

Tribute to Our Founder-Editor On the Occasion of His 66th Birthday

It Has Been a Trying Year without Ali Bhai

by Mahfuz Anam

It has been a little over a year that S.M. Ali, the founder editor of this paper, passed away. With his passing, the whole nation lost a great journalist. In The Daily Star we lost our leader. The beauty of our leader was that he was a hands-on leader. He led us, as he worked along with us. He constantly exemplified what he said. If he wanted us to write more, he would start by himself writing more. He spent more time in the office than most of us. Even during his later years, when it was obvious that health was failing him, he would spend more hours in the office than many of his younger colleagues. There were several occasions when I would suddenly pop into his office and not find him there. His things spread across the table would indicate that he had left the office yet. Searching, where he could likely be, I would often find him with the compositors or proof readers, talking to them about how they could improve their work. No part of the paper was outside his purview, and no staff member, however junior or senior would be outside his daily contact.

Sometimes I would get too involved with getting advertisements, improving circulation or collecting outstanding bills. This involvement would make me miss out on regular column writing, which was in addition to the four editorials, minimum, that Ali Bhai and I would write each week. On such occasions, Ali Bhai would tell me that I should never neglect my writing, whatever may be the cause. A journalist should, and must, be known by his writings, and not by the increase in revenue or circulation that he can bring about. He was, however, fully con-

scious of the need for increasing the paper's earning. In fact he would himself volunteer to join the finance and commercial team to help out. What he was objecting to was not my involvement with the commercial and circulation activities, but that I was allowing that to impede my journalistic work. That for him was sacrosanct, and nothing, absolutely nothing should come in its way.

Ali Bhai was a severe task master. But his severity was of a unique kind. He would make a staff member work more by himself working more. He would lead by example, and not by words alone. For instance, when he started the very popular Daily Star column Dhaka Day by Day, Ali Bhai sat with our feature writers and explained what he thought the column should contain. After a few weeks, and several sittings, when he was still not happy with what was going into the column, he started writing in it himself. His pieces acted as models for our young writers, and soon the column took the shape that Ali Bhai had in mind.

He used to be surprised by how little of their own paper the staff actually read. In our morning meetings he would ask whether we read this or that story. Hearing us mumbling incoherent answers, he would know that we did not really read the story he was talking about. This used to infuriate him. He would burst out in anger "How is it possible that you don't read your own paper." His constant advice was "read your paper from page to page, not just the portion that you wrote, or edited." He used to be so apologetic

that he could not stay late in the office and work with the news desk at night. His health obliged him not to stay up late. So we would never call him after 10 p.m. This was a matter of great regret for him, and he would often mention it in our meetings. But during the day he was always there. Sometimes I would suggest that he should take the afternoon off and sleep. He never listened. I insisted that at least he could lie on the couch for an hour or so during the afternoon. That also he never would do. One day he brought with him a pillow from home, and showing me he said, "Mahfuz from now on I will take some rest on the couch, as you advised." The truth is that I seldom saw him do that. The pillow remain unused.

It has been extremely hard for us all at The Daily Star to have passed the last one year without Ali Bhai. We missed him at every turn and in every corner of our journalistic life. When we were looking for somebody to edit our story, when we wanted to talk about a new story idea that suddenly flashed across our mind, when we went blank in the head and wanted someone to give us some fresh ideas, we missed Ali Bhai. We missed that gentle, soft-spoken, infinitely patient and untiringly helpful leader.

Whatever modest achievements we have had in the last one year, has been entirely due to the training that he gave us. What we have failed to achieve during the same period, has been due to the fact that he was not there to extend that soft, warm and affectionate helping hand. There is so much we learnt from him. But there was much more that he could have taught us if he had the time. That remains to be our greatest tragedy.



