

A
JOURNEY
IN
JOURNALISM

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MJH JABED



KOBI PROKASHANI

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by MJH JABED

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Dedicated to



Sonia Sharmin Swarna
my love of life!



FOREWORD or DISCLAIMER

This publication is a collection of mainly newspaper articles which were published over a span of three decades—from mid-1990s up until now, mid-2020s. So during these long three decades the same person in the form of a columnist had a transition from a university freshman to an older than mid-career civil servant. Some of the newspapers in fact graciously published my early pieces turning a deaf ear to the apparent indiscretion of a ‘university going columnist’ while allocating space in their established newspapers reserved for established hands. I, therefore, would request my present readers not to judge the entire compilation from the vantage of point of how much a typical bureaucrat’s pen might be allowed to go. Please note that it is essentially a reprint and the original publication date is provided as a footnote along with the name of the newspaper which carried it. In other words, my present self preserves the right to even disown any part of it considering the dimension of time!

I was emboldened to assemble the articles otherwise scattered here and there in the hope that this way I might be able to preserve these from a time when journalism was at the frontier of transitioning to the online domain. For fact checking and analysis we still had to depend on the

traditional sources. Printed words on paper were still a magic to the eyes. I remember I attached a few paper clips to my student file seeking admission to the US graduate School which not only duly considered those; they even preserved all till I arrived at the School and handed me back the file intact. This anecdote I would like to put on record as a point of inspiration as part of the file goes into printing now.

I am particularly grateful to my editors and senior journalists at different daily newspapers who endured the pain of brushing up my write ups which in many instances might not even qualify as publication worthy for their erudite readership. However, as many of the senior journalists often later shared with me that they did not want to discourage a budding writer. I salute their generosity. I recollect during my early days of writing, as I later realized, I submitted a very sub-standard draft. A senior journalist took it from me and said “Let me see how I can make it better and publish worthy.” Never shall I forget his contribution to my publishing adventure.

My beloved better half Swarna, daughter Ushashi, son Sarhan and my constant guide, my mother always stood beside me in any of my endeavour: be it writing, civil service or whatever.



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Limits of Trend- setting¹

Are they ready to start where tradition ends?

When a group of young people assemble for a gossip, can you guess what they discuss or what they shrug off? You will see, they sit by the street or in an open space (if available) mainly to pass the idle evening. Can you think that they would recite from Shakespeare or Tagore, critically discuss politics or economics or culture? This might be imponderable today but this was a very natural scene of Dhaka in the 60s, as is claimed by elderly people of today.

The progressive section of youths will counter the orthodox belief on the ground that everything is changing and in course of time the present supersedes the past. The sky of the 60s is now a thing of the past. In contrast, a social and cultural metamorphosis has taken place in the life of Dhaka and therefore, young men and women are updating their surrounds. Youths always seek to discover new frontiers and their creative minds try to be equal to the challenge of the time. Elders at the wrong end of the age smell rate in the new ventures the young generation

¹ Published in *The Daily Star*, Dhaka on 16 February 1997 (under the Section *Dhaka Day by Day*)



embarks upon. The predecessors most of the time disassociate themselves from what they consider reckless and defiance of the superiors.

Today is the heyday of sky culture. We easily observe the touch of this technology in the hearts of youths. This has preoccupied the realm of their thought. They are eager to dress in what their favourite stars put on, to get their hair-cut like the stars of the screen. Even they commit suicide if any favourite luminary falls! So, gossiping of the youth is dominated by any favourite dialogue uttered by any favourite screen star.

You can never think of any picnic party arranged by them where Tagore songs or folk songs are heard. Instead Hindi, English pop, jazz etc blare while the party starts moving towards the destination. They might take some modern musical instruments but they can never think of rendering vernacular songs. This would, perhaps, denigrate their amusement extravaganza!

