

Masked Memo [R&S&E]

By Ahmed Abid



Rudhra Baul (Ahmed Abid)

A self-professed storyteller
গল্পটা মানুষের জীবনের ও জয়ের

In this time of new normal life and virtual reality any one from any part of world could get access to my social media page on Facebook where I identified myself as ‘Rudhra Baul’, meaning a ‘rebel bard’ in English. As the Facebook allows putting a photograph- anybody could see my masked profile picture covered with green red white coloured face mask.



To be honest, in Dhaka, where I have been living since early 70’s already became most dusty city long before the pandemic. Some health conscious citizen started using mask to avoid dust and uncomfortable smell of waste used to piled next to the streets. I never could do that or thought about it, as I do not like to cover my face. However, I had to start using mask since March 2020 due the reality of NEW NORMAL life. The first day I used mask publicly was in 29 March 2020, the day I went to a remote village of Tangial to shoot a narrative of a migrant worker. In

the rural areas I found different narrative of resilience adapted by common people and their culture. They have taken pandemic as a part of their normal life and reality!

In short time I started using a mask when I was doing voluntary works, for a charity organization to distribute food and protection materials at west Hazi para during the months of lock down due to pandemic in Dhaka city. At that time my colleague took a few photographs

of masked people and overall situation in city. The situation was so terrible – I felt like, the language on their masked face and of the eyes was – ‘I can’t breathe’ the universal voice of humanity uttered by George Floyd i.e. Black live matters. All their lives were frozen by some black magic or evil activities! **THE NEW NORMAL REALITY!** Here begins my new normal life of adjustment and learning at the age of 53.



Being trained social science researcher I just submitted my Ph.D. thesis in a University of Australia and came to visit my family in Dhaka by the end of February 2020. Never had any idea what the challenges I was going to face in coming days and how it would change the course of my life! The ideal plan was if my wife and my son could get visa, we would go to Sydney to explore our livelihood there! Fortunately, on 4th of March my wife and son got visa. Unfortunately, Australian border got closed by mid of next month and as I could not take my decision quickly, thus we got confined! There was no way out except comply with the time and try for some innovations! **THE NEW NORMAL STRUGGLE BEGINS.**

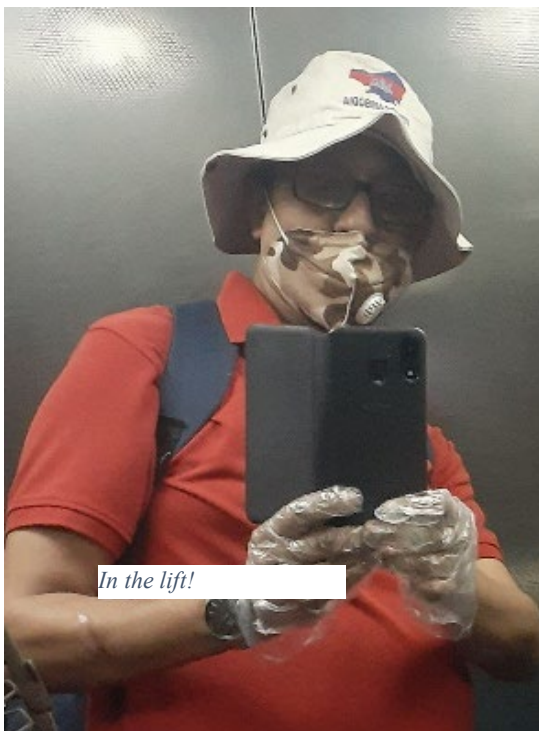
In my observation most of the groups of working class people in the dusty capital city DHAKA, never wore mask, nor do they want to, but during the pandemic they had to use masks! I can read the language of their flat faces; those had been blotted out of the colours of lives, due to LOCK DOWN and as do not have any regular income! A lot in fact had been expressed through their gaze, through their flat eye sight! They did not need to say anything! But their gaze reckoned that they could not breathe!



