

HASAN MANZAR

A Man's Country

MOBINURROHMAN WAS ONE of those people who are really quite decent but are somehow spurned by those around them.

He would often be seen at work on the ship's bridge, or sitting alone on the closed lid of the hold twining rope. No one had ever heard him hum a note or utter a cry, nor had his breath ever smelled of alcohol. Generally, too, sailors from his part of the world¹ drank very little or did not drink at all.

This, we thought, had to do with their miserliness, neither themselves drinking, nor ever buying anybody else a drink, nor even rushing from the port to the town where women from all over the world sat waiting for us, the sailors.

In short, Mobinurrohman, who his coworkers called just Mobin, was not one of those sailors of whom it is said that they have a dame in every port.

We were a fairly free and easygoing bunch, swilling drinks and always drinking in company. Our Purser would gladly get a tab going for everyone's purchases; even then, we were always willing to lend a helping hand to any of our mates who didn't have cash on him, who would then return the favor, later on, if the need arose. Sometimes it would so happen that you would be sitting in a bar drinking with a lady friend, and putting your hand in your pocket suddenly discover that there wasn't a copper in it. At such times, if any of our shipmates was about, he would be called over. He would realize the seriousness of the situation, come up with enough cash for the last drink and say, "Hurry up, I'm waiting for

"Insān kā Dēsh," from his collection *Insān kā Dēsh* (Lahore: Qausain, 1991), pp. 103–24.

¹East Pakistan.

you outside.” You would be wise to do as you were told—by one who was still in control of his senses. Otherwise, after his departure, neither would the bar-boy look at you, nor would your lady friend keep you company for long. And, also, the whole business of getting to the ship would still be there—the taxi fare, the walk to the port, the entry into the unsteady sloop on staggering legs, the walk to your cabin on the gangway of the rolling ship. Often, for hours you didn’t know who you were or how you came to be where you were.

But these sailors from East Pakistan! I don’t recall if any one of them was ever helped to the ship, even once. We used to joke about them: every one of them drinks a bucketful of water before going ashore—as children do at dawn before the fasts of Ramadan—lest he have to buy a lemonade in town. We believed these people also used to eat a full meal so that they wouldn’t feel hungry during the few hours they had to spend in port.

Before the ship docked we always arranged to hide some liquor, which we recovered as soon as the customs officer had left the ship. We would drink what we needed and take the rest out to sell. Some of it had to be given to the duty guard at the gate: sometimes a packet of cigarettes would do, or a bottle of beer or stout which would cost only a few pennies on board. Sometimes some of us who were off duty, knowing that in the next port of call liquor would cost less than a glass of water, would go on the wagon a day before the ship came into port. There you would be able at the cheapest prices to get the best rum and the most potent brandy, one sip of which would be enough to transform the ugliest hag into a delicate beauty. When we came back from such ports we would all be drunk, each one swinging in his hands a bottle or two of rum or whisky.

But whenever the ship docked in such ports where there was nothing except drink and women, Mobinur’s mates would either be found sleeping somewhere on the deck, or, if they were off duty, trying to catch the fish that would be circling the ship if the cook happened to have dumped leftovers into the sea. They were really good at that.

Passing by him at such times I would say, “Mobinur, what are you trying to catch? There’s no *hilsa* here.”

He would smile, and if he were in a good mood, answer, “But *hilsa*’s brather’s here. I vaiting for them.” His being in a good mood meant that no letter from home bearing any bad news had arrived, that his mother was well, his father too, also his sister and three younger brothers, as well as his wife and kids; even his older sister and her husband and children,

who lived in some small town with a name like Munshi Ganj, or Narain Ganj, or Gopal Ganj, at a distance of about forty or fifty miles, three or four rivers away from Mobinur's own hometown.

His brother-in-law was also a sailor like him, but on another shipping line. I had never met him, neither in those days when Mobinur and I worked together, nor later. But I would often see Mobinur's face suddenly light up when he recognized the stacks of a ship going far in the sea and exclaim, "That seep is of my brather's line!"

