

ISMAT CHUGHTAI

From Bombay to Bhopal

“WAH, the trip to Bhopal was something else!” Yusuf spoke joyfully.

You must be wondering who this gentleman Yusuf Sahib is and how he is connected with the Progressive Writers’ Conference in Bhopal.

If you’re looking for something to help you distinguish, but without having to exert your mind, what is progressive and what is not, just observe Yusuf Sahib. Whatever upsets him and prompts him to be abusive has got to be progressive; whatever makes him break into a wide grin must be unmistakably reactionary.

Consider this for instance: Yusuf thinks that [Muhammad Hasan] Askari is the world’s greatest philosopher and Meeraji the greatest poet, that if [Khwaja Ahmed] Abbas has written anything of worth it has to be the preface to *Aur Insān Mar-gayā* (and humanity died), and that the correct way to live is none other than the one portrayed by Ramanand Sagar.

So when commotion swept across our ranks following the arrest of Ali Sardar Jafri, why should Yusuf not have been overjoyed? Under different circumstances I might have taken him on, but Seema’s pajamas still remained to be stitched and she would have caught a chill in just her panties. So, whatever happened was for the best.

Jafri was whisked away to prison and warrants were issued for Kaifi Azmi and Niyaz Haider. That pretty much meant the end for the *mushā’ira* in Bhopal. It was Jafri who had convinced us to go there, using sweet talk, persuasion, coaxing, and threats. And now we had collapsed face up like a bunch of marionettes.

On Sunday we decided that since we weren’t going to Bhopal we should go instead to the Progressive Writers’ meeting and protest Jafri’s arrest. But when we got there we encountered an altogether unexpected situation. In Jafri’s absence Krishan Chander had assumed the role of

commander-in-chief and had taken charge of the fortifications.

“We must go to Bhopal, now more than ever,” the commander-in-chief gave the ultimatum, and Shahid Latif, who had deserted literature in favor of filmmaking a long time ago, became so excited that he declared, “It is extremely cowardly on our part that one of our members is incarcerated and all we can do is huddle in a corner. The arrest of a single Jafri has placed a collar of timidity around our necks.” That did it. I was so aroused that I stitched Seema’s pajamas in just one night and come morning our small army of six adults and two infants set off for Bhopal: Krishan Chander, Mahindar Nath, Shahid Latif, Majrooh [Sultanpuri], Adil Rashid and I; the infants included Adil Rashid’s daughter and mine. The rest of the fanfare was provided by a large assortment of luggage: suitcases, *nāshṭa-dāns*, and bedrolls.

Initially our plan was to travel by third class. However, we found out that this was too cramped to allow even an occasional breath of air. In the second class compartment we eventually opted for, it appeared that the Railway had made every effort to ensure that we still received all the other discomforts of third class. As a result, all of us settled down very comfortably on bedrolls, bundles and the pointed corners of suitcases and started playing rummy.

Suddenly Adil Rashid pointed to some hills outside and selecting one, exclaimed, “Haji Malang Sharif, Haji Malang Sharif!” and, donning expressions of extreme piety, all of us immediately began staring at the hills. Majrooh, who had two jokers in his hand at the time, insisted that we should abandon the idea of tomb-worship and return to the game of cards, but we were praying earnestly, “*Yā* Haji Sharif, give us jokers! O master, O Benevolent saint, give us jokers!”

“You’re a bunch of faithless people, your prayers aren’t going to be answered,” Majrooh said, making use of the opportunity to swipe another joker from the stack of cards.

And I started thinking: What is this thing we call faith? Why are we so used to having faith? Why do we insist that others must have it too? How long will we demand that men give us our rights? Why don’t we, like Majrooh, sneak a joker from the stack of cards?

“These saints have it good,” Adil said, squirming around in order to find a comfortable position in the cramped space. “At least they can stretch out their legs in the grave.”

“And no hassle of putting down a *pagri* either,” Mahindar Nath remarked.

“But what peace can they have? There’s such a commotion all day

and all night long at their graves. Sometimes it is the ghouls who are descending upon them, sometimes the out of tune *qavvālī* music keeps blaring, and what's worse, some men drag their favorite prostitute to the place to carry on with them. A man dies to escape the grueling travails of life, to finally have some comfort, some sense of space, not to have people disturb him with all this relentless activity and noise."

"Now listen people, I've never written a welcome speech and I don't intend to write one now." I suddenly dropped an ultimatum.

"Look, it's not difficult at all, it can be written in an hour," the commander-in-chief assured me.

"But I have no idea how to write the stupid thing. I don't even know how to begin. 'Honored gentlemen ... honored ladies, ...'"

"No, no you don't need any of that nonsense." After this Krishan earnestly proceeded to explain all the neat tricks for writing a welcome speech but my mind refused to comprehend and I started to feel really panicky.

"I will never ever be able to write one. Folks, why don't you write a paragraph each in legible hand and I'll read them out, just as I did once before?"

"Once before" referred to the time way back when I had first started teaching. Our Manager Sahib ordered me to write a welcome speech.

"Forgive me, but I don't know how to write that kind of speech."

