



Hoggole Singapore Hoibar Chai

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The girl in the Raffles Hotel purred: bottled glitter and sexy danger. It was late. She was drunk. There had to be better ways to end up in a stranger's hotel room.

Everyone wants to go over the fence. The Bangladesh elite so fervently admires Singapore. The clean streets, the high-rises, the S-H-O-P-P-I-N-G. Tiny nation, largest government investment fund. Elections that return an absolute majority to the ruling party. No really, we ask, why can't that be us? The wistful examples: Jessore in Bangladesh had an airport before Singapore had an international airport, and now Singapore has the Airbus A380. Somewhere it went wrong for us.

Why can't we all be Singapore? Why can't I be you?

The answer always comes back to our obstinate love for elections. Our Bangla elders remind us that Singapore dispensed with democracy, and in exchange got efficiency, boomtown and profit. We "cling" to our cycles of election gridlock, parliament walkouts, strikes, riots, military coups, and finally democracy movements that overthrow the military. Then we get back to democracy/dysfunction.

Somebody said we need "a brand of democracy particularly suited to the genius of the Bengali people." Genius? Or does he mean we're children who haven't learnt to handle the vote? Perhaps he means we have too many choices and need a drastic reduction. The chatterati want a Bengali Lee Kuan Yew. But what if we hope for LKY and end up with Idi Amin *dada*? He promised to modernize as well. Digest the marrow and the bone.

Give some people democracy, and look what they do with it. This cannibal nation that ate its own "father." After splitting Pakistan in two and bringing Bangladesh to independence, Sheikh Mujib was machine-gunned four years later by his own men. Unable to imagine that the army would turn their guns on him, Mujib walked down the steps of his house and said "tora ki chas?" (What do you boys want?). He imagined it was 1971 again. That he would bravely march to jail and come back out the national hero. But it was '75, not '71. The bullet, not the ballot. The end of the grand experiment.



Bhodrolok is civilized or courteous man. The term seeps out of precious manners set in motion by the Hindu elite in the early twentieth century. As the Bangla Muslim elite came out of their larval stage, they took on the connotations of the *bhodrolok*. Or, how not to get your hands dirty in the messy business of life. A great retreat from politics by the Muslim *bhodros*. The spectacle of running a country was becoming too much for them. Independence war, failed reconstruction, cataclysmic famine, assassination, Maoist rebels, CIA station chiefs, coups and counter-coups.

Disgusted with politics, fearful for their purity, the *bhodro* retreated into seminars, dinner parties and op-eds, leaving politicking to others. As new groups infected politics, the intelligentsia formed alternate power silos. First the NGO revolution, until organizations like Grameen Bank, BRAC, Proshikha and GonoShastya functioned as parallel governments. Next, the Fourth Estate, as the satellite television age arrived. Linked and overlapping were the giant business houses, hydras reaching everywhere. A paradise that needed stability, not elections.

And now enter that concept— stability— that drains the blood from political life. The dream of Singapore. *Hoggole Singapore hoibar chai*. And now we see the *bhodroloks* return. Reborn into a new form we call *shushil samaj* - civil society. The word *shu* in front of a Bangla word gives it a nice sheen. *Shumoti*, sane thought, *shubochon*, well spoken, *shubuddhi*, good idea. My classmate rasps at me, “We call all of you *kutil* (twisted) *samaj*, not *shushil samaj*.” Yes, he includes me. We benefit from the *shushil* money going into galleries, art journals and biennial trips...

In the sixth year of the new millennium, Bangladesh was in the grip of collective democratic hysteria. At stake were the coming elections. Neither side willing to trust a fair fight. Rigged voter lists and crooked judges. Debates and battles. Train tracks uprooted. Burning tires. Rubber bullets, tear gas, Molotov cocktails, barbed wire. Trouble in mind, death in the air. In front of the stadium, the “Islamists” battle the “Progressives.” One of the Islamists is beaten to death on live TV. Brain and blood on asphalt, horrified clucking in the blogosphere. Kids, did you think 1975 was any gentler? Video only killed the mystery.

On January 10th 2007, the United Nations announces that if the Bangladesh Army supervises elections in this chaos, they could endanger their UN peacekeeping role (Bangladesh is the largest supplier of troops to UN missions). This is serious business. On January 11th, the army steps in and installs a “Caretaker Government.” 1/11. Our life rich with numerology. A World Bank alumni is appointed to head the caretakers.

A “war against corruption” is announced. Target: the political class. The raids begin, and there is no end to the looted riches being uncovered. Peacocks and pet crocodiles. BMWs, Hummers, Mercedes. One after another, all the big politicians are arrested on corruption charges. A minister is sentenced to five years for possession of foreign alcohol. A chill descends on the Dhaka party scene. Everyone starts flushing their stash down toilets, or better yet down their own



gullets. Beer, vodka, gin. For the younger set, yabba is *the* party drug. A lethal amphetamine from Thailand, now locally manufactured. Mad Dog and Pink Pleasure. Honeyed brand names that drip off tongues. The big yabba dealer in town is busted. Surprise, he turns out to be a relative of one of the politicians. Another round of politicians to jail. I don't think anyone sheds a tear for these political godfathers. But we're jittery, because we wonder what will come when there are no more politicians. And why are the Islamists left alone? Something wicked this way comes.

Perhaps some are waiting for the "international community" to step in and "restore" democracy. That fabled Gandalf the good. But no one wants to disturb plans to install a Muslim-led UN peacekeeping force in post-America Iraq. With Pakistan out of the running, Bangladesh is the next candidate for the mission. So many players in this double-decker chess game. Only tunnel and tunnel, no visible light.

But there are still protestors on the university campus. They haven't given in just yet. Their message is painted on the dormitory walls. If you're going to end politics, don't tell me it's for my own good. Kill me before you kill my time.

The caretakers assure us there will be elections in December 2008. The army is supervising voter list registration, with computer equipment that will create biometric national ID cards. At the registration center, my mother's fingerprints don't register on the scanner. "You're old," says the smooth faced man, "your fingerprints have rubbed away." I'm in the next room- there are murmurs as people cut the line in front of us, breaking the orderliness. An old man dryly remarks, "There are no aliens from another planet, everyone comes from the same mother. Even if you beat it with a stick, the snake remains crooked."

Last man in front of the Tiananmen tanks-- I wish I could be that brave, but I'm not. But I keep thinking that planned history will not work. Bengalis still want a choice, rather than a lobotomy that births a nation of shoppers. We are not quite ready for our Singapore moment.

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