

A veteran of several successful campaigns abroad, he was our *Ulysses* in the arena of journalism. Like *Ulysses*, S M Ali braved the turbulent sea of world events to return home at an advanced age. But his lack of physical agility was more than compensated by the unlimited intellectual spoils of those many campaigns. A troubadour in him has driven journalist Ali from one station of life to another but nevertheless his commitment to the country he was born in persuaded him to get back to his mooring at the last leg of his illustrious journey.

Even during his early stint with journalism, Ali had shown a rare glimpse of his capacity to unblinkingly look reality in the face before moving to take his assignment abroad. Yet those long fruitful years in foreign climes are a chapter that shaped up largely in isolation from our own social milieu. However much did he try to be a part of the domestic process in his country of origin, a sort of detachment was quite inevitable. This he felt intensely and his yearning for a meaningful home-coming was cascading into a compulsion.

Not surprisingly, it was not before his last journalistic mission at home that he finally found his *de jure* position in the pantheon of the discipline's all-time greats. Ever since the launching of *The Daily Star* in the country, journalism, English one in particular, has achieved a new credence. The conception of newspapers in the country no more remained the same after January 14, 1991 — the date of *The Daily Star*'s first appearance. In terms of both look and content, this daily started charting a new course all other stereotyped and traditional English dailies were soon forced to follow to stay in the competition.

Some of them succeeded, some did not in copying Ali's brain-child, but all had to take stock of their resources and change somehow or other their positions. Surprisingly, with the unmistakable mark of copying, these dailies also have got their market. This is ample proof of the virtue of a pioneering type of journalism the late editor brought along with him. With a single stroke of his genius S M Ali has suddenly delivered the country's English journalism from its uncertain, inhibited and *de facto* status to a surer, liberated and *de jure* footing.

Nothing less could give enough cause to savour for a man who had journalism as the consuming passion of life. But Ali was most modest about his achievement. For he set himself a goal still higher once the earlier one had been reached. All this he did with a rare flair of his own, always throwing a new challenge before him and his colleagues in whom he could successfully instil the spirit of hard work and never-say-no. S M Ali's geniality, humour and an easy approach made his task easier. He often boasted, "At times I can be very blunt." In reality rudeness was foreign to his nature. Suave and sensitive, Ali could therefore get tough job done by his colleagues without himself being tough.

No wonder, he set the standard by his prolific writing and in the process outpacing his colleagues. And this is despite his nagging physical illness. Seldom did he betray how painfully constrained he was by the diseases he was suffering from. His untiring zest for writing was too overpowering for him to attend to other considerations — even physical discomfort. It is most fitting that such a man might be gifted with the uncanny instinct for detecting potential in others and also bringing out their very best. A crop of young journalists must bear witness to this remarkable ability of this doyen of journalism.

His is a legacy hard to shoulder but he himself has made the task easier by his own set of ideals in that untrifling efforts combined with sincerity and love for the profession really count. S M Ali has ably passed his envious standard of professionalism on to a new breed and he will continue to live among them for years to come.

Niratan Halder

It would be an understatement to say that it was my privilege to work with him. For Mr S M Ali, as I did find myself, was not only a great editor, but also a great man.

Everyday that I came across him, it was a new day of learning that enriched me both professionally and personally. He was a fountain of wisdom. And that wisdom was not only reflected in the skill with which he used words, written and spoken, but in the good deeds he himself performed. He enlightened not only our minds but also enlarged our hearts. I, like others, found him to be a great communicator. He could deal with and understand all types of men and situations and as easily could present ideas and suggestions in a manner of lucidity and clarity, using a style that was essentially his.

The regular meetings that he conducted with the reporters and editorial staff, gave us a profound insight into his superb professional and analytical skills. He always came up with suggestions and analyses of what we had performed and what areas we could have improved in further.

He advised us without admonishing. He gave us suggestions without issuing orders. He commanded us without being commanding. He liked to be listened to, and himself always asked and heard what others had to say. He had a profound impact on our minds, which left a profound impact on our professional pursuit.

