

Notes

Remembering Dr Rais Ahmad Khan

*Sharif al Mujahid**

In October 2007, the Area Study Center for Africa, North and South America at the Quaid-i-Azam University dedicated its 10th Annual American Studies Conference to the cherished memory of the Center's Founder-Director, Dr. Rais Ahmad Khan (1925-2006). I had known him for some 44 years and I was asked to make a memorial presentation on the occasion.

Dedicating conferences, just as dedicating books, to someone who has contributed substantially and significantly to the onward march of knowledge in a certain discipline or to building up an institution, brick by brick, into a formidable knowledge-generating powerhouse, is a time-honoured tradition. I can recall several conferences in North America and the United Kingdom which were dedicated to intellectual giants and great institution builders. One such conference on Pakistan at Duke, Durham, North Carolina, sponsored by Professor Ralph Braibanti (d. 2006), the noted author of the much acclaimed *Research on the Bureaucracy in Pakistan*, in 1974, was dedicated to my much cherished friend, Wayne A. Wilcox (d. 1974), the pioneering American author on Pakistan. Hence the Center's decision to dedicate the conference to its Founder-Director was in order. More important, in the acknowledgement deficit academic community that is Pakistan, it initiates a constructive trend to honour those who have contributed significantly in building up institutions.

I had known Rais Ahmad Khan rather closely from the time he joined the Karachi University in late 1962 till his death on 6 July 2006. During this rather lengthy period, I was in close touch with him, despite our political cleavages, despite our factional differences in the Karachi

* Prof. Sharif al Mujahid, an HEC Distinguished National Professor, has co-edited Unesco's *History of Humanity*, Vol. VI and *The Jinnah Anthology* (3rd edn., 2012) and edited *In Quest of Jinnah* (2007), the only oral history on Pakistan's founding father.

University Teachers' Association politics, and despite his shift to Islamabad from Karachi, sometime in 1974.

By the time Rais Ahmad Khan entered the portals of the Karachi University as Assistant Professor, Department of History, he had acquired social mobility, leaving his formative phase and baggage far behind. He had also, more or less, settled in his career, mindset, approach, and disposition. Some two decades earlier, he had his schooling at Allahabad and his university education at Lucknow. In 1948, he had become physically mobile: he shifted himself to Rawalpindi and got himself a teaching job the following year at the well known Gordon College, the only credible institution in the region at the time. Here, he taught history for a decade, from 1949 to 1959. Meantime, he fortuitously found himself a spouse in Basirat, and got himself married in 1955, launching upon the pleasant, yet daunting, task of raising a family. Atif Rais Khan is the first fruit of this happy wedlock, followed by two daughters. All of them are happily married, well settled and endowed with children.

In 1959, Rais Ahmad Khan relaunched himself upon the eternal quest for the extension of the frontiers of knowledge, which had been momentarily suspended during the previous decade when he was trying to settle himself in the land of his dreams, in a new clime, and amidst a mass of new faces. In that year, he had qualified himself for a prestigious fellowship, and went over to Berkeley to do his doctorate in American Studies, which he completed in 1962.

The fellowship for Rais Ahmad Khan was extended by The Asia Foundation. It was done at the instance of Dr. Mahmud Husain, Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the Karachi University since 1954, who was actively engaged in conceiving and developing new areas of studies. Apart from journalism, international relations and library science, he also sought to establish a course in American history. With the assistance of The Asia Foundation he was successful in enlisting three visiting American Professors to give the course in the Department of History during 1956-62. They were Professor Bean of the University of California, Dr. George Lerski (later at San Francisco State University) and Dr. George Montagno, who was later associated with the Association of Colleges and Universities for International Intercultural Studies. Upon completing his doctoral studies, Rais Ahmad Khan joined the Karachi University and took over the courses from his American predecessors. However, what is most unique about his venture is that for almost or over 30 years he was the only academic in Pakistan with an expertise in American studies.

For the next ten years, Rais Ahmad Khan taught American history and civilization at the Karachi University. Later, in 1972, his expertise in the field got him catapulted as Director, Institute of European Studies at the Karachi University (1972-73), when the Area Study Centers came to be established at various universities during the Bhutto era. Rais Ahmad Khan had also had brief stints as Registrar, Karachi University (1972-73), and as Director General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1973-78), during the 1970s before he landed himself, in 1978, as the Founder-Director of the Area Study Center for Africa, North and South America at the Quaid-i-Azam University. Meantime, he had attended staff courses at the Pakistan Administrative Staff College at Lahore (1973-74), and the National Defence College at Rawalpindi (1974-75). As, at both the institutions, I had the privilege of being a visiting lecturer, I had the opportunity to update myself on his academic pursuits and career accomplishments. The National Defence College awarded him an M. Sc. in Defence Studies in 1974.

As Director, Area Study Center for Africa, North and South America, Rais Ahmad Khan had considerably long and consequential innings – much longer and more consequential than any director of any area study center in any university in Pakistan. He built up the Center literally from scratch, and made it into the great powerhouse of knowledge that it is today which, in the ultimate analysis, represents a lasting monument to his untiring efforts, systematic approach, leadership qualities, the range of his vision, and his endless dedication.

