

TAGORE

The Chittagong Connection

UDAY SANKAR DAS

Long before his only visit to Chittagong in mid-June 1907, Rabindranath Tagore had had contacts with the literary figures and members of civil society in the city. As a matter of fact, when Tagore was in his teens - he was only 16 at the time - he met the famous poet of Chittagong, Nabin Chandra Das, during the Hindu Mela in 1877.

After reading Nabin Chandra Das' Bangla translation of part one of Kalidas' Raghubangsha, Tagore in a letter to Das in June 1892, sent this compliment:

I have had great pleasure reading your translation of Raghubangsha. Such lively and beautiful translation of Sanskrit poetry is hard to come by. In majority cases, the language of the translation of such poems becomes clumsy and unintelligible. The substance and beauty of the original book has been retained in its entirety as much as possible in your translation.

Tagore was so pleased after reading the second part of Raghubangsha that he wrote a lengthy review of this work in Sadhana in 1895.

Shashanka Mohon Sen was another prominent literary figure of Chittagong. After reading Sen's Sindhu Sangeet, Tagore's brief comment was, "In this book, one can see a natural compassion and poetic talent".

When Tagore visited Chittagong in 1907, he did not miss the opportunity of meeting the eminent writers and members of civil society. After politely declining an invitation to dinner by the ICS judge of the city and sending his nephew Surendranath to the judge's residence, he had a lengthy meeting on the evening of 17 June 1907.

A great scholar of Chittagong, Professor Jogesh Chandra Shingha, while recalling the events of Tagore's visit to Chittagong wrote in a letter to researcher Pratap Mukherjee that Professor Rajani Kanta Sen, a teacher of Chittagong College, who was also a noted litterateur, had invited Tagore and all the leading literary personalities from all communities of Chittagong to his house on the first day of the poet's visit. The main agenda was a discussion about the formation of the Chattagram Shahityo Parishad (Chittagong Literary Society).

The meeting was held at Professor Sen's house 'Parade', and among the poets, authors, litterateurs and eminent citizens of Chittagong present, were Abdul Karim Shahityo Bisharad, Nabin Chandra Sen, Purna Chandra Chowdhury, Moulana Moniruzzaman Islamabadi, Jatra Mohon Sen, Ram Chandra Barua, Harish Chandra Datta, Abdur Rahman Dobhash, Mahim Chandra Guha, Kazem Ali and Braja Kumar Sen (grandfather of Professor Anupam Sen, a reputed social scientist and the present vice chancellor of Premier University).

Tagore was very pleased that this meeting was held in a very peaceful and congenial atmosphere, because the formation of a literary society was the main reason of his visit to Chittagong.

Tagore was also fascinated by and interested in many events happening in Chittagong. These included the various activities initiated by Nalini Kanta Sen, and also the initiatives that he had heard and read of in Jamini Kanta Sen's books. Tagore was also very keen to know how the people of Chittagong could form their own Bengal Navigation Company and also run two steamers by overpowering the mighty British company, Messrs M David Company.

Tagore had formed, only a couple of years before his visit to Chittagong, an insurance company with some of his relatives and friends by the name of The Hindustan Co-operative Insurance Society, for the benefit of the poor people of the community. An abbreviated but much more multi-faceted form of this insurance company, called Marriage Provident Fund, was formed in Chittagong and Tagore showed keen interest in how it worked in practice.

After his brief sojourn in Chittagong in mid-June 1907, Tagore expressed his satisfaction at the turn of events both there and in Barisal, and mentioned in his letters that 'in both the places I had encouraged the appropriate people to establish branches of Literary Society'.

However, it took just over four years to form the branch in Chittagong. To be precise, the society in Chittagong was formed on 15 August 1911 with poet Nabin Chandra Das as its founder president and Bipin Chandra Guha as the secretary. The 221-member committee comprised ten Muslims, including Kazem Ali and Abdul Karim, and also a number of Christians and Buddhists.

