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A 'Bangladeshi foreigner' reminisces

Every year between December and February, Bangladeshis look back and remember. Some of them still remember the struggle for independence from the British sixty plus years ago, others the Bengali Language Movement of 1952, and many, many more, the Liberation War of 1971.

I also remember some of those days, for, as a young man, I was working in Bihar, India, with a Gandhian village development project. As soon as the Pakistan crackdown of 25/26 March 1971 took place and refugees started flooding across the border into India, I was asked by my organisation, OXFAM, to be based in Kolkata and run a huge refugee relief programme from there.

I remember digging graves for cholera victims in a refugee camp in Jalpaiguri, North Bengal.

I remember hearing the harrowing accounts from some families who while fleeing their homes to come to India had lost some family members as a result of the cruelty of the Pakistan soldiers.

I remember asking OXFAM to airlift huge quantities-about one million doses- of anti-cholera vaccine and arranging mass vaccination at the border crossings with new intra-dermal jet sprays under high pressure via 'Panjet' and 'Pedojet' appliances. The fear was that Kolkata would be overtaken by a cholera epidemic.



I remember the pride with which the refugees kept their camps neat and clean despite the very heavy monsoon of that year which flooded many areas and forced OXFAM to use amphibious vehicles. I remember that to keep the spirits of the refugees high and full of hope for the future many refugee camps organised cultural activities, particularly singing.

I remember that most of the 36 staff I had at that time were refugees who had come across the border, some losing family members with heart attacks etc. on the way. Others were from

West Bengal with Bangladeshi family links.

I remember buying 100,000 sarees, 100,000 lungis and ganjis and 300,000 sets of children's clothing. It was a commercial nightmare but it was achieved!

I remember the visit of Edward Kennedy to the camps where OXFAM was working and what an impact his visit had.

I remember being worried about the cold winter of 1971/72 in some border areas and the campaign we had to supply blankets and clothing to the refugees.

Whether the refugees in the camps or the people I met inside independent Bangladesh, I have felt that I had shared a history with these "Children of the Fire". I saw in their eyes, and felt in their handshake, an excitement and hope for the future.

It has been a privilege to share the struggles and the successes of my many Bangladeshi friends. It is always important to remember and not forget but it is even more important to look forward to future greater achievements for Bangladesh and Bangladeshis.

Julian Francis

On e-mail

(Julian Francis works with Adarsha Gram Project-II, an important GoB poverty alleviation project that is co-funded by the European Union)

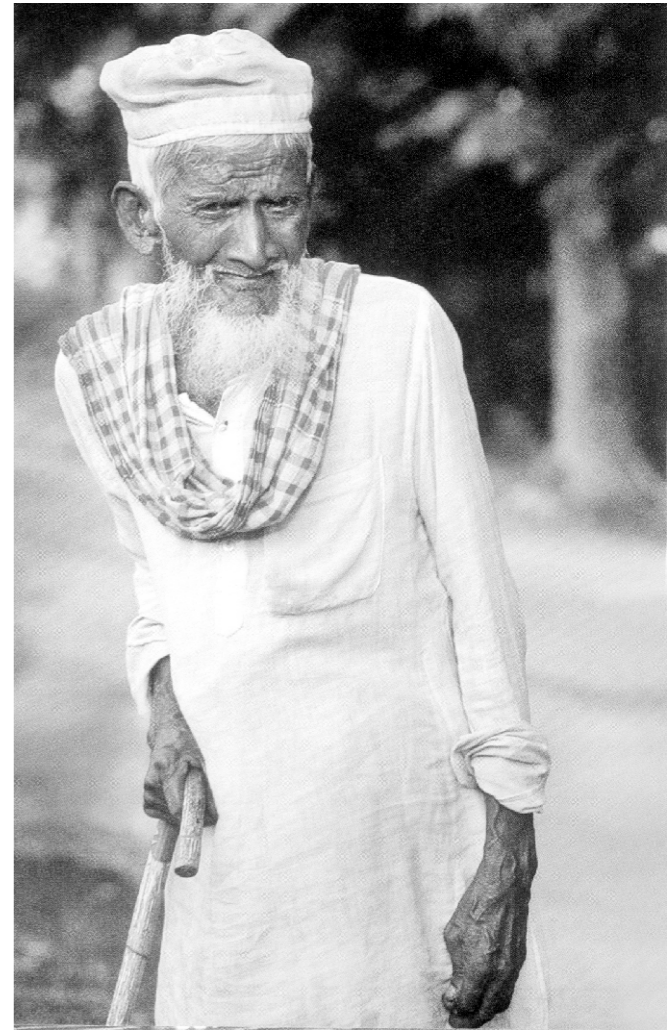


PHOTO: DR. NOAZISH AHMED

Microcredit

In the report "Nothing but age changes for the ultra-poor", Inam Ahmed points out, "Figures are there that support that microcredit has missed the ultra poor by and large. At least 30 percent of total population falls under the extreme poor category and microcredit could touch only 12 to 15 percent of them, even after much debate, embarrassment, and concern among the NGOs that the wretched have been left out of the credit bandwagon."

