



Urdu Studies

An international, peer-reviewed,
bilingual research journal

ISSN: 2583-8784 (Online)

Vol. 6 | Issue 1 | Year 2026

Pages: 215-224

Tom Jefarsan ke Pinjray

Ilyas Ahmad Gaddi

Introduced & translated by

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Introduction

Ilyas Ahmad Gaddi (1932–1997) was a famous Urdu novelist and short-story writer who hailed from Jharia, a coalfield area in Dhanbad, Jharkhand. Gaddi began his literary career with a short story named *Surkh Note* (A Red Note), which was published in *Afkar*—an Urdu monthly that used to publish from Bhopal—in 1948. His two anthologies of short stories, *Admi* (1983) and *Thaka Hua Din* (1987), are widely popular in the Urdu circle. His novels include *Zakhm* (1953), *Marham* (1954), and *Fire Area* (1994). *Fire Area* is usually considered Gaddi's *magnum opus*. Gaddi's powerful imagination, as well as his literary craft, won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1996. The novel was translated into English by Jai Ratan in 2002. Gopi Chand Narang, a well-known Urdu literary critic, considered Gaddi's *Fire Area* as one of the “excellent novels” from the “new generation in India.” Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, another noted critic of Urdu, thoroughly appreciated the novel. In *Shabkhoon*, a literary magazine, Faruqi opined: “On behalf of all of us, Ilyas Ahmad Gaddi has paid a huge debt by writing this novel. I can't recall a short story, let alone a novel, in Urdu that deals with the condition of coalfields, life in colliery, and the temperament and psychology of coalminers.” Gaddi penned *Laxman Rekha kay Paar* (Beyond the Laxman Rekha), a travelogue, after visiting East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) in 1968. The travelogue not only covers Gaddi's journey from Jamshedpur to Dhaka and then back to Calcutta (Kolkata) but also entails his personal experiences. And the text betrays Gaddi's penetrating insight and sensitivity towards fellow human beings, along with his class orientation. His famous short story *Sidh Kiya Hua Sānp* (The Hypnotized

Formerly UGC-CARE Listed since October 2021

Published on October 23, 2026

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Snake), which captures the dubious role of politicians in the wake of the communal violence, is also part of an anthology of stories in Nagri script titled *Kitnay Toba Tek Singh* (1994). Besides being a literary figure, Ilyas Ahmad Gaddi was also a translator. Gaddi's Urdu rendition of Phanishwar Nath Renu's stories was published by the National Book Trust in 1999. It is titled *Phanishwar Nath Renu ki muntakhab kahāniyan* (The Selected Stories of Phanishwar Nath Renu). A blend of pain and empathy for the oppressed toiling masses everywhere is woven into the warp and weft of Gaddi's oeuvre. For his contribution to the Urdu literature, Gaddi received awards from the West Bengal Urdu Academy and the Bihar Urdu Academy as well.



Tom Jefferson's Cages

The young boy was teaching profanity to the parrot.

“Dear parrot, speak up: ... *Sālā* ...!”

Sālā ... *Sālā* ... *Sālā* ...

The parrot started repeating the swear word merrily ... Turning his face, the old Tom looked at the boy.

“What’re you doing ...? Are you corrupting my little ones ...?”

Ignoring Tom's words, the boy looked at him with impishness and once again started preaching the expletive to the parrot: “Dear parrot, speak up: *Harāmī* ... *Harāmī* ...”

“*Harāmī*...!” shouted the parrot as if it were in a mood to make the boy happy.

The old Tom picked up the staff: “Will you bug off or not? I’ll just go and see your father.”

When he grabbed the staff, the patriarch of the monkey's family, caged in a big pound, screeched. The old Tom scolded him, too.

“Why are you grinning, you son of a whore? I’m going to beat up that lad who has corrupted my kids’ habits.”

The boy was standing near the parrot on the veranda. When he spotted the old man coming, he ran off, and while running away, he said, “Uncle! Your kids are my friends. They’re more loyal to me than you.”

There were one male monkey, one female, and their two infants. There were eight rabbits, like the white, bright silk. Their pretty red eyes would always relay a fear that seemed to leap out at you. Even a slight

noise would startle them. They would look back for a second, then run away. One cage was also meant for them, but they would usually roam free. If boys wanted to make them run, they would hastily stick to the earth. This would help boys catch them. They would carry rabbits in their lap and roam around the area; they would set them free and catch them once again. Sometimes they would keep them on their laps and stroke their backs; the rabbits would enter a different world of pleasure, closing their beautiful, red eyes.

