

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

lunch — the most delicious kebab I have ever tasted anywhere in the world, soft nan and some sauce — my friend told him that my uncle had most certainly eaten his lunch at the same restaurant some forty years earlier. For me, therefore, it was a kind of nostalgic visit.

The waiter gave me a broad smile. "I thought," he said with a grin, "I had seen someone who resembled you some forty years ago." Then came the punch line. "Let me check if he owed us any unpaid bill."

My friend translated it all from Arabic to English. We all had a hearty laugh. Unlike Arabs in other countries of the region, Egyptians have a good sense of humour. May be that's what keeps these people smiling in the midst of many misfortunes.

If we no longer walk through the shaded roads of Ramna, take a leisurely stroll through the soles of Sukunvit in Bangkok or stop by Manila Bay to look at the sunset, we also no longer see Zamalek in the same way as we did some two and a half decades earlier. This fashionable residential area in the Egyptian capital, full of medium-sized houses along tree-lined avenues, a couple of posh clubs, cafes and well-stocked shops was hardly recognisable when we drove through it in the mid-eighties. Few capitals in the developing world have changed that much — and all for the worse — over the past three decades as Cairo.

Years later, it was uncle Syed Mujtaba Ali who would chat with us about Cairo, especially about Al-Azhar where he had studied for some time, in his inimitable style, mixing fact with fiction. He would give us glimpses of the crowded bazaar, of the long winding lanes lined with packed cafes and of endless noise mingling with the smell of kebab, nan — and of course of Egyptian coffee.

During one of my last visits to Cairo in mid-seventies, an Egyptian friend took me to the Al-Azhar area. Having just come from Europe where major educational buildings are so well-maintained, surrounded by green lawns, a somewhat rundown look of the great — perhaps the greatest — Islamic university was something of a disappointment to me. We walked through the crowded lanes, smelled the noise and flavour of the bazaar and ended up at a kebab shop which, according to my companion, was probably as old as a century. This is perhaps where your uncle had his occasional lunches," he said. It was packed and we just managed to find a small table, sharing it with two other persons.

When a youngish-looking waiter served our



Pyramids: Are they threatened by pollution?

In joining the rank of megacities, the population in the Egyptian capital has now crossed the seven million mark, just a little ahead that of Dhaka but still behind Manila, Jakarta, Bangkok and, of course, the Mexico City. With over 45 per cent of the population living in major urban centres, along the fertile Nile valley that stretches only 550 miles, Egypt is a nightmare for urban planners. Nigeria tackled the urban explosion in its over-populated chaotic capital by moving out of Lagos to Abuja. At one stage, Thailand started looking at Thonburi, across the Chao Phraya river, as a possible alternative to Bangkok. But no one talks of the move any more. Like Bangladesh, Egypt is without a choice. The Arab country is stuck with Cairo just as we are with Dhaka.

Meanwhile, pollution, the drainage system, the traffic, the shortage of housing and expansion of slums, among others, have been slowly turning the capital of Egypt into a horrendous city, without any of the charms and grace that I saw in it during my first trip to the city in the mid-fifties. In a documentary film on Cairo the other day, we saw part of the Nile, with rowing boatsmen, like our own Padma Nadeer Majhi, with a misty view that lent it a certain beauty. But it was not mist. It was pollution which, experts say, has started doing some damage even to the indestructible Pyramids, like it is reportedly causing to the great Taj Mahal.

The sub-continent and Egypt share much in common, in terms of their sense of history, cultural heritage and even literary achievements. After all, if Rabindranath Tagore was the first Asian writer to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, Naguib Mahfouz became the first Arab-writing author to receive the same honour, more than half a century later.

All these shared achievements are now overshadowed by common misfortunes virtually at all different fields. So, our prayer for the future of Egypt remains a subdued one. But it is solemn and it comes from our heart.

As a reasonably veteran traveller, one of my regrets is that I have seen nothing of black Africa and hardly much of the Arab world. At one stage, I looked forward to visiting Damascus, the capital of Syria, which is often said to be the oldest surviving city in the world, rivalling Jerusalem.

