

Maniruzzaman Miah, as I knew Him



TAJ HASHMI

STRANGER THAN FICTION
ALTHOUGH he was more of a guru and mentor to me, Professor Maniruzzaman Miah was also a very good friend of mine. He was also a very close family friend. This obituary of this great man isn't an emotion-charged eulogy or tribute. What I write here simply reflects my candid, honest

thoughts about the departed soul. My superlatives about his virtues and qualities simply reflect my deep appreciation, love, and admiration for this great man. His death is a personal loss to my family, and me; and I believe, for the entire nation of Bangladesh.

Days after my joining Dhaka University as a lecturer in February 1973, my friend, renowned historian Ahmed Kamal introduced me to Professor Miah, and other progressive faculty members at the Arts Lounge of Dhaka University, viz. Ahmed Sharif, Serajul Islam Chowdhury, and KAM Saaduddin. He was exceedingly polite and civil, which is quite rare among many; academics, bureaucrats, and politicians at times could be very arrogant, loud, self-promoting, vain, and not-so helpful to others. Not him. He was urbane, modern, humorous, soft-spoken, kind and gentle, erudite and humble. He would love to dress up, and was a connoisseur of good food until he had a heart by-pass in 1991. He, however, remained a good and generous host, till his last days.

What was most striking about him – besides his disarmingly sombre demeanor and politeness – was his empathy for others, beyond his class, close associates, friends and family. He was a very good listener. As he was respectful and kind to his colleagues and friends, so was he to the ordinary people: rickshaw-pullers, his chauffeur, cook and members of the working classes in general.

He played a heroic role in the liberation of Bangladesh. He never ever took any undue advantage from the State or from anybody else for his role in the Liberation War. He was in Tikka Khan's hit list, and narrowly escaped death at the hands of Pakistani occupation Army. He, however, never talked about it in public.



Many people – including my past and present colleagues at various universities in Bangladesh – aren't aware that Dr Maniruzzaman, along with a handful of other professors of Dhaka University, played the most important role in the eventual enactment of the Dhaka University Order by the Bangladesh Parliament in 1973. In 1969 and 1973 as the Secretary of Dhaka University Teachers' Association, he played the key role in drafting the Dhaka University Order, to ensure autonomy or relative independence of the University from government control (like any other public/government-funded university in the civilised world). As a follow up to the Dhaka University Order, the government subsequently made the other public universities in Bangladesh autonomous too.

I recall his untiring efforts in organising relief operations in Dhaka city during the famine of 1974. Hundreds of starving people were dying on footpaths, and in and around the Dhaka Stadium and Kamalapur Railway Station, everyday. He was the main coordinator of collecting and distributing dry food – mainly bread and powder milk – from Nilkhet-New Market area among famine-stricken people, who mostly came to Dhaka from the northern districts of Bangladesh.

He was known for his strong secular views and preference for socialism to capitalism. He, however, never imposed his philosophy on his friends, colleagues, and students. As the Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University for a short span of time – around three years – he never gave any preferential treatment to anybody only because they subscribed to his ideology. In fact, some Dhaka University teachers shared with me what they thought of him as Vice-Chancellor. To them he was simply "pathetic", and "useless" to teachers belonging to his own group, as he would

often select teachers from other groups for various administrative positions in the University. There were three different quasi-political groups of teachers at Dhaka University, White, Pink, and Blue.

It's noteworthy, by the late 1980s the erstwhile leftist/socialist Maniruzzaman Miah started lending open support to the BNP, preferring it to the Awami League or whatever was left of the leftist politics in Bangladesh. He was not alone. By early 1990s, many left-oriented and even pro-Awami League politicians, including university teachers, had shifted their allegiance to the BNP. However, some of his very close friends and comrades at the University were totally disillusioned with him for this decision.

What I'll miss for the rest of my life is the small anecdotes Professor Miah would share with his friends, from time to time. Unlike some people, who would always brag about their connections, families, intelligence, honesty, scholarship and achievements, he would always be least pretentious, and humble. He would only talk about certain institutionalised corrupt practices at our universities and certain government departments, including the Anti-Corruption Commission, where he worked for a while. He would avoid naming the corrupt, as his intent would always be to rectify the system, not to denigrate people, dead or alive. But sometimes there were exceptions to his rule; he would reveal names, which I avoid disclosing here.

I give an example of his honesty, dignity, and self-respect. While he was the VC, he had no money to get a heart by-pass operation outside Bangladesh, as there were no good hospitals in the country in those days. He badly needed the surgery, but his principles and self-respect wouldn't allow him to ask the Prime Minister money for his treatment, from the state coffers. By the way, on someone's asking the PM to do so, Mrs Zia is said to have remarked: "He's a bachelor. He has lots of money. He doesn't need any state funding for his treatment". Professor Miah narrated this anecdote with a big laugh. He never justified taking any money from the state coffers for any VIP's treatment. I couldn't agree more with his uprightness and dignity.

He also refused to request the NUH cardiologist and surgeon to waive their fees, unlike some other "poor" Bangladeshis had done before. He told me point-blank: "Look! I'm a vice-chancellor from Bangladesh. My country is poor, but I'm not a beggar; I've my own dignity and self-respect". He borrowed money from his younger brother Arshaduzzaman for his treatment. And thanked me and my family a million times for what he thought we had done for him by merely offering him a place to stay in Singapore, before and after his surgery. Hats off Professor Miah!

