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What Ralph Russell Meant and Means to Me

RALPH RUSSELL, although he most certainly would not have seen it this way, belonged to that extraordinary generation of British scholars who became Marxists at Oxford and Cambridge in the 1930s and acted as a leaven in British intellectual life for the rest of the twentieth century. He shares the company of, amongst others: Eric Hobsbawm, the historian of social banditry and industrial capitalism; E. P. Thompson, historian of the working class and nuclear disarmament activist; Rodney Hilton, historian of the late medieval peasantry; Christopher Hill, historian of the seventeenth-century Puritan Revolution; Victor Kiernan, polymath, translator of Iqbal and Faiz, and critic of European empire; and Joseph Needham, gifted biochemist, but even more gifted creator of the extraordinary *Science and Civilization in China* (1954) in many volumes. Ralph shared with Hill, Kiernan, Hilton and Thompson the background of religious nonconformity (i.e., religious positions which differentiated themselves from the Anglican Church), which from the seventeenth century has been such a rich source of social and political action, and of creativity in general, in Britain. Ralph shared with Joseph Needham the distinction of having opened up an important aspect of a major world culture so that it came to be better understood, indeed valued, in the West.

I can only recall meeting Ralph, and my memory usually serves me well, on three occasions, which some may feel is strange for colleagues in the same university, but the federal university of London was a strange institution. The first occasion was when Peter Reeves, then at the University of Sussex, held a weekend workshop in the early 1970s for those interested in the world of North India. The second was when I reviewed the first volume of Ralph's autobiography, *Findings Keepings: Life, Communism and Everything* at a launch in London's Nehru Centre in February 2002. The third was at the Ralph Russell Day held at SOAS in June 2007 when, aged 89, Ralph performed, vigor undimmed, for the

whole of a morning and an afternoon. However, I always felt that I knew Ralph well. We kept in touch through the occasional letter and phone call. He started the process in early 1972 when he telephoned to thank me for my review of his *Ghalib: Life and Letters* (1972, 113–15). No one has ever done that since, although I have had the occasional grateful letter; it was an act of generosity from a senior to a very junior scholar which was typical of him. In the late 1980s Ralph wrote a charming letter of thanks for my contribution to his festschrift (1989). Then contact became more regular as he arranged for me the business of paying for my copy of *The Annual of Urdu Studies*. Just before his death we had a heartening exchange of letters in which he revealed his great interest in the future of the study of Muslim South Asia in the U.K. But there were other reasons for feeling that one knew Ralph so well. The first were the tapes which accompanied his *Essential Urdu* (1971). Everyone who used them to try to learn Urdu, as I did, had Ralph's voice constantly ringing in their ears. The second was the work. Scholars rarely come upon their subjects by mistake. Ralph, working with Khurshidul Islam, was the great expounder of Urdu love poetry in English. This was evidently done by a man who understood the forms this "madness" might take, and when it came to verse knew, as Mir said, that "poetry is a task for men whose hearts have been seared by the fire of love and pierced by the wounds of grief" (see Russell 1999, 157). Moreover, Ralph was such a memorable presenter of Urdu literature because it was his delight to engage with the humanity of the Urdu writer and enable us to share in it.

I began postgraduate research on India in autumn 1966 and by mid-1967 was coming to focus on the United Provinces (became the state of Uttar Pradesh, 1950) in general and its Muslim world in particular. There was no money available for learning Urdu but, beyond that, I was actively discouraged from doing so, an attitude of "imperial" Britain which Ralph discussed at his "Day" in 2007, and to which he refers in the authors' introduction to *Three Mughal Poets* (Russell and Islam 1969). This meant I was hungry for books which would take me beyond the Anglophone world of Muslim India (a very small world) to that of Urdu and the range of reference and sensibility that came with it. I was particularly concerned to have a stronger sense of what it meant to be human in the North Indian world of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The publication of *Three Mughal Poets* and *Ghalib* in 1969 suddenly made this possible as never before. This said, it has taken some time, and indeed the help of a growing interest in the eighteenth century, to develop a proper appreciation of *Three Mughal Poets*, but the impact of *Ghalib* was immediate. The man, his great love affair, his household, his friends, his work as a

poet, his endless search for patronage, and his passion for mangoes and for alcohol are brought wonderfully to life with skillful use of his correspondence as well as his poetry. So too, moreover, was the clash of the mid-nineteenth century between a somewhat brash, transforming industrial civilization, and the high, courtly culture of the fading Mughal world. Ralph and Khurshidul Islam offer a vision through Ghalib's eyes, which has no match, of the horrors of the destruction of Delhi in the British suppression of the Mutiny uprising and of the extraordinary changes confronting Muslim North India from the 1840s through to his death in 1869. No other work enables one to engage so fully with what it meant to be human at this time, and with the meaning of British rule. For this reason I often return to it but also use it much in teaching; it is a good way of introducing students to the harder edges of imperial conquest.

