

## Bangladesh in Diplomatic History: Experiencing an Inherent Discipline

THE concept of diplomacy is as old as civilization. And appointment of envoys is as ancient as politics itself, but not until the fifteenth century when appointment began to be more or less on regular basis. Normally envoys had traditionally been recruited in Europe from the wealthy aristocratic families in those old days. Social position in the society was the prime factor for selection on diplomatic assignment. At one stage, 'inordinate emphasis upon linguistic competence' was placed on the selection of envoys, side by side a degree of financial solvency.

In Europe, the Italian states first established permanent legations in the fifteenth century which was followed by the introduction of the Ambassadorial system. Two classes of diplomatic representatives were working in Europe. One was ambassador, who was obliged to vie for precedence in the capital where he was accredited to and the other semi-official agent, who did not have access to authoritative sources of information.

Since ancient times a diplomat has been in communication and negotiation with foreign governments though the nature of these negotiations have grown very complex in the present day world.

The origin of diplomacy in Bangladesh in fact dates back to the fourth century BC when the sailor Buddha Gupta sailed from Chittagong Port for Malacca. According to Malayan history, Buddha Gupta was instrumental in establishing relations between Bengal and Malacca in fourth century BC. Traditionally the people of Bangladesh are hospitable and as tactful as a diplomat. The people have inherent discipline in the art of diplomacy.

Fahien, Ibn Batuta and Ralph Fitch had established a link between Bengal and the countries these roving ambassadors represented.

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thinker and pundit, Dipankar Srijnan imparted knowledge to pupils in medicine and assisted Tibetan people in building water conservancy project. Having achieved clear perception and understanding in Buddhism from long studies in Sri Lanka, Dipankar Srijnan, who was awarded the highest honour 'Atisa' in Tibet, was invited by the King of Tibet twice. Initially he declined the invitation. However, he went to Tibet on foot in 1041 AD at the invitation of Raja Byan Chub. A dike which was built in Tibet under his supervision to protect people from the scourge of recurring floods remains till today as a symbol of friendship between the peoples of Bangladesh and Tibet.

Dipankar Srijnan had to play the role of a mediator in resolving a dispute between Raja Nayapala and Karna of western India while he was there on way to Tibet. He was also received by the King of Nepal. He died in Tibet at 72. His ashes were brought to Dhaka at the instance of late President Ziaur Rahman to pay respect to this great diplomat of the eleventh century. His ashes are preserved at Atisa hall in Kamalapur Buddhist monastery.

According to a number of Chinese records as deciphered by Hirth and Rockhill in K'oung Pao and P. C. Bagchi and Hsiang Ling, a number of emissaries had been exchanged between Bengal and China in the first half of the fifteenth century.

During the fifteenth century, Bengal was ruled by Pathan rulers independent of the Government at Delhi and

its capital was located at Pandua in the district of Malda. According to information compiled in 1520 in Si Yang Ch'ao Kung Tien, first envoy was sent to China by King Ghiyasuddin of Bengal in 1408 AD. The envoy reached Tai-t'ang in King Su with gifts from the King for the Emperor of China in 1409 AD. The envoy from Bengal was received by the Minister of Foreign Affairs at Tai-t'ang.

As per other records, envoys paid visit to China in 1414 and 1438. However, there remains differences of opinion among the researchers on the exact date of the voyage of the first emissary from Bengal. The visits of envoys from Bengal inspired Emperor Yong Lo of China to initiate a policy for establishing political relations with foreign countries in 1409. According to Chinese book Ming-She, many more envoys from Bengal visited China since 1409. In 1412, officials were sent out to Cheng-King by the Emperor to receive the Ambassador of Bengal. The Ambassador of Bengal was on a visit to convey the message of the death of the King of Bengal. The name of the ambassador has not appeared in the report. While granting an audience to the Ambassador, the Chinese Emperor expressed shock and sympathy at the sudden demise of Ghiyasuddin, the King of Bengal. Emissaries were sent to Bengal by the Emperor of China to attend the coronation ceremony of Prince Saifuddin Hama Shah who ascended the throne of his father, Ghiyasuddin. The

coronation took place in 1412. The newly appointed King had sent a delegation to Emperor Yong Lo with gifts in an attempt to reciprocate the sentiments of the Chinese Emperor and to continue bilateral political relations that was developed by his father. The Chinese Emperor similarly acknowledged the desire of the King of Bengal and advised his envoy Eunuch Hou-hien to visit Bengal with presents for the King, Queen and Ministers of the country. On his way to Pandua, Eunuch Hou-hien arrived at the port of

