



memoir

# Abba at War — III

by Kaiser Haq

## Interregnum: Lahore, Kirkee, Bombay, En Route to Japan

**T**HE war reached its final phase; the enemy was in retreat; many units were being dissolved. Abba's unit was ordered to report to Lahore depot prior to dissolution. The journey was comfortable and uneventful, Captain Hambury as troop train commander having ensured that his men had a few compartments exclusively to themselves. But in Lahore Muslims and Sikhs were at each other's throats. The troops had to wait in the station till military transports came to fetch them, and when they reached the depot in the evening it was overcrowded. The men kipped down on verandahs. They felt resentful about it till they discovered in the morning that Captain Hambury had suffered the same plight and had his sleep repeatedly interrupted by a pie-dog bent on licking his face.

The unit melted away. Abba was posted to the Lahore depot, a novel experience on account of the presence of a number of young women employees, a giggly, coquettish lot who spent their time varnishing nails while the men made sheep's eyes at them and like eager slaves did their work for them. When they wished to leave early they smilingly approached the subedar in charge, whose stern countenance dissolved in a reciprocal smile as he asked with a wink, "What, do you have a date?" With fetching blushes the girls mumbled that they had something important to do and left. There was a Hindu youth from Pabna in East Bengal on whom Abba practised the key lesson of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*: take an interest in other's personal lives. He'd show Abba the letters of his beloved Gouri, for whom he pined night and day. Even he, asked by his beloved to send her the loveliest thing in Lahore, confessed indirectly to being enthralled by the city's damsels: "If I were to keep your request you'd brand me a devil." Less contentious pleasures were there too, gorgeous grapes, not available in Bengal or Madras, fragrant rice (and they said it was even more fragrant in the Frontier Province), delicious fish fries. But after the relatively equable climate of Madras the blistering summer and chilly winter were a torment.

Despatched with a squad of sepoy for a stint at familiar Kirkee, Abba took the opportunity to visit Poona incognito, (for it was out of bounds to servicemen) where the All India Congress Working Committee was in session. Mr Nehru addressing a public meeting spent most of his time exhorting discipline and when Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was scheduled to speak the crowd became so unmanageable that the meeting had to be called off: sad foretaste of what independence would bring.

Trying to sneak into a cinema in Poona Abba and a Madras friend were challenged by Military Police and asked for their ID's. Theirs clearly stated, 'In

no circumstances should places out of bounds be visited.' Abba's friend, intuiting the MP's poor grasp of English which, he rightly judged, rendered a big word like 'circumstances' incomprehensible, launched into a vigorous exegetical exercise which demonstrated that the passes specifically enjoined their owners to visit out-of-bound places. It worked.

Another incident made Poona memorable. Stricken with toothache Abba sought out Dr Kale, an eminent dentist in the city. The waiting room was full, Abba's chances of being attended to in the normal course slim. In desperation he barged in and explained that he had evaded the military hospital, where the remedy for toothache was invariably extraction, and violated out-of-bound rules in order to seek Dr Kale's aid. The doctor took pity and saw Abba out of turn. He applied a white powder to the troublesome tooth, and lol the ache was gone. He gave Abba a small phial of the powder, which kept him toothache-free for the rest of his military days.

Back home, after demobilisation, whenever someone mentioned toothache Abba told the story of Dr Kale's miraculous powder.

The victim would ask in anguished tones, 'Why didn't you bring a prescription for the powder?'

'Yes, I should have, it was a big mistake not to,' Abba would say with profound regret.

There was no way of getting at the powder now, for Poona was over a thousand miles away, on the other side of a recently drawn border. And there were only one or two dentists in Dhaka, and their attitude to a problem tooth rather like that of their military counterparts: Out with it!

In my cartes-blighted childhood Dr Kale glowed in my imagination like an inaccessible angel. I had to make do with clove oil to ease the pain, or resort to a hilarious folk cure. The traditional belief in the East was that caries resulted from the burrowing activity of certain minuscule insects, which bit into the gums, whence the ache. (Rotten teeth are called 'worm-eaten' in colloquial Bengali). Those with a gift for legerdemain came up with a way to rid one of these creatures; it was a mystery into which initiation was not easy to secure. Word reached us of an adept at this form of dental exorcism. Early one morning, before brushing my teeth, I was taken to the medicine-man. He came out of his hut with an unprepossessing little root in his hand. This was twirled a few times inside my mouth and then shaken. Sure enough, out dropped a few tiny, white, wriggling creatures. None could see through the sleight of hand. Only later in Hygiene class did I realize that I had been fooled. Looking back it seems strange that none saw through the trick, not even educated elders like Abba. Belief in the magic roots lives on; recently I saw a pavement vendor advertising them to a credulous audience.

Ordered back to Lahore Abba found the cold aggravated by the dispersal of old friends and acquaintances. He applied for transfer. The Adjutant offered to post him as a member of the British

and Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan. The lure of travel decided Abba.

Within days he was headed with a squad of sepoy to join the 907 Works Section at the embarkation point, the port-town of Nasik, near Bombay. A tent-city had sprung up there, its thousands of British and Indian inhabitants awaiting the voyage to Japan. Like Abba's old unit the Works Section comprised British and Indian troops. A British subaltern with little Urdu couldn't find his dog and asked his Indian batman, 'Where's my kutta?' Kutta, which rightly pronounced means 'dog', in the subaltern's intonation sounded unfamiliar to the batman. The officer kept repeating the word, voice rising in volume and pitch with each attempt. The puzzled batman fetched a kurta, or shirt, from the sahib's wardrobe. His sahib went down on all fours and barked away, to the batman's utter bewilderment. Then somebody bilingual turned up and put an end to the comedy.

Instances of British organisation and discipline at the transit camp impressed Abba. The British NCOs set up a common-room in a tent where they could spend their leisure playing cards, chess, or doing crossword puzzles. Abba had an appointment one evening with a British sergeant at this tent, but when he went there everything was so quiet that he assumed there was no one inside and went away. Later the sergeant gave him a mouthful about keeping engagements. He had been in the tent after all! How different would an Indian common-room have been, Abba mused: the hullabaloo would have disturbed everyone within a hundred yards away.

The British NCOs also arranged weekly lectures, and asked Abba to speak on 'India seen through the eyes of a soldier.' He used the opportunity to advocate the Muslim separatist view and drew the audience's attention to Beverly Nichols's *Verdict on India*, which is sympathetic towards it.

As the date of departure drew near a week's leave was granted all round for visiting Bombay. Abba wasn't keen, having seen the city already, but he had to go as a consignment of Indian troops had been put in his charge. They put up in a rest camp on the city outskirts and travelled in daily to savour the city's delights. A rendezvous was selected where the group congregated in the evening for the return journey to camp. A sepoy didn't turn up one day. Abba orchestrated a search, each going in one direction. He himself went one way and landed unawares in a red-light district. Before embarrassment drove him back, accompanied by feminine giggles and guffaws, he noted 'the charming postures of the cluster of lissome females'. Abba returned to camp without the missing sepoy, who turned up next morning with a story that he had gone to the rendezvous but hadn't found anyone and had then spent the night on a railway platform, where in his sleep his pocket had been picked.

'Your story won't wash, I'm afraid,' Abba told him. 'You'll be dealt with when we get back to unit.'

The sepoy had to pay for his night of pleasure with a week's loss of pay.

At the railway station near the rest camp one day Abba saw some tommies carrying one of the number on a commandeered shop signboard. At the ticket barrier the inspector assumed that the man was seriously ill and let the group through without checking their tickets. Safely through, the 'unconscious' soldier nimbly leapt to his feet and joined in the guffaws of his friends.

'See, the bloody Indian couldn't catch us out,' Abba overheard one of them exulting.

He felt mortified, distraught, humiliated. Indians wouldn't have got away with the trick. The inspector, like all Indians, had been daunted by white skin. But how to square the soldiers' behaviour with Abba's lofty notion of the British character? For he believed the British, despite their flaws, never forgave moral degeneracy. Nor did he blame them entirely for the persecution of Indians: often Indians themselves, in order to ingratiate themselves with their masters, behaved cruelly towards their compatriots. How then to explain the behaviour of the soldiers? They must be base-born, Abba concluded; they belonged to the uncultured class, devoid of self-respect.

On Bombay's Juhu Beach Abba was titillated and charmed, and felt poetic yearnings. On the dazzling expanse of sand at low tide sprawled — Abba was staggered to note — white couples in near-nudity uninhibitedly indulging in heavy petting. Not far from them some Parsi girls practised riding. If only he were a poet or novelist, Abba mused, he'd have filled pages describing the intoxicating scene: the beauty of the dancing waves, the lovers, the lovely riders.

