

NON-FICTION

A Moon-Wounded Night

BELAL CHOWDHURY
(freely translated by Khademul Islam)

At those days, it made no difference to us whether it was night or day--we didn't know, didn't care to know. What mattered was spending twenty-four hours of the day at the Coffee House on College Street. Its main gate, even though officially it was supposed to open at 9:00 in the morning, we knew that an insistent clamor for opening it began from 8:30 onwards and that by 9:15 it would inevitably begin to loosen and open up. Some of us insiders who knew the real deal would then always slip in early and grab the seats at our favorite tables. At the entrance by the foot of the stairs leading up to the café would be Ismail the man from my own side of Bengal from whom we would buy ten-plus--totaling to twenty sticks meaning two packs of Charminar cigarettes, which was our invaluable prop while seeking the precious philosopher's stone inside the café.

As the day wore on all sorts of people would start to drop by. Some were stooped from the weight of their learning, while others were racked by drugs--everybody from hangman to racetrack addicts, who would not drop by there? By then we were the senior-most of the Coffee-Housians. Until the gates closed at 10:30 at night, who had time for anything else? No sooner would one group depart than the next one would breeze in. All of them were our devotees and hangers-on. Ah, life then was so light and sublime and full of promise! The days blew by in a swirl of good times and laughter.

If Baruna left our table the gap would be filled by Namita. Almost five tall and shapely and chocolate-coloured, Namita had us all buzzing around her like a swarm of bees. We would table-hop all over the place--sometimes it would be this table and then it would be that table and time would fly by nobody would know how or where. Especially if it was a winter day.

One such day saw the arrival of our very own Babu Shri Chandan Majumdar. Good looking, well spoken, and a Coffee House



artwork by amina

regular. What could one do with one's life except write poetry? With his broad, beguiling smile he informed us that his Uncle S... and his mother had been repeatedly urging him to bring us over to his home, and that today was the very day. That they had heard so many tales about us from him that everybody in his household from old to young now felt as if they had come to know us intimately. His mother seemed touched on hearing all those stories, especially about a certain wretch named Belal Chowdhury, and now seemed to have a store of affection for this fellow far in excess of what she displayed for her own sons and daughters. It would be very good if Namita and the Mitras could also come along, but of course they had households and responsibilities, people to take care of. Whereas among the rest of us all there was one utterly free male named Belal--if he could be made to tag along then we were assured of not only a chicken-and- rice dinner layout but also some extra cash, say, a little twenty rupee

handout, that could be cadged. No way! I took a firm stand against such an idea. That would not be allowed to happen. I would announce to his folks from the very first that I had no need of anything. And even if there was, I would ask for it myself. The afternoons then were honeyed. And now that there was no way to get out of this outing then it made sense to waste as little time as possible in hitting the road since that would afford us more time for play and fun. Led by Chandan, by the time we descended from the Bangaon train line at some cow-shit, fly-blown off-station, the winter afternoon shadows were beginning to darken and deepen. Dense banks of trees lined the path to Chandan's village. An equally dense, deep blue dusk began to fall. The moment we entered the neighbourhood his house was in, however, a deep voice made us come to an abrupt halt.

Aha, the voice intoned, from which direction today has the sun god risen today!

Otherwise how can it be that this early, at this time of the day do we get to see our Chandan Babu in our lowly little village, and that too with his friends and boon companions. Are you fellows feeling all right, your bodies fit to do battle, is that it...

It was Chandan himself who stepped forward and introduced the voice to us as his maternal uncle. Who knew about so much, and yet had not the slightest air of affectation about him or a jot of righteousness, talking and mingling with us like some genial lord of the manor: Baba, all of you are very lucky fellows, you have budded forth on a very auspicious day. So what if it's a Kartik night with its cold but sweet air blowing around us--today it's also a Kartik full moon night. The goddess Parvati's son, the six-faced one who is the commander of the heavenly forces, in his abode will enchant us tonight with his playful frolicking and fancies. But, Chandan Babu, listen, why don't you hurry on ahead in the meantime to the house and give my didi Audity advance notice of our guests? By the time you get everything ready I will have shown them the moonrise over on the other side of Dudh Sayer beel and then bring them around.

It did not sit well with me. No matter how dear a mama he was of Chandan I didn't feel like going forward even one step with this gentleman. But what choice did I have? In the tenth circle of hell even the gods become ghosts! And we all know who's to blame for it. And even though I and Chandan grumbled a bit about it, I noted that the others were all for experiencing the Kartik moonrise over on the other side of Dudh Sayerer beel.

