

Kichhu Katha (Nov 11-27, 2016)

Four years almost passed since I last visited Africa. Onek kicchu bolar chhilo, kintu bolbo bolbo bole kicchu-i bola hoye otheni. Oneker request-e aaj likhte boslam. Onek kicchu mone-o nei. Jato tuku mone pochhe, likhchhi.

Visit to Kigali, capital of Rwanda. It is a small country next to Uganda in Central Africa. The purpose was to attend the 27th General meeting of TWAS (Third World Academy of Sciences, later on renamed as The World Academy of Sciences for the Advancement of Science in Developing Countries), Nov 14-17, 2016. That was the time when demonetization was going on in India. (Note that, demonetization in India began on Nov 8 and ended on Dec 30, 2016.)

My ticket was like the following with AI (purchased though Balmer Lawrie & Co. Ltd), as I was travelling using partly my JC Bose fellowship fund and partly the INSA travel support. While the travels in domestic parts were by AI, the International flights were operated by co-shared Ethiopian Airlines.

Note: "Rwanda" is a country which is not known to many, unlike "Uganda". The young lady from Balmer Lawrie who was booking my tickets got surprised to know the names, Kigali, Rwanda when I told her over phone. She asked, Sir where are they? I know a country named Uganda. I replied - I was not good in Geography in school. Now it appears that you too 😊 Please search with Google. It is next to your Uganda in Africa.

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We reached Kigali international airport on 12 Nov afternoon via Addis Ababa with Ethiopian Airlines. Had breakfast in a restaurant at the Addis Ababa airport with Prof. Swapan Datta, the then VC, Visvabharati who travelled from Delhi (menu: sausage, egg, bread and coffee, costing about 10USD per head including tips). "Maha kalua-ra" serve korlo. Eto mahakalua (black people) ek-sathe, onek-din por dekhlam. Last was in Dakar, Senegal in 1998 TWAS meeting. Addis Ababa airport is very busy and congested with lots of nice handicraft shops, among others.

In the departure lounge for Kigali flight, we met several other TWAS delegates who travelled by different airlines from different locations. We found there Prof. Hemanta Majumder (HM), a Biochemist from IICB, Kolkata sitting with his wife. (Bou-ta ke sange niye “subodh balaker” moton boshe royechhe ☺). Unar mathar kalo chul, as usual, poripati kore acchrano (combed).

Note: One of the attractive features of attending TWAS meetings was to see countries and places around, where people usually do not visit as tourists or do have less opportunity to visit, unlike UK, USA etc. So, we purchased the tickets so as to reach two days before the convention starts.

On the way to hotel from airport we collected our registration kits. After checking into a nice hotel, we (HM+wife, and me) hired a big car (as a small car, just fit for three, was not available) to visit Kigali city and around. The city is so clean that I fell in its love. Its characteristics features are:

Kigali was declared to be the cleanest city in Africa. No food is allowed to consume in the street. Every last Saturday, they have a community service to clean the city. All families have to take part in turn. No one can skip the duty by paying instead, or hiring someone else to do for him. Even the own kids cannot be sent in lieu of the head of the family, as they need to go to school/ college.
Hard to believe in India!



Figs. 1 - 3: Typical roads in Kigali



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Fig. 3: A typical road in Kigali: Students in uniform (Okhaneo neel-sada 😊)



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Figs. 4 & 5: Inside a genocide museum

We visited a Rwandan genocide memorial at Nyamata. (The other bigger one was shown by the organizing committee during the convention as one of their events). At the end, we had little shopping, mostly are locally-made handicrafts. They are beautiful and unique. However, one needs to bargain with the owners to get a good price. Mrs. Majumder can bargain well, and I like that. Among different items, we bought wooden Gorillas, typical of the place and Agaseke peace baskets. Agaseke peace basket has also become a Rwandan cultural symbol of peace and reconciliation. It is woven from natural sisal fibers; one 4 inch basket takes at least one day to weave.



