

Two Books by S M Ali

Through the Eyes of a Special Kind of Observer

ON Sunday two books by S M Ali are slated to be launched in a Dhaka publication ceremony. The books — one a re-issues of Mr Ali's musings on the problems facing Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the first year of his triumphal return from a Pindi jail after the liberation of Bangladesh and the other a political novel setting forth the resolves and frustrations of all who wanted to shape this country in a way reflecting the ideals for which the Liberation War was fought — have generated significant pre-publication interest. This is due no doubt to Mr S M Ali's great stature as a journalist of high integrity and rare insight but also because of his diction that made his columns and leaders so popular with the discriminating readers of this nation. The publishers, the redoubtable UPL, have also no mean role in engendering readership appeal of these volumes. And to them goes the credit of first publishing Mr Ali's novel Rainbow Over Padma.

Lucidity and eminent readability crown the many qualities of these two books. At the very outset of his journalistic tome, *After the Dark Night*, truth comes to him in a flash that the freedom-fighter he was talking to in the brief pre-boarding time at the Dhaka airport was an insider and as such, was less forthcoming than Ali wanted him to be — and that he, Ali, was an outsider. But he was a special kind of outsider, returning to his provenance to found an eminent daily newspaper and to die. A very special kind of outsider haunted for two decades by that freedom fighter's pose — does Bangladesh stand a chance — and sharing in the forced optimism and unavoidable frustrations of all who have Bangladesh in their sinews. Following we print excerpts from the opening chapters of the two books which should serve as hermeneutic studies allowing important looks into the shaping realities of Bangladesh.

from *After the Dark Night*

"Our armed struggle has ended. We will have to turn the independence movement into a struggle for building our country. The struggle for reconstruction is more difficult than struggle for freedom."

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, January 30, 1972

FOR THE RELATIVELY quiet international wing of Dhaka airport, Friday mornings are different. The usual crowd of passengers is checking in for the 30 minute flight to Calcutta; another group has just flown in from the Indian city and is slowly making its way out through the main exit. Among the outgoing passengers are people whose faces show unmistakable signs of weariness, whose impatient gestures betray a restless desire to get away as quickly as possible. This is understandable since flights to and from Calcutta often run late. In contrast, the incoming Indians and other foreigners, some visiting Bangladesh for the first time since liberation, smile broadly, some a little nervously, desperately trying to be pleasant, even in the midst of a general confusion prevailing in the lobby. If they are a little shaken by the porter raising his price for the service supposed to be free, or by the loud cries of the street beggars, they somehow manage to hide their reactions behind faint smiles.

On Fridays, the pace is a little more hectic. Around eleven in the morning, two international flights pass through Dhaka. A regional Asian airline, originating in Bangkok, touches down in the capital of Bangladesh and, an hour later, takes off for New Delhi; many of its passengers carry booking for onward connections to the Middle East and Europe. The other international flight arrives from the Middle East and leaves on the direct route to the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur.

Nothing extra ordinary about these flights, unless one sees them, as I did on a Friday morning last May, as useful links which connected Bangladesh with the outside world. Purely commercial operation, these flights gave the Bengalis the much needed psychological boost, a sense of belonging to the rest of the world from which they had been cut off for so long. By now, and increasing number of international airlines have learnt to regard Dhaka as a convenient stopover in their regional network in South Asia. But in May, less than six months after liberation, the BOAC flight direct from Dhaka to Kuala Lumpur, or a Thai flight direct from Bangkok to Dhaka — neither touched Calcutta — provided a kind of symbolic expression to the emergence of Bangladesh as a new sovereign state in Asia, the eighth most populous country in the world.

ON THE SECOND Friday last May, when I was at the airport to take the BOAC flight to Kuala Lumpur, I had other things on mind.