After walking a considerable distance I felt as if I no longer even had the energy to listen to the howling and barking of distant foxes and jackals. Mama was striding in front of us like Vasco de Gama and muttering some incantations under his breath. To be perfectly truthful our collective knowledge of Sanskrit was so meager that it was the Shiva-like cries of those jackals that seemed clear and frightening. But Mama was our indisputable leader. Drawing up his dhuti tightly around him and clutching at his sacred paita thread

he was murmuring things so obscure and unathomable that it was impossible for any of us to understand a single word of it. Then all of a sudden Mama stopped at a spot and raising a forefinger at the distant forest line said, look, look at a scene that in this life are you destined to ever see again? Fill your heart with it. If not over a bamboo grove the moon has certainly risen over the tops of the mango orchard, and even if Kajala didi is not here to sing this sloka to you all at least the Mama who is before you will always be eternally with you. And look, look, take a good look across this vast plain to see what a real full moon night can be--oh, what a flood of shimmering light falls down on us.

But, you know, all this while there were jackals, now it seems that packs of wild dogs have joined them in the baying and howling. Even then I would urge you to take a last look at the moonlight cascading down over the tree line. It was not for nothing that Abanindranath had written: *here is one moon/there is another moon/o brother the moons twine/the moon over the hinchay bush...*

The way in which Chandan's mama that night in that remote cow-shit, fly-blown sheltering nook, in leading us to see the moonrise, flayed us with the moon that even today after all this time it seems to me that we are still trapped in some charmed circular maze, going round and round in a trance...

The above article appeared in a special issue titled 'Josna Shonka' in the little magazine *Boitha*, (editor Shihab Shahriyar, 30 August 2005) featuring nearly every notable Bengali writers. Readers should attempt to get their hands on the issue in order to read Belal Chowdhury's piece in the original Bengali for the sheer play of language, which in some sense rivals the moonrise he describes. All English translations, including this one, can be nothing but poor simulacrum of the original classic.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star

Walking the Walk

AHSAN SAJJID

The nineteenth century French poet Baudelaire coined the term 'flâneur'--meaning a "gentleman stroller of city streets." He derived it from the French masculine noun flâneur, basically meaning a "stroller." In Baudelaire's use the flâneur became a character who was something more

than a mere stroller, broadened to mean somebody participating in, and portraying, his city. A flâneur played a dual role in city life--simultaneous a part of and apart from--combining sociological, anthropological, literary and historical ideas of the relationship between

the individual and the masses.

Sam Miller, the author of the book *Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity* (Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2008), was born in London in 1962, and went on to study History at Cambridge University, and Politics at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies. He joined the BBC's World Service, was posted in Delhi, later becoming Managing Editor, South Asia after a stint as head of its Urdu service. He currently lives in Delhi, running media training projects for the BBC World Service. He has also worked as a reporter in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Balkans and Northern Ireland.

Miller is a self-styled flâneur. But he is modest and humble about his "eccentric" hobby and isn't given to flights of fancy. While in the poem 'London,' Blake strolls through a

decadent, decaying city like a prophetic wraith, and in 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge,' Wordsworth stares at his city dazed as if in an opiate dream, Sam Miller has both of his feet firmly stuck to the ground of the city he experiences, writing with originality and humour. He is at once part of and apart from Delhi, the megacity. "My size, my colour, my gait, my accent, my demeanour, my body language, my facial expressions mark me out as a foreigner. And I always will be a foreigner, however long I live here. The more Indian I wish to become, the more eccentric I appear. Because, unlike most foreigners here, I speak and read some Hindi, I appear even more unusual."

Delhi is one of the world's largest cities, a teeming metropolis with a population growth rate unmatched by the other such megacities. Perhaps because it's also one of the oldest of the world's megacities, its modern development has been largely ignored. Sam Miller set out to discover the real Delhi, a city he describes as being "India's dreamtown--and its purgatory." His method of exploration was more than eccentric; he started at Connaught Place, spiraled outwards till Gurgaon. Why spirals? Because he had been "staring at a book about Shahjahanabad--now known as old Dehli... full of strange diagrams about how cities were formed. Muslim cities, I read, were formed in concentric circles. And there was a little drawing--six perfect earthly circles, orbiting around a central mosque. How could I visit each circle, and move between these circles? By spiraling. A closely packed spiral is, after all, hard to distinguish from a series of concentric circles." After a little digression on motifs and Louise Bourgeois, the artist who exalted the spiral as "an attempt to control chaos," Miller "found (his) device and metaphor." The spiral mode of walking ensured he didn't follow the set patterns of the usual travel writer--visiting landmarks and writing textbook history. After this initial discovery, Miller made well-planned walking trips in Delhi, covering, and un-covering, all its

hidden nooks and crannies and uncelebrated destinations. His open and inquisitive mind made light and easy play of some of the challenging sights and times during his many walks.

