

SAADAT HASAN MANTO

## A Progressive\*

WHEN JOGINDER SINGH'S SHORT STORIES became popular it occurred to him that he might throw a party for famous prose writers and poets. He thought this would probably widen the scope of his popularity and acceptance.

Joginder Singh was nothing if not a man who had notions about himself. After inviting the renowned litterateurs to his home and showing them great hospitality, he finally sat down with his wife Amrit Kaur and allowed himself to forget, at least for a moment, that he was just a clerk at the local post office whose real job was sorting letters. After he had relieved his head of the burden of carrying a three-meter long Patiala-style, colored turban and put it aside, he invariably felt that the smallish head hiding under his long, jet-black hair was utterly filled with progressive literature. This feeling suffused both his heart and mind with a strange élan. He thought that the entire tribe of the world's short story writers and novelists was connected to him in a subtle relationship.

What Amrit Kaur had a hard time understanding, though, was why, every time her husband invited these people, he never failed to say to her, "Amrit, these people who are coming for tea today, well, they're India's top-notch poets. Do you understand? Now don't you go cutting corners in showing proper hospitality, okay?"

Sometimes it was India's top-notch poet, sometimes its greatest short story writer. Anyone even a notch lower just didn't cut it. Then there was all that raucous conversation that went on at the party, every word of it went over her head. Progressivism was talked about with great gusto and Amrit Kaur was at a loss to understand.

One time, when Joginder Singh had just finished entertaining a very great short story writer and came to sit in the kitchen area, Amrit Kaur asked, "This blasted progressivism—what is it?"

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\*"Taraqī-pasand," from Sa'adat Hasan Manṭō, *Manṭo Kabāniyān* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mīl Publications, 2004), 267–77.

With his turban still mounted, Joginder Singh shook his head slightly and said, “You can’t understand what it means just like that. A ‘Progressive’ is someone who promotes ‘progress.’ It’s a Persian word. In English such a person is called a ‘radical.’ *Afsana-nigars*—meaning short story writers—who seek ‘progress’ in story writing are called *taraqqi-pasand* (‘progressive’). In the whole of India today there are only three or four progressive short story writers and I’m counted among them.”

Joginder Singh had a habit of expressing himself using English words and phrases and it had become second nature. So now, without the least bit of hesitation he thought in an English that was made up of the choicest and most pithy phrases taken from the writings of some famous English novelists. In ordinary conversation he used about fifty percent English words and phrases culled from English books. He always called Aflatun, Plato and Arastu, Aristotle. He threw Dr. Sigmund Freud, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche into every one of his important conversations for good measure, though in ordinary speech he never mentioned these philosophers and took special care not to allow English words or these philosophers to come anywhere near when talking to his wife.

Amrit Kaur was terribly disappointed when Joginder Singh finally explained the meaning of progressivism to her. She was under the impression that this subject so hotly debated by her husband with distinguished poets and fiction writers would be something truly great. But after she realized that all of India boasted only a smattering of progressive short story writers, a soft glint appeared in her eyes. When Joginder Singh saw it, his bushy-mustachioed lips quivered a bit in a faint smile. “Amrit,” he said, “you’ll be pleased to know that a great man of India wants to see me. He’s read my stories and likes them very much.”

“Is this great man a poet or a story writer like you?” Amrit Kaur asked.

Joginder Singh promptly took an envelope from his pocket. Patting the back of his hand with it he said, “He’s both. But his most unforgettable fame rests on something entirely different.”

“And what might that be?”

“Well, he’s a wanderer.”

“A wanderer?”

“Yes, a wanderer ... he’s made drifting the sole aim of his life. He’s always on the go. Now in the chilly valleys of Kashmir, now on the sun-swept plains of Multan. Sometimes in Sri Lanka, other times Tibet.”

Amrit Kaur’s curiosity shot up. “But what does he do?”

“He collects folk songs ... from all over India. Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, Peshawari, Frontier, Kashmiri, Marwari, you name it. However many languages are spoken throughout India, and whatever folk songs

he can find in those languages, he collects them.”

“So many songs! What will he do with them?”

“He writes books, articles ... so others can also hear about those songs. Many English-language magazines have published his articles. To collect folk songs and then present them skillfully is no ordinary task. Amrit, he’s a very great man, a truly great man. And look how cordially he’s written to me.”

Joginder Singh read out the letter to his wife, the letter that Harendarnath Tirpathi had written to him at his post office address. Harendarnath Tirpathi had praised Joginder Singh’s short stories in a delightfully sweet manner and written, “You’re a progressive writer of India.” When Joginder Singh read this phrase he couldn’t resist commenting, “Now see, Tirpathi Sahib also says that I’m a progressive.”

