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## **Bangladesh as a World divided within in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's *Bangladesh Impressions***

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Lop-sided economic policy and political rivalry may interrupt the growth of a nation. The section of the people who resides close to the powerful lobby may take the advantage and write the growth story in their favour leaving the majority reeling in real poverty. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's long poem "Bangladesh Impressions" attempts at an image making of a country in such doldrums. This article interprets the contrast of pictures described in the poem and shows that the poet holds the political class responsible for this failure of equanimity in the growth story of Bangladesh.

The impression that the poet receives from his maiden visit to Bangladesh as recorded in "Bangladesh Impressions" is that of a country divided within socio-politically and economically. There are two contrasting worlds at the east and the west of the magnificent Meghna River: one bedeviled by corruption, underdevelopment and poverty and the other basking in the glory of a globalised liberal economy. One is represented by the agro-based rural Bangladesh to the east of the Meghna River and the other by the industrial urban centres of Dhaka district to the west of the Meghna River. The poet suspects that the contrast and divide that plague Bangladesh may have a political origin. The violent ideological conflict that separates one group of people from the other may be the reason why more than a half of Bangladesh is poor, backward and is struggling to survive.

The poet enters Bangladesh from the eastern front. His first interface with Bangladesh begets an impression of a landscape suffering and tottering in economic poverty, corruption, and underdevelopment. At the Akhaura Check Post, the enthusiasm with which the poet and his friend Murasingh entered Bangladesh received a serious dent as they saw the road conditions and the traffic after paying "a hundred and thirty takas" to the Land Customs Officer for permission to cross the border. There was complete chaos on the road as nobody obeyed any traffic rule. There were rickshaw-pullers everywhere and people travelled as they liked. The large number of rickshaw-pullers in the streets of Akhaura also indicated the fact that people living in the villages must have lost their livelihood. Leaving their agricultural work in the paddy fields, peasants from villages have turned into wage-earners in the streets of Bangladesh. Natural calamities like flood and cyclone have destroyed the backbone of the rural economy of Bangladesh. Lack of industrialization and an appropriate economic policy adopted by the government, people in this part of Bangladesh had no other choice but to become wage-earners. The life of the wage earners was not safe even here as they were competing among themselves for a single coin raising "their curses and their fists."

The true picture of the poverty in rural Bangladesh is most vividly expressed by the image of a naked man who "bathed himself with the roadside dust,/ howling and thrashing with frantic

rage.” The bizarre state of the agro-based economy of the Bangladesh to the east of the Meghna River is encapsulated in the image of this dirty naked man. The poet juxtaposes four pictures of rural Bangladesh tightly together to provide reciprocal commentary. The agriculture upon which the people in rural Bangladesh is dependent gets destroyed by devastating floods and the destruction of their paddy fields drive people to the street to become somebody like the dirty naked man. The people of rural Bangladesh have turned symbolically into “a dead cow tied to a tree” and poverty and misfortune are pulling their life like dogs. The existence of the dirty naked man and the dead cow pulled by the dogs is one and the same. Under the cruel boot of poverty, the respect and honour of life succumb and crumble. The poor naked man is no more alive than a dead cow and no less helpless than a dead cow pulled by the dogs.

Another significant sign of the underdevelopment in the eastern part of Bangladesh described in the poem is its poor transportation system. After taking a rickshaw from the check post to the railway station in Akhaura, the poet and his friend planned to travel by train to Dhaka. Unfortunately, from such an important place in the eastern border to the capital city of Dhaka, there was only one train. Because of the busy traffic and their inordinate personal delay, they could not reach the railway station on time. The only train that travels from Akhaura to Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, had left before they could reach the station. They were forced to change their plan and travel on a bus.

The description of the road journey is presented with plenty of humour by the poet. The laughter is at the cost of the poor transportation system and road conditions in eastern Bangladesh. The roads got never repaired as the floods came every year and destroyed the roads-“The side streets have been/ half-eaten by the floods.” So, on that road with potholes in the middle and erosion by the sides, the poet and his friend had a rather difficult journey. The poet remembers, “We tilted to the left. We tilted to the right.” At an unfortunate moment, the auto-rickshaw on which they were heading toward the bus station broke down in the middle of the road and they had to push it to get the engine back to work again. Along the road, the poet sarcastically describes the auto journey, “The auto grunted, slipped, slid, lurched/ and dragged us from dusty village/ to dusty village.”

People adopted new ways of livelihood in the wake of economic poverty. There are touts fighting for their share of the profit emanating from pushing people in to buses which has become a business. As the poet and his friend reached the place where the bus station was, there was a flock of people who came rushing for them. Initially, they tried to prevent their auto from stopping near the bus station, but as they heard that they were passengers looking for a bus to Dhaka, they were allowed to get down. These people had their own ways of livelihood and they distributed the place among themselves. They did not allow auto-rickshaws from other localities to intrude into their territory. Along with these touts, the poet and his friend perceived “Women draped in black robes like friars”. The poet’s friend, who had a better knowledge of Bangladesh, stepped in immediately to break the illusion that the dress of those women might have created. He told the poet that they were not “young widows”. The immediacy with which the poet’s friend clarifies the identity of the women dressed in black posed a question mark on the nature of the profession of the women. So, the

economic poverty in the eastern Bangladesh forced people to find different ways of livelihood, no matter how despicable they were under normal circumstances.

