

Remembering Syed Mohammad Ali

It is now over thirteen years that S. M. Ali, my dear Khasru Bhai, left us for eternity. And yet, I still feel his presence all the time with his last words that he spoke to me: "Firoz please pray for me," still ringing in my ears. Today I, with the feeble attempt through these lines, write to commemorate the fourteenth death anniversary of this remarkable personality. Everyone dies but a few live on.

SYED MUSHARRAF ALI

SYED Mohammad Ali, the founder editor of *The Daily Star*, requires no introduction. He was one of the few personalities whom I looked upon with awe and admiration. He was popularly known as SM in the world of journalism and was addressed as "Khasru," which was his nickname, by his very close relatives and friends.

Although he was my first cousin, Khasru Bhai hardly made any distinction between brother and cousin as far as I was concerned. One of the reasons that attributed to this relationship was the very deep personal attachment Khasru Bhai had with his uncle, my late father Dr. Syed Mujtaba Ali (Bengali litterateur), who actually introduced me to this unforgettable S. M. Ali. From what I had heard about Khasru Bhai from my late father, I had already painted an imaginary picture of this legendary person in my mind long before I actually met him.

I came into close acquaintance with Khasru Bhai after liberation. Before that, I was studying at Rajshahi Cadet College and, therefore, missed almost all the opportunities to meet him during his occasional pre-liberation visits to Dhaka. It was only after 1970, when we finally settled at Dhaka, that I found opportunities to see him on various occasions. In my first meeting with him, I immediately realised that I had come across a person who was every inch a gentleman with an amazing personality. Hardly have I encountered such a soft spoken, polite, and well-mannered person. And English? When he spoke, one could hardly realise that it was not his mother tongue. Needless to say, I became completely overwhelmed by the qualities that Khasru Bhai possessed.

He was quite fond of my late father. During our numerous discussions there was hardly any time when Khasru Bhai didn't refer to him. Once, sipping a cup of coffee in his house at old DOHS after he finally settled down at Dhaka, he remarked: "Do you know what uncle Mujtaba (your father) told me on the eve of my first visit to

Europe?" I looked back at Khasru Bhai with interest blazing in my eyes. S. M. Ali smilingly continued: "He told me not to have coffee in the same restaurant where I finished my dinner and other people were having their meal, because the smell of the food coming from all sides would then prevent me from inhaling the fresh odour of coffee which I would like to have at the end of my meal. So he advised me to go to a coffee shop after I had had my meal and take the coffee there to enjoy the air filled with smell of coffee only, which I did."

Bangladesh was born through bloodshed. The smell of gun powder was prominent in the air. The country was economically shattered, with bridges demolished, houses burnt and industries closed. Indeed, it was a challenge for the post liberation government to address the multifarious problems that cropped up. S. M. Ali visited Bangladesh, and lost no time in picking up the burning issues which confronted the government, and those found the way to his book, *After the Dark Night*.

In this book, S. M. Ali dealt elaborately with the problems the government was facing immediately after independence. After the book was published, he presented a copy of the book to my father Syed Mujtaba Ali who admired it, and was making notes on some of the pages which drew his attention as I discovered later.

S. M. Ali's attachment with my father is inexpressible in words. Their relation had deep roots, which dated from the days in Kolkata as far as back as the late 1940s when Khasru Bhai was a student and my father was staying in 5, Pearl Road, Park Circus, Kolkata.

S. M. Ali recollected the memories of the days he lived in Kolkata with a slight nostalgic touch in one of his articles published in *The Daily Star* in his very popular column "My World," where he dealt at length about his early days in Kolkata, how uncle Mujtaba exposed him to the literary circle of West Bengal which brought him close to none other than the noted critic of modern poetry the late Abu Sayeed Ayub and his wife Gauri Ayub.

