

Tourism Month — a Good Opening

The Prime Minister on Saturday opened the 'Tourism Month' with words customarily used to stress the importance of the occasion and the subject at hand.

The Parjatan Corporation, rather the tourism ministry has chosen the beautiful autumn month of Kartik as the 'Tourism Month' — with an unannounced appearance of a promise that this would be a regular yearly affair.

There is undeniably a very big potential for our tourism industry to flourish as was so forcefully pointed out by the Prime Minister. But we have already been living too many years, four decades it may be, with this potential without ever any part of it coming to materialise.

For Parjatan to effectively tear itself from the rut dug by decades of benefiting from the advantages of handling foreign and duty-free things on the one hand and near-immunity to accountability on the other — and make a true take off, it is necessary that it be made a competitive enterprise with a lot of the areas it now commands made private business.

Before that Parjatan would need a very fetching tourism approach — cultural and yet pragmatic. And in building this we could benefit from the experiences of the other countries of the Third World, particularly India.

It is unfortunate that we have so long been eyeing the foreign tourist, exclusively, and not addressing in any manner the customer potential that lay dormant within the nation.

Beleaguered Haiti

Haitian military ruler General Raoul Cedras's continued defiance of the United Nations and the United States appears to be proving highly costly soon. In fact, the general and his close associates are held responsible for a terrible mix-up.

Evidently, Cedras's days are numbered. With US President Bill Clinton sounding the warning that the use of force cannot be ruled out, the Haitian strong man and his supporters have little chance of a survival from the wrath of the world's only superpower.

This time the US has the full support for the military blockade to enforce an oil and arms embargo against Haiti. Moreover, street fighting and escalation of violence in the impoverished country, already accounting for the life of the country's justice minister, have caused great concern among the international community.

Certainly, a man like general Cedras deserves no sympathy. But any measure against him should have the UN sanction and the US role must not overtake the UN one.

S. M. Ali — a Towering Figure in the Field of Asian Journalism

by Shah AMS Kibria

It is hard for me to believe that my good friend S M Ali is no more. He passed away in Bangkok on 17 October after a short illness.

My friendship with S M Ali dates from the late forties when we both spent some time in the sleepy little town of Moulvibazar. We used to take long walks along the tree-lined and shaded but dusty streets and shared our thoughts and ideas.

Perhaps many people in Bangladesh are not aware of the achievements of this remarkable man in the field of journalism in Asia. He worked in the Asia magazine, published from Hongkong from 1962 to 1964 and then, after working for a short time in Pakistan, went back to South East Asia to join the Bangkok Post as its Managing Editor.

Today the Bangkok Post claims to be one of the best English language dailies of Asia. In the late sixties I often passed through Bangkok on my way to Indonesia where I served as a diplomat. What impressed me most was the respect and esteem in which his Thai hosts held him.

local journalist circle. But he did not like to live too long in any particular country. Like his illustrious uncle, Syed Mujtaba Ali, he had, I believe ingrained in him, what is known as the wanderlust — an irresistible desire to travel. So he moved from Bangkok to Singapore and from there to Hongkong again as the Managing Editor of the Hongkong Standard. In 1977 he moved to Manila to join the Press Foundation of Asia as its Executive Director.

One tends to be biased towards a friend but I believe I am being thoroughly objective when I say that S M Ali had a style which was distinctly his own, simple, spontaneous and free from pedantic pretensions. He had that rare capacity to get to the heart of an issue with a few words and retain the interest of his readers.

Syed Mohammed Ali (widely known as just S M Ali and for many others as Khasru Bhai) spent the best part of his working life abroad but he was never far from his homeland Bangladesh as in his heart and in his dreams. While working in South East Asia he would visit the country and write about his impressions of the unfolding drama of the struggle of the Bengali people and the eventual emergence of Bangladesh as an independent, sovereign country.

