

Two Pieces of Superb Political Writing; an Indian Media Journal Gets a New Look; and M J Akbar Offers Tips for New Dailies

EVEN when it is an unhappy admittance of hope and despair, politics sometimes produces superb writings. There are two such pieces before me, from two parts of the world, which deserve to be included in anthologies and mentioned in extracts, in this column.

The first is a valedictory address by the President Corason C. Aquino of the Philippines, delivered some time last year, the text of which has just been sent to me by a good friend in Manila.

Saying farewell to a nation which expected so much from a housewife-turned-politician and was, in the end, more disappointed than pleased with her performance was certainly difficult for Ms Aquino. It was difficult because, right until the end of her presidential term — it formally terminates next month — her political honesty, often interpreted as naivety, remained her biggest political asset. So, not surprisingly, she was torn between the politician's temptation to defend her actions in socio-economic fields and her instinctive sincerity in admitting her lapses. It was not the case of the President performing a balancing act. It was more a question of putting her own performance in the right perspective. Here are a few extracts:

On election: "In the past, the idea was to give people just enough power to elect their mistakes and suffer the consequences until the next elections. Elections were a safety valve. We want elections to be just one of other more effective means to bring the people into government and government to the people, to make it truly a participatory democracy."

On democracy: "In one thing, we grew from strength to strength — in the enlargement of our democratic space and the strengthening of our democracy. Every calamity tested the capacity of democracy to absorb distress, find relief, and meet the absolute necessities of people without the least curtailment of freedom or compromises of rights. Against our economic gains that are ever hostages to fortune, stands one steadfast, unalloyed achievement: our democracy. It is an achievement entirely in our power to preserve and enhance."

On dictatorship: "The formula for success is said to be dictatorial government. But we tried that already (during the Marcos regime), with worse results than the most irresponsible democracy can produce. The spirit of our race will not accept a dictatorship; and memories, fresh as the scars they left, will not let us consider that option again. Democracy is the only way for us. We must find ways by which the pitfalls that go with its blessings are reduced, while its inherent strengths are brought to the fore."

On the freedom of the press: "I firmly believe in the freedom of the press. And I

accept the criticisms poured on me, painful as they are, as part and parcel of the hazards of public service, and conducive to its honest performance. True, I have sued for libel, but I did not use the power of the Presidency to advance my cause. This is shown by the fact that four years later, my case continues to drag on... I want to encourage people to seek redress in the law, despite the inconvenience, rather than in vindictiveness which has no end."

On participatory government: "The organised partic-

THE other piece of political writing, as I said earlier, comes from another part of the world. But it is also a superb composition.

It is an appeal by Eduard Shevardnadze, a former Soviet Foreign Minister, asking for contributions to his Fund of Rebirth and Democracy of Georgia, his homeland which now demands and deserves all the attention of a man who, next to Mikhail Gorbachev, did most to end the Cold War.

The appeal, titled "On this side of the wall" and published in a number of European

ers without even the possibility of buying a glass of milk for their children; and at the elderly who have no one on whom to lean. But most of all, I have been shocked by the reflection of adult melancholy in the eyes of the children who have learnt to live in a world of constant fear and deprivation. One cannot ask them to tolerate this for much longer in the name of a radiant future which they may have to pay for with their own lives."

The man who was one of the first to sound the warning about a coup by hardliners against the Gorbachev government could have said all this about suffering millions anywhere else, in Asia, Africa or Latin America, about deprived people in the slums of Tondo in Manila, about hungry children in an African state in the south of Sahara or even about Rohingya refugees living in fear of the coming monsoon. When a twist of history that people of Georgia, once one of the most resourceful republics of the former Soviet Union, should now join the suffering humanity.

If the appeal of Mr Shevardnadze, as reproduced above, evokes some response here and helps in saving just one child in Georgia, I will take a modest pride in writing this column every weekend.