As long as my father lived,

Khasru Bhai never missed a chance to visit him at our Dhanmondi residence whenever he visited Dhaka. The two men passed long hours together on lengthy discussions covering wide range of topics, while my mother was busy supplying cups of tea at regular intervals. Uncle Mujtaba did most of the talking while nephew Khasru was a patient listener. On hearing the news of the death of my father, he wrote to my mother: "I want to know how my brothers Firoz (myself) and Kabir (my younger brother) have responded to this great tragedy." I regret that I do not possess that affectionate letter, which expressed nothing but deep love and concern for us.

Looking back to the past and recollecting the occasions of S. M. Ali's visits to Dhaka, that I fondly cherish, I cannot but help myself from being a little emotional. As and when profession brought S. M. Ali to Dhaka he used to put up most of the times at Hotel Intercontinental (later renamed as Hotel Sheraton) and later on at Hotel Pan Pacific Shonargaon. Although his brief visits to the capital were tightly scheduled, he still could spare some of his time by calling me occasionally to have breakfast with him. Normally he used to order a continental breakfast, which he knew I would like.

During breakfast he used to ask me about the atmosphere at Dhaka University, where I did my graduation and masters, about the political unrest that frequently cast its dark shadow on the political horizon of our country, and many other issues of journalistic interest. Although I was years younger than him in age, experience and knowledge, he, nevertheless, listened to me attentively, and then expressed his views over the issues that came up during our discussions.

S. M. Ali was out and out a journalist, having a deep commitment towards professional ethics. He is never known to have compromised on principles. As a true patriot, he always cared for his motherland, no matter how far his professional life took him from his country. During the liberation war, when he was posted at Singapore, he played a

significant role in mobilising public opinion abroad for the pro-liberation forces operating in the then East Pakistan. At that time I and my only brother and our mother were staying at Dhaka. My father, who had earned the displeasure of the Pakistan government as far as back as 1948 for having written a book, *Purbo Pakistan* (Rashtrabhasha), had left Pakistan for good in the early fifties, and was staying at Kolkata when the crackdown on East Pakistan started on the March 25, 1971.

As the news of genocide committed by the occupation army became known to the outside world, my father became alarmed and was anxious to know about our welfare since he was always worried that we would face the wrath of the military regime due to his anti-Pakistani views. Since it was impossible for our father to gather information about Dhaka directly from Kolkata, he asked Khasru Bhai working in Singapore to inquire about us. Khasru Bhai (S. M. Ali) readily obliged. During the entire liberation period he used to communicate with Dhaka on a regular basis through his own mechanisms, and passed on the information to my father regarding the country in general and us in particular.

Another person who did a similar thing was another nephew of my father's, late A.S. Mahmud, who later became the chairman of ETV and was one of the founders of *The Daily Star* as well. Mahmud flew to London in the middle of 1971, after narrowly escaping arrest by the Pakistani military regime. Nani Bhai, as I called him, like Khasru Bhai, played the role of media man from London, communicating both with Dhaka and Kolkata.

S. M. Ali has left behind him a distinguished and a successful career as a journalist. His remarkable journey in the world of journalism dates back to the early fifties, when he joined the newly launched Pakistan Observer in 1949 as its first staff reporter while studying in the English department of Dhaka University. His dream of becoming a full-fledged journalist brought him to England for pursuing higher studies in journalism, where he worked with *News Chronicle* of London and also with the BBC. S. M. Ali returned to Pakistan in 1954 and joined the *Dawn* in Karachi, and rejoined *Pakistan Observer* in 1956 as a staff reporter. In 1960 he joined *The Pakistan Times* as assistant editor.

