

Mir Kallu's Testimony¹

Anjum Manpuri

Translated by

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Introduction to the Author

Anjum Manpuri (1881-1958) was born and brought up in an educated family in Gaya, Bihar. He was christened Noor Muhammad but he chose to use Anjum Manpuri as his *nom de plume*. He received initial training at home, in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. *Shahi Madrasa* in Muradabad was his first alma mater. His quest for *ilm* (knowledge) led him to Nadwatul Uloom (Lucknow). Maulana Shibli Numani conducted Manpuri's *dastarbandi* at his home in Moryaghat (Gaya) in 1916.

Manpuri began his career in journalism with *Zamindar* (Lahore), Maulana Zafar Ali Khan's well known Urdu newspaper, in 1918. *Zamindar* was, in fact, started by Maulana Sirajuddin Ahmad, father of Zafar Ali Khan, in 1903 as an Urdu weekly newspaper. It often raised issues related to peasants and landowners. However, under the stewardship of Maulana Zafar Ali Khan, it became a daily newspaper, and played quite an important role in raising issues of Indian Muslims in pre-Independence era. After a stint as assistant editor at *Zamindar*, Manpuri returned to his home town. In 1920 he had started the Urdu magazine, *Rahnuma* (leader). Again in 1931 he launched an Urdu monthly magazine *Nadeem*, (companion) and remained its editor till 1938. *Nadeem* carried most of Manpuri's satirical pieces. Of all the satires penned by the author, *Mir Kallu ki gawahi* (Mir Kallu's Testimony) and *Kiraye ki tamtam* (the hired tamtam) are considered to be his best.

¹ This story was first published in *Nadeem*, Gaya in August 1931

On account of his witnesses' absence, Ahsan, having submitted an application to reschedule the date of the hearing, was sitting cosily in the bar library talking to his counsel when his panic-stricken assistant appeared, and remarked: "The call for witness has been given; the judge has turned down the plea to defer the hearing. If the witness doesn't show up today, the case will be disallowed."

Seeing Ahsan shocked, his counsel allayed him: "There's nothing to worry; there is no scarcity of witnesses here." Thus Mir Kallu, a well-known practitioner of the art of giving testimony and the master of all the professionals of the trade, was sent for. The counsel took a five-rupee note from Ahsan, and gave it to him; and took him to the court room.

Mir Sahib salaamed the judge and walked into the witness box.

Ahsan was utterly shocked because Mir Sahib was completely unaware of the case: "How could he give his testimony when he had neither been briefed about the defendant, the name, the amount of money that was being claimed, nor had he been given any advice regarding the testimony? What would he utter, after all?" The poor man thought he was bound to lose the case.

The prosecution counsel got to know beforehand that Ahsan's main witness could not make it to the court. When he saw Mir Kallu in the dock, he felt happier and thought to himself: "How long will this hired gun manage to survive a grilling?" Mir Sahib, by dint of his intelligence, sensed the nature of the case through the chief's questions; and also realised that Ehsan Ali Khan, the main debtor, had died. And now a suit had been brought against his son and heir, Shahid Khan. As he was contemplating his lack of familiarity with the countenance, appearance and age of the late Ehsan Ali Khan's, who had written the promissory note—the prosecution counsel began questioning him.

Mir Sahib had already been to jail for giving a false testimony under oath, and so the first question that was put to him, was in this regard.

Lawyer [L]: Mir Kallu Sahib! Have you ever had the honour of spending time in prison?

Mir Sahib [MS]: In this day and age, there is no servant of the country who has not been to prison.

L: What service to the country brought you this honour?

MS: Of course, breaking the law.

L: You took responsibility of breaching the law. What law was it?

MS: Gandhiji took it upon himself to break the Salt Law. And some leaders assumed the task of breaching the Forest Law. As I see it, the law of testimony is in urgent need of reform. Thus, I chose to violate this law.

L: [Addressing the judge] My Lord! He has already been penalised for giving false testimony. But he doesn't want to confess it openly.

Judge: You can submit a copy of the judgement; ask the next question.

L: You knew the late Ehsan Ali, Mir Sahib, didn't you?

MS: My Lord! I want to convey only one thing. May *Khuda* grant the deceased eternal rest in heaven! We were a single soul inhabiting two bodies. I couldn't find comfort without seeing him nor did he have peace without me.

L: What was his age?

MS: Just between thirty and sixty.

L: The answer that his age was between thirty and sixty is not acceptable. Tell us clearly, was he old or young?

MS: Given his age he didn't look very old; however, owing to his being sick most of the time he looked older than he was.

L: Was his hair white or black?

MS: His hair had turned white because he had been suffering from cold. However, he looked younger than his age whenever he coloured his hair.

L: Was his complexion fair or dark?

MS: He was a man with an exceptionally fair complexion, but again owing to his illness his complexion had become slightly dusky.

L: Was he short or tall?

MS: He was a man of tall stature but given a bend in the waist he looked short.

