

AHMED SOFA'S 14TH DEATH ANNIVERSARY

AHMED SOFA IN WEIMAR

A Bangali tribute to Goethe

SALIMULLAH KHAN

*Why have I sought my path with fervent care,
If not in hope to bring my brothers there?*
—Goethe

Ahmed Sofa, as his mentor Abdur Razzaq once put it, "is an established literary figure of Bangladesh." It was written in course of a preface the good old man wrote for his protégé's account of Germany, and perhaps gave passage more to the spirit than a statement of facts. That was then in June 1991. Ten years later, in July 2001, Ahmed Sofa died a rather premature death. He was still less than established, though was certainly recognised as more than a literary figure.

Sofa's various universe includes a translation into Bangla of Goethe's *Faust: Part I*, done in 12 years though only from another translation. On publication of that volume, Ahmed Sofa was awarded a fellowship in Germany to brush up his elementary German. Although he made it there in 1986, Ahmed Sofa returned without completing it. We, nonetheless, owe his three fine lectures broadcast over the Deutsche Welle radio to this trip. In these lectures, he paid his highest tribute to the great laureate and compared him with Rabindranath Tagore.

Ahmed Sofa, unfortunately, did not write his experiences of his first journey but did eventually publish an account the next time, in 1991. In this account, written in English, of his second visit, Sofa paid tribute also to friends who he met there in 1986. Among

them were a good many Bangladeshi exiles in Germany. "Bangladeshi boys," Sofa writes, "used to cook for me, buy things and extended all kinds of help. In exchange, I offered them nothing, except a grain of pride, that they are the host of a man who has translated Goethe's *Faust*." "Very often," Sofa adds, "they would present me to their German friends and would say with a proud undertone 'Sie übersetzen Faust von Goethe,' i.e. he translated Goethe's *Faust*."

Abdur Razzaq chided Goethe's Bangali translator for not writing this account in Bangla. "I do wish he had written it in Bangla," sighed our old man. "His translation of Goethe, a remarkable piece of work of its kind," in his view, "is Goethe plus Ahmed Sofa." His works in Bangla brings about a sense of emotion in people. "Their appeal for me," Razzaq writes, "is because they are written in Bangla. They constitute a treasure trove for Bangla literature."

To return to the account itself, I will confine myself to only one episode here. It was Peter Dietzel, a newly made friend of Ahmed Sofa's, who suggested visiting Weimar. Herr Dietzel also agreed to finance it. On February 23, Ahmed Sofa, with Indira Roy, was visiting Peter and Gabriella in Feldatal, a village somewhere in former GDR. "Our train," Sofa records, "was passing through the territory of erstwhile Eastern Germany. This is the first time that I had a chance to look at the East German countryside." It was snowing rather heavily, however, it was still possible to tell one from

the other. "In my 1986 trip," he notes, "I had a fair chance to visit rural sites of Western Germany. Now I could make a comparison in my mind. Compared to West German villages, the East German ones looked poorer, uncared for and devoid of any spontaneity."

Some two to three days on, Sofa's train found its path to Weimar station. He had, it's true, a companion for the day. But young Andrea too was a stranger to the city that was once a cultural capital of Europe. It houses Goethehaus, Goethe Museum that is. "At the entrance of the city," Sofa remembers, "we came across a coffee shop which bears the name Goethe Coffee." Sofa's discoveries get real there. When they came out of the coffee house, the sky was dark, it was still snowing. "In German," Sofa notes, "they use the word *dunkel* for darkness. Somehow, I developed a liking for this word. I do not know why. The streets, the buildings, the vehicles everything seemed *dunkel* to me." But so what? "Like a ray of torch in darkness, the undying spirit of Goethe's was driving us to the streets."