VIDURA, the English-language quarterly journal of the Press Institute of India (PII) has certainly come a long way. Launched more than two decades ago by one of The Daily Star guest columnists, Chanchal Sarkar, in his capacity as the then founder Director of PII, the journal is now a glossy magazine, printed on white art paper, full of stimulating articles, well-researched features, cartoons — and several full page advertisements. Within the south Asian region, Niriksha, the journal of the Press Institute of

Bangladesh (PIB) now becomes a close second. A few years ago it was Vidura which was trailing behind. For a long time, Sarkar had to run the PII journal on a modest, using old-style printing equipment, including hand-set types. But it still published good articles and remained a pioneer in its field in Asia.

Now edited by S. Nihal Singh who has had a distinguished career in Indian journalism as a commentator, writer, broadcaster and a former editor of the Statesman of Calcutta, the March edition of Vidura, just received, contains several stimulating pieces which call for a more detailed discussion than, for reasons of space, we can offer in today's column. One of them is a panel discussion on "What is a Newspaper?", participated in by three noted editor-columnists of the country, on the changing role of the print media, on its values and standards, not excluding, I am pleased to note, the part positive and negative, played by press barons of India.

Not surprisingly, a shooter piece, written in a somewhat lighter vein, also caught my attention. Not surprisingly, because it is by someone whom most journalists have known, M J Akbar who started and made a success of The Telegraph in Calcutta. In his article, he gives a few tips to editors on "How to Start a Newspaper and Succeed."

It is a good piece, full of nice anecdotes, witty commonsense views and several useful guidelines for potential editors.

Since we cannot lift Mr Akbar's article without his authorisation, the most I can do in this column is to reproduce two illustrations used by Vidura with the piece by the former Telegraph editor. Maybe we can expand on the VI Commandments to suit our local conditions. But that's a different matter, a possible topic for another column.

MY WORLD

S.M. Ali

ipation of the people in daily government may provide the stabilising element that government has always lacked. Policies have radically changed with each administration, yet the basic needs of its unchanging constituencies have not been met: less bureaucracy for business, more public services and infrastructure support for agriculture and industry, an economic safety net for the common man. This is what I wish for most. That after me, the continuity of our work is not broken. So that things well done shall be completed and the same mistakes avoided by succeeding administrations. In this way, nothing done shall go to waste, and the light of a misplaced candle shall still be valued for the light it sheds on the things to avoid... I am not asking that all my programmes be blindly followed by my successor. God knows, we have made mistakes. And the new way is much better than those before."

There's more, much more, with Cory Aquino speaking with both humility and conviction, and above all, not for seeking support for herself or anyone else in an election, but to share her thoughts with her people about democracy, good governments and her dreams, hopes and lapses.

