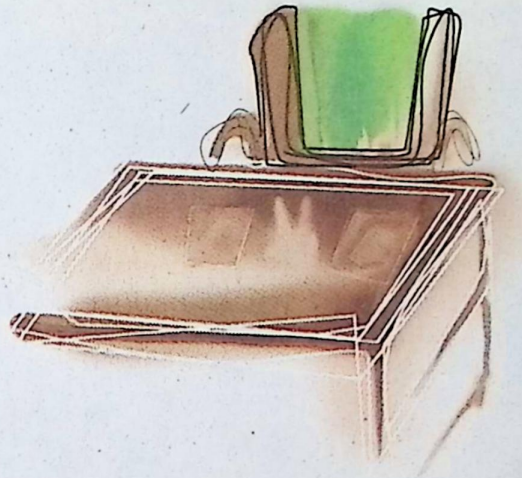


The Towel on the Executive Chair

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A few years back this phenomenon was rare. Offices in Bangladesh have acquired a chic look lately-but the towel on the chair betrays the basically rustic strain in us. The tie and the suit are worn in perfection but often, people wearing them pronounce tragedy as 'trazedy' begin Bengali sentences with 'so' and 'even'. Coming to entertainment, Bengali hostesses used to vie with one another in serving exotic dishes like Mousaka, fish and chicken soufflé thus bringing France and Greece together on the table. Their trifles might have lacked the magical touch of hot rum but their Mughal cuisine was refined not muddy concoctions of grease and chillies.

Offices were humbler but no one spread towels over their chairs. People's English and Bengali were reasonable good. There was less affluence but more sophistication. Parties were a delight, not the present-day torture it has become; food would be served by nine in the evening. Even during the eighties Bangladesh could boast a rich ethnic tradition along with the urbane culture of the cities. The fast degeneration that overtook politics, social life, education and the medical sector in the following years, was so destructive that we lost all standards- the yardstick of excellence being only wealth and its vulgar display.

To obtain wealth people are prepared to go to any length. While marble structures were being filled with imported crystals and fittings, two eluding phenomena quietly fled from our lives - the soul, conscience, I should add taste. Otherwise the existence of the towel on chairs would not be possible. Pray, what is its purpose? To wipe clammy palms, dry greasy hair -remove beads or should I say streams of presperation? All these actions are of such a private nature that they can happen only inside the bathroom. Then why is this towel displayed and flaunted with such pride? I am sure there is no reasonable answer to these questions. They only answer is: *Out! Out! You filthy rag-your only place is on the bathroom's railing and perhaps behind wet bottoms of leaking infants.*

I have no quarrel with towel-lovers as such. Soft, floral pastel-coloured ones are my favourites. But I have to take great care of them in this humid climate to protec them from invisible fungi -drying them daily and meticulously in the sun. What could be the condition of these towels on chairs? It they are fungus-ridden the executive neck is constantly brushing against them. I am sure my crusade against the towel on the chair is going to prove futile-like many other battles I have fought, especially against careless use of Bengali and unidiomatic, intolerable English. Such usages on the television are particularly galling as the masses consider the TV to be the standard to be followed. Another shocking practice in Bengali journalism is the treatment of murderers, rapists with endless respect. In Bengali a person who is venerated is singled out by adding an 'n' to the verbs relegated to him such as 'koren' as opposed to 'kore'. It is equivalent to the Spanish 'Usted form. Now I see hundreds of news items when a criminal is treated with tremendous respect by adding this 'n' to the most heinous deeds committed by him. A sort of virus has crept into our brain cells turning us into indecorous bipeds with neither taste nor discrim-