

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

I was probably a sense of adventure, or just a nostalgia for the past, that made a group of close elderly female relatives of mine leave Dhaka last week, cross the Indo-Bangladesh border and visit their ancestral home which is not too far from Karimganj on one side and Badarpur Railway Junction from the other end.

There are some 14 people in the group, about half of them in the age bracket of 65-75, a few suffering from old age ailments. But they are full of guts and enthusiasm about seeing the place where many, related as sisters, were born and married, before going in different directions, including Britain. Their ancestral home, a number of well-built pucca houses, in a village called Deorail, fell in India. It is now being looked after by one part of the family that stayed behind in the village.

So, for these elderly relatives of mine, this emotional visit to Deorail which they had not seen for more than three decades is bound to evoke all kinds of feelings, from sadness and sense of loss of close relatives who are no more to that mild excitement of recognising some old trees and plants which they had known from their childhood.

It seems the group chose the route carefully, perhaps under the expert and helpful advice of the visa section of the Indian High Commission here. It travelled by train from here to Sylhet, hired a mini-bus and started the journey, with Deorail, marked on the road map (if there was any) as its final destination. I am told, the group did not pass through Karimganj, but somewhere along the way, it took a new access road to go up to Badarpur and then head for Deorail.

It is a pity that the group skirted Karimganj which retains an important place in my school days' memories, enough to write a fairly long piece on the town. The important thing is, this is where my modest political education began, when one day I sat on the back-row at the local town hall and, in rapt attention, listened to Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. With his beard already long and turning grey, the Moulana was then the President of the All Assam Muslim League, but pursuing a strident critical line against the provincial Muslim League administration of Syed Sadullah. The immediate issue related to Sadullah's opposition to Bengalee migration to vast land areas in the districts of the Assam Valley, the home of the Chief Minister. If Bhashani advocated the right of peasants from the Surma Valley to move to other parts of their own province, he also spoke up for land reforms, better educational facilities for the poorest of the poor, an easy debt settlement system for farmers and for harmony between the Muslims and Hindus. This was probably the first

time that I heard a politician discuss these issues with force and conviction. Little did I know that in a matter of decades, I would move up from the back-row of the Karimganj Town Hall and cover the activities of this incredible personality as a reporter and then even serve him as an interpreter during his stay in London.

There was another kind of contribution Karimganj made to my political education. As a result of the referendum, the whole of Sylhet which included Karimganj, opted for Pakistan. So, on August 14, 1947, Pakistani flags flew from house-tops and, in a quiet solemn mood, people celebrated the advent of independence, with Muslims obviously feeling a great deal more jubilant than the Hindus. Two days later, the Redcliffe Award placed Karimganj in India, using the Kushiara river that flew between the town and Zakiganj as the boundary between India and Pakistan.

The Indian national flag replaced the Pakistani ones, but no one made too much fuss about the change. Some Muslims went to mosques and, it is said, asked for forgiveness of Allah for their unknown sins which made them lose their place in Pakistan. The Indian national anthem was played from loud-speakers and we heard news from the Calcutta station of All India Radio. Dear old Fatch Lohani, probably the first news-reader of Dhaka Station of Radio Pakistan was no longer heard at Karimganj.

It was all very peaceful, full of subdued amity and harmony. When we started packing our meagre possessions, with my father ready to move to his new posting in what was then East Pakistan, his local friends and Hindu colleagues came to help. No matter how we saw the situation in political terms, it was a break-up in human relationship that we were hardly prepared for. The fact that it ended in embraces rather than in an exchange of angry glances was part of my humble political education.

BELIEVE it or not, Deorail has a modest place in contemporary Bengali literature. Some time in mid-forties, uncle Syed Mujtaba Ali wrote a long poem for a handwritten family magazine. The entire piece which he wrote from Boroda where he then lived and taught in the local

college was full of his recollections of his life in Sylhet, at various places, about his friends and relatives, about our cuisine, in fact, about anything and everything that had touched the heart of this sensitive human being.

It is a superb composition. Not surprisingly, it is included in one of the volumes of the 12-part collected writings of Syed Mujtaba Ali, brought out by his publisher in Calcutta.

In this long poem, several stanzas are devoted to Deorail, a little bit to its scenic beauty but mostly to the gracious living of its inhabitants, in which neither luxury nor blatant affluence had any place. Instead, there was emphasis on education, modesty and, much to my uncle's delight, good food. Years later, second generation members of families in Deorail became doctors, bankers and educationists, among others.

One person of the Deorail clan that fascinated uncle Mujtaba Ali most was of course Mohiuddin Ahmed, a civil servant, and the younger brother of noted writer Matinuddin Ahmed, both dead a long time ago.

