

Tribute to SM Ali, Our Founder-Editor

On the Occasion of His 68th Birthday

Leading by Example

by Mahfuz Anam

VISION of late S M Ali in giving birth to The Daily Star was to create a newspaper which would help to strengthen democracy in Bangladesh and be uncompromisingly committed to establishing a transparent and accountable government. His newspaper was to uphold the principles of rule of law, constitutional government and a representative political system. Above all his newspaper was to uphold freedom over everything else. Freedom of expression and the rights of a free media were something that his newspaper would give its full concentration on.

Lack of democracy in Bangladesh was a matter of enormous frustration for him for most of seventies and eighties. Thus when it was restored with the fall of autocracy in December '90 he at once concluded that time was appropriate to launch the paper of his dream. Thus on 14 January '91 The Daily Star was born with the promise to do everything in its power to keep autocracy and all sorts of dictatorship at bay and do everything that an independent newspaper can do to strengthen democracy.

It was also part of his vision to establish a newspaper in this country which will uphold causes of concerns to the people and yet do so from a non-partisan view point. It will be neutral to groups and parties and yet be most partisan to principles and issues. The paper of his dream was to be an uncompromising crusader for human rights and dignity of the common man, the unyielding fighter for social and economic justice of the people and the irresistible champion of peace and harmony.

Based on an extremely challenging and varied personal experience, which was at the same time global and national, Ali believed in the ultimate success of virtue. He had tremendous faith in goodness of people and sincerely believed that a right cause will win in the end. Upholding principles were for him the ultimate test of a person's character, and upholding them in the newspaper of his dream was for him a test of his own commitment to these principles.

Thus began the journey of The Daily Star under his committed and rigorous leadership, in inspiring us for the job ahead

his main thrust was on commitment. His point was simple, without commitment nothing can be achieved. He was well aware of the importance of talent but without commitment, it was not of much use to him. After commitment, he laid emphasis on professionalism. Competence was something that he gave a lot of attention to in The Star. He would repeat to us all the time we must do everything possible to procure higher training in journalism. Thus one of the first things he did was to organise a training course for all the staff members of the new paper, especially the new comers. Through a special arrangement with GEMINI News Service of London he brought his long time friend Daniel Nelson for a three months training programme. Whenever time and health permitted he would attend dinners of Dhaka based ambassadors with one special agenda — to explore the possibility whether some scholarship or training arrangement could be made for his staff in the newspaper. Every time I would have some contact with foreign press bodies he would instruct me to see what could be done about training of our colleagues.

The paper of his dream was also supposed to be full of writers. He would never tire of telling us that journalists must be writers. If a journalist did not write then he was not meant to be in this profession. After we started the newspaper he was surprised to find that in Bangladesh people in the profession confined themselves to editing only and did not actually write. He tried his best to encourage them to change their habit and try writing occasionally. Writing skills were of tremendous importance to him. To the surprise of us all he would take the write-ups of even the junior most staff member and sit with him or her and talk about their copies. It was amazing how he would find time for everybody. I could see the gleam in the eyes of those who got his personal attention. Never mind that he scolded them, what caused the smile was the fact that the editor himself — and that also an editor of the stature and fame of S M Ali — took the time to personally correct his copy and gave him or her individual lesson in good writing.

About writing he would always lay stress on simplicity. Our readers who are familiar

with our founder editor's writings would recall how simple and easy to read they were. He used to be amazed, and no doubt amused, to see the nature of our English writing. He never tired of repeating that if there was a simple word for expressing something never opt for the hard one. You are writing to tell a story, to communicate, to explain and clarify, to help readers understand an event or a process. You are not writing to impress the readers with how many words you know.

