

IMPRESSIONS

My Father's Autobiography

SAARA ZABEEN

(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

The other person of whom I got to know more than I knew before is my Kaku, my uncle, my father's only sibling. Kaku's life was no less agonizing than my father's. If attempted, I am sure a more poignant and grievous book would come out from the chronicles of his life. However, my father's book doesn't say much of him as he was not staying with his brother most of the time. As mentioned earlier he was first in the hostel and then later at a cousin's place in Mymensingh. He used to come to see his family but after long intervals. But whenever he came he duly played his role as the eldest son and brother in the family. Instead of letting know his mother of the hardships of living in a hos-tel he always assured his mother of his well being. Before leaving he used to urge Dadi not to worry and give her high hopes for the future and give lots of advices to his young brother. The other aspect of Kaku that is learned from the book is his responsible and sincere approach towards education. We always had seen him as being strict about our studies and wondered what caused it. But the book proves that his seriousness was more inborn than acquired. My father remembers the times when Kaku used to study in the primary school of the village long before going to the hos-tel. At an age when kids are more into games and fun Kaku was more concerned about his studies than playing. He used to reach school much before everyone and if for some reason he had missed going there before the first bell rang no one could convince him to go to school on that day. An interesting example in the book of his attentiveness would be when once his Bara Mama came and decided to take everyone for a visit to his sister's place in another village. On the night before the journey suddenly late at night Kaku started to read his lessons loudly baffling all at home. When asked about the reason for this earnest reading Kaku answered that he was preparing his lessons in advance as he wouldn't

be able to do so in the following days of his visit. I highly respect Kaku for his discipline and sense of responsibility and believe these are the qualities that have made him and my father achieve success in life. And I am proud to say that they have also instilled in us their principles.

The person that I must also mention is my father's Choto Mama. I never knew about his contribution in my father's life. After my Dadi's death he had come as a blessing playing the role of a protector. Of the incident when his Choto Mama came to take him away with him after Dadi's death my father says in the book "It seemed after regaining all the happiness we lost it again. But then also felt that there is nothing to fear because Choto Mama is here to take care of us." I pay special tribute to this person's sincere and responsible guardianship.

While carrying on with the flow of time as a young child my father observed and experienced numerous incidents. All these incidents starting from very personal to simple happenings occurring on streets to bigger events in the relatives' places are recorded in the book. The incidents however are not only mentioned but also elaborately described. That my father can still remember those happenings so vividly is a wonder to me. The reasons, that I can think of are perhaps because the incidents had created a strong impact on him and because he must have had a keen sense of observation which I must say is a rare quality among children. Anyhow among all the instances his visits to his numerous relatives' houses in various villages in Vikrampur are notable. What is remarkable of these visits is the hospitable nature of the middle class gentle folks. It is not that on every occasion the women of the family entertained with a special preparation. But the memories of all these occasions have stayed in father's heart because of the care and affection with which they had served their simple provision. He fondly remembers one such visit and makes us see the warmth of the hostess.

Besides this we get to see the tradition of hospitality on special occasions and the weddings. The rituals of

treating the groom with special array of dish and delicacies and ways of entertaining guests on the occasions are amusingly elaborated.

The other significant feature of rural culture that we learn is the sport of fishing. The book in numerous sections unveils to the urban readers the pleasures of fishing. Different methods and techniques are explained in detail. The description of the method of catching *taaki* fish is quite interesting.

Besides explaining the methods, various successful fishing adventures are recounted which are quite thrilling to read. That the successful capture of a loan or a heap of fish can be a triumphant event is well enhanced by the readers. An amusing occurrence would be his visit to his cousin's in-law's place. When my father was there it was suddenly heard that the girls of the family were having a hard time washing the utensils on the bank of the pond because large sizes of fish were nibbling on to their toes. Hearing this my father's cousin's best friend dived into the pond and with his bare hands started to pull out and throw big fish one after another on the ground. The bold act surely made everyone in the house admire the person and rejoice at the catch of so many big fish.

