

## INTERVIEW

### ***Zafar Khan in Conversation with Rafi Mustafa***

Dr. Rafi Mustafa is a Canadian national of Indo-Pak background, and a former Associate Professor of Chemistry at the University of Khartoum in Sudan and the University of Sindh in Pakistan. He was also engaged in postdoctoral research at the Universities of Toronto and Windsor in Canada, and the University of Leicester in England; at present CEO, Indusflow Systems, an IT company and author of *Tales from Birehra* (2020), a work of fiction.

**Zafar Khan:** Birehra sounds like an exotic name to many readers. Tell me why you chose Birehra as the centrepiece of your stories.

**Rafi Mustafa:** I was born in a village called Birhara in District Etah of Uttar Pradesh. I changed the spelling slightly to fictionalize it.

**ZK:** The subtitle of your book is “A Journey through a world within us.” Is there any special reason for this subtitle?

**RM:** Birehra is a fictional village where everyone of us would like to be born, grow up, and spend the rest of our lives. We all have our own Birehra, where life is simple, and people are loving. They want to keep living the way they have always lived and don't want anyone to change them or judge them. Likewise, they do not have any desire to change anyone or judge anyone.

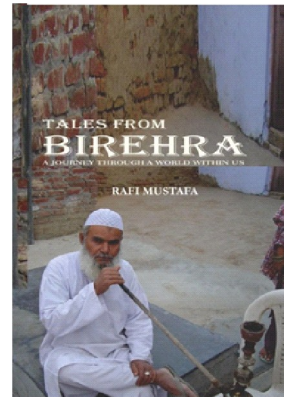
In Birehra, every day is just like any other day; children play in the street, farmers plough their fields, and women spend all day doing housework. They have simple problems with simple solutions. So this is Birehra! It is a place where little things make one happy. It is not like we need big things to make us happy, and every little problem looks like a mountain to us. In other words, Birehra is a world within us in which we would want to spend the rest of our life.

**ZK:** You have called Birehra “a timeless globe,” and the very first part of the book reveals your nostalgia for Birehra. Do you still miss this fascinating place?

**RM:** I have called Birehra a timeless globe because it has no past and no future. Even though nights follow days and days follow nights, there are births and deaths, love and betrayal, fights and reconciliations, but time stands still, and every event occurs in the eternal present.

Of course, I miss Birehra, I mean my birthplace, but I know that it does not exist anymore, at least not the way I remember it. Time can be made to stand still in our nostalgia, but not in reality. That is why I have built my own Birehra.

I have never been to India, and some friends have asked me over the years if I would like to visit my birthplace. My answer is always negative, and the reason is that when you migrate from your birthplace, you take a snapshot of it and put it in your pocket



over your heart. Then you take it out of your pocket to look at it from time to time. You are happy that it is still there the way you had left it. If you go back decades later, you will be shocked to find out that it is not there anymore.

**ZK:** Your book has a historical perspective as it highlights some important events of India's freedom struggle. How did you combine the world of the socio-political reality of colonial India with the world of fiction? Did it involve a lot of research?

**RM:** I tried to avoid history as much as possible, but I had to bring the historical background into the story to set the perspective, especially for the Western reader. The biggest challenge for a writer in bringing history into fiction is that history is inherently biased, and I believe that bias should not enter the realm of fiction. If my agenda is to convey a message to my reader, I better write history so that I can afford to be biased.

I am not sure how far I have succeeded in presenting an unbiased account of India's partition. It is up to the reader to judge that. However, I do not have any reservations in admitting that whatever I have said about Partition is my personal opinion. You know that opinions are just opinions; there is no point in refuting them or debating over them.

I have avoided the gory details of the bloodshed associated with the event; it all happens in the background. Secondly, there is no significant villain in the story. The villain who caused all the upheaval in Birehra turns out to be a young, educated man who follows his ideology. I have tried to present his viewpoint as honestly as possible, and at no point does a reader feel hatred for him. I received a comment from a reader who said that it is difficult to judge whether this writer is a Hindu or a Muslim. I feel that it was the best comment I have received about this story.

**ZK:** When there was an outbreak of Bubonic plague in India's urban areas, the people of Birehra were celebrating Khansab's birthday. Does it mean the people of Birehra were leading a happy and peaceful life, defying the religious division of being Hindu or Muslim? Were mutual love and respect norms of the day?

**RM:** The culture presented in this book is popularly known as *Ganga-Jamni Tehzeeb*, which flourished in Northern U.P. from the Mughals' days. It represented the comity of Hindus and Muslims, whose friendship and the association had blossomed from generation to generation, and they respected each others' religions and values.

I remember my grandmother telling me that God had sent 124,000 prophets worldwide to educate people, and Prophet Muhammad was the last one of them. She said that we should not be disrespectful to Rama and Krishna or Buddha because they could also have been God's messengers.

The characters in *Tales From Birehra* are Hindus and Muslims. They are involved in each others' lives and share each others' joys and sorrows.

