

BOOK REVIEW

A double first

Deen Mahomed (1759-1851) deserves to be remembered for having initiated two very different traditions; one is the tradition of literature and the other that of the marketing of Indian exotica by Indians themselves, says Kaiser Haq

I doubt if many, even among students of postcolonial literature, would be able to name the first Indian to publish a book in English – Sake (Sheikh) Deen Mahomed, an adventurer, writer and entrepreneur whose life is a fascinating instance of the dramatic changes that cross-cultural interaction may bring about in individual lives. He soldiered for the East India Company before emigrating to Cork in Ireland, where he published his *Travels* at the age of the eighteenth century. He married into the Irish Protestant gentry and had several children: one of the earliest Indo-British families about whom we have fairly detailed information. The family moved to London and then to Brighton and showed remarkable entrepreneurial originality in marketing the cuisine and medical practices of exotic India.

Deen Mahomed was born in Patna in 1759 into a Muslim family that boasted kinship with the Nawab of Bengal. The family had traditionally been in the employ of the Muslim rulers of north India, but Muslim power was in decline and the East India Company was in its ascendancy, rapidly expanding its political and economic control, and in the process offering good prospects of employment to willing Indians. Deen Mahomed followed his father (who died in action) and his elder brother into the service of the Company, becoming, at the tender age of twelve, a camp-follower or Godfrey Evan Baker, an Irishman from Cork, who was Quartermaster of a European regiment in the Bengal Army. In 1781, when Baker was promoted to Captain and given command of a sepoy battalion, he had Deen Mahomed appointed Jemadar in charge of a grenadier company. Sepoy units had to do much more fighting than the elite European ones, and in a year Baker and Deen Mahomed saw more action than they had in their twelve years with the European regiment – against the Marhattas and the rebellious Raja Chayt Singh of Benaras. While engaged in crushing the rebels in Benaras, Deen Mahomed was promoted to Subedar, the

highest rank Indians could attain in the Company's army. But almost immediately afterwards his army career ended, when Baker was recalled from a mission in disgrace (villagers accused him of extortion) and he chose to resign and accompany his patron.

Baker and Deen Mahomed spent some time touring in eastern Bengal (present-day Bangladesh). They visited Dhaka, then an important manufacturing city famous for its muslin, witnessed a spectacular pageant annually organised by the ruling Nawab, and returned to Calcutta by boat through the densely forested Sunderbans, which were infested with tigers as well as robbers. Baker formally resigned his commission and decided to return home, whither Deen Mahomed accompanied him.

Baker and Deen Mahomed reached Cork in 1784. Mahomed was sent to school, where he acquired a sound literary education, and in 1786 (also the year of Baker's death) eloped with a fellow student, Jane Daly. The couple returned to Cork and for the next two decades Mahomed probably worked in the Baker household as a manager. In 1799 he met the Indian traveller Mirza Abu Taleb, who left an account of the encounter in a travel memoir. By then Mahomed's position in Cork society had been advanced by the appearance of his book, published by subscription in 1794.

The complete title of the book is 'The Travels of Dean Mahomet, A Native of Patna in Bengal, Through Several Parts of India, While in the Service of The Honourable The East India Company Written by Himself, In a Series of Letters to a Friend'. In using the epistolary style it conforms to a popular convention in English writing of the age. Michel H Fisher, whose edition of the book, titled *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) makes the work available for the first time to a wider readership, and also includes the most comprehensive study to date of Deen Mahomed and his work, points out several interesting points. Rather than a

single reader, there are two categories of readers that the book is aimed at: 'First, he was presenting India, and himself, to the elite society around him. Authorship proved him an educated man. Second, he intended, at least in part, *Travels* to be a functional guide for European travellers... To this end Dean Mahomed delineated Indian cities, industries, geography, flora, and fauna, he included a glossary of Persian and Indian terms and factual descriptions of Indian cities which he did not himself visit.'

Fisher also presents evidence showing that Mahomed plagiarised 'Jemina Kindersley's *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe... and the East Indies* (1777) and, more extensively, John Henry Grose's *Voyage to the East Indies* (1766). 'And yet, though 'Dean Mahomet took seven percent of the words in *Travels* from Grose,' he successfully 'reconstructed them into his own voice.' For instance, the two writers give very similar accounts of betelchewing, but whereas to Grose it is an unhealthy practice, to Mahomed it is wholesome and 'conducive to polite social intercourse.'

