

## SHORT STORY

### Toba Tek Singh \*

SADAT HASAN MANTO

Two or three years after the 1947 Partition, it occurred to the governments of India and Pakistan to exchange their lunatics in the same manner as they had exchanged their criminals. The Muslim lunatics in India were to be sent over to Pakistan and the Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani asylums were to be handed over to India.

It was difficult to say whether the proposal made any sense or not. However, the decision had been taken at the topmost level on both sides. After high-level conferences were held a day was fixed for exchange of the lunatics. It was agreed that those Muslims who had families in India would be permitted to stay back while the rest would be escorted to the border. Since almost all the Hindus and Sikhs had migrated from Pakistan, the question of retaining non-Muslim lunatics in Pakistan did not arise. All of them were to be taken to India.

Nobody knew what transpired in India, but so far as Pakistan was concerned this news created quite a stir in the lunatic asylum at Lahore, leading to all sorts of funny developments. A Muslim lunatic, a regular reader of the fiery Urdu daily *Zamindar*, when asked what Pakistan was, reflected for a while and then replied, "Don't you know? A place in India known for manufacturing cut-throat razors." Apparently satisfied, the friend asked no more questions.

Likewise, a Sikh lunatic asked another Sikh, "Sardarji, why are we being deported to India? We don't even know their language." The Sikh gave a knowing smile. "But I know the

**\*Toba Tek Singh** is the classic 1947 Partition story, the widely acknowledged masterpiece of Saadat Hasan Manto, who along with Ismat Chughtai, is among the two most celebrated writers in Urdu. Manto was born in Indian Punjab in 1912 and immigrated to Pakistan in 1947. He wrote dozens of plays and essays, as well as over 200 short stories. He died in 1955 in Lahore.

language of *Hindostoras*" he replied. "These bloody Indians, the way they strut about!"

One day while taking his bath, a Muslim lunatic yelled, "Pakistan Zindabad" with such force that he slipped, fell down on the floor and was knocked unconscious.

Not all the inmates were insane. Quite a few were murderers. To escape the gallows, their relatives had gotten them in by bribing the officials. They had only a vague idea about the division of India or what Pakistan was. They were utterly ignorant of the present situation. Newspapers hardly ever gave the true picture and the asylum warders were illiterates from whose

As his name was Mohammed Ali, he one day proclaimed that he was none other than Quaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Taking a cue from him a Sikh announced that he was Master Tara Singh, the leader of the Sikhs. This could have led to open violence. But before any harm could be done the two lunatics were declared dangerous and locked up in separate cells.

Among the inmates of the asylum was a Hindu lawyer from Lahore who had gone mad because of unrequited love. He was deeply pained when he learnt that Amritsar, where the girl lived, would form part of India. He roundly abused all the Hindu and Muslim leaders who had conspired to divide India into two, thus making his beloved an Indian and him a Pakistani. When the talks on the exchange were finalized his mad friends asked him to take heart since now he could go to India. But the young lawyer did not want to leave Lahore, for he feared for his legal practice in Amritsar.

There were two Anglo-Indians in the European ward. When informed the British were leaving, they spent hours together discussing the problems they would be faced with: Would the European ward be abolished? Would they get breakfast? Instead of bread, would they have to make do with meaty Indian chapatis?

There was a Sikh who had been admitted into the asylum fifteen years ago. Whenever he spoke it was the same mysterious gibberish: "Up the gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the latain." The guards said that he had not slept a wink in all this time. He would not even lie down to rest. His feet were swollen with constant standing and his calves had puffed out in the middle, but in spite of this agony he never cared to lie down. He listened with rapt attention to all discussions about the exchange of lunatics between India and Pakistan. When the guards asked him to come down he climbed up still higher and said, "I don't want to live in India and Pakistan. I'm going to make my home right on this tree."

All this hubbub affected a radio engineer with an MSc degree, a Muslim, a quiet man who took long walks by himself. One day he stripped off all his clothes, gave them to a guard and ran in the garden stark naked.

Another Muslim inmate from Chiniot, an erstwhile adherent of the Muslim League who bathed fifteen or sixteen times a day, suddenly gave up bathing,



mung the dal of the latain."

When he had been brought to the asylum, he had left behind an infant daughter. She was now a comely and striking young girl of fifteen, who Bishan Singh failed to recognize. She would come to visit him, and not be able to hold back her tears.

When the India-Pakistan caboodle started Bishan Singh often asked the other inmates where Toba Tek Singh was. Nobody could tell him. Now even the visitors had stopped coming. Previously his sixth sense would tell him when the visitors were due to come. But not anymore. His inner voice seemed to have stilled. He missed his family, the gifts they used to bring and the concern with which they used to speak to him. He was sure they would have told him whether Toba Tek Singh was in India or Pakistan. He also had the feeling that they came from Toba Tek Singh, his old home.

One of the lunatics had declared himself God. One day Bishan Singh asked him where Toba Tek Singh was. As was his habit the man greeted Bishan Singh's question with a loud laugh and then said, "It's neither in India nor in Pakistan. In fact, it is nowhere because till now I have not taken any decision about its location."

Bishan begged the man who called himself God to pass the necessary orders and solve the problem. But 'God' seemed to be very busy other matters. At last Bishan Singh's patience ran out and he cried out: "Up the gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the latain da Khalsa and Gurjari ki fateh... jo boley so nihal sat sri akal."

What he wanted to say was: "You don't answer my prayers because you a Muslim God. Had you been a Sikh God, you would have surely helped me out."

A few days before the exchange was due to take place, a Muslim from Toba Tek Singh who happened to be a friend of Bishan Singh came to meet him. He had never visited him before. On seeing him, Bishan Singh tried to slink away, but the warden barred his way.

"Don't you recognize your friend Fazal Din?" he said. "He has come to meet you." Bishan Singh looked furtively at Fazal

What the roots lie in folk etymology, in words created by misunderstanding them when first heard. It can happen within one's own language: an American once recalled that during his early years in school, one of the favorite songs sung was "Three Cheers for the Red, White, and Blue." But for the longest time he along with many others in his class thought that they were singing "Three Ