

## MATIUR RAHMAN

LIVING in the throes of his country's turbulent history, he has staked out a position from which he can exercise an influence in creating a better society for his people. His is the position of a journalist who has practiced a craft and vocation in bold, expansive terms for more than four decades.

Matiur Rahman was born in Calcutta (now *Kolkata*), India, on January 2, 1946. The place of his birth is circumstantial. Before the partitioning of India in 1947, his maternal grandfather was a member of the provincial assembly of Bengal and Matiur's parents were sojourning in Calcutta, where his grandfather was based, when Matiur was born. When he was around two or three years old, however, his parents returned to their family home in Bangshal, in the old part of Dhaka where Matiur would live practically all his life.

When Matiur was born, World War II was at its height. While the war did not have the kind of impact on India that it had in other Asian countries (the Japanese had started to move troops into northeast India but were quickly thrown back), it weakened British imperial power and accelerated the process of decolonization in the Indian subcontinent. Decolonization proved to be a highly complicated and contentious process because of the Hindu-Muslim feud. It would radically change the political landscape and see Matiur and his family transition from being subjects of British India to citizens of Pakistan and then Bangladesh.

On August 15, 1947, Great Britain partitioned its Indian Empire into two new countries, India and Pakistan, with Pakistan further divided into two parts, West Pakistan and East Pakistan, located about a thousand miles apart in the northwest and northeast of the Indian subcontinent. The struggle to form a separate Muslim state out of Hindu-dominated India occasioned not only the birth of a new country but a period of instability. Religious riots and an undeclared and inconclusive war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir marred the transition. The formation of the new state out of two widely separated parts, East and West, also proved untenable as East Pakistan, with Dhaka as its center, chafed against the dominance of the West and agitated for a greater share of political and economic power.

Matiur was too young to have been directly affected by the turbulence that attended the Partition. But this was part of the world that filtered into Matiur's consciousness of boyhood. His maternal grandfather and uncles were involved in the intense political debates of the period, and Dhaka was a center of political ferment going back to the time when it was still part of India's Bengal province.

THE social and cultural tensions of a rapidly changing environment were part of his early formation. The oppositions, for instance, between the traditional and modern, the secular and religious, were played out in his own family.

His parents, who had an arranged marriage according to the custom of the times, came from different backgrounds. His father, Md. Fazlur Rahman, came from a humble, rural and deeply religious family. Though Fazlur became, in time, a fairly successful lawyer, he held fast to a rigorous Islamic faith and wanted his children to attend a traditional Islamic school (*madrassa*) and follow a strict religious life. On the other hand, his mother, Lutfunessa Begum, was of an educated and propertied family that was modern and secular in its outlook. Lutfunessa was an avid reader and varied in her interests. Frustrated that she did not have much of a formal education, she tried, even when she was already married and had children, to complete her middle-level education. She stopped only because of the pressures of family duties and the financial difficulties the family had at the time. Perhaps in compensation, she strongly encouraged and supported her children, the girls as well as the boys, in their education, saving money to pay for their tuition.

"My father was a very religious person," Matiur recalls. "He wanted us to have an Islamic religious education. My mother wanted us to have a good general education and study well." This

difference of opinion, Matiur says, “continued up to the end.” Matiur and his siblings decided to pursue the education their mother desired for them. The third child in a family of four brothers and five sisters, Matiur found himself enrolled in statistics. His brothers went on to earn degrees in engineering, zoology, and medicine, and all his sisters obtained the highest academic degrees as well.

Matiur attended Nawabpur Government High School and continued his secondary education at Dhaka Government College and had higher education from Dhaka University. At the beginning, the family was in financial straits and Matiur remembers that he and his brothers had to go to school barefoot (“I had my first pair of shoes when I was in class four or five”). His father’s law practice, however, eventually prospered and the family’s situation became, in middle class terms, quite comfortable.

Matiur was not a particularly serious student but he enjoyed the social life of school and was passionate about cricket, frequenting fields and stadiums to watch or play the game. More important than school in his boyhood formation were his mother, maternal grandfather, and the assorted uncles who frequently visited their home. His grandfather, a person of some prominence in Dhaka, was an important influence. A well-studied man though he did not have high formal education, he read works in Bangla and English and loved British authors like P.G. Wodehouse. “He used to take us to the bookshops and buy books for us,” Matiur fondly remembers.

They were a close family and relatives often came to their house to visit or stay for a few days. Matiur grew up surrounded by people.

