

Letter of a Nationalist

by Mir A Sattar

THE night of March 25, 1971 — the night a Bangladeshi can never forget. It was the night when the brute Pak army of military dictator Yahya Khan attacked the sleeping Bangladeshis with modern sophisticated weapons. All Bhai was my house guest in a Hong Kong apartment that fateful night. He stopped in Hong Kong on his way to Saigon to cover the Vietnam war for the New Nation, Singapore, of which he was the Roving Editor then.

The next morning — the morning of March 26, 1971 — we heard over Radio Hong Kong, of what had happened in Dhaka. Both of us — Ali Bhai and myself, were terribly shocked. "Ali Bhai was dumbfounded. Leaving him in that mental shock, I entered the bath for my shower. I came out after a while but did not find Ali Bhai there. My wife told me that Ali Bhai took his suitcase and walked out quietly with a heavy heart. He did not take his breakfast — nor did he utter a word. I was very worried about him and I continued to do so until I received his letter after a few days written from Singapore — soon after his return from Saigon. All these days, inside me I was boiling with anger for what the Pak army did to my countrymen. My anguish was killing me — my heart was longing for contributing something positive to our liberation struggle but I did not know how to do it and when Ali Bhai showed me the way. Ali Bhai wrote me a letter, outlining his plan for activities in support of the liberation war. The letter contained his precise and well-thought out action plan to mobilize support in Hong Kong to our just struggle. His letter was so inspiring that it put me to work at once. The respect and esteem Ali Bhai earned for himself among the community of journalists in Hong Kong was enviable. It was due to his excellent relationship with the Hong Kong Press in general and the senior journalists, named in his letter, in particular that our liberation war got the best possible coverage in the Hong Kong newspapers. Ali Bhai's said letter is a testimony to his deep love for Bangladesh and its people.

Ali Bhai and I were in regular correspondence for a very long time. In a good number of his letters he said, "My heart lies in Bangladesh." On a number of occasions during his and my stay abroad he told me that he would return to Bangladesh someday and bring out a newspaper. I was so happy that the dream which he nourished in the bosom of his heart for so long, came true at long last. The Daily Star was born — and he

gave all his time to nurture it to make it healthy, with no time left for looking after his own health! I now feel so sad that he is no more but his words and deeds will no doubt, continue to inspire us to work for making Bangladesh a better place to live in.

(The letter, which is repainted below with minor editing, provides a sample of the contribution of S M Ali, to the war of liberation. Through his wide network of personal contacts, Ali was able to mobilize the regional press to support our war through indepth coverage of the atrocities committed by the Pakistan army.)

Singapore, April 9, 1971

My dear Sattar,

I wanted to write to you a few days ago — I arrived here from Saigon on April 4 — but what could I say in a letter except sharing with you my sense of agony and utter helplessness? So much has been published here — and I am sure, much has also appeared in Hongkong papers — that at one stage, I was breaking down even while talking to colleagues and friends. In my house, I feel lonely too.

I can go to the border any time I want to, perhaps right up to Jessore. No problem of visa. But my office is worried about me. So we are just marking time, waiting for further news. I will let you know as soon as I have made any plan.

But we just can't wait. There is something we can do. After long thought, what I have decided is this:

In five major Asian capitals, Manila, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, Tokyo and Bangkok, we will try to set up local committees of "THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS OF EAST PAKISTAN". Very simple title, and let's use "East Pakistan" to avoid any controversy. These committees will mainly include local writers, journalists and intellectuals (professors too), local and foreigners, but officially no East Pakistanis and very few (if any) Indians. The following will be the main tasks:

(1) To publish a full-page appeal in the most prominent local paper, addressed to Yahya, asking him to stop the mass slaughter and the use of force in East Pakistan. It will be signed by at least 50 or 100 (a round figure is good) prominent citizens of the area. (We will prepare the draft of the appeal here OR every city can make its own draft). After the signatures, we will put "ON BEHALF OF THE HONGKONG COMMITTEE OF THE SOCIETY OF EAST

PAKISTAN."

