

# Tribute to S M Ali, Our Founder-Editor On the Occasion of His 67th Birthday

## Missing His Guidance at This Critical Time

by Mahfuz Anam

AS we write our editorials, discuss what position to take in the present complex political situation in the country, think how to treat one news compared to another, we in The Daily Star, miss our founder editor. Surely, we think, he would have found something more appropriate, more creative, more original to say than what we have been able to articulate so far. While formulating our editorial positions, we often ask what would he have written on this occasion, what suggestions would he have put forward to solve this crisis, what formula would he have come up with to find a way out of the present constitutional stalemate? We try to pick up clues from what he wrote on similar situations, extrapolate from related comments that he made and think of the words of guidance that he shared with us. Thus we run The Daily Star today.

Needless to say, it is far from satisfactory. If Ali Bhal, as we called him lovingly, had been with us during the last



two years. The Daily Star would have become a far better paper than it is now. Under his wise, experienced and capable hands this country would have had its first truly quality paper. We have tried our best to live up to his expectations, but then we all know that the master's stroke is really not there.

For the purpose of this piece I was going through the files of his writings. As I was leafing through the large numbers of his articles, commentaries, MY WORLD and AT HOME AND ABROAD pieces, and other items, I was amazed at the variety of what he wrote on. There were the serious articles, the political commentaries, the analytical pieces and the regular columns. But in addition, he wrote many pieces on people he worked with, people he met, and read about. He wrote about places he visited and re-visited, about books that interested him. He wrote several pieces on art, contemporary literature, and on writers, both old and new. He wrote on popular art, and I remember one particular piece that dealt with art on the Eid and New Year's cards that he had received that year.

In other words, Ali Bhal's world was so vast. As a journalist, everything appears to have interested him. Everything he saw, read or heard, he used as a source material for his writing. Thus one day he wrote a most serious article on the edit page, and on the very next, he wrote a most humorous piece in the Dhaka Day By Day column. Many of his write-ups were inspired by the letters to the editors. He would pick up issues and ideas from them. People were his favourite writing subjects. Some of his best journalistic pieces were interviews with political and literary figures. Ordinary people were most often featured in his articles. There was a one-legged beggar he would see everyday while coming to office. One day Ali Bhal saw him selling bananas and asked him about it. The beggar told him that he had turned into a banana vendor and would never again beg. The very next article featured the beggar's story.

What it all means is that a journalist must possess almost an inexhaustible supply of curiosity. Everything should interest him or her, and he or she should approach all of them with an open mind. In other words a journalist should never assume anything. He or she should listen, search, read, and seek out different views, and then, and only then form his or her own opinion. Ali Bhal was a living example of that curiosity and open mind.

None of us who worked with him found him to make disparaging remarks about other people. If he did not like anyone, he would keep quiet. That was enough for those who knew him to understand his feelings.

Today, as we remember him and pay tribute to his memory, we cannot but feel how much he would have been pained to see what is going on in the country. He would have suffered immeasurably at the political crisis that we face today. Like every other democrat, he was delighted beyond description at



the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh in December '90 and believed, like many of us, that we were well on our way to institutionalising it. He was particularly disappointed at the breakdown of communication between the two supreme leaders. Numerous times he wrote urging the AL and BNP chiefs to sit for a dialogue. His calls remain unheeded even today.

The nation, journalism in

general, and we in The Daily Star in particular, feel the absence of his guidance. If he were with us today, he would have no doubt formed a part of the political reconciliation process. Through his writings he would have given some guidance as to how we should move forward at this critical juncture of our nation's life. We miss him, and need him, so very much today.



S M Ali at a press conference (4th from left) being addressed by the then US Ambassador to Pakistan at the Press Club, Dhaka in the year 1958.

## In Remembrance

by Syed Badrul Haque

LIKE many of his readers, I used to be compulsively drawn to Mr S M Ali's insightful and fascinating column, My World every week. Written in a personal vein as the title suggests, it lent a meaningful perspective as he, in his inimitable style, would dwell on situations which otherwise could easily pass off as trivialities. Unfailingly it had the captivating charm of a letter almost similar to sneaking a look in a private diary. In an impersonal polity, My World was characteristically a touching and refreshing retreat from the tales of our rather hidebound existence.

In one of such columns, My World had me track down the memory lane back to the early fifties. I was then on the last leg of my university days and was bracing myself for the new career I was about to embark upon. At that moment I received a letter from Mr Ali, already a reputed journalist in the country who was then serving in The Dawn, the premier English daily of the erstwhile Pakistan as a senior editorial hand.

