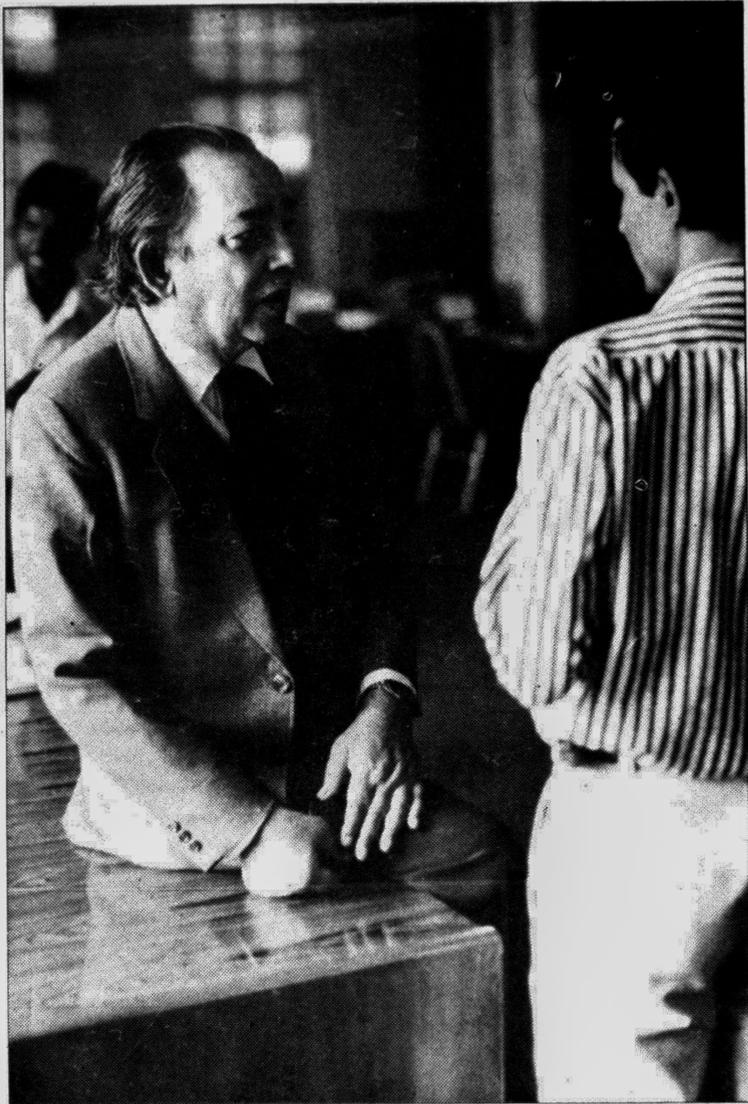


Remembering Our Founder Editor

By Mahfuz Anam



THE MENTOR: The man who made the move.

In Memory of S M Ali

By A K N Ahmed

S M Ali was a great friend of mine. I cannot recollect exactly when I first met him. All that I 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 a very fair complexion, 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 his

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 only to add years to life he tried to add life to his years.

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 his 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 the 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 SM Ali he narrated how kind the lady was to him and how on more than one occasion 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 worked out. Later in 1957 when he lived with us for some time 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 Post*, *Straits 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

ON the occasion of S.M. Ali's 70th birthday we most respectfully and gratefully remember the man who got us all started. It was under the enlightened, visionary and committed leadership of this renowned journalist that this paper saw the light of the day. Those of us who had the opportunity to be with him at that auspicious moment of *Daily Star's* birth felt exceptionally honoured and privileged to be associates of this great man who was about to set a new standard of English language journalism in this country.

His dreams were many. He wanted to make his new paper the voice of patriotism, truth and freedom. He wanted to train his young lieutenants to be objective, fair and fearless. He wanted us all to have a special pride in this profession which will help us to rise above petty and sectarian interest and focus our attention to the bigger interest of the society.

All these qualities he would try to transmit to us through endless discussions. Most of all he would do this with examples. Even at that advanced age, — and with considerable illnesses, which we came to know at the very end of his life — he would put in more hours than most of us. Almost always I would find him already in his room by the time I would arrive at the office. Again it was very seldom that he would depart from the office before me. We repeatedly urged him to keep shorter hours to which he would always turn a deaf ear. In desperation we bought a long couch for his room on which we forced him to lie down for a few minutes every day. This was as much he would allow us to indulge him.

He would read his paper thoroughly and by the time he was at the office by 10:30 a.m. he was all prepared to brief us on the editorials of the day. All this perhaps would sound quite normal. What proves my point is the fact that after briefing us about what to write on, he would pull out his own editorial already finished and typed. Almost always he would submit his writings in typed form, a habit many editors find demeaning to have.

He always had time for his colleagues, especially for the young ones. I remember seeing him sitting hours together with young reporters, helping them improve their reports. For those reports already published, he would call the reporters afterwards and show them his corrected versions of their published reports.

Mornings were usually kept aside for meetings with senior staff, including the management and commercial people. Those were extremely trying days for *The Star*. He would spend hours talking to us as to how to improve circulation and advertisement.

