

An afterthought to “A Gift of heart”

Trinkets in my Shoebox

Mostafa Abdullah

Just as that of [“A Gift of heart”](#), I have written this one too for our grand children who are growing up abroad across the world. Through this I wish them to have a feel of their ancestral land, ancestors and their times. I want them to visualize how, why and what meant most to their forbearers. This write up is of very personal nature and may not mean much to others not connected directly to me or my family. Nevertheless if any of our next generation can get a snap shot of our times and life from this, I shall consider this as my “job well done”.

Most of us as kids did not know about the use of discarded shoe boxes as the treasure chest of memorabilia such as old photos, letters, object of interest of the time and as such. This practice, as we became aware later on, is common among the westerners from their early age. Whereas the westerners grow up more or less with an individual identity, even within a family, we grew up as an integral member of the family with mostly a common identity and often of similar interest. The urge or a need for individual “shoe box” did not occur as collective memories remained and passed on from one generation to the next in the extended families, which seemed like, would last forever!

Unfortunately that is not to be. Not only families have disintegrated and/or undersized to keep up with the demand of time, individuals have chosen to live at distant lands making their decedents inaccessible to the treasured memories and the ways of the lives of their forbearers. I do not know if they would ever feel deprived enough of being shielded from the time and life of ours’, but I indeed would feel deprived of the privilege of not being known to them; of our ways of life, what and who meant more for us and why. So I opened the lid of my mind’s shoe box and peeped into it to be amazed at what more treasure it holds.

It is this treasure that I wish to share with our grandchildren and with others of my extended family at home and abroad. My attempt to do so through “A Gift of Heart” helped open my eyes to the fact that my “shoe box” contains so much more to share, so much to treasure, so much may remain untold. Our grandsons; Isa, Uzyar and others who may read this, be assured that it is by no way meant to be a biography, though at times it may seem so. It is about the events and people that touched my life in many ways and helped shape my thoughts, my life and living. Their life and

living has taught me to distinguish between the pure gem and what is not. This is about few of the down-to-earth persons with modest attitude towards life and living and with hearts that money could ever afford to buy. I am sure I will miss many more that I will fail to recollect here. This I attribute to my own limitations, limitation to look further more to recognise them and their deeds. I seek their understanding and forgiveness.

Though I was the only child of my parents but that never deterred me from being a member of the extended family that comprised of my aunt, uncles and hordes of cousins. I was more attached to my maternal cousins compared to that of my father's side. This could be due to the fact that the cousin closest to my age from my father's side was ten years younger than me. This resulted in me being looked upon more as a "boro bhai" (big brother) figure than a friendly cousin. Besides most of my paternal cousins lived at our village home whereas I lived almost all of my life in Dhaka where most of my maternal cousins lived. Two of my good friends of my adolescent years had been my two cousins; Taifur and Khurram Bhai. Khurram Bhai sadly passed away only few years back. Taifur retired as a Deputy Chief of the Planning Commission of Bangladesh. Khoka, a retired senior Executive of the Bata Shoes, Bangladesh had been the other good friend who is an uncle/nephew by relation but of the same age as that of mine.

I remember being a very affectionate nephew to my eldest paternal uncle. He is the one who used to take me around telling how he and my father were the best pals when they were young. I am glad that he taught me something that will stay with me until my last day. On one of our home visits he took me to the local pond to teach me how to swim. As I clung to him, he took me into the deeper part of the water and let me go off him. As I started drowning, I flung my hands and feet with the fury of my life, gulped lots of water and made my way to the shore. Next day into the pond again, I discovered that I could swim on my own!

This reminds me of the incident that happened on the first day I took our elder daughter Tazin for swimming. This was at the Dhaka Club swimming pool and I think she was about 5 years old. She got down into the pool with other kids of her age with an inflated car tube around her chest under the arm to serve as a lifebuoy. As she started floating, suddenly part of the inflated tube moved up from behind her shoulders and pushed the head face down into the water. As she started suffocating under water, I jumped into the pool fully dressed and fished her out. After this incidence it took a while before she would get down to any swimming pool again.

Later Tazin & the younger one, Samin learnt to swim with me at the Australian High Commission Recreation Centre at Dhaka.