Fig. 6: Market place while raining

In the evening, when we returned, our hotel became full of Indian delegates; several Bengalis were from different parts of India as well as from other countries e.g., Bangladesh, Australia, Canada. And, as usual **“Bangla” became the 2nd language after the local host language**. This had always been the case in previous TWAS meetings. Banga-santan der ei-kathata shunte bhaloi lagbe 😊

In one of those days, we took a whole day trip for an African safari in Akagera national park. Without a safari, Africa visit remains incomplete. There we had three more members in the group, viz, Prof. Ranjan Mallik of IIT- Delhi, and Profs. Md. Shamsheer Ali (Physics) and Zahurul Karim (Agriculture) from Bangladesh, i.e., six members in total. We hired an expensive car, with open-roof facility, to have better comfort and view of animals.

Before describing the trip, let me give a brief description about **Ranjan**, otherwise, the story would remain half-complete. He is a “hashi-khushi” (smiling) EE of about 55 year old. A “subarna banik”, wearing a golden necklace, married to a lady of a purba-banga (east Bengal) family. Very talkative, pete khub ekta katha thake na, monta bhalo 😊



Fig. 7: Akagera National Park: Entrance



Fig. 8: Akagera National Park: Around the reception building

I had seen Ranjan always carrying a couple of small waist bags since I had met him in an earlier TWAS meeting in Muscat, Oman in 2014. Initially, I thought these bags may have a “Gopal” or some “Thakur” or some valuables inside which he never likes to detach from his body. Karon, onek boyosko mahilader dekhechhi, onara ekata bag sob samay carry kore jar bheto-e “Thakur” thake ba chabir-gochha (bunch of keys) thake, ba something special (??), ebong kaoke dhorte-o dei na. Being curious, I asked Ranjan a number of times about the contents jokingly, but he was reluctant to tell.

In the safari trip he was sitting beside me, and opened those bags once. Then I noticed, one of the small waist bags had a very small water bottle, and some smaller bags/pockets, one inside another. Some were seen to have half-finished “masala chholar”, “badam-er” packets, piece of burger, biscuits, some medicine..... Of course, he was kind enough to offer me some pieces of masala chholas to taste.

Note: Our six-member group consisted of four persons of East Bengal origin, and two of West Bengal, i.e., “ghotis” (HM and Ranjan). And those two “ghotis” are again “bangal barir jamai”, i.e., half-bangal 😊

The first part of the safari was very exciting, we had seen various colourful birds and small/medium/big sized animals (e.g., deer, zebra, wild buffalo, elephant, Rhino). The second part was completely reverse and horrible. Because of the rain that made the roads badly slippery, our car slipped down into the side drain. We got totally trapped with tension inside the car. Nobody was around, and one is not supposed to get down from the car for possible animals around. Besh bhoi-er byapar! Sabai chup! Takhon bojha geche amader ke koto boro palwan 😊. After about four hours, around the sunset our car was pulled up by a rescuing truck. We were all relieved. Thanks to God/Allah that no one got injured, and no animal attacked us.



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Figs. 9-16: Akagera National Park: Animals Inside



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Figs. 9-16: Akagera National Park: Animals Inside

So we could not see African giraffes and other big animals which were supposed to be in the places to be covered in second part of the trip. However, I did not feel that bad like some other members, because I had seen those (giraffe, zebra, elephants, and hippopotamus) in an earlier safari in South Africa while attending another TWAS meeting in Durban in 2009.

Then we had our late lunch in a restaurant in the park, as it was included in the cost of the trip. We were all tired because of fear, and could not eat well the prescribed meals. Note that we had to walk over hard mud (shokto etel mati) from the place where the bus dropped us to the restaurant. As a result, Sabar juto-r tola-te sei kada bichhri bhabe atke chillo. Some of us tried to clean them in basins in Men's room of the restaurant, but could not succeed fully. After returning to hotel I tried to clean mine in the wash basin, and it took about 45 minutes to remove the mud reasonably in a number of steps. My shoes, purchased from Sao Paolo, were made with Brazil calf's skin. It was very light weight with grooves in lower sole. After getting mud inside the grooves and elsewhere, shoes became heavy ("bhari") to walk. Kathaler aatha-r moton lege chhilo. I used my finger-nails and tooth brush to remove them. As expected, "khuchiye khuchiye sticky kada tolar jannya amar angul gulo besh byatha korchilo". Jeno mone hochhilo, keo bolchhe – "ar jabi safari korte"? ☺

