

WORLD POETRY DAY

On resilience and hope in Bengali verse

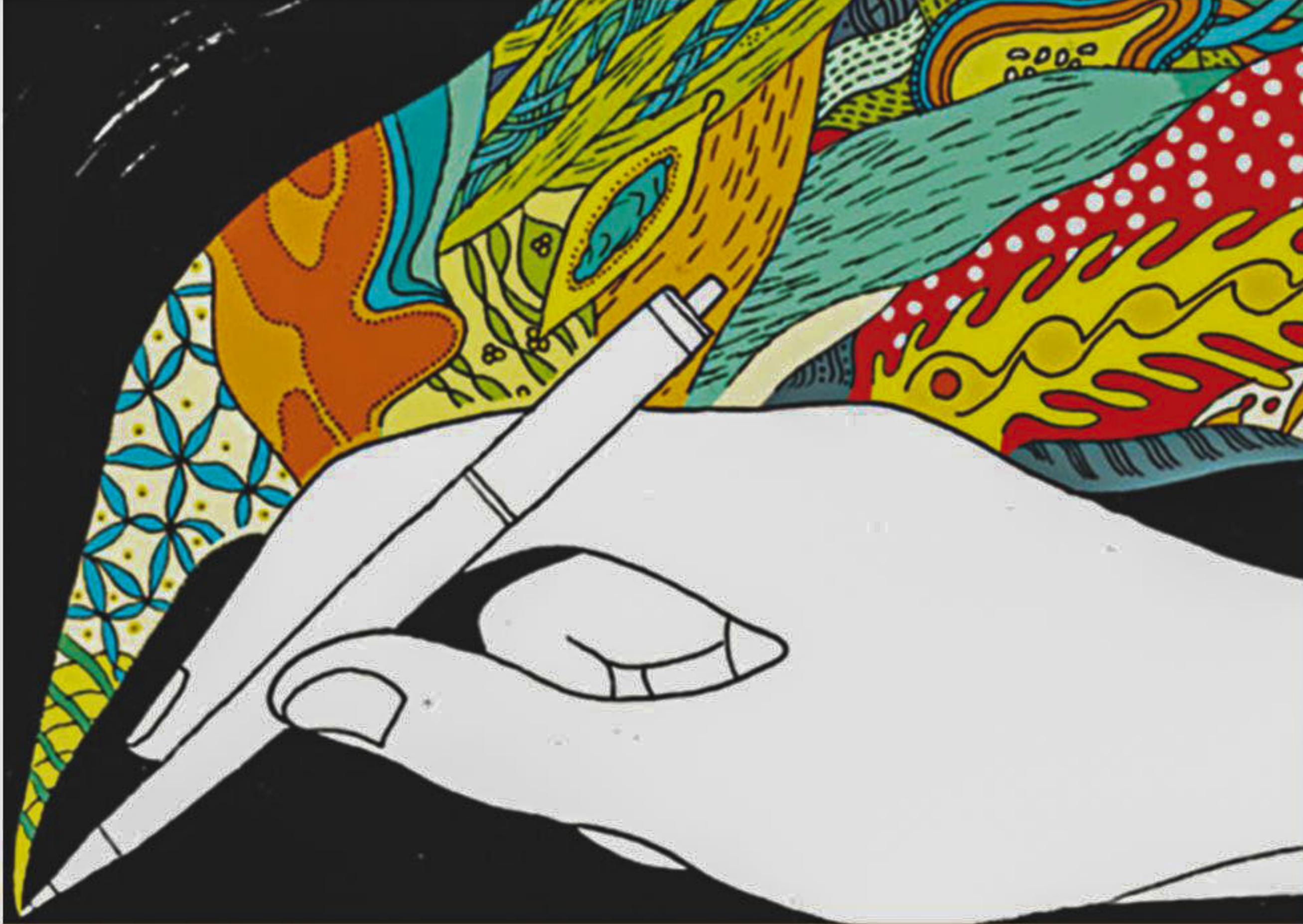


As a student of English literature, "Eshob pore ki hobet?" is a question I've had to face on a near-daily basis. The society's scepticism of a life devoted to

literature has been impossible to evade. It is, however, that same society that recites verses of poetry as fluently as nursery rhymes; with lines by Tagore and Nazrul lovingly repeated at dinner table discussions, in classrooms teaching political science, or on traffic-ridden commutes filled by conversations with a rickshaw-puller. As if in defiance to its increasing marginalisation on the global sphere, poetry remains as intricately woven into our lives as ever before. This endurance is further reflected in the theme of hope which can be traced through most Bengali poetry to this day.

