

# Profile of a Filipino Presidential Candidate; How Immigration has Helped Economic Growth in Southeast Asia; and a Seminar in Greece on Races that Burma Probably Missed

**M**ORE than two decades ago, we were enjoying an after-dinner conversation at the tastefully furnished living room of a modest house at Quezon City in the suburb of Manila. Our hosts were a young, soft-spoken and extremely good-looking couple, Mr and Mrs Ramon Mitra. The small group of friends who had been invited by the Mitras that night included a noted painter, Malang Santos, a couple of writers and one speech-writer who worked for the same boss as our host, Mayor of Manila, M Villegas.

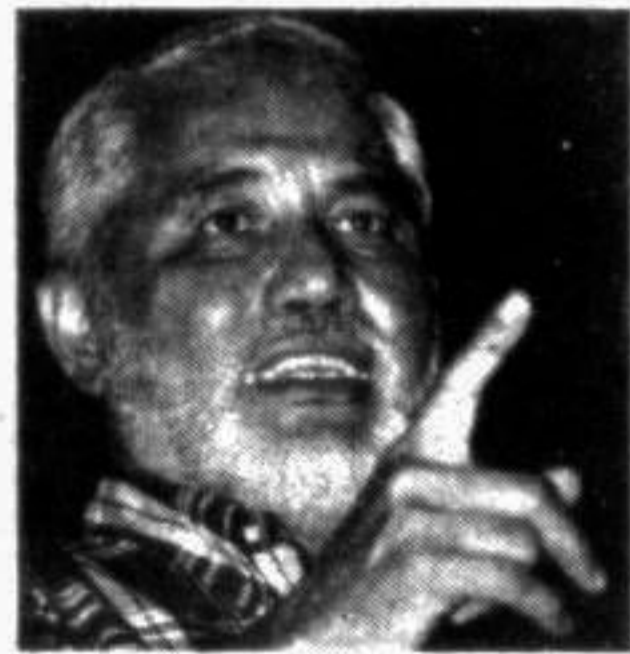
It was the first time that I had actually met a speech-writer in person who, instead of being somewhat secretive about his profession, openly talked about the challenge of expressing views which may not necessarily be 'your own', about some resentment he felt when there were arbitrary changes in the draft and, finally, about a little sadness he experienced when he could not claim the authorship of a speech that evoked a genuine applause from the audience, with the leader bowing his head in appreciation.

While the speech-writer made it all sound rather amusing, I kept wondering, in case journalism did not provide me with a decent income — at that moment, the prospects seemed rather bleak — I could take up speech-writing for some politician friends of mine in what was then East Pakistan or on the other side of the divided country. The problem was, although I did have some ideas, very limited ones, on a few selected subjects, I had no real command over any language spoken or written by any section of the human race in my part of the world. I had enormous difficulties — I still have — in coping with spellings in Bangla and I had worse problems with the use of the definite article, in placing punctuation marks at the right places and other niceties of the Queen's English. At times, I had even toyed with the absurd idea of writing Bangla — or, better still, my Sylheti — in Romanised script. Here, with this idea, I was at least 25-30 years ahead of time. I have just learnt that one cabinet minister did recently read his speech in Bangla written in Romanised script!

After all these years, I would not remember if I dis-

cussed my problems with languages with my Filipino speech-writer friend. However, clearly sensing my interest in his profession, he did assure me when you have mastered the technique of writing speeches, it would not take long before you start doing them for yourself. Then, you have no idea how far you can go," he said to me, almost in a whisper, as if passing on a secret.

Well, our speech-writer friend was right. He was none other than Blas Ople who, on entering politics, became the Minister for Labour in the Marcos administration, did a good job in opening up the Middle East and the Gulf region for Filipino workers and, somehow or other, politically survived the fall of Ferdinand Marcos. In one way or another, he may still be active in the country's national scene.



Ramon Mitra  
Courtesy: Far Eastern Economic Review

During our wide-ranging conversation, Ramon Mitra spoke in well-measured sentences, offering moderate views on current controversies, such as Indonesia's then confrontation against Malaysia and President Sukarno's bid to create a new bloc of what the flamboyant leader called the newly-emerging nations. It was a typical low-key performance of Mitra.

During the following two decades and a half, Mitra kept his low-profile, even when he was put under detention, for a short period, by the Marcos regime for his opposition to the authoritarian government. The fall of the Marcos dictatorship saw him run for the Congress, win the contest with ease and take over as the Speaker of the 198-member House of Representatives which, most Filipinos say, hindered rather than helped the reform process initiated by President Aquino.

