

wildly, he was wondering what to do next when the owl flew from its perch and made straight for him. Scared out of his wits, Mahbub slammed his door shut with trembling hands. He put off the light, slid into bed and pulled the quilt over his body and lay still all night. Outside he heard the owl hooting away *goo boom, boom* all night. At cock-crow, just as dawn was about to break, he realized the cry had ceased. Stepping out cautiously he saw the owl was no longer there. He felt a load lift off his heart.

After a hurried wash he decided to inform Jatin Babu about this strange occurrence right away. But as he climbed onto his cycle, Mahbub saw, in the half

light of dawn, Jatin Babu himself speeding towards him. He seemed quite shaken. "Mahbub saheb, an amazing thing happened last night. Deep in the midnight hour, I suddenly saw an owl sitting on top of my garden wall and crying out loud. As I opened the door it started to fly straight at me. I slammed the door as fast as I could and closed all the windows and lay still till daybreak. The owl hooted on my verandah all night! It left as dawn started to break and I rushed over to your place as fast as I could."

Mahbub stared at Jatin Babu, dumbfounded.

This story does its rounds among the owls as well.

They say: "We were watching the suspicious movements of those two for quite a while from our secret lairs. Finally we decided to issue stern warnings to both separately. We appreciate their interest and all that, but they should be aware of boundaries that should not be crossed. The unbridled curiosity of their kind had led to the extinction of our beautiful kin, the island-dwelling dodos. They have been wiped off the face of the earth. Do they think by any chance the owls are willing to suffer such a fate?"



artwork by apurba das

What Do You Have On The Menu That's Totally Tasteless?

SYED MUJTABA ALI

(TRANSLATED BY NAEEM MOHAIMEN)

[Excerpt from a project on the impossibility of translating Syed Mujtaba Ali]

The last time I dated a Bengali woman, we reveled in our language alignments. We could gibboth freely about other New Yorkers, in front of them, by switching lingua. It was much better than when I used to talk to my slightly hard-of-hearing friend Zahin in Bengali about an uber-glam passerby. He would ruin the effect by swiveling his head and saying (in English) "Who? Where? Oh, you mean her?" What's the point of having your own language if you have simultaneous dubbing..

Things go better with Coca Cola, and things go better with Bengali. This is a sly way to think of Syed Mujtaba Ali - one of the most widely read Bengali (or Bangali or Bangla) writers of pre- and post-Partition India. Ali's ambivalence on Partition, and his comfort with a Bengali cultural scene that was (seemingly) pan-religion, created a schizophrenic position in divided India. His tart, essay-length response to Jinnah's declaration that Urdu would be the "state language" of Pakistan damaged his older brother Murtaja Ali's early career in the Pakistan civil service. Mujtaba's wide interests, exorbitantly far-flung travels and knowledge of eight languages made him a popular dinner companion, short story master, travel writer, cultural ambassador, and goppobaj in the Bangla tradition.

But his work remains, in some forms, supremely untranslatable. Ali's wit depends on inserting English, French and German phrases, references, jokes, locations and beauties into, rubbing against, jostling and rudely interrupting the flowery path of Bengali language. Rendered into English, there is a curious bland flattening of distinctions. All this is to say that, gentle reader, I wish you would read this in the original Bengali. So I could whisper in your ear, "There goes a real beauty."

--Translator's Note

[And so we enter "British-Indian Exchange of Views", written by Mujtaba Ali in Bengali in December 1945, the eve of the nightmare of Partition...and here I have cobbled together a translation -- but the juice, the essence, is somewhat lost. But read on anyway...indulge me]

British: I invited you to Firpo the other night. You made some excuses and left. Later I learn you were seen that night at Amjadia Hotel. Firpo's food is cooked by the tri-universe famous chef de cuisine. And you ignore him to go eat that savage's cooking?

Indian: Before I debate the other qualities of your cooking, I must draw your attention to something very basic. I don't know if you have noticed yet, but your cooking is badly missing three of the six essences: bitter, tart and spice. Sometimes there is a drop of spice, but that too trapped in a bottle. Even after two hundred years of home rule, you still fear and suspect that object. So before accepting your invitation, I can already say that whatever else your "tri" cooking may have, it lacks diversity. How many tunes can you possibly play with salt and sweet? You want to fight the lyre with a two-stringed instrument? Even Amjadia's "savage" can beat your chef any day. Secondly, yes I come to secondly, there is no difference between your kitchen and your dining table. You place a basket full of broken bottles on the table, call it a cruet! In case a guest has difficulty swallowing your bland boiled and flame-charred creation, he has to become his own master chef at

your dining table. To add some fat you pour olive oil, to add sting you spread mustard, to make it bitter you sprinkle pepper--the bottle's holes are blocked up, so your arm may actually separate from its socket trying to wrestle the pepper out. The coward chef dare not even add salt--have you noticed that eighty percent of your guests sprinkle salt BEFORE they take a sip. So there you are, pour salt! When you find the object still tasteless, you start showering it with some peculiar liquid called sauce. *Bhai*, I'm the son of a *bhadralok*, in my house cooking is always completed in the kitchen.

British: Well, there are differences in taste the world over...

Indian: Don't try your high theories on me. If that were so, why don't you just light a flame at the dining table and let everyone cook their own meat? Some prefer their meat rare, some well done -- why leave that choice to the chef? The truth is, even though there is difference in palate, the cook has learnt the middle path over time. Even though there is difference in taste, wise men prefer Shakespeare and Kalidas.

British: But Amjadiyas eat with their hands, they have no cutlery.

Indian: Actually they do. By now the subcontinent, under your influence, has become so uncivilized that even Indians are trying to use knife and fork. Why they would want to take up that filthy habit...

British: Filthy habit? What do you mean?