My first meeting with Ralph at that weekend workshop hosted by Peter Reeves had two outcomes. One was derived from the topic Ralph discussed formally at the workshop, Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's *Bibishti Zewar*. It was the first time that I had heard of it. Ralph swiftly outlined its popularity—the most widely-published book in Muslim India after the Qur'ān—and whetted my appetite for it. I soon had my own copy, rather poorly translated into English. But it required Barbara Metcalf's *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860–1900* (Princeton, 1982) and her subsequent translation of part of *Bibishti Zewar* (1990) for me to understand the full weight of the text as a handbook for the formation of the “protestant” Deobandi mindset, indeed, of the new Muslim emphasis on action on earth to achieve salvation, which was to be the feature of reform across the Muslim world. Because Ralph had introduced me to *Bibishti Zewar* I was well-prepared for Barbara's work and have found *Bibishti Zewar* most useful in research and teaching ever since. The second outcome of the meeting was that Ralph introduced me to the work of the Progressive Writers and, either then or later, gave me a copy of an unpublished paper he had written on them. This lay fallow for five years, but then in the autumn of 1978 a young Muslim came to see me who, now that General Zia ul-Haq was in power, had found Pakistan becoming rather hot for him. He was a communist, who came with a sheaf of somewhat dense Marxist writings, and wanted to do postgraduate research. After much discussion it became clear that a thesis on the Progressive Writers might be the way forward. I gave him Ralph's paper and he went to see him. He received much encouragement and it was not long before he had produced a thesis on the subject, which was subsequently published (Ansari 1990). He is now a full professor at the University of London with, amongst other things, a major study of the

Muslim communities of the U.K. to his name (Ansari 2004).

In the 1970s Ralph and Khurshidul Islam published one of the more important articles to appear in *Modern Asian Studies*, “The Satirical Verse of Akbar Ilahabadi” (1974). This was the first time that substantial quantities of verse from this sardonic commentator on the impact of British rule—on Sayyid Ahmad Khan, on the shallow and hypocritical behavior of “brown” sahibs, and on the dangers of what was good in the Muslim civilization of India being sacrificed in a headlong rush to embrace an English modernity—had been translated into English. It was just too late, unfortunately, for his mixture of biting satire and perceptive comment to be included in my *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, which was also published in 1974. The article brought to life the world of humor in the cartoon and verse of *Awadh Punch*, where Akbar published most of his output. But it also brought a new richness and nuance to my understanding of Muslim responses to change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Akbar could be skeptical of what Sayyid Ahmad Khan was doing while still admiring the man; he could recognize the need for change while deploring what might be lost in the process. As with *Bibishti Zewar*, I have found this presentation of Akbar of enormous value in thinking about the period and in persuading students to engage with it. On a more personal note, it meant much to me, too, that these lines by Akbar were inscribed on the *maqbara* over the grave of Maulana ‘Abdul Bari of Lucknow’s Farangi Mahall family of ulama, which would occupy much of my energies in the years from 1976:

Oh heavens let the winds of passion blow
Oh set the springs of action free,
Let us work, let us strive,
Let every shaykh like ‘Abd al-Bari be.

(qtd. in Robinson 2001, 145)

Arguably, what was most valuable about Ralph and Khurshidul Islam’s translation was that they enabled me to sense the ways in which Indian Muslims saw their world being transformed—indeed saw a great civilizational change taking place—and how they felt about it, often with despair. The translation from Akbar below has always made the point most powerfully for me:

The minstrel, and the music, and the melody have
all changed.
Our very sleep has changed; the tale we used to
hear is no longer told.
Spring comes with new adornments; the

nightingales in the garden sing
 a different song.
 Nature's every effect has undergone a revolution.
 Another kind of rain falls from the sky; another
 kind of grain grows in the fields.