"Oh, there's nothing to it. Won't take more than an hour to write," he said, snapping his fingers very much like Krishan Chander had done.

"One hour—I won't be able to write such heavy stuff in one year."

"What? So you think a welcome speech is heavy stuff?"

"Absolutely. Totally stupid too."

"Excuse me, but what about the stupid, excuse me, woefully stupid stuff that you write..." He was visibly incensed.

"But you probably don't want me to write a woefully stupid welcome speech..."

"All right, I'll attempt it myself."

He kept stewing inside and the next day the poor man presented me with his extremely pathetic attempt.

But no one in this group was willing to rack their brains like the Manager Sahib for my sake.

"You want women to have the same rights as men?" Krishan taunted.

"What fool wants to have the same rights as men? Our rights and our responsibilities are greater than those of men and will stay that way."

But no sarcasm, no enticement and no threat proved useful. Krishan couldn't carry his arguments beyond a few points.

"Haji Malang! Haji Malang!" Adil screamed again.

"*Arē bhā'ī*, why are we stuck with this Haji Malang?" Krishan said. "It looks as if he too is going to the Bhopal Conference with us." And then Krishan let loose the reins of his imagination:

"These *pīrs* and *faqīrs*, don't they have conferences? Say, if Kalyer Sharif, Ajmer Sharif, Ghazi Mian, and Muinuddin Chishti showed up at one, what kinds of things would they discuss? What problems would they have to face?

"Well, I bet they'd complain that the general populace has become very indifferent. No more gifts and votive offerings. People just walk in empty-handed to make their petitions, their prayers. Worse yet, there's been a drop in the number of the Bohri and Khoja visitors at the shrines because most of their affluent members have snuck off to Pakistan. The ones who still remain are just a bunch of petty-merchants. What use are they? As for the atheists, they will receive their punishment with the *kāfīrs* when the time comes."

"*Hunh!* Why don't the *pīrs* and *faqīrs* get up and go to Pakistan then? If they can fulfill the vows and wishes of others, surely they can relocate their shrines as well."

"They will have to ... one day. Haven't you seen the flood of pilgrimages to Bapu [Gandhi Ji]? What chance do the old graves have in the face of these new pilgrimages?"

"How can you say this? Hindustan is a secular state. Religious tolerance will endure here, the Muslims will have the right to freely create as many Haji Malangs as they wish."

"*Arē*, stop this profanity, you wretches! If Haji Malang gets angry, he will lift the entire train from its tracks and smash it to the ground." Adil tried to scare everyone.

"That's plain sabotage—the shabbiest tactic, I might add," Shahid Sahib remarked.

"About as shabby as throwing members of the opposition party into slammers, putting locks on their tongues and shutting down their newspapers," Krishan explained.

"*Shush! Shush!* Play your card, come on, play your card," Mahendar said.

And we began playing our cards.

We had food with us and were feeling hungry at this point. But when we opened our tiffin-carriers we discovered that eating required the

special skills of a juggler. The morsel intended for the mouth was ending up in our noses. The train was shaking far too much. Add to it the misery of having to endure the pain as the sharp corners of the trunks and the buckles of the holdalls on which we were perched jabbed into our bottoms and thighs.

“*Arē śāhib*, bringing about a revolution is no joke. These trunks and holdalls are nothing at all.” That day Majrooh Sahib had made a firm resolve to bring about the revolution. And so whenever a heavy trunk had to be dragged, Shahid Latif invariably yelled, “Majrooh Sahib! Is this how you will bring about a revolution?” Provoked into action, Majrooh would drag the trunks and the holdalls, take the girls to the bathroom (making sure that they didn’t get their shoes wet), and then drag the trunks back again, all with such vigor that each time you could savor the taste of a grand revolution right there in the compartment.

The question of where to sleep came up once we were done eating. Krishan Chander and Shahid Latif took charge of the arrangements while the rest of us sat quietly like a bunch of dreary-faced refugees. One seat was assigned to Seema and myself, another to Adil Rashid and his daughter, Nahid. Well, that took care of those of us who were accompanied by children. Only a single small seat remained with four adults vying for it. After a bit of an argument it was decided to give it to Krishan Chander and Mahindar Nath. I don’t know how two adult males squished and twisted their bodies to fit into the cramped space of that seat, but they did. As for Shahid and Majrooh, they were so overcome by fatigue that they would have had no difficulty falling asleep hanging from the tip of a needle. They first sat down on a couple of bundles and giant-sized trunks, then gradually stretched out their legs, and soon were snoring away.

At Bhasawal station, despite the cold weather, the local group of Progressives, who had gotten wind of our journey to Bhopal, were waiting for our slow train to arrive, with garlands and flowers at the ready. They had only one message for us. The Progressive writers should not, under any circumstances, yield ground to the reactionaries. The message energized the listless atmosphere and we set out with their flower strings around our necks and their determination lodged securely in our hearts. If we lost on a single front, many more fronts would inevitably be lost as well. No, we couldn’t allow that to happen.

Night passed swiftly. At the crack of dawn Majrooh started to yell, “Tea is here. Drink it quickly or it will get cold. And, yes, the biscuits—don’t forget to eat them. We’ve paid for them.”