It is about three-hour journey from the park to our hotel at Kigali. I was sitting next to Driver's seat. Being tired over the whole day, most of us were more or less sleeping or feeling sleepy during the return journey. Amar ektu jhimuni aschhilo maje modhye. Hatham, Prof. Karim bole uthlen, Sankarbabu, apni kinu ghumaben na, ta hole driver-ta ghumiye porbe. I said, bah, Bangaladeshi budhhi, nije ghumabo arame, aar arekjanke bolbe jege thakte for his safety ☺.

We left Kigali on Nov 18, 2016 afternoon. Reached Bombay on 19th morning via Addis Ababa. Prof. Majumder and Mrs. Majumder also reached Bombay with me. They left for Kolkata by a private airline in the morning. However, there was a restriction for me to travel only by AI, and its next flight for Kolkata was scheduled in night at 10.45PM. Now the problem is where to stay for so long in Bombay? For that, I requested Prof. Ambuja Salgaonkar, Dept. of Mathematics, Bombay University to arrange, if possible, an accommodation in their guest house. She booked it happily in the Kalina campus of the University, and requested me if I could get time to meet their students and deliver a talk in an ongoing workshop. I said, no problem in giving a talk, as I was carrying my laptop. Accordingly, I got a free accommodation in Bombay, and some honorarium too (in old Indian currency) for the talk. Because of demonetisation and long queue in banks at that time, the honorarium was paid in old currency with a request to get them changed with new ones at some bank in Calcutta. **“Ektu-adhtu porashuna jana thakle o gyan deoar abhyesh thakle, oi subidha gulo pao jai”** ☺. Tobe, laptop, ba lecture material, carry korte hobe!

Carrying laptop in connection with the aforesaid scenario of “talk - free accommodation – honorarium”, reminds me some advice in my childhood days. From our residence at Entaly, we use to visit “mamar bari” at Dakshineswar during summer/ puja vacation only for fun and enjoyment, and no study. My “dadu” (maternal grandfather) often used to tell me a story citing an example of “napit” (barber). **A “napit”, wherever he goes, even to his “shashur bari” (in-laws house), always carries his small box (that contains scissors, combs, shaving cream etc.) with him**, so that on the way he can earn if he gets customer(s). Therefore you should always carry your school books, note books etc. whenever you come here to “mamar bari”, so as to have not only fun, but some study also.

The story is not yet complete! Because I had to travel the next night again to the same continent, but a different country. The following was the itinerary. The purpose was to attend the 1st Mediterranean Conference on Pattern Recognition and Artificial Intelligence (MedPRAI16), Tebessa, Algeria, Nov 22-23, 2016 (website: <http://medprai2016.sciencesconf.org>). The conference was organized by the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science, Larbi Tebessi University, Tebessa, Algeria. My one-hour keynote speech was scheduled at 9:30AM on 22nd.

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Question may arise, why didn't I travel to Algeria directly from Rwanda? Actually, I had initially some doubt to get Algerian visa because of their requirements, and was not sure to make the trip. By that time, I fixed the Rwanda trip and purchased tickets. But, Dr. Chawki Djeddi, Organizing Chair of the MedPRAI16 conference, was continuously chasing me by providing all information for a possible Cultural visa. He sent me an expensive ticket too. The tickets were purchased through the travel agent: Tourina Vovages Algerie. As can be seen, my international tickets were by Qatar Airways, while the internal ones (blue marked) by Air Algeria. They were with different PNR numbers.

Note that notarized invitation is not required for cultural visa to Algeria. For other categories of visa, you need that. So, **I travelled by a Cultural visa** which was obtained just by an invitation letter from the Conference organizing committee. My travel agent in Calcutta was not somehow aware of this process. Thanks to Dr. Chawki Djeddi for making my visit possible.

