

## ESSAY

# The Bridge on the River Kawai : A bridge to the future

DR. MIZANUR RAHMAN SHELLEY

THE mid night of 14<sup>th</sup> of September, 1999 virtually turned into a time-machine. It was the film on the TV screen that made it possible to undertake a journey to the past. In essence, that veritable time travel also promised a walk on a splendid bridge to the future.

The film that unfurled on the Singapore channel was the moving tale of relatively recent history; the Bridge on the River Kawai. I remembered, as I sat watching it in my home at Dhaka, the first time. I saw the film in this city some four decades ago when we were college students. Late friends who died young, Mahiuddin Mahmud Hafiz and Mian Mohd. Nuruzzaman were with me. We were thrilled by the touching tale of human endeavour and courage.

Nearly forty years later, in mid September 1999, I again watched the classic film spell bound like a teenager. The distance in time had not diminished the captivating charm of the timeless tale. It was a gripping story of British prisoners of war during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War led by an indomitable Colonel portrayed by inimitable actor, Alec Guinness.

Imprisoned in a Japanese POW camp in the jungle fastness of the Thai countryside bordering Burma to the west, the British prisoners under the leadership of their commander refused to bow

Within Nations, values seem to be absent and the game is played savagely without rules and convention, there seems to be no tolerance, consideration for others and belief in human dignity can revisiting the past through such experiences as chronicled in the Bridge on the River Kawai, once again help enkindle humanity and dignity that has survived centuries of conflicts and war through which the human kind has waded in blood and fire.

down to the unreasonable demands of their captors. Their unbreakable spirit is reflected in full glory in the dauntless personality of their leader. He withstands untold travails to make the Japanese commandant yield to the demand that the convention of not putting the officers to manual work is honoured.

The Japanese commandant has a job to be done, to build within a short time a wooden but durable bridge to connect Bangkok with Rangoon now Yangon by rail. He needs the cooperation of the British POW battalion. After failing to break the resolve of the British Colonel, he agrees to spare the officers from manual work. The imprisoned British Colonel with his officers and troops, then steadfastly turns to the work of building the bridge with all skill and hard work. He does not see it as an act of collaboration with the enemy but as reassertion of the dignity and superiority of the British officers and troops. He hoped that the Bridge on the river Kwai would be in a future time of peace, an enduring memento to

the dedicated work and classic skill of the British fighters even in a context of captivity. Once the bridge is finished and there is merry making in the camp by the captives, Alec Guinness acting the role of the unflinching and resolute British leader congratulates his officers and men for "turning defeat into victory".

The night before the end, in a conversation with the Japanese commandant on the completed bridge, the British colonel says "I have served for 28 years in the Army, spending only ten months of these at home. Now when one looks back, one realizes that one is nearer the end than the beginning. At such moments you ask yourself what is the meaning of it all? Did your being their make any difference, what difference?". The Japanese commandant kept silent all through.

Another touching sequence found him sitting on the mat in his room performing religious rituals with all devotion, not knowing that this was his last night on earth.

A parallel story supplies the other side of the

chronicle. It tells of the exciting adventure of an allied commando team with the deadly mission of destroying the strategic bridge built by the British POWs at Kawai.

The secret journey of the team through dangerous mountain trails made deadlier by dense tropical jungles infested by the Japanese Army of occupation, is full of suspense and thrill. A group of sprightly but steadfastly competent, youthful, agile and smiling, Thai women bearers add colour and charm to the challenging and exciting trek of the commandos. The warriors on a deadly mission emerge as a perfect portrait of handsome courage and undying resolve. The daring team has its own reverses. A chance encounter with a Japanese patrol at an idyllic fountain leads to casualties. An officer is wounded in the leg. Though the pragmatic wounded leader wants to be left behind so that others can go forth to complete the mission, his colleagues display an undying friendship and resolutely carry him along in a stretcher. One of them says to the injured

captain "you and colonel Nicholson always think how to die by the book, by the rules when what is important is to survive as a human being".

In the penultimate and final scenes, the commandos successfully attack the bridge but are found by the British prisoner Colonel. Alarm is raised, there is shooting. Some of the commandos die. So does the Japanese commandant shot by the allied attackers. The British Colonel tries to diffuse the explosives tied to the bridge but himself wounded by his commando colleagues, collapses on the trigger and the bridge he helped build, blows up. The first train to travel on the bridge also crashes to its destruction into the surging river Kawai.

This masterly tale based on historic happenings may have a message to convey to the world of our times. The feelings of noble combat, the urge to play the game of conflict by the rules seem to be treasures of the past. What we have today in the post bipolar, near-poliarchic world is a grotesque and bizarre fall in the level of humanity

marked by a gaping erosion of values.

