Dhaka, Monday, October 18, 1993

'Valediction Forbidding Mourning'

In trying to pay tribute to a great soul, we only bring him down to our level because of our own incapacity to depict him as he truly was. This humble tribute to S M Ali will not be any exception. For those of us who follow-on in his footsteps are only his pale shadow, trying desperately to grasp the man whose thoughts transcended those of his contemporaries, whose vision went far beyond our own, and whose insight into contemporary issues and problems made us gasp in wonder, and bow our head in adulation.

If a journalist is the conscience-keeper of the society, then S M Ali epitomised it in Bangladesh. His thoughts were never clouded by prejudice of partisanship, nor were his views ever tempered by fear or favour. He wrote what he truly felt, and his feelings were based on the strongest possible attachment to ethics and fairplay. His was a pen guided by a singleminded concern for truth, common welfare and democracy. His capacity to see the many facets of a single issue made his editorials and columns as much a treat for the mind, as they were a challenge for those who refused to see the other side.

His was a vision of a democratic Bangladesh, forging forward with a maturing polity and a development pace gathering constant momentum. Thus he fervently wrote for a consensus on core national issues and steered Star's editorials in bringing the major political parties, especially the two biggest ones, towards a common national agenda. He once wrote about an imaginary dialogue between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina, in which they begin with caustic attacks on one another but gradually discover the hidden points of convergence, long overshadowed by the confrontations of the day.

He passionately believed in the inherent goodness and commitment of our leaders. He tried to touch their patriotic chord and bring out the positive in all so that we could join hands in taking the country forward. The everyday bickering of leaders pained him, producing some of his sharpest commentaries. But his optimism never waned and he continued to write unceasingly, about the Bangladesh he wanted built.

His own profession —journalism — obviously concerned him the most, second only, to his concern for his country. He was disappointed by the all round standard of journalism and especially frustrated by the excessive politicisation and the consequent factionalism. That was perhaps why he would never tire of emphasising the need for professional training and the strictest adherence to ethics.

What he preached in his writings, he proved in his work in the paper that he founded. In setting up and running The Daily Star, Mr S M Ali has not only established the pre-eminent English language daily of the country, but has also given us a new vision of what journalism can be in a country like ours.

As we mourn today the passing away of our editor, we mourn the loss of an intellectual whose thoughts and ideas were as refreshingly creative as they were simple and practical; we mourn the loss of a teacher who would take each of us by the hand and through a pat on the back, a gentle nudge to double-check the source, or a reprimand in his voice, teach us to be better journalists; we mourn the loss of a human being who, through his understanding, compassion, and most importantly, love, enhanced our sense of self-worth and thus gave us a new pride in our profession.

* The occasion, we all felt, deserved a frontpage editorial. But SM Ali taugut us never to compromise the intrinsic value and dignity of an editorial by moving it from its usual place.

Unprecedented Train Robbery

The derailment of a Sylhet-bound train at Tilagarh, Moulvibazar, technically speaking, is an accident. But all the reports published in different dailies, despite variations on some of the details, agree on the most important point that the incident was a result of a heinous and calculated plan by a gang of dacoits. In that sense, it is an act of sabotage committed to serve the gangsters' nefarious motive of looting after the passengers have fallen victims to the deliberately worked out disaster. Mercifully though, the accident was not as serious as it could be after the rail track had been cut off and removed. One report attributes the credit for avoiding a possible large-scale tragedy to the desperate attempt of the train's driver who sensed a foul play when he saw parts of the railway track hidden under some leaves of tree.

Train decoity is nothing new in the country, but this is perhaps for the first time that the dacoits have laid a trap for a running train, with more than a thousand passengers on board, to meet with the worst fate possible for loot. The recklessness and murderous motive behind the deadly swoop should have few parallels in the annals of train dacoity not only in this but also other countries. We are apprehensive, once such an incident has taken place, there is no reason to believe this will be the last of its kind. Far from it, this incident may be the beginning of a series of such diabolical villainy unless the gangsters responsible for the attack are hunted down for punishment. Criminal acts are contagious and nothing explains this more than the acid throwing spree the country witnessed in mortification.

There are a lot of unanswered questions: such as the armed railway police contingent's unscheduled departure at Shreemongal Railway Station. Whether they will be implicated or not depends on the investigation now underway. But what we find at this moment most alarming is the total mindlessness of the bandits who are ready to go to any extent for exploits. This incident gives an insight into the deepest reaches of the criminal mind this country has by the time managed to produce. If the criminal groups are so desperate, train passengers on the long stretch of railways are sure to be exposed to the dual threat of accident and robbery. It is because of such overhelming insecurity that the law and order situation of the country must be urgently improved.

