A Death in London

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Mir Abdur Razzaq has died in London at the age of eighty. Two years ago, on a fairly cold October day, a good group of Bangalis resident in London, most of them British citizens, came together to observe the fiftieth anniversary of Razzaq's arrival in London. He deserved all the tributes, all the poetry that was showered on him that evening. I listened, impressed, to every word of praise that was being directed at Razzaq. He listened too, somewhat embarrassed, for he had never consciously made an effort to be in the public eye in all the years he had spent in Britain. In this he was unlike so many other Bangalis, who always appeared to be keen to play leading roles in the advancement of the British-Bangladesh community, sometimes falling over one another as they did so. Razzaq was made of different stuff.

And the difference was one of both style and substance. Mir Abdur Razzaq had experienced a lifetime of events and personalities and was not afraid of talking about them openly. As he aged, he began to develop all those ailments that come with the approaching winter of one's life. He coughed repeatedly. It came in the way of his conversations with others. But it did not work as a damper for him. He loved a good, informal conversation. All too often, the conversation turned into a process of learning for his visitor. In a *lungi* and shirt, if the weather was not too cold, or a sweater added on if there was a chill in the air, Razzaq sat in the drawing room of his Leytonstone home and received visitors all day long, every day of the week. That was his style. He worked as an interpreter for the police department. That was how he kept his family going. Through the banalities of life, for that was the way he appeared to see things, his quiet Thai wife helped him in a considerable way. An unmistakable quality in Razzaq was that he did not allow his work to come in the way of his social dealings. I noted, more than once, how he declined a sudden offer from the police for some new interpretation work because he wanted to carry on a conversation with a fellow Bangali. He lost money in that way, but that did not bother him.

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The substantive about Mir Abdur Razzaq came in the wealth of information, truly encyclopaedic in nature, that he had stored in his memory. He was always enthused about my return to London, for he had things to tell me. For me, it was an unending joy listening to him relate the little and big incidents he had encountered early on in his career. He was once on the staff of Dawn, Pakistan's leading English language daily, and in that position he was able to observe the ways in which Altaf Hussain, the Bangali editor of the newspaper, worked. Razzaq was not impressed with Hussain. More than a year ago, when I told him that even though I was in school at the time, I was pretty disturbed about the editor of a newspaper joining a government as a minister, something that Altaf Hussain did in 1965 when he entered the Ayub Khan government as minister for industries. Razzaq's response was quite revealing. Altaf Hussain, he told me, had been trying to be a minister for a long time. It was therefore no surprise for him and others who had known Hussain for long when the editor cheerfully accepted a job under Pakistan's first military ruler.

From Mir Abdur Razzaq I have heard about such significant personalities in our history as Fakir