

## TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR



Azhar mosque, Cairo.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

## CAIRO

Cairo, the capital of Egypt, has 20 million people spread over 600 square miles. Founded over a thousand years ago during the Fatimid dynasty, it is historically rich and strategically important. But for me Cairo is also the home of the grand storyteller Naguib Mahfouz who deftly weaved tales of this intricate city in his *Cairo Trilogy*.

On a short visit to Cairo with family, I alternate between the two facets of this great city: immersing myself in the present while marvelling at its history.

Walking through the older Cairo neighbourhoods, where neighbours smoke hookahs around a cafe table, children play on the narrow streets on their way to school and housewives negotiate the price of meat with the butcher, something seems very familiar. This could very well be one of the *mahallas* (neighbourhoods) of old Dhaka.

But only a short taxi ride away is a fort on top of a hill: the massive Citadel, built by none other than the great Salihuddin. We reach here in late afternoon and enjoy beautiful views of the city in the setting sun. Also on the hill is the Mosque of Mohammed Ali, which looks like the mosques of Istanbul from the outside. In the cavernous interior, stained glass filters the sun's rays into a multitude of colours.

If the Citadel is grand, Tahrir Square is anti-climactic. The scene of recent uprisings appears to be nothing more than a busy traffic roundabout. I am reminded of foreign visitors when I take them to Shahid Minar: they understand my words, but looking at their faces I can see them struggling to fathom its significance.

One afternoon my son leads us to another Cairo landmark: Koshary Abo Tarek. This low-profile restaurant serves *koshary*, a dish made of lentils,

rice and small elbow macaroni, flavoured by spices and topped off with browned shallots. The waiter is used to tourists. He shows us how to blend the sauces, lemon juice and garlic with the dish. Taking a cash advance from every table before the meal, he relies on a prodigious memory to calculate the total and return exact change afterwards. The *koshary* is delicious, filling and inexpensive (about BDT 40.)

Another time we visit the Naguib Mahfouz Cafe in the middle of Khan al Khalili, the great souk of Cairo. We sip tea, coffee and *sahlep* while well-heeled Cairenes - men and women - around us smoke hookahs and talk boisterously. I can't recall whether Mahfouz frequented this cafe, but his favourite hangouts included the Ali Baba Cafe and the Orabi Coffee Shop, both of which appear closed.

There are numerous references to birds and animals among the artefacts in the Egyptian Museum, but in today's Cairo, the cat is king. There are cats of every shape, size and stripe, often luxuriating in the attention showered upon them. Among birds I see Pied Crows, White Wagtails, Sparrows and the beautiful red Laughing Dove.

Cairenes are polite and smooth to a fault with the exception of a taxi driver we had the misfortune to hire. He "understands what he understands," taking us to the wrong hotel and losing his way again and again until, alarmed at the prospect of missing our flight, we release him and find another taxi.

I try to imagine life in this city whose air has a whiff of lost grandeur, whose people have unlimited charm and whose madness belies its method. Not my cup of tea, but I feel fortunate to have made its acquaintance.

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## Conjoined

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Bangladesh will carry out the final operation, he said.

Dr Samanta said a Bangladeshi doctor is accompanying the parents to Hungary and a two-member team of the burn institute will also join them shortly.

Taslima, mother of the twins, said, "We know it is a risky operation. But we took the decision because we want to see them live normal lives."

"Though conjoined, they share different personality traits. For example, if Rokeya cries, Rabeya doesn't," she said.

The father, Rafiqul Islam, said they were not informed of the condition before their birth even after conducting ultrasonography during pregnancy. All the radiological tests showed a single baby, he added.

They became nervous after their birth and went to different hospitals for treatment. Finally, at DMCH, doctors advised them to wait for five years for their separation.

Rafiqul said the prime minister has been bearing all the costs of their treatment since she was informed about them through local lawmaker Makbul Hossain.

Yesterday, Health Minister Mohammad Nasim handed over air tickets to the parents during a press briefing at the burn institute.

An Emirates flight carrying them was scheduled to depart Dhaka airport at 1:30am today, said Dr Samanta Lal.

The couple also have an eight-year-old daughter.

## Samson H Chowdhury's death anniversary today

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

Today is the seventh death anniversary of Samson H Chowdhury, the founder of Square Group.

On this day in 2012, the visionary entrepreneur and industrialist passed away at Raffles Hospital in Singapore at the age of 86.

Samson Chowdhury left behind an unmatched legacy of entrepreneurship and industrialisation.

He built up from scratch Square Group, one of the largest conglomerates in Bangladesh, and set an example of ethical business that is certain to inspire many others in the years to come.

Born on February 25, 1926 in Pabna, Samson H Chowdhury was the eldest child of Eakub H Chowdhury and Latika Chowdhury. Educated in Mymensingh and



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Kolkata, he also obtained a diploma in management from a Harvard University school.

Samson Chowdhury, son of a medical officer in an outdoor dispensary, started a small pharmacy at Ataikula in Pabna in 1952. It was beginning of the country's one of the leading pharmaceutical companies that eventually became the Square Group.

He was awarded the Best Entrepreneur of the Country for the year 2000-2001 by The Daily Star and DHL. The American Chamber in Bangladesh honoured him as Business Executive of the Year in 1998.

He was founder president of Bangladesh Association of Publicly Listed Companies and vice-president of International Chamber of Commerce, Bangladesh.

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CASES AGAINST KHALEDA  
Petitions may be moved next week: Lawyer

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The two pending petitions filed with the High Court and Supreme Court in November last year, challenging BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's convictions and sentences in two corruption cases, maybe moved before the courts next week, Advocate Zainul Abedin, a lawyer for Khaleda, said yesterday.

The Election Commission did not allow her to run in the December 30 national polls, following her convictions and 17 years' jail sentences in the cases.

On November 18 last year, Khaleda filed an appeal with the HC, challenging the trial court verdict in Zia Charitable Trust graft

case that sentenced her to seven years' imprisonment, said Advocate Zainul.

In the appeal she also sought acquittal from all the charges.

The November 18 petition is still pending with the HC. We will place it before the bench, and pray for its hearing. If the bench orders a hearing, we will move another petition, seeking bail of Khaleda in the case," the lawyer added.

**ZIA ORPHANAGE TRUST GRAFT CASE**  
The BNP chief's participation in the parliamentary polls became uncertain after a special court in February last year sentenced her to five years in prison in Zia Orphanage Trust graft case.

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## USAID project leads to 35pc increase in peanut yield

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Peanut was always a low productive crop to the family of Rezaul Karim from Chuadanga for the last 40 years.

But the introduction of improved seed varieties and cultivation method through USAID's agricultural value chains (AVC) has put a smile on the face of the 37-year-old farmer.

"My family has been engaged in peanut farming for the last 40 years. Never did I, or my ancestors, ever witness yield of such grand scale and quality of [peanuts]," said Rezaul.

AVC has led to a 35 percent increase in peanut yield, and a 25 percent increase in the income of the farmers, said a USAID press release yesterday.

Since 2014, USAID has been implementing AVC with the partnership of Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) and Partex.

AVC is an initiative in the region to address the challenges of using poor quality seeds by farmers, and their poor technical know-how on productive cultivation practices.

As of August 2018, with AVC's support, Partex has increased production of quality seeds through three seed production hubs in Chuadanga, Barguna, and Patuakhali.

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