

## EDITOR'S NOTE

*In order to exist, man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limits that it discovers in itself - limits where minds meet, and in meeting, begin to exist. (Albert Camus)*  
To proudly show the black stain on our thumb and make a vote count. To protest when the votes are counted wrong. To demand a fair court of hearing. To meet on common ground for the greater good. As a nation we have repeatedly been forced into situations when we had no choice but to rebel. And, as a nation we have also been able to settle differences and forge a stronger path ahead. Today's SLR thus salutes the rebel in us, through words, through fiction and outraged verse. We remain in hope of smoother roads ahead, trying not to choke until the dust beneath our feet settles and are willing to acknowledge each other as travellers with the same destination.

MUNIZE MANZUR

# SYED MUJTABA ALI AS A REBEL

Abdullah Shibli

Most people, including his close associates, don't see Syed Mujtaba Ali as a rebel. He had all the traits of a regular guy: a family, love for his siblings, dedication to parents, and commitment to one's roots. But, from the stories I've heard from his brothers and sisters, it seems he was a rebel child from his elementary school days. A modern day psychologist might detect in his lineage and family composition an environment that nurtured and propelled him to become a rebel:

youngest of three boys, good looking, with doting younger sisters. In his biography of Mujtaba Ali, his elder brother Syed Murtaza Ali writes that when Mujtaba, or Situ as they called him, was a student of Class IX, some Hindu students, to celebrate puja, stole flowers from the garden in the Sylhet Deputy Commissioner's residence. Soon, the offending students were brought to task, and to protest the treatment meted out to the students, he refused to go back to school. This act of defiance was an extraordinary show of courage since his father Syed Sikander Ali was Sub-Registrar, a government servant, and he was worried about the consequences of his son's act.

His subsequent self-imposed exile to Bolepur at the age of 17 and journeys he undertook thereon show many other signs of his empathies for the underdog and rebel causes. According to his elder brother, Mujtaba Ali wrote to Tagore when he was only 14 years old and he did so without consulting any other member of the family. Tagore had visited Sylhet in 1919 and met with high school students of Sylhet Government High School, where Mujtaba Ali was a student of Class VII. Tagore's speech on goals and aspirations inspired Mujtaba Ali. He wrote to Tagore, "What does one need to do to set higher personal goals in life?" Tagore wrote back, "You need to set your aspirations high—the meaning of this notion is—one should not be driven by self-interest alone. A spirit of spontaneous endeavor whose goal is to improve the welfare of the nation and public good will take us on the path of collective emancipation. I cannot offer a dictum for you from so far away. However, the good intentions in your heart will lead you towards the common good."

Since then Mujtaba Ali had set his sights on going to *Biswa Bharati*, and the student rebellion gave him the opportunity to get away and find his own moorings in a world where change was in the air – in India, Afghanistan, Turkey and Europe. When the incident

surrounding the Hindu students of Sylhet Government School was over and things started to settle down, his father entreated Mujtaba to go back to school. Instead, Mujtaba expressed his desire to go to *ShantiNiketan*. After he finished his studies at *ShantiNiketan*, Mujtaba Ali did a short stint at Aligarh Muslim University. Then he went to Afghanistan where Amanullah Khan had become the Malik (King) of Afghanistan in 1926 after working as an Emir (Governor) of

administration authority in Sylhet, aligned himself with the efforts of Amanullah to sever ties with Britain which until then dictated Afghan foreign policy. During his stay in Kabul, Mujtaba Ali also became aware of anti-British sentiments in the region, and further west, Germany's attempts to push back demands made by Britain for WWI reparations and other conditions imposed by the victorious powers. Amanullah Khan was captivated by

