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Abrar's murder charge sheet in quick time

It exposes much more than the killing only

THE investigating agencies deserve compliments for submitting the charge sheet in the cold-blooded, brutal killing of Abrar Fahad. It was done in five weeks, a relatively short time given our experience in case of other high-profile and sensational killings. This was made possible because of the priority accorded to this case. We would hope that all cases of killings would receive similar consideration. We also thank the law minister for his assurance that the case would be tried in the speedy trial tribunal and completed in three and a half months.

However, we feel that the investigation report reveals much more than merely the killers and the circumstances of the killing. Firstly, it exposes the unbridled profligate behaviour of the BCL which is fairly representative of its behaviour in most of the public universities. It would not be remiss to say that their unruly behaviour has been driven by an aura of impunity that the BCL existed in without anybody realising the grave injury that it was doing to the academic environment in general.

Secondly, Abrar's killing shows the level the so-called student politics has degenerated into. Chhatra League's conduct has given a bad name to student politics. Their behaviour has nothing to do with either students or politics and everything to do with highhandedness, extortion, suppression of the rights of other students to ventilate their demands, and in certain cases, acting as an auxiliary of the law enforcement agencies.

And finally, the killing exposes the shoddy administration of Buet. That too is the trend that one notices in several other public universities. It is shocking to see the university administration abandoning their duty towards other students by turning a blind eye to the criminal activities of BCL on the campus.

It would be advisable for the administration and the Awami League to draw the essential lessons from the investigation report and take action to reform its student wing.

Bangladesh Railway still in deep sleep

Why has recruitment been ignored for so long?

IT is quite a shock to learn that while huge investments are being made in various mega infrastructure projects, when it comes to a sector as important as the country's railway, there have actually been major cutbacks in spending over the years leading to severe manpower crisis. According to a report in this paper, the Bangladesh Railway (BR) has 40,275 sanctioned posts of which it only has 25,845 people—in other words, around half the required manpower is missing. A top official of the BR has admitted that there is a major crisis of station masters, loco masters, booking clerks, attendants and security guards. In this situation, should we be surprised by Tuesday's horrific train accident in Brahmanbaria that left 16 people dead and many others critically injured? It has been reported that the collision occurred because the driver and his assistants in one of the trains had ignored the signal because they might have been dozing off.

The tragedy, which has taken the lives of so many people and maimed many others, is a rude wake-up call for the railway ministry that has been painfully sluggish in improving this vital transport service. This has been mainly because the BR has failed to employ an adequate number of staff members to run the passenger and freight trains. What is even more befuddling is that the government allocated a huge amount of money—TK 54,816 crore—to the Ministry of Railways to implement 36 development and technical projects to improve rail services, but recruitment of the staff to keep the service going has not been given priority. According to the railways minister, the existing training facilities and curriculum are outdated and require revision. Pray tell, why this revelation did not come a few decades ago since that is how outdated the curriculum is?

The railways minister has assured that the authorities are "trying to improve the situation", that a new organogram to accommodate the additional number of trains and routes is in the offing. We hope such recruitment and training will be done on an urgent basis before another tragedy like that in Brahmanbaria hits us again.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Case against Myanmar: A long overdue initiative

On behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), The Gambia has recently filed a case against Myanmar with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for committing genocide on the Rohingya minority in Rakhine State. Even though such an initiative was long overdue, it finally seems that Myanmar and its officials can be held accountable, thanks to the noble step taken by the Gambian Justice Minister Abubacarr Tambadou.

The allegation that has been submitted to the ICJ focuses on the "systematic ethnic cleansing" of the Rohingya in Myanmar. Ironically, like Gambia, Myanmar too is a signatory to the 1948 Genocide Convention which explicitly prohibits states from committing genocide. It is indeed shameful that despite the accusations made by the Rohingya about the horror that was unleashed upon them, Myanmar continues to disregard the claims, mostly due to their sense of impunity.

However, after such a promising step taken by Gambia, now it is only a matter of time before the perpetrators of human rights violations in Myanmar are brought to book.

Ali Asgar, by email



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

this rather romantic notion, mentioned in Arnold's "Essays in Criticism," to describe their alma mater. One of the few Bangladeshi scholars to study English at Oxford University, Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui (1928-2014), quoted this motto twice in his memoir *Amar Chalar Pathay* (ACP 2003) to suggest how Oxford served not only as a microcosm of the academic universe but also as a site that offered a fertile ground for different persecuted causes to flourish.

On his fifth death anniversary on November 11, I picked up the book written by the two-time Vice-Chancellor of Jahangirnagar University (1976-1984) with a personal desire to remember my mentor. The book filled me with a concurrent sense of pride and sorrow. I am proud to be a student-turned-colleague of ZRS; I am honoured to experience the brilliance of his scholarship sitting in a classroom and to hear some of the vignettes first-hand while working as his research assistant. I am sad to recognise that a luminous generation has almost vanished, depriving our campuses of scholarship, leadership and visionary guidance. In their absence, our universities have become "homes of all lost causes" in a literal sense of the term.

