

NON-FICTION

KHADEMUL ISLAM

"Lunch" called out the umpire as he delicately tipped one ball from on top of the wickets to the ground. The batsmen walked off the field with the fielding team and the two umpires following them.

Farid slowly brought up the rear. He had dropped a catch. Posted on the leg side boundary, he had been distracted by the Rakhi Bahini truck going by on the main road, its top half visible above the boundary wall encircling the field. He could see faces beneath peaked caps sitting inside the truck looking curiously at the cricketers. Some among the hardened faces had looked fresh from the village, too young to be in battles and gunfights. When the ball had come towards him, falling from a long way above, he had still been thinking of them, and had started off late. Amid shouts of "catch it", "catch it", the ball had grazed his fingers before hitting the ground. As he picked it up he had glanced again at the road. The truck was gone.

November 1973. The university's interdepartmental cricket tournament was in its mid-season. Today's scheduled match between Farid's department and Geography had been cancelled. A student of Geography had accidentally drowned while on a class river trip. Farid's team had arrived at the university sports ground to learn that there would be no cricket. They had milled around for a while, unsure of what to do. Then the captain of Farid's team had spotted Momin, Economics' vice-captain, among the early spectators and had proposed an impromptu match. Momin had immediately taken up the idea, assembling a team from the already sizeable crowd who had turned up to watch the match. The assistant sports director, a trim man with a small moustache, had obligingly agreed to the use of the field. As luck would have it for him, History's pace bowler Shaheen had been there too, and Momin had gleefully induced him. Shaheen, snapped up by Wanderers for the season's league matches at the outer stadium, had been fearsome in the departmental matches so far. "All right, boys, see you all in whites in half an hour," Momin had told his makeshift team, clapping his hard hands.

It was a perfect day for cricket, bright and cool. The lingering fog that had blurrered the sun floating above the coconut palms at the far edge of the field had mostly burnt off. A number of students from Farid's department had seated themselves at the front of the left pavilion. Farid loved best the pre-match warm-up, the raillery and the jokes, the practice catches, rummaging through the battered black tin trunk of village households with its treasure load of cricket bats, gloves, pads, stumps and cricket balls.

"If I win the toss I'm going to take fielding. The pitch's still damp, Shaheen will seem," Farid's captain had said before walking out for the coin toss. A coin had whirled through the air. Farid's captain had turned towards his teammates and flashed them the V sign. Toss won! Fielding!

Lunch*

She had not been there initially among the cluster of classmates. A sandal strap had torn, Sultana had informed him when he had asked, and she had gone back home to change sandals. The stands had filled up rapidly as the 8:20 and 9:20 classes ended and disgorged their inmates, who had made a beeline for the cricket field. On the topmost row a few sleeping beggars were stretched out. He had spotted her later, seated amidst her friends afame in her yellow sari with the thin green stripes.

Here in the gallery away from the pitch, the crowd's chatter was loud. Paan-cigarette-wallahs had stationed themselves at the edge of the field, and the peanut vendors and muri sellers were doing a brisk business. A few street children ran among them, savoring the excitement. Farid climbed the several steps up to her. A mass of curly hair, sharp cheekbones, eyes that danced all over the place and a loose 'Santiniketan' style of wearing a sari that she copied from her elder cousin studying music over there. The two Bengalis intimately knotted in ways impossible to unite!

She looked at him and smiled.

"You could have walked around barefoot," he said as he sat down beside her.

"Yes, I could have."

"Did you see me miss the catch?"

"Yes." Then she laughed. "Well, we all saw you looking the other way."

"Shala" Rakhi Bahini, had to come just then.

Kalpana sitting beside her laughed too. He looked over to where the two of his classmates were unloading brown paper bags and a crate of Coca-Cola bottles from a rickshaw. Burgers from the shop at Shahbagh for lunch.

"What do you think of this?" she asked, extending a foot encased in a green-and-gold sandal.

"Very nice."

"Bought them last week."

A dazzling light lay upon the deserted pitch and a light breeze tickled the ragged fringes of the palm leaves. Over the boundary wall the noontime traffic was a car or bus at the roundabout.

"Farid," called out his captain, ballpoint and paper in his hands, "I'm putting you down at number four in the batting order."

"Okay."

He glanced again at the paper bags. Burgers meant lentil patties inside small crusty buns, the whole thing so dry that only generous swigs of the warm Coke enabled one to swallow them.

