

Dhaka: A distant dream

Sara Rashid, based in New York, is interested in how religion and politics shape art in South Asia.

SARA RASHID

“Desher maya tyag kore bideshe chole gecihen apnara?” (“So you have forgone your longing for the country and settled abroad?”) It wasn’t a question, but an attempt to understand a decision that was incomprehensible to him. His words gave away his emotions, which showed hints of scepticism, resigned curiosity, and even attempts at acceptance, but mainly disappointment. As a forest ranger, his work was to protect and preserve the country’s emerald pride, the Sundarbans, and its rapidly vanishing wildlife, which became the nucleus of his existence. He had given his life to safeguarding a national landmark, he would live and die by it, and the impossibility of leaving a land that he had offered himself to, which in return had given him his livelihood, stories, passion, and faith, showed his sadness at our decision to move away from our

chaos I was raised alongside, and it feels like a reunion with a childhood friend. We might not meet often, but when we do, we’re at home. I think back to the rules shaping my New York life, and the rigid structure that guarantees the security needed to survive in a place with few second chances. It feels strangely alien to the life I experience fleetingly every winter in Dhaka; and although on most days I rely on this very structure for survival, today it feels unfamiliar, remarkably sterile, like a life seeped in the insipidity of achieving and chasing, lacking any semblance of spirit or joy.

Dhaka is my place of healing. My days start with ripe pomegranates, my mother waiting with a box of *motichoor laddoos* for us to share over breakfast, and the smell of crisp winter mornings conflated with the unbearable honking of cars doing rounds of school drop-offs. Most



PHOTO: MARUF AREFIN MIM

travelled through geographies, danced through weddings and held hands through heartbreaks, they have weathered fights and nursed each other’s illnesses. All this over hours of retelling the same stories while sharing endless cups of *cha*, and all this while finding a way back to each other, regardless of where life has taken us. Dhaka feels glorious from the sweetness and secrets of childhood friendships. And today, my home is an extension of these friendships. And every winter, without question or delay, they converge in the heart of my beautiful, broken city.

Winters in Dhaka are a ballad carried from the city’s birds to its few remaining trees, from the nonchalance of children playing in parks to the scent of *mehedion* brides, from the hustle of street vendors to the buzz of new friendships forming on university campuses. This season is a celebration of the city, both in defiance of its reality and in honour of it. The lights strung in the corners of every street and the smell of *kachchi* wafting out of the windows mingle with the anticipation of a groom’s arrival and the changes about to mark the beginning of a bride’s new life. It seems as if the city is the bride, dressed in a red *sharee*, adorned in traditional gold jewellery that’s complete with a *teep*, she’s waiting for a glimpse of her beloved as they embark on this journey, one marked by hints of apprehension, but mainly by hopes and dreams.

Through all the mangoes and monsoons of my life, what has remained constant is the comfort and security of Dhaka. A city that cannot be contained within borders, but lives in the souls of those that carry with them a piece of what it means to be from this unforgettable, extraordinary place. A city of heartache and broken dreams, a city of triumph and soul-crushing defeats, a city that breaks you bone by bone, then nurses you back to health. A city exploding with love and longing, I carry all this with me, and once again prepare to leave the city of my faraway dreams, a home that I remember, not one where I live.

In Dhaka, mourning has dignity, it is patient and empathetic and brings with it the kindness and strength of community. There is less of a rush to bounce back into work or society, less of a need to hide your pain, and more room to grieve and tend to a broken heart. You’re offered the kindness to take more than you can give. There is grace in healing over time, which is a luxury New York cannot extend me. And so, every year, I carry all my love, but more so all my loss to Dhaka; I rely on the generosity of the communities, kindness of strangers, love of childhood friends, and security of family to heal and mourn all I have lost.

magical country – *mayabi desh*. Dhaka is a dream, albeit an elusive and distant one. Within minutes of landing, I’m embraced by an overwhelming feeling of belonging. I am welcomed by *chaos*, one that has been sown into the very fabric of my being. In fact, I slip right back into the

days, my mornings bleed into the afternoons, as my parents and I spend endless cups of cha over stories about childhoods, relationships, collective and personal traumas and the love that binds us together. When at home, whether I’m reading, eating, working or daydreaming, my parents

and I are always together; the physical proximity they demand of me during my time in Dhaka is a testament to our time apart, and the lives we live away from each other. To my mother, my time at home feels like time borrowed from someone else’s life. She needs me in her line of sight at all times. My name, dripped in honey, echoes off the walls when I’m not near her, as if any moment when she cannot see me is a moment of loss. For this, I count my blessings, because where else can I find a love this pure, without questions or conditions, where I’m enough just as I come, and all I have to do is be.

