

SHORT STORY

Hands for sale

NAIMUL HASAN RIZVI
(translated from Urdu by TLM and Jai Ratan)

There were heaps of hands in the shops, white, black and brown. Some beautiful, with long and slender fingers, others ugly, with thick fingers and horny nails. The few flawless hands were vastly outnumbered by the ugly ones, many of which bore oozing ulcers and rosy veins. Many hands were hung out on wires, their restless fingers in quest of a cooling breeze. Many beautiful hands were on display in bright, velvet-lined cases. A powerful, dark hand stood on its elbow in a bright showcase, proudly assertive. I watched the whole display spellbound. But my companion, a journalist who had come here in search of a great story, had eyes only for the dark hand. 'A powerful hand indeed,' he said. 'Naturally,' the shopkeeper laughed. 'It is the hand of a black demon.'

A big showcase held many compartments, each displaying a hand and its description. They were powerful hands which had come down from the mountains, digging canals on the way, bringing milk and honey down from the heights. The mere touch of those hands could transform seawater into sweet water and dust into gold by secret alchemy.

'These hands are voiceless,' the shopkeeper said. 'They don't talk. They only act.'

'It's incredible,' my friend said. 'I can't believe it.'

'What's incredible about it?' I said. 'These people have sold their hands, as I intend to do now. These hands have become rusty. I just stay home, doing nothing. Where's the harm if I can get good money for my hands?'

'So you are also one of those who would sell their standing crops for cash,' my friend sneered.

Ignoring the taunt, I dragged him to a brightly-lit shop. Crowds of people had queued up at the counters, from which signboards advertising the shop's services hung. 'Offer your hands here,' one board proclaimed. And a big poster said: 'If you are out of work, or living beyond your means, don't despair. We have a ready-made solution for you. Give us your hands and spend your life in peace. One of our ships is sailing for foreign shores with a cargo of hands.'

My friend said, 'This is fantastic. I assure you, my story will be a sensation!'

I said, 'Sensation or not, that's your affair. I have come to sell my hands. All my neighbours have prospered. The vines of prosperity have sprung up their walls so quickly, while my courtyard is still poor and cold. My wife says I always have my idle hands in my lap.' My friend shook his head in disgust.

Suddenly, there was a great commotion and people fell pell-mell on each other, breaking the queue. A man in a blue suit and gold-rimmed glasses cried out, 'Brother, it's my turn. Don't deprive me of my turn.'

Leaping forward, my friend took hold of the man's hand. 'What's the matter?' he asked. 'And why are you so keen to sell your hands?' The man said, 'I have a job, but I'm heavily in debt. The burden is killing me. I don't know how to pay off my debt. It's too much for me.' Then he ran desperately to join the queue again.

A fashionable woman in a red sari, glowing like a neon sign, drew our attention. Her purse was half-open, and a hand peeped out of it. 'I hope I'm not late,' she said to the man with her.



artwork by apurba

'No, you are not late,' my friend said. 'But why do you want to sell your hand?'

'It's not my hand; it's my husband's!' She gently caressed the hand in the purse. 'He is a reputed architect. He builds bridges and big mansions. Shahjahan built the Taj Mahal out of love for his queen. Never mind a mausoleum, I told him, just build me a house on a thousand yard plot in the Defence Society. He said he would have to sell his hand, because...'

My friend interrupted her; 'Surely, you know how useful your husband's hand is. How can you do without it—you need the support of his hand so often. And then...'

Suddenly, the neon glow on the woman's face was extinguished. 'It's my personal business,' she said. 'Don't poke your nose in my affairs.'

'So there you have it,' I said to my friend. 'Didn't I tell you not to waste your breath?'

'Leave me alone,' he fumed. 'You have no idea what I'm headed for.' 'Get on with your story and let me do what I have to. I've carried the burden of my hands far too long.'

'Give it another thought before you take the plunge,' urged my friend. 'If you sell your hands, who would play your accordion?'

'It's my personal affair,' I said irritably, like the neon-lit woman, and walked away.

When I returned home after selling my hands, my wife beamed and gave a warm hug like a newlywed. She was pleased with the beautiful overcoat which I had got in exchange for my hands. 'Just the thing for you,' she exclaimed, caressing the overcoat. 'You look wonderful in it.'

I said, 'One good thing about this overcoat is that you can't make out that my hands are missing. And it has bottomless pockets. They never run out of money.'

