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Mazharul Mannan

Translation
Sanad Singha Goswami



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Dedicated to
Nazma Mannan
my life partner and comrade.
Author

Foreword

Tides of Tears is the autobiography of Prof. Mazharul Mannan, written in the form of a novel. When the manuscript first reached my hands, I pondered whether this work would truly bring tears to the eyes of its readers. By the time I turned the last page, my own eyes overflowed with tears.

This remarkable book unfolds upon a vast canvas, tracing the lives of the ultra-poor in Bangladesh from the early decades of the twentieth century through the first decade of the twenty-first. It stands as a study of the subaltern people, preserving their ways of life, their idioms of speech, and their social values.

The author's mother, an orphan from childhood, grew into a woman of uncommon kindness who, though destitute, succeeded in raising the author with dignity and affection. Nevertheless, by sheer determination and the encouragement of his parents, the author rose to a prominent position, touching each realm of success. The original text is written in prose so poignant that once opened, the reader is compelled to continue until the very end.

Prof. Mannan portrays his parents with rare sensitivity. He does not veil their hardships: a mother who often fasted for want of food, at times compelled to ask neighbours for charity to feed her children; a father bowed under the weight of deprivation. He describes with precision the famine that struck Bengal, as well as the dumb agonies of his own youth, when he endured relentless poverty as a student. Lacking even the means for the simplest study materials, he was sustained from the morning years of his life by the compassion of noble hearts who extended their hands in selfless generosity. It is in such unvarnished truth that the narrative derives its extraordinary potency.

The work also preserves the dialect of Rangpur region, Bangladesh, as well as wedding songs sung by the author's mother—precious fragments of folk literature woven into the autobiography. Beyond the private struggles of one family, the book also opens a window onto the broader history of Bangladesh: the state of education in the fifties and sixties, the major political movements, and the Liberation War of 1971—all rendered here with an immediacy and honesty rarely encountered.

Sanad Singha Goswami has made a commendable effort to render the Bangla autobiography into English. The translation of this autobiography has been carefully overseen by the author himself. Without his guidance, many vernacular idioms and expressions—so profoundly rooted in the soil of Bangla—would have been impossible to transmit in another tongue.

Tides of Tears is indeed a priceless gem of Bangla literature. More than a memoir, it is a mirror of our subaltern history, capturing the voices and lives too often disregarded.

Dr Gauranga Mohanta
Poet and Researcher
Dhaka
01.01. 2026

Introduction

Tides of Tears—originally written in Bengali as *Chokh Vese Jai Jole* by Mazharul Mannan—stands as a remarkable memoir that rises beyond the confines of personal sorrow, suffering, and success. More than a chronicle of personal struggle, this autobiography explores the intricate harmony between human resilience and the larger forces of the world—social, natural, and spiritual—with which every life must negotiate.

A truly great work of literature is expected to engage with the broader dimensions of human experience, opening new possibilities and prospects for humanity. For this reason, a story filled only with mere drama cannot transcend the barriers of time and place or reach broader audiences. From a timeless work, the readers may draw vision and valour to brave the chaos of existence—to wade through life’s uncharted uncertainties.

This idea is vividly illustrated in Mannan’s own journey, which begins in childhood. At this time, tumultuous politics coupled with deadly famine haunted British India. The nation was at the threshold of independence after two hundred years of colonial exploitation. Amid the turbulence, an impoverished family dared to dream of education. They yearned to break the age-old chains of deprivation and inheritance of illiteracy. To educate a child in such a destitute family was a sheer luxury—an almost impossible task. Yet, an unlettered mother did not cease to dream. She strove to hew out the stone of hope from the mountain of despair.

Building on this foundation, although destitute and often despondent, the visionary mother nonetheless instilled the aspiration for knowledge and enlightenment into her son. Thus, from the faint flame of a mother’s dream, the stirring journey of a child—determined to break every barrier, armed only with patience and perseverance—begins. This autobiography stands as a timeless testament to tenderness and tenacity.

Yet the power of the memoir lies not only in overcoming hardship but also in affirming a deeper truth: the enduring faith in human kindness. As the memoir shifts from personal struggle to broader social experience, the author feels blessed to be surrounded by kind-hearted souls extending their hands in times of dire need. Neither as a child nor as an adult did the author lose trust in the innate greatness of the human heart.

This trust in humanity was not confined to individuals alone; it was embedded in the communal life of the village. The village where the author was born and brought up remains an example of Hindu–Muslim communal harmony. Ramesh Kaviraj, a Hindu village doctor, ‘would come and stay up all night if any’ of the Muslim men or women in the village were sick. Likewise, a Muslim villager would not hesitate to risk his life to safeguard the honour of a Hindu woman during the Liberation War of 1971. The amity and harmony were exemplified by their way of living: ‘In the evening, to the sound of conch shells from the Hindu village, the women of the Muslim neighbourhood would light their evening lamps too.’

The author held faith in the goodness of life. Even amid severe scarcity and silent starvation, the family believed in better days ahead, without resorting to blame or complaint. They remained austere toward themselves yet compassionate to others. Even in utter penury, the author’s parents displayed extraordinary compassion that profoundly shaped their children’s psyches.

Throughout the memoir, one feels the kindness kindled in chaos—the unbroken belief in the human heart’s hidden heroism.

To convey such layered experiences across languages is itself a formidable challenge. It must be acknowledged that a translation can never perfectly replicate the original creation, as some nuances, cultural textures, and specific wordplays are often lost or transformed in translation. Even the translator makes choices about how to convey meanings, and thus, different translators may interpret a book in different ways. Here, too, the loss may certainly affect this widely acclaimed memoir, particularly with the songs, poems, and other cultural terms that, admittedly, cannot be carried over with their full connotations.

Fortunately, this challenge was lessened by the author’s close involvement in the translation process. Shifting focus to the practical aspect, as a translator, I feel fortunate to have been in constant contact with the author, Mannan, who guided the entire translation process. Under his discerning guidance, I sought to remain as faithful as possible to the original work, striving to retain the cultural rhythm and emotional fidelity of the Bengali version. Despite the author’s generous supervision, the translation is not without shortcomings, for which I take full responsibility.

The memoir, *Tides of Tears*—published in Bengali as *Chokh Vese Jai Jole*—was first issued in July 2011 by Anannya Publication, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Owing to the demands of readers, the second and third editions soon followed. This is the first time the book has been published in English.

By penning the foreword, Dr. Gauranga Mohanta has bestowed a rare dignity upon the translated version of the autobiography, a generosity that leaves the translator deeply indebted.

I must also acknowledge with due respect the valuable advice of essayist and educationist Prof. Dr. Mohammed Shamsul Hoque, and poet and translator Mostafa Tofayel Hossain. This translation owes much to their guidance and inspiration.

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*Our sweetest songs are those
That tell of saddest thought.*

—**P B Shelly**

One

I spent my childhood and adolescence in a remote, impoverished village in Gaibandha, a northern district of Bangladesh, steeped in poverty. Today, it is hard for anyone to grasp the depth of poverty we endured.

There were five of us siblings, though my eldest sister was already married by then. Of the other four, I was the eldest. Two of them were my sisters—Fazila and Rabeya. Another was my brother, Fazlu. Our youngest brother, Dilal, was not born then.

Let me start with a particular incident. It was the end of the 1940s. The day before, Ba'jan (father) couldn't even manage a seer of rice for the family, so we went the whole day without eating. Around dusk, Maa (mother) husked some paddy that was meant for seeds and cooked the rice. It was only enough to leave our stomachs half-full. Half-fed, we all fell asleep.

Ba'jan went out early the next morning. We waited eagerly and patiently, hoping Ba'jan would return with something to fill our empty stomachs. My two younger sisters bore the hunger in silence; however, my brother, Fazlu, grew restless and began to cry.

That evening, with no other option left, Maa began frying some chickpeas probably left over on some occasion. The four of us watched the pan with anxious hunger. Maa was cleaning the excess ash from the pit oven.

Lamps needed kerosene, which we could not afford. We could see Maa's face, wrought with distress, often gleam in the flickering fire of the cooking stove.

At that time, Ba'jan came in the half-dark evening and sat silently by the stove. He returned empty-handed. In the flames that flared up every few seconds, we could see his helpless face—exhausted and sorrow-laden.

Maa stirred a bit but maintained silence. She gave us the chickpeas in a small bowl. Meanwhile, Fazlu had fallen asleep on Maa's lap after crying for food for a long while.

Rabeya ate a few pieces and said, 'Maa, give Ba'jan some of the chickpeas'.

Startled at it, Maa handed Ba'jan a handful of chickpeas in a small bowl. Ba'jan stared into the flickering fire. Tears rolled down his cheeks and hissed as they fell onto the burning ash.

Fazila, my middle sister, was naturally calm. Tolerant. Approaching Ba'jan, she gently took his head and pressed it against her chest.

Ba'jan, feeling the warmth and love of his little daughter, broke down in tears. Tears streamed down as he murmured, 'O Maa.'

We all followed suit. Except for Maa, who remained silent. She stared blankly into the darkness.

I was never meant to go to school. Ba'jan was the sole breadwinner. His health deteriorated with each passing day. Exhaustion had overtaken him. We had a few small plots of land—barely enough to feed six mouths. We couldn't even afford two meals a day. For me, schooling was a luxury.

I was the one to carry Ba'jan's meals to the fields. I would prepare a hookah (a traditional hookah for smoking tobacco) for him. I also tended to the cows and goats.

Every morning, around 10 a.m., I would roam near the primary school located close to our home. I watched the children studying. I would see children about my age writing letters in the soil with sticks. A banyan tree spread over their heads. They would arrange letters with turmeric seeds.

In unison, they often recited:

*The day breaks with the chirping of birds
And buds bloom to flower in the garden.
Shepherds lead the herd of cows to the field,
The children devote their minds to their lessons ...*

They learned to count:

*One for the moon, two for fortnights,
Three for eyes, four for Vedas ...*

I would watch them from a distance, sometimes joining in their chorus. Occasionally, I would sit by the sandy shore. A small river flowed by the school. Lost in my thoughts, I liked to write letters on the wet sand.

One day, while I was lingering near the school, Mr. Sobhan, an Assistant Teacher, spotted me.

‘Hey boy, would you like to study?’ he approached and asked.

I nodded shyly. I whispered, ‘I do, but I have neither books nor any clothes.’

That same day, Mr. Sobhan spoke to my mother regarding my studies. Maa gave the same reply.

The very next day, he brought Maa a shirt and ijar-pants. A pink-covered book, ‘*Shishu Siksha*’, a beginner’s guide to school. Written by Madanmohan Tarkalankar (1817–1858), who authored several textbooks on early childhood education.

Thanks to Mr Sobhan’s kindness, I now had a book and a set of clothes. But the challenge of finding a pen, paper, and ink remained.

Ba’jan came up with a solution. He gathered newly sprouted banana leaves, cut them to a usable size, and dried them in the sun to soften enough to be written on. Ba’jan tried to craft a pen from whatever was available. He cut a twig from a bamboo tree. The twig was sharpened at one end. In size and shape, it appeared to be a pen.

That night, I could not sleep in excitement. The next morning, dressed, I got ready for school.

‘Touch your Ba’jan’s feet for blessings,’ Maa said.

I touched Ba’jan’s feet.

Ba’jan recited a verse from the Holy Book and blessed me.

‘Say, *bismillah*, and go ahead,’ Maa again said.

On the first day of school, I discovered I knew my lessons well—better than anyone.

The annual exam was just two months later. I was exempted from paying the exam fee. However, we had to buy paper. Maa made ink by mixing baked-rice flour and the juice of an ivy gourd. Ba’jan made a few pens of bamboo twigs.

I used to get back home happily every day, completing a satisfactory exam. Everything seemed pretty easy to me.

I came first in the very first exam. Mr. Sobhan patted me on my back. On hearing the news, Ba’jan recited some verses from the Holy Book.

Maa cried in joy. She started dreaming once again. The dream first began at my birth. In the maternity room. One of our neighbours, seeing a zigzag line on my forehead in infancy, said to Maa, ‘Your son would, one day, be a learned man.’

That impossible dream resurfaced in Maa’s heart.

Gradually, I was promoted to Class Four. But the financial condition of our family remained the same. Buying books was a challenge. Paper and pens were scarce. So was food—seldom twice a day.

At that time, a scholarship exam was held in Class Four. High school started in Class Five. Teachers decided I would sit for a scholarship exam. The headmaster paid the exam fee for me.

Maa’s dream flared up once more. Compromising with all the necessities of the family, Maa bought me paper and pens. She borrowed a bit of money, too. Maa used to borrow books from others for a day or half a day.

On some occasions, Maa used to take me to other boys so I could use their books for a few hours. Not everyone behaved well. Some said, ‘No’.

A feeling of disturbance sometimes came over me. Yet, Maa remained unmoved—unhesitant. Those petty incidents could not affect her dream.

It was after the Second World War—as the heat of the Partition of India was gradually settling down. However, famine’s claws gradually spread over remote areas. The government started rationing the daily necessities for the destitute.

Kerosene was scarce. Maa had to feed us before sunset. Then, the kerosene lamp was only for me. Maa did not compromise.

Sitting on the floor I memorised the history of Alexander the Great and the heroic Indian king, Puru, captured in the battle.

Maa kept a sharp eye on my inspired face and the waning kerosene as well. She cleaned the wick of the lamp over and over. Kerosene burnt up. The lamp went out. Maa sighed heavily, staring at the darkness.

One evening, Maa could not manage kerosene to light the lamp. She went to a few of the neighbours to borrow a bit of kerosene. All in vain. None could give her any. Everyone was in dire poverty.

With no other option left, Maa went to the house behind ours. The house belonged to Fazar Ali. We used to call him Nana (maternal grandfather). His wife was Kandri, whom I used to address as *Nani* (maternal grandmother)—of course, none of them was related to us by blood.

Theirs was not a well-off family either. They saved some money with much hardship. They clung to the little money, as though it were a lifeline in a storm for the family. The family used to finish the dinner before sunset so that they would not need to light the kerosene lamp. They sent none of their children to school, fearing any expenditure.

Maa came back from their house empty-handed. I kept my books back in place, went into my room and lay down. Frustrated, Maa sat in the yard facing darkness.

At that time, Kandri Nani came with a little kerosene in a little bottle. She said to Maa, ‘I saved this little kerosene for some emergencies. Your son, today, can’t study for this dearth of kerosene. What could be a greater emergency than that? Please, take this, light the lamp, let your son study.’

Maa was surprised but said nothing. She just lit the lamp. I started studying in the feeble light. Two destitute, unlettered women—Maa and Kandri Nani—sat staring at me as I read, tears streaming down their faces.

As I was promoted to Class Six, my attraction to books knew no bounds. In a few days, I finished reading books such as *Ramer Sumoti* and *Mejo Didi* by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, *Golpo Guccho* and *Noukadubi* by Rabindranath Tagore, *Sojon Badiar Ghat* and *Naksi Kanthar Maath* by Jasimuddin, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Gulliver’s Travels*. Whenever I heard about a rare book in the possession of someone, I did not hesitate to walk for five to six miles or wait for the whole day. No number of books was enough. The next day, I had to search for a new one.

One day, my classmate, Mostak, told me that his father had bought him a big Bengali dictionary. The dictionary seemed to cover everything.

I became desperate with excitement. I could not wait to see the miraculous book. Mostak’s parents were educated people and economically solvent too.

Mostak’s house was about one and a half miles away from our school.

After school, I did not get back home. Instead, my destination was inevitably Mostak’s house.

Seeing the dictionary at Mostak's study table, I said, 'Friend, may I take it with me for a night? I'll certainly bring it back to school tomorrow without fail.'

Mostak hesitated a bit and said, 'Let me ask my mother.'

A few minutes later, Mostak came with his mother. I offered her a respectful salam, touching her feet.

'See, boy', she said, 'Mostak's father has just bought the book. Mostak has not even had a proper look at it yet. I can't give it to you today. You would rather turn over some pages, sitting here.'

Mostak's mother was right after all. However, I felt ashamed like never before. A wave of pain pierced my chest.

As I immersed myself in the red cover of the book, my eyes gleamed. The dictionary offered not only the meanings of the words. It covered etymology, too. Historical, cultural and mythological contexts. Everything was there.

In one section, I found the story of Lord *Rama* of the epic *Ramayana* beside the word '*Raghab*.' More specifically, the tale of Lord *Rama* and his wife, Sita's exile. All were there—Queen Kaikeyi's claim of the two boons promised by the King Dasharatha, Rama's exile, Laxman's devotion to his brother, Ravana's abduction of Sita in his flying Ratha (chariot), Sita's miseries, and Ram-Ravana colossal war.

I started wandering the *Panchavati* forest in my imagination. Rama, Laxman, and Sita lived here during their fourteen-year exile.

Suddenly, I was startled by Mostak's call. I found Mostak's mother standing before me with food on a ceramic plate and water in a clear glass. By then, the sun had set. I hadn't noticed at all. It was quite dark outside. A wide *beel* (a large wetland) lay on my way home. Then came a long bamboo clump. A chill crept down my spine.

I told Mostak's mother, 'Aunty, I'll come another day and then have the food. I should go now. It's a long way home. Maa must be worried.'

'No, boy,' Mostak's mother said firmly. 'You have to have the snack now, or I won't let you leave.'

With no way out, I began to swallow the food reluctantly. Before I could finish, she returned with a man.

'This is Noimuddin,' she said, 'He'll walk you home. Now you can enjoy the snack without any worry.'

Having had the snack, I stood up to go home. To my surprise, Mostak's mother, bringing the dictionary from the table, said, 'Please take it home. It is my gift to you. We'll buy Mostak another dictionary.'

I stood speechless, feeling completely at a loss. That same sharp, painful cry rose from deep inside me again.

'Aunty, Maa will scold me if she sees the book with me. She'll think I stole it from somewhere,' I said softly.

Mostak's mother smiled, bringing me closer to her chest. Kissing softly on my forehead, she said, 'Tell your mother, Aunty has gifted you this book with affection.'

I was about to cry. Pressing the book against my chest, I again offered her a respectful salam, touching her feet.

I was barred from attending school just before the final exams in Class Seven. My tuition fees for the entire year were still unpaid, and my parents couldn't manage the exam fee. I also owed the school fees from the previous year.

One day, the headmaster got me out of the class. After that, I wandered the streets like a stray dog. Each evening, I returned home filled with disappointment. Maa's face was marked by the deep sorrow of broken dreams.

At that time, a surprising incident occurred. An Ibrahim from Chowdurany, a distant place from our home, came to the house of our neighbour, Mafiz Uncle, to buy the tin-shaded houses. After the Partition of India, Hindus in the area were moving to India, selling whatever they had.

Mr. Ibrahim stayed at the house of Mafiz Uncle for a week. By this time, I came in contact with him.

On the day, as Mr. Ibrahim was leaving the village, he said to me, 'As I notice, you have much interest in studies. You may go with me. I will get you admitted to a school.'

When I informed my mother about Mr. Ibrahim's proposal, Maa jumped at the offer. She went to Mr. Ibrahim to express her heartfelt gratitude and burst into tears.

The time to leave my home came. Maa handed me two coins and some clothes. I saw Maa, her fingers pressed to her eyes, trying to hold back tears. My three younger siblings came closer, crying. Ba'jan had not yet come back from the farmland. It was getting late. Mr. Ibrahim could not wait longer. I took his bag in my hand and started following him to the road leading to the town of Gaibandha.

Looking back, I saw Maa and my siblings standing far away, gazing.

For a moment, I thought, 'It would be better if I stay with all. What's the point of leaving all the beloved ones to attend school only?' However, by this time, we had walked away too far.

It was almost evening when we got on the train at Gaibandha Railway Station. The train roared northward. A sharp whistle cut through the stillness. The whistle pulled me further away from everything I knew. My mind remained behind with Maa, Ba'jan and my siblings. In my mind's eye, I could see the beloved faces and the familiar surroundings. The rhythmic clatter of the train echoed like, 'Where're you going? Where're you going?'

The rhythm broke as the train rode on a bridge. I came to my senses.

An hour later, we reached Chowdhurani Station. Leaving the station, we walked about five kilometres to reach a village named Mondoler Ghat.

A small river flowed by. A bamboo-made bridge was on the river. In the deep dark, we crossed the bridge to reach the house of Mr. Ibrahim. It was twelve at night.

After a few days, Mr. Ibrahim arranged for me to be admitted to class eight at Chodhurani Upgraded High School. He did not let me stay at his home. Instead, I was placed in a lodging house. On the northern side of the river, at Sarkers' house.

Kafi Sarker, a well-off man, was my lodging master. He had two wives. His first wife was childless. He married a second time. I had to tutor his two sons, Rafiq and Shafiq. The elder of the two, Rafiq, was almost my age.

I was given a room that was actually the cowshed. On one side of the room, there was a space for two bullocks, which were used for drawing carts. I shared the other side of the room with a boy who worked as a household help. There was no mosquito net, and every night I endured the constant annoyance of mosquito bites and the stomping of the bullocks.

In the midst of these hardships, memories of my home began to flood my mind. Depressing images tormented me—the face of Ba'jan marked by frustration, Maa's exhausted demeanour, and most hauntingly, the starvation-stricken faces of my poor siblings.

The servant boy brought my meals to the cowshed after he had eaten his own meal inside the house. If he was absent, I was called inside the house to have my meal. With my head bowed, I would go inside, have my meal, and return to my room with my head bowed in the same way. I became the object of ridicule. I could sense the women inside the house smiling at me. I was too shy to lift my head and look around.

In the morning, my duty was to teach the two brothers. Then, I had to walk nearly five kilometres to my school. By the afternoon, I would return to the lodging house, exhausted.

As evening approached, my daily task of teaching the brothers resumed. Days came and went by. I felt I was making no progress in my own lessons. I was hindered by the same old reasons—scarcity of books, paper, and pens, along with months of unpaid school fees. I had only one set of clothes. If those were washed, I couldn't attend school that day. I also had very little time to study.

My lodging master did not like me reading my books while I was teaching his sons. He would say, 'It's not fair for you to open your books while you are teaching my sons.'

I had to dedicate much of my time to the boys, even at night. Tired and drained, I was left with little energy to prepare my own lessons.

Outside my room, darkness covered the earth. Fireflies gathered around the bushes. Foxes howled from nearby jungles. The barking of dogs floated in from distant villages, sounding like women wailing. My heart raced. Sometimes, fear struck so hard that I lay with the torn quilt tightly wrapped around me. Yet, fear still lingered.

I could hear the clink and clatter of a glass and jug. The sound grew louder with every second. I knew my food was coming. The servant boy, having finished his meal, was bringing mine. By then, all the family members had eaten. The hunger that had tormented me was now gone. But a reluctance came over me. I didn't feel like eating anymore.

Half-fed, I tried to sleep again. Maa appeared in my dream, waving from the other side of a river.

'My son, are you in distress? No need to suffer so much. Please come back to my bosom. My heart bleeds...' She said.

I awoke to find my pillow wet with tears.

Despite severe poverty at home, my parents never let me do all the difficult chores. In the lodging house, I was forced to take on all the unpleasant tasks. No choice. No option.

The servant boy couldn't handle the weight of his job. He was often absent—probably returning home for a break. I became the scapegoat. All his responsibilities fell on me. I had to graze the cattle and work the farmland.

Twice a week, I had to go to the Haat, a weekly market, two miles from the lodging house, with large wicker baskets or a jute bundle on my head, or a heavy bamboo pole on my shoulder.

It was a Haat Day. The servant boy was not at the house. They loaded two bundles of jute onto my head. The load was too heavy for me to keep my head straight.

I nearly dropped the bundles—but managed somehow. The jute fibres hanging from the bundle almost blocked my vision.

The road swarmed with people and carts, each step a battle against the throng, my body strained under the crushing weight.

Haat Day meant there was a rush—everyone buying or selling.

I was moving forward, guessing my way—trying to dodge potholes and people. The elder son of my lodging master, Rafiq, was ahead of me to give directions, 'Teacher, beware—a big pothole. Move to the right.' Or, 'Teacher, a bamboo cart behind. Move to the left,' or 'Teacher, the bamboo cart is gone. Go straight.'

At last, we reached the Haat. I dropped the bundles. Pain clenched my shoulders—but I sighed in relief. I was released, and it was over.

Next week, I received a postcard from home. It was posted a fortnight ago. The postcard made me restless.

I said to the lodging master, 'Uncle, my younger brother is very sick. Ba'jan has sent a letter by post. He wants me to go home immediately.'

At that time, the servant boy had gone to his village, and my lodging master's temper flared, his frustration building with every unfulfilled task. He became furious.

‘My son’s exam is starting soon. What nonsense! You want to go home? Impossible.’

