VAKKOM ABDUL KHADER, THE FREEDOM FIGHTER

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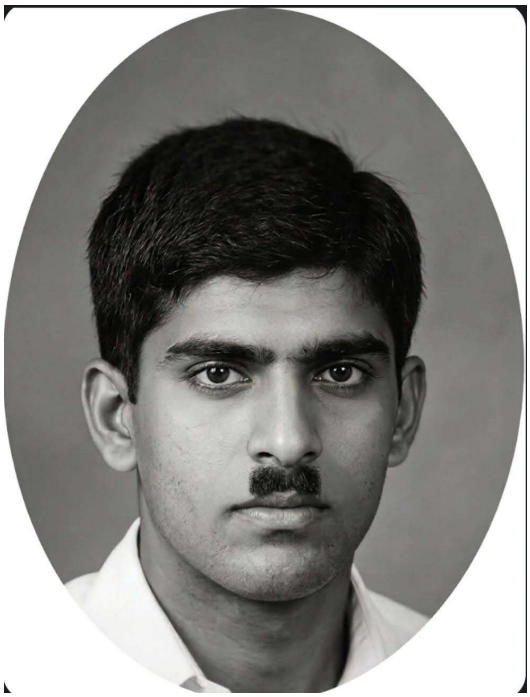

Vakkom Abdul Khader, who sacrificed his life for India's freedom, was a dedicated member of the Indian National Army (INA) under the leadership of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. Though he was captured by the British in Tanur—a coastal region in South Malabar—his journey began in the south of Kerala. Born on May 25, 1917, in Thamarakkulam, Vakkom, to Vavakunju and Ummu Salma, Muhammad Abdul Khader showed early promise. He attended primary school at Rightervila and later moved to Sri Narayana Vilasam High School in Nedunganda. A well-rounded youth, he was known for his love of music and sports, eventually becoming a skilled wrestler.

Khader's political consciousness was ignited during his school years. A defining moment occurred during the Temple Entry Proclamation movement when he learned that Mahatma Gandhi would be visiting Thiruvananthapuram. Knowing that steam trains stopped at Kadakkavoor to refill water, Khader and his friends waited there. He managed to see Gandhi closely and even kissed his hand—an encounter that left a lasting impact on his life. During his time at Nedunganda High School, Khader witnessed the local activities of the Indian National Congress. He saw firsthand the police atrocities committed against Congress leaders and activists.

A pivotal moment occurred during a District Conference of the Congress party held near his school. Despite attempts by British loyalists (including the school's own manager) and the police to violently disrupt the meeting, Khader did not remain a bystander. At 19 years old, he

organized a mass student agitation, leading his peers while wearing a symbolic white dress and a red cap.

Migration and the INA

His father was a boatman who ferried travelers to the other side of the water, and whenever his father was occupied with other work, Khader would take over the oars. He was known for his kindness, assisting the poor, the destitute, and women by carrying their belongings and helping them safely step onto the shore. Abdul Khader was also a passionate reader with a particular love for poetry, often committing the works of Changampuzha Krishna Pillai to memory. During this time, he was mentored by the prominent literary figure Vakkom Muhammad Abdul Kader, who provided him with books and encouraged his intellectual growth.

However, his involvement as a Congressman drew the unwanted attention of the authorities, who frequently visited his home to monitor his movements. These constant investigations disturbed the peace of his parents, who sometimes resorted to bribing officials to protect their beloved son. Hoping to secure a stable future for him, his parents longed for him to become a government official. In 1938, through his father's efforts, Abdul Khader secured an opportunity to work in Malaysia.

At the age of twenty-two, he arrived in Klang, Malaysia, where he was appointed as an Overseer in the Public Works Department on August 10, 1938. After three years, he resigned from this post to work as a surveyor for a private company, a role he continued in another firm seven years later. As the Second World War broke out and Japan attacked Malaya, Khader's sense of nationalism deepened. He joined the Indian Independence League as a volunteer and became an active member of the Malay Muslim organization known as the Kerala Muslim Union, eventually serving as its secretary.

