

On Migrating Mammals

Meeting Debo In New York, March 23rd'05

For he thought
he had worked hard
and made himself a man,
made himself a house,
raised a family.

I should curl up
like an uninvited guest
his brother-in-law's friend,
be insecure,
realize - that I was new
to New York,
young, poor, liberal
spineless and Indian.

For he was
a Bengali.
And a Bengali from
Bangladesh (not Calcutta).
he had a filing cabinet,
a bar-code reader
internet. His heart
was an empty football field,
why did he need to
enter discussions
which held him
guilty?

Meeting Debo in New York, March 24th'05

Next time he sees me
he might not recognize me,
might not remember
that it was raining once
and he was walking,
with his umbrella open,
and I was lugging
my luggage.
That I was sleeping
on his couch
he was serving cereal
to his sons.
He had said
our country has nowhere to go,
our country has got it all wrong,
he knows things about
our politicians,
that I'll never imagine.
"People like to imitate success
look at America." I am wearing
clothes made in India,
and they fit me well.
He will not remember
that he'd said to me
that I must
vote for
Bush, Modi etc.
The fact remains,
that he is a Bangladeshi
in New York.
Celebrating facades, parodies
of Holi, Diwali - congregating
with Indians. Supporting
nationalists conservatives
parties-in-opposition-in-India.
Putting in his penny
to serve his vision
of the world
as a pushcart
coindrop exhausted
vending machine.

Meeting Debo in New York, April 5th, '05

You were in the middle of nowhere
so I didn't disturb you.
You were sneaking away to
eat berries,
I didn't get in your way.
Where do you live?
"1st street left,
from the highway."
I didn't question you.
And then one day,
you left,
with another dream
playing in your head.
You went away
to New York, NY
and started talking
with an accent, in a slang.
I didn't call you back.
you started painting pictures
writing stories of
all the eagles, vultures
parrots mynas back home
all the songs, dances
TV programs back home
and I didn't stop you.
You earned good money
you built yourself a house
I didn't come and fight
you for a room
fight you for a room a porch
a parapet for anyone,
back home.
Now you are
a NRI¹,
if you come back home
you'll find people ready
to serve you, marry you,
loot you, sleep with you.
you come only sometimes
you read news at rediff².
You vote for Bush (twice).
You argue, that
to make the world a better place
all that's needed is truth.
You complain that India
is not like your books
anymore.

1 Non Resident Indian

2 rediff.com, a leading Indian portal

you meet MPs,
sponsor politics.
I called on you
a few days back
and you refused to entertain me,
you said - to make the world
a better place,
all that's needed
is truth.
And I believe
in exposing
lies.

Arriving in New York, March 22nd, '05

At the airport
there are electric
birds.
There are cherubic
girls, saying "Hi"
and then there are immigration queues.
I queue as a non-resident.
So many Indians who traveled
with me, on my flight
smugly enqueue as residents,
US citizens. They do not meet my eye.
In each such stranger's
bag - there are distances
and photo albums,
apologies, framed but not posted.
In my bag,
I only have clothes and availabilities.
They never meet my eye,
They are well assimilated,
Chandan is either chandu, channy or chan
or whatever.
I have no problems
with that.
I spill my bacteria
bacillus, tragicus, triangles, puzzles.
I now live by their jurisdiction
fancy, choice.
I claim baggage,
they claim baggage.
They choose
to lug more baggage...
I choose
to point this out,
they ignore me.

Remembering Debo, "You Dream For My Country"

From the moment you
left India and waited tables
did degrees stole jobs
rented cars to now,
sitting smart in an angled
chair very rarely
going back there...
there's a big void.

From selling monks
to building totems,
selling monks
to building totems,
there's a big void.

My guess is,
that void is pregnant
with the dreams
you have for my country,
the country you wear
on your sleeves
in your shoes,
I wear on my passport
my paycheck, salary.

I don't know
when, if at all
you build your bridges.
I have my
apprehensions,
about
your
architecture.

Remembering Debo, Questions

there's a big void
...from selling monks
to building totems.

I can spy stories,
in this void.

Stories which are raw
unedited, unverified,
What is your wife's name ?
What was the name of the hotel,
where you stayed,
when you landed in New York
and had nowhere to go,
nothing to do ?
You were not so busy then.
You used to look at other Indians,
you saw on the streets
as if they were redder
shinier
gas-balloons.