Ali, Our Inimitable S Friend

by Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

N the days immediately fol lowing the partition of India (1947), we, who had just finished our Intermediate examinations and duly got our results, found ourselves in a new and unexpected environs, in Dhaka. All had come from St Pauls', Calcutta; I from Presidency College. We were quite a few of us from Presidency College. I mention this to suggest that we made our first acquaintance here in Dhaka. more precisely, in Salimullah Muslim Hall, as resident students of that hall which prided itself as the premier hall of the University. As for Ali and myself, we were in the same Department (English), which meant that our togetherness was conspired by powers above. We became friends the day we met each other, and that friendship lasted till the last day

Taller and much fairer than an average Bengali, with English flowing like oil from his mouth, Ali easily made his mark among his compatriots and in any company. As a student, his love of literature was a little curbed-by his growing love for journalism. Already, he had decided to be a journalist and ! owe it to him that I met editor Abdus Salam of Pakistan Observer, literally conducted into his room by Ali. Among his class fellows. All had two budding parts. One of them flowered into a pact of the first rank, Shamsur Rahman; and the other dwindled into a minor one - myself; lent for both Ali retained a special tenderness and affection. I can say this with confidence because he remembered and loved to recite lines from our youthful verses till the other day.

With his romantic nature, it was inevitable that Ali should fall in love at the earliest opportunity, and should turn into writer of letters, sometime in English Poet often in Bangla, in which his hopes and feelings found beautiful expression. All had a great capacity for friendship and was perhaps a little more steady in his friendships than in his love for females.

am not suggesting that his romances were fleeting affairs; only that, perhaps in the very nature of things, the lover in him met with more reverses. necessitates than the It is a comforting thought that in Nancy Wong, he had finally found a wife and a companion who much have provided the emotional stay he needed and deserved so much. Ali's journalistic career had been rather chequered, in its early phase. He was an expatriate during most of his professional life. Living mostly in South-East Asian cities, lent his roads were strongly in Bangladesh, and he kept returning here whenever he could, and he never failed to look up his friends however busy he was during his short stays in Dhaka. There was a spring of youthfulness in him which never dried up, but a hagging ailment haunted him in

his last years. How long did Ali serve the UNESCO? Perhaps a decade or so. When he friendly retired, his thoughts turned to starting an English daily from Dhaka. It was an all-conduming thought. and when, after a year of gestation, The Daily Star friendly appeared, it must have been a crowning day for him. I cannot describe the amount of thought and planning and energy that he put into the ended vocer, but I have no doubt that if told upon his failing health. The Daily Star soon became the first choice among a large number of readers used to reading on English daily. What is more, Ali. as an Editor, soon established his pre-eminence among his colleagues in the profession. Moving with an assurance and an authority which set him apart from the rest of them. Through his sheer personal qualities he had raised the status of an Editor have to new heights, and this he had done within a brief span of hardly these years. The community losses, in his death, a stalwart. a pillar of strength, and his friends a friend who will be remember till the day they join

him in death.

Selitor and Publisher of The Daily Star who died in Bangkok yesterday morning, was born in Sylhet on December 5, 1928. The eldest son of late Syed Mustafa Ali, an official of the Assam Civil Service, he came from a noted Bengali literary family. He was the nephew of famous litterateur and essayist late Syed Mustafa Ali and late Syed Mustafa Ali, a former Chairman of the Press Institute of

Bangladesh(PtB) Educated in Calcutta, Dhaka and London, All was one of the few Asian journalists who distinguished themselves in regional journalism. Starting as a Reporter at the erstwhile Pakistan Observer during his student days at the Dhaka University, he went on to hold important positions in various regional publications in Pakistan, Hongkong, Thailand and Singapore. He later joined the Press Foundation of Asia as its Executive Director in the 1970s, and in 1981 became the Regional Communications Advisor for Asia and the Pacific at UNESCO based in the Malaysian capital. Kuala

All returned to Bangladesh in 1989 and for a brief period was 'the Editor of the Bangladesh Observer. He launched The Daily Star in 1991 and worked tirelessly, even until the day before he left for Bangkok to undergo medical treatment on October 1, 1993, to establish this newspaper as a leading independent national

All completed his matriculation in Sylhet and went on to attend Saint Paul's College in Calcutta. He completed his honours and masters' degrees from the English department of the Dhaka University in 1950 and 1951 respectively.

