

# When did We Last Hear a Good Political Joke? Well, Here are Some from Another Time, Another Place

EVERY administration, be it in Bangladesh or anywhere else, produces its own jokes and anecdotes. They may be extremely simple or complex, a little crude or highly sophisticated, a figment of imagination or based on an iota of truth. When they figure in small talks at parties, they brighten up otherwise dull conversations.

Am I right in assuming that there aren't that many jokes in circulation these days? Or are we going to the wrong kind of parties? Or are my impressions is, instead of jokes and some spicy anecdotes, we hear an ever-increasing number of rumours, very serious ones, quite a few about 'who's in and who's out'. This is perhaps a kind of a hang-up of the past when the closed society, under the authoritarian regime, produced what some one called a 'bumper crop of rumours' in a secretive, cheerless climate.

Now, one may well say, give us an open administration, and we will give you a regular supply of jokes, plenty of them.

When it comes to an open administration, one cannot yet beat the one we had soon after the liberation, but the climate lasted only a couple of years. Much of this openness was due to the outgoing personality of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who himself loved hearing gossips. So, hanging around the Bangabhaban, a journalist would pick up all the news — not all fit to print — plus a lot of rumours, gossips and jokes. He would find out about all the incredible new high-level appointments which would be of course changed in a matter of days, to make way for more incredible appointments. Then, one would get to know a new group of sycophants who were always coming up with new ideas for promoting the image of Sheikh Mujib, ideas which, in a matter of hours, would be circulating as jokes.

Did someone actually suggest that the Bagabandhu himself should sign the banknotes of Bangladesh, instead of Hamidullah, the first Governor of the central bank?

Whether Sheikh Mujib dismissed the suggestion straightaway or did so after consulting Finance Minister Tajuddin remained unclear. Perhaps that became the subject of another joke.

What we treated as a joke in Dhaka in 1972 was taken up as a serious suggestion in Islamabad several years later. According to a Pakistani friend, the late Ziaul Haq was sorely tempted to go along with the idea, obviously offered by an ardent follower of the President, that he could sign the country's banknotes, instead of the Governor of the State Bank. He did not do so because, so the joke goes, no one could find the relevant provision under the Islamic banking system.

As the saying goes, good jokes, like good ideas, do not disappear overnight. They just wither away.

Sometimes, good jokes travel from one country to another and acquire local colours. Here is an example:

During a ride in a crowded bus in Manila, in the days of martial law of the seventies, one man felt that a fellow-passenger had stepped on his toes. It was hurting. There was no sign that the man would take his foot away. After a while, the poor victim whispered to his

tormentor, "Sir, excuse me, are you in the army?"

The man answered haughtily, "No." Gaining a bit more courage, the victim now asked, "Have you got your brother or any of your close relatives serving in our valiant armed forces?"

This time, too, the answer was in the negative. Now, the victim screamed, "Then, take your b...y foot off my toes."

The late Chino Roces, the Publisher of the Manila Times, related this joke to some of us in the Philippines. A few years later, a regional weekly reproduced the same joke as one which was in wide circulation in Ziaul Haq's Pakistan. Did it eventually reach Dhaka? I wonder.

Now, here is a practice — call it an official norm — that I have seen followed in three

varied, depending on who was really more powerful, the minister or the secretary. This is another area in the administration that produces several anecdotes and a few good jokes.

During the first post-liberation administration when ministers carried much weight, some due to their role in the freedom struggle and others on account of their relationship with Mujib, secretaries were particularly deferential to the bosses.

The idea of contradicting the minister would never cross the mind of a poor secretary, especially if he carried the stigma of being a collaborator for having worked in the erstwhile East Pakistan during the liberation war instead of crossing the border to India.

Such a secretary would even think twice before making a suggestion or offering a new

idea to the minister during a departmental meeting. The secretary was never expected to know more than his boss.

"Then, how could you ever offer a suggestion to your minister?" I once asked such a secretary in Dhaka.

