

No room for rhetoric

The only way this government can stay in power peacefully is by holding the opposition at bay, staying on course to genuine democracy, and combating corruption within the ruling party. It must try to win the hearts of the people by pursuing a pro-people policy of improving the lot of the common people who live in the villages and in the slums in big cities and towns.

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

THE government came to power with a pledge to bring about a change. Obviously, this means that the government should and must change the status quo ante insofar as it runs counter to established norms of good governance and democratic rule, and the overall interests of the people and the country. Unfortunately, there has not been any such change as yet.

The government is up against a formidable opposition, comprising mostly the anti-liberation forces, who had not taken kindly to Pakistan's shameful dismemberment in 1971. They have gained in political strength and support for the simple reason that they have been in the corridors of power since 1975, except for a brief spell of AL rule.

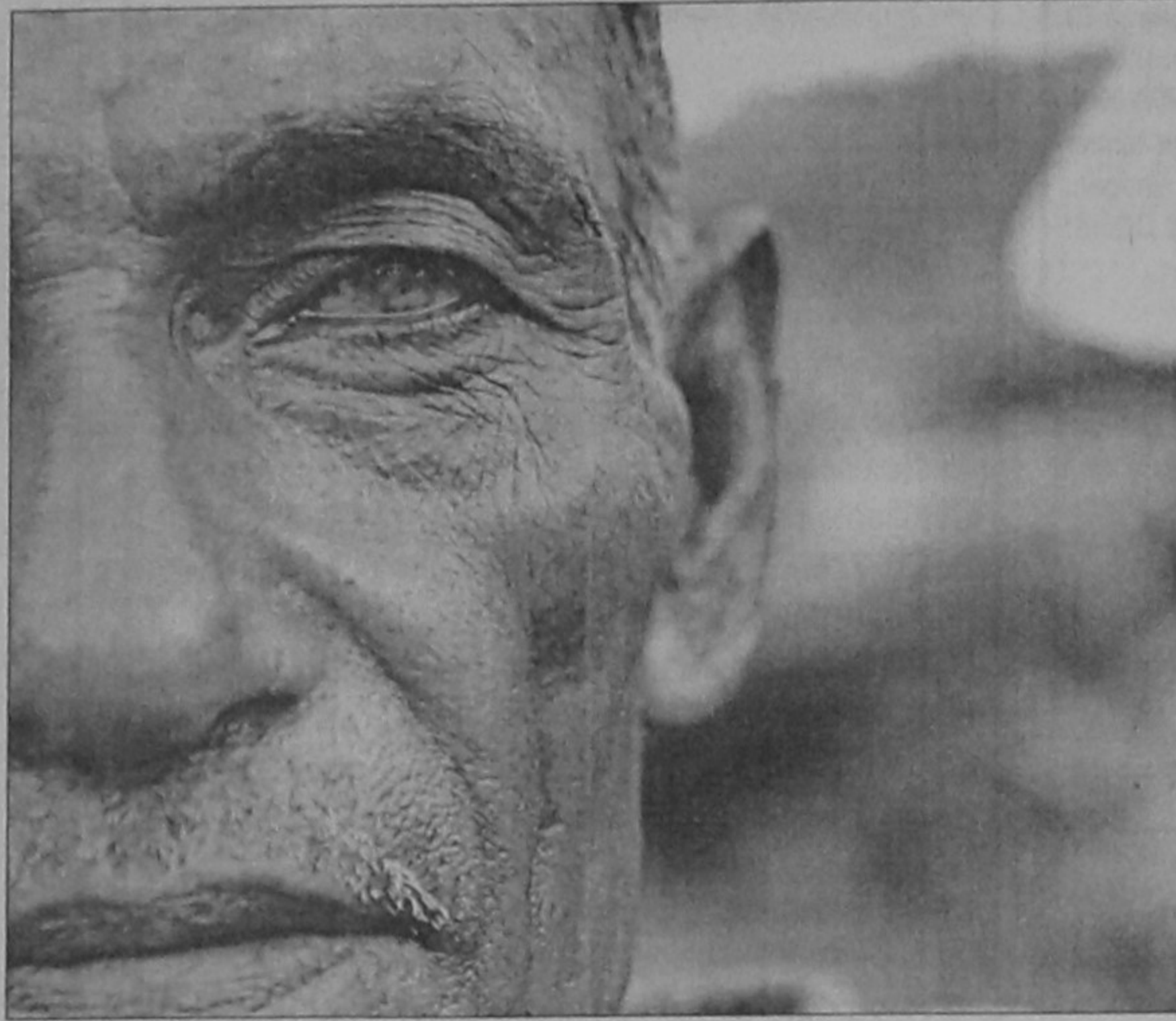
The only way this government can stay in power peacefully is by holding the opposition at bay, staying on course to genuine democracy, and combating corruption within the ruling party. It must

