

Faiz Ahmed: A visionary labour leader of divided Pakistan

SARAH ANJUM BARI

HISTORY often has a way of challenging our biases towards our present. Perhaps the one thing common to humans of all generations is our steadfast belief that our own time, unlike any other time in the past, is the most developed, the most inspiring. A dip into the archives, into memories and oral histories is an exercise in humility—they remind us of the fact that all that remains to be done can only be achieved with a clear-sighted knowledge of the events of the past.

Faiz Ahmed (born in 1902), who passed away on March 2, 1974, was one such figure in the history of divided Pakistan's labour rights movement whose contributions, over the passage of time, have slipped through the cracks of collective memory. With passion and sharp farsightedness, Faiz Ahmed had begun advocating against capitalist British forces for the rights of the Pakistani working classes from early in his career in law. Between 1950 and 1965, he was the only Bengali Muslim to be elected as a representative of Pakistan at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva, where he first travelled in 1945 to bring global attention to the absence of labour rights for Pakistan's maritime workers.

Born along the coast of Chattogram in the Shaherkhali village of Mirasharai, Ahmed grew up as the only son of Amena Khatun and ship captain Abdul Hakim. He completed his SSC and college in Chattogram

and moved to Kolkata for higher studies after the demise of his mother. Under the guidance of Advocate Badiur Rahman, who would become his father-in-law, Ahmed completed his LLB from Kolkata University and settled in Kolkata to begin practicing law. It was while serving as a lawyer at the Kolkata High Court that he noticed an entire culture of injustices—workers being laid off illegally, their inhumane working conditions, lack of job security, lack of compensation for injured and handicapped workers, and the absence of any legislation to monitor the power dynamics between workers and employers.

The maritime workers of Bengal—labourers who worked in the ships charting both domestic and overseas journeys—had no job security or labour laws to protect their interests at the time. Crewmen who worked on international routes were often forced to serve in war ships, but were not given any compensation for the injuries and damages they suffered. As a result, the maritime workers collectively boycotted British ship owners, who in turn filed cases against the legitimacy of their employment.

Because these patterns were hardly unique to this particular occupation, protests started brewing in the backdrop, drawing in nearly two lakh of the region's motor vehicle workers; labourers from across greater Bengal and Assam formed the East Bengal Union and the All India Seamen's Association, and by 1935, transport workers across the region had joined together to demand labour rights, bringing operations in trade ports to a halt.



Faiz Ahmed (1902-1974)

Soon, the protests began spilling onto other regions.

Faiz Ahmed, who by then had started working for the rights of sailors and crewmen under the guidance of Sher-E-Bangla AK Fazlul Haq and had served as General Secretary of the All India Seamen's Association, represented the naval workers against their British employers in court along with AK Fazlul Haq and Shaheed Suhrawardy. The British ship owners lost the case, and for the first time, naval workers of Bengal won the rights to stable jobs, fixed

wages, and compensation for damage and injuries, bound by a legal framework. After the Partition of India in 1947, Faiz Ahmed was posted in East Pakistan's Narayanganj, a centre of cloth and yarn mills and naval workers' activities, where he established the East Bengal Labour Federation.

In 1950, Ahmed once again travelled to the ILO Convention in Geneva, where he urged the need for land reform in East Pakistan. "Some 90 percent of our people are suffering from the curse of poverty, disease and illiteracy," he stated during his speech on the morning of June 16, 1950, according to a report extracted from the ILO archives. "With the increase in birth rate, the conditions are likely to be worse. If we sincerely believe that poverty in one region is a menace to the peace and prosperity of other regions of the world, then let us [...] employ all our resources in raising the Asian masses, which constitute half the population of the world [...]."

Ahmed advocated for the freedom of trade union workers held up in detention centres, for the representation of workers whose states are hesitant to dispatch delegates to the ILO, and for the minimum wages of agricultural workers who had been rendered vulnerable by the overturning of the feudal system. Asia would no longer be dragged as pawns into any more wars to support the political dreams of the West, Ahmed stated, and the ILO must engage directly with workers' organisations in Asia to safeguard their interests. "The Constitution of the ILO should be amended,

if necessary, so as to achieve the above results," he said.

As Iftekhar Ahmed notes in his PhD dissertation, "Faiz Ahmed: A Man of Vision and International Statesmanship", the ILO and UN responded by dispatching a fact-finding and reconciliation mission, which eventually led to the ratification of the ILO Convention No 87, Freedom of Association, and Convention No 98, the right to collective bargaining.

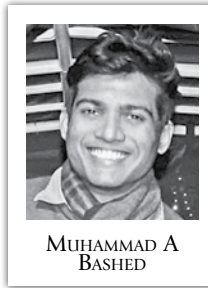
A host of such professional victories—which were deeply personal to Faiz Ahmed—mark his career committed to ensuring the dignity of the workers of his countrymen. A book on his life and work is forthcoming from the Bangla Academy, which is being compiled by the illustrious children he has left behind—his eldest son Golam Mostafa, who was Director of Photography at BTV and currently teaches photography at universities in Dhaka, Farida Hossain, Ekushey Padak-winning poet and novelist, and his younger daughters Hasina Karim and Hameeda Rahman.