Tebessa is located in the north-east part of Algeria, close to the border of Tunisia. It is a small city. There was no direct flight from the capital Algiers. I flew from Algiers to Constantine, and from there by a car to Tebessa which took about 6 hours. Otherwise, one had to stay overnight at Constantine to get a flight to Tebessa next day morning. And that was not possible as my talk was in early morning at 9:30AM. Accordingly, the chosen route was Kolkata-Doha-Algiers-Constantine ... (road) ... Tebessa ... (road) ... Constantine-Algiers-Doha-Kolkata. Names of airports at Algiers and Constantine are Houari Boumediene Airport, and Mohamed Boudiaf Airport, respectively.



Fig. 17: Outside the Houari Boumediene Airport, Algiers in Evening

Our QR1379 flight from Doha Hamad International airport landed at the international terminal of Algiers Houari Boumediene Airport. After immigration clearance I had to move to its domestic terminal for AH6026 flight. The environment, as expected, was completely different, mainly with language problem. While waiting in the lounge, I bought a small packet of potato chips, and paid 5USD in cash, as I did not have local currency. Definitely, it cannot cost so much, but I had to pay!

Dr. Chawki Djeddi and Mr. Mohammed Cherif came to Constantine airport to receive me and drive to Tebessa. We reached the hotel at about 2:00AM. On the way, we had nice Algerian dinner (in road side) mostly with roasted beef, ribs and kababs of different kinds. The hotel room that I was given to stay had a typical smell, and I was not feeling comfortable to sleep.

Anyway, in the morning after little breakfast I was taken to the conference venue. It was a warm welcome. People around were happy to see, perhaps, someone all the way from, Calcutta, India. Ladies were not seen with borkha. Several, not all, of them had hijab. I delivered my Keynote talk. Some questions from audience were there too. After the talk, students in a group, mostly lady, took a few close photos with me. If by chance my body or hand touched the lady adjacent to me, I got the automatic reply - saying - no problem! **This really surprised me when I compared with other Islamic countries** that I visited, e.g., Iran, Saudi Arab, Oman, Indonesia, Egypt. ☺



Fig. 18: After the Keynote Talk in the Conf. Auditorium of Larbi Tebessi University, Tebessa

For example, In Bangladesh: Students or young people behave very similar to ours. In Dhaka University, chhela o meyera lawn-e eksathe bose golpo korchhe. Emonki, Doyel Chalk-er famous Curzon Hall-er wall gheshe **young couple nirabe bose ache, may be, prem nibedan korchhe**. This kind of scenario is very common here and there. Female students are either with or without hijab. You can talk to them, smile, no problem. I have visited Bangladesh several times, particularly, Dhaka University.

In Tehran University, Iran: Here female students were 30% in 2011. I talked to girls in conference, they took picture with me in groups, **but no smile. Hanste mana ☺**. Even in the hotel reception desk, no smile of women at you. They wore mostly styled borkha (tapered at waist), not covering the head. Black borkhas covering the whole body+head were hardly seen. Whereas, during my earlier visit to Tehran with my wife in Feb 2001 in connection with receiving the Al-Khwarizmi International award from the President Md. Khatami, most of the women had typical black borkhas covering the whole body, although some wore jeans trousers inside. My wife had to cover her head with a scarf. What a change was noticed in ten years!

Interestingly, **Isfahan is a very romantic city**, with several historical (heritage) monuments, minars and bridges. Here, husband-wife were often seen to move around on streets quite late evening holding each other's hands. However, women's character was as in Tehran. In our hotel, the security person was asking me about Hindi films, mentioning the names of Rani Mukherjee and Sharukh Khan.

In Oman: We spent about a week in Muscat for TWAS meeting in 2014. Here, women smile at you, not problem, whether in a shopping mall, or hotel, or conference. **Indian engineers have high respect**. Their service in building different constructions in Oman was acknowledged several times during our stay. Behaviour of people was also nice.

