

PART VII

GROWING UP

Ideas and Ideals

Kids have funny ideas at times, but often we would find they are much more mature than the many grown-ups who strut the world today. For one thing they are not obsessed with false notions of status the way adults are and are more than willing to accept as their equals other kids or even grown-ups willing to be treated as such. For another, they dearly wish to be treated as equals with grown-ups.

In this sense children are far more egalitarian than adults who have gotten so used to absurd ideas like the inferiority of other men passed down the generations that they often lose their sense of reality. If only people could recall how they thought when they were little, the world will be a better place to live without a care for race or social class. And so it was with us. We often wondered why there was so much inequality in the world and why all people in the world couldn't just be equal. Even as kids we often discussed among the two or three of us what we could do to make the world a more equal place. Given our Superhero craze at the time, we were even considering becoming *superheroes* with distinctive figure-licking attire as our Marvel heroes were depicted, just to accomplish this objective of *civilizing* people to think of one another as equals. If we did go for it we would have probably taken on a name like V3.



We imagined ourselves becoming something like these guys

We could see that in the West which we called *civilized*, that there was manifestly less inequalities than existed in our part of the world. After all had it not been the West that had produced the likes of King Arthur whose stories uncle Firoze regaled us with, dwelling on how he built a *round table* so that he and his knights could deliberate on equal terms, so unlike the rectangular boardroom tables where the boss sits at the head and his minions along the length of the table. What we did n't know then, of course, was how much of that culture we called *civilized* had been built upon the oppression of other peoples.

Children are of course taken up by trivial things. It struck us as very fine that even the most menial workers over there wore uniforms or fine clothes while at their job, while ours were clad in dirty shorts and if not barebodied wore an equally dirty shirt. One day at Arts class at Mahanama College we were told to draw a man at his job and as if to express my feelings, I drew a local municipal worker smartly clad in uniform and boots trundling a wheelbarrow. A classmate seated next to me was quite amused and commented in Sinhala *Huh,tava*

avurudu seeyakin vat mehema venne ne! (Oh, it won't be like this even in another hundred years). His prophesy was a bit premature. Within thirty years of his hasty remark, many of our garbage collectors could actually be seen clad in smarter clothes or at least in a neat luminous orange bib.

One day I matter of fact told a classmate that all people had a right to be treated equally. He promptly replied that would make me a *communist!* I was stumped, for my impressions of communism was not at all a positive one, having been told by father that the commies in Russia ruled ruthlessly with an iron fist and did not even allow people to leave their country, as a result of which many defected to the West. What irked him most was the restriction on people's freedoms and especially on free enterprise the communists imposed in their bid for state control of each and everything. He even had us believe that in Russia toddlers were given a number of toys that represented different occupations such as a gun for a soldier, and whoever chose that particular toy was compelled to take to the occupation it represented.



Father said toddlers were given toys to determine their jobs

Father's fears, though largely based on hearsay, were of course not unfounded, for communism was still alive and kicking back then in the early 1980s. His own experience, as a family man with responsibilities when our own country experimented with a nationalistic form of socialism and closed its economy to the outside world in the early and mid-1970s had heightened his concerns further for he could still recall the privation it brought to ordinary folk while those in power and their families enjoyed all the perks and privileges as *party people*. His auctions did well in those times, since restrictions on imports meant that more people would bid for used items from the west and elsewhere, but despite this he harboured a strong mistrust of people espousing socialism of any kind.



Father at opening of 552 Showrooms in Colpetty with George Selliah, founder of Selmars. He was wary of communism.

In the run up to the 1982 elections or thereabouts an auction help had managed to get a copy of a picture story book in black and white with a catchy title such as *Hat Avurudu Saapaya* (The Curse of the Seven Years).

We curiously leafed through its cheap cream white pages, if for nothing else, the caricatures. What we saw horrified us, for it depicted Madame Sirimavo Bandaranaike who had presided over that era in a very negative light. She was shown in military fatigues, with cap and boot, doing all kinds of terrible things including shooting a young woman stripped bare from head to toe. The unfortunate girl so depicted was Kataragama beauty queen Premawathi Manamperi who was brutally murdered by some army men at the height of the JVP insurgency in 1971.



Sirimavo was depicted like this in Hat Avurudu Saapaya

Needless to say the grand old dame had nothing to do with the killing. It had taken place during her regime and she had to take the flak. Children are impressionable and we got away with a very bad impression of the poor old woman who had by then been deprived of even her civic rights by her successor J.R.Jayawardane on some pretext or other.

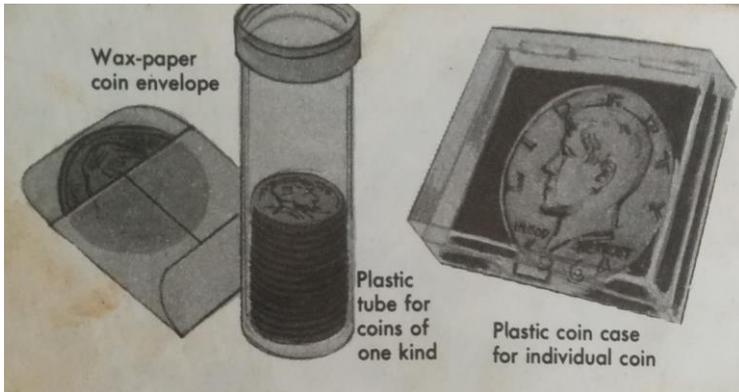
What father or mother did not tell us was that communism envisaged the equality of all citizens, even to the point of

advocating collective ownership of property to accomplish the goal so that there won't be rich or poor.



Soviet books like this translated into Sinhala were popular

Equality was one thing, but the forced pooling together of property was another and with this we could not agree. We did once experiment with the idea of having common property between us - with disastrous consequences. That was when we decided to pool our coin collection which had hitherto remained in our separate possessions. The coins we cared for well when they were in our individual possession, acquiring new ones and caring for the existing ones by storing them in plastic tubes, smarties containers and transparent plastic cases padded with cotton, much of it gleaned from a Ladybird book on *Coin Collecting* and a smaller *Quiz Me* book on *Coins* by Dean & Son we had.



Coins in containers from our Quiz Me book on Coins

But alas, as soon as we pooled them, things changed. None of us evinced the kind of interest we had when we actually owned them individually. Needless to say, our entire collection fell into a sad state of neglect. This experience would not be in vain and if we had any more ideas of pooling our property, it was all but abandoned, that is except our books, which mother purchased for us and which was deemed the collective property of the three of us anyway. Books of course did not need the kind of tending and grooming coins needed as a hobby.

However we could still not abandon our egalitarian ideals and it was not long before that we would learn that our Islamic faith advocated the absolute equality of all humanity, so that being egalitarians now assumed a religious dimension as well. I can still recall while approaching my teen years reading with delight the words from the farewell sermon of the Prophet hung on a wall of the Colpetty Mosque: “*No Arab is superior to a Non-Arab or a Non-Arab to an Arab. No white is superior to a black or a black to a white except in good deeds*”.

THE FAREWELL SERMON OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD ﷺ

The Farewell Sermon (Arabic: Khutbatul Wida), also known as the Prophet's ﷺ Final Sermon, was delivered on the Ninth Day of Dhul Hijjah 10 A.H. (632 CE), in the 'Uranah valley of Mount Arafat' (in Makkah). This was at the end of His ﷺ first and only Hajj pilgrimage to Makkah. After praising and thanking Allah (God), the Final Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

" O People, just as you regard this month, this day, this city as sacred, so regard the life and property of every Muslim as a sacred trust. Return the goods entrusted to you to their rightful owners. Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. Remember that you will indeed meet your Lord, and that He will indeed reckon your deeds. Allah ﷻ has forbidden you to take usury (interest, Arabic: Riba); therefore all interest obligation shall henceforth be waived. Your capital, however, is yours to keep. You will neither inflict nor suffer any inequity. Allah ﷻ has judged that there shall be no usury (interest) and that all interest due to Abbas Ibn Abd al Muttalib (the Prophet's uncle) shall henceforth be waived.