It was tremendous misfortune that we lost our leader less than three years after we got started. During the thirty-three months at the helm, S M Ali gave this paper everything he had. He was totally oblivious of the cost to his health exacted by the long hours he kept. He seemed to be constantly putting us to shame by working more hours than we did. His method of getting us to work long hours was to himself work longer hours. His message was always more by example than by words. He would come to office by 10.30 a.m. at the latest and stay all the way up to 8 to 9 p.m. He would not go home for lunch but eat at a restaurant nearby. Some time later we forced him to buy a couch and placed it in his office so that he could rest a few minutes after lunch. But frankly I seldom saw him use it. I often felt that he was denying his age, and more so the state of his health. He would seldom talk about it. If I would ask him about how he were he would give a quick answer and change the topic, giving me clear signal that he did want to discuss the matter.

One of his habits, and for us a treat, was to invite us to join in his lunch. I was more lucky than others and had the pleasure of long conversations with him during his regular lunch hour. Occasionally he would invite others to join us which would then turn out to be an interesting discussion session on journalism or contemporary politics or international issues. When I was otherwise busy he would invite others, taking particular care to invite people from all sections and grades. So joining the editor for his lunch became a regular feature in our newspaper and a matter of pride and pleasure for our staff.

Such are the indelible impressions he left on us as an inspiring heritage for The Daily Star.



ASIAN DIARY BY ARJUNA

Reprinted from our issue of December 5, 1993

Ali Bhai

HE was among the last journalists to have interviewed the last Emperor of China, but this was only one of the many sidetrips Syed Mohammad Ali made in his distinguished journalistic career of 44 years.

S M Ali to colleagues, Ali Bhai to friends, S M passed away last October. He would have been 65 on December 5.

His remains arrived in Dhaka October 20, the day he promised his newspaper readers he would return from Thailand after his 'regular medical check-up, a bit of rest and an overdue holiday.' He would be keeping that deadline for his return like a true journalist, his friends quickly noted, if not in life then in death.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia said S M Ali served Bangladesh and journalism with distinction for a long time. President Abdur Rahman Biswas noted the country lost 'a distinguished editor of the contemporary period.' His colleagues observed that if a journalist is the conscience-keeper of the society, S M Ali epitomised it.

Ali Bhai once wrote about an imaginary dialogue between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, leader of the opposition. They began with caustic attacks on one another but gradually discovered hidden points of convergence, long overshadowed by the confrontations of the day. It was his way of bringing a consensus on core national issues and in bringing the major political parties, especially the two biggest ones, towards a common national agenda.

S M Ali was a nationalist. In 1971 when he was the Roving Foreign Editor of the Singapore afternoon daily New Nation, he actively rallied support for the Liberation War of Bangladesh. But as early as the 1950s, in London, he was a spokesman and translator of the late Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani who was staying there during his brief exile.

