

MUJTOBA ALI

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Mujtoba Ali: The Enigma of Transit

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Vacuum Packed Sweets [Roshogolla]

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Although some Bengalis tried to popularize the word "chungi ghor", it never really caught on. In English this is the "customs house", in French "duan", in German "tsl umt", and in Persian "gumruk". I give so many translations of this horrid institution because these days every Yaar, Pachu and Bhutho from the neighborhood, whether on a government, half-government, or non-government stipend, ends up going to Cairo-Kandahar-Paris-Venice, really anywhere, for all sorts of conferences. And of course, there are all the trips to Pakistan. If you know the appropriate translated term in advance, you might be able rush there before the crowd and escape quickly. But don't ever think of trying to bypass it. You have more of a chance of escaping the Kabuli moneylender, but not the "gumruk" of his country. I have not seen "Kabuli-wala", but I imagine the film version of Rohmot did not try to evade his "gumruk".

Why all this fuss? Patience, dear readers, patienceÉ

It is hard to say who was born first—doctors, lawyers, bandits, or editors (and editors would add, writers). Whoever it may be, they are definitely not older than the chungi ghor. Exchanges between human beings must have started at the dawn of time, and with that a third person popped up and said "Don't forget my tax!" That person may be the village elder, the leader of fifty villages, or kings and their employees. Well let him take his cut. I am not too worried as the only things I have ever sold are stacks of old newspapers. But when there is not even a penny of profit, and the chungi ghor still demands a cut— that is when we start plotting, how can we cheat this fellow?

Let's say, you were going to Dacca. When it's time to pack, you find only two shirts that have escaped alive from the laundry's vicious beating. On the way to the station, you buy a new shirt. That's it, you're finished. As soon as you arrive in Dorshona, the Pakistani customs officers demand their visitation fee. Then they sniff your shirt thoroughly, and embrace it just as Dhritorashtro must have embraced Bhimsen.

Your heart starts pounding in fear. With a thin voice you protest, "But I bought that for my own use. There should be no tax on that."

That is indeed what the law says. But so what? The customs officer immediately replies, "Yes of course, but what if you sell it in Dacca?"

Let's say that your father was a great debater, so you also decide to argue the point. "Well, you can sell old shirts in Dacca as well."

And here is where your troubles begin. If winning an argument meant you could win in life, then Socrates wouldn't have had to drink poison, Jesus wouldn't have to get nailed to that cross.

The customs officer knows, the first rule of transaction is to stay silent, arguing is a bad sign, not a sign of intelligence at all. He starts looking into the distance, trying to spot a landing craft at the far end of a really long airport. Then he replies, "Yes, you could do that indeed."

Then he does some quick magic calculations and announces, "Fifteen rupees."

You know your own state of mind, I don't need to elaborate. When you finally recover, you try one last faint protest, "But that shirt only cost four rupees."

The customs officer has already moved on to the piece of paper in his hand. It is your customs declaration, and you have not mentioned the shirt

anywhere. To the customs officer this can mean only one thing, you were trying to smuggle it in and have been caught. You definitely have to pay a fine for breaking the law. Good thing it wasn't opium or cocaine, or you could have gone to jail as well.

There's no point in trying to re-evaluate that piece of yellow paper.

The first question on there is:

1. What was the size of the pair of scissors that were used to cut your umbilical cord when you were born.

And the last question is:

2. What is your date of death?

By now you have given up all emotional attachments to the shirt. Next comes sulking: "Fine, you can just keep that shirt!"

But that's no solution either. If you get three months hard labor for stealing a watch, the judge won't let you go free if you return the watch. So there's no returning that shirt either!

Running out of options, you put the shirt on auction. If you're lucky, you may get one rupee. Of course, the fine stays what it is.

On the way back from Dacca, the Indian customs officer on the other side spots your new Pelican fountain pen. By now you know the routine, no need to repeat it.

After all these experiences, you think to yourself, well Indian and Pakistani officers are relatively new to this game of border crossing. They harass the passengers for no reason. In Europe, the customs offices must be there only for the amusement of the tourists.

Well, now listen to my story.

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One of my friends goes to Europe and America all the time. Jhandu-da travels so often, when you meet him there's no telling if, as the Old Dacca coachman would say after seeing a gentleman in a v-shaped vest worn the wrong way, "Sir, are you coming or going?"

He had landed at Venice port from his ship. Jhandu-da was a businessman. After answering honestly to all questions on that yellow form, he wrote at the end, "One packet vacuum-packed Indian sweets. Value Ten rupees." When Oscar Wilde came to visit America, a customs officer asked him "Anything to declare?" Mr. Wilde tapped his brain box a few times and replied, "Only my genius." Among our friends, this Jhandu-da is the only person I know who could not only tap his head, but also his heart.

