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## A Sentimental Essay in Three Scenes

My essay has an epigraph; it comes, with due apologies and gratitude, from the bard of St. Louis, Mo., and gives, I hope, my ramblings a structure.

*No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;*

*Am an attendant lord, and Urdu-wala*

*one that will do*

*To swell a progress, start a scene or two*

Or, as in the case here,

Exactly three

### **Scene 1**

In December 1906, twenty-eight men traveled to Dhaka to represent U.P. at the formation of the All India Muslim League. Two were from Bara Banki, one of them my granduncle, Raja Naushad Ali Khan of Mailaraigunj. Thirty-nine years later, during the winter of 1945-46, I could be seen marching up and down the only main road of Bara Banki with other kids, waving a Muslim League flag and shouting slogans. No, I don't imply some unbroken trajectory from my granduncle's trip to my strutting in the street, for the elections in 1945 were in fact based on principles that my granduncle reportedly opposed.

It was Uncle Fareed who first informed me that Naushad Ali Khan had gone to Dhaka. Uncle Fareed knew the family lore, and enjoyed sharing it with us boys. In an aunt's house I came across a fading picture. Seated in a dogcart and dressed in Western clothes and a jaunty hat, he looked like a slightly rotund and mustached English squire. He had

been a poet, and one of his couplets was then well known even outside the family. Sadly, I cannot correctly recall it. And so I offer only an improvised version.

*Dosto bagh-i-jahaN meN surat-i-shabnam rahe*

*Ek hi shab go rahe lekin guloN meN ham rahe*

I lived in the world's garden like a drop of dew,

For only a night, but in flowers' lap.

A grandaunt always said it was a perfect epitaph for her brother.

Posterity, in the form of Professor Francis Robinson, tells us a bit more. Robinson writes, '[He was] a Kidwai Sheikh, of the same family as the [taluqdar] of Jehangirabad .... He attended the foundation session of the All India Muslim League at Dacca in 1906 and was appointed a member of its provisional committee. From 1907 to 1909, he campaigned with Viqar-ul-Mulk and Mahomed Ali for the foundation of District Muslim Leagues. He was the first secretary of the UP provincial Muslim League after its foundation in June 1909. In the same year, he agitated against separate electorates and took part in the July 1909 discussions of the Government of India's compromise proposals. [He was] supported by [his uncle, the Raja of Jehangirabad] in 1909 as a candidate for the Oudh Muslim seat on the provincial legislative council. Described by Hewett [the Lt. Governor of U.P.] as "a disreputable Taluqdar," he faded from politics after the Morley-Minto Reforms.'<sup>i</sup>

Naushad Ali Khan had not faded away; he had merely died, reaching not even an age of thirty-five. Ironically, in the election that Robinson mentions, he had lost, to none other than the second Bara Banki man at Dhaka: Mr. Mohammad Nasim, the grandfather of Professor Irfan Habib. I may also add that, unlike what frequently happened with reference to one of his cousins, there was never an exchange of knowing glances when his name came up in the family. He had married, but had no issue. He had lived extravagantly, often giving donations beyond his means to public causes—like the five thousand rupees to the Mohsin-ul-Mulk Memorial Fund at Aligarh. And when he died his estate was sold off to pay his debts.

Now that you know the crucial role Bara Banki played in the foundation of the Muslim League, allow me to boldly skip forward thirty-nine years to the winter of 1945, when the elections that settled the political fate of South Asia came also to Bara Banki.

## Scene 2

I was eleven years old in the fall of 1945, mildly precocious for my age, and the smallest boy in seventh grade. I was also an enthusiastic member of the All India Muslim Students Federation (MSF), which had opened its branch in Bara Banki a year or two earlier. An all boys' organization, it had a fair number of members from the three schools in the city. We played a prominent role in the processions taken out by the League. We managed the crowd, helped with banners and flags, and lustily led others in raising slogans. We did much the same at our election rallies, except that smaller boys like me were assigned to help in the curtained section exclusively for women.

