

IN MEMORIAM

Remembering Azim Bhai

MAHFUZ ANAM

He was a most unlikely media man. In fact all his life he was a very low profile, self-effacing, unassuming, shy, and quiet person. Happy to be left alone to his work. If anybody ever tried to predict the future course of Azimur Rahman's life, being the founder chairman of Mediaworld, the owning company of The Daily Star, would not have been included in that prediction. When invited to join the Mediaworld Board by A.S.M. Mahmud and Latifur Rahman he was very surprised, as he subsequently told us. I learnt later that it took quite a bit of persuasion to get him even to come to one of our initial meetings which was held at the Gulshan residence of our founding Managing Director A.S.M. Mahmud

This meeting was the first time that both SM Ali, the paper's first editor and myself its executive editor had ever set our eyes on him. I remember the meeting, during which he hardly spoke, very distinctly. He said he was there primarily to hear what others had to say and that he was still to make up his mind, which he would do only after learning more about the planned paper and after meeting its editor and others.

By the time the meeting ended a complete transformation had taken place in Azim Bhai's attitude towards our project and he decided to become a part of the paper's investors. The magical change came about, as he later told us all, by meeting S.M. Ali. He said that he had never met a journalist by whom he was as impressed as he was by our founding editor. He said that if Mr. Ali would be the editor then he would unhesitantly invest in the paper.

As a man who did not know much about newspapers and who never imagined himself to be involved with one, his fundamental awareness of the need for a free and independent newspaper was remarkable. He seemed to have instinctively felt that Bangladesh needed a paper like The Daily Star and that he was determined to do his utmost in building it.



That was how a very unlikely entry of Azimur Rahman in the world of the media took place. In our first formal board meeting he was elected as the chair of Mediaworld, a position he was repeatedly re-elected to until his untimely death.

Discovery of Ali Bhai's cancer

and his succumbing to it within 19 months of the paper's founding created a severe crisis in the leadership during which Azim Bhai performed roles far beyond the call of a Board's chair. Becoming S.M. Ali's successor without much of his talent and experience was a challenge

that I would not have been able to rise up to without the support, encouragement, and commitment of Azim Bhai.

The most important part he played at this crucial time of transition was to encourage me to play the role that so untimely fell on my unprepared shoulders. He stood by me and made up with his support what I so obviously lacked in confidence and skill. While he was most helpful to me, he was also extremely conscious of separation of the institution of the editor and that of the Board. Thus he laid down the most significant practice in this newspaper of a clear separation of the role of the board of directors and that of the management of the newspaper, and the totally independent role of its editor.

The present success of The Daily Star, however modest, is due as much to its editorial independence as it to its modern and scientific management under the guidance of an enlightened, idealistic, patriotic board of directors with unquestioned integrity and honesty. Azimur Rahman can be termed to have been the most ideal representative of this board. Simple, honest, idealistic, determined, and committed, he drove us all to strive for higher values and put ethics at the heart of our journalism.

Any successful institution needs many founders. The people who come together at the beginning make a crucial difference as to the future of the organisation that they set up. We at The Daily Star were immensely lucky to have had such a group to give us to a solid start. It was indeed most fortunate for this paper, its management, its employees and especially for this writer that a person of Azimur Rahman's intellectual makeup became the founding chairperson of Mediaworld, the owning company of The Daily Star.

He was a superb institution builder. Never putting his own

person or views before anybody else's and being always open to suggestions, criticisms, and to alternative view points, he was the perfect chairman of the founding Board of a budding new newspaper with its multifaceted challenges. The pressures were many, so were the views as to how to handle them. Azim Bhai, as he was lovingly called by all of us, managed this stream of divergences extremely well and was always able to bring a consensus out of the chaos of opinions, and give the management the most clear and unambiguous direction to move forward.

Always having calm and unperturbed veneer (in the later years he confided that he was not always as calm as he looked) he was always the person on top of the challenges. What was the most significant development for the Star was that the reluctant media investor had, over time, become passionately involved with it. With the passage of time, and as he became more and more exposed to the difficulties of managing and leading a newspaper, especially one that is uncompromisingly non-partisan and ferociously independent, Azim Bhai became more and more attached to the work in the Star. For Board meetings he was almost always the first one to arrive and of course the last one to go. He would prepare meticulously for every one of them and regularly talk to the company secretary and me about decisions taken.

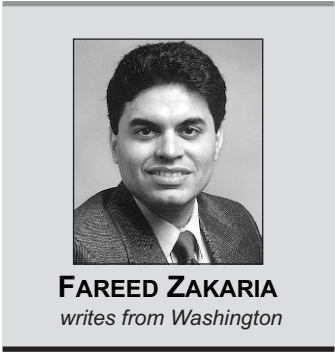
As a man who did not know much about newspapers and who never imagined himself to be involved with one, his fundamental awareness of the need for a free and independent newspaper was remarkable. He seemed to have instinctively felt that Bangladesh needed a paper like The Daily Star and that he was determined to do his utmost in building it. Once in it he gave it his best. With everything he got he protected the paper's independent editorial policy and prevented all sorts of influences from affecting it.