Suicide Cadets

While the World War was raging, the Indian Independence League convened a meeting at Bangkok and decided to organize the Indian National Army. To provide training for civil services and military operations, the Swaraj Institute was established at Penang. This institute consisted of two branches: one for civilian training and the other for training suicide cadets. The primary objective of the institute was to mould patriotic civilians into individuals dedicated to saving their country. The leader of the institute was Mr. Raghavan of Guruvayur, who was a prominent barrister practicing in Penang.

The suicide cadets were rigorously trained to act as spies as part of the specialized wing of the INA. Those who joined the Suicide Corps were required to take a solemn pledge, written in their own blood, vowing to serve the country at the cost of their lives and promising never to retreat from their objective. Although many Indian youths applied to join this elite group, only thirty-three candidates were selected for the first stage. Khader was the final person included in this prestigious list, designated as the thirty-third candidate.

The first batch of the Suicide Squad completed its training, and twenty individuals were selected to depart for India, with Abdul Khader among them. This diverse group consisted of eleven Malayalis, three Bengalis, two members each from Punjab and Tamil Nadu, and one each from Mysore and Andhra Pradesh. These twenty men were divided into four groups of five. It was decided that two groups would reach India by sea, while the remaining two would travel by land.

On 18 September, the group of five—comprising Khader, K.A. George, C.P. Eapen, Ananthan Nair, and Muhammad Gani—departed from Penang aboard a submarine. Each member was entrusted with two envelopes: one containing money and the other containing specific instructions to be opened upon reaching India. They were also armed with guns to defend themselves against enemy forces. The submarine's mission was twofold; in addition to transporting the Suicide Squad, it was tasked with monitoring the movements of Allied warships. Alongside the five volunteers, the vessel carried approximately eighty-five Japanese soldiers and the crew.

After traveling for nine days, the ship reached the waters near Alappuzha. The squad requested the crew to allow them to land at Alappuzha or Kochi, but their request was denied. When they spotted the Ponnani lighthouse, they asked once more to be let ashore. Eventually, the submarine stopped seven kilometers away from Tanur, near Ponnani. From there, they moved toward the coast in dinghies, which were specialized rubber boats. Two such boats were launched from the submarine, and the five members of the suicide squad rowed them toward the shore.

The winter sea was furious, making the journey in the small dinghies incredibly tiresome. Khader, Eapen, and George were in one of the boats. The storm was so intense that the two boats lost sight of each other during the six-hour ordeal at sea. At last, they reached the coast of Tanur, and some time later, the second boat also reached the destination.

Unfortunately, they encountered a man named Muhammad Ali Cheriya Purakkal, who was a constable in the coastal patrolling service. Khader saw him and asked him to approach, explaining that they were students from the south who had lost everything in the storm. Khader then asked him to fetch some food for them. In the meantime, another constable named Pocker arrived at the scene. While Pocker went to purchase food, Muhammad Ali secretly instructed him to report the arrival of these newcomers to Saidali Kutty Master.

Saidali Kutty Master was a wealthy loyalist known as Valiya Muthalali, while his brother was referred to as Kochu Muthalali, or the minor rich man. Although he was called "Master," it was not because he was a schoolteacher; rather, it was because he taught local fishermen how to read and write. Since it was the day of Badar during the month of Ramzan, the town was still crowded for the Maulid ceremony. News of the newcomers spread quickly, and crowds flocked to the coast fearing they might be Japanese invaders, as Japan had already conquered Singapore and Burma and was expected to target India next.

The news eventually reached an army outpost in Tanur, and soldiers soon arrived at the shore. By this time, Khader and his friends had already thrown their guns into the sea to hide

their true identity. The group was taken to Saidali Kutty Master's warehouse for interrogation, after which the head constable informed the Sub-Magistrate and the Tirur Sub-Inspector of their arrival. Although Khader and his party realized they had been trapped, they maintained a calm and happy exterior to avoid suspicion.

During this time, a Congress leader named Hasanarutty, acting as a representative for the Mathrubhumi daily, arrived to question them. Khader trusted him and revealed the truth—that they were Congressmen—and pleaded with Hasanarutty to convince Saidali Kutty Master to release them. However, since the police authorities had already been notified, Saidali Kutty was powerless to help.

