turn of the screw.

It was for the bail hearing of this case that Sara Hossain had joined other lawyers (prominent among whom were Firoz Ahmed - "Firoz Bhai" to us all -- from Khulna, a long-time activist in the field of human rights, and Shah Alam, the secretary of the Satkhira Bar Association) in Satkhira Sessions Court on March 11. It was evident that interested parties who had framed the initial incident were still pulling the strings at the local administration level. This became further evident when, on the way to court on the morning of March 11, we learnt that, perhaps anticipating that Shahidul Islam might be freed on bail, yet another case had been lodged against him. The practical result of being cleared by the army's own investigation, of the expression of civil society concern, has effectively been zero.

Bail, despite the eloquent pleas from the gathered defense lawyers, was denied by the magistrate. At this point the team decided to obtain the required order from the ADM and meet Shahidul Islam at

the district jail. It is, ironically, a pretty jail, with red brick buildings, flowerbeds and swept courtyards. The jail superintendent proved to be an impeccable blend of official responsibility and personal courtesy. The order arrived and the team finally found itself face to face with him. Reportedly Shahidul Islam was younger than expected. Speaking Bengali with the distinctive Jessore accent, he was very much the picture of the idealist snared by machinations beyond his understanding. In the morning we had driven past the school building with students playing on the field that had been Uttaran's start. Beside it had been the college that Shahidul Islam had funded with the Ashoka Fellowship grant he had been awarded for his services to the poor and the distressed. And here he was now before the assembled group, pale, stressed, a man visibly traumatized by his experience. To his fellow Uttaran members he said, carry on, it's in your hands now, judge for yourselves and take the decisions yourselves. His lawyers talked with him. Finally, in a reversal of roles they offered him hope and told him that good people, in Satkhira, Dhaka and the larger world, were on his side. Then they walked out of the prison gates silently, heads bowed.

In the current regime of neces-

sarily sweeping powers and detention laws this case perhaps represents an aberration. This is one that fell through the cracks. However, even one such case is one case too many. One mindless act of violence has paralyzed a fine institution and wrecked tens of lives. The Chief Advisor Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed has spoken about the need for controlling market prices and to refrain from razing slums so that the poor are not doubly victimized. The poor, he has declared in no uncertain terms, must not be harmed.

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The message of the resurrection

MARTIN ADHIKARY

TODAY is Easter Sunday. It is being celebrated by Christians all over the world with the message of joy and hope. Easter commemorates the resurrection of Christ after his death on Good Friday. At the heart of the Christian faith lies the belief that sinless Jesus Christ died for our sins, and he also rose from the dead.

Dr John Stott, the world's best known evangelical writer of our time observes: "The Church was right in its choice of symbol for Christianity. There were many options. It could have chosen the crib in which the baby Jesus was cradled (emblem of the incarnation), or the carpenter's bench at which he worked in Nazareth (emblem of the dignity of manual labour), or the boat on the lake of Galilee which he used as a pulpit (emblem of his teaching ministry), or the towel which he tied round himself when he washed and wiped his disciples' feet (emblem of humble servitude), or the tomb in which his body was laid and from which he rose (emblem of his resurrection), or the throne which he occupies today at the Father's right hand (emblem of his supreme sovereignty), or the dove, the wind or the fire (emblems of the Holy Spirit). Any one of these could have been an appropriate symbol for the religion of Jesus Christ. But the Church passed them by and chose the cross instead. We see it everywhere -- in the great cathedrals of medieval Europe, whose nave and chancel deliberately display a cruciform ground plan, on the necklaces of Christian women and on the lapels of Christian men. For the Christian faith is the faith of Christ crucified."

By undergoing all his sufferings and dying the atoning death for human sin, he fulfilled all the Old Testament leadership roles in the Israelite nation: the Priest, the Prophet and the King. As priest he



offered the perfect sacrifice to God by giving up his own life on behalf of sin, he suffered the sufferings of the supreme prophet while he brought to man God's message of reconciliation and right relationship with God Himself, and then was raised in the glorious resurrection in the transcendent body and, as such, is given by God all authority as the King and Lord.