Beware of Satan for the safety of your religion. He has lost all hope that he will ever be able to lead you astray in big things, so beware of following him in small things.

O People, it is true that you have certain rights in regard to your women, but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as your wives, only under Allah's ﷻ trust and with His permission. If they abide by your right then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in kindness. Do treat your women well and be kind to them, for they are your partners and committed helpers. And it is your right that they do not make friends with anyone of whom you do not approve, as well as never to be unchaste.

O People, listen to me in earnest, worship Allah ﷻ, say your five daily prayers (Salah), fast during the month of Ramadhan, and give from your wealth in Zakaat. Perform Hajj if you have the means.

All mankind is from Adam and Hawwa (Eve), an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black, nor a black has any superiority over a white - except by piety and good action. Know that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood. Nothing shall be legitimate to a Muslim, which belongs to a fellow Muslim unless it was given freely and willingly.

Do not therefore, do injustice to yourselves. Remember one day you will appear before Allah ﷻ and answer for your deeds. So beware, do not stray from the path of righteousness after I am gone.

O People, no Prophet or Apostle will come after me and no new faith will be born. Reason well therefore, O people, and understand the words which I convey to you. I leave behind me two things, the Qur'aan and the Sunnah, and if you follow these you will never go astray. All those who listen to me shall pass on my words to others and those to others again, perhaps some of those who receive my words would understand them better than those who listened to me directly."

As part of this sermon, the Prophet ﷺ recited to them a Revelation from God which he ﷺ had just received: "This day the disbelievers despair of prevailing against your religion, so fear them not, but fear Me (God)! This day have I perfected for you your religion and fulfilled My favour unto you, and it hath been My good pleasure to choose Islam for you as your religion" (Al-Qur'aan 3:3).

Towards the end of his sermon, Muhammad ﷺ asked: "O people, have I faithfully delivered unto you my message?" A powerful murmur of assent "O God, yes", arose from thousands of pilgrims and the vibrant words "Allahumma na'm" rolled like thunder throughout the valley.

Muhammad ﷺ raised His forefinger towards the Heavens and said: "Be my witness O God, Be my witness O God, Be my witness O God"

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A framed poster of the farewell sermon like this was hung on a wall of Colpetty mosque where we used to pray

These simple but wise words so strongly enunciated by the Prophet certainly offered a better deal for achieving equality than the harsher doctrine of communism that did not take human nature into consideration, and which was for all practical purposes impossible to accomplish. Little wonder it remained a pipe dream much abused by those in power which George Orwell neatly captured in *Animal Farm* when he summed it all up: *Some Animals are more equal than Others.*

Keeping the Faith

As Muslim kids brought up in a largely Sinhalese Buddhist household, we realized that we were a bit ‘different’ quite early on. We were told when quite young that we were something called ‘Muslim’ though back then I did not know what it really meant except that it had something to do with being a bit different from the rest in what we believed in or the way we were expected to behave. It did not at any time mean that we were an altogether different kind of people.

In fact throughout my early childhood I could not even comprehend the difference between race and religion, for I imagined then that all people were divided on the basis of what they believed, in other words religion and not race, that is until I digested the contents of our earliest factual work the *Hamlyn Boys and Girls Encyclopedia* by Jean Stroud at about the age of eight or so. This colourful well illustrated work graphically brought out the differences between the primary races of man, the fair-skinned fine-featured Caucasoid, the straight-haired, slit-eyed Mongoloid and the dark-skinned woolly-haired Negroid.



Race differences from our Hamlyn Boys & Girls Encyclopedia

These obvious differences in men were until then lost on me for some reason and even after this basic grounding in anthropology I could not quite understand how Sinhalese and Muslim differed; they all basically looked the same, somewhat like the Caucasoid type illustrated in the book. This was perhaps the result of a mixed childhood where whatever little perceptible differences of race paled into insignificance and only what one believed in really stood out.



Our Sinhalese grandma in front of Adam's Peak which Buddhists revere as the spot where Buddha laid his footprint. Muslims say it is where Adam fell after his fall from paradise

Besides matters of belief, certain cultural peculiarities marked us out from the rest of the household - names for instance. The country's Muslims like others elsewhere are extremely fond of Arabic or Persian names, rather European sounding really, and more continental than English like Ashroff that sounds so Russian, Hussein more like German and Firoze somewhat like Italian. Father's name *Wazir* with its *z* and my own name *Asiff* with its *f* sounded rather outlandish when compared to the vernacular Sinhala names that lacked the *f* or *z*. Though our maternal clan had no difficulty pronouncing our names due to their familiarity with these sounds which were found in English, there were those more conservative folk connected by marriage who could not, for instance aunt Priyanthi, uncle Suranjan's wife who had this bad habit of calling my name out as *Asip*.



Cousin Lakmini in the inner hall of Accha House. On the right upon a table covered in white cloth is an image of the Buddha

It was our frequent interaction with our paternal kin that really defined our identity as Muslims, for not very far from Accha House was father's family home. All we had to do to get there was cross the road, walk down Boyd's Place and turn right to Alwis Place. The house at No.30 served us as a home away from home where we were kept when our parents were busy at the auctions.



Our paternal clan introduced us to the basics of Islam

It was here at Umma House that we were really initiated into our Islamic faith. Islam means 'surrender', in a religious sense 'surrender to the Will of God' and so there we were submitting to His Will. God is generally known among Muslims by his Arabic name *Allah* meaning 'The God' as if to stress his Divinity. This is the same name even Christian Arabs such as those of Palestine, Syria or Lebanon use to address Him.

To us little ones he was introduced as *Allalla*, a sort of duplication of the proper divine name which our father's folk

probably thought would appeal to us better as kids are known to be fond of repetitive sounds such as *mama* and *papa*. We were hardly four or five years old, when while stationed at Umma House, we were instructed by our aunts Fairoze, Shafeeka and Shanaz to sit cross-legged on the floor, close our eyes and reel off the words *Allalla... Allalla...* While at it for a minute or so, a brazen five or ten cents coin would suddenly fall at our feet with a clink as if from heaven. This, our aunts would exultantly tell us was a reward for praying to Allalla. He had been pleased with our prayers and had sent down the coins from the heavens.



Us kids with doting aunt Shafeeka

We did not grudge them though, after all it was all in good faith meant to instill in us a belief in God, especially since we were growing up in a largely Buddhist environment. Though these small-time worldly inducements had only a limited effect

in introducing us to our Creator Lord, it was not without its benefits, for by now we had some vague idea of whom this god whom we called *Allalla* was – some sort of transcendent being who lived up on high and who looked after people.

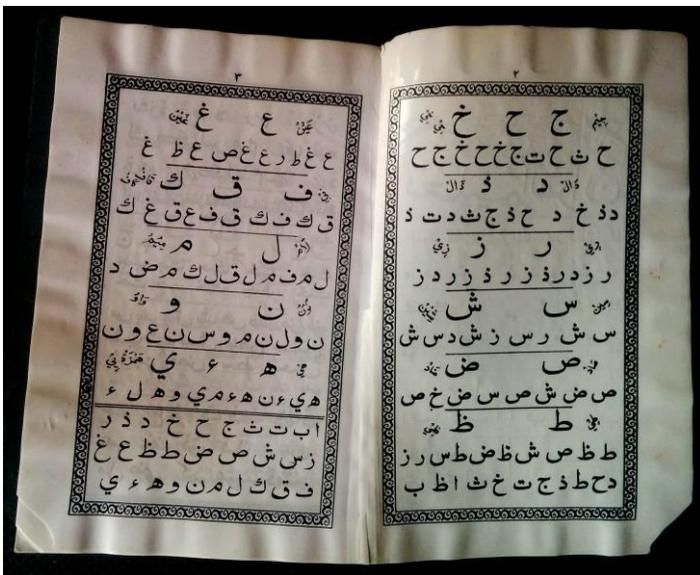
More was to come with the Arabic classes grandmother ‘*umma*’ had us attend when we were around seven years old, not at some *madrasa* or little seminary attached to the mosque as most Muslim boys and girls are used to, but at her house which we had to attend after school or in the weekends. Here we were taught the basic creed of our faith by one Saleem Lebbe, a tall bearded man attired in white shirt and sarong with a white skullcap perched on his head.

