

# Life lesson in Sylhet



ANDREW EAGLE

**A**WAY from the news. Away from the enormity of a planet on the brink. Away from inner restlessness there is yet life. It's what I learnt in Sylhet.

It was morning, it was sweltering. Still, I was fortunate to be back after several years. Sylhet's precinct along the northern bank of the Surma River, alongside the Keane Bridge and Amjad Ali's clock tower, is one of those iconic *adda* spots that live on in the mind. Unknowingly about to get a little life lesson, or a gentle reminder of that sort which Bangladesh is expert to give, I sat for tea.

I was feeling restless. Restless in the way I think most people feel some of the time, that restlessness born of the modern world, when we read headlines and despair at the litany of violence, bigotry, environmental collapse and pointless power grabs. Restless about life's passing, that usual wondering if one is on the best path. Amjad Ali chimed the hour.

Nobody is only ever the one thing—and I promise I'll get to the point promptly. But the thing is, as much as I left it behind a long time ago a part of me is still the Sydneysider, and a part of growing up in that fast-paced impersonal city is the usual penchant to complain—a ten-minute late train is a big deal—to never truly be satisfied, to always want more, to want deeper. Truth be told, I felt that kind of restlessness too, an unreasonable almost-genetic restlessness.

Mid cup of tea, a young man sat on the tea stall bench beside me. Predictably, curiosity willed him to strike a conversation. At first I was unsure if I really wished to answer the



Ali Amjad's clock tower in Sylhet.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR/STAR

standard form questions, if I wished to be disturbed from my self-centred jumble of thoughts. But he was polite.

The young man, originally from Hili in Dinajpur, was on his way to work, he said. He worked in a juice bar which he said he liked.

I'd come to Sylhet by plane—he asked that—and of course with adventure's twinkle in my eye I suggested he could save up, bit by

little bit, and one distant day splurge on a flight to Dhaka, just the once, to experience air travel.

Later, I learnt that he works twelve-hour shifts with no holidays. Without a hint of complaint in his voice he said too that he'd completed second year of college but was unable to sit for his exam because his father couldn't afford it. His father is a rickshaw driver. He has a younger sister at school and the

family relies on his meagre earnings. A pre-shift cup of tea must have been a ritual indulgence for him.

His is not an unusual life story for Bangladesh, I know.

We spoke of the difficulties graduates face in getting a decent job—common knowledge—that even with a Master's degree he might still work as a waiter.

And then I heard myself counselling him, as a sort of elder brother or

uncle might, in just the way any Bengali would—no, I'm not only that Sydneysider anymore!—to try to finish his college anyway, if not now then later, whenever circumstances allowed. Maybe only after his college graduation he could start saving for that plane ride.

When it came time to pay for his tea I told him not to worry about it, but he was insistent. He pulled out some taka and said, "See! I have money!" And instinctively—Bengali instinctively, I grabbed him by the arms and pushed him back a little so he couldn't give the money to the shopkeeper. I told the shopkeeper in Bengali style not to accept money from him.

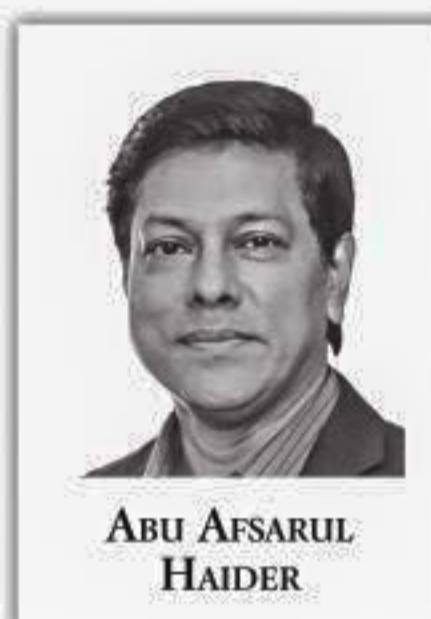
Well, the young man had no choice but to accept my insistence. As he finally wandered off towards the juice bar, out of the corner of my eye I saw a little smile had crept onto his face. I guess he had a bit of a story to tell his juice bar colleagues—his unexpected encounter with "the foreigner".

In truth, he gave much more than I gave him. It's been more than twenty years since Bangladesh first blessed my life. I've often tried to learn that kind of patience and humility that ordinary Bangladeshis have in abundance. I'm still trying. I was reminded to count my blessings, to be happy with whatever I have, or don't have, to live in the moment and make the most of every single Amjad Ali tick. In short, I was reminded not to be restless.

It can be that mine is a life of privileges and opportunities that the young man will never know. Even so, as I sat on that bench with a new cup of tea in hand, I wondered once again: perhaps it is him, and all of the ordinary Bangladeshis like him, who are truly the most professional human beings. Westerners have a lot to learn from Bangladesh.

