

The attack on Hero Alom and a lost opportunity



Tanim Ahmed
is a dropout journalist who
thinks, freely, comments a lot,
and writes a little.

TANIM AHMED

Popularly known as Hero Alom, Ashraf Hossain Alom made his name as a YouTuber with chronically viral but unashamedly vulgar content. It is not just that his videos are repulsive and distasteful, but they are also blatantly sexist and chauvinistic. What is perhaps most revolting about this viral content creator is his conscious and deliberate attempt to embrace vulgarity to become popular. He tickles the basest desires of an unsophisticated demographic with his titillating videos and secures hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of views. But Hero Alom is fully within his rights to do so, just as this writer is in calling him vulgar. Freedom of speech, thoughts, and expression is a fundamental inalienable right. And, fortunately, one's right to free speech is not subject to the approval of any individual or group. It is guaranteed by law.

This same Hero Alom was running as an MP candidate in last week's by-election to Dhaka-17 constituency. He had gone to a number of polling centres and complained that his polling agents had not been allowed in. This article will continue to refer to him as Hero Alom, for it was not the candidate Ashraf Hossain who was hounded down the streets of Banani like a common criminal when he had been to inspect a polling centre. The

YouTube has been trying to make his mark in politics since 2018 and came quite close to winning a by-election in Bogura in February of this year.

On July 17, Alom had himself gone to inspect one polling centre, at Banani Bidyaniketan, where he was assaulted and made to leave quickly before the situation got out of hand. Then, outside on the streets, a crazed mob of ruling party activists chased him down, sometimes landing flying kicks on his back, sometimes hitting him with sticks, and sometimes simply felling him on the street and pummelling him.

Not that the ruling party activists would be expected to behave kindly with their opponents. Imbibed in a culture of intolerance for dissent, the ruling party cadres appear to view one's desire to contest elections against Awami League very much as an audacious affront – more so from a subaltern YouTuber, if one might call Hero Alom that. But their behaviour towards Hero Alom, their viciousness towards him suggested there was more to it than merely his role of a political opponent. To them, Hero Alom was trying to sneak into the high table at dinner, whereas they would rather he stand in queue on the pavement for table scraps and leftovers. He was little more than a street urchin who was the main challenger of a constituency that was



FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

previously held by one of the most popular actors in Bangladesh's film industry.

It may very well be that Hero Alom is among the cringiest manifestations of free speech, but he still deserves it as much as the finest artists and writers in Bangladesh. It may very well be that Hero Alom provides the best excuse to impose some form of moderation, which will invariably lead to regulation and then to censorship, which is why his right is as sacred as anyone else's. Hero Alom is also a test for the intellectual elite. Their dedication towards and belief in the sanctity of individual

freedoms are best tested when the worst practitioners are censured. A test that we roundly failed when he was picked up for allegedly distorting Rabindra Sangeet. And when he was set upon by a mob last week, we failed to rally around him. Hero Alom may well present a case where one must defend distasteful content for the sake of defending free speech. But our failure to do so points only to our intellectual bankruptcy.

Had it been any other artiste, actor, director, writer, or playwright rooted within Dhaka's urban community, there would be droves of people protesting against this

behaviour of the ruling party cadres. Associations and unions would be foaming at the mouth in protest. Civil society platforms would be up in arms in furious uproar. But Hero Alom rubs them the wrong way. He scoffs at sophistication and shuns artistry, and thus does not meet the approval of the intellectual elite. But that is exactly why his rights deserve to be championed more than others'. Otherwise, it will make for that one instance that is needed as precedence, after which detractors will continue making excuses against free speech, which is already in peril.

Hero Alom's case provides for

another interesting test that surely many will be looking at keenly. There were scores of cameras following him that day, and there must be thousands of photographs from different angles every time he was struck. His assailants did not make any attempt to hide their faces either. So, each one should be easily identifiable. This is probably one case that leaves no doubt about at least half a dozen individuals who, by dint of their actions, make for excellent candidates for the recently declared US visa restrictions. The ruling party as well as the opposition camp will be quite keen to find out whether the US actually follows through with what it has threatened to do. For now, there has not been much noise beyond a joint statement.

