

The Southern Door of Memory

By Sheikh Hasina

The Tungipara village of Gopalganj district once stood beside the river Modhumati. Madhumati has now shifted a long distance. Today the Baigar river, which is a tributary of Modhumati, flows alongside Tungipara village with its waves dancing in a rhythmic fashion. The water of that river shines like silver when the sunlight strikes or the moonlight falls on its water.

Along the river-bank were forests of common reed, fields of paddy-jute-sugarcane, lines of date-palmyra-coconut-myrobalan trees, bushes of bamboo and banana, jungles of wild-creepers, fresh tips of long and thin, green and tall grasses. Overall, it was like a wonderfully pleasure-giving piece of picture. I was born in this Tungipara village on an Ashwin noon illuminated by the golden rays of sun. I grew up under the shadow of this village, its enchanting natural beauty and the sweetness of a simple and ordinary life.

Our settlement was over two hundred years old. The buildings which were constructed before the Sepoy Revolution still exist. Our relatives live there. But most of these have broken down, becoming den of snakes. Our ancestors had tussles with the indigo landlords. Cases were instituted. There were also frequent quarrels with the British folks. Once, a British gentleman was fined in a case. That broken building still remains as a silent witness of history. The Pakistani army had attacked that building during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. They burned it with fire after keeping my grand parents sitting on the front-road.

It then took seventeen hours to go to our village by steamer from Dhaka. There were no roads. The only option was to go by boat or on feet. Even then, that village had a great attraction for me. One can, however, travel by surface transport now. Keeping pace with time, speed-boats are also available now for the journey. It took 3 to 4 hours to reach Tungipara from Gopalganj by boat.

The colourful and dreamlike days of my childhood were spent on the soft alluvial soil of rural Bengal amid its muddy water during monsoon, in the sweet sunlight, smell of dewdrops falling on grass-flowers and leaves, the sound of crickets at dusks lit by fireflies, hide and seek in the bushes of palmyra and mangosteen trees, sewing of garlands after collecting water-lilies

(from ponds) and scented white flowers ('shiuli' and 'bakul'), getting covered by mud and playing in the monsoon rain.

My father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was involved in politics. He was then imprisoned in jails most of the time. I and my younger brother Kamal used to live with our mother at the village home of our grandparents. My father used to study at Kolkata and simultaneously engage in politics during the time of my birth. He came to see me after getting the news later on.

My father used to come home whenever there was time and opportunity. We never moved from his side during those episodes. By listening to stories while sitting on his lap and eating together, what we got from him during childhood seemed enough to me.

One day when papa was brought to Gopalganj police station, I and Kamal went to see him along with our grandfather. Kamal was in fact born when my father was in a Dhaka jail. He therefore had not yet seen father from a close range. He used to listen spellbound to the stories I told him about papa. We were standing beside a pond near the Gopalganj jail to have a glimpse of dad just when he would be taken to the court. Kamal stood by my side and said: Hasu'pa, will you allow me to call your papa 'papa'? This sentiment of Kamal could never be erased from the depth of my childhood heart. We rarely got our father during our childhood and teenage years. As we were deprived of his affection during childhood, we got much of it from our grandparents, relatives and village-folks.

The moulavi, pundit and teacher for the family-members were resident at our home. All children in the household used to receive education from them in the mornings and evenings. I also studied for some days at the primary school of our village. I maintained close links with the village even while my teenage years were spent in town. I first came to Dhaka with my grandfather in 1952, aboard our own boat. My affectionate grandparents and relatives mostly stayed in the village. I went back to village three or four times in a year during our school holidays or other occasions. Even today, the rural setting and my childhood years there makes me very nostalgic.

My childhood days still evoke many memories. Today, recollections of those times are sweeping my mind over and over again, as if by opening the southern door of memory. I cannot help mention an incident here. A cousin sister of my father was 3 to 4 years older than me. One day, all children in the

household were going to school with that aunt. There was a bamboo bridge over the canal. We had to cross that bridge. On the first day, I was terrified by the experience. My hand and feet were trembling. It was my aunt who gave me courage and helped me cross the bridge by holding my hand. After that, I never became fearful. Rather, I used to remain ahead of the bunch.

After getting up very early at dawn, we children used to roam about on the river-bank; making my feet wet in warm river-water during winters also attracted me. We used to swim by floating pairs of coconuts or banana trees and caught small fishes by spreading the towel in water. Water-hyacinths came to the canal during monsoon. When we pulled these up, small fishes came out of them. One day, I was shocked to see a snake instead.

During the month of Boishakh, we cut fresh mangoes into pieces, mixed those with mustard paste and green chillies and then filled the cones of banana leaves with those; the joy we derived by sipping this juicy paste still thrills me. Anybody who has not tasted this mango paste after putting it inside banana leaf cannot appreciate its taste. And its very smell became different after it was put inside the leaf. We picked up so many quarrels centring on eating mango in this manner. We also competed with each other in eating plum after shaking its tree-branches. There was a huge plum tree beside a large pond in the village. When we shook its branches, the ripest plum showing reddish hue fell deep inside the pond. When none of us could pick it up, the sorrow we felt for that plum still remains fresh in my mind.

