

Remembering Xulhaz

KASIA PAPROCKI

Xulhaz Mannan, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights activist, was killed in Dhaka because of the meaningful impact he was making to foster a more diverse, equitable, and tolerant society. It made him a threat to those who seek to close this space of pluralism and syncretism which has been celebrated in Bangladesh for so long.

In the aftermath of the brutal murder of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights activists Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy at Xulhaz's home in Dhaka on 25 April 2016, journalists and pundits denounced the deteriorating law and order situation in Bangladesh and the failure of the government to protect the free speech and security of its citizens. While Xulhaz's role as the founder and editor of *Roopbaan*, the country's first and only LGBT magazine, has been widely publicised, little else has been written about his activism or his commitment to his country and culture.

Although *Roopbaan* remained the most visible manifestation of Xulhaz's work among and on behalf of Dhaka's gay community, his efforts and vision extended much deeper. They are critical to understanding the importance of his work. Unlike many of the victims of previous extremist attacks which have escalated in Bangladesh since 2013, Xulhaz did not intend to make claims about the character of secularism, or Islam, but about a particular vision of the pluralism of Bengali culture and society.

Identity and Commitment

As an activist, Xulhaz always insisted that he was a Bengali first, and this identity and commitment to Bangladesh is what drove his vision for *Roopbaan* and the rest of his work. His humble grace, integrity, and sense of humour made him an adept and widely respected leader. But it was his deep belief in the profound pluralism of Bangladeshi society, which drove his commitment to building a more equitable and tolerant nation and made his voice so powerful. It would be a mistake to allow this tragedy to belie that pluralism and openness.

I first came to know Xulhaz in 2006, when we worked together on a project supporting former garment workers to develop workers' cooperatives in a slum on the east side of Dhaka where they lived. Whereas many fieldworkers of

non-governmental organisations (often upper middle class urbanites), who work with poorer communities, such as farmers and slum-dwellers, sometimes cultivate an air of condescension with members of communities such as these, Xulhaz always came with a kind and open heart. I was moved by the tenderness with which he spoke to these women, and his studied concern for their conditions and what could be done to support their own organising efforts among themselves. Xulhaz liked to listen more than lecture. He brought this brand of quiet and perceptive leadership to his work on behalf of the United States (us) embassy in Dhaka (where he served as an assistant to two ambassadors, offering invaluable insights into cultural norms and diplomacy), and of course, to his work as an organiser among Dhaka's gay community.

Crusader for LGBT Rights

Xulhaz's efforts as both a leader within and an advocate for the gay community were truly groundbreaking. He grappled with balancing his long-held determination to create safe spaces for the LGBT community in Dhaka, with his commitment to being an advocate for LGBT rights in Bangladesh more broadly. In the aftermath of his murder, indicating his pioneering work to promote visibility and claim rights, Xulhaz has been called "the Harvey Milk of Bangladesh," referring to the legendary American gay rights activist and politician.

Yet, it would be a mistake to think of Xulhaz's vision, or the movement he led, as derivative. Indeed, they have always been resolutely, determinedly, Bangladeshi. Xulhaz was committed to building an indigenous LGBT movement by and for Bangladeshis. He was conscious of claims that homosexuality is foreign to Bangladesh, and that an LGBT rights movement was imported. Xulhaz went to great lengths to prove these claims wrong, often refusing support where it was offered in order to assert and affirm this independence. Even while he was open about his own sexuality, he, in fact, rarely referred to himself as "gay," a word with no comfortable Bengali translation, due to this concern with claiming an unambiguously Bengali, not foreign, identity.

Kasia Paprocki (kasiapaprocki.com) is a research scholar in the Department of Development Sociology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

Likewise, he easily could have left Bangladesh if he had wanted to, but had no interest in doing so. “This is my home,” he said to me once, after the threats against him had started, “I have work to do here.” On the many occasions when I asked to connect him with international LGBT advocacy groups and donors to support his work, he rejected the offers, explaining that they needed to prove their autonomy. He would accept solidarity, not charity or patronage.

