

# The Krishnachuras in Cambodia

FAISAL AHMED

I reached Phnom Penh on a late summer night in 2011 after twenty-some hours of flights from Washington. The airport had a mofussil feel. The immigration officer chose to speak in Khmer, a welcome with the unintended hint that I belonged. As I exited the airport, the half-moon above was bright, the air fresh after a heavy rain, and the road empty except for the construction workers and a few stray dogs.

The next morning, from my 10th floor balcony, opened up a panoramic view: the city below was cosseted by the Mekong and three other rivers; spanning across Hun Sen park, two rows of krishnachuras were in full bloom, a tango of green leaves and red flowers blowing in the wind. Fittingly, in Khmer, krishnachura is called kangauk (peacock). To my three-year-old, krishnachuras - with their green and red - brought to mind the Bangladeshi flag.

The krishnachuras transported me back to 1980s Dhaka with my father.

Over a quarter century ago, under a krishnachura, and not too far from a 15th-century Sufi shrine in Mirpur, I said my final goodbye to him. From across the pond, the breeze got cooler and heavier as the March drizzle conspired with the maghrib azaan to make the freshly shoveled ground muddy but holy. Fahim, my younger brother, did not fully fathom what was going on. I remember hugging him for a long time after the hasty burial.

My father had suffered for most of my teen years. When we are young, days are short but years long. The fear of loss meant those five years in the hospital felt like an eternity.

We all cope differently after a loss as to the question of why me. Over the years, as I looked for answers, I often felt the urge to write about him, about how I still miss him. Some say words heal by first sculpting our feelings, then by burying them. But writing is a delicate exercise in nostalgia, healing, self-pity, and, unavoidably, narcissism. The balance is never easy.

My father was a gentle, family man, with a thick set of wavy hair and a sense of humour that all of his seven children loved. His sad eyes and wide nose showed Indo-Chinese features.

If a single variable explains me, it is him, first through his presence, then his suffering, finally his departure. The irony is that his early departure lent only more permanence.



In many ways, he has been with me since he left. In the walks I take alone. In every Eid prayer. When I drink tea with *muri*. I keep a black and white picture of him on my office desktop. It shows him, at 38, with a mustache. For me, black and white pictures simplify memories. My office cleaner, Sukunti, once nervously advised, "If you are going to keep your own picture on the table, please get a different one in colour but without the mustache." My father and I look a lot alike.

A few months after he departed, I left for the US. The next two decades, my 20s and 30s, flew by in schools, in jobs. Of and on, I would replay the 1980s in my head, picture that krishnachura in the Mirpur cemetery. American writer Graham Greene once said life is lived in the first 20 years and the remainder is just reflection. He seems almost right.

Then happened Cambodia. I read up on the politics, the history, and the old IMF

reports for the job interview but knew little about the society beyond the genocide and Angkor Wat. It was only after I moved that so many memories unfurled, swirling in a time warp.

The familiarity was disorienting: the krishnachuras; the palm trees; the oxcarts; the dheki for husking rice; the new year on Pahela Baisakh; the sound of heavy rains; the alphabets - ka, kha, ga, gha - and faces blending Indo-Chinese features. Phnom Penh partly resembled a reincarnated 1980s Dhaka; rural Cambodia perhaps a muffled echo of the Buddhist Bengal. The initial surprise borne out of my own ignorance slowly matured to gratitude.

In one of the worst mass killings of the 20th century, Cambodia lost three million of its seven million people during the Pol Pot years, 1975-1979, leaving no one unscathed. In my office, Yong, the driver, lost his grandfather; Sukunti, the cleaner, her father; Chenda, the assistant, her brother; Leapho,

the manger, went to look for food for his starving family, only to find upon return that they were all killed. Their smiling faces gracefully masked souls full of crater-like losses, dwarfing mine, making me, for the first time, even thankful for my father's natural departure. For the short five years in hospital.

The chemistry of memory is complex. The hippocampus and the frontal cortex areas in our brain store memories, which can erupt, mutate, and even nest like onions in layers as we reinterpret our past and experience the new. Memories also decay with time, that's how we eventually forget something. For me, the krishnachuras halted that decay, provided a refuge for my memories, perhaps replenishing my frontal cortex.