The women would express a special interest in monkeys. They would laugh a lot when monkeys removed each other's lice from their hair and ate them. Whenever a brave lady would present her head to the monkeys, they would attentively start picking up lice. The lady would remain in terror all the while, however. For once, a monkey slapped a lady when she frighteningly wanted to take her head back. The other women took great pleasure when a male monkey got angry and frightened a female one. It was good to see that they lived like a family. The small errand of the monkeys' two kids, the frequent screeching of the infants' father, and the affection of their mother would create a homely atmosphere. The women would also bring peanuts and fruits for monkeys. The people would also send leftover foods, as well as stale, dried bread, to the old Tom's speechless children. During the harvesting season, they would get a fixed amount of produce. Occasionally, the men would also help the old Tom with a small amount of money.

Tom's home was *qasba*'s zoo. The decent people of the locality would usually make it to the old man's home with their families. And the old man would welcome one and all by lifting his cap—it can't be said for how long he had been donning the cap. It was a small home, but there was a large patch of land in front of it, enclosed by the henna trees. There were no benches, et cetera, in that open area. But it was always covered with soft bent grasses, where men and women would sit and relax, frankly. The boys would engage in competitive running races, joyfully roll on the grass, and try to catch the rabbits—moving hither and yon.

Such scenes of unlimited lively jubilation were a source of utter contentment for Tom. It felt as if there was nothing in his life beyond this overwhelming joy.

Indeed, there was nothing beyond this great delight in Tom's life. Forty-four years ago, he had come to this place, living through a war, coughing in the fumes of plenty of ammunition, and soaked in the enemy's blood. Stationed on the border of Burma, his digits got badly injured by pulling the trigger and cocking the rifle for days on end. He

was brought to the headquarters of the Eastern Command on the outskirts of Ranchi, where he was admitted to the army hospital for the treatment of his fingers.

It is said the Hindustani wind is permeated with magic. It etherizes people: The utter fascination of valleys covered with greenery, the serenity of life, and the catholicity and openness of decent, clean-living Adivasis. So, how could he have unmoored himself from all sorts of enchantment? So, he couldn't resist the temptation. This place enticed him to stay in the locale.

The war got over. He left for England after losing two fingers. A long stretch of time had already passed. The children were adults now. Suddenly, one day, he returned to the same valley with his tattered army rucksack on his back. He had won the battle but lost his heart. Standing on a hill, he looked at the extremely beautiful valley covered in lush greenery. He let the fragrance of dancing plants with the wind sink into him. And he realised there that beyond the smoke and odour of gunpowder, which had dampened his olfactory organ, there existed other aromas, too, which not only reach the lungs but also overwhelm the whole body; and inform us that a noisy, paced, and affluent lifestyle is certainly not necessary for living a decent life. If Mahatma Buddha had attained nirvana somewhere near the place, he also got his first lesson of life in the locale.

Some people also held the opinion that there was, in fact, one dusky girl behind Tom Jefferson's migration story. When he was admitted to the army hospital, he met an Adivasi girl. She worked as a sweeper there. And the East had surreptitiously knocked on the door of the West. And when the West opened the door, it got completely mesmerised by the extreme beauty of the East. A black rose, a piece of black jewel!

If someone wanted to talk to Tom Jefferson on the issue, he would just laugh and narrate a different tale altogether.

"I didn't want to live amidst robots. I was a mortal being, so I wanted to live among people. Lively and warm people. The machines have smothered every human voice there. Everything, including people's laughter, people's weeping, people's speaking, and people's screaming, has been lost in the din of the machines. The social fabric has been completely torn. Just like cold, insensitive machines, the people have been deprived of human warmth. They are not only losing their identities but also their true selves, and they are living their lives like robots."

No one here understands him. He's considered a crazy person. And it looks quite probable. Otherwise, if he had been a sane person, he would not have left his beautiful, big country and stayed in a forest. But his obsession with animals is interpreted differently in this *qasba*. Consequently, he is believed to be a superhuman by the local inhabitants. So, they profoundly respect him, too.

The parrot, however, doesn't obey him a bit. He has become totally naughty. He starts cussing Tom when he gets late in bringing the food.

Betā ... Betā ... Betā...!

Harāmī ... Harāmī...!

Sālā...!

Malcom Kujur's son Jokhim Kujur has taught him these profanities. Jokhim is not only mohalla's most errant boy but also the most intelligent lad. He studies in one of the mission schools in Ranchi. His father has bought him a bicycle. On this very bicycle, he goes to school daily and rings its bell sharply while going to and returning from school. On every sound of the bell, the parrot hurls a swear word, and subsequently, Tom waves his staff to intimidate him into silence. The parrot, just like Jokhim, doesn't give a heck.

During the holidays, Jokhim immensely bothers Tom.

"Living alone doesn't scare you ...?"

"I don't feel lonely ... They're with me!" He would point towards the animals.

"Are they a human species ...?" He retorted.

"They're better than human beings."