The big attraction of the MSF for me was its dingy reading room. We didn't get any Urdu newspaper at home—Father read only *The Pioneer*—but at the MSF I could read two: the weekly *Manshur* from Delhi and the daily *Tanwir* from Lucknow. The first was the mouthpiece of the Central Muslim League; the U.P. branch just for the purpose of the elections had started the second.

The files of the two newspapers now seem to have disappeared in India. Soon after the Independence, North Indian Muslims, scared of house searches and arrests, desperately got rid of anything connected with the League, and many public libraries did the same for their own reasons. Only last year, finally, did I find a few tattered pages of *Manshoor*, all from May 1944, at the Jamia Millia. I was surprised. I had always remembered it as a fine-looking paper. That, apparently, wasn't always the case. Despite its two mastheads, one in English—'Supported by Mr. Mohammed Ali Jinnah'—and the other in Urdu—'*Murabbi Qaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah*'—what I saw was third-rate calligraphy on cheapest paper. Offered at 3 annas per issue it couldn't have found many takers. Obviously, before 1945, *Manshur*, and its Urdu readers had not been of much importance to the Central Muslim League.

An editorial dated May 28, 1944, however, didn't surprise me, for it laid out the 'hostage theory' of the League, which I had so often heard in 1946. 'The Muslim

League,’ it declared, ‘wants that the Muslims in the Muslim-majority regions become safe from the influence and domination of the Hindu majority in other regions (*khariji hindu aksariyat*). And that a balance of power should be created between the Hindus and Muslims of India by establishing free and autonomous Muslim governments in those regions (*azad aur khudmukhtar muslim hukumateN*). Whatever kind of treatment Muslims in Hindu-majority regions shall require from the Hindu governments, the Hindus in the Muslim-majority areas would require the same from the Muslim governments. And thus the rights and welfare (*huquq aur mafad*) of the Muslims in the Hindu sectors shall be much better protected.’

It sounds so simple, so logical. Believe you me, it sounded simpler and more logical back then, when phrases like ‘territorial adjustments,’ ‘linking corridors,’ and ‘inseparable heritage sites’ were the currency of the day. And when the most potent, the most passionately raised cry at our rallies that winter was: *pakistan ka matlab kya // la ilaha illallah*, ‘What does Pakistan mean? // “There is no God but Allah!”’

It was, of course, the League’s high command that chose the man to represent Bara Banki in the legislative assembly. Choudhry Khaliqzaman, at the time the most powerful man in the League in U.P., has a revealing story. According to him, the U.P. branch of the Muslim League set up a board of nine persons to select 66 candidates for the elections. When the board convened some of its members had candidates of their own for consideration against the candidates already chosen by Khaliqzaman and his coterie. The first case taken up was for a seat where Maulana Hasrat Mohani, a crotchety communist/pan-Islamist/romantic, had a different nominee. The presiding officer called for a vote in favor of Mohani’s candidate, and only three hands went up. Then, before a vote could be called on the other man, Khaliqzaman intervened and withdrew—‘out of respect for the Maulana,’ he says—the name of his choice. The wily Lucknow politician knew the rules of *adab* well. His action, as he coyly puts it, ‘had an overwhelming effect on the Board’s future decisions, as all the sixty-five candidates were then selected unanimously.’<sup>ii</sup>

Be that as it may, the young Maulana Jamaluddin Abdul Wahhab was the perfect choice for Bara Banki. His father, Maulana Abdul Bari of Firangi Mahal—we called him

Bari Miyan—had gained national fame as the leader of the Khilafat Movement. The famous Ali Brothers had once proclaimed him their spiritual mentor. Even Gandhiji had come and stayed at his house in Lucknow. After the abject collapse of the Khilafat Movement, the people of Firangi Mahal had followed many different political paths. Bari Miyan's son, not quite out of his twenties in 1945, had chosen the League's.

