

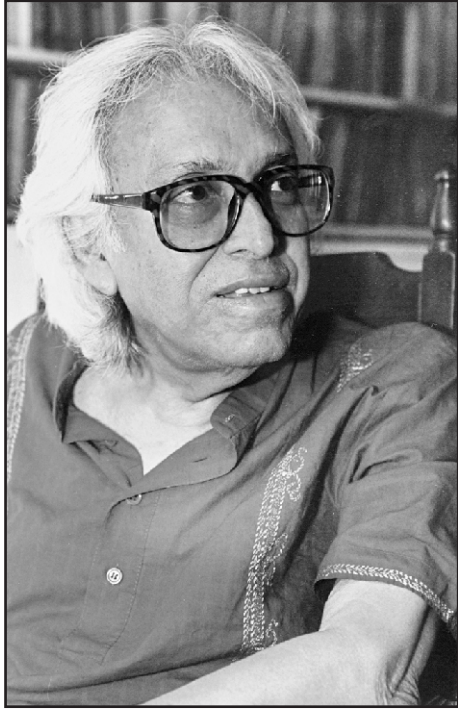
Shamsur Rahman: A tribute

ZILLUR RAHMAN SIDDIQUI

SHAMSUR Rahman left us on August 17. I am writing this obituary note on the 18th, barely 26 hours after his death. Ever since he was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit of the Bangabandhu Medical University Hospital he was in coma. There never was a doubt that he was critically ill. A Medical Board was formed and the Board kept us reassuring that the ailing poet was receiving treatment at the international level, whatever that might mean. The management of visitors, since access into the room showed a strange laxity, was far from being that standard. I, myself, was astounded when I found a cameraman from one of our TV channels, sitting next to his bed, taking pictures from very close quarters, and in an unhurried manner, with nobody opposing or protesting. It cannot be said, from the overall situation prevailing during those days, in and around the Intensive Care Unit of the hospital, that the poet was allowed to die in peace.

Shamsur Rahman became the leading poetical voice of our time. Quite early in his life, while still an undergraduate in the university, he made poetry the first vocation of his life. As a fellow student, studying the same subject, I can testify to this. During those early years, he quickly came to identify the latest trend in Bangla poetry, the trend of modernism set firmly by the group of poets conveniently called the Thirties Group. This group represented the cutting edge of Bangla poetry. The modern sensibility that marked his poetry almost from the beginning can be ascribed mainly to this early discovery. The fact that he was born, and grew up, in a city (not much of a city in those days by world standards but still a city) must have played its part in moulding the urban, and urbane, cast of his mind. Shamsur Rahman did not have to wait long before establishing a vital contact with the modernist poetry of the western world. The process was made easy by his access to English literature.

Shamsur Rahman's transition, from an intensely private to a largely public mode of poetry, goes to explain his emergence as a



public figure wearing a poet's mantle. This view about him has gained general assent. But this over-simplifies the real fact. Even before he started coming out of his private groove he had established his claim as the up and coming poet of his time. The turbulent 'sixties' drew him out of his alienation. Slowly, but inevitably, he reached a stage when his pulse beat with the same rhythm as his people's did. But here he achieved something quite uncommon. As a poet he gained new ground without losing hold of his old domain, his private world where he still retained much of his basic alienation, and his refusal to come to terms with the world as he found it. To any one surveying the corpus of his poetry it is preeminently personal as opposed to public. A poet is his individual self most of the time, and public only on occasion. This is as true of

Shamsur Rahman as it is of Pablo Neruda. True, his so called political poems have struck a sympathetic chord in the public mind. They enjoy a wider circulation among readers. But who can deny that the mystery lies in the poetic treatment of a popular theme, the very personal poetic attire that the poet was able to weave for the theme.

This naturally leads on to the issue of form and style. As a major poet he developed his individual poetic language, flexible, versatile, flowing and, strangely enough, lucid. His metrical competence is amazing, though he was never bound to a strictly predetermined form. When he did submit himself to one, as when writing a sonnet, he managed to play with the set rules with a freedom which is striking. His diction varies according to the demands of the particular poem, moving from the rhetorical to the colloquial, never shy of using the strange, and the unexpected, word. And finally, he has his complete mastery over the language that he gained through sensitive, and particular, attention to its undiscovered nuances. In any one of his typical poems, one is struck by the clever intermingling of the strange and the familiar. He is able to impress, without trying to be impressive. When he is most personal, verging on the confessional, his disarming candor does the magic. It establishes a kind of rapport between the poet and his reader that largely explains his wide, and unflinching, appeal as a poet.

