

## WEEKEND MUSINGS

Mahfuz Anam

## Congratulations to the DU Debating Team

WEDNESDAY'S The Daily Star, along with several other newspapers, carried a picture of a Dhaka University debating team with Vice Chancellor Professor Emajuddin. The team became champion in an international debating competition in Brisbane, Australia. I would like to congratulate the team — consisting of two male and one female students — for bringing such exceptional honour to our country.

Given the deterioration of the standard of English education here, it is no small wonder that we continue to produce such exceptionally talented young men and women who not only hold their own, but even go to the extent of winning competitions in places like Australia. If I am not mistaken, I heard that some years back, another debating team from DU won a similar competition in Canada.

I must confess that the photograph triggered a whole range of nostalgic personal memory of my days, as a debater, first as a student of Notre Dame College, and later as that of Dhaka University. The reason I take this opportunity to talk about this subject is because I attach tremendous importance to the art of debating. The opportunities that now appears to be available to our students compared to what we got during sixties, are extraordinary. Our students must be encouraged to take full advantage of them. Opportunities make so much difference. I had my own modest success as a debater. But it all happened because the Lions Club happened to organise the then East Pakistan Inter-College Debating Competition during my college days, 1965-67. Then when I entered the University, quite suddenly, and pleasantly for me, the Esso Oil Company (the Pakistani branch of the global company) organised the All Pakistan Inter-University Debating Championship for three consecutive years, from 1967-68 to 1969-70; till the time of our Liberation War.

The All-Pakistan debates took me to Karachi and Lahore. That is how far I got. After Bangladesh, I went to Delhi to debate as a DU student. When I read about our University debating team going as far as Australia, I realised how much the world has become smaller, and how far more talented these young men and women must be compared to us. The chance of going to Karachi — the 1967-68 Inter-University Debating Championship hosted by the Karachi University — was such an exciting thing for me. I still vividly remember the day, within months of my joining the DU, when I was told by my provost (of Haji Md. Mohsin Hall), that the Vice Chancellor, Dr. M O Ghani, had asked me to see him. In those days being summoned by the VC was a big thing. I was quite anxious, and a bit frightened — for you seldom got summoned to the VC's office those days for anything pleasant.

As I entered his office, which was in his official residence at that time, Dr. Ghani announced, in his very deep and decisive voice, that he had nominated me for the All Pakistan Debate in Karachi, to be held two months hence. For the next two months I spent sleepless nights in the excitement of travelling on a plane all by myself (I had travelled earlier with my parents, but I was school boy then) and going for this challenging event.

I wonder how the students, whose pictures I saw in the newspaper two days back, felt about going to Australia? Were they as excited going to that beautiful continent of a country, as I felt going to only another city, of what was then my own country?

For whatever it is worth, I would like to say that the art of public speaking has been of immense help in my life. It gave me self-confidence and the courage to articulate my views in public. The more I got into debates, the more I learnt to speak clearly. And more I learnt to speak clearly, automatically I learnt to think clearly, reason in a logical, sequential manner. This helped me immensely in day to day activities. As I learnt to speak clearly, I realised that people listened when I tried to explain something. The reason I am saying all this is because I think debating and public speaking should become an integral part of the learning process in all our schools, colleges and Universities. I think our politicians would be less rhetorical if they had some training in debates. The school TV debates, all will agree, are usually a treat to watch. How beautifully our young boys and girls argue on issues and make their points. One serious flaw with our national TV debates is the dull subjects that they are usually given. All controversial things are a no-no for them.

In this regard one very positive development I have noticed. An independent debating movement, especially among a section of schools and colleges, has developed. There now exists debating clubs in all major schools and colleges in Dhaka, and there is I understand, a debating fraternity which spreads throughout, if not the whole of the country, at least the big cities of the land. Good luck, and God speed to them.

## Why do We have to Publicise Our Good Deeds?

ANOTHER point I want to raise. This was also triggered by a picture published in the papers on Wednesday. Splashing through the front pages of many national dailies was a picture of the Prime Minister handing over a cheque of Tk. 25,000 to the father of Shahid Noor Hossain, the hero of our democracy movement, the youngman who was shot down in central Dhaka, during the anti-autocracy struggle. Noor Hossain was a valiant youngman, totally taken over by his commitment to democracy, and who was shot dead while he marched with the slogan painted on his bare chest and back "Let autocracy die, and Democracy be freed."