Interrogation

The Sub-Magistrate and Sub-Inspector then moved Khader and his friends to a traveler's bungalow and placed them in separate rooms for individual interrogation. Under the pressure, Ananthan Nair decided to reveal their true mission. He requested a pen and paper to provide a detailed account, stating that he repented for his actions and was willing to serve the British. Realizing that the truth was already out, Khader and the remaining three members of the group concluded there was no longer any benefit in trying to conceal their identity.

The following day, rumors of a Japanese invasion spread throughout the town. When word got out that the prisoners were being moved to Calicut by train, crowds flocked to the railway station to catch a glimpse of them. All five men were eventually taken to the Nadakkavu Police Station. For their role in identifying and capturing the INA members, the British government rewarded Saidali Kutty Master and Constable Kunhi Muhammad. In a special ceremony held at Tanur, Malabar Collector R. Matheevan presented them with gold medals.

At the Nadakkavu Police Station, a team of police and army officers arrived to interrogate the prisoners. Under the direction of CID Inspector Gopala Krishna Menon, the men were placed in separate rooms and subjected to brutal physical persecution. Despite the bodily inflictions and torture, Khader remained defiant, boldly speaking the truth and expressing pride in his mission for India's freedom. After seven days of continuous and exhausting questioning, the five men were chained by their hands and feet on the eighth day. Their eyes were covered with black cloth, and they were transported to the Calicut Railway Station in a military vehicle.

They were placed on a specially arranged train and transported to an unfamiliar location under the cover of night. When they were finally locked into separate rooms and their blindfolds were removed, they found themselves in total darkness. Unable to see his companions, Khader tried to push against the door. When he called out to ask where he was, a voice from outside informed him that they were in the notorious dark cells of Fort St. George in Madras.

Life in the dark cells was horrific. There was no light at all, and the only amenity was a small hole in a corner of the floor for their primary needs. No water was provided for sanitation, and Khader was told to use paper instead. The following morning, they were taken outside, allowing Khader to finally see his surroundings. Even as they were led to the lavatory, their legs remained chained, and the heavy iron links roared against the ground with every step. Their

meager rations consisted of a small portion of rice in the previous night and two dosas for breakfast. After breakfast hey were once again locked back into the total darkness of their cells.

After 105 days, the Governor of Madras and his wife visited the fort to see the prisoners. All twenty INA prisoners were brought out of their cells, allowing them to see one another for the first time. They had changed so completely that they could hardly recognize each other; with long, unkempt hair, unshaved mustaches, and deep, dark hollows under their eyes, they looked like beggars.

By January 17, 1943—exactly four months after they had departed from Malaya on September 16, 1942—Khader and his party were moved to the Madras Central Jail. Here, the conditions were significantly better, providing them with beds, improved comforts, and decent food. In the central jail, they encountered prominent leaders like V.V. Giri and Professor N.G. Ranga, who were also imprisoned for their involvement with the Congress party.

From jail, Khader wrote to his father describing their situation and expressing their desire to have their case argued by eminent national lawyers such as K.F. Nariman or Tej Bahadur Sapru. He also requested his father to send some money through his friend, Mr. Haque. To handle their case, the government enacted a new regulation called the Enemy Agents Ordinance and established a special court for the trial of the INA prisoners. E.E. Mack, an Irishman, was appointed as the presiding judge.

During this period, Vavakunju traveled to see his son. It was a momentous and emotional meeting as father and son embraced, tears flowing from their eyes. Vavakunju was accompanied by a Congress worker named Majeed. When his father mentioned that Khader's brother, Raheem, had been appointed as a coastal guard, Khader burst out in protest. He insisted that taking such a role was equivalent to supporting the British government and demanded that his brother resign immediately. Following Khader's firm advice, Raheem later gave up his job as a guard.

The legal proceedings moved swiftly in the special court. On 17 February, the charge sheet was submitted, detailing the primary accusations: that the accused had entered India as Japanese spies to sabotage the government and that they intended to share state secrets with Japan to disgrace the British administration.

