

A Personal Tribute to Ali Bhai

I first met Ali Bhai some 35 years ago when I was still a student at Dhaka University. He was a good friend of my brother and used to drop by to see him from time to time. During the next 30 years we met periodically.

It was only after my posting as High Commissioner to Kuala Lumpur in 1987 that we became good friends. At that time Ali Bhai was Unesco's Regional Communications Advisor for Asia-Pacific, based in Kuala Lumpur. He knew just about everyone of any importance in the media in Malaysia and was instrumental in my getting to know many of the key media personalities on an informal basis. His knowledge of the Malaysian political scene, as well as regional problems and issues proved very helpful. Both Nasrin and I were always warmly welcomed by Nancy and Ali Bhai during our frequent visits to their home.

It was during one of these visits that Ali Bhai mentioned his idea of launching a daily newspaper in Dhaka after the retired from Unesco. I thought this was an excellent idea and I encouraged him in this project which became a subject of regular discussion until my departure from Kuala Lumpur for Beijing.

While in China we corresponded quite regularly and after Ali Bhai and Nancy came to Dhaka both Nasrin and myself would try and look them up on our periodic visits back home.

by Farooq Sobhan

What impressed me immensely about Ali Bhai was his sense of commitment to journalism of the very highest standard. His many years abroad had also imbued in him a sense of objectivity and detachment which helped him to look at issues at home in a manner free from any political prejudices or ideological hang-ups. These qualities were early reflected in The Daily Star. His willingness to examine and put across various points of view, to discuss and debate important national issues made to paper both interesting and stimulating.

In spite of his failing health, which was a matter of great concern to all his friends, Ali Bhai continued to not only devote his energies to The Daily Star but always had time to think of the larger issues and problems both at home and in the region. He had an excellent grasp of global and regional problems. His firsthand encounters with some of the top leaders throughout Asia as well as his extensive travels in Asia enabled him to speak with a great degree of understanding on most international issues. He could recall events from personal experience going back twenty-three years. In many respects Ali Bhai belonged to the region. He was someone who felt equally at home in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand or the Philippines. He

was a frequent visitor to China and I still recall our lively discussions on China during the period I was posted there.

Not only was Ali Bhai well-known throughout South East Asia where he had spent most of his life as an eminent journalist but he was also widely known and respected throughout South Asia. In India he had a wide range of friends and contacts who had the highest regard for him. He was very keen to foster better contacts between editors and journalists in India and Bangladesh. He realised the importance of such interaction if Indo-Bangladesh relations were to be put on a better footing. He was also very responsive to the idea of the media being more supportive throughout South Asia in fostering regional cooperation.

Ali Bhai's death has not only been a great loss for Bangladesh but also for the whole region. He will be missed by his many friends and admirers in all walks of life. But The Daily Star will always be there to remind all of us about his signal contribution to improving the standards of journalism in this country. It was Ali Bhai's deep feeling for Bangladesh, that brought him back to Dhaka. He was determined in his own way to help in the process of nation building. He brought to his work a deep sense of compassion, honesty and maturity. He was a man of great integrity. He was a man Bangladesh could feel proud of.



Some Reflections

by Dr. Anwar Hossain

IN the college days, we (Zillur Rahman Siddiqui and myself) used to talk nonchalantly about our experiences in Presidency College, Calcutta, while he was a student of 'City College' only. It was in Dhaka University that we became good friends. It was strange that most of my friends belonged to English Department (including MAD Ali, as we fondly called him) while I was a Physics student. Zillur used to say that I strayed into Science Department by mistake — I was morally an arts man. Most of us were romantic (except perhaps S R Karim who was a practical person and went for Civil Service before even obtaining Master's degree) and had some flair to write. I started writing on 'Science' in 'Mukul' for the youngsters (along with Abdullah Al Muti) but suddenly discontinued, after a romantic disappointment. Another friend, Fazle Lohani, was bold enough to come out of science and went for journalism to proclaim our common concern on the unfairness going on in the society. The rest, including, Zillur, Mahubul Zamal Zahedi and SM Ali continued and became well-known in their respective fields. SM Ali had his disappointments too and he left the country and became well-known outside. He was so fond of me and appreciated my scientific achievements that once he interviewed me (I was then Director of Atomic Energy Centre, Dhaka) and wrote flatteringly about me and my plans (peaceful) in 'Far Eastern Economic Review'. Alas! the lack of consciousness on the part of our political leaders not only dampened my spirits but thwarted the growth of science in Bangladesh. It is indeed a pity because we had (and still have) a potential to change the face of the country and free it from the bondage of LDC given to us. SM Ali recognised this and one of his