In the afternoon, I was supposed to carry two large bamboo poles to the Haat. The servant boy hadn’t come back. My lodging master and his son placed the thicker ends of the bamboo poles on my shoulders while the thinner ends rested on Rafiq’s. Most of the weight was on my tender shoulders.

Carrying the bamboos through the crowded streets was difficult. The bamboo butts bruised my shoulders. Pain deepened as I walked. The pain shot up to my head. I put the bamboo poles down twice to rest. Instead of relief, the pain worsened.

While returning from the Haat, my lodging master placed a large basket of vegetables and groceries on my head. A sharp pain seized my head, neck, and back. My spine seemed to crunch.

Before reaching the lodging house, a fierce fever seized me. I set the basket down inside the home and went to my room to lie down. I felt my mind blur, caught between sleep and waking, my body sinking deeper into a numb, feverish haze. I found myself running. I was running toward the railway station to catch the home-bound train. I saw the two o’clock train waiting at the station, whistling. The station seemed close at hand, but my feet stuck in the sand. I tried to run faster. All in vain.

When I reached the station, the train had already started. The compartments sped past me. I struggled to catch up but failed. Finally, I managed to grab a compartment’s handle, but my grip slipped. I was flung onto the platform. People rushed to help, shouting in panic,

Suddenly, I woke up. The dream ended. I felt someone had touched my forehead gently. A fever raged through me. Heat burning through my skin. A crushing headache gripped my skull. A wave of scorching heat blurred my thoughts.

Opening my eyes, I saw a beautiful woman applying a cool compress to my forehead. Worry shone in her eyes.

Rafiq was standing by. He said, ‘Teacher, this is our *Boro Maa*.’ (First wife of Rafiq’s father.)

I saw Rafiq’s mother on a few occasions. I had never seen his elder Mother before. She was such a beautiful lady!

A painful cry rose from deep inside me. ‘*Boro Maa*,’ I whispered, thinking nothing.

To my surprise, the childless woman suddenly pressed my head against her chest, wiping my tears. She ignored all boundaries of unfamiliarity. My tears soaked her clothes. The next day, *Boro Maa* arranged everything to send me home.

I reached Gaibandha at sunset. As I left Railway Station for home, the evening darkened. Darkness cast shadows over the paths ahead. The rural paths were desolate. I walked fast. Someone seemed to follow me. I looked back in fear, but no one was there. A fox hurried across the road.

When I reached home, it was about nine at night. The village had fallen fast asleep. It was quiet. Just before the yard, fireflies were weaving an intricate dance in front of the family graveyard. Dogs barked in the distance, their sound cutting through the darkness.

I called out to my mother. Her silhouette framed the doorway, a shadow of love and longing. She broke, wailing.

I had returned home after almost seven months. I met everyone except my younger brother, Fazlu. A seven-day bout of dysentery had taken his life. He was no more.

Two

When I was very young, like the children of the other poor families in the village, I used to address my father as ‘Baa’, ‘Bago’, ‘Bapo’. In more affluent families, children would call their fathers ‘Ba’jan’, ‘Baba’, or ‘Abba.’

As I started attending school, I noticed how others addressed their fathers. One day, without thinking much, I called my wretched, destitute father, ‘Ba’jan’.

He was taken aback. A wave of shame washed over me, and I quickly turned away. From that moment, I don’t remember when I became used to calling my father, ‘Ba’jan’.

While standing before the mirror, I used to be stunned. My father’s reflection stared back at me. His face, his eyes, his skin—exactly like mine, though he was a little shorter.

His nature, though, was steady and calm. Mine was restless and fickle. He studied only up to Class Four, yet the knowledge he gained was profound.

He owned a small, barren plot of land by the river. He toiled there day and night. Alone. Poverty never relented. He had aged beyond his years. He spoke little, but always with elegance.

His face was a mystery; his mind was hard to read from it.

Let me share an incident. It was when I was in Class Four. I got a bit of a reputation as a good student. The school was right in front of our house. Just a short walk away. The classes were held in a half-ruined schoolhouse fenced with bamboo slats. The floor was always covered in dust.

Our Maulavi teacher, a religious teacher of Islam, carefully got up from his iron chair, whose one leg was broken.

‘Take out your slate and pencil. We’ll discuss ‘Gender’ today,’ he said.

Going to the blackboard, he wrote the word, ‘vidyan’ (learned)—which was, in fact, misspelt.

My exuberance had gone too far, and I said, standing up, ‘Sir, the spelling is wrong. It should be ‘vidwan’, not ‘vidyan’.’

He paused, then raised his bamboo cane. With a swift movement, he struck my back. He did not hit me as hard as it seemed.

‘You’re too rowdy. Intolerable!’ he muttered, a bit too forcefully.

All the classes were housed in a long, single room without any partitions. The children in the school stared at me. The humiliation pressed down on me, making me want to disappear into the ground. I packed my books and left, without asking for permission.

Ba’jan, exhausted from the day’s work, rested under the mango tree in front of the house. A baby goat was licking salt from Ba’jan’s sweat. When he saw me walking home untimely, he looked up curiously.

I began telling Ba’jan about the incident a bit exaggeratedly. I explained that the Maulovi teacher couldn’t spell ‘vidwan’ correctly. I told Ba’jan, bragging that even I knew the correct spelling. Ba’jan frowned deeply, then grabbed my hand.

‘Let’s go,’ he said, his voice calm.

‘This time, Maulovi teacher will learn his lesson,’ I thought to myself. Excitedly, I led the way, my feet practically flying ahead of Ba’jan.

When we reached the school gate, the Maulavi teacher looked at us in shock. He tried to speak, but Ba’jan did not give him a chance. He did something abruptly.

With one swift motion, Ba’jan grabbed me by the neck and pushed me to his feet. I fell on the Maulvi teacher’s feet.

‘Beg his pardon, touching his feet,’ Ba’jan said to me.

He said to the Maulvi teacher, 'My son, in his inexperience, has wronged you. Please, forgive him.'

The Maulovi teacher was taken aback, pulled me up, and hugged me tightly to his chest.

He said, 'My boy, the mistake was mine. I'm not less hurt by hurting you.' He gently rubbed his hand on my back, where he had hurt me with the cane. His compassion was overwhelming.

I looked up and saw Ba'jan, his eyes hidden behind a *gamcha*, (a type of neck towel) wiping away tears.

Another incident close to that one flashes in my mind. A solvent family was just behind ours. They were affluent farmers. Khalil, the youngest son of the family, was my friend. We studied together in the same class. He watched us go hungry. It hurt him.

One evening, just before sunset, he took me to their banana plantation. The trees were wild, most bearing seed bananas. A huge cluster of bananas hung from a tall tree.

Khalil cut it down, separating the hands of bananas. A cold knot of fear and guilt twisted in my stomach. I carried the bananas home, my heart heavy.

'Aunty, put the bananas away. When they ripen, we'll eat them together,' Khalil said to my mother.

Maa looked at me, startled, her eyes blazing with anger. She, however, put the bananas in a sack and placed them in the loft.

In the middle of the night, I overheard Maa and Ba'jan whispering about the bananas.

Ba'jan said to Maa, 'You shouldn't have indulged him. Allah knows what trouble it will bring.'

Ba'jan's fear proved right. The next morning, Khalil's mother came to our yard, fuming. She burst out in anger, screaming and accusing me of stealing the bananas.

Maa once tried to speak up about Khalil, but her voice was drowned out by Khalil's mother's screams.

Soon, many neighbours gathered in the yard. Ba'jan had left early for work. He returned at that moment.

He tried to reason with Khalil's mother. 'Sister,' he said, 'the boy got greedy and did this. This is our fault. Just take the bananas.'

But his plea was ignored, swallowed by the shouting of Khalil's mother.

Ba'jan turned to Maa and said, 'We can't feed our children, so he stole. It's our fault. Go, bring the bananas.' His voice cracked.

Maa slowly went inside and brought out the sack of bananas.

I stood there, feeling extremely guilty like a convicted criminal. My younger siblings huddled together, scared.

Suddenly, Maa grabbed a stick and started beating me. The first blow sent me to the ground, at Maa's feet.

Ba'jan didn't stop her. He sat, stunned.

The neighbours objected, but Maa ignored them, beating me with a wild, unyielding fury.

At last, Maa collapsed on me in tears. The younger siblings hugged her, crying.

The neighbours, shocked by the scene, quietly left. The sack of bananas lay in the yard. Ba'jan picked it up and went to return it.

By evening, my body was consumed with pain, my bones throbbing with fever. I lost consciousness.

I woke up in the dead of night to find Ba'jan leaning over me, his eyes full of worry.

'Are you in pain, my son?' he whispered.

Looking at Ba'jan's painful expression, I wanted to say, 'Ba'jan, I'm not in pain. I'm fine', but the flood of tears in my eyes wouldn't let me speak.

Early the next morning, a knock on the door woke us. Ba'jan opened the door. He was taken aback to find Khalil's mother standing at the doorstep, holding a bunch of ripe bananas. With tears in her eyes.

‘Brother, I’m in so much pain,’ she said, her voice thick with emotion. ‘I couldn’t sleep all night, thinking about what happened yesterday. Your wife beat the boy so hard. Please call him.’

Without complaint, Ba’jan called me over. ‘Look what your aunty has brought for you,’ he said gently.

I was awake, lying in bed, hearing every word exchanged between Ba’jan and Khalil’s mother.

Noticing my hesitation, Ba’jan urged, ‘Get up, greet your aunty.’

As I stood and greeted her, she pulled me into her arms, caressing me fiercely, almost desperately. Her hands went over my back as she began to sob. The bananas slipped from her hands, rolling on the ground.

Ba’jan, a man of quiet devotion, said his *namaj* (prayer) five times a day without fail. He woke before dawn, long before *adhan* (call to prayer). He would walk to the river to wash, performing wudu (ablution) in the cool morning air. In the courtyard, he would pray on a small bathing stool.

During *ruku* (bowing) and *sajda* (prostration), one of the stool’s shorter legs made a *tuk-tuk* sound that echoed in the stillness of dawn.

After prayers, Ba’jan would sing devotional songs, his voice soft yet filled with reverence:

*‘Sing, O Muslims, sing the praises of the Prophet.
Sing Peace be Upon him, filled with emotions...*

His voice would fill the air, a calming rhythm that seemed to echo the prayers of his heart:

*‘Namaj is a lamp in the darkness of the grave,
Namaj is a companion through life.
Namaj is the solace day and night,
Muhammad, O Messenger of Allah...*

Sometime after *namaj*, Ba’jan would wake us up and ask us to start reading. On some days, he would sit beside us, offering his quiet advice.

He used to say, ‘Son, it’s not wrong to be poor. But not being a good person—that’s a sin. He often told us not to ever lie knowingly. ‘Lies multiply,’ he’d say. ‘Lying is a great sin that Allah does not forgive. Allah does not like liars. If you make a mistake, admit it immediately. Repent. Apologise. You’ll see, there will be no unrest in your heart.’ I can’t explain how deeply these words stuck with me, especially as a teenager. But one day, I felt their weight.

My mother carefully saved money to buy molasses, keeping it aside for when relatives visited our home. She would hide it in the large paddy seed pot in the loft, far from our hungry eyes.

One day, driven by greed, I quietly climbed into the loft, tiptoeing. Fear gripped me. If Maa found out, I knew there would be no escape.

Suddenly, I was startled by the sound of clucking. A hen was hatching eggs beside the pot. It got terrified when it saw me and began making frantic noises. Without thinking, I grabbed a piece of a stick and struck it on the head. The hen’s neck tilted, and its eyes rolled back. A cold chill ran down my spine.

‘The hen is dead,’ I thought. My mind raced—forget the molasses. I was terrified, thinking only of how to avoid Maa’s wrath. But guilt soon consumed me—I had killed a living creature. In a panic, I ran from home.

I spent the whole day wandering, my stomach empty. Fear gripped me more than hunger.

The day dragged on. As evening fell, a heavy darkness surrounded me. In the end, I had no choice but to return home.

I stood in the courtyard, trembling. The house was dark, silent. I thought of calling for Maa, but my courage failed me. Without thinking, I opened the door to the cowshed and stepped inside. The two cows got startled as I entered. I sat down slowly, leaning against the fence. Despite the mosquito bites, I eventually drifted off to sleep.

In the dead of night, Ba'jan came to the cowshed. He made smoke to protect the cows from mosquitoes. He saw me there and called out to Maa. His loud voice woke me up. In that still of the night, Maa gave me something to eat and started crying softly.

Ba'jan sat quietly, asking me no questions. I thought maybe no one had found out yet that the hen was dead. I didn't sleep the rest of the night, anxiety gnawing at me.

Early the next morning, I climbed into the loft with great care to remove the dead hen. But to my surprise, as I approached, the hen started clucking. It wasn't dead after all. It had simply fallen from a slight blow due to its frailty. A massive weight was lifted from my chest. I felt I had survived the wrath of Maa. Relief and joy filled my heart.

Just as Ba'jan had faith in his religion, he had unwavering faith in God.

Once, it was a haat day. We had no food. Ba'jan didn't even have a penny in his pocket. He had sold almost all the bamboo clumps by then.

Ba'jan found one, though it had come with much hardship. We decided to go to the market with the bamboo to sell it. Ba'jan took the lead, carrying the bamboo on his shoulder. I followed, holding onto a small portion of it.

The market was full of bamboo, but there were a few customers.

Ba'jan urged the customers to have a look at the bamboo. Many came closer to see, but no one agreed to buy.

They said the upper portion was too thin; the bamboo wouldn't come to any use.

The market was quiet. Bamboo could not be sold.

Despite his best efforts, Ba'jan couldn't manage a seer of rice even on credit.

Exhausted, he slung the bamboo back on his shoulder and made his way home. He didn't let me carry any portion of it.

I walked beside him and asked, 'Ba'jan, why do we suffer so much?'

Ba'jan said, 'Allah tests people with this.'

'Why does Allah test only the poor?' I asked.

'Listen, son, whatever He does is for our wellbeing,' his voice trembled with pain as he replied.

Returning home, we found Maa sitting by the pit oven in the dark. My siblings were sitting around the oven. Seeing us empty-handed, they got up and went to sleep. I sat next to my mother.

Performing ablution, Ba'jan stood to offer the night prayer. His *adhan* was softer than usual, and he ended the prayer in silence.

As he prayed, he murmured, 'O Merciful God, feed the mouths of all the children of the world. Make everyone happy, Lord. I am but a servant, a sinner...'

At the end of the prayer, he broke down in tears. Even in the darkness, I could see his body shaking with emotion. He fell prostrate on the ground.

Ba'jan would grow restless when he saw anyone in danger. He'd rush headfirst into danger without hesitation, always facing the impossible with courage.

I remember it clearly from my childhood.

The house of the neighbouring rich man was robbed late at night. Torchlight flickered all around, and the screams of frightened people filled the air.

Ba'jan couldn't keep up, but Maa refused to let him go.

He didn't listen to her.

Armed with a large harpoon, Ba'jan confronted the robbers and shouted, 'How dare you!'

The robbers' swords glinted in the torchlight. Ba'jan realised the peril he had walked into at the edge of the slope. He knew retreat was not an option. With unwavering courage, he raised

his head and shouted, 'Don't come any closer. I will pierce this harpoon into your chest!'

The robbers retreated. Ba'jan survived that ordeal. In fact, the swords in the robbers' hands were not real—they were made from banana bark. Yet, they gleamed as it hovered in the light of the torch. The villagers caught the seven robbers by surrounding them on all sides of the river. Ba'jan could realise how the courage of the poor could bring about disasters. He sensed it well on that occasion. He did not stop; he always protested when he saw injustice.

I can remember an incident. Not so clearly, though. This was years before the Partition of India, toward the end of World War II.

The *zamindars*, (the landlords'), dominance was excessive. No one could slaughter cows on the land of the Hindu zamindars of Rasulpur. Cows had to be slaughtered on the government land by the side of the river during *Eid al-Adha*.

Back then, only one or two cows from a village were sacrificed. Many villages could not afford even one. Everyone eagerly awaited the meat.

Our neighbour, Fazar Bapari, a solvent farmer, decided to sacrifice a cow. But, fearing the zamindar, he dared not do it at his own home.

Ba'jan, a bit too eagerly, said, 'Sacrifice it at your home, not on government land. If you're not brave enough, do it in my yard. Let's see how the landlord reacts.'

On Eid day, as usual, the sacrifice took place in our yard. Every villager was given meat. For us, it was a rare occasion to enjoy meat to our heart's content. It used to bring a unique joy.

Later that day, a security personnel of the Zamindar came to our courtyard with a stick in his hand.

'Our Sir, Zamindar, had ordered you to meet him. Come along,' He said.

Maa anxiously stepped forward, folding her hands, begging him not to take Ba'jan. But to no avail.

Ba'jan, as he was leaving, said, 'Don't worry; Allah is above our heads.'

Maa rushed to many, but no one came forward to offer help. The sacrificial meat remained raw in the pot.

Ba'jan returned in the evening, his face devastated. His eyes were swollen, and his body bore the marks of torture. Maa screamed and cried in front of him.

Ba'jan, his voice strained with pain, said, 'Do not worry, God will judge.'

In the dead of night, Maa cooked the meat, gently waking us and urging us to eat. Ba'jan also sat with us. We ate hurriedly, driven by hunger. Ba'jan said nothing; he merely stared blankly at us, sighing heavily.

The events that followed belong to the very end of the sixties. The country was in turmoil, filled with unrest against the misrule of the West Pakistani rulers.

I went through many ups and downs in life and eventually became a teacher at Gaibandha Degree College. By then, Ba'jan had grown old.

The Zamindari system had been abolished long ago. Then the zamindars of Rasulpur were in a miserable condition. All of them had gone to India. Only Gopal Roy Chowdhury, the younger partner of the estate, remained with his wife and children.

One day, Gopal Roy Chowdhury brought his two sons to my college. They had just passed their SSC exams. I happened to meet him.

'You know our situation. If you could help a bit, they would have an opportunity to continue their studies,' Mr Chowdhury said.

I was astonished to see their faces. What had happened to the successors of the powerful landlords?

I promised him that I would help in any way I could with the education of his two sons. It seemed that he felt assured.

Having arrived home in the afternoon, I told Ba'jan everything about Gopal Roy Chowdhury and his sons. I was surprised to see that his eyes were getting wet with tears.

'Ba'jan, do you not remember the torture they put you through?' I asked.

Ba'jan wiped his eyes and replied, 'They were our breadwinners. We were their subjects. Today is their bad day. It isn't fair to remember such things. Help his two sons carry on their studies anyway.'

A sense of extraordinary pride filled my chest for my very ordinary father.

Ours was adjacent to the Hindu village. Since my childhood, I had seen how the people of the two communities shared an invisible bond of kinship. In both happiness and sorrow, in joy and celebration, they mingled with each other.

Ramesh *Kaviraj*, a village doctor, would come and stay up all night if any of us were sick. He offered courage and comfort. In the evening, to the sound of conch shells from the Hindu village, the women from the Muslim neighbourhood would light their evening lamps too.

Before dusk, uncle Ramakant's elderly father, Akshay *Dadu*, grandpa, sitting on a *tong* in their yard, would sing softly, playing the '*khamak*', a musical instrument:

*'Hari (God), the day is gone.
The evening has come,
Take me to you.
Knowing that you are the
master of the hereafter, I call you...'*

At the dead of night, the soft sound of *Khol-kartal*, musical instruments, and the melody coming floating would lull us to sleep. Half-asleep, we could hear.

*Dedicate yourself to Saint Gourango
Murmur Gourango, praise Gourango
One who praises Gourango is my soul.*

On the night of *Lakshmi Purnima*, a Hindu religious occasion, when the *Kojagari*, a group of devotional singers, danced and sang around the neighbourhood, we Muslim boys would join them and follow all night.

We used to hear the voice of the Kathal *Bairagi* (monk) at dawn. He would sing, playing a *mandira*:

*At dawn, in Shachi's courtyard
Gour Chad (a saint) is dancing,
Wake up Sachi-Maa
Gour comes to preach love.
Spreading the name of 'Hari'
From home to home ...*

It was even earlier back then. Kathal was not a monk; his full name was Kathal Das. A Hindu of the lower caste. A fisherman.

There was a *yatra Pala*, an indigenous theatre, in the village.

Kathal played the role of the hero of the drama group. He was dark-skinned. A young boy with a strong build, whose parents had died much earlier.

Mr. Naren, we called him Noren Uncle, was the manager. Naren Uncle belonged to the caste of *Kayestha*, a superior caste.

They were pretty affluent. Every night, rehearsals for the *Yatra Pala* were held in front of the temple in Naren Uncle's courtyard.

Rehearsals for two performances took place simultaneously. One performance was *Chandidas-Rajakini*, and the other was *Srikrishner Nouka Bilash* (Sri Krishna's Boat Luxury). We neighbourhood boys would gather in groups and sit through the night, watching the rehearsals for *Yatra Pala*.

Even today, I still remember the exuberant voice of Kathal Das on the stage of Chandidas Pala, singing:

*Listen, folk, brothers,
Man is above all considerations,
And it's the supreme truth.*

The heroine, Rami, was portrayed by a handsome Muslim boy from the village, named Makkar Ali. As Makkar, in the role of Rami, sang on stage, crying, the audience would listen in silence. Many in the audience would weep:

*Please wait, my beloved,
Across the river of my life.
I'll reach out to you, rowing the boat,
step a bit forward...*

He also sang:

*I built the house for happiness,
But it has burnt out.
As I sought happiness, diving into nectar
Everything turned into poison.*

I didn't fully understand back then. What I did understand was that the unequal love between Chandidas, the son of a high-caste Brahmin, and Rami, a low-caste washerwoman, was not accepted by society. Seeing the unspeakable torture they endured, I unknowingly felt a rebellious spirit arise in my teenage mind that day.

One morning, I woke up to hear that Naren Uncle's younger sister, a child-widow, Annada, was missing. I was deeply saddened to hear that Annada, a beautiful, innocent-looking teenage girl, had disappeared.

Zamindar Surendra Nath Roy Chowdhury, a distant relative of Naren Uncle, was informed immediately. Upon hearing the news, he quickly dispatched people to find Annada. She must be found—otherwise, everyone would be in disgrace.

A net was cast into the river. People guessed the unfortunate girl had likely jumped into the river to end her turmoil. Yet, nothing was found.

Annada was nowhere to be found—neither alive nor dead.

In the afternoon, word spread that the hero of the Yatra group, Kathal Das, had also disappeared. By that time, everyone

understood that an unexpected event had occurred inside Naren uncle's house. No one outside knew how long this silent exchange of love had been going on, but Naren Uncle's family probably suspected it. Perhaps they had taken precautions, but could not prevent the inevitable. Annada and Kathal were never found. Time passed, and everyone gradually forgot about them.

About five years later, Kathal Das unexpectedly returned to the village. Alone. He had a *tilak* on his forehead and a string of beads around his neck. Annada, to everyone's surprise, was not with him. What happened to the girl? Where did he leave her? Is she dead? Or was she sold into prostitution?

Kathal Das did not answer any of these questions. He was now no longer Kathal Das, but Monk Kathal, holding a '*khanjari*' (a musical instrument) in one hand and a *Japa mala* (rosary) in the other. There was no uproar. Everyone understood the situation without further explanation.

Days passed. Months went by. Years came and went. Once again, the Yatra Pala was held in Naren uncle's courtyard. People from far and wide stayed up all night to watch it. Yet, the two curious eyes of a child widow at the open window were never seen.

Now, let's talk about Ba'jan again. Ba'jan was loved by all for his natural honesty. Some Hindus called him Dada (brother), others called him Uncle. Young housewives of the village used to call him father-in-law. Hindu children were as dear to him as his own.

I remember one afternoon, Ba'jan came to Maa in a hurry and said, 'Listen, do you know what our son has done?'

Maa thought that I had done something wrong, so she looked at Ba'jan with worried eyes.

Ba'jan understood Maa's concern and said openly, 'No, it's not what you think. Our Madhav, you know Madhav, he got first place in the school finals this time.'

Maa sighed in relief and reassured herself.

Madhav, a Hindu boy, is the elder brother of my classmate, Dhiren. Madhav used to visit our house with Dhiren. Maa would feed him with care. Ba'jan would call him over and treat him like his own child.

I heard that Madhav would remind Ba'jan of one of his own deceased children. When Madhav left for India with his family in 1948, during partition, Ba'jan grieved silently for nearly seven days. He silently shed tears. The loss of another child weighed heavily on his heart.

In the middle of 1971, during the liberation war of Bangladesh, the Hindu neighbourhood was destroyed once again. Almost everyone fled to India after selling everything for a pittance. Naren Uncle and his brother Nava Kumar Uncle, along with a few families of fishermen, clung to their ancestral land.

