

SHIFTING IMAGES

Those were the days, my friend!



MILIA ALI

MALA and I were relishing a leisurely latte at Starbucks and chatting about... whatever it is that friends who meet after a gap of six months talk about... "shoes and ships and ceiling wax and cabbages and kings?" Suddenly we were hit by a gust of nostalgia about the "good

old days!" Remember those days? The days when a trip to a movie theater was an outing not just a click on the remote control of a flat screen TV. And, receiving your first watch from your parents meant opening the gift wrappings with anticipation, placing the watch on the wrist with love and wearing it to school with pride -- not just a trip to the Mall and a swipe of the credit card. Those were also the times when we believed that socialism was an ideology, not a failed economic system, and a patriot was someone to look up to, not a Mel Gibson movie!!

"Do you remember my first flight abroad when I was in college?" Mala quipped. "Oh! The excitement I felt at the pit of my stomach!" "Yes," I interjected "and all of us, the other classmates, were green with envy." In the good old times an overseas trip meant exploring a whole new world and uninterrupted family bonding. There was no anxiety of being hassled by immigration or being taken hostage by terrorists!

Ah! The good old days when one didn't need to surf through fifty TV channels before deciding what to watch; when one was not confused by five different versions of the same news! Those were the days when eating out was a treat at a familiar joint, rather than an exercise in consulting the Michelin guide and choosing the best-rated restaurant within a five-mile radius.

And what about our heroes? We had so many that we worshipped -- actors, authors, even politicians because we were not exposed to the minutiae of their private lives. We didn't suspect that Rock Hudson was gay, J.D. Salinger was a horrible recluse, or that John F. Kennedy was (reportedly) engaged in a dalliance with Marilyn Monroe. We didn't know whether our idol was "tweeting" porn photos to bar maids or sleeping with the woman who mopped his floor! Free of such predilections, we could build our dreams around our heroes and, I suppose, even aspire to be like them.

And the best part of the good old times was that chil-

dren talked to parents face-to-face and not on Facebook, or by texting cryptic messages. You were sure that the answer to a question was addressed to you and not to the Blackberry! Also, reading a book meant holding it in your hands, turning the pages, and dog-earring them... not sliding the bar of the i-Pad or the Kindle.

Those were the days when a cricket match was a nail-biting and exciting adventure because we were oblivious of the term "match fixing!" Also, a headache was just a headache and not the result of "stress" because we didn't exactly know what stress was.

"The good old days," exclaimed Mala, "when the prospect of a letter from a near one kept us expectant for days! It wasn't just a five-word business-like email update! And of course, the absence of cell phones meant that we were spared the irritation of having to listen to high decibel private conversations in public spaces."

As Mala spoke, her cell phone rang and she answered the call. I noticed that she turned pale and said: "I will be there right away. But will call 911 first." As she grabbed her purse and darted toward the parking lot she nervously shouted back: "Nasir (her husband) is experiencing severe chest pains, I am calling for an ambu-



Stock Foundry

Don't Get Left Behind!

Those may have been the days of lofty ideologies and romance, but these are the days of change and innovation. Can we, somehow, find a happy balance between the two?

lance!" I lingered at the café for a long time, dazed and stunned at the uncertainty of life. After downing three

cappuccinos, I mustered enough courage to call my friend and ask how Nasir was doing. She informed me that, thankfully, the paramedics had reached her house before she got there and had whisked him to the hospital. She was waiting to hear from the doctor. Luckily things were under control and Nasir had received immediate medical attention.

I drove back home wondering whether the good times, we had just reminisced about, were really that great. Or did we feel they were good because we yearn to re-live the days of our youth when we believed in our invincibility and life seemed simple, and carefree. But, would Nasir have the swift and efficient care in the old days when there were no cell phones? Could he have made the call to Mala who took a life saving instant decision to phone 911?

My thoughts reverted to my own situation as a fledgling columnist. Would I be publishing this column from a location more than 12,000 km away, without the help of the Internet or computers? Let me be candid: I have no illusions of being a Hemingway or even Maureen Dowd (the columnist). The strange bird called inspiration visits me only occasionally, and, that too for a few fleeting moments. When I hear it tweeting (I mean the bird and not Twitter), I bolt to my study, jot down my stray thoughts on my desktop and quickly push the "Save" button. The rest is a process of stringing the sentences together, ensuring their rhythm, Googling to check facts, cutting, pasting and editing on "Word." Finally, I press "Send" and wait for the transfer of my thoughts through cyber space, to an unseen repository at The Daily Star.

May be the good old days were good, but modern times have provided ordinary mortals like me with an opportunity to reach thousands of people around the globe in the most extraordinary ways. It has also opened up access to knowledge and information that was, in the past, only available to the privileged few. The democratisation of knowledge has given so many of us, mediocre people, hope that we, too, can live our dreams and continuously extend our frontiers.

Those may have been the days of lofty ideologies and romance, but these are the days of change and innovation. Can we, somehow, find a happy balance between the two?

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

Support efforts towards autism welfare

MUHAMMAD QUAMRUL ISLAM

IT is really encouraging that the International Autism Conference will be held on July 25-26 in Dhaka, which would come up with a "Dhaka Declaration" for helping the autistic children around the world. It is reported the organising institute is the Bangbandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) based on the support and initiative by Saima Wazed Putul daughter of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. She is the main organizer and a guest speaker.

The chief guest at this Conference, Indian Congress President and Chief Patron of Action Autism Sonia Ghandhi, will inaugurate the conference. Apart from her, other international dignitaries will participate as guest speakers. They are the Pakistani Speaker, Health Minister of Bhutan, First Lady of Sri Lanka, First Lady of Indonesia and Health Minister, Vice President of Maldives and his wife, Disability Chief of the World Health Organisation, and UN representative on Disability.

