

THE MUSLIM LEAGUE IN BARABANKI:

A Suite of Five Sentimental Scenes

by

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Preface

What follows was originally written as two independent essays, at separate times and in reverse order. The first essay was written in 1997, the fiftieth year of Independence in South Asia. It contained the last two scenes. The second, consisting of Scenes 1 through 3, was written in 2006 to mark the 100th year of the formation of the Muslim League. The underlying impulse, confessional and introspective, was the same in both instances. The two essays, with some corrections and changes, are now presented as a single narrative. I am grateful to the Indian Institute of Advanced Study and its Director, Dr. Peter R. deSouza, for making it possible.

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

Am an attendant lord, one that will do

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

(T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.')

(1)

In December 1906, twenty-eight men traveled to Dhaka to represent the United Provinces of Agra & Avadh at the foundational meeting of the All India Muslim League. Two were from Barabanki, 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, together with other kids, marching up and down the one main road in Barabanki under the green flag of the Muslim League, shouting slogans in support of its candidate in the assembly elections.

No, I do not imply some unbroken trajectory from my granduncle's trip to Dhaka to my strutting in the streets in Barabanki. The elections in 1945 were in fact based on principles that my granduncle is reported to have 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 rotund and mustached English squire. He had been a poet, and one of his couplets was well known even outside the family.¹

Lutf se bāgh-i-jahāN meN sūrat-i-shabnam rahe

Rāt hī bhar go rahe lekin gulōN meN ham rahe

I lived in this garden like a drop of dew,

In flowers' lap though only for a night.

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

Posterity, in the form of Professor Francis Robinson of the Royal Holloway College, tells a bit more. Professor Robinson writes, '[Naushad Ali Khan was] a Kidwai Sheikh, of the same family as the [ta'luqdār] 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

¹ I owe the correct version of the couplet to Ahmed A. Jamal, the noted maker of documentary films (*The Journalist and the Jihadi*). He tells me that as a child he often heard his father, Maulana Jamal Miyan, quote it in conversation.

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.²

Actually, Naushad Ali Khan had not faded away; he had merely died, reaching not even the age of thirty-five. Ironically, in that election in 1909, he had lost to none other than that second Barabanki man at Dhaka: Mr. Mohammad Nasim, the grandfather of Professor Irfan Habib, the distinguished historian. I may also add that, unlike what frequently happened with reference to one of his cousins, there was never an exchange of knowing glances between my elders when Naushad Ali Khan's name came up in any conversation. 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.³ And so when he died his estate was sold off to pay his many debts.

Now that I have told you how critical a role Barabanki played in the foundation of the Muslim League, I can boldly skip thirty-nine years and come to the winter of 1945, when the elections that settled the political fate of South Asia were held also in Barabanki.

² Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 408–9.

³ Muhammad Amin Zubairi, *Hayāt-i-Muhsin* (Aligarh, 1934), p. 203.

(2)

In the fall of 1945 I was eleven years old, 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 Barabanki 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 Muslim League. We managed the crowd, helped with banners and flags, and lustily led others in raising slogans. We did much the same at the League's election rallies, except that smaller boys like me were assigned to help in the curtained section reserved for women. I doubt if I ever knew where the office of the District Muslim League was, but I can still point to the spot where the MSF once had its dingy office that included a tiny lending library. Nafis Ahmad Tirmizi, a studious classmate of my brother Matin, ran it. Nafis Bhai had a serious bearing, but he also had an ability to make even small boys feel at home in the MSF. Other older boys were rambunctious; they did daring things. Once they roughed up the local RSS boys when the latter tried to take over the playground of the newly opened Niblett Islamiya School.⁴

⁴ L. H. Niblett was a fabulously popular Deputy Commissioner, sometimes referred to by local wits as the 'Shahjahan of Barabanki' for the many public parks and buildings he squeezed out of assorted rajas and ta'luqdars. An avid sportsman, who also wrote verse and essays, Niblett opted to serve in East Pakistan, where he died in a tragic accident.

The biggest attraction of the MSF for me was its reading room—in actuality, the back part of the single room office where a table and some chairs served many purposes. We did not get any Urdu newspaper at home—Father read only *The Pioneer*—but at the MSF I could read two: the weekly *Manshūr* from Delhi and the daily *Tanwīr* from Lucknow. The first was the mouthpiece of the Central Muslim League, while its U.P. branch had started the second for the purpose of the elections.

The files of the two newspapers 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, including pamphlets and newspapers. Many public libraries did the same for their own reasons. It was only in 2005 that I found a few tattered pages of the *Manshūr*—all from May 1944—at the Jamia Millia Library. The find surprised me. I had always remembered the *Manshūr* of 1946 as a fine-looking paper. Apparently, that was not always the case. Despite its two mastheads, one in English—‘Supported by Mr. Mohammed Ali Jinnah’—and the other in Urdu—‘*Murabbī Qā'id-i-Āzam Muhammad Āli Jināh*’—what I saw now was third-rate calligraphy on cheapest paper. Offered at 3 annas per issue it couldn't have found many takers in 1944. Obviously, before 1945, the *Manshūr* and its Urdu-speaking readers had not been of much importance to the Central Muslim League.

