

The Curzon Hall – A Dream Castle for the Budding Romeos

This is a trip down the memory lane - the untold story of the alternative use of the famous Curzon Hall by the budding Romeos of the mid-sixties. These latter-day Romeos were the frustrated students who roamed around the buildings looking for excitement and refuge from the tyranny of the likes of (late) Prof. Matin Chowdhury, (late) Professor Rafiqullah etc. inflicted through their hour-long lesson sessions on dry classical electromagnetic theory of light, or the bewildering theory of quantum electrodynamics. The excitement came in the form of a game, called in the west, 'skirt chasing', perhaps more appropriate to call it 'a Sari chasing' in our case. This gave rise to the remote possibilities of romantic adventures for the budding Romeos.

The seventies, following the swinging sixties, was the decade of love, peace and flower power throughout the world. The epic stories of Romeo and Juliet, Laila and Majnu, Shireen and Farhat etc had already moulded the collective psyche of that generation of youths. The stories of eternal love adventures from Mymensing Gitika were still freshly imprinted in the hearts and souls of the youths and often rang a un-expressible melancholy tune – as is said, 'Our sweetest songs are those which tell the stories of saddest thoughts'. The grim prospect of missing out from being the hero of such a story, despite the very poor prospect of being remembered by any member of the posterity like those of Romeos, was painful. So we all had to try.

The weird story of the marriage and love and adventures of a 12-year-old girl called Rupban with a 12-day-old boy in the folklore of Bengal, more specifically, of Mymensingh, is unique in the world. The story was made into a film for cinema. One part of the story was filmed in and around the Curzon Hall. I watched the filming of the episode where, Curzon Hall was depicted as the castle wherein lived princess Tajul, Rupban's competitor for the love of her husband, then a grownup boy. It was not difficult for us to fantasize of being the love-stricken romantic, vying for the love of the princess, who would be one of our fellow female students, looking down on us from the top-floor corridors of the Curzon Hall.

In the early sixties it was fashionable for the girls to study arts and literature. Science, in particularly physics, was dominated by male students. The female students, at that time comprised roughly 10 %. Of those, almost 30 % were either married or engaged. Therefore, there were not many left for us to fantasize about or fall in love with. But that did not deter us doing exactly that. In one class, almost the entire male student population were in love with one girl student. The shadowy corridors, verandas, balconies, each and every nook and cranny of Curzon Hall were our hunting ground to have a 'close encounter with the second kind'. An exchange of glance, or if one was extremely lucky, an exchange of smile was considered to be a big achievement and a matter of detailed discussion, dissection and interpretation amongst friends and rivals during marathon 'adda' sessions in the student canteens or at the all-night tea stalls.

There were hardly any Casanovas at our time, but plenty of Romeos. The fever of achieving Romeo-hood was not only confined to the fellow students. The youngish lecturers had the advantage and excuse to be with the Juliets, particularly the willing and attractive ones. They also had the offices or rather laboratories where they could

invite them to have company over a cup of tea. What, I still wonder, did they talk about for hours on end?

The Curzon hall was then unofficially divided into three sectors. The department head's office and the surrounding area was practically a no-go area for the average student. The main teaching laboratories were both on the ground and the first floors. Then, the West Wing was divided into experimental arenas, confined to the ground floor and administered exclusively by (late) Prof. Shamsul Islam. The theoretical arena was collectively inhabited by the elite theoretical Physicists like, (late) Prof. Rafiqullah, Prof. Abdul Latif (nickname – prince) etc. There had always been a rivalry between the two camps, albeit very superficial one and it did not affect us, the Romeos of the M Sc thesis group students. The time of our amorous activities started when the theoretical classes ended and the majority of the students were confined to laboratory work or were sunk in deep siesta (afternoon nap).