A Bengali by birth — and now a citizen of Bangladesh — I have come home three months earlier, on an assignment from a South East

Asian regional Sunday newspaper. But I have the option to stay on, to join a local paper or to launch a new one. I had stayed abroad continuously for 10 years, mostly in South East Asia, and it was time to 'settle down' as my elders said, or as my friends put it more flatteringly, to contribute my share to the progress of my homeland. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman the Prime Minister and the leader of the new nation, had been very pleasant too, as he always is to his old friends and acquaintances, when I had met him socially within a week of my arrival in February. "You are not going back. Are you? I would like you to stay here..." he had said, but I had given no reply. For all I know, Sheikh Mujibur may be under the impression that I am still somewhere inside Bangladesh and doing something worthwhile for the new republic.

At the end of three months, there was still no plan and no decision. All I knew was that a book on Bangladesh was slowly taking shape in my mind and that I wanted to go back to Singapore to write it. Other things, including starting a newspaper in Bangladesh, could wait.

"The oarsman is holding fast. The boat will be tossed and turned by the waves. But I want to assure you that the oarsman will hold fast and bring the boat to its safe destination."

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, February, 1972

BANGLADESH, the state born in December 1971, has already completed the first year of its independence. It was an occasion for quiet satisfaction, but not for ecstasy, for 75 million people in this young nation. They have learnt that, unlike in their battle for freedom a year ago, they have no shortcuts to national reconstruction, progress or even political stability. They have learnt not to look for miracles and not to trust their own proverbial good fortune. Instead, through trials and errors which involved the life of the entire people, they have developed a quiet sense of realism, an unemotional approach which is as much influenced by disillusionment as it is shaped by intangible hopes and aspirations. In this sense, the people of Bangladesh have grown a little more mature and also more confident of their place in this turbulent age.

For the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, it had been a bad year. It inherited almost a hopeless situation, with a host of intractable problems whose solutions called for extraordinary zeal, purposeful leadership at all levels, co-ordinated planning and a high degree of administrative efficiency. But at the start of her long journey towards stability and progress, Bangladesh did not possess any of these assets. Even the Sheikh's own charisma and his own fantastic capacity for hard work, his obvious sincerity and his undoubted patriotism proved poor substitutes for what the country, and the leadership, lacked. Thus, much time was lost, and many opportunities thrown away before the government could even identify the problems facing the new

state, come to grips with the tasks of economic planning or cope with the challenges of creating national cohesiveness and defining its ideals and goals in meaningful terms.

Yet, it is anything but a story of failure. Bangladesh has survived, which is more than many cynics had predicted, and it has survived without slipping into anarchy. The drift has been halted, without any bloodbath; the crisis of confidence is much less pronounced today than before.

from *Rainbow over Padma*

THE curtain was swaying in the early morning breeze of Dhaka winter. Slowly waking up from a deep, dreamless sleep, Rafique Anwar looked through the half-opened window at the clear blue sky. He felt a little chilly, but he did not mind. He pulled the blanket over himself and wondered if he should go back to sleep again. That would be one way of enjoying the cold season, the pathetically short winter, which everyone in Dhaka, a city of four million people, looked forward to, through the long sweltering summer and the fury of monsoon. There was very little in life that people of Dhaka or, for that matter, of Bangladesh could count as blessings. The winter provided a respite.

The bedroom in Rafique's apartment, on the second floor of a newly-built residential building, overlooked a lawn where a huge banyan tree, older than the building itself, faced the threat of being chopped down by the landlord. It was not clear what he had against the tree. He would simply say, "It does not belong here." Now, a "Save the Tree" campaign, launched by some tenants and supported by Rafique, had won a reprieve for the poor old banyan tree, a reprieve which might turn out to be just as short as the Dhaka winter.

The apartment block was on a narrow lane that meandered its way beside a lake, a major landmark — even some kind of a scenic attraction — of the area, before joining the main road pompously called Gulshan Avenue. It was a busy thoroughfare, filled, throughout the day and much of the night, with hundreds of bicycle rickshaws, countless pedestrians, trucks, buses and cars. Rafique often wondered what it had in common with wide tree-lined avenues in other Asian cities. In fact, he wondered about lots of things about life in Dhaka. But these days, he was no longer particularly interested in organising his thoughts or in pursuing any of them to their logical conclusion, especially when it involved a hard decision. It did not matter much, not really.