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Where have all the fields gone?

HASAN MEER

CONFUSION, denial and finally, elation – these were the three stages of emotions that I experienced when my son enthusiastically informed that he wanted to go outside and play football with me.

Which made me wonder, why are kids nowadays so reluctant to play outdoors? Not that they don't want to step outside the house. My eight-year-old is quite keen to visit the countless A-Z fried chicken places whenever he gets a chance. He also loves to play. He is an expert at shooting, destroying, racing, and a myriad of insane actions in video games. But, the moment I suggest going outside to play in the sun, he starts to sulk.

Finally, when he got a football game and lost several times to the kid next door, he, being a smart 21st century child, understood that it was not the video game's fault. He needed to have first-hand experience of the actual physical sport; he realised that in order to improve his game stats, he first needed to practice the sport in the field.

I am a teacher. My physical fitness regime is usually limited to crossing the street or running to catch the university bus. Still the significance of my son's request was not lost on me; I could simply not pass this bonding opportunity. Suddenly I felt a pang of pride, since he rarely ever wants to spend time with me, preferring instead to stay glued to the television.

Since it was an early weekend morning, the streets were sighing with relief, as the constant hammering and thrashing they received from all sorts of vehicles had yet to begin. We had decided to go to the nearest playground, which was near the lake. As we approached it, I saw him beaming with joy.

But as fate would have it, the playground was closed. Construction work!

To avoid a lengthy explanation about who was constructing what at a playground, I decided to try the lakeside, which is a pretty big area and is supposed to have some open spaces. So we resumed our journey, took a left turn, then a right, before the beautiful lake greeted us warmly.

We walked past the public washroom, which definitely needed an immediate and urgent clean-up, then past the lake which was filled with colorful garbage. There were some open space beside the lake, but those were quickly reserved by joggers, fitness fanatics, groups of elderly people – all of them walking in circles. We saw a corner where we could practice football – but hawkers, little



shops, and people of different age groups looking for privacy, found it first. We then went to the open space on the other side. The moment we started playing, a guy began setting up tables and chairs there, apparently for the restaurants situated near the lake that would probably be open for business in a little while. He informed me that the place usually got busy very fast, as students gathered there even on weekends.

By this time I was adamant to find an open field for my son's sake! I also asked an old man resting nearby, who said there used to be one next to the mosque, before adding the reassuring words that none of the parks were adequate for children – events were always being organized at Suhrawardy, Ramna was too small and crowded, Chandrima was unsafe, and the ones in the old city were mostly occupied by squatters.

That day, we also searched our adjacent neigh-

borhoods for an open space where we could play football, and even asked locals for suggestions. Most of the fields were either occupied with construction materials or were reserved for some function or had simply vanished!

Now every time I visit a neighborhood, I look for an open space, a field where a bunch of children can run around freely, and the sweet cacophony of their chatter and laughter floats in the air.

But I cannot seem to find that melody anywhere.

We keep proclaiming that kids are occupied with video games. They do not want to step outside and are reluctant to play outdoors. We should start wondering if it's really their fault. We have to provide them an open space first. If we can create fields, they will be eager to play outdoors.

Open fields are essential for the wellbeing and safety of any urban community, and for a health-

ier physical environment. The city corporations are efficiently freeing parking spaces these days, which is praiseworthy; if only they would free up some space for parks too!

Fields and parks have always played a role in strengthening our bonds. The memories of time spent with our family and friends - while playing in the scorching heat, or even trying desperately to stay awake watching a play or movie under the starry sky, or begging our parents to buy us cotton candy at the playground fair - are not fables; they are etched forever in the open fields of our hearts.

So, let us not deprive our children of these memories. Let us not force them to grow up with the sense that their elders failed to offer them the joy of an open space to breathe, run and most importantly just feel free for at least some time.

The writer is a journalist with The Daily Star.

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QUOTABLE Quote

PABLO NERUDA
"You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep Spring from coming."

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Cook's creation
5 Scarlett's last name
10 Patriot Allen
12 Acted out
13 Dakota city
14 Saw
15 Clay, later
16 Big truck
18 Skip, as TV ads
19 Color-ations
21 Nut's partner
22 Ringtone bearer
24 Different
25 Unclear situations
29 Frost, for one
30 Roofer's need
32 Throw in
33 Eur.-Amer separator
34 West of films
35 Stair part
37 Impetus
39 Conjure up
40 Begets

41 Jazz blowers
42 Only

DOWN
1 Time in a way
2 Stressed type
3 Sacred place
4 Witch
5 Saudi Arabia neighbor
6 Secreted
7 Warrior woman
8 Entertain
9 Skilled
11 Freshness
17 Paving staff
20 Enjoy one's triumph
21 Suffering ennui
23 Proclaims
25 Lady of riding fame
26 Fenway team
27 Regard
28 Pitching great Tom
29 Trims
31 Baseball's Pee Wee
33 Son of Zeus
36 -out a living
38 Crater part

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

L	A	B	O	R	H	A	S	T	O
A	M	U	S	E	A	C	T	I	O
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A	S	S	E	T	N	O	S	E	S
D	E	E	M	S	B	L	E	S	S

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott