FICTION

The vanishing Ramanujan



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

calculations really fast in his head. I

in the papers once but I couldn't

believe that I'd be able to find one in

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

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

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

"I just turn the numbers into taka

than a calculator.

around in my head."

Bangladesh.

had read about human calculators

"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

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

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?"

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

only one weapon to fight with, and a Jamal had developed a habit of making The boy nodded quietly, biting 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 ago, looking for a job after graduating here and there, he was too broke to from a local college. A second division be staying somewhere decent and in his intermediate exam and a third decided to move into a slum. When his

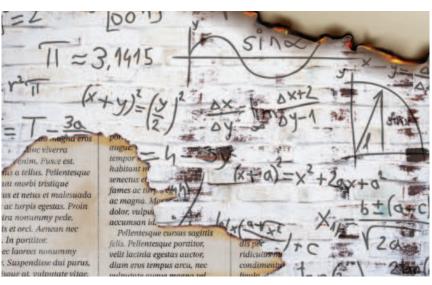


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

the brightest of students, but he was immensely desperate. He'd applied for everything—junior officers, clerical jobs, typists, peons.

Some people are born this way. They don't have any strings to pull, bribes to offer, or merit to compensate to meet Jamal, it blew me away. for the lack of the others. Jamal was God's handcrafted failure, designed

division in his Bachelor's, he wasn't father died and he was too broke to be able to afford the bus fare, he made the journey to Cumilla on foot. When he reached his village two days later, his father was already six feet under.

> But when Salim told me about the real reason behind why he wanted me

Jamal had a secret talent, one that only very few people knew about. myself with Jamal's power and they'd meticulously to suffer. He was gifted Despite being a below-average student, be willing to buy tickets to watch the

him as Ramanujan Jr.

magician at work. I decided to launch

Owing to his shyness, he was heavily reluctant at first but he needed the money way more than I did and an advance payment did the trick. He had only one condition: "Javed bhai, under no condition should anyone be able to know how I got these powers. No one can know about my financial condition."

Jamal made it into the papers right after the first show. Soon, he was doing shows at the Shilpakala Academy, with big circuses, and alongside magicians like Jewel Aich. I was also able to book shows for him in Kolkata, Assam, and Shillong. A year later, he was finally able to pay back all the debts back home and get his sister married.

But soon, people were done with Ramanujan Jr. Sure, we had made a fair share of money together but he never popped off as a big celebrity. He wasn't getting shows anymore and a few years later, I could see his name slowly drift out of relevance.

I wasn't ready to give up on making money already. I had tried launching a few more talents here and there and even tried starting my own circus, but I had overestimated my managerial skills. That's when I decided to play the final card up my sleeve.

I called a journalist friend of mine and paid him to write a story on the origins of Ramanujan Jr. If people got to know about Jamal's story and the heartbreaking origins of his power, they'd be bound to feel sympathy for him. Jamal wouldn't just be Ramanujan Jr. anymore. He'd be the slum-dog who made it to the stage out of poverty. Rich men would pay to see him again, to feel pity on him, to hear him talk about his struggling days.

The night after the story got published, Jamal stormed to my home at around 11 PM, drenched in the rain. That was the first and only time Jamal raised his voice against me, breaking into tears as he did. "Javed bhai, this was the only thing I ever asked from vou. You took two-thirds of the money from the shows, I didn't utter a single word. I have been as grateful as a dog, a filthy stray dog, this entire time and this is how you repay me!"

I tried to calm him down, telling him that it was a misunderstanding and that I would fix everything the next morning, with no intention of doing so whatsoever. The story started doing its trick and I had already booked two shows that very afternoon.

But Jamal was beyond consolation. He kept wailing like a baby, lying on the floor, and banging the carpet. It was the only time Jamal wasn't quiet. I told him to go home, get a good night's sleep, and meet me in the morning.

That was the last I saw of Jamal. He packed up that very night and left home for good. He didn't really move out of his mess in Dhaka, shift anywhere else, or return to Cumilla. His mother and sister didn't hear from him ever again, and neither did I. We filed a missing report and circulated posters all over. The news of Ramanujan Jr. missing made it to the papers and television, but it was of no use.

Betrayed and anguished, Jamal simply disappeared from the face of the earth.

Hasib Ur Rashid Ifti is a writer and a final year undergraduate student.

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.

Ahaduzzaman Mohammad Ali is a former journalism professor of Dhaka University.

