

SHORT STORY

Shapur the Poet

GEORGE MANO

It was the thirtieth year of the reign of Shah Abbas the Great. Wonderful things were happening in Esfahan, the new capital of the Shah's empire. Glorious buildings were going up—palaces, schools, mosques—and a magnificent square, a crown for this most beautiful of imperial cities. An ornate mosque, covered in gleaming blue tiles and decorated with the finest calligraphy, was being erected opposite the ancient bazaar, so that they—the mosque and the bazaar—were like two delicate hands holding the rim of this crown. The best architects and the best brick masons were hard at work. Traders in silk, wool, and ceramics were arriving every day by horse and camel and taking up residence in the caravanserai. World-renowned scholars, philosophers, artists were all gathering in the city. It was a time when the whole world wanted to be in Esfahan.

It was also the time of Shapur Bani Olaq's eighteenth birthday. Shapur had been grazing like a sheep for the previous two years. Every day he would wake up late, say good-bye to his parents, and walk past the little shops selling bread, spices, and meat near his home and head down the dusty roads leading to the center of the city—stopping only to chat with friends over a cup of tea every half hour or so. At the end of the day, when the sun was about to set and his legs felt tired, he would walk home. Each day seemed full, but Shapur had a feeling that his life was somehow directionless. He felt like sand blowing in the desert wind. It was time for a change, he thought. So Shapur decided to look for a job.

He walked to one of the many gardens that beautified the Shah's capital, sat down on the edge of a fountain pool, and looked into the clear blue water. "What shall I be?" he thought. "Should I follow in my father's footsteps?"

His father was a famous philosopher and carpet seller. Originally, he was just a carpet seller, but when potential customers came to his shop, he was more likely to impose his views of politics and religion on them than he was to exalt the color and weave of particular kilims and gabbehs. He became best-known for postulating that air was really water and water was really air. Soon his reputation spread and he earned the nickname "Olaq," which some said was due to his resemblance to a donkey, while others said it was due to his thinking like one. In any case, he still earned a decent living and he was able to send his only son, Shapur, to school.

Shapur was never a great student; he spent the majority of his class time day-dreaming. His only accomplishment in his six years of schooling was that he read the Holy Book from cover to cover twice. His education certainly had not prepared him for this day.

Shapur was now faced with a daunting task of monumental proportions: he needed to find a career that would match his talents. But what were his talents? Walking, daydreaming, and drinking-tea were not skills in great demand in those days. The only things of value that he could do were reading and writing.

"That settles it," he said to himself somewhat loudly, "I'm going to become a poet. If writing is the only thing I can do, then

I should become a poet."

It was quite a commendable choice indeed, because Shapur had never really read any poetry. He had heard verses recited occasionally, and he knew that Ferdosi, Sa'di, and Hafez were the big names in the literary world, but he had never experienced the object of his new career. In fact, he had only seen a book of poetry once; it was Ferdosi's *Shahnameh* on a shelf at the back of the butcher shop near his house. (The butcher was viewed as something of a crackpot by people in the neighborhood. On some occasions customers had walked into his shop and had caught him reading his poetry book. "What need has a butcher for reading?" locals would ask each other.)

Shapur knew what he had to do. He had to get to that shop immediately and read that book. It was the only thing stopping him from beginning his career, the only roadblock on his path to destiny. He stood up and set off on his way.

On the way back to his neighborhood, he stopped, of course, to have tea. He also decided to take a small detour and walk through the Great Bazaar. Normally, he would avoid the Great Bazaar, because it was filled with foreign traders, camels, and other undesirables, but this time he decided to walk through it and experience a little of the atmosphere there. It seemed like the kind of thing a poet might do. He had barely walked a hundred steps when something caught his eye. It was a shop which he had never noticed before—a bookshop. Shapur did not know that there were people who sold books. He had never thought about how readers came to own them. Unconsciously, he had assumed that the poets sold their works directly to people who wanted to read them. Then, he glanced over at the shop next-door, a carpet-seller. He knew about carpets because his father sold them. He wondered whether written works were somehow like the woven art. He concluded that they were, and that poets were like the nomads who weave gabbehs. Nomads in the deserts and mountains would weave carpets, and then traders like Shapur's father would go out into those areas, buy them from the nomads and sell them in their shops. "There must also be people, then, who go out to where poets live and buy their poetry," he thought. "Maybe I need to become a nomad?"

