

*Ajay*  
*And His Tales*  
*From Faraway*  
*Lands*



*“A short story is like a quick kiss in the dark  
from a stranger” – Stephen King*

*Ajay  
And His Tales  
From Faraway  
Lands*

Amitava Chaudhuri

Exceller Books



EXCELLER BOOKS  
A GLOBAL PRESS

**Ajay and His Tales from Faraway Lands**

Copyright © Amitava Chaudhuri, India, 2021

Cover design by Exceller Books using resources from Pixabay.com

All rights reserved. No portion of the book may or should be reproduced, stored in any retrieval system (including but not limited to computers, disks, external drives, electronic or digital devices, e-readers, websites), or transmitted in any form or by any means (mechanical, recording, electronic, digital version, photocopying, or otherwise) without the prior, written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

The book has been published with all reasonable efforts taken to make the material error-free after the consent of the author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination have been used fictitiously except where stated otherwise, and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. The views and opinions expressed in this book are the author's own and the facts are as reported by him. The author, publisher or editor shall not be liable whatsoever for any errors, omissions, whether such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident or any other cause or claims for loss or damage of any kind, including without limitation damage arising out of use, reliability, accuracy, sufficiency of the information contained in this book.

ISBN: 978-93-90746-73-6

First published in India in 2021 by Exceller Books

G1, Dream Apartment, Degree College Road, Belgharia,  
Kolkata, 700056, India



EXCELLER BOOKS  
A GLOBAL PRESS

[www.excellerbooks.com](http://www.excellerbooks.com)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my wife Anuradha for her encouragement and support and for her many helpful suggestions. She was the first to read my manuscript.

I thank Joie Bose, poet, writer and creative person, who guided me in practical matters of writing and publishing.

My colleagues in offices where I worked, friends around the world and ordinary people I met often by chance – some at airports, hotels and game parks, others during voyages – people who shared their experiences and aspirations with me spontaneously. I am indebted to them.

The stories ‘A King’s Word’ and ‘The Prison Island’ are based partially on historical events, which were a source of inspiration for me.

## REVIEWS

“History and Geography blend together lucidly in Amitava Chaudhuri's collection of poignant short stories based on his travels around the world.”

- Jai Talwar, formerly of *The Telegraph*, *Hindustan Times* and *Khaleej Times*

“The ten stories in the volume, set in different parts of the world, reveal vignettes of lived experience that appeal. Weaving characters, places, sentiments and situations into stories that linger on, Chaudhuri presents a colourful palette in this collection of short stories that is sure to interest readers worldwide. Written in an idiom that is simple, the stories leave a lasting impression.”

- Nishi Pulugurtha, Academic and Author

“The stories in *Ajay and His Tales from Faraway Lands* are a casket of cultural roadmaps. Amitava Chaudhuri is a global person. The stories are clear, graceful and sharp, and the language simple and direct. Together they form a good part of the human journey and enrich the reader.

- Jaydeep Sarangi, Poet, Translator and Academic

“Ten on Ten is a collection of short stories from different countries and cultures.... Amitava Chaudhuri

has managed to capture the social and cultural nuances of each of these countries in which the tales are set. Sensitively portrayed and exquisitely written...it makes the reader want for more. A must read especially in current times...where an attitude of gratitude is a must."

- Nandita Puri, Author & Chair, Om Puri Foundation

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amitava Chaudhuri, PhD has worked for the United Nations, the World Bank, The Commonwealth Secretariat and national governments for about 40 years. He has visited about 70 countries and lived for long periods in southern, central and east Africa, the Caribbean, South and Central Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

He graduated in engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur in India. He received his Master's degree in business management from the University of Wales, Cardiff, UK. His doctorate is in e-commerce applications, and he received it from the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

The author is 74. He has homes in New Delhi, Kolkata and Gurgaon.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

This is a book of ten short stories. They are set in different parts of the world where resources are usually limited, but human values and principles are not. It is a world in which people are happy with less, lead simpler lives and try to make the best of it.

**The Telephone Call:** A telephone operator in Mongolia tries to repay a debt which does not exist; in the process, she finds love and happiness.

**The Doctor:** A brilliant young doctor from Cameroon reunites with his wife and family through a blessing which came in disguise.

**The Prison Island:** An old fisherman out in the sea links the history of Zanzibar and its fortunes to the love story of a princess.

**Bride Price:** A young conscientious officer in the government of South Sudan is in love with his bride, but cannot afford to pay for her.

**The Landlady:** A wealthy landlady in Jordan regains her second husband, an Iraqi dentist, and finds fulfilment and happiness.

**The Premonition:** A game drive in the Kalahari Desert in Botswana turns deadly, when a visitor is pursued by a strong premonition.

**A King's Word:** A king in Bangladesh prefers to give up his kingdom and live in exile rather than break the word he had given to a defeated government.

**The Housewife:** The misadventure of a housewife in Zimbabwe almost costs her life, but she survives and brings her family together.

**The Gorilla:** The silverback gorilla in the Virunga Mountains near the Congo laughs at visitors like a human and develops emotional links with the trackers.

**The Blessing:** A disappointing trip to the Victoria Falls turns out to be a blessing for a hardworking secretary in the Botswana government, and for her children.

## FOREWORD

‘Ajay and His Tales from Faraway Lands’ is the classic example of a globe-trotter translating his real life experiences into fiction. Normally we regale when we find reality taken out of the pages of a drama or a tale, but Amitava Chaudhuri revels in doing just the opposite. Quite close to life, each one of his stories makes a fascinating reading. Oft times, one finds him in the garb of the chief character of his story, mixing merrily with locals in every station of their life and in the natural environment of their being.