'Just the thing I wanted,' she said. 'That your pockets would hold so much money that you could spend and spend, and yet they would

be full. Well, let's get down to business straightaway,' she said, putting her head in my lap. 'How do you want to go about it? We must have a bungalow.' 'Yes, by the sea,' I agreed. 'It will have ivory walls. Its doors will spring open when you say, "open sesame". And chandeliers on ceilings.' 'And the light of dawn will cascade from these chandeliers,' I reminded her. She clapped her hands in joy: 'Oh, how beautiful our house will be!'

'As I walk on the lawn, as I bend down to pluck a rose...' My voice trailed off as I realized that I had no hands. A wave of helplessness swept over me. I asked my wife how the tenor of life would change, now that I had no hands. 'Not at all,' she replied. 'You'll get used to the loss in a few days. Just think: there are so many men without hands in our lane, but they are happy and cheerful. Why don't you go and meet them—see what your new way of life will be?'

Not a bad idea, I thought. In the evening, I was standing at my window when I spied Malik Saheb, my next-door neighbour. He was in an overcoat like mine. He almost jumped with joy when he saw me. 'Aha, so, you too... your hands. Congratulations!' he exclaimed. 'Yes, Malik Saheb,' I said. 'But I feel very odd.'

Malik Saheb said, 'Never mind, there is nothing to worry about. Now, you will savour the joys of life. Come, I'll introduce you to some people.'

He took me to Chaudhary Saheb's house. He was having a gala evening in his drawing room. They were all there: Kanwar Saheb, Khan Bahadur Saheb and other eminent people of the neighbourhood. All of them were in overcoats like mine. They were discussing VCRs, and the latest regulations about the import of cars. Malik Saheb told the gathering, 'My friend here is in a quandary. Tell him how to live without hands.'

Swift as an arrow, Kanwar Saheb's response flew at me. 'Forget your hands; start living life,' he said.

Khan Saheb nodded in agreement. 'People nurture their hands so that they can help them in their old age.'

Subedar Saheb said, 'Don't worry about your hands. Let them do their job.'

I returned home feeling quite positive, thanks to the company of these veterans.

But that very night, after I had fallen asleep, I thought I heard someone knocking on the windowpane. It was a dark night, with only a faint glimmer of moonlight in the window. I looked out, but could see nothing. I closed my eyes. Again, someone knocked on the windowpane. And now the window opened and I saw two hands enter the room, walking on their fingers. They were my hands, and they jumped up on my bed and began to play on my chest as I watched, fascinated. Then they climbed onto my table and started

writing on a piece of paper. I got up and looked at the paper. 'Your hands are the repository of your strength,' it read. Then they slipped out the window.

When I told my wife what had happened, she laughed. 'You must have been dreaming,' she said.

The next morning, I went to Chaudhuri Saheb's house. 'Do you ever see your hands?' I asked him.

'What are you talking about?' he said.

I put the question to Kanwar Saheb. He laughed sarcastically. 'Brother, your hands and mine, they must be utterly tired out. Probably asleep somewhere. It is not in their lot to go gadding about.'

But the same thing happened the next night. I again saw those hands coming in through the window. I watched them stealthily from the corner of my eye. The hands went round my bed a number of times and then started playing together on the floor. Then they climbed onto my table, put on my gloves and began to play on my accordion. They played sad numbers that brought tears to my eyes. My wife woke up and was surprised to see me weeping. 'Why, what's the matter?' she asked. 'Why are you crying?'

'Didn't you hear it? My hands were playing the accordion.' She looked around the room. 'I don't see them here,' she said. 'Perhaps you were dreaming.'

'It's not a dream,' I cried. 'Those hands come to me again and again. They are drawn to every object in this house. All this is so dear to them!'

First thing in the morning, I went to the hand market. The shop where I had sold my hands had just opened for business. I looked keenly for my hands, but they were not to be seen. I said to the manager, 'Sir, I want to take my hands back. I shall return your money and that overcoat too.'

The manager looked surprised. 'Why do you want your hands back?' he asked. 'Don't you know what wonderful work they are doing?' He drew me to a picture. In a burning desert, a crop of hands grew all the way across the frame. I closed my eyes. When I opened them again I saw the desert crowded with gravestones, each inscribed with an epitaph.

'No, I want my hands back at any cost,' I said.

Just then, a huge crowd burst in through the open door. More people who wanted to sell their hands. In the melee, I found myself being driven towards the exit.

'My hands,' I cried. 'For God's sake, I want them back.'

But no one took any notice of me. Like a crocodile, the shop had begun to devour the long queues that had formed at its mouth. I saw my friend standing in a corner of the shop. 'Listen, I want my hands back,' I barked at him. 'Are you listening? You must help me; no one is listening to me.'

He looked at me, a faint, lifeless smile on his lips. 'What do you need these hands for if you can be happy without them? Look what I have brought.' He drew out a packet from under his arm. His sunken hands lay in it.