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In these days of global economic crisis there is a need now for the government to practice austerity, starting from the president, the prime minister, ministers, members of parliament, down to the junior-most government official.

In a poor country like ours there is no room whatsoever for anyone to travel in luxurious cars and live in luxury at state expense. It is only befitting that the government ratifies the ordinance promulgated during the last caretaker government, and scraps the MPs' privilege of importing duty free cars. This privilege has been thoroughly abused in the past by MPs, who sold their luxurious cars and earned a good deal of money.

There has been an outcry by the parliamentarians against ratification of this ordinance. It is appalling to see how parliamentarians are more focused on



All I've ever heard is promises.

lining their pockets rather than working to improve the lot of the poor people they represent. These parliamentarians would have earned the gratitude of the people and the media if they had voluntarily renounced this privilege, which had been doled out to them during the autocratic regime of Hussain Mohammad Ershad. Another area where the sincerity of this

government will be put to test is the involvement of MPs in the development activities of their constituencies. All MPs of the ruling party are clamouring in the parliament for direct involvement in the implementation of all development works in their constituencies.

They have been demanding an office at upazilla level so that they can lord over

the upazilla parishad. No wonder they are against ratification of the Local Government Commission Ordinance promulgated during the last caretaker government, which aims at strengthening the local government system.

Their over-enthusiasm for involvement in local development works is not difficult to understand. During BNP rule, MPs were allotted huge amounts for development works in their constituencies. Sometimes, funds were allotted just on the eve of elections. There was no transparency and accountability of how these funds were spent.

No wonder that MPs of the ruling party are demanding not only a role for direct involvement in development of their constituencies. Small wonder that these MPs are demanding that the parliament does not ratify the Local Government Commission Ordinance.

There were startling media reports that during the last BNP-Jamaat alliance government many bridges and culverts were constructed under local government agencies, but were not traceable on the ground. This is how corruption spawned and spread fast like cancer, and development suffered and wilted under the BNP-Jamaat alliance government. Begum Khaleda Zia quite often boasted of such a "deluge" of development.

I am not against MPs shying away from development of their constituencies. They ought to be in touch with their grassroots level party leaders and the

upazilla parishads in assessing and planning development works. They must use their political influence in getting these development works sanctioned and adequate funds allotted.

But implementation of all development works and spending of development funds must be left to the upazilla parishad, which is an elected body. Under no circumstances should MPs meddle in matters like who should or should not be given the work order and how funds are to be disbursed.

