

1ST DEATH ANNIVERSARY OF LATIFUR RAHMAN

The man with the magical 'personal touch'

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

HE ran one of the biggest corporate houses in Bangladesh and yet nothing was beyond his "personal touch". There was his special imprint in everything he did, especially in dealing with people, whether important or otherwise. Everyone I have met since Shamim Bhai (Latifur Rahman, the famed founder of the Transcom Group, and a director and leading light of this newspaper) left us, on July 1, 2020, talked about how each and every one of them remembered him for his humane qualities—his compassion, sensitivities, empathy, personal care; for the gestures he made, the words he used or the soft voice in which he said things. His dealings with others, be it in business or in social and personal settings, bore that magical personal touch that made him so special.

He was an epitome of courtesy in official meetings in his office. Tough negotiations with him on business deals were always marked by frankness and dignity. He tried his best to be fair in his dealings and believed firmly that for agreements to last, both between individuals and between institutions, all sides must not only feel but actually emerge as winners.

He held ethics as his core value. Nothing he would do or touch that was not totally transparent and above board. Once, we almost concluded negotiations to buy a private TV channel. We had worked out all the details. However, he changed his mind when he found out that the payment for the satellite fees that the station paid was not through official channels.

He was obsessed with quality. He insisted that the "Made in Bangladesh" tag must stand for dependability and service. This was not only about being ethical but also farsighted. A business would never succeed in the long run unless it ensures the quality of its service or product. Everything else was short-term. Quality, he believed, was the best advertisement. He never stopped warning

against cutting corners. This was against sustainability of a business, he used to say. He strongly believed that in matters of money, the best policy was to be frank and never to end a discussion on vague promises. He would repeat that in negotiations, we Bengalis do not feel comfortable talking about money, especially when negotiating salaries. But it is the money issues that sour most things. "So get it out of the way at the very beginning," he used to advise me.

He was quite insistent on cleanliness. When he launched the Pizza Hut outlets in Dhaka, he kept his staff on their toes for the cleanliness of the premises. "Was everything clean?" would be the question he would ask Shaheen, my wife, every time we ate there. When the Pizza Hut outlets in Bangladesh were ranked the best in the region, he was almost childlike in his happiness. I used to be quite tense during our board meetings at The Daily Star Centre as every nook and corner would attract his attention if not properly clean. So I used to spend nearly as much time supervising the cleaning of the office as I would preparing the papers for the meetings.

On a personal level, whenever one visited his house, he would almost always be waiting in advance in his ground-floor living room overlooking the garden. His attention was unrelenting and his hospitality overwhelming. While saying goodbye, he would invariably come up to the car, insist on opening the car door for every visitor, and then wait until the last wave had passed the point of his vision.

The painstaking preparations that Joyu Bhabhi (Mrs Shahnaz Rahman) and Shamim Bhai would make for the social gatherings they frequently hosted in their house made them elegant, beautiful, and warm, and exemplified his famous personal touch. From asking after every guest—who were from the high and mighty to the very simple and modest—to insisting that you had a taste of every dish that was served, to making sure that you had a generous serving of that calorie-filled irresistible ice cream dessert that Bhabhi would make and to the final coffee or tea, the occasion would see him running non-stop from one guest to another so that everyone would get the full dose of his incomparable personal touch.



Latifur Rahman (1945-2020).

STAR FILE PHOTO

His concern for everyone in his employ was extraordinary, which really showed when any colleague needed medical attention. He made sure that we had the best medical insurance for all staff of *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*. Once, when all options for a *Prothom Alo* photographer were exhausted, he insisted on sending him by air ambulance to Singapore, thus saving his life. He took care of all the expenses.

It was his personal attachment to journalists and their family members that lay behind the introduction, when profitability permitted, of cars to senior staff members of the two papers. It was his idea that the cars should be given not only for official purposes but also for personal and family use. He rightly advised Mati Bhai (Matiur Rahman of *Prothom Alo*) and myself that such a move would add a new sense of pride, a heightened sense of dignity and a deeper feeling of self-worth among all staff and their family members. It was the first time that such a practice was introduced in the print media and it was solely due to Shamim Bhai's thoughtfulness.