An illustrious son of Chittagong and a renowned litterateur, Professor Abul Fazal was only four years old when Tagore visited Chittagong in 1907. But in his autobiography Rekhnachitro, Abul Fazal has written that when Tagore visited Dhaka University in 1926, he was a student volunteer, and

heard with rapt attention the poet's speech at Curzon Hall. Abul Fazal also admitted to sneaking into a private gathering in Dhaka, where Tagore was a guest, just to have a closer glimpse of the poet he adored.

By the time he was in his thirties, Abul Fazal had gained name and fame in the Bangla literary arena and a number of his books had already been published. In his writings, Abul Fazal endeavoured to depict the everyday life of the then Muslim society in East Bengal, including its usage of Arabic and Parsi words.

Abul Fazal wanted to have Tagore's opinion on the usage of such words in Bangla literature.

On 31 August 1940, Fazal wrote a letter from Chittagong to the Nobel laureate on the subject, enclosing three of his already published books - 'Chouchir', 'Maatir Prithibi' and 'Bichitra Kawtha'.

Abul Fazal wrote in his letter, "An effort has been made to portray some pictures of the society and the family lives of the Muslims living in the eastern side of Bengal. As a result, it has not been possible to exclude many words and expressions used in their everyday lives, which are not yet prevalent in our literature".

He added, "I believe, if one has to paint a picture of Muslim society, Bangla language has to accept many such uncustomary words".

Citing quite a few examples of such Arabic and Parsi words in the day-to-day lives of ordinary people, Abul Fazal in the last paragraph wrote, "I would be benefited if I could get some of your comments on this subject.....".

Tagore sent a reply post-haste. Writing on a letterhead of Vishwa Bharati, Santiniketan, on 6 September 1940, he at the outset mentioned his failing eyesight and his doctor's advice 'to give rest to his eyes'.

"You have said correctly about the use of language. There is no effectiveness in a language if the difference in customs and the traits of psychology are not complied with", wrote Tagore.

He, however, emphasised the limit to the flexibility of any language which should not be exceeded.

Tagore also said that there were quite a good number of Arabic and Parsi words in the Bangla language, and these have rightfully established their places.

As regards the Muslim writers' contribution to Bangla literature, Tagore in that letter commented:

The powerful Muslim writers have not adequately described the Muslim way of life in Bangla literature. This inadequacy, irrespective of any community, is a failure of the entire literature..... If the words regularly used in Muslim society enter the language spontaneously, no damage would be inflicted on literature, rather it would be strengthened. There are examples of this in the history of the evolution of the Bangla language.

Despite his failing eyesight, Tagore in that short span of time could read the story 'Chouchir' and expressed the hope that writers like him would be able to fill the vacuum of sufficient knowledge of Muslim society in Bengal.

