

4TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY OF LATIFUR RAHMAN

Remembering the flagbearer of independent journalism



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

MAHFUZ ANAM

Latifur Rahman—Shamim or Shamim Bhai to all—was an unlikely person to become a flagbearer of independent journalism. But once he did, he was most unwavering about it.

Before *The Daily Star*, he never showed any sign of wanting to get involved in this complicated and highly sensitive industry. Credit to draw him towards the media goes, as far as I know, to his one-time business partner and friend, Mr AS Mahmud (Mahmud Bhai to me) who convinced him about the importance of this crucial industry. It was my privilege to enjoy the latter's affection through my elder brother, Mahbub Anam, who was his professional colleague in the oil sector from pre-Bangladesh days. It was Mahmud Bhai who organised my first meeting with Shamim Bhai at the Dhaka Club in 1988-89. I really don't know if I had made any significant impression on him, but it seemed enough for him to continue to meet and carry on the discussion for investing in a new English language newspaper. He was a no-nonsense person and thought about whether I would really leave my tenured UN job—at that time posted in Bangkok, Thailand—to plunge into the uncharted waters of Bangladeshi media, which in the 1990s had very few new investors. I think it was our meeting at my apartment in the Thai capital in January 1990 that convinced him that my determination was for real. From then on, our friendship grew and we soon became partners in giving journalism in Bangladesh a new life, with SM Ali, our founding editor, at its helm.

It was in the initial board meetings of Mediaworld Ltd, the owning company of *The Daily Star*, that the true commitment of Shamim Bhai to independent journalism became apparent. Both Ali Bhai—a very famous and highly respected journalist and editor in the Asia-Pacific region—and I were most thrilled by the rules of the game that Shamim Bhai was enunciating, along with other founding directors, to run the newspaper. Before Ali Bhai or I could suggest

it, Shamim Bhai persuaded other directors to collectively declare that the role of the board would be to formulate the overall policy and only monitor the financial aspect of the paper. The full journalistic control of *The Daily Star* would be totally in the hands of its editor-publisher. Nothing could energise us more.

It would be fair to think that it was as a mark of respect for Ali Bhai that the board of Mediaworld took such a hands-off approach. But when I was made its editor-publisher, following the sad demise of Ali Bhai in 1993, within two and half years of our founding,

the same respect and independence was shown to me, proving that Mediaworld board's approach was institutional and not personal.

It was this institutional approach that was the hallmark of Shamim Bhai. *The Daily Star* must become an institution and everything must function systematically—this was the supreme message of the board. I can say with utmost pride that *The Daily Star* has a board which is among the most enlightened

There are many examples, but two would suffice to tell the whole story of Latifur Rahman's commitment to independent journalism.

Once, Shamim Bhai was contesting to become the president of (Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries) FBCCL. His opponent was Yussuf Abdullah Harun. Throughout the campaign, the paper, of which he was a vital leader, gave

There was another occasion when a fellow businessman complained to him about some coverage by *The Daily Star* about corruption, especially wilful loan default and laundering of that money. Shamim Bhai advised him to contact the editor. "I don't run the paper, the editor does," he said. The businessman was shocked and exclaimed, "You own the paper and the editor runs it. How can that be possible?" That was Latifur Rahman.

the biggest Bangla news portal in the world, outstripping *Anandabazar Patrika* of Kolkata of that position, his happiness showed no end. He was usually not very expressive, but on that occasion, it crossed the usual bounds.

There was an occasion when Transcom was about to own a well-known TV channel. Mati Bhai and I were assisting Shamim Bhai. At the very end of months-long negotiations, it came out that there was no official channel to pay

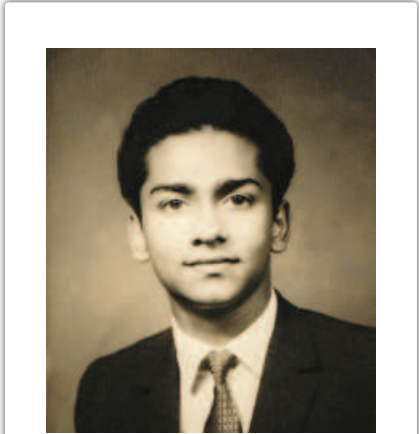


PHOTO: COURTESY
A young Latifur Rahman.



Latifur Rahman at a reception after he was honoured with the Oslo Business for Peace Award in 2012, with Prothom Alo Editor Matiur Rahman and The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam.

PHOTO: COURTESY

equal coverage to both. We interviewed both, wrote on both, but never tilted on either side. I went one step further. In every coverage, his opponent's item featured before his. As a contestant, he definitely must have wanted

When Matiur Rahman (Mati Bhai) and I approached him with the suggestion to launch a Bangla newspaper, he immediately agreed and found in Mati Bhai the perfect editor to go forward with it. All his values about journalism that he started with in *The Daily Star*, he implemented with equal gusto in *Prothom Alo*. He realised that an English newspaper was necessary, but a Bangla one would reach a far greater audience with the message of independent journalism. He greatly appreciated the extra efforts that Mati Bhai made and encouraged him to take newer initiatives like Prothoma publications, etc.

