

TRUE STORY

Swindlers on the prowl

SYED ASHRAF ALI

Alec Talukder, my good old neighbour, called on me one early morning last week. He made me swear that I would not disclose to anyone whatever he would tell me. Then he cupped his hands against his mouth and leaned precariously close to my ear to whisper some words that I could barely decipher.

"Did you say battery," I thought I had heard him whisper this word.

He whispered again, this time a little louder, "No, it's not battery but lottery--UK Coca Cola Lottery. My prize is worth five hundred thousand pound sterling. Do you know how much that is in our own currency?"

"Lots of money; it's more than six crores taka at the current rate of exchange." I couldn't hold back my surprise. "But when did you buy the ticket of Coca Cola lottery?"

It turned out that he did not buy any ticket but last evening had received this message through his email account.

Your E-mail ID was selected for 500,000.00 GBP UK Coca Cola Lottery."

The unknown benefactor had asked Talukder to provide his address and other details to claim the money.

Noticing his disoriented look and the disheveled tuft of hair dancing across his thinning hairline, I conjectured, "You must have missed your sleep last night to make plans for using the money."

He confessed he indeed did, and added that he had a heated argument too with his wife over the use of the yet unseen money.

This story, bizarre as it may look, plays out in many homes and offices across the country and, indeed, the world over. Many of these characters approach me in the mistaken belief that my background qualifies me to answer their unanswered questions. Some come with a million dollar note issued against nothing but 'the goodwill' of the American people, a few come with billion dollar notes issued by 'Hell Bank' that they had found in the pocket of a second hand blazer bought from what is known as t'al market. When they finally leave, some speculate that I am too jealous about their newly found fortune to tell the truth; some decide to go to a real 'expert'.

There must be very few persons, with an address in the trade or telephone directory, who have not received a sugar coated letter from an unknown benefactor from Nigeria with an offer to send to your bank account, say, sixty million ill-gotten American dollars to hide it from the prying eyes of the Nigerian authorities. Your share is set at something like 10% of the booty, enough to keep you

sleepless for a couple of nights.

If you thought that only our simpleton Talukders are hooked by these tricksters, you have not seen the last of human follies. The chief of the Indian Press Council, Justice Markandey Katju, recently caused a stir by saying that 90% of Indians are idiots. "You people don't have brains in your head....it is so easy to take you for a ride." Substitute the word Indians with any other nation; you would come pretty close to realities everywhere. Haven't we seen how three simple words 'Islam in danger' could stir a frenzy to kill people, burn houses and places of worship, torch vehicles and make the whole nation a hostage? Or this photo-shop swindler in Bogra, who sent a sample of Katju's 90 percent scurrying on the streets to destroy everything in sight simply by concocting the image, silhouetted against the lunar landscape, of a beast masquerading as a saint. But, let us continue our story.

When Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserves had almost dried up in the early seventies, missives came from all corners of the world with offers to lend hundreds of millions dollars on very soft terms. The files on such offers were getting bulkier every day. Key men of the central bank and the government, mesmerised by these charming offers, held several rounds of discussions to 'materialize' a few offers only to discover some days later that the 'kind financiers' were not worth more than a few thousand dollars.

At about that time, a very shrewd businessman I knew was hooked by a Californian financier with an offer to lend twenty million dollars, again on soft terms, as venture capital to set up an industrial complex. He spent a year and about one hundred thousand taka on telex, fax and telephones. When I last met him he assured me, "Syed sahib, you will see, I'll succeed in collecting this money from them." No amount of reasoning could stop him from pursuing his dream until the end of his life, cut short by illness.

The advent of the internet has opened a whole new window of opportunity for swindlers. The inboxes of the targeted 'customers' are mercilessly cluttered by them. Irritating as these unwanted mails are, they, nonetheless, make fascinating reading. The last one in my inbox is from an Audit Manager, Mr. Axel Brice (fake, no doubt) from what he claims to be an international bank with an offer of \$15.2m million. Where did he get this money? Here is an extract, without correction, from his mail:

"3 years ago, most of the African Politicians used our bank to launder money overseas through the help of their Political advisers, Base on the fact that fund been deposited in our bank was much for the Politicians to control, as

they are transferring the fund to overseas, I was able to divert (\$15.2M) to an escrow account that belong to unknown person. I will give you full details of this transaction as soon as you confirm your readiness to assist me transfer the fund into your account."