ANNOUNCEMENT

On the occasion of the 66th birth anniversary of our Founder-Editor S M Ali, The Daily Star is proud to announce the "S M ALI PRIZE FOR INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING." The prizes to be awarded annually will be worth Tk 50,000 (Tk fifty thousand). It will be open to Bangladeshi print media journalists of both Bangla and English languages.

The detail rules and procedure of participation will be announced in due course.

The annual awarding of the prize will start from 5th December 1995 on the occasion of the 67th birthday of our Founder-Editor.

As I See S M Ali

by Shah Husain Imam

ONE does not have to qualify by personal association with late lamented S M Ali to write about him. His life and works read like an open book enabling one to form reasonably accurate impressions of him as a man and a journalist.

Besides, I have a very special reason to share my reflections on him with the readers who took a great liking to his well-crafted and scintillating writings. I write simply out of a sincere gratitude for him that I am a beneficiary of what he has left behind. Joining The Daily Star within a year of Ali Bhai's demise, I stepped into a work atmosphere full of commitment born of fond memories of him. The continuation of the work environment which he had fostered around him, with a cheery cooperation from Mahfuz Anam, did not surprise me at all; because: (a) it had paid rich dividends; and (b) his long-time associate Mahfuz took over after him.

What was the environment like that I walked into and have felt at home from day one of my membership in the Star family? It is a seminar and collegiate atmosphere in which issues are debated freely to arrive at the best possible ideas. Hands would be shaken on differences, if any, at day's end. The levels of intellectual transparency and team work are at their modernist best. The sense of belonging is very strong among the members of the staff, something which has helped breed a competitive flair in relation to other papers but not any tendency to run them down. I believe that, by a conscious decision, both Ali Bhai and Mahfuz have infused the staffers with a spirit of internal competition as well. We are not losing out on respect for each other because of that. When fierce individualism and self-valuation have otherwise undermined discipline and collective ethos in organisations we have modestly retained a productive cohesiveness here.

SM Ali has been rated highly as a journalist but he was equally accomplished in the art of newspaper management, a fact that is somehow glossed over by many. That he strived to establish at The Daily Star some of the office norms he had absorbed during his management stints in East Asia and even largely succeeded in setting the right tenor in our imperfect conditions, speaks a volume about his all-round professionalism. He obviously tried to follow the pattern of corporate management out of a realisation — not perhaps without a flair for vengeance — that newspapers stood a chance here to last only by good internal administration and a modicum of institutionalisation.

Ali Bhai takes his place with the luckiest few of his peer who saw their dreams come true within their lifetimes. Closest to his heart, as he was approaching his tombstone was obviously the establishment of a classy newspaper in Bangladesh modelled on the ideas he had nurtured for whetting the appetite of the English-knowing readership in our country which was getting increasingly exposed to international standard of print journalism. He must have died a satisfied man, even though the prematurity of his death was hurting to us.

The next remarkable thing about him is that few of his professional standing abroad hardly came back to the country as a matter of firm and irrevocable personal decision as he did. If one or two of this breed ever returned to settle back in their home country, it was to live in comfortable retirement off the savings they accumulated. They could hardly think of taking up any formidable challenge like starting a newspaper. He was

being highly patriotic and missionary to a point of altruism when he decided to cast his lot with his country and its people.

Of course, two of his credentials worked to his advantage when he came back but these again bore marks of his patriotic inner self. First, even in the thick of his assignments in the East Asian capitals he never forgot to send in occasional despatches for The Bangladesh Observer in particular and to participate in media conferences in the South Asia region which kept him in view of many people at home. Secondly, his international stature as a mediator made him readily heard and respected not only by the members of the local journalist community but also the policymakers and planners in the country.

In his book "After The Dark Night" he portrayed a picture of things to follow, as early as in 1973, with such a clinical finesse of a reporter and a deep insight into the country's problems that this has proved prophetic to the hilt. His another book titled "Rainbow over Padma" brings out the dreariness in S M Ali. He could be genial and objective at the same time both as a reporter and a commentator. SM Ali set a high output standard for The Daily Star by personally working the hardest of all despite his being the senior-most in age. When I had a brief chat with him in 1974 as he came here from Hong Kong as a personal guest of Mr A K N Ahmed, the then Governor of Bangladesh Bank, he briefly reminisced about his London days in the fifties and said, "I had to slog my way up." This underlines his persevering qualities, brilliant as he was though in such a great measure.

