

TRIBUTE A free spirited innovator

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

ONE of the most crucial traits of greatness is the ability to retain one's humility despite it. That would probably be an apt description of S M Ali, our founding editor who passed away on this day October 17, 1993, leaving behind for us, an example to be cherished and emulated. Long before he realised his dream of establishing a brand new English newspaper in every sense of the word, he had already become quite a celebrity, having established himself as a journalist of worth in the news world.

In 1960 he became Assistant Editor of the *Pakistan Times* in Lahore, later joining *The Asia Magazine* in Hongkong with the same position. He was the South Asia Bureau Chief for the Karachi daily *Dawn* (1964-95) and then the Managing Editor of Thailand's leading English Daily the *Bangkok Post* (1966-70). In 1972 he became the Managing Editor of the *Hongkong Standard* and in 1977, the Executive Director of Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia. He also started *Depthnews Features* a development feature service. In 1981 he joined UNESCO as regional Communications Advisor for Asia and the Pacific in Kuala Lumpur during which he actively promoted journalism in Asia.

This was probably what evoked such respect from eminent people at home and abroad – he was after all, quite a brand name in journalism. But more than that it was his extraordinary personality that drew people to him. He was confident yet self effacing, straightforward yet never aggressive, firm yet charming. As young aspiring journalists we loved him because he seemed genuinely interested in us. It is with great sadness that I realise how brief the time we had with him and how little we knew of his achievements at the time. Yet I feel so privileged that I had a chance to interact with him at a time when *The Daily Star* was taking its baby steps along with the nation as it started its tumultuous journey as a democracy.

We were then in a one-floor office in Motijheel and the area where the editorial and feature section where we worked, was spacious and largely empty. Every now and then S M Ali would walk towards us and chat for a few minutes. What amazed us was that he commented on our writing – he actually had read our pieces – praising us or suggesting ways to improve. All this was done in his characteristic paternal way, making witty comments, showing concern for our wellbeing and exuding a rare compassion for his employees. He was kind, knowledgeable and someone who was 'larger than life' as a colleague describes him and though we knew very little of his glories we recognised in him an inspiring leader.

In the commemorative pieces written by his friends – many of them prominent personalities from home and abroad – what keeps reverberating the most are his commitment to journalism and his bohemian approach to life. He is described as a restless spirit who could not stay in one place – he had to explore new horizons where he could gain new experiences and make a difference in the journalistic scene. Thus travel was a part of his karma and took him to South East Asia where he made his mark as an ace journalist/editor much in demand. But there was that unquenchable thirst to do something for



S M Ali

(December 5, 1928 - October 17, 1993)

his country which lured him back. His determination and dedication, despite his failing health, gave him the strength to establish an English daily that brought in a freshness and zest to journalism in the country. With his vast experience in papers in South East Asia, he brought in a set of standards that was unprecedented in Bangladesh. His paper *The Daily Star* stood for objectivity not neutrality, as a watch guard of all the political players. It was a platform for new writers, for public opinion and for the voices that had never been heard before. The editorial of the inaugural issue written by S M Ali on January 14, 1991 himself, stresses on the papers non-partisan position free of influence of any kind. It also confirms its role: "...we will be anything but neutral in conflicts between good and evil, justice and injustice, right and wrong, regardless of positions assumed by political parties – whether in power or in opposition. No politician will be able to take this paper for granted but none will be given cause to doubt our fairness." Remarkably under the leadership of his dynamic successor, friend, colleague and the paper's co-founder, Mahfuz Anam, *The Daily Star* has managed to retain this credo all these years.

All throughout his endeavours it was his wife Nancy Wong who supported him with her love, wisdom and care.

His writing gives a glimpse of someone who was unfazed by fame and always ready to laugh at himself, a quality that made him all the more endearing.

In one of the entries of his column 'My World' he writes: "In between bouts of choking cough, the lingering after effect of a weeklong bronchitis, I read out our paper's homage to the Shaheed Day last week with a certain pride but not without some regret that my name appearing on the print line as the editor, I had so little to do with the planning of the supplement. Since it gave the opportunity to more experienced hands to produce it, absence was perhaps something of a blessing in disguise."

And with his incorrigible tongue-in-cheek style he could be critical: "To what do we attribute this passion for talking? May be we are basically an articulate people, to put it nicely, or just garrulous, to put it less nicely, constantly promoting what a colleague describes as our 'vocal culture'. It has probably something to do with our high rate of illiteracy, which makes it necessary for us, especially the politicians, to talk rather than write, to repeat a point again and again (to make it sound convincing), to speak in a particularly loud voice (a habit acquired by politicians in total disregard of the use of microphone) and, at closed door meetings, to remain on the offensive in dealing with any viewpoint that may not come from 'your own side' (whatever that side may be)."

It is tragic that illness took away S M Ali from us long before he could see for himself the success of the paper that he had founded. What if he knew that, despite regular turbulence, it has managed to retain the philosophy that he had left behind. One can just imagine the twinkle in his eyes as he allowed himself to indulge in a moment of pride.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, *The Daily Star*.

