

Holy Prophet of Islam (pbuh)

SYED ASHRAF ALI

THE 12th of Rabiul Awal is a red letter day not only in the history of Islam but also in the annals of civilisation. It was on this day in 570 Anno Domini that the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was born as guide for all mankind, nay for the entire creation.

"The advent of this great Teacher, whose life from the moment of his Ministry is a verifiable record," says Syed Ameer Ali in *The Spirit of Islam*, "was not a mere accident, an unconnected episode in the history of the world. The same causes, the same crying evils, the same earnest demand for an 'assured trust' in an all-pervading Power, which led to the appearance on the shores of Galilee, in the reign of Augustus Caesar, of a Prophet, operated with greater force in the sixth and the seventh centuries."

The end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh centuries stood for an epoch of disintegration -- national, social, moral, spiritual and religious. They all pointed to the necessity of a revelation of Divine government.

The annals of history testify eloquently to the fact that the Voice of God, though unheard, has always sounded the Call to truth. In hours of crises, the servants of the Great Unknown, the "Messengers of Heaven," inevitably rose to proclaim the duties of man to himself and to his Creator.

Such indeed was Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) whose Mission was not for the Arabs alone. He was sent for not one age or clime, but "for all mankind to the end of the world." The Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah, in His infinite Mercy, sent Muhammad (pbuh) as Rahmatul-lil-Alameen -- mercy not only for the entire humanity but also for each and every creation in every nook and corner of the infinite universe.

The holy Prophet (pbuh) with his amazing soberness and incompara-

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ble self-control, with which he entertained his all-absorbing visions, rose to the occasion with all the sincerity, conviction and determination under the sun. The challenge was dreadful, the task stupendous. "Many a less sincere man, many a real hero," says Major Arthur Glyn Leonard in *Islam: Her Moral and Spiritual Value*, "would have shrunk from and succumbed before an ordeal so terrific, a contest so supremely titanic. But Mohammed was made of sterner stuff, of the spirit gods are made of. Failure was a word that he did not recognise. With God at his back, success was an absolute certainty -- a foregone conclusion."

There was something so fascinating, so arresting in the personality of this great Arabian who, without any standing army, without any palace, without any huge resources to fall back upon, without the slenderest human backing and against the heaviest material odds could so effectively revolutionise the social, political, moral and spiritual out-



IQBAL KHATRI

look of the wild hordes, the barbarous savages of Arabia, creating a new orientation, developing a new phase of action, a new angle of vision, giving a new direction to human thought, a new bond to world civilisation, a new interpretation of human life and destiny.

There was something so chivalrous about this giant among men that alone among the great teachers of mankind he conferred the first legal status of honour and responsibility upon women, making them Sui-Juris, ensuring their economic independence and providing them opportunity in all spheres of human activity, guaranteeing their rights in the properties of the deceased parents, of the dead husband and children -- rights and privileges which could not be conceived of before the enactment of Married Women's Property Act in England by the middle of the 19th century, rights which are being conceded to them by the civilised nations of Europe and America even in the twenty-first century.

There was something so generous and magnanimous about this Seer of Arabia that alone among the Prophets of God he sympathised with slaves in their deep distress and did not merely liberate thousands of slaves after the Battle of Hunain and inspire his companions to emulate his noble example, but also laid down principles with proper religious sanctions with a view to emancipating them for good.

There was something so noble and humane in this orphan child of the desert that he responded so readily to the cry of distress from orphans, soothed their troubled hearts, enjoining upon his followers genuine sympathy and punctilious regards for their just right, giving strict orders against encroachment upon their rights and properties in any shape or form, creating the noblest urge for the establishment of orphanages all over the world.

There was something so constructive and creative in the amazing genius of this great man of

vision and imagination that he reconciled the divergent claims and conflicting interests of all classes and conditions of people, combining various aspects of human life, the individual with the social, the national with the international, the material with the spiritual, the here-with the here-after, laying down principles for all stages and conditions of human society, principles aiming at the perpetual growth of the human race.

There was something so rational, so dynamic, so material, nay so original, in his magnificent conception of God and His relation with man and the system of universes that he could with his simple humanity, with his democratic conception of the Divine Great, with his appeal to reason and the ethical faculty of mankind, lay the foundation of the modern world, establishing both in theory and practice liberty, equality and fraternity at least 1,200 years before the French Revolution.