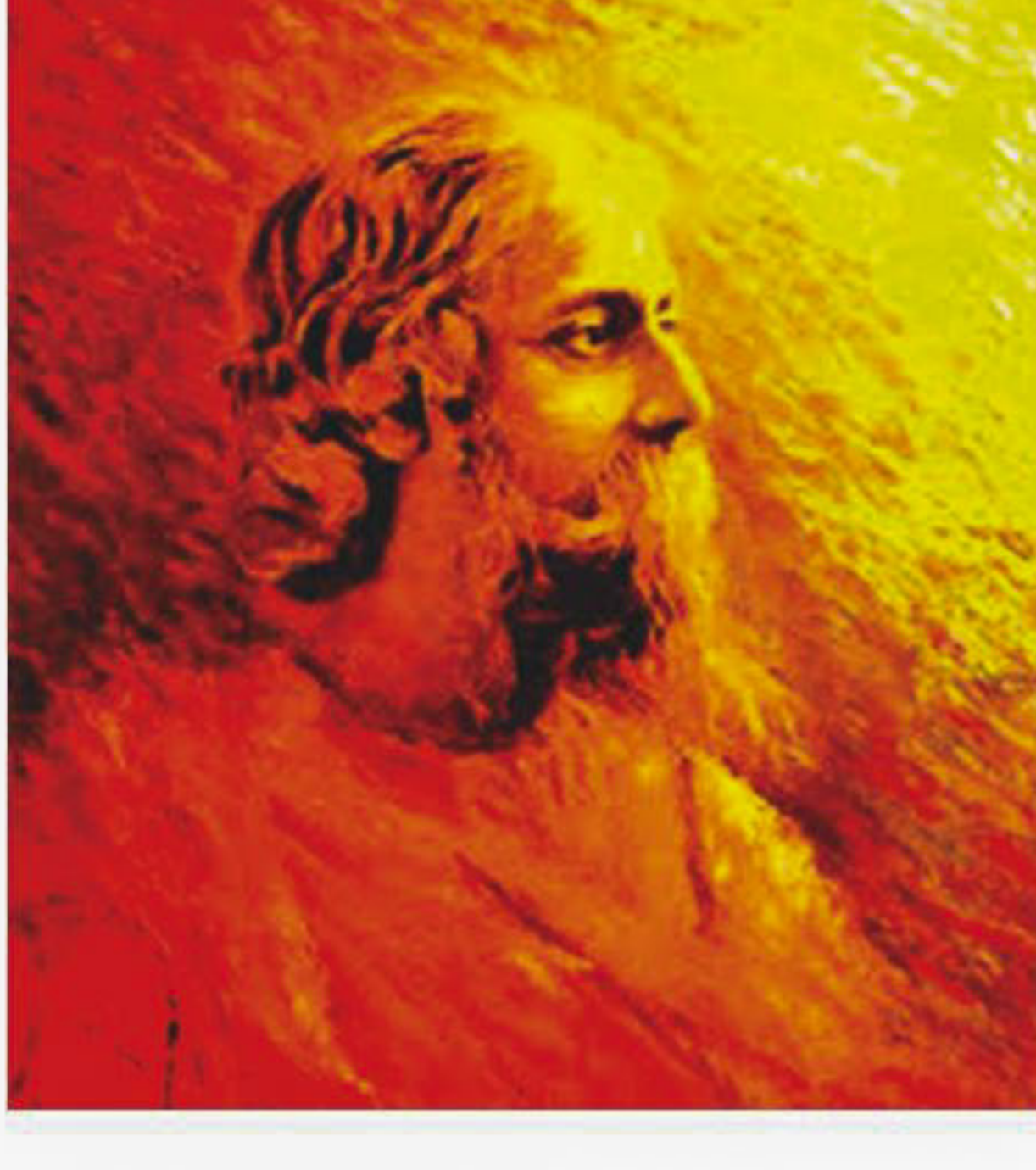
Tagore, however, warned that in this endeavour, if there was hard-heartedness due to a stubborn attitude, then there would be a detrimental fallout.

In the last sentence of his reply, complimenting Abul Fazal on his writing, Tagore wrote, "From what little I have been able to see, I have felt that there is smooth flow in your writing".

It was therefore befitting that when, despite so much opposition and resistance, when Tagore's birth centenary was celebrated at a week-long programme in the compound of St Placid's School, Chittagong, it was Abul Fazal who delivered the presidential speech, delving deep into the thoughts and philosophy of this great poet.

(This is the second and concluding part of the article, the first segment of which appeared last week).

UDAY SANKAR DAS IS A SENIOR JOURNALIST WHO HAS SERVED AT BBC BENGALI SERVICE IN LONDON. HE NOW LIVES IN CHITTAGONG.



Abul Fazal

MYSTERIES

Two floating lights, one shrouded figure

SHAHID ALAM

I cannot vouch for the veracity of this story, simply because I personally have not witnessed any of its details. However, that does not necessarily mean that the story itself is a pure fabrication of some devilishly fertile mind, since several people of mature age and firm conviction corroborated, and elaborated on, the original story first related to me by a mid-ranking Bangladesh government official. The reader can form his/her own opinion and interpretation on it. I will just stick to telling the story although, towards its end, I would not be surprised if I added my own two-bit perspective on an intriguing story.