first attempts was to project prospect of science in 'The Daily Star'. He introduced me in this illustrious daily, with a photograph of mine, as a distinguished scientist. I wrote several articles on Science Policy, Energy Alternatives, Ecology and some other subjects but I intentionally didn't write much because of my frustration on the neglect of science by the administration. SM Ali persisted on encouraging me and twice wrote in support of my ideas (even mentioning my name) in Editorials. He wanted to hold a Round Table Conference on Science and publish the results of it in The Daily Star, but Providence took him away from this world before he could do it. Once I wanted to go away with an attractive job outside, but he resisted saying that I have a lot to do in science in Bangladesh. However, I see little change in climate for this. Anyway, SM Ali showed his profound interest in science and let us see what might happen in future.

Coming back to the personal qualities of SM Ali, as I knew him, he was simple and had a shy smile, during his younger days, about which we used to cut jokes, but looking back, I think it was a rare quality, putting modesty above pride and arrogance. We had some common feelings, which I better not disclose, brought us together. Perhaps our friendship grew on the edifice of the philosophy that we should always try to do things 'big', but never think big about ourselves. The latter is for others to do. SM Ali proved this concept with his works and his life. Of late he was too busy, which used to worry me, not knowing that he was nurturing a fatal disease. I would like to end by repeating one advice he gave me "Badsha (my nick-name): let every day be a renaissance in your life". I am trying my best to keep his word of advice.

S M that I Remember

by Linda B Bolido

HIS passing may not stop the world or cause a tear to drop from everybody's face, but those who knew him in life will certainly pause to remember him in death.

Not just because he was once a superior in office, or he had done a good deed for someone. That would be petty. SM Ali would have commented. Rather, SM, as he was fondly called by peer and subordinate alike, would have preferred to be remembered as a journalist first, second and third.

It would be the highest tribute anybody could pay SM, who died recently. And it is a tribute he would have gladly endorsed; and given the modesty of the man, would have appreciated very much.

That's what he wants you and me and all those who had the singular privilege of working with to remember him by. Never mind that he was also compassionate, professional and extremely proud of his calling. Disregard the fact that his thoughts or directions were never blemished by prejudice or bigotry; forget that he was never accused of being biased or tempered by partisanship.

Never mind that he dearly loved his native Bangladesh and worked ceaselessly to make it a democratic and progressive nation in his own small way. Just never, ever forget that SM was a dedicated journalist, no more, no less.