There was something not only

original but unprecedented in his concept of the Ethics of War, which had never been conceived of before, and principles of warfare which furnished the real guidance for conduct of warfare for succeeding generations for centuries in three continents of the world.

No wonder it is not the Moslems alone who claim that the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was the greatest and most influential in the annals of civilisation. Michael Hart, in *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, wrote: "My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world's most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and the secular levels."

John William Draper, who claims that Renaissance owes its birth to Islam, shares the same view and acknowledges in *A History of the Intellectual Development of Europe*: "Four years after the death of Justinian, in A.D. 569, was born at Mecca, in Arabia, the man (Muhammad) who, of all men, has exercised the greatest influence upon the human race."

Alfred de Lamartine sums up the great virtues and the excellent qualities of the Last and the Greatest Prophet (pbuh) in *Histoire de la Turquie* when he says: "If greatness of purpose, smallness of means, and astounding results are the three criteria of human genius, who could dare to compare any great man in modern history with Muhammad? Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational dogmas, of a cult without images; the founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire, that is Muhammad. As regards all standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than He?"

The writer is former Director General, Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh.

Remembering Zeaul Huq

REHMAN SOBHAN

TODAY is February 16, the tenth death anniversary of one of my closest friends, Zeaul Huq -- Tulu to his friends. His passing left a major void in not just my life but in the lives of many people of diverse backgrounds and political beliefs. His decency, integrity and warmth as a human being reached out to everyone he met. There was no second face when you met him. The rare quality of a human being who is transparent in his dealings with people invested Tulu with the equally rare capacity to enjoy the confidence of a quite large and diverse collection of people. In an increasingly divided society this also remained an exceptional quality.

Tulu could reach out to all sides of the political spectrum at all levels. I have enjoyed innumerable breakfast meetings at his house, with Sheikh Hasina and Kamal Hossain prior to 1991, and a few even when she was the leader of the opposition. Khaleda Zia also shared political confidences with Tulu. When I was a member of the first caretaker government in 1991 and wanted to informally discuss the idea of constituting the 29 Task Forces with Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia it was Tulu who facilitated my meeting with them, which needed to be done outside the public eye.

If I recollect, I met Sheikh Hasina at Tulu's home in Banani and received her blessings for the idea. Similarly, Tulu took me to the home of the late Col. Mustafizur Rahman in Gulshan where I met Khaleda Zia in the company of Saifur Rahman. It may be added for the historic record that at that meeting both Khaleda Zia and Saifur Rahman enthusiastically endorsed the idea of the Task Forces. It was this rare consensus of the two leaders which encouraged me to go ahead with the Task Forces and, as in many other such events,

Tulu was the facilitator for these encounters.

In setting up meetings outside the public eye between people who were not willing to be seen together in public Tulu was again a unique resource in Bangladesh's fractured political life. I can recollect any number of crucial negotiations in his successive homes in Green Road and Banani which impacted on the fate of some of our political parties and on national politics. For example, a number of crucial meetings were held in Tulu's house when the alliance between the Awami League and the BNP was being forged to confront Ershad.

Further meetings all the way upto the fall of Ershad, including Tulu's own meetings with key members of the diplomatic community, are part of Bangladesh's history of the restoration of democracy. In the days after the fall of Ershad and the constitution of the caretaker government of President Shahabuddin, Tulu's house in Banani was a virtual antechamber for consultations on who would become members of the caretaker government.

How did one person who had never directly participated in politics or held any important public office command the confidence of so many who had mattered, in an environment of mutual distrust and antagonism? I can think of no second person in the contemporary life of Bangladesh who was privy to such a range of confidences and commanded such influence as to be able to bring people of such diverse positions together.

Few history books will record Tulu's catalytic role in the making of Bangladesh's political history. But Tulu's contribution needs to be placed on record, particularly in our current phase, when the major leaders and parties rarely talk to each other or even have access to

the necessary meeting ground once provided by Tulu at his home.

In setting up these meetings it was Tulu who was always the go-between. It was Tulu who ensured the privacy and security needed to hold such meetings and then assured the necessary confidentiality which gave him his unique credibility. The quality of the meetings at his home was of course immeasurably enhanced by the superb cuisine offered by Jolly, Tulu's wife, who thereby came to be known to all those who were in the process of contributing to Bangladesh's history.