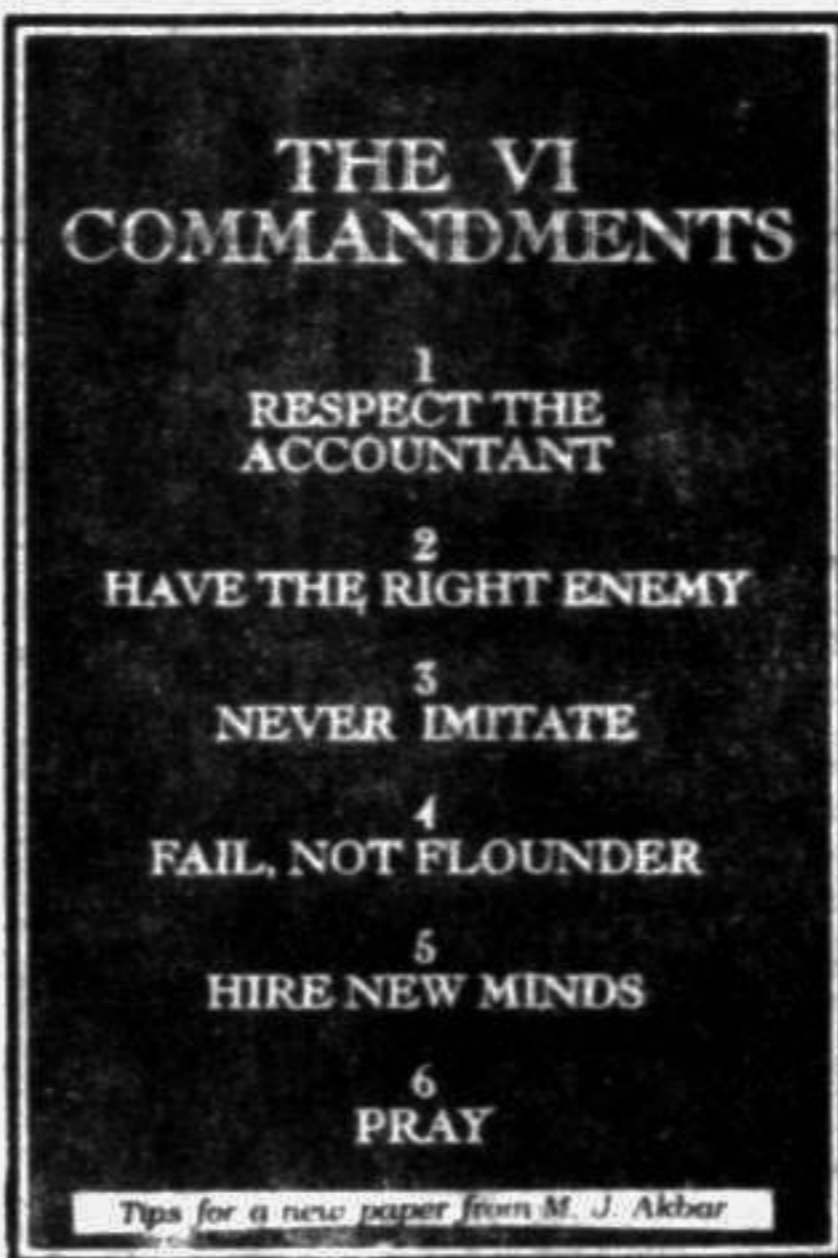
The above extracts have particular relevance to this country. Indeed, in more ways than one, Bangladesh and the Philippines share a great deal. In the way the two countries ousted their authoritarian regimes and went on to face new challenges, amidst fresh pitfalls and lapses. My one regret is, while Bengalis are just as articulate as Filipinos, capable of nursing the loftiest thoughts, our leaders of the post-Ershad period are yet to give us an insight into their thinking on issues touched on by Cory Aquino. Here, I am thinking of the substance of the address, not the occasion chosen by the Philippines leader to deliver it.

newspapers, starts with these moving words: "There are walls that can be knocked down in a few days. These are walls made of brick and stone, which are collapsed easily by will and force. But there are other walls which cannot be destroyed in just a few hours. These are the walls built up by the blocks of ideology and concepts, by mistrust and fear which unmovable in the conscience of men dividing, hiding and separating them from each other."

Then Mr Shevardnadze talks about the suffering of his people in Georgia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. To quote him again, "No one can explain to them why the uncaring wheel of history has to pass over their particular souls and over their destinies. Nor will a reasoned argument over the historical cycle which has terminated the last empire of the world offer them comfort... I have looked into the eyes of despair, at desperation of moth-



The front page of the first edition of The Telegraph.



Tips for a new paper from M. J. Akbar.

TWO DIFFERENT KINDS OF BOOKS



"**O** RA KAW-JAWNA MUKHENA" is a book decidedly addressed to a school-going readership. But that can hardly detract from its importance as an eloquent document — and any fictionalised hair-raising thing — of exploits of true fighters in the Liberation War and how they died.

The same point at once makes this labour of love and gratitude weak as a piece of literature — all full of little-tattle resembling baby-talk used as cliché in juvenile literature, and is of immense value as perhaps the only book giving detail of the heroism of those of little tender-aged fighters whose achievements haven't been so far recorded anywhere else or perhaps ever will be. As such we would like



very much to command this book to all homes with children and all school libraries. This is not to say that the older ones would not find it interesting. They would on the contrary find it to be a mine of important elevating information they had missed out on.

