

New Energy Policy should Cater to the Needs of the Poor too

Privatization — Tangles and Way out

Right at the beginning, from the manner the process of privatisation started, one could infer that not much by way of advance planning had gone into the programme. The fitful progress of the programme tends to confirm these misgivings. It's turning into a tangled affair and the government continues to temporise.

At this stage, it is not so much a question if privatisation should or would succeed. Rather, the travails of the transitional phase are causing most of the concerns at the moment. Uncertainties and fears of social discord dominate the scene now.

Divestiture of state property is an ongoing process the world over. The modalities for privatisation and the mechanisms for carrying the programme through, causing least dislocation to the socio-economic fabric of a country, have come to be widely publicised by now. It is difficult to understand why policy makers in this country could not draw on the experience of other nations and prepare a blueprint for privatisation in advance, with contingency plans for meeting exigencies of varying situations. One talks of political will. However, political will also needs a workable base to manifest itself.

First comes the question of objectives of privatisation. Caught in a recession, some of the affluent nations are selling off chunks of state-owned property, to raise funds for financing programmes to stimulate the economy. Although budgetary figures show receipts from sale of assets, raising funds does not look like a primary motive behind privatisation programme in this country. Rather, the avowed objective of the government is to open up the economy, enlarge private sector's participation in production through the privatisation programme and, in the process, also stop the resource drain caused by loss-making public enterprises. Given this scenario, government should have been in a position, well ahead in time, to issue clear-cut guidelines on problems such as redundancy provisions and debt assumption, which are now holding up privatisation.

It was known that after divestiture, the new owners may not wish to retain all, or any, of the employees of the concern they have taken over. As some other countries have done to meet this contingency, government's policy in this regard could have been spelled out in advance. However, it is only now, at this late stage, that the government is said to be toying with various options such as declaring lay-off in the enterprise earmarked for sale, giving the buyer an explicit right to retain or discharge the incumbents and, so on. After having declared its intent to sell an enterprise, such moves could also be seen as interfering with accrued rights of the employees, leading to unrest and legal tangles. In any case, the best that the government can hope for is an equitable sharing of redundancy payments with the new owners. More likely, the government could find itself taking over the entire liability for redundancy payments, adjusting these against the sale proceeds or, even meeting the expenses from its revenue budget — in other words, with the taxpayers money.

Enterprises sold off so far were relatively sound financially. Some of these are even reported to have attracted offers higher than the reserve price. Had all the enterprises earmarked for sale been public limited companies, conceivably the government could have opted for a system of bundling, as a device to sell a variety of shares — mixing some bad with the good ones. However, having sold off its crown jewels, now is the time to try to pass off the losing concerns, burdened with debts. In the jute sector restructuring format, government appears to be on the way to set a precedence of assuming part of the past debts of privately-owned mills as well. So, conceptually at least, government might find assumption of past debts of enterprises with negative net worth, owned by itself, a painful but acceptable proposition. However, to mitigate the impact of diversion of its budgetary resources, government should also establish a safety net programme — hopefully with support from the donor community — to maintain an adequate level of expenditure on education, health, sanitation and other such activities which benefit the community at large.

A Helping of Joy

Autumn is a very evocative season for the Bengalees, evocative of all that our great poet has celebrated it for — the light, the clouds, the kaash blossoms. But most of all it has been evocative of the *pooja* — and the festivity attending it, some shining thing as splendrous and delightful as the glimmer of the autumn dew. It is not without reason that the festival is more commonly called the *Sharadiya Pooja* or the autumnal homage. Homage to Devi, who is popular in the eastern subcontinent as Durga.

In addition to treating the deity as someone important in the Hindu pantheon, the mind of the devotees has metamorphosed her into a dearly loved girl-child falling in love somewhat preciously and wending off to her lord's place in the *Kallasa* and returning on an yearly *naior* to the eastern parts where Himalaya, her father, lives and rules. This appeals to the ethos and the more philosophically significant symbolism of the Durga legends has been let to slip off the mind although the vicissitudes of time have been warranting a mindful recall of exactly that. Demons, whether they are *Mahisha* or *Madhu* and *Kaitabha*, are forces of darkness which always exert a mighty pull on humanity; they are vanquished by Durga, who represents light. And the followers celebrate this victory only to recreate the mythical achievement into realities of the present day.