Going back to talking about my eldest uncle again, he told me how fortune turned table on the family with the partition of India when they lost all of their business on the other side of the border in India. He shared with me a family secret about the hunting trips of my grandfather who is said to have accidentally shot a man in the swamp mistaking him for a game. Since that incident my grandpa never took to hunting again in his life and never spoke about it either. My uncle must have been very much attached to his mother and his eyes beamed like a kid when he spoke how pretty his mother was and about her mouth-watering cooking. It seemed so amusing to me at that time, hearing such an older man talking in such a manner about his mother. But aren't our mothers the prettiest woman on earth? Aren't we all, our mother's baby at any age? Incidentally, I discovered from an old land deed that my grandmother's name was Meher Jan, a classy name indeed even by today's standard! My grandfather may have been quite a catch as a bachelor boy. Because I found out from that land deed that my grandmother brought in a fair bit of property with her at the time of her marriage with my grandfather!

Sadly my good days with my uncle did not last long as he died in his fifties as my father had and also his two other brothers. I had one remaining uncle who is only three year older than me. We could never become friends because of the uncle-nephew relationship, nor could I see him as an elder because of the proximity of our age. We did connect, somewhat at a formal level. He passed away recently leaving me to be the eldest of the clan.

My eldest maternal uncle, Boro Mama was a big man with just as big a smile and a heart to match. He seemed temperamental but I doubt if he ever been hard on any one unless there was any good in it for us. I was one of his favorite nephews only to be beaten by Dada, by mile's length. Dada (our eldest surviving cousin and my wife's eldest brother) is indeed the most favorite of his Mamas and Khalas (maternal auntie) and none of us has any qualms about it. To us cousins, our Dada is beyond and above everyone else. We had another older cousin, Jahangir Bhai. Jahangir Bhai was one of the first few Bangalees that graduated from the Harvard Business School in the sixties.

Boro Mama spoke few languages that he learnt himself as a young man from playing gramophone records at his village home. Boro Mami, Boro Mama's wife also could speak few languages herself, even though she never attended any formal school!

Boro Mama graduated from the Presidency College of the Calcutta University in the forties, served the British Indian army as the first Bengali Muslim commissioned officer in the Artillery regiment during the Second World War. Later he served as an Instructor at the Pakistan Civil Service Academy, Lahore and retired as a civil servant of the Government of Pakistan. Incidentally, he was barred from sitting in any competitive examination for civil service in the British India as he is said to have made a very strong aggressive protest at a personal derogative comment by the English Chairman of the Interview Board.

Last date for the submission of the fees for my SSC examination (1963) closed in and my father wasn't sure if he could manage the money in time. My mother sent me with a letter to Boro Mama with a request to lend the money which she promised to return in the shortest possible time. Boro Mama got the money in an envelope and told me "Rest assured that if you ever need money for education I will manage it somehow even if I need to skin myself" (লেখা পড়ার জন্য যদি কখনো টাকা পয়সার প্রয়োজন হয় - তা আমার গায়ের চামড়া বিক্রি করে জোগাড় করে দিতে হলেও তা আমি করবো, এটা সব সময় মনে রাখবে)!

At the news of my SSC (year 10 exam) result Boro Mama beamed in pride and happiness. A few months later when my mother attempted to return the borrowed money, Boro Mama declined to accept it saying that I have already paid him back lot more than what was borrowed; through my SSC result! He celebrated in jubilation at the news of the award of my scholarship for study in the US. He saw me off at the airport, and years later on my return, brought me to his house to live with them.

Years later I became privy to a similar sentiment as experienced by Boro Mama about paying him back my debt. By the time our younger daughter Samin came to Australia in 2003 to go to the University, entrance and fee regulations seemed to have changed a little bit for students who completed their schools overseas. I was to foot a hefty fee for the pre-university qualifying two years. However, if she could do very well in the first year, she would be eligible to move into the second year directly into the University. This meant that I would be relieved of paying the fees upfront for at least one year. Seeing her work very hard until late at nights, at home and in the library, Tazin suggested that she should take it a little easy and not wear herself out. She is said to have replied "When Abbu is spending so much of his hard earned money, how can I afford to take it any easier"! She indeed did very well at the end of the first year and moved directly into the second year in the University.