During the course of a recent conversation, the official, in his mid-fifties, revealed that his deceased mother, a deeply religious, canny, and intrepid woman, had witnessed a number of unnatural occurrences during her lifetime, which ended around her eightieth year. They used to live in a Bogra suburb in a spacious one-storey building adjacent to one in which his brother-in-law and his wife (the official's eldest sister) lived with their children. Beyond his brother-in-law's house was a densely wooded area, housing a variety of wild animals, including poisonous snakes. Only the adventurous, curious or foolhardy would venture inside its wide expanse, and that too, usually during daylight hours.

As the official narrated, the sightings began in the nineteen sixties. Or, at least, as far back as he could remember his mother having been witness to them on multiple occasions, always around or after midnight. As already mentioned, she was a deeply religious woman, spending much of her waking hours, which were of short duration each day, in taking care of her family and praying. After finishing her nightly household chores, she would pray and recite the Holy Quran deep into the night, often venturing out to the courtyard all by herself, while darkness engulfed the parameters of her house. As also narrated, she was fearless. Add to that a serene temperament and a fiercely independent spirit, and a portrait of a strong woman emerges.

It was during one of her late night strolls on the courtyard that she first witnessed the phenomenon. Turning her head to follow a low whirring sound, she first saw a glowing disc of light floating from the west to the east. A moment later a similar disc floated towards it from the opposite direction. She watched in amazement as the two discs, glowing like fire, met in mid-air, just a few yards in front of, and above, her, and then went into what can only be described as an intimate aerial gyration, at one with each other, appearing as a single ball of flame, although nothing was set on fire, and the night continued to be pitch-black around and beyond the two-in-one spectacle. Then the dance, if that is what it was, ended, just a few moments after it had begun. The two-in-one entity separated, and, emitting the low whirring sound, floated back the way they had arrived to meet and unite. The darkness that had been interrupted came back with a vengeance.

The official paused, and then went philosophical.

"I'm a man of science, and personally did not witness anything like it. But I usually did not stay up late either. I'm agnostic about the supernatural, and would more likely view these phenomena as psychological, or natural, or as illusion, the mind playing tricks on the eyes of the beholder. The only thing is that my mother was a level-headed, healthy, and intrepid woman, whose piety overrode everything else for her. I know she was relating what she had actually witnessed, especially as she saw the same phenomenon on other occasions down the years, till, inevitably with population growth, the wooded area was gradually cleared and human settlement there in the nineteen seventies seems to have made it disappear."

He then casually remarked that his mother also saw, also on more than one occasion, and also well into the night, a figure in a white shroud manifesting itself in front of her, then walking, or more accurately, floating away and vanishing into the night air. When I remarked that I would have loved to have talked at length with his mother, he said, "My eldest sister also witnessed the two fireballs on several occasions. My mother was never affected, but every time they came in proximity to my sister, she used to become ill, at times even losing consciousness." So, there were multiple witnesses to the phenomenon! He was talking about his married eldest sister, who lived with her husband and children in the house bordering the densely wooded area. She was still in the land of the living, although getting on in years. All her children had grown up, gotten married and dispersed to Dhaka, except the youngest, who lived with his own family with her in the house that his father had built. I made up my mind to call on her as the official took me along on one of his visits to his own parental property, a part of which he had inherited and had built a smallish house on it.

His sister was remarkably forthcoming as she related very matter-of-factly those strange events of so many years ago. She was touching seventy or had just gone a couple of years over it, but she was still sturdy and spoke slowly, but firmly. A hint of a smile crossed her face as she related her own traumatic experience with the two fireballs.

"They were each about the size of a very large dinner plate. And one was deep orange, while the other was yellowish."

