



memoir

Abba at War — V

by Kaiser Haq

The Return

THE voyage back was uneventful but for a day's stop at Singapore, where the home-bound soldiers amused themselves with sightseeing and visits to the cinema. A few more days and they were docked at Madras. As they disembarked, the customs men, learning that they were on their way to be demobbed, pounced on them and fleeced them as best they could. From Abba's luggage some Japanese silk handkerchiefs were singled out to be taxed and when he protested that they had been used the customs man calmly asked for a two-rupee bribe. But Abba drew the line at some spare buttons for his bush coat, which he had taken with him from India; rather than pay duty or bribe he threw them away.

A Madras from another unit borrowed five rupees off Abba to settle his account with the corrupt customs man. He promised to pay back the sum as soon as they got to the transit camp. Days passed but there was no sign of the money. One day Abba was chatting with some friends in a tent when he spotted the debtor walking by. His friends hauled the defaulter in and prepared to deal him a good drubbing, but Abba asked them to let him off. 'Let him keep the money,' he said in disgust. The man promised to clear his debt the very next day, then made good use of the reprieve to vanish completely from the scene.

Soon Abba was on his way to Lahore where the formalities of release would be completed. There he met up with Mofizuddin Shah, a friend from the Madras days, and an inveterate cadge. True to habit, he began rummaging through Abba's luggage, asking, 'You've travelled to distant Japan, but what have you brought home?' He satisfied himself with a spare soap.

The Army gave Abba a gratuity, handed him his release papers and sent him on his way. As his train was pulling out of Lahore station a Punjabi youth ran to bid him farewell: Tofayel Shah, whom he had successfully coached for the Army Certificate of Education. After exchanging a few letters Abba lost contact with Shah and feared for his safety; he came from Jullunder, which saw some of the worst communal

riots. Riots were on in Calcutta as Abba made his way home. Unarmed, though still in uniform, he planned his itinerary so as to avoid the city. In the process he ran into two con men.

Waiting for the train on the last lap of the journey, Abba asked a stranger the way to a restaurant. When Abba returned to the station from the restaurant the man accosted him and wheedled out twenty rupees. He claimed to be a demobbed soldier himself, who had been divested of all belongings by thieves and now didn't have enough money to return home. His chaste diction, comely appearance and pathetic expression induced Abba to part with the money. The man claimed his father was a *Rai Bahadur* in Jalpaiguri. He exchanged addresses with Abba and promised to send the money as soon as he got home. Later Abba began to suspect — rightly, as it eventually turned out — that he had been conned. First the Madras who had fleeced him of a five, then this. But twice bitten thrice shy: another fellow tried to touch him for help and was rudely told off. Without further incident he returned to Rajshahi, to mother and elder brother, who were overjoyed to hear he had come home for good and not just for a holiday.

A colonial education had imbued Abba, a village boy, with a hunger for self-improvement and a desire to see a bit of the wide world he had read about. Military life gave him the opportunity to satisfy both, though sadly it was in the nature of things that one should interfere with the other. 'During my stay in Japan, was undergoing a Journalism course in Australia. Paid about Rs. 240 as fees. But owing to my departure from Japan I could not get the diploma — *ABT for Journalism*. While in the Army, was preparing for BA degree exam of the Bombay University by availing myself of the special facilities granted for serving personnel but ultimate posting to Japan marred all hope of getting the degree.' And in the unit he'd try to learn from those around him. Among his papers is a curious piece of verse by a colleague, Corporal J A Bowker:

My heart is in the office,
A'bashin' out returns.

And filing Indian orders,
Is one of my concerns.

Reading scraps of novels,
Writing letters by the score,
Helping Haq with English verbs
Is something of a bore.

But now it's turned eleven,
To the canteen we must go,
For there, there are some WASBs,
Whom we'd like to get to know.

Abba's war-time note-books are primarily commonplace books crammed with maximums gleaned from varied sources. Amidst them the pithy, stoical summary of his failed attempts to acquire educational qualifications stands. I can never read it without being strangely moved, for it reflects more than the common desire for self-advancement. Abba longed for the magical power of self-expression. He dreamed of becoming a writer. And he passed on the dream to me, the most valuable part of my inheritance.

Abba's memoir ends with an elegiac flourish. Gone, the hardship, excitement, danger. Now the engulfing sea of samsara. Still, friends from military days corresponded for some time; one who had stayed on in uniform used to visit us in a Military Police jeep, in which we'd be given rides; and there were memories like prized snapshots, sun-dazzled Juhu Beach, sunset on the sea, the exploding coral, desolate Hiroshima.

There was a deeper influence: the Army gave Abba an experience of discipline and order conspicuously absent in civilian life. It transfigured his personality. Friends spoke endearingly of his 'military temper'. He wouldn't brook inefficiency, he didn't keep files 'pending'; he always spoke his mind. He dressed neatly, doused handkerchiefs with *Kohla* seerai, brought by fiends from Calcutta and held them to his nose when dust swirled or car exhaust polluted the air.

