

Non-Fiction

# Secularism in search of truth

WAHEED NABI

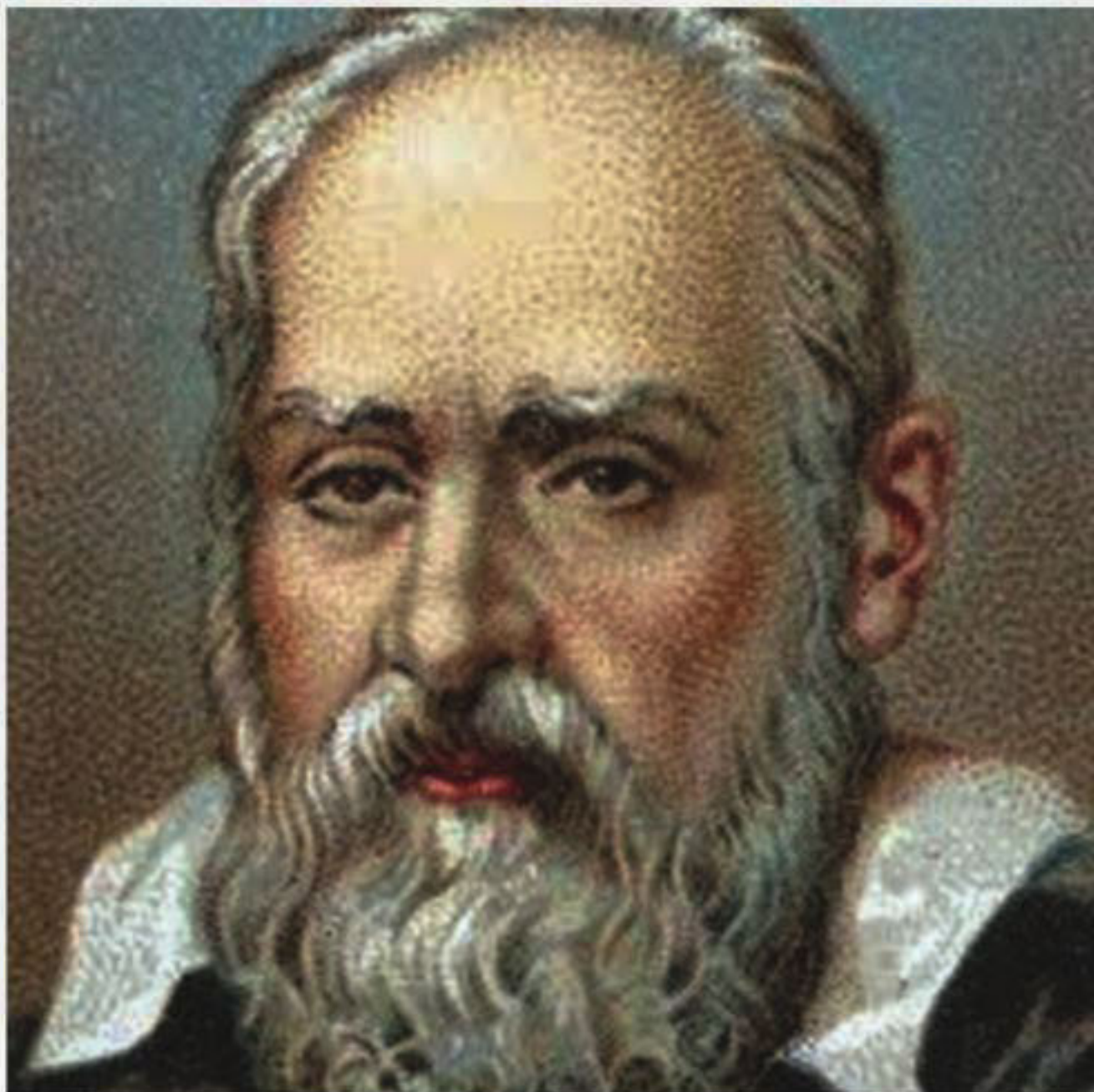
In the eleventh century, the conservative Arab philosopher Ibn Ghazali wrote a book called "Incoherence of the Philosophers". In this book he bitterly criticized the progressive minded Muslim philosophers. In reply, a Spanish Muslim philosopher, Ibn Rushd, wrote a book called "Incoherence of the incoherence". The eminent historians thought that he clearly expressed secular ideas in this book. The debate between Ibn Ghazali and Ibn Rushd was about the study of philosophy. But secular thoughts were quite apparent in Ibn Rushd's book. Though in the ideas of ancient philosophers like Protagoras and Marcus Aurelius, secular thoughts were there, Ibn Rushd was the first philosopher who clearly gave expression to secularism. Ibn Sinha of Iran, a world renowned physician, was also a wise philosopher and believed in secularism. Ibn Rushd was a follower of Ibn Sinha. It seems that Muslim philosophers were the pioneers of secular ideas. But, unfortunately, because of the Crusades Muslims went backward in their intellectual activities.