Under the Enemy Agents Ordinance No. 1 of 1943 and Article 121A of the Indian Penal Code, nineteen of the accused were found guilty. One individual, Balakrishnan Nair, escaped prosecution after siding with the British and revealing secrets of the INA conspiracy, aided by his relative, Sub-Inspector Gopala Krishna Menon. Ananthan Nair, the leader of the group, also deserted to the British side and disclosed the full plans of the suicide squad.

Judgement

A secret trial commenced on 8 March. The accused were denied the right to choose their own advocates; instead, the government provided them with loyalist lawyers. Rajagopal Ayyangar was appointed to argue for Khader and two others, while V.N. Ethiraj served as the

government prosecutor. Throughout the trial, Khader remained adamant, declaring himself a proud Congressman. Saidali Kutty and his brother further sealed the group's fate by testifying against them.

The court found Vakkom Khader, Ananthan Nair, Bardan, Boniface, and Fauja Singh guilty. They were initially sentenced to five years of rigorous imprisonment followed by the death penalty. Others were released due to a lack of concrete evidence, though they remained detained by government order until January 1946. On 26 April, Justice Mack declared the judgment before High Court Judge Wordsworth. The convicts in the dock responded by raising their voices in defiance against British imperialism.

The High Court later amended the sentence, ordering that the convicts be hanged immediately, bypassing the term of imprisonment. Although Boniface was eventually released due to a technicality, and advocates petitioned the Viceroy for clemency, all appeals were in vain. The execution was set for 10 September.

Last Letter

On the night of 9 September, just hours before his death, Khader wrote a final letter to his father:

9 September 1943

My dear Dad, I had intended to send this letter about two months ago, but my heart held me back then, caught up in other thoughts. Now, I feel prompted once again.

In our journey of life, we often encounter stages where we must face dangers and endure sorrows. Sometimes, such calamities and grief are merely trials from Almighty Allah. We may go through terrifying experiences, but in such states, we have no right to complain to Allah. Our duty is to believe that whatever we receive comes from the Most Merciful Lord and to endure it with patience. Only then will we receive Allah's mercy and blessings.

The Holy Quran specifically highlights 'patience' (Sabr) as one of our greatest virtues. In times of sorrow and hardship, the Almighty also grants His beloved creations the strength within their hearts to bear them. The Lord of all creation will never burden us with anything in our lives that is beyond our capacity to endure.

Beloved Bappa (Father), the Most Merciful Allah has blessed me with a heart that is peaceful and unwavering. We must not murmur in discontent or show any mental instability in the face of our helplessness. This is the moment to sacrifice one's soul, being content with the will of Allah. If Allah tests me with the loss of my life, He tests you with the loss of your child. I do not falter; my heart only grows firmer. I do not look for worldly solace. I know that what I am sending is not just a letter, but a torpedo.

My birth and my life seem to have existed only to cause you pain. You desired to educate me beyond your means. You never showed any hesitation in fulfilling my every need. I never once thought that any of my ventures were beyond your reach. My heart breaks when I remember the struggles and hardships you endured for me alone. There is no measure for the tears you shed for my sake.

To secure my future, you monitored my companionships; you even scrutinized my private life. Day and night, through meals and sleep, you prayed for my future prosperity. When you were troubled by my mischiefs and childish antics, you hoped that my journey to Malaya might at least be useful for my character building. You believed that my future would be of use to you. You had rightful expectations of me.

But what can be done? Ask the Merciful Allah. Pray to Him. Let Him give the answer. Allah says in the Holy Quran: 'Call upon Me; I will answer you.

Though it is our hopes and desires that drag us forward in life, the experiences we encounter are often the complete opposite of what we wished for. How magnificent life would have been if it unfolded according to our will! In life, we experience and seek so many things, yet we never truly stop to think about the secret behind this—the secret of life in this world. Even if we were to reflect upon it, not only would we fail to grasp its true meaning and essence, but the very act of thinking would only cause us more distress.

