

One of my oldest memories of the joys of eating, of wanting to eat again and again, was when my grandmother sat me by her bench and painstakingly broke into a *rui* fish head to find the juiciest bits for a happy four-year-old me. There are other memories too. The smell of *khejur er rosh* being churned into caramel goodness as *dadi* stooped low over the mud stove, her wooden ladle going round and round,



PHOTO: COURTESY

the sticky caramel coating the spoon, the smell burnt, heavy and wholesome.

The Proustian punch of eating food that stirs a nerve is something I have always been on a quest for. Since reading Johanna Spyri's *Heidi*, I have longed to walk the Alps and sink my teeth into a loaf of bread and a big block of cheese, all to be downed with a glass of fresh milk.

And so it was during my travel to Bhutan, the small country nestled in the Himalayas, that I was jolted back into my wistful longing for a meal like that of Heidi's.

The crisp mountain air in the Himalayan country is sharp even during May, when it is the height of summer back home in Dhaka, and it whets your appetite.

In the trip, I diligently jotted down places I wanted to try, foods I had to have, something that would make me write like Proust wrote about eating madeleines in *Swann's Way*.

Hungry after a short 30-minute airplane ride from Dhaka, Naimul, Sakib, Tanni and I landed in Paro, and quickly made our way to the old farmhouse that would be our home for a good part of the stay.

Our host was kind and packed us a lunch of huge beef and cheese momos to take on our ride to Chele La Pass, the highest motor pass in the country. We also took along a flask full with piping hot tea made with milk.

All through the winding journey, the alpine forest loomed dark and ominous

over our heads, the idea of the spicy momos a constant thought in me.

Finally on top, I took my first bite of the momo, and it was everything I had imagined and more. One bit and the drama begins. The oil trickled down my hand, the beef and finely diced onions, sweet and savoury against the red chilli dip.

Our hands were frozen, as the cold mountain wind blew down in the

IN SEARCH OF HEIDI, EATING MY WAY THROUGH BITS OF BHUTAN

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY



PHOTO: COURTESY

approaching dusk. We savoured the momos, one huge bite after the other, ending the feast with the sweet milk tea.

Back in Paro from the Chele La Pass, we grabbed coffee and butter cookies from one of the many new-style cafes that have sprung up all over the small Paro town square.

For dinner, at the farmhouse, nestled away from the city, we were served potatoes with cheese and chillies with cheese—Ema Datshi and Kewa Datshi—two of the most popular dishes in Bhutanese cuisine.

This was accompanied with bowls full of red rice, a staple in the Bhutanese diet. A bite of the Ema Datshi and I knew I would be stumped for words to describe the taste to anyone who has never tried it.

Long green chillies slit all the way through, plump and mushy, coated in salty, rounded cheese, tingled all corners of my mouth. I took another bite to try

and make sense of the flavour profile. The rice is nutty, chewy and full-bodied, a perfect balance against the spicy dish.

Over dinner, in the well-lit and spacious kitchen room, conversations flowed with Jojo, the grandfather of the house, and Pema, a local guide. Stories of tiger lairs and Buddhist monks dominated the night.

The next day we were to hike up to the famed Tiger's Nest. Again I



PHOTO: COURTESY

tea (chai) or suja (butter tea) plus a communal basket of puffed rice known as zaow for breakfast or if you happen to visit any household.

In our travels, we often missed regular lunches and instead snacked on products from roadside stores. The mountain fruits are sweet. When you tear into the small oranges, the paper peels off like skin easily. The orange broke off, spraying droplets that landed on my spectacles. The tiny oranges, flood your mouth, like a dam giving way to floodwaters. I ate a couple in one go.

For our last night in the Himalayan country, we were served fresh sugar snap beans stir-fried in oil with some fresh garlic and a homely take on Shakam Paa.

There are many meals and memories I brought back from my travels in the country. The warm éclairs and butter cookies I got during a bathroom break in the clouded Dochula Pass. The salty butter tea for the cold, rain-soaked evenings, and the unending dumplings.

Bhutanese food is little known outside of the country, but my appetite is whet and I want to explore more. Whether I got to live my dream of having Heidi's meal is something I am still unsure of though. The little child in me will keep searching for that memory and in that quest hopefully eat through all the cheeses and breads among the mountains.

Abida Rahman Chowdhury is an online journalist, *The Daily Star*.

TRAVEL

TRIBUTE

There is nothing dark in Zeheen's room. It's well lit, everything put away methodically—his clothes folded neatly in a stack, the bed made with a colourful bedspread and pillow case, the boxes filled with files and old cassettes, the showcase of DVDs and video cassettes of popular sitcoms and animated movies, the match box cars on the dresser... nothing that reflects the heavy weight of grief that engulfs those he has left behind.

Then there's that rectangular case on the floor that held his real passion—his beloved Fender electric guitar, suddenly

childhood stories that popped up now and then at weddings or family dinners. He would shyly greet me and I was always struck by how warm and well-mannered he and his brother Zerif and sister Raya were. I would get updates about him and his siblings from his mother, Sony, my cousin and childhood friend whose world revolved around her family, especially her children. I knew a little about his pain, the anguish that he kept fighting, sometimes winning, sometimes losing.