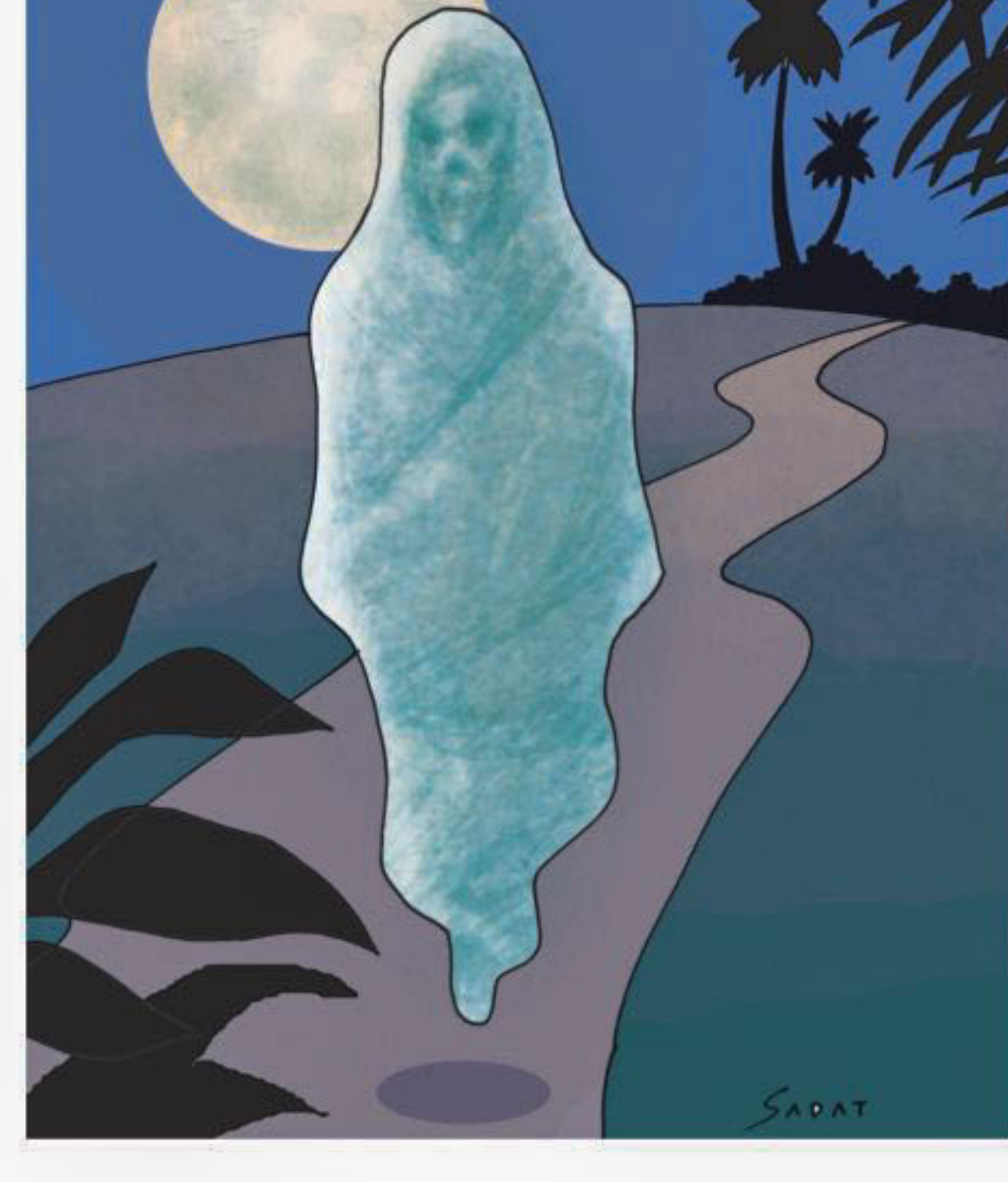
She inherited her mother's habit of staying up late, was obviously devout, as she broke off during my long visit to

say her afternoon and evening prayers, and very level-headed. Although the house has undergone extensive renovation courtesy of her sons, it still retains an impressive courtyard where she used to sit and chat with her relatives and neighbours late into the night all those years ago.