In Saudi Arabia: We spent a week at Jeddah for a workshop in King Abdullah University. Here, during classes, female students can see the male teacher from the upper deck through a transparent (glass) wall, but not the other way. If you have female students to work with you as research scholar or project student, you can talk to them, but preferably not looking at their eyes; forget about smile. **If you smile, you may invite trouble**☺. Within the university campus, I had not seen any women without borkha. In ladies hotels, boys are not allowed to enter. There was a time mentioned at the entrance of ladies hostel within which all students had to be inside, no way outside. In public place, say, market, borkha, small or big size, is a must; otherwise, very likely, you would be in great trouble. Police is watching.

Let us now come back to the story of Tebessa.

I was told that the Larbi Tebessi University, Tebessa, had 30% women students. Here in Algeria, religion is not that much strictly followed. More freedom is there in women dress, behaviour and liking, unlike many other Islamic countries. Wearing borkha, hijab or nothing is their own choice. Even during the selection of a bridegroom, whether arranged or love marriage, **woman's (bride's) opinion is given the due respect.**

During lunch, the first dish provided was a big bowl of soup containing various vegetables, leaves, meat (chicken) pieces etc. That was something to remember as a typical dish of the region.

After the lunch on 22nd, I changed the hotel. Moved to one towards the city. That too was not so good. So, after staying one night there, I moved to another to stay for the next two nights. **Basically, I stayed in three hotels.** However, their conditions, somehow, were not so pleasant.



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Figs. 19-21: Churches in Tebessa old town

Next day (23rd Nov), Mr. Mohammed Cherif drove me in his car to visit the old town, some church, historical places, and the wall that surrounds the city and its gates. Quite interesting! Took some photos. The city was little dirty, not so clean. Like several places in our country, plastics were scatted here and there. Road conditions were mostly similar to ours. Poverty on common people was noticeable.





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Figs. 19-21: Churches in Tebessa old town



Figs. 22: Wall that surrounds the city with one of its gates

On 24th Nov, we went to a date market, among others. That was one of the things to see in Tebessa, and Mr. Cherif wanted to buy some for me as gift. I was told that dates of that region are the best in the world. Size of some is about 2.5". They are transparent, and the colour is little whitish. Dates are packed in small packets nicely, each weighing 1Kg or 2Kg.



Fig. 23: A market inside the Wall that surrounds the city

Cherif wanted to buy 5kg for me. I said no, no, as that would increase my luggage load and cross the permissible free limit. Then he bought, I think 2kg or 3Kg. While paying to shopkeeper he introduced me as the university guest from India, and said these dates were for me as gift. Then the old shopkeeper replied (as per the English translation by Cheriff), university guest means his guest, so it would be a gift from himself, so no payment is required. Though I did not understand their conversation, but his body language told me everything about feelings and how much he was happy. I was just thrilled. Such nice people are here! **This was really a memorable experience** 😊



Figs. 24-26: A market



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Figs. 24-26: A market



Fig. 27: A typical street in Tebessa old town

Next day (25th), we planned to visit Constantine city before taking the flight for Algiers in the evening. Constantine, located in the north part of Algeria, was a French colony. It is a wonderful city. Accordingly, we started from Tebessa in early morning about 4 or 4:30 AM (completely dark) so as to reach Constantine by 10AM. On the way, we were stopped in several places by police for security reasons, and Cheriff had to explain the reason of driving at the early morning, particularly for being accompanied by a foreigner. Police initiated the dialogue uttering – Salam Ali-kum, and Cheriff responded – Wa-alikum-Salam! I understood only this much.

