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THE historic five-yearly mango show was just around the corner and there was a frenzy of preparation. Fortune had been kind this year: the crop was especially good because the weather had been ideal from the moment the mango trees had bloomed. As always, the *zamindars* who owned orchards and nurseries in Avadh and Rohilkhand had been preparing throughout the entire five years, and a particular urgency had pervaded their activities since the beginning of this, the fifth year, as it had every other time. It's true that every year a mango exhibition took place, but it was only once every *five* years that a competition was held for new and improved varieties of the fruit.

*Zamindars* spent the five years between contests preparing themselves and trying to ferret out the secrets of their competitors. Enormous conspiracies would arise and they would bribe away employees and laborers from each other's estates. Plot after plot was hatched at intimate social gatherings. On top of all this, the bullying and coercion typical of the *zamindar* class was accompanied by the verbal abuses traditional in Avadh and Rohilkhand.

All kinds of coalitions and factions emerged: Northern India would square off against Southern India; Bengal and Bihar against U.P.; Murshidabad and Darbhanga against Avadh and Rohilkhand. Unwilling to accept the primacy of Avadh, the people from Murshidabad and Darbhanga would display a couple of mangoes in each exhibition which left the eyes of Avadh and its ally Rohilkhand wide with amazement. Meanwhile, the *zamindars* of Rohilkhand never explicitly acknowledged Avadh's leadership, but privately they accepted the latter's superiority, understanding very well that the art of mango cultivation had advanced further there than in their home territory. The competition was always fierce. Avadh had been able to command the field because just about every estate there produced several new breeds over the course of the five

years. The passion for breeding mangoes had never caught on in quite the same way in Rohilkhand, Bihar, Bengal and other places.

It was rumored that this year's competition would be exceptionally spectacular. Wild tales circulated from faraway Bengal all the way to Avadh and Rohilkhand, and it became widely known that the Rohilkhand party was going to arrive fully girded for battle. While it was true that only the most grand and noble champions took part in the tournament—itsself a relic of the Savanti period—Rohilkhand's pervading spirit reflected not just regard for peculiar Savanti traditions but also certain democratic tendencies originating in the reign of the Rohillas. In the dark days of the eighteenth century Rohilkhand had challenged the Navab of Avadh, Warren Hastings, the Navab of Bangesh, *and* the Emperor in Delhi, all at the same time, on the populist strength of its small landowners and farmers. Even when Rohilkhand was defeated after the sudden martyrdom of Hafiz Rahmat Khan, a democratic spirit remained all through its landowning class. Thus, a *zamindar* would occasionally enter one or two varieties of mangoes created by an ordinary Rohilkhand farmer into the competition. But none of these entries really ever came up to the mark.

Outside of the mango competition, the strutting Chowdhury's of Sandile, the Afghan-looking Pathans of Malihabad and Shahjahanpur, the *zamindars* of Bareilly, the rough, tough Rohillas of Rampur, and the high-and-mighty Saiyads of Shahabad (each of whom had helped to bring mango culture to the entire area) were in the habit of settling bad blood among themselves with guns designed to fell elephants, and of using the bodies of their own people for target practice. But, when it came to the competition itself, they were unity incarnate in their effort to attain victory for their region. They were so deferential in their dealings with visitors from outside that they expressed hospitality by tying silk handkerchiefs to their guests' wrists, pleading with folded hands, and laying their hats on their feet, all in order to convince their guests to stay longer. They held friends and visitors in higher esteem than even the Dome of the Rock! These *zamindars* were such staunch traditionalists about sharing and enjoying with others that when the mango crop came in, they advertised a "public free-for-all"; and for those who couldn't come, they let it be known that "anyone, of our acquaintance or not, may send his request by penny postcard, and a gift parcel of mangoes will be dispatched."

They fed mangoes to everyone with the same openhearted generosity, from the ordinary village headman to the Viceroy, from fakirs to aristocrats. And when they sat down to eat mangoes themselves, their jaws

worked from morning to night without pause, and again more from nightfall to dawn. They ate and ate until mango juice practically ran out of their nostrils, but loath to stop, they'd still find another one in their mouths waiting to be eaten. When at last, gulping down several glasses of iced milk, they went off to bed dropping with mango-intoxication, they would disappear for sixteen hours or more ... until suddenly their eyes would snap open in the darkness and they would be drawn out of their beds once more by the same mango mania! Possessed by this madness all over again, they would head straight for the orchard in the dark nights of Savan and Bhadon. While gusting, whistling *purvai* or easterly winds blew all around them, they could be seen groping for mangoes in the dense foliage with only flashes of lightning to show the way, and apparently each of these aficionados was impervious to the swaying, hissing cobras which frequented the groves as well.

In short, there was no occupation during the entire period of the show except consuming the mango crop, persuading others to help consume it, sending mangoes out, and requesting mangoes to be sent in from other places. The whole world was nothing but mangoes, and life was lived only for the sake of this luscious fruit. Everyone spent their waking hours debating about mangoes and their sleeping hours dreaming about them. If someone woke up in the middle of the night, in his drowsy state the bedsheets and pillows felt as if they were under three inches of mango juice and pulp.

Every year, preparations for the mango exhibition were carried out with greater enthusiasm than for the celebration of 'Id. When it came to the five-yearly competition, the hosts infused their own activities with an air of military urgency, and induced the high and low among their relatives and associates to do the same. Mangoes from Murshidabad, Bihar, Bengal and Assam competed. A few new breeds from western U.P. and Central India were also brought forth each time; but the real contest was among Avadh, Rohilkhand, and Murshidabad. Usually, Avadh won, yet every year the Rohilkhand and Murshidabad parties brought five or so new mangoes which would stop the Avadh party in its tracks. Whenever the Murshidabad party seemed to be gaining ground, an East-West battle broke out between the entire province of Bengal and all of U.P. When it seemed that Bengal was about to win, Avadh and Rohilkhand would suddenly speak with a single voice, and defeat Murshidabad through a majority of votes, although in their hearts they would own up to the superiority of the new breed. At such times, Avadh and Rohilkhand would secretly cast lots and divide up the first and second place prizes

between themselves.

Agha Sahib had a large orchard, and a good-sized nursery; Khan Sahib had an even bigger orchard, but his nursery, while proportionate in size to his estate, wasn't as splendid as Agha Sahib's. They had both announced that they were in the business of selling plants from their nurseries, but that purveying seeds was beneath their dignity. They both practiced the principle embodied in the second line of Akbar Allahabadi's couplet:

Lest you write us back in reply  
 "We'll do as you ask, but first send the fee."

Millions of mangoes, of a thousand different varieties, were distributed free from their orchards at harvest time. Cuttings from their nurseries were sold all over the country, and thus there was a greater portion of commercial advertising in their generosity than Savanti noblesse oblige. There was publicity to be gained by feeding people free mangoes and giving out free seedlings, and trade propaganda was being spread in the guise of lordly bounty and graciousness. Every year, thousands of orders came for mango plants, with the price depending on the variety. The overhead cost for preparing a graft slip of any mango, whether inferior or excellent, was the same Rs. 3. But the price of common varieties such as Langra, Bumbai, Safeda, Dasehri, Malda, Fajri, etc. was set at just Rs. 1 per cutting, while higher and higher fees were set for new hybrid varieties, depending on how fine and rare the breed was. This reached such an extent that the Malihabadis set the price of "Shamsul Asmar" at four hundred rupees per plant, and the Shahabadis set the price of "Mai-e Bekhudi" at five hundred rupees per plant. Malihabad then renamed "Samar-e Behisht Chaunsa" as "Khajri Kamal" and set the price at a hundred rupees!