Picture: 1 & 2. Rickshaw pullers 3. Face of Volunteer, Prochesta- WORLD CLEAN, Photo by Abid Mallick



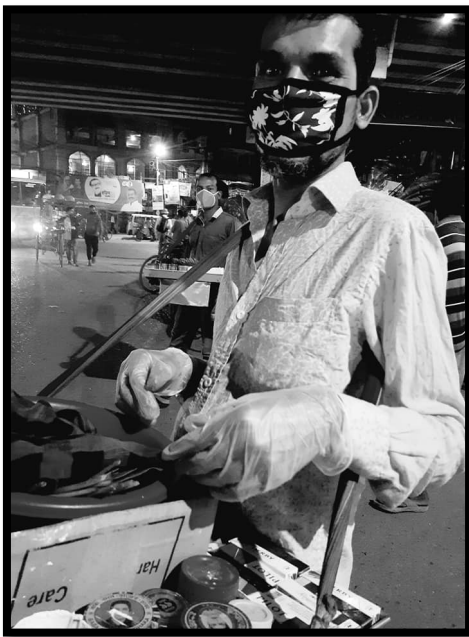
As I could not return to Australia, I was in dire need to find a place where I could work, which would be like a work station; unfortunately, I could not manage any! The situation was so



worst, that being a ‘middle class’ member that I could not continue to revise my academic thesis work of in the place where I was living with my wife and kid! My mother in law’s rented flat was enough for our stay, to have foods and my wife has a separate living room. However, there was no place to concentrate on serious academic work as we have a toddler around and I was only able to work on my e-mail in the common space. On the other hand, my school informed me to complete the revision work of my thesis within a certain time. In search of an uninterrupted space of work, I moved to one of my Aunt’s husband’s office for a couple of weeks, which is situated in other part of the city. Unfortunately, it didn’t work too, and then I moved to my elder brother’s flat, where my parents and two other sisters were living with him. One day while inside the elevator of my Aunt’s apartment, I looked at me towards the reflecting mirror of the lift and felt something.

It was not a good feeling, I felt like I had been ‘caged forever and there is no way out to get rid of it!

The situation seemed so restless to me, I was in full of stress and unlimited uncertainty! I was trying to complete my thesis revision working in the living room of my elder brother. It was not possible to work there in the evening as my father used to watch TV in the first hours of evening and my mother and sisters used it to watch Indian TV shows in the later part. During the time of LOCK DOWN they were under mental stress. TV was their only windows to get relax. In addition, without earning a penny over months made me even more restless, I need to maintain the expenses of my child’s basic materials! My brother, who is an academic of public university, unsubscribed the newspapers, the most important thing of my father’s life. Being a senior citizen of eighty, even having myopic vision he could not do without newspaper!



Mobile photo by Author: Street vendors at Malibagh wearing mask and gloves

While I was struggling in my situation, I realised that the general people quickly adapted THE SUPER MASKED REALITY which was a ‘NEW NORMAL’ to everyone. One evening I looked across the street and saw a couple selling betel leaf and cigarettes. I was surprised to see them wearing masks! They did not only wear masks, they put on hand gloves too! At that time, I realized- it is possible to give a try to survive in any challenging situation, you just need to work it out! - That was my first learning during pandemic.

