

ASAD MUHAMMAD KHAN

Anger's Fresh Crop

HAFIZ SHUKRULLAH KHAN preferred brevity in his speech.

Hafiz Shukrullah Khan was a man of learning and few words. Perhaps this is why he liked to be brief in what he said; going into details and wasting time irritated him.

In the neighboring villages this stocky, well-educated Rohilla gentleman was known for his unforgiving temper, which is probably what led people to refer to him as “Hafiz Gainda” (Hafiz the Hippo) behind his back.

Hafiz Shukrullah Khan knew that he was called Hafiz Gainda, but he didn't let it bother him too much. Most of the time he restrained himself and ignored it. The only people he had roughed up so far were the ones who had deliberately used the nickname to his face or used it to insult him. When anyone called him Gainda without meaning it as an insult, or when children and friends used it with lighthearted irreverence—he overlooked it.

Hafiz Shukrullah Khan Gainda had another strange trait: He treated followers of other faiths and even atheists graciously. After all, he'd say, it doesn't cost anything to be courteous. What do we lose if they're not in agreement with us? Poor things, they're already lost as it is.

Such an attitude in any distinguished individual of the village should have been quite enough to rattle every one of the ordinary Muslims; but they weren't surprised at all. They understood Hafiz Shukrullah Khan's disposition well enough.

Hafiz Shukrullah Khan lived in Rohri, a village on the banks of the Gomal river which flowed through the foothills of Koh-e Sulaiman. He had heard from his elders that Rohri was the fatherland of the ancestors of the benevolent and all-powerful Sultan Sher Shah Suri. Sher Shah's grandfather, Ibrahim Khan, had set out from Rohri with his young son, Hasan Khan, and never returned. Ibrahim Khan had died in Narnaul in

the Punjab, and Hasan Khan in Sehsaram in Bihar. Like everyone else, Hafiz Shukrullah Khan believed that since the father and grandfather had never returned to this long-forgotten village, it was also unlikely that Sultan Sher Shah ever would. Following this line of reasoning, Hafiz Shukrullah Khan resolved: if the mountain would not come to him, he would go to the mountain. Thus, after duly consulting his family, Hafiz Shukrullah Khan Gainda decided to go to the capital and started making preparations. He had heard accounts of the stability and prosperity and of the learned men and savants to be found beyond the Punjab and Multan in Sirhind, Bihar, Bengal, Malwa and Khandesh. He had heard stories of the distinguished son of Rohri, Sher Shah Suri, who had constructed a highway stretching sixteen hundred miles, had introduced land reforms, and had brought peace to the troubled areas of Hindustan in an incredibly short time. Using his sword and his sagacity Sher Shah had quelled strife and annihilated mischief in the land of God and made it livable for mankind.

Shukrullah Khan Gainda wanted to see all this at least once with his own eyes. He also wanted to behold the great Sultan, “the wielder of the sword, the just.” And so invoking God he saddled up his horse, tied the books that he could not bear to part with for long in a length of coarse cloth and set off to meet Sher Shah.

Hafiz Shukrullah had learned from his elders and had heard from those experienced with visiting seats of power and royal courts that one desiring an audience with a regal personage needs to pay obeisance and offer a gift which both the giver and the receiver consider invaluable. After a great deal of thought the Hafiz finally decided on the offering he would bring to His Highness, the Sultan of Hindustan.

He strode over to the village mound where, according to the elders, the Suris had long ago set up their hearth and home. There he scooped up three shovelfuls of earth and wrapped it in a piece of brocade, which a soldier had given to him to make a satchel for his books.

With the earth and his favorite books, Hafiz Shukrullah Khan first went to his aunt’s in Hasan Abdal. He stayed there for seven days and then traveled on to Lahore with a party of *bafindas* or cloth weavers. Lahore was a city of fun-loving carefree people while Shukrullah Khan was soft-spoken and unobtrusive by nature. So for five days he hung around the lodgings of the *bafindas*, trying to shake off the fatigue of the journey; he didn’t even venture out to see the city’s exquisitely laid-out gardens or its jostling crowds. On the sixth day he hitched up with the bullock train of some gypsy grain traders, the *banjaras*, and thus advanced

toward the capital without unduly tiring his horse.