Quite irritated by now, the counsel retorted: "Why don't you give a real, frank answer to a clear question? He was tall as well as short; he was fair as well as dusky; his hair was white as well as black: What kind of answers are these? Can we get a clear picture of the physical appearance from them?"

MS: *Janaab*, I haven't said anything that should make you angry. Had I met him just once or twice, I would have explained his countenance and physical appearance in a precise manner. Since the friendship spanned decades, I gave you an account of the varied shades of his appearance that evolved over time.

L: Fine! Did the late Ehsan Ali also sport a beard?

MS: He was uniquely unconventional in his orientation, and had an impulsive nature. When the mood reigned, he used to have his eyebrows shaven. And whenever he wore a beard, he could beat even Khwajah Khizr.

L: Stop talking rubbish! I just asked you whether he would sport a beard or not. You could have answered either a yes or a no. There was no need to say anything else. We are not interested in unnecessary details.

MS: Okay! From the next time I'll answer in only in either of those two words.

L: Where did the late Ehsan Ali live, most of his life?

MS: *Jee haan*.

L: What is this "*Jee haan*?" I asked you a question: "Where did he live?" and your reply is "*Jee haan*." Should this be the answer to my question?

MS: *Janaab*, you just said that I should respond in either a yes or a no.

L: I didn't mean that this should be the answer to all the questions. Fine! Now tell me where did he live?

MS: He stayed at his home.

L: *La-haula wala quwwata!*² You are so confused. I meant to ask whether he lived in a town or in a village.

MS: At both the places; sometimes in the town and at other times in the village.

L: What is the direction of his home in the village? You must have travelled with him to his village.

MS: Yes! I often accompanied him to his village.

L: You evaded answering the main question. I am not asking whether you lived with him in the village. Answer the question about the direction of his home over there.

MS: (In the meanwhile, an answer dawned on him) People who live in a town usually get disoriented in villages. Whenever I visited the place, I would lose my sense of direction.

L: Why did he take the money?

MS: For his needs.

L: What needs? Did he encounter such a problem that it was not possible to solve it without borrowing the money?

MS: He was quite an ambitious man. Both, ordinary and special needs were the same to him. He always made sure he had two to four thousand rupees with him.

L: When did he borrow money?

MS: When he needed it.

L: How much time has lapsed?

MS: Three hundred and sixty days make up a year; I can't work out the total number of days because doing the math is quite difficult.

L: I'm not asking you to add up the two. Tell me how many years have elapsed since he borrowed the money?

MS: After seeing the date on the promissory note, you can also count the total number of years.

L: So, you should frankly say that you don't remember it.

MS: *Jee haan*, it has been ages since I left studies. I really can't do the math now.

L: It's not about doing the math or forgetting it; do you remember when the promissory note was written and how much time has passed since then?

MS: Since you asked about the period of time, as far as I could remember, he had borrowed the money during his lifetime.

The counsel very well understood from the balderdash that the witness didn't know anything about the case and was only killing time. What angered him, however, was the fact that the fellow had not even seen the face of the defendant, let alone other details, and was claiming that he was not just his

² *There is no power nor strength greater than Allah* (often uttered when something is displeasing)

acquaintance but he used to live with him; and still it was difficult to pick holes in his glib utterances. Lastly, the counsel thought of a question that he believed would help expose the falsehood about Kallu's familiarity with the late Ehsan Ali. The council asked the question.

L: Pray tell us, Mir Sahib, you were a close friend of the late Ehsan Ali Sahib and lived with him for ages. Surely, you can recognise his hand writing?

MS: This was the only area of expertise the deceased was proud of. He was skilled in the art of seven styles of penmanship. He used to write flawlessly in many different styles. His grip on the pen was such that one letter would never match another.

After this answer the council gave up. The court hearing had started at two o'clock, and it was just a few minutes to four in the evening. With a smile on his face, the judge asked the council if he had anything else to ask. "No," he replied. However, all of a sudden, he thought of something else. He told the judge: "My Lord, I'll end the cross-examination after putting one last question to him." Considering the fact that, by the way, the file mentioned the cause of the death of the late Ehsan Ali Khan, the counsel came up with a question in its regard.

L: Mir Sahib, tell us about the ailment that caused the late Ehsan Ali Khan to die.

MS: (Feigning sadness) No stone was left unturned to ensure that he could regain his health. *Hakim, vaid*, doctor, everyone conducted check-ups but no one could diagnose Ehsan Ali Khan's disease. Everyone was of a different opinion. After all, as the saying goes, when death comes a knocking, doctors become naive. To tell you the truth, *Janaab Vakeel Sahib*, he suffered from the *disease of death*.

It was four o'clock by now; the court was adjourned. Now Ahsan had enough time to prepare his witnesses for the next day's hearing. And this was possible only because of Mir Sahib. Since that day everyone has believed that more than being truthful, a witness needs to be intelligent and quick-witted.