The Daily Star would not have been what it is today without the guiding and loving leadership of its founding chair. May God grant him

Eternal Peace.

Mahfuz Anam is Editor and Publisher of The Daily Star.

What Bush and Kerry missed



FAREED ZAKARIA  
writes from Washington

THE presidential debates are lauded for having been substantive and revealing. In particular, people have noted how rare it is to have a serious discussion about foreign policy these days. Except that we did not have a serious discussion about foreign policy. We had one about Iraq. And thousands of miles away, there is a new world coming into being -- one that America is quite unprepared to handle.

There have been two great shifts

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in the international balance of power over the past 500 years. The first was the rise of Western Europe, which by the late 17th century had become the richest, most dynamic and expansionist part of the globe. The second was the rise of the United States of America, which between the Civil War and World War I became the single most important country in the world. Right now a trend of equal magnitude is taking place -- the rise of Asia, led by China, which will fundamentally reshape the international landscape in the next few decades. For America, whether it is preserving jobs or security, recognizing and adapting to this new world order is key.

China's rise is no longer a matter of the future. It is already the fourth largest economy in the world, and it is growing at three to four times the rate of the first three. It is now the world's largest importer and exporter of many commodities, manufactured products and agricultural goods. It will soon be one of the largest exporters of capital, buying companies across the globe.

India is growing with impressive resilience and determination. And because of its size, it adds another huge weight to the Asian balance.

now submits 1,000 papers a year. With economic growth comes cultural confidence and political assertiveness. The West has long taken Asia for granted, seeing it as an investment opportunity or a stage where Great Power rivalries could be played out, as in Vietnam and Korea. But this too will change. China and India are both proud and ancient civilizations. They are also large internal economies, not totally dependent on exports to the West. (In the wake of the East Asian crisis of 1997, all the East Asian tiger economies collapsed. But China and India grew solidly even when demand from the West dried up.) This rise of confidence is just beginning -- it's clearly visible in trade negotiations -- and will only grow with time.

The United States will remain the most powerful country in the world. But the gap between it and these new Great Powers will slowly shrink. And to continue thriving, it will have to adjust to the rise of Asia. Asians should also hope that America focuses on this new world, because only that Asia's rise happens in a way that is beneficial to both Asia and

IN MEMORIAM

Haroon, my friend

MANZUR MURSHED

He was tall, fair, and handsome. You could pick him out in a crowd, dapper and distinguished, yet modest and self-effacing. He looked more like a professor than the businessman he was. He was also quiet by nature, speaking only when it was necessary to speak, and when he spoke, he spoke with conviction, his resonant voice ringing in the air, his hands, his eyes, and his mouth orchestrating in a supremely convincing manner. The words would sink deep into the mind of the listener.

Such was my childhood friend, Azimur Rahman. We used to call him Haroon. I first met him in Dacca, the then capital of East Bengal, the eastern province of Pakistan, soon to be re-named East Pakistan. This was 1947. Many of the East Bengali Muslim families flocked to Dacca from Calcutta in the wake of the traumatic Partition of India. For those of us who came from Calcutta, Dacca, the sleepy little district town, was a bit of a culture shock. Initially, there was a schism with the local Dacca boys, who spoke Bengali with a Dacca accent and who would treat us as aliens, who spoke Bengali with an accent that sounded strange to their ears. In this milieu, the Calcutta boys found comfort in

would go to Rajendrapur Forest Bungalow by train (there was no road those days) and stay there for two or three days. It was fun, those outings.

We passed our high school examinations and entered Dacca College. Haroon and I both went into the Science section. Fulbaria campus of Dacca College was closer to home but we still used our bikes. Haroon was a good sportsman and was inducted into the college cricket team. We both joined the Air Scouts and for a while our sole ambition was to join the Air Force. I was medically disqualified but Haroon carried on. He was sent to Karachi and England by the Air Force for orientation courses, but finally his family decided against his joining the hazardous profession. In due course we passed our Intermediate Science examinations and joined the University.

At Dacca University, we parted in our course of education. Haroon continued with science study and I joined the faculty of commerce, aspiring to be a chartered accountant. We were physically separated, he in Science Faculty Building and I in Arts. We continued to meet, however, outside class hours. He was good in studies and when he applied his mind to studies he did very well. Once he learnt something, he never forgot it. Science



in Motijheel, within a hundred metres of Haroon's office. So, we were seeing each other quite often. Socially our families became close too and there were a lot of parties where we were meeting frequently. Haroon, Rokia, and their youngest daughter Fayza visited us when I got posted to Indonesia and we had a wonderful week of reunion there.