The man had earned a reputation as a *lebbe* or religious teacher and quickly set about teaching us the *Kalima* or Declaration of faith ‘*La-ilaha-illallah, Muhammad-ur-rasulullah*’ (There is no god but God. Muhammad is the Messenger of God) which was followed later by lessons in the Arabic script in which the Qur’an is written. The primer he employed for the purpose sufficed to teach us the entire Arabic alphabet with its profuse bows and dots which looked like little stylized crescents and stars, so beautiful to behold.



Grandma plump as always prays at opening of 555 showrooms. Mother behind her covers her head at prayer

We then thought of Arabic as a sort of sacred language taught to man by God Himself for the purpose of revealing His Word to mankind. Little did we know then that it just happened to be a language that existed among a people known as Arabs even before Islam was brought to them 1400 years ago. It was a language like any other belonging to a particular group of people, but one which God had chosen to reveal his final revelation, His very own Word, the *Qur'an*, which in Arabic simply means 'The Reading'. And so it was that Saleem Lebbe taught us the Arabic alphabet with its 28 characters beginning with the first two letters - *Alif* and *Be*. A couple of years later we were thrilled to find out that these two characters *Alif* and *Be* were related to the first and second letters of the Greek alphabet *Alpha* and *Beta* which in combination gave the English language the very word *Alphabet*. Both Arabic and Greek had derived its alphabet from the ancient Phoenecians, a hardy sea-faring people who had first developed it.



Our first Arabic book taught by Saleem Lebbe looked like this

The lead came from our *Hamlyn Children's Wonderful World Encyclopedia*, a compendious illustrated work which mother purchased for us when we were about ten years old. A graphic in the book very much in the form of a golden tablet very beautifully traced the evolution of the Roman characters *A* and *B* used in modern English to the Phoenecian hieroglyphic forms based on an image of an ox and house, the Hebrew forms of which were given as *Aleph* and *Beth* in which our inquisitive minds saw a close resemblance to our *Alif* and *Be*, especially since there were others that showed a similar pattern, as for instance Hebrew *Daleth* for door, *Lamedh* for whip, *Caph* for palm and *Shin* for teeth which closely resembled our Arabic *Daal*, *Laam*, *Kaaf* and *seen* representing the sounds *d*, *l*, *k* and *s*. We were correct, for Arabic like the Hebrew had derived its alpabet from Phoenecian and shares a close relationship with it, not only alphabetically but also because both are Semitic speeches originating from a common tongue spoken as far back as the days of Abraham over three thousand years ago. That their speakers are constantly at loggerheads with one another and sometimes at each other's throats is another story.

Hebrew	Name	Hieroglyph Picture of	Hebrew		Roman	
			Phoenician	Early	Greek	Modern
Aleph	Ox					
Beth	House					
Gimel	Camel					
Daleth	Door					
He	Window					
Vau	Hook					
Cheth	Fence					
Yod	Hand					
Caph	Palm					
Lamedh	Whip					
Mem	Waters					
Nun	Fish					
Ayin	Eye					
Pe	Mouth					
Keph	Head					
Resh	Head					
Shin	Teeth					
Tav	Mark					
Samekh	Post					
Zayin	Weapon					

Evolution of scripts from ancient Phoenician from our Hamlyn Children's Wonderful World Encyclopedia

Adding to our religious knowledge were the regular Islam classes at Mahanama College Colpetty where we schooled. These were handled by a fair chubby lady we simply called 'Sitty Miss' to whom all the Muslim boys of a particular grade were brought for Islam lessons. The first day of the class stands out in my mind for an interesting incident that took place that day. Here stood Sitty Miss surveying the little boys and not so little boys, for some of them who hailed from Slave Island were notorious failures compelled to do time in our grade.

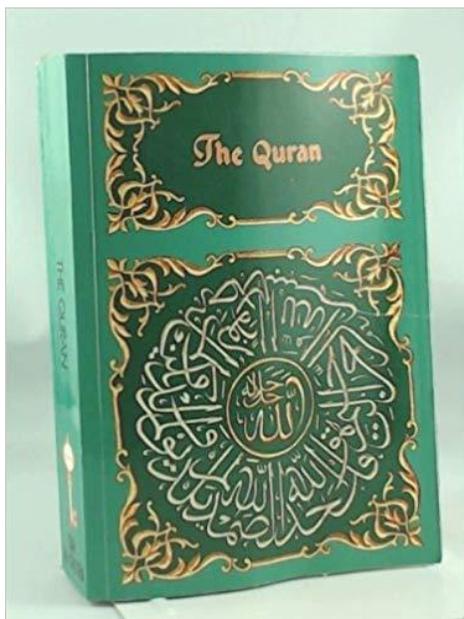
She now started throwing out questions to test our religious knowledge and the very first question she shot out was *Apey Nabituma Kavuda?* (Who is our Prophet?). All the boys looked on stone-still, silent as lambs, as if pondering over the question and there I was plucking up some courage to show off the little Islam I knew. The question rang out again *Apey Nabituma*

Kavuda? That was when I managed to blurt out *Muhammad*, for that I was quite sure was the name of our Prophet. The fair lady looked at me and then at the others reproachfully “*Ogollanta Taama danne nedda apey nabituma kavuda kiyala?*” (Don’t you’ll know who our Prophet is?) in such a scornful tone that the boys looked down shamefaced. Not that they didn’t know the answer, they had been dallying simply because they were too scared of the teacher.

Whether it was her roly-poly form draped in saree, or her rosy, somewhat porcine mug sitting on top of it, or the short pixie hair sprouting from it, so different from the homely kind of ladies these lads were used to seeing, I cannot say. Whatever it was, it certainly had the lily-livered bunch petrified as if they had just seen Medusa. Had she covered her hair with the end of her saree in keeping with the standards of female modesty required in Islam, these lads from conservative Muslim households would probably have felt more comfortable, but then again she was not obliged to do so, even by her religion, in front of these pre-pubescent males. We eventually got used to her and she made a good teacher, dwelling on the teachings of Islam based on the textbooks issued by the Ministry of Education.

Another important work which we often read at home was an English translation of the Islamic Holy Book, the Qur’an which Muslims regard as God’s Word. This lovely green-covered paperback with its text printed on light green paper had been published by Dar Al Shoura, Lebanon and was issued free by the Islamic Call Society of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriyya. It made fascinating reading, relating as it did God’s Commandments to man; His Glory and Grandeur, Mercy and Munificence and His Omnipotence and Omniscience which was said to be closer to us than our very jugular veins; the duties of His heavenly winged messengers, the Angels; the stories of his chosen earthly messengers, the Prophets; parables of various sorts and even beautiful poetic verses that speak about time, natural phenomena such as the night and the glorious morning light and heavenly bodies such

as sun and moon. These were after all Signs of God, Signs by which humans could know Him; Signs to be found in the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and day; in the sun and the moon; in the beasts of all kinds He had scattered through the earth and in the variations in the colours and languages of men, in the mates He had created for them among themselves. Of all this the Qur'an spoke about in beautiful verses which even in translation did not lose its profundity.



