

NON-FICTION

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

A news item on hoax e-mails prompted me to write this piece. The Daily Star on 10 October 2007 reported that the British High Commission was warning people against being duped by Internet scams which claim to offer large financial sums. The need of such a warning was now apparent since many people had started receiving such unsolicited e-mails, purportedly from UK companies. But who warns when those come from companies of other countries! Moreover, the fact is such e-mails are the product of the computer age, and have been in practice for quite some time. This story is about one such email scam.

People who use free e-mail accounts like me are the frequent victims of scams. Even if you do not post your e-mail ID to any of the unknown places, your e-mail account may be automatically enlisted. The more you begin to open those mails, the more the number of such e-mails, i.e. spam, will increase. Once it used to originate only from African sources saying that s/he is a barrister or manager or attorney who has been entrusted with a huge amount of money that s/he wants someone reliable like me to disburse to. To date many students of mine, novices in the online world, have made phone calls and queried with trembling voices about such receipts of mails. I can only whisper to him/her: "My dear, please don't get caught as your teacher did once."

It was November 2004. By that time I had been an internet user for about five years. No doubt I had experience in scam emails as well. My Hotmail account stores them in the 'junk' box, while the Yahoo mail throws them in the 'bulk' bag. Even while being aware of all these facts I got snared into a lottery scam.

The mail seemed to originate from the Netherlands and even though I wasn't exactly sure at first, later it did prove true. How could I disbelieve the message of the electronic mail saying that my email account had received a huge cash amount totaling three hundred thousand euros? Immediately I multiplied the figure with 85 and began to drown myself in unfathomable waters. I also strongly felt that I shouldn't tell this fact to anyone else in order to ensure the security of my own property.

Didn't I ask to myself why my name would be placed there? Why not somebody else? Yes, I did, and answered them myself, in my own favour. My e-mail account ID was on many different sites as a lot of my write-ups on Kazi Nazrul Islam or other novelists/writers of Bangladesh had been posted with my email ID at the



bottom. And so it was not very unlikely that mine would be included in the random lottery draw and therefore incidentally also win the cash prize.

While I had to keep the news secret, I could not sit idly as there was a time deadline. The first night I just read the mail over and over again and could not keep my head cool. In accordance with their suggestion I sent a reply with some basic information about me to someone who was to deal with the disbursement of the money. Immediately I got a form from the second mail recipient. The form was supposed to be filled up neatly. So, I had to go to Nilkhet, look for an electric typewriter, get it filled up and then fax it to the destination. But what a problem, the form demanded a bank account!

It seemed to me to be an insurmountable problem. I did not earn enough money to necessitate a second account! Could the account that dealt with my office payments serve the purpose? By then I had to share my anxiety with my wife and sister-in-law, who play a vital role in all our familial affairs. All three of us decided not to mention the previous bank account since the huge amount might be exposed to all my colleagues. So we began to talk to our family friends in banking. We did not tell them why I needed a second account for, but only narrated something fictitious. But our friends advised us, saying that it was no problem to receive big foreign amounts. With their help over the phone, we were able to open a new account in a non-governmental bank. While opening it I had to fill out a column of possible monthly transactions. With huge uncertainty I wrote ten thousand to ten million. Taking the code of the branch from the helpful manager I rushed to Nilkhet.

It is the only place where one can do many things with little hassle. People without a personal computer at home can get their work done on payment there. But

you have to rush to a place like Nilkhet to fill up a form with an electric typewriter. After some meticulous checking I filled up the form and at last faxed it with a great sigh. Now, nothing else remained but to wait for their reply.

My wife took greater care of me since she saw that I was passing through a period of great anxiety. With hot dishes before us on the dining table, we sat down to revise what we had done by then and how we could manage the forthcoming flood of money. And what a discovery! The passport number on the form was wrongly written. How could that blunder have happened after so much careful readings? Consequently I had to rush to the cyber

cafe where I do my online activities, take another print of the form, run to Nilkhet again, get the form electrically re-typed, re-fax it to the Netherlands and return home with no appetite left for dinner.

But the tired eyes would not close as one's anxious mind was filled with new apprehensions, ever-unknown possibilities, conditions-not-met problems, etc., etc. A sleeping pill could create dozing effects only. We then decided to make a phone call to the office mentioned in the Netherlands, since we feared that duplicate faxed forms might cause some troubles. We had to clear up the confusion.

And how nice it was to talk to the person who picked up at the other end! Such a soft voice, ever so polite a tone, a generous approach. That phone call became the main topic of conversation in our everyday life.

But everything ended in smoke when I was sent an email from that office that I was to send five percent of the total cash for managerial purposes. How was that possible! Five percent meant a million in our currency. How could I collect that huge a figure? With big sighs I had to give up all possible hopes of the money, thinking that if only I were rich, I would have been able to collect the huge amount and be a truly wealthy person.