Once, our ship came—in the seamen's language—alongside a dock in a port. Two or three ships ahead of us, a ship belonging to another line had already docked. Seeing that ship Mobinur went simultaneously into a fit of joy and a flurry of activity—perhaps because it was a good port and that meant that there were going to be ore cranes, more on-shore workers, quicker work and higher per-hour charges for the ship's stay in port. At such ports, ships would dock only for a couple of hours, and very few of us could get leave, and then only for a very short while.

Mobinur's joy, in my view, had much to do with his miserliness. The ship had come alongside; that meant that now he would not have to pay the sloop oarsman to carry him to and from the shore. This he would have had to do if the ship had anchored farther out to sea. But it was no big deal. If he really needed to see his brother-in-law or find out about him, what was a few shillings? People from my side of the world never bothered about such small expenses.

Mobinur was the most niggardly person I knew. The European Second Officer who was looking after the off-loading of the ship's hold told him again and again, in an effort to get rid of him, "No, no, Mobin. You can't leave. Go work. Duty. Duty. Go work," while he was also ordering the crane operator to lower or raise the cargo.

Expending his entire stock of English, Mobinur tried to make the Second Officer understand that he would be back as quickly as possible. His sister's "hosband" might be there on that "seep," or there might be some letter from home. Many people from his part of the world were there in the "corew (crew) of that seep." There may be someone there who might even know his brother personally.

Because of the heat, the Second Officer had undone all the buttons of his shirt and was downing can after can of cold German beer. He was unable to understand why these people—he meant all of us—were so anxious about letters from home, to find out how everyone was doing back there. If the Europeans were like that, they would be unable to work in peace for half an hour, for one had one sister in Australia and another

in Canada; one's mother was in Holland and one's father in the Congo. We learned such things from the Chief Stewards on different ships. A Chief Steward was usually a man from our own part of the world, a second class officer on the ship, who could speak English as well as some of our local languages. Chief Stewards usually had a share (as did some of the European officers) in the minor swindles that we carried on at sea, as when we smuggled small amounts of gold here and there—not shiploads of it; we did not do things like that.

Gently the Chief Steward tried to make the Second Officer understand that the ship's Captain and the Chief Engineer had already gone into port. But before he could finish his sentence, the Second Officer blurted out: "Oh, what else can they do in the port besides ...," and leaving his sentence incomplete, he started taking swigs of beer from his can, all the while ordering with the movement of his fingers the crane operator to move the arm up or down.

Then, when the Chief Steward tried to recommend Mobinur's leave, the Second Officer swore at himself and said to Mobinur, "My sister also home. She also not all right. I no die. Understand?"

Mobinur's dark cheeks reddened and he asked the Second Officer if he had used a swear-word for Mobinur.

"No, no, not for you," the Second Officer cooled down suddenly and putting his hand on his heart said, "I swore at myself. See the work going on and me, and me ..."

The Chief Steward explained to Mobinur, "Don't mind him. He's drunk. Has gone half crazy handling the crane. He's swearing at himself, as sometimes even we do when there's too much work, like 'bugger me' or something."

Looking repeatedly, one after the other, at the faces of the Second Officer and the Chief Steward, Mobinur said, "There in my contree cyclone, this monsoon seajen; men die. Thousands. Ten thousands. Sildren. Booman. Old men. No home. Saar, there all young men go work. Feesing. On seep. Bery far. On reever. Who make house? I burry bery much."

The Second Officer swore again, "Akh, Mobinur, your country always men dying. They no want to live. Always cyclone. Always famine. Flood. Damn it."

