TRIBUTE TO SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM

He moves still, in the gyres of our memory

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It has been several days since the passing of Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam, yet I remain grief-stricken. I find myself asking: what is loss? Or rather, what is loss for those like me who have lost such a man? And what is loss for those who have never lived with such men?

As I travel back to the beginning, I recall—Manzoor *da's* doctoral thesis was on Emanuel Swedenborg's influence on WB Yeats. He had titled it "Gyres and Spirits," exploring Swedenborg's notion of spiralling motion and how it resonates through Yeats's idea of the gyre—an image that envisions histories and human consciousness as moving in intersecting spirals, ever-evolving, ever-rotating. I try to picture him as a young student walking the streets of Kingston in the late 1970s, his mind alive with ideas of motion. I think of Manzoor *da's* passing through this very idea of motion.

He loved Yeats. When it comes to death, the poet believed in the afterlife; Manzoor *da* did not. "I don't believe in the afterlife. Rather, I'm happy spending my life as a teacher. I'll be extremely fortunate if this happiness remains till the end of my life," he once said, and indeed, it did. Yet, he now gyres back as an element of nature through his merger, his burial.

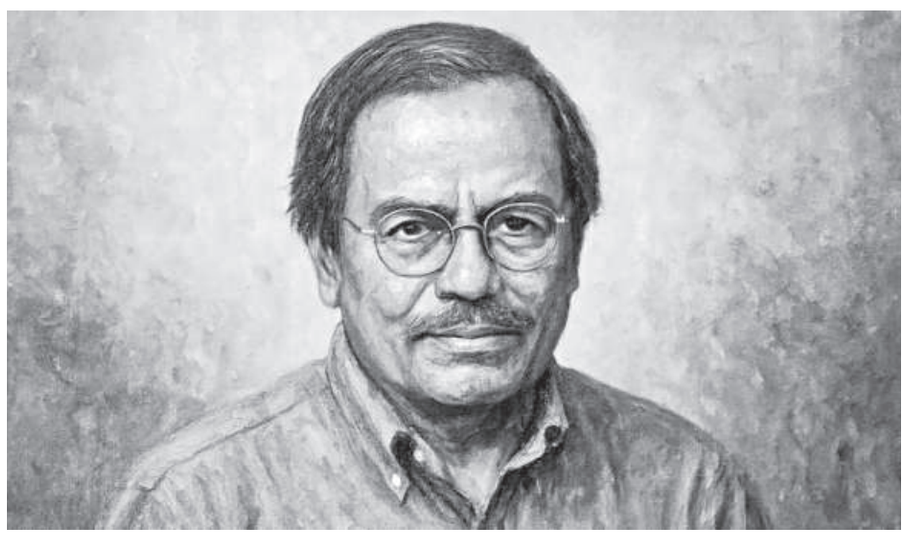
Manzoor *da* never forgot to text me after Bangladeshi or Nepali cricket victories. I was revisiting some of those old messages yesterday morning. After Nepal's recent win over the West Indies, I had written, "It's amazing! What has happened to the West Indies?" to which he replied, "No, it's what happened to Nepal that is amazing! I guess Stuart Law is giving them a sense of confidence." Manzoor *da* was quite fond of Nepal. Whenever we invited him to a conference or a meeting, he would be there without any delay. The last time he visited Nepal was in 2024, as a keynote speaker at a conference.

He first visited Kathmandu 34 years ago for a literary conference. I remember the day he met my family for the first time. My daughter, Pallabi, was three. He bent down, held her face, and touched the tip of her nose with his. It took very little time for Soma, my wife, to find a brother in him. We laughed at how I had instantly become his *jamai*, the brother-in-law. "I have a sister in Nepal," he would often tell his friends. I cannot describe when or how our families became one.

Come to think of it, he never met our son-in-law, nor did we meet his daughter-in-law, but how lovely these two recent additions were in our lives was always part of our regular conversations. Once, I visited Dhaka without Soma, and Manzoor *da* chided me, saying I was "not welcome" there without his sister. The depth and warmth of his love were magnificent.

One day, I called him to complain about the nature of religious discourses and regressive foundational thinking in South Asia. He listened patiently as I said, "I'm detesting reading the Upanishads and Hindu texts on philosophical systems." "Why?" he asked. "Too much mediocrity in the use of these texts—people use them to propagate regression, division, and fundamentalism!" I replied. He said, "No, Arun! They are, as you already know, monuments of unaging intellect. All religious texts are, in their deep structures. You cannot read or unread them based on how people interpret them. You are Shreedhar's student. Go and talk to him again."

