



# memoir Abba at War — II

by Kaiser Haq  
*Madras Massala*

**A**BBA's postal address in Madras was c/o 14 Advance Base PO. The actual location of the unit could not be divulged, whether on the envelope or inside it. But when he heard that a cousin of his, an airman posted at Calcutta, might be sent to Madras on duty he wrote back enclosing his actual address, thinking that it would be no crime as the addressee was also a serviceman. The Censor thought otherwise and Abba was hauled up before his OC and reprimanded.

One day, Abba returned from morning parade and learned that Jemader Joseph, the sole Indian Christian in the unit, had placed Khan under open arrest (Jemadar was the lowest rank among Viceroy's Commissioned Officers, roughly equivalent to Warrant Officers, the other two being Subedar and Subedar-Major.) Jemader Joseph had actually wanted to arrest another Pathan. Khan had interfered and started such a frightful row that Jemader Joseph had no alternative but to arrest him as well.

The unit comprised mainly Punjabi Muslims; they felt their coreligionist had been wronged and as a show of protest decided to incarcerate themselves in the unit lock-up. Abba was in a quandary. He joined his friends, but not wholeheartedly.

Jemader Joseph reported the strange turn of events to the Second-in-Command, Captain Francis. He came at once and ordered the cell to be unlocked and cleared. The men filed out, Abba bringing up the rear with bowed head. On seeing him, Captain Francis exclaimed, 'Et tu Brute!' Jemader Joseph tearfully complained that the men had conspired to get him into trouble. Captain Francis confined the troublemakers to their barracks, with a sentry outside to signify that they were under open arrest.

In the calm of the barracks the protesters realized the enormity of their offence. It was tantamount to mutiny. They were liable to be tried by Field General Court Martial and, if found guilty, sentenced for life in the penal colony on the Andaman Islands, or even shot by firing squad. There could be no appeal. The whole unit was stunned; none had a word of reassurance for the protesters; everyone exclaimed, 'What have you done!' The hapless culprits sank into despair, lost appetite. All but Gul Khan; as always, he was in excellent spirits.

Brigade Headquarters ordered a court of enquiry, and on the basis of the court's report Khan was court-martialled. The rest were let off with the summary punishment of a week's loss of pay. Eventually Khan was saved because the evidence was insufficient to convict him.

Military discipline had tragic consequences for the Head Clerk, a Madrassi named Senthivew. A bit slow in everything, he always took a moment too long to wriggle out of his chair when summoned by the Officer Commanding, Major Thompson. One day the Major lost his temper and hurled a paper-weight at Senthivew. It missed. The Major ordered Senthivew to go round the unit on the double. He finished the run somehow but seemed on the point of collapse. One more time! the Major commanded. Halfway round

Senthivew's knees buckled; he was panting uncontrollably. The Major sent him to the Medical Officer. The doctor certified him fit. The Major was furious, sure that he had been feigning weakness, and sent him 'under report' to the Lahore depot. On the way Senthivew died of cardiac arrest; he did have a weak heart after all. Abba was shocked and attributed Major Thompson's actions to colonial prejudice, forgetting that the military can be merciless even when colonialism doesn't complicate matters.

Abba felt that his queasiness over the harshness of military discipline came of not belonging to a 'martial race'. Subedar Farzand Ali, an old-timer who in the Great War had seen action in Mesopotamia loved to narrate an anecdote about the 'non-martial' Bengali. When the order came to advance a Bengali sepoy in Farzand Ali's unit thrust his rifle forward but himself refused to budge. When his commander yelled at him he replied, 'I've advanced my rifle, haven't I? Why do you want to drag me along as well?' Farzand Ali would laugh whenever he told the story and comment that Bengalis couldn't fight. Abba would regain good-humouredly that they were clever nonetheless. All conceded the point and laughed even louder. Years later when Bengali freedom fighters aided by Indian allies won an independent Bangladesh, defeating the Pakistan Army, Abba's inferiority complex over being 'non-martial' was overcome somewhat.

Abba's room-mates Abdullah and Iqbal returned from a night on the town with bandaged heads. Khan had started a row over who should go in first, a brawl ensued, a brothel goonda coshed Abdullah and Iqbal with an iron rod, and Khan ran away. Once out of danger Khan's sense of responsibility returned as he realised that returning alone to the unit would provoke official reprimand. He went back and had his friends patched up somehow.

But how explain the bandaged heads? They decided to tell Major Thompson that they had gone to the cinema where some hooligans had attacked them.

The Major was furious — how dare civilians attack his boys? — and rang the Police Commissioner demanding an inquiry within twenty-four hours.

The next day an Indian Police officer arrived to interview the victims of the outrage, who made a clean breast of it all and begged him to report to the Major that the Police had already dealt out suitable punishment to the culprits. The Police Officer agreed with a wink.

Another day Khan came up with a ploy to save money on cinema trickets: 'Let's buy only two and when I'm showing them to the usher give me a shove, I'll fall taking the usher down with me and in the scramble you fellows can sneak in.' The trick worked because the seats weren't numbered and tickets weren't sold out, but fear of being found out prevented Abba from the enjoying the show.

One rainy night the Japanese bombed Madras, giving Abba's unit its sole opportunity during the war to display its special talent. Major Thompson was away on a day's leave and his second-in-command, Captain Francis went in his stead when summoned to disarm an unexploded bomb. When he got back Major Thompson was bursting with

excitement. 'Now boys, get ready', he thundered. But there were no more bombs, it had been a freak attack that hadn't caused any spectacular damage.

Being an Engineers Corps outfit the unit was rich in varied technical know-how, and was called upon to construct a theatre for the troops. Major Thompson undertook the task with great enthusiasm and in no time put up a large auditorium, which opened with an English play with an all-British amateur cast, a cautionary tale about the wiles of spices. The enemy send a woman spy to obtain a certain top-secret document from a British officer. She feigns love and in an exciting climax, as the officer deliriously showers her rosy cheeks with kisses she clasps him to her snow-white bosom and with lightning-swift fingers extricates the document from his pocket and secretes it into her cleavage. This is a translation of Abba's suddenly lyrical Bengali. As interesting is his subsequent observation that though the actors came from respectable families they were so dedicated to their art that in depicting concupiscence convincingly they exceeded the bounds of common decency, oblivious of the sacredness of social values. Here's the rural Bengali Muslim boy speaking, his puritanism barely managing to come to terms with the element of vice inseparable from art.

Coral posed a novel threat to security. It was proliferating so rapidly that shipping near Madras port was endangered. Ordered to deal with it Major Thompson took a platoon down to the sea and began mining the deep with dynamite. Sea creatures, including delectable species of fish, were killed by the shock waves and floated to the surface. Abba, a fish-loving Bengali, eyed them with sad longing for they were not fit to eat.

During this operation an incident afforded Abba a chance to pontificate on the iniquity of colonialism. Major Thompson asked a clerk, Krishnamurti, to despatch some machinery to Madras, by train. The stationmaster sent him back as there were no trains scheduled till much later. Major Thompson himself took the machinery to the station and demanded that it be sent off at once as it was a matter of the greatest urgency, especially since the Japanese were already headed that way. The Indian stationmaster commandeered a locomotive idling in the yard and sent it on its way. An ecstatic Major Thompson poured scorn on Krishnamurti, a 'bloody Indian', and bragged about how he had bluffed his way through. Abba remarks that it was churlish of the Major to exult over using a ruse, especially on one of the colonized, who would be prevented by his inferiority complex from suspecting any chicanery.

Abba's Madras sojourn gave him a chance to get to know one of his heroes, A A Rabouf, editor of the Deccan Times, whose pages hosted the 'Muslim Youth Majlis', which he conducted under the pseudonym 'Bhaiya' ('elder brother'). Abba had been a subscriber to the paper and a member of the Majlis for four years. When Abba sought him out Bhaiya was working on a biography of Jinnah that earned popular acclaim. Abba would alternately urge him to get on with the work and implore him for journalism lessons.

'Bhaiya,' Abba said one day, 'none of the words in your editorials are un-

known to me, but why can't write as fluently as you? Why do words become so intractable when I sit down to write?' Bhaiya replied with down-to-earth realism.

'Get on the staff of a paper and try heart and soul, then you'll surely succeed as a writer. I must warn you, though; you must have the capacity to struggle with poverty, which means living on one meal a day.'

This cured Abba of the desire to become a professional journalist; instead he later became an enthusiastic amateur contributing occasionally to English-language dailies in Dhaka.

Sent for three months' training at Panchmari in Madhya Pradesh, a place of stunning natural beauty — wooded hills on all sides, fountains, windings rills like a maiden's tresses, songbirds in plenty — Abba mused that here even the most bloodthirsty soldier would be lulled into a pacific mood.

The trainees were billeted thirty to forty to a block. Abba discovered a fellow Bengali in this block and before long they found that there were a number of others scattered throughout the camp. Trainees were categorised under three heads, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh.

Bengalis fell either in the first or the second. But now they wished to be together in one block, speaking their language, sharing untranslatable jokes, something they sorely missed in the Army, where one spoke and heard Punjabi, Urdu, Pushto, Marathi, English, but no Bengali. The authorities, however, would not patronise Bengali solidarity. The Commandant and the Subedar-Major conferred on the matter and scattered the applicants further apart.

The Subedar-Major was a stern disciplinarian, a formidable personality with a huge figure and elaborate whiskers. He spoke fluent Urdu and Pushto and loved to recite the poetry of Muhammaed Iqbal; this had led Abba to mistake him for a Muslim. He turned out to be Hindu and particularly sensitive to growing Muslim separatism. He stopped Abba's copies of the Deccan Times. Abba protested that his British Officer Commanding didn't mind, so why should a fellow Indian?