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY An end in sight for ultra poverty



PHOTO: THE DAILY STAR

MUHAMMAD MUSA

IN the last 15 years, Bangladesh has emerged as one of the champions of poverty reduction. Statistics suggest that during the last 10 years, the number of people living below the poverty line in Bangladesh has gone down from 25.1 percent to 17.6 percent. On the eve of the International Day for Eradication of Poverty, this number gives us a reason to pat ourselves on the back and feel proud of our achievements. However, a key question remains - is this achievement enough? If we continue at this pace, will we be able to eradicate extreme poverty from Bangladesh by 2030?

This year's International Day for the Eradication of Poverty is special because it comes at the heels of the adaptation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations. The most critical item of this agenda, as could be expected is, "End poverty in all its forms everywhere" by 2030. Because travelling the last mile is always the toughest, we cannot do it by following the same strategies, tools and path, which led us to success in the past. In spite of the seismic achievement in reducing extreme poverty by half since 2000, eradicating extreme poverty in the next 15 years will require carving a path out for the poorest of the poor – the ultra poor (those earning 70 US cents or less a day).

Traditionally, most social protection programmes target the destitute, and extreme or moderate poor. Similarly, traditional microfinance and livelihood development programmes target those who are poor as well as non-poor. This design has two limitations. First, social protection programmes designed to offer protection (for example, from hunger), fail to offer the ladder (for example, jobs or livelihood) to climb out of extreme poverty. Second, it doesn't recognise that the ultra poor require additional guidance. We found this particular group of people to be so poor and so weighed down by ignorance, ill health, and social exclusion, that they were unable to do anything significant with the microloan given to them. As a result, while this set of programmes may have helped a good number of people to get out of the poverty trap, they were not particularly useful for the ultra poor population.

After decades of trial and error, starting in 2002, BRAC began deploying a set of carefully sequenced measures tailored to the unique set of challenges faced by the ultra poor. A custom-built, two-year intervention included steps such as targeting by the community, productive asset transfer, weekly stipends, intensive hands-on mentoring on utilisation of resources, healthcare, saving and social integration. The carefully designed programme did not just look at economic growth but also their respectful social relations. At the end of the programme, participants were evaluated based on certain graduation indicators on social acceptance and economic prosperity.

The first results of the programme evaluation were astonishing. A collaborative study conducted by BRAC's Research and Evaluation

Division (RED) and the London School of Economics (LSE), showed that over 95 percent of the targeted households graduated from ultra poverty, fulfilling the set of criteria. Improvements included, among others, a rise in livestock asset base by Tk. 11,000, even two years after the intervention ended. Since 2002, BRAC has scaled the programme and has graduated 1.5 million households out of ultra poverty.

These research findings and experience

First, social protection programmes designed to offer protection (for example, from hunger), fail to offer the ladder (for example, jobs or livelihood) to climb out of extreme poverty. Second, it doesn't recognise that the ultra poor require additional guidance.

encouraged governments and NGOs in nine other countries - Ethiopia, Honduras, Peru, Yemen, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ghana and Haiti - to replicate the model in their own countries. BRAC provided technical assistance in most countries and directly implemented the programme in Pakistan and South Sudan.

Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Poverty Action Lab ran six randomised controlled trials over a seven-year in six-countries with more than 10,000 poor households. The results were equally encouraging. The graduation rate ranged from 75-98 percent. At the end of the two-year programme, the monthly consumption of food had risen by around 5 percent relative to a control group. The value of assets had increased by 15 percent. Even more encouraging, when the researchers went back a year after the programme ended, they found that people were still working, earning and eating more.

After this successful adaptation of

the graduation approach outside Bangladesh, governments, NGOs, and policymakers can be confident that they now have an adaptable, scalable, international solution to address poverty that is hardest to beat. This presents an incredibly exciting opportunity for the global community to think carefully about how new international aid programmes, government social safety nets, and financial service packages can be re-designed to reach households living in the very fringes of our societies, and create more effective impact.

Of course, BRAC's model is one among many and there must be many more experiments that took place in solving this seemingly impossible challenge of reaching the ultra poor. That's exactly why we need to engage in a broad-based dialogue both home and abroad to share our insights and experiences and design a new paradigm for fighting extreme poverty suitable for each country.

As a first step for that, this year, BRAC is co-hosting an international extreme poverty summit in the UK, along with London School of Economics looking at the evaluation results with international policymakers. From 2016 onwards, we are starting a process to organise a similar summit every year in Bangladesh in partnership with the government and other development stakeholders of the country. We hope that such summits with clear goals will become a collaborative platform for countries around the world to fight the menace of extreme poverty more effectively. With proven models like BRAC's globally recognised 'targeting ultra poor' programme, the opportunity to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030 looks more realistic than ever.

The writer is the Executive Director of BRAC.



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