S. M. Ali's career took a crucial turn when, in 1962, he became the

assistant editor of the Hong Kong based regional publication *The Asia Magazine*. From that point of time onwards S. M. Ali never looked back. His journalistic talent coupled with his dedication brought him to even higher levels of status and responsibility in the international arena of journalism, which includes the post of managing editor of Thailand's English language daily, the *Bangkok Post* (1966-70), the roving foreign editor of the Singapore afternoon daily, *New Nation* (1971), and a year later as contributing editor of the new weekly regional news paper, *The Asian*. In late 1972, Khasru Bhai found himself as managing editor of the *Hong Kong Standard*, and in 1977, S. M. Ali joined the Manila based Press Foundation of Asia as its Executive Director, and continued to serve there as CEO till 1981 when he joined Unesco as its regional communications advisor for Asia and Pacific based in Kuala Lumpur.

On retiring from Unesco in 1988, S. M. Ali joined the *Bangladesh Observer* as the editor in June 1989, the institution where he once worked at the infancy of his career. But his uncompromising stand in matters of principle did not allow him to continue there for more than six months, when he tendered his resignation at the end of the year. It may also be mentioned that he was an advisor to the United News of Bangladesh (UNB) for a few months in 1990. By that time, he had already settled in Dhaka with his wife Nancy Wong, a lady of Chinese origin, in a quiet apartment of old DOHS.

At this point, I would be lacking in my responsibilities if I didn't put in a few lines about our dear Nancy Bhabi, who was not only the life partner of Khasru Bhai but also a co-worker in the journalistic activities of S. M. Ali, which he acknowledged time and again. I had visited them quite a number of times in their flat situated on the first floor of the house at old DOHS, and had the opportunity to taste the cakes and many Chinese recipes prepared by Nancy Bhabi on a number of occasions. By that time, she had become quite intimate with my family and became particularly fond of my eldest son Muddassir, then a tiny boy, whom she frequently addressed as *chhalak chhele* (intelligent boy) as she tried to talk in Bangla with him.

S. M. Ali's launching of *The Daily Star* in 1991 was a great historic event. For months together, we were waiting for that memorable event. It

was his dream of creating his own newspaper in his motherland, and that ultimately came true. S. M. Ali's experience, coupled with his hard work with a dedicated team, took *The Daily Star* to great heights in no time. Circulation accelerated, and so did its popularity. And now one can say without the slightest hesitation that *The Daily Star* is the pick of all English dailies of our country, from any perspective of comparison.

Thus, S. M. Ali's outstanding role as the founder editor can hardly be overemphasised, and will be remembered in the history of this distinguished daily. Yet, lived he not long. Unknown to him, as well as to his loved ones, the claws of death were silently approaching to snatch him away from us. It was the later part of 1993 then, and S. M. Ali, at the peak of his editorial role, was becoming immensely involved with multifarious functions as *The Daily Star* was expanding in its publication each day that followed the other.

I, too, working in a private bank, became awfully occupied with my profession, which barred me from maintaining the frequency of my visits to him. But news that he was not keeping well came to my ears, and I was thinking of paying him a visit when suddenly the news came that he was going abroad for treatment in early October 1993. I found myself ringing the door bell of his house the evening before the day he flew for Bangkok.

Nancy Bhabi appeared at the door with signs of anxiety in her eyes. "Bhabi how is Khasru Bhai?" My question was instant. Already aware of the gravity of the illness, Bhabi whispered "Firoz, it is serious, we are taking him to Bangkok tomorrow. He still doesn't know what is all about." Nancy could not continue any further since S. M. Ali entered the drawing room at that very moment, with a white patch on his neck. He greeted me with the same warmth and affection, although I could feel that the shadow the illness cast over his body and mind had made him considerably weak. "How are you Bhai?" I asked him, holding the hand which he extended towards me. He answered: "Firoz, one question I had been repeatedly asking my doctors, how bad it is? But they have not been able to give me an answer." I told Khasru Bhai not to worry, and assured him that it was certainly for the better that he was going to Bangkok for medical treatment and that we would be eagerly waiting for his return home. But little did I know then about the ferocity of the disease that took away this precious life.