Man's only true longing is simply to live. But is there a grand purpose for them in human life? I cannot wrap my mind around it. The profound mysteries hidden within Allah’s plan cannot be grasped by our limited intellect. In our practical lives, we swim forward, clinging tightly to certain hopes and ideals, considering them our means of survival. Yet, in the unfolding of those experiences, we sometimes find ourselves held responsible for actions that go against truth and righteousness.

Sometimes, man deliberately places no value on life itself. Born with the seeds of death already within him, he himself assigns a worth and a standard to his existence, ensuring it does not descend into a mere animalistic state. He strives to bring a sense of virtue and fragrance to his own life. He turns away from selfishness. Bravely defying death, he becomes ready to do anything with complete sincerity.

Why should man think so deeply about a life that has no permanence? Indeed, a practical man has no need to overthink anything. Once he begins to act, there is no longer a need for contemplation.

Bappa, I have written so much, yet I have no clear sense of what exactly I have put into words. About five years ago, at the dawn of my youth, I left you. That departure was in search of some kind of fortune or status. Both you and I, back then, built many castles in the air without any foundation. However, even if you gained no benefit from my departure, I can take pride in the fact that I gained something. If you ask me what that is, my answer is this: I have understood a little of what life truly means.

Though you were poor and helpless, you raised me by enduring hardships and difficulties. You sent me out—at a time when I knew nothing of life—to seek a livelihood amidst varying circumstances and opportunities. Yet, I learned a path that you had neither advised nor desired for me. I never forgot the duty or the debt I owed you. I once believed that I could fulfill my obligations toward you, complete them, and thereby earn your blessings and pleasure. I only realize now that this was one of the misconceptions I held.

Beloved Bappa, though I have never forgotten my duties toward you, I know I was never selfish; others may not know this, but Allah is aware of my sincerity. Take heart in the belief that He is powerful enough to fulfill those duties tenfold on my behalf. Our current pathetic state will surely change within this lifetime itself.

Last month, I sent a letter to Abdul Majeed Kakka. I have reason to doubt whether it reached him. In that letter, I had described my temporary situation.

On the first of April, the judgment of my case was pronounced. According to the Indian Penal Code, I was sentenced to five years of rigorous imprisonment, followed by death by hanging. Following the formal review of our case by the High Court, which upheld the lower court's verdict, it was stated that at this most troubled stage—a critical time when opportunities are being sought to attack India and the country is being distressed and exhausted—their crime is in no way pardonable and the death penalty must be carried out immediately.

The High Court pronounced its verdict on April 28th. After that, a petition prepared by our own lawyers was sent to the Viceroy.

My dear Father,

I know that this extremely harsh news will cause you unbearable sorrow. In the name of Allah, I plead with you to try your best to control your heart and find peace. Remember that we are helpless and that our only help is from Allah alone.

My beloved father, I am parting from you forever. My humble death will take place tomorrow morning before six o'clock.

Be courageous.

I see each of my dear siblings in my heart as if watching a motion picture. My heart speaks to theirs. In this tragic state of mine, the pen I have been using seems to show a sort of reluctant attitude, as if it cannot bear the immense mental agony. Here, a humble pencil has courageously come forward to help me.

I was unable to do anything for my siblings. I had believed that it was not too late for me to work for them as I had hoped, and to fulfill my duties toward them. Only now do I realize that this was one of the many misconceptions I held. I shall not write more about it. I know that your thoughts are not occupied by any of those things right now.

My dear younger brother Abdurahim, though you are losing an only brother, I have earned many friends of great stature and value during my brief life in this world—friends who have regarded me, and whom I have regarded, as more than a dear brother. Believe me when I say that in time, their presence or their companionship will surely be enough to heal the sorrow you feel for me.

My dear affectionate Mother and my only sister Habsa—I hereby entrust them to you and Abdussalam. I believe that the grief they suffer from my loss will be eased as quickly as possible through the joyful care and the happiness the two of you provide. I hope that the both of you will take up my share of responsibility as well, and strive for their happiness until the day they pass away. If ever anything is gained as a result of my labors, you must use it solely for Habsa and my dear Mother. I cannot say now what is to be gained, from whom, or when. All those who owe me will surely deliver it to you at the right opportunity. You need not even go looking for who they are.