Meanwhile, memorable bantering and innuendo went back and forth among the breeders. Year after year, accusations of irregularities would be brought before the Board and justice would be administered, punishment meted out, and names added or deleted from the list of participants according to its decisions. In the nursery business, this landed gentry of impeccable lineage came to hold strange positive and negative commercial and feudal views.

The designated place for the mango exhibition was an unremarkable rural area where the boundaries of Rohilkhand and Avadh happened to meet. In spite of this, it was the focus of intense *zamindar* interest.

Orchard after orchard was planted in wide plots stretching for miles. The *zamindars* had consolidated several villages together and planted huge orchards on the land, and as there wasn't any other kind of farming here, rural workers could be had at low wages. Nursery plants and shipments of fruit could be easily loaded at the country railway station. There was nothing special about the area other than these matter-of-fact considerations, but still people said that the soil here was particularly suitable for growing mangoes—after all, every square inch of land in the United Provinces could be said to have the same virtues!

The mango competition was very famous. Responsibility for staging the annual show, as well as the five-yearly competition, lay with Khan Sahib and Agha Sahib. "Samar-e Behisht Chaunsa" and "Aman-e Ibrahimpur" had received first and second prizes; both were Khan Sahib's mangoes and he was worried lest some other fruit beat his out this time. This despite the fact that he had developed several especially fine varieties in the last five years. Khan Sahib fretted day and night about how to get his hands on the special mango which Agha Sahib was going to present in the competition this year. He wanted to acquaint himself with its properties ahead of time so that he could decide whether to enter both of his previous winners or one of his newly created breeds against it. For the last five years, Khan Sahib had been hearing praise and rumors of Agha Sahib's new mango, and he feared lest the dominance established three generations ago be trampled to dust.

As the time for the competition approached, Khan Sahib's emotions waxed hotter and hotter. Granted, his family had been Indian for seven generations, but he was also the scion of an Afghan line, and he suddenly reverted to his origins. He took the ultimate, most drastic step toward cracking the secret he had been trying so desperately to find out for the last five years. The night was an ideal one, the kind that just begs for such measures—it was one of those terrifying wet nights of Asarh when black clouds sheath the sky and the ground is covered with black mud. Through the collusion of several of Agha Sahib's servants, Khan Sahib had already found out the exact location of the trees that bore the new mangoes his rival was entering in the competition. He sent for several hot-blooded young men with grudges of their own, and risking life and limb, they broke into Agha Sahib's orchard and came away with several fruits and two saplings of the variety in question while the watchmen, lulled by the cool monsoon breeze, the taste of ripe mangoes and sheer fatigue, slept away.

Even the dogs didn't wake up, and no one realized what had tran-

spired until the next day. Agha Sahib made the rounds of his orchards every morning. One glance and he knew that mangoes had been stolen during the night, and moreover, that several potted saplings were missing. He was beside himself with rage. First, he demanded an accounting from the guards, but he was not terribly harsh with them. Instead, without wasting any time, he began tracking the miscreants, which turned out to be quite easy to do first thing in the morning during the rains. The ground was soft and damp, and there was a clearly visible trail of the thieves' footprints going from Agha Sahib's orchard to Khan Sahib's estate.

Agha Sahib was of Iranian extraction, and his ancestors had been granted a *jagir* here during the Mughal period. If Khan Sahib could find a dozen locals to carry out his will in the dark of night then ... why, Agha Sahib's family had put down roots here twice-seven, fourteen generations ago! He was ready to take up arms and go to any extreme for revenge since his precious secret of five years had suddenly been stolen! Khan Sahib had pulled off a night raid. Agha Sahib rounded up his various hangers-on, cultivators, employees, servants and laborers and led an attack on Khan Sahib's orchards in broad daylight! His party beat up Khan Sahib's watchmen and even chased them away. Not even in his wildest dreams had Khan Sahib thought that Agha Sahib would show such reckless bravado and retaliate in the clear light of day, especially since the orchard in question was well-guarded! Khan Sahib mustered his troops and seized yet another big orchard belonging to Agha Sahib.

Both Khan Sahib and Agha Sahib were powerful landlords with broad networks of supporters and allies. Both had a touch of the renegade in their natures, and renegade *zamindars* considered it beneath their dignity to appeal to the law. Agha Sahib had somewhat greater influence in the region relative to Khan Sahib, so he assembled a larger contingent and turned his attention toward the very biggest of Khan Sahib's orchards. Meanwhile, Khan Sahib got ready to defend his property with all his might, and it seemed that a pitched battle would break out at any moment.

Generally, the police never intervened in *zamindars'* conflicts over seizure and possession of land. There were times when opposing sides would assemble their own "troops" and deploy them like armies against each other, and thus carry on their wars of inheritance from generation to generation. The police just sat by and watched quietly, and would later bring cases of "unlawful seizure and eviction" against the *zamindars* on the grounds of someone's having perpetrated forcible capture of property.

But this time there was neither a quarrel over inheritance nor a case of “unlawful seizure and eviction” at the root. The entire conflict had begun with the petty offenses of theft and illegal entry. Government powers intervened just in time to avert disaster by seizing the disputed orchards and taking them into custody under article 145 of the Police Regulations.

And so a hubbub spread throughout the country. It was time for the mango competition and the people in charge of it had gotten themselves embroiled in this mess! Thousands of mango connoisseurs had patiently waited five years for their happy moment, and they created an uproar trying to intervene in the controversy. The high officials did not think it fitting for their pens to issue a decision on the matter since they had always been given bushels-full of brand new mango varieties from both of the opposing parties, and had been treated with similar generosity by both sides. They found the government intervention a godsend, and were only too happy to have the responsibility taken off their own shoulders. So, with the mutual agreement of the opponents and the mediators, they placed the case under arbitration, with Faruqi Sahib chosen unanimously by all as the adjudicator.

The quarrel was between two Avadhies. Since anyone of rank in Avadh had leanings toward one of the contending parties or the other, there could be no better arbitrator than Faruqi Sahib, who hailed from the famous district of Rohilkhand and had been educated in Britain. His father, a botanist of the scientific type, was a *zamindar* of middling status, and did a bit of breeding and nursery work himself. He had seen to it that Faruqi Sahib acquired a formal education in botany, and had then sent him off to England for advanced training. Faruqi Sahib finished up abroad in three years, and armed with scientific knowledge and European experience, got involved in his father’s work to a degree far beyond what had been expected of him. And, Faruqi was a surprisingly cool-headed man for someone of his Sheikh heritage.

In addition to running a nursery, Faruqi Sahib had written a hefty technical tome called “The Characteristics of Good Orchard-Keeping” based on his advanced knowledge and vast experience. The book had made him famous throughout the country among people in the field. He was a mature young man who had spent his time at home wedding technical knowledge to practical experience. When the people of Rohilkhand found out that the government as well as the opponents in the case had picked him to arbitrate in the Avadhies’ big quarrel, they were very pleased indeed and saw him off with great excitement.

Family training, practical experience, a first-rate education—Faruqi

Sahib was an all-around expert. He had also inherited and indulged since childhood a passion for breeding Surkha mangoes. The varieties named 'Urus, Husn-Ara, Bride of Russia, Seb-e Hindi, Farangan and Sinduriya had all been developed by him. Despite his scientific inclinations, there was a bit of the poet and romantic in his nature as well, and this made him a connoisseur's connoisseur of mangoes. You could put a leaf in his hand in the dark of night, and he could tell you the name of the variety. He could also tell the age of a mango tree by just looking at it from a distance. Whenever a new mango was produced by any nurseryman anywhere in the country, he would know the ins and outs of the pedigree, and he could make accurate predictions about the current season's crop just like an astrologer. He knew how the soil related to the mango trees in a given region. Such was the man who showed up on the disputed property itself to settle the quarrel between Khan Sahib and Agha Sahib, a quarrel which had been affecting everyone interested in mango breeding, and all nurserymen, large and small, in the country.