You are not to reason why, was the substance of the Subedar-Major's brusque rejoinder. 'That paper discusses politics, so it can't be read here.'

The newspapers available in the reading room didn't shy away from politics, so Abba readily inferred that it was the Deccan Times' Muslim slant that had provoked the interdiction.

It was winter while training progressed. Reveille at four. Teeth clattered; cold stiffened boots were sheer agony to get into. Fog lay thick and in the absence of electricity one had to grope one's way to the toilets — hopelessly inadequate in number — and queue up. One morning a trainee gave up the struggle to control his bowels, jumped the queue, burst into the toilet and evacuated on top of its squatting occupant. The latter picked up a handful and rubbed it on the other's face. A vigorous contest ensued, each trying to out-besmeared the other, while the entire camp cheered and roared.

One day the following graffiti appeared on the blackboard: 'Mr. Simon is a laundabaz.' Mr. Simon being an unpopular instructor, a laundabaz a pederast. This was a serious breach of

discipline. Vigorous efforts were consequently made to catch the culprit. The Commandant sent a pointless-seeming passage for giving a dictation test: 'Baz Khan has died in the war in Africa. The Simon Commission came to India....' Scrambled in it were the syllables of the offending graffiti, but the culprit was never found out. He must have seen through the ploy to detect his handwriting, and altered it when taking the test, or perhaps he had anticipated the trick and scribbled the graffiti as an assumed hand.

Abba completed the training with distinction. Back in Madras his friends were in a fluster. All clerical staff were required to pass a departmental test, or else suffer loss of pay. They had already paid the penalty once and were gloomy at the prospect of losing more money. They showed Abba the old questions. Simple enough, he said, further deepening their gloom. At least Khan came up with a solution. The question papers came from Lahore in envelopes marked Confidential. It was simply a question of intercepting mail thus marked and from that city, steaming them open and re-sealing them. Only Khan was reckless enough to carry out the operation. In time he came upon the desired papers, and copied them out for Abba to write answers to be memorized. This time everyone passed with flying colours. Abba, by virtue of having done the training course, was exempted from the test.

The unit moved from Mount Road to the city outskirts. Soon after there was a spectacular accident. Major Thompson was experimenting with explosive devices. Suddenly a live grenade slipped from his hand, rolled into a barrack-room and exploded, starting a blaze that destroyed soldiers' personal property worth several thousand rupees. A court of enquiry decided no one was to blame, but didn't award damages to those whose belongings had perished. Captain Hambury, the new Second-in-Command, took the matter up and pursued it all the way to the Governor, who finally compensated the loss fully. In the meantime Major Thompson had been succeeded by Major Kirkpatrick. Captain Hambury distributed the money and had fourteen annas left over. He handed over the amount to Abba to distribute as he saw fit. Abba could devise no formula for handing out the coins, to the annoyance of the new Officer Commanding. Major Kirkpatrick couldn't bear the thought of the recalcitrant remainder from the division sum hanging around under his command. Finally, mumbling angrily, he took the coins from Abba and declared they would remain in his custody till a way to get rid of them could be found. Abba was impressed and found a parable here. An Indian wouldn't have been bothered a bit by such a petty snag in accounting, but not so the British: they were such sticklers for form that just fourteen annas of loose change could disturb the composure of a Middle-ranking army officer.

Major Thompson's department too occurred under circumstances that deeply impressed Abba; it was very much in keeping with his glorious record. He had fought in North Africa, had earned kudos from his general for successfully disarming a German mine that had drifted perilously close to shore and had defied the defusing ex-

pertise of the Royal Navy. As in practice so in theory. Soon after Abba's unit came to Madras a local journalist who edited a magazine published by the ARP sent the Major an article on bomb disposal for critical comments. Major Thompson wrote back curtly citing a publication from which the whole piece had been plagiarised. Asked to despatch the note Abba had blushed on glimpsing its contents, seeing it as a national shame.

Now, with a desperate unconventional war going on in Burma, Major Thompson, a trained commando, wanted to join the fray. He was told there was no position open for a Major. He said he'd go as Captain. In that case he wouldn't have his own command. This was going too far. How could Thompson then show what he could do to the bloody Japanese? He took leave and went to Army Headquarters in Simla and prevailed on his superiors to send him without loss of rank and position.

Abba regard Major Thompson with awe. He saw his commander's patriotism and fighting spirit as a transcendence of human nature, generally dominated by a mean urge to survival, towards something noble. There was something superhuman in it; Abba used the word 'demonic'.