He was always insistent upon each one of us in improving the quality of the paper as well as our own professional skills. While at every opportunity he gave us frequent reminders to explore and pursue new ideas related to news stories and issues, he left upon us the task to perform and deliver. And we, more often than not, succeeded. Always expecting us to do our best, he never inflicted his impatience on us. Despite his age, he was never a man in a hurry.

He always stood for professionalism and often cautioned us to be fair, accurate and objective with our stories and never to be swayed by our personal opinions or bias. He always encouraged us not only to write, but write what is right and in the right manner.

M Anwarul Haq

It was a cool November morning in 1990 that I had the honour of meeting Mr S M Ali, the renowned journalist, for the first time, in the newly set-up office of *The Daily Star* on Toynebe Circular Road.

Although the weather was cool, Mr Ali's response to me was warm — full of sunshine, warmth, cosy and comforting. As I approached him — an elegant, handsome man — I introduced myself. I informed him that I was referred by my old friend, Mr Mahfuz Anam.

"Ah, yes, Mahfuz told me a lot about you. Why don't you talk to our Managing Editor, Mr Tawfik Aziz Khan, sitting over there, and see if you can work out something with him." That was how I had the privilege of meeting Tawfik Bhai, the very well-known radio and TV sports commentator, for the first time also.

Gradually, as *The Daily Star* began to grow under the watchful, affectionate eyes of Mr S M Ali and other around him, I had the opportunity of meeting S M Ali frequently on official business.

As the days passed, one day he mildly reprimanded me and said: "Why do you address me as 'Sir'? I am not a govt Secretary or a bureaucrat. Had I been a Secretary or bureaucrat, you could have addressed me as Sir. But I am merely your Editor. You may address me as Mr Editor or Ali Bhai — whichever you choose." But I could not bring myself to address him in either of the two and continued to address him as "Sir".

Few days later, when I again addressed him as "Sir", he flared up and said: "Did I not tell you not to address me as Sir? I know your elder brother so very well, can you not take me as an elder brother also?" I was cold to the soles of my feet at his anger. I felt ashamed.

I related this incident to Tawfik Bhai and Mahfuz Anam, and both said: "Well, if Ali Bhai has asked you to call him Ali Bhai, then you should call him so." And so my "Sir" became "Ali Bhai" from that day, but not without some conscious effort on my part.

Over the years my closeness to Ali Bhai began to grow day by day like a blooming garden, full of flowers — mostly due to official inter-action. Truly, he was an elder brother to me — loving, kind, gentle and affectionate.

Sometimes he would phone me at home, and invariably my wife would answer the call. "This is Ali speaking, S M Ali. I am sorry to call at this hour and disturb you. But I want to pass on some urgent instruction to your husband. Is he busy? If he is, please ask him to give me a call later when he is free." My wife went into raptures at Ali Bhai's charming approach. Who wouldn't be mesmerized by such gentle behaviour and genuine courtesy?

My closeness to Ali Bhai grew more and more from the time *The Daily Star* officer moved to Dhanmandi. This was primarily due to our daily Management Committee meeting with the Editor every morning the other members being the Executive Editor, Managing Editor, Finance Manager and Advertisement Manager. These daily meetings were regular business meetings, discussing in detail the various business and pressing problems of the day, interspersed with Ali Bhai's jokes and anecdotes, and of course, tea and biscuits.

I will never forget the last time I met Ali Bhai. It was 31 Sept '93, the last day that he attended office. I normally came to office around 10:15 am but on that fateful day, I reached office half-an-hour early (at 9:45 am). As I entered our office gate I was surprised to see Ali

The Editor as We Saw Him

TRIBUTES FROM THE STAFF



S.M. Ali with his colleagues, on the eve of his departure for Bangkok. On a sudden impulse, the staff brought flowers and came to his office to wish him speedy recovery. Who knew that this would be the last picture with his colleagues whom he loved so much.

