

REFLECTIONS

Dying 'peacefully' ...

M. FOUZUL KABIR KHAN

I always wondered what it meant when death announcements in newspapers used the phrase “someone has died peacefully.” How does one die “peacefully”? When we were young, the Italian poet Dante whispered into our ears, “Death, always cruel / Pity’s foe in chief / Mother who brought forth grief / Merciless judgment and without appeal!” How could one have peace with such a cruel adversary? Yet, when my mother, Suraiya Begum died on the first day of August, I found no other way to describe it. She died “peacefully” --- and that is what our relatives were telling everyone.

She had dinner that night, said her prayers and complained about feeling unwell, experiencing a somewhat different discomfort than her usual ones. My eldest sister offered to sleep with her and she declined by saying that “you will not able to sleep, if you are with me.” The night passed without any event noticed by others. My sister got up in the morning and found our mother asleep in her bed. She touched her gently to wake her up for early morning prayers and breakfast. Her body was still warm, but she was no more! When we arrived there she was still sleeping, as if she would wake up if we called her and we did. But she did not respond.

She was an ordinary woman. She had not completed her schooling. With age, she had developed typical chronic diseases --- asthma, hypertension, rheumatism --- but was beautiful even at the time of her death. She was about eighty when she passed on to the other world. One cannot be exact as birth records were unknown in those days in a village in the remote island of Sandwip, where she was born. She came to life in a relatively well off family that became poorer due to a devouring of her ancestral property by the mighty Meghna river.

Her life can be divided into four distinct phases. Her pre-marriage life was a life of relative abundance but with little emphasis on education. She then married my father and struggled to raise seven children as the spouse of a college teacher, at a time when private tuition was unknown. The third phase of her life was devoted to taking care of an ailing husband. In the final phase, she herself became sick but during this period her struggle bore fruit as her children became accomplished professionals, from doctors and engineers to high civil and military officials. She lived to see her grandchildren grow up, get married, and even got to play with her great granddaughter!

As a wife of a college teacher and mother of seven children she had to live a modest life of sacrifice for her children. How modest? A couple of examples would suffice. A chicken can be divided into four leg and four breast pieces, a maximum of eight pieces of meat. Her husband plus seven children would have eight pieces of meat. So, she would have whatever bones were left, sharing with the domestic help. This became a habit for her. Later, in better days, when her children were grown up and offered her a good



piece of chicken in their houses, she would exchange it for bones in the bowl --- that she was forced to develop a liking for.

In our childhood, we would communicate our demands to our father through her. She would place them before him at an appropriate time and get back to us. I needed to buy a book of poems for my school, I told my mother. It was a tiny little book of about 50 pages. My father had advised her that I should write the book by hand (no photocopiers then!) or even better memorize it. I told my mother that I would do neither. Either I would have the book or stop attending school. Thanks to my mother’s persuasion, I received a brand new copy of the book.

Her emotions were always muted. It was my pleasant duty to take her to Sonali Bank to collect her pension, due from her husband’s service. Sometimes to avoid traffic or because of my other preoccupations, I would offer her money instead of having her to go to the bank. She would refuse to accept the money and insist upon collecting the small pension amount. The other issue that she would constantly remind me about was to find out whether the students at Chittagong College were regularly receiving the stipend from the scholarship fund that we had created in the memory of our father.

How or when does one die peacefully? Is it after suffering long illness? Or due to exceptional sacrifices that turn an ordinary life extraordinary? After she died all three of her surviving siblings were saying they had been orphaned. How does a dead sister make orphans of her siblings? By extraordinary love, I suppose, for she had hardly much else that she could offer to them. A nephew of hers sent me a text message from abroad after her death, “We all are witness to Allah; she was a pious and kind Muslimah.” Her grandchildren competed with each other for the privilege of lowering her body into the grave.

A friend of mine who got to know my mother over a short period of time came to hear about her passing away and sent me an email, “May the Almighty bless Chachi, fill her grave with Noor, make it a Garden, grant her Shade under the Arsh on the Day of Judgment, and grant her entry into Jannatul Ferdous.” Not only her siblings and nephews, her cousins, other relatives, but all persons known to her felt the some kind of void, for she touched their lives. Perhaps the following quote from an unknown author provides an answer to my mother’s “peaceful” death: “Those who have lived a good life do not fear death, but meet it calmly and even long for it in the face of great suffering. But those who do not have a peaceful conscience dread death as though life means nothing but physical torment. The challenge is to live our life so that we will be prepared for death when it comes.”

