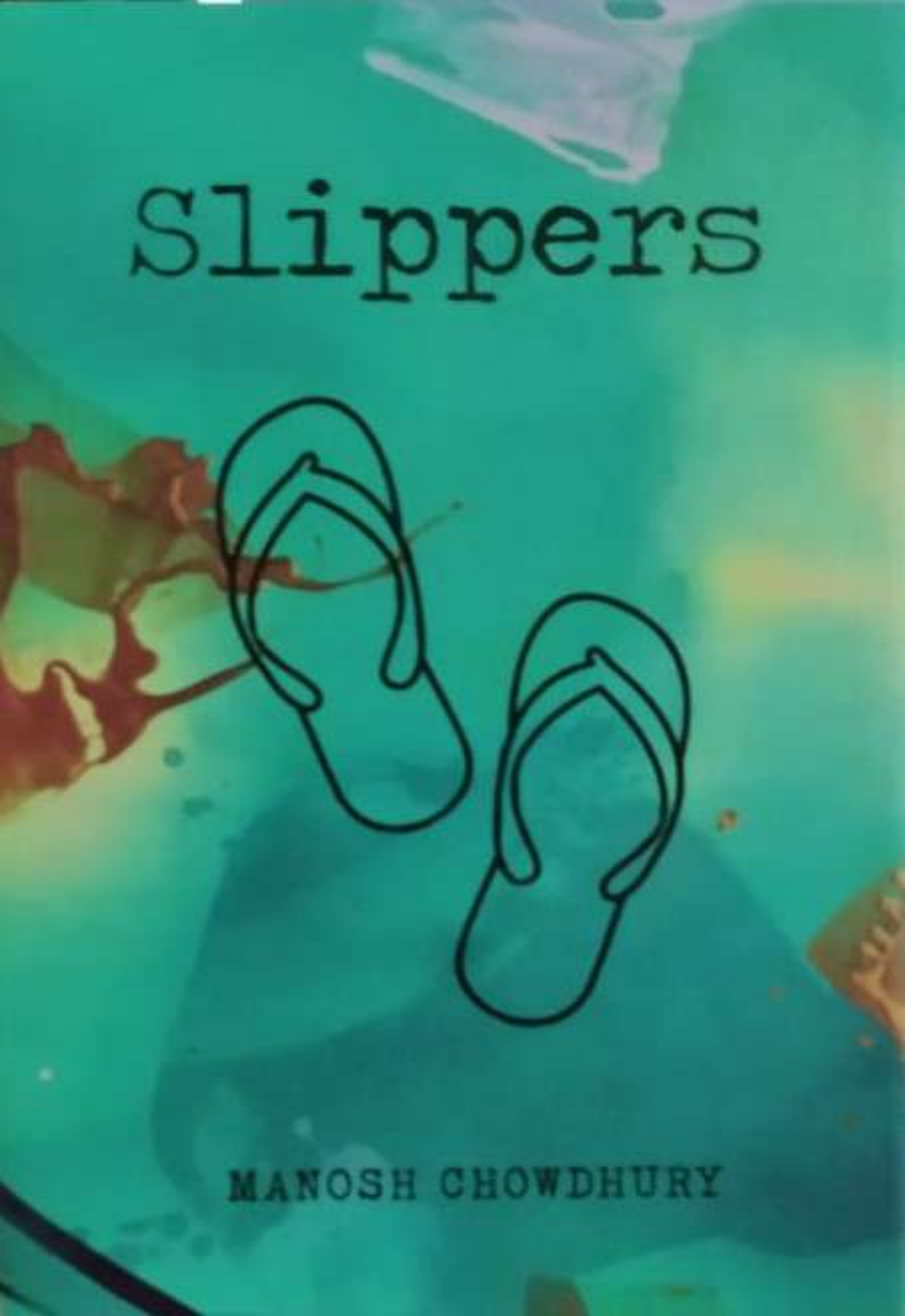
Slippers



MANOSH CHOWDHURY

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K H O S R A K H A T A

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Manosh Chowdhury

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baba, when alive, always felt sorry for not training me with proper English skills... even a book won't make him feel any good about it...

Preface

Slippers is an unlikely book to conclude as a project. I had a complicated relationship with English language. Writing 'academic' pieces in English was not my agenda. Though it was a strange move and definitely a 'self-destructive' initiative in one's career. But that is altogether a different issue. On the other hand, writing 'creative' pieces in English was beyond my capacity. My background and linguis tic training was quite limited. But eventually I developed a keen interest to learn the language by myself. But I never felt it adequate for the nuances that a creative piece requires. It all began when I met Khademul Islam, back in 2003, the-then literary editor of the leading daily in Bangladesh—The Daily Star.

By that time, I had s tarted a few Bengali literary works that could be categorized as 'creative'. He insisted that it was all about literary skill and imagination. And he

encouraged me that I should not be bothered about my language and that he would brush it up for betterment.. Some titles were also suggested and finalized by him. So this is the story. These essays were published by him during 2003 to 2005. I ususally consider myself a lazy writer. Had I been a bit more active, the editor, friend cum inspirer was perhaps ready to publish more. He somewhat introduced my essays as reflexive new kinds in Bangladeshi 'travel' writing. Khademul Islam is the sole reason or the source of inspiration behind my effort at writing in English. I am very much grateful to him. In the later years, I couldn't keep up a steady pace at it; partly because I was lazy but mostly there was none like Khademul Islam to oblige me to write.

Then came a desire to get these essays published in booklet. Tanmoy Dasgupta of Khosra Khata publications came forward with great interest. He also complied with my wish to have some illustration. Kei Yasaka has very kindly agreed to do illustration. This meant a lot for

me. Both of them deserve my gratitude. And then Aditi Mondal gave some serious editing to the text. I thank her for exploring possibilities in linguistic expressions. If it becomes a good read, it is purely because of the team. Hence, I believe that there is nothing much to celebrate, other than the people who have engaged themselves and contributed in this endeavour, rather an extended journey for the past twenty years or so.

Manosh Chowdhury
Dhaka

17 August 2020

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On *Karabi* and the Politics of Peace

I was waiting for Tetsuya's call. He did call me, but not for Hiroshima Day on August 6. Instead, he invited me to an open-air concert that took place on 30th July in observance of the same event.

Tetsuya was a surprising meet for me. I had been looking for some English-speaking people to talk to. This was not easy to find in Japan. So, after a few weeks in Japan, I posted an online advertisement: "I am a South Asian staying here; I wish to meet some local people. I look forward to have a bit of conversation. And I can't speak Nihongo (Japanese)"—or something like that.

However, a week later, I received an email from Tetsuya, the only one to respond to my advertisement. Eventually we started emailing each other.

... *Friend, I feel very sorry knowing all these things that Japan did to the Chinese people during the WWII. I never knew this. Did they do something similar to your country-people too?*

He asked me in an email in the context of the Chinese, in February-March of this year, raising strong objections to Japan's claim of a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Japanese public opinion ran strongly against the Chinese. But Tetsuya had a different concern. I replied, "No, we didn't have Japan. Long before WWII, our colonial lords were the British. So we survived Japanese atrocities, but definitely had to go through British ones. But of course, in multiple other forms."

Though for once I thought of telling him about Japan's association with Netaji Subhash Bose's 'Azad Hind' movement, yet later stayed aloof. Otherwise,

things would get too complicated. We kept on emailing each other until he invited me for a friendly meeting. I was so excited about this meeting as this was the first contact that I had made on my own without any prior introduction, I went to Hiroshima city right away. At the train station, I went to the wrong gate as usual. Tetsuya was waiting at the other gate. We contacted each other over cell-phones, an essential component of the Japanese lifestyle. I had to search for about fifteen minutes before finding the specific gate where Tetsuya was waiting.

Tetsuya had lived in Los Angeles, United States for almost sixteen years, where he had a music studio and served as a production manager. But gradually he lost interest, came back and joined his father's engineering firm. On the way to the parking area, he offered me hesitantly to go to Soka Hall, the famous peace initiative, run according to Buddhist theology. Mr. Ikeda is the current president, traveling all around the world, delivering lectures on his understanding of Buddhism

and peace. Tetsuya is a follower of him and also a volunteer member of the organization.

"So why did you hesitate to ask me about that?" I asked him as we were on the road, glancing through the books that he had bought for me.

"Because every time I start discussing these things with a new person, they stop listening and want to get rid of me."

"I understand what you mean. People are becoming more secular I guess."

"Yes, but we are talking about peace. It has nothing to do with religion as such. You're not a Buddhist, or Ikeda's follower, yet you're showing interest because you're a peace-loving person. You're a good Buddhist."

But I really couldn't tell him how I actually felt about the global peace activities, or the various Japanese movements about it. I sat there, a little nervous, thinking how to act like a 'good Buddhist.'

This time when he invited me to a concert, things went better. I sat with his family among thousands of people, with packaged food for lunch. Tetsuya said that the concert had been arranged by a group of people who are also engaged with the *Soka* activities. Also he mentioned that some of the American jazz musicians amongst the participants and performers were Buddhist. The organizers, Youth Music Forum, had tried hard to promote the event 'Music for Peace' or so; with celebrity jazz players like Herbie Hancock on the piano and Wayne Shorter on the saxophone. First, though, there were other pieces, including Japanese traditional drums, all of which were fabulous. And finally the main attraction was performed by the jazz team from US, who played fusion numbers composed only for this event. Most of the Japanese came with their families, and there were a lot of foreigners too. This is something very common in Hiroshima round the year, especially during July and August around Hiroshima Day.

After attending the concert, I had not yet planned on going to the August 6 event. But Rehman, a Pakistani friend from Hiroshima University, phoned me while he was still in bed (it was an off-day) and said that he needed a reason to get out of it. So we went to Hiroshima city. It was twilight, the sun and clouds together seemed to be complimentary to each other; as if together it was adding a spectacular essence to the moment as the calm Hiroshima sky turned saffron and further unfurled into multiple number of hues. Down on the land, a huge crowd was heading towards the tramline. Once I joined them, I realized that it would have been a loss if I hadn't come.

Though it has all the facilities of a typical hi-tech Japanese city, yet Hiroshima is not a major metropolitan center with a population less than two million. But that day it seemed to be different. The trams were jam-packed in the evening in spite of being a Saturday. Almost everybody got off in front of the Atom Bomb

dome. The dome is actually the remains of a building, which is said to be the only building in the surroundings which hadn't collapsed completely in the bombing. Eventually it became the monument of grief and hope together, something that symbolizes Hiroshima. The city authorities have preserved the damaged building. A peace memorial park and the peace museum were established afterwards in the same compound.

There were people all over the place—around the dome, in the park, and on the streets; of all the ages, but more importantly, of all the races! Hiroshima people believe that they are conveying the message of peace to the world. It is the identity of Hiroshima today. That evening I got to see how the message was being reciprocated by the world. Every year, the city prepares itself to accommodate thousands of tourists from around the world, all visiting with some specific reason to join the event. Be it peace activists from America, or Britain, or anti-nuclear activists from Germany, or human

rights activists from Egypt. It appeared to be an all-encompassing event for different people from different corners of the world. I don't know, but I had the feeling that the July London bombings exaggerated the appeal of this day. Candles were lighted on the dome compound. Children were asking their parents what all this was about. There was a wall beside the dome, built from the wood collected from all over the world. This was built as a symbol of the chain of the peace-loving people of the world. Small pieces of wood signed by the individuals. A block imprinted with the words, "I love India" caught my eyes. Rehman and I both smiled.

Thousands of people moving around, and hundreds of thousands more were present metaphorically with their signatures, a global camp of pro-peace people! But at that moment, in front of the Atom Bomb dome, I kept thinking: "Is there anybody in the world who really expects the world will be rid of nuclear arms? Or any weapon? Aren't the Iraqi people wanting the end of

the occupation and justice against those who invaded them? And what else could the British expect except to be bombed again?" I remembered my disappointment on the first day when I came to see the dome. There is a memorial stone about the dropping of the Bomb that said a lot of words about 'humanity' and so on. But it did not name the actor that was responsible for the attack, the United States. Not one word. This is how Japan balances its contemporary politics. And this is how many global peace activists approach their mission–without naming any possible opponent, except some anonymous evil. Or, at present, that 'evil' is being named loudly as 'terrorism'.

"So how do you feel now?" Rehman asked me.

"Oh, I am very much with it," I replied. On summer nights, flowers are a little paler than they are in springtime in Japan. Still *Karabis* were bright under the electric floodlights. *Karabi* was the first flower that blossomed after the bombing; hence it is special in Hiroshima. I was unable to find out its Japanese name. Sakura (cherry

flowers) is synonymous with Japan, but for the older generation in Hiroshima, the Karabis mean something special.

