

NON-FICTION

Reflections on Ramu

JULIAN FRANCIS

Forty three years ago, in India, I was attacked with lathis and gunfire. Some landowners near to Bodh Gaya in Bihar were angry that I was working with members of 'untouchable' castes. I was working with the Gandhian 'Samanvaya Ashram', which is based very close to the main Buddhist temple in Bodh Gaya, the birthplace of Buddhism. It is interesting to note that Samanvaya Ashram was set up to study all religions. At the early morning prayers each day, one day there would be readings from the Quran and then on successive days readings from the Gita, Buddhist Scriptures, the Bible, the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikhs' holy book).

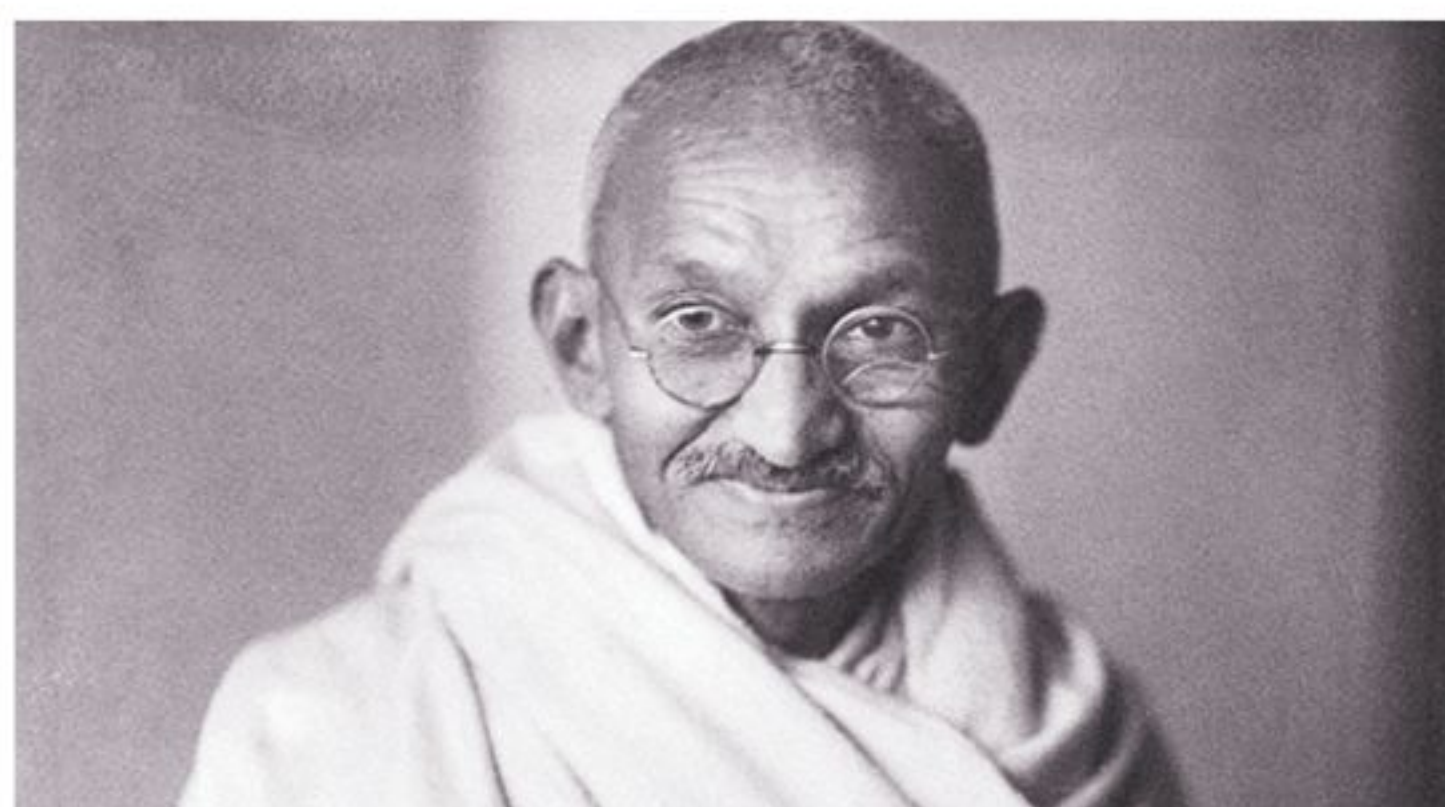
After my 'fight' with the landowners, I decided that probably I would not be able to continue to work in the Harijan villages and I would have to return to the UK. One evening I was sitting near the Mahabodhi Temple and great sadness overcame me and I started weeping, feeling as though I had become a failure. One of the Buddhist monks came to comfort me and suggested to me how I should try to win the hearts of the landowners. Probably, as a result of his teaching and advice, I am still living and working in Bangladesh today.