It was extremely thoughtful of the Prime Minister to give the old and ailing father of Noor Hossain some financial assistance. There was another cheque of the same amount for the wife of a rickshaw-puller, who was killed in police firing, at the same time. Though, I think the amount of Tk. 25,000 is too meagre to do anything of long term importance. But the very fact that something was done, deserves to be praised, and I do congratulate the PM for her thoughtfulness. But that is not why I am mentioning this today. My point is about having the picture of the incident being splashed all over the front pages of newspapers. Why can't our kindness or generosity or expression of concern be more subtle. Wasn't it adding insult to the injury to have the ailing father of the dead Noor Hossain be seen throughout the length and breadth of the country taking money in the memory of dead son. To be with the PM is an honour. But to be there to get some dole, or a handout, is demeaning, especially for the father of a hero. How will the PM fend off criticism that she was trying to get some cheap, and proper mileage out of that gesture? More importantly, does she need it? I think not. A rethinking is called for, when handling such incidents. To honour a hero is our moral duty. To give assistance to the families who sacrifice their lives so that we can live better, is a greater moral duty. But to make a publicity event out of that, is morally reprehensible.

## Residents Take to Self Defence

FIRST the residents of Gulshan and Banani, and now those of Dhanmandi, have reportedly formed their own groups to look after the health of their respective locality. This is both a good sign, and also a matter of great concern. Good sign is that local community is awakening-up to the fact of their respective responsibilities in looking after the areas where they live. In all advanced countries, local communities exist who supervise, monitor and plan things that deal with their localities and dialogue with the authorities concerning them. It is only in countries like ours where we leave everything to the government or the municipality and wait with folded hands for things to happen. So the news that more and more people of respective localities are forming into groups or societies, to look after the affairs of particular areas, is indeed good news.

However, the bad news is the reason behind this new awakening. People are forming these societies, or coming into groups not because they are suddenly driven by a desire to beautify their localities, or to improve the civic amenities, but they want to protect their lives and property. This new trend is a reaction to the deteriorating law and order situation, and the dwindling level of personal and property security. Take Dhanmandi for example. The recent spate of criminal activities, especially that of mugging and snatching away of valuables from people going about their daily business has reached an intolerable level. As a result there is a serious security concern in all these streets.

However, should the residents perform such a role? Should they be allowed to?