Well, we had to drink the tea and also consume the stale biscuits.

Since, by God's grace, Majrooh was the only poet who was not in jail, he was attending the conference as a representative of the Progressive poets, and also as a bridegroom, since he was to rush straight off to his own wedding after the Bhopal Conference. He was acting boorishly standoffish, as though he wouldn't be able to usher in the revolution if he got married. Marriage is in itself a "reactionary" act, especially to an illiterate, coltish young woman from one's enemy village, like the one being foisted upon Majrooh.

"*Arē bhā'ī*, you don't have to submit to such high-handedness. Why are you agreeing to this marriage?" Mahindar Nath spoke irately.

"Because I don't want my domestic life to glide smoothly along like a well-oiled wheel. I need the bumps and jolts, the grind. A harmonious family life will make me complacent; the throb, the ache, the tenderness which I feel now will simply vanish."

And I wondered: Why is it that these writers and poets romanticize the coltish, naïve village lass in their imaginations but lose their bearings the minute they are confronted by her in real life? Why is it so? Why do men like to hold women responsible for all their misdeeds? The wine of poesy doesn't spill over from the goblet until the poets have suffered heartbreak. The muse evades them unless somebody has stirred them up and left them spinning. But in the case of our Majaz this prescription seems to have had the opposite effect; maybe his hand shook and he took more than the prescribed dose. Now our *hakīms* (healers) have come up with the idea that if the patient were administered some super effective purgative, accompanied by the prayer "God will heal," it would most certainly breathe new life into the faded buds of poetry. And I prayed in earnest that this new bride from the village would waste no time in becoming artful and wily and give Majrooh's heart such jolts that for once *gham-e jānān* would be sufficiently stretched to become *gham-e daurān*.

A contingent of people was waiting at the Bhopal station to welcome us. Shahid and I were taken to Jan Nisar Akhtar's. Adil Rashid went to his in-laws' house and Akhtar Saeed took Krishan Chander and Mahendar with him. Coming upon the heels of our short journey this splitting up dampened our spirits.

The moment we arrived at Jan Nisar Akhtar's house Safia and I hugged each other right on the stairs with such clumsy ferocity that we both nearly lost our footing and narrowly escaped rolling down the stairs. Upstairs in the flat, we started inspecting each other's children. Safia said, "Your daughter's better looking than either of you," and I said, "Both of

your kids certainly look much better than you two.” Subsequently we decided together that we were laying the foundation for a better world, a stronger and more beautiful world.

After breakfast Safia left to run some errands at the college, telling me to eat or have cooked whatever I wished. Suddenly I remembered that I still hadn't written the stupid thing—my speech. I felt like I would drop dead. Not only did I have my own daughter to take care of, but I also needed to keep an eye on Safia's two darling children whom she had left in my care.

Thank God the speech was about communal riots. Those three children were determined to reduce my life to a ruin. Krishan Chander said that my tone in the address was exceedingly bitter. It must have been. But I was hardly to blame for it. God, those kids!

Just before leaving for the Conference Safia and I argued about something really silly. She claimed that my temperament was much too acerbic. I, on the other hand, declared that when the angels were molding her they had kneaded the clay with honey and milk instead of plain water. Each thinking the other foolish, we arrived at Manto Hall, where a corner had been cordoned off to seat women who observed purdah. The men's part of the hall wasn't too crowded, but the women's was packed and bristling with activity. The hall was very large and there was something wrong with the microphone so you could hardly make out anything. Young women were darting back and forth trying to catch a word. Frustrated they plopped down in their seats and, like typical women, began analyzing the shapes of the noses and mustaches of the Progressive Writers. All of a sudden the microphone jolted back to life and the minute Krishan Chander began his speech the sound came through clearly. Safia and I made a “bogus” (silly) joke about this.

The speech was well received, not only for its subject but also for Krishan's lyricism, to which Ali Sardar Jafri too seemed to have had some objection. I could see that Krishan's style touched the hearts of the young people. Even when he struck with a shoe, he softened the blow with lyricism. That is why the wound, even though invariably deep, never left a scar. My heart began to sink. And here I attack with claws that lacerate. The specter of my speech rose before me, baring its teeth in an attempt to scare me. I looked the speech over when we got back home, to tone down its edginess.

How well Krishan captured minds and how many of them! How supple branches gently bent over in the forceful winds of his writing! How numberless the seeds of reflection that were planted in young, inno-

cent hearts! Foundations dug for new edifices! But what if the builder's hand became shaky? The pen did guide, but sometimes it also led astray. Not a responsibility to be taken lightly.

The next day Shahid Latif chaired the session. Zafar Sahib read one of his plays, but for one thing, the microphone acted up again, for another, the play itself was too long, for yet another, he read it much too fast, just to finish it in the time allotted. I also read a story, mostly as a trial; I was afraid my legs might buckle during my speech and I might not be able to get a word out. But nothing of the sort happened. I neither fumbled, nor did my legs shake. How many Haji Malang Sharifs we carry on our backs. When will we get rid of them? How many more hurdles do we still have to cross? How can I offer advice about anything to those who sit crouched behind their veils when I'm still in the clutches of superstition, I who regard myself as liberated and progressive?