The artistically designed house of the two brothers in Deorail was a garden by itself, full of trees, unusual plants—and orchids. Incredible though it may sound to many people today, Mohiuddin Ahmed pursued his passion of growing all varieties of orchids, in that faraway village near Badarpur, often sitting up at night watching them open up. He was also a keen photographer. So, I believe, he left behind a good collection of pictures of his orchids.

All this finds its rightful place in the poem of Syed Mujtaba Ali.

Having visited Deorail many times as a teenager with my parents, I saw a good deal of this gracious living in that family that grew orchids, had elephants which we rode on going out for deer hunting and sampled a cuisine that we seldom found anywhere else in the district.

Let us hope that part of this gracious living has survived for my elderly female relatives who are just now visiting their ancestral home in Deorail. From here, I see smiles on their faces, but I also notice some tears.

INDIAN journalism has produced a number of good all-rounders. They started as reporters, got foreign assignments, handled work on

the newdesk, wrote political commentaries and then took over as chief editors of national dailies.

Only a few among them made a greater impact on the country's media scene than Shri Mulgaokar, until recently, the Chief Editor of *The Indian Express* group of papers, who passed away in New Delhi last week. He was just past 80.

Mulgaokar — we all addressed him as Shri — started as a reporter and was one of the first Indian journalists, to be posted as a London correspondent in the mid-fifties. That's where we first met, when he would come to see Moulana Bhashani, then living in a kind of self-imposed political exile in the British capital.

Two decades later, we met again and worked together, sharing the same desk, in an unlikely place, Singapore, performing two somewhat unlikely jobs, but both rather comfortable and stimulating. In *The New Nation*, a serious mid-afternoon daily, launched by *The Straits Times* group, Shri was the Foreign Editor, while I worked as the Roving Foreign Editor. The year was 1971, a crucial year for all of us, professionally and otherwise. I left Singapore in February, 1972 to return to Bangladesh on an assignment. Shri went back to New Delhi a few months later to take over as the Chief Editor of *The Indian Express*.

Shri was my mentor, a friend, a good colleague and caring host for lunch at his three-room apartment, all rolled into one. The new daily had a few former editors, but it was also full of young reporters and sub-editors, columnists and leader-writers. It took us very little time to realise that one colleague we could rely on for guidance and advice was Mulgaokar. From time to time, he would edit my reports and columns and reprimand me if there were what he would call 'silly errors.' His editorials were direct and forceful — he wrote some superb ones on the genocide in Bangladesh — and his by-lined weekly columns were, to quote our then editor, 'just elegant.'

My last meeting with Shri which took place a few years ago was at his house in Jorbagh in New Delhi. We sat in a comfortable tastefully furnished living room, overlooking what I thought was the greenest lawn in the Indian capital. Then, we had a simple lunch, cooked and served by Krishna, Shri's Kashmiri wife.

Mulgaokar was often in my thoughts. I invariably asked after him whenever we had a friend visiting us from New Delhi. Recent reports gave me a gloomy picture of the health of my friend. I was getting ready to have a sad news.

The sense of loss is there, loss for Indian journalism and loss for many of his friends in different parts of Asia. May he rest in peace.

London — a Shopper's Paradise

by Linda Parker

(British Tourist Authority)

LONDON is one of the most exciting and easiest places to shop. Many parts of the city have a distinct character and specialise in particular styles or products. A short time spent researching before going shopping ensures you will take home a special buy or bargain.

Shopping in London is a social event — with many cafes and bars from where you can observe the hustle and bustle and watch street entertainers, known as buskers.

Most visitors immediately think of Oxford and Regent streets in the West End as the main shopping areas — yet these are only the most obvious. All the well-known chain stores can be found there, including traditional Marks & Spencer, British Home Stores and C&A, and inexpensive fashion houses such as Miss Selfridge, Hennes and River Island. Branches of Mark One and What She Wants offer bargain basic wardrobe items from £1.99.

As well as shoe and clothes shops galore, the Oxford and Regent streets have a good selection of record shops (three of which — HMV, Virgin and Tower Records — each claim to be the largest in the world), and opticians (contact lenses less than £40 a pair), there are

the impressive, mock-Tudor store of Liberty, with its distinctive designs and prints in clothing and all manner of accessories, also featuring top-quality China, glassware, jewellery, leather products, linen and household goods. Electrical bargains of every type can be found in Tottenham Court Road and, although the advice is not particularly specialist, the prices are unrivalled.

Foyles, Dillons and waterstones have the largest selections of books, with the highest concentration of bookshops being found in Charing Cross Road.

For a touch of exclusivity, Knightsbridge offer purchasers the most cachet. In addition to the most famous department store in the world, Harrods — which claims it can provide everything from a pin to an elephant — there are many other top stores, and individual designer shops in nearby Sloane Street, leading to Chelsea.