A canine colonial drama was enacted on the beach. An Englishman was exercising two dogs, one Indian, the other a foreign breed, by throwing something for them to fetch out of the water. Sometimes the Indian dog got it, sometimes the foreign one. (Incidentally, the Indian dog was nearly twice the size of the other). Then the object was thrown a far greater distance than before. Both dogs swam out, but after a while the Indian dog returned and stood waiting in shallow water. When the foreign dog came back with the thing the Indian dog snatched it out of its mouth and carried it to their master. Abba unstintingly acknowledged that the English vis-a-vis Indians possessed greater integrity and strength of character, but he was surprised to see this discrepancy reflected in their respective canine populations.

Time to sail. Abba's heart was heavy at the thought that soon he'd be separated from mother and brother not by just a thousand miles of land but thousands of miles of alien sea.

The seven-storied ship carried several thousand passengers. A broadcasting station relayed news and announcements through ubiquitous speakers; even lavatories had them. Piped music played at meals. The speed was a steady fourteen to sixteen knots. It was a novel experience for Abba, but



Abba (c) with friends outside the Bombay Museum

after a few days the novelty gave way to boredom and he was happy to sight land. Hong Kong. The island's starkly contrasting affluence and poverty made a deep impression on Abba. Hong Kong poverty surpassed the worst he had seen at home. People lived in incredibly tiny, flimsy hovels, wore shorts and skimpy sleeveless shirts in all weathers, looked disease-ridden. But more striking was a look of rage and rapacity on their faces, the opposite of the apathy and abulia conspicuous in India. Abba later connected the mood of the Hong Kong underclass with the general rebelliousness in mainland China that fuelled Mao's revolution.

There was a joyous reunion with a unit with which Abba's unit had been neighbours in Madras. The old acquaintances, who had been stationed for some time in Hong Kong, cautioned against carefree sightseeing, and advised Abba and his shipmates to get back to ship before dark. The hovel-dwellers turned into expert muggers by night, and servicemen on a spree were their favourite targets. Usually the victim was quickly overwhelmed with a massive dose of Kung Fu, robbed, debagged, abandoned. But murders weren't uncommon. Or worse: some had been robbed, then set alight. The Hong Kong-based unit lost a soldier who had been sleeping alone in a tent: he disappeared one night along with the tent and its other contents.

Stopping for tea at an American restaurant with his friends Abba had an inkling of what aggravated the resentment of the Chinese poor. He thought the restaurant had skimmed off the cream of Chinese womanhood to wait on American troops. A Punjabi in the group beckoned to a waitress but when she came over fell speechless, broke into a sweat, and mumbled and gestured as if to show that ignorance of her tongue was preventing him from expressing himself. To the rising annoyance of the others his charade kept the

girl waiting for several minutes. He explained that he was only trying to enjoy the girl's beauty free of cost. Abba gave him a severe tongue-lashing. The day before sailing on some of Abba's friends, ignoring his counsel of prudence, went ashore in quest of sex, luckily without mishap.

Through the Pacific Ocean, a kaleidoscope of colours. Flying fish appeared, creatures Abba had read about with amazement in school. On first sighting he mistook them for birds, until they took a dip. At times it was quite choppy and seasickness spread but Abba seemed immune, something he attributed to having grown up by a river. Each day the clocks were advanced a little; finally, twenty-eight days after leaving Bombay the ship docked at Kure.

Japan fascinated Abba. Everything was so different from what he had been used to: wooden houses with ropes dangling from upper floors to enable a quick exit in case of tremors, winter snow, picturesque hills, assiduous terrace farming, pretty flowers and fruits, the latter more attractive to see than to taste. Above all the women, so free and frank and independent, friendly even to strangers, smilingly ready to pose with them for snapshots.

Abba's unit had sent an advance party, a Punjabi member of which was set upon while out walking alone by a group of American soldiers who beat him senseless. Abba's Officer Commanding took up the matter with his American counterpart and an identification parade of all the Americans was arranged. But they all looked the same to the Punjabi sepoy and the ones he finally picked turned out to have been on duty at the time of the incident. Abba uses the anecdote to moralize on the character of Americans, which he decides is inferior to that of the British or Irish.

## two poems by Azfar Hussain



### The Fog

The fog spread  
across the field  
like half-sleep  
is mildly melting;  
see, she is relaxed!