The Qur'an we had looked just like this

And so we learned more and more about our faith and particularly about our God of whom a clearer picture was now being formed in our young minds. We learned that God was our All-Powerful Creator and Sustainer, who despite all our efforts, was the One who actually provided us sustenance and that too according to a measure He had allotted to each one of us. He nevertheless desired the best for His Creation and

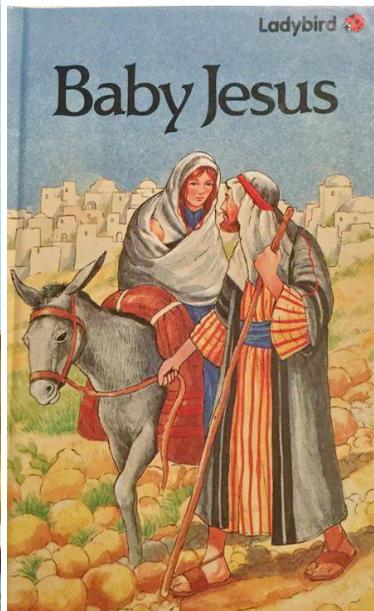
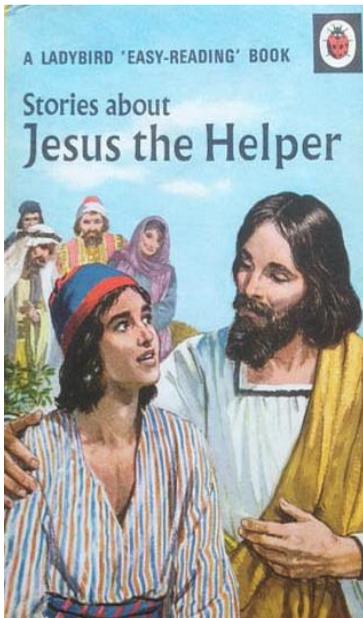
particularly for man whom He elevated above the rest of creation. He desired that man whom He created in His Image be just and fair just as He was all the more, but most of all He desired that man be wise enough to believe in Him through the signs He had created and humble enough to worship Him, bowing and falling prostrate before Him at least five times a day; to this transcendent Divinity up above the heavens we could not see but were nevertheless required to believe in. What we could not figure out was why God had left us earthlings in seeming charge of ourselves without as much as offering a glimpse of Himself to instill greater faith in us. But then again, who were we to question Divine Wisdom. Faith was, after all, not about seeing, but about believing.

Father loved to stress how Islam was not only the the newest of the great faiths, but also the most modern. He went on how the Qur'an described the growth of the foetus in the womb of its mother from a leech-like clot long before such knowledge became known to Western science, which he took as a remarkable prophesy. This he probably picked up from somebody discussing the findings of eminent French surgeon Dr. Maurice Bucaille, author of the book *La Bible, Le Coran et La Science*. Little did we know then that there were much more details in the the Holy Book that agreed with modern science, including among others, the creation of all life from water; the orbit of the celestial bodies, each swimming along in its rounded course and even the idea of a *Big Bang* when the heavens and the earth were a single entity before being split asunder to form that which we call the universe.



An interest in Islam was spurred by organizations like Centre for Islamic Studies founded in the mid-1980s

And so it was that our faith was strengthened in our God and in the other articles of our religion including belief in the Angels He had created, the Prophets He had sent, the Scriptures He had revealed and the Afterlife He had promised. These bore a remarkable likeness to the teachings of Christianity which we were becoming increasingly familiar with through the books we read at the Children's Section of the Colombo Public Library including the stories of the prophets and the parables of Jesus as well as some of the programmes on the life of Jesus we watched on television, especially during the Christmas season. They had to be, they were after all from the same source.



Books like these were found in the children's library

We loved to compare Islam with Christianity. We had come to look upon it as a *civilized religion* which like Islam was devoid of the kind of idols we saw for instance in the *gopurams* of Hindu temples, colossal terrarium-like structures whose gaudy sculptures of various deities and demons in various postures seemed rather scary to our untrained eyes. Nor were we alone in feeling like this, for even some of our paternal kin such as uncle Hyder shared our sentiments, taking pleasure in comparing Islam with the older faith brought by Christ, not to mention our parents' auction assistant, a cheery young Malay woman named Zeenia who would gleefully compare even something as trivial as the Christian *Amen* with the *Aameen* uttered by us Muslims at the end of the *Fatiha* or Islamic Lord's Prayer.

What little we learned about Christianity seemed so much like Islam. This was especially so since we thought at that time that the God of the Christians was One like our God and that

Jesus was simply a messenger sent by this One God. That most Christians believed that God was One of Three or Three in One, God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost was lost on us, for such a grotesque doctrine as the Trinity is not even taught to Christian children for whom the books we read were meant. Little did we know then that what we supposed to be Christianity with its Unity of the Divinity was professed only by a miniscule number of Christians known as Unitarians whose beliefs are very much like those of Muslims. The Christianity we knew as kids had been dealt a severe blow in the Council of Nicea over 1500 years ago when the Trinitarians prevailed over the Unitarians. Little wonder the Qur'an which was revealed a couple of centuries later urged Christians to say One instead of Three.

Generally however the Qur'an spoke favourably of Christians, calling them the closest in love to the believers in contrast to the Jews whom it condemned as the foremost foes of the faithful. Indeed there could hardly be any love between Jew and Muslim and this we learned very early. I distinctly remember my paternal grandfather *Vappa* dismissing the Jews as a *cursed people* while in later times while residing at Umma House for a while in my youth I recall grandmother *Umma* expressing a great admiration for Hitler, calling him a *strong man*. Unlike some Muslims today, I never heard them rue that *Hitler had not finished the job*.



Although Hitler was terrible, his relations with Muslims were good as seen in this photo with Mufti of Jerusalem

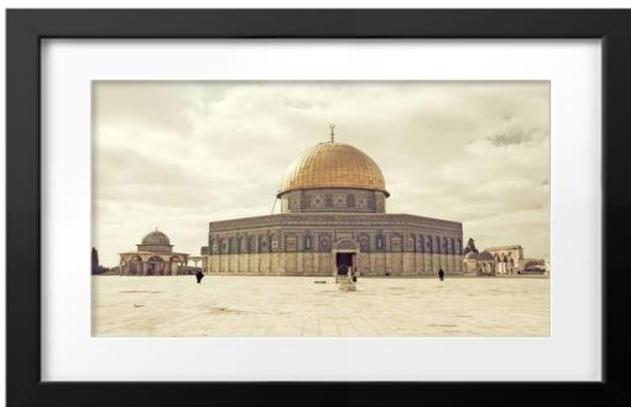
I could n't imagine they would condone the Fuhrer's plan to exterminate Jewry, but there was ill-feeling nevertheless. The reason for the hostility was perhaps the stories of Prophet Muhammad's own treatment at the hands of the Jews, like when he and his small group of followers were betrayed by them after taking flight to the town of Medina.

The Jews who fondly believed themselves to be the 'Chosen People' had not only rejected and sought to kill Jesus who had been sent by God to reform them and do away with their devious practices like usury, but even when given a second chance to accept the message of Islam brought by their Arabian cousins, the offspring of their forefather Abraham through a different mother, had spurned it in their racial arrogance.

Also deeply troubling to them no doubt was the emergence of Israel, the Jewish state that generation had witnessed being implanted upon a Muslim country once known as Palestine. They had probably heard or read how the Zionist state had

been founded by Jewish terror groups like the Irgun and Stern Gang who massacred in cold blood innocent Palestinian men, women and children and even the unborn in the wombs of their mothers, to enable the Jews to return to their 'Promised land' after a nearly 2000 year exodus as a result of Roman rule.

Prominently hanging on a wall of Umma House was a framed colour picture of the Dome of the Rock Mosque in Jerusalem with its beautiful golden cupola which had come under Israeli occupation following the Six Day War fought in 1967, an aide memoire that this third holiest mosque after Mecca and Medina, the one from which the Prophet had ascended spiritually to the heavens, would always remain dear to Muslim hearts.