It has been seen in history that when a particular idea gets stagnant with time then it is replaced by new ideas. The leading figures of the old thoughts do not realise their own shortcomings and try to stick to their outdated ideas. In situations like this the leaders of the old schools get aggressive against progressive thinkers. We can find many examples of these in history. Following the ideas of Copernicus and through his own observation Galileo found that the earth moves round the Sun. He did not have any intention of fighting against the church authorities. He only wanted to present the proof of his findings. But the religious authorities were not interested in new scientific findings.

According to them, whatever was written in the Bible was the absolute truth. They put Galileo in prison, where he died. Michael Servetus, a Spanish scientist who described the blood circulation system in human beings, was burnt to death by the church authorities. Giordano Bruno talked about the eternity of the universe. He said that the Sun was among many stars. Bruno was also burnt to death by

the religious establishment. Charles Darwin was given a hard time by priests for revealing a scientific truth. We now see that the truth arrived at by secular scientists is universally accepted and conservative superstitious doctrines have been flung into the dustbin of history. But in spite of that the forces of darkness show their muscle power every now and then and obstruct the progress of history.

The term "secularism" was first coined by an English philosopher called George Jacob Holyoake. He was a follower of a school of philosophy called "agnosticism". This school of philosophy was established by Thomas Henry

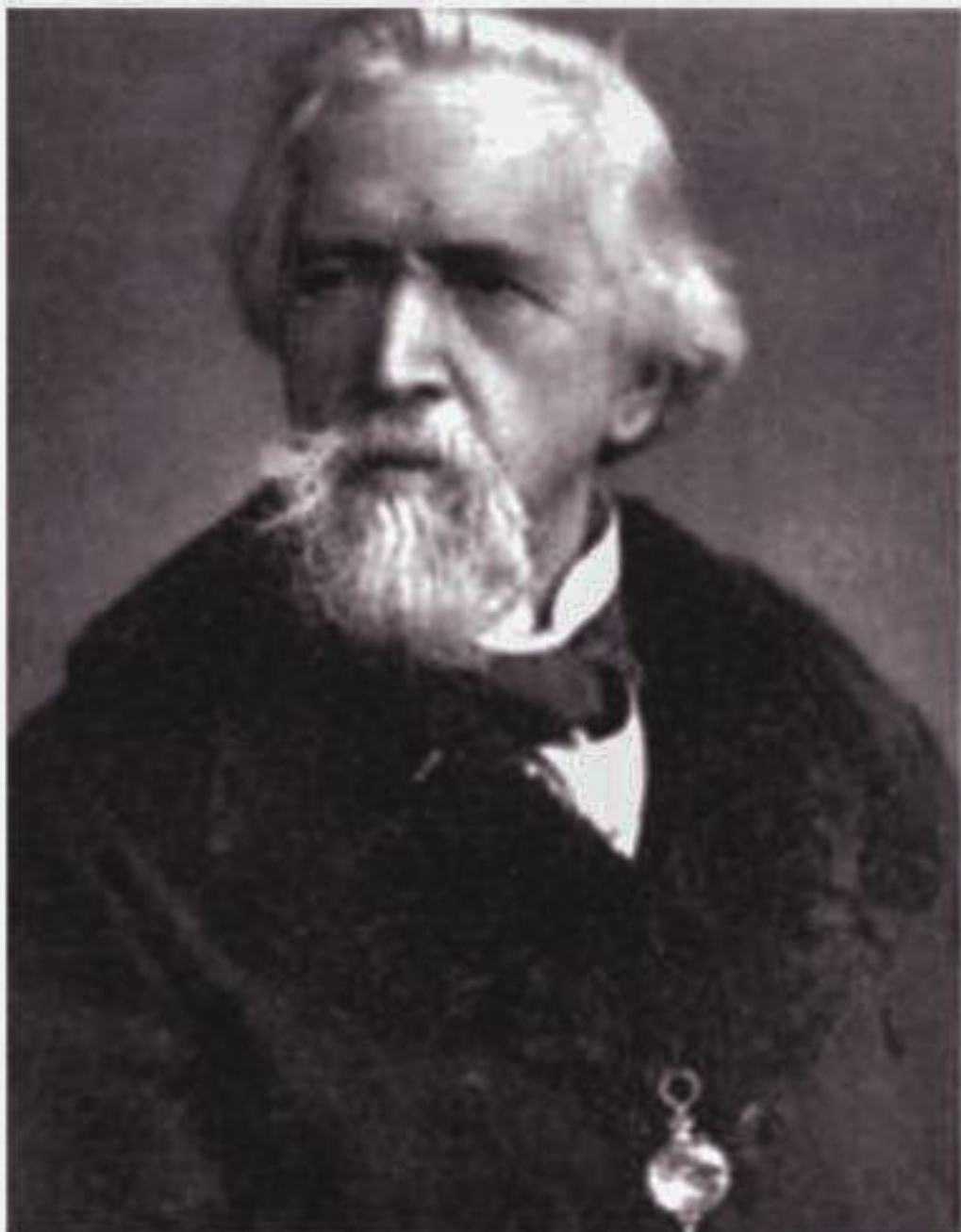


Galileo

Huxley. He said that agnosticism is not a belief system but a process by which one can test whether an idea is true or false. Holyoake said that secularism was not against Christianity. Secularism takes the cause of truth forward. He said that secularism was not the only way to establish the truth but definitely secularism helps in knowing the truth. In his opinion, our life is the foundation of secularism. He believed that human welfare was deeply related to this ideology. We can test the validity of this ideology with the experience of our life.

We believe that there is a need to discuss secularism in our country. Even the people who