First off, Faruqi Sahib sent for the government file on the case and attempted to settle matters informally between the opponents; when that didn't work, he set official proceedings into motion. He took formal depositions from Khan Sahib and Agha Sahib, asked for written proof of ownership and custody, examined a tree-by-tree plan of the garden, and inspected the orchards.

He was out alone one day inspecting every row and every plot in person when he arrived at the boundary of one of Khan Sahib's orchards, right next to which lay an orchard of Agha Sahib's. He could see the trees of Agha Sahib's orchard at a distance as he approached the mounded edge of the first orchard. When his gaze traveled back to the nearer space between the two orchards, he saw a lush and verdant area set in a rectangular plot, actually just a thin strip of land. A thorny hedge stood between himself and this particular plot, or else he might have reached it with a single step. Right in the middle of the plot he saw a hut which was so completely covered from top to bottom with abundant flourishing vines that no walls or roof-thatch could be seen at all. He was quite astonished to see this unexpected and odd bit of land set between the two large estates, so he went to take a closer look, and saw that native roses were growing there. Hundreds of rose bushes were planted in long, perfectly maintained rows, and the hut itself was covered with climbing rose vines as well.

Faruqi Sahib saw that the little plot lay in utter tranquility, and not a soul was to be seen anywhere. After looking around a second and third



time, he finally spied a gardener working with a spade off in a corner. The man was hoeing with his back toward Faruqi Sahib, who continued his silent survey and concluded that the plot was laid out strictly for crop cultivation rather than as a pleasure garden. The long strip was divided into smaller square segments, and these rose-laden patches jutted into the boundaries of the two larger estates on either side. "But this acreage of roses is neither mentioned in the depositions of the two opponents, nor is it marked on the plan!" he thought to himself. And of course, he *was* a great lover of roses.

Faruqi Sahib looked intently over each square foot of the plot and every leaf growing on it. He saw four rose bushes growing around the hut, one at each corner. All of the bushes were entirely covered with flowers, so that only a rosy mass without so much as a glimpse of green leaf presented itself to the eyes. "It isn't the season for roses, so what special variety can be blooming so furiously during the monsoon rains?" he asked himself and looked harder, only to be struck with even greater astonishment. "What?! They're mangoes!" The plants were four or five feet high and grew out in perfect symmetry just like four domes, each corresponding precisely to the others and spreading to exactly the same circumference as if deliberately trimmed that way. They were so heavily laden with red Surkha mangoes that not a single leaf could be seen anywhere. These "trees" would have seemed enchanting to anyone, but especially Faruqi Sahib, who had a particular fancy for Surkhas and had developed some of the best himself. "Praise be to God!" he exclaimed. Unable to stop himself, he leapt over the thorny hedge and landed on the other side. "What amazing Surkhas! These are the queens of the whole estate! Even if the fruit is sour, no orchard would be worth the name without a whole section of these in it!" he declared to himself and went for a closer look.

The way the trees were growing indicated careful tending. The mangoes on the trees facing east were partly ripe, and had the kind of beauty the bodies of young maidens have in the first blush of womanhood. As for the hard little green mangoes, they were like young girls poised on the brink of adolescence! And the trees themselves were even as lissome red sylphs of the orchard! Thus, Faruqi Sahib became lost in the contemplation of this spectacle of nature. The man had a poetic disposition anyway, and the proximity of native beauties compounded with his stay in England had brought the aesthete out in him, as well as the critic. Faruqi Sahib's eyes would feast on Surkha mangoes as if on the glowing red cheeks of the maidens of France and England, and then he would suck on them with great delight. This time the enchantment of the season and the

moment, the felicitous atmosphere of the garden, and the splendor of the four small mango trees on top of everything, had thrown Faruqi Sahib into such an absentminded reverie that he couldn't take his eyes off the sight before him, until the gardener's voice greeting him broke the spell. When he looked toward the voice, the gardener had stood up and was waiting politely to be acknowledged.

Faruqi Sahib inquired, "This garden ... whose is it? Agha Sahib's or Khan Sahib's?" The gardener seemed to shrink a little at the mention of the two *zamindars*. Everyone knew about their quarrel, and about how a gentleman from Rohilkhand had come to settle the dispute. The gardener had actually seen Faruqi Sahib already, and knew who he was. He bowed his head a little and said with extreme courtesy, "Sir, consider it your own!" He paused and added, "And sir, we owe our loyalty to them all, Agha Sahib, Khan Sahib, Khvaja Sahib and Sheikh Sahib!"

Faruqi Sahib noted how judiciously the gardener chose his words. "I see, so this garden is your very own! But isn't it in an odd location here, between the estates of Agha Sahib and Khan Sahib?"

The gardener seemed a little flustered, and then said with a helpless grin, "Yes sir, and I am the slave of them both. Lowly folk like me don't meddle in the disputes of the high and mighty—only the great can intervene in the affairs of the great!"

"My good man, what I want to know is, how did you come to possess this tiny plot of land situated exactly between these two huge estates?"

The gardener folded his hands and said with decorous humility, "Sir, there is a battle going on between two giants. I know that you've come to investigate things and find a solution, but I won't give a deposition. I'm a poor man and am beholden to both for my daily bread."

"Look, my man, I'm not asking you for a deposition. There are only four *zamindars* in this whole area: Khan Sahib, Agha Sahib, one of their grandsons, and one of their sons-in-law. All I'm asking is that you tell me whose land your rose farm is on."

"Well, sir, in that case, I'll tell you about it. I can't read what it says on the deed, but from the *patvari's* office I found out that it falls half in Khan Sahib's and half in Agha Sahib's estate. And sir, it was given to me by both of them as well. Sir, you can see that it's just a thin strip between the two estates. Of what possible use could this barren wasteland on the edge be to anyone? It wasn't good enough to raise anything on, but sir, a gift from a *zamindar* is a big thing after all, and sir, my family has been dependent on these two masters for generations. And for generations, we've been seeing the young heirs and heiresses through their weddings

by supplying all the flower-strings to decorate the house with ...

“And so, my master Agha Sahib’s noble grandson’s wedding date was set. My lady Khan Sahiba did one better and picked the same date for a wedding in her own family, and there was a bit of a tug-of-war at first. Then, the guests from both sides calmed things down. This slave serves both houses, sir! I strung flowers for both weddings, and for my services each of my lords gave me a guinea, a set of clothes, a gold bracelet, and an acre of land exempt from taxes or the obligation to raise a crop for anyone

...

“And so, sir, I just plowed the bracelets and the guinea coins right back into the land and made it green. We gardeners are the playthings of the well-born, and we fill our stomachs by bringing you sweet flowers to sniff. Sir, have you ever seen a flower-gardener working with a farmer’s plow and spade? But I did, and I did a lot of other things of that nature as long as I had the strength in my arms. It’s only now in my old age that I rely on this flower-patch.

“All the mango orchards are my handiwork, and all the greenery you see has been nurtured by these hands. I prepared the Samar-e Behisht Chaunsa, and I developed Behishti Alibagh. The rarest Shahabads, Firdausias, Benazirs, Shir-o-shakars, and Dilrubas were all varieties raised by my hands, and, honorable sir, so are the Unnabi Gole, which come into season already in the month of Baisakh, so that *zamindars* can satisfy their craving for the mango early in the year. After that, apricots mature in the month of Jeth—and sir, those were tended by me as well.