An editorial dated May 28, 1944, however, did not surprise me as much, for it laid out, among other things, the ‘hostage’ argument of the League that I had much heard in 1946. ‘The Muslim League wants,’ the editorial declared, ‘that the Muslims in the Muslim-majority regions become safe from the influence and domination of the Hindu majority in

other regions (*khārijī hindū aksariyat*).⁵ 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 (*āzād aur khudmukhtār muslim hukūmateN*).⁶ 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 (*huqūq aur mafād*) of the Muslims in the Hindu sectors shall be much better protected.’

If it sounds so simple and logical now, believe you me it sounded much simpler and more logical back then, when phrases like ‘territorial adjustments,’ ‘linking corridors,’ and ‘inseparable heritage sites’ were the currency of the day. When the most potent, the most passionately raised cry at our rallies that winter was: *pākistān kā matlab kyā // lā ilāha illallāh*, ‘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 Barabanki in the legislative assembly. Choudhry Khaliquzzaman, at the time the most powerful man in the League in U.P., has unwittingly provided a revealing story in his memoirs. 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

⁵ The stated fear was most peculiar. The Muslims in the ‘minority’ provinces could have feared the alleged ‘domination,’ but surely not the Muslims of the ‘majority regions.’ Mr. Jinnah at various times described it as the fear of being ‘a perpetual minority’ within the country.

⁶ The use of the plural ‘states’ in 1944 is also noteworthy.

chosen by Khaliquzzaman 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, Khaliquzzaman intervened and withdrew—'out of respect for the Maulana,' he says—the name of his choice. The wily Lucknow politician knew well the rules of *adab*. His action, as he coyly put it, 'had an overwhelming effect on the Board's future decisions, as all the sixty-five candidates were then selected unanimously.'⁷

Be that as it may, the young Maulana Jamaluddin Abdul Wahhab was the perfect choice for Barabanki. 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 *jawār*, 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 *jawār* was without someone who was Bari Miyan's spiritual 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 *khālīfa*. I had seen Jamal Miyan at our house; he

⁷ Choudhry Khaliquzzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan* (Karachi, 1961), p. 336.

called my grandmother ‘*chachī*’ (aunt), and she, in turn, did not observe *pardah* with him. Of course, all the savants of Firangi Mahal, though established in Lucknow, belonged in their ancestral origin to Sihali, a place in Barabanki District. They were all considered men of our *jawār* even though they lived in Lucknow.

The resident leaders of the Muslim League in Barabanki, 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 had perhaps been good for his soul, but surely a disaster for his education.

I asked Matin: was there in Barabanki much of a Muslim League 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 had not been 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 Barabanki 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 had not been much known for anything.

In contrast, several of the Muslim elite or the *miyān log* of the *jawār*, 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 Barabanki in 1945, but he chose to put his political reputation to test elsewhere and gave the nod for the Barabanki seat to a distant cousin, Jameelur Rahman Kidwai of Baragaon. Thus it developed that the battle to represent Barabanki Muslims in the provincial assembly was fought between a Jamal and a Jameel—a rather confusing manifestation of the truth in the Prophet’s axiom, *allāhu-j-jamīl wa yuhibbu-j-jamāl*, ‘God is Beautiful, and Loves Beauty.’

It’s not too 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 behest. Needless to say, he also had what counted most in Barabanki: the *jawār* connections. Not only was he a Kidwai, he belonged to a major clan of the Kidwais.

Equally unsurprisingly, while Jameel Miyan presided over the Congress Party in Barabanki, his older brother, Ehsanur Rahman Kidwai, was the General Secretary of the U.P. Muslim League. Being also a man adept at *adab*, he did not actively work against his brother in Barabanki; instead he joined Khaliquzzaman’s campaign in Lucknow, and earned grateful mention in his memoirs.

My father was not much interested in national politics, for him politics was only local. He took delight in the intrigues and cliques that decided the elections for the District (i.e. rural) and the Municipal (i.e. urban) Boards of Barabanki. In fact, he had once been elected the vice-president of the District Board. But he read only *The Pioneer*, the pro-Raj newspaper, and did not subscribe to either the *National Herald* or the *Qaumi Āwāz* when the two were started in Lucknow at the instance of Jawaharlal Nehru and Rafi Ahmad Kidwai. At some time in his life he had received the title of *Khan Sahib*, the lowest civilian award that the British gave to Muslims—the equivalent for the Hindus being *Rai Sahib*.

It would be unfair of me to assume that Father was a ‘toady’, and couldn’t have cared less for the elections had Jamal Miyan not been the Muslim League candidate. Had it been someone else, Father would have supported and worked for Jameel Miyan, who was not only a peer and friend but also distantly related. Jamal Miyan, however, was the son of my grandmother’s spiritual mentor, and he addressed Father as ‘Masud *Bhai*.’ Clearly, when it came to Father’s loyalties, Jamal Miyan had a higher claim—not on account of his politics, but in his own person.

And so, following the unwritten rules of the culture he lived in, Father energetically gave the Firangi Mahal ties what he owed them. It meant hosting visitors, holding sessions with friends and cronies about the ways to ‘influence’ voters, and, on the day of the election, loaning his car and driver to shuttle women voters to the polling booths. Nevertheless, I honestly do not recall ever hearing him discuss any *qaumī* (national) issue or attending an election meeting.