In 1807 the Mahomed moved to London, where he found employment with the Honourable Basil Cochrane, a Scottish nobleman who had made a fortune in India and now opened an establishment offering vapour bath therapy. Michael Fisher notes that 'Dean Mahomet apparently added to Cochrane's bath a practice that he would make famous in England as "shampooing" (therapeutic massage).' The etymological derivation of the word 'shampoo', it is worth noting, is from the Hindi *chhampo*, imperative of *chhampa*, 'to press'. But the fame lay in the future. From 1809 to 1812 Mahomed was a restaurateur; his 'Hindustanee Coffee House' at posh Portman Square offered Indian cuisine in an Indian ambience created with the help of cane furniture, hookahs and Oriental paintings. Though initially successful, the venture ended in Mahomed's bankruptcy.

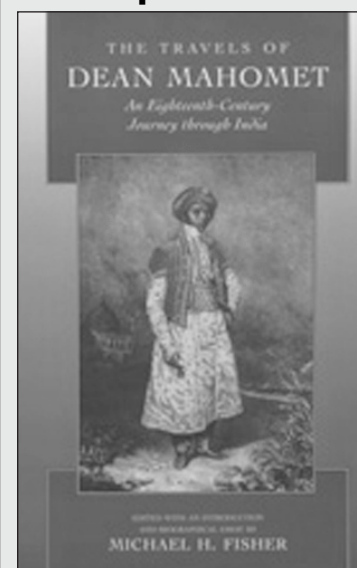
Mahomed then moved to Brighton and opened

a bathhouse offering what he dubbed 'the Indian Medicated Vapour Bath' (it had Indian medical herbs added to the vapour) and 'Shampooing with Indian Oils.' The business prospered, necessitating a move to larger premises. With the help of a backer Mahomed built an imposing bathhouse called 'Mahomed's Baths'. For publicity, besides newspaper advertisements, Mahomed published two books, first 'Cases Cured by Sake Deen Mahomed, Shampooing Surgeon, And Inventor of the Indian Medicated Vapour and Sea-Water Baths, Written by the Patients Themselves' (1820), and subsequently three editions of 'Shampooing, or, Benefits Resulting from the use of The Indian Medicated Vapour Bath, As Introduced into this Country by S.D. Mahomed', in which he claimed to have trained and served as a surgeon before becoming a soldier, and added ten years to his age to make the fib credible. The peak of Mahomed's career came when he treated King George IV and King William IV and was awarded Warrants of Appointment as 'Shampooing Surgeon' to their majesties. Sometime in the 1830s Mahomed opened a branch in London, which was run first by his son Deen Junior, and then by another son, Horatio, who also published two books for publicity.

In 1841, following the death of his backer, Mahomed was forced to move to a smaller establishment. By now his popularity had declined, and when he died in 1815 he was almost a forgotten figure. His obituaries suggested that he had lacked in business acumen. But there is no doubt that his had been an extremely colourful personality, and he deserves to be remembered for having initiated two very different traditions; one is the tradition of Indo-Anglican writing, and the other that of the marketing of Indian exotica by Indians themselves. A remarkable Double First!

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Excerpt from The Travels of Dean Mahomet



Dear sir, A few months after our arrival at Chunargur, Captain Baker disclosed his intentions of going to Europe: having a desire of seeing that part of the world, and convinced that I should suffer much uneasiness of mind, in the absence of my best friend, I resigned my commission of Subidar, in order to accompany him. We took boat at Chunargur, and proceeded to Calcutta, by the way of Dacca, sailing along the Ganges a distance of three hundred miles. Our passage was very agreeable, as the season was fine, and the farmers were just returning from the fields with the fruits of the harvest. It was not uncommon to see two thousand bullocks carrying corn, the property of one yeoman, to the granaries. There are many fine seats on each side of the river, with a continued variety of beautiful improvements, striking landscapes, and sublime scenes of rural imagery, which, at once astonish and delight the enraptured view.

Having completed the most pleasant voyage imaginable, we, at length, arrived at Dacca, one of the most extensive cities in the province of Bengal, which lies in twenty-four degrees north latitude, on an eastern branch of the Ganges. It is near five miles in length, but very narrow, and winding with the river.

Dacca is considered the first manufactory in India, and produces the richest embroideries in gold, silver, and silk. It also receives considerable advantages from its cottons, of which the finest striped and worked muslins, colicoes, and dimities, are made, much superior to those finished in other parts of the country. The best kind value than any permitted to be sold either to the natives or foreigners.