Rais Ahmad Khan was a born leader, by any definition. This anyone attending a meeting, formal or informal, which Rais was chairing or was participating in, could not have missed noticing. Yet he believed in team work. That explains how he was able to gather around him a passionate group of young academics and researchers, how he was able to initiate them in their careers, and how, in the process, he was able to build up this grand edifice of the Area Study Center in terms of human resources and academic expertise. His research orientation is not only reflected in the high grade publications authored or edited by him, but, more importantly, in the number of Ph.Ds he had produced and the way he had built up the biannual *Journal of American Studies* on an enduring basis.

Besides the Centre, Rais Ahmad Khan was active on other fronts as well. Briefly stated, he was a founding and Executive Committee Member of the Council of Social Sciences (Islamabad); the President of Pakistan-India Peoples forum for Peace and Democracy for 2002; and Secretary of the Islamabad Council for World Affairs (ICWA) for some eight years, from 1988 till his death.

As I look back, I feel that Rais's entire life and career may be broadly divided into three distinct phases wherein he sequentially passed through the processes of physical mobility, social mobility and psychological mobility – the three critical processes for a person to pass through, in order to finally cross over the modernity threshold, as identified by Danial Lerner in his *Passing of the Traditional Society* (1958). In 1949, when Rais migrated to Pakistan, he had left his ancestral mundane and more material Lucknow baggage behind, but not the more enduring cultural values, so quintessentially epitomized in Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's iconic *Umrao Jan Ada* and Abdul Haleem Sharar's *Guzashata Lucknow*. Rawalpindi, his new home, was not then a vibrant, bustling metropolis that it is today, but largely a cantonment town. Ranked twenty-fifth among the subcontinental urban centres at the time, it presented the rustic, rather than the urbane, face of the Punjab. And one could easily imagine what an urbane, cultivated Lucknowite would have encountered in grappling with and coming to terms with this rather challenging, bizarre environment. That surely must have obliged Rais to opt out for adaptability for mere survival – willy nilly, I should suppose. That process should have as well injected into him the pragmatic streak, which he maintained throughout the rest of his life. And this physical mobility phase continued unabated during his stay at Berkeley and his relocating himself at Karachi in late 1962. His long Karachi sojourn represents the second phase, when he began climbing the social mobility ladder. And by the time he shifted back to the Rawalpindi-Islamabad region, he was ripe for the third phase – the creative psychic mobility stage. By then he had developed and crystallized the attribute of empathy, and had entered the modernity realm. That's why and how he was so empathetic to his colleagues and students during his Area Study Center phase, and popular with them. Thus, all said and done, it was his overwhelming empathetic attribute that had earned him his colleagues', associates' and students' devotion to a point that the 10th Annual American Studies Conference in October 2007 was dedicated to him and the Centre's main Hall was also named after him. That had made him the grand persona that he came to be known to his friends and colleagues during the last two decades of his life.

Here, I can not avoid recalling the halcyon decade of the 1960s, when he had his first brush with modernity, and when I, along with him and Viqar Ahmad, the BBC newscaster and analyst, formed a trio, a nucleus sort of Young Turks, in the Karachi University's Arts Faculty. Despite his three years at Berkeley when it exploded with students' revolt and activism, making students' activism an enduring feature of

American campuses all through the 1960s and the early 1970s, Rais was not yet an activist, *per se*. This he did become in a recognizable measure during the early 1970s, but at the faculty level. And that he couldn't possibly avoid because Pakistan itself as a whole was charged with activism and feverish emotionalism at various levels at the time, if only because of the charismatic Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's soaring inspiration, and the high promise he held forth for the 'New Pakistan'. But then, in the 1960s, we, the trio, were text-book idealists, brain picking and brainstorming for hours on end, desperately trying to find solutions to Pakistan's myriad problems during Ayub's lengthening, but darkening, decade. In this endless, though by no means a futile, exercise, which did help us immensely in getting the issues at hand clarified a bit in our own minds, some others also joined in, most notably Dr Muhammad Ahsan Chaudhry, then fresh from Duke University after obtaining his doctorate in International Relations, to head the department at the Karachi University.

All through his life, Rais believed in values, the old values, the Lucknowite values of a cherished bygone era. That made him a gentleman par excellence. He was extremely courteous all the time, besides being warmly hospitable. But frank and straight forward he always was. He was also endowed with a sense of humour which made his rather terse remarks sound less unbearable. He not only kept his eyes and ears, but also his mind open. And he kept his communications channels open as well. That's what kept our friendship going, despite our serious differences during the Bhutto years. Also, because he was ever prepared to give the devil (or an angel), his due, and that applied to things and matters concerning his political affiliations, preferences and biases as well. In short, he believed in the Milton's concept of the 'open marketplace of ideas'. That makes him liberal in the true sense of the term.

Finally, I would like to conclude my brief assessment by pointing out that what Mark Antony tells of Brutus at the fag end of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* fit in Rais Ahmad Khan in full measure. And in the context of Ghalib's lamentation, *Admi ko bhi mayassar nahin insaan hona* ('It is almost impossible for a man to be a human being as well'), just consider how fortunate we, Rais' friends, have been to have known and spent a good many hours with an *insaan* (a human being), brimming with an endless array of human and humane values, in a person called Rais Ahmad Khan.