“I was the one who had Aman Ratol mangoes brought from Muzafarnagar. Ma‘rakatul Ara, Surkhas, Brahmans, Seb-e Hind, Aman-e Husn-Ara, and sir, Aman-e Ibrahimpur and Shamsul Asmar—their cultivation in these parts is all due to me! I risked life and limb to snatch Bengal graft cuttings from Chowdhury Sahib’s garden and bring them here by post horse, and I managed to get Mai-e Bekhudi from Khvaja Sahib’s stock—the same Khvaja Sahib whose dogs guard his orchards like tigers!

“And now, sir, I have a daughter—and like all daughters, she belonged to someone else even before she was born. If not today, she will certainly leave me tomorrow. This rose-farm, sir, will suffice this slave, for as long as he lives. I can live out the rest of my days right here.

“My heart feels content when I gaze at the orchards I’ve planted. Before I came, all the mango trees here had been raised from seeds, and here and there you could find old-fashioned grafted trees of the Langra, Bambai, Sapeda, Fajri and Dasehri varieties. When I look at these

orchards full of the new grafted varieties I've created and nurtured, I feel like I'm looking at a standing army of my own sons! And what about all the graft cuttings that came from Bengal, Bihar, and Hyderabad that I raised single-handedly, and all the thousands more that I produced from them?! Besides those: Sharbati Bigreen came from Anvala; Kala Pahar Murshidabadi, Koh-e Tur Murshidabadi, and Kegva arrived one cutting at a time from Murshidabad; Hathi Jhul, Langra-e Darbhanga and Roman Kanta from Darbhanga; Khajri Kamal from Shadabad; Kishanbhog and Mohanbhog from Nagpur; and I prepared each cutting with my own hands and raised thousands of new trees from them. All the Surkhas and Amans here have also been grafted and raised by me. And now in my final years, I can't even eat mangoes when the crop comes in! Sir, I've had my fill of them. Now, just seeing the trees is enough to gladden my heart. This flower-patch brings in enough to make ends meet. If I went into town to sell flower garlands I'd make as much money in one evening as I make here in a month. Yet, sir, I can't stop loving these orchards," said the gardener, gazing fondly at the *zamindars'* estates stretching far into the distance.

"But surely, your plot yields a large quantity of flowers. What do you do with all those roses out here in the countryside?"

"Look, sir, they're roses after all, and they even sell dried! When the crop comes in, the perfumers round up distillers and have them draw the essence out of the roses, which they then take away. Through your kindness, it's enough to make ends meet. And besides, I've become so attached to this bit of land!"

It occurred to Faruqi Sahib that the gardener had mentioned every variety of mango but hadn't even remotely referred to the Surkha which stood laden with fruit at the four corners of his hut. It was clear that he was being a little evasive, so Faruqi Sahib brought it up himself.

"And this Surkha? What about this? Is it something new you've just created? It looks like a really fine specimen!"

This seemed to throw the gardener off balance. A *zamindar* had gotten wind of the matter, and it did not bode well. He was well-acquainted with the article in the U.P. Tenancy Act which forbade any cultivator from planting a mango tree on the plot assigned to him. Doing so could land a farmer in deep trouble—if he let the tree stand, he could be evicted from his plot, and if he cut it down out of fear of eviction, he could be put in prison.

But the man had spent practically his whole life among the aristocracy and knew well how to get himself out of a tight spot. And so he said

lightly, “Indeed, sir, it came from a seed that had sprouted over there on the boundary mound,” and pointed to a good-sized tree. “A crow brought it from who knows where, and that’s the original seedling which sprouted from it. And sir, it grew up quickly too, entangled in the rose bushes right there on the mound where the seed was dropped. My Sundariya was five or six years old at the time, and the seedling caught the girl’s eye. Other children would have dug up the seed, made a hole in it and used it for a whistle, but she’s the born daughter of a mother-gardener, and she began raising the seedling into a tree.

“Just in play, she dug a well, a yard-and-a-half deep, next to it. To water the tree, she made a tiny Persian wheel using little clay lamp saucers from Divali strung on a line for dippers. She’d bring water from the canal to fill her little well, and sir, it was all just in fun! It seems like only yesterday. In her twelfth year—in other words just five years later—the seedling became a tree, and sir! the fruit it brought forth was a Surkha, and a beautifully colored Surkha at that!

“Sundariya was ten or twelve years old, and you know sir, no one has to teach a baby fish to swim! From her very first conscious moment she has been around roses day and night, but I have no idea how she learned to tie grafts on mango saplings! I never saw when she secretly made four graft cuttings from the original tree, but they grew up to become these very plants,” said the gardener as he pointed to the four trees standing at the corners of his hut. Faruqi Sahib gazed tenderly at the little trees weighed down with the rosy mangoes.

The gardener continued, “So, sir, it’s all thanks to the mercy of Indra Maharaj. In just three years, they grew up under her care and began to give fruit, but as you surely know yourself, it’s not good to harvest in the third year, so I brushed the mangoes off when they were still small and green. Last year too there was fruit and we let a few ripen, and then this year the trees brought forth full crops. There’s a greater quantity of fruit on each grafted tree now, and a wonderful sweetness has suffused the mangoes. The pits have gotten smaller, the juiciness has increased, and the fibers have disappeared from the flesh. Just take a look!” The gardener pointed towards the original tree whose branches were laden with small mangoes. “How they’ve grown! Sir, it’s all the work of her tender little hands! And now, sir, you should please taste a slice!” And then he called out “Hey, Sundariya! Bring a mango for the gentleman!”

A rose-hued beauty came out from inside the green-covered cottage—Sundariya! May God have mercy! It was as if the whole garden burst into bloom at that moment! She put each and every lovely mango

hanging from its branch to shame. It seemed as if the color in all the roses and the piquant delectability of all the Surkha mangoes in the world were brought together in her.

Faruqi Sahib was stunned by this first, unexpected sight of her. There seemed to be a glowing flame as tall as a human being standing in front of him. He pulled himself together a little and said in a voice that caught in his throat, "I see! So this is Sundariya! Your daughter?" And then he went into a kind of trance contemplating Sundariya's beautiful form.

The gardener repeated to his daughter, "Come on, bring the gentleman a mango to taste from one of your trees, and let him see the kind of fruit poor people can raise! And sir, I for my part have let the trees stay, so that if we don't feel like it we don't have to go begging for mangoes at some *zamindar's* orchard during harvest time."

Sundariya began to pick the choicest mangoes off the nearest tree and as she worked, Faruqi Sahib caught sight of the alabaster undersides of her rosy pink arms and was swept away. For one thing, he was from a *zamindar* family, and besides that, he had been to England and back—ordinarily, he was unlikely to have paid much attention to this sort of hospitality extended towards him by someone of a lowly rank, but he was so overwhelmed he barely registered the transaction at all. Who knows when he took the rosy slice from those rosy fingers. In spite of being such a connoisseur, he didn't have the wits to note the virtues and flaws of the variety when he ate the first piece. When he saw those delicately tapered fingers holding out a second slice for him, he took it and tasted it carefully, and his appreciative gaze rose and met the proudly expectant eyes of the gardener's daughter.

Faruqi Sahib's eyes went up and down this girl whose whole body seemed to be waiting for admiration and praise. He couldn't recall an occasion like this even in European society—that is, to be presented with an artist's creation by the creator herself, as she stood right in front of him waiting for his approbation. Thus, Sundariya presented the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth slices of the mango she had bred, while Faruqi Sahib noted every single virtue of the fruit, along with those of its breeder, and blurted out, "Is this a mango, or is it the paragon of fruits?! The taste alone is something, but it has such devastating beauty and form as well!"