The filigrane, in particular, is admirable, the workmanship being more costly than the metal itself. It is not perforated, as with us, but cut in shreds, and joined with such inimitable art, that the nicest eye cannot perceive the juncture. The embroidery and needle-work, for elegance, surpass all description, and greatly exceed any thing of the kind done in Europe: but it is remarkable that there are no female embroideries or seamstresses here; the men do all the work in these branches, and their patience is astonishing, as their slowness is singular. Provisions of all sorts are exceeding cheap and plentiful in Dacca: the fertility of its soil, and the advantages of its situation have, long since, made it the centre of an extensive commerce; it has still the remains of a very strong fortress, in which, a few years back, was planted a cannon of such extraordinary weight and dimensions, that it fell into the river, with the entire bank on which it rested; the length of the tube was fourteen feet, ten and a half inches, and the diameter of the bore one foot, three and one eighth inches; it contained two hundred and thirty-four thousand four hundred and thirteen cubic inches of wrought iron, weighed sixty-four thousand four hundred and eighteen pounds avoirdupoise, and carried a shot of four hundred and sixty-five pounds weight.

Here is also the residence of a grand Nabob, who, at his accession to the throne, conformable to an old custom, something similar to that of the Doge of Venice on the Adriatic, enjoys a day's pleasure on the river, in one of the most curious barges in the world, called a samsundar. It is sheathed with silver, and in the centre is a grand eminence of the same, on which his crown is placed on the day of coronation: nearer the stem is a brilliant seat encompassed with silver rails, and covered with a rich canopy embroidered with gold, under which he reclines in easy majesty. This boat and another of considerable value, that conveys his attendants, are estimated at a lack of rupees. He is accompanied by a number of the most distinguished personages, and there are no bounds to the lavish waste of money expended on this occasion, in order to aggrandize the pomp of this ancient ceremony. Travellers of every description, who pass this way, are led by a prevailing curiosity to see these elegant boats.

TRAVELOGUE

Brazilian experience

I have travelled since my student days to many fascinating cities and savoured the life and flavour of those distant lands. I was always attracted to the cultural aspects of places I visited. I was drawn by the people, their customs and mores. Since my childhood, the stories I had heard about famous cities, such as Baghdad, Basra, Cairo, Istanbul, Samarkand etc. used to fascinate me. My mother had related many stories of these cultural places. Thus as soon as I got the opportunity, be it as a student on a shoestring budget, and later on in more affluent times, I pursued the path of finding my roots in these ancient capitals of the world. My passion for music, theatre and arts led me to delve into the rich treasures of the cultural past. I wish to share these experiences because I did not travel merely as a tourist, but rather went in pursuit of mankind's history and the search for my own heritage, says Sayeed Ahmad

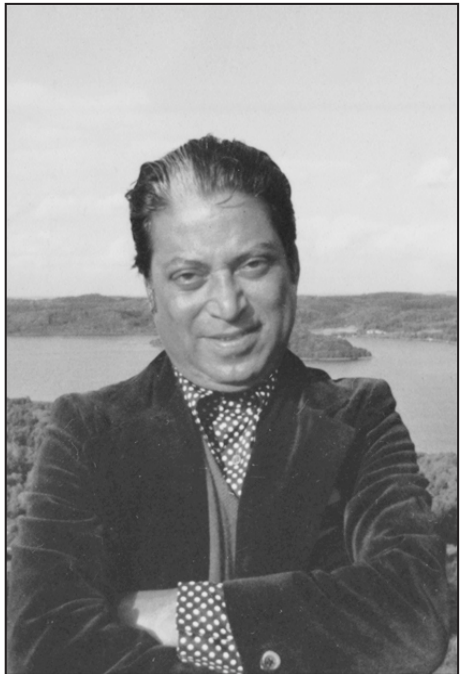
THE Brazilian art exhibition held in Sao Paulo in Brazil, South America, is one of the biggest of the art world. I had nursed a desire since a long time to attend this great event of art exhibits and I got the opportunity in 1979.

I visited the Brazil Embassy in Dhaka to make arrangements. The Ambassador was helpful and gave time to work out the lengthy route cutting across half the globe. I received some excellent guidance from the Press Counsellor named Roberto of the Embassy. He was proceeding back to Brazil, and promised to fix up a programme that would enable me to see the best of theatre in Brazil and art centres.