It was during that moment of reflection that Shapur's day would take a fateful turn. A middle-aged man with a mangy, gray beard and a few strands of long, stringy hair on top of his head saw Shapur standing motionless and targeted him. The man was dressed in rags and reeked like he had not bathed in years. Shapur, who was dressed in fine silks, as befit the son of a prosperous merchant, looked like a sacrificial lamb. The man in rags walked towards his target.

"Young man, could you lend me some money?"

"No," replied Shapur politely, yet resolutely.

The middle-aged beggar was taken aback.

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I mean I cannot lend you money. I don't know you, and if I lend you money I might never get it back."

"But everyone knows me," said the beggar with a smile that revealed half the



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teeth in his mouth were missing. "I'm a famous poet. I'm Lubiya, the Poet of the Great Bazaar."

"You're a poet?" Shapur exclaimed with excitement. "It must be my lucky day! I've just decided to become a poet. Can you teach me how to begin my career?"

Lubiya realized that a great opportunity had just fallen into his lap.

"Of course," he replied magnanimously.

"But first, we need to go to a nice inn and have a big meal."

"I'm not hungry," Shapur stated.

"Nonsense," said Lubiya, "a poet is always hungry."

"Oh! Thank you for telling me that.

Anything you can tell me about our profession I would greatly appreciate. I can learn a lot from someone like you. Do you mind if we stop to buy some paper before we go to eat? I want to have some paper to hand, in case I am inspired to write some verse."

"Paper? You don't need paper. You don't need to write either. I am fifty-seven years of age and have never written a single word."

"Never written...? Do you have someone write down the verse for you? Is that how the famous poets worked? Did Hafez and Ferdosi dictate their verse?"

"Habebz, Bergoszi, bah! They are fools! I have lived fifty-five years on this earth and have never read a single word. Reading and writing are for foolish people. The real poet keeps his work up here," Lubiya said pointing at his head.

"Oh!" Shapur said feigning understanding. In reality, he was confused by this apparent contradiction, but because Lubiya was the famous Poet of the Great Bazaar, he went along.

"Let's go eat," Lubiya suggested again.

The two of them walked through the labyrinth passages of the Great Bazaar until they came to an inn next to the caravanserai. At that time of day, about a dozen customers were sitting on carpets eating their meals. They were all men, and their fashions suggested that they were foreign merchants. Shapur and Lubiya ordered some food and sat down between groups of

those men. "What is the secret to poetry?" Shapur asked.

Lubiya, still grinding down the food in his mouth with the seven teeth he had left, said something that sounded like "fire."

"What?" asked Shapur again.

"Fire."

"Fire?"

"Yeah, let me show you."

Lubiya took two pieces of flint out of a woolen bag tied to his waist. He turned and leaned over to a merchant who was sitting behind him with his back to him, a short, stocky man wearing a Turkish fez. Lubiya scratched off a couple of sparks onto the back of the merchant, onto his fine silk garments. Before long a little flame was smoldering on his back. Once the merchant felt his skin burning and smelled the smoke, he jumped to his feet. His hands were moving furiously to put out the fire. Two big men sitting with him stood up quickly and patted down his back until the flame and smoke were out.

"What on earth is the matter with you?" shouted the short, stocky man. He drew a curved knife out of a sheath tied to his belt and raised it in a threatening manner. His two friends stood behind him and appeared willing to help him disembowel the Poet of the Great Bazaar.

"There's nothing wrong with me," Lubiya replied calmly and matter-of-factly.

"I ought to kill you."

"Don't you know anything about poetry, you idiot? I was only explaining to my student here how to create poetry."

The face of the stocky merchant expressed complete bewilderment. The man before him looked like an illiterate beggar, but the young man with him was dressed elegantly. His mind was unable to place the two of them in the same context. Maybe, the man in rags really is a poet, he thought. Maybe, poets dress in rags to understand how poor people live.

"You're a poet, are you?" he asked after his temper had dissipated somewhat.

"That's right."

The stocky merchant stood for a moment looking over the beggar, still trying

to resolve in his mind what he knew about poets from his education and what he saw before him.

