



essay

A No-go Jubilee

by Waheedul Haque

THIS WAS DECIDEDLY THE first time in world history that any group of people has celebrated 793rd or any other non-jubilee year of any event real or cooked up. For a practising Muslim no human can ever approach Prophet Muhammad in any of his multifarious dimensions. His life and work and teachings form a pillar of Islam next in importance only to the Holy Quran.

No one from among the world community of a billion-plus Muslims has marked, not to say celebrated, that the present year is the 1374th solar year of the Prophet's flight to Medina, an event central to the rise of Islam.

Official Pakistani line would like all in that country to believe that they come down from Muhammad bin Quasim, the Arab conqueror of a pocket in Sind. Neither Pakistan nor any Pakistani has so far thought of celebrating that event in even century terms. Islam in its first hundred years conquered about half of the world known then. It is not known if any of the dozens of nations conquered by Islam at the time celebrate any of their conquerors' feasts in even five century terms, not to speak of centennials or yearly remembrances.

On January 9 a mock pageant was held to celebrate the 793rd year of Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad Bakhtyar Khilji's conquest of what the organisers said was Banga (Vanga, as mentioned first in a commentary of the Rig-Veda). At hand to extol the importance of the event and to elaborate on the greatness of the conqueror were academic and literary heavyweights like Syed Ali Ahsan, Emajuddin Ahmed and poet Al-Mahmud. But they preferred to skip the importance of the event and greatness of the protagonist understandably because there was nothing much to be said on those accounts — or even to weave one's fancy about. And they as well as other speakers on the day used the occasion to expand on current political issues. Al-Mahmud was more cogent in demanding for the Khilji adventurer the status of national hero and naming of roads and institutions after him. He was, however, wanting in putting forth his reasons for that. He would have to be quite an inventor and not the poet of exceptional cadence and imagery that he is — to substantiate his demand.

The crudity of the political ploy was manifest not only in the choice of the year but also in the naming of the day. Who was Bakhtyar Khilji? They meant, of course, Ikhtiyaruddin and not his father. Why a mistake of this order? Surely, Professor Ali Ahsan, if not Emajuddin, knows better. So? And again that the conquest of two cities in

what is now West Bengal — and their outskirts — do not constitute a conquest of Banga of any of its different configurations down the epochs — should also have been known to the Professor who is generally credited to be a man of wide reading and travelling. What made him jump on the bandwagon of extraordinarily ignorant people? He is in such perfect harmony with the object of the organisers of the show that he can ignore the mountain-size inaccuracies and all too transparent dubiousness of the enterprise as trifles needing hardly a bother.

What is that object? To find a father for this nation who can be fielded to dispute the Awami League nomination for the epithet. General Zia cannot obviously be introduced into the projected fray. He was nearly a son to the founder of the state of Bangladesh and who knows more about this than the murdered general's wife? To displace Sheikh Mujibur Rahman some BNP pretenders to knowledge of history would have their party hark centuries back to King Sasanka. But before this could attract serious thought a fitter candidate was seen in Bakhtyar. This was a mistake, very costly mistake indeed. For Bakhtyar is hardly a historical figure you can hang the coat of your political designs on. His history is scanty and unreliable and not anything you can gloat over howsoever you want to. A far better candidate as a throw-in contender would have been Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah. Why did the poet-scholar-teacher by no means of pedestrian level Syed Ali Ahsan and that scholar deadbeat on taking leave of scholarship, modelling his efforts on Dr B Choudhury's infatuation for things other than he was truly cut out for, namely Emajuddin — go straight for this injurious mistake? Can they ever even with their immeasurable capacity for talking through their hat convince that Bakhtyar was not a purebred Khilji Turk but a patriotic Bengali who drove out a foreign ruler to ensure that the Bangalees ruled themselves? The very much irritating word Bengali is used as General Zia and his articulator of Bangladeshi nationalism, Khondakar Abdul Hamid were to be born seven hundred years after the dear fortune hunting cavalier whose arms extended to below his knees — according to one of the many tall tales by Min-hajuddin.

