



#PRESPECTIVE

An Autumnal Paean

Autumn has long been my favourite time of year. Astrologically I fall into its seasonal calendar, so there is in me a latent belief in this "pseudo-science" that astrology is dismissively termed as; nonetheless the changes in environment that autumn affects and ushers, all hugely different to the preceding seasons, combine to conspire and seduce with their copious charms.

Exquisitely lauded, in both Bangla and world Literature equally, John Keats's "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" finds resounding echoes in Bangla literature and in the hearts of Bengal's general populace. In fact, both Bengalis, I am persuaded, have a decided penchant for this gracious season and must have commonalities that outstrip and outweigh religion or dogma and are inherently tied together by cultural and lingual similarities.

As a child growing up in Kolkata, the months of September/October or in Bangla, Ashwin, heralded the advent of Durga Puja. My earliest imbibing of the heady atmosphere that surrounded the most important puja of Bengal began with experiencing Mahalaya, seven days prior to the actual start to the puja itself. The neighbourhood radios would be on full blast, synchronised with the dawn chorus and Vedic slokas immemorial as time, with chanting of verses announcing the advent of "Ma Durga," her subsequent descent to the realm of mortals, her journey from Mount Kailash, the hallowed abode of her lord the god Shiva. The sonorous incantations sent goosebumps and prickles down my five-year-old spine and arms, and as my world slowly awakened, and I was taken for my morning ablutions, my head would be filled with an entire kaleidoscope of images of the goddess bearing down on her temporary home amongst us. The ten days of the actual puja itself were a whirlwind of experiences never savoured before as I was taken by

my family to visit neighbourhood "puja pandals" and dais after succeeding dais of the deity. The goddess Durga, beautifully crafted, gorgeously adorned, astride on her lion with the demon "MahaAshura" lying vanquished beneath! The highpoint of my every evening, was when "Aarti" was offered with ritual dancing. Earthenware bowls aflame with oil lamps or candles, wicks aglow, were held aloft in outstretched arms as figures danced and swayed to the music



of conches and beating drums. Whirling ever faster in abandon, heavy intoxicating fumes of Frankincense perfumed the air conveying to my precocious young self both a sense of divinity and eroticism, joy and ecstasy, a comingling of the terrestrial with the sublime.

Years later in Dhaka, as a young woman indulging in a spot of amateur astronomy, I would be on the hunt to espy an autumnal waxing Gibbous moon; that which is supposed to be suspended in the sky noticeable in the daytime, as autumn skies

without rain clouds are clearer and bluer than any other time of the year.

Thus, my convoluted memories lead to the actual crux of the matter. Autumn fills me with nostalgia. Nostalgia one has discovered is an ambiguous feeling, a mixed emotion, at best experienced occasionally. It is resonant of reminiscence. Too much and it is full of regret and rumination that don't serve much purpose. A happy medium would perhaps be to evoke all the memories roused, without falling prey to interminable longings for a season, all too short too briefly savoured, disappearing like quicksilver before winter's advent.

When I further stir the stewpot of autumnal memories, I recall the Dhaka of old, before it succumbed to becoming the clichéd concrete jungle of today! Arising early, it would fall to my lot to switch off our nightlights on the patio and lawn. Opening the front door, the cool freshness of the air would assault my senses and the blush pink of an early dawn would hold me in its thrall. There would be mist, wraithlike, hovering on the lake fronting our home, and the grass underfoot would be carpeted in dew.

The ambient morning, silent, surreptitious and pregnant with mystery. I, suspended between sleep and wakefulness and a desire to linger outdoors, to scamper and collect Shiuly/Shephali, Kamini and Togor from the branches of the trees or from the grass itself, quintessentially the floral offerings of Bengal. To be scooped up in both hands and placed indoors in bowls to delicately scent the air with their innocence and purity.

Another memory slips in insidiously — that of "going on a drive." A phrase forever evaporated from our terminology. Unthinkable today to drive through our insane megapolis with its cheek to jowl traffic and noxious fumes just for the sake of a joy ride. Yet once it was not so. We

loved piling into the car and speeding off leaving the city behind fairly quickly. Outside city limits, villages sloped off in opposite directions from the road, fields of paddy chequered green darkening in the gloam. Homesteads close to the road in clusters with common yards roughly cemented over. The perennial roosters hens and chickens pecking at grain, and invariably the wafting aroma of jaggery, molasses or "Gur" in the vernacular, being stirred in huge vats. Initially the smell of fermenting toddy quickly meshing into the mouth-watering treacly scent that we so loved combining with the smoke of wood-fired stoves on which they cooked. With the setting sun, autumn's multitudinous stars would light up the sky along with lanterns glimmering in distant hamlets. The incessant chirping of crickets would start and should we drive past a bamboo grove or thicket, we would be rewarded by the sight of ephemeral fireflies and glow-worms flitting through.

Sight, smell, sound, taste, touch, all contribute to complete our living experiences, each dependent on the other to bring us full circle to our entity, that which throbs pulsating and completes our lives. Autumn is to be experienced not as a tangible but more as an intuition, and a harbinger of things to come. A nebula in fact, ushering in longings and delights hidden untrammelled in some corner of our psyche.

In the words of Piet Mondrian, the Dutch painter, "Intuition enlightens and so links up with pure thought. They together become an intelligence which is not simply of the brain, which does not calculate, but feels and thinks."

Autumn makes me both think and feel like no other season.

By Lita Samad

Photo: LS Archive/ Sazzad Ibne Sayed
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