While a student at the Dhaka University he joined the newly-launched erstwhile Pakistan Observer in 1949 as its first Staff Reporter. An ardent nationalist, he actively participated in the Language

In the early 1950s he left for London for higher studies in journalism, where he worked with the News Chronicle of London and also the BBC.

in London, he also served as a spokesman and translator for the late Maulana Abdul Hamid

LIFE SKETCH



Khan Bhashani, who was staying there during his brief exile.

Ali returned to Pakistan in 1954 and joined the Dawn newspaper in Karachi as a Staff Reporter and again came back to the Pakistan Observer in 1956 as a Staff Reporter.

At that time he became active in the journalist union and was the President of the erstwhile East Pakistan Union Of Journalists (EPUJ) during the 1958-60 period. He also represented the interests of the journalist community as the only journalist member of the All Pakistan First Newspaper Wage

In 1960 he joined the Pakistan Times in Lahore as an Assistant Editor: Subsequently, in 1962 he became the Assistant Editor of the Hongkongbased regional publication The Asia Magazine (1962-64). He then joined as the Southeast Asia Bureau Chief for the Karachi daily Dawn (1964-65) and then was appointed the Managing Editor of Thailand's leading English-language daily, the Bangkok Post(1966-70).

In 1971, Ali became the Roying Foreign Editor of the

Singapore afternoon daily, New Nation. At the time he actively railied support for the Liberation War of Bangladesh: A year later, he returned home to cover the Liberation of Bangladesh as Contributing Editor of the new weekly regional newspaper. The Asian.

in late 1972, Ali based himself in Hongkong again, as Managing Editor of the Hongkong Standard, His articles and analytical essays on Asian events have appeared in leading regional journals including the Far Eastern Economic Review, the Asian Wall Street Journal,

Orientations and Insight.

In 1973, Ali wrote a book, based on his personal research and at-the-site study, about the problems during post-Liberation Bangladesh entitled: "After The Dark Night".

in 1977, All joined the Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia as its Executive Director and started the well-known development feature service Depthnews Features.

He served as the chief executive officer of this premier journalism training and research institution until 1981 when he joined UNESCO as its Regional Communications Advisor for Asia and the Pacific based in Kuala Lumpur.

' in this capacity he was instrumental in promoting the advancement of journalism in Asia, specially in the developing nations of the region.

Several media-related organisations in Bangladesh received support from UNESCO during Ali's tenure there, including support for setting up and subsequent expansion of the Press Institute of Bangladesh.

After retiring from UNESCO in 1988, Ali briefly joined the Bangladesh Observer as the Editor in June 1989 and served in that capacity until he resigned in December of the same year. He was also an Advisor to the United News of Bangladesh(UNB) news agency for a few months in 1990.

On January 14, 1991 he launched The Daily Star as its Editor and Publisher and helped establish the newspaper as a leading independent national daily. He remained actively involved in the day to day affairs of the newspaper right upto the day before he left for Bangkok.

Will Aman Harvest Bring Better Returns This Time?

In its impact on the rural economy, hemanta is a season of contrasts. Kartik is the leanest month of

the year to a poor villager. As a village adage says - it's easier to push an elephant aside than get

the month of Kartik over with! However, right around the corner is the month of Agrahayan, bring-

ing harvest time for the Aman crop. That is the time for relative plenty even for a landless peasant.

N Saturday, on the month of Kartik, we stepped into hemanta, our fourth season of the year. We also call it autumn. Qur hemanta lasts two months -Kartik and Agrahayana. Autumn in the Northern Hemisphere enters earlier, on September 22 - lasts longer, till December 21. The season between summer and winter, autumn in figurative English is also known as the season of incipient decay. They also call it the fall, presumably because that is the time the trees shed their leaves - to face a bleak winter. Yet, this is the season also that their trees turn out in riotous colours as the leaves prepare to fall off. From green to vellow, the leaves would display the different shades in the colour spectrum, turning gradually into red, before they fall off. City dwellers would flock to the mountainsides to feast their eves on fall colours.