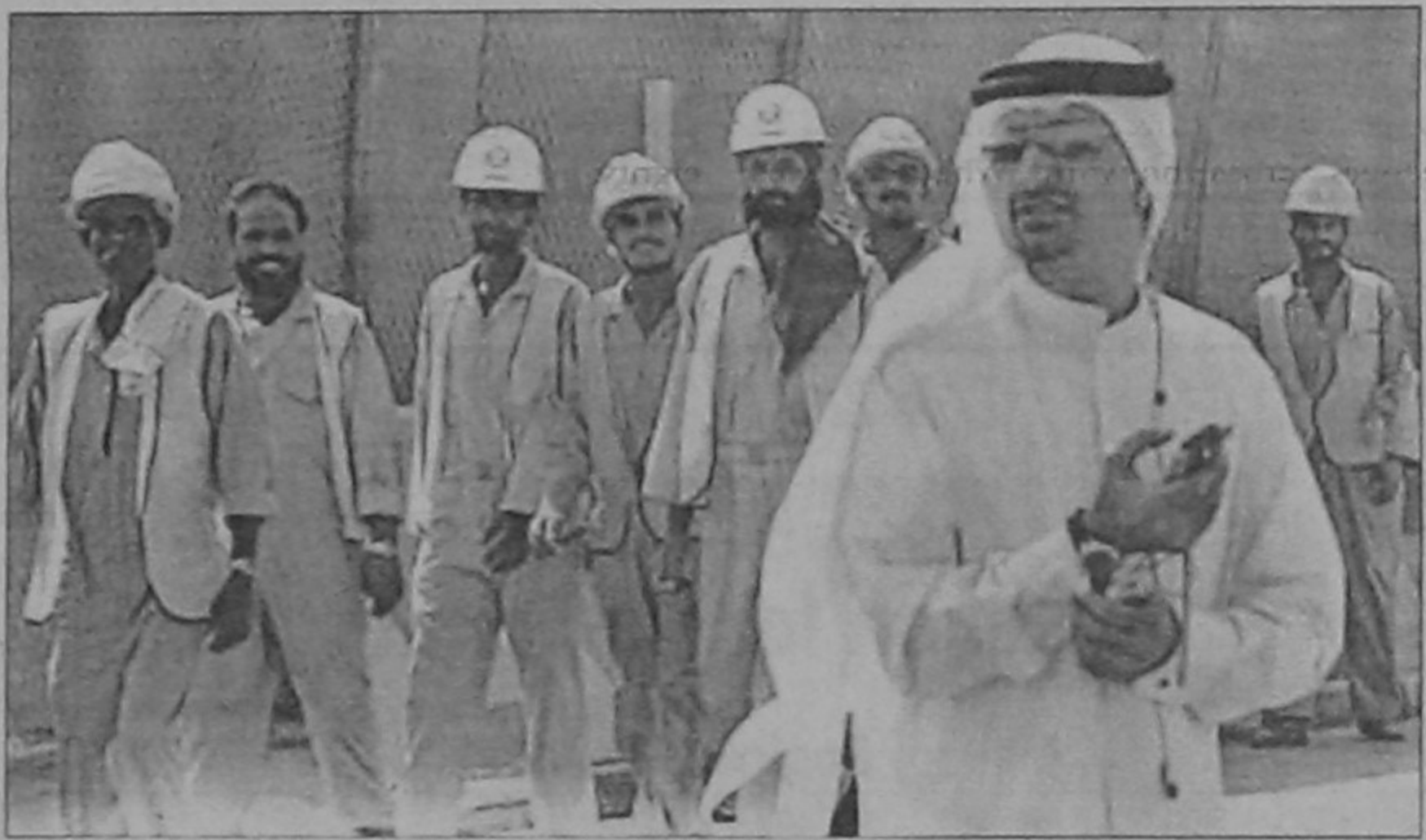
The government can and must improve its pro-people image by enhancing the existing rentals of Nam flats occupied by MPs as per rates fixed earlier by the caretaker government. It is a shame that our MPs, who constitute the wealthiest section of our people, pay a paltry sum of Tk. 400 or 500 as monthly rental for a fully furnished flat at state expense, while a low paid government employee cannot even dream of living in a dingy government flat at that rent. MPs having any qualms would have preferred either not to live in these flats at these rents, or to ask for rationalisation of rents long before.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina must realise that the people who voted her to power would like seeing how the government performs. There is no time for rhetoric.

Brig. Gen. Shamsuddin Ahmed (Retd) is a former Military Secretary to the President.

Why is there so much hate in us?

I put his question to my students. They agreed that they had harassed foreigners, particularly South Asians, in the streets. One said that seeing a worker in the street was a perfect chance for them to beat him up and then run away. Some admitted searching for foreign workers to beat up, throw eggs at and generally abuse.



ABDULLAH AL-MUTAIRI - AL-WATAN

THERE is a home delivery service next to my house, which is run by an Indian. He is hardworking and devoted to his job. He talks to me about the time he spent working in Abu Dhabi and of his dream of living in London.

Last week, while delivering a newspaper, he asked me whether I wrote in it. I told him that I did, and he asked me to write about why young Saudis hate foreign workers, particularly Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. He asked: "Why do they throw rocks at us when they see us in the streets?" He said that in India they were taught to love others because that is the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). I was moved by his words and promised him that I would write on the subject.

