

Udbhēda

Details of Bangladesh Life & Adda

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Critical Perspectives on Social Science



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Foreword

Kaiser Haq

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Kathryn Hummel has devoted nearly two decades of intellectual and emotional commitment to Bangladesh. She first came ostensibly to work for an NGO, but she was very different from the aid worker disinterestedly trying to help the disadvantaged. She was drawn to the people of this fertile yet troubled deltaic region, their culture, their distinctive collective psyche. She interacted with them with an open mind, without concealing her own vulnerabilities, and without suppressing the inevitable emotional effect the encounters were having on her. There could be no better preparation for social-anthropological research on Bangladeshi life and “adda”, which earned her a PhD. The present book, *Udbhēda: Details of Bangladesh Life and Adda*, is a spin-off from that research, packaged to offer varied experiences.

The introduction follows academic protocol, impressively modulating theoretical discourse with references to such heavyweights as Heidegger and Derrida, convincing the reader of the author’s intellectual credentials. What follows is more engaging, foregrounding Kathryn the writer. As many already know, she is an accomplished poet and a fine prose writer. Both qualities are showcased in the main body of the book. Each section begins with a passage of sensitive free verse, and is followed by what is now popularly referred to as creative non-fiction. Together they comprise a graphic and moving account of Bangladeshi life.

The incorporation of Bengali words in the book is well-thought out and semantically evocative. *Udbhēda* is a rather uncommon Sanskrit-derived word, with a range of meanings adequately explicated in the introduction. It can mean a plant shoot, a manifestation or revelation, an expression, an eruption on the skin. Adda has gained wide circulation, finding its way into the Oxford English Dictionary in 2004; it is the peculiar palaver of Bengalis. Five of the six seasons of the South Asian year are used as section rubrics, and one section is titled “Barhi/Ancestral home”: all of them have highly significant emotive connotations. Their apt use in the book is ample proof of Kathryn’s intimacy with Bangladesh; there is an inwardness to her understanding of its people and culture that can only spring from genuine affection.

The author has three principal interlocutors in the book, from social realms far removed from each other yet having points of contact, like the sides of a triangle. A woman academic, a masseuse, a hijra dancer/activist: a middle class

Muslim professional, a working class Hindu woman, a social outcast. The author herself, it is worth keeping in mind, has been shaped by feminist and postcolonial/post-structuralist thought and the concomitant activism.

But this is not simply a book about women and hijra by a woman. Men, whether named or anonymous, have bit parts that fill out the portrayal of the society as a whole. I don't want a spoiler alert to be sounded, but Kathryn presents the everyday activities and struggles of Sampurna the masseuse and Afreen the hijra with a deadpan realism that has a telling impact. To many readers, the accounts of the gender fluid sexuality of Afreen and others of their ilk will come as a revelation, *udbhēda*. There are also shocking descriptions of sexual violence, but thanks to the way these are contextualised the reader does not stop at simply registering shock: they are moved to recognise and respect the humanity of the victim and to be repulsed by the bestiality of the perpetrator.

The ethnographic accounts of the three interlocutors is followed by an elaborate discursive take on other writers and theorists. Kathryn is salutarily self-reflexive, frankly acknowledging her linguistic limitations: she is too modest, in my view. Her Bengali may not be perfect but her fine intuition more than makes up for the deficiency. She rounds off with a useful conspectus of Bangladesh's history, down to the recent upheaval of July-August, which has finally put paid to the longest and most autocratic regime the country has experienced so far.

I am sure Kathryn will have many more things to say about Bangladesh, for her interest ranges over every aspect of its socio-cultural fabric. By way of illustration I will offer a personal anecdote. Ages ago (sixteen years, to be precise), out of the blue came a letter from Kathryn, introducing herself and expressing a wish to interview me. That was the beginning of a lasting friendship. Only someone with a comprehensive interest in Bangladesh would think of engaging with an obscure postcolonial poet like yours truly. I will eagerly wait for Kathryn's further thoughts and observations on this land and its people.

