

# Fear and Killing in Bangladesh

by Gino Leineweber

“You are an atheist, your father was an atheist, we will kill you, we will cut off your head and nail it on the *Statue Against Terrorism* in Dhaka”.

My attention to the bloggers’ scene in Bangladesh was first drawn by the International P.E.N. program: *Writers in Prison* (WiP) in May 2015. At that date, three bloggers were killed by Islamic militants and others threatened with murder.

On behalf of International P.E.N., I wrote to the President of Bangladesh, Mr. Abdul Hamid, and to the Prime Minister, Ms Sheikh Hasina. I demanded to take care for the security of the threatened bloggers, but to no avail. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of August, another blogger was brutally slain—in his own home. Again I wrote and insisted that all attacks and threats against writers and journalists must be vigorously investigated so that those responsible can be brought to justice. Furthermore, I demanded that all necessary actions should be taken to protect writers, whose life is at risk.

Some weeks later I learned that one of the threatened bloggers, Ananya Azad, thanks to an invitation from the Hamburger Stiftung für politisch Verfolgte (Hamburg Foundation for Supporting Political Persecuted People) is now living in Germany. I made an appointment with him, and met a young and sympathetic man with a body that seemed fragile to me, but with a mind that was straight-forward and strong

I found out Ananya was the son of one of the most famous writers and scholars in Bangladesh, the late Humayun Azad, who himself was threatened by Islamic militants.

Not only threatened. In 1990 Humayun Azad started writing columns for newspapers. He always expressed himself as a nonconformist, an agnostic, and a critic of religious extremism of Islam. In 1992 he published a book with the title *Naari (Women)*, in which he criticized the male-controlled attitude of religion towards women. The book became a bestseller, but soon after, in 1995, it was banned by the government. In 2003, after his new novel *Pak Sar Jamin Sad Bad (Pakistan’s national anthem; The Blessed Sacred Land)* was first published by *The Daily Ittefaq*, he was threatened by Islamic fundamentalists. Moreover, during the annual “Bangla Academy Book Fair”, he was brutally attacked.

Ananya told me that his father was seriously injured with a machete. The doctor in the hospital then said, he was clinically dead for more than seventy-two hours, but luckily survived. Although the people of Bangladesh protested against this attack, nevertheless the government's reaction showed, as Ananya said, that its members were connected to the war criminals from 1971. At the time of the attack, Bangladesh had a coalition government consisting of Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami Party. Jamaat openly supported the war criminals and intends to establish the Islamic law, the Sharia. The government never seriously investigated, who were the attackers. Ananya was saying: "On the contrary. They didn't do anything to avoid more threatening not only to my father, but to the whole family. At that time I was thirteen, a schoolboy, my two older sisters were university students, but because of lack of safety we couldn't attend our classes. We even couldn't go to exam sessions."

I asked Ananya whether they wanted to leave the country, and he answered that it was never an option. His father used to declare: "I fight the government for freedom of expression." But, because of his family was in a great danger, he, in an open letter, asked for compassion for his family and almost begged for help. He wrote: "If the government or the Islamic militants are angry with me, let them criticize me openly, but they should not attack my family."

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of July in this year 2004 Islamic militants tried to kidnap the thirteen-year-old Ananya in front of his house, just a day after his father had declared he wanted to go to Germany for research of the poet Heinrich Heine. The German P.E.N. supported him and arranged his stay in Germany. He openly made clear he will come back after he has finished his research. He departed for Germany on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of August he was found dead in his flat in Munich. It was three days after he last talked to Ananya on the phone...

When I asked Ananya why and how his father died, he answered, it was a mystery. It was never investigated in detail. It could be a heart attack. Could be, but not sure. He could be poisoned from drugs, however that isn't sure either. In autopsy they found elements of sleeping pills, what, according to his son, is very peculiar, because his father never took any pills.

I felt compassion to Ananya. His story about his father moved me. It is sad and hardly bearable to lose a father in a young age (although it is never easy). With the situation around—seeing father's struggle for free expression, suffering for and with him, not

knowing how the beloved father died—how could anyone stay strong and still have faith? Nobody would wonder if under such circumstances one chooses more quiet life, without fear and danger, so to say—normal life. But that was apparently never an option for Ananya. He not only got father's genes making him to stand up against injustice, but also genes of his mother, brave woman, who firmly denied to obey orders of political leaders of Bangladesh. After the mysterious death of her husband, she was requested to leave the country, but she said: "No! No matter what happens to me and my children, we won't leave." Even after the loss and long suffering, she did not break. She is a woman with principles. As a librarian she knows well about the power of written word, books and literature. She was convinced that the struggle, her husband (and now her son) is in, one day will succeed. From her side, she was fighting for the right of education, literacy, university for everyone in Bangladesh.