Hanging on the wall was a picture of the Dome of the Rock

The Jews were now claiming the site as their own on the grounds that their holiest shrine, the Temple of Solomon, long destroyed by the Romans had once stood there. But nay, the picture on the wall, like in many other Muslim households, was a compelling reminder that Muslims would not allow it. The holy land would have to be liberated, if not in our times, certainly before the end of days. Islamic tradition had it that

Jesus would descend to earth before the Last Day to usher in an era of peace and justice. The Muslims would throw in their lot with him and they would fight against the Antichrist and his Jewish bandwagon, wiping out the entire lot!

Among other beliefs which we shared with our Christian friends was the belief in angels, winged beings created from light, among them, the archangel Gabriel known to us as Jibreel, the angel of revelation who had announced Jesus' birth to Mary and brought down the Qur'an to Muhammad. There were others we learnt about, for instance Mikail known to Christians as Michael. Then there was Izraeel or Azrael, the Angel of Death who took away the souls of those God had willed to die and Israfeel or Raphael who was bidden to blow the trumpet that would extinguish the lives of all creation on the Last day, after which the Almighty would resurrect them for the afterlife. These four archangels we learned about from our textbooks, but there were others I was not aware of. One such was Rilwaan, the Keeper of Paradise after whom a Muslim classmate of mine had been named. I once happened to remark to grandmother that this chap had a funny sounding name that sounded more like a *rilava*, a type of light brown furred monkey commonly found in the country. She promptly corrected me, admonishing me not to say such things, for to put it in her words, it was an *angelic name*. Grandma, despite her Tamil speaking upbringing, knew her English well and put it to good use especially when instructing us on religion.



Gal Palliya or Church of Saint Michael down Michael's Road in Colpetty was named after an angel we called Mikail.

Unlike Accha House, Umma House had no dogs as they were believed to keep the angels out. However there was one angel whose advent was often taken to be indicated by the howl of a dog. The folk at Umma House held that whenever a dog howled incessantly especially at night, a death would very likely take place in the vicinity, since the creature could make out the frightening form of Azrael, the Angel of Death as he hovered around, waiting to take the soul of a dying man or woman.

It was mainly from an English translation of the Qur'an and of course uncle Firoze that we imbibed the stories of the prophets, belief in whom was another important article of the Islamic faith. The Qur'an named only 25 prophets from Adam to Muhammad, but according to long accepted Islamic tradition there had been over a hundred thousand prophets. There had to be, for had not God sent them to every nation at different times to invite people to Godliness and warn them to keep away from evil. Adam's mission had been confined to his

immediate descendants, that of the later Hebrew Prophets like Moses, David and Solomon to their people and the final mission of Muhammad meant for all mankind.

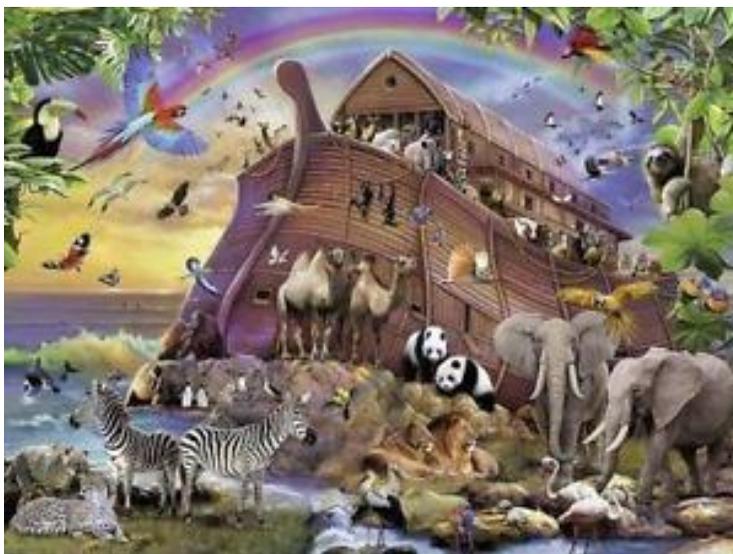
Our English translation of the Qur'an sounded somewhat like the Bible when it spoke of these Divinely inspired messengers of God. The story of the first man Adam it dealt with at length with man's arch foe Satan being brought into the narrative. God, having decided to create a vicegerent on earth commanded the angels to fall prostrate before Adam after He had fashioned and breathed into him his soul. They all fell down prostrate before him, except Iblees, a Jinn or Genie created from fire who refused saying: "*I am better than him. You created me from fire and him you created from clay*". Since then, this Iblees, also known as Shaytaan or Satan had been the arch enemy of man telling God Himself that he would mislead and arouse in men false desires, ordering them to slit the ears of cattle and change the nature created by God.

God created for Adam whom we call Aadam a wife Hawwa or Eve and let them dwell in paradise, at the same time warning them not to eat from a particular tree. Satan who was up to mischief whispered to them that God had forbidden them the tree only because they would become angels or immortals and so misled them with the promise of a kingdom that would never waste away. They ate of the forbidden fruit so that the shame of what was hidden from them, their private parts, became manifest. They sought God's forgiveness and He forgave them, but banished them to earth to live and die and to propagate their kind.

The Holy Book also told the stories of many other prophets, but these stories, profound as they were, were scattered over its many pages and not as easy to make out to our young minds as the way uncle Firoze related it to us in his simple language in the course of the casual, yet intellectually stimulating conversations we had with him.

So it was that we learned about the story of Noah and his Ark which conducted to safety a pair of every species of animal after the great flood so that they could propagate their

kind once the waters had subsided; the story of Abraham who had discovered God amidst all the idolatry around him and who was even willing to sacrifice his son Ishmael to Him after seeing a dream, only to find near the sacrificial spot a sheep being sent to take his beloved son's place; and even the story of his contemporary and kinsman Lot who was sent to reform the people of Sodom but to no avail, whereupon God rained down fire and brimstone on their city. He was cautious not to go into too much detail, simply telling us in all innocence that these folk were 'bad people' but not dwelling on what he meant by it. After all we were too young to understand what a Sodomite or for that matter a Bugger really meant.



We loved the story of Noah because he saved animals

Belief in an afterlife we were also agreed on, with the godly entering heaven and the devilish falling into hell following the Great Judgement when the Almighty Himself judges them, questioning and penalizing them on matters even as seemingly trivial as taking the life of a bird for no cause. I could only imagine that Day of Judgement as a vast horde of humanity

with God passing judgement this way or that on each and every one of them who would then be commanded to cross a bridge as thin as a hairline. The godly ones would have no difficulty crossing over to paradise while the evil-doers will simply not make it, falling over somewhere midway into an abyss of hellfire where they would suffer torment upon torment.

Paradise on the other hand, we were told, was a beautiful place before which all the bounties of the earth would pale in contrast. Here was a place where all that one desired would be fulfilled in an instant. For instance if one longed for an apple, he had only to wish it and presto it would appear right away in our hand. This was perhaps a bit overdoing it, but nevertheless sufficed to show us what paradise could be like. About the only splendour of paradise we were not told about then were the *houris*, fabulously beautiful heavenly nymphs whom no man or genie would have touched before.

Besides our belief in God & c, what would also define us as Muslims was the service or prayer we offered Him, not once, but five times a day. Yet it would not be proper to do so with our foreskins intact, especially at our age when it was still not retractable and when the urine after a pee tended to stick on to it. Urine and such unclean bodily emissions are considered by Muslims *najis* or polluting to the extent of invalidating one's prayer and a Muslim child was expected to commence his prayer when he was only ten years old. In our younger days, it had served a protective function, protecting our little penises and especially the glans, the erogeneos warhead-like part, from harm or injury in the process of birth itself and even in later times when we would have been running about naked, besides preventing any urine dribbling after a pee soiling our pants; but now it had outlived its use and had to go. And so it was that we were deprived of our little prepuces at about the age of ten in a little surgical operation our folk simply called *sunnat* 'the way'. The procedure not only purified us for prayer, but also physically marked us out as Muslims.