S M Ali: A Gentleman in Journalism

by Kuldeep Nayar

S M Ali died in harness. No journalist could have asked for a better end. He kicked the bucket and excelled both in the field of information and print media. An English daily from Dhaka was his dream, which came true at the last leg of his journey.

The Star is his baby. He was conscious of his ill-health and literally drove himself to death while helping the Star to grow. That meant training a young staff who could take over the onerous responsibilities which he knew will fall one day on them. It is credit to Ali that his deputy, Mahfuz Anam, stepped into his shoes, without letting the staff or readers feel the pinch. Ali had ensured that the glow of Star would not dim, whether he was on the scene or not.

He was a gentleman in journalism, never hitting anyone below the belt, never criticising to the point of harshness. Even in his behaviour, he reflected the streak of fairness towards even those who had rubbed him on the wrong side. He would have made an outstanding diplomat, but a rough and tumble way was chalked out for him. His amiability disarmed even his critics, and has left indelible mark on the people who worked with him, whether in Bangkok, Manila or Dhaka.

Despite the feeling of friendship he emitted, he was a private person, even to the point of being formal. This was probably because he spent most of his years abroad, where the people, unlike us in the subcontinent, are correct, fair, but not presumptuously intimate.

Ali and I were close friends for more than 30 years. Yet when I visited Dhaka last, a few weeks before his death, he insisted on having a sit-down dinner in my honour and wore an evening suit with necktie. That was his profile even otherwise in the muggy town of Dhaka.

We first met in Bangkok when he was heading a leading

English daily there. He left the job soon because, as a craftsman, he preferred to chisel and train journalists, a job he did admirably well with devotion. I have met a many in the media who are his products and they proudly flaunt the fact that Ali was their teacher.

One of the most principled head of pre-liberation journalists, Ali had no rancour against the sufferings he had gone through. His vision stretched to the time when the high walls that fear and distrust had raised on the borders would crumble and the peoples of the subcontinent, without giving up their identities, would work together for common good.

Ali was a man of modera-

tion. Working from a few simple commitments, which meant a great deal to him, he set himself to mould the opinion accordingly. He might have annoyed many, he might have even felt that he was not reaching the people he wanted to. But he never gave up. Although never a member of any political party, he was interested in the same problems of the country and was well-treated by the leaders of different political ideologies.

A thin, lean, man Ali had a style and sense of humour that could survive only in the age of political correctness. That he still made impact and has left behind his print on whatever he did is a tribute to his integrity and hard-work. Such devotion does consume people quickly.



A Patriot to the Core

by P J Kuriakose

I cannot claim to have known "S M" as we used to call Mr. Ali for many years. My first contact with him was only in 1986 when he was a UNESCO Regional Adviser based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and I too was there as a UNDP Regional Project Manager. Both of us lived in Bangsar, a residential suburb of Kuala Lumpur. When at the instance of the Malaysian government, most UN offices in the city got housed in one single building, we happened to be allotted adjacent office space. Proximity in the living and working environments gave both of us and our families many opportunities to interact and thus come to know each other fairly well. Even after his return to Bangladesh, I was privileged to visit him and his wife Nancy more than once. Besides these occasional visits, we remained in touch with each other through occasional telephone calls and letters.

Above everything else, S M was the quintessence of human decency. He was the very embodiment of politeness in the finest Asian Muslim tradition. Although he came from a well-known and influential family with many of his relatives holding high positions in various walks of life in Bangladesh and outside, S M did not show any trace of arrogance. He was a perfect host, making his guests feel entirely at home, serving Bengali and Chinese dishes of the finest variety. He had a basketful of lively true to life stories gathered during his postings in different countries and he knew when he should come out with some of them to the delight of his guests.