"Well, if I felt strongly about the suggestion, I would prefix it with the statement, sometimes totally false, to the effect, Sir, as you suggested yourself the other day..."

A minister would think twice before turning down an idea that was presented to the meeting as his own. He would rarely show the courage of saying that after some thought, he had changed his mind on the proposal.

This way, the secretary got quite a few of his ideas, including some outlandish ones, accepted by his minister.

However, the relationship was almost reversed, at least in some ministries, during the Ershad regime. Now, it was a minister who had to be deferential to the secretary and find out from him what the President wanted! What's happening now is anybody's guess. As I said at the start of this piece, there are more rumours than jokes. And, believe me, that's not particularly healthy for a nation.

## MY WORLD

S. M. Ali



Sir, excuse me, are you in the army?

Asian countries, including Bangladesh. It was simply this: If an official was seated when he had a telephone call from the leader of the nation, be he (or she) the president or prime minister, he would stand to attention to receive it and remain standing during the conversation. It would not simply be a reflex action, but a conscious act of courtesy to the leader.

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## Sex, Violence and TV

When US viewers turn on their television sets, they are confronted mainly by social stereotypes and fantasy instead of reality, says a recent study. Jim Lobe of IPS reports from Washington.



A major new study by the American Psychological Association (APA) says US television programmes tend to stereotype minorities and reinforce conventional sex roles.

Entitled Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society, the recently released study also found that US children spend more time watching television than they spend at school.

Poor viewing habits can lead to anti-social behaviour and weak academic performance, it said. Five years in the making, the study sought to determine television's effect on vulnerable populations, especially women, children, minorities, and the elderly in US society.

The task force of nine psychologists responsible for the report found that television is not inherently good or bad. It can have very positive influences, depending on programme content and the way viewers use what they see.

Children, the elderly, ethnic minorities and women were found to be the heaviest users of television, because television is the option ordinarily turned to when other activities are not available in US society.

As to programming content, "programmes often contain social stereotypes, violence and other content selected for its immediate appeal to a targeted market of buyers (not the majority of viewers)", the study said.

Television was also found to devalue and stereotype social groups — especially minorities and women — both by excluding them from programmes and by presenting negative images when they are portrayed.

The report said that this treatment creates or maintains prejudices and racism, and has a negative effect on the self-esteem of members of those groups.

Most ethnic minorities are virtually absent from television, the report said, and when they do appear, they are often negatively stereotyped as criminals, dangerous characters or victims of violence.

Blacks appear more often than other minority groups and now appear in more major roles than ever before, it said. At the same time, portrayals of men outnumber those of women — as much as 3-1 during the 'prime-time' evening hours.

The model television female is a 'young adult, beautiful, dependent, helpless, passive, concerned with interpersonal relations, warm and valued for her appearance, rather than for her capabilities and competence.'

These highly stereotyped appearances increase adolescents' sex-stereotyped beliefs and attitudes, the report said. It also noted that implied sexual activity on television occurs most often between couples with little emotional attachment or commitment to one another.

The task force concluded that watching sexual violence leads to its increased acceptance, and can instigate anti-social and behaviour. The rate of violence on prime-time television is about five to six incidents per hour, whereas the rate of violence on children's Saturday morning programmes is 20 to 25 acts per hour.

The kinds of violence depicted range from property destruction to physical assaults causing injury and death. TV violence can cause aggressive behaviour and cultivate values favouring the use of aggression to resolve conflicts, the study concludes.

It also found that the average child witnesses 8,000 murders on television by the time he or she graduates from primary school, and witnesses more than 100,000 other acts of violence. Similarly, the average child views one hour of television advertisements for every five hours of programming — 20,000 commercial messages a year.

But children under seven years have difficulty distinguishing these messages from programmes and thus increase their desire to consume the products being advertised. The task force found that the average US child watches television about three hours a day and that boys watch more television than girls — more cartoons, action adventure shows, news and sports.