## Bringing Good Cheer to Jamalpur Children

by Nancy Wong

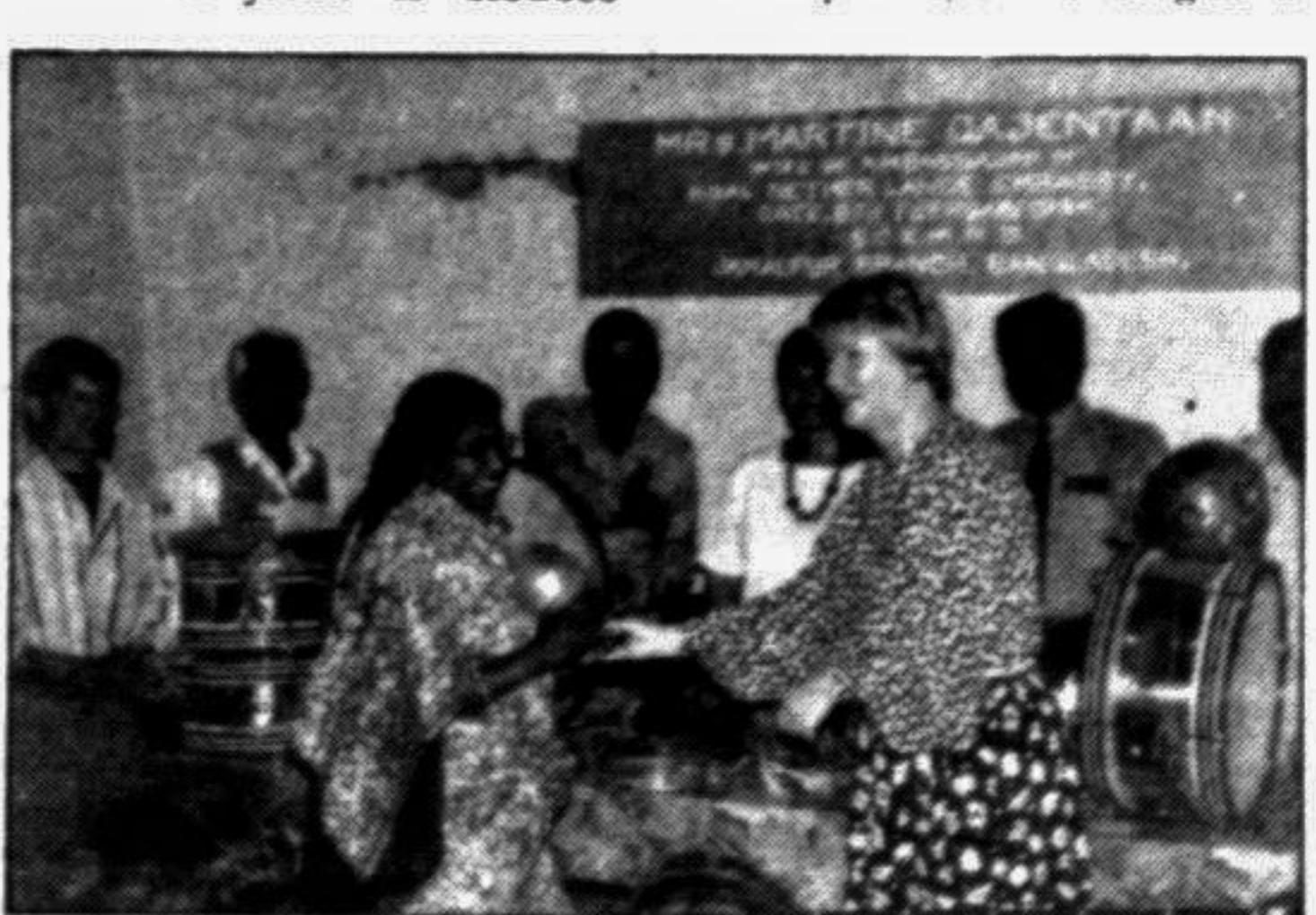
MARTINE Gajentaan, wife of the Royal Netherlands ambassador, recently visited the Jamalpur branch of the school managed by the Society for the Care and Education of Mentally Retarded, Bangladesh.

Despite a four-hour long drive which included some bumpy stretches, the group which consisted of herself, Maria Schutte (wife of the Counsellor at the Netherlands embassy) and W Ph Billy Barnaart, a Dutch physiotherapist and specialist for mentally handicapped children, felt the journey was well worth it. They were greeted joyfully by students of that school, who were delighted with this special visit as they were presented with musical instruments such as sets of drums, samba balls worth Taka 20,000. They also received teaching aids to enliven their learning process.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Mrs Gajentaan revealed that members of the Dutch community in Dhaka had raised Taka 150,000. This year in the annual bazaar of the Women's Volunteer Association. This is our only fund raising project of the year and it was really

heartening to get so much response from our compatriots living and working here," she said.

A major Dutch garments buyer donated the bulk of apparel which ranged from T-shirts to jeans to blouses



which were snapped up by eager visitors to the bazaar. About twenty companies and consultant agencies involved in development work contributed cash and Dutch souvenirs to the fund raising drive.

As music has the magical

quality which can soothe and cheer up sad spirits, Billy Barnaart regards musical instruments as essential tools in therapy for the mentally handicapped.

To show their appreciation, students of the SCEMRB, Jamalpur branch, staged a



cultural show for their distinguished guests.

A Dutch family, the Da Costas, from the Netherlands embassy, joined in cheering up the students by giving the school a TV and VCR set.

"I N Chile the ideas of film-makers get assassinated. The film-makers are in jail there. It is the same in Argentina and Bolivia."

The words belong to the distinguished Chilean director, Miguel Littin, and were said in 1979 at the Delhi International film festival where he served as a member of the jury. Littin, who crossed fifty recently, would know what he was talking about.