The idea of seeing more of the Middle East actually came to me from the late Zainul Abedin who, as my contemporaries would remember, served as the Director of Information of the then

East Pakistan government with distinction, taking particular interest in the career development of young journalists like myself and Mahbub Jamal Zahedi.

Just before I had left for London in the early fifties, Abedin had sent me a few letters of introduction to his friends in the British capital in such prestigious institutions as the BBC and the English Speaking Union. Then, in a long typed letter — he was a great correspondent — he had advised me never to return home without touring the Arab world. As he put it — I still remember the line — "You will have forty centuries breathing down neck, from the hills and mountains, from the rugged plains and the rivers, vast and small" — but I failed to carry out his advice, partly for lack of funds.

Oddly enough, a chance for me for paying a long visit to that region came in the mid-sixties. Then working for the *Bangkok Post*, I received an invitation to Israel, as an official guest, through the country's mission in Thailand. I treated the offer with interest, but pointed out to the embassy that there was no chance of my passport being endorsed for Israel (for that matter, at that time, for South Africa and Taiwan). But the second-in-command of the Israeli mission had done some homework on this matter.

"Your visa for Israel will be on a plain piece of paper," he said. "Your passport won't be stamped by our immigration."

"Unfortunately," I replied, "my visit to your country won't remain a secret." My position was, I would be writing under my own name and I would certainly be speaking my mind.

However, we agreed to meet the following Sunday for lunch to discuss the matter further.

We met for lunch. However, just by coincidence, the magazine section of the *Post* had carried a lead piece that Sunday, a hard-hitting article by the late Arnold *Towsey*, which was highly critical of Tel Aviv's *toymen* towards the Arab world. My Israeli host was flabbergasted. He assumed that, by approving the publication of this article, I was giving a signal of my refusal to accept the invitation to visit Israel. We finished the lunch in stony silence.

It was the first time I realised that with all their suave sophistication, Israeli diplomats could be unduly sensitive or almost arrogant, perhaps both.

Several years later, soon after the liberation of Bangladesh, the Israeli Embassy in Singapore, then my place of work, tried its best to be friendly with me, ready to use any channel to get Dhaka's recognition of Tel Aviv. I remember, one high-ranking official telling me a few times, "After all, General Jacob who played such an important role in the liberation of Bangladesh must be of Jewish faith. You should not forget it."

"I quickly told him off. To me, Gen Jacob is an Indian and I do not care about his religion," I said, not forgetting to remind him that many Muslim officers and jawans of the Indian army too had fought on the side of Bangladesh. The message from the Israeli Embassy in Singapore never reached Dhaka.

INTIMATE MADHUSUDAN A Genius Died 120 Years Ago

by Vidyarthi Chatterjee



Educated Bengalees of the day, inspired by the proud and powerful writings of the educationist and social reformer, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, were discovering a special delight in expressing themselves in their own language. Madhusudan, having realised his initial mistake and with the gift of genius, plunged into the new tide with characteristic fervour and energy.

Madhusudan's writings in Bengali were profoundly innovative in style and rebellious in content. His greatest achievement was the introduction into Bengali of the blank or unrhymed verse in 1860. This was followed by the introduction of the sonnet in 1865-66. A set of one hundred sonnets written when he was in a state of semi-starvation with his wife and children at Versailles, was the contribution of his physical and emotional sufferings of the period.

However, Madhusudan's reputation as the first modern Bengali poet rests primarily on his long epic poem, *Meghnadbadh Kavya*, written in blank verse in 1861. He treated the story of the defeat of Meghnad, son of Ravan, by Ram along the most daring and unconventional lines. We find him even making up an episode describing Ram's descent to hell which, of course, does not occur in the original Ramayan. The Ramayan theme treated from such an iconoclastic angle greatly infuriated the orthodox elements in the Hindu society of the day. Madhusudan's alleged heresy was that he had made a struggle between opposites and irreconcilables appear as a war between rivals and equals. One shudders to think what would have happened to Madhusudan had he been living today, in the midst of the current rabid tide of Hindu fanaticism!

Madhusudan's sympathy for Ravan is not camouflaged. It is open and there for all to see. Ravan's clan of demons is drawn in bright colours while Ram, Hanuman and the latter's army of monkeys are referred to with contempt. This highly individualistic treatment (Hindu purists would call it distorted or even perverted) of the epic theme is strongly suggestive of the Homeric influence on Madhusudan's education and poetic outlook. More than any other factor in his life it was his reading which moulded the poet's morals, methods and modes of expression which, taken together, is sometimes thought to be his deliberate iconoclasm.

