

Sher-e-Bangla was one of us

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THERE was sheer energy in Abul Kashem Fazlul Huq, almost unbridled in substance and depth. He was larger than life, in the literal as well as figurative sense of the word. In all the years he spent in politics -- and that was nearly his entire life -- he demonstrated a restlessness which only comes to men for whom politics is that higher calling in life in which lie embedded the seeds of human welfare. Sher-e-Bangla, for that is how we remember him, belonged to a generation of men and women who fully, truly and endlessly believed in the capacity of politics to change the fate of men. When you study his times, when you observe the trajectory of his beliefs and his achievements, you do not miss that one cardinal point which defined his career: he was a man of the people. As a leading figure in the movement for Pakistan, again as a central element in the politics of Bengal, Huq understood the pulse of the people, in this instance the peasants of the land. There was in him that certain pull of the local as well, that particular Barisal touch, which did not ever become the casualty of his incessant rise in politics. Sher-e-Bangla did not or could not turn into an all-India figure. He was



circumscribed by or was content to be in provincial Bengal. He was forever bursting with passion, was always garrulous in conversation, was unceasingly driven by the larger issues confronting life. Huq's attachment to grassroots notwithstanding, there was the love of pomp and power in the man. The very idea that he had to step down as Bengal's prime minister, once his Muslim League support base vanished, was anathema to him. He quickly went for a deal with Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and hung on to authority. There was a secular spirit in him and yet it was he who cheer-

fully tabled the so-called Pakistan Resolution in March 1940 in Lahore. It is said that the Muslim League councillors went wild with excitement as he entered the venue of that decisive conference. He relished it all, swaying slowly from left to right and vice versa. It did not matter that his appearance interrupted Mohammad Ali Jinnah, then at the podium explaining the need for Muslim freedom. Jinnah, used to undivided adulation, was clearly peeved at the cheers for Huq. "Now that the tiger of Bengal is here, I must stop," said he. The future, if you recall, did not have space for these men together. Jinnah would throw Huq out of the Muslim League; and Huq would lash out at Jinnah in all the fury of language he could muster. Fazlul Huq possessed that rare capacity for greatness. Yet greatness quite eluded him, for reasons that only he was to be held responsible for. He played a pivotal role in the United Front electoral victory over the Muslim League in East Bengal in 1954. As chief minister, he was expected to inaugurate a transformation in Bengali and by extension Pakistani politics. He was not permitted to by a West Pakistan-based coterie intent on frustrating Bengali aspirations. Pilloried for his sentimental remarks on the historical oneness of the two Bengals on a nostalgic visit to Calcutta soon after the elec-

tions, Huq was soon brought down along with his ministry. The imposition of Section 92-a unnerved him, to a point where, unlike the vocal Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani and a young and rising Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, he felt little need to mount a struggle for a restoration of the United Front government. And then occurred the unbelievable: Huq assumed office as Pakistan's interior minister in 1955. And then, in 1956, he took over as governor of East Pakistan. Sher-e-Bangla's politics effectively came to an end with the imposition of martial law in October 1958. He would die in less than four years. Warts and all, Sher-e-Bangla remains a giant in Bengali political memory. He touched lives, spoke for the underprivileged and gave short shrift to the elite -- a quality that would be fine-tuned and refined by a future Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Where Suhrawardy was a shrewd actor, Huq was a natural in his defence of the public interest. Where Bhashani demonstrated a refreshing degree of rusticity in politics, Huq gave politics a dash of the pastoral. Abul Kashem Fazlul Haq was one of us. (Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, born in 1873, died on April 27, 1962) The writer is Executive Editor, The Daily Star. E-mail: ahsan.syedbadrul@gmail.com

India's "Bachelor Democracy" rediscovers a wife



PERHAPS the most evocative ritual of a traditional Hindu marriage is the "saat phere" (seven rounds), where the bride and groom walk around a fire making seven vows. One of these is a promise to nurture the marital relationship with love and honesty. The "saat phere" underscores the Vedic tenet that marriage is a sacred alliance between a man and a woman for this life as well as all "future lives"...

