

Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury Tutul started the little magazine *Shuddhashar* in 1990. Fourteen years later, it grew into Shuddhashar, the publishing house, known for bringing about a new wave in the Bangladeshi publishing scene. On October 31, 2015, Tutul was viciously assaulted, along with his friends Tareque Rahim and Ranadipam Basu, for printing the works of free thinkers. He sought refuge in Norway soon after and lives there till date. **Irfanur Rahman Rahim** talks to him about the state of free thinking and reactionary politics in Bangladesh.

How are you, Tutul bhai?
I should say I'm fine. But am I? Though the anxiety and insecurity have gone, I feel a strange kind of helplessness—as if I've lost my way. **I understand. Living in exile is a painful experience. What do you miss the most about Bangladesh in Norway?** Myself.

Before we discuss the present in more details, let's look at the past. When did you move to Dhaka from Sylhet? How did your little magazine, Shuddhashar, which later became a publishing house as well, begin?

I moved to Dhaka in 1992, but it was not a planned decision. It was family pressure that compelled me to move. In my childhood and teenage years, I developed a habit of reading books, which drove me towards publishing little magazines. One day, while I was cycling, suddenly the name *Shuddhashar* came to mind. The first issue of *Shuddhashar* was published in December 1990, after the fall of Ershad's regime.

Who wrote for Shuddhashar in the beginning?

Initially, it was sort of a family affair. We wrote and we published, all by ourselves. We also found some enthusiastic contributors, some of who went on to become renowned writers. Most of them are still committed to the arts and human rights.

Our group was not a closed one. We hardly cared about our academic lives. But we used to keep ourselves up-to-date about global affairs. We hardly got advertisements for our magazine. I had to sell two of my cameras to keep it alive.

Could you tell us about the books you published in the early years of Shuddhashar?

We published quite a lot of books on the Liberation War, science, poetry, literature, etc. We also published a series of Russian novels, simplified writings of Albert Einstein, and interviews of Arundhati Roy, among others.

"Homosexuality" by Avijit Roy was published by Shuddhashar in 2009. "The Philosophy of Unbelief", co-authored by Avijit Roy and Rayhan Abir, was published in 2011. "Earthly", co-authored by Ananta Bijay Dash and Saikat Chowdhury, was published in the same year. The topics of these books range from homosexuality to atheism, which are still considered taboo in our society. Given Bangladesh's socio-cultural reality, other publishers might have refused those writers. What encouraged you to publish them?

The company of those extremely courageous writers, along with my

commitment to free speech and critical thinking encouraged me to publish those books. You may notice that before the murder of Faisal Arefin Dipan [who ran Jagriti Prokashony and had also published Avijit Roy], many other publishers also published books on topics considered "unconventional" or "taboo". But, after Dipan's murder, everything changed.

Can you elaborate a bit more how things have changed?

The changes are evident to those who are willing to notice. It was the first time that Dipan had published Avijit's books. As far as I know, some other young publishers were also considering publishing books with similar ideas. In the Boi Mela in which Avijit was murdered, a publishing house had been banned. We strongly protested that at the time. But after Dipan's murder, in the Book Fair of 2016, yet another publishing house was banned. Its publisher was arrested; he still hasn't been able to return to work. One does not need to imagine how much self-censorship is being exercised by those who had similar works in the line—one can simply look at the list of published books. It is unclear when these publishers will be able to work freely again.

Looking back at the Shahbagh movement of 2013, how would you evaluate it now and the subsequent rise of Hefajat?

When Bangladesh was under military rule, political failure and criminal

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activities alienated student politics from the grassroots. In a country like Bangladesh, progressive political parties are expected to function like an alternative school of thought, developing democratic, secular, and progressive ideas. But post-1990s, a vacuum was created. With the fall of the Soviet Union, left-wing politics lost its ground. Many became disillusioned, which made them inactive. Fundamentalist politics seized the moment. It started to spread everywhere and rooted itself in every

“While progressive politics remained confined to some closed groups in urban areas, fundamentalism seized the moment”

In conversation with Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury Tutul



Ahmedur Rashid Tutul

nook and cranny of society. It even spread into the grassroots.

On the other hand, progressive politics remained confined to some closed groups in the cities and towns. This situation created both a sense of disappointment and a need for change among the progressive, educated middle class. We have seen the explosion of these two realisations in the Shahbagh protests. Though the movement emerged from certain specific demands and achieved those eventually, there was the dream of more. The spirit of our Liberation War was to build a progressive democratic state and Shahbagh brought back that dream.