(2) In places like Manila, Singapore and Tokyo — in independent Asian countries — the society will meet the local government leaders (the president/prime minister) in a delegation and try to seek a statement, if possible a condemnation of what Yahya is doing.

(3) A mass signature campaign on a petition to be submitted to the local Pakistan mission.

(4) In Manila, it is even possible to have a demonstration outside Pak mission.

(5) Raise funds, generally from East Pakistanis and Indians, but very quietly. Keep the fund ready, after using part of it for publishing the newspaper appeal.

Yesterday, confidentially, I sent two cables to Manila and Hongkong. In Manila, my contact man is Amitava Chowdhury of Press Foundation of Asia; in Hongkong, I have sent it to Derek Davies of the Review.

To Derek, I have said this:

"Request organise Hong Kong Committee of Society of Friends of East Pakistan preferably with yourself or Vittachi as chairman to organise signature campaign funds stop my bleeding country needs your help Regards Ali."

I want you to get in touch with Viswa Nathan (in Hong Kong Tiger Standard) whom you can completely trust. Discuss the plan with him. Then he will see Derek, Vittachi in Asia House, Gantobon and Suman.

Meanwhile, once the society is formed, you should organise the private fund collection from among our own people. You will need the money to get that full-page ad.

I do not know how much it will help. But international pressure has to be built up as fast as possible.

All this must be done quickly. Time is the essence of the matter. Call Viswa today (from a public call booth) and meet him in a neutral place (avoid meeting him at your or his house) and discuss it with any body you trust.

I am sending you the draft of the appeal by Monday or Tuesday. Of course, you can also use your own draft. That's entirely upto Viswa, Derek and others.

My love to you, Manu and the children. God bless you.

Yours sincerely,



In a jovial mood with Sheikh Hasina, Leader of the Opposition.

SM Ali, who Raised Bangladesh's Journalistic Image Abroad

by Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

I was away in New Delhi when Mr. SM Ali, widely known as "Ali Bhai" to his younger colleagues and friends, died in Bangkok. The news of his death caused an avalanche of shock in the journalistic circles in the Indian capital where he was known among the senior journalists for decades. Mr. Ali's death was not premature but certainly it was somewhat sudden. He was not known to be suffering from such acute illness that he would die soon after he himself wrote in his last piece "My World" that he was going to Bangkok for routine medical check-up.

The news of his death, came as a surprise to many at home, and likewise in the capital of several regional countries, whose journalism owe much to Mr. Ali. Senior Indian journalists like Mr. Nikhil Chakravarty, Mr. Chanchal Sarkar, Mr. Uma Shankar Phadnis, Mr. D Sen, Dr. Dileep Padgaonkar and others took the news of his passing away with great shock and disbelief. "We were planning to bring him here for a seminar and we were told that he was not pulling well but I never thought that Ali will leave us so suddenly," said Mr. Phadnis. "You have lost a journalist of such eminence. He raised the image of your country abroad. I heard his name in the capitals of South East Asian countries," said an official of Indian External Affairs Ministry, whom I met in New Delhi at a reception the day after Mr. Ali died.

Our country has produced an array of distinguished journalists of whom we can be proud of: Maulana Akram Khan, Abdus Salam and Zahur Hossain Chowdhury are among those whose names would remain forever in the annals of history of journalism of this country. But Mr. SM Ali was possibly the best known journalist of this country abroad. It was in a way circumstantial because he happened to criss-cross several countries during his long career and in the process left an indelible print everywhere he worked and stayed. Senior journalists from Pakistan and Sri Lanka, who were in the Indian capital for a seminar, said, Mr. SM Ali was no stranger in the press circles in their countries and the news of his death would send shock waves among their friends.