A flurry of news on campus vices—murder, physical assaults, extortion, forgery, corruption, and sexual abuse—is a case in point. Except for sporadic individual feats, our universities as institutions are failing to live up to public expectations. The situation is so dire that the prime minister has to go to the extent of announcing the possibility of suspending the funding of one public university. She is irked by the fact that a group of agitating teachers and students laid siege to the residence of a sitting VC and her family demanding the resignation of the VC, who is accused of sharing the development fund with party goons. The

Home of all lost causes

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui was an exemplary VC of Jahangirnagar University. At a time when this beautiful campus remains plagued by chaos, it is worth remembering his mentorship and love for the university and its students.

problem is, the money is yet to be cleared by the university's Finance Committee or Syndicate. In theory, the money does not exist to be shared in the first place. Nevertheless, these alleged corruptions are tantamount to moral turpitude and some members of JU are seeking an institutional beheading. The incumbent VC's reliance on party-men as protective shield instead of initiating a dialogue or a judicial enquiry against the allegations has aggravated the situation. The rigidity on both sides has brought the autonomy issue guaranteed by the Public University Act of 1973 under an uncanny spotlight.

Prof Siddiqui once told me that

evening or certificate programmes. The earning, however, is mostly shared by the faculty members, and the university gets very little from these financial programmes. There are too many vested groups reigning over our campuses, and serious scholars and students are constantly finding themselves in migratory cocoons.

I feel sorry for Jahangirnagar, which was once my own. It had all the potential to become a Green Campus against the concept of Red-Brick university. The idea of a research university was conceived by General Ayub Khan who laid its foundation stone at Salna, Gazipur. The site was later found to be unsuitable and

The only AC in the house was installed in the study room as it was the room where he mostly spent his time. He wanted the house to be the centre of his social life (ACP 263). It seems the same house has now become the centre of many asocial activities where the rescue party featuring employees and students have allegedly kicked their colleagues and peers, while radical educators have threatened their administrative head with snapping off all supplies and even damaging the house. This is not the first time the house of the campus is witnessing such tension.

Prof Siddiqui made it a personal mission to beautify Jahangirnagar in the like of his former workplace at Rajshahi, if not of Oxford. Under Prof Siddiqui's leadership, JU turned out to be a lush green campus. The designing of the Muktomancha, modelled after the amphitheatre carved in the rocky mountains of Denver, is one glorious example. He brought in fellow Oxonian experts from Calcutta to design the curricula of the English Department. He even gave regular classes in the first periods while serving as a VC.

Once, General Zia summoned VC Prof Siddiqui to point out about the "offensive" and "uncomfortable" graffiti that he had seen on the university walls along the Dhaka-Aricha Road. In response, Prof Siddiqui quipped, "If people could ventilate freely in newspapers and TV, there would be no need for graffiti on the wall." The General listened quietly (ACP 263-4). While at Rajshahi University, Prof Siddiqui ousted an NSF cadre from his hall of residence. The police IG protested the incident in the presence of Governor Monem Khan to the then VC, who, in response, said, "If you have anything to say, share it here; but don't you dare implicate my colleague." One may wonder, where are these men today? When did we lose our path? Where did we go wrong?

Prof Siddiqui's memoir is replete with memories of some great men and their equally great moments. Revisiting the book on his death anniversary made me think of "London 1802" where William Wordsworth felt the absence of Milton during his time. Borrowing the lines, let me end by saying, "ZRS! Thou should be living at this hour/ Our universities hath need of thee!"

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Zillur Rahman Siddiqui (1928-2014)

the universities could never claim full autonomy without freeing themselves from the State purse strings. The PM has a duty to remind the agitators of the government spending of Tk 1.5 lakh per student a year as against the collected fees of Tk 150 per student. If the teachers really want to stop classes for their agitation, they must first think of generating their own resources. While this stance of the PM may appear to be an invasion of the 1973 Act, the reality is, our universities have not tried to be independent in the true sense of the term. Despite the abundance of physical resources, they have failed to generate income for their infrastructural development, research or rewards. Recently, some universities have started running

the campus was moved to 750 acres of land acquired from Savar Dairy Farm. In an independent country, the university assumed a new residential character where stipends were offered to all incoming students. Prof Siddiqui's predecessor as VC, Dr Enamul Haq, impressed upon Bangabandhu JU's uniqueness as a "laboratory of Higher Education" (ACP 236). That was the level of a VC's prestige in the past.

I felt sorry to read about the JU VC's residence being under siege. Prof Siddiqui's book recounted how he himself identified an elevated plot of land by the lake for constructing that house. He took great care to demarcate the public and private spheres in his official residence.