His father, on the other hand, increasingly drifted from a family that did not quite turn out in his own religious image. Resigned to the paths his children had taken, he refused to pay for their studies—particularly in the case of the girls who, he thought, had no need to go to a university—and lapsed into remoteness and silence. He became even more religious and in time almost stopped talking to his children. In his final years, he did not play a role (as was expected in the community) in the marriage of his daughters, leaving the matter to his sons. Yet, Matiur remained respectful of his father, attending to him when he fell seriously ill. He was present at his father’s death and always accepted the choices his father made with respect. “It is his world. What can we do?“, he says.

IN the early sixties, after high school, Matiur went to Dhaka Government College, one of the best colleges in the country at the time. Even when he was still in high school however, Matiur says, he had been exposed to the debates surrounding the anti-imperialist movement, the peasant and workers’ struggle, and communism, from the elders and relatives who came to their house. He recalls the people’s resentment over the dominance of West Pakistan and the call for greater democracy and autonomy. Bengalis resented the fact that East Pakistan received only 36 percent of the national budget and 20 percent of the country’s foreign assistance. Also, the army and the civil service were dominated by West Pakistanis.

Matiur remembers, in particular, the people’s resistance to the attempted imposition of Urdu, the dominant language of West Pakistan, as national language. This resistance came to a head on February 21, 1952 after a student demonstration in Dhaka University turned bloody when it was broken up by police and the paramilitary. Four student protestors were killed. (In 1999, this tragedy was remembered when the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) declared February 21 “International Mother Language Day,” to promote language pluralism and the preservation of the world’s threatened and vanishing languages.)

In college, Matiur played cricket—and was so skilled in the game he played for the college team and became a First Division cricket team captain in Dhaka—but he was, at the time, reading Marx and Lenin as well. He soon left cricket to devote himself wholly to student politics. In 1962, he joined the growing and increasingly militant student movement. He joined the East Pakistan Student Union (EPSU), a left-wing student organization, and participated in street demonstrations and mass organizing work.

In 1963, he entered Dhaka University, the country’s premier educational institution and a center of democratic and nationalist ferment. His family wanted him to be an engineer but he decided to enroll in statistics instead. He figured the course would not be too exacting and would give him more time to devote to politics. Sacrificing classes and lectures, he immersed himself in the student movement, attending meetings, participating in discussion groups, and writing poems and other pieces for newspapers and

journals. He was an organizer and General Secretary of Sangskriti Sangstha, a university-based cultural organization, and one of the leaders of the East Pakistan Student Union (1965-1969).

In 1964, he joined the Communist Party of Pakistan. The Communist Party of Pakistan had evolved from the Communist Party of India, became the Communist Party of East Pakistan in 1968 and then the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) when Bangladesh became an independent state in 1971. The party was practically illegal from 1947 to 1971, and Matiur kept his party membership secret. He was, in effect, doing underground political work.

This was a time of intense activity for the young Matiur. He was actively involved in party work, joining demonstrations, organizing meetings, producing and circulating propaganda, soliciting funds, and recruiting people for the movement. He studied history and politics and came to know many prominent writers, artists and leaders in the country. He stayed mainly behind the scenes. "I'm more of a planner, organizer, executor of programs," he says.

As in many postcolonial societies, Marxism was an attractive and potent force, particularly for the young in what was then East Pakistan. One reason for communism's appeal was that it was "nationalistic" and "democratic" in its aims at that time. The CPB was active in the call for secession from Pakistan, a movement that began with the demand for autonomy and then a war for independence. The appeal for Matiur was also intellectual. He was reading authors of the Left, from Maxim Gorki and Russian authors to the French poets Paul Eluard and Louis Aragon, to the American communist author Howard Fast, who was famous for *Spartacus* (1951), a novel about an uprising of slaves in ancient Rome.

It helped that his mother was supportive of his activities. Their family home became a meeting place for communists and activists (some of whom would find shelter in their house for one or two days). In 1970, Matiur also married a kindred spirit, Maleka Begum, a fellow activist in the university and one of the organizers of the Chhatra Union, the student wing of the Communist Party. Maleka was, Matiur says, more popular in the student movement than he was because she was "a good speaker, good organizer and street fighter." A brother of Maleka was, in fact, Matiur's first contact and "political educator" when he first joined the Communist Party.

DESPITE the frenzy of political activism, Matiur managed to earn a master's degree in statistics from Dhaka University in 1967. It was at this time, as Matiur weighed his post-university options, that his journalistic career began when the Communist Party sent him to help put out the party's weekly organ, *Ekota* (Unity). He became its acting editor when it came out in 1970. Though he had little journalistic training, he was no stranger to press work. He wrote and distributed propaganda as an activist and, as a student, had frequented the office of the leftist newspaper *Shangbad* (News), which was located near their house, and befriended journalists, including the well-known Bangladeshi journalist Ronesh Das Gupta and writer Shahidullah Kaiser.