This year's *pooja* has been vitiated by long shadows cast by the post-Babri Mosque developments. It is patently a matter for those that worship whether they would do the supplication or refrain from it as a token of protest against certain socially intolerable situations or whatever. And it was those who became divided exactly on that point — which was so natural. Last-minute moves by leaders of opinion of the society at large lent an air of sanity to the development but could not save the Hindu citizens from confusion and a resulting absence of colour and gaiety.

We assure the devotees of Durga that the point of the projected boycott has been driven home. We are waiting to see that the point has been well-taken — which is a much more formidable thing to happen. We wish, in these circumstances, very emphatically a helping of a happy *vijaya*, for all who eagerly wait out the whole year with anticipation for the traditional festival called the *pooja*.

Ya Devi sarvebhooteshu matri-roopen samsthita
Roopang dehi jayang dehi yasho dehi dwisho jani.

A new national energy policy has been in the making for months now. An inter-ministerial task force had been working on it. In July, a section of the press had reported that the new policy might come out in September. The Government organised a discussion meeting of politicians and professionals in August to review the situation and suggest guidelines for the formulation of a national energy policy. It then came out that the experts who were drafting the policy, had sought an extension for six months to finalise it.

In the meantime, in July, the government had approved a petroleum policy. Petroleum forms an essential component of the energy policy matrix. The urgency for finalising the petroleum policy earlier was traced to a need for paving the way for wrapping up ongoing negotiations with overseas investors for explorations and production sharing arrangements for oil and natural gas. The upcoming three-day World Bank (WB) sponsored multinational moot on investment in petroleum sector in Bangladesh, scheduled to be held in the United States in early September, would have called for early action in this area. In any case, surer prospects of foreign investments in the petroleum sector would have added to the credibility of the policy package on energy as a whole.

Analysts now say that it is not the experts drafting the package, who alone are holding up the finalisation of the national energy policy. In addition to participation of private investors from abroad, the implementation of the new energy policy would also need active support of the foreign donor community, particularly WB and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The continuing uncertainty over availability of WB and ADB financing could well be another reason for the delay in the finalisation of the

By all accounts, the main thrust of the new energy policy would be on oil and gas exploration. Increased emphasis is being laid on private sector participation in exploration and extraction of gas and hopefully, oil.

new energy policy. Meanwhile, experts are depicting rather a grim picture of the energy situation. Let's first look at generation of power through electricity. The capacity for electricity generation in March, 1993, stood at 2608 megawatts (MW). According to available estimates, the country's electricity demand would come to around 5500 MW by the end of the year 2000. Huge investment running into hundreds of thousands of crores of Taka, would be needed to attain the required level of electricity generation capacity to meet the demand. Unless the ability to mobilise and invest funds internally grows dramatically, programmes for the power sector would remain overwhelmingly dependent on external assistance. The only other hope for funding the programme, is to attract direct foreign investment into the sector.

Just talking of electricity generation capacity in terms of megawatts does not give us any clear idea of where we stand. Perhaps we need an international comparison of our situation. World Bank data tell us that energy consumption per capita (kilograms of oil equivalent) in this country in 1991, stood at 57. India's was 337, Pakistan's 243 and Sri Lanka's 177. On the other hand, in Nepal's case, it was 22 and for Bhutan, 15. These numbers relate to commercial energy consumption only. As the WB explains, these numbers refer to commercial forms of primary energy — petroleum and natural gas liquids, natural gas, other solid fuels such as coal, and primarily electricity — all converted into oil equivalents. So we know now our rating among the starving nations, in so far as electricity consumption is concerned. What about the total energy situation then?

Unfortunately, the situation does not seem to be amenable to international comparison. As WB admits, use of firewood, dried animal excrements, and other traditional fuels, although substantial in some developing countries, could not be taken into account in its data base as reliable and comprehensive information is not available. Still, we can draw some inference about how crucial, traditional fuels are, to energy consumption in this country. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, in its esti-

manifestation of the so-called system loss syndrome? In case it is the latter case, then we would have, in all probability, consumed the missing electricity too. Of course, it did not enter the official figures for electricity consumption, the power generating agency did not get its revenue from sale — a glaring instance of misallocation of resources — you might say.

It is said that 88 per cent power in the country is being generated by using natural gas. Thus, we come to the question

mines, located in the country's north-western region, had been in the news, off and on, for nearly fifteen years now. International tenders for the project had been floated earlier. However, no deal seems to have been struck yet.

As for other forms of commercial energy, well, we are generating hydroelectric power from the Karnaphuli plant, but that seems to be the limit. Geothermal power source? We just don't have any. A nuclear power plant is beyond our reach.