Every aspect of the paper received his attention. It was my privilege to be with him in every step of the way. When he would see me spend a lot of time on financial and management issues and miss out on writing he would remind me that "if you want to be remembered and respected as a journalist you must never neglect your writing. Without regular writing you can never be a journalist. So however busy you are, you must write, even if it means going without sleep for a time."

I am overcome with sadness when I think what a wonderful newspaper this country would have got if he was with us today and how we all would have been better trained to carry out his dreams if he got some more time to train us. Still we are determined to give shape to his dream of making *The Daily Star* a paper of international standard in every way. We, and I most of all, are acutely aware of the tremendous shortcoming we suffer from, yet keeping in mind his teachings, and have been trying to make his paper worth his memory. For all that *The Daily Star* has achieved in the last eight years, credit entirely belongs to our founder-editor but for whose training we could not have come so far. We recall the memories of S.M. Ali with pride and joy. On this occasion we rededicate ourselves to fulfilling his dream of making his paper the best English language newspaper in the country, and one of the best in the region.

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From SM Ali's World

Some Reflections on Our Politicians — And the Case of Three Envelopes

When it comes to seeing leading figures of the last government it is said to be different this time from previous occasions. For a variety of reasons, they are not particularly viable, except, in the case of some, in the luxurious seclusion of the parliament or, as in a few cases, in the suffocating isolation of a court room. They need more time to come in from the cold.

We can wait.

WITH every change of government in the country, we open our doors to leaders and functionaries of the ousted administration. They have plenty of time to kill; many need sympathetic shoulders to cry on; and some just want to become friends again with those who, until the other day, were just useful contacts.

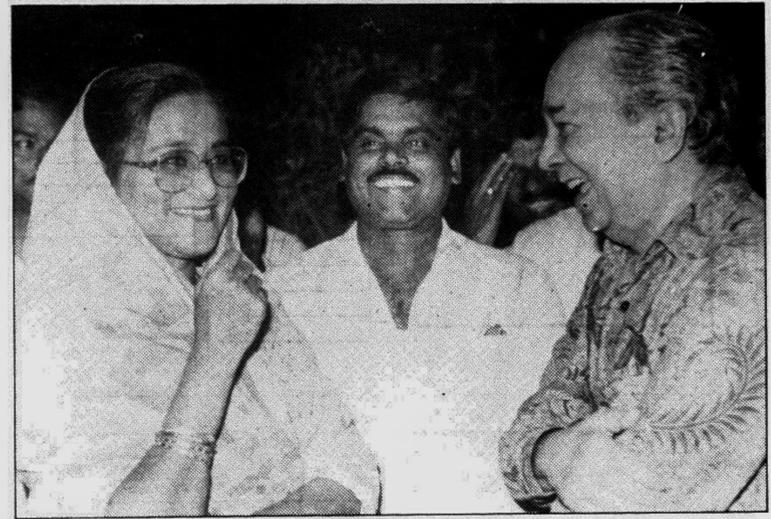
Many of them still have the old habit of talking non-stop, quite forcefully, often detailing the mistakes and blunders of their own leadership, which led

seeking as any young politician of today. Get to know him well, but trust him at your own risk.

During the second phase when the "man with a promise" turns into "man in power," the transformation can follow more than one unpredictable course. In all fairness, I will concede that if the touch of power brings out the worst in some, if not most, politicians, a few may look upon their new challenge with a degree of humility, perhaps even with a realisation that this chance of do-

power. But, then, what kind of category shall we put him in — "A Man Out in the Cold"? Perhaps, or, as one politician friend once suggested, "A Man in Peace with Himself?"

Perhaps, we should not look for a stereotype among those who are out of power. They come in all shapes and forms. Some are bitter and lonely, but some return to their original professions, if they had one, with a show of vigour, even complaining that their partners had neglected their obligations



With the then leader of opposition, now the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina Wazed.

to the fall of the government. "Had I been in charge..." but the sentence is seldom finished.

In a way, "Had I been in charge..." should be a good topic for a conversation piece between *The Daily Star* and a former Number Two of the previous regime. After all, a real second-in-command is supposed to be always within the whispering distance from the big boss, a de facto Number One in the shadow. The question is, is there any genuine second-in-command in any regime — or, for that matter, in any political party — in this country? If it is any consolation to anyone here, the same question can be raised about most democracies, especially in South Asia.)

If we cannot make a former Number Two join a conversation on "Had I been in charge..." how can we ever make a politician talk on the second most fascinating (to me anyway) topic we have in mind: "What is the worst political mistake of my life?"

Why should a politician admit his past mistakes since he must remain free to make new ones?

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My own love-hate relationship with a politician — almost any politician — in this country has always followed three distinct phases. Each one has its own charm and frustration, a few hilarious moments and some professional satisfaction.

However, seldom does any of the phases produced genuine human contacts or any intellectual interaction. (My apologies if I use "intellectual" in a totally wrong context.)

During the three different phases, the same politician undergoes total transformations.