introduced secularism in our constitution did not explain secularism to our people. The political parties whose ideology is secularism also did not explain the ideology to the people. Because of these reasons conservative forces tell people that secularism is nothing but atheism. The fact is, with the progress of time circumstances change. To adjust to these changing circumstances is a necessity. If we try to stick to the circumstances of the long ago past, then our quality of life will remain poor. This is a reality. Secularism will help us get adjusted to our life's situations. Here is an example. Women's whole life used to be spent in giving birth to babies



George Jacob Holyoake

and to bring them up. They could not do anything else. Now because of modern scientific birth control methods women are contributing to the welfare of society. If we go back from here then tremendous harm will be done to our society.

Secular thoughts were disseminated widely during the Renaissance. The Renaissance started in Florence in Italy in the 14th century. The pioneer of the renaissance was Francesco Petrach. The Renaissance then spread all over Europe. It brought a new awakening in Europe. It exerted its influence on art, literature, science and politics. Roman Catholics had brought

stagnation in the lives of Europeans. The Renaissance brought about a new revolution. The Renaissance encouraged free thinking. It helped people acquire knowledge in all spheres of life.

Now let us look at the history of our own country. Perhaps William Hunter's book The Indian Mussalmans will help us. During British rule the Muslims of India felt as if they had lost. Even though during the period of Muslim rule they were nowhere near the centre of power, they felt as if they had some kind of relationship with the rulers. Because of these reasons there was some kind of distance between the Indian Muslims and the British rulers (according to Hunter, the Indian Muslims did not learn the Persian language during Muslim rules). The Hindus learned the English language and got themselves educated. The Muslims stayed backwards. When the English wanted to spend money to promote Hindu religious education, Raja Rammohan Roy opposed it. He demanded education on scientific and other modern subjects. The Hindus benefited from his foresight. The backwardness of the Muslims was the reason behind the demand made by Pakistan. The religious basis of Pakistan was soon proved futile. The book Pakistan: between mosque and military" by Husain Haqqani will help us to understand this.