Bhai's car so early in the morning; more so as he was not keeping well for the past few days. I entered his chamber with a broad grin across my face and enquired after his health. To my utter surprise, he was furious at seeing me. He was in an uncontrollable rage. To my knowledge, none of us had the misfortune of seeing him in such a bad fit. But I soon realised that it was due to his fast deteriorating health, and therefore, he was not in full control of his actions. Sadly, the kind, gentle, affectionate and humorous Ali Bhai that I knew so intimately for the past three years was totally missing in him. Suddenly and strangely, he was a shadow of his original self. Slowly he was sliding into oblivion, I said to myself.

Those who did not meet him ever cannot even imagine what a genuinely wonderful person he was to work with: always gentle, humble, courteous, charming and full of knowledge. And for those of us who had the rare honour of knowing and working with him closely, will always cherish his memories with unbounded fondness and infinite respect. To me personally, he was an affectionate teacher, a gentle guide, a father-figure and my loving "Ali Bhai".

A F M Jamaluddin

"NURUL, our late editor loved to call me by my first name, not by the other one, Kabir. I do not agree with what you have preached against expurgation of Parliament proceedings in your present article," S M Ali told me in an evening of the last summer.

He took a pause, looked at me — a disappointed reporter sitting on other side of the editor's table — and completed his sentence pronouncing the fate of my write-up: "However, I want the article to be published in the tomorrow's issue of *The Daily Star*."

I thanked my editor for what I first thought his special liking for me. But moments later, I found myself to be wrong in identifying the reason behind his permission to print the write-up.

Explaining the reason himself, over a cup of tea, the editor said: "Any journalist, serious about issues of national interests, should be allowed to present his or her views on national problems and in that case, the personal opinion of an editor should not appear to be the obstacle for the different views to come to light."

I did not take time to realise that it was S M Ali's commitment to the freedom of expression — not his personal liking for me — which made him release the article, despite disagreement with content.

What moved me best that evening was the way Ali Bhai — most of us called him so — concluded the discussion: "Nurul, never hesitate to come out with your own views. Always remember that you are not working under me, rather you are working with me."

This is the height of professionalism our beloved Ali Bhai, the founder-editor of *The Daily Star*, achieved. Readers! you can now easily understand that what a rational editor we lost on October 17 last!

It would be unfair on my part, while writing on the late editor, to resist temptation for recalling another observation he made at a critical juncture of my journalistic career.

A top brass in the country's political arena, while formally addressing a press conference in mid-1992, made a very independent comment against a respected journalist who allegedly had been critical of the concerned leader in one of his contemporary write-ups.

The next day's issue of *The Daily Star* had carried my two reports on the news conference — one on the political statements of the leader and the other on the said comment. Once published in the newspaper, aware of the misdeed, the party concerned issued a rejoinder against the second news

item, denying the original spirit of the comment. Several influential leaders of the party made innumerable phone calls to the Star authorities to print the rejoinder, eventually undermining the objectivity of the already published report.

When asked by the authorities, I had nothing to say about the printing of the rejoinder, but I had a definite say, as a reporter of the prestigious daily, on the objectivity of the report.

I demanded that side by side with the rejoinder, my version — upholding "the text of the report once again" — be published. It could be a difficult situation for any newspaper authorities to decide on the issue, when they were not present in the conference plus, no major dailies except the Star had published the item.

I was in the most critical situation because the leaders persuading their cause were many and I was only one to fight for objectivity, as none of my colleagues in the reporting team was present at the conference. At one stage, I was left with no option but to tender my resignation in protest against someones' thought of publishing the rejoinder without the reporter's version.

However, finally our Mahfuz Bhai — the present editor of *The Daily Star* — somehow appeared to be the trouble shooter on the occasion. He himself wrote a fresh item accommodating both the party's statement and the reporter's version and published it later. Ali Bhai was not present during the crisis.

But the next morning the editor came to the office. Informed about the whole episode, Ali Bhai called me to his chamber. He, patting my back, told me: "I am happy you submitted your resignation on moral ground. Mahfuz told me that he was also happy."

