AHMED ILIAS

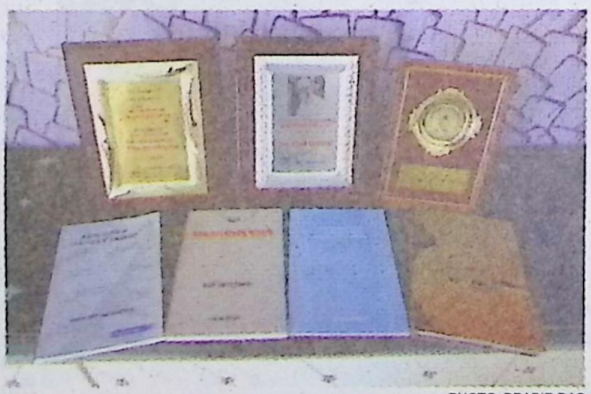
In Pursuit of Cultural Pluralism in Bangladesh

C R ABRAR

Last week marked the 80th birth anniversary of Ahmed Ilias – poet, rights activist, researcher and social commentator. His has been a life worth spent.

Born in 1934 in Kolkata Ilias lost his mother within hours of his birth. He endured another tragedy when his foster father died in a road accident within a few years. It was from a tender age that Ilias faced the brute realities of unending challenges of life.

Mistreated by his step-mother, the young boy escaped his house and had to learn to fend for himself. He worked as a hawker for three years at the Hogg Market (now New Market) and subsequently as salesperson at a bakery in Free School Street, Kolkata. His efforts to continue his studies faltered as working hours became more demanding. Eventually with the help of his friends this meritorious boy maintained his subsistence through tutoring and got enrolled in the Islamia High School of Kolkata.



Some of the poet's accolades and works. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Soon Ilias's penchant for poetry became evident. He actively participated in the *mushaiara* (poetry sessions). It was at an annual poetry festival that his ghazal drew appreciation of the renowned Urdu poet Allama Jameel Mazhari. Ilias retained a life-long interest in poetry, and, over the years, became a leading light in the Urdu literary circles of the subcontinent. Critics have noted that his collections of poems 'Ainey Rezey' (Broken Mirror) and 'Harfe Darida' (Torn Letters) are in a way reflections of a person who is 'in exile in his own country' and 'universal cry of all the refugees and the exiles the world over'.

From his Kolkata days Ilias became interested in the language movement of 1952. He came to Dhaka immediately after the movement. He served as a night guard in Johnson Road. Harsh reality of the new land forced him back to Kolkata within a few weeks. He subsequently migrated to East Pakistan in 1953. Within a short time he sat for matriculation examination and secured 7th position in the merit list of the private candidates. In Dhaka he was drawn to progressive thinking and activism. His interest in social and political issues made him quit a comfortable job at the Geological Survey of Pakistan and opted to serve as manager of the National Press Club.

It was at this important hub of liberalism Ilias came in touch with torchbearers of the democratic movement against the Ayub regime. With his writing skills further honed he joined the Urdu newspaper Pasban in 1964. In 1970 eminent Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz inducted him into the editorial board of the Karachi based weekly *Layal O Nahar*. Faiz did so to ensure that the Bengalees' struggle for autonomy would get adequately and properly reported in the weekly.

Like most other members of the Urdu speaking community Ilias faced a challenging time in the period soon after the independence of Bangladesh. His loss of job was further compounded by illness of his son. After a brief stint in Kolkata where he went for treatment of his ailing son, Ilias returned to Bangladesh in 1973 and joined Heed Bangladesh, a NGO working with the camp based Urdu speaking community. In 1981, he established Al Falah Bangladesh.

Ilias's is steadfastly committed to promotion of rights and welfare of the members of the camp dwelling Urdu speaking community. In the post liberation period in the face of discrimination and disenfranchisement when almost all leaders of