When we met last time in Manila in 1989, Mitra looked every inch a presidential candidate and, with his greying beard, a bit like the late Orson Wells.

Now, regional journals have dubbed Mitra as the front-runner in the Presidential Election in the Philippines, scheduled for May 11. Reports talk about his unexpected rise to national prominence, about his inability to get the endorsement of Corazon Aquino,

able number of people, especially in the affluent upper class, would claim their Spanish, American or Chinese ancestry, but rightly insist that they were now second or third-generation full-fledged Filipinos. Among them, one can count Cardinal Jaime Sin, the head of the Catholic Church; President Corazon Aquino; and Locesina, the noted business people as being of Chinese origin. And then you look at the fair skinned sharp

the downtown Manila. Somewhere in the suburb of the capital, there is some kind of an enclave, a couple of long narrow streets, where live perhaps a hundred or so dark-skinned families who are said to be originally from parts of South India. The theory is, their ancestors landed in the Philippines towards the end of the Second World War as part of a small British force in the US-led operation to liberate the archipelago from the tattering Japanese rule. Having failed to become part of the mainstream Filipino nation, through inter-marriages and economic interaction, the community of these South Indians, unlike their resourceful counterparts in Singapore and Malaysia, are now almost a dying breed. It remains a subject for a good research study.

majority Buddhist Burmans. Thus, this beautiful country has been forced to do without the kind of contribution that various ethnic groups have made to the spectacular economic progress of countries like Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. Unlike Burma, these countries have gone much further then just giving the immigrants a stake in their economic scene. The first elected Chief Minister of Singapore was David Marshall, a Lebanese Jew who has been as much a citizen of the city state as his Chinese successor, Lee Kuan Yew. The present Prime Minister of Malaysia is Mahathir bin Mohammad whose father migrated to the Malay federation from somewhere in India or Pakistan.

Years ago, there was a UNESCO-sponsored seminar held in Greece, under the initiative of the then Minister for Culture, Melina Mercouri, to discuss racial assimilation in various parts of the world. The three-day deliberation produced one simple but heart-warming conclusion: There are no — repeat no — pure races in the world.

Had the government of Burma attended the seminar and learnt from its discussion, there might never have been the Rohingya refugee problem.

## MY WORLD

S.M. Ali

which has gone in favour of Gen Fidel Ramos, perhaps the strongest contender and, finally, about his low-profile, not necessarily an asset in the politics of a volatile nation in the Philippines. Well, it won't be much of an asset in Bangladesh either if Mitra was to run in an election in this country. However, I, for one, would wish him good luck at the polls. After all, an exclusive interview with the President of the Philippines would be good, indeed most welcome, for the The Daily Star.

featured Rocés, Aranetas and so many others and they would not feel lost if you speak to them in Spanish.

The small community of Indian immigrants — all called 'Bombatia' because many of their ancestors boarded the Manila-bound ships from the port of Bombay — do not figure very prominently in this scenario of racial admixture. There are Sikhs owning small retail shops on side lanes off

**W**HAT makes me sad and even angry is that in sharp contrast to the process of ethnic, religious and cultural assimilation which has shaped the destinies of countries in Southeast Asia and even in former Indo-China states, Burma has pursued its insular, narrow ethnic policy, denying the various minorities, the rights enjoyed by the



A group of Rohingya refugees, victims of racial domination in Myanmar —Star photo

ladies, who were well versed in English and besides this, they had wide knowledge of the contemporary affairs.

The evening dinner that was served to us was artistic in every way. Good food can only be enjoyed in a pleasant company. We all enjoyed our five-hour long dinner and thereafter were entertained by a musical evening (Samasin).

The Ministry also arranged for our visit to some of the im-

portant cities like Kyoto, Nara, Nagoya, Atami and the lake districts. Nearly three decades have passed, since I was in Japan, but I will always remember the graciousness, humility and industriousness of a great nation. As an economic superpower, Japan is a world leader. This could only be attained by a people who could make great sacrifices to achieve their goal and objective.

### People and Places

## A Memory of Japan in the Sixties

by Shahabuddin Mahtab



reflected in their day to day living. Their cleanliness and neatness can be gauged from the fact, that when entering a place they leave their own shoes outside and wear comfortable sandals which are provided by the host.

In matters of management, the people have many qualities which make them highly efficient. They have a single track mind and put their whole-hearted efforts to a specific and particular work at hand. In our system of management, we do not often specialise and sharpen our workmanship but like a grasshopper, we want to know many aspects of a work which are not relevant to us. Mr. Takeshita was in the Savings Bank unit and excelled in this own area of work and did not bother to know about money orders, mails, registration etc. etc. To a visitor like me, it first appeared that the work in the office was highly compartmentalised, but in the final analysis it is the end

product that matters, and here the workmanship and the quality of work was superb.

