



## LIFE SKETCH

Monajatuddin was born in Rangpur on June 27, 1945, to Matijan Nesa and Alimuhammad Ahmed. He passed matriculation from Rangpur Kolashranjon School and IA from Rangpur Carmichael College. Subsequently he obtained a BA degree. He started journalism from his student life but his career began with Bogra Bulletin in the 1960s. From 1972 to 1976, he was the correspondent of Dainik Purbadesh and Azad for the northern region. In 1976, he earned fame by sending reports to Dainik Sangbad as its correspondent for the northern region. In April 1995, he joined Dainik Janakantha.

He died on December 29 that year.

Notable books: Path Theke Pathe, Sangbad Nepathye, Kansonar Mukh, Shah Alam o Maziborer Kahini, Pairabander Shekor Sangbad and Lokkhitari.

Notable awards: Zahur Hosen Gold Medal (1984), Philips Award (1993) and Ekushey Padak (1997).

THE DUST ROAD OF  
MONAJATUDDIN

MARTIN SWAPAN PANDEY

The constant traveler is on the move, perpetually. Now Rangpur, now Kurigram, now Dinajpur. Beneath his feet is entire North Bengal, and he treads the dust road fast, with a sense of urgency, ever alert. No, he is not running away from anything or hiding from life. Rather, he is out on the road to confront life head-on. He is out to look for the widow whose husband died of hunger, or the father whose teen daughter returned home after her third marriage broke, like the previous two, for failing to arrange dowry. Charon Sangbadik Monajatuddin is out looking for an entire village where the privileged few suck on the underprivileged many.

Throughout his career of over three decades, Monajatuddin made sure that the city people hear the cry of the eight northern districts and its ever neglected

men, women and children. It was a life-long mission he took it upon himself. And he showed us, singlehandedly, the otherwise unseen political rot, the social injustice, the venomous bite of dowry system and the multifaceted impact of misinformation on rural people.

This information gap is depicted in one of his stories vividly and rather humorously when an elderly woman in a northern village describes Khaleda Zia as "gormen" (government) and as that "Dhawla Fokfoka" (white and fair) lady. Of Sheikh Hasina, the woman says: Hachina coshma pinda tay khali rindia (India) jay.

It is not for nothing that his colleagues and senior journalists of the time named him Charon Sangbadik. He had one address and he would never forget that: the dust roads of northern districts he would take to again and again. Consider this: In 1982, he wrote a 13-part series

report in daily Sangbad titled "Drishapat Chilmar," accounting the many problems facing this Kurigram upazila. Twelve years later, in 1994, he went back there, now to report if lives in this impoverished area have changed. This report -- Chilmarir Ek Jug -- puts under spotlight the political hypocrisy. While it details how thousands of lives there have remained as they had been, it also pinpoints how reality is different from empty lip-service:

"In 1974, the near naked, fishing net-wearing Basanti-Durgati of Chilmar's Majhipara village had been dragged onto the political stage to blow out the political opponent. But still today, there has not been any change in the lives of the Basantis. The Basantis are still malnourished; they still wear fishing net-like tattered clothes. Several governments have come and gone and each of them promised time and again to change peoples'

lives, but for Basanti, nothing has changed in these 20 years except that she has grown older."

News in its conventional sense was never "news" for Monajatuddin. To him, news was what lay underneath. It is for this reason that his thrust is not on the deaths from hunger, but why that hunger in the first place. And very Monajatuddin-like, he finds out: Rice price has gone up in the north when work is scarce. It is also for this journalistic maxim that when he discovers Freedom Fighter Shah Alam begging on the Farmgate footbridge pretending to be a leprosy patient, he sets his searchlight not on the beggar, but who and what made him so.

Monajatuddin was a self-made journalist who created a genre of his own. Terse and fierce, it is news report and literature at once. He took journalism to a height where our he-said-she-said journalism cannot soar.

Within, Monajatuddin must have been a poet and felt ill at ease. When he took up his last assignment to report on the sufferings of the people trapped in the middle of the Jamuna because several ferries got stuck on its Chars in Gaibandha, he was already ill with chest pain. He would not listen to his doctor and his wife and take rest. At one point of his investigation, he fell from the roof of the ferry, Sher-e-Bangla, and drowned, though the exact circumstances of how he fell is not clear.

In worldly sense at least, death is a thing not of celebration. Yet what bravery it is for a warrior to collapse in the battlefield, what joy to die while in the embrace of one's love. Monajatuddin made journalism his battleground and his love. In dying while on an assignment, he has forever dignified himself and his work. He has dignified death itself.



## The Pathfinder

EMRAN HOSSAIN

Very few journalists in the world have ever thought of using a president's chopper to send a photo film to his newspaper. But Monajatuddin did it, in 1982, sending the photo of flood-devastated Chapainawabganj. He is better known as Charon Sangbadik (bard journalist) for reporting from across the country, particularly the northern districts.

Sophisticated overseas skill training he had none. Doctorate research he had none. The daring idea of using a president's chopper is only testimony of his devotion and commitment to the call of duty.