Later on, in 1971, while responsible for about 600,000 Bangladeshi refugees in many refugee camps in Agartala, Assam, Meghalaya, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Siliguri, West Dinajpur, Bongaon and Barasat, I made it a point to have discussions with members of all religions. Some of those discussions were very painful. I was told by some that they had been attacked by neighbours whom they had regarded, over many years, as close friends. Nevertheless, I was struck by the great respect that the refugees of different religions showed each other. They probably knew that they needed each other to survive in those refugee camps!

When I came to live and work in Bangladesh in the 1980s, I found that the inter-religious harmony was, in my opinion, much better in Bangladesh than in India. In addition, I have found that when an incident is described in the media as religious tension, nine times out of ten it is to do with a fight

over land or property and not about religion. This is particularly true in the cases where ancestral land has been steadily grabbed from the different ethnicities found in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and other parts of Bangladesh like Madhopur and Mymensingh where, the Garos, particularly, have suffered greatly.

The incidents that took place in Ramu, Ukha, Teknaf and other places, almost certainly pre-planned, have shocked all Bangladeshis and people from all walks of life and people of all faiths have condemned what happened in the strongest possible terms. I do not know how we can prevent these types of atrocious incidents from happening again but as a first step, I believe that schools and madrasas can do much more to teach about religious tolerance. As Buddhism is the second oldest religion in Bangladesh, every attempt should be made to protect it at all costs and all Buddhist properties must also be protected. I would also add that I am full of admiration that many scholars and teachers of Islam have come out strongly to state quite clearly that the Quran and Hadith do not permit the



attacking of people and places of other religions.

Almost exactly 150 years ago, an ancestor of mine, who was part of the police force in Chittagong and later was Superintendent of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, paid his first visit to Cox's Bazar. In his memoirs he wrote about Buddhism. He wrote, "Benevolence is esteemed the greatest of virtues, and to do no harm to any living creature is the cardinal maxim of Buddhism. 'Receive your thoughts as guests but your desires as children.'"

Perhaps we should all remember what Mahatma Gandhi said. He said, "Let all the windows and doors of my house be open and let all the religions of the world blow through my house."

(JULIAN FRANCIS, WHO HAS BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF BANGLADESH SINCE THE WAR OF LIBERATION, RECEIVED THE 'FRIENDS OF LIBERATION WAR HONOUR' FROM THE BANGLADESH GOVERNMENT EARLIER THIS YEAR).

THOUGHTS

Emily Dickinson ... the murmur of a bee

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

The mind is wider than the sky. That was the way Emily Dickinson looked at the world outside her. Or you could say it was the way the soul worked in her. Weigh that statement. There is something of the metaphysical about it. There is a linkage of ideas which comes into a working out of the imagery. Consider the universe you are part of. Or think of yourself, the essential you in whom the universe comes to epitomize itself. That is what comes through in Dickinson, in her use of words, the words shaping a thought, the thought leading you on to a wider ambience of experience.

That is how Dickinson's poetry comes to us. It is different from the way we have perceived poetry through the ages. The different emanates from the fundamentally reclusive which Dickinson has personified, indeed held up as a model for herself in her lifetime. It is also in the mode she employed in her poetry, in the sense that the poems did not have titles, indeed the formulation of her verses employed such grammatically unconventional forms as the use of unexpected capital letters where small letters would have sufficed. But that, you will likely argue, is liberty poets are perfectly within their rights to take advantage of. Dickinson did it, in all her eighteen hundred or so poems composed over a creative lifetime spent in fashioning ideas.