Knowing him as well as I did, I was not surprised that he would make the country of his birth his last stop. Both S M Ali and my good friend Mahfuz Anam often discussed with me in Bangkok their favourite project for bringing out an English

language daily in Dhaka. We talked at length about the pros and cons but in the end, they both demonstrated their dedication and commitment to journalism and a lot of courage to publish The Daily Star.

The obstacles were formidable. The number of readers of English language newspapers is not only small but it is probably shrinking. Competition for the limited market is tough but S M Ali cheerfully took up the challenge. I believe the paper that he established, together with Mahfuz and the group of quiet friends behind the scene, embodies their aspirations for honest and fair journalism in the country.



S M Ali

S. M. Ali and My World

by Faruq A. Choudhury

I called him by his nick name, Khasru; but as he was older than me by a few years, I would, as we do in this part of the world, suffix it with a 'bhai', and call him Khasru bhai. To me that was S. M. Ali, as far back as I can remember.

We grew up in the thirties and the forties in the small world of Sylhet and its adjoining places in Assam of the then British India. Our fathers were colleagues and friends in the Assam Civil Service and in that remote and placid corner of India of those days, our paths often crossed.

The sixties happily brought us close, when I was serving in the Pakistan Embassy in Beijing (Peking, then) and S. M. Ali was in Hongkong as the Special Correspondent of the Pakistan daily, Dawn. I used to go down to Hongkong, on work, at least once in two months, when we would invariably spend a lot of time together.

But more importantly, I have had the privilege of travelling extensively in parts of China with him and of having the thrill of discovering together, as it were, a little of, then the largely unknown People's Republic, with all the enthusiasm of our youth.

One of my tasks was to look after Press relations and it was a matter of great joy for us in the Embassy, when Marshal Chen Yi, the then Foreign Minister of China agreed to grant S. M. Ali an exclusive interview. The year was 1964 and till that time, very few, if any, foreign journalists had the opportunity of an exclusive meeting with a front ranking leader of the People's Republic of China, which Chen Yi was.

The meeting took place in Shanghai. At the beginning of the meeting Marshal Chen Yi handed over to S. M. Ali, written answers to a number of questions earlier sent by him, and the two then had an hour long chat.

That was election year in the United States and Chen Yi told S. M. Ali that he thought that Lyndon Johnson would be elected the President. But then Chen Yi said that he would be personally happy to see Goldwater in the White House, for then, the world would see the United States in its, 'true imperialist colours'. Goldwater was known as an anti-Communist hardliner and this of course explains this remark.

International Relations are such that within eight years of this remark, Richard Nixon of the Republican party, to which Goldwater belonged, was an honoured guest in China, as the President of the United States. But in the context of the global politics of the sixties, Chen Yi's

remark was hot news. In answer to a question by S. M. Ali, Chen Yi also said that China would not directly participate in the war in Vietnam unless the United States directly attacked North Vietnam. China, he added, would not fight in 'some one else's territory' unless she felt threatened about the violation of her own territory.

S. M. Ali, those days a young journalist, was naturally excited about all this. But as he was taking leave, Marshal Chen Yi, somewhat casually remarked that the conversation was 'off the record' and that S. M. Ali could only use the written replies handed over earlier. This came as a bitter disappointment to S. M. Ali. But I remember him in Beijing saying with a shrug of the shoulders, 'C'est la vie, that is the life of a journalist. He does at times know more than he can write about'. He then added with his characteristic smile, 'you diplomats do write to your governments whatever you come to know, but perhaps no one reads those. And we journalists sometimes do know so much, that we cannot write.'

The interview was prominently published in Hongkong's 'Far Eastern Economic Review' and Karachi's 'Dawn' without even a hint of that 'off the record' talk. To him journalistic ethics always prevailed over the temptation of hitting the headlines.