Women, on the other hand, — especially those who do not work outside the home — spend more time watching television than do men. The elderly watch more television than any other age group does, most often using it as a social information network that replaces the informal network previously supplied by the workplace.

## Music from an Ancient Mariner

by Wahedul Haque

ON June 27 the Shuddha Sangeet Proshar Goshthi held at the Bishwasahitya Kendra a solo flute recital of Azizul Islam. Before we take up two proceedings of the evening, it is in order that mention be made of the good work the two — the Goshthi and Azizul Islam, popularly called Kamal — have been doing between them.

The Shuddha Sangeet group — in fact it's almost wholly a two-some affair by Shafiqur Rahman and his wife Parul — has been promoting the cause of serious music for years in a manner no other group has done. It used to hold monthly concerts without missing any simple month over years on end and, on top of that, organise big yearly 'music-conference' type festivals of high music. This, together with the group's insistence on patronising the Bangladesh artists exclusively, made the

goshthi into the only haven the votaries of Raga music looked up to, whether for a goodly audience on the part of the performers or for a host of fledgling hopefuls on the part of the admiring listeners. It was indeed an oasis to all serious practitioners of music in a desert distinguished by near-perfect lack of taste.

Azizul Islam could better be described or introduced as an 'ancient mariner' — if only he did not wear such young locks, for he was a sea captain for a longish stint back in the Seventies. It's more than a decade that he has 'landed' on lucrative shore businesses relating, of course to ships. How come this man from so different a world graduated with time into our nation's best flautist — one who is in constant demand at music conferences across the

border?

There is a kind of learners best described as *Ekolavayas* — after that immortal Mahabharat character of the same name who learnt archery setting before him an idol of the master — Drona, never meeting his revered teacher while he kept excelling even past the phenomenal Arjuna. Azizul Islam — the *Ekolavaya*, had in Pannalal Ghosh his Drona. And on his unending journeys on the oceans of the world he took in all of the master's recorded works. And kept on copying them hour after hour, day after day, month after month, year after year. And then one day when he went in front of the footlights — his guru was no more. It did not take him time to reach to the top — and go visiting the guru's great disciples, specially Divendra

Murdeswar and Karnad and seeking advices from them as one artist would from another.

From then on he was the best in our land. He came to the flute just for the love of it. He continues with the flute with that same sheer untrammelled love — taking nothing in exchange for his performances. And on the contrary he spends thousands on accompanists and in travel expenses. Perhaps he had one good and correct inspiring influence early in life. Velayut Ali Khan, the son of Ustad Mashuk Ali Khan, groomed his sister Bela Islam into a Kheyaliya of good standing. Velayut was a gem of an artist and his presence in the house must have led Azizul Islam to a rare understanding of the unfolding of the ragas.

On the 27th, it seemed to me, the Shuddha Sangeet group was holding again their monthly session after quite sometime. That was a most welcome thing to do — and it became more so with Azizul Islam performing a solo on the occasion. I was late reaching the concert, caught in double mind because of a shift in the date of the session. Azizul Islam was doing a *vilam bit gat* in *Jhaptala* — a rare thing to come by. He was possibly playing *Yaman* but was all the time taking care to shun more familiar patterns of melody. In the case of many ragas, *Jayjaywanti* to cite one, this yields delightful result and speaks of masterly command over the ragas. But perhaps in *Yaman*, or say *Behag* or *Malkauns* — this should better not be tried.

The master-instrumentalist then took up *Mian-ki-Mallar*. Aziz's forte lies in the long unbroken, seemingly unending *meend* which, in his hands, travels surefootedly across the very difficult terrain of 'shrutis'. And what better raga is there than *Mian-ki-Mallar* to glide between the two *nrkhas* with the *meends* as only Aziz can employ? Unfortunately for me, I didn't find Aziz delighting in that in the manner he does on other occasions. Aziz, perhaps has also slowed down a little which can very well be a sign of maturation. All the same, we sadden at the thought of Azizul Islam's being past his prime and starting the slide after the peak. Let us be assured that this is not the case — with a brilliant Azizian performance — and soon.