We used to move about on a dinghy boat through the jute field. My granddad had a large boat, which also contained two rooms with big windows. There was a rudder behind the boat with two oars in front. I very much liked to watch through the window the clear blue sky and the village surrounded by dark green trees at a distance. That boat was wrecked during the 1971 liberation war. That village which I left behind during my childhood still appears like a perfumed picture to me.

My father's birthplace was also Tungipara. He now sleeps in the soil of that very village in a cool and shady setting. The graves of my grandparents lie by his side. Those who had filled my life with infinite affection and love, today they mingle with the soil of my village. I lost my mother, father, brothers and many relatives by the brutal bullets of the assassins on 15 August 1975. The country and the nation lost all possibility of living with dignity after losing

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – who was the embodiment of all hopes and aspirations for freedom. The band of assassins had buried the great man at that secluded soil of the village after removing him from the heart of Bangla – Dhaka. They made an unsuccessful attempt to erase him from the pages of history – but have they succeeded?

I used to spend most of my times near my father. I also got the opportunity to take part in discussions on his future plans. I vividly recall one of his utterances. He told us quite often, 'I shall live in village in the last part of my life. You will take care of me. I shall live near you.' Those words still resonate in my ears. This back-pull of my father's tomb in the secluded atmosphere of a village will bring me back to that village over and over again wherever I may be on earth.

I have now got myself involved in politics. I am proud to have dedicated myself for the welfare of the country and its people. I want to spend the last days of my life in Tungipara. I have a fond wish to build a house beside the river. I also intend to write memoirs on my parents. Everybody knew my father as a politician. But I want to write about this hugely big-hearted man that Mujib was as a person.

I wish to go back to my village, in the same condition as it was during my childhood days. But wishing is not enough. Time is now passing very fast. The simple ordinary lifestyle of the village is becoming busier after getting the touch of mechanisation; there are other thrills as well. People are also getting habituated. There is no scope to deny the blessings of science while living in this century. Modern technology is being applied for raising the quality of life and work-environment in developed countries of the world. We also shall have to forge ahead.

Whatever busy schedules I may have, I go to the village whenever I find time. If only I could get back to the village of my childhood – it occurs to me! When I lose sight of the rural path at a distance, I feel like singing at the top of my voice, 'That coloured path of clay leaving the village, oh makes my mind captivated.....'

I could easily memorise the poems about villages included in our school texts during my childhood and teenage years. I still recall some lines here: 'There are little homes in my small village'; 'Will you go with me, brother, to our small village'; 'I recall the lap of my rural mother after so many days'; 'A moon has

risen over the bamboo garden'; 'I am a boy on the bank of the river Meghna'; 'Three long oars, three boatmen'; 'The palm-tree stands on a single feet'.

I was a mere teenager when I entered the realm of Bengali literature and culture as a reader. Later, I became a student of literature. I read the village-centred novels, stories and poems whenever I got the opportunity. Initially, it was 'Pather Panchali' of Bibhuti Bhushan which had a great impact on me. Even now, I turn its pages whenever I get the opportunity. The love and affection between the two siblings Durga and Opu, their interactions and walks around the village, sharing food with each other when they got something, Durga's sense of responsibility towards Opu, illness of Durga and her subsequent death; Opu's sorrow and pains at losing his sister, hurt state of old grandma, sadness-pain, helplessness; Opu's mother Sarbajaya – whose constant companion was misery and poverty and whose life was full of struggles, her love and affection for her children; work-life of Opu-Durga's father abroad, sari brought for her by father after Durga's death – many of these small and sad episodes can be observed in the real life of Bangladeshi villages even today. 'Pather Panchali' reminds me of my own village. It is the greatest novel in Bengali literature. The village-based short-stories of Rabindranath are also my favourites. The sketches on villages by artist Zainul Abedin are also realistic. I still remember the picture of a bride wearing nose-ring and standing beneath a banana tree. Our cultural heritage is quite notable. The songs of Baul, Vaishnab, Bhawaia and Bhatiali are our pride since time immemorial.

The village is our life. The rural economy and people are keeping alive the modern illuminated capitals and towns. We shall have to build up our small and large villages as modern and ideal ones in accordance with our tradition.

Proper electrification is needed for developing the villages. All villages should have hospitals having modern equipment, schools, maternity centres, agricultural and technical training centres, cultural centres, playing grounds, etc. The conditions of homesteads should be robust and clean. The roads would be wide and pucca; communication with towns should be made easier by making arrangements for movement of transports.