### Esthetic

The sunlight  
hyaline and brown  
like an onion's surface  
cuts across the  
terrazo

and a glistening tiger-skin  
round the neck  
of a woman  
warmly patterns  
an enclosure

## book review

# The Man, the Myth, and the Poet

By Sadeq Khan

**F**AITH Hope and Ecstasy is an anthology under three heads as indicated by its title and twenty-eight subtitles, almost all beginning with a motif defined by quotations from holy books or powerful authors (excepting six of his sole design, namely On This Day, Husbands and Poets, Her Smile, The Last Subterfuge, Nameless, and Rendezvous), along with a dedication and a preface, all further expanded in nineteen pages of meticulous notes by the poet himself. In totality 124 pages of display writing consisting of twenty eight poems, lucid and laurel worthy (the printer's devil notwithstanding), well spaced with blanks as in transparent landscapes of English water-colour, neatly designed with the insert of a colonial painting. The book deserves to be read.

By Bangladeshi criteria, Nadeem Rahman is the last of the idle rich. A father of four and obviously happily married (witness his poem Wives) to no less a lady who shares his temporal burdens, contentment and a sense of fulfillment are the cornerstone of his temperament. Yet he is driven by an inner compulsion to devote his talents and

energy in the pursuit of truth and beauty and uncompromising soul-searching. And having an occidental liberal education, he does it with distinction, for his generation of Homo Sapiens, expiating the original sin in earthly banishment.

In the suffering of generic guilt complex, religion, politics and poetry, from The Waste Land of his wanderings, shrinking from the 'extreme prejudice' of The Age of Treason, he seeks personal solace in devotion to something divine, social equity and justice in political thought and culture, and freedom of expression in art. Like an expressionist painter, her pens in rhetoric and prosody his random reflections and remembered emotions of realistic and surrealist experiences with hints of a latent mysticism, even in the heart of our materialistic society.

Being of a bohemian temperament myself, albeit struggling for a fastidious existence in a self-appointed capacity both in moral and material senses, I do respond to Nadeem's writings, although I often do not share his line of thinking. I empathise with the spatial echo of his unique mystique, but I don't feel like his 'equal accomplice' in witnessing the sordid side of history. I imagine myself instead to be still part of history in the

making and unlike Nadeem, neither am I 'haunted by progress' in the glass menagerie of historical cycles that repeat savage cruelty with satanic jest. In spite of this, Nadeem's 'artistic incisions intimidate, arouse and inspire', and I share his ecstasy in such poems as: A Free Man's Worship, I Wonder If The Lord, and Dreams, not to mention his blistering rhetoric in The First Fundamentalist.

Nadeem's comparative theology as in Al Ameen, his sacred outrage as in See Bosnia And Die, or his solemn self-portrait as in Nameless, appeal to the head and heart short of moving the spirit to action. This passivity of approach appears to me to be the singular characteristic of Nadeem contradicting the fury of his emotions.

'Such is the symbiosis between reality and myth. Such has been my life. I live, because God still lives. Life of course, is a complete waste of time, the tragedy of the inevitable.' With these words Nadeem concludes the 'anti-memoirs' of his 'own personal myth' in his earlier work Poems of Expiation. He quotes from Jung: 'What we are to our inward vision, and what man appears to be ... can only be expressed by way of myth'. This paradoxical relationship between reality and myth, Nadeem ex-

plores to the fullest in poetry and prose, and within its labyrinth are we to find the multi-faceted, multi-gifted personality of Nadeem's poetic vision. Nadeem is a romantic, with a burning need to be brutally honest. Throughout Nadeem's 'aesthetic adventure' there is a quite uncurrent of conflict between emotion and reason, hunger and hedonism, as the pendulum swings from solitary melancholia to joy and optimism.

With characteristic candor, he acknowledges: 'My poems possess neither the medicine to heal, nor the power to wage peace. Should they elicit a little dignity, in what some may construe as defeat, I will not have sung against the wind in vain.' In my opinion at least, his songs have not been in vain, however, being outdated myself in many ways. I shall be a poor judge of whether or not Nadeem may strike a chord with the contemporary set, in this age of satellite sophistication.

Regarding the literary form he adopts for self-expression and self-fulfillment, I have simply to say that in its totality the anthology exudes Nadeem's personality as I know it. Just as I cannot fail to detect the stamps of the personality element of SM Sultan, Quamrul Hassan or Mohammad Kibria in their respective works of art more than the pastoral



Nadeem Rahman

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scenes, preternatural figures or pictorial drama they portray, I cannot but visualise a motion picture of Nadeem the man, the myth, and the poet, in the wit and wisdom of his word-spinning magic.