Looking back, I wonder if the powerful resonance I felt in Cambodia had more to do with the phase of life I was about to enter. In our forties, like a half-moon, with more yesterdays than tomorrows, we are aware of

transitions: the shrinking world of my mother from dementia making space for the expanding universe of my 3-year old. Like the impossible staircase in an Escher painting, 40 is where the beginning and the end intersect, the past and the future merge.

1991-2015. Last August, I moved back to Dhaka, as a friend once said in jest, in response to my mid-life crisis. A week after I arrived, I visited my old elementary school. The library and the playground now look much smaller than I recall. Although I struggle with the ghosts of my memories, my daughter is relishing Dhaka with fresh curiosity, unburdened by any nostalgia to create her own memories.

Slowly, I am learning to not resist the obvious - Dhaka is no longer the city that I grew up in. Dhaka has moved on. Now with crowded roads, shopping malls, cell phones, 24 hour TV channels and modern ads, shrinking lakes, fewer trees, traffic jam, and fast food joints on every corner, the society sits atop the fluid vortices of change. Amid aspirations, the rise of the market, growing strains and affluence of many with their busy lives, social values and norms in flux. The collision of my out-of-focus memory with the present was inevitable.

Around the time I started feeling settled in, on March 7, a news caught my eyes: artist Khalid Mahmood faced a tragic death as a *krishnachura* fell on his rickshaw in Dhanmondi. In a surreal coincidence, a year ago, he had an art exhibit in Chicago titled *Krishnachura: Poetry of Color*.

In Cambodia, krishnachuras triggered memories of my father, of 1980s Dhaka. Now, in Dhaka, it ignites my reminiscing Bangladesh in Cambodia. After March 7, it also reminds me of Khalid Mahmood, whom I never met.

On my father's death anniversary this year, March 25, I went to Mirpur with my daughter. The krishnachura and the pond are long gone to make room for new graves. My daughter, now 7, will have no memories of the krishnachura but will inherit and perhaps curate the stories of my memories. As we were walking back from his grave to the car, she held my hand tight, asked where the pond was.

In endless cycles, we keep growing as do our memories, even, or especially, that of a krishnachura near a pond in a cemetery.

The writer is a macroeconomist. Email: faisalxahmed@gmail.com

## Can public interest litigation change culture?

KIM VELLER

SEXUAL harassment is a pervasive problem arising from gender inequality and patriarchal attitudes and norms around the world. Though progress has been made in recent years in Bangladesh, we don't have sufficient legal instruments to address issues of sexual harassment, which disproportionately impact women and girls. The Constitution outlines fundamental rights to equality and treatment in accordance with law, as well as the right to work, and to protection against degrading or humiliating treatment. Bangladesh is a signatory to several international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). As a result, every person in Bangladesh has a right to be free from sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based discrimination.

Women advocates have been leading the charge to confront this harmful and discriminatory practice by raising awareness and identifying gaps and flaws in the legal system.

Rights-based organisations working on issues of gender equality, such as the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST)

have sought guidance from the court in their quest to prevent and address sexual harassment.

In 2008, the Bangladesh Women Lawyers' Association filed a writ petition before the High Court in the context of pervasive sexual harassment being reported by women students on campuses across the country, with limited redress. The Court asked the respondents to explain why no sexual harassment guidelines had been adopted, leaving women and girls needlessly vulnerable in workplaces, schools, and other public spaces. The case followed a major press conference in 2008, during which a committee of 47 rights-based organisations presented statistics showing 333 incidents of violence against women in the first half of the year alone. The frequency of incidents of sexual harassment at educational institutions and workplaces, as well as the lack of protocols for appropriately responding to such occurrences were highlighted. The organisations involved adopted seven resolutions to effectively respond to and prevent sexual harassment at educational institutions. These resolutions are reflected in the reasoning and judgment of the court.

In Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association v the Government of Bangladesh, Writ

Petition No. 5916 of 2008, the High Court reviewed recent instances of sexual harassment in universities and workplaces, and ultimately issued directives to address the gaps in the legal framework. This guideline extend to all workplaces and educational institutions, public and private, throughout the country. It defines sexual harassment broadly, capturing any unwelcome sexually

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determined behaviour, and also prohibits several specific behaviours, including demands for sexual favours, showing pornography, taking still or video photographs for the purpose of blackmail and character assassination, among others.