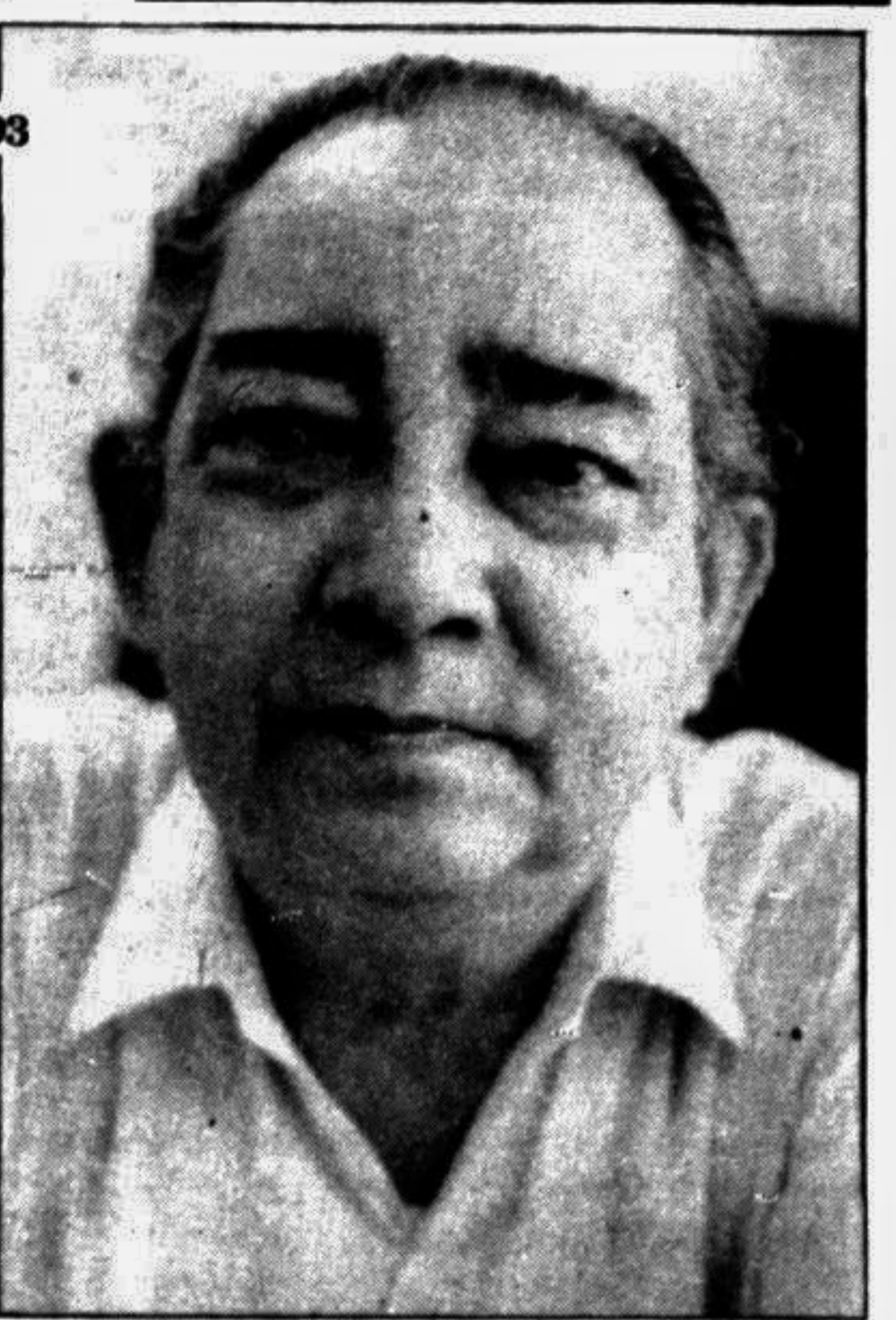
In 1952, as a young nationalist, he actively participated in the Language Movement. And in 1973 he wrote a book 'After The Dark Night', a personal research and on-site study about the problems of post-liberation Bangladesh.

Ali Bhai, who was married to Nancy Wong of Singapore, completed his matriculation in Sylhet and went on to attend Saint Paul's College in Calcutta. He completed his honours and masters degrees from the English Department of Dhaka University in 1950-51.

While still a student, he joined the newly-launched Pakistan Observer in 1949 as its first Staff Reporter. In the early 1950s he left for London for higher journalism studies and where he worked with the News Chronicle of London and also the BBC.

He returned to Pakistan in 1954 and joined the Dawn newspaper in Karachi as Staff Reporter and again came back to the Pakistan Observer in 1956 as Staff Reporter. At that time he became active in the journalist union and was the president of the East Pakistan Union of Journalists during 1958-60. He was also the first journalist member of the All Pakistan First Newspaper Wage Board.

S M Ali was an expatriate during most of his professional life, living mostly in South-East Asian cities. After joining the Pakistan Times in Lahore in 1960, he subsequently became the Assistant Editor of the Hongkong-based regional publication, The Asia Magazine from 1962-64. In 1964-65 he was the South-East Asia Bureau



Chief for the Karachi daily Dawn and then was appointed the Managing Editor of Thailand's leading English-language daily, the Bangkok Post.

