

Travelling down the lane without Shahed Latif

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It was in the early afternoon of March 12, 2001 that Shahed wanted to get out of the bed on his own, without assistance. Perhaps he wanted to stand on his own feet by himself once again. He could not, fell down and muttered, looking up at Panna in the eyes, "Have I died?" A quite unlikely question from a person who wrote only a few months ago a piece, *Adding Years to Life* (Star Magazine, October 20, 2000), striking a graceful posture of hope against the most daunting inevitability. To me, and to many of us, his friends, it was a luring and daring paean to life. No, he did not die. Shahed Latif, our friend, crossed over into the after-life before the dawn break of March 13, a pilgrim on his way to the Great Concourse towards which we shall all move on, each in our own appointed time.

It needs some distance, distance of time and space, to perceive any vista or event, in depth and dimension. Perhaps many of us will revisit the day, and many other days, each on his own, when we first met Shahed, came to know him and to feel him blossom inside us in love, affection and tears.

Unlike many of his other friends, I did not know him in his childhood. To Shahed perhaps I presented the same degree of delight as the sight of a peripatetic specimen of stone-age *Homo sapiens* would present to an archaeologist. To me Dhaka University in the July of 1969, with six years of total obliteration after the I. Sc. Classes, as I was unwell, was an act of painful resurrection. To the freshmen in the 1969 honours class of economics I was a virtual alien.

A man of 23 who does neither have any eyes for the University belles nor talks much to his own class fellows but only to teachers of various faculties as if they were his peers, or even juniors (in actuality, many of the young teachers were my juniors and some were contemporaries in schools and colleges when I was a regular). I was a perfect quarry for any Sherlock Holmes. The mystery of a real-life Rip Van Winkle was spun with such authenticity by Shahed, and with further adornment by his other imaginative friends that, I was soon anointed a "grandfather" to all. I felt terribly ill at ease to talk to any of the students and for me the only "safe house" was the library. In seven days, however, shadowing me relentlessly, Shahed tore down the barrier of divide, with a painful trauma to my ego, as he downgraded the form of address towards me from the lofty *apni* to the plebeian *tumi*, the only person to do so at the time in the university. My reintegration into life at the age of 23 became the responsibility of a warmly shy, but inordinately daring, boy of a person who was himself still not out of his teens. But such are the ways of life and its inscrutable mysteries! Otherwise, on the scorching afternoon of March 13, following the day when he asked his question but did not bother for an answer, why should a silent scream pierce through the hearts of all his friends, waiting their turns to lay a fistful of earth on his grave, "why, of all persons, Shahed?" It is a question that men will always ask at times when they face the inconsolable loss of a treasure that can never be retrieved.

To me the treasure translates into memories of four decades of friend, and companionship, which, quite unwittingly, commingled to fuse our lives into an undefinable confluence of brotherhood.

The memories of No. 1 Eskaton Garden: starting with the presence of Barachacha (Shahed's father) radiating an all-pervading aura of warmth, affection and benign authority; of Raquib Chacha (strangely, an object of uncommon fear to all of Shahed's friends, except myself) seeing it that Shahed's friends were not denied a gala evening of gourmet dinner (special service from Hotel Shahbagh, of which he was the Managing Director) on his 20th birthday (witnesses: Dr. M. R. Shelley, Ambassadors Masum Ahmad Chowdhury and Ataur Rahman Khan Kaiser, Shahed Kamal, late Mohiuddin Mahmood Hafiz and the writer of this article); Shahed abandoning, with a wan smile, all hopes of protest against an announcement by Shelley that there will soon be an end to his halcyon days as there will appear on the university scene Zahed Latif (Shahed's only brother) finishing his run with the Cadet College at Fouldherhat, whom Shahed holds in utter dread; my short stint as the president of a short-lived talks-club at Modhu's Canteen titled "Chakrabak," when one day on the powerful theme of "Bangla shahitye gala galir probhab" - the impact of calling names on Bengali literature - our dear friend Agha Kohinor Alam, the first speaker, leapt up on the wooden table around which we all were seated and assailed the president and all other present in such genuinely egregious terms to expand solidly on the theme that, all that remained in a few seconds were a few empty chairs and Agha continuing with his matchless tirade (Shahed is no more with us but Masum, Shelley and Shahed Kamal are still the living witnesses); the memories of dinners at Chu Chin Chow, one of the best Chinese restaurants ever, in the Gulistan building, where it was decided a priori, in view of our individual resource endowments, that on the matter of settling the bills we will go Dutch and Masum (Ambassador Masum Ahmad Chowdhury) announcing with a poker face, after a hearty meal, that he is a broke Dutch; Shahed crying out in dire anguish as we were drowning deep into desperation around 3:00am in the morning before the honours 3rd paper examination, surrounded by mounds of notes and textbooks, with our brain and eyes torched, as if, by a thousand suns, "Bhai, re, if one could pass this Dhaka University honours exams, I bet Oxford and Harvard would be a child's play!" (Child's play or not Shahed went on to Harvard in 1978 and obtained his post-graduate degree); of bringing out the first business journal of the then East Pakistan, "The Economic & Business Review" in 1962 (with Shahed Latif as the editor and the present writer as the joint editor, from the small office of Raquib Chacha's Sakura restaurant at the DIT market, across the then Hotel Intercontinental), when Shahed rested after the honours results to prepare for the CSS examination of 1963; the re-kindled hopes in our hearts after the horrors of March 25 and 26, 1971 when on March 27 and 28 we did hear, repeated at various of the days, a faint radio proclamation of independence from Chittagong in the name of the Father of the Nation, and Dr. Iqbal Mahmood (Shahed's cousin and the former VC of BUET) guesstimating, from the weakness and frequent dying of the signals, that it must be coming from a small transmitter placed on a boat, zigzagging its course to avoid aerial bombings; the excitement of December 16, 1971 when we two, catching the surrender conversations between the Pakistani and the Indian armed forces early on the radio, startled all by darning out of the house around 11.00 in the morning and sped in my red