One thing that did matter was that the noise from Gulshan Avenue did not reach the apartment which, throughout the day, remained quiet, like a basement flat in any big city in Europe. Rafique thought it suited him perfectly well. He could now pay all his attention to his life-long passion, writing. He was not quite sure at what stage in his career he had developed this passion. Maybe it was when he had stopped working for newspapers

and had, almost at the same time, found non-journalistic writing a challenge he could not handle with much confidence. Now, his quiet apartment in Dhaka, with a book-lined study and a view of the banyan tree, offered him the last chance.

It could indeed be the last chance. Rafique was not just past fifty-five, and a long-suffering victim of arthritis which had slowed him down. His western-educated Chinese doctor in Kuala Lumpur, whose prescription he still followed, had assured him a year ago, that his case was not particularly serious. Dr. Khoo, which was his name, had put it at stage two on a scale of ten, and had told him that it might not necessarily get worse. Rafique found this vaguely reassuring, but the ailment still affected him, more psychologically than physically, making him a little nervous about accepting any serious work commitment, physical activity or sometimes even an invitation to dinner which, in Dhaka often meant staying out until midnight.

Rafique was slowly turning into a recluse.

There had never been one like this before.

It was the Friday "open house" breakfast at the Anwars, just three days after the polling. Some forty Alliance members and close associates had turned up, some for the first time, many of them carrying the day's copy of the Chronicle. Almost the whole front page of the paper was taken up by the result of the election, with its detailed breakdown spread over two inside pages. It was all official, released by the Election Commissioner on Thursday night.

So, it was not just the unprecedented size of the attendance that made this particular breakfast party so different from all the others. It was the mood, part cheerful and part solemn, buoyant without being ebullient, that gave the party its own distinctive character. Above all, there was a sense of relief felt by all, after days and weeks of tension, anticipation, expectation.

The Alliance had won 60 seats, out of 120 it had contested.

So, when Sheila Sen came up to Rafique and asked for his interpretation of the result, the Alliance leader simply said, "If you ask me if the glass is half empty or half full, I will say, it is half full." Then, he gave her a warm smile, patted her on the cheek and added, "My sincerest congratulations to you, Sheila."

Sheila was among the sixty who had won. Others were all those candidates whose victories had been predicted by both Mahmood and Rafique during their quiet lunch on Thursday and, what the Alliance leaders did not know, also by President Morshed when he had met Rezaul Hossain the same night.

Three had won landslide victories. They were Munshi Abdul Karim, Mansur Ahmed and Kamal Abbasi. "Mohammad Yakub and Mohammad Shauem had got in from two constituencies at Sylhet."

and poetry criticisms; particularly notable is his work on Iqbal, the Urdu poet. With a detailed introduction, he brought out a brilliant edition of *Alaol's Padmavati* in 1950. Then, in 1953, he brought out his famous *Bangla Shahittiyer Katha* (Stories of Bengali Literature-Part I) which anthologized as many as 17 articles/essays on old Bengali. In Part II, essays on the political background to medieval Bengali literature and on the trends and tendencies in Bengali literature were included. In fact, one can justly say that it was Muhammad Shahidullah who notably facilitated our access and exposure to old and middle Bengali, encouraging further research and investigation.

One must also speak at this point of Shahidullah's *Vidyapati Shatak*, rich with an unusual biographical note on the poet and a lucid but penetrating commentary on Malthill grammar, let alone verse-translations of Vidyapati's mellifluous, vibrant lyrics, capturing now and then kirtanic cadences and blood-throbbing beats. Shahidullah's work on yet another lyric poet, Chandi Das, is equally remarkable. And, of course, his interest in the history of the Bengali language, as indicated earlier, was obvious — perhaps most tellingly exemplified in his famous work called *Bangla Bhashar Itibritttya*. He also exhibited his ardent interest in dictionary, encyclopaedia and grammar, as he was equally deeply interested in writing textbooks for primary school students. This is, in fact, an aspect of Shahidullah which brings him quite close to Vidyasagar, both of whom took an active interest in primary education with the objective of secularizing it. This secularizing of the syllabi, be it noted, constituted one of the significant cultural projects undertaken by Shahidullah, and the kind of