I put his question to my students. They agreed that they had harassed foreigners, particularly South Asians, in the streets. One said that seeing a worker in the street was a perfect chance for them to beat him up and then run away. Some admitted searching for foreign workers to beat up, throw eggs at and generally abuse.

I asked my students why they behaved in this way. Some said it was just fun. Some said it was because those people were weak and unable to fight back. Some said that their favourite pastime was catching cats, and killing and skinning them. I was shocked and disturbed by all this, and wondered what was causing it.

The classroom discussion ended but my questions would not go away. Is this violence only committed by children or can we see it at other levels in other forms? How do older people deal with foreign workers? Do the workers feel that we respect them? Sadly, the rude and sarcastic way we often refer to them sprang to my mind. Can such relationships be called humane? Are they based on equality? Are they in keeping with the tenets of Islam?

Do we adult Saudis, who sponsor and employ foreigners, fulfill the conditions of their contracts -- which both we and they have signed? I remember a worker in my school, who was on the job every day and who had not been paid for six months. I remember another unpaid worker who asked humbly and politely for his dues and received nothing but curses and insults. It seems to me that our children's violent

behaviour has its roots in the behaviour and attitudes of adults. My Indian friend's question should have thus been directed toward all ages and not just at the young.

Are these things related to education? Can we blame this shameful behaviour on a lack of education? The answer came all too quickly to me. I remembered one of my colleagues, a teacher who belongs to a certain tribe. He believes that a student lacking a tribal name is a man with no roots and, hence, of no importance. Then I remembered a preacher who visited the school after 9/11 and warned the students against dealing with non-Muslims. I also remember a sheikh in a mosque, who would not allow a foreigner to pray next to him -- simply because the man was not Saudi.

It is not difficult to come up with examples of our relations with people who belong to different religions and cultures, and I will not discuss our own relations with other Saudis. Many of us will not allow our daughters to marry someone just because he is from a certain place or because we look down on him. Behind all these examples are beliefs and thoughts toward "others," which glorify us and our egos and degrade them and theirs. Such a situation is fertile ground for hate and infertile ground for love.

Those brought up to love people will not throw rocks at them and curse them. Those brought up to love people will not degrade those who are different from them. Where is love in our lives? Has it given way to hate? What answer can I give my Indian friend? Is he going to understand that it will take a long time to change this culture of hate?

I do not think that it will be easy, since so many of us do not want to and so many believe they are unique and the best in the world. I remember when I was in England last summer, arriving at the front door of the house where I was staying. I saw a little girl standing outside the house next to mine.

I wondered if she would curse me or throw stones at me, or whether she would just look away in disgust. Instead, she carried on watering the flowers; then she looked up and waved at me, with a big smile on her face. Could that have happened here?

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A tribute to a non-conformist

NEHAL KARIM

DR. Ahmed Sharif, the legendary figure of free thought movements of the country, died on February 24, 1999. He was born on February 13, 1921.

He was a rational humanist, who left behind a legacy for those fighting fascist ideas, autocratic views, communalism and superstition. Whatever he said or wrote caused a lot of furore in intellectual circles. He had been living a secluded life to avoid the wrath of a section of the public who thought his views to be too dangerous for the establishment.

He was a controversial and misunderstood personality among his contemporaries. He was controversial because of his outspoken views against the establishment, intellectuals and political leaders, and above all religious and parochial outlooks.

He was misunderstood because he was always reluctant to be associated with government agencies. Moreover, he was often black-listed from the national media.

Dr. Sharif was from Patiya, Chittagong, and did his Masters and Ph. D in Bangla literature from Dhaka University in 1944 and 1967, respectively. From 1945 to 1949, he taught at Laksham Nawab Faizunnessa College and later on at Feni College.

He was program assistant at the Dhaka Centre of Radio Pakistan in 1949-50. He joined as Research Assistant in the Bengali Department, Dhaka University in 1950, and retired as Chairman and Professor in 1983.

He was elected a member of the Senate and Syndicate, and was president of the Teachers' Association and the University Teachers Club. He is the only person who was elected the Dean of the Faculty of Arts for three consecutive terms. After his retirement from Dhaka University, he joined as the first "Kazi Nazrul Islam Professor" at Chittagong University, where he served from 1984 to 1986.