Khasru Bhai inquired as usual about my wife and children, and we were talking casual when the door bell rang. I got up from the sofa to open the door, and in stepped Mr. Mahfuz Anam of *The Daily Star*. The two immediately entered into the last professional discussions before the departure of S. M. Ali. S. M. Ali expressed his deep concern about the young generation, specially the students, and asked Mahfuz to watch and warn them against drug abuse and other detrimental habits which were influencing the lives of the students. As their talks continued, I could feel the very high opinion and the confidence S. M. Ali had on Mahfuz Anam, that was being reflected in his last moment advice. At one point Mahfuz Anam humbly said: "I can hardly be a substitute for S. M. Ali." S. M. Ali promptly remarked: "No one can be a substitute for anyone. Each has a distinct style of his own."

The discussions continued for some time when the door-bell rang once again, and Mr. Latifur Rahman, one of the founder owners of *The Daily Star* entered the room. At that point, I thought that it was time for me to depart and let the others continue their official discussions more conveniently without the presence of someone not belonging to their group. I, therefore, stood up and asked leave from S. M. Ali. Khasru Bhai extended his hand towards me for a farewell handshake and said in a soft voice: "Firoz, doa koro (pray for me)." I nodded my head and walked quietly out of the room closing the door behind, never to see him again.

Outside Old DOHS, the evening Dhaka was illuminated with street lights and neon signs, and heavy traffic was moving along the main road leading to the airport. Suddenly an uncanny feeling crept up in my body. In spite of the continuous roar of the countless automobiles and the voices of multitude of people I suddenly found my surrounding empty. For a few moments I stood motionless on the pavement amidst the crowd around me, and felt very lonely.

S. M. Ali's untimely departure from us has been a great loss to the journalist world. Personally, I lost an older brother and friend. As a champion of democracy and a relentless soldier for upholding the freedom of press he will be remembered long. He was a dreamer about the future political culture of our country, which was manifested in his only novel, *Rainbow over Padma*, in which we see the image of S. M. Ali reflected in the actions of Rafique Anwar, the hero of the book, and Sara who has a striking resemblance with Nancy Bhabi.

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Syed Musharraf Ali is a freelance contributor to *The Daily Star*.

Some difficult truths

A committee set up by university teachers and civil society members, with help from Transparency International (Bangladesh Chapter), can prepare a white paper on corruption. This will be for posterity.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

IN the 1992 movie A Few Good Men, when confronted by dashing Navy lawyer Tom Cruise in a probe about a crime (as it happens, in Guantanamo Bay Naval Base) Jack Nicholson, a Marine Lt. Colonel said: "You can't handle the truth." I want to ask the same question today: "Can we handle the truth?" Handling the truth is often more daunting than discovering it. What kind of truth do we need to establish, and for what? Do we need to find out whether our businessmen, at least those who are accused of dishonesty, are actually honest? Could it be the case, as they claim, that they were bullied into corrupt practices? I always thought that it was only our bureaucrats who set the standard of innocence, to the extent that some of them cannot even flip a fried fish on their plate, and that they were the ones bullied into taking bribes by the politicians. Now our business community is asserting the same level of innocence. Their alleged innocence or guilt can be established

by an investigating officer. You do not need a truth commission for that.

A truth commission, in recent history, was set up in South Africa by an Act of Parliament in 1995, and was called "Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995." The commission, which was known as TRC or Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was mandated to establish a "complete picture ... of the violation of human rights" between the periods 1960 to 1990, during the dreadful apartheid era. When the report was released in 1999 it showed, among other things, the role of the state in sponsoring and executing horrendous violations of human rights.

The purpose of that commission was to establish who did what to whom, not so much for establishing culpability as for bringing in a new era of forgiveness and peace and moving ahead. Healing and unity were the key motives.