That these achievements are not well-remembered now is a testament to the cloying need for more research and historical archives in Bangladesh, which can document not only the larger narratives that we are already familiar with, but these vital but forgotten chapters of our subcontinent's history.

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Expendable lives

How many more have to die in road accidents in Bangladesh before we act?



MUHAMMAD A BASHED

WHEN we look at newspaper reports, what is the most common cause of mortality among Bangladeshis that we find? According to reports published in *The Daily Star*, road accidents killed at least 4,284 people

and injured 9,112 others in 2017, while the figures were 3,412 and 8,572 respectively in 2016. The numbers of accidents and deaths increased by 15.82 percent and 25.56 percent respectively in 2017 compared to 2016.

A recent addition to these casualties is my paternal uncle, who lost his life while trying to cross a busy highway in the middle of the night. There are three worrisome aspects that have surfaced after his demise that are directly relatable to this whole affair of road accidents. The first one is that he did not use an over-bridge, which was available exactly at the spot where the accident had taken place. Secondly, his family did not pursue any judicial process to seek justice and fair compensation for his life. Finally, a week after my uncle's death, a negotiation took place between his family and the transport agency that was found guilty of the fatality. Both of these parties settled for a paltry Taka one lakh in compensation for my uncle's life. These three developments clearly indicate why people are regularly falling prey to sudden deaths on the roads and also, what happens once the deceased is buried and is no longer able to speak for himself.

Every time we leave the house, we are gripped with the insecurity of not knowing whether we will return home safely. As road accidents are happening almost every day and in almost every corner of the country, anything can happen to anyone at any given moment. Even more worrying is the fact that all the initiatives that have been taken by the government so far—like the formulation of the Road Transport Act 2018, observance of several police weeks to make the commuters and the pedestrians aware of traffic rules and the Prime Minister's 17-point directives given in 2018 that include limiting the drive-time of drivers on long-route vehicles—have turned out to be futile in curbing the number of road fatalities. This outright failure from the highest policy-making body indicates

that something is going really wrong in our transport sector. It also prompts us to delve deeper into the underlying factors.

Much has been said about the causes of road accidents, including unfit vehicles, reckless driving, physically and mentally incompetent drivers, unregulated working hours for the drivers, poor traffic management and lack of awareness among the general people about traffic rules. Unless each one is addressed individually, enacting new laws or punishing the drivers will not bring about any long-term changes on our roads. According to data from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), there are 31 lakh vehicles across the country without fitness certificates and 77 percent of the drivers do not hold valid licenses. Although BRTA has 23 training institutes across the country, only 14 of them are currently operating and only one of them is providing some sort of training. There are around 70 lakh drivers and transport workers in our country. If only one training institute is designated to train them and if two-thirds of these workers operate without any approval, the negative and far-reaching impacts of such a situation should be quite obvious to everyone.

The topmost causes for road accidents are speeding and overtaking. These tendencies originate because our transport workers are paid on a contractual basis, not in weekly or monthly wages. Their earnings depend on

how many trips they can make in a single day. As a result, introducing a standard payment system would be a positive first step in controlling the rate of reckless driving. Besides, there are 222 blind spots on our highways where the majority of accidents take place. These points need to be redesigned to prevent road accidents. According to Osman Ali, general secretary of the Bangladesh Road



Only four days ago, four people were killed in Bogura when a bus from Dhaka crushed a CNG-run autorickshaw.

PHOTO: STAR

demands and formed a committee with three ministers, which came up with some suggested changes to the Act. Although these suggestions are yet to be made public, the confusion created as a result means the law is not being fully implemented and many of the provisions—like making all offences under the act non-bailable and fining a worker Taka five lakh for involvement in a road accident—

Ordinance 1983, which used to contain a provision for suing not only the drivers but also the owners of the transport companies. But the new Act removes this right of the victims and replaces it with a mechanism of monetary assistance. The Act also removes the provision to set up a Motor Accidents Claims Tribunal. Chapter 10 of the Road Transport Act replaces a road accident victim's right to sue the vehicle owners for compensation before a tribunal with the right to apply for "financial aid". So while transport owners had a hefty price to pay if their vehicles killed or injured any person under the 1983 ordinance, the 2018 Act grants them total exemption from such a liability.

According to Taqbir Huda, a research specialist at Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), imprisoning a reckless driver and slapping him with an unrealistic fine is not the best way to address the mayhem on our roads, given that reckless drivers are the symptom and not the cause. The tendency to speed among the drivers is the direct result of the way transport owners operate the industry and the working conditions that are imposed on the workers by them. So it is only when these owners are held accountable that the root causes of road accidents can effectively be addressed.