It was around September. The country was torn apart by the violence of the Pakistani army and the *Razakars*, collaborators of the Pakistani army. Village after village was burned to ashes. People were killed indiscriminately. Women were often violated. Panic spread everywhere—screams and cries echoed through the land.

One morning, we received news that the Pakistani army and the Razakars were going to attack our village. The main target was the house of Fazlar Rahman Sarkar, because his nephew Kabir Chowdhury, along with his son Sadekur Rahman, had remained in the liberation war.

Upon hearing the news, the women from here and there hid among the pampas grass bushes by the river. The boys scattered in all directions. Nava Kumar Uncle's wife remained in the house for some reason.

By noon, the Razakars surrounded the Hindu village. Looting began, followed by the burning of homes. The sky was alight with the flames. The air was filled with the screams of people.

Ba'jan was very old by then, but his anger flared up once again. Without hesitation, he rushed to the Hindu village with one of my uncles, Golam Hossain.

Ba'jan, along with Golam Hossain Uncle, went to Nava Kumar Uncle's house. Nava Kumar's wife was there. Ba'jan saw a young *Razakar*, about her son's age, holding her hand and pulling her away. Ba'jan ran and snatched the lady away from the man, a collaborator of the Pakistan army.

'Take the lady and go to our house quickly,' he said to Golam Hossain.

Seeing that the target had slipped away, a Razakar pushed Ba'jan hard. Ba'jan fell to the ground, his vision clouding as darkness overtook him.

Nava Kumar uncle's wife survived that occasion, but Ba'jan did not live long after that injury. He passed away soon after independence.

Many years have passed now. I could never forget Ba'jan, not even for a day. I feel his radiant presence in my being every moment. At the end of the month of *Chaitra*, mid March to mid April, when the dust storm blows, I remember my father alone in the field by the river, weeding the fields of *Aush* paddy. He sings from the depths of his throat.

Leave your worldly deeds.

The sun is about to set

After the sunset

Darkness will engulf you.

Early in the morning, when I hear the *adhan*, I hear the sound of the water fountain in my chest. I listen to the sweet music of the morning air.

Namaj is a lamp in the darkness of the grave,

Namaj is a companion through life.

Namaj is the solace day and night,

Muhammad, O Messenger of Allah...

Three

After attending seven schools and experiencing various strains and stresses, I was finally admitted to Class Nine at Kamarpara P M Institution. Kamarpara was the first railway station north of Gaibandha Railway Station. Back then, the intermediate station at Kuptala hadn't yet been built. The school stood a short distance from Kamarpara Railway Station—within walking distance.

It was early February in 1958. Within three months of admission, I had to change my lodging three times. Books were scarce. I needed a classmate next door just to borrow textbooks. I couldn't afford notebooks, let alone clothes—buying books felt like a luxury beyond dreams.

There was no contact with home for a long time. No one asked where I was, how I was. I, too, stopped sending word back. Life in this wandering state—this bohemian existence—became my own.

I sat for the annual examination, but the school withheld my results because the tuition fees for the entire year remained unpaid.

I thought to myself—no more. That's enough. I decided to end my studies then and there.

I returned home after a long time. My younger siblings clung to me in joy. Rapture. Playful and curious. A quiet ache rose in me—if only I could give them something.

Mother came near, gently touched my body, then wiped her eyes against the edge of her sari. Ba'jan stood quietly at a distance.

'Ba'jan, I'll go to work with you from tomorrow. I won't bother with studies anymore—I tried, but fate doesn't permit it,' I said.

He didn't respond to my words. It looked as though he were struggling just to take a deep breath.

That evening, Jabbar, a distant relative of ours, sat down with my mother for a conversation. Jabbar was our neighbour too. I used to call him Jabbar Bhai. He was a poor man of the village. Humble and friendly. His own children used to work on other people's land. He too lived hand to mouth, surviving through daily labour. But his thoughts—his vision—were to educate someone in our slumbering village. As if he hoped to kindle a light in one soul that might one day illuminate the entire village.

'Aunty, your son's education must not stop—we must find a way,' he told my mother.

At that time, I wandered about like a forsaken animal—drifting in a world of emptiness and need. Then, Kashem Bhai changed everything. He was a distant relative, a little older than I, whom I used to call Kashem Bhai. He had failed Class Eight twice and had decided to give up on studies altogether.

One day, he came to me and said frankly, 'Look, I won't study anymore. But you—your intelligence is good. You must study. I'll get you admitted. I'll arrange the money.'

Kashem's father was a wealthy man, so they had no shortage of money. Still, I had no idea how he would manage it.

On the north edge of Gaibandha Town, a former madrasa had just become a high school.

One day, Kashem Bhai led me there. Almost by force. He was a student at that school himself.

He walked straight into the headmaster's room and declared, 'Sir, I've brought you a good student. He must be admitted.'

The headmaster was Gofur Uddin Sarkar. A calm, quiet man—but I could tell, he didn't like Kashem's brash tone.

I stood beside him, trembling, and offered a silent salam.

Perhaps my shabby clothes and shabby look moved him.

As the Assistant Headmaster, Mr. Mohiuddin arrived, the headmaster said, ‘Please see if this boy can be admitted to Class Ten.’

Mr. Mohiuddin glanced at my forehead, then asked, ‘There’s a famous poem in Bengali titled *Proshno*. Do you know who wrote it?’

‘Rabindranath Tagore,’ I answered without hesitation.

He looked me in the eye and continued, ‘Can you recite the last two lines of the poem?’

‘I can,’ I replied.

‘Let’s hear it.’

I had memorised the entire poem, so it wasn’t a problem. I began:

*‘Those who poisoned your air, extinguished the light—
Have you forgiven them, have you loved them?’*

Mr. Mahiuddin nodded, then asked, ‘Tagore has another poem also titled *Proshno*. Do you know that one?’

As luck would have it, I did.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘He wrote it under the pseudonym *Bhanu Singha*, in *Brajabuli*.

My unexpected answer caught the teacher off guard. He looked at the headmaster and said, ‘The boy can be admitted.’

The headmaster asked, ‘Anything else?’

‘No,’ Mr. Mohiuddin replied. ‘That’s enough.’

The whole exchange wasn’t particularly pleasant for me—but for Kashem Bhai, it was a triumphant moment.

We returned home. Kashem Bhai declared to my mother, ‘Aunty, your son has done amazing—he’s going to make it!’

Maa didn’t seem to understand. She stayed focused on her work, responding with quiet indifference.

A week later, I was admitted to the high school. Kashem Bhai paid the fees. How he managed the money became clear two days later.

Kashem Bhai managed the money by giving up two months’ worth of his school fees and selling his textbooks. Even then, it was barely enough for my admission fee. So, he stole from his father’s pocket.

The news didn’t stay hidden. It reached his father, first through whispers, then louder. Furious, his father threw him out of the house. But Kashem Bhai stood firm in his decision. He had no intention of continuing his own studies. His mother died long ago. No one was there to intervene. No one called him back. He quietly left for his maternal uncle’s house.

On my first day at school, I met the first and second boys in class. The first boy was Monotosh Saha—everyone called him Jhantu. I thought the name ‘Monotosh’ sounded beautiful. He lived on Bridge Road, not far from the school. Son of a wealthy business family. Quiet and well-behaved. His books, notebooks, and clothes were immaculate. His handwriting was neat and elegant.

The second boy was Shajahan, from out of town. Quite tall, a bit unkempt, but simple and cheerful by nature. He laughed heartily—*ha ha ha*—at everything.

In the first class, Mr. Gofur Maolana came. An Urdu teacher. Dressed in a *Sherwani*—a long cloak. Short and calm in appearance.

Seeing that I was new, he asked me to read the first paragraph of a story from the textbook.

I had read the story earlier, so I began confidently:

A farmer and his son were going to the market to sell the farmer’s donkey. At the turn of the road, they found some children playing...

Maolana Gofur stopped me, turned a few pages ahead, and asked me to read a paragraph of a famous story, ‘*Guzra Hua Zamana*’ (Story of the bygone days).

I read pretty fluently. When I saw Mr. Gofur's surprise and affectionate smile, I realised—I had already found a place in his heart. From that moment on, I received his boundless love and blessings throughout my life.

At the end of 1971, during the Liberation War in Bangladesh, Mr. Gofur rescued me, saving my life from the death trap set by the Pakistani Army. At that time, he was the Ameer (President) of *Jamaat-e-Islami* and convener of the 'Peace Committee', a collaborating group of the Pakistan Army.

Then, I was one of the five most wanted teachers of Gaibandha College on the Pakistan Army's list. The other four were Principal Ahid Uddin Ahmed, Dr. Abul Hasan Shamsuddin, Matiar Rahman Sarkar from the Bengali department and Abdul Wadud Chowdhury from the Chemistry department.

In the next period, the mathematics teacher, Habibur Rahman, came to class. He gave us a math problem using the K-method. It seemed fairly simple to me.

I submitted my solution first—and not only that, I solved two extra problems ahead of time. The teacher looked at me with interest, and the whole class turned its eyes toward me. I had always been weak in math—afraid of numbers, even. But that day, I surprised myself. And strangely, the same thing happened in every subject—Bengali with Mr. Mohiuddin, English with the headmaster, and Urdu with Maolana Gofur.

In everything, it felt as if a black curtain were being gradually lifted from before my eyes. A quiet light began to flash inside my mind.

More surprises awaited. During the tiffin break, I wandered into the library. My eyes widened—so many books! A full almirah devoted to Bengali literature. I spotted a complete collection of Rebel Poet Nazrul's *Sanchita*.

One shelf held all of Sarat Chandra's novels, lined up neatly. I had already read *Ramer Sumati* and *Mejodidi*, but now I saw

everything—from *Nishkriti* to *Pandit Mashai*. I stood there, overwhelmed, lost in wonder.

I borrowed a book every day. Between classes, I devoured them—even while walking to school. In that world of books, outside suffering faded to insignificance.

The door to a dream world was slowly opening before me.

On one side were sky-high dreams and the joy of discovery, and on the other, the harsh weight of reality. It was a five-mile walk from our house to the town's school, with the Ghaghat river in between—a river that remained full throughout the year. For a long time, the only way to cross was in a small boat owned by the boatman, Tunku. But often, the boat was moored on the opposite bank. With no other option, I had to swim across. My clothes were just a pair of *pyjamas* and a shirt—nothing extra. I had no sandals on my feet. These were problems, of course. But the most significant obstacle was the lack of books.

I was in the matric class, where I had only Bengali, English, and Urdu, plus K.P. Bose's *Algebra* in my collection.

It was difficult to borrow all the books. But notebooks, paper, and pens—they were luxuries I couldn't afford. Slowly, the light of hope began to flicker.

Finally, I happened to find an opportunity. A Kabir Uddin Chowdhury, from the same village, also studied in Class Nine at the same school. He was the second-ranked student in class. A brilliant student. The only child of a widowed mother, he was the apple of her eye.

I called his mother *Bubu* (sister), and Kabir called me *Mamu*, maternal uncle.

One day, his mother, Jobaida Bu' made a proposal.

'Kabir may stay with you at night,' she said. 'Study together. You'll be able to share his books, and he'll learn something from you, too. The books of class nine and ten are the same.'

It felt as though I'd been granted a dream. We had a lamp, but no kerosene was available. Kabir's mother gave us a hurricane lamp filled with kerosene—and even a mosquito net. For the first time in my life, I slept under a mosquito net.

We studied together. Walked five miles to school every morning. We quizzed each other on lessons. Sometimes, I sang softly as we walked.

*'Lord, tell me some way,
Father died when I was in Maa's womb.
I couldn't see him anymore ...'*

I would sing, and Kabir would cry. His father had died of a snakebite before he was even born. The poor boy never saw his father's face.

After becoming a widow, Kabir's mother returned to her father's home. Looking at the face of her only child, she chose never to remarry.

But, let me return to my own story. Amid all the hardship, my greatest solace was that I had found my way back into the stream of education. Still, the challenges never seemed to end. If one month's school fee was somehow managed, the worry of the next month loomed large. The anxiety of paying exam fees and subscriptions often left me restless.

I had no textbooks of my own. I couldn't afford notebooks or paper to write on. I had only one set of clothes, which I wore with extreme care. Yet, despite my caution, they slowly wore thin. The moment I noticed the first signs of tearing, my chest would tighten with fear. There was no washing soda at home. We boiled banana ash to make *khar*, alkali for cleaning. If the dirt didn't come off, the clothes stayed soiled—because rubbing too hard would surely tear them. I had no umbrella for the rain, no bag for my books.

It cost one ana per day to cross the river by boatman, Tunku. As I was unable to pay consistently, he graciously excused the fare on his own accord.

Then came a day I'll never forget. Kabir wasn't with me that morning. It had rained heavily the night before. The river was swollen, full of water hyacinths. The boat was moored on the opposite bank.

What could I do? I put off my trousers, gathered my shirt and books in one hand, and began to swim, wearing a *lengti* (a short piece of cloth).

Midway across, the current overwhelmed me. I couldn't move forward because of the thick hyacinths. I couldn't stay afloat properly. I didn't know whether to save the books or myself. For a moment, I thought—this is the end.

However, someone had seen me from the shore and informed the boatman, Tunku. He leapt into the river and swam toward me. He pulled me to safety, laid me down, and wiped my arms and legs with his own hands.

He didn't let me go to school that day, nor did he allow me to return home. Instead, he took me to his house. He laid my books out to dry on a mat. At noon, I had to have a full meal—lovingly served.

In the afternoon, he wrapped my books and walked me across the river. Before letting me go, he said gently, 'Son, life is much more important than going to school. Promise me—never do something like that again.'

I returned home, but I didn't tell anyone what had happened—not even my mother, who keeps track of my every breath.

On the way to school lies Haripara, a predominantly Hindu village. That's where Subhash Chandra Roy lives—our beloved *Subhash-dada*. He studied in the degree class at Gaibandha College. Tall, fair, with a strikingly handsome, almost heroic presence. There were hushed whispers that Subhash-da was in a

romantic relationship with Gita, the daughter of our school's Sanskrit teacher, Gosaipada Pandit. Gita was also a student at our school, which made our fascination with Subhash-da' all the more intense.

Kabir and I used to walk to school with him. We'd stop at the school gates, while Subhash-da' continued on toward his college in town. Those morning walks with him opened up a whole new world for us.

Each day, he would narrate a story—sometimes from a film, sometimes a novel by Rabindranath, Sarat Chandra, Tarashankar, or Bibhutibhushan. His storytelling was so vivid and mesmerizing that we'd be completely transported. We'd reach school without even realizing how far we'd walked.

Most days, we were enchanted by the legendary love stories of Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar in Bengali cinema—*Shapmochan*, *Sagarika*, *Shilpi*, and more. We would lose ourselves in these tales, forgetting the world around us.

In my imagination, I became a gifted boy from a poor home who makes it to Kolkata, singing on the streets, *'Listen, friend, to the tragic story of the city made of hard concrete and lifeless iron ...'* stirring the hearts of the urban crowd.

Sometimes I was the genius son of a humble potter, earning praise from all and winning the city's best artist award.

At other times, I was a young lawyer, eloquently defending an innocent client who had been wrongly imprisoned for years. And then, suddenly, the story would end. Reality would snap back like a jolt, cutting through the haze of dreams. Yet somewhere deep within, the sweet seed of hope remained alive. Because in all of Subhash-da's stories, the heroes were sons of the poor. Their paths to success were paved with honesty, desire, and relentless hard work.

The half-yearly exam was approaching. By then, I had read more books from the library than I had studied from our class

textbooks. Even after receiving the exam schedule, I couldn't resist devouring Rabindranath's *Noukadubi*, Sarat Chandra's *Devdas*, and Bibhutibhushan's *Pather Panchali*.

One day, I noticed two books of beautiful covers in our first boy, Monotosh's hands—Prabhavati Devi Saraswati's *Chirabandhabhi* and Avadhut's *Marutirtha Hinglaj*.

I couldn't take my eyes off them. I desperately wanted to borrow them. Monotosh wasn't the kind to refuse. But the upcoming exam pulled me back from that temptation.

I sat for the Half-yearly exam. It went well—not outstanding, but decent.

On the day of the results, I overheard whispers about Shahjahan, who was expected to secure second place. Something seemed off. When the results were finally posted on the notice board, it was announced: Monotosh stood first, but Shahjahan had dropped to third place.

Suddenly, Kabir burst out from the crowd, shouting gleefully, *'Mamu, you came second!'*

Oddly, I didn't feel much joy. Shahjahan, my tall, soft-spoken friend—who had quickly become one of my closest companions—stood silently, clearly disheartened. I didn't know what to say to comfort him. But then, to my surprise, he walked up to me and said, *'Well, what do you know—you finally made it to second place! Honestly, I thought you'd beat Monotosh and come first. But oops!, you stood second!'*

His words struck me. It felt like even if he had come in last, it wouldn't have stirred a trace of resentment or envy in him. There was a rare purity in his heart.

Soon after came the pre-test. This time, I set aside everything else and studied with full focus. The exam went well. My marks improved slightly in Math and English, but my position didn't change. Not that it mattered. My thoughts were now consumed by one thing alone—how to pass the Matriculation Exam.

The year drew to a close with many ups and downs. The Test arrived. However, due to numerous shortages and struggles, I was unable to prepare as I had hoped. I realised now—I was falling behind. Monotosh Saha, ever-disciplined and focused, was ahead in every way. He took private tuition in various subjects, especially in mathematics with Mr. Habibur Rahman. Even Shahjahan had become serious about his studies. Compared to them, I felt insignificant.

Every morning, I left home on an empty stomach, having only a bit of *panta*—leftover rice soaked overnight. Then I walked the five miles to school. I never had even a single farthing in my pocket to buy something to eat. From morning till late afternoon, I went hungry. And on the long walk back, hunger gnawed at me with sharp teeth. My legs often refused to move.

Then one day, the selection exam (Test) for Matriculation began. Maa tried her best to prepare a small meal before dawn. I left early as usual. Kabir came with me, always supportive, always encouraging.

On the road, he would quiz me, remind me of answers, and lift my spirits. As soon as I stepped out of the exam hall, he would snatch the question paper from my hand and say with confidence, ‘Mamu, this one’s so easy for you!’

His enthusiasm was boundless. But I knew the truth—my exams were not going well. I especially fumbled badly in Bengali. The test ended with disappointment weighing heavily on my heart.

A few days later, the results arrived. Deep down, I knew: I had lost the glory I once earned. The boy who had surprised everyone at first was now fading in failure.

I reached school in the afternoon on result day. Other classes had already been dismissed. The teachers were still busy finalising the results. Outside, students and their guardians

gathered in anxious clusters. Just before noon, the result sheet was pinned to the noticeboard. A crowd surged forward. I stood at a distance, paralysed. I didn’t have the courage or strength to approach.

From the cries and quiet sobs that followed, I could tell that many hearts had broken that day. From the cries and quiet sobs that followed, I could tell that many hearts had broken that day. I heard that some had failed, and had been disallowed from sitting for the exam. Many were breathing a sigh of relief, having passed this time. None mentioned my name. Kabir wasn’t there that day. I started to panic.

Someone said that Shahjahan had come third again this time. Shahjahan seemed satisfied with that. At that moment, the first boy, Monotosh—the calm Monotosh Chandra Saha, who had never been second in any exam until now—came close to me, hugged me, and said, ‘At last, you carried the day. You have stood first. Congratulations.’

The warmth of his embrace left me stunned. I couldn’t respond. A wave of tears began to swell within me, like waves in a river.

I wanted to say, ‘Monotosh, actually, I have been lost to you, brother. I don’t compare myself to you.’ But I couldn’t say it aloud.

It was evening, time to head home. Both Maa and Ba’jan were waiting for me. When Mother heard the news, she wiped her eyes. Ba’jan’s reaction was hard to read.

Jabbar Bhai came running, hearing the news. But instead of joy, he gravely said, ‘Aunty, the real problem starts now. How will we manage the money for the form *fill-up* and registration for the exam?’ The thought of that great problem seemed to give him a headache.

In the end, it was decided that we would sell Fazila’s pet goat to manage the money for the form fill-up for the exam.

Ba'jan took the goat to the market for two consecutive days. But the price never rose above fifteen taka. Twenty-seven taka was needed for the form fill-up.

Finally, on the morning of the last day for form submission, the goat was sold to a wholesaler for eighteen taka.

Just as the goat was being taken away by the wholesaler, my sister burst into tears. Seeing her cry, I felt as though I didn't need to study. What's the use of passing the Matriculation Exam? A selfish guilt began to torment me.

Eventually, after everyone explained and calmed her down, the goat sat down—it couldn't be dragged anywhere. It sounded only like 'Ma, ma'.

Finally, Fazila brought a handful of rice from the house and held it in front of the goat's mouth. But to our surprise, it no longer showed the same eagerness for the food it once had.

At last, they dragged the goat away, but my poor sister's silent love for the animal flowed down her cheeks in the form of tears.

Eighteen taka had been managed. But I needed twenty-seven taka. Nine taka short, yet. Jabbar Bhai fell into deep anxiety. What now? Whom would he turn to for help? Suddenly, he rushed.

A few hours later, he came back with a ten-taka note in his hand. He handed it to my mother and said, 'Aunty, by God's will, I have managed the money. Give him breakfast and send him to school. Today is the last day for exam form submission.'

The mystery of how Jabbar Bhai, the penniless man who could barely feed his children twice a day, managed to find those ten precious taka remains unsolved. That loan was never repaid.

By the time I finished filling out the form and started heading home, it was already late afternoon. That day, for some reason, I didn't take my usual route—I took another way home.

I turned around a bit. I was alone. I lost myself immediately after crossing the iron bridge at Pulbandi, some distance from the town. I began wandering in another world. Dream. Desire.

I dreamt I had passed the Matriculation Exam. I passed Intermediate, too. I went to a big city, caught the attention of a wealthy man, and was admitted to medical college thanks to his compassion. A good student with a good nature. Everyone admired me.

Wearing an apron, I walked through the corridors of the college, deeply absorbed in my studies. After all, I had to become a great doctor. Around me were the envy of many, the love of many, and the curiosity of even more.

The final-year exam results were out. I stood first. Amidst the cheers, the principal called me in. As I entered the room, he said, 'Well, my boy, congratulations! This time, I've proposed your name for the state scholarship.'

'Thank you, sir,' I said, stumbling forward to touch his feet in joy. But then my dream was shattered. I tripped on a broken brick in the road. My big toe on the right foot burst open, bleeding. The shock of reality hit me hard, and I realised just how deeply the ghost of the *Sagarika* movie, which I had once heard about from Subhash-da', had taken root in my mind.

Darkness descended around me. The sound of the crickets was all I could hear. There was still a long way to go home.

I thought of my mother. Perhaps she was sitting alone in the yard, without having eaten. A crescent moon rose above the bamboo tree in front of our house. My mother looked at it with tears in her eyes, thinking that one day her son would grow up to be something very, very big.

I didn't grow up the way my mother had hoped. I couldn't become the doctor she dreamed of. But, as far as I had risen, even within a poor family, it was something that had once seemed unimaginable.

This was all made possible by the sacrifices, kindness, grace, and good wishes of so many. Many of them are no longer with us. Kashem Bhai passed away of cancer at a young age. Dear Jabbar Bhai died, defeated by hunger.

Kabir Chowdhury left this world with a chest full of pain after battling a complicated kidney disease for years. He bore witness to countless events—stories from his own life, beginning with his role in the Liberation War. His loving mother, Jobaida Bu', was left behind, mourning her dear son, who lay in an unknown land in America.

Mr. Mohiuddin, one of the district-level organisers of the War of Liberation in 1971 and my revered teacher, now rests in a grave not far from here, in Kholahati. I never visited his grave, not even once. Maolana Gofur passed away, and I couldn't place a handful of soil on his grave.

The grave of boatman Tunku has also disappeared in the riverbed. Not even a single day was spent searching for it. These regrets, these shortcomings, constantly burn within me. I don't know much about my two dear friends, my classmates, Shajahan and Monotosh. I have heard that Shajahan's health isn't good. He now lives in Rangpur after retiring as the Additional District Commissioner of Rajshahi. Monotosh never returned to our town from Narayanganj, where he went to work as a teacher or started a business.

I am indebted to all of them in so many ways, and yet, that debt was never repaid.

Four

The crowd at Gaibandha Railway Station was a little larger than usual that day. I don't remember the exact date—only that it was sometime in May 1960.

The commotion was due to the publication of the Matriculation examination results in Dhaka the day before. The newspapers carrying the results were expected to arrive on the 10:30 am train. By then, it was already eleven. Still, there was no sign of the train. People kept glancing anxiously down the railway line, waiting.

At the time, there was only one education board for the entire country—the East Pakistan Secondary Education Board, Dhaka.

The train finally arrived around 12:30. The moment it halted, the newspapers vanished like mist in the sunlight.

