

REMEMBERING LATIFUR RAHMAN

A fighter for independent journalism



Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZ ANAM

I cannot yet fully reconcile with the fact that Latifur Rahman, Shamim Bhai to us all, is no longer among us. He seemed so much in the driving seat of his affairs just prior to his illness – so aware of what was going on, so surefooted about the plans he was making, and so acutely conscious of the implications of the changes that were engulfing the world. Above everything else, he was so proud of the strides that Bangladesh was making, and confident about its bright future. He used to say to me, “As Bangladesh advances and its economy becomes stronger and bigger, the future of *The Daily Star* would also grow and expand. Just make sure that you hold your position as the biggest and most trusted newspaper. The country will always need a quality English language daily. If you can maintain your quality and increase the paper’s credibility, then your future is assured.” His belief encouraged us all, especially me, and doubled my energy to drive on.

Clear thinking about *The Daily Star*, unshakeable faith in our economic growth, and supreme pride about his country were the hallmarks of Latifur Rahman, our founder director. He was boastful of the fact that he never invested even one taka abroad and that everything he did was in Bangladesh and for Bangladesh. He would never tire of saying that all of his children had studied abroad, but none of them stayed back and tried to become the citizen of another country. He would also refer to his grandchildren who were studying in the US at that time and say, “I am sure they would all return to serve the country”. Little did he know that his favourite one – Faraaz – would serve his country in the most unique but tragic way, bring pride to him, to his family, and to the people of this country with his courage and sacrifice in standing up to the most brutal of killers. Though his pride for Faraaz’s action knew no bounds, yet the pain of the latter becoming a victim of a most vicious act of terrorism was too much for him to bear as a loving and doting grandfather.

Though he tried to carry on with a brave face, he was gradually being eaten away from the inside by this grief, which to most of us seemed insurmountable. Yet he carried on, too proud to show his wound, too committed to work to take time off, and too devoted to his family to show any sign of weakness, lest the rest of the family feel weakened. He had to be the source of courage and strength not only for his family, but for everyone who worked with him – alas, at a great emotional cost to himself.

The more I think of him, the more I realise how fundamental were his contributions to this paper. In a country of family-owned newspapers and in a tradition of the owners running their paper like personal fiefdoms, *The Daily*

*Star* was the first to introduce a corporate culture in running a newspaper. The existence of a Board of Directors was unknown in the newspaper world, and if known, it was most likely only on paper. Ours was a functional board, led by our founding chair, Azimur Rahman, from the very start – strict on finances, and hands off on journalism. In the last 29 years of this paper (the period of my editorship), I never received a single phone call or faced any question in the board meetings as to why, as the editor, I took a particular editorial position on any issue, however sensitive or politically volatile. This was *The Daily Star*’s board, of which Latifur Rahman was the most active, lively, knowledgeable, and passionate guide. Once a close friend of his complained about the paper not taking any strong editorial position against the government of the day. His reply was, “I trust the editor fully. When the time comes, he will take the most appropriate position.” As and when the paper did, Latifur Rahman called him and reminded him of their earlier conversation. I was told this by the friend concerned. That was the respect, trust, and dignity with which he and the whole board dealt with the editor of the paper.

To me, Latifur Rahman was the most ardent and active supporter of the concept of press freedom. Though a lifelong businessman, he had an intuitive understanding of the value of “freedom of expression”, “multiplicity of views”, and “independent journalism” in ensuring good governance, transparency, accountability, and above all, in establishing democracy and people’s rights.

For him, “debates” were at the centre of the intellectual development of a nation, and he wanted very much for *The Daily Star* to be the “debating” platform for all sorts of ideas and programmes on social and political issues. In-depth analysis of policies and threadbare discussion on them were fundamental responsibilities of newspapers, he used to say.

One idea he was firmly and consistently averse to was military dictatorship or its involvement in the running of the government. He thought Pakistan’s plight was singularly due to its military’s role, and he was determined that the same shouldn’t happen in independent Bangladesh.

On his second death anniversary, we in *The Daily Star* remember him for his contribution in establishing this newspaper, for his uncompromising stance on the freedom of the press, and for his firm conviction that democracy, with all its flaws, was the best form of government for this country. But above all, we remember him for his faith in Bangladesh, and his personal and institutional contribution towards its prosperity.

To us, he exemplified patriotism.