Meanwhile, Sundariya, who had been traipsing in and out of *zamindar* households since childhood with flowers and henna, was quite unaffected and bold. Hearing his words of praise, she smiled like a rose in bloom herself and said in an exquisitely sweet voice, "Sir, I don't know if you prefer tree-ripened fruit or the kind picked green and set aside. You

can put away the hardest new mangoes from these trees—so green the fiber hasn't even formed inside!—to ripen on their own. Put them away during the months of Jeth and Baisakh, and they mature just fine.”

“Yes, very good,” said Faruqi Sahib, licking his lips.

“And sir, I couldn't tell you because the fragrance of roses is always in my nostrils, but whenever I've given anyone a mango that's been kept aside for a day or two, they've told me the fruit carried a rose scent,” said the gardener, turning to his daughter. “Go see if there are any perfumed ones inside right now and bring one out so His Honor can test it for himself to find out whether the scent of roses really does settle into the fruit, or if this is just loose talk!”

The girl brought out four mangoes from the hut, washed them with water, and sliced two of them. Faruqi Sahib ate a slice and said, “Yes, they certainly do give off the scent of roses!”

“Well, sir. They have been set aside for one night.” The girl sliced two more mangoes.

Faruqi Sahib ate the pieces and said, “Yes, yes, quite! This is exactly the fragrance of roses!”

“So you see, sir, these were just set aside last night. The fragrance—it stays in them to the end, even if the mango rots,” said the girl.

The gardener added, “But sir, this type doesn't actually rot; it just dries up after it ripens.”

The government itself had entrusted the duty of arbitration to Faruqi Sahib. The very exhibition and competition depended on its success. The eyes of the whole Subcontinent were riveted on him, and his task seemed to him fraught with historical import. Taking the entire burden onto his own shoulders, he attended to the business most assiduously, and was finally able to bring about a reconciliation between Khan Sahib and Agha Sahib. Whatever the distance between their hearts, they were at least made to clasp their hands in agreement, and thus the way was cleared for the mango show. In the meantime, the week of the event arrived.

Extensive preparations were underway, and as an added touch, this year Faruqi Sahib was honored with the post of General Secretary and Manager. For the entire week before the exhibition, despite constant showers, the clouds had not cleared from the sky. The day on which the months of Savan and Bhadon met, the “New Year's Festival” of mango lovers, came right in the middle of the week appointed for the show itself. And smack in the middle of that very week, it not only rained, it poured

torrentially.

An easterly breeze, a *purvai*, gusted as if with a tipsy gait, and dark purplish clouds swollen with water hung low in the sky. The whole world was moist and verdant, and the breasts of the earth were full. The fragrance of mangoes filled the air and a contagious sense of intoxication reigned everywhere. The lightning whip of Indra the rain god cracked again and again among the dark clouds in the sky, the ensuing rumble causing peacocks to shriek in the dense, lush orchards enveloped in darkness. Heavy under the weight of moisture and fruit, tree branches bent down to the carpet of green grass; the heavily-laden trees brought intimations of delight to the mind and an altogether otherworldly state to the heart.

This year a newly-planted orchard was being celebrated, and the exhibition was to take place there. The pavilion in the orchard was also chosen as the site of the competition. New varieties of mango from every village and town of Avadh and Rohilkhand were on display, and breeds from every other region throughout the length and breadth of the country had been gathered together as well. These included the Murshidabad and Darbhanga group, mangoes from Bombay and Calcutta, new varieties from Dhaka and Assam, some samples from central India which had been sent by parcel along with those of the Hyderabad group, and many others that had been personally carried by representatives from different regions.

It was a public feast for which the *zamindars* of the region had brought the finest specimens from their respective orchards. As far as you could see, a carpet of mangoes covered the ground. There were mangoes in piles, in mounds, in mountains; there were masses of mangoes of various colors and kinds, different varieties jumbled together or just one variety alone. There were mangoes above, below, to the left, to the right, in front and behind—the whole world was filled to the brim with mangoes! There was nothing but festive abundance, profuse fragrance and juicy ripeness under every tree in the orchard. The nectar of mangoes sparkled in the eyes of the guests like wine. Everyone was invited to the banquet.

There was hardly a lack of mangoes in this one orchard, nevertheless mangoes were arriving by the cart- and bushel-load from other estates. For special guests, ice cream was churned in basins and tubs set up at the foot of the pavilion. Stalls dispensed milk and ice for the ordinary guests. An open invitation had been issued far and wide in the countryside and in distant towns and villages as well. Group after group of farm laborers and cultivators arrived throughout the day. Each *zamindar* played host with all the mangoes from his estate at the ready. There was no counting



the number of piles of different types of Langra, Bombay, Sapeda, Dasehri, Fajri and Maqbul-e 'Am.

In hopes of gaining the good opinion of the general populace by delighting them with brand new varieties, many *zamindars* had brought along cartloads of Samar-e Behisht Chaunsa, Khasul Khas-e Shahbad, Samar-e Behishti Alibagh, Husn-Ara, Bride of Russia, Aman-e Ibrahim-pur, Hamid Pasand, Shahpasand, Mai-e Bekhudi, Shir-o-shakar, Shakh-e Nabat and other types. Rivals of the first group brought Sharbati Bigreen, Dilruba, Seb-e Hind, Nilam, Glas, Gola-e Basirbagh, Hathi Jhul, Qaus Qazah, Kothi Hyderabad, Nayab, and some little-known varieties, which they fed solicitously to all manner of people.

Continuously for four days there was much coming and going and eating and drinking, and by the fifth day perhaps a few stomachs, along with a few desires, were sated, and perhaps a few mouths were tired of eating. The crowd lightened a bit, although more and more mangoes kept arriving without any letup. Now party after party, rather than consuming the mangoes, began to critique—according to their own respective abilities and ways of thinking—the special qualities and varieties of the fruits. Discussions took place about the mangoes on display, and rumors circulated about the competing entries. Those who had until recently been preoccupied with eating mangoes, now took greater interest in just looking them over. This went on for two days.

The competition was scheduled for the afternoon of the third day. Preparations for the event had begun early in the morning, with Faruqi Sahib at his busiest. By noon, he had gotten ready the list of entrants and submitted it to the Board of Judges. The judges were struck with consternation when they saw the name of “Sundariya, daughter of Gardener Ambika Parshad” at the bottom of the list. The word got out and a wave of disappointment swept over all the *zamindar* entrants. Gossiping broke out in various places among their parties.

“This is a fine new Secretary they’ve picked! He’s entered a common gardener in the competition!”

“Nothing like this has ever happened before in all the generations the competition’s been held!”

“Now we have peasants and untouchables entering an aristocrat’s contest! What kind of gentlemanliness is this?”

“It isn’t really proper, is it?”

“We live in evil times, gentlemen, when regard for decency and good breeding have disappeared from the face of the earth. And he’s even known to come from a noble family!”

“Precisely the consideration which led to his appointment as arbitrator and then as Secretary of the exhibition!”

“What else did you expect? ‘These are times when the noble are dishonored.’”

“These Rohilkhandis—they’ve been prone throughout history to love the riffraff. They’re the ones who went and crowned Jats and common farmers their kings.”

“And they never really got along with us Avadh folks.”