Tulu inherited his decency, values and transparency from his father Janab Fazlul Huq, Mowla Mian to his friends, who in his time, from the 1930's, was the repository of many political confidences and was known to all the major political figures of East Bengal before and after the partition of India. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who shared Mowla Mian's origins from Faridpur, had the highest respect for him and let this respect carry over to his affection for Tulu. He was also well known to Ziaur Rahman who reportedly invited him to join his first cabinet, an offer which Tulu declined. Even though there were aspects of the Awami League regime with which Tulu disagreed, he was deeply distressed by the assassination of Bangabandhu and angered at the subsequent attempts to devalue his historic role in the emergence of Bangladesh.

In later years Tulu became more frustrated with the direction of the major political parties. But right upto the end of his life, the personal respect and trust he enjoyed with their senior members, including their two leaders, was never extinguished. Tulu had accumulated enough political capital to still exercise his magical charm over diverse

political constituencies. But in his last year I found that Tulu had lost his zest for political inter-mediation. Tulu's withdrawal from the role of political mediator was itself symbolic of the vanishing middle ground in Bangladesh's increasingly confrontational political life.

Our close personal relations impacted on our attempts to contribute to the political life of the country. Whilst Tulu became a successful, if not overly affluent businessman, he retained his close links with the Left. He certainly shared the dominant concerns of our generation for attaining self rule and democracy for the Bengalis. He, therefore, readily joined hands with me, Prof. Razzaq, Kamal Hossain, Mosharaff Hossain, Salahuddin Ahmed and Badruddin Umar when, around 1960/61, we set up the National Association for Social and Economic Progress (NASEP), a political study group designed to inject constructive policy inputs into the political discourse of the day.

Tulu encouraged us to widen NASEP into Jonomoytri Parishad, where he brought in a broader spectrum of political intellectuals to contribute to the effort to influence the political debates of the time. Given Tulu's wide network of connections with the media, world of culture and politics his presence was crucial in connecting this narrow group of academics with the wider world of politics.

After the fall of Ayub in 1969, Tulu joined Hameeda, Kamal Hossain and myself to found the English language weekly Forum. Hameeda and I were the editors but we drew upon a broad range of professionals not just in East Pakistan, but also in the West Wing and abroad to shape Forum into an exciting venture designed to influence the policy agendas of the nationalist movement. It was again



Zeaul Huq

Tulu who linked Forum with the journalist community, with prospective advertisers from the business community and political figures who were our readers.

As Kamal and myself found ourselves being more actively involved in the political process it was Tulu who helped us to liaise with the political players of the day. It was in Kamal's and Tulu's homes where Bangabandhu and Tajuddin met occasionally with those of us who were becoming actively involved in the liberation struggle. As the democratic struggle escalated into the Liberation War, it was Tulu again who chose to stay back in Dhaka, so that he could support the war effort from within. He remained totally committed to the liberation of Bangladesh throughout 1971 and served as a valuable source of intelligence to the Mujibnagar government whilst providing funding for the war effort and refuge for those in danger. All this at considerable risk to himself and his family.

The most remarkable quality of Tulu was his refusal to extract political or material benefit from the uniquely advantageous position he commanded in Bangladesh's public life. Over the last 30 years there was no major political figure across the

political spectrum, no secretary to the Government of Bangladesh, no major businessperson and indeed no ambassador resident in Dhaka, who was not intimately known to Tulu. This remarkable accumulation of social capital in Tulu's hands could have been parleyed into political office and financial fortune. That Tulu refused to capitalise on the unique opportunities open to him is a measure of his integrity and also the source of his credibility.

In his passing Tulu has left a vacuum not just in Bangladesh's politics but also in many personal lives. He could be totally trusted with confidences and could offer sustenance without any sense of making the beneficiary feel obligated. This applied not just to me and my family but to many of his close and even not so close friends. An exceptionally large number of people will thus share my sense of personal bereavement that a guide and friend is no more.

Tulu always planned to write his memoirs. If he wrote it with complete candour it would not only have been a unique cameo of Bangladesh's political history but also a contribution to the social and intellectual history of our generation. This opportunity was denied him so it is left to his friends to imperfectly recognise his contribution to Bangladesh's public life as much as to our personal lives.

It is unlikely that a person of his unique qualities will emerge in the life of Bangladesh. We may continue to pay a heavy price now that the contemporary culture of intolerance, confrontation and distrust have made it virtually impossible for another Zeaul Huq to build bridges across the political divide and in the process to enrich so many lives touched by his friendship.

The writer is Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue(CPD).