After reading the entire letter aloud Joginder Singh looked at his wife for a few seconds and then asked what she thought of it, “So?”

The sharp, piercing eyes of her husband made Amrit Kaur blush a bit and then she smiled and said, “What do I know? This is big man’s talk, only a big man can understand it.”

Joginder Singh didn’t catch the subtlety of her comment; he was somewhat preoccupied with the thought of inviting Harendarnath Tirpathi to stay at his place for a while. “Amrit,” he said, “shouldn’t we perhaps invite Tirpathi Sahib? What do you think? I wonder whether he would turn down our invitation. After all, he’s a great man. He might think we’re just trying to flatter him.”

On such occasions he always included his wife in the project so the work involved in inviting someone might be shared by both. When he used the word “our” Amrit Kaur, no less naïve than her husband, started taking an interest in this Tirpathi fellow, although not only was the man’s name something of a riddle for her, she failed to comprehend how wandering around collecting folk songs could make someone great. When she was first told that Harendarnath Tirpathi collected folk songs, she was reminded of something her husband had once told her, namely, there were quite a few people in Vilayat [England] who earned a lot of money catching butterflies. The thought crossed her mind that maybe Tirpathi Sahib had learned collecting folk songs from some guy from Vilayat.

Joginder Singh expressed his anxiety: “Who knows, he might think our invitation is just some kind of flattery.”

“How could it be just flattery? Other great men come to visit you, don’t they? Write him a letter. Something tells me that he *will* accept your invitation. Why, he’s also eager to meet you, isn’t he? But tell me: does he have a family, I mean a wife and children?”

“Family?” Joginder Singh mumbled, his mind was busy composing the contents of his invitation letter in English, “Perhaps. No, I’m sure he does. Come to think of it, I once read in an article that he has a wife and a little girl.”

Now that what he wanted to write in the letter had jelled in his mind, he got up, walked to the other room, took out a small-size letter pad—the one he used only for correspondence with very special people—and started writing to Harendarnath Tirpathi in Urdu, or rather an Urdu translation of what he had thought up in English during his conversation with his wife.

In just three days he received Harendarnath Tirpathi’s response. Joginder Singh opened the envelope with a throbbing heart. Reading that his invitation had been accepted, his heart throbbed even faster. His wife was outside in the sunlight rubbing yoghurt into the hair of their young boy when Joginder walked over to her with the envelope in hand. “He’s accepted my invitation. Says he was coming to Lahore anyway. He’s got some important work to do here ... wants to arrange for the publication of his new book. He sends his greetings to you.”

A feeling of immense happiness washed over Amrit thinking that such a great man, who collected folk songs, had sent her his greetings. She thanked God from the depths of her heart for having been married to a man known to every great man of India.

It was the early days of a wintry November. Joginder Singh woke up around seven in the morning but lingered in bed with his eyes wide open. His wife and son lay on a nearby cot under a warm quilt. Joginder started thinking: How immensely happy he would feel meeting Tirpathi Sahib, and the latter no less happy meeting Joginder Singh, India’s youthful, up and coming short story writer and progressive man of letters. He would engage Tirpathi Sahib on every subject under the sun: folk songs, village dialects, short stories, recent events of the war, etc., etc. He would tell him how despite being just a hardworking office clerk he became a good writer. Amazing, isn’t it, someone who sorted mail was by nature an artist?

Joginder Singh was mighty proud that even after toiling half the day like a common laborer at the post office he could still find the time to edit a monthly magazine, plus contribute stories to two, even three publications, to say nothing of those long letters he sent off to friends weekly.

He lay in bed for quite a while preparing himself mentally for his upcoming meeting with Harendarnath Tirpathi. He had read his stories and essays and had also seen his photograph. By reading someone’s stories and seeing his photo, Joginder Singh usually felt that he had come to know the person quite well. But in Harendarnath Tirpathi’s case, he

couldn't trust himself. Sometimes he felt that Tirpathi was a complete stranger. In his fiction writer's mind, the man appeared wrapped in reams of paper rather than clothes. And when he thought about the papers he was reminded of the wall in Anarkali. It was plastered from end to end with so many layers of cinema ads that it seemed as if a second wall had sprung up in front of the original.