“Still, the Rohilla Pathans are tolerable. Sure, they’re on the coarse side, and tend to fly off the handle, but these Sheikhs! The Rohilkhandi Sheikhs—may God have mercy if they’re not absolute rascals. Can you believe the mischief Faruqi has perpetrated? It’s one hundred percent pure Sheikh!”

“But it was the Avadhis after all who put all the arrangements in the hands of this grand pseudo-Englishman, sullyng the honor of all Pathans and Thakurs! If they just *had* to hand everything over to a Rohilla, why couldn’t they have found a proper Rohilla Pathan from Rampur, Shahjahanpur, Bareilly, or Moradabad—someone with at least a little regard for the honor of the nobility?”

“And what would such a person do? My friend, pick up any history book and read—when did the Rohillas ever *not* do things like assembling armies of Jats, farmers and untouchable leather-workers and lead them into battle against the King of Avadh, the Emperor in Delhi, the Navab of Bangesh, and Queen Victoria—against all of them! And now, just look—history is being repeated and a lowly gardener has been brought forward by them to compete against the princes and nobles of Avadh!”

“They’re all in it together, and it seems to be Faruqi’s personal plot to step into their private controversies and turn their own weapons against them!”

“You’re absolutely right—it’s got to be a conspiracy! Rumor has it that Faruqi Sahib had sent for baskets of mangoes from his own estate to be placed in the competition. But when this gardener came to hand as a means of embarrassing the Avadhis, he quietly withdrew his own mangoes from the contest and put them up just for exhibition!”

“It makes sense! So this time not a single Rohilkhand mango will appear in the competition—that’s right!”

“Why would it? The purpose of his plot is to make us rice-and-watery-*dal*-eating easterners grovel in shame. The outcome is now in God’s hands! Either way, he’s succeeded in entering the lowliest commoners into the competition.”

“We are afflicted by evil times, friends. Only God can protect our honor. Didn’t you notice how much bigger the public feast was this year? Certainly, a large number of people show up at the exhibition every time, but this many? And just about the crudest commoners on earth to boot! Tons and tons of mangoes were squandered, all because of him!”

Among the people outside, there were as many opinions as tongues. Even inside, the judges suggested to Faruqi Sahib in hushed tones that he should once more reconsider the fact that he was allowing a very untraditional element to participate in the competition. He responded with “This is a public contest and there is nothing in the rules which indicates that a person of low status can’t enter his mangoes ... And besides, we are here to decide which is the best mango produced in the country in the last five years. This is an open competition among *mangoes*, not among the people who grow them. If any top-notch mango is left out of the competition, it would mean that your five years of research remain inconclusive.” The judges couldn’t say much to this, and by virtue of Faruqi Sahib being the officially appointed Secretary, it was entirely up to him to decide whether the social status of a mango-grower mattered or not.

First, the competing mangoes were placed in a special room, and later each breeder was called, in listed order, to appear before the Board of Judges with his fruit. As for the ones who had sent parcels of mangoes from outside with no accompanying representative, the Secretary himself would take care of their presentation before the judges.

Everyone had delivered their respective mangoes several hours prior to the time the contest was to begin. Just a little before the appointed hour, Sundariya arrived. She walked into the enormous gathering of landowners and cultivators, completely unconscious of her surroundings and of the circumstances, and with the same innocent and frank air with which she delivered trays of flower garlands to the *zamindars*’ mansions on ‘Id, Baqr ‘Id, Holi and Divali. Gardener Ambika Parshad led the way through the gathering, and Sundariya, in a freshly-washed sari and with a basket of mangoes on her head held up on both sides by her rosy arms, followed behind.

She lowered her eyes as she passed quietly through the throng towards the pavilion. In the crowd of onlookers, dozens of *zamindar* eyebrows were raised as she ascended the seven stairs up to the pavilion. Glances were exchanged, and smiles fraught with meaning twitched on *zamindar* lips. Bold young men were suddenly left heaving long helpless

sighs. Covetous men in their prime found their hearts involuntarily tied in knots, and even the wrinkled faces of white-haired old men were suddenly smoothed over with amazement—in a moment, they were recalling the days of their youth and their now hollow chests secretly gave rise to song! Whispers spread through the crowd and by the time she reached the seventh and final step, dozens of esthetic assessments had been advanced.

“Is this a girl or an Aman-e Anguri?”

“Come now, you should say rather that this is an Aman-e Farangan!”

Another one said, “Aman-e Husn-Ara! You should say she’s an Aman-e Husn-Ara!”

But still another insisted, “What nonsense! She could only be a Bride of Russia!”

Then someone recognized her and said, “Hey, it’s Sundariya! Ambika Parshad Mali’s Sundariya! God help us, how this unbeliever is spreading her fancy wings! Just like a new butterfly in the month of Chait!”

“She’s like a rainbow!”

“Hey, she herself should be put in the exhibition!”

“Come on, who could compete with her? Watch out, my dear fellow!”

And so, walking with her characteristic charming gait and naïvely oblivious of her surroundings, Sundariya ran the gauntlet of gazes, mounted the seventh and last step of the pavilion, and passed from the veranda into the room where the mangoes for the competition had been placed.

Then, under Faruqi Sahib’s supervision, the judging began. Some had written down the entire pedigree of their mango and presented the fruit on a silver platter, giving the judges sample slices cut with a Rogers knife; some had placed their offerings on dishes of sandalwood and ebony; and some brought their entries forward delicately wrapped in cotton-wool. Some took out their Surkhas after crushing an entire slab of ice and presented their lush fruits with a romantic flourish, set against a backdrop of frosty crystals. The judges kept up their observations, visual and gustatory, external and internal, as each mango was presented. They listened to the details of each pedigree and assigned their scores, until at the very end came Sundariya’s turn. She raised her entire banana-leaf-covered basket, and stepping forward, put it down in front of the judges without any fuss.

When the judges asked the name of the breeder, she softly answered, “Sundariya.”

Faruqi Sahib added, “Daughter of Gardener Ambika Parshad.”

When the judges asked the name of the variety, she stood there speechless, too bashful to speak.

Now Faruqi Sahib had insisted on her entering the competition, but had forgotten to properly explain this very important point to the girl. She still didn't utter a word, but Faruqi Sahib swallowed hard and spontaneously offered, "The mango? Its name? It's called Gulab Khas."

Then, when the question of pedigree came up, even poor Faruqi Sahib was stumped. Who could tell what the pedigree was of a seed-stone dropped by a crow? The judges were compelled to assign a zero in the lineage category. The moment Sundariya removed the leaves from the top of the basket, the judges beheld the wondrous handiwork of the Creator. Was it a basket of mangoes or a vessel filled with roses?! With the very next breath, their nostrils were struck by the exhilarating fragrance of roses. They quietly put down maximum points for color, appearance, shape and aroma. Now it was time to cut a few fruits for the taste test. Sundariya skillfully sliced up several mangoes and presented each of the judges with a piece.

"May God be praised!"

"The color of Husn-Ara and Bride of Russia, together with the beautiful form and intrigue of Aman-e Farangan! The sweetness of Samar-e Behisht Chaunsa together with the headiness of Khasul Khas-e Shahbad and Alfonso!" exclaimed one judge.

"The sweetness is stronger and clearer than even that of Samar-e Behisht Chaunsa," opined another.

"Compared to the taste of this flesh, Dasehri is nothing at all, and it completely overwhelms Sharbati Bigreen where lusciousness is concerned."

"How thin and sturdy the skin is!"

"How small and fiberless the stone is!"

"And the fragrance? What fragrance!" queried one judge with some excitement, and the other four all burst out at once, "This fragrance has never been found in a mango before! This Gulab Khas mango really is a rose, a *gulab*!"