My second maternal uncle, Mejo Mama, also served the British Indian Army and later in the Pakistan Army (1947) and finally retired as a Colonel from the East Bengal Regiment of the Bangladesh army. He was taken into custody by the Pakistan army from the Chittagong Cantonment on the 23rd March 1969, on the day of the military crackdown by the occupation forces of West Pakistan. My Mami (auntie) fled to the town with few other families and went into hidings. Mejo Mama was interned during the entire period of the liberation movement and was severely tortured by his captors. He himself never spoke much about this period but I heard it from an army friend of mine, Captain (retd) Shujauddin Ahmed, who was also a co-prisoner with him. Shujauddin later retired as a Secretary of the Government of the Bangladesh. Mejo Mama being a senior officer received more of the wrath of Pakistani occupiers.

On the 15th December of 1971 the Mukti Bahini (Bangladesh Freedom Fighters) & Indian Army ran over Pakistan's occupying forces. Mejo Mama was escorted out of the confinement to be ferried to Pakistan through Chittagong port on a Pakistani Naval vessel. He was put in a jeep in the front seat with the Driver and a young Pakistani lieutenant with a gun in his holster. There were two other heavily armed soldiers in the back seat. As the jeep rolled through the Chittagong city area, Indian jets started strafing on the fleeing Pakistani soldiers. Mejo Mama noticed the tense and nervous young officer next to him and took the opportunity to take out the gun from his holster, unnoticed. Mejo Mama is said to have made up his mind to fight it out to the last, if it came to that. Just when a burst of gun fire hit very close by and everyone jumped out of the jeep to take cover, Mama quickly moved away from his captors and disappeared into a side ally. At that point soldiers were more intent on taking cover from Indian jets than minding their captive. Mama walked into a nearby house, got a change of cloth from them and asked them to burn his uniform so that if the soldiers came looking for him they wouldn't know he was here. He then borrowed a shopping bag and walked out into a nearby market.

Mejo Mama was known for his integrity and honesty in all spheres of his life. A military officer in uniform of the Pakistan Army in the fifties used to be considered beyond and above the common statues applicable to most. During one of those days Mejo Mama was travelling from his home town to the capital Dhaka. As usual for those days, he was by himself in a first class compartment of the train. As the train made its scheduled stop at Jamalpur, he noticed one of his younger brother (our) Choto Mama and one of his nephew (our) Dada in the station. He sent for them and found out that they were to travel to Mymensingh in the same train. He asked them to get on board with him in the same compartment, which they

obediently and gladly did. As the train resumed its journey, a Ticket Inspector came on board and asked Choto Mama and Dada to show their tickets. Realising that the two were accompanying the Army officer in the compartment, the Ticket Inspector hurriedly attempted to leave the compartment. Mejo Mama asked him if he shouldn't be charging them the extra fare for travelling in the first class compartment. The Inspector replied modestly that it would not be necessary as they were travelling with him. Mejo Mama insisted that unless the Inspector charges them the extra fare, he may file a complaint to his superiors for nonperformance of duties! (Dada told us of this incident which is one of many such instances of his honesty and integrity).

Dada narrated to me a very interesting episode of Mejo Mama's life that also involved Dada himself. One may call it destiny or a sign of special bondage.

After the partition of India Mejo Mama resigned his commission with the British Indian Army and returned home (1947) to his village in Shorulia, Jamalpur. Times turned hard as he looked around for a suitable employment for some time. That's when an offer for a job of a District Adjutant of Ansars (para militia) came. Not to his satisfaction, but in the absence of any other, he decided to take it. He left home to take the train to Mymensingh, his would be place of work. As he was waiting in the train station someone came running to him informing that Dada was severely injured with a broken hand and shoulder from a football game. Mama being the lone adult member of the household at that time, decided to return home to take care of the events. This off course meant losing the opportunity to take up the employment that came by after much effort. Lo and behold, next morning a telegram came from the Pakistan Army Head Quarters offering him a commission in the Army! Had he left for Mymensingh the day before, he would have missed the telegram, and in that day and age, it could have been extremely unlikely that he could be informed of it in due time!

