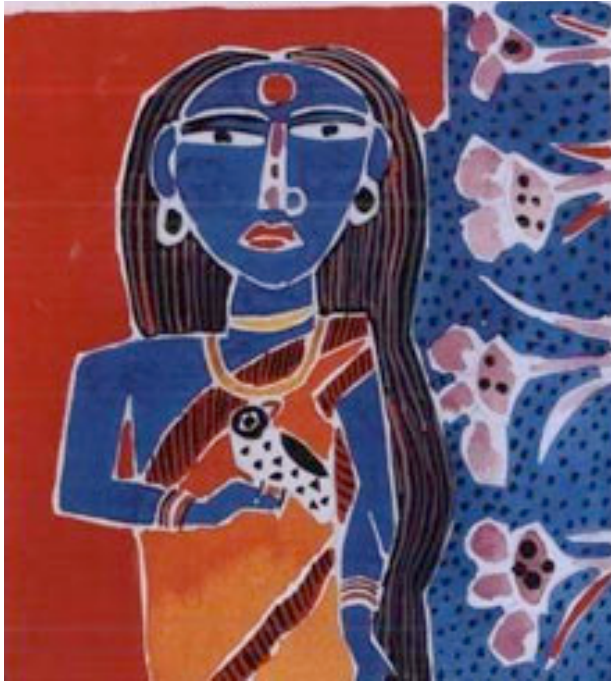


Ballad of Sakhina - the Heroin of Jangalbari

(One of the ballad from the Moymonsingho Geetika)

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The ballad of is based on a true story and, along with 43 other ballads of Eastern Bengal (the then Mymensing district), was collected and compiled by Dr Dinesh Chandra Shen in 3 large



volumes. Some parts of the ballads had been translated in English. One of the great French thinker and literary giants, Roma Rolla commented that the theme of this ballad could be the subject of a great painting by Raphael, the all time great painter and could have been immortalized by being the song sung by the immortal musician Orpheus, These ballads have prompted German thinker/writer Hynothsmode and check philosopher Doosan Jabethil to comment that the great sacrifices and utmost moral strength shown by the heroines of Eastern Bengal ballads are indeed rare in the history of ballads. This may be so because unlike other ballads, such as the English and Scottish popular ballads, the ballad of Sakhina is based on a true story which took place in Jangalbari (Kishoreganj) at the end of the 17th Century, during the

rule of the Mogul Emperor (of India). Jahangir. It had been sung and performed on stages in villages of Eastern Bengal since the story ended in tragedy.

Once I undertook a journey of pilgrimage to the ramshackle mausoleum/grave of Sakhina Bibi, the fabled warrior lady and the bride of Jangalbari, in a small place called, Kumrigram. It is situated on the eastern bank of the river Shuria and only half a mile away from the historic castle of her father Omar khayam of Mugal (dynasty) ancestry in the village of Killa Tajpur within the Gauripur sub-division which is very close to the well-known railway bridge in Shamvuganj, over the river Brammaputra. The villagers still light candles in the evening at her grave and some time someone pauses to spare a thought for the tormented soul. The decaying castle of Sakhina's father (Lord) Omar Kha, where she was born and grew up, is still there in Killa Tajpur. The famous man-made lake and its 'Ghat' (the concreted enclosures with a flights of steps leading to the water at the depth of the lake), the moat, the tunnel leading to the castle etc. are also there as testimonies of the splendour in which the fabled warrior lady, Sakhina was brought up and taught the art of archery and cavalry until her adulthood.

I met Abu Taher, a 45 year old boat man in the village of Kumrigrām. He told me his experience of the apparition of Sakhina: “On many occasions I have listened to the heart-rending ballad describing the heroic but tragic tale of the fabled lady, Sakhina Bibi. I have cried every time the story ended, more so in recent times since I lost my beloved wife. Last summer, one day, I took refuge at a little green space shaded by thick branches of a few large trees near Sakhina’s grave to escape the midday solar torture. There was not a soul in the neighbourhood and the only sound that came to my ears was that of screeching insects. I was reminiscing about my late wife and I must have been half awake when I heard the sound of horse’s hoof approaching towards me. I saw the white horse stopped near the grave. I was petrified and closed my eyes. Then I heard a heart-rending sound of a cry of a woman while falling out of the horse, and then there was a silence – even the insects stop screeching. The silence seems to last for eternity. I opened my eyes with fear, anticipating seeing Sakhina’s dead body. What I saw was a cat mewling and a large cock roasting.” When I asked, he told me that the word ‘love’ did not mean anything to him. But he longed to have a chance, only one chance, to tell his departed wife that he did buy the red Shari he promised her long time ago. It was, however, too late, but still he bought it now for her although she was not here to take it and wear it! He finds some solace after a cry at the graveside of Sakhina Bibi as she also lost her husband and life, albeit under different circumstance and a few centuries ago.