Miller's book is packed with knowledge, but subtly enough, in a conversational tone and pace, so that it takes a while for a reader to realize that s/he's doing some serious learning, on just not Delhi but a variety of subjects: history, math, pop culture, the art of reporting. Miller measured the floor length of a Metro coach by sprawling over it; he mimed the act of a Sastang Pranam devotee; he measured the depth of a manhole by falling into it vertically. In his book there is no telling what's going to happen next, and with his whatever-may-come attitude and thirst to experience and uncover, it is of little wonder that he discovers Delhi like nobody has done it before. He refrains from making social commentary but the social conditions of those living in abject poverty do not escape his eye or pen. His observations are factual and non-judgmental, with a healthy dose of humour and wit. He describes the Delhi he sees--a fast, shining metropolis riddled with those inhabitants who live in a shadowy poverty-ridden world. And Miller maintains his balance in portraying the best and worst of both worlds. He certainly sets himself apart from other non-fiction travel writers. As I came to the end of the book, the line from the Dhammapada, the best known text of the Theravada canon, came to my mind: "Travel only with thy equals or thy betters; if there are none, travel alone."

Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity will appeal to all readers: from those interested in learning about a city, its history and by-lanes, to the more casual reader wanting to be entertained by a sharp and quick wit. It hardly needs mentioning that the book will also be of abiding interest to fellow flâneurs.

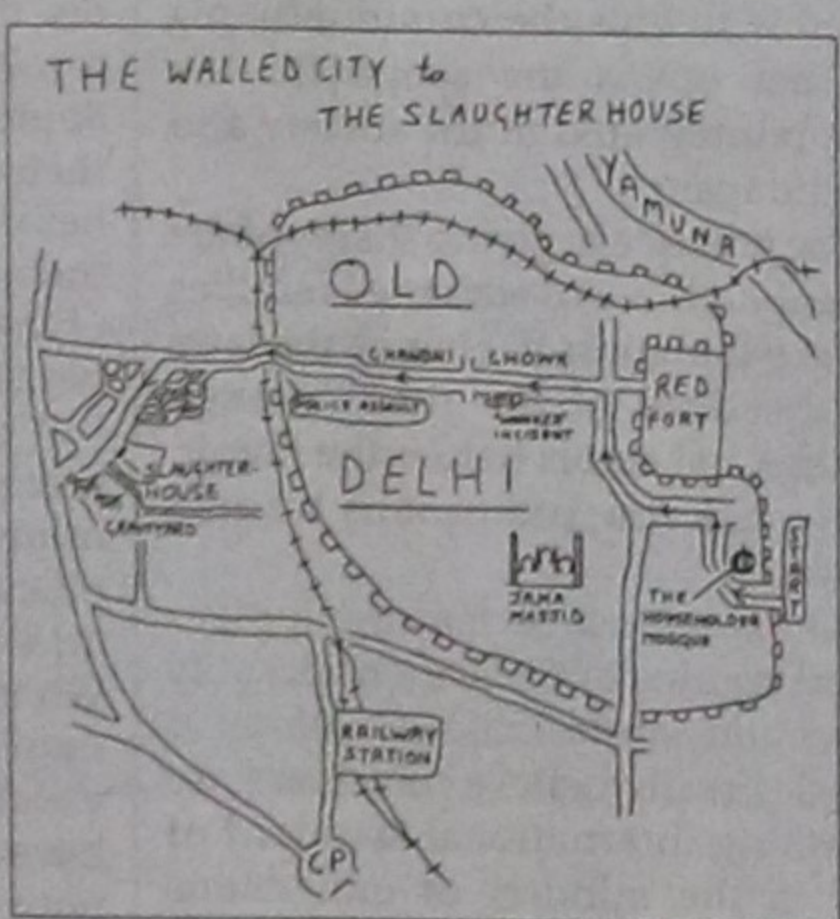
Ahsan Sajjid works at The Daily Star.

Extract

I was now leaving Shah Jahan's city and entering its oldest suburb, Sadar Bazaar, less well-planned, but as full of life as Chandni Chowk... I marched on, accompanied now, to my disbelief and to the delight of the traders, by a cow which was matching me step-for-step, which stopped when I stopped, and started when I started. I went down a side lane, followed by my new friend, who eventually ditched me in favour of a plastic bag full of rotting food. These were narrow lanes, with tall buildings, a series of residential neighbourhoods. At first all the residents, by the evidence of the nameplates and swastikas on their doorway, and the small well-tended shrines, were Hindus. Then at the end of one street, I entered a totally Muslim area, where many of the men wore white skull-caps and the women covered their hair in scarves; the nameplates were in Urdu and the streets were narrower. I had lost my way...