The Chief Steward wisely refrained from translating this comment, or there would have been a scuffle between the Second Officer and Mobinur right then and there. And since this was a matter happening on land, not at sea, some port official would have to settle the issue, not the ship's

Captain. At sea, the Second Officer could have consulted the maritime laws and punished Mobinur as he thought fit; he could have spoiled his report, noted in his passport that he cannot control his temper and doesn't obey commands, but here at port, he was helpless, while Mobinur was ready to wage a war. Actually, at heart, this Second Officer was not a bad fellow. Whenever any crew member fell ill, he would go to inquire after him ten times a day. And if his case was serious, he would arrange to have him admitted into a hospital in the next port of call, and thus prove himself to be more loyal to the crew than to the company that had hired him. More often, the shipping companies, whether native or European, tended to be worse blood suckers than even the usurers.

The goods were now being hauled out of the lowest hatch. For some reason the crane operator stopped working. Far away, on a narrow gangway, some stevedores were prodding and shoving cattle onto the ship.

The Second Officer threw the empty beer can into the sea, lit a cigarette and said, "Aakh, as far as I care, he can go to his country, if he likes, and save it from cyclones. What is he doing here? What is his government doing?"

"What Sahib saying?" Mobinur said apprehensively. "Government issue new orders?"

"Nothing, nothing," the Chief Steward said, "He says go find out if there's been any cyclone."

"Thank you, saar," Mobinur answered, quiet and subdued. He wasn't convinced by the Chief Steward's translation.

"Is there cyclone again there?"

"Go, go," the Second Officer pushed Mobinur by the shoulder. And then asked the Chief Steward to tell Mobinur in his own language to go have a few drinks. It was because he didn't drink that he was always worried about cyclones, about ferries sinking and about people drowning.

That night I couldn't see Mobinur. The next morning when we came out to swab the deck, that other ship and port were miles behind us. Now there was only the ocean, or the river, as we used to call it, all around us. The river, on this side, was always stormy. You didn't feel like eating, drinking, smoking or even talking to anybody. We wore full rubber boots and were scrubbing the deck with mops. Mobinur was throwing sea water on the deck with a hose. I greeted him with the Bengali word *bhaalo*. I would use this word more as a "hello" than to find out how he had been feeling. He just nodded in response.

After lunch I took two aspirins from the Second Officer and went to

my cabin to rest. My head was still heavy. The Second Officer said when he gave me the tablets: "Remember, Abdul, you are a Mozlem. You are not supposed to drink, and you drink too much."

I answered, "Sir, you also remember: like Christians, Moslems are also of two kinds: good Moslems ..."

"...And bad Mozlems," he completed my sentence. On this particular voyage shipmates from my part of the world were pretty happy. Sher Afzal had discreetly delivered the pair of binoculars to the store keeper whom he had promised them and had earned about five pounds. Jeera had done the same with a camera.

The Third Engineer Tripstra, the Chief Steward and Fazla had managed to sell some gold. Fazla had gone to purchase it in the last duty free port and had handled the sale so circumspectly that no news of it had reached the next port. Tripstra was a white man. He had kept himself detached from the whole deal. If anyone had been caught, it would have been Fazla or the Chief Steward. Tripstra would have flatly denied having anything to do with it. But everything worked smoothly. The rest of us had either sold cigarettes or bottles of scotch. I, too, hadn't fared badly. But most of us had already squandered on women whatever we had earned. As the saying went: "Seaman, funny life / New port, new wife." Ever since leaving the port, we the "fun-lovers" had gone around teasing those who had come from Mobinur's part of the world. "Just as well, man, you didn't go into that port. Firstly, you wouldn't have been able to see the girls because you would barely reach their shoulders; secondly, the girls there are scared to death of dark skin."

If somebody felt like carrying the teasing further he would say, "The cows in your part of the world look as big as she-goats, she-goats as big as she-dogs, and you—do you know how big you look?"

Sometimes this sort of verbal sparring would lead to physical fights, because some sailors from Mobinur's world could also handle themselves well in such situations. One would, for example, ask a dark-colored sailor from our side, "Are you sure your father didn't come from our contree?"