Dada has recounted to us of many more instances of the special bondage between him and the Mamas (uncles). Among those one that he recollects very fondly is about a near thrashing that he was about to get from Boro Mama. Dada all along his life wished to be a journalist. To this end he moved to Dhaka from Mymensing. In those days for a young man from out of town vying to be a journalist was a very hard sell and it rarely paid any decent wages. However, that did not deter him to struggle to achieve his goal, in spite of the fact that he had to sleep on floors in shared accommodations and often remained half fed. Boro Mama was very upset with him because Dada declined to take up a decent paying job that Boro Mama had arranged for him. Dada also continuously resisted being helped financially. Boro

Mama usually was not known to take "NO" for an answer. As the story goes, Boro Mama was up in rage and demanded to know why Dada refused the offer of the job. Dada collected all the courage and strength he could master and expecting a big thrashing on his face, closed his eyes and answered that only thing he wish to be is a journalist, and that too on his own efforts, and at any cost. Dada kept his eyes closed expecting the inevitable. To his disbelief he found himself in the warm embrace of Boro Mama. Boro Mama told him that he had never been so proud of any one and prophesied that Dada indeed will achieve his goals. Dada indeed made everyone very proud of him as he finally retired as one of the Senior News Editors of the Voice of America, Washington DC.

Bacha mama was the youngest of the mamas, Bacha meaning baby. He was a commando officer in the Pakistan Army and later served the Bangladesh Army for a while after its independence. I shall always acknowledge his kindness towards us in our bad times. He put us up in his house in Gulshan for quite some time after our house was destroyed in the cyclone. Being the youngest he was the pet brother of my mother. A very affectionate and an adventures man in his personal life.

I still have one surviving maternal uncle who now lives in England. He served in the Pakistan Defense Science & Technology Organisation and later taught at a university in Uganda. One other uncle worked and lived in Bogra.

My mother had five living brothers. But since I was a kid, I grew up knowing and seeing six maternal uncles! The sixth one, Alimuddin Mama, wasn't Amma's own brother but wasn't any less than that. Alimuddin Mama was born in Bihar in India. He fled from Bihar at about the age of 20 during the Hindu-Muslim riot that broke up in the Indian subcontinent immediately after the partition of India in 1947. He turned up at Narangonj, a town about 40 kilometers from Dhaka, where he knew none and he only spoke Urdu, his native language. Someone led him to Boro Mama's office who also could speak Urdu. Boro mama offered to put him up in his house until he could find some work. That's how he became one of us. Later he started working for the Forestry department and retired from there. Mami, also from Bihar, was a very a simple women of affection. They have three sons and two daughters, all of whom are well educated and well placed in life. Mama has been an uncanny honest man to his bones. A forestry officer throughout his life, paid for every piece of timber that he used, to build his house and furniture!

Alimuddin Mama revered my father very much. He believed that it was my father's instigation that he could get a block of land at Banani where he later built his house.

For some procedural mistakes my father did not get any plot though they both applied for it together. Mama lamented that very much and became extremely happy when I started building my house at the Old DOHS. During the construction of the house he would often come down and sit at the construction site for hours together. If I told him not to tire himself out sitting there so long, he often replied that if my father was alive, he (my father) would have sat there all day looking after the work. He is just trying to do his best to fill in for my father.

Alimuddin Mama made the then East Pakistan and later Bangladesh his home and never betrayed it. The family adapted Bangla as the spoken language at home. He never sided with the Pakistan Army during the liberation war, which most Urdu speaking population did to be in the position of advantage and benefit. Some Bengalis even left their valuables with them when fleeing their homes. Those were returned to them just as they left it, after their return nine months later. After the liberation war one day his children came back from school with some pieces of cloths that were given to them as relief material received from overseas for the war torn country. Mama had those returned next day as he thought that there were lot more deserving people who needed those even more. Even in his not so well financial situation he backed up some members of his adapted family in need, at the cost of his own family's hardship.

Chondra's Nana (maternal grandfather) was one of my mother's uncles. They had no children of their own and adapted one of my mother's sisters as their own. This kept my mother and her other siblings relatively closer to them. This Nana lived a very modest life within his meager means. On a certain occasion one of his associates borrowed some money from him. Being unable to return it on time he gave Back Nana the equivalent worth of Prize Bonds, which could be cashed from the Bank or Post office anytime. After a while as Nana was about to cash it, he was told by someone that the lucky draw for those bonds took place couple of days back. It would be wise, before cashing, to check to find out if any of those bonds won any prize. As luck would have it, one of the Bonds did win the 1st prize; a sum of ten thousand rupees. Ten thousand rupees during the fifties was hell of a lot of money, more so for any one like Nana, who lived very meagerly.

