



PHOTO: COLLECTED

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Our eids and puja in Azimpur

This day I miss the confident architecture of companionship—the way doorways conspired to stay open, the way radios in different flats tuned into the same song and made the air itself a chorus, the way festivals adjusted our sense of “we” until it could comfortably include anyone who arrived with a good wish.

AHMED AHSANUZZAMAN

In 1970s Azimpur, the two Eids and Durga Puja were the punctuation marks of our year—days when stairwells, verandas, and a single playground turned many flats into one home.

We were colony children—Azimpur children—held together by stairwells, verandas, and a playground that made the whole block feel like an address bigger than any flat number. In the government colony blocks of the 1970s, companionship wasn’t a slogan; it was habit. We borrowed salt and stories with equal ease, and when dusk arrived, a dozen doors stayed ajar as if belonging itself required cross-ventilation. The ordinary days were ruled by school bells and marble games, but the calendar’s truest punctuation marks were the two Eids and Durga Puja. Those were the days the colony breathed in unison and then laughed out loud.

Ramadan redrew the afternoons. By late Asr, the playground quietly became our operations room. Boys and girls fanned out to collect dry leaves, fallen branches, and sometimes a used tyre finally retired from service by an indulgent father. We built our little bonfire pyramid beside the boundary wall and then waited for what mattered most: the Shawwal moon. At Maghrib the whole block turned into an ear. First came snatches of news—someone’s uncle had heard from an office clerk that the crescent might be visible—then, most important of all, the radio. We waited for Kazi Nazrul Islam’s

immortal song, “O mon, Ramzaner ei rojar sheshe”, to arrive like permission. The first lift of the melody felt as if the colony’s heartbeat had found a higher gear.

If the moon was sighted, we became a small orchestra. A match skimmed along a twig; the pile caught; sparks leapt like impatient birds. We clapped, we shouted, we promised each other to wake before dawn and then recommitted to the promise five minutes later. If the crescent refused us, we drooped together; even the tyre looked embarrassed. But our disappointment never lasted longer than a night. By the next afternoon we gathered again, as if patience itself were part of our Ramadan syllabus. In that waiting we learned time’s soft discipline, a lesson that continues to serve when adult life feels like a queue that won’t move.

Eid-ul-Fitr arrived like a holiday you could smell—attar and new cotton, the faint starch of freshly ironed panjabis, the sweetness travelling on platters from flat to flat. We woke before the sun, bath-fresh and shivery with importance, pulled on new clothes slowly to make the moment last, and set off for prayers. Sometimes we walked to the eidgah in a cousinly convoy; sometimes we chose the nearest mosque. The morning light did a kind thing to faces; every salaam seemed to carry a little extra lift.

After prayers, we became citizens of the colony’s republic of joy. Doorways pulled us in; courtyards stitched us together; the word “come” functioned

less as an invitation than as a statement of fact. And then came the magic of salami. Khalammas and khalus pressed one taka, two taka into our hands with a gravity that said, “Use this well.” It was quite some money. We counted, re-counted, and planned purchases that changed flavour every 15 minutes. Even our parents’ salami felt different, as if it had been minted by the morning itself.

Evening carried its own magnetism: a neighbour with a television. Chairs were summoned from rooms; cousins camped on the floor; someone always ended up on the windowsill; elders perfected the art of leaning against the doorframe without surrendering their balance. If it was the Eid when Amzad Hossain’s new drama in the *Jobbar Ali* sequel aired, a hush descended that rivalled prayer. The adults laughed on the beat; we children learned the beat and joined one laugh later. The next morning the playground glittered with new catchphrases as if the TV had minted a private currency we spent freely on jokes.

Eid-ul-Adha added the serious music of sacrifice to the carnival. We woke early to help where we were allowed—carrying bowls, fetching water, delivering messages across stairwells, tidying the corridor when elders needed room for their quietly choreographed work. There was solemnity but never fear. By afternoon, the colony smelled of home cooking in a dozen accents of the same dish. “Come taste” became a task we completed with civic pride. The evening’s television gathering felt

earned—laughter wrapped around tired satisfaction.

Durga Puja belonged to us with the quiet certainty of habit. It never occurred to us to think of it as “someone else’s” festival. There were two Hindu families in our block; during the five days of Puja we became their honorary cousins. Their living rooms filled with our chatter; our cheeks powdered with naru and bright with sandesh; our hands sticky with fruit syrup; our eyes set to alert for the small differences that made other people’s customs so delicious. The happiness was not borrowed; it was shared, and therefore multiplied.