The second book that we take up for this column belongs to quite a different genre. A genre rather unfamiliar and uncultivated in post-Tagorean Bengali literature. Hosne Ara Shahed is a prolific writer, 22 published books already proclaiming that to the Bangladesh readership. One tends to take her for a career journalist from columns coming out for over a decade in a prominent — in fact,

many believe her to be such. But she is far more a teacher — the head of a famous girls' college — and a creative writer. One of recent opus — perhaps no 23 — "Ack-i Awang Ato Roof" — is a rewarding exercise in aphoristic writing. That this anthology of terse and satirical comments on society and human frailty does not ever rise to give a maxim — which the prototype of all such writings, the Sankrit Subashitas do plentifully — is more a matter of preference than failing of the part of the writer.

In the introduction another of our prolific writer Santosh Gupta have very unnecessarily, as it by of comparison, talked of Tagore's Sphulinga and Krishnachandra Majumdar's Sadbhava-shatak or the Japanese Haiko, all of which are short poems. And Ma Shahed's pieces, although short never even pretend to rise to poetry. Hers is not even Kahlil Gibranesque, but is often times very fetching. The intended satire mostly drives home — and in good literary fashion.

This is her first book in this genre — some that is rare in the whole post-Second World War Bengali literature. If she would keep to it, we could get much more socially and aesthetically useful things from her.

There are drawings in profusion strewn all over the book. First, there was no need for it. Second, beside being very weak and inept, they go very ill with the text. It has been a job done in poor taste.

Reviewed by Waheedul Huq

Calcutta Cinema Houses

Continued from page 9

young business executive whether he would like to spend his weekend seeing a Spielberg film on the big screen or even the latest Julia Roberts, the Pretty Woman who stunned the world with her electric charm, and the answer would in all probability be in the negative. Instead, he would perhaps like to see the same films on video. The choice of films on the video circuit is greater; and films like the controversial JFK reach the Indian market faster on video than on the wide screen.

On the Indian film scene, the story is much the same. Those who watch films for the sheer pleasure of an evening out with the family are in quite a different frame of mind. The atmosphere in the cinemas has been somewhat vitiated by the kind of films that have been made and, consequently, the kind of audiences that patronize them. Even the Bombay blockbusters had a measure of taste in the fifties and sixties. Now there is no knowing to what level of perversity they will sink — thanks to the unpredictability of the censors. Rather than that, it would perhaps be a better bargain to bring a choice of cassettes from the parlour across the road and watch the films in the comfort of one's drawing room.

Comfort. That is the thing cinemas are now unable to give. And in throwing up their hands in despair, they have

also allowed a good deal of unlawful practices to take place on their doorsteps — like rampant black marketing during the first few days a new film is released. A section of the cinema employees contributes to the sorry decline in the image and atmosphere of the theatres by treating filmgoers with contempt and conniving with anti-social elements. In some halls, it is difficult to persuade counter salesmen to give change for tickets sold. But all this constitutes a minor hassle compared to the sheer physical discomfort that now goes into seeing films on the big screen.

While there is, now little hope of the cinema owners doing much to bring about any improvement, it is surprising that the civic authorities have lapsed into total callousness. When the decline began to set in, the Calcutta Corporation threatened to cancel the licences of some cinemas. But the cinema owners succeeded in getting the Corporation to turn a blind eye to the condition of the halls and also indulged in unlawful practices.

Surveys conducted by the Corporation in recent years have shown that most of the halls have been violating rules with regard to air-conditioning, number of seats and sanitary facilities. But action has not been taken. It is said, because the licensing authorities are the District Magistrates of North and South 24-Parganas and the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta. A similar

complaint is often heard from the regional censorship authorities about censored portions of films being tagged on in some cinemas by film distributors in collusion with the cinema owners. Again, the police are supposed to take action but most often they do not.

Collusion between the cinema owners and the administration does not end there. Amusement taxes which are supposed to be deposited with the civic authorities are most often held back, enabling the owners and, no doubt, a section of the civic staff to share the bank interest. And if the cinema owners are particularly resourceful, they can even "arrange" not to deposit the amusement tax at all.