After reaching Constantine, we had our breakfast. Some Algerian delegates from Constantine, whom I interacted during the conference, met me in there. They took me again to a market, bought some dry foods for me to carry to India; one of them also brought two small bottles of Attar for me. Then, Cherif took me to a shopping place to buy a woollen alkhalla for me. In heavy winter, those people wear alkhalla to protect from cold. One cashmere woollen alkhalla, that he chose for me, was beautiful with hand-knitting work and very expensive, in my scale. He was so determined to buy and present me as a souvenir. **“Ekebare nachhor-banda”**. In fact, he did put me in an embarrassing situation. However, after lots of arguments, I could manage to convince him that it would be of no use in Indian weather. **So, it would be a complete wastage if you buy ☺**

Then we went to visit the main city, several museums and historical sites located around the city. Constantine is a big city, and it is often referred to as the "city of bridges" for having numerous picturesque bridges connecting the various hills, valleys, and ravines that the city is built on and around. **Khub-i sundar!** Since we had a car with us, we could visit conveniently several tourist spots, as we liked, just after properly parking the car. Sometimes, I had seen Cheriff to talk to police, may be regarding the parking.



Fig. 28: On the way to Constantine

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Figs. 29-33: Picturesque views in Constantine: Bridges, hills, ravines, river and buildings



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Figs. 29-33: Picturesque views in Constantine: Bridges, hills, ravines, river and buildings



Figs. 29-33: Picturesque views in Constantine: Bridges, hills, ravines, river and buildings

We reached the Constantine Mohamed Boudiaf Airport well in advance. I had an Assamese scarf (red-white) in my hand bag. (Often I carry a similar item in my bag for offering, if situation arises so.) I presented it to Cheriff by wrapping up his shoulder as Indian way of honouring someone. In return, he hurriedly bought a book about Constantine from a shop inside the airport, and presented to me. However, when I opened the wrapper at home, I found the **book full of beautiful pictures of the City, but in Arabic language** 😊



Fig. 34: Constantine Mohamed Boudiaf Airport

In the flight to Algiers, I was assigned to a middle seat. However the Aisle set, next to me, was occupied by a young lady, of course beautiful. During the last three days, I got little bit acclimatised about their culture. So, to open the dialogue, I asked her a standard question - where does she live in, Algiers or Constantine? She said, she lives in Algiers, and she went to Constantine for honeymoon. **Tahole-to, Golpo korarr moton onek rasad pao gelo** 😊 Then I asked some typical questions to pass time, e.g., Where is your husband now? How come that you are travelling alone after honeymoon? Is it an arranged marriage? After smiling she said, my husband is a doctor. He had some work there to complete, and would return after a few days. I have some urgent work at Algiers, so I am returning back today. She knew him (husband) before marriage and had love affairs for quite some time. I asked if there were any family opposition. She said, after listening to my selection, my elder brother met him, and found him a qualified and nice person; so did not object. Meanwhile, she also asked me the reason of coming here, and about India. **Katha bolte bolte ek ghonta samay sundar bhabhe kete gelo.**

The crew started announcing the precautionary steps before landing at Algiers domestic terminal. While preparing to leave her seat to get down, she took a pen (blue coloured Islamic look) out of her small ladies hand bag and presented to me. **I also reciprocated by presenting her** a steel golden colour pen, which was in the chest pocket of my jacket (displaying partly outside) for a long

time ☺ My QR1382 flight from the international terminal was at 11PM, leaving adequate gap in between.

On the way to immigration counter, I was enquiring about something from an airport official. He smiled and asked – are you from India? I said, yes, Calcutta. Then he uttered the name “Raj Kapoor”, “Sharukh Khan” (?), and started singing a few lines of a Hindi film song. ☺

So, just within a few days, I was in two completely different countries of Africa with two different kinds of people, one Negroes (black), and the other Arabians. There was a Big contrast in several aspects, e.g., environment, behaviour, food habit, cleanliness, hospitality, attitude, and religion.

Had I not visited Algeria, I would have a different impression about Islamic countries.



Fig. 35: A view of the city Doha from hotel

After landing at the Doha Hamid International Airport in the next morning (Nov 26, 2016), I was taken to a hotel, with a Qatar transit visa, for taking rest, and having breakfast, lunch and snacks, as my Kolkata flight was in the evening. The hotel was located on the coast of the Persian Gulf. My room had good sea view. Lunch was with delicious foods of various choices. The city, as I could see, was very clean. On 27th very early morning, our flight (QR 540) reached safely Kolkata Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport. I reached home with sweet memories.

Sankar K Pal
Kolkata
Sept 13, 2020
