

Face to Face

Ahsan Habib: Drawing Lines on Lighter Sides of Life

AHSAN Habib is a name associated with the cartoon magazine, *Ummad*. Although he did his masters in geography, his passion for drawing cartoons present from his early childhood days defined his career.

He was born in a family where everyone was part of some cultural activity. His father was a regular writer for a magazine called 'Detective'. His mother also contributed to it, albeit less frequently.

"We were always excited when one of my father's writings were published. We all rushed to see them!" he recalled while talking to the Daily Star at his office in Dhanmondi.

One of his earliest memories is of a time when he could hardly sit anywhere without his eldest brother (Humayun Ahmed, the prominent novelist and playwright) calling out, "Go get a cigarette." This, to little Ahsan was a hectic job, as he frequently had to go out of the house to get them. His brother always had the Bristol band. In order to save himself the pain of going in and out all the time, he borrowed some money from his elder sister and bought a whole carton of Bristol cigarettes. He was very pleased with himself the next time his brother ordered him to get a pack of cigarettes. However, something was different. Instead of saying, "Go get a Bristol", he said "Go get a Capstan!"

"I was devastated. 'Why do you want Capstan? You always wanted Bristol,' I cried. When he found out what I did, he felt obliged to stick to Bristol."

His elder brother, who happens to be science-fiction writer Zafar Iqbal, was his inspiration in drawing cartoons.

"Actually, it is he who should've been a cartoonist. He was very good at it. He drew for the JSD newspaper, *Gonokantha*, and he even got arrested by the Mukti Bahini for his work. I liked to watch him work and wanted to be like him when I grew up, that is, as a cartoonist," he said. "That is how I entered the world of cartoons."

It was after completing his matriculation examinations in 1978, that he along with four other friends brought out *Ummad*.

"We were all good at painting. One of us, Ishti-aque, was always full of ideas. Students often brought out magazines on a small scale, among themselves. On the contrary, we decided to bring one out professionally. It was a major hit. Everyone accepted it and liked it very much. That was our inspiration to move ahead," he recalled.

At that tender age, they had no set values that they

By Navine Murshid

enjoy cartoons. Even the illiterate can perceive the messages they bear and laugh at their wit.

On using cartoons as a political weapon, Habib feels that it is only Shishir Bhattacharya who could do this and do this well. He considers himself a 'social cartoonist' and, hence, away from the political arena. He feels that in this respect there has been little work. He remembers a cartoonist during the liberation war, who was jailed for drawing a cartoon where war was going on in East Pakistan while cows were having

We once did a cartoon of Rezaur Rahman (of 'Ain-O-Adalat' fame). His sidekicks kept chanting, 'They let you down'. Then he said, 'They did this because I'm famous.' You see, he understood this. Many do not. We still haven't learnt to laugh at ourselves."

Habib thinks that a cartoon can only be judged to be a good cartoon when everyone, including the ones ridiculed, can enjoy it. If, after seeing the cartoon, someone (the subject) feels like killing the cartoonist, then the cartoon is actually worthless.

that we made a mistake we had to stick to it because we had already made the declaration," he sighed.

The other problem the team faces because of the name is the reluctance with which companies place advertisements in their magazine.

"Say, we went to this big company for an advert. They see the name and they think that we must be crazy as well and hence are reluctant to give us ads. What they do not realise is that one *Ummad* magazine is read by four people. One person buys it and shares it with three others. Hence, when our circulation is 10,000, it is actually 40,000. So, I think if a company wants publicity for its products, they should place adverts in *Ummad*."

About maintaining the quality of the magazine, Habib feels that they have always done their best to keep up with the standard they themselves have set.

"Nobody would want to draw badly. I am always trying to do my best. For example, at one time I was an avid reader of *Masud Rana*. But I don't read them anymore. I've grown out of them. But they have new readers today. Similarly, our readers, who consist of a certain age group or level, are enjoying our work. As they grow older, they may grow out of it, but a new readership will be formed who will enjoy *Ummad*," he said.

He recognises that when there are deadlines to meet, when cartoonists are under pressure to bring out the magazine within a certain time period, that is when their productivity may come to a standstill.

"For that reason we welcome new artists to share with us their ideas and wit," he said.

Sometimes, the type of humour portrayed is crude and in bad taste. On this Habib said that it is not possible to be perfect.

"Then again, it is often seen that some readers enjoy these crude jokes. If we publish an 'intellectual cartoon' many may not even understand what we are trying to say. What we pro-

"Former Indian prime minister, Narsima Rao, collected all the cartoons that were drawn of him so as to find out his mistakes, to understand the hidden messages. In Bangladesh, it is not always that people can take it easily. They usually take it as a personal offence. We once did a cartoon of Rezaur Rahman (of 'Ain-O-Adalat' fame). His sidekicks kept chanting, 'They let you down'. Then he said, 'They did this because I'm famous.' You see, he understood this. Many do not. We still haven't learnt to laugh at ourselves."

wanted to pervade. They were too young to think and then work. For the small group it was doing something they enjoyed.