Altogether more human — and humane — was the second-in-command, Captain Hambury. He was sympathetic towards Indians, and for Abba he had a particularly soft spot. Whenever he went into town he'd ask Abba, 'Anything I can get you?' If the answer was no, he'd rejoin, 'Not even a toothbrush or something?' Often he'd refuse to take any money for things bought for Abba, saying that his salary was incomparably larger than an Indian NCO's.

Abba's friendship with the Captain survived their military association. After Captain Hambury returned to England and married he kept up a correspondence with Abba; sometimes when he was too busy to reply he'd ask his wife to do so on his behalf.

No doubt it was because Captain Hambury was a volunteer and not a career soldier that he had befriended Abba with such naturalness. (His Irish origin was also a factor, no doubt.) Otherwise the difficulties faced by different nationalities in relating to each other in a colonial situation, were quite in evidence, as, comically, in an incident involving Captain Hambury. Abba, a Scottish Sergeant and some sepoy. For several days, starting punctually at eight, they inventoried the unit's arms and ammunition. One morning the Sergeant arrived after nine. 'Good evening', Captain Hambury greeted him. Piqued, the Sergeant launched on an elaborate explanation. 'Unpunctuality is a national flaw in Scots', the Captain retorted angrily, and for good measure added other unsavoury comments to which the Sergeant couldn't respond without becoming guilty of insubordination. Later the Sergeant turned to Abba for sympathy: 'See how the Captain has insulted me in front of Indian IOR's'. (IORs being Indian Other Ranks) Abba tried to console him by saying the IORs didn't understand English. 'They may not understand the language,' the Sergeant still moaned, 'but they could understand the gestures and expression.' Abba relished the irony of being called upon to soothe a Briton's ruffled colonial pride.

## book review

# Autobiography of An "Unknown" Poet

By Sayed Kamaluddin

**E**NGLISH, the lingua franca of the world today, is undoubtedly the most enduring legacy of the British Raj. With its rich and vast vocabulary of assimilated wealth, some would consider it a gift, rather than an inevitable imposition of imperialism. Throughout South Asia, remnants of this legacy are to be found from the Khyber Pass to the Bay Bengal in multifarious fashion. At their best, Subcontinental writers and intellectuals such as Tharoor, Seth and Singh, to mention a few in a list of increasing excellence, have achieved extraordinary distinction in the language of their former masters. In affinity to these, Poems of Expiation can be counted as another admirable addition to this rising tide of Asian English Literature.

Even though Bangladesh boasts and

impressive array of exceptionally gifted poets and literatures in their mother tongue Bengali, Bangladeshi practitioners of English language poetry however, are few and far between. As one such practitioner, Nadeem Rahman is perhaps its most eloquent exponent, not only as a 'foreign language' poet but simply as a poet in his own right, in any language.

Departing from the colonial tradition of the Autobiography of An Unknown Indian among others. Poems of Expiation is essentially different in medium and post colonial mood, particularly considering that in Bangladesh the colonial experience ended as late as 1972. No less a son of the soil. Nadeem's poetry in is in concert with a contemporary crop of cultural Asian artists who recognize no political borders of humanity, and remain blissfully indifferent to the 'stigma' of a colonial heritage. His po-

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ems Baa Baa Black Sheep concerning destitute children of the world, Uhuru challenging the meaning of freedom in a class-structured police state, History as 'the essence of human filly', and The Ballad of Bangladesh, are a profound testament to the spirit of this free-thinking breed.

As a work of reportage, it whets the appetite, leaving a great deal to the imagination. The author himself admits to "an autobiography of omissions". And despite the subtitle an (unauthorized) autobiography, Nadeem really should write a less esoteric account of what might possibly prove to be a colourful and eventful existence. It might yet unravel the riddle of his schizophrenic "secret self-portrait" embracing the full gamut of the poet's psycho-poetic versatility, from romance and sentimentality to cynical realism. The notes rendered by way of elucidation in this volume are brilliantly

provocative and far from prosaic. We are told that "despite the vicissitudes of his life, poetry has always remained a constant factor" and poetry predominates, almost intoxicates this book's personality, enticing the reader to wish for more from the same pen.

Like the famine sketches of Zainul Abedin, the drama of life and death is vividly etched in Nadeem's poetry. The vast panorama of human experience and emotion from "the intimate to international issues, from history media art and politics to children" are woven with masterful artistry and an abundance of earthy emotion, to bear the soul of a humanist, with universal appeal. Whatever it's appeal, neither the book nor its author can go unnoticed. The ultimate impression is one of understated beauty designed to leave a lasting impression. Poems of Expiation is by far a formidable debut, and Nadeem Rahman can no longer pass himself off as an "unknown" poet!

## Poems of Expiation



Nadeem Rahman

Title: Poems of Expiation  
Author: Nadeem Rahman  
Publisher: Academic Publishers  
First Edition: 1992  
Hard Bound: 146 pages  
Price: Tk 200