

Paisa Akhbar expressed freedom and values

OVER the years the Lahorites have traversed a path which was not a bed of roses, and was dotted with twists and turns. Many permutations and combinations have appeared in socio-political horizons, which witnessed ups and downs in the fortunes of the rulers and individuals. Yet one aspect stood the test of times, the persistent, and at times, dramatic refusal of Lahorites to permit anyone to take them for granted or place them in a pre-determined slot—a most striking trait of Lahorites. All this because of a consciousness amongst Lahorites of the power to initiate things on their own.

One such Lahori was Maulvi Mahboob Alam, who so blessed with this trait ventured into a profession aimed at serving people, as well as attempting to reflect their aspirations. Born in 1865, Maulvi Mahboob Alam was a breed apart and at the age of 20, had already made a name for himself by founding a "Khadim-ul-Talim publishing house. Unmindful of the financial constraints, he then started a monthly titled "Zamindar", followed by a weekly "Himmat". Thus encouraged, he launched the now defunct "Paisa Akhbar" in 1887. Priced at 12 annas per annum, with another anna for pre-paid postage, it initially constituted eight small-size pages, and saw Mahboob Alam in the unique capacity of "One-in-all" and "all-in-one", being the editor, publisher, manager, page-maker and

reporter himself.

"Paisa Akhbar" was launched by him as an act of faith, as a cause for a cause, and as a means of carrying on struggle against false ideas and for mirroring the truth about life as it was lived by thousands of his age. And what an era, where the school was the primary source of knowledge, and the teacher its licensed dispenser. Well aware that there was an immediate dearth of communication, Mahboob Alam strove to pass on the information to an illiterate society through a medium best understood by them, Urdu. Conscious of the fact that there prevailed degrees of pessimism and defeatism in his society, Alam's "Paisa Akhbar" acted a bride, providing facts and analysis to combat those unhealthy trends in his society.

But his sense of mission and seriousness of this truly audacious adventure would have collapsed, but for his vision. He was the first one to realise the equation between publication costs and advertising, and thus was able to sustain the newspaper for a number of years when a number of periodicals had gone out of publication. His hard work and visionary approach paid off, and in due course he was able to set-up a printing press, with 17 machines. It was followed by a publishing house that in due course of time, published over 700 books. Other publications followed; "Intikhab-e Lajawaab", a weekly

edition of "Paisa Akhbar". Women readers were placated through "Sharif Bibi", a ladies only issue. "Bachoon Ka Akhbar" catered to the needs of the kids while 'Baghbaan' looked after the interests of the farmers. The student community was not ignored and "Kaleed-e-Imtihaan" provided



them enough text and tips to tackle the examinations. Maulvi Mahboob Alam, who had gone to England in 1900, introduced "Intikhab-e-Lajawaab" on return on the pattern of London's "Tit-Bits".

His chain of publications survived for nearly fifty years, mostly because he could attract advertisements. Legend has it that "Paisa Akhbar's" publication once touched a figure of nearly eleven

thousand in 1887 and had a regular sale of nearly five to six thousand. Unfortunately, subsequent management failed to sustain the tempo and in due course, "Paisa Akhbar" ceased publication. Currently, a much congested Piasa Street, in as congested and teeming Anarkali Bazar, serves as a reminder of the efforts of one Maulvi Mahboob Alam.

But it is not the publication of a daily newspaper and other sister publications that illustrate Mahboob Alam's contribution to Lahore's history, but his approach during a very difficult socio-political interaction. It was his approach towards providing information to the society that stands out. Despite less manpower and money, his publications, especially "Paisa Akhbar", were much better in contents than a modern newspaper and highlighted press freedom within limits of (then) patriotism and Islamic values. Not only that, "Paisa Akhbar" served as a 'finishing school' for future journalists, like Lala Dina Nath (founder of Hindustan), Hakim Ghulam Nabi (later editor of "Al-Hikmat"), Munshi Ahmed Din, Munshi Mohammad Din Fauq, Maulvi Shujaullah and Mir Jalib Dehvi. All these and many more were attracted to his publications because they featured serious, balanced reporting and promoted sanity, with articles related to everyday problems and concerns.

But it offered more; besides projecting a clean, respectable, sober press, it promoted national integration and unity. And despite certain unwarranted pressures, it constrained itself in presenting facts. Its editorials appealed to the people to retain sanity and not succumb to overt fanaticism, not to take the law into their hands and presented correct perspective, without exaggeration. But above all, the "Paisa Akhbar" sustained an acceptable balance in the complex relationship between publisher, editor, advertiser and the reader. And despite not having or matching the financial resources and trained manpower of the modern times, "Paisa Akhbar" expressed an unsurpassed quality of journalism and level of professional management, the envy of the best.

"Paisa Akhbar" survives no more, yet it serves as a guide to modern journalism. Like that trait of the editor being supreme, with everybody, including the publisher conceding to the authority of the editor. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, it is to the contrary, where everybody, including the editor, is at the mercy of the publisher. Presently, our journalism projects a blissful negation of every principle of professional conduct. If we all take that supremacy of the editor from the leaves of "Paisa Akhbar", reading daily newspapers and other periodicals would certainly become more attractive and enterprising.