That morning, I left home after having a little food. Then, I had to walk five miles to the station. My weary body could hardly bear the strain of standing for long. I was in no shape to push through the crowd to get a copy of the paper. What to do? I looked around helplessly.

Nearby, I spotted a group of people crowding around someone who had a newspaper, scanning the result sheet. Everyone tried to know the result from the gentleman.

I approached, drained and desperate, and softly asked him, 'Brother, could you please check my roll number?'

He looked at me with a gentle expression. 'What's the roll number?'

'Two hundred and fifty-six,' I replied.

He was an elderly man—likely someone's guardian. He ran his eyes down the list and muttered, 'No... no, it's not here.'

The ground beneath my feet seemed to shift. A strange darkness clouded my vision.

‘Could you check the Third Division list, please?’ in a trembling voice, I pleaded.

‘I already looked in the Third Division,’ he replied with a hint of irritation.

Of course, he had only bothered to check the First and Second Division lists. There were hardly five students across the entire Gaibandha subdivision who had passed in First Division. Even a Second Division was rare. For a weary-looking village boy like me, Third Division was too much—and the man, understandably, hadn’t thought to check the list of Second Division, let alone First Division.

Just then, a boy around my age, standing nearby with a newspaper in his hand, asked gently, ‘What number did you say?’

‘Two fifty-six,’ I said anxiously.

‘Two fifty-six?’ he repeated, scanning the list again. ‘Ah, here it is—Second Division!’

A surge of blood rushed to my chest. Joy exploded like fireworks inside me.

I looked at the boy, my voice carrying a mixture of disbelief and hope. ‘Brother, can you show me the roll?’

Pushing through the crowd, he brought the newspaper over to me and pointed to my number with his finger. ‘Can you believe it now?’ he said.

I looked at him, and one thought lit up in my mind: Ah, people can be so kind. Even as the joy of passing coursed through me, it was his small act of goodness that moved me to tears.

Just as I stepped out of the station, I ran into my classmate Shajahan.

‘What’s the news?’ I asked.

‘Same as yours,’ he grinned. ‘And Monotosh too.’

He told me the tabulation sheet had already arrived, and the headmaster had taken it home. We went to find him.

Gofur Uddin Sarkar, the headmaster of Modern High School, was building his new house in Gorosthan Para, in the town. Seeing us approach in a group, he came out holding the tabulation sheet in his hand.

As soon as his eyes met mine, he sighed and said, ‘I had such high hopes for you—but you’re unlucky. You missed the First Division by just three marks. You didn’t receive the Letter marks in Math. And it’s those missing three marks that cost you the First Division. Your aggregate is four hundred seventy-seven.’ Our headmaster’s face clouded with regret.

‘Such a pity,’ he said softly, almost to himself.

In that moment, the joy that had just blossomed in my heart withered. A bitter wave of disappointment swept through me. I kept hearing the same words echo in my mind—letter, First Division... I missed it by only three marks...

By that time, I got hungry. My limbs grew heavy, my head light. I felt myself collapsing. I sat on the ground, grabbing a brick pillar. Then—darkness.

I don’t know how long I was unconscious. Probably, I lost my consciousness. When I opened my eyes, I saw a beautiful woman sprinkling water on my face. My friends were holding me up from behind. Someone was waving a handmade fan. Our headmaster sat beside me, gently stroking my forehead, worry etched deep into his features.

‘This is Sir’s wife,’ someone nearby whispered,

In a faint voice, I greeted her.

In a gentle voice, she asked, ‘Would you like to eat something?’

I shook my head. ‘No... I want to go home.’

I shattered inside—as I had come so close to an outstanding achievement.

By the time I reached home, the daylight had nearly vanished. The sun had slipped below the trees. Only a tired amber glow

remained on the horizon. My mother stood at the edge of the courtyard, a silhouette in the twilight.

Seeing my weary, disoriented face, she asked, her voice tight with fear, ‘Son, didn’t you pass?’

I stepped close to her, leaned in, and whispered, ‘Maa, I passed ... Second Division.’

I don’t know what went through her mind. She did something she had never done before—she drew me into her arms and kissed my forehead. Tears flowed from her eyes.

Before long, Jabbar Bhai came running first, receiving the news. Jabbar Bhai—ever my well-wisher, ever poor. Turning to my mother, he said with pride brimming in his voice, ‘Aunty, didn’t I tell you? This dark-skinned son of yours will one day light up the whole village.’

By evening, one by one, from nearly every household came to see the first matriculated boy of the village. My mother tried to offer each visitor a bit of betel leaf and nut—her own humble gesture of gratitude. Ba’jan began rubbing his hands together, asking for forgiveness. He could not afford sweets, a traditional way to express gratitude for congratulations.

That night, during the *Isha Namaj* (night prayer) Ba’jan sat for a long while, weeping in gratitude and whispering thanks to Allah. After finishing his prayer, he quietly stood for two extra *rak’ahs*—a voluntary prayer of thanksgiving. My mother was in the kitchen. Father called out to her, ‘Tell the children to raise their hands. Let us all pray together.’

And so, in the stillness of night, this family of little means, draped in poverty, finally found a joyful sleep for the first time in ages. The boy at the centre of it, that’s me, passed a sleepless night, pierced by the ache of quiet dissatisfaction.

Then came the slow days. That same sluggish, sun-beaten time. Poverty did not leave; instead, it tightened its grip. Each morning brought the same silent question—how will I find work? Who will offer me any?

No answer came. I only counted days like beads on a worn-out rosary. Yet, an impossible dream had begun to take shape in my heart—to go to college. But that was all it was. A dream. A whisper. Hardly something I could dare speak aloud.

Since childhood, I had been in the habit of reading books, drawing, and playing the flute. Books were rare—painfully rare. So by day, I sketched whatever I saw; and by evening, I would take my flute down to the riverbank. A deep sense of beauty and fascination for melody used to keep me spell-bound. The soft tunes rising from my flute carried me beyond the reach of hunger and hardship, lifting me into another world—one of melody and meaning.

Maa didn’t like flutes played at night. There was a belief that if a mother of a single child hears the flute’s cry after dusk, she had to fast that night. Perhaps this tale had travelled to our Bengali village from the legends of Lord Krishna and his foster mother, Yashoda. But I paid little heed to my mother’s gentle protests. As the light faded from the sky, I would slip out with my flute. And then, across the quiet water, in the depth of night, the notes would rise—soft, sorrowful, and searching. I do not know in which lonely mother’s heart that melody found an echo. But I played on.

My life took a quiet, unexpected turn one day. A Dr. Moin Uddin had come from the town to visit the ailing father of our local Union Council member, Kabil Uddin.

I was sitting under the mango tree on the north side of our courtyard, lost in thought, sketching a scene that had long lived in my mind: a narrow river curling through the land, a sailboat drifting gently, two palm trees standing guard at the bend, and a soft reflection of the setting sun melting into the water. I was utterly absorbed in my drawing when the sound of approaching footsteps stirred me from my reverie. Looking up, I saw a tall, dark-skinned man watching me with curiosity and wonder in

his eyes. Beside him stood Kabil Uddin with a bag in his hand. I quickly understood—the tall man was Captain Moin Uddin, the doctor.

I stood and greeted him respectfully. He took the drawing from my hand, turned it over thoughtfully, and smiled. ‘Excellent,’ he murmured.

Councilor Kabil Uddin then explained my situation: that I had passed my Matriculation exam but could not continue my education due to poverty.

The doctor didn’t say much. He took a small prescription pad from his coat pocket, scribbled a short note, tore it off, and handed it to me. ‘Go meet him,’ he said.

The note was addressed to Professor Abdul Matin Chowdhury, the English teacher at Gaibandha College.

The next day, with cautious hope, I made my way to the college. I found him in the staff common room, reclined halfway in a wicker easy chair, reading a book. He wore a crisp white panjabi-pajama, gold-rimmed glasses resting on the bridge of his nose, his expression thoughtful—an aura of calm dignity surrounding him.

I stepped forward quietly and greeted him. He looked up, his gentle eyes searching my face. Hesitantly, I handed him the note from the Captain-doctor.

He read it, then looked at me again. ‘Did you bring your mark sheet?’ he asked.

I nodded and passed it to him.

He examined it closely, his fingers moving slowly down the columns. ‘Hmm,’ he said, ‘Your marks in Bengali, Science, and Mathematics are quite good. Somehow... get yourself admitted into the science stream. I’ll take care of the rest.’ Then, after a pause, his voice softened but carried a quiet strength:

‘And listen—don’t be afraid of hardship. You must fight through it. That’s the only way forward.’

Something in his words settled deep within me. His compassion sparked a new courage—gentle but steady—somewhere in the hollow of my chest.

The admission fee for the science stream was fifty-seven taka—forty taka for the enrolment and seventeen for the laboratory deposit.

After much discussion with Jabbar Bhai, my mother made the decision—she sold everything: the chickens, the goats, even the poultry she had raised with care. Despite borrowing some money from others, we found the amount only forty. The remaining seventeen—in no way could it be arranged.

I had to give up my dream of studying in the science stream and settled for the Arts. Returning home, I told Maa about this. She didn’t seem to grasp the full meaning. She just stared at me with wide, searching eyes. And then the tears came—slow and silent. Whether those tears carried pride or pain, I could not tell.

Because I had the highest aggregate among all the first-year students, the college granted me a full free studentship. Professor Matin Chowdhury went a step further—he arranged for me a lodging at the home of Mr. Nurul Islam in Gorosthan Para.

I had no bedding of my own. I shared a bed with the lodging master’s eldest son. I lacked even the most basic books, borrowing whatever I could find. My pockets were always empty. My clothes were threadbare, my shoes worn down. And yet, the simple joy of being able to attend college dulled the sharp edge of every sorrow.

Every day, when I stepped into the quiet, grassy square on the southern edge of the town and entered the sublime ‘E’-pattern tin-shed building of Gaibandha College, I felt myself to be the most fortunate in the world. But the real trial had just begun.

I had enrolled in the Arts—felt like being plunged into a puzzle—a world of subjects I had never even heard of before. And not in Bengali, my mother tongue—every subject had to be

studied and written in English. I remembered how I had nearly fainted trying to translate a forty-mark English passage in the Matriculation exam. And now, everything—except Bengali—was in English. Reading, understanding, writing, exams—everything. Even today, looking back after all these years, I still marvel: How did I ever survive that storm?

My fear of English began to loosen its grip—not through textbooks, but by simply watching how our teachers spoke it.

Professor Ramzan Ali, broad-shouldered and commanding in appearance, taught two subjects each day—Economics in the morning, Civics in the afternoon. He spoke English as effortlessly as water flows—clear, crisp, and confident.

Professor Matin Chowdhury, dignified and elegant, taught English with such warmth that it often felt like he was teaching Bengali. He used to teach poetry three days a week. He took three months to cover ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ in class—the rest of the three days, he taught rhetoric and prosody. Still today, I have not forgotten what he taught—simile, metaphor, transferred epithet, or hypallage.

And then there was handsome T. H. Khan, our Mathematics teacher. With him, the line between Bengali and English blurred completely—it all seemed one seamless current of thought. A few students from the Arts stream took Mathematics as an intermediate-level subject.

Professor Niamat Ali, though plain in appearance, was a wonder in the classroom. When he taught Logic, his English turned into enchantment—concepts became luminous, almost magical. Through these voices, I slowly began to feel at ease with the language. I still couldn’t speak it fluently, but I grew comfortable writing it—freehand, without fear.

Years later, I would return to Gaibandha College—not as a student, but as a teacher. I taught there for a long span of my life. So much happened during those years—strange, beautiful, inexplicable things. The golden moments of that time are

slowly fading from memory. Yet, the small bittersweet incidents from my own student days still sparkle at the edges of remembrance.

In front of the college stretched a vast green field. The vast field stretched treeless under the sun. Boys and girls strolled together along the veranda. They chatted in the corridor, lounged in the common room. Sometimes, the teachers would join in—laughing, exchanging stories. They played cards. Others took turns at table tennis. Some sat with cigarettes balanced at their lips, playing chess with the quiet intensity of meditative monks.

Professor Jahangir Kabir, the teacher of History, was one of them. It wasn’t easy to trace him among the students. I was not worthy of being in their company. I watched them from afar—with a mix of curiosity, wonder, and a twinge of envy.

Let me tell you about something that happened one afternoon, near the end of my first year. I was still a newcomer, commuting to college daily, unfamiliar to most. I had to walk past the narrow front balcony that ran across the middle section of the college. From one end, it was impossible to see the other.

That day, Professor Ramzan Ali was walking in from the west, on his way to teach in room number eleven. Just then, from the opposite side, I saw a woman approaching, a red bindi glowing on her forehead like a flame in the sunlight. She was a graceful student in a sari—her presence quietly striking. Neither she nor the teacher noticed the other as they turned the corner. And then—an almost imperceptible jolt. Their shoulders brushed. The books in her arms slipped and scattered on the ground.

Without pausing, the teacher continued toward the staff room, his expression unreadable. And she—rather than appearing embarrassed—stooped down with a soft, shy smile and began gathering her books.

I stood nearby, watching it all unfold. The moment itself was ordinary. But something in their body language, their silence, felt different and unusual.

Just then, a hand rested on my shoulder. I turned to find a senior student beside me.

‘What are you staring at like that?’ he said with a smirk. ‘Don’t you know? That’s the teacher’s wife. Maya ma’am.’

I almost laughed at myself. I tapped my own head—half out of disbelief, half out of embarrassment. But a strange pang stirred inside me. A mix of jealousy and something more profound—something wordless—curled tightly in my chest.

That same Maya ma’am is now a close acquaintance of mine. We meet quite often. Whenever I bring up those old romantic moments, she reacts with playful irritation. She pretends to hit me, and I jokingly run away, which only makes her more mock-angry.

Back then, I couldn’t capture anyone’s attention in college—not with my looks, not with my clothes, and certainly not with my demeanour. But there was one moment that stood out. I caught sight of Professor Niamat Ali of Logic in a particular incident.

It was during a Logic class test. The question was: Are proper names connotative? The reference was the tale of a blind boy named *Padmalochana*, one whose eyes are like the flower of the lotus.

Among the bright students in Logic were Sattar from Kanchipara, Mahbuba from Malipara, and Mostafa from Tulsighat. I understood Logic well, though I was not considered among the best ones. However, I did well in the exam. That day, I had studied B. N. Roy’s original text carefully—and I poured everything I had into that exam.

Three days later, the Professor returned the answer sheets to most of the students. A few, however, were held back. Sattar had the highest score. Mahbuba came in second, just two marks behind. Then, the teacher looked at us and said,

‘Among the remaining exam scripts, who do you think deserves the highest mark?’

I stood up with courage. A soft murmur of contempt rippled through the class. My ears burned with embarrassment.

The next day, entering the class, the teacher addressed me, saying, ‘If you stood up so bravely yesterday, what do you think today?’

I was in a pitiable state. My legs trembled, not just from fear but from the weight of my own shame.

Summoning every ounce of courage, I replied, ‘Sir, I did well in the exam.’ My voice quivered so much that the entire class burst into laughter.

The Professor silenced them immediately, reprimanding everyone. He then said, ‘Listen, he got the highest marks. I admire his confidence.’

Tears of joy welled up in my eyes upon hearing the teacher’s words. In my elation, I even forgot to sit down.

The class fell into stunned silence. Some of the girls in the front turned their heads, glancing at me with curiosity, as though I had achieved something monumental. From that day on, Professor Niamat Ali became my favourite teacher, and Logic became my favourite subject.

During our first year, Professor Niamat Ali completed his EPCS (East Pakistan Civil Service) and transitioned to the administration cadre. My last meeting with this Professor took place in Sylhet Jail in 1977. By then, he was the Additional District Commissioner of Sylhet, and I was in solitary confinement in the condemned cell of Sylhet Jail for political reasons. But there are many stories, too many to share here. They can be told another time.

Returning to the matter at hand, less than five months later, I found myself drained at the lodging house. Teaching children in exchange for food and shelter seemed like a minor task. Yet, the

suffocating, soul-crushing life surrounded by the cold bricks, wood, and cement of the city was unbearable to me..

The enchanting fields, ghats, and rivers of the village, my mother's face, the paintings, and the melody of the flute began to call me back, pulling me with a desperation I couldn't ignore.

Finally, one day, I returned to that dilapidated house, living in the shadows of misery and poverty. Mother already knew of the unhappy life I had led in the city, so she wasn't at all surprised to see me return like this.

She embraced me and said, 'My son, there's no need for such higher education. Better, you stay with me. In my bosom.' Her voice cracked with emotion as she spoke. The moment I walked in, my siblings shouted with joy. The room buzzed with excitement. Ba'jan, sitting by the door, watched this scene with a detached gaze, letting out a long sigh.

The struggle began again. Ba'jan bought me an old bicycle, putting a piece of fertile land as a mortgage.

Every morning, I woke up, grabbed whatever little food I had, and ran to college. By afternoon, I dragged my weary, hungry body back home. I had no textbooks, none of the necessary study materials. My studies were barely progressing.

I took the half-yearly exam without adequate preparation, and over time, dissatisfaction and disappointment gnawed at me. The test results weren't good, but there was some good news.

The head clerk at the college told me I had been awarded a scholarship. According to the Dhaka Education Board list, this scholarship was granted by Rajshahi University, as Intermediate courses were then under the university. Within a few days, I received a lump sum of money.

I bought each of them something with the scholarship money. I also bought some notebooks and books. One day, my siblings were overjoyed to have a proper meal at home. My life, which had once seemed stagnant, began to find its rhythm again. Mother, too, filled her chest with renewed hope.

On March 29, 1962, the Intermediate final exams came to a close. The exams hadn't gone well, but by then, the family's situation had only worsened.

Ba'jan's health also deteriorated. He could not manage everything with his minimal and uncertain income.

Yet, despite all this, my mother remained resolute. She alone stood by, unwavering, facing a sea of challenges. The family, with much hardship, kept moving forward.

Even on this sorrowful day, a new dream began to take root in my heart: after I pass Intermediate, I will study for Honours in Bengali Literature. I had no idea what 'Honours' truly meant or how one studied for it. Yet, just hearing it from others' lips made this seemingly impossible dream spin in my mind.

The results of the Intermediate exam were out, and mine were far from what I had hoped. I had already braced myself for disappointment, so, somehow, I managed to absorb the shock and set my sights on the new dream of studying for Honours.

On July 25, 1962, my life took an unexpected turn. Without telling anyone, I left home with not a single coin in my pocket. My plan was to go to Rangpur and study Honours at Carmichael College. I embarked on this uncertain journey, almost in a trance.

At twelve noon, I boarded a local train without a ticket, a cloth bag slung over my shoulder, and a letter from a distant relative tucked into my pocket.

When I arrived at Kaunia station, I thought, This madness makes no sense. I considered turning back and going home, trying to find a job. But just as the train began to leave, I boarded it subconsciously.

When I reached Rangpur station at 3 p.m., I was immediately caught by the ticket collector. He rounded up several other ticketless passengers and led us to a small room at the station for questioning.

He approached me first, rifling through my pockets to check if I had any money.

In a voice full of despair, I told him the story of my hardships and shared the impossible dream I was chasing. But his heart didn't soften. He grabbed one of my ears with his left hand and slapped my left cheek with his right. Darkness swam before my eyes. Tears welled up, the sting of humiliation more painful than the physical blow. I kept thinking of my mother. I hadn't told her I was leaving. I wondered where she was, perhaps wandering restlessly, anxious and lost. Oh, my poor dear mother...

Despite my many pleas and desperate requests, I was not released. Before evening, the railway police, along with others, tied me with ropes around my waist and shackled me to the police station on foot.

At the duty officer's command, a sentry ushered us all into a dark cell. That was my first time in a prison.

I spent a long, nightmarish evening with many unfamiliar faces, enduring mosquito bites and the suffocating stench of urine.

In the morning, the new duty inspector arrived. He ordered everyone to line up in front of him as he prepared a list of the criminals to send to the court.

I was so hungry and thirsty that I was on the verge of fainting. I could barely stand. The inspector went down the line, recording everyone's details one by one, speaking to some with a hint of sympathy.

When he reached me, I broke down in tears. He listened to my story, then gestured to the stool beside him and indicated I should sit.

I stood frozen, not knowing what to do.

Then he spoke, his voice soft but firm: 'Haven't I told you to sit down? Just sit down. Don't worry, I'm arranging for your release.'

I was stunned. In that moment, it felt as though the man in front of me, dressed in a police uniform, was not a policeman at all. He seemed more like an angel. I stood up, went over to him, and touched his feet in gratitude.

After finishing the list, the inspector took a tiffin bowl from the drawer of his table. He opened it with his own hands and handed it to me, saying, 'Eat.'

Perhaps he hadn't had breakfast that morning, so he had brought food with him—two or three pieces of bread with a small portion of vegetables.

I hesitated as I held the bowl in my hands.

Seeing my hesitation, he spoke in a tone that was almost threatening: 'Have the food. I'll bring something for myself later.'

I don't know what magic was in his voice, but as he spoke, my body swelled with the weight of my tears.

The inspector walked with me to the main road in front of the police station. He hailed a rickshaw and told me to get in. He paid the fare himself, instructing the rickshaw puller to take me straight to Carmichael College.

With a gentle hand, he slipped a five-rupee note into my breast pocket and said, 'Get educated and become a better person. Ease the sorrow of your parents. Only then will this humiliation be avenged.'

The rickshaw pulled away, and I offered him a salam .

He looked at me and said softly, 'Khuda hafiz'—goodbye in the name of God.

As the rickshaw started down the road, I looked back and saw him standing quietly, looking at me.

Five

It was around ten or eleven in the morning when I got off the rickshaw at the main gate of Carmichael College. I remember the date vividly—July 26, 1962.

No sooner had I stepped down than the first complication arose. The fare was eight annas, but I had a five-taka note. Now, where could I find change?

Sensing my hesitation, the rickshaw puller handed me an eight-anna coin, took the note from my hand, and said with a reassuring smile, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll break the note and bring back your change.’

As he went off in search of change, I began walking slowly along the path ahead.

The road was laid with red surki (rubble of bricks)—sunbaked and firm underfoot. Majestic cedar trees flanked the path on both sides, their tall shadows dancing gently in the breeze.

Ahead loomed a magnificent building, crowned with a dome reminiscent of the Taj Mahal. A soft carpet of green grass stretched before it. Dotted with elegant *zhau* trees. Well-dressed students lounged and chatted in the shade.

To the south of the main building stood the common room. Besides it, at Panialtla, was the college canteen. The veranda of the common room was packed with bicycles—hundreds of them, it seemed.

Inside, the rhythmic pop of ping-pong balls echoed between bursts of laughter. The sound of the Grundig radio—its long aerial stretched overhead—crackled with live cricket commentary. Suddenly, a collective roar erupted: ‘O-u-t!’

Farther off, nestled in the tall, beautiful trees, I noticed bungalow-style staff quarters. To the right, the road led eastward toward GL Hostel, then past the Chemistry Gallery, and finally to the KB Hostel, which was reserved for Hindu students.

The vast field at the heart of the campus remained untouched by buildings back then. To the north stood the CM Hostel, a long, tiled structure.

The eastern side of the campus lay utterly bare—untouched and quiet. Here and there, a few patches of sesame plants peeked out from the earth, bordered by dense, tangled greenery. Standing at the edge of the open field, I paused for a long moment, taking in the majestic splendour of Carmichael College’s Indo-Islamic architecture.

Suddenly, a jolt of realisation struck me—I hadn’t taken any change from the rickshaw puller. Panic gripped me.

I rushed back to the rickshaw stand, eyes scanning every corner, heart pounding with a kind of childish desperation. I looked for him everywhere, but he was gone.

An inexplicable ache settled in my chest. The five-rupee note was gone. Still clutching that sinking feeling, I began searching for the Bangla Department.

At last, I found it and stepped inside. There, facing me, was the head of the department—Professor Abu Talib. A composed man with a modest beard, dressed in a *khaddar Punjabi* and *pajama*, with tire-soled sandals on his feet. The gentleman, calm in demeanour and modest in build, looked at me with curiosity.

I said softly, ‘Sir, I want to be admitted in Bengali.’

‘What’s your score in Bengali?’ he asked.

‘Together, the two papers add up to one hundred and ten,’ I replied.

He nodded with satisfaction and asked, ‘Did you bring your documents and the admission fee?’

‘I’ve brought the documents, Sir,’ I said, lowering my eyes. ‘But... I don’t have any money.’

He frowned and said, ‘So?’

In a voice full of sorrow, I spoke of my miseries. I told him about passing Matriculation and intermediate by sheer struggle. About my family—poor farmers, barely surviving, dreaming through me. About my journey here, which I kept private. About the night I spent in the Kotwali police station, caught for travelling ticketless, and about the kind policeman who gave me a five-rupee note. About how, in my naivety, I lost it, along with the remaining four and a half taka. And now... I had nothing.