Here is an extract, without editing, from another fraudster:

"How are you doing? My guess is as good as yours' permit me to introduce myself, am Barrister Abdul Luckman Esq' from Kuala Lumpur Malaysia, Asia. It will be a reckoned day if this opportunity is granted for both of us to come together and reason what I have to share with you. It's not a trade but an important roll you play to get 35% of the total sum of \$189 million dollars."

This 'Barrister' must have dropped out of secondary school and is now trying his 'skill' to scoop a quick buck from unwary targets.

Another swindler did not explain the source of funds but straightaway credited my account (imaginary, I guess) against my invoice (imaginary, again).

"Please we are very sorry for the delays in making the payment, today we have remitted payment against your INVOICE. Find attached TT copy of payment of \$140,000 USD made to your account, kindly confirm the BANK SLIP attached."

There is then this Audit Officer of a bank in Africa (Africa seems to have an endless supply of tricksters) who is sitting over fifteen million American dollars in the account of a gentleman who died in a plane crash. He drew out a plan to 'rob' that money from his bank with my assistance.

An eighty year old 'kind' widow from Britain, claiming that she had inherited twenty million pound sterling from her 'beloved' husband, sent a passionately worded email with a promise to give the money to me for charitable works in my country.

The streams of mails continue, and so do the colourful stories. Where these lures lead to is another story.

Does it make sense to write a silly piece with a touch of humour for a prestigious daily? It doesn't really, but our government is getting offers from known and not-so-known sources to finance the dream bridge across the Padma. And there are Talukders (with apologies to all those bearing this surname) who may be tempted to bite the tantalizing baits. To them my advice: it is not wise to lower your guard even when the carrots look fantastic.

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REALISM

Is there light at the end?

IMMITA MANAL

I wish I hadn't come to work. I wish I had listened to my mother. I wish I was anywhere else now. I wish I was dead.

Ayesha, my friend and colleague, came to my house in the morning and told me our manager wanted us at work; that the building was safe; that we wouldn't get paid if we didn't go. My mother pleaded with me not to go, that she had a bad feeling, but I didn't listen to her. My little sister needs treatment, and the treatment requires money. I am the sole bread-earner of our little family. I had to come.

What if I die? Who will look after my family? Who will feed them? How will my sister get the treatment?

Everything's so blurry to me now. People screaming and running, shoving each other out of the way in order to get out, Ayesha pulling my hand and screaming at me to run. The next thing I knew, I was lying in the dark, dust making everything look foggy, piles of rubble everywhere, and me trapped under a pile of that rubble. That was yesterday, I think. I have no idea how much time has passed exactly. Ayesha is near me, but she has been quiet for a long time. I am trying to talk to her, but she isn't responding. Maybe she is asleep. She is trapped under a huge boulder.

I keep hearing a lot of noise, people shouting and screaming, things that sound like drilling, and injured people moaning. There were a lot more people moaning, but it's getting quieter as time goes on. I think I understand why. My leg, which is pinned under rubble, is hurting so bad I feel someone is trying to rip it off, but it hardly hurts anymore. In fact, I can hardly feel my leg anymore. I still can't move it though. Is that a bad sign? Am I going to lose my leg? If so, can I still work to support my mother and sister?

It's getting very hard to breathe. My mouth is so dry it feels like the inside of the Sahara desert. The hunger has faded into numbness, but hunger is not new to me. Before I got this job, hunger was my constant companion for days at a time. I had vowed after my father's death that I would never let my sister feel that agony, but will I be able to keep that vow? If I die... no, I can't think about that. I have to live! I need to live! My family needs me to live!

