



View of the old Brahmaputra from the Langalbandh Ghat.

PHOTO: FAISAL AHMED

REFLECTIONS - A YEAR AFTER HOLEY ARTISAN ATTACK

# Consoled by the Brahmaputra

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July 1, 2016. I spent the afternoon with my frail 80-year-old mother. Despite dementia, she was lucid. With a white *tajbih* and an old Koran in her hand, she asked if I prayed *juma*, if we wanted spicy *piaju* for iftar, if Renia, my 7-year-old, her namesake and a product of two worlds, is all packed for the flight the next day to see her *nanu* in the U.S.

Later, braiding her thinning grey hair, she told stories of her parents. A 7-year-old in the 1940s, she travelled with them by steamer from Bikrampur to see her brothers in Calcutta. Even at 7, she knew how to recite the Koran. A river of warmth running through three generations spanning two centuries evoked gratitude.

We left my mother's place early to finish packing. Driving through Gulshan Road 75, punctuated by irregular lights and leafy tall trees, we reached home after 8:00 pm. I lay down with a headache. Minutes later, came the sound of firecrackers. An hour later came the SMS: "Holey Artisan Bakery is under siege; situation is NOT UNDER CONTROL."

I called my friend Chotu. Renia, sitting next to the half-packed suitcases, learned from my hushed, hurried conversations that those were gunshots and grenades, not firecrackers; multiple attacks might be underway. Unsure and scared, she looked for Shaila, her 3-year-old sister. We huddled in our living room away from the windows. A precious afternoon thus vanished into a night of horror.

Awake, lying next to Renia, only two hundred metres from Holey, I kept thinking about how it might end. She finally fell asleep after midnight. At 3:43am, curled up in a fetal position, she twitched as the *Fazr azaan* crawled into our balcony, vandalising the fragile calm. In a fog of unfamiliar fear, I had only water for *seheri*.

The next morning, the gunshots and blasts started around 7:30am. Renia ran over from where she had been playing with her little sister. With the loud blasts, it was impossible to tell what was happening inside Holey and outside in the neighbourhood. Around 11am, in a short, sombre call Adeb *bhai* confirmed his nephew Faraaz had been there.

Grisly news and pictures kept pouring in all day, as punishing gloom filled the Dhaka sky. Witnesses later recounted how, despite given the choice, Faraaz refused to leave Holey. He stayed back to protect his friends, Bangladeshi-American Abinta and Tarishi from India, transcending religion, gender, and nationalities.

On that unaccustomed day, no one quite knew how to feel. I called my sister, "Don't let *amma* watch TV." Under the weight of her faith and dementia, all this would be too disorienting, no less than it was for Renia. Renia told her mother they could no longer go outside in Dhaka because her mother is not from Bangladesh.

Unsure if she belonged to the land she inherited from her father, Renia felt targeted. It had not been even a year since I returned to Bangladesh after twenty-four years to grow her roots. Later that evening, standing at the long airport security queue, she looked back, "Abba, please don't go outside." I kissed her forehead and lied, "Don't worry ma, I won't." I felt sick from a mix of emptiness and relief as the plane vanished like a thief into the black sky.

With Renia gone, Ramadan afternoons grew longer than the afternoon shadows. The pre-Eid roads, soaked in the monsoon rains, were empty. I spent most evenings indoors and caught myself glancing at the Buddhist statues I brought from Cambodia, my home during 2011-15. With passing days, their faces grew more homeless. My friend Lori later explained, "It's called projection."

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In less than a week, Eid arrived tastelessly like an uninvited guest. I was glad Renia missed this Dhaka Eid, wrapped around with 22 funerals of different faiths across the world. For the Eid prayer, I walked to the mosque braving the morning drizzle, avoiding the raw potholes to keep my leather sandals half-dry. The drizzle had the sad lethargy of a snowfall.

On my right, behind the rusty fence of Baridhara park, through the rain-bathed,

violently green leaves and the gory red *krishnachuras*, peeked a reflection of Holey floating on the lake. The white chairs on Holey's second floor looked hauntingly abandoned. During that week, Baridhara lake had turned greener with algae, swollen by rain and fear.

A week of rain had also cleaned the red-brick Baridhara mosque, now apologetically standing like a high-risk airport with two dog squads and an electronic gate manned by pot-bellied guards in uniforms. The dogs comforted humans in the house of God.