Within a year or two, urged on by grandmother, we were learning to say our daily prayers, getting used to it by attending the weekly Friday congregational prayers at the nearby Colpetty or Devatagaha Mosque and studying a book entitled ‘Let’s Pray’ issued free by a foreign Muslim missionary organization. The manual proved to be an easy one to follow as it was well illustrated, depicting all the movements of prayer with the Arabic words one had to utter neatly printed below in Latin text with its English translation. We had by this time already learnt what would go on to be the main body of the prayer, the *Fatiha* or Islamic Lord’s Prayer and a couple of other *surahs* or chapters of the Qur’an that would figure in our daily prayers. These short *surahs* were three in number; *Surah Ikhlas* which affirmed the Oneness of God; *Surah Falaq* where one sought the protection of the Lord of the Dawn from the evil He had created, from the evil of the darkening night and of witches blowing on knots, and *Surah Nas* where one sought refuge in the Lord and Cherisher of Mankind from the evil one who whispered in the hearts of jinn and men. These we had by-heart when quite young, well before we were circumcised, reciting these at night shortly before going to bed to earn our Lord’s favour.



Colpetty Grand Mosque as it stands now

And so there we were praying to God day and night in the peculiar form of Islamic prayer with its cycles of standing, bowing, kneeling and prostrating - the most active form of prayer prescribed in any faith. Particularly elevating to both body and mind was the prostrating posture where after dropping on one's knees one placed the forehead on to the ground in an act of utter humility and submission to the One True God, the blood gushing in to the brain imbuing to the head a feeling of tremendous exhilaration that one sometimes felt like keeping it that way for as long as one could. The prayers we sometimes offered at home and sometimes at the mosque, making it a practice to walk all the way to the Colpetty Grand Mosque for the dawn *Subah* prayer which we would pray in congregation, after which we would find our way to a scenic spot at Perahera Mawatha overlooking the Beira Lake to enjoy the cooling breezes as the day broke.

Our grandmother we constantly saw at prayer in her bedroom and grandfather often found his way to the Colpetty Mosque, on one occasion even chiding us when still quite young for trying to accompany him to the mosque wearing shorts. Even children had to be well attired without their thighs showing in order to visit God's House and this he impressed on us very early. However father nor mother offered their daily prayers, though father never missed his Friday prayers and whenever possible took us along with him. They were not alone. Many Muslims of that generation seemed to think that the Friday prayer alone was compulsory much like Sunday service in church and took their daily prayers lightly or neglected them altogether.



Another mosque where we went for Friday prayers was Dewatagaha Mosque in Cinnamon Gardens

One could hardly blame them. They lived at a time when much of the Islamic world following the fall of the Ottoman empire had succumbed to colonialism, socialism and petty nationalisms that banished religion to the rural backwoods except for a few lucky ones who had kept the faith. However that was changing in the 1980s when we were growing up and entering our teens. A sort of Islamic revival was underway and it told in many things, and not just prayer.

This was seen in other more external aspects like dress, particularly of the women, so that now instead of looking like any other local woman in saree and uncovered head of hair, they were clad from top to toe; the fairly orthodox among them with their colourful headscarves looking like red riding hoods; the strictly orthodox with their hooded heads and long gowns like Christian nuns and the ultra orthodox with their black veils with only a slit for the eyes like Japanese ninja warriors, a strange and outlandish sight for the uninitiated.



At the Zoo with grandma and aunts. 1970s. Only grandma used to cover her hair by drawing over the end of her sari

Before the revival some seemed not to be aware even of the basic teachings of the religion against idolatry, the greatest offence one can do to God. For instance, reverence for some saintly persons known locally as *awliya* or guardians had degenerated to such a low level among certain sections of local Muslims that they were used to posting pictures of these persons on the walls of their houses and praying to them, beseeching them to intercede with the Almighty to grant the humble supplicants their very worldly wishes.

This we saw even in our own home in our young days when mother used to hang upon a wall in the pantry of Accha House a framed picture of a local saint named Thalayan Bawa, a barebodied fakeer clad only in a sarong and seated on the ground cross-legged much like some Indian guru, a pose perhaps taken after the seated Buddha familiar to most Sri

Lankans. She would pray to the saint for favours while holding under the framed image an incense holder as if the fragrant fumes it belched would reach him in some distant spiritual abode. Mother used to say that the easiest way to a man's heart was through his stomach, but now she seemed to think that it was through his nose. Her prayers, needless to say, went unanswered though it took some time for the sanctified image to fall from grace.



A Sufi Sheikh at the Thalayan Bawa Shrine in Ratmalana

True, the image concerned was not an idol in the strict sense of a graven object made of wood or stone nor was it, strictly speaking, bowed down to; nevertheless the very act of giving it a hallowed place and praying to it as a medium between man and God, was in itself anathema to the faith, since the Almighty is supposed to be prayed to directly, not through an intermediary of any sort, especially the picture of a dead man.

Despite its unflinching attitude towards idolatry, Muslims generally do not regard photographs even of living creatures to be prohibited in their faith as they are a mere reflection of an existing created object much like a mirror image and not a product of one's own imagination as a statue would be. Nor for

that matter are playthings for children prohibited, for had not the Prophet, upon beholding a doll belonging to his young wife Ayisha which she probably kept as a keepsake and inquiring what it was, merely laughed when he was told it was a winged horse and that King Solomon had them.



Father's cousin Fatima at her 3 year b'day party. Above her is a picture of Arabic calligraphy with the word Allah "God". Muslim homes do not have statues or pictures of living beings.

There were nevertheless occasions I thought that the penal laws of Islam, though not applicable to us here, were rather harsh. For instance, when the CBS television series Kane and Abel was aired on local TV in early 1987 towards the tail end of our stay at Accha House. The series named after Adam's two sons Cain and Abel known to us Muslims as Qabeel and Habeel told the story of two men, worlds apart, one a privileged US banker and the other a Polish migrant who no

sooner they meet, fall apart, with one later finding that the other who had passed away, actually had a soft spot for him, a nicely woven tale no doubt, but one that also depicted Islam in a very bad light. A part of the plot had the Polish hero Abel giving the slip to the Germans and Russians in the days of the Great War and finding his way to the Ottoman dominions. Here, out of hunger he grabs a fruit and makes away with it after a salesman refuses to accept his obsolete banknote. He is quickly arrested and taken to the executioner to have his hand lopped off, but in the nick of time is saved by a diplomat who conveys him to the Polish consulate whence he migrates to the United States to start life anew.



The teleseries Cane and Abel gave a bad image of Islam

It was much later that I would find out that the tale was an absolute travesty of facts, for no Ottoman who knew very well the laws of his faith would cut off the hand of a man who stole out of hunger or something as insignificant as an apple or orange. Further, the act itself as portrayed in the series was not theft but misappropriation which does not invite such punishment. True, Islamic law lays down that the hand of the thief, male or female, must be cut off from the wrist, but many conditions apply before such punishment could be carried out.

For instance, it could not apply to a child, a lunatic or one who steals out of hunger, or in a famine or a war or in the case of public property. The item stolen must also have a considerable value, worth at least a little over a gram of gold, besides being deliberately removed with the intention of stealing from a place of safekeeping like a safe or locked house, which by extension means it cannot apply to those sharing a common residence, or even an employee, servant or guest. Thefts in public places even when no one is looking around will not incur the punishment, so that it will not apply even to shoplifting or pickpocketing; nor will appropriating an item by seizing it or running away with it since an element of stealth such as seen in burglary should be involved. And to cap it all, the victim could pardon the thief by gifting the stolen item to him or her before he or she is taken to the judge for redress. These and many other conditions like the requirement for two witnesses seeing the thief in the act itself make the prescribed punishment for theft a most difficult one to implement, which was of course not what I saw in the series. In fact, it made me feel rather ashamed that a man should be so punished for an offence as trivial as getting away with an apple simply to satisfy his hunger.