The session of the Progressive Writers' Conference conducted by Sundar Lalji turned out to be truly grand and impressive. He didn't need a microphone. Every corner of the hall resounded with his oratorical roar. I felt envious of his ability to extemporize with such ease and not to have to jot down his speech. The subject was the defense of the Urdu language, and he seemed to be fencing in all directions at once, delivering blow after lethal blow: a few here to politics, one or two there to economics, one every now and then to religion, saving the worst ones for both Hindus and Muslims. Along the way, when the opportunity offered itself, he also took a few pot shots at Allah Mian. Next the jails and the people who ran them came in for a heavy tongue-lashing, throwing punches at *akhand* Hindi and Urdu as well in the process and knocking them over. Except for cooking recipes and the techniques of sewing and embroidering, he brought up nearly every topic under the sun. His speech made it obvious that Sundar Lalji possessed the amazing ability to talk about different issues in different languages and with equal facility, adding the right amount of sweetness and bitterness, saltiness and sourness as he went along. Sometimes he gave the patient a shock as part of the cure, at other times he surreptitiously offered a quinine pill quoted with sugar. But the prescription didn't always work. Often people felt completely lost, wondering what exactly did it all add up to. But when he prophesied revolution in Hindustan—like the one China had—which no power would be able to forestall, a few in the audience reacted warily, but for the most part the hall resounded with applause. He also claimed that Urdu would never be wiped out from Hindustan. Just as the mother tongue of Hindustan couldn't be vanquished in spite of the best efforts of the

British, in the same way *akhand* Hindi would not be able to kill off Urdu. Rather, we will have to bring the two languages together and create a new one—“Hindustani.”

I spent the intervals between sessions in the women’s section. I was gratified to notice that the young women in Bhopal were one step ahead of their sisters in Hyderabad with whom I had occasion to spend some time three years ago. For instance, the young women in Hyderabad had asked me what I thought about love. I had replied, “I don’t profess to be an expert in this area. But I must say I don’t like the current style of love, especially if it promotes slavish adoration. Love is a kind of need, like hunger or thirst. If it’s just a sexual thirst then it’s ridiculous to dig deep wells to quench it. One might just as well wet one’s lips with the waters of the free-flowing Ganga. As for the concept of love based on friendship and intellectual companionship, I don’t think this country is ready for that.”

The girls in Bhopal on the other hand asked me about the future of Pakistan, about possible solutions to the problems Muslims faced in Hindustan. A few inquired about communism. I ended up feeling that these young women certainly didn’t lack romance in their lives, but they didn’t allow it to preoccupy their thoughts completely, they wanted to do more than just engage in daring, romantic escapades. But what that something more was they hadn’t quite figured out.

Now hold your breath. Here comes my turn. Oh God! Is the crowd really so big or am I seeing quadruple? There were human faces everywhere. Today the women’s section had been pushed way back into a corner. The microphone was dead, all the same Jan Nisar Akhtar kept thrusting it into my face because he had already paid the rental fee for it. As the saying goes, the Khan was not only eating his merchandise he was also forcing others to eat it. It seemed the mike was choking off the sound. It would swallow one’s voice and instead of amplifying it merely emit a burp. There was constant whispering in the audience. The women behind the curtain kept murmuring. Then the speech was over—finally!

A play was performed during the second session. Absolutely incomprehensible. The actors didn’t remember their parts. The prompter’s voice overpowered all the other voices. And worse, the boy who was playing the heroine had forgotten to shave that morning. Also, the braid attached to his hair had been fixed so loosely by some inexperienced moron that it seemed in constant danger of falling off. Certain that it would come off before the curtain fell, the girls in the audience fidgeted with trepidation. When the play reached its finale with the braid still in

place everyone heaved a sigh of relief. It seemed as if we had been hanging on the gallows all this time.

The other boy attempting to play a girl had padded his shirtfront so heavily that the sight of him made the girls in the audience chafe with embarrassment and anger. A couple of them came to me and complained.

“Did you see how they caricaturized women, making them a laughing stock?”

I was already quite upset. I felt like scratching their wretched faces. I said, “Well, this is your punishment. Sit behind your veils and sit there till doomsday if you like. People will make up ghouls to represent you and to scare each other. Do you know how many minds have been twisted and subverted by your purdah? You have acquiesced to being victims and you’ve grown used to it. I have no sympathy for women who don’t know how to help themselves.”

The faces of the girls fell and I realized that Safia was probably right. My disposition was far too acerbic, something that could only hurt, that could only scratch up a soft and delicate surface. I decided to try proving Safia wrong: I proceeded to sweeten my tone with a little bit of honey.

“Just think for a minute. How much can men do for you? If you can’t share in their work, at least take your burden off their shoulders.”