learning a new language. We also see the effect of his rebellious soul in his writing and life journey. For example, he came up with words that were a fusion of strands from different languages. As one biographer mentions, "A master of many languages and animated by his exceptionally intimate association with the heterogeneous strands of life, Mujtaba had rather a fascination for making all sorts of queer, even awkward combination of words: mingling the Sanskrit with the Persi-Arabic, the undignified slang with most sophisticated tatsama." (Note: Tatsama = words borrowed from Sanskrit). Mujtaba Ali alludes to various unorthodox life styles in his travelogue, his novels, and particularly in his essays which gave rise to a new genre of writing in India, *romy rochona* or humorous writing. But to me, his most bold statement as a rebel was articulated in his book *PonchoTantra* where he asks himself "What do you do? Well, I write books for a living. I am a writer, both a consumer and a producer of written words." To announce so boldly, that I am a professional writer while he acknowledges that he is not sitting on a stack of cash or was not privileged to have been born to a royal family, is the ultimate act of rebellion.

As I reread Mujtaba Ali's account in *PonchoTantra*, I was struck by the similarity between Syed Mujtaba Ali and another great writer, the Colombian Nobel-prize winning novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In his autobiography, "Living to Tell the Tale", Garcia Marquez describes in detail how he had disappointed his father when he quit his studies to become a writer. Once, his mother came to see him and questioned him persistently about his plans for the future. Finally, before she returned, she tried one last time: "So, what shall I tell your papa?" "Tell him I love him very much and that thanks to him I'm going to be a writer. Nothing but a writer."

Abdullah Shibli is an economist and IT professional working in Boston, USA.



a province for seven years. The King announced his plans to modernize Afghanistan, and invited Syed Mujtaba Ali to work as a professor and on educational reforms. Syed Mujtaba Ali took up residence in Kabul and worked in the education department during 1927-1929. As Mujtaba Ali described so eloquently in *Shabnam* and *Deshe Bideshe*, King Amanullah met resistance from the conservative and the fractious warlords of different Afghan tribes. The changes that Amanullah and his wife, Queen Soraya, were advocating were truly revolutionary for those days: abolition of polygamy, secular education, and reform of the hijab tradition. Mujtaba Ali, who by this time had some experience with the abhorrent nature of British rule, given his brushes with British civil

Germany's attempts and struggles to recover from the destruction of WWI and the efforts by Germany to overcome the harsh financial penalty imposed by the Allied Powers. As mentioned above, he sought to gain autonomy from UK, and decided to travel to Europe and particularly to Germany to forge better relations with President Paul von Hindenburg. King Amanullah and Queen Soraya arrived in Berlin in February, 1928. After Amanullah returned from his trip to Germany, Mujtaba Ali had several meetings with him and became aware of the intellectual climate in the universities of Bonn and Berlin. As a rebel in the making, he had probably by that time decided to get his higher education in Germany rather than UK, even though it would necessitate

# Rahman's Conscience

S M Shahrulk

Rahman, a young man on the doorstep of thirty, falls to the ground as the knife plunges deep into his back; piercing his muscles to almost reach his heart but, missing it by a hair's breadth hits his ribs. It was a long bladed knife. His head was already spinning from being hit by a bamboo stick, a *latthi*, made to order for fights and not for fooling around. As he lies dying, a pool of blood forming about where his torso has landed, he sighs at the death of conscience in his beloved motherland, a land where his unborn child will have to grapple with the difficulties of a fatherless child.

Rahman used to live in the outskirts of Dhaka, a lower middle class suburb called Demra. He worked at the offices of the local municipal office, a clerk; he was never suited for a higher paying job. His wife Sokhina became pregnant after three years of a happy marriage. She was barely twenty.

Rahman's office work, of late, involved hardly any work as the country was sinking deeper and deeper into political mire. With agitation programmes all over the country, his colleagues at the office had been involved in heated political debates, their numbers equal on both sides of the political aisle. Rahman's stand was in favour of the opposition who had called the agitation but he had been aghast at the terrorism adopted by the affiliates of the party he supported. He was constantly in a harried state defending the party he supported in the face of its wanton use of arson against the innocent public. The happiness he felt at the prospect of becoming a father faded when he turned on the television and saw the gut-wrenching scenes of mayhem. He looked to the heavens for an end to his exasperation but the sky was always empty.