Much of it takes the form of courage and political rebellion – in the works of Sukanta Bhattacharya and Achintya Kumar Sengupta in a post-World War II era warped by famine and societal unrest; in the "revolutionary voice" of Sikander Abu Jafar; and in Kazi Nazrul Islam's eminence as the "Rebel Poet", among many others. But a more peaceful and positive kind of hope pervades the wide canon of Bengali poetry written in ode to the country's natural beauty, and the strength of its people and relationships. The biggest example lies in our national anthem.

Written in 1905, *Amar Shonar Bangla* was born out of Rabindranath Tagore's defiance to the Bengal partition led by Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of India. To the British forces it may have seemed justifiable on administrative and political grounds, but the aftermath was a wave of protest from East and West Bengal, united in their passion for a shared language and culture. This history led a newborn Bangladesh to choose the song as its national anthem in 1972. Despite the violence embedded in both historic movements,



SOURCE: PATCH.COM

the lyrics of the anthem are devoid of any dark or political content. Instead, the colours and sounds of Bengal are equated with the sweetness of nectar, the melody of flutes, and the tranquillity of a mother's shade. In Tagore's vision, a seemingly undivided *Shonar Bangla* basks in a "golden" light – a colour that connotes grandeur, warmth, and the light of dawn. These sentiments pay homage to the way that each side of divided Bengal exchanged "rakhis" in the hopes of maintaining unity during the partition in 1905, and the way Bangladeshis rose out of a bloody battle in 1971, victorious and excited to build a new country.

Years later, another Bengali would mark her place among a rich cultural landscape largely ruled by male poets. Born to a conservative family that frowned upon women's social exposure, Begum Sufia Kamal emerged

from being a homeschooled young girl who devoured literature in the secret of night, to a social activist, a fighter of women's rights, and the brainchild behind some of the most seminal initiatives in Bengal's cultural history – the Martyrs Day March in February 1952; the Sangskritik Swadhinakar Andolon; the Mahila Parishad; Chhayanaut. These strengths, reflected in her poetry, gave her a mentor in poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. In her ode to summer in *Pochishey Boishakh*, Sufia Kamal describes a fertile, bountiful land that worships the sun for never ceasing to rise each day. This reverence for an eternal force, felt by a land that is beautiful and giving in itself, reflects the hope with which Bengalis have continued to rise from each blow dealt by political suppression and unrest. Similar sentiments are present in her other poems, from her nostalgic

messages to the youth in *Ajikar Shishu*, to her seeking of political guidance in *Hey Mohan Neta*.

To attempt to address the vast expanse of such luminous creative works in one go is a near-impossible task. Across the decades, Lalon Shah and Hason Raja's spirituality, Shamsur Rahman's quest for intellectual liberty, Al Mahmud's nationalism through his use of dialects, and Syed Shamsul Haq's focus on human indomitability have presented the Bengali spirit in its numerous shapes and colours. What has remained constant is the theme of resilience to strive towards a better tomorrow, garnered from the strong links between nature and human lives.

An article in *The Washington Post* titled "Is Poetry Dead?" explains that, "All the prestige of poetry dates back to when it was the way you got the most vital news there is. *The Iliad*. The

Odyssey. *Gilgamesh*. All literature used to be poetry. But then fiction splintered off." Today, these functions of inspiring (although 'influencing' might be a more relevant term now) people's sentiments and ideologies are carried out by movies and the media, abundant in Opinion pieces, analytical talk shows, and social media commentary. This, in addition to the disconnect from Bengali literature felt by a portion of the younger generation, indicates the ebbing relevance of Bengali poetry in our midst today.

But I don't see it as proof of the death of poetry. Changing in form and function along with the change in time, poetry has now evolved from serving as a vessel of information to a vessel of inspiration that continues to survive in little pockets across the country, often in unique forms. Poetry recitations, no longer confined within university campuses or the Bangla Academy grounds, are now popularly hosted by student groups and young artists in restaurants and cafes. Spoken word poetry – a modern twist on *Kobir Lorai* – is slowly gaining popularity, especially with the Ampersand group's inception in 2015. And the month of November has overtaken February and April in its outpour of cultural festivities. Following the fear and uncertainty cast by July's terrorist attack last year, the grandeur of 2016's Bengal Music Festival, Jazz and Blues Festival, and Dhaka Literary Festival highlighted most strongly our capacity for hope, resurrection, and defiance in the face of misfortune.

Contrary to popular belief, literature is very much alive in the veins of the current generation of Bangladeshis who, once introduced to the large wealth of Bengali literature still being produced today, could work remarkable wonders with it. In helping Bengali verse survive, we need to make room for it in the inventive things being done with literature by our wildly creative artists today, applying to the task the same hope that runs through its historic lineage to date.