In the afternoon I came out of my cabin. The pain in my head was gone; only the throbbing remained. I got a cup of tea from the storekeeper and sat on the closed lid of the hold in the shade. It was quiet all around in the ship. Only the sound of the sea or the splashing of waves could be heard. The workhands were either in the engine room or on the bridge; the rest might be asleep in their cabins. At such times nobody even listened to the radio which every one of us had. We had each bought one to take home with us. Some of us had three or four watches each,

transistorized tape recorders, broad cloth for use in weddings, and ugly-looking rough-hewn gold rings—a common method of transporting gold home.

Mobinur himself and his mates used to buy German lanterns, stoves, Chinese umbrellas, and similar other objects of daily use with the little spending money we got on the ship. Also, whenever they got the chance, if they could buy the rupees cheap in any port, they'd sell their shillings and send money home. They did the same when they signed off from the ship. Every step of the way, they would like to take as much money home as possible. None of us could stomach their obsession with money—perhaps because none of us was himself capable of saving any.

A certain amount of money from everybody's salary was deducted at our Karachi office to be sent to our families. The shipping office was convinced that if we received all our pay on ship we'd squander it on wine and women, and our families would starve to death. But we knew fully well how much they cared for the welfare of our families and households. The company paid the shipping office our salaries in pounds sterling and dollars, which everybody knows are the most powerful currencies in the world. How were our families paid? In rupees. And guess who made the killing in all this? The one who didn't have to do anything. The capital that the shipping office invested consisted of men—of our labor; the gain they made was in dollars and pounds. And we were the safest capital: we couldn't run away anywhere. As the saying goes, one who has tasted of sea life once, returns to taste it again and again.

But we, too, were bastards of the first order. We wouldn't allow ourselves to be passed over that easily. Those among us who used to drink and had befriended the purser would spend so much by the time they reached the home port that nothing much would be left either for them or for their families. We would be told that no money has been forwarded to our families for many months. At that news we would feign surprise. That was sheer perversity on our part.

The shipping office was our lord and master. A sailor fears only two things: not being assigned to a ship and getting his report ruined. The condition of the sea didn't affect us, but being assigned or not to a ship was completely in the hand of the shipping Master—in other words, the shipping office.

The shipping office is a world by itself. Going in you seem to have walked into a carnival. You meet dozens of your old shipmates, some whose names you may even have forgotten. This one was with you on that ship; that one on another. You traveled to South America with this

one, to Portugal with that one. This one comes from your own country; that one doesn't. Someone would be busy signing off, another joining the queue to sign on to another ship, and so on.

At the time of signing off in the shipping office, we would dutifully hand over whatever gifts we had brought—a carton of cigarettes, a bottle of scotch, or something small like a perfume bottle—to whomever we had brought it for, promising them we'd do better next time. We did that so that they wouldn't make it hard for us to sign on to a new ship after the break.

Sailors like Mobinur, on the other hand, always came for the signing off cringing and quailing. At the shipping office just about everybody usually looked better-fed than them—not exactly like a towering American movie star, but not nearly as stunted as these folks, either. And sailors like Mobinur were really the ones who had spoiled the people at the office. If someone, at the time of assigning them to the ship, had asked for a tea set from Germany, they would bend over backwards to obtain one, never considering the possibility of a substitute. They would be half dead with fear that if the Sahib got angry they'd have to stay for weeks in Karachi, because after signing off, these people had to go on their own expense to Chittagong or Navakhali. The company looked after their transportation only to the home port. In the Company's eyes their home was Karachi, but their actual home was elsewhere. They had to travel as passengers on another ship through Colombo, Chittagong, and God knows where else, and then on ferries and boats to get to their homes. They arrived in pretty ragged shape.

Our real peeve was that while we rested at home during the two or three months of the break, these people would be ready to sign themselves on another ship as soon as they had signed off from one, as if money were all that mattered and as if they didn't know that it could be spent. We used to smoke Craven A or 555; they used to smoke home grown tobacco that they brought with them, rolling their own cigarettes. But that's a different matter. Some sailors from our side, those who didn't have their homes in Karachi and who had to take the trains to get home up north, did not fare any better than those from East Pakistan. Not everyone's home was on the railway mainline; some had to take buses and hire tongas to get home. There were some consolations, however; there was no fear of drowning and when you reached home, you'd find it still there. No cyclone would have carried it off somewhere else.