Matiur worked fulltime on *Ekota*. It was a small operation and he had to help out in everything, from writing and editing to layouting. His work on the paper was interrupted when the war for independence began on March 25, 1971, when Bengal was declared a "rebel" province and the Pakistani army moved in to suppress the opposition. The CPB joined other forces in the country in waging the independence struggle. In the third week of April, Matiur left Bangladesh for Agartala, capital of Tripura, an Indian state encircled by Bangladesh except for its northeastern boundary with the state of Assam. In this refuge, the party had set up a base to train guerrilla fighters for the war. Around ten million refugees fled to India as the fighting intensified. Maleka was herself traveling through India at this time, helping in drumming up support for independence. It is estimated that three million Bengalis died and over a million homes were destroyed in the nine-month war of liberation.

Shortly after independence was won on December 16, 1971, *Ekota* resumed operations and Matiur continued as acting editor. The Communist Party was now legal and open. In 1973, the first open party congress was held in Dhaka and Matiur was elected to the party central committee. He also became full editor of *Ekota*, which had a circulation of twenty-five thousand copies at this time. Later, Matiur also edited the Bangladesh edition of the bimonthly *World Marxist Review*, a now defunct international communist journal published out of Prague. Its local edition in Bangla lasted for five years and had a circulation of three thousand copies.

The establishment of an independent Bangladesh was followed by years of hope and despair. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the architect of the new nation, was killed in a military coup three and a half years after independence. In the next decade and a half, the country was in the grip of the military junta. Through several changes of government, the military remained the real power and, during this time, communist leaders and activists were killed, arrested, or forced underground.

Various repressive measures restricted the development of a free media through licensing acts and laws under which journalists could be detained in the name of “national security and public order.” Between 1972 and 1991, *Ekota* managed to come out except for two interruptions—in 1975, when Sheikh Mujib banned all political parties except the Awami League, which he headed, and all newspapers except a few; and in 1986, when Gen. H.M. Ershad held a rigged election and *Ekota* was banned.

Matiur managed to keep his head above water through this difficult period. It was at this time that Matiur and Maleka started to raise their family. They had a daughter, Mohsina, and a son, Mahmudur, born in 1973 and 1979, respectively. “We lived a very simple, humble life,” Matiur said.

IN the mid-1980s, Matiur went through a crisis of loyalties. Communists were divided in the rift within global communism between Russia and China. There were differences within the CPB over what the creation of a socialist state in Bangladesh required. In this context, Matiur and his comrades debated over the direction the paper *Ekota* should take. Matiur chafed against strict party guidelines and wanted the paper to reach out to a broader readership by cultivating a more general content and appeal. He was, at this time, reading a wide range of literature, exploring new ideas, and interacting with many non-party intellectuals. He was beginning to establish his personal credentials as a journalist by contributing to daily and weekly newspapers outside *Ekota*.

The changing international context was decisive for Matiur. This was the time of perestroika and glasnost, the time of Mikhail Gorbachev, and tectonic shifts were taking place in the communist world. Matiur was directly exposed to these shifts since he was, apart from his work in *Ekota*, head of the party’s international department, and in this capacity visited Moscow several times and traveled to countries like Bulgaria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. He met leading communists not only in India and Sri Lanka but also from places like Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa. He was thus exposed to wide-ranging discussions on the status and future of communism. His visits to communist countries, moreover, had a chastening effect. It saddened him to note the lack of personal freedoms and the “freedom to talk, to write,” in these places.

A particularly memorable and unsettling experience was Matiur’s visit to Moscow in 1988, the year of the Reagan-Gorbachev Moscow summit and the landmark Nineteenth Party Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) that approved sweeping political reforms. It was the year Gorbachev, who assumed power in 1985, initiated the first bold moves to democratize the Soviet political system by allowing, for the first time, open discussions on such sensitive issues as the personality cult and atrocities during Stalin’s time, ethnic nationalism, and others.

In Moscow, Matiur exchanged views with conference participants and listened to speeches and forums where ideological differences were openly debated. “This was absolutely a new world I was in,” Matiur recalls. “Poets, writers, painters, intellectuals and journalists were coming out. They were speaking about everything openly—about the past, about Stalin, about the future of the socialist system, about the absence of democracy, about the absence of freedom of expression—everything.” The atmosphere of openness amazed him.

He vividly remembers an early morning press conference in which Gen. Dmitri Volkogonov (head of the Institute of Military History at the Soviet Ministry of Defense) talked about the crimes of Stalin, including the death of his own parents in the Stalinist purges. (Under Boris Yeltsin, Volkogonov headed the presidential commission that examined and declassified files of the Secret Soviet Archives. He wrote several important books exposing the atrocities Stalinist era, including *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire* [1998], that were widely read in the West).