As early as in the age of fifteen, Ananya published his first article in a daily newspaper, and continued writing articles for two or three years. His articles were about his father, who was not only a famous writer, but also a poet and highly esteemed scholar. But as he, Ananya, wanted to write articles with other topics, the editor demanded: no critical ones. Ananya refused and quit the newspaper. In 2012 he started blogging, with the idea that everything prohibited in the government controlled newspaper could be openly expressed on Internet.

"Is that the reason why bloggers in Bangladesh are so active?" I asked him, and he nodded in agreement. "In newspapers you can't", he told me, "criticize Muhammad, Islamic, or Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian religion. Can't say anything against religion at all. On that our government is clear. If anyone is writing against religion, he or she will be arrested".

Ananya said Bangladesh claims itself to be something that it is not: a democratic country. Moreover, the political leaders always manipulate the Law. The common people in Bangladesh practically don't have any rights. Ananya said, most of the people in his country are illiterate, and they don't read much in general. And most of the Bangladesh people do not like to hear criticism about religion or anything else.

I asked him, if the ability to make critical remarks on religion is the reason for the blogger scene in Bangladesh to be so active. "If you take about all bloggers," Ananya told me, "that is not entirely right. In Bangladesh there is a variety of bloggers' groups. One

group is political bloggers, who support the government. Another writes about Islamic people and support them.”

The bloggers expressing criticism, the ones that are threatened by Islamic militants, are known as the so-called ‘group of 84’. It is named so because of the list released by an Islamic organization “Hefazote Islam” in 2013—the list, which marked 84 bloggers as their target. “Hefazote Islam” took the list to the Ministry of Interior and demanded to arrest and punish everyone from the list. If not, the organization would ‘take care’ of the ones in the list by itself. The same year two other organizations, “Jamaat-e-Islami” and “Islami Chatro-Shibir”, published their own target lists, but the most published list is the ‘84-list’.

2013 was also the year when the first blogger was killed. In January of 2013, the blogger Asif Mohiuddin was brutally attacked by Islamic militants, but he survived. Probably Ananya, apart from other experiences, had in mind the fate of this colleague blogger Asif Mohiuddin when he was saying: “Our authorities seem to be more concerned with what bloggers are writing than to catch their killers. The main objective of the police should be to provide protection, but instead of doing their duty properly, police is also criticizing bloggers.”

So, instead of chasing the attackers, the police, in April of 2013, arrested Mohiuddin and three other bloggers for ‘blasphemous posts’. Mohiuddin was sentenced to prison, but released three months later. He moved to Germany, but still faces charges in Bangladesh. In February of 2013 Rajib Haider was brutally killed in front of his house. He used to post comments about religious fundamentalism. He was hacked to death by machete-wielding fighters from a militant group associated with the Jamaat-e-Islami party.

By now, in 2015, Bangladesh was shaken by four dead bloggers:

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, Avijit Roy, a U.S. citizen of Bangladeshi origin, was hacked to death also by machete-wielding assailants on the way home, while returning with his wife and fellow blogger, Rafida Ahmed, from a Book fair. The wife was seriously injured, but survived.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, Washiqur Rahman, who blogged under the pen-names, either Kucchit Hasher Channa, or Ugly Duckling, was attacked and killed near his home, in Dhaka's Begunbari area.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of May, an editor and a blogger, Ananta Bijoy Das, was killed by four masked men on his way to the bank, in the city of Sylhet.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of August, Niloy Neel, was attacked and hacked to death by a gang of about six

men armed with machetes in his house, in the Goran area of Dhaka.

A new Islamic organization, “Ansurullah Bangla Team,” claimed their responsibility for the four killings. All four bloggers were on that 84-list of 2013. The same list, which “Hefazote Islam” sent to the government and demanded arrests, threatening that otherwise they themselves would ‘take care’ of the ones in the list. Apparently, “Ansurullah Bangla Team”, was founded in 2015 as the ‘execution group’ that will continue killing—one by one.

