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Asghar Ali engineer

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Asghar Ali Engineer
By Jan-e-Alam Khaki

WITH a great sense of loss I read the news about the death of Asghar Ali Engineer, who used to frequently contribute to Dawn in its Friday Feature column. I would like to compliment Dawn for giving space to such intellectuals.

I think he was one of those exceptional scholars of our time who had a deep sense of realisation of the problems of Muslim societies, particularly in the subcontinent, due largely to the conflict between the practice of the faith and societal advances.

One may agree or disagree with his arguments, but he pointed out the issues facing Muslim societies due to the traditional interpretations vis-a-vis modern-day developments. He tried to negotiate a path in this maze and was frank, daring, lucid and appealing. I learnt a lot from his arguments and felt drawn towards his way of dealing with these issues, including women's status and his approach to the interpretations of the Quran.

Most, if not all, societies face these issues. Often, when intellectuals do not find enough space to think, and think critically, and question old-age wisdoms, it inevitably leads to friction. Despite the fact that the Bohra community is a very respected, educated and liberal community in many ways, Engineer had to face some adjustment problems within the community.

Historically, all such individuals have faced issues of adjustment with their communities. This happened in Christian society at the dawn of industrial revolution and Reformation.

In Muslim societies this is happening today. Many intellectuals have found it difficult to survive in their own communities and societies and fled to advanced societies where they have created a name for themselves.

The lesson we learn is that the constraining environment and little space for any meaningful engagement with ideas in an academically liberal environment are stifling the creativity of Muslim intelligentsia. There must be space for such people in their communities, which have to learn to expand their intellectual space to allow their scholars to flourish.

In sum, Asghar Ali Engineer's perceptive ideas and daring thoughts published in the Dawn Friday Feature will be missed for a long time to come.