Of his visit to Moscow in 1988, Matiur says: “I was inspired by the whole atmosphere, the changing of situations, new ideas, policies... I was also very sad at the crumbling of an idea, the thought of our life changing.”

A troubled Matiur returned to Dhaka. “I must say that I was greatly influenced by Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev freed my mind.” In 1989, Matiur withdrew from the CPB party secretariat and, in 1991, he ended his work in *Ekota* and left the party. “I simply, quietly quit. And I started my own new life.”

Thinking about his thirty-year involvement in the communist movement years later, Matiur says he does not think that these were lost years. They were years of intense learning. He came to know his country, its politics, economy, and people, and the experience deepened his commitment to work for “the good of the people.” This commitment has guided his career as a journalist. Years after he left the party, he continued to regard with respect the people in the movement with whom he worked. “I don’t want to disown the past,” he says, “the dream remains that I want the people to have a good life.”

IN the middle of 1991, Matiur joined mainstream journalism. This was an expansive time for media in Bangladesh. The end of military rule in 1990 ushered in a boom in newspapers such that, between 1990 and 2002, the number of daily newspapers increased from 67 to 282. The field was wide open for him to explore ideas about journalism he could not quite exercise as a party functionary.

He began by working for a daily newspaper, *Ajker Kagoj* (Today’s Paper) as a special correspondent writing about anything he wanted. In February 1992, he and some young journalists started a new daily, *Bhorer Kagoj* (Morning Paper). He acted as editor and publisher and helped raise funds for the paper.

Matiur stayed on as editor of *Bhorer Kagoj* after the businessman-politician Saber Hossain Chowdhury came in to invest and assume ownership of the paper. As editor of the paper, Matiur built it up as a major daily in Bangla with a reputation for boldness and independence. *Bhorer Kagoj* provided Matiur with his first important experience as a mainstream journalist and editor. The paper set standards by introducing opinion pages with guest columnists representing a spectrum of views, building a network of contributors and writers from the Bangladeshi diaspora, and maximizing the art and use of editorial cartoons. It nurtured the careers of many writers, poets, cartoonists, and artists.

In a country where almost all newspapers had a strong partisan affiliation, *Bhorer Kagoj* earned respect by publishing opinion pieces from politically opposed writers and parties. The paper pushed such advocacies as government reform, press freedom, minority rights, and the need to build a national consciousness. It won prominence for its investigative work in bringing out what had been suppressed during the reign of the military junta, publishing stories about how the military ran the country and about the personalities and circumstances behind the assassination of president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, and Ziaur Rahman in 1981.

With *Bhorer Kagoj*, Matiur began to develop his ideas of an independent, non-partisan newspaper responsible only to the “people,” exploring the possibilities of what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (though in a different context) calls an “integral” journalism that tries to work out of the people themselves, “one that seeks not only to satisfy all the needs of its public, but also to create and develop these needs, to arouse its public and progressively enlarge it.”

The paper did well. Problems arose, however, after Saber Hossain Chowdhury was elected to the parliament in 1996 and appointed Deputy Minister of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s cabinet. The ruling government put pressure on Chowdhury to discipline his editor after *Bhorer Kagoj* published reports on such anomalies as stock market manipulation, questionable loan guarantees, and other scandals involving powerful persons and parties close to the government.

Protesting publisher and owner interference, Matiur handed in his resignation as editor on August 15, 1998. He said: “I believe in an independent media and in the independent role of the editor. This has been my cardinal principle in journalism. Partisan politics and independent journalism cannot function together.”

PRIOR to leaving *Bhorer Kagoj*, Matiur had discussions with Mahfuz Anam, a friend from his days of student activism and editor of *Daily Star*, the largest English-language newspaper in Bangladesh. Out of discussions with Anam and *Daily Star* main owner Latifur Rahman, plans were hatched for the founding of a new paper. *Prothom Alo* (First Light) was launched on November 4, 1998. Matiur assumed as editor, bringing with him practically the entire staff of *Bhorer Kagoj*.

A daily newspaper in Bangla, *Prothom Alo* is published by Latifur Rahman's Media Star Limited, part of the Transcom group of companies. Latifur Rahman is a leading businessman and industrialist in Bangladesh, with investments in tea, pharmaceuticals, soft drinks (Pepsi-Cola), insurance, electronics, and media. He is a respected public figure as well.

