

Adieu, AB

ADNAN R AMIN

AB is no more. The nation is in his debt, and there's nothing we can do about it. There are murmured demands for some sort of a national tribute or recognition. If you ask me, a man, who has won over hearts, has no use for medals.

On October 18, 2018, there was shocked disbelief in the morning air. Slowly, the tributes began flowing in. The prime minister and the president expressed their condolences. Social media was in flux. Thousands reminisced their unique relationship with this revered musician, with many posting photographs, autographs, album covers and song links. Messages poured in from outside Bangladesh too. As I write today, his music is emanating from every other screen, apartment, store and vehicle. The nation is paying its tribute.

Of course, fudging the limits of decency and civility during emotionally-charged times is our albatross around the neck. Sensational tidbits like his last moments or similar details seem to be in high demand. AB's family has had to issue a plea to stem the sharing of post-death photos. I don't deny that AB the artist is a towering public figure and thereby belongs to all Bangladeshis—but let us not forget that AB the man belongs to his family and loved ones.

Ayub Bachchu (AB) debuted on the Chittagong "band music" scene in 1978, at the age of 15. Remember, back in those days, the category of "band music" was viewed with a lot of malice and suspicion. Most households didn't look too kindly upon indoor jams and practice sessions. Most conservative parents didn't approve of the wild-haired, reckless and permissive culture that this music supposedly represented. Band music—in this view—didn't conform to prevalent lyrical etiquette, musical traditions, percussive beats or gender norms. An abomination, if you will. To many, it represented free-mixing, western clothes, smoking, drugs, and nonconformance in general.

It was into this rock musician's nightmare that AB was thrust. One can only imagine what mettle it takes to start out as a fairly skilled guitarist, and to then mature into a boundary-pushing, genre-shaping, much-loved national icon. I wouldn't be exaggerating to say that AB, along with contemporary musicians, led a mini renaissance-of-sorts back in the 80s, enabling rock music to reestablish its footing in the mainstream. But the impact of a musician of his stature is still more far-reaching.

Coming of age, globalisation, urban isolation, infatuation, unrequited love, pop culture, patriotism, death and departure have all featured prominently in songs sung by AB. Bachchu's music embodied a sweet balance of boldness and the uniquely Bangali vulnerability known as *obhiman*. There are thousands of overly sentimental Bangali men, myself included, who have found—in Ayub Bachchu and LRB's songs—words to embody their feelings. Hopeless romantics and infatuated youth have found meaning in their suffering, and discovered in themselves the tenacity to persevere on their amorous pursuits.

In a culture where men are raised to suppress their feelings, providing avenues for expressing passion and desire is no ordinary feat. In multiple instances, Bachchu openly discussed his personal life, starting from reminiscing about his departed mother, to sharing his dreams for his children. For him, Bangali sentimentality wasn't necessarily something to be ashamed of. And for this reason, through his songs and his persona, AB managed to help his listeners find the courage to acknowledge, and speak openly about their own feelings. He inspired entire generations to be comfortable in their own skin. And all this while maintaining an immaculate public persona in the eyes of his millions of fans.

It is true that AB started off his career singing English numbers, adopting western musical styles and dress codes. But one can't help suspecting that Bachchu himself was a true product of the Bangali middle-class. Behind the shades, the leather and the bling, he adored his mother, worried about his family, loved to show off his children's achievements, and never forgot where he had come from.

Those close to him often describe Bachchu as a

hardworking professional. Music was his profession, and his great love. Early on, he learnt to play guitar without the help of readymade lessons and tablature. Remember this was in the 70s, when you didn't have product reviews, online stores or proper technicians. Against all odds, AB developed his own brand of licks and solos, and is responsible for some of the best riffs in contemporary Bangla music.

Bachchu tirelessly did live performances, while balancing time for his prolific studio albums. He was also dipping a toe in cinema playback, with all instances finding popular acclaim. Like a true artist, he dedicated himself to celebrating love, to critiquing society, to regarding human frailty, and last but not the least, to uplifting his craft and profession. He was a prolific artist, but he was never wealthy. He was reportedly a generous soul, but never forgot that music was as much his profession as it was his passion.

On the side, he was a leading figure in organising professional musicians and advocating for industry issues like anti-piracy regulations. AB was also a source of appreciation, mentorship and patronage to a host of aspiring musicians, in and out of his studio AB Kitchen. He was always gracious to the thousands of boys with guitars who wanted to emulate him. It is largely thanks to giants like Ayub Bachchu that young women or men can today freely dream of becoming career musicians.