Military rule in Chile and Argentina has ended and elections have been held, but democracy and the rule of law breathe an uncertain life in both the countries. The generals who killed thousands of dissenters in either country in the name of 'God, nation and family', allowed elections to be held on the condition that they would not be brought to trial.

A process of 'atonement' that begins with such a black compromise can never be a real or long-lasting one. In effect, Littin's words are still true.

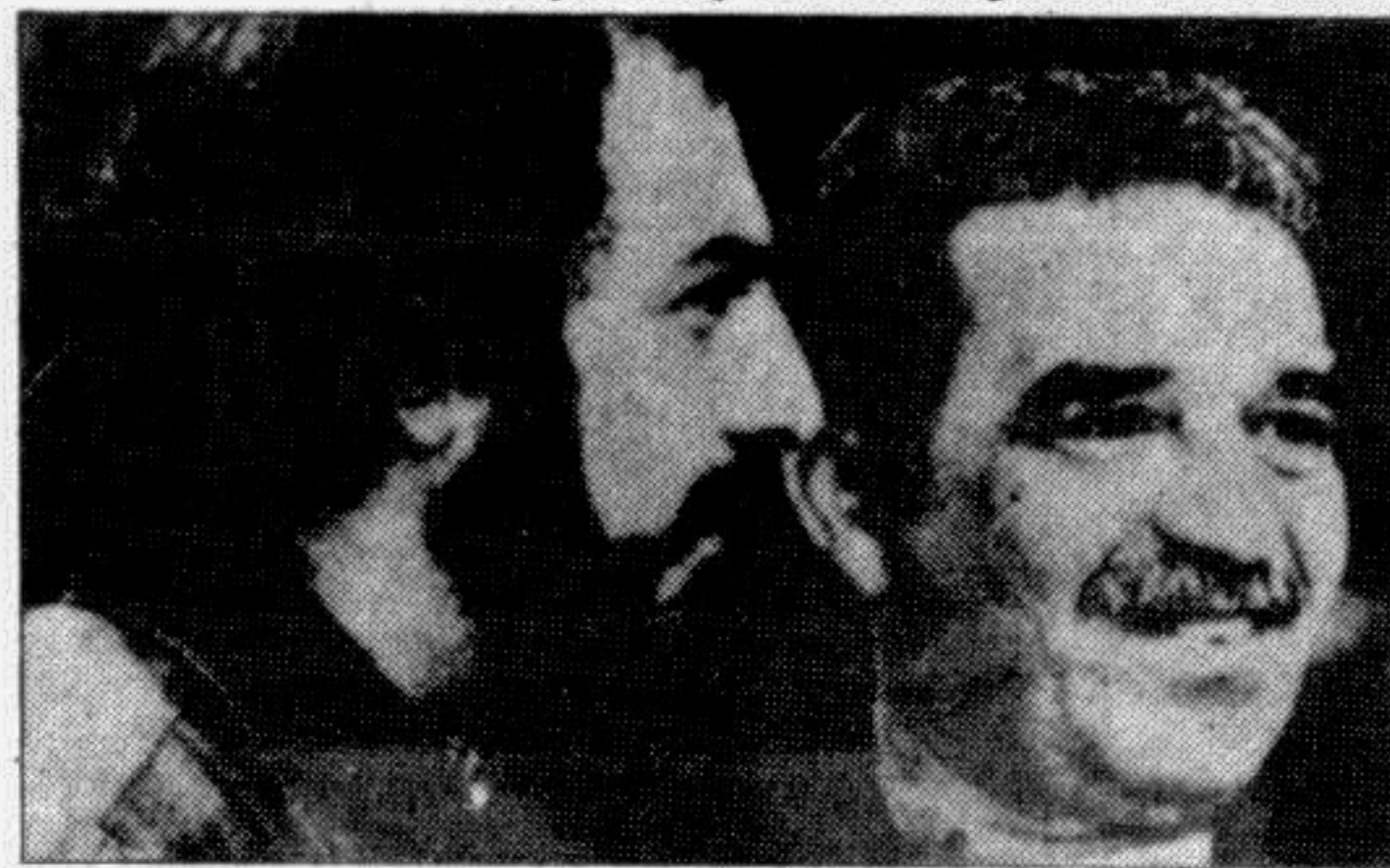
After almost two decades of exile divided between Mexico City and Barcelona, Littin is back in his country, but he looks back at the years he has left behind with sadness and nostalgia.