Kaiser Haq

Dhaka, Bangladesh, 23 December 2024

Introduction

While preparing *Udbhēda: Details of Bangladesh Life & Adda* for Vernon Press, I realised how much it draws on the idea of balance. Balance occurs not only between the ethnography and its exegesis as two complementary parts of a whole, but in the evocation/discussion/confrontation of anthropology and narrative; individual and community; reflection and observation; distance and nearness; assigned and identified gender; friendship and research; and, above all, creativity and theoretical analysis. Since none of these pairings are oppositional, I have matched and combined them, balancing the latter, in particular, without conceding their mutual exclusivity.

The title of the book refers to concepts that may require clarification: firstly, *udbhēda* relates to the position of my research participants—Sampurna, Afreen and Nusrat—in the narrative and in the making of our dialogues. Across contexts, *udbhēda* connotes confluence, or the act of breaking through (as a shoot from a seed); it may also be used to signify an outburst or exposition, as well as the more cerebral revelation, manifestation or union (HinKhoj Dictionary). Here, the word attends to its meaning in Bangla but, due to its Sanskrit etymon, is similarly used in languages including the Indian Marathi and Kannada (Hiemstra 2022). The related narratives confirm each interlocutor as the bearer of certain beliefs, emotions, responsibilities and fates, articulated over time in a manner signified by *udbhēda*. Moreover, ‘breaking through’ reflects the expression of the roles assumed by Sampurna, Afreen and Nusrat: their complex relatedness with the collectivist culture of Bangladesh, its family- and religion-oriented social traditions and sense of community-as-identity (Scroope 2017). Even as they participate in the status quo of social and family life, my interlocutors’ positionalities are alluded to throughout our meetings and conversations, emphasising the need to consider and make space for variations in identity formed by gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and class. Such an intersectional approach not only reflects *udbhēda* as confluence but also contributes to a core concern of this book: the investigation into why and how categories of difference are constructed and reproduced by dominant discourses.

Still, *Details of Bangladesh Life* implies no complete accounts of my participants or myself, but unabashedly subjective narrative fragments that were sometimes volunteered, sometimes led and sometimes deliberately emphasised during our conversations, or *adda*. Popularly defined in Bangladesh as ‘gossiping’, *adda* has greater meaning as a cultural concept, practice and pastime. To make *adda* is to ‘gossip’ in a special way: at its best, it is unplanned,

uninhibited, lengthy and passionate oral discourse on topics ranging across the political, social, intellectual and personal.

Location is significant to adda not only because the Hindi meaning of the word is related to a gathering place for conversation (Oxford English Dictionary), but because of its gendered history. In West Bengal, neighbour to contemporary Bangladesh, adda followed rural village “patterns of male sociability” and later, those of the “urban male intelligentsia” more than the “interstices of women’s work” and the domestic realm they traditionally inhabit (Chaudhuri 2023:388, 400). Throughout *Udbhēda*, I habitually make adda with my research participants in safe, relatively private, domestic or familiar settings, owing to the nature of our conversations and adherence to ethical research practices. Yet adda also takes place with my friend Sonny under the veranda of his shop and with Poppy, a fleeting acquaintance, in Chobir Hat, the sprawling park and bohemian hangout near the University of Dhaka. Although conversations with my research participants were never as spontaneous as adda unadulterated, when adopted as a research method (as discussed in the chapter “The Ways of Tasting”), adda went beyond the informal ethnographic interview, following a unique rhythm wherein diverse experiences were expressed and exchanged.

Udbhēda is a multi-genre account of my research trip to Bangladesh, beginning in December 2009 and ending in September 2010. In the foreground, my meetings with Sampurna, Afreen and Nusrat and the stories they share with me are interpreted in prose; in the background run my prose poem reflections as a sojourner in Bangladesh. The stories rise and fall, following the events of our daily lives and the numerous patterns and topics of our adda—or at least, my version of it, as I listen, observe and absorb details, then direct the narratives outward once more.

There always exists a margin for misrepresentation when writing about another country, just as there is when writing about another person—our interactions with both are irrefutably subjective. The Bangladesh I describe in *Udbhēda* has, of course, changed, though it always was abundantly more than my experience, a snippet during a world news programme or a summary in an encyclopaedia. To provide readers with context, certain aspects of Bangladesh’s history, society and politics are detailed in Appendix A, though its national and cultural identities remain incontrovertibly motile.