Shamsur Rahman won the hearts of millions across national boundaries, and to his own people he became a sort of an icon. He did it through the magic of his poetry, and through the complete emotional identification with a people lost in the wilderness of political foolishness and failings. When he spoke out, as he did often enough, his voice was resonant. He was a source of moral strength to a people desperately looking for light and guidance. His death is a terrible loss for all of us at this hour of gloom and despondence. A bereaved nation has paid its tribute to its illustrious son in a manner which will be remembered for many years.

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui is a renowned educationalist.

The terror of August

HASAN ZILLUR RAHIM

ON Tuesday, August 8, I flew to San Francisco from London's Heathrow airport. The check-in was a breeze, and with a few hours to spare before boarding, I had time for some last-minute shopping: perfume, English biscuits, toffee, and tea.

The Virgin-Atlantic flight took off on time and we arrived at San Francisco a few minutes ahead of schedule. The only "inconvenience" I suffered was when I was among about 50 of my fellow-passengers, selected at random for baggage checking.

My annoyance must have shown on my face because the security officer said almost plaintively as she checked the contents of my suitcases: "We are just doing our duty, sir!"

Considering the number of times I have flown in and out of the country since 9/11, and this being the first time I had been thus "inconvenienced," I apologized for my impatience and assured her of my full cooperation. The entire process took about 10 minutes.

Little did I know that in less than 48 hours all hell would break loose at Heathrow and other British airports and also at major American airports. British police had apparently broken up a conspiracy to blow up 10 jetliners over the Atlantic, and over two dozen suspects were taken into custody, all Muslims living in Britain. Arrests were also made in Pakistan, including British citizen Rashid Rauf, identified as a key player in the plot.

A nightmare ensued for travelers, particularly those stranded in Britain, but with a rippling effect throughout the world. I couldn't thank God enough for leaving London when I did.

The inevitable backlash against

Muslims followed. Many American mosques were vandalized and Muslim women wearing hijab taunted and threatened. A Reverend labeled Muslims bloodthirsty barbarians, and a radio talk-show host dubbed Islam "a religion that is designed to cut off your head."

But there were also hopeful signs. The FBI worked with mosque-goers in major cities to boost security. Police in San Jose, California, where I live, proactively began guarding local mosques. San Jose may be unique: its police chief, Rob Davis, had fasted the entire month of Ramadan in 2004 to show solidarity with the estimated 15,000 Muslims living in this pluralistic city.

As details of the terror plot unfold in the coming days, Muslims will be wondering what continues to lurk in the minds of some of their co-religionists. Is it the insecurity of their psyche in a modern world? Is it Islam reduced to a political ideology, instead of being a source of moral guidance? Is it the clash of utopian fantasies against dystopian realities?

One can only guess.

If indeed certain radical Muslims sought midair martyrdom with horrific consequences, we have to acknowledge that no amount of western sins (and there are many), attributable to foreign policy or racism or such, can justify such acts or intentions.

Surely, with the memory of last year's 7/11 bombings still vivid in their minds, the English can be excused if they feel jittery and angry.

And always, in the wake of atrocities and foiled conspiracies, the bitter question of societal integration of immigrants, or lack of it, comes up.

While in London, I watched on TV the third cricket Test between Pakistan and England at Headingley that England won by 167 runs. In the annals of cricket, this would hardly register a flutter, except that the architect of English victory was a 24-year-old fast bowler named Sajid Mahmood.

Born in England of a Pakistani-born father, Sajid was heckled by a small section of the immigrant crowd

as a traitor!

Normally, Sajid's father would have supported the land of his birth against England but Sajid insisted that must change: "My dad had some split loyalties, but I told him he had to support England during this series."

I bring this up because of a provocative reference that the 1998 Economics Nobel-laureate Amartya Sen made in his recent book called *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (pp 153-155).

It is the famous "cricket test" proposed by Lord Tebbit, a conservative political leader. Tebbit contends that British immigrants from the subcontinent and the Caribbean should support England, not the lands of their ancestry. Only when that happened could integration into British society be considered a success!

Tebbit's test may be considered idiosyncratic by some in the immigrant community but more and more, it could emerge as a telling divider between assimilation and retreat, between flexibility and rigidity, and even between living and delusional martyrdom.

A few days after my return from London, I visited our small San Jose mosque, nestled against the hills of the Diablo range, to offer the pre-dawn prayer. Stars bloomed like flowers in the endless California sky. An impossibly luminous Morning Star rose above the hills, as if to greet early-risers. Above Venus was Orion and then, wonder of wonders, shooting stars began to fall like rain!

It felt good to be alive, even if only to thank the Creator for His wondrous creation.

Hasan Zillur Rahim is a computer scientist working in Silicon Valley, California.



Terror also struck us in August (site of August 21, 2004 AL meeting, Bangabandhu Avenue, Dhaka).