Similar truth commissions have been set up in more than two dozen countries, ranging from Germany to Rwanda to East

Timor. In Germany, even outside the truth commission, the dreaded Stasi (the East German secret police) met their victims face to face to ask for forgiveness so that they could reconcile with their own guilt-ridden conscience. In Rwanda, close to 800,000 people were slaughtered in inter-ethnic violence with the complicity of the Rwandan military. In East Timor, sections of the Indonesian military committed blatant violation of human rights.

Violation of human rights have taken place in Bangladesh, though they cannot be compared to those in Rwanda, South Africa or even Argentina. Systematic violation of human rights of the Hindus in particular and political opposition in general took place in the aftermath of elections that brought BNP to power in 2001. It was reported in the media that the BNP thugs wanted to teach them a lesson for supporting the Awami League. Yes, a truth commission should be established to determine the extent of such violations, and the perpetrators must be brought to book.

The caretaker government is already stretched. Yet, it can set up a commission to prove human rights violation during the past regimes. But the most urgent task would be to bring to completion the trial of the Bangabandhu murder case and the jail murder case. These are deep sores on the conscience of the nation. These cases must be resolved to restore faith in the judicial system.

A committee set up by university teachers and civil society members, with help from Transparency International (Ban-

gladesh Chapter), can prepare a white paper on corruption. This will be for posterity.

There is a need for reforming the existing laws, especially laws that are more likely to be abused or laws that allow for violation of human rights. Many noted lawyers have stressed the importance of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which was enacted in USA in 1966 to fight corruption. What I would like to import from the US legal system is the Miranda Privilege. This simply says that prior to any sort of questioning a suspect must be told that he or she has the right to remain silent. The suspect must be reminded that anything he or she says can be used against him or her. It further says that the suspect is entitled to a lawyer at the time of questioning. This principle ensures that an arresting officer cannot force a confession from the suspect. In the eyes of civilized law, one is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. There are many such areas where laws must be reformed to preempt the possibility of abuse.

Bangladesh is at a cross-roads, hence the CTG must take steps that are cautious, and which cannot be perceived as unfair or unjust. Businessmen and others who are given bail by the court must be allowed bail. Granting bail does not mean that they have been exonerated. The law should treat everyone equally but fairly; more important, legally. If a suspect, say a businessman, is given bail by the court he is still under the supervision of the law, and he can exercise his legal rights of self-defense. He might also resume his business in full swing to meet the legal fees, as well as the hefty fines that might be imposed as part of the punishment. Justice not only upholds truth, it makes good economic sense too.

Habibul Haque Khondker is a sociologist.

Left triumphs in Ecuador

For his part, Correa has repeatedly denounced the private banks in Ecuador for their exorbitant profit-taking and high interest rates. And he has expelled Ecuador's World Bank representative for meddling in the country's affairs and has virtually terminated the country's relations with the International Monetary Fund.

ROGER BURBACH

"WE have won an historic victory," proclaimed President Rafael Correa of Ecuador. On October 7 the political coalition he heads won an overwhelming majority of the seats in the constituent assembly that is tasked with "refounding" the nation's institutions.

Taking office early this year in a landslide victory, Correa has repeatedly called for an opening to a "new socialism of the 21st century," declaring that Ecuador has to end "the perverse system that has destroyed our democracy, our economy and our society." His government marks the emergence of a radical anti-neoliberal axis in South America, comprising Venezuela, Bolivia and now Ecuador.

"The assembly elections are a devastating blow for the oligarchs and the right wing political parties who have historically pulled the strings on a corrupt state that includes Congress and the Supreme Court," says Alejandro Moreano, a sociologist and political analyst at the Andean University Simon Bolivar in Quito.

Even Michel Camdessus, the former director of the International Monetary Fund, once commented that Ecuador is characterised "by an incestuous relation between bankers, political-financial pressure groups and corrupt government officials."

The victory in the constituent assembly is the result of years of agitation and struggle by Ecuador's indigenous and social movements along with an unorganised, largely middle-class movement of people known as the "forajidos," an Ecuadorian term meaning outlaws or bandits who

rebel against the established system.