Hiroshima city is intersected by at least seven rivers. The dome is located by the Mato Yasu river and people were packed on both sides of it. Shops were selling candles, wooden frames and paper covers. Hundreds had queued up to light their candles, which they then put to the river water. A group of people were singing in Japanese by the riverside. Yuko, our guide, translated some parts. These were about the victims of the bombing, about war, destruction of human lives, and also about how Hiroshima stood back on its feet again.

The main official program was in the peace park. There was a huge stage which could capacitate a large number of musicians at once. On this particular day at least 300 musicians including some Japanese and foreign peace-delegates were participating altogether under a Japanese host. Mammoth screens were showing

the event to viewers. This had a completely a different atmosphere, with melancholy music. And we decided to return to the Mato Yasu, where the singers were still singing and people in queue. They would continue till midnight. Or maybe till the candle stocks were finished. Offering light to souls is partly a Shinto rite which has become fused with contemporary ones related to 'light.' The A-bomb killed almost 250,000 people in Hiroshima. Some of them had jumped into the river to cool down the unbearable pain inside, to escape the extraordinary heat outside, and died in the river. Thousands of lives had ended miserably. All had fallen victim to the conflicts amongst state machines; rather, in other words, victim of the desires of some others who dominated the world. Everybody knows the story of death. It has become a kind of a folktale in Hiroshima; it is uttered like a hymn, at least on the day of 6 August.

And when you listen to the story and see the candles floating in the river, you definitely and voluntarily hope

for the unfortunate souls to receive the warmth of prayers. The souls of those who fought against Japanese militarism and died, got bombed and perished, were hushed about the whole history of people's uprising for social justice in Japan. Moreover several aspects and queries such as who could be the possible suspectbehind the bombing incident at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was also suppressed. Often we are told that peace will come after we pay the price for it. These people have been paying it. But for what? I could see two poles, one being the people and the other was the war machines. If people keep on being killed, at least that would be one resolution. That's one kind of peace for sure.

In this huge crowd I was not sure if being pro-peace meant anything. I decided to go back. Rehman and Yuko wanted to stay on.

"So what will you do at home?" Rehman asked me.

"Nothing. Maybe eat something. I am starving", I replied as I started walking towards the tramline.

(03 September 2005)

GPS-ing to a Japanese Village

The trip had long been due, before I came here; yet when Yuko told me that she would take us to her home, it meant something special to me. There were five of us, three from Bangladesh and one from Taiwan, with Yuko as the guide-cum-host and driver.

It is often said, especially among the foreigners in Japan, that one is handicapped here without a car. This is realized when paying a large amount for public transport just to travel a short distance. But when you are in a personal car, especially sharing it with others, traveling can be comparatively cheaper. It is true that you need

to buy fuel, and pay toll/s for the highways (which costs pretty high and people are always complaining about it), but it is still cheaper compared to public transport. Yuko had rented a five-seated car for 56 hours. And then we were on the road.

This was totally a different Japan for me, or for anyone who didn't travel much by road.

All areas of Japanese cities and suburbs tend to be the same; no definite localities or neighborhoods. Here the perception of 'agricultural areas' definitely differs from that of a Bangladeshi's understanding of the term. The meaning of the term is mostly limited within the understanding of 'farm-land' here. Considering this, it is better to presume that there is no 'rural Japan' to be spotted as we Bangladeshi's often tend to correlate with the term 'agricultural areas'. Traveling by Shinkanshin (the bullet train) can be a sheer thrill for a Bangladeshi. Discussions can center around if one has experienced a ride already, or is going to. But those trains do not

provide any essence of Japanese countryside. Local trains are of course local. I don't know why, but when I rode a local train here for the first time, I thought of the music played by the metro rail authorities in Kolkata. I missed those tunes.

It is only by car that one gets to see the Japanese landscape. Fabulous hills in multiple shades of green. A shade which of course, turns to yellow during the winter, and gradually turns reddish and finally brown. Drive along, and all of a sudden you enter a valley with typical two-stored Japanese houses. In their compounds—you can see the fruit trees from far, planted so carefully. Agricultural lands can also be spotted. This is of course modern technocratic Japan, still the outcome of Meiji Restoration. Bangladeshis often are surprised with their use of land—even a one-decimal flat land is cultivated. But sitting in a car and waiting for the next valley habitat, you come across a hill with a hundred houses, delicately grafted into its body. Observation of the countryside

architecture in Japan can be confusing. This moment you see the mighty bridges, tunnels, highways—solid concrete or steel. And the next moment you find the fragile-looking wooden lodgings.

Yuko had strongly recommended that we must bring all our favorite music for the trip just to avoid monotony. I don't know about Tehsan, our Taiwanese companion. But for us, Humayun, Seuty and me, all the three Bangladeshis, the car windows were simply too magical. We were stuck onto it. Then I learnt something astonishing about our car. I had heard about GPS (Global Positioning System) before, but while sitting beside Yuko, I found her looking into the multi-purpose screen, supposedly our CD player cum DVD player cum TV. It provided us with a satellite-controlled GPS image that showed every detail of Japanese highways and roads. We could even know how many meters away we were from a highway-cafe or a signal light. I sat speechless for a while with my eyes on the screen. I recalled the second-

hand pen with an electronic watch I got as a gift from my parents during my last days of school. This was a very expensive item to gift considering our living standards back then. Yet, the next week I had dismantled it as a result of my curiosity. Sitting in the car, I controlled myself from being inquisitive about the mysterious screen. It was hard to resist though.

We reached at our destination finally, after dusk. One or two hens were still moving in the yard. Hypothetically it was Japanese countryside. This meant that the neighbors knew each other and there were no shopping malls nearby. Yuko told us later that for several weeks the story would buzz around in the neighborhood that the Mizuno family had some foreigner guests. A long time back her grandfather had come here, settled, and built a futon (mattress and blanket) factory. Her father runs this factory now. 'Factory' actually would not be the right term since it was more of a traditional cottage industry; a kind which is fast disappearing nowadays. It resembles

dhunkar in the Bangladeshi context. But no comparison is possible given the affluence of Japanese society.

Next morning, on the way to Fukuoka, we talked about that.

"Father is somehow disappointed that none of my brothers showed interest in the profession." Yuko was talking about her father. One of her brothers was in the fire service, while the other was in the navy.

"But that's understandable I guess. Does he have regular clients?"

"Mostly the long-time ones. But these days, even they hardly come for a new one."

"Why?"

"They ask for repairing their old ones."

"So that's also part of your services?"

"Now that has become the only service."

"Then how can your father really expect his sons to join him?"

"Right. Last year my father himself bought two

blankets from Nafco." Yuko was laughing. Nafco is one of the major chain shops in Japan. And among other items, they sell the *futons*—the readymade ones that are factory-manufactured and mainly synthetic. "Cotton is expensive" she added.

"What about Japanese cotton?"

"Well, Japan produces cotton. But the main source for traditional *futons* is imported cotton. My father developed an import chain from India. All by himself."

A familiar story, I felt; also at the same time not so familiar as well. The decline of the cottage industry didn't really corner a whole generation of craftsmen. Well, perhaps it has pushed them to a marginalized position culturally but not financially; at least it seemed so.

Her parents were waiting for us to join them at dinner. Her mother and sister-in-law had been preparing food for us for hours. His brother and his wife drove down just for the event—to meet his sister's foreigner friends. We sat down at Japanese short tables loaded with food.

Soba (noodles), Onigiri (a cake made of rice and fishes), Sushi (raw fishes with some sauce), boiled Shrimps, chips, cakes, cheese, beer, fruits juices, Sake (traditional Japanese wine) and some more that I couldn't follow anymore. Everybody was keen to know their guests. The language divide was great—Yuko spoke Japanese and English. Her parents, brother and sister-in-law knew only Japanese. We three Bangladeshis spoke Bangla and English. And Tehsan spoke Taiwanese, Chinese, Japanese and a little English. Now, except for me, the other two Bangladeshis, Seuty and Humayun could follow some words and phrases in Japanese. Yuko's father somehow had learnt some Bangla and Hindi words. Yuko could barely follow a simple Bangla conversation. Yuko's mother learnt Chinese in a language school and now had largely forgotten it. And Yuko's 2 years old nephew was still struggling with Japanese. Very soon the dining table turned into enthusiastic language exercises.

The place where we had dinner was actually the guest house. Yuko had a room in this. We five were to stay in this house. Yuko's brother, his wife and the little one went off. After they left, her parents also went to the main house. Both of them were early risers. Futons came out from wardrobes. "These are our factory products," Yuko said. Everyone got a single bed with a thin blanket, placed on the wooden floor. Tehsan was the disciplined one, so she went to bed immediately. But we four went on with our adda till midnight. We had been so distracted after we reached her home that none of us had thanked Yuko until then.

"So you like it?"

"I feel like I am visiting my grandparents at my village home." Humayun said. He had told me this twice, and now he told this to the others as well.

"Honto? (really?)"

"Me too. I feel like I am in Syedpur at my maternal grandma's house." Seuty had been raised in her

grandmother's house for years, and now she was thinking of her. Yuko felt happy with this "at-home" feeling provided to her friends and classmates. I was thinking of it too. How our memories were always seeking references. Was it by chance? Otherwise how could a village in Japan, bereft of meaningful linguistic exchange, is capable of re-generating some old emotions? There is no doubt that all of us were thinking about the inevitable drift of later generations towards the city. Yuko also told us about how she chose to opt for a distant university and not the one nearby. She asked me, "And Manosh da, you?"

"I am enjoying myself thoroughly. And I am thinking of it too."

"Don't you feel the way they feel?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I had never been to my village except for my grandfather's funeral when I was twelve. And before that I saw him once for two hours."

"Honto? And don't you have some other memories?"

"Nothing comparable. My maternal grandparents also didn't live in their village home. Then they left Bangladesh long back, in 1981."

"And didn't you ever visit any of your friends' homes?"

"That is what I am thinking about right now. No. This is the first time that I am staying in somebody's home village."

"How can it be?"

Seuty and Humayun also waited for my response. But I couldn't find the right answer to the question. I knew what I wanted to say, but it was hard to translate it into language.

(12 November 2005)


2020

The Other Americans

The document that was handed to me by the immigration officer at San Francisco airport in February of this year, started saying, "The United States has a proud tradition of welcoming immigrants and visitors..." It further said that I had to inform them of my departure every time I visited the US in future in order to "ensure the safety of all persons in the United States-citizens, residents, and visitors as well." Then I signed a paper which said that state authorities could stop, question and arrest me anywhere if required. What a welcome, I wondered as I ran to board the connecting flight to Orlando, signing

away my rights! Here I was, an academician with an invitation letter from an American university—and a non-Muslim! And yet...

My conference (the annual one on film and literature at Florida State University) was in Tallahassee. I had to write a note explaining it. I must have not written it well, because I had to explain it again to a group of immigration officers. For the next ninety minutes I had an insider's view of the 'special' immigration process that Americans now reserve for visitors from certain parts of the world. On my very first visit to America!

After an overnight bus ride from Orlando to Tallahassee, I found the hotel nearby designated for conference attendees. I didn't feel sleepy. I managed to connect to the internet through the hotel LAN-cable and felt relieved. Ah, the delights of modern communication! I immediately sent an e-mail to the organizers, and almost immediately got a reply from Amit Rai of the English department at FSU asking me to have lunch with him.

Amit's mail was more than mere courtesy since he was working under tremendous pressure as one of the seminar organizers. He also had to take a couple of classes that very day. But Amit—a bearded man in his late 30s', surrounded by books—greeted me with warm welcome to his office. A Hindi *ghazal* was playing on his PC followed by a jazz piece. "That's my taste," Amit explained. A poster of Shammi Kapoor was pinned behind the door.

He was now researching broadly on Indian cinema and specifically on Bhopal as well. It was exciting to see a literature professor working on cinema. This was something quite unusual from the way Bangladeshi academia thought. Melissa is one of Amit's graduate students. While discussing her research, I wondered how Subrata Augustine Gomes could be so unnoticed in our universities, especially with his translations and work on *Charjapod!*

"So, how do you manage to mix your interests in

Indian cinema and Bhopal?" I asked Amit, while thinking about the tragedy of course!

"It's very simple. I am doing a kind of historical work on a cinema hall in Bhopal." Amit's family had immigrated from Bhopal to New York when he had been a child. He had received his Ph.D. from Stanford University and taught at New York University before joining FSU. He told me all this while driving to his favorite food-shop. On reaching there he first asked me if I had any problem with vegetarian food or not. I was okay with it.