RTI law: Bridging the gap between promise and practice

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

THE euphoria accompanying the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War era late last century was followed by an upsurge of democracy in the new republics and a resurgence in nominal democracies. One manifestation of this was the global rush to adopt the Right to Information (RTI) or Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. Out of around 130 countries which have enacted the law so far, a large majority did so in the last three decades. Bangladesh adopted it in 2009.

The ostensive purpose of the law is to establish the right of citizens to access information about the functioning of their governments. By doing so, they are able to monitor the work of public authorities. It is based on the concept that since, in democracy, governments serve as representatives of the people, the latter have the right to obtain almost every information that their governments possess or create. The law is a potent tool for political accountability.

In recent days, however, a growing literature on the subject is progressively turning despondent about the prospects of the law. The growing gap between the promise of RTI/FOI law and its practice in many countries has led scholars to refer to it as "democratic window dressing". They argue that a key reason for governments to adopt the law is to benefit from the image it provides of democratic governance, rather than a means to introduce more transparent governance.

As Bangladesh commemorates the tenth anniversary of RTI, we are hung up on counting the number of RTI applications rather than their impact.

The Preamble to the Act clearly states that the basic objective of the law is to ensure "peoples' right to information." It goes on to underline that through the exercise of this right, two goals are achieved: one, "empowerment of the people" as "owners of all powers of the republic", and two, increased "transparency and accountability" of all public offices, leading to decreased corruption and increased "good governance".

The "promise" of the law is thus very clear: if peoples' right to information is duly exercised, good governance will follow. Just as the goal of vaccinating all children in the country is to reduce preventable infectious diseases, the goal of RTI is more democratic, law-based governance. Information, like vaccination, is only a means to an end. In Bangladesh, we seem to be focused

more on the objective of the law than its goals. Unless we turn it around, we will continue to rejoice over small individual gains here and there—such as obtaining a Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) card under the government's safety-net programmes—and downplay the larger goal of the law, which is ending abuse of power by public officials for private gains. Additionally, our assessment of progress of RTI will remain focused more on numbers of requests made under the law than their impact on governance.

Of course, numbers are very important. Without a sustained flow of RTI requests to public offices, there can be no appreciable impact on governance. But larger numbers can be meaningful only if they lead to achieving the desired goals. For that to happen, RTI applications must have a clear objective of the change envisaged.

use it. This is largely because they are not familiar with the promise of the law. If one asked the members of the well-to-do, educated, socially aware and urban professional groups—who know that the law exists—as to why they don't use it, they will most likely say that they feel no need to use it because they have other ways of obtaining the information. Obviously, they think that the law is meant to obtain information that people need for personal reasons. The larger public good of the law is missed on them.

This group of knowledgeable people should be encouraged to use the law as part of their civic responsibility, to monitor the work of public authorities. They must realise that among the three main instruments of accountability available to citizens in a country, namely periodic elections, criminal law and the

in the country would need to change their tactics. Without abandoning their focus on helping ordinary people to use the law for their personal needs, they should also seek to draw in members of the groups mentioned above, including all other social and political elites, to promote the larger goals. They are people with the right background to understand the inner workings of public bodies, their responsibilities, the challenges they face and how best to overcome them. They would know better what sort of information would be useful to unearth anomalies. And if they approach the law in an objective manner, make use of it responsibly, not to rock the system but to change it slowly, they may be able to avoid ruffling feathers. But they must have faith in the system and not be sceptical. Their involvement will help



Mundane, inconsequential RTI requests, which may be meaningful to an individual but are hardly of interest to the public at large, appear to dominate the RTI scene in the country. With such requests, there can be little hope for systemic change.

Everyone involved with the RTI regime in the country—from individuals applying for information, to public officials dealing with them, to the Information Commission mediating disputes between the two sides—must understand the perspective of the bigger picture. We must ask ourselves whether the main impediment to the progress of the law is lack of awareness about the law or lack of familiarity with its goals.

The answer must be both. There is, of course, a tremendous lack of awareness about the law, but there are also those who are aware of it but are reluctant to

RTI law, the latter is most easily accessible and readily available to everybody.

We believe that large numbers of our socially and politically conscious compatriots, who are always prepared to stand up for political accountability of the powers that be, would begin using the law in larger numbers if they are familiarised about its inherent power to foster change, decrease abuse of power and contribute to accountable governance. It is not an easy task but not impossible either. We have already seen some of them resorting to the law in recent times with good results. Imagine the likely impact if more of our teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers, journalists and political workers were to use the law to address governance issues relating to their areas of concern! To advance the goal, RTI workers

both the demand and supply sides to be engaged in a constructive manner.

As they see more engagement of financially and socially powerful individuals, ordinary RTI applicants may feel more confident to apply for "sensitive" information which may upset public officials who are not used to responding to "audacious" requests from ordinary citizens.

We do not want to see RTI in Bangladesh becoming "democratic window dressing" as in some countries. We have made a good beginning by keeping the law alive for ten years, but we need to take it to greater heights, to take it from promise to practice.

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