Like those of all versatile artists, Bachchu's fans remain divided when it comes to deciding on his best creation. There are those who argue that his early work was much more socially-



COURTESY: AB KITCHEN

Themes featured in AB's songs range from coming of age and unrequited love to globalisation and urban isolation.

conscious and meaningful compared to his later musical choices. Others counter that that's only because we're comparing Bachchu to himself. Otherwise, he is unparalleled.

Some say Bachchu, while a technical genius, truly mastered "feel" in his guitar-playing during his later years. Then there are those who agree with and vigorously defend his foray into folksy pop tunes—the same ones that drew the most number of dancers during concerts. Others bring up the natural trajectory of an artist's career, evolving with the times, evolving with changing social realities. In that sense, artists like AB who radiate the dreams and aspirations of generation after generation, slowly become part of the zeitgeist.

Let us mourn AB's loss, and let us pay attention to what AB sang, what he valued and what he represented. I understand the prevalent sentiment, "He had so much more to give!" While that is entirely plausible, what he has given us (28 studio albums to begin with) is staggering. Let us consider this huge body of work, and realise that "band music" has come of age, and truly deserves institutional patronage and policy support. Oh! And... no piracy please!

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Developing countries losing out to digital giants



Libertarian "light-touch" regulatory frameworks allow powerful digital corporations to largely evade strict regulatory supervision and oversight and limit policymakers' influence.

PHOTO: REUTERS

JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM and ANIS CHOWDHURY

A new United Nations report warns that the potential benefits to developing countries of digital technologies are likely to be lost to a small number of successful first movers who have established digital monopolies. According to the Trade and Development Report 2018 (TDR 2018), subtitled "Power, Platforms and the Free Trade Delusion", while developing countries need to invest more in digital infrastructure, they must also address the ownership and control of data and their use.

Developing countries will need to protect, and extend, available policy space to successfully integrate into the global digital economy. Stronger competition and regulatory frameworks will also require multilateral cooperation.

Digital concentration

Libertarian "light-touch" regulatory frameworks have allowed powerful corporations to largely evade strict regulatory supervision and oversight, expand exclusively into lucrative related areas and limit policymakers' influence. Digital monopolies have thus profitably "mined" and processed data.

Of the top 25 big technology firms in terms of market capitalisation, 14 are US-based, with three in the European Union, three in China, four in other Asian countries and one in Africa. In 2015, the top three big US technology firms had average market capitalisation of more than USD 400 billion, compared to USD 200 billion in China, USD 123 billion in other Asian countries, USD 69 billion in Europe and USD 66 billion in Africa.

Apple recently became the first company in the world to be valued at more than USD 1 trillion, matching the combined economic output of Saudi Arabia and South Africa. Such concentration and market dominance have ensured lucrative rents for the big players in the sector. For example, Amazon's profits-to-sales ratio increased from 10 percent in 2005 to 23 percent in 2015, while Alibaba's increased from 10 percent in 2011 to 32 percent in 2015!

These trends are largely due to the extraction, processing and sale of data.

Digital platforms use their control over data to organise and mediate transactions along value chains. Network effects allow these platforms to expand these ecosystems utilising feedback-driven processes.

The resulting market power, with stronger "property rights" on the control and use of data, has enabled rentier and other uncompetitive practices. Thus, one cannot but be circumspect about the hype over "big data" and "data revolution". They rarely promote inclusive development, especially when left to "market" or "self-regulation".

Digital democracy?

TDR 2018 recommends active policies to check anti-competitive rent capture

In our increasingly digitised world, consumers receive services in exchange for surrendering their data, at zero nominal prices, i.e., for free.

by digital platforms, and misuse of data. Antitrust and competition policies, historically concerned with market structure and behaviour, increasingly emphasise maximising consumer welfare, using price-based measures.

In our increasingly digitised world, consumers receive services in exchange for surrendering their data, at zero nominal prices, i.e., for free. The control and use of such data enable the lucrative rentier activities associated with their use and abuse.

Policy options include stricter regulation of restrictive business practices and breaking up large firms responsible for market concentration. The digital world's monopolistic

tendencies should be regulated, and firms' abilities to exploit their dominance restricted, e.g., the recent measures taken by the European Union against Google.

Developmental digitisation?

For developing countries, the regulatory challenges to realise developmental gains from digitisation are greater. Some countries are already using localisation measures to develop domestic digital capacities and digital infrastructure. But in most cases, data are owned by those who gather and store them, mainly digital super platforms, which then have full, exclusive and unlimited rights over the resource.