I wanted to find out how common the experience of apparition of Sakhina among the villagers was. I sat at a tea stall in the market place and asked a lot of people if they have had experience of Sakina Bibi’s apparitions. I did not find anyone else with a tale like that of Abu’s. But a lot of elderly people said that they knew of somebody who had experienced such apparitions. I was advised to go to Jangalbari village as the rumours had it that many people there had much more vivid experience of hearing the sound of horse’s hoof, banging sounds of sword duets and often people are said to have seen a fakir (holy/crazy man) with a single-stringed musical instrument (Dutara), wondering the wooded paths of Jangalbari, lamenting with the name of Sakhina. The people were sanguine that the fakir was the reincarnation of the long deceased Dewan (Lord) Feroze kha, the husband of Sakhina and the grand son of legendary Dewan Isha Kha of Jangalbari. Little do these people know that I do hail from that village and I have named my eldest daughter ‘Sakhina’ to keep the story of ‘Jangalbari’s Sakhina’ alive in my heart! But nobody there seem to have personally encountered any apparition of the fakir Feroze Kha, wondering within the enchanting forest of Jangalbari and lamenting his deed and declaring his eternal love for his deceased wife Sakina and crying for forgiveness from her. However, the stories abound that such events were quite widespread in bygone days.

The most famous amongst the 12 Bhuyyas’ (land lords) who revolted against the Mughal emperor of India and eventually declared unilateral independence from Delhi rule was Isha kha of Jangal Bari. He refused to pay tax to the far away Mughal coffer and wanted to rule the land around Jangal bari by his own decrees and settled down there. He settled down in Jangal Bari and there he established a castle, built a lake, a moat and a passage way tunnel leading to the Narosunda River. He also setup schools and mosques in the neighbourhood. The remnants of these are still there as testimonies to his chivalry and nobility. For his revolt he had to face the wrath of Man Sing, the chief army general of the Mogal emperor Jahangir. When he faced the large army of Mymensing near ‘Egara shindhu’ village, 12 miles south of Jangal Bari, he cleverly avoided a whole scale battle and challenged the general for a duet. The Rajput warrior will die

rather than cow away from a challenge. In the ensuing sword fight Isha Kha defeated him. Instead of killing or imprisoning him he let him free to go back to the emperor with a goodwill message. In return the emperor of Delhi allowed him to rule his territory without having to pay tax. This story remains a footnote in the annals of the history of Eastern Bengal during the later part of the Mughal dynasty in India and Jangal Bari was an obscure village, irrelevant to mainstream history and the people of Eastern Bengal. The name of Jangalbari, however, had been immortalized and made famous by the true story of romance between Dewan Feroze kha and Sakhina Bibi and the tragedy that followed. The story eventually was made into a folk lore by making it into a famous ballad, sung and read by Bengali speaking people all over the country and still continues to be so. The ballad tells the tragic story of a young woman in love and it makes the most enchanting song, as the poet said, "Our sweetest songs are those, which tell the stories of saddest thoughts".

Dewan Feroze kha was the maternal grandson of Isha kha and he inherited the title, 'Dewan' and the Zamindari (ownership of the land) of a vast area including the town of Kishoreganj, four miles away from Jangal bari. He longed for complete independence from the influence of the Mughal ruler. In his 'darbar' (court) among many portraits, the portrait of his grand father, Isha Kha was placed in the most prominent place on the wall. The frame of the portrait was coated with gold. The portrait depicted Isha Khan in a royal outfit, with a ceremonial turban (Pagree) and a sword in his waist.

Feroze Kha started to build up a new army to revolt against the Mughal rule which was reinstated after the death of Isha Kha. Despite the threat of retribution and severe punishment from the Mughal court he, once again, unilaterally declared independence from the Mughal rule and stopped paying the revenue. His mother, Amma Begum was very worried. She did not want more battles. She had seen too much of such horror, untimely death of young soldiers and a lot of blood letting. She wanted peace at all cost. She was aware of the tragic story of one of their great warriors, Khaza Osman. Deeply worried mother asked the Wazir (prime minister) to arrange a marriage for Feroze Kha as soon as possible. She counselled that once the young Dewan (prince) gets a beautiful bride, he will forget his unrealizable fantasy of having a true independent state and will happily accept the central rule and, live with peace and prosperity for ever after.

The match makers started to visit the Dewan's court from far and away. They came with proposals from the Zamindar fathers of prospective brides and presented their cases with recitals in blank verse and musical accompaniments describing the unparalleled beauties and qualities of their clients. They also presented the young Dewan the portraits of the prospective brides to entice him to accept their respective proposals.