At the end of the lane, I came upon a scene of slaughter the like of which I had never seen before. Now, I have always loved walking through markets, even Middle Eastern meat markets, and am used to the sight of flesh and offal, heads and trotters; eyeballs and bladders. But I was not prepared for this. After my first shocking glimpse, I looked down and shut my eyes as if not quite believing what I had seen. The air was suffocatingly heavy with the smell of fresh meat. Beneath my shoes, the street was sticky from the blood and viscera of cattle. I looked up a little, and a small river of blood was running past me, into a drain and the sewers of Delhi. I drew breath and lifted my head to take in properly the tableau in front of me.

I had wandered into an open-air slaughterhouse. It was a scene of cruelty and comradeship, a giant courtyard of death and laughter. The



human beings were mainly young men; noisy, shouting off, shouting instructions, hurrying each other up, telling stories. Two schoolgirls, with ponytails peeping out from under their headscarves and with brown leather satchels on their backs, wandered through their midst, and the men leapt apart to let them through. An old man was hunched over his steaming tea, as if unaware of the series of human and animal dramas being enacted around him. And everywhere there were cattle in different states of life and death and incompleteness. The living cattle were silent and dignified. They were being unloaded, almost unpacked, from small trucks, and then led into what looked like garages, open-fronted, where they were lined up in rows. All of them facing in the same direction. The young men started at the front, with the buffalo nearest the street. One of them grabbed it by the tail, the other

by the head, and forced it to lie on the ground. It looked up in my direction, plaintively. I imagined, a drool of gelatinous saliva escaping from its half-open mouth. With one upward stroke with his knife, the butcher cut the throat of the buffalo. Its body moved slightly, a gentle rattle of its rib-cage. Its eyes remained open, gradually glazing over, as it bled to death. And then the butcher moved on to the next one, which was standing, waiting and watching, with apparent equanimity. And so the killing was repeated ten times in this one building. Then another young man appeared and began removing the skin, the leather of the first buffalo, with a series of light knife cuts, and some tugging; he removed its skin as if it had been wearing an all-in-one wetsuit. Within minutes, the cattle had been cut up into pieces and sorted into neat piles. Skin, ears, hooves and intestines on one side. Tongues, flesh and offal on the other.

Three Poems by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

Beating the 'are there anymore poems left in me?' blues

The prevention is:
To stay clear of people
Who say they love
Poems you wrote thirty years ago.

The cure:
To believe
Poetry is not an act
But an excuse...

The Garden

My foot crushed a snail as big as
My palm
In the garden
Last night.
My grief was as violent as the poor thing's spasm...
But
'It wasn't meant to be there'...
We were ruefully accusing each other.

Dream traffic

It is the usual street drama:
Of my jittery dreams
Honking, screeching,
Slamming pedals, inching to get ahead,
The vintage one about imminent death in the family
and the tan minicab: of some promise forgotten,
The dented blue one: global warming
and the covered truck conveying something nostalgic
The red one: walking across a slippery wall,
the motorcycle of phantoms leering,
The BMW: VIP guests coming and the kitchen exploding,
Stream of rickshaws: dead ancestors sleeping on your sofa...
Somehow the clog melts and all that is left of the chaos
is the way the morning looks after being caught in a dream traffic.

Nuzhat Amin Mannan, of English department, Dhaka University, is presently residing in Morocco.

Apology and Explanation

An article published in the May 16 issue of *The Daily Star's* literature page titled 'Searching for Pir Shah Jalal' was deemed by some of our esteemed readers to have been irreverent and disrespectful to the memory and shrine of one of the greatest of Bengal Sufi mystics and revered religious figures. I fully apologize for causing such feelings among those readers. No offense against any religious sentiments and feelings was intended. In this context, if I may be permitted, perhaps a little explanation is in order. The article was allowed to be published in order to illustrate the contrast between a younger generation of Bangladeshis who are curious but largely ignorant of such mystical and religious traditions (a feeling, incidentally, the author of the piece freely confesses to), and the veneration with which Hazrat Shah Jalal is held in by the average folk (exemplified by Helal bhai, who feels radiantly alive at having had the opportunity to pray at the dargah, and which the author has clearly pointed out). A certain tone and language that was objected to were allowed entry in the same spirit, to convey in the live, spoken language of present-day youth the gulf between generations and classes in Bangladesh about traditional symbols and meanings. In literary writing (which today encompasses a huge variety of genres and forms) a certain license has to be granted so that the stigma of censorship--a thing utterly antithetical to authentic expression--is avoided. Be that as it may, I reiterate that there was absolutely no intention to cause any offence, and it was wholly inadvertent. I also thank my readers for keeping me on my toes about their sensitivities, sentiments, and sensibilities, and hope they continue to provide support and aid to this tricky and thorny business of encouraging creative writing in English by Bangladeshis.

---The Literary Editor