Nana quietly thought over it for few days without letting anyone know of the winning. After a while he went back to the person who gave him the bonds in the first place and requested him to take those back and return the cash instead. This gentleman also suggested that Nana should check of any winnings before returning. But Nana insisted on returning those and prevailed. On taking back the bonds, the gentleman

found out of the winning. He insisted that Nana share the winning with him. But Nana refused to be in any part of it.

Nana's rational for such an act was based on his religious conviction. He believed that game of chance is not permitted in Islam. He thought that it was a trial for him by the Almighty to see if he could resist the temptation. He believed he had lived all his life very modestly and honestly to the best of his ability. He thought he may have passed all the tests that Almighty may have put him in for so far. May be this was one of the final trails as he was nearing the end of his allotted time! He definitely did not intend to fail it!

I have been very fortunate to have seen people around me who considered themselves to be blessed because they were able to get an opportunity to take care and look after their parents. Chomon may have surpassed most in this regard. Chomon is Liza's (my wife) eldest sister's second son. He made a modest living from a printing business. He often went thru hard times because of his honesty and ethical standards in business dealings. Many a times I offered to help him financially to get over the bad times. On each occasion he modestly declined saying that he would indeed ask for any help when really needed. He never asked. I know that even in his hardest time he always bears a smile and never approach any one for any financial gratis. It is rare to find persons with such self respect in this age and in his situation.

On a certain occasion Chomon's mother fell seriously ill. The medical bills kept on mounting. Without anyone knowing anything about it, Chomon sold off his printing business to take care of his mother! Come to think of it, he had a wife and two school going sons to support! When I think about it, how much courage and devotion for parents is required to go this length. I often take gratification in thinking that I could take care of my mother. But I doubt if I could have done what Chomon did for his mother.

Chomon's younger sister Kakoli lives with her husband Pavel and three sons in New York. While she was very young, Kakoli used to say that she wanted a husband like her Khalu; that's me. I am sure that you will get a much better husband than your Khalu, Liza would say to her. And indeed, Allah has granted her a great loving and caring husband. Pavel is one of those blokes; a great son, son-in-law, husband and a father. And also he is way more smatter and handsome than their Khalu 😊. Pavel is the youngest of his brothers and sisters and lost his father at an early age. He worked through his education to be become a Pharmacist in New York. Kakoli &

Pavel took care of their mother and mother-in-law until their last. Often when I feel content about taking care of my mother, I think of these two who took care of two mothers at the same time! It was hard to believe that those two and their three grown up kids rarely took any holiday for themselves, lest the mothers are left uncared. It is hard to describe Kakoli's patience and resilience against insurmountable odds as a young wed. She battled and survived through it as a victor with the support and understanding of Pavel. Pavel himself suffered and battled through Kakoli's bout of cancer as a pivotal support and courage for all the family. They have raised three great sons; Iram, Irfan and Ishmam. I promised Pavel that I hope to visit them again when one of their sons decides to get married. I am waiting.

I have had the fortune of coming in contact with few, to whom self respect and dignity weighs above anything else in life. One such person is Shaju Bhai, my wife's elder sister's husband. To his students across the world, who flock to pay respect to him whenever they are in Bangladesh, is known as "ZIK Sir". ZIK for Zahurul Islam Khan.

Shaju Bhai taught most of his life at the Government Laboratory High School, Dhanmondi. It is rare to find in any area of importance that someone did not know him either as his student or their parents. He lives a modest and a respectable life. He is respected because never in his life he ever attempted to seek any personal favor from anyone in spite of the connections he held. Individuals have tried to use his connections to seek favors from the highest order of the establishment in exchange of significant material benefit; benefit that could easily change the life and living for his family. He never dreamt of sacrificing the respect he had earned over the years in exchange of any material benefits. He says, that is too high a price to pay to lose all that he has earned over the years; the respect of his students and others. Bunch of his students are up in arms to take him and his wife on an overseas tour to pay their respect. He has been able to resist them so far.