Those who have met Jhandu-da and seen the girth of his chest know that the ship that keeps him afloat is no small affair. As that massive vehicle landed, the scene at the customs house was like that of a soccer match between Mohonbagan and Film Stars. Our Jhandu-da soon grew tired of standing in that massive line. Suddenly he remembered that Italy's chianti wine was particularly rich and overflowing. Gesturing to the guard peering through the railing, he handed him a thousand lira note and asked him to get a few bottles of chianti.

The guard, understanding that he was in the presence of a man of original stature, came back in three minutes with the original material. I mentioned earlier that Jhandu-da was born with a vigorous heart. He now started giving out chianti to every guard, soldier, servant, coolie, literally everyone from the ship, friends and strangers. Just as the "to your health" episode was about to begin, it was Jhandu-da's turn at the custom desk. Well, it is a great sin to keep the chianti queen waiting, so Jhandu-da spread his two arms like a migrating bird and said, "Please, all of you continue your drinks, I'll be back in a moment."

Jhandu-da's suitcase had so many hotel labels, even the most novice customs officer could understand that the owner did not care for home or country, his life was spent in transit. But today's customs officer was something different-- he started inspecting all the labels, in the manner of a first grade student who stumbles over his homework. The man was quite hideous looking as well. Thin as a rod, with sunken cheeks, eyes in deep crevices, and to top it off, a Hitler moustache under that thin nose. Jhandu-da is generally not a man to judge by appearance, but even he had to break his rule today. Looking suspiciously at the man out of the corner of one eye, he whispered to me, "Shakespeare said, beware the thin man."

Now the officer looked up and asked, "What is inside the tin?"

"Indian sweets"

"Open it up"

"How can I do that? I'm taking it to London. If I open this, it will totally spoil."

The way the officer now looked at Jhandu-da, no king could give a stronger command with five hundred drums.

Jhandu-da became desperate. "Brother, I am taking this for my friend's daughterÑshe's such a young one. If I open this, she won't be able to taste it at all."

The officer looked at him very sternly. This time I heard a thousand drums.

Jhandu-da shrunk his massive body into a cockroach pose and said, "Well, in that case, let me send it by mail to London. I'll get it cleared there."

All of us chimed in, "But that would be so expensive. At least five pounds, if not more."

A long sigh. "Well what else can I do, I have to spend that money."

But what a peculiar turn of events. The officer wouldn't even agree to this logical proposition. We were all baffled, everyone knows this is by the books.

Gritting his teeth, Jhandu-da explained the basic law to this novice. The substance of that law is, whether there are bears, tigers, cocaine or heroin in that tin, as long as it goes straight to London and gets cleared there, his holy land Italy stays untainted.

We all formed a circle and tried to explain to the butcher that the proposal at hand was eminently sensible and legal. Our group had expanded dramatically. There is never a lack of followers of the chianti-queen in Italy. If there was world-parity, the same would be true everywhere. One French lawyer was going from Cairo to Port Said, even he gave a free legal opinion.

But the customs officer sat unmoving, as if he understood no language in the world.

By now, Jhandu-da was getting angry. He started muttering under his breath, "Scoundrel, I'll open it, but I won't let you go without eating this." Then in clear English, he said, "Very well then, but you will have to taste it personally to make sure they are authentic Indian sweets."

The devil immediately pulled out a tin-cutter from under the counter. There was no lack of guillotines during the French revolution either.

Jhandu-da looked the tin-cutter over and repeated, "Remember, you have to taste the sweets to make sure they are real."

The customs officer gave a thin little smile. The sort of smile we give if our lips are cracked from the winter chill.

Jhandu-da cut the tin open.

They came out. Well, what else would come out? Roshogolla. Jhandu-da is the son of a Brahmin, he is an old hand at distributing sweets at weddings. Forgetting any formalities with fork and knife, he started picking sweets out with two arched fingers and giving them out. First the Bengalis, then all Indians, then finally, the French, Germans, Italians and Spaniards.

It has been hard enough for me to master this Bengali language. How do I do justice to the dozen languages in which this wondrous creation was now being glorified?

The French went, "epata" (?)

Germans, "Klorke" (?)

Italians, of course, "Bravo!"

Spaniards, "Delicio, delicio"

Finally, the Arabs, "Ya Salam, Ya Salam!"

The entire customs office was now swallowing roshogolla. The air was full of that sweet scent. Only with Cubist or Dadaist techniques could you draw a picture of that scene. Police, guards, servants, spies, everyone had a sweet in his hand. First they had chianti, we had sweets, now within seconds we had switched positions.