In the nineties we were back again in the same orbit and alas it had to be so shortlived. Since my return to Dhaka in January 1992, on retirement from diplomatic life, we have had frequent contacts. His abiding interest in what we are doing at BRAC, the Development Organization I now work for, brought us even closer. Only last August, he along with two of his colleagues, spent well over four hours one morning having a 'round table' discussion at our Head Office. He was visibly in great physical pain, suffering as he was, from a debilitating Arthritis walking up to our second floor office with great difficulty. But nothing could deter him from his duty and joy of reporting whatever he felt was news worthy.

S. M. Ali enjoyed being a journalist and his contribution to the development of journalism in this country has been very great. We shall miss this warm hearted, generous man, this very able, imaginative and courageous journalist and a sincere friend, very much. We shall miss reading his frank and forthright commentary on the socio-political and economic scenario in this country. We shall miss his immensely readable column, 'My World' which he kept up till his last days, in spite of his failing health.

Khasru bhai very often asked me to write for his paper. It is my deepest regret that I should do so at his death. At a personal level, a great deal of my world has died with him!

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

DCC taxes

Sir, The Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) taxes commonly known as Municipal Taxes are payable in four equal instalments in September, November, January and April as per bill book. A rebate of 5 per cent is allowed in case the instalments are paid within the months indicated above.

Unfortunately, many DCC tax payers have paid the first instalment due in September '93 but as per notification of Chief Revenue Officer of DCC, they are not entitled to get the 10 per cent rebate on the remaining three instalments if they want to pay by 31st October '93. What a funny policy!

In the context of justice, equity and fair play let the DCC authority, LGD Ministry, the judiciary ponder over our intelligence and misdeeds!

Sadiq Alee Maghsar, Dhaka.

'New Divisions'

Sir, This refers to the letter which appeared in your esteemed daily under the above caption on 08.09.93.

The Divisional Commissioner is a very dignified post but no Joint Secretary of the Administrative Cadre Volunteers is to become a Commissioner because the incumbent of this post is not considered as the 'Proshashak' of a Division. The DC's and TNOs are directly under Cabinet Secretary and he writes their Annual Confidential Reports and the Commissioner is not associated in such

evaluation. That is why the transfer as Divisional Commissioner is considered, allegedly, by some joint secretaries as 'punishment' and they try to avoid their transfer to the Division although to become the DC of a big district is the cherished dream of every officer of BCS (Administration).

Therefore, the post of Divisional Commissioner should be made more attractive than the Joint Secretary's to make the Division an important tier in the administrative hierarchy of the Government, and officers having the aptitude and inclination of mixing with common masses for rendering social service may be posted as Divisional Commissioners.

Abul Hashem 161, Shantinagar, Dhaka

Of medicine, food and blood

Sir, If the rape seeds possess ghost, how will you drive away ghost with the rape seeds? Thus goes a Bengali proverb. But this proverb is applicable in the case of medicines manufactured in our country. For instance, on 19-9-93, special squad of the city Special Branch seized capsules filled with coarse flour and duplicated paracetamol syrup worth Tk 15 lakh from two godowns at Mitford market. On the other hand, police on that date unearthed an unauthorised pharmaceutical factory at Madhya Badda and seized medicine and raw materials worth about Tk 20 lakh. Not only this, but also it was published in a section of the press on that date that 50% of the blood used in the different hospitals of the country might carry germs of Hepatitis, Syphilis which may spread in the healthy body. These news, of course, scare any citizen conscious about his/her health. How are we still alive, only god

knows! If medicine and blood cause harm to the body, what will cure it?

I apprehend, there may be many unauthorised pharmaceutical industries situated at the nook and corner of the country. As per report from Bangladesh Aushad Shilpa Samity, there are more than 100 pharmaceutical companies in Bangladesh. I do not know whether the Drug Administration Authority physically verifies credibilities or feasibility before giving permission to a new pharmaceutical company that whether it has sufficient equipment of quality control, competent pharmacist and suitable room for manufacturing medicine, etc. All pharmaceutical companies submit proper specification of medicine for getting approval. After getting the approval, what they use in medicine only God and they know.