Interestingly, the Army in his experience also was less hidebound by petty formalities. On return to civilian life Abba got a job as a clerk, first in the Secondary Education Board, then in the newly formed Text Book Board, which controlled the publication of all school text books. He joined evening classes at

St Gregory's College (now known as Notre Dame), run by American Catholics, took a degree, and rose professionally as the Text Book Board expanded, eventually retiring as Controller of Production and Distribution, a key position in the organisation.

One day soon after his return to civilian life he was sitting at his office desk exchanging a few words with a friend who had called, when one of his superiors entered the room. But forgetting what he came for he reprimanded Abba: 'When a senior officer steps in you should stand up!'

I did show you a gesture, probably you did not notice that, Abba calmly rejoined in English. Meaning that he had raised his right hand in a Salaam.

This further angered the senior official. 'I'll see you,' he murmured threateningly as he withdrew. 'Is this the state of civilian service?' Abba asked the friend he had been talking to.

'Yes.'

The British ruled us for two centuries,' Abba said. 'And we were said to have been virtually their slaves. But in my experience I have not seen them treat us like slaves. In my unit the Officer Commanding taught me not to stand up every time he came to me for something. In fact he chided me for standing up. 'I'll have to come to you quite often,' he said. 'That doesn't mean you have to pop up like a Jack-in-the-Box each time. Don't do it again.' And yet in our own independent country your superiors tries to make you feel like a slave.'

The story has a peripatetic finale. The senior official lost his job soon after and became a text-book publisher. He submitted two books for the Board's approval (without which it could not be prescribed in schools) which as it turned out was within Abba's purview to withhold, and *unflinchingly* presented himself to Abba as a suppliant.

Coda
There's coda to Abba's life as a soldier of the Raj. In 1965 the British Council sent him to England for a year. The programme included lectures at London University and practical experience of modern publishing at Hutchinsons. But the highlight of the visit was a reunion with Captain Hambury. He lived with his wife and two children in Derby, where he worked as

an architect with local government, and invited Abba over for a weekend.

Abba and Fred (Hambury's Christian name) chinwagged all they could, and Abba was bowled over by the hospitality shown him; a party was thrown so that he could meet his host's friends and acquaintances. But to me the most interesting part of the visit is an exchange between Abba and Mrs Hambury.

Abba: When Fred was in the Army he never mentioned you but soon after he got back home he wrote of your wedding. In your country people do not marry on short acquaintance, but you seem to have done so.

Mrs Hambury: (with a chuckle) We've known each other since our student days, and we did correspond when he was away. But how could he talk about marriage till everything had been fixed? In these matters there are many doubts till the last moment.

Abba: But while he was in the Army didn't you fall in love with anyone else or think of marriage with anyone else?

Mrs Hambury: (blushing, archly) Why should I tell you?

Abba: Another thing. In all the letters I wrote to Fred before coming to London I asked after you but he didn't mention you in any of his replies. This led me to suspect that just as he had suddenly married on returning home, the marriage had broken down too just as suddenly.

Mrs Hambury: (to Fred, who just entered) When did I walk out on you?

Fred: What's all this about? (Laughs when Abba explains.)

Mrs Hambury: (Joining in the laughter, to Abba) You won't talk such nonsense again do you understand?

Abba: Very well. But I have to ask you another question.

Mrs Hambury: Yes?

Abba: Many coloured men fall in love with the attractive women of your country and marry them. What is your opinion about that?

Mrs Hambury: I can't stand it at all.

Abba: Why? Such marriages have become quite common.

Mrs Hambury: I'm not happy about it. Children of mixed marriages can't be happy. When I see a white woman wearing a sari or a coloured woman in a skirt my body recoils in disgust. If you look into the backgrounds of white

women who've married coloured men you'll see they are either illegitimate children or belong to the working classes. I'm not saying of course that there aren't exceptions.

Abba: In your country girls marry whomsoever they wish. What if your daughter falls in love with a coloured man and wishes to marry him?

Mrs Hambury: I'd rather die than see it happen. I've given up my schoolteaching job so that I can devote myself wholeheartedly to bringing up our two children. If both Fred and I were concerned only about our careers we wouldn't know if the children went astray.

Abba: But they meet different sorts of people at school, they have boy friends and girl friends. You too were Fred's girl friend once.

Mrs Hambury: I know who our children are going out with. I know their teachers and in fact you've met their headmaster at the party on Sunday; they can tell me all I want to know about our children.