George Bernard Shaw had once said, "The man who writes about himself and his own time is the only man who writes about all people and all time." The other reason why the book interests me is its historical backdrop. My father was born during the reign of the British and his childhood moved along with significant events like the Second World War, the famine of 1943, the riots and the partition. Some instances narrated in the book give us authentic pictures of the time. The tyranny of the British is proved in his witnessing of some British school children's act of hooliganism on some innocent peanut sellers. His narration of his stay in Kolkata during the World War Two and descriptions of air raid precautions where trenches and walls were built to protect the city from bombardment, show how the war had absorbed Kolkata. The departure of the Allied Forces from Kolkata is masterly drawn which helps us to pic-

ture the state of the city then.

My father remembers while the endless rows of the tanks and lorries of the Army were leaving the city, one day, a caterpillar had almost run over an old woman who was trying to cross the road with a basket full of vegetables. When the old woman quickly got up and shook in fear the British driver of the vehicle got down and helped her pick up the vegetables causing every bystander appreciate the gesture. However my father and his family falling victims to the riots and the partition afterwards are the true examples of how he had trodden through the path of history. Leaving their residence for the fear of danger and taking shelter first in a slum, school and then in a relative's house during the riots in Kolkata make us realize how distressing the situation was. Finally we can realize the split of a nation in my father's exodus from his own surroundings and entry into a new motherland. In his own words 'I got dressed and in few minutes left Kolkata for East Pakistan. This country is no longer ours but a foreign land.' My father had to leave his very own Kolkata---the city of so many thoughts and memories, his father and in a way Dadi as she was buried there. Indeed I got to know a lot of things of the times long gone which I won't probably find in any other text of history.

In the end I would say the book has given me a kind of pleasure that I cannot compare with any other pleasure I experienced in life. Besides enjoying immensely the contents of the book, it was also delightful to hear the praises and appreciation from all the people who have read the book. Everyday our hearts over-flow with pride to receive the emotion filled compliments. The book has not only been a treasure trove for us but a great heritage too to pass on to coming generations of the family. No other gift from a father to his children can be as special as this. (CONCLUDED)

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TRIBUTE

Konedine Ashiben Bondhu

NASHID KAMAL

What do you say about a man who deeply loved Tagore, who loved music and had a way of enriching the life of every person that he was in contact with? That Professor Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury was a complete human being, never saw the dark side in anyone, always illuminated the place he went to with his brilliant smile and exquisite manners. That too was unintentional; he wanted to remain in the background. He once confided to me, "I am happy with the role of a prompter, which I once had." "What does that mean?" I asked He said that was the closest he had ever gotten to acting!

We were in the middle of a celebration to commemorate the tenth year of Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), which was his last workplace. He said that during his student days at Dhaka University (in the late 1950s), as very few women appeared on the stage, he had taken the contact details of Jharna Bashak alias Shabnam (noted film actress). Jharna agreed to play the lead female role provided there was a prompter; she didn't have time to memorise her dialogues. Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury agreed to be the prompter. He did so till the day God took him away from us on December 30, 2010.

He prompted the university colleagues, prompted the Trustees, prompted the students, prompted the non-academic staff and all the other hands responsible for logistic support at an institution. He knew each and every person by name and showed the same respect to the menial labourer at IUB as well as eminent industrialists who shape the future of IUB! He never took centre stage, he was always in a pursuit of actors who would take centre stage and act out the role.

There was not an iota of self adulation or glorification in him. During his days at Rajshahi University (in the 1970s), Prof Salahuddin was called the Jesus of Campus No.1 and Professor Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury of No.2. I met him first in 1996 as the Vice Rector of IUB where I joined. Together we spent long hours developing various curricula outside the periphery of my limited knowledge. His trust was simply complete, and through the long fourteen years of association, I realized why people called him the Jesus of the campus. Once I was in Darirampur (where poet Kazi Nazrul Islam once lived) and was about to commence singing for a national event commemorating the birthday of the National Poet. BMC (as we lovingly addressed him in short), called me on my mobile. He was looking for my father and I could not decipher his voice, due to the din. When I shouted loud into my mobile, "Who is this?" he said, "I am Bazlu, I am looking for your father". I noted that he was able to shed all man-made addresses (for example, VC of IUB or Dr. Chowdhury) and present himself simply as 'Bazlu' the way his friends addressed him.

