

The Silent Doer

SHAHEEN ANAM

He called me *bhabhi*, a salutation I accepted happily because of the unique connotation of this relationship. It was one of jokes and laughter, but also of mutual respect. His favourite line was "Bhabhi, Limi does not let me eat anything, look I am growing so weak." We both knew this was not true, because few wives could be as loving and caring as Limi was to Fahim.

Alas! On May 30, in the early morning, when Limi just got up for her Fajr Prayers, Fahim, Tipu as many called him affectionately, suffered a massive heart attack and left this world, leaving his family in utter grief, his wife inconsolable and his friends shell shocked.

We shared a unique moment in history when he played a crucial role in the enactment of one of the most progressive and people friendly laws in the country. This was the Right to Information (RTI) Act. Syed Fahim Munaim was the Press Secretary to then Advisor of the Caretaker Government in 2007. A few years prior to that Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) with other organisations had started to raise the demand for the enactment of the RTI.

The demand for the law started way back in the 80s during the Ershad regime when journalists demanded the RTI. The Law Commission drafted a concept note in 2001 but this never went beyond the relevant ministries and later got lost somewhere. In 2004, MJF convened a broad based multi-stakeholder conference where it was agreed by everyone that a Right to Information Law was required to

improve governance and ensure transparency and accountability of state structures and expenditure of the revenue budget. This was followed by extensive lobbying with elected officials and political personalities in which NGOs, academics, professionals and journalists participated.

It was during this time that the Caretaker government came to power with the promise of holding free and fair elections in the next two years. Fahim Munaim was appointed as the Press Secretary to the Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmad. Barrister Moinul Hasan was the Law and Information Advisor.

There was a great deal of debate amongst us whether we should push for the RTI law at this time, as this was not an elected government. However, again the consensus was that we should try to have it passed as an ordinance and later lobby for its enactment once the elected government came to power. This was also the opinion of political leaders of all major parties. We set out to draft the law and entrusted the job to Barrister Tanjibul Alam. There were many others who contributed to the drafting and lobbying, among them were Shamsul Bari, Sultana Kamal, Iftekharuzzaman etc.

As one of the leading organisations pushing for the law, it fell on us to approach the relevant authorities, such as the Law and Information Ministry plus the Chief Advisor's office. Fahim Munaim, in his capacity, made our access easy and possible. He became the civil society's main conduit to place the draft to the Chief Advisor who made a personal commitment to pass it as an ordinance. Meanwhile, we submitted the draft to the Law and



Syed Fahim Munaim

Information Minister. In a meeting organised by MJF, in September 2008, the Chief Advisor announced publicly that the RTI would be passed as an ordinance and requested the Law and Information Ministry to work on the draft submitted by the civil society. Contrary to practice, one of our team members was requested to be a part of the drafting team set up by the government.

During this time, there were several attempts within the

bureaucracy to dilute the law. It was Fahim who would alert us to the changes being made without our knowledge. We, in turn, worked on the draft again and sent it back to him. This happened a number of times and Fahim was always there, helpful, accessible and shared our collective intention to finalise the draft which would meet international standards and stand up as one of the best laws among the 75 other laws enacted in other

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countries. He kept us informed of the dynamics going on within, the resistance and even the attempts to prevent it from becoming a reality. He made sure that the clauses we proposed as essential to the spirit of the law should not be deleted.

As we all know, the Right to Information Act gives citizens the power and right to seek information from any government machinery. It was envisioned that through this law, the prevailing culture of secrecy

would end and an era of openness and transparency would begin. It was by design that NGOs receiving foreign funds would also have to disclose information if requested.

However, this article is not about the RTI but rather to recognise the contribution of a person, who quite accidentally was in a position at a critical juncture of our nation's history and played a crucial role to get this progressive and people-friendly law enacted. The law was passed as an Ordinance in September 2008. The rest is history, as the elected government came to power and showing a unique commitment towards openness and transparency, passed the Right to Information Act 2009 in the first parliamentary session.

Later, he would say with that trademark twinkle in his eyes, "Bhabhi, remember the RTI work we did together? Someday I will write about it in my memoirs."

It is hard to believe that Fahim is no more; it seems like a bad dream from which we will wake up to see his ever smiling, jovial and pleasant face, cracking a joke or pulling somebody's leg. To me it's a personal loss of a person who called me *bhabhi*, but never failed to give the professional respect that is often not given in our culture.

I mourn his death along with his family and can only pray that Limi and his wonderful sons and daughter-in-law will be able to someday recover from the loss. Their only consolation is that Fahim lived and died on his terms, loved, respected and admired. I wish him eternal peace and salvation.

The writer is Executive Director of Manusher Jonno Foundation.

She was a model

CLEAR AS MUD



AHMED HUSSAIN

WHEN it comes to portraying women as sexual objects, some media outlets' attitude teeters on the brink of mania. There are times it comes out in little bursts.