While micro credit works for poverty alleviation, its interest rate should be lowered and the amount of money provided should be increased with flexible conditions for the betterment of the borrowers.

Roney, On e-mail



Human rights violation

The United States is concerned about the Human rights situation in Bangladesh. In their report they referred to various sensitive issues like extra judicial killing, detention without legal support, compulsory retirement of the security forces, physical and mental torture of the detainees etc. The report also states that there were 396 extra judicial killings last year, among which 340 were in crossfire. The report also added that the attack on journalists is the sign of limitation of freedom of expression.

When the law minister was asked about the concern of the US about the human rights violations in Bangladesh, he said, "The truth of the base of preparing this report should be scrutinized." On the other hand, these incidents were certified as true by Dr. Shah Deen Malik. (BBC Bangla, March 9, 2006).

So what do we have to surmise?

Taslim Hasan Sabu
University of Dhaka

you articulated. These points would have raised the objectivities of my article at a higher level. Sitting next to me in the aircraft while flying to Washington D.C. on February 26, you skimmed at my first draft on my desire and may have hinted some of these points including that the Russians have no security interest but their own narrow economic interest. That was a very valid point too and I agreed. But, I could not include these points in my article because that would be tantamount to borrowing ideas unless somehow I give you credit for them. I must confess that there is no country in the world I would trade for my American freedom and living except where I was born no matter what the lures are. America is the best place to be, but I want her to be better and better. We may not meet ever again, but my best wishes to you, and thank you for your enlightened comments.

Alvin Blanco and Abdullah Dewan
On e-mail

Woes of retired officials

I refer to the report published in The Daily Star on February 21, 2006 entitled "ACC asks audit to look into retired officials' woes". The audit officials in general have adopted a nonchalant attitude about settling the pension cases in time. This particularly relates to the foreign ministry officials who find it an uphill task to get pension. Many retired ambassadors are waiting for pension for many years.

When I retired in 2002 I personally obtained "No Demand Certificate" from the missions I served during my diplomatic career and happily looked forward to my early pension. But I was told by the mission officials that they did not recognise those certificates by the missions! Subsequently, they gave me a long list of flimsy objections which should not have been given but more importantly they were not communicated to me before I returned to Bangladesh after

retirement.

The most pitiable thing is that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself is flouting the rules under the Memorandum on "Simplification of rules /procedures pertaining to pension of the civilian government officials" dated October 8, 2001. The paragraph 2.12 of the Memorandum on Provisional Pension clearly states that in the cases which cannot be settled in the absence of "No Demand Certificate" or essential papers, 80 per cent of the full pension must be given to the officials concerned on the basis of their applications.

The rule further makes it obligatory on the part of the concerned office to collect all the essential papers within six months and finalise the pension cases. Otherwise, after the expiry of six months the pensioner must be given full pension on the basis of his statement. The ministry, as was the case with many other retired ambassadors, did not respond to my application for 80 per cent pension.

The concerned audit officials and those working in the foreign Mministry have little understanding of the seriousness of the rules as stated above.

Getting pension is a matter of right for rendering service to the nation for long years. The officers should get pension the day after they retire. Many audit officials have vested interest in keeping the matter pending and they are hardly punished for incompetence or corruption.

Since no other options are available, the retired ambassadors may perhaps be compelled to go to the court to seek redress to their plight and get what is rightfully theirs.

Syed Noor Hossain
Uttara, Dhaka

Muslims and the West

Much has been written and heard of about the foolhardy publication of a series of cartoons of our Prophet Muhammad (pbu), first in the Danish Daily Jyllands-Posten on 30 September 2005. To my utter surprise and indignation, the Danish Prime Minister Anders Rasmussen,

who has been championing the freedom of speech, refused the ambassadors of 10 Muslim countries their freedom of (official) speech (against the cartoons) by refusing them a meeting with him in Oct. '05. Perhaps, it's not freedom of speech that matters; it's the freedom of speech that has a preference that matters.