And then there were his personal imprints in meetings. He would talk only when his turn came but once he did, he became the guiding spirit of the proceedings. Suddenly, we would find answers to questions that we were desperately searching for. He had a way of arguing his points of view that was powerful, persistent and logical. Frankly, it was difficult

to contradict him, not so much because he was averse to listening to contrary views—in fact, he loved a good bout of debate—but because his own formulations were so rooted in facts, experience and examples—so characteristic of him—that it was difficult to argue otherwise.

One of the extraordinary things about him was his dignified presence. Everything he did or said had the mark of dignity about it. He was generally calm, composed and deliberate in his bearings. As and when he did lose his cool, which was almost never with me, he was quick to apologise and restore the normal tone of things. He was generally serious but practically never tense. On occasions when he was light-hearted, his hearty laughter would enrapture those around him.

His was a definitive presence. He would change the setting of formal meetings or social occasions by just being there. He highly valued his own time and more so that of others. Hence in seminars and other formal settings, one would never see him speaking out of depth. Not that he spent hours studying a subject. He seemed to have an intuitive capacity to grasp the core point of any issue and address it directly, succinctly and eloquently. He was not a great speaker but a very effective one. He knew what he wanted to say and would not hesitate to be repetitive in order to ensure that his point of view was understood.

He was a guiding light for me. I regularly visited him and sought his views on practical problems that the paper faced. Occasionally, I used to feel sad at the ways in which succeeding governments of both hues treated independent journalism generally, and *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo* particularly. His advice was always "patience". "You do your work in an unbiased and ethical manner and don't bother about what the government or the opposition say." He was pragmatic but ethical, generally unperturbed but never unconcerned, and conscious of the impediments he faced but was never intimidated by them. He was patriotic but self-confident enough to admit our shortcomings. He was proud to be a Bangladeshi but never in a chauvinistic manner. He deeply wanted Bangladesh to succeed and celebrated every time it did.

I find it difficult to believe that one year

has passed since he had left us. Ever since we first met in 1988—courtesy Mahmud Bhai (A.S. Mahmud), our founding Managing Director—and began planning for *The Daily Star*, a positive chemistry worked between us which brought us close and transformed our relationship from being mere collaborators to fellow travellers to close associates and finally to being intimate friends. In the later years, he became like an elder brother to me. Throughout this period, my admiration and love for him steadily grew and continued to do so till he breathed his last. Our ultimate meeting took place in his magnificent village home in Cumilla, wherein Joyu Bhabhi's immaculate hospitality and Shamim Bhai's affectionate inquiries and loving personal gestures will remain indelibly etched in my mind.

As we grew closer, I felt more and more that I would not be able to continue running *The Daily Star* even for a day without him. I suppose life is such a positive force that it overcomes all barriers, setbacks, impediments and tragedies, and moves on. We know that time is the greatest healer and the past one year has healed us somewhat, but deep in our hearts, we know that things are not the same.

As we trudge along in his absence, I am conscious of the fact that nothing would disappoint him more than if we gave up. I know that he would want us to strive ever harder on the path that he so meticulously set us on. Nothing would make him happier than to see us courageously and ethically upholding the spirit of free and independent media and celebrating every success—as we did in the past—that Bangladesh achieves in the future.

This we pledge to the spirit of Latifur Rahman, our dear Shamim Bhai, that we will spare no effort to build a future of fair play, honesty and ethical values that he so devotedly strove for.

Postscript: The above tribute does not touch upon his enormous contribution in the development of the two independent papers that he co-founded, but is confined to his personal traits which so profoundly distinguished him from his contemporaries.