And then they took several fruits in their hands, looked at the stem ends and declared, "It's very sturdy of stem."

They asked Sundariya, "Not easily shaken down by the wind, is it?"

Sundariya answered softly, "Sir, not a single fruit falls. The whole tree grows low to the ground, so the wind doesn't get much of a chance to disturb it."

"It's a middling-sized fruit. What's the yield?" a judge asked

Sundariya.

Sundariya answered, "The tree is just covered with fruit, you can't even see the leaves. Come and look if you like! The mango shows a powdery bloom on the surface, exactly like a Malihabadi."

The judges took a collective deep breath. Hundreds of years of tradition crumbled to dust. From every angle, the outcome was obvious—Gulab Khas proved to be the perfect new variety and was crowned queen of all mangoes! To top it all off, it turned out that the queen had scored so well for both internal and external qualities that she was not only awarded the silver cup but also the gold medal!

Farmers, gardeners and estate laborers—everyone's jaws dropped in wonder when the winner was announced. What had the world come to?! A deathly pallor spread over *thekedars* and *zamindars* possessing vast holdings and high status, and when Sundariya came out once more with her silver cup and gold medal, a commotion rippled through the throng outside. Even the astonished and terrified peasants let out a loud cheer and the *zamindars* were left grumbling to themselves as they nursed their wounded pride.

Faruqi Sahib had, after all, allowed the victory wreath to be given to Avadh, but as a result of his naïve idealism, it was laid on the lowliest of brows, which unbearably intensified the cruel irony of the situation. He had come to Avadh to carry out the routine duties of an arbitrator, but there too he had conducted himself in the same manner.

Faruqi Sahib was a young man who had been to England, and who, from the very first years of his youth, had gotten used to the superficial delights of mixed company. He had a very romantic, poetic temperament, and was a circumspect sort of aesthete. When he returned home from abroad, he satisfied his finer sensibilities by, if nothing else, raising Surkha mangoes. Subsequently, he was engaged to his uncle's daughter, so his entire youth was passed in the celebration of beauty unencumbered by obligation; he had been able to indulge his epicurean predilections without disruption. He had only been in Avadh a scant six or seven weeks when here too, luck had supplied suitable objects for his enjoyment. With a tremor, it had made a rose spring from the black soil solely for the gratification of his senses.

Sundariya, holding a Gulab Khas in her hand, had been granted to Faruqi Sahib as a generous fulfillment of his quest for esthetic stimulus. His heart felt a transitory yet profound fascination—temporary diversion

though this may have been—and this, along with the lighthearted willfulness stemming from the arrogance of youth, drove him to have her enter Gulab Khas in the contest against all kinds of famous and excellent varieties. He hadn't paused to consider what the brilliant reflections of the silver cup and the gold medal in the rosy blush of Sundariya's innocent cheek might do to her mind. He himself had saved a few souvenirs of his stay, preserving, by means of his camera, a few images of his time here with Sundariya, and then he had gone on his way, leaving all of Avadh behind. But in the meantime, a hue and cry had gone up throughout the region—nothing less than a blazing fire had been ignited! Suddenly all necks were willing to be slashed for the privilege of wearing Sundariya as a prize necklace!

Normally, Khan Sahib was respected as an elder and superior, but even *his* vanity began to prove true the adage "Sixty brings childish foolishness." The poor man was a longtime sufferer of chronic constipation, and his affliction was increasing with advancing age. *Hakims* had long prescribed for him *Gulqand-e Aftabi*, a concoction made of sweetened preserved rose petals. Being constantly afflicted by his wretched malady, whenever Khan Sahib saw a rose he would experience an intense desire to rub and crush it in his palms to make *gulqand*, and then swallow it with one gulp. The looser Khan Sahib's outward appearance became as he aged, the more constrained he became internally, so that by the time he was sixty or sixty-five the condition he found himself in was such that the damned *gulqand*, instead of serving as a medicine, had become a dietary staple. He couldn't even get his bread down without it. And today, he had just beheld the glorious blossom of a wild rose, dewy and fresh, to serve as his next meal!

Meanwhile, Agha Sahib came from an Iranian lineage which hailed from the land of colorful apples and pomegranates. Iranian fruits had not been seen for generations after his people had settled in India, and a fondness for cultivating orchards of Surkha and Sinduriya mangoes had developed as the family legacy instead. Agha Sahib had a long-standing personal as well as hereditary interest in both varieties. He viewed Surkhas and Sinduriyas, not just of this region but also from far away provinces, as his true and proper birthright. These days, of course, there were no teeth left in his mouth. But even when all thirty-two of his teeth had been intact, he preferred to suck on Surkhas and Sinduriyas. And Sundariya—she had in herself all the color, sweetness, and delectability of Surkha Brahma, Gulab Khas, Husn-Ara and Aman-e Farangan put together! And she was *his* soft, ripe, sweet and delightful morsel.

Khan Sahib and Agha Sahib were both worldly-wise and levelheaded elders. They had just settled an enormous conflict over property seizure by placing Faruqi Sahib in the middle—why, they might settle this the same way! And besides, this kind of give-and-take was accepted in the traditional culture of their class, and they were used to share-and-share-alike. But who would go first? That did present a bit of a problem, but not one that couldn't be solved. The elders themselves didn't particularly care "whether Sher Shah or Prince Salim had the edge" in the matter; Sinduriya and Surkha mangoes had always gone back and forth between this side and that as gifts after every harvest anyway. So they could have settled things by simply taking turns. After all, a couple of days this way or that was of no great importance.

But the two old men found themselves caught on the horns of an odd dilemma. Noblemen have always gotten into such predicaments because of their unworthy heirs—namely Agha Sahib's nephew by his sister, upon whose head the wreath of son-in-law-hood had also been tied, and Khan Sahib's grandson by his daughter, whose coming-of-age ceremony had just taken place last year. The two had been lifelong friends and companions, but both were of fresh young years and hot blood, and they had both set down Sundariya's name in their respective inventories of moveable property. Outside, the childhood friends clashed, and at home harsh words were exchanged between father-in-law and son-in-law, and between grandfather and grandson. The elders began to fear that the young scions were on the verge of doing something untoward. Each of the boys was a *zamindar* with his own manor and thus was settled independently.

In order to keep a close eye on the prize, Agha Sahib deliberately ordered Ambika Parshad Mali to transfer his invaluable services to his back garden, while Khan Sahib ordered him to tend the garden around his gazebo. The two young men made similar offers to the gardener in view of the latter's highly artistic sensibilities. Both of them suddenly seemed to feel a desperate need for an experienced horticulturist to lay out new-style gardens around their just-built, contemporary mansions.

But Ambika Parshad begged to be excused by all four of his masters. As a result, tug-of-war teams got ready to play on behalf of each heir. The competition came to the brink when both sides decided to take a defensive posture toward the other. Each let the rope go slack for the time-being, and sat down to develop a strategy for yanking the prize over to their own side for good. Khan Sahib and Agha Sahib, meanwhile, were fighters of the old school. They pored over their plats and titles. A close



examination of the documents revealed that Ambika Parshad Mali's rose-farm fell exactly half and half on each of their estates, and that each of them had exactly the same legal rights over it. The gardener had planted mango trees on it "without obtaining an official release" and "without payment of title fee," therefore he was subject to eviction. And thus, on the basis of their legal rights they both issued notices of "cessation of cultivation rights" which read to the effect that "wherefore you while occupying lands held by another have planted our mango trees on it without permission, show cause why you should not be evicted and brought to justice under Article 59, concerning property seizure, of the statutes of the United Provinces of Agra." Moreover, it was stated that "if after being served this notice, you cut the trees down, a police case will be brought against you."

