

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## TRIBUTE TO SALAM—A PIONEER IN INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM

**D**RIVING down the Manik Miah Avenue the other day, I started wondering why the late Editor of the Bangladesh Observer, Abdus Salam had not earned the distinction of having a city road named after him, like the founder-editor of the Ittefaq. Maybe there is a little lane, somewhere in the old city, which bears the name of this towering figure of our national journalism, whose death anniversary falls this week.

If there is, indeed, a road in the city named after Salam, it is unlikely to be as impressive as the Manik Miah Avenue. There is of course quite a bit of politics behind it. As an old associate, almost a mentor, of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Manik Miah could have anything—a road, park or a building—named after him. On the other hand, Abdus Salam was no one's mentor or even a political confidante. On the contrary, he incurred the displeasure of one Pakistani regime after another, starting with the first provincial government of Khwaja Nazimuddin, and not excluding the successive central governments in Karachi, some of it prompted by the politics of Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, the owner of the Observer. Finally came the Observer editorial in early 1972 when quite thoughtlessly and almost irrationally, Salam challenged the constitutional legitimacy of the Bangladesh government, headed by the Sheikh. This marked the end of the career as an editor for Abdus Salam. Bangabandhu did not deal with the Observer editor too harshly. He was just retired, I believe, with a modest pension.

### The suicidal editorial

Looking back, I cannot help recalling a conversation at the Press Club—I was then spending a working holiday in Dhaka—that Salam's suicidal editorial was either prompted by the paper's owner, Chowdhury who was then living abroad or suggested by a senior staff member who, for reasons of his own, was anxious to put Salam in a bad light before the Sheikh. All this is history, which some want to rewrite, some want to forget and a few, with their commitment to truth, want to tell in full.

Salam was part of this

history, although one should not speculate as to where exactly he belonged. Too close a scrutiny of the role of the Observer editor during those crucial years—from, say, 1968 to the liberation in late 1971—might lead us to some unfair, superficial and one-sided conclusions. After all, he is not with us to tell us his side of the story.

Again, whatever his failure during this period, as an editor, one should not forget that he had been working in a difficult set-up, under a difficult owner whose political beliefs and ambitions cast a shadow over the paper's policies, and above all, in a political atmosphere which hardly provided for any real rapport between a major political platform like the Awami League and the Observer.

In some ways, the paper had always been in a strange paradoxical situation, even in the late forties and sometime in the fifties when I was on its staff. To put it plainly, it was respected but not trusted. It was respected for its balanced news coverage and features, for its technical excellence as compared to that of the other English language daily and finally, for standing up for the rights of the people of East Pakistan, an exercise in which the owner Chowdhury obviously made a significant contribution.

No, that was not all. The Observer was greatly respected for the editorials by Abdus Salam.

All written in the Editor's own lucid style, most editorials dealt with the problems of East Pakistan and identified how the province's interests were being undermined by the Central Government in Karachi and later in Islamabad. There was hardly an issue on which the editorial writer (mostly Salam but sometimes his deputy, the late Zohur Hussain Chowdhury) could not almost instinctively know what was good

for the people of the then province of East Pakistan.

### Uneasy conscience

In retrospect, one may even make a case that next to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, it was the Observer which, unconsciously, promoted, not the well-defined con-

cept but a vague sense of Bengali nationalism. Yet, sadly enough, when the battlelines were drawn for the liberation of Bangladesh, it was the Observer which retreated into a little corner, perhaps with a slightly uneasy conscience but perfectly comfortable with its earning and circulation.



Late Abdus Salam

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Yet, for some reasons, Observer evoked mild distrust right from its inception. After all, a daily newspaper launched and owned by the then finance minister of the provincial administration—the position held by Chowdhury—could hardly qualify as the mouthpiece of the people, except on issues concerning Dhaka's relations with Karachi. In those days, a few newspapers we had in Dhaka could hardly be

negative feeling during the Bangladesh crisis. Oddly enough, the distrust lingered on for years and decades. Soon after I had taken over as the Editor of the Observer—to be a successor of Salam seemed a great honour—in June 1989, I was promptly warned by friends about the paper's former anti-liberation stance which had now allegedly turned into an anti-Bangladesh position, while one senior colleague cautioned me about a move by the management to drop the word 'Bangladesh' from the title of the paper.