"I never witnessed them coming together from the east and the west. In fact, I saw them floating in parallel over this courtyard from the south towards the north. When we were sitting here and chatting, we would be made aware of their approach by a faint whirring sound. As they reached over our heads, invariably I would be affected. I would feel uneasy, giddy, and, sometimes, I would simply fall flat on the ground almost senseless. After this happened a few times, the other would immediately hurry me inside the house. None of the others were so affected. I saw the phenomenon several times over the years until the surrounding wood was cut down and people started settling in the clearing."

She could not say with any certitude what those things were, although she ventured that a good number of people were killed and thrown down a well in a nearby ashram in 1971. I could get her drift, but reminded myself that the phenomenon had been first witnessed in the nineteen sixties. While we were having this talk, a number of relatives and neighbours had gathered. And, then, provided another piece of information reinforcing the official's mother's other sighting. They said that several people living in, or visiting, that locality with half a dozen or so houses, including the official's nephews, would see a figure in a white shroud lightly walking or seemingly floating across a small expanse of field and then vanishing into the night air. The last such sighting had occurred only a couple of months before my visit.

I have just related a narrative started by the mid-level government official and ended with his sister's own experience with whatever the phenomenon. Add to it her own sons'



sightings of the shrouded figure and an assortment of peoples' endorsement of all the goings-on and one is left to one's imagination's mercy. Stories of the paranormal are as old as recorded inscription, having their supporters and debunkers alike. I have also heard other sketchy accounts of a similar nature within a few kilometers around the house I had visited, and I fully plan on gathering the details in the near future. A couple of narratives are truly fascinating. I am agnostic about the two phenomena that I heard about from one of the persons who actually encountered one, and heard about the other from her mother and sons. Actually, I am inclined to believe that the two glowing discs were UFOs who were visiting and observing the human race and that the energy they emitted adversely affected the health of the official's eldest sister. But others would be more inclined towards a paranormal explanation, and still others would dismiss them as figments of imagination. Nonetheless, how do I explain the figure in the white shroud that manifests and vanishes?

P.S. The night before I left for Dhaka, I was staying at the official's house, with one of his male relatives occupying the room next to mine. Our rooms had a closed corridor in front of them, and a hefty mahogany door opened and closed the way to the corridor. The entire house was walled in on all four sides. At around 1:30 a.m., I was woken up by an insistent loud banging on the outer mahogany door. I went out of my room and shouted "Who's there?" several times. My neighbour was also woken up at around the same time and was yelling the same words. Hearing no response, I opened the mahogany door and saw --- no one or nothing. We looked around the premises very carefully. No one. Maybe someone ran away, jumped over the high wall, and vanished. We were not disturbed the rest of the night.

SHAHID ALAM WRITES FICTION, IS AN ACTOR AND CURRENTLY HEADS THE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT AT INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY BANGLADESH (IUB).

HARTAL DIARIES

Marital romance and brain masala

TANVEERUL HAQUE

0530: the cellphone alarm goes off and I clamber out of bed to silence the unearthly jangle that could wake up the dead! Out of the blue I'm reminded of the alarm clock that I used in university - that had to be placed in a metal bucket to amplify the alarm to wake me in my single bed cubicle and also my neighbour in the next room who was ever so grateful, as he slept soundly through the ringing of his fancy musical alarm clock.

I slowly consume my half litre bottle of chilled water, sit in the open balcony for a few minutes, then perform the wudu and say my delayed salat followed by tilawat of Surah "Mulk" - ("The Sovereignty"). As I boot the desktop to check on e-mails and facebook, Eva - my wife of 35 years - walks in groggily saying, "How about breakfast at Star? The driver is on leave, it is hartal today and tomorrow, may be the maid won't turn up and I'll be stuck alone in the house all day!" I say that would mean my giving up the morning jog, but succumbing to her incontrovertible (as always) logic I agree, my mouth watering up to the thought of brain masala, crispy nan, golden paratha and the awesome milk tea served at Star Banani - not to mention the affectionate, chatty bearers/waiters that wait hand and foot on us with their winning smiles.

fear of picketers who may chuck stones at the car as they did once more than a decade ago to shatter the windshield of my car then. At the thought of the rickshaw ride - Eva screws up her face - she hates rickshaws - but we have no choice - either the rickshaw or no StarBanani.