By all accounts, the main thrust of the new energy policy would be on oil and gas exploration. Increased emphasis is being laid on private sector participation in exploration and extraction of gas and hopefully, oil. Direct foreign investment is being sought also for power generation and distribution. Efforts to attract foreign investment in the power sector seem to be drawing some response. Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with six foreign oil exploration companies had been signed during the September moot in the USA. It is said that two of these companies might sign agreements now, for exploration of new gas and oil fields in the coastal region of the country. Earlier, it was reported that another foreign company had signed a MOU for setting up a power plant in the private sector. Efforts to secure official development assistance to finance public investment in the power sector also continue. However, many a tangle such as institutional reforms, gas and electricity pricing and, of course, system loss, remain to be sorted out.

How about traditional fuels, the main source of energy for the poor, particularly for cooking? To what extent will the new

energy policy go into this area? Available estimates suggest that nearly all rural households depend exclusively on biomass fuels for cooking. Even seventy per cent of poor urban households depend on biomass fuels to cook their food. Increased availability of commercial fuel such as gas, would offer a replacement. However, can they afford it at the going price or, for that matter, meet the cost of installation and accessories? Few of them can afford even kerosene for lighting. Besides, it would be a stupendous task, both in terms of investment and organisation, to provide coverage to the countryside. Protection of environment, on the other hand, calls for a halt on indiscriminate use of some of the biomass fuels.

Experts are suggesting increased use of bio-gas for fuel. They cite instances of China, India, Korea, Sri Lanka and Thailand, as some of the countries making extensive use of bio-gas. Bio-gas technology is not exactly new to this country. However, organisation, creation of facilities, would be needed to make people accept this renewable source of energy. Bio-gas can, perhaps, provide the cheapest source of energy to the poor. Another renewable source of energy, solar power, had been tried in this country, albeit in a limited way. It does not seem to have taken a hold. We leave the sun alone, to work for us in its own way.

It was S M Ali (Khasru Bhai to me) who gave this weekly write-up, the by-line, 'Along my way'. I was at loose ends after leaving Bangladesh Bank. He insisted that I write for The Daily Star. "It would help us," he said. That was his way. It always was the other person who was helping him. Never that it was really he, who was helping the other one. So here I am, writing — whatever it's worth — for the paper he loved so dearly.

ALONG MY WAY

S B Chaudhuri

mate of energy supplied by traditional fuels, tells us that items such as firewood, rice straw and husk, jute stick, bagasse, twigs and leaves, and, of course, cowdung, annually supply nearly ten million tons of coal equivalent of energy. We note that our direct consumption of coal itself comes to only about half a million tons a year. Thus, we can infer how important these traditional fuels are to us as a source of energy.

Our energy scenario also presents us with a bit, enigma in one respect. That relates to a wide divergence between generation of electricity and its consumption. For instance, ADB data tell us that in 1991, the country produced 7823 million kilowatt-hours (Mn kWh) of electricity but consumed only 4871 of it. What happened to the remaining 2952 Mn kWh, or about 38 per cent of the total electricity generated in the country that year? A strange phenomenon indeed for an energy-starved country! Was there a genie at work? Or, is it a

major source of energy world wide. Our imports of crude oil and petroleum products together come to about two million tons. The import bill naturally varies according to the fluctuations of world prices of crude oil. At the moment, petroleum probably accounts for around 9 per cent of our total imports and 15 per cent of our export earnings. Coal also, we import now. However, prospects of extracting coal from the Barapukuria coal

'A Tribute to Khasru Bhai'

by Abul Maal A Muhih

admitting at the same time that he was personally inexperienced. He warned my wife about the cheating practices, particularly with brand-name products. "Do shop in the bazaars and buy from the street hawkers after a good deal of haggling. But if you want to buy something good or valuable go to one of the Department Stores." At the end of the day I found that my wife took the ad-

vice seriously. Khasru Bhai was naturally an expert guide on sight-seeing and stories of Hong Kong. He identified for us the hill-top of the famous film "Love is a Many Splendored Thing." He took time to tell us the stories of Hong Kong entrepreneurs and Hong Kong business practices. We learnt from him as to how Ikarika, the owner of the Hotel we were staying in, landed in Hong Kong from Sind as a pauper and made it big. My little girl fell sick and Khasru Bhai called a doctor; it turned out that she had pneumonia and needed some anti-biotics. Khasru Bhai was very disturbed by this turn of events; he suggested that we cut short our journey and pro-

ceed to our destination (Boston) immediately. We were overwhelmed by his concern even though we skirted his advice. That was our last contact for a long time. In 1971 when he was in Singapore I was in touch with him indirectly through his brother, Syed Muazzem Ali (now Director General in the Foreign Office) who was my colleague in Washington. But immediately after liberation he was in Dhaka

for the first time. In Tagalog (or is it in Malay), Bhai had a special meaning quite different from our word. Nancy Bhai had to get used to the Bengali term in Manila, long before she moved to Dhaka.