'What about your story, powerful enough to shake the world?'

'No one wants to publish it,' said the journalist. 'It's time I sold my hands.'

He moved on, leaving me standing alone.

Published with the permission of The Little Magazine, Delhi. Naimul H. Rizvi is a well-known Pakistani short story writer who lives in Abu Dhabi. Jai Ratan has translated many works from Hindi and Urdu into English.

Letter from TORONTO

REBECCA SULTANA

I just returned from a great conference at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Titled 'Indigenous Women and Feminism: Culture, Activism, Politics' the conference brought together scholars and community members concerned with conceptualizing theories and practices of indigenous feminism. Speakers delivered papers within panels that addressed topics such as the roles of indigenous women in the academy, the intersections of research and political practice, and the ideologies and material processes of colonization in 'settler-colony' countries and, as in my case, international organizations.

Presenters interpreted 'indigeneity and feminism' as broadly as possible in order to achieve a dialogue that was necessarily interdisciplinary, international, and inclusive of scholars and students from a wide range of disciplines. This was unlike the usual conferences I attend which are either of literature or cultural studies. Speakers came from every department imaginable—ranging from Law, Literature, Philosophy, History, Film to Latin American Studies and Visual and Cultural Studies. Canada and the United States were, of course, a major focus for discussions, with comparative analyses offered by scholars from Latin America, Australia, New Zealand, and Uzbekistan. I was the lone participant representing Bangladesh.

I was impressed by the community workers who attended either to speak or just to observe. It was four days of bonding with women from different walks of life—from senior professors to grass-root-level social workers. The conference was inaugurated with a prayer by Marge Friedel, a Métis Elder, who invoked the spirits and the creator for the well beings of us present as well as the ancestors. After the speeches by the Provost and the Dean we were entertained by a colourful dance by the Thundering Spirit Dance Troupe. This was a family affair of three generations of women with the youngest one being six years old. They did have male dancers but decided not to bring them any this particular meet said Shirley Thunder, the daughter, much to the mirth of the audience. She explained that one of the reasons they decided to put together this troupe was to preserve the Cree tradition as well as the language, which they made a point to speak at home. Many indigenous languages are being lost for ever due

Conference on Indigenous Women, Culture and Politics

to massive assimilation within the mainstream culture, especially of the younger generations.

Canada is home to many native tribes who are referred to as First Nations, a term of ethnicity in Canada that has widely replaced the use of the word 'Indian'. The Inuit or Métis, however, do not fall within this group. The proper terms to refer to the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis collectively is Aboriginal peoples in Canada or First peoples or Indigenous peoples, tribes, or nations. The use of the word 'Indian' in day-to-day language is erratic in Canada, with some seeing the term as offensive while others prefer it to alternate terminology such as 'Aboriginal'.

With all the glorification of the noble brave we see in logos or Disney movies, racism still runs deep, in the city and on the reserve. And it is more than simple prejudice. Canada is no South Africa, but there is enough of a fissure that it amounts to a subtle form of apartheid. Intentionally or not, too much of Canada continues to push natives into a second-class carriage, and too many native leaders keep them there. In workplaces, sports teams, schools and places of worship, there are powerful divisions that perpetuate a two-tier society, the one that Paul Papigatuk, a Quebec Inuit leader, calls 'our caste system.'

John Stackhouse, a journalist from the Globe and the Mail, remarked about a nickel mine on Papigatuk's people's land that seemed like a scene out of the American South, with Inuit taking the place of blacks in the menial and unskilled jobs with whites in positions of authority. Sometimes, this is not because of intentional racism. Decades of failed education, social and cultural policies, as well as retrograde attitudes among many aboriginal leaders, has ensured that the Papigatuk people can't do much more than hunt, fish and wash dishes.

Community workers, in the conference, were especially vocal about the segregationist attitudes of the general white public towards the aborigines, drawing particular attention to a series of gruesome murders in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside of indigenous women and what they saw as a complete apathy in the police force to solve the cases. The serial killer was later apprehended but that did not stop similar crimes being committed against poor indigenous women forced to walk the street.

It was a white policeman who finally solved the case and was later

presented with the Esquao Award. Muriel Stanley Venne, president, Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, explained that this is an award which is given every year to community leaders, educationist or any native woman who makes a remarkable contribution to the community. The institute started the Esquao Awards by reinventing the word 'squaw'. Their brochure explains: 'From the colonist's inability to pronounce the word Esquao, the word "squaw" came to be a derogatory term. IAAW is claiming back the term for all Aboriginal women to stand proud when we hear Esquao applied to us.'

