

Minnat Ali's *Kafoner Lekha* and the biography of an autobiography

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After savouring English and world literature for quite a while, I developed an interest in South Asian literature. This led me to study writers of this literary tradition. The latest in my list of authors is Minnat Ali (1932-2008), the recipient of the 1975 Bangla Academy Literary Award for short stories. I grew up hearing so much about the wordsmith of our district Brahmanbaria, but never had an opportunity to meet him in person.

During my trip to Bangladesh in February 2020, I contacted some of his

relatives and family members to know more about the writer and, if possible, collect his writings. Upon my request, one of his relatives, Mr Shamsul Alam Shahin (1964-) of our village Araisidha directed me to Minnat Ali's eldest son Khushbu Mohammad Al Aman (1963-).

I met Mr Al Aman at "Shuvo Bari" – as Minnat Ali's homestead is named – at the heart of Brahmanbaria town. Mr Al Aman treated me with proverbial Bangladeshi hospitality. He shared with me insights into the literary career of his father and was courteous enough to present some of his late father's books

to me as gifts. Among them was *Kafoner Lekha* (2005). Once back in Kuala Lumpur, I read the books. Even though the title sounded familiar, I was certainly not prepared for the treasure trove I found within the covers of *Kafoner Lekha*. In the book, Minnat Ali retells the autobiography of the renowned scholar, writer and freedom fighter Fazl-e-Haq (also spelled as Fadl-e-Haq) Khairabadi (1796-1861) – so named because he was born in Khairabad in what is now the Indian

relations in the region for the next ninety years. A number of local patriots and freedom fighters challenged imperialism head-on and, consequently, bore ruthless cruelty of the British occupying power. Khairabadi narrates the tragic end of Mughal rule in Delhi and critiques the sell-out intellectuals and opportunists who colluded with the British in return for perks and privileges. They made it possible for the foreign power to establish dominion over, and snatch independence from the people of South Asia.

The sexagenarian Khairabadi actively participated in the Rebellion. Moreover, as a prominent intellectual and religious scholar, he issued the famous anti-colonial nationalist clarion call *fatwa-e-jihad* against the British. He declared that it was a religious duty to fight the colonial system of exploitation. He visited Ayodhya (Ajothya) and other near and far-off areas to deliver firebrand speeches and motivated freedom fighters to jump into the battle against British rule to reclaim independence.

The colonial government became alarmed and accused Khairabadi of treason. After the fall of Delhi, it took prolonged punitive measures against the people of the land. Khairabadi and other anti-colonial intellectuals were arrested, tortured and faced punishments, including death. In 1859, a sham trial was conducted and Khairabadi was exiled for life on the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal.

Though now a tourist destination and often compared to Hawaii for its scenic beauty, during the colonial period Andaman was a nightmare and synonymous with a death sentence, especially for anti-colonial freedom fighters. Mainly because of the horrors associated with the Andaman high-security prison and "the strong currents and shark infested waters surrounding it," the island gained notoriety and was popularly called *kala panir desh* (land of black waters).

At that time, the deputy jailor of the Andaman prison was a knowledgeable Englishman with a deep interest in eastern traditions, especially Indian astronomy. At his disposal was a precious Persian manuscript on the subject.

He knew there were erudite scholars among the inmates under his charge and gave it to one to unpack and decipher its content. That prisoner passed the work to Khairabadi who embraced it as a godsend opportunity to engage in scholarly activities after a long gap. He translated and annotated the book for the benefit of the jailor who read it and was amazed by the depth of Khairabadi's knowledge, as reflected in his notes and commentary. The jailor then rushed to the prison barracks to meet the great scholar.

Khairabadi was away on penal servitude (hard labour). After waiting for some time, the jailor saw him returning to the prison barracks with a spade on his shoulder and a bamboo basket in his armpit. This scene deeply moved the jailor who could not control his tears. He removed the spade and basket from Khairabadi's hands and deplored that such a man of letters had to do menial, laborious tasks with ordinary prisoners.

From that day onwards, the jailor spared Khairabadi prison labour. Meanwhile, having been exempted from penal servitude, Khairabadi decided to write his autobiography. He managed to collect some charcoal to use as pen and fabric material as paper and started writing his memoirs about the Great Rebellion in Arabic.

