

**Lest we forget**

On the third anniversary of death of one of our celebrated poets and a renowned national and international civil servant, A Z M Obaidullah Khan, we recall his valued association as an esteemed columnist. In paying our homage we reproduce one of his weekly columns, published under his rubric 'Do I Dare' in The Daily Star on October 17, 1997.

**They dare to dream and dare to act****A Z M O B A I D U L L A H K H A N**

*I grow old I grow old  
I shall wear the bottom of my trou-  
sers rolled...  
Do I dare to part my hair behind  
Do I dare!*

I never dared except for once. I was a mature seventeen then. Not me alone, but with my peer groups. Our elders advised caution. We said 'No'. Our language is our birthright and our culture. We spoke truth to power and power succumbed.

Teenage, perhaps, is a magic age. Twenty-seven years back, it was the seventeen-year-olds who flaunted death and agony in their face. They came from the cities and from the countryside. Together they won the freedom for their people to shape their own lives and the country themselves.

Power operates at various sites. A large number of autonomous darlings or should I say, movements from below are required to transform the power-relations. An Asian minister of agriculture, herself a political and social activist once told me about the powerlessness of the peasant farmers and the marginalised women in rural Bangladesh. "Subvert authoritarian male ego at home, workplace and beyond," she said. "Subvert downward directed power at strategic sites where it impinges on the creative freedom of the farming communities and the disadvantaged. Subvert reductionist science alienated from social practice. Women and peasant farmers are helpless individually. Organised, they are empowered. They can then stand up to the establishment -- political, bureaucratic or pedagogic. And dependence is transformed into collective self-reliance."

As I was listening to the minister, I recalled what a grandfather peasant farmer told me in China long time ago. "We, the peasants, are like cherry-flowers. Red and beautiful to look at. But one gust of wind we are scattered about. If we get together in a bundle like the roots of a tree, come hail or storm, we shall overcome."

Professor Yunus, who dared to turn the banking system on its head, has proved it not only for the resource poor women in the countryside of Bangladesh but elsewhere. Peer-groups of the disadvantaged

have got together and claimed their fundamental right of access to credit. Today, they are the majority shareholders of the Grameen Bank. Power-relations are changing not only within their homes, but also in the community and the sophisticated banking institution.

In a similar vein, women farmers in Tengal and in the villages of Western Java, Jogjakarta, and Madras are standing up to the powerful pesticide-lobby and the conventional green-revolution wisdom. They are saying 'No' to chemicals and asserting community rights over seed-selection, preservation and germ-preservation.

Ibu Sudaryanti is 45 years old and a mother of four children. She and her

getting together in their own field school, farmers are very dependent on pesticides dealers and government officials. If there are a few pests in the field, these farmers run to agriculture officers for help and spray pesticides. Now, they are able to think for themselves. They make their own observations and discoveries. They take their decisions and act on their own."

Another anecdote from Tonle Bate, a village approximately 35km from Phnom Penh: It was April, 1996. Farmers there were conducting their own field-school for growing poison-free rice. The minister for agriculture came to visit.

After his formal speech he sat down on the ground with farmers

Scientists: "Why do you ask?"

Farmers: "Because the short-horned grasshopper only eats small amounts of rice leaf. And the long-horned grasshopper, which is more common, eats the egg masses of stemborers. Why should we kill them?"

Farmers learn to work with nature. They become experts. As a farmer-researcher in Kalensari village in Western Java told me, "Guests come to visit and learn about our story. I tell them we hold doctors-in-rice-production."

Coming back to our neighbouring country, let me recount the story of a day in the life of Sreemati Radha, a one acre farmer in the village of Melgoltivakkam in Madras.

hills per pair.

A nearby group is observing the spider population while yet another is carrying out defoliation experiments against leaf-folders.

By 12:00 noon, the field work is over. Radha and her friends clean their feet in the water-channel and come to the makeshift discussion space, open on all sides with palm thatch on top. They squat on the mats covering the mud floor. One draws the sample plant. Another one looks at the insects she has collected through a magnifying glass and draws the same. Her little son sits beside her carrying the crayons she will use for colouring the insect.

Another one struggles with the pen and paper to write the brief analysis

**"Among the Kung San hunter gatherers of the Kalahari desert," writes Carl Sagan, "when two men... would begin to argue the women would reach for their poison-arrows to put the weapons out of harm's way." And he wonders whether in our world today, "the women -- and the children -- will put the poison arrows out of harm's way."**

and asked what they were doing. The farmers explained the role of rice-pests pointing to a series of large eco-system diagrams which they had prepared during the preceding weeks. At a certain point, the minister interrupted:

Minister: "How do you know that the spiders are eating the leaf-hoppers?"

Farmers: "Because, sir, we have observed it in the insect-zoo."

The farmers then showed the minister the zoo which they had constructed. Inside a 'cage' made from clear plastic was a pot containing a rice plant and a combination of insects. Soon the minister was on his hands and knees with his nose up against the plastic. After some moments he announced "I saw it!" He then turned to the officials who had accompanied him and said "I am learning something from these farmers."

A young researcher thought that he should show off his knowledge and put the farmers in their place:

Researcher: "Spiders can eat leaf-hoppers, but how do you kill grasshoppers? They are too big for the spiders to eat."

Farmers: "What type of grasshoppers are you talking about?"

It is 05:00 am. Smt Radha wakes up earlier than usual. She finishes the laundry soaked the night before and prepares food for her family. By 06:30 am she is already in the tiny vegetable-garden in the backyard. She waters the plants. She goes back to the house to prepare for the weekly training session in the field school of her village, Melgoltivakkam. She gathers her group members Ramani, Ranjani, Rosie, Venita and Yammar. They discuss about the tasks in the field school that day and divide the assignments, namely field experiments, defender-pest dynamics, nutrient management etc.

It is 07:30 am. Some 30 farmers get together in the field. Mr Raghu, a paddy-farmer in less than one hectare holding explains the flow of the day's assignment for the five groups and the rationale behind each activity.

After this Radha and her group, as also others, armed with their own note-books, sweep nets, and plastic bags go to their respective areas in the farm-site. It is divided into six plots for the five groups.

Radha's group observe the water in the field. It is stagnating. Divided in pairs, they calculate the pests and natural enemies in approximately 10

report for the group. Some others compute the numbers of tillers and number of leaves per tiller.

The charts and reports of each group are held up by designated members for all to see.

Smt Ramani from Radha's group presents her report. They have observed 12 pests and around 35 natural enemies. The ratio being 1 is to 3, the ecological balance is most favourable. She explains that the field needs to be dried and top dressing applied to the plant.

Another group reports that the number of friendly insects identified in the field are lower than the previous week. A farmer asks what will happen to the insect-pests in response to that situation.

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