In late 1972, S M Ali was in Hongkong again, as Managing Editor of the Hongkong Standard. His article and analytical essays on Asian events appeared in leading regional journals, including the Far Eastern Economic Review, the Asian Wall Street Journal, Orientations and Insight.

In 1977, S M Ali joined the Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia as its Executive Director. In 1981 he was in Kuala Lumpur with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as its regional communications advisor for Asia and the Pacific.

After retiring from UNESCO in 1988, S M Ali briefly joined the Bangladesh Observer as Editor in mid-1989 and was advisor to the United News of Bangladesh news agency for a few months in 1990. In January 1991, he launched The Daily Star as its Editor and Publisher, steering it to become the premier independent daily in Bangladesh. He remained active in the daily affairs of the newspaper and continued writing his column 'My World' until the day he left for Thailand.

"In trying to pay tribute to a great soul, we only bring him down to our level because of our own incapacity to depict him as he truly was," The Daily Star commented in an editorial. "This humble tribute to S M Ali will not be any exception. For those of us who follow on in his footsteps are only his pale shadow, trying desperately to grasp the man whose thoughts transcended those of his contemporaries, whose insight made us how our head in adulation."

The Daily Star staff felt the editorial deserved front-page treatment, but they did not put it on page one, as S M Ali taught us never to compromise the intrinsic value and dignity of an editorial by moving it from its usual place.

— Dephneius/Asia

We reprint here excerpts from some of S M Ali's writings favourite with the readers

AT HOME AND ABROAD

Boycott Weakens the Parliament: AL should Seek Other Options to Fight Anti-terrorism Bill

November 1, 1992

AN opposition may face a parliamentary defeat, but it is often within its power to turn it into a political victory. No matter what happens, it should use the parliament as the best forum at its disposal.

All within 24 hours, the following views were expressed to me last week, some at a get-together and others over telephone, each person speaking on the basis of anonymity.

A cabinet minister: "You should take a position against the opposition's boycott of the parliament session. Perhaps, the ruling party should make concessions to reach an accommodation with the other side. But we cannot do so under pressure from an agitation from the street."

An Awami League leader: "There are people in the government who are prepared to talk to us and find a way-out of the deepening crisis. Unfortunately, they cannot get through to their chairperson who is unwilling to make any concession, even to honour our past agreements. On the other hand, my own position within AL is anything but comfortable."

A leading figure at the Jatiya Party: "What is the point in staying through the session? When we reject the Anti-Terrorism Bill, we cannot move any amendment. That would mean our tacit acceptance of the principle behind the bill. We are left with no choice but to take to the street. We cannot help if the street overtakes the session of the Jatiya Sangsad. This has happened before. This will happen again."

A leader of the Jamaat: "We oppose the Anti-Terrorism Bill. But we shall fight it from the floor of the parliament, not from the street."

A neutral observer: "It is part of a possible deal offered by the ruling party that the Jamaat should stay in the parliament, oppose the bill and suggest a couple of amendments which the government may accept. This would give a bit of legitimacy to the passage of the bill."

If we take these views at their face value — my impression is, the leaders who offered these opinions meant what they said — we have an unfolding scenario of a new chapter in the country's divisive politics. In this situation, fragmentation within each grouping will be added to the broad polarisation, with each party trying its best to maintain a cohesive approach to its strategy.

ruling party the Anti-Terrorism Bill is hardly the most popular move made by its leadership. It has not caused a split within BNP, but there are many among the back-benchers of the ruling party who feel uneasy about the move, unsure about its purpose and doubtful if the new proposed act can handle the lawlessness and terrorism any better than the existing provisions in the penal code of the Special Powers Act (SPA). Whether or not the present government uses the proposed new act against its political opponents remains to be seen. But it is certainly making a fit to the next government, a possible AL administration, which can use it to suit its political purpose. As one BNP member told an opposition MP, "one day I may fall a victim to the Act that I am voting for."

