



artwork by mahbubur rahman

Man Without His Tongue

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(Translated by Rubana)

Altab Ali's hopes about his son, Ramzan, adjudged a 'merit scholar' while in class seven, suffered a dent when Ramzan's association with the politically left-wing Babar Bhai began to flourish. Ramzan's association with theology cost him his academic place and he barely got a second division in SSC.

For Altab the non-matriculate, Ramzan was a rare feather in his family's cap. A glorious future, that's what Ramzan had for himself, thought poor Altab. After all, wasn't he one of those who had gone hungry and fed their children? Weren't they the same ones who had clothed their children and themselves walked barefoot in winter? Hadn't they slogged so that the tiffin could reach their children at school? Yes, poverty had not curbed his dreams. Altab himself was a disillusioned soul, but that story will have to wait for its turn another time. Today, we can only accommodate Ramzan in the plot.

Thanks to his tiffin money, a lot of friends were drawn to Ramzan. And thanks to his protective father, Ramzan had grown up vulnerable and unsure. His snack money was often spent on his friends' cigarettes and luckily Altab Ali remained unaware of this practice. But that Ramzan had registered with the left wing of the students' union had ceased to remain a secret: So, a betrayed Altab lost no time in pleading with the well-known leader of the Left, Babar bhai: "Oh bhaijan, let go of my Ramzan. You are destroying my dreams." Babar Bhai had an unusual response to his plea: "But, bhai, there are people who expect a lot from Ramzan." Altab disappointed, then tried to reason with his son, "You are my eldest, baba...class struggle should rank the last in your list!"

In reality, neither Altab Ali nor Ramzan had the faintest idea about theories of class warfare. Only history could attest Babar Bhai's strength in that particular area. But somehow the ring of the phrase 'class struggle' appealed to Ramzan's senses and he consoled his father:

"Don't worry, Abba, I promise to study and lead the masses as well." Altab wondered if both were at all possible at the same time. Perplexed, Altab Ali at one point fell ill. He also remained blissfully unaware of Ramzan's brief love affair with Rushna, a student of Kaderia-Ambia Madrasa.

Ramzan used to send Rushna love letters drafted mostly during his study hours. Yet poor Ramzan's passion was wasted on his lover, who was about to wed a garments factory worker. But that's beside the point. Today our focus will only be on Ramzan and Altab. And at this point in the story, the inevitable happened. Altab's health deteriorated and Ramzan scored a minimum third division in his HSC.

This is where I make my entry into the plot. That summer, I had gone to my village and when I heard the news of Altab's ailment, I felt compelled to visit him. Altab, bursting into tears, looked like a man betrayed by destiny, "Baba, please take Ramzan to the city and get him a job that'll sustain him, or else my death will not be a peaceful one."

Dreams may be abstract and multifaceted and it may be difficult to interpret them. Altab perhaps in one of his dreams saw Ramzan as a doctor; perhaps in another he dreamt of Ramzan as an officer in uniform. His dreams must have interacted amongst themselves. But I am certain that the subject of his dream had never wandered beyond Ramzan and his happy world. That particular dream frame must have routinely made Altab a happy father.

"Does Ramzan want to work?" I asked casually as I was sure that his third division HSC would not be of much use. Besides, what powers did I have to employ Ramzan? My isolation from mainstream political activities on the campus has not done me much good. I have been, for the last seven years, pleading with the dean and the syndicate members to regularize a temporary employee, the son of a freedom fighter, who currently works as a university guard.

And I was the one who's supposed to be the resource person for Ramzan? Hah!

Ramzan took it upon himself to answer me, "Sir, I can work for a garment factory in Dhaka."

"In garments, Ramzan? I thought factories only hired female workers."

"No, sir. There are male workers out there too."

"Oh."

It was then that I firmly handed him a piece of advice: "No. Ramzan, you will study." I had, by then already calculated that between my wife's and my earnings we would be able to contribute at least 2000 takas for Ramzan's education. Since my wife earns more than me, expecting her to contribute 1500 takas and leaving myself with a minimum 500 was not that illogical an equation! And it certainly seemed like a feasible plan.

But Ramzan didn't want to pursue my dreams. He had his own to chase. He was adamant. He wanted a career in garments. He followed me to Dhaka and came to 'Mondal Garments and Knitwear,' which had two units under one roof. Mondal was a student of a batch of Preliminary students (Pre-lims were known as 'Pilu' years ago). Mondal's class unusually had two Mondals in it. The other Mondal was from the Honors stream. He was simply a Mondal and our Mondal was "Pilu Mondal".

Pilu had inherited the factory from his father and had expanded to knitwear manufacturing on his own merit. I referred back to an old business card of Mondal's I had from meeting him at a wedding some time back.

I called him, and surprisingly and almost instantly, Mondal agreed to hire Ramzan. "Sir, why just one job? I can hire even five at a time, specially when they come with your recommendation!"

Tell me, didn't I have enough reasons to be proud of Mondal? But wait...my sense of glory was short-lived; my trip to Ramzan's factory had killed my euphoria.

It was a huge, six-storied unit in Mirpur Number 12. The factory had only one locked, collapsible entry and exit point. Mondal's office was great to look at, though and he welcomed Ramzan with