

TO be or not to be, that is the question," — the Jatiya Party leader and a former Speaker of the parliament, Shamsul Huda must have pondered the famous Shakespearean expression many times during the past few weeks, torn by indecision and driven by a sense of revenge, not necessarily of the kind that caused such torment to the Prince of Denmark.

One may not immediately think of Huda — let's not get the Hudas mixed up — as a particularly literary person, as one whose emotions reflect a poetic flavour. Well, there you may be wrong. The former Speaker started his chequered career as a broadcaster and a good one at that in the Calcutta station of the All India Radio (AIR) in the early forties, before moving to the erstwhile East Pakistan as the head of our local provincial station of Radio Pakistan. His first wife was a highly literate person who wrote nice gentle readable Charles Lamb-type of essays which appeared in the then Pakistan Observer from time to time. For his second — and present — wife, Huda found another engaging, almost a famous, personality, none other than Laila Arjumand Banu, certainly one of the best singers of our time.

To what extent the marital connections have influenced the thinking of Huda we would not know. However, speaking from my personal experience, I know for sure that even at his age — he is 73 — he remains a good conversationalist, quite capable of quoting from great writers, including Shakespeare.

However, my assumption that the indecision of Hamlet, expressed so vividly in the famous line, "To be or not to be", reflected his procrastination borders on speculation.

However, there is little doubt that this good friend of ours — out of office, all politicians overnight become 'good friends' — have been subjected to all kinds of push and pull, not particularly good for his health or state of his mind.

The pressure on Huda came in different forms. One JP leader who wanted him to form a new party, reorganise the existing one or just set up a faction — no one really knows what the gameplan was — reportedly quoted from a contemporary British poet. The lines which made a great impact on the former Speaker of the parliament are by Cecil Day Lewis and, if my memory serves me right, go like this:

Move then with new desires,
For where we used to build and love,
Is no man's land.
And only ghosts can live
Between the two fires.

Having heard these lines a couple of times from an admirer, begging him to move on, Huda felt miserable. Well, with so many others in JP, he had indeed lived in what was undoubtedly a "no man's land". But, then, which are the "two fires"? Again, the thought that he might just be a ghost from the past only added to his agony.

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

Come to think of it, Huda should not have felt so miserable. Others felt worse. During that crucial meeting at the residence of the JP leader last week when all the rivals smiled at one another and "settled" all their differences, one line from US poet Ogden Nash crossed the mind of a former Cabinet Minister: "Am I maturing late or just rotting early?"

So, you see, it is good to read poetry. You may just understand the thinking of our politicians, past and present and even of future. Once you penetrate their minds, the politics of Bangladesh will cease to be a puzzle.

HOWEVER, one puzzle will always be there. It is, in fact, acquiring somewhat bewildering proportions.

Instead of fading away gracefully, like our generals, our politicians just do not leave the scene. They take a breathing time when they are out of office, manage to take a few trips abroad and then wait for the right opportunity for making a come-back. They just do not retire. This has nothing to do with age or party affiliations. This is very much a South Asian phenomenon, but not entirely uncommon in other Asian countries.

The subject had come up for a serious discussion with a noted South Asian personality, Sardar Swaran Singh, a former Foreign Minister of India when we met in Kuala Lumpur back in 1987.

Sardar Sahib, as I called him, was at the Malaysian capital to look at the activities of UNESCO. However, we took time off to talk of other — I must say, more interesting — subjects.

At that time, Swaran Singh was closely associated with an international group of "retired" political personalities of different countries, which had been set up by a former head of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Bradford Morse. An unstructured body, the group included several well-known personalities, mostly from Europe and North America, who had once served as presidents and prime ministers of their countries, but it seemed they were no longer interested in taking up active roles in politics.

Instead, as a group, these personalities met from time to time, like an international think tank, discussed issues facing the world and offered advice, when it was asked for, to governments concerned. The group brought into its work a dispassionate understanding of complex questions and expertise, two essential assets of a think tank.

In the late eighties, three members of the group, including Swaran Singh, visited Nelson Mandela in a South African prison and had the vivid impression, as the Indian leader told me in

Is it possible to set up a think tank for South Asia, one that will discuss all the complex issues facing countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and offer some new ideas for their solutions?

