

sufficient warmth. But the people surrounding Ramzan looked like...naaah...is it right to compare them with...the Mafia? Their steely expressions was loaded with suspicion. Mondal then educated me about his work force, which was 90% female. I shuddered at this. That would mean that these girls were always under the watch and care of these hard-eyed men. Mondal's guided tour unsettled my nerves further. These girls were not even allowed to smile since any sign of mirth from them would be considered blasphemous in a place like this factory. It would be considered a distraction. Ramzan got the job; his salary was decent and Mondal displayed enough respect towards me by providing him with accommodation as well. Yet Ramzan was the only one who had a smile on his face at that hour.

When I walked out of the factory, ironically, I felt a huge sense of relief. I felt like a prisoner out in the air for the first time after long many years of captivity.

As a boy, my cricket days were spent in front of the Sylhet district jail. Thanks to my friend, Gaus Sultan, whose doctor father worked there and through whom I had the rare opportunity to make friends with prisoners. Cane was their chosen handicraft and cane products were sold right outside the jail. Those products, to me, symbolized tears and pain. My decision not to ever buy any of those things or even sit on a cane stool stemmed from that single emotion.

Strangely enough, I connected with that old, repressed emotion of my past after long many years...right after I came out of Mondal's factory.

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The last two years of Ramzan's academic life may have taken a nosedive, but his integrity and strength of character did not waver even for a moment. While his friends were busy smoking cigarettes with his money, he never took a puff; when Rushna got married, he stayed calm, never defied his father, and remained a devoted brother to his siblings. Ramzan might have had a measly score as a student, but as human being, he qualified for straight A-s. That doesn't, however justify Ramzan's cowardice. He could barely stand up for his rights...but isn't it unfair to expect a 100% out of a mere mortal? And even if he were at the impossibly perfect score range, he would then qualify to be a protagonist of a different story with a different plot.

Ramzan began his work at Mondal's factory with three specific commitments: One, he would reach work on time; two, he would set out to look for Rushna only after work; three, he would regularly send his mother her monthly allowance. His sincerity did not go unnoticed by Mondal and he was promoted to the post of a supervisor, surpassing Shampa and Habiba who, even after working for three long years, failed to bag that position. Ah..but then again...the gender issue? I had almost forgotten that part. Shampa and Habiba are not even our central characters. We surely sympathize with them, but Ramzan is the one today deserving the attention as he was the one who was able to get his sister decently married off with his own money.

Ramzan, a loner at heart, had no social life. So, when Shampa and Habiba gave up talking to him, Ramzan suffered, especially because his after-work hours were all spent on looking for Rushna. But he made an exception one day and bought two packets of chips for the two of his 'apas'. In return they hurled insults at him; labeled him as the owner's 'rat' and then finally broke down and blamed their own karma. For Ramzan, 'fate' wasn't a word he was fond of. He knew 'reason' as taught by his mentor Babar. So, when he explained it to those two, they smiled and tried to keep up with him.

But the smiles faded with the announcement of

the termination of three workers on grounds of violence and protest. All they had done was scream. They had raised their voices and spoken against the management's failure to increase salaries. Mondal himself had promised them the raise. But that was a Pre-MFA Phase not to be considered now. You must be aware of the termination of the Multi-Fibre Agreement as per WTO rules through which exports from Bangladesh to America cease to be quota free from December 2004. But that was still to be a year from now. So why would Mondal then not live up to his word? Besides, why should the three of them lose their jobs? There were just too many questions and too few answers. However, Ramzan got his raise and instead of being a victor, turned into a victim.

Haplessly Rushna-less, Ramzan had earned himself an extra misery. Since his meeting with Mondal took place once every month, he took advantage of the routine and asked for a little extra time from him. He pleaded, "Sir, could you please increase their take-home salaries? I promise to increase your profit margin by ten percent." For Mondal, it was a tough equation to come to terms with. Profit and increased wages did not go hand in hand. Though Mondal believed Ramzan, he did not trust the rest and he believed that it was wiser to invest in power plants than in labor. Future lay in Power and not in Garments.

Brooking no further words Mondal dismissed him from his office - without, of course, even considering his demands. Ramzan dared to plead once more but Mondal remained unshaken. Ramzan was rather harshly told to mind his own affairs. "Sir, could you please reconsider as their families depend on their earning?" Ramzan's did, too. Nothing worked. But, neither Ramzan, nor Mondal made the failed negotiation public. In no time, when the workers felt that their wages would be halved and that many would lose their jobs, all hell broke loose in the factories between Mirpur Numbers.10 and 12 and their voices of protest crossed the locked, collapsible iron gates of factories and reached out to their neighboring friends. Mondal, of course couldn't be blamed for all the neighborhood discontent. But when posters were being pasted on his factory walls, he lost his temper and tore them off. By that time, the workers' union, which did not even exist a couple of months back, was fully at work and had called for further strikes. Besides, Ramzan being the secretary general of that organization and Habiba the president made the scenario worse. It was a disaster for Mondal anyway with the company facing a no-profit situation, and on top of that, he had the Ramzan-Habiba duo to take care of.

