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A TOAST TO THE TEA TOWN

ASGAR ASWAD

Here's a toast to the holy city. The city of beautiful rain, the beautiful city of rain. The green city.

To the places with memories.

All the times we fiddled with our phones a little too much and had to take them to Karimullah Market, only to be lost in the sea of a thousand tech-shops, and all the times the same thing happened when we were looking for RAM sticks at Planet Araf. The smell of newly printed books and leaflets at the libraries and publishers of Raja Mansion that we can only sniff but rarely buy. I can't forget to mention Baatighar. The times we went to Al-Hamra, not to buy anything, but begging our parents to buy us a yo-yo or that remote controlled car. All the times we pretended to be interested in the food of Spicy Restaurant, only to catch a picturesque view of the whole city from the top of City Centre. All the times we went to Latif Center to buy CDs from that one shop in the entire city.

To the city of rain.

The beautiful smell, just before it rains.

It doesn't always make us feel the same way. Sometimes, we'd just like to watch and hear and smell it from the balcony, or maybe even read a book while doing so. Other times, we can't help but go to the rooftop and let it drench us. But then again, there are times when life isn't so gentle to us, and the rain is just there to ruin our days and we have to do three hours of classes in wet clothes.

To the food.

All the lunchtimes at Panch Bhai restaurant, trying out all the unknown *bhorta*, the only way of distinguishing between them being the taste, while we waited for the *begun*

bhaji. All the afternoon snacks at Panshi, ordering the beef *chaap* after waiting so many hours. All the evenings, getting hot *jilapi* from Foyez Snacks after the endless cruel hours of coaching, or the hours we spent at the lawn of Palki, just enjoying the glasses after glasses of lemon juice, maybe give some people the look for smoking in public. *Doi chira* from Sufia, *khichuri* from Bhojon Bari, Nuru bhai's *chotpoti*. Artisan's hot chocolate, and President's *biriyani*. How can we ever forget Arcadia's food court?

To SUST.

All the times we walked the 1 Kilo Road with someone special, knowing that they liked us back, but never having the courage to actually admit it to each other. And all the times we hung out at New Zealand and Australia, two places named by students who felt stuck in this small town, a way to tell themselves they were travelling the world every day of their lives. All the times we bunked classes in the name of extracurricular clubs, only to share *shingara* from Central Cafeteria, and *fuchka* from near the campus' Shaheed Minar.

To the holy land.

All the times we went on adventures, trying to find all 360 of the shrines scattered throughout this vast maze, while a secret chamber of our heart knew that we'd never catch them all. All the visits to the *mazars* of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) and Hazrat Shah Paran (RA) as children, the beautiful hours spent feeding the birds and the fish. All the hundreds of different mosques we prayed in, and running out of them after prayers when the elderly tried to make us stay for another hour to attend further religious discussions.

To the rides.

To all the bicycle rides to Temukhi. The



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group tea parties at Bacchu Miya's tea stall after a long ride to the airport. Maybe even Baishtilla, if we'd been still yearning for a little more adventure. All the while gazing at the tea gardens at both sides. The long-awaited rides to Bypass that we never eventually went on. All the time we spent doing downhill biking competitions and making compilation videos of those. All the biking groups we made, that we no longer use now. All the slow rides inside the city. If this isn't the best city for cycling, which is? The city is big enough to feel like a ride, and small enough to have cycling as an actual method of transportation.

To the tea gardens.

All the times in childhood we thought we could just pluck the tea leaves from Malnicherra, Lakkatura, Tarapur, and make tea

directly from the leaves. And all the times we got lost in each of the tea gardens.

To the walks, the roads, and the bridges.

All the traffic jams in Ambarkhana Point. The regular protests and movements of the youth in Chowhatta. To the lonely, quiet walks in Housing Estate. To the hangouts in Eidgah, be it during the day, the night, or the afternoon. How much time have we spent at Eidgah? Then there are the romantic walks in Eco Park. And yes, I saved the best for last. Who can ever forget the midnight walks in Chanchal Road? All the first hours of the day, standing there by ourselves at the Keane Bridge, with a cup of *rong cha* in our hand, feeling the trembles of the bridge. The last hours of the day spent at the Kazir Bazar bridge, having *jhalumuri* with our closest friends, watching the sunset. All the afternoons at Temukhi Bridge, going to the outskirts of the city and calling it a day.

All the tours to Bisnakandi, Jaflong, Sreemangal, Ratargul, Shadapathor, Bholaganj, Tanguar Haor, Hakaluki Haor, Baikka Beel, Madhabpur Lake, Tamabil, Jaintia with friends that we'll never forget no matter where we end up in life.

Then there are times it feels a little too cramped and small. As if you want to get away. Like all small towns, a part of you wants to leave, to fly away, and a part of you wants to stay forever. A paradox, like all cities.

But then it gets better. All the known faces, and their smiles of familiarity. We don't just have sincerity, we exude it. Something about this city makes it feel so safe, so cozy.

This is home. Here's to Sylhet.

