

TWO EDITORS *PAR EXCELLENCE*

*A Tribute to R. E. Hawkins
and Soli S. Mehta*

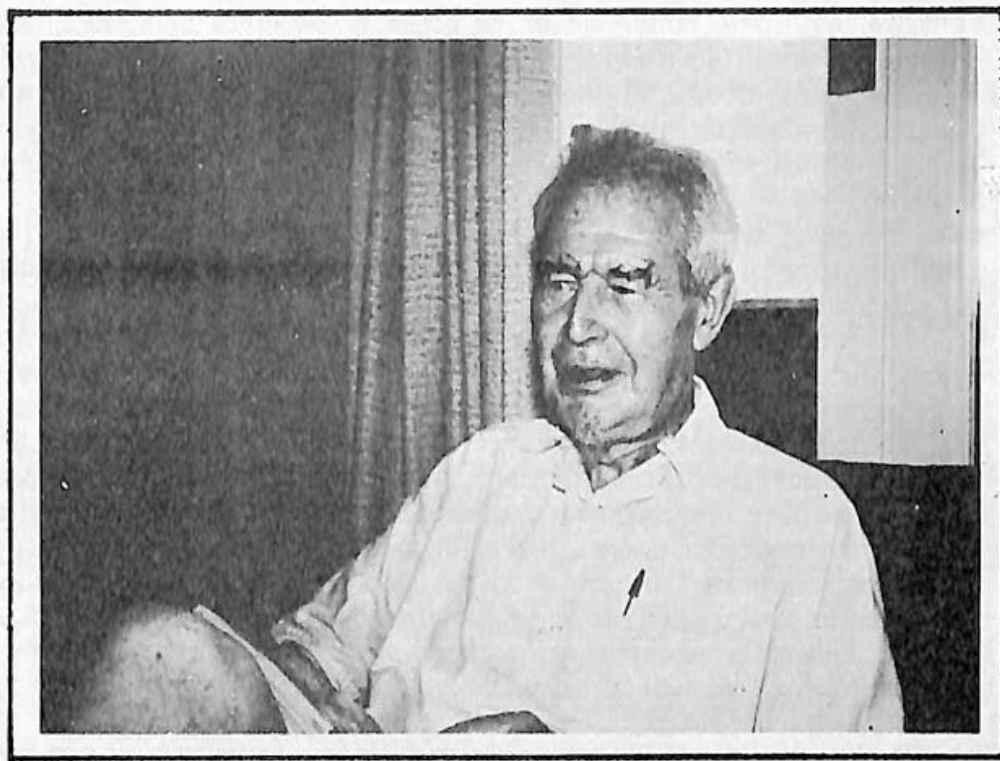
HARISH KAPADIA

IT IS A TRAGIC coincidence that within three weeks two editors who nurtured the *Himalayan Journal* passed away. R. E. Hawkins passed away at age of 82, while Soli S Mehta died of a sudden heart attack at 62. I had learnt all the editorial tricks from them and owe them a personal tribute.

It was in 1978 that Jagdish Nanavati, Hon. Secretary, quietly broached the subject of my helping in the *Himalayan Journal* (H.J.) as Soli Mehta, editor for past 8 issues was leaving for Nigeria. H.J., first published in 1928, had a string of great editors like Kenneth Mason, H. W. Tobin, T. H. Braham and Soli Mehta. I had no editorial experience — not even a college magazine. My only qualification was publishing the two editions of the guide book *Trek The Sahyadris*. My reaction was of course to say no, but Jagdish knows his job, master-fixer that he is for the Himalayan Club, and I was persuaded. I was assured that R. E. Hawkins would lend a keen eye.

When I first met Soli and Hawkins their expertise and experience was evident. After explaining the current issue (the Golden Jubilee issue, vol. XXXV) over a few meetings Soli handed over files and left for Nigeria leaving his beloved baby in my care. We kept in regular touch — great correspondent as he was.

Hawkins stayed quite close to me. That facilitated a close contact. Almost every morning we would exchange articles and notes. Everytime I entered his house, Hawkins would be working at his table in front of the walls lined with books. He was a man of few words and watched me with keen eyes. He established fresh conventions for H.J. to match the International standards. He visited our printers often and when they delayed publication he changed to new printers. If there was a reference he would go to Asiatic Library and next day there would be a foot-note added. As a teacher he was of the stuff great gurus are made of. I was allowed to make my mistakes. He would put a '?' there and that's it. You had to search for an answer and of course finally he was there to correct it if you failed after efforts. When we read galley or page proofs we compared notes. Hawkins with his old but experienced eyes would



Roy E. Hawkins (1907 – 1989)

have found more corrections. But you did not feel humbled. He would make a small nod with his head and you knew you had to improve. During the decade that I visited his house, only once did I sit down to have coffee and discuss un-related subjects. No, he was not a recluse, but he had work to do, there was urgency, expertise not to be wasted. Incidentally my old servant Vishram, who delivered papers to Hawkins always came back with news of a cup of tea with his servant and having 'talked' to Hawkins. Thus I learnt that Hawkins knew many Indian languages and that had led to the publication of *Common Indian words in English*.

