

At the sudden loss of a friend

I believe what killed them was not just the bullets of a few reckless BDR men, it was also the increasingly violent culture of the world we are living in, the current crisis of values.

TARIK M. QUADIR

I mourn my friends Col. Elahi and Col. Moshir who were murdered in cold blood by my own countrymen. We met when we were only 12 at the Jhenidah Cadet College (JCC). As my elder brother had done, Moshir's brother had also gone to study in America. That was our connection; otherwise, I knew him as a very good boy and a good cadet. But, Rahman Shafiq, as we called Col. Elahi, sat next to me in the class for all the six years we were at JCC.

I left Bangladesh for America 27 years ago and unfortunately did not keep in touch with him. Through other friends I knew he was in the army and I wished him well. I hoped to see him again.

Two days ago, my brother emailed me a picture of Rahman Shafiq receiving an award from Ban Ki moon. Looking at that picture I could vividly recall his smiling face from over 30

years ago. I could see that in some ways he had not lost his childlike innocence even after all these years.

Rahman Shafiq did not study too hard, but he was very attentive in the class and had a knack for intelligently summarising any subject of our study in a few words. I marveled at the way he wrote answers to questions very briefly and then scored higher than others. In this he became my role model. He had an infectious quiet laugh that shook his whole upper body and made others laugh too.

I recall the ingenuity of his mind when he and I were partners in class eight, first in a project to make a rudimentary telescope and then in making a more ambitious battery-powered plane that did finally fly a few meters, to our astonishment. But his real passion was not for science, it was, as I recall, for communication and genuine friendship with others.

Over the six years that I knew him, I him as an unbiased person who was

not only a keen observer but also unassuming, kind, just, courageous, and most of all, childlike. This last trait of his character was totally disarming for; above all, he was an enemy to none.

I am sure my two friends were friends of all who knew them. I am sure those who shot them did not really know them. But I believe what killed them was not just the bullets of a few reckless BDR men, it was also the increasingly violent culture of the world we are living in, the current crisis of values.

If we want to live in a more peaceful world or in a more peaceful Bangladesh, we must pay attention to the root causes of violence and not just to the wages we pay. The root cause I believe is not economic but more an increasingly mechanised world where meanings and purposes are being reduced to quantifiable material ends.

In such a world a perceived injustice, true or false, is fought less through appeal to values of goodness and truth, than through material means, which, in this case, were guns! In this situation, it is not enough to mourn and pray but to act against those forces that undermine spiritual

values, which served our nation very well through ages.

I will end by identifying some causes of the current crisis of values.

Violence on the media: Ban all movies, video games, and advertisements which glorify violence.

Technomania: Let us not adopt every latest technology that comes along without careful thought so we may be able to minimise mechanisation of our lives and its inevitable spiritual cost.

Let the loss of so many friends of our beloved nation wake us up to reflect deeper on the direction we are heading in, and how that is affecting our values. Col. Elahi's full name was Quadrat Elahi Rahman Shafique. Even in our childhood, I wondered how his parents had chosen this rather long but very meaningful name.

Now I know that his name had to be determined by providence; we have truly lost a *quadrat elahi* -- to help us wake up from our slumber of indifference to the decline in values caused by the mad rush for material progress. May we never lose another *quadrat elahi* through our failure to nurture true values.

Tarik M. Quadir is a PhD candidate, University of Birmingham, UK.



Col. Elahi

In the line of fire

But, now that things have been brought under control and a hunt is on to catch the perpetrators under Operation Rebel Hunt, we must remember that our beloved, blood-soaked country is now caught in a line of fire.

REAZ AHMAD

ON February 25 the nation lost over a hundred officers of the armed forces in a bloody mutiny, which was waged by a disgruntled clique of BDR sepoys. These murderous mutineers had the audacity to give their victims a bad name by leveling graft charges against the valiant officers of the Bangladesh army whom they killed in a most heinous way.

The people of the country were numbed by the acts of barbarity they inflicted upon the unarmed officers. I can't find any words to describe the state of hollowness within me.

No cause can ever justify such genocide. How can soldiers become so angered that they massacre their superior officers -- including their chief -- because they thought they had been "deprived." Nobody is going to sub-

scribe to this notion. There must have been a deep-rooted plan against our army, against us and against our sovereignty.