It is because of this commitment he accepted the 24-hour deadline given by his news editor for a photo from the flood-affected area. To do that he had three options: carry the photo in person to Dhaka, which is 316km away; send it through a messenger; or via post. But journalists could hardly rely on the

third option because if the package ever reached the destination, it would miss the deadline by days, even weeks. In those days, news reports used to be sent mainly by telephone.

"Will I fail?" Monajat asked himself after getting the assignment. "I will not," he assured himself, as he later wrote in a book.

But then he gave a second thought. The road communications between Dhaka and Chapainawabganj was dead. Train would take three days to reach Dhaka.

Yet, he took up the challenge at a time when lowly-paid journalists and newspaper owners had to compromise with professional ethics. In desperate times like this, many reports were filed, often on instructions of the office, which Monajat found "brain-made." For example, a northern district reporter of a certain newspaper once sent a report of six people dying from severe cold. Laughably, the temperature on that day was 15 degree Celsius.

"I am running the newspaper for business," a certain owner said, when journalists pressed him over sacking of a journalist who denied to file such "brain-made" report.

It was in this socio-economic background the ambitious idea of using HM Ershad's chopper came to Monajat's mind the next morning, when he heard that the president would visit Chapainawabganj in the afternoon. Monajat placed a bet on sending the film through the journalists covering the military dictator's visit for the state-owned BSS and BTB.

But first he needs the photo. So he borrowed a motorcycle from a friend around 10 in the morning. But the bike would not get started -- the fuel tank was empty. Now he ran for having

the bike refueled, but the boy at the pump was not there. But then he came, luckily for Monajat.

After travelling six miles on the bike, he got his photo: Some farmers swimming through a paddy field, submerged in flood water, with bundles of half-ripen sheaf.

Back with the film by 1:00pm, Monajat together with thousands of villagers was waiting for the president's arrival at Chapainawabganj stadium. But for Monajat the chopper mattered more than the president himself. The chopper landed, after three hours' waiting, with Ershad coming out first. The BTB journalist and a BSS photographer followed, but Monajat, to his shock, knew neither.

Then emerged his saviour: a BSS reporter whom he identified in his book as Robi Bhai. But between them lay an obstacle that Monajat never considered: the president's guards. His first attempt to go near Robi failed, as the president's men would not allow him. Why, Monajat did not have the "special security pass."

Monajat employed his final card. When he made his second attempt to reach Robi, which was again foiled by a security officer, Monajat lied. He told the officer that Robi was his Dulabhai (brother-in-law) and that he must meet him at least for once.

Released from the heavy grip of the officer, Monajat started to run, crying: "Dulabhai...O Dulabhai."

But Robi first grumbled about carrying the film. "I threw myself straight onto the feet of Robibhai...begging," wrote Monajat, years later.

Robi did agree in the end, and the photo was published as a four-column lead in the next day's Sangbad.

## Blend of Talent, Labour

MONJURUL AHSAN BULBUL

"Will there be another Monajatuddin?" is a question I often face. This is because as a journalist Monajatuddin was my idol in the early stage of my career, then he became a colleague and finally a friend.

Whenever asked, I say it is difficult but possible to become a Monajat. Difficult, because Monajatuddin is a rare blend of talent and labour. Of course, I must say this should be the basic and natural quality of a journalist. In my eye, a journalist is a balanced combination of talent, extraordinary analytical power and combination of thoughts centring on human and society. All these rare traits were there unmistakably in Monajatuddin.

Monajat was a reporter and cameraman at once -- he used to personally shoot all pictures relating to his reports. But surprisingly, as a journalist he looked beyond and saw things that camera lenses fail to capture. He was such a talented journalist who was able to separate past from present and lay out a distinct path towards future. And this he did with a sense of ingenuity found in a very few.

Again, Monajat seems unsurpassable as the number of talented and hardworking journalists is going down. With a few exceptions, whether in the print or in the broadcast media, journalists now are not ready, if not incapable, to put their best. Journalism of the day seems to have become incident or occurrence-oriented. Today, most of us do not feel the need to dig deep into the facts the way Monajat used to do. The very term -- investigative reporting -- seems to slip into the past. Have we forgotten the investigative reporting on Ghorashal done by

Monajat? This journalist toiled long 12 years for follow-up reports on the issue. Can we imagine this now? What a plan! What presentation! What patience!!

Monajat was commonly known as a minstrel journalist (Charon Sangbadik). Like a minstrel, Monajat used to tread along every nook and corner of the country and stand beside the ordinary people. The reports of Monajat reflected the very picture of the people living from hand to mouth.

Not only in rural areas, when he stayed for a short period in the capital, or travelled abroad, news never skipped his nose and eyes. It was Monajatuddin who dug out the historical documents of our Liberation War from the dark storeroom of the Radio Transcription Service building in Shahbagh. He brought to light how a freedom fighter on the Farmgate footbridge earned his bread through begging with a sore on his leg. Monajat has shown journalists have no frontiers. Monajat, who early in his career made blunders and having been misled sent reports like "Darite Mouchak!" (Honeycomb in a beard!), was later bold enough to challenge the highest administration of the state machinery with facts during the 1974 famine.