**ZK:** Sherwanis were Pathans of Afghan descent. Khanum, Sherwani sahib's mother, could not imagine a woman belonging to the untouchables caste would breastfeed her grandson. Does it show that the Hindu caste system had an impact on the Muslim psyche?

**RM:** When early Muslim invaders came into India, they did not assume Indian identity; instead, they took pride in their Persian heritage. The term *Ashrafiyah* or *the Gentle People* represents that class of people; they were given land to cultivate and became landowners. The Sherwanis in Birehra belong to the Ashrafiyah class. In the neighbouring village, Nagla, we have Hindu landowners; they are mostly Brahmins who take pride in their Aryan heritage and are the Hindu version of Ashrafiya. The rest of the people, Hindus or Muslims, are ordinary people who work in landowners' fields. One common trait that the landowners have is their fair skin colour which makes them superior to the rest of the people who are dark-skinned. Such colour discrimination was prevalent among the Ashrafiyah in U.P.

The Sherwanis have an issue reconciling their religion with Indian tradition; on the one hand, they are not supposed to discriminate based on colour and caste and, on the other hand, they have to conform to the standards of the Brahmins of Nagla.

That is how caste and colour consciousness entered the Muslim society in U.P. Even Khanum is torn between her religion and what she calls her "Indianness."

**ZK:** In *Book Two: Paradise Lost*, your narrative takes a new turn. Suddenly, the storm starts gathering, and the peace and harmony of the Indian sub-continent, in general, is lost. People like Karmoo behave in selfish ways, and city life becomes more attractive. Does Karmoo's persona reveal the changing socio-economic life patterns due to the influence of western culture?

**RM:** I wouldn't consider Karmoo to be selfish. To me, he is a hero because he challenges the status quo. His father and forefathers have been serving the landowners in exchange for food and clothing. Karmoo breaks away from that slavery by moving to the city and becoming the master of his destiny. That was a courageous move. Come to think of it, his brother, the watercarrier, also rebelled and decided to charge for his services, but the landowners conspired to thwart his attempt, and he admitted his failure.

**ZK:** On pages 212 and 213, you have mentioned how Pundit Uday Lal's son Amrit was attending meetings secretly and inviting strangers to his house. Does it mean violence was their hidden agenda, and the signs of dissent from the Gandhiji's principles were visible?

**RM:** Amrit was not a follower of Gandhiji. He was influenced by the Arya Samaj movement and had developed his own ideology. According to his theory, the Muslim Ashrafiyah was a stumbling block in the path of bringing ordinary Muslims back to Hinduism. He believed that if the Sherwanis could be driven out of the village, it would be easier for his group to achieve its objective.

The Arya Samaj movement was inherently non-violent, but Amrit and his group did not find any issue with breaking a few jaws to persuade Khansaab's workers to stop working for him.

**ZK:** Do you think the British were responsible for robbing the Indian people of their traditional life of peaceful co-existence?

**RM:** So much has been said and written about the exploitation of India by the British. Dr. Shashi Tharoor has said it all, and I don't think anyone can refute him.

**ZK:** In the Epilogue, it is evident that Azad has a tone of voice of this work of fiction. Azad's friends think he is at the crossroads of nostalgia and schizophrenia. Azad does not believe that Birehra is a mirage. For him, it is a fascinating reality. Do you share his views?

**RM:** Oh yes. Azad has spent decades travelling through the world and has been looking for his Birehra, but he does not find it anywhere. So he builds one himself, erecting mud walls with his own hands and raising thatched roofs on top of them so that every house is a duplicate of what he had left in Birehra; he puts the characters of his choice in every home, and engineers every event with utmost care.

As the book ends, Azad's friends think that he has schizophrenia and tell him that Birehra is just a mirage that he has been chasing all his life. He does not believe in mirages since he knows that every oasis, appearing on the far side of the quivering desert heat, is real. All that a weary traveller needs is the unwavering passion for reaching it. And that is where the book ends.

**ZK:** My last question is related to your passionate journey, beginning from a university professorship to being a CEO of an IT company, then a fiction writer. How did you enjoy and manage all these journeys? Was the journey from a world of reality to a world of fantasy full of challenges?

**RM:** They say that once you are a teacher, you are always a teacher. I left academia effectively in 1978, but I still lecture in my dreams. By the way, those dreams sometimes turn into nightmares when I come unprepared in the classroom. Apart from making a living, I have also been associated with the International Development and Relief Foundation or IDRF for the past 35 years, as a board member, as a past president, and now as a member of the Advisory Council. IDRF is a Canadian charity that funds development and relief projects worldwide, especially in South Asia. So, that has kept me busy all these years.

As far as the journey from reality to fantasy is concerned, I feel that there is no escape from reality. When you write fiction, your characters are very much real. You have met them somewhere in your life or have heard about them. Sometimes, a character is a composite of several characters you have come across. Similarly, the events described in fiction are based on actual events. One advantage that fiction writers have is that they can lie through their teeth, and no one would challenge them because, after all, it is fiction.