

Refusing to succumb to fear

RIFAT MUNIM

THE night Faisal Arefin Dipan died concealed more than it revealed. It revealed the motive behind the attacks, which was to send a clear message to all: those who dare to bring out any books by the likes of Avijit Roy will be met with the same brutality as Dipan and Ahmedur Rashid Tutul. It revealed the shock of Dipan's family; it also revealed the pall of gloom cast over the whole community of writers and publishers.

But it concealed the fear that struck them all and how deep that fear ran in a publishing industry that has never seen its all-embracing openness shrink like this before. In other words, what that night concealed was the tremor felt across the literary and publishing spectrum, which has so far boldly, if not unassailably, kept itself uninvaded by this kind of censorship.

Despite many challenges and violent opposition at times, writers and publishers have written and worked more or less freely in this country. Books were banned, mostly on religious grounds, and bans were lifted eventually (Humayun Azad's *Nari* was banned in 1992 and the ban was lifted in 2000), except those imposed on works of one female author. A few writers even faced brief spells of incarceration on political grounds but none of these shook the freedom they enjoyed in terms of choosing writing or publishing content.

The first time the nation experienced a jolt like this was in 2004 when Humayun Azad was attacked not for his freethinking writing, but for two of his novels, *Chhappanno Hazar Borgomile* and *Pak Sar Jamin Sad Bad*, which were a searing indictment of Jamaat's role in 1971. Even then, although writers were shocked, nothing could unsettle their courage and they came out on the streets in large numbers to unequivocally condemn the attack.

But things are way different this time. The brutality this time, well planned and carried out in the manner of an execution, came as a shock-and-awe military act of censorship that is unprecedented in the history of this country and that, in the name of religion, is fanatical about blocking every view, every thought or expression that clashes with its restrictive ideological position. Spared from it are not even those cherished elements that emanate from our own secular culture and its festivities such as the Pahela Baishakh celebrations.

The attacks constituted the tremor and the fear, the aftershock. But in the cultural arena, there is no readymade tool to gauge how deep the aftershock has cut, or will cut. The subsequent events, marked by our collective silence and passivity in sharp contrast to their cloak-and-dagger presence and heightened activity, have only cleared the ground for the aftershock to deepen its cut, without any sign of a stop.

That night, I, among many others in this newspaper, reached out to many writers, both young and old, and publishers for their reactions. Only the older generation said it clear and loud. But as we called the younger bunch, we sensed the fear of being attacked was already running deep and it was no different among the publishers.

I would have liked to share their names for fulfilling the minimum requirements of a journalistic article. But at the risk of penning an un-journalistic piece, I've thought better of giving away their names because all of them, invariably, have requested anonymity with a tone that you cannot ignore. Even the closest of Dipan's and Tutul's friends and co-travellers refused to be identified and quoted in the reports unless their anonymity was ensured. We would not be surprised if the information we sought out was somehow related to the sensitive aspect of atheism or freethinking. But all the same, they requested anonymity, failing to conceal the fear from their voice, even when we just asked them about Dipan's son's or daughter's name.

Meanwhile, there were rallies and angry pro-

rallies. It rather solidified in the minds of writers and publishers. They still preferred to be quoted anonymously while some refrained from making comments altogether.

We are not surprised because we know the mission to strike terror is on, and very consistently so. Two of our most revered writers, Prof Anisuzzaman and Hasan Azizul Haque -- who made no bones about condemning the attacks which they said were carried out by religious extremists -- were threatened with death.

Writers and publishers, as a result, now agree to speak on the record only when they are solicited for comments on less sensitive aspect of the issue such as if these attacks will impact the industry financially -- the answer to which, of course, was no. But that's perhaps the silliest question to ask

silence, but no if we refuse. Before we take any side, we must carefully weigh the pros and cons of our answer because this is a transition period in our history and how we answer will have a direct bearing on our future. To answer in the positive and remain silent is how we have dealt with the whole issue so far and we all know where it has taken us. Keeping up with the globalised flow of a world dominated by sleek gadgets, this silence has only weakened us, alienating us from one another, making us fear for our lives and hide into our dens when we should be erupting into protests and thinking up ways to broaden our platform and strengthen our fight.

