Star Literature
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NON-FICTION

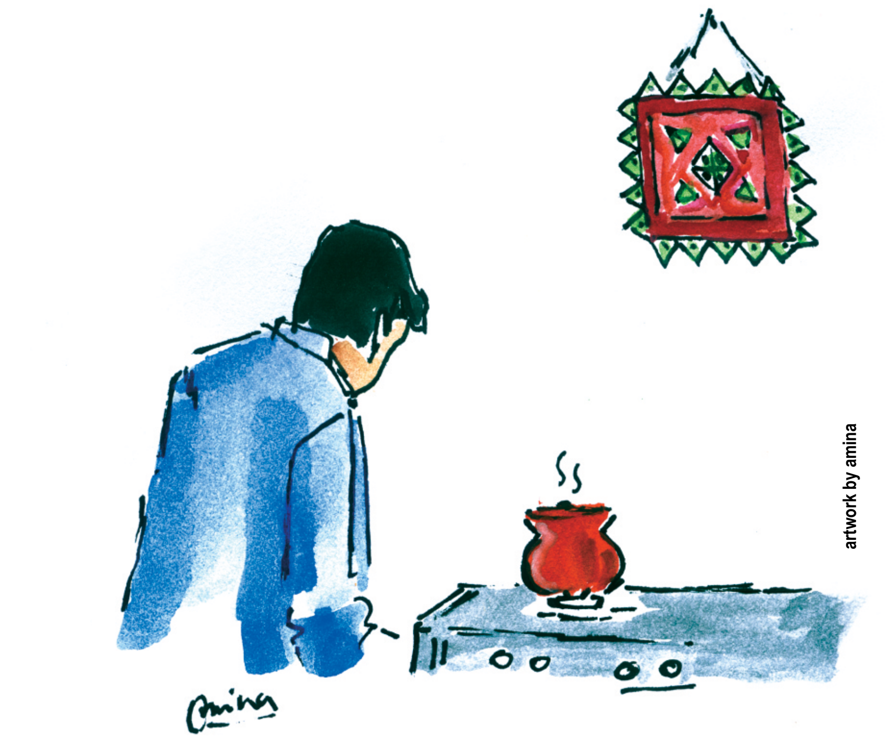
Cooking a Pot of Rice

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Six weeks after I came to America, I began to hanker for plain white rice, cooked the way my mother used to back in Bangladesh. I was tired of fried rice, of Mexican beans and rice, of the sticky Japanese stuff, of wild rice from Louisiana, even the rice in Indian restaurants--tired of what the whole, noisy medley of "ethnic" cooking had done to an elegant food staple.

To the Bengali bourgeoisie, the class in which I had been reared, rice was the essence of a good meal and was no simple affair. First, one always ate white rice (Atap), none of that coarse brown nonsense, which one could never tell if it was properly husked or not, and when cooked, always seemed to retain a faint gamy undertone. Before cooking, the rice had to be picked and washed free of all grit, the dust of Bangladesh. Second, one always ate it hot, freshly cooked, ladled out steaming from a bowl in the center of the table, never as a leftover. Third, the color wasn't a bright, hard-edged white but had a softer, matte finish. Fourth, plain meant plain, white rice cooked without peas, carrots, or vegetables of any kind. No oil, butter or margarine, thank you very much.

The right rice cooked properly, as my mother would say wrinkling her nose, never “smelled.” It would have a clean, faintly starchy aroma. And cooked rice should never, ever be mushy, which could ruin a meal, if not possibly the day. In the perfect dish, each grain would lie as a separate, opaque entity in a delicate latticework, yet pliant. When squeezed between thumb and forefinger, it dissolved into a white skidmark of carbohydrate.



artwork by amina

Though rice is cooked plain, no Bengali ever eats it plain; it has to be accompanied by either lentils, curried fish or vegetables. Or as a dessert delicacy, with mushed bananas and yogurt. Even the poorest, even the beggars, would scrounge up some salt and hot peppers, mixing it into the rice with their fingers before squatting to eat.

