

Non-Fiction

Memories Of Durga Puja

Fakrul Alam

The very first time I heard Shah Abdul Karim's heart-stirring song, "Age Ki Shundor Din Kataim" I was transported to my childhood years in Dhaka's Ramkrishna Mission Road and the Durga Puja days we used to revel in then. Karim remembers lyrically "how happily" he and other village youths would spend their childhood days, "Hindus and Muslims /Singing Baul and Ghetu songs all together." Karim's song always strikes a responsive note in my heart because I recall how joyously my friends -- whether Muslim or Hindu -- and my family members would spend the Puja days every year in our Ramkrishna Mission Road *para* or neighbourhood. Although my memories of those days have dimmed considerably by now, one thing I still remember clearly is this: after the two Eids, Durga Puja was the most important festival to light up our young lives then. Alas, those days are gone, not only for me, but for most people growing up in a *para* in Dhaka.

One explanation for the spontaneity with which we would participate in the Ramkrishna Mission Puja festivities was demography. Our *para* consisted mostly of Muslims but also of not a few Hindus; our nearest neighbors, for instance, were two Hindu families. True, the events leading to 1947 Partition had created a divide of sorts between people speaking the same language but belonging to different religions, and yet on most occasions we interacted freely with each other. Every day we would hear the ululations linked to prayers in our Hindu neighbor's house just as they would listen to the *azan* drift into their homes five times a day from our neighborhood mosques (sans loudspeakers!) summoning the faithful to join the congregation. On puja days they would send us *prasads* and we too would share sweets our mothers would cook for our religious festivals with them. Pakistan was very much a state built around one religion, but do I deceive myself or were ordinary people much more secular and much less bigoted then?

Another reason for the ease with which we moved in and out of Ramkrishna Mission stemmed no doubt from the attitudes of the people who directed Ramkrishna Mission. Much like the Catholic American missionaries who ran the school and college where I would get my basic

education, the saffron-clad men of this mission were always tolerant of *para* children irrespective of their religion. We were allowed to play football in the Mission field, bathe in its pond for hours, pick the *bokul* flowers from its trees or while they were strewn in the shades, chat for hours on its lawn, or read in its reading room. Occasionally one of the missionaries who would spend most of their time meditating or leading prayers for Hindus would even drop in for a chat with my parents, both devout Muslims but very pleased to have our "others" in our midst. Sure, there were limits even then, for we would not go inside Hindu prayer rooms and our Hindu friends would never disturb us during our prayer times, but open-mindedness and forbearance ensured that most of the spaces we lived in our community were shared ones.

In any case, Durga Puja in Ramkrishna Mission was the most memorable experience of another religion I have ever had. The moment we would hear the *tak dum tak dum* of the drums pervade the spaces of our neighborhood in the mostly warm but occasionally hot and humid end-autumnal days full of fleecy clouds in nearly always blue skies our hearts would flutter. Those thrumming, magical beats announced unmistakably that the time for another fun-filled Saradiya Puja week had come! The *dhakkis* or drummers, I do believe, were our Pied Pipers, for we would sprint like the spellbound children of Hamelin then to the open field in front of the Mission Prayer hall the moment we heard them. We would find them there pounding away on their drums, swaying and smiling and showing off their skills on those ponderous-seeming but colorfully decorated and deep-echoing *dhols*!

