

Visiting home

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MANZUR RAHMAN

FOR a jajabor (nomad), the geographic determination of home is often not easy, not to mention its philosophical and psychological aspects. For current purposes then I shall limit myself to visiting "home" in the sense of geographic origin, or for me, visiting Bangladesh, specifically, Dhaka.

Even by this definition, however, it is not quite as simple as one may like, which is the excuse for this digression. For many of my generation born before Liberation, our birth certificates or passports indicate a city in what is now Pakistan. Clearly other than the letters in black and white spelling Karachi in my passport, I have no familial or emotional or historical ties to that city or region. However, as is wont to occur often

in the life of a jajabor, the answer to the most basic question: "Where are you from?" often elicits, hopefully imperceptible to others, the slightest of hesitation as I answer "Bangladesh," questioning myself whether full disclosure requires further elaboration.

This also reminds me of a very dear Pakistani friend of mine, also born in Karachi, but whose father was born in Bihar before Partition, and whose mother was born in what was then East Pakistan. Of course, many more august figures, such as the current heads of government of both India and Pakistan, also share the same characteristics (though, surely, increasingly less so as the fractures of the subcontinent inevitably recede further into the past), i.e., the disjunction between what they may state as their home country and where they were born. I wonder if they ever feel a momen-

tary sense of, for lack of a better word, "multi-statedness;" my guess is that the non-diasporics in our set, being rooted in a single state though it be other than that of their birth, are not susceptible to these flashes of ambiguity, though I think this would be a good sociological question.

Returning to the present theme, a fairly recent flight home to Dhaka (I must admit that the speed dial settings in my SIM card include the following designations: "Home -- San Diego," "Home -- Dhaka," and "Home -- Rome," though the schizophrenia entailed therein is surely better explored under a psycho-philosophical approach to "home" alluded to above) brought to immediate relief the two major societal distinctions, which requires a far subtler eye for the expatriate Bangladeshi to detect in the West; permeating the daily

life in our country: class and wealth. Though on my trips home over the past quarter-century, I believe that I have found the weight of such distinctions to have diminished on the margin, the first impact unfailingly remains bald and pervasive.

The instant and in-your-face nature of these distinctions make it difficult to avoid noticing, and that time it began with my Biman flight from Fiumicino airport in Rome. Even in a pre-9-11 setting, the check-in area appeared quarantined; the non-Bangladeshi passport holders were segmented and seemingly better treated. A degree of confusion reigned: for example, most of us boarded the flight to Dhaka, only to learn after being airborne that we were first going to London. And that was just the beginning.

While we were waiting (quarantined in the transit lounge in Heathrow, it became clear that many other passengers were joining our flight and that the seat assignments had in many cases been duplicated. Being a somewhat experienced traveler I managed to return to my original seat and fend off the pretender with a cold stare. My row mate, however, being a less experienced traveler, or perhaps just a milder

fellow, was having a more difficult time, with the steward insisting he go to the rear. As it was quite clear that the steward was not extending equal treatment to him perhaps due to his colloquial Bengali, though usually a confirmed non-interventionist, I felt compelled to intervene, and successfully so given that the gentleman had clearly paid for his assigned seat.

During the flight from London to Dhaka, I learned a little bit about my neighbour. He was also from Dhaka but from the other side of the Buriganga. About eight years earlier he had made the cross-continental trek across Asia and into Europe, first to Germany, and then, finding it impossible to obtain employment there, to Italy. Over the previous six years, he had worked a number of menial jobs in Rome, obtained his papers, and had become a proud owner of a fruit stand in front of the entrance to the Vatican Museum. He was returning to his village for the wedding of his younger brother, and had dressed up in a suit and tie for his first return home.

Slightly before our landing he made, and to my arms-length, westernized ways, a rather suspicious request: could I possibly

walk with him through customs. I, of course, began to mumble something about why it might not be possible given the different lines in immigration or the timing of the arrival of the luggage --but he had not asked me to carry anything and here was a man who felt that my education could be of help, so I agreed. When we went to the customs officer he looked at me quizzically as I stated that I had nothing to declare but was there, instead, to accompany my fellow passenger. He, it turned out, had saved and brought over sixty thousand dollars -- an amount that I had not heretofore seen in cash at one time -- for his family, but did not have the confidence to face the customs officer and make such a (lawful) declaration on account of his relative status in our society. While the particular bureaucratic moment passed uneventfully, declining the offer of the delicious fruits that the gentleman had carried so carefully with him for his elderly father was altogether a different matter.