But after some days my pangs of sorrow turned cold when I found the same exact message in my other email accounts as well, and knew what kind of a scheme had been attempted on me. It came as a consolation for me that I had been saved from near ruin that originates from the sin of greed.

Subrata Kumar Das, a teacher, has also set up www.bangladeshnovels.com

An Internet Scam

Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* wins regional Commonwealth Best First Book Prize



An international judging panel has awarded the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best First Book Award for the Europe and South Asia region to *A Golden Age* (2007, London: John Murray) by Tahmima Anam. The novel, a densely packed, lyrically written narrative set during Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence, was praised by the panel as "sensitive and evocative." *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha was given the region's Best Book Award. *A Golden Age* had previously also made the final shortlist of five for the 2007 Guardian's First Book Award.

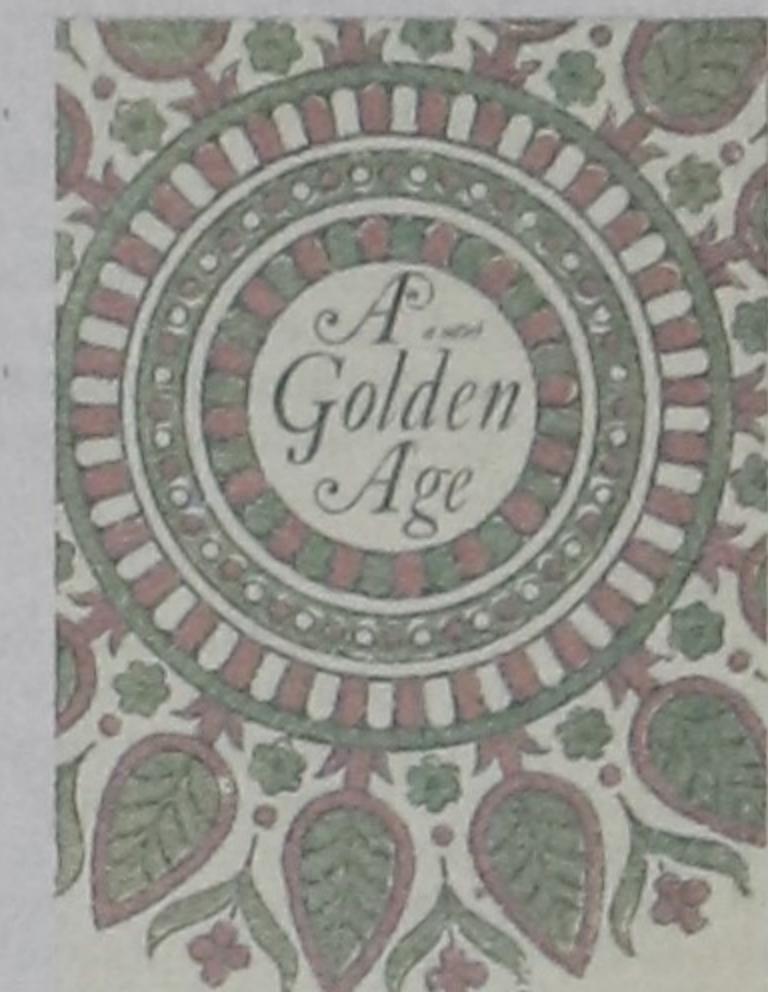
Anam, on hearing the news, responded to *The Guardian* newspaper that "Over the years, many of my most cherished authors have been winners of the Commonwealth Prize, and I'm deeply honoured to have been given the chance to be counted among them. I'm particularly proud to be representing my country as the first regional winner from Bangladesh."

Every year, the Commonwealth prizes are given for the Best Book and Best First Book, valued at £1,000, in each of the four Commonwealth Regions: Africa, Canada and the Caribbean, Europe and South Asia, South

East Asia and the South Pacific. This year's eight regional winners will be invited to take part in a week-long program of readings, community activities and other public events alongside the final pan-Commonwealth judging in May of this year in South Africa for the overall Best Book and Best First Book winners. The announcement will be made in a special ceremony as part of the 2008 Franschhoek Literary Festival, in the Cape Winelands District, on Sunday 18 May.

The Prize, now in its 22nd year, is organised and funded by the Commonwealth Foundation, and supported by the Macquarie Group Foundation, one of Australia's leading philanthropic foundations, across all four regions.

The judging committee for Europe and South Asia consisted of Professor Makarand Paranjape (India, Chairperson), Professor Neloufer de Mel (Sri Lanka) and Donna Daley-Clarke (UK).