Born in the province of Palmyra, Littin's early interest in the theatre led him to take drama courses at the University of Santiago. But his career was destined to be in the cinema. He achieved international renown in 1969 with his very first feature film, *El Chacal de Nahuelito* (The Jackal of Nahuelito). Unfortunately this is the only film by Littin which is available to Indian viewers interested in Latin American cinema of the sixties and the seventies, a period of revolutionary ardour in cinema which witnessed the birth and growth of other eminent artists like Tomas Alea, Glauber Rocha, Fernando Solanas and Jorge Sanjines. Each a blazing torch from a continent in violent and tragic ferment, their films traced the history, setbacks and successes of popular upheavals against social tyrannies and gross economic disparities.

*El Chacal* is an incisive criticism of social conditions in Latin America. Littin made the film with the avowed intention of exposing the fascist nature of the social system in his country. The 'jackal' referred to in the title of the film is an unlettered, poor and emotionally crippled young man who kills his common law wife and her five children in a fit of drunken fury. The incident actually

## Witness to a Coup

Vidyarthi Chatterjee writes from Calcutta



Miguel Littin with Gabriel Garcia Marquez (above) and Pablo Neruda (right)

happened in the backward interior of the country where people are in the habit of worsening their poverty by drowning themselves in alcohol.

The inadvertent murderer was soon enough tracked down, given his first hair-cut, his first decent meals and his first lessons in the Spanish alphabet under the care of a chaplain — and then sentenced to death and shot. There is an inescapable refrain of tragic irony in the way the man's life is snuffed out. The director accuses the system that produces people like the so-called 'jackal' who are denied basic opportunities to grow into physically and emotionally balanced human beings.

The popularity and commercial success of *El Chacal* caused the traditional battle lines between the conservatives, aided by the church and the military, and the socialists, who drew their strength mainly from the working class and the youth, to be drawn more clearly. The film challenged the church's teachings of morality as they affected the lives of people like *El Chacal*. It was a time of great stress and strife in Chile when the forces of change were locked in battle with the advocates of a fossilised tradition.

Littin was working as a director for Chilean TV when in 1970, the Popular Unity Government of President Salvador Allende Gossens appointed him head of the national film production company, Chile Films. In 1971, Littin made a short film about Allende, not to glorify the man

but to popularise the high ideals he epitomised as against the inhumanity of the big multinationals acting in collusion with their cronies in the defence forces, the media and the government. The film on Allende was followed a year later by *La Tierra Prometida*, which won the prestigious Sadoul Prize in France. But Littin's rising success graph was to be rudely interrupted by the most tragic event to befall modern Chile.

After the assassination of President Allende in the CIA-led coup of 1973 and the fall of his popularly elected government, Littin had to flee to Mexico. In 1975 he directed *La Actas de Marussia*, which was Mexico's entry in competition at Cannes that year. Two years later, he adapted the novel, *El Recurso de Metodo*, by the well-known Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier who combined the strength of his European origins with a literary and cultural vision that embraced the entire Latin American continent. Made as a Mexican-Cuban-French co-production, the film competed at Cannes in 1978 and, later, was screened in the information section of the San Sebastian film festival in Spain, where Littin was also a member of the jury.

Soon after, Littin directed *La Viuda Montiel*, based on a story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, with whom he was to write a book years later on the 1973 coup and the two imperishable figures associated with it, Salvador Allende and the poet, Pablo Neruda.

Neruda did not long survive

Allende who was shot at least thirteen times by the military after his refusal to resign, come what may. In fact, just twelve days after the overthrow of the Popular Unity Government and the assassination of the first freely elected Marxist head of State, the poet died in Santiago. He had been suffering from chronic leukemia and the doctors had given him some more time to live, but brief on hearing of the coup and the murder of the President, speedily worsened his condition. Augusto Pinochet Duarte's vandals in uniform ransacked the poet's houses in Valparaiso and Santiago, and made bonfires of his books and manuscripts.

*Clandestine in Chile* relates the events of the coup and what happened to the country and its people thereafter. Written by Marquez, the slim but stupendous volume records with a proud sadness the memories and experiences of Littin, as told to the Nobel Laureate.