Hafiz Shukrullah Khan had some money on him when he left Rohri. Then in Hasan Abdal his aunt, out of sheer affection for her nephew, added a handful of silver coins to his pouch. And en route to Lahore the *bafindas* wouldn't let him spend any money at all; they felt honored to have such a venerable gentleman, a savant like himself travel with them. So Shukrullah Khan ended up having a substantial amount of money with him on his way to the capital. The *banjaras* repeatedly tried to pilfer some of it, but Hafiz Gainda didn't give them a chance. It wasn't his intellect or wisdom, which in any case didn't impress the gypsies much, but rather his stout body and his sword that held them in check; in the end though he thought it best to part from their company.

Lahore was now far behind and the capital was still some distance away. The crowds at the government-run *sarais*, or inns, were getting bigger. *Sarais* were certainly cheap, but Hafiz had never felt comfortable around crowds. As the capital drew closer, he could see the number of villages along the highway increasing. There were mosques as well as privately-run inns and guesthouses in all these villages. Hafiz Shukrullah Khan knew that the caretakers of the mosques would gladly let him stay with them. But the thought occurred to him: why impose on the hospitality of the imams and muezzins? Why not spend some money and stay at private inns? After a couple of such stays he would reach the city. Then, if need be, he might even find himself a job. After all capitals offered thousands of jobs. Thus, stopping and resting along the way in private *sarais* and guesthouses, Hafiz Shukrullah Khan made it to the capital.

The *sarai* he chose there was located next to the city library. No point in strolling around town, he thought. Weren't all cities more or less the same anyway? He was here for only a few days. Why not spend this time in the library? What could offer better entertainment than looking through books and copying whatever appealed to him! He talked with the manager of the *sarai* and found out the prices for room and board. The rent was not much, considering the facilities offered. The charges for food were more or less what a person would have to pay at any good *sarai* in a big city. But there was one problem: There were no private single rooms available. The manager suggested, "Well, if you like, you can take a bed in a room with four others."

"Oh brother!" the Hafiz replied. "If I'd wanted to live in a crowd, I'd have found myself a place in one of the rent-free government *sarais*." Then the manager looked at his pile of books and quickly surmised that

this bookworm was likely to burn the lamp all night poring over his materials or else lapse into a *chilla*, the forty-day vigil of meditation—this was not the place for him. So he gave Hafiz Shukrullah the address of a nearby *sarai* and said, “You’re a learned man. You’ll find a vacant room there as well as people of your ilk.”

The manager had smiled when he said “people of your ilk,” but at the time Hafiz Gainsa did not quite understand what the man meant, nor did he care to give it much thought. Holding on to the reins of his horse he walked the animal to that other *sarai*, which turned out to be very much to his liking. Here, he found a whole room for himself, a room not only neat and clean but also inexpensive, and relatively quiet; there was almost no noise at all.

The Hafiz secured his horse in the stable and then deposited his satchel of books, his small brocade bundle, his weapons and other baggage in his room, and taking out some paper and a pen he headed straight for the library. Being a rugged mountain man, Hafiz Gainsa wasn’t given to bothering too much about food like city folk. Since he had a whole day ahead of him in the library, he just stuffed a half dozen fistfuls of roasted chickpeas in the pocket of his quilted coat and settled down to read. Come noon he got up to say his *zahr* prayers. He offered the mandatory part of the prayer under the shade of a flourishing tangerine tree in the library’s small garden. Afterward he ate a handful of chickpeas and washed it down with some water. Shortly a vendor came by and sat down in the sun on the steps of the library. He had been roaming the streets and bazaars selling Arabic coffee from a pot tied to a brazier which was hanging on a shoulder sling. Coming upon a restful place, the vendor sat down to relax. Shukrullah Khan found something quite appealing about the man’s weary demeanor. Although he had no desire to drink coffee he bought a demitasse and sat down on the steps near the vendor and began sipping it. The coffee was good. It seemed to perk him up, so the Hafiz bought a few more cups. He had just paid for them and was getting up when he saw a young man emerge from the library. He was coming in their direction. The newcomer, who must have seen the Hafiz earlier sitting among the books, greeted him and said, “Learned sir! Sit for a while. Have another cup. With my compliments.”

