

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
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Justice for Dipan at last!

We hope verdicts in six other similar murder cases are delivered soon

WE concur with the observation of the Anti-Terrorism Special Tribunal that the efforts of the banned militant outfit Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), via ambushing and murdering bloggers, writers and publishers, were, in effect, attempts "to muzzle public voice, violate people's right to freedom of expression and destroy the secular harmony of the nation." While handing down capital punishment to eight ABT men on Wednesday for the murder of publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan on October 31, 2015, the court also added, "Those who can kill people for publishing books are the enemy of the state and the society"—a sentiment we wholeheartedly agree with.

The gruesome killings of secular bloggers, writers and LGBT rights activists between 2013 and 2016 shocked the nation's conscience and perhaps woke us up to the true danger posed by intolerant and extreme ideologues. Although six cases filed over the killings are still awaiting verdict or are under trial, we are pleased that the trial in the murder case of Dipan was concluded in 36 working days since the framing of charges against the eight accused on October 13, 2019, though it has been an excruciatingly long wait for Dipan's family since he was murdered. Sadly, a report published by this newspaper on Thursday revealed that the six convicts who were in custody showed next to no remorse in court while listening to their death sentences being read out. Such lack of emotion is another chilling example of what happens to individuals who are brainwashed into believing ideologies that are completely dismissive and hostile towards every other worldview except theirs.

As the chapter of Dipan's murder case draws to a close, we hope the law enforcement agencies are soon able to capture the two other accused who are currently absconding—especially the leader of the team, Sayed Ziaul Haque, who is also an accused in the other murder cases. And we hope to see similar progress being made in the other murder cases, too. Moreover, we would like to see the state itself make greater effort and provide better security that aims to guarantee people's right to freedom of expression and protect the secular harmony of the nation.

Proper data needed for ensuring disability rights

Lack of data heightens risks of exclusion for an already vulnerable people

IT is disheartening that seven years after passing the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, Bangladesh still lags behind many comparable countries in ensuring disability rights. The main reason is, we still do not have proper data about the number of people with disabilities living in the country. The number of people identified in the survey done by the Department of Social Services (DSS) does not reflect the actual figure of the people with disabilities in the country, as experts have pointed out. Although these people are entitled to receive an allowance and should also get priority in accessing various government services and benefits, in reality, a lot of them are being deprived because they are left unidentified.

There are many limitations in the process of registering people with disabilities. What happens now is that they have to go to the local administration offices to register themselves as disabled, which many cannot do due to accessibility, mobility and other issues. Another major problem in identifying these people is that the doctors and social workers who are in charge of registering them are not well-trained to identify different types of disabilities. While physical disability is easy to recognise, there are various types of neurological disorders that are not. As a result, a large number of people are still not registered as disabled. Moreover, corruption often impedes the process of giving allowances to these people. Reportedly, while many disabled people cannot apply for the allowances and other government benefits because they do not have the Golden Citizen Card (given to them after registration) needed for getting the allowance, there are many who do not have any disability but have managed to get the card any way, using political connections.

What the authorities need to do now is update the registration system so that all people with disabilities can be registered without facing any difficulties. Also, identification of disabilities in people should be done by doctors and nurses who have specialised knowledge in the field. The authorities must also work towards changing the corrupt system where a person with actual disability is deprived of their due rights while random people with political affiliations are reaping the benefits of the system. Incorporating the disability data in the 2021 population census, scheduled to be held in October, is also vital. If all these issues are addressed properly, it will make a big difference in the lives of a community that often suffers due to entrenched social prejudices, lack of institutional support and protection and various other problems.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Reopen educational institutions

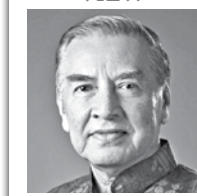
All educational institutions in Bangladesh have been closed for about a year now, due to the pandemic. Despite several announcements to reopen them, there is still no certainty about when that might happen. Such a prolonged closure is certainly unwise and has had many unforeseen consequences for the students already. Since experts have suggested reopening educational institutions in compliance with health regulations, it's time the government reopened them, especially now that the vaccine is finally here.

Mahtab Uddin

Headmaster, Prime Star Academy, Gazipur.