What I would later find out was that the punishment portrayed in the series reflected not the state of affairs as it existed in Islamdom, but rather of mediaval Europe and even of pre-eighteenth century England when even a teenager could be put to death for stealing something as little as a loaf of bread out of hunger, let alone pickpocketing or petty shoplifting, which went even beyond Jesus prescription: "*If your right hand sins, cut it off*", a few of over 200 individually defined capital crimes the English had at the time.

Circumcision

Circumcision is a hallowed Islamic rite going back to the days of Abraham, and perhaps even further back to the time of the Pharaohs. The Egyptians did not confine it to their males like the Jews did, but also extended it to their maids. Lady Hagar, Abraham's Egyptian spouse was herself cleansed by it and passed it on to her descendants through her son Ishmael who eventually went on to become the father of that nation we know today as the Arabs.



Circumcision likely originated in Egypt, Land of the Pharaohs

In Islam too, both males and females are supposed to be purified by it, though in the case of males it is better known and publicized, being generally performed in early childhood between the ages of 5 and 10. The circumcision of girls is generally performed in early infancy, usually on the 40th day and is not publicized beyond the immediate family circle. It is strictly women's business left entirely to the lot of women.

The difference in the case of Muslim male circumcision is that it is not strictly an all male affair. Women are associated with it in different ways. In Arab societies mothers would

prepare their young sons for it by gently endeavouring to push the foreskin beyond the glans and singing verses to the effect that what they are doing will make them men. In Malaysia, the involvement is taken further, with female surgeons playing an active role in lopping off the prepuces of little boys, many of them as young as seven years, the preferred age.



Circumcision ceremony of Turkish boys held in grand style

In Sri Lanka the female involvement is much less marked though sometimes this is observed in the breach. In our case, the earliest announcements of the impending operation came from women, not surprisingly. That was when mother and her assistant at father's auctions whom we fondly called Zameen aunty used to joke about it once in a while, teasingly commenting about cutting our 'gadgets'. Now gadget was the name by which we referred to our little penises, no doubt taught to us by mother. Hearing it often since the tender age of five or six we took no notice of it, till one day father too joked about it, and mother matter of factly asked him "*Seriously Luvi, when are we going to circumcise them?*".

I was about seven years old then and realized from the tone of mother's voice it was no joking matter after all. This was serious talk!



Father and brothers after their circumcision. In the olden days Muslim families celebrated circumcisions in a grand way

And so it was that my brethren and I girded ourselves for the surgeon's scalpel within the next couple of years, though we were not too keen about it initially. With time the perception changed and I came over to look upon it in a more positive light, even eagerly looking forward to it. Not that I disliked the idea of having a prepuce or removing the little strands of thread from my pants that sometimes got embedded in that fold of skin which I regarded more as a diversion than anything else; there was something about altering this very special organ and that was the draw. Little did I know it then, but had I remained uncut into my teens it would not have been very conducive to my personal hygiene as the prepuces of grown-ups are said to produce a cheesy stuff called smegma which may serve as a breeding ground for germs. Little wonder then that my Islamic faith, so concerned as it was with cleanliness laid down that this superfluous bit of skin though serving a protective function in infancy and early childhood be removed before adulthood. This applied to both males and

females, for women too have a little prepuce that covers their clitoris like a hood.



Me and my twin with parents and aunts. Talk about cutting our gadgets was taken as a joke until we were about seven

I gradually came to fantasize with the idea - perhaps the first stirrings of a very nascent, narcissistic sexuality - of having a circumcised penis and even made several attempts at about the age of eight to push the foreskin beyond the glans to see how good it looked. Nay, it would not budge, still looking very much like an unpeeled banana with its lower tip still intact. It was only a year or so later and with some difficulty that I would succeed in retracting the foreskin to reveal a pink glans protruding beyond the prepuce that had been temporarily drawn back. When would it be a permanent feature of my organ I wondered. I didn't have long to wait. The big day came the following year, but when it did, I nor my brothers - who were all done the same day - were too happy about going under the scalpel. It momentarily scared us. After all we were

about to be fleeced of our foreskins. It was only a little bit of skin no doubt, but it was still skin and it was going to be shorn off us like the scalp of an injun. Any kid would be apprehensive when that moment arrived.

We were done at a local hospital or nursing home during the school holidays as most Muslim boys were and still are. Asgar being the elder by 12 minutes went in first and after he was done it was my turn. As I was being taken in to the operating theatre and he was being wheeled out on a stretcher, I queried “*Did it pain?*” much to the amusement of the giggling nurses. All I could hear was a muffled mumble and I figured it wouldn’t be easy going. And then they came for me. I was done by a Muslim doctor going by the name of Sheriff or something like that, ably assisted by this matronly type, little doubt the matron of the home as far as I could judge from her peculiar headdress that looked like a truncated pyramid.



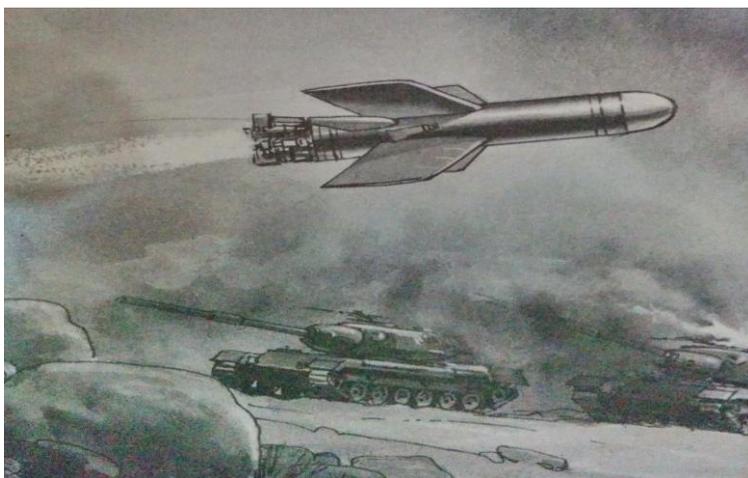
We were circumcised at a local hospital such as Kaleel’s Nursing Home in Maradana pictured here

Even though the part had been locally anaesthetized, I was still in my senses and could somewhat feel the doctor putting

his scalpel or shears or whatever he used back there to good use as he snipped and stitched, though I could not see it being done as a metal or plastic plate of some sort had been placed as a no-see barrier near the navel area, blocking my view.

The operation a success we were conveyed home in a van clad in white sarongs and were soon recuperating, though it took about a week or so for the wound, dressed in some sort of white bandage, to heal. Our paternal grandmother Umma, who had experience in this sort of thing, having herself experienced the circumcision of as many as seven sons, paid a visit to Accha House, perhaps her first and last, to remove the dressing about a week after the snip. She and mother gently took off the dressing that evening after flushing it with water while we were all wet and naked in the bathroom.

The wound was still somewhat sore, but healed well no sooner mother bandaged it with some gamma-irradiated gauze recommended by a family doctor. It certainly looked better than the uncut organ or so I thought. At least now it looked more like a modern missile with a thick warhead than an unpeeled banana with its discoloured primitive looking excrescence at the tip, a look which perhaps appealed to my subconscious militaristic psyche.