"Here lies the strength of *The Daily Star*," S M Ali told me, again, over a cup of tea. I was really amazed at his observation especially because some of my wellwishers in the office had meanwhile rebuked me for the "foolish act of resignation."

However, Ali Bhai was the last person to compromise over professionalism. In this connection, Ali Bhai discussed about some common hazards of political journalism in the third world countries, especially in one like ours. That morning he advised me not to get disappointed in the face of professional hazards.

I am sure, Ali Bhai's words at that morning — both appreciative and suggestive — will consistently inspire me to uphold professionalism until the last day of my journalistic career.

Nurul Kabir



S M Ali with Mrs Nancy Ali, after wedding.

As per inviolable law of nature, everybody will have to depart — sooner or later. But the demise of our dearest editor is highly unbearable for, we the staffers of *The Daily Star*, could not get the slightest hint of his deteriorating health condition. As long as he was with us, we never heard him complaining of serious ailment to any his colleagues. With the deepest sense of regard for this multi-dimensional personality, I am really appalled to think for a moment the incalculable losses sustained to journalism in the entire Asia-Pacific region by his demise.

If any journalist of an international repute could exult, to his credit, the glory of climbing to the top of the profession setting a unique trend of non-partisan outlook and neutrality, he was distinctively our reverend editor S M Ali. His epoch-making editorial titled "An Independent Voice" published on the very first day of launching of *The Daily Star* testifies to this fact.

A doyen of journalism S M Ali did everything possible to create a team spirit in *The Daily Star* and he was successful. He introduced the system of weekly meeting with the news desk as well as reporters separately which subsequently proved to be very fruitful. Apart from removing our lapses, these meetings helped promote a greater understanding among colleagues. Moreover, he used to have witty and humorous talks covering wide-ranging issues which we will never forget. He had similar meeting with other employees.

Ali Bhai worked harder than he was really supposed to. Excessive work took upon his health heavily. He had pains but he did never let his colleagues know of his illness. He was always fresh in mind. We lost such a great journalist who, with strength of his pen did never hesitate to unveil social evils and injustices. We are happy to see that the achievements of our beloved editor have earned him admiration at home and abroad.

Md Atiqul Karim

The first time I met him, I had no idea of what a great man he was or how much he was revered both at home and abroad. Yet my ignorance did not stop me from feeling rather awed at his presence. "Well you can call me Ali Chacha or Ali Mama" he said, "Ali Mama perhaps, since the connection is stronger on your mother's side," he added with his typical tongue-in-cheek smile. And so my association with

Ali Mama (though I always referred to him as "sir") began in July '91. I did not have the privilege of knowing him very long but even in the following two and a half years, I knew him to be the kindest of souls and a man who had the rare quality of being down to earth in spite of all the power and fame that his professional accomplishments had brought him. His most remarkable trait was that he treated everybody with equal respect whether it was a senior journalist, an intern or even a peon. When he gave us any assignment it was always "see if you can do something with this" or "would you like to do this?" and never "do this or do that." This kind of humility never failed to surprise us and make us complete the assignment with greater alacrity and goodwill.

But most of all, I enjoyed the anecdotes he would relate to us either in his office room or when he visited us at our desks. Once when he asked me if I would like to write something on un-usual hobbies, he recounted his childhood days when one hobby he pursued with passion was collecting autographs of famous people. Instead of just getting their signatures, Ali Mama, then a young boy, would make the particular famous person give him an autograph that represented his special talent. For example, when he met a famous painter, he asked him to sketch something on the autograph book, which he did, and no doubt gave the young S M Ali the greatest thrill.

Apart from his incredibly prolific writing, which never ceased to amaze us and make us a little shameful thinking of our own insignificant output, he somehow found the time to read all our articles. Every one of them. This of course made us very nervous especially when Topon, his ever-faithful peon, would come and say "Sir is calling you". Yet his criticisms were never offensive or belittling just as his compliments never too effusive although they boosted our egos immensely. He would always give us useful tips on how to balance the page with pictures, how to make our articles "tighter, more crisp", how to always give a caption under each picture and so on. Even now every time I sit to write something I remember those tips which seemed to have been ingrained into my brain. He certainly was a wonderful teacher.