Uncle Fareed, on the other hand, talked *qaumī* politics all the time. Though proud of the one-time prominence of his own uncle, Raja Naushad Ali Khan, Uncle Fareed did not much approve of the Muslim League. He was an old-fashioned pan-Islamist; his heroes were Jamaluddin Afghani, Shibli Nu'mani and Abul Kalam Azad. He knew much of Shibli's Urdu poetry by heart, and had me memorize Shibli's long lament on the Balkan War. But I don't recall him quoting from any of the poems in which Shibli had made fun of the League—I came to know of them much later. As for Uncle Fareed's adoration of Abul Kalam Azad, he could quote from memory several favorite snippets from *Ghubār-i-Khātir*, including one where Azad sensuously describes his morning ritual with Jasmine tea while a prisoner in the Ahmadnagar Fort. When my brother Mohsin found work in Bengal, Uncle Fareed asked him to bring some Jasmine tea from Calcutta. Needless to say, the tea did not live up to Azad's lush and intoxicating words.

Uncle Shaheed, another first cousin of Father, was not only himself a Kidwai but also married to Jameel Miyan's sister, and yet he was a fairly vociferous Muslim Leaguer. It was always exciting fun for us boys when the two uncles happened to visit at the same time. They argued with much vehemence. Not outside, not in Father's presence, for he was much older to them and also cared little for their sort of political talk. They went at each other in the *zenana* section of the house, in the presence of my mother and sisters, where my brothers and I could also freely butt in if things calmed down.

The League's election rallies that I can recall now were held in the evening, in the period between the two post-sunset prayers of *maghrib* and *'ishā*. 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 both body and soul, sallied forth

again for a nice time with other men. Barabanki had, then, any number of open spaces that could accommodate crowds, but 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 still slept in the ladies’ section of our house, whose back door was locked early. And so, sadly enough, when the main speaker would be warming up to his subject I would usually be running home to avoid a scolding.

In any case, the first hour or so of any public meeting was always more fun. People slowly trickled in, and those who thought much of themselves or their comfort took up positions in front of the surrounding shops closed for the night. There they could find 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 senior boys seeking to be close to the girls in the *purdah* section—happily sat 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 Barabanki. Some, no doubt, received a little money for their pains, but for most the brief spell in limelight, despite the barbs and insults it brought from the audience, was a heady and sufficient reward.

A few so-called ‘better’ poets came from Lucknow and other places. They would come to the mike only after the leaders had arrived. Of them the most popular in Barabanki 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. But 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 of those 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—we made fun of them the next day—but no one cared. Everyone just gaped as this enormous sound came out of his mouth, and then swayed, involuntarily, to the rhythm of his *tarannum*. Thankfully, only two of his verses are still nailed to my memory:

Ye ummat kī kashtī, Jināh ke sahāre

Chalī jā rahī hai kināre kināre

The community's boat

With Jinnah's support

Merrily floats

From shore to shore.

The second masterpiece went as follows:

Jināh par hai sāya Muhammad Alī kā

Karam par karam be-hisāb ā-rahā hai

Jinnah is shaded by Muhammad and Ali

God's favors to him are manifold.

Similar poetasters must have graced the Congress rallies, but I can't name any because 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, Shamim 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 tad or two. Here are some lines from one of his denunciations of the Muslim League:

Ham ko batlāo to kyā matlab hai pākistān kā

Jis jagah is waqt hain muslim najis hai kyā wo jā?

Nīsh-i-tuhmat se tere chishtī kā sīna chāk hai'

Jald batlā kyā zamīN ajmer kī nāpāk hai?

hain imāmoN ke jo rauze lakhna 'ū kī khāk par

ban gaye kyā tauba tauba khitta-i-nāpāk par?

ah us pākīza gangā ko najis kahtā hai tū

jis ke pāni se kiyā muslim shahīdoN ne wuzū

kyā ye matlab hai ki ham mahrūm-i-āzādī rahen?

*Munqasim hokar 'arab kī tarh faryādī rahen?'*⁸

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?

⁸ Shamim Kirhani, 'Pakistān Chāhne-wāloN Se' in *Urdū meN Qaumī Shā'irī ke Sau Sāl*, ed. Ali Jawad Zaidi (Lucknow, 1959), p. 329.

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 quote Dil but have no memory now of what Jamal Miyan and others said in the speeches I enthusiastically applauded that winter. Doubtless they were heart-warming and mind-boggling in equal measure. The one name that still lingers is that of Maulana Sibghatullah 'Shaheed' of Firangi Mahal, but neither his words nor Jamal Miyan's are recorded in the sources I have access to.

I can only offer a brief quotation from a statement issued in October 1945 by the president of the All India Muslim Students Federation, Raja Amir Ahmad Khan of Mahmudabad. The Raja had extensive properties in Barabanki; consequently he was also a highly respected person of our *jawār*. In his statement, he exhorted the boys of the MSF to suspend every activity and work hard only for the League's cause. 'Today the road of our duty is clearer,' he wrote, '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 is watching 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, has his duty to perform in these 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-Jadīd*, Calcutta, 5 October 1945.)⁹

A truer sense of the rhetoric that actually galvanized audiences at the League’s meetings comes through in such anecdotes as follows.