In four years, *Prothom Alo* rose to become the country's largest daily, breaking records in the pace of its growth. Today, its circulation is placed at 350,000. (The figure can be appreciated if we note that the total circulation of newspapers and periodicals in Bangladesh is only about 1.5 million) On the assumption that a copy of the daily is read by an average of five to six persons, *Prothom Alo* reaches as many as 2.2 million people everyday. The internet edition of *Prothom Alo* is read by an average of a quarter million Bengali readers all over the world. The paper has 375 journalists and employees. In addition, it has 220 correspondents in all the districts and a good number of the sub-districts in the country, as well as a network of correspondents in New York, London, Berlin, Tokyo, Calcutta, Delhi, and Islamabad.

It has achieved high circulation in a short time due to its neutral presentation of news and views, its proven commitment to a just and democratic society, and by targeting a broader readership with a mixture of specialty supplements, as well as wide regional coverage.

Not least, the success of the paper draws from the fact that it is a well capitalized operation able to sustain an organization, attract talent, and build state-of-the art technological support. The paper has led the way in professionalizing journalistic practice by setting standards in salaries and other benefits for journalists and staff.

Building on his experience in *Bhorer Kagoj*, Matiur worked on broadening the paper's appeal. He diversified *Prothom Alo*'s content, with supplements (in broadsheet, tabloid or magazine format) on sports, art and culture, fashion and entertainment, health and science, children, and women's affairs. In making this innovation, Matiur saw that the interests of contemporary newspaper readers have become voluminous and diverse. They look for more information and variety than just hard news and analyses.

The need to be inclusive drives the paper. Apart from its special supplements, the paper publishes the views and opinions of different parties, groups, and communities. It opened its pages to a diverse range of writers and contributors that include government officials, scholars, academics, and NGO activists who represent a wide spectrum of opinions. It has paid special attention to its readers, providing a platform for them by conducting opinion polls and interviews, publishing readers' comments, and organizing roundtable discussions.

The history of journalism in Bangladesh has been dominated by sectarian newssheets, ephemeral periodicals, and party organs. The relationships among government, interest groups, and newspapers are often incestuous, a situation conducive to media manipulation and the partisanship that nourish a constant state of strife instead of building democratic consensus. Against this background, *Prothom Alo*'s innovations have been refreshing. It is ironic that these innovations have come from someone who started his career in journalism as a party propagandist.

THE advocacies of *Prothom Alo* have gone beyond the printed page. The newspaper has become a nexus for many civic initiatives.

This is shown in its pivotal role in the campaign against acid throwing, a vicious crime of revenge that mostly victimizes young women who have offended their attackers by denying them sex or rejecting a proposal of marriage. Other attacks result from family feuds, land disputes, or local rivalries. Acid attacks are particularly abominable because the physical and psychological effects ruin victims for life. "Acid attacks are living death," says Sigma Huda, Secretary General of the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR). (Bangladesh is where this crime is most prevalent, with a high of 484 cases reported in 2002.)

Matiur was impelled to take up the cause after he saw a victim in the burn unit of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, a fifteen-year-old girl whose face had been disfigured by acid thrown by a boy whose sexual advances she had spurned. Matiur was so moved and incensed by what he saw, he wondered (as he later related): “How often have I gone mad over breaking news in the bizarre forest of politics and economics? All those strikes and speeches, do they mean anything? How important are they compared to this tragedy? And how many times will this continue? Why should one burn someone’s face with acid?”

He resolved to do something about it. *Prothom Alo* did not only campaign against the crime in its pages, it initiated, organized, or supported various awareness-raising events, like public forums, seminars, concerts, and a countrywide cycling tour meant to bring the message to the grass roots. On March 8, 2002 (on the occasion of International Women’s Day), *Prothom Alo* and the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) organized a unique and highly successful “men’s rally” that was staged in Dhaka and forty cities. The rally was meant to arouse the men to denounce acid throwing and act to prevent its incidence. From October to December 2003 alone, *Prothom Alo* organized awareness raising meetings at the grassroots level in forty districts. The campaign continues all over the country.

Earlier, on April 19, 2000, the *Prothom Alo* Aid Fund was formed to raise money to cover all facets of the anti-acid throwing campaign: popular education, legal and medical aid, counseling, and livelihood and educational assistance for victims. Kicked off by the *Prothom Alo* staff who pledged to donate part of their salaries, an effective fund campaign was mounted that included events like the auction of prized paintings and cricket bats autographed by star players of the game. The public response was inspiring. By June 2006, the drive had generated 10.2 million taka (US\$1=Taka 65.72).