In our *jawar*, in that hard-to-define landscape of kinships and marriages but also of emotional affinity and cultural one-ness that cut across religious and sectarian divides, Bari Miyan, had been the most revered Sunni figure during his life. Probably no Sunni Muslim elite family in our *jawar* was without someone who was Bari Miyan's disciple. My late grandfather must have been one, since he had sent my father to study at Firangi Mahal; my grandmother, certainly, was—though at a second remove. She was a disciple of Qutub Miyan, Bari Miyan's *khalifa*. I had seen Jamal Miyan at our house; he called my grandmother 'chachi' (aunt), and she, in turn, didn't observe *purdah* with him. Of course, all the savants of Firangi Mahal, though established in Lucknow, belonged in their ancestral origin to Bara Banki. They were all considered men of our *jawar* even though they lived in Lucknow.

The resident League 'leaders' in Bara Banki, on the other hand, while belonging to the right class were mere lightweights. To make sure of my impression, I called up an older brother in Karachi. Matin was at Aligarh in 1945. When the administration of the university encouraged the students to go out and work for the good cause, he had gone off, first to Gorakhpur in Eastern U.P. and then to Nawabshah in Western Sindh. The experience was good for his soul, of course, but a disaster for his education.

I asked Matin: was there much of a Muslim League in Bara Banki before 1945? 'Hardly any,' he promptly replied. Then he mentioned the two names that were linked in his mind with the Muslim League of those years. That assured me that my own recollection was not wrong. One man, as Matin put it, was 'a nut case,' though neither he nor I could recall exactly how. As for the other man, I can still visualize him, a lumbering figure with a prominent head, made the more conspicuous by a fur cap that he sometimes decorated with a crescent and star. He was indeed a prominent figure at the League's

rallies that winter. But then he was no less conspicuous in Bara Banki for living in a curiously unfinished house that was surrounded by tall reeds and invariably got flooded every year by an insignificant stream. Matin and I were also able to identify the president of the local branch of the League, but decided that he too was not much known for anything.

In contrast, several of the Muslim elite or the *miyan log* of the *jawar*, who had joined the Congress, had made a name for themselves in local and provincial politics. The most prominent, of course, was Rafi Ahmad Kidwai of Masauli, who was made the Revenue Minister in the 1937 Congress government in U.P., and who later went on to greater prominence in the Central cabinet under Nehru. Rafi Ahmad Kidwai could have run from Bara Banki, but he chose to put his political reputation to test elsewhere and gave the nod for the Bara Banki seat to a distant cousin, Jamilur Rahman Kidwai of Baragaon. Thus it developed that the battle to represent Bara Banki Muslims in the provincial assembly was fought between a Jamal and a Jamil—a rather confusing manifestation of the truth in the Prophet's axiom, *allahu-l-jamil va yuhibbu-l-jamal*, 'God is Beautiful, and Loves Beauty.'

It's fascinating but not surprising that the Congress candidate, whom I called Jameel Chacha and most people addressed simply as Jameel Miyan, was also educated first at Firangi Mahal and only later at secular institutions. As most Kidwais of his generation, he had joined the Congress and identified himself with the faction around Jawaharlal Nehru. Since 1937 he had been the president of the district Congress, and twice gone to jail at the party's orders. Needless to say, he had what counted most in Bara Banki: the *jawar* connections. Not only was he a Kidwai, he belonged to a major clan of the Kidwais.

Don't be surprised if I tell you that while Jameel Miyan presided over the congress Party in Bara Banki, his older brother, Ehsanur Rahman Kidwai, was the General Secretary of the U.P. Muslim League. Being also a man of *adab*, he didn't actively work against his brother in Bara Banki; instead he joined Khaliquzzaman's campaign in Lucknow, and earned grateful mention in his memoirs.