Syed Manzur Elahi is Chairman of Apex Group, and former president of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) and Bangladesh Employers Federation.

SYED MANZUR ELAHI

MY connection with Latifur Rahman (Shamim) goes back to pre-partition times when both our families lived in Calcutta (Kolkata), though we never actually met then. It was after the Liberation War that I first met Shamim and in the 80s became close when we worked together as members of the executive committee of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI). I found him to be very sincere and serious, always immaculately dressed. He never lost his temper, even during heated arguments in meetings,

Bangladesh. In conversations regarding Bangladesh, he passionately defended his country.

He was reasonable and always used logic in his arguments – he never tried to force his ideas on anyone. When it came to business policies, especially after the budget announcements when the chamber executive committee would meet, his inputs were very clear and practical. Whenever we represented the Chamber to the government, he made it a point not to talk about issues affecting his own business. Some people would do that but Shamim always brought forward issues that affected the industry as a whole. This was the correct attitude to have. He never took advantage of his position. In short, he was always fair in his dealings with everybody.

We also used to go on medical trips together to Singapore where he introduced me to some of his doctors. On those trips, I saw how much the doctors respected him.



Latifur Rahman

which was truly impressive. We also started to meet socially at each other’s houses and though he was around three years younger, we became the best of friends.

His wife Joyu and my wife Niloufer also became very close. We became closer during our official foreign trips mainly on MCCI and International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) delegations together – at least three times a year. During those trips to cities like London, after our work was done, we would go to the theatre and eat at restaurants. Often, Mahbubur Rahman would be with us. Shamim’s giving nature would come out during those trips and he would never let anyone else foot the bill. He knew which were my favourite restaurants and would take me there, going so far as to go there personally beforehand to make a reservation.

What really struck me about Shamim was the courage of his convictions. He would steadfastly defend the principles and values he believed in. His patriotism was deep-rooted – he truly believed in

In fact, wherever he went, he commanded a lot of respect from people. People immediately took to him; they liked him.

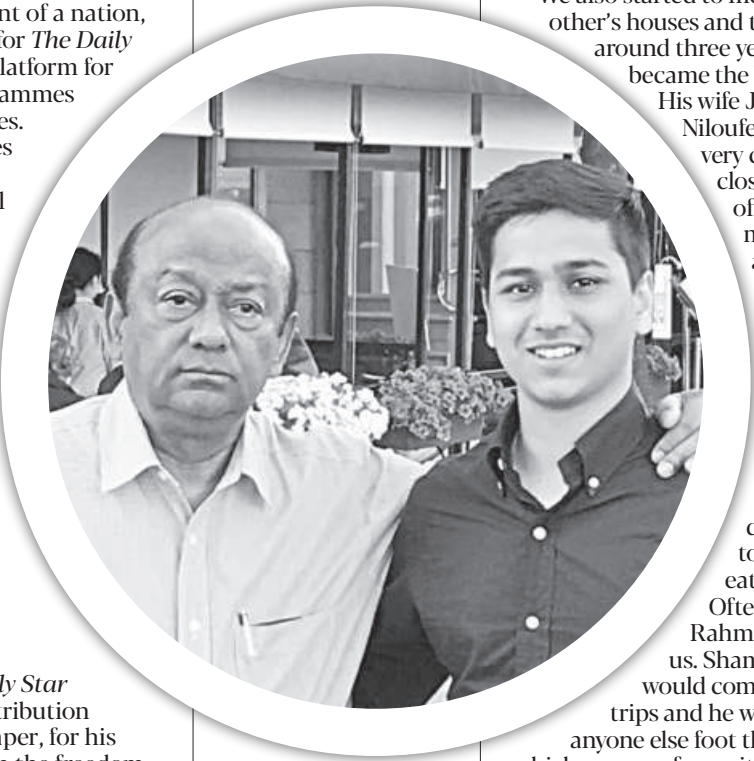
Of course, he was great company, fun-loving, and such a good sport. We engaged in a lot of leg-pulling – all in good fun. We accepted each other for what we were; there were no inhibitions. It’s difficult to find a friend so sincere, one who doesn’t expect anything from you but loves to give so generously.

He was also a good father and I could see how his children and grandchildren doted on him as he, too, doted on them.

The tragedies he faced were immense. He suffered acutely when he lost his daughter and later his grandson but there was very little public display of grief. His stoicism and mental strength were admirable.

