

The final story



HERE lives a storyteller inside every mind. The stories that we create and tell ourselves, about ourselves, help us make sense of our constantly shifting identities and experiences, and justify our being who we are and doing what we do. As the anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson puts it, we "compose" our lives through this "act of creation."

Arghya Biswas, a student of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University in Gopalganj, also told himself a story before committing suicide on November 14. It was unlike stories that freshmen tell themselves—in which they usually appear as happy, excited, fun-loving, or adventurous. In Arghya's story, we have a young man deeply disturbed by his surroundings, crippled by a sense of hopelessness so profound that the only way out of it seemed to be jumping off the roof.

We know about Arghya's story because he shared it via a Facebook post minutes before he made that fatal leap. It was quite elaborate for a suicide note, written lucidly and with barely any typo, and there was no indication of the imminent disaster. In hindsight, it seems like Arghya was trying to make a statement with the final story of his life.

The 353-word note was addressed to Bangladesh ("Priyo Bangladesh"). What follows is a sarcastic, unflattering observation about the current state of affairs in the country, especially the public universities, question paper leaks, murders and abductions, the pervasive corruption, and so on. At the heart of it is what he calls a "spineless" education system that punishes the students for refusing to conform—which was apparently the driving force behind his suicide.

Arghya believed in every word that he said. His conviction that he and others like him were victims of this system was expressed with the visceral intensity of a troubled mind, without recourse to complex reasoning, but one can relate to his sense of inadequacy

because he spoke from a common moral ground about issues that are already common knowledge.

There is indeed something amiss with a system in which students end up feeling depressed and overwhelmed. The characters in Arghya's story are real, who in the past were reported to have been involved in activities unbecoming of a teacher, but attempts to make them account for their action fell through because of the immunity that politically connected teachers enjoy in some public institutions.

Arghya's case has provoked a public outcry and discussion about the country's education system, especially the undue pressures that students are subjected to as well as the overriding influence of politics, but it also brought to the limelight the hitherto unexplored effects of this climate on the mental health of those involved, particularly the students.

In Bangladesh, young people are more vulnerable to suicide, although a nationwide survey on suicide has yet to be conducted. According to a report by

Asian region, South Asia accounts for 39 percent of global suicides. However, in Bangladesh, unlike some other countries, that a person's academic life may have something to do with depressive disorders leading to suicide is seldom discussed.

In the last six weeks alone, four college students, three of them female, have committed suicide. Relatives are often unwilling to report depression and suicide because of the stigma attached to them. To change this and create an environment in which vul-

of resentment or despair. Your brain keeps rewinding that story over and over again. And you wonder what right you have to be alive and pretend everything is okay when, in your mind, everything is clearly not.

I think it's normal to ask that question. Life being too burdensome and all, we all ask that question from time to time. But it's important that you don't answer that question. A suicidal thought, in the wrong head, might wreck terrible results, and once done, you may never have the opportunity to undo that mistake. The important thing is to understand that killing yourself, however justified it seems at that moment, is not the solution.

Preventing suicide and suicidal thoughts, especially among young people, should be a top priority. We can't expect to do that just by having a restraining order safety-pinned to the chest of a suicide-prone individual.

I think we need, first of all, to acknowledge that suicide is a health problem, and prevention and reduction of suicide should be on the agenda of the healthcare planners. Also, there should be facilities for on-campus psychological counselling in all academic institutions, and toll-free helpline services for people with suicidal tendencies. Social awareness, and acceptance, of mental health issues is also very important as discussing and disclosing depression can help enormously.

Just days before Arghya killed himself, he uploaded a profile picture with a text that reads: "Wait enough to quit?" To anyone aware of how a suicidal mind works, this should be indication enough that he was probably contemplating something. "Quit" is a standard reference to suicide. Clearly, Arghya's family and friends didn't know that, or they could have brought help in time.

A favourable environment in which discussion on mental health issues is welcomed and the needs and challenges of a suicide-prone individual are understood and respected can go a long way in dealing with suicide. We need to start working on that before another young person falls victim to our collective failure.

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Arghya Biswas, a student of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University, killed himself on November 14, 2017.