This dialogue, startling in its frankness and gaucherie, offers a paradigm of the colonial relationship in its benign aspect, founded on mutual acknowledgment of difference. Colonialism had been pioneered in promiscuity by knavish adventures and consolidated under the aegis of Victorianism, only to collapse in post-colonial promiscuity. As black and brown migrants from decolonized regions mingled with native whites, good colonial subjects like the Hamburies and Abba reacted with discomfort, even horror. Interracial friendship was fine, but interracial sex threatened their sense of identity.

Though Abba was effusive in praise of the beauty of English girls and, when teasingly asked by a relative also visiting Britain whether he had any English girl-friends waggishly riposted, 'No, but if I'd been younger it might have been different', the urge to transgress racial boundaries was something to be resisted. Most of his compatriots who gave in to temptation aroused his contempt as their partners came from a class inferior to the one they had belonged to back home. It was all very well to joke about English girl-friends, but at the end of the scholarship stint Abba was glad to return home.

interview

Sayed Ahmad — A Play Wright with Mission

by Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman

"THEATRE is a living entity. And whenever I commit myself to it, I remain conscious of arresting that spirit — Sayeed Ahmad.

After a dreadful silence of almost a year, he has started again. A leading English daily has just completed publishing his eight-part tributes paid to the music maestro of Bangladesh. A Bangla literary fortnightly is continuing the publication of another series based on his recollections and impressions on and about the good old Dhaka. Not only that Bangla Academy has undertaken the task of publishing a volume of his translated foreign plays. The Academy will also print his own English version of *Shesh Nawab* (The Last Nawab), based on the tragedy enacted at Plassey in 1757. And Shilpakala Academy is going to publish a commemorative bilingual book on Hamidur Rahman, the architect of Shaheed Minar, which he has co-edited alongwith this writer.

Yet at one stage last year it seemed highly improbable that Sayeed Ahmad, country's leading dramatist, would write again. A severe stroke had left him virtually paralysed and he could hardly remember the known faces. Moreover, the master of words, Ahmad, to his utter frustration, had known the dramatic experience of witnessing things fall apart as words kept on betraying him for quite some time. And he had to depend on sign language to make himself understandable even to the known ones. Thank God, the spell of drought is now over.

Sayed Ahmad, as we know, made a sensational debut in the then Pakistan theatre by producing *The Thing*, a play on absurd mould in early sixties. Since

then he has created about half a dozen of original thought-provoking plays. A bilingual dramatist, he has rendered all his plays excepting *Protidin Ek Din* into English and thus provided the foreigners with a taste of our drama. For his outstanding contribution, Ahmad was accorded 'Legion d'Honneur', France's highest honours, in 1992. The celebrated arena stage of Washington DC, USA named a row of seat after him in 1977. He has also won all prestigious awards at home. *Encyclopedia of Post-colonial Litterateurs* in English, published in 1994 by Routledge, makes the following observation about this innovative playwright —

'Ahmad combines elements of the realistic, legendary and folk theatre in the style of Chinese opera and packs a power into his language that links him to the Indian tradition of street theatre' — (Vol. I PP-27).

However, quite ironically, Ahmad, born and brought up in the last fifteen years of the British Raj, did not nourish the slightest intention of becoming a dramatist. True, he had passion for drama, and during his university days he appeared on the stage as 'hero' in two productions. He also played the role of the romantic lover-boy Lorenzo in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (the play could not be staged at the Dhaka University premises as the female roles were performed by women) which was directed by the then chairman of the Department of English Professor Turner. But, his real love was music. In fact Ahmad had early training in music in Dhaka and later under Ustad Alauddin Khan of Maiba. As a professional musician he presented a star-act in Musee Humiet in Paris in 1955. While attending the university he formed an orchestra named 'Sayeed Ahmad and companions' and gave regular recitals at the Radio.

However, once *The Thing* (Kala Bela)

was premiered in 1962 by the Drama Circle in Dhaka, his fate as dramatist, was cast once for all. While reading or watching the play one is reminded of Ionesco and Beckett for their approach to human problems and the sense of despair and disillusionment of human beings. However, though the play opens with Munir and Ahmad, (like the two tramps — Vladimir and Estragon — in *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett) waiting. For some mysterious being it does not end like the 'Godot-classic,' for in the last scene, *The Thing* appears, the cyclone hits the island and the village drummer in great despair sings the swan-song:

'Well, I guess, my job is done.
And ... nothing more to announce.'

The Thing was followed up with two more powerful plays — *The Milepost* (1964), based on the horrendous 1943 famine in Bengal, and *Survival*, which, at its centre, engraves a powerful metaphor of the exploitation of the masses. The later, first published in the English weekly *Holiday* in Dhaka in 1967 and first staged in the same year in Lahore at the Alhambra Theatre, in Punjabi under the title *Jangal da Rakka* (translated and directed by Najm Hosain Syed) is an allegory based on the popular folktale of the mother crocodile and the shrewd fox. The irony and sarcasm packed final speech of the play addressed by mother crocodile to fox caused sufferings for Ahmad, then a government official here's a fragment of the dialogue: 'I shall come back not with seven but seventy million children. There will be millions of innocent toddlers. I am going to bring the entire clan — it's an unending cycle — you will teach them, make useful beings out of them. I hold tremendous faith in you. I can swear on God that to us you are the only hope, the greatest teacher.'