Finally with slow resignation he said, "Then... I understand."

He re-sheathed his knife. His two friends backed off and sat down. He also sat down.

Lubiya turned to Shapur and explained the lesson.

"You see, the key is fire. You need to make a fire."

"Yes, I see," said Shapur making an effort to grasp what the old man was teaching.

"There is nothing more important than fire," Lubiya continued. "On a cold winter day, when you are sleeping on the ground by the wall of a mosque, there is nothing more important than fire."

"Why would I sleep on the ground by the wall of a mosque?"

"You want to be a poet, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then, you need to live like a poet."

Shapur nodded, although he did not understand this last lesson.

After finishing their meals, the two men set off into the center of town. Lubiya told Shapur more about the life of a poet as he had lived it—how to look for discarded food scraps near the caravanserai, how to size up the wealth of merchants in the bazaar to determine whether they were likely to donate money generously or not, and how to find a warm place to sleep by mosques in winter and a cool place in parks in summer.

Most importantly, Lubiya intoned about the necessity of building fires. "In my long life of fifty-nine years, I have learned one thing," he instructed, "you must make a fire." To demonstrate his point, twice the old poet stopped to kindle an object in his path. First, it was a pile of fabrics that a merchant has left on the road by his cart. "You must make a fire," Lubiya intoned, as he set the fine threads alight. The two men were far down the road when the merchant ran out of the shop, saw the pile of ashes, and shook his fist in the air at some long-gone culprit. The next time it was a camel tethered to a post. Unfortunately for Lubiya, the uncooperative beast moved its legs every time he tried to make the sparks catch its hairs, and he had to abandon the idea of turning it into a barbecue.

Eventually, the two men stopped their educational promenade in front of the large house of a khan, a distant cousin of the Shah who was also the local political leader.

"The best way to learn is to do," instructed Lubiya, who had now taken on the tone of a teacher. "It is your turn to make a fire."

"There is nothing to burn here. How shall I make a fire?"

"There!" Lubiya pointed. "That donkey cart is made of wood. Unhitch it, move it over next to the wall of this house, and set it alight."

Shapur agreed to give it a try. Lubiya lent him his flints. The young carpet-seller's son went over and unhitched the donkey cart, which was empty except for a few vegetables in the back. After moving it next to the wall of the house, he tried to make some sparks, but these were not enough to set the wood alight. He didn't have much experience in these matters, and he looked somewhat clumsy in his attempts. In addition, the cart was moist in spots from the

vegetables.

Lubiya was starting to lose patience with his pupil.

"Here, give me the flints. I'll start the fire. You go look for some more wood."

Shapur headed down the road looking for something, anything that would burn. In the meantime, it had only taken a few seconds before Lubiya had the donkey cart kindling. The old master could start a fire anywhere in moments. In order to keep the flames from dying out, he tipped the cart on its side and leaned it against the wall of the khan's house. In no time, he had a significant blaze scorching the walls, and he cracked a big, almost-toothless smile which told the world he was proud of his work. He was hoping that Shapur would return soon, so he could show him this magnificent conflagration.

Shapur was wandering the side streets for a good twenty minutes before he looked back over his shoulder to see an enormous cloud of smoke billowing up from around the area where he had left Lubiya. He decided to abandon his search for wood and head back; this was his first opportunity to see a big, beautiful, poet's fire, and he didn't want to miss it.

When he got back to the street where he had left Lubiya, he stopped in his tracks. The scene before him was entirely different from what he had expected. Not only was the donkey cart burning, but so was the roof of the khan's house. Also, a crowd had gathered in the street. There were some angry men—a farmer who was crying about his donkey cart and cursing the man who had set it ablaze; and the resident of the house, the khan himself, with two of his servants, condemning the man who had torched their beautiful abode. In the middle, with his arms and legs bound by ropes, was the man cursed by the farmer and condemned by the khan and his servants—Lubiya, the Poet of the Great Bazaar. The angry men were hitching him to the back of a pair of donkeys and were planning to drag him through the streets. Lubiya, in vain, tried to convince the angry mob of his innocence by repeating over and over again that he was only trying to create poetry. Shapur, who watched this scene in disbelief, thought it would be wise not to get involved in such judicial matters, so he turned around and walked away.