Technology has turned the vast planet into a tiny global village. Global culture is day by day replacing the national

or regional one. A sport star can become a global face overnight. At the time of world cup extravaganzas – both cricket and football – Jayasurias or Romarios are always beside or before you. The whole country catches the fever, let alone the trend-setter younger generation.

Modern heroes are very naturally to illuminate the present ambience but should they come in conflict with the heroes of the past? Obsolete ethos should be replaced but what should be the extent of the change? Global harmonization cannot and should not be a replacement for diversification of culture and other elements of individual national identities.



Inclined Overseas ways²

The concept of the free market economy is very popular with us today. Discussions, seminars, exchange of views and research are dwelling on this crucial issue. Aside from the arena of thought, impact of this newer concept is strong in the day to day life of the Dhaka city dwellers. When you return from the shopping centre with any garment of the newest design the first and foremost questions you face is as to whether it is from abroad or not. You can seldom satisfy any member of your family with indigenous cloths. When you are at the shopping centre you ask the salesman to display before you only the Indian sareers or kameez or Thai Jeans or European skirts and what not. That things from outside our territory are superior in quality seems to be the attitude.

There are a lot of shops in Dhaka city, which display signboards like only foreign clothes are available. You rush to the ‘hi-fi’ part of any shopping centre in the hope of buying gorgeous one of at a fair price, you ask the salesman to tell the name of the country from where this or that has came. As it is from India or United States or Australia

² Published in the *The Daily Star*, Dhaka on March 15,1997 (under the section *Dhaka Day by Day*)




you need not bargain. You at once pay the *price of the priceless* thing. Had it been home –made, the case would have different. Of course, you would say the colour is bad or dead, knitting is poor, quality is low, the price is so exorbitant and so forth. Thus, the nationality of the ‘foreign clothes’ serves you at least one purpose; it refrains you from unwanted bargaining and saves your time.

More often foreign clothes are cheaper, especially the ones which cross the Indo-Bangla border, thanks to the active presence of the smugglers. Indian sarees rather than those of Tang ail or anywhere else in Bangladesh are overwhelmingly accepted by Bangladeshi ladies because these are both cheaper and better designed compared to ours. Our market is not under our control at all. In the eyes of passive onlookers, such a situation is advantageous for us as once we had to travel to Calcutta or Bombay to buy some Indian things, now we can easily procure those from Dhaka.

The trend is so strong that some indigenous garments factories are making endeavors to sell out their products

under the fake name of any Thai or Australian company . Any domestic name is not reliable to them. They adopt this way, understanding the prevailing psychology of the customers. The smart businessmen are putting any foreign stickers bearing name of any foreign company or domestic sticker hearing name of any foreign company in the hope that this would serve them well. What a fine strategy to sell out goods (domestic) that buyers are not ready to buy!

Finally such apathy towards home –made goods is not necessarily for quality –related reasons: rather mainly for social-psychological reasons. Our failure in all spheres of national life has resulted in such a negative attitude. A stereotype notwithstanding partly true, has developed in our minds that very few things of this land are pure or of top quality. We lack much faith in ourselves and the base of our confidence as a nation is very weak. May be our goods are at fault or not up to the mark but who would accept those if we refuse? Is another movement necessary to patronise our home- made things as we did during the British regime in protest against colonialism?



Let the Libraries be for the Learners³

A western scholar observed that no other furniture at home is more beautiful than a book. Syed Mujtaba Ali's romanticism about books was several degrees higher – that is why he observed a book as more evergreen than the black eyes of sweetheart, more lasting than the bread and wine. Lev Tolstoy felt the importance of only three things in life—book, book and a book. Over and above, Rabindranath Tagore deeply regarded its role in constructing a bridge between past and future.

Anyways, the significance of books in a progressive and forward looking society can hardly be underlined in a short detail. Given the importance of books in educating people and in disseminating knowledge, one must grant a library the credit of a 'store house of knowledge'. But in what state are our libraries located at different schools, colleges, universities and city avenues? How much can these libraries serve the purpose of the readers? What has gone wrong with them?