Today is the chehlum of late Shahed Latif. On this occasion we remember him as one of the longest serving columnists of The Daily Star. His column Window on Asia first appeared in this paper as far back as 1991. We gratefully acknowledge his contribution to this paper, especially during its early years. - Editor



Volkswagen on an empty Dhaka street still under a curfew, to the then Hotel Intercontinental, diving to the hotel ground for dear life when, in the total melee of the day, a convoy of retreating Pakistani troops suddenly started to shoot at random in panic, witnessing the grand finale of surrender by Niaz! at the then race course ground where an elderly gentleman almost went berserk with excitement as he (as he announced to the world) could take off one of his shoes and thump the same on the head of one of the top Pakistani generals (the poor wife, red in the face at the sight of such unabashed behaviour by her otherwise quiet and dignified husband, was trying in vain to cool him down); the uncontrollable tears that shook us up on the killing field of Rayer Bazar in the morning of December 17, where the two of us had gone in a vain search of Khaleque ulabhai, the Finance Member of the Jute Board; his days in the Ministry of Agriculture where he cultivated the subject of agriculture to a degree whereby Shahed, along with its Secretary, the late AZM Obaidullah Khan, came to be recognised as experts on the subject (strange expertise for one borne and raised hundred per cent in the city); the rhapsody of scintillating verbalism in which we were awash whenever Shentu Bhai (AZM Obaidullah Khan) stole into Shahed's room from his Secretary's chamber; Shahed's tireless efforts and travels around the world to set up the Milk-Vita establishment under Danida aid; his transfer to Rome in 1979 to IFAD and later to Bangkok at ESCAP till he came back on August 6, 1996 only a few days before Barachacha (Shahed's mother) passed away. But the above litany does not tell what or how Shahed was.

To each he had a distinctively different dimension. To the many followers of his column in The Daily Star, *Window on Asia*, he was an engaging writer with incisive vision, elegant charm and unflinching wit who hardly failed to stir the mind of his readers with the burning love that he bore in his heart for his country and its unfortunate millions, always suffering, unjustly, at the hands of power, whomever that be! He had always something to say on how the country may see itself out of the tunnel that we have put ourselves into. To his friends who lovingly looked forward to his visits to Dhaka while he was serving in the ESCAP, he was a comrade of consummate camaraderie. To Panna who evolved from a shy maiden stealing away for trysts with a young bachelor to a companion par excellence and a tower of strength when the hour so demanded, was he a shy romantic who masked his inner feelings with an outward matter-of-factness of a bureaucrat or a cascade of life that she will not desecrate with her sighs! Eamon and Mon Ami I am sure, will always feel the blanket of love which Shahed, a friend and father, had wrapped around them.