Kuala Lumpur, that once freed, the African leader would play a moderating role in putting his strife-torn country on the road to multi-racial democracy.

The question that Sardar Sahib had in mind was simply this: Is it possible to set up such a think tank for South Asia, one that will discuss all the complex issues facing countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and offer some new ideas for their solutions?

The proposition seemed extremely attractive but also challenging. The question was, where would we find people in these South Asian countries to form such a think tank, people who are familiar with the mechanics of power, have the expertise and status to influence policies but are far from interested in taking office in any government?

We identified a few noted personalities, including a handful from Bangladesh, who might just "qualify" for membership of the group. However, there was one nagging question. How could we be sure that these people, many nearing seventy or more, say, like Asghar Khan of Pakistan, Gujral of India or Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, would not use this forum to return to active politics for their own ends?

"Your see, my friend," Swaran Singh said in a sad voice virtually closing the subject, "our

politicians never retire, present company excluded."

THE idea of a South Asian think tank may well be an impossible dream. But is there any hope at all of setting up a national one in Bangladesh? One gets varieties of answers when it is put to top leaders, the so-called decision-makers, of the ruling party, the opposition and even of smaller groupings.

An answer from a member of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) came as a retort, "How do you think we run the administration without a think tank of our own?" One response from Awami League (L) was equally unhelpful, "If the think tank is to work out answers to our present day problems, you have to wait until we come to power. At this moment, the task of solving our problems belongs to the government." The AL leader thus simply dismissed the idea of even offering what we might call "an alternative agenda." In this respect, the smaller groupings may be doing no better. Here, one exception — some would say, a dangerous one at that — is the Jamaat.

However, what BNP and AL leaders may not know, the interest in promoting more in-depth thinking among younger members of their parties on contemporary issues is growing all the time. Many of them realise all too well that this should be part of their preparation for the role they must play in national affairs in not-too-distant future.

At a delightful lunch here last week, one young BNP parliamentarian asked this writer if *The Daily Star* could start talking about promoting "political morality" — his exact expression — in Bangladesh. At the same lunch, an AL member of the parliament — also young and articulate — showed interest in discussing the question of trying Golam Azam for his alleged war crimes, but I got the impression that he was perfectly willing to go into the question in some details. Others talked about mismanagement in the administration, corruption, work stoppages so on and so forth.

So, the conversation went on, leaving me with an optimistic feeling that somehow, somewhere, the idea of a national think tank may be taking shape. All is not lost.

OVERHEARD at a reception: "The leader is right, the party is not." "For every dishonest person you know, there may be three you don't!"

CORRECTION

The birth anniversary of Tajuddin, the late lamented Awami League leader, which was observed last month was inadvertently mentioned as his death anniversary in my column "My World" published last Friday. My apologies. S. M. Ali

One Hundred Years of Peter Rabbit

by Deryk James

LPS Special Correspondent

WHAT an extraordinary story is a remark that could well be made after reading one of Beatrix Potter's tales for children about Peter Rabbit, or any of her other much loved animal

and even Latin. An estimated 80 million copies have been sold. This year (1993), the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is holding an exhibition to make the centennial of Beatrix Potter's appearance in Beatrix's



Beatrix Potter (Mrs William Heelis) (1866-1943), aged about 30, British writer of stories for children.

characters. But it could equally be said about the life of Beatrix Potter herself.

Her books have been enjoyed by successive generations of children round the world, and have been translated into 20 languages, including Japanese

letter to her former governess's child.

Born in 1866 to a wealthy London family, the author could have been destined to be a typically Victorian stay-at-home daughter. Her brother Bertram

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Media: Freedom in Focus Building a Free Press in Kazakhstan

by Nicolas Michaux

The obstacles to a healthy, independent media are not always repressive governments. Economics also plays a major part.



The studio of Radio Maximum Kazakhstan's pioneering private radio station. (Photo: Martin Hadlow)

strides, although certain among them were extremely critical of the government.

While he declined to give details of the mission's recommendations, which have not yet been submitted to the Kazakh authorities Mr Juneau said economics was "the man obstacle to press freedom."