Tele View

by Kaiser Parvez Ali

TELE-serial "Eetekhata" last week had a film hero Salman Shah as a visitor. Chowdhury's grandson comes from the United Kingdom to visit his mother and grandfather. He finds the village a very interesting place to pass his leisure, he visits different areas of the village and finds new friends including the two eunuchs who whenever they met Salman sang popular Hindi songs in Bengali. He also visited the striking handloom workers and discussed various problems related to their welfare. He also displayed his intentions to join them and work with them. His intentions came as a shock to his friends, grandfather and mother, but he wanted to work on equal basis with them despite being the grandson of a landlord. The striking workers were bought by another landlord called Bepari, who convinced them to join his production. But the cold and hot war continues between the workers and Bepari. Meanwhile Yorkshire returned spoke, sophisticated, innocent looking hero (Salman Shah) has attracted more televiewers. Let us see if the community allows him to work with them, who wishes to stay back permanently in Bangladesh.

"Eetekhata" has more problems in the handloom workers colony. The workers assault Bepari and some of the workers are arrested and taken to jail. The work stoppage in the handloom industry affects the workers mentally, they are depressed having nothing to do. Dadu (Abul Khair) wanders and goes to his married daughter's house. The hero (Salman Shah) interested as ever convinces one worker (Shumi Kaiser) to allow him to work in her house in the handloom machine. What is not liked by her male friend and he asks Salman to leave the workers' colony. Salman refuses and it is here the episode ends. Let us see, in the next episode, if the hero can work shoulder to shoulder with the handloom workers. His very however, is providing sort of film glamour to the serial.

BTV's weekly drama "Naam Prokashhe Onnichhuck" was entertaining with Pijush and Tarana in leads roles. The story begins as after being married for only six months their conjugal life appears to go through a crisis period. Ragib's (Pijush) life becomes miserable as his habits are now being shaped on the whims of his wife Renee (Tarana). Whatever she feels 'desirable' she wants her husband to do, which is not at all liked by Ragib since as a bachelor he was independent and could do whatever he wanted to do. He starts to complain about his problems to his close friend Shafiq and his wife Shanu. Renee also discusses her problems with Shanu. Meanwhile, one day Ragib has a surprise visitor in his office — a con-

tractor who wants him to pass his not-so-actual bills. Ragib being an honest man refuses to comply with and the contractor warns him. From the moment the contractor leaves, Ragib begins to receive anonymous telephone calls from a female. Ragib thinks the call is from a junior officer in his office, as whenever the call is made the woman is found talking on phone what he can see through the glass partition. The call then begins to come to his residence. His wife begins to suspect him of having an affair with another woman. To keep away his wife from receiving the calls when he is at home, he begins to take his wife out and be closer to her. Renee's attitude to her husband also changes and she does not force him to do whatever she wants but suggests moderations. In the end, the junior officer who was suspected as the phone caller gets married, leaving Ragib wandering who the caller was. He suspects the contractor was involved in it but later finds that his friend's wife Shanu did this to act as a buffer so that Ragib does not fall for any other girl, and eventually get closer to his wife Renee. The sort of comedy-cum-melodrama, could keep a large number of viewers glued their TV sets.

BTV serial "Tathapee" had most of its happenings this time on the kidnapping of honest custom officer Raihan Sobhan's son Shubo. The kidnappers inflict torture on him and want him to take leave for three months so that the smuggled goods can enter the country through airport. Raihan Sobhan does not yield to the pressure and the smugglers, after some time, make Shubo forcefully drug addicted and drop him at a remote area. The search team finds him and informs Raihan. Everyone close to Shubo is relieved to hear he is safe but the immediate information on his addiction leads to concerns. Shubo is shifted to rehabilitation centre and the treatment on drug addiction commences. The doctor of the clinic Shubo was sent was his girl friend's father Mumtazuddin. He is also a close friend of Raihan. A few other drug addict patients were shown in the clinic. So last week's episode dealt with the menace of drug addiction and the rehabilitation part with a message on what drug addiction can lead to.