May her “peaceful” death carry her on to her final abode, in the company of the Almighty.

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NON-FICTION

A garden of gastronomic delights

TANVEERUL HAQUE

A friend of mine always keeps reminding me that if we were asked to rank our most pleasurable activities, the ingestion of good food would always find a very high spot on everybody’s list. Yes, I couldn’t agree more. It seems as time goes by and I get more opportunities to sample a wider range of food, the truth is sinking in. When men reach a certain age, they like picking through their memories. We are indeed willing slaves of our taste buds. How else do you explain the obesity epidemic or the explosion of cooking/dining shows on prime time television?

Of course every country, region, tribe, religion, even language, has its own food habit/cooking style peculiar to it. The principle that I personally subscribe to is that food is an acquired taste. The more I ponder on it, the stronger is my adherence to this principle. Take *shutki maachh* (dry fish), for example. I could eat all variations of it thrice a day for the rest of my life but some of my friends will not even allow it inside their homes. For that matter the luscious *kathal* (jackfruit) is anathema in some households. As for myself, I pity those poor souls who do not like *shutki maachh* or *kathal*. They just don’t know what they are missing out. Well, to each his own. Another principle that I much revere.

If summer be the season of mellow fruitfulness then in the Bangladesh context winter must be the season of gastronomic delights. As we bid adieu to summer now that the last mangoes are gone too we are in a state of limbo and look forward to approaching winter. That too is quite a few months away! It’s a joy look-

ing forward to a raft of winter vegetables, whole range of spinach and --- need I mention? --- the mouth watering *mithas* that are these days more bought and enjoyed in shops and at outdoor winter festivals than painstakingly prepared at home.

Ever notice how much dining out or eating away from home is getting into vogue? The younger generation having been brought up on fast food just cannot seem to wean itself away from burgers, French fries and soda! As they grow up and enter their income generating phase, they keep on frequenting restaurants, albeit of a more upscale and varied nature. In Dhaka you now get a whole range of culinary styles from Japanese to Thai, Indian, Middle Eastern, Vietnamese or Greek. The choice is quite simply endless.

People attend breakfast joints like my favourite Star Kebab in droves. Even a decade back, other than in Old Dhaka, having breakfast out was almost unthinkable. Now, I have initiated a breakfast club and even before Ramadan ended, somebody posted on my facebook wall when our next breakfast outing would be? If we arrive late, say after 7:30 a.m. my favourite *paaya* is sold out!

We members of The Reading Circle during Ramadan initiated an iftar-cum-dinner buffet. It’s been such a hit that we are setting it up as a once-a-month regular affair and you’ll be amazed at the wide ranging choice we have on offer and at great prices from the downright economical to the opulent. I’d recommend the website DhakaSnob.com to check out what’s on offer.

Entertaining at home having guests for

dinner is such a strain on the hosts that only the super rich with a passel of servants --- cooks, maids, servers, etc. --- can carry it off with aplomb and they too get a lot of stuff catered from restaurants or clubs, trust me. We resort to outside catering full time. Actually, just my wife and I, with our part time maid, have our hands full in dusting the premises, washing, wiping the crockery, polishing the cutlery and getting the house ship-shape! The food is catered and I can tell you, with careful planning the stuff one can serve can have exquisite variety to satisfy the most discerning palate. Indeed, you can choose from the best chefs in the city! I prepare and serve the drinks myself and being a teetotaler all I serve is mocktails, but they can be most enjoyable and come in a rainbow of colours too! The desserts can be most creative and, to top it all off, in the privacy of your home, without any servants snooping on your conversation, the host and particularly the hostess can also dress up for the occasion and mingle with all guests to have a very enjoyable evening --- leaving the washing and cleaning up for the maid in the morning.

Eating out, however, is a wholly different experience, whether it be quiet dining with a treasured friend or a few friends or in my opinion a maximum of a dozen guests. Like minded people --- and the conversation flows. Enjoying good food in the company of treasured friends is as much a gastronomic delight as high quality social intercourse, although over-indulgence can be telling on the waistline.

Twenty-first century hectic lifestyles are very demanding on our time that is avail-

Original: BANAPHUL

Translation: HELAL UDDIN AHMED

ONE
Sudhir had arrived. He had in his hands a stalk of white tuberose flower. There was a smile on his face and in his eyes. It was as if his whole mind was craving to unfurl its wings and fly.