As for the Awami League's last chance to demonstrate that they could oversee and the Election Commission's chance to show that it could execute free, fair and inclusive elections and act when necessary, this by-election leaves little doubt that they can't. For argument's sake, if Hero Alom had indeed ended up winning the seat, he would have been an MP for no more than five months anyway, but the ruling party would have come away with a political victory evincing what it has been claiming for long – that it can hold free, fair, and inclusive elections. This needless violence smacks of political short-sightedness that is atypical of the ruling party. Instead, Dhaka-17 will have an MP with just nine percent of votes of the electorate. While it may be sufficient to win a seat, it is certainly not enough to earn the moral right to govern. A right that the ruling regime appears to be clinging on to, rather like clutching at straws.

A pursuer of change

Shuvo Kibria
is a senior journalist and former coordinator of Bishwo Shahitto Kendro.

SHUVO KIBRIA

I knew that Abdullah Abu Sayeed was the founder of Bishwo Shahitto Kendro (BSK). But I didn't get the opportunity to know him personally as he taught at Dhaka College and I studied in a remote, suburban institute. Still, whenever I watched him speak on television, I was mesmerised. He is among a few select individuals in the country who have spoken about eternal values and standards.

After graduating with an engineering degree during the 90s, I started working at the Power Division. Soon afterwards, I realised that I was not ready for a nine-to-five job. I had a single-track mindset; and I always believed my work should mean something. Motivated by that drive, I wrote to three renowned, visionary individuals – Dr Muhammad Yunus, Professor Dr Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, and Professor Abdullah Abu Sayeed – outlining my dream job in those letters.

Only Sayeed Sir responded. He invited me to meet him at the BSK in Dhaka. From then on, I saw him every evening, for two to three hours, for more than a month. Further motivated by him and his work, I quit my job and joined BSK as his deputy in mid-2000, where I worked till 2006. I must say, those were the best years of my life – as well as a transitional period. I tried to spend as much time as possible with Sayeed Sir at BSK, and discovered him to be a multifaceted personality.

I remember one day in particular. We were waiting for him to sign a letter, to be sent to a ministry. Eventually, he came in and we gave him the letter, which was printed on BSK's letterhead. The letter had to be sent to the ministry the next day, so everyone was in a rush. Sayeed Sir read the letter and made some corrections. We placed the corrections and gave him another printout, but he made some more corrections. He looked at the new draft and asked for it to be sent to his house, where he would take a look at it the next day.

We could not send the letter to the ministry the next day either. Even after repeated corrections, we could not get the final signature from Sayeed Sir. At one point, I got a bit annoyed and said, "Sir, if we take so much time to send one letter, we have to stop all other work." In reply, Sir raised his voice a bit and asked, "Whose signature will be on the letter, yours or mine?" I answered, "Yours." Sir replied, "Then it is necessary to be cautious. My image is at stake here. If a single word is wrong in this letter, everyone will laugh and say, 'This is the maker of enlightened individuals (alokito manusher karigor)!' My whole life's efforts will be tarnished within a moment!"

I became dumbfounded. Sir noticed my reaction and signed the letter. Lowering his

voice, he said, "Look, it's about perfection. I know I am nobody. But look at Rabindranath's manuscripts, and you will know what perfection is. He used to make so many corrections in a single write-up!"

This is how concerned Sayeed Sir is about his and BSK's reputation, which is why he has always been cautious about his work, especially

that such committees would eventually not be fruitful. Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury would sometimes attend the meetings. The only exception was Sayeed Sir. He had a lot of enthusiasm and he really hoped for a positive change. Sir used to tell us, "A state is a behemoth. You have to continuously push it for the sake of the people. It is the civil



Professor Abdullah Abu Sayeed

SOURCE: FACEBOOK

that which is linked with the BSK.

Sayeed Sir has been deeply interested in the environmental movement. New initiatives and innovations make him more active. In the past, when he got involved with the environmental movement, it caught the government's attention, especially due to the media coverage of his involvement. He was outspoken against river-grabbing and river pollution. He started speaking about these issues on TV regularly and wrote articles for newspapers and journals. For the first time, it seemed that a civil society movement was being formed, and it also garnered respect from the media. At that time, the government established a high-powered committee to eliminate river-grabbing around Dhaka, and to create a circular riverine way.

As civil society representatives, Professor Sayeed was included in the committee, along with Professor Muzaffar Ahmed and Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury. The BNP was in power then. The committee members included powerful ministers such as Mirza Abbas, Sadeque Hossain Khoka, Lt Col (ret'd) Akbar Hossain, etc. The committee met occasionally, but Professor Muzaffar Ahmed would never join them, because he thought

society's duty to do so."