His weekly column, Sixth Column, if I may recall, was a drawer in those days for many a reader of The Dawn. In his two-page typed letter Mr Ali counselled me on how to improve one's writing ability — a requirement so vitally needed for an aspirant to make a career in journalism — and to read especially, The New Statesman and Nation and The Economist. — the two highly readable journals published from the UK as regularly as possible. (In those days foreign journals were not so easily available as at present). He also cautioned me not to nurse any illusions about journalism. 'Life in journalism is too hard for most of us. Often it may seem almost unbearable', he wrote. His was indeed a realistic appraisal of the condition prevailing at the time in the field of journalism which obviously, as the circumstances would dictate, did not belong to the faint hearts.

This forewarning was much more relevant in my case for more than one reason. Most of the middle-class families to which I belonged so crucially depended on their wards' earnings to improve their economic standing and also may be for a sort of face-lift in the community they lived in. In spite of such a despairing situation, quite a number of bright

young men and a few women took heart to take up the challenge of the profession. Many of them I knew had an enviable academic background, and I presume could land without much effort some secure and cushy jobs in other callings of life. To my perception, the moving urge for many, even if remotely felt, for venturing into the profession was its unique role to serve the cause of the society.

Today after a long and arduous journey over the decades, journalism has come of age in this part of the world, as many would agree. In journalism these days one can hopefully look forward to a decent career, both in terms of money and social respectability which barring a small number of practitioners was almost a dream until some years back. The journalists' record in discharging the varied social responsibilities under the circumstances has also been noteworthy. This vastly improved scenario was obviously not an easy street all the way for a Third World country like ours still stuck in a plethora of daunting issues. In fact, at one point, as one would recall, the Press was muzzled and rendered totally subservient to the dictates of the ruling masters.

In recent times there has been literally a profusion of newspapers not only in the capital city, Dhaka but in other places as well of the country. It would, however, be a bit naive to expect that all of these newspapers will in the long run be able to survive, for very obvious reasons. Nevertheless, an evaluative study of these newspapers if undertaken particularly in reference to quality journalism periodically, say on yearly basis, will enormously benefit not only the serving journalists but also the burgeoning newspaper industry of our country. This exercise may be continued till such time these newborns reach the take-off stage in terms of social obligation.

Ramblings aside, though a pertinent question, may I ask the successor-journalists whether they acknowledge the contributions of their pioneering-elders at least in terms of gratitude or remembrance. Frankly, I am pained to be in the negative as many others are. To mention, Mr Mahubul Jamal Zehedi, a pioneering distinguished journalist of this soil

is hardly mentioned in the profession here. They certainly deserve a little more on that score, I suppose. Beyond this imporing, to stretch the issue a little further, this shift (or should we say we settle into a bland acceptance of it) in our time-honoured value-culture, however trivial it might seem to many, is apparent not only in the realm of journalism but in fact it now touches a wide spectrum of our social fabric. Worse still, these days one may even perceive a fashionable blather about ignoring the virtues of yesteryears as matrices of culture.

In many minds there is a question-mark about the factors that caused such an erosion in our value-culture. Not a social moraliser myself nor do I pretend to be one, all that I want is to get a fair understanding of the societal development in a given society like ours. The answer to this conundrum, I believe, can be helped by our social scientists, and we can have some illumination along the way. Should they take up the job to delve into the subject in all its ramifications, they would in all certainty find it an intellectually stimulating one, and the society, — gaining in perception, — would indeed be well-served, the culture-watchers hold. Well, all these are beside the particular point that I would like to raise in this piece. Apologies for the digression which I could hardly help.

Mr Ali in his column, My World had mentioned of quite a collection of publications that were signed by eminent personalities of Bangladesh and other countries to adorn his bookshelf. He also had invited his other author-friends to send him their publications so that some day in future, as he had wished, his inheritors could put them to auction as rare books. But, now I am quite skeptical if any of them would ever dream of gainfully bartering those cherished books bearing his sacred memory.

To revert now to Mr Ali's letter, I must say that it had been quite a booster to my morale in charting out my future career at a vital crossroads of my life. Over the decades the letter had almost attained the precious 'antique' status and is preserved with care as a memento. And the letter, I hasten to add, is not a trade-off and never to go at the call of the hammer, no matter what was the price offered.