Sudhir said immediately after arrival, 'Hashi, there is real good news today. What will you offer me for it? Otherwise, I won't tell you.'

Hashi was all eager. 'Please do tell me. What is it?'

'First tell me, what will you give me?'

'What can I give? Okay, I will do a beautiful piece of embroidery on your handkerchief. I have a lovely design.'

'No, I don't agree to that.'

'Then what do you want? I can give you the chocolate which I have now.'

'Am I a little kid? Can a chocolate satisfy me?'

Hashi laughed aloud. She said,

'Then I don't want to hear. Please go now. I offered to do the embroidery, give you a chocolate, but as they did not get your ...'

Sudhir said, 'I am leaving then.'

Hashi asked again, 'Won't you tell me?'

'I can divulge it only if I get the thing I want. Remember what I sought that day?'

As he said this, he looked at Hashi in a meaningful way. Suddenly feeling very shy, Hashi pulled herself up and said, 'I told you that was not possible.'

She was fearful as she looked at Sudhir's face. She heard Sudhir saying,

'I thought I would divulge the news in humour and fun. But I could not do that. Please forgive me. I have heard that your marriage with the groom from Santragachhi is now final.'

After saying this, Sudhir left. Hashi called out.

'Sudhir Da, please listen.'

Sudhir did not come back.

TWO

Alaka had arrived.

Alaka, for whom Ajay had waited all day for a glimpse. When would she appear in the evening?

Alaka said after arrival, 'Well, Ajay Da, is there any word called 'pet' in English?'

Ajay said,

'Yes, 'pet' means 'head.'

'Really?'

'Look up the dictionary. The meaning of 'pet' is 'head'.

'So, has our Baruna Di spoken correctly?'

Ajay said,

'Okay, please tell me. What is the meaning of 'mundu'?'

Smiling, Alaka replied,

'Head'.

'Matha' means head. The meaning of 'mundu' is also head!

Laughing out loud, Ajay said,

'Is this your knowledge of the Bangla language? Are 'matha' and 'mundu' the same thing?'

Alaka asked him, laughing as she did so, 'What is the difference?'

Ajay said in a sombre tone,

'Then there is no difference between you and Panchi the washerwoman! After all, both of you are female!'

Alaka asked,

'Who is this Panchi washerwoman?'

'There is a washerman's daughter at the bend of your alley. She is quite young would be of the same age as you.'

With an oblique smile, Alaka quipped,

'It seems Ajay Da has started to look at everything very minutely nowadays! Even the washerwomen are not spared!'

Ajay replied,

'Certainly. Shouldn't I check whether the thing I own is fine?'

'Who is it that you own?'

'There is someone.'

Suddenly absent-minded, Alaka started to tidy the adjacent table. For no reason in particular, Ajay gazed out of the window.

The two were experiencing two dreams.

They lay huddled together, very intimately.

Hashi's hands were on Ajay's chest.

Hashi and Ajay. Wife and husband.

(Banaphul is the pen-name of

Balaichand Mukherjee (1899-1979), an outstanding Bengali short-story writer of the twentieth century).

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the workplace means lesser time left in hand to spend in the kitchen. The dwindling supply of domestic help is also a critical factor. With more disposable income in hand and having travelled abroad the well-off younger generation try to emulate the lifestyles of the developed nations. Glossy magazines, cable television, Hindi movies, the internet glorify fast paced urban lifestyles where the kitchen does not really fit in.

The exception of course is recreational cooking, where people indulge in cooking to try out their hand at preparing mostly non-traditional as also traditional fare in a fusion style, bringing in cross-cultural influences in their cooking repertoire. This is becoming wildly popular with the upper-class, middle-aged slice of the population. These are mostly rich people who have travelled widely, are discerning and have acquired a taste for the good things in life. They like fine dining, entertain a lot and enjoy experimenting and sampling newer, more exotic food. For them are the cable TV shows depicting glamorous lifestyles, faraway fairytale locales where gourmet food is *de rigueur*. So, after all, modern times are getting a hold on us, bringing about a change not only in the way we live but also radically changing the traditional Bangalee “Dal, Bhat, Maachher Jhole, Shobji Bhaji, Aloo Bhorta” regimen that was our daily fare just a generation ago. Indeed, the world is getting smaller and we are becoming part of the global village.

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