The professor gestured toward me to sit in a chair before him. I remained standing.

After a pause, he said gently, ‘Young man, I, too, once stood like you—I too went to Dhaka University empty-handed, just like you,’ Professor Talib said softly, a distant look clouding his eyes. ‘I stood once before Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, not knowing where to turn. So, don’t lose heart. Place your trust in Allah.’

Tears welled up in his eyes. He reached for the bell on his desk and rang it gently.

Moments later, a Bihari, the orderly, appeared.

‘Go find Akhlaq,’ the professor said. ‘Tell him to come here.’

Soon, Akhlaq Hossain entered and offered a respectful salam. A short, handsome, well-dressed young man with a commanding presence—he was a student leader, the son of a prosperous businessman from Haragach. Mannan from Shathibari and Akbar from Gangachara were with him.

Akbar had just been enrolled as a fresh face in the new academic session of the Bangla Department.

The professor pointed toward me and said, ‘Akhlaq, this boy has come from Gaibandha with nothing but determination. Seems like a promising student. He wants to study Bengali. See if you can help him out.’

Akhlaq turned to me with a gentle smile and said, ‘Come with me. Let’s see what we can do.’

That simple, sincere invitation resonated through my heart like the sound of a thousand-stringed harp. For the first time that day, a faint warmth flickered within me.

Akhlaq managed to gather forty taka towards the sixty-five-taka admission fee—how, I didn’t know. Then he led me, papers in hand, to the principal, Ilyas Ahmed, with a humble application requesting waiver of the remaining twenty-five.

The principal glanced at the application, paused, and then returned it with a shake of his head.

‘There’s no provision to waive the admission fee,’ he said. Then, reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his wallet. ‘Better you just take the twenty-five taka from me.’

Akhlaq was caught off guard by the gesture. Words stumbled out of his mouth as he tried to thank the Principal.

A storm of joy and sorrow churned within me. I didn’t know who to thank—the Principal or Akhlaq. I could only wipe the silent tears trailing down my cheeks.

When the admission process was finally completed, it was past three in the afternoon. Not a grain of food had touched my lips since morning. Hunger gnawed at me from within, my intestines tight with emptiness. In one pocket was an eight-anna coin—the one the rickshaw puller had left behind. In the other, a letter of introduction from my distant relative, Basir Pandit, addressed to Abbas Bhai of Kamarjani, a clerk at the Rangpur Construction and Buildings office.

I didn’t have enough money left to take a rickshaw. So, I walked—step by weary step—toward the Beth Potty area in the town.

On either side of the narrow lane were rows of rice hotels. But not a grain of rice was to be found. It was late. The bustle of lunch had passed; the hotels were now preparing for dinner.

After searching and wandering through alley after alley, I finally came upon a modest eatery where I managed to find half a plate of cold rice, a piece of beef, and a bowl of thin, watery lentils.

I devoured the plate of rice, filling my empty stomach. But soon, a burning sensation flared inside—likely from the overly spiced curry. Hunger was gone, but discomfort took its place.

The bill came to eight and a half annas. Sensing my state, the hotel manager looked at me with sympathy and said gently, ‘Give eight annas. That’s enough.’

I made my way to the Construction and Buildings office at the intersection near Jahaj Company, an electronics shop. After asking around, I found the man I was looking for—Mr. Abbas. A stranger to me, yet his face bore the weariness of someone who had seen many like me before.

He asked me to sit on the small stool in front of him, took the letter from Basir Pandit, one of my relatives, and read it silently, his expression unreadable. I sat still, waiting.

The day drew on. Outside, the sun dipped low. One by one, the street lights flickered to life. Inside, the office quieted. Files were stacked away. At last, Mr. Abbas rose and said, ‘Let’s go.’

He lived in a narrow lane in Guptapara, sharing a modest home with a local family. In return for tutoring their four children, he received two simple meals a day and a small hut to sleep in.

His wife and children remained in the distant village home. With his meagre salary, bringing them to the city of Rangpur was out of the question.

That night, dinner came from inside the house—just enough for one person. But Mr. Abbas, without a second thought, shared it with me.

I ate slowly, while he quietly watched. That night, I lay curled on his narrow bed, in a corner of the small room.

The next morning, before leaving for the office, Mr. Abbas took me to a roadside restaurant. He ordered two *luchis* and a bit of vegetable curry, placing them gently in front of me.

‘Eat,’ he said.

I hesitated. ‘Won’t you eat?’ I asked softly.

He smiled faintly. ‘No, I have breakfast at home.’

After finishing my meal, Mr. Abbas quietly placed five taka in my hand.

His voice trembled as he said, ‘You see my situation... take this money and go home. Try to stand on your own feet. Don’t come back here again.’

His throat caught on the last words. I could see the weight he carried—not just in the gesture, but in his restraint.

Within seven days, I returned to Rangpur. With me was an old Raleigh bicycle and a trunk made of tin. Inside the trunk were a few worn clothes, a pillow, a quilt, and my cherished flute.

Mr. Akhlaq had arranged for a place to stay—a bit far from the town, in a village called Kukrul. The road to Kukrul passed through Jumma Para and across the vast Chikli Beel, stretching northward.

My lodging master was a small-scale businessman with a shop in the hawkers’ market under the municipality. That was nearly fifty years ago. It bears little resemblance to today’s Rangpur.

As part of the arrangement, I had to tutor his two sons. The elder one, Idris, was a student at Kaylash Rangan High School—sincere, although not academically strong. But his manners were impeccable, gentle beyond his years.

His father, however, was of an entirely different temperament—often impatient, brash. I never met his mother in person, though I often heard whispers of her grace—her beauty, they said, matched only by her kindness.

In the first year of my Honours course, the schedule was light—only one or two Honours classes a day, the rest were subsidiary subjects.

All things considered, life had begun to settle. The problem began with books. But books were a luxury. Their prices were daunting—beyond my means. My only hope was the college library.

Back then, the Carmichael College library was a vast treasure trove. Towering shelves stretched from floor to ceiling. Thousands of books—many rare, some priceless.

Most students gravitated toward the shelves of Bengali and English fiction. But the true bookworm scholars—the serious ones—could always be found buried in volumes of history and philosophy, oblivious to everything else around them.

I was given three library cards—two for Honours and one for the subsidiary course. To me, those three cards were like keys to hidden gold mines.

During my free periods, I would slip into the reading room, and when I left, I would carry home three books, clutched to my chest like sacred relics.

In those moments, I wandered freely in another world—a world far removed from hunger and hardship. The world of books. There, the poverty and misery that clung to me in life had no entry.

I devoured novels like *Grihadaha*, *Shesh Proshno*, *Charitraheen*, and *Chokher Bali* right there in the reading room. At night, I would stay up reading Anna Karenina, Lolita, and Lady Chatterley's Lover.

Poetry never spoke to me much—not even Rabindranath. But Jibanananda Das was the exception. The nature that pulsed through his quiet, introspective lines has remained within me ever since. The tone vibrating in his Nature poems reverberates in my perception. My heartbeat seems to echo through that

world. Whenever I find a moment of silence, I return to Jibanananda, again and again.

Everything was moving forward—except my own studies. Mornings rushed by in a blur as I raced to college. Nights were spent teaching the sons of my lodging master. By the time I sat down with my own books, exhaustion often won. And even then, many of the essential texts were out of reach—too expensive.

Most of our Bengali Honours classes were held under the shade of the *zhau* trees on the college campus. We sat on the green carpet of grass, listening as our gurus spoke, their words flowing like the divine nectar in the open air.

Bilvamangal Bhattacharya—our beloved BMB Sir—taught Tagore with reverence, surrounded by nature's serene beauty. He would spend an entire year exploring just Chitra, Urvashi, and Jiban Devata.

Professor Talib was a devout Rabindranath follower, but taught us the mystical songs, *Vaishnava Padabali* (lyrics) and Sufi verses of the medieval period.

Professor Mofakhkharul Islam was a devoted disciple of poet Farrukh Ahmed, a poet of the Islamic Renaissance. His Bengali, infused with the flavours of Arabic and Persian, often drew light-hearted clashes with Professor Talib. Their debates, though earnest, often turned into comedic duels.

I'm compelled to share one particular incident. One day, Professor Talib launched a new monthly literary magazine. He named it Rahobor—meaning 'The Guide.'

The next day, Professor Mofakhkhar saw the title and couldn't resist teasing him.

'Why do you use Arabic words without learning their proper pronunciation?' he said with a grin. 'It's Rāhbar, not Rahobor! First, learn the pronunciation. Besides, the name itself does not suit the Magazine. There are so many beautiful words other than that.'

The whole class burst into laughter, but behind it was a deep camaraderie and mutual respect. Even their disagreements had a lyrical quality.

‘No, it’s Rāhbar,’ Professor Mofakhkar insisted, grinning. ‘At least learn to pronounce it properly. It’s such a beautiful word—you should do it justice.’

Professor Talib didn’t take it lightly. Without waiting to hear the rest, he snapped back, ‘I’m not from the land of date palms like you. I’m a Bangalee. I say ‘Alla’ not Allah, and ‘Sajahan’ not Shah Jahan. And tell me, why would I name my son Ghulam Ali? Even if he has a great career, people will still call him junior Ghulam Ali. Instead, I’ll name him ‘Chengtu’. Then he’ll be a ‘Senior Chengtu’—not a ‘Junior one!’

Such humorous exchanges were common in the Bengali Department of Carmichael College, often turning into delightful spectacles enjoyed by both students and teachers alike.

Professor Motahar Hossain Sufi taught *Galpaguchchha* (A Collection of Short Stories by Rabindranath) with quiet devotion. He stayed away from intellectual quarrels or public theatrics, seeking knowledge in solitude, like a true scholar of silence.

Professor Nurul Islam could easily capture the students’ attention, but rarely made academic progress in the lesson. But in matters of theatre and music, he was unmatched. To us, he was nothing short of a cultural icon, a hero.

And then there was Father H.R. Lahiri. Even after his retirement, he would habitually appear at college each morning, an armful of books tucked under one arm, stepping into any class as if he still belonged. He once taught Nesfield’s grammar. They said he had even taught the Bible—that’s how he came to be known as Father. A confirmed bachelor. A quiet, learned, and saintly man. His death was heartbreakingly tragic.

That morning, as I walked into college, hushed whispers met me: Father Lahiri had taken his own life.

How?

Someone said he had jumped into the well of his own home. I stood still. It was unthinkable. How could such a wise and dignified man commit suicide? It was difficult to believe.

Along with many others, I rushed to his home. His lifeless body still floated in the well. The police hadn’t yet arrived. No one had dared to retrieve him. The air buzzed with low voices. Some said his adopted son was behind it—he wanted the old man’s property. Ah, property!

It was the end of 1962. Ayub Khan ruled Pakistan, but the student movement against his regime was reaching a fever pitch. Protests were erupting across the country—especially in response to the Sharif Khan Education Commission.

Three students lost their lives in Dhaka on September 17: Golam Mostafa, Bablu, and Waziullah.

Their deaths shook the student community to its core. On January 13, 1963, Governor Monayem Khan arrived at Rangpur Railway Station. As soon as students from Carmichael College raised black flags in protest, a violent clash broke out with the police. The students were met with brutal force. Many were badly injured under the rain of batons and boots.

The next morning, at 10 a.m., a massive protest procession surged from the college campus toward the city centre. I was among those leading the march. Someone handed me a long bamboo pole with a black flag fluttering at its tip. I held it high, marching forward with pride and defiance.

But as we crossed the Grand Hotel and approached the then National Bank, the attack came suddenly. Armed goons—loyal to Minister Kazi Quader—descended on us with chains, knives, and machetes.

Chaos broke out. Bloodied bodies collapsed onto the street. Students cried out in pain, some too injured to move.

The police stood still, not to intervene but to guard the attackers.

One of the goons—a man named Boga—chased me down, swinging a heavy iron chain. I clutched the flagpole and ran for shelter, ducking into the National Bank building just in time.

By noon, every hospital in Rangpur overflowed with wounded students. When National Assembly members Mashihur Rahman Jada Mia and Sirajul Islam visited the hospitals, they wept openly upon seeing the condition of the students.

In immediate response, they led a protest procession, violating Section 144—carrying the bloodstained clothing of the injured.

Rangpur erupted. It became a hotbed of anti-government resistance. But with the rising tide of protests came a wave of repression.

Police began raiding homes at night. The students of Carmichael College were hunted, one by one.

I could no longer sleep in one place. I became a fugitive—slipping through doorways, sleeping wherever there was safety.

One evening, my lodging master called me aside. His voice was heavy with worry.

‘It’s best if you go home,’ he said. ‘If they arrest you, you won’t get out of prison easily. And if you stay, you’ll put me at risk too.’

And so, reluctantly, I left Rangpur and returned home—quietly, in the shadows.

A few days later, I left again. This time, to the village of Dhutichera, to visit a distant relative, Mr. Basir. He was the secretary of a nearby high school.

He requested that I teach part-time at that school during my free time.

Since I wasn’t sure when—if ever—I would be able to return to Rangpur, I accepted the offer with quiet gratitude and began working there passionately.

Mr. Basir had a school-going nephew living with him. His name was Abdus, though everyone affectionately called him Dula.

On my first day, I took him to school with me. Many of the teachers were already familiar faces. They welcomed me warmly.

During the tiffin break, as I stood watching the children play in the field, my attention was drawn to a girl who stood apart from the rest. She wore a short frock over tight *salwar*. Her shoulder-length hair curled slightly at the ends. She put on white Keds. She stood quietly, holding the hand of a younger girl—her sister, I assumed.

Something about the scene struck me as unusual—almost out of place in a rural schoolyard.

Unable to contain my curiosity, I turned to Dula and asked, ‘Do you know that girl?’

He responded with a knowing smile, ‘No use asking. She’s from the Khandaker family. Highly respected.’

I gave him a sharp look. ‘Did I ask for all that?’

I had scolded him—but oddly, a strange ache stirred in my chest. A feeling I couldn’t name, and couldn’t explain.

The next day, I met her. She was bright, sharp in speech and mind.

‘My name is Nazma,’ she said, smiling. ‘Everyone calls me Nazu. I know you—you studied Honours in Rangpur, at Carmichael College.’

Surprised, I asked, ‘How do you know that?’

‘Why! Everyone in our house knows,’ she replied.

‘How?’

‘One of my uncles studies with you in Rangpur. He told us. He also said you’re a very good student.’

I said, ‘He didn’t tell you right. He exaggerated a bit.’ I added, ‘Let’s drop it. But you’re really beautiful.’

I hadn't thought through my last sentence. But I saw her fair face flush red with shame. Without a word, she lowered her head and walked away.

A pang of guilt crept into me. I felt a flicker of fear. Would this stir up any trouble at school?

For days, I worried. But nothing happened. Only—Nazma began to avoid me.

I tried to forget it all.

About fifteen days later, a cultural programme was to be held in the school. There were days of rehearsals leading up to it. A little girl named Firoza had a dance performance. Back then, there were no cassette or CD players. A live singer was needed to accompany her steps.

The song was a duet. Nazma would sing the female part. But for the male voice? I suspected Nazma would tell them about me. Sure enough, the headmaster called me in and said, 'You'll sing with Nazma.'

I had inherited a bit of a singing voice. So, I didn't say 'no.' Maybe my heart had quietly longed for just such a moment.

It was an evening show. We stood behind the wings, close—singing into the same microphone. During a pause in the song, I felt her hand gently on mine. The moment I noticed, she quietly pulled it back.

Later, when we were alone, I gathered the courage to call her closer. She came, but kept her eyes down.

I said, 'I'm coming to your house tomorrow.'

She lifted her head in a flash. 'No!' she said.

'Why not?' I asked.

She gave a shy little smile, a blush playing across her pretty face.

'You silly man, you understand nothing. Can't you get how shy I feel?' With that, she darted off.

I don't remember when or how the event came to an end. But I returned home with a joy so overwhelming, it felt as if I had conquered the world.

That night, I couldn't sleep—my heart too full, too restless with the excitement of it all.

What followed was a long story. A story of a long wait—a patient waiting for joy and inspiration. This story is not to be told here.

In the meantime, I received a letter from the lodging master. He had written a great many words, but the essence was clear: 'My sons' education is being seriously disrupted. Please return at once.'

When I returned to Rangpur, the college was abuzz with a different kind of excitement. The students' council elections were drawing near. The air was thick with anticipation.

At that time, all student organisations nationwide had been banned. But activities continued—quietly, anonymously. For instance, the Student Union had taken the name *Kafela* (a group of travellers). Its leader was Mr. Afzal. He had once been a student himself, then been jailed repeatedly, and now had returned to us, an older youth among his peers. On the other hand, the Students' League, led by Anis and Roshan, had adopted the name *Mujahid* (warrior). Under this banner, the Akhlaq's panel won the Student Council election. Akhlaq became the GS—General Secretary.

There was an inauguration ceremony for the newly elected student council. After introductions, the oath-taking, and congratulations, a cultural programme was held. Annadamohan Hall was packed to the brim.

The event began with a song performed by intermediate student Atika Khanam. She sang, '*keno jamini na jete jagalena, bela holo mori laje* by Tagore (why didn't you wake me up early in the morning? I'm feeling so ashamed now.) Her voice carried the weight of longing.

Then professor Nurul Islam took the stage and sang one of Pratima Bandyopadhyay's popular songs: *Ekta gaan lekho*

jonno/Na hoy ami tomar kase cilam oti naganya... (Please write a song for me, Even if I am so futile to you ...)

After that came a string of dance performances to songs by invited artists, who were hired from outside the college. But they failed to hold the audience's attention. The hall gradually filled with murmurs, noise, and scattered jeering.

Just then, Mr. Akhlaq stepped forward and announced my name. I was to play the flute.

I had been informed earlier, so I had no choice but to go on stage.

Many scoffed at the idea of an unknown village boy, in traditional dress, attempting to entertain a restless crowd with just a flute.

With quiet self-assurance, I stepped onto the stage. There was no percussion to guide me—only the breath in my lungs and the flute in my hand. Immersed in the melody, I played a soft, meandering Bhatiali (a folk song) tune for nearly nine or ten minutes.

When I finally lowered the flute from my lips, the last strain still lingered in the air, echoing off the walls of the auditorium.

For a moment, there was utter stillness—then the silence burst open like a dam. Applause thundered through the hall.

After the programme, I stood outside the entrance. A crowd of boys quickly gathered around me—everyone eager to know my name, as though a hidden star had suddenly appeared in their sky.

Pushing through the throng came Rekha, the only girl in our class. With a warmth that caught me off guard, she said, 'That was beautiful! But why didn't you ever say you could play like that?'

Nearby, a group of girls watched from a slight distance. Their quiet, curious glances stirred an aura of with all the students thrill into my heart. Overnight, I became a favourite face.

That night, I went to sleep with a glow in my heart. By morning, I had become a familiar face across campus—a favourite, almost overnight.

At the end of the year, I lost is lodging. Idris, my student, had failed his exams. The lodging master blamed me, saying I hadn't taught my sons properly. In a flash of anger, he told me to leave—within twenty-four hours.

A faint protest rose from inside the house. But the householder's voice roared over it, final and loud.

The next morning, as I packed my bedroll and belongings, Idris's mother appeared before me for the first time. She was veiled, her posture composed but heavy with something unsaid.

Addressing her son, she said softly, 'Seek blessing by touching your teacher's feet.'

As Idris bent to touch my feet, I pulled him into my arms. The boy collapsed into my chest and began to sob.

Then Idris' mother came forward and held out a ten-taka note.

'I am like your mother,' she said, 'Please take this. Don't refuse me.'

I accepted the note in silence and touched her feet in a gesture of respect.

She placed her trembling hand gently on my head. Her voice cracked as she said, 'Forgive my son, man.'

Only then did I realise—the warm drops of tears wet her affectionate eyes under the veil.

The very next day, my classmate Akbar arranged new lodging for me at his sister-in-law's house in Kerani Para, at the western end of the town. The new lodging master was a government officer—a new setting, a new beginning.

Ashraf Chowdhury was my new lodging master. He had two sons, Saheb and Dulal, whom I was engaged to tutor. Back then, Kerani Para was almost a jungle. Even during the day, foxes roamed freely across the open paths.

The college was far from Kerani Para. My only hope, my only ally, was my bicycle. Each morning, after having breakfast, I set off for college, returning home around five in

the afternoon. Irregular meals and lack of rest began to wear my body down.

The subsidiary exams began in June 1964. Political unrest and constant disruptions meant I had little progress in my studies. I filled the pages of my exam scripts in my own words—summarizing whatever I could grasp from the classroom. There was just one thread of hope—no divisions in the subsidiary courses. All I needed was to pass.

Three months later, the results were out. I was in my Honours class. Someone said, ‘The tabulation sheets are in the office. Please go and have a look.’

My heart began to race. I had taken the exams with little care, distracted and underprepared. If I failed, I would lose a whole year.

I went to the office, heart pounding. When I finally laid eyes on the tabulation sheet, joy filled my chest to the brim.

Sixty per cent marks in both subjects. I couldn’t believe it—such unexpected marks! My chest filled with joy.

I rushed to the Kachari Bazar post office to send a telegram home with the good news. I parked my bicycle at the stand and hurried inside.

Twenty minutes later, I came out. The bicycle was gone. My head spun. My vision darkened.

That bicycle had come through unimaginable sacrifice. Ba’jan had mortgaged a piece of our rice field just to buy it for me. As his face flashed before my eyes, an ache spread through my chest. I had lost not just a bicycle, but my companion—my lifeline.

I stood on the post office balcony, numb to the world. And then I broke down—sobbing uncontrollably, forgetting time, place, and all else.

It was 1965. Final year of Honours. By then, I had begun to earn a little. I played the flute at various events, and the small

honorarium I received served as my pocket money. I also wrote for the District Council’s fortnightly newspaper, *Unnayan*. Editor Professor Nurul Islam offered me twenty to twenty-five taka a month. That modest sum felt like a blessing.

With the help of friends, I launched a monthly literary magazine called *Shikha*. With a few advertisements, I managed to cover the cost of paper and repay the dues at Minar Press. There was even a little left over.

It had been a long time since I’d gone home. I wanted to return with some money—to see my siblings, to hold them close. But somehow, the journey kept slipping out of reach.

The Honours final exam was scheduled for August 7. On the western border, war had broken out between Pakistan and India, centred on Kashmir. Even as war raged, the exams began.

The first paper was on modern Bengali prose. I can’t say I was prepared. I entered the exam hall full of anxiety and dread. The moment I received the question paper, I knew—I was in trouble. Most of the questions were unfamiliar. I recognised one or two, but my mind was blank. My head swam. Cold sweat broke across my forehead.

Professor Sirajul Islam from the Chemistry department was invigilating. A strict man by reputation. Seeing me falter, he leaned over and asked gently, ‘Hey, what’re you doing? What’s wrong? You’re one of the good boys of the department.’

His unexpected kindness pierced me. Tears welled up—tears of regret, of shame, of helplessness.

After submitting the script of the first paper, I made up my mind: I would drop the exam. But just as quickly, the faces of my parents floated before me—their weathered expressions, their quiet suffering. I thought of my siblings, their eyes full of hope. What would I tell them? What excuse could I possibly give? A wave of guilt swept over me.

Now, nearly fifty years later, when I look back on the foolish things I thought and did that day, I'm overcome with shame.

I borrowed a bicycle from a friend to go to the next exam. It was a brand-new bicycle. On the ride, a dark idea took hold in my mind: I would fake an accident—somewhere along the road. I'd injure myself, perhaps even cripple a limb. Then I'd have an excuse not to sit for the rest of the exams.

It sounds absurd now, but such thoughts haunt many in moments of panic and despair.

There was a bustling intersection near the *Jahaj Company* where accidents were common—one or two almost every day.

I arrived there and slowly steered my bicycle toward the crowd. I tried my best to join them, to blend in—but everyone avoided me so deliberately that my plan failed completely.

Back at the lodging house, I made another attempt. There was a pond in front of the house, filled with cold water—chilling to the bone. I stepped in and immersed myself for nearly an hour, hoping to catch a severe fever, something convincing enough to abandon the exams. But alas—nothing. Not even the hint of a common cold. Still, I stood firm in my decision: I would not take the exam.

That afternoon, after much hesitation, I made my way to Shirin's house in New Senpara. Shirin was a student of the Department of Bengali, a year junior to me. We weren't close; we were just casual acquaintances from the department.

I rang the bell at the gate of the lovely two-storeyed house. Shirin herself answered. Seeing me, she spoke with effortless warmth, 'You? What a surprise! Come in, come in.'

The drawing room was beautifully arranged, the walls painted a soft blue. The whole place had a dreamlike calm. Shirin asked me to sit and disappeared inside. Moments later, she returned with a glass of water and a small plate of food and took a seat opposite me.