The infrastructure in Kazakhstan is poor. The only big printing plant belongs to the state, which can thus have a say in what is printed. Reliable sources of information are not always available. Foreign newspapers arrive in Alma Ata, for example, three or four days late and only a few local newspaper offices can afford even a copy of the International Herald Tribune, which costs \$2 — a week's salary.

Advertising revenue is still meagre. "A free press in the child of a free economy," said one of the journalists the mission met. But most newspapers live off state handouts — a whole mentality which has to change. "Many papers recoil from freedom," says Retner von Schilling. "It's not the government that shackles them. It's just easier to beg for money."

Only a few of the hundreds of generally over-staffed publications will survive the law of the free market. "We saw newspapers without even a camera or with just a single ancient typewriter but which hired 50 people, many of whom had to pretend to be working," said Mr Gai.

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Ethnic Minorities

Some papers are published in the Kazakh language (the Soviets imposed Russian on the country), or in Uighur, German or Korean. These also depend on subsidies, but give a voice to ethnic minorities Kazakhstan

wants to safeguard and, in so doing, avoid the bloody inter-ethnic strife that has riven much of Central Asia. Press freedom and subsidies will probably have to be combined for at least an initial period, according to the three experts. One way they suggest would be to set up an independent authority to distribute the subsidies on a fair and open basis. In this difficult period, viable economic conditions also have to be created by reducing taxes and costs to a minimum.

Overall, the space the press needs has yet to be marked out and developed. Any new law must also ensure journalists access to information, especially from official sources. Some kind of independent press council could be set up to watch over press ethics, as in a number of democratic countries.

Because of its importance for social and cultural development, radio and television need special attention and perhaps separate legislation. Kazakhstan could follow the example of Western countries which have set up independent watchdog authorities.

The mission had great difficulty explaining the concept of "public service" in this section of the media, said Mr Gai. For most people, "public" meant "government" and thus official propaganda. This difficulty over words symbolised a whole problem in itself.

Arrival

by Syed Haider

On a barren shadowless place
a cloud arrives,
the trees start growing from the raindrops
the castle-roofs are transformed into shades.
The streets are not linked to any dwelling,
there is no footpath before the palace,
the mouth of a cow is detached from the grass —
oh! Such sickness!
and then who blows the pipe in the doorway?
who sings the song?
The pretenders are reassured, the prostitutes on the throne
and the sword of sermon
shakes this earth in tremor,
— a poet has arrived, so we say.

— Translated by Helal Uddin Ahmed

Earthworm

by Shamsul Islam

Who does detach the garden from the heaven
Leaving behind a desert-like vacuum?
Whose 'nolok' is dangled by the wind
In the quivering leaves of palm-frees?
And the distant gap throws a peal of laughter?
In whose hair does the switch of darkness weep
Yet the striped cheetah dances up and down all around?

The earthworm tussles with life
In the thicket of poison's neutralizer
Haply in hunger does death
Stretch out its icy hands.

— Translated by Alfaz Tarafder

Russia — New Journalism, Old Idealism

Jeffrey Heinrich writes from St. Petersburg

IN a 17th century building next to a canal in St. Petersburg, a handful of editors who used to be underground and opposition journalists now run Russia's first private news agency, Severo-Zapad.

They digest 30 stories and editorials a day on regional Russian news and issues, fax them to a dozen subscribers in Scandinavia and Germany, are paid 20 per cent more than their competitors, and pride themselves on their objectivity.

"I am not a member of any political party because I think it's unnecessary," said editor and writer Andrei Bogen, 33, a specialist in Russian language and literature. "I am not a political man. I am a journalist."