Roopbaan

His work on *Roopbaan* reflected this vision concerned with creating local social change within Bangladesh, speaking and organising inwardly, not to the outside world. It also reflected an ongoing struggle to balance community work within and on behalf of the gay community. The magazine was itself preceded by a much less polished publication, more like a zine, circulated exclusively within the gay community of Dhaka, produced by and primarily for several friends and fellow activists.

When they began to imagine a more professional publication with a broader circulation, Xulhaz talked privately about his anxieties concerning the challenges of creating a publication for the gay community, while realising that it would also implicitly come to represent the gay community. What would people think? How would they respond? Could it possibly foster a broader acceptance? Xulhaz knew he did not speak for or represent all of Bangladesh’s LGBT community, which is, of course, extremely diverse.

When the death threats against him and his colleagues started appearing on the internet shortly after the publication of the first issue, Xulhaz weighed them against the overwhelmingly positive reception the publication received from the broader community. Certainly the threats bothered him, but he seemed largely unconcerned—chalking them up to the pitfalls of the enhanced visibility which he was, after all, seeking.

Rainbow Rally

I had the opportunity to witness the positive reception of Xulhaz’s activism first-hand in 2015, when he organised

the second *Rangdhanu Jatra* (or “Rainbow Rally”) during the *Pohela Boishakh* (Bengali new year) festival. This was the second year they had organised a Rangdhanu Jatra to take part in the Pohela Boishakh parade. Beginning near dawn on the first day of the Bengali calendar, thousands of people from all walks of life gather for the parade starting near the Fine Arts faculty of the University of Dhaka campus, where students create large, colourful floats and puppets for the procession. Women wear flower garlands in their hair and there are masks and banners and vendors selling noise-makers and bangles.

For the Rangdhanu Jatra, Xulhaz and friends created masks and decorations in various colours made out of paper flowers and balloons in the spirit of the new year celebration, with the organising principle of *boishakh*, *boichetra*, *bandhutta*, or new year, diversity, friendship. We dressed up in different colours of saris and Punjabi suits and lined up like a rainbow to join in the procession. As a crowd of dozens of people, including several hijras, dressed up in bright colours with decorative paper leaves, flowers and animals, we were already attracting attention before the parade began. Many spectators, including families and even groups of policemen, stopped to take pictures with us.

As we prepared to fall in line, Xulhaz moved through the group with a slightly nervous but earnest and resolute energy. How would people respond? They had already received threats, would this be

the day they were acted upon? Positioned near the front myself, I watched the crowd somewhat cautiously for sneers or taunts. Tonoy himself led the procession in the middle of the front line, striking in a bright yellow sari, trumpeting a *shankha* (conch) which rang out impressively. As we proceeded, the energy of the group lifted as we found the crowd to be overwhelmingly receptive.

People were excited to see the Rangdhanu Jatra. They smiled and cheered and waved. Photographers clamoured for pictures. One journalist stopped me to ask why we were marching. I told him simply “Pohela Boishakh is for everyone.” At one point, the procession became congested, as the parade in front of us was backed up, and we were being crowded from in front and behind. A line of people materialised in front of us from the crowd, clasped hands facing us, and began to push backwards, to create space and protect our group so we could continue, and everyone could see. The crowd was responding not only without malice, but with support and encouragement. They, too, believed in the diversity of Pohela Boishakh.

What an incredibly proud moment this was for Xulhaz. Not only had he facilitated this safe space for members of the LGBT community to participate proudly in the Pohela Boishakh celebration, but the gathered crowds had responded exactly as he hoped and believed they would. The Rangdhanu Jatra, like Pohela Boishakh itself, was a celebration of Bengaliness, of the unique syncretism

Oral History Archives

On behalf of EPW, the Centre for Public History, Srishti School of Design, Bengaluru, has put together extended interviews of 30 individuals associated with *Economic Weekly* and EPW.

These are interviews with present and former staff, readers, writers and trustees, all closely associated with the journal.