30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DAILY STAR Snapshots from the past, thoughts for the future

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

Rahman, A. Rouf Chowdhury, Shamsur Rahman—gave birth to what we called in our first editorial the "Independent Voice".

Readers in Bangladesh were waiting for a non-partisan, fair, decent (with no screaming headlines), well-designed, morally upright and fiercely independent journalistic voice—at that time, it meant only newspapers—and they saw our potential from the early issues. Within months, we were able to make our credible presence felt. And with that, our march forward began, moderately at first, gathering momentum as time passed. Within the first five years, we reached the top spot and, with the unwavering support of our readers, have remained there for the last 25 years.

The paper was a while in the making. It started in the 80s, with the frantic exchange of letters between SM Ali, based in Kuala Lumpur, and myself, based in Bangkok, both working for Unesco. The plan was that he would retire, in 1988, and I would resign, in 1990, and both of us would return to Bangladesh and launch our paper. The two-year advance presence of Ali Bhai coupled with my frequent visits from Bangkok, sometimes once every month, gave us the chance to finalise investments (with Mahmud Bhai, our founding managing director, acting as the catalyst), finalise our plans for the paper, wrap up major recruitments, rent the premises, and most importantly, get the "declaration"—the official permission to start a newspaper.

Everything worked like clockwork and the timing turned out to be most propitious—the fall of Gen. Ershad's autocracy and restoration of democracy in Bangladesh. Suddenly, all the fetters were gone. Unity of all political parties gave democracy its due supremacy, freedom of expression found its space, and journalism had the magnificent opportunity to acquire its lustre and glory. And we were there to emerge at that precise moment.

It must be mentioned here that the role of journalism during the anti-Ershad movement was exceptional and most laudable. Our journalists acted in unison to dismantle the repressive regime and played a crucial role in bringing back democracy in Bangladesh. It was a proud moment for our journalism. It was also the last time that all journalists would work unitedly, for soon their representative bodies would go their separate ways on partisan lines.

We got a taste of the emerging intense partisanship in our journalistic community in the early days of the paper. Ali Bhai returned to Bangladesh after more than 30 years, and I after 14. Neither of us had any inkling of the partisan divisions that had already taken root during this time which lay hidden due to the all-party unity against autocracy.

As we invited colleagues to join our

THIRTY years ago, the coming together of a regionally famous editor and a near-novice at journalism along with some visionary investors—Azimur Rahman, AS Mahmud, Latifur

paper, it turned out that inadvertently more people in leadership positions were from one side of the political spectrum, creating a deep suspicion in the other—completely unbeknownst to Ali Bhai and me—that we were fronting a partisan venture. Murmuring of this began to trickle into my ears which I conveyed to Ali Bhai, who was as amazed as I was, but couldn't do anything as we were well set on our course. Ali Bhai's overwhelming track record of supporting the liberation movement and my somewhat modest one of being a student activist and a freedom fighter partly neutralised the suspicion, but did not remove it completely.

In 1991, our first observance of August 15, the day Bangabandhu was most brutally assassinated, brought home the external partisanship into our newly-built house. At that time, the general practice was to mention the whole event as an Awami League programme and publish it as a single-column news

by the emotional and psychological impact of this event. As his flight took off, I, as acting editor, began to get resignation letters that amounted to 25 within two days. On reaching Bangkok, Ali Bhai's wife, Nancy Wong Ali, asked me not to convey the news of the resignations to him as it could further complicate his situation, since eye ailments are sensitive to the emotional state of a patient.

As this stage, a crucial decision transformed the paper and set it on a trajectory that would make it truly independent. Instead of recruiting replacements from existing newspapers, we took the bold decision to recruit 35 fresh graduates from various universities—except for a few crucial posts. We gave them intensive training through a trainer brought in from London, Daniel Nelson, and inspired them with the ideals of journalism and also gave them the freedom to write as they wished under a strong editorial control at the news, views

today. The rise of intolerance, which inevitably results from partisanship, is its direct result clouding our mind from distinguishing between what is politically correct and what is objectively so. This is the reality in which *The Daily Star* has to survive on a daily basis.

