



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

CREATIVE NONFICTION

London cabs, jams and kinship

Bangkok has jams and so does San Francisco. There is perhaps no country in the world that is jam free—both kinds, traffic and the edible fruit-flavoured ones that go with bread or scones at breakfast or tea. I remember, once during the Mayday holiday in China, being stuck in a jam in a scenic town called Hangzhou. Pedestrians moved faster than us and yet we were told to sit tight as otherwise we were likely to get lost. It was our first holiday in China.

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

London, once the centre of the empire where the sun never set, dates back to prehistory with evidence of structures from Mesolithic times. This was of course long after dinosaurs had died, and humankind had started on its journey. The journey takes us through history where the Roman Empire gave way to the British Empire. Coaches dotted the cobbled paths. Jane Austen, Sherlock Holmes and so many more wrote of them—that was before the jet set drove at breakneck speed across the autobahn, or man thought of colonising outer space. Those were more graceful eras when people had time to pause and stare. But, from Londinium of Queen Boadicea's time, perhaps one interesting thing remains—the speed at which the traffic moves in downtown London—along residential areas. Or, maybe Boadicea, whose statue graces the banks of Thames, was faster paced than taxis in modern-day London as she rushed down with her tribal lot to raze the Roman stronghold in Britain, for after all, they had taken away her kingdom. Perhaps, sitting inside a London cab is more like being in a horse trotting carriage with Ms Betsy Trotwood. Of course, those would be coach horses, and these were crawling cabs.

Crawling cabs are a feature of many downtown traffic infested cities around the world. But the distinction in Londinium was that there were no impatient honks, no angry rebuttals from drivers or passengers but a peaceful calm camaraderie, a patient wait to get to the destination. The traffic in general moves slowly. It was somewhat like the protests they hold outside the Parliament and Westminster Abbey—disciplined with placards, no violence, no unruly mobs, no clashes with police or bloodshed.

Occasionally, cabs in London town refuse to ferry passengers across to another area as the places are, say the cabbies, 'too far'. But I

had seen that in Kolkata too—when it was spelt Calcutta and the claims of Job Charnock to being its founder had been unchallenged—that is, when I was a teen. Now, as the crown returns its 'loot' on popular demand to countries who may or may not care for them as well as the British Museum, I wonder if the London cabbies learnt the trick from Calcutta drivers of yore or was it the other way round.

The trend has recently spread through more colonies of the former empire. In Singapore too, nowadays the cabbies choose their passengers based on their own needs and conveniences, not that of the passengers. Private hires offer multiple rides in the same car—not much different from a stagecoach, except they are sleeker and carry fewer, belted, and seated in more comfort. The cost is shared.

In cities like Delhi, traffic jams are accompanied by noise of honking horns and irate drivers overtaking from the wrong side. If your cabby does not close his window, you might hear colourful language and watch people hawk. You can see that even from inside a closed window.

The place for watching people hawk though is China—where jams are not unheard of either. Once, I had seen a man hawk while on a ropeway in Guilin. There were people walking below and I wondered how they would interpret the viscous liquid that dropped from high above their heads?

But getting back to traffic. Bangkok has jams and so does San Francisco. There is perhaps no country in the world that is jam free—both kinds, traffic and the edible fruit-flavoured ones that go with bread or scones at breakfast or tea. I remember, once during the Mayday holiday in China, being stuck in a jam in a scenic town called Hangzhou. Pedestrians moved faster than us and yet we were told to sit tight as otherwise we were likely to get lost. It was our first holiday in China. A few months later in Beijing, I remember, on one

such holiday when the whole of China was out to party, we were stuck in a human jam in the Summer Palace. It was tough to quit too—to go against the stream of people that almost carried us with them—but we did do it and escaped.

China was the place where I learnt to bake scones. I had read of them in Enid Blyton books when I was a child. I learnt an easy recipe for children while compiling a multinational cookbook with a German friend. And those scones did not even need a jam to go with them.