The whole of Ramkrishna Mission became a spectacle of sights, smells and sounds for the next few days. No matter where or when we went to the Mission during the festival season we would experience a riot of colors, a medley of sounds, and a range of flavors that made the Durga Puja days unforgettable. Durga Puja in Ramkrishna Mission was truly in the carnivalesque mode, for there was an unmistakable *mela* or fair-like quality to it. Hindu men and women would come dressed in their fineries, the married women glowing because of their vermilion smeared-foreheads and multi-colored saris, the men looking happy and yet self-conscious in their bright but heavily



starched new dhotis and the children beaming and giggling because of anything and everything. We too would dress up for the occasion because whether Hindu or Muslim this was an occasion to meet people, mingle, chat, display and (for the boys) ogle. The sound of the drums would merge with the tinkle of *mandiras*, the chiming of bells, the unique note coming from conch shells, the ululation of women, the chanting of the mysterious but solemn-sounding Sanskrit prayers and the incessant chatter of not quite focused devotees. Indeed, there was a constant buzz in the Mission compound everyday from mid morning till late in the evening. In the Mission field hawkers would sell hot and spiced-up pickles and chutneys, delectable sweet and/or sour savories and flavored and syrupy drinks. At times the missionaries and

volunteers would serve watery but delicious *labra khichuri* to anyone who cared to line up and eat from the plantain leaves. The smell of the different food items sold throughout the day would blend with the smoke and scent of the ceremonial *dhups* or incense lighted for the occasion. The press of the crowd, the feeling of excitement exuded by the people who sat to watch events or wander from place to place and the assorted Bangla dialects heard all around us created a matchless mix. But of course Puja was mainly a holy occasion for the Hindus of the city. While we Muslim children did not understand a lot of what went on and were often mystified by the seemingly endless cycle of rituals, there was much to keep us absorbed in at least a few of the religious events. At the centre of the Puja, undoubtedly, were the idols built for

the occasion. They are traditionally unveiled on the sixth day and placed on a *pandal*, a temporary structure erected for the veneration of the goddess Durga. Even if we did not know the import of all that we saw who could not but be overwhelmed by the centerpiece, the resplendent goddess, ten weapons in her ten hands, a benign smile on her face, glowing in light golden colors, draped in a flaming red sari, standing on her lion mount, taming the demon Mahisasur? Also awe-inspiring were the attendant deities (how "filmy" are the idols made now!). We were captivated by the welcoming melodies of *agamoni* and intrigued by the *chandipat* or reading from the Hindu scriptures. Day and night we were captivated by the rituals of *anjali* as the deity was offered flowers and prayers. For most of us one of the more fascinating moments of Durga Puja came on the ninth day, when a little girl was made the *kumari*, symbol of pristine beauty. But the climactic event was the immersion of the deity in the Mission pond on the tenth day. From the morning of this day we would witness intense activity. First, devotees would begin preparations to move the deity, then the *pandal* would be carried to the pond to the sound of ululations and finally the Durga would be immersed in the pond water to chants affirming her victory and predicting her triumphant return the next year.

The Durga Puja days mesmerized all of us in the *para* in many other ways. For instance, the *dhaakis* seemed to punctuate the days and nights of the Puja week with *aarati* or ritual dances, gyrating and drumming with abandon and delighting us children. In the evenings *kirtans* or devotional songs absorbed older people who were content to muse to musical tunes even in the middle of a crowd. But what fascinated most people young or old was the *jatra* that was staged in any one of these evenings. Like the morality plays that I would read about later in my English Studies when studying the history of the theater of Elizabethan England, this folk genre had angels and demons, characters like Vice and Conscience, music and dance, pathos and farce. In short, it was made out of a recipe guaranteed to please. Its plot, typically taken from an episode of a Hindu epic, was of the kind that would keep children as well as adults spellbound.

All in all, Durga Puja was a truly enthralling and synaesthetic experience; no wonder our senses were satiated by the end of the

Puja week! The most important thing, I now realize, was that for nearly a week our *para* came alive and we had become part of a carnival that had gone on for days. And in the process our neighborhood had managed to come somewhat closer, for this was one religious occasion where differences were overcome to a great extent.