We reprint here excerpts from some of S M Ali's writings favourite with the readers: Columns — My World and At Home and Abroad, and Commentary

### MY WORLD

#### A Code of Conduct for Ministers and Civil Servants? Just Watch Out?

(May 15, 1992)

IF we make a list of topics we have been discussing at parties, receptions and small get-togethers during past two weeks, the reported move by the government to prepare a code of conduct for officials, starting with ministers, would be somewhere near the top.

In fact, all other topics on the list — the so-called talking points — also related to the activities of the government and the political parties. Listening to friends and acquaintances — it can be rather relaxing if one can only put a couple of questions without being asked any — I could not help wondering whether the government has an overpowering hold on our entire thinking process or we have become a little obsessed with what goes on along the corridor of power. May be both.

Most people talk about this code of conduct in a mixture of cynicism, doubts and, surprisingly, a degree of optimism, with their views falling into three categories: serious, not so serious and light (if not flippant).

Those who take this matter seriously are aware that some Asian countries have indeed drawn up codes of conduct for government officials, starting with ministers, even if they tend to be broken from time to time. After all, it is better to have a code than to have none at all.

Here is a good example from Malaysia. Some time in the early eighties, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad made it obligatory for all government officials and cabinet ministers (including himself) to wear name tags in copper (just the name, without any position or designation) and

to punch his or her arrival and departure times on a clock at the office entrance, a system that Dr Mahathir himself launched by punching his own attendance card. By and large, the two practices have proved both durable and successful, although one may assume that the Prime Minister and other ministers do often "forget" to punch their office attendance cards.

There are other provisions, many dealing with members of the public, in codes observed in such countries as Singapore, Thailand and, of course, Malaysia. A lot of importance is attached to the question of courtesy to visitors at government offices and to the need for promptness in handling complaints from members of the public. When there are signs of slackness in the observance of these provisions, campaigns are launched to give officials a little push to follow the code.

WE do not know yet whether the proposed code of conduct in Bangladesh will go as far as to cover the provisions mentioned above. If it does not, we will talk about some amendments in due course.

It is said that what the government is particularly concerned about is putting together a set of rules relating to such matters as accountability, discipline and the chain of command involving senior officials and even cabinet ministers.

On all these issues, there is no shortage of ideas, some innovative ones but some borrowed from the ousted regime of Hussain Muhammad Ershad. They may also overlap, since, to a large extent, they will come from the

same source, the bureaucracy.

Some will suggest how the code can strengthen the office of the Prime Minister, and make it as powerful as it can be within the framework of parliamentary democracy. A few will see little difference between a strong Prime Minister and an authoritarian one, with the late Indira Gandhi or Margaret Thatcher serving as a model.

However, there will be others who will propose how, without weakening the office of the Prime Minister, there can be increased decentralisation, of power to promote grassroots development throughout the country, more delegation of authority to individual ministers and a greater sense of collective responsibility at the cabinet level than seems to be the case today. They may also say, with much justification, that while technocrats, including civil servants, play a major role in running the administration, the country is governed by people elected to the parliament with a political mandate. But, then, much depends on how well-equipped are the individual members of the cabinet, the people with the political mandate, in running their ministries, in formulating, the policies and in carrying out their projects. Here, opinions will be divided: I share the view that there are more grounds for optimism than reasons for pessimism about what we can expect from individual cabinet colleagues — I use the term colleagues deliberately — of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia. After all, their failure will be the failure of the parliamentary system as a whole. This is something we do not want to accept — yet.

One answer to the ques-

### AT HOME AND ABROAD

#### Idea of Second Chamber Merits Attention: Let's Look for Alternatives to Hartals

(July 21, '92)

SEVERAL experts, including guest columnists of this paper, have spoken up against the wave of hartals which hit the country, especially the capital, from time to time, sometimes without much of a warning. Their views reflect a broad consensus in the country that as a political weapon, strike or a hartal — there are differences between the two — is a much abused option, one that can be best described as "institutionalised lawlessness" an apt expression used by a guest columnist of this paper, Shah A M S Kibria, in his piece last week.

However, despite the near unanimity of the opposition to hartals, several questions and possible solutions have eluded the government and the political parties. We are in no position to know if any serious attempt has been made to identify the question, not to mention their possible answers.

In the first place, we are unaware if the administration has an early warning system that effectively alerts the authorities of the possibility of a strike or a hartal well in advance, setting the stage for negotiation or conciliation. Assuming such a system exists, the dilemma facing the government is that any move made towards the 'disgruntled' potential strikers may be interpreted as a sign of weakness, while a firm refusal to reconceive the advance warning may be interpreted as an act of arrogance that raises the level of demands — and the latent militancy — of the involved party or group. For the administration, it can often turn out to be a "no win situation."

