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April 14, 2021

**Farewell, Rehman Sahib**

How do you dissolve that lump in your throat when you begin to write the obituary of I A Rehman? Possibly by first remembering what a wit he was. His puns and his ability to create humour from the humdrum were a remarkably refreshing habit.

Last year, due to the pandemic, for weeks I hadn’t been able to travel to my workplace in Lahore from my home in Islamabad. I phoned Rehman Sahib to wish him on his 90th birthday. In the course of our conversation, Rehman Sahib fleetingly said: “I am glad you have finally started treating Lahore as your pind [village]. Because when a boy gets educated and moves to a city, he starts visiting his pind only for Eid – once a year.” The very next morning I arrived in Lahore, masked up and carrying a bottle of hand-sanitizer.

When Rehman Sahib met one of our most prolific writers in Pakistan at some reception, he couldn’t resist asking him: “It is dinner time and you haven’t published a new book today. Is everything all right?” On another occasion, at a book launch, one of the speakers preceding him eulogised the author by saying that he had shown enormous courage while writing this book since he was very unwell all along. Upon his turn, Rehman Sahib said that not only did he agree with his fellow speaker, the text of the book also confirmed that the author was unwell. The audience, including the author, burst into laughter. Of course, then in his usual style Rehman Sahib proceeded with a serious assessment of the work.

Once, he was presiding over a conference session on rule of law. One of the speakers gave a long spiel which was all over the place. Rehman Sahib came to the podium after him and said: “There is very little left for me to say. The gentleman has answered even those questions which do not exist.”

Rehman Sahib came from what is now Haryana in India. It was then a part of undivided Punjab. Once sitting in the company of young friends he told them that he was born in 1930 in a village on the banks of River Jamuna where his ancestors from Balochistan had settled. Someone asked him: “What was on the other side of the River Jamuna?” Rehman Sahib quipped: “Ahl-e-Zaban (to whom the language belongs).” I’m afraid this is an in-joke requiring the listener to be familiar with the banter and sarcasm that used to be exchanged over matters of language and idiom between Punjabis and Haryanvis on one side and Urdu-speakers from Delhi and Uttar Pradesh on the other.

When someone there praised Rehman Sahib by saying that although he wrote in English his command over Urdu was exceptional. He responded: “It is my first language. But it is not a matter of which language one speaks. It is more important to be Ahl-e-Awaz (to whom the voice belongs) and raise your voice for those who are voiceless.” This defines Rehman Sahib.

For more than 65 years, he raised his voice for the voiceless, wrote in favour of the oppressed, pleaded the cases of women and religious minorities, and advocated for the rights and dignity of labour, peasants, clerks, nurses and teachers.

In 1947, Rehman Sahib was studying at Aligarh Muslim University. The family first moved to Multan but soon Rehman Sahib shifted to Lahore. He finished his master’s degree in Physics from Punjab University before making journalism his profession. He started reporting on films and served as a sub-editor at the prestigious Pakistan Times newspaper. Later on in his career he wrote for and edited different weeklies and dailies including Viewpoint, Azad, Dawn and The News. He served as the executive editor of the weekly Viewpoint under the iconic Mazhar Ali Khan during the martial rule of Gen Ziaul Haq and then as the chief editor of the daily Pakistan Times between 1988 and 1990.

Since then he had left journalism as his full-time profession and had joined the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). However, he regularly contributed columns to the national press for another 31 years. His last column appeared in the daily Dawn on Thursday, April 8 – four days before his passing. He also wrote numerous thought-pieces and papers, insightful introductions to various works, and edited and co-authored a few books. Even his supposedly journalistic writing is laced with knowledge of history and literature, a deep understanding of politics and sociology, and a complete command over the constitution and law-making. He was the most resounding public intellectual whose primary concern was the welfare of people.

Rehman Sahib was against the 1971 military operation in East Pakistan. His criticism did not sit well with the powers-that-be of the times. Under different regimes, from the 1960s to 1990s, he faced witch hunts including a jail term and removal from employment. His first and foremost passion was a free press and freedom of expression, both in journalism and in the arts. He was also a trade unionist and was considered a guiding light for the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ). He worked as advisor or board member of various organisations that promote art and literature, theatre and film. Ajoka Theatre in Lahore remained close to his heart.

After joining the HRCP, Rehman Sahib served as its director from 1990 to 2008, when he became the secretary-general. He retired in 2016 but the HRCP Council (the board of the organisation) requested him to stay with them as the honorary spokesperson. He was not involved in day-to-day management but continued to advise the organisation. He also led a number of fact-finding missions and edited some of the key documents produced by the HRCP. The inimitable Asma Jahangir, co-founder of the HRCP who also served as its Secretary-General and Chair, had always called Rehman Sahib her mentor. Jahangir used to say: “His wisdom is unmatched and his composure has a calming effect.”

Rehman Sahib was born into a religious family, but he always said that his elders were practising Muslims with a secular outlook in politics. He grew up to be a Marxist who became close to people like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Habib Jalib, Prof Amin Mughal, Aziz Siddiqui, Husain Naqi and Dr Mubashir Hasan among many others who had shared his ideological bent. It was his inherent humanism and respect for divergent views that kept him away from turning into a dogmatist and strengthened his belief in democratic norms while remaining a staunch socialist.

During the Partition riots in 1947, Rehman Sahib had lost kin. However, he championed peace and development across South Asia. He believed that the common people of the region would continue to suffer, materially and emotionally, if peace and stability were not restored in the South Asian subcontinent. That led him to becoming the founding-chair of the Pakistan-India Peoples’ Forum for Peace and Democracy.

I had known Rehman Sahib from the times I was a child growing up in Karachi. Over the last 30 years, I had an opportunity to travel along and spend quite a few evenings with him in Pakistan and abroad. But it was a profound privilege to work closely with Rehman Sahib in the past few years.

What my colleagues and I struggled to learn from Rehman Sahib was his incredible ability to not judge individuals nor personalise his political and ideological differences. Besides his character and integrity, it was his demeanour that made even those who thoroughly disagreed with his opinions end up respecting him. Rehman Sahib lived a full life. Maybe, it was time for him to call it a day. But as a friend Zeeshan Noel puts it: “So many of us wish that he lived forever.” What a tremendous loss. The lump in my throat has reappeared.

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