The next day, Shapur woke up late, as he usually did, and walked through the dusty streets of the town, stopping occasionally to sip some tea. At midday he stopped in a park by a fountain pool, the same one he had visited the day before. He had a book with him, a book of blank pages. He opened it to the first page and took out the quill and ink he had also brought with him. He thought for a moment, and then he wrote his first verse:

Yesterday I was a poet.  
I learned how to be a poet.  
I learned how to make a fire.  
A fire can do much damage and make people angry.  
Today I will stop being a poet.

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Books From The Past

How it is done

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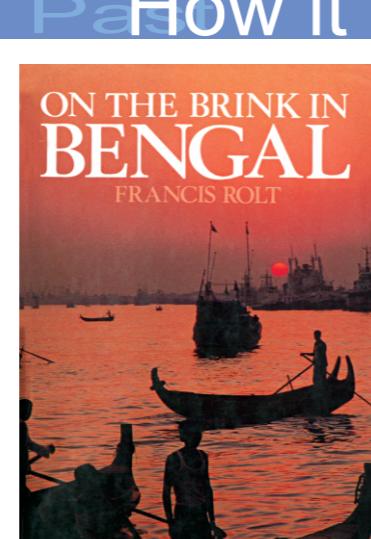
*On The Brink In Bengal* by Francis Rolt, with photographs by Peter Barker; London: John Murray, 1991.

Reading this book one realizes, yet once again, how little of modern-day Bangladesh, its people, rivers and haors, have been written about at a suitably high level of English. Our country, its sights and sounds, is largely missing in our English-language writing. Or else, all too frequently, it is badly written about, its contours and colours mangled by inept scribes.

Francis Rolt, an Englishman who first came here in 1978 at age 23, worked for Oxfam and War on Want and also wrote the novel *The Last Armenian*, shows us how it is done.

Here he is on the salt boats being unloaded at Chittagong's Majhighat:

"Conditions...were positively medieval. A heavy grey mud, which contained the salt, was shoveled out of the boats' holds into a pile. From there it was weighed into the labourers' head-baskets, each one containing thirty-seven kilos. The men, sweating under weight and with salt-saturated water running into their eyes, took a wooden spill from a clerk sitting under an umbrella, then holding the basket steady with one hand, and grasping the spill with the other, they ran up the alley and into the factory. Once they'd got rid of the mud they gave the spill to another clerk, who put a mark against their name in the ledger. The operation was quick and efficient, a system which had been in operation for centuries, perhaps since the early fourteenth century, or before, when the first



When it first came out, the book encountered the stiff disapproval of the Bangladeshi authorities. The immediate cause of it was a two-chapter account of an unauthorized trek through the Chittagong Hill Tracts that describes in unflattering terms encounters with Muslim Bengali settlers and army personnel. Fifteen years later, with much water having flowed under the bridge, it makes for fairly innocuous reading. There are many Bangladeshis, especially human and tribal rights activists, who have had similar experiences in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and all heavy-handed attempts to suppress such counter narratives, or banning documentaries such as Tanvir Mokammel's *Karnaphulir Kanna*, is simply self-defeating.

The real objection to the book, it seems to me, is the way Francis arbitrarily leads off from his stated objective in writing the book, which was to travel along the fissures created by "the dividing line between hill and plain, jungle and rice land, tribal and Muslim

Bengali." Since his sympathies, beginning from his teaching days in 1979-80 at Chittagong University, clearly lie with the "tribals", sweet, innocent and spat upon, the Bengali Muslims in the book tend to come out as *tupi-wearing*, women-repressing, *pir-duped*, sinfully-visaged beings. Even a West Bengal Brahmin, with his "ancient Aryan prejudices (against) the Mru, Khasi and Mandi," comes in for a back-handed swipe. This is not right—just as it wouldn't be right if I traveled through Britain and wrote disparagingly about everyone who looked as if s/he had voted for the despotic Iraq-occupation peddler known as Tony Blair! No matter what our history is with regard to the tribal peoples—and it has been manifestly indefensible conduct—it is patently unfair to view all Bangladeshi Muslims through that prism. It mars this otherwise very fine