Wars and conflict are no more based on ideology which is transmutable and transmittable, these are now caused and propelled by primordial ethnic, religious and linguistic or cultural cleavages denuding societies of their civilization and human values. Examples are plenty; Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Somalia, Congo, Chechnya, Sierre Leone, the West Bank and Gaza etc.

Within Nations, values seem to be absent and the game is played savagely without rules and convention, there seems to be no tolerance, consideration for others and belief in human dignity can revisiting the past through such experiences as chronicled in the Bridge on the River Kawai, once again help enkindle humanity and dignity that has survived centuries of conflicts and war through which the human kind has waded in blood and fire.

One is tempted to believe that it can, what is necessary is to restore human values even in war and political combat among and within nations. The stories of noble combat and valour found in conflicts of earlier times including those of the American Civil War, need to be told time and time again. The present and the future generations must know that we were not as inhuman, as the behaviour of our valueless global and local elites tend to make them believe.

## PEOPLE &amp; PLACES

## FISH OUT OF 'ANOTHER' WATER - II A Rabindrapremi in the hills of Bundelkhand

'Aham Mussalman asmi'

Awruprawton

*Having erected walls around my playground, I remained immersed in my solitary thoughts.*

*It was only when you broke those boundaries and came in that my inhibitions dispersed.*

-Rabindranath Tagore

LUBNA MARIUM

A group of us, in Dhaka, intermittently, run an organization called 'Shadhona' which we describe as a *Center for Advancement of Sub-continental Music*, and my friend Kanak Dixit in Kathmandu runs *Himal* which is a 'South-Asian' magazine. These are the little games we play with nomenclature. Well, the first thing I do when I start one of my lecture-demonstrations on Classical Music, for our young Bangladeshi participants, is to get the necessity of saying 'sub-continental' or 'south-Asian', with every second breath, away and very firmly affirm that, for me, India is not just a specific country but a shared heritage which belongs to everyone living all the way from Pakistan to Bangladesh and from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka. Then onwards the discussion is about Indian music, the Indian audience, the Indian aesthetic experience, etc.

Was the Buddha born in Nepal or in India? Are the archaeological remains of Mohenjodaro in Pakistan, Dholavira in India and Shortugai in Afghanistan part of the Indus Valley or the

Saraswati Civilization? Is the *bandish 'Jago Mohana pyare'* in Raga Bhairo, sung by almost all young '*shastriya sangeet'* students across the sub-continent, part of the Bangladeshi or Indian classical music? Did the great rebel Bengali poet Nazrul Islam belong to Bangladesh? Is Urdu a Pakistani language?

These questions itself are delimiting, and make losers of all of us, South Asians, just by the asking.

Last May, by a quirk of fate, I spent 21 days with the RSS participating in an '*Akhil Bharatiya Sanskrit Sambhashan-Shibir'*. To make a very long story short, let it suffice to say, it was an extremely interesting experience which I would certainly repeat given a second chance, for various reasons not pertinent here. I must admit, though, that the overweening reaction on my part was one of deepest respect for the organizational capacity of the Sangh. The only time I felt compelled to put in a word, was when a senior RSS member from Delhi addressed the gathering at the last-before-closing session and kept on and further on about Sanskrit being the heritage of the Hindus, and was the means for the renaissance of the *Bharatiya Rashtra*. After his address I was kindly granted permission to voice my opinion, which in fact I found admirable. So, there was I among a 1000 strong crowd of RSS supporters going up to the mike and declaring '*Aham Bangladeshtaha agatavati. Aham mussalman asmi tathaiva'*, very firmly, '*Sanskrit-bhasa*

*mama eva paramparaya angsha asti'*. Then I went on, to ask finally if the gentleman didn't think Muslims were part of this new *swadeshi* Indian state that they planned to build? I wracked my brain to ensure that I spoke each word in my newly acquired spoken Sanskrit. There was pin-drop silence, while my heart was actually quaking so loudly that I thought everyone could hear. To his credit our honorable guest merely hesitated a

A vibrant political culture needs public forums for cross-cultural dialogues and a meaningful citizenry requires that people feel a connection to their fellow citizens. Today, forces inimical to such a 'people's participation' in policy-making are constantly endeavoring to create conscious and sub-conscious barriers between the various strata of society.

second to clear his throat before replying, '*Behenji, mai jab Hindu Samaj keh raha tha....* when I was saying Hindu Samaj I didn't just mean people of Hindu religion but everyone belonging to the Hindu parampara'. In fact, I had only wanted to make a statement in front of this gathering. What remains etched in my memory is the congratulatory smiles of my young fellow participants who had come from varied destinations like Pondichery, Simla, Ahmedabad, Ujjain and so on. After all we had dismantled walls and become friends, hadn't we?