Classism is surely a universal trait and a constitutive part of the human condition. In the various countries that I have lived and worked in across four continents, none could be termed a classless society. The question is, of course,

one of degree of classism, and the relative disadvantages faced by the lower classes. Returning home to Dhaka, however, the level of inequality, perceptible to even the most casual observer, always appears to have been raised to the nth degree.

The difference between the upper and lower classes here no longer seems to be a quantitative matter, but rather, a qualitative separation, perhaps analogous to the distinctions explicitly, and now, often, implicitly made on account of race and skin colour in the West. Think of the last time you invited a candidate for a household service position to take a seat with you during the interview!

In thinking about the impact of inequality on a nation's development, I was reminded of a comparison related by one of my teachers a very long time ago, namely, Japan and Siam (present-day Thailand), and the exactly contemporaneous reforms they undertook (notably successful in terms of avoiding falling under the domination of Western colonialism) to modernize under the Meiji Emperor and King Chulalongkorn, respectively, in the last third of the 19th century. One commonality was to send Japanese and Siamese students to the West to learn modern

science and technology.

The result: within one generation, Japan had transformed herself to an industrial power, while Siam remained a largely agrarian society (though, surely, even as today, a delightfully pleasant one). The difference according to my professor: the Japanese teams of students sent abroad were comprised of a cross-section from a more egalitarian citizenry that mastered the nitty-gritty of the mechanics of industrial production and readily implemented their learning upon their return, while the Siamese students, selected primarily from the noble classes, absorbed the art of managing the workers, and upon their return found implementation, absent the nuts-and-bolts knowledge of the workers, infeasible. Perhaps it is an apocryphal story, but, viz. the modern trajectory of other, generally more egalitarian Far Eastern nations such as South Korea and post-communist China -- it does seem to have a ring of truth to it.

Manzur Rahman is a professor in San Diego, California.

Fond memories of my friend, Maisa

Today, when I drive past her Dhanmondi house, just across the lake from mine, I will remember my old friend Maisa as someone who truly lived a large life and not as someone who suffered a single day in her illness. In her astonishing life she not only accomplished highly in her academics and career, she also experienced something very rare that many people don't find in their lifetime.

TAREEN HOSSAIN

WHEN I first heard my friend Maisa Karim had brain cancer two years ago, we were both living in New York City. I immediately sent her an email asking her how she was feeling and what the doctors had said. When we spoke on the phone later that week, she did not sound like someone who was suffering or someone who had just been given the news that she might not live very long. We spoke about her illness as if it was just like any other of the challenges in life we had faced together: not being able to find a job we wanted or waiting to get into the university of our choice. We hung up like we always did -- planning to meet up when our schedules permitted.

Maisa and I met when we were 10 years old. Her grandfather and my father were both serving in the government together at the time. Our parents were also friends. However, Maisa and I did not meet in that context. We became friends because we both went to the American International School in Baridhara and lived in Dhanmondi. This meant that we took the same school bus to school and home everyday. It was during these rides back and forth across town that our friendship grew. Sometimes we use to get off at each other's houses to play after school. Then Maisa went away to live in Bahrain

and on to boarding to school in Singapore and we only saw each other during the holidays.

After we both graduated from college in 1997, Maisa and I found ourselves living in the same Dhanmondi neighbourhood again. We were both back with degrees and trying to figure out what we wanted to do with lives. We spent many days talking and soon found that we had something in common. We both had this obligatory feeling inside us to live and work for our country. We talked about whether or not we thought we would settle in Dhaka and how growing up in international schools gave us other options and dreams. Somehow both of us always shunned these dreams out and concluded by saying that we would end up working in our country.