Recent events in the political life of Narendra Modi, the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP-led alliance for the 2014 Indian elections, reveal that the marriage vow is not sacrosanct for him despite his ultra-conservative Hindu beliefs. Modi, who is currently the chief minister of the State of Gujarat, never publicly acknowledged his wife until a journalist discovered this mystery woman, Jashodaben. After choosing to leave his marital status as blank on all electoral forms, Modi has finally decided (under intense political pressure) to revise his biography. Recently, he declared his status as "married" at an election registry. This would have been somewhat acceptable had he not actively flaunted his bachelorhood in his campaign by repeatedly claiming: "I have no family ties, I am single. Who will I be corrupt for?" Narendra Modi continues to claim that he never "lied" about his marriage; he only left the space for marital status blank. Ironically, his recent turnaround is in stark contrast to his lofty claims about reviving the "purist" Hindutva (Hindu-ness) ideology in India. His election rhetoric is replete with the promise of a new Bharat where hard-core Hindu principles will guide the country's policies and family values. It, however, appears that Modi's definition of truth is as malleable as putty. More importantly, it fails to meet the high standards derived from the Mahabharata hero, Yudhishtira, who is the symbol of honesty and dharma for all devout Hindus! Even if we choose to ignore Modi's partial amnesia about his marriage, we cannot excuse his statements about corruption and its causal relationship to the family. It is ridiculous as well as unfair to transfer the blame for one's moral lapses to one's spouse and children. More importantly, political corruption is not only about stealing money from public coffers. It's also about destroying public institutions and subverting justice. And Modi is reportedly culpable of both these offenses. He is the man who is said to have facilitated the Gujarat Massacre in 2002. In these communal riots more than 1,000 innocent people (mostly Muslims) were brutally killed, thousands lost their homes and numerous girls and women were gang raped and then burned to death. Not only did all this happen under Narendra Modi's watch as chief minister, it is alleged that he deliberately prevented authorities from intervening. To date, India's Supreme Court has not issued him a "clean chit" for his role in the massacre -- despite all his political clout. At a personal level, Modi's mendacity runs deeper than a mere contradiction between his declared beliefs and their practice in his life. His refusal to acknowledge his wife of almost 50 years demonstrates an utter lack of respect for women. According to various media reports, Jashodaben lives frugally in a one-bedroomed tenement and has never remarried. It is said that she is reluctant to express her views and opinions freely since the aspiring prime minister's powerful supporters closely scrutinise her. One wonders...How can a man abandon his wife and then subject her to a lifetime of marital bondage without giving her the privileges of a spouse? And, is this someone who can be entrusted with the responsibility of the highest office in any country? Narendra Modi's polarising politics has already created deep fissures in India's cohesiveness. His Hindutva-espousing followers have been responsible for "vicious attacks on Christians, murdering missionaries and calling for Muslims to choose between Pakistan and the graveyard." Although his Hindu nationalism is seen as a key aspect of his popularity, it's also a sore point for his opponents, who claim that his political beliefs are guided by hard-core religious biases. The prospect of a Modi victory is thus frightening for all minorities and a threat to the secular principles of India's Constitution -- something that Indians have always been proud of. It is quite obvious that Modi's public image has been strategically crafted by his party's spin masters to project the impression of a dedicated "Sevak" committed to reinstating the core principles of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in modern India. But over the last few weeks, with the unexpected appearance of his "long lost" wife, his moral halo seems to have evaporated. He certainly does not come across as a twenty first century Rama who bravely ventured into Lanka to rescue his Sita or even one of the Pandavas who fought valiantly to avenge their wife's honour!

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Not a tragedy: Returning to 'crime scene' Rana Plaza

DESDEMONA KHAN

O, how this spring of love resembleth The uncertain glory of an April day Which now shows all the beauty of the sun, And by and by a cloud takes all away.

--Shakespeare, Two Gentlemen of Verona

"FROM a very early age," George Bernard Shaw is supposed to have said, "I've had to interrupt my education to go to school." Even if GBS didn't say so, I would perhaps, especially in view of the real life lessons I got in the wake of the events now known as the 'Rana Plaza tragedy.' It was hardly two or three months inside my job working for a non-governmental voluntary organisation which specialised in, among other things helping disaster victims. I learnt what may be called 'the real,' which no college would, or probably could, teach. On the morning of April 24, 2013 an estimated 4,000 workers, female and male, had just begun to run their machines and sundry equipments in four RMG factories located on the upper floors of a nine-storey building named Rana Plaza in Savar, Dhaka. By about 9 am electricity supply had been sapped and a stand-by generator jump-started. All of a sudden the whole structure, with its human load, collapsed. The previous day, a wide crack had appeared and workers were evacuated. Next day, the owners forced workers to join work in order to meet what they called their export shipment schedule in time. Rescue work followed close on the heels of the catastrophe. The actual number of casualties has not been determined precisely to this day. Death toll is estimated to be 1,135, and the figure for the wounded and injured, as reckoned by rescue workers, is around 3,000. Perhaps there had been more or less, but as I read in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Living to Tell the Tale, "people raise the number according to their own grief." Not too many days later, I happened to visit