A Christian Negro from Africa had once told me, "When the missionaries came to our land, they had bibles, we had the land. In the blink of an eye, they had the land, and now we have the bible!"

We had the chianti...

Meanwhile, Jhandu-da was leaning heavily against the counter and saying to the officer, in Bengali, "Come on, just try one."

In his hand was a juicy roshogolla.

The officer put on a serious face and shook his head.

Jhandu-da persisted. He leaned forward even more and said "Look, everyone is eating it. Not cocaine, not opium after all. But still, you must try it out yourself to make sure it's ok."

The officer shook his head again. The man had no manners. Not even a small "sorry"!

Suddenly, no warning, no announcement, Jhandu-da slid his entire belly on the counter, grabbed the officer's collar and smashed the roshogolla on his nose. Jhandu-da's aim was always quite bad!

And with that came the shouting, "Damn you, you won't eat it? Your whole family will eat it! You think this is a joke? I told you a million times, 'Don't make me open it, they will all spoil, the little one will be crushed!' But no you wouldn't listen..." and so much more of the choicest insults!

By then the customs house was in chaos. In a strangled voice the officer started screaming for help. He cried not just for guards, but Il Duce Mussolini, Consuls, Ministers, Ambassadors, and even Plenipotentiaries. Mother Mary, Holy Jesus and the Pope thrown in for good measure.

And why shouldn't there be a fuss? This was a totally illegal act. If you try to stop a government official by crushing him with your three maund body and force-feeding him, whether you fed him sweets or arsenic is irrelevant—you can definitely go to jail for this. In Italy, you could hang for lesser crimes.

Five of us grabbed Jhandu's waist and tried to drag him off the counter. Jhandu-da's voice kept rising octave after octave, "Oh you won't eat it, dear heart? You won't? I'll make you eat it now!" The customs officer kept calling for the police. But his cries were so weak, I felt like I was receiving a trunk call from my golden homeland India. But where on earth were the police? The customs office was suddenly bereft of pike, barkandaj, danda-bardar, as-sardar, servants, everyone! What was this—magic or illusion?

The French lawyer raised two hands in prayer and offered unsolicited commentary, "This is truly a holy land, this Venice, this Italy. Even the Indian sweet can create miracles by making all officials disappear. This tops even the 'Miracle of Milan'! This is the 'Miracle of Roshogolla!'"

Lawyers never use one sentence when three are available. But if I boil down his long-winded speech, it comes to this—having tasted Jhandu-da's generosity, and of course his sweets, no official was willing to betray him by intervening to rescue the officer.

Most of us agreed with this, although a few cynics ventured, "Not the roshogolla, chianti did the trick!" We even started taking bets—roshogolla or chianti. Whatever the case may be, the result was an empty customs office.

By now, we had managed to get Jhandu-da off the officer. As the officer pulled out a handkerchief to wipe off the debris, Jhandu-da yelled, "Don't you dare wipe that off. That will serve as your witness in court-- exhibit number one!"

One well-wisher whispered to Jhandu-da, "The police will come soon, better get out of here while you can."

But Jhandu-da didn't care, "Look, he's calling them right now! I don't care, let the police come. "

Within three minutes, the head officer made his way through the crowd. The French lawyer seemed to think a bribe would do the trick and started walking forward with a bottle of chianti. Jhandu-da blocked his path and said, simply, "No!"

Walking up to the officer, with an open box, he said, "Signor, before you proceed with your cross-examination, please try one of these Indian sweets." Then he popped one into his own mouth. Another round was distributed to anyone who was still left.

The head officer may have known and taken many kinds of bribes. Or maybe he had never taken a bribe. If Ishyar Chandra can talk about "Kanai's mother without getting married", there could also be an "Officer who has never taken a bribe."

The officer put one sweet inside his mouth and closed his eyes for two and a half minutes.

With eyes still closed, he held out his hand.

Again. Another.

Now Jhandu-da said, "A drop of chianti?"

Like an agonized Kadombini came the cry, "No. More sweets."

At last. The tin was finally empty.

The customs officer made his complaint at last.

The head officer replied, "You did very well to open that tin, otherwise how would we get to eat it?" Then looking at us, he yelled, "What are you all staring at? Go get some more roshogollas!" As we quietly crept out, we heard him berating his junior officer, "You are an absolute ass! You open the tin and you don't even try this delicious object!"

Well, that resolved the puzzle of whether it was "chianti or roshogolla"

The Italian poetess Filicaja wrote,

"Italy Italy, why did you hold such beauty in you

There must be tragedies written in your fate."

Borrowing a page from her, I say

"O Roshogolla, why did you hold such sweetness in you

Italians forget their true religion

And fall at your feet today."