³ Published in the Observer Magazine, *The Bangladesh Observer*, Dhaka on May 7, 1999



The public library at Shahbagh maintains an open-shelf policy. This is the biggest government run library in Dhaka city. Apart from students of different educational institutions, different professionals and researchers pay regular visit to it in pursuit of knowledge but on most occasional the knowledge seekers have to return unhappy due to non-availability of books and necessary chapter from the available books. “Most of the books are mutilated and outdated. Dishonest readers do not hesitate to cut necessary pages from the book and thereby make it useless for other readers. The shelves are not cleaned regularly that is why most of the books are too dirty to touch. The old version of books are not replaced by newer ones. So if you rely on facts contained in these books, your research work might remain outdated and sub-standard” said a researcher who visits the public library regularly. “Still I have to come here because there is not even a single modern library in the entire city on which to rely. Apartments and commercial buildings are mushrooming in the city but libraries are not. There are only a few girls and guys who have strong

inclination towards a library. Had there a strong public demand, the authorities would automatically develop modern and well-equipped libraries and upgrade the prevailing ones. Libraries should be turned into a castle of national movement for progress.”

Dana, a graduate student at Dhaka University, a deplored, “These days I do not go to the DU Central library because in the last two years and a half I had not any moment of getting necessary reference books there. On the eve of second year course final examination, I collected the class numbers of more than one hundred books in preparation for the examination. But I could have glimpse of maximum ten books. Of the ten in hand most were found mutilated. The necessary chapters were missing. I couldn’t prepare notes as I expected.” Asked if reference books are available in the open market she replied, “How could you think that? Most of the text books are written by foreign authors. Very few of the text books are available in the open markets. But one single book might cost you more than total monthly budget of a residential student. For instance, Paul Samuelson’s ‘Economics’ is regarded as a bible for the students of economics from first year upto masters. Presently the cost of this book is about TK.1000” continued she, “If students are to buy the key reference books from the open market at sky-rocketing price then what are the university libraries for? Why is it claimed that DU central library is one of biggest libraries in Asia?”

Maushumi Barman, a master’s student of political science who stood first class first in honours examination observed, “These days libraries are no more a place of acquiring knowledge. Rather this has become a spot of gossiping and romance. Girls and guys gossip there in shrilled voice, have breakfast and even date over the hours occupying the desk. Particularly in the sultry days they do everything except studies in the air-conditioned rooms.”

Compared to the local libraries, foreign libraries and information centres are more developed in terms of access to updated information and modern technology. The leading foreign libraries and cultural centres in Dhaka are – the British Council Library the American Cultural Centre Library (USIS), World Bank library, the Indian High Commission library, Goethe Institute, Iranian Cultural Centre etc. But these foreign libraries are not enough to meet local needs and their main aim is to present their culture and tradition before the locals. Still they face some problems that are very common to ours. These problems are mutilation and disappearance of books. “It seems that people come here more for cutting pages and stealing books than for taking notes or acquiring knowledge. We have arrangement for photocopying still they cut pages. The harm they cause is more than the benefit they reap since for disappearance of just one single page we have to procure a fresh copy. For instance, when 3/4 parts of Encyclopedia Britannica were lost from our library we had to buy thirty part series at a very high cost. Unfortunately, some parts of new series got lost hardly one month after buying it” said an information officer of British Council Library on the condition of anonymity.

The departmental seminar libraries are engulfed with the same types of problems. Mr. Mahboob-UI-Alam the seminar librarian of international relations department of Dhaka University said, “Students suffer from the problems created by the students themselves. They know it very well as to what problems they are creating for the fellow students by mutilating the books. Still they do it. It is not expected of a university student that they would make noise inside the library.” “I ask them time and again to maintain silence but they pay no heed to me. In our department students are not allowed to keep the book overnight and if they violate this rule they are to pay TK.10 fine for overdue