In 1967 my family moved from Ramkrishna Mission Road to another part of Dhaka and I have never been to another Durga Puja held there since then. But by 1965, a change had already come over our *para*. The India-Pakistan war of 1965 had widened the rift created by Partition, a rift that seemed to have been bridged to a great extent in a neighborhood like the one we lived in. A few of our Hindu neighbors left for India after the war. The rest, I know from subsequent visits, have migrated to India over the decades. The Ramkrishna Mission Puja, I hear, is still a huge event, but I doubt very much if the whole neighborhood comes alive during puja week like it used to when I was there.

Will coming generations in our part of the world ever rediscover the joy that comes from knowing that despite different beliefs, people can participate spontaneously in each other's festivals and even delight in them fully? In 1985, after six years spent in Canada, I remember walking past a Durga *puja pandal* in Khulna with a nephew. I asked him, "Have you ever gone inside and enjoyed the puja festivities?" "No" he said, "there is a smell that comes from the *dhup* that they use that I can't stand. Besides, we aren't supposed to!" It was a moment that first made me realize that the dream of a secular, tolerant, humane Bangladesh had received a jolt in the years that I had been away. Subsequent events have been even more upsetting for those of us who believe in the values encapsulated in that part of our original (1972) constitution that was later "amended". It is thus that Shah Abdul Karim's song has so much resonance for me that every time I hear it I keep thinking of the Durga Puja celebrations in Ramkrishna Mission that I had been part of once upon a time: "How happily once we village youths/Would spend our days, Hindus and Muslims!...." I keep thinking: we'll never be happy like then./Though I once believed happiness was forever/Day by day things get worse and worse".

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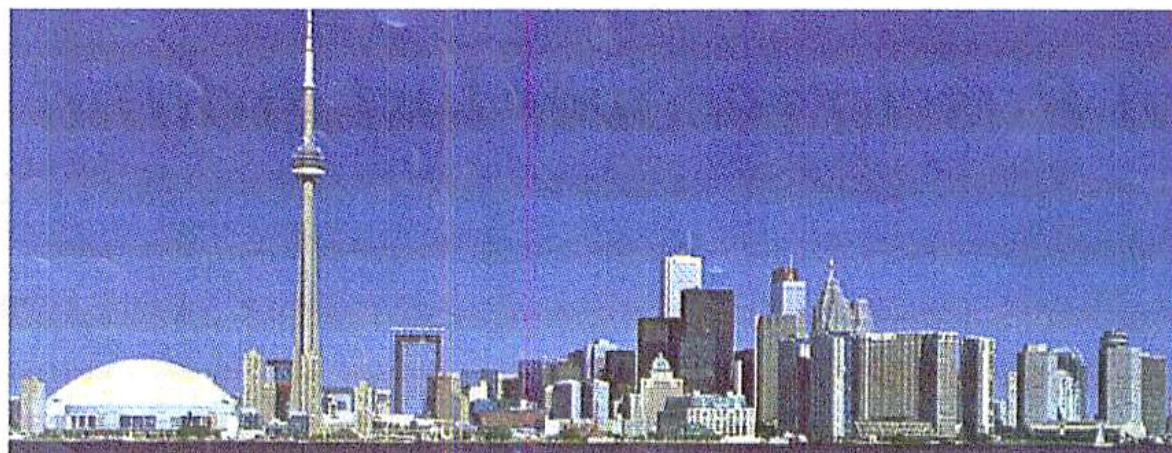
Toronto's slightly confused autumn

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

Almost thirteen drops of rain after a very hot day. Or maybe fourteen drops. One has to pay attention at midnight in the deserted, low-end neighbourhood that we live to hear the timid raindrops hitting the ground. Cars parked in the open shine reluctantly but there is no one hurrying home in Toronto's confused autumn.

Fall arrived a couple of days back but the weather is summery and warmth is promised deep into October. We were here this month the last year and remember the cool, cold weather and the blazing red and browns of the tree leaves. But green still hangs on. A few maple leaf trees have turned partially red and look like the mop of middle aged men who dye their hairs but left it too long for a recoloring. Winter and summer share the leaves, the weather blows hot and cool and arctic ice is melting more swiftly than ever before. An ice free arctic in the summer is just a matter of a decade or two. Climate change?