The disillusioned Bengalis demanded self-autonomy and when it was suppressed they fought for independence and got it at a very high price. The four pillars of this new state were "nationalism", "democracy", "socialism" and "secularism". The backward thinking people could not accept it. Under the leadership of two army generals they turned the wheels of history backward. As there was ignorance in our people about the four pillars of our constitution, the reactionary forces did not get any resistance in changing the constitution. Due to various reasons it is now difficult to come out of this unwanted situation. The only way out of this situation is wide discussion about secularism. Mass awareness about secularism is the only way out of the impossible situation we are in.

WAHEED NABI IS A FELLOW OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PSYCHIATRISTS IN BRITAIN.

Poetry

# Cats

SHIHAB SARKAR

A pet cat ought to be buried again and again.  
Every time you fill its grave with earth, sand, gravel it scratches up through the layers to wriggle itself out in the open.  
Then at night you find your cat pussyfooting in the bedroom or sitting stoned, eyes wide open, on your high wardrobe.

Cats beckon peace and solitude  
When they're alive,  
Many see in them bad omens,  
Many never know the feline magic.  
Everything told,  
dead cats are a nightmare,  
Tell me why ---  
A strong urge prompts you and me  
to bury them with so much love.  
But we cannot.

Dead cats never like to remain holed up in graves;  
They know they aren't alive;  
Still they want to move around, despite the fact that they're dead  
and you are scared of them,  
you just can't throw your pet cat away into the wild bush.  
Cats are so cuddly!

I'm one of those doomed,  
who wander for the rest of their life  
with dead cats slung over the shoulder.

SHIHAB SARKAR IS A LEADING POET AND EMINENT JOURNALIST.

Essay

# Our writers, our moral parameters

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Taslima Nasrin thinks the Indian government gets nervous when it comes to thinking of providing shelter to the American whistleblower Edward Snowden. For that matter, she thinks that nearly every government or country around the world is frightened of the United States. Why else would Snowden remain trapped at Russian airport, unable to walk free of it and into a country of his choice? She has a point.

Not very long ago, some irate Muslim lawmakers attacked Taslima Nasrin in Hyderabad. Earlier, somewhere in India, a Muslim bigot decreed that Taslima Nasrin be beheaded. The one who can accomplish the deed, or misdeed, would be rewarded with nothing less than a tidy sum of five hundred thousand rupees. When you sit back and reflect on the edict, disturbing as it is, you cannot but wonder at the temerity with which the so-called defenders of the faith have regularly taken it upon themselves to define the course of life for people who happen to think of temporal existence in terms of the literary and the philosophical. It is quite another point whether or not you agree with a writer. But it becomes a positive threat to decency and human dignity when an individual thinks nothing is remiss when he lets the world know that a writer who has aroused his ire must be dispatched with swiftness to the grave. Such a threat was held out back in 1989 to Salman Rushdie when Ayatollah Khomeini, convinced he was the new guardian of Islamic religious thought, ordered a bounty on the writer's head. It was a bad move. It went against the principle of liberal thinking. It made Muslims everywhere shudder in unease.

History is of course replete with instances of individuals and groups and governments persuading themselves that they ought to be arbiters of the moral parameters which underpin, or should underpin, life. There is the story of Leni Riefenstahl, the German film-maker and admirer of Hitler (until the Third Reich collapsed in a heap), for whom life after 1945 was essentially a tale of vilification. There has been nothing to suggest that she collaborated with the Fuhrer in the latter's nefarious attempts to reshape German society according to Aryan specifications. Not a shred of evidence has been found to implicate Riefenstahl in any of the crimes the Nazis committed in their twelve-year dominance of their country. But the film-maker continued to be reviled in her lifetime. In our times, the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, whose Nobel certainly ought to have come later, is a man whose running battles with the state convince

us that the historical image of the writer being at the receiving end of persecution is a reality that has acquired permanence of a definite kind. Naguib Mahfouz was never in the good books of the regime, any regime, in his native Egypt. And if you remember the trauma that Boris Pasternak went through once the Nobel for literature came to him in 1960, you will have cause to comprehend anew the many shades of darkness courageous writers live under from day to day.