To answer in the negative and break the silence is to go Hasan Azizul Haque's way. Hasan, after a

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PHOTO: AFP

tests where writers, publishers, and rights and Gonojagoron Mancha activists strongly demanded the government immediately arrest the killers and attackers, and ensure protection of all who were or are being given threats.

More and more nights went by. The government continued playing the role of a bystander with its agencies holding occasional news briefings on arrests, the trials for which, if begun, always progress at a snail's pace. So the rallies thinned out and media got busy with other issues. After all, who cares about a bunch of freethinkers and the men who had the courage to publish their works, especially when caring about them might mean putting your own life under threat?

So the fear stayed. It did not thin out like the

in these times. The question we must be asking ourselves now is what this new fear means for our literary and intellectual culture in the bigger picture.

It means the demise of whatever we have achieved in the past four and a half decades since our independence. Doesn't it also mean a retrogressive journey, as opposed to a progressive one, to a time when our writers had struggled to forge a path to freedom of expression? Doesn't it mean not only science and non-fiction writers but also fictionists will have to think twice before incorporating in their work any sensitive issues relating to religion and the abominable role Jamaat had played during the Liberation War?

The answer is yes if we let them coerce us into

long, successful and committed writing and teaching career, is in the twilight of his life now. Still, he refused to remain silent and let the aftershock deepen its cut any further. He is not a lone traveller in his track. There's also Tutul. Still recuperating from those almost crippling wounds, he told a correspondent of this newspaper that he'd not give in to any threat and would continue to publish works of freethinkers.

In an atmosphere of suffocating silence, their courage comes as a breath of fresh air and in the fight against religious extremism, I have sided with fresh air.

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Why is Bangladesh different?

OPEN SKY



BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

BD ANGLADESH is categorised as a lower middle income country in the World Bank's country list. Economists now classify the country as a developing nation. In the past, we were defined as a third world country -- a notion which no longer exists. Despite being defined

from various angles, Bangladesh is distinctly a different country among its peers from a macro point of view.

In 1971, Bangladesh became independent defeating a mighty Pakistani army. But our economic power in comparison to Pakistan seemed much weaker after independence. No macro statistics ever showed any superiority of Bangladesh over Pakistan in the 1970s and 1980s, lending credence to the claim of the anti-liberation forces that abandoning Pakistan was a blunder. Bangladesh's economic fate began to change since the early 1990s when the country embarked on liberalisation. Although its South Asian neighbours including Pakistan started opening its economy at the same time, Bangladesh's performance began to outshine Pakistan's in most economic fronts, something

our founding fathers dreamed long ago. Liberalisation empowered Bangladesh to outperform Pakistan in terms of economic trends in investment, trade, and growth while more foreign aids flowed into the latter without strengthening its economic base. While Pakistan is struggling hard to remove its name from the list of "failed states", Bangladesh has carved out a model of a vibrant economy. No one in the mid 1970s and early 1980s anticipated that Bangladesh would demonstrate a stable growth rate of more than 6 percent for more than a decade. That's exactly why Bangladesh is different.

If we can further liberalise our trade by reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers and by removing age-old regulations, our growth will exceed even 7 percent. We have already outperformed India in many socio-economic indicators like life expectancy, infant mortality, and participation of women in the labour force. Our stability in growth and inflation is better than India's and actually the best in the region. That's also why Bangladesh is an example to many other countries.

