All those Peripatetic People

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

SIRAJUL Hossain Khan died last week. Those of us who have had cause to know him, maybe even interact with him, will surely have reason to recall the reasonably good journalist he was in his time, until he went into politics through joining the military regime of General Hussein Muhammad Ershad. It is quite intriguing that even a couple of days before Khan became a minister, he strenuously denied what he called rumours of his linking up with the dictator. It was therefore rather a shock for us when he proved the rumours true. The shock was not so much the truth that he was becoming a minister as it was the reality of his ditching journalism for a berth in a regime operating on extra-constitutionality. We simply lost Sirajul Hossain Khan the day he became a politician. Then politics left him and in the last few years of his life he was not much in circulation.

When you remember the many times in which some otherwise good people have caused bad tremors to flow through your sensibilities, you will be inclined to the melancholic. Back in 1965, Altaf Hussain, the respected editor of Pakistan's leading English language daily Dawn, cheerfully joined the government of President Ayub Khan as minister for industries and natural resources. Why he chose to come down from a journalistic perch where Muhammad Ali Jinnah had placed him in the 1940s remains anyone's guess. But it is true, as conversations with some of his acquaintances have revealed, that in the 1960s Altaf Hussain, a Bengali from Sylhet, went about energetically looking for a ministerial position in the Ayub dispensation. He remained a minister till the fall of the regime in March 1969. No one remembered him after that, perhaps for all the right reasons in the world. But one Pakistani who has made sure the spotlight will not miss him is Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada. He was attorney general when Ayub Khan made him foreign minister once Z.A. Bhutto left the cabinet. And since that happened more than four decades ago, Pirzada has wormed his way into any administration dominated by the military. Some Pakistanis are quite fond of suggesting that Pirzada has regularly taken pleasure in ingratiating himself with any man who has seized power in a coup.



Ayub Khan

If you observe India and watch the tribulations Natwar Singh has been going through, you tend to wonder why good superannuated diplomats like him must make their way into politics. He could have sat in the twilight, written his memoirs and given us some insight into his worldview. Now politics appears to have tarnished his reputation in his final years. The Iraqi oil for food scam has sullied his image, so much so that all the good he could have done as foreign minister has now become a distinct non-possibility. Worse has been the knowledge that the ruling Congress party has disowned him, prompting him to marvel at the ingratitude even governments might demonstrate towards their own fallen on bad days. Go back to 1971, here in Bangladesh. Abdul Mutallib Malek was a respected man, a well-known Bengali who had served as Pakistan's ambassador abroad and was clearly leading a quiet life in retirement. But when he agreed to replace Tikka Khan as governor of a tottering, shrinking East Pakistan, he made sure that all the good he had done in his life would become subsumed to that last act of being a loyal Pakistani when his fellow Bengalis were struggling to drive Pakistan into the sea. He died unmourned, which is a pity.