

HAMIDUL HUQ CHOWDHURY: A TRIBUTE WITH A DIFFERENCE

FOR a journalist, it must be a record of sorts to have worked for the same newspaper on three different occasions, separated by long periods, nearly a decade between the first and the second and as long as close to three decades between the second and the third occasion. Without meaning any disrespect to the newspaper in question, it can be said with certainty that there won't be a fourth time.

Such is the history of this writer's relationship with the Bangladesh Observer whose founder-publisher Hamidul Huq Chowdhury passed away on Saturday, at the age of 92, thus marking an end to an era in journalism in this country.

This may be an exaggeration. The era in our journalism that was directly influenced by the late Mr Chowdhury ended two decades ago, when this remarkable man — outstanding in many ways — had failed to come to terms with his country's liberation war which, many have noted, has been termed as "conflagration of 1971" by the Observer in its front-page editorial on Sunday on the death of its owner. Since then, even after regaining the ownership of the Observer in 1984, he remained a bitter, angry and a sad man, for reasons which often seemed to me to be more personal than political. His common complaint was that he had to wait long to get back his newspaper and that he had been denied the return of some other properties by the then administration of Hussain Muhammad Ershad.

At that stage, the late Mr Chowdhury had ceased to be a positive influence in the country's media field, while his paper, still the largest circulation English-language daily in the country, was no more than a shadow of its former self. Then, watching the "boss", as so many in the Observer called him, walking along the dark dusty corridor to his office, in unsteady footsteps, supported by his ever-loyal valet-cum-secretary Shamsu Miah, one often got that eerie feeling of watching a movie based on a Kafka screen play.

For this writer, to join such a set-up in June 1989, and that too as the editor of the

paper, was hardly much of a home-coming after living abroad for some 25 years. Mercifully, my stay in the Observer was short. I walked out down the same dusty dark corridor that the "boss" — I had started addressing him as "Mr Chairman" — used every day, just six months later, without much damage done to my soul and sanity.

Yet, looking back, I think

both of us wanted, due to reasons beyond our control.

Then, when I called on him at his office in the Observer to say goodbye, he got up from his chair with some difficulty, which he rarely did for any visitor, extended his hand in greeting and smilingly asked, "Can you suggest whom I can now hire as your successor?" Then, we both laughed. It was a nice way of parting as

committed by Islamabad, the so-called united Pakistan could at all survive?

While we are on this subject, one also wonders why a politician with a progressive background like Mahmud Ali also deserted his people and go over to the other side?

There are of course differences between the two. Chowdhury came back to his

Hence, despite his sharp mind, Hamidul Huq Chowdhury showed poor political judgements on a number of other occasions, even before 1971.

One of his worst political mistakes, as the Foreign Minister of Pakistan in 1956, was to provide tacit support to the western position against the nationalisation of Suez Canal by the Egyptian government of Gamal Abdul Nasser.

While attending a phony conference in London of west-

MY WORLD

S. M. ALI

more of the late Chairman's kindness and acts of consideration towards me than of our differences, arguments and bitter exchanges. Our friends and foes gossiped about the rising tension between the two of us and speculated on the timing of my departure, a subject that reportedly figured in occasional conversations even at the Bangabhaban. What was not known outside was the trouble the Chairman took in selecting a decent office room for me, in buying a car for my use and in trying to ensure that I enjoyed total editorial independence in running the paper. During my six months stay in the Observer, I felt reasonably comfortable in my office, my car never broke down, but my editorial independence eluded me due to circumstances beyond our control.

On the day I left the Observer, I sent a letter to the Chairman thanking him for appointing me as his editor and regretting my inability to serve the paper in the way

friends. It was no longer a scene from a Kafka movie.

IN a signed piece I had written for this paper on Sunday, I had wondered "how posterity will judge a man of the calibre of Hamidul Huq Chowdhury." The thought will be in the minds of many people in this country, the main question being about his anti-Bangladesh role during the liberation war.

What is it made a man with such an astute mind, one who had so zealously advocated the cause of the people of erst-while East Pakistan, desert his people at the most crucial moment of their history and go over to the other side? If I had brought up the subject with him, which I did not, he might have said that, in his view, Bangladesh could not have worked, a pet answer he had reportedly given to many people. But, then, what made him assume that, after the army crackdown and genocide



Hamidul Huq Chowdhury with the then US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles (man at the extreme right is an aide of Mr Dulles) during the west-sponsored conference in 1956 that opposed Egypt's nationalisation of the Suez canal. (Courtesy: "Memoirs" by HHC)

country without being assured of a welcome: All stayed away in permanent exile, almost like a charity case for successive governments in Islamabad.