The situation inside the AL-led Opposition also hardly reflects the inner cohesion that it needs to meet the challenge. According to one source, it decided on the 'boycott' of the whole session, as opposed to a walk-out, without much of a deliberation over other options, and, in the same spirit, issued the threat to take to the streets, to force the government to withdraw the controversial bill.

With its student front split and rumblings within the party on a number of issues, the AL's capacity to stage a massive demonstration, except forcing a hartal on a reluctant city, is limited. It may also be quite embarrassing for AL leadership if some JP stalwarts join the agitation.

Again, what will happen if the controversial bill is passed within next 48 hours? What kind of strategy can the AL then work out to continue the agitation against the Act? While it cannot ask for a continuous movement without the risk of it being exploited by lawless elements, it cannot suddenly make a retreat without losing face with its own rank and file. Thus, the opposition may be placed in a 'no win' situation. A number of opposition leaders have been debating over other options, the alternatives to the boycott of the JS session and the call for street agitation.

Among many AL members, perhaps the most popular view is that the opposition should have stayed on within the parliament, perhaps after a token walk-out, and used the forum for a most spirited, comprehensive all-embracing attack on the bill. It would have added a new unforgettable dimension to the parliamentary deliberation in the first popularly

elected Jatiya Sangsad after nine years of autocratic rule. With the help of eminent lawyers, AL leaders, Sheikh Hasina included, should have prepared their case, more legal and political than rhetorical and emotional, against the controversial bill. Such a presentation would have taken the proposed legislation into pieces and shown the weakness of the government position. If the opposition had followed this strategy, the ruling party, despite its majority, would have been put on the defensive, with AL possibly emerging as a voice of the people.

There have been three other options which, as far as we know, were ignored by the AL leadership. First, it should have launched a signature campaign against the bill, throughout Bangladesh, with the target of getting anything between fifty lakh to a crore people initial the petition against the move. Secondly, it should have taken out full-page declaration in ten leading dailies in the country, signed by ten eminent lawyers and former judges explaining why the bill was counter-productive, politically motivated and contrary to human rights.

COMMENTARY

No-confidence Move Serves a Signal at Right Time, on Right Issue

August 6, 1992

WITH her stage set for the first no-confidence motion against the government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in the Jatiya Sangsad, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia will be well advised to see the move as a signal that she must set her house in order.

With its comfortable majority in Parliament, the ruling party should easily pass the least, with some short-sighted BNP politicians gloating over the victory. But the message behind the no-confidence motion — one or seven make little difference — represents almost an overwhelming sentiment shared by a cross section of our people.

Last but not the least, the opposition should have asked for a referendum. Of course, the proposal would have been turned down by the Sangsad. But the AL would have made its case, and produced considerable impact on the public opinion as a responsible opposition.

If these options had been exercised, the parliament would have gained a new measure of credibility. The process would also have helped to educate the public on the provisions and their implications of the controversial bill and enhanced the image of Awami League as a responsible alternative government.

In parliamentary democracy, the minority opposition may face one defeat after another in all kinds of motions, from the passage of a bill to the approval of the budget. However, it is often within its power to turn a parliamentary defeat into a political victory. The key to this lies in political planning and sophistication, together with the realisation that no matter what happens, no party can run away from the sovereign parliament, the source of all power and authority in the best of times as well as in the worst of times.

which, in recent days, has developed a number of new dimensions, such as the feared kidnapping of children, the brutal murder of a veteran ageing political leader in Khulna and the spread of campus violence to educational institutions which had so long been spared from lawlessness.