My brother Matin knows only Urdu, and that too of a very urban kind. When he was growing up in Barabanki he never spoke Avadhi or even what we called *kachchi boli*. When we spoke recently I asked him, ‘Look, you couldn’t have understood the language of the villagers in Gorakhpur where you went to campaign. Nor could they have understood much of what you said. So what did you do?’ ‘I talked of the Qur’an and the Prophet,’ he replied, and followed by a hearty laugh.

Qazi Jaleel Abbasi of Basti, a well-known Congressite from my part of the world—though not from my *jawār*—has written his memoirs. It contains a couple of anecdotes from 1946 that strongly resonated with me after my conversation with Matin.

Abbasi, who campaigned in 1946 in support of his brother, begins with a truism that most Muslims use when they feel uncharacteristically sheepish: ‘*musalmān fitratan jazbāti hotā hai*’, ‘A Muslim is by nature emotional.’ Then he goes on, ‘At one place I

⁹ Ishtiaq Husain (Ed.), *Khutbāt-i-Rājā Sāhib Mahmūdābād* (Karachi, 1997), pp. 117–8.

showed my Muslim audience a picture of Mr. Muhammad Ali Jinnah and explained that Jinnah Sahib had no beard, that he lived like an Englishman and cared little for *namāz-roza* (prayers and fasts). Further, that his wife had been a Parsi.¹⁰ 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 *imām*. It’s not a picture of Jinnah Sahib that you have in your hand; it is of Mr. Abulkalam Azad. You should repent, sir, repent.” The crowd broke into loud applause, and I was left blankly staring at the man.¹¹

Abbasi’s second anecdote resonated with me even more. He 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 [with the Prophet] at the battles of Uhud and Badar? A righteous battle is always fought trusting only God.... With one shout of ‘*Allāh-o-Akbar*’ we shall be in Delhi, then with another shout of ‘*Allāh-o-Akbar*’ we shall reach Lucknow. Sir, you should keep your faith strong. U.P.

¹⁰ Ruttie Jinnah had been dead then for 17 years.

¹¹ Qazi Jalil Abbasi, *Kyā Din The!* (New Delhi, 1985), p. 132.

too will be a part of Pakistan.” And a huge shout of ‘*Allāh-o-Akbar*’ went up from the crowd.’¹²

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 for the Muslims of India. Their stand was: let Pakistan be formed now, we shall deal with the issues we face here later. [They would say at their meetings:] “Listen Muslims, one ballot box is Jawaharlal’s and the other belongs to Muhammad, the Prophet of God. Now tell me, who would you rather vote for?” And the crowd would roar back, “*Allāh-o-Akbar*.”’¹³

It may be very relevant here to mention a couple of incidents recounted by Riaz-ur-Rahman Kidwai, a nephew of Jameel Miyan’s, in his book on the Kidwais of Barabanki. By 1945 most of the prominent *ulemā* of North India had left the Muslim League, and their organization, the Jami’at-ul-Ulema-i-Hind, was working hard in support of the Congress. Quite a few of them were traveling around at the behest of the Congress, speaking at the political rallies of its Muslim candidates. They were expected to rebut the League’s Islamic claims with their own religious rhetoric. When the provincial Congress committee offered to send such a group to help Jameel Miyan, he declined. He reportedly said that if the voters wished to elect a person who prayed more often than he did they were welcome to do so. It seems so much in character for him. Another time, when Jameel Miyan was shown some documents that alleged that his opponent had improperly

¹² *Ibid*, p. 133.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 134.

earned some income from a property that belonged to a mosque, he firmly stopped their publication.¹⁴ There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that if a similar situation had developed concerning him, his opponent Jamal Miyan would have acted no differently. No *sharīf* person in those days ever did certain things. When the campaign manager of the League's candidate against Rafī Ahmad Kidwai needed a car—'since his own was out of order'—he telephoned his good friend Rafī; the latter immediately sent him his own car with a full tank of petrol.¹⁵

The result of the election was foregone. 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 staying out way after ten, 'Beauty' had indeed triumphed over 'Beautiful'—Jamal Miyan of Firangi Mahal had garnered 10,006 votes, while Jameel Miyan of Baragaon had received only 4,390. It reminds me of what Matin confided to me during our aforementioned conversation. After campaigning for Z. H. Lari in Gorakhpur, Matin was on his way back to Aligarh on the Election Day. While waiting to change trains at Lucknow, he told me, he made good use of the time by going into the city and casting a vote in favor of Khaliquzzaman.

Matin's little joke aside, it was indeed the year when eligible Muslim voters seem to have voted in extraordinary numbers. But who exactly was an eligible voter at the time? Only those who in the British view were fit to vote: i.e. people who paid income tax in any amount, paid Municipal tax on a certain minimum income, owned certain minimum

¹⁴ Riaz-ur-Rahman Kidwai, *Biographical Sketch of Kidwais of Avadh* (Aligarh, 1987), p. 101.