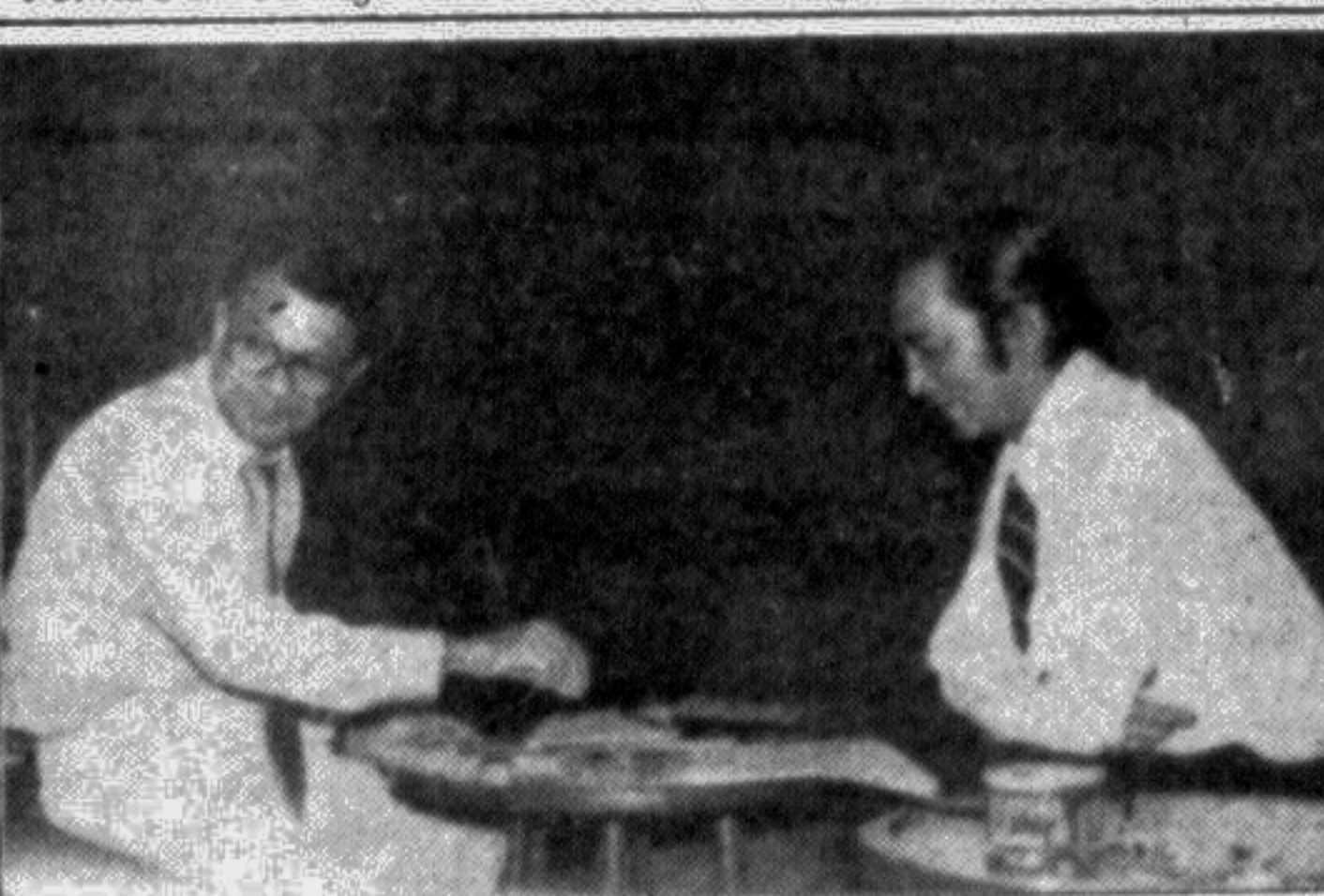
He wrote what his heart dictated, and this was premised on his uncompromising attachment to fairplay, ethical journalism and uncompromising truth. His inherent sense of seeing the many sides of an issue, and digesting each, made his editorials, columns and comments talking points of erudite discussion and reference material.

As it was, SM in life could have honestly claimed an exalted place in his country's roll of honor. But remembering SM is also recalling the little things that made up his whole being. Like his singular love of country, his seemingly inconsequential assistance to building writers and newspapermen, his innate sense of compassion for the struggling, ambitious but determined young newspapermen. He knew the roadblocks and the odds on the successful launching of a journalistic career.

He was more than glad to point the way, to clear the path so that you and I and the next generation of media people will find the going less difficult, less challenging and easier to traverse.

As we mourn his passing, let's rejoice that in the relatively short time he had been with us, he had managed to enhance our sense of values and thus gave us new insight in our chosen profession.

The author is the editor of the Manila based, *Depthnews* Feature Service of the Press Foundation of Asia.



With his life-long friend, well-known journalist and former Executive Director of the Press Foundation of Asia (PFA) Armitabh Choudhury.

S M Ali — the Journalist and the Writer

by Tuhfa Zaman Ali

WHEN he left for Bangkok, for treatment he told his readers that he would be back in three weeks' time. Yes, he kept his word. He did come back to Dhaka on the 19th of October, but in a casket, his soul — his caring, loving, compassionate soul — in heaven. But S M Ali lives on, he lives on in the hearts and minds and the prayers of all those whose lives he had touched in various degrees through his words, deeds and writings.