The regard he held for Professor Shreedhar Lohani was of a different league. Once, in Pokhara, I asked him about Shreedhar sir. "I feel like there are just two or three scholars left in South Asia who carry this dynamic oral tradition of the Socratic kind. Two of them are pirs or sadhus by the lonely hut and riverside, and one is your Shreedhar," he said. I never heard either Manzoor *da* or Shreedhar sir say this outright, but I often wondered if their shared fondness for Yeats might have drawn them to each other. In fact, Shreedhar sir had



Syed Manzoorul Islam (1951 – 2025) FILE ILLUSTRATION: **STAR**

met him even before I knew either of them—at Oxford. Two days ago, when I told him the news, Shreedhar sir wrote, "I'm heartbroken, Arun. I will never go to Bangladesh." He meant it. His friend isn't there anymore.

As I write this, these lines from Yeats's cross my mind:

"Think where man's glory most begins and ends,
And say my glory was I had such friends."

It was 2018. Manzoor *da* and his wife, our *boudi*, had visited us, and we had gone to Nagarkot. It was that time of year when the icy peaks were still visible. We sat facing them, drinking tea. I remember asking him something along the lines of, "How does South Asia look when we discuss it from Bangladesh's perspective, or Nepal's, for that matter?" I don't remember his exact words, but recalling that conversation, he said something like this:

"Arun, it expands South Asia into a range of perspectives—the myths and sea discourse Kaiser (Prof Kaiser Haq) is writing about, Fakrul's (Prof Fakrul Alam) interregional literary sensibilities, or Abhi's poems, where he sees you beyond your room and sees us beyond ours. The Bangladeshi perspective can connect South Asia to Southeast Asia—the maritime silk route from Bengal, eastern Nepal, and India to China in the north. The cartographic vision can thus shape both similarities and contradictions in South Asian studies."

One cannot forget such nuances. His understanding of Islam was linguistically and vernacularly driven. "Arun, Bangla *bhasha* (language) will retain the culture of Bangladesh," he once told me. At another time, he said, "If languages are lost, the philosophies of religion go haywire!"

I had developed the habit of listening to people like Manzoor *da* and Shreedhar sir. They taught me the meditativeness of listening.

A week ago, as we do every year during Durga Puja, Soma and I called him to seek his blessings. He asked how we were, and Soma told him about our plans to return to Kathmandu from the US, where we were visiting our daughter, *jamai*, and granddaughters. "What is Jhinki (Pallabi) doing?" he asked. "Working away as usual," Soma replied. His response: *"Tomra shobai dosh haathe kaaj kore jao, tomrai toh Durga"* ("You all work with ten hands; you are the Durga"). It was always about perspective—I always learned that from him.

Just a week ago, before his passing, Soma and I were thinking about grandchildren—not just ours, but the very idea of them, the peace they bring, and the joy they radiate. We had just hung up after talking to Manzoor *da*, and Soma recalled his fondness for his grandchildren, and we reminisced about a funny story he once shared with us.

Once, while stranded in a city during floods, Manzoor *da* took his toddler granddaughter downstairs to see the water. As he held her, she stretched out her arms towards the puddles that the floodwater had formed inside their hotel. Glancing over his shoulder to see the father distracted, he quickly let her dip her feet in the water, and she splashed away happily. Upon returning upstairs, he carefully reminded the child that the splash was their secret. "But the moment she saw your *boudi*, she let it all out! Oh, her look!" he told us, laughing. Soma and I could picture his mischievous smile and the mock-fear on his face—like a child himself...

Manzoor *da*, the human child, who has now been stolen from us.

As I finish this piece, written in memoriam of Manzoor *da*, these lines from Yeats's "The Stolen Child" feel peacefully fitting:

"Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand."

Go, Manzoor *da*. Go with a fairy hand in hand. And here we remain, mourning this loss for the rest of our days.

RTI: Are our political parties ready for transparency and accountability?

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An encouraging outcome of the protracted crisis confronting Bangladesh'sright to information (RTI) regime over the past year has been the growing attention the law has received from concerned citizens and civil society leaders. The July 2024 uprising further amplified the debates.

Out of this moment has emerged a clear public demand: to explicitly include political parties within the RTI Act's definition of "public authorities." Such inclusion is contested in most jurisdictions, most notably in neighbouring India, precisely because it would subject political parties, like other public-serving bodies, to statutory record-keeping and disclosure obligations. Unsurprisingly, many parties resist this expansion, wary that their internal records, finances, and decision-making processes could be scrutinised under the law.