Another great trait of Latifur Rahman was his honesty – he was always very diligent about paying taxes and VAT; he set very high standards not only for his personal life but for his companies. He was an ethical businessman. As a leader he took charge but also believed in consensus. He was a great listener and did not browbeat anyone to make them agree to his point of view. Instead, he would hear out their views patiently and then present his counterargument.

It pains me that I could not see him during his last days. He had gone to his ancestral home and it was during the Covid pandemic so I couldn’t go. I miss his company – he was such a good man and a precious friend. It’s very hard to find anyone equal to his level.



Latifur Rahman with his grandson Faraaz.

A legacy of integrity



Parveen Mahmud is Chairperson, Under Privileged Children’s Educational Programs (UCEP), Bangladesh.

PARVEEN MAHMUD

TWO years ago today, we lost Mr Latifur Rahman. He was a man of immense integrity and determination. He was an ethical entrepreneur, a champion of the free media, and a family man.

An entrepreneur is someone who has a vision for something and who wants to create. Mr Rahman was a great example of that. He lost everything in 1971, but built up the Transcom Group from scratch, and took it to the pinnacle of success. He was a true leader who set a new standard for businesses. He received the “Oslo Business for Peace Award” from the Business for Peace Foundation, Oslo, in 2012, as a mark of distinction for his outstanding contribution to business ethics and social responsibility.

I consider myself privileged to have had the opportunity to work with Mr Rahman, and to have served with him on a few boards: Linde Bangladesh, ICC

Bangladesh, Brac, and Syeda Anjuman Ara Girl’s School, Chauddagram, Cumilla. I had seen him in Brac when Sir Fazle Abed was thinking of its governance structure and succession – in spite of his ill-health, he tried to do his best. He was a trusted friend and contributed immensely to Brac.

There was so much one could learn from him. He never spoke ill of others. He had a firm and positive mind, and a caring nature that made him into an icon in the business world. His personal traits made him a great person. I always appreciated his mental strength, of how he managed to deal with the challenges of business, and how he faced the tragedies of life with dignity and fortitude. He remained strong through the harrowing experience of losing his youngest daughter Shazneen in 1998, and then his grandson Faraaz in the Holey Artisan terrorists attack in 2016, whose death anniversary coincides with his own.

He has set a remarkable standard for all media owners and for the entire business community. He carried his remarkable achievements with a great degree of anonymity and modesty in a world full of arrogance. He was a very special human being, who left an extremely challenging legacy for his heirs – a legacy of integrity. Today, we remember him with pride.

A true patriot



Mahbub ur Rahman is CEO, HSBC Bangladesh

MAHUBUB UR RAHMAN

LATIFUR Rahman, or “Shamim bhai” as we knew him, is no longer with us today. In his absence, the business community in Bangladesh will never be the same again. His guidance and cool temperament will be greatly missed.

It is obvious that such a personality would leave a legacy – a legacy of establishing a world class business, of endurance, and of doing the right thing. Besides being a successful businessperson, he was a man whom I grew to admire for the remarkable human being that he was – strong in his leadership, unwavering in his values, and above all, gracious, respectful, and inclusive of everyone.

Despite his vast contribution to the business community in Bangladesh, he was always an internationalist to the core. He started his business selling tea to European traders, became the sole importer and distributor of a Global FMCG, and drove the first Bangladeshi

acquisition of a multinational company when he established Eskayef. He was deeply focused on establishing corporate governance, maintaining financial control, and empowering people to take decisions. His thought process was always ahead of his time.

I was fortunate to be present at the Taj Lands End in Mumbai when he became the first non-Indian to receive the “SAARC Outstanding Leader” award.

He had a profound sense of patriotism and a strong commitment to the country. He always believed in the growth story of Bangladesh and its immense economic potential. He was a realist in many sense, but an optimist when it came to Bangladesh. His exemplary business conduct has been a recipe for success for many successful business houses in Bangladesh.

The last time I spoke to him over the phone was on the day of the announcement of my appointment as the Chief Executive Officer of HSBC, Bangladesh. He was genuinely delighted and wished me the very best for the future. To this day, I am grateful for the affection he showered me with over the years.

His nickname, Shamim, means “fragrance”. And just like fragrance, he left a pleasant trail wherever he went.