As a boy, I would accompany my father when he would go to the bazaar to buy the week's, or month's, supply of rice. On weekends especially, men and women jostled each other on its crowded paths, trailing children and servants in their wake. All the rice merchants would be in one section of the market, fat men fanning themselves in the heat with hand-held *pakha*s, keeping a hawk eye on their tiny empires of bulging rice sacks arranged in neat rows. There was rice of every variety. My father would stop in front of these open sacks of rice, scoop up a handful and look at the grains, assess color and shape, hold it close to his nose for the bouquet, then pour it back in a slow shower. After going through a few of these shops, he would ask the price -- rice was a no-haggle item yet he would always ask --and then in the din of the *chaalmondi*, skinny helpers would weigh out the amount on large wooden scales and cheerfully lug it to the car. Or the rickshaw.

In America, of course, there was no bazaar to go to, and no way was I going into a supermarket to buy my rice. The Uncle Ben's was laughable, the other stuff too enriched and it seemed to me that the rice was less important than the packaging. So I hit one of those Indian immigrants' shops that dot Washington D.C.'s suburbs. I had never been to one before: Hmmm, not quite the *haat*s back in the Old Country, but still, it had that familiar slapdash air about it. Spices, loose tea leaves and mango chutneys lined the rickety, narrow shelves. Bankers boxes of squash, spinach and cauliflower were stacked on the floor with ginger, garlic and Coke in the refrigerated section. *Dum maro dumm* issued faintly out of two tinny speakers. The man at the counter looked like one of my uncles in Bangladesh, only far more forlorn.

I headed for the 10-kilo bags piled on the floor. No good old Atap here, only Basmati, which was a little fancier than what I wanted but it would do. Nicely. The gunnysack bags were sewn shut, which meant that I could not see or feel or smell the rice. So I did the next best thing: I studied the labels. Basmati from Pakistan came in bags with roses and scales stamped on them. Bags from India tended towards elephants and the Taj Mahal (one from Dehra Dun had a princess with a beatific look). Instinctively, I hefted several bags in trying to decide, chose one from Pakistan and carried it to the counter, suddenly reminded of sun-blackened coolies unloading sacks of rice at railway stations, backs bowed by the weight. For a split second, I was a *chasha* in a gray-green rice paddy, barefoot in the water-logged clay, bending to plant tiny rice shoots by hand. *Bolo soobho shaamm*...

One day, much later, coming out of a store in Virginia with a bag in hand, I noticed a car pulling up, an Indian dad and his two children inside. Dad got out, but the children slid down in the back seat, trying to be invisible. Dad was probably an immigrant with a hankering for plain white rice, while his children, born here into an uncertain brownness, hated to go inside a funny-smelling place that literally screamed outsider. Messy, I thought, this business of being squeezed in the middle.

I called my mother -- my Betty Crocker -- in Bangladesh to get it right. She started to laugh, “You? Cook?” Afterwards, I followed her instructions to a T.

First, I washed the rice, letting the water run from the tap into the bowl, scrubbing the grains. Thoroughly. It removed all traces of any smell. Rice exported to America was exceptionally clean, the usual grit picked out by nimble fingers elsewhere.

“Remember,” my mother had said, “if you want *pulao*, soak it for an hour.”

“Nah,” I had replied, “no *pulao*.”

After draining the water, I transferred the wet grains to the cooking pot. According to my mother, this was the tricky part, how much water to put in. Too much and the rice would get unspeakably mushy while too little would mean brittle shards of chalk.

“After you put the rice in the pot,” she had said, “the water level should be three fingers above the rice.”

Okay, I thought as I added the water and put the pot on the stove. Brought it to a boil, then cut the heat back by a quarter, and watched the rice. About eight minutes later, I took a spoon and lifted a few grains out from the middle. I blew on the rice to cool it, took a single grain and squeezed it between thumb and forefinger. Ah, almost there. I gave it a couple of minutes more, lifted the pot off the stove and dumped the whole thing into a colander, then set the colander on top of the pot. “Never cover steaming rice,” my mother had said, “sure way to turn it soft.”

And so right there in the kitchen of my basement apartment in Washington , D.C., I made my perfect pot of rice, with nothing else to eat it with, no lentils, no fried eggplant, no curried fish with tomatoes, but who cared? I was home!

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Letter from **BRISTOL**

Dhaka on my Mind

ANDREW MORRIS

As the plane banked over Dhaka and roared out into the December night, I looked out of the window at the millions of flickering, pulsing gold lights below, sinking further and further away from me. Each one represented a family home, an office, a factory, and around each of these buzzing bulbs, relationships, hopes and despairs, loves and antipathies fluttered like moths. But as we hurtled upwards, they shrank into silent sparks, then were finally lost in lapping waves of darkness. My head sank back against the seat, and a strange sound escaped my lips. When I played it back in my mind, I realised it was a small sigh.