However, the ambassadors did forward a protest to the Danish PM on 20 October 2005, but the PM or the govt kept their eyes closed to it. Then came the pan European freedom that prompted newspapers in Norway, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain to republish the cartoons defying the Muslim protests and loss of lives in February. And in an act of "overt provocation" as stated by President Jacques Chirac, the French magazine Charlie Hebdo published the Danish cartoons along with other caricatures on 8 February 2006.

Lately, in response to the opposition's demand of an independent investigation of his government's handling of the crisis over cartoons, the Danish Prime Minister has said, "Nai!"

Well, our forefathers and we have been denied freedom for centuries (especially by the British rule) and thus we may not be capable of recognising the glory of freedom (unlimited) But, how can we understand or judge the European freedom credentials while just a few days ago, the 67-year old famous British historian David Irving has been found guilty in Vienna of denying the Holocaust of European Jewry (in WWII) in a speech in Vienna way back in 1989 and has been sentenced to three years in prison despite his acknowledgement of error in the court saying that the Nazis did murder millions of Jews and that he had made a mistake when he said that there were no gas chambers at Auschwitz (Poland)?

My childish question is, if a dozen countries (in Europe and Israel) can have laws against Holocaust denial, why can't laws against publishing

cartoons or caricature of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) and other similar ones like disrespect to the Holy Quran cannot be enacted?

And the current firestorm on Capitol Hill in the US that may sink the deal (effective from March 2) of a United Arab Emirates company to manage six US seaports reminds me of the immoderate discrimination that is taking place against the Muslims in the unipolar world. One must be bewildering how a UAE company can go as far as making a deal of running six US seaports! The fact is the state-owned Dubai Ports World has purchased Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation which currently runs those ports. If the lawmakers from both Parties, teaming up against the deal, give us an eyewash referring to security reasons if ports are operated by foreign companies; may we use our vision to ask why P&O, a British-based company, for several years has run commercial operations at the ports in New York and New Jersey; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Baltimore, Maryland; Miami, Florida; and New Orleans, Louisiana?

Indeed many things are visible like the sun if our eyes are open.

Mohiuddin Ahmed
Banani, Dhaka

Away from home

The weather is turning in London. No more the grim greyness that greeted you every morning for the last four months. No, these days if the weather gods are kind, you might even be lucky enough to wake up to bright cheery sunshine lighting up the crevices of this helter-skelter city. Of course, if you were to close your eyes for just a few seconds, the chill wind against your skin would transport you right back to the depths of winter, that ferocious, marrow-freezing cold to which my tropical soul could never get accustomed, no matter how many years I spend in these northern latitudes.

But spring is certainly in the air, and the occasional show'ers are welcome proof of that. It's been an exceptionally dry British winter, and

the TV news is full of reports of the rivers running dry and the water companies having to go to extreme lengths in order to satisfy the city's need for water. The news is also full of war and politics, celebrities and soccer, bird flu and cartoon fires. But one merely notes these with bemused resignation and flicks on to the next channel, to follow Grissom's latest exploits for the Vegas PD, or some obscure 1950s Western movie playing in the wee hours, the stars on the screen as forgotten today as the stars in the night sky outside the window.

Incongruous as this may sound, the city occasionally reminds me of Dhaka. Not because of the climate certainly, and heaven knows there's enough differences between here and there to fill a book or three. But what the two have in common is a mad metropolitan bustle, millions of people milling in its pavements and shops, pressing shoulder to shoulder (or nose to arm-pit if you're unlucky) in its buses and trains, absorbed in the familiar business of rushing about, of getting and spending. It's that frenetic urban chaos of London that reminds me more of home than any other place I've been perhaps mid-day Manhattan would be another example. This Christmas on Oxford Street, in the city centre, the crowds of shoppers were so thick that you could, in a fanciful mood, imagine that you'd momentarily been taken back to Farmgate or Gausia the weekend before Eid!

What prompts these thoughts on a certain morning in February, while I sit under the anonymous arclights of the office - e-mails and Excel spreadsheets impatiently awaiting me - what prompts these thoughts is that date on the calendar. It's the 21st of February, and I'm a million miles from the Boi Mela, Probhat Feri, the steps of the Shahid Minar and Gaffar Chowdhury's immortal lyrics. Things that were staples of life for 20-plus Februaries in a row. In short, far from home, an exile's life.