¹⁵ Choudhry Khaliquzzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan* (Karachi, 1961), p. 337.

property, passed the upper primary examination, or served in the military forces—plus a few exceptional souls. For example, the widow of a soldier had the right to vote, but not the equally indigent widow of a farmer.¹⁶ Returning to the Muslims of Barabanki District, the census says that there were about 227,000 of them in 1951. Allow me to assume that five years earlier, in 1946, they numbered only 210,000. That fateful year, the number of ‘eligible’ Muslim voters in Barabanki was 21,549. Of them 14,396 went forth and voted—an amazing sixty-seven percent of the ‘eligible,’ but a miniscule number of the actual Muslim adults. Little did they know what chain of events they had set in motion.

(3)

I can close my eyes and see the scene in our *āNgan* (the inner courtyard) that summer evening—to be precise, the evening of June 3, 1947. The thickening light and the gritty air of that oppressive June dusk are still palpable for me. A cousin from Gonda, who had an electrical goods shop there, had stopped with us for the night on his way back from Lucknow. Among his purchases was a magnificent battery-run portable radio, nothing less than the famous ‘Transoceanic’ made by Zenith Corporation of Chicago. Barabanki then did not have electricity, and my father was not interested in radios. And so he was not a part of us who eagerly clustered around the radio as my cousin fiddled with its knobs. Finally the mighty men of the time began to speak one after another. I doubt if any

¹⁶ N. C. Narasimha Acharya, *A Manual of Elections in India* (Bombay, 1946, 2nd revd. ed.)

of us listened to the first two, for it was the third man whom we wanted to hear so keenly, almost achingly. A deep hush fell over us when he began. He spoke in English, like the previous speakers. Did we understand everything he said? Did it matter what he said? Did anything matter except the gravity of his tone and the confident delivery? None of us had heard his voice before; we were surprised how deep it sounded for a man who looked so very frail in pictures.

He ended his remarks with the two words I had shouted a thousand times in the preceding months: '*Pakistān Zindabād*,' 'Long Live Pakistan.' We looked triumphantly at each other, though I was also a little startled. 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 would be a damnable liar if I now claimed my eyes were not moist like everyone else's. That the same eyes, only eight months later, shed many more tears for a painfully related reason is, of course, another story.

(4)

As I now recall... Or, more correctly, as something called memory now tells me decades later: it was a gray morning. There was not the faintest glow of a sun in the sky, the colour of a dingy sheet, and the infrequent gusts of air came damp from a fine spray. But it was, by no means, an unpleasant day. One felt rather grateful in Barabanki in

August when it actually rained, instead of just being so hot and humid that even a breeze grazed one's skin.

I was four months short of my thirteenth birthday.

My father's terminal illness—he was to die fourteen months later—had not yet made itself manifest, and we still lived in our old home in the Civil Lines, next door to the Hobart Club and the Company Gardens, not too far from the Police Lines and the sports pavilion that honoured a former Governor of the province named Hallett. Our town boasted only one main road. It started from the railway station and, shaded by old trees, went past the *kothis* and bungalows of the Civil Lines, then crossed a *nullah* by a bridge that too commemorated the Jubilee of Queen Victoria, 'India's Caesar.' On the other side of the bridge, it passed by a few cultivated fields before making contact with the more inhabited part of the town. The crumbling remains of the Hobart Club, till recently, housed a secondary school for girls; now someone more resourceful has torn it all and erected a girls' college. The lawns and flowerbeds of the 'Kampani Bagh' (Company Garden) have disappeared under the bricks and concrete of a housing colony, as have also the badminton court and the soccer field of the sports complex. The Hallett Pavilion and its annexe have been converted into the living quarters of minor officials. Only the Police Lines is still there, its *esprit de corps* enhanced by a Hanuman temple. The Station Road is still the city's main artery, though not its only street, and the ancient trees shading it are almost entirely gone.

I woke up early, probably on my own. More likely I was awakened by the voices of the Congress boys who went around the city that morning—as they had been doing for more than a week—loudly chanting nationalist songs. I imagine I was quite excited. The

previous afternoon we—all the stalwarts of the MSF—had celebrated the creation of Pakistan by holding a rally in front of our small office-cum-library. The crescent-and-star-on-green flag of the Muslim League was raised and saluted, poems were sung, and speeches were listened to. Later, as we were dispersing, someone suggested that we should further display our commitment to the Muslim League and the Quaid-i-Azam by ‘boycotting’ the ceremonies at the school the following day. There was an immediate agreement. We were fearless Muslims. Hadn’t we just won Pakistan ‘laughingly?’¹⁷

The ceremony at the school—Government High School—was at eight, but the students had been told to come early. We would assemble in rows in the front yard of the school according to the grades we were in. Then, to the accompaniment of an anthem sung by a chorus, the principal would hoist the flag, and everyone would salute the flag by folding an arm before his chest. Later, sweets would be distributed.

I left home early. As I hurried to the MSF office, I met some fellow-members from my neighbourhood. Soon there were five or six of us. As we jauntily marched down the road, we noticed how the Congress volunteers had gone about hanging strings of tri-colour bunting across the road and between trees at numerous places. Someone in our group leaped up and pulled down a string of the tiny triangular pieces; then a second boy did the same. Soon all of us were randomly tearing down whatever such decorations our hands could reach. Why did we do it? I have no explanation, except perhaps that it was out of a

¹⁷ After the announcement of the Partition Plan and the acceptance speeches of the leaders on 3 June 1947, some enthusiastic slogan-maker of the Muslim League had come up with a hot one: *haNs ke liyā hai Pākistān // laR ke leNge Hindustān*, ‘We took Pakistan laughingly; we shall take Hindustan after a fight.’

habit we had developed during the preceding so many months. A few people here and there shouted at us, telling us to stop, but no one actually confronted us. We were bold and fearless and full of more certainties about ourselves than we could have actually named.