And when I held this sigh up and examined it in the harsh light of the cabin, I saw it had many qualities. A pinch of sadness to be leaving behind a place full of discoveries and new relationships: 2006 had been the year, for example, in which I began to write, and in which I stumbled across many people who have since become close friends. There was, too, a smidgen of fatigue: many of my work plans had been frustrated by the political unrest leading up to the break. But there was also, if I am honest, just the smallest hint of relief. For a person who likes to be alone, to curl up silently and read, to walk through deserted parks and down echoing cobbled streets, Bangladesh can, just occasionally, be a challenge. Just as for someone who is by nature orderly, likes to plan, who may be called fastidious and even fussy (and that's just by his friends), the place is, you might think, an unlikely long-term partner. I've often thought of my relationship with Bangladesh as an arranged marriage. Flung together by others, we initially circled warily round each other, wondering how on earth we would learn to co-exist.

But that was then. Back in the present, the sigh soon subsided, drowned out by a growing excitement and anticipation. There was much to look forward to in this two-month break. The chance, first of all, to sleep for about eight days, but then a great deal besides.

And so it has proved. Uninterrupted time alone with my wife, intimate conversations with old friends, the warmth of the family home around Christmas. I've enjoyed the unfamiliar sights of spidery frost glittering on the ground, and the long-lost feel of the raw air of winter, and the comfort of stepping out of the cold into a house warm as freshly-baked bread, as opposed to the more usual Dhaka feeling of stepping out of a sauna into an oven. The bare trees clawing the air above the old Victorian streets, the colourful delicatessens and muggy pubs, and the steam rising off the coffee as I sit in my favourite café in the gathering dusk.

And in the evenings, I've taken advantage of the huge array of entertainment on offer here in the vibrant city where I live. I've laughed in comedy shows, watched films from half a dozen countries and gazed up at a small stage where a woman who sang like a deity stood in the spotlight, holding the audience with the power of her voice and the tumbling chords of her guitar.

Meanwhile, on the home front, I've reintroduced myself, after a year of being pampered, to such esoteric gadgets as a washing machine and an iron, and rediscovered the pleasures of shopping, the therapeutic qualities of washing the dishes and, yes, even doing the cleaning. In this banal, unruffled way, over thirty days have already slipped by in a pleasant haze.

A complete escape, you might think; a period of refuge from this faraway country I've been hurled into a relationship with. But if I stop still at any moment, on any day, there's another faint noise in the background: a constant hum. At first I think it's just the blood singing in my ears, but when I listen more closely, I realise it's something else entirely. It's the lingering echo of Bangladesh, the memory of the energy, drive and warmth of the place.

It would be difficult to forget even if I tried - there are constant reminders around me. When I make myself a cup of tea, I reach most naturally for the big green and red mug emblazoned with the country's name, presented to me on one of my earliest visits. I then make for the papasan chair bought in Rajshahi, where I relax and turn the pages of a new book set in the East End of London, teeming with Bangladeshi characters. Or perhaps I sit at my laptop and check emails or browse news websites most of which take me back to Dhaka. On my study walls there are photos of rickshaws in the morning mist and of ships being broken in the half-light of dawn down in Chittagong, and in other rooms there are earthenware pots, candle holders, carved tables, and even a pair of tabla drums, all taking me back to that other world. Besides, over the last four weeks, of the ten or so times in which I've been out to dinner in restaurants or other people's homes, about eight involved Bangladeshi friends, who, incidentally, always amaze me by the way they seem to discover common acquaintances or even relatives within three seconds of meeting each other.

And to top it all, a curious new feeling arose the other day in the most unassuming of locations. While getting my hair cut, the young woman washing my hair asked if I'd like a head massage. I said yes, but should have known better: it's been a while since I've had such a lack-lustre experience as if she was tickling my head with a feather duster. A far cry from the masterly attentions of Rahman back in Gulshan who kneads my head like an expert baker. It was at that moment that I realised I had begun to *miss* the place, this country which has given me so much. I caught myself thinking, for the first time, “I'm going home soon.”

