

NON-FICTION

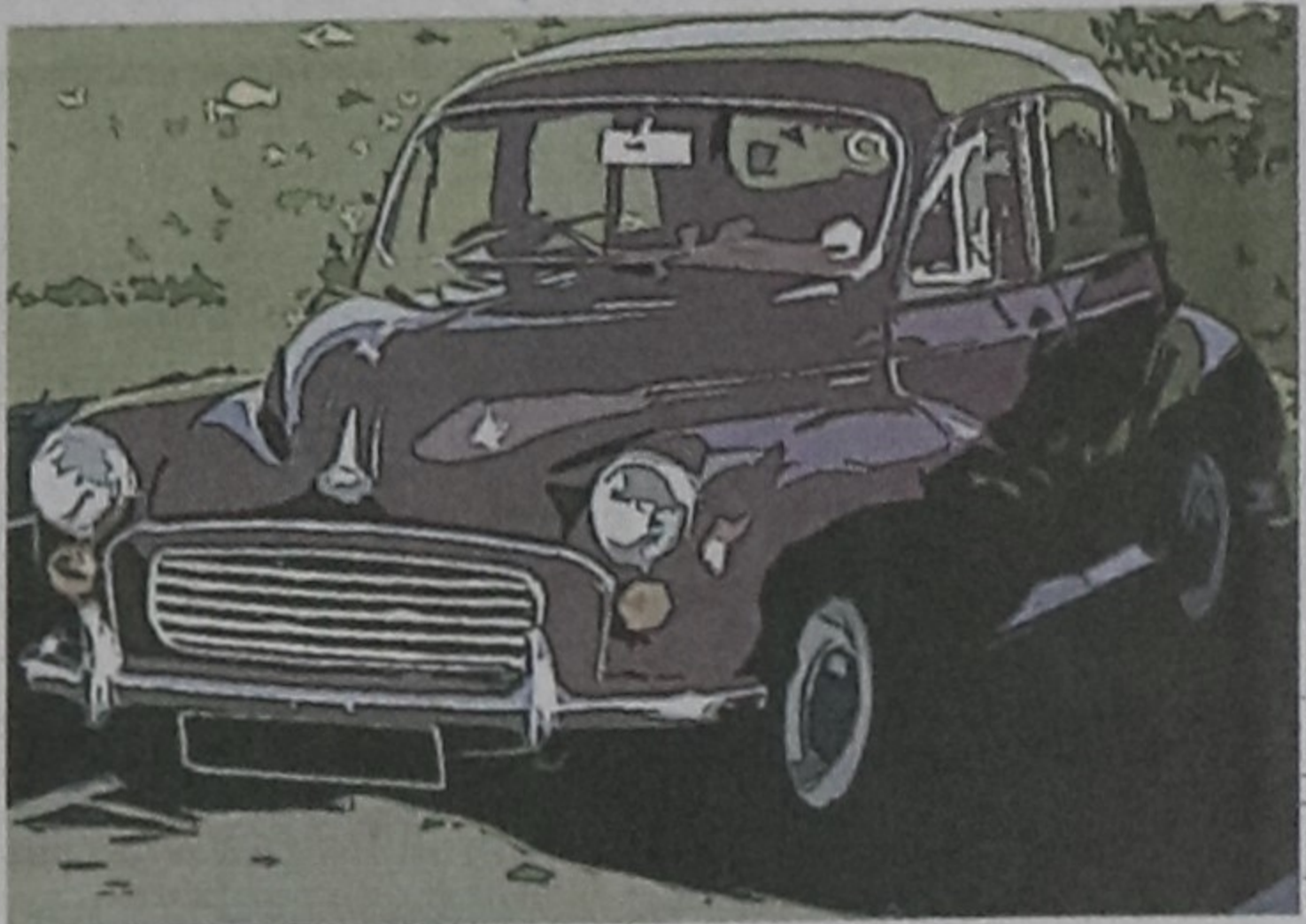
ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I have sweet memories of driving a car in Dhaka. The car we purchased was a small one, a Morris Minor, which my father had owned second-hand when he was stationed in Dinajpur. However, Abba did not drive; and, while he had six sons, we were all very young when the Morris Minor joined our family. Soon thereafter, my older brother and I got our "learner's permit" - nonetheless, keeping a driver still considered a necessity to take Abba to work and take us places. After I got my driver's license, I would always be on the lookout for an opportunity when the family car might be available, and take it out for a spin. Initially, I'd have an escort, the family driver, but soon I would take the car out all by myself and drive around in the Ramna area where we lived, or in the Dhaka University area where I was studying.

