

# We All Love Flying Our National Flag; and More Anecdotes from Another Time, Another Place

**A** MONG a few things the Awami League leader Abdus Samad Azad and myself share, like our concern for the low literacy rate in the greater Sylhet where we come from and our nostalgia for life in Dhaka University in the fifties, is our inexplicable fascination for flying a flag, almost any flag, from the bonnet of our car or from the top of a pole at our residence.

This fascination is just as strong as the resentment some people, like Minister Nazmul Huda, feel about this symbol of authority being used by any one who may not be entitled to it. I suspect, this resentment is just as inexplicable as the feeling shared by Azad and myself about flying a flag, preferably our national one.

Surprisingly enough, the subject cropped up during the parliament session on Sunday afternoon, when our MPs had "effectively" dealt with more pressing issues facing our nation. But it was surprising even for the Speaker who, realising the seriousness of the subject, invited the parties concerned to discuss the matter in his chamber. It was a bit like what often happens in the TV drama serial, "LA Law", when, at a crucial moment, the Judge tells counsellors, "Please approach the bench."

This comparison between what we often see in "LA Law" and what sometimes happens at the Jatiya Sangsad is, to put it mildly, a bit off-the-record. This is my defence in case we, the paper and myself, are cited for contempt of parliament.

**D**URING the "battle of words" over the use of the national flag, Abdus Samad Azad looked "bemused", according to a colleague who covered the JS session on Sunday.

Bemused? That's odd. Samad should have looked a little angry, perhaps a little thoughtful, but certainly not amused.

Maybe the Awami League leader was wondering how many in the present Sangsad realised that he was one of the very few, if not the only one, among the MPs today who had first used the national flag from the bonnet of his official car and seen it flown over the official residence. That was way back in the early seventies, as the first Foreign Minister of Bangladesh. Now, he is one of the last surviving members of the government of the Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as well as of the Mujibnagar administration. In that sense, Abdus Samad Azad remains a part of history.

Back in early 1972, Samad was the first cabinet minister I had called on for breakfast at his official residence. In the delightfully informal setting, we sat on the first floor balcony of the 50-year old wooden building in a pleasantly warm sunshine of early winter, talking of some grand plans for the Foreign Ministry, such as the setting up of a "think tank" for perspective planning of the external relations of the new republic. In those days, we always thought of new ideas, seldom looking

for personal involvement. But these days... well, that's another matter.

From the balcony, I could see the national flag fluttering in the wind from the pole, a brand new one. It looked good.

"Hope you have a brand new official car," I said casually. "It won't look nice flying our national flag from a ramshackle second-hand car left behind by a provincial minister of the erstwhile East Pakistan Government."

Samad could read my thoughts. "One day, you may well be flying the national flag from your car," Samad said in an encouraging tone. "But you will have to run in the election from your hometown at Maulvi Bazar."

Then, in the encouraging tone, he added, "Bangabandhu will surely make you a Minister of State, perhaps in my ministry, or maybe a

Deputy Minister."

It did not matter that I was not being considered material for a full cabinet minister. What lifted my heart was the hope that I might one day fly the national flag from my official car and, if government rules allowed, lend it to any of my four brothers and three sisters whoever managed to buy a second-hand car while my job as the Minister for State or Deputy Minister lasted.

All this was way back in 1972, when we all felt sentimental about Bangabandhu, the national flag and national anthem, in that order. Within two years, the order was reversed.

My own dream of flying the national flag has so far remained unfulfilled. However, after the battle of words at the Jatiya Sangsad over the use of this symbol of authority, some new

options are said to be under consideration. They are as follows:

First, any citizen of Bangladesh, above the age of 50, would be permitted to fly the national flag from the bonnet of his (or her) car on a payment of ten lacs which would be used by the Finance Ministry to settle bad debts of nationalised banks;

Secondly, editors of Trust newspapers would be given the status of the Ministers of State and be entitled to fly the national flag from their vehicles; and

Thirdly, any minister dropped from the cabinet (if and when) a reshuffle takes place would be allowed to keep the national flag as a personal souvenir on payment of a price to be decided at a cabinet meeting.

These are well thought-out options. However, a disturbing possibility has also surfaced. Rumour has it that the size of the national flag used by a minister will vary according to his status and the portfolio. So, the flag flown by a senior minister like Mirza Gohar Hafiz would be seen from a distance of a mile, while a Minister of State might think twice before using his tiny emblem. The whole idea is said to be the brain-child of the Minister for Information. He wants to settle the matter once for all.