Was Emily Dickinson drawn to conventional faith? The answer to this kind of query comes in a rather simplistic manner. Like men and women of her generation, she comprehended the place of religion in life. And yet there was, once she had outgrown youth and was well into deeper communion with the world around her, the feeling in her that faith was not merely to be discovered through a conventional observance of its basic tenets. It was also to be spotted in the beating of the heart. People went to church, thought Dickinson, to find God. For herself, God was in the heart, right in her home. She did not wear her faith on her sleeve. She simply felt it in all her consciousness.

And that was the way things were in her native Amherst, Massachusetts. It was New England ambience that mattered. In the early to late nineteenth century, it was intellectual liberalism which underscored the pursuit of education, of anything, in Massachusetts. At Amherst Academy and then at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Dickinson was part of the air of academic freedom New England then symbolized. And yet there was something more, something greater in terms of desire that tugged at her heart. It was always home that beckoned her. She kept going back home, eventually making it a point not to leave it again. Amherst provided the perfect backdrop to a flowering of her poetic genius. It came in association with her aloofness, with her isolation if you will,

from her surroundings. She was forever uneasy dealing with people or making small conversation. In her aloneness, though, she was endlessly in conversation with herself.

The conversation was with her poetry. Or conversation for her was poetry. Think back on the profundity of the thoughts in the poem beginning thus:

Safe in their alabaster chambers / untouched by morning and untouched by noon / sleep the meek members of the resurrection / rafter of satin, and roof of stone. Light / laughs the breeze in her castle of sunshine / babbles the bee in a stolid ear . . .

There is certainly a quality of the arcane about the poem and you wonder at the deep religiosity which pervades it. She speaks of death. Mortality was always a poetic preoccupation with her, the underpinning of which happens to be this poem. Alabaster is symbolic of beauty; and it is cold. Death, if you must know, is a cold affair. But then there is the matter of the resurrection. How do those expected to resurrect themselves lie still in death?

In Emily Dickinson, you run into a panoply of thoughts, perhaps of the kind you stumble into in modern poets.

Difficulty of understanding is what you experience, all the while knowing that the difficulty is compounded by the poet's own questions about the mystery of life and death, of the process of Creation itself. Reflect on the following:

The murmur of a bee / a witchcraft yieldeth me / If any ask me why / 'twere easier to die / than tell / the red upon the hill / taketh away my will /

if anybody sneer / take care, for God is here / that's all.

A romantic spirit was what Emily Dickinson was constituted of. The lyrical came in beautiful tandem with the spiritual in the poems and, doing so, lifted the poetry to heights rare in the annals of literature. Feel the throbbing sense of life and death, of beginning and end, in these thoughts:

If I should die / and you should live / And time should gurgle on / and morn should beam / and noon should burn / as it has usual done . . . / it make the parting tranquil / and keeps the soul serene . . .

The soul, said Dickinson in one of her usual reflective moments, should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience.

It is ecstasy you dip into and stay in . . . as you take in the warmth of Emily Dickinson's poetry.



SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR.

Doors to the soul

TULIP CHOWDHURY

Where lies the soul? I may not know its exact abode but there are hundreds of ways that I feel its presence within me. There are many doors to the soul. The soul plays in strange ways. You may not be aware but the soul leads you on, you make choices that seem to be strange to you on a second look. The soul seems to sit at the helm of your life and steer you on, destination unknown. You wonder how and where the soul resides to lead you on. The soul, with invisible wings, soars high and low. At one time it is in the nooks and corners of your house and then suddenly you wonder if it is in the seventh heaven, taking a look at the ethics of your life. At one time the soul seems to be so engrossed with the material possessions that surround you and yet then it is flying around looking for the aesthetic senses to fill the heart. You wonder for the umpteenth time: How many doors are there to the soul? Imagination costs you nothing and you are a free bird as you let yourself keep searching for the whereabouts of the soul. But there is one thing you want, regardless of its exact location, and that is peace of the soul. You want solitude in life.