"But the human species should live with their own beings." The lad would answer smartly.

"These animals are better ...when human beings get transformed into robots!"

Jokhim is a student of class 10th. He knew the meaning of a robot but had no inkling about the transformation of human beings into robots. That's why he takes Tom for a half-mad person. He eventually changed his conversation.

"Don't you remember your home ...? And your kids ...?"

Nobody knows whether Tom remembers anything or not. He doesn't even say anything to anyone.

He has been asked this particular question multiple times. Many a

time, people showed interest in knowing about the reason behind Tom's emigration from his country of origin. People have also been nosy if he is happy here. He could easily quench the thirst of people, but he doesn't want to. He knows well that if he answers people's queries, they would consider him even more eccentric. But he reveals everything very generously to Jokhim.

"My home is here only. In my past life, I was born here."

"How did you come to know the fact that you were born here, in your previous life?"

"I know it very well. Here, we had one small home, made from mud, and your aunt used to live in that home."

"Aunt...?" Jokhim asked surprisingly. "Was aunt fair like you?"

He would laugh a lot. Then he would say, "No, she was dusky, a completely dark woman, just like you people. A black jewel ..."

"Then ..." To know more about Tom's life, Jokhim would become restless.

"I can't recall anything more than this ...!"

When Jokhim would fail to get answers, he would become sad and rush to the parrot.

"Please say, dear parrot ... aunt was dark ...!"

Tom lovingly looks at, first, the parrot, and then Jokhim. Somewhere in the corners of the darkness, a spring of light sprinkles.

The Adivasi *qasba*, inhabited in the suburbs of Ranchi city, is so calm and serene that it appears as if it hasn't even been touched by the ills of modernity. However, this area is not far from the city. Many men go there to do jobs. This city is a source of livelihood for a good number of women, too. Many children go to schools in the city. People keep visiting the city. Sometimes, missionaries of the Catholic Church make it to the *qasba* to deliver sermons. Everything, however, remains the same, just like a wave, which ascends and descends without adding or reducing anything to the state of being. During festivals, people enjoy rice wine called *rāsi*. Keeping their hands over each other's waists, the women dance together. *Mridangam* and drums are played. And all these events usually take place in Tom's compound. On this day, Tom *sahib* comes to the party donning his only suit, which has lost its colour and shape owing to a lack of laundering and ironing. On this particular day, he not only gulps rice wine but also claps along with other people during the dancing. Here, life is not like a noisy river. On the contrary, it is akin

to a quiet lake: calmness, deepness, and unchangeability.

Tom *Sahib*, however, was badly mistaken that no change could come to the area. A change was surreptitiously and very slowly ushering in. And it was quite evident in the conversation, in the vocabulary, in the lyrics, in the attire, and in the thoughts. It was beyond Tom Jefferson, who had never stepped out of his campus, to comprehend the varied changes that were slowly taking place in the Adivasi area. It hadn't awakened completely, but it was certainly in a state of awakening, wherein consciousness comes to realise itself and comes to grips with the realities of existence.

Tom came to realise this fact the day three working women from the *qasba* were kidnapped in the city. An unease had gripped the area when the three women didn't return even after sunset. The people, who were used to staying inside their homes after sunset, were gathered here and there in groups of twos and threes discussing the dire situation. Then a group of young people was sent to the city to learn about the issue. Nobody in the *qasba* was able to sleep the whole night.

At dawn, people got to know that one of the women had been murdered. And the two women were found unconscious. It was established, after a medical investigation, that they were brutally raped by many men. The culprits were almost recognised. The police were hesitant to register a complaint against the culprits, as they were the influential people of the city. An effort was being made to hush up the issue. The Adivasi students from the college *gheraoed* the police station and started pelting stones in rage. The police retaliated by beating up the students. Many students got injured.

All this news had astonished the inhabitants of the *qasba*. In the beginning, nobody could make heads or tails of the incident. Then it appeared as if the fire had started spreading. The people were now brimming with exasperation and rage. They started showing anger. Youth on cycles shuttled back and forth between the *qasba* and the city. The very next day, Ranchi was closed. The call was given by the Jharkhand Student Federation. On the same day, it was decided that a protest demonstration from the *qasba* would go forth to attend the meeting of the Deputy Commissioner of Ranchi. Since morning, people started to make it to the *qasba* on foot or by train from the nearby villages, as well as from the far-flung areas. There were people from the deep forest, too. Bows were hanging from people's shoulders, and bunches of arrows in the bamboo quivers were on their backs, along with the beating of drums and kettledrums. By noon, the *qasba* was thronged

with strangers. There was no space left. Tom Jefferson's ground was packed like sardines. Then, the leaders in jeeps and hired taxis started coming to the place. The whole area was echoing with slogans.