He starts off as a "man with a promise" when, being far removed from the corridor of power, he talks in idealistic terms, listens to others with a show of attention and, from time to time, emphasises his commitment to what he calls constructive politics. He is visible in newspaper offices where he patiently cultivates journalists. From time to time, he manages to convey the impression that he is much closer to the leader — the leader, I mean — than most people think and that he has already been asked to prepare his inputs for the next election manifesto of the party. But this "man of promise" can sometimes be most discontented.

For one thing, he is concerned about the growing infighting within the organization, about the increasing alienation of the younger generation, to which he himself belongs even if he is past 40, by the elders and, last but not the least, about anti-party rumours circulated by a section of the hostile press.

In short, he is a good company and useful up to a point, but unreliable and as self-

ing some good for the country may not come again. A man in this rare category works hard, retains something of the idealism he once possessed as a political activist and clears his office files with reasonable speed. What's more, he himself reads most of the daily newspapers and weekly journals, without relying on his staff to provide him with a distorted summary of news and views from the daily press. (The distorted version of what appears in the daily press usually places exaggerated emphasis on praises showered on the minister, plays down constructive suggestions made by newspapers and blacks out direct criticism of any move made by the boss.)

In time, he may turn a seemingly unimportant and unglamorous ministerial portfolio placed under his care, such as livestock and fisheries, rural cooperatives and environment, into a major triumph in development. But this success does not necessarily ensure his political survival. Above all, while he is there in the government, he remains in a minority. A "man in power" is more likely to be one whose vision of yesterday has turned into an ambition for tomorrow and he can no longer distinguish one from the other. His concern over broad national issue lingers on for a while, but soon the range narrows down to such matters as his political future, proximity to the leader, the TV and press coverage and the attention he commands from the leader and his colleagues at cabinet meetings. If he is pleased with the distribution of portfolios in the cabinet — he has probably got the ministry he wanted — he remains concerned about rumours of a next reshuffle and, worse still, about who among his colleagues is eyeing his portfolio. He knows he must protect his position, but he is anything but sure as to how he should go about it. He assumes that at some point a private chat with the leader could serve a purpose, but he fears that it would reveal his own sense of insecurity. In the end he becomes suspicious and even paranoid, with his attention getting increasingly focused on his political survival at the cost of his ministerial responsibilities.

The transformation casts its shadow over the dealings of our "man in power" with his former friends, the journalists. Depending on his mood and/or his immediate concern, he can be alternately aloof or arrogant, friendly or preoccupied. But he tries his best, often with little success, to give the impression that he remains in full command of the situation. From time to time he invites a friend from the press for what he calls "a chat at home." He uses such occasions for picking up gossip, not ideas, or for delivering monologues, with the visitor serving as nothing other than a listening board. The exercise helps in bringing down the tension level of the minister.

In a matter of year, our "man in power" turns out to be no more than a shadow of the "man with a promise" that we knew in the past.

When you face the first major crisis, open the envelope, marked one, and read my advice. You open the second envelope during the second crisis and the third one in the next one.

The new head of government listened to all this with a polite show of interest, as he (or she, as the case may be) said goodbye to his predecessor.

For a while there was a honeymoon between the people and the new leader. Then, in a matter of months, problems cropped up. The leader was ... despair. He went to the iron safe, brought out the envelope marked one, opened it and read the advice. It was simple: "Blame your predecessor for all your problems."

The leader followed the advice. At a mass rally and later during a TV address, he put all the blame for the troubles facing the country on the previous administration. "Give me more time to solve the problems! I have inherited..." he said.

The solution worked. People went back to work, the transport strike was over and the universities reopened.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the situation got out of control again. This time, the railway went on strike, newspapers brought up charges of corruption and trade circles circulated rumours of devaluation.

In despair, the leader brought out the second envelope, opened it and read the advice: "Announce a shake up of the administration and a major reshuffle of the cabinet."

The advice was scrupulously followed. It worked. At a mass rally, people cheered the leader who smiled and waved. It was like a second honeymoon.

It turned out to be a short honeymoon. Within a few months, another crisis hit the country. The patience of the country seemed to be running out, while the leader was left with no choice but to open the third — and the last — envelope and read the advice which his predecessor had written in hand. The advice was simple: "Prepare three envelopes for your successor."

with almost criminal indifference, still using a bit of ministerial rhetoric. It is easier return to the old profession if it is in teaching, legal practice, medicine or in accountancy.

But it can be awkward if it is in indenting trade or in running an industry that is included in the list of defaulters in bank loans.

Well, life in Bangladesh for all former "men in power" gets harder every day!

WHENEVER there is a change of government in a crisis-torn country, the following story is repeated by someone who has a good sense of humour.

The outgoing head of the government was paying a farewell call on his successor.

After they had exchanged pleasantries, the new leader asked his predecessor if he had any advice to offer about running the administration.

"Oh yes," said the old fox. "I have left three sealed envelopes in the iron safe, marked one, two and three."

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THE LAST DAY AT WORK ... Among colleagues a few hours before he left for Bangkok for treatment.

"Welcome back," so we say to the many who has just lost

(Extracted from S M Ali : A Commemorative Volume)