All this adds up to a sorry tale. While there may be some substance in the cinema owners' claim that they would close down their establishments if they could, there is little reason to believe that the exhibitors have been worst-hit by the recession in the film industry. They are probably in no position to offer their employees the minimum wages if the cinemas were to be considered a full-fledged industry. But they enjoy safeguards that normally do not extend to other sections of the film trade. Above all, they do not appear to be interested at all in contributing even a little to the pleasure of seeing films. They watch helplessly as the old habit of "going to the flicks" dies a natural death.

Philippines : A Festival Binge

by Arjuna from Manila

Unlike other democracies where only two major political parties contest high elective positions, the Philippines appears to have pulled out all stops and a clutch of political aggruppations has fielded candidates numbering in the hundreds of thousands....

THE Philippines is in the throes of a presidential election year and to those not familiar with the Filipino psyche, it would seem that the whole country is on a festival binge.

A festival — or surfeit — of presidential candidates, that is.

Whoever heard of a major election where there are reportedly some 70 candidates who want to be the next president of the land?

Honest, at the last count — and still growing — at least half a dozen "serious" presidential and vice-presidential teams are in the thick of the fight and more than 50 "nuisance" candidates have filed their certificates of candidacy with the Commission on Elections (COMELEC).

To students of participatory government, the current exercise in democratic processes in the Philippines would appear to be an exaggeration of the real thing. But then, local friend of mine say, Filipinos aren't adopted sons of the Americans for nothing if they can't "out-democracy" their parents in all aspects of government.

And unlike other democracies where only two major political parties contest high elective positions, the Philippines appears to have pulled out all stops and a clutch of political aggruppations has fielded candidates numbering

in the hundreds of thousands.

One foreigner told me: "Aren't you Filipinos overdoing this democratic thing?"

Indeed, even to the casual observer, the coming presidential polls are an exercise in exaggeration. Apart from the overabundance of "presidentiables," it is projected that billions of pesos will saturate the landscape in the next three months while armies of bright boys, PR people, speech writers and peripheral personnel will find instant jobs in the various political camps.

Tons of printed election paraphernalia — leaflets, brochures, streamers, calling cards, magazines, comic books and the like are keeping the nation's printing shops humming with activity 24 hours a day while TV and radio stations are booked solid until the end of April. Meanwhile, local officials and village councilmen, pampered with money and pats on the back by aspiring candidates, criss-cross the boondocks marshalling constituents for their all-important votes in the May 11 elections.

The more credible presidentiables are a study in contrast and come from every imaginable sector of Philippine society. One is a billionaire many times over who says he has an income of over 35 million pesos a day and therefore can never be a crook once elected. A second is a movie

actor who wants to do a Reagan while a third claims he was an abandoned child who scratched out a living by working the land by day and fishing by night.

One woman candidate has an obsession with graft and corruption in government and vowed to skin alive all the bad eggs in public offices.

A fifth shouts to all and sundry that he has always been No. 1 and has never been beaten politically, and therefore should be the rightful successor to outgoing President Corason Aquino. The sixth is a retired general and once the chief of staff of the army in the Marcos regime. He is President Aquino's pet.

The rest of the also runs (they are concededly just "nuisance" candidates) are therefore have no chances of getting more than their families' votes) come from a broad spectrum of personalities that include some eccentric, faith healers, psychics, fortune tellers, government employees, soap box orators, patent medicine salesmen and frustrated mayors, policemen and merchant mariners.

The coming polls indeed have assumed some sort of tragicomic appearance. Tragic in the sense that while the country is mired in economic difficulty, billions of pesos that would otherwise perk up the business climate go instead into the pockets of people

whose motto is "Easy come, easy go."

The whole thing looks funny, at least in the eyes of foreigners, because with so many candidates trying to seduce the electorate all at once, pty the Filipino voter attempting to fill up his ballot and choosing the best men.

Anyway, this is the Philippine scenario today. Everything and everybody has taken a backseat to the election fever and the favourite topic of the day in very nook and corner of the archipelago is "Who are you voting for?"

Meanwhile, TV, the radio, newspapers and millions and millions of posters and leaflets keep the heat of the election campaign at fever pitch. In fact, even before the official start of the campaign got the go signal, the candidates have already jumped the gun and began kissing babies, attended parties and meetings of total strangers or otherwise commended pressing the flesh.