In all the cowboy and Indian movies and Western comics that I had pored over with my brothers, I had figured the 'squaw' to be the natural designation. The term, of course, came with all the implications that those cowboys had meant to express—dirty, disheveled and ugly. The connotation continues today. No matter how educated or high-placed an Aborigine woman might be, she is still regarded as a squaw by most. In answer to Audre Lorde's 'How can we dismantle the masters' house using the masters' tools?' the women of the native community has subverted the master's tool to their own empowerment. Esquao is now a term of empowerment.

I did manage to steal some time out to do some sightseeing on the third day of the conference. My niece Shurovi and her husband Rashed, both graduates of U of A, took me to Jasper Park, part of a spectacular World Heritage Site about 360 kilometers from Edmonton. The sight was breathtaking, with blue lakes flanked on one side by the Rocky mountain range. This was the pristine landscape that the native forefathers had lived in and which now has to be a protected area brings us face to face with the dire prospects of our endangered world.

My paper, on the fourth day, was on the state of indigenous women's activism in the context of the mainstream women's movement in Bangladesh. The program ended with a dinner banquet at a local Italian restaurant. As we exchanged e-mail addresses with hopes of meeting again at future meets, I also longed to go back home. But after Edmonton, Toronto seemed too crowded, too noisy, too hot, and most of all, too flat. I miss those mountains.

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Book Review An important resource for scholars of Bengal history

Communalism in Bengal: From Famine to Noakhali, 1943-47 (hb) by Rakesh Batabyal; Sage Publications: New Delhi/ Thousand Oaks/London; 2005; 429 pp.

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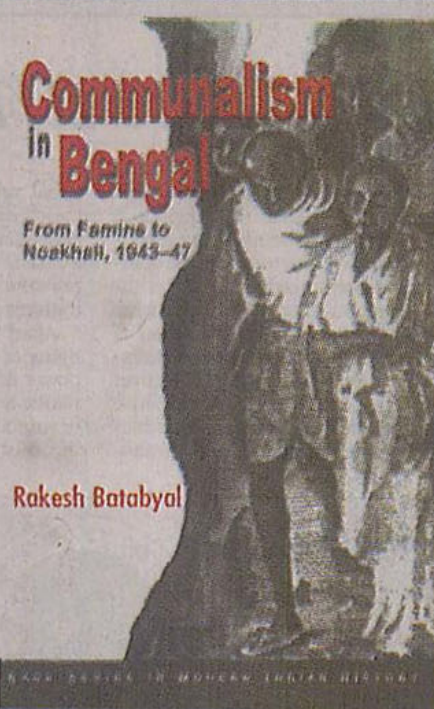
The research undertaken by the author of this book bears a resemblance to Alex Hailey's famous search for his roots. Rakesh Batabyal was literally born with an umbilical cord attached to the rise of communal violence in pre-partition Bengal that saw his grandparents flee their Barisal home. The Batabyals in Barisal are still a well-known family in the area.

At the very opening of the work, Batabyal discloses, 'This book has its origin during the days when I used to ask my grandmother about her early life in the tranquil village of Gaurnadi, in Barisal district of what is now Bangladesh, about the forces that compelled her family to come to this completely unknown tribal belt of Jharkhand as refugees. She was full of agony and anger at the thought of her refugee status, while nostalgic about her lost world. But there was no sense of vengefulness or bitterness.' Few readers would fail to notice the emphasis Batabyal puts on the absence of vengefulness when they reach this mission statement: 'I hope the pages in this book, which I finally wrote years after she had left this world, can at least capture cameos of that world of hers, with its bitterest memories, but no sense of revenge.'

Yes, revenge is not there and the author is successful in providing a vivid, multilayered exposition and analysis of communalism both as an ideology and in practice on a concrete historical plane. But there is a clear undertone of regret for East Pakistan's separation from its 'better half' and an accusatorial finger pointed at the Muslim League for the act.

Nonetheless, the work is of much import owing to the fact that a clear understanding of the nature and dynamics of communalism is crucial in order to remedy its socially-threatening aspects. Besides, since early 1980s, as Batabyal mentions, it has acquired urgency vis-à-vis the advancement, and even the survival, of the peoples of Bangladesh, West Bengal and the adjacent states in the face of a re-advent of Islamist militancy, Hindu fundamentalism and communalism, anti-Bangalee attitude and separatism. But a clear comprehension of the phenomenon called communal strife still eludes us and is the subject of much research.