Direct assistance was extended to 197 acid-burned women by 2006, in the form of monthly stipends to those unable to work, capital for livelihood, counseling, vocational training, and educational scholarships. Livelihood assistance included such grants as a gift of a cow, sewing machine, trawler, small store, or (in the case of a destitute and homeless victim) a small house and lot. Indirect assistance included donations to non-government organizations involved in helping victims as well as funding for additional facilities at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital Burn Unit.

The campaign inspired government to take action on the problem, as instanced in the passage and enforcement of the Acid Crimes Prevention Act and the Acid Control Act, which stiffened penalties for acid throwers and tightened licensing requirements for acid sales. Government imposed control over the import of eleven different types of acids, which were imported freely in the past, and introduced new measures to regulate the sale of acids.

The *Prothom Alo* Aid Fund for acid victims was so successful that it was featured in an Asian Development Bank publication, *Investing in Ourselves: Giving and Fund Raising in Bangladesh* (2002), as a model effort in local fund mobilization to address a social problem, citing the fact that the bulk of the fund was contributed by students, workers, and ordinary wage earners.

*Prothom Alo* has taken up other advocacies, like HIV/AIDS education and control, the campaign against drugs, and emergency relief to flood and cyclone victims. When floods devastated Bangladesh in 2004 and in the years that followed, *Prothom Alo* spearheaded a relief effort that provided flood-affected people in forty-four districts with food, clothing, medicine, and rehabilitation assistance. Around a million people were provided with help in various forms over the years. In the campaign against drug abuse, *Prothom Alo* mounted a vigorous campaign that included, in addition to reports and features in the newspaper, activities like meetings, rallies, concerts, and the distribution of propaganda materials to create public awareness about the problem, specially among the students and youth.

In the anti-AIDS campaign, the newspaper organized a huge rally and concert for the youth in Dhaka on December 1, 2004, with celebrity artists and entertainers participating, in observance of World AIDS Day. On the same day, *Prothom Alo* collaborated with the Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere (CARE) in holding AIDS awareness rallies in forty districts across the country. To make this effort a success, millions of stickers and posters were delivered throughout the country. While official figures indicate that HIV prevalence in Bangladesh is low, *Prothom Alo* has taken a proactive approach, aware of the country’s vulnerability because of factors like cross-border migration, poverty, systemic gender inequality, and an inadequate health care system.

Under Matiur’s leadership, *Prothom Alo* has been involved in programs aimed at improving education in science and culture for the youth. It has done this by initiating in 2003, with financial assistance from Dutch-Bangla Bank, an annual national Math Olympiad. Twenty-five thousand students participated in the Olympiad in 2004-2006. As a result of this effort, Bangladesh has begun to send participants to the World Mathematics Olympiad. To honor the sacrifice of students in the 1952 campaign

to make Bangla the state language, *Prothom Alo* also organizes Bangla language competitions aimed at promoting knowledge of the mother tongue and literature. Fifteen thousand students from 333 schools have participated in this program in the last three years. The competitions are done on both local and national levels.

To recognize exemplary work in the field of culture, *Prothom Alo* gives out annual awards for achievements in creative writing, sports, and entertainment. The paper sponsors other social and cultural activities, including school debates.

Matiur says: “In *Prothom Alo*, we are not only into good words but also good works.”

AT the center of all its activities is the responsible practice of journalism. If *Prothom Alo* has been effective in mobilizing civic action on a score of issues it is because of its popularity, credibility, and reputation for editorial independence and disinterested public service.

*Prothom Alo* has demonstrated its boldness and independence on a number of issues. It is the first Bangladeshi newspaper to report on the training of militants in certain Islamic *madrasas*. In 2004, it ran a series of stories on terrorism, “Terrorist Activities in Greater Chittagong,” that sparked demands from religious extremists for a ban on the paper and the arrest of Matiur Rahman. The paper’s billboards were smashed and torched and copies of the newspaper burned by protestors in various parts of the country. Nevertheless, this has not deterred the paper from confronting the growing threat of terrorism in the South Asian region.

In the same year, the publishers, editors (including Matiur), and reporters of *Prothom Alo* were charged, convicted, and fined for contempt of court after they published reports on the alleged tampering of the educational and professional credentials of an appointee to the High Court Division of the Supreme Court. This attack on press freedom was protested by national and international media groups.

Matiur and his paper have been harassed with threats, boycotts, and lawsuits. Harassment has taken such forms as the withholding of government advertising and allocations of newsprint imported at a favorable tariff rate. In 2001, after Matiur criticized the state minister for information for discriminating against certain newspapers in the allocation of newsprint and award of government advertising, government suspended the transmission of *Prothom Alo* news through the twenty-four-hour news service of the Grameen cellular phone network, which counts millions of subscribers.