To the believer, Easter speaks of the fact that Christ is eternal, assures us that our sins have been forgiven as Christ has conquered our physical and spiritual death, which is the ultimate consequence of sin. Now we have easy access to the throne of God's grace and mercy. We can stand justified before God, who is holy, just and sovereign.

We have also a hope of eternal fellowship and communion with such a God. Lastly, we can have in the resurrected Christ an experi-

ence of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit that strengthens our whole being, even in the midst of trials and sufferings.

Resurrection is infusing the holiness from Christ's spirit. In our world we see everywhere the marks of sins and stress. The believer in the resurrected Christ is one who discerns this. The fault of many today is that they fail to do this. The reason is that we do not take sin and its consequences seriously enough. In the social and cultural life of people it sometimes seems that lawlessness is the law and order of the day; might is right, and the end justifies the means.

All these are the signs of a world engulfed by what is known as sin, which has put man in a dialogically wrong relationship both with God and with his fellow-beings. Gradually, sin makes us so insensitive that we cannot realize the gravity of the situation, the serious-

ness of it.

Sinful life, and all that it pertains to, takes hold of us and we become insensitive to the fact that our life in not on the right track, that we need to right our ways. This results in misery, sadness, loss, not only for the person concerned but also for the entire society, the nation. For, in the end, nobody gains from bad deeds and bad ways. It is needless to point out that Bangladesh is, at the moment, revealing many examples amply testifying to this truth.

Belief in Christ calls for a definite change in the life of the believer. This change has to be seen in practical life and conduct. It is the ideal. Christ's holy life, and his love and concern for others are of supreme value in practical life.

This was true of all those who truly believed, and took their commitment to Christ seriously and patterned their lives on him. Today the whole human society is experiencing erosion of human and ethical values, values of genuine and sacrificial love for others and holy living.

The Resurrection gives a clear challenge for renewal and transformation of our lives. It sends us a call for "death-to-self," and to live a regenerated life in harmonious relationship with others and with the Creator. This can only happen when we truly repent our sins and submit ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God which raised Christ from the dead. This is because Christian theology is Theology of the Cross, and Christian theopraxy is Theopraxy of the Resurrection. Let the promise and the challenge of Christ be a reality in us as we celebrate.

Reverend Martin Adhikary is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

IN FRONT OF THE BOX

May he be left-handed

PAUL MASON

MY pulse quickened the other day watching my son Miles using a fork for the first time. I can't be 100% certain, but I think he just might be left-handed. I immediately imagined him in his whites, coming in at first drop, putting the bowler off his line, and driving the ball to the rope with a glorious follow through. Left handed batsmen -- surely the cricketing dream?

A study by the University of South Wales in Australia showed that having a left-handed batsman improved a team's chances, as they were more likely to bat for longer and score more runs than their right-handed counterparts.

There is also the conventional wisdom that having a left-right combination forces bowlers to adjust their line, and fielders their positions, and can put them off their stride. But neither of these reasons adequately explain the ability that left-handed batsman seem to have of inspiring us mortals.

My childhood hero was the great David Gower (yes, I am a proud Brit!). His elegant style made batting look effortless and this was often mistaken for a laid-back attitude at the crease -- and yes I suppose he did have a habit of getting out carelessly at times. But what timing -- I can still picture his trademark shot, a graceful flick off his legs.

I'll even forgive Gower that he once refused to give me an autograph on his way to the team bus outside Gaddafi stadium in Lahore -- a little churlish, I felt, considering I was certainly the only 12 year-old English supporter at the ground.

My fondest sporting moment of all time had to be watching him



playing against India many years later in a dead rubber at the Oval. Our favourite batsman was once again playing for his place. We all knew he needed at least a half century to make the cut for the upcoming Australian tour. If I recall, he started the day in the thirties, passed 50, then he made his ton. When he reached his 150 we rose as one in the sunshine and cheered, eyes glistening -- he was our man.

