**The end of spring**

BY I. A . R E H M A N 2020-11-05

USING the past tense about Saleem Asmi is like putting an unwanted full stop in an unfinished sentence, for he had an amazing ability to frustrate the angel of death. One heart bypass in Rawalpindi followed by another in London and increasingly frequent trips to hospitals in the final years of his life did indicate a decline in flesh but there was no sign of the weakening of spirit, and whenever you asked him how he was the answer invariably was `mein theek hoon` (I am fine). During the last years of his life he had no unfinished business on his hands and perhaps only one regret: that his inability to walk made it impossible for him to go abroad, especially to the United States where all his three children had built new worlds around themselves.

Saleem Asmi was a man of many parts and he especially achieved distinction in three areas; as a journalist ahead of his times, as a defender of rights who was not shy of carrying the cross, and as a promoter of the arts without any axe of his own to grind.

After spending many years as a reporter in search of stories and crossing the T`s and dotting the I`s in the newsroom Asmi jumped at the possibility of designing a new daily, the first to be wholly based in the national capital. The amount of work Asmi put into designing the daily Muslim that started coming out in 1978 had to be seen to be believed. He went into the history of newspapers to study how the struggle between traditionalists and innovators proceeded and how journalists in various environments responded to pressures from conservative regimes and the aspirations of an increas-ingly demanding readership. Unfortunately, his efforts went waste as the printing machine ordered by the proprietors dictated different terms and Asmi described the affair in an article overflowing with his robust sense of humour, which is included in a collection of his writings.

After working at The Muslim for a year or so, Asmi went to Dubai to join M.J. Zahedi at the Khaleej Times and he is credited with making a considerable contribution to the paper`s increased popularity. On his return to Pakistan in 1988, he joined Dawn where he worked as city editor and news editor before joining the team of leader writers, and the line leading to the editor`s office.

As its editor, Asmi brought changes to the paper that were considered radical at that time. The halfcolumn and single-column pictures were banished from Haroon House and Asmi proved the paper could afford to break the double-column ceiling on pictures.

Asmi`s desire to create and enlarge specialised readership led to the launching of thematic magazines, Books & Authors and Gallery, the latter devoted to the arts. Books & Authors was intended to present a South Asian portal and for some time it did achieve that purpose but South Asia was far behind Asmi`s thinking and he was obliged to cut his sails. All of Asmi`s plans didn`t bear fruit but while he was at the helm he made sure that the prestige Dawn had gained under Ahmad Ali Khan`s stewardship did not suf fer any damage. For reasons still not known the management decided in 2003 that Asmi had earned his right to rest and the curtain fell on his career in journalism, a bit earlier than he wanted.

Asmi`s activism was inspired by his faith in Marxism that he had started adhering to as a schoolboy in Hyderabad and it found fuller expression during his years at the Karachi University where he was an active member of the Democratic Students Federation and where he earned the lifelong friendship of doctors Sarwar, Haroon and Adeebul Hasan. He was a dynamic PFUJ activistand was sentenced to a year`s imprisonment with hard labour by a military court during the Musawat agitation and fellow prisoners Aziz Siddiqui and Ghazi Salahuddin testified to his ability to keep his chin up in the worst of circumstances.

From active trade unionism to a defender of human rights was a natural step for Asmi. One of the earliest members of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan he served the commission as its vice chairperson for Sindh and it was under his guidance that the commission`s Karachi office began its regular functioning.

Respect for human rights had a deeper meaning for Asmi than is the case with most people, including many rights professionals. He was capable of breaking with an old friend if he disregarded the vulnerability of an innocent woman. With Asmi, respect for human dignity had to be demonstrated in practice instead of being preached only.

There was a time when Asmi read a lot of fiction and James Joyce was one of his favourite authors.

When his interest shifted to classical music he could spend hours listening to great exponents of the art, women and men both. He travelled to Lala Musa to interview Roshan Ara Begum and traced the hovel Madam Azurie had retired to.

Among the practitioners of fine arts Asmi`s preference for painters was quite evident and he wrote about quite a few of them, and he took pains to encourage younger artists. When an iPad had become the only window open to the world of arts Asmi used every opportunity available to him to encourage young artists. He tried to help and guide almost every young artist whose work appeared on Facebook.

Although Asmi`s passing has created a huge void in the life of his innumerable friends and admirers, his life deserves to be celebrated for he lived the way he wanted to, said whatever needed to be said, made no compromises for friend or foe, and kept his heart free of ill-will. A friend described him as a great and humble giant, one of the apt descriptions of the person Saleem Asmi was.