School closed for Puja and the Dhakeswari Temple stood less than a kilometre away—near enough to feel like an extension of the colony. We slipped there almost every day, our feet learning the route so well that we could have walked it in our sleep. Under the large shamiana, the heat turned generous; shade became a kind of hospitality. The aarati rose and fell like careful breathing; the brass lamps sent small messages we didn’t yet have the vocabulary to decode but understood all the same. We sat, we watched, we learned to be still without being bored.

We looked forward to proshad with the appetite of 10-year-olds and the patience of devotees. When the plates arrived, the sweetness—so simple, so confident—confirmed a conviction we were already forming: community tastes best when shared. On the way home, we compared notes like trainee critics.

Whose aarati hand was steadiest? Which corner of the shamiana caught the breeze best? Was today’s prosad a touch sweeter than yesterday’s?

If Eids taught us ceremony and celebration, Puja taught us theatre without pretence—the idea that worship, too, can be a choreography of light and attention. The colony’s distances were small enough for hope to travel fast: one shout from a staircase and the necessary help arrived with sandals slapping, shawls thrown quickly over shoulders, someone remembering a torch, someone else a bottle of water. In that closeness we learned a grammar of care that did not need big words. A cousin’s loose sandal, an khalamma’s empty plate, a neighbour’s silent sigh—each was a sentence we read and responded to without consultation.

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We were colony children; more than that, we were students of each other. And the syllabus was clear: practise joy, practise patience, practise generosity—repeat until it becomes the shape of your days.

Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman is professor of English at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB). He can be reached at ahsanuzzaman@iub.edu.bd.

POETRY

A woman-shaped exhaustion

AREEBAH AHSAN

By twenty-four I could make my voice sound sunlight—warm over the phone.

No trembling.
No evidence.
I think women should receive medals for this sort of thing.

Not for beauty or childbirth or softness, but for sounding normal while something acidic keeps eating through them from the inside.

“Yes, absolutely.”
“No problem at all.”

The office was refrigerated like a morgue.

Men glided through meetings carrying urgency in their mouths like lit cigarettes.

Their requests bred overnight in my inbox.

Excel sheets opened white and endless as hospital corridors.

Sometimes I would stare at the blue light of my laptop until my reflection floated back at me from the screen.

A woman-shaped exhaustion.
Blue around the mouth.

Still typing.
Still, I thought:
Good. This means I am becoming useful.

As a child, I thought adulthood belonged

to girls who had never imagined their own death before puberty.

Girls who did not stand barefoot on rooftops staring down at concrete



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

while their little sister played at being a

child

whose mothers served rice for dinner with tiny sighs of disdain

Money moved strangely in our house.

Loud, like another parent with bad temper

Sometimes I think it raised me more than

own father

I have heard vases shatter against wood

over the cost of a mathematics tutor.

I have seen silence spread across dinner

tables after someone asked for something

small.

Shampoo.

New shoes.

Extra notebooks.

In our house every need arrived carrying

shame on its back.

Even now I cannot buy cherries without

briefly feeling fraudulent.

As though my father might appear in the

doorway holding a receipt as long as a burial

shroud

Years passed.

I began spending long hours at jobs that made me feel necessary.

I ate badly. Slept lightly.

But it still felt better than asking for things.

The money from my internship barely mattered in any real way.

Sometimes it paid for coffee, transport, stupid little things I could have survived without.

I earned just enough money to become dangerous to myself.

I started buying things without rehearsing explanations beforehand.

A coffee.

A lip tint.

Strawberries in winter.

Tiny reckless acts.

But I remember the strange privacy of it.

Nobody asking why.

Nobody sighing afterward.

Nobody prying my body against the electricity bill.

I remember standing at counters waiting for my card to check out

feeling something inside me unlatch

slightly.

Like a window opening in a burning house.

Like an animal briefly forgetting it had

once been cornered.

I remember thinking:

So this is what freedom tastes like.

Small.

Temporary.

A little like burnt coffee.

But fear is patient.

It survives migration.

Employment.

Monthly salaries.

Nicely furnished apartments.

Even now adulthood feels strangely similar

to being fourteen.

The same panic.

Just better dressed.

Half of me answers emails

and pays bills and speaks professionally in

meetings.

The other half still prepares for catastrophe before entering rooms,

still reaches automatically for the cheapest

item on the shelf.

Still feels relief when nobody sounds

angry.

Sometimes I think survival is not a wound.

More like mildew.

Something that blooms quietly in dark corners and learns the shape of the house

before you do.

Sometimes at night I feel it turning softly

inside me.

Wet.

Breathing.

Waiting for the walls to go dark again.

Areebah Ahsan struggles with the ordinary chaos of life the same way she struggles to write a bio. You can find them at @areebahwrites..