

# From the crossroads to the highway

## PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

WHEN I joined The Daily Star in mid-December 1993, a few months after the sudden and sad demise of the Founding Editor S. M. Ali, I was struck by the organisation's attention to detail and the starry-eyed philosophy behind it.

The man who had given a twinkle to the Star was no more, but the traces of his influence I could see etched here and there. The first thing I noticed was the austere similarity in the size and quality of all the tables and chairs that made up *The Daily Star's* furniture inventory. This uniformity symbolised a democratic flair in the work environment. The second feature of surprise to a man used to a rather casual working style in Bangladesh's newspaper world was the almost daily run of circulars and notices issued to different departments and pasted on notice boards. This was a refreshing departure from the verbal culture practiced by most newspaper managements. In most cases, the tendency appeared to be to treat information as an exclusive preserve or a prerogative of a few in the hierarchy, so it could be used as a tool of power. More to the point, withholding information, whether wittingly and unwittingly, smacks of lack of transparency and accountability on one level and ruptured working atmosphere on another. The third head-turner, if you like, to a new arrival was certainly the hectic pace at which one meeting after another would be held across the departmental corridors on daily basis. This was aimed to create a collegiate environment for interfaces, debates and consequently cross-fertilisation of ideas, so vital for a dynamic, innovative and thriving newspaper. It also keeps kindling a competitive spirit. It is said that small is beautiful and that the nitty-gritty or the nuts and bolts make the cornerstone of an institution. Frankly, not until did I cross the gateway, look sideways into the newsroom and hop upstairs to settle down in the cubicle allotted to me, would I grasp the full meaning of the foregoing statement. *The Daily Star* had got its basics right from the beginning and in time the paper's management would read very much like an open book.



Founding Editor of *The Daily Star*, late S.M. Ali, addressing the staff in 1993 with then Executive Editor, Mahfuz Anam, beside him.

Introduction of discipline in the work culture is a creditable contribution of *The Daily Star* to the newspaper industry which any serious media watcher wouldn't hesitate to endorse wholeheartedly. Paying tribute to Editor Mahfuz Anam, like drawing up a catalogue of his achievements, can go on and on. It is under his stewardship for the 23 and a half years of *The Daily Star's* quarter of a century that the paper has made its mark as a truly international quality newspaper. From steadying the rocking boat until end-1995 when the paper broke even and went on to peak in circulation and revenues, it has been a long but tireless journey. Rigour-free because it was enlivened by the tenacity and good cheer of Mahfuz Anam. He thinks that his single-minded pursuit of improving

the paper without distractions others fall prey to is the secret of his success. We couldn't agree more. After the story telling, the future beckons. The citizens are being flooded with news and views from the print media, its online version, electronic media and the multimedia digital platforms. Funny but not disdainfully, every social media user is an instant journalist because he or she enters news or information into the cyber space for theoretically a wide spectrum audience. Amid the surfeit of media men and women and sources of information and comments, the numerous recipients are confused becoming per se selective and choosy sifting through the mass of information and value judgments to try and get to what finds reso-

nance with them. In other words, they are thirsty for authentic and genuine information based on fact-checking that only print media can provide and deliver a distilled version of. Then you look for the-story-behind-a-story, analysis and interpretation of what is on the news circuit. This can only be provided by print journalism and its online extension through updates. The appeal of the first and the original media i.e. the print media therefore remains undiminished. But if corruption should be a different matter altogether. For, as Mike Royko, a Chicago newspaper columnist and winner of the 1972 Pulitzer Prize, picturesquely put it, "No self-respecting fish would be wrapped in a