We're fortunate in this World Cup to be able to watch some of the great left-handed batsmen. They don't come much better than Brian Charles Lara. The all time leading run scorer, twice holder of the highest individual innings, responsible for a staggering 20% of his team runs -- a feat only surpassed by Bradman and Headley.

Strong off the wrist, Lara has shown his genius time and time again. He's still the Windies' great hope -- though he must be getting tired of the role. I've been in the ground and felt the hushed air of expectancy that follows him to the

crease each time he walks in to bat.

The Australians are currently blessed with two devastating lefties: Gilchrist and Hayden. Gilchrist: a true attacking batsman; straight-forward and simple in his approach -- an expert at the one day game and of intimidating bowlers. His counterpart, Hayden is going through a blistering run of form at the moment that shows no signs of abating. And we wonder why the Australians can put up such huge totals.

I'm really pleased -- as many cricket fans no doubt are -- to see that Jayasuriya is also in great touch at the moment -- a genuine master with both the bat and the ball, and making the most of what is likely be his swan song. A powerful cutter and puller of the ball, largely credited with transforming the tactics of one day batting -- I remember being stunned watching some of his early onslaughts. His presence in this World Cup is proving to be key in Sri Lanka's march to the semi-finals.

Surely one of the most elegant batsmen to come out of New Zealand -- and our highest run scorer, Fleming is also someone who captivates when he's at the crease. Tall, with great flair, his shots come straight out of the coaching book -- the trademark straight drive with an extravagant follow-through is the pick of the bunch. His recent ton against the Tigers gave an indication of his class -- though he does have a poor record of converting 50s into 100s.

The Tigers themselves are blessed with riches in the left-handed department. Nafees, Tamim, and Saqibul all offer the squad that little extra inspiration, and to those of us in front of the box, a sense of heightened anticipation.

Nafees is the only one of the trio yet to make his mark in this World Cup, and though he was replaced by the veteran Omar in the last match, I still maintain he is a key player -- but must chip in with some runs soon.

Tamim has proved himself to be something of a hard hitter -- stylish, and full of positive intent. He has the capability of plundering a bowling attack, as we saw against India, but he could do to be a little less heedless at times and adjust his game plan to suit the circumstances. In the game coming up against South Africa it will be interesting to see how he takes on Ntini. Might be fireworks.

I'll be sitting down to watch that game with my son -- who usually wakes up in time for the second innings. He can't quite say "cricket" yet, and his attention span wavers after a few overs, but I'm hoping the inspiration is starting to seep in. And if he takes to cricket, and becomes a batsman, please may he be left-handed.

Can we dare to hope?

If the caretaker government can ensure that corrupt people cannot contest the elections (there are already enough laws to ensure that -- it is simply a question of enforcement), make the election process totally transparent and then step aside, it will earn the eternal gratitude of the people. If it tries to do too many things, it is guaranteed to fail. If the army -- instead of providing firm support to the caretaker government -- tries to institutionalize a permanent role for itself in the politics of the country, it too shall fail.

FAISAL M RAHMAN

AS an expatriate Bangladeshi, I have watched for the last three decades the sad deterioration of all political, economic and social institutions in my home country. Whatever progress Bangladesh has achieved has been due to the ingenuity of individuals and organizations who owe very little to the government and even less to the politicians and bureaucrats. I look at the current developments with both apprehension and hope. Can we dare to dream of the "Sonar Bangla" for which so many gave their blood and lives?

Bangladesh's birth was unique from a number of different perspectives. The war of independence was unique because it was a war of liberation as well as a war of secession. Never in the history of the world had the majority of the population of a country broken away from the union to form their own country.

Though the liberation war was costly in terms of lives ruined and lost, it was short by all historical standards. Just think about China, Vietnam, or even the United States. A longer liberation war would perhaps have had a "cleansing" effect of weeding out many who sacrificed little but were first in line to claim

"glories and permits" for their personal gain.