Hemanta is the harbinger of our winter season too. However, our winter is relatively mild and the trees do not bare themselves as they do in the Northern Hemisphere. True, the leaves take on a listless look, some of them turn yellow and do fall off. But the denudation of leaves is nowhere near the way it comes about in the North. You do not get to see fall colours unless you happen to have a grove of some exogenous

plants near about you. All the same, weather can turn unpredictable in hemanta. Depressions can form in the Bay of Bengal and bring in a much dreaded cyclone. We only have to remember the disastrous cyclone driven tidal waves of November 13 in 1970 which left at least 200,000 dead and over 100,000 missing. At times, hemanta also brings in chilling rains, reminding us of the approaching winter. That would be the time for the housewife to check if the quilts - or lep, as you would have it — are in

In its impact on the rural economy, hemanta is a season of contrasts. Kartik is the leanest month of the year to a poor villager. As a village adage says - it's easier to push an elephant aside than get the month of Kartik over with! However, right around the corner is the month of Agrahayan, bringing harvest time for the Aman crop. That is the time for relative plenty even for a landless peasant. He also would go out on the rice field, a sickle in hand, to work for a rich farmer. His children would be roaming the fields to pick up and take home. stray sheaves of paddy that may have dropped off. Maybe, the

harvest time work cycle will

bring a temporary job for the

wife too.

Despite the expansion of Boro paddy and irrigationbased dry season cultivation. Aman still remains the main rice crop in the country. Aman harvest time, therefore, brings up questions concerning rice price and the government's food policy. The historically low level of inflation in the country provide a source of solace to the policy makers who justifiably take pride in our macro-economic stability. Given the predominance of food (a weight range of 61.1 to 79.4 in 100) in the basket of goods that go into the construction of our consumer price index, the realisation also dawns that it is the fall in rice prices which, as of now, is contributing most in bringing about the miracle in the infla-

Will the Aman harvest this hemanta bring a better return for the grower? Immediately after the last Aman harvest, paddy prices plunged by 25% in December-January. With the onset of the traditional lean

season preceding Aman harvest time, the price of rice had looked up a bit recently. The immediate reaction of the government was to slash its own sale price of rice from its godowns. Presumably, the move would help the government sell off quickly some of the grains in its stock and release storage space. However, the move also signals the government's readiness to intervene to keep prices low. Experts say that the slump paddy price has been brought about by the interplay of market forces. This would signify that the government

outlay in farming and, among other things, constricts employment opportunities for agricultural labour — adding to ru-

The official Thana Development Monitoring Survey, 1990, put 7.45 per cent of the rural population as owning no land. 43.73 per cent as marginal land owners who own 0.01 to 0.49 acres of land and the balance 48.82 per cent as land owners who own from 0.50 acres upward. In other words, 51 per cent of the rural population who are landless or own little land, can be counted as net

ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

had, by and large, allowed prices to slide downward without any intervention on its part. Reports that government procurement of foodgrains accounted for only two per cent of domestic marketings in 1993 as compared to ten per cent in 1990, tend to support this conclusion. On the other hand, this time, when seasonal factors exerted bit of an upward pressure on the price, the government intervened to keep the market depressed.

Analysts are viewing the paddy price slump phenomenon from differing angles. The dominant view, which also seems to correspond to the official food policy outlook, holds that low rice price helps alleviate poverty. Hence, it is a welcome development. Other analysts say, that low price reduces inflow of cash to the farmers. This, in its turn, reduces cash

purchasers of food. The larger segment of the remaining 49 per cent rural population owning half an acre or more of land, also would be buying food most of the year. The Agriculture and Livestock Census of 1983-84 had counted medium and large farms together as accounting for less than 30 per cent of the total number of farms in the country. Besides, most of the owners of medium farms, who commanded nearly 25 per cent of the total farms, would be buying rice for consumption at least for sometime during the year. Add to it the urban population and you see the vast majority of the people benefitting from low rice prices. Experts say that more than 90 per cent of the population stand to gain from low foodgrain prices.

The other camp concedes that low rice prices benefit consumers at large. However, they

differ on the question of impact of low rice prices on the rural community. They would say that anywhere around 50 per cent of the people living in villages derive their livelihood from daily wages or petty trade related activities. By reducing cash outlay on farming, low pay prices takes away job opportunities for agricultural labourers. Lower availability of cash with surplus farmers also shrinks petty trade related activities. In other words, food may be cheaper but the village poor would have even less money than before to buy it. Lower paddy prices would act to reduce their earnings and the capability to buy food.

Then there is the question of sustainability of agricultural growth in a scenario of continuous downslide in paddy prices. The farmer just would not leave his land lying fallow. He would try to adjust to the changed scenario by diversifying shifting to other food crop, vegetables. However, sooner than later, limitations such as suitability of land, cropping pattern, storage and marketing facilities, would set in. To the extent he shifts away from food crops, level of foodgrain output itself could be affected. Crop diversification is a desirable outcome but needs some planning and has to be backed by adequate

The long term impact of paddy price decline on investment in farming also needs to be evaluated. Economic incentives for the farmer mainly come by way of lower input price and a remunerative return. Instead of subsidising directly, government is now trying to reduce cost of input by lowering the price such as that of urea fertilizer. However, there is an obvi-

ous limit to reduction of input price. The issue of output price, thus, needs urgent consideration.