I left the country end of September 1979 and reached Amsterdam next day. There I was informed that due to a coup in Monrovia, on the African West Coast, our route had to be changed. Now we would fly to Las Palmas, an island of great beauty. After a bit of a circuitous flying we landed on the island and found many people of Indian origin who had settled there since half a century. Then I flew on to my destination, which I reached on 2nd October at 12 noon. It was a very long haul but the thrill of visiting a great Latin American country exhilarated me.

I was received by an official of the Ministry of Culture who took me to the government Guest House which was grand and spacious. The car sped along at such high speed I could sense the dare-devil driving that many of our own Dhaka drivers indulge in! I was overwhelmed with the variety and courses of food that were served to me in my room. I received a message that the Bangladesh Charge d'Affaires Mr Maudud Ali would soon be meeting me next day.

The exhibition was inaugurated on 3 October



The author in his Brazilian sojourn

with great fanfare by the Governor of Sao Paulo Mr Paolo Saleem Muluf in the place of the President of Brazil who could not attend, being indisposed. Nearly two thousand people attended this remarkable exhibition. Fifty ambassadors from Brasilia, along with painters, critics, journalists and intellectuals attended the show. The Bangladesh painters whose works were put on show were Quamrul Hassan, Mohammad Kibria, Murtaja Baseer, Qayyum Chowdhury and Monirul Islam. It is worth mentioning that one of Bangladesh's renowned artists Monirul Islam's graphic at the show drew the attention of the representative of Chase Manhattan Bank USA, who was Director of the Bank of Latin America. He wished to purchase this graphic work for President David Rockefeller but as Shilpakala Academy had made a no-sale undertaking with the Brazil Gov-



Sayeed Ahmad delivering lecture on Bangladesh Art in Brasilia organised by the Bangladesh Embassy in 1979. Maudud Ali chargé d'affaires is on extreme right

ernment it was not possible. Big business concerns always buy works of art from exhibitions so as to get income tax rebate. I was able to arrange placing of the Bangladesh painting in the permanent gallery of the Brazilian Government. On my recommendation each of our artists was given a token payment of Tk. 3,000/= from the Ministry of Culture. These paintings hang in a prominent place in the Sao Paulo Museum. This was the first time that Bangladesh art was hung in South America.

Every year the Foundation awarded different prizes but this year a decision was taken not to award any prize. The reason being that it was not necessary to give any gradation. But of course works were adjudged for their excellence.

On 4 October morning I met Dr Alves, Chief of the Biennale and the Foundation to discuss the arrangement of my giving a lecture on Bangladesh Art. This was a unique opportunity for our country. On 6 October I delivered a lecture on art and culture of Bangladesh on the invitation of Professor Oswaldo D'Amore, President of Sao Paulo Art Foundation who interpreted my lecture in Portuguese. The illustrated lecture lasted for over an hour and was translated simultaneously by Professor Oswaldo D'Amore assisted by Dr Marianne de Tolentino. She is a well-known art authority and Chief of Culture Ministry of the Dominican Republic. It was well received in a jam-packed hall. For the first time a Bangladeshi delivered a lecture in Brazil. Later on I delivered two lectures in Brasilia and Rio. After the lecture we made our way back to a reception hall along with special guests, ambassadors and artists. We were in great spirits and the weather was fine. The Indonesian Ambassador said that there is a custom in his country that when one completes some job successfully he makes special purchases for the family as gifts, and also buys a present for himself. Mr Maudud Ali and I enjoyed this proposition but I was a little hesitant. There was a famous shop named Piter, a large store like Macy's of New York, and we decided to walk down the bustling streets which reminded one of Manhattan area. We entered the shop with the hope of buying a handkerchief and tie, but my eye fell on a very chic suit of Pierre Cardin. I instantaneously decided to spoil myself and make a big buy! The suit had to be altered and the tailor was called and did the needed measurements. The shop keeper asked if I would pay by cheque or cash but by friend the Indonesian Ambassador

said "Please send the suit to the Government Guest House, and if it fits well payment will be made."

We left the shop happily and were walking at a good speed, Mr Maudud Ali and I slightly behind and the Ambassador in front. The city is somewhat hilly and the streets slope up and down. Suddenly a black boy brushed past me and pulled out my back pocket wallet. Indonesian Ambassador started shouting in Portuguese "Thief, thief" and I too was feebly calling out that my wallet had been taken. I was quite dumb founded as was Maudud Ali. The thief had the leap of a panther and had disappeared in seconds down a stone staircase. As soon as we recovered our bearings the Indonesian Ambassador and Maudud Ali decided to go to the police station.