The newcomer spoke in the fluent Persian of a native speaker. Gainsa smiled, thanked him, and sat back down “All right,” he said, “one more cup.” He took the coffee, told the newcomer his name and asked for his. The newcomer said he was from Isfahan and that his name was Feroze. Both began to make light conversation. Feroze was studying

history and logic and had left home with the intention of becoming the student of a scholar from Jaunpur.

Their coffee finished, both men climbed the stairs and once again sat down in the library.

Leaning against the spacious window of the library, Hafiz Shukrullah continued reading till sundown. A little before the call for prayers he got up and left the library, while Feroze, who was settled in the far corner near a small pile of books, kept transcribing something onto a sheet of Isfahani paper spread out in front of him.

Shukrullah Khan's first day had been fulfilling. After taking his meal at the *sarai*, he took a stroll through the bazaar before the *isha* prayers. In the center of town, there was a small mosque right next to a newly constructed Afghani *madrassa*. Here, the Hafiz offered his prayers. Then alternately losing his way and asking for directions, he managed to return to the *sarai*. He was tired and fell asleep in no time at all.

God only knows how long Gainda had dozed when, half-asleep and half-awake, he felt as though he was being chased by a pack of screaming, bellowing man-eating demons-of-the-desert. He tried to flee, to save himself, but it seemed as though the ground below was clutching his feet. With all the strength of his body he tried to free himself. At first he wasn't successful. The demons-of-the-desert—raving like a horde of hunger-crazed camels, moaning and wailing like some living being under a terrible chastisement—closed in on him, until they were no more than two steps behind. These ogres could even reach out with their claws and touch Hafiz Shukrullah Khan, and one of them extended its sharp pointed talons and lacerated his back. Hafiz Shukrullah let out a muffled scream and jolted upward in bed.

"God help me! What kind of dream was that," thought the Hafiz. But it wasn't entirely a dream; in some way it was also strangely real. The room seemed to be filled with screams and angry voices. The Hafiz bristled. "God help me! What kind of sounds are these? What demons have invaded this room?" He got up and raised the wick of the oil-lamp, and then reached out for the dagger under his pillow and tucked it in his belt. But there was no one else in the room; there was only this hair-raising noise which seemed to come from everywhere, from the ceiling, and even from the floor.

Hafiz Gainda wrapped himself tightly in the lightweight quilt, picked up the lamp, and stepped out of the room with his sword still sheathed. "Could it be a raid by robbers?" he wondered. But this was a densely populated city, and no ordinary city at that but the very capital. How

could thugs and robbers dare to freely attack residential areas in the reign of Sher Shah? Robbers strike with impunity where a ruler is weak or corrupt. But Sher Shah—he was neither a weak king nor a corrupt ruler.

Then Hafiz Shukrullah Khan thought that perhaps a fire had broken out in the *sarai* and people were stampeding out to save themselves. He came out onto the veranda and looked around; he even checked the courtyard, but there was no smell of anything burning. On the veranda he noticed light coming from every room but the occupants were nowhere to be seen. A bonfire was blazing in the middle of the courtyard but no one was sitting around it, no groom, servant, sentry, *jarib-bardar*, resident or traveler. There was no sign of anyone for miles.

It was then that the Hafiz noticed the glow of torches on the roof. And those voices, they were also coming from the roof. He looked for the staircase and bounded up holding on to the lamp and his sword. There, Hafiz Shukrullah Khan Gainda beheld a strange sight.

The roof was illumined with all manner of oil-lamps, torches, and candles turning the night into veritable day, and some forty to fifty men and women were sitting in a circle emitting strange sounds of rage and anger. At times it seemed as though they were about to get up and tear each other apart. But in spite of their incredible rage and fury, no one stirred from his place or attacked anyone. They were each just trying to frighten the person in front of them with angry noises, glaring eyes and gnashing teeth.

Hafiz Gainda set the lamp down on the floor, hid his sword behind him, and stared in amazement at all these people ranting and raving.