I was sitting on the lid of the hold having tea when I happened to look at the other side of the lid which was in darkness. I saw someone

sitting there. Could it be Mobinur, I thought, and called him in a dull, heavy voice. “Mobin? Mobinur?”

He was probably knitting a cord-muzzle for holding cooking pots, or a coil-base for an earthen waterpot. He knew how to make many such things. He had once made something like that for me: it looked like a horse’s tail and could be hung on the wall by a nail. In the hair that fell from its sides one could tuck in combs, brushes, etc.

Mobin kept quiet. I picked up my tea mug, and went and sat by him.

“*Bhaalo?*” I said.

His face was taut.

“What happened? Got a big hort?” I teased him. He had the habit that whenever he got a scrape or scratch lifting or lowering the cargo, he’d raise a caterwaul saying, “I going die now! I got a big hort!” That was another reason, besides his stinginess, that people on ship kept themselves away from him—even his own countrymen. He did not talk much, but once he started it would be impossible to get him to shut up.

To avoid having to talk to me he said, “News from my home not good.”

I should have kept my mug glued to my lips so as not to proceed with any further inquiries. The Second Officer was right: when was the news from his home ever good? It was either the cyclone or the sinking of the ferries. And these people were known the world over for their hunger. My own mother used to call me a starved Bengali if I ever hurried with my meals.

Then why did these twits not stay home to do the farming? Or make some arrangement to save themselves from the cyclones? At least they could build stronger houses which wouldn’t fly away in high winds. Why did their boats always sink? Couldn’t they make them bigger and stronger? Why didn’t any meteorologist or someone who gave light signals from a tower stay in the village to warn people about the approaching cyclones, and tell them not to go out in their ferries? Everyone there was either a fisherman or a sailor; the rest had assailed our part of the world to look for work.

My own home is in Karachi, in an area which is not for rich people. But I know that in many areas of the city where well-to-do people reside, and in many other cities, there are thousands of people of Mobinur’s nationality who work as cooks or drivers and are always cursing their fate.

But I couldn’t bring my mug to my lips. Instead I put it down on the plank and asked Mobinur, “Is it really bad?”

He nodded.

We sat there quietly. I was watching the sea. Big bloated waves like air-filled sails were forming and moving towards our ship.

Then Mobinur put the cord down, stood up and began saying his prayers right there on the plank. I felt as if he was not praying but crying. My mind was not working fully and the storm in the sea was affecting my stomach. I walked to the railing, emptied my mug into the water and, having nothing else to do, came back and sat down with Mobinur. A little later I felt as if he were talking to himself.

“What can one doing? It’s God’s vill.”

“Did you say something to me?” I asked.

Then he couldn’t seem to contain himself any longer, and I, whose senses had been dulled by the hangover, was startled by the tone of his voice.

“I said this God’s vill. What can a poor man doing? It is looking they suit (shoot) my sister’s man. Many other men die there also. First cyclone kill some; others not yet build their house when people suit them.”

“Which people shoot them?” I asked startled.

“Your people.” And he glared at me as though I had been personally responsible for the deaths of his sister’s husband and others, as though I were the one who had crossed the three seas to go kill them and was now hiding here after committing that heinous crime. By now he was again talking to himself.

“Now a var must happen. The man on German line seep tell me all. Thing being really bad. What can a poor man doing? Must fight to save life of wife and sildren. Now nobody can stopping var.”

My mind hadn’t fully cleared yet. Also, I was not one of these sailors from our side who were glum and serious-looking, who never drank, who saved all their money and who constantly worried about the breakup of the country, talking about the treacheries of this or that race or the flaws in one or the other race. All this bothered me no end.