The food-shop was a fairly old, a little house with wooden sign-board hanging on the door. The place is quite crowded at lunch time. The owner's family was Brazilian *Vaishnav*.

"You mean Iskcon campaigners?" I asked (ISKCON stood for International Society for Krishna Consciousness, better known as the Hare Krishna movement).

"So you know about them?"

"Of course. How can I be ignorant about them?"

Most of the diners were university faculty members. There were a few popular Indian drawings of *Krishna-in-Gokul* and *Krishna-in-Vrindabana* on the walls. Amit smiled when he saw me looking at them. The food—rice, dal, spinach, vara, vegetable—is truly a reminder of Indian cuisine. Amit told me about his life in USA, about FSU. Also how he got married to Sarah, a woman of Pakistani origin, whom he had met in New York. Amit and Sarah have their infant daughter named Afia who is of 22 months only. At the counter the Brazilian shop-owner who was wearing a tulsi mala, chatted with Amit before we left.

"So this is what is left of Florida's hippie lifestyle?" I asked as we walked towards the car parking.

"Yes, it is," Amit answered with grinning face.

"It gives me a kind of strange feeling seeing all these which I have only read about in books."

"I do understand what you mean."

"One question, Amit. Do they not have problems with the state structure?"

"White hippies have no problem," Amit said carefully.

"I guessed that."

Empty streets lies ahead with just cars rushing forth and back. Amit was in a hurry for his class.

"But there is this one thing you can be sure of in Tallahassee."

"What's that?"

"These people are exclusively anti-Bush and anti-Republican."

I started laughing and Amit continued, "They consistently vote Democrats."

"The limit of their political actions."

"Yes. You're right. The limit."

The first session of the conference was about race in the films. Two of the three paper-presenters were black. A fascinating paper was about how black campuses were being portrayed in the recent films. Later in the evening two documentaries by Alan Rosenthal who is considered as an important documentary-maker these

days, were screened. The first one was on Palestinian issue, while the last one on the anti-Semitic doctrine in the Nazi movements, a juxtaposition that was a little discomforting. Especially against the backdrop of overt Western support to the Zionist state. Though I was very interested in listening, yet I simply couldn't keep my eyes open. So, with an unpleasant feeling inside, I left the hall for my hotel room.

The big occasion was the next day. Almost twenty different panels along with the speech by Prof. Hamid Naficy from Rice University, a guru of contemporary film studies, followed by a reception party in the evening. Four paper-presenters from South Asia listed in a single panel, which I couldn't resist telling the organizers later that it was an "area studies" framework and it had not been used for any other region except South Asia and Middle East. However, next morning only the panel chair Tamara, a faculty member of archaeology at FSU, turned up. Bev Curran, an energetic Canadian professor

working in Japan, came to boost me up. Amit also came. Though the discussion afterwards was fascinating, yet it was conducted loosely as some other presenters did not show up.

"So you maintain that any local film genre is obviously global to some extent?" someone asked.

"Yes I do. Especially if we consider the contemporary processes of visual production."

We talked about different things. About why I didn't feel that, even with the enormous influence, Indian cinema couldn't be compared with Bangladeshi cinema. About the significance of having a diasporic perspective and a defined viewership that Indian cinema is celebrating these days, not only in terms of the specific codes but also in material terms the emerging consumer around the globe. Amit was from India, Tamara's specialization was largely on the temples of India, Bev had a deep interest in sub-continental issues.

"So this is your first presentation in the US?" Tamara asked me.

"Yes, my first presentation in English too."

"So how do you feel?"

"Your conference is on trans/nationalism. I would feel more comfortable if it was on US nationalism." I had told them earlier about my experience with airport immigration. The best they could do was to laugh. And they did it well enough.

Later I was overwhelmed with Prof. Naficy's speech given to an auditorium full with audience and delegates. His main point was that it was wrong to label as 'marginal' films made by diasporic populations since they had their own unique 'accents.' At the reception later I met Sarah, Amit's wife. She talked to me as if we knew each other for years. And within a few minutes asked me if I wanted to go out to a faculty party. We chatted as she drove. After finding the house, we went inside. Her friends were very welcoming and warm, even though I was a newcomer to their party.

The host offered me gin and tonic. I talked with his partner Helen. I also chatted with Karen.

"So when did you come in US?" she asked as others listened.

"Yesterday."

"You mean you've arrived here yesterday?"

"Yes." Sarah smiled.

"How can it be? It seems as if you've been long familiar with the US."

"Yes, I am. It's very simple. I know your lifestyle. To me it is global."

"C'mon, this is Florida. There are other parts of America. And we have different lifestyles even among the Florida people, too."

"I know that. Still, this is my position."

"How long are you going to stay here?"

"I leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Why were you here?"

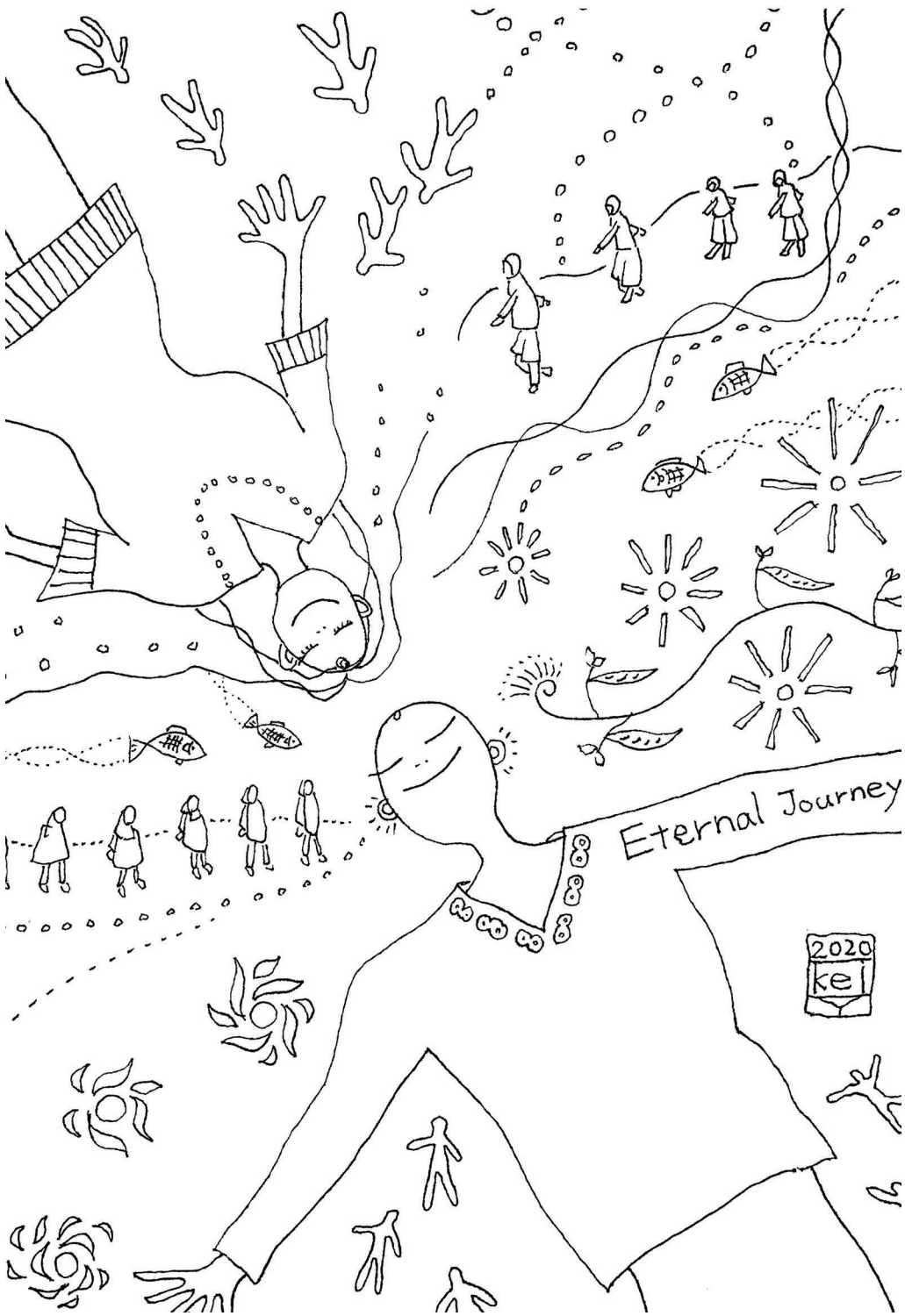
"To attend the conference... or maybe to see you all."

"You are going tomorrow... This is too bad."

"Not really."

A brief moment of silence. And then they invited me to come again. I said that I would. These were the other Americans, open-minded and kind, whom I knew to be sincere about their invitation.

(30 July 2005)


Eternal Journey
2020
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A Harvard Professor on ‘ Peace ’

I went to *Satake* Memorial Hall, the university auditorium, to hear a Harvard professor speak on the topic of peace. Though it had been just a week since I arrived here on a study program, yet I went there because I was very interested in hearing a Harvard professor speak. Smiling volunteers were distributing Japanese and English versions of his paper. I certainly took the English one. They also offered a translation device. I looked at Ichi, my Japanese classmate. He replied in Bangla: “Take it. It is easier to take one than to refuse it in Japanese.” So I took one. The Harvard professor

claimed in his introductory lines that he had something new to offer. He suggested that a university curriculum should adopt peace studies in its academic programs. No wonder that he had been giving lectures for the last few days in different auditoriums of Hiroshima and had been traveling to multiple countries to spread the word.

Everywhere in Higashi-Hiroshima you find the expression of "peace", "peace" and "peace". And wherever you look outside, you see green hills of less height. The greeneries of which are changing to reddish and maroon and later to brown in color, and then towards... who knows what! Maples are the ones with the color of flame; so many shades—yellow to orange, brown to maroon, and a series of red—scarlet, crimson, ruby—you need a color chart for that. The place reminds me of those sights from the hilly areas in the '60s and '70s Bengali films where doctors send their rich patients to recuperate, and where the camera zooms in on the ailing hero in an emotionally charged and profound scene with the heroine. The only element missing is a beach and the sound of the sea.

This is not proper Hiroshima. This is Higashi-Hiroshima, designed to be a small university town. Higashi's topography has more natural curves and colors than Hiroshima. For the people who live in Hiroshima and commute to some office at Higashi-Hiroshima, the latter is meant to be a comfortable place. It's 1500 Yen for a round-trip bus ride of 40 minutes each way, not a huge amount by Japanese standards. The Japanese run from the bus stops to the offices they work at almost without a word to anyone in the mornings; then do the same in the evenings, from office to bus stops. And unlike chattering Bengalis, once they get on the bus, they sit silently and look out of the windows at the hills.

Set amidst this natural beauty, Higashi-Hiroshima is essentially a university town. Because of Hiroshima's history, there is a continual emphasis on peace curriculum and peace studies, on related subjects and what they call international cooperation. From the very first day, one feels a pressure to visit the peace museum

located in the main town. I did not go yet. I did not attempt the 40-minute bus ride to the city—it would happen sometime in the future, so why force it? Also, I just couldn't understand why Hiroshima museum was named as peace museum and not museum against US aggression or nuclear-bomb museum. But that must be my problem. Here at the university no one talks about US aggression during World War II nor the recent contexts. Instead, everybody seems to be supportive of current Japanese foreign policy. Regardless of their disciplines, any professor barely displays any kind of academic interest in colonialism, imperialism, or even in global trade-imbalance. It was shocking for me. It's not that the Bangladeshi situation is very different, yet there are people within and beyond academia whom you may find interested in such issues. When, later on, I heard about some British student researching on post-Iraq trans-national relations, I hurried over there to listen to the presentation. The presiding professor, Dr. Yoshida, had clear observations about present-day power politics.

A few days later, when I found out about a literature professor working on Japanese colonialism, I e-mailed him expressing my interest in talking to him. He invited me over. My new Pakistani friend, Abdur Rehman, drily suggested that I should not get too excited: "Look, here the people all of a sudden shut the door. You can find them very enthusiastic in the first few meetings. And then when you begin to think you have a relationship, you find them disinterested."

However, I disregarded this and arrived at the professor's office two minutes before the scheduled time, after asking with difficulty for directions from eight different people. It is necessary to understand Japanese here. The professor knew three languages—Japanese, English and Chinese. His main thesis was about how Japanese scholars portrayed China in general, and Chinese literature and paintings in particular, as their "Orient". He found this characteristic to be an influence of Western Orientalism, of French and other

European 'study' of non-Western societies and cultures. He is presently examining Japanese paintings, and investigating Japanese mimicries of Western styles and genres. It was an interesting session with him. We both agreed that we would keep in touch. But I think I need some tips from Rehman about how I should proceed with the second phase of a 'relationship' with a Japanese as I feel utterly inadequate to initiate the task myself.