Initiatives will have to be taken for a balanced distribution of the agricultural system and its output, marketing of produced crops at specified price and making the food storage system hygienic after combining agricultural lands

through cooperatives. Proper supply of those products which would be exported and those which would go to factories as raw materials will have to be ensured under public management. The agricultural work will have to be modernised and brought under scientific management. The production of all crops should be doubled or tripled through cultivations round the year. No land should remain fallow. Fish production should be increased by cultivating fishes in rivers, canals, marshes, lakes and ponds. Farms should be set up for increasing the production of livestock and poultry. Newer methods are being invented throughout the world for increasing food production. I believe, food production should be attached top priority in this country of misery-poverty and famines. The rural people will not crowd the towns if food production is raised. They will have to be kept busy round the year by imparting training and making agricultural inputs readily available. The rural cottage industry should be expanded and its quality improved in line with our culture and tradition. Avenues will have to be opened up for the flourishing of rural agricultural commodities, businesses and industries. Employment opportunities will be generated as a result. I hold the view that a modern and time-befitting agricultural system can be the principal tool in enhancing production. At the same time, the lot of the famine and poverty-stricken peasants, who have been exploited, deprived and neglected throughout the ages, must be changed; their basic needs and rights for a decent living must be ensured.

Our rural women are the most backward. Ways will have to be found for flourishing their talent by overcoming social restrictions, religious fanaticism and walls of superstitions. Their labour will have to be utilised in productive pursuits on the basis of equal status. They become victims of many abuses and injustices in society. If the girls get the opportunity of universal education, if they become economically self-reliant, if they get the chance to become established based on the merit of their intellect-personality and courage, then the repressions and exploitations would no more be a bar to their uplift. The girls themselves will have to take up their struggle for establishing their rights with a firm hand. But all official cooperation should be extended to them for ensuring their safety.

I am also awe-struck by another aspect of rural development. It is the excessive number of neglected and helpless, skeleton-like and malnourished children, who are now a majority in our population. I have seen these children in all villages of the country I visited. As the births of these children are taking place, we must make their future promising and secure. We will have to take

initiative for making their childhood and youth joyful and happy. We should nurture a mentality of sacrificing our present for their affluent and prosperous future. And everybody will have to be selfless. The capable population will have to be engaged for increasing production after containing our population growth.

I am not a believer in any small or stop-gap arrangement for developing the villages. We shall have to build up modern villages by reforming the prevalent notions of traditional agricultural system, which went hand in hand with the darkness of regressive lifestyle over the ages. I do not want any grant-dependent or pledge-based development; I seek 'total' development. For this, we shall have to wage a countrywide movement if needed and the educated and conscious youths will have to be involved for the purpose.

I have seen numerous characters of our village-life from a close distance. I remember one lady called Akkel's mother. She has grown old now and has three sons. She became a widow at a tender age. She had free entrance in all areas and households of the village. She had information about every house at the tip of her finger. She was like a village gazette. Akkel's mother was available for cooking, making cakes or producing sweets made of palm-fruit, whenever the need arose in any household. If anybody knocked on her door on the way, she would offer a seat and serve betel leaf with nut.

Many people used to come from the south during the harvesting season. They were known as 'outsiders'. They used to perform tasks like cutting paddy and threshing. They stayed the whole season in small dwellings. After harvesting, they left the place with their shares of paddy. The snake-charmer women used to come during monsoon. They used to fit our hands with glass bangles of different colours. They arrived at specific time of the year with ribbons, dyes, comb, mirror, different kinds of toys and equipment. Sometimes they played with snakes and sang different varieties of songs by playing flute. The womenfolk in the village crowded around them and took indigenous medicines. They used to provide so many types of charms and amulets. In return, they took paddy-rice or vegetable-eggs-chicken.

There are innumerable and varied characters in the fields, farms and pathways of rural Bengal. The peasant who toils from sunrise to sunset for two fistful of rice, pulls his plough in a field burnt by the heat of summer, cuts jute tree by diving under chest-high water during monsoon, harvests crop by withstanding

the biting cold of winter – is his life's struggle of less value than any other endeavour?

I know, those beautiful days in my village will never come back. Everybody has left us one after another. That forever familiar village of mine is no more; neither are those humans, who were shattered by the ups and downs of life. That mind, that human life no more exists. It is as if everybody has lost the battle. That soft existence has perished. Today, there is only the competition for living. And that is why, selfishness and clashes have increased. The brotherhood of humans is gone; the extended hands have been withdrawn. I do not know where it all ends.

I was born in a village; I enjoyed the colourful days of my childhood. I have deep linkages with the rural behaviour, manner, ways of life and mentality. Even now, I go to the villages whenever I find time, as I become fed up with urban chores. When I move to the secluded and peaceful environment of my village after taking leave from the mechanised and busy city life, my eyes fall asleep in peace. It is difficult to get such a sleep in the capital. Here, the air is very heavy and it becomes difficult to even breathe. The starlit open sky appears much bigger in the village. The open wind swoops in with a rhythmic sound by touching the leaves of margosa, rubiaceae, palmyra-coconut trees. My village resembles the 'Beautiful Bangla' of poet Jibananda – my eyes are calmed when I look at the dark-green nature and the crop-laden terrain. During desolate noons, the sound of doves float in the air; the kingfisher succeeds in catching a fish after diving into river-water. Nothing is more attractive, captivating or pleasing to me than this. The dust-laden rural life is my eternal love. It evokes the deepest feeling inside my heart.

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