If humans share an incredible 99.99 percent of genetic material, then these differences, potent as they are, are all in the mind aren't they? How does one remove these barriers?

My father, whom I've always admired for his capacity for objectivity, writes and asks, 'Has your search within the Hindu *shastras* shown you tolerance in their thoughts?' As I sit pensively, watching the sun setting over these gentle

Bundelkhand hills, I am reminded of the Bauls of Bengal singing,

*'...Je thake shawmaj bondhone chalte hawy taake pawrer jnane....'*

...Whoever remains within the confines of society has to proceed according to the judgement of others.

You will not be liberated by others' knowledge; rather your own knowledge will be eroded.

Raaj says, cast off the bonds of society, (and) the bonds of the world will (also) be served. This is not just about tolerance. It is about

being able to exclude the subjective ethos in each other's beliefs to try and reach the wisdom within the conceptual structure of the thoughts. It is about identifying the Truth inherent in all. However, most of all it is about making a sincere effort to break the barriers and build bridges. In a fine sentence Tagore says, '*Man is defeated when the authority inside him is curbed*'; curbed by the externals of religion, by tradition and custom, by scripture and ritual. The onus today is on each one of us to take this one crucial step across an imagined *laksmanrekha* and go forward in the exciting macrocosmic advance of human civilization.

*'Isavasyam idam sarvam yat kim ca jagatyam jagat*

*Tena tyaktena bhunjitha, ma grdha kasyasvid dhanam.'*

-Isa Upanisad 1.1 (Know that) all this, sentient and insentient, whatever moves in this moving world is enveloped by God. Therefore find your enjoyment in renunciation; do not covet what belongs to others.

If what is in you and also in me, in the countless little street-children shivering in the cold, and in the sky and the ocean, and yet again in a wisp of grass or in the bird flying into the sunset, aren't we all then an equal part of the whole? Equals enjoined. Can we consciously ignore the shivering and poverty of the child in the street? When we deface the Narmada or the Bamiyan Buddhas

do we not then deface a part of ourselves too? A profound thought. The next line of the sloka, however, has one of the most pragmatic pieces of advise. A beautiful commentary by Tagore reads as follows: '*When our egos concentrate on the insignificant, it serves only to destroy unity. The part revolts thence against the whole. Thus has renunciation been advocated. However, this renunciation far from taking us towards an emptiness, is assuredly for the purpose of fulfillment. Renounce then the part to gain the whole, renounce the ephemeral for the eternal, ego for love, renounce worldly happiness for eternal bliss* (Tawpobon; Santiniketan Essays).

A vibrant political culture needs public forums for cross-cultural dialogues and a meaningful citizenry requires that people feel a connection to their fellow citizens. Today, forces inimical to such a 'people's participation' in policy-making are constantly endeavoring to create conscious and sub-conscious barriers between the various strata of society.

Has South Asia today not bled enough from this *aaon-pawr*, we-they, dichotomy? Have we not yet paid the price for this, several times over, with the blood of our loved ones? Will we let these deaths - each death, go in vain? Can we not join hands to '*renounce the part to gain the whole*'?

Lubna Marium, ICCR Scholar from Bangladesh, Saugor, Madhya Pradesh -February 27, 2001

## REFLECTIONS

## Income and well-being

M A RAHMAN

AMARTYA Sen's treatise, "Development As Freedom" had been reviewed by Mr Fareed Zakaria, the Managing Editor of the Foreign Affairs and a reviewer of The New York Times the largest daily in the USA Mr Zakaria was merciless in critising Amartya Sen, in his language "Amartya Sen was an odd choice for the Nobel in economic science in 1998. In a field increasingly obsessed with narrow technical virtuosity, Sen has persisted in asking big, messy questions, mixing ethics with his equations. The choice was also unusual because, unlike most Nobel laureates, he was not associated with a single grand idea "a killer theorem," in the language of the field having written across a range of topics, even disciplines."

