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PHOTO: AKIB ABDULLAH

"Courage is not the absence of fear, it's to feel the fear and face it anyway."
— Jeanette Coron, Author

SNAPSHOT

OUTLOOK

Dear Beloved Bangladesh,

A decade ago, when I was applying for a Fulbright scholarship, I asked others if I should come to you. I routinely heard, "It's a very poor country. Do you really want to go there?" Honestly, people's words seemed to conjure images of famine and hunger.

My father felt differently, and he replied, casually, "You'll be just fine. It's just like our country." On that basis, I took my leap of faith, the plunge to join you.

However, recent attacks on Dhaka brought back a rush of memories to remind me that you are anything but "like our country." At least, you were not back then. And you will see what I mean in a just a bit . . .

I am an American, of Pakistan and Indian origin, and I have lived and worked in both countries. I had originally applied to Fulbright's Pakistan programme; however, it was temporarily closed by the U.S. Department of State due to security concerns. After that, I considered India, and heard that getting a visa to work on gender violence as a woman with a Muslim-sounding name would be nearly impossible. Being inclined toward South Asia, you, Bangladesh, sounded "close enough" and seemed easier.

What I have learned is that you are also the most welcoming of the six countries in which I have been an 'expat'. You carry your humble and beautiful self with an amazing openness and warmth toward expatriates of all walks of life.

I spent a few years of my life at an American high school in Lahore, Pakistan, and we never walked the streets, not even in broad daylight. I grew up hearing about potential lock-downs and security threats to my school. There was little attractive about being a non-white foreigner beyond access to food at the Commissary. It was like walking around in a cage that said "foreigner" with a big blue passport to confirm it.

As a current expat in Mumbai, I feel like I am blending into an undifferentiated and little-regarded mass of foreigners from across the globe. And there are two main varieties: those who serve a very economic function and those have come to get high and "bum", both of which can be perceived as a nuisance, in their own right. There is no real concept of a guest having arrived at India's doorstep; I am a part of a traffic influx.

Open Letter to Bangladeshis from an Indo-Pak American Girl: It is not too late



ILLUSTRATION: HUMAIRAH SHAMS

In the UAE, the locals kept very much to themselves and the opulence was jarring; if anything, I recall a Lamborghini pulling up to me and trying to pick me up in broad daylight by offering me money to accompany him simply because I was dressed in jeans as a foreign woman. I felt similarly uncomfortable in Jordan. There seemed to be the first-rate Arabs, the domestic works, and then everyone else, from Egyptians to those like myself who were worth little.

I do not mean to compare, really, I do not. But I want you to know that you are different. We all have our strengths and weaknesses, and as an outsider, I want you to know, from the bottom of

my heart, that you have yours. Specifically, I had come to you seeking to learn more about a unique form of gender violence, acid violence, which was being actively combated by you so well. That was quite normal; that's what people do: come to you to learn, to test, and almost to a fault. I had heard Bangladesh once called a human laboratory. Where in the world will you find a country that welcomes strangers to co-create with the long-term future in mind? So forward looking are you.

Further, there is an incredible hospitality ingrained in Bangladeshi culture toward foreigners and locals alike; I never left a home – poor or rich, village or city - without feasting on a

meal. "Khabo" (I will eat) is one of the first Bangla words that I learnt.

You are also the home to one of the most widespread NGOs across the globe, or BRAC that has an amazing commitment to poverty alleviation and impact at scale. You take a very active approach to managing human rights and development, and a part of that includes this openness to the globe. You should be proud of yourself.

Bangladesh, you are and were a place where people of all religions can live side-by-side in the same village, and attend schools together. Muslim villagers even wear saris, which is just something I had never seen among Pakistani Muslims. Your context is very unlike the sectarian violence ever-so-rampant in other places. This is a sign of remarkable tolerance.

And I cannot help but wonder how much of your ability to cultivate a diverse and pluralistic fabric is rooted in your strong identity that was oppressed and violated through rape and plunder when you were a part of Pakistan. I will never ever forget the images of rape I saw at the Liberation War Museum. You struggled and won against great odds to achieve freedom for your culture, your people, and the right to speak the Bangla language that was being suppressed. Never ever forget.

However the events of 1/7 represent another turning point in my mind. I paused – for the first time in my life – as I thought of you . . .

The incident at Holey Artisan Bakery was incredibly frightening for those I know in Dhaka. Gulshan is where I had lived; it is an affluent area frequented by expats. Those killed could have very easily have been me or my friends.

Yet, what is most frightening is the fear that such an attack creates for foreigners in a country with not only vibrant industries that welcome foreign trade, but also a social impact and development microcosm that has been uniquely advanced through its friendships across the globe. It is this type of violence that truly impoverishes a nation. It could destroy you.

So, no, Bangladesh, you are not just like 'our country' or any other country . . . Not yet, at least. So, do not let anyone tell you otherwise and stop this before it is too late.

Eid Mubarak.

Yours truly,
A concerned friend and neighbour

MAILBOX

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A Story of Principle before Profit

I was really very moved by the article titled "Niaz Rahim: A Story of Principle before Profit" published in the *Star Weekend* on July 1, 2016. Many Islamic scholars stated that if Zakat is collected from well off people and distributed among poor properly, then the severity of poverty in the country will disappear in a few years. Centre for Zakat Management, an initiative undertaken by Rahimafrooz's welfare business, has proved it significantly. I would like to thank the writer and the *Star Weekend* for writing and publishing such an article which not only provides information but also inspirational lessons. I think Niaz Rahim could be an icon for the young entrepreneurs. Fareed Uddeen Keraniganj, Dhaka



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSSIN AGAZ APURBO

The Good Old Days of Printing

I would like to thank Nilima Jahan for her precious article titled "The Good Old Days of Printing" published in the *Star Weekend* on July 1, 2016. The article really made me nostalgic as it took me to the age of cyclostyle and block printing. Living in the digital age, we the young generation cannot imagine how much effort our ancestors had to make to disseminate knowledge amongst us. I feel grateful to them whenever I think about the old days of the printing press when publishing anything was a thankless and backbreaking job. I totally agree with the writer that despite poor pay and hard work, our ancestors did not leave this profession as for them it was not only a means of livelihood, but also a contribution to the society and that feeling made the work easy and enjoyable.

Enam Hasan
Madaninagar, Narayanganj

For Our Four-Legged Friends

As I read the article titled "For Our Four-Legged Friends" by Naziba Basher, published in the *Star Weekend* on June 24, 2016, I was so glad to see that animal rights was finally becoming a topic to be discussed broadly. Now, many people have come forward to make this world a better place for animals to live in. I loved how several animal welfare activists shared helpful instructions and their opinions on what is to be done when animals are in danger and need human assistance. I would like to thank the writer for finely assembling this handful list of do's and don'ts. I, being an animal-lover myself, might just as well start keeping some antiseptic Nebanol powder with me when going out just in case I come across any of our four-legged friends needing it! These animal welfare organisations are such a blessing for countless unprotected animals out there. Keep up the good work guys!

Zaria Amreen
Sunnydale School, Dhaka

The opinions expressed in these letters do not necessarily represent the views of the *Star Weekend*.



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Buildings Do! Build Safe!**

