



THE RETURN OF X-2

A man who wrote 245 books, created two popular crime series, spawned a generation of imitators, and discovered Zeroland. The phenomenon of Urdu crime writer Ibne Safi >>>

by AMRITA DUTTA

KARACHI WAITED eagerly in November 1963. Banners and posters went up around its poky lending libraries, and word spread beyond the border to the north Indian heartland. It was the return of Ibne Safi, prolific and popular Urdu crime writer, from the depths of a mental breakdown that had lasted three years. With him returned, between the lurid covers of the slim volume of *Daerh Matwaalay*, the much-loved Ali Imran, a goofy, rich and spoilt young man, who is actually X-2, chief of the secret services of an unspecified country somewhere in Hindustan.

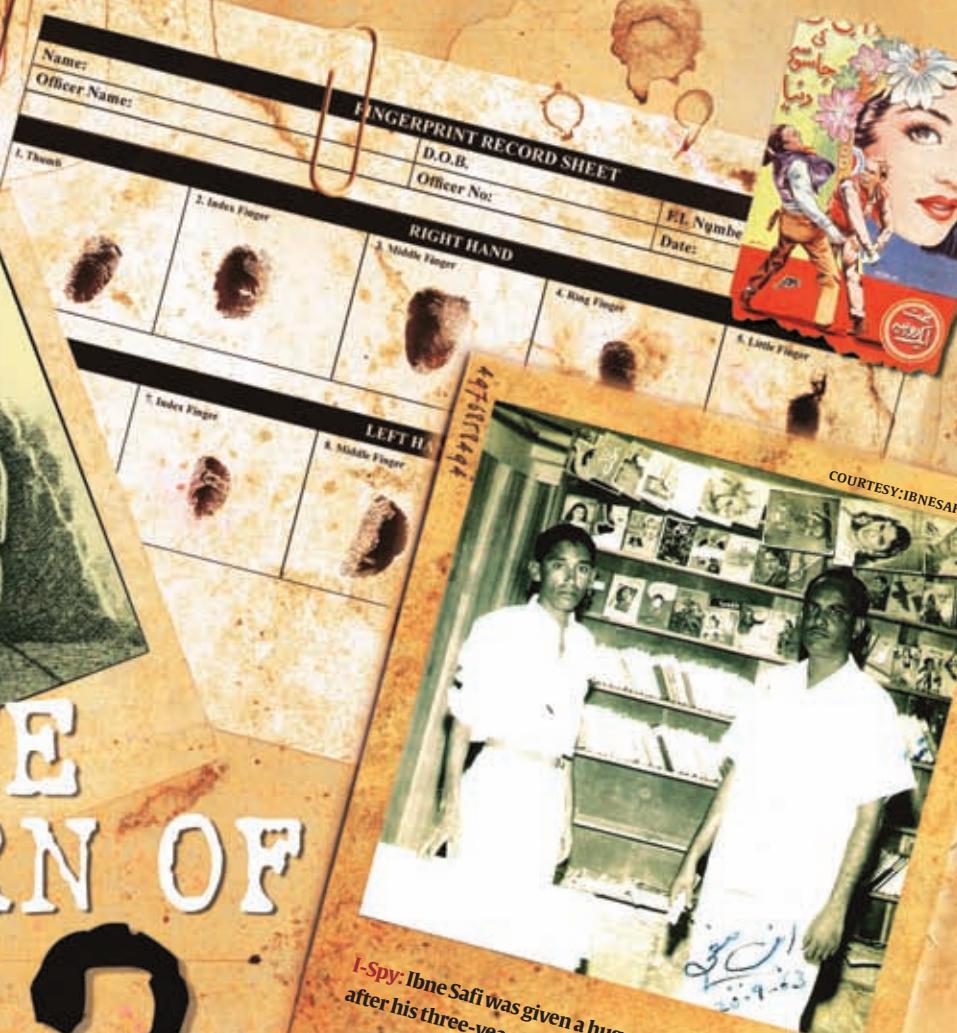
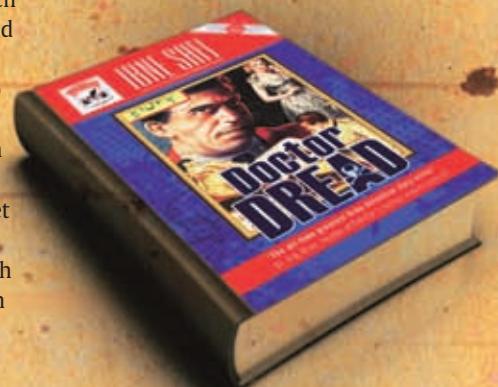
If you were an Urdu reader in the sub-continent in the 1960s, three years would have been too long to wait for your fix of Ibne Safi. In his 28-year-long writing

career, Asrar Ahmed aka Ibne Safi (1928-1980) wrote 245 books, at the astonishing rate of two-three a month; and the strain of his productivity led to his mental collapse in 1961. Priced at 9 aanas, the novels were devoured by readers from Karachi to Kanpur, from schoolboys who would slip them between textbooks, away from the eyes of disapproving parents; and mullahs who would queue up at bookshops at the launch of every new book; to a certain 14-year-old in Meerut, Surendra Mohan Pathak, who hid himself in a cowshed near his home to read the contraband volumes.

If, like Mohammad Hanif, a teenager in Hyderabad, Pakistan, in the Sixties, you could not afford a new novel, you could get your hand on a grubby dog-eared copy through a network of aana-libraries, which loaned the books for a few aanas each. "On days a new novel would release, people

would pay up to Rs 5 per hour to read them. And simply stand there and read. It was like an addiction," says Hanif, now an IT professional in Kuwait. Proof that the addiction survives is in the Ibne Safi novel that he still takes to bed every night, and the exhaustive website that he runs on the crime writer (ibnesafi.info).