Incidentally, it was in New Delhi that I came to know late Mr. Ali somewhat closely even though I heard his name and casually knew him before I met him for a lengthy session in the Indian capital way back in 1982. My stay in New Delhi as a journalist for BSS in the early

eighties propelled me to be in close touch with two other distinguished journalists of this country — Mr. Abdul Latif Khatib and Mr. Shahidul Huq. Like Mr. Ali, both are no more with us today. One day Mr. Shahidul Huq, our favourite "Shahidul Bhai", informed me that Mr. SM Ali, the regional consultant for UNESCO, was in the city and that he will be coming to his residence for dinner. "Shahidul Bhai" was then the Minister (Press) in the Bangladesh High Commission. I had seen Mr. Ali only once in Dhaka before and I felt somewhat excited at the chance of meeting him (as I heard of him from Mr. Khatib and also from Indian journalists). "Shahidul Bhai" would often speak about Mr. Ali's journalistic ability and particularly of his exceptional command over English language, both as a writer and speaker. I spent a long time that evening in the "Gulmohar Park" residence of Mr. Shahidul Huq in the company of Mr. Ali and several other guests. His way of talking — choice of words in addition to his penchant for discussing contemporary events — left such an impression on me that I looked forward to meeting him every time he travelled to the Indian capital in his capacity as UNESCO consultant. I took care that my relationship with such a man of charming personality and high professional capability remained uninterrupted and, in the process, proximity with him grew stronger. At later stage, when I had occasions to travel to Bangkok or other South East Asian countries, it appeared that Mr. SM Ali was not an unknown name with the press circles there. I met "Ali Bhai" in early 1989 on a private visit to his residence in Kuala Lumpur. That time he was planning to return home permanently after bidding 'adieu' to a long sojourn abroad (he had earlier been stationed in Manila and Bangkok as well while working for major journalistic institutions). "Ali Bhai" wanted to know from me about the journalistic atmosphere in Bangladesh. Now I vividly remember, I encouraged his wife, a foreign lady, to come to Bangladesh to stay. She came here with a smile with her husband and I had to fight back my tears when I met a sobbing "Nancy Bhabi" at the "Qul Khwan" of Mr. Ali the other day.

Here, I cannot forget two incidents that involved Mr. Ali. After his return to Bangladesh, we were together at the World Education Conference in Jomtien, near Bangkok. He was accompanied by his wife. While we were taking a stroll along the lovely beach of Jomtien, he was

complaining of pain in his foot. That pain continued to bother him, and his cousin, Mr. Hedayet Ahmed, Regional Director, UNESCO, got a new pair of shoes for him. But he remained bogged down by the pain and at a later stage, this appeared as an intractable arthritis problem.

Another occasion which demonstrated his fellow feelings and his mentality to stand by colleagues during crisis, would remain in my memory as a shining example of sincerity when it was needed most. After Mr. Ali returned home from abroad for permanent stay, some friends including Mr. Hasan Shahriar, now Press Club President and Mr. Matur Rahman Chowdhury, the editor of "Banglabazar Patrika", organised a get-together for him but he unexpectedly got himself embroiled in a crisis that evening. As the editor of the Bangladesh Observer, he was involved in complex negotiations with the management on behalf of his colleagues. But we, the hosts, obviously became unnerved as other guests were waiting for him but the chief guest was not turning up.

I was alarmed to know that Mr. Ali would not at all be able to turn up and I rushed to the "Bangladesh Observer" office to bring him to the get-together. Mr. Ali said he felt very sorry and apologised for his inability to turn up at the function which was meant for him. But I insisted that he must come at least for sometime. Otherwise we would lose face to the waiting guests. But he would not leave his colleagues while he fully appreciated our predicament. I then took the help of some friends at the Observer like Mr. Reazuddin Ahmed and Mr. Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, the trade union leaders. After my passionate appeal, they agreed to request their editor to leave them for half an hour for the sake of the hosts. Even after their requests, Mr. Ali did not budge and remained with his colleagues at the height of an organisational crisis while he apologised to us repeatedly. This was a remarkable example of standing by one's colleagues in the hour of need, notwithstanding that his other engagement was no less significant.

As Mr. Ali is being eulogised, somehow I feel that "Ali Bhai" might have had some kind of premonition about his death albeit his own writing that he would be back by October 20 after his "routine check up". Possibly, he could read his epitaph — otherwise how could his dead body return home by the same deadline?