I bet my mother is extremely worried about me. She has high blood pressure, and if she continues to worry, she will get ill. I hope she remembers to take her medicine on time now that I am not around to remind her. I wish I could find my mobile phone so I could call her

and tell her not to worry, but I lost it in all the confusion.

The drilling seems to be getting closer. Why are they drilling? I wonder if the entire building has collapsed. I wonder how many people are still alive. I wonder how many of my friends I will see again.

Don't think morbid thoughts! Think happy, positive thoughts! Let's see, the green dress I was making last needs a few more sequins on the body. I wonder who will get to wear it. Then again, it was on the fourth floor, the floor above mine, and that floor is in pieces lying on top of and around me. The dress won't be a dress anymore. There are few pieces of cloth lying around me. Most of them look like they've been through the jaws of a tiger! I wonder what I look like. There is blood on my arms. That much I know, but I'm not sure if it's mine. If I need to go to the hospital for treatment, how will I pay the bills? I hope I die so that my family won't be stuck paying huge amounts of money for my treatment. But if I die, who will feed my sister? Why do I keep thinking about this?! I need to divert myself!

The drilling sounds like it's coming from my left. I am picturing the little drills the workers use to stick small pins in the walls to hang up photographs. How will those tiny holes help? Whatever their plan is, I hope it works.

Is that light? I think I see a tiny speck of light! Or is that just more dust? I can't be sure. No, wait, I definitely think that's light. Where is it coming from? Or am I just hallucinating?

How much time has passed? Has it been a day? Two days? A year?

I had hoped to get promoted this month, but I guess that's not happening. It's amazing how things like the promotion thing, which seemed like such a huge deal for me, seems rather insignificant at the moment.

I feel very cold. That is weird, because it's April, and it was boiling inside when we were working. They don't always turn on the fans because of the electricity bills. Well, they won't have to worry about that anymore!

It's getting colder. I feel sleepy. My body feels numb. I am picturing my sister and mother's faces, the way they will smile at me when I finally get out of this mess.

I feel sleepy.... Maybe I will go to sleep and wake up in my mother's arms. I hope so. I know my father is watching over me, so I will be all right.

Please, someone, help me!

IMMITA MANAL WRITES FICTION BASED ON THE HUMAN CONDITION

TRAVEL

Darjeeling: demographic ivide

*Tourism, human circulation considered as consumption is fundamentally nothing more than the leisure of going to see what has become banal.*

--- Guy Debord (1931-1994). French activist and philosopher

RAANA HAIDER

The hill station is immensely tourist-trodden and one is never far from the madding crowd. Rapid commercial and residential development spurred on by the ever-increasing demand of visitors has resulted in a deeply dense Darjeeling. An endemic problem in the hills is the frenetic developmental enthusiasm. A blanket of humanity crowds the serpentine lanes that weave through mountains edges and passes, as mushrooming buildings cling to its slopes. Heavy vehicular traffic creates congestion. A shortage of water requires water-carriers to haul the liquid commodity for usage by high-end hotels. These carriers have created deep tracks in the road surface. Buses, trucks and heavy vehicles carry the following ditties on the back: 'I miss Darjeeling', 'Singh is King', 'Pray for us' or 'Best to Come.' A visit to Kalimpong – said to be the more serene site – was cancelled since a round trip could take up to five hours. Urban blemishes in the form of piles of construction debris and garbage, open drains, missing manhole covers mar any residual sentiments of being in the lap of the Himalaya.

Here lies a legacy otherwise. For 'Dorje Ling' – 'Place of the Thunderbolt' – has been a perennial favourite and possibly fallen victim to its own success – falling prey to being loved to death. Yet an earlier generation or two carry a different picture in their heads. While charting a journey into memory; they reminisce of a more peaceful and pristine past. It was a coveted destination – a piece of paradise. Today, the ground reality differs. An expanding middle class; disposable income, improved transport and greater accessibility are all factors for the increase in tourism – the world over. Tourism is the great new commodity. 'Get-aways' are no longer the privilege of the few but the practice by many. And Darjeeling is not devoid of visitors. Manobina Dasgupta in a review of Discursive Hills: Studies in History, Polity and Economy published by St. Joseph's College Darjeeling notes "...The natural beauty of the mountains has generated tourism, but growth in infrastructure haphazard." Echoing the sentiment, Ruskin Bond laments in Mussoorie and Landour: Days of Wine

and Roses (1997): "Stand still for ten minutes and they'll build a hotel on top of you."