Now the question is: Was Monajat last of his kind? The answer is: No. Now we have stupendous technologies in hand. Nowadays we don't have to roam about across the country to collect information like Monajat did. One click on the mouse, and we are in a world of enormous data pouring in from everywhere. All we need is to have more confidence on our talent and continue to whet our investigative mind. If this is done, if we remain honest and sincere to our profession, there will be no dearth of Monajat in future.



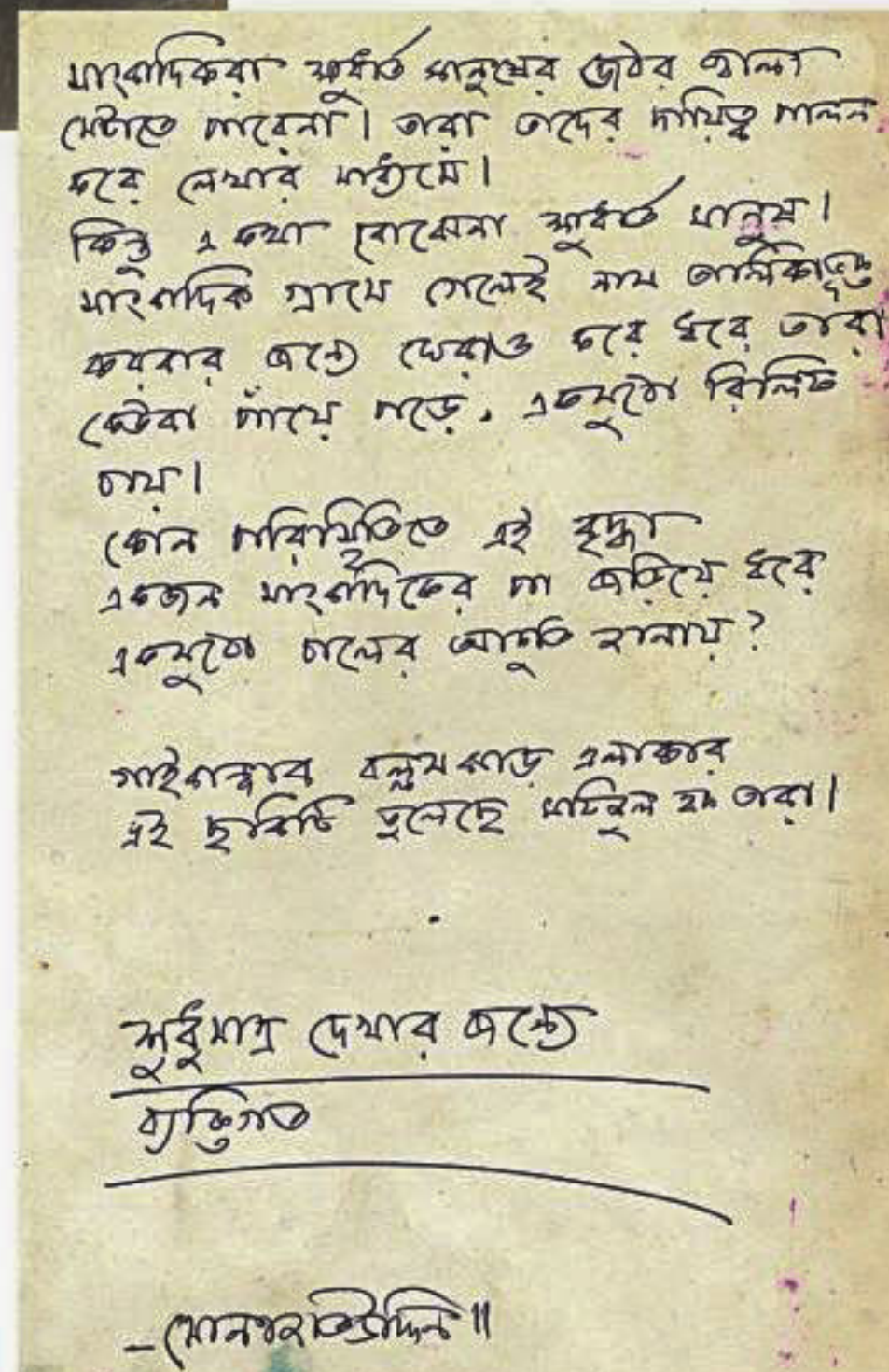
## IN THEIR EYES

"The way the vast neglected countryside of our country and the dull and dreary life of people and their struggle would come to life through Monajatuddin's pen is almost incomparable."

PRIME MINISTER SHEKH HASINA

"By depicting the real picture of the country's northern region through his writings, Monajatuddin has made a huge contribution."

FORMER PRIME MINISTER KHALEDA ZIA



Monajatuddin, in this note, describes how a famine-stricken elderly woman falls on his feet, requesting him to put her name on the government list for relief.