

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-issue 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 Mujib 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

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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

small fort.

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 a 'small fort'.

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.

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Charles V (1364-1380), 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 Chateau 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 of Fontainebleau.

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