

The vanishing Ramanujan



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

“When I walk by the street and look at vendors selling things on the footpath, I can see the prices floating on the products. I see numbers all around me now. Prices hovering in the air and how much I would have left by the end of the month if I bought them.

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

I first met Javed on a rainy evening in March 1991. I was waiting for my friend Salim near Ashfaq Mia's tea stall, hoping he wouldn't ask for the 200 bucks I borrowed a month back. Sipping my ginger tea under the shed, I saw a lanky boy walk towards me. His shirt had visible dirt spots and one of its buttons was torn. The boy was probably in his early 30s but looked somewhere near 40 with bald patches and grey hair already visible.

"Are you Javed bhai?" asked the boy. "Salim bhai is on his way. He told me to come and accompany you while he arrives."

He looked exhausted but also looked like someone who was used to being exhausted. It wasn't an exhaustion born out of some recent stress, but rather one that had grown over months, years; the boy looked like he was moulded by it. 'The most depleted man in the world'—he'd call himself jokingly later on.

When I offered him a cup of tea, he said that he didn't have any cash on him. "It's on me, relax," I said as I told him to sit beside me.

He hesitated for a while, even after sitting beside me, and finally mustered up all his courage and told me, “Bhai, I don’t want the tea. Can you just give me the two bucks instead?”

I tried to keep my intrigue to myself and laughed, "Have the tea. I can give you the two bucks as well."

The boy blushed and nodded while looking at the dirt under his sandals. I could sense the discomfort in him and I wasn't kind enough to let it go.

"What now?" I smirked, "Would you rather have four bucks and not have the tea then? And the chain would go

on and on?"

The boy nodded quietly, biting his lips. Much to his dismay, I spent the next 15 minutes poking him even further before Salim arrived. Realising that I wouldn't get many answers from the boy, I asked Javed about him after he left.

His name was Jamal. In his mid-30s now, he came to Dhaka some eight years ago, looking for a job after graduating from a local college. A second division in his intermediate exam and a third

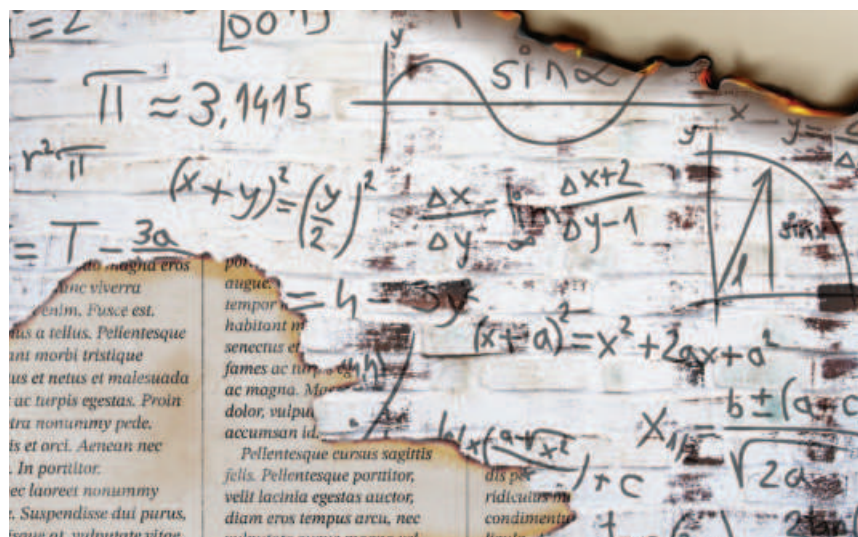


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

only one weapon to fight with, and a rather rusty one at that—his patience and the gift of staying quiet.

He stayed quiet when his unemployment cost him the love of his life, Ruqaiyah. He stayed quiet when his landlord at Aga Sadek threw his belongings on the road in front of the entire neighbourhood and kicked him out. In and out of a few tuitions here and there, he was too broke to be staying somewhere decent and decided to move into a slum. When his

Jamal had developed a habit of making calculations really fast in his head. I had read about human calculators in the papers once but I couldn't believe that I'd be able to find one in Bangladesh.

But Jamal's powers didn't originate from his genetics or some childhood love for numbers. His powers originated from his impoverished conditions. With less than a 100 taka each month, rent to pay, mouths to feed, and an unmarried sister back home, Jamal had to think a thousand times before spending a single paisa on himself. Any coin left on the road, any penny saved from a cup of tea or an unpaid bus fare—Jamal would save it. For months after months, and years after years, Jamal had to calculate every penny he saved, every penny he sent back home, and every penny he spent on himself. And soon, he could make calculations in his head faster than a calculator.

"I just turn the numbers into taka and the calculations become easy," Jamal had told me. "When I walk by the street and look at vendors selling things on the footpath, I can see the prices floating on the products. I see numbers all around me now. Prices hovering in the air and how much I would have left by the end of the month if I bought them. I don't do the math willingly. This machine just keeps churning out numbers that float around in my head."

I was a mere insurance agent back then, making ends meet myself, and I had been looking for an idea to make it big. That's when Jamal came into my life with his superpower. I realised that people would be as amazed as myself with Jamal's power and they'd be willing to buy tickets to watch the

POETRY

Albert's dream

AHADUZZAMAN MOHAMMAD ALI

A long stretch of time
passed in prison,
four decades and more
in a solitary cell of Angola.
Dear Mom you did ask me often,
Albert, when will you get free?
The question remained unanswered
and you faded away forever,
I failed to leave wreaths of love
at the cemetery in New Orleans,
I bore the burden of inability
to say you goodbye,
the burden that lay
like lead on my soul.
Scarcely did one ask
how I passed my time in the cell,
I did it in my way,
I turned the cell into a university
a podium for debate
an illuminating law school,
Nothing put me down,
Terror and torture



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Disgrace and despair
Violence and vileness
Nothing made me cringe or cower,
Through the cell bars
I saw a newspaper van
coming daily at dawn
with the headlights on
giving me a sign
that I will win one day
and be the lead headline,
I sat in the bunk
and gazed at the night's sky
where my mother morphed

into an astral glow.
With no evidence
of stabbing in jail
I was given a life term,
a travesty of justice,
I plodded through endless time
in the sultry sickly cell,
When I verged on seventy
I stepped into airy light
out of the dungeon,
My hair was greying,
but I grew more resolute
sturdier than ever before,
I do still dream of a land
free of friction and hate,
where the black millions
will stand erect,
where the captive conscience
and muted music will move into
untrammelled spaces of sunshine.

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