But my heart was not in this lecturing. I noticed that now and then, along with expressions of helplessness and weakness, fleeting traces of anger, of frustration had begun to appear in the eyes of those purdah-observing young women. They won’t stay put in this situation much longer, I thought. Some looked like they were waiting to be rescued by a liberal young man who would wed them and, along with the bridal attire, give them freedom as a wedding gift—a freedom which would enable them to frequent movie houses and parties without a care in the world. Watching me roam about without restriction filled them with envy. In the eyes of some other girls I saw excessive impatience. They seemed so distraught by their present situation that they would have left it at any cost, even to elope with the first man who promised to give them all this.

“Tell us then, what should we do?” they asked me.

“If I say give up your purdah, get an education, find jobs, take an interest in adult education, etc., I know it would be of no use. You’re imprisoned in purdah, your sisters are illiterate, the children of your country are hungry, the young men are unemployed and sick. This purdah, this illiteracy, this hunger and poverty, they are all fruits of the same tree. Links in the same chain. If you tear off these leaves, these flowers, new ones will just appear in their place and produce different, far

deadlier fruits. This is why we must attack the roots.”

“Well then, what should we do to dig out those roots?” they asked. I was stopped short in my tracks. They were testing me, but I performed so poorly I couldn’t hope to pass even with a “C”; I was unable to answer this simple question of theirs. My head was lowered in shame. We don’t have a program that we can offer to our youth, no path that we can point to and say, “There! Follow it along. All the way!”

“You should read literature.” At that moment all I wanted was to hand them an easy remedy so they could get started. A more effective drug was sure to come along in the meantime. However, I knew they wouldn’t, they couldn’t read literature. Their youth, the atmosphere around them, the ambience—all these prepared them to read only fairy tales or mushy romances. The acerbity in my temperament mounted again. Only yesterday one girl had mentioned that most of the young women attending this meeting belonged to affluent, well-to-do families. Woe to me! Why had I ever started preaching women’s reform? Reform was not even my objective. The building was already in ruins, beyond all hope of repair. Any attempt to do so would be plain foolishness. The whole structure had to be demolished and built anew. We’d wasted too much time already dressing the wound. What was needed now was a scalpel both sharp and quick. “But I must have at least some answer to the girls’ question,” I thought. “Right now, though, I’d better make my escape. Outside, in the men’s section, there are many stalwarts, one more distinguished than the other. Surely they could teach me some spell to bring these girls under. Shall I ask Krishan Chander? He’d know. And he won’t hold back.” But when I came out, Krishan Chander, surrounded by a group of students, was holding forth:

“The problem is that we don’t have a constructive program before us. We *do* know what is required, but as the saying goes, who will bell the cat and how?”

“Oh dear,” I exclaimed, “the messiah himself is in trouble.”

Mahendar Nath took the chair on the third day. His speech was listened to with rapt attention by the audience in the women’s section because most of it was about young women. They could easily relate to what he was saying and, hence, comprehended his speech better than they had either Krishan Chander’s or Shahid Latif’s.

As the evening progressed the crowds increased. Today the women had been brought very close to the stage and they could hear everything quite clearly. The residents of Bhopal seem to be particularly fond of *mushā’iras*. The audience was mainly women. The *mushā’ira* continued on

until a quarter to twelve, mainly on the strength of *ghazals* and *nazms*. Majrooh was the only person representing the Progressive poets. Like a sacred relic he was being saved for last; Josh Sahib, expected to arrive from Lucknow by the noon train still hadn't. At the beginning the *mushā'ira* was somewhat sluggish and to make matters worse Safia's children and my daughter were still awake. So except for Hazrat Tabban's poem "*Dīvālī*" we couldn't really enjoy anything. The children were feeling terribly agitated and crabby because of the hullabaloo all around us and, in turn, were making Safia's life and mine a veritable hell. Suddenly a clamor arose. "Get out of the way children ... Josh Malihabadi *zindabād* (long live!) ... the poet of revolution *zindabād* ..." and we saw the throngs being rent asunder as the poet of revolution was led toward the stage.

After Josh Sahib had settled down on the stage in splendor, Safia Akhtar got up and delivered a short address welcoming him on behalf of the purdah-clad students and then she proceeded to drape a garland of *gōṭā* around his neck with trembling, nervous hands. The hall echoed with loud clapping and rallying cries, and, terrified, our children began to bawl.

Things finally appeared to jell some. Majaz and Sahir, who were supposed to come with Josh Sahib, couldn't make it; Sahir had a fever and Majaz ... well, you should know. We must be accustomed to his absence by now. Anyway, Majrooh took charge and was able to carry the *mushā'ira* through to Josh Sahib. Tired from the long journey and also because the hour was late, Josh Sahib had become a little irritable. I don't know what happened exactly, but something went wrong suddenly and the *mushā'ira* ended abruptly.

Since setting up a pattern-line (*miṣra' tarḥ*) has gone out of fashion, poets have also stopped offering their fresh compositions in *mushā'iras*. Everyone reads their old pieces. Except for Tabban's "*Dīvālī*," I had heard every other poem before and hence had no fun at all. You see, there's that acerbity beginning to mount again.