The writer is a student of English and Economics at NSU, and a member of the editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

REMEMBERING AMBASSADOR MOHAMED MIJARUL QUAYES

A man of many strengths



Mohamed Mijarul Quayes

that a man so vibrant, bubbly and full of life should die such an untimely death. With rare and sterling virtues and qualities, Quayes was extraordinary and outstanding in many ways. A robust and retentive memory bolstered his intellectual splendour. He was the quintessential scholar

diplomat; equipped with the state-of-the-art knowledge in diverse matters which enabled him to face with full confidence his counterparts in bilateral, international and multilateral forums and situations. As Foreign Secretary and a senior career diplomat, he made direct contributions to the govern-

ment's achievements of foreign policy objectives. Being an art, music and literature enthusiast, besides his job in the government, Quayes always kept himself involved with literary and cultural organisations. He was also achieving prominence as an art critic.

With an aptitude for speaking effectively, and with a natural endowment of a rich sense of humour, he could easily become a central figure in any gathering of friends, colleagues, or strangers. He used to often crack jokes that were his own. Regardless of whether it was informal conversations or serious discourses, they always betrayed the depth of his learning. His knowledge of art and literature, songs and music, history, culture, psychology, philosophy, science, etc. was surprisingly profound. His was a multi-faceted talent which I would dare call genius.

Ambassador Quayes had an enormous self-confidence, which I believe had its roots in his knowledge of himself and his intellectual capability. His mind had a sort of unshakeable equanimity and serenity about it that helped him remain unfazed and self-composed under any amount of pressure or anxiety. During my more than 30

years of association with him, I never saw him losing his temper. Under provoking circumstances, he would at most show some irritation. And I cannot recall even a single occasion when he indulged in backbiting or used swear words against anyone. At his level of modesty, elegance and cultural refinement, he was above those frailties.

In the late 1990s, when he was posted in the Bangladesh Mission in Singapore as Counsellor, a part of his job was to look after the Bangladeshi patients (many of whom were critically or terminally ill), who travelled to Singapore for medical treatment. Taking care of the patients and their accompanying family members also embodied providing emotional support to them. All that was truly an unenviable job, but Quayes did it with alacrity and a smiling face. He kept the door of his residence always wide open for any of those patients or their escorting family members who wanted to stay with him and his family. His and his family's generosity never dried up in doing this.

A man of many strengths, Quayes had only one serious weakness, his Achilles'

heel – his recklessness about eating food his doctors advised him not to. Apart from being a voracious reader, he was a voracious eater as well. Perhaps his obesity played a role in his untimely death.

Quayes was good of head and heart. He loved socialising and being in the midst of friends and colleagues, especially batch mates and other cadres. He was loved and admired by all of them. They fondly nicknamed him 'Miserable Quayes', punning on his first name 'Mijarul', and he seemed to enjoy the nickname. When shamming anger towards close friends (his equals or near juniors whom he held in great affection), he used to punch them on their upper arms or backs with his big fists. Those punches invariably amused the 'victims', and made them gravitate emotionally still closer towards Quayes. Ambassador Mohamed Mijarul Quayes will be greatly missed and always remembered by his innumerable friends, colleagues, and admirers at home and abroad. He will continue to live in their hearts.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

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QUOTABLE Quote



We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.



CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 New Year's games
- 6 "Hush!"
- 11 Cager Shaquille
- 12 Up
- 13 Like some questions
- 14 Called to the phone
- 15 Cheap
- 17 Grammy's category
- 19 Geologic period
- 20 Carpet cleaner, for short
- 23 Precocious Plaza resident
- 25 Carpet feature
- 26 Sports betting number
- 28 Writer Jaffe
- 29 Missouri motto
- 30 Many a time
- 31 Zodiac cat
- 32 Cacao holder
- 33 Malay island
- 35 Matt of movies
- 38 French spa city
- 41 Blow away
- 42 Edison's – Park
- 43 Insignificant
- 44 Keyboard key
- 45 "I'm not at home"
- 46 "Meet John Doe"
- 47 "Shonar Bangla"
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DOWN

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- 2 Wallet item
- 3 Cadet's place
- 4 Turner of Hollywood
- 5 Least speedy
- 6 "Meet John Doe"
- 7 Not at home
- 8 Pester
- 9 Mamie's hubby
- 10 Danson of "The Good Place"
- 11 Bedroom sight
- 12 Copy for pasteup
- 13 Reserved
- 14 Opinion
- 15 Texas landmark
- 16 Handover
- 17 Copy for pasteup
- 18 Reserved
- 19 Opinion
- 20 Opinion
- 21 Texas landmark
- 22 Handover
- 23 Letter sound
- 24 "Tizzy"
- 25 Favouring
- 26 Solitary sort
- 27 Letter sound
- 28 Buffoon
- 29 Block
- 30 Parisian pal
- 31 Man
- 32 Letter sound
- 33 Tumed up
- 34 Block
- 35 Block
- 36 Chess piece
- 37 Chess piece
- 38 Chess piece
- 39 Brit's quaff
- 40 Negating link

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