S M Ali stayed away from Dhaka for many years, about 26 years; but he was never very far from the country, he was a frequent visitor and a prying observer. In 1980 we met in Paris and Khasru Bhai was joining International Bureau of Labour, i.e. UNESCO. But his interest in the problems of Bangladesh never received short shrift. I looked him up in Kuala Lumpur in 1988 when he was retiring from UNESCO. I was in exile at the time and was not perhaps in the best frame of mind to tender advice to someone on his retirement plans. He had the option to retire in Singapore or Kuala Lumpur, two cities both of them knew very well. But Khasru Bhai wanted to go home and bring out a good newspaper. It was a kind of obligation in public service that he had to discharge. As he spoke of his plans it sounded like a mission of his life and he tried to transport you to an enchanted land so very different from the despotic reality of Bangladesh. I was not encouraging him at all; I was aware of censorship, and specially the system of advice by the security agencies. But he was incorrigible optimist, he believed that things would change for the better and turn out well. He had great faith in Mahmud's ability in making the publication happen and Mahfuz's tenacity in putting it together.

In December, 1990, when I returned home I found Khasru Bhai ready to launch his dream publication, The Daily Star. I had to admit freely that my surprise was wrong and he did the right thing by moving to Dhaka. As if in atonement I had to write for The Daily Star, although I couldn't promise to be a regular columnist. The Daily Star did come out as a standard bearer of good journalism. Khasru Bhai has successfully assembled a good staff and more importantly created a host of good columnists.

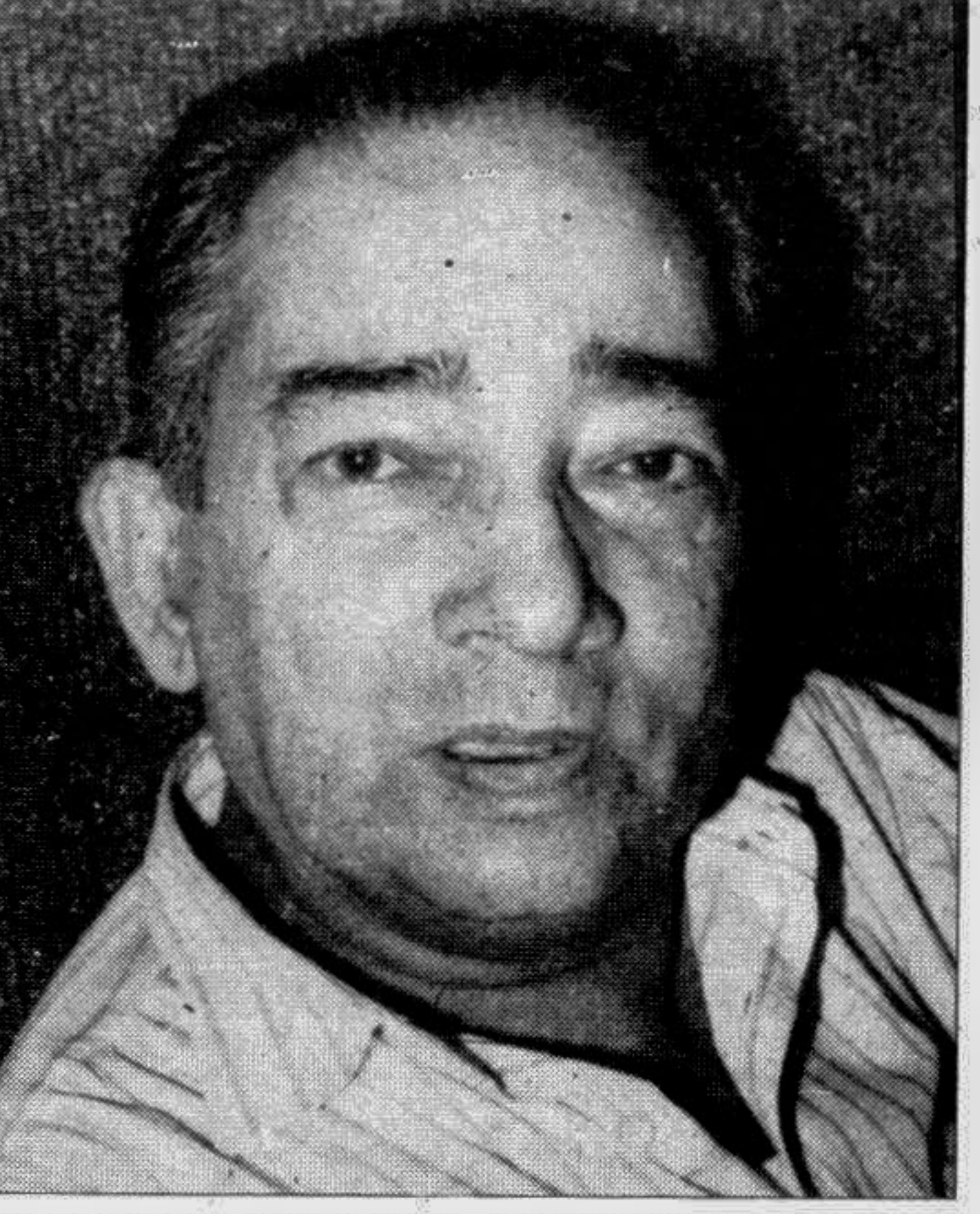
At the end of this personal narrative, much of which may not interest many readers, I would like to make a couple of points. Khasru Bhai, as his close friends and relations know