World leaders met at the UN on the 25th and as usual promised much. Many are critical of the Canadian PM



Stephen Harper's plans. In a land where they have more weather channels on TV than entertainment ones, they are slight behind any serious level of concern. Canadians dying in Afghanistan is eating into them not the climate.

Roja here

The good old Ramzan popularly titled *roja* came and went. It was very visible in this part of the town - in the Bangla shops of Danforth Avenue, Toronto's *deshi* heartland. In grocery shops named Dhanshiri, Banglatown, Marhaba, Sarkar groceries, etc., one can buy much of what Dhaka can offer. Around 11th there was the familiar buzz as eaters and shoppers gather to have and to hold. With fast breaking at 7.30 in the evening, there was not much time left afterwards except to pray and rest I suppose.

One did get *Peanzu*, *beguni*, *jilapi*, *halim*, *chola*, *muri* and other stalwarts of the *ifrar* menu. The quality was not Dhaka but the prices are Toronto. Two *peanzus* are a dollar, a small pot of *chola* dollar one. The rest can be estimated. But people do buy if only to taste delicacies which smell of a distant muddy home.

About four years back, while visiting Ottawa, a Pakistani friend and I missed spicy food so much that we were invited by the very kindly Chair of the Sri Lanka Association who fed us rice, curry and tons of chili like a mother hosting children visiting after many weeks. A memorable feast.

Spicy curries haven't caught on yet in snowy Canada. The food is North American, whatever that means - burgers - and unless the shop is Lebanese or Mexican, the food is bland even for me who has chronic ulcers and hasn't tasted chili in years. The lady at the Lebanese shop where I buy a Pita veggie wrap was so shocked when I passed the chili sauce that she asked me twice. At 2.98 the lunch is a bargain and like all Lebanese eateries I have

been to, food is served with friendship.

Wait!

In Dhaka, my blood pressure doctor could see me only after three weeks. In Canada, an MRI tests can take months. Apparently the lucky ones are the dogs whose waiting time for an MRI is only one day. This waiting time is the biggest crisis in the health system. You have to wait and wait and that could run into weeks and months. Going by what grumpy sick people say in the letters column and columnists add on, even emergency cases take months. A well-known lady politician, famous for wealth and other matters recently went to the US for her cancer treatment. Eyebrows raised and patriots mumbled by this attitude but Canada does have huge backlogs and immediate caretaking of the seriously sick isn't routine. US visiting is rising so do add some sodium to the hallelujah of the Canadian health system, say those who scribe.

Apparently because hospitals are free, everyone tends to drop in demanding health attention critics say. Make them pay and the problem will listen. Hmmm....

Many white Canadians prefer the US whether for

employment or medical treatment leaving the second-generation Chinese and Indian medicine people to take care of those Chinese, Indians, Pakistanis and Jamaicans who can't afford to leave Canada.

By the way, the Canadian and the US dollar now cost the same. So more Canadians are going to visit the US but the incoming tourists are not going to be happy and an export slump is inevitable. China has beaten the Canadians for the first time as the main supplier to the US.

Oh, globalization!

Postscript: Eid came and lo and behold on a Saturday, which meant the huddled and toiling masses could officially stay at home and celebrate. On the eve of Eid the Bangla market shops bustled with people buying it up at their possibly fantasy hometown shops. *Peshita*, *kishmish*, *shemai*, curry powder, *morich*....

'Mr. Bangladesh', the name of an exclusive meat shop in Banglatown, the Toronto version of Brick Lane, sold out their stock of chicken, beef and mutton. The owner with a permanent scowl continued to scowl even more as he expertly sawed off the drumsticks from the breast meat with a humming electric meat cleaver.