My father had always resisted buying an automobile, since he did not have any savings to pay for the down payment. Auto loans were virtually non-existent in those days. Being a civil servant in the pre-Bangladesh Judicial Service, my father's salary and a large extended family to support left him with very little savings. We were not poor, but the family, like others in our situation, was on a tight budget. Government officials were provided with public housing and 'orderlies,' but judicial service officials, and even the Justices of High Court and Supreme Court, were not provided with government vehicles from what was known as the "Transport Pool."

Before Dinajpur, my father was stationed in Dhaka. For about a year, and just before being transferred to Dinajpur, he was on deputation to Dhaka WASA. This job came with a transport, a Land Cruiser with a driver, for the incumbent's use. So, for a little while we were okay without our own car. In Dinajpur at that time, all the other officials of the local administration had transport provided by the government. The other judges serving in Dinajpur had their own private cars. My father, on the other hand, had an ex-officio chauffeur (an orderly who doubled as a driver) but no car, either personal or government-owned, since District Judges were not provided with official transportation. A District Judge who did not have a private car was unheard of even in those days. For a few months after the family moved to Dinajpur, Abba would go to the Court House sometimes riding with other judges, sometimes in a rickshaw! Complicating the scenario was the fact that the District Judge of Dinajpur and Bogra districts, while based in Dinajpur, would

Driving Mr. Dad



of the driver was an extra financial strain on our family budget.

Then came Independence. In the post-independence days, the new Awami League government cut the salaries of the Supreme Court judges. This, along with galloping post-war inflation, was hard on the family - we could feel the strain on the family budget. We still stayed in the same house on Minto Road, but the price of gasoline shot up 100% and so did the cost of maintaining the old Morris Minor. Spare parts became harder to find and breakdowns were frequent. We all started to think about helping out the family in keeping the Morris Minor running.

Among my brothers, I had a greater experience as a driver, and a more flexible schedule. I was studying at Dhaka University and had only two or three classes a day. My older brother, Shadani, on the other hand, was in BUET where the curriculum was very demanding and students hardly could spare any time. So, when soon after Independence our driver left because of a more lucrative offer elsewhere, I felt I should do the honorable thing. I offered my services to my father as the family driver. Though a little taken aback by this bold gesture, he assented. Despite objections from my brothers who worried that I would monopolize the family car, I was given the honor of driving Justice Abdullah Jabir to the court, and back. My schedule became very hectic. I had an 8:30 class, and so I'd go to the university, and be back by 10:00 a.m. in time to drive my father to his court, which started at 10:30 a.m. On one occasion, when the professor decided to continue his lecture beyond 9:30, I had to sneak out in order to be able to be at my "job" of transporting my father to the Supreme Court.

My driving improved considerably, and so did my ability to pass time doing nothing while sitting in the car. Often, when I would go to pick up my father, I'd have to wait in the car. The car did not have air-conditioning, so I'd always keep a towel and a change of clothes handy. I also would often take Abba to official ceremonies, and depending on the situation, either be sitting in the parking lot with other drivers, or idle away my time window-shopping. Since there were no cell phones, there were frequent hit and misses - he'd come out of a meeting and not find me where he was expecting me. Luckily for me, my father was an easy-going person. I was visiting my aunts, uncles, and my parents' friends regularly. I got to know all his colleagues in the Supreme Court. I also virtually had a car of my own, a rarity among university students in those days. My brothers felt envious of my exalted status in the family hierarchy and other

hold court in Bogra every month for about a week. My father would travel to Bogra by railway and on a jeep borrowed from the local officials, and this short trip would take up the better part of a day.

So he soon realized that owning a motor vehicle was assuming the status of a "basic need". Finally, the other judges and the DC prevailed upon my father to buy a car, which he managed to accomplish with a little bit of help from Mama and his banker friends.

Soon thereafter, he was transferred back to Dhaka, and promoted to the East Pakistan High Court as a Justice. In this new situation, the car came in handy for a number of reasons. Since all the High Court judges had an automobile of their own, if he did not own one himself, he would certainly have been considered an oddity. Also, a judge was entitled to fly the High Court flag on his/her car - a distinction few were likely to pass up. Furthermore, a judge's orderly was also expected to escort him to work and back, carrying the important court documents. However, in those times, before and after Bangladesh's independence, neither the High Court nor the government provided a driver for the judges. Many hired their own drivers, and some drove their own cars. As mentioned earlier, my dad never learned to drive. So a new driver was hired, and the salary

Letter from KOLKATA

RUBANA

To be or not to be...a Nationalist!