Earlier this week, in the hope of adding



I-Spy: Ibne Safi was given a huge welcome to Karachi, after his three-year-long mental breakdown

to his Indian readers, the Chennai-based Blaft Publications and Tranquebar Press brought out English translations of four novels of the *Jasoosi Duniya* series: *Doctor Dread, Smokewater, The Laughing Corpse* and *Poisoned Arrow*. Last year, Harper Collins released Hindi translations of a set of Imran novels; and Random House India translated another Imran novel in English.

Ibne Safi was born in Nara village, Allahabad, in 1928, to a family of landlords, and grew up into a precocious reader of epic fantasies like *Tilism-e-Hoshruba*, and the adventures of H. Rider Haggard. As a young member of the Urdu literary circle of Allahabad in the 1950s, he wrote poetry, wore his hair long, dabbled with communism and worried about the smut that had swamped popular literature of the time. At a gathering of poets and intellectuals, when someone claimed that nothing but sex could sell in Urdu, he decided to start a homegrown crime series to disprove that thesis. In 1952, at the age of 24, he wrote *Dilaer Mujrim*, featuring Inspector Faridi and his sidekick Hameed, the first of the 120 novels in the *Jasoosi Duniya* series. (Not all his plots were homegrown; he admitted to lifting from English writers.) The same year, he left with his family for Pakistan, where he would live the rest of his life.

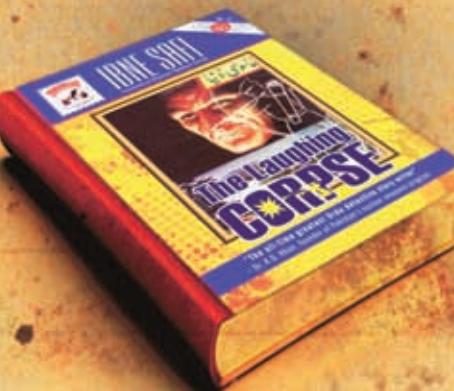
He was as much of a phenomenon in India as in Pakistan. An abiding memory of his son Ahmed Safi is of his father working through the night. "I remember him lying on a bed, on his left, propped up on a pillow, and writing. The paper he would write on was held by a clipboard, beneath which was a sheet of carbon paper, and another blank page. When he had finished, the carbon copies of an entire novel would be mailed to Allahabad to his friend Abbas Hussaini, who published them there, almost simultaneously," says Ahmed, a mechanical engineer in his 50s in Karachi. "His Indian readership was bigger than in Pakistan, and his books were translated into Hindi and Bengali."

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By the 1960s, Ibne Safi was a brand. And like any famous brand, he spawned a library of knock-offs. "A lot of people stole characters from his series and started writing novels based on those. This happened mostly when he was ill for three years (1961-63). They came up with similar names. Enn Safi, Ibban Safi, Naghma Safi, Najma Safi and many such Safis surfaced," says Ahmed. "My father once wrote in a preface, 'You can be a successful mystery writer in Urdu but you'd have to declare my father as your parent to do so.' Magazines like *Mujrim, Tilisme-Jasoos* and *Jasoosi Panja* took his idea, but could not run too far with

it. Though his plots were simple, he also showed the way to more serious writers. "My first impulse to write about crime came from reading him," says the grandee of Hindi pulp fiction, Pathak. "He picked up the idea of a police procedural, because, obviously, there were no private detectives in India or Pakistan. In fact, they didn't exist till a couple of years ago."

Ibne Safi's sleuths were impeccably moral men, driven by a strong sense of



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nationalism, a long way off from the amoral, realistic universe of Pathak's criminals. There was Colonel Faridi, an immensely wealthy aristocrat who studied criminology in Oxford, and whose passion led him to join the police force. He lived in a palatial home, drove Lincolns and Aston Martins, and was unmoved by the attractions of the many femme fatales that crossed his path. Imran was his bumptious alter ego whose ludicrousness was a camouflage for his real identity. According to Shamshur Rahman Faruqi, who has translated the four novels for Blaft, it was the kind of fiction that "instantly appealed to the instinct of the average middle-class Muslim (and Hindu) in India and Pakistan". Both come together in one novel *Zameen ke*

Badal, where they go in search of the mysterious country of Zeroland.

The world of Ibne Safi, peopled by a cast of quixotic characters, and exotic locales, though, is hardly revelatory about the times he lived in. "He never wrote about the local *thana* and its setting. It was modeled on Scotland Yard," says Pathak. The novels are usually set in an unnamed country, which could either be India or Pakistan, where a *jangbaaz* foreign power (strong suggestions of America) sets traps for his crime-busters, and where they take on larger-than-life baddies with monikers as flamboyant as their crime: Gerald Shastri, scientist and scholar who invents a method to turn men into gorillas; Sing Hee, half-Mongolian, half-Chinese, who can dodge any bullet with ease; Humbug the Great, a spy with a hump, whose mission is to foment a revolution in Imran's country.

Filmmaker Mahmood Farooqui, a fan of the writer, remembers it as a curiously modern world. "There was nothing orthodox about it. It was about a high-end life, about night clubs and cafes with names like Arlechhino, attractive Anglo-Indian women and men in felt hats. What, indeed, was a felt hat?" he says. For a reader in a small town in India, a Technicolor world had been switched on.

In the last few years, Pakistan has seen a revival of Ibne Safi's works, with many critics insisting that he be re-evaluated as a mainline literary icon. Faruqi is not too convinced, and finds in his writing neither the sophistication of plots nor of detection. Pathak agrees, but adds of the man who wrote untiringly from his house in Nazimabad, Karachi, "What he taught me was how to say it well, how to make a simple line sparkle with wit. No one had done that before." □