An equally important part of the message relates to the refusal of the administration, especially of the Home Minister, to view the situation with a sense of urgency, and, instead, to suggest that it has 'improved' in recent months. Far from outlining a plan of action that should restore the confidence of the people in the law-enforcing agencies, the Home Minister has been talking about preparing a list of terrorists and wanted criminals, prompting this paper to ask, in some bewilderment, "What is the list for?"

The debate on the no-confidence motion (or motions), whenever it is held, should primarily focus on the law and order situation in the country,

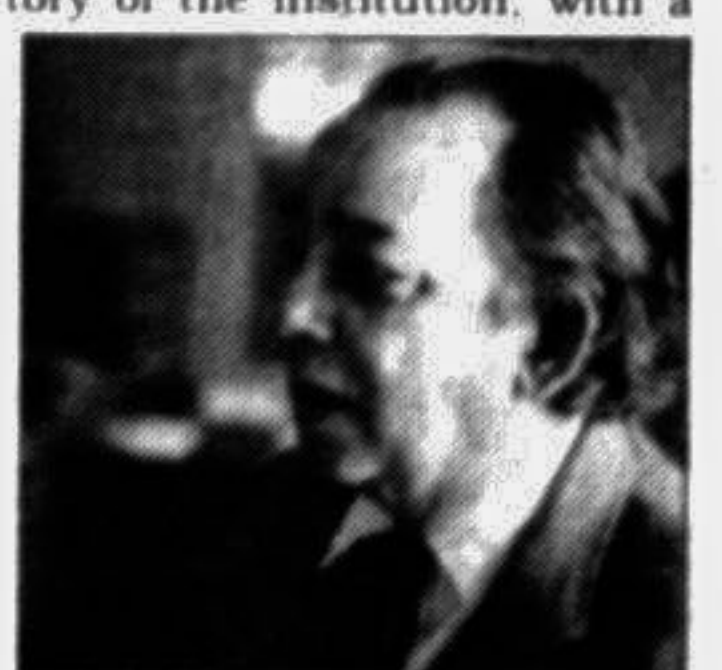
MY WORLD

It's All About My Old School; and Hopes for Other Century-old Institutions

July 17, 1992

A LIGHT-HEARTED mood that I often get into for writing this column has suddenly disappeared. Maybe there are the lengthening shadows, the dimming of the sunlight and the darkening of the Ashar sky, all conspiring to turn what is normally a pleasant duty into a dull chore.

However, there is also a specific reason I have been looking at a photograph of the century-old High School at Maulvi Bazar, in greater Sylhet, my old school, a run-down structure that, to start with, can certainly do with a fresh coat of paint. What's more, I have been reading for the second time a published report by this paper's correspondent, Rajat Kanti Goswami, a comprehensive history of the institution, with a



long list of distinguished personalities, past and present, who, in their teens, walked down the long corridors of the school, in rain and sunshine, either on their way to the class or on their way out. All this forms a part of the history of the school, that should lift our hearts.

Unfortunately, it is different — rather depressing — with what is happening now. The report by Goswami tells us something of political in-fighting among students and local residents which has caused serious uncertainties about the proposed centenary celebration of our old institution. The possibility of the 'festival' being held in the near future is rather dim unless the District Commissioner of the town discards what Goswami describes guardedly as his 'silent role' in favour of a positive intervention. Meanwhile, old students of the school, now residing in Dhaka, such as the Finance Minister, a just retired high ranking UN official, several former district commissioners, doctors and the governor of the central bank, not to mention a handful of journalists, can work out a plan to honour the institution that, in the past, produced gold medalists of all-India fame, fighters against the British rule, social workers and writers.

My colleague, Waheedul Haq talks about other educational institutions, schools and colleges, which may be soon completing their centenaries or have recently done so. Situated in different district towns — district of older times, not the sub-divisions upgraded without much mental preparation — they were set up in another age, in the age of philanthropy, a thirst for modern English education and absentee landlordism, in the order. Are all these institutions in a state of decline, no longer living up to the tradition of their individual glorious past? I hope not. But they are all caught in the challenges of the changing times, such as politicisation, bureaucratic bunglings and mindless in-fighting among student groups leading to senseless violence. As I said metaphorically at the start of this piece, there are the lengthening shadows, the dimming sunlight and darkening Ashar sky.