There was another writer-scholar named Inayat Ahmad from Kakori in Uttar Pradesh who had been jailed in Andaman before Khairabadi. Inayat Ahmad is known to have written a biography of Prophet Muhammad in prison and did a British official a comparable favour by translating an important Persian book on geography titled *Taqim al-Buldan* (A Sketch of the Countries) by the great scholar Abul-Fida (1273-1331). Upon recommendation by that British official, Inayat Ahmad was released from Andaman prison. When seeing off Inayat Ahmad, Khairabadi gave him his manuscript written on shrouds, saying, "Dear Brother, please give these grave clothes to my son Abdul Haq."

The Andaman prison authority did not scrutinize the content of the clothing parcel, as they took it for grave clothes. The parcel arrived in mainland British

India safely. Meanwhile, artists, writers and the intellectual community of the subcontinent submitted petitions to the Privy Council in London for Khairabadi's acquittal. As a result, in 1861 a release order was issued and his second son Shamsul Haq collected it from the then British colonial administrative centre of Calcutta.

With the release order in hand, Shamsul Haq started his voyage for Andaman in order to bring back his father. After four-day long sea journey when he reached Andaman, he found a long funeral procession. "Who passed away?" he enquired. "The well-known scholar Fazl-e-Haq Khairabadi," came the reply. Shamsul Haq immediately said *inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi rejiwun* and cried out aloud: "Abba!" He joined the procession, buried his father in the ground of Andaman and returned home with a broken heart.

In the course of time, scholars of British India decoded the text of Khairabadi's autobiography written on grave clothes, made copies and circulated them to various parts of the region. They did so in secrecy, fearing colonial surveillance, censorship and punitive measures. After many decades in 1941, politician Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) persuaded a scholar named Abdus Shahid Khan Sherwani to translate the work into Urdu. While writing its introduction, Abul Kalam Azad titled the unnamed manuscript *Sawratul Hindia* (Indian Rebellion) under which the autobiography is now known. Soon after its Urdu translation along with the original Arabic text was published, the colonial government confiscated all its copies and subjected the publisher to harassment and torture. The book was freely available to the public only after independence in 1947.

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The Cellular Jail in Andaman.

state of Uttar Pradesh. According to scholar Jamal Malik at Germany's Erfurt University, Khairabadi "was one of the first political prisoners of colonial times, who ... resigned from the post of *kutchery* chief and ... drafted the first constitution of Independent India based on the 'principles of democracy.'"

In his autobiography, Khairabadi provides an eye-witness account of the Great Rebellion of 1857-59 and its aftermath. A landmark event in British colonial history in South Asia, the Great Rebellion (known as Sepoy Mutiny in colonial officialese) impacted colonial



FICTION |

When the Gypsies Came to Town

WAQAR A KHAN

It happened sometime in the winter of 1959. There was a ripple of commotion in the 'kancha bazaar' (kitchen market) in Dinajpur town. Someone gave a clarion call, "The gypsies are here. Allah save us! Secure your things." It was as if a calamity had descended on the small town. Sajeed our domestic servant came running home from the bazaar and excitedly broke the news.

The kancha bazaar in those days was the hub of news, both real and imagined and the pulse of society. There was an immediate stir in our family. Everyone spoke excitedly. Mother was worried. Our Dadi (paternal grandmother), a pious, conservative lady of the old school who knew enough about gypsies from her childhood days in Malda, declared with a magisterial flourish that they were evil people. Prejudice and fascination combined with a litany of negative attributes ranging from: thievery, witchcraft, sorcery, black magic, kidnapping of children were all associated with them. Even our young teenage paternal aunt and uncle chipped in, "these people know Jadu" (magic). However, what struck me as a bit odd even as a 5 year old, was the sudden furor the news had aroused in an otherwise quiet, orderly household. I became very curious. Who were these strange people? Our front and backyard gates were promptly locked. It was debated if we (children) should be sent to school that day or not? Even our beloved pet dog Pinky sensed something was wrong and barked incessantly. Only our father maintained his calm. With a huff he rode off in his bicycle to his office, glad to get away from it all. "Don't forget to notify the police," mother called after him. Nobody cared to recall then, that our celebrated national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam was enamored of the gypsy girl, and had admirably written an enchanting ode to the dancing Iranian girl who played the tambourine.