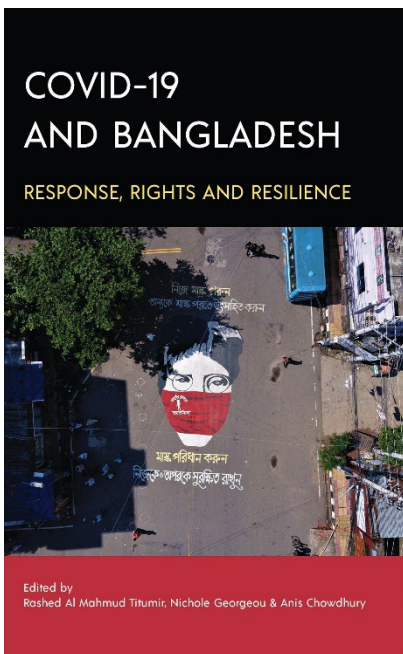
Since getting a job in a University outside Dhaka and after joining there in mid-August 2021, I tried a few many things to overcome few of the challenges including how I wanted to use the time. Unfortunately, most of the projects I tried turned as failed attempts. And by 12 December, 2020 my father, the 80 plus senior citizen died from cardiac arrest and internal bleeding inside his brain. The pandemic created huge mental pressure for him as he was restricted in the flat since March. He was passing a tough time in his life like a prisoner! Me along with my elder brother could not even fulfil his last wish to bury him at our village, next to her mother- due to pandemic reality! At that time, I saw masks became one of the priorities in my bookshelf at my workplace hanging next to my books and film's poster.



The work place at my elder brother's rented flat was situated at one part of the city, and my wife and son live with my mother in law in an apartment at other part of the city. Therefore, I used to commute from Malibagh to Mohammadpur. Most of the time I commute wearing mask in a type of three wheelers small vehicle locally called as CNG (as it is fuelled by CNG gas). I have some photographs of those moments. Later I started riding bike- motorcycles. On the way I found beggars and vendors, all are wearing masks. During the traffic signal they came near me to beg or sell things by the CNG's window wearing masks. I found the newspaper seller or a vendor without one hand selling pens – as per his survival efforts, they are wearing mask! Once again I saw Dhaka, a magical city with thousands of possibilities to survive.



Field work at Remote Island Bhola with Research team



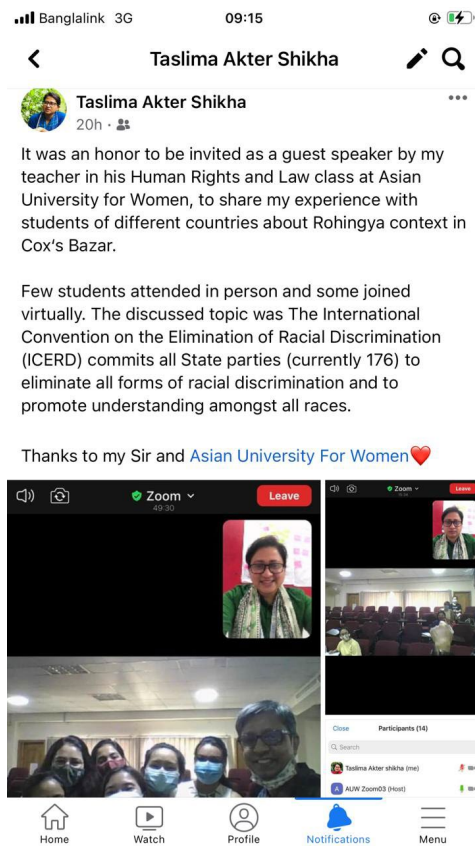
Masks also reflects the standards and class of the people. Flat, white, blue surgical mask, fabric made mask are being used by general and mass people. where each of the government and non-government organization use their own logo/ designed mask. I myself found me in this race when I was working in the remotest area of Bangladesh with my team on small projects as a team leader. Being a contributor of a chapter of an academic publication I found mask has become a symbol of resilience!

Book cover where I contributed a chapter



Field work, river bank Majher Char, bhola

True, I do not like to wear mask but we may have to live with this new normal reality for a while. There are no other choices.



Face book post Screen shot: Taslima Shikha



Photo: Shajiya Khanom

I wish to write a whole book on this memo's if I can get a publisher and I hope that would be valuable cultural anthropology of culture and resilience!

Ahmed Abid, Ph.D.

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Note: This is product out of In Situ Graduate School (ISGS), 2021 on 'Cultural Precarities'. Any image/ copy/ reproduction of this write up without permission is forbidden.