One or two of us, fortunate enough to inherit an aristocratic title like, Syyed or to have obtained a very high position (within the first ten) in the league table of the past national exams, or were gifted with a head-full of hair groomed like a film star were, in general, immune to the love-fever that engulfed the rest of us. We did not have the above attributes to attract the attention of our Juliets', so we had to take alternative measures. Heroism has many facets. In the Arthurian time it was acquired through the chivalrous adventures of the knights - by demonstrating their skill of fighting with their swords and lances, and surviving to tell the tales and win the admiration and hearts of the beauties. In our time we needed the skill and charm of James Bond to impress our Juliets' (it would have been too risky anyway). We did have our own ways to be chivalrous and funny to try to achieve our goals. The latter was often at the cost of cruelty to a competitor. One of the stories goes like this:

A handwriting-copying expert was located among the Romeos by an exclusive sub-group. A letter was smuggled to one of the secret Romeo through the exchange of a textbook, which was in the possession of our one and only Juliet. The recipient, could not believe his eyes, doubted it a little, but had no reason to question the reality of the situation or the authenticity of the hand written epistle. At last a dream come true, that's what he thought. The clandestine venue for the Romanic encounter, the date and the time was specified in the epistle. My friend and the fellow Romeo, like all of us, did believe in miracle, and that unexplained letter was the proof. The members of the group did know the exact location of our Juliet and were waiting clandestinely to witness the circus. After the encounter and the exchange of smile and greeting the dialogues went on like this. "I have secretly cultivated my passionate love for you, but did not have the courage to approach you, in case you reject me unceremoniously and with disgust. But my hesitation vanished after I received your letter". The surprised reply was, "I am, off course disgusted and don't know what you are talking about. It is most ridiculous to think that I could write such a letter to you. It is insulting for me that you can even think of me in that way." The evil jokers came out from hiding and pretended to console the sobbing Romeo – to paste salt to the wound.

I tried my tricks to achieve the notoriety needed to draw the attention of the one and only Juliet in our class, which was clowning – a hall mark for my reputation. It helped me to amuse friends but did nothing to win the attention of the Juliet. I had to do a heroic stunt.

It was the grand annual event to bid farewell to the final year (M.Sc) outgoing students. The agenda, as always, included a formal speech session, followed by cultural events (music and dance) and refreshments. The formal session was chaired by the then vice-chancellor – (late) Prof. M.O. Gani. I elected myself as one of the spokespersons from the outgoing class (Class of 65) of the Physics department, with my close friend and collaborator, (Late) Mushfig Ahmed as a co-presenter. The auditorium was packed with students from all the classes and most of the teachers, including the head of the department, (late) Prof M Chowdhury (the Dynamite). Both of us, in our speeches, broke the age-old tradition of ‘nicety’ and ‘gratitude’ towards the teachers and the administrators and blasted out giving vivid account of the inefficiencies, failings, corruption and moral-degradation of the teachers and the overt use of students to achieve political goals and the nepotism and corruption of the VC’s office. Although we received thunderous applause from the audience, afterwards we had to face the wrath of the teachers and the VC. We were both temporarily rusticated from the University. That did not matter then; I did get the admiration of the fellow students and became a star – a hero – that’s what I thought. I was waiting to receive a flower garland for my Juliet. But alas, it went, to someone else’s neck, who was not a hero, but sang romantic love songs and stood first amongst us – the outgoing M Sc. students.

I look back and take a panoramic view of the situation at the west wing of Curzon Hall, in a typical afternoon to reminisce. Perhaps in one class room a few theoretical students, with one or two of their youngish supervisors, will be having idle conversations, mainly small talks, in another room one of the lucky ones will be having a one-to-one talk with a starry-eyed Juliet. The topic may relate to academic matters, but this would only be pretence for a close encounter. But, the real drama would have been played on the ground floor where, the research on Cosmic Radiation was carried out under the able supervision of (late) Prof. S Islam (nicknamed – Juba Raj). The laboratories were the strategic position for a vista, looking for the wondering beauties or for that matter, any one of opposite sex. However, the reputation of the class of 65 must go down in the annals of the history of Curzon hall as the Romeos who were collectively faithful to their one and only Juliet until the last days of their terms and their ceaseless adventures along the alleys and corridors of the famous Curzon hall. The society, PAS, created by the enthusiasts and the leading members of the clans of Romeos to commemorate these adventurous and chivalrous time still exist and is active, with Mr Habibullah as the president and Dr SM Farid as the secretary. Dr S Rafi Ahmad looks after the society’s overseas interest.

Curzon hall did provide a bastion of our sweet memories of wilder days and will continue to do so for as long as we live.

Dr Sheikh Rafi Ahmad.
sheikhrafiaahmad@hotmail.com