### Math, first love

Those who knew Abdus Salam, but only superficially, would have regarded him as rather a highly unlikely choice as the Editor of the first English-lan-

guage daily newspaper of the country. Trained as an accountant whose first love, as he once told me, was mathematics, he had been working in a government department in Calcutta when he was picked up by Hamidul Huq Chowdhury to replace one Mohammad Idris who had been hired to launch the paper. Idris had in fact appointed a core staff, including myself as a reporter, and then he was gone, perhaps after bringing out the paper for a while and then handing it

per in the country. His communication with the staff was anything but satisfactory. From time to time, he held short consultations with some senior staff members, but seldom a full editorial meeting. It seemed that he had little patience for a sustained conversation. He would become absent-minded or get lost in his own thoughts. In short, Abdus Salam was a difficult editor to work with.

Then, what was it that made this accountant-

tor, Salam, and it is simply this: If you want to be an independent editor, you must also be a non-partisan one.

Looking back, we may not be sure if Salam knew all the hazards of independent journalism or, to be more specific, independent editorial writing. Perhaps he did, but he did not care. My recollection is, whenever the paper got into trouble with the administration, it was always due to something Salam had written in the editorial column rather than because of any news story or feature. Thus, Salam gave the editorial column of the paper a status that it has never enjoyed again since he left the Observer in 1972.

On most topics which he handled as editorials, Salam wrote with near-perfect understanding of the subject under discussion. And these topics could range from literature and art to economics and problems in the administration. In this sense, his erudition and the range of his learning could be almost astounding. A good example comes to my mind.

### The GBS episode

In 1950, the day after George Bernard Shaw had passed away in Britain, and the news reached us the following morning and got Salam all rather excited, I went along with the editor to a bookshop. An hour later, we returned to the office with ten of Shaw's paperbacks. Then, as I was getting ready to attend to my reporting assignments,

Salam started dictating to me a piece on G.B.S. From time to time, he would pick up one of the paperbacks, turn to a page and give me a quote. Sometimes, he would go on reading one of the plays—or perhaps its preface—for a few minutes, as if refreshing his memory, without saying a word, after giving me a signal to stay on. This went on for four hours or so. At the end of it all, Salam had produced a 3000-word special article on the art and ideas of George Bernard Shaw as well as the first leader on the playwright.

When the paper came out, with almost the whole editorial page devoted to Shaw, some eyebrows were raised. However, our friends at the British Council which was valiantly trying to strengthen the cultural ties between London and Dhaka were mighty pleased.

For me, the experience produced some mixed feelings. It was an ordeal to take dictation for four hours in long hand. My fingers were aching. I had quietly made up my mind that next time a personality died, I should stay away from the office and certainly from Salam.

However, the following day, I read the paper with tremendous pleasure. The special article was a delightful piece of writing, knowledgeable yet lucid, scholarly but not pompous. I felt a certain pride that I worked for a newspaper that carried such a good piece. I also felt good that I was working for Abdus Salam.

Two other prominent editors of this region—Ataf Hussain of Dawn and Faiz Ahmed Faiz of the Pakistan Times, both now dead—will be featured in this column very soon.

## MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

over to the new chief. After all these years, one is not quite sure.

Having had no journalistic background, as a reporter or as a sub-editor, Salam must have felt somewhat out of place at the Johnson Road office of the Observer. The fact that with the exception of Kulin Pal and Brojen Das who had been brought from two Calcutta dailies on short-term contracts, others hardly knew anything of newspaper production might have been of some consolation to the new editor. But then he might have been also quite worried about bringing out the paper under such conditions.

At the beginning, younger members of the staff hardly felt particularly close to Salam who, it seemed, was obliged to spend a lot of time with the owner Chowdhury, and when he was not doing that, to write his editorials and his inimitable column 'Idle Thoughts.' He wrote them in long hand, continually puffing a cigarette, throwing its ash on the floor, and, from time to time, ringing the calling bell for tea. He was always casually dressed in slightly crumpled baggy trousers and short-sleeved shirt, hardly looking presentable as the Editor of the leading English-language newspa-

turned-editor a towering figure of Dhaka journalism for more than two decades? What did he bring to our English-language journalism that still endures, almost as a source of inspiration to many young newsmen.