Though essentially a poet, Madhusudan tried his hand at playwrighting, too, and achieved no mean success. *Sarmistha*, first staged in 1859, proved to be the most successful of his plays. The stage brought him into a close and fruitful relationship with another literary luminary of the day. Even while engaged in government service, in 1860, Dinabandhu Mitra wrote, anonymously, the play *Neel Darpan* which exposed the inhuman exploitation of poor and helpless Bengal peasants by British indigo planters. As a document of social protest, *Neel Darpan* set exceptionally high standards and, to this day, is used as a reference point in any serious discussion on the history and growth of Bengali theatre.

Madhusudan translated the play into English. The planters lost no time in striking back at Reverend James Long in whose name the translation was published. A British judge, making common cause with his aggrieved courtiers, fined Reverend Long a thousand rupees which in those days was a small fortune. The fine was promptly paid by a rich young zamindar with strong intellectual leanings, named Kalliprasanna Sinha (of Hutum Pechar Nakasha fame). The same Kalliprasanna had translated the *Mahabharat* into Bengali. One of the tragic coincidences of the Bengal Renaissance is that death claimed both Madhusudan and Dinabandhu Mitra in the same year, 1873.

While it is true that Michael Madhusudan Dutta exercised considerable influence on his contemporaries, those who came after him were even more profoundly influenced. Among them may be mentioned the two who have left the deepest impression on the literature of Bengal in the last hundred years: the novelist, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and Rabindranath Tagore. While Tagore started out disapproving of many things that Madhusudan had written only to recant in course of time, Bankim Chandra admitted his debt to the sterner critic of Bengali letters in unforgettable language. For instance by calling upon his countrymen to "fly a new flag and on it write the name, Sri Madhusudan".

OVER the years I have developed a practical philosophy which is based on an idealism — the idealism of my grandfather who believed in nature and nature alone. I recall that old days when my grand father, who was 110 in mid-fifties used to instruct my elder brother's wife to massage the entire body with pure mustard oil. After half an hour or so basking in the sun the grand-old man took his bath followed by the day's meal. This was really the daily routine till his death at 115. Had there been any delay for five minutes in anything of the daily routine, he started expressing displeasure. That was indeed a disciplined life. He had never suffered from any ailment. He died a natural death of old age.

Today we suffer from various ailments because we care little about nature. I recall these events to show as recent episode of mine. I had a fever and the doctor said that it was a virus infection of severe nature. I was naturally worried. The temperature did not, however, cross the danger level. Doctor, who is supposed to be a modern thought to prescribe antibiotic capsule, analgesic and antihistaminic tablets and when he had made the prescription the temperature was 101 degrees Fahrenheit. As suggested, however, I followed the prescription as a modern

man who naturally did not have much faith in nature. The prescribed medicine did really act — the temperature fell down considerably. But then the real tragedy began. At afternoon, on the same day, following remission of the fever, I started hiccupping. The attending physician, who would not diagnose, recommended my admission to hospital. Meanwhile, the blood pressure as recorded by the physician was 160/105 mm Hg. That caused me the real anxiety.

At Sarkari Karmachari Hospital, (formerly Railway Hospital) it took practically an hour to get to know the doctor concerned after completing the red-tape formalities although the patient being a mid-level officer and in a bad shape. Pulse was at its lowest run. After one hour, the doctor advised the chemist, to bring a few injections and tablets which were not readily available in the hospital. Medicines were bought but nurse on-duty could not adjust a solution. Another nurse helped her in completing the job. Doctors apparently were juniors who could not diagnose or assert themselves unless the consultant (a senior doctor) returned in the afternoon. By now the patient had been experiencing harrowing impact of unabated hiccupping accompanied with severe vomiting. Doctors remained puzzled

REFLECTIONS

Episode of a Patient

by Mohammad Amjad Hossain

and said, we were extremely sorry that we could not lessen your pain'. A few young lady doctors turned up to look after the patient but there was not much that they could do despite their apparent best desire. A hospital by name was neither equipped with modern equipment like ECC and endoscopic machine, nor it had essential life saving medicine. Doctors at the hospital, time and again, told that it would be furnished with necessary modern equipment and medicines.