I knew that recently there had been a cyclone in Mobinur’s part of the world; it was perhaps because of that that every Bengali had his ears tuned to the radio listening to programs, whether in Bengali, Urdu, Hindi, or English.

In actual fact, all the sailors of the world belong to one race, having the same language. Whatever radio station is on, every sailor hears what he wants to and can dance to the music of every country.

But I myself am one of those sailors who, once they are on the ship, completely forget at what price his family buys the flour or how many times a week or month they eat meat. I don’t even notice the earthquakes

at sea; what did I care for these little cyclones in East Pakistan. Even nowadays, if someone begins to discuss politics with me, I get uptight. In those days if someone asked me to listen to the radio to find out what was happening back home, I would answer that my radio catches only those stations where pop music is played, like Radio Ceylon. If it ever catches a news bulletin, it starts choking on it.

Now when I thought hard, with my heavy head, I recalled that the ship's crew for some time had been divided into two distinct groups: one that felt stricken about the fate of the country, and the other that was deeply anxious. Mobinur belonged to the latter group. He and his mates, it seemed to me, were constantly busy whispering to each other.

That was the first time I had seen tears in Mobinur's eyes. Perhaps among the many sailors from his side on the German ship there was one who knew Mobinur well. He must have exaggerated in telling Mobinur the story—that first there was the cyclone which blew away all the housetops; then a lot of damage was done by the government's people, who destroyed all the aid sent by the foreign countries. Who really knows what happens to the stuff sent from outside? Who hands it out? Anyway, it didn't seem to have reached the needy—the starving and the destitute.

"Why?" I asked him.

"So that all Bengali people starve to death."

This argument was a little beyond me. Perhaps, as he had said, rice, lentils, blankets, and tarps had indeed been sent to East Pakistan by foreign countries, not by West Pakistan. Also, given the laziness and the insensitivity of the people in both East and West Pakistan, perhaps all the stuff had rotted in warehouses or at airports. But to claim that the government, or that the West Pakistanis, wanted all Bengalis to starve to death, or be destroyed by cyclones, didn't seem a very reasonable argument to me.

With a lump in his throat he said, "I not knowing how my sister is now. How her syeld? Everyone there afraid. Those who running to safety, sot with masine-gun. My sister's man was being in boat. They fired and boat ober-turn. Those who swimming was sot. What the man told me about was looking like my brather, my sister's man...." Tears were running down his cheeks and neck.

I had to keep quiet for a while. Then I asked him, "When was the last time you met your sister?"

"Three years ago."

I was startled. "You go home every year, and haven't gone to see your sister? Nor has she come to see you?"

He looked at me as one observes an ignorant child. Then wiping his tears he said, "After signing off, when did I go Bengal last three years? You know how much it costing going there? A family can living three months in that much money."

"And where do you spend you holidays then?"

"In Karachi. Doing small labor. What I can get."

I got up quickly and without saying anything went to my cabin.

That was the day I discovered what the people of Mobinur's race thought of us. It was like what the blacks of South Africa thought of the whites who were few in number but controlled everything in their country—the government, the army, the navy, the air force. In fact, they considered us to be even worse than the whites in South Africa; they had the same view of us as the Uhurus of Kenya had of the English: they were sent from England to rule them, but after staying there their entire lives and after making money they had ravaged the place before leaving.

So what now? I thought.

Even I had quite a few relatives in East Pakistan, poor, unknown, unimportant people, those who at the time of the creation of Pakistan and India, because of being near East Pakistan, had gone to Chalna, Kishwar Ganj, and other such places and settled down there instead of coming to Karachi. If this idiot was right and a guerrilla war was going to start in East Pakistan, what would happen to those people? What England could they go to? Previously, whenever there was a strike in a factory or some other disturbance over there, some of them would run away and come to Karachi.

After this voyage, we had to undergo another and then sign off. In other words, we still had to spend another nine weeks on the ship. I don't remember having spent a worse time on the sea than that. People worked very quietly and, in their spare time, sat in their cabins and swore at the people of Mobinur's race. I think his people, among themselves, must have been cursing us.