Next, please convey my final farewell to my other brothers. I entrust you with the duty of fulfilling that task. Tell Muhammad Meeramma that I remember her specifically. Please ask her to care for her younger sister in the same way I had cared for my Habsa.

My Moothumma, Moothappa, Pareethumma, Appachi, Mama, Ummachi, and Kochumma—these are my close loved ones who cherished me with all their hearts. Tell them to try and forget me. To all my other relatives and friends who loved me, I offer my very last Salaam.

Assalamu Alaikum (Peace be upon you)."

Let me conclude my letter by saying a little about some friends whom I loved with an open heart. The following are individuals who loved me with the affection of a brother: T.M. Kadar Pailwan, Paravur M.K. Ashan, and Edava M.A. Abdul Majeed Alamkode. These three are currently in Malaya. They shall be the ones to sing my praises in the future. I shall not write anything here regarding their individual greatness or their many virtues; you will come to understand those from them personally one day.

I am deeply indebted to certain people. I owe the most to Shine Kakka and Ramzan Edava. I am grieved that I am unable to express my humble gratitude to them through anything other than these mere words.

Please ensure that you mention to Noohu Master, Muhammadali Kakka of Anjuthengu, Muhammad of Mavila, Muhammad Kunju Ayiroor, Mr. Madhavan of Karumamvilakam, Mr. Vasudevan Nedumkanda, and Mr. Krishnan of Edavila that I have made special mention of them. Though I have much to write about Senan, the son of Vakkom Thayyil Raman Vaidyar, I do not feel like writing anything further at the moment. Mr. Senan was both a well-wisher and a close re lation of mine.

Please tell Vadakke Vilakathu Abdurahiman Kakka, Mamukkakka, Zaid Kakka, Puthiyaveettil Hakeem Kakka, Ubaid Kakka, Shafi, and others that I remember them with great pride. I have many other friends and relatives whose names I have not written here; I ask for their forgiveness. Since time is running out, I must stop.

The clock is about to strike twelve. It marks the beginning of the day of my death. The signaling bell is about to toll.

On this very Friday, the seventh day of the month of Ramadan, between five and six in the morning, I shall die. My dear brothers and sisters, I have no words of consolation left to offer you. I am parting from you. We shall meet again in Mahshar (the after-life). Do not grieve for me. There are only a few hours left for the drama of my life to finish its final act.

When you happen to hear from eyewitnesses at some point about the courage, joy, and peace with which I faced death, you will surely not be able to help but feel happy. Indeed, you will surely be proud.

Let me conclude. Assalamu Alaikum.

This is the heart rendering letter written in Malayalam language by Abdul kader to his father on the last day before his execution. His friend Bonyface was in the other room he wrote a letter to himand gave it to him throughthe water channel going through his room. His letter might have sent to his father through the jail authorities.

Execution

On the morning of Friday, 10 September 1943, the Jail Superintendent and the executioner arrived. All four men—Ananthan Nair, Khader, Fauja Singh, and Bardan—were led out from their cells. Ananthan Nair and Khader were the first two scheduled for execution. At the time, Khader was only 26 years, three months, and ten days old, while Ananthan Nair was thirty-nine.

As they were led toward the gallows, they remained remarkably bold, showing no signs of fear or disappointment. While ascending the platform, they shouted "Bharat Mata ki Jai" and called for the downfall of British Imperialism. Later that morning, the other prisoners saw the

bodies of the four martyrs hanging from the gallows. Even in death, it is said that their faces bore the faint trace of a smile, as if they were at peace with their sacrifice.

Vakkom Abdul Khader's story is a profound example of the courage found within the INA. From a young boy kissing Gandhi's hand at a train station to a revolutionary facing the gallows in Madras, his journey remains a vital part of India's struggle for independence.

(Courtesy: Vakkom Sukumaran, *INA Hero Vakkom Khader*, (Malayalam), Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 2014)