We reached there and were presented to the Magistrate sitting in a high chair. I began to explain the circumstances that brought us here. In a very haughty manner the Magistrate speaking in Portuguese said he did not know English. The Indonesian Ambassador quickly explained the incident, but the Magistrate told him that as a diplomat he should leave as soon as he could, else the press journalists would get a chance to make a story as there were many dope addicts, criminals and prostitutes around. The Ambassador hearing this decided to leave. As I looked around I felt helpless, but Maudud Ali stood by me like a pillar of strength.

An hour passed in this way. Then a man approached from the far end of the huge room and spoke in English. I sighed with relief, "What is the matter with you?" he said and I explained the situation to him. He told me that no matter how genuine the case was, unless the Magistrate was offered a bribe he would not listen. He said, "I am a garage owner and rent a parking lot and I have to come every now and then with a pleader of mine and a bottle of Cognac. I will ask my pleader to help negotiate on your behalf."

Since I only wished to lodge my complaint for the theft and loss of my Traveller's Cheques I did not really need a pleader. However, the man told me that I would have to wait a long time as the Magistrate would now go off to the bar. As I surveyed the room I saw a group of prostitutes huddled here and there in one corner, petty thieves and transvestites in another and drunkards in other places. It was a big area and there were crowds everywhere, jostling and arguing, vomiting and spitting like in a 16th Century colonial

market place. Two clerks would circulate among the groups asking for money to be paid to the Magistrate. I was told I even had to pay to get my report written out. Two more hours passed in this manner. Than after a while the garage owner came back and related a strange story. He said "I was a teenager and joined the Merchant Marine during World War II and once during my travels reached Karachi port. As we got shore leave all the young fellows and several guys who were hard boiled eggs, made it to the city. You have lived in Karachi," he said, "there was the Excelsior Bar and Hotel where we thronged to watch cabaret and have drinks. It was the favourite haunt of many navy guys. Soon after there was a brawl and some men came to blows. Whistles blew and the police ran in to stop the fight. We were all hauled up. As this was my first experience as a 19-year-old I was terrified and shaken. I cried and begged for mercy and the Hotel Manager said that this young boy appears to be innocent so he took pity on me, and ordered me to run as fast as I could and inform the ship's Captain about the brawl. I fled out of the place, took a taxi and reached my ship. That incident had such an effect on me, in an alien country with nobody I knew, that I later on felt I would like to help someone someday. So now Sir, I will ask my pleader to present your report in English and later on to be translated and beseech the Magistrate to hand over your complaint sheet without delay."

Maudud and I still had to wait another two hours; it was almost 10 o'clock at night. The clerk finally took sympathy and submitted the typed report. The Magistrate was nowhere to be seen. He came out at 11 p.m. and then fussing and fuming said he needed to have another cognac. More time passed. The pleader persuaded him and then I saw that he passed on a bottle to the Magistrate. It was now almost midnight and his duty was getting over, so at just five minutes to 12 midnight, he handed the signed report with great annoyance. Very frustrated that he did not get his palms oiled! This struggle of mine was necessary in order to present the police papers to American Express and retrieve the loss. It was an ordeal from the afternoon and one which enriched my experience of another country!

I was yet to discover another tenor of Brazilian temperament when I visited the American Express office next morning. As I was filling out the form the lady officer glanced at the newspaper and saw my photograph giving a lecture in Sao Paulo University. She smiled and pointed to the photograph saying "You are a famous person, I will especially give you a payment of \$500/-." I thanked her for the gesture. Mr Maudud Ali quickly said, "Why don't you sanction a bit more," and the lady officer smiled and agreed to give \$700/- . I collected the remaining amount in Rio de Janeiro.

On a bright morning, accompanied by Mr Maudud Ali, Charge d'Affaires of Bangladesh, I left Sao Paulo for Brasilia, I called on the Chief of Culture Mr Guy Brandao, and presented him with the letter from our Bangladesh Minister for Culture. Mr Brandao expressed his happiness at the existing cooperation between our countries and held out promises of assistance. In the case of football he explained that it was a million dollar business in Brazil and therefore no Government assistance will be forthcoming. However, in the case of artists and scholars there could be further cooperation.