Once, he entered the meeting a bit later than the stipulated time. Mirza Abbas remarked, "The civil society makes such noise, but no one other than Sayeed *Shahab* attends the meetings." Sir replied with a smile, "Civil society is like a Royal Bengal Tiger. One member is good enough." His witty comment led to roars of laughter.

On another occasion, during an important government meeting, someone commented that Sayeed *Shahab* had worked with the previous regime, too. Sir paused for a while, then replied with a smile, "See, BSK gets nominal help from the government. Thus, I have to participate in meetings and work with whoever forms the government. Can I be blamed for your inability to come to power? Previously, you failed to form the government, and now why are you shifting the blame on me?" As usual, the meeting ended with a lot of laughter.

I have many such experiences and anecdotes regarding Sayeed Sir. Before knowing him, I did not know that one could work with so much love for life, with the dream of awakening the hearts of people. Sayeed Sir continues a most difficult act of making people habituated with

reading books, and keeping that initiative alive and running year after year through new ideas, with an almost meditative attention, for which we should praise him. I believe there are very few individuals in our country who can match Sayeed Sir's tolerance level and his ability to accept criticism with a smiling face. He is an exceptional human being with a childlike simplicity, and a great love for mankind in his heart.

On July 25, Sayeed Sir's birthday, I bestow my humble respect and love towards him. His work, words, writings, resilience, colourful efforts – all these will continue to inspire Bangladesh's youth through different ways and means, for generations to come. Happy birthday, sir! Congratulations, and best wishes to you.

Translated from Bangla by Mohammed Ishtiaque Khan.

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh Directorate General of Food Construction & Maintenance Unit 16, Abdul Gani Road, Dhaka-1000 www.dgfood.gov.bd Invitation for Enlistment (Works) Part A, of Schedule X of the PPR 2008)		
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh		
1.	Ministry/Division	Ministry of Food
2.	Agency	Directorate General of Food
3.	Procuring entity	Director General of Food
4.	Procuring entity district	Dhaka
5.	Invitation for	Enlistment of Contractor
6.	Invitation Ref No.	13.01.0000.140.48.218.23 (Port-1)-314
7.	Date	25/07/2023
KEY INFORMATION		
8.	Procurement method	Limited Tendering Method
PARTICULAR INFORMATION		
9.	Application closing date and time	Date 16/08/2023 Time 4:00pm
10.	Name & address of the office(s)	Address
	- Application form availability	Cashier, Accounts & Finance Division of Directorate General of Food (Room No. 419, 4 th Floor), 16, Abdul Gani Road, Dhaka-1000.
	-Receiving application form	Application will be received in the box kept in the Room No. 511, Construction & Maintenance Unit, Directorate General of Food, 16, Abdul Gani Road, Dhaka from publication date to time and date mentioned in Sl. No. 9.
INFORMATION FOR APPLICANT		
11.	Eligibility of applicant	a. Must have valid trade license. b. Must have TIN and Vat registration certificate c. Must have up-to date bank solvency certificate d. Submission of number of employees & list of equipment as specified in the application form.
12.	Price of application form (Tk)	1,000.00 (One thousand) only (non-refundable)
13.	Enlistment fee (Tk)	5,000.00 (Five thousand) only (Vat applicable).
14.	Enlistment/license book (Tk)	500.00 (Five hundred) only.
PROCURING ENTITY DETAILS		
15.	Name of official inviting application	Abu Bakar Siddique
16.	Designation of official inviting application	Executive Engineer
17.	Address of official inviting application	Directorate General of Food, Construction & Maintenance Unit, 16, Abdul Gani Road, Dhaka-1000.
18.	Contact details of official inviting application	Tel: 02-41050726 E-mail: ee.mu@dgfood.gov.bd
19.	The procuring entity reserves the right to reject all Applications	
20.	Note: In the financial year 2022-23, all the institutions which have submitted their application in view of the enrollment circular called 13.01.0000.140.48.137.22.1000 dated 04/08/2023 may be mentioned in the enrollment circular that they do not need to re-apply.	
GD-1154 Abu Bakar Siddique Executive Engineer Directorate General of Food, Construction & Maintenance Unit		