He received many honours and awards for his outstanding contribu-

tions in medieval Bengali literature and contemporary socio-cultural-political essays. A major recognition came from the Rabindra Bharati University, India, which conferred upon him Doctor of Literature title in 1995 for his outstanding contribution to Bengali literature. He was invited to deliver many commemorative and institutional lectures.

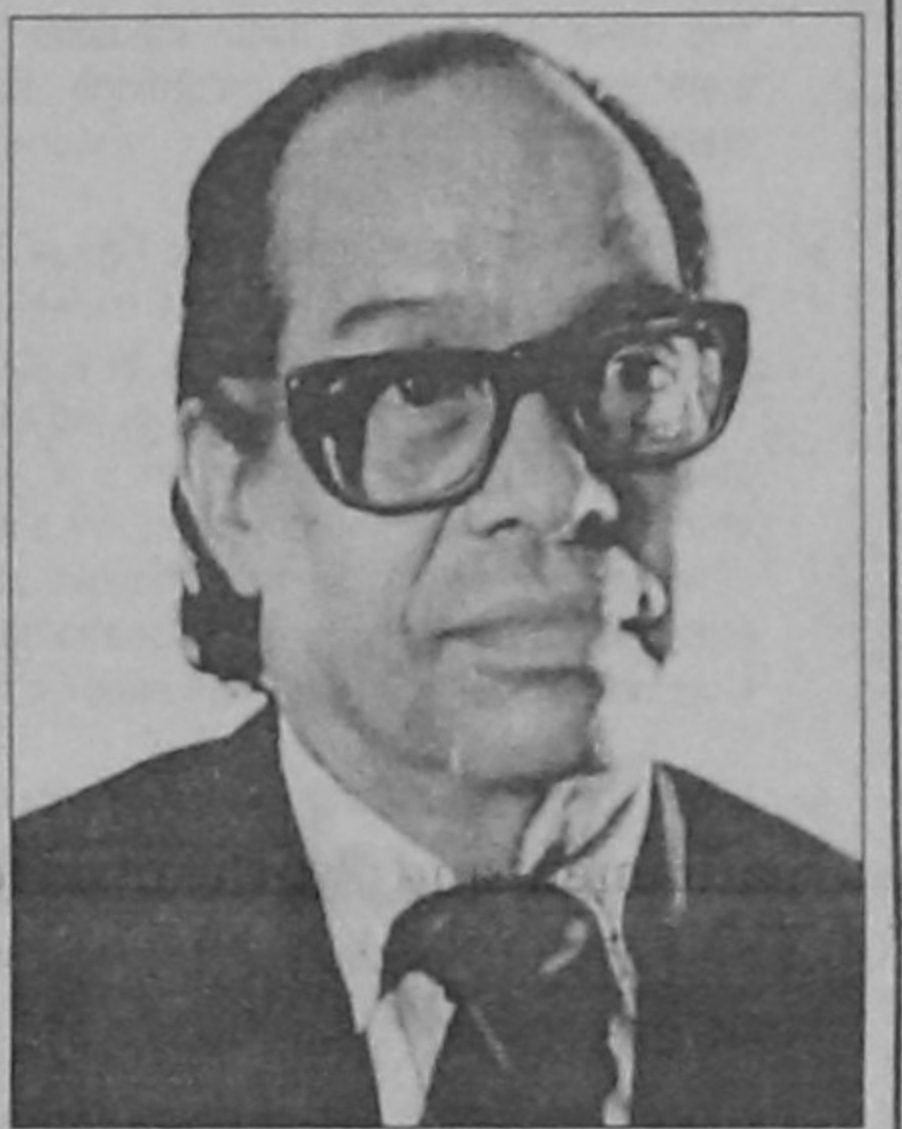
Dr. Sharif was the lone authority on ancient and medieval Bengali literature, and was author of more than 100 research publications. He edited 46 manuscripts of ancient and medieval Bengali literature, and a lot of others in joint collaboration. Two volumes of his Bangalee and Bangla Shahitya (Men and Literature of Bengal), published between 1978 and 1983, are masterpieces according to sub-continental scholars.