well, was a great friend. There was a very affectionate side of him. He was by nature deeply humane; and sorrows and difficulties perhaps more than joys of life affected him very much. He would be very easily moved by distress or strains of others and his concern would invariably be very genuine. This one can as well read between the lines of "My World". His affectionate nature had an infectious quality and Nancy Bhai is not also immune from that.

S M Ali is the most international of all our journalists. For 26 years, leaving aside the years in Pakistan, he functioned outside the country. He is the first Bangladesh journalist, to my knowledge, who curved out a place of eminence for himself in the outside world, specially in South East and East Asia. There have been many others of his kind from the subcontinent but very few from Bangladesh. He followed the tradition of Altaf Hussain, who was once his senior colleague, and broadened his sphere of operation. It would be a testament to his memory if in years to come we find others, following this blazing trail.

A final point about Khasru Bhai's commitment to his country and its people. Despite his work abroad his heart was always here. He was determined to give back something to his country and a ripe age did not deflect him from this mission. It is usual to encounter animated discussions among expatriate Bengalis about problems of Bangladesh. But the difference in a discussion with Khasru Bhai when he was abroad was that he was very serious. He would brighten up at the slightest flicker of hope. But more than that he would moderate the worst despondent scenario with some hopeful brushes.

I saw him for the last time at his DOHS apartment two months ago. He was not very well but he had time to dwell on the importance of good governance. He thought that if it could do miracles in Singapore it could do the same in Bangladesh. He had not only the free inquisitiveness of a top-class journalist and editor but he also had the inimitable force of conviction that good sense will prevail and all will turn well. The Daily Star was his medium of expression and it was for him a dream come true. This is the memorial to a true son of the soil, who returned home to contribute his share of service to the nation. A rich, powerful and valuable indeed is that share of service!



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S M Ali who was always Khasru Bhai to me suddenly took leave of the world. I say suddenly because most of us were not aware of the deterioration in his health that commenced about three weeks before his death. He has left behind memories and an excellent record of public service in the region. It is a kind of consolation that he breathed his last without too much suffering and also without causing his dear and loved ones a period of protracted concern. Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi rajeem.

My personal acquaintance with S M Ali dates back to 1951 as I came to Dhaka for higher studies. I had visited the city earlier on several occasions; but this time I needed help from students of the University and specifically resident students of S M Hall. I had notes of introduction meant for two senior students. Late Shaif Chaudhury, later of Railway administrator and a martyr in the War of Liberation, was one of them and the other was S M Ali. I did not know Shaif Chaudhury at all but his father was known to my father. Khasru Bhai, however, was one whom I had never set my eyes on but knew quite well from reputation. It was third generation contact between the families and a host of his cousins were my close friends and associates. I knew that he belonged to the progressive camp of students and this in our days meant leftists. He was also known to be a top class speaker in English and that was a cherished distinction in our days.

I did not have much of a problem with my admission, so the guidance given by the two venerable seniors was limited to detailing the various procedures and formalities and, of course, some entertaining. A S Mahmud (now of Transcom) was my friend from school and he also joined the University at the same time. He was a cousin of Khasru Bhai and in my view rather very close to him even at that time. Thus he was a further source for a kind of closer relationship with Khasru Bhai.