He would never miss the annual staff meetings of the two papers, especially of *Prothom Alo*. While appreciating the paper's magnificent performance and congratulating the staff and the editor for it, he would never fail to goad them to aspire for greater circulation, quality and business. When the paper reached a circulation of five lakh, he said, "Why not aim for 10 lakh?" That sort of ambition would require huge additional investment, but Shamim Bhai never shied away from it. When *Prothom Alo*'s digital version became

the satellite fee and the channel paid it through "unofficial means." Shamim Bhai would have none of it. He said he would never accept that as a practice. We again marvelled at his ethical stance and wholeheartedly supported him.

Following every board meeting, he would join many of the senior colleagues of the paper and spend hours talking with them about any issue that would come up, but never forgetting to inquire about their personal and family situations. Once, a photographer of *Prothom Alo* suffered a life-threatening accident; Shamim Bhai arranged for him to be airlifted to Singapore and personally paid all his expenses till he recovered. This endeared him forever to all of us.

Today, as we commemorate Latifur Rahman on his fourth death anniversary, we at *The Daily Star* sorely miss his presence. We miss his warmth and his personal touch in going forward in the cause of independent journalism. He will be remembered for, among many other things, his sterling contribution in helping the emergence and continued success of the two most trusted and respected newspapers in Bangladesh.

Both Ali Bhai—a very famous and highly respected journalist and editor in the Asia-Pacific region—and I were most thrilled by the rules of the game that Shamim Bhai was enunciating, along with other founding directors, to run the newspaper. Before Ali Bhai or I could suggest it, Shamim Bhai persuaded other directors to collectively declare that the role of the board would be to formulate the overall policy and only monitor the financial aspect of the paper. The full journalistic control of The Daily Star would be totally in the hands of its editor-publisher. Nothing could energise us more.

anywhere in terms of giving the utmost respect to the institution of the editor and allowing the management a free hand in running the newspaper. That is how we started, and that is how it remains till date.

more coverage. But as a newspaper owner, he knew that the public would be watching and judging us as to how we handled the coverage. He never said a word to me about it. That is how objective he had the quality to be.

8 years since Chotoo, 4 years since Nana Bhai



Zaraif Ayaat Hossain,
grandson of Latifur Rahman and elder brother
of Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain, is head of strategy and
transformation at Transcom Group.

ZARAIF AYAAT HOSSAIN

To write a piece on July 1 in remembrance of my loved ones is a challenge. The same day belongs to two of them, and maybe that's exactly what they'd want. My clever younger brother wouldn't have had it any other way but to be remembered on the same day as his Nana Bhai for eternity.

Remembering both Chotoo and Nana Bhai today, I think about what a 20-year-old could possibly have in common with his grandfather. It turns out, quite a lot. A calming presence that made everyone feel at home. A quiet confidence that exuded incredible strength, without ever being loud. A tenacious sense of right and wrong. Their refusal to back down when faced with adversity.

One day, when Faraaz and I were kids, we went to see Nana Bhai and Nanu Ma the evening before the beginning of a new school year. That night, he told us the story of his first day of boarding school at St Edmunds. On a cold morning in Shillong, he landed up in school as the new kid, when a student a year senior to him decided to pick on him. The senior student, according to Nana Bhai, was "acting funny" and so he had to do something to stand up for himself. He gave this senior a strong shove to back off, and that's when he established himself as the kid nobody should bully. He told us this story to teach us that we must find the

strength to fight back even in our most vulnerable state.

That young Latifur Rahman would then lead a life with the same spirit. Standing up for himself, his family and protecting his loved ones.

Faraaz would go on to stand up to fiends of a greater magnitude as a young man. On July 1, 2016, Faraaz found himself confronted by armed terrorists. With his

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Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain with his grandparents Latifur Rahman and Shahnaz Rahman after graduating from American International School Dhaka in 2014.

PHOTO: COURTESY

life in danger, he chose to fight, to protect, to not cower to evil.

On July 1, to remember Nana Bhai and Chotoo is to keep standing by the same righteous values they both lived by. To remain steadfast in doing good while weathering malicious storms, undue pressure and dire circumstances. To honour them is to keep standing up the way they did.

Mr Latifur Rahman, business icon, industrialist, founder chairman of Transcom Group. Faraaz Hossain, the boy who heroically sacrificed his life during the terrorist attack at Holey Artisan Bakery. But to me, to my family, they'll always be Nana Bhai and Chotoo. Nana Bhai as a grandfather, a husband, a father, and Chotoo as a brother, a son, a grandson. Our beloved Latifur Rahman and Faraaz Hossain remind us to keep fighting for what is right.

Remembering both our guardian angels together on this day, the ultimate remembrance of both Nana Bhai and Chotoo is to live with the courage they would want to see in us. I pray their light shines brighter than ever and that the strength they give never fades.

To our family, friends, loved ones, and well-wishers, our deepest gratitude to you on behalf of our family for always standing by us.