However, Paddington Bear might still have needed jam. Marmalade jam was always a favourite with the fictional bear who moved out of the deepest, darkest of Peru, a place I have always wanted to visit, especially the Incan ruins. I have yet to go to South America. But the very fact that I could see their artefacts in the British Museum drew me closer to their culture. The commonality of humankind is something I have seen displayed in artefacts in museums. I have never quite understood the concept of homeland. Between marmalade and morogba (mango jam), the difference is only the favour of fruit and what climate suits which tree. I have lived in bungalows with orange trees and in houses with mango trees and loved living in both, even though they were separated by divides created artificially by our species.

For a lay person like me, a glimpse into the commonality of humankind generates a sense of kinship with people of diverse cultures. That is what museums showcase. Or traffic jams. Or even jams from many countries or cultures to spread on bread and scones.

Mitali Chakravarty is the founding editor of [borderlessjournal.com](#), which has published its first hardcopy anthology, *Monalisa No longer Smiles: An Anthology of Writings from across the World*.

POETRY

Blissful-morning journey

Translated from the Bangla by Abdus Selim

MOHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

The blissful-morning journey's begun; it leads ahead to the light;
The journey's started in the twilight; setting out to the joyfulness;
The auspicious rallies are all around; they're processions of felicity;
Man, your universe is now a stretch of a glorious millennium.

Perfumed with Amani Bengal's bronzed farmers are in the rally,
With ilish-panta bowl in hand ebony-beauty farmer-women too,
Holding their halkhata to their bosom frugal dealers fluster about;
Stretching over the entire sacred hours birdlike men have turned into hermits;
This morning men are corn-kings, women are harvest-queens.

Highways, townships, open fields and lands, market-places of this Bengal
All walks of people have come bare-footed, to this youthful procession;
Masked they've come, with mallets in hand—killers of countless monsters
Youths n old, blacksmiths, potters, and fishermen-weavers farmers, all;
Human faces have now become one mass-face, all cheering 'Love you';
Human language transformed into love, all voices chorus 'Love you'.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

Wings of thousand oars, punts with three poles, sails of thousand boats, Cautious in storm and rolling water, Jatipita and Jatimata are holding the helm; We're boat-cruisers, our known yet strange earth's full of wealth-harvest-blossom; Up and down stream we travel as pilgrims; we're the couriers of millennium.

It emerged from copper-inscription, this fleet'll cross pass every shack-town-port;
Himalayan peak, myriad streams of Ganga-Padma, warbling Bay of Bengal at the north;
From Behula floating to Ma-Fatema, trouble-soothers, by the side of the rolling river;
This procession will stir all Bengalees' rebirth, the Shaheedminar of language martyrs;
All Bengali castes and-creeds, birds and animals, and gulls glide into this procession.

As it advances
The procession will relit itself from monument of freedom, from eternal flame,
This procession will wind through all water, land and air passages of Bengal;
This procession won't stop, this procession won't stop ever;
Triumphphant Bengalees know, winning Bengalees believe
The procession will retrieve days of change for all-blissful Bengalees every dawn.
This procession won't stop, this procession won't stop ever;

Translated by Abdus Selim

Mohammad Nurul Huda is a Bangladeshi poet and novelist, and the current Director General of Bangla Academy.

Abdus Selim is an academic, writer, and translator. He teaches English language and literature at Central Women's University. Email: [seliminubd@gmail.com](#).

INTERVIEW

‘We are translators every day’: Arunava Sinha

Arunava Sinha is a prominent and prolific translator of Bengali and English texts, whose works include *Khwabnama* by Akhtaruzzaman Elias, *Shameless* by Taslima Nasreen, *Bonduk Dweep* by Amitav Ghosh, and many more. In this conversation, the academic and translator discusses how and what he translates, the need for constructive criticism of translation, and suggestions for emerging practitioners.

MASHIUR RAHMAN, NAIMUL ISLAM, SURAIYA ALAM

Do you feel that you need more critics than you have right now?