The league's election rallies, as I recall, were mostly held in the evening, in the period between the two post-sunset prayers of *maghrib* and '*isha*. It ensured good attendance.

People finished their day's work at the store or at the office, then went home, prayed, had dinner with the family, and then, content in body and soul, sallied forth again for a nice time with other men. Bara Banki had, then, any number of open spaces that could accommodate crowds; the most sought after was our open-air grain market. It was right in the heart of the city, and the clock tower that commemorated the jubilee of 'India's Caesar' provided it with an imposing backdrop. Less than a mile from our house, it was close enough for me to get to after grabbing some food in the kitchen. But I don't think I ever attended any rally to its very end. I was still sleeping in the ladies' section of the house where the back door was locked early. And so, sad to tell, as the main speaker was warming up to his subject I was usually running home to avoid a scolding.

In any case, the first hour or so was always more fun. People slowly trickled in, and those who mattered much in their own opinion, took up positions in front of the surrounding shops now closed for the night. There they found something to sit on—a bench, a ledge, or a cot brought down from the owner's residence upstairs. Only the humble and the meek—or the glamour boys seeking to be close to the ladies' section—happily chose to sit on the dusty dhurries spread before the speakers' platform. Before the leaders arrived, suitably late, the mike and the platform were always available to the many budding poets and orators of Bara Banki. No doubt a few received a little money for their pains, but for most the brief spell in limelight, despite the barbs and insults it brought, was a heady and sufficient reward.

The so-called 'better' poets came from Lucknow and other places, and they came to the mike after the leaders had arrived. Of them the most popular in Bara Banki was a young poet named Dil Lakhnavi. Whatever Dil lacked as a poet—and lack he did much—he more than made up for it in his recitation. What a powerful voice he had! He could clearly be heard from far away even when the mike failed. And with the mike working, his *tarannum*, his melody, resounded in the sky above the city, and alerted everyone but the heaviest sleepers to the League's virtues and promises. Tall and fair, dressed in a black sherwani and a Jinnah cap, Dil was a hit with everyone, particularly with some in the curtained area. As a volunteer in that section I had to get his autograph for many an ecstatic girl. His verses were awful, but no one cared. We just gaped as this enormous sound came out of his mouth, and then swayed, involuntarily, to the rhythm of

his *tarannum*. Be thankful that only two of his verses are still nailed to my memory, and here they are:

*Ye ummat ki kashti, Jinah ke sahare*

*Chali ja rahi hai kinare kinare*

The community's boat

With Jinnah's support

Merrily goes

From shore to shore.

The second masterpiece went as follows:

*Jinah par hai saya Muhammad Ali ka*

*Karam par karam be-hisab a-raha hai*

Jinnah stands in Muhammad's shade

And Ali's too, as God bestows

His favor on him manifold.

There must have been similar poetasters at the Congress rallies. But I never went to any Congress rally. It could have cost me my membership in the MSF. To balance the record, I can only quote from a Congress poet, Shameem Kirhani, whose name I had seen in magazines even then. I looked up some of his topical verses in an anthology of nationalist Urdu poetry published in India. They are better than Dil's, but only a shade or two. Here are some lines from one of his denunciations of the Muslim League:

*Ham ko batlao to kya matlab hai pakistan ka*

*Jis jagah is waqt hain muslim najis hai kya wo ja?*

*Nish-i-tuhmat se tere chishti ka sina chak hai'*

*Jald batla kya zamin ajmer ki napak hai?*

*hain imamon ke jo rauze lakhnau ki khak par*

*ban gaye kya tauba tauba khitta-i-napak par?*



*ah us pakiza ganga ko najis kahta hai tu  
jis ke pani se kiya muslim shahidon ne wuzu  
kya ye matlab hai ki ham mahrum-i-azadi rahen?  
Munqasim hokar 'arab ki tarh faryadi rahen?'*<sup>iii</sup>

Tell me, what does Pakistan mean? Is this land,  
Where we Muslims are, any less pure?  
Your slur has wounded Chishti's breast;  
Quick, tell me, is Ajmer impure?  
And Lucknow's shrines to the holy Imams,  
Do they stand, God forbid, on unclean land?  
You call the Ganges unclean, but its waters once  
Were used by Muslim martyrs to cleanse themselves.  
You wish us to remain devoid of freedom,  
Cut up like the Arabs, forever a victim.