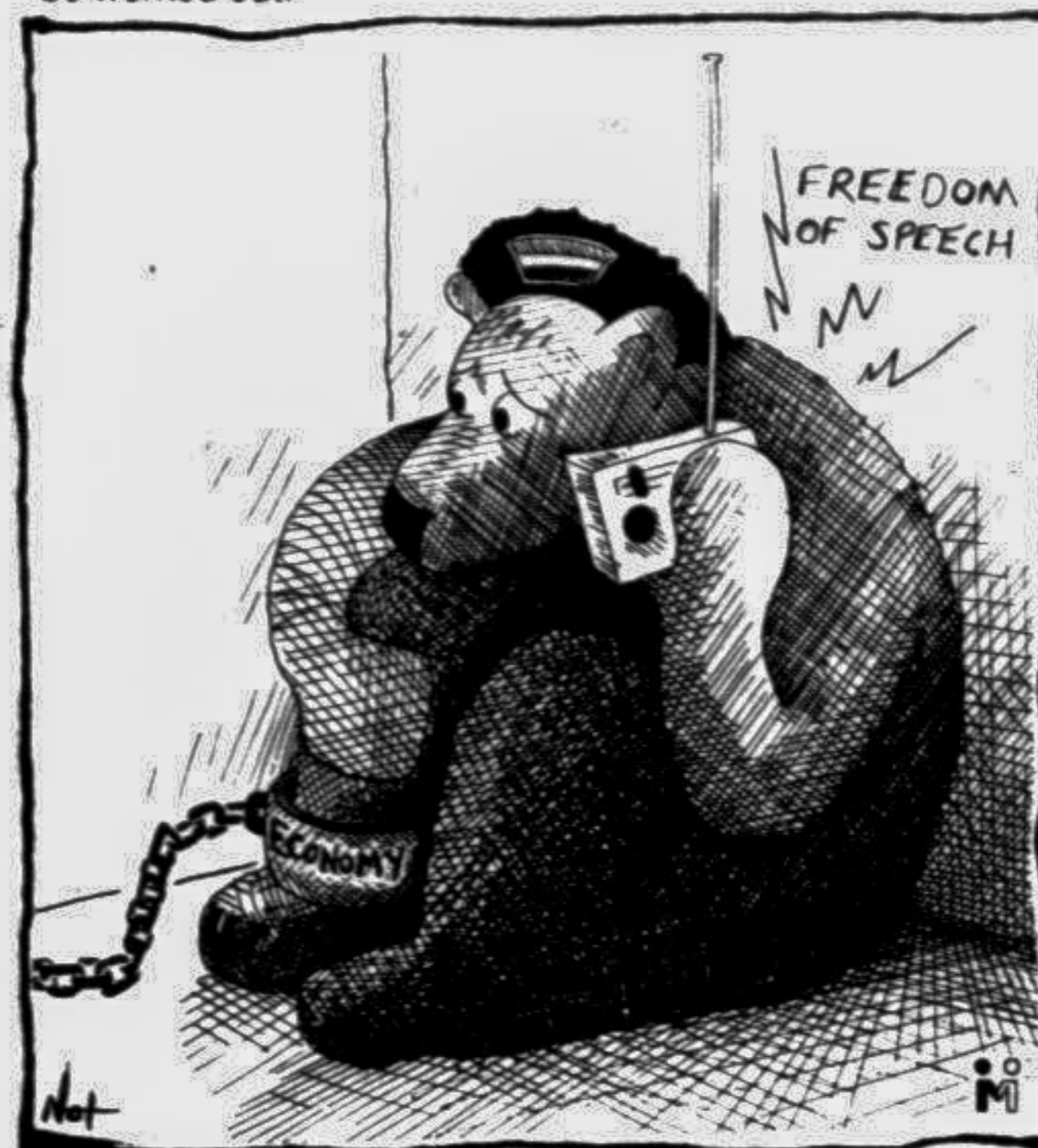
At some personal profit, too. In a city where a ride on the underground Metro cost five roubles, Bogen is paid R9,000 a month to edit copy and another R25,000 to write articles and book reviews. Not bad for a young journalist with little experience.

His beginnings in the trade were humble. In the twilight of the communist years in the late 1980s, when St. Petersburg was still Leningrad, Bogen started writing what he called "very short, deep and bright" articles for "a very small newspaper called Private Opinion," an organ of the national opposition Democratic Union Party.

Then in August 1991 he heard about Severo-Zapad. The agency had opened a few months before, the brainchild of Leningrad dissident writer Elena Zelinskaya. Unlike the state Tass news agency, it had a policy of hiring young people with little experience and no ties to the official press. Zelinskaya gave him a job.

