

# Pursuit of profit and our burning cities

Dr Sultan Ahmed is associate director at the Bangladesh Institute of Governance and Management, former secretary of the Power Division, former chairman of Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha, and former director-general of the Department of Environment.

Nafisa Binte Farid Prova is research associate at the Bangladesh Institute of Governance and Management.

SULTAN AHMED and NAFISA BINTE FARID PROVA

Bangladesh is witnessing a frightening surge of fire incidents, affecting densely populated commercial and residential areas. The question arises: are such incidents a result of engineering faults or social negligence? According to the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence (FSCD), there were 27,624 fires countrywide in 2023, which resulted in the death of 102 people and injuries of 281 others. The estimated loss caused by these fires was around Tk 792 crore. The leading causes of these incidents were electric short circuits (35.52 percent), burning cigarettes (17.76 percent), oven-related incidents (15.11 percent), playing with fire (3.34 percent), gas pipeline leakage (2.79 percent), explosion of gas cylinders and boilers (0.45 percent), and firecracker explosions (0.32 percent). Despite the devastating human and economic costs of fire, poor implementation of safety rules has led to an increase in fire incidents over the last few years.

Our buildings are often constructed with a blatant disregard for fire safety. Codes, meant to be the armour against flames, are routinely bypassed or ignored. Inflammable materials are used with reckless abandon, electrical wiring is a chaotic labyrinth, and fire suppression systems are poorly maintained or absent.

The Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) is a crucial document for ensuring fire safety in buildings. However, its implementation remains a significant challenge. According to the BNBC, a high-rise building is any building that is more than 10 storeys or 33 metres high from ground level. These buildings have to be equipped with hydrant and sprinkler systems so water is sprayed automatically if a room's temperature exceeds 62 degrees Celsius. Sprinklers need to be installed every 10 feet. There must be a minimum of two sets of stairs in high-rise buildings with floor areas larger than 500 cubic metres on each level used for assembly, educational, institutional, production, storage, or mixed-use occupancy; and fire exits need to have doors that block out fire and smoke. (To note,

the Dhaka Metropolis Building Construction Rules 2008 allow 10-storey residential buildings to feature only one staircase and exit.)

The BNBC mandates fire-resistant construction, fire detection, and alarm systems, multiple escape means, firefighting equipment, smoke management systems, and regular fire drills and training. However, despite these comprehensive laws, numerous explosions occur due to a lack of accountability and the absence of an implementing authority. The revised National Building Code, 2020 requires an authority to implement it, but no such authority has been established yet.

Several key players, such as Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk), the fire department, and city corporations, have a large portion of the responsibility to address this difficulty. They are tasked with approving building plans, conducting rigorous inspections, identifying and penalising violators, and ensuring compliance with the BNBC. Nonetheless, enforcement is frequently weakened by a culture of seeking benefits and taking shortcuts. Corruption and a lack of manpower often render inspections a mere formality.

But the onus doesn't lie solely with authorities. Building owners, driven by short-term gains, often prioritise cost-cutting over safety. The pursuit of profit often overshadows safety concerns. A lack of basic fire safety features like fire doors, sprinklers, and smoke alarms becomes commonplace, turning buildings into ticking time bombs. The regular maintenance of electrical systems and fire escapes is also frequently neglected. While builders are required to obtain approval from 11 authorities, including the FSCD, many do not. In some cases, building owners even violate safety designs and engage in bribery and corruption to get approval for their plans. From January 2020 to December 2023, firefighters inspected 24,193 buildings and identified 7,801 as having risks. Among these, 1,803 were at high risk.



The Bangladesh National Building Code is a crucial document for ensuring fire safety in buildings. However, its implementation remains a significant challenge. PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

All this aside, users also play a big role in ensuring fire safety. Overloading circuits, improper storage of flammable materials, and a general lack of awareness about fire safety protocols contribute to the risk of fire incidents taking place. Simple acts like ensuring proper disposal of cigarette butts or learning basic fire escape routes can make a life-or-death difference.

The current crisis demands a collaborative effort on multiple fronts to ensure fire safety. Architects and engineers must prioritise fire safety in design by incorporating fire-resistant materials, designated escape routes, and robust fire suppression systems as core elements of the construction process. Authorities such as Rajuk and the FSCD must enforce the BNBC with unwavering rigour, implement stricter approval processes, have the necessary resources and manpower to

conduct thorough inspections and hold violators accountable for non-compliance. This approach will not hinder the progress of infrastructure development. Rather, it will ensure that the infrastructure is safe and sustainable for the city dwellers.