The recent incident of the suicide of a woman in Mirpur is a case in point. She had threatened to kill herself in a video posted on a social networking site before she actually went on carrying out the sad act. A lonely woman early in her life killing herself is indeed tragic. To begin with, such an incident should have been reported in a more cautious manner. This is especially so when the victim is a woman and also because suicide in our society is still a taboo. There is also the issue of respecting the memories of the dead. On top of it all, through the act or taking that leap of faith, she has gone beyond the confines of our worldly

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affairs. Some media outlets, especially the online-only ones, have discovered in her death a godsend to increase visitors for their website. That she was a model had made her story even more interesting for them. It seemed as though the video and her subsequent death had made the woman an object, a commodity. As good as a news product. Her personal life suddenly became an object of scrutiny. These 'newspapers', armed with quotes by some police officers, started to give detailed accounts of her supposed private life. These reports, most of them riding on the quote of that know-all sepoy or sergeant, appeared to know every person that the deceased had come across in her life or all the places that she had frequented. Not to mention the detailed, intimate descriptions

of her supposed private life. Most of them are of course fictitious, yet they are duly typed and sensationally headlined for the palate of unsuspecting readers. The kind of 'journalism', where computer screens or newsprints are daubed with trash, is not new, though. To make it sad to tragic, some mainstream, respectable newspapers are also infected with this disease of the soul. Take Oishee Rahman, a teenager who had killed her police-inspector father and homemaker mother in 2013. Long before the law enforcers disclosed the teenager's real age, her name, photo and personal details were published, and she was shown handcuffed on primetime television. Again, her gender had made her an object of close media scrutiny. It suddenly seemed to matter a lot as to with how many men she regularly

visited different fast-food joints or the kind of cough syrup she had allegedly preferred to get her kicks. And it all came from the horse's mouth - police officers who had diligently supplied friendly reporters with all these 'crucial' details about the case. Some newsroom heads appear to possess the not-so-enviable ability to transport their readers to Victorian England, where words such as allegedly, sub judice, norms, and editorial guidelines were considered alien to journalism. It can be fairly said that long before a Dhaka court had handed the girl death penalty for parricide, some newspapers and television channels have already executed the verdict for her imagined crimes through reports and comments that were at times irresponsible, shoddy and were devoid of the sense of propriety that is indispensable to running a

newspaper. Media trial is a nasty business, and women are its worst victim. Thus, a woman caught with the cough syrup Phensedyl can be reported as 'Phensi Queen' or a girl in possession of methamphetamine tablets will be called 'Yaba Princess'. The crux of the matter lies in seeing women, her body to be precise, as a commodity. This has particularly proliferated since the country's Bourgeoisie revolution of 1990 that had ousted Gen HM Ershad in a mass upsurge and restored democracy. The get-rich-quick economic system has given birth to a consumerist culture, which sees women as a product, her body, like a designer hat, has been turned into a sellable item. Even more so is her life - some news outlets think it is their right to talk about what goes on even between the sheets. That she is dead is news, that she was a model is even better for the story.

The solution, however, does not lie in regulation. History tells us that it is a matter of days, if not years, that general readers will reject outlets that pander to false news or sensationalism. Given that our society is littered with remnants of feudalism along with the presence of a crummy education system that wishes to generate only good grades, it will take our readers a little longer to reject the Phensi news outlets. However, at the end of the day media as an entity is a self-regulatory affair. Having said that, there is always room for debate, and it should be encouraged. The Press Council needs to hold regular events to sensitise reporters about gender, children and other issues of importance. News editors can hold meetings where editorial guidelines can be discussed and swapped. This is especially so in the wake of the digital revolution.

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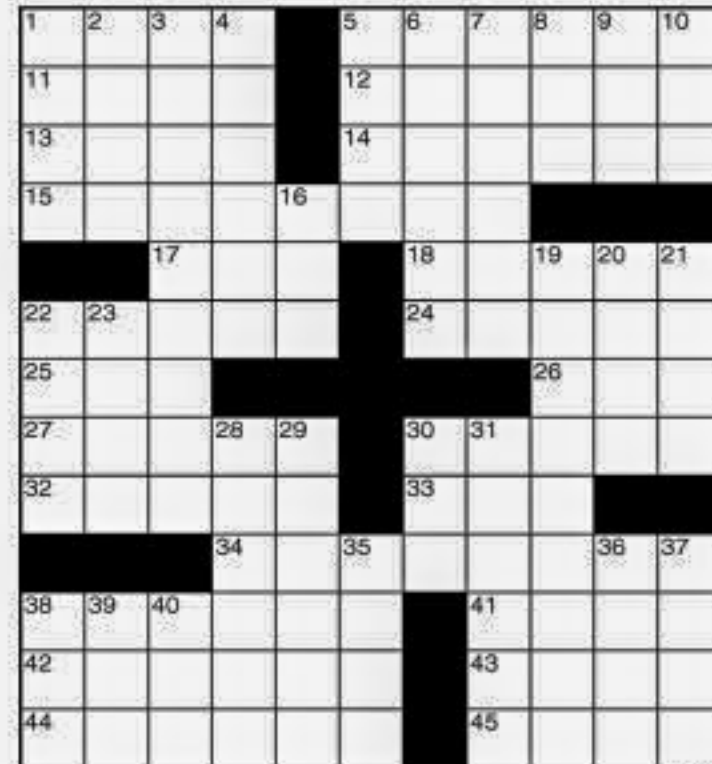
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