And oh, yes... what is likewise making the political exercise even more interesting is Mrs Imelda R Marcos, widow of the late President Ferdinand Marcos.

Imelda is one of the avowed candidates and at this writing, she is still determined to go for the presidency notwithstanding the fact that she knows it would be an uphill battle at the very least.

But then, as one local anti-Marcos diehard said to me: "If ex-cons, crackpots, seers, cult heroes and the like believe they could run and win the presidency, what could keep Imelda from pursuing the impossible dream?"

She believes Filipinos have short memories.

— Depthnews Asia

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

The answers you give are good but too short. This is understandable given the size of the column. I think it will be a good idea if you sometimes wrote an article on some of the common problems in marriage. Many people I know have similar impression that your answers are not very satisfying. Please think about it.

Sufia, Dhanmondi.

Dear Sufia,

Thank you for reading the column carefully enough to comment on it. Yes I will think about the suggestion you have made. I too find it unsatisfying to give solutions to some of the very complex problems in this limited space.

Thank you for your suggestion, I will seriously think about it.

Dear Mita,

After much hesitation and nervousness I've decided to ask you for solution to my problem.

I'm a teenager. I love and respect MacGyver very much because of his distinctive, artistic and simple ways. I like him so much that I cannot do anything properly. During daytime, without my knowledge, my mind is run by the thought of MacGyver's activities and speeches. At night I cannot go to sleep because of the same reason. Even if I do go to sleep after a hard struggle, I dream about MacGyver. If this situation goes on for long it has started more than two years ago and it still continues. I'll be in big trouble because the big SSC exam is in '93 and my folks are expecting a lot from me as I'm their only daughter.

Please don't neglect me because I'm a teenager. Do please think up a solid solution. You'll have to bear the responsibility of ruining a poor girl's life forever if you do not do so.

Distressed and Helpless one

Dear Distressed and Helpless one,

You are infatuated with a person who is almost every teenager's hero now-a-days. This is not very uncommon. It is a phase in life which will pass. The solution lies with you, whether you want to get over it soon or whether you want to prolong it for few more years. Thinking and dreaming about him is not harmful unless it affects your day to day activities. If you are serious about getting out of this situation then plan your day in such a way that among all your activities you will keep a certain amount of time for MacGyver. Over the months

slowly, make that time shorter and in about a year you will find that you only think about him for 10-20 minutes per day. Try to do this and let me know how it works.

Dear Mita,

My teen age daughter does not realize how unsafe it is to go out alone. She is unaware of the danger and gets very upset when I try to restrict her movements. What can I do to make her understand? She thinks my fears are exaggerated and that I don't want her to have fun with her friends. This is very upsetting as it's very important for me to have a good relations with her.

Misunderstood mother.

Dear Misunderstood,

Please don't be too upset teenagers have a habit of expressing themselves more seriously than they mean to. Young people have always rebelled and will continue to resent restrictions on their movements, think how you reacted when your parents stopped you from spending the night at a friends house. Your daughter should be made aware of the dangers in being foolishly brave. Incidents of robbery, chain snatching and harassment is going on everyday and there is no sense denying it. Ask her to read the newspaper and keep an open mind about the dangers in the street rather than looking at it as a disciplinary action from you. You on the other hand should make an effort that she spends time with friends by assuring her safety.

Dear Mita,

Is it possible to make the Eid celebrations a little more interesting. All we do is eat, wear new clothes and eat a little more. Visiting relatives is no fun also because one sees them all the time. Every year I promise myself to do something different but find myself repeating the same rituals. Do you have any suggestions?

Sultana, Azampur, Dhaka

Dear Sultana,

I tend to agree with you to some extent but in spite of the boredom, the repetition etc. we all somehow look forward to the event. Eid somehow brings back childhood memories and remains in us the spirit of generosity, charity and kindness towards our fellow humans. The exchange of gifts with close relatives is also fun which is enjoyed by both young and old. Visiting relatives you have not seen in a long time is also another way of spending Eid. Last of all, this is the only major celebration in our religion and we should all make an effort to make the best of it.