Five minutes to 8 - we are both ready and step out of our apartment building, leaving the flat keys with the darwan with instructions for the bua who comes in at 0830 to sweep and wipe the floors. The rickshaw wallah gives us a welcoming broad smile and pedals us to Star Banani in no time, as he can use the main road which on non-hartal days are off limits to rickshaws.

We order our pre-breakfast first cup of milk tea asking the waiter to go easy on the sugar as the regular milk tea here is syrupy stuff - he grins knowing that's our usual. Then I ask him for brain masala, chicken giblets with dal, one crispy naan, and one special golden brown paratha - to be served after we've savoured our milk tea.

Eva and I sip our teas, I glance through the Daily Star and Eva regales me with her reminiscences of her childhood and our early days of married life, snippets of long lost memories of our two kids (their favourite dresses, their first day at school), her own classmates in Islamabad, how she has lost track of them, her few short months at Dhaka University before she married me. These morning tête-à-tête's take me deep into this beautiful woman's labyrinthine mind and even after 35 years of marriage I marvel at how difficult it is

to understand a woman, to try to know the answers to the eternal question - "What does a woman want?" I snap out of my reverie - when the waiter serves the breakfast with a few slices of lemon and a couple of green chillies - the "salad". I fold up the newspaper, grin sheepishly at Eva, without letting her understand that I was inattentive to her, lost in my own thoughts - and we both dig into our hot breakfast with gusto.

All inclusive the breakfast costs us Tk. 222 including Tk. 29 VAT - that's under 3 US dollars for two people - I remind Eva that a few weeks back in LA - we were having sumptuous breakfasts with our kids at fancy joints like BJ's and Chili's costing US dollars 12 per person!

We head back home in another rickshaw and I ask Eva if she remembered when last we two had traveled together on a rickshaw? Neither of us couldn't recollect - may be decades ago!!!

Back home - the bua has arrived - she opens the door and greets us with a big Eid Mubarak and then I realize it's only the fifth day after Eid!

I have to head for work - we are open today - though because of the hartal and the long Eid holidays - business will be lousy, I don my NY inscribed baseball cap and walk down to Gulshan Circle 2 to a waiting CNG auto rickshaw - telling the driver to take me to my office at Bijoyagar and reminding him that because of hartal the roads would be deserted and it would take him only 15 minutes to reach my

destination and hence I'd be paying him Tk. 120 only. He cocks his head at me, then gives me a mile-wide grin and says today is your day, other days I'd not go for a single taka less than 200. I tell him lackadaisically - all year round you guys overcharge us, only once in a while do we get a chance to get even with you! He smiles and retorts, "Well, for you there is some advantage to be drawn from hartal!". I sigh and say to myself, "If only you knew how badly hartal impacts on me as a businessman."

0832 - 0847, I am in office in 15 minutes - the normal ride on "normal" days in my comfortable car takes a minimum of an hour and I am again reminded, "there is some advantage to be drawn from hartal".

Sitting behind my desk - I am back to my usual grind, back in the rat race - I have 700 people on the payroll - may be 3000 mouths to feed - most of whom are yet reveling with their near and dear ones in their village homes on the long Eid holidays further extended by the 48 hours hartal. They don't have a care in the world as to wherefrom and when their next salary will be coming - they don't understand P&L accounts or balance sheets or debt servicing or have pressures from umpteen creditors.

Uneasy indeed lies the head that wears the crown!

TANVEERUL HAQUE IS A BUSINESSMAN WHO LOVES TRAVEL AND BOOKS AND IS A MEMBER OF THE READING CIRCULE. E-MAIL TANVEERHQ@YAHOO.CO.UK