of going back. Our classmates are all becoming CEOs. The Indians are doing it, why not us? First India Shining, now Bangladesh Shining. A recent Time Magazine cover story, "Bangladesh: Rescue Mission,"[2] seems to have done wonders. There's some grumbling in the politically savvy corner of the table that a Washington DC PR firm was hired by the Bangladesh government to plant stories like this. But still, good press is good press ... even if it is potted news.

I enjoy the loose talk. They may all be masters of the universe, but it's hard to feel threatened by any of this. A Bengali Wall Street high-riser is not quite the standard testosterone cowboy. Besides all the colonial baggage (the ethnic group selected as "gentle" and "bookish" by the British Colonial project and raised to be the Empire's accountants, not its fighting force), there is also a latent cultural distrust of overt enthusiasm and energy. These are factors that serve to dampen any aggression emanating from the macho Wall Street ethos. Soon enough, many of these Bengali professionals will hear the "call" and depart the trading floor to return to Bangladesh and start their own companies.[3]

At some point during our dinner, we discover that our head-waiter is Bengali. After listening to our banter for a while, he finally decides to break cover and reveal that he's from Chittagong. His name is Mahmud and he's thrilled to find the restaurant's largest table occupied by compatriots.

"This is an Italian place," he explains, "We don't often get Bengalis here. Actually never. Not spicy enough. *Fika.*"

Everyone takes a shine to Mahmud. He's self-assured, especially when explaining various wines to the table. Yes the Pinot is good, but not that year. Hmm, that other one has a smoky flavour. It won't go well with the fish. This one is from Coppola's vineyard. He's better at wine than film! Mahmud has no hang-ups about showing off his expertise to a table full of Bengalis. Some people at the table drink, others don't. But there's no pretense that some Muslim "standard" has to be kept. I'm reminded of the *New York Times* profile of one of the oldest bartenders in a stately Manhattan hotel -- a man who proudly told the reporter that studying chemistry in Bangladesh gave him the knowledge to mix drinks. But though he was quite comfortable talking to an American reporter, I wondered if he would be horrified if that story made it back to the Bengali press.

Bangladesh is Bangladesh, appearances must be maintained.

Throughout the evening, Mahmud keeps coming back and giving us little tips. Yes, that fish is good. No, you won't like the asparagus dish. "It's fine for others, but you'll find it very bland." *Fika* again. He keeps up a steady line of questioning about what each of us does. Mahmud is particularly taken with the people that are senior management, especially the women. The presence of male executives is not a surprise. But female executives holding their own, while looking and sounding like a wife or sister he may expect to stay at home, is scrambling some part of his brain.

Goldman Sachs and Merrill Lynch. CBS and Ogilvy.

"*Bap re bap.* Our people are making it there, too?"

"Yes," laughs one woman, "Not just Indians any more."

A confident laugh. The world is someone's oyster.

The dinner almost over. I lean forward and ask Mahmud what he does.

"I'm studying at City College. Second year."

"What's your major?"

"Oh. Aeronautics. I'm studying to be a pilot."

He goes on to other topics: Course load. Favorite classes. Chinese TAs. Difficult accents. Tuition. Night course. GPAs. Grading on the curve.

But I'm still on that phrase.

Pilot.

Studying to be a pilot.

After he leaves to bring dessert, I turn to our host. "*Kothin obostha!* That's a tough situation. Does he really think he can get hired as a pilot with that name?"

"Don't be silly. Why should it matter? He'll be fine. Anything is possible." This is coming from a man who's a vice-president at his company. Equities or something -- I forgot what he said at the beginning of dinner.

Flash back to a recent quote from Raju Narisetti:

"Becoming the deputy managing editor of the Wall Street Journal in the US suggested that being South Asian is no hurdle or bar to get there."[4]

Anything is possible.

I was recently at a South Asian conference in Michigan. Halfway through the weekend, I realized the unintended, dual track of the speaker selection. The Muslim speakers were all in the "angry activist" ghetto -- the



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