But I shall not have some of the small but priceless mercies of life ever again: of lunging into tiffs with Shahed over portions of rich food on the table from which Panna, ever vigilant, cut him off ruthlessly while I continued unrestrained; over the debate of relative greatness of Premendra Mitra and Jibanada Das in terms of modern poetic diction; the recurrence of the word *shamnat* in his own poetry, time and again; the delight on his face on an evening as he switched on the lights to show me off the newly laid out garden of the refurbished Eskaton Garden house and his remark, "See, the garden will look splendid when the grass turns green and the flowers bloom."

When the grass turns green and the flowers bloom, when the glow-worms dance amongst the branches of frangipani in the gathering dusk of the evenings, whenever I am at Eskaton Gardens again, I shall have nothing to say, but to remember, "The loss of a friend is like that of a limb; time may heal the anguish of the wound, but the loss cannot be repaired." (Robert Southey, poet laureate, 1813-43).

I shall walk down the lane without Shahed Latif!

An Islamabad diary

M.J. AKBAR

THE Kabul River is as dark and broken as the mountains that frame the western horizon. The Sindh River is as blue and serene as the sky that covers us at the curve where the Himalayas dwindle into the Hindu Kush. The two rivers, one from the west and the other from the east, meet at the fork below the bridge across Attock, a slim line thrown from sandy bank to bank, below the fort sprawled over the hill. This is the fort built by Emperor Akbar, a strategic citadel that protected the empire from the familiar incursions along the route taken by Akbar's grandfather.

From Attock, at the northern mouth of the Punjab, the road rises through the Frontier, through Landi Kotal, supermarket to the world's most inventive smugglers, drug merchants and patent-busters (they fight arms that match, part by part, with anything murderous anywhere) to Torkham, midway point on the Khyber pass. Torkham commands the valley, and offers a bird's eye view of the trails on the opposite ridge, the favoured passage of horse and infantry in search of plunder or power. The Mughal mounted cannon at Torkham, and dared the invader to cross the line of fire. No one dared till Nadir Shah, by when the fire had spluttered in Delhi and died in Punjab, until Maharaja Ranjit Singh stoked it alive again. His successors gifted the flame to the British, who fenced Punjab with a bureaucracy, after they were humiliated beyond Torkham.

These days Attock is a fort for VIP prisoners. The last well known guest was Mian Nawaz Sharif.

The dark waters of the Kabul and the azure sparkle of the Sindh meet at Attock but do not merge, travelling in visible parallel lines downstream towards a later, forced marriage. The waters lie on the same bed but dream separate dreams. The Sindh is reminiscent of that extraordinary artery in the heart of Central Asia, the unmatched Oxus. Oxus is a corruption of Abwagh; "Ab" is water in Persian, and "waqsh" is blue. East of Attock is the cradle of the Gandhara civilisation, with its epicentre at the fabulous Taxila (Takashila). A notice in Public Works Department colours, nailed to mountain rock, proudly announces this as you race up the wide Great Trunk Road into Taxila. The museum is four kilometres off the highway, in the standard shape of subcontinental inns of heritage, protected with spasmodic concern as much here as in Pataliputra or Patna, on the other side of the Mauryan empire. The route from Taxila to Pataliputra, along the base of the Himalayas and hugging the shore of the Ganga, and on to the port of Tamralipi near today's Kolkata in Bengal, was known as the Uttarapatha. Goods and life flowed from Taxila to Magadh and Rajgir to the port in Bengal from where the ships sailed, for profit and faith, to Indonesia and the islands of the Pacific. The Uttarapatha gave the land of the Gangetic belt the name Uttar Pradesh. The southern route for trade, through Gujarat and the Ghats was known as Dakshinapatha, from where we get the Deccan. Ancient and modern are linked in the collective memory by a language that absorbed English as easily as Sanskrit and Persian over three thousand years of cultural continuity through the options of history.

The kingdoms of this area dazzled the known world more than two thousand years ago and obsessed the imagination of conquerors who wanted to reach the shores of the end of the earth, from Darius to Alexander. This was the age of Gautam Buddha and of the two-generation sparkle of the Nandas; of

the glory of the Mauryas and the dance of Amrapali in the east. Herodotus wrote of anti-gold in Taxila, of heaps of gold dust thrown up by ants sized between gods and foxes: the wealth of Taxila had become a fevered metaphor to the Greeks. Taxila's trading wealth brought scholars and universities and sages: the Mahabharata says that the epic of the Bharata war was first narrated in Taxila. Kautilya may be Taxila's most famous son thanks to Chandragupta and Arthashastra (rediscovered when handed over in palm leaves to an eminent Indian scholar by an unknown priest more than a hundred years ago). But long before him Panini compiled a grammar that was the greatest intellectual achievement of civilisation. Panini in a sense created Samskrata (perfection) that gave us Sanskrit.