Ananya said: “I was their target. Yet, I am in Germany now. But they killed Niloy...”. I asked him, whether he knew him, and he replied: “He was my closest friend.”

After saying this, Ananya became more vulnerable, deep sadness overwhelmed his face, and now it was visible what sacrifice he made and what fatal danger he was facing all these years. Talking to Ananya I felt him as a sensual being with dreams and desires, as all of us. And above all—with certain aims and civil duties that he pursued in his life.

The 84 secular bloggers are writing about topics like the right of free expression, women’s rights, human rights, minority rights, the right to criticize fundamental sides of Islam or other religions, etc. It is a small group of people in a country with over 150 million citizens. Anaya’s writing and his struggle is focussing on the right of free expression—the right that the UN General Assembly, in its very first session, in 1946, adopted in a resolution as a “fundamental human right”.

His struggle turned Anaya Azad to the main target of Islamic militants and put him on the 84-list, especially after he, on TV, criticized the government, the police and the Islamic militants for the killing of two bloggers in February and March, 2015. In May, the organization “Ansarullah Bangla” posted on their website his photo and made a cross sign on his face and declared he will be the next. Shortly after, he got another threatening message on Facebook, quoted in the beginning of this article: “You are an atheist, your father was an atheist, we will cut off your head and nail it at the Statue Against Terrorism in Dhaka.”

Because of the serious threats, he had to leave his education as a student of Marketing that he was already half through in doing his master degree. His life was in such a danger that he couldn’t attend any classes or take examinations. When he was walking on the streets, he never did it alone—always with friends around or wearing a helmet. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2015, around 11:00 p.m., he was with friends chatting near his house. Suddenly noticed, four people starring at him. A day later, driving home, he saw four

people on two bikes following him. He changed his route, so did they. He called his friends and asked them to come to a certain place, agreed and chosen in advance for this kind of emergency. After the multiple worries of his friends that reminded him, 'he would probably be the next', he felt, he cannot bear it any longer. The threats and the danger he was in were obvious nationally as well as internationally through the press. The German foundation decided to contact him at that time. They offered him a place in Germany.

He arrived there on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June, and that most likely saved his life, because the government, or the police in his own country, do not protect the bloggers. On the contrary, as you can see in a post of Ananya on Facebook on the 10<sup>th</sup> of August: "Yesterday IGP (Inspector General of Police) warned bloggers 'not to cross the line'. And today we hear and know, that if anybody writes anything about religion, he or she will be locked in prison. The police and the government focus on bloggers, not on the killers. The Minister of Industry said, that this kind of killing is so called political. What is this – the political killing? Every killing is killing. People are dying. And we don't get any justice. What else one needs to prove that Bangladesh government is clearly taking the fundamentalist's side?"

Ananya now is in exile. That means, he is, more or less, safe (even still there are threats to kill him, even in Germany). We, in Germany, had a lot of writers that were forced to go to exile in the 1930st years. From writings and lectures of these writers, I learned a lot about the feeling of an exile. At least, I was aware how Ananya feels, when I met him... He confirmed it himself after my question how he is feeling: "It is another culture, and I do not know, what will happen after a year ... whether I could go back, or not. If I decide to risk ... maybe, I will. I love Germany, love a lot of things here, I am definitely safer. But I miss my mother, I miss my family, my culture, my friends. I want to be a free man, walk on the streets and be able to go anywhere. I can do it here, in Germany, but I don't have friends and family here. I spend my time reading or writing. It keeps me going, but I miss a lot too, especially my language. The language is a part of my culture, and in exile it is apart from you. But I am alive, and I can write."

What I saw in Ananya Azad, is a brave young man with a spirit that is unbroken. The sacrifice he made, and the threats he is facing did not distance him from his life aim. I hold him in high regard and my thoughts are with him and his love ones that suffer with him. What that latter means shows deeply evident a recent post on Facebook by one of

his sisters: "Miss you so much ... want to hug you, want to hold your hand tightly bro ... miss you every seconds that we passed together ... take care."

Postsript:

On 31<sup>st</sup> of October 2015, while finishing these article, the Bangladeshi publisher *Faisal Arefin Deepan* was brutally stabbed to death in his office. He published, amongst others, books by the blogger *Avijit Roy*, who himself, as mentioned, was murdered in February 2015. As a concerted action, another publisher was attacked in his office, together with two visitors (a poet resp. a blogger). All three were seriously injured, and the attackers ceased and left apparently only because they thought the victims were dead.