He recognized quite a few. Among them he saw the owner of the *sarai*, who would loll around all day leaning his elbows against a pillow and peering through his half-closed eyes at the guests as they came in or out; the manager, who considered every guest his master, nay even his preceptor, and went to great lengths humbling himself before them; the kitchen crew, who spent their entire day cooking and tasting food and getting fat in the process; and many helpers, stable hands and grooms, and, most surprising of all, the *sarai's* guests, who could be distinguished from the rest by their clothing and the air of contentment—a mark of privilege and affluence—on their faces. What was so amazing was that, just like everyone else, these guests were fuming and raging at the person in front of them with their faces horribly contorted, their teeth bared, and their eyes glaring.

“What kind of people have I gotten in with?” thought Shukrullah Khan. “Or is this just a dream?”

But no this wasn't a dream at all. The very people Hafiz Shukrullah had seen behaving quite normally during the day as they stood, sat, ate or drank, were really here, and now, past midnight, were gripped by some strange madness. "Are they all seized by some obsession?"

"Are they all going through some collective fit? Perhaps a secret society is holding its meeting? Or maybe some satanic cult is reveling in its macabre ritual?"

Hafiz Gainda was about to move away and return to his room and his belongings when a man from the assembly got up and rubbing his face, as if he'd just woken from sleep, came over to him. The Hafiz recognized the man at once. It was the groom under whose care he had left his horse. Then a woman, whose features and skin color suggested she was a native of some cold country, got up from the group and stroking her face also walked toward the Hafiz. The groom and the woman each gently seized one of the Hafiz's hands and attempted to pull him into the circle. Then the woman's eyes fell on the Hafiz's sword and she screeched, "Goodness gracious! You've brought a weapon—what ever for? This is an assembly of rage. What possible use can you have here for a sword? Remove it and come with us."

Shukrullah Khan freed his hand from the woman's grasp rather forcefully. Seeing this, the groom who had until now been holding the Hafiz's other hand gently, suddenly grasped his wrist with both of his hands and dragged him toward the circle. "Come! Come *Agha*. Don't delay anymore. As it is, you're already quite late."

"For heaven's sake, what kind of mess have I gotten myself into?" With a quick, brisk movement Hafiz Gainda irately yanked his hand free from the groom's grip, lifted it and motioned them to back off. Then he picked up the lamp and darted toward the stairs.

They all saw how he had forcibly freed his hand and then rushed away—something that displeased them greatly, and they registered their displeasure with a dreadful outcry. As he climbed down the stairs the Hafiz felt as though every one of those forty or fifty savages might swoop down on him any minute and tear him apart. Never before had Hafiz Gainda seen such a shocking display of fury, or such a ferocious expression of rage. His quilt wrapped around him, he descended the steps one at a time, fully prepared to face any violent situation that might come his way. There was no telling when he might have to put down the lamp and pull out his sword. At last he thanked God that all those demented people—the ones who managed the *sarai* and the ones who stayed there as guests—remained on the roof in their circle, frothing and foaming at

the mouth with rage and emitting terrifying sounds, and none of them actually came after him.

When he reached the courtyard Shukrullah Khan heaved a sigh of relief. He walked onto the veranda and looked at the manager's small room, and then at the row of guestrooms. All the doors were open, all the rooms were empty. Slowly he entered his own room, returned the lamp to its stand, and sat down on the bed.

So was this it then—what the caretaker of the first *sarai* had meant by “people of your ilk”? The fool took me for some crazy maniac and sent me over to this place.

Shukrullah Khan Gainda became so incensed that had it been daytime he would've run off to the first *sarai* right then, grabbed the caretaker and given him such a thrashing with his horsewhip that the idiot would have remembered it for the rest of his life. However, circumstances dictated that for the time being he'd better control his anger and look at the situation with a cool head.

“I'm not in some wilderness, I'm in a city, and an overpopulated city at that, right in the heart of the kingdom of Sher Shah, in its capital, where the Minister of Police and the Minister of Law are both present, and the night-guard patrols the streets regularly. What earthly reason do I have to take action myself? I'll register a complaint against those maniacs who interfere with people's rest, and I'll register it right now so that even if I've lost my sleep, at least others won't lose theirs, they'll be able to get through the night peacefully.”