To the stories presented here, Bangladesh lends its constant presence: *Udbhēda* opens with a description of dusty Dhaka city and charts certain phases of the year, noting the ashen chill of winter, the remorseless heat of the dry season and the wet intensity of monsoon, none of which daunt the activity in the streets. As time ‘runs’—and curls up and curves around—my relationships

with Sampurna, Afreen and Nusrat develop and articulate the varied milieu of Bangladesh. Sampurna's description of her massage training and work is bound with details of her family and childhood, as well as her personal beliefs and fears. Conflict with social tradition is a theme of Afreen's story—they are a hijra dancer and activist who works determinedly for the equal rights of Bangladesh's marginalised communities, in accordance with their vision of how the world should be. Nusrat recounts her childhood desire to teach and her subsequent retreat from the middle-class expectations of a wife and daughter-in-law. Her story communicates a simultaneous optimism for the present and quiet despair for the future, as she considers life, death and the future of her country.

Initially, *Udbhēda* was formulated as a counter to prevailing gender-based narratives disseminated by local and international development industries, in turn flavoured by colonialist and Orientalist conceptions (Talpade Mohanty 1991; Said 1993; Visweswaran 1994; Snigdha 2021). Such narratives are, as Elora Halim Chowdhury asserts, predicated on “the rhetoric of development that promises to lift the poor, particularly women, out of their backward and uneducated ways” and free them from the oppression of “local patriarchal religious and cultural practices” (2010:309, 302). Given Bangladesh's “seemingly obligatory sex and sex and gender-roles” are based on an essentialist male/man–female/woman binary (Khan et al. 2009:449), it is likely these studies relate to cisgender, if not heterosexual, women. With the inclusion of Afreen as a research participant, *Udbhēda* likewise responds to standardised or pejorative tropes surrounding the hijra community in Bangladesh—not the least its historical, cultural and political dissimilarities to Western conceptualisations of transgender (Snigdha 2021).

Udbhēda also acknowledges my role as an emotional actor in the narrative. My own story balances my present and past experiences in Bangladesh and my converging identities as a cisgender woman, foreigner and writer/researcher devoted to the elusive cause of setting down the details of life. My fieldwork is influenced by the idiosyncratic formation of my days; by encounters with and reactions to people; by traffic jams; by illness and desire; by contemplations of class, ethnicity, race and gender, and by the language, writings and music I discover or recall. Although *Udbhēda* contains ‘only’ details, they are enough to intimate the depth and breadth of certain lived experiences, as well as the ethical, scholarly and literary quandaries of consigning them to text.

Reflection on these complexities forms the greater part of *Udbhēda*'s exegesis, which follows the process of thinking about and writing narrative ethnography. “The Book of Bangladesh” recognises existing discursive approaches to Bangladesh and related constructions of gender, as well as various ethnographic, feminist and postcolonial texts that influenced my writing style

and themes. From the discussion of auto/ethnography and auto/biography emerges my motivation to explore the ‘illegitimate’, subjective side of anthropology that has not been a traditional focus of the discipline. A consideration of various textual approaches to time and memory shows their influence on my formulation and stylistic treatment of ‘jam time’, its relation to life in Bangladesh and the rhythms of adda.

The connection of ethnography to the colonial structures of West–East and Self–Other is expanded in “Everybody is a ghetto”. My combined use of Bangla and English as linguistic media of research forms the basis of the discussion on power, yet in the Bangla–English/English–Bangla process of translation, one benefit did emerge: Jacques Derrida’s notion of *différance* that destabilises the certainty of and binaries within the process of representation (Webb 2009). This chapter also explains the pitfalls of positioning English as the “real” language and Bangla the illegitimate (Passerini 1989:62), supporting the considered use of transliterated Bangla throughout the book.

In “Freeing the *post-*”, I position *Udbhēda* in the “space of negotiation” between postcolonial theory and my fieldwork in Bangladesh (Parry 1997:12–3). In doing so, I contrast instances of my research against the pre-defined roles of researcher and participant. The chapter goes on to argue for the disassociation of postcolonial theory from detached academic origins and for increasing its adaptability and relevance to ethnographic practice. Martin Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit* is put forward as offering such a shift, since it involves ethical, non-calculative modes of thinking and the emergence of other ways of being (Heidegger 1977; Carey 2000).