But maybe not as far as all that. Last night, walking home around

midnight after dinner with friends, I noticed a procession of people ahead of me on the Whitechapel Road. (Whitechapel is in the heart of East London, the epicentre of the immigrant Sylheti community that Monica Ali wrote about in her book.) So many people milling about so late at night is an uncommon sight in this place governed above all else by law and order. My curiosity piqued, I took a slight detour and followed the crowd. And lo and behold! - what soon greeted my astonished eyes were a few hundred people braving the freezing wind, standing there with wreaths and bouquets, waiting to present flowers at the pedestal of London's very own Shahid Minar, built in a patch of green called Altab Ali Park. Sure, there were a score of burly policemen in bright yellow jackets to ensure security. But for a few moments, you no longer felt the

chill, you only felt joy and wonder, pride and a knee-buckling love for all that you can't leave behind. This morning, passing by the park again, I took a moment to take a last look at the flowers on the Minar, before the dutiful municipality sweeps them away. I doubt they'll be there by nightfall.

Zed Mahboob, London

Poor umpiring biased selection!

All the cricket fans of this country were glued to their television sets to watch the BD-SL second Test match.

Fresh from their maiden ODI victory against the Lankans on this very ground of Bogra, this time around the Tigers as well as all the spectators were expecting a same hard fought performance in the longer version of the game.

But our hopes for a better performance were simply dashed because of some poor decisions by the umpires and biased team selection.

We have been watching it for quite some time now. The umpires being human beings may mistakenly rule a batsman out. But what amazes me most is that more often than not their (umpires) poor decisions go against us.

For instance, in the second innings of Bangladesh batting, at a very crucial time captain Bashar was given out while tv replays suggested that the ball might have missed the leg stump!

Not only that, in the past too umpires were very aggressive against this emerging cricketing nation.

It may be mentioned here that at Multan (Vs Pakistan) ,we might have won had the umpires not saved Inzamam from a couple of close LBW shouts.

I.C.C. should definitely chalk out a plan to stop the recurrence of such incidents, which are really taking out the charm of cricket.

Apart from poor umpiring, biased selection also ruined

our prospects. I still firmly believe had Alok Kapali & Aftab Ahmed been given chance, the scenario could have been different. What surprised me most was the inclusion of the 17 year old Mushfiqur Rahim in the match. Of course he is a talented wicketkeeper cum batsmen, but in no way he can be compared with proven performers.

Nazmus Saquib
Notre Dame College, Dhaka



The western context

Having read Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam's article "Freedom of expression and multi-culturalism" fairy tales immediately come to mind. Danish xenophobia, according to the author, is expressed by Danish troops' participation in Afghanistan and Iraq; one being a terrorist centre that protected al-Qaeda and Iraq which was Muslim only in so far as it benefited Saddam. The wholesale slaughter of Kurds, Muslim dissidents and the war with Iran that pitted Muslims against Muslims at the cost of millions of lives appears irrelevant to the writer; as did Saddam's imperialist incursion into Kuwait and his plans for Saudi Arabia and the Emirates.

Admittedly the western nations, starting with England and Germany and proceeding to Russian and the United States have played politics with the Islamic world. When Islam was one of the two great powers (the other being the Catholic Church and its "vassal" nations) Islam played the same politics.

Alan Siegel
Jerusalem

Bravo!

It can be easily guessed how the whole Bangladesh roared with joy and pride when our cricket team defeated Sri Lanka. When I was in BD last time we had a win (over Australia); we all friends had great fun watching the match from the very first ball.

Congratulations, cricketers.
Mahmudur Rahman Erash
Melaka, Malaysia



We know that Bangladesh has got a very warm relation with the United Kingdom and nowadays more than six lakh Bangladeshis are living in London alone, and all of them are British citizens. Most of them have made it their motherland. If we go forty/fifty years back, there were very few Bengalees in the UK.

People could easily settle in the UK in the past. Most of the immigrants were from the greater Sylhet district, I mean Sunamganj, Habigonj, Sylhet and

Maulvibazar. But after four decades what we can find in the UK is that the Bangladeshis (Greater Sylhet people) have made their own town of Algate where MPs are elected from amongst them. Catering and hotel business belong to the Bangladeshis and Indians. Our Tomy Mia is the latest star in the horizon of restaurant business.

We as Bangladeshis feel proud that there are so many Bangladeshi nationals contributing their valuable services and

efforts in various important areas of life in the UK.

But nowadays what we do find is that students have to go to the UK and other foreign countries for higher studies and after completion of their studies, many of them prefer to stay there by way of marriage etc. The British government is changing its immigration rules to handle this situation.

Peerzada S.R.Hussain
Hiala Shaheb Bari, Habigonj