The rise of Hefajat was also noticeable. The political and cultural detachment of the erudite middle class from the grassroots enabled such a movement as Hefajat to arise. Afterwards we noticed how the platform

[Shahbagh] became a political ploy. It's incredible that those in positions of power began to consider it a threat. There are a lot of stories as to on whose advice, they began to think/do so [but I am not interested in visiting those stories]. What we can say is that the end result has not been good.

The times have changed. The space for democratic expression and progressive politics is shrinking day by day. It appears that groups like Hefajat enjoy a kind of leniency—and even support—that emboldens them. Some say that this is to prevent radicalisation. I disagree. De-radicalisation is impossible without educational and cultural reforms. As we have seen from the textbook reform incident, our hope is shrinking.

How do you evaluate the progress made by the government in

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apprehending the perpetrators of the attacks on bloggers, writers and publishers?

As an ordinary citizen, I want justice for all kinds of crimes. At the same time, I believe that our laws need to be reformed and modernised. There should definitely be justice for the murders and attempted murders of bloggers, writers and publishers, even though we express our hopelessness at the current situation, and declare that we do not expect any justice. But it falls upon the state to ensure justice. Over the last two or three years we have made some observations regarding the investigations that have given rise to such hopelessness. It is the responsibility of the government to put an end to this hopelessness. Another thing I think is important is that if someone really is arrested for committing such crimes, he should be given the chance to realise his ideological fallacies. To understand and to be able to make others understand is a crucial aspect of deradicalisation.

If you see the practice of free thinking in Bangladesh as a movement, what are its internal weaknesses?

I don't think that there is a lot of space for creativity in any type of organisational practice in this country, left or non-left. Free thinking developed in this part of the world in a lot of ways—there are social and political backgrounds to it. Some thinkers developed locally, such as Aroj Ali Matubbar. But I think by the free



On October 13 last year, the 2016 PEN Pinter Prize recipient Margaret Atwood chose Bangladeshi publisher, writer and activist Tutul as the International Writer of Courage.

thinking movement, you are referring to the blog-centred free thinking movement. Freedom of thought is itself a dangerous force. When humans start thinking beyond convention, beyond the structure of traditional thinking, no force can be greater than that in the world. But sophistication is necessary, as is common sense. I don't believe in self-censorship, but writers must have common sense.

In Bangladesh, especially since 2013, we have seen a new wave of reactionary politics. How can we resist it, at least

intellectually? Do you have any advice for young free thinkers?

It is not the duty of young free thinkers alone to resist reactionary politics. Politicians should play a greater role. Finally, the state itself should take steps. I consider free thinkers as writers. I hope they will write logical and constructive write-ups in a way which will be easily communicable to readers, so that readers get a chance to understand the falsity, illogicality, and irrelevance of reactionary ideas and

review their own thoughts. And the free thinkers have to increase their engagement with people. Intellectual motivation is needed in the grassroots.

What is the role of the youth now given the constrained political reality of the country?

You see, through many events, a kind of de-politicisation has taken place in Bangladesh. No one considers the national assembly as the centre of state machineries. The young people hate politics. This is, indeed, a pathetic situation. It deepens the already-existing class divisions. Most of the youth are not involved with the process of dreaming about changing poor people's lives. They dream of a democracy without politics! But it is not the youth who should be blamed for this situation. It is the politicians who must be held accountable for this reality. Except for this apathy, the youth of today are very smart. This smart young generation encourages me.

But I want political change in a political way, in a democratic way. To resist fundamentalism, we must stop corruption, stop violence against women; we must encourage women's empowerment. And for that, we need quality and meaningful education for all. These are more important than erecting new bridges and cantonments and flyovers. But no change is possible without commitment. If young people join politics in a democratic way (not through financial influence or family connections), there is a chance of a brighter future.

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“PUNISH HIM, PUNISH HIM!”

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was so happy when I saw the madam of the house. I told her I'd do whatever she asked of me," described Moyna. "She took me to a room and asked me if I wanted to shower after my long flight from Bangladesh." Moyna said yes.

"After that she gave me a dress to wear that was very flimsy and revealing and asked me to put it on," Moyna shared. "I said I can't wear this." That is when the mistress of the house started to beat her up. A crying, scared Moyna put on the outfit provided to her. The matronly-looking woman is a mother of two and had gone to the Middle East to support her children.

"A young man entered the room, and wrapped his arms around me," continued the woman, breaking down into sobs as she told the story. "An older man, the master of the house followed."