Both Chowdhury and Ali travelled abroad during 1971 and, wherever possible, met Bengalee diplomats who had defected to the Bangladesh government-in-exile.

To one such diplomat who was then based in Washington DC, the differences in their presentation of the case for a so-called united Pakistan were marked.

In the case of Chowdhury, the premises were wrong and so were his conclusions. Yet, he managed to present a case for the so-called united Pakistan that diplomats listened to with attention, even with a grudging admiration. It was definitely an astute mind at work. One could not just treat him as a mindless collaborator.

In sharp contrast, the presentation by Mahmud Ali was full of lies, lots of silly assertions, talks of Indian aggression and hate of Bangladesh nationalism.

It is one thing to possess an astute mind, but it is something quite different to have the right political judgement at the right time.

ern powers and their allies, organised to protest against Nasser's decision. Chowdhury supported the internationalisation of the Canal, Egypt's national territory, while India, under Nehru, stood by Cairo, cementing an alliance with Egypt that has stood the test of time.

During tea at the Claridges, I listened to the Pakistan Foreign Minister presenting one legal argument after another why President Nasser could not take over the territory, meaning the Canal, that rightfully belonged to Egypt. It was certainly an astute mind at work, but entirely in the wrong direction.

I might have been listening to John Foster Dulles, the then US Secretary of State, who, in fact, called on the Pakistan Foreign Minister soon after I left. What an honour for government leader from a country which was fast becoming a client state of Washington!

However, my conversation with the late Mr Chowdhury on that day in London ended on an unexpected note. I accepted his offer to rejoin his paper in Dhaka as its Staff Correspondent — a return to my old paper — but I was to arrange my own air fare back home!

Drumming the Way from Siberia to Arkhangelsk

IT is not often you fly thousands of miles to play a concert for under £3, but the Vilnius jazz festival is something special.

And amid the chaotic confusion of Lithuania's transition to a McDonald's democracy, the organisers became heroic workers to make sure that one of the most exciting avant garde events in Europe actually happened.

To help make it all possible, the British Council, recognising the value of the event, supported the six British musicians who played in the festival. In roubles, each musician was paid half the average Soviet monthly salary — a fee of 150 roubles.

But now the official rate has gone up considerably. It makes for some interesting shopping.

With a fistful of dollars you can do well. In Vilnius one can buy for £5 a fur hat which would sell in London's West End for at least £200. And I picked up a Lithuanian lightweight winter coat for £6.

Lithuania, moving towards the introduction of its own currency, makes the purchaser pay the shop price plus the same value in coupons for some goods.

Workers get the coupons as part of their salary. The locals reckon that it is to pave the way for massive price rises when the currency change comes.

Having been sent to Siberia in 1990 by the British Council, I was aware of the need to organise your own food in the Soviet Union — or ex-Soviet Union countries. You can never count on any restaurant to be open at normal times. And the lack of advertising means it can be hard to even find a restaurant.

For example, we referred to the breakfast room in our rather rundown hotel, as "the secret eating place." Even the organiser of the festival who booked us into the Gintaras was unaware of its existence.

It was located in a dark corridor on the fourth floor with bedrooms on either side. The only clue that there might be food behind the door was a dingy sign giving opening times.

Inside, we set ourselves up for the day with a magnificent feast of tasty black bread, hard boiled eggs, coffee, smetana (a bit like yoghurt) splendid fresh tomatoes and cucumbers and fruit juice for under 10 roubles for two.

On the first day we noticed that "the secret eating place" also stocked half litre bottles of good vodka, and working on the basis that it is better to be prepared for all emergencies, we ordered two bottles. The whole bill came to around £1.50.

Although the temperature in the bedroom seemed low enough already, a fridge was provided. This is a good thing. We never drink before a performance, but afterwards, a little taste of 60 pence-a-bottle vodka can be a refreshing experience.

So the bottles went in the freezer compartment for correct temperature consumption later.

The next thing is to find a shop which sells food. Now it is true that there are shops

Six British musicians flew to Lithuania to play in an international music festival. One of them was a Gemini News Service correspondent who doubles as journalist and jazz drummer, playing in some most unlikely places. In 1990 he went to Siberia. This year he aims to take part with a Siberian musician in the Arctic Circle festival in Arkhangelsk. He reports: "I've got the hat already..." Ken Hyder writes from London:

with maybe only cheese in them. And these are the ones you see on the television.