Ambika Parshad Mali, the breeder of thousands of new mango trees and the creator of dozens of new gardens and orchards, now found himself cornered for the crime of raising four small mango trees. He may have been the humblest of Shudras, but he knew the psychology of these Rajput nobles deep in his bones and—this much even his naïve and innocent Sundariya could see clearly—that he was being punished not so much for the crime of raising rosy Gulab Khas mangoes but for committing the beautiful offense of bringing a rose-hued daughter into the world.

He had only two paths open before him: abandon both his flower-farm and Sundariya, and become a retainer for any one of the four masters, or make his escape from the place altogether. There wasn't the slightest question of taking the first path, as he saw plainly before his eyes the pit of infamy in which it ended. The second option offered a ray of hope, and one dark night, before those admirers of Gulab Khas could make any concrete moves, Ambika Parshad Mali, whose people had only wielded spades for generations, was now seen with a pickaxe in his hands.

He pounced straightaway on the original seed-tree of Gulab Khas, hacked it to bits and then flung the pieces away. Sundariya sobbed and kept looking toward her four graft-trees with terror in her eyes. When he fell on them, she let out a shriek at the first blow as if the pickaxe had struck her own head. But Ambika Parshad Mali didn't even hear her and in a very short time had cut down all four of the colorful and fruitful little trees, trampling into dust twelve years of his Sundariya's hard work and loving attentions. All four Gulab Khas trees, in which Sundariya's sweetly scented perspiration ran like sap, were toppled to the ground and trans-

formed into a pile of dead wood. The intoxicating Gulab Khas fruits into which the wine of Sundariya's youth had been poured and in which the color of her cheeks was reflected, lay scattered all around on the ground. Next Ambika Parshad Mali turned toward the row of pots containing the year-old cuttings of Gulab Khas and he began ripping them out one by one.

Sundariya sobbed helplessly as she gazed with grief-stricken eyes at the pile of Gulab Khas branches on the ground. When Ambika Parshad Mali, tearing out the new saplings one at a time, arrived at the last two pots, Sundariya threw herself passionately on them and began to weep as if her heart would break. In them stood two sturdy and promising young plants she had tended with her own hands that very year. Coming to the pots Ambika Parshad Mali hesitated a bit and stopped. Looking all around at the heaps of destruction he had produced, he sighed with some satisfaction.

The night was a dark moonless one in the month of Bhadon, as dark as the very darkest night of the entire year. All of creation appeared to be nothing but darkness.

"Let's go, child," he said in an almost calm voice. Sundariya held the two pots in her arms as if she were carrying two pitchers of water filled at the tank. There was nothing to take along as far as household goods were concerned, so the two of them set out immediately. Each footstep Ambika Parshad Mali took seemed to announce:

God's earth is hardly narrow,  
And my legs hardly lame!

And Sundariya walked on, holding the two pots in her arms, without even stopping to think:

Where will you rest,  
O poppy of the desert?

Coming to the gate of the flower-farm, they turned their heads one last time and each tried to make out something in the darkness. Who knows what Ambika Parshad Mali was looking for ... perhaps Sundariya was looking for the desolate hut in which she had been born and probably for the pile of chopped down Gulab Khas trees which she had once created and raised. But it was hellishly dark and they could see nothing, and besides, there was nothing of theirs left to see.

Out in the open field Ambika Parshad Mali heaved a long sigh. He surveyed the surroundings—near and far, dark orchards lay in eerie silence all around him, every inch of their soil bearing the stamp of his matchless art and intense labor. It occurred to him that he had made milk and honey run on the land of others, and had absurdly considered each mango tree that he raised to be a son. But after they were fully grown, each one of these “sons” had been conscripted into the ownership of others. In every direction there were nothing but orchards planted and raised by his own hands. In the darkness of his imagination, row after perfectly straight row of fruit-laden, robust and densely canopied trees radiated far into the distance the way each line of a writer’s work is etched in his mind. The details had been wrenched out of Ambika Parshad’s brain and entered in the *zamindars’* plats and titles, and at this moment he fully realized why he had never been able to leave this place until tonight, why he had just stayed on, stuck, depending on a tiny flower-patch when he could have sold garlands on street-corners in the city and made more in one evening than that patch could yield in an entire month. And it was tonight, as he was leaving for good, that he realized each and every tree truly was a son of his. It was as if he was leaving behind a settlement populated by his own healthy, young, stout-and-sturdy sons, and was going off utterly alone. In the damp gloom of the monsoon he just kept walking until everything of his own, everything he had nurtured with pride, was relinquished to others, until he had vanished into the darkness that spread in the direction of the country railroad station. Sundariya followed behind, clutching the recently grafted saplings in her arms, perhaps in search of a new patch of soil so that she could once more draw milk from the breasts of the earth with which to nourish her Gulab Khas. □

—Translated by Sagaree Sengupta and Muhammad Umar Memon

### Glossary and Notes

*Hakim*: a traditional doctor of the Yunani (Arabo-Greek) school of medicine.

Indra: Hindu god of rain.

*Jagir*: land grant from a Mughal or other king.

Maund: a unit of weight, approximately 80 lbs.

*patvari*: village accountant in charge of land deeds etc.

Sheikh: descendant of the Prophet Muhammad/Islamic teacher/ a prestigious Muslim lineage.

Shudra: the lowest of the four classical Hindu social divisions, associated with laborers and cultivators.

*thekedars*: contractors/large leaseholders.

**Mango varieties; approximate translation or explanation provided where possible**

[Aman]

Aman-e Anguri: “Grape-cluster Mango.”

Aman-e Husn-Ara: “Ornament of Beauty Mango”; see Husn-Ara

Aman-e Ibrahimpur

Aman Ratol

Bagh ki dulhan: “Bride of the Orchard”

Brahman—after the Hindu god

Chaunsa

Dilruba: “Heart stealer”

Farangan “The Foreign Lady”

Glas

Gola-e Basirbagh: “Round [fruit] of Basirbagh”

Hamid Pasand: Hamid’s favorite

Hathi Jhul: “Elephant Caparison”

Husn-Ara: Ornament of Beauty

Kala Pahar Murshidabadi: Black Mountain [i.e. Krishna] of Murshidabad

Kegva

Khajri Kamal: “Date of Perfection”

Khasul Khas-e Shahbad: "Select of Selects, Shahbad," "Choicest of Shahbad"

Kishanbhog: "Fit for Krishna's Delectation"

Koh-e Tur Murshidabadi: "Mt. Sinai, provenance Murshidabad"

Kothi Hyderabad: "Mansion of Hyderabad"

Langra-e Darbhanga: Langra of Darbhanga

Mai-e Bekhudi: "Wine of Self-forgetting"

Mohanbhog: "Fit for the Charming One's [i.e. Krishna's] Delectation"

Roman Kanta

Nayab: "Rare"

Nilam: "Sapphire"

Qaus Qazah: "Rainbow"

Samar-e Behisht Chaunsa: "Fruit of Paradise Chaunsa"

Samar-e Behisht Alibagh: "Fruit of Paradise Alibagh"

Seb-e Hindi: "Apple of India"

Shahpasand: "King's Favorite"

Shakh-e Nabat: "Flowering Branch"

Shamsul Asmar: "Sun among Fruits," "King of Fruits"

Sharbati Bigreen

Shir-o-shakar: "Milk and Sugar"

Sinduriya: "Marked with Cinnabar"

Surkha: a group of mango varieties featuring red or reddish coloring

'Urus: "Bride"