Never did he care for appreciation or publicity for his scholarly works. Although many so-called liberal democrats and secular intellectuals of the country denied his scholarly contributions and suppressed his free thoughts, no one has ever questioned his intellectual honesty.

However, many believe that one of his major achievements was that, unlike many of his contemporary scholars and academicians, he was able to negate the hatred and enmity of reactionary forces by the bold expression of his own views. The late scholar was universally highly regarded for his ability to say "no" to various material temptations; his dignity and self respect never permitted him to be complaint and submissive to power.

He was considered an impractical man, seized with radical ideas but never "clever" enough to understand his own mundane interests as he never took any advantage of his scholarship position nor wield his influence to become wealthy, famous and powerful.

Dr. Sharif never compromised, and held on to whatever he thought right through to the end; he rose above all dogmatic and parochial outlooks towards life. For his brave statements against communalism, superstition,



Dr. Ahmed Sharif

autocracy and fascism, his life came under threat many times, but he didn't care. He was an institution for people with a rational outlook, and his school of free thought influenced many youths of the country for almost half a century.

Those who came across him, either at the adda at Suhrawardy Uddayn or at his Shukurbare Adda (Friday gathering), specially the young who took part in the weekly discussion at his residence on issues ranging from the ideal way of social life to modern theories of literature, philosophy and contemporary politics, certainly developed a talent for provocative one-liners on virtually everything, starting from imperialism, fascism, racism, culture, religion and Marxism.

As a teacher he taught his pupils to think and honing of the intellect was his prime concern, not for his own sake but in order to live life more meaningfully, for the good of all.

He will be remembered for his ideas and modern outlook, and also for the donation of his eyes and body for the benefit of mankind. All this will encourage the liberal democrats and progressive forces, and his massive scholarly contribution will enrich and help the researchers of Bengali literature throughout this century.

Dr. Nehal Karim is Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka.

Most pointless records



HE sat in front of the idiot box for 72 hours. "I feel fine; I drank between 25 and 30 cups of coffee," Suresh Joachim said.

Suresh already has several world records. He stood on an escalator for five days, travelling 225 kilometers without going anywhere. He holds a record for crawling 56 kilometers. (Why does this remind me of "staff appraisal week" in my office?)

He once rocked on a rocking chair for 75 hours. And he ironed 639 garments in a 55-

hour stretch to set a world record. (My domestic helper could give him a run for his money.)

In China, a man named Lui Mei last week demonstrated how he could walk in the world's most uncomfortable shoes: lead boots weighing 290 kilos. He trained for four years to set that record.

Then there were the women in Cyprus who formed the world's longest chain of bras. Listen, Cypriot ladies, you may think that bras are feminine objects of great interest to males, but I have news for you. This is only true if they contain their normal contents.

Then there was one Ashrita Furman who got himself listed in the Guinness Book of Records for rolling an orange with his nose for one mile (1.6 km) at JFK airport in New York. The same guy "tiddled" a tiddlywink for the same distance at Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Some of the record holders are not even human! Albert Einstein, a three-year-old goldfish, is listed for being the fish with the largest repertoire of tricks. He can do six things, including playing football and performing the limbo.

Now is it just me, or has the whole idea of "world records" becoming ridiculous? I mean, the silliest category of records is one of the most celebrated: the money ones. The highest price for a pair of jeans is US\$60,000 paid by some Japanese guy, the priciest tea was a rare Chinese green tea costing US\$12 a cup, and so on. These records demonstrate nothing except that people are stupid with their money. Why should we celebrate that?

No, we should either ban ALL world records or limit them to people doing worthwhile things. But who am I fooling? There's no way the group of gibbering lunatics known as the human race is ever



going to limit itself to intelligent activities.

In which, case I shall follow the "if you can't beat them, join them" school of thought. I hereby declare that the following world records have not yet been set, and I invite readers to claim these titles or stand back while I grab some myself.

- Most obviously crooked business person to make a billion dollars.
- Biggest moustache on a female.
- Spottiest bottom in the world.
- Largest number of uses of the word "tiddlywink" in a newspaper column.
- Stupidest individual to become a national leader.
- Smelliest sock.

Guess which of the above records this columnist is about to claim? Tiddlywink, tiddlywink, tiddlywink.

For more pointless remarks visit www.vittachi.com.