The interviews cover both the EW and EPW years, some are of the 1950s, others the 1960s and some even later. Each interview lasts for at least an hour and a few are multi-session interviews.

The interviews maintained in audio files (with transcripts) are available at the EPW offices in Mumbai for consultation by researchers.

Individuals interested in researching those times and the history of EW/EPW may write to edit@epw.in to explore how the files may be heard and used.

and dynamism that characterises Bengali culture. This positive reception indicated the success of the efforts he led in community organising focused within Bangladeshi society more broadly.

This year, Xulhaz had helped organise a third Rangdhanu Jatra to participate in Pohela Boishakh. Their plans continued despite mounting threats, until the police ordered them to cancel the programme late the night before. Unable to get ahold of everyone to notify them of the cancellation at such short notice, Xulhaz went the following morning to inform those who had not heard the news. A few asked if they could take some of the prepared paper flowers anyway and participate individually in the festivities. It seemed no extraordinary request—the decorations, while lovely, are not so different from any others on display at the festival.

Just over a week before he died, he wrote me a note explaining that he saw no harm (is not Pohela Boishakh for everyone, after all? Is it a crime for a gay man to celebrate the New Year?). After

Xulhaz returned home, four of these men were later detained by the police, charged with attempting to initiate a Rangdhanu Jatra. Xulhaz spent all day working to get them out of jail. The men were finally released to their parents late at night, after the police informed them that their sons were homosexuals, and released the names of the arrested to the press. Xulhaz later described this to me as “a day of absolute trauma”. He must have felt incredible defeat. In the face of last year’s unqualified success, how could he understand this profound sea change? In his note, he expressed sadness and anger. “I am utterly disgusted by this,” he wrote.

His organising strategies, focusing on social mobilisation and outreach as opposed to service delivery, illuminate the deep rift in Bangladesh between the political struggles of activists and deeply depoliticised, donor-funded NGOs. Xulhaz’s efforts were focused on creating social and political change within the broader community, indeed, building civil society directly. Yet, the work of so many donor-supported NGOs in Bangladesh

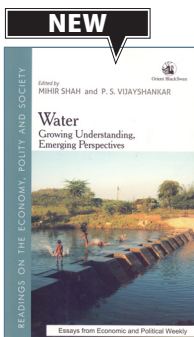
eschews this kind of political activism—a phenomenon certainly not limited to NGOs concerned with LGBT rights. Many civil society activists reached out to him to offer support in the days leading up to his death. Their political efforts, and the vision they shared with Xulhaz for Bangladesh, are precisely the subject of mounting fundamentalist intimidation and attacks.

Over the 10 years that I knew Xulhaz, I learned from him immeasurably about community organising and how to make social change. His death is a devastating loss not only for those who loved him and Dhaka’s gay community, but also for all of Bangladesh. In the end, Xulhaz was killed precisely because of the meaningful impact he was making to foster a more diverse, equitable, and tolerant society. It was these political claims which made him and his work a threat to those who seek to close this space of pluralism and syncretism which have so long been celebrated in Bangladesh. Recognition and celebration of this space is the best way to honour Xulhaz’s memory.

Water: Growing Understanding, Emerging Perspectives

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For decades after independence, Indian planning ignored the need for sustainability and equity in water resource development and management. There was just one way forward, that of harnessing the bounty in our rivers and below the ground. It was only in the 1990s that serious questions began to be raised on our understanding and approach to rivers.

This collection of essays, all previously published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* between 1990 and 2014, reflects the multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary character of water and spans hydrogeology, sociology, economics, political science, geography, history, meteorology, statistics, public policy, energy and ecology.

The essays are arranged thematically and chronologically: Water Resource Development and Management, Historical Perspectives, Social and Political Dimensions, Economic Concerns, and Water Policy.

With detailing of the huge diversity of concerns and points of departure, *Water: Growing Understanding, Emerging Perspectives* will be invaluable to students and scholars of sociology, economics, political science, geography, ecology and public policy.

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