For a generation in the Subcontinent now aged 50+ – many schooled in Darjeeling. St. Paul's, St. Joseph's College, Loreto Convent, St. Helens and countless others remain educational institutions of repute. That same generation may have honeymooned in the same hill station in the 1960s and 1970s. That generation would today be amongst the Senior Citizens of West Bengal and Bangladesh. Noteworthy, is the Great Divide amongst their memories and that of subsequent generation. In my exchanges with friends in both Dhaka and Kolkata, it is revealing how different are their mental imprint from decades back and my impressions based on my first visit as well as my expectations (as also a Senior Citizen) of Darjeeling. Centuries back, Francis Bacon declared 'Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education'; in the elder, a part of experience' in Of Travel (1597).

The Zero Point of the town has to be the Chowrasta with Nehru Road constituting the main road taking off from it. It is generally still referred to as The Mall where one strolls to see and be seen. The Oxford Book Store founded in 1890 is one of the shops in a row of Tudor-façade buildings. Selling Tibetan trinkets, shawls, silver bric-brac and woolies is the Habeeb Mullick & Sons store that also dates to 1890. A bibliophile's dream, the vast space stocks a variety of titles. A glance at some of the book spines reveals the following: The Darjeeling Tea Book by Gillian Wright, For all the tea in China by Sarah Rose, Darjeeling Tea: The Golden Brew by G.& S. Banerjee. Coffee table visual gems include: Kanchenjunga Guardian of the Eastern Himalaya: Five Treasures of the Eternal Snow by Tim Hauf and Himalaya: Where Gods and Man Meet by J. Poncar. Innumerable are books on Tibet, the Lord Buddha and the Dalai Lama.

Further down is Das Studios, a landmark camera stockiest. Of Nepali origin, I spoke at length with Mrs. Das. The spacious shop's provenance goes back to 1927. Dramatic images of Everest, Kanchenjunga and the Himalayan wall make for captivating visuals. So too do photographs of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. Tenzing 'Tiger of the Snow' was a resident of Darjeeling. He was the Director of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute for many years. Founded in 1954, it remains an obligatory visit

with well displayed and documentation of the paraphernalia required for the herculean endeavour. Tenzing died in 1986 and was cremated on the premises. The Institute remains one of the leading centres of mountaineering in the region.

Everyone from our 'older generation' recalls Keventers for breakfast and coffee on the rooftop for unparalleled views of the mountain lineup. Satjayit Ray shot some of his scenes for his film 'Kanchenjunga' (1962) from this venue. The Bollywood blockbuster 'Barfi' (2012) also featured Keventers. Signed photographs by the film directors grace the wooden stairway. Today, the supposed panorama is lodged or hidden between 'Opium', 'Chanakya' and AD Ark - a boat constructed on the rooftop that offers 'Foodings and Lodgings.' One of the waiters has been at Keventers for over half a century and the other a mere 30 years. We paid a visit to the rooftop of Keventers for coffee but were alarmed at the panorama of construction-covered mountain sides. Where are the forested slopes of the hill station? To mind came the evocative line penned by Rabindranath Tagore: 'Trees are the earth's endless effort to speak to the listening heaven' (Fireflies). We, however, were in view of the Darjeeling Club, popularly known as the Planter Club. The land was donated by the Maharajah of Cooch Behar. Legend has it that only the royal rickshaw pulled and pushed by his liveried porters was permitted to park in the main porte-cochere of the Club. A coveted location as it straddles a hill; it once upon a time had an uninterrupted view of the Himalayan snowy peaks. Another landmark is the Glenarys Bakery. Here too disappointment prevailed. The Hot Chocolate was not hot and the Lemon Tart had no lemon and the tart was tasteless.