Hafiz Gainda began to put on his clothes intending to go out. He was scarcely finished changing when the voices of anger and rage rising from the roof suddenly stopped. He opened the door and peered out; at first the movement of shadows and lights appeared in the courtyard. Then one or two guests could be seen walking through the veranda.

A small handsome boy went past holding his mother's hand. Noticing that the Hafiz was watching, the boy looked up at him and smiled. When the mother noticed her son's smile she likewise turned her eyes toward Hafiz Shukrullah Khan and smiled too.

Things slowly began to change.

First the child smiled, then his mother smiled; then in a singsong voice she greeted Hafiz Gainda, “*Salam 'alaika, Fazil. Khair bashad?*” (“Greetings, learned one! How are you?”)

The Hafiz found himself at a loss. He didn't know what to say to this elegant and dignified woman who was now all smiles. So he intoned softly, “*Bahamduli 'l-Lah, sab 'afiyat hai.*” (“By God's grace, everything is

fine.”)

Looking at him pleasantly and blinking her big bright beaming eyes the woman walked past, holding on to the boy’s hand. Then one of the *sarai*’s staff went by his open door carrying some dishes. This man too was now smiling. He greeted Hafiz Shukrullah with a nod and continued on his way.

After he was gone the same middle-aged woman who had tried earlier to grapple with him on the roof, came along on the veranda, taking slow steps and accompanied by two smiling travelers. Passing in front of the Hafiz’s door, she greeted him with great affection and affability, whispered a prayer for him and walked on.

“Good Lord! What is this? All these people are now smiling at me, greeting me and offering me their blessings, when only a short while ago they were treating me, and even each other, as worse than enemies. Look at them, how they walk toward their rooms, hand in hand, with such affection, such closeness, such love and kindness for each other, while back on the roof they glared at each other with such meanness and hatred, such colossal anger and rage, and they roared like blood-thirsty beasts.”

A potbellied kitchen hand coming through the veranda stopped short and approached Hafiz Shukrullah Khan with great respect saying, “Your servant has prepared some fresh soup. If the master commands, I will serve it. God willing, you will like it.”

Hafiz Gainda gave the buffoon a cold look, and said to himself: “Just look at this dolt! He’s asking me if I want soup! These wretches, they woke me up in the middle of the night and now they’re showing hospitality by offering soup, damn!” Hafiz sprang from his bed and slammed the door shut on the broad, shiny face of that fat, ridiculous cook.

Nevertheless, the courtesy shown to him by this last of the *sarai*’s staff deflated Hafiz Shukrullah Khan Gainda’s anger like soapsuds. He changed back into his sleeping clothes and tried to doze off again. And what do you know? He did.

In the morning he found the attitude of the manager and the other staff still just as courteous and businesslike. At daybreak they told him that hot water was ready, so the *Agha* may take his bath. What followed by way of sweetmeats, juices, food and coffee, their abundance and the great hospitality with which they were served, none of this was out of place either. The guests and the travelers exhibited the same mutual regard and warmth among themselves. Who would ever guess that in the middle of the night these very same people were, with threatening looks

and words, after each other's lives.

The Hafiz was late. Today following mid-afternoon prayers, he was to present himself before the Chief Minister, Bermazaid Kor. He was to give him the petition requesting an audience with the King of Hindustan, His Majesty Sher Shah Suri, to pay his respects, because not only was he among the King's subjects he was also a resident of His Majesty's paternal village, Rohri.

He only had until noon to spend in the library. So with his pen and bundle of papers under his arm, Hafiz Shukrullah Khan set off.

He settled in by the same window as the day before. He wanted to have the books of his choice brought out and he just wanted to lose himself in them. But today was not like the day before. Today the shouting and screaming of the previous night kept coming back to him, and so did the memory of the sheer terror and dismay he had felt on his way down the stairs.

Leaving his pen and paper behind, Hafiz Shukrullah Khan went out into the garden and began to stroll. When in the fresh air he felt calmer so he decided to go back inside. He saw Feroze, his acquaintance from the previous day, coming along. Shukrullah Khan stopped briefly to exchange greetings with him. Feroze Isfahani asked, "Savant! You seem preoccupied today? Don't you feel like reading?" The Hafiz said something or other to evade the question.

