# Meetings Remembered? Moments Lost

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There are remembrances we sometimes cannot wish away. And there are meetings we recall with happiness, if only to tell our grandchildren about them in a distance of time. On a cold November day a decade ago, it was Malcolm Rifkind I bumped into on the steps of a hotel in Edinburgh. As the wind tore through the streets and across our faces, we spoke, for what was the very first time and will probably be the last in our lives. In Rifkind was an individual at ease in conversation with a perfect stranger. His large eyes, made larger by his spectacles, gave him a vigour that you cannot quite define.

Not many years ago, in Kolkata, it was a rapidly talking, extremely energised Buddhadeb Bhattacharya I spoke to. He was on his way to being chief minister of West Bengal; and I was among a group of visiting Bangladesh journalists spending sometime with him in his office. At one point, he asked if he could take the liberty of smoking. That made some in my team happy, for they too needed a bit of smoking. And Bhattacharya and they smoked in perfect bliss. Of course, when later in the day we met Mamata Bannerjee, there was no hint of smoking anywhere. She was Indian minister for railways and was interested in talking only about what she was doing to enhance the quality of her train services. And she offered us sweets we could not, and did not, resist.

When I walked up to Shobha De at the end of a presentation by her in London on a breezy summer evening, she had crossed fifty, she had her dark hair sliding down to below her knees, and she had eyes that said a thousand words. I thrust her new book into her hands, asking for her autograph. She asked for a pen, and I gave her mine. In the end, the tale boiled down to her giving me her signature and I parting with my pen. I wonder if she still has it, but I do have the book on happy display at home in London. Long years ago, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did not take the hand I proffered to him but instead pinched me affectionately on the cheeks. Then he led me by the hand to the dinner table. As he spoke to all those eminent people before him, I listened in awe and sheer reverence to the man who would soon become the father of a free nation.

And, yes, I have spoken earlier of my meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev. It was the rolling energy in him that I admired, have always admired, despite his disastrous leadership of what could have been a new Soviet Union in the 1980s. Speaking of energy, of dynamism, it was there in plenty in Dilip Kumar when he visited Dhaka in the mid-1990s. Ministers, lawmakers and bureaucrats were tripping over one another trying to shake his hand. When my turn came to be face to face with him, we spoke in Urdu. His Urdu, to be sure, was far richer, far more wedded to the culture it had sprung from. He was a Pathan, but his Urdu reminded me of Mir, Firaq and Zafar. Sometime in the early 1980s, a shy Taslima Nasreen turned up at my office. She was already becoming famous for her columns and it was a pleasure seeing her. We had coffee. A few years later, as fame took her to bigger heights, I spotted her at a diplomatic reception, said hello to her. She did not appear to recognise me.