Who's hacking away
at my country's
memories, secrets, dreams
tucked away in pillow-covers
and empty machine-gun cases,
empty lipstick shells?

The Disconnect

There is a cord stuck into you
in the middle of your middle
and this feeds your distresses
mistresses of failure, greed, disarray.

This cord connects you
to the source,
of your annual dose of
booze, loose pennies,
parts of your heritage.
When you step out of India
this cord snaps.
This cord snaps
each time you say
you want to sober up
you refuse to be drunk
anymore. you resist
being stuck with crazy puzzles
paradoxes riddles
any more.

Then you become a part
of the other.
The NRI, the non-NRI
those who remain -
are accused
of being unkempt dissuaded.
When you want to develop,
develop a theory
placing utopia on a ferris wheel
stop listening to screams
and start listening to professors,
start thinking of making people happy...

The cord snaps
and you are on your own.

Searching For Keys

Cars were in procession
going to the river
to fall into it.
When a toddler smells
of tomes
of dictionaries,
you know something is wrong.
The internet is down
no connection.
If you had written to her
what would it have been,
stories of how the spring is catching up ?
stories of how the music is lagging ?
you threw all your paperweights
now see, you're flying
you have captivated our imagination,
talk of unpaid bills, talk of grass at the window sill
love is echo, parking is leaving
cars to solitary performance.

When you can't connect,
when the cord has snapped
you have danced in the same pose forever.
Look at the map of your country
the cord connected you
to the source of your history.
Now you can eat shell fish, you can tap dance
no one ever counted vegetarians
no one ever measured the righteous
shallow ponds sink big ducks
The map is no more recognizable
now it is the public good
and jungle talk, it is searching
for your ring your key in the bathtub.

Burning Old Constitutions

Dylan sang of isolation
of highway 61
he had a crown
made of shoelaces
and time bombs.
I was mentioning
the way a bird glides down
on a freeway and picks up
a banana.
Cars speed like falling matchsticks
there are red stars in the fridge
which should have frozen
the stories are too old
the confusions are too new
there is nothing to sing to
if you are an Indian
weeding snow from your hair
on Monday afternoon.
He lives in Delhi
is a broker of change
his TV has stickers of
Mohammed Ali on a rampage.
He is a Bangladeshi
who is in India for a few months.
On Thursday he counted the days
left before he heads back
to Canada. Stopping in NY
on the way
to meet his sister.
Bangladesh has had its history re-written
they have started afresh so many times
figs are upon the tree
the roads are slippery.

He and his wife
cuddle around the fire
which burns an old constitution.

the cord has snapped long back
now its dancing long legs
smelling wine.
His wife's a good cook
she drops eggplants on democracies.

Trying To Fly Torn Kites

India is approachable
from several levels
of misunderstanding.
For my friend who
burns constitutions
it is an *akhada*³
he attacks evils.
He feels Eskimos
have a right to own refrigerators
whether or not they need'em.
I fight for the rights of unborn ideas,
he is a volunteer for change.
I change clothes every morning,
I change flavours, banks, ATMs...
he wants to change the world
out of season out of chance.

He slides a trolley out
of the supermarket
cannonballs and lilies
on his mind.
He dives into
illusions
and boils spaghetti.
He has a kite
he tries to fly,
each time the wind
starts blowing hard again.

3 A wrestling ground

Free Strawberries In The Classifieds

Stroll in parks
she has a tattoo
on her forehead
which she has painted over.
There are no relations
there are those assumed.
The TV is replaying a 60's
round of boxing and there
are coupons for free strawberry
with the cereal.
All those who are dented
beyond recognition
waiting for long distance phone calls
cutting out classifieds
wearing t-shirts
please realize that Bangladesh
is no pattern, it is no holy land
it is a country - with shared
history temporary governments
constitutions burning in New Delhi
and fuming chest-thumping
citizens in New York.
Once everyday all Bangladeshis
walk in the same direction
with the same speed.

Who Sleeps In Your Chimney ?

I am done meditating on Bangladeshis
am ready to deal with the extravaneous.
Who sleeps in your chimney ?
Who speeds your highways
there are ladders you can climb
they'll lead you to conclusions.

At the very least
there will be music in the boardroom
if you are no longer arid
vultures digging claws into pastries

Things are assembly-line
everything is up to you
you cannot bust supernovas
and drink textures
rest relieved.

You take it up
Tou take it up
taxis are for fake parades.