The doors to the soul have a special place for people. It opens and shuts for particular people. The loved ones always find the doors open; they come and go, leaving the soul content. It lies in expectations of having dear ones nearby; it wants to hold on to the moments of pleasure. But at times it leaves space for reasons, tries to accept people even if they do not touch the heart. The soul looks forward to spending long hours of life with people who are loving, who are close. It is in constant reminder that life will not last, that the end will come. And so the soul wants to keep in constant touch with people who are the objects of your love. There is a craving for the happy hours to be endless. But this is far from the truth. All good things come to an end. And the truth is that not all the people one meets in life are welcome; there are people who inflict pain and leave the soul awash with tears. The soul seems to be in fear of them; it holds back smiles when these people come near. When life comes to the sunset years the soul finds that it is the people who matter the most in life, the love shared are what make life go around. The material goods and possessions seem to be trivial when people stand in the front, looking at the eyes with empathy and love.

The doors to the soul so often open out to people who have departed from the world. Their love and the ways they have known, come back and one wishes that life would come back again and they would be once more with us. Many of us believe that when those we love die their souls remain to watch over us with love. When we inflict pain on our fellow beings, how often are we reminded after death that their souls may come to haunt us?

There is craving in the soul for peace. The doors are forever open to the solitude of the heart. Violence and anger give way to uneasiness and unhappiness of the soul. The soul becomes restless and life becomes dreary. When life is chaotic one wonders where lies the solace that allows one to smile and sleep in peace. The soul seeks cracks and holes in search of peace. When cruelty strikes suddenly the doors to the world seem to be tight and shut. Without peace life becomes almost unbearable for the moment. One goes in search of friends and well wishers, for it is the people who keep you within the fortress of love and affection. When the soul is restless it reaches out to others for peace that we cannot do without.

The doors to the soul open and shut to happiness and tears and to good and bad. It opens to happiness with ease and remains open. But at times the doors open without heed to misdeeds and tears. We question our thoughts and actions and often wonder where the soul was when we were busy in the worldly deeds. When we fail to justify our deeds we look for the consent of the soul. Was it with us? The soul is very much there with us all the time and yet because it is invisible we feel lost at times.

The ultimate and constant reminder to us of our soul is of its closing its doors forever. We never know when the soul will leave the body and we will crumble like withered flowers, lifeless and lost to the world around us. While we are so alive with our soul playing the life songs with us, we are fearful of its exit from life. We dread the day, the moment it will be taken away from us by God. We are forever petrified: When will the soul close its doors to the world forever? But it is hope, life for yet another day, that leads us on to the last breath we take. We wonder if the soul will finally come and say, "Here I am", when we say goodbye to this wonderful world?

TULIP CHOWDHURY WRITES FICTION AND IS A POET.

SHORT STORY

... Nazneen...

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

My mother called me Adrita--a nickname she apparently selected while I was still in her uterus--even though everyone else called me by my real name Nazneen. My father was posted in Kishoreganj when I was born, but I took my first breath in Moulvi Bazaar in my grandparent's ancestral home where Amma came to stay for a few days for the delivery of her first child. Amma, then only eighteen years old, was so overjoyed to have her own baby, that she called me Adrita which, she told me as soon as I was old enough to understand, means the beloved one. After me, Amma had six more children, five sons and a daughter, but none of them got any nicknames from her. My numerous aunts and uncles came up with nicknames for my brothers and sister before Amma had any chance, and she just went along with those picked by them. As a consequence, some of my siblings ended up having more than one nicknames--for example, my youngest brother was given two, Bacchoo and Tukon, one from my mother's family and the other from my father's. Anyway, I was Amma's darling when I was growing up and reciprocated by helping her out after my brothers and sister were born and during their adolescent years. After my sister, who was the youngest of us, was born she became the recipient of all my attention and creative energy since I was very happy to finally have a sister after five brothers. I adoringly called her Putul when she was three months old and that's the way it was until she was nine or ten, when she told me that she did not like that name any longer. Since then, I called her by her real name, Naushin.