'So,' she said kindly, 'how did your exam go?'

I hesitated. 'No, not good... I've decided to drop the exam,' I said. 'Actually, I came to you for next year's syllabus.'

Shirin was taken aback. 'What are you saying? You're the hope and pride of our department. And now this?'

Her genuine concern only deepened my embarrassment. I tried explaining my state—how unprepared and overwhelmed I felt—but she wouldn't accept it. Instead, she quietly stood up, went to her room, and returned with a stack of books and notes.

Placing them in front of me, she said, 'Take these. They'll help. Return them after the exam.'

Then she added, gently but firmly, 'And listen—there's a long gap before the next paper. Use the time. Study. Sit for the exam. If it really goes that badly, you can decide at the end and drop out. Why give up so early?'

The second paper was on Modern Bengali Poetry—Rabindranath, Nazrul, Jasimuddin, Satyendranath, and Jibanananda.

Let it be, I told myself—for today. Thinking to myself, 'I'll probably fail tomorrow's exam,' I walked into the exam hall in a strangely relaxed mood and took my seat. But as I settled in, a sense of calm confidence began to rise within me.

The moment I took the question paper in hand, I was stunned. Every question felt easy—familiar, almost friendly. A gentle breeze of relief seemed to sweep through the chambers of my mind. I began to write.

Everything I had memorised from my notes, everything I had picked up in class from my teachers—it all flowed effortlessly through my pen. The words seemed to write themselves.

The exam was four hours long, and we had to answer five questions. After I had finished writing all of them, I turned to the invigilator and asked, 'Sir, is the time up?'

The invigilator was Professor from the Department of Bengali. He looked up, surprised, and replied, ‘Why? There’s still an hour left.’

I stared at him, stunned.

When I finally submitted my answer script and stepped through the exam hall, there were still twenty minutes left before the exam officially ended.

As I stood on the veranda outside, I looked up—and there she was. Shirin. I was taken aback. I hadn’t expected anyone to wait for me.

Noticing my composed expression, Shirin seemed to understand.

Smiling, she said, ‘What did I tell you? You’d do well.’

Embarrassed, I replied softly, ‘It’s all because of you.’

I ended up taking all nine papers one after another. But I didn’t do particularly well in the tenth—the thesis paper. I left the hall that day with a tinge of dissatisfaction and, once again, ran into Shirin.

This time, without waiting for me to speak—and unlike that of other days, without taking the question papers from my hand, she said firmly,

‘Listen, whatever’s done is done. Now get ready for the next exam—viva-voce. I had already seen the circular. The exam will be held at Rajshahi University. Professor Talib, the departmental head, said the external examiner is Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah.’

Meanwhile, much had changed in the country. By September, the borders between Pakistan and India had quieted. The war had stopped. However, the result was as in most wars. Neither side had achieved victory, but thousands had suffered.

Nearly three months had passed since the exams ended. Still, there was no news of the results. One morning, driven by a sudden impulse, I boarded a train to Rangpur.

As soon as I arrived, I went straight to the college. By chance, I ran into Shirin in front of the Bengali department. She was now in her final year of study.

‘Shirin,’ I asked, ‘any news about our results?’

She looked at me in surprise.

‘What? You didn’t know? The results came out fifteen days ago. You placed fifth. Do you hear me? Fifth! And to think—you were once ready to throw it all away, talking about dropping the exam. What do you say now?’ She continued speaking, but I couldn’t hear another word.

The vast green grounds of Carmichael College stretched out before my eyes, blurring through tears. They came like a tidal wave bursting through a dam. I didn’t know whether they were tears of joy or sorrow.

I should have expressed my tearful gratitude to that girl named Shirin. I should have bowed before my teachers, touched their feet, and received their blessings. I should have gone to find Akhlaq and shared the news. Or at least visited the lodging house in Kerani Para one last time. But I could do none of them. Instead, I turned and walked straight toward the railway station.

When I reached the Lalbagh crossing, I saw the signal had already gone up—the 1:30 train. The station was still some distance away. I began to walk faster... then came the sound of the train on the tracks.

Now I started running... I had to catch that train.

Six

My Honours results were pretty good, so I strongly desired to pursue a Master's Degree.

That was in 1966. At the time, the only viable option was to attend a university. Studying privately was possible, but only after having worked for a year at an educational institution.

I managed to save some money and went straight to Dhaka. Still, I worried: would I really have the chance to study at Dhaka University—the Oxford of the East—even for just one year? After all, my Master's degree was only a one-year programme, following the completion of my Honours degree.

It was only my second visit to Dhaka, the capital city. The first time was in 1961, when I was studying Intermediate at Gaibandha College. Back then, I had accompanied a group of students from colleges under Rajshahi University on an industrial tour.

We travelled across the country for a month, all at the government's expense. At that time, there were only a handful of factories in Dhaka. I can't recall much—only a hazy image of glassware being made from a fiery boiler at the *Hardeo Glass Factory*. We had also visited the paper mill at Chandraghona in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Kaptai Hydroelectric Project. The work at Kaptai was still unfinished; electricity generation started a year later.

When I arrived in Dhaka this time, I stayed at a relative's house. I knew no one. Not a single street felt familiar. After much effort and wandering, I finally made my way to the Dhaka University campus. The Head of the Bengali department

at that time was Muhammad Abdul Hai. His renowned book *Bilete Sade Satsho Din* (Seven Hundred and Fifty Days in England) was part of our Intermediate syllabus. Through it, I was introduced to the British spring—a feast of flowers everywhere. Lilacs, tulips, May blossoms, daisies—what a vibrant carnival of blooms.

Interestingly, the book was a literary offshoot of his academic journey. In Britain, his primary focus had been phonetics. His work in that field remains a benchmark of authenticity to this day. But that scholarly contribution remains largely confined to academic circles, while *Bilete Sade Satsho Din* secured his popular fame.

I entered Professor Abdul Hai's room and told him directly of my desire to study at Dhaka University. At that time, there were no admission tests for university entrance.

The calm, soft-spoken man listened to me attentively. Then, in a gentle voice, he said, 'Look, young man, with your results, you certainly qualify for admission here. But why would you? You already have a university, where you have completed your Bachelor's degree. Scholars like Dr. Mazhar, Dr. Mannan, Dr. Mustafa Nurul Islam teach there. And there are gifted minds like Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal. What more could Dhaka offer you than they can? Nothing at all. Better, go back to Rajshahi—your own university. If you have the will and the enthusiasm, you'll do just fine there.'

His words were etched into my heart. I returned to Rajshahi University.

A month after getting admitted to Rajshahi University, I was notified that I had been awarded a residential scholarship based on my Honours results. The scholarship consisted of a one-time payment of eight hundred taka, for which I received the amount in full, and a monthly stipend of seventy-five taka.

I spent most of the initial eight hundred taka on books and clothes, yet a good portion remained. I gave some of this leftover money to my father before returning home.

As for the seventy-five taka per month, my expenses were modest. I spent only thirty-five taka each month. The remaining forty were saved. My seat rent at the hall was just seven taka, and the daily meal charge was only four *annas*. I began to accumulate surplus money. With it came a subtle shift—I started skipping classes and making frequent trips home.

Gradually, my focus on studies began to wane. At first, my teachers were quite optimistic about me. But as my absences grew more frequent, their interest in me began to fade. Still, despite everything, what I saw and experienced on the Rajshahi University campus remains a priceless treasure in my life.

The Indo-Pak War of 1965 had just ended. The Tashkent Agreement had significantly eased tensions between the two countries. But in early 1966, Sheikh Mujib's Six-Point Movement began to awaken a new wave of nationalist consciousness among the Bengalis. That wave reached the varsity campus too—and the Bengali Department stood at the heart of it.

At that time, the Chhatra League, the student wing of Awami League, held the cabinet in *RUCSU* (Rajshahi University Central Students' Union).

Abu Sayeed from Pabna—a brilliant Master's student in Bengali—was the Vice President (VP). Despite his brilliance, political considerations denied him a First Class in his Master's. That very Abu Sayeed is now a prominent leader of the Awami League.

Another moment from that period remains vivid in my memory.

I lived in Room East Thirty-Two of the then Jinnah Hall, now Sher-e-Bangla Hall. The Provost was Dr. A R Mallick.

It was time for the hall's annual drama programme. The selected play was *Khudha* (Hunger) by Bidhayak Bhattacharya. The director was Professor Ali Anwar, a teacher from the English department and also our hall's house tutor.

On the first day of casting, something I said caught Professor Ali Anwar's attention. He turned to me and asked, 'What is your opinion about the selection of this play?'

I replied without hesitation, 'To be honest, Sir, I don't think the selection of the play is quite right. More than that, what strikes me as the play's biggest inconsistency is the sudden death of the heroine. It lacks any logical progression. It feels like it's been inserted purely to force a tragic atmosphere—something the audience may find emotionally manipulative rather than convincing.'

Professor Anwar looked at me admiringly and said, 'You got it right.'

The heroine's role went to the now-renowned literary figure Selina Hossain, who, at the time, was a first-year Honours student. Her soft, gentle appearance closely matched that of the character *Manabi*, the play's heroine. Besides, she was already a regular stage performer.

The play *Khudha* (Hunger) included three main male characters—Soda, Goja, and Rama—all of whom were unemployed and destitute. They rent a room in the heroine's house. There's no arrangement for cooking there for the three of them. Some days, they manage to eat; on others, they have to starve. I played one of the three unemployed men.

Now, let me share an incident from the day of the actual performance, a scene from Act II, where the three of us are returning home after yet another futile job hunt. We haven't had anything to eat all day. Starving and exhausted, we suddenly come across a lavishly decorated house, glowing with lights. Inside, people are feasting in celebration.

Driven by desperation, we quietly slipped in and took seats at an empty table.

Rama, excited beyond control, calls over a waiter and says, 'Look, man, we're guests from the groom's side. Take a good look at us, listen to what we're saying!'

The waiter looks confused—because, of course, this isn't a wedding at all.

The inevitable follows: a mass beating. According to the director, the scene was supposed to freeze at the moment of assault—it was meant to be symbolic. But the opposite happened. Instead of freezing, everyone kept going. We were thrashed so much that all three of us came off the stage genuinely bruised and battered.

From the wings, Selina cried out in alarm, 'Hey! What's going on?'

As we limped off the stage, the director smiled and said, 'Whatever anyone says, that scene was electric!'

To this day, I'm not sure if the beating was part of the professor's secret direction—but the next morning, none of us could make it to class. Our bodies ached from head to toe.

My days at the university were short-lived, and much of that precious time I squandered in carelessness and lethargy. Whenever I remember those days, my sense of regret only deepens. Even now, I vividly recall the invaluable lectures of my revered teachers in class.

Professor Abu Hena, who taught modern poetry, often spoke more about music than literature. In fact, he was a renowned singer. In class, he frequently made provocative remarks about widely accepted ideas, often leaving students perplexed and unsure how to respond.

He could say, 'Jasim Uddin cannot be regarded as a Palli Kavi (poet of rural life). If the use of a few rural metaphors and similes is all it takes to be labelled a village poet,' he continued,

'then many others would qualify as well. In terms of language and consciousness, Jasim Uddin is in fact a poet of urban life, not of the village.'

At other times, he would say, 'Poet Satyen Dutt was not particularly intelligent.' He'd explain, 'Mr. Dutta seemed overly satisfied with Rabindranath's introduction to his translated collection, *Manisha*. But what did Tagore actually write? Tagore said, 'After reading these poems, it feels as though they are not translations but creations of the poet himself.' But listen, my dear students—if a translation reads like an original, can it be a proper translation?'

Such remarks left us stunned.

Professor Kazi Abdul Mannan taught Rabindranath with great passion. Occasionally, he would bring a tape recorder—an extraordinary item at the time, recently imported from abroad—and play Tagore's songs for us in class. Back then, very few people in the country owned such a device.

Professor Mustafa Nurul Islam taught modern prose, with a special focus on Pramatha Chaudhuri. His refined rhetorical style often bore a resemblance to that of Chaudhuri himself.

Professor Sunil Kumar Mukherjee conducted research on Poet Farrukh Ahmed and Jasim Uddin, but in class, he taught grammar and phonetics. What I learned from him has stayed with me for the rest of my life.

At the helm of the department was Dr. Mazharul Islam, an internationally renowned scholar of folk literature. It was he who introduced a new term for it: *Loklore*.

A man of remarkable composure and grace, he was a student-oriented teacher.

One incident from our Master's oral examination is still etched in my memory. This time as well, the external examiner was Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, the legendary linguist of the subcontinent. This distinguished scholar had once been the

teacher of all our current teachers. His presence alone commanded reverence. He was seated in the chair of the Departmental Head, his face barely visible above the table—only the top of his Rumi cap, a traditional cap, could be seen.

From behind the desk, he suddenly asked, ‘Tell me, what is a *nijanta kria* (causative verb)?’

I froze. I did not know the answer. My mind went blank.

Sensing my discomfort, the Head of the department intervened gently, ‘Sir, they studied this long ago—perhaps they don’t remember it anymore. Maybe you could ask something else.’

Dr. Shahidullah raised his head just slightly and said to the head of our department in a calm but cutting tone, ‘Listen, Mazhar, you yourself never understood grammar properly. Now I see your student is in the same boat.’

All of the teachers in the room lowered their heads in silent embarrassment. As for me, guilt washed over me like a tide. After stumbling through a few more questions as best I could, I stepped out of the room. To my surprise, the Head of the department followed me. My heart sank—I expected a scolding. But instead, he placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder and said warmly, ‘Don’t worry. I’ll take care of everything.’

Then, turning to the others waiting outside, he said, ‘Someone, please go fetch a school-level grammar book from my house. Dr. Shahidullah is reviewing the basics. Otherwise, it’s me who’ll be scolded next time!’

After the exam, I returned home, head still heavy with the events of the day.

I didn’t bother looking for jobs—I had to wait until the results of my Master’s were published. And so, there was nothing to do but wait—and count the days.

When three long months passed with no news from the university, not only I but also my relatives began to grow anxious. I had requested Farooq, the department’s administrative

officer, to inform me when the results were released. Yet, Farooq did not write anything to me.

Tired of waiting, I finally began preparing to go to Rajshahi University in person. But on the very day I resolved to leave, a postcard arrived in the afternoon mail. At the end of my name, written neatly in ink, were the letters ‘M.A.’

It was from Farooq. The delay, he explained, was due to two examiners being abroad.

Then came the real news: ‘Your position in the final result is ninth,’ he wrote. ‘It would have been within the top five had it not been for the low marks in your viva.’

Now came the question of job hunting. In the whole Gaibandha subdivision, there were two colleges except for Gaibandha College. One was Palashbari College, and the other was Gobindaganj College. Gaibandha College was established in July 1947. Much later, in 1964, Palashbari College was established, and after one year, in 1965, Gobindaganj College followed suit.

The Principal of Gobindaganj College, Sirajul Islam, was an acquaintance of mine – a bit senior, though. He requested that I join his college without arranging an interview.

At that very time, in 1967, Naldanga College came into being. I was interviewed for the newly established college for the post of Lecturer in Bengali in the same year. I received the appointment letter on June 4, 1967. The joining date was July 1.

Gobindaganj was far away from our home, and the road communication was not very convenient. Compared to the Gobindaganj College, Naldanga College, as we supposed, seemed better. As all of my family members wished, I ultimately chose Naldanga College.

On June 30, 1967, I arrived at Naldanga Railway Station at nine in the morning to begin my first job. As I stepped off the train, I was met with a sight I will never forget. Around twenty-

five respected local residents stood waiting, holding garlands of flowers to welcome me. The entire station was abuzz with curious onlookers.

I overheard whispers: they had all come just to catch a glimpse of a college teacher. It felt like something from a dream. Even now, I wonder if anyone would believe it.

At the end of the month, when I returned home with my first salary—three hundred and twenty-five taka—the entire village gathered at our doorstep. No one could believe it. ‘Three hundred and twenty-five?’ they echoed in disbelief. ‘Not one hundred? Not even one-fifty? It is three hundred and twenty-five taka!’

Half a century has passed since that day. That image has completely changed now. Today, even a child might laugh at the thought that a college teacher once earned just three hundred and twenty-five taka a month. But disbelief aside, back then, a family could live quite comfortably on that amount. A decent house rented for less than forty taka. A maund of rice would cost twenty. A seer of lentils went for just eight annas. Mutton was two taka a seer. A tin of kerosene was sixteen taka.

Back then, money—and even the head of a large ruhi fish—cost at most eight annas. If I were to list prices, I fear readers today would grow increasingly skeptical. So, I’ll leave it at that. Still, a few details are worth noting.

At the time, no one wanted to cook with soybean oil. Perhaps people might not have accepted soybean oil if it were given to them free of cost.

I remained at Naldanga for two years. By this time, I had applied for a job advertised by the Public Service Commission (PSC). On the other hand, Gaibandha Degree College advertised for a teacher in the Department of Bengali in mid-1969.

The interview was scheduled for September 22 at 10 a.m. in the office of the then Sub Divisional Officer (SDO), the non-Bengali officer S. S. G. A. Rizvi.

Most of the board members were my former teachers. In short, they were generous to me. The questions they asked were direct and familiar—none caught me off guard. I answered each one confidently and clearly. Ultimately, I was selected, outscoring fifteen other candidates.

That very afternoon, around four o’clock, I received two letters. One arrived by the post office peon—a registered envelope. The other, in a long yellow envelope, was hand-delivered by the peon from Gaibandha College.

I already knew what the yellow envelope contained. But when I opened the registered letter, my heart sank. It was the interview card from the Public Service Commission. The date? The very next day. The letter had arrived far too late. If I wanted to make it to Dhaka in time, I would have to catch the train that very evening. And there was no other way to get there other than by train. A PSC interview in those days practically guaranteed a position at a government college. What should I do? I felt torn—on the horns of a dilemma.

My mother was home. I turned to her, as I always had.

She listened quietly and then said gently, ‘Son, why do we need a government job? You have earned your education through much hardship. Now help the people of your area to be illuminated.’ That was her answer. Simple, grounded, final.

The next day, I carefully folded the PSC interview card and placed it aside. Then, without looking back, I went to Gaibandha College to begin the next chapter of my life.

Seven

By now, many extraordinary events had already unfolded in the country. Through the great Liberation War—won at the cost of an ocean of blood and the honour of two hundred thousand mothers and sisters, a nation long under occupation for a thousand years finally achieved its independent homeland. It is now Bangladesh.

While carrying forward the movement so that the working class could truly be empowered in an independent nation, I was forced to spend twenty-seven long months behind bars.

The leader of the independence movement, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was assassinated, along with many of his family members, while in power.

Conspiracies, coups, and counter-coups followed one after another, leaving the country shaken and disoriented.

Amidst all this turmoil, my only son, Tutul, has become a marine engineer. After sailing across the world, he has eventually settled with his family in Singapore.

It was Tuesday, May 30, 2007. At 12:05 a.m., I boarded a Bangladesh Biman flight bound for Singapore. Like a curious child, I kept wondering how this massive plane—laden with passengers and luggage—could ever lift off. But as my excitement over the first flight of my life began to settle, the aircraft jolted forward and soared into the sky.

Within a short time, I had my dinner, following the others. Before I knew it, sleep had overtaken me.

I awoke to the distant, ethereal sound of the morning prayer call. Through the window, I saw the soft mist surrounding Kuala

Lumpur International Airport. I found the aircraft door open. All the other passengers, who were bound for Malaysia, had disembarked during the stopover.

A few of the cleaners were working inside. They requested that I get off the plane for a few moments.

After an hour's layover, the Biman flight, now carrying me as its only passenger, resumed its journey and landed at Singapore's Changi Airport. The rays of the sun beamed all around. It was Tuesday, May 30, 2007.

My only son, Tutul, works for a shipping company in Singapore. He lives with his wife, Elina, and their little daughter, Sreyoshee—a child so delicate and beautiful. Their son, Sreyan, hadn't been born yet. I had not seen them for a long time. My heart ached with anticipation.

They had recently secured permanent residency and were expecting citizenship soon. With that certainty, they purchased two properties in Singapore—not just one, but two. One was modest and practical. The other, in an elite area, was a condominium meant for their own residence. Everything was there, from a swimming pool to every modern convenience. They had just purchased a brand-new car to match the new house. Nothing was missing. Everything needed for a happy life was there.

I was eager to see it all—the warm, persistent invitations from my son and grandchild pulled at my heart. My little granddaughter had insisted for days. I could not ignore any of them. And so, the trip to Singapore had become inevitable.

It was the late 1940s. We, a handful of siblings from a poor farming family, lived in such poverty that we often went to bed hungry. Through the cracked roof of our rundown thatched hut, we could lie on our backs and count the stars. On moonlit nights, a pale, silver light would fall gently onto the mud floor. However, the true challenge came during the rainy season. When

rain poured through the leaking roof, our mother would spread the leaves of giant taro above us, desperately trying to keep the water off our bodies. We slept, somehow. Mother did not. She stayed awake, soaked and anxious. When strong winds blew, she would rush to wake us, and we'd flee the trembling house—drenched and frightened it might collapse over our heads.

Years later, who could have imagined that one of those born in this family would one day spend millions of taka to build a permanent home in one of the most beautiful countries in the world, and create, within that distant land, a family touched by comfort and abundance?

Not only abroad—even here, in our own country, stand houses built in modern, foreign styles. Gleaming brass nameplates on the gates, manicured gardens blooming with native and exotic flowers. Decorative fish swimming in garden aquariums. Flowering fountains at the centre. Cars are parked on the porch.

But none of this was ever my wish. These were not the things I asked for. I am an ordinary teacher. My desires were simple. Why God chose to bless me in this way—I do not know. Only He knows best.

It reminds me of a day I vividly remember. At the time, I was teaching at Carmichael College in Rangpur. I used to commute from Gaibandha by car—driving myself, without a chauffeur. Many people travelled with me to Rangpur and back.

Sometimes, my wife, Nazma, would join me on trips to Rangpur. She always sat beside me in the front seat. Sometimes, she would fasten her own seat belt. Other times, she'd ignore my gentle reminders, brushing them off with a smile.

Once the car hit the highway, she would often burst into song—singing an old, familiar tune with the carefree joy of a teenage girl. Those moments made her deeply happy.

I remember one such day clearly. We were leaving Rangpur together. Nazma was seated beside me. The car sped down the

highway at nearly a hundred kilometres per hour. From the cassette player came the song of Tagore.

I glanced at Nazma. She was humming along softly, her face glowing with a kind of innocent, contented joy. My heart ached, gently.

Before she reached her teens, she left her wealthy home and took the helm of my family, which was then plagued by poverty and hardship. Marrying me, she faced poverty and struggle hand in hand with me, never once turning back. And still, she could sing like that—light and full of joy. How deeply it moved me.

I pulled over and stopped the car by the side of the road. Nazma turned to me, surprised.

'What happened?' she asked.

'Nothing,' I replied.

'Then?'

'Just... pinch me on my finger.'

'Why?'

'I tell you—just do it.'

'What happens if I pinch your finger?'

'I'll explain later. Just pinch.'

A bit annoyed, she pinched my finger. I felt the sharp little sting—and in that moment, I knew this was real. This joy, this peace, this strange happiness—it wasn't a dream.

When I told her what I'd done, she burst out laughing and said, 'You're crazy!'

Let's return to Singapore after this memory from my past. As soon as I stepped out of the airport, scanning the crowd, I saw little Sreyoshee running toward me. 'Grandpa ...' she shouted.

I dropped my handbag and knelt to the ground, arms open wide. Sreyoshee leapt into them. She threw herself into my arms. I clutched her close. The quick beating of her tiny heart felt like soft drumbeats against my chest. The bond we shared, a powerful connection of blood, was unbreakable and magnetic.

The MRT station was just next to the airport. Without delay, we boarded the train. It moved swiftly—so fast that the next station arrived before I even had time to notice the last. At one stop, a Tamil family boarded, including an elderly woman. All the seats were occupied, and they stood silently. The old woman struggled to keep her balance as the train sped on.

Just above each seat, as I noticed, were the words in clear lettering: ‘Please offer this seat to someone who needs it more than you do.’

Even though Elina had told me not to get involved, I stood up and offered my seat, gesturing politely to the old woman. To my surprise, she didn’t take the seat. Instead, she quickly ushered a younger girl—perhaps her granddaughter—into it.

I remained standing, a little puzzled. The woman hadn’t acknowledged the gesture, hadn’t even offered a nod. She didn’t even turn to look at me.

Elina muttered something under her breath, clearly annoyed. Then, in Bengali, she added a few sharp words, just loud enough for me to hear.

I smiled inwardly, relieved that no one around us could understand because of the language barrier.