Ahmed Sofa had a real hard time finding out where that Goethehaus was. "We enquired from the people, which bus should we take in order to reach the Goethe museum. Well, people were quite friendly. One very old lady, when she came to know that we came to visit Goethe museum, suddenly brightened up her cheeks, her eyes sparkled. She volunteered to accompany us." When the bus stopped, the lady gave them directions, "*Links dann rechts, dann geradeaus*" - "first left, then right, then straight," with the



Ahmed Sofa

movement of her very thin, emaciated right hand. It all went in vain.

Sofa and his young German companion became exasperated. "We walked and walked and many times changed the direction from

left to right, right to left. But no trace of Goethe museum," he writes. Ahmed Sofa waxed philosophical. "With every sunset, old glory dies, and with every sunrise new glory is born. Today you ask direction of Goethe museum, at least a section of them would tell you without shame that they do not know the place or have not heard the name" or worse. Finally, Ahmed Sofa found it. It cost him only a pack of Camel cigarettes. He had to, for courtesy's sake, offer to that bearded young man who helped trace Schiller museum in the vicinity.

Weimar is, after all, a city of museums. There are four, "probably within the radius of half a kilometer," Sofa thought. He did not count Herderhaus among these though. Weimar's glory includes its status in Germany's political history. It was once capital of that late-comer's stillborn republic. After few years of reunification, Weimar still exuded an odour of hard times. "Signs of poverty, mismanagement and uncleanness were visible everywhere. Houses were without any patch of whitewash. Streets were dirty. People in general seemed tense and were without any spontaneity. Gay spirit, which is natural to a city, is completely absent."

"I regret my fate," Ahmed Sofa wrote after reaching there. "I have only three hours or less to spend here. Had I been given three years, three months, or at least three weeks, I could probably do some justice and soak myself up."

The writer is Professor of General Education Department, ULAB.

A big challenge in border management is extreme poverty in border areas

Major General Aziz Ahmed, Chief of Border Guard Bangladesh, talks to Shamsuddoza Sajen of The Daily Star on various aspects of border management and development of the border area.

The Daily Star (TDS): Bangladesh shares long contentious borders with India and Myanmar. What are the major challenges in managing the border? Maj Gen Aziz Ahmed (AA): Bangladesh shares 4,156 km long border with India and 271 km border with Myanmar. It includes plain land, hilly areas, and marshy land. The two borders have different characteristics as well different challenges.

In the plain-land part of the border, we do not have border fence and link road along the border. India has already built border fence and pukka road in most of its border areas. It is crucial to have a road along the zero line. The government has recently given more than 1,600 motor cycles for border patrolling. But we cannot make best use of these motorcycles due to a lack of pukka road. On the Indian side, due to better border management, trespassers have to face the BSF and suffer casualty.

A big challenge in border management is extreme poverty in border areas. Now, for smuggling a cow one gets Tk. 5000-10,000. So smugglers can easily allure them to cross the border, even risking their life. It is one of the main reasons behind border killings. There are also cattle smugglers from India. In the recent past, 4-5 Indian smugglers got killed by BSF.

The zero line is an imaginary and arbitrary line. It often happens that the border cuts across families, even going through one's homestead. Crossing the zero line without any valid document is illegal crossing but they do not understand that. So we often see violence by civilians. This year, there have been five to seven cases where Bangladeshis were killed by Indian civilians. We do awareness building programmes regularly in the border area but it is not that effective.

We had 539 km unguarded border in the hilly areas. In the last one year, we have arranged patrolling in 110 km of these areas (60 km with India and 50 km with Myanmar). There we have established new border outposts (BOPs). So at present, 429 km of the border still



remains unguarded. India has better management system there with BOPs and border fencing in most of these areas.

In the case of borders in the river area, it is difficult to monitor every bend of the river. We do not have border fencing along the river, so we cannot check trespassing there.

Myanmar shares 184 km land border with Bangladesh and 67 km border in the Naf River. They have established BOPs, border fencing and roads along the land border. They have even set up border fencing all along the river bank of the Naf river.

On our side, the gap between the two BOPs is 10 km. For India and Myanmar, it is 2.5 to 5 km. Recently, the government approved some more BOPs to reduce the gap between them. It will strengthen our vigilance at the border.