"I don't feel like eating a burger," he said.

"We can go over to Tuli's," she said. "There's always food at her place." Tuli was her aunt, her father's sister.

"All the way to Mogh Bazar?"

"I've got the car. We'll be back before they start play again," she said, her eyes dancing and shimmering. Beauty, he felt, was the most mysterious thing in the universe. It had no reason to be, yet there it was, incandescent, casually erupting out of nowhere, and equally casually dying in a squalid lane somewhere.



dissidents. At the university the ruling party student leaders sprawled on chairs in the union office rooms, shouting and ordering endless cups of tea. As monsoon rains clawed at classroom windows, demonstrations and counter-demonstrations raged through the corridors and nobody could hear a thing of the class lectures. On the streets surrounding the campus, trucks armed with hard faces rolled through the slush. At that watchful, steady speed.

They got out of the car at the small wooden gate. The driver drove off to park in the side alley. She pushed open the gate and they stepped inside into a large front yard. "Let's go by the side door," she said, stepping on to the redbrick path lined with pink-and-white periwinkles. That looked as if they never died. At the side of the house she thumped with an open palm on the old, green, double-paneled door secured from the inside by a cross-bar, then shouted for the servant boy, "Kalam, Kalam." Footsteps sounded inside and the door opened. Kalam was a sturdy, cheerful-looking teenager. "Kiray," she said cheerfully to him as they stepped inside the guestroom, "is Tuli home?"

"No, she's gone to the bank."

The house was actually her father's, who had given it to his only sister. In June of 1971 the aunt's husband had been picked up from this house by the Pakistan army and had never returned.

"Can you give us a quick lunch?"

"There's plenty of chicken from last night. Just have to put the rice on the stove."

"Quick then, set it. We have to be back." She and Kalam disappeared inside through the other door, amid her volley of rapid-fire instructions.

A plainly furnished room with hairline cracks on the red cement floor like rivers emptying into the sea. A rough bed covered with a thin mattress, a clothes rack, a worn jute mat on the floor in the corner with a harmonium and some tattered songbooks. Farid took off his shoes and walked over to the bed, the floor cool under his bare feet. It was through the side door that the army had entered, through that front yard that the army had taken her aunt's husband. Farid stretched out, sighing, on the hard bed on which had been laid a fresh coarse-weave bed sheet and looked up at the small square of blue framed by the window set high on the wall. Fielding was a hard thing to do, with its alternating pulses of alertness and relaxation, the swing of the bat and the sudden hot sprint, the odd tumble on the uneven ground, the fear of dropping a vital catch or letting the ball through your hands. The war had ended, but men were still dying and disappearing, no promise was ever true, certainly no promise of human freedom...she came back into the room and tossed off her sandals, green as the window shutters and the door.

"The rice will be done soon."

"All right." She came over and lay down beside him. "Have you locked the door?" he asked.

"No, you do it."

"But it's on your side of the bed."

"So..."

"Ohhhh!" Farid theatrically groaned out aloud as he raised himself on the bed. Laughing, she pulled him down to her. He nuzzled his nose deep into the curly mass of her hair, clasping a breast in his hand. She made a soft yielding sound, then pushed him away, rose in a shower of loose yellow, went to the door and locked it. She came back, sat by the side of the bed, looked down at him and slowly unbuttoned his shirt. Sweaty damp patches had formed on the thin cotton of her underarms. She leaned forward and kissed him on the lips.

"The chicken," she whispered, her breath warm in his ear, "is very spicy. You think you can handle it?"

"No problem..."

They came back to the cricket ground just in time, driving through empty noontime roads. The umpires were walking out on the field. The batsmen were placed back on top of the stumps. Kalpana gave them a knowing glance as they seated themselves among the other classmates. Though she had taken care to smooth out the creases in her sari after the kissing and tussling, there was no erasing an indolent, blinking vulnerability in her eyes, a heightened colour in her face. The batsmen walked out, to much clapping, whistles and catcalls from the crowd.

Farid's captain was the opening bat. Shaheen waited patiently at the top of his mark, tossing the shiny red ball from hand to hand. The captain cast a look around at the field-keeper and three slips standing way back, a packed offside field-and then settled into his stance, feet wide apart. The umpire dropped his upraised arm and Shaheen began his run, jerky strides that belied the speed with which he could bowl, the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt coming loose as his arm whipped down to release the ball.

