



PHOTO: COLLECTED

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SILENCING THE CRITIC

The cost of stifling voices in the name of authority

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MAMUNUR RASHID and NAZIFA RAIDAH

Shamim Ashraf, a poet and graphic artist from Mymensingh known for his visually compelling artworks, has found himself embroiled in a conflict that transcends the personal sphere, entering political discourse and putting into question citizens' right to free speech. The nature of his dispute with Md Ekramul Haque Titu, Mymensingh city's former mayor, remains shrouded in ambiguity. Yet, what is clear is Shamim's unwavering commitment to critiquing the operations of the relevant city corporation—a mission he took on not as a detractor but as a vigilant citizen deeply invested in the welfare of his community. Notably, Titu is also the president of the Mymensingh Metropolitan Awami League and a candidate in the city election scheduled on March 9.

Through his posters, Shamim voiced concerns about the Mymensingh City Corporation's seemingly unchecked authority. This led to his arrest under the contentious Section 54 of The Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898 under which a person against whom a reasonable suspicion exists can be arrested without a warrant or an order from a magistrate. The allegation against Shamim was that, through his poster designs, he has conducted a smear campaign against the MCC and the city's recent former mayor Md Ekramul Haque Titu.

The imagery of Shamim speaking from within a prison van, lamenting the loss of his children's right to gaze upon the sky, and the drying up of the Brahmaputra, is poignant and heartrending. His words, "I speak for the people of my region. I speak in poetry. I speak in the voice of beauty. This is my crime," resonate with the power of truth spoken to authority.

The story does not conclude with his arrest. Shamim was released on bail on the afternoon of February 20, after being arrested from his office on the night of February 18. But despite being granted bail by Senior Judicial Magistrate Md Tajul Islam Sohag, the saga continued as the MCC (through administrative officer Kanhan Kumar Nandi) pursued further legal action against Shamim at the Mymensingh Cyber Tribunal on February 20. This relentless pursuit sends a chilling message: criticism of authority will not be tolerated.

Yet, reflecting on our history, the monumental role of Quamrul Hassan's "Ei janowarder hottya korte hobe" ("Annihilate these demons") poster cannot be overstated. This iconic artwork, portraying Yahya Khan as a malevolent figure, became a powerful emblem of resistance and played a pivotal role in garnering international attention to the genocide occurring in Bangladesh during its liberation struggle. But it also begs the question: would we, in today's Bangladesh, have subjected Quamrul Hassan to imprisonment for employing his art to critique the current political culture?

The act of vocal criticism runs deep in our veins and is testament to our forebears who fearlessly raised their voices against tyranny, risking everything for the sake of future generations. Their battles were against a foreign oppressor and were aimed at forging a distinct national identity. The irony in the contemporary landscape is that, despite living under the banner of a "free" state, expressing dissent—even against glaring issues like dilapidated roads, inadequate drainage systems, or the absence of essential public amenities—can potentially endanger one's life.

The stark contrast between our foundational principles and current realities raises a critical question: why does the act of pointing out observable flaws in the work of the government, an act intrinsic to the very DNA of our nationhood, place us in the line of fire? It's a reflection that demands not just contemplation but a collective reevaluation of our commitment to the freedoms which our ancestors fought so valiantly to secure.

Lawyers and human rights activists have rightly identified Shamim Ashraf's ordeal as a stark violation of human rights, signalling a dangerous precedent where the act of criticism becomes an act punishable by law. The response to Shamim's arrest—from the human chains formed by cultural activists to netizens' outcry on social media—showcases the community's resilience and the universal value of free speech. But the very need for such protests highlights the fragility of our rights in the face of oppressive laws.

Global Human Rights Defender Award winner Nur Khan Liton's commentary on the use of cybersecurity laws to hinder free speech hints to a systematic approach to suppress any form of dissent, thereby eroding the foundation of democracy and human rights. Liton mentions that the town of Evansburg in Alberta, Canada has taken a novel approach to embrace criticism by appointing an official "Town Grouch." This role, dedicated to voicing complaints, criticisms, and accusations, embodies the democratic principle that opposing views are essential for societal growth. By formalising dissent via the establishment of this position, Evansburg highlights the importance of contrarian

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perspectives in fostering dialogue, uncovering issues, and stimulating change. Evansburg's unique initiative serves as a reminder of the value of criticism in enhancing transparency, accountability, and community engagement, thus offering a model for how societies can constructively engage with dissenting voices to promote collective improvement.

For the citizens of Bangladesh, the ordeal faced by Shamim Ashraf should be a wake-up call. It underscores the urgent need for vigilance and resistance against any form of censorship. If authorities continue down their current path, they risk creating a society where silence is the norm, and the ability to critique is an anomaly. This is not just about one individual's right to speak; it's about preserving the collective soul of our society.

