

FAIZ Amongst his people.....

by Ahmad Salim

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To speak of death is also to speak of life, for death is part of life and all our references to death are in terms of life. That is why when we speak of Faiz' death all we can speak of is a life fully lived.

On November 20th, just a day before Faiz' death, I was talking to Afzal Randhawa, a famous Punjabi writer and poet from Faisalabad, who had stayed close to Faiz, in his last days. He had driven Faiz down to his village and back to Lahore.

As the car hit the highway after the trek through the dirt roads that connected to the village, Faiz turned to Afzal Randhawa and said: 'You are right, our villages are distanced from the town by about five hundred years.'

Afzal's brother Aslam who drove the car apologized to Faiz for the dust, Faiz laughed and commented, 'Why should you apologize. Did you build the roads?'

But there was so much that was wrong, so much that was ugly about the life people lived. The roads, the schools, the hospitals that weren't there, and the hunger and destitution that was. Faiz lived with it for 73 years but did not put up with it. He tried to help improve it, change it. Till 20th November 1984.

A couple of days prior to the end of his journey, Faiz wanted to visit his native village where he had not been for the last forty five years.

'I have to go there to see my friend Sher Mohammad before I..' but the wary eyes of Chemi daunted his plans.

In the funeral procession I trailed behind. We had just looked at Faiz for the last time. Humair Hashmi was shooining press photographers away. The day before Shoaib had lost his cool and said,

'Faiz is alive, you need not show him dead.' When the PTV crew arrived Shoaib had said, 'Are you sure you can show Faiz over television?'

"Tell me of his last days," I asked Afzal Randhawa as we moved along the funeral procession.

'We were together for three days and spoke of writing in Punjabi. He had never been against it, in his last eight years he had written in Punjabi too, but he believed what was fundamental was for scholars to compile, a standard dictionary of the language, of its grammar and idiom. Books for children should be written in it. More ground work had to be done before people demanded Punjabi poetry.'

'I hear there was a Punjabi mushaira in the village?', I said.

'Hardly a Punjabi mushaira. A few local poets got together and read poetry, but in Urdu. After I had recited my Punjabi poem, Faiz Sahib said, 'Me too' and read his Punjabi 'Kisan ka Tarana' after which he said 'but the stock of my Punjabi poetry ends here and started reciting his Urdu poetry.'

The procession had by now reached the graveyard. Afzal Randhawa went on narrating Faiz' village trip.

'You know the village people gathered around Faiz taking him to be their king, and started putting their demands and complaints. They wanted things changed in the village and thought Faiz could do it. Faiz kept telling them, 'But I have some friends and if any one of them comes to power I shall ask them. These days I have no friends in the government. Some time back there were, I had asked them to build a road to my village and they had...'

The procession stopped. Ustad Daman, a mentor of Faiz who was hospitalized had insisted on being carried to Faiz and stood there unwilling to leave his side.

Kishwar Naheed, in tears, said: "Once Alys and Faiz Sahib had discussed the question where both of them would like to be buried. Alys had said

'wherever I die, I am an internationalist.' But Faiz Sahib said, 'but I shall die in my homeland, amongst my people.'"

Munuu Bhai shares his memories: "I was driving down Faiz Sahib to Narang Gallery to attend the function in memory of Khwaja Khurshid Anwar and Mirza Zafarul Hassan when he expressed his extreme consternation at the state of Ustad Daman's health. 'What must be Ustad Sahib's age?' I asked Faiz and he replied, 'age cannot always be measured in terms of months and years, for some people months and years are of longer duration than for others; the days of joy are shorter and the nights of sorrow longer. And that is the difference between the wealthy and the wretched.'"

The body of Faiz had been returned to the earth. The mourners were wailing. Gradually each one cries his or her heart out and moves away. My eyes fall on a frozen I . A. Rehman.

'Why don't you say something? I ask him and almost instantaneously I recall the letter Faiz wrote to Alys from prison on receiving the news of his elder brother's death.

'I have held my head up high in the pride of my pain; I have not lowered my eyes before anyone. It was difficult, it was harrowing, but now I am alone with my anguish in my cell and do not feel ashamed in bending under this immense injustice.'

I.A. Rehman presses my hands and says, "Tomorrow we shall read in the papers, Faiz is dead".

"And in his homeland, amongst his people," I added.

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Viewpoint

Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the ones who think differently