Physically, mentally and emotionally, drained, Moyna steadily got sicker and sicker until her sponsors "sold" her to Dubai where she ended up in a hospital. She used to continuously pass blood as a result of the sexual abuse and still continues to do so. She was in the Middle East for 11 months before managing a flight back home.

Moyna was one of the many women speaking about their experiences of abuse in the Middle East, in front of a full audience at the Muktiuddho Jadugar premises last week. Almost all the women had gone there to provide domestic services. They were speaking at a Public Hearing arranged by One Billion Rising.

"The master of the house and his son used to come into my room and abuse me," described Yasmin who had gone to Jordan for a job at a garments factory, but was cheated into entering domestic service. "The dala's name is Altaf, punish him! Punish him!" Yasmin screamed at the audience before collapsing into a fit of sobs on the podium.

According to the existing laws, none of these women who had, on many occasions, been treated as modern-day sex slaves can ever get justice for the terrifying ordeal they faced. They are now back in Bangladesh, battered and bruised, working menial jobs for peanuts.

"The first barrier that a domestic worker who is being raped will face is in reporting the event," stated Shakirul Islam, the chairman of Oviabashi Kormi Unnayan Programme. They were one of the organisations who worked closely with the survivors speaking at the event. "The migrant workers going from Bangladesh are rarely allowed to have cell phones. They depend on their employers to make calls. So how will they call the police?" he added. "If they try to get out of the house and go to the police station, they need the permission of their employers. The

minute they step out of the house without their consent, they become undocumented," continued Shakirul. "The employers can then file a lawsuit against the workers for running away."

That is precisely what happened to Yasmin. Unable to take the abuse anymore, she ran away from home one day, under the pretext of leaving the house to take out the trash. After walking for a while, she was picked up by the police and thrown into prison for three months.

This happened because domestic workers are brought to the Middle East through the "kafala" system, under which their employers pay a heavy sum of money to be provided with a labourer. Only the employer can let the worker go—there is no other way out.

"I was bought" was the most common line spoken by the women on stage that day.

The only way that rape victims can get help is so idealistic that Shakirul has never seen it happen in his years working for migrant worker rights. "Bangladeshi embassies in the Middle East have legal wings that are supposed to help victims," he stated. Acknowledging the fact that domestic workers can neither use phones, nor get out of the house on their own, an embassy can get to know whether someone is being abused only if they constantly monitor the wellbeing of all the migrants. "That does not happen," said Shakirul.

"The embassy does not help much," said Ayesha, a migrant worker from Jordan, speaking through Skype at the event. "If we go to them for help, they say that we have signed contracts and so must go back to our employers to finish our terms."

"The labour wings in the Bangladeshi embassies have no accountability towards the government," stated Salma Ali, executive director of Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers' Association, also adding in retrospect, "We cannot collaborate with the NGOs there because most of them are state-owned."

Even if a victim of sexual abuse does get access to legal services the onus of proving the rape is on the victim according to existing laws. If the incident cannot be proved, the migrant worker would be sentenced by the court for committing adultery, or for being alone with a man who is not family. Punishment for those offences still involves archaic methods like flogging.

All they can do is come back home, tails dragging. "Migrant workers who return to Bangladesh sick or injured are given a small government financial package. Sexual abuse victims, who go through debilitating trauma, are excluded from programmes like these because of one reason only—they need to be able to show medical records issued from their country of employment, to be eligible for compensation," said Shakirul. If women are not being able to report rape, how would they get medical records? "In the case of unnatural deaths, for example suicides



Legal experts listen to the testimony of migrant workers

due to torture, no autopsies are done in the Middle East," he added, citing it to be a judicial gap.

According to government statistics, one million female migrant workers went abroad from Bangladesh this year, almost all of whom found employment in the Middle East. The actual number would be higher, when taking into account the number of undocumented workers flying out. According to a report published in *The Daily Star* early last year, Saudi Arabia requested 2 lakh women in the domestic sector.

"Presently Bangladesh has no bilateral agreements with any country. All workers going are being recruited by individual agencies with one wing here and another there,"

said Syed Saiful Haque, chairman Welfare Association for the Rights of Bangladeshi Emigrants, in a speech at the One Billion Rising event.

Is there a way out? To begin with, the recruiting agencies can be held legally accountable for hoodwinking migrant workers, said Nazmun Ara Sultana, a former head of the Appellate Division in the Supreme Court. "Their licenses can be revoked. A High Court order can be extracted on this matter if a relevant organisation brings forth a case."

The real culprits however will stay safe until further notice.

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