Neither Nasser nor Nehru had any answer to the Yugoslav leader's question. They sat in silence, gloomily pondering the grim prediction made by Tito, a prediction that, we know now, came true in a matter of decades.

## MY WORLD

S. M. Ali



## REFLECTIONS

### The Other Man's Death

by Qazi Moinul Fazal

"ANY man's death diminishes me." Really? John Donne's statement seems slightly excessive, but he was a seventeenth century English churchman. How relevant is his pious pronouncement in today's world? Can we actually feel the deaths of enemies, or even strangers as a loss to ourselves?

Malthusian economics would suggest that an individual's death actually enhances us: the more that dies off the more space and material there is left for everyone else. Take a look at countries bursting with people. Kill off half the population of Bangladesh (excluding our family, of course), and the rest of us will manage quite well, thank you — with double the standard of living.

Perhaps Lawrence Summers, the Harvard Professor turned Chief Economist at World Bank, was thinking about the absurdity of Donne's words when, in a memo, he suggested that all the polluting industries of the developed world should be transferred to the third world countries — lives there are "cheap". Why should an American care about the deaths of third world citizens due to industrial pollution? In fact, why should even a citizen of a third world country feel diminished by the death of total strangers in another underdeveloped country, let's say, due to an industrial gas leak?

Fine, I did shed a tear or two for the several thousand casualties of the Union Carbide toxic gas leak in Bhopal, India. Maybe, the process of diminishing implied by Donne is a state of grief. Of course, I care about people dying unnecessarily. We all shake our heads in pity at the starving children in Bangladesh and other poor countries. When we read about train crashes or natural disasters our hearts, and sometimes, our money reach out to the victims. Feel the death of strangers? Yes! We cry. We sincerely do experience pangs of pity and sorrow, especially if the newspaper article or pictures are graphic enough for us to relate with the sufferers. Well, we feel a fleeting sense of sorrow till the next disaster hits the headlines.

Now, try to feel diminished by the death of someone who is your ideological or cultural opposite. The task is indeed difficult. Can a true Arab feel any anguish for the death of Jews in "terrorist" attacks? Aren't they killing and tortur-

ing Muslim brethren in Palestine? Isn't the Zionist movement racist and unjust?

On the other hand, why should a Jew feel any sympathy for the death of anyone outside Israel when they themselves have been persecuted throughout history? Imagine you are an Israeli. Wouldn't you fight and kill for your country? Being a victim of brutality, wouldn't you lash out as a perpetrator of brutality as a reflex action?

At times, we are not only unable to feel grief, but we rejoice at a death and feel enhanced. I am as patriotic as the next person, and of course, if I were able, I would have fought for the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. And that meant killing the Pakistanis who committed various atrocities on our people. If gaining liberty meant killing the Pakistani soldiers, of course I would have felt enhanced, because of my nationalistic fervour, by the death of my enemy.

Give anyone a cause or ideology and if they feel strongly enough, they will go and fight for it. Eventually, killing becomes an easy solution. Give a gun to a child and teach him how evil your enemies are, and he will quite willingly go and destroy a few of them.

In this analysis, John Donne is quite off the mark. Perhaps we can feel "some" grief for the death of "some" strangers. But actually "diminished"? Hardly. Our lives go on as before, perhaps even better. And "any"? No, all of us are quite happy to see dead a few of those people we don't like too much.

Even the brief spell of sympathy that we may feel for strangers becomes intricate at times. How should a Muslim Bangladeshi react to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait? The government of Bangladesh sent troops to support the opposition to Saddam Hussein, but the general consensus of the Bangladeshis was to support him. Both Kuwait and Iraq are our Muslim brothers. If I supported Iraq, should I stop caring about the death and suffering of the people of Kuwait? (At the same time, I would have to avert my eyes from the persecution of the Kurds). If I supported Kuwait did that mean I was giving a tacit approval of the deaths of several hundred thousand Iraqi soldiers under US air bombing? The answer, I am sure, depended on with what I identified myself most. If I felt more

as a Bangladeshi cherishing the independence of our country, of course, I would support the defeat of Iraq — it was destroying the sovereignty of Kuwait. On the other hand, if I were identifying myself as a Muslim, who disliked the encroachment of the West in our culture, of course I would feel grief for my brother Iraqis. God help the Iraqis destroy Israel and defy the imperialist Americans, I would think.