I went to my usual spot, fourth row, second floor, now empty. So I moved to the front row. There, men in colourful *punjabis* glanced at each other only slightly longer than usual, being alert without being too obvious. The Eid *jamat* had a funeral feel. I skipped *khutbah*, left early. On the staircase, the sandals were all wet, strewn like dead soldiers.

I came back to my empty apartment and turned on the TV. Sholakia, the largest Eid *jamat*, was attacked. Senseless violence tore apart lives at home and abroad: Istanbul. Dhaka. Sholakia. Nice. France.

Violence has long been common in us, in humanity, and in the name of all faiths. But Holey was so close, so brutal, so blind, and so unexpected. This violence violated everything I wanted to assume about us.

Who are we? What are we made of? What have we become?

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I internalised Holey through the eyes of my bicultural daughters, the faith of a devout grandmother, and the tenderness of a timid father. Unnervingly, this cocktail convinced me that I am not brave. In a long-delayed revenge, my social bubble could neither shield nor comfort me. In fact, the earthquake happened inside the bubble.

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Looking back, since I lost my father in my teens, I have known that life is fragile and random. I have since been paranoid of losing my loved ones. In difficult periods, I often found oxygen in long walks, in mathematics, and in history. Long walks repaired fragile memories. Mathematics gave orderly beauty amid random grief. History helped me resurrect my father when I missed him; it also instilled in me a belief that we all are rivers, a complex flow of continuity and contradictions.

Rivers rise, fall, shift, bend, loop, criss-cross. They water our memories, nourish our imagination, quench our thirst, devour our

homes, leave silt after the floods to console us with bumper crops. Like Brahma, they create; like Shiva, they destroy. Beautiful, kind, cruel, volatile, resilient, all at once, rebelling against all rigid definitions and otherness, washing away our past to invite the future. Like cultures, rivers embrace everything on their way.

Perhaps, it is the fluid geography of our rivers, our forests, our villages that have shaped our psyche, the melody of our songs, and the genes of our syncretic faith. Perhaps, the resiliency in us comes from the relentless, hungry rivers in our nimble delta, surviving the constant feud between land and water stoked by the monsoon rain. Perhaps, our fierce individualism borne out of that feud gave us the confidence for peaceful coexistence amid diversities and adversities.

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July 15, 2016. Two weeks after Holey, on a sun-soaked Friday with a blue sky dotted by ambitious, puffy white clouds, I went to Sonargaon for oxygen. There lies a slice of our sleepy past corralled by a fluid rectangle of rivers: the old Brahmaputra, Meghna, Dhaleshwari, and Sitalakhya.

Brahmaputra grew old a while ago. In 1762, halfway between the sunset of 1757 when Bengal lost its independence and the famine of the 1770s that killed one-third of its 30 million inhabitants, a massive earthquake shifted Brahmaputra's course, aging the only

poet Chandidas succinctly captured humanism: *Sobar upore manus sotto, tahar upore nai*.

I grew up with the stories of Sonargaon told and retold by my mother. Her ancestral village in Bikrampur is not too far from Sonargaon. I became interested in the Buddhist Bikrampur since my stint in Cambodia. As the first millennia came to a close in the Buddhist Pala Bengal, a child named Chandragarva was born in Bajrajogini, not too far where my mother was born a thousand years later. That child later grew up to be Atish Dipankar, Asia's leading Buddhist reformer, who took his final rest 3,000 km upstream on the banks of the Brahmaputra in Tibet. The Brahmaputra connects the land of his final rest to the land of first breath. Dalai Lama belongs to the school of Buddhism that emerged out of Atish Dipankar's teachings.

After the Goadi mosque, I wanted to see the old Brahmaputra up close and got off the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. Around noon, following a short drive, then a brief walk, I reached the Langalbandh *ghat*. There, in the short midday shadow of a tall banyan tree with exposed interwoven roots, I saw people who did not know each other sitting in a circle around those roots: a man with his well-planned wrinkles, hena-dyed beard, and a white *tupi* ready for *juma*; a woman with *sindoor* on her black parting hair and her family; two women with black *hijabs* barely



The single-domed Goadi Mosque (1519) in Sonargaon.

PHOTO: FAISAL AHMED

revealing their eyes; teenagers staring at the smartphones with intense love, busy taking selfies with pouty lips and fake dimples.