Building owners are obligated to install firefighting equipment and adhere to fire safety regulations. They need to obtain FSCD approval before completing building construction. The building is inspected by the FSCD to ensure that it complies with all fire safety design specifications and houses adequate firefighting equipment. Only then will a No Objection Certificate (NOC) be issued by the FSCD. Owners will be obliged to prioritise safety measures if more stringent laws are implemented and high penalties are imposed for violations of fire safety.

Initiatives to raise public awareness are

essential to ensure fire safety. Citizens can be better equipped to take preventative action and respond to crises by receiving education on best practices for fire safety, appropriate evacuation plans, and responsible management of flammables. If one discovers that certain buildings that are not complying with fire safety standards, they should avoid living or entering those establishments.

This fight requires collective action. Each of us has a role to play, from engineers to educators, enforcers to everyday citizens. Only then can we extinguish the flames that threaten to consume our cities. Let us give fire safety the utmost priority in terms of not only design but also enforcement, education, and social accountability. Let's construct sanctuaries rather than mere buildings. Let our cities become safety nets of security rather than careless pyres.

## A EULOGY FOR SADI MOHAMMAD

# I cry for thee, Sadi

### AN OPEN DIALOGUE

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and works for Change Healthcare, Inc., an information technology company. He also serves as a senior research fellow at the US based International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI).

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

musician is natural. Tagore alluded profusely to these feelings in many of his epic poems, including "Jete nahi dibo," and innumerable songs. Tagore also saw a silver lining around hopelessness: "Achhe dukkho, achhe mrityu, birahodahano laage, tobuo shanti, tobuo anondo, tobuo anonto jaage" ("Despite misery, death and churning of the estranged heart, There is still peace, still joy, and abundant

were planning a fundraising event for flood victims in the country. Sadi's name came up immediately. The community of Boston, the artistic hub of the New England region, is greatly attuned to the cultural crosscurrents of the South Asian subcontinent. The Bangladesh Association of New England (BANE) invited Sadi, Shibli, and Nipa. Sadi's calendar was tight, and he was not planning any tour of the Americas. He had his hands full with Rabi Raag, the institution he was building up from scratch. But he agreed to come. Sadi, Shibli, and Nipa came to Boston, and BANE held a grand show with the three in the City of Quincy.

My early memories of Sadi are very sweet. My eldest khala, my mother's younger sister, was the first to mention that I should meet Sadi, the Tagore singer who ascended to fame immediately after his return from India. Shama, her eldest daughter (an architect and a musician), was taking lessons from Sadi and helping him along with Shibli, Amina Ahmed, and Naima Ali build up Rabi Raag, his signature institution. Sadi had charmed khala with his knowledge, dedication, and passion for Tagore. Salma Choudhury, a professor of Bangla literature at Eden College and a Visva-Bharati graduate, was a lifelong follower of Tagore and spent most of her illustrious career researching his life, poetry, and literature. They were kindred spirits and formed a bond. My family welcomed him into our orbit. "What a magical personality," my khala told me. Her motherly instincts kicked in, and she once said, "He is single. A very eligible bachelor. You may want to look for a suitable partner for him."

Wherever you are, Sadi, you will be missed. By your friends, admirers, students, and, above all, those for whom you were a "life coach." You embraced Tagore and inspired us to do the same. Those who come to Tagore do so from various places. We each have our connections and our spirituality. But once in a while, we are all together.

Dear Sadi, friend, brother, guru: it is spring now, and the tune that comes up frequently is "Rodon bhora e boshonto": "Never seen such a spring, soaked with tears. The crimson colour of palash, O my friend blushes my pain of estrangement."

We'll meet again. Soon, or maybe in a few years. And if there is a harmonium or musical instrument in forever land, we'll sing together again.



My friend Sadi Mohammad, renowned Tagore singer and founder-director of Rabi Raag, passed away on March 13. My first reaction when my friends passed on the news on social media was disbelief. How could that be? Only earlier that morning, I was thinking of calling him because we had discussed the possibility of my taking music lessons from him over Zoom. Why did he leave so soon? Why now? Why hadn't I called him sooner? All these questions kept creeping up as I was filled with grief.