Jan Nisar put Josh Sahib, who was travelling with another gentleman, in the other room. Safia shifted the beds in her room for the new guests and made arrangements to sleep on the floor with her children. If she could have managed it she would have peeled off her own skin and spread it out as a carpet for her husband's mentor Josh Sahib. Today she was very happy, Hindustan's greatest poet was her guest. In her excitement she had forgotten to have the evening meal prepared and was now tormented by the thought that if Josh Sahib asked for food she wouldn't know what to do. "Safia," I advised, "Josh Sahib is a very sweet man and

if someone insisted that he had already eaten he would agree that he had.” As it turned out, Josh Sahib had in fact already had a meal in the train.

Early the next morning we were awakened by Josh Sahib declaiming his *rubā'īs* (quatrains) in the adjoining room. Safia shook us awake, and, after quickly splashing some water on our faces, we all arrived in Josh Sahib's presence. Bathed and dressed in clean crisp clothes, he seemed to us the very personification of poetry itself.

These poets are strange creatures indeed. Especially new poets. Majrooh doesn't resemble a poet at all, he looks more like a college freshman. And Jafri, his features bear no affinity to the Arabic and Persian words that are the hallmark of his poetry. One suspects, looking at Kaifi, that he's just been pushed out of a water pot and made to stand but that before long he'll crumble in a daze. However, when he recites his couplets his entire being bounces up with incredible force, like a compressed spring. Majaz never strikes one as capable of unleashing bloody windstorms. But as for Josh Sahib, he is as smart, alert and forceful in his person as he is in his poetry. At the moment he appeared to be in good humor, though still a bit put off by the *mushā'ira* the previous evening.

We had lunch at Akhtar Saeed's. Then Ahsan Ali took us to Akhtar Jamal's house. Akhtar Jamal is one of those fortunate young women of Bhopal whose parents are liberal in their outlook and have given their children a lot of freedom. I couldn't figure out, however, what program these young girls had in mind for putting that freedom to good use. From there we went to the Coffee Club where the welcoming committee had arranged an at-home for us.

In the evening the informal *mushā'ira* held in the adjoining room with Josh Sahib at the helm drew us all together. Josh Sahib was in an exceptionally good mood and was aggressively demanding praise. It was the first time that I saw his real colors. The bitter taste from the previous evening's *mushā'ira* still lingered in his mouth and he wasn't at all willing to attend the *mushā'ira* organized by the Union. But people weren't about to let him go to waste.

The next day I thought I should pay a brief visit to Hamida Salamuddin or she might get upset with me. I had barely been with her a few minutes when Akhtar Saeed telephoned to say that everyone was going to Sanchi. I said, “When do they expect to be back, if they're leaving at four o'clock?” He said that time was not a consideration. They were going to Sanchi and would return eventually. Coming all the way to Bhopal, I thought, and returning without visiting the Sanchi stupas would be like having seen nothing at all. Also, not a shop was open so I

couldn't very well look for the *batvas* (draw-purses) I wanted to buy.

However, when I came home I found out that, hell-bent on taking a siesta, Josh Sahib was ensconced in his bed with a quilt and was not in the mood to go anywhere. Safia and Jan Nisar looked terribly exhausted, as if recuperating from a daughter's wedding. Shahid was also groggy with sleep, but Krishan Chander, Mahendar Nath, Adil Rashid and Adhu Kumar had planted themselves resolutely in the lorry outside, insisting they were going to Sanchi come what may. Akhtar Saeed and Ahsan Ali were solidly behind them. Team after team was being dispatched to persuade Josh Sahib, but he wouldn't budge. Krishan declared, "All right, we'll go without Josh Sahib," and ordered the driver to start the lorry. Just then Askari Sahib yelled from the upstairs window: "Stop! Stop! Josh Sahib is getting up."

Fifteen minutes passed.

We screamed again that we were leaving.

A voice came from upstairs, "Josh Sahib is up—really."

Another fifteen minutes went by.

Our patience was wearing thin. Just then someone informed us that Josh Sahib was coming down the stairs.

Another ten minutes passed!

And Josh Sahib was still on the stairs.

But before we lost our patience altogether Josh Sahib, all spruced up, actually appeared on the stairs. Jan Nisar Akhtar, Safia, Askari, and Shahid accompanied him. A large cushion was stuffed in the space between two seats over which a *gā'ō-takya* was laid out and, thank God, the poet of revolution installed himself regally on the furnishings.

No ordinary lorry that! We were travelling in a special ambulance borrowed from the hospital. The wretched thing rattled so much and was so rickety it could even make a corpse come to life. We had barely gone three or four miles when it began making whimpering noises; apparently keeping company with the sick had rubbed off on it—it had become half-dead itself.

"*Ghach, ghach ... gheech!*"

"This lorry won't go any further, sahib," the driver announced dryly.

"Why won't it?" Akhtar Saeed roared.

The driver mentioned some very technical term referring to a particular part which he said was missing; as a result there was dirt residue leaking into the petrol. The vehicle came to a halt.