Elina, my daughter-in-law, is a smart young woman. Intelligent, yet humble. Thanks to her husband’s career as a marine engineer, she has travelled to many countries. As we sat together on the train, she began offering a brief introduction to Singapore.

The national symbol of this island nation is the lion. Ironically, no lions are found here—except in the zoo. Rain and sun take turns like clockwork. But there’s no dust, no mud, no sand. No pickpockets, no thieves, no muggers. No lies, no adulteration, no extortion. No traffic jams. No honking. No exhaust fumes. No expression of annoyance if one has to pull the brake. And if a child strays into the path—no shouting, no panic.

Here, everything moves with calm precision. People—regardless of race, religion, or status—are respectful and polite. That Tamil woman possibly was the rare exception.

Elina spoke all of it almost in a single breath. Then, pausing for just a moment, she added, The streets, shops, elevators, and escalators are filled with ‘Excuse me’ and ‘Sorry.’ And whenever two people are standing somewhere, one asks, ‘Any queue?’ People here step forward willingly whenever someone needs help.

Everyone speaks English—but most speak the uniquely Singaporean version of English, known as Singlish, which is full of local flavour and rhythm.

I gazed out the train window, eyes wide open, taking in the astonishing orderliness of this country. Sleek, high-rise condominiums. Everywhere I looked, there were green trees. Fascinating natural lakes. Crystal clear water. The shadows of hills and skyscrapers in the water. No sign of soil, anywhere. The whole country is covered with tar, concrete, and carpet grass. It was hard to look away.

The great architect of this nation, former Prime Minister Dr. Lee Kuan Yew—who had transformed this once modest island into a world-class city-state—was now serving as Minister Mentor in the Prime Minister’s Cabinet, while his son was the Prime Minister himself.

Later that evening, Tutul had invited some of his friends to meet me. They were coming for dinner. By afternoon, the massive dining table was overflowing with dishes—some home-cooked by Elina, others ordered from outside. The sight of so much food at once startled me. For a moment, I lost my grip on the present. My mind drifted back to an afternoon of the month of Chaitra long ago.

How old was I then? Nine, maybe ten. A child in a family drowning in poverty. And Chaitra—the cruellest month—had brought with it the season of *monga*, desperate hunger. We

survived on boiled sweet potatoes, sometimes fried chickpeas. But the longing for a plate of rice never left me.

One day, across the river at the house of Basharat Sarker, there was a buzz of excitement from morning. His eldest son, Joynal, was getting married—and the feast was grand. Basharat Sarkar was a wealthy man, though few in his family were educated. It is a matter of much pain for him. This time, he had removed the discontentment. He had brought home an educated bride. It had to be announced in style. And so, everyone in the village—rich or poor—was invited.

By noon, groups of neighbours, with children in tow, were heading toward the wedding feast. After the meal, it was customary for guests to offer the new bride a salami—a small gift of one to five taka.

We had been invited too. Ba'jan was empty-handed. How could we show up without even a token offering? And so, we didn't go.

As the afternoon wore on, the chaos and noise of the ceremony subsided, the barking of stray dogs quieted, and the village fell into a gradual silence. Still, something tugged at me. I waded across the river, its knee-deep water sluggish under the Chaitra (March-April) sun, and slowly made my way toward the wedding house. By then, preparations were underway to seat the final batch of guests for the feast. Standing quietly at a corner of the courtyard, I hesitated, thinking—perhaps, I should not have come at all.

Just then, the head of the household came out. Spotting me, he turned to a servant and asked, 'Hasn't this one eaten already?'

Serving food on banana leaves, the servant replied, 'Of course, he has dined. This greedy boy has come back again.'

The word 'greedy' landed like a slap on me. Everyone turned to look at me. My legs began to tremble. A wave of shame and

humiliation crashed over me. Without thinking, I turned and bolted. I ran straight to the river.

It was the dry season. In Chaitra, the river shrinks to a narrow stream. The water was shallow and barely moving, and the sand was gleaming under a clear stream of water. I ran along the riverbed, desperately searching for a deeper patch—anywhere I could dive in and disappear forever, swallowed by the water, free from the unbearable sting of that moment.

I don't remember how I got back home that day—still hungry, still reeling from shame. Perhaps someone had told Ba'jan about the humiliating incident.

Later that night, when Maa called me to eat, my eyes were still swollen with tears. I couldn't bring myself to swallow a bite. The cry that I had held inside all day rose in my throat.

As soon as Ba'jan sat beside me and gently placed his hand on my head, the dam broke. I burst into tears.

'Grandpa, are you crying?' Sreyoshee's soft voice brought me back to the present. Her tiny hands were on my cheeks, her eyes wide with concern.

Startled, I quickly wiped away my tears. I smiled as best I could, trying to mask the storm inside me from the innocent.

The next day was Sunday—a holiday. We all went to Serangoon. First stop: Mustafa Centre. This multi-storey Indian shopping complex, with levels both above and below ground, seemed to sell everything under the sun—everything except, perhaps, tiger's milk.

Right next to it was another smaller market. Locals had given it a familiar name: *Little Bangladesh*. It felt just like home. The tin-roofed shops stood in neat rows—Tangail Sweets Store, Kashem Baburchi's Hotel. Counters piled high with fish, such as hilsa, pangas, pabda, puti, and fragrant basmati rice. Just like the makeshift hotels near our river ports back home—people calling

out, grabbing customers' arms, pulling them in with warmth: 'Come, come! Sit down! Have a meal here, please.'

On weekends, this place transformed into a gathering spot for Bengali workers. They came from every corner of Singapore to check in on one another—to share joys, sorrows, and stories from home. At midday, they sat down to plates of steaming rice with lentils, fried vegetables, and *bharta* (mashed) items.

They chewed betel leaves with Hakimpuri twigs (tobacco), passed around cigarettes, and laughed heartily.

Someone broke into song: '*Boydeshe na jaeyo, Bondhu re...*' (Don't go overseas, my love...). But midway through, the singer's voice cracked with emotion. His tears fell. And soon, the audience was crying too. Laughter and grief—always close companions in exile.

In just a few days, I saw so much in this small country of only six hundred and eighty-three square kilometres. I visited the Bird Park, Singapore Zoo, Night Safari, Chinese Garden, Japanese Garden, Sentosa Island's Underwater World, Butterfly Park, and the towering Sky Tower.

There was the futuristic VivoCity mall, the buzzing Orchard Market, and the majestic architectural wonder of the Marina Bay Sands Casino building.

I visited Changi Village—a peaceful coastal spot—and Mount Elizabeth Hospital, one of the world's finest medical institutions.

The Asian Civilisations Museum left me speechless. Inside, I found relics from home: Bangladeshi sweet potatoes, a farmer's cooliehat, even a betel nut cutter used by a village woman—all carefully preserved behind glass, treated with dignity. But what struck me most were the primary schools. Their school campuses could almost equal some of the universities in our country.

One day, we visited the Singapore Zoo. A single ticket gave access to all three experiences: the daytime zoo, the evening

animal show, and the Night Safari. Each one was its own world—thrilling, clean, and masterfully organised.

We spent the entire day exploring the zoo, and by evening, we made our way to the animal show. The venue resembled a vast pond or open amphitheatre, surrounded on three sides by gallery seating.

In the centre stood a small stage beside a body of water, where a young, smart man stood to present the show in English and Hindi. Sreyoshee sat nestled between Elina and me, her eyes wide with excitement. Suddenly, an owl moved over the gallery a few times and disappeared. In a calm, thoughtful voice, the presenter said, 'It looks like the sign is ominous, signalling a bad night.'

Right on cue, a few deer emerged into the spotlight, gently sipping water from a small pond near the presenter. But as soon as a leopard slunk out of the adjacent forest, the deer bolted away, vanishing into the shadows. The lights dimmed.

The faint sound of bells filled the air, and through the soft glow, a herd of big and small elephants drifted along.

In a voice filled with mock surprise, the presenter said, 'Hey! Where are they heading at this hour?'

No sooner had the elephants exited than a group of mongooses stumbled and began quarrelling—loudly, dramatically. The quarrel escalated into a scuffle. Then, a monkey walked in from somewhere and began to mediate their dispute.

The presenter, feigning helplessness, exclaimed, 'If they are doing all the talking, what's left for me to do?'

And so the show continued. I lost all track of time, completely absorbed in the animals' antics and the theatre of the performance.

Overhead, the owl swooped by once more, letting out its eerie *kutch-kutch* call.

Then suddenly all the lights snapped on. In a voice filled with mock fear, the presenter announced, 'Ladies and gentlemen, it

seems we may have to end the show right here. A large python has escaped its enclosure. Please remain calm and stand directly in front of your seats.'

Sreyoshee jumped into my lap, clutching me tightly in fear. All around us, little children burst into tears.

Moments later, a commotion arose from the left side of the gallery. A voice shouted, 'Here! Over here!' Everyone's attention shifted at once. Ten or twelve people carried the huge python on their shoulders close to the presenter.

The presenter let out a dramatic sigh of relief and declared, 'Thank God, the python has finally been caught!'

Of course, it was all part of the act. A carefully rehearsed performance.

The next day, I visited the National Botanic Gardens. Right beside it lies the Singapore Orchid Garden—a breathtaking landscape bursting with flowers of every imaginable colour. After wandering through the vibrant blooms, I took a turn and entered the deeper forest trail within the Botanic Gardens.

The variety of trees and plants seemed endless. Species I had never seen before stood tall around me. Caught in their spell, I moved forward into the deep forest, losing track of time, like someone entranced.

Suddenly, a piercing whistle shattered the silence. The sound echoed sharply, startling the tranquil forest. I looked ahead—and froze.

Coiled tightly around the slim branches of a nearby tree was a long, green snake. My eyes were locked on the snake. Its tongue flickered in and out with eerie rhythm. Fear seized me. I couldn't move.

Just then, I heard voices. Turning around in alarm, I saw three young men cleaning a nearby drainage canal. I must have let out a scream, because all three of them rushed out of the drain toward me.

Dressed in T-shirts, shorts, and tall rubber boots, their clothes and faces were streaked with mud. One of them, a Tamil, called out, 'What happened?'

Still shaken, I pointed with a trembling hand. '*Shap* (snake),' I whispered in Bengali.

The other two boys suddenly lit up and cried out, almost in unison, 'Hey, you're a Bengali!'

'Yes,' I said, my voice still unsteady, 'I'm a Bengali.'

'We are too,' they replied—still in unison.

By then, the snake had slipped away into the dense foliage. My fear slowly subsided.

I took a breath and asked, 'What are you doing here?'

At my question, the smiles faded from their faces. Their expressions turned pale. The mud on their bodies told its own story—of hardship, of long days and unseen labour in a foreign land. Looking at them, my heart ached. They, too, are my people—struggling, enduring, surviving—far from home, just for a few dollars.

I gently consoled them and said, 'There's nothing to be ashamed of. The nation should be proud of you. The real disgrace lies with those who exploit your hard-earned money and live in luxury without lifting a finger.'

When they learned I was a teacher, they immediately offered salam with due reverence. I raised my arms and drew them both into an embrace. That was all it took. They began to cry—softly at first, then openly. Even the Tamil boy nearby, witnessing this sudden, emotional scene, began to wipe his eyes.

One evening—about a week before my return home—Tutul came back from his office, handed me a visa and ticket, and said, 'Abba, before you head back, you must visit Mahathir's Malaysia. It's a country worth seeing. You'll love it.'

I hesitated. 'How can I go alone? I'm going abroad—I don't know anyone there.'

Tutul smiled. ‘Why? Isn’t this a foreign country, too? You’ve managed just fine here. And you won’t be wandering around aimlessly. Everything’s arranged. The hotels are already booked through a travel agency. All star-rated accommodations.’

Hearing about Star-rated hotels made my heart skip a beat. My palms began to sweat. I knew nothing about the etiquette of such elite places. How to behave, how to sit, how to ask for food—I had no idea.

I worried that I might make a mess and cause any unwanted trouble.

On the day of the journey, around 10 p.m., my son, Tutul, personally accompanied me to the bus terminal. There were a few passengers inside the bus—most of the seats lay empty.

Until the bus started, Tutul sat by me like an anxious guardian, offering me a flood of last-minute advice. ‘You know English. You’ll have no trouble communicating. Everyone there is helpful. Eat properly. Don’t be too frugal,’ he said.

As the bus began to pull away, I looked out the window. He was still standing there. Though he had given me so much reassurance, the worry on his face hadn’t faded in the slightest. And in that moment, I saw it—after so many years—the loving, protective face of my late father reflected in the face of my son. That same silent concern, that same tender anxiety... My eyes filled with water. Longing rose from the shadows of the past and quietly settled in the light of the present. A flood of painful memories brought tears to my eyes.

I remember the day Tutul joined the ship as a cadet engineer. I had gone to see him off in person. That little boy—how old was he, really? My heart grew restless thinking of how he would spend months at sea, surrounded by unfamiliar faces in an alien world.

When he climbed down into the hull of the ship, dressed in a black boiler suit and helmet, a strange, overwhelming ache began to pound in my chest.

I left him on the ship and returned to the hotel, but sleep wouldn’t come that night.

The next morning, I boarded a train at Chittagong station to return home. As the train picked up speed, my thoughts remained anchored to the port. Suddenly, a scene from long ago flashed across my mind.

Tutul had just been admitted to Class Three at the village school directly. He was a bright child. But since he had no real understanding of what an examination meant, he came home less than an hour after his very first exam.

When I asked him why he had returned so soon, he said matter-of-factly, ‘I knew all the answers, so I didn’t bother writing them.’

‘Where’s your answer script?’ I asked.

‘This is it.’ He held up a blank paper.

My blood boiled. I lost control. In a fit of rage, I slapped him—again and again.

The poor child, bewildered and speechless, just stared at me with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

That night, he came down with a fever so severe it rattled his bones. I stayed up the entire night by his side. Guilt, raw and unforgiving, howled through my heart. My chest swelled with tears, threatening to break like a bursting tide.

I came to my senses when I arrived at the busy, bustling Sitakunda Railway Station.

The passenger sitting beside me asked, ‘Why do you look so upset?’

I had no answer. I just kept my head down, eyes closed.

A memory from long ago suddenly resurfaced. At that time, Tutul was serving as either the chief or the second engineer on a foreign vessel. He had visited several ports all around the world and had recently brought the ship to dock in Madras, India.

It was around 10:00 at night when the house phone rang. My mind was always restless, perpetually adrift on distant seas because of my son's job.

As soon as I answered, Tutul's anxious voice crackled over the line: 'Baba, I'm at a clinic in Madras right now.'

Fear shot through me. 'A clinic? What happened?'

He sounded exhausted. 'Terrible headache. I'm waiting for a CT scan. The doctor thinks it could be something like a tumour.' There was a hollow resignation in his usually calm voice, 'Malignancy isn't impossible.'

Suddenly, the lights around me seemed to spin. I began trembling. The phone receiver slipped from my hand and fell to the floor.

His mother, hearing the thud, came running. She clutched me tightly and cried, 'What happened to my son?'

I tried to calm her down—but inside, I was breaking. My own panic only grew by the minute.

That very night, the two of us went to see Dr. Ekram, the owner of a clinic situated near our house.

He listened patiently, then gently reassured us. 'Headaches can stem from many causes,' he said. 'From what you've described, I don't see any clear signs of anything serious. You're worrying unnecessarily.'

We returned home, but neither of us could find peace. His mother collapsed onto the bed in tears. After performing ablution, I sat on the bed facing the *Qiblah*, the direction that Muslims face during their prayers, my hands lifted in prayer. Forgetting everything else, I pleaded with Allah to take my life in exchange for my son's.

I don't know how long I remained in that state. I didn't even notice when my chest grew damp with tears. Then, suddenly, the phone rang.

I jolted upright and grabbed the receiver with trembling hands. I was in a state somewhere between being awake and unconscious.

Tutul's calm voice came through from the other end: 'Baba, it's nothing serious. Just a sinus infection. I've got a heavy cold—it's freezing out here. I just need to flush it out. Of course, it would be painful too.'

A thousand strings of joy resonated in my heart. I shouted aloud, 'Alhamdulillah!'

I don't know what his mother understood in that moment, but she rushed over, embraced me tightly, and began to weep uncontrollably.

Later, as our Volvo bus continued its ascent through the cold, I was struck by a sudden chill. The road wound along the mountainside, and I heard a fellow passenger say we were nearing the Genting Highlands—the main attraction for the tourists in Malaysia. The bus finally reached the mountain top, around eight thousand feet above the plains. As we stepped down, we were greeted by a biting wind and a gentle flurry of snow.

The hotel complex seemed to rest in the lap of the sky.

I checked into the pre-booked *Hotel First World*—a massive, multi-storey, Star-rated hotel. But navigating the hotel's system overwhelmed me. I wasn't familiar with many of its amenities or procedures. Eventually, somewhat embarrassed, I called an attendant for help.

Later, around ten in the morning, I stepped outside. The golden sun poured down across the mountaintop. White clouds drifted lazily along the slopes in the distance. Below—far, far below—the smoky green of the forests curled like mist. If I stared at it too long, I grew dizzy. But my eyes couldn't turn away from nature's kaleidoscope of colour and form.

This scene would not be unfamiliar to those who have seen the *Chimbuk* or *Nilgiri Hills* in Bandarban, Bangladesh. The only difference is that here, everything is carefully designed and maintained—while in our country, such beauty is often neglected or left to chance.

As golden lights flickered on in the evening, Genting transformed into a dreamland. Elegantly dressed men and women, dazzling shopping malls, and the lively chatter of gamblers in the casino created an atmosphere of celebration and luxury. I am just an ordinary man—what use is there in knowing so much?

I left for Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, the next morning. Travelling by road, I was struck by how rapidly the country was advancing. Village after village had begun to resemble towns; rural landscapes were giving way to urban sprawl.

I arrived in Kuala Lumpur in the late afternoon. The moment I stepped off the bus in front of the pre-booked *Federal Hotel*, my first thought was: this is Gulistan, Dhaka. The streets were jammed with traffic. People moved about in disorder. Vendors spilt across the sidewalks. Bargaining between the customers and vendors. But that impression quickly changed when I took the overhead monorail to visit the famous Petronas Twin Towers later that evening. Suddenly, the city looked completely different. Alongside its traditional colonial buildings stood rows of sleek, modern skyscrapers. The transportation system is organised and efficient. Roads are wide, clean, and lined with beautifully maintained trees. As night fell, Kuala Lumpur too turned into a city of dreams.

The next morning, as I was stepping out of the hotel, I asked a passerby, ‘Hi, how can I get to the Central Mosque?’

He looked at me for a moment and asked, ‘Are you a walker?’
‘Yeah,’ I answered casually.

Then he pointed and said, ‘Just follow your nose straight ahead. You’ll reach a flyover—cross that. Then take a U-turn. You’ll see a tall tower—that’s the National Mosque. *Masjid Negara*.’

Thinking it was nearby, I decided to walk. But very soon, I realised just how wrong I was. It felt as though I would collapse, reaching the flyover, walking under the scorching sun. My tired limbs began to tremble as gusts of wind from countless speeding vehicles rushed past above me. Gripped by a sudden wave of fear, I held onto the railing and sat down.

Sensing my distress, a passerby came forward kindly. Without a word, he took my hand and gently helped me cross the flyover.

He said softly, ‘Noisy road. Walk carefully.’

That simple, sincere gesture from a stranger in a foreign land touched me deeply.

The Kuala Lumpur Central Mosque—*Masjid Negara*—is a stunning masterpiece of architecture, blending traditional Islamic and Malay elements. From a distance, it resembles a giant, half-open umbrella, majestic and serene.

As I entered the mosque complex, I was taken aback. It was not just a mosque but a vast complex, complete with a massive library and a museum. Since it was a Friday, everything was closed, and despite my keen interest, I could not explore all its spectacular features.

After visiting the mosque, I decided I had had enough walking for the day. I hailed a taxi. The driver, a Chinese man, recognised me as a foreigner and smiled. ‘I English no good, sir,’ he said.

Still, I managed to make it clear that I wanted to go to the Sultan Abdul Samad Palace easily.

He hesitated at first, as if unsure. Then, he opened the door and gestured for me to get in.

To my surprise, barely two minutes later, he stopped the car and asked me to get out.

Puzzled, I rolled down the window—and there it was. The palace stood just next door.

Somewhat embarrassed, I asked the driver, ‘How much?’

He didn’t reply. Just smiled, started the car, and quickly drove off.

Standing before the majestic Sultan Abdul Samad Palace, I was immediately reminded of Dhaka’s Curzon Hall and Rangpur’s Carmichael College.

This grand structure, built in the Indo-Islamic architectural style, was designed by British architect A C Norman in the final decade of the nineteenth century.

As I was leaving the palace grounds, I turned to a passerby and said, ‘I want to go to the High Court. But how?’

He paused, thinking for a moment, then responded, ‘High Court? That means... Mahkama. Go ahead.’

I assumed it must be nearby, so I resumed walking. But after covering quite a long distance, I realised—I had been foolish once more.

Tired, I raised my hand to hail a taxi. As I reached for the door handle, I told the driver, ‘I want to go to the Mahkama.’

He asked, ‘Which Mahkama—Kuala Lumpur or the Putrajaya one?’

I replied, ‘Kuala Lumpur.’

The driver gave a slight smile and pointed ahead. ‘Look.’

I looked up—and there it was, right in front of me: the grand, traditional gate of the High Court, with ‘*Kuala Lumpur Mahkama*’ written in large letters across the top.

Despite all my wishes, I couldn’t visit Putrajaya, Penang, Malacca, or Langkawi during this trip.

I roamed around Malaysia – a country of excellent beauty and diversity, immersed in mystery.

On my final day in Kuala Lumpur, I visited several landmarks, including the King’s Palace, the National Museum, the National Park, and the world’s largest net-covered bird park. Then I headed straight to the Tun Abdul Razak Memorial Museum. The afternoon passed as I walked through glimpses of the great leader’s political career, personal moments, and family life—an experience both humbling and inspiring.

Feeling tired and hungry, I stepped into a small canteen within the museum grounds. The manager, a Malay Muslim woman, was affectionately called ‘Mamma’ by everyone. Two young women were serving food, joking and chatting with familiar customers.

Seeing a foreigner, the manager herself came forward and motioned for me to sit. She looked at me with a questioning gaze, as if to ask what I would like to eat.

I smiled and said, ‘Mamma, please give me *nasi* (rice), fish curry, and fresh water.’

Hearing herself addressed as ‘Mamma’ by a foreigner, something warm flickered in her eyes. She personally arranged my meal, carefully tidying the plate, and began a short conversation with me in a mix of broken English and Malay.

‘I have heard Bangladesh is a very beautiful country,’ she said. ‘The people are simple and religious.’

‘You heard right,’ I replied.

‘Most people in your country are poor, right?,’ she said.

‘That’s true,’ I replied.

‘Your people who work here are very hard-working. But their wages are very low.’

‘Do you know why their wages are so low?’ I said.

She nodded. ‘It’s probably your country’s agents. They deceive and exploit those workers.’

‘You’re right. But how did you figure that out?’

‘My brother owns a farm. Several Bangladeshi boys work there. I heard it from them.’

She listened with quiet attention as we spoke.

When I finished eating, she brought a drink from the refrigerator and said, ‘Here, have this.’

I replied, ‘No, thank you. I don’t drink cold beverages.’

There was a soft, pleading note in her voice. ‘Please take it, dear. It won’t cost anything.’

‘You called me ‘Mamma’, didn’t you?’ she said gently as emotions choked her voice. She placed a hand on my shoulder.

In that moment, something melted inside me. Sitting in a modest little eatery far away from home, my thoughts turned to my mother—frail, frozen in bed, her life stretched out behind her like a long, quiet century. I had been of little use to my mother, whose boundless sacrifices had allowed me to move forward in life, leaving so many others behind. And yet, though he had done almost nothing for her youngest son compared to me—and though she often scolded him for ‘not becoming a prosperous one’—it was this son, my brother Dilal, who took full responsibility for her. He carried her to the bathroom like a child, bathed her gently, fed her with his own hands, and then lifted her back to bed, tucking her in with care. He did this—every day—for twelve years.

I know I can never repay my mother’s debt. Neither can I repay the debt I owe my brother. If Allah has recorded even the slightest of good deeds to credit in His book of record, I pray with all my heart: may He bestow that reward upon my brother.

On the day of our return home, we all arrived at Changi Airport at 7 a.m. We knew we wouldn’t see each other for a long time. Everyone’s heart was heavy. As I prepared to pass through immigration, I gave Tutul and Elina my final words of household advice. Then Sreyoshee struck the final blow. Just as I

lifted her into my arms to cuddle her one last time, she wrapped her little arms tightly around my neck and said, ‘Grandpa, I won’t let you go. I was getting worried.’

‘I’ll come back, sweetheart,’ I said gently.