Reaching Netaji Bhavan in Kolkata at 6:00 pm sharp on a smoggy December evening can be an impossible mission given the bad Kolkata traffic with Ambassadors running as grim reminders to the city's vulnerability to soot, and with me gritting my teeth praying for redemption.

But I am headed to listen to Professor Amartya Sen speak in person, in Kolkata. His book *Identity and Violence* (Penguin, 2006) had gotten me thinking: Who was the man? Was he indeed the man that he wrote he was? Was theory a tool that gave him gratification in Massachusetts?

By the time I and a friend reached Netaji Bhavan we had missed ten minutes of his talk. Women in shawls and men in suits were crowding the outdoor space. On the stage were the ex-MP Krishna Bose, Professor Sugata Bose (Gardiner Professor of History at Harvard and a grand-nephew of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose), the Governor of West Bengal Gopal Krishna Gandhi, and, of course, the Nobel laureate himself. Clad in a blue suit over a grey sweater, Amartya Sen looked every bit the global citizen. By the time we made our way to the second last row, he was already into his 'Nationalism: curse or boon?'

For Amartya Sen, identity has always been a gallery of co-existence out of which we prioritize our choices - choosing ones we accidentally discover, or are forced to adapt to. His book had argued that history and background should not be the only way of looking at ourselves. A human being belonged to various categories and had multiple identities of being an Asian, an Indian, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, a Hindu with a non-religious lifestyle, a non-Brahmin, and a non-believer in an afterlife. Yet all these identities, according to him, may tragically evaporate under communal pressure into a reductive single identity.

His talk was also about choosing from the different compartments of identity and judging if nationalism was the best one to opt for. Professor Sen's focus was on the perspectives and on convincing his audience on how nationalism benefits one and condemns the other. In the process he made references to the Germans, British and French, pointing out how their overwhelming Christianity could not help them avert war and yet how their common European-ness had overtaken their alleged national priorities. At this point, Sen was critical of European policies of 'multiculturalism' - terming it as a 'federation of religious identities' - which treated each ethnic/religious community as a separate group and created further divisions.

Throughout his talk, he frequently referred to Bangladesh. That Bangladeshis had chosen language over religion in 1971 was an issue of interest to him. In the book's last chapter, Sen had written of a certain Kader Mia, a Muslim who had possessed no other identity at all for the "vicious Hindu thugs" who confronted him in a riot. He had discussed the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war to say that identity divisions then were "along the lines of language and politics, not religion, with Muslim soldiers from West Pakistan brutalizing and killing - mainly Muslim dissenters." Sen's Kader Mia died a victimized Muslim, but he was also a poor laborer who was out in the street desperately seeking work. "In the Hindu-Muslim riots," Sen says, "Hindu thugs killed poor Muslim underdogs with ease, while Muslim thugs assassinated impoverished Hindu victims with abandon." Sen, in resisting reductionism, quoted Derek Walcott, "the goldsmith from Benares", "the stone cutter

Listening to Amartya Sen

from Canton" (Derek Walcott, *Names*) can jointly affirm their common identities.

Through out the one-and-a-half-hour long lecture, Sen emphasized a single point: if nationalism is to breed violence and divisiveness, then there's no further need to be a nationalist. Nationalism, as per Amartya Sen, cannot be brutal.

Professor Sen recollected his years in Trinity College, Cambridge where the walls on campus were filled with the names of the dead soldiers. He paused to quote Wilfrid Owen's use of the famous lines from Horace: "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" - which was termed "The old Lie" and "a desperate glory" by Owen. Susan Owen wrote to Tagore after the death of her son, telling him that he had died with a diary on him which had the following Geetanjalini lines written on it: 'Jabar diney ei kawthati boley jeno jai - Ja dekhechi, ja peyechi tulona tar nai' - (When I leave, let these be my parting words: what my eyes have seen, what my life received, are unsurpassable.)

He spoke of the Bengal famine, driving home the point that in spite of the British taking pride in the fact that they brought 'good governance' and 'rule of law' to India, in spite of all the alleged misrule of the Indian rulers of pre-British era, there was no historical record of any major famine in Bengal prior to the colonizers' arrival there. When he was finishing off with the concept of economic redistribution and who we would share our food with when confronted with the harsh realities of life, the news of Benazir Bhutto's assassination came. A silence fell over the audience and Professor Bose quickly began taking questions. Came the obvious question on terrorism: where does it stem from? Does it start with "bad" nationalism that becomes flammable and engineers violence? Amartya Sen, clearly shaken by the news, replied by again referring to Owen: All a poet can do is warn. He referred to brutal terrorism, saying that people should not be goaded into acquiring identities and that membership in each of the categories or groups of identities should be voluntary. After he concluded by referring to the Gita, that great example of the argumentative tradition with Arjuna asking questions to Krishna, a young man from the audience wondered whether Sen was overlooking "good nationalism" that sprang from democratic resistance.

