

Rest in Peace, Dear Aniusuzzaman Sir



FAKRUL ALAM

I was probably on a day in the second week of March that I last saw and heard professor Aniusuzzaman—our Aniusuzzaman sir—speak publicly. As the president of Bangla Academy, he was chairing an event there, as he always did without fail. The speaker was Major Rafiqul Islam, who spoke eloquently and at length about his role in those turbulent days of March 1971 at a critical stage of our Liberation War. Sir looked unwell though and sat still all through the speech. When Major Islam ended his speech, sir spoke briefly and to the point, summing up the importance and relevance of the speech, and thanking the speaker. He was always precise whenever he spoke in such events, but on this occasion he seemed more sparing of words than ever before.

I asked someone from the academy if Aniusuzzaman sir was really unwell. He said he was. The two of us noted then that sir would never shirk his responsibility just because he wasn't feeling hundred percent. But how could anyone there understand how unwell he truly was then? In the weeks that followed, he disappeared from public view. I heard from someone later that he had been hospitalised soon afterward. Of course, the corona pandemic had ended all public events by late March. In the first week of May, we learnt that he had been transferred to CMH; yesterday, I saw him being buried in a live TV broadcast.

Aniusuzzaman sir's death and the way he was being buried saddened me immensely, as it surely did thousands of others. In normal circumstances, his dead body would have been surrounded by countless grieving admirers, many of whom would have

accompanied it all the way to the burial ground. Indeed, when I went to bed the night before, I kept wondering whether I would be able to go to the DU Arts Faculty Building or the Shahid Minar to pay my respects to him there the next morning and be present in his *janaza* at the DU central mosque. How was I to know that it was not merely what is usually dubbed "old age complications" that felled this unique human being, but that nasty and often lethal human assembly constricting virus, Covid-19?

I know it for a fact like thousand others that Aniusuzzaman sir's passing away is an irreplaceable loss for Bangladesh. He was exemplary and worth revering for all sorts of reasons. He was, and I am making this list not necessarily in order of importance, a distinguished academic, a writer and an activist. He had contributed at every bend of the road that led to Bangladesh and afterwards when we as a nation kept going forward, despite the many obstacles in our way. He was our conscience, for when things would take a wrong turn in public life, he would speak up and resort to activism then. To many he was a guardian, to others a dear friend. For my generation and still later generations, he was a much

admired scholar, teacher and a role model, a *guru* in the best sense of the word.

In fact, many were the labels that were applied to him in his lifetime; we can see them circulating now in obituaries and tributes in our newspapers. One label that keeps recurring there is that of a "public intellectual". As Edward Said pointed out in his *Representations of the*



Professor Aniusuzzaman (February 18, 1937 – May 14, 2020). PHOTO: STAR

Aniusuzzaman sir's credentials as a scholar was impeccable; he had done pioneering research on the true origins of Bengali prose, the evolution of Bengali Muslim thought, and the role Bengali women had played in the medieval age.

Intellectual, this is a person who has dedicated himself to scholarship/research but is ready to stand up for national causes, and even embrace the role of an oppositional intellectual who speaks "truth to power" when the need arises. He was thus someone who took an active part in epochal events such as the Language Movement of 1952, the movement to uphold Rabindranath Tagore's place in our culture/literature in the 1960s, the Liberation War itself, the campaign to uphold Liberation War values afterwards, and the programmes undertaken to oppose autocracy and punish the war criminals of 1971 in the 1980s and 1990s. He played a key role in translating the

Bangladeshi Constitution of 1972 into Bengali. Till the end, he believed in it and its four pillars—democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism. He also served diligently in education commissions constituted in the nascent state of Bangladesh. Presiding over the Bangla Academy with exemplary dignity was the last public role this august intellectual played, but I am sure I have omitted many others in what I have said above.

Aniusuzzaman sir's credentials as a scholar was impeccable; he had done pioneering research on the true origins of Bengali prose, the evolution of Bengali Muslim thought, and the role Bengali women had played in the medieval age. He was also himself a writer of lucid Bengali prose, a critic, an essayist, a memoirist, and has even written books for children. He wrote as he spoke—lucidly and precisely. A crusader for Bengali, he also spoke English fluently and wrote in the language lucidly, and was much sought after overseas not only for his knowledge of Bengali culture and wisdom but also his articulate presentations. Indeed, he was a citizen of the world as well as a Bangladeshi, a true cosmopolitan as well as a Bengali.

If I can put all this somewhat differently, Aniusuzzaman sir was, on the one hand, an idealist and a humanist, and on the other, a committed and engaged intellectual. However, he himself said in an excellent longish interview he once gave to Sajjad Sharif of *Prothom Alo*, he liked best being viewed as a teacher. Let me interject here, however, to say that the grief so many of us felt at the news of his death was because he had gone beyond all such labels; he had become for us a symbol of essential Bangladeshi national/cultural values and an internationalism that he embodied in practice as well as in theory. Only someone who hated the ideology that led to Bangladesh could have found him deficient in any way. I had the good fortune of knowing

him quite well. What impressed me about him throughout our encounters was how balanced and elegant a person he was. He listened intently to others and spoke only when appropriate—an exceptional quality in our part of the world. He was unfailingly polite but could be witty on occasions. He was, I would like to add, a scholar-gentleman, or even better, a scholar and a gentle man. It was my good fortune to have him chair many of my book publication ceremonies and preside over numerous committee meetings in which I was a member. I also had the privilege of hearing him speak on countless occasions, at home and abroad.