The Night of Ascension

SYED ASHRAF ALI

THE Holy Quran states: "Glory of Allah who did take His servant for a journey by night from the sacred mosque to the farthest mosque, whose precincts We did bless -- in order that We might show him some of Our signs: for He is the one who heareth and seeth (all things)." (Sura Bani Israel, Verse 1). The journey refers to the Glorious Ascension (Mi'raj) of the holy Prophet Muhammad (SM).

It was on a Monday on the 27th of Rajab one year and five months before the emigration to the holy Madinah that the holy Prophet (SM) was first transported through a unique Night Journey from the Holy Makkah to the seat of the earliest revelations in Jerusalem, and then taken through the Seven Heavens, even to the Sublime Throne, and blessed with the unique opportunity to meet the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Rabul Alameen.

On that auspicious Night of Ascension (Lailatul Mi'raj) the Apostle of Allah (SM) was roused from sleep by the Angel Jibrayel (AS) [Gabriel] who said: "Allah Jalla Jalaluhu sends you greetings and He invites you, and I have come to take you to Him. Allah desires to show the Wonders and to dignify you in a manner as He has not done anybody else before. No one ever heard this nor could anybody ever conceive of it in his mind."

Accompanied by Gabriel, the holy Prophet (SM) went to the Holy Ka'aba, performed the circumambulation of Ka'aba (Tawaf) seven times and sat for a while in the Hatim of Ka'aba. Mounted on Borak, the holy Prophet (SM) was then carried to Masjidul Aqsa (Baitul Muqaddas) in Jerusalem.

There a huge gathering of angels received him very cordially, maintenance of old power plants. With the constant power crisis, large garment factories are switching to gas-operated generators, as operating diesel-run generators is becoming expensive.

On average, owners pay an overhead cost of Tk. 4,000 to Tk. 6,000 per day for diesel-operated generators. Although the cost of gas is low compared to the price of fuel, switching to and maintaining gas-operated generators would be a high overhead cost for medium and small sized firms that play an effective role in the total export earnings.



RMG sector: Survival of the largest?

HASANUZZAMAN

THE lack of external initiatives for efficient infrastructural development in power and energy sectors, a "natural" component for any finished-goods manufacturing industry, and no appropriate measures to ensure a comprehensive trade organization, hang as a double-edged sword for the readymade garments (RMG) sector.

The first statement can be supported by the anticipated "Power Rehabilitation Program," worth Tk. 100 crore, only for the repair and

This has a negative impact on medium and small sized knitwear manufacturers, as their total labour supply and number of active machines substitute each other in the sense that most industries pay at a per-piece rate.

Despite knitwear exports nearly reaching woven export level and our neighbours taking giant steps to capture a larger share of international apparels market, RMG industry that regularly accounted for more than 75 percent of export earnings and elevated standard of living of a social class, making appropriate investments in accordance with our neighbours' standards does not seem to be on the agenda of our government.

While Pakistan plans supplying gas to 425 towns and villages during the next two years, India reduced its customs duty on natural gas from 10 percent to 5 percent, somewhat decreasing dependence on fuel and stabilising its rising price. Sri Lanka has initiated Thulihiriya Complex -- a dedicated textile zone in addition to Horana Textile Processing Zone -- ensuring stable power and water supply, thereby reducing internal lead-time. India has also increased its spending on Technology Upgradation Fund (TUF) by 19 percent for textile sector and plans to

launch Jute Technology Mission by the end of this year. Unsurprisingly, our government seems ignorant of the setting up of proposed garment villages by various important bodies.

Withdrawal of duties on yarn, spare parts and raw materials provide a responsive avenue for "tailors" at the possibility of "cultivators" encountering an external shock relating to the price of yarn and other raw materials in the international apparels market. Extension of tax exemption and rebate for two years till June 2008 bestowed the textile industries with a larger degree of advantage in a comparatively protected domestic market, supported by complexities in importing raw materials at entry ports. Interestingly, as the prices of exported finished apparel items are decreasing, the volume exported and the prices of raw materials that are imported have been, simultaneously, increasing.

Therefore, if the textile industries produce inferior yarn compared to our neighbours, its adverse effect will be felt right across the apparel value chain and Bangladesh will successfully maintain status quo in the lowest category of finished products chain. If Bangladesh retains its position in such category of low value-end items, the RMG

sector would be in a stalemate situation with its competitors, whereby no market or product diversification would be necessary to facilitate further development.

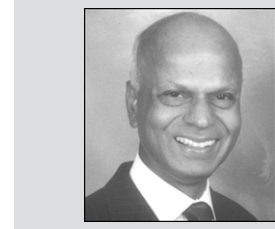
No solution has been found to the existing power supply crisis in areas such as Narayanganj, a hub of medium and small sized knitwear firms. Switching to solar power, as an effect of Energy Development Fund, would only be sweeping dirt already under the carpet. For the last two years, several garment owners (mainly medium and small sized firms) failed to meet shipment deadlines due to inconsistent power supply.