It is these shades of darkness Taslima Nasrin has been living through for the past thirteen years. There has been no official decree formalizing her exile abroad; and yet no government in Bangladesh since 1994 has felt any compulsion of bringing her back home. There are the bigots who man the ramparts, here in Bangladesh, intent on ensuring that Nasrin does not make her way



back to her country. In the mid-1990s, with the Awami League holding political authority in Bangladesh, the natural expectation arose that conditions would be facilitated for the writer to end her exile abroad and come home. The expectation turned out to have been misplaced, for the ruling classes were afraid of the consequences should Nasrin return to Bangladesh. The BNP-wallahs, of course, were never expected to warm to Nasrin. And they never did. Today it is our collective reputation as a nation proud of its democratic sensibilities that stands threatened through the hypocrisy defining our attitude to Taslima Nasrin. By every measure, Nasrin is a good writer. In terms of social commitment, she remains one of the foremost defenders of courage as a weapon in the war against obscurantism. Yes, to be sure, there are times when something of the worryingly judgemental comes into her analyses

of conditions around her. But judgement ought never to be challenged through a brazen display of ignorance. You do not finish off the idea that is Federico Garcia Lorca by pumping bullets into his head. You may find Ayaan Hirsi Ali's views on the faith she has deserted repugnant to the core, but when you decide that she should die for her heresy, it is your attitude which threatens to become a good deal more reprehensible than hers.

Taslima Nasrin's thoughts have never been repugnant. Writers, in the true spirit of a formulation and dissemination of ideas, are careful to state the truth. Any writer who believes that treading a fine line between truth and the lack of it is what the calling of writing should be is making a dreadful mistake. You are not a writer if you cannot or will not write in all the boldness your heart can call forth. That is where the difference between politicians and writers lies. A politician, with his sights on gaining power over the state, will hedge his arguments, will compromise to reach the top of the mountain. A writer has no such compulsions, for it is not the peaks he aspires to. He is content with the open valley before him, for in that valley he spots beauty he sings praises of and notes cacti he thinks ought to be out of the way. There is Ahmad Faraz in Pakistan. Courage in the face of adversity has been his forte. In Bangladesh, Ahmad Sharif and Shaukat Osman, all these years after their passing, remain emblematic of the principles that once underlined, and continue to denote, writing. Araf Ali Matubbor was an iconoclast all his life. In death, he remains an inspiration from whom men and women given to thoughts of life and nothingness draw a certain strength of will.

The bizarre spectacle of the severed head of Taslima Nasrin on a platter is an image that should bring men and women of conscience everywhere together. The man who issued that threat is a grave danger to decency, to civilised life everywhere and ought to be dealt with as such. For us, here in Bangladesh, it is time to ask that the state move to reinstate the rights of a woman who has been wronged for the past thirteen years, through opening the door for her re-entry into a country she was born in and to which her devotion has been as well pronounced as ours.

And much of the shame our impotence puts us to can be scratched away when, and only when, those who dominate Bangladesh's literary ambience in these times come together in a defence of Taslima Nasrin's unquestioned right to be back where she belongs. And she belongs here, whether or not you like it.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR

## LETTER FROM BOSTON

# Memorial Day, 2013

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

Omar Khayyam, the 11th century Persian poet, is well-known for his four-line poems or quatrains known as *Ruba'i*, and his *Rubaiyat* have been dear to us since my high school days. Only the other day, my friend Mushtaque, while reflecting on the value of money and the importance of non-monetary objects in life, quoted the following to emphasize his point:

*Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,  
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse — and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness —  
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.*

(Omar Khayyam translated by FitzGerald, 1859)

Of course the idyllic picture painted by Khayyam may or may not be realized in this world, but we attempt mightily to recreate his vision of it every now and then. We are each, or least some of us, also devising our own paradise on this planet. However, philosophers have from time immemorial wondered whether one could truly build a replica of the paradise (or invent one) in this world. One of our own poets, Fazlul Karim, articulated the same sentiment in the following lines:

"Kothaye Shorgo, Kothaye Norok, Ke Boley  
Ta Bohudur/ Manusher Majhey Shorgo Norok,  
Manushetey Shurashur".