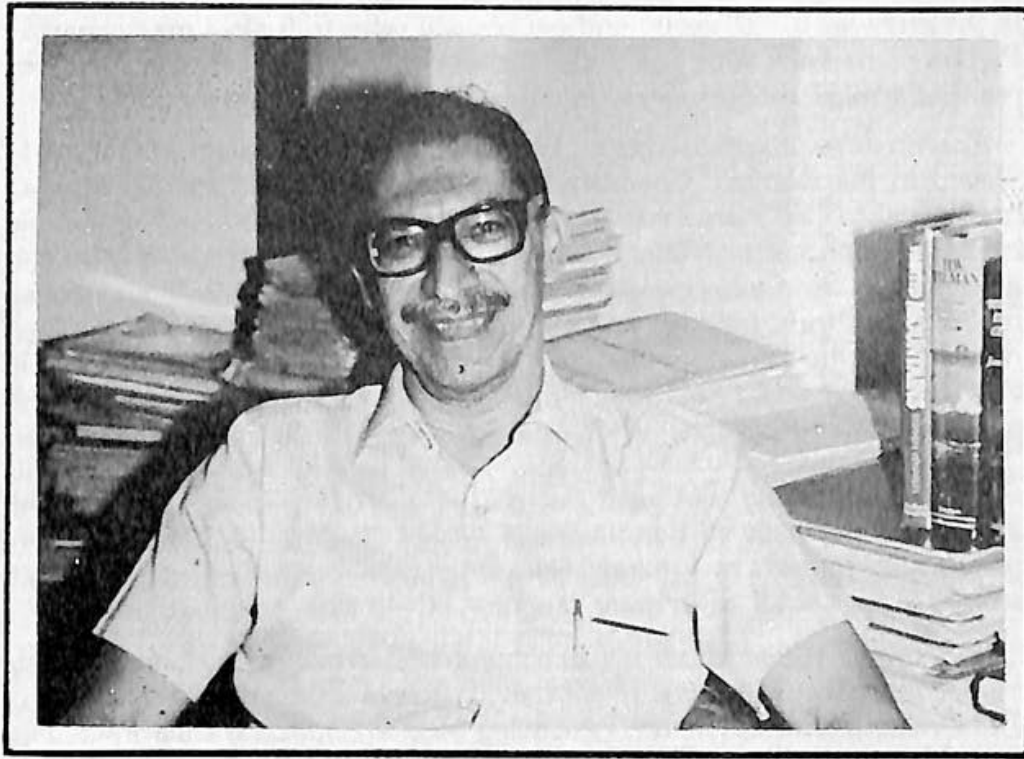
Hawkins was fond of trekking and he roamed in the Western Ghats from 1940s with different companions. He rarely talked about it but whenever I mentioned my last trek, Hawkins had been there. Once a prominent local daily gave a full-page coverage as to how a historic fort was 'discovered' by a local photographer in 1970s. I was furious at this sly claim as this place was visited and known for generations. I wanted to write to the paper. Hawkins visited the photographer-author next day. When I asked him whether the author had said he had 'discovered' the fort or whether this was one big distortion by the press, Hawkins quietly replied: 'He doesn't say he has *discovered* the fort, he says he has *built* it! He is so egoistical and the claim so much of a humbug that it must be ignored'. Thus I learnt the important lesson to ignore the trivial. Though we fought for truth in H.J. we ignored the sensational and ignorant press.

His walking spree continued till he could walk. Once he went to the airport walking from Pedder road (about 15 km) to receive a friend. He always climbed up and down 7 storeys of my building and never sat for long. My children would meet Hawkins in white-shorts walking on the road almost anytime of the day. He did not like a telephone at his house and led a spartan life travelling by local buses and trains.

But behind all the austerity was a genius, as it is always. Hawkins was attracted to Gandhian ideals and secured a job in a Delhi school to be in India. As fate would have it the school was closed in response to Gandhiji's call for non-cooperation with the alien system of education. So he joined Oxford University Press in India. This was in 1930. From 1937 till his retirement in 1970 Hawkins was General Manager of OUP. He was the publisher of Jim Corbett, Minoo Masani, K. P. S. Menon and Verrier Elwin amongst many others. He was a close friend of the great ornithologist Dr. Salim Ali. Dr. Salim Ali's autobiography *Fall of a Sparrow* is dedicated to him — 'To Hawk'. He was the General Editor of the monumental work *Encyclopedia of Indian Natural History* published in 1987. This was the centenary publication of Bombay Natural History Society of which he was a Vice-President.

As I started editing with him we had our first difference. He insisted to be an 'Assistant Editor'. He firmly believed that a mountaineer only — can understand the intricacies of mountain climbing articles. He refused to be persuaded. This was his another great trait — he did a lot for many causes but took very little credit. He was genuine to the bone and had adopted humility as a way of life. On the title page of H.J. his name appeared in '8 point' below mine. When I corrected it to appear in '10 point' he struck it off. When I restored it again an angry Hawkins climbed seven storeys to my flat with; 'Shall we stop scratching each other's back?' The printing tradition was that an assistant's name should appear smaller and that must not be violated — even though his contribution was in '12 point'.