The day itself was coldish with a decent wind chill and yet Bangladeshis did their thing - visiting, eating, visiting - in *kurtas*, *kameezes* and children in tow. The colourful *kurtas* has finally overwhelmed the 'safed punjabi'.

Here was one day that belonged to a people confused by location and migration.

Now it is *puja* time.

Afsan Chowdhury is a writer and journalist currently living in Toronto.

The Battle of the Roses

ROMANA SIDDIQUE

I find it very disconcerting
When my battlefield
Is strewn with roses
I would just as soon
Condemn my roses
As accuse my florist
Of being a fundamentalist
As some have treated God
Come nakedly armed
If you must
But please don't give my roses
A bad name



art work by anisuzzaman sadiq

Earnest brain-burying*

SHAMSAD MORTOZA

I say brainless burying is a light thing
I was brainless not to know
my brain in formalin
Was helping knowledge groom
while my body in the pit
Was serving daffodils to bloom
I say brainless burial is brain-ful indeed

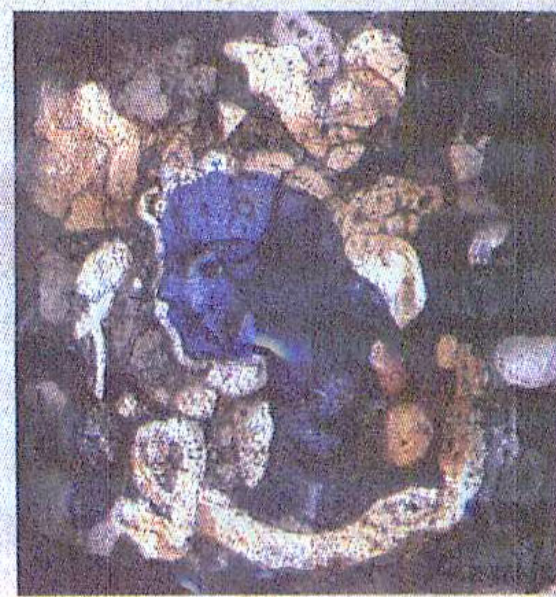
*[On learning that hospitals retain human brains of the deceased without consent of the family members for medical experiments]

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Kali O Kolom

MUNEEM RAHMAN

The striking cover of the October 2007 issue of *Kali O Kolom* is the work of Tarun Ghosh. Inside is the usual mix of pieces featuring art criticism, short stories, serialized fiction, plus Mohammed Zafar Iqbal's popular, and popularizing, science articles, which have justly earned him a degree of renown. There are also memoirs and reminiscences, among them a tribute to artist Nitun Kundu by Ramendu Majumdar titled 'Nitunda'. There is also the usual complement of poets and poems (one by Al Mahmud, among others), and an engrossing and discursive debate on literary modes and language being conducted by the journal's readers and writer Anisul Haq. The latest installment of this exchange is titled, aptly, 'Shorajontro'r kothata aami kothao boli nee.' *Kali O Kolom* has begun to showcase Bengali translations of foreign authors, and this volume is no exception, featuring as it does a translation of the anti-militaristic and leftist Finnish writer Pentti Haanpää. It is commendable that *Kali O Kolom* is introducing to Bengali readers such writers with universalist appeal, who yet remain obscure due to reasons of access and language. However, from the author bio supplied at the end of the translated short story, it seems that the Bengali translation has been done of an English translation of the Finnish original, and perhaps it would have been proper for the translator/editor to make this fact of double translation clear. The issue also contains an extended retrospect of the Ingmar Bergman, who has long considered one of the greatest film directors of all time. Though the famed Swedish director died in July of this year and is a favourite among discerning Bangladeshi art movie lovers and aficionados, his death passed by unmentioned over here. *Kali O Kolom*'s essays make up for this relative neglect. A continuing delight are the black-and-white illustrations by well-known Bangladeshi artists that now form a distinct leitmotif inside this literary journal.

Muneem Rahman is a government officer.