The final chapter of the exegesis describes “The ways of tasting”—that is, ways of ‘doing’ ethnography that were adapted according to competing identities and unpredictable contexts in the field. In keeping with postmodern and deconstructionist views that refute the reduction of ethnographic research to a single type of analysis, my fieldwork in Bangladesh did not conform to any pattern. When it came to interacting with my research participants, the participant-observation I practiced came to rely more on intuition than a conscious employment of method; I also used my body “as a site of knowing” in order to engage with the environment of Bangladesh (Conquergood 1991:180). In addition, the method of informal ethnographic interview I used was not always defined or controlled by me, or indeed by Sampurna, Afreen or Nusrat, but became a balancing act between conscious investigation and natural conversation. Instead of a textbook interview technique, adda was employed as a culturally-specific method of research (Four Arrows 2008).

Balance is just one theme readers may glean from *Udbhēda: Details of Bangladesh Life & Adda*. The book is, among other things, evidence that I was not at all times a woman alone in Dhaka, but shared company with Sampurna,

Afreen and Nusrat, as well as many others who, moving across my path, left an impression. As its exegesis explains, the process was not simple, nor easy to set down—now, or in 2009, when it was conceived as the thesis for my Doctor of Philosophy in Social Sciences. Prior to my PhD research, I had spent two years as a disenchanted NGO volunteer based in Dhaka, aware, even then, that the stories about Bangladeshi women featured in field reports and fundraising brochures were far from nuanced; removed from what I knew of the ways in which women spoke about themselves and their communities. The appeal of these *chosen* narratives led me to the rather formal pursuit of academia and the fraught elements of cross-cultural representation.

Since then, *Udbhēda* has remained at the core of my scholarly research as a source of reference—for the journal articles and conference papers written during and after my PhD (Hummel 2011a; Hummel 2011b; Hummel 2014; Hummel 2018; Hummel 2019; Hummel 2022; Hummel 2024)—as well as a source of resistance. This has taken form in ways both methodological and socio-political: my scholarship has expanded beyond accounts of ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative data collection to related discussions within disciplines like cultural studies, as well as an abiding interest in arts-based research. Prompting this shift was a refreshed awareness of the need to decolonise the mechanisms that continue to segregate the globe, many of which are addressed in these pages and, at a self-critical meta-level, through the writing of *Udbhēda* itself.

Settling theoretical, historical and postcolonial discourse with what I discovered, felt and came to know through my research in Bangladesh is a matter of ongoing reflection. Now removed from the company of Sampurna, Afreen and Nusrat—though not from the effects of their time, trust and goodwill—I find that inquiry and exposition are again needed to sort through these issues and to honour the presence of certain people and places. It is a lesson I have learned from Bangladesh to ask questions—even the same questions—in order to define increasingly thoughtful ways of researching and writing ethnography.

Author's Note

Both the narrative ethnography and theoretical sections of *Udbhēda* follow American Sociological Association referencing guidelines. Owing to the style of the first section, however, in lieu of individual footnotes providing details of personal communication and interviews, citations are given below according to chapter.

'Nusrat's academic voice': Nusrat, interview with author, August 5, 2010.
Nusrat, personal communication with author, September 29 2010; December 7 2010; January 18 2011.

'Time can't be relied on': Sampurna, interview with author, January 8, 2010.

'With his photographer's eye': Faruq, personal communication with author, February 25-6 2010. Mallika, personal communication with author, March 1 2010.

'Sampurna's level of comfort': Sampurna, interview with author, February 2, 2010.

'Afreeen agrees to meet me again': Afreeen, interview with author, May 5, 2010.

'Sampurna's eyes are round with worry': Sampurna, interview with author, May 7, 2010.

'As we sit on the floor, chatting': Afreeen, interview with author, May 15, 2010.

'Perhaps Afreeen and I are not two people': Afreeen, interview with author, May 29, 2010.

'Afreeen has been travelling Outside of Dhaka': Afreeen, interview with author, June 10, 2010.

'Afreeen's house is organised': Afreeen, interview with author, June 24, 2010.

'Sampurna and I have not seen each other for some time': Sampurna, interview with author, June 25, 2010.

'Afreeen has a busy day planned': Afreeen, interview with author, July 9, 2010.

'We arrive early and at the same time': Afreeen, interview with author, July 23, 2010.

'I'm unsure of how to write Nusrat': Nusrat, interview with author, August 5, 2010.

'Within a week of our first adda': Nusrat, interview with author, August 10, 2010.

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