Home is tucked away in the softest corners of Dhaka: it hides in the flavours of Jhorna’s aloo bharta, in Baba’s worries that come alive when I oil his hair, in the rings that form inside our cha cups as my friends and I retell stories that have held us together for years, and in the *anchol* of my dadima’s *sharee* that dances with the jingle of her keys. Dhaka is my place of loss; it is where I come to grieve the parts of my childhood I’ve lost, and it is where I have buried

loved ones who raised me, like my dadima and nanu.

It’s my first time home since the passing of dadima, and a visit to her graveside is a reminder of how physical loss is, and the suddenness with which it erases parts of home that were tied to a person and their presence. Her passing looms over my head like a heavy, dark cloud; I think of her love for feeding others – pitted lychees waiting for us after school, *pitha* in all seasons, *jhal aam shotto* baking under the winter sun – now there is no one impatiently running after me with a second piece of *gorur gosh* with a side of folktale: “Take two bites or you’ll fall into the river.” Her passing has left a void in this city, and parts of my childhood and of life in Dhaka have left with her.

In Dhaka, mourning has dignity, it is patient and empathetic and brings with it the kindness and strength of community. It doesn’t come bearing a timeline; there is less of a rush to bounce back into work or society, less of a need to hide your pain, and more room to grieve and tend to a broken heart. You’re offered the kindness to

take more than you can give. There is grace in healing over time, which is a luxury New York cannot extend me.

And so, every year, I carry all my love, but more so all my loss to Dhaka; I rely on the generosity of the communities, kindness of strangers, love of childhood friends, and security of family to heal and mourn all I have lost. There’s something in Dhaka’s air, heavy with its own struggles, frustrations, and heartbreak that hide behind its endless optimism and champion spirit. It becomes your companion during times of anguish and loss, but also teaches you to pick yourself up after a fall, instilling the spirit of fighting, of being fearless.

Dhaka is my place of joy, of hope, and of the kind of love that bursts at the seams. It’s the place that has given me friendships of more than 28 years, the comfort and security of which have held and sustained me through the different seasons of my life. Our stories started at the age of three, inside a freshly painted school in the corner of a busy Dhanmondi street; they have

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

A blueprint from India for women’s economic empowerment



Anita Zaidi is president of the Gender Equality Division at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

ANITA ZAIDI

Throughout my career, I have seen many examples of triumph against the odds – extraordinary accomplishments that often begin with a small group of individuals seeking to solve a problem. In the best cases, local communities, government, and the private sector align and invest in programmes and policies that create more opportunities for these groups to flourish.

The extraordinary success of women’s self-help groups in India represents one of the best-case outcomes. Established by women determined to build a brighter future for themselves and their families, these groups have thrived thanks to innovative financial and infrastructure support from the Indian government. With over 80 million women participating in 7.5 million such groups, India is fostering the world’s largest community development programme, which is now a key component of the country’s economy.

Women, especially in rural areas, face gender-based barriers to participating fully in their communities and building a livelihood. Many are unable to open a bank account or access credit and are dependant on informal loans from relatives, friends, or money lenders. Moreover, traditional family structures and social norms may constrain women from engaging in activities necessary to start or expand a small business.

Self-help groups were first formed in the mid-1980s to address these barriers by providing access to savings and credit so that women could earn a livelihood and lift themselves

and their families out of poverty. The results speak for themselves: women’s self-help groups have contributed to India’s extraordinarily sharp reduction in poverty, from 55.1 percent to 16.4 percent (415 million people), over the last 15 years.

Initially, new groups were dependant on members, though often impoverished, pooling what little money they had to get started. The Indian government stepped in to alleviate this hardship by providing unsecured loans without the need for a formal, registered business entity. Importantly, these loans are offered at a very competitive interest rate of 12 percent, which drops to seven percent if a group repays its loans within 30 days of the due date. With this support, the average self-help group was able to borrow around INR 200,000 (USD 2,500) each, and in 2021 the limit for collateral-free loans was increased from USD 10,000 to USD 25,000.