Exclusive fashions are the

Oxford Street, antiquarian maps at the Map House in exclusive Beauchamp Place in Knightsbridge, Button Queen in Marylebone Lane; to scissors and boomerangs for left-handers at Anything Left-Handed in Beak Street.

The gift shops that are now an integral part of museums, art galleries and National Trust properties are excellent hunting grounds for unusual souvenirs. They sell interesting, high-quality goods, including reproductions of their rarest treasures, commemorative books, attractive jewellery based on ancient designs, and miscellaneous articles, from Astronaut freeze-dried ice-cream at the Science Museum, to Winston Churchill tea and boxer shorts with a fighter plane design at the Imperial War Museum.

Shoppers looking for more 'way out' goods could try Kings Road in Chelsea, or Kensington Market and Hyper Hyper in Kensington High Street. Both areas boast unusual fashion collections — dresses with skull and crossbones, American 1950s gear, punk clothes and rubber outfits. Even if it is not to your taste, just browsing is an experience.

Best for browsing and bargains are London's many street markets. From high-quality



Browsers in one of London's street markets.

also several large department stores — principally Selfridges, in its imposing headquarters, and John Lewis, famous for its reasonably-priced household goods.

Specialist stores include the Virgin Games Store, stacked from floor to ceiling with almost every board and computer game imaginable (Oxford Street near Tottenham Court Road underground station); Hamleys, the biggest toy shop in the world; and the Wall Disney Store (both in Regent Street).

Quintessentially English
Regent Street also contains the headquarters store of Burberrys, famous for its quintessentially English raincoat, but now providing a range of clothing and accessories. Meanwhile, tucked in the angle of Regent and Oxford streets near Oxford Circus, is

mainstay of Bond Street and South Molton Street (both off Oxford Street) and Savile Row, famous for its bespoke tailors. Even there the prudent shopper can occasionally spot a bargain on the 'sale' and 'end of season' rails.

Value-for-money classics by Britain's leading designers can be discovered at fashion displays held at town halls — advertised in listings magazines — at sales, or at the special warehouses and 'nearly new' shops such as Pzazz at 13 Church Road SW13, Laurel Herman in Lambolle Place, Hampstead, Designs in Rosslyn Hill, and the Frock Exchange in Fulham Palace Road.

Museum Shops
Shoppers looking for something distinctive will not be disappointed — from umbrella and walking stick specialists James Smith and Sons in New

fashion stalls set alongside permanent shops in Covent Garden, to the traditional cheap-and-cheerful self-everything stalls of petticoat and Brick land (both held on Sundays, nearest underground station Aldgate East) in the East End, there is something for everyone.

Portobello Road enjoys an international reputation for its antiques (Saturdays from 0700 hours) and the fashions, bric-a-brac and jewellery stalls at trendy Camden Lock, next to a canal, draw enthusiastic crowds of mainly young people at weekends.

Nearly 100 markets, their locations and opening times, are listed in 'Markets in London' — a London Tourist Board leaflet available free from the capital's tourist information centres.

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Cultural Implications of International Broadcasting in Bangladesh

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of cultural frontiers, pluralism, and, however ironical it might sound at this moment of history, about human solidarity, validated by truth and conscience.

We must recognize our ambivalence in that we need and desire its blessings and yet seem to be suspicious of its bias and its largely unidirectional nature, forgetting that it has often been our only means of access to information about our own public affairs, the deeds and misdeeds of our own governments. It is true that the relationship between the weak and powerful nations would be, for the foreseeable future, one of tension, or of active conflict, but it would be a grave mistake to refuse to learn about them and their societies.

We must appreciate that nations have been influencing one another culturally from time immemorial and that influences that are capable of assimilation and adaptation answer some needs within us and enrich us. What happens when an influence with an inner core of relevance is at work is a combination of foreign and native elements resulting in a welcome new amalgam? While such mixtures are not only to be expected but inevitable, a truly alien influence never stays for long because nature's mould rejects it. If we are securely based in our own culture we would receive the world, and whatever is worthwhile in it, with discrimination and without undue suspicion and fear. The world is for us to know — it is our world too.

A fact to be noted is that popular culture, especially in its musical manifestation, often a target of attack as a foreign import, although not solely purveyed through the electronic media, was initially a Western phenomenon but is now a world-wide one with sympathetic connections with the arts of painting and the theatre. It has perhaps influenced some of our art forms but not overwhelmed any of them. Incidentally, the foreign electronic media cannot fairly be blamed for glutting us with images of violence and sex, because they are there aplenty in our cinema. Here a word about the representation of sex in our cinema is perhaps in order.

It is clothed and extraordinarily obscene and without the frankness and dignity of a beautiful uncovered body.