I am also fascinated by the huge landscape his stories cover from the most advanced countries of the world in the west to the least developed ones in Africa, where he has been on critically important assignments, official and private, national and international, as an industrial expert.

The author of these tales seems to have an extraordinary ability to relate to all cultures, religions and ethnicities with equal ease. He is equally at home in war torn South Sudan as he is in the pristine glory of the Virgin Islands in the Caribbean. He works seamlessly alike with Ministers of a government and with the man on the street. People confide in him across civilizations. Quite unaware of the dangers involved, he plunges into conflict zones in Iraq and South Sudan, at times having had to hide himself from rocket attacks in the former and stray bullets in the latter. One finds him operating easily in the post conflict regions too, like in Rwanda and Ethiopia.

At the very basic level he connects with animals such as the gorilla and those who work with them in the Virunga Mountains in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda. He even seems to try and connect inadvertently with the Kalahari lions, narrowly escaping disastrous consequences.

As a diplomat and a writer, I deeply admire not only Mr. Chaudhuri's penchant to have worked extremely successfully across diverse nations and cultures of the world, but also his rare gift of mirroring his life's varied experiences through his 'Ajay and His Tales from Faraway Lands'.

I wish the author all success.

**Ambassador Lakhan Mehrotra.**

*Formerly Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Africa, and United Nations Envoy in Cambodia and Indonesia.*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Telephone Call

The Doctor

The Prison Island

Bride Price

The Landlady

The Premonition

A King's Word

The Housewife

The Gorilla

The Blessing

## THE TELEPHONE CALL

It was just another evening for Solongo, the telephone operator of the Bayangol Hotel in Ulaanbataar, Mongolia. The hotel guests, mostly businessmen from overseas, were back from their days' meetings. As was usual in the evenings, Solongo was flooded with their requests for calls perhaps to report progress at work or to talk to families back home. Solongo understood the guests' needs and tried to help as well as she could.

Mongolia had just emerged from the authoritarian system of the Mongolian Peoples' Revolutionary Party, which was backed by Moscow. The country was still under tight control. Contacts with foreigners outside the former Soviet bloc were a novelty. Communication with the outside world was regulated. All overseas calls made by foreigners at the hotel had to be first booked with Solongo and a deposit made in dollars, usually ten dollars. There would be a period of waiting, as Solongo would pass on the bookings to the Mongolia Telecom Company on Sukhabataar Street, not far away from the hotel. Foreigners paid a higher rate than citizens and there was an extra charge for priority calls.

Solongo looked at her list of waiting calls. They were to China, Russia, India, Europe and the US. She checked the deposit money in her drawer. She would hand over the dollars to the cashier before leaving for the day. Solongo was tired but all the calls had to be put through. The guests were waiting for their calls -- some in the hotel foyer, others in the restaurant. The

work will not finish till late evening, but jobs were scarce and Solongo felt very lucky she was selected for this work, perhaps because she knew a little English.

The telephone on her desk rang. "I am putting through the two calls to the US one after the other," said Batsaikhan, from Mongolia Telecom. Solongo walked out to locate the two guests who had booked the calls. Fortunately, they were together in the foyer. Solongo put the calls through to the telephone booth outside her office. "Please," she said, "I shall connect one at a time, we have only one line, sorry." When the calls were over, she checked the durations, made a refund or asked for the balance, usually a dollar or two.

Suddenly, a man came in through the swing doors of her office. "Can you connect me to Lahore, please, urgently?" he asked, "I need to talk to my wife, my child is not well," and looked at Solongo. "Urgent, please. Do calls to Pakistan take long to get connected?" he asked. He seemed tired and anxious.

Solongo looked up. "Please, I will try. Pakistan in the US?" she asked.

"No, no," said the man. "I said Lahore l-a-h-o-r-e; it's a city in a country called Pakistan. It's not the US. Separate country. The country code is 92 and the number is +92 42 36287683." He spoke rapidly.

"Not in the US. OK. I will try just now," said Solongo. "Please give me ten dollars deposit. You have to wait a little."

"Sorry. I have just seven dollars in change," said the man. "Please connect me. I will pay you the rest tomorrow."

She dialled Batsaikhan in Mongolia Telecom. "Batsaikhan, can you please connect me to this

number very urgently, +92 42 36287683”, she said in Khalkha Mongolian. “The man says his child is ill, but I don’t know what country it is. Near India, I think from the code. Please give him priority. He is a guest in our country. We have to help him, Batsaikhan,” she added.

The call came through in a few minutes. “You are very lucky, sir. I hope your child is well,” said Solongo, as the man took the call in the booth. Solongo got down to preparing the day’s accounts and reconciling the cash. The man was still speaking 15 minutes later when Solongo stepped out to check, before going back to her accounts. When she checked again a little later, she was surprised to see the booth empty. She replaced the receiver which was hanging by the cord, and went out to look for the man.

There was a person outside who looked like the man who had booked the call. Solongo was not sure.

“Did you book a call to Pakistan, sir?” she asked.

“No. I’m Ajay Chaudhuri. You know me. I am in Room 202. Is there a problem?” he asked.

“No, sir. I am sorry I disturbed you,” she said.

“What will I do now?” Solongo cried to herself. Maybe the man has gone to his room after making the call. Anyway, the Reception will debit his account, she thought, like it happened once or twice earlier.

On her way out that night Solongo stopped at the Reception to ask about the guest from Pakistan. Alinur, the night clerk checked the register, and to Solongo’s surprise could not find a man from Pakistan among the guests.

“Check tomorrow morning,” said Alinur. “Maybe his details have not yet been entered.”

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