By the time we started from the MSF office for the school, our small procession consisted of some twenty or so boys—fewer in number than the previous day rally and a fraction of our actual strength. One boy was carrying our flag, the flag of the Muslim League. It was tied to a tall bamboo pole, and the boy frequently made good use of it to pull down any celebratory string of flags or bunting he passed under. We were shouting our old slogans—probably the new one too—as we marched down the main road, turned at the General Hospital, and cut through the large open space where there were always some grazing cattle herded by little boys and girls. It was a shortcut that everyone used to go to the school and to the courts further down the road.

On our way we passed many people. We couldn't have known the names of most of them, but the faces must have been familiar. And the people, in turn, must have had the same feeling about us. In fact, we must have exchanged greetings, for no boy in our procession could have failed to greet any older person he knew with an '*Ādāb Arz*' or simply '*Ādāb,*' with his right hand quickly raised to the forehead, then dropped. It was then the accepted way in Barabanki for a *sharīf* Muslim boy to greet his elders whether the latter were Muslim or Hindu. The Hindu boys too used the same greeting with their parents' Muslim friends. That shared phrase of courtesy has now almost disappeared—it was perhaps too Islamic for the Hindus, and not Islamic enough for the Muslims—replaced by '*Namaste*' by the former and '*Assalām-o Alaikum*' by the latter.

The people we passed on the way didn't avert their eyes. They looked at us. Some, I imagine, with curiosity, some with surprise, even incredulity, others perhaps with some indulgence. Still others must have felt some degree of contempt or anger. But no overt response occurred. No one stopped or questioned us.

I'm afraid I might have forced my memory when I put our procession on the shortcut leading to the school's eastern gate. The memory, on the contrary, insists on placing our crowd at the western gate of the school, and I must yield to it.

No, our procession did not take the shortcut. It followed the longer route. We marched through Begumgunj, turned south at the old Shi'ah mosque, passed the Veterinary Hospital on our way to Fyzabad Road, where we turned left and ended up at the western gate. There we stopped, by the cherished and scarred red-tamarind tree. It still stands—cherished for the blood-red inside of its fruit which is normally green, and scarred by the stones that generations of schoolboys have thrown at it to knock down the deliciously sweet and tart fruit.¹⁸

So there we were finally at the western gate, waving the Crescent-and-Star and shouting the familiar slogans: *Pākistān Zindabād... Quā'id-i-Āzam Zindabād... Na'ra-i-Takbīr, Allāh-o-Akbar... HaNs ke liyā hai Pākistān, LaR ke leNge Hindustān*. In front of us was the low boundary wall, behind which was the front yard of the school where we

¹⁸ The road to Fyzabad is now a heavily used national highway. In the Nineties it became the road to Ayodhya. Mechanised chariots, consecrated bricks, fiery *sadhus* and *sadhvis*, garish politicians, cheering volunteers, humble devotees—they all used it during those scary months. And when an evening came too quickly for them, they stopped and spent the night in the rooms and verandahs of my old school.

could see our fellow students assembling in rows. Most of them came through the eastern gate, for it was closer to most of the city, but quite a few also went past us. Given the population of the city, most of them were Hindus—at the time there were only two Sikh families in the city and only one Sikh boy in our school. But, Muslim or Hindu, none of the boys going in challenged us. We, on the other hand, probably accosted the Muslim boys and tried to stop them from going in. We had plenty of practice of doing that the previous year, during the provincial assembly elections, much to the discomfort of the numerically fewer Muslim *kāngresi* boys.

Some time passed. Ten minutes, maybe fifteen. Twenty? I can't be sure. Then out came Kaul Sa'ab, one of the most popular teachers at the school. A handsome Kashmiri Pundit of refined manners, he spoke elegant Urdu and Hindi, attended every *mushā'ira* and *kavī sammelan* in the city, and religiously visited the tomb of Haji Waris Ali Shah at Dewa. Eventually, in his devotion to the saint, he refused promotions and transfers, and died in Barabanki.

We fell silent when Kaul Sa'ab stepped through the gate, and greeted him with proper respect. He didn't scold us. Even otherwise he never spoke sharply to any student—he usually addressed him as *Bete*, 'Son.' Gently and calmly, he told us that what we were doing was not nice; that it was improper for us to behave that way even if we didn't like what was happening. Someone responded that our protest was against the required saluting of the flag, that we had no intention of showing respect to a flag we didn't care for—it was not our flag. Even then Kaul Sa'ab didn't get angry. He merely shifted from quiet reasoning to the more jovial manner he was known for. He teased one boy, made fun of another, told jokes and quoted verses, and soon had us all bursting into smiles.