“Jharkhand state ... *zindabād* ... *zindabād*.”

“Blood will be avenged.”

“Hang the killers ... Hang the killers.”

Then the crowd started to proceed along the path, leading out of the *qasba*, as if water had broken the embankment of a lake and gushed out of it.

When the march proceeded to a considerable distance and the *qasba* had almost become empty, Tom Jefferson looked at the deserted compound from behind the closed doors. He glanced over the *qasba* and used the offensive language for the very first time.

“*Harāmī* ...!”

The sparrow started shouting loudly:

“*Harāmī, Harāmī, Harāmī* ...”

The monkey screeched in a high-pitched voice. Their infants, too, showed displeasure by showing their teeth. Tom became angry after ages. He picked up the staff and literally started beating up monkeys. Being experts, they ducked every blow. When he got tired and started sweating profusely, he threw away the staff.

“*Sāley*, scoundrels ...!”

The parrot started shouting: “*Sāley ... Sāley ... Sāley*.”

Tom rushed towards him, “I’ll wring your neck today.” Getting scared, the parrot moved to the back end of the cage.

He descended from verandah. The ground was strewn with unnecessary items: Used leaves of *pakaudā*; colourful wrappers of bread; a few empty packets of cigarettes; bricks and small-sized stones, which were used as seats; crushed grasses, and an eerie silence. He kept standing there, scandalized.

Many a year was consumed in such issues. Suddenly, the *qasba*'s slow-paced life had become so fast that even the nearby happenings couldn't be realised in the flow of that very speed. One such close by site of activities was Tom Jefferson's compound. Now the social gatherings here have ceased to take place. Even on Sundays, groups of women and children had stopped coming to play with the pets. The women had stopped sending stale foods, and the men had also put an end to the occasional monetary help. They had to give donations to the party for

various social causes now.

One day, an idea suddenly dawned on Jokhim Kujur that he should pay a visit to Tom Jefferson. He got injured during the lathi charge in a protest in the city. Though the leg bones didn't break, the pain had almost rendered him useless for many weeks. During this leisure period, one day, he made it to Tom's place using a stick.

Seeing the absence of hustle and bustle of the compound, he felt really sad. He shook the parrot's cage first.

"Dear parrot, speak up: *Harāmī* ..."

Instead of saying anything, the parrot moved to the other side of the cage and started looking at him with fearful eyes. He was very astonished. Then he glanced over monkeys' and rabbits' cages, and was stunned. The two infants were absent, and there were only four rabbits in the cage now. Earlier, they used to roam freely, but were caged this time.

"What happened to infants, uncle?"

He asked Tom who was coming out of the room after seeing Jokhim in the compound.

"I sold them ...!"

"Sold them ... but why ...?"

"There was no other option than selling them off. How could I have fed them? People have stopped coming here; no one donates a single penny now; people have lost interest in them; now they are busy doing politics; they shout slogans. They give calls for strikes, chakka jams, processions, and protests. They want to free Chota Nagpur. Jharkhand ..."

There was something, not in Jefferson's words, but in his tone. It was disdain, or something like that, that enraged Jokhim. Perhaps he would have indulged in a fight. He was now a grown-up man, however. He was a college student. The history books had armed him with the knowledge of thousands of years. He, thus, happily said: "*Āzādī* ...? We've written this word on every leaf of Chota Nagpur's jungle."

Tom Jefferson's bluish eyes suddenly shrank. He kept a stiff upper lip. He asked a question as if England were asking India: "Do you know the meaning of *āzādī*?"

Jokhim smilingly answered, "Whether we know the meaning of *āzādī* or not is beside the point, but we do understand the meaning of bondage. Just like them ...!" He gestured towards the caged animals.

“Are they slaves ...? For years, I’ve been taking care of them against all odds. These are my kids ...!”

Jokhim laughed.

“Such sentences have repeatedly been spoken in history. My people ... my subject ... my children ... but there has always been an urge to rule the people behind all such claims, or the fear. Even the saint who renounced everything and made jungle his abode couldn’t take out this ambition from his mind ...!”

“You mean to say ...?”

“Yes, I meant the same thought ...”

A heart-afflicting silence gripped the moment for some time. Jokhim stood up, wanting permission to leave the place. While leaving, he turned back, and said: “When parrots give up talking, monkeys stop screeching, and rabbits cease running, then it should be inferred that ...”

He left his sentence incomplete and limped off the premises using a stick.

After four days, the news that Tom Jefferson had died spread like wildfire. When Jokhim, walking with a limp, reached the place, the people were already present there in large numbers. Tom Jefferson’s body on the floor was laid on the *chārpāī* by his team. He died with his eyes and mouth wide open. Jokhim was stunned, seeing all the doors of Tom Jefferson’s cages unbolted and the absconding animals.

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