She likes people who, like

The new-found freedom of the press that has emerged in Russia in the last few years means financial and journalistic success for young reporters, editors and owners. Private news agencies are providing reports to several Russian cities as well as to Scandinavia and Germany. But, as Gemini News Service reports in this profile of one such news agency, a few bugs still have to be worked out.



her, started on the right side of the political fence. By day through the 1980s, she worked as a guide for in tourist, the state travel agency. By night and on weekends she wrote articles about real life in and around Leningrad for underground newspapers. Some of her stories were published abroad in the Russian emigrant press.

Under the glasnost of then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and spurred by the country's new liberal press law in January 1991, Zelinskaya turned from dissident to businesswoman. She applied for a licence to open a news agency, and got it.

"We started with one computer and three reporters in a room of the district city council, after the election of the democrats in March," she recalled. During the abortive military coup against Gorbachev in August, the agency got the big break it needed to raise its profile and attract foreign clients.

"Our telephone lines were not cut off, because we were in a city government building and the putschists didn't know we were there. So we were the only press able to operate."

During the short-lived coup, the agency sent electronic mail dispatches to Finland and foreign consulates in Leningrad, and Zelinskaya's voice was heard across the city from public loudspeakers normally used by the state. Technicians had hooked up the agency's phone lines to an obscure little radio station called Open City and she read the news live over the air. It was a dissident journalist's dream come true, and it was good for business.

Today, the agency has grown into a network of young corre-

spondents in 30 Russian cities, from the Baltics to the Urals. There are none in Moscow, however, which Zelinskaya considers an impenetrable market oversaturated with foreign journalists.

Half of Severo-Zapad's output is sold to Finland, mostly media and research institutes and associations in Helsinki. For foreign subscribers, the agency-generated news on Russia's internal political turmoil, its environmental pollution and hazards such as run-down nuclear power stations and hydroelectric dams draw the most interest, Zelinskaya said.

The agency publishes a separate monthly review in English called Eco-Chronicle, entirely devoted to environmental issues. "In the last two years, we have had all sorts of possibilities in Russia to have contacts with foreign media, especially in Finland, and they are very open to all kinds of information we can provide," said 37-year-old Zelinskaya.

The agency writes in Russian, but has four translators to turn copy into English, a language easily read by the Finnish editors. The rough copy often leaves much to be desired, said Laura Jones, a 20-year-old Harvard University student on leave. She is one of two American editors the agency has hired to clean up copy for R200 a page. The articles often lack background and have poor syntax and spelling before they go out, Jones said.

Some critics of the service within the Russian media said the agency's faults go deeper. One Moscow radio station last year stopped subscribing to Severo-Zapad. It said the agency too often ran stale, two-day-old news and got its facts wrong on a number of stories. "They were not as professional as I would have liked," the producer said.

Logistics are part of the problem. Russia's antiquated phone system is one example. Only at the end of last year did St. Petersburg get direct-dial service to Helsinki, only a few hundred kilometres away.

It is also hard to get good, reliable reporters in a country which until recently had a press that "did not have to use facts, that simply put out propaganda and wrote commentaries with no basis in reality," Zelinskaya said.

Writers and editors such as Bogen and Zelinskaya try to avoid that trap. Their liberty as members of the private press carries with it certain responsibilities, which they do their best to respect. It is almost as if the idealism they and others had under the old regime has seeped into the work they do now for pay.

Bogen said: "I work here because what I do gives something real to society and to me my nature needs to write, but I must give to my society too. It is best that way."

JEFFERY HEINRICH is a Canadian journalist based in Paris.

Freedom of Expression Exchange

Close to 1,500 attacks on freedom of expression are reported each year, from censorship to terrorism. In recent years, more than 60 journalists and writers have been killed annually. With UNESCO's support, a system of alert was set up last September to collect and disseminate information on attacks against press freedom. Based in Toronto, the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) is operated by the Canadian Committee to protect Journalists. It works closely with the International Committee of the Red Cross and Amnesty International. Recent actions include a campaign for press freedom in Turkey, where 11 journalists were killed last year. IFEX is now focusing its attention on China.

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