Murdoch newspaper". The scandalous *News of the World* experience may be behind us but hardly forgotten. This triggered the debate on self-regulation within a media versus an externally operated regulatory mechanism. In the end, it is self-regulation that prevails in the British media. We make much about the media going high tech, emphasising the savvy side to journalism which may be good and dandy, but actually it is the man behind the machine or the instrument that makes all the difference between responsible and irresponsible applications. By this criterion, *The Daily Star* may feel redeemed in terms of integrity of journalists the Editor often says he has not heard a negative word reflecting on the reputation of any staff. This factor is coupled with an unwritten and habit forming code of ethics that binds the organisation into a concert as it were. It has all been about leadership at the top and inspired team spirit at the various tiers of the organisation. Loosely-knit hierarchies have been maintained with ample delegation of authorities. This has led to setting of tenors and percolation of values down the line. Here the Board of Directors enlightened and progressive outlook to let the newspaper be with full professional flourish and editorial independence merits a special mention in an owner-dominated newspaper world of Bangladesh. If one were to ask what is the single signature of *The Daily Star's* character; the answer would be its impersonality. A little philosophical that it might sound, it forms the bedrock of the paper's acceptability. The Star deals with issues on their merits. With robust common sense and the feeling of popular pulse, the paper is wedded to bring maximum good to maximum number of people. It is fiercely nonpartisan and unbiased, topped up by a handholding to the disadvantaged, weak, vulnerable and defenseless among the people. In the eye of *The Daily Star*, the ruling party having the governing and dispensing role attracts more space and with that criticism as well vis-à-vis the opposition. The opposition hasn't, however, been spared the flak for its injudicious, even harmful excesses from time to time. When the opposition fails to play its mandatory role of exercising oversight, the independent newspaper per se has to play a watchdog role. This is what the Fourth Estate is all about. Free media has been one of the most significant gains of independent Bangladesh and we must strive to keep it at that. The writer is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.

# How the newsroom changed in the last 25 years



SHARIER KHAN

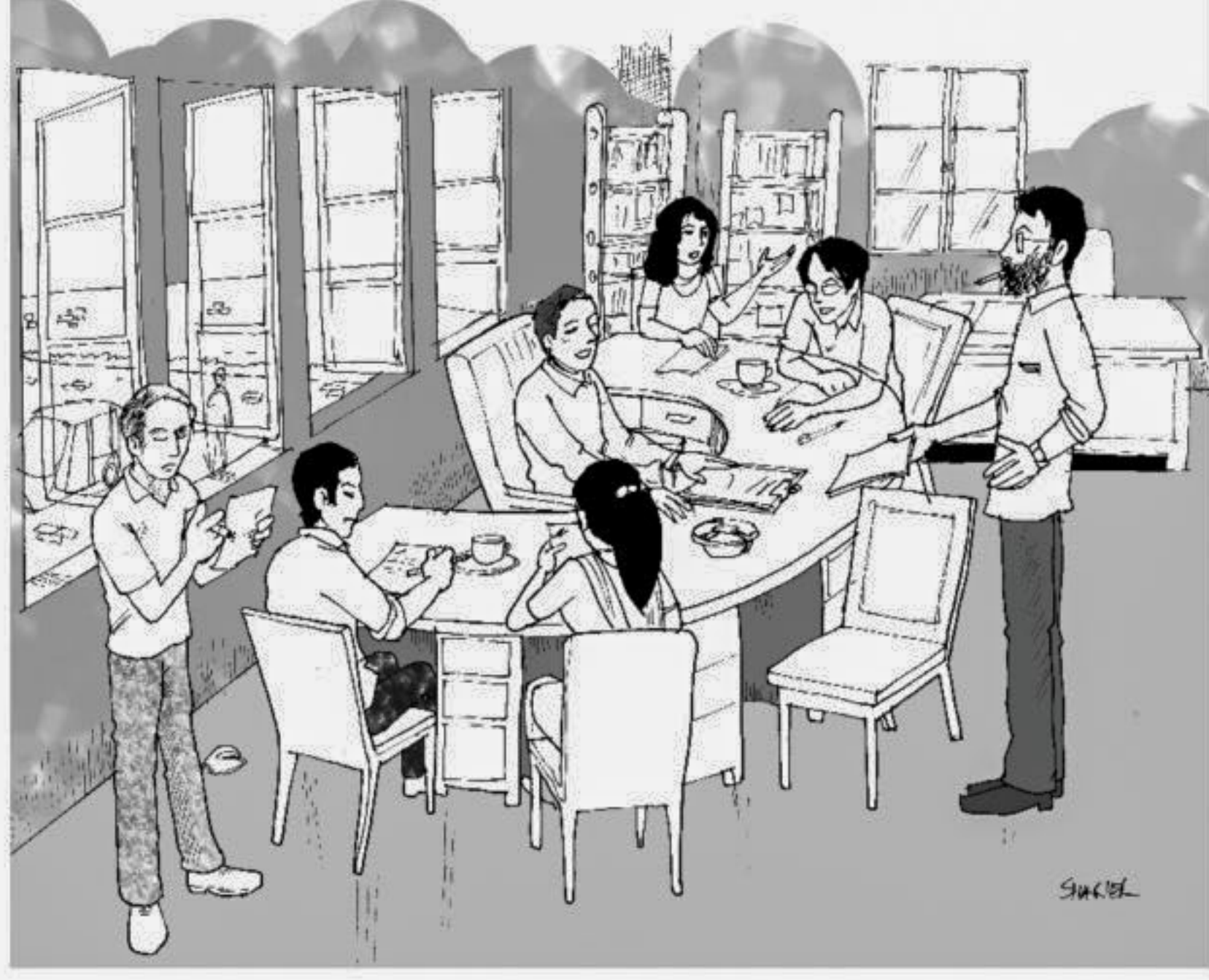
HAVE you heard of a horse-shoe desk? Or a cellophane makeup page? A dark room? Or even a typewriter? Oh well, of course you probably have at least heard of them. But kids born in the last one decade are unlikely to see any of these things for real. They have become extinct. Yet, in the 'old days' these used to be the initiating symbols you would get to see or use when you joined a newspaper. When I joined *The Daily Star* in 1991, it was already equipped with the most sophisticated newsroom. That big horse-shoe table, its own darkroom, a big page make up room, expanded news and feature sections and the most sophisticated of all - the "compose section" which was equipped with a dozen or so Macintosh computers. The compose section was the only general section that was fully air conditioned. People could not walk into that section without taking off their shoes. Macintosh computers, equipped with a maximum of 5 megabyte hard disks, were too delicate to be exposed to dust. I remember back in the early 90s, those desktops, revered like deities, were so costly that one hard disk replace-