‘No! You’re lying! You won’t come back!’ she cried. Her words turned into sobs, then loud wailing. Her parents tried to take her from my lap, but she clung to me with all her might. When I finally managed to hand her over and stepped into the immigration queue, my eyes were blurred with tears. I didn’t have the courage to look back.

I don’t know when I boarded the plane, when it took off, or how far we had flown by the time it landed. I could think only of Sreyoshee.

The captain’s voice broke the silence, announcing, ‘We are now cruising at thirty thousand feet.’

I looked out the window. The sky stretched endlessly in all directions, filled with rolling waves of white clouds, like some great cotton carder had scattered tonnes of soft cotton across the heavens with a mighty wind. What magnificent beauty! At that moment, I felt as if, were my soul to leave my body and drift into that vast expanse, it would be a kind of joyful liberation.

At one point, the plane crossed into the skies over my homeland. A clear blue sky above, and below, the lush green map of the earth—houses like toy blocks, hills like mounds of termites, and rivers winding like silver ribbons. Ah, my beloved homeland! A scene from Singapore returned to me.

That day, just outside Choa Chu Kang MRT Station, I had seen a group of college students handing out leaflets to passing commuters. The leaflet had pictures of elderly people, and beneath them was written: *‘They are the ones who built this country. Thank them for everything.’*

I understood immediately—perhaps the elderly were beginning to lose their place of honour among the younger generation. That message was a gentle reminder.

Later, on my way to Lot One Market, I noticed an elderly woman standing all alone, her face clouded with quiet sadness. That leaflet came back to mind. I walked up to her and softly said, ‘Ma’am, thank you for everything you’ve done for your country.’

Hearing such words from a foreigner, she looked at me with grateful eyes and smiled faintly. She mumbled something in response.

Though I couldn’t make out the words, I felt I understood their meaning with my heart. It was as if she were saying, ‘I don’t know what country you come from, but it’s certainly a good country. Your mother, too, must be very fortunate to have raised a son like you.’

I felt a lump form in my throat. I wanted to say, ‘Mother, you’re not entirely right. I was born in a country where ‘Even the king won’t stop until he has grabbed everything of the poor—big or small!’ But then I paused. No—this is not the true face of my homeland. Instead, I wished I could say: ‘Mother, I come from a land where young men shed fresh blood on the streets to protect their mother tongue. I come from a country where a mother wraps her only son in a white shroud and sends him to war for the independence of the soil she calls home, where a person surrenders her own golden years of joy to care for an aging mother like you. I am a son of such a country.’

My thoughts were interrupted by the passenger beside me. ‘The plane is about to land. Please fasten your seat belt,’ he said. ‘Oh! Tears in your eyes.’

‘Nothing, I was just... thinking,’ I said with a soft smile while buckling my belt.

Eight

My mother completed a century of life before she left this world. Her last decade was one of agony. She had endured poverty and sorrow all her life. Just as comfort arrived, her body gave out—she broke her waist and remained bedridden until her death.

She was born into tears—and lived her life within them. Her life was soaked in tears. On her final day, she departed wrapped in nature’s grief, as if the skies wept for her. Why God wrote her destiny in sorrow—only He knows. That answer remains beyond human understanding.

It was sometime in the early part of 2010. A televised music competition called Three-Wheeled Stars was airing on ATN Bangla. An elderly, impoverished van puller stood on stage, singing with his whole heart. His voice was raw, unpolished—but laced with something rare—unbearable emotion:

*My mother, born of sorrow,
remains ever drenched in pain...
Harbour all my agony,
O my ever-suffering mother...*

The singer broke down in tears mid-song. Guest judge and folk-singer Momtaz wept openly. The veteran judges couldn’t hold back their emotions either. Presenter Asaduzzaman Noor held a handkerchief to his eyes.

I watched the show with tears in my eyes. In that van puller’s voice, I saw my mother—as if she were still alive, still carrying her pain.

It was the beginning of the twentieth century. Just beyond the Katihara River, six miles northeast of Gaibandha town, lay a vast stretch of open land known locally as Pakhimarir Math. North of

that field stood a small village—Dakshin Gidari. And in that quiet, remote village, a newborn girl child had just lost her mother.

At the time, when she was about three years old, her father was sentenced to transportation for life to *Kalapani Dwip*, the Andaman Islands, accused of murder. She was too young to understand any of it at the time. These fragments of the past reached her later, told in hushed voices by her uncles and aunts as she grew older.

It was around 1908. Seated in court, the English judge asked the accused one final time,

‘Did you really commit this murder?’

‘Yes *hujur* (lord). I killed with my own hands.’ the accused replied, his voice calm and clear.

‘Why did you kill?’

The accused lowered his head, saying nothing.

‘Do you realise your confession could lead to a death sentence?’ the judge continued, voice heavy with sympathy.

‘Yes, *hujur*. I know,’ came the quiet reply.

The defence lawyer made a last desperate attempt to save his client.

‘Your Honour,’ he pleaded, ‘the accused is not of sound mind. He was devastated by the death of his wife. Grief has broken him. This wasn’t a murder—it was suicide. He’s taking the blame.’

Preparations had been made beforehand, and the state prosecutor offered no objection. But the accused raised his head and looked directly at the judge.

‘*Hujur*, I am an *imam* of a mosque,’ he said firmly. ‘I cannot lie. Allah is the witness that I killed with my own hands. Please, punish me.’

The accused was supposed to be sentenced to death. But moved by the man’s sincerity and age, the judge instead ruled for life imprisonment—transportation for life.

On the day of his departure, the accused’s brother brought the accused’s young daughter to the prison fence. Through the

prison bars, the father reached out, hoping to touch her for the last time. Startled by the sentry’s warning, the child cried and pulled away. The father’s hands met nothing. That was their final meeting. The child was too young to remember the place or her father’s face. That orphan child was my mother.

Because of her reddish, fair complexion, like the colour of *sindoor* (vermilion), her neighbours gave her the name Sindoor. Sindoor Rai. Seeing the title Rai attached to my mother’s name, one can’t help but wonder: perhaps it was a time when the love story of Radha and Krishna had quietly entered the inner chambers of Bengali Muslim households. After all, the name Rai is derived from Radhika>Rahiya> Rai, like Aishwarya Rai. Ah... what a beautiful name my mother had!

That three-month-old orphan was taken in by her aunt. She suckled at her childless aunt’s dry breast—and, by God’s will, those barren arms were blessed with a child of their own. A miracle of flesh.

My mother grew up with her cousins, believing they were her siblings. She long believed those she called Baba and Maa were her uncle and aunt. By the time she learned the truth, she was a spirited teenager—dancing, singing, chanting rhymes, drawing every eye. Village festivals—turmeric ceremonies for brides, prayers for fertility, newborn haircuts, and Annaprashan (the occasion when a child first eats cooked rice)—never came to life without Sindoor’s energy.

God had gifted her a voice full of melody. A voice bright with wit, sharp in satire, and soaked in sorrow when it broke into tears. Even after she came to her husband’s home, that spirit never dimmed. She was still the same.

I vividly remember my elder sister’s wedding. For two full days, our house was filled with song. My mother danced with the young women, sang old folk songs, and radiated joy like the centre of the celebration.

Then came the time of the bride's departure. By late afternoon, the palanquin arrived to carry the bride and the groom away. The feast was over. The farewells had begun. The bride and groom sat quietly inside the palanquin as the final song of parting began—sung in the deep, trembling voices of the elderly women:

*You stole our beloved daughter
from among the women in the room—
You have stolen our beloved daughter
from among many in the yard.
Take back the money gifted—
give back our daughter.*

Suddenly, my mother's voice rose above all others:

*O my beloved daughter
sits in a Palanquin, weeping,
If I had known earlier
Someone would take you so soon—
I would have taken you in my lap,
Leaving the sandal paste on the grinding stone.*

Everyone fell silent. They realised she wasn't singing a farewell song—she was weeping through the language of melody. Not just singing, but grieving. The words trembled in the raw pain of a mother losing her most precious treasure.

Slowly, the palanquin disappeared into the distance. One by one, the guests returned to their homes. But my mother remained, her tears flowing quietly down her cheeks, long after the music had ended.

Grief and tears were her lifelong companions. She lost her first four children—all to smallpox. All in the month of *Chaitra* (mid-March to mid-April). Every year, when Chaitra returned, my mother would finish her household chores and quietly make her way to the family graveyard. With trembling hands and aching tenderness, she would touch the graves of her children and weep—not with hysteria, but in a soothing, heart-melting

melody. As the wind swept through the trees and rolled down toward the river, her voice would rise—slowly, gently, until it echoed across the water, carrying her grief to the far bank. Even the sky, heavy and dull in the late afternoon, seemed to sink under the weight of her sorrow.

My elder brother, Faisal, died at seventeen. I was so young at the time that much of it remains a blur—but my mother never forgot him, not for a single day. There was a handsome young cobbler boy who often came to our house. He bore a striking resemblance to Faisal. My mother would call him inside with motherly affection and offer him *chira-mudi* (puffed rice and flattened rice).

After the cobbler boy had had the snack, my mother wiped his mouth with the end of her *sari* with the frantic love of a mother, saying, 'Faisal, don't leave me ever, my son.'

The cobbler boy left. My mother would sit, holding the plate of half-eaten food, and break into sobs.

Almost every week, *Vaishnavi* (a nun) Haridasi from Raydash Para came to beg for alms. With a *rasakali* (longish painted mark on the bridge of the nose used by the *Vaishnavas*) on her forehead, and a cloth-bag slung over her shoulder, she'd arrive.

My mother would always welcome her in, seat her gently, and speak with kindness, as if she were a guest, not a beggar.

The Vaishnavi used to tell the story of *Nimai Chand's* renunciation of worldly life (Nimai is a Hindu monk leaving his mother earlier in his life. After renouncing his life, a Hindu monk cannot even meet his mother back as per the rule of monkhood), her voice trembled with devotion. She would play the mandira, a musical instrument, and sing in a plaintive tone the yearning of Nimai's mother's heart:

*'Nimai, my son, wait. Nimai,
let me see your face just once.
Where did the Guru come from? I let him sit.
What mantra did the Guru*

*whisper into Nimai's ear—
Till then, I do not hear the word 'Maa'
from Nimai's lips.
Nimai, wait, my beloved son...'*

The aching longing in her voice would bring rivers of tears to my mother's eyes. When the song ended, the monk would quietly collect her alms and leave, while the tears in my mother's eyes would continue to flow, silently and endlessly.

The woman who raised my mother—her aunt—was always addressed as Maa. For many years, my mother didn't realise that she wasn't her biological mother. And when she finally did, it changed nothing. She still saw her as Maa, and we, her children, knew her only as Grandmother.

That grandmother, too, carried a life full of sorrow. The family was poor. Her sons had grown up and drifted away, each preoccupied with his own struggles. The elderly woman was left to fend for herself—lonely and often hungry.

She would often come to our house, walking slowly across the uneven path of *Pakhimari*, leaning heavily on a stick. In a tattered cloth bag, she would carry whatever little she had managed to gather: sometimes two ripe bananas, other times a handful of sweet potatoes—offerings from her heart, though her hands were nearly empty. She had been bringing those small gifts for as long as we could remember.

As soon as she stepped inside, she would call out, 'Dear Sindoor, look, what I've brought for your little ones. I don't have much money, dear.'

Our household was one of constant poverty and worry. Even one extra guest meant increased pressure on my mother. But the moment she saw Grandma, her worries melted. Her face lit up like a child's.

'Oh, you're so good, Maa,' she'd say, pulling her into an embrace. 'Stay for a few days this time, won't you?'

Even so, in a poor household, an extra person—no matter how loved—can't stay for long. After about ten days, my mother would gently say to Grandma, 'Won't you go back home, Maa? Your grandchildren must be missing you.'

Grandma would understand the hint. But with a quiet voice, she'd reply, 'Surely, I'll leave tomorrow.'

Tomorrows come and tomorrows pass by. Still, Grandma lingered. My mother never said another word to her after that. She would simply adjust her own meals, sharing what little she had, making sure no one knew.

Eventually, it was time for my Grandma to leave as well. My mother, too, went with Grandma to the river. Just before they parted, my mother hugged her and said, 'Come again soon, Maa. This time, you'll stay longer.'

Her throat tightened, and tears welled up in her eyes. Grandma also cried. With great tenderness, Grandma took the *anchol*, the edge of the sari, and gently wiped the tears from my mother's cheeks.

After crossing the river, Grandma stood on the edge of the desolate field of *Pakhimari* and turned back one last time to look at my mother. But her vision was too blurred to see anything. On either side of the river stood two sorrowful women—silent, still, and quietly weeping.

I have often spoken of my unlettered mother's immeasurable contribution to what little education I've been able to acquire. She did everything possible so I could be educated. She would barely eat, saving most of her food for me. Before I left for school—or after I came home—she would feed me from her hands.

Sometimes, there would be no food at all. On those days, ignoring her sense of respect, Maa would go to others' houses with an empty bowl, asking for a little rice and curry.

None of the neighbours let her return empty-handed, but I remember clearly the pain on her face. Tears welled up the moment I looked into her eyes.

I remember such an incident. I tried my luck in various places and eventually enrolled at Gaibandha Modern High School. The school was five or six miles from home. I walked that distance every day. There was a dire scarcity of clothes. I owned just one pair of pyjamas and a single shirt.

The night before, my mother had washed my only shirt using *khar*, an alkaline made from burnt banana tree ash. But when I woke the next morning, it was still wet—completely soaked.

Maa felt utterly hopeless. It was a critical time. Exams were near, and missing even a single class could mean disaster. Left with no choice, my mother went next door to ask the neighbour if he had a shirt she could borrow. It wasn't the first time she'd asked this family for help with clothes for me. Without hesitation, the neighbour handed over a shirt. I put it on. It nearly reached my knees.

What else could I do? I prepared to leave, awkward in the oversized shirt. But just as I stepped toward the door, the sky opened up—a sudden, torrential downpour.

My mother bit her lip. She was seized with panic. She briefly considered asking someone to lend me an umbrella, but quickly dismissed the thought. How many people could one turn to for help? And how many even owned more than one umbrella? On a rainy day, an umbrella is no small thing. Everyone needs their own.

Without another word, she ran outside, cut a broad *taro leaf* from the yard, and handed it to me.

'Take this, son,' she said gently. 'Make it work, somehow.'

As I stepped outside, balancing the giant leaf over my head, I saw the same neighbour standing at her doorstep. Without a word, she opened her family's only umbrella and held it out to me.

Behind me stood my mother—silent. She said nothing. But I watched as her tears mixed with the rain that drenched her face in a stream of quiet, holy mercy.

Much later—probably in 1969—after crossing a vast sea of hardship, I finally became a teacher at Gaibandha College. I used to cycle there each day from our home in the village of Baguria. By then, our family had become financially more secure, more comfortable.

One Friday, I was at home. Out of nowhere, Ba'jan appeared, smiling as he approached my mother.

'Did you hear?' he said, his face glowing. Ba'jan was elated about what someone very respectable and wealthy in the next village told him about me.

Ba'jan continued, 'Today he called me from the street and invited me to sit in his drawing room. Imagine that! He said, 'I heard your son has become a professor at a college. To be the parents of such a son—it's a matter of great fortune.' As he spoke those words, Ba'jan broke into tears.

At first, my mother stood silently. Then, in a trembling voice, she turned to Ba'jan and said, 'Why are you crying?—offer thanks to Allah.'

Though Maa told Ba'jan not to cry, her tears betrayed her.

Maa had never known what a mother's love truly felt like. And whenever she saw someone deprived of it, her heart would ache in a way words could not express.

During the Liberation War of 1971, several members of the *Mukti Bahini*, freedom fighters, secretly came to my village home for shelter. Many of them were not only my students but had also stood beside me in various movements and struggles, both before and after the war. I can recall the formation of a Teachers' Struggle Committee for Freedom at Gaibandha College during those turbulent days of March. Abdul Wadud Chowdhury, a professor of chemistry was the convener, and I served as the joint convener of that committee. Throughout the month, we visited far and near areas across the subdivisions, mobilising teachers in support of the struggle for freedom. At the

committee's call, on March 24, teachers and students brought out massive processions that paraded through the town. The demonstrations culminated in a grand rally at the Shaheed Minar square. The very next day brought the dreadful black night of genocide on March 25.

At that time, I was living with my family in a small tin-shed house on Godown Road. That modest home had become a gathering place for student leaders. In the early days of resistance, my students and I cut down large trees along Sadullapur Road, leaving them across the path to block the invaders. In the evenings, those young men would gather at my house to practise making bombs and take oaths to join the war. Many of those freedom-loving faces are no longer with us. Some perished during the war; others faded away in the years that followed. And those who survived, few remember or seek them out today.

I still remember their names—two siblings—Hiru and Toru, Mintu, Lulu, Bachchu, Yakub, Baki, and many others. They would arrive under the cover of night, dusty, tired, and hungry.

One such night, Syed Shamsul Alam Hiru—now a prominent lawyer at the Gaibandha Bar and president of the district Awami League—arrived with his Mujib Bahini, a special group of freedom fighters after the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. With a half-smile and childlike longing, he turned to my mother and said, 'Auntie, I haven't had duck meat in so long. I really miss it.'

That very night, Maa searched the houses of our neighbours and managed to find a duck. My wife, Nazma, stayed up all night cooking. She prepared the meal with love and fed them until their hunger was gone.

Maa sat nearby, watching them eat with quiet joy. Before dawn, they said their goodbyes and disappeared once more into the dark.

As my mother watched them walk away, she sighed deeply. 'Oh,' she said, her voice heavy, 'how long it's been since these boys haven't seen their mothers... how long since they haven't

eaten from their mothers' hands...' Her voice broke. The tears returned.

I recall another vivid moment—this one from late 1973. By then, I had been a teacher at Gaibandha College for four or five years. I had been commuting to college from my village. At the same time, I was managing the family farm in the village, which had brought us a certain level of financial stability. But the village itself was reeling from famine. Work was scarce. The poor had no steady income. Many struggled to afford even one meal a day.

One day, I was looking for a few men to help weed the fields. Eight or ten people showed up, ready to work—not for wages, but simply for one meal at noon. That's all they asked.

When lunch time came, everyone sat down to eat. Maa made sure each one had enough to fill their stomach. The men ate silently, gratefully. But one elderly man sat motionless before his plate. He didn't touch the food. Instead, tears streamed steadily down his cheeks.

Maa noticed. She gently asked what was wrong.

Suddenly, the man broke down.

'Auntie,' he sobbed, 'since yesterday, my children have been starving. How can I have the food, leaving them unfed?'

A sea of sorrow welled up in my mother's eyes. The past surged through her—the years of hardship, the haunting memories of starvation. Without a word, she filled a fresh bowl with food, handed it to the old man, and said softly, 'Go, son. Take this home. Let the family eat together.'

When the day's work was over, my mother personally gave each man a seer of rice. She also insisted I pay them wages.

Even then, her tears continued to flow. She turned to me and wept. 'Today, your father's face came back to me, son. After all these years... I saw him again.'

I said nothing. I simply stepped away, slowly. Behind me, my mother kept crying—uncontrollably, inconsolably.

It was 1978. I was imprisoned in Sylhet Jail on political charges. They kept me in a condemned cell—solitary confinement. In the cell next to mine was a young Indian man named Nanda. He was a Maoist political activist who had fled across the border while being chased by security forces. He crossed into Bangladesh—and found himself behind bars. That young man, who had lost both his parents, had a remarkable singing voice.

In the late afternoons, when the skies of Sylhet filled with the melancholy cooing of Jalali pigeons, Nanda would sing. His voice, trembling with tears, would rise from the next cell:

*O parrot,
I'll free you, breaking your chains
If you fly back and bring my mother to me...*

And sometimes:

*My mother's sweet smile rests upon the moon
I remember my mother. I remember my mother...*

Nanda would sing and weep—his songs soaked in longing. And through the thick walls between us, his sorrow seeped into my own heart.

I spent thirty long months in prison. In all that time, I didn't see my mother once. I didn't know how she was—how her days passed, how many rivers of tears she must have wept. My chest ached for a single glimpse of her.

For the last ten years of her life, my mother was completely bedridden. Her vision had faded. Her body, too, had failed her. Yet even then—if I quietly approached her bedside and stood silently—she somehow knew.

'Is that you, my son?' she would whisper.

Startled, I'd ask, 'How did you know, Maa?'

Ignoring her pain, she would smile—a smile sweeter than anything in this world—and say, 'My treasure, apple of my eye, don't you think I'd know my own heart?'

She used to say, 'One side of a mother's chest is soaked in a child's urine and excrement, while the other freezes in the biting cold. How can a mother forget the child raised with such hardship? Can anyone ever forget pain like that?'

Whenever I called, 'Maa... Maa...' she would stretch out her two frail arms—arms as dry as jute stalks—as if to cradle the same baby she once rocked.

Oh, Mother—could I ever repay the price of even a single drop of your milk in this lifetime?

My mother never had any demands. As a child, she wore a *Sapta*, a torn piece of cloth. Even after marrying into a poor household, she managed to live on with only a single piece of clothing. Often, she would keep fasting and give the food to her children instead.

That mother—born into hardship, raised in deprivation—once asked me for only one thing. It was during her final days. She lay on her last bed, unable to see, barely able to hear. Her voice was faint, slurred, each word an effort.

One day, she said, 'My son,... how far is Kalapani?'

'Maa, no one calls it Kalapani anymore.'

'What then?'

'It's called the Andamans now.'

'How far is that?'

'If you travel by ship, it takes three days and three nights. By plane—just a few hours.'

'Can't you go there?'

'Why can't I go, Ma?'

She fell silent for a moment, as if something deep and old stirred within her. Then she took a long breath and said, 'Is the mosque, still there?'

'Of course it is.'

'Then go... Go once to that place and offer a prayer. Arrange a *milad* (a congregation for prayer for a particular purpose.) And

bring back a handful of soil from that land. Remember—your grandfather’s body is mixed with that soil.’

Silent tears streamed down her cheeks—grief without sound, sorrow without words.

The longing of a dying daughter for the father she barely knew—a man who was a self-confessed murderer. It is an ache that transcends explanation. A man who does not have any daughters cannot feel the unfathomable mystery.

I have two daughters of my own—Binu and Manisha. One lives in Rajshahi, the other in Dhaka, two cities in Bangladesh. Both are always busy—with their husbands, children, families, and careers. Yet amid the noise and demands of their lives, their father takes centre stage in their thoughts.

Not long ago, I was admitted to the National Heart Institute in Dhaka for a minor surgery. As I lay there, I saw the anxious eyes of my younger daughter, Manisha. In that moment, I truly understood how hard it is to break free from the illusions of this world. She left everything—her husband, her children, her responsibilities—and devoted herself to my care entirely, as if possessed by fear. The thought of losing her father made all her worldly joys seem meaningless.

Once, while wishing a happy birthday to my elder daughter Binu’s only son, I jokingly said, ‘Maa, you don’t need to worry about your father so much anymore. After all, your father is growing up in your home now.’

What a cry my daughter let out at those words!

She said, ‘What are you saying, Baba? Even if I had a hundred sons on one side and only my father on the other, my father would outweigh them a thousand times. In my world, there is no equal to my father.’

Hearing her say that brought a sea of tears to my eyes.

I had once made a promise to my mother. I would go to the Andamans: I would visit the mosque, would pray in the mosque,

and arrange a *milad* for her father’s soul and would bring back a handful of Kalapani soil. But I failed to keep that promise. Mother is gone forever. I could not make it to the Andamans. And now, what would be the point even if I bring a handful of soil from there? Who would I even show the soil to?

Maa left this world at 6 a.m. on Monday, August 18, 2008, leaving behind her beloved son, the treasure of her heart, whose scent she could recognise with a single breath.

The morning had been bright and calm. But as the day progressed, the sky grew heavy and overcast. Just after *Zuhr*, the mid-day prayer, a torrential rain began to fall. And in that heavy rain, they lifted the coffin bearing my mother’s body for her final journey. As they carried her, voices rose in unison: ‘La ilaha illallah...’ Inside the house, the women cried out together in uncontrollable grief.

Outside, the rain poured harder, and the wind howled through the trees—as though the heavens themselves were mourning her. The shroud was soaked with rainwater, dripping steadily to the ground. A few people hurriedly spread a sheet of polythene over the body to protect it.

As the coffin carrying my mother’s body passed before me, it suddenly reminded me of my elder sister’s wedding farewell—the palanquin that had once carried her away. I saw again, in my mind’s eye, my mother standing beside that palanquin, singing through her tears:

*O my beloved daughter
Sits in a Palanquin, weeping,
If I had known earlier
Someone would take you so soon
I would have taken you in my lap,
Leaving the sandal paste on the grinding stone
O my beloved daughter...*