Mouth-watering momos were savoured in a hole-in-the-wall outlet. Selected by our taxi-driver, we crossed pools of slush and stagnant water and piles of construction debris in order to climb a rickety staircase to an upper floor where one could barely stand. This was a makeshift mezzanine landing on which we were seated at a formica-covered table and served succulent dumplings of vegetable and chicken. A mean mixed noodle dish was also satisfactorily consumed. Yet it was at a halt in Kurseong that we devoured the best momos. A popular stopover for the Bagdogra-Darjeeling vehicular traffic, the wooden building sits perched on a precarious slope.

A visit to Tiger Hill, the most recommended spot to view Kanchenjunga revealed a mist-covered scenario and of course no tigers. Another spot in Darjeeling is known for sighting the



Himalaya – 'the architects of Time.' We were standing over The Highlands Inn' a quaint cottage with hanging gables and a rooftop ablaze with blooming geraniums and pansies. Adding further colour were multi-coloured prayer flags fluttering across poles and trees. Not a clear day, neither us nor Inn occupants had any view of the 'abode of snow.' We were close to 'The Matterhorn', currently the Raj Bhavan and earlier the summer residence of the British Lieutenant Governor. It was built in 1936 on land owned by the Maharajah of Cooch Behar.

In retrospect, the best view of the 250km. stretch of the Himalayan massifs with Kanchenjunga at 8598m. was seen from the window of the aircraft as we approached Bagdogra airport. A swirl of wispy white clouds in an azure blue backdrop caught my vision. Some minutes later, the mirage of white concentration revealed itself. There lay before my straining eyes, a magnificent vista of snow-capped jagged peaks of which one in particular soared above the others. I was in sight of Mount Kanchenjunga - the world's third-highest mountain and the highest in India. The name is derived from the Tibetan words for 'big five-peaked snow fortress' or 'big five-peaked treasury of the snow.'

Until the early eighteenth century,

the area between the present borders of Sikkim and the plains of Bengal, including Darjeeling and Kalimpong belonged to the Rajahs of Sikkim. In 1706, they lost Kalimpong to the Bhutanese and the rest of the area in 1780 to Nepalese Gurkhas. The presence of Gurkhas led to conflict with the British East India Company. A series of disputes with the Gurkhas led to their defeat and the British then restored the Rajahs of Sikkim. One such dispute in 1828 led to the dispatch of two British officers to Darjeeling. They foresaw the site as an ideal hill station – a retreat from the heat, humidity and discomfiting dust of the Bengal delta. It was densely forested and largely uninhabited. By 1840, there was a salubrious sanatorium, a cemetery, hotels, roads and houses. En route to Tibet, the Hungarian Sanskrit and Tibetan scholar Alexander de Coros based at the Asiatic Society, Calcutta died in Darjeeling in 1842 and lies buried in the cemetery. In a measure of remembrance, on Coros' death anniversary, the Hungarian government to this day honours his memory with a wreath of garlands on his grave. By 1857, there was a population of 10,000. Darjeeling became the summer seat of the Bengal government based in Calcutta. Darjeeling has never looked back.

According to The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vo. 11, 'It was only after the acquisition of Darjeeling by the British government in 1835 that the official and non-official European families in Bengal could have a hill-station cum sanatorium.' In The British in Bengal: A Study of the British Society and Life in the Late Eighteenth Century by Suresh Chandra Ghosh, "For the convalescent who survived the doctor's care – almost none survived the surgeon's – there were as yet no hill-stations, no modern sanatoria. A trip to Chittagong, a resort to Madras, a journey by river were all that the patient could look to as aids to his recovery...It was on such a voyage to Madras in search of health that Mackrabie died...As a result Bengal, a land of exile also often became a grave..." The father of the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray lost all of his five brothers while they were in service in Bengal. The novelist was born in Calcutta.

(The second and final segment of this article will appear next week)

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