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- 33 Caribou's cousin
- 34 Lively parties
- 38 Like tears
- 41 Hen holder
- 42 Mischievous acts
- 43 Melody
- 44 Optimally
- 45 Hearty dish

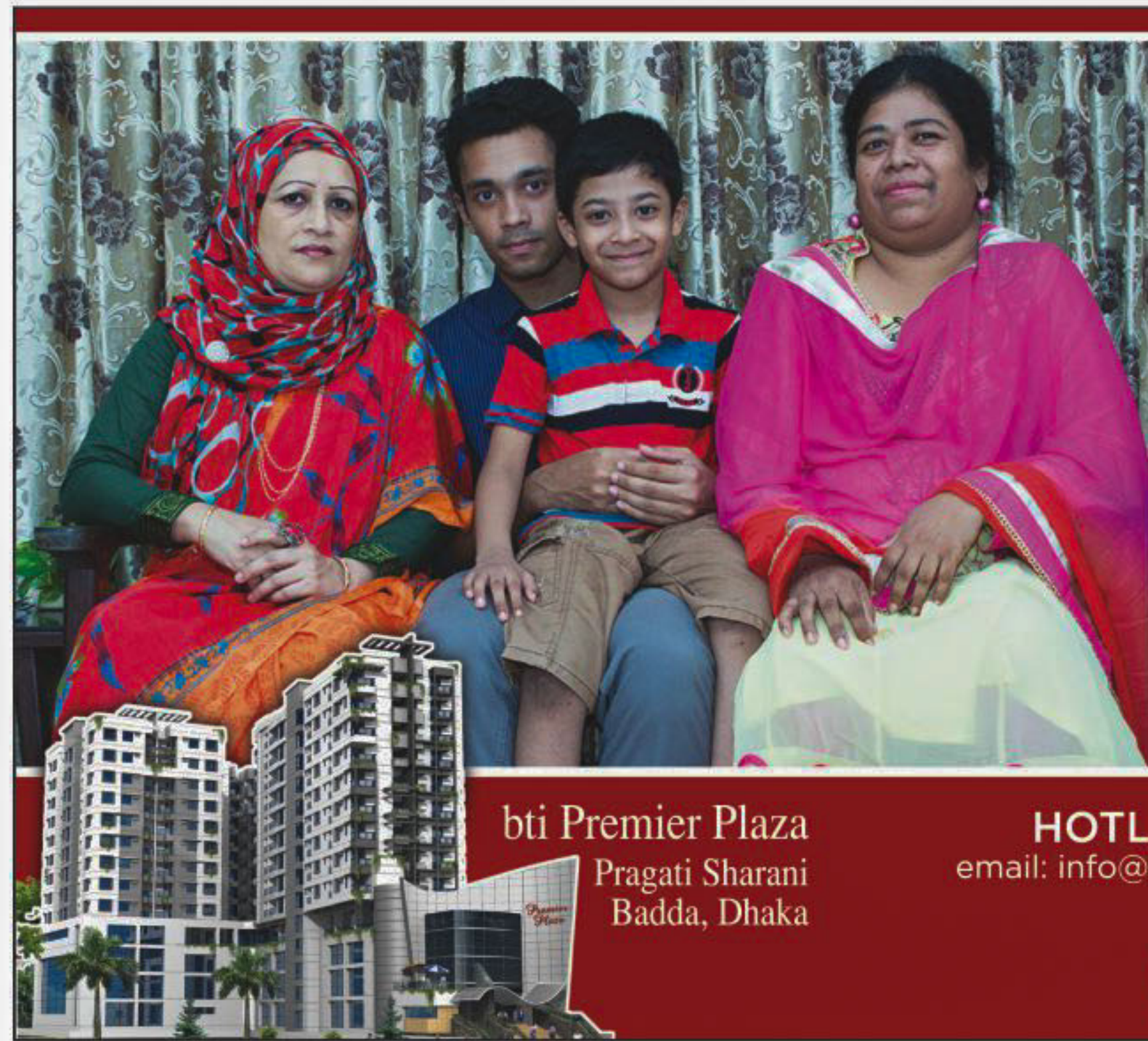
DOWN

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- 8 Sold-out show
- 9 Shelley work
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- 21 Enjoy the pool
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- 29 Beach wear
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- 38 Soaking site
- 39 Gallery fill
- 40 Research spot



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

ECHO STRATATA
CLOUD QUOTED
ROUE UNDEAD
UPS DANE
ETUDE HIP
TOWED LOOSE
UNIX DUET
TUFTS MOSES
USE CHORE
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