Over the past decade, more than USD 60 billion has been made available to self-help groups in India and, cumulatively, women in these groups have saved an estimated USD 6 billion. Access to low-interest loans continues to help an increasing number of women create sustainable sources of income, accumulate assets and savings, and build financial security. And individual group members are building more than their financial skills; they are also raising their self-confidence and influence within the community.

per month. And each woman has her own story. Sunila Devi enrolled her children in private schools, Chitrekha Devi is working toward a bachelor’s degree, and Pushpa Devi has started her own ambitious business renting mobile sound systems, which allows her to employ others.

Now multiply those stories by millions, and you can begin to grasp the full effects of these groups. As each woman contributes more to the household income, she gains more say in household decisions. And collectively, they show what is possible when one of the most essential challenges to gender equality – increasing women’s economic power – is addressed.

Ultimately, we know that increasing a woman’s economic power bolsters her personal agency and empowers her to play a greater role in her family and in her community. India’s government-

Self-help groups were first formed in the mid-1980s, providing access to savings and credit so that women could lift themselves and their families out of poverty. The results speak for themselves: women’s self-help groups have contributed to India’s extraordinarily sharp reduction in poverty, from 55.1 percent to 16.4 percent, over the last 15 years.

supported self-help groups demonstrate the transformative effects of policy initiatives that are designed to meet the needs of

marginalised women. The task now is to replicate this success.

The goals should be clear: to make credit accessible and affordable, build women’s financial skills and credit history, and strengthen their financial security. And the various players must be resolute in their support. The closer you look at the details of the self-help groups in India, the more you see the dedication it took from all stakeholders to bring together the people, resources, and tools needed to succeed at this scale. Government agencies at both the federal and state levels were involved, along with banks and other financial institutions, researchers, and an extensive network of non-government and voluntary organisation partners working at the grassroots level in communities across India.

This formula of determination, collaboration, and political will

can be applied to other stubborn barriers to gender equality. One of the more persistent challenges I hear from women, most recently during a visit to Dakar, Senegal, is that entrepreneurs also need business development services, skills-building, and access to markets and value chains. India’s programme shows that this is feasible: Currently, about 20 percent of self-help group members have these additional supports, and efforts are underway to promote women-owned cooperatives and businesses.

Everyone deserves the chance to live a healthy and productive life. My resolution for this year is to remain inspired by the determined efforts of individuals and by our collective capacity – as India’s self-help groups’ remarkable success have demonstrated – to innovate as we strive for a healthier, happier, more equitable world.



Love solving our crossword puzzles?

WE SEE YOU!

Email us a photo of your solved crossword puzzle at dsopinion@gmail.com and we will post it on our Facebook page. Let's grow our community of crossword solvers!



www.facebook.com/dsopinion

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Tot's spot
5 Jazz genre
10 Helen's mother
11 Groom's garb
12 Commotions
13 Some marbles
14 Worrier's mountain
16 Wagon-pulling group
20 Boosts
23 Parisian pal
24 Show gratitude to
25 Grating sounds
27 Cochlea setting
28 Upright
29 Roadside marker
32 Part for Ford,

perhaps
36 Laundry problems
39 Pennsylvania port
40 Aerie youngster
41 Go by bus
42 Low cards
43 Wound remnant

DOWN

1 Chowder bit
2 Make over
3 Pop star
4 One on a diamond
5 "Taps" tooter
6 Glorify
7 Track act
8 Pindar poem
9 Not neg.
11 Flip call
15 LummoX

17 Move carefully
18 Band boosters
19 Atomizer's output
20 Flower part
21 Bangkok native
22 Rank above viscount
25 Token of love
26 Stag's pride
28 "The Planets" composer
30 Blunt of "A Quiet Place"
31 Window sections
33 Rocker
34 Verdi opera
35 Stag, e.g.
36 Ready to go
37 Sea dog
38 Long time

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	C	O	T		S	C	A	M
P	A	C	E	R	S	L	A	T
I	R	E	N	E	M	A	N	O
E	L	L			L	O	O	T
L	O	O	I	N	G		N	E
S	T	O	V	E		L	E	D
			B	E	I	G	E	
C	A	Y		R	O	A	M	S
C	O	P		L	O	O	P	I
L	O	O	K	I	N	G		L
A	L	L	E	N		O	H	A
P	I	L	E	D		L	I	N
S	T	O	P			P	O	D