But all these came after the Harvard professor's speech on a peace curriculum. Mostly Japanese graduate students, and a few international students—male and female. And some Japanese professors and officials—practically all male. Except for a handful of international students, everybody was wearing a suit, which is the unwritten dress code. Everybody was busy trying to set the translating device. I also struggled with it, then gave up. Then the professor came.

By this time, half of the audience had fallen asleep leaning their sleepy heads onto their chests. So it was only

for the other half that the Harvard professor delivered his speech. I had already taken a look at the paper. It claimed to introduce some new approaches to contemporary peace studies. According to him current peace studies tended to define peace negatively; the definition must address an absence of violence and terrorism. Hence, concepts of peace is associated with concepts of violence and so on. On the contrary, what he wanted to promote, and which he had been promoting everywhere, was to conceptualize peace in a positive manner, emphasizing on international cooperation as the first step.

I am enrolled in IDEC—Institute of Development and Cooperation, and around me IDEC students were eagerly waiting to take notes. Then, the professor, in his preface to the talk, mentioned that it was a very significant tour for him since Japan had been seriously involved in the campaign against 'weapons of mass destruction.'

So this was the case! The invasion of Iraq was simply a part of the campaign against WMDs! And this Orwellian

statement was being made by someone who was proposing a 'new' approach to the peace studies! Now I knew the intent of his speeches around the world.

And the professor, supportive of the Bush-led war couched in terms of banishing nuclear weapons, is considered as one of the leading advocates of UN peace initiatives. Not surprisingly, he was a non-white American. With each passing day I am amazed by the loyalty of these 'minority' figures to the Bush regime. It is now understandable why Colin Powell, even with all his attempts to justify the aggression, was considered not loyal enough. The present of US regime sets the standard of loyalty, specifically for non-white Americans quite strongly. And what could be a more appropriate place for such a demonstration than Hiroshima? I just couldn't stop thinking about it, a Harvard professor covering for the Bush war by justifying it as a campaign against WMDs! It kept haunting me. This is particularly crucial at Hiroshima University where the Japanese government

is spending a huge amount of money for overseas students who mostly come from South-east Asia, China and Africa. The Harvard name has such an authority that it superimposes on everything else. He could be quoted for the next few weeks in almost every department. That is where his power lies.

The experience was bitter. Two weeks later, when I was invited to another 'peace' lecture at the Satake, I searched for some excuse to skip it. It was not possible though. Our professor was quite eager for us to be there. The event was for the celebration of 10th anniversary of IDEC. Faced with this prospect, I tried to think of some positive aspects of the anniversary. The peace-related speech was to be given by the director of UNITAR-Hiroshima (United Nations Institute for Training and Research). An Iranian woman. I also got to know that cultural programs would be performed by the international students. This sounded better, I thought that it might be an opportunity to meet students from different countries. Graduate

students here barely venture out of their offices, or 'laboratories' as they call it here. Cultural performances along with a speech from a UN official from the South? It made me a little more enthusiastic.

(04 December 2004)


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Cricket , Communism , Consumerism and *Krishna* . . .

The last time I visited Kolkata, the most interesting thing I had found was a series of billboards, particularly at bus stops, by the Bangla daily Bartaman. Very bravely! The words in scarlet red were as such: "(Bartaman) Doesn't frighten anyone except Bhagaban." Since the Kolkata newspaper readership is captive of the dominant Anandabazar, and the only recognizable challenger from the left is Aajkaal, those billboards were loud enough to get my attention. This time I found quite less of Bhagaban; which I don't know whether it is because of a reduced publicity of Bartaman, or my dull observation

faculty. Rinku and Tapash, my sister and brother-in-law, informed me that they had been taught a very good lesson. Ganashakti, the official spokes-paper of ruling CPI(M), had written in their publicity posters, in black instead of red: "Only the cowards are frightened by Bhagaban." So Ganashakti maintains the bravery! I was indeed dying to read a copy of the newspaper. But I couldn't arrange it during the first few days. My appetite was strong because I could only get Aajkaal at my sister's place for the first three days.

The bad thing was that my visit to Kolkata coincided with David Beckham's transfer to Real Madrid, and an in-between tour to East Asian zone. And so even the leftwing Aajkaal was helpless. For four subsequent days, they were forced to give cover photos, in color, of a dashing Beckham. I was quite happy that Beckham and Real Madrid had decided to exclude India from their trip. Later I talked about this to Dilip Samanta, an activist friend, a small trader and a poet who is hardly known

in the mainstream media. I learnt about his frustration: "Bodmaash! All of these newspapers. Do you know that they all published cricket on the top during the recent US attack on Iraq?"

"Oh! I don't know. Wasn't India a possible champion in the world Cup!" I just replied vaguely.

He was still unhappy and described how Indian presses print trash news, particularly when Indian diplomacy is in tension, as it was during the US invasion. "So what about Ganashakti?" I asked very politely. "Yeah," Dilip replied, "they demoted World Cup cricket news to second place. But you know the government press. And as for our public, even the regular subscribers moved towards other dailies just to hunt World Cup news, to look for Saurav and Sachin." Dilip was furious, and of course most of his anger was largely upon the general Kolkata-newspaper readers.

I was really curious about the general reaction in Kolkata against recent US attack on Iraq. I already knew

the critical official position of Left Front and about their processions against imperialism. I went to talk it over with Debapriya and Mou. Both of them teach English literature in college. All the time they are reading and discussing about the recent book of interview of Jacques Derrida or Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's latest essay; exchanging thoughts on how has influenced them.

They live in a modest, well-furnished flat near Garia, owned by Mou.

Their little four year old girl goes to school now. She hardly speaks and even if she speaks, it is mostly in English. A very tough host to encounter! Last time she could utter only a few words without a complete sentence and I had felt much at ease. But I was very happy to find two of their former students, both doing graduate studies in English, one in Jadavpur University, another at JNU. After a few welcoming words, I asked about the political situation on the campuses and student movements. Aniruddha said that in his first year at JNU, he had problems with

the political parties and with food and all the rest. And above all he really missed friendship. That interested me. "What's that?" I asked. He explained the scenario. He said that the BJP-backed student organization was always knocking at the door, pressurizing him to attend their meetings and always asserting Hindu solidarity; the Congress-backed student organization is cornered now, but at least they are 'secular'. Earlier when I had asked Aniruddha whether he belonged to any group, he had been critical of SFI, the left-backed student organization. Now he told me that "SFI at least has Bengali students in their party and that most of the students from Kolkata are with them, even if all of them are not necessarily supporters." This made me curious. I asked about the North-Eastern students. Aniruddha literally exploded, "Do you know them? They don't even acknowledge themselves as Indians. They talk in such a manner... 'you Indians'... they do their closed-door meetings... they are very ferocious, mainly the Nagas..." and a lot more.

On hearing this I asked him, "Aren't most of the BJP-supporting students from Northern India?" "Yes!" "And you SFI supporters from Bengal mainly, with a few from Kerala?" "Sure." "So why is it not normal for them to have their own political groups?" Aniruddha was very particular, "Dekhoon, we all are very committed about our Indian identity regardless our differences. They are not. Do you think they can run their own government if permitted? They fight each other. Even SFI doesn't think them reliable, doesn't trust their capacity. Do you know?" "Yes, I do." Aniruddha assumed my sympathies were with SFI. I was silent. Debapriya and Mou, however, knew better and took over the discussion until Shuvayan, the other fellow, a Jadavpur graduate, spoke up on different matters. Though there were big smiles at the end and the two freshly literature graduates were to depart, yet I remained angry over the conversation even after I woke up the next morning. So next week I found some papers delivered by Dilip Samanta earlier. Those

were on Nagaland-India relationship. I photocopied and handed them to Mou for delivery to Aniruddha.

I went to CSSSC (Center for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta) by bus. It was very close to Mou's flat. I didn't have any appointment, but Anjan Ghosh, a busy academician, didn't mind and offered me lunch. I found my head bubbling with a lot of issues, particularly inside a highly privileged academic institute. Eventually he had asked me about current publications in Bangladesh and their unavailability in Kolkata. I got my chance. "Since our relationship is assumed much on West Bengal's superiority, publications from Bangladesh reaches you only when we secure a fair chance to serve these to you." I couldn't help but be a bit harsh. However, we managed to talk a little about the existing disparate relationship between two Bengali-speaking territories; even if we exempt the relationships with other ethnic groups within and around West Bengal even during CPI(M) administration. I strongly wanted make some comment

on the issues brought up by well-known political scientist Partha Chatterjee, whom I saw during our lunch sitting at the far end of a common lounge; but then thought that it would be better not to disturb him while he was eating. So I rather concentrated on lunchtime conversation between Anjan and his colleagues, which centered around Anand Patwardan's recent film on fundamentalism, Amitava Ghosh, Partha Chatterjee's visit to Kathmandu, on writing and publications—glimpses of a lifestyle, academic and beyond. The newly constructed bypass road marked the seam of Kolkata. CSSSC is located outside proper Kolkata, at a distant and amidst calm ambience. It seemed to me as if it was a space outside this planet. Miles after miles were abounded with under construction buildings, dug up lands, a few government offices and a few extravagant towering offices of the Kolkata based developers (who are called as 'promoters' here). Most of all, the cafe, a round-shaped open space with a rooftop, was a very stunning one.

So this was Kolkata! Thousands of Bengali-speaking middle class people with their cosmopolitan aspirations, an identity in constant renewal, in different forms, in the streets, in English-medium schools, in the giant concrete shopping malls, in the pubs, watching TV, enjoying cricket match in the galleries, or some visiting mandirs etc. Signs of consumerism were everywhere. Often I wonder what exactly made Kolkata so distinct? Was there a difference with other big cities in India—Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, Delhi? Weren't the MNCs here to steer their business endeavors with significant pace and motivation despite the presence of the ruling CPI(M), a professedly Marxist party? Wasn't Kolkata a manifestation of a globalized metropolis? It was an important inquiry for me, a Hindu from Bangladesh who had experienced the severe flight of family members to West Bengal, to Kolkata in particular. On the footpaths, in the shops and crowds, all over Kolkata, there are enormous number of migrants from Bangladesh. I kept

wondering about it while walking down the footpaths or roadside. Then stopped when loudspeakers on the street were turned off of the songs and started some religious talk. The songs had been Krishna Katha, very common in older Kolkata. These were probably in Brajabuli language which is the language of Vaishnavite scriptures. The talk seemed to have something to do with Bangladeshi (Hindu) migrants, but I couldn't make any sense of it. I merely assumed that a large portion of the assembled people in the devotional ceremony, on the rooftop of a giant, brightly decorated building, were migrated East-Bengalis or shared some connection with East- Bengal.

But as for the Indian press was concerned, I was off the mark. Advani soon replaced Beckham in the newspaper headlines. He was supposed to attend the anniversary of Shyamaprasad Mukherjee who had been a founding member of the Forward Bloc and had supported the cause of refugees from the then East Pakistan. An official program was arranged with huge security precautions

by the state government. The safety measurements were pretty strict as it involved the security of Mr. Advani, and because of the sentimental Babri Masjid case which was still in its legal proceedings at the time. And also since the Gujrat court had dismissed the notorious 'bakery murders' just then. I asked Swapan, the owner of the cigarette-paan shop at Bablatala bus-stop if there was any chance that Advani might get attacked or not. Previously, during my first days here, Swapan had asked me about the scenario of Hindus in Bangladesh. I had answered (which was the same answer I gave everybody there) that "I think Gujrat is of more concern." Swapan seemed to be shocked. So now in response to my Advani question, he answered, "Look, dada, whatever you think of us, we the Bengalis are still against communalism. We fought BJP, and will fight till our last drop of blood. Bengal could be the place of Advani's fear." However I was not convinced about a possible fear. The next morning, interestingly, I read about Advani's preaching to the state government to

be more tolerant of other opinions. Can't deny but I totally enjoyed the reading though! CPI(M) had boycotted the anniversary program.