The driver fiddled with the engine. Everyone got out to stretch a bit. It felt like every bone in my body had been rattled by a few jolts. Safia

said, “What is the matter with Ahsan Ali today?” Both of us noticed that he had assumed a romantic pose and was engrossed in staring intently at a tree. Meanwhile the lorry was fixed and we were on our way again. We must have only gone half a mile when it gasped and froze again. But Akhtar Saeed thundered and the lorry continued on its course. That was when I became aware of the expression on the driver’s face. “Safia, what’s wrong with the driver?” I asked. “Why is his face tensing up?”

“He’s probably a military man. He seems to be fuming inside.”

The driver probably heard us muttering. The lorry stopped once more. It was the dirt again. And I suddenly remembered Niaz Hyder, who used to say, “Clean up the dirt!”

Akhtar Saeed got out in a huff and threatened the driver with a lecture on the mechanics of horse and carriage. Safia elbowed me and said, “Look.” And I saw that Ahsan Ali was again measuring the height of the trees with his gaze.

“I think he’s in love,” Safia said as if she had guessed his ailment by merely taking his pulse.

Ahsan’s voice carries a challenge, his words are dynamic, his thoughts are animated and vibrant, when Ahsan speaks he reminds me of Ali Sardar Jafri for some reason.

Why is it—Safia and I wondered—that when men fall in love they all behave in a similar fashion. They completely forget how they are supposed to act and ignore the rules of conduct imposed on them by their calling. When a poet, a writer, or even a communist falls in love he looks at the sky, but when a laborer or farmer falls in love he counts the stars, smells the flowers and sighs deeply.

“*Arē*, why are you making him out to be such a tempestuous person?” Safia said. “His *gham-e jānān* has long since been transformed into *gham-e daurān*.”

The lorry began moving again, rather grandly this time. Perhaps it had become used to hauling patients out of this mortal world. The stormy speed at which it now proceeded, making such a commotion, tossing us from side to side—all this did indeed make us believe that the end was near. Poor Josh Sahib was clutching onto the *gā’ō-takya* in a desperate attempt to steady himself. Afraid that their heads might collide and crack, the others looked anxious.

“Josh Sahib is really very handsome,” I whispered in Safia’s ear.

“*Shshsh!* Be quiet. What if Josh Sahib hears?”

“Do you think I care? Why, Josh Sahib and his tribe can praise a woman’s beauty to high heaven and we cannot even so much as object,

but if I, impressed by Josh Sahib's beauty, utter a few words he will threaten to get upset?"

"*Uffoh!* It is so difficult talking to you. It's like getting stuck in brambles. Look, it isn't considered proper for women to exhibit their fascination with a man's looks."

"So in your opinion women should only exhibit an interest in the looks of elephants and horses? I don't agree with you at all. A woman has the absolute right to praise a man's beauty. Krishan Chander has actually asked me to write an *afsāna* or an essay on the subject of men's good looks and, you'll see, I *will*. As soon as I get a chance. I will broach, with great subtlety and delicacy, the subject of a man's nasal hair and show how the point of his mustache can kill more efficiently than the sharpest dagger. I will compare his beard to the clouds that swirl in the dark evening skies and tell how a woman's heart is trapped and flutters in its expanse like a wild pigeon. And just as a thousand verses have been written in praise of a woman's *chōli* (bra), its fasteners and button loops, I too will write about a man's *lanḡōṭ* (loincloth) and ..."

"*Hai, hai!*" Safia interjected. "You wretch! May you die!" She crushed my face with her hand and trembled from head to foot. "This is why people accuse you of obscenity."

The ambulance hiccuped again and we slipped from the point of masculine beauty and very nearly fell face down.

"Sahib, the 'motor' may get us to Sanchi but it won't get us back. However, if you insist, I'll keep going," said the driver, making an effort to be respectful. If he had been more straightforward he might have said instead, "Fools! You're leaving at six in the evening to see the Sanchi stupas. It's a seventy-mile trip and you have neither food nor water with you for the journey. I'm your well-wisher so I'm telling you that you're just wasting your time."

"What now? Is the motor acting up again?" Akhtar Saeed bellowed.

"Look here, I say we should go back," Krishan suggested. "The driver doesn't feel we can make the trip."

"How dare he, the damn fool!" Akhtar Saeed shouted angrily.

The driver's face tensed up even more; he seemed to be saying, "Fine. But don't complain later. I'm not at all in favor of taking you to Sanchi at this crazy hour."

"In that case let's go back," Jan Nisar said, frightened by the driver's ominous silence.

"It won't act up now," the driver assured us with a mischievous grin once we had turned around.

“*Arē*, where is Ahsan Ali?” someone asked. With great difficulty the lorry was put into reverse and we turned back. A branch of *čānbēli* (jasmine) buds in his hand, Ahsan Ali was standing by the road, gazing up at the sky. Everyone started scolding the poor fellow but he remained silent. The excitement of visiting Sanchi had completely dissipated. All we wanted now was to reach home safely and quickly. Well, a ride of thirty or forty miles back and forth—so much for our trip to Sanchi.