S M Ali's writing knew no parallel; — however, one could possibly say that the subtle humour in his recent writings could be compared to that of his illustrious uncle, Syed Mujtaba Ali, the great litterateur of Bengal. His late father, Syed Mustafa Ali, a lover of the English language, had graduated with the first batch of Honours students of the English Department of Dhaka University in 1922, and was probably responsible, in an indirect way, for his joining the field of journalism. Syed Mustafa Ali encouraged his children to read newspapers and magazines, and discussed with them the vital issues of the day and styles of writing. He was proud when his eldest son decided to follow in his footsteps and graduate with Honours in English, but was a little disappointed when the son chose not to follow him into government service. That disappointment must have been short-lived, for prouder still was he when the name S M Ali began to shine gradually brighter in the arena of journalism at home and abroad. S M Ali's writing was precise, and he rarely used hyperbole. His language was simple and concise, and one did not need a dictionary to read him, yet he was so articulate in expressing his thoughts. People looked forward to Fridays to read 'My World' in The Daily Star and enjoyed the journeys with him in space and time, usually back into the

past, and looked to the future with hope. Alas, that future is lost, travels curtailed and our world without S M Ali is grimmer.

S M Ali was an optimist, — the imaginary conversations between the two leading political figures is an example of his optimism. He was quick to express his opinion on important issues; his commentaries were read with eagerness, the solutions offered by him discussed at length. It was quite easy to recognize the editorials written by him — his style was so much his own. He would smile if one commented on an editorial written by him, happy that his style was recognized. The Daily Star founded by him, brought a breath of fresh air, new challenges, an originality not known before to Bangladeshi journalism. When a nephew, home from the States on School holidays, commented on this, he expressed his usual optimism, his hope that Bangladeshi journalism would soon rise to international standards.

S M Ali's optimism and his keen mind is visible in his book *After the Dark Night* (Thomson Press, 1973). He had wanted to write about the dark days of Bangladesh's liberation struggle, but after his visit to the new state in early 1972, he rejected the idea. "Instead," he says in the preface, "I found it infinitely more stimulating to share the thoughts and hopes of my countrymen who are trying to see the future and rebuild their times in a new context". As one reads the book, one finds S M Ali relentlessly probing through the mass of problems facing the new nation, trying to detect some virtue in everything that was going on. He ends the book with the hope that "the dark night will really come to an end". The book was well-received in the foreign press and much-discussed among the

academicians. It was recommended reading on Bangladesh in universities in the United States and India.

S M Ali was a greatly respected personality in the international journalistic circles. Journalists in South-east Asia and western journalists who had worked in Asia spoke highly of him, when one met them during one's stay abroad. In New Delhi, journalists of repute, like Kuldip Nayyar, Suman Dubey, Khushwant Singh, Chanchal Sarkar, George Verghese, H K Dua and Prem Chopra held him in high esteem. In Pakistan, veteran journalists in Karachi and Lahore remember their old colleague fondly. Bangladesh was close to S M Ali's heart and he always tried to project a favourable image of Bangladesh in the countries he was stationed. Bangladeshi diplomats recall his unhesitating assistance whenever they approached him for introduction to the media, whether he was the editor of a South-east Asian newspaper or was working with the Press Foundation of Asia or the UNESCO.

S M Ali worked with the UNESCO as its Regional Communication Adviser for Asia, based in Kuala Lumpur, from 1980 to 1988, calling it "a challenging but also a most rewarding phase of my working life". He writes to friends before leaving Kuala Lumpur, "we will move to Dhaka where I expect to be involved in a journalistic venture". For someone who had spent almost his entire working life outside the country, and for his Singaporean wife who had never before lived in Bangladesh, this was a major move. "Both of us will feel our way through the harsh realities of life in Bangladesh", he writes, "because Dhaka still offers so many possibilities in my field". Let us hope that The Daily Star will remain a shining memento to S M Ali.



In one of his many trips to Vietnam, providing assistance for media development.

Ali Bhai

by Arjuna

HE was among the last journalists to have interviewed the Last Emperor of China, but this was only one of the many sidetrips Syed Mokhammad Ali made in his distinguished journalistic career of 44 years.

S. M. Ali, to colleagues, Ali Bhai to friends, S M passed away last October. He would have been 65 on December 5.

His remains arrived in Dhaka October 20, the day he promised his newspaper readers he would return from Thailand after his regular medical check-up, a bit of rest and an overdue holiday. He would be keeping that deadline for his return like a true journalist, his friends quickly noted, if not in life then in death.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia said S. M. served Bangladesh and journalism with distinction for a long time. President Abdur Rahman Biswas noted the country lost a distinguished editor of the contemporary period. His colleagues observed that if a journalist is the conscience-keeper of the society, S. M. Ali epitomised it.