The sarcasm with which the poet describes the roads in eastern Bangladesh reaches its peak when he describes his journey to Dhaka on the luxury bus. Instead of the relative comfort and ease associated with journeys on luxury buses, the poet experienced possibly the worst bus ride in his life. It was all because of the bad roads that “The luxury bus bumped along like a horse-cart.” The condition of the national highway was so bad that as the bus bumped along, the poet had to clutch his “entangled entrails”. The poet reminds the reader that “This is the National Highway.” A national highway is the nerve of the economy and transport of nation. It reflects the economic condition of the country in particular. The poet raises serious doubts regarding the road conditions in rural places in Bangladesh considering the bizarre condition of the national highway. The enormous amount of rice produced in Bangladesh along other objects needed to be transported to different markets both within and outside of Bangladesh through these national highways. The condition of the national highways was seriously causing detrimental effect on the economic growth of eastern Bangladesh.

The poet got a different picture of Bangladesh as he crossed the magnificent Meghna River. For the first time during his visit to Bangladesh, the poet saw the signs of a developing Bangladesh. In opposition to the dirt and poverty in the east, he saw affluence and pomp in the west. He saw “Two magnificent bridges and Nuttall.” The poet’s friend, Murasingh explained to the poet that “Bangladesh is developing/ like anything with foreign aids.” As they came near the Dhaka city they could see the glitters of a modern city built on a western model. It was a journey from a dark age to the age of neon light. The poet could not resist himself from exclaiming that, “Arriving in Dhaka is like flowing/ into an ocean of neon. I was a firefly/ seeking dreams like a search light.” The poet was happy to be in Dhaka as the Dhaka city had everything that a westernized modern city stood for- “...tall towers and starred hotels,/ wide streets lined with trees and foreign cars.” But amidst this pomp of modernity, the city had the remnants of its past also in the form of the “rickshaw-wallahs” in large numbers as they could still “fight with Toyota drivers.” The history of the city was still visible in the “trees” as “they have taken the colour/ of brown dust.”

Besides the developing trend in the capital city of Bangladesh, the poet received the impression that the country had an amazing respect for poets and poetry. The place where the “Jatyo kabita Utsav 2003” was held was the Dhaka University. The place became a meeting ground for “musicians, folk singers, and a thousand-strong crowd, humming.” Unlike what happens in the place where the poet himself comes from, the poets’ national meet was organized with absolute festivity and ceremony. The poet was confused for a second as he asked himself, “Have we come to a carnival?” The ceremonial arrangement and the largeness of the crowd in the event surprised the poet and he realized the fact that poetry was not just a holiday exercise in Bangladesh. Murasingh explained the importance of poetry in the cultural life of Bangladesh, “...everyone is a poet./ Bangladesh produces poets like paddy.” There was a procession in the honour of the great Bangladeshi poet, Nazrul, and for a moment the poet became a part of the revolution for the cause of humanity. Such was the enthusiasm and

vigour in the procession that he got to believe Murasingh's explanation that "...unlike India, poets here/ are opinion makers. The words of Shelley/ are alive in Bangla." The words of revolution and the message of freedom spread by the "Bangubandhu, giver of freedom" once in the times of captivity and occupation of Bangladesh are still valid. The poet feels that Bangladesh needs another poet of his stature and influence to take the people of Bangladesh to freedom, equality and fraternity.

The poet and his friend felt immensely benefitted by their visit to the "Jatyo Kabita Utsav" held in Dhaka University. The aroma of poetry was everywhere as it was a "garden of poetry." Poets and critics from different corners of the country thronged the festival. Discussions of various aspects of poetry echoed in the walls of the discussions halls of the university. It was a day off from petty politics and mediocre personal jealousies. People found themselves at the service of art and poetry. The narrates the event as "A park of trees, birds and lovebirds./ Wall magazines, photos of past festivals,/ dead poets, living poets, news, stories,/ comments and reviews." The event would be organized again in the next year and the poet and his friend was hopeful that their attendance in the event would be duly recognized then. Personally, the poet was extremely elated by the enthusiasm and motivation for poetry he perceived in Bangladesh. He found the country a breeding nest for art and poetry as he writes, "Nowhere have I heard poems chirping/ with birds or seen them blooming like/ eternal lovers." Hearing the melody of poetry in Bangladesh, the poet equates the country with a holy place and his journey becomes a pilgrimage to that holy place. He is thankful to Dhaka as he writes, "...Dhaka, having made/ this pilgrimage, I am at peace."

The contrast and divide that the poet experienced in his journey to Bangladesh is because of the petty political rivalry in Bangladesh. As he returns to his native country, the poet gets the impression that the contrast of experience that he received is mirror image of the opposition and binary that exists in the political life in Bangladesh. Two powerful political forces have been taking the country for a ride. The country has turned into "A car with a steering at the front/ facing south, a steering at the back/ facing north." Powerful lobby of the party in power pursue their pet political ideology to garner personal benefits. The rivalry between these two groups has disturbed the steady progress of Bangladesh. The road ahead for the people in Bangladesh is to shun oppositional politics and join hands for co-operation. But the poet is suspicious of the possibility of a consensus as he questions the identity of the leaders engaged in this tug of war- "...I hope/ the women at the wheels are not/ Sheikh hasina and Khaleda Zia." Personal rivalry in the guise of political ideology may prevent that dream from becoming a reality.

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