In addition to outlining what is

considered sexual harassment in Bangladesh, the court also addressed the importance of the issue and outlined a number of preventative steps. Sexual harassment can be humiliating for those targeted by it, but it also represents a broader societal issue that impacts public health, school and workplace safety, and gender discrimination. In order to minimise occurrences, the court

directives urged all employers and educational institutions to prohibit sexual harassment, ensure that their environments are not hostile toward women and girls, and establish complaint committees through which instances of sexual harassment can be handled and reported to the

government of Bangladesh in the form of annual reports.

It has now been seven years since the litigation was brought by BNWLA. Though the guidelines created by the court are clear and thorough, there are major enforcement issues, and many workplaces and educational institutions are simply not taking up the directives. Salma Ali, executive director of BNWLA, notes that though sexual harassment is a punishable offence, it continues to be a major problem in the country. "Though several initiatives were taken by government organisations, NGOs, educational institution and private companies to execute the directives, there is still no substantial implementation mechanism established, and there is need for a national level monitoring and oversight committee for effective implementation of the Supreme Court directives."

Ms. Ali also told us that universities are major sites of action on this issue, and that she is happy to see young people, including young men and boys, interested in stopping sexual harassment. Reflecting on the 2009 case, she stressed the importance of public interest litigation (PIL) as a crucial advocacy tool and instrument of social change.

On June 4, 2016, several leading human rights organisations, lawyers,


researchers, and government officials are coming together for a conference on the role of public interest litigation in advancing rights and justice. The conference is being convened by BLAST, with Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) and BNWLA, and supported by the Community Legal Services Programme of DFID.

It will provide an opportunity to discuss in detail some of the landmark judgments that have provided tools to resist inhuman and degrading treatment, and ensure safer places of education and work. This will be an opportunity to hear from those directly involved, and explore the steps to be taken and work out existing challenges in the way of implementation of the PIL judgments, rules and orders, and to focus on the steps that are required by different actors, the media, citizens' groups, government officials and the judiciary to ensure transformative change in ending the culture of sexual harassment that inhibits women from working and living securely and freely.

For more information on the conference, please contact [blastevents@gmail.com](mailto:blastevents@gmail.com).

The writer is a student at Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto, and is currently based at Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST).

**QUOTABLE Quote**



**GUNTER GRASS**

*I have found that words that are loaded with pathos and create a seductive euphoria are apt to promote nonsense.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- Moved stealthily
- Spring
- Variety show
- Comedian Sykes
- Banded rock
- Writer Chekhov
- Expansive
- Dakota city
- Yale rooster
- So far
- Word of accord
- Gobbled up
- Small valley
- Plummet
- Redirected
- Lynx or lion
- Decimal base
- Butter unit
- Perfect place
- Metric mass
- Assayed
- Washbowl
- Roofing material
- Be penitent
- Pipe bends

**DOWN**

- Big ringers
- Yeared for
- Entertained lavishly
- Slippery
- Green stroke
- Course start
- Bowling site
- Contest form
- Find charming
- Window sections
- Served at a restaurant
- For each
- Christmas season
- Outmoded
- Joanne of film
- Singer Foy
- Church tower sound
- Assam export
- Some bees
- Use fourletter
- Even a little
- Complete
- Darings
- Green Hornet's valet
- Do a checkout job

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

C	L	I	M	E	M	A	P	L	E
H	A	R	E	M	A	R	R	A	Y
O	P	E	N	I	N	G	M	O	V
S	E	N	T	O	M	V	E	T	
E	L	E	K	T	R	A	E	R	E
L	E	M	W	I	N	S			
F	L	I	E	R	M	O	T	E	T
L	A	M	E	J	A	R			
A	S	P	G	O	N	E	A	P	E
T	A	R	A	A	A	D	I	B	
C	L	O	S	I	N	G	F	E	S
A	L	V	I	N	E	L	A	T	E
R	E	E	D	S	D	Y	L	A	N

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker



**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