Most definitely. I do feel the need for criticism. I need people to tell me what can be better, and what didn't work. I certainly want people not to be blinded, but to read with open eyes and an open mind and to honestly take each work on its own merits rather than associate it with any kind of reputation the translator may have. That's how I would read, and that's how I would want others to read and respond as well.

What I have found is that very often the criticism of translation comes from this notion that, "This is such a good book in Bangla (or any other language) that it could never be translated. Therefore, the translation must be bad." This is the kind of response I've faced from people who haven't even read the translation. They're criticising on principle. Which I respect—if you believe that translations can never match the first version, by all means you are entitled to that viewpoint. But then

it's of no value to me, because that is a generalised position which is not really responding to my translation in any way whatsoever. So, I'll listen to it, but I won't learn anything from it.

I believe in translation. So, I would like to hear from people who also believe in translation but feel that my translation was not up to the mark. That would make sense. Then I would really like to know where the gaps were. And there would be an opportunity for open conversations as well. What I feel the lack of is open conversations on translations.

All the questions in literature festivals and so on all come from people who have not read the translation, so they don't ask specific questions. They end up asking the same generalised questions—*What is your process of translation? How do you translate so many books? What was the most challenging thing? Which is your favourite translation? Who was difficult to translate?* These are questions you can ask anybody. They are not unique to the person you're talking to.

So, I would like someone to pick up a book I've translated, go



COLLAGE: SARAH ANJUM BARI

over it, pick up examples, talk about specific things in the text and ask me, *What were you thinking when you translated this? This is perhaps what my thought was when I read your translations. Would you like to engage with my ideas?* And I would love to engage with deep readers' ideas on what they're reading and listen to them, maybe with different versions and different interpretations. Show me where I may have misread the text altogether, which is entirely possible.

Do you think artificial intelligence could take over human intelligence in terms of the craft of translation?

No. Artificial intelligence can do a great job of giving you meanings of

individual words. Maybe two words. The moment you put three words together, there's a context. It's a story that does not limit itself to the dictionary meanings of those three words. Maybe one day it will be developed if it takes enough input from human translators. At the moment, it is developed by software engineers, so it can't because they bring a brutal analytical part to it.

And we are translators every day, by the way. Everybody is a translator. We're forever taking things and ideas and thoughts that existed in one medium and putting it in another. We're starting with finding the right words for your thoughts, to conveying what you're thinking to someone

else, to listening to something on the street and putting it in your own words when you recount it to someone. Everything is an act of translation. And these are so strongly located in your own mind and your own heart and your own experiences that every such reading and therefore every such translation is unique. If you read two translations of the same text, you'll find that they're different. They use a different set of words, they arrive at slightly different places although they are clearly the same text, and yet they are not the same text. AI doesn't work in that direction. AI treats it like a crossword puzzle—there can be only one answer.

Do you have any advice for amateur translators who want to take it as a profession?

First, don't take it as a profession that will pay your bills. Take it as a profession that is your passion. Treat it like a profession, but don't expect all that comes from a profession. Two, read furiously. For every book that you translate, read a hundred books, both in the language from which you're translating and the language

into which you're translating. Three, read not just with your eyes but with your ears and your entire mind and your entire body, and I use the word body advisedly. Let the book talk to every part of you. Let the book talk not just to your intellectual mind, but also to your heart. Also to the core seat of your emotional responses, to the seat of your instinctive and psychological responses.

And practise. Practise all the time. Don't just work on the book that you're translating. Practise with other passages, practise with poetry, practise with drama. Very importantly, listen to how people talk in the language into which you're translating. Because a lot of books have dialogue, and getting dialogue right is tough.

Read the full interview on *The Daily Star* website and on *Star Books & Literature's* Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages.

Mashiur Rahman is an MA graduate from Creative Writing, while Naimul Islam and Suraiya Alam are pursuing their MA in Cultural Studies, at ULAB.