I got married when I was starting my MA in Sociology at Dhaka University. By then, marriage proposals had been streaming in incessantly from my father's friends and colleagues on the lookout for a daughter-in-law. Amma was not very happy to see me get married and leave the house even though she knew that sooner or later she would have to let go of me. One day, my father announced that a colleague of his wanted to visit us with his son to see me, for *koney dekha*. I was surprised since most of the others before that either came to the University to get a glimpse of me or saw me at one my aunts' who were drawn in to facilitate the *ghotkali* process. When Amma asked him why my prospective in-laws can't just go to the University to get a glimpse of me, my father proudly announced that this "candidate" was very smart, and wanted to meet the girl he was going to marry face to face. That's how I met my future husband. I was never asked by my parents if I had any liking or disliking vis-à-vis men, or if I had any liking of my own. Two of Amma's three sisters had "love marriages" as they used to be known as in those days, and I would have preferred to have found my own life partner, but I never had a chance since I channelled all my energy on studies and my younger siblings, and these kept me wondrously occupied.

Amma did not cry at all, as I was afraid she would, during my wedding. She was busy chatting with my aunts and uncles, and was giving directions to my brothers and sister on this and that. "Please make sure the groom's family is seated properly and our *beyaine* is shown proper respect"; "Remind your father to greet the *bar jatri*"; "Don't ask for an outrageous sum for *salaami*" etc. etc. I overheard all those commands and conversations even though I was in my room with my friends and cousins who were told to not let anyone in or allow me to go out.

I could hear Amma keeping track of the army of helpers and guests and could not help but wonder where she found so much energy from. It seemed like she was on an energy pilloutwardly she appeared very excited and I surmised it was all driven by the reservoir of motherly love she had been saving for the day when her eldest daughter would get married and our house would be humming in the company of family members and friends would gather there to enjoy the first marriage in our family. I remember she was constantly humming the tune for a Tagore song, which she had told me many years ago was the song that her mother had sung when she herself got married to my father:

On the journey that you begin today on this boat, O newlyweds, Be sure to keep as your guide the One who guides the universe . . .

When it was time for me to go with my husband, and I got down from the podium at the completion of the *rosumat*, she whispered in my ear, "Take good care of your mother-in-law". I was puzzled because I was expecting to hear another of her favorite Tagore songs, but then I understood.

I moved into a joint family, with my husband's parents and one unmarried sister, Kanika. I tried to adjust to my new surroundings and role, and everything was going well for the first two years. I was too excited about my new life and busy trying to find my bearing to notice anything except that living in a joint family with in-laws entails a lot of responsibilities and a complex set of "dos and don'ts", some of which I had learnt from my Amma, but others I was not prepared for. My husband Akram, being an only son, always deferred to his parents for any decision. When he was transferred to Chittagong to be the District Commissioner, I wanted to join him there. But my in-laws convinced him to leave me in Dhaka and stay in a government rest house in lieu of the DC bungalow.

"You guys are young and need to save money for your children. If Akram stays at a mess he will save money and he can visit you every month," they said.

I was going to talk to Akram about this arrangement which was not what I was expecting, but he also sided with them, and I did not bring it up with him or voice any reservations. Amma, when she heard about Akram's decision to leave me in Dhaka, voiced her strong displeasure but said nothing either to my in-laws or to him. She knew from her own experience that keeping quiet in certain situations is better than to rock the boat. I guess I inherited the motto "go with the flow" from my mother.

While Akram was in Chittagong, I had my first child. I named him Farhan and was glad to have a companion to fill up my days. Akram came every month to see us, particularly to spend time with his parents. It was during these months that I noticed some change in his attitude towards me. Before, when we were alone in our bedroom, he would try to touch me, and draw me closer towards him. During the pregnancy, he stopped this and we almost never made love during this period. While this change took me by surprise and worried me, I did not bring it up with him. But I could sense that something was amiss when I found out that he was talking frequently on the cell phone on the roof. As soon as I went to the roof to join him, he would hang up. I was not sure if I should ask him about these calls but

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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