Suppose I am an average American. I feel grief for the suffering of the Kuwaitis and feel apprehension at the security of Israel. I rejoice at the destruction of the Iraqi army. (Does it matter if not only Iraqi soldiers died but also women and children as well instead of

utensils, her "boti", "kula" and "dekchi" were carefully presented in tiny, neat stitches. There was also a depiction of a boy having his meal near his house. In another corner was seen a man in his bullock cart while a boy was chasing a cock. The colours were carefully balanced, the browns and the blues offsetting the brilliant yellows and oranges.

The oblong Nakshi Arshi Lata from Rangpur was a sophisticated piece indeed. This had four tassels at four ends. There was a neat border done in brown. Neat floral motifs in vermilion and indigo blue plus emerald green filled the piece.

The Nakshi Kantha wall decoration from Sonargaon was a massive piece of display. There were three main displays on the kantha. One showed royally going by boat surrounded by fish and birds of different shapes and sizes. The people in the boat were carefully stitched and each given an individual pose and colour of clothes. The boat too was skilfully done and looked like a peacock in its complete glory.



Women making Nakshi Kantha in a Jamalpur village

the root of the Iraqi problem. Saddam Hussein, who, by the way, was supported by the Americans in the past? Now what grief do I have for the hundred thousand dead or dying East Timorese in Indonesia? Well, out of sight, out of mind. Show me some pictures and I will feel some pity.

Unfortunately, sympathy or the sense of feeling diminished is quite complicated. My grief for strangers are temporary, only a basic human nature. Also, other's suffering may actually be a chance to rejoice, for the stranger may be an enemy. Similarly, what is my source of identity? My identity is the only guide for me to judge the death of my



Nakshi Kantha cushion cover from Jassore

In the centre was a court with royally on throne and courtiers attending them. The men and women were shown in costly costumes with chairs, mats, attendants and lanterns. Stars, paisley patterns and floral motifs completed the decorations.

Nakshi Kantha food cover from Kishoreganj had birds, fish, animals and foliage done in blue and red against a white background. Heart shapes, circles, scallops were methodically done. It had two sets of borders, both a combination of blue and red stitches.

The Nakshi Ashon Kantha from Gopalganj had paisley patterns, sun-swirls and flowers in green and vermilion. The patterns were set in 16 squares. The work was done with care and precision.

Nakshi Jaenamaz from Kishoreganj had a bold mosque in its body, all complete with three large domes, four minarets and arches. Plants

and shrubs completed the picture along with a large pineapple done in the forefront in red and blue. Swirls of flowers and tendrils were found in the border.

The Nakshi bag from Khulna had geometrical patterns all over it in vibrant vermilion and indigo. The squares and triangles certainly fascinated the viewer. Oranges, pinks and reds predominated the piece. The patterns were set out in two oblong sections with 4 rectangular borders.

The Nakshi cushion cover from Jessore was a magnificent one. It had elephants, peacocks, other birds of all shapes, sizes and colours, fish, trees, shrubs, lotuses, paisley patterns and sunbursts. Pinks, blues, oranges, and purples were used for the stunning effect.

Houses done in orange, red and black in the Nakshi Ashon Kantha from Kishoreganj added variety to the range of decoration of the kanthas. Autumnal leaves in black, yellow and orange plus swirls of orange and red flowers, offset by black, gave the "ashon" a dramatic effect.

—FH

# Neelima Sen in Dhaka

Wahidul Haque

For those hundreds in the city that cultivate Rabindra Sangeet with an amount of seriousness and even the thousands that take more than a casual interest in the songs by the great man, it is quite a news — incredible at first — that Nilima Sen is in Dhaka and that it is weeks that she is here.

The former chief of the Visva-Bharati Sangeet Bhavan



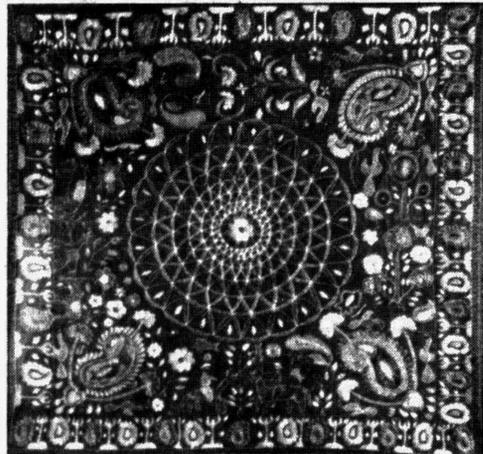
Nilima Sen speaking at the inaugural of her workshop of Rabindra Sangeet late last month. The inauguration was done by Begum Sufia Kamal and the function conducted by Dr Sanjida Khatun. Photo: Bachchu Choudhury