TAHMIMA ANAM

A SAARC poetry festival

RUBANA

Bharathi Devi's mail smelt of a complaint. I hadn't written, hadn't called, and hadn't done anything since I got back from Bhubaneswar. Bharathi, the nightingale from Karnataka, was a schoolteacher and a poet who believed in revisions. Her poem 'Taimur' had gone through at least ten rounds of revision while most would be attempting to write the next poem and paint the next page. She also had a voice that demanded the attention of even the most vocal bunch of sixty-four poets, thirty-four of whom were from Orissa. Bharathi was indeed a bridge. And with her help, I ended up without having to suffer the severe bouts of fibromyalgia - painful muscle-tightening of the back - that long distance travel otherwise triggers off in me. What cures it is simple rest. That has been difficult all my life except this one time I'm writing about now, where no discomfort was experienced despite daily bus travels for over five hours to distant places, eating out of "kolapata" platters, drinking tea in plastic cups, and having to use public toilets. It also speaks volumes about the therapeutic powers of poetry!

This rare opportunity came my way when I was asked to participate in a SAARC poetry festival in Bhubaneswar, Puri, Konark and Cuttack organized by FOSWAL (Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature), New Delhi. My first surprise came in the form of a plain, unassuming print which was slipped into my palms by an Oriya poet right after I arrived on Feb 22 at the Suryansh Hotel in Bhubaneswar. Soubhagyanta Maharan, a young man in his 30's, a manager of an insurance company in Orissa, had his English translations by Jayanta Mahapatra ready to be shared with the rest of us:

Ah! Around me is a crowded procession
Of corpses with firebrands,
Demanding their right to live
Amidst the strange din of skeletons

By the time I came to the last line, it was time for Ms. Ajeet Caur, the president of FOSWAL, to speak. The stage was set: the Governor of Orissa had spoken and scholars like Dr. Sitakanta Mahapatra had talked about chasing the bird of poetry for 40 years. Then came our turn. The Nepali poet, Manu Manjil, began with his own translation of a poem that speaks of ownership and rights to land:

Don't come, I said
The city abounds in troubles



Streets here stab and shock
The dream walker's steps...
The city, I said, is ungenerous to life....

Manu draws clean portraits of the City screaming at daybreak, crows perching on its shoulders, being half awakened to "write poem". That is a true voice of a Nepali poet who watches the disappointments of his country in transition, and has trouble looking straight into the mirror. While I was trying to side with Manu's picture, the lovely Bharathi Devi from Karnataka carried her soul in her poetry and wanted a poetic corner of her own:

When the pressure cooker hoots
When mustard bursts in the burning oil
when milk boils over the vessel...
And when those dreams seek a space to paint their riot of shades

The desire to have a room of my own
Swells within me.

The next surprise was a Ms. Srebanti Ghosh from Kolkata who, with her impassioned verses, had stirred up enough controversy amongst the audience by using the word 'masturbation' in her poetry. The Oriya poets boycotted her; the rest of the crowd sat in supportive silence. Yet Srebanti was fearless when it came to expressing herself:

This house smells only of males, even the *chomrie*,
The old mattress, also the *batasa* for homage
...The male incarnated pillars, the Natamandir, the iron door,
Those helots hiding at the end of the stairs, stale and foul,
Fed on leftovers...

But I soon realized that it does take a Satchin Ketkar, a young lecturer at Baroda University, to tame the audience. In Puri, right after the team had visited the Sun Temple, and had undergone a few guide sessions on 12th century eroticism, Satchin had written a poem that drew graphic details of the chariot on sun dials and of the greed and passion of kings. The audience clapped while he recited the poetry; the Oriyas, the rest of India and SAARC together. Yet poor Srebanti got singled out for rebuke for using a single, simple word? Satchin has edited a lovely anthology of Marathi poems which lists the contemporary poets writing in vernacular. I played around with the collection for almost over an hour and decided to ask him if he had ever feared readers' response.

His instant response hit my gut: "Only poets read poetry, don't they?"

They do, indeed and therefore, Satchin's 'Spam' had a gripping effect on yours truly:

My Norton protected soul
Proves toothless to retaliate

Like some mutant fish
Struggling on a hook

Poets like Anghushman Kar from Kolkata also displayed a deviant voice when he writes:

1996:

BPL Large. Color set. When purchased for home, for the first time I began thinking we're also getting rich-men-like. Sourav's century I saw, Anaida's album, films on Star Movies. Mom became an addict, a movie worm of various serials, but Dad only of cricket and old films on Zee cinema - of the sixties-seventies - the Hindi films with dishoom-dishoom.

2000

Dad passed away.