I accept that there is a certain degree of homogenizing of culture owing to exposure to popular culture from the West — images of plenty, glamour,

fashions in music, styles of clothes, building, decoration, manners, and speech. But we as a community, aware and respectful of our roots and happy in our traditional forms and yet finding new forms of self-expression under the impact of the West, do not feel ourselves so undermined as to cry 'doom'. Our safeguard has so far perhaps been our deep, unaggressive, and aesthetic variety of nationalism.

There is then no cultural invasion from air frequencies to be really afraid of. Our pattern of response to what is conveyed through them however remains colonial. Anything broadcast in English, the language of the erstwhile rulers, and from the 'metropolis' has, for a variety of reasons, a weight and prestige which the local electronic media do not enjoy. English, the language of hegemony, is admired for its power and reach: power has its fascination for even those who resent it. The stuff it puts across is the product of superior technology, efficient and instant coverage of events across the globe, and 'authoritative' commentary. Besides, it is a one way traffic — 'they produce and we consume. The problem is compounded in our case by the fact that radio and television here are a state monopoly and are totally subservient to the government of the day, their low credibility or lack of it raising the credibility of information from foreign sources. In con-

trast, the BBC is an autonomous institution 'with full editorial and managerial independence' and the CNN a product of the American free market with all that it means. International broadcasting should have been a challenge to Radio Bangladesh and Bangladesh Television to improve their credibility, quality, and outreach. Unfortunately, the political dispensation in the country does not yet seem to believe that these things are important.

By making Bangladesh Television a partial vehicle for the CNN and the BBC World Service, with others reportedly soon to share it and enough traffic to fill a twenty-four hour channel, the Government has however created a situation with interesting possibilities. The least that a well-informed public would expect is that the establishment should not look primitive, odious and silly. Our own radio and television broadcasts are hourly being compared with foreign broadcasts and judged, and pressure is likely to build up for doing away with political control of information and for enabling these media to fulfil the obligations of an open society by honestly undertaking the responsibility to inform and enlighten.

International broadcasting has in the long run the greatest significance for our politics. I believe, more and more people would see how a political debate is conducted, the

public mind educated, and governmental accountability ensured in democratic societies. The community would, increasingly realise that freedom is viable only with free institutions. I trust the proposed new channel is not packed with fare designed to put all questions to sleep.

Whatever has been said above must be mediated by the following reflections: one, the BBC is, all said and done, a British institution, albeit a source of information and en-

lightenment universally available. Its command of a multiple vision, awesome capacity for assembling information and 'rigorous' standards of 'impartiality', however do not render it absolutely immune from the bias of its country, race and culture; two, broadcasting organizations like the CNN have a lively interest in expanding their market and the bracket would include the BBC World Service too. I heartily support the service

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Whispers in the Net for Banalata

by Azfar Hussain

Beneath this stone unmoved, still by time and moss, a cry seeks its connections, lost long ago. See, this lyrical blue hand now yawns like an egg lying sleepless and silent. Whispers in the twigs of trees and the feathers of birds cobbling up into an uneasy truce now trace the track to silence: Silence, a gesture only catching the metaphor of a seven-days-old moon.

Kissing the eyebrow of a musical moment a lover returns home, and he returns to the spot called wound, a wound burning and sprawling like love, the fisherman's net only gets soaked in the stellar water.

Talk to the night and you would know only a man and a woman are tired of their love: the rains fall but do not sound and a cry is a bird lost in the direction of the yawning blue that you call plenitude in a strange language. Whispers, only whispers real, unreal.

This poem is selected for inclusion in the forthcoming anthology 'Commonwealth Poetry' to be published by the Indiana University Press, USA.

Saga of the Bullets

by G A Momin

In '52 I followed the bullets to find where they went. They pierced through my friend's bosoms. In '71 I followed the bullets to find where they went. They stripped the nation of all the blossoms. In '75 I followed the bullets to find where they went. They tore through the sun of my flag. In '81 I followed the bullets to find where they went. They brought down a heroic fighter to sag. In '90 I followed the bullets to find where they went. They got my neighbour's son killed. In '91 with new hopes in my heart filled, I said to the bullets, "from now on I do not have to follow thee," "Nevertheless" they said from now on they would follow me.

A Poem Dedicated to the Martyr Chinku

by Syed Ali Kabir

You lie in an unknown grave, Beside the grave of your friend Khusru, Who participated in your funeral prayers, Was there any grass on the grave, Was there any melancholy cry from a bird? And did the housewives on hearing the news said Who is this young man like an unseathed sword, As though a white man.

Who was his companion, The one the very embodiment of a genuine Bengalee? Searching for you, Chinku Your father went from place to place. Did your disembodied soul follow him? Send the news if you can, Your mother so longs for your news.

You can appear in a dream Or your dear ones' imagination. Mother wants to get your news. And father? Why, he is now with you.

Translated by Abu Rushd