But shops with food do exist, so it is wise to stock up your fridge with bread, cheese and smoked salmon for supper and emergencies.

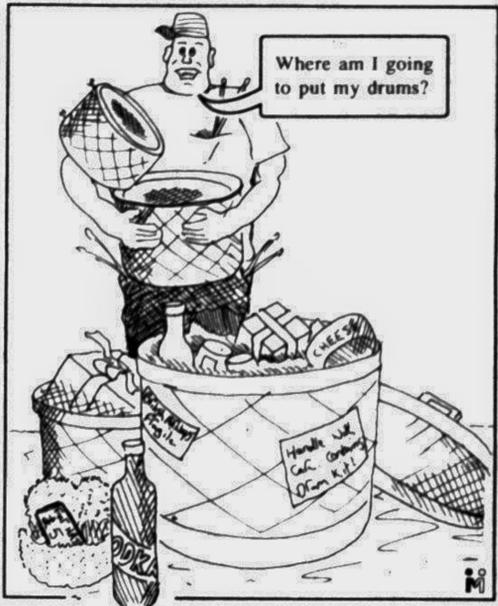
bow ties and wood-panelled walls and barely acceptable food. To locals it was massively over-priced at 700 roubles for four. But for us it worked out at £3.20 each.

The status of food is interesting. Waiting for the Vilnius flight in Moscow airport, I noticed a young woman with a familiar trademark on a carry-out.

Maria had queued at the Moscow McDonald's for three hours and was taking the now-cold burgers back to nine-year-old Alexei for a treat.

What made all the chaos so bearable was the special nature of the festival with musicians from Bulgaria, Romania, Germany, Latvia, Estonia, the US, Turkey, Israel, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, and of course, Russia.

We saw one of the most amazing singers I have ever heard. Sainkho Namchik is from Tuva, Siberia, and has studied Tibetan chant and Siberian throat-singing where one singer can produce whole



The loaf we procured was large, heavy and healthy. The Russian cheese was very tasty. Later we used our emergency rations to save a German band who had not taken the trouble to keep themselves informed of the local conditions which change by the hour and they came unstuck.

They asked the organisers for a taxi to take them to a restaurant. They did not realise that all the restaurants were closed, and besides there was no petrol in Vilnius that day, making taxi availability problematic.

So they ate our bread and cheese. We had taken the precaution of dining in the poshest restaurant in town... all

chords. When we were asked to put on an extra concert with Sainkho and British fiddler Sylvia Hallett we knew something unique was likely to happen.

The last improvised number consisted of Siberian shamanic rhythms and chanting with a spontaneous jig over the top.

It is not every day you get the opportunity to do that kind of thing, and that is why I am making plans to play with Sainkho this year in an Arctic Circle Festival in Arkhangelsk.

Well, I've got the hat already... KEN HYDER is a British freelance journalist who writes widely for national papers and is also a jazz musician.



FRIENDS AND FOES: This historical picture taken during the Round Table Conference held in Rawalpindi in 1969 shows (seated from left), Nazrul Islam, Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, Mumtaz Daulatana and Nurul Amin. Standing just behind HHC is Mahmud Ali and at the far end is Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In the two years time, they went their separate ways. (Courtesy: "Memoirs" by HHC)

THE meteoric growth of flower shops in the city and elsewhere is eye-catching. No previous indications, no ground work, a chain of these shops with attractive display signs sprung up almost all at a time — though, annually, flower-shows are still being celebrated in posh hotels which can be termed as connoisseurs' exercise.

There is a remarkable difference between a connoisseur's exercise and a business venture each of which, however, agreeing to a common un-relaxable restriction on the flowers — from the taste viewpoint in case of the connoisseurs and from the valuation viewpoint in case of the business venture. The flowers are, therefore, not free.

Flowers were organised in the form of a thriving business in our society rather abruptly than having a touch of planning and imagination during the last days of Ershad which witnessed, among others, a powerful movement for the restoration of the people's democratic and fundamental rights. The meteoric surge of flowers and the powerful movement for democracy, though simultaneous, are in actual effect, co-incidental with lots of ultimate similarities, each on the other hand having its own separate perspective.

To confine ourselves to flowers, they symbolise the finer values of life. They appeal to our sense organs transforming an ordinary moment into ecstatic. But, other things remaining more or less the

How Much do We Say it with Flowers?