It was difficult for us children to go off

to sleep that night. We tossed and turned, dithered and shuddered. Mother scolded us. We were told to close our eyes and go to sleep. We feigned sleep for a while, before sleep and "dreamland" overtook our weary souls. However, as children our fear and excitement was palpable. Then all hell broke out the very next morning. Sajeed raised the alarm, "Amma O Amma, amgo khaise re khaise, gypsy ra bashar pechone aise!" (Mother O mother! We are undone. The Gypsies are right here in our backyard!) We all woke up with a start. For the first time I saw a look of concern on my father's face. He told everyone to stay indoors while he and uncle Akram hurried to our backyard to investigate. Sajeed was right. The house we lived in was previously owned by a Hindu pleader who had left for India soon after the partition. It stood on an elevated plot of land. In our backyard was a small patch of land we used as a kitchen garden, at the edge of which was a sheer drop of about four feet into a shallow, murky, dying canal called the Ghagra. It was once a prominent canal dug by Raja Ramnath of Dinapur for purposes of drainage and sanitation to ensure public health in the town. However, during our time, the Ghagra was silted and had very little water except in the rainy season. The canal previously drew water from a nearby ancient river called the Kanchan, mentioned even in the old Hindu scriptures. Sadly, when we saw the Ghagra, it slowly meandered through the town like an oversized drain carrying filth. Viewed from our backyard across the canal, lay a vast stretch of uninhabited land where the cattle grazed. The Gypsies had camped there. It was also there that the local communities of the *dom*, *chamars* and sweepers, the lower caste Hindus, used to let loose their pigs to forage. In winter we used to watch the hogs from our rooftops and wonder aloud why the pigs pictured in our English story books were always white or pinkish in color,



whereas, the ones we saw were dark, dirty and wallowed in filth. As small children, I and my older sister naively believed that since the English sahibs were white, so too, must be their pigs!

That day, we all ran up to the rooftop to watch the gypsies from a distance. There were probably four families of them who had pitched a few tattered tents. Their noisy, disheveled children were running around, while their donkeys grazed. But what alarmed us was the big black guard dogs they had brought along. These fierce dogs had already seen us and were furiously barking away. We despaired for our little Pinky and resolved to keep her indoors. Gypsy men in loose garments and headgear (turban) were busy scrounging the wasteland for firewood and dry leaves, while

their women in billowing colorful Ghagara (skirt) were already busy with their cooking pots. This was for the first time that I and my sister had seen gypsies. We were fascinated. Racially, they clearly stood apart from us. They were taller and bigger. Their skin color ranged from swarthy to fair. They spotted us on the rooftop, seemed to wave at first and then jeered. Our elders immediately brought us down into the house.

Soon the local administration sent for the police. There was some altercation between the gypsies and the police. Their children cried and the dogs barked menacingly. Later our father said that the gypsies had prayed for a day or two of reprieve before leaving. They had come from across the Indian border (West Dinajpur, West Bengal), to try and sell their wares in our part of Dinajpur.

It was said that they originally belonged to Rajasthan, India.

Next day all was quiet. The gypsies stayed put and we went off to school. Meanwhile, a most unnecessary incident took place. Our house-servant Sajeed had opened the rear boundary wall door of our house to let in the sweeper. As he did so, he was startled to see at close proximity gypsy women washing utensils and clothes in the brackish water of the Ghagra. They grinned at him and said in a smattering of Hindustani if the Begum Sahiba (meaning our mother) of the house would be interested to see their goods. A scared Sajeed lost his cool. He was abusive and threatened them with a piece of firewood. The enraged gypsies in turn screamed obscenities and lobbed a few bricks into our backyard. However, our uncle Akram managed to calm things down. The gypsy women grudgingly departed. Later, Sajeed was severely taken to task by our parents for his folly.

Couple of days later, while we were at school a commotion broke out again at the gypsy camp. This time the local police came and forcibly evicted them amidst much hullabaloo. Within an hour the gypsies after hastily packing their belongings on their donkeys left, all the while gesticulating wildly and taunting the police. They also left behind quite a mess, which was later set on fire.

As night fell on us with a hush, I ran up a high fever. Our Dadi prayed beside my bed, while mother gently wept. Aunt Sara anxious at the sudden onset of my fever, quipped, "It's all Sajeed's fault. He should never have behaved so rudely with them. Now the gypsies have put a curse on this house." Our father scolded, "Nonsense," he said. "It's just a bloody coincidence. Don't be so superstitious. It's un-Islamic."

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