is here on a purely private visit. But she has done so at the invitation of Chhayanaut, the doyen of cultural organisations in Bangladesh. The organisation has arranged to put her month-long stay in the city to good use by calling in all serious students and practitioners of her art to come and sit at her feet. Six days a week the spacious hall of a Dhanmandi residence is filled with almost all of the who's who in Bangladesh's little world of Rabindra Sangeet. And the big mansion starts exuding heavenly airs. It is not only that the last word in homophonic beauty wafts out of the windows of that hall, — the whole milieu rings out every afternoon. It is a haunting, bewitching experience.

Srimati Nilima Sen, who works such a spell, is long a resident of Santiniketan — doing her studies there, raising a family and teaching at the

listening to Nilima Sen singing. Or Konika Bandyopadhyay or Subinoy Roy. Three district musical personalities but all three — and there are a host of other stalwarts besides — carrying on the same tradition of perfection of *laya* and *swara* and *matra* and *trueness* to the mood and temper and inner significance of the lyric. And, perhaps above all, the manifest shaping of the *chhanda* — the intricate designs on the time element. Nilima and her peers differ from each other by the differing combinations of the degree of perfection in these and by the difference of their personalities. And she occupies a special place in the Tagore Song pantheon for her soulful rendition, for her evocation through a Shelley-sky-larkesque ethereal timbre of sentiments and dream worlds that make us totally oblivious to our otherwise banal existence.

## The Fascination of Antique Needlepoints



Nakshi Kantha cushion cover from Jassore

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—FH

## WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,  
I am 18-year-old and a very responsible person. My parents don't want to give me any independence. I am sick and tired of their constant questions, about where I am going, with whom etc. I am not allowed to go anywhere alone, not even with the driver or a maid. My mother comes along to drop me. This is very embarrassing as none of my friends have such parents. Please advise, what shall I do.  
Shelley, Moghbazar.

Dear Shelley,  
Young people dislike being controlled. This is universal but everyone has to go through it. Your parents in their own way are showing that they care about you. The present law and order situation has worsened things for you people. But believe me this will pass, just be patient. Meanwhile you can do things that prove you are responsible such as returning home on time, doing your share of the house work etc.

Dear Mita,  
My elder sister got married three years ago at age 24. She used to work in a bank, had many friends, was extremely witty and a fun to be with besides being extremely attractive. Now she has two children, has gained weight, does not work outside the home and cannot talk about anything else but her babies. Looking at her I am put off by marriage. If this is what marriage does then I am not interested. What do you think?  
Rima, Naya Paltan.

Dear Rima,  
There are two sides to the situation. First just because your sister has gained weight, does not mean she is not happy. Perhaps she has chosen to do this for the present and will get back to her career when the children are older. Now it also very well be true that she has resigned herself to the monotony of married life from which she may never come out. For you this could be a lesson, getting put off by marriage is no solution because chances are that you will get married some day. It is possible to have an exciting marriage plus a career and children too.

Dear Mita,  
My only son is 18 and has started keeping bad company. I don't know how to stop him because anything I say makes the situation worse. He used to be a very good student but now barely manages to pass. I am afraid that my worse fear might come true because he looks strange, his hands tremble, his eyes look blurred. Please advise me, what shall I do? This will ruin my whole family.  
Anonymous, Gulshan.

Dear Anonymous,  
This is the most painful reality that parents have to face. Please take hold of yourself and see it as a big family crisis. All of you, including your husband, should put your head together and think of how you can solve the problem. Try to find out what he does, where he goes and whom he meets. Have a doctor, examine him, because his physical symptoms could be due to some other reason. But above all most importantly, please look into the reasons behind this strange behaviour. Could it be due to some frustration he is harbouring but cannot talk about? Look into your relationship with your son, you might find the answer.

Dear Mita,  
In your column last week you asked not to send messages through this column. I was a little disappointed because some of us who cannot convey a message directly to someone would like to do through your column. I was shocked to learn that some readers have been playing antics or sending false letters. You should discourage this very strongly. Many of us like your column and have found good advice in it, so would like to thank you.  
Rahat, Dhanmandi.

Dear Rahat,  
Thank you for your kind letter. Don't worry about the false letters. I can deal with them. Please don't be disappointed because I discourage messages in my column. If you combine it with a problem needing a solution, I will print it.