Cheng Ho was accompanied by two Ambassadors and four Vice-Ambassadors. A banquet was given by the King in honour of the Chinese envoys. According to Chinese record, no beef or mutton was served at the banquet nor the Ambassadors could drink for fear of trouble as it was a breach of decorum. It reflects clearly that the court was predominantly dominated by Hindus.

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ices of the Emperor of China through his emissary. The Emperor was told that the King of Jaunpur had invaded Bengal several times. Envoy Hou-hien was sent by the Chinese Emperor to inform the King of Jaunpur that by being good to a neighbour he could save his own. Presents of silk and money were given to the King of Jaunpur by Chinese Emperor in anticipation of good neighbourliness. It was really a good gesture shown by the Chinese Emperor towards the ruler of Bengal which clearly indicated the successful diplomacy maintained by King of Bengal.

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Bengal, one can say certainly that Bengal was rich in resources. It was a civilized nation. Chinese trade with Bengal consisted of gold, silver, satins, silk, blue and white porcelain, copper, iron, vermilion and quick silver and grass mats. In the fifteenth century, according to Chinese accounts, Bengal used to produce white paper which was smooth and glossy, cotton fabrics, silk and embroidered silk handkerchiefs.

After the fall of Ming dynasty, political and trade relations between Bengal and China had ceased.

From the fifteenth till the arrival of the British Raj there has not been much activities in the diplomatic field in Bengal. During the period of subjugation under the British, Bengalis had no place in the field of diplomacy.

Following partition of British India, professionalization of diplomacy had taken shape. Competitive examination requiring high educational competence had been introduced. Every year selection had been made for entry into diplomatic service through competitive written examination and viva-voce. However, there was wide disparity in recruiting from East Pakistan, which was part of Bengal under British India, in the diplomatic service. Those who were selected following competitive examination were of high calibre. A few who had been inducted in diplomatic service of Pakistan at the initial stage from the then East Pakistan, which became an independent and sovereign na-