Some say that it was a conspiracy to pit the armed forces against the BDR, destabilise the democratic political environment, and demolish the coherent social fabric that we built over the years with much toil and sweat. Thanks to the political wisdom of the government, normalcy could be restored in Pilkhana without further bloodshed. No amount of reasoning can bring any solace for those who lost their near and dear ones in the mayhem.

Me, my family, and thousands of people in the Pilkhana neighbourhood, spent dreadful hours on February 25 and 26. We were literally in the line of fire, exposed to countless bullets for two days. People living in Azimpur, Hajiribagh, Jigatola, Dhanmondi spent

a sleepless night on February 25.

Guardians were caught in the line of fire while desperately trying to bring back their wards from schools. One young mother described to me how a stray bullet hit a young man. The army was deployed near Abahani playground, but bullets were still flying around.

On Day-2, as hectic negotiations were in progress to disarm the so-called mutineers and heavy military deployments were built up encircling Pilkhana, people living within a two-kilometer radius of the BDR headquarters were asked to take safe refuge because of the feared skirmish between the armed forces and the murderous rebels.

Thank God that a bloody fight was averted as the armed goons eventually gave up following a well-composed televised speech delivered by the prime minister. Sheikh Hasina's address to the nation had appeals on one side and a threat of dire consequences on the other side. That worked well.

The death of over a hundred army officers is not the only casualty that befallen on us, rather this bizarre and unprecedented act of mass murder in the BDR headquarters has sent a big shockwave across the nation, which will take months, maybe years, to go away. But, now that things have been brought under control and a hunt is on to catch the perpetrators under Operation Rebel Hunt, we must remember that our beloved, blood-soaked country is now caught in a line of fire.

If we want our country, its independence, its territorial integrity and its sovereignty to be safeguarded, we must be united. This is not the best of times to score political points by being acrimonious on floor of the parliament, this is not the best of times for any blame game.

As a nation we've failed to save the lives of our valiant army officers, but we can appease the departed ones by identifying the masterminds behind this most heinous genocide and meting out befitting punishment to them. Otherwise, we'll never be able to free ourselves from our conscience.

Reaz Ahmad is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star. Email: reazahmad@yahoo.com.



Escaping from the sudden rain of bullets.

Atrophied language muscles

Its extreme form can be seen in something called first language displacement. If you are constantly submerged in your second language environment for a good number of years and have barely any contact with your first language they will inevitably switch places.

NAIRA KHAN

MORE often than not, I find that my friends who speak both Bengali and English habitually complain about their linguistic difficulties in terms of the usage of Bengali, especially in reading and writing and, somewhat amusingly, they pit it against English. Interestingly enough, they blame the language and its orthography for it. So, for quite some time, I've been attempting to tell them that the problem isn't with the language, it's with the user.

From the perspective of linguistics, there really is no such thing as one language being easier than another. There may be certain factors in terms of regularity and uniformity of linguistic components, along with structural similarity between languages, which might make it easier for learners to assimilate one language over another.

However, structurally speaking, the idea of one language being easier than another from a user's perspective is a conceptual fallacy. And yet I find that a large number of people staunchly believe that English is a much easier language than Bengali and Hindi (sister languages with sister scripts), which have scripts that are far more regular (phonetic) in terms of sound-letter correspondence than their distant cousin English.

Statistics aside, I give some simple examples. Since the complaint is primarily about the *shaus* and *naws* I'll use them as examples: If I write *shoishawb* or *shawb*, will you not be able to read it just because there are two different *shaus*? How about *mon/mb mon*? Can a nonsensical word, *nosshochamidashan*, be pronounced in more ways than one? Would you be confused regarding the pronunciation of any of the syllables?

How about a nonsensical word in English, how would you pronounce "chadefough"? Will the "ch" be pronounced the same as that in "cheer" or

you can see is more phonetic in terms of its sound to letter correspondence. The bottom line is practice.

When I was teaching Bengali in the US, my supervisor Dr. Dwight Stephens would give a brilliant analogy whereby he would compare learning a language to learning to play football (he called it soccer, of course). He would say: "I can tell you the rules of the game, show you pictures of the field, draw diagrams of elaborate strategies, and even bring a ball into the classroom, but will that teach you to play soccer? No, you have to go into the field and play for real."

