

## Obituary



### **Reminiscences of Past Days with Prof. Dr. Mohammad Ali Asgar, Fellow, BAS**

The death (on 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2020) of Prof. Dr. Ali Asgar, Fellow, Bangladesh Academy of Sciences (BAS) and Former Professor and Head, Department of Physics, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), has been a great loss to the intellectual community of scientific thinkers and researchers in Bangladesh.

I have known Prof. Ali Asgar for decades since my University days in the fifties. We both got enrolled as students in the physics department of Dhaka University in 1956; he comes from the Edward College in Pabna and I from the Rajshahi Govt. College. We soon made good friends with each other. One characteristic of both of us was that unless a topic of physics were conceptually clear to us, we would dwell on it for days till the clarity was obtained. Another two common aspects of us were humour and good food. We used to recollect humorous stories, one after another, in a prolonged session. He had a joke for every occasion and many of them were based on the common men's living in villages. Out of the meagre pocket money that we had in those days, we used to enjoy good foods sometimes. Living in Fazlul Haq Hall, we used to go to Capital Restaurant on the Nawabpur Road to eat Mughlai Parata at the price of half-a-taka each. We were both fond of Roshogollahs (the famous Bengali sweet). Asgar (as I used to call him) informed me that he had learnt of a good sweetmeat shop on the Alauddin Road where warm Rosogollah can be had at night. This information was enough for us to rush to that shop one night after dinner. We enjoyed the warm Roshogollahs all right, but we forgot to look at our watches. When we reached our Hall, the gate was closed. I still remember that the two gatemen Hadi and Wadud, were sleeping in their guardroom beside the gate. They were snoring. I said we are in a problem. Let us not wake them up for opening the gate. You just follow what I am doing, said I to Asgar.

Then I tried to scale up the gate; when I got to the top of the gate, the chain with which the gate was locked made a strong sound and the snoring Hadi woke up, saw me in an awkward position and made a short but pinching remark in his Urdu accent 'Prefect ho ke bhi' meaning you are doing all this being a Prefect of the Hall.

It is necessary to mention here that in those days, Prefects were chosen from among the brilliant and upright students by the provosts of the Halls of Residences. Prefects were to encourage other students to be law-abiding and also to report on their problems. Hearing the comment of gate keeper Hadi, I really got nervous, thinking that he might report it to the house tutor of the hall. I just said to him very politely, 'late entrance has happened to me for the first time.' Hearing this, he said 'Thik hai jaiye', which meant 'ok, get in'. Hadi opened the gate and Asgar did not have to follow my 'scaling up the gate'. I mention this event to show that in our young days, we were respectful even to subordinate employees in administration in matters of law-abiding processes. This one incident was enough for me and Asgar to return to the Hall at the right times though we made no compromise with our eating-sprees

Ali Asgar and I, besides studying academic topics, used to watch interesting movies. Gulistan and Naaz, the two cinema places, were within walking distance.

From Honours Final examination, we followed different courses for quite some time. For some reasons, Asgar dropped his Honours and M.Sc final exam each for a year for some personal reasons and there was little communication between us. After having passed my M.Sc final exam in 1960, I joined the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission in early 1961 and went to the Manchester University, UK, for a Ph.D. degree in Theoretical Physics under a Commonwealth Scholarship Plan. After completing my Ph.D. I returned to Dhaka in 1965 and joined the Atomic Energy Centre, Dhaka as a senior scientific officer. Ali- Asgar joined the BUET in 1962, proceeded to Southampton University, UK. In 1970, he returned to Dhaka after having had his PhD in Solid State Physics from the same University. The old friendship was renewed again. There was a Physics Division of the Atomic Energy Center, Dhaka (AECD), of which I was Director for the period 1970-1978 and Dr. Ali Asgar made collaborative efforts with the researchers of that Division, especially when the AECD managed to purchase a furnace for investigating the properties of magnetic materials. Dr. Ali Asgar was instrumental in building up a collaboration between the BUET and the AECD in the studies of magnetic materials. Whenever, research projects were discussed either at the Bangladesh Academy of Sciences (of which Ali -Asgar was made a Fellow in early 2000) or at other forums, he advocated the case of magnetism very strongly, not without reasons, for making efforts and investments on the studies of magnetic materials of several kinds.

