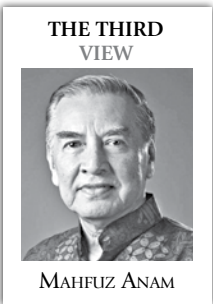


The front pages of the Daily Ittefaq covering the last days of the 1971 Liberation War, from the publication "Front Pages 1953-1972"

PHOTO: STAR

History within Covers

The Daily Ittefaq's publication of "Front Pages 1953-1972"



MAHFUZ ANAM

THE THIRD VIEW

THE contribution of the *Daily Ittefaq* to the formation of our nationhood is well-known. Its editor-publisher, Tofazzal Hossain Manik Miah, remains an icon of journalism in this part of the world, and a source of inspiration and pride for those of us who have tried to follow in his footsteps. From its very inception to the very beginning of our Liberation War, the *Daily Ittefaq* was relentless in putting forward the rightful demands of the people of the eastern wing of Pakistan, and exposing the discriminatory policies of its leadership.

This paper has published, in the 50th year of Bangladesh, a commemorative issue titled "Dainik Ittefaq Front Pages 1953-1972." It brings together the front pages of the daily in chronological order, literally bringing alive those eventful days starting from the Language Movement to the beginning of our War of Independence. This is a first for any newspaper in the country, and provides an absorbing reading for students of history, politics, social science, and especially journalism. This initiative can be considered a milestone in Bangladesh's journalism.

Reading history is one thing, but seeing it unfold through the front pages of a newspaper published at that time, on a day-by-day basis, is something quite different. Each day comes with its own focus and tells the story, not knowing what the very next day holds. When read with the benefit of hindsight, each of these front pages acquires a special meaning and helps the readers to analyse those events with a fresh perspective. It becomes more exciting as the period that the paper covered deals with some of the crucial developments of our formative years, and widens the canvas of our understanding of the genesis of our war.

The paper started as a weekly on August 15, 1949, with Maulana Bhashani as its chairman and Yaar Mohammad Khan as its publisher. Manik Miah was the real worker behind the scenes, and formally took over in August 1951. It was turned into a daily in 1953 with the active support and encouragement of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. This was done with the Jukta Front (United Front) election of 1954 in mind, according to Anwar Hossain Manju, son of the founder, a long-time editor of the paper, and now the chairman of the Ittefaq Group of Publications, who, in his introduction, says that "...four iconic men, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, and Tofazzal Hossain Manik Miah" moulded the ideological basis of *Ittefaq*, which devoted itself to the cause of the Bangla-speaking people of East Pakistan from the very first day that it started publication.

In the newly formed state of Pakistan, its founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah, during his first and only visit to the eastern wing, arrogantly declared that "...Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the national language of Pakistan," foolishly and blatantly ignoring the mother tongue of 56 percent of the country's population. Given such an attitude

to what was a basic, fundamental, and life-and-death issue, one can easily imagine what priority and seriousness was given to the other concerns of the people of the eastern wing. Thus, the need for a voice of the people of East Bengal (it was still called so) was a dire one. The weekly and later daily *Ittefaq* tried to fill that void with courage, consistency, determination, and professionalism and—it must be pointed out—with extremely meagre resources.

The formation of the Awami Muslim League, later renamed Awami League, and its meteoric rise in popularity made the transformation of the weekly into a daily inevitable, as well as an urgent necessity.

The inaugural issue of the daily, dated Thursday, December 24, 1953, consisting of four pages, starts with an eight-column heading "Gonobikkhobher mukhey Muslim



Tofazzal Hossain Manik Miah (1911-1969)

League daler nabhishtwush" (Muslim League party asphyxiates in the face of mass protest—translation ours). In addition, there is one story of how people were booing and throwing rotten eggs at Muslim League leaders on an election campaign, another one on how workers and leaders from the Muslim League were deserting it. This report was sourced from Faridpur, Barishal, Sylhet, Chandpur, Manikganj, Khulna, Kushtia, Bogura, Tangail, Pabna, Cumilla, and Jashore—an impressive reach, given the period and the paper's resource constraints. There were two foreign news items, one titled "Struggle of the Viet Minh" and the second titled "Postal and airline strike in France." There were two advertisements, one of "Shool Sudha," an aid for digestion, and another of

"Milko," promoting dairy products. The daily cover price was 10 paise.

The sweeping victory of the Jukta Front in the 1954 provincial election—led by the three stalwarts of Pakistan movement, Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq, Maulana Bhashani, and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, and consisting of Awami Muslim League, Krishak Praja Party, Ganatantrik Dal and Nizam-e-Islam—was a momentous event. The Front won 223 seats in a 309-seat assembly, where the ruling Muslim League got only nine seats. Of equal embarrassment was the defeat of the veteran Muslim League leader, Nurul Amin, the incumbent chief minister of the East Pakistan, in the hands of the 27-year-old student leader Khaleque Nawaz Khan. This devastating defeat spelled the death of the Muslim League, the party which was born in Dhaka in 1906 and which spearheaded the



PHOTO: COLLECTED

birth of Pakistan. It never recovered from this defeat. Very seldom in history has a party that gives birth to a new country been buried in its own soil within seven years of its creation. The Awami Muslim League emerged as the largest party of the coalition with 143 seats, foreshadowing its magnificent and historic future.