It is unbelievable that these two were as ignorant as the colourful journalist who said Bakhtyar drove Lakshman Sen out of Bengal. In point of fact the Sens, even perhaps the aging Lakshman, survived Bakhtyar and the dynasty ruled over the whole of Eastern

Bengal, now Bangladesh, many decades past the unlucky Turkish adventurer's premature death in the wake of a disastrous expedition to Tibet the very year next to his great conquest. Which was a telltale proof that the man was never one of the order of generals and could possibly command only a section of a platoon, something at the head of which he rode into Nadia. There is no record of the Sens being driven out and sent packing to Karnataka — the fanciful invention of the eminent journalist who has vowed to extricate the Gowdas from Bangladesh and push them back to Karnataka. This he cannot do not only because there are no Gowdas in Bangladesh but also as Gowda was what Bengal of now or precisely northern part of present West Bengal was known for centuries. He cannot extricate Gowda from the history of Bengal or for that matter of Bangladesh for this was the capital of most of the Sultans of the 200-year spell of pre-Mughal Turkic sultans in the Ganges-Brahmaputra basin.

Professor Ali Ahsan allowed himself, with trappings of punditry intact, to be both mean and coarse for a while. He called those that found a father-figure in anyone other than their biological sire, bastards. Is he sure he hasn't himself addressed anyone beside his progenitor as father. What would he say of the Turkish people who call Mustapha Kemal as ata-Turk — the father of the Turks? Are they all bastards? And those that lovingly call M K Gandhi Bapuji — the revered father? He was doing this unbecoming exercise while himself engaged in finding a father for the Bangladeshis, he included.

Professor Emajuddin is now a whole-time politician madly cashing in on his academic credentials. He found it unfortunate that some intellectuals treat Bakhtyar as an outsider and invader. Well, the fellow was not quite an invader — you cannot invade a kingdom with that proverbial seventeen-man cavalry. In both his forays into Gowda he didn't need to flourish or even unsheathe his sword for once. He walked into a welcoming crowd of once-Buddhist people now grown impatient with the Sens persecution inspired by Hindu bigotry. Was he come as a messiah, a redeemer? According to predictions in the Rasul-bijoy Kabya, Bakhtyar had to be that. But he didn't fit the predictions, and he neither knew about the expectations of the native populace nor did he have any reason to care for these. Lakshman Sen was at least settled in this eastern alluvial plain for three generations and was not a total foreigner in that he too belonged to the great Indic

culture to which Gowda or Banga also belonged. Bakhtyar was a Turk with nothing in common with the natives. He was a complete outsider. And he was not quite an invited guest which Zahiruddin Babur was in a manner of speaking. He was an invader all right but without needing, by circumstances, to mount a bloody invasion.

All such display of scant regard for truth and history wouldn't be necessary if they would only give the role to Nawab Khwaja Salimullah Bahadur of Dhaka, the great-grandson of Khwaja Alimullah, the hide merchant come from Kashmir. Why did they shy of that? After all there are quarters active recently on the rehabilitation of the only Khwaja who is celebrated through the naming of different institutions in Dhaka after him — although it was his father Ahsanullah and grandfather Abdul Ghani who did all the philanthropy and not he. There can be two good reasons for rejecting him as a candidate for fatherhood — not biological as meant by Professor Ali Ahsan — of Emajuddin and their ilk. Championing Salimullah may be seen by many as a proof of the campaigners being Pakistanis by conviction. Two, he is too recent to be legitimised according to necessity. Bakhtyar doesn't suffer from this drawback and can be, by repeating it the Goebbelsian way for a hundred times, made into a national hero who dreamt of Bangladesh.