victims under treatment in various city hospitals -- Dhaka Medical College Hospital, National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopedic Rehabilitation and Centre for Paralyzed Rehabilitation in Savar. It was a hellhole of a new world! I never thought I would see such a 'divine hell' in life. All inmates were severely injured and screaming as if they were 'souls contesting with their God.' On my first visit, to NITOR, I met some 70 survivors struggling for their lives in two wards (male and female). As I entered the hall I was shocked and almost paralysed. I thought perhaps I had been carried to the hell described in Dante's Divine Comedy. But I had to interview them. I had a questionnaire prepared beforehand, but the condition of every inmate there was so self-explanatory that it made me think it was ridiculous to use it. I just talked to them as it came along. I could not sleep for the first two nights. The hospital wards were all over in my dreams. They traumatised, shocked, denied sleep and when nature intervened I woke up frequently. However, I had to return there several times and became used to the heartbreaking scenarios. Eventually we all do. I am still in touch with them. Each victim I met had a different story to tell. All were moving. Most survivors were invalids, either completely or partially, from injuries sustained. For instance, Abdus Subhan (40) had his spinal cord completely broken, Shahabuddin (42) had his hip and loins dislocated. Ashrafujul Sujan (35) developed infections from blistering wounds that wouldn't heal for long. Among the worst were Karuna (20), Rozina (25), and Sapna (20). Sapna had damaged brain-cells and lost her speech, Rozina lost a hand, and Karuna became paralyzed from the waist downwards. Almost all of them were sole bread-earners of their families. They didn't know what awaited their families in the days to come! Despite all the misery, the power of their 'human spirit' didn't decay at all and they are still keen to get back on their feet. Sufferings of many female workers were doubled. Some women, on account of becoming invalid,

were abandoned by their husbands. They are young and with a whole life-time ahead! Many got help, but it was hardly enough to meet their basic needs. Newly married Ariful (18) is missing and his wife Asha (15) was four and a half months pregnant. Adding insult to her suffering, Asha was denied the human comfort of family recognition. Her mother-in-law wouldn't even recognise the child in Asha's womb as a legitimate offspring. She claimed that she didn't even know that her son had put his wife in the family way. When I met Asha, who may herself be taken for a child, she was worried about both the upcoming trial of a first childbirth and the tribulations of rearing him/her up in an uncertain world. Rana Plaza disaster has often been referred to as a tragedy. But on close reflection, however, it seems inappropriate to think of it as a tragedy in the classical sense. For tragedy implies something ineluctable or inevitable in course of things. The April 24, 2013 disaster was nothing of the sort. It was foreseeable, and already foreseen. It was a chronicle foretold, forewarned well ahead. A manmade disaster such as this is better called a crime. Is it due to its tragic proportions, that it destroyed thousands of lives, that we call it a tragedy? Labour conditions, including work-place security, here are appalling. Rana Plaza, sadly, is only a demonstration that thousands can be pushed to meet their deaths in foreseeable, hellish conditions. Labour laws are no pro-worker dissertations in Bangladesh. Right to trade unions in the RMG sector is still in dreams. In Bangladesh, according to authentic sources, no more than 3.88% of the employed workforce is under aegis of some kind of union. RMG workers, being the worst paid industrial workers in the country, provide one good reason for foreign capital being drawn to Bangladesh. Civil society, factory owners (BGMEA included), government and international buyers -- all of them -- owe it to the workers, don't they? It is after all their unpaid labour which provides for all our profits and taxes. The writer is a researcher.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



HENRY by Don Trachte



QUOTABLE Quote
Democracy is the only system that persists in asking the powers that be whether they are the powers that ought to be.
Sydney J. Harris

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Eastern prince
- White's colleague
- Dodge
- Entertain
- Washroom sight
- Squander
- Fling
- Jazz legend Getz
- Shows sorrow
- In need of directions
- Calamity
- In one way or another
- Early Mexican
- "Skyfall" singer
- It follows the last quarter
- Phone bug
- Chow
- Present
- Church response
- Soft mineral
- Ultimate
- Routine parts
- Less than right
- Turn aside
- Stopwatch button
- Hear again

DOWN

- Yank's foe
- According to
- "Keep this secret"
- Sonora sendoff
- Chick tenders
- Shop tool
- Stockpiled
- Precisely what's needed
- Nick and Nora's dog
- Cutting
- Letters before pitch or mo
- Symbol of grace
- Seep
- Mideastern nation
- Glasgow native
- Norwegian king
- Showed sorrow
- Issue
- East, in Germany
- Fliedler's aid
- Miles off
- Cats' quarries
- Less than right
- Rent out
- Make mistakes

Yesterday's answer

CRYPTOQUOTE
ZQ VZXMVLXOVPL AXL TVAOCBG LP EXVHGH BXTTVLGGWW OBXL OAPLOVLCG KVSVM EPHXHO. -- AKXHX WABCZLL

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW
One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: MAY YOUR BLESSINGS OUTNUMBER THE SHAMROCKS THAT GROW, AND MAY TROUBLE AVOID YOU WHEREVER YOU GO.

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