And if *I* feel this way, who knows what the hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis scattered across the world must be thinking. It all goes to prove that life may take you out of Bangladesh, but nothing can take Bangladesh out of you.

Andrew Morris is an educational consultant in Bangladesh currently in Bristol. He will be back in February.

Second Daily Star Anthology - Non-Fiction

The Daily Star literature page, in order to promote English-language writing among Bangladeshis, will publish an anthology of non-fiction writing. Bangladeshi writers/authors/translators, plus our readers, are invited to send in their contributions for consideration. Themes and contents must deal broadly with Bangladesh, or with Bangladeshi life, whether here or abroad. Submissions should be limited to 2500-3000 words, though this condition can be relaxed in the case of outstanding efforts. High-grade translations will also be considered. Translators should send in the original Bangla if they are to be considered.

Submissions should be sent electronically as Word attachments to starliterature@thedailystar.net or by snail mail to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka-1215. All submissions must be clearly marked 'For Anthology' (in case of electronic submission on the subject line).

Only Bangladeshis need submit.

We specially welcome submissions from outside Dhaka, as well as humorous pieces dealing with the lighter side of life.

The last date for submission is May 15, 2007.

--The Literary Editor

NOTE

DO NOT send poems or short stories. An example of non-fiction has been published above.

Book Review

Stylish and light

ISOBEL SHIRLAW

Rage by Balaji Venkateswaran; New Delhi: Penguin Books; 2005; pp.408.

RAGE
A Novel
BALAJI VENKATESWARAN

Set against the violently discordant soundtrack of twentieth- century India, Balaji Venkateswaran, in his novel, *Rage*, weaves together the stories of three generations of women from one fractured family in what is now recognised as the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

In the turbulent years leading up to Independence, we are submerged in the dangerously murky waters of the underground City - a secret society of freedom fighters, activists, artists and rogues - 'the furtive, invigorating City that the British had only heard of, but could never visit'. Within the hushed walls of the City, Rangachari, a subversive film writer, is sent to jail, thus introducing one of Venkateswaran's signature motifs - that of the relationship between art and politics.

As the years unfold, Rangachari's daughter, Devaki, becomes infatuated with his great friend and political ally, Nasser Sharif, a legendary Moplah Muslim movie star. But when childhood infatuation turns to adult lust the two are ostracised from their families and community, and their baby, Lakshmi, is brought up by Rangachari's wife.

The figure of Lakshmi stands at the heart of Venkateswaran's novel, as a symbol of womankind and of the new India, borne of Muslim and Hindu parents into a world where the old rules no longer apply. Filled with an inexplicable rage at her mother, at the nomadic Kurava people, and at the rest of the world, Lakshmi turns away from her life in the theatre in favour of a different public stage, as her political conscience evolves.

The story is narrated by Lakshmi's childhood friend, Vasu, in the distant and mournful voice of a man whose love, like a flower out of sunlight, has unexpectedly blossomed in her absence. Vasu traces her movements through magazine stories, through the anecdotes of the disinterested journalists at the newspaper on which he works and through the growing beauty of her daughter, Ragini.

Venkateswara's writing is lyrically elliptical and his presentation of the outsider in addition to his perception of female thought and dialogue is unusually sensitive. He conjures up the almost narcotic lure of fame and adoration and paints a convincing picture of the way in which political ideals all too often collapse under the unbearable temptations of wealth and power.

Rage is Venkateswara's first novel and his prose is stylish and light, rarely allowing clumsy political analogy to cloud the effects of his artistry. It is exciting to imagine what other tricks he might have up his sleeve.

Isobel Shirlaw lives in Dhaka and is a free-lance editor and reviewer.

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the mailbag

Movie Criticism: A Response

This writing is a response to Rebecca Sultana's '*Of Paan, Parineeta and Parvati*' published in Star literature on 6 January, 2007. I could not keep myself from responding for a number of reasons. Firstly, I need to express my gratification over having found such sophisticated piece of movie criticism, which I believe is simultaneously the least flourishing genre with the most potential, especially in Bangladesh. In this regard, I would like to thank the editor of Star Literature and hope he publishes more such theoretically enthused criticisms in order to initiate a new trend.