It is useless to go into the merit of what they said to eulogise Bakhtyar. For it was a populist delusion they were trying Bangladesh, specially its intellectuals, to get into. The same kind that played so well in the early forties — a havoc if ever there was one. Most of these arose from a minority's attempts to develop defence mechanisms. Zealotry and militancy and a sense of being beleaguered and an irremediable sense of persecution gave rise in the Indian Muslims of a sense of superiority to all other communities in the sub-continent. Strangely this superiority was seen in 'brute' force terms and courage. And of course character. An idea of racial superiority not unlike the Nazi master-race delusions was spread all over the sixteen hundred thousand square miles of the subcontinent very deliberately. The propaganda fitted very well with the growing sense of cultural and social distinctiveness among Bengali Muslims who started seeing themselves as exploited and socially discriminated against by those designated by what was fast becoming a loath word: Hindu. How dearly they embraced the bits of vulgar history come their way either as propaganda from what they called upcountry or found by them-

selves in the history of Turkish, Afghan and Mughal incursions into the sub-continent through reading into the texts what they wanted to read. They saw eternal glory even in Muhammad bin Quasim's seizure of a pocket in Sind.

Truth arrived at through a critical study of objective history naturally cannot be the concern of a community in search of assertive force and unity to break out of a long history of suffering and exploitation. The Bengalee Muslims, most of them peasants and weavers, were the same peasants and weavers when they were for centuries pre-Muslim low-castes and for another set of earlier centuries, almost a millennium and more — Buddhists. Exploited and oppressed for two thousand years and more many of them found a taste of freedom from the social discrimination of the caste system simply by conversion to Islam. Now in the mid-twentieth century things looked like another recourse to religion — this time in the form of communalism or hating the other community as undeserving of treatment as equals — could do the rest of the magic and bring about a literal el dorado where those alienated through conversion would rule and prevail materially too. That was the promise of Pakistan. And its pull was so great that all through a half century's rabid anti-colonial fight against the British, the Muslim community in Bengal just stood aside, very willingly partaking of the dangerous pill — the British are not your enemies, the Hindus are.

Vainglory was one mental activity that was inflated into mass psychosis to sustain and indeed to add fangs to the anti-social idea that part of a society — a minority on the all-India scale and a slight majority even in Bengal — can flourish through eternal enmity with the rest of it. Jinnah saw through the impracticability of it all and expounded Pakistan as an antidote where this perpetuation of enmity between parts of society would cease as, in Pakistan, all would be 'we' and no one 'they'. When at the inauguration of Pakistan he enjoined upon who were his loyal lambs so far that all in that state would now be 'we' or Pakistanis and no Hindus and Muslims etc., he was up against a Frankenstein he had fashioned himself and one that would not only eat him up but his Pakistan too. The message of two nations had gone too deep into his followers to heal instantly by a complete aboutface by its exponent.

To come back to the vainglories resorted to in the making of mankind's cruelest tragedy — the interminable bloodbath inaugurated in the forties and one that continues with unmiti-

gated ferocity even today — one cannot but recall the contribution of the Aligarh Movement. Not the one Sir Syed Ahmed intended it to be or the current one spearheaded by Professor Irfan Habib. In the thirties Aligarh Muslim University was the main breeding ground of a special genre — communal nationalism. Those returning from there to the tree-canopied sleepy villages of Bengal, in black shirwani and an astrakan later called Jinnah cap and Aligarhi churidar, were St Paul-like apostles electrifying the Bengal peasants through oratory breathing fire. These were no religious pep-talk in the line of Maulana Keramatullah but virulently communal demagoguery. Bengali Muslims, dhoti-wearing peasants and weavers, gorged themselves not only with their inspired hatred for the other community but also with their attires now become synonymous with Islamic culture, although shirwani and churidar were neither of Arab or of Irani origin but were patently Rajput Hindu dresses.

The vainglorious Muslim patriot youth returned from Aligarh had this story of Ikhtiyaruddin Khilji's thirteenth century exploit as standard weapon in his headload of ill-constructed arsenal. What was the point of the Bakhtyar story? Yes, the problem with the name had its genesis in those half-baked youths' bad education. The point was, see, only 17 Muslims conquering and destroying a Hindu kingdom, making a Hindu king flee through the backdoor to doom. Seventeen against a king and his army. That's what Hindus are worth.