What Mr Zakaria says about Mr Sen is not correct in ultimate analysis. The underlying theme in Sen's work is the skepticism that money is the measure of everything. He has posed the question repeatedly: What do we mean when we

Development, for Mr Sen, is the process of expanding human freedom hence his book's title. Raising people's incomes is important, but so is giving them political rights like ability to choose their governments and express themselves without fear. But freedom for Sen goes well beyond providing people with basic political and civil rights. True freedom "substantive freedom" is his term requires "economic facilities," "social opportunities" and "protective security" in other words, state-funded jobs, services and income subsidies for the less successful in society. Mr Sen considers his theoretical innovation to be his expansive definition of substantive freedom as whatever helps human beings fully exercise their capabilities the freedom to achieve various lifestyles.

say that a person or a group or a country is better off. The conventional answer higher incomes is not enough for Mr Sen. He points out that many places with low per capita incomes, like Sri Lanka, China, and the Indian state of Kerala, have achieved higher life expectancies and literacy rates than much richer lands like Brazil, South Africa and Namibia. We, in Bangladesh, are also going ahead to meet the criteria of development due to the democratic government for the last four and half years. Mr Sen recognizes that

higher incomes in some countries produce improvements across most measures of the quality of life. Mr Zakaria says that in looking at the exceptions, Mr Sen forces us to examine the connection between income and well-being, between money and happiness.

Mr Sen argues that democracy is crucial to the prevention of famine and points out the striking fact is that there has never been a famine in a functioning multiparty democracy. We, in Bangladesh, have been able to avoid national

crisis including famine in 1998 and 1999 and also in 2000 for the mass participation of people to face the devastation caused by floods, cyclone and water stagnation. It is because the democracy has its full play in the country.

Mr Sen lauds the East Asians for investing in Human capital through health care and education because these policies not only produce growth but also improve people's qualities of life. Mr Zakaria observes that Mr Sen's claims for democracy, however, are not really about economic

performance. He argues that democratic government is an end in and of itself because it furthers human freedom. This is a powerful, well-established statement that few would disagree with Mr Sen places it at the centre of his overall theoretical framework. But this governing idea which takes up several chapters, has neither the originality nor the power of Sen's more specific insights.

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In awarding Sen his prize, the Swedish Academy of Sciences noted that he had "restored an ethical dimension to the discussion of vital economic problems." He has done this more. His book is rich in insight and moral imagination.

## POEMS

## I Want a Firearm

Rafiq Azad

I need a firearm  
I have no enemies  
I have no friends either  
I need a small firearm  
Not to kill any enemy or  
Silence any friend of mine or  
To commit suicide.  
I need a small one.

I am not an assailant  
Nor am I a member of any secret society  
I do not belong to any politics  
There is no reason to think that  
There is someone sitting on a distant minaret, over my head  
I do not intend to pull the trigger and get him down  
I find no rationale in killing human beings.

I made it clear earlier  
I have no personal enmity with anyone  
Nor do I want to get rid of any friendship  
That binds me hard  
I have no such deep bond with anyone.

I have no necessity of self-defense  
I have no thirst for other people's life  
Yet I want a small firearm of my own.

I need a firearm  
Any brand would do for the present  
No matter if it is a Chinese automatic one or a carbine or  
One M-16 or an AK47 would be wonderful.

After all I want a weapon, no matter what the brand is  
I want a small firearm  
Keep trust on me  
I will not use it against anybody  
I have no hatred for anybody  
Nor do I have any beloved one  
I have none in a love and hatred relationship  
Therefore I will not cause any harm to any life.

I want a firearm  
I do not possess many other things  
It matters very little to me  
As I have no other want.

But I have a beautiful flag  
Now I need a firearm  
And I need nothing else.

Translated by Andalib Rashdie

## The Hajj

Hayat Saif

Millions congregate there  
Under the sun  
In the centre of the earth  
Right under the heavens  
In the courtyard of  
The House of Allah  
Which bears the signature of Abraham  
And where Adam trod  
Near Muzdalefa where Adam and Eve mated

Here I am O Lord here I am  
Here I am O Lord you are the one the Unique  
The perpetual  
The giver of truth  
The giver of conscience  
The mover of the universe

Anticlockwise they move like particles in an atom  
Round the cubical form the simplest and  
the most dignified  
Each one shrouded and shorn of the self

shorn of pride  
shorn of all petty cravings  
of a mandane existence  
tied down to earth only by flesh  
I have seen the hand of God  
At work  
The Benevolent the merciful  
The congregation moving round and round  
The form in black since the beginning of time to  
The end of time

O! here I am my lord the unique  
the beneficent the merciful

Bless me now.

## Stop n start

Shamim Azad

My life  
not just momentous  
little features  
intricate details  
groovy lakes  
the connections  
delicate marks

precious moments  
imbecile arguments  
given proximity  
inconvenience  
do's and don'ts  
my profile  
the travellers cheque  
extinguished cigarette  
lighted furnace  
what I remembered  
larger than life  
the collapsible gate

the corrugated tin-shed  
my story  
words of swim  
dazzling in the sun  
frightened as a lamb  
dream on fluffy floss  
road of paved gold  
my identity  
floating twigs  
stopped by the wind  
cold and crisp  
soup kitchen  
asylum blanket  
new colour  
stop n start.