In Karachi after we signed off, I saw Mobinur in the shipping office. An unusual thing was that he hadn't given the silverware drinking set to the person he had bought it for. He seemed a different man that day, not the Mobinur who used to scream, "I got a big hort!"

His mates also had an air of insolence about them and were talking to everyone in the shipping office arrogantly, as one does to one's boss when one has made up one's mind to quit.

Passing him by I casually said *bhaalo* to him.

He said, "I thinking you not say *bhaalo* to me anymore."

“Why?” I asked.

“You vill find out. Let time coming.”

He and his mates were in a hurry to get to East Pakistan so I couldn’t talk to him anymore.

But the time predicted by Mobinur really did come, and I did find out. Some of my distant relatives and acquaintances were killed in East Pakistan. The rest were trapped there in refugee camps. Whenever a letter from one of them managed to find its way to Karachi, having gone through various countries, it would still have Pakistani postage stamps on it, but now the stamps also bore the postmark of Bangladesh on them.

Those who were referred to there as the Dutch or the English had already moved to West Pakistan before the striking of the evil hour. The rest, impoverished and destitute, were slowly reaching Karachi one by one. Some had to spend the rest of their lives there.

West Pakistan had now become Pakistan, as if it had become higher in rank or station. Previously it was a part of a country; now it became the whole of it.

I quit my job at sea and was yoked to the family occupation that I hated—working on hand looms, sitting from dawn till dusk in the hollow of the weavers’ loom and weaving cloth for loincloths. Time had also taught me to take interest in politics because many of our people who were trapped in Bangladesh had begun to escape through India and to trickle into Karachi. The tales of their hardships would regularly reach my ears: how much misery had been endured by which family, which ones were saved from Bengalis by Bengalis themselves, and how many were feeling unsafe even in Karachi, for the situation there was no better than in Bangladesh. Things seemed ready to fall apart, as if the end of the world were at hand. Hearing the names of places like Comilla, Barisal, and Nawab Ganj from their lips would remind me of many of my Bengali shipmates. Who knew how they were, whether they were even alive now or not!

Sometimes, when I ran into some Bengali in some part of the city, I would feel a sort of pleasure. He would be one of those who had decided to settle down in Karachi or in the Province of Sind. On my inquiring he would say, “The condition there is really bad.”

It is no better here either, I would say to myself. Our chances were pretty equally balanced.

Bored with my work, one day without any particular reason I walked into the shipping office. This was many years after leaving ship. Actually, I had had a little tiff with my father and uncle. I was planning to do

something different with my life. My uncle was also my father-in-law. It was a family squabble.

I ran into some old acquaintances there: Aslam, who had been a carpenter on a ship with me; Nazir, a boatswain; one or two people from the catering department; one tindal, and many sailors. Everyone seemed to have changed.

Going through the crowd, suddenly I spotted Mobinur. He saw me and lowered his gaze.

I knew that there were never enough home ports for these people to sign for work on ships. Some of them would even reach Calcutta without passports and visas and catch ships there. Obviously in Calcutta they would claim to be Indians.

I darted towards Mobinur, shook him by the shoulder and said, "Mobinur, is it you?"

He nodded.

This time the haughtiness of our last meeting was absent from his face.

"How are your wife and children? Are they safe? And your parents? And brothers and sisters?"

He kept nodding in answer to each of my questions. Then I asked him, "What brings you to Karachi?"

"Coming to signing on a seep," he finally responded.

"But you have your own Bangladesh now, don't you?" I spluttered, as crudely and inappropriately as the Hindus and Sikhs in India, I hear, used to say to Muslims, "You have your Pakistan now. Why don't you go there?"

Almost vengefully I asked him. "You didn't go to Bangladesh?"

He ignored the mercilessness of my tone and said, "My Bangladesh right here."

"What?" I asked.

He repeated his answer, as if explaining something to an ignoramus: "My contree—this seep, right here."

—Translated by Faruq Hassan