As I recovered from the shock, I drafted these thoughts and took a broader look at his life and legacy. As a music lover and lifelong devotee of Rabindranath Tagore myself, I realised how much Sadi meant to his admirers and his students. Research shows that the impact of a musician's death is deeply personal yet socially under-recognised. The loss of the parasocial relationship with the musician for me is almost comparable to losing a close social contact.

What a loss! I sat there and tried to take it in. Many magical moments flashed through my mind. I don't remember when Sadi and I first met in person; possibly at a family musical soiree at my cousin Shama's apartment in Gulshan, at Shilpakala Academy when my youngest khala—Mustafa Zaman Abbasi—was the director general, or much earlier when I was in Dhaka College and he was a student of Class 5, visiting us with his brother Shanu (my classmate). Many other blurred visions crossed before me in a splash of music, tones, and rhythm.

My sense of bereavement deepened as I looked back and remembered our best moments together. Memories of Sadi came bubbling up: his rise through the echelons of musicdom of Rabindra Sangeet on his return from Shantiniketan in the 1980s, of his sweet personal touch which swayed everyone, his deep voice when he performed some of my favourite Tagore songs in person—at my house, on stage, or TV—put me in a state of profound anguish and denial.



My early memories of Sadi are very sweet.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

My heart soon filled with sadness. I began humming "Tomar kachhe e bor magi, moron hote jeno jaagi" ("May I ask for a divine gift from you, that may I resurrect with the melody of music in the air?"), a devotional song by Tagore that Sadi had once sang for me.

Then, reality set in. I needed to call Shibli, his brother, and my cousin Shama, his friend and student. We met Shibli and Nipa during my last trip to Dhaka at a performance at Shilpakala Academy. Shibli had lately become the flagbearer of the illustrious Salimullah family. Every time I meet Shibli, I can't help but see the images of Sadi in him. The three of them, Sadi, Shibli and Nipa, were like a "band of siblings" and always brought me immense joy when chatting with one or the other. They had come to Boston and stayed with me when my wife organised a fundraiser for the flood victims of Bangladesh in 2004.

Bereavement and coping following the death of a personally significant popular

hopes"). Tagore wrote this after the death of his beloved wife, Mrinalini Devi, at a very young age.

Oh Sadi, I cry for you. I will miss you, and your call in a deep, baritone voice, "Shibli Bhai." I will miss your live renditions of Rabindra Sangeet, which we, your fandom, enjoyed in every nook and corner of this planet, whether in Sydney, New York, or Washington, DC. They say you were mourning your mother's death, who was your lifelong companion. Some even say you took umbrage at society. But we are your friends and we understand your pain. Now, I realise that maybe you were in a profoundly spiritual world, and looking inward. You had lived a full life and you decided, "I am at a crossroads," and interjected, "I am done, it is time for me to go." As Tagore referred to in his song "Ke jaay amritadham jatri," you are the traveller of the holy pilgrim route.

I remember, a few years ago, Bangladeshis living in the Boston area

## CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

- 1 Stew meat
- 5 Sun-dried brick
- 10 Fiery crime
- 12 Made well
- 13 Spy writings
- 15 Green prefix
- 16 "Shoo!"
- 17 Summer, in Paris
- 18 Brook
- 20 Ref's decision
- 21 Country division
- 22 Pub pints
- 23 News summary
- 25 School near Windsor
- 28 Musical drama
- 31 Supplies with staff
- 32 Not roundabout
- 34 Diner dessert
- 35 Casual shirt
- 36 High card
- 37 They're typed on entry keypads
- 40 Show gratitude to
- 41 Happening
- 42 Employes

### DOWN

- 1 Diamond corners
- 2 Builds
- 3 Chaperone
- 4 Gift tag word
- 5 Bank statement no.
- 6 Couple
- 7 Severe trial
- 8 Firefly, for one
- 9 Old auto
- 11 Make void
- 14 Video editing aids
- 19 Brings in
- 20 Criminal outing
- 24 For each
- 25 Person who can read emotions
- 26 Meditative martial art
- 27 Like some garages
- 29 Book lover
- 30 Stress
- 33 Exams
- 35 Chiding sounds
- 38 Hydrocarbon suffix
- 39 Future embryos



## WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.