Looking ahead, unbelievable transformations in the media landscape are taking place. The digital technology has disrupted journalism like never before, posing a deep challenge for the profession, opening up unfathomable opportunities on the one hand and posing threats to our very existence on the other. While digital technology and the Internet have given us a chance to reach readers and viewers like never before, at the same time, the same technology has transformed the way our readers and viewers receive and consume news, obliging us to rethink journalism as we know it. The netizens, as digital citizens are called, have different priorities, tastes and ambitions than our readers of the past.

The change, not necessarily good always, is here and the need for the profession is to adapt to it as quickly as we can while holding onto our core values.

The transformations of our economy, social interaction, education system, labour market and production process that we have seen during the pandemic should be an eye-opener for us. The e-commerce has turned hundreds of thousands into entrepreneurs, especially women who were fettered by tradition and restricted social mobility. People are contributing to overall productivity in ways that never seemed possible, especially in a country like ours. The media must learn from this experience and change and adapt.

Many feel that the days of quality journalism are over. Our view is the exact opposite. The golden days of quality journalism are ahead. Given the tsunami of news and views through the social media, which are distributed without any or little verification, leading to half-truths or outright falsehoods, readers and viewers are most likely to return to authentic sources of news and views like ours. Here lies our future. This gives us the opportunity of reaching out to a whole new world of readers and viewers through digital platforms that we could never have done with only print. Every media institution—print, TV and online—can now extend multi-media service to its audience. And here lies the great opportunity.

This calls for new journalism, discovering new stories to write about, new ways of writing those stories, new ways of reaching our readers and, most importantly, transforming ourselves from a model of supply-side news business into a demand-sensitive news organisation. All this has to be done without compromising our core values of ethical journalism.

The future lies with quality journalism and that is why we feel so confident about our future. We pledge to serve our readers in every way the digital and other futuristic technology permits us and still maintain the old values of authenticity, credibility and quality journalism that served the cause of freedom everywhere and is essential for the democratic society that we aspire to build here.

Mahfuz Anam is Editor and Publisher, *The Daily Star*.



Sheikh Hasina, then leader of the opposition, talks to *The Daily Star's* Founding Editor SM Ali, Executive Editor Mahfuz Anam and other colleagues, in 1992.

PHOTO: STAR ARCHIVE

item, not necessarily in the front page. Very little would be mentioned about Bangabandhu's role in the struggle for our democratic, cultural and language rights, especially his role in gaining our independence. It is hard to imagine the situation at that time.

In contrast to that practice, we published a double-column news item with black borders around Bangabandhu's photo—a well-established practice to show respect—with a staff correspondent's story on his role and the tragedy of his killing along with that of his family.

The external political divide in the journalistic community suddenly turned into an intense internal issue with a strong protest being lodged by a section of our staff, led by a very senior colleague. A big staff meeting ensued in the editor's room where the paper's leadership was accused of being politically biased. Ali Bhai stood firm and rebuked them for their actions. Without going into the details, let me just say that this event led to the resignation of a key figure in the paper, which later led to *en masse* resignations of 25 staff members including heads of most sections. A major shock for any newly established paper.

Ali Bhai, shocked and hurt, flew to Bangkok for an old eye ailment worsened

and editorial levels. It changed everything.

As we played the role of an "Independent Voice" holding "power to account", and being a "watch dog", the party that formed the government in 1991 felt that we must belong to the other side while the party in opposition felt that we were their paper. Thus, we were the "enemy" of the one in power and the favourite of the one in opposition. Then when power reversed in 1996 and we kept on playing the same role, those who once considered us their favourite felt outraged and betrayed (complaining to one of our directors about the editor), while the opposition of the day felt surprised and delighted. As the "Independent Voice", we were at the receiving end of the wrath of both parties, a fate that pursues us till date. The fact that a newspaper can be an "Independent Voice" is not acceptable in our political culture. The idea is, if we criticise one, we must belong to the other.

I recount the above in some detail because both were transformative moments for us, and also because this virus of partisanship—instead of waning as we progressed as a nation—has actually increased, posing, in my view, the most serious threat to the emergence of independent journalism in the country

An exhaustive study of Muslims in Assam



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

published by Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, is one such book. The publication of the 179-page book could not have possibly come at a more opportune time with fresh assembly elections in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam just a couple of months away, setting the stage for playing out of linguistic, ethnic and religious fault lines among the voters. In recent times, the contentious issues of National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have heated up the political cauldron in Assam, especially for its 1.07 crore Muslim residents, who constitute 34.22 percent of the state's total population of 3.12 crore (as per the last census in 2011).