What if Tirpathi Sahib turned out to be such a man—Joginder Singh wondered still lying in bed. In that case it would be very difficult to understand him. Later, when he remembered his own penetrating intelligence, all his difficulties evaporated in an instant. He got up and started to make preparations for Tirpathi's reception.

It was settled in their correspondence that Harendarnath Tirpathi would make his way to Joginder Singh's house himself, this because he hadn't yet decided whether to travel by lorry or train. Anyway it was decided that Joginder Singh would take Monday off and wait for his guest at home the whole day.

After bathing and changing Joginder Singh walked into the kitchen and sat with his wife for a long time. They took their tea quite late, thinking that Tirpathi might show up. But when he didn't, they put the cake and other food back into the cupboard and just drank tea while they continued waiting for the guest.

Joginder finally got up and went into the other room. He was standing in front of the mirror sticking clips into his beard to keep it neatly pressed down when there was a knock at the door. He left his beard half finished and dashed to the *devrhi* to open the door. As expected, it was Harendarnath Tirpathi's lush black jungle of a beard, at least twenty times bigger than his own, that first came into view.

A smile fluttered across Harendarnath Tirpathi's lips buried under the thick mop of his moustaches. One of his eyes, which was slightly crooked, became even more crooked. He jerked his unbelievably long hair and stuck out his hand—as calloused as a peasant's—toward Joginder Singh, who was greatly impressed by the steely grip and no less impressed by his leather bag as distended as a pregnant woman. "Tirpathi Sahib, I'm very pleased to meet you" was all he could get out of his mouth.

It has been fifteen days since Harendarnath Tirpathi's arrival. Initially his wife and daughter had come with him but they decided to stay at the home of a distant relative who lived in the Muzang area of Lahore. Tirpathi didn't think it proper for them to stay there long; two days later

he had them move over to Joginder Singh's.

They spent the first four days talking about quite interesting things. Joginder Singh was very pleased to hear Harendarnath Tirpathi praise his short stories. He read him an unpublished piece and received much acclaim. He even read him two stories he hadn't quite finished and Tirpathi expressed a good opinion about these as well. They also discussed progressive literature, noted technical flaws in a number of writers, and made a comparison of old and new poetry. In short, those four days brought them a surfeit of enjoyment. Tirpathi's personality left a deep impression on Joginder Singh. What he particularly liked about the man was his way of talking, at once childish and wise. The man's beard, twenty times bigger than his own, totally overwhelmed his thoughts, and his long, jet-black hair, that had something of the flow of folk songs, never ceased to dangle in front of Joginder Singh's eyes, not even when he took care of the mail at the post office.

Tirpathi completely took hold of Joginder Singh's heart during these four days. He was so enamored of the man that even his crooked eye now looked infinitely beautiful to him, so beautiful in fact that one time the thought crossed his mind that had the eye not been crooked, Tirpathi's face could never have looked so graceful.

Every time Tirpathi's thick lips moved under the thick mop of his moustache, Joginder Singh felt a bevy of birds warbling sweetly in the bushes. Tirpathi spoke slowly and gently, and now and then he caressed his beard, which gave Joginder Singh a sense of immense comfort, as though his own heart was being caressed with tender love.

The atmosphere pervading those four days was such that, even had he tried, Joginder Singh couldn't have succeeded in describing it in any of his stories. But—voilà!—on the fifth day Tirpathi suddenly opened his leather bag and started reading his own short stories aloud and for the next ten days kept it up relentlessly. He must have read out the equivalent of several books.

Joginder Singh was mightily fed up. He developed an absolute aversion to short stories. Tirpathi's leather bag, puffed up like some money-lender's protruding belly, became a source of unending torment. Every evening as he was returning from work the fear that he might run into Tirpathi the moment he stepped through the doorway gripped his heart. They would exchange a few words and Tirpathi would open his bag and subject Joginder Singh to a couple of his short stories.

Joginder Singh was a progressive, otherwise he would have told his guest flatly, "Enough, enough, Tirpathi Sahib, that's quite enough. I have no more strength left to listen to your stories. Please ..." But then he

would think, “No, no, I’m a progressive. I shouldn’t say this. It’s my own fault that I no longer like his stories. They must have something good in them. After all, I did like his stories before. In fact, I thought they were excellent. I . . . I’ve become biased.”

For one whole week this conflict continued to ravage Joginder Singh’s progressive mind. He thought so hard and so much that he reached a point where he couldn’t think anymore. All kinds of thoughts assailed his mind, but he’d lost his ability to sort them out properly. Slowly his confusion grew so intense and unforgiving that he began to hallucinate: he imagined being stranded in a gigantic house caught in the middle of a hurricane. Its numerous windows were being blown open by gusts of merciless wind and he didn’t know how to close them all at once.