In response, Matiur and his paper have been active in the defense of journalists and the campaign against media repression. When the journalist Tipu Sultan was brutally assaulted in 2001 by henchmen of a member of parliament because of reports he had written, *Prothom Alo* and *Daily Star* did not only denounce the assault but started a fund drive that raised US\$40,000 for the journalist’s treatment. Today, Matiur has created a fund for rehabilitating injured journalists and assisting the families of journalists who were injured or lost their lives in the performance of their duties.

*Prothom Alo* has been vocal against corruption, undemocratic government policies and actions, political violence, and religious extremism. It has consistently urged public accountability, the values of openness and pluralism, and the rights of religious and tribal minorities. It is a voice for constructive dialogue and reform in addressing the country’s problems. It has demonstrated this not only through its editorials and reportage. It has proactively organized multisectoral seminars and dialogues at district and national levels to mobilize public opinion and influence public policies.

To help foster an informed public opinion, Matiur published books that draw from reportage he has done through the years. These include *Ek Dophā, Ershad Sarkar O Bikalpa Bhabna* (One Point, Ershad Government, and Alternative Thoughts, 1988), on Bangladesh politics in the mid-eighties; *Khola Hawa, Khola Mon* (Fresh Air, Open Mind, 1988), on glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union; *Itihasheer Staya Sandhane: Bishishtojander Mukhomukhi* (In Quest of Historical Truths: Interviews of Prominent Personalities, 2004); and *Kar Rajniti, Kisher Rajniti* (Whose Politics, What Politics, 2004), on politics in Bangladesh. In addition, he has compiled and edited—through partnerships between *Prothom Alo* and other organizations—books of articles contributed by eminent persons on the history, politics, and economy of Bangladesh.

In all these efforts, *Prothom Alo* has prioritized the interests and welfare of its readers. Matiur says, “Our source of might is our readers and the people; we are inspired only by them.” Readers look to *Prothom Alo* as “a hope against hope,” Matiur says. “I work to use it for the cause of the people.” Elsewhere, he writes, underscoring his paper’s activist stance: “We do not dwell on dreams alone; we stand by the people in need. Our role is not limited to the publishing of news alone. We put forward our opinion.”

MATUIR Rahman lives in Dhaka. While completely invested in journalism, he has cultivated his own personal interests in culture, reading on various subjects (he is particularly fond of autobiographies) and collecting books on Pablo Picasso and Che Guevara (subjects of longstanding interest for Matiur), autographs of famous people, and paintings by Bangladeshi and Indian artists.

His wife, Maleka, has continued to pursue her own remarkable career. Considered “one of the most important voices in the women’s movement of the country,” she organized the first and largest left-oriented women’s organization in Bangladesh, acting as its general secretary for twenty-one years. She has a master’s degree in Bengali language and a doctorate in sociology from Dhaka University. She stays deeply involved in women’s causes through her teaching and writing. She has campaigned and written extensively on violence against women and was party to the landmark case in 2000 in the Bangladesh High Court holding *fatwas* unlawful.

Matiur is wholly dedicated to his work, confident that it is important and that he is making a difference. He typically wakes up at around six a.m., goes for a walk or a jog for an hour, eats breakfast, takes notes for the day’s work, and makes phone calls to the office and staff. He is in the office at around eleven a.m. and his day is usually taken up by discussions and meetings with visitors and staff. He stays in the office until a little past midnight as the paper goes to the press, and he leaves happily for home with a copy of the paper for the day.

He did not train in a school of journalism but learned the profession on the job. He is helped by his appetite for learning. “I’m still learning,” he says, “I want to know more and learn more.” He credits his success to his colleagues, many of whom have worked with him for years. “Without them, I would be nowhere.” He is proud that *Prothom Alo* has in its staff and pool of contributors the country’s leading writers, columnists, and intellectuals.

He acknowledges that, in Bangladesh as elsewhere, media freedom can be compromised by the reality that newspapers, television, and radio are often controlled by large corporations with investments in fields other than media. He believes, however, that he has been fortunate for working in a media outfit that encourages community involvement (or what is, fashionably, called “corporate social responsibility”), and is aware of the long-term compatibilities of business growth and the exercise of a free and responsible press. In this respect, he gives due credit to the positive working relationship he has had with Latifur Rahman and *Prothom Alo* publisher Mahfuz Anam.

Looking towards the future, he believes that the paper’s circulation can still grow. He is enthusiastic about the possibilities of *Prothom Alo* branching out into other publications or forging partnerships with other media, like television and radio. He remains excited by the prospect that the media in Bangladesh can still do more as a professional organization as well as social institution. Citing the case of *Prothom Alo*, he proudly says: “I’m reaching 2.5 million people everyday.”