### Fearless mind

Undoubtedly, it was the Observer editor's fearless independent mind which he applied, day after day, on issued and problems facing the country. As far as we know, he did not belong to any political party—his association with the Krishak Samik Party was too short to influence his basic non-partisan outlook—and, I suspect, he viewed all of them with a mixture of distrust and aloofness. Early in my life as a journalist, I learnt this simple lesson from my edi-



## Pianist to the Fore

At 19, Russia's Evgeni Kissin takes America by storm.

He looks like your average teenage TV star—gangling, shy, his boyish face framed by a mop of dark curly hair. Until he sits down at the piano. Then, all of a sudden, Evgeni Kissin, who just turned 19, grows up. Big, powerful hands crash down on the keyboard with the assurance of a performer three times his age. His tone is full-blooded yet lyrical, a mature sound that most fine pianists need years to achieve. Only his interpretations betray his youth, but that is precisely what is right about them. Dashing, impetuous and seemingly spontaneous, Kissin's playing is a reminder that classical music is supposed to be fun for both performer and listener.

Kissin's Carnegie Hall recital in New York City last month was one of the most eagerly awaited American debuts of the past decade.

**M**ETROPOLITAN Dhaka has not much to offer in the way of entertainment to its citizens. Of the few places one could go to for a breather away from the craze and pressure of the daily life, Zoological Gardens at Mirpur would perhaps be the ideal first choice. It is quite a popular place for the Dhakaites with about four to five thousand visitors going there on the week days—the number swelling to over 10,000 on weekly and other holidays.

Established in 1964 on once which was at that time the outskirts of the city, Mirpur Zoological Gardens is a beautiful spread, a mere 10 miles from city centre and easily accessible through different road transports.

It was a beautiful winter morning on a Friday that I first visited Mirpur Zoo with my family, a place where one could take the children for an outing. It was a rather happy experience and at the end of the day we came back not fully appeased and wanting to go back there again. So it was on another Friday that we went back more prepared and ready to enjoy and enjoy we did.

If for the moment you could overlook the mismanagement at the entrance, nonexistence of guides and information on zoo layout and staff out undaunted with a sense of adventure and your curiosity leading you on, you could happily lose yourself in there. And of course you should allow your mind to play a trick on itself so that it fails to notice or be irritated by the jostling crowd around you. You should only be aware of the animal in this cages or in pitiful imitations of their natural habitats, there the rolling acres are there for you to roam and enjoy and you would be in the right frame of mind to set the tone of your day long excursion.

Situated on the eastern bank of the river Turag and bounded on the north and the



## A Day at the Zoo

H. Kabir



Among the hot favourites are the African lion... and the Royal Bengal Tiger.

If in this cool and sunny winter days you have nowhere to go and nothing better to do, a visit to the Mirpur Zoo gardens would be nice for a few hours of change and relaxation.