In March when the Congress and the right wing political parties tried to sabotage the elections for the assembly, tens of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Quito, blocking the entrances to Congress and backing the disarmament of the Congressional members who wanted to suppress the elections.

The "Country Movement," the popular political coalition lead by Correa, will convene the assembly at the end of October. Its charge is to draft a new constitution that will break up the dysfunctional state, establish a pluri-national, participatory democracy, reclaim Ecuadorian sovereignty, and use the state to create social and economic institutions that benefit the people. One of its first acts will be to abolish the existent Congress.

The assembly will also facilitate an international realignment of Ecuador's international relations. The Correa government has already moved assertively in its relations with the United States. Maria Fernanda Espinosa, the dynamic minister of foreign relations, declared that Ecuador intends to close the US military base located at Manta, the largest of its kind on South America's Pacific coast. "Ecuador is a sovereign nation," she said. "We do not need any foreign troops in our country." The treaty for the base expires in 2009 and will not be renewed.

Thus far there have been no direct confrontations with the United States, but the Pentagon has manifested its displeasure. Every year since 1959, the US Southern Command, together with the Pacific coast nations of South America, have undertaken joint naval exercises called Unitas. This year they were to

be hosted in Ecuador, but the United States opted to conduct them in Colombia, its closest regional ally. Ecuador responded by announcing it would not participate in this year's exercises, with Correa proclaiming, "It appears the Southern Command believes we are a colony of the United States, that our navy is just one more unit controlled by their country."

Correa is also standing up to Occidental Petroleum, a US-based corporation whose Ecuadorian holdings were taken over by state-owned PetroEcuador last year for selling off some of its assets to a Canadian company in violation of its contract with the Ecuadorian state. With the takeover of Occidental's holdings, PetroEcuador now controls more than half of the country's petroleum exports, which themselves account for about 40% of Ecuador's total exports and one third of government revenues. Correa has denounced Occidental's "lobbying" of the Bush administration to regain its holdings. "We are not going to allow an arrogant, portentous transnational that doesn't respect Ecuadorian laws to harm our country," he said.

At the same time, Ecuador is negotiating special bilateral trade and economic agreements with presidents Chavez and Morales. Venezuela has agreed to refine Ecuadorian oil and help fund social programs in Ecuador, while the Bolivian government has concluded an agreement to import foodstuffs from small- and medium-size producers in Ecuador. Correa has also signed several petroleum accords with Venezuela, of which the most important is a \$4 billion project for a refinery backed by PetroEcuador and the Venezuelan state petroleum company.

Alejandro Moreano of the Andean

University worries that "that all of the interests involved in the Country Movement may not back the tough steps needed to end neo-liberalism and bring the banks and multinationals under control. This will depend on the strength of popular mobilisations as the assembly undertakes its work."

For his part, Correa has repeatedly denounced the private banks in Ecuador for their exorbitant profit-taking and high interest rates. And he has expelled Ecuador's World Bank representative for meddling in the country's affairs and has virtually terminated the country's relations with the International Monetary Fund.

There is already a steady drumbeat by the indigenous and popular movements to have the constituent assembly take over all multi-national mining interests. In early June, the local populace in the gold-mining southern highland province of Azuay, backed by environmental and human rights organisations, blockaded major highways, demanding the expropriation of the mining companies, many of which are controlled by trans-national corporations that have polluted local rivers and aquifers.

Alberto Acosta, an internationally renowned anti-neoliberal economist who will be president of the constituent assembly, met with the protesters. He told them the mining concessions couldn't be annulled outright. "This is a task of the constituent assembly," he said. "It can establish a legal framework that will enable us to revise all the concessions." This month on October 22 a national mobilisation will take place that will call upon the assembly to nationalise all foreign mining interests in the country.

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Courtesy: Znet.