Poetry, particularly bad poetry, is of course more memorable than prose. That's why I could share with you Dil's verses. But I have no memory of the speeches I enthusiastically applauded that winter. Doubtless they were heart-warming and mind-boggling as political oratory always is.

Instead I shall quote briefly—not improperly, I hope—from the statement issued in October 1945 by the president of the All India Muslim Students Federation, Raja Amir Ahmad Khan of Mahmudabad. Though Mahmudabad was in another district, the Raja had extensive properties in Bara Banki; consequently he was also a highly respected person of our *jawar*. In his statement, he exhorted the boys of the MSF to suspend every activity and work hard only for the good cause. 'Today the road of our duty is clearer and more open than in the past. Next month it shall be decided if the Indian Muslims can live in India as Muslims and as members of the [world] Islamic brotherhood, or will they be forced to live under a culture that is totally opposite of Islam. . . . The world watches us

to see if the Muslim nation utilizes this God-gifted moment and declares that Pakistan was its birthright and must be obtained no matter how.... Every Muslim, young or old, faces his duty in this time of elections. Any hardship is to be tolerated considering how precious and important the results will be. Muslim youth is about to have a most valuable experience in practical politics. Compared to it, the cost of their time is insignificant. The experiences that our youth will now have will be of utmost value to them later. When, in the future, the burden of administering the country will be placed on their shoulders they will fruitfully draw upon the precious experience they will gain now.' (*Asr-i-Jadid*, Calcutta, 5 October 1945.)<sup>iv</sup>

My brother Matin knows only the very urban Urdu; he never spoke Avadhi or even what we called the *kachchi boli* when he was growing up in Bara Banki. And so when we spoke recently I asked him a question. I said, 'Look, you couldn't have understood the language of those villagers in Gorakhpur. And they couldn't have understood everything you said. So what did you do?' 'I talked of the Qur'an and the Prophet,' he said, and then he laughed.

Lately I have been reading a lot of memoirs, one of them by Qazi Jaleel Abbasi of Basti, a well-known Congressite from my part of the world though not from my *jawaar*. It contains some anecdotes from the 1946 campaign that resonated with me, more so after my conversation with Matin.

Abbasi introduces his anecdotes with a truism that most Muslims use when they feel unwontedly sheepish. '*musalman fitratan jazbati hota hai*', he begins, 'Muslims are by nature emotional.' Then he goes on, 'At one place [as I campaigned on behalf of my brother] I showed my Muslim audience a picture of Mr. Muhammad Ali Jinnah and explained to them that Jinnah Sahib had no beard, that he lived like an Englishman and cared little for *namaz-roza* (prayers and fasts). Further, that his wife was Parsi. (Poor Ruttie had been dead then for 17 years.) Then I showed them a picture of Maulana Abulkalam Azad and tried to convince them that the Maulana was a religious scholar held in high regard by religious scholars all over India. I also said that in Calcutta, where lakhs of Muslim came together to pray at the Maidan on the two Eids, it was the Maulana who led the prayers. Immediately a man stood up and shouted: "Sir, why must you tell us

these lies? Why must you cast slurs on Maulana Jinnah Sahib, when I've myself prayed where he was the *imam*. It's not a picture of Jinnah Sahib that you have; it's a picture of Mr. Abulkalam Azad. You should repent, sir, repent." The crowd applauded loud, and I was left blankly staring at the man.<sup>v</sup>