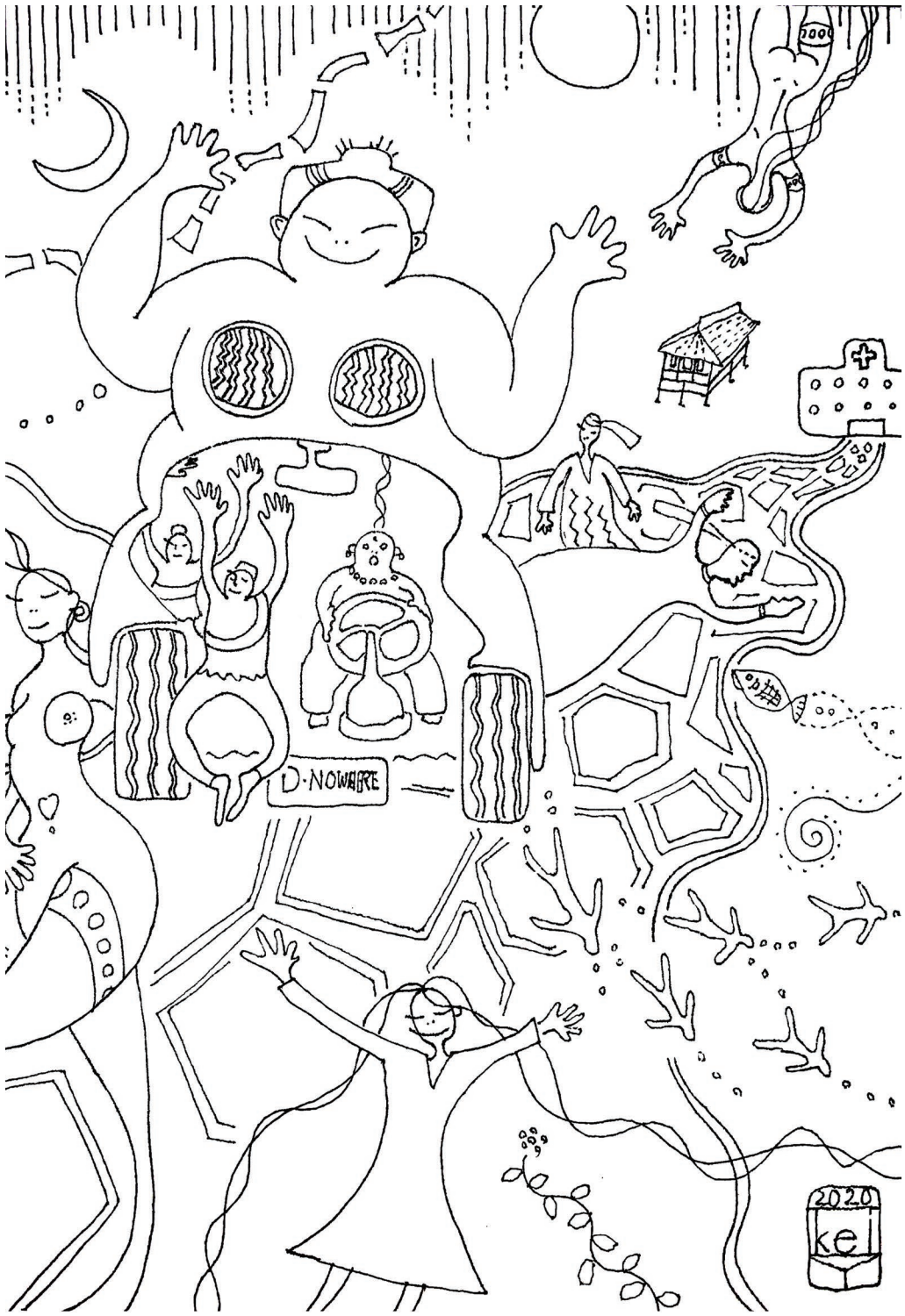
I decided to attend to two more matters—one is to drop in at College Street and look for little magazines; but more importantly, to get prepared to visit my less well-off family members who had left their ancestral village for Canning, near the Sundarbans in the year 1971. Canning is an outpost with a post office and a railway station, a poverty-stricken place built mainly by the refugees from Bangladesh in 1971. The whole day I had been overwhelmed by seeing so many reference books on several texts in College Street. I almost went out of breath while finding some primary textbooks. But alas! Bengali classics were easy to find but not the little magazines. A benevolent passer-by kindly helped me find Patiram's shop on the footpath, or 'foot' as they call it there. And he had little magazines from every corner of West Bengal, mostly the current issues. I had thought

that Kolkata, especially College Street, would have an exhibition of little magazines. Very naive indeed!

The whole day I had been tense about going to Canning, the place of marginal Hindu migrants, with their agony and their hatred against the abandoned Muslim East Pakistan! At Sealdah, I was almost ready to postpone my visit, when I noticed that trains to Canning and other places in the south were on a different platform. With much doubt and confusion, I came out from the main terminal and went to the southern terminal, which was loud, narrow, and crowded with working class people mostly. I found out that I had a one-and-half-hour wait for the train. And though I kept thinking that I should go back to the main terminal and buy some books from the large bookshops there, yet I felt stuck to the that particular floor filled with of hundreds of passengers travelling southward. The velpuri vendor stared at me, something that had happened all along since I kept my beards. Further, even my ordinary kurta-

pajama seemed a bit ornamental amongst the awaiting crowd of the south terminal. Waiting for the train idly, I ordered for a velpuri. He asked for 1 rupee. He had a clear voice, but I asked again. While sipping the tea in an earthen cup, which is popularly known here as 'bhar', I tried to recall my uncle's face. He is now in his eighties, with tulsi mala on his neck, buying and selling rice on Canning railway platform. The last time when I had seen him was in 1979. Still, I was glued to the floor, hoped that it would be delayed and I wouldn't have to go...

(06 September 2003)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Dispossession , Destitution , Descent and *Desh* . . .

"Won't you catch this train?"

The little boy on the platform was curious about me. His voice and eyes were sharp. I was tired then, unable to go through the newspaper pages with which I had been trying to get involved into. I had been seriously reading the business and commerce pages of an English daily, The Telegraph. Though I was unable to understand head or tail of the articles there, I had at least understood that something very exciting was happening—Banks these days were trying hard to make 'people' become

consumers. Even to my dull sense of economics, it was evident that deposit banking was at an end, that there was to be the new era of 'consumer' banking. How thrilling, I thought. The boy was not familiar with men wearing white pajamas and reading a newspaper—he probably did not care about the difference between Bangla and English papers—especially here, the extreme east platform of the crowded southern terminal of Sealdah, practically his home.

"No", I said, "I have to take the Canning train."

There came a train just a while ago. And though the passengers were in a hurry to leave the platform, yet some of them kept looking at us, coming close to listen to our conversation. A bearded man nearby was asking the boy to carry water was looking at us too. Also a pleasant-looking woman. I assumed them to be his parents. It was surprising to see a Muslim 'family' on the platform. The boy was keen on helping me. He suggested: "But you have to wait for that. And you should go to platform no. 11."

"I do know that. I read it on the ticket counter" I replied. He thought a while, and then gently asked "Are you going to visit your relatives?"

"Yes, I am."

"So you have relatives in Canning! Where do you live, in Kolkata?"

I thought once to say 'yes', but then said "No, Bangladesh". His face had a blank look for a few seconds, then a confused smile. I too smiled. Then he walked off.

The compartments of the train were quite packed when I reached platform no. 11. An old lady, in her 70s, wearing a white dhoti, a sign of widowhood, sat next to the window. She looked at me, then allowed me to sit beside her. She was reciting her prayers almost in silence. The hardship of these years was apparent in her thin face. Each four-seater bench was holding at least five passengers. When the train left the platform, it was fully packed with people and their belongings—goods to sell, some household items, putlis and water pots. A few

well-off passengers were there with water bottles bought from the platform shops, but most of the passengers had brought their water pots with them. It was a two-hour journey; though I could not manage for a window seat, yet could look out at the countryside outside the window from a distance.

I was supposed to make a phone call from Kolkata to Radhakanta, my cousin in Canning. He has a brick house with a roof, a tiny mudi khana (grocery) shop, and a room he rents out. So he is one of the richest members of my family members who migrated to India. And the tenant family had a telephone line. Getting a telephone line costs only 3000 rupees in West Bengal, a fact that was astounding for me as a Bangladeshi. Radhakanta earlier had asked my sister in Kolkata to give him a call if I was actually going to visit them. He wanted to receive me at the station. My plan was different. I wanted to go there unannounced and surprise his family. I had last seen him in 1981. My grandfather had died that same

year in a remote Bangladeshi village of Pirojpur. Radha and some other cousins had been in Bangladesh at that time and thought of continuing to live there. But later he left for West Bengal, leaving behind two of his siblings. They are still in that village. So on the train to Canning, I had a lot of thoughts in my mind—how to handle my uncle's (jetha) anger at why I had not visited them over the last twenty years, about so many family members, whom to exclude and whom to meet—all these and a lot more! The train was a local one and stopped at every station. I tried hard to learn the names of those stations so that I would not have to write them down on my notebook. Already I was the subject of much observation and attention in that compartment.

Canning railway station! The platform was full of passengers, small tea stalls, and one magazine stall. The coolies and other working people were eating, dipping the 'pauroti' (bread) into the tea. It was already lunchtime. Some bi-colored posters of a Bangla film and a *jatra* were

posted on the wall of the men's urinal. But no photos, only writings. The dark red railway wall gave me a sense of 19th century Bengal. Whenever I come across a red colored railway station, whether in Bangladesh or in India, I can't help thinking of Jarashandha's *Louha Kopaat*. Not that I would be able to link it easily—a railway station with a jail, but there is something in the story, about a jail established under colonial administration, which always made me think that the two establishments were similar. This time Canning's small railway station again brought about this feeling. It was the last station on this line and the Sundarbans is very close to this place. As I came to know later that the forest area actually begins just after the residential area.

Standing there, I had a strong sense that most of its people, if not all, were from the former East Pakistan. My sister couldn't give me Radhakanta's address, or of any other relatives. She had met some of them in some anniversary at a relative's place in Kolkata. But I had the

telephone number. Nearby the station, a much more urban show was apparent. Two tailors with glass shield in front of their shops, a suited male illustrated on the signboard, some shops with locally made electronic goods, small stores with mini-pack strips of *paan masala*, shampoo, toothpaste, lotion. And a pay telephone shop with a 'private' booth just in front of me. I went inside and made a call. A female voice, probably somebody from the tenant family, answered: "Oh, from Bangladesh? You don't need to get accompanied. It's so easy to get here, just ask a van puller to bring you to Shmashan Ghat (cremation ground) road, okay? Near the place is your dada's shop. We will be there on the road." She was very pleasant. I learnt later she was not a migrant from Bangladesh.

"So, bhai, you have a beard now?" Dada (Radha) said on seeing me, smiling in a teasing manner. He did not have the tulsi mala that I had seen him wearing in 1981. My family from my father's side belongs to the Vaishnav

sect of south Bengal. Almost every married woman had a tulsi mala and the males in their 50s also would wear them. Radha had been the exception, since he had started this custom when he was in his 20s. A mala signified a lot of social-ritual acts. I asked him why he was not wearing the mala. His gave a short reply "Oh, you remember? I don't wear it these days." Then said "Give me khobor of Desh". At that time, and subsequently, I got the sense that I was seen as a person from Dakurtala, supposedly 'my' village, and not from Dhaka. Or it may be that I really did not know what they meant by 'desh'. Maybe it was something beyond a physical space, beyond the people they had known earlier, and even beyond a newly constituted nation-state. When they talked, when they were enquired about 'desh', I saw shadows in their eyes. Maybe 'desh' is some fragment of their memories, their previous selves.

They already had had their lunch. So Boudi (sister-in-law) arranged one for me—an omelet added to the

begun (eggplant) and potato fries, lentil soup, and bhetki fish with daal. "Does this mean we're bongsho?", she asked me affectionately. "Shouldn't you visit us more frequently? We left our desh, and yet we are seeing each other for the first time." I thought that it would have been the same even if they were in Bangladesh; but didn't say anything. Their two little girls were sleeping then. Later, when we were sitting on the floor and talking, they woke up and discovered one more uncle they had not seen before.

I expressed my priority to dada—that I would like to visit my uncle (his too) at least, Radha's youngest brother Madhusudan , and that I would go back to Kolkata as early as possible the next day. At evening Radha got his bicycle while Boudi looked after the shop attached to their house. Usually she did the job with her sewing machine behind the door, keeping an alert eye on the shop and shifted from sewing to selling whenever a customer came in. I soon realized that I should have asked for another

cycle. I was in the carrier behind Radha. And when we hit the muddy road my hip was almost paralyzed with pain. However Radha was ever enthusiastic. "Look at that shop..., our son-in-law... don't you remember? That's the road to... all came from Pirojpur, Bagerhat. Here you can find a lot of them, even from our village. All are our people..." Once or twice I tried to convince him that I wouldn't know them all, but he paid no attention. "We may have faced a very hard life, bhai, left our desh, but you will find more of our kins here. If I tell people that my brother has arrived from Bangladesh, do you think that they'll let you leave within a week? No way!"