His dry wit and ability to laugh, often at himself, was also one of the great qualities that endeared so many people to him. Always referring to us women employees as "ma" (mother) he would tease us by saying "I hope you are not going to get married and quit the Star" with a twinkle in his eyes. Once when he asked me to interview the Nepali ambassador he mused, "I would have done the interview myself, but I'm sure he will find you more charming than an old man like me!"

In this way he would banter and joke making us feel as if he really was our "mama" or "Chacha" and not just our boss. In the old office at Toynebe Circular Road when his health was better, the "Editor" as we referred to him would often come to our section (features) and sit at our desks. Each of us would later boast that the editor had sat at one of our desks to make the others feel jealous. This kind of childish possessiveness would always be displayed after he had gone back to his office chamber, with "well he said my article was good", "so what he sat at my desk" or "so what he's a Sagittarian like me!" Whenever we celebrated our birthdays we would offer him a piece of cake and he would come personally to wish us. At one time he gave me a beautiful present — a little statue from Malaysia. It still sits on my desk and everytime I see it I am flooded with all those warm memories of Ali Mama.

Like the times he would call us just to have a "chat" and he would offer us tea and special savory biscuits from Denmark or Germany or some other far away place. These we would munch, greedy little pigs that

we were, as we listened to stories of a man who had left his mark across the world, although we did not know that then.

Approachable, witty, courageous and extremely alert even at his most ill moments — we felt for him a rare mixture of respect and love that will endure long after our own hands are too feeble to write. He bade us farewell in his chamber at Dhanmandi office by saying, "I always considered this to be a team" promising us that he would come back. He hasn't broken that promise, for even now as I pass by his chamber I can feel him typing feverishly with his spectacles falling on his nose or busily briefing a reporter on the next assignment. Even now I almost expect him to get down from his white sedan, his hand up to return a salaam and a crisp "what's up?" as he would move slowly towards his office chamber. We miss you terribly dearest Ali Mama, dearest 'sir', but your spirit will continue to inspire and guide us as your memories will continue to warm our bereft hearts.

Aasha Mehereen Amin

I was participating in a workshop at the Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) on that very day (September 30) when Ali Bhai held his last meeting with *The Daily Star* staff and went for his "overdue" holiday. Thus I missed the last chance of listening to him. He inquired after me before he left the office to convey his appreciation for my write-up, "behind the headline" which I had submitted earlier.

I had no idea about the seriousness of his illness. There was no sign in him that his health had gone so bad. I thought it was a regular medical check-up for which he went earlier, a couple of times.

I came to know about this great man from an interview published in the *Nirikkah*, a bi-monthly publication, when he joined *The Bangladesh Observer* as the editor in 1989. I was then a student of Rajshahi University and was simultaneously working as a stringer for the UNB news agency and the New Nation. I first met him at the UNB office when he joined as an adviser to the agency. I was impressed by his cordial behaviour.

My performance in *The Daily Star* at the beginning, was not up to the mark, but Ali Bhai always encouraged me by saying "Keep on trying."

He was my best teacher in the profession. His capacious memory, his clear conception of various subjects and his natural simplicity charmed me more.

He was the most accessible editor one can imagine. He never said "I am busy, come later." Even when he was busy, mainly with writings, he used to say "Chatt kore bolely fele" (Please say quickly).

I consider that the weekly reporters' meetings were training courses for us. It was more helpful for me than some of the courses I attended in training institutes.

He used to scan the newspapers and point out the lapses a reporter committed. He discussed every aspect of a report at those meetings. Sometimes the discussion was punctuated by humorous anecdotes.

He always acknowledged the good performance of any particular reporter. It was one of the happiest days of my life when Ali Bhai told me, "You are now doing really fine."

He taught me that credibility and integrity are that most precious assets of a reporter. I lost my great teacher but I am trying to follow his path, his teachings.