The Greeks gave Taxila a bad name, and its neighbour a good one. Both were a little undeserved. Ambi was king of a Taxila that thrived on trade and scholarship; it had no natural defences and no army capable of challenging the menacing Greek. While Porus did want to talk to Alexander on the battlefield, and preferred to be treated like a king in defeat, the fact is that both Ambi and Porus became allies of Alexander. Porus took a little more convincing, that's all. It was Porus who wanted Alexander to cross the Beas and conquer the Nandas who were, Porus taunted, led by the son of a barber, a low caste sudra rather than a blue blood ksatriya. But the barber had a standing army of 200,000 infantry, 20,000 cavalry, 2000 four-horse chariots and up to 6000 war elephants. The Greeks preferred Greece.

Taxila is thirty kilometres from Islamabad, about as far as Gurgaon is from Delhi.

Nawaz began handing out pips to toadies in an extraordinary display of insecurity, the Big Clock in Army Headquarters started the count-down. Second, the civilians who have run Pakistan since the death of General Zia ul Haq, the families Bhutto and Sharif, have both become synonymous with corruption. Hence the second, and not so muted, joke. It is only in silly countries like India that a leader of a ruling party can accept, and then be caught accepting, a bribe of a measly two thousand dollars. For two thousand dollars you could not have crossed the threshold of the Sharif cook. And why would any Pakistani ever get caught in Pakistan? They wouldn't even take the money in Pakistan. When the Swiss draw up their list of nations to be deeply thankful to for the well-being of their banks, Pakistan apparently comes very high up. Everyone seems to have a foreign bank account, some even legally.

Benazir Bhutto loyalists still believe that the Powers That Be stole the elections in 1994 for Nawaz Sharif. Their logic? What they saw. No one voted, so how could anyone win?

There is substance in the argument but not really in the conclusion. Voting levels were so low that you could be forgiven for believing that no one voted. In the last general election Nawaz Sharif won an overwhelming avalanche of seats, what he described as a "massive mandate". What was the percentage of the vote that he received? Sixteen per cent. That's it. Benazir Bhutto managed to get less. Incidentally when Benazir Bhutto won her "mandate" she received only 19 per cent of the vote. This is serious disillusionment.

Pakistan is fed up of its democrats



Buddhist remains showing double-headed eagle at Sirkap (Taxila) near Islamabad.

The muted joke in Islamabad goes something like this. An Army chief who has taken over has nowhere to go but up. Up, and further up.

Eventually of course we will go further up, with or without going up. But to expect an Army chief who has come to power to hand it back to the civilians he has replaced is expecting more than any uniform can give with safe hands. General Musharraf is bolstered by a few new facts in an old syndrome. First, fame was thrust upon him by a rather dodgy Nawaz Sharif. It is a truism in Pakistan that a Prime Minister cannot appoint a second lieutenant, but he can appoint an Army chief. However, he cannot do it arbitrarily. When Mian

and totally uncertain about its generals. There is systemic instability whose cause is apparent, but whose consequences are unknown. The Musharraf government was welcomed when it removed Nawaz Sharif, but today it is defined by a single phrase: price rise. The economists argue that this is the price of previous profligacy but that does not pay for the price of a meal. If there is one monster that is bigger than corruption it is hunger. You cannot kill the one and nourish the other.

The Chief Executive was drenched in tennis sweat, and happy. He had won a four-set match against his junior officer. No. He did not win most of the time. I checked.

Not with him but with his tennis partner. Sycophancy was not permitted in sport. But someone did point out, very loyally, that it was only recently that General Musharraf had given up playing squash, a much more tiring game, regularly.

We were waiting for him in the drawing room of his official residence when he came in his T-shirt to say a quick-hullo-and-sorry-for-being-late. He was only ten minutes late, actually. I have known some Chief Executives to be ten days late. If this was a PR gesture, it worked. He asked for a few minutes to shower and returned in a flowing shalwar-kameez. The kameez had a laundry tag behind a button hole: further evidence that he was normal. That is the sort of thing that happens to you and me.