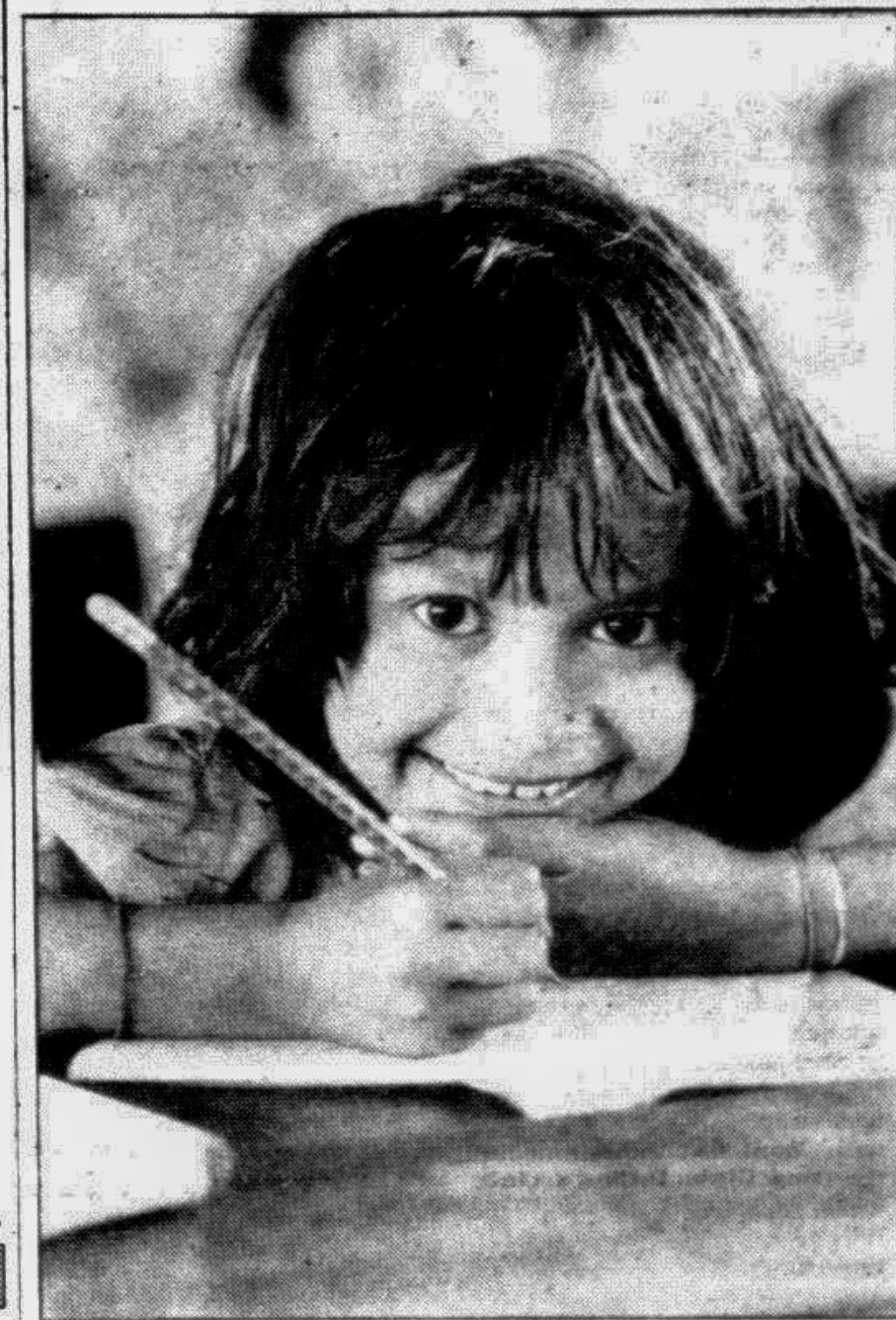
tion state in 1971, were rated as diplomats par excellence. The name of Khajwa

Mohammad Kaiser may be mentioned in this regard. During the War of Liberation, many Bengali officers of Pakistan Foreign Service, who were posted in Missions abroad, declared allegiance for Bangladesh. The first in the series of defection was KM Shahabuddin and Amjadul Huq of Pakistan Embassy in New Delhi followed by A H Mahmood Ali in New York. The entire Bengali officers and officials numbering 70 working at the Deputy High Commission of Pakistan in Calcutta, India including late M. Hossain Ali, Deputy High Commissioner, declared their allegiance in April for

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## Learning the ABCs

by S. Bari



To achieve universal education, we need hard data now. — Photo: Shehzad Noorani

CAN we achieve universal primary education by the end of the century? Promises are made, money is pledged. And nails are bitten as educationists and governments figure out ways to keep all their grandiose commitments.

A new method of assessing education levels may have some of the answers. Presented by its Bangladeshi developers at a workshop last week, the technique targets the virus that plagues education crusades in almost all developing countries: lack of information.

Just what do kids know about health? How does a mother's education affect the child's? Is what we are teaching making any difference? Thanks to cumbersome mechanisms, current figures and evaluation techniques are disarmingly inadequate and slow. The Assessment of Basic Competencies (ABC) is a collection of questions only a few pages long, a trimmed-down incarnation of traditional survey methods.

It is also one of Bangladesh's idea-exports to other countries that face similar dilemmas. The idea will be presented at the Comparative and International Education Conference in Jamaica this year by Dr. Mushtaque Chowdhury, Director of Research at BRAC. At the workshop that ended yesterday, education experts from six SAARC nations and their UNICEF offices came to learn the ABC method.