A close look at the definition of "authority" under Bangladesh's RTI Act, 2009, helps explain how political parties contest their inclusion. To qualify as an "authority," an entity must be: (i) any organisation constituted under the constitution; (ii) any ministry, division, or office established under what is known as the "Rules of Business;" (iii) any statutory body established by or under any act; (iv) any private organisation funded by government grants; (v) any private organisation funded by foreign grants; (vi) any organisation performing public functions under a government contract; or (vii) any organisation notified in the official gazette.

Political parties argue that they fall into none of these categories and, therefore, lie outside the RTI Act's purview, not being obliged to respond to citizens' RTI requests.

Citizens, on the other hand, argue that they should have access to information about political parties' activities, given their central role in governance. The RTI Act was adopted to make public officials more open and accountable to the people. In practice, politicians—operating through their parties—are integral to governance, such as shaping policy, selecting candidates, forming cabinets and coalitions, and influencing public expenditure and regulation. In that context, political parties too should be considered "public authorities," accountable to citizens.

Though untested in Bangladesh, similar issues have been debated in India. As RTI requests to political parties were repeatedly stonewalled, the Central Information Commission (CIC) of India faced numerous complaints from citizens. In 2013, the CIC ruled that political parties are indeed "public authorities," as they are "substantially financed by the Central Government," and they receive benefits from it, and perform functions of public importance.

Parties enjoy benefits such as the allocation of land for offices, government accommodation at subsidised rates, and income tax exemptions, the CIC noted. It reasoned that political parties wield significant influence over government power and must therefore be accountable to citizens.

As expected, the parties ignored the CIC's decision. Yet, since it was never overturned, it remains valid, albeit in legal limbo. This led an NGO to file a writ petition before the Indian Supreme Court in 2015, which the court finally took up for hearing in April 2025. The outcome remains awaited.

Given India's experience, incorporating political parties into Bangladesh's RTI framework is likely to be a challenging task. As a starting point, citizens could test the parties' positions by submitting RTI requests. If they refuse, the Information Commission's complaint mechanism, once revived, should be invoked. Failing that, a writ petition may be filed in court.

This process will likely take considerable time. Meanwhile, citizens may pursue three avenues in parallel.

First, they may lobby the interim government to include political parties as "public authorities" through an amendment order to the RTI Act, reportedly under consideration with input from citizens, which the next parliament will hopefully endorse. A few countries—Mexico, Nepal, and North Macedonia—have explicitly brought political parties within the scope of RTI laws. Others, such as Chile, Spain, and South Africa, have achieved the same effect through related legislation or judicial rulings.

Second, citizens and NGOs could engage directly with political parties on the importance of transparency and accountability and on their readiness to accept inclusion under the RTI Act. NGOs with relevant expertise could organise dialogues ahead of elections to discuss parties' likely obligations under the RTI framework, ideally encouraging them to include a commitment to the law in their manifestos.

Third, citizens may begin seeking information about political parties that is already available from public bodies. Under the Representation of the People Order, 1972 (President's Order), parties must submit reports to the Election Commission detailing financial statements, income, expenditure, and sources of funds. These can be requested directly from the commission. Similarly, tax-related information may be obtained from the National Board of Revenue.

The Information Commission has previously ruled against releasing such information held by the Election Commission in response to citizen requests. This prompted Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan), the civil society organisation, to file a writ petition with the High Court, challenging the decision. In its landmark judgment of February 2016, the Court declared the Information Commission's order to have been "passed without lawful authority and of no legal effect," directing the Election Commission to release the requested information.

More importantly, the court stated unequivocally: "Ignoring the people's right to know, keeping them in the dark, and playing hide-and-seek with them in a democratic country like ours, where all powers belong to the people and their mandate is necessary for ruling the country, no registered political party can be allowed to take the stand that the audited statements submitted to the Election Commission are 'secret information'."

There is, therefore, reason for hope. Let us proceed constructively: first, by opening dialogue with political parties on this vital issue and promoting greater use of the law by citizens committed to strengthening democracy; and second, by urging the interim government to enhance transparency and accountability by swiftly filling the vacant posts of Information Commissioners with qualified, credible persons, making the necessary amendments to the law, and ensuring its proper implementation. After all, it was a caretaker government that first enacted the RTI Ordinance, 2008, which was later passed as the RTI Act, 2009.