That circle of Bangladeshis exuded harmony. Of all the geometric shapes, I always felt closest to the circle. It is made of infinite, equal points, with a timeless flow among them that has no beginning or end. In a poetry of mathematics, sitting next to one another, together, they build and live for something far bigger than themselves, all around a shared centre.

That banyan tree and the Goadi mosque embraced so much of our common past. They together watched so many floods and droughts, full moons and gentle suns, high and low tides, dusks and dawns, *fakirs* and *sanyasis*, *bauls* and beggars, spirits and djinns, happy families and broken souls; Buddha purnimas, Pujas, Eids; even famines, riots, stampedes, and wars; the temporary partition of Bengal in 1905; the violent partition of India in 1947; the disintegration of Pakistan. Jubilantly, the painful birth of Bangladesh in 1971. But, throughout, the perennial proximity of faiths in our fidgety delta.

On the *ghat*, a father and a son were taking a holy dip. I thought of my own father. Blessed by the *ghat*, a Friday *haat* was humming behind the banyan tree whose

heart-shaped leaves were rustling in the ancient summer breeze from the Brahmaputra. In that cool breeze, people were busy selling jackfruits, sugarcane, betel leaf, pigeons in bird cages, spices in recycled cement bags, milk tea made from a small stove.

Around 12:30pm, the *juma azaan* drowned out the fading sound of an engine boat carrying cargoes and families. I went for *juma* in a nearby mosque of corrugated tin and red bricks. We huddled behind the *imam*. The prayer rows were all full and the *khutbah* short.

Inside the mosque cooled by the old Brahmaputra, as I closely looked at the eyes, the noses, and the faces of those praying around me, in a whispered echo of nostalgia, amateur anthropology, and unflattened history, I felt a silhouette of the answer to "Who are we?"

We are a layered *khichuri* of humanity mashed by the monsoon rains over three thousand years: Austroasiatic, Mongoloid, Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Arabs, Turks, Ethiopians, Afghans, Animist, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christians, all interwoven by time like an airy muslin *sari* on the banks of the Sitalakhya. Our mosques, our temples, our viharas, our shrines all are made of red bricks. Inevitably, the search for exclusive purity is poisonous in this delta.

After the prayer, the afternoon advanced with the serenity of a dawn. For lunch, I had milk tea and snacks from the *haat*. I wanted to return to Dhaka early to see my mother before she went to bed.

When I left Sonargaon, the Friday afternoon traffic had already thickened. The puffy, white clouds had thinned and turned light pink by then. Over the Kanchpur bridge, the air carried a mineral smell of exhaust from the sand trucks from Sitalakhya. I looked out the window and could not get over how pale the old Brahmaputra and Sitalakhya have become from pollution, strangled by silt, water hyacinths, and the land grabbers, mimicking my mother's clogged neural veins of vanishing memories.

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August 1, 2016. Renia and Shaila returned after visiting their *nanu*. The evening airport traffic stalled and flooded their faces with red taillights. Renia fought her jetlag and leaned on me. I thought of Faraaz's parents and grandparents who must forever bear the soul-crushing pride that in his values, the noblest inheritance from his family and our delta, were the seeds of his and their unimaginable sacrifice. I thought of the loneliest desolation of the parents of the five young attackers who could neither grieve nor bury their children without shame or fear. Halfway through the ride, Renia fell asleep on my shoulder.

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July 1, 2017. It has been a long year. I cannot imagine how the devastated families survived their year. Renia felt traumatised for over six months. My mother's dementia has worsened. In good days, she can gather only a few sentences from the shrinking circles of her world. The verses of the Koran she has been reciting for 73 years now escape her. The struggle shows in her tired nods, in her unsure frowns, even in her sad, blank stares. In difficult days, I have often thought of Faraaz.

For many, Faraaz collapsed the potential contradictions between religion and humanity, becoming our young river of solace after the earthquake. He represented the ultimate inheritance of our composite past, the best that we can imagine about ourselves. In so many ways, as a quiet hero, he supplemented our faith, our dreams, and our imagination to remind us that our syncretic diversity is our salvation.

For me, during this long year, Faraaz lightened my soul with his departing gift: the courage I long lacked to tell Renia that, not despite but precisely because of her hybrid heritage, she belongs to Bangladesh, as does a monsoon raindrop to the old Brahmaputra.

The full version of this article is available online.

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