In the chapter on 'communalism



and historiography', Batabyal outlines the three major schools of historiography regarding communalism in Bengal: one holds it as an ever-existing socio-cultural element; another as a false consciousness produced by the immediate inter-class economic relations; and the third as a category of politics that counterpoises nationalism inspired by European 'enlightenment'.

The thesis that Batabyal presents mostly agrees with the second group (the so-called 'Cambridge school') which regards the role of colonial regime in the rise of communalism as crucial, but he also considers it a modern manifestation of a continuing phenomenon. Communalism in Bengal, he says, appeared in the 1940s as a form distinctly separate from its counterparts in other provinces due to various factors. 'Bengal,' he says, 'was the region where colonial rule first entrenched itself and where it had a deeper impact than in any other area of the subcontinent,' and that 'colonialism produced a context which was totally new and of significant consequence. Agrarian dislocation, caused by the Permanent Settlement, introduced a new class relation to land while dispossessing the older classes.' According to him, 'communalism grew [here] as a reaction to the politics and the ideology of (a) nationalism' that failed to articulate the interests and aspirations of all the conflicting social segments' and captured the imagination of a large section of people in the subcontinent, [meaning mainly the disadvantaged

Muslims], finally resulting in the partition.'

British colonial rule generated two major causes of religion-based segregation: differences in educational and employment statuses. These two, Batabyal claims, were the crucial elements in the growth of communal consciousness, because the colonial Raj had linked them so closely that social mobility became entirely dependent on them. Education and employment thus became the principal sites of contest between the communities, resulting in a strong and sometimes quite ruthless urge among the disadvantaged Muslims to replace the advantaged section: 'An intense contest began to take shape in the early decades of the century. One section of the population [Hindus] had already become entrenched in positions from where it was easy for it to be upwardly mobile. The second group [Muslims] arrived late in the scene. Only two alternatives seemed available to the late arrivals, i.e., either they were to be accommodated within the first category, or were to replace or be replaced by the earlier lot,' expounds Batabyal. By the 1930s and 1940s the Muslim peasantry began to subscribe to the idea that there was a pattern to their backwardness and injustice they faced. These experiences were then translated into the idea of their community in opposition to another community.

Citing historical events, Batabyal tries to establish how the Urdu-speaking Muslim upper class politicised religious and communal perceptions to achieve its political and economic ends. This he attempts to illustrate by narrating the history of the Bengal famine, the agendas and activities of the country's major political parties (the Muslim League, Hindu Mahasabha, Indian National Congress and Communist Party), the Kolkata riots of 1946, the Noakhali-Tippura riots of 1946-47 and the roles other actors, including Gandhi and the colonial authorities, played in the violence.

Talking on the causes of the famine, Batabyal cites Amartya Sen's argument that there was no substantial difference in food availability between 1941 and 1943. The problem lay in the lack of purchasing capacity of consumers, but the reasons for its drastic fall remain contested, adding, 'and here the critical role of colonialism stares us in our [sic] face, despite serious

attempts to dilute its exploitative character.'

Here, it must be stated that Batabyal's historical interpretations cannot be termed as wholly unbiased, as witness his view of the role played by the provincial government of Surawady and others in the Calcutta riots, that 'Whatever role the Mahasabha played during the Calcutta riots, the riot itself and the role of the Muslim League ministry gave credence to its stance that the latter was out to trample the Hindu population.' Credence to whom? Or again, when he says Shyama Prasad Mookerjee's calling Suhrawardy the 'biggest goonda' must have appealed to a large number of frustrated Hindus, who felt helpless because of the manner in which the government had managed this calamity.

In 1945, the elections were an episode that showed the unacceptability of the communist message. The Muslim League had won easily,' he mentions and then jumps to this conclusion, 'It was in such a situation that the Noakhali riots became a test case for the idea of replacement, which was tried out in full strength.'

His narration is critical of the Congress's role, which he says failed to deal with the violence. According to him, 'The Noakhali riots and the violence associated with it brought to the fore the helplessness of the Congress leaders in the face of extreme communalism. While the local leaders gave a call to organize defensive corps to deal with the situation, the central leadership was totally confused regarding the next course of action.' Again, 'It was not strange, because well before the Noakhali riots, Congress workers and organizations were finding it difficult to come to terms with extreme communal violence.'

He however is appreciative of Gandhi's attempt to 'locate communalism as an ideology, and to devise ways to counter it' in Noakhali.

Overall, the book compiles and presents data that is not readily available. It should serve as an important resource for students and scholars of history, politics and sociology and those who are keen to understand the socio-economic and political realities of Bengal. The language at times is stiffly academic yet is lucid enough to be comprehended by general readers. But there are many grammatical errors, surprising given the book is from a house like Sage with a strong, three-member editorial board.

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