No wonder, magnetic materials need the attention of the country's highest policy makers for the production of energy saving and energy producing materials.

An area in which I worked with Ali Asgar is the popularization of science. With the effort of Prof. M. Innas Ali, who was a favourite teacher of both of us, a science club activity was introduced in the seventies through the Science Museum. I, along with Prof. Ali Afzal, Dr. Ali Asgar, Dr. Muhammad Ibrahim, and others, had got quite involved in it. Dr. Ibrahim started publishing a science periodical titled “Biggyan Shamoyiki” which has been running well for decades. This activity further encouraged the foundation and activities of science clubs throughout the length and breadth of Bangladesh. Dr. Ali Asgar played a key role in the organization and evaluation of the scientific projects displayed annually in local districts and finally at Dhaka. The science club movement generated a mass awareness of what science can do for people. Dr. Ali Asgar wrote a large number of papers on this and along with Dr. Ibrahim; he was an inspirational figure among the science club boys and girls of Bangladesh who participated in indigenous science projects.

Incidentally, Dr. Ali Asgar was a member of the editorial committee of a book published in 1979 and titled Biggyan Club, in which Dr. Abdullah Al Muti Sharafuddin and Tamal Kanti Dey were members. The editor was Dr. Muhammad Ibrahim. I had to be the publisher of the book as the General Secretary of the BASSP (Bangladesh Association of Scientists and Scientific Professions). This book containing articles written by Dr. Sharafuddin, myself, Dr Ibrahim and Dr. Ali Asgar on Science Projects and elaboration of projects of some science clubs created a stir amongst the science popularizing circles of Bangladesh. Unfortunately, the book is out of circulation now. The Science Museum of Bangladesh would do well to reprint this book in order to let the youngsters of today know how the science club movement originated in this country and how young people can be motivated to apply science and technology for the public good in Bangladesh.

Dr. Ali Asgar served the BUET along with a few class friends of his from the very beginning of his professional career to his retirement. Initially, he lamented sometimes that the culture of basic science in an Engineering University is a difficult task as the engineers do not appear to be very enthusiastic about the growth of basic science; they concentrate mostly on technological things. I used to console him by saying that this is not necessarily true. There are many researchers who were working at MIT, USA have won Nobel Prizes in Physics and Economics also. However, the redeeming aspect for Dr. Ali Asgar had been that he was made Rashid Professor of BUET, a very honoured post that exists in BUET.

Dr. Ali Asgar and I had useful interactions in the BAS for a large number of years for arranging Science Olympiads throughout Bangladesh. We had to set innovative questions for the SSC and HSC level students in physics. The attempt in this connection was to find out talented boys and girls who have an open mind to learn about science and its application. I shall miss this association with Dr. Ali Asgar as long as I live.

Dr. Ali Asgar really worked very hard to set up a modern Magnetism Laboratory in the Physics Department, BUET. In this connection, he traveled to institutions abroad like IPPS, Upsala, Sweden, University of Hanoi, Vietnam. His local co-operation with AECD in producing a number of PhDs and M.Phills in the areas of basic understanding of co-operative magnetism and technical magnetization processes in different magnetic media was appreciated by concerned quarters.

Dr. Ali was a socially conscious scientist and has written very extensively on science and its application for the service of mankind. His name will be remembered forever in “Khelaghor” (Children’s Organisation), of which he was a great part for decades. His association with educational reforms in science and also his involvement in cultural activities deserve special mention.

As a human being, he maintained a very high moral and ethical standard, although he was not particularly sensitive to religious rites and rituals. On many occasions, I said to him 'you think of Creation, why don't you ever think of the Creator.' He once said, 'Einstein wanted to know the mind of God.' I have the same interest. I asked him if he had not been able to know the mind of God as yet! He smiled. I did not pursue the matter further.

In conclusion, It can be said that Dr. Ali Asgar lived a busy working life with great interests and achievements in his researches. We in the BAS, like other organizations and institutions and people in many walks of life, will remember him for long and wish his family members health and happiness in the years to come. Prof. Dr. Ali Asgar left behind his wife Dr. Farida Begum and two sons, Md. Asif Asgar and Md. Arif Asgar. Dr. Farida Begum retired as the Principal Scientific Officer of Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), Gazipur, Dhaka.

- M. Shamsheer Ali