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Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain represents humanity and hope

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

SOMETIMES it is a choice made instinctively, at the edge of a precipice, that defines a person's character. Faraaz's ultimate test came in the midst of numbing terror. When the Holey Artisan attackers on July 1, 2016 gave him the option to escape, there was no

question of leaving behind his two childhood friends—Abinta and Tarishi, both young women, both representing to the deranged terrorists what they had been brainwashed to despise. For Faraaz, when it became evident that there was no hope for his friends, the choice was clear: he chose to stay and embrace whatever fate lay before him. He was not one to abandon his core values of friendship, loyalty, and protectiveness. No one would have thought that this shy, lanky 20-year-old—the baby of the family who obsessively supported Manchester United and was an incorrigible prankster to his friends, who was brought up in comfort and luxury, and still a teenager at heart—would be the hero of the hour. No one except his mother Simeen Rahman, whose heart froze when she heard that Bangladeshis were being freed, but foreigners were not. Abinta was a Bangladeshi-born American citizen and Tarishi was Indian. There was no way he would leave them to save himself—this is what she told her elder son Zairaif during the agonising wait that night, words that proved prophetic.

But then again, this was characteristic Faraaz, who, from a very young age, had developed a deep sense of what it meant to do the right thing. Strangely, when you look back into his short life, it is hard to find a blemish, something to make him less flawless than he was. An outstanding student throughout his school years up until

his Junior year at Emory University, Atlanta, US, when his life was so cruelly cut short, a resolute sportsman excelling in athletics and volleyball, a devoted son, an adoring brother, a doting grandchild, nephew, cousin and most remarkably, the most loyal, empathetic friend anyone could have... his track record is unusually squeaky clean. Perhaps it was because his life on earth was destined to be a brief but significant twenty years.

He was a natural leader, elected president of his school's student council and president of the school's executive council when graduating from the American International School in Dhaka. While his teachers found in him the ideal student, his fellow students could unfailingly rely on his camaraderie and kindness, a connection that endured well after graduating high school. In fact, Abinta Kabir and Tarishi Jain were two of his closest friends from school, Abinta also being a fellow Emory student and Tarishi studying at UC Berkeley.

He had unique relationships with each person in his life. His mother, Simeen Rahman, was his and his brother's rock and took the role of parent, mentor, confidante and buddy all rolled into one. Growing up with a strong, professionally successful and loving mother who always made time for her sons, no matter how hectic her work schedule, Faraaz, lovingly called Chotoo, learnt to respect and value women, something that stayed with him till his last breath. He shared a rare friendship with his older brother Zairaif Hossain and, for all those twenty years, rarely were they apart—being roommates throughout their childhood and even when they attended the same university in the US. The two beds in the bedroom the brothers shared in all their growing years are still there even now, with one of the occupants missing, a favourite toy from his childhood on the bed as if waiting for him to return. He had the most loving relationship with his grandparents and both brothers thought of them as their second set



From left: Abinta Kabir, Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain and Tarishi Jain. Faraaz, who refused to leave his friends during the Holey Artisan attack on July 1, 2016, remains a symbol of friendship, loyalty, and protectiveness.

STAR FILE PHOTO

of parents. He always wanted to be like his Nana Bhai, his grandfather Latifur Rahman (founder, chairman and CEO of Transcom Group) who by strange coincidence passed away in 2020 on July 1—the very day his dear Choton (Faraaz) had left him, heartbroken and utterly lost, five years ago.

Those who have been lucky to have known him since he was a little boy will remember him being part of an inseparable group of four—Zairaif, Faraaz, Zoheb and Mikhail—the last two his maternal aunt's sons. Most people thought they were four brothers, always impeccably dressed and with the most endearing manners, who mercilessly teased each other and shared a rare, unbreakable bond. The band of brothers has never been the same in his absence.

To say that he was loved would be an understatement—it was hard not to. That handsome face and dazzling smile was the window to a pure heart that knew how to

give most magnanimously and embrace humility. It is no wonder that even after his passing, there will be thousands who will remember him for his generosity, his love for his country, his family, his friends and the act of courage that caught the world's attention. Faraaz is probably one of the few young men recognised posthumously with such prestigious awards as the Mother Teresa Memorial International Awards for 2016 that honour individuals and organisations promoting peace, equality and social justice, and a unique recognition by the Garden of the Righteous Worldwide on July 15, 2016 through the planting of a tree inside the Italian Embassy in Tunis in honour of Faraaz, for being one of "the righteous fighting fanaticism". PepsiCo, meanwhile, initiated the annual "Faraaz Hossain Courage Award" from 2016, to be awarded each year for twenty years to "recognise acts of exceptional courage by individuals setting examples of empathy

for fellow human beings, to encourage the spirit of bravery among Bangladeshi youth". The Goizueta Business School of Emory University has recognised Faraaz as a graduate of the Class of 2018 (when he would have attained that distinction) and introduced the Faraaz Hossain Core Values Award.