The cheerful and polite demeanour of this wonderful man also concealed another aspect of his personality — strength of character, an unwillingness to compromise on matters of conscience. I know of at least one instance when he discovered that a person of some local importance and known to him professionally had attempted to misuse official funds, he had no difficulty to take action against the person concerned even though it was a most unpleasant thing to do.

S M was a Bangladeshi patriot to the core, proud of the land of his birth. On retirement it would have been very easy for him to live outside Bangladesh with material comforts that Dhaka could not have provided but he chose to return home to finish the tasks he had set before himself. However, loyalty to his country did not prevent him from being fiercely independent in his thinking and judgement of the policies followed by the government, both domestic and foreign. He used to talk more in sorrow than anger about innumerable opportunities that

were being missed by the governments of Bangladesh and India to forge a mature and mutually beneficial neighbourly relations between the two countries. Having been an experienced purveyor of the Asian scene, he was quite aware of the political and geographical compulsions that governments of both countries had to reckon with in dealing with each other. Yet he genuinely believed in the supreme need for warm and friendly relations between his country and India. He used to say jokingly that India and Bangladesh were like a Roman catholic couple who at times felt the need to separate but realised that what God had united should not be separated. In fact, he used to say that if the people of both countries established warm and friendly relationships, the two countries could have formidable economic and political power. When he started The Daily Star, he was very keen that I should become a frequent contributor of articles about India's development experiences so that Bangladesh also could learn from those experiences.

Towards the end of his UN career, he looked forward to his return to Dhaka to work on his dream to start an independent English language daily. He had no illusions about the obstacles he would have to overcome, especially those of a political nature. This was also the time when his health was causing anxiety to everyone who wanted S M's dreams to materialise. His own dogged determination made it possible for him to launch The Daily Star which today is internationally recognised as the best English language daily published in Bangladesh. That he succeeded without compromising his personal and professional integrity is a tribute to his strength of character.



His last day in office. With his beloved colleagues the day before he left for Bangkok for treatment.

In Memory of S M Ali

by A K N Ahmed

S M Ali was a great friend of mine. I cannot recall exactly when I first met him. All that I can remember is that we first met each other in a misty winter morning in the Old Arts Building compound of Dhaka University sometime in 1947. I was then finishing my final year in MA class and he was an undergraduate student. On our first encounter he struck me as different from other students of our age. A handsome young man with very fair complexion with a gentle face and a pair of sparkling intelligent eyes, extremely well-mannered and polished in his behaviour and talks. During our first encounter we clicked together despite the fact that I was perhaps senior to him by 3/4 years and as we came to know families of each other over the years he almost became my younger brother.

As I try to remember our acquaintance and friendship for about half a century, memories of so many incidents crowd in my mind. It is not possible to narrate them now. The two important traits of his character that have impressed me right from the beginning are his total dedication and commitment to the profession of journalism and a sense of bohemianism. I remember early in 1948 he joined as a reporter in a little known weekly journal — East Bengal Times — which used to be published from somewhere in Wari of Old Dhaka. As if this was not enough, he forced me to write for that journal and those were my first venture in writing which were printed. In 1951 when he passed out with his MA degree he came to me one day and announced that he had decided to make journalism as his career and he was proceeding to London to live there for a couple of years. This was a very unusual decision for a bright young man like him when he could compete for and get a civil service job with hands down. He was not prepared to listen to any argument; his goal was set and mind made up. And off he went within a few days almost penniless. When I met him again in London in early 1954, he was struggling very hard to make both ends meet. But never for a moment he thought of changing his decision. He was my constant companion then and we spent hours together discussing all subjects under this sun. One day he took me to his dig where he lived to introduce me to his landlady. During my conversation with her I could feel how much affection she had for him. When we were about to leave, the old lady whispered in my ear "Tell Ali to give all