TDS: The acquittal of the alleged killer of Felani has disappointed many, both in Bangladesh and globally.

How can we restrain the trigger-happy BSF from resorting to excessive use of force?

AA: We do not know the official status of the Felani trial. When these sorts of incidents happen at the lower level, the decision is not final until it gets official approval from the top level. It is a judicial matter, so it is difficult to comment on it. We expected that the trial would be fair. So far what we know about it through media reports is unfortunate.

When there is any border killing, we send a notice to BSF through an official channel. In every protest note, we demand trial of the guilty BSF members. In many cases, they take departmental action but it does not come out in the media. When we meet them they tell us about these punitive measures. In our meetings, we tell them to take judicial measures other than shooting. They give us various explanations and excuses. As the movement is illegal and happens on their side, we cannot put much pressure on them.

TDS: In recent times, we see increasing tension between border forces of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Is there any gap between the two border forces?

AA: Myanmar has problems within the country with various insurgent groups. And their army is at war with these insurgent groups.

In the last two years, only two major events occurred at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. In May 2014, one of our Nayaks was killed by the Border Guard Police (BGP) of Myanmar. We set up BOPs on the route of yaba smuggling to control that. The smugglers fired on our patrol killing one of our Nayaks. When our force went to recover the body, there was exchange of fire between BGP and BGP. It was reported in the media that 3-4 of their troops were killed in that fire exchange. Another incident took place in December 2014 when one of our men got injured. And in the recent past, Nayek Rajjak was captured by BGP and later handed over to Bangladesh.

Now communication between us has improved a lot due to the internet. We are also sitting with them frequently.

Two big challenges on the Myanmar front are infiltration of Rohingyas and yaba smuggling. We are effectively tackling Rohingya infiltration. But getting control over yaba smuggling is quite a difficult affair. We have a long coas line and it is really difficult to monitor it with the limited capacity of our Coast Guard.

TDS: In the light of the new Land Boundary Agreement, how it will help manage the border?

AA: Previously, it was really difficult to keep track of activities happening inside enclaves because that was not our area. Both countries suffered for that. And also the citizens cannot enjoy government facilities. The new border agreement will end their captive situation. And it will lessen the burdensome management of enclaves.

TDS: What should be done to develop the border areas?

AA: I think NGOs should work there as they do elsewhere in the country to empower people and reduce extreme poverty in the border area.

We took an initiative called Alokito Simanto in Thakurgaon to improve the livelihood of the border people. We acquired some khas land with the help of local administration and distributed them among some former smugglers. They are supported with facilities to raise cattle and apiculture. It is just a pilot project. NGOs can replicate it in all the border areas.

We have also talked about legalising cattle trading with India. But they have told us clearly that it is not possible due to religious reasons. They have promulgated more stringent rules for preventing cattle trade. I am afraid that during Eid-ul-Azha cattle smuggling will increase and that can lead to more casualties at the border. To prevent it, we have already increased border patrollings.