One portrait, in particular, of a young princess on a horse back and a sword in her raised arm caught his eyes. He bought the portrait from the match maker at a very high price and framed it with gold and placed it on the wall by the side of the portrait of his grand father Isha Kha. That was the portrait of Sakhina bibi, the warrior princess of Kiila Tajpur. Feroze Kha used to gaze at the portrait for hours and end, and felt it difficult to take his eyes off it. He fell in love with the princess in the portrait and longed to see the beaming beautiful face and offer his love to the princess in person.

One day, Feroze kha arrived at Killa Tajpur incognito, dressed as a fakir (holy/crazy man). At that time, Omar Kha, the father of Sakhina was ill. He announced his presence at the court and requested for an audience with the ailing landlord. The landlord recovered from his illness within a few days after a few sessions of kind and sweet words of wisdom. In the afternoon of the day he left Killa Tajpur he had a chance, albeit brief encounter with Sakhina at the concreted Ghat (area with steps for getting into the water of the lake). The eyes met, glances were exchanged, he had the brief moment to tell her, "I leave my message in two drops of warm tears on the steps of Ghat of the lake for you to read and answer", before she was whisked away by her companions.

Secret exchange of epistles that followed through the servant girls and couriers culminated into an inexorable bond and an unfathomed desire to be one another's arm against strong opposition of Sakhina's father, Omar Kha who carried royal (Mughal) blood in his veins and so did Sakhina and she was a real princess. For Omar Kha It was unthinkable to give her hand away to marriage to a commoner however handsome or good worrier he might have been. She must have a royal spouse at any cost.

Sakhina's love for Feroze Kha was eternal and undying, nothing could come between them. Soon Feroze Kha sneaked in to Killa Tajpur and eloped with Sakhina and came to Jangal bari riding on the same horseback. The beats of drums were heard from every corner of Jangalbari village. Marriage was arranged and it took place in great pomp and grandeur. The whole village celebrated with singing, dancing and feasting.

The episode was intolerable to Omar Kha. He launched an urgent complain to the Mughal governor at Dhaka that her only daughter and heir to the estate had been abducted by a minor rebel Dewan. He sought help with a contingent of soldiers to rescue his daughter from captivity in Jangalbari. With a large army of foot and cavalry soldiers Omar Kha faced Feroze kha's smaller but well-trained and well-motivated army on the bank of the river Noro Sundha. The battle raged, soldiers from both sides were killed and on the third day, due to bad luck and overwhelmed by a large number of enemy soldiers Feroze Kha was captured by Omar kha's army, and dispatched KillaTajpur. The battle continued with soldiers tired and disheartened by the loss of the commander who was leading the battle.

Sakhina was preparing for the return of her husband; she was sanguine that he will return with a flying colour. She asked the servants to prepare rose water for his bath and ablution (for prayer), clean and fragranced towel for him to dry up, sweetmeats for him and for the distribution to the villagers. She was overseeing the preparation of feasting for the villager in his honour and also preparing herself with a new red sari with matching blouse and coloured feet and nails. She was resting in her cane chair when she saw a soldier on a horseback arrived at the gate, she was apprehensive, worried and asked him for the news from the battle ground. As soon as Sakhina heard the news, she stood up, went inside the palace, opened her wardrobe and took out the battle uniform, a uniform reserved for the male commander of the army. She asked her servants to prepare her favourite white horse for the battlefield. She came out of the Jangal bari castle riding the ferocious white horse and a sword raised above her head and joined the battle to lead the fighting. While the Soldiers of Jangalbari knew who was this great worrier and got tremendous boost and a new vigour. The enemy soldiers, however, got frightened to encounter a new

commander with unparalleled skill in fighting and battle strategy and started to retreat. Sakhina with her army chased them until she reached the bank of Shuria River. There a stiff resistance by Omar Kha's army ensued; the river water went red with the bloods of soldiers from both sides. Sakhina was planning to cross the river and take over her father's castle and rescue her husband to bring him back to Jangal bari triumphantly. While she was fighting the enemy riding the horse, a soldier from the enemy line bearing a white flag approached Sakhina. She thought he must have brought a message of surrender from her father. The messenger knew that the man leading the battle was none other than the great daughter of that village, warrior Sakhina. He took out a paper and handed it over to her saying, "There is no need for you to continue with the battle. Your husband has divorced you. Here is the signed document witnessed by two independent people". Sakhina recognized her husband's signature. She collapsed from the horse's back. Her head gear dropped off revealing her long female hair. Her mail war uniform fell apart. She couldn't bear the pain of such a betrayal from the one and only man who she loved so much that she defied her father and razed a battle against him. The shock was too much to bear. It was like being bitten on the head by a poisonous snake. She died.

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NB. *The author's village home is at Jangalbari (a stone's throw from Sakhina bibi's palace/castle(now a mere skeleton) and his first daughter was named after her.
