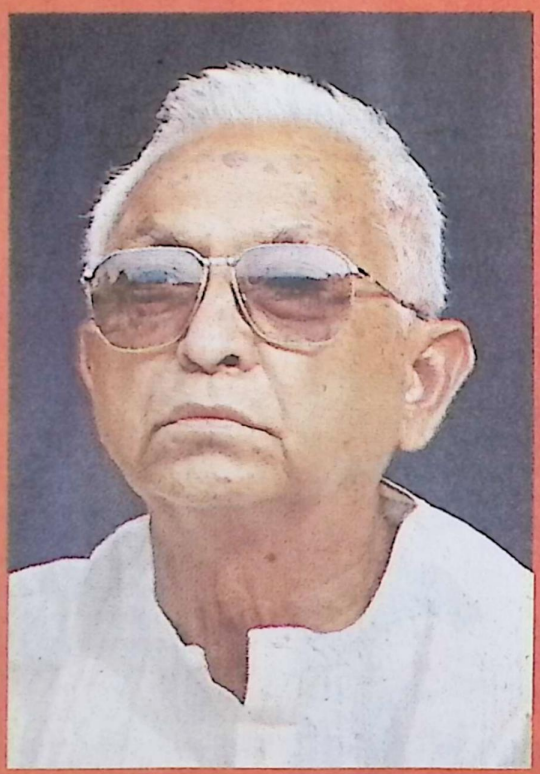
Memories of a Lapsed Communist

SYED BADRUL AHSAN



Saifuddin Ahmed Manik

It was toward the end of the 1980s when I first met Saifuddin Ahmed Manik. He had become general secretary of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and clearly intended to demonstrate his ability to do what communists around the world were expected to do. And do not forget that those were rather heady times. Mikhail Gorbachev was shaking up things in the Soviet Union, indeed across the globe. To those of us who possessed abiding faith in socialism (and many of us still do), Gorbachev was the man of the hour. Here at last was the communist, as Waheedul Haque (our very own Waheed Bhai) informed us, who could take on the decadent capitalism which men like Ronald Reagan sought to represent. It was in Geneva in 1985, when a dynamic Gorbachev clearly overshadowed a tired-looking Reagan, that the ultimate triumph of socialism seemed to be assured.

It was this march of socialism that Saifuddin Manik and Waheedul Haque discussed at the New Nation office on that late 1980s day. I had just been introduced to Manik and thought it prudent to remain silent and listen to the conversation between the two men. It was much later that I learnt of the significant role Manik had played in the emergence of Chhayanaut in 1961. But on that day, it was the humility in the CPB leader that impressed me. As a matter of fact, humility has always been a defining quality in those who have upheld the principle of socialism through the ages. Once, on a bus from Gulistan to Shahbagh, I spotted the BSD's (Bangladesh-er Showmastantrik Dol) AFM Mahbubul Haque holding on, just, to the back of a seat, in that crowd of plebeians. It was impressive, for here was a prominent politician feeling not at all out of place among common citizens. It was similar sentiments that arose in me when I met Saifuddin Manik that day. At one point, he asked Waheed Bhai to enlighten him on matters relating to Bengali cultural traditions. Waheed Bhai laughed. That did nothing to stop Manik from repeating his question. "Waheed Bhai", said he, all I have done in life is to engage in politics. But now I need some knowledge of culture to inform my thinking and indeed add substance to my politics."

It was a good beginning, in so far as knowing Manik was concerned, for me. He was a powerful figure in a party that had the long legacy of the revered comrade Moni Singh behind it. And then there was comrade Mohammad Farhad, the cerebral general secretary of the CPB whose demise had paved the way for Saifuddin Manik to rise to the top. At that point, I confess I was not sure whether Manik would be able to rise to the stature Farhad had attained in his time, but Manik's lack of hauteur, his candour and distinctive humility clearly egged me on to the thought that someday he could matter on the overall canvas of national politics. He had been a warrior in the War of Liberation; he was a culture enthusiast and, best of all, he was a communist. If Gorbachev succeeded in transforming the