We reached my uncle's house. It was very small space. A marshy land turned into an inhabitable place. Some people, all from Bangladesh, were also there. Except the houses and the path, everywhere else was clogged with rain-water. Kingfishers were diving into ponds. We entered the house. It was a bamboo house with asbestos covering the roof and a muddy floor. One of my sister-

in-laws (boudi) was there. Yet another first meeting! My uncle was not at home. He had gone to the railway platform. We met him on our way to see Madhusudan. We had to travel for another 2 kilometers by bicycle. The land, owned by the Govt. railways, had been distributed to some families at a quite cheap price and Madhu had bought 2 decimals. His house was almost on the train track. The house was locked; so we figured that nobody was at home. We started walking on the line, which was not easy for Radha with a bicycle. I was feeling nervous as we moved closer to the station. My uncle, along with others, shared a tin-shaded open space nearby the platform. They bought rice from the bazaar next to Canning, or from the warehouse, and sold them to regular customers in small quantities. Radha had to introduce me to my uncle. He first gave me a blank look, then burst out laughing; though he had tears in his eyes, yet he said, "Your father was an irresponsible one. And now you seem to have perfectly inherited his qualities as

well." I understood that these words were not meant to be taken literally. He was very much taken aback on seeing me and these were more of a sentimental outcome of his expressions. And I totally understood the emotional setback. "You are living in our desh ever since, whereas, some of us had to leave; don't you feel the need to keep in touch once in a while?"

Then he ordered three cups of tea and loudly informed his neighboring shopkeepers 'bhaaaatijaa!' The tulsi mala on his neck tightened when he spoke loudly. He lit up his biri and took along puff and then asked me: "Are you staying with Radha? Well, he has a brick house." Radha replied in hurry. "Did he know where your place was?" Uncle was silent for a moment, then asked "When will you have dinner at my house?" This time I replied hurriedly, "Not this time uncle, but I will certainly visit you again, and stay at your house, possibly in December." Then a long pause. I was staring at his face while Radha kept his glance downwards. Soon we had to depart

because Radha had to shop for a fancy dinner. And we had to go see Madhu, who worked in a tailor shop. "You will visit me in December!" my uncle remarked calm and long sigh, and said, "so you are sure that I will not die till then." I kept silent.

The Shmashan Ghat area was very dark even with electric lights in some of the houses. A space by the little river where the corpses were burnt. I thought of going there, but it was a bit too late into evening. The tenant lady arranged for a mat on the road in front and for neighbors, some of whom had been Indian born and they came to talk about Bangladesh. A nice starry night. One of the neighbors remarked—

"You are not a supporter of BJP. But don't you think their presence is a cause of security for Hindus in Bangladesh?"

"No."

I replied.

We sat there until Boudi called us for dinner. Radha had bought Katla fish, and sweets in honor of me. He had also asked me whether I wanted to have chicken or mutton. But I said no because usually meat was not appreciated or preferred in that house. And I was quite happy at the cordial reception that I was getting. Boudi told dada that he should have bought at least a pot of curd. Later I was lying awake thinking about the whole day, as if it was a cinematographic representation of my feelings, and finally my uncle's words resounded again and again in my mind. I woke up very early next morning when Madhu's wife came to see me. Though Madhu is not much older than me yet 'boudi' was the right term for her. She had been out when we had visited their house last evening. She knew that I would take the morning train and had walked almost three kilometers after sunrise to meet me.

After I had my breakfast and a cup of tea, I asked her to stay so that I might go with her to the station, which was the same path as her way back. The two little girls were sad

and me as well. Everyone else had a morose look on their face, including the tenant family.

"Will you be able to walk that long?" Boudi asked me as we got on the road. "The station is almost a kilometer from here."

"Yes" I replied. "Even if it was three kilometers. Perhaps it all depends on what you are walking for."

(13 September 2003)


EVERY
EXISTANCE
EXISTS
Eternal
2020
kei

Riding a Tata Sumo: On Being squeezed Out of Bangladesh

(This trip took place just before the Indian parliamentary elections in 2004)

We three were sitting side by side in the Tata Sumo going from Petrapole to Kolkata. I had the window seat. The man sitting in the middle beside me was a Bangladeshi Hindu (Chanchal Saha) both of whose children went to school in Kolkata. It was also obvious, when we got to talking, that he spent a huge amount of time in that city. And the man on the other side of him was a Bangladeshi Muslim (Jahangir Ahmed), from Gopalganj, who owned

a buying-house in Dhaka. He was going to support his friend who had taken his father to Kolkata for medical treatment. Jahangir told us that his in-laws were Indian, and that he was planning to pay his first-ever visit to their home in Burdwan. Chanchal Saha would listen to both of us, and was cool enough to carry on conversations with both sides. Since we were sitting right behind the driver, he kept squinting at us through the rear view mirror. I couldn't be sure whether he was interested and eager to participate in our conversation or not. But I guessed that he was a Bengali-speaking Indian, perhaps a contract driver based in Petrapole, and probably a Hindu too.

However, Tata Sumo is a popular brand among Indian vehicles. No doubt it had been named so as to sound big and strong, like a Japanese wrestler. But when the passengers were told by our travel agent at Petrapole to ride in one, none of us had been happy. Usually, the Dhaka-to-Kolkata route has a number of travel agents doing business in a haphazard way. When

they issue tickets imprinted 'Dhaka-Kolkata,' one can barely imagine the tough time that awaited at the border. However, the process goes something like this—a group of travelers from Bangladesh need to reach Benapole first. After that one must go through a phase of utter confusion not knowing how the next leg of the trip i.e. from Petrapole to Kolkata will be like. The very common vehicle is Tata Sumo four wheelers. Most of the times it is a contract based transportation system. The Tata Sumos wait for groups of travelers, and as soon as 7 to 8 travelers clear their immigration procedure, the travel and transportation companies get hold of them and board them into one of those vehicles to its fullest capacity. Neither the travel companies, nor the state authorities, bother to supervise how travelers actually are being transported. So there we were, absolutely uncertain, standing with blank looks, when we were herded towards the Tata jeep.

"So *dada!* Do you have Sumos in Dhaka?" our driver asked, his eyes looking at me in the rearview mirror.

I looked at Chanchal beside me as I was not the right person to have a discussion on cars. Then Jahangir looked at us as if seeking permission to start on this topic. But the subject had already awaited a response. Someone said from behind, "Come on, what are you even saying? Bangladeshi people do not even bother with Indian cars. They have plenty of Japanese ones."

"Really? Then they must have a lot of money."

Though our driver sounded unhappy with this, yet his face seemed to express his familiarity with the fact. Maybe Sumo-topic was an easy subject for him to start a discussion with his India-bound passengers. It seemed unbelievable to me that people from this region, especially the Bengali-speaking ones, had to be provoked into a discussion. But maybe our driver wanted his passengers to have a lively time.

Two girls, in their early teens, were settled in a single seat beside the driver. Till now they had shown no interest in the seniors' conversations, but the comment

on vehicles in Bangladesh by their father made them sit up straight in their seats. He now began to express a real annoyance about the extravagance of Bangladeshis, which he had seen on his two-week visit to Bangladesh.

This family was Muslim, from Barasat, a town located in the surroundings of Kolkata. I knew very little about Muslims in West Bengal. What I did know was mostly through a general knowledge of Partition and pre-Partition, and migration of a large number of population from both the communities; the majority of whom consisted of the ones that were upwardly mobile with a keen interest in modern education and trade. Yet it surprised me to see an average trader Muslim family from West Bengal with very close kinship in Dhaka, (Bikrampur actually) who had made a real long trip of two weeks just for a wedding.

Earlier, in the waiting room, at immigration, this family was the only one that looked happy. A wearisome journey along with a lengthy and tortuous immigration

process had made everyone very tired. It was much stressful for the senior passengers. For them, waiting for a vehicle that could get them a bit closer to the destination was indeed a painful experience to bear. The returning passengers from India to Bangladesh, were also there, giving us travelling tips for India. There were the money-changers, each one telling us how his service was much better than the other. Even with so much happening in one small room, some passengers had set themselves in their chairs and fell asleep. An arrow was painted on the walls, pointing towards the washroom. Nevertheless, everyone could easily find out where the washroom was as the urinal smell hovered in the wind all around the room. It was like no breath of yours was allowed to go inside your nostrils without the foul smell. However, none of these seemed to bother the Barasat-family. They were full of joy, chattering with the nearby passengers about the wedding, elaborating on how gorgeous the ceremony had been; that Bangladeshi Muslims still cared

about family pride and relatives and other such things. The two teenage girls, probably coming back in order to join their school, had been quite talkative. Then I had wanted to travel the rest of the way with them because I was curious about a wedding which brought together relatives from the two nations, Muslims from either side of the Bengal divide.

But Govinda, our driver, made things difficult by starting on the topic of cars in Bangladesh. My interest got swayed far away with this particular topic of cars. I had no hope of re-establishing a link to the wedding. So Sumo was the sole concentration of the conversation! The two girls were eagerly following the points being made by their father. I guessed that probably they had been impressed by the multiple types of cars that appeared in the wedding which they had just attended. But Govinda took the discussion to another direction by providing bitter observations about Bangladeshi people: "Then they must have money, eh?" He seemed irritated by the

fact that few families still having their ancestral ties in present-day Bangladesh. Which had a visible impact on my two Bangladeshi seatmates. Jahangir Ahmed looked at Chanchal Saha, and Chanchal looked at him. Then both of them looked at me hoping for a favorable say on this. But disappointingly I refused this invitation to defend Bangladesh against this charge. Jahangir countered: "They say that Bangladesh is a beggars' country. They should go there and see for themselves what our people can show. What do you think, *dada*?" He said, turning to both Chanchal and then me. Both of us were, technically, 'dada'. After a short moment of hesitation Chanchal decided to join Jahangir.

"Sure! Huh! All that other talk is hot air..."

Jahangir seemed to be relieved to have this Bangladeshi Hindu support on Indian land. But the head of that Barasati family wouldn't give up so easily: "What a useless lifestyle! Everybody there is wasting money."

And so it went on for some time.

Later, everybody calmed down eventually. A thick silence followed immediately after. The groaning engine seemed louder than ever. And when anybody tried to talk, as if the words had dissolved into the sound. I dozed off. Then woke up to find that the Sumo had come to a halt. I saw that we were behind a long queue of other vehicles, surrounded by a vast countryside. It was a long journey and we all were hungry by that time. The prioritized question was, "When do we stop at a *dukaan*?" We had thought that surely there would be a stoppage for some food. Maybe a break at Barasat. But getting stuck in the traffic jam had successfully reduced the chance for that. We were literally starving. Passengers from other vehicles got down from the cars and were walking around. Govinda informed of a very tiny shop at the end of the slope beside the highway. People almost rushed down to buy some food and water there. Jahangir from our car also ran down with them but he could only manage a small packet of *muri* which he shared with us.

After we had settled back in our seats, we were told what had actually happened. The president of India Mr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam was visiting Barasat school for a meeting and a speech. Hence for security purposes all the roads were blocked for some time. This incident evoked another thread of discussion. Since Barasat was rather remote place in West Bengal with a lot of Muslims. The president's appearance to such a place was indeed a hot topic for discussion. Govinda found the president a 'bojjat' (scoundrel) without any fault in BJP's act: "He is just spoiling all credibility of the government. He is a clown, you know? A reputed scientist, eh? Then let him go back to his laboratory." Chanchal Saha was furious about the BJP's strategic move of selecting one from 'minority' community for the presidential post: "An unnecessary move. Surely India could have found a more competent candidate."

Jahangir was trying hard to follow his position but waited to hear what the head-of-the-Barasati-family

would say: "Don't you understand? Just to cash in on the Muslim votes. They make fun of the people, but everybody knows. *Dada* was absolutely right." This view shocked him. At the beginning he was supportive of Abdul Kalam being the president: "India has the guts to do it. A Zail Singh, then …" Now he looked to Chanchal Saha for support. But the latter didn't respond. So he turned towards me—

"Ki Bhai? What do you think?"

"Huh? Me? Nothing really."

We were still stuck in the traffic jam. Soon the light faded away and night befell on us. It was mid-February and the day-light was rushing to its end. Far from our destinations, we settled in for a long wait. Everybody was tired and hungry. Another silence. Girls were sleeping. No movements around. And then softly somebody proposed an alternative route, very narrow and risky. There was a small road on the right by which we could reach a muddy by-pass, where cars didn't dare to venture

much. I thought Govinda wouldn't be interested in such a risky effort, especially with a brand-new Sumo. But surprisingly enough, he seemed quite delighted. Everybody then debated on the matter. The Barasati head-of-the-family led the way: "I don't have to go a long way, just to Barasat. And I am going home anyway, so no urgency." Chanchal added: "My sister-in-law's home is in mid-town Kolkata. So no problem with a delay." Jahangir: "I am going to be in a hotel near Shyamoli (our travel agent office) in Kolkata. So there's not much hurry." But everybody was hungry. And when I asked Govinda, he said: "You know, *dada*, my wife had a baby just last night. She is in the hospital and my mother is ill. I have to get back from Kolkata tonight."

