

# It takes a village Abed Chaudhury

A few years ago in international arena it became very fashionable to talk about villages. Starting with the media-savvy term “global village”, one could hear reference to village everywhere including the title of this essay, which was also used by Hillary Clinton in her book.



“It takes a village.....” leads to questions. What takes? What is the “It” the term refers to? And it takes a village to do what? And what indeed is a village and where are they situated in this modern urbanised world?

In Bangla village has been variously referred to as “Gram”, “Geram”, if you are truly a villager, and “Palli” if one is poetic. In Bangladesh a village is characterised by its visual appearance, consisting of endless rice fields punctuated by green foliage, trees and more rice fields. Households are largely invisible ensconced into bamboo orchards or mango groves. From afar it looks pristine and calm and framed against the blue sky it looks like a heavenly abode of eternal peace. We have all seen pictures of such bucolic hinterland, often referred to as “Gram- Bangla”. Often the same visual motifs are referred to as Sonar Bangla, indicating vistas of ripe golden rice, or metaphorically but not visually, a field of jute, when jute used to earn us gold.

Such a poetic image of a village is the cultural heartland of Bangla culture. It is indeed part of our dream-land, a fountainhead of all our poems and songs. Add to it the expanse of our mighty rivers such as Padma or Meghna and you have total completion of the dreamland. So a village is a metaphor that we carry in our head based on what we saw or what our parents saw in the Padma-Meghnaic delta. Our eternal homeland, no matter where we now live, is that delta.

I left that delta seeking other pastures when I was 23 and landed myself in the pacific north-west of USA amongst glacial lakes surrounded by volcanic mountains. Indeed a few days after I arrived there one of them Mount St. Helens erupted depositing black flakes and debris all over. In those days, devoid of internet, mobile phones or proper international telephone connection, back in 1970’s, the Padmaic delta of Bangladesh rose inside me almost as soon as I had lost sight of it. There, among the hills surrounding Columbia and Willamette rivers I was immediately reconstructing in my mind a village of warm yellowish green and sylvan shadows. What I was

surrounded with was rural and beautiful, but it was not a village. It was referred to as “country-side” or “wilderness” but never a village. Village was too ancient a metaphor to be used in such relatively more recently inhabited lands.

After that initial journey I have lived in many lands, but have always carried this village inside me. Indeed wise people in the past have said “you can take a man out of a village, but you cannot take the village out of him”. The more I lived in urban centers such as Seattle or Boston, the more I visited glitzy cities such as New York or Paris, the more this village took root in me, erupting inside me with long-lost visual images and forcing me to take frequent shelter in poetry.

Ignoring the urban surroundings of here and now, forgetting the civilised odours of perfumes and flowers, an eternal rural melancholia called “Gramyota” grabbed me forcing me to remember the odour of new rain on grass, the frolicking of frogs on the mud of may and the gravity-defying walks of a particular insect on my village fish-pond. I kept remembering them incessantly and tried to capture them in sad and heart-rending poetry just in case they disappeared. Village, like a large snake was slowly swallowing me up.

By 2002 I had spent a time overseas equal to the one I left behind in the village-bound Bangladesh. In a cold rainy night in Canberra I decided to pay a longer visit to that village. Forgotten places and spaces were now calling loudly. All my written poems and even the unwritten ones were lining up reading themselves to me, almost sounding as desperate as : “Darao Pothikbor Jonmo Jodi tobo Bongey...”

The village epitaph of the Paris-living poet Madhushudan.

The ancient eternal cycle of life was spinning its wheel. I felt the power of the term “It takes a village”. For hundreds of thousands of years after we became human our ancestors were pastoral nomads, peregrining the earth under cycles of moons and stars and believing in the seasonal journeys and the fruits of return.

Why should we be any different? Inside us is a clock measuring things for us without us being aware of it, charting the course of our thoughts, suggesting to us ideas like a primordial teacher. Suddenly I became aware that it takes a village to find our path, to chart a course in the long and inevitable journey through life, and to find a wisdom that is not our own but is deeply rooted in the links that we have with the soil of the earth. That soil belongs to a village.

It suddenly dawned on me that it takes a village to go on living.

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