Ali Bhai once wrote about an imaginary dialogue between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, leader of the opposition. They began with caustic attacks on one another but gradually discovered hidden points of convergence, long overshadowed by the confrontations of the day. It was his way of bringing a consensus on core national issues and in bringing the major political parties, especially the two biggest ones, towards a common national agenda.

S. M. Ali was a nationalist. In 1971, when he was the Roving Foreign Editor of the Singapore afternoon daily *New Nation*, he actively rallied support for the liberation war of Bangladesh. But as early as the 1950s, in London, he was a spokesman and translator of the late Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani who was staying there during his brief exile.

In 1952, as a young nationalist, he actively participated in the Language Movement. And in 1973 he wrote a book 'After the Dark Night', a personal research and on-site study about the problems of post-liberation Bangladesh.

Ali Bhai, who was married to Nancy Wong of Singapore, 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 Dhaka University in 1950-51.

While still a student, he joined the newly-launched *Pakistan Observer* in 1949 as its first

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

He returned to Pakistan in 1954 and joined the *Dawn* newspaper in Karachi as Staff Reporter and again came back to the *Pakistan Observer* in 1956 as Staff Reporter. At that time he became active in the journalist union and was the president of the East Pakistan Union of Journalists during 1958-60. He was also the only journalist member of the All Pakistan First Newspaper Wage Board.

S. M. Ali was an expatriate during most of his professional life, living mostly in South-East Asian cities. After joining the *Pakistan Times* in Lahore in 1960, he subsequently became the Assistant Editor of the Hongkong-based regional publication, *The Asia Magazine* from 1962-64. In 1964-65 he was the South-East Asia Bureau Chief for the *Karachi Daily Dawn* and then was appointed the Managing Editor of Thailand's leading English-language daily, the *Bangkok Post*.

In late 1972, S. M. Ali was in Hongkong again, as Managing Editor of the *Hongkong Standard*. His articles and analytical essays on Asian events appeared in leading regional journals, including the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, *Orientations* and *Insight*.

In 1977, S. M. Ali joined the Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia as its Executive Director. In 1981 he was in Kuala Lumpur with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as its regional communications advisor for Asia and the Pacific.

After retiring from UNESCO in 1988, S. M. Ali briefly joined the *Bangkok Post* as Editor in mid 1989 and was advisor to the United News of Bangladesh news agency for a few months in 1990. In January 1991, he launched The Daily Star as its Editor and Publisher, steering it to become the premier independent daily in Bangladesh. He remained active in the daily affairs of the newspaper and continued writing his column 'My World' until the day he left for Thailand.

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. The Daily Star commented in an editorial. 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 insight made us how our head in adulation.

The Daily Star staff felt the editorial deserved front-page treatment, but they did not put it on page one, as S. M. Ali taught us never to compromise the intrinsic value and dignity of an editorial by moving it from its usual place.

— *Depthnews Asia*

S M Ali — Some Recollections

by Sulaiman Chaudhury

S MALI — Khasru is my cousin, younger to me by about four years. We grew up together. We were good friends. Our long and close association of five decades is filled with happy memories.

Some of our memorable days were spent in Calcutta in 1945-47 when Ali was an undergraduate student in St Pauls College and I was a postgraduate student in Calcutta University. At times both of us, in pockets empty, would make a bus trip to Park Circus residence of our uncle Dr Syed Mujtaba Ali, who would guess the primary purpose of our visit. He would as usual carry on his pleasant conversation, offer us high tea and then give us generous cash replenishment.

He spent about 40 years of his life in foreign lands, married an accomplished foreign journalist, rather late. After staying abroad so long he came to his homeland — Bangladesh — in 1989 to fulfil his dream and mission to start an independent daily newspaper. This was possible mainly because of his intense love for the country and its people, particularly for the youth. He loved the younger generation both in the family and outside. It was very much noticeable in his handling of the

children and teenagers. His keen interest in them used to involve him in friendly dialogue at family functions and occasional parties at his house, exclusively for the younger generation. He used to consider such parties special occasions for the young guests and for himself. His lovely wife Nancy also enjoyed and encouraged such functions and encounters.

He was very attached to relations and friends and genuinely concerned about their welfare. I know of several instances where he contributed, unsolicited, money for the treatment or education of his distant relations and acquaintances without being specifically told about the need. He would make such contributions with such grace and silence as if even his left hand did not know what his right hand has given.