Both the camps I mentioned

earlier, agree on one point. Government, they say, must not interfere with market forces. Yet, the existing marketing system of rice seems to work to the disadvantage of both the growers and the consumers. The decline in the price of paddy brought less money to the grower alright. However, consumers of rice, particularly in the urban areas, do not seem to have benefitted that much from it. Official data say that middle class consumers in Dhaka saw a decline of only 1.9% in food prices in March 1993, as compared to the same month in 1992. Even the rural population of Dhaka saw a fall of only 3.2% in food prices in the same period. Food price movements in Chittagong. Khulna and Rajshahi display, by and large. a similar pattern. All these are nowhere near the decline in Aman paddy prices in last December-January.

Presumably, the marketing chain lapped up most of the differential between paddy and rice prices.

It is conceivable that a streamlined processing and marketing system for paddy and rice could yield a better return on paddy to the grower, even with rice price at more less its current levels. Perhaps, the public investment programme in the agricultural sector needs to be geared more towards increased emphasis on and bringing about qualitative changes in processing, storage and marketing of paddy and rice. Meanwhile, the government's attitude on procurement this hemanta, will perhaps provide us with a glimpse of its policy perspective. Governmentis promoting industrialisation. However, many an industry will find it difficult to sell products unless the farmer has money to

To the Dathon...

Ban on polybags

shape.

Sir, We are all aware that we are abusing nature to the extent that it has started acting up in the form of floods, depletion of ozone layer, earthquakes, famines etc. Strict policing of this abuse is therefore needed and we commend the attitudinal change of the Government is recognising the ill effects of using polybags which has acquired a 'bad for nature' syndrome.

The recent law banning its use locally solves certain problems, but have we tried to weigh the benefits of banning against lost opportunities?

To me the best to avoid burglary is to avoid anything of material value; avoid tensions by not taking any responheadache by not having a head.
But are these alternatives viable? Problems arising out of using polybags have been raised in many parts of the world.

Banning its use is the easiest way out, but it will create many problems in the society which has become so dependent on it.

The best way out would be to allow the use of only Bio or Photo degradable poly bags which, because of its chemical composition, will rot away like any other garbage and turn into soil.

Will this make it very expensive? Why don't we let our entrepreneurs decide.

Crusader Dhaka

USA and Somalia

Sir. The field is clear and there is no competitor or rival. After the collapse of the USSR, the USA rules supreme in the

The situation in Somalia, however proves that a rich, powerful or developed country cannot win the heart of the poor and weak people by US dollars, helicopter, gunships and tanks.

People all over the world, rich or poor alike, have a hearty dislike for abuse of power and violation of human rights. True, the Americans came to Somalia for humanitarian service but the moment they perhaps started behaving like masters instead of friends of the Somalis and started commanding "do this, don't do that, come here and don't go there" etc, a wave

of hate and suspicion swept all over the country. It seems today the Americans are explating their mistakes. Better late than never.

What for did the USA brand the Somali leader Mohammad Aideed as 'war lord'? Why did the USA declare a reward of US \$ 20,000 for the head of Aideed, dead or alive? Is it not a disgrace and insult for the sovereignty of Somalia?

To err is human; forgive is divine. Let the USA and Somalia, instead of accusing each other, rebuke themselves and see the light of the day. Somalia needs US and UN help and the USA and UNO require to help Somalia on humanitarian ground.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203.

Panacea for Bangladesh

Sir, Fiftytwo major reforms in the administration of Bangladesh recommended by an indepth study of this state's public administration, conducted by a UN team, will hopefully be a giant leap forward in updating the governing system of the eighth most populous state in the world.

The overdue overhauling of this LDC's functioning seams to have required development of knowledge faculty of the policy and decision makers and executives covering the nation's history and geography as top prior-

By and large, the nation may justifiably view the study outcome as the Golden Fleece or as the Aladin's Lamp for panacea toward the country's rejuvenation.

spend.

Even then, until the age old "bureaucratic red-tapism" is replaced with cost-efficient procedure, "white elephant" administration will be adding loss to the state treasury resulting in inflated budgets and more burdens on the taxpayers coupled with price-hike only to make the voters' life harder.

All the costly trainings of

Bangladeshis including Civil

Servants and legislators at home and abroad sponsored by the state and foreign agencies so far should have spared such an external expert investigation of this "sovereign" state.

M Rahman Zila School Road, Mymensingh.