I asked questions too. True, Professor, while terrorists put 'Nationalism' to shame, aren't there other sides to reckon with as well? Where would 'independence' be sans nationalism? Where would we be without 1971? True, that for a nationalist, victory of the other side is never the official history for the defeated, but arguments of the defeated still find a place in the dialogue. What is it that spoils nationalism? My questions were answered by Governor G K Gandhi, who pointed out the two most crucial elements: iconism and emotion, that despoil nationalism.

True, Governor Gandhi, politics in our lands follow the musical pattern of *arahan* (ascent) and the *abarahan* (descent) and truer still, that worship in our lands turns to hatred in no time, but what is truer is that our leaders are the ones who encourage us to turn acknowledgements into adulation; adulation into veneration, and veneration into worship.

Can there not be an idol without idolatry? Can there not be a nationalist without militarism? Can there not be emotions without malice? Can there not be lands without leaders like ours?

The evening ended with Prof Sen taking more questions, and later on my way back home I wondered once again whether there ever was a single truth, anywhere and at any point of time.

The Urdu scene: Delhi Part 3

KHADEMUL ISLAM

I was patted down expertly. Security was tight at the Indian vice-president's residence. Which, fittingly enough, since he was a Muslim, was on Maulana Azad Road - Maulana Abul Kalam Azad having been the most prominent Muslim Congressman opposed to the 1947 partition. Our names were checked off against a list cleared for entry, after which came the metal detector gate. Only then were Ritu Menon (publisher of Women Unlimited, a Delhi feminist publication enterprise) and I free to walk on the long driveway curving towards a classic Raj-era bungalow set amidst croquet-quiet green lawns.

I had come to the Indian vice-president's house for a book launch: the two-volume *Oxford India Anthology of Modern Urdu Literature*. When Ritu had asked if I wanted to go, I'd been surprised. At the vice-president's residence? We from Dhaka were used to far more modest book launches.

In Delhi the words 'Urdu literature' tug - it was here that Urdu was born. After a whole lifetime in a Karachi school having to memorize Urdu poetry, like English schoolboys numbed to Virgil after having to conjugate Latin verbs on wintry mornings, in my ripe middle age I had come around to it. Bangladesh at its times felt like a macrocosm of Delhi ravaged by the British after 1857, with kerosene lamplights flickering out over the vermilion-stained waters of provisional autocracies: *Baat karnee mujhey mushkil kabhee aisee to na thhee jaisee ab hai teree mehfil kabhee aisee to na thhee...* (Never had speaking been as difficult for me as it is now. Your gatherings never were what they've become now...)

The attempted imposition of Urdu had lit the fire of Bangladeshi nationalism, had blazed it all the way to independence, but Urdu *shairs* could capture our post-independence fall in ways that not even the most ardent nationalist could have dreamed of.

Urdu is dying in India. The Hindu-Muslim communal divide meant that the original Hindustani language peeled off into two separate streams: Urdu became the Muslim half, weighted with Persian and Arabic words and written in the Nastaliq script, while Hindi - beginning with Pratapnarayan's 1892 three-word formula: 'Hindi, Hindu, Hindustani' - went the other way with its Devanagiri script and Sanskrit words. In Anita Desai's fine novel on the politics of language, *In Custody*, the old Urdu poet Nur spurs Deven, the college teacher who loves Urdu: "Urdu poetry?" he finally sighed, turning a little to one side, towards Deven although not actually addressing himself to a person, merely to a direction, it seemed. 'How can there be Urdu poetry where there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished. The defeat of the Mughuls by the British threw a noose over its head, and the defeat of the British by the Hindi-wallahs tightened it. So now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried.' He tapped his chest with one finger.

So what would they say at the book launch? What would it be like?