"We didn't think of the impact when we started off. I can say things like we wanted to teach the society something or the other. But it wasn't anything like that. People have a way of interpreting things after something comes out. For example, when Picasso painted *Guernica* he probably did not think of the war. He sat at home and painted to his heart's content. It was the critics who thought it had an affiliation with the war."

"Our situation may be something like that. But at that time, we simply brought out a magazine for fun, and later continued with it because it made good money," he said.

Later, as they matured, they tried to portray the problems the society was facing. They realised that cartoon is a universal language and people need not be able to read in order to

grass in the west.

"I cannot recall his name, but this incident shows that cartoons have been used as a weapon against oppression for quite a long time, although on a small scale," he said.

He refutes the allegations that *Ummad* does not have such cartoons. He feels that in our society politics is an inherent part of life. Politics is bound to be there. In his magazine, politics is present in the form of dialogues. It may not be pronounced, but effective nevertheless.

Cartoons have a role to play in society because it allows people to laugh at their own mistakes. Habib feels that it depends on how people accept such criticisms.

"Former Indian prime minister, Narsima Rao, collected all the cartoons that were drawn of him so as to find out his mistakes, to understand the hidden messages. In Bangladesh, it is not always that people can take it easily. They usually take it as a personal offence."

Ummad has been criticised for copying MAD magazine. Resemblance does not essentially end with the title (*Ummad* means mad). Habib said that they brought out this magazine at a time when MAD was what they read. At that time, they thought that naming the magazine *Ummad* was a very smart thing to do. However, later he realised it had not been so smart after all. The cultural, social and economic differences between Bangladesh and the western world are so great that the two enjoy different types of humour. What is funny in their surroundings may not be so in this part of the world. Therefore it was only the name that they 'stole'. The material was completely theirs. Still, as they named it *Ummad*, they had to live with the criticism of *Ummad* being a replica of MAD. Today he feels that they shouldn't have called it *Ummad* because it failed to give them recognition for their creativity.

"Even after we realised



duce is in accordance with what our readers want. We receive plenty of letters each day, through which we can determine the mentality of our readers and hence produce cartoons in line with what they want."

If the jokes are in bad taste, it means that the readers have bad taste. Is that so?

"No, no, that's not what I meant. Sometimes a few mishaps occur accidentally which is regretted," he clarified.

The *Ummad* team has a lot of plan for the future, although they do not know whether they will be able to turn them to reality. Although it is difficult to live solely by selling comic books, they have achieved just that.

One of their major projects is to bring out joke books. They are in the process of compiling about a thousand jokes, including some they have themselves given birth to. They also have production of posters, cards

and stickers included in their agenda.

Today we see Hallmark and Archies monopolising the market. These are foreign enterprises, with foreign humour. We plan to take over the market. It is our, that is, home produced products that should rule, because we Bangladeshis understand each other the best."

Ummad tasted success when they started producing stickers. These stickers played a role in creating public awareness such as clean environment, toilet manners and the like. However, an unscrupulous group of people brought out a sticker which read 'Patri Chai' (bride wanted) which guys stuck on each other. The blame fell on the *Ummad* clan.

Today, stickers by *Ummad* are produced only on the occasion of *Ekushey* February (February 21) which are sold in the *Ekushey* Fair. They always try to give a meaningful,

worthy message to make the world a better place, without burdening the people.

The *Ummad* bunch had produced a package programme that resembled something like a mad-show. They incorporated the ideas portrayed in the magazine to produce a magazine show. It was the first ever package programme submitted to BTV. However, it was rejected.

"It was probably the first package programme they rejected!" Habib joked.

"We do not have the mentality to accept such radical changes. It was a good programme and in fact BTV was the loser."

Nevertheless, he feels that it is his readers who gave him the recognition of a cartoonist. He had the disadvantage of not being a graduate from the Institute of Fine Arts and hence not an artist. Yet, his fans gave him a lot more recognition than he hoped for.

Any message for the readers?

"Buy *Ummad*!"

When I was a Teenager

HE is one of the pioneer physicians in the country and a National Professor. The eminent doctor is also both the first Bangladeshi Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and a professor in the field of Child Health in Bangladesh. Doctor Mohammad Rafi Khan has relentlessly pursued his ambition for a Bangladesh with healthier children and achieved major breakthrough in the fields of medicine. More popularly known as M R Khan, he is the founder-president of the Shishu Shastha Foundation in Mirpur, a bold venture extending not only health for children but empowering mothers and providing education. The 71-year old specialist gave us a wonderful opportunity to chance upon the episodes that made him grow, from a teenager to a young practitioner, and to the man he is now.