A full twenty days had passed and Tirpathi showed no sign of leaving. Joginder Singh began to feel edgy. Every evening when Tirpathi treated him to a fresh story he’d written during the day, Joginder only heard flies buzzing in his ears and his mind wandered elsewhere.

One evening Tirpathi read out a brand new story that focused on the sexual relations of a man and a woman. Joginder Singh felt a shock realizing that for exactly three weeks he had spent every night sleeping under the same covers with a long-bearded man rather than with his own wife. The thought stirred up a veritable riot inside of him, at least for a moment. “Heavens, what a guest I’m stuck with!” he said to himself. Is he a leech or something? Why doesn’t he leave? And why am I forgetting his Begam Sahiba and daughter. The whole family has moved in. He doesn’t even think that it will crush us poor people. I’m an ordinary employee of the post office. All I make is fifty rupees a month. How long will I have to play host to him? And listen to his short stories that never seem to end. I’m a human being after all, not some metal footlocker. And worst of all, I can’t even sleep with my wife. These long winter nights, my God, how they’ve been wasted!”

After twenty-one days Tirpathi began appearing to him in a completely new light. Now everything about the man repulsed him. His crooked eye was now just a crooked eye. His long, lush, raven-black hair no longer seemed quite as soft and silky, his inordinately long beard an unforgivable stupidity.

After twenty-five days had passed, a strange condition swept over Joginder Singh: he began to think he himself was a stranger. Surely he had known Joginder Singh once, but not anymore. And his wife, after Tirpathi had packed off and everything had finally returned to normal, he would marry her all over again. His old life, which these people had been using like a tatty old rag, would be restored to him and he would be able

to sleep with his wife, and ... and ...

Thinking beyond this point brought tears to the man's eyes and something bitter caught in his throat. The desire to rush to Amrit Kaur, who used to be his wife in the good old days, take her into his arms and start crying would overwhelm him, but he lacked the courage for it because he was a progressive writer.

Now and then a crazy thought bubbled up inside of him like milk come to a boil: why not tear off this mantle of progressivism he'd wrapped around himself and start screaming, "To hell with Tirpathi! Damn progressivism! You and your folk songs are all phony! I want my wife back! All your desires have shriveled up in your folk songs, but I'm still young. Have pity on me. Just think about it, I, who couldn't stay away from my wife for a minute before, have been stuck sleeping with you under a common quilt for the last twenty-five days. If this isn't tyranny, what is?"

But boil inside himself as much as he might, he never could utter those words. Come evening, impervious to his miserable condition, Tirpathi would unload a fresh story without fail and then slip under the same quilt with him. After a whole month had passed, Joginder Singh had about had it. Finding an opportunity, he met his wife in the bathroom. His heart throbbing violently, afraid that Tirpathi's wife might show up, he planted a hasty kiss on her lips like he was franking an envelope at the post office and said, "Stay awake tonight. I'll tell Tirpathi that I have to go out and won't be back before 2:30, but I'll come back early, say, around midnight. Open the door when you hear a soft rap. And then ... The *devrhi* is somewhat secluded, but do lock the door that opens toward the bathroom."

After firmly instructing his wife he went to Tirpathi and took his leave.

Twelve o'clock was four chilly hours away. He spent two of them paddling around aimlessly on his bike and didn't feel cold at all. The thought of the coming intimacy kept him warm. Then he decided to spend the rest of the time sitting in the open area across from his house. There, he felt himself getting romantic. The hushed silence of the cold evening seemed familiar. Stars shone overhead in the frosty sky, like heavy droplets of water congealed into pearls. The occasional scream of a locomotive tore through the silence prompting his writer's mind to think of the silence as a massive chunk of ice and the sound of the whistle as a nail being driven through its heart.

For quite a while he let the unprecedented feeling of romance spread through his mind and heart and meditated on the darkened beauties of



the night. Suddenly he was jolted out of his reverie and looked at his watch. Only two minutes before 12:00. He promptly got up, went to the door and knocked softly. Five seconds went by. The door didn't open. He knocked a second time.

The door opened and he whispered, "Amrit ...". But when he raised his eyes to look up, whom did he see but Tirpathi. Joginder Singh was overwhelmed by the feeling that the man's beard had grown so long it seemed to touch the ground. Then he heard Tirpathi's voice, "Wonderful! Can't ask for more. I've just finished writing a new story. Come, let me read it to you." □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*