Now-a-days, more or less in every family there are patients of diabetes, gout, asthma, ulcer even cancer and other diseases and the number of patients is increasing day by day. I think majority of these diseases are the reaction of contaminated food and medicine. Manufacturers and sellers of food and medicine also want their money back with profit like other businessmen. They have little time to think what is their moral duty towards the well-being of the human beings.

Occasionally we hear that police have seized huge quantity of contaminated food or medicine and arrested owner or employee of the firm or company. But we seldom hear, of subsequent actions, taken against them. I think government only can ensure the quality of food and life saving drugs if it takes proper action against unscrupulous businessmen. It is very difficult for the government to supervise all the pharmaceutical and food manufacturing firms. But government can give some exemplary punishment, as a deterrence, guarding against contamination.

Government may pick up sample of food and medicine from market at random and take proper action if the stuff is found defective and injurious for human life. It is even better if government officials pay surprise visit to pharmaceutical companies to see the actual condition on the spot. Contaminated foods and medicines are killing or crippling many lives. Manufacturers and sellers of contaminated food and medicine should be brought to book and awarded punishment like any other criminals. I request our government and the concerned authority to make a law to ensure the quality of food, medicine, blood and medical equipment and make that so strict as no body dares to do any misdeed.

Nirmal Choudhury, Dhaka

Taka convertibility

Sir, We are never accustomed to 'open convertibility of Taka'. But our government is going to introduce it for the first time in our country.

Unfortunately most of our people do not know what it really means. How would the exchange rate of local currency with foreign currency be determined? What is the criteria? How would the people know the real value of Taka? What about, say, if Mr. 'X' wants to transfer his bank account, both saving and fixed deposit, to England, Pakistan or India? Would it not cause flight of capital from Bangladesh to abroad? There are thousand and one such questions answers to which people should know, but there seems not a single authority to satisfy the people.

We fail to understand as to why our government is in a hurry to introduce Taka convertibility all of a sudden? If we could not introduce it during last 22 years can't we wait till people understand the pros and cons of this crucial financial matter?

It may be recalled that more than a decade ago we introduced the metric system in our country but our people could not pick up the arithmetic of the system as yet. Taka convertibility is more a complicated and complex subject than metric system. We would, therefore, request our government to kindly let the people know the positive and negative sides of 'open convertibility of Taka' first and then to introduce it.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203.

OPINION

Architecture in Public Life

A Mawaz

The Prime Minister's directive to preserve selected traditional architecture of the country is a step in the right direction, as technology and functional aspects can be applied indoors without much altering the external appearance. The latter falls under related and co-existing disciplines, namely, aesthetics, culture and heritage. The restoration of Ahsan Manzil is a fine example.

Kuala Lumpur, for example, has not suffered much, but Singapore's eagerness for fast modern progress has taken its toll by totally changing the tone and image of the city and some of its old landmarks, turning it into a concrete jungle, with lots of young trees growing up. Such actions are irreversible, in the sense that once removed or destroyed, the sentimental link with the past is snapped.

Munich city was razed to the ground by the 1000-bomber night air raids. Miraculously much of the city's old skyline was restored, as the old drawings of the buildings and the landscapes had been carefully preserved.

Sentiment plays a big part in

human life, after the office or business hours, during the leisure period. The enjoyment of culture is a leisure-hour activity — provided the mind is free to look around. In the developing countries, with fast furious development activities (to catch up with the Jones'), this small pleasure of life is denied to the administration, and to the citizens at large.

Architecture's influence on the society is deep, long, and lingering, as three generations are involved at any point of time — the past, the present, and the future. Architecture, therefore, becomes involved not only in the transmission of culture but also as an archive. The human mind thrives on attachment, and also seeks it in the national architecture, its art and in the cumulative culture.

The role of the contemporary architect is important to the society at several stages: new architecture, restoration and preservation.

It is hoped that the agencies concerned in this important work will find conducive mechanism for co-ordinated planning exercises.