Feroze then said, "You look tired? Didn't you sleep well last night?"

Again the Hafiz hedged. But Feroze's persistence had put the worrisome incident of the night before back in his mind. He still had a few more days in this city, he thought. Why not ask Feroze about some tranquil *sarai*?

The Isfahani youth gave him the addresses of many *sarais* and also appraised him of their rents and amenities. None seemed to suit Shukrullah Khan: some had exorbitant rents, some were much too far from the library, and others were located right in the middle of noisy markets. Feroze wanted to know what problem in his present *sarai* was causing the Hafiz to look for another. Shukrullah Khan had no alternative but to tell him the whole story.

When he had heard it all, Feroze, instead of showing sympathy, began to laugh. How strange! On his first day in the city Feroze too had the very same experience. "But, savant," he said, "the heavens were kind to me. Early in the evening I found out that that *sarai* belonged to the *wardoozi*. And I was out of there with my baggage well before nightfall."

Now Hafiz Shukrullah Khan was not familiar with any group called

mardoozi. In fact, this was the first time he had ever heard that name. When he asked, the Isfahani told him that distortions wrought by centuries of overemphasis on civilizing tendencies had become manifest in the form of this, the *mardoozi* sect. He went on to say, “I don’t know who their teacher is or where they are based. All I know is that the affluent find its ideology very useful and effective in the pursuit of their goals; hence, its popularity is increasing rapidly in capital cities, and now, in imitation of the privileged, those of lesser status and even menials are joining the sect.”

Shukrullah Khan Gainda wanted to know the general direction of this sect’s thinking. The Isfahani obliged by explaining that the *mardoozi* believe that man’s intrinsic disposition is formed by a combination of love and anger, and respect and hatred, but that the demands of civilization and culture compel him to suppress his anger and his hatred. Such suppression inevitably leads to destructive tendencies; the hatred seeps below the surface and begins to fester there. It continues to multiply inside while man thinks he has purged himself of anger and has developed a disposition which includes neither anger nor hatred.

The *mardoozi* contend that this is not the case. Anger is present within man all his life, but it remains hidden. If, however, he is given the chance to express it—i.e., get rid of it—then it is likely that he may one day really purge himself completely of hatred and anger. The *mardoozi* call this state “wholeness.”

“That is why,” Feroze continued, “to attain this ‘wholeness’ every member of the *mardoozi* sect sits with fellow-members in a circle each night and rids himself of all the hatred he has accumulated, and all the anger he has nursed throughout the day. For the remainder of the night and the following day he becomes a civilized, loving and whole human being.”

In passing Feroze also told him that Sher Shah’s Minister of Court, Amir Bermazaid Kor, was also a *mardoozi*.

Shukrullah Khan found such details and minutiae tiresome. “What a shame!” he exclaimed after hearing Feroze’s long-winded exposé. “What a terrible shame! So these cuckolds have finally found a way to waste such invaluable human assets as anger and hatred!”

Here the saga of Hafiz Shukrullah Khan’s incomplete journey ends.

Remember Hafiz Shukrullah Khan Gainda preferred to be brief in his speech.

He was a man of learning and few words, which is probably why he shunned details, and found any waste of time irritating.

He composed no lament on such a deliberate waste of the anger that exists in man, but before leaving for home he did manage to write a few lines to His Excellency, Minister of the Court, Bermazaid Kor on a scrap of paper—lines whose purport makes it well nigh impossible for us to reproduce them here.

On the library steps, as he was leaving, Hafiz Shukrullah Khan Gainda offered the piece of brocade which had contained the earth from Koh-e Sulaiman, the earth from Rohri's Mound of the Suris, to Feroze as a gift. He had already scattered the earth itself over the bed of white flowers that stretched from the steps of the library to the compound wall like a foamy, gushing stream.

Early the next morning as Feroze was climbing the steps of the library, his glance fell on the flower-bed. It felt as though a physical blow suddenly pushed him from a standing to a sitting position on the steps.

The patch in which only white flowers had bloomed until yesterday was glowing with flaming red roses today. □

—*Translated by Aquila Ismail and Muhammad Umar Memon*