What I find particularly disturbing is how Arghya, who represents a generation of students growing up in an increasingly unhealthy academic environment in which "success by any means necessary" takes precedence over excellence and moral principles, reacted to the situation. As the growing suicide mortality rate tells us, when feelings of despair and helplessness as powerful as his take root, for whatever reason that may be, unless you know how to overpower them, you're probably just one bad day away from being Arghya.

World Health Organization, the number of deaths by suicide in Bangladesh was 10,167, or 1.40 percent of the total deaths in 2012. The most recent estimate of the annual suicide rate is 39.6 per 100,000 population; however, it remains unknown how many of them are students.

Judging by available media reports on suicide, it is safe to assume that most of the young people (students) who commit suicide are female, victims of sexual harassment, which remains a major cause of suicide across the South

Westerly individuals are inspired to find constructive alternatives to depression, Bangladesh needs to recognise the importance of mental health issues and adopt a national suicide prevention strategy.

I often think about the stories that those college students have told themselves during the final hours of their life. Stories about things not working out for them, about a world conspiring against them. In a way, these stories help you make sense of your present predicament and the resultant feelings

Dip Flip

BEING late in Dhaka due to traffic jam is the lamest of all excuses. For if there is anything predictable in Dhaka, it is the gnarling traffic jam. To make it on time for an appointment across town, all one has to do is start two days early.

But for once, I am "late" in starting. So is the motorcade in front of my car. It is that of the head of a diplomatic mission who I know is also heading to the same event across town. Then comes the magic: the football referee whistle starts blowing, red coloured, uncircumcised versions of the lightsaber from *Star Wars* jut out through the windows of the escorting vehicles. Instead of the "voaam, voaam" sound of the lightsaber, we hear the rich baritone (perhaps the selection criteria for this position) blaring through the loudspeaker of the lead vehicle ordering the omnipresent traffic to part like the Red Sea. The barrage of admonishing sounds like that of *The Hillbilly Bears* where the bear mumbles a two-minute-long sentence where only one word, the only important one, is discernible. In this case, all we hear is

"[Mumble, mumble] SHADA GARI! [Mumble, mumble]!" But the tone of authority is unmistakable and so is the exclusive VIP horn which sounds of breaking wind. The crowd all around takes the massive audio and visual assaults as seriously as it takes the wailing siren of an ambulance stuck in traffic. For once, EVERYONE has the

Hepatitis E (E for Emergency) and turn yellow.

And then, the motorcade does the "right" thing and veers to the right of the divider, all to the alarm of the oncoming traffic... "Abort, abort!" is my radio call to my driver sitting in the front seat. We abort mission and remain (stationary) in the traffic. Better

ans (and motorbikes). Oh, and also "No Parking" orange cones (artist credit: contracted private security companies). Funny, I get yelled at for parking my car in front of the Palestinian Ambassador's house, a piece of real estate (the road) owned by MY country and occupied by NOBODY.

But diplomatic immunity doesn't

the same (left) side where I am sitting with my two little kids. The SUV then honks the daylights out as a means of cussing us out. I tell my driver to turn around and chase the SUV, which by then speeds away taking advantage of a power engine and an empty road ahead of it (it being Gulshan at 10pm on a Saturday).

The person in the driving seat very likely was not the staff driver—he wouldn't dare jeopardise his job. If the driver was a diplomat, I am certain this was then a rare aberration of someone driving under the influence, resulting in a "dip flip"—a 'dip'omat 'flip'ping out while trying to flip my car while my five-year-old flips over in trauma. But like everything "phoren", this is a matter of "status"—at least it was not a rundown truck flipping me off while carrying construction material into Dhaka's elite section to ensure everyone in the vicinity is unable to sleep from the sound of unloading metal rods all night.

So, who was the 'dip'? Sure can be found out with the flip of a switch—there WERE CCTV cameras right there at the intersection...

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right of way.

