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**Rest in peace, Teacher**

When we first met, we were poles apart ideologically. When he departed, we were less so. He had converted me to many of his ideas.

We spent many an evening talking religion, morality, history, politics, poetry, novels.

My association with Zain (Zainul Abedin) began after I wrote an article for The News op-ed pages for the first time. When I thanked him he replied: “yaar tum ne to aag laga di” – because that article provoked some regular writers to write a response.

We also worked for Daily Times but in different sections so we did not have the chance to become friends there. At The News, too, we were in different sections but on the same floor which enabled us to talk for hours on end.

Although he was a fierce Marxist, Zain managed to keep his objectivity at work. He published an article of mine and faced the backlash from some influential people himself – even though he did not agree with my arguments in that article. He firmly believed in the freedom of expression. In this matter he was an ardent follower of “I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to death your right to say it.”

He wasn't like those who criticize religion without studying religion. (There can be editors who don’t even know whose son Yazid was.) He had read religious scholars of India and Pakistan extensively and intensively, and was able to quote religious scholars word by word. And he took pride in his knowledge of religion.

Although he did not write in Urdu, he had great command over the language because he had read the best of Urdu poets. Not only was he capable of quoting Faiz and other leftist poets, he had also read Iqbal and Ghalib and others critically.

Zain was a voracious reader all his life. A few years ago, one of our colleagues mentioned that there was a shop selling old books near his residence. Zain spent hours locating that shop. The next day he said he was very disappointed after finding it because the books that were there were all “how to-type” books.

He visited old books sellers frequently. Many of them used to ask him how many books he had in his library. They wanted to buy the collection. He once smilingly told me that they were waiting for his death to get hold of that treasure.

Zain was possessive about his books. It took me a couple of years to make him trust me with his books – as well as some DVDs from his movie collection. He lent me a book written by Sibte-Hassan. I wrote some remarks on it. When I told him that I had marked that book, he said:” Now you keep that book. I will buy another copy.”

He had multiple copies of many books because after buying one he found another copy in a better condition. He gifted me the ones that he had an extra copy of. I will forever be grateful to him for that.

Because of his fondness for books, he was always able to guide me about where I could find and buy a certain book. Besides, whenever I faced difficulty in getting the data I needed for my research, I would go to him and he would, as expected, guide me to the right books.

He was so much in love with books that he made an arrangement with some local press which would print a copy of whichever rare book he had found online. It cost him a lot of money but he firmly believed this investment always pays dividends. He would say to me, “You are lucky you have developed the habit to read online. I couldn’t.”

Because of the Covid-19 situation I have been working from home for a few months now. I wonder how it will feel passing by his cabin when I return to the office. I already feel the void.

Before meeting Zain, I had read a lot without knowing how to read. He taught me that. Rest in peace, Teacher.

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