At the initial stages of the current movement, Rahman had joined some activists of the opposition party who got together at a clubhouse. He even joined them in processions screaming against a government he thought was depriving people of their democratic rights. As the movement precipitated to a never ending impasse and

atrocities began to be perpetrated by his fellow activists, Rahman tried to distance himself from the clubhouse, its occupants and their nefarious plans to cause terror. Rahman always believed, some would say foolishly, that to attain demands did not necessitate violence of such gruesome nature – people burned to charcoal while travelling in a bus. As the agitation worsened and more burn victims took up the pages of newspapers and became constant breaking news on TV crawls, Rahman's position at the office political scene became untenable and he faced verbal abuse for his political beliefs. One day he was even



accused by a colleague as an agitator of the worst kind and threatened with a possible report to the law enforcers, albeit without any proof that his hands were bloody. He was advised to watch his back. A cold shiver ran down his spine as he thought of a heavily pregnant Sokhina and the yet unborn baby, to be named Zia if a boy or Ayesha if a girl. Around this time, Shujon – a firebrand of the clubhouse with virulence flowing in his veins, asked Rahman to keep a few Molotov cocktails at his house. He said he would retrieve them the next day to use in a planned attack on goods-laden trucks that regularly plied on the

highway adjoining Demra on their way to the capital city.

Rahman lost his head and screamed at Shujon, "I don't like the way the government has been going about things and would like nothing better than to see its back but killing innocent people is something I would never condone. If this is what you do in order to achieve the goals of our party then damn the party, damn the leaders, damn you all to hell!" Shujon warned him of dire consequences as he left with his bag of 'toxic' load.

Two days later, Rahman lies wondering which side got him. He breathes his last thinking once again about Zia or Ayesha and how an almost illiterate Sokhina would cope with a life of uncertainty.

Caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, Rahman is a man with some semblance of a conscience still fluttering like a candle flame in the tumult of a country falling apart. Political awareness or activism has moved far from belief in an ideology. Politics has become the ladder of success for the rapacious, the avaricious, the greedy, the hoodlum, the godfathers, the coteries that surround 'leaders'. Politics is no longer aimed at the greater good; personal good is far more profitable and desirable. Politicians are not at the level of the general masses anymore; they are now in the class of the rich and they are not willing to relinquish the comforts of easy money any time soon. The leftists do not dream of emancipation of the working class anymore, they would rather move to the upper echelon too.

Warren Buffett put the current class war very poignantly, "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning." When hell fire engulfs, the angels of heaven are scarred to a dark hue and the angelic white becomes a distant dream; God remains silent, as usual.

S M Shahrulk is a freelance contributor. Read more of him at [tracesoforange.wordpress.com](http://tracesoforange.wordpress.com)

# Fanatics Have No Religion

Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah  
Translated by  
Mohammad Shafiqul Islam

Golden diseases are born in blood, Then they grow, flesh out as ghastly sores. See, the nation bears incurable diseases today, Bigoted demons are after-life businessmen, Phthisis, severity of diseases gradually burgeoning.

Religion brought light to darkness in ancient times, With its skeletons and decomposed flesh, Some selfish foul people hawk it around today – They fill up the mystery of creation with idle stories. Opium is still good, but religion – that's hemlock.

Fanatics have no religion – they have greed, vile astuteness. Dividing the human world into hundreds of sects, They established class difference in the name of God. In the name of God, they endorsed wrongs.

Ha bigotry! Ha ignorance! How far, wherefore is God? Murders, bloodshed in the name of unknown power. Myriads of cruel storms swept in a thousand years! Where are the *houris* of heaven and sacred sherbet? Where are the eternal times in endless sexuality? People turn worse than beasts for the greed of them! Is there any other hell more dreadful than this? Is the fire of starvation less blistering than *habiah*? Is that fire softer than *rouwab*?

Eluding mortal life, they are engrossed in the Hereafter – They should go to their heaven in the Afterlife. We'll live in this beautiful world. Stirred by future dreams, we'll sow the seed of Equality In the dynamic stream of disputable civilization.