But here is my chance to try to make it on time. I tell my driver to turn on the hazard lights (which in Bangladesh are interpreted as going straight) and follow the mini motorcade. How I wished the proletariat white number plate of my car would get instant

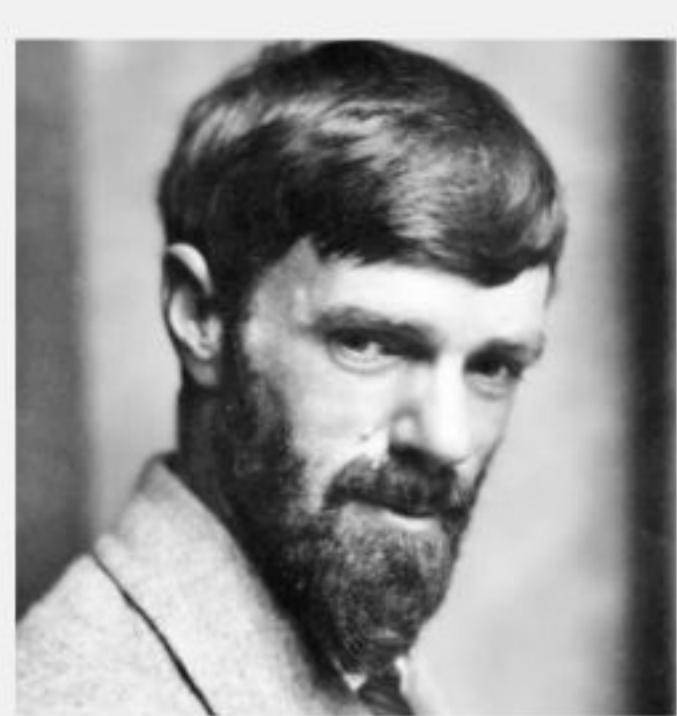
late than never.

But this is an exception to the rule. Diplomats in town are highly respectful to all local norms, especially the law. Well, except when it comes to putting up barricades on taxpayers' public roads and concrete blocks on sidewalks meant for us poor pedestri-

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QUOTABLE Quote



DH LAWRENCE
NOVELIST, POET, LITERARY CRITIC AND PAINTER

Perhaps only people who are capable of real togetherness have that look of being alone in the universe. The others have a certain stickiness, they stick to the mass.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Gift tag word
- 5 Make headway
- 9 Of the kidneys
- 11 Salty water
- 12 Puccini creation
- 13 Baseball's Pee Wee
- 14 Assn.
- 15 Talked like a Texan
- 17 Fished, in a way
- 19 Place down
- 20 Grove makeup
- 21 Monk's title
- 22 Moving about
- 24 Writer Hecht
- 26 Cager Shaquille
- 29 Day light
- 30 Joined a melee
- 32 Proceeded slowly
- 34 Bar concern
- 35 "Tiny Alice" playwright
- 36 Entertain
- 38 Did a haying job
- 39 Alpine trill
- 40 Raced
- 41 Nuisance
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- 98 Alpine trill
- 99 Raced
- 100 Nuisance

DOWN

- 1 Window coating
- 2 News offering
- 3 Like some garages
- 4 Blemish
- 5 Matured
- 6 Danny of "Moonstruck"
- 7 Day light
- 8 Pants measure
- 9 Impoverished
- 10 Soup servers
- 11 Small nail
- 12 Make good as new
- 13 Withdraw by degrees
- 14 Made a sketch
- 15 How Rome wasn't built
- 16 Sack material
- 17 Refer
- 18 Rental agreements
- 19 Strike defiers
- 20 Ran, as color
- 21 Lived
- 22 Hoe target
- 23 Swabbing tool
- 24 Family leave
- 25 Patron
- 26 Feed more
- 27 Fetus
- 28 Family leave
- 29 Oxen
- 30 Peoria
- 31 Gene
- 32 Oyster
- 33 Family leave
- 34 Patron
- 35 Feed more
- 36 Fetus
- 37 Family leave
- 38 Oxen
- 39 Peoria
- 40 Gene
- 41 Oyster
- 42 Family leave
- 43 Patron
- 44 Feed more
- 45 Fetus
- 46 Family leave
- 47 Oxen
- 48 Peoria
- 49 Gene
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- 100 Family leave



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

BEETLE BAILEY



BABY BLUES



BY MORT WALKER