There is always some last-minute hitch in these set-piece arrangements, but Army rule waived aside the objections of some power-level that had been left out of the loop. Hurt egos hurt journalists. But now at last four powerful cameras, bristling with lights, cowed down a lonely and humble tape recorder. The tape recorder belonged to old fashioned print media. Two of the cameras were from PTV (Pakistan state television) and two from Zee. As is conventional practice, the guardians of the General had requested a set of questions for a pre-interview briefing. I had sent an outline because, at least in my view, an interview is not a kindergarten class but a conversation between two adults with differing perspectives and a common theme. In any case the better questions only emerge from answers. Without too much forethought I started the interview on a subject outside the

Safe ride



A rare black-necked swan carries its two-week-old cygnet on its back at Pensthorpe Waterfowl Park, Fakenham, Norfolk on Wednesday. Native to Argentina and Chile, the rare bird is the only species of swan that carries its young on its back.

Man's world made to pay

One wanted more time with her children. Another objected to sexist taunts. A third complained of unequal pay. A fourth was distressed by lewd innuendo. High-flying female bankers are fighting back to expose a macho chauvinism in London's financial centre, which they say is as much a part of the City culture as the pinstripe suit, the champagne bar and the annual bonus, writes Marie Wolfrom of AFP from London

IN little more than a year, five big City banking names have been hauled before industrial tribunals and hit with hefty penalties for discriminating against female employees.

The cases have made for lurid newspaper splashes complete with tales of how female bankers have been dismissed as "hot totty", ordered to wear short skirts, and even sacked for asking for more time with their families.

But behind the headlines lurk more delicate issues. How can working-mothers be accommodated in the 14-hours-a-day environment of merchant banking? How can women overcome the old-boy preserve of the City? And does anyone complaining about a 25,000-pound bonus deserve sympathy?

Julie Bower, 35, believed she did. And so did an industrial tribunal which last week ruled in her favour in a discrimination case against City stalwart Schroder Securities.

Bowers said her five-figure bonus

was a small fraction of that earned by male colleagues in a record year in 2000, when some bankers at her level were awarded more than half a million pounds in bonuses.

"I hope that no one else ever has to go through the same sort of thing again," said Bower, who claimed unfair dismissal when her boss refused to consider her bonus complaint.

"The way in which Schroders dealt with my complaints about the way I was treated was completely unacceptable," she said.

A month earlier, City trader Isabelle Terrillon celebrated a 70,000-pound out-of-court settlement from Japanese giant Nomura for unfair dismissal. Terrillon had earlier alleged that senior Nomura executives demeaned her during her six-year stint at the bank asking her to wear "short, tight skirts."

Also last month, Vanessa Brennan said she was "made to feel I was a second class citizen because I was a woman" at her job with credit

card group American Express. She left Amex alleging that her boss's taunts almost led to her miscarriage her child.

In a fourth case last year, JP Morgan banker Aisling Sykes won a case for unfair dismissal when her demands to be able to spend more hours with her children went unheeded.

And in possibly the most widely publicised case of recent years, Deutsche Bank lost a case against an associate director, Kay Swinburne, who said her boss blocked her promotion, subjected her to sexist taunts and accused her of sleeping with a client. In general, the number of sexual discrimination cases in Britain has increased sharply, from 3,157 in 1996 to 4,926 in 1999.

"With this particular generation very much expecting gender equality, women are more willing now to challenge (when) they feel that they have been treated unfairly," said Norma Jarboe, the director of Opportunity Now, which champi-

prepared list. The general was unfazed, perhaps because it dealt with a story in the morning papers about the alleged corruption of the Bhuttos. Easy to bat that one out. A hint of tension appeared when I asked about corruption in the armed forces. But it was brief and melted as the topics chased one another. One hears that General Musharraf used to be tense when meeting the press after he took over. He has learnt to handle power now. The interview was billed for about forty-five minutes. It lasted close to two hours. If ever General Pervez Musharraf wants another job, he should become a lawyer. He argued the difficult case for the armed forces pretty well.

ons women's rights in the workplace. Jarboe says that the negative publicity of sexual discrimination cases is forcing the big boys to alter their it's-a-man's-world mantra. "The penalty of getting it wrong could be getting a (lawsuit) getting your name in the paper, negative publicity," she said. The problem is that the City has retained a highly patriarchal flavour. From board level, where just one blue-chip company boasts a female chief executive, down to the trading floor, a macho culture bubbles away just below the surface.

"It's a man's world," said Pierre, a trader with a large British brokerage. "People belch in your face or scratch their bollocks, just to be rude, whether women are present or not."

But equal opportunities activists insist this must change. "Equal opportunities are not an optional extra and there is no case, as is sometimes claimed, for the City to do things differently," said Jenny Watson, deputy chairman of the Equal Opportunities Commission.