The 50-bed hospital is located at the heart of the old town to cater to the needs of Sarkari Karmachari (government employees) but what a fun indeed! — without modern equipment and medicine while doctors, nurses and a few staff members are paid salaries as usual but without yielding as much!

Sarkari Karmachari is the service-holder who offers service to the government and the nation as well. And a hospital provides benefit in the form of service to the Karmachari when one is in need of it. But because of insufficient service facilities at the hospital, poor government Karmachari is deprived of the services of doctors.

Had the Sarkari Karmachari hospital been properly equipped with modern equipment and essential medicine, it could have absorbed pressure of the patients on the Medical College Hospital or PG Hospital to a certain extent.

Apart from insufficient equipment and medicine condition of the hospital itself deplorable — the essential toilet is simply beyond description. Lady doctors feel scared as there is no proper protection in the hospital. They complained, there seemed to be a den for drug addict youngsters a few years from the hospital. No apparent remedial measures had perhaps been taken by the law enforcing agencies, as I was told by the doctors.

Because of pitiable condition, a patient cannot remain there more than a couple of hours unless he/she has no

other means to afford to stay somewhere else for better facilities and treatment.

Without wasting further time this patient had to move to a private clinic — of course expensive. Facilities in the clinic were excellent. All modern machines were there to check the patient within half an hour.

Doctors were engaged in diagnosing while nurses attending with smiling faces — all in contrast to Sarkari Karmachari Hospital. But the fact remains that the consultants at the clinic were government doctors. Consultant physicians of the rank of Professors/Asst Professors, at the request of the clinic, attend patients, from Medical College or PG Hospital twice a day, depending on the nature of disease. It is quite likely that these professors, who work as consultants at the clinic, did not find time to pay attention to the poor patient admitted in the government sponsored hospitals as much he/she deserved although these doctors are trained at the expense of the poor taxpayers of the country.

In a poor country doctors are thought to have low salaries. It is equally true a considerable time, energy and money are invested in making a doctor but that does not mean that they would pay less attention to a poor patient of the

country! Doctors are respected in the society but if some of them are turned out to be 'money making machines', in the perception of the patients, I am afraid, they will certainly lose confidence of the general masses which might lead to where — no one knows.

It is high time that a compromise solution between doctors and the 'authority' should be evolved keeping in mind the conditions of the poor country.

It is also sad that some doctors having passed out from the medical colleges have not been enriching their knowledge with latest information on modern medicine and surgery. For this, they are required to subscribe the latest medical journals from abroad. A round-the-clock research should also be introduced in the medical institutes if not done earlier. A doctor with PhD/FRCS/MRCP may not do much unless he keeps his knowledge upto date. Because the medical science is a fast developing branch of human knowledge.

I would like to conclude by saying that attitude of a doctor or, for that matter, of a patient, plays an important role in the maintenance of a sound physical health. A smiling face of a doctor or nurse would cost nothing but would certainly help improve the ailing patient.

THE national anthem is played and folk troupes blowing bagpipes and playing drums entertain thousands of guests under a full moon in a public park. Forty bridegrooms are celebrating their wedding under government patronage.

A marriage Fund now gives substantial grants to eligible young bachelors, provided they vow to tie the knot with local Arab girls.

And a tiny bedouin village has a solemn treaty among its elders pledging to ensure that their sons take only local women as their brides.

All this is part of a spirited campaign in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to keep Arab social values and cultural traditions of the desert region free from alien influences. The goal is to discourage local men from marrying foreign women and in the process, encourage indigenous weddings.

High demand for dowry by the girls' parents and the heavy cost of wedding receptions prevents young Arab men from marrying local girls. They are tempted to wed foreign women because of their modern education and broad outlook.

Foreign women's entry into conservative Arab households leads to a clash of culture, linguistic incompatibility, social isolation due to lack of natural assimilation, and friction between the newcomer and other members of the family. More important, children are more influenced by mothers' alien ways, triggering wider social and cultural complexities in mixed marriages.