THE challenge of working in one of the world’s most populous and poorest countries is formidable. The current population of Bangladesh is estimated at 147 million. While poverty reduction rates have improved over the past decade, poverty and all its concomitant problems remain a large and urgent concern. While democracy has been restored, political stability remains a problem.

Coming out of a violent history of political, religious, and ethnic strife, Bangladesh is confronted by problems familiar to new states elsewhere in the world where the state is weak, factionalized, and (in

many cases) repressive. In such a situation, the need is great for popular-civic action to address problems that government does not or cannot address. Such action is also vital in creating conditions for strong, effective, and democratic governance. People themselves have to address deficits in public services and mobilize to defend and advance their rights.

The people of Bangladesh have shown that they have the cultural resources to rise up to this challenge. It is remarkable (but not entirely surprising) that Bangladesh has given rise to a large and innovative “civil society.” The number of government-registered, locally initiated non-government organizations (NGOs) increased from 293 in 1990 to 1,045 in 1997. These include the world-renowned Grameen Bank, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Proshika, and Association for Social Advancement (ASA), which offer services that are often superior in quality and wider in coverage than government services. Their efficacy and grassroots character are shown in studies indicating that while roughly 74 percent of government resources benefit the non-poor, 66 percent of NGO resources reach the poor.

Media organizations are an important part of this burgeoning civil society. From the time military rule ended in 1990, the number of newspapers increased fourfold, to 282 as of 2002. A similar expansion has been witnessed in radio, television, and the new electronic media.

It is in this context that one can locate the role played by *Prothom Alo*. Unlike their counterparts in advanced Western countries, newspapers in Bangladesh like *Prothom Alo* often find themselves in a situation where they have to assume a more interventionist and multifarious role. They go beyond simply “reporting the news” (without neglecting, of course, that this is their first and primary function) to “making the news” by assuming a proactive stance in building public opinion as well as responding to urgent needs that are not adequately met by government. This explains the initiatives *Prothom Alo* has taken in mobilizing public opinion (such as multisectoral forums, opinion polls, and lobbying). This underlies as well its efforts to leverage its advantages as a media institution to address problems like the crime of acid attacks and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The affinities between media work and civic activism are illustrated in Matiur Rahman’s career. He has served in the governing board of BRAC (2003-2004), “the world’s largest NGO,” and the executive committee of South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR) (2001-2003); and participated in the non-governmental South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in its election monitoring work in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. He has attended conferences in various countries on such issues as the Palestine crisis, terrorism, the rights of children, and the role of media in society.

An “interventionist” media has its dangers. Newspapers can lose their focus, overreach themselves, and compromise their credibility as they get entangled in partisan and sectarian interests. Discerning what causes it will take up, for what ends and by what means will be an important test for *Prothom Alo* in the years ahead.

Matiur appreciates the daunting challenge that confronts Bangladesh media as it deals not only with age-old problems like ignorance, corruption, and poverty but also the pressures of today’s globalized world. He says:

*The world of mass media today is in turmoil. The post World War II intellectual edifice of international laws, norms and practices are today under serious challenge as the bipolar world learns to deal with one super power in the international scene. The war on terror and the traditional values of liberalism and an open society, on which the Western media flourished for so long, are on an apparent collision course. There are clear signs of erosion in the fundamental values of individual freedom and national independence under the pressure to ensure national security, both real and imaginary.*

*In the developing world, new social and economic challenges, the ever-increasing burden of poverty, and the marginalization of the poor have brought the media into deeper questions about their relevance and purpose. Rising corruption, the nexus between politics and crime, disregard for the law by the rich and the powerful, and the clear danger of social outburst caused by neglect and continued discrimination have revealed, as never before, the possible constructive role that an independent and socially committed media can play.*

Matiur says that the contributions of *Prothom Alo* will ultimately be judged as to how well it performs this role.

HE is a social optimist. Despite the problems of poverty, corruption, political polarization, and the threat of extremist violence, Matiur remains hopeful about his country's future. "There are good things happening outside government," he says, "in the grass roots, civil society and the private sector, and all that is needed is better direction, a more sustained and concerted effort by all." He looks to media's role as crucial in this effort:

*The role of the media has now become more important. It has become the last platform to pin our hopes on. As far as the masses are concerned, when they cannot pin their hopes on the government, or the administration, or the political parties, they rely on the newspapers. They hope we would play a role.*

Matiur Rahman believes that media must take up this challenge so that "the positive Bangladesh" will prevail over "the negative Bangladesh." "We should take," he says, "a better, more constructive role as journalists so we can really help raise the voice of the people, stand by them, and try to help them solve the country's problems."

Resil B. Mojares

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