One does not think of one's hometown all that much, especially if one is away from it for a long period, as I have been from Maulvi Bazar for decades. I just cannot decide when I should pay a visit and suffer a few shocks. The roads will look narrower than they do in my imagination, houses pathetically rundown, the "Choumohoni" — the main shopping centre or maybe it has another name — bigger, dirtier and noisier, and even the football field facing my century-old school will seem too tiny to be no more than an apology for a village playground.

Yet, Maulvi Bazar has a powerful presence in my sub-conscious, I realised it with some intensity during the war of our liberation in 1971.

Then working in Singapore, I was asked by my newspaper to write a colour piece on any town or village of Bangladesh, one that might capture the mood of the time. I wrote about Maulvi Bazar.

I depicted it as a 'dying town' which had lost its soul. In fact, the piece was a profile, not of the town itself, but of a young friend of mine whom I knew as an outgoing teenager who used to help his father in running a ramshackle old printing press. Then, as he grew up and went to school, he developed an interest in music. So, whenever I went home during my university vacations, he would come over to our house and sing for hours. Then, we would go for long walks by the riverside. He would talk about his frustration as an unsuccessful singer, of his loneliness and of his sheer despair of living in a town that offered him nothing.

Then, after a lapse of a few years, when I paid another visit to Maulvi Bazar, I was told by one of my brothers, that my friend had lost his mind, gone mad. He could be seen walking down the road, wearing almost next to nothing, muttering to himself, avoided passing by his father's printing press for fear of running into my friend. I knew there was probably nothing I could do to help him. The fact that I did not even think of doing something for him is what later made me rather angry with myself.

If my friend had lost his sanity, so had Maulvi Bazar lost its soul. This is what made my hometown a dying one. I prayed that the emergency of Bangladesh would help this faceless, insignificant town rediscover its soul and that someone would be singing again, walking down the riverside to watch the sunset over Moni. That was what my hope for

Bangladesh was all about. The piece meant something to quite a few of my readers in Singapore, who had some connections with Sylhet and believed in the War of Liberation for Bangladesh. Among them was my long-lost cousin from Nagaland, Mani Chandola, married to an Indian journalist, Harish. Mani's father, K V Chusa who, as a Deputy Magistrate in Assam, had been a colleague of my father and uncle — this is what made Mani my adopted cousin — eventually became a member of the Indian parliament from one of the eastern-most states of India. Another was an equally big surprise, Mushahid Ali, a Singaporean of Sylhet origin, who had made a career as a diplomat in the city republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. By now, he has probably become a Singapore ambassador somewhere or retired from the service.

So, Maulvi Bazar found a place in the international media. Whether it made a difference to the future of my hometown, to the centenary celebration of its century-old school some 20 years later, is another matter.

If only I had the time and energy, I would have started travelling around the country, preferably by public transport, from one town to another, feeling the noise, smell and dirt in each place. I would visit the local college, sit down with students in the shade of a mango tree and find out what they believe in and what they want. I would eat my food in local restaurants, visit the bazars and see what the prices are like. I would get sick from time to time, look for non-existent medical help but would not think of abandoning the trip. I would not offer instant answers to problems of any of these towns, because I would have none. Instead, I would listen and find out what people know, want and even read.

Yes, even read, would visit the public libraries and see what new books have been added to the bookshelf and, what's more important, what people read instead of watching the video. There will be times when I will wonder if this is my country, the country I believe in.

Then, I will make a surprise visit to Maulvi Bazar, see for myself if I rediscovered its soul after liberation and, what's of more immediate concern, if we can all do something for the centenary celebration of our old school, before another century passes us by — or our children or grand children — in silence.