

It was after evening when we sat in the living room ready for *adda*, a chat that could foreseeably last half the night. Zaharul Islam, 50, had just arrived in the city from his home in Dinajpur's Ghoraghat. He found his way to my place from Gabtoli Bus Stand.

It's ironic we spoke of it then – it was hardly the first topic – because well-after-evening is probably the time of day when people most readily consider those Islamic spirits called *jinn*s. And yet, from Zaharul Bhai I was about to hear that a jinn can also arrive of an afternoon.

Before we go further... Of course I cannot attest to the veracity of what he described. It occurred when he was twelve years old. What I can say is that he was entirely serious in the telling.

It happened on a day in Phalgun or Choitro month

– the season of spring. The sun was hot enough for his uncle, with whom the young Zaharul was to travel to his maternal grandmother's house, to carry an umbrella.

And the late Hafez Abdur Rahman was no ordinary uncle. Blind from birth, he was renowned for being spiritually gifted – he was considered a *pir* or a dervish. "In Ghoraghat we use the word *aulia*," says Zaharul Bhai.

From childhood Zaharul's uncle had been educated by a Maulavi from Noakhali. The parents hoped their blind son could memorise the holy Quran to become a Hafez, which village wisdom says assures one a place in heaven. Zaharul's uncle studied for seventeen years. He was a good student.

"He didn't only know the Quran," says Zaharul, "He knew all the hadiths. Not only did he know the hadiths but he understood their meaning."

"Planes, volcanoes, science..." says Zaharul, "How big is the world? Without the hadiths, who could understand?"

There are many stories about his uncle. "He could

read palms," says Zaharul, "telling people about a serious disease they'd suffered ten years before. He'd tell their futures, including when they'd die."

Once, Zaharul's uncle is said to have arrived home with his wife and after going inside, he told her they'd been robbed. The blind man described what was missing and where it had been placed; and he identified the thieves.

Another day, Zaharul remembers, the large stand of bamboo outside the house was behaving strangely. It was as though a large wind was passing, except there was no wind. Yet the large stalks were bending profusely until with a tap-tap-tap they hit and hit again the tin roof of the house. "The bamboo will be ruined!" said Zaharul's father.

His uncle then called out, "Lalu... Kalu... Stop!" Suddenly the bamboo stood straight. There was no more tapping. The air was still. "He often called those names," says Zaharul, "Nobody knew what they meant. But he said he could control jinn's. On that day it seemed his jinn's were making mischief."

"My uncle had many followers. There was a retired major from Dhaka Cantonment – when my uncle died ten years ago the major offered a water buffalo for his *chollisha*," says Zaharul, referring to the tradition of a deceased's family providing food to the poor forty days after their relative's demise. "The major gave many goats too."

In the morning of the day when he was twelve, Zaharul set off, leading the blind man towards the house of Zaharul's maternal grandparents – a house that sat on a shoal across a wide stretch of the Brahmaputra River, some 30 kilometres away in Gaibandha District.

They had reason to go. Zaharul had another uncle there, and that uncle's wife was having trouble conceiving. She'd had three to four unsuccessful pregnancies and despite previous efforts by the late Hafez Abdur Rahman to help her, nothing worked.

"My aunt was very beautiful," says Zaharul. "After we arrived, my blind uncle did some treatment." He performed an exorcism. "Suddenly I heard my aunt shouting, 'I will go! I will not stay here any longer! I will never come again!'" The jinn inside her, was pleading for mercy.

Zaharul's uncle was serious. "No! You stayed here for long. You will not go."

"When the jinn emerged, my uncle caught it and put it into a bottle," says Zaharul. "I saw that! He buried the bottle. After that my aunt had a son followed by three daughters. One of them lives in Italy."

By early afternoon it was time to leave, so uncle and nephew made their way back to the riverbank. In the morning it had been no problem but by afternoon the riverbank was deserted. There was not a single boatman waiting to ferry them across. "We could go to *Phuphu's* house?" suggested the young Zaharul, knowing his paternal aunt's house was nearby.

"No," said his uncle. "We'll cross the river, you'll see!"

"After some time," says Zaharul, "I heard a snorting sound. I saw a large dog come out of the bushes. The dog went to the water's edge."

"Did Kaloo come?" asked his uncle. "Don't you see him?" The dog was in the river. He was very broad in the back and jet black. Only its head and back were above water.

His uncle told Zaharul to climb onto the dog's back. "You must only look forward," he told his nephew, "Don't look around. Focus on the river's far bank." After Zaharul climbed aboard his uncle did the same.

"My uncle was speaking without sound," says Zaharul. "It looked like

he was reciting something."

What happened next was remarkable. "At most," Zaharul says, "within forty seconds we were on the other side. I hardly knew what happened. I was in ankle-deep water – it was clear, you could see everything – just beside the far bank." The dog had vanished.

The 12-year-old was terrified. He ran as fast as he could up the bank.

"Where are you, nephew?" his uncle was calling. "Come here! Come here!" After running some distance Zaharul stopped, and returned to his uncle. How else would the blind man find his way home? "Now, don't tell your grandparents," the late Hafez Abdur Rahman said.



Dinajpur's Ghoraghat has a long history. An old well in town.

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Early morning in Dinajpur's Ghoraghat.

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