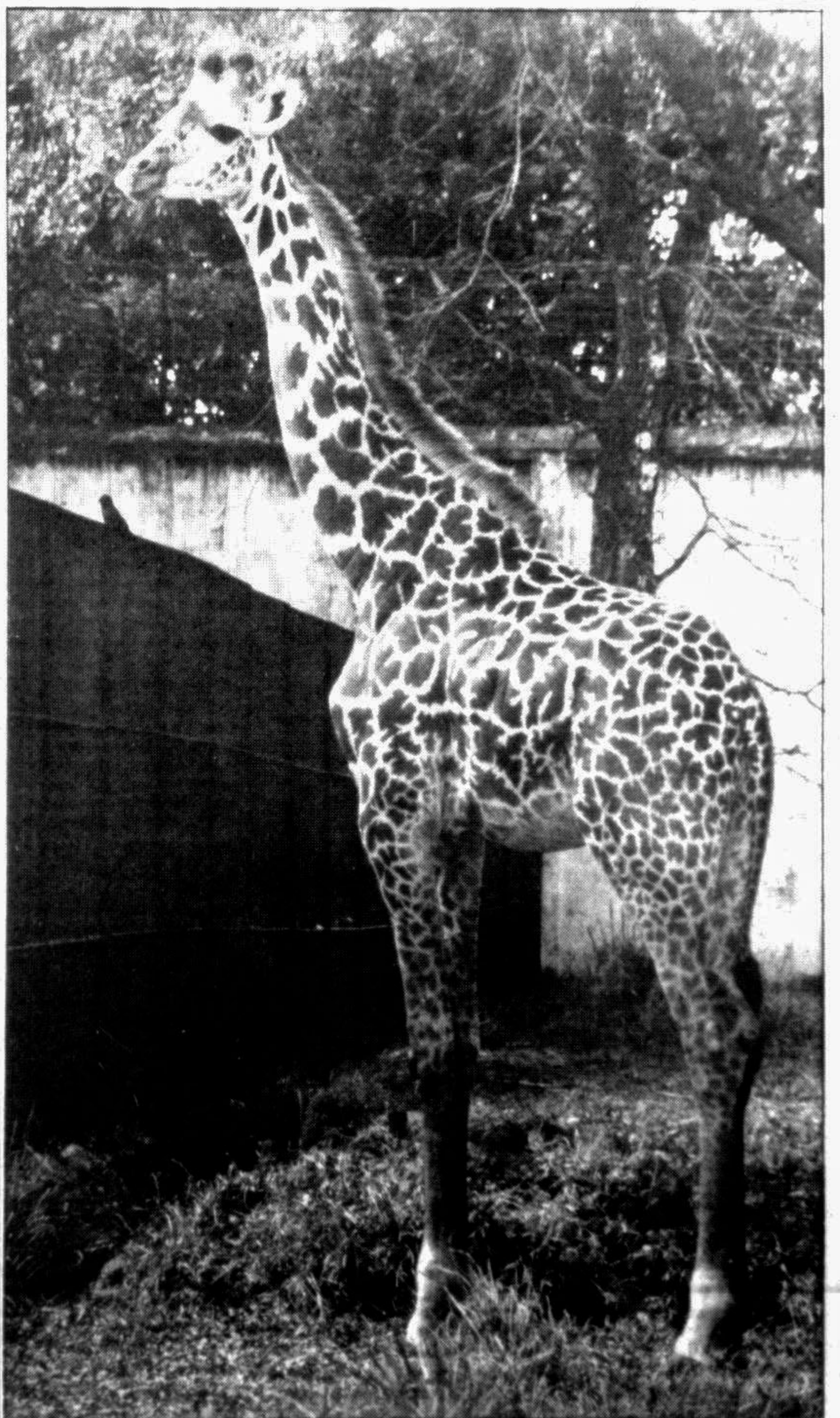
south sides with natural lakes, the Zoo area is a beautifully laid out green spread, sparsely wooded with gently sloping grounds. As a visitor enters the Zoo area, the first thing they are greeted with are a cageful of monkeys, the favourite gathering place for the children as well as adults, for they are the one who invariably provide the most entertainment with their unpredictable antics. Further ahead and roughly located in the centre are the main attractions of the Zoo, the cages of the African lions and the

Royal Bengal Tigers. Sadly, they seem rather demoralized with a famished look, mostly sleeping their time away. Around them are strewn the cages of bears, leopards and some other wild cats. If the northern section of the Zoo are quartered different species of snakes, guinea pigs, fowls, fishes and a pond for the hippopotamus. The lake there is visited, we are told, every winter by migratory birds and we did find sizeable flock feeding there and truly speaking they were the only creatures that looked comfortable in that contrived setting. Along the north western border are housed the various species of wild cattle, deers, giraffes and two shy zebras. There is also a bird section in the southern half where among the various species, the ostriches are the main crowd pullers. Strewn all over the places there are various other attractions like kangaroos, procupines, baboons, chimpanzees and the ponds for alligators.

Another major attraction of the Zoo is the area at the southern tip where horse rides and elephant rides are offered to the visitors for a nominal sum.

If one is not too critical or demanding it is possible to spend a lazy day at the Zoo enjoying the various attractions in a rather festive atmosphere becoming a part of the general milieu. The one secluded and quiet corners where one can take mealtime breaks and set up a little picnic of their own, although there are two spots for visitors to have snacks and refreshments. In fact you can find lot of couples and family groups spread out under the trees enjoying their noonday breaks.

If in this cool and sunny winter days you have nowhere to go and toiling under workload and the pressure of everyday boredom, the Zoo gardens would be nice for a few hours of change and relaxation.



Giraffe with its long neck and legs and dark patches on its coat is a crowd-puller, young and old alike. — Photo: Raquib Khan.