I came back home in 1991 and decided to quit the government and go into business. I knew nothing of business and was sailing into uncharted waters. I went to Haroon for advice, knowing full well he would give me the right counsel. He encouraged me to build up my own business. Go slow but steady, he

His death was sudden and it came as a great shock to me. He looked quite healthy and played golf regularly, almost every afternoon. He hardly looked like one who would depart so soon. I was not even aware of his hospitalisation. I was sleeping late the morning after he passed away and my little granddaughter came and woke me up with the newspaper in her hand. Your friend is dead, she said.

each other's company. That's when I came to know Haroon intimately.

Haroon and some others, who were studying in English medium schools like St. Xavier's in Calcutta were quickly accommodated in the hurriedly opened English medium section in St. Gregory's School in Laxmibazar in the old city. This section was housed in three large rooms beneath the students' dormitory across the football field. We, the *deshis*, the Bangla-medium boys, were in classes in the main building. Yet, the Calcutta fraternity transcended the distance of the medium. Haroon and I got very close to each other and although he lived in Purana Paltan and I in Segunbagicha, we met almost every day, either at his place or mine. Our transport was bicycle, on which we used to traverse the great distance between our homes and our school. Mounting the bicycle, he had a definite advantage over me -- he had long legs which he used as props at traffic posts; he did not have to dismount. I, on the other hand, had short legs and had to dismount when the traffic police stopped the traffic. Once I tried to imitate him and capsized, much to his amusement and to my discomfiture.

He was a true friend and always shared his moments of joy and sorrow with me. I still remember the day when the Matriculation Test Examination results came out. I got the highest marks in English in a combined result of both mediums.

"You beat us all hollow -- us the English medium boys," he grinned at me with genuine happiness. After that we both went to OK Restaurant next to Mukul Cinema and had our favourite snack, pastries and coffee.

Then there were the picnics. When winter came (winters were colder those days), we went on picnics, clad in heavy pullovers and woollen pants. Eight or ten of us would get on our bicycles, back-carriers full of food and drinks, and would ride through the early morning fog to the outskirts of the city, which is where we live now, the present day Gulshan, Banani, and Uttara. One of our favourite spots was the abandoned World War II military airstrip, which is now the Zia International Airport. This place was empty of people and we could do whatever we liked. We even carried an old gramophone which had a gooseneck sound box with a needle attached to it and you had to crank the box with a Z-shaped cranking bar. The Bakelite 78 rpm records were breakable and had to be handled with great care particularly because they were borrowed. We would sing and dance as we pleased and there was no one in view. Invariably, Haroon would be given the charge of making the sandwiches and the coffee, a task, which he performed seriously. He would be the last one to eat, after all of us had eaten. Sometimes, we

studies were demanding and he was becoming restless; he wanted to go abroad. He thought it was more important to be successful in life than be a mere good student. His wanderlust had earlier taken him to England and Ceylon, and now America beckoned him. So, one day, we saw him off at the old airport in Teigaon, and he left for the US.

I lost contact with Haroon for several years after he left for abroad. I graduated from the University and completed my chartered accountancy course. But instead of joining the accountancy profession, I joined the civil service of Pakistan and for some years lived away from Dacca as a field officer. I kept hearing about Haroon from friends, bits and pieces of information, but never met him during this time. He had returned from America and joined a tea estate in Sylhet as manager, I heard. Then I was posted back to Dacca and chanced upon him one day. I was in the New Market area for shopping and was browsing the shops in Balaka Cinema Annex. Haroon materialised in front of me. He was slightly heavier. This was a pleasant surprise for both of us and we embraced each other. I noticed a shy, pretty young woman with him and he introduced his future wife Rokia, who was then the manager of the ladies' branch of a major bank situated in Balaka Building.

The contact with Haroon was re-established after many years. He told me since he was getting married, he was leaving his tea garden job and taking up a new one in Dacca. He would be the East Pakistan head of a large trading company having its head office in Karachi. He worked diligently with this company for a few years and we kept seeing each other quite often. My office in those days was in Motijheel, the same area as Haroon's, and we would drop into each other's office now and then for a cup of tea and a round of chat.

This is the time when he got ill. He got very depressed during this prolonged illness. The doctors in Dacca couldn't diagnose the disease. He suffered for nearly a year before Rokia, who has always been strong-minded, took the decision to take him to England for treatment. He underwent surgery and came back cured. He got back his verve and sitting in his office, cheerfully showed me the X-rays of his colon of which a part was excised. I was happy to see him back in good health.

On the eve of the birth of Bangladesh, his erstwhile employers sold him the firm in Dacca and he became the owner of the company that once employed him. This was an astute decision and really launched him into a successful business career. He worked very hard and expanded his business. He built a house in Gulshan. In about a decade and a half, I had three different postings with offices

mightily, and at great cost, to stabilize disorderly parts of the globe. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the United States of America was building its vast economic, technological, and cultural might, which would soon dominate the world.

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