In 2004, Maisa and I were both living in New York City. We met up occasionally but not as often as I now wish we had. We saw each other more after she fell ill. When I met her it was just like any other time in the past that we spent together as Maisa never talked about having cancer or being in any pain. She would casually call me up to tell me that she was at Sloan Cancer Center, right behind my flat, to get chemotherapy and if I wanted to meet for coffee.

She continued working at her job. Sometimes she asked me if I thought her hair looked OK, as she had to shave it for her treatment. There were never any complaints

about pain or any grief about how unfair life is -- it was always business as usual and in all the months after her diagnosis, she never once let me feel sorry for her or let me even realize for a second that she had cancer. In fact, most of the time I was with her, I forgot she even had cancer.

The last few times Maisa and I met were pivotal time in our lives. She attended my baby shower not with a present for my baby but with a present for me! It was the sweetest gesture and one I hope I thanked her enough for. Another night, her mom cooked us a very special Moroccan meal at their flat. Over dinner we talked very excitedly about Maisa's upcoming wedding. She also showed me photos of her handsome fiance and told me about her plans to go to Cambridge University to do her MBA.

I was overwhelmed with admiration and respect. Here was my friend who had a brain tumor and who did not know how long she would live grabbing life by its neck and marching forward. I gained even more respect for her when a mutual friend whom I had told about Maisa's illness called me and asked if I was sure about what I had said. She said she recently spoke to Maisa and that Maisa did not mention anything at all about being ill let alone having cancer! How could I explain to her that I was in much awe as she was!

The last time I saw Maisa was when she came over to see my newborn baby. We sat like two schoolgirls in the back of a school bus talking, as we did so many times in the past, about our plans. She asked me how it felt to be a mother and how she looked forward to the day she would have children of her own. I told her I was moving to Bangladesh and she told me about her plans to move to London. I did not know that it would be our last conversation. To me, it was like all the other conversations we had ever had: making plans to move ahead into the future that lay ahead of us.

You see, even in her illness, Maisa never looked back. In all the times we spoke while she had cancer she talked about things like her admission into Cambridge, job opportunities, trips she was planning to take, and her upcoming wedding. I do not know where she drew her strength from.

Today, when I drive past her Dhanmondi house, just across the lake from mine, I will remember my old friend Maisa as someone who truly lived a large life and not as someone who suffered a single day in her illness. In her astonishing life she not only accomplished highly in her academics and career, she also experienced something very rare that many people don't find in their lifetime. You see Maisa's fiance, Ian, married her a few months before she passed away. So Maisa left this world knowing life's sweetest gift of love. Therefore, in my mind, there is no doubt that my friend Maisa left this world with a smile on her face and warmth in her heart.

Use of hartal and police

According to that study, only 15 days of hartal were observed during 1962-71 (East Pakistan), only 5 days of hartal were observed during 1972-75 (Awami League regime) and 59 days of hartal were observed during 1981-87 (First 7 years of Ershad regime). Interestingly, however, 266 days of hartal were observed during 1991-96 (BNP regime) and 215 days of hartal were observed during 1996-2001 (Awami League regime).

KAZI SM KHARUL ALAM QUDDUSI

OF late, our otherwise ineffective parliament has seen a wave of refreshing moments as concerns and expectations were voiced and shared there by our ruling party and main opposition party stalwarts regarding a very nagging problem -- hartal. Though it doesn't guarantee ditching of hartal as a political weapon immediately, people of all walks of life must have liked this attitudinal change of our major political leaders.

Police actions and atrocities -- though there are allegations of police excesses in many non-political matters as well -- during hartals and other political programs have also attracted a fair amount of criticism these days, and rightly so. While corruption on the side of the government is doing inordinate damage to our economy and society, excessive use of hartal and use of police to suppress political agitations are constantly adding to the crises.

Admittedly, the people of the country have little fondness for hartal though it is a traditional democratic right. To be candid, the people of Bangladesh have seen so many hartals that they are raring to do away with them. People of various professions, and foreign dignitaries, have long been urging

the political parties to find out alternatives to hartal. But, who heads the urgings? While hartal is creating a dent in our economy, political use of police force is persistently contributing to spiraling of human rights violation in the country.