While at the Ministry, I visited the various branches of the office, but did not see many files with the concerned officer. On enquiry one of the Directors told me that all decisions were normally taken at the nearest point of operation. All the decisions could therefore be made through 'slim files'.

My colleague from Lahore Saeed Qureshi and myself had a lot of inquisitiveness about the 'geisha'. With the helpful cooperation of Mr. Miyamoto, the Director, an opportunity was afforded to us while at Osaka. It was already late on a summer day, when we visited a geisha house. The house that we visited was extremely neat and simple, and as we went inside, we found it fully air-conditioned. There we met two Japanese ladies in their mid-thirties who welcomed us. We had conversation with the

**I**T was a very cool evening in the last week of April, 1963, that I landed at the Haneda International Airport. The visit was sponsored by the Government of Japan and was to last for a period of three months. The objective was to get some idea regarding the postal savings habits of the people in the rural areas and to draw some lessons/ideas which could be of some use to the then Pakistan Post Office.

The next morning, I reported myself at the Ministry of P.T & T. My guide in the Savings Bank, Mr Takeshita took me to meet the Vice-Minister, who was actually the executive head. I was warmly received by the Vice-Minister and he requested me to see him in case of any difficulty or a problem. After this meeting, I also reported to the Embassy of Pakistan and met there Lt. General Khalid Masud Sheikh who was the Ambassador at that time. On learning the very purpose of my visit, the Ambassador told me that I was going to learn a lot from the friendly people of Japan. He

mentioned to me that in Japan, people were thrifty and saved as much as thirty percent of their income that went for the investment and development of the country for which the nation was striving hard.

In conformity with the purpose of my study, my stay was arranged in Hakone along with my interpreter provided by the Ministry, and we stayed in a Japanese Inn (called Royokan). This enabled me to have some glimpse of the Japanese way of life. I slept on a 'tatami' and took my meals squatting on the tatami floor and having my meals on a low table, dressed in a Japanese style sleeping suit.

The first thing that would strike any visitor from South Asia was the most courteous behaviour of the Japanese people. This culture of politeness has a background of centuries. This is amply reflected in the Japanese tea ceremony, the flower arrangements, the Japanese gardens and their love for beauty, solitude and symmetry. In fact all these are



### Remembrance

## Papa Gave his Life for the Cause of a 'Shonar Bangla'

Rubina Qadir Mahmud

**P**ERHAPS the memories of one's childhood are the sweetest and the happiest of all.

My life with my father — Lt Col Mohammad Abdul Qadir — hence are the most memorable of all.

He was my hero and I loved him dearly, not only because he was my father, but a man with unique qualities, strong belief and personality as well as caring and loving.

His love still holds our family together and his strength helps us to carry on.

I remember those afternoons or after dinner hours when he would spend with us telling stories of 'Hatem Tai,' the favourite Bengali folktales. Sometimes he would play cards, ludo or carrom with me and my brother, Nadeem.

He would take us for morning walks and narrate his experiences with nature when he grew up in his village home, while sometimes in the afternoon we would get surprises by going to the market or parks. The evening was reserved for our loving Amma. Yes, he was a perfect father and a husband.

In the army, he was known as the 'blue-eyed boy' despite his open love for Bengali and the Bengali people. Seniors possibly respected him for being straight-forward and possibly that is why he always held prize positions.

A genius in mathematics with an incredible photographic memory. He had no dearth of friends, who enjoyed his good humour and warmth. Some still remember him with respect today.

My happy life came to an end on the 17th April, 1971, the day I lost my 'dear papa,' as we used to call him.

After March 25 military crackdown, it was the first day he wanted to get out of his room for the morning air. He was depressed of not being able to join the Mukti Joddhas as we were trapped and hiding. Not a light in the house or curtains moved.

Papa also had dreams for his third child my mother was carrying at that time and went quite sentimental hugging us that day. Perhaps because he knew that the end was near.

Papa was in his room and Amma and myself were taking breakfast, when we heard loud gun-shots outside and thumping of boots on our front door. Nadeem and one of our bearers opened the door and in came several Pakistani soldiers carrying automatic weapons.

They started yelling 'Gaddar Kaha Hal' (Where is the traitor) along with Papa's name. They went to his room and permitted him to change.

Papa, always smart and elegantly dressed, changed into his favourite present from Amma — a white checked shirt and grey trouser.