Littin escaped death at the hands of the generals by a hair's breadth: many of his friends and associates were not as lucky. Visiting his country incognito (as a prosperous Uruguayan businessman) many years later, when the rule of the generals was still in force, Littin discovered that two names were forever emblazoned on the hearts of the Chilean people, from the peasant to the philosopher: Allende and Neruda, "two of the dead who never die."

A woman was taken aside by the director and asked whether she had been an

Allendista, meaning a follower or supporter of the late President. She reacted quickly: "Not had been, am." And removing a figure of the Virgin Mary from the house, revealed a photograph of Allende behind it. There are other stories and anecdotes in the book that serve to confirm, if confirmation is necessary, that the ideas and example of Salvador Allende were, if anything, strengthened and perpetuated by Pinochet and the junta.

Littin also visited Neruda's home at Isla Negra, sealed and closed to visitors by the military. Taking photographs was strictly prohibited. Littin found that the poet's home had become a place of pilgrimage to generations of men and women in love who loved their country no less. On the barred shutters and on wooden planks used to seal the house, there were thousands of signatures of love and gratitude, often scrambled over each other for want of space. Most of them were variations on the same theme: Juan and Rosa love each other through Pablo. Thank you, Pablo, for teaching us love. We want to love as much as you loved... Generals: Love never dies, Allende and Neruda live. One minute of darkness will not make us blind.

Speaking to the literary editor of *India Today* some years ago, the poet Dom Moraes said that rare is the poet who can fashion popular poetry out of his or her avowed political commitments — or words to that effect. Neruda, said Moraes, was such a rare poet who could capture the imagination of his people and set them dancing on city streets. "Under the volcanoes, beside the snow-capped mountains, among the huge lakes, the fragrant, the silent, the tangled Chilean forest.... I have come out of that landscape, that mud, that silence, to roam, to go singing through the world...."

Miguel Littin and other artists like him should not allow the world to forget the struggle, the sacrifice and the vision of solidarity that ennobled the lives of folk heroes like Allende and Neruda. This world is the richer for the speeches that Allende gave, the verses that Neruda wrote and the films that Littin and Rocha and Sanjines directed. Surely, a comradely salute to them would not be too much to ask on the twentieth anniversary of the unforgivable coup of 1973?

## Letter Writers in Historical Perspective

by Anwarul Afzal

words "the Court", the head of her secret state council, Lord Granville, was unhappy: Under no circumstances should a monarch write a letter to the Editor. In 1867, Charles Dickens wrote to the paper to complain about the "wild lurching" of the train between Leicester and Bedford. The famous novelist asked the newspaper "to warn" railway clients about this stretch.

With their penchant for self-deprecating irony and absurd humour, British journalists provide skilled models for their readers. And like the professionals, says Matthew Hoffman, letters editor at *The Independent*, the readers also enjoy their "fun" even if it is in the Monty Python class.

A parish priest, Ian Graham-Orlebar, for example, turned to *The Times* for help with an unusual problem. He had named his old riding horse "Ministry". The reason: while he was out for a ride, parishioners who came by looking for him could be told,

and quite honestly, that he was "exercising his Ministry". What, he asked *The Times*, should he call his new horse?

Some 350 proposals poured in, including names like Liturgy and Mercy. Graham Orlebar finally settled on Sabbath, allowing his assistant to tell people, of course, that he was "one Sabbath".

In *The Daily Telegraph*, readers debate such hot topics as what to do about the spread from the Continent of that horrid habit known as 'social kissing', whose unpleasant side effects could include the "crashing together of eyeballs". Proposed one reader: "Remove eyeglasses, exchange a sort of fencers' salute kiss."

And now *The Times* — 206 years after printing its first letter — has found a new use for its readers' offerings. Now it posts copies of the letters in the Tube to attract publicity.

Underground travellers can now read (as they travel along in the widely lurching cars)

what his compatriots have been saying on such burning issues as: "Sir, if cigarettes kill, why are they included in the cost-of-living index?"