Often, he would praise our careers and make himself sound so humble by saying that he had



gone to the University of Aberdeen and was just a professor of sociology, not an alumnus of some prestigious Ivy League school! As I got to know him as a sociologist I found out that many Ivy Leaguers would shy away from the deep knowledge and understanding that he had of life, living, culture, arts, crafts, painting and above all people. The first time I visited his home for dinner, I found two portraits on the wall, one of Pandit Ravi Shankar and one of Bismillah Khan. His wife, Zakia, looked at me and said, 'Nashid, Bazlu himself put up these portraits!' There was no other portrait of anyone else in his living room. The second time round, I found portraits of his grandson, the apple of his eye.

I sensed his sensitivity and during long discussions found out that during his student days he shared his hostel room with renowned vocalist Syed Abdul Hadi. He watched as Mr. Hadi practiced his voice in the morning and he had deep respect for musicians. He took deep interest in music and often during my tours to Kolkata to attend programmes on Tara channel he would request me to bring albums of new artistes. One last request was of the new Tagore exponent Saheb. I went to Kolkata New Market but could not find his album and shall never be able to gift it to him. The day before he passed away I was on a programme on NTV and it could be at the exact moment when he had his heart attack that I remembered him on stage. One of his favourite songs from my grandfather's collection was 'O ki o bondhu kajol bhromora re.' I was singing this particular song and remembered his playfully hurt expression in my house when he requested my aunt Ferdausi Rahman (also his class friend in sociology) and my aunt expressed her inability to oblige him. I had learned this song for BMC and although I can no longer sing it before him, myself and all his admirers at IUB long for his presence and say 'konedine ashiben bondhu koya jao koya jao re'

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ESSAY

Why I Write Poetry

SHAHABUDDIN NAGARI

I try to write poetry. 'Try' in the sense that over the last forty years I have gained some experience in understanding poetry. I am fairly familiar with the clichés of the alley of poetry. I have been familiar with the words, symbols and metaphors. I have grown a tongue that can taste poetry. It is imperative for those who write poetry that they know these matters up close. I have gradually understood when I should write with the heart, and when with the brain. Thus immaturity grows up to maturity. Now I think I am fairly mature enough to understand poetry. Through observation, I have learned what kind of poems can earn popularity and what kind of poems are written to fill the spaces of newspapers.

There's no limit to knowing. Only the grave is the last frontier of knowledge. That is why I always try to learn, from the young as well as from the old. I enrich my knowledge through reading books, newspapers and magazines. The Internet invigorates me and I go through the writings of native and foreign writers. Some of this learning I store in my brain, and some I scrub out. There's a limit to the storage capacity of the brain. Things that I learnt in my juvenile days can't be phased out of my brain. These seem to me a lifelong process. Some unimportant things are deleted automatically.

I have learnt poetry through patient study; so I write poems. I try to understand the techniques of expressing my learning in a new form. If anyone asks me, 'Why write poetry?' I could answer, in conventional manner, 'Poetry is one way of telling the truth, a way often superior to others.' This may qualify as an answer, but is poetry really always a way of arriving at the truth? Does the poetry we read in newspapers tell the truth always? In the era of Aristotle, when there was not much analysis of poetry, it was said that 'poetry uses words in their fuller potential and creates representations that are more complete and meaningful than nature can give us in the bounty.' Now, in these times, if we try to analyze poetry in similar fashion, will we get a 'Complete' and 'Meaningful' form?