The authority was quick enough to

decode the message that the 'seventy million children' were the oppressed, ill-fortunate people of East Pakistan, planning a synchronized move to dethrone the military regime of Gen Ayub Khan. And the play appeared in 1967, a year after Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had placed his famous six-point demands.

After the liberation of Bangladesh, Ahmad wrote *Protidin Ek Din* based on the conflict, resulting from the expectations and failures of the freedom struggle.

Shesh Nawab published in 1989 attempted at seeing Sirajuddin in a fresher and unbiased perspective. The playwright in his preface categorically states that he had tried to present Siraj in a new light. Poet Shamsur Rahman in his foreword, too, acknowledges this feature in the portrait of the protagonist, remarking that 'Sirajuddin was never appeared irresponsible or feather-brained. How come he be so when the fate of Bengal entirely depended on him?'

Apart from the characterization of the hero, the portrayals of Robert Clive, Mir Jafar and Ghoset Begum, the infamous trio, deserve serious consideration. Ahmad does not characterize them the way they had been portrayed by his illustrious predecessors, namely Girishchandra Ghosh, Sachin Sen and Sikander Abu Jafar. For instance, Sayeed Ahmad's Ghoset is a woman 'with a man's heart' who, like Clytemnestra in Agamemnon by Aeschylus, knows that her claim on the Bengal throne cannot even be considered only because she is a woman. Again, Clive is presented as a man who rose to high place by virtue of his own merit and labour.

However, the portrait of Siraj invites close analysis as it reminds an initiated reader like the poet Shamsur Rahman of the tragic end of Sheikh Mujib, a monarch without the crown, who loved

his people more than his life. In his last speech Siraj, a victim of the court-intrigue and conspiracy, rhetorically asks — 'If the people of this country cannot believe their compatriots, whom they will trust? will they believe the foreign strangers?' And, leaving the stage, he declares — 'Siraj has been defeated at Plassey, but not the country. Hundreds of Siraj will be born to avenge the defeat.' Alike Siraj, Bangabandhu was also surrounded by enemies and he could sense the approach of disaster. He, too, was left with no option. Lady luck played a cruel joke with him, didn't she?

In a recent talk with this writer Sayeed Ahmad acknowledged the foregoing observation. 'Yes, I was shocked at the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu. At once I discovered the link between him and Sirajuddin, the hapless victims of cruel fate the idea kept on haunting me and I began the play in 1978. You see, it took me almost a decade to complete the play. During the long tenure of composition, I had hardly known the peace of mind. I was troubled with uneasy dreams.'

However, when his attention was drawn to his recently published series on the musicians of Bengal in an English daily, Sayeed Ahmad confirmed that it was a tribute paid by an admirer to his idols. 'I had known them personally for years and I wanted to share my sense of joy and admiration of them with the readers.'

Why did you leave music, your first love? Confronted with the question Mr Ahmad looked uneasy for a moment. Then, recovering himself, he recited some oft-quoted lines from a Frost number:

'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I
I took the one less traveled by
And that has made all the difference'

(The Road Not Taken)
Requested by this writer to elaborate, Sayeed Ahmad reluctantly said, 'The decision had to be taken. I had no choice but to bid adieu to my music career. And he would not tell any further.'

However, commenting on Beckett and Ionesco (Ahmad has translated — two plays by the latter), he observed, 'Both viewed the world from an upside-down position, thus presenting to us familiar situations through which we had passed untempered times but never felt the comical or tragic aspects so deeply.' Then he differentiated his own idea of absurdism from theirs — 'Eastern absurdism reaches a climax in giving a philosophical content to our behaviour. In western absurdism, the "waiting" leads to everyday's failed appointment, "Godot" never shows up, keeping the tension and hope at a high-pitch. Where as my eastern sensibilities enable me to be at once with my "Godot." In *The Thing* the cyclone comes engendering destruction of the village and also helping them (Nature and human beings) to embrace each other.'

Averting a direct comment on the contemporary theatre of the country, Ahmad rather pointed out the quality that gives permanence to drama. 'We must keep in mind that drama is an art. And without essence no art can survive in the long run.'

Since *The Thing* Sayeed Ahmad has come a long way. And although he is nearing seventy, it is good to see him work tirelessly. When this writer asked him to shed light on his future plan, he remained silent for some time. Then with mysterious smile in a corner of his face, he recited the final stanza of another popular poem by Robert Frost: 'Woods are lovely, dark, and deep But I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep.'