Of late in the famous daily the *Bangkok Post*, on 23.11.1992, the gist of one of the letters of Mr O H Kabir from Bangladesh was highlighted at the page titled "World News" dealing in international news. It was used as a news item with the title "Perot for B'desh post?" having it published prominently with the photographs of President-elect Bill Clinton (left), Vice president-elect Al Gore (centre) and transition director Warren Christopher who were shown walking through the leaf covered grounds of the governor's mansion in Little Rock, Arkansas. In his letter, Mr O H Kabir urged upon President-elect Bill Clinton to appoint Texan billionaire and independent candidate Ross Perot as US Ambassador to Bangladesh. Extracts from his letter were used in the news item.

I could still remember that Indian Civil Servants like Messrs Hasan Torab Ali, M A Sobhan, Altaf Ghauhar while they were serving at Central Secretariat responded personally to my father's letters to the Editor by writing to him with the earnest desire to know in more details the problems and also seeking suggestions. Alas! at present it is a dream.

Last but not the least, many of readers appear to be quite allergic to letters writers. I hope henceforth it would not be so.

## Abul Kalam Shamsuddin

Continued from page 10

He was a great patriot throughout his life and took part in the anti-British independence movement ever since his student life. At the call of Swadeshi Movement he gave up his studies in the Ripon College in 1919. Although many of his friends later on went back to take degree from British established college but Abul Kalam Shamsuddin did never go back in 1952 he resigned his provincial Assembly membership in protest against police firing on Bengali language supporters. It was he who inaugurated the first ever Shaheed Minar erected in honour of the language martyrs of 1952 which was later on demolished by the police. He was decorated twice by the then Pakistan Government and these awards he renounced during 1969 mass upsurge in protest against Government repression.

Although he had strong views on different issues and never compromised on principles for fear or favour, he was a man who could never bear malice against anybody. A man of head and heart of the standing of Abul Kalam Shamsuddin is a rare phenomenon in our society today. On the occasion of his fifteen death anniversary, now we wish he never died. May his soul rest in peace.

invitation of King Fahd himself gave many diehard Muslims in the kingdom an opportunity to be critical though not audibly. Many considered the footsteps of non-believers on the holy soil as sacrilege.

The spectre of 'democracy' hovering over the Middle East and Arab countries continues to keep the kings, and sultans in abject apprehensions. It must happen as long as people's participation in the governance in bigger dimension and on democratic footing is not meaning-

fully ensured.

By the time the writer was concluding it transpired from a news item that the first ever time in their history in sixty years the Saudi Monarch had a 60-member Majlis-e-Surah comprising people belonging to ordinary citizenry to counsel the King in all matters of the government. It is not though very clear as to what actual weight they would carry, but is a good omen for which King Fahd's wisdom and farsightedness can obviously be praised.



American troops in Saudi Arabia during Gulf War

## Saudi Arabia

Continued from page 9

their dislike about such higgling, although they too are capable of asking for exorbitant prices quite often. And once they agree at a reduced price while you as a buyer continue to hesitate and come out to have a second thought only to return to get the item, you would not be surprised if the salesman asks for double the price that was settled a few minutes earlier. Such may be an overt expression of their disgust with the alien customer. He does not care if such stance turns out to be uncouth and uncharitable. You have no other choice but to swallow the bitter pill in consternation and sullen silence.

Such discriminating behaviour may not be representative of Saudi hospitality but it is the stark reality in Saudi business places. And the 'miskins' from Bangladesh are the most normal casualties to such queer behaviour. Coming out without the buying after settlement of price is considered as an offence by the shop-keepers.

Language barrier aside, it may be very difficult to under-

stand Saudi society, its people, its custom and cultural leanings; very few people would be interested to have any discourse with foreigners except on business. In Saudi Arabia, foreigners are isolated communities living in their own little island. A sort of curtain appears to have been drawn between the two.

And yet, there are some Saudis, may be very small in number, who detest such socio-political segregation. There has been an apparent change in their attitude. Attitudinal transformation within some section of the people is palpable. For being the custodian of the Holy Kaaba and all other places of religious importance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the King enjoys absolute impunity to be respected by all and sundry. That has been the tradition for long and except for the abortive coup in 1984, there has not been any known instance of public criticism of the monarch or the system itself. But the Gulf War in 1990 and the consequent landing of the American military forces in Saudi Arabia at the express