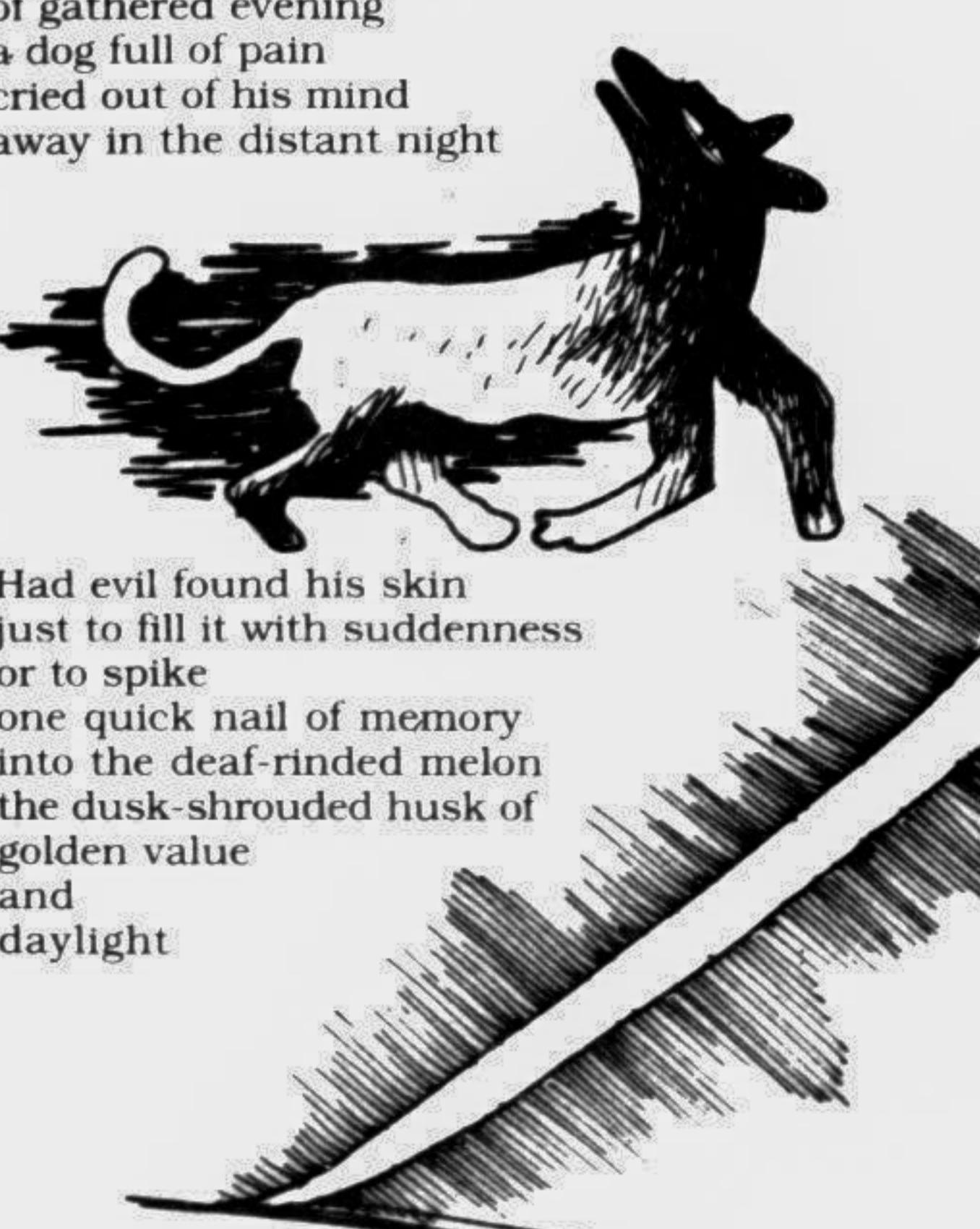
One good thing, perhaps the only good thing of the coming of Pakistan was that the Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan outgrew all this. For the whole two dozen years of Pakistan display of such warped mentality was unknown in what is now Bangladesh. It is highly improbable that each of the 100 million individuals that now constitute the Muslim community in Bangladesh has been fully cured of the Aligarh or two-nation hangovers. That is one thing and for a major political party to seek protection in such socially sterile and politically bankrupt rabid communalism as harking back to Bakhtyar is altogether a different thing. Howsoever they may fondly hope for, Pakistan is a gone thing together with all its trappings of false history and malign mentality. Not ever to come back again. The reappearance of Bakhtyar has its own good aspect as well. It is highly probable that the 794th anniversary of his conquest would not be celebrated — or any other anniversary of it, ever.