To prevent road accidents from happening, we should firstly focus on redesigning and realigning our highways and local streets according to the needs of the modern transport system. At the same time, we have to cultivate a culture of abiding by the already existing transport rules among the citizens. Practices like keeping earphones plugged in while walking on the road or driving a vehicle, and not using over-bridges while crossing the street, have to be consciously abandoned by the people. Finally, the enactment of laws is not enough; successful implementation of these laws is also necessary. Enforcing the existing laws has to be a top priority for the government. Policy-makers have to create laws keeping in mind the plight of the victims of road accidents and the punishment has to be borne by both the transport workers and the owners of the vehicles. Establishment of the rule of law and strict adherence to our laws have to be ensured by the concerned authorities if we want to truly reduce the amount of bloodshed on our vicious streets.

Muhammad A Bashed is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

The loopholes hidden in the Road Transport Act 2018 need to be discussed too. This Act replaced the Motor Vehicle Ordinance 1983, which used to contain a provision for suing not only the drivers but also the owners of the transport companies. But the new Act removes this right of the victims.

Transport Worker's Federation, only Tk 200 to 500 crore is required to perform this task. Putting all the blame on drivers without correcting the faulty designs of our roads is in no way acceptable.

When renowned filmmaker Tareque Masud along with cinematographer Mishuk Munier and three members of his film production crew were killed in a road accident on the Dhaka-Aricha highway in Manikganj on August 13, 2011, the court sentenced the driver to life imprisonment in 2017. But then, the whole country came to a standstill because of the strikes imposed by transport workers and owners. The same thing happened with the Road Transport Act 2018. When the government tried to enforce the law in November 2019, transport associations once again called strikes, demanding amendments to some sections of the law. In an unfortunate development, the government finally gave in to their

have become wholly ineffective.

The power and influence that is wielded by transport workers pose serious threats to the safety of the millions of commuters who are directly reliant on these people on a daily basis. Their confidence in their impunity basically comes from their ties with socially and politically influential figures. The seven million transport workers act as a significant vote bank and as a source of much-needed muscle power for our political elite. In turn, the latter group functions as a source of security for the workers, who often suffer from a feeling of helplessness resulting from their economic and social positions. If this mutually benefiting syndicate cannot be broken, both the workers and the owners of the transport sector will continue to enjoy impunity against the laws of our land.

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QUOTABLE Quote

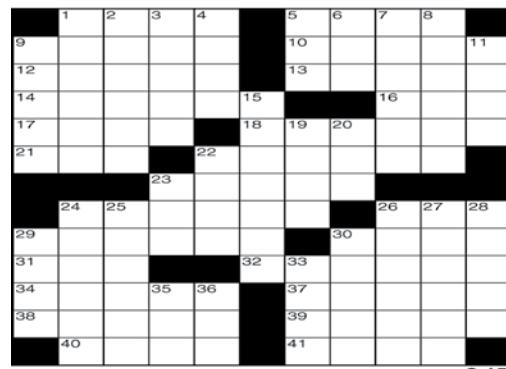


JAMES ALLEN (1864-1912) British writer

You will become as small as your controlling desire, as great as your dominant aspiration.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Open-handed hit
 - 5 Doe or buck
 - 9 Flair
 - 10 Knight's wear
 - 12 Seminar group
 - 13 Augusta's state
 - 14 President Jackson or Johnson
 - 16 Guy's friend
 - 17 Edinburgh native
 - 18 Too
 - 21 Fellows
 - 22 Ready to strike
 - 23 Internet connection
 - 24 Becomes sunny
 - 26 Implore
 - 29 "— the Chief"
 - 30 Give a hoot
- DOWN**
- 1 Posture
 - 2 President Johnson
 - 3 Watchful
 - 4 Soccer legend
 - 5 River blocker
 - 6 Stretch of years
 - 7 Asylum seeker
 - 8 President Reagan
 - 9 Twitch
 - 11 Depend
 - 15 President Wilson
 - 19 Competes
 - 20 Shade tree
 - 22 Varnish layer
 - 23 Singer Torme
 - 24 President Coolidge
 - 25 Deceives
 - 26 President Obama
 - 27 Puts up
 - 28 Gift from parents
 - 29 Toppers
 - 30 Angler's wicker basket
 - 33 Church area
 - 35 Have lunch
 - 36 Number after due



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BETLE BAILEY



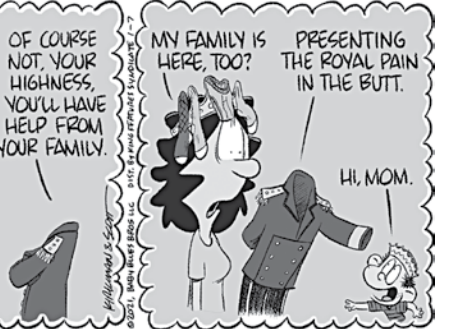
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