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SYLHET IN SPIRIT

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Think up some facets or concepts that are intertwined with the name "Sylhet". There is a very good chance that the term "Sufism" would cross your mind at one point or another. Bricks of worn out buildings in Sylhet might gradually transmute to powder but the ambience created by Sufism is far from fading away from the minds of the people living here. Interlaced with the history and faith of Bangladeshi Muslims, Sufism has been never stilted or pockmarked with implausible notions. Rather it has played a crucial role to weave cocoons of harmony among different religions.

Sufism can be construed as a Muslim philosophy which has a different ambience compared to the legalistic, formal Islamic theology of the ninth century. Its rudimentary preaching consists of forming a unique spiritual relationship with the Almighty instead of clinging to the worldly aspects. Sufism is synonymous to mysticism and encourages a person to glean the true essence of one's religion.

The advent of Sufism in Bengal dates back to the mid-11th century and it began to permeate a huge portion of lifestyles of people living in the region. The Sufis were assiduous in spreading Islam to the different parts of Northern India and they had no qualms about enlightening the people about humanitarian values. As time went by, Sylhet became a sort of epicentre of Sufism due to the arrival of a large number of Sufis here. The Sufis played a significant role in shaping people's repertoire through constant preaching of Islam and humanity. Sufism never entertained the notion of demeaning other religions; the Sufis were always parting knowledge on how quintessential it is to live in harmony.

The waters of the river Surma had been stippled with the arrival of great Sufi scholars including Hazrat Shahjalal (RA). Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) expunged the atrocious rules of the then ruler and acceded to the hearts of people as the benevolent propagator of Islam.

While talking to the present Mutawalli (Supervisor) of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) *dargah*, I came across some interesting stories. Fateh Ullah Al Aman, the current Mutawalli of the *dargah* was recounting the story of how Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) rescued the people from the burden of paying unconscionable revenues by abolishing the corrupted tax system. It's believed that he wrought miracles which inexorably drew people to accepting Islam. What's more, the *dargah-e-Hazrat Shahjalal (RA)* is an exemplary embodiment of harmony as people from different religions visit this place throughout the year. The roads of Sylhet are usually packed with unusual traffic on Thursday owing to the fact that a large number of Sufi proponents set out to pay their weekly visit to the *dargah*, on the threshold of the weekly Jummah prayers. People seek out solace here as they offer prayers and recite from the Holy Quran. Some insomniac visitors even claimed that a visit to this place helped them with their peace of mind more than their regular dose of sedatives. It all comes down to the beliefs and perspectives of people. The Sylhetis are mostly tuned to the spiritual essence of religion and they crave for spiritual tranquillity.

Sylhet is dotted with many shrines; shrines can be even found on the outskirts of the town. People visiting the Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) *dargah* usually make a mental note to pay a visit to the

shrine of Hazrat Shah Paran (RA) as well. Hazrat Shah Paran (RA) is believed to be the nephew of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA). The face of Sylhet changes by a wide margin during the time when Urs (death anniversary) observations begin at the shrines. The two-day programme is carried out with a plethora of arrangements including prayers and distribution of food. Schools are often declared closed on those days as it's a well-known fact that the traffic would skyrocket, providing little to no scope for students to reach their respective institutions.

Now let's come to the perceptions and thoughts of Sylhet locals revolving around the notion of Sufism. A large number of the Sylhetis are devoted to respecting the preaching of Sufism as they believe it paves a path for them to connect with the Almighty. Many of these proponents are dedicated to supporting the overall maintenance of the shrines through financial means; some even put away a share of their monthly income to contribute to the maintenance of the shrines.

However, there is another group of people who think differently about Sufism. Some believe that while the philosophy itself is free from errors, it's incorrect to assume that all rituals and practice carried out in the name of Sufism are valid. Some even go as far as to voice out their suspicions on how people are straying away from the main concept of Islam by clinging on to the belief that the shrines alone can help to mitigate their problems. They express their contempt that the funding process related to the maintenance of the shrines is neither satisfactory nor convenient.

Albeit Sufism is an intriguing philos-

ophy, its misinterpretation can lead to severe ramifications. For instance, people with little academic qualification end up ignoring medical emergencies. The reason behind this is their misconception that a visit to the shrines alone can solve all their problems. While prayers can go a long way, one must not stick to such erroneous concepts. Therefore, people must keep some points in check before delving into the world of Sufism. Sufism should be a key to accruing tranquillity; it doesn't encourage adding condiments namely exaggerations and innuendos to its interpretation.

Overall, Sufism is a riveting way of perceiving the world. Its kaleidoscopic preaching can surely lead the way to a placid and focused mind. The teachings can go a long way in helping us to take portentous decisions. However, one must not breach the line between right and wrong interpretations surrounding Sufism. Obnoxious interpretations could only lead to travesties – the exact opposite of what Sufism stands for. The amicable people of Sylhet should address these problems with tangible approaches so that the essence of Sufism can continue to thrive with utmost clarity. Sufism and Sylhet are intertwined, indeed.

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