A poet friend had said earlier that South Asia boasts of contradictions. While bombs are dropped, we celebrate survival. In our lands, guns and roses, rags and riches, fair and foul all live cheek to jowl. While lovers make love, a young poet from Tamil Nadu, Venilla, writes:

A tremor...
Mating ends in smoke

Anar, a young Muslim woman from Sri Lanka, had paid her own air fare and for lodging to come to India just to read poetry. The ceaseless twenty-two long years of conflict has left the Sri Lankan's mind devoid of any romance. So she writes about the bloodbath in her land:

I am habituated
to the sight of blood
shed every month. Yet,
when the child comes screaming
with his finger, slashed,
I shudder in shock and suffering.

I was among poets who spoke the language that they wanted to. Verses of Shamim Reza, a young lecturer of Dhaka College, spoke of boundaries while Alfred Khokon, another Bangladeshi poet, was all about passion. Their voices, their candor in speaking about the unspeakable, and mostly, their courage in tracing the untouched terrains of torture touched all. While poetry was a walking nation, we were all fellow travelers with our backpacks and addresses etched on the common cyclostyle, spiral-bound anthology that the organizers had published.

We, the poets, shared many treats besides poetry during the festival, one of which was the Sun temple. The Chandrabhaga river right beside the temple was a delight. The architecture and the aesthetics of the temple, when explained by the tour guides, gave us all a chance to laugh out loud while listening to the ever-overzealous guides detailing the sexual antics of 12th-13th century royalty.

Then came Ravenshaw, a college (currently university) which had been in existence since 1868 at Cuttack. That stole the show. Sitting on a bench of a Chemistry class in Cuttack, Orissa, realizing that nothing in that majestic institution was less than a hundred years old, my mini dvд recorder automatically locked in to the face of the Oriya poet Jayanta Mahapatra, who was telling the audience that a poet was not a social reformer and that in spite of the undiscovered graves, imprisonments, and killings sixty years down the line what holds true is the spirit of the poet.

He quoted Laxmi Prasad from Nepal and referred to:

Let me rise higher than the sage,

He quoted Al Mahmud from Bangladesh:

I cry as these birds cry

And what he said lastly made sense. He said that poets write with hearts gone bad because of injustice. These 64 poets from all over the SAARC region had collectively sealed their bonds with casual cards, hugs and courtesy and they were all poets with bad hearts. I, for one, made the most of whatever came my way and by the time I had left Bhubaneswar, I was resplendent with a new resolve of writing also in my vernacular language, the stream which hosts my inner reflections.

Towards the end of the festival, unable to say no to a request by the Vice Chancellor of Ravenshaw, I attempted writing in Bangla while reflecting on the battling borders of our region:

*Kobey janami amakey charlam
Aaka holo kobey janu turni and bhumi
Bhashon aar Boshho*
(When was it that I had slipped into my shadow?
When was it that you were painted in your own land?
Amidst rhetoric and ruin)

Rubana is currently doing a PhD in English at Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

I heard the bon morog this morning

ABEER HOQUE and MAHMUD RAHMAN

I heard the bon morog this morning as the mangrove forest appeared out of the darkness a photograph developing

I'm wearing a yellow kurta for Pohela Falgun, the first day of spring in the Sunderbans

Modontak, the lesser adjutant, takes flight from the broken beach away from the battered piers

I'm studying the map my skin, ash brown and covered in goosebumps it's cold at dawn in the Bay of Bengal

LaThimara River, Kotka Tower, Kochikhalii, Khulna, Mongla Port, Harbaria, Supati Rupsha River, Passur River, Supati Khal

Tiger tracks evanesce in wet black clay mudskippers flick along the bank of the bay coconuts hang like eggs in the fronds

I climb to the top of the boat spread my arms, play eagle under the *taal gach*, the white gold sun

The forestry guard reminisces about 15 taka rice when the Awami League was in power BNP passengers walk away

I walk through Jaamtola which is actually full of *jaam* trees and Badamtola Beach, which is not

my patent leather shoes crush the spiked-up roots of the mangrove trees motor motor motor

Kalu and Mintu, the wild black boars so named by the guards snuffle around in the tiger fern and shundori

Scrabble on the deck caption, whore, mafia, quell, ruined, error, woven teeth, oaf, cook, sex, gaped, elite, lave, ague, just

I take a glass of fizzy Sprite down the narrow stairs into my cramped cozy cabin

I take a glass of extra fizzy Sprite up the narrow stairs large clear drops spilling onto my notebook

The boy with one earring and pink fur trim coat brings me rice and daal as we drift among the golpata

Orange boat, green water, blue rope, white sky the crocodile thrashes at the bank metal boat, slow water, wet rope, wide sky

my phone beeps startlingly I check into my other life two bars, one bar, nothing I check out

Abeer Hoque is a writer and photographer. Mahmud Rahman is writing his first novel.