Interviewing Ferdinand Marcos

I Miss Khasru, My Younger Brother

by M A Samad

KHASRU used to call me "Mula Bhai" and my wife "Lucy Bhabi". He was younger than me by six years. It was early 1949. Most probably it was the month of February. We were residing at 6 Folder Street, Wari, Dhaka. I had just resigned from radio Pakistan, Dhaka and had been planning to publish a progressive children monthly. Khasru came up and volunteered to help us on our project. The journal was named "Minar". The general editor was my wife Fawzia Samad. S M Ali agreed to be in charge of a section to be named Desh-e-Bideshe. What was most pleasing to us was that he decided to stay with us. The first issue of "Minar" came out in the month of April 1949 (Bengali year 1355, month Chaitra).

In the first issue, we published a poem of Dr. Mujtaba Ali, times he was too formal. He used to return home late at night. Some day even after midnight, I had the habit of finishing my dinner early and go to bed early. The servant was instructed to serve hot food when he would be back home. Some nights the servant would be asleep when Khasru had been back home. Myself and my wife repeatedly asked him to awake the servant if found sleeping so that he served him hot food. But Khasru would not do this, lest the servant would feel hurt and disturbed. Khasru was so gentle, so polite, so humane.

I remember one night when he returned late, he could not open his room as it was locked and the key of the room which he used to carry had been missing. The duplicate key was with us. Khasru had been knocking

What a Coming Back!

by Mahbubur Rab Sadi

WHY did Syed Mohammad Ali go away in the midst of a career that was shaping famously and drawing him ever near to the things close to his heart? A superficial look from outside would only say he found his deserts abroad all right — shining all the way from an exuberant youth in his twenties to a ripe beginning of the seventh decade of his life. He was perhaps looking for some personalised lebensraum — living space — finding his home country rather stuffy for too many reasons. Did he find that in the lands he chose to live and work? His peers had all gone west, why did he head east? It cannot be true professional openings alone determined the choice. And he was not an inch less westerly than Tarzie Vittachi — the other South Asian from Sri Lanka who did quite a long spell of stomping over world journalism. Whatever the reason of his choice he seemed to have fit perfectly in the Thai-Malay-Chinese milieu — something no other Bengalee has done with anything near half Ali's success.

If four decades of his life was quite out of step with what equally talented compatriots of his times did, his return to his native land was even more so. He felt drawn to the idea of coming back not out of any feeling of being at the tether's end — tired and lonely. He was underneath all his western and profession-imposed trappings an *adda* loving decent fellow — Bengalee to the core not much unlike his uncle Syed Mujtaba Ali. He started pining for the cozy warmth of his childhood camaraderie — a three-some formed of Solaiman Chowdhury and Shegufa Bakht Chowdhury — one elder to him and the other younger. And it was Solaiman Chowdhury and S M Mahmud whose goadings decided for him to take the plunge. What a decision it was. He was going to set up a milestone in Bangladesh's journalism with a fiercely confident sweep. And how he did it! In the matter of months all Bangladesh woke up to the fact that here was something new and fresh and very professional at work, perhaps for the first time in the history of Bangladesh's journalism. Did his total commitment to The Daily Star burn himself up?

I was too young to remember anything of his preparations for great things before he left for abroad. I wasn't also able to meet him on his rare visits to Dhaka. His long absence lighted up the more the kindly face of Khasru Bhai, for that was his name for the near ones, which I bore in my mind. And how I prided myself in the fact that I had a bhai who had done so well in world journalism.

And that bhai is now no more. Now there wouldn't be anyone anymore to tell me, "Sadi, you are my only bhai who is a great freedom fighter and an activist of social movements and I am proud of you." I say this not for glorying in tasteless vaunting but being unable to help bear my sense of loss. He materialised for me out of my childhood remembrances as a famous man in 1986. We were sitting in the lavish lobby of "Sonargaon" and talking over an article on international affairs by myself. It was a measure of his greatness that he deigned to debate for long two hours with a non-entity and summed up by disagreeing on three points but accepting many more.