Young Khan hailed from the village of Rasulpur of Satkhira and was the second among four brothers. So what dominated the early country life? M R Khan wanted to start his story by recalling his passion for football. As a youngster he used love every moment with a ball at his feet. He was his school's team captain (which happens to be the more than a century old Prem Nath High School, better known as P.M. High School) in Rasulpur and for the Rasulpur village team. He

was an inspirational member; in one particular year the Rasulpur team clinched a record 13 trophies! Injuries too were not to hinder a probable future football star; after fracturing a wrist in a match collision, tennis balls would be replacements for a normal game! Keeping up with the famous Calcutta league of those days and watching teams like Mohammedans (Calcutta), Mohun Bagan and East Bengal were also routine for Khan. And he enjoyed it even more because of the special complimentary gallery tickets procured from being associated with the acclaimed Azad newspaper of Moulana Akram Khan. Akram Khan, as Khan later found out happened to be his "nana!"

And so that lead us to talk about his parents. Father late Abdul Bari Khan was a noted social figure in Satkhira. So much so that every person everywhere knew him. He was intensively involved in numerous social activities, being founder of the prominent Satkhira Darbar Hall. Mother Jaira Khanam also supplemented on her husband's work. Many people of the towns and villages used to come and stay at the Khan residence to continue their education or earn their livelihoods and Mrs Jaira Khanam was chief in looking after them.

Young Khan parents were quite liberal towards their children. In fact his father

IN CONVERSATION WITH M R KHAN

By A. Maher



This photograph of Dr M R Khan was taken in August 1946, when he was a 1st year medical student.

Photo courtesy: Family Album

used to encourage his children to learn from the social spheres of society and had considerable influence on their lives. Home was quite cosy and richly furnished for those days probably because Father Khan was a contractor by profession as well as *zamindar*. When they were in Calcutta, he used to take them to theaters like the Star theater and insisted on the closet rows in front of the stage. These seats, we learnt, in was 50 taka each in 1940's currency!

Professor Khan insists he was not a wonderfully brilliant student, but somewhere a bit above the average lot. After leaving Prem Nath High School, he went to Calcutta to become a student of the reputed Presidency College in 1943. Here, among a host of glittering names in the world of scholars that student Khan got exposed to, was his new teacher the late Khudrat-E-Khuda, then teaching chemistry. We heard a little anecdote about in the process of applying for the Mohsin Scholarship. The Scholarship had two criteria - one had to be sufficiently meritorious and sufficiently in need of financial assistance. Now M R Khan was, as mentioned

before, from a quite well off family given his father's *zamindari*. So when teacher Khudrat-E-Khuda inquired as to why he should be given the award even though he was hardly in need of one, the plain-faced student replied, "Only the well off come to Presidency College and I am here. If you think I deserve it, you can give it to me." His mentor was so surprised at this answer he just shook his head. After the application were processed, M R Khan was on the approved list!

After Presidency, Khan moved to the Calcutta Medical College in 1943 around the age of 17. As he recalls, the competition and academic challenges at this college was more fierce than the other institutions he had already completed. Yet studies were absorbing and time could be managed to go to cinemas with friends. Regarding *addas* he was not that inclined to "spot and stationary" ones and participated more on group ventures into city sights or a vacation trip. In many of these he was often accompanied by his close friend the late M R Chowdhury, who passed away a few days back.

During his teenage days M R Khan was a lively and cultural-minded youth. He relished things that presented activity and was always one thing or the other. In Satkhira, he was also an active performer on stage, acting in theaters plays through school. One

instance he likes to remember is when 14-year old Khan was the "Mohon Lal" of the famous *Siraj-ud-doula* play. During holidays picnics would be the order of the day and these were specially noisy and fun. A little tree-climbing around the school-premises was also revealed, along with the brushes (some literally!) with some of the wild boars and foxes roaming the area. And to round up a truly adventurous soul, bird hunting was there as well. Now, here was something that Khan tried to talk us out from inquiring. But the Daily Star prevailed. The Professor was destined to arm himself with surgical pricks in place of a 0.22-bore rifle!

The present day child specialist also had something to say about the present generation. He was particularly upset over some elements in our system of education that was being "heaped upon the poor little souls". He was referring to his daily brush with his little "clients". "Nowadays there is no consideration for the amount of work given to children in the primary classes. Their every-day routine is too tight and going by the minute hand! A child has work at school, comes home and does his homework and when he is done he is just in time for bed. This only reflects the crying need for qualified teachers in the country, both in this area and in the higher tiers of learning."