his clothes to me for laundry. He need not wear socks which stink". When I mentioned this to S M Ali he narrated how kind the lady was to him and how on more than one occasions he wanted to leave her place for being unable to pay for the board and lodging for weeks together she counselled him to be patient and stay on until something works out. Later in 1957 when he lived with us for sometime in Karachi on his return from England he endeared himself almost instantly to my wife whom he met for the first time and the bond of friendship and affection he forged with her lasted up to the end of his life. My wife still fondly mentions that every morning he used to ask her for little money to buy a pack of cigarettes. One day she asked him why he did not approach me for money. In a disarming way he replied that I did not approve of his smoking habits. In those days we used to live in a small apartment and we had other house guests and Ali had to sleep on the floor along with others. But never for a moment he allowed us to feel uneasy about the discomfort he was undergoing. My wife is always fond of saying that Khasru (his nick name) is the specimen of a perfect English gentleman among our friends — civil, graceful and elegant in manners, considerate, tolerant and unobtrusive in habits and honest, truthful and fair in character.

If my memory serves me right, on his return to Pakistan in early 1957 he worked for Dawn, Karachi, Pakistan Times, Lahore and Pakistan Observer, and left the country once again in 1960 and then lived in various countries working as editor of Bangkok Times, Strait Times, Singapore, Hongkong Standard, Chief of Press Foundation of Asia at Manila and then as Regional Communication Adviser of UNESCO, Kuala Lumpur. It is really an extraordinary achievement for a journalist from Bangladesh in his early forties to serve as editor of so many dailies abroad. He could do this and do so well because of his talent, application and great zest for his profession.

The other dominant trait of his character was bohemianism which did not permit him to settle down in one place for too long. He had within him a restless spirit which used to propel him from place to place in search of something new in order to break fresh pasture and improve his skill and add to his life's experience. He imbibed this spirit perhaps from his uncle — Syed Mujtaba there.

Ali Saheb whom we all know by name and fame, I remember while he was in UNESCO, he started feeling restless after sometime and when we met he used to discuss with me his plans for bringing out a daily newspaper at Dhaka. In fact, he pressed me to join hands with him in his venture and serve as the chairman of the Board of Directors of the new company. He also told me then he was trying to persuade Mr Mahfuz Anam to give up his UNESCO job and join the proposed newspaper. His letters to me during this period used to deal with this subject alone.

When at long last Daily Star appeared at Dhaka the readers immediately felt that there was a newspaper with a difference. In news coverage, selection of news, depth of editorial comments, articles on current topics written by persons who never wrote for newspapers before this paper opened up new vistas before its readers. All these were possible because of the untiring efforts of S M Ali who also took great pains to groom a new breed of journalists in Bangladesh. It is gratifying to see that even after his death the same group of journalists under the able leadership of Mr Mahfuz Anam are valiantly trying to uphold the tradition of principled stand on issues and expressing opinions with clear objectivity but without fear or favour. If this effort strikes root sprouts, grows, blossoms and bear fruits this newspaper that S M Ali founded and nurtured up to the last day of his life will be a living and lasting tribute to him.

When I think of S M Ali I think of a journalist we can be proud of, a friend who has left a great void in my life. I am introvert by nature. Though fond of many acquaintances, I have intimacy only with a few. He was one of the closest friends of mine with whom I could share my innermost thoughts without reserve. Unlike many of us who try to add years to life he tried to add life to his years. As I am growing old I often remember a line from Shakespeare's Hamlet — "Thou hast that thou hast and their adoption tried grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel". I grappled him to my soul with hoops of steel. But alas! he slipped through them quietly and disappeared suddenly to that uncharted world, unknown and unknowable. I do not know whether there is any scope for newspaper industry in that world. If there is, then I am sure, my beloved friend, Khasru must already have started contemplating to bring out a special edition of The Daily Star there.