Last Eid-ul-Fitr I went to his house to present him something that I was sure would both surprise and please him. It was a photograph, nicely laminated, of our three great *bhais* in their boyhood. They were Solaiman Chowdhury (Mukta Bhai), one of the most respected of Bangladesh's senior bankers, Shegufa Bakht Chowdhury (Dada-bhai), a former governor of Bangladesh Bank and Syed Mohammad Ali, the great journalist and the eldest son of my *baro Mamu*. Khasru Bhai recognised the photo instantly and cried with joy. "Hey! This is a surprise. I shall preserve it with all care."

As that was the last time I saw him alive, that supremely pleased face of his will live with me till my day of parting from here. I saw that face again on October 20 — dead. And I said to myself I would do my utmost what I couldn't when he was living — care for his dear things.

Syed Mohammad Ali was honoured on his death as few have been in the recent past. His two-year final stint as a son to his own people did touch the souls of all who care for the state of this nation. Such honour and recognition do not come to the undeserving. His public achievements are for all of us to see. I can't help remember one private small great thing about him. He loved his stepmother, Mrs. Hur Iqbal Khanam as if she were more than his own mother. I do not know who will console her now. And how.



A photograph of childhood camaraderie. Solaiman Chowdhury, S M Ali (guess which) and Shegufa Bakht Chowdhury. He started pining for the cozy warmth of this camaraderie in his late years abroad.

Those Dramatic Fifteen Minutes

by Noazesh Ahmed

WE were just leaving the Hotel Langsang for the airport. Our team was heading to Pakse. That was back in mid 1985. In the hotel lobby I met my Laotian friend Michael Samsanuk with his usual broad smile. With him was a fair gentleman of our subcontinent. Michael introduced him as Mr. Ali of UNESCO.

S M Ali — I was astounded. I heard so much about him from many friends of mine, particularly in Bangkok Post and PFA in Manila. I was, in fact, eager to meet him. But alas! could not do so in Bangkok, Hongkong or in Manila. Some how I missed

him. Of all the places, at last we met in Vientiane. I looked at him intently with regards. He was elegant and jubilant. I am one of your admirer. I have presented your Bangladesh photo album to many of my friends," he said cheerfully.

Our ADB team was in a rush. We would be back from Pakse after five days. Mr. Ali had a short visit to Laos. After two days he would be leaving for Kuala Lumpur. That meant I would not be able to see Mr. Ali after my return. So much to talk about, but had to leave silently. He shook my hand. "Good Luck."

After my return, I immediately enquired about Mr. Ali — in case his departure was delayed which was not uncommon in Laos. But I was unfortunate. Michael who was heading the external service of Radio Lao, was very moved by Mr. Ali. All the time he was talking of Mr. Ali's competence and high professional quality.

After several years, I met Mr. Ali again for few minutes only — on the stairs of The Daily Star office. He was rushing for an appointment. Mahius was with me. Mr. Ali said, "sorry I am to leave now. Please come again soon and write for us." I wrote in The Daily Star alright but could not go to the star office to see him.

When I heard other day the sad news of his demise, it immediately reminded me of those dramatic fifteen minutes in the lobby of Hotel Langsang of Laos. I had always a curiosity about S M Ali — a wonderer like me in the southeast Asia. We both spent a good deal of time there. Perhaps we both love the region. In that brief span in the Hotel lobby he exclaimed, as I remember, "wonderful people are around here".

Tributes from Overseas Readers

THROUGH his untimely death Bangladesh has lost one of those great men who help shape events in the right direction. Unfortunately for Bangladesh, there are not many people of S M Ali's calibre, dynamism and, in particular, his single minded determination to shape society in a proper and just manner.

Mr. Ali succeeded in presenting to Bangladesh a newspaper which has been a very important source of development dialogue. Having lived outside Bangladesh for about two decades and like many other people in my group I have been more familiar with the Western press. But, then, I am fortunate in that I have been able to visit Bangladesh frequently over the last six years. Initially during my visits to Dhaka, I greatly missed my usual morning papers, the *Financial Times* and the *Guardian Weekly*. However, with the appearance of *The Daily Star* a significant change took place in my reading habits. From the beginning I started enjoying the paper and, as it happened, six months ago I arranged to subscribe to the paper for our Bangladesh Community in Glasgow. Since then *The Daily Star* (or should I say, S M Ali's paper) has been one of my regular reading items.