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cordially invites you to the launch of
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edited by MEHR AFSHAN FAROOQ
SHRI M. HAMID ANSARI
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will be the Chief Guest
PROFESSOR MUSHIRUL HASAN
Vice-Chancellor, Jamia Millia Islamia
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only saying that aside from government posts, they were doing fine in the private sector. Here he lamented the loss of Urdu. In fact, the dominant air in the room was that of a *nazuk* elegy for a language fallen on such hard times. Later, after tea and snacks on the lawn, this gave me the opening to riposte at Ritu, who was prone to comment that Bengalis were insufferable with their Nobels and constant Tagore harping. Why damn the Bongs, I now grinned, you Urdu-wallahs are just as bad, getting together in your little *mushairas* and moaning about lost days of the rose, the nightingale and the *nigha-i-teer* (the arrowlike glance) of the beloved cruel...

A few days later, at my Fort Siri guesthouse I noticed that the stitches of the sleeves on my blazer had torn off at the back. I needed a quick fix. I walked to the dirt alley market beside the ruined 13th-century fort walls where I'd 'top up' my Reliance cell. This morning I kept on going past the phone shop, into more dirt and chickenshit, asking about a *darzi*. Way down I entered a side *galli* at whose dark end were two tailor shops, but there the women took one look at my blazer and said, no quick fix, this was complicated. As I stood there, one of the women said something in Bangla to a young man. What, I said, switching to Bangla, you guys are Bangalis? The man replied, 'Yes. In fact, he was from Bangladesh. I began a rap: 'Come on, man, I'm from Bogla da, I'm in a fix, what the hell was this, no damn *darji* here who can repair a coat, you kidding me, what kind of a *baajar* was this?' He smiled, thought hard, then said come with me. We went across to a building where five stinking floors up was a room with a man sitting behind a sewing machine. Boys sat on the floor weaving coarse blankets on handlooms. "Ustad," Robi da said, "There's a coat you have to fix." The instant Ustad took the blazer in his hands I knew he could do it. I said, in Urdu: "Ustad, you the man, fix me up. Look at this, I get up in the morning and find the sleeves on my blazer like this. There are places I must have looked like some fool wandering with torn sleeves..." Ustad let slip a grin, and said okay, let me work on it. He spoke Urdu, too. As he expertly began to fold and stitch, I asked him about it. He said his father had taught Urdu in a school. He asked me about mine. I told him. And that was it - sitting in that sad, desolate room with child labour at my back, like two old friends, we began to lament the loss of Urdu: What a lovely language! All gone! Born here in Dilli, and look at it now. Just fifteen kilometers from here in the *mohallahs* of Chandni Chowk. My children have no time for it, they teach Hindi in schools. I complimented his accent. He said as much of mine. Then the blazer was done, and he handed it back to me. "It'll last," he said, "unlike Urdu." Then we began a courtly dance, me pressing money into his hands and he backing away, me pleading please, you have to, and him saying no way, till I just laid the note on his sewing machine before saying goodbye. Downstairs I thanked Robi da, and walked off beneath dusty *neem* tree leaves, thinking that if a *darzi* in a raw hovel, a galaxy removed from the haughty world of the old Urdu elite, could give the loss of his language then that loss was real, there was no brushing aside the hurt here...

Just the other day I took out my blazer and looked at the stitches. Ustad's sewing was holding up fine, while his Urdu...

The Freedom Fighter

ABEER HOQUE

Nurul lives in Feni near the *lichu bagan* tiny flecks of mud pale against his skin his foot is healed from the gunshot wound 36 years ago

He is leading my father down the furrowed dirt path to a great old battleground now host to picnickers under a tapestry of trees

I'm not listening to their conversation I'm captured by the light as it drifts between bamboo and blue sky by Nurul standing barefoot in a dusty checkered lungi next to my father in polished leather shoes

He gestures high and my father laughs I catch a snatch of speech it's not the arch angel my father is saying bringing rain when we pray it's the science of weather the art of chance Nurul nods *meghe meghe bari lage*

I imagine a celestial war lovers dressed as clouds coursing in, crumbling liquid as they meet

We come to a mud house with a naked child hiding between bright wet sari and opaque petticoat and they're not laughing anymore

I don't remember how much Nurul gets each month in return for what he gave our country what I do remember is that the walls of the house are smooth, freshly basted each broom stroke on the ground a hypnotic visual rhythm

I don't care how many times you pray Nurul says at last his voice sliding into my soundtrack if you murder someone your hands will never be clean

spoken like a freedom fighter my father says Nurul shrugs it's only part of the truth the leaves of the *lichu* trees judder and not one part of it, my father replies comes cheap

Abeer Hoque is a Fulbright Scholar in Dhaka. She is currently holding a photography exhibition at The Alliance Francaise, Dhankhondi.

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