Asiuzzaman

I cannot still imagine that a man of the stature of Ali Bhai actually wrote on me on two occasions. He has mentioned me twice in this "My World" column, which will remain as a kind of certificate for me forever. I am sorry that I did not say "thanks" to him when he was alive.

In February '92, *The Daily Star* printed a health feature on quack dentists written by me. It was nothing extraordinary. But after a couple of months, an English daily lifted the feature, without a permission from the Star.

When I told Ali Bhai about it he joked: "Send that paper a huge bill." Then he lowered his voice, "Or have you secretly joined them?"

Ali Bhai wrote a piece on the ethics of journalism in his "My World" column soon which, as I know, generated a desirable reaction in the paper that lifted my piece.

What I have learnt from this is a true leader inspires through appreciation, even if most insignificant person. He wins the hearts of others in making them feel great instead of telling them how great he is. I did not know Ali Bhai before joining the Star, and we had a generation gap to understand each other. Yet he won my heart as much with his wit, frankness, progressive attitude and wisdom as by inspiring and encouraging me. He was always accessible to us. Ali Bhai will always remain as my spiritual leader.

Sharier Khan

To me, he appeared as a perfect gentleman and a complete journalist, and I thought to myself he was the right kind of man I had been searching for to make my idol. At last my dream came true.

When he talked to me and had gone through a long conversation, he forgot that I just joined the paper after the completion of my education and knew nothing about the mysterious world of journalism. His pleasant and friendly manners removed my fear of a teacher. With a smiling face he told me about the art of this field, the responsibilities of a newsmen and the ways of serving the national better. I gazed admiringly at his shining eyes with a question in my mind — is every editor the same?

Time rolled on, I observed him closely at our regular meetings and gradually discovered in him all the traits of a professional editor. He criticised our headings, news selection and writing of a story, picture cropping, page make-up etc. With every criticism he gave us guidelines. When he spoke about an issue, his speech sparkled with wit and humour.

Shahzad Monju

It was like being unknown younger brothers of a vastly eminent elder brother — at once happy and proud. We were aware of the great and mastered in him. Indeed, he exuded a refinement and aristocracy of the highest order. Still, we were never over-awed. He was always so accessible, affable and tender.

We had him among us, the pity of it, for less than three years. He deluged our proof section with his classy writings — editorials, My World, At Home and Abroad, news commentaries and, occasionally, the unique ones for *Dhaka Day by Day*. How easily we would read them — a few going well over our head — for the pleasure of work. And how it shamed us to find our mistakes in print the next day, whereas the over-worked Editor gave us copy neatly typed and meticulously revised by himself. He was all praise for us though. The modest man never let slip a harsher word than "inadequacy" for all our mistakes. If we had difficulty — unpolished as we are — in uttering a word of respect, he would come first with "How do you do?" "Are you well?" or the like tender inquiries whenever we met him.

It was more than mere modesty — a genial kindness and an innate simplicity — that touched one and all in *The Daily Star* office. That is why we all melted in tears — tears sudden and gentle — for the good, good Editor. To take liberty with the words of the immortal lines. He is in his grave. Oh, the difference to us!

Sankar Pande

The first time I saw Mr Ali, he was sitting in the chair preparing to inaugurate his newspaper "The Daily Star". I didn't see him before, I never thought I would be introduced to a kind of journalist whose mind and heart were as clear as pure water.

My father sent me to someone who was also a journalist and arranged a job for me. But after seeing Mr Ali I felt as if I had left the place where I spent most terrifying moments of my life.

Really, Ali uncle — as I used to call him — was a man I needed to thank my fate for having met. When I first reached "The Daily Star" office, someone led me to near Ali uncle's chair, where all attending journalists kept a welcoming smile. From the beginning when I first set off for the Star office, through the past two years, specially I always found him lost in his work, and producing superb pieces of journalistic excellence, providing guidelines for both leaders and citizens.

This was his special quality that despite even being so preoccupied with his job, he always kept a smile whenever whoever he met. I didn't have enough opportunity to talk to him, although, I had in mind to do so very often. Now that he is no more, I long to get in touch with a kind of man like him once more.

Shamsur Rahman