That did it. Everybody wanted Govinda to return to his wife and little baby. So he started the Sumo and swung into the risky, narrow, muddy road towards the Barasat bypass. A sense of relief, and tension were at function simultaneously. Jahangir looked at me holding a water bottle in his hand–

"Don't you have any urgency?"

"Not really." I replied.

"I see."

"It is fine as long as I get there by midnight."

"So where are you going?"

"Oh, Kolkata, of course."

"To relatives, or for work?"

"Actually, I am visiting my parents."

"They live in India?"

"Yes, at present. Originally they are from Bangladesh."

"So you visit them frequently?"

"This is my first visit after they left." Hindus had slowly been squeezed out of Bangladesh, for different reasons. Some had to sell the old *bheeta bari* and leave for India in some midnight. Some spend years in confusion if to go to India and reunite with the relatives who had migrated during the war. But this is not something anyone feels comfortable about for a friendly discussion.

"Oh!"

Darkness had completely swallowed the inside of the vehicle. It was even darker outside on the road, muddy, with trees on both sides. The only source of light was the car headlights. We moved forward in silence and into the black night.

(30 October 2004)

PEACE
2020
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Durga Puja in Kishoreganj

A pleasant noon, the sun was out after two gloomy days. The inter-district bus terminal was on the outskirts of Mymensingh, a town of great historical significance. Rickshaw-pullers surrounded me, very eager to take us to the destination. "How much for Amlapara?" I asked. "Twelve taka," he said. Prosenjit frowned at the rickshaw driver. He was very much interested to take charge after we got down from the bus. He was thirteen years old by age but acted like someone older. And besides, wasn't Mymensingh his town?

"It costs ten takas maximum" he said.

But the rickshaw-puller had a surprise for me.

"Shouldn't you give something extra because of puja?" he said.

At this point I felt compelled to join the exchange.

"So is there a Hindu population here, for whom you can claim the puja bonus?"

"What are you saying?" Asked the rickshaw-puller.

"That we don't have Hindus in Mymensingh! The place that you are going, only Hindus live there. You must be one too!"

I realized that he had already figured by seeing me that I was not a native of Mymensingh. Perhaps this was a reason enough to get on his rickshaw. Prosenjit tried to hide his disappointment.

While riding in the rickshaw, I thought that I should stick to my plan of leaving for Kishoreganj before noon so that I could lunch at the place I was going. But I had doubts whether Prosenjit's mother would allow me to leave since it was my first-ever visit to their house, especially during

Durga Puja. The rickshaw-puller, Ali, attempted to give me (an outsider) an overview of the puja scenario here in Mymensingh. At the end of every lecture, he would emphasize it as if underlining by saying: "Bujhlen to?" (You understand?) Prosenjit was happy at this, that his town, and the event of Durga Puja, was being narrated. I had been thinking about asking him whether he too was a singer like his father, Sunil Karmakar, a legendary "baul" singer from this region. But he seemed to be enjoying the rickshaw ride, silently and smiling with his face down on his chest. And it appeared to me that I might have asked the question at a wrong time. So I concentrated on Ali. At the time the rickshaw was passing by Charpara, and I could see the top of the tin-roofed house Ramzan had once taken us to. I thought of stopping there, but then remembered that I really should stick to my schedule. Maybe tomorrow I would have time to go see him! In the meantime I had missed Ali's comments on the previous years' incidents on Durga Puja.

A stormy night. A friend and I had been on a bus to Mymensingh. We had thought very foolishly that we would reach there by 11 p.m. at night, and still could make it to Muktagacha somehow. When our bus reached Mymensingh, it was almost 1 a.m. It was raining heavily and our only option had been to stay in a hotel. Ramzan, the conductor on our bus, made us change our plans. He took us to a 24-hours-open restaurant in front of the medical college, fed us well, and then took us to his home. A midnight visit to his parents, in a tin-roofed house, lighted with a kerosene lamp. We had entered to see the smiling faces of his mother and grandmother. We met his father the next morning. That area had been Sahebpara in Charpara! Later, I could only talk to Ramzan over the telephone. He came to Dhaka after marriage. He had left home after facing a bit of crisis with his family. He had called me, probably in hope for a favorable care from me that he had once bestowed on us previously. But I had avoided it. Yet, over the phone he remained his polite self

and invited me to visit him to the hotel in Gulistan where he had been staying with his wife. I had promised to do that, but somehow I could never make it. It was in 2001. And Ramzan never called me again.

However, we could hear puja prayers carried over by loudspeakers at the bend where the road turned towards Amlapara. At first it was only a single priest, but then I heard two, three, four, and five! It was the third day of prayer, the Mahashtami. By the time we came to a stop at Prosenjit's house, I was feeling extremely guilty about my behavior towards Ramzan. Which had made me inattentive to what Ali had been saying about Mymensingh. Prosenjit was also giving accompanying asides—about how many protimas (idols) could possibly be there, how many of them were in his familiar spots, etc. I was a little surprised when I learnt that there were some 40 spots for puja in Mymensingh. I asked him if Hindi film songs were played there or not. He was a bit surprised by the question and then said yes. He said that

once the puja proceedings were completed, those songs were played quite freely and loudly. I found their house full of visitors. His mother was very pleasant. I gave her a brief explanation why I couldn't stay for lunch; that I needed to reach Kishoreganj very soon since my friend was waiting for me there. When I left their house, Prosenjit's mother and others bade me goodbye, insisting that I should come over the next day on my way back.

A Friday in a sub-urban town! I expected a bit less of hustle and bustle, a little silence. Markets and shops in Mymensingh were closed and it was not yet a time for Jummah prayer. But as soon as my rickshaw got going through the place, I was totally flabbergasted to see such a huge crowd of people moving around the streets in the neighborhood. Women with a typical Hindu look, children with their new clothes, and the men strolling indifferently. Puja prayer time was over and Prosenjit had proved to be quite right about Hindi songs. Kalibari Road was jammed with people, with at least five puja spots

were there in a row. This was Mymensingh—a colonial imprint along with a feudal desire to preserve heritage and culture. Identities were being contested—Congress Jubilee Road met with Ismail Road undoubtedly. Moreover it was a Friday, the day for Jummah namaz for all the Muslims; and very unlikely, with so many Hindus on the road, I had started to feel quite uncomfortable as I had presumed of a dulled Durga Puja celebrations here. Here again, the rickshaw-puller seemed to sense my thoughts. Without being asked he suggested that the Commonwealth parliamentary summit in Dhaka was the reason behind the successful puja. "A big meeting in Dhaka, men have come from outside. So this time puja is peaceful. Do you get my point?" he asked me. "Uhh...Humm!" however, was all I said in reply. I had understood the point. There were decorated gates on the streets. I stopped thinking about serious matters and just concentrated on the gates. What a wonderful piece of work! Magnificently decorative, huge in size and so colorful!

It reminded me of the Shambhuganj Bridge. It had been a magnificent event that occurred in the early 90s when it was finally completed. Mymensingh shared an easy connectivity with the surrounding districts by road. The modern outlook, the lights, wide footpaths, and lamp posts etc. all had been so wondrous. Affluent people used to take their evening strolls on it.

Waiting for the bus to Kishoreganj, I lit a cigarette while pondering how I would fit my long legs in the small seats of the miniature bus. Bus size had remained the same throughout all these years. As I had rightly assumed and feared about my legs, it didn't fit. The bus conductor was very kind and offered me several alternative seats, but none helped. Then he helplessly asked me if I wanted to sit just behind the driver. I did not. This made him upset. So somewhere after Ishwar Ganj, he bought two cigarettes, one for the driver and one for me. He was a restless man in his early twenties. Giving me the cigarette he asked me why I was going to

Kishoreganj, and to whom. He became friendly after I had answered his question. "Yes, good. Kishoreganj is a genuine place for Durga Puja. Lots of your kin are out there. I love Durga Puja. You don't believe me? I grew up among Hindus. I know them better than you do. But…" he continued while smoking the second half of the cigarette, "what about puja in Dhaka? Aren't there more in number than Kishoreganj? And you came all the way from there to here to see puja. How did your parents allow you to do it?"

And he kept me busy with his prattling about this or that...

Susmita had given me directions to their home. She even had suggested that her husband Newton, my old friend, should pick me up at the bus-stop. I had said no. But after getting down from the bus, I realized that I had a very poor idea on how to proceed from this point onwards. I saw some young men in white pajamas and dhoti beside a pond and asked them "Where is the Chakraborty house?"

"Which Chakraborty?"

"Oh, I think Chakraborty is..."

"Do you think that there is only one Chakraborty here?" one of them asked me as I was visibly hesitating.

Well...Susmita's father's name slipped out of my memory. So I said, "The Chakraborty whose daughter and son stay at Rajshahi University."

"Oh," he said, and gave directions to the rickshaw-puller and not to me.

Newton was out. He had gone to Mymensingh on some business. I was given luchi and mishti, which made me think that lunch would probably be orthodox vegetarian kind. I talked to Mashima, Susmita's mother. "In Barisal, the well-to-do families celebrate this Ashtami Day by eating fish and other veg, non-veg dishes." It is a ritualistic mannerism that the Hindus follow during Puja days and it varies from one region to another. Meherpur, where I stayed later, had nothing in particular. But here in Kishoreganj, they celebrate it with vegetarian food.

Then she said pointing towards me, "But you will get fish at dinner."

There was an old Zamindar house (land owner) near their house. On the way there, Susmita and I passed a cinema hall crowded with Friday movie enthusiasts. The house was being maintained by somebody who had inherited it. It had a large compound, a building and a mandir.

"Don't they have legal complications with this property?" I asked Susmita.

"No. I think one of the owners is already a lawyer" Susmita said firmly.

The mandir had a small Durga idol inside, but not centrally placed. So I asked once again what mandir was it.

"I suppose Radha-Krishna," Susmita replied.

We then found the murtis (idols) of Radha and Krishna. Also noticed another interesting idol which had a fair complexion but didn't look exactly like Krishna, yet

resembled His *Tribhanga* form. It was quite confusing. The sculptures themselves were not particularly good. But the style of the third idol still puzzled me. I was quite sure that it resembled Balaram, Krishna's brother, by chance and his boyhood mate. But then why should Balaram be in tribhongo style? However, I asked myself, "who am I to question an artist's imagination!"

Later than night, mashima told me that it was indeed a mandir of Balaram.

When we visited the puja spots in the evening, it was as crowded as Mymensingh. It started drizzling all of a sudden. Little Lalon, Susmita and Newton's child, was excited. The loudspeakers were at its fullest volume; the pandals were colorful, decorated with various kinds of lights and finely ornamented; *dhak* (sound instrument) and *kashor* (another sound instrument, usually accompanied with dhak) resounded everywhere—"dhyaang ta teng! dhyaang ta teng!" Such a unique sound and energetic vibes all around! As if it hits directly at heart

somewhere. People were walking about and chatting with each other merrily. The children's excitement was mixed with fear of possible rain. After visiting three or four spots, Mashima decided to leave for home with Lalon. We, the remaining four, Susmita, two of her younger friends and I, continued to walk around. At all puja spots the same scenario was to be found; though I could smell the different fragrances coming out of the dhunuchis (a type of earthen incensory) at different places. Soon I got tired of the *dhak* and *kashor* and wanted to get away. All the energy, excitement and enthusiasm turned into jostling crowd and noise and felt the need to return to the comfort of bed and calmness of home. So when someone uttered, "how about a rickshaw ride on the highway" I was more than happy.