The first delivery was a snorter, just short of a length that zipped past the outstretched bat through to the keeper. The slips jumped up and raised their hands, but did not appeal.

"Ooooh!!!!!!" rose the accompanying cry from the crowd.

Shaheen at the end of his follow-through made a show of glaring at the batsman before turning to walk back to his mark. There was a slight swagger to the way he began to roll up his shirtsleeve again.

Farid took out the single stick of cigarette he had bought from the vendor as he had entered the field. He lit it with matches borrowed from Javed sitting in front of him. The system beat you in the end. He took a deep drag of the cigarette. No matter what you did, there was no escaping it. It got you in the end. Any day you could vanish and never come back.

He blew out the cigarette smoke and watched it whirl away in the bright air. 118 runs to win. Zero on the scoreboard. He leaned back against the steps and studiously focused on the figures arrayed on the cricket field.

The match had resumed. In right earnest.

*Abridged for publication.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Six Shared Seasons

KAISSAR HAQ

Since we are
our worst enemies,
is it any surprise

that barbed wire,
watchtower and searchlight
should keep neighbours apart,

border guards suddenly
slug it out
for no apparent reason,

families picnic
willy-nilly, as they wait
in visa queues,

loonies looking just
like you and me
blow up each other's shrines,

and poor people are
rounded up—undesirables
or aliens or both

we're almost as bad
as Europe was
until the other day.

All the time
the year keeps rolling
to its celestial schedule:

grishma's furnace heat,
barska, monsoon floods,
sarat's mello skies,

hernant's fresh harvest,
mist over the fields,
dew underfoot,

warmth of embroidered quilts,
winter bonfires, snow on mountains,
fog on the plains,

then every girl a beauty
in vasant's vibrant amber,
& flowers with humid lips

kissing the passionate bee.
Six seasons to everyone else's
Four — from the Himalayas

to Serendip, & the Indus plains
to the delta
of the Ganges & Brahmaputra —

hold the whole
of Southsia together,
six shared seasons

making nought
of borders & barbed wire.
Nature as usual, is

prodigal with gifts & lessons —
& we as usual, alas,
grab the gifts & ignore the rest.

Kaiser Haq's Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems (1966-2006) is available in the city's bookstores.

Letter from KHULNA

RIFAT MUNIM DIP

A film festival in a city like Dhaka is not a big deal for its dwellers, be it Boishakhi, or Falgun or any other month. But when such a festival finds its way to a small town like Bagerhat—however small the monetary resources and funding for advertising and mass gathering—it is quite an event, a breakthrough in the context of a small town. Especially when one considers that even Khulna, the divisional city, has no such venture. To fully understand the impact of the film society, one has to take into account the context. Bagerhat's filmgoers, much like other parts of the country, gradually shifted over to commercially-oriented Hindi films on the back of the gradual degradation of our national movie industry over the past two decades. It was during this critical time, in 2002, that Bagerhat Film Society, the brainchild of Abdullah Boni, was formed. With the slogan 'Better film, better society', a committee was formed on August 30 with S. Zakir Hossain as president, Abdullah Boni as secretary, and Mahmud Rahman as chief organizer. It has arranged five successful festivals so far, all held at the auditorium of Bagerhat Cultural Foundation located in the center of the town. June 2003 saw the first festival where Bagerhat's inhabitants were given a chance to view what till now were seen perhaps by only Dhakaites: Charlie Chaplin's 'The Kid' and the Polish Oscar-winner 'No Man's Land' as well as Bangla classics like Satyajit Ray's 'Gopi Gynne Bagha Byne'. However, as expected, turnout of an audience addicted to Hindi movies was poor.

The following year witnessed a change, when, films like 'The Colour of Paradise' (Iran), 'Life is Beautiful' (Italy), and 'The Flag' (Indonesia) were highly appreciated by the audience, clearly implying that the film society was gaining ground. The third year surpassed the previous shows both in number and variety. This time the audience response was also very high. A total of 25 movies were screened that included the Bangla movie 'Iti Shrikanta' directed by Anjan Das—who hails from Bagerhat and is now based in West Bengal. The audience also liked 'Children of Heaven' (Iran), the Italian classic 'Bicycle Thief' and the American documentary 'Fahrenheit 9/11' on Bush's so-called 'war on terror'. Movies from not-much-heard-of Asian and African countries were also highly applauded: 'Osama' (Afghanistan), 'Laz' (Assam) and 'Jail Girl' (Morocco). For the 2006 festival, for the first time, the audience wanted more Iranian and Hindi movies. But the small auditorium overflowed when movies from the Middle East, Latin America and India were presented. 'Rang De Basanti', 'Ahlam' (an Australian-Iraqi co-production), 'Baran' (Iran) and 'Motorcycle Diaries' based on Che Guevara's trip through Latin America were hits.