As the educationists-turned-students sat pencils in hand and brimming with questions, Chowdhury outlined the method. Currently a MacArthur Fellow at Harvard, Chowdhury has been involved with ABC since its birth.

"First," he told his audience, "you define what basic education is." Bangladesh has taken its cue from the Joint International Conference on Education for All (1990): the "three R's and life skills." Life skills are certain kinds of knowledge necessary for survival. This part of the survey asks children questions like what to do if someone has diarrhoea, whether girls should go to school, what size of family is best.

To measure social influences, the method has a section that addresses the child's background. How far the

mother has been educated, how much land the family owns, whether or not there are books in the home: all these factors carry their weight when a child starts its schooling.

The beauty of the system, according to Chowdhury, is its adaptability. "Because it's fast and simple," he explains with ill-suppressed excitement, "you don't need years to do it or particularly skilled staff to carry it out. Within a month, you have results which tell you how your primary education programme is going. You can make changes in the programme if that seems necessary. You can change questions every so often to suit your needs." Best of all, you can transplant the whole machine to another country and another cultural set-up.

Chowdhury admits that rapid assessment has its pitfalls. "You cannot have all the details and the in-depth analysis that traditional methods offer you, but an education programme like Bangladesh's requires immediate feedback." This is mainly because Bangladesh has set ambitious goals for itself. If we put a priority on education, and we want it fast, we need to know how we are doing, and we need to know it now.

Rapid assessment was inspired by the Extended Programme for Immunization example; largely thanks to fast feedback, the UNICEF-led programme's coverage jumped from 2 per cent in 1984 to 70 per cent last year.

The initial concept for ABC was suggested by James Grant, UNICEF's Executive Director. BRAC founder F.H. Abed, and former UNICEF representative in Bangladesh, Cole Dodge, Advisors roped in to the effort included government and non-government stalwarts in the field of education, from the National Curriculum and Textbook Board to ICDDR,B, and Friends in Village Development, Bangladesh. The pilot-test was carried out on 2100 children from all over the country and took just 4 weeks from beginning to end. Chowdhury adds an impish financial footnote to make donors smile: "It all cost less than 15 thousand dollars."

Gudrun Forsberg, chief of education at UNICEF in Dhaka, hopes that experts who have attended the workshop will take ABC home to Nepal. Continued on page 11

## PROFILE

# Lubis, Doyen of Asian Journalism, Battles on for Press Freedom

Jailed by successive regimes in Indonesia, winner of Magsaysay Award for journalism and now the head of the Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia, Lubis serves as an enduring symbol of all that is best in our regional media.

Interviewed by NANCY WONG in Kuala Lumpur

MOCHTAR Lubis, the doyen of Asian journalism and a stalwart champion of press freedom, told The Daily Star at an interview here last week regarding his journalistic career and oftentimes stormy relationship with the powers that be, that "given a second time around, I would not have done it any other way. The press must be strong in order to work for the public good."

In spite of long years of jail terms under two successive regimes — Sockarno and Suharto — plus sporadic suspension of his newspaper, "Indonesia Raya", (with a final closure in 1975), this rock of Asian journalism firmly asserts: "I have no regrets."

To Mochtar Lubis, a responsible newspaper is a gadfly of society accountable only to the readers. He holds true to the view that "the press is not only out to communicate information, but should also fight corruption, as a corrupt bureaucracy will never work for the people's interest. If you are critical, then only can you see the wrong things in society. The press is the only safeguard of the ordinary people's interest — there is no other forum." Ironically, he pointed out, Indonesia commemorates and event the authorities call, "National Press Day". The awful fact remains, he explained, "This is a day we should mourn, not celebrate. The press today have less rights than the common criminal who has access to lawyers, whereas newspapers have no right of defence — the government can simply close them overnight by revoking their publishing licence."

The bright side of an otherwise bleak picture is that Mochtar Lubis' battle for press freedom has not gone unnoticed in other Asian countries. He was honoured by the Magsaysay Foundation in Manila and conferred the prestigious award for journalism in the 70s.