He used to write long letters to his nephews and nieces. Sometimes he would write to them from visiting places on his frequent trips on work. These letters were a source of joy not only to the recipients, but to their parents as well.

I shall end by quoting from one of his letters which, I feel, will give a good insight into the mind and soul of this noble person. He had faith in his

country, its people and its future. He was a devout person without being noticeably religious.

"My personal plans are taking shape. I will be away on a trip to Europe from 10 December to 24 December, which includes my debriefing visit to the headquarters. On my return, we will still be in Kuala Lumpur, perhaps until the end of March. Then, after a couple of weeks in Nancy's country, Singapore, we will move to Dhaka, Bangladesh where I expect to be involved in a journalistic venture. For Nancy, there will also be plenty to do in Bangladesh, in some community welfare projects, perhaps in the Assistance to Blind Children (ABC), a wonderful project which we visited when we were in Dhaka last month. Both of us will feel our way through the harsh realities of life in Bangladesh, not because we have no other options, but because with all its problems, Dhaka still offers so many possibilities in my field. If we make the best of these possibilities, I will know that's due to your best wishes and prayers for both Nancy and myself."

5 December, 1988, written prior to retiring from Unesco and returning to Dhaka.



S M Ali conducting one of the many high level training workshops.

The Man in Search of a Rainbow

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certainty in his conversations. A straightforward person, his statements were forthright and simple. He never flinched from calling a spade a spade; but then he would do it without being offensive.

Ali Bhai and Nancy would also entertain us once in a while at their modest home on top of the Bangsar hills in KL. They would insist that we bring our children along. Being childless themselves, they loved young kids. Once Nancy prepared a special Chinese delicacy for us at dinner; it was called the *beggars' chicken*. Mr Ali explained to us how the name originated in China when people were so poor that they would greet one another with the question, "Have you eaten today?" Inevitably, our conversation moved towards poverty, society and politics in Bangladesh. A theme that recurred again and again whenever we met and discussed with mutual friends. He had travelled extensively not only in South-East Asia, but all over the world and he had met so many of the world leaders not only in politics, but in various other fields. He was probably the most cosmopolitan Bangladeshi of our times. Since he was so well informed about what was happening in the world and particularly in South-East Asia, he was also concerned about the backwardness of his own

country and society. I remember the first time he met Professor Yunus and we discussed Grameen Bank and its programme at our house back in 1987. He seemed so keen and enthusiastic about a programme that was targeting on the poorest of the rural poor. His keenness was subsequently reflected in the coverage that he gave to Grameen Bank in The Daily Star.

It is probably around that time that he took the momentous decision to come back home. I guess every expatriate Bangladeshi has a hidden desire to return home one day. When Ali Bhai mentioned that he would like to go back I was quite surprised, because I knew he meant it. It was all the more surprising because he would have grown accustomed to the perks, the conveniences, the certainties of a settled life, that come from working with a UN agency and living in a modern city like Kuala Lumpur. He mentioned about his plans to start a newspaper that would have not only a new professional style but also a distinctive social role in promoting the country's development. One could feel that he spoke from very strong convictions. He had also thought out his plans in very concrete terms. I met him again in December of 1990, but this time recuperating at a private clinic in Dhanmondi from a serious lung infection. He was

also having problems with the *Bangladesh Observer*, which he had joined as an editor soon after returning home. He looked physically pulled down; but with a gleam in his eyes he once again told me about his plans for starting The Daily Star. He was indomitable. It is said that the test of a man's character is, at a time of crisis — I have seen Ali Bhai when he was most vulnerable, at a time of personal danger, when it would have been easy for him to go back to a safe refuge. But he stood his ground. He was definitely an inspired and self motivated person, something quite precious in a cynical middle class society like ours.

His inspiration came from his vision of a modern, progressive Bangladesh. He had hoped for a politically tolerant society, that would be able quickly to rid itself from the corruptions, the social injustices and the curse of poverty. After his death, to my sheer surprise once again, I discovered that he had already finished the manuscript of an English novel which he named *Rainbow Over River Padma* — it was all about his dream of a progressive Bangladesh. It envisions a political process that promotes development at the grassroots. Ali Bhai, till his very last, was searching for a rainbow! I am sure in the process he would be inspiring many others.