The fifth festival held in February 2007 focused on Bangladeshi films in order to give us a chance to historically trace the development of our movies. Contrary to our expectation, it only featured movies that matched the modern-day projector in DVD format—a total of 19 Bangladeshi movies. Surprising everyone who predicted a drop in viewers' response,

Charlie Chaplin and Anjan Das in Bagerhat

the auditorium erupted when 'Emilie Goyenda Bahini' and 'Wrong Number' were shown. There was also considerable enthusiasm for the so-called alternative films: 'Matir Moyna', 'Neerantor', 'Joyjatra', 'Nandita Noroke', 'Duratto', etc. The off-beat picks like 'Bacheler', 'Made in Bangladesh' also met with unexpected success.

A year has since passed by without a film feast, except for a two-day-long program devoted to re-screening two Irfani films so that the viewers, as the organizers put it, do not lose taste for good films. Later it came out during a talk with S. Zakir Hossain that the usual yearly event has been postponed until a later date due to unavoidable political changes. Still one has to wonder if there has really been a change, if moviegoers in a small town have truly developed a more sophisticated taste over the years.

Indeed, there is more to it. In an informal talk at our favourite adda place, the Salam de Cafè, with S. Zakir Hossain, Abdullah Boni and Mahmud Rahman, (the current secretary) I was told that at the beginning it was hard attracting viewers. But soon things began to change. The Bangladeshi Film Festival, they went on, helped them to understand the real situation. While the viewers like to see movies from other countries, they are far more interested in Bangla movies since not very many viewers can keep pace with subtitles on screen. Asked about the unbelievable response to movies like 'Bicycle Thief', 'No Man's Land', 'Baran' and 'Motorcycle Diaries', they said that it was the subject-matter combined with the cinematic techniques that overcame the language barrier. Side by side with these extraordinary foreign productions, they concluded, we need more quality Bangla movies.

Here I would like to comment on an observation from a piece by Rashid Aski published in this literature page not long ago, "Increasing public interest in audio-visual media has given rise to serious misunderstandings about the consequence on our poor literature. The existence of Bibhutibhushan's 'Pather Panchali' or Tagore's 'Ghare Baire' owes more to the celluloid versions of Satyajit Ray than the old printed texts which are only gathering dust on the library shelves. These classic books are reportedly reaching wider audience by turning into films." While his anger at the commercialized representation of classic Bangla novels is quite justified, the last sentence offers us the stark reality of a historical change that has seen the electronic media as the absolute means to reach a wider audience. There is no denying that movies reach and affect us more immediately and readily than other mass art-forms. Keeping this in mind, Bagerhat Film Society is determined to move on not with commercial enterprises, but to shake up numbered viewers gorging on cheap TV serials and films. The society presently looks forward to arranging regular publications and seminars on different aspects of movies.

The fifth festival held in February 2007 focused on Bangladeshi films in order to give us a chance to historically trace the development of our movies. Contrary to our expectation, it only featured movies that matched the modern-day projector in DVD format—a total of 19 Bangladeshi movies. Surprising everyone who predicted a drop in viewers' response,

RIFAT MUNIM DIP

the auditorium erupted when 'Emilie Goyenda Bahini' and 'Wrong Number' were shown. There was also considerable enthusiasm for the so-called alternative films: 'Matir Moyna', 'Neerantor', 'Joyjatra', 'Nandita Noroke', 'Duratto', etc. The off-beat picks like 'Bacheler', 'Made in Bangladesh' also met with unexpected success.

A year has since passed by without a film feast, except for a two-day-long program devoted to re-screening two Irfani films so that the viewers, as the organizers put it, do not lose taste for good films. Later it came out during a talk with S. Zakir Hossain that the usual yearly event has been postponed until a later date due to unavoidable political changes. Still one has to wonder if there has really been a change, if moviegoers in a small town have truly developed a more sophisticated taste over the years.

Indeed