True, hartal is an age-old democratic weapon of political parties to protest against misdeeds of the governments. However, its over-use in recent times has not only turned it extremely unpopular but also made it utterly ineffective. Use of hartal existed and, of course, was sparingly used during the British period with good effect. In a research article by Dr. Ashraf and Dr. Alam, published in Chittagong University Journal of Social Sciences, interesting information -- based on newspaper reports -- regarding hartals in various periods and regimes, has been compiled.

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seems to have been reduced during the current coalition regime, an end to this gratuitous haemorrhaging of the economy is still not in sight.

So many days of hartal after restoration of democracy in 1991 is indeed a great blemish on our political history and is not only painful but thoroughly unacceptable. The net loss of one day's hartal is around 350 crore taka. The stated study further reveals that gross financial loss for hartals during 1991-2001 was 183,465 crore taka. And the loss continues unabated as hartal is again on the increase these days. What an irony! What a luxury of self-immolation! In passing, around 3 lakh crore taka has reportedly been squandered through syndicate during the last four and half years.

Concurrently, use, or rather, political use of security personnel has also reached unmanageable proportions these days. A bird's eye view of our newspaper reports and electronic media bulletins are enough to give us a clear idea about police atrocities during hartals and other political programs. Though the police have to keep law and order, their excesses in many cases verge on gross violation of human rights.

Odhikar, a human rights organization, in its recent report said 166 people were killed in the last six

months by the law enforcing agencies across the country. Of them, 133 people were killed in crossfire. Odhikar also said 84 people were killed by the Rapid Action Battalion, 80 by police, one by forest guards and one by detective branch police. At the same time, eight people died in police custody at police stations and 29 died in jail.

According to Odhikar, 160 people were killed due to political violence during the same period. The report prepared on the basis of newspaper reports said 9,939 people were injured, 42 kidnapped and 2,983 were arrested in politics related incidents. Besides, 4,557 opposition leaders and activists were arrested in raids across the country before the opposition's Dhaka Siege program, hartals, and gherao of the Election Commission.

It is high time that the leaders of our major political parties found an alternative to hartal and stop political use of security people. How long will they mess around? Finding alternatives to hartal is very much within their reach. Similarly, political use of police force resulting in their brutalities should also come to a stop forthwith -- which requires only political will -- to salvage the flagging image of this essential security organ. Continued failure in taking immediate steps on these burning issues will not only add to the frustration of the teeming millions but also continue to further debase the concerned in the public eye.

Kazi SM Kharul Alam Quddusi is Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Chittagong.

We need a civilising law for our lawmakers

The sense of guilt or shame varies from person to person. What is a matter of shame to someone may be a matter of pride to others. Some people may be ashamed of taking any undue favour, but others may be proud of being able to take bribes. Sense of guilt or shame depends on one's moral and ethical standards and mentality.

MD. ABUL BASHER

THE behaviour of our lawmakers is such that we need an appropriate law for them to maintain the dignity of the parliament. They don't apply logic to debates on economic and political issues but instead waste the resource on meaningless personal attacks. But we expect them to follow some civic norms in the parliament.

Norm refers to a rule that is neither promulgated by an official source, such as a court or legislature, nor enforced by the threat of legal sanctions, yet is regularly complied with [Posner, Chicago School of Law]. The basic norm to maintain congeniality in parliament is yet to be developed but the bad practices of our lawmakers do not show any sign of change.

with economic development. I had the opportunity to visit the transport museum of Glasgow in Scotland once. They displayed the public transports used in the past. I went inside some of them and noticed that all of these buses used to have different instructions written inside the body. No doubt that these instructions reflect the public behaviour and attitude of different time periods. For example, some old public buses had instructions like "No spitting, please" or "No standing in the doorway, please," until the 1960s, and then the type of instruction had changed.

It means that even in the Scottish society, people used to spit in the buses or they lacked the sense not to block the door till 1960s. Nobody will see similar instructions now in any bus on the roads of Scotland or any western coun-

try. That nobody would spit in the public transport is a social norm now, and not blocking the door to cause trouble to other passengers is a part of the social value in the west. Of course, you will probably see the instructions like "No food, please" or "Use headphone to listen music, please" in public buses in the western world.

