

Non-Fiction

Of Love and Insanity

AZFAR AZIZ

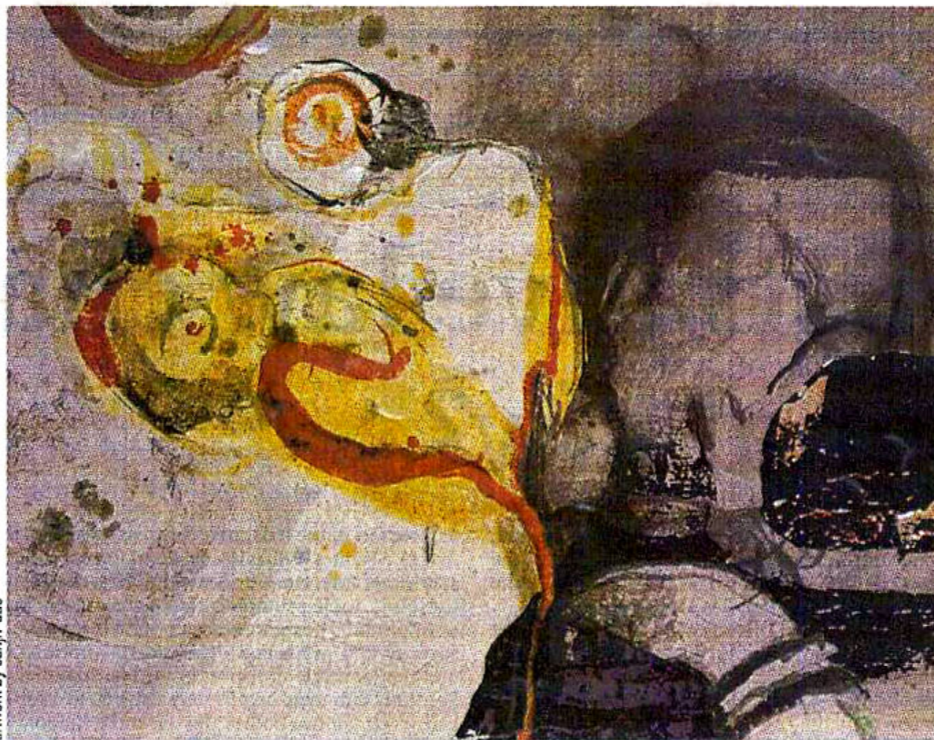
It took me 17 years, give or take a few months, to arrive at the first unassailable truth of my life, that I was a born loser, of which 'lunatic possessed by genie,' 'misfit,' 'eccentric,' 'freak,' 'artistic,' 'queer,' 'loner,' 'genius,' 'nuts,' 'philosopher,' 'outsider,' and 'existentialist' were some of the terms my family, relatives, friends, and acquaintances used to describe or label me with. Even sharing this conviction with the young lady I was then neck-deep in the only, obsessive and one-sided calf love proved yet another losing experience as I slipped a number of notches down her measure of respect. "Don't you indulge in self-pity," she said in a tone of admonition with an undercurrent of mild disgust, which she could as I was 17 and she 24.

I met her first a few weeks after my first and last sincere attempt at suicide, inspired by a combination of a depressive combination of Einstein's theory of relativity, a complete loss of faith in ego, self and all forms of religion, the recent suicide of a near-moronic maternal uncle in his mid-twenties, the conviction that his suicide was but a subtle psycho-social execution of an unwanted member by his family, with my mother playing the role of chief prosecutor, the contempt I had for my mother and for her family for committing this senseless assassination - all of it wrapped-up in the smell of rotten bodies wafted by evening breezes from Azimpur Graveyard. All this, and more, drove me towards what seemed like a tranquil void called death, but instead I woke up from a five-day coma in a Dhaka Medical College Hospital ward. I immediately staggered out of the stinking place and fell asleep outside on a footpath, under an eucalyptus tree. A friend noticed me there and brought me to our dormitory in a rickshaw. Two days later, my roommate burst into the room and shouted, "What have you started, huh?" He blamed me for

his dearest *chhoto mama*, a vagabond with an unfulfilled dream of becoming a great poet, attempting a copycat suicidal act, which luckily had ended in abject failure. It was the failure at killing myself that made me decide to dedicate the rest of my life, spurned even by death, to the welfare of fellow humanity. I joined the cultural front of a Marxist political outfit. That is where I met my love.