For 8 years we edited the journal bringing out 8 issues. During all these years we kept in contact with Soli at Nigeria. He procured articles with his contacts, suggested subjects and made enquiries. Once there was a poem on mountaineer's world at high altitude (H.J. vol. 36) called 'Ballad of Bethertoli'. It naturally included four-letter words that mountaineers used at high altitude. I was at a loss whether to include these in the Journal or not. Jagdish Nanavati strongly objected to such 'filth' in our respected journal. Hawkins came with Oxford Dictionary to analyse each word, to determine whether it could be classified as 'dirty'. He cleared all except two words. Finally all the material was forwarded to Soli at Nigeria for a final verdict. 'Keep every " " word of it. We don't want to be left behind in these days of permissiveness' — came a curt telex that settled it. And so it was fun learning from these masters.



Soli S. Mehta (1927 – 1989)

Soli returned to India in 1985 and I was glad to hand over his baby to him immediately. In the meantime Hawkins had retired from all public life on completion of 75 years. He was made an Honorary Member of the Himalayan Club and continued to be available for guidance. Soli took over with all his bottled-up energy. I immediately became an assistant to him — a fact that drew surprise from some. Rarely a current editor relinquishes to become an assistant (particularly in government publications here, where battles are fought to retain the position). But this transition was entirely a tribute to greatness of Soli. He never made me feel any way inferior and as I always treated Soli as a guru it was a most natural transition.

Policies of editing remained the same but the modes changed totally. Now at Soli's house, there was always pakora and tea, and side-tracking to various subjects and lots of laughter. Soli's Parsee humour regaled all of us. Soli liked to laugh at everything including himself. He once passed on a letter from Polish climber Voytek Kurtyka to me in between a meeting. Soli had requested him for an article, which had already been printed in our last Journal. Kurtyka wrote: 'Don't you read your own Journal?' Soli added with a grin; 'Look I messed up'. Everytime I would ring him up there will be strong welcoming voice; *Bol Dikra (Yes, son)* and we would start shooting. Exchanging editing notes on the margins was also fun with Soli. Once after striking out some utter nonsense he wrote: 'Shit'. I wrote there: 'Soli be careful, we preserve these papers

in the archives for posterity and people will refer to it after many years. Papers came back with Soli's curt writing below mine; 'Sorry, I did not realise that. I'll use stronger words next time.' He was irrepressible.

Apart from editing Soli was an excellent pianist and cellist. He regularly played in the Bombay Chamber Orchestra. He worked for ICI (India) from 1950 to 1985 when he retired. He served in various senior positions in Bombay, London, Rishra (Bengal), Sudan and Nigeria. He had a degree from St. Catherine's College, Cambridge. He travelled a lot and met many editors, trekkers and mountaineers the world over. He trekked regularly in the Himalaya and talked about it with excellent slides. He was Vice-President of the Himalayan Club and handled all the organisation of the Club's Diamond Jubilee in 1988. He gave a talk on 'Executive Trekking' where he demonstrated how he stuffed himself with food while enjoying the beauty of the trek. To a packed hall he came away from the mike to demonstrate; 'I was like this — when I left' — taking his stomach in — and; 'like this when I returned' and put his stomach out — all to a great laughter. Only Soli could do this.

Soli always talked about his daughters with great verve. Naushad is a senior journalist with *Time Magazine*, U.S.A. ('Like father like daughter — he added) and Yasmen is practising Modern Dance at California. His wife Meheru was a constant source of inspiration to him. She read, corrected manuscripts and reviewed books. During 1967 to 1979 between them they produced 8 issues of the *Himalayan Journal* without much support from any quarters during the darker days of the Club. Soli kept this international Club alive and going — a debt the Club can never repay.

In 1988 the Himalayan Club celebrated the Diamond Jubilee. To commemorate the event it was proposed to publish *Exploring the Hidden Himalaya* (Hodders and Stoughton) jointly written by Soli and myself. At once Soli flung himself into it with great energy. We collected slides, material and wrote all the chapters. It was great fun sharing Soli's lunches and enjoying his humour. The book was published in early 1990. Alas he was not to be around to see it. Death came suddenly. A heart-attack snatched him away on 4 November 1989. He had looked forward to retired life, music, editing, writing further books, H.J.s and lots of fun.

With Hawkins passing away on 13 October, 1989 after a year of illness, suddenly two persons who did a lot for the *Himalayan Journal* and life were gone. It will be a challenge to keep to their standards and keep up their good work. I would have sent this piece to them for editing immediately after writing it. But perhaps there is some urgent editing to be done up there. Now they have two editors *par excellence*.

SUMMARY

A personal tribute to R. E. Hawkins and Soli S. Mehta, who died in 1989.