The political message from this electoral triumph was lost on the Pakistani leadership who—ignoring the people's verdict, as they would so many times in the coming days—dismissed the provincial government formed by the Front and led by AK Fazlul Huq. Then Pakistan President Ghulam Mohammed dismissed the Jukta Front government, accusing Fazlul Huq—the man who tabled the Lahore Resolution in 1940—of

attempting secession. This can be considered as a key turning point in Pakistan's history. Three things become clear here: the Pakistani leaders' intrinsic disrespect for people's will, disdain for the opinion of the Bengalees, and suspicion about the motives of the leaders from East Bengal.

A vital outcome of the Jukta Front victory was the popularisation of the 21-Point Programme of the Front and its acceptance by the mass. The massive election victory on the basis of this programme, popularly called "Ekush Dafa," established—for the first time and unequivocally so—the demand for provincial autonomy as the foremost demand of the people of East Pakistan. This first-time articulation, in such a compact and easy-to-read format, helped to reach the masses and get their endorsement all across the province.

Ittefaq's role in the election, in popularising the 21-Point Programme, taking the message of the Jukta Front leaders to the masses and making the ordinary people aware of the discriminatory nature of the Pakistan state, was extraordinary. This established the *Ittefaq* as the authentic voice of the Bengalees of East Pakistan, and its editor as a serious, insightful, and powerful journalistic voice in the whole of Pakistan.

Manik Miah's clarity of vision, his powerful articulation, and his ability to communicate with his readers and the public beyond has proven to be unmatched in journalism till date. It also brought a new prestige to the profession and established press freedom as an integral part of the democratic right of the people. Probably due to archival constraints—it has to be mentioned here that the *Ittefaq's* entire building, with all its printing and other machinery and archival material, was burnt down on the night of March 25, 1971, when the genocide began—the "Front Pages 1953-1972" jumps from the paper's inaugural issue to 1956. In fact, not all front pages of every issue are there in this publication. Such gaps are quite significant.

The military takeover by General Ayub Khan, and the simultaneous arrest of most of the leading political figures of the Front, including then-young Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Abul Mansur Ahmad, Manik Miah and many others, killed the prospect of a democratic Pakistan—and with it the possibility of Bengalees getting a fair share of Pakistan's development. East Pakistan obviously resisted Ayub's rule far more vigorously than the western wing, and the anti-martial law movement gradually took a very strong hold in East Pakistan, mostly led by the students.

The coverage of the launch of the Six-Point Programme by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Agartala conspiracy case and its subsequent withdrawal in the face of mass movement, the demise of Ayub Khan and the return of martial law under General Yahya Khan, the 1970 election and the beginning of our Liberation War—in reporting all these events, it was always *Ittefaq* whose bold and fearless coverage, courageous editorials, and insightful post-edits truly made it a people's paper. The political column of Manik Miah, "Rajnoitik Mancho" (Political Stage), became the reference point of all political discussions. His language was punchy and highly effective in making his points, and had a magical ability to convey his thoughts to his readers.

The role of *Ittefaq* during the martial

law regime of General Ayub Khan and our subsequent journey towards independence was brave, consistent, and professional. With great wisdom and maturity, Manik Miah continued, till his last day, to promote the cause of provincial autonomy and the rights of the Bengalees, carefully navigating through the pitfalls that independent journalism suffers in times of military rule and quasi-military rule. He was arrested again in 1962, when protests spread throughout Pakistan at the arrest of Shaheed Suhrawardy. For supporting the Six-Point Programme, he was arrested once more in 1966. After 10 months of incarceration, he was released as his health deteriorated. He never fully recovered, and left on his eternal journey on June 1, 1969, while on a work-related trip to Rawalpindi. He was only 58.

A natural question for the moment is: Can *Ittefaq's* brand of critical, questioning, challenging and dissenting journalism of the 50s and 60s be replicated today? Is such journalism relevant? Does Bangladesh need such journalism? Isn't dissension an inseparable part of democracy, making it almost two sides of the same coin, as if one cannot exist without the other? The *Ittefaq* spoke of the deprivation of the people of East Pakistan, their exploitation, the rising inequality between the provinces, and the rising poverty of the people—especially the Bengalees. The Pakistan government failed to see the merit of *Ittefaq's* message and thus harmed and weakened themselves. Imagine for a minute that *Ittefaq* had been taken seriously for the truth it represented, and not denigrated for the flaws in the economy that it revealed, the disparity and income gap that it repeatedly warned against. Would that not have helped the rulers of the day in building a better country?

The *Ittefaq* found a people in chains, and participated in the process of their own liberation. Today's journalists find a people liberated, but enchained by corruption, misuse of the law, cronyism, and waste and abuse of power. Can the process of nation-building make any headway without fairness and justice? Can society be creative without contestation of ideas? If democracy is our goal, then how can we achieve that without allowing dissension?

So, the *Ittefaq* of the past has a lot to teach the journalists of the present.

Postscript

I would like to congratulate Tareen Hossain, the young and dynamic executive director and publisher of this legacy newspaper, not so much for the uniqueness of the idea (as it has been done elsewhere), but for the courage, energy, and efficiency in delivering such a quality publication. Conceptualising the project appears to me to have been an enormous challenge, which she and her team dexterously accomplished. The period covered is so rich in history and so vital for the nation to remember that the decision about which front pages to include and which ones to leave out must have been a heart-wrenching one. This publication is a seminal contribution to the world of newspapers in Bangladesh, and other publications should seriously consider emulating this superb example. Team *Ittefaq* deserves our heartiest congratulations.

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