ment would cost as much as Tk 70,000! I worked at the desk initially for three months and then switched to reporting. The horse-shoe desk, shaped like a horse-shoe, was the hub of all work and *adda*. At its centre sat the Shift-in-charge, who headed an eight hourly shift and selected news copies from agencies and correspondents and deployed sub-editors like me to edit the copies. He would later hand over the copies to the News Editor who headed the night desk. The cellophane makeup page was where the News Editor and Page Editors assembled and pasted transparent print-outs of news from desktop computers, positive films of photos, newspaper logos etc, complete with hand-drawn lines that separated newspaper columns and other material. As these were fundamental structures of the news room, journalists tended to work late. Back then, front page journalists in an English daily were considered 'larger than life' figures. If he was a political reporter, he would walk into the office after 7pm or 8pm and the first thing he would do is draw everyone's attention to share stories and anecdotes as well as for a good laugh or two. These guys would not start typing their stories before 10-11 pm. In fact, any reporter who finished the report before 10pm would be considered a sissy, who must be too eager to get home. The senior jour-

nalists would say - journalism is about staying up the whole night, finishing your story at 3am with the latest update, and going home at 6am with the freshly printed newspaper in hand. The result of this unwritten rule of midnight or 2am due to this newsroom culture. Things began to change, however, due to chronic pressure from the editor to stop Mail Fail and complete filing reports, editing and makeup as early as 2 am. Then the makeup cellophanes would be converted into printing plates and sent to the press for printing. By early 2000, our office timing drastically changed. Reporters began to filing stories from 5 pm and then finally from 4 pm (till today).

