

SHIFTING IMAGES

The wind beneath my wings



MILIA ALI

TODAY is Father's Day, an American National Holiday honouring fathers. The tradition dates back to 1909, when Sonora Smart Dodd of Washington State organised a special celebration to pay

homage to her father, who raised her and her five siblings after her mother died at childbirth.

As Americans observe Father's Day, my thoughts naturally drift to my father and his contributions to my life. I fondly remember him for the values he imparted to me with the humble realisation of how little I gave him in return. By dedicating this column to my father, I express my solidarity with all of you who also have evocative stories to tell about your dads.

One of my earliest memories is that of my father carrying me on his shoulders. We were vacationing in Inoni -- a remote, sleepy village on the shores of the Bay of Bengal. It was a beautiful, picture-perfect day and the four of us (abbu, ammu, my sister Sonia, and I) were picnicking on the beach. I was barely five years old, but I distinctly remember running on the sea shore with my hair flying, my feet splashing in ankle-deep water, happy and carefree. Then suddenly I tripped and fell. Blinded by the stinging sand in my eyes, I felt the pull of the receding waves under me. As I cried out for help, I felt my father's strong hands pick me up. He rinsed my eyes, wrapped me in a towel and held me close to him. I lay shivering in his lap.

Soon the setting sun cast its ochre light on the sea, and it was time to return to our beach cottage. Abbu heaved me up on his shoulders and carried me for the entire mile-long walk. I faintly recall my mother's murmured protests that I was heavy, and he should let me walk. My father held on tightly to my legs wrapped around his neck and responded: "Jennat, she is not heavy at

all. Let her be, can't you see, she is scared?" This was the first time I consciously felt the strength of my father's love and support. As long as he was in this world, he continued to give me what only fathers can give -- his unconditional love.

The most remarkable quality about my father was that he was extremely liberated and gave both his daughters a fair amount of freedom. Although we lived in a society where girls led a relatively sheltered life, he never put any restrictions on activities that helped our intellectual growth. Abbu would also sit with us for hours and share stories about his life and travels. Of course, as a child I loved to listen to him, but as I approached my teens, I became a little weary of his reminiscences of the "good old days!" At some point I must have stopped listening, as I discovered years later through a heart-wrenching incident, when he was no longer in this world.

Five years ago I received a phone call from a gentleman called Mr. Walter Webb who had obtained my phone number from a contact in Bangladesh. He said that his grand uncle and four other Americans were part of a bombing mission near Rangoon, in the Second World War. Their plane crashed in the Sundarbans. Unfortunately, two of the men died. Three of the crew members were rescued (among them Mr. Webb's grand uncle) by a young forest officer called



STEFANO TOGNETTI

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Choudhury Qudrat Ghani (my father). Mr. Webb said that he was writing a book about daring rescues during the War and wanted some detailed information on how his uncle and the other two Americans were saved by my father. He was particularly interested to know what abbu had told me about the incident.

I was taken by surprise -- yes, I had heard my father mention the crash. The accident occurred in 1945, years before I was born. I vaguely remember my father telling us that some local dwellers had informed him about the "foreign men," and he had gone with his retinue of forest guards to rescue them. However, my memory about the incident was sketchy. I had heard the story so many times that at some point I must have blocked it out. Perhaps, I was a bit

sceptical about how much of the narrative was based on real facts and how much of it was embellished by abbu's oratory skills!

Mr. Webb's phone call shook me to the core. I wished I had paid more attention to my father's conversations. I was reminded of the five-year-old girl riding on her dad's shoulders and thinking he was her saviour and hero. Somewhere during the course of her life he became "just plain old abbu" -- someone who was there in the background while other people occupied the front seat. I was filled with a sense of remorse for not taking an active interest in the stories of his life. Above all, I regretted the fact that I seldom sang for him. There were times he would ask me to sing and I would make an excuse and say "later." I was too preoccupied with the challenges of my own life. At some point he stopped asking but would always record my television performances and play the videos over and over again!