Gholam Mohammad

same, have the flowers succeeded in bringing about some change in our national mood or, under pressure of the business, the flowers themselves stand denuded of their aesthetic value? Have the flowers been simply commercialised without due regard to their significance?

I do not question the commercial aspect of flowers. Nor do I consider it contradicting their aesthetics. But looking at the flowers in the shelf of the show rooms with their price tags, it gives me the feeling of their helplessness. Around the same time more or less, girls in their glass show rooms in Amsterdam emerge from the memories with a wild jerk down to the knees. These flowers then refuse to come into the experience, as original with their colourfulness and fragrance. There is no denying the fact that these flowers mean much more than anything, including their aesthetics, have passed through the cruel processes of their own cost-benefit analysis facing the adverse market forces to have eventually established their economic viability as a successful business proposition on which they are surviving to the gloom of the so-called connoisseurs in the society. We have to prove that these flowers are really different as a lot from the Amsterdam girls in their glass show rooms.

The commercial aspect of the flowers at the marketing stage and for that matter,

when standing in the fields/gardens as a crop, cannot be ignored for the simple reasons of commodity exchange. But they should relate to our national mood and in doing so, commercial considerations alone should not be the decisive force.

People's response to the democratic movement and the

the flowers are made. Therefore, we have to address ourselves, first, on the issue of love with oblique reference to the flowers.

Do we still have love or something like that in our hearts or has it already found its way into more urgent things, electronics and items of fashion not excluded.



growth of flowers at the same point of time, was positive and strikingly similar. The flowers, leaving out the other issue, have seemingly denied the most delicate corner of our hearts.

It is time, we had assessed and re-assessed our own hearts with regard to their capabilities to treat the flowers with that tenderness which

We have no option to reverting to the connoisseurs who are known for their uncompromising taste. The restriction of taste, although un-relaxable can be tolerated against the wholesale commercialisation of flowers as a marketable commodity. The national mood somewhere around the flowers dominating the movement for democracy

cannot go altogether unnoticed at this stage because the flowers do not bloom outside the community in which we live. To them, as a community, how much have we succeeded in belonging?

Have we really loved the flowers like the poets, lovers or devotees?

We would in point of fact, assassinate the flowers if their aesthetic value is forsaken and it is substituted for decorative value like one or many things

man or machine is capable of manufacturing. Our national mood exposes in its own direction-lessness, precisely, this threat to the existence of the flowers.

Needless to remark that this threat does not come from the flower shops which have, no the other hand, provoked us into a serious re-thinking on the flowers issue.



Why Me?

by M. Rahman

Just alive! All alone.
Me, the one — nobody
From nowhere but somewhere
Never known to none.
"I do," says Ie.
"Who?"
"Behold! Dare ask not
For everything and beyond
He — The Lord, Creator, Master of Masters."
Everything else — natural ones
Before time and after till knows the greatest.
Me, never was and never'll be what not to be.
True as light and dark, life and death
Me, again, barely alive!
Came alone, found what not
Everything and nothing.
Gone a long way, nowhere, alone
Left behind nothing for none.
Me, so lost all that was mine
And is His — The Almighty.

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

Suppose a woman finds out that her husband is being unfaithful to her, but cannot prove it, what should she do? Should she confront him or wait till she catches him red-handed? There is a lot of hypocrisy in our society, and people who we know to be good and decent are cheating on their wives secretly. Don't you agree with me?

Anonymous, Dhaka.

Dear Mita,

Three months ago I left my husband after three years of marriage. We had started fighting over little things, and the main problem was my in-laws. They were interfering, dominating and poisoned my husband's mind against me. My parents encouraged me to leave, but now I am regretting it. My husband wants me back and I don't know what to do.

Anonymous, Dhaka.

Dear Anonymous,

I would like to approach the problem from a different angle. If the husband is being unfaithful then there is a problem in the marriage which should be addressed first instead of waiting to catch the husband red-handed. Yes, I agree there are hypocrites in our society, just as in most other societies and there will always be some husbands who cheat behind their wives.

Fortunately they are in the minority, our society still upholds the sanctity of marriage and frowns on any deviations.

Dear Anonymous,

I am afraid you took a hasty decision when you left your husband, so now don't take another hurried decision which you might regret even more. Please go back to the root cause of your problems. In-law interference and domination are a part of our culture, and except in very extreme cases, should not be a reason for marriages to break. Instead of going back right away start a process of a dialogue with your husband. Find out each other's weaknesses and strengths, and build on that. Iron out the major points of differences among you so that this time when you get back together it is for good.