

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR



Ripe for Re-reading.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

Books New and Old

This is the time that many people consider the old and the new and take stock of the year. What did the last year bring? What was I able to accomplish? We also try to prepare. What should I expect in the new year? What shall I try to achieve? And, in times like these, what shall I try to avoid?

Those are broad and deep questions that we all will face to some degree. But in the meantime I want to dwell on new and old encounters from the world of books.

Perhaps the most interesting book I read in 2016 has been around for forty years: *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins. Several years ago, I had tried reading it only to abandon it due to lack of interest. However, in recent years, I have spent much time observing nature (particularly birds.) So I connected easily with this book which extends Darwin's theory of natural selection in a fascinating manner.

In 2016 I also read with much attention and interest *H is for Hawk* by Helen MacDonald. It is the account of a bird enthusiast's very personal struggle – in a time of grief – to befriend and tame a strong-willed bird of prey.

I cannot remember much else of what I read in 2016. It was, for me, a lean year for good books.

For 2017, I want to re-read a few special books that I read years ago. They are memorably good and I want their taste again. I am also curious how their meaning may have changed as I have grown. Among them:

Arctic Dreams by Barry Lopez: A lyrical paean to the great North, I read it first two decades ago. My recent interest in birds will doubtlessly infuse

new meaning into my reading of this book.

My First Summer in the Sierra by John Muir – I have always felt that nature writing is one of the main pillars of American literature, and this book is one of the best in that genre.

Desert Solitaire by Edward Abbey: I first read it in 1983, while camping in the desert of Death Valley, California, then re-read it in the 1990s. It is time for another round with this opinionated but hugely enjoyable book.

The Snow Leopard by Peter Matthiessen: a difficult but rewarding book about a man's journey – both external and inner – by a writer I admire immensely.

A Sand County Almanac by Aldo Leopold: a lyrical classic I discussed in last week's column.

Poems of Jibananda Das: Somewhere along the way I lost my copy of his complete poems. But his precise details of the natural world (*shonali danar cheel*) reverberate in my head.

Books of Syed Mujtaba Ali: He carved out new territory for Bangla literature, creating a fresh style of storytelling. I read all his books long ago, but lost touch in recent years. Last month, my uncle gave me an English translation of his *Deshe Bideshe*, and after reading a few pages, *voila*, the magic is back!

Finally, two books I bought with every intention of reading, yet allowed to collect dust in my bookshelf: *The Invention of Nature*, a biography of Alexander von Humboldt; and *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Those are the only contemporary books in my reading wishlist for 2017.

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Living in fear

70 Khasi families of 2 Moulvibazar punjees may lose their land

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

Sngai Marchiang sells betel leaf for a living.

For him it is not just work, but rather a family tradition and the 55-year-old takes a lot of pride in it. His grandfather used to grow the plants in their garden while his grandmother sorted the leaves in the yard.

He also sends his two children to school and wishes to expand the betel leaf garden with the help of his wife and eldest son.

Not only Marchiang, most of the residences of the Lawachhara and Magurchhara punjees (village) are involved in this trade, where life goes on for the Khasi people amid optimism and making do with what they have.

But everything changed recently after the government took a decision to relocate them from their villages in the Lawachhara national forest for, what they claim, saving the forest.

Around 70 Khasi families of the two adjacent villages -- Lawachhara punjee under Sreemangal upazila and Magurchhara punjee under Kamalganj upazila of Moulvibazar -- are now in fear of eviction from the land they have been living on for years.

Though Christmas is just around the corner, it hardly brought any joy to them. A sense of fear has gripped the minds of apprehensive residents.

While visiting the Lawachhara punjee, this correspondent saw women with heavy hearts sit idly without sorting the betel leaves. The elderly could barely concentrate on their chores. Few children were plan-

ning to play, but after seeing their parents wearing a bleak look, did not.

"My grandparents died here," Marchiang pointed towards the area under a Koroi tree. "How can I leave this place?"

"I wish the authorities concerned would come here to discuss the situation with us. We have nothing against them. They need to know how badly we will be affected if the decision is implemented. I survive by growing betel

We live in harmony with everyone," he added. All the youths standing beside him echoed.

The elderly were not as much vocal. An aura of melancholy hung in the air where they sat in silence.

"I just want to be laid to rest here. But the government is saying I can't even die in my land," lamented Flora Pohthmi, 90.

Jhorna Dkhar and Saju Marchiang, sitting beside her, were too distraught to talk.

"How can the forest department take such a decision without informing us? How are we hurting the forest? It's our home. Our land is our pride. We plant trees, and look after those. We also stop miscreants from felling them," said Phila Pohthmi, headman of the Lawachhara punjee.

"Even the word Lawachhara is a Khasi word. 'Lawa' means bees, and 'Chhara' means a small cascade. The bees were aplenty at one time. But due to deforestation their numbers had reduced," he paused, and added, "Just like ours."

Donno Lamin, 55, said, "When I heard the news I could not believe it. None of us can focus now. We fear for our children's futures."

His wife Khonglah, 52, looked away while wiping tears. "How could a country take such a decision against its own?"