My readers might at this point be trying to guess where I am heading with these musings on pleasure and paradise. Well, on some days I find myself sympathizing with poets like Omar Khayyam and Fazlul Karim and feel that paradise, or a paler shade of it, can be found on this side of the Rubicon. One of these occasions came to us on the last Memorial Day. First, a little bit of introduction to this national holiday celebrated in the USA for the benefit for my readers.

Every year, this country observes Memorial Day on the last Monday of May. On this day, the nation pays homage to the fallen heroes, and remembers the sacrifices made by the members of the armed forces in defending the country particularly during the two World Wars. As a Bangladeshi transplant, we've also gotten into observing the various national days of our adopted homeland, including Memorial Day. Since it is a federal holiday, banks and offices are closed, and so are liquor stores. It is one of the three days in the year when sale of alcoholic beverages is prohibited in the state of Massachusetts where I live. However, that does not prevent one from celebrating the holiday, and to welcome the unofficial onset of summer.

Thus, Memorial Day serves a dual purpose, a day also for visiting the memorials and veteran's cemeteries strewn around the country. The wars this country fought in the last two hundred years are numerous, some good and some not so good. But the heart-felt sentiment of gratitude we all feel for those who made the ultimate sacrifice for the country is universal, and is almost as passionate as the devotion to the national flag. Parades, waving the flag, and visits to the national monuments (mostly in Washington, DC and in all states) are the order of the day. Then there are also the cookouts and picnics. Open-air bar-b-cue (called "cookouts")

in every backyard is a *de rigueur*, and the smell of hamburgers, hotdogs, and chickens roasting on the grills adds to the flavour of the day in most neighborhoods. Also this day heralds the beginning of the lawn mowing season and the constant noise of the engines, weeders, and hedge trimmers gives away a cacophony of medley sounds that can truly be called the concert of summer.

For the Bangladeshi community, the biggest challenge often becomes one of finding the right balance between their urge to celebrate this national day and the instinct to fuse it with the Bengali trait of adaptation and dedication to our roots. This year we celebrated Memorial Day with our friend and neighbor who invited us for a mid-day cookout. However, Mukta, our host, also hinted beforehand that should the guests be so inclined, we could have an impromptu concert of our own after the feasts are over. And we were not disappointed. Mukta arranged a "fusion menu" and in the first round served the guests *jhaj muri*, *chatpatti*, and other *deshi hors d'ouvres*. Before we had time to finish these mouth-watering *nashtas*, the gas grill outside the house was already sizzling with corn on the cob (*bhutta*), barbecued chicken, and fried vegetables. The aroma stoked our appetite again, and the volunteers who were tending the grill made sure that the food was done with the care and delicacy of professionals, and served them right out of the stove top. The most amazing scene was the choreography of cooking, serving, and scooping up the food from the tray. As soon as each trayful of food was passed around, it was just snatched up before one could blink. As one partygoer joked, the trays are going full inside, but coming back empty in a split second. Where are they going? Well, where else? Into our hungry mouths and stomachs!

After a while, as we were diving into our second and thirds servings of drumsticks, chicken thighs, and breasts, we heard the announcement from the ladies in charge that the third round was ready to be served in the dining room of the house. When we went inside to the dining table, we could not believe the variety and arrangement of the most incredible array of *deshi* delicacies: *aloo bharta*, *begooner dolna*, tomato *chutney*, *shutki*, *loite*, *deem bhuna*, *kathal bichi bharta*, *daal*, etc. etc. Need I dwell on the mood and the camaraderie we felt as we fought and vanquished the gastronomic beasts inside the belly?

As we sat down to recover from the battle of gorging from the last round, the sound of harmonium with our friend Rumi at the helm, and all of us lending our voice for the chorus, took us from worldly pleasures to the realm of ecstasy. And, just as Khayyam rejoiced with the flask of wine, we did the same with coffee poured from the Dunkin Donuts "Box of Joe" served with the *payesh*, *cheesecake* and other desserts. It was one of my favourite songs that finally tipped the scale and took me into the land of paradise:

*"Amar praner porey choley gelo key"*  
Who wafted by my heart

Like soothing breeze of spring  
She touched me, brought me to my knees  
Made flowers bloom in tens of thousands...

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI LIVES AND WORKS IN BOSTON