

# Akhter Hameed Khan's Death

## Remembering One's Mentor

### Shoaib Sultan Khan

On his last visit to Islamabad, Akhter Hameed Khan confided to me that in 1929 Cheerio, the world famous palmist, had told him at Delhi that he would live up to 85 years of age. I dismissed it as the figment of imagination but even the thought of the event sent shivers down my spine. He was my mentor not only in name but in reality.

Every time I met him, I learnt something new. Every time he visited the Rural Support Programmes (RSPs), he gave the programme a new dimension, a new interpretation and a new direction but his humility was overpowering. He would explain that his job was very difficult. His students are like McEnroe, Bjorn Borg and the like: they need the most refined and the minutest of infinitesimal adjustments in what they are already doing.

He found it very challenging and exhilarating. Now that he is no more who is going to be my beacon? He never failed me in showing the light when I would be desperate and have the feeling of being caught in a cul de sac or faced with an insurmountable wall. He would explain every issue--social, economic, temporal or metaphysical--with the ease of a person having full command on the subject. His explanation of the religions of the world especially of Islam used to have a depth and breadth which left even the most ignorant deeply moved. When in Sri Lanka I took him to a Buddhist monastery and the monk started reading Dhamma Padda in Sinhalese, Khan sahib recited it in the original Pali.

The monk was simply amazed and couldn't believe his ears. He had, of course, never read the book in Pali like Khan sahib had.

Although I had heard about this unusual person who had resigned from the most coveted service in India, the ICS, I came face to face with him for the first time in 1959 on Green Arrow train in the then East Pakistan. He had already selected the subdivision of which I was the assistant commissioner as orientation and training ground for the Academy for Rural Development of which he had accepted the directorship. He said how the chief secretary, Mr Azfar, called him and said Akhter you are a "fool but a good fool" and government would very much like you to run the academy.

This was the beginning of my long internship with Dr Khan. I had suddenly found a teacher who opened new horizons and vistas for me but I was still too deeply steeped in status, power and the glitter of the civil service to become his true disciple. He was disappointed and accused me of running away. The unfortunate events of the break-up of the country in 1971 brought me close to him again.

In 1970, I got an opportunity to visit my old subdivision after a ten-year interval. I could not believe the changes brought about by Khan sahib's approach to

development in the area. In my road travel throughout Comilla and Brahmanbaria subdivisions, I did not come across a single paddy field which was not scientifically planted.

The Thana Training and Development Centres, as he had visualised, were real symbols of development as against thana building which for centuries had been the symbol of law and order. The condition of the poor people had changed beyond recognition. Traces of poverty were nowhere visible and even today, thirty years after Khan sahib's departure, Comilla district has a per capita income of \$600 compared to the national per capita of \$220 in Bangladesh. His photographs still adorn the houses of Comilla district dwellers.

Khan sahib was a towering personality but innocent like a child. I used to chide him about his being an awfully bad judge of people and of course I used to have full support of his wife. He accepted everyone on his or her face value which sometimes landed him in deep trouble. The blasphemy case was one such example. All engineered and crafted by a man Khan sahib so genuinely trusted and wanted to become his right hand man. He would dismiss my protestations but listen with great attention what Tariq Siddiqi had to say.

In all my travels throughout the world, I have never come across a person of the stature of Akhter Hameed Khan. I sometimes wonder if Pakistan really made the best use of his unique experience with which he was so willing and keen to benefit his countrymen and women. But now it is too late even to ask this question. The country has missed the opportunity of a century.