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa) demanded that the government change its decision of relocating the punjees. Abdul Karim Kim, SEE PAGE 4 COL 7



Flora Pohthmi, 90

I just want to be laid to rest here. But the government is saying I can't even die in my land

plants. What else am I supposed to do if evicted from my land?" he said.

"It's happening just for grabbing land and felling trees," alleged Rony Suchiang, 25, a degree final year student.

"We are spreading our call for justice through the social media. We are proud to be Khasi and Bangladeshi.



Gripped by uncertainty, Khasi people of Lawachhara punjee under Sreemangal upazila sit gloomily. Around 70 families of two punjees in Moulvibazar are living in fear of eviction following a government decision of relocating them. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

Govt to solve land issues of Santals permanently

Obaidul Quader tells representatives of the ethnic group



Santal representatives meet Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader and ruling party lawmaker Dipu Moni yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will take necessary steps to permanently solve the problem of the Santal community of Gaibandha's Gobindaganj upazila, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader told representatives of the ethnic minority group yesterday.

The team of representatives placed a 10-point charter of demands to the minister and informed him about the current situation of the evicted Santal people.

Quader, also general secretary of the Awami League, said the government was eager to solve their problems, and he would soon sit down with them again after taking some steps in this regard, said an AL leader who was present at the meeting.

"During the meeting he called up the deputy inspector general of Rangpur range and the deputy commissioner of Gaibandha and asked them to ensure safety and security of local Santal people," said AL organising secretary Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury.

He was also present at the meeting along with the ruling party lawmaker Dipu Moni, held at the Dhanmondi

office of the AL president.

Santal people of Gobindaganj was recently evicted from the land which they claim belonged to their ancestors. There were clashes and attacks on the community people and their houses, leading to deaths, injuries, and loss of properties.

The team of representatives demanded withdrawal of all cases filed against Santal people following the movement of Sahebganj-Bagda land reclamation committee, compensation for their standing crops and fish in the ponds they had during the eviction drive on November 6, compensation to the families of the dead, injured, and other victims, rebuilding of all of their houses, religious institutions, and schools that were torched during the eviction drive, removal of the barbed wire fence installed along the Santal village, trial of the masterminds of the November 6 attacks, removal of the upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) and officer-in-charge of Gobindaganj Police Station, and punishment for those police officers who "set fire" to their houses and officials of Rangpur Sugar Mills who leased out the mills' land, which they claim to be theirs.

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Bird fair promotes conservation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Rifat Ara Moma, a class IX student of Methodist English Medium School, saw only five to six bird species in her life. When she was informed of a bird fair being held in National Botanical Garden yesterday, she was very enthused.

"It's really a very nice experience in my life because through the exhibition, I have learnt the names of different birds," she said, referring to the fair which featured a photo exhibition and video screening of birds and rendition of folk songs.

Nusrat Jabeen, an aunt of Rifat, knew about the fair through Facebook and accompanied her to the venue, in the capital's Mirpur.

Visitors were shown live birds in the garden through telescopes.

The Department of Forest, Nature and Life Foundation, and Bangladesh Bird Club jointly organised the fair to mark 50 years of bird census across the world. The fair was inaugurated through the release of 324 rescued birds. It started at 10:30am and continued till 4:00pm.

Ashit Ranjan Paul, conservator of forest, said there were around 726 bird species in Bangladesh, of which 300 were migratory.

He said they rescued the birds from Savar early yesterday and released all of them during the inauguration.

Among the birds, 181 were munias, 82 doves, five parrots, five red-headed parrots, and one eagle, he said, adding that they released 37,500 birds after rescuing them from different places of the country in the last four years.

Ashit said of all 726 bird species in the country, 170 would be found in the 208-acre area of the botanical garden, while three species of them would be found nowhere in the

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President of Bangladesh Bird Club Enamul Haque speaks at the inauguration of a bird fair held in the capital's National Botanical Garden yesterday. The fair was inaugurated through the release of 324 rescued birds.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Quader visits Manna at BSMMU

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader yesterday visited Nagorik Oikya Convener Mahmudur Rahman Manna at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU).

Quader went to the hospital around noon and took information about his health conditions, BSMMU Director (Hospital) Brig Gen Md Abdullah-Al-Harur told The Daily Star.

The minister stayed at his cabin for around 15 minutes, the director said.

Manna, also a former organising secretary of Awami League, was released on bail on December 18 after he had languished in jail for over 21 months in two cases filed on charges of sedition and inciting the army.

More than 20 hours after "plainclothes men had picked up" Manna from his niece's house in Banani on February 24 last year, officials said he was arrested by Rab who handed him over to the Detective Branch of police.

Rab officials had then said Manna was arrested in a case filed with Gulshan Police Station for "trying to instigate revolt by the armed forces". The arrest came days after his two telephone conversations were leaked.

Girl kills herself for not being allowed to chat over cellphone

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

A schoolgirl allegedly committed suicide by hanging herself from a branch of a tree beside her house at Mirjaganj village in Nilphamari on Thursday night.

Munni Aktar, 11, daughter of Md Afizuddin of Domar upazila, was the only child of her parents, locals said.

According to her family, Munni hanged herself as her father did not allow her to chat at night over the cellphone and also rebuked her.

Domar police sent the body to Nilphamari hospital for an autopsy, said officer-in-charge of Domar police Ahmed Raziur Rahman.

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