Myself and Amma remained mum by fear and shock. Nadeem was running up the



Shaheed Lt. Col. Mohammad Abdul Qadir

stairs as he was taken away in a blue jeep escorted by a junior officer (a captain may be) and waved for the last time — 'good bye.'

My heart sank and a strange emptiness came over me, which is still there as we mark 21 years of his arrest today.

Later, the same soldier came back searching for his pistol, which was by that time was with the Mukti Bahinis. They lined us up and threatened to shoot us. 'Kill us,' my Amma said.

Then the officer said 'we will take your son,' when we cried out pleading no. Strangely, maybe Amma and myself were reciting from the holy Quran, the officer ordered his men out and said 'we do not harm pregnant women.'

Nadeem asked 'uncle when will you bring back Papa?' He said 'Fikir math karo, shamko le ayege.' (Don't worry, we will bring him back in the evening).

From then on we fled from house to house and finally saved by a dear friend we called Chacha, late Ruhul Ameen (General Manager of BCCI, Dhaka). He took us to his house, looked after us for a month and arranged the safe birth of our youngest brother, Naweed.

Naweed is as old as Bangladesh and he is an exact replica of Papa. We are very proud of him.

After independence we found out (Papa's) underground work for the cause of Bangladesh by way of getting information, supplying explosives and manpower so that his dreams of 'Shonar Bangla,' where everyone would have enough to eat, a shelter and peace, & BECAME A REALITY.

What we did not know was that his Shonar Bangla was more important to him than his family or his own life. But, we know that he lived for beliefs and died for his beliefs. Like him, millions of people have given their lives for the same dream.

TODAY, on the 17th I pray to Allah and hope that the dreams of my Papa and thousands others who gave their lives for our better tomorrow comes true, so that they can rest in peace and we can all enjoy the 'TRUE SHONAR BANGLA.'

## WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,  
I have been reading your column for the last one year. Your answers are mostly objective and balanced, but I find them too careful. You seem to be afraid to speak your mind and because of that your advice is often not forceful enough. You must be bold when necessary. Your readers want advice from a professional person who is not afraid of the truth. Please print my letter because there are many who will agree with me.

Safa, Mohammadpur

Dear Safa,  
There is some truth in your letter, I am careful and sometimes give guarded advice even against my better judgement. But please remember one thing, speaking the truth in frank, brutal terms is sometimes counter productive. I have to be culturally sensitive. But I do appreciate your letter. Please be more specific if possible, I shall try to correct myself.

Dear Mita,  
Please continue this column because I and many of my friends have greatly benefitted from it. I agree with the women who wrote last week that you should write series of articles on common issues in marriage. I think it will be appreciated by most of your readers.

Sara, Maghbazar

Dear Sara,  
Thanks for your encouraging words, I do need such feedback as there is no other way for me to know if I am getting across to my readers. About those articles, well I will think about it. I promise.

Dear Mita,  
My husband and I are having big arguments which are turning into unpleasant fights over the Golam Azam public trial business. He says it is illegal while I see it as a means for people to exercise their democratic right of freedom of speech. In the past we have often differed over political issues but this is the most serious one. What do you think I should do when he provokes me and hurts my sentiments. I often react very strongly and say things I don't mean to. Please advise.

Rehana, Dhanmondi

Dear Rehana,  
Having different opinions on personal, family and political issues is common and natural even among the most loving couples. It is something positive and adds excitement to the relationship. But as with everything else, this difference

should stay within certain limits. If you have respect for each other's views then there should not be a problem. If you differ on some very basic and core values then it is best to avoid those subjects.

Dear Mita,  
I went through your answer regarding my letter (about a quarrel with wife while writing a letter). Unfortunately I am not satisfied with your answer. I had clearly mentioned that it is the content of letter which creates trouble between us but not the person whom we write as you had wrongly guessed. Moreover, you were cruel to comment 'I would not worry too much about it' because I did not ask for your reaction to my problem. All I want is your ever convincing and prudent advice on such trivial matters as this.

Apts, D U Dhaka.

Dear Apis,  
Please forgive me if I appeared cruel, that was not my intention at all. I suggest, you both have a frank discussion among yourselves regarding this problem. Explain to your partner that it is not worth fighting or creating tension over such trivial matters. You are newly married. You have many wonderful and exciting ways to spend your time. So don't waste it on arguments over writing letters.

## WRITE TO MITA

Run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counsellor, assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer, this column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family laws, and social and interpersonal relationships. Please address letters to Mita, The Daily Star, GPO Box 3257 or to 28/1, Toynbee Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.