Then, with mock seriousness, he told us about the delicious *laddus* that were to be distributed under his supervision at the end of the ceremony. Before we knew what was happening, he had us agreeing to a compromise: we would go in immediately and stand with our classmates for the ceremony, but we wouldn't sing the anthem or salute the flag. In return, Kaul Sa'ab would see to it that each of us received an extra share of the sweets.

And that is exactly what happened. We left the green flag at the gate leaning forlornly against the tamarind tree, and ourselves went in, stiff-necked but quiet. The tri-colour was raised, the anthem was sung, the salute was given—we remained silent and kept our arms hanging by our sides. Afterward, as each class marched by him and his helpers, Kaul Sa'ab quietly made sure that we got two packets of four laddus each. Then everyone dispersed. I too returned home, feeling quite triumphant.

That was the last time the boys of the MSF met as a group. Our library-office closed a month or so later when Nafis Tirmizi, who had been running it, moved to Pakistan with his family.¹⁹ Many older boys who had already graduated from high school also left for jobs in the new country. Many of the 'leaders' in the local branch of the Muslim League disappeared too. There was, however, no incident of communal violence in Barabanki in 1947, nor for that matter in Lucknow and other neighbouring districts. And, thank God, there hasn't been any so far either.

I have no contemporary memory of the horrors that were happening at the time in other parts of the land. My father used to get *The Pioneer*, but I could then barely read it. At the MSF library, I had been reading *Manshūr* and *Tanwīr*, the two Urdu newspapers that the

¹⁹ Since the original publication several people have corrected me: Nafis Tirmizi and his family did not move to Pakistan, though most of the other seniors boys in the MSF did.

Muslim League used to bring out, but the library was now closed for good, as were indeed the two newspapers. We didn't have a radio—the city had no electricity then; it came three years later.

Two of my three brothers went across the border. The older of the two, Ahsan, was in the army, and had formally opted to serve in Pakistan. He was with a Dogra regiment, and its only Muslim officer. His colonel, an Englishman, held on to his option papers and told him to re-think his decision. That evening several of my brother's subordinates came and pleaded with him to change his mind. But the next morning, my brother went to the colonel and asked him to forward the papers to Delhi.²⁰

The other brother, Matin, had been a student at Aligarh and, in 1946, with the blessings of the university authorities, had also gone to Sindh to campaign for the Muslim League during the elections. Now he quit the university, went back to Nawab Shah, and took up a job with the local landlord he had campaigned for. Later he moved to Karachi, where his lack of a college education didn't stop him from making a reasonably good life for himself and his family. Soon we heard of other young men—within our extended family as well as outside of it—who had made the kind of decisions my brothers had. It was happening in all the *sharīf* families of our *jawār*. The sons and sons-in-law were moving away; the relatively younger in age were moving away; the men, more than the women, were moving away. And yet our life still seemed to move along on an even keel. If my father felt any anxiety, he didn't talk about it in our presence. As for my mother, she of

²⁰ I learned this only when I met my brother some thirty years later in Chicago. He told me he had no actual reason in mind when he made that option—it had just happened.

course wept when two of her sons left for Pakistan without even coming home to bid her goodbye, but her tears were expected and didn't give us a pause.

In my own life outside the house, at the school and on the playground of our hockey club, and among friends—most of them were Muslim, though several were Hindu—I felt no difference. In fact, our hockey club—the Comrades Club—was buzzing with such excitement in the final months of the year that nothing else could have mattered. One of its members, K. D. Singh 'Babu'—our very own 'Babu Bhai'—had been selected for inclusion in the Indian team for the Olympic games in England, and the entire city was gripped with hockey fever. He would be the second 'All India' player from Barabanki; twenty years earlier, my friend Nusrat's father, Shaukat Ali, had gone to Amsterdam with the legendary Dhyan Chand.²¹ Little Barabanki had achieved at least in hockey what few cities in India could then claim.

(5)

I really can't recall what that January morning was like. It must have been very cold. But it couldn't have been too foggy, for we had started quite early. Father was going to Lucknow, probably for a check-up, and my mother and I were going with him in the car.

²¹ In the Forties, we had at least six regular teams in the city competing with each other.

Now there is no hockey, or any other team sport, in Barabanki. Even the stadium built by the state in the Seventies lies unused except for political rallies.

Though he always took with him Buddhu, his personal servant who knew driving, my father liked to drive the car himself. And, before any trip, he invariably went first to the petrol pump in our neighbourhood. But that morning, when we arrived there, the place was closed. The owner, however, was still there, in his little office; he came out to the car and told us the news: someone had killed Gandhiji.

He had no details.

Father turned the car around. He looked grimmer than I had ever seen him. There was absolute silence in the car during the few minutes it took us to reach home. Was the car immediately put away in the garage as soon as we got out? Probably. It was a day of unprecedented acts. The moment we were inside, Father had every outer door closed and bolted. And he ordered everyone to stay inside, not just inside the house but inside the central rooms—we were not to go out even into the two inner courtyards except to use the latrines. Only Father's voice could be heard in the house; everyone else—when they did say something—spoke in whispers.

My father was avidly fond of hunting, particularly of duck-shoots in winter. He owned three shotguns and a rifle; he also had a revolver that he had bought many years ago when there had been some threat to his life in a matter of ancestral property. Now he had all the weapons taken out of their cases and laid out on a *takht*, and he personally checked and loaded each of them. One of the guns was given to Buddhu. I had no experience with guns then—my father had not considered me old enough to put one in my hands when I went with him on duck-shoots—so I wasn't of any use to him.