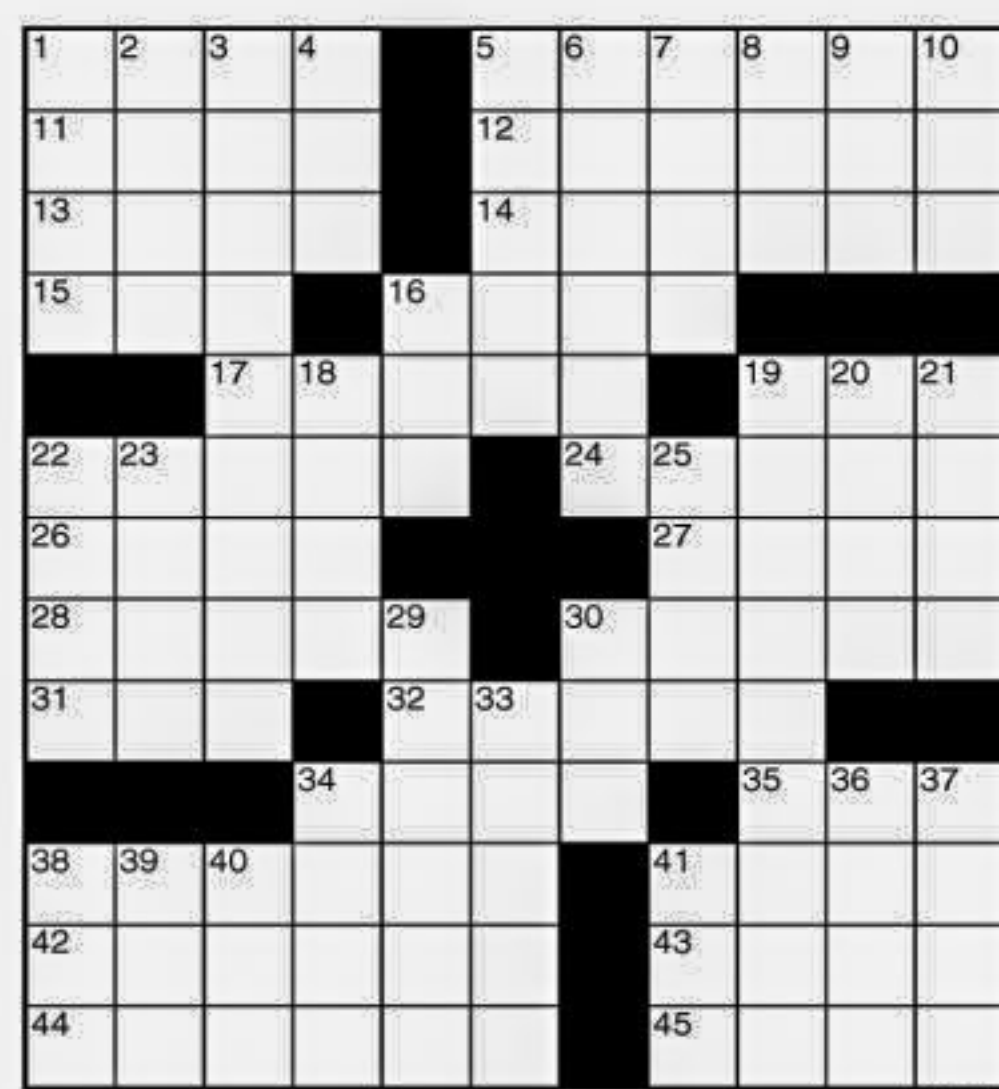
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ACROSS

- 1 Green Hornet's valet
- 5 Diamond units
- 11 Press
- 12 Reformer Bloomer
- 13 Citrus flavor
- 14 Formed into spheres
- 15 PC key
- 16 Snug
- 17 Way to go
- 19 Failure
- 22 Burner setting
- 24 Sedimentary rock
- 26 Boat's trail
- 27 "The King and I" heroine
- 28 Warning sound
- 30 Like some online videos
- 31 Chapel seat
- 32 Verdi work
- 34 Trojan War hero
- 35 Luggage ID
- 38 Brewing item
- 41 "Dear me!"
- 42 Show up
- 43 Greek cheese
- 44 Glib talk
- 45 Worry

DOWN

- 1 Highland attire
- 2 Silks song
- 3 Longtime news anchor
- 4 Start of a count
- 5 Explorer John
- 6 Wows
- 7 Depend
- 8 Everyone
- 9 Even score
- 10 Despondent
- 16 Stage prompt
- 18 Finished
- 19 Longtime news anchor
- 20 Radius partner
- 21 Start a hand
- 22 Exchange
- 23 Account
- 25 Brush target
- 29 California desert
- 30 Torment
- 33 Beeper's kin
- 34 Somewhat
- 36 Pay to play
- 37 Butter on the farm
- 38 Keg need
- 39 Pitcher's stat
- 40 Museum focus
- 41 Switch setting



Yesterday's answer

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