National data policies should be designed to address four major issues: who can own data, how data can be collected, who can use such data, and on what terms. They should also address the question of data sovereignty, e.g., which data can leave the country, and consequently are not governed by domestic law. South-South and regional cooperation can help small developing countries build their digital skills, capacities and capabilities.

Developing countries need to protect and expand available policy space to implement development strategies that should include digital policies with regard to data localisation, data flow management, technology transfers and custom duties on electronic transmissions.

The international community is just beginning to discuss rules and regulations to improve them, before agreement is reached at the World Trade Organization and other multilateral bodies. A premature commitment to rules with long-term impacts on fast-changing matters should be avoided, especially where powerful business interests remain influential and often dictate the very terms for discourse.

Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, and received the Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought in 2007. Anis Chowdhury is adjunct professor at Western Sydney University and the University of New South Wales, Australia. He held senior United Nations positions in New York and Bangkok.

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A WORD A DAY



EFFECTABLE
ADJECTIVE

Able to be described in words.

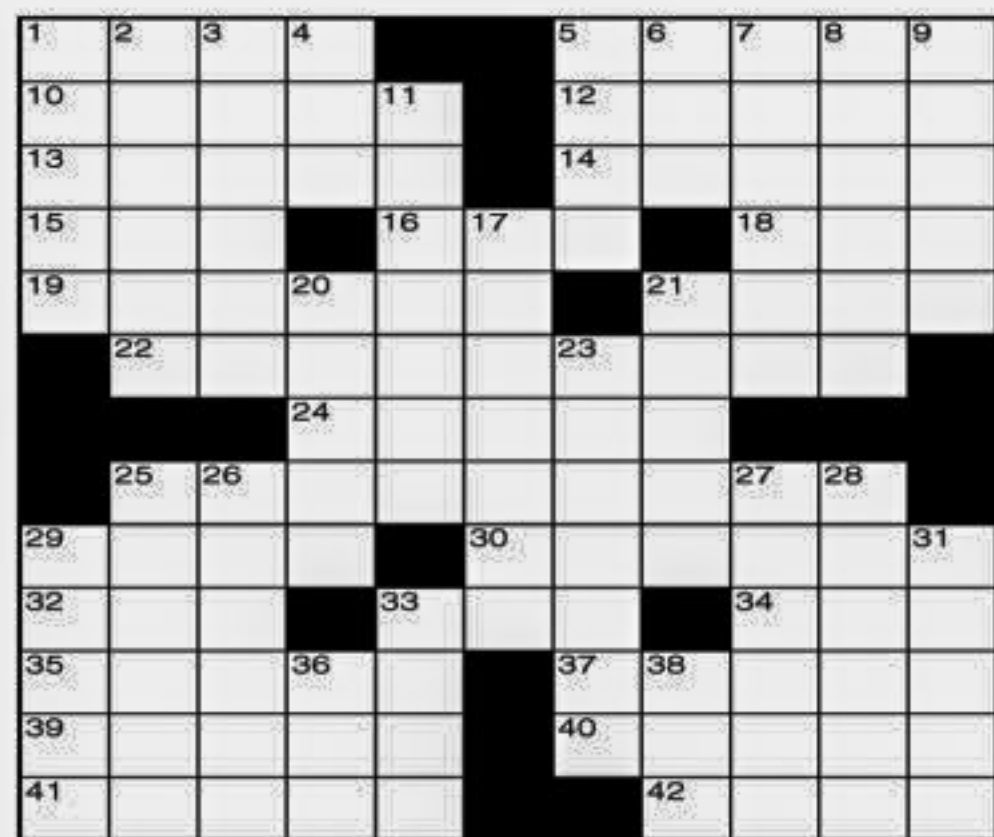
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Tore
- 5 Plotting group
- 10 Sorbonne setting
- 12 San Antonio sight
- 13 Top players
- 14 Art exhibition hall
- 15 Finish first
- 16 Tick off
- 18 Programming error
- 19 Brain, slangily
- 21 Takes in
- 22 Confection
- 24 Revealed
- 25 One sharing an apartment

DOWN

- 1 Give rise to
- 2 Cookout sites
- 3 Before, poetically
- 4 Day in Durango
- 5 Wine holder
- 6 Imitating
- 7 Panama explorer
- 8 Check number
- 9 Pines
- 11 Look upon warmly
- 17 Fall back
- 20 Red-ink entry
- 21 Fragrant wood
- 23 Club constituents
- 25 Out of danger
- 26 Disloyal
- 27 Gauguin's adopted home
- 28 Light pioneer
- 29 Sea dogs
- 31 Perfect places
- 33 Invites
- 36 Cease
- 38 Succor



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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