(qtd. in Russell and Islam 1974, 9)

Such is the value of Akbar's literary output to the historian, regardless of its value for Urdu literature, that I am sorry that thirty-five years after Ralph urged in this article the importance of a major study of Akbar and indicated that materials to support such a study were plentiful, nothing to my knowledge has been done, in English at least.

The next work of Ralph's to make an impact on me was his *Anthology of Urdu Literature* (1999) which was first published in 1995 as *Hidden in the Lute*, and I am afraid truly hidden from view. I reviewed it in the *Times Literary Supplement* in January 2001 (see Robinson 2007, 247–50). It is a particularly well-chosen collection, combining some of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's writing with that of his critic Akbar Ilahabadi, some evocative and affectionate memoirs of poets, some of Ghalib's letters, an excerpt from Rusva's *Umrao Jan Ada*, some short stories by Progressive Writers, and some delightful examples of the popular literature which might be picked up at a bus or railway station bookstall—stories of Akbar and his sidekick Birbal, Mulla Dopiazza and Shaikh Chilli. The centerpiece, however, was the fifty pages devoted to love poetry, to the ghazals of Mir and Ghalib. It is an outstanding exposition of this poetic form, its context, its elements of wordplay, multiple connotation and contrast, its strict unity of form, well-defined single meter throughout, and the pleasures to be derived from the shape and sound of couplets not necessarily connected by a unifying theme. Ralph loved rhythmic music; he was always singing. It was not surprising that he was in love with meaningful music made with words. It was not surprising, too, that he did arguably his finest work on the Urdu poetry of love. "Loving is fundamental to being human," he declares in his autobiography, "in one sense it scarcely matters who you love, or how much opportunity you have to express it; what matters is to love" (2001, 372).

One of the expressions of Ralph's love was through service to his fellow humankind. This made him a communist from his teenage years because it was thus that he felt best able to serve—nothing was known of the horrors of Stalin's Soviet Union at the time. So, as an officer of the British Indian army building military roads into Burma, he spent his time trying to convert his sepoy to the cause. Likewise, as a teacher on the staff of SOAS for thirty years and more, he worked openly for the Com-

munist Party. Then, in the 1980s, he found arguably a more effective outlet for his desire to serve. He had come to realize that there was a real need for his skills both amongst the Urdu-speaking communities which were rapidly forming in Britain and amongst those in the host population who were trying to serve them. In 1981 he retired early from SOAS so that he could devote himself to this purpose full time. He produced an improved version of his Urdu course, *A New Course in Hindustani for Learners in Britain* (3 parts, 1980–82). Now, through his teaching activity in the community, through his campaigning for Urdu teaching in schools, and especially through his pupils he was able to create a space in British society for the language he loved. This work he continued to his last months in 2008. It is a humbling act of service and one which will always remain with me as an example of how to make one's scholarly knowledge socially useful.

In 2001 Ralph published the first volume of his autobiography, *Findings Keepings*, which covers his life up to 1946. I have read most of the second volume, which covers his SOAS years, and which I believe is to appear in 2009. I am told there is also a third to come. Speaking at the launch of volume one forced me to pay greater attention to it than I might have done, and led to me immediately sharing it with my wife who, only vicariously associated with Muslim South Asia, was so impressed that she wrote a letter of appreciation. Volume one has that openness about love, and in particular sexual relationships, which was pioneered in the U.K. by the philosopher Bertrand Russell. Several strands run through the book. The first is Ralph's love of song, already alluded to: Yorkshire songs, London songs, school songs, army songs, lewd songs. His head was full of the music of song as well as of language. The second, unsurprisingly for someone growing up in the lower-middle classes in twentieth-century Britain, was his consciousness of class, which in India he found transformed into racism by his British officer colleagues. The third was his engagement with communism, which had the enormously important effect that it drove him to learn Urdu so that he could proselytize amongst his soldiers. The final strand is love, which he sees as tying all of his life together and which by example makes his particular mark on me. He declares towards the end of volume one:

There have been three main strands of my life—the commitment to the fundamental values which made me a communist, the study of Urdu, and an awareness of love as the fundamental feature of true humanity ... to me the three strands have always been inextricably intertwined, each informing the other, and it is that interaction which has affected the way I have worked for Urdu, enabling me to understand things in Urdu literature and

about the lives of Urdu speakers that would hardly have been possible otherwise. This in turn has had an effect on both my personal relationships and my understanding of what it means to be a communist. And it has been through my personal experiences as much as through the pressure of world events that my concept of how to live as a communist has changed.

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