Identity politics in Assam, Zafri's debut book would like us to conclude, began in 1836 when the Assamese language was replaced by Bangla in official communications and in education. Six years down the line, however, Assamese was restored as the official language with the help of American Baptist missionaries and Assamese "visionary" Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. But by that time, a sense of disquiet had already crept into the hearts of those whose mother tongue is Assamese. Over the following decades, what has sharply accentuated that feeling of hurt

were mainly economic backwardness, "geographical seclusion" (of the entire North East India) and "invasive and illegal migration from across the border." All this had had the cumulative effect of giving birth to the movement against "foreigners" (read Bangla-speaking Hindu and Muslim migrants from across the border) from late 1960s to its culmination in 1985 with the signing of the Assam Accord.

The replacing of Assamese as official language and subsequent years of underdevelopment blended into what came to be known as "Axomiya Jatiyotabad" (Assamese nationalism). And this, along with the vote-bank politics of regional and national political parties, made migration from across the border a "volatile issue," as Assam's former police chief and poet Harekrishna Deka is quoted in the book as saying.

The author, who belongs to Dibrugarh, Assam, devotes two long and separate chapters on the controversial NRC and CAA issues, the fierce opposition to which contains strains of Axomiya Jatiyotabad. An interesting observation by Zafri is that "the opposition to CAA in Assam is more about how many get included because of the legislation, and not who are excluded."

Tracing the evolution of Islam and Muslims in Assam, the author tells us that most of the Muslims in the state are converts. "Muslims started making their appearance in Assam in the medieval times", in early 13th century. Delving into historical records, he says a man belonging to Assam's local Mech tribe—who guided Qutubuddin Aibak's military general Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar, popularly known as Bakhtiyar Khalji, to its invasion of Assam (then known as Kamarupa) in 1206 AD—"is believed to be the first person in the area to have embraced

THE IDENTITY QUOTIENT *The Story of the Assamese Muslims*



ZAFRI MUDASSER NOFIL

"The Identity Quotient", by Zafri Mudasser Nofil

Islam."

The book divides the Muslims of Assam into mainly six groups: Deshis of lower Assam, the Goriyas and Moriyas of upper Assam, the Julhas, comprising mainly of tea garden workers brought by the British from outside, the Syeds, and Bangla-speaking Muslims of Barak Valley. They are dealt with in great detail. The book segregates immigrant Muslims, who are termed as "Miyas" in Assam, from the six main groups because most of them are of Bangladeshi origin and live in "char" areas of rivers.

Most importantly, the author proceeds to discuss these different Muslim groups from the point of view that "Muslims of Assam are different from [their co-

religionists] in the rest of the country." To buttress his belief, he says, "Muslims [here] take pride in calling themselves Assamese first." According to the book, "Muslim settlers in Assam, after they had made this land their permanent home, adopted Assamese as their language and accepted local habits and customs that helped them identify themselves as locals." The Muslims of Assam "unhesitatingly fought against the Mughal army that consisted of a good fraction of the followers of Islam, when the latter attempted to invade Assam." The author's assertion that Muslims of Assam are different from Muslims in the rest of India is likely to leave views divided on the extent of Muslims' integration with the social mainstream in other parts of India.

A great value addition to the "The Identity Quotient" are the chapters on Muslim culinary and food habits in Assam, contribution of Muslim writers and singers, the film fraternity in the state and marriage customs among Muslims, which are a combination of Islamic customs and "some traditions common among Assamese Hindus closely entwined." For instance, "sindoor" (vermillion) is still used by Deshi Muslims in seven districts of Assam, albeit symbolically, during marriage, a hangover from Hindu traditions, says the book with empirical evidence. Quoting extensively from historical documents and interviewing leading Muslims in different fields, the expansive focus of the book on different aspects of the community in Assam makes it a must-read for the students and researchers. But the price of 595 Indian rupees could come in the way of the book becoming more easily accessible to a wider audience.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for *The Daily Star*. He writes from New Delhi, India.