On 8 October I delivered a lecture on "Trends in Bangladesh Art" which was attended by diplomats, artists, intellectuals and press. A columnist of Jornal de Brazil, Miss Cora Ronai interviewed me subsequently and wrote a big despatch highlighting art activities in Bangladesh. A booklet written by me and published by Shilpakala Academy in 1977 which gave a brief description of the arts was translated in Portuguese. The Minister of Culture of the Dominican Republic promised to bring out a supplement on Bangladesh as a result

of our discussions and notes made by her.

Brasilia is one of the most beautiful cities of the world. It was planned and designed by Mr. Oscar Niemeyer who was entrusted to implement the unique metropolis. I had never seen such beauty in a city; the parks, the streets, buildings both government and mercantile are all works of art. While Sao Paulo was a jungle of a city, Brasilia in contrast was balanced and orderly. On the streets even the spittoons were artistically conceived! I was amazed and moved at the richness of artistic concepts. I was led by my journalist friend to the Chamber of Deputies and the opulence and grandeur struck me there. Indeed Brasilia is a marvel city.

I remember in 1966 I went to Nepal at the invitation of the Royal Nepal Academy whose chief was Mr Bangdel, a reputed art personality and friend and classmate of Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin in Calcutta. I was to lecture at the USIS Auditorium, as the Royal Academy had not yet got its own building. After my lecture and the question hour session Mr. Bangdel led me to meet the world famous architect Mr Oscar Niemeyer. He was a towering personality and I was delighted by his extent of knowledge of Asian art. He enquired about my country's art and showed serious interest in the current state of Asian arts. He told me about his plans to visit

set up in many other cities and were holding regular shows. Mr. Humberto Braga the Director of Children's Theatre, in his forties, showed me two auditoriums and took pains in explaining every aspect of the theatre. One had a capacity of 1200 seats and the other 500 seats. Both were air-conditioned and had plush seats. He was full of enthusiasm telling me about the excellent performances by the children. There was also a theatre school attached to the Centre. The children took training in direction, stage sets, costumes and production. I witnessed the play "Aladin and His Lamp." There was a large grant for the staging of plays throughout the year. The Children's Theatre was a stimulating experience. We do not have a children's theatre, but would be better served if government initiates this programme.

Rio's famous art museum got burnt in an accident this year. It was an extensive fire which burnt down the entire wing. Therefore, my lecture was rescheduled to another building. Mr Arnold Riqueria was Director of the Art Museum. The Art Museum had a spacious building before but now it was extended and renovated, so as to redisplay the rescued art pieces and ensure their safety. I was lucky to see an excellent play "Macunaïma." It was a spectacular play in which the actors wore costumes made out of daily newspapers. The



The great Oscar Niemeyer

Patan and Nagarkot and invited me to join in his entourage. Nagarkot was the seat of the Mallah King. There is a famous Peacock Window carved by the King who was a gifted carver himself. From Nagarkot one gets the view of Mount Everest when the sky is clear. But as I had already made arrangements so I declined the offer. As I walked down the streets of Brasilia, I paid my humble tribute to the great Oscar Niemeyer. He was born in Rio de Janeiro on 15 December 1907. He studied Le Corbusier in 1936. He was the Chief Architect of Govt. under Brazilian Authority (NOVACAP) from 1956-1961. He was awarded Julliot Curie Award in 1956, Lenin Prize in 1963. His exhibition in Center Georges Pompidou 1979 was a landmark in architectural circles and designed a Mosque in Algiers in 1968.

After Brasilia I proceeded to Rio de Janeiro though I was not feeling too well. My nose started bleeding suddenly. I recovered soon thereafter. I took a trip to see the Children's Theatre on which Brazilian government had spent much money. I was told that now "Children's Theatres" had been

concept and presentation were brilliant. The actors were competent and decor was marvellous. This was a 'revolt' play. In Brazil there is a genre of plays which express revolt. These are very popular.

Rio de Janeiro is a city of contrasts with poverty and wealth coexisting. On one side it is famous for fiestas and extravaganzas and on the other are the 'flavela' (down-trodden people) and high crime rates.

In the course of my travels Brazil stands out because of its extraordinary cultural vibrancy and the fact that it enriched my experience of a region of global heritage. In Brazil you have thieves and pickpockets as well as warm-hearted helpful people.

In the end the recovery of my stolen dollars brought a happy ending to my visit. Without a fuss the Bank Manager handed over the money. I thanked him for the gesture and left Rio for London with a happy heart.

Sayeed Ahmad is playwright and art critic