The second anecdote resonated with my memory even more. Abbasi writes, "It was my habit to draw a map of India on the wall and then explain to my audience that no matter what happened U.P. was going to remain in India. I'd say to them, "Even Jinnah Sahib is not deceiving us. He openly says that the Muslims of U.P. will have to bear domination by the Hindus, that they will have to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their Muslim brethren elsewhere". On one occasion a man got up and said, "Sir, must you show us the weakness of your own faith? Tell me, how many Muslims were there at the battles of Uhud and Badar? A righteous battle is always fought trusting only God.... With one shout of 'Allahu Akbar' we shall be in Delhi, then with another shout of 'Allahu Akbar' we shall reach Lucknow. Sir, you should keep your faith strong. U.P. too will be a part of Pakistan." And a huge shout of 'Allahu Akbar' went up from the crowd.<sup>vi</sup>

Not surprisingly, while Jaleel Abbasi and his brother Adeel were Congress stalwarts, their other brother and a brother-in-law were passionate supporters of the Muslim League. 'But they had nothing personal against us,' Jaleel Abbasi writes, 'they honestly believed that Pakistan will be a boon to Indian Muslims. Their stand was: let Pakistan be formed now; we shall take care of our own issues later.'<sup>vii</sup>

And so it was that when the final tally was announced that January night, when half the city seemed to have gathered in the *kuchehri* and even I had risked to stay out way after ten, Jameel Miyan of Baragaon had received only 4,390 votes, while Jamal Miyan of Firangi Mahal had garnered 10,006. Sixty-seven percent of all eligible Muslim voters in the constituency had exercised their restricted franchise.

Let us skip forward again, from January 1946 to June 1947, to be precise to June 3.

### **Scene 3**

I can close my eyes and see the scene in our inside courtyard that evening. A cousin from Gonda, who had an electric goods shop there, had stopped for the night on his way back from Lucknow. Among his purchases was a magnificent portable radio, nothing less

than the famous ‘Transoceanic’ made here in Chicago by Zenith. Bara Banki then didn’t have electricity, and my father was not interested in radios. And so he was not a part of us who clustered around the radio as my cousin fiddled with its knobs. The thickening light and the gritty air of that hot June dusk are still palpable for me. Finally the mighty men of the time began to speak, one after another. I doubt if anyone listened to the first two, for it was the third man whom we wanted to hear so keenly, almost achingly. A deeper hush fell over us when he spoke. Did we understand everything he said? Did it matter what he said? Did anything matter except hearing that surprisingly deep voice coming out of the man who looked so frail in his pictures?

He ended his remarks with the two words I had shouted a thousand times in the preceding months: ‘Pakistan Zindabad,’ ‘Long Live Pakistan.’ We looked triumphantly at each other, though I also felt a little surprised. It was the way he had said the two familiar words—almost like an Englishman, with clipped vowels and hard ‘t’s and ‘d’s. But I’d be a damn liar if I tell you now that my eyes weren’t moist like everyone else’s. That the same eyes, only eight months later, flooded over for a different though painfully related reason is, of course, another story, and I have already told it elsewhere.<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 408–9.

<sup>ii</sup> Choudhry Khaliqzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan* (Karachi, 1961), p. 336.

<sup>iii</sup> Shamim Kirhani, ‘Pakistan chahne-walon se’ in *Urdu men Qaumi Sha’iri ke Sau Sal* edited by Ali Jawad Zaidi (Lucknow, 1959), p. 329.

<sup>iv</sup> Ishtiaq Husain (Ed.), *Khutabat-i-Raja Sahib Mahmudabad* (Karachi, 1997), pp. 117–8.

<sup>v</sup> Qazi Jaleel Abbasi, *Kya Din The!* (New Delhi, 1985), p. 132.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 134.

<sup>viii</sup> C. M. Naim, ‘Two Days,’ in *Ambiguities of Heritage: Fictions and Polemics* (Karachi, 1999), pp. 76–85. Also at

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/naim/ambiguities/09twodays.html>