How do we cope with the loss of this unique Bangladeshi/Bengali/Citizen of the World in this corona-contaminated world? His favourite poet and composer, Rabindranath at least offers us a way out of taking consolation from his passing away. Here is what the bard had written (in my translation) about the cycle of life and death, inconsolable losses and future directions for those who are left behind:

Shesh Nahi Je Shesh Kotha Ke Bolbe

There is no end; who is to say there is one?

What appears a wound becomes a flame

When clouds cluster, downpours follow

Packed ice melts to become a river in full flow

What looks like the end is only seemingly so

Crossing the dark, one sees light at the door

When an old heart breaks, a new one beats

Where life blooms, the harvest has to be death!

Rest in eternal peace, dear Aniusuzzaman sir!

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Time for fashion to practice the sustainability it preaches

RMG NOTES
T HE world is reeling from the aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects are being felt across all strata of society. As stock markets tumble, countries go into effective lockdown and the death toll continues to rise. The pandemic has changed the lives of everyone globally. As the impact of the pandemic spreads, every industry worldwide has been affected with the ramifications of the disease wreaking havoc within the global apparel industry.

Retailers and brands face dwindling customer numbers, store closures and mounting stock inventory. The immediate reaction from these companies has been the cancellation, a scaling back of, or delay to current production orders. This has been further compounded by many companies withholding payment for goods that have been shipped or insisting upon longer payment terms with their manufacturers that were originally agreed when orders were placed.

This has created a perfect storm for apparel manufacturers around the globe. Unable to rely on supplementary business from existing or new customers, as the business has, put simply, evaporated, their cashflow is seriously affected and they are struggling to raise the necessary funds to pay their workers and to cover the purchase of the materials necessary to

generate new orders, or diversify into other product areas. What this perilous state of affairs brings to light is the ethics of companies when dealing with their apparel manufacturing partners. It would appear that, in some cases, the moral compass of companies is askew, as they seem to, put simply, forsake the relationships that have been built with their partners and are prepared

that it will be "business as usual" as our customers are, themselves, facing challenges from all sides, not least on how to protect their own employees. Across the globe, clothing retail stores are being forcibly shut down and customers advised to stay at home, for fear of spreading the virus. Brands and retailers are seeing their sales fall through the floor and, of course, all of us involved in the apparel

the apparel manufacturers themselves. Often the small print of an order is used as the pretext for the cancellation of orders or the delay in payment but these actions are being taken without open dialogue with business partners and with no consideration for the far-reaching consequences that they bring to bear.

This seems to me to be a short-term strategy. The COVID-19 pandemic will be defeated and, when the dust has settled, companies will need the support of their apparel manufacturing partners to cater for the post-virus demand in product.

From an ethical standpoint would it now not be better for companies to engage with their manufacturing partners, negotiate terms that allow both parties to remain functioning and, in effect, be prepared to lose today in order to reap the benefits of an understanding established business relationship when the situation improves?

We are in unchartered territory and entering into a period that threatens the well-being of the whole apparel manufacturing industry and the livelihood of the millions of workers around the world, that rely on our industry to support them. When the COVID-19 crisis is finally averted the industry needs to ensure that the events of recent weeks are not allowed to take place again.

Surely, from an ethical point of view, an order between a brand or retailer with an apparel manufacturer should be seen as a binding contract. As recent events have proven, that does not currently appear to be the case. This is a situation that needs addressing at an international level going forward.

There is no safety net in place for the apparel industry, in particular manufacturers who have to cover fixed costs and are, largely, operating on limited profit margins. Given these circumstances, the ethical approach would be to safeguard the interest of the apparel manufacturers and, more importantly the well-being of their employees. Contracts between manufacturers and their customers should be respected and, when faced with unprecedented circumstances, such as we now face, be allowed to be renegotiated to the satisfaction of both parties.

Whatever the outcome of the COVID-19 catastrophe, it is the industry's moral duty to do whatever is possible to mitigate the damaging effects that a calamity of this scale causes to ensure that the industry is fit for purpose going forward and to safeguard the long-term security of the workers that depend on the industry for their survival.

During these troubling times the global apparel industry needs to be working together to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 virus. There has been much talk across the sector amongst manufacturers and their customers about responsibility, partnership, cooperation and collaboration.

Now, more than ever, is a time when the industry should stand up and start practicing what it has been preaching over the last few years and find a way to overcome the financial dilemma facing manufacturers around the globe.

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Garment workers who have not been paid for months gather to demonstrate in front of their factory at Malibagh in the capital on April 12.

to cut them adrift during these unprecedented times.

I, like many of my peers in the apparel manufacturing sector, appreciate the gravity of the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are not naïve enough to assume

manufacturing process appreciate that our customers cannot trade as normal.

What concerns me is that the approach that appears to have been most commonly adopted by our customers is to minimise their financial burden, instead shifting the onus on to

the apparel manufacturers themselves.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



END OF SRI LANKAN CIVIL WAR

May 17, 2009

The Sri Lankan government defeated the LTTE on this day, ending almost 26 years of fighting between the two sides.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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