

REMINISCENCES OF A FORMER COLLEAGUE

Getting into the groove



SABIR MUSTAFA

It was some time in January 1991 when I first set foot in *The Daily Star* office. I had recently left the weekly *Dialogue* after two years. The English-language weekly was a good place where I learnt many things including how to use technology for journalism. *Dialogue*, owned and edited by former diplomat and foreign minister AR Shams-ud Doha, had also given me a taste for global events, not to just read about them but to treat them as stories for my own work.

I was in the market looking for a job and the Editor of *The Daily Star*, SM Ali, appeared to need an Assistant Editor to bolster his already-formidable team of writers which included the venerable and venerated Wahidul Haque. The ground work was done by Rahat Fahmida, my colleague at *Dialogue* who

married, she had every reason to be keen on what I would do!

But first I wrote an opinion piece for *The Daily Star's* op-ed page. I wanted to put my cards on the table and let the editor know my world view before joining the paper, rather than afterwards. The piece was about the 2nd Gulf War, triggered by Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait (which in turn was triggered by the Sheikdom's refusal to write-off debts owed by Iraq). In my piece, I argued that the US air campaign appeared to be more about destroying Iraq's industrial and economic infrastructure than about liberating Kuwait.

The op-ed convinced S M Ali that I could write fairly well, and that therefore I could look forward to joining the DS editorial team. He clearly did not agree with the views I had expressed in the piece. But he did not see that as a reason to not publish the article. That alone convinced me DS would be a decent place to work and build a career.

Mr Ali, along with the then executive editor Mahfuz Anam, took me to lunch, at Café Jheel just across the road from the DS office. He asked me about my last salary. I said I received Tk. 16,000 per month at *Dialogue*. S M Ali looked at Mr Anam, then turned to me and said, "As far as I am concerned, 16,000 doesn't exist".

The reality of the marketplace hit me pretty hard then. I suppose *Dialogue*, in an effort to be generous to its staff, lived beyond its means and paid the price of insolvency. The editor of *The Daily Star* then offered me Tk. 6,500 per month. I, being absolutely incapable of haggling over money, accepted the poverty-line offer without the slightest attempt at a negotiation. On the other hand, money was never the issue here. This was an opportunity to build a career under the guidance of an editor of S M Ali's reputation. After my first meeting, I had little doubt this paper was destined for great things.

One of the great things about *The Daily Star* in its early days was the ease with which anyone could integrate him/herself. The news and reporting sections were full of people who had worked with each other in previous jobs. But people staffing the editorial and feature sections did not come from the same place (Rahat and me being the exception). But the more experienced journalists there were only too willing to help out the newcomers.

There was Wahidul Haque, who appeared to inspire anyone who came within earshot of him. He was an extraordinary man whose knowledge of the country, culture and people was rarely matched. He was the kind of man who was as at ease discussing social prejudices with a 20-year-old as he was dissecting the finer points of Tagore with an 80-year-old. But my real inspiration was Mashuqul Haq, the Feature Editor. He loved to tell stories and was full of wit and humour. And he took some photos which, to this day, I consider to have been the best photos anyone has taken of me.

Listening to him, I suddenly felt the urge to write satirical pieces, or at least something that could be passed off as satire. Mashuqul Haq constantly prodded me, gave me ideas. I wrote a few pieces which even I found funny. Then suddenly, Mashuqul Haq left the paper – along with a large number of staff in the reporting and news sections (they left to join a new paper, *The Telegraph* which closed in less than two years). With Mashuqul Haq gone, I lost the inspiration which was driving me to think of satire as a genre to explore. With no one to prod or inspire me, and with no one there for me to use as a sounding board, my career as a satire writer came to an abrupt end, even before it got going.

But *The Daily Star* was not a rigid place where people worked only as per their job descriptions. People were able to do different things (provided, of course, they did them in their own time!). One of S M Ali's pet projects was a small daily feature called 'Dhaka Day by Day'. This was a little piece, a lighter story with a bit of colour written by feature writers as well as reporters, placed in a box on the top left hand corner of page 3 (no relation to page 3s of tabloid newspapers in the UK which often carry pictures of topless women). Sometime in early 1992 (or was it late 1991?) he asked me to go to the conference of Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the Awami League, at the Engineers Institution. There were two guests from the Indian Communist Party's youth wing at the conference and I was curious to hear what they'd say.

I can't remember their names now, but one of them, a female youth leader who spoke with stunning fire, ended her speech with the words 'Inquilab Zindabad!' Somebody in the crowd turned to others sitting next to him and asked, 'What's wrong with *Itefaq* then?' He was speaking in jest, of course, referring to the rivalry between the two leading Bengali dailies, the *Itefaq* and *Inquilab*. I thought it was amusing enough to start my story with those words, which mean 'Long Live the Revolution' in Hindi, the battle cry of Indian communists.