During our first one-to-one conversation at her home, where we gathered on the pretext of co-authoring a drama script, I broke the ice, or rather kindled the hellfire as I realized much later, by blurting out, "I want you to know that I hate sex and I have no such intention towards you." Both statements were spontaneous lies. I lied because I was too eager to gain her confidence and knew that I, being a first-year student of higher secondary school, and she already having her first university degree and my lower-middle-class family being totally incompatible with her comparatively elite one, there was no hope of striking a love affair. So I wanted at least to win her friendship, which would ensure her company and proximity. But, in time, those lies proved too costly and heavy to bear. Eventually a day came when I had to blurt out again, this time the truth, that I was madly in love with her and that it would be impossible for me to live without her. The admission cost me the relationship. It also did kill me in a way, throwing me into a paralyzing schizophrenia for 10 long years and a numbing depression that still continues.

Yet, the couple of years I had acted out my part as a devoted-friend-cum-younger-brother-she-never had was a piece of paradise that I am eternally grateful for. To be near her was all that I desired and needed to be the happiest boy in the world. It also taught me, after the long journey I had to take through hell, the love of all life forms including so-called inert matter, and empathy for everyone in pain, in one way or another.



artwork by sanjay das

Anyway, during that first intimate conversation, in response to my lies, she opened up her heart and bared its wounds to me. She too had her calf love, with a cousin, ever since she had been a student of Class IX. In 1971, her cousin joined the liberation war and turned into quite a hero. After the war, he became one of the many liberation war veterans, frustrated and furious at the turn of political scenario, who rebelled in deeply disturbing ways considered criminal by the authorities then in power. So, to save his skin, his family sent him off to the USA. He did not know that among others he was also leaving behind an embryo in his cousin's belly, who for some reasons, including pride, did not mention it to anyone. A few months after his departure, it was her mother who first noticed her pregnancy. Scandal, gossip, and shame

followed; family pressure finally forced her to have an abortion. It hurt awfully. And how she missed that baby that had never been born! Even more than the cousin who meanwhile had fallen in love and married an American girl.

That could be the routine end of a love story. Except it was not.

After eight years, her cousin and his American wife were divorced, and he discovered that he still loved the brown, bonny girl he had so brazenly and selfishly ditched. As the changed time and tide in politics did not pose a threat to him anymore, one fine day our lover boy returned home and laid a claim on her again, throwing her into an emotional hurricane.

Four years before this, I had made that

maddening confession of my love and then dived deep into insanity. I became so withdrawn that it was tough even to utter a word, let alone speak coherently. People, including my own family, thought I would not live much long. Nobody cared. No one arranged any treatment for me. They just ignored me and treated me as if I did not exist or, at best, treated me like the pariah that hangs around the house. During that time, on one winter night, I found my equal in life, a puppy which evidently had lost its mother, whimpering outside the gate of our house. I brought it to the veranda I used to live in then and held it to my bosom throughout the night to provide it with some warmth, while it sucked my nipples to appease its hunger. I did not mind. I was way beyond gender by then. After a long time, that night I prayed to God, who or whatever that meant, to let it live and felt a definite affinity between it and me.

Ultimately, it was music that helped me come out of the burning darkness. I persuaded my mother, whom I hated the most, to buy a second-hand violin for me. She did, may be out of pity. For 13 years playing violin was my only occupation, except when I slept from dawn to noon and the time when I read whatever book I could manage. I also wrote poems that I would burn in a pile after regular intervals.

It was in such a state that one day I received a letter from her, requesting me to meet her immediately. The effect was uncannily therapeutic. I regained a part of my lost humanity and was less afraid of people. The way to her house was so familiar that I could, and probably still can, walk to it blindfolded. When I arrived and knocked on her door, the old housemaid opened the door and ushered me in to her bedroom. She was sitting surrounded by friends, all wearing yellow dresses. Being mad and disoriented, I could not understand that it was her *gaye halood* ceremony. She leapt up from the floor and led me by the hand to another room. There she bared

her heart once again to me. I listened in silence. She was tormented by a dilemma. She did not love her cousin any more, at least not as much as in her teenage days. But, both the families wanted them to get married -- hers probably to wipe off the shame of the abortion, because however secret they might have kept it so far, it did gnaw at their peace, and his probably to see their boy to settle down with a girl of his own kind, especially as their past love affair was no secret to any of their relatives. That was not all - a part of her also hated him for abandoning her, for the loss of her baby, for the guilt she had to bear all those years, and also for the marriage he had in the States. She hated the States too. She would never agree to go there. And she really did not.

She asked my advice about what to do. Oh the joke of it all - asking advice from a madman whom no one considered a man any more. The only thing I could manage to say was, "If you want, you can come and live with me. I will provide for you."

Someone called her and she left the room. Then her cousin entered. He said he had heard of me a lot, he knew I too loved her in a way, and that he could not go on living without her, and so on. He even wept like a child. I liked him for being or acting so innocent. She came back and the three of us shared a cigarette. Then I took my leave.

They did marry. But it did not work out. She never agreed to go to the States to live with him. So, after some years, they got divorced. She later married a businessman and eventually gave birth to three children. She seems at last to have settled down to a respectable and stable middle-class family life.

Stories in real life end in such prosaic ways that one wonders what is the meaning or purpose of all the heart-rending, foolish happiness and sufferings that precedes them. Why do we get entangled in the cobwebs of lunacy called love, when the endings are almost always so mundane?

Azfar Aziz works at New Age, Dhaka.

Glimpses of 'An Anthology of Selected Writings on East Bengal' from the 'India Collection' at the India International Centre Library, Delhi

RAANA HAIDER

Introduction

The 'India Collection' at the India International Centre Library in New Delhi earlier constituted the 'Collection of British Books on India' of the British Council, New Delhi. Numbering over 3000 rare and old books, documents, personal accounts, prints, memoirs, maps and manuscripts; the 'India Collection' consists largely the works of British authors on India, particularly covering the British period. The Collection spans the period from the 17th century (the earliest title is dated 1672) to 1947.

The extracts presented below draw on expansive archival material pertaining to selective original works in the form of memoirs, records and travel accounts primarily on nineteenth-century East Bengal. Rich in topographical and architectural documentation and social customs the topics include administration, animals, architecture, climate, customs, geography, lifestyle, mores and manners and the rulers; by generations of British civilian and military officers, scholars and traders in India. These 'voices that speak' from a bygone era are an introduction to a larger literary canvas of the British presence in East Bengal that will be explored in a forthcoming book.



John Beames, aged about 21, on the eve of his departure for India

MEMOIRS OF A BENGAL CIVILIAN

JOHN BEAMES

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1961
CHATTO & WINDUS
LONDON

'Memoirs of a Bengal Civilian' by John Beames Published by Chatto & Windus, London, 1961. (R.H. Note) John Beames arrived in Calcutta in March 1858 at the age of twenty-one; as one of the last batch of cadets appointed by the East India Company. He served in Chittagong from 1878-1879, was appointed District Magistrate of Balasore and retired from India in 1893. His other accomplishments were a translation from the 'Turki of Babar's Memoirs' and an unfinished 'Historical Geography of India'.

Extract: "We were supremely unhappy at Chittagong. In fact we spent there two of the most miserable years of our existence. The contrast to Cuttack where we had been so happy, was cruel. Sir Ashley Eden, the Lieutenant-Governor, was unfriendly to me and put junior men into good appointments over my head. The pay of the appointment of Commissioner and Judge of Chittagong was less by some Pounds 350 a year than that of other Commissionerships, though, as everyone said, a man ought to have been paid higher, and not lower,

for having to live in such a place. And it was a terrible burden to have the work of Judge, work of which I had no previous experience, added to the already very heavy work of Commissioner. The two posts were, in fact, incompatible. The work of one interfered with that of the other. If I devoted time to the administrative work of Commissioner, I got into trouble with the High Court for neglecting my judicial work as Judge, and vice versa. The arrangement was an unworkable one. Fortunately circumstances arose (though after my time) which compelled the Government to sever the two posts and appoint a separate officer as Judge."

"...We were engaged on a very difficult, in fact an almost impossible, task with these Mughls. The tangled maze of hills in which they live is densely wooded and contains a great deal of valuable timber. It had been placed under the charge of the Forest Department. A department of any kind in India always assumes that the world exists solely for the use of itself. And considers that anything that interferes with the working of the department ought to be removed...Finally some wise man observed that it was not so much the Mughls themselves as their practice of 'jhumming' that did harm, and he suggested that they should be taught to till the soil by ploughing like the Bengalis...Every year the steamers of the British India Company carry from Bengal to Chittagong, Akyab and Rangoon thousands of Bengali labourers, who go to earn good wages for two or three months by cutting and garnering the crops, while the lazy Mugh proprietors sit in their verandas smoking their long, rank cheroots and cutting jokes at the hard-working Bengalis..."

'The Hand-Book to India: A Guide to the Stranger and the Traveller and a Companion to the Resident' by Joachim-Hayward Stocquer Published by W.H. Allen & Company, London, 1845. Extract:

"Calcutta to Dacca (186 miles) ...The trip from Calcutta is effected by means of boats of large barthen at all period of the year. Dacca is both a civil and a military station, and many indigo-planters likewise reside there, or in the neighbourhood. The following is the best description of the place that we have fallen in with: "The city of Dacca, with its minarets and spacious buildings, appears, during the season of inundation, like that of Venice in the West, to rise from the surface of the water, and, like the generality of native towns presents an irregular appearance...There is an Armenian church at Dacca. The floor of the interior of the building is divided into three parts: one enclosed by a railing, for the altar; a central portion, into which two folding-doors open; and another raised off, which is exclusively occupied by the women and children, has a gallery over it...The floor of the verandah contains many tomb-stones, in memory of departed Armenian Christians, who formerly abounded in the city of Dacca, where there are still an influential and wealthy body" (RH Note): there is no mention of the source of the above account of Dacca.

"...But the chief cause of the destruction of the city of Dacca is to be traced to the loss of the muslim trade, which has almost entirely disappeared. It is true that, by giving a commission, an extremely delicate article may be still procured, at the rate of 150 rupees, or Pounds 15 for ten yards; but at that rate, as may be readily imagined, little can be sold, as the demand must be necessarily very small. The working of shawl-scarfs with flossed silk is carried to

great perfection, and many are despatched by banghy to Calcutta. Beautiful ear-rings and other ornaments, made of the purest silver, and of an infinite variety of patterns, can be supplied at a very short notice, and at reasonable prices. The suburbs of Dacca were formerly inhabited by thousands of families of muslim-weavers, who from the extreme delicacy of their manufacture, were obliged to work in pits, sheltered from the heat of the sun and changes of the weather; and even after that precaution, only while the dew lay on the ground, as the increasing heat destroyed the extremely delicate thread..."

'Mercantalism and the East India Trade' by P.J. Thomas Published by Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., London, 1926. New impression, 1963.

Extract:

"...A Persian ambassador, returning from India in the seventeenth century, presented his royal master with a cocoanut set with jewels, containing within it a muslim turban thirty yards long. But such excellence has long passed away, and is not even attempted at the present time. (RH Note: In a footnote Thomas adds): "This industry is now practically dead. The Exhibition at Wembley (1924) has only one old specimen of the old Dacca work."

"...Some of the poetic names of muslim tell their own tale. "Subnam" (or evening dew) is the name for a thin pellucid variety, because it is scarcely distinguishable from the dew or sand. Another of the chefs d'oeuvres of Dacca is called "Abravan" (running water) because it is supposed to be invisible in water. "Alabalee" (very fine), "Tanjeb" (ornament of the Body), "Kasa" (elegant) are also interesting examples of poetic nomenclature. These goods were called by similar fanciful names in other countries also. It has been called in Europe ventus textiles (textile breeze) 'web of woven air', 'cobweb', and so forth. The woollen manufacturers of England said that muslim was the shadow of a commodity rather than a commodity by itself. This was indeed great praise."

'Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India from Calcutta to Bombay 1824-1825 by the Reverend Reginald Heber D.D. Vol. 1. (3 Vols. Third Edition).

Published by John Murray, London, 1828. Reverend Reginald Heber was the Lord Bishop of Calcutta.