My story is not unique -- there are many such poignant tales that sons and daughters can recount about their fathers. It is interesting that, while we readily remember our mothers as bastions of love and affection, fathers, traditionally, are viewed as bread-earners and disciplinarians. This stereotype prevents us from appreciating that, underneath their stoic exteriors, fathers too have an emotional and vulnerable side. Many of us know the story of the Mughal Emperor Babar asking God to spare the life of his son Humayun in exchange for his own. Babur's death wish to save his son stands out as one of the great humanising examples of history. Though a father's love

for his child has remained steady over time, the 21st Century is witnessing a qualitative shift in the parenting role of fathers. Today, fathers are more proactively involved in the day-to-day activities of their kids. Hence, they have a greater impact on the emotional and social development of their children.

I am reminded of a moving story about a Romanian friend and her father. Her mother died when she was three. Her father gave her the nurturing care of both parents. He consciously sacrificed his career ambitions and took a less challenging job so that he could spend more time with her. At twenty one she developed a rare kidney disease and needed a transplant. Her dad donated one of his kidneys to her. A year later he had health complications and his other kidney malfunctioned. He did not respond to dialysis and passed away. Before his death he told his daughter: "I don't ever want you to think that I made a sacrifice for you -- I did it for myself. I want to live through you."

My own father passed away sixteen years ago, when he was seventy four -- too soon and too suddenly. He always wished to die with his boots on, and he did. As we celebrate Father's Day, TV ads keep telling us how to thank our dads with i-pads or digital cameras or golf sets, but, I am filled with a sense of nostalgia. I remember all the sacrifices my father made so that I could live a better life. If only I could go back in time and get that one opportunity to tell abbu: "I am sorry -- sorry that I never sent you flowers, that I never sang your favourite song for you, never hugged you and told you how much I love you." But then, abbu would not want me to be sad or sorry. He would want me to move on and not look back with regret.

Now, all I have left are dreams of my father. Whenever the dreams begin to be tainted with remorse or regret, I whisper to my heart: "Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

Subsidise food not energy

ZAHIN HASAN

IN "Development as Freedom" (1999), Nobel laureate Dr. Amartya Sen points out that famines are not simply caused by low food production; they happen when the poor lack the income to buy food at market prices.

Dr. Sen explains that the Bengal famine of 1943 was largely a rural famine. Incomes in Kolkata shot up because of British wartime expenditures; city folk spent their increasing incomes on food, pushing food prices up. The income of the rural poor was stagnant; they could

more jobs and higher wages for the rural poor. When land-owning farmers sell their crops at higher prices, they employ their landless neighbours to build new houses, poultry sheds, and grain warehouses.

In Bangladesh our population is growing while our agricultural land area is shrinking. Every year, land is diverted from crops to industry and to the expansion of urban areas. We must accept that we will have to import large volumes of food in the future. In this we are not alone; India and China are demanding more food as their populations increase

per kilogram) would cost a staggering Tk.7,000 crore (\$1 billion) every year. Fortunately, the government can raise this amount of money by increasing the prices of diesel, gas and electricity to the prices at which they are sold in India.

Raising fuel and energy prices would also promote energy conservation and renewable energy. Many renewable energy projects (like large-scale biogas plants) are financially feasible in India and China but not in Bangladesh, because energy here is sold at too low a price. By keeping the prices of fuel and electricity low, the government is in



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and become richer; both of these giants will become major importers of food.

In the future, poor Bangladeshis will be competing with richer Indians and Chinese to buy food on the world market. Our government will then have to abandon its policy of dictating low food prices; we will not be able to import the food we need unless we pay the same as India and China.