Unlike America, which also won its independence through armed struggle, Bangladesh was not fortunate to have a group of "Founding Fathers" who created a series of institutions along with a superb constitution which ensured continuity as well as checks and balance.

It is, therefore, not an accident that the country survived a civil war, more than one presidential impeachment (most recently Clinton) as well as a resignation (Nixon). History has shown that the system may bend but it is unlikely to break.

Bangladesh's thirty-six years of history tells a different tale. Post-independence leadership tried to follow the misguided path of one-party state through the creation of now infamous "Baksal." It was followed by the cold blooded assassination of our "Founding Fathers," military rule, autocracy and "democracy." I put democracy within quotation marks, because other than voting (often controversial and fraudulent) very little of real democracy was practiced in Bangladesh.

What did the twelve years of Hasina-Khaleda and the preceding seven years of Ershad give Bangladesh? The results can be summarized in a few telling points:

- Corruption became institutionalized. Every aspect of life in Bangladesh was infiltrated with corruption including the judiciary. Getting anything done or recourse against wrong doings was no longer through proper channels of the government, police or judiciary. Instead bribes at multiple levels became the order of the day.
- The performance of the leaders

of both parties proved why "inherited leadership" has a performance gap compared with "earned leadership." While both may have been successful in organizing public agitations or electioneering, they were failures as chief executives. The deterioration of the economic infrastructure or object failure to address the energy needs is just two examples from the long list of disappointments suffered by the voters.

- The most heinous aspect of the behaviour of the leadership of both parties was their single minded pursuit of stifling any dissenting voice within their respective organizations. Both parties over time became absolute dictatorships. It was particularly sad to see former firebrand student leaders acting like sycophants and sitting silently, "compromised" in their Hermes ties and Gulshan residences.
- Both parties -- though the larger share of the blame must go to BNP -- contributed to the deterioration of all neutral institutions

from the Election Commission to the Bureau of Anti-Corruption as well as the Public Service Commission. If Sheikh Hasina's rule can be cited for taking us to the top of the world's list in terms of graft and corruption, Begum Zia deserves the "credit" for ensuring that Bangladesh remained at the top for the following four years. A rare feat indeed. The situation was such that a free and fair election was not possible. Even if elections could be held with some degree of neutrality, the politics of money would have ensured the return of politicians/businessmen who would have turned their new found power to recoup their "investment" (since nominations were being made available in some cases to the highest bidders).

Awami League's street agitation could not bring about free and fair elections but effectively opened the door for the new caretaker government with the blessings of the army.

Constitutional purists will probably call this government extra-constitutional but it currently enjoys

public support. The government should realize that such support is transitory and could very quickly evaporate. The problems of Bangladesh are many and no caretaker government can "fix" all of them because they do not have the mandate, resources and most importantly time.

The brief "honeymoon of goodwill" granted by the people of Bangladesh should be used by the caretaker government to reform and restructure our institutions -- in this case they should act like the "Founding Fathers" of the American Revolution, ensuring "checks and balances."

Most problems can be traced to an imperfect process or incompetent people. If the institutions are sound and the processes are right, success is almost guaranteed. That should be the singular focus of the caretaker government.

While it might make good press counting the number of spotted deer found in some BNP leader's backyards, it is really irrelevant for the future of Bangladesh. If the caretaker government can ensure

that corrupt people cannot contest the elections (there are already enough laws to ensure that -- it is simply a question of enforcement), make the election process totally transparent and then step aside, it will earn the eternal gratitude of the people.

If it tries to do too many things, it is guaranteed to fail. If the army -- instead of providing firm support to the caretaker government -- tries to institutionalize a permanent role for itself in the politics of the country, it too shall fail.

Meanwhile we should welcome new entrants like Dr. Younus to politics. The better elements from both Awami League and BNP should also break their chains and step forward for the service of the nation. Maybe we can all again dare to hope for true "Sonar Bangla."

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