The road was very steep, clad with profound darkness. After five minutes there were no more electric lights. I assumed from roadside shadowy shapes that there were a great variety of trees around us, the ones that survived

the developmental planning. It was late at night and the season was autumn which refers to *Karthik* month in Bengali (a month of Bengali calendar, it appears around the English months of late October and early November). The nights and early mornings are very interesting during this time of the year. From evening onwards, dewdrops and mild fog offers very soothing and cheerful experience. Be it daytime or night, nature seems to be most lustrous in its own mystic beauty. The general experience is almost next to hallucination. We went on for a long time, then sat down for some tea in a tea stall with kerosene lit lamps. We were the two rickshaw-pullers and the four of us. The shopkeeper was angry at some officer of the *Palli Bidyut* (village electricity) board. He was paying for an electric line to the shop, and all they got was disappointments. Then boarded the rickshaws again started to move forward. The dewdrops made me nostalgic. I had wondered about the fertilized lands around us. The sultry land that

awaits watering; as if it is yearning for the dewdrops, for moisture, for *Hemanta* (Dewy season), followed by the Winter. I heard a distant call from an imagined forest, the passionate drumbeats—"Dhyaang ta teng! Dhyaang ta teng! Dhyaang ta teng!" As if I was in my reverie, into past, running forth and running blind; my loose trouser is almost slipping off of my waist. Running further and running wild! Towards the direction of the sounds, towards Barguna, the place where I was born. Where the legs of the drummers were dancing with the delicate rhythm. It was so spectacularly spontaneous. Still running, on legs that were not used to such an effort. Moving towards the small town of Barguna, from the rickshaw on a highway in Kishoreganj. So many years lie silently in between.

Sitting beside me, Susmita asked, "What are you thinking of?"

"Nothing. Just the road seems quite nice."

(22 November 2003)


2020
kei

Nilphamari
Field Trip

"So, what would you like to have, *darbesh baba*?" the keeper of the old teashop asked. He was leaning forward almost into my bearded face. He wore a white *tahban* (lungi) and a kurta-like shirt, with a pale rosy thread from some *mazar* around his neck; and his breath had a subtle smell of *siddhi* (marijuana). I felt a bit awkward but tried not to make it visible.

"Tea! Just a cup of tea will be fine."

But Ahasan felt compelled to protest on my behalf.

"Look here, he is our teacher," he said. But the shopkeeper paid no heed to his words and, while

ambling over to his cash box, ordered the waiter, a little boy, to serve us two cups of tea. Then murmured, more to himself than us, "But you should eat something at my shop."

Thick bricks were jutted out from the plaster of the wall beside me, an old calendar with a painting of *Krishna* in *Gokul* hung above, and beside it, a framed photo of *Baba Loknath* was there. We sat on a low and smoothened bench while an uneven high bench in front of us served as our table. The 60-watt electric lamp casted a feeble light. The swirling smoke of oven and of cigarettes, spider-web and the rest of the wall pasted with torned papers and shrinked curtains, all of which appeared to have created the ambience of theatre stage set up; as if it was an enigmatic work by some theatre lightning designer.

It was foggy outside on a darkening twilight hour in early November. The first week of *Ramadan*. As we waited for the tea, I had felt that Ahasan shouldn't have spoken

out. A *darbesh* (saint)! I stared for some time in front of me. I observed the activities silently—the little was boy making the tea and the spoon chinking loudly against the teacups, and the shopkeeper gazing with his dreamy eyes as if floating in sea of *siddhi;* and I contemplated… "why not? Why not assume the title of 'Darbesh Baba'?" Questions began to run through my head–What quality differentiates a *darbesh* from us? But who knew the answer to that? And the darbeshes themselves were not saying anything about themselves. It's not just my beard, I thought, it's the kind of beard that I had. Its waywardness, a complete lack of any sort of urban styling, which had caused the shopkeeper to address me with the honorific. For a moment I thought of asking him if he had ever been associated or involved with any of the local saints, or any kind of form of a certain belief system. But I didn't. After all, I too belonged to a developmental school. And by not asking about local *darbeshes* I hoped in return to be spared questions about whether I worked for any NGO there or not.

I didn't know much about the legendary saints of north Bengal except for Shah Makhdum. But here in Nilphamari, up towards the north beside Rangpur, it was no great wonder that there were a lot of them, with a huge number of followers of each sect. In a way, saints are one significant core of the idea of Bangladesh. As soon as you get out of Dhaka, you are within a mosaic of multiple spiritual and mystical beliefs and thoughts. I didn't know much beyond that. And was I correct even in assuming that? How much did I really know about this aspect of Bangladesh? The fact that I did not know sufficient about this, the lack of knowledge annoyed me to extreme; sometimes it felt as if I was losing my academic awareness, my training in anthropology.

The teacups were small and the tea was finished all too soon, which meant that I couldn't sit there for any longer and sip tea and think on the subject. What should I do, ask for a second round of tea? Or, I thought facetiously, go ahead and take up the original offer of

siddhi? I looked at Ahasan sitting next to me, looking at me with a far-off gaze.

Luckily, the shopkeeper resolved the dilemma by offering me a *shandesh*. Though what I really wanted was a second cup of tea, I was happy with the exchange. And after some time I came out of the shop with the taste of sweetmeat on my tongue. In the murky light, spider webs of smoke were still being spun behind me, rendering a mysterious projection of the shop. I felt that the entire town was like that, vaguely mysterious, unidentifiable, as if it were any other *mofusshil* (suburban) town, as if it were Meherpur (the small town I had grown up in), and not Nilphamari. Two little words *darbesh baba* seemed to have caused a metamorphosis within me. And I felt it wouldn't be easy to communicate with the developmental team I had come to work with. I became a bit sad, I don't know why.

I had come to Nilphamari yesterday to engage with my eight-membered research team. Before dawn when it was still quite dark. The district office of the development

organization was located in a nice place. In fact, one had to think hard for a while whether it was in town or in a rural area; as it often happens with most NGO offices outside Dhaka. The guesthouse was inside the office building itself. The team was going to stay there for a month, while I was there only on a two-day visit, which seemed the current norm for NGO team leaders engaged in social research. My team was excited about the project. This accounted for the fact that two of them, despite the very early hour, despite the fact that they themselves had barely two hours of sleep after *sehri* (the very first meal of the day before sunrise during fasting period in Muslim community), immediately sat down with me and launched into a full-scale *adda*. It didn't occur to them to show me to my room, which co-incidentally was the VIP room, and also the only vacant room. The regular office people, whom I later met at breakfast, seemed bemused by this informal rather very personal approach of leadership. A bemusement which I had felt

too, but for an entirely different reason. It was the month of Ramadan and some of my colleagues were fasting. Though it was not expected of me, to fast being a Hindu, yet it seemed impolite to eat. But I was starving inside, and unfortunately one glance at the table. It was almost full with *paratha, bhaji*, sweets and what not! All cooked by a full-time employee. And this surely was enough to make me tuck in heartily. Unable to conceal my happy face by any means.

Finally, I said that I wouldn't feel comfortable taking the VIP room. Then it went to our only female colleague since it had an attached bathroom. And I got a shared room. While the rest of the team were getting ready to go on the field trip, I sat by the window. The sun was barely visible through the fog, with a mellow yellow light on the pale trees. There was *shimul* (silk cotton), some *neem,* and quite a few others that I did not recognize. The sight evoked faint memories in me, of something dusky and gray, or something which perhaps was unreal, rather

only an imagined memory. I tried to fix this memory into a nice frame, this scene was so close to me, just before my eyes. Which had started to gain a steaming vigor gradually.

"You must take a bath, Sir, and then some rest." Someone suggested seeing me sitting quietly at the window. I felt offended that my workmates thought that a night journey would make me feel tired. I said nothing.

"You definitely are going with us, aren't you?"

I couldn't tell them that yes I didn't want to go out. Not because I was tired, but because I wanted to sit by the window for a longer time. Ahasan looked at me worriedly, "So how are you feeling? Are you all right?"

"Yes. Why shouldn't I be? I am not a white man unaccustomed to the land."

"But you've been living in Dhaka for so long!"

"I travel outside Dhaka all the time. Villages are not fictional to me. And this is not really a village. This is a district town!"

"But Nilphamari is very different from Dhaka."

"That's a different point altogether. But, unlike you, I am from a *mofusshil* town."

"Yes, that's true. But a trip with a development mission, an NGO man, doesn't that feel very different? Doesn't it have a specific meaning?"

I looked at him. Ahasan was sharp as ever. He had figured my ambivalence about this whole venture.

"Yes. It does. It's as if I have to justify to myself every move I make. It is tiring."

"So do you think you'll be able to hold on?"

"Maybe I should split into two personalities," I laughed in reply. "One would go to work. And the other would be free to enjoy the trip."

Later I went to the village, to perform the obligatory ceremony sacred to all development programs—the field trip. With three others on a rickshaw-van. On the way back, Lily took photographs of the group with her digital camera. There we were, picture perfect, sitting in a rickshaw van with rural Bangladesh as a backdrop!

She was going to take these images back with her to Italy. Or was it UK? She showed us the images on the square-inch silver screen. There I was, smoking, swinging my feet by the side of the van, set against a huge, green, fertilized background. For a moment I felt like being Krishna myself; as if I have come here to bring salvation to the inhabitants of Mathura. What else could serve as a better evidence of my alternative existence than this? A 'salvatore' from a mere village dweller! Though I was making fun of myself, yet I was not feeling good about me at all.

So I asked the rickshaw-puller, later at the evening, when I was moving around the town. "So who is your hero here?"

"Here?"

"Yes, let's suppose Nilphamari. Or north Bengal."

"And you mean a hero?" he asked again while still pedalling.

"Yes, an *ustad*. A guru. Who you feel you are loyal to, or from whom you taking guidance."

"Why should I need guidance?"

"Yes, that's true." I nodded in agreement. He had been hired on an hourly contract. He informed me that though he was originally from Dinajpur, the adjacent district, in reality his village was closer to Nilphamari town than Dinajpur town. He was living here with his only son. His wife and daughter were still in his village home. "Why?" I asked. He explained that he couldn't support the whole family in the town. But he needed to work here in order to look after his son, who was proving to be a good student. So he and his wife had decided on this particular arrangement.

"And where is your son?"

He seemed shy about replying to my question, but then said. "He is at home now, studying. I have rented a room. Last month I somehow managed to buy him an electric lamp."

"So he is studying here?"

"Yes. You know, he is in class seven at the district

school. Next year he will take the examination for scholarship. With your blessing of course, *bhai*."

I didn't say anything. I knew what his next question was going to be. And finally, after some more pedaling, he asked it. "Are you working in an NGO?"

"Yes."

"You are. You get a good salary, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Do you think my son someday will get a job in your organization?"

I managed to escape answering to him by pointing to a roadside sweetmeat shop and asking him to stop there. I went inside. Once I got back, he hadn't ask me the question twice.

After we came out of the smoky teashop, Ahasan and I started walking towards the guesthouse. My bus to Dhaka would leave in three hours. I told him about my conversation with the rickshaw-puller, about his hopes for his son being employed by an NGO. Ahasan didn't

reply, and in the dark I couldn't make out the expression on his face. I also mentioned that though I had searched high and low earlier that day for a flute (as a souvenir), I hadn't been able to get one.

"Did you really think you'd find one here?" he asked me.

"Well, I don't know. I just hoped that I would get one here, but they don't have any in the bazaar. If there's a flute player around here, he must be getting it from some other place. Anyway, what use is a flute, it's not like food you can eat." I was deeply vexed with myself for not finding the flute.

Suddenly, out of the blue, Ahasan asked me—

"Why didn't you say something when the shopkeeper called you *darbesh baba*?"

"Why? What difference would it have made?"

"You are not a *darbesh*. Don't you think it was wrong?"

"But then I am not a liberator either, but here they look at me that way."

"But being a *darbesh* raises expectations in people. They want certain things from you."

"And what about our work here? Isn't it the same thing? It's a very thin line we are straddling here. For a moment I just wanted to be a *darbesh*. So what?" And both of us didn't say anything for a very, very long time.

The bus started a bit late. One reason was a youth leader, who was seen off by a cluster of fellow male colleagues, all of whom kept calling out his name. It was evident that he was a bigwig of one of the youth fronts of a national political party. Or maybe an ex-student leader, going to the capital city to pay a call on his bosses. The seat next to mine was empty; actually the only one that was empty. He came and sat down, his face still wreathed in false smile of a 'leader'. The bus started then. He finished his waving at the window, then turned to me.

"You look like a fine arts student. Aren't you?"

"No, I am not." I said, very softly, waiting for the inevitable next question. He paused now, eyes sparkling, thinking of how to pose it, then gave up and came out with it.

"Where's your *desh*?"

"I don't think it's important. But it is Kushtia." I replied, still softly. Meherpur would be too remote for this leader.

"Kushtia! Lalon's place. See, I was on the right track! So you must have a particular *darbesh* line, aren't you? You know, our party (and here he named the political party he belonged to is now taking you cultural folks seriously ... earlier we made a mistake in underestimating people like you. You too are a part of our national history. So, tell me ... ha, ha … aren't you from a similar line?"

Now it was my turn to smile widely. I put on a facsimile of the smile he had been delivering to his disciples who came to see him off. Whatever field of interest I had followed, it was next to impossible for this 'neta' (leader) to find out!

(20 March 2004)