July 1, 2016 will always be one of the darkest chapters of our history when a group of young men swathed in a distorted, demented ideology ruthlessly cut short the lives of 22 people, including 17 foreigners. They included seven Japanese citizens who were working on the Dhaka Metro Rail project, nine Italians and an Indian (Tarishi) who had come back to do an internship in the summer. The attackers conformed to the stereotypes of Muslims hyped up by Islamophobes and reinforced by fellow militants—young delusional men frenzied by hate and blinded by misogynistic views, who misinterpreted Islam as a religion that encouraged violence against anyone who did not conform to their twisted ideology. But it was one young man, Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain, who changed the narrative of this oft-told story of the young male Muslim terrorist. A practicing Muslim who had performed Umrah several times and could have saved himself by reciting a few verses from the Quran as he had learnt from childhood, he chose love over hatred, inclusion over discrimination and courage over cowardice, displaying what he believed a true believer of the faith is supposed to be.

The militants left behind only grief, terror and devastation. Faraaz, in those seconds before death, left behind for the world an example of what youth is meant to be—a beacon of fearlessness, humanity and hope. While we mourn with his family for the excruciating loss of his life, we cannot help but share their pride in the sheer tenacity with which he proved to be such a rare and exemplary human being.

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QUOTABLE Quote

OPRAH WINFREY (1954-) American talk show host

When you undervalue what you do, the world will undervalue who you are.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Cook's creation
- 5 Some singers
- 10 Like draft beer
- 12 Baseball's Joe
- 13 Tennis star
- Osaka
- 14 Market action
- 15 Lennon's love
- 16 Driving aid
- 18 Station worker
- 20 Pizzeria buy
- 21 Aware of
- 23 Conclusion
- 24 Meyers of late night TV
- 26 Rogues
- 28 Cat breed
- 29 Opposed to
- 31 Hydrocarbon suffix

DOWN

- 1 Campaign supporter
- 2 Ludicrous
- 3 Got up
- 4 Sandwich meat
- 5 "– girl!"
- 6 Parliament
- 32 Unde-served accusation
- 36 Auto racer's warmup
- 39 Yale rooster
- 40 Piano piece
- 41 Bolshevik leader
- 43 Away from the office
- 44 Put up
- 45 Grove makeup
- 46 Really impresses
- 7 Walked heavily
- 8 Predestines
- 9 Oozed
- 11 Voracious fish
- 17 Make a choice
- 19 Barracks bed
- 22 Multiply by eight
- 24 Capitol worker
- 25 Carry out
- 27 Objective
- 28 Be contrite
- 30 Court org.
- 33 Make fresh
- 34 Wonderland visitor
- 35 Pub orders
- 37 Falco of TV
- 38 Eye part
- 42 Pitcher's number

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TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

TRIPPOD IDLE
 IODINE REAR
 STANCE OLGA
 GEMINI
 TADS MOCHA
 OLE SPANIEL
 PAL TAG OAT
 IMITATE UVA
 CORAL USER
 INK SIN
 AGOG ARCANINE
 PAUL CALLON
 ELSE KNEADS

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

I CAN'T GET ONLINE
 THERE MUST BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE WI-FI
 A NEW EXCUSE TO TAKE THE DAY OFF

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

THE SHOW IS CALLED "SPACE MAGGOTS," WHICH IS BASICALLY WHAT IT'S ABOUT.
 TELL ME MORE.
 ...AND THEY END UP FEEDING ON ASTRONAUT GUTS, WHICH EXPLAINS ALL THE EMPTY SPACE SUITS FLOATING AROUND IN SPACE.
 OKAY THANKS.
 MOM IS ACTUALLY INTERESTED IN "SPACE MAGGOTS"?
 NOW IT JUST HELPS HER TO STOP SNACKING.