Buddhu and Father, guns in hand, stayed inside with the women—my mother, grandmother, and maidservants, including Buddhu's wife—and the children—my three

sisters and Buddhu's many children.²² My father guarded the front rooms, while Buddhu prowled back and forth through the inner courtyards. Outside in the back, our *chowkīdār*, Bhagwan Din, armed with his well-oiled, iron-tipped lathi, took up a position under a tree near the back gate, while in the front yard, our cook Sajjad, similarly armed, lurked behind a bush near the other gate.

I was probably as horrified as my parents when I had first heard the news at the petrol pump, but now, at home, my state of shock was chiefly due to the terror I could see in their faces. I had never seen Father looking like that. I could not have ever imagined that my quick-to-raise father who was always so sure of his privileged status and its attendant powers—he was after all a zamindar of three villages, had received the minor title of *Khan Sahib*, and was an 'Honorary Magistrate' as well as the 'Special Railway Magistrate'—could suddenly appear so helpless and scared. I was terrified, and so were my mother and sisters and everyone else, as we huddled in the gloom behind bolted doors. Even my grandmother had been made to come inside—she normally spent the winter months in the verandah near the kitchen. After a while she had me sit beside her—I was her favourite—as she quietly murmured endless prayers.

A couple of hours passed. (Was it really that long?) Then we heard some announcement being made on a loudspeaker. The sound came closer, but the words couldn't be heard clearly inside the rooms. We cringed as we strained our ears. Finally, Father opened one of the doors and went outside. We anxiously watched him through the opening as he stood on the front terrace and listened to the announcement. Suddenly he began to

²² Mohsin, my eldest brother tells me that he too was home then, but I have no memory of his presence.

swear—more profanely and loudly than we had ever heard him. He stood there in sunlight raging, and seeing him in that familiar state reassured us. It gave me the courage to open a side-door and step out into the verandah, while my mother and sisters gathered at the door behind me. It was either a jeep or a truck, either of the police or the army, equipped with a loudspeaker, and someone in it was making an announcement over and over. I wish I could recall the exact words, but I can't. I do remember, however, what they meant: an almost palpable sense of immense relief. The words even brought a few furtive exchanges of smiles, for they told us that it was a Hindu who had done the killing—a Hindu, not a Muslim. Now we could all acknowledge the terror we had been gripped by and also the reason for our relief, as indeed my grandmother audibly did when she thanked Allah for making Gandhiji's assassin turn out to be a Hindu and not, God forbid, a Muslim.

Soon 'normalcy' returned to our lives. The school re-opened after a sudden closure for a few days, and the only visible difference there was the mysterious absence of our Geography teacher, who had been a leader in the local branch of the RSS—he was held in custody for a few weeks, then released. Father's illness soon became fully manifest, and ran its course until he succumbed to it one night in October. His death radically altered my own individual life. As the only male at home, and with our mother observing *purdah*, I was now the visible 'head' of the family—but that was usual and expected. A few years later, the government abolished the zamindari system and our main source of income disappeared, but that too had been expected. We could still maintain our *safed-poshī*, our genteel ways, though at a lower scale. There were changes in the hierarchy of

local movers-and-shakers, but we still knew many of them and, more importantly, they still knew us.

What was new was the gradual discovery that the terror which that January day had suddenly permeated our bones and then as quickly seemed to have disappeared, had never actually left us. Months would go by, even years, then suddenly at some odd occasion or during some innocuous conversation, it would let its presence be felt, as deep and certain within us as the sound of our heartbeats and the filling and emptying of our lungs. No longer could we—my friends and I; our relatives; the *sharīf* Muslims of the *jawār*, of my generation and older—feel as cocksure as we had that day in August, or earlier. On the surface it was still very much ‘life-as-usual’ for most of us, but underneath we no longer had the old conviction that paramount in everything that concerned us was only our own say. Instead, we were now convinced that everyone and everything we held dear was at the mercy of someone else’s whim.

The specific events of that earlier August day soon turned into ancient memory. But not so the passions that had led to that day in our lives. They transformed themselves into two inter-laced narratives, both curiously reliant on the terrors of that January day—it seemingly had left a permanent fault line in the landscape of our lives—for maintaining their hold on us. As time passed, we developed a peculiar bipolar attitude towards Pakistan. It appeared to us as a land of opportunity and possible future refuge, but it had seemingly also left us mired in an abject insecurity we had never dreamed of. We missed no occasion to lament the harm we had so foolishly done to ourselves or to feel twinges of guilt for what we had done to our Hindustan, but just as often we also rejoiced in Pakistan’s existence and felt grateful it was there even if its borders were no longer open

to us after the Nehru-Liaquat Pact. When parts of our homes were arbitrarily padlocked by the authorities under the Evacuee Property Act or when Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated in Pakistan we told each other how foolishly we had acted, but when the fires of Jabalpur and Jamshedpur rose in the sky we assured ourselves how right we had been. In that manner, swinging back and forth between the polarities of being right and being wrong, we somehow managed to add a few more decades to our lives.