A documentary film on World Population Day telecast on Monday night after the Bengali news was really worth viewing. It had interviews of eminent personalities on population around the globe, good footage on population control and, to make it more attractive and interesting, it had added statements from film actress Moushumi and popular singer Sabina Yasmin on population.

From a Fortress to the Most Beautiful Museum in the World

The Epic of the Louvre

by Pascale Teinac



ALL the French sovereigns have left their mark on it, in a series of ambitious architectural undertakings and a continual alternation between splendour and tragedy.

The Louvre saw Francois I receive the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V with great ceremony, and Henri IV marry Marie de Medici and die after being stabbed by Ravaillac. It witnessed the Protestants being massacred on the night of Saint-Bartholomew in 1572, young Louis XIII riding a camel, Moliere presenting his triumphant comedies and Napoleon marrying again in 1810 to Marie-Louise of Habsburg, after repudiating Josephine and turning out the craftsmen who occupied the buildings.

The Louvre came into being

at the end of the 11th century, when King Philippe-Auguste, leaving on a crusade with his brother-in-law the King of England, Richard the Lionheart, ordered that, for the safety of his throne, "the city of Paris be surrounded by a perfect wall, fitted with good towers and gates."

The fortress of the Louvre was built at that time with, in its centre, a superb tower whose imposing remains were uncovered in 1984-1985 and can be seen in the basement of a museum specially designed to enable people to visit them.

Why was this citadel called the "Louvre"? Nobody is quite sure. The name could come from the Latin "lupara" a place frequented by wolves, or from "lauer" a Saxon word meaning "a small fort".

Charles V (1354-1380), the

kind who loved books and literature, turned the medieval fortress into a royal residence and installed his library and beautiful illuminated manuscripts there.

But, in the following century and a half, the kings of France preferred the charms of the Chateaux on the Loire. In the 16th century, however, Francois I gave a sumptuous reception for the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. He had the tower razed and had the architect Pierre Lescot build "a large Renaissance mansion" with luxury apartments. It was he who started the museum's collections but the antiques and paintings that he acquired (including the Mona Lisa) are on exhibition in the Chateau de Fontainebleau.

— N' Actualite en France

Muhammad Shahidullah

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daughter of Muhammad Mustakim who lived in a village adjacent to Shahidullah's. Now, Shahidullah wanted to pursue his graduate studies in both Sanskrit and Law. But, Pundit Sattayabrata Samsarami declined to teach the Vedas to a non-Hindu student like Shahidullah who, nevertheless, kept his passion and insistence unflagging. He approached Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, the then Vice-chancellor of Calcutta University; but, the unyielding pundit went onto turn a deaf ear to even the Vice-chancellor's recommendation. Sir Mukherjee, then, suggested Shahidullah that he should get admitted into the newly established department of Comparative Philology. Shahidullah acted accordingly, and in 1912, he alone took the MA degree in Comparative Philology. He also took the BL degree in 1914, and came back to Basurhat to practise law. But, legal practice somehow did not prove to be his appropriate *metier*, and later on, at Sir Ashutosh's request, he joined Calcutta University as a research assistant to Ramtanu Lahiri Professor Dineshchandra Sen.

When the University of Dhaka was founded in 1921, Muhammad Shahidullah joined the Department of Sanskrit and Bengali as its first and only lecturer. In 1926, he went to Paris for research on "Saraha" — one of the 84 *Mahasiddhas* of Tibetan Buddhism. He obtained his doctorate from Paris University and also a diploma in Phonology. Besides consolidating and strengthening his grasp of the Vedic, Sanskrit and Prakrit languages, Shahidullah, at this time, also mastered the Persian and Tibetan languages. On his return from Paris in 1928, he

again joined Dhaka University. When the Department of Bengali was separated independently from Sanskrit, he took the responsibility as Head of the Department of Bengali in 1937. Since then, his teaching career had not only continued uninterrupted, but it had been varied too: he worked as Principal of Azizul Huq College in Bogra; and after the partition of India, he rejoined, despite his formal retirement, the Bengali Department as its supernumerary professor. He also taught for quite sometime at Rajshahi University. Muhammad Shahidullah died on July 13, 1969.