*Vigilant Missile from our Ladybird book on Arms and Armour
that resembled our newly circumcised penises*

It was while recovering and running about wearing nothing but underpants that a saucy Malay girl named Zeenia, joined our parents' business as an auction assistant. To make our day, she fawned it was a very good thing for boys to have done, and that they did it in the West too. We too were quite certain about its benefits as mother too had mentioned that they did it in countries like the US, but we were a bit irked why only boys had to undergo it. Why not girls, we reasoned. Could not something similar be done to girls ? We were sticklers for gender equality even then. *What's good for the gander, had to be good for the goose surely.* No one had ever talked of girls being circumcised, but we decided to find out just in case. And so one day we decided to ask this young lady we called Zeenia Aunty whether girls were circumcised. *No!*, she simpered quite bemused, her lips from which we had tried to winkle the answer poutier than usual. We should have known better. After all, it's strictly women's business!

Growing up

When a child, one simply cannot wait to grow up which is perhaps why in one's young days, time seems to pass so slowly but when one really grows up it seems to fly ever so swiftly so that one wonders whether a lifetime is such a long time after all. Looking back on those days even now it seems to me that even a little time seemed so much back then. I supposed like most or all kids my age that babies were born spontaneously, with their mothers' bellies being slit open to deliver them and that fathers were there simply as the husbands of their wives, to take care of their wives' children.

As with life, so with death. There was a time in my very young days when I believed this worldly life was eternal and that people lived on and on. Even when I became aware of this thing men called death, I came to believe that men or animals died only when killed by another or in an accident. It was only in later times that I learned that people could die of disease and old age like when our great grandpa *pappa* died. Nobody could escape death and this in itself seemed such a frightening prospect. I would eventually come to accept it as a fact of life. As our Holy Book, the Qur'an succinctly put it *Every soul shall taste of death.*

One evening when quite young, I learned that the heart had to continually beat to keep one alive. I had felt that beat before, going *dug dug, dug dug*, but upon hearing the news, instinctively placed my hand upon my chest, only to recoil in fright, for I could feel no such beat. Startled, I gasped "*Mamma, my heart has stopped beating!*". Mother burst out in laughter while my heart skipped a beat or two. Being a right hander, I had held my hand on to the right side of the chest. She promptly replied that the pump was on the left side, and so placing my left hand on it I could now breathe a sigh of relief. I was probably aware of the heart's home even earlier but had forgotten about it in my sudden curiosity following the revelation that its beat was necessary to live.

Another object of curiosity were of course our genitals which we knew simply as ‘gadgets’ and which we believed to be solely for pissing purposes. I recall us asking mother one evening after stripping for our regular bath or body wash whether girls too had ‘gadgets’ and being told that they had no such thing. This only aroused our curiosity further, which was only satiated when we convinced a young female guest holidaying in the house to play doctor. *You show me yours, I’ll show you mine!*

Indeed so innocent were we at the time that we conjectured whether not the word *fucker* which we knew to be a ‘bad word’ had its origins in the World War One German warplane known as *Fokker*. We reasoned that this word which even grown-ups dare not use except when greatly incensed, must have come into being when the Brits began cursing the German Fokkers which gave them some extraordinary dogfights during the Great War. In fact, allied pilots called themselves ‘Fokker fodder’ when facing the superior German planes. Our little theory on the F Word was not so far fetched after all.



Fokker plane in dogfight from our How and Why book on the First World War from which we thought the F word came

The only sex education we had in those days came in the form of a coverless outdated sex manual with a few illustrations and a lot of missing pages which one of us found neatly tucked away in our parents' cupboard or drawer. We would eagerly browse through it when our parents were away, though there was nothing much we could glean from it except for a few irrelevant tidbits like nudist camps and a penis enlargement technique probably thought up by some aging Casanova.



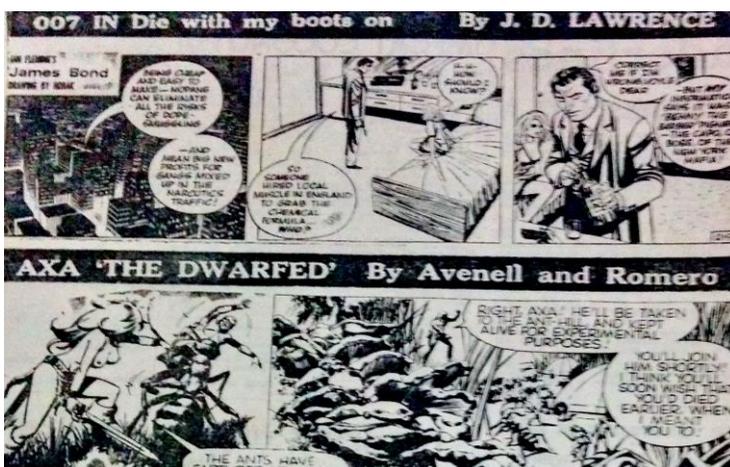
Our parents sex manual was a coverless book like this

Sexuality was a slow process that peaked in my early teens. Its first signs I guess were the feelings of shame I experienced while still quite young such as when I attempted to put my socks on in the mornings before departing for school and noticed my toes protruding from my feet which I thought to be a rather unseemly sight, perhaps shades of the shame our first parents Adam and Eve felt upon discovering their nakedness after eating of the forbidden fruit, though strangely this sense of shame did not extend to my still uncircumcised penis.

A year or two after circumcision, when I was about twelve years old I noticed after urination, a thicker, stickier fluid trickle out following the spray of urine which was all the more noticeable in the absence of the foreskin. This was about the time I began to experience some amorous thoughts, though it

took some rather strange forms like fantasizing over a lurid, rather kinky picture of Lady Godiva, naked and rather golden-complexioned with firm upturned breasts and cascading blond hair sensually mounted on a white horse riding through the town of Coventry. This salacious, almost pin-up picture which I came across in an illustrated children's encyclopaedia in the Kiddies section of the Colombo Public Library was, veritable kinderporn, certainly enough to turn on any pubescent boy, kindling a fire of a desire he could achieve only in his wettest dreams, in a fantasy factory of his own making.

No words could capture the hold it had on me- this image that could spark a Bacchanalian orgy or drive an aspiring Viking warrior to the battlefield fantasizing about the Valkyries in Valhalla. Unlike today's prudishly conservative culture, folk back then did not seem to think of such works in the public domain as corrupting, which is why even a cartoon strip like Avenell and Romero's *Axa* published in the *Sun*, a local daily newspaper as late as the 1980s could depict the heroine topless or even nude at times in a manner that it could even have a seasoned Victorian voyeur drooling over it.



Comic strips published in Sun newspaper, July 12, 1983

The hormones had sprung into action and before long I would experience my first ejaculation, not as a wet dream, as many adolescents do, but as a deliberate attempt to hurry my manhood. So there I was one afternoon after school in the bathroom of Accha House all alone to myself, my right hand the only collaborator in the peccadillo now being enacted. Destiny was at play here, a drama that would change my life forever. It didn't take long to come, and come it did with a force and feeling that had me almost reeling - this rapture, when bursts of white seed gushed forth in a flush of orgasmic delight. In the few seconds that preceded that fateful moment I had felt my heart throbbing with excitement, as if it were in some mighty rush, flushing my body with adrenaline and sending the hot blood pulsing through my veins, so overwhelming that it was almost as if I were in a dream, nay in a delusion of fantastic, unimaginable proportions. I was the first of my siblings to experience that rupture into adulthood and need to say was proud of it. I had finally become a man and I had rushed it. The experience was impressionable, for even many years later I would get away with the idea that people made love standing.

On the one hand, it had been a fall from innocence, the innocence of childhood, the innocence of my father Adam, the father of my fathers, before he ate of the forbidden fruit and felt the shame of sex. On the other, it had been a flight, a flight to another world that looked down upon the celibacy of childhood with scorn, a world created weak in the flesh both as bait for sin and as a foretaste of the pleasures of paradise. A world one had to tread with caution. I would reserve my first real sexual encounter for marriage, many, many years after we had left Accha House. My faith strictly forbade pre-marital liaisons of any kind and it had to prevail over any other instinct, however strong it may have been.