But later when I went to interview the young activist, she told me the little piece on page 3 of our paper had saved her a lot of embarrassment. It turned out that quite a few people were left puzzled by her use of the words 'Inquilab' and 'Zindabad' at a gathering where both words were viewed with utter suspicion. Apparently, they breathed a sigh of relief after reading that this was just a traditional slogan, and the guests from India were not unwittingly lending support to the AL's rivals. Great, I thought, this is impact (even if it was only page 3)!

Another guest from India arrived in late 1998. I didn't get to interview him. That would've been front page stuff, not 3! The guest was Amartya Sen, fresh from being awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics, only the second Bengali-speaking man to be awarded the Norwegian prize. Dr Sen was speaking at the Public Library auditorium, at a reception hosted by the Bangladesh Economics Association. It was a Friday and my day off. I got a call in the morning from my colleague who was assigned to cover Dr Sen's speech at the



CARTOONS: SHARIER KHAN

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had left the weekly more or less at the same time. Rahat had immense respect for S M Ali and was quite elated to have secured a place in the paper's feature writing team. She was keen for me to join the DS and had given Mr Ali my résumé (as we were destined to be

reception. He had some problems and asked if I could cover for him. Cover meant going to the reception other journalists would give an arm and a leg to cover! The phrase 'no-brainer' came to mind.

Dr Sen's speech, as would be expected, had the audience in rapt attention. The question and answer session was a more sedate affair, with mostly his friends and acquaintances from academia asking questions with references only they understood. I have rarely enjoyed typing out a report on a Friday evening more than I did on that day! The DS's photo journalist had taken a great picture – showing Dr Sen at the centre of a circle formed by dozens of cameras snapping away. Next day I saw my report as the second lead in the paper, top right hand side. Excellent treatment. But I was disheartened to see that brilliant picture not used. Instead, there was a photo of Amartya Sen receiving an honour from President Shahabuddin Ahmed. Quite boring.

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Back at the office, one of the areas

where I got well involved was in editing and producing supplements on special occasions. But there were pitfalls there, pretty big ones too. This posed a particular problem when producing features or whole supplements on such occasions. The Awami League which had led Bangladesh's independence movement had one narrative of 1971 while its rival BNP, born in 1978, had chosen to challenge that narrative. How do you stay true to the historical narrative without backing one party in the current political climate? How do you 'balance' the two sides when there can only be one truth?

One of the first supplements I produced at the DS was the Independence Day special on March 26, 1991. An artist was hired to illustrate the banner with a scene from a demonstration in March 1971. The artist stayed true to his task and drew protest marches as they appeared in photos from the period. But as some of placards carried by the protesters had the slogan 'Joy Bangla' written on them, it drew the ire of some colleagues who thought this made the supplement 'pro-Awami League'.

The BNP had adapted 'Bangladesh Zindabad' as the national slogan, and anyone using 'Joy Bangla' was deemed to be an AL supporter. But both the Editor and Executive Editor felt the banner depicted the period in question accurately and any attempt to remove slogans of the times would have amounted to doctoring of history. Complaints dismissed. There was not going to be any equivalent of Stalinist air-brushing of Trotsky's pictures!

The writer is head of the BBC World Service's Bengali service.



QUOTABLE Quote

JOSE MARTÍ
Cuban poet and essayist

Like bones to the human body, the axle to the wheel, the wing to the bird, and the air to the wing, so is liberty the essence of life. Whatever is done without it is imperfect.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Plane part
- 6 Gives a dam
- 11 Gladiator's spot
- 12 Without others
- 13 Egypt's Anwar
- 14 Spartacus for one
- 15 "Nova" carrier
- 16 Exploit
- 18 Big racket
- 19 New Haven student
- 20 "Far out, dude!"
- 21 Determined
- 22 Cash in
- 24 Rover's pal
- 25 Guaranteed
- 27 Beaver structures
- 29 Marries again
- 32 "Rose—rose..."
- 33 Dieter's no-no
- 34 Drops on the lawn
- 35 Naughty act
- 36 Clock numeral
- 37 Glacier makeup
- 38 Lions' prides
- 40 "Walk Away—"
- 42 Hollywood mover

DOWN

- 1 Cartoon ghost
- 2 Fit for farming
- 3 Doctor's asset
- 4 One—million
- 5 Normal states
- 6 Packed in boxes
- 7 Everyone
- 8 Casual eatery
- 9 Was covetous
- 10 Handled
- 17 Feudal warrior
- 23 USN rank
- 24 Handful of
- 26 No longer working
- 27 Dreary
- 28 Crumbly Italian cheese
- 30 Suitably dressed
- 31 Candy
- 33 Dukes
- 39 Wrap up
- 41 Longoria of TV

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

BOFFO SNAIL
BRAIN LINDA
SEINE LINTOP
RELATE
WASSASSHAT
ITHINKMETE
SHAKESPEARE
POKE FOLDIN
SSE GOT SAY
ENRICH
PASTA OHARA
AGENT NAKED
TEXAS STEAD

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott