

THE MASTERS - SAMACHAR



By Abdulrazak Fazal *Updated: November 2020*



History of the Samachar 1901-1967

A few years back I happened to visit Milton Keynes where after years I met Arif Master in his optical shop, a replica of Bha Roshan (his late father Roshan Master whom we intimately and respectfully referred to as 'Bha Roshan'). Bha Roshan was an intellect with modern ideas. He had replaced the old machines in his press with the new ones. His entrepreneurial ability flourished in Samachar and led to the release of its Golden Jubilee issue in 1952 that is still on display in the Zanzibar Archives. As a leading journalist and Editor of 'The Samachar' he even visited England in 1954 on the invitation of the British Government.

Bha Roshan was a kind soul, pleasant personality and full of inspirational ideas. How could I ever forget watching the Gossage Zanzibar versus Kenya football match in the midst of the Sultan's family members and the then British Resident at the Khalifa Ground stadium in 1959! It was courtesy Bha Roshan, then Zanzibar's leading journalist who held a VIP pass or else a commoner like me could not have even dreamt of such an experience. What also comes to mind is the Master House in the vicinity of Vuga/Portuguese Street by the side of the twin towered Catholic Cathedral, and the Samachar Press downstairs. It was a privilege to have been

associated with the 'Masters' since childhood, the linkage through my 'masi' (maternal aunt) Sugrabai that provided a special bond between us. Sugrabai, my mother's younger sister, was married to Hassanali's eldest son Mohamedrafiq. The children, Hassan and Shakki, in my age group frequented our house. I too regularly visited their place. Many Sundays of olden days were spent at the Master house. The Samachar Press below was a scene of hectic activity as the machines and printers slashed and rolled bundles of papers, a vivid recollection that can never be erased from the mind. The twin towered cathedral almost adjacent to the press held special fascination for me. The hymns coming out from the Sunday mass at the church sounded somber. Almost the entire Goan community in their appropriate attire gathered at the church. At times I would stand outside the church to stare at those statues of the Christian apostles.

In the annals of Zanzibar history, the inscription 'Samachar' goes down as Zanzibar's oldest paper. Its history stretches back to the late nineteenth century era when [Fazal Janmohamed Master](#) landed in Zanzibar where for some time he taught at a 'madressa' (school), Sir Euan Smith Madressa, before the advent of the Parsees who probably came at a later stage. In those days ESM was yet to thrive though Fazal proved a real good teacher and was accorded the title 'Master' that became synonymous with the entire family, to this very day the family bears the surname 'Master'. However, Fazal had a passion for journalism that led him to quit his teaching job and buy a press. The first issue of SAMACHAR appeared in Zanzibar in 1901. That was a historical event as Samachar was the first ever paper in Zanzibar, and the Zanzibar Archives bears testimony to it. It became Zanzibar's leading bilingual (English and Gujarati) paper circulated on Sundays only). Let us take a time ride to capture the history of Samachar, its ups and downs, and the ordeals that Fazal and his children had to go through.

As we understand Zanzibar then was at the forefront of the Khoja dissident movement. Fazal being a prominent Khoja Ithnashri and on the committee of its 'jamaat' had Samachar leaning towards the Ithnashries. Some of the articles in Samachar led to a big libel case filed against Fazal who had to be taken to court. He was even sentenced to four months imprisonment but later released on appeal. His acquittal was greeted with joy by the Khoja Ithnashries. That was a famous judgment and a landmark in the history of the community as well as Zanzibar. Fazal was a courageous person who encountered all the challenges with indomitable will. While his Samachar prospered he himself sadly succumbed to a severe heart attack in Jamnagar, India in 1920. During my visit to Jamnagar in 1967 I had the opportunity of paying my respect to him at his grave.

Fazal was succeeded by his adopted son Hassanali who was also very keen on journalism. His tenure witnessed the publication of various special editions of Samachar. Sultan Sayed Khalifa conferred on him a Jubilee Medal. His 'Coronation Edition' published during the Coronation of King George VI was highly acclaimed. On Hassanali's untimely death in 1937 the then British Resident expressed his

profound sorrow on the passing away of the Samachar Editor stating, "In the realm of journalism in Zanzibar Hassanali's death is a big loss."

Hassanali died at a young age when his children were small. In the aftermath of his death the ladies in the family mustered all the courage and took control of 'Samachar' with the assistance of the Head Compositor Kashiram Khimdas, his assistant Mohamed Rashid Manek (Mohamed wa Masi aka 'Kisaka') and the Editor Mohamedali Rahim. Eventually in 1952 emerged on the scene the charismatic Roshan Master who had a broad outlook. Unfortunately, Roshan's vision was short lived as Zanzibar was struck by a bloody Revolution in January 1964. There was a mass exodus of the Asian community from Zanzibar and that meant the closure of Samachar. Bha Roshan was even imprisoned for some time. In fact, Mtoro Rehani (the Zanzibar Mayor in the Revolutionary Government) and Nasser Moyo (the father of Hassan Nasser Moyo who was a Minister in the Revolutionary Government) were in the employment of Samachar at the time of the Revolution.

I recall having delivered Bha Roshan his special parcel from Bombay's 'Akbaralys' that he had ordered through me during my visit to Bombay before I left for Dubai. He was extremely thankful and gracious. When I went to greet him before my departure for Dubai, he in his usual joking way told me that even he was traveling but heading for his inevitable destination. Sadly, shortly thereafter Bha Roshan passed away in London and the Samachar episode came to an end. There is a befitting epilogue that informs Mrs. Rubabbai Roshan Master establishing and funding a 'madressa' in Zanzibar at Mwera where the Masters had their 'shamba'. It was a beautiful resort filled with exotic Zanzibar fruits that we used to pluck from their trees. Our salute to the remarkable Rubabbai. The 'madressa' at Mwera corroborates her deep affection for Zanzibar and its people. Rubabbai is an intelligent person, the family matriarch whose wisdom and foresight sees the Masters well established in the UK today. A devout lady, Rubabbai has been affectionate and inspirational not only to her family members but also to all those who are dear and near to her.

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