Salman Rushdie holds the conviction that true freedom of thought is at risk when subjects or ideas are placed beyond the realms of criticism, satire, ridicule, or contempt. We must be able to challenge, question, and even mock ideas to ensure a vibrant and free exchange of thoughts.

If any thought, idea, or state activity cannot be purified through criticism, then the light of progress is blocked. The question for authorities now is: in this era of unquestioning, criticism-free, and continuous praise and obedience, are we walking down the path towards another dark age?

The ravages of wealth

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IMRAN JAMAL

The side and back streets of Dhaka's Tejgaon industrial area are a beautiful microcosm of the city, perhaps even the country at large. There are aged banyan trees with rows of rickshaws parked underneath, and almost permanent dwellings made of wood and corrugated metal sheets on the sidewalk, which become flooded after heavy rainfall. Some streets have little shops and a bazaar, others house shiny new buildings featuring contemporary architecture, and showrooms display luxury imported cars. Wandering down some of the streets, it is commonplace to see a car worth crores parked next to rickshaws

luxury 4x4s often waiting next to each other—each costing more than the earning potential of most university graduates.

Moving away from luxury status symbols, everyday costs of living have spiralled over the past two years, with Russia's war with Ukraine cited as the cause of double-digit inflation and falling foreign reserve (which has caused an over 30 percent increase in the exchange rate). Government officials, bankers, business associations, and traders have pinpointed the exchange rate rise as the reason behind inflation. Some, however, have used this as an opportunity to hike prices to artificially create scarcity or have resorted to price-fixing to boost their profit. The impact of this is that working class people are finding it increasingly difficult to eat balanced meals, with some skipping meals altogether.

trader is unnerving. If certain vested interest groups are willing to go as far as murdering someone to ensure their extraordinary profit, there is something horribly wrong with our society's collective list of priorities.

Given the astronomically high cost of living and stagnating wages, it is important to ask where and to whom the country's wealth is being transferred. We saw during the height of the Covid pandemic how the wealthiest individuals got richer. If we had transparent data on the richest individuals in Bangladesh, it would perhaps be reasonable to suspect that those at the top of our society have managed to amass considerable wealth during the last two years of economic turmoil. Based on the data we do have, the top 10 percent had increased their wealth by 40 percent by the end of 2022, which means the wealth disparity in Bangladesh is set to



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PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

which support the livelihoods of millions of people.

The income gap between those chauffeured around in hand-stitched leather seats and those ferrying people is astronomical. A high-end Mercedes-Benz costs between Tk 2 crore and Tk 3 crore and serves almost no purpose other than to showcase how much money the owners have been able to accumulate, either through their work or by incurring debt which they have no intention of repaying. The rickshaws, on the other hand, cost Tk 7,000-Tk 12,000 each, which takes almost a year to pay back and provides for the livelihood of a family, though the three-wheeled vehicle is sneered at.

Bangladesh's wealth inequality keeps getting wider, with data from 2022 further highlighting our slide towards greater income and household expenditure disparity between those with the highest levels of wealth and those living in poverty. This decades-long trend can be more readily understood by walking through the various neighbourhoods of the capital city. The traffic congestion on Gulshan Avenue gives us a glimpse of the grotesque wealth some have been able to accumulate, with multiple

Even though the government has repeatedly attempted to fix the price of basic food commodities, it does not seem to be working. Government officials state that the power of corporate entities in certain markets has grown to such an extent that they can now do whatever they want. The egg market is a prime example of this, as a number of businesses managed to collude to increase the price of eggs overnight with marginal increase to their cost, citing the dollar crisis. For many weeks in 2023, egg prices were out of the reach of many for whom this food was once the only affordable source of protein.

Curiously, at the end of last year, the price for beef fell for the first time in almost two years—something many claimed was a ploy to garner votes before the election and that the price would shoot up again. Interestingly, days after the election, beef prices started creeping up again. In one instance on January 20, a trader in Rajshahi was killed for selling beef at the mandated price. Unscrupulous business practices have long been a part of how people accumulate wealth. But the fact that small-scale traders felt it was worth taking the risk to kill a fellow

grow even wider.

Profiteering in the agribusiness sector is not limited to manipulating the prices of eggs and beef, or something unique to agribusinesses. Special interest groups, usually called syndicates, have become an even greater mainstay in Bangladesh's economic landscape. Ranging from money launderers to bank loan defaulters and train ticket resellers, our economy has become one where the only goal of society is to get rich.

Successive policy interventions have failed to stop the league of bandits, making it harder for people to enjoy even a decent standard of living. As this government starts its new term, let us hope they will put the "awami" back in Awami League. A good place to start would be to take the current policy of deterring the import of luxury goods and extending it to banning the import of luxury high-end vehicles, electronics, and other non-consumption goods. It has taken decades for the country to overcome some of the highest levels of extreme poverty globally. For it to now fall into the trap of becoming one of the most unequal economies in the world would be a devastating downside that we frankly cannot afford.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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- 41 Gorilla, e.g.
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WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS



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