Extract:

"To the Right Honourable Charles W. Williams Wynn, Dacca, July 13, 1824. My Dear Wynn, ...Two thirds of the vast area of Dacca are filled with ruins, some quite desolate and overgrown with jungle, others yet occupied by Mussulman chieftains the descendants of the followers of Shah Jehangire, and all of the "Lions of war," "Prudent and valiant Lords," "Pillars of the Council," "Swords of Battle," and whatever other names of Cawn, Emir, or Omrah, the court of Delhi dispensed in the time of its greatness. These are to me a new study. I had seen abundance of Hindoo Baboos and some few Rajahs in Calcutta. But of the 300,000 inhabitants who yet roost like bats in these old buildings, or rear their huts amid their desolate gardens, three-fourths are still Mussulmans, and the few English, and Armenian, and Greek Christians who are found here, are not altogether more than sixty or eighty persons, who live more with the natives, and form less of an exclusive society than is the case in most parts of British India. All the Mussulmans of rank whom I have yet seen, in their comparatively fair complexions, their graceful and dignified demeanour, particularly on horseback, their shewy dresses, the martial curl of their whiskers, and the crowd, bustle, and ostentation of their followers, far outshine any Hindoos; but the Calcutta Baboos leave them behind *toto coelo*, in the elegance of their carriages, the beauty of their diamond rings, their Corinthian verandahs, and the other outward signs of thriving and luxury. Yet even among these Mahomedans, who have, of course, less reason to like us than any other inhabitants of India, there is a strong and growing disposition to learn the English language, and to adopt, by degrees, very many of the English customs and fashions." "...The most whimsical instance of imitation, is perhaps that of Mirza Ishraf Ali, a Zemindar of 100,000 acres, and with a house like a ruinous convent, who in his English notes, signs here hereditary title of "Kureem Cawn Bahadur" in its initials, K.C.B." "...a desire of learning our language is almost universal even here, and in these waste bazaars and sheds, where I should never have

A Life, A Journey

SYED SHAMSUL HAQ

(Translated by the poet himself)

He was buried with his Bag slung from his shoulder. To the hills he went from the plains, from the sea He tracked back to the river's source, scouring The earth.

Now in his bones laps the sea
Now his skull fills with hills

He is the river's murmur lying in the plains
A sun dips in the west
A sun rises in the east.

Syed Shamsul Haq is a noted writer and poet.

Missing Dhaka

SUPREETA SINGH

slant shadows stroking rugged open bricks
a pool of golden veil soft and gentle
falling across cushions red and yellow
cigarette puffed and ashes dropped
ashray on the table top
leftover fingerprints stirring and stirring tea in a white cup
creating ripples of silence
where words fade and memories curl up in smoke.
caught unawares.

Supreeta Singh has left for Kolkata after working for a year in Dhaka.

expected any thing of the kind, the dressing-boxes, writing-cases, cutlery, chintzes, pistols, and fowling-pieces engravings, and other English goods, or imitations of English, which are seen, evince how fond of them the middling and humbler classes are become..."

'British India: Its History, Topography, Government, Military Defence, Finance, Commerce and Staple Products with an Explanation of the Social and Religious State of One Hundred Million Subjects of the Crown of England' by Robert Montgomery Martin, Esq.

Published in London, 1855. Reprint 1983. (RH Note): Robert Montgomery Martin was Treasurer to Queen Victoria in Hong Kong and Member of Her Majesty's Legislative Council in China.

Extract: "Dacca, - on the Burha Gunga, an offset of the Koniae or Jabuna; 4 m. long, and 1 and ¼ m. broad. It is at present a wide expanse of ruins. The castle of its founder, Shah Jehangir, the noble mosque he built, the palaces of the ancient newaubs, the factories and churches of the Dutch, French and the Portuguese, are all sunk into ruin, and overgrown with jungle. The city and suburbs are stated to possess ten bridges, thirteen ghauts, seven ferry-stations, twelve bazaars, three public wells, a variety of buildings for fiscal and judicial purposes, a gaol and gaol-hospital, a lunatic asylum, and a native hospital. Population, 200,000.

Raana Haider is a writer and researcher on global cultural heritage. Her book India: Beyond the Taj and the Raj, India Research Press, New Delhi will be out soon.