Consequently, some of them forced workers to work irregularly, in order to maintain an economic break-even situation, and a satisfying image. With the prices of finished apparel items decreasing and volume exported increasing, together with a price-hike of essential commodities, in conjunction with an unreliable power supply, the ongoing dilemma between owners and workers can be viewed as a cumulative causation of the consequences of government inaction.

The budget has allocated Tk 20 crore for skill development programs for RMG workers; however, lack of appropriate monitoring

Peace in the Middle East

CHAKHLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM



writes from Madrid

ALTHOUGH the declared aim of Israel's disproportionately violent offensive in Lebanon was to seek the release of two soldiers kidnapped by Hezbollah, in fact this was merely an excuse. Olmert had several other objectives in mind before starting this war. Besides destroying Hezbollah, Israel, at the behest of the United States, was going to help reshape the Middle East. Now that Iraq was under American military occupation and most of the other significant Arab states had become subservient to America's imperial designs, the plan was to force Iran and Syria to toe the line.

US strategists had thought that this could be achieved through the destruction of Hezbollah and Lebanon. Hence the Dresden-like bombing of the Lebanese villages and towns -- more than 1000 bombardments in the first 24 hours of the invasion alone -- by US supplied warplanes. The goal was to set Lebanon's destruction as an example and to send a clear message to the Iranians, the Arabs and others: Look what will happen to you if you dare challenge the supremacy of Israeli-US alliance.

Olmert came to power with the pledge that he was going to set the final boundaries of Israel by unilaterally withdrawing from certain parts of the occupied territories leaving a Bantustan-like Palestinian state in

the rest of the territories which would be completely at the mercy of Israel. By destroying Hezbollah and Lebanon, Olmert wanted to demonstrate the power of US-Israeli alliance and to send a warning to the Palestinians that they must accept whatever is given to them; otherwise they will face similar destruction.

No doubt, Lebanon has suffered badly. Leaving aside the loss of an unknown number of Hezbollah fighters, more than a thousand Lebanese civilians have been killed, a million have been displaced, many villages and towns have been flattened, entire infrastructure of Beirut have been reduced to rubble, numerous roads, bridges, power plants have been destroyed, yet Israel has failed to destroy Hezbollah. It has survived the combined Israeli-US military and diplomatic onslaught for 34 days. Israel's much-vaunted military invincibility has taken a serious knock.

According to some international correspondents, even "the beneficiary of the destruction (of Lebanon's towns and villages) is most likely to be Hezbollah." Thousands of Hezbollah members across the country are busy cleaning, organizing and surveying the damages done by Israeli bombings. Hezbollah and its leaders have grown in stature and are now hailed all over the Muslim world as heroes, whose examples are to be emulated.

Even al-Maliki, the prime minister of Iraq's American sponsored government has condemned the Israeli actions as crimes against humanity. Fouad Siniora, the pro-Western prime minister of Lebanon has felt so let down by American acquiescence in Israel's indiscriminate killing of Lebanese civilians by using American warplanes and bombs that he has felt compelled to ask why the US treats the Arabs as "the children of lesser gods."

Israel has not come out of this confrontation unscathed. Never before has it suffered such a sustained, indiscriminate rocket attack on its homes and factories inside its own territory. Never before have so many Israeli citizens been displaced from their homes to bunkers because of rocket attacks from a neighbouring country.

Until now with the unconditional support of its patron, Israel has violated the airspace of its neighbours, made land incursions, fired American-supplied precision-guided bombs on civilian targets and committed numerous assassinations with impunity and without fear of reprisal. But now Hezbollah has dealt a serious blow to its morale.

Every state has a right to feel secure within its borders and that applies not only to Israel but also to its neighbours. Hopefully, this war may force Israel to redefine its strategic needs. If Israel wants to live in peace in the Middle East, it must stop acting as America's deputy sheriff in the region and negotiate a comprehensive peace deal with all its neighbours in line with the Beirut Declaration of 2002, which guaranteed its security.



Refugees: Uncertain future.

Israel cannot insist on the full implementation of UN resolution 1701 until it complies with prior UN resolutions which called for the return of all occupied territories and the creation of a viable Palestinian state along the pre-1967 borders. A comprehensive peace deal will force the guerrilla groups to disband or merge into the armed forces of their respective countries because the reason for their existence would disappear.

Israel must realise that in the long run, its much-vaunted strategic alliance with the United States will not be able to guarantee its safety and security. In an article published in El Pais of August 14, Professor Norman Birnbaum, an American Jewish intellectual of great reputation pointed out that all strategic alliances are temporary and that at a future date the US would not hesitate to abandon Israel if it feels necessary to do so for its own strategic interests.

Hasanuzzaman is continuing his Masters at the London School of Economics and Political Science.