Given the polymathic range and the catholic breadth of his concentration and work, it is simply difficult to touch upon all the areas and spaces of interests Shahidullah had traversed with the zeal and enthusiasm of a genuine humanist. Renaissance scholar, commanding *trivium* and *quadrivium* at his fingertip. However, what we can possibly do here is touch upon only a few areas crucial to Shahidullah's work.

Shahidullah wrote and edited numerous books. His first book, a volume of essays called *Bhasha O Shahittiya* (Language and Literature), was published in 1939. And with the publication of this book, Shahidullah was able to capture the attention and admiration of readers and critics alike. Rabindranath Tagore himself was appreciative of the merit of this book. In fact, Shahidullah wrote numerous essays on history, culture, literature and language; he rendered into Bengali the verses of Hafeez Khayyam-Iqbal; he also wrote biographical essays

textbooks he came up with accommodated such contents as were tailored to the free, uninhibited growth of children and young boys and girls. It was true that he did not at all undermine religious education, and that his abiding intellectual preoccupation with the Quran and the Hadith could fairly easily be exemplified in his own works meant both for children and adults alike. For instance, he wrote on the Quran and science, on the life of Prophet Muhammad (SM), on mysticism, on mystics like Rumi and Jami, and even on things like *Hajj* and *Muharram*. But, then, he was never in favour of a religious education which only induces the spell of self-justifying, self-limiting hermeticism and other-worldliness. Indeed, having written on the Quran and the Hadith, he could also come up with inspired writings on Kabir and Hinduism, on Bharat-Kanya-Viswamitra, on the *Gita* and Sree Krishna, and so on, and he also had an active interest in the study of Christianity. What deserves noticing here is that his interest in religion, theology and myths was never that of one belonging to a religious community as such, but it was that of a humanist scholar and a cultural thinker who was trying to evolve a unity-seeking cultural text as it were.

The urge for evolving such a text was indeed one of the organising principles behind the language movement he was involved in, and also behind his repeated insistence on the social and cultural role and function of literature, particularly in a society torn by communal disharmonies and colonial cultural aggressions. It was he who maintained strongly that the growth of a non-communal culture, and even of a state, could be significantly effected by literature itself.

In fact, the 'political work of culture' that Shahidullah

undertook in the process of carrying forward an anti-colonial struggle could be seen in his attempts to discover and identify the strengths and possibilities of Bengali language and literature; he discovered the time or period in which *Charyapada*, our early poetry, was written; he also tried to resolve the debate as to the number of poets known by the name of Chandidas, and he fairly convincingly demonstrated that our medieval literature has nothing 'medieval' about it, but has the linguistic and aesthetic *elan* and excellence. And it was he who assuredly put his finger on the Buddhist and Muslim contributions to Bengali literature as well. In other words, what Shahidullah was trying to do was that he was carrying forward a cultural struggle, a language movement by observing, identifying and reorganising the hitherto-less-explored but unmistakably strong areas and spaces of language and literature. His attempts to reform Bengali grammar, phonetics and spellings also prove this point. He said, "mother, mother-tongue and motherland — these three are priceless possessions one could possibly have". And Shahidullah, in his work, kept consolidating and strengthening such possessions.

In today's Bangladesh, the need for rereading and reevaluating Shahidullah's work is no doubt an obvious one, given the neocolonial cultural aggression we have been subject to. Work on Shahidullah has remained glaringly inadequate, and the kind of humanistic search and intellectual exercise Shahidullah exhibited has not also been adequately pursued by scholars, researchers, critics and linguists who, in fact, have miles to go following the path of Dr Muhammad Shahidullah, our contemporary in the continuing cultural and language struggles.