**Wit and wisdom**

BY M A H I R A L I 2021-04-14

I WISH I did not have to write today`s column. Not because of its content but because of the circumstances.

The fact that thousands of people felt personally bereft when they learnt of I.A.

Rehman`s demise on Monday testifies to the breadth and depth of his influence and reach.

Pakistan has lost perhaps its brightest guiding light.

One could possibly embellish that thought with the notion that the nation must bear that loss amid one of its darkest hours. But perhaps IAR, as he was fondly referred to, would not agree with that conclusion. After all, he was already almost an adult at the birth of Pakistan, and witnessed all of its tribulations over the decades. And he had an incredible knack for putting matters in perspective.

I cannot remember where or when I first encountered IAR, but by the time I got to know him better, in my late teens and early 20s, I felt I`d known him all my life.

I had the enormous privilege of being able to work with Rehman Sahib for several months between high school and university, and then again after university three years later, as a kind of intern at the weekly Viewpoint. It`s hard to imagine a more fruitful training ground for an aspiring journalist.

At the weekly`s unprepossessing premises on Lawrence Road in Lahore, I shared a desk with IAR in a cramped room that also served as a hub for Viewpoint colleagues (who operated out of a larger but equally cramped space across a dusty divide that served as a parking space) and a steady stream of illustrious visitors.

The colleagues included Prof Amin Mughal, Zafar Iqbal Mirza (better known as Zim), Alys Faiz and Ikramul Haq. The visitors ranged from illustrious fellow journalists Abdulla Malik, Hameed Akhtar, Hussain Nagi, Meem Sheen (Mian Muhammad Shafi), the brilliant photographer F.E. Chaudhry, and Nisar Osmani, Dawn`s redoubtable Lahore correspondent at the time to poets (not least Habib Jalib), provocateurs, polemicists and, occasionally, poseurs.

IAR treated everyone as an equal. Warmth and gregariousness came naturally to him. If, on occasion, the conversation grew heated, he deflected the rancour with humour and wit.

He gently chided me once for my habit of standing up and offering my chair to anyone older (which was pretty much everyone at the time)who walked in. The precise words elude me more than 40 years later, but it was something along the lines of: chairs can always be requisitioned don`t ever give up your seat.

That was hardly the most valuable lesson I learned during those precious months, which were filled with endless cups of tea, too many cigarettes and innumerable invaluable insights. Not just into the journalistic profes-sion or politics, but into life.

Thereafter our paths crossed only occasionally. At some point in the interim, IAR transformed from a well-loved and widely admired journalist into a cherished institution. The enhanced stature which was obviously a process rather than an overnight transformation did not af fect his personality: the disarming charm, warmth, generosity of spirit and infectious sense of humour remainedintact.

I imagine this helps to explain why he was not only adored by the multitudes who shared his views wholly or in part, but inspired at least a grudging respect even among those who disagreed with his humanistic vision and, quite possibly, even those whom he took to task for their follies and foibles.

Rehman Sahib never needed to chase causes. They came to him naturally, and he embraced them with genuine enthusiasm.

The range of his interests would be hard to catalogue, but it would be fair to say that a passion for human rights underlay his life,and his life`s work.

Whatever the issue be it child labour, discrimination against minorities, women`s rights, exploitation of the rural or industrial proletariat, or disappearances in Balochistan he could be relied upon not only to castigate the offendersbut to articulate viable solutions.

Beyond the nitty-gritty of politics and economics, his passions extended to culture, literature, architecture and numerous other spheres of life. The breadth of his erudition was nothing short of remarkable, and many of us will forever struggle to understand how he managed to encapsulate so much knowledge in a single lifetime. One can only assume that the expanse of his intellect matched the magnanimity of his indomitable spirit.

Rehman Sahib remained a working journalist and a relentless crusader for human rights right to the end of his 90 years. That itself is a formidable achievement. He leaves behind a bereaved family and legions of grieving admirers right across the subcontinent.

It`s natural for many of us to feel bereft.

But it`s easy to envisage him frowning down on the mourners. He would be much more moved, I suspect, by an ef fort, however small, to carry on any of the myriad struggles in which he selflessly participated. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com