To listen to this intrepid journalist recount his manifold experiences is both inspiring and fascinating. Mochtar Lubis started life as a reporter in the Antara News Agency in Jakarta, just when World War II ended. Four years later he and a few like-minded friends got together to publish a daily, "Indonesia Raya". They had

practically no capital, had to borrow a car and some typewriters and somehow managed to persuade a kind-hearted Dutch man who had a printing company "to give them a chance". Credit was thus extended to this valiant band on a weekly basis. The Dutch man had no cause to regret his impulse for "from the very first day, our paper sold well as it was one of the few independent dailies at the time. At the end of the week we were able to settle our debt and the arrangement continued," recalls Lubis.

Owing to the consistently independent stance of the daily, circulation climbed and after one year, it was able to purchase a plot of land at the centre of Jakarta, and soon after it had its own printing press. When communications between the numerous islands of Indonesia improved, "Indonesia Raya" reached an even wider circulation.

The political situation in Indonesia, meanwhile, was getting volatile, with the nation achieving independence from the Dutch after a long and bloody struggle. "We became critical of many leaders who forgot the independence promises made to the people. We became critical of corruption, lagging economy as a result of too much political bickering and did not hesitate to write about these issues. Our readers found that our writing reflected their feelings and frustration," Lubis recalled.

Sockarno, who was part of the independence movement had become very powerful and assumed all the trappings which went with such a position. He was also well on the way to dictatorship. In 1955, he dissolved the parliament and reinstated the 45 Constitution which made the post of President supreme.

Speaking of that period in Indonesian history, Lubis disclosed that the "Indonesia Raya" became very critical of Sockarno when he became a dictator and later then he arrested political leaders for op-



posing his policies. "We became more critical of his actions and he closed our paper many times, though only for short periods — like a week," he said. This did not deter his commitment towards an independent daily and "Indonesia Raya" persisted in its efforts to report the truth.

One day, three members of the Indonesian Young Women's Association showed up the newspaper office with information that Sockarno had secretly taken a second wife. Her name was Hartina. While this is allowed in Islam, what was unacceptable was the fact that Sockarno had been publicly

sky-rocketed and there was a big reaction from women, so much so that the generals and their wives refused to attend functions at which Hartina was present. This irritated Sockarno a lot," he recalled with a grin.

With Sockarno getting more and more irrational in his actions — he started confrontation with Malaysia and flirted with communism, "Indonesia Raya" did not spare any punches. Finally, in late '57, Mochtar Lubis was put under house arrest for two and a half years, his passport confiscated. This did not stop him from writing, for his wife served as a courier bringing his articles to the newspaper office. After his release he attended the International Press Institute annual meeting in Tel Aviv during which he spoke frankly about the situation of the press in Indonesia. Ignoring pleas and warnings from his European friends not to return to Indonesia, he went back. Sure enough, he was re-arrested under the Emergency laws which excluded any semblance of a trial, and spent over three years in jail.

Despite the loss of freedom of movement and what must have been worse, the inability to practise journalism during his years of incarceration, Mochtar Lubis does not seem to harbour any bitterness. Appropriately dubbed the "second university" by canny journalists, he made full use of his time there by writing short stories for children (especially his own as they missed him dreadfully), doing yoga exercises and teaching himself wood sculpture and ceramics. In fact, he earned the respect, empathy and liking of his wardens to the extent that they would release him for a day from time to time on the undertaking that he would return to his cell. He never broke his word!

With the downfall of Sockarno in 1966, came Mochtar Lubis' liberation. Suharto freed all political prisoners. Lubis returned to a normal life and

lauding the role of women in development. "Indonesia Raya" thought this was a bad example unworthy of a President. Lubis went to the summer palace in Cipanas where the ceremony was alleged to have taken place and tracked down the mullah who was supposed to have performed the ceremony. He had no trouble getting to the bottom of the matter, for the mullah was so proud to have done it for such an illustrious figure, he promptly showed him the records. Whereupon Lubis made photocopies, returned to Jakarta and splashed the news on front page. The circulation