

Indian: Absolutely. There are your knife, spoon, fork. There is your napkin. Just give them a good rub, and see how much dirt comes off. And what doesn't come off will slide off with food juices and slide into your stomach. Even if my fingers have dirt, I can go to that toilet and wash with soap. If you walk in that direction with your cutlery, the manager will call the police on you. And here's my last word: I am putting my own fingers in my mouth; your fork has probably traveled through millions of diseased lips and orifices. The Chinese are much cleaner than you, they walk into restaurants with their eating sticks.

British: Well, anyway...

Indian: Yes, this conversation is hurting your feelings. I had a Bengali Christian friend. He tried to eat hilsha fish with a fork—he wanted to be a *sahib* badly. The fishbones became lodged so badly in his throat, his own bones made a permanent home in the graveyard. (tears)

British: Aha! Well why not just stop eating fish then!

Indian: Why don't the English stop eating bacon-eggs, French stop drinking champagne, Germans stop eating sausage? Bengalis can stop eating fish, they can also fast unto death, they can also commit suicide. You, sitting here in Bengal, if you don't get your tinned bacon, you want to set up a commission to investigate "British Tradition in Danger". And I won't eat fish on the edge of the Ganges? How can you even say that!

British: Be that as it may... (ahem). But now your women do all the cooking. Is that all they do? Why do they accept this cruel segregation?

Indian: You have to ask when you meet them.

British: But we never get a chance to meet with them.

Indian: That is our extreme good fortune.

British: (worried) Is that quite fair? Are we really that bad?

Indian: Mister, I don't know about good-bad. We jumped into your loving embrace in 1757. We lost the self-rule *gamcha* and for two hundred winter years, we are sinking into poverty-disaster-filth. We still haven't made it onto dry land. That's the story of the men, so the women have already quit you and are hiding inside the harem.

British: That is only the exterior. What about your culture, your tradition...

Indian: Another day for that. Right now I have to go into the streets and sing *Quit India*.



artwork by mahbubur rahman

## The Girl Who Sold Incense Sticks

DELWAR HASAN

(TRANSLATED BY NEEMAN SOBHAN)

Watching the neighbourhood folks dunk *daalpuris* in their tea makes him long to do the same. Then he scraps the idea. These days he is rather low on cash. At least, he still has six sticks of cigarettes in his packet, which is such a comfort. Strange, how just a few cigarettes and a box of matches can become comrades in your solitude!

He arrived in this city only recently, and hardly knows anyone here. He hasn't even had the opportunity to make anyone's acquaintance yet. The very first person he got to know in this city is Miyajaan Munshi of this neighbourhood. Munshi was sitting one evening at a roadside eatery dipping *daalpuris* in his tea. It happened to be the very day that he had arrived in the city, his cloth knapsack hanging from his shoulder. He had entered this neighbourhood to

seek out a friend of his. Even though he had traced the address he couldn't find the friend. Apparently he had left town. Now he was in dire straits! He had very little money with him, and on top of that he knew no one in this city. Exhausted from traveling and with a mind beset with anxiety, he entered the café and that's when he saw Miyajaan Munshi eating *daalpuris* dunked in tea. A few others in the café were also doing the same. He didn't know then that this business of dunking *daalpuris* in tea was a part of the local culture.

Miyajaan Munshi was chatting away with everyone, and at one point he spoke to him as well. Munshi, finishing his tea, had just lit a cigarette, and as a matter of course asked him whether he was a new arrival in the neighbourhood. Scrutinizing Munshi's face he found a striking resemblance with Dadajaan, his dear departed paternal grandfather! Of course he didn't reveal this to Munshi. But, in

spite of being rather shy and most likely under the sway of emotion, he didn't hesitate to reveal to Munshi the circumstances of his arrival in this city, the disappearance of his friend and the fact that he now had no place to stay.

His story probably generated some compassion in Munshi's heart, for the latter took him to his house and having ordered the attic to be cleared, set him up there. Of course he was embarrassed to stay there on charity, and within a few days he let Munshi know this. Munshi smiled and said, "All right, tell you what! I have this grandson, and the bloody kid doesn't give a hoot about studying! How about taking him under your wing, and tutoring him, once in the morning and once in the evening?" Since then, he has been living in Miyajaan Munshi's house. Apart from Munshi's attention-deficit grandson, he is currently also tutoring two other kids in the neighbourhood.