Andrew Eagle is an Australian-born writer and English teacher who has been living in Bangladesh for quite a long time.

# The 'Get-Rich-Quick Syndrome' and our dilemma



ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

**H**OW to get rich quick? That's the question I once asked my professor of economics when I was studying in the United States in the late '80s. Without

a moment's hesitation, he said, "Well, son, if getting rich is really important to you, then you should probably not study economics, better go to any third world country and start your own business or just get into politics." At the time I didn't have a clue what he was talking about and was unable to follow his recommendations. But after coming back to Bangladesh it didn't take me long to realise and understand that what he was saying had truth to it.

In most developing countries today, political corruption include extortion, cronyism, graft, embezzlement, nepotism, and fraud; bribery in the awarding of business contracts are common and the governance system is weak. Bangladesh is no exception. What we see is for some people politics is a family calling; for others, just business—a means to acquire wealth through the preferential allocation of contracts once in office. Though our leaders often claim that their politics is for the people and for the welfare of the country, in reality what we see is that many of them serve themselves upon being elected to serve the people.

Today, it is a commonly accepted fact that politics is the best profession that one can opt for if one aspires to

make a lot of money in the shortest possible time. Politics as a career is becoming lucrative in our country, and more and more people are getting interested in this profession. When a person, coming from the lower rung of the social ladder becomes a politician, they magically rise to the highest rung of the same hierarchy. Although our politicians are on the highest rung of the social order, some of them lack a strong moral fibre. It is this feature of our politicians that makes them a class apart from the politicians of well-governed countries.

Dishonesty in politics can be found everywhere; but here, the manner in which some politicians now are manipulating the system, by taking control of their local areas and amassing fortune through tender manipulation, shady land and sand business, by extorting money from the transport sector and running drugs and gambling operations, and illegal casinos, are worrying. Economists argue that political corruption undermines the rule of law, tilts the playing field and creates unfair competition, and increases the cost of doing business that is eventually paid by the common people. It also damages investment environment, and above all, erodes trust in government and politics. At a discussion on Bangabandhu's 7th March speech, Awami League leader Obaidul Quader asked, "How many politicians can honestly say they are completely clean?" It is the politicians who should be blamed for widespread corruption in Bangladesh, he added.

According to the 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by



Transparency International, Bangladesh is the 149th least corrupt nation out of 175 countries. Unpleasant as it may sound, corruption has spread its web in all the sectors of Bangladesh. Our banking sector is currently one of the most affected victims of corruption. People with political connections find it too easy to borrow from financial institutions with no intention to repay. The stories of Hallmark-Sonali Bank loan scam, Bismillah, or BASIC Bank loan fraud and embezzlement of thousands of crores of taka from the state owned and private commercial banks by various business organisations, and stock market manipulation, are known to all. There are allegations that in many of these banks the board of directors have been formed mainly on political consideration; these people

have earned huge sums of money by approving and disbursing loans. Meanwhile, the United Nations in a report published on May 7, 2018 also stated that the banking sector in Bangladesh had been plagued by financial scams, non-performing loans and weak monitoring problems, which might cause a macroeconomic risk in the near term.

The common people expect that our local and national representatives will raise their voice on the key issues of economic development, health, education etc., and will create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. However, many, if not all, who join politics have other motives. The deadly virus known as "get-rich-quick syndrome" has permeated almost every facet of our lives and hence

causing indiscipline at all levels—from the literate to the illiterate, the aristocrat to the underclass, everyone is suffering. The need to become wealthy is so deeply ingrained in our psyche that our leaders, teachers, students, doctors, engineers, public servants, social workers have lost their real goal, forgotten their real identity, while moving towards only one thing in their lives: money. It's at the centre of virtually all thoughts, decisions and activities.

Today, the concept of honesty and human dignity seems lost in our politics. It is now an open secret that people join politics not to serve the nation but to earn wealth within a very short span of time. Various media reports suggest that more than 61 percent lawmakers in the present parliament are from the business community. It is a definite indication that political standards are going down to abysmal levels, because when politics turns into a business for the politicians they stop considering the interests of the masses. Our President Abdul Hamid rightly said, "It's a matter of regret that today's politics has gone into the pockets of businessmen... We have to get rid of it." Unfortunately, politics nowadays does not attract too many committed people. However, the political parties can change this scenario: by stopping criminalisation of politics and by promoting honest, educated and service-minded people who will put national interest first.

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**ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY**

**Neville Chamberlain**  
SEPTEMBER 30, 1938  
**Munich Agreement signed**

The notorious Munich Agreement, in which Britain's Neville Chamberlain encouraged Britain and France to appease Adolf Hitler's demands in the hope of preventing World War II, was reached on this day in 1938.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**

**ANDREI TARKOVSKY**  
(1932—1986)  
Russian filmmaker, writer, and film theorist

*A book read by a thousand different people is a thousand different books.*