Often a thing or two rest with you throughout your life irrespective of its material value. It is the intrinsic value of certain things that overshadows everything else. Khaleda Apa, my cousin, presented me with a shirt when I left for USA for studies. Later in the life, I have had many more shirts, may be lot more expensive too, but I still vividly remember the texture, color and the style of that shirt. I wore that shirt very fondly to most events and occasions while in the states. I often wondered, why do I remember that shirt so vividly and not the others. It had to be the love and affection that it came with it. I have been very fortunate to have so many loving and

affectionate cousins. All of them have been extremely kind and good to me. Among them Khaleda Apa somehow stands out and I often wondered why. After my mother passed away, I may have found the reason. Every time Khaleda Apa hugs me, I smell my mother! Come to think of it, my mother used to say that in her looks and affection Khaleda Apa is very similar to her own mother, which is my grandmother! I do long for her hugs.

On my return from USA I bought a shirt for Boro Mama and one for Shariar Bhai, Khaleda Apa's husband. I still remember the grin on their face. I am still convinced to this date that it wasn't for how much worth those were, for those weren't of much worth at all, but for the love and affection that those carried with it.

Come to talk about love and affection; this episode will always stand out throughout my life. Nobo Mama is a distant cousin of my mother. He led a very hard life due to not so well financial condition of his family. My father helped him finding a work and he found a boarding place to live close by. A few days later he walked into our house one evening with a large ripe mango. It was a "fazli" mango, the kind that grows to be fairly large when they are fully matured and ripe. For him, in his financial condition, it did cost a lot. He brought this mango to our house to share with us. I have eaten many more mangoes in my life and bought even lot more. But that mango and the happy expression on the face of Nobo Mama to be able to share it with us, shall remain with me till my last day.

That a small gesture can go a long way is what I found out from my office Driver Ali on a Ramadan day. It was past the time of breaking the fast as we hurriedly returned home from work. I asked Ali to follow me inside to have his Iftari and told Tazin to arrange it as I walked upstairs for a change of cloth. Tazin got up from the dining table interrupting her own Iftari and set up a plate for Ali. In the next few days Ali had told almost everyone in the office about his boss's daughter interrupting her own Iftari to arrange one for him!

Then there was this elderly lady who lived next door to us when we moved to Sydney for the first time back in 1977. She was a childless widow who lived by herself. As we befriended her, over the time we developed a fondness for each other and she took it on herself to look after my wife as she fell pregnant. When the time for the birth of the baby neared, she insisted that she must be informed at the time of our departing for the hospital, even if it is in the dead of night. As it happened it was at the dead of night and we decided not to wake her up. Instead we requested our other neighbor to inform her when she gets up in the morning. On hearing this in

the morning she hurriedly left for the church and told our neighbor that she will be in prayers and would return home after she is informed of the birth of the baby. And that's what she did after I went to the church to fetch her.

Meanwhile she had number of dresses made for our new born, all of which she stitched herself! She kept a framed photograph of herself with our daughter in her lap, in her living room. She said she looks at the photograph when her "granddaughter" is not in front of her. After about four months we decided to return home to Bangladesh and that indeed made her very sad. After about five years we returned to Sydney for a short visit and visited her in the same flat. Our daughter's framed photograph was still there on top her television set!

She insisted that we visit her once more before leaving Sydney. When we visited her again she gave us a bag full of dress materials that she bought in the meanwhile. We could see she was barely managing with her meager pension and she was not in good health. In spite of all that she bought all those dress materials by herself! Now that she had become very frail and her eye sights became very poor she was unable to stitch any more. She requested us to make dresses with those materials for our daughters when we return home. We used each and every piece of material to make dresses that carried the love, affection and blessings of a grandmother from a far, faraway land.

By the way she was almost ninety years old when we met her the second time. This was also the last time that we saw her. May her soul rest in peace.

When I write this I want you to know that life does not contain only of happy episodes. There would be many unhappy incidences and memories. Just as we cherish happiness one must also learn to accept and deal with the sadness as it comes. But at the end it is the happy memories that makes life more desirable and makes it worth revisiting. So when you save your memories, just as you save your only good files in the computer - save only the happy memories and censor the rest.