The first day after the Conference was over I got a chance to chat some with Safia. But there was some muttering and whispering going on in the adjoining room so we couldn’t really enjoy our little tête-à-tête. The sounds seemed strange and mysterious—a few whispers followed by loud, boisterous laughter. Safia and I decided to steal into the hallway and eavesdrop. The only problem was that there was a good chance our ill-behaved children would tag along and announce our presence so that we wouldn’t be able to unravel the mystery of this noisy hilarity. It took some doing to finally cajole them into the servants’ care. We then went into the hallway and hid in a corner. We couldn’t believe what we heard. Some of the men from the Progressive Writers’ Conference had put their heads together and were reciting poetry on the very same topics that constituted the stuff of the jokes Chuttu Jan was asked to tell by many of the older married women in our households.

This Chuttu Jan was a *čavā’if* (courtesan, prostitute) of Delhi and a great favorite of my Mumani Jan. That woman, God bless her, had a store of bawdy jokes; made-up tales based on the clandestine liaisons of men and women and an abundant variety of spine-tingling jokes about sexual brutality. It didn’t matter that the women in her audience were from upper class families, women who would kick up a fuss if they so much as noticed the *dupaṭṭa* slipping off the heads of young girls. How they would listen avidly to these jokes, scream with delight, and roll over with laughter.

I don’t know why, but when I heard the men occupying themselves with this sort of thing I was reminded of the processions in the Punjab in which women were paraded naked; images of women being raped on the streets and of their horrifying destruction sailed before my eyes. Might not that and these bawdy jokes in the adjoining room have stemmed from the same desire to indulge one’s sensuality?—I wondered. Safia told me that nearly all the top-notch poets wrote this type of poetry and a recitation of them in private and intimate gatherings was regarded as the best means of relaxing and having a good time. And there I was who had all along believed this to be a pastime only for idle women who stayed at

home. Men, I thought, must engage in serious discussions on politics and economics. People accuse Manto of writing smut. If he actually wrote down all that men do, he would be guillotined instantly. And if I were to write everything that respectable ladies listen to and narrate with great relish, only God knows what people would do to me. Broached in private, all this was regarded as light literature, but if brought out in the open, people held their noses in disgust like virtuous women. I also discovered that there existed a massive collection of such poetry which, like royal prescriptions, was only handed down orally from generation to generation. The treatment meted out to poor Chirkeen must have convinced people that publishing such work meant being dragged into the public square and done in with shoe blows. Far better to commit it to memory to nurture the intellect.

Nonetheless the question is: how did this “art” come into existence in the first place? I absolutely refuse to believe that like anger or grief, or love or hate, sexual beastliness is also a part of human nature. Certainly these are gifts bequeathed by our royalty’s (*shāhi*) way of life. When the rich and the highborn had an overdose of physical excesses—which, after all, have a limit, for virility pills and salves can go only so far—they resorted to mental debauchery. In many famous courts materials to satisfy carnal appetites were provided in the form of pictures of naked women, *Kok Shastras*, poetry and lascivious jokes, all of which served to breathe some vitality into the apathetic lives of these noblemen.

Along with old garments and bones from which the last scrap of meat had been sucked, this “blessing” was also passed down to the families of the royal associates and therefrom to their associates. Today this copycat class of ours is gorging itself on the leftovers—morsels regurgitated and spewed out by them. But how have those who profess to be the standard-bearers of revolution come to terms with this mentality? I was unable to find an answer, which made my heart infinitely sad.

Unh! Let’s forget all this talk. When change comes, mentality too will change. It’s foolish to waste time trying to trim the foliage instead of concentrating on digging out the roots. It’s useless to try and exterminate the worms that exist within this class. When the roots change, new leaves will sprout and new flowers will bloom on newly-grown branches.

On returning to Bombay we found that Ali Sardar Jafri had been released. It seems that the higher-ups in the government goofed or maybe they committed a blunder of some sort.

My message to the Progressive Writers of Bhasawal is: Folks! We didn’t yield any ground to the reactionaries, just as you’d requested.

Actually, no one from that camp showed up. So we did win the battle. □

—Translated by Tahira Naqvi and Muhammad Umar Memon

Glossary

afsāna: the Urdu term for short story.

arē: hey! (interjection used chiefly to call somebody's attention); *arē bhā'ī*
Oh brother!

Divālī: the Hindu festival of light.

dupaṭṭa: a long, thin, gauze-like scarf, often starched and gathered in a bunch to form creases, worn by women across the bosom and draped backwards across the shoulders.

faqīr: a mendicant, a fakir.

gā'ō-takya: a large bolster to support the back.

gham-e daurān: trials and travails of quotidian life.

gham-e jānān: trials of love; pain caused by separation from the beloved; the anguish of unrequited love.

gōṭā: gold or silver lace.

kāfir: an infidel, unbeliever, one who denies God.

mushā'ira: a gathering in which poets declaim their poems; a poetic symposium.

nāshṭa-dān: a portable food-locker.

nazm: a poem.

pagrī: a fairly large sum of money given by the prospective buyer of an apartment or shop to the owner over and above the price of the premise; non-refundable or adjustable earnest money towards the purchase of a premise.

pīr: a Muslim saint.

qavvālī: a devotional song sung at the shrines of Muslim saints.

yā: O!, oh! (interjection).