What do I remember of Khasru Bhai in those days of our early acquaintance? Just a few things but they look so big in retrospect. Soon after we joined the University there was Hall Union election. In the elections Khasru Bhai had an important role to play; he was for all practical purposes the official introducer of the candidates of the Panel of the progressive camp. This was very important

in those days because a large number of students used to make up their mind on the basis of credentials of the Panel members and the way these were presented. The Panel which Khasru Bhai presented and which we supported was headed by Abdus Samad (now better known as Abdus Samad Azad and the honourable Deputy Leader of the Opposition). S M Ali used to introduce the candidates in English in which he was not only very fluent but used to make very favourable impressions on the listeners as well. He would start by saying, "Please excuse me for speaking in English. My Bengali is heavily tinged by my Sylheti dialect and it may not be easily intelligible to you." Everyone understood the ruse and the listeners would warmly invite him to speak in English. Because we were struggling at the time for the recognition of Bengali as a state language, it was felt necessary to seek permission to speak in a foreign language.

Soon afterwards there was M A examination and all the senior students became busy. S M Ali was out of the campus but had social links with us. During the State Language Movement of 1952, once Dhaka University erupted many former students became marked persons. In the books of the Government the Movement was engineered, guided and led by conspirators against Pakistan and students were misled by "Indian agents" and "Communists". Two cousins, S M Ali and Tassaduq Ahmed (MBE), who in the books of the Government were communists, had ultimately to leave the country to avoid possible persecution. Tasnu Bhai went to London where he is settled now. Khasru Bhai went to West Pakistan and then to London but soon came back. We met Khasru Bhai through the courtesy of Mahmud perhaps before he left for UK. All that I remember is that it was a very emotional occasion but we gave him a hearty send-off.

My next encounter with Khasru Bhai was in 1963 in Hong Kong. I was passing through the city with my wife and nine months old child. Khasru Bhai was a different person here; a dear elder brother very mindful about helping the young mother and the niece. I remember his advice on shopping in Hong Kong,

To the Editor...

Olympic and politics

Sir, Politics and sports now seem inextricably mixed. War is politics continued by other means — this maxim of Von Clausewitz may well be adapted to read 'sport is politics' continued by other means' vis-a-vis the Olympic demonstrations in this half of the century. States like the former East Germany used sport as a means of gaining international recognition. International tensions are mirrored in Olympic bans and boycotts. In particular, the Cold War rivalry between the USA and the former Soviet Union reflected in their

competitions as to which of them gained the most gold medals — the media making the score tables almost a test of national superiority.

International political issues have affected the Olympic movement since the end of the Second World War, in particular, the problem of the two Germanies and the China-Taiwan question. Most recently the question of human rights is also being raised by western countries against China's 2000 Olympics bid.

At the domestic level, governments use sport to achieve social and political objectives. Perhaps the intent of holding

international games is to gain a favourable image both at home and abroad.

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'Promotion scandal'

Sir, I am shocked and surprised at the remarks of Mr Kalam bin Sultan in his letter published in your daily of 16th Oct, 1993. ACR's and PD's of the candidates who were called for interview for promotion to the posts of Deputy Secretary and Joint Secretary were thoroughly scrutinised by Superior

Selection Board and only after clearance by SSB they sat for interview.

Regarding duration of interview and assurance by the then Establishment Minister and the PM in presence of thousands of officers in Osmari Memorial Hall, the matter is too well known to be contradicted by any vested interest group. Independent section of the press reported in details on many occasions how the whole thing was conducted. Because of the merit of the case honourable High Court also admitted writ petition. Hence I fully subscribe to the views of Mrs Jonab Begum published earlier

in your daily.
Mrs Montaz Jahan
Dhaka

Active RAJUK: Hope for 'J' block?

Sir, An explanation from RAJUK about sorting out a problem regarding a plot of land allotted to the hon'ble works minister has given me some hope. It seems that the minister was an allottee with others who received allotment in the Baridhara 'J' block and paid for the plot several years earlier.

Mere mortals like me had no means to place the grievances to the 'higher authority'. All this time I had a frustrated feeling that nobody was thinking about my plight. Even several years after receiving the full payment with interest (due on instalment payments) the authorities remained completely silent about the handing over of the plot. Gentle prodding from more courageous ones failed to elicit any information.

Now can I hope that the RAJUK would carry on and solve all outstanding problems? Hopeful