Our geographic location provides us with a strategic advantage over our peers. Sri Lanka has a central position in the Indian Ocean, but it is an island state. In contrast, Bangladesh has a balanced sharing of land and sea so the country can take advantage of land transport with India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar. The open south

side meeting the Bay of Bengal gives the nation the opportunity to navigate across the world and explore the benefits of the vastly-untapped blue economy. Thus Bangladesh can build its future as a hub of regional connectivity, attracting huge investments in infrastructure and communications. Only a few nations on earth enjoy such connectivity with thriving nations of Asia that include two emerging giants of the world: China and India. Our demographic dividend will be short-lived (another 40 years), but this geographic advantage will always be there. And that creates the difference for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is also special among its peers in regards to the debt-GDP ratio. Its debt ratio, being 30 percent, is one of the lowest among countries of equal status. Only one or two other nations could achieve a persistent growth rate over 6 percent over a decade with such a low debt ratio. Both India's and Pakistan's debt ratio is close to 70 percent. While India successfully cultivated foreign loan to add value to its GDP, Pakistan failed, registering almost 4 percent growth over the last two decades. This distinction of Bangladesh also conveys a message of opportunity to borrow from outside to undertake mega projects that enhance growth potentials.

Participation of Bangladeshi women in the labour force is one of the highest in the region although there is room for improvement in the

quality of employment. But the social mindset has already changed towards working women. Bangladesh will take advantage of this advancement in the future when more jobs will be created in the services sector now occupying 55 percent of GDP. Only a few countries on earth treasure that advantage.

Bangladesh has done very well in popularising the concept of financial inclusion - a much needed paradigm to ensure sustainable growth. While private sector credit occupies 40 percent of GDP, almost 30 percent of outstanding loans are now serving small and medium enterprises - an essential step to expand employment without concentration in the capital city. The banking industry is revolutionising their services and outreach. The central bank is tirelessly and passionately digitising the entire banking sector day by day.

The country is energy-hungry with inadequate infrastructure. Manpower still suffers from inefficiency. Higher education lacks quality. But Bangladesh has a track record of overcoming terrible odds in a reasonably short period of time. History will back me up on this. "A basket case" has now turned into a vibrant economy.

Bangladesh commands respect in the global stage for that.

The writer is chief economist of Bangladesh Bank.

If we can further liberalise our trade by reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers and by removing age-old regulations, our growth will exceed even 7 percent.

A WORD A DAY



TACENDA

[ta-'chen-da]

things better left unsaid

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Emily Deschanel series
- Flashy
- Pass
- Asian peninsula
- River of Hades
- Fighting
- Figures of speech
- Close
- Freud topic
- Vigorous fights
- Private room
- Incalculable
- City-based
- Trophy recipient
- Green and Gore
- Mapping satellite
- Unrefined
- Cunning
- Change
- Push rudely
- Like judges
- Complete
- Sleep disturber
- Vegas attraction

DOWN

- Contradicted
- Anxious
- Map area
- Cave sound
- Maneuvers on the slopes
- Reggae's fore-runner
- Piping
- "1984" author
- Made independent
- Rushing measure
- Ray
- Bravura performances
- Heir, often
- German conjunction
- Pop's Andy
- All told
- Mideast peninsula
- Current rage
- Uppsala natives
- Endures
- Gimlet or screw-driver
- Brewery sight
- High trains

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A	S	H	E	S		J	O	U	S	T
M	E	A	N	T		A	P	P	L	E
P	A	N	D	A		B	E	T	O	N
G	U	R	U			R	O	W	S	
C	H	O	P			S	L	A	T	
H	E	N				W	E	A	T	H
E	R	A	S	E		P	E	E	V	E
R	E	S	E	N	T	S		M	E	N
						E	A	T	S	
T	A	C	T			P	L	A	N	
A	B	O	I	L		E	R	U	P	T
P	E	N	N			S	I	T	A	R
S	E	D	G	E		S	E	E	D	Y

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



DO YOU WANT TO MAKE AN ANNOUNCEMENT, SIR?

YES, WHICH BUTTON DO I PUSH?

I CAN NEVER FIGURE OUT HOW ANYTHING WORKS

TRUER WORDS WERE NEVER SPOKEN

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



THE KIDS AND I HAD SUCH A GREAT DAY TODAY.

OH?

WE WENT SWIMMING, WE WENT TO THE LIBRARY, WHEN AND I TOOK A NAP.

I'M TOTALLY READY FOR THE NEXT SOUL-CRUSHING FAMILY DISASTER.

YOU'RE AN INSPIRATION, WANDA.