poem

As Summer Returns

by James R Killingsworth

At the quiet
of gathered evening
a dog full of pain
cried out of his mind
away in the distant night



Had evil found his skin
just to fill it with suddenness
or to spike
one quick nail of memory
into the deaf-rinded melon
the dusk-shrouded husk of
golden value
and
daylight

A sharp knife
for the silent bladder
patiently at drink
from
piles of jute
lying barefoot and exhausted
under the coming
hunger of night

tributes

A Tribute to Akhtaruzzaman Elias

by Khurshid Anwar

THERE IS NO GAINSA-ying the fact that Akhtaruzzaman Elias' greatness as a novelist and a short-story writer is a source of inspiration to many. What remains to be explored is his multi-faceted personality that used to glitter like a kaleidoscope. For all his noble traits that constituted an enthralling personality in him, Elias never allowed anybody to be overawed by his resplendent presence, for he had a flair for developing a close rapport with people from a variety of social strata; nevertheless in most of the cases of this sort of interactions, it was an obvious fact that the effulgence of his personality left an indelible impression on the individuals.

An implacable foe of hypocrisy and ostentation, Elias hated trumpeting his own achievements; it can also be said unmistakably that he was far from being a pedant. What used to astonish almost all his friends was his strong sense of humour that enabled him to disgorge, effortlessly, merry quips which, although sounded scathing at first, were found innocuous afterwards. His ingenuity in choosing the right moment for making an appropriate remark of this sort often made it pertinent to a par-



Akhtaruzzaman Elias

briety beneath the veneer of which lurks both bestiality and hostility. His deep sympathy without any iota of spurious sentiment in it for the masses is evidenced in these words that he once addressed to me — "Look! you cannot claim to be an inhabitant of this metropolis unless you savour the taste — be it sweet or bitter — of travelling by a crowd-infested bus that plies metropolitan routes, and the inside of which continuously reeks fetid stench of sweaty-men, causing suffocation. You can rightly boast of dwelling in the metropolis if you learn to bear the tribulations of the metropolis-dwellers heroically."

I think that is the reason why in his novels and short-stories these vociferous groups of poverty-laden, emaciated people are seen tramping from end to end, betraying their follies, weaknesses and foibles, occasionally indulging in larceny and other foul activities; but these marauding crowds never sink into atrophy; and when occasion demands, they are found in the vanguard of a rebellion. Undoubtedly Elias has picked his characters from their own society where a special kind of social milieu has produced them. That is the reason why his charac-

ters are never over-blown caricatures of his wishful thinking.

A complete analysis of Akhtaruzzaman Elias as a writer will entail much more hard work and preparation. My attempt is far from that. But here this can be said without much ado that Elias was an upright and honest person whose sense of commitment and integrity as a writer is undeniably a matter of wonder to many of us; but on top of that one should remember that he was a great man (this is definitely not an apotheosis of Elias), whose major worries always concerned man and his society, to be more precise, humanity.

A man with manifold interests, Elias was an Eclectic by nature who explored peripatetically earth and heaven in search of the roots of his ancestors, the origin of his culture, to find out his own identity. While doing it he was beginning to open up new vistas of a land of promise. But this incomplete pilgrimage of his has come to an abrupt end, taking us by surprise, and leaving us disconsolate in the middle of a chaos. Akhtaruzzaman Elias' premature death at the age of 53 is an irreparable loss to humanity as well as literature.