Our social norms and values are also changing in all aspects. Possibly, the most important change in our social norm during the last two decades is the wide acceptance of women's role outside the house. Our society has not only accepted women's education but also their economic participation. It was not long ago when the education of girls, especially in the rural areas, was confined to specific tasks, mainly household and domestic chores, and restricted to defined social

spaces. Going beyond this defined limit was not only strongly discouraged by friends, relatives, neighbours, and even the family members, but also prevented by direct or indirect action. Women who went beyond the defined limits were immediately insulted, laughed and pointed at, despised and slandered, and "brought down" to the lowest rung of the social ladder.

Because of such confinement women lack the confidence to cope with the prevailing systems of relationship, information and communication and to participate in income generating activities outside their homes. But the microcredit programs, and their consultative process of group formation, help the women to shed their initial diffidence and emboldens them to go beyond the house or the defined limit. The exchanges in the weekly meetings with other women are clear enough but what also increase their confidence, and help them to build an atmosphere of mutual trust and economic reciprocity. A large number of rural women are now participating in economic activities, and society has also

come to terms with the economic participation of women. This change in our social norm is the most important non-economic benefit of the microcredit programs.

Although our rural society has accomplished a number of positive norms during the last two decades or so, our members of parliament, who are supposed to lay out the rules for the advancement of our society, are still practicing the bad norms of personal attack and castigation. They drum the same norms into the heads of tomorrow's political leaders to such an extent that they may become habits that the next generation of leaders may feel very comfortable with. Therefore, it is important that the current pattern of behaviour of our lawmakers should change. But will they change on their own without any law? The incentives for obeying laws are clear enough but what about the incentives for obeying norms?

Posner identified several incentives for obeying norms. Some norms are self-enforcing. For example, if a member of parliament uses the

floor to attack other members, or to speak something off the topic, the speaker can seize his right to talk. The members of his own party can rebuke him for his idiocy. But what happens in our parliament is quite the opposite.

Secondly, some norms are enforced by expression of disapproval, by ridicule, and in extreme cases by ostracism. Obviously, we cannot ostracise our lawmakers. The most effective expression of disapproval can come from the party high ranks. But in most cases, one is applauded by his party colleagues for making indecent comments in the parliament. The top rank leaders are also guilty of using ungenerous words and gestures in the parliament.

Most of the current lawmakers are basically businessmen. They know that as long as poverty exists in Bangladesh, and voters are not politically educated, they can win the election by using their money. The disapproval of their bad practices in the parliament by a section of people is no threat to them. Therefore, they can afford to be rowdy and unruly in

the house where their main responsibility is to make rules and laws. Isn't it ironic?

According to Posner, people also obey norms out of a sense of guilt or shame. The sense of guilt or shame varies from person to person. What is a matter of shame to someone may be a matter of pride to others. Some people may be ashamed of taking any undue favour, but others may be proud of being able to take bribes. Sense of guilt or shame depends on one's moral and ethical standards and mentality. The way of dressing that you consider to be bizarre or inappropriate, may seem perfectly fine to others. Unfortunately, it seems that our parliament is dominated by the people who do not suffer from any sense of guilt or shame for the public display of their rowdiness, intolerance and churlish attitude. They don't feel ashamed by the public disapproval of their abrasive attitudes; instead they feel encouraged to practice the same because party support is with them.

Even our lawmakers cannot deny that they are gradually

losing public respect. The reasons for this pertain to misuse of power and their behaviour outside the parliament. But people are also tired of seeing their free-style squabbles and castigation in the parliament. As there is no reason to hope that their behaviour will change, it is time to enact a civilising law to control the degree of chaos in the parliament. In many cases, if a student misbehaves in the kindergarten or first grade, teachers isolate him or her from the rest and put him in a quiet zone for a while. Maybe we need some law like that for our lawmakers. A law becomes a norm when practiced for a long time.

I know that our lawmakers will not make any law for themselves, let alone follow it. My only hope is that some of them will try to understand how frustrated we are about their activities in the parliament to think about a law for them.

The author is Visiting Assistant Professor, Willamette University, US.