In the future, the rural poor in Bangladesh will be better off; higher food prices will translate into more rural income and more rural jobs. The urban poor, however, will starve unless they are given subsidised food. To buy the poorest 30 million Bangladeshis 200 grams of rice every day (at the current price of Tk.35

effect subsidising the consumption of fuel and electricity. Some argue that low energy prices are necessary to encourage industrialisation. I disagree; our export competitiveness is based on cheap labour, not cheap energy.

I suggest the following policy: the government of Bangladesh should raise revenue by making significant increases in energy prices every year; this revenue should be used to subsidise food for the poor. We must prepare for a future in which food is more expensive; we must create a mechanism to deliver subsidised food to the poor. Countries which fail to do this will be at risk of famine.

The writer is an industrialist.

Trafficking in Bangladesh

MAHMUDA IMAM

WOMEN and children trafficking is a perennial problem, not only in Bangladesh but also in the world. Poverty, over-population, gender-based discrimination, lack of consciousness are some of the reasons behind women and children trafficking in Bangladesh.

Nowadays, trafficking is an easy way of making money. A group of heinous criminals have adopted it as a profession. They allure the victims' parents and guardians to voluntarily put them in (the victims) their hands. Sometimes they kidnap individuals to traffic them outside the country.

In the name of providing employment they entice innocent people into their trap. They are brought over to Dhaka and forced into antisocial activities. Good-looking women are being trafficked abroad. Although Dhaka is their hub of activity they have networks across the country.

According to unofficial statistics, during the last ten years, more than two lac women were trafficked to Pakistan and five lac were sent to India. Ninety-percent of women and children were trafficked through Benapole border at Jessore. The other transit points are Sona Masjid at Rajshahi, Meherpur, Hili, Shylet and Brahmanbaria.

In recent times trafficking is increasing in the name of labour migration. The main destinations of the trafficked persons are India, Pakistan, Middle East, Lebanon, Thailand, Cambodia. They are mainly trafficked for sex trade, domestic work, forced labour, camel racing, forced marriage and other forms of exploited labour. Attitudes towards women in the society should be changed and their contribution should be valued.

Most of the trafficking incidents take place through the border areas. There is a need for building up community awareness, and forming watch committees comprising border guards, Union

Parishad members and NGO's to contain the menace. The local bodies should become particularly proactive in reaching out to the vulnerable families, mostly the ultra-poor, in finding work or employment for the adult members.

The media, local government, non-government organisations and law enforcing agencies should work together to combat trafficking. NGOs should send their recommendations for addressing trafficking to the parliamentary committee on the ministry of women and children's affairs.

There is also a need to review the existing laws, including the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 (amended 2003), and formulate women and children repression rules that would provide more detailed guidelines to address the issue of human trafficking.

The problem exists in the entire country, as such it would be impossible for the government alone to address the issue. All the stake-

holders should come under one banner to take up the challenges and find effective solutions. The media of the country can be utilised in a structured manner for creating awareness among the people about human trafficking.

Trafficking of women is taking place in the name of labour migration. We call for setting up of a monitoring cell under the employment and expatriate welfare ministry.

Those women victims of trafficking who are rescued need shelter homes, but they are not adequate. It is at such homes that they can learn a skill for livelihood and can stand on their own feet. Relatives, even their parents, do not accept returnee trafficked women in their families.

We have laws, but they are hardly implemented. Let us all in concert try to resist trafficking of women and children from Bangladesh.

The writer is Director, Karmojibi Nari.

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not buy food at higher prices and starved to death. Similarly, during the Irish famine of the 1840s, food was actually exported from starving Ireland to well-fed England; the market prices of foods were pushed up by wealthy English consumers until the poor in Ireland could no longer afford to buy food.

For decades, our governments have attempted to control the prices of foods by dictating ceiling prices. The conventional wisdom is that food must be cheap so that the poor can afford it. Such reasoning ignores the fact that all the poor are not in the same boat. The urban poor -- factory workers, rickshaw pullers, and daily labourers -- benefit from cheap food. But in rural areas, most people are engaged in growing and processing food crops; high food prices translate into