Azizul Islam at the recital.

And let this piece on his performance be a proof of how seriously I take him as an artist — and never to be construed as a detracting diatribe against a bad performance. Aziz is simply incapable of giving such.

## MOONMOON SEN TALKS TO BBC



Indian film star Moonmoon Sen (left) being interviewed by Manosi Barua and Serajur Rahman for the BBC Bengali Service's weekly youth programme 'Rangmahal'.

Moonmoon Sen, who has just been elected Best Actress of the Year by the Critics Association of India, talks to the BBC Bengali Service's young listeners. Interviewed by Serajur Rahman and Manosi Barua, Miss Sen says she feels that the standard of Calcutta's Bengali films has dropped in recent years. "I think that more powerful stories, directors of greater talent and more melodious songs are needed to revive the quality," she says. Miss Sen also talks about her attitude to her many fans, many of whom write to her frequently. "Fans are an important psychological and morale booster," she says, "but my role as a wife and mother prevents me from devoting more time to them."

The interview will be broadcast on Tuesday, 14 July, in the 1930-2010 (Bangladesh) transmission on 9605, 1192 and 15245 kHz in the 31,25 and 19 metre bands.

## WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

I have gone through the letter of Anonymous. Gulshan, Dhaka, and your reply. I found it very interesting with red and danger signal.

I have seen a new-born boy exactly like the other who has no conception with his family and even quite unknown to them. The new-born baby is the only son of one of my friends. Now he is 4. During pregnancy, his wife had a picture of a baby in her room.

His new-born son looks exactly like the boy in the picture. Will you please tell me who is responsible for this resemblance?

A K M Sirajul Islam

Dear Mita,

There is a saying that certain pictures, persons or images influence the physical characteristic of a new-born baby. This, however, has no scientific basis and is treated as old wives' tales. Even if the child looks like the one in the picture now, he will change and start looking more and more like his parents.

Dear Mita,

After reading about battles, murders, kidnappings, and other horrors in the rest of your paper, I sued to turn for relief to your column. It was my favourite, and it always went with my other favourite, my daily cuppa. Later, I would discuss it with my school friends, and we would all have a good time.

But recently your column has taken a bizarre turn and started dealing with shocking and shameful things. Please go back to your old style. How can people write such things about their own family? You should discourage them. And if you don't, my advice to such people is this: "Give us a break. Travel into a hole out of our sight, and take Mita's column with you".

Nazneem Khush, Banani, Dhaka.

Dear Nazneem,

All letters seeking advice will not necessarily be pleasant. Life is tough for some people and it takes all kinds to make the world. Tolerance is a virtue your know?

Dear Mita,

I study in class six at an Int'l. school. I am thirteen years old. I am quite tall. I have black hairs and I am quite handsome. I am the most handsome boy in the class, most of the girls are after me. I am also the best in sports in the class.

My problem is I find all the girls in my class immature and I don't love any of them, although they love me. I love all the girls in class seven, but they don't love me, not a single one of them. Tell me what shall I do?

I also have another problem, all my hairs have started to fall off. My hair was always silky and it always stayed stiff and it was very strongly type. But now it is falling down, please tell me what shall I do.

Mamun,

Dear Mamun,

First you will have plenty of time to fall in love, so take it easy. Enjoy yourself and don't complicate life by such serious matters as love. As for your hair, see a doctor, maybe, there is some deficiency in your body or you might need an improved diet of protein. Your doctor can advise you best.

Dear Anonymous writers

I am not printing your letters because you do not ask for advice but just make statements and accusations. Some handwritten letters look strongly similar, for example — the letter from the mother of the person whose son looked like his cousin and the cousin's letter seemed to be written by the same person. This column is not meant to pass messages nor for playing antics.