Secondly, I really appreciate the perspective Ms. Sultana demonstrates to unearth the politics entailed in the construction of character, plot, and rhetoric of those two movies, *Parineeta* and *Devdas*, which she significantly relates to an yet-to-be-fully-discovered norm of violence against women. Undiscovered because, we have accustomed ourselves to encountering violence in movies where it is attributed with a bodily form, materialized by severe injury, death, destruction and caused by physical force or the like. Rebecca Sultana, on the other hand, regards the overall chauvinistic design of all narrative elements as more violent in the sense that the sustained ideology of this design is the frame from where violent motifs are derived. It also seems worth mentioning the way she dramatically confronts her own reception of *Parineeta* which she thinks is contaminated as a result of having been inculcated on so many occasions.

Additionally, while I agree completely with her methods and its contents, I feel the opposite is true regarding “Dr. Yunus's Nobel prize was especially welcome considering Grameen's reputation of working with disenfranchised women.” Such an uncritical remark invalidates her analytical as well as political stance as it unwittingly once again adheres to another sort of representation, this time journalistic, missing all the politics that this mode might be involved with.

Sincerely

Rifat Munim Dip
Final Year, English Discipline
Khulna University

A Jailhouse Story

Subhash Mukhopadhya
(translated by Shahid Khan)

I was returning
after a walk though fields grass birds piers markets--

when somebody hailed
me from behind.
'Comrade!' 'Comrade!' he yelled.

I turned to see a familiar face
a face I would spot at meetings and marches
bristle-bearded, hollow-cheeked, rail-thin,
plain khaki short-sleeved shirt, a *dhuti*.

When I drew close I realized with a start
that once upon a time
we all had been in the same jail,
his features I remembered well
his name for the life of me I could not recall.
Oh, what a fate,
all those photos in memory's album
and each name erased!

We sat on a bench
and instantly there appeared two glasses of tea
we set the warm containers on the rickety table
with relish squeezed every drop out of the tales
of those bygone days.
Those days of sitting with gritted teeth
with nothing to eat
of barricaded stairs, water stored for the teargas
in the verandah, the flocks of bullets the entire night--
yet, just think, yes, how wonderfully had passed
those day of our lives.
and tears rose to our eyes as we talked,
faces floated up and we recalled
Probhat-Mukul-Shumote.

Then came
talk of the present:
Who is where,
who is doing what--all that! We discover
how contagious is fear.
Both of us fell silent, both unwilling to let things shatter.
Who is where on which side
of the fence--as soon said,
a giant wave right then

roared in
picked us up with both hands
and slammed us two on to the sand.

In front of us was a wall,
and grasping iron bars,
outside stood the dark.
I looked to see both of us back again in our neighboring cells.

Imprisoned in nets, nets of our own weaving.

From Shubhash Mukhopadhya's *Sreshtho Kobita*. Shahid Khan is an occasional translator.

When it Rains in Dharamsala

TENZIN TSUNDUE

When it rains in Dharamsala
raindrops wear boxing gloves,
thousands of them
come crashing down
and beat my room.
Under its tin roof
my room cries from inside
and wets my bed, my papers.

Sometimes the clever rain comes
from behind my room,
the treacherous walls lift
their heels and allow
a small flood into my room.

I sit on my island-nation bed
and watch my country in flood,
notes on freedom,
memoirs of my prison days,
letters from college friends,
crumbs of bread
and Maggi noodles
rise sprightly to the surface
like a sudden recovery
of a forgotten memory.

Three months of torture,
monsoon in the needle leafed pines
Himalaya rinsed clean
glistens in the evening sun.
Until the rain calms down
and stops beating my room
I need to console my tin roof
who has been on duty
from the British Raj.
This room has sheltered
many homeless people.

Now captured by mongooses
and mice, lizards and spiders,
and partly rented by me.
A rented room for home
is a humbling existence.

My Kashmiri landlady
at eighty cannot return home.
We often compete for beauty
Kashmir or Tibet.

Every evening,
I return to my rented room;
but I am not going to die this way.
There has got to be
some way out of here.
I cannot cry like my room
I have cried enough
in prisons and
in small moments of despair.

There has got to be
some way out of here.
I cannot cry,
my room is wet enough.

Tenzin Tsundue is the leading Tibetan English language poet-in-exile and activist of Friends of Tibet, an organization whose activities are aimed at ending China's occupation of Tibet (http://www.friendsoftibet.org>www.friendsoftibet.org). The poem was sent to The Daily Star literature page for publication.