40-in-One Receptions Help Arab Wed Arab

Mohammed Aslam writes from Dubai

The authorities in the UAE, a federation of seven autonomous emirates which joined together at independence from Britain in 1971, therefore hit upon the idea of helping young citizens overcome the difficulties in finding local marriage partners.

Sheik Sultan bin Mohammed al-Qasimi, the Ruler of Sharjah, third largest emirate after Abu Dhabi and Dubai, started giving loans to local young men three years ago and holding mass marriages to cut expenditure on individual weddings and receptions.

At the seventh such ceremony since 1990, held in January, 40 bridegrooms celebrated at a mass reception attended by 5,000 men in Sharjah's Al-Jazira park. It was a lavish party. The local media reported that six tons of food were served and 10,000 plates spread on tables all over the park along the seashore.

The ostentation of the occasion was a little ironic since the objective of the exercise is to encourage austerity. But because the party was for 40 weddings, it saved every bridegroom 50,000 dirhams on a party in a hotel.

In addition, every bridegroom was entitled to a Dh30,000 loan if he could

prove he needed it. The interest-free loan is repaid in easy instalments over three years. The father of one bridegroom said: "This is a great help. The older generation would not have been able to think of it before the discovery of oil."

He explained that the cost of a marriage had been high, even in oiden days, with many fathers asking for half a kilogram of gold as dowry for their daughters.

The advent of oil riches transformed the traditional-bound societies of the Gulf states. Massive development projects in the 1970s and 1980s brought in large numbers of foreign workers, exposed local people to outside cultural and other influences, and enabled young Arabs to travel abroad more freely.

When the problem of "foreign wives" persisted, despite efforts to discourage them through loans and other incentives at the individual emirate level, the federal government decided to launch its own Marriage Fund this year, with a minimum allocation of Dh50 million. The Fund has already exceeded Dh80 million with contributions from cultural bodies and philanthropists.

A 12-member board of directors will administer the



Fund under the chairmanship of Labour and Social Affairs Minister Saif al-Jarwan. He said at its institution that the scheme was intended to guarantee a comfortable and stable family life to the youths of the UAE.

Jarwan said: "Inter-racial marriages affect children's behaviour and their role in society and lead them to shun the father's identity due to their attachment to the mother and her culture and traditions, which are different from our society. The Fund aims at maintaining the identity of the UAE as an Arab and Muslim state as well as its traditions and heritage."

The Fund will provide a grant of not less than Dh80,000 and not more than Dh70,000 to any UAE man wishing to marry a UAE national. He must meet three other conditions: the source of

his income should be "limited"; he should not be less than 18 years; and he should not have previously been paid any aid for marriage.

Considering that the region is awash with crude oil and petrodollars, it sounds strange that citizens need government aid to cope with wedding expenses and dowry demands. But everyone is not a millionaire, and many families steeped in tradition and living in remote desert villages depend on social security.

Another obvious question arises: Why does the government not simply try to discourage the demand for high dowries and expensive ceremonies rather than try to help those who cannot meet those expenses? The answer is that at stake are tribal prestige and social customs which are quite risky to attack in a deliberate manner.

The authorities intend to conduct a gradual educational campaign to cut marriage costs and encourage matrimonial alliances between young UAE citizens. The driving force behind the programme is Sheik Sultan of Sharjah, a history scholar who has written books on the Gulf states and won plaudits for his pioneering effort.

The practice of dowry in this part of the world is quite the opposite from the one followed in the Indian subcontinent, where girls' parents have to pay high dowries to bridegrooms' families.

The UAE and other Arab Gulf states have for some time faced the problem of young men being driven by the extravagant demands of girls' parents to seek foreign wives, mostly in Muslim areas of India and Pakistan, at much less expense.

Another aspect has been the neglect of Arab girls. Many have to wait a long time to get married or turn into spinsters. An increase in divorces and juvenile delinquency has also caused anxiety. Tensions among spouses of different socio-cultural backgrounds are being blamed.

Other regional governments have considered legal measures to discourage menfolk from marrying foreigners and imposed certain curbs. The UAE has preferred the path of persuasion and incentives.

MOHAMMED ASLAM is on the staff of *The Khaleej Times*, Dubai.