"What's going on, Ramzan?" Mondal asked Ramzan in an unforgiving voice, and which I was lucky enough not to have heard.

"Nothing much, sir", replied the rebel and said that it wasn't fair to treat his workers in that manner. Mondal was surprised, disgusted and lost no time in throwing Ramzan out of his office again.

Ramzan left for sure, but by the time he reached the landing he had already qualified for the legendary status of a hero. The women were carrying him on their shoulders, while he was having mixed feelings about the whole incident.

He felt relieved to have gotten rid of his 'rat' label. At the same time, he had his own material issues to deal with. If he lost his job, who would pay for his brother's college tuition, the one remaining son who would have made their father proud with his first division in SSC?

Something within him hurt when he remembered his father. There were two additional reasons that brought him close to tears. One, by the time he had tracked down Rushna, she had left for Pakistan along with her husband, a fact that Ramzan discovered twelve days too late. Goodbye, Rushna, forever! Two, Mondal's goons had beaten him up, and had

threatened to properly "size" him down if he deviated from the owner's line.

Most of the garment workers are women, the socially vulnerable ones unable to fight the Mondals of the world. Mondals were always backed by the government and protected by the police. I noticed that articles in the newspapers had taken the workers' side, The Left Front had taken to the streets for them, but to no avail. Strikes would lead to retrenchment and even closure. How could one stand up against such ultimatums? After all, wasn't it better for the Mondals to just pay twenty takas to the police rather than pay ten takas to the workers? Blumenthal has give an explanation regarding this irrational psyche: aggression satisfies the ego and there is an added joy in brutally defeating the oppressed. The same theory works for religion and reproduction as well, doesn't it?

A few days later, when the unrest was almost brought under control, Mondal called Ramzan in.

For some time, Pilu Mondal had suffered humiliation. When the protests of the workers had peaked, Mondal was almost ready to accept defeat. For Mondal, defeat meant the end of human dignity. He had started looking at Ramzan through a different lens. After all, a slave had started to use his tongue to lecture his master. Ramzan had almost dared to replace Mondal; Ramzan had almost become him, and he, Ramzan; Ramzan the oppressor and Mondal the oppressed. Ramzan had become the center and Mondal the periphery.

For this, Ramzan would have to be punished. Mondal ordered, "You will not go 200 yards beyond this building." Ramzan, surprised, protested that his residence was over a mile away from the factory. To this Mondal suggested that he stay within the periphery of the office building. Ramzan was assigned a residence with the guards. At one point, he thought that he would give his job up and go away to Karachi. But what would happen to his Ma? Who would take care of his younger brother?

One afternoon, during the break, when a couple of hundred female laborers were dashing to their homes to grab a bite to eat and a few rushed to the roof to snack, the sight of Shampa's body shocked them all. Two girls testified and said that Shampa had slipped and fallen while rushing downstairs. The word of the girls could not be trusted as they were new recruits. Shampa, though not a favorite of every worker, had always worked on behalf of the workers, and they could not take her death lightly. Some even smelt murder. The workers started their agitation.

Mondal was home, entertaining a guest from America. After he received the news in the afternoon, he rushed to his neighbor Amir Hossain's verandah on the fourth floor and tried to assess the consequent developments. In the evening, Ramzan was seen talking to a reporter on a private television channel. He had the look of an angry man, Mondal thought. After a few hours, Mondal the dutiful host returned home. By that time, his goons had taken charge of the factory and the situation seemed to have been brought under control.

The channel had broadcast Ramzan's interview. Mondal had watched that bit. To Mondal, Ramzan's tongue suddenly seemed to have grown too long for comfort. Meanwhile, two or three of Mondal's *chamcha* workers had come in to update their 'boss': Ramzan had spoken for the poor; Ramzan had spoken about class struggle and had vowed not to return to work till their demands were met.

Ramzan's tongue! That long and stretched tongue! That tongue had to be taken care of! It had to be cut off! If the other tongues continued to grow after that, he would let them be. Even if factory-owning elites suffered violent deaths as a consequence, Mondal would still wait and watch.

Finally, Ramzan had lost his tongue. Mondal