I didn't meet this great man personally but on one occasion I had a telephone conversation with him from Dhaka. This was in July 1992. He asked me to give him a short paper on the area of "Technology Transfer", a subject which I have investigated at some length in the course of a research project at BIDS. I promised to give him an article on this, but this has been delayed and I feel badly that I failed to give him the article. However, early this year I was visiting Bangladesh again and at the request of Dr. Majeed Khan of the IUB, I gave a public seminar at BIRDEM, on "Industrialisation and Technology Transfer in Bangladesh". I discovered, to my surprise, that in the next day's issue of *The Daily Star*, S M Ali took the theme of my public address for his main editorial. He didn't even stop there and, following his usual approach of initiating development dialogues in *The Daily Star*, he brought out the theme again after a gap of two days in the context of some remarks made by an industrialist on the eco-

conomic development of Bangladesh.

Reading *The Daily Star* regularly for the last one year or so, the impression I have formed is that at long last Bangladesh has a top quality newspaper which wants to fight against evils and injustice in the society in a non-partisan manner. I think that as the founder-editor and producer of the paper, Mr. Ali wanted this, and there is no doubt that he fully succeeded in achieving this goal. At his death, while paying tribute to him I sincerely wish that *The Daily Star* will continue to serve the nation the way S M Ali wanted it to happen. Let the paper continue to remain an important forum of development dialogue, let it continue to fight for a better and fairer Bangladesh. Only in this way, will our tribute to S M Ali be true and meaningful.

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I was not his friend nor was I close to him, but I knew him. He was senior to me by a few years and, as such, had been in a higher class at the University of Dhaka when I first saw him. A simple dressed slim young man with a cigarette between his fingers S M Ali would walk slowly and talk intently, but politely, to make his points.

In those days (early fifties) journalism in Dhaka was in a poor state and not many talented men were venturing to join the profession. It was ill-paid, insecure and not regarded as respectable enough. S M Ali was one of those persons who could join and be successful in more lucrative/ attractive profession, but who chose journalism instead. It was a courageous move in those days. But, S M Ali knew what he was doing and he was confident of his future. It did not take him long to be recognised as one of the best in the country.

S M Ali was also brilliant in another field. He was an eloquent speaker — perhaps one of the best that Dhaka University

produced in our time. This quality of Ali's may not be so widely known as his skill and ability in journalism. The domain of the vocal words is limited compared to that of the pen and ink. I was fortunate enough to hear S M Ali speaking on more than one occasion. He was compelling without being obtrusive. His fluency in the English language was second to nobody in the university. Above all, like all great speakers, he could create an atmosphere which no listener could ignore. I remember one of his speeches very distinctly. S M Ali was speaking one day in one of our Hall elections for our Party holding microphone on his knee with one of his hands from inside a room of the Hall. The Hall walls were vibrating with his voice and language. On the other side, at another end of the Hall, Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed, another well-known student and distinguished orator of the university, was doing the same thing for the opposing Party. As I was coming out from the Hall I met Ishtiaque Bhai — who, by then had finished his speech — at the gate and he asked me, "Who is it speaking for your Party? It is S M Ali, isn't it?" When I replied in the affirmative Ishtiaque Ahmed felt relieved that it was no other than S M Ali who could match him and perhaps outshine him as he had been doing that night. It brings back to my mind another thing — how the students of the university admired their opponents in those days!

Finally, I don't think I saw S M Ali more than twice or thrice after my university days. Once, I remember, when I was working as a sub-editor in the Pakistan Observer, he was then an editor of a journal in West Pakistan. I asked him if there was any possibility for me to write in his journal. S M Ali replied in the positive, welcoming my thought in utmost politeness. Not many editors would treat a most junior subscriber the way S M Ali did that day!

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