Most of the guests are women. Guardians earnestly hope that their participation will discover new paths to come out of the utter despair that can only be felt by the affected children and their families.

What kind of life awaits autistic children in different countries classified as developed, developing, and least developed? This is a vital point in formulating practical measures for autism welfare relevant to a country; as in this country extreme unequal distribution of income and richness of the few may give wrong impression about its socio-economy to the foreigners.

The co-partner in organising this conference is US based Autism Speak with whom the Bangladesh Steering Committee keeps contacts intimating the extent of preparations to a successful holding of the Conference. 35 specialists from the US, Canada and other western and Asian countries have been invited.

They will give advice based on their experience in handling children affected with autism. Some autism specialists from Bangladesh also will participate in the discussion. It would lead to Dhaka Declaration and holding of a training workshop at BSMMU for guardians, teachers and psychologists.

Thanks to the Bangladesh media, which carried news and views on autism from the very beginning of organised activities by guardians and parents in Dhaka in late 1990s and raised awareness across this country as well as draw the attention of the international community.

I wrote columns on the different the different functions I attended as a grandfather of an autistic child, an invisible disability unknown to us when he was born, for promoting the welfare of autistic children/adults.

We happily passed three years since his birth on December 10, 1998 with the confidence that his physician parents would take care of him. They did so, but suddenly he lost his ability to speak and interact socially. People and physicians here were not aware of autism then.

Who knew that he had autism? Neither the doctors in Dhaka nor the concerned centres in India and Singapore could prescribe any cure for him when the disease was finally identified as autism. Such is the sad experience that cannot be expressed, not only by us but also by guardians and parents of other autistic children we met; some of whom went to western countries but couldn't find the cure.

One of them, a dedicated physician, Dr. Rawnak

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Hafiz, returned to Bangladesh after having looked for treatment of her autistic girl in the US. She felt the need to get the guardians and parents of autistic children to form a voluntary organisation for taking up special education programmes.

It was possible for her as a physician to come in close touch with those parents who came to seek treatment, and inspired her to find way out. It led to the establishment of Society for Welfare of Autistic Children (SWAC), and Autism Welfare Foundation (AWF), in Dhaka, as pioneer organisations in this field with the help of affected guardians under the initiative and leadership of Dr. Rawnak Hafiz.

It was possible because of the unhesitating support of guardians who wished to see a better future

for autistic children. As a field trip, one may visit AWF to get first-hand knowledge about autism welfare in Bangladesh, the present activities and future programmes.

The purpose of the Training and Education Centre is to enable autistic children and adolescents to perform to their maximum strengths and interests, and make them able to support themselves. It runs a highly structured programme where the teacher student ratio is 1:1.

It also emphasises communication skills, social skills, behaviour and functional academics. It runs a vocational training centre for students above 10 years old. Other adult activities are secretarial job, work in cafeteria, gardening, etc. SWAC, AWF and Beautiful Mind create mass awareness for better understanding of autism.

AWF holds annual cultural activities and sports for autistic children/adults, and publishes an annual magazine and news letter. Fairs are held and handicrafts made by the children are displayed.

The expenses for maintaining and conducting the programmes properly are borne by the parents of students admitted into those centres. It is those affected parents who formed and mobilised voluntary organisations who are to be credited for the success.

Even with the support of the guardians and wealthy businessmen, and income from advertisements and CSR, funds have not reached the expected level. The main cost component is rent for those premises in a rising market rate.

Shifting of premises is very disturbing. But dedicated teachers and guardians are core assets who're sustaining the centres in spite of socio-economic hardships, lack of residential facilities, traffic jam etc.

What is required is not flow of money but support in kind, especially land, enabling construction of suitable complex, including playground, swimming pool, auditorium, dormitory for autistic children and adults, etc.

We have the required expertise, including foreign trained and dedicated core of teachers/ guardians, to make Dhaka a centre of excellence for autism welfare in this region and the world.

We convey our best wishes to the guests and participants for creating awareness about autism with meaningful actions.

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Long term weather forecast neglected

A. M. CHOUDHURY

MODERN weather forecasting has improved a lot with the introduction of satellites and radar in addition to ground observations. But in Bangladesh, we don't seem to be utilising all these facilities. Heavy rainfall very often brings floods and landslides in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong areas, and it is noticeable that no adequate advanced warning is given about these events.

The meteorological department follows the age-old practice of giving weather forecasts by signal numbers. You very often find that, in the port area, signal number 3 is hoisted. Signal numbers are meant for ports, but they are applied for everything, including rainfall, wind etc. There are ways of forecasting heavy rainfall, but they are not being practiced in Bangladesh.

We see very often landslides causing deaths of hundreds of people and floods affecting thousands. This time, according to a report, 3 lakh people have become water-locked, and according to the cloud picture, there are more clouds in the Bay of Bengal. Is there any forecast for the amount of rainfall coastal areas will receive? There is only mention of heavy fall and light fall, but this is not very helpful for the affected people. There was a report that there was more than 1,000 mm of rainfall in one day.

Even our TV and news media neglect this weather information. If you open any foreign newspaper, you find at least half a page on the weather forecast. It is time that our meteorological department, the media and the public in general should become more aware of the weather information because we are a country where natural calamities strike frequently.

If more accurate weather information is provided with regards to rainfall and wind, the lives of a lot of people could be saved. Another noticeable thing is that there does not seem to be any coordination between the forecasters and those who are affected. In this age of Digital Bangladesh, the meteorological department should be included as a part of that.

The writer is a former Chairman of SPARRSO.

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