A language is just like that. "You have to use it to learn it, to become fluent in it and to be a sophisticated user of it. And if you don't use it for a long period of time it will fall into disuse and your linguistic abilities in that language will atrophy. Much like being a great football player and then taking a 10-year break."

Its extreme form can be seen in something called first language displacement. If you are constantly submerged in your second language environment for a good number of years and have barely any contact with your first language they will inevitably switch places.

Hence the reason that English may seem easier to some people may be because they are in constant practice regarding the usage of English, and Bengali is limited to the confines of informal everyday speech, which by itself is also punctuated with a bit of English.

Naira Khan is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.



Can one forget one's mother tongue?

The disappearing mustaches mystery



QUICK. To the bathroom. Grab the razor. The financial crisis is wreaking carnage among a whole new group of victims: mustaches.

They are being slashed off faces as bankers make a desperate bid to look less creepy. Having halved most people's retirement funds, moneymen are using every means possible to rebuild their images.

What am I talking about? It's a known fact that all men with mustaches are serial killers. Walt Disney? Santa Claus? But okay, I take your point, there may be some who have not killed anyone. Yet. And even if there's no

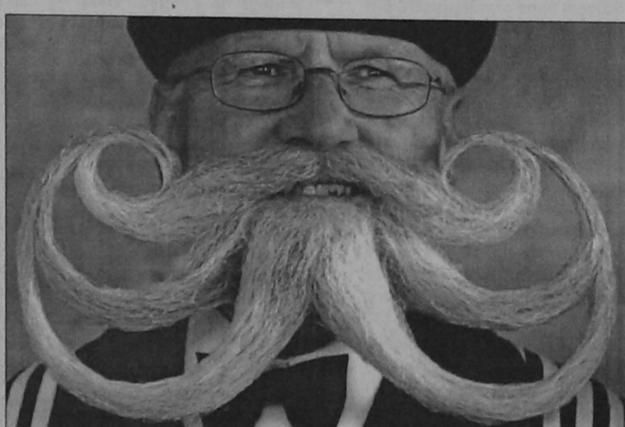
proof they've committed mass murder, it's generally accepted that men with mustaches are perceived more negatively than clean-shaven men.

The recent rash of mustache-shedding reached its peak a few days ago when Bill Gross, who is the world's largest bond dealer, was asked by reporters to give his views on the financial crisis. When they met in New York, the journalists all asked the same thing: "What happened to your mustache?"

Gross replied: "My mother always said there was something shady about a man with hair on his lip."

Incidentally, the mustached-men-are-serial-killers principle does not apply to gay people. Gay people with mustaches are considered "fashion victims" (far worse than being a mass murderer).

Anyway, this news is particularly bad for Celebrity Land, where thick



upper-lip hair is the new fashion (mostly for guys). It started a few weeks ago when Brad Pitt grew one.

Then James Franco's mustache hair in the film "Milk" caused such excitement it narrowly missed getting the

Oscar for best supporting role.

Mustaches have an even more powerful psychological effect in Asia. It is a given that criminals in India deliberately grow large, threatening ones to intimidate victims with. Bandit gangs in Madhya Pradesh have long known that the sight of a massive walrus growth with mutton-chop side-whiskers terrifies people into handing over all their worldly goods, plus daughters, house deeds and so on.

But Indian police have fought back, launching Moustache Wars. In India, budgets have been set aside to enable the development of an elite group of officers brandishing acres of hair on their upper lips. I am not making this up.

"Thick mustaches have been traditionally associated with bandits dwarfing their victims psychologically," a senior officer told the Indian Express when the program started. "This warfare will be employed against

criminals here."

A 50-strong patrol of elite officers has been touring criminal blackspots in Morena city on motorcycles, openly displaying massive moustaches to strike terror in the hearts of all who see them. This trend started about five years ago, and many rank-and-file cops in India now groom their mustaches so they can join the hairy-faced elite.

In some Indian states, officers receive a cash allowance for the upkeep of their growths. (I'm not sure what they spend it on. Plant food?) It's good to see Asia trying out innovative crime-fighting techniques.

But anyway, if you have a big mustache and you are not a criminal, not an Indian police officer, or not male, take my advice.

Become a serial killer now, and get it over with.

Visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com.