The truth is that 'Poetry is not easy'; and, moreover, 'The medium is a compact one, needing great concentration to read, and even more to write'. It could be said to be an important fact for both writers and readers. Readers do not read with concentration; and writers lack concrete concentration too. Focus is the most crucial thing for a poet. Much of contemporary poetry fundamentally lacks breadth and conception. It is pointless blaming only the readers. Readers always want to get something of substance. If they get nothing, if they lose interest in poetry, them? When a poet says about Bengali poetry, "In both Bengals, comparatively more in Bangladesh, the tendency is to gather some cacophonous montage of imagery to create poems that lack resonance" --- then we understand that this poet has properly cultivated the essential being of poetry. With regard to those who gave commentary while neglecting the postmodernist literary critics, "It is an art form, and must therefore do what all art does- represent something of the world, express or evoke emotion, please us by its form, and stands on its own as something autonomous and self-defining", it should be realized that poetry is not a scattered symbolism; it should possess the quality of free-will and self expression.

It is my opinion that, when I try to write poems, emotions, theme, belief and wholeness are combined in them. When I drag down the sky to the earth, I compose a

symphony between the sky and the earth. When I illustrate the mood of moonlit night and raindrops, it is not for the sake of incorporating multi-spectral imagery. I rather try to make a sequence in order to construct a story. Poetry is like a tale and after all it should have an end. This tale is like a banyan tree which has branches, leaves spread out at the vast compass outside and roots dipped inside. All these parts together make up a complete tree. Poetry is similar to trees; it should possess branches, leaves and roots. A presentation of poems should be a mixture of poetic essence, emotion and truth. I believe that "poems are not created by recipe, or by pouring contents into a currently acceptable mould. Shape and content interact, in the final product and throughout the creation process, so that the poems will be continually asking what you are writing and why." When I endeavour to write poems, there is always a question haunting me: what do I write in poems and why? Is my writing pursuing any expression? Does it tell anything? Does it ask anything? If it is doing nothing, then why am I wasting my time adding up these words, 'signifying nothing'?

If anyone goes through from John Milton's (1608-1674) epic "Paradise Lost" to Michael Madhusudan Dutta's (1824-1873) "Meghnadbad Kabbyo", he will experience the heights of poetic expression. The poem that is read by readers again and again will be the perfect poetry. It has been said that popular poetry is perfect poetry (though there are different judgments for figuring out the popularity of prose). In past centuries, it was seen that readers accepted those kinds of poems which possess a concrete emotion, a desired question and an obtained answer. There were scattered themes but those were matched up to a certain point. Readers may argue with me as I go through the following examples. Syed Ali Ahsan's (1920-2002) "Amar Purbo Bangla", Abu Zafar Obaidullah's (1934-2003) "Ami Kingbodontir Kotha Bolchi", Shamsur Rahman's (1929-2006) "Tomake Powar Jonno Hey Sakhinota", Al Mahmud's (1936) "Sonali Kabin", Nirmolendu Goon's (1942) "Huliya", Shahid Quadri's (1943) "Tomake Oviadon, Priyotoma" all of these are full of multidimensional themes, symbols and metaphors. The poets journeyed through the whole surface to reach their readers and make them surf across their poetry. For that reason, those poems are frequently read by readers. Jibananondo Das's "Bonolota Sen" is also a readers' favorite for this reason, isn't it?

Poetry is the workshop of language, the most acute and comprehensive way we have of expressing ourselves. After this there is not much to say about the language of poetry. In fact there are many definitions, explanations and analyses about the language of poetry among different nations, languages and countries. But poetry is definitely beyond any definition.

I try to write a complete poem comprised of emotions, conflict, truth, symbols, similes, faith and beliefs, and what happens or could have happened. I nurture them all in my world of poetry. While giving form to my poem, I keep on editing and modifying till I feel satisfied that it is finally something worth reading and generates an ease to perceive. I organize and reorganize the words in different rhymes and rhythms so that it becomes reader friendly. My poetry is my medium to communicate with my readers. I believe 'poetry is a lot of things to a lot of people'. I try to write poems jubilantly.

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