It's unimaginable that after two decades, we actually complete reporting, editing and page layout by 10 pm and send the paper for printing directly from our computer at *The Daily Star* centre electronically to our press in Tejgaon. The press directly makes the plates from their computer and prints the "First Edition". This first edition is sent to the districts early; no mail fails and no wasted production of a day. And by 2am, with a skeleton staff, we make a "Second Edition" with updates and corrections. This edition is aimed at the biggest market of our paper: Dhaka. There was another mainstream newsroom culture back in the nineties. Whenever we missed a certain kind of news - let's say a crime story - the senior journalists used to argue with the editor: *Our readers do not want to read those gory stories*. And how did they know this? They would confidently show other English dailies which had also missed those stories. I have heard this excuse frequently till the late nineties. This culture also changed by early 2000 when *The Daily Star* finally started comparing its daily stories with mainstream Bangla newspapers. The newsroom in the nineties was casual. We smoked, had tea and snacks spread all around our desk. It had its perks - working was fun and full of laughter, eating and smoking. But it had its disadvantage too. We

used to smell like cigarette butts by nightfall and did not feel too well with so much smoke around. I remember senior journalists smoking in front of late editor SM Ali in his meeting. This now seems unbelievable because people no longer smoke beyond the designated smoking areas in the office. As computers made their way into the journalists' tables from the mid-nineties, we dumped our typewriters. Along with that, the sub-editors no longer needed to edit on the print outs. The sub-editors were resistant about this for a long time. But eventually they started to accept editing on their own computers. With that, the horse-shoe table died. As *The Daily Star* turns 25, I can see so many changes; I cannot write them all down in just one feature. The office that was so casual back then has evolved into a formal institution and I bet if I could bring back some people who had left this organisation two decades back, they would not be able to recognise it now. Today I asked my younger colleagues if they knew what a horse-shoe table was. Four of them looked blank at first. One of them said yes he had seen one. Where? I asked. "At a zamindar's house," he said. No, even he did not know it was a part of an extinct newsroom culture. The writer is Deputy Editor, *The Daily Star*.



**QUOTABLE Quote**

OSCAR WILDE

*I can resist everything except temptation.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

ACROSS  
1 Barrel parts  
7 Impertinent  
11 Isthmus nation  
12 Ness, for one  
13 Draw out  
14 Open space  
15 Church feature  
16 Strata  
17 Pitcher Nolan  
18 Lassie, e.g.  
19 "Brian's Song" star  
21 Print measures  
22 Iceland's capital  
25 Superman foe Luthor  
26 Hold power  
27 Arthur's final destination  
29 Demand  
33 Evil spirit  
34 Eeyore's creator  
35 Eye part  
36 Next to  
37 Highest digit  
38 Hammed it up  
39 Turns right

40 Copier powders

DOWN  
1 Harpoon  
2 Add the score  
3 Writer Loos  
4 Motel sign word  
5 Mideast ruler  
6 Used a couch  
7 Thrash  
8 Rhine siren  
9 Skating site  
10 Moon views  
16 Not dissonant  
18 Cuisine with cayenne  
20 Soapbox Derby setting  
22 Daydream  
23 Look over  
24 Game choice  
25 Storing cargo  
28 Places last  
30 Select group  
31 Hero of an Orson Scott Card book  
32 Actions  
34 Office note  
36 Stake

**BEETLE BAILEY**

by Mort Walker

BEETLE: "GROWL GROWL!"  
DOGFACE: "WOOF! WOOF!"

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

CABIN CARES  
ARENA ALONE  
SADAT SLAVE  
PBS USE DIN  
ELI RAD SET  
REDEEM FIDO  
ENSURED  
DAMS REWEDS  
ISA FAT DEW  
SIN III ICE  
MANES RENEE  
AGENT EVENT  
LORDS DARTS

**BABY BLUES**

by Kirkman & Scott

BABY BLUES: "HERE COMES MOMMY! SEE MOMMY?"  
MOMMY: "SEE HER CLOTHES? SEE HER HAIR?"

BABY BLUES: "I DON'T DRESS UP TO CLEAN TOILETS, GIRLS."  
MOMMY: "LET'S LEARN FROM MOMMY'S MISTAKES, WREN."