



The Indian **EXPRESS**

JOURNALISM OF COURAGE



THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS

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Father's tantrums for Armanitola

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Dec 25, 2011

Unforgettable memories are all we've returned with from Madhyapara village outside Dhaka. For my father, this was a nostalgic return after 63 years to our ancestral home they'd abandoned during Partition riots. Hospitable occupants at our lost home were inviting my parents to spend more time here, but unknown to us, a hostile undercurrent was gathering momentum. They were afraid we were coming to repossess our 400-acre mislaid property, especially as Bangladesh Parliament had recently passed an amendment to ease "enemy property" recovery. We later heard they were livid with the man who first identified my great grandfather. They mistakenly thought we'd bribed him to help us reclaim our land.

My father's childhood memory determined the places we'd visit. He recalled the Padma river ferry junction from where they'd travel to different places like Faridpur, Madaripur, Barisal. I later understood his main intention was to re-experience Padma river hilsa (ilish in Bengali) fish, the benchmark of all hilsa according to East Bengalis, although West Bengalis may not agree. A Bengali is identified by his love of hilsa fish. Eating Padma ilish at the ferry-ghat is a tradition,

even public buses advertise ILISH in large letters across the bus-body to entice people to this fresh hilsa destination. It reminded me of how everyone rushes to eat fresh oysters on-the-spot at San Francisco wharf as the fishermen haul them in. Unfortunately I had to brutally stop my parents enjoying the freshly caught hilsa displayed in rows, cut into slices, marinated in turmeric, invitingly ready-to-fry. Because hygiene was doubtful here with swarms of flies partaking of the fish first, and the oil and frying pan over-used and black.

Back in Dhaka, my father was enjoying a green mango drink in a modern cafe. He asked for one more, but without ice. The café waiter flatly refused, saying the drink formula called for ice. Surprised, we explained once again, but he was adamant. Then he came near me, switched to a very local Dhakai Bengali accent, and confessed that without ice, the tall glass will look vacant as it's the ice that gives it the big size impression. My father gave a mischievous laugh at the boy's honesty, and happily accepted the iced drink. In fact I noticed my father was continuously embracing people of Bangladesh, as though they were a part of his family. This was clearly a psychological connect, I've not witnessed it in him in West Bengal.

Nor have I ever seen my father making a tantrum to go to any place. But Armanitola in Dhaka he absolutely had to visit. He perfectly recalled his last journey here as a 10-year-old after his father's death, from Rangoon to Kolkata by boat,

then to Gualnanda by train, by ferry to Sadarghat in Dhaka to stay with relatives in Banshibazar and Armanitola. Then from Sadarghat, they'd reach Madhyapara by steamer, where you can now so easily go by road. But the traffic jam in Dhaka city is unimaginable; traveling a kilometer takes an hour. Our dead-slow car ride to Armanitola was to find a field where he used to play with his relatives living there.

When moving tortoise-like, you have to toggle your mind-gear to enjoy the jam session street festivity to avoid boredom. Were Dhaka's auto-rickshaws obsessed with safety? They have a metal mesh as in police vans carrying convicts. Suddenly a 3-wheeler auto-rickshaw sidled up to the side, a bird-cage door opened, passengers started emerging. My eyes were riveted there, I counted one, two, threea total of 8 people were traveling in that auto-rickshaw, and they all reached their destination. With nothing to do, I was calculating the high efficiency of these 3-wheeler transport cages with the luxury of the Pajero, Land Cruiser, BMW among others that were stagnating along with us in the massive traffic squeeze.

My father was totally disappointed when we arrived at Armanitola. We couldn't find the playground, nor his relative's house. I suddenly awoke to the name Armanitola. Does it have anything to do with Armenia? Armenians had come to India much before the British for trading mostly in silk, muslin and jute. There's an Armenian church in Kolkata and other cities. My on-the-spot Google search confirmed that Dhaka has an Armenian church built in 1781. After Madhyapara, this beautiful heritage church is now etched in my mind. The kaleidoscope of my Armenian connections in Paris appeared before my mind's eye, they are all highly rooted to their homeland. Even Patrice Civanian, who'd worked in my company, is from Armenia but born in France. His parents had told me

that Armenians came to India as early as 327 BC, with Alexander the Great.

That evening I met an Armenian gentleman who'd come to pay homage to his ancestors at Armanitola church. He knew little about Bangladesh, the tourist guide informed him he can experience golf and rickshaw at the same time. He said he wanted to take home a beautiful decorative pedal rickshaw displayed at our hotel. He thought it was to draw tourists, and had no idea that the livelihood of poor people in Bangladesh depended on rickshaws.

It's time to say "au revoir" to my erstwhile native land where I experienced my life's five most memorable days. On the 30-minute flight back to India, it felt like we were distancing ourselves with thousands of kilometers in-between. This feeling was reminiscent of the romantic-heartbreaking Hollywood movie Roman Holiday starring Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn. After a short but intense relationship the couple knew their parting was inevitable. That was a story, but this, my respected readers and victimised brotherhood, is my real life experience of discovery and loss. The unwanted political separation in 1947 turned so many of us into beggars, homeless, suffering tragic deaths, a situation I've never been able to accept. I'm sharing my small Bangladesh experience with all of you who've lost everything during Partition, as though we'd been in the Holocaust.

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