So now I watch his music videos and am struck by the confident, focused

“ I ONLY FEEL GOOD WHEN I'M PLAYING THE GUITAR ”

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN



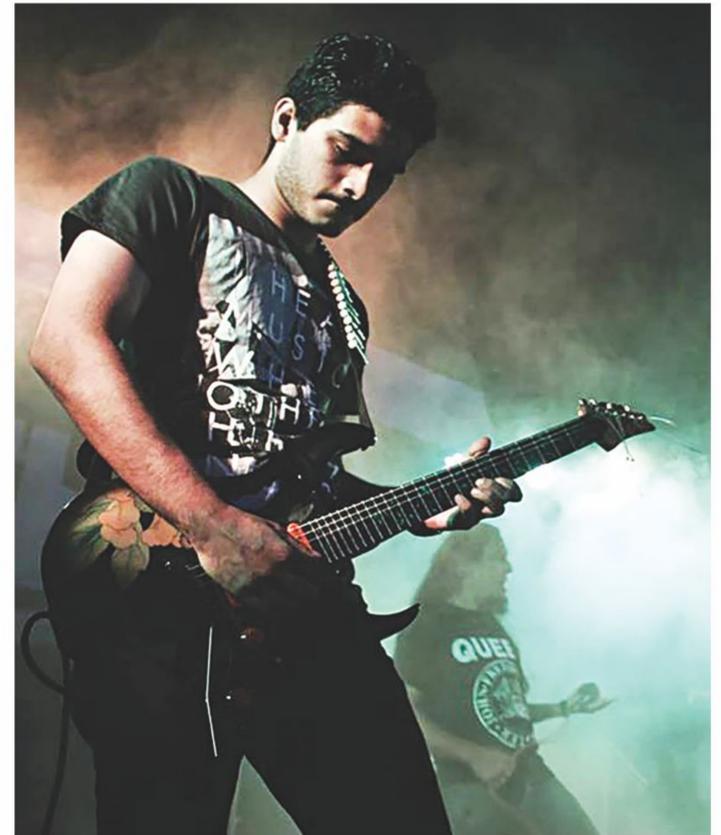
PHOTO: COURTESY

bereft of the caress of his delicate fingers that made it sing with such soulful intensity only a few days ago. It gives a hint of who this man child of 27 really was before a moment of when despair took him away from this world on July 22. Who was this lanky young man whose angelic features betrayed the fire in his soul that produced such passionate, heart-wrenching tunes?

I admit to myself, with painful remorse, that I did not really know Zeheen the way I should have. I was that vague *Khala* he saw once in a blue moon, a character in his mother's long lost

persona of a musician who seems completely immersed in the electrifying notes, the adrenaline rush as the adulating crowd roars its unequivocal approval. Here he is not shy or reticent; he does not avoid human contact as he would in the so-called real world. Here he embraces the attention, and plays with abandon in perfect synchronisation with the other members of the band.

I manage to get hold of his friend and fellow band member of Mechanix, Aftabuzzaman Tridib, the long-haired, energetic vocalist who has known Zeheen for at least ten years as his *choto*



Zeheen Ahmed

PHOTO: COURTESY

bhai, friend and lead guitarist of the band. The adoration is obvious. Meeting Zeheen for the first time, Tridib says, he was struck by the 16-year-old's gentle manners and maturity. But it was Zeheen's obvious talent as a musician that kept Tridib and the other members spellbound. By 19, Zeheen's musical prowess had matured and he was involved in composing many tunes for the band. "Zeheen took lessons from anyone—he had a God-gifted talent, he had melody in his soul, in his blood. Only a pure soul can produce this kind of music", says Tridib. "His compositions were exemplary—his sense of tune, arrangement. We used many of his tunes in our songs including Mechanix's first single 'Druboshor' as well as other albums such as 'Aparajeyo'." Many of the songs he helped compose were about the social anomalies of time. 'Elegy', for instance, is about the destructive influence of social media.

And music was in his blood for sure, being the son of a talented musician – Manam Ahmed (Miles) whose father was a musician too. Unsurprisingly his younger brother Zerif, too, became a musician and the two brothers often performed together in gigs. The two brothers shared the closeness of best friends with a shared love for music. Although his real affection was for metal music, perhaps for the release of raw emotion it brought on, Zeheen experimented with other genres—rock and roll and pop, doing live shows with many well known musicians. He even

had a small stint with the popular band Nemesis. He liked to listen to all kinds of music including that of Joe Satriani, Steven Vai, Paul Gilbert, Marc Tremont, Alter Bridge, John Petrucci, John Mayer, Artcell and Nemesis.

Music was definitely his respite, his escape from the demons of depression that kept haunting him. At one time he taught music to students, revealing the nurturing, patient side that endeared him to others. His band was his second family and he would spend hours on end, even the whole night, not just practicing but hanging out with them, laughing, joking but mostly expressing himself through the strings of his guitar.

His death at 27, an eerily common age for many other gifted musicians, will remain an agonising mystery – for his parents, his siblings, relatives, friends and fans. In a message that his brother stumbled upon while going through his notebook, Zeheen Ahmed talks about his simple dreams—to make a career out of his music, which was perhaps the only language he really spoke or understood.

"I only feel good when I'm playing the guitar... I don't do very well when mixing with people-kind of a social outcast... I don't know how to fix myself... I love my family and friends... My goals consist of being successful at what I do. Want to make a solid career out of it. Want to tour the world and be happy and content."

Wherever you are dear Zeheen, may you be happy and content and always surrounded by music.

Aasha Mehreen Amin is the Deputy Editor, *The Daily Star*.