One answer to the ques-

tion is that a popularly elected democratic government, like the one we have today, should have a major advantage over the previous ousted authoritarian administration. We assume that its organisational network extends to labour unions, associations of low-paid office employees — the ardent protagonists of hartals — and, last but not the least, the student bodies. How often do government leaders meet these groups for informal exchanges of ideas, not necessarily to resolve a deadlock?

One aim behind these exchanges, based on political rapport rather than on administrative arm twisting, could produce, in the best of circumstances, a social contract between the government and unions in different categories. Maybe this is easier said than done. However, the possibility can be explored if government leaders do more listening than talking, before explaining to their audience some home truths about our economic predicament, with the help of simple facts and figures. Of course, we will put a lot of blame on the misdeeds of the past authoritarian government. However, can we, for a change, start talking about the future? Where are we now in agriculture, industry, public health and education, as compared to other Asian countries, and where do we go from here — and how?

The modalities for reaching such a social contract are time consuming and complex. However, at some point, the understanding must indeed be linked to a national consensus that involves all the major political parties, with all the groupings agreeing to take a common stand against strikes and hartals

which come about without exhausting all the avenues for conciliations.

Again, this is easier said than done. It is always hard for a political party, almost in any country, to give up its immediate gains derived from its control and influence over, say, a section of labour or students in favour of long-term national interests. A commonsense view is, one major party will make the move provided other parties do the same. A more sophisticated, opinion is, with moderate groups in each party exerting their influence over its leadership, various groupings may come together on the basis of a minimum agenda for national salvation.

Instead of treating it as a secret deal, we should publicise the proposed national consensus as a gain for the country as a whole as well as a deterrent to hartals and strikes. At this moment, right from the time of Hussain Mohammad Ershad until the present day, organisers of most hartals rate the chances of their success pretty highly, with the public treating them in a mood of despair, the opposition parties viewing the situation with subdued satisfaction and the government weighing its options in terms of political and financial fall-outs.

Assuming that, through this national consensus, we are able to reduce hartals and strikes to the absolute minimum, what do we give the concerned people in return? What can we offer them as a tool for expressing their grievances, genuine or phony, for the attention of the public at large, of the opinion makers and, last but not the least, of the government?

A silent procession with placards?.....

### COMMENTARY

#### On Foreign Policy Crisis, Govt should Brief Opposition at Every Step

AS Indo-Bangladesh relations enter a difficult phase, with a shadow cast over regional co-operation, there is an urgent need to develop a common understanding between the government and the opposition over the foreign policy objectives of the country and as to how they can be reached.

Even in the past, the need was there. However, in retrospect, it seems that some kind of an unspoken consensus existed on the handling of the external relations by successive governments in Bangladesh. Then, during the nine-year authoritarian regime of Hussain Mohammad Ershad, political parties, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL) were rightly preoccupied with the struggle for the restoration of democracy to pay much attention to foreign relations.

Now, in the changed scenario, foreign policy issues have assumed extraordinary importance — and visibility — arising out of unprecedented developments in South Asia, such as the massive influx of refugees from Myanmar, the demolition of the Babri Masjid followed by outbreak of communal frenzy in different places and the uncertainty over the holding of the twice-postponed summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC).

What has dismayed non-partisan observers here is, differences between the ruling BNP and the opposition AL over the handling of the issues now figure prominently in the continuing in-

ternal political debate, virtually sending out a wrong signal to the outside world that Bangladesh may well be a "house divided" on the country's foreign relations, especially in the South Asian context.

It would certainly be a wrong signal, because we believe that the major parties, especially BNP and AL, are united when it comes to such broad issues as the repatriation of Rohingya refugees, the maintenance of communal harmony throughout South Asia, the holding of the SAARC Summit and the expansion of regional co-operation. They are also united when and if the country's sovereignty is questioned or its interests threatened.

Unfortunately, national leaders like Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina would never take the platform or the floor at the Parliament to reaffirm their shared commitment. Instead, the two and their ardent followers do not miss any opportunity of hammering on their differences on the execution of the accepted objectives, often going to the extent of questioning one another's motives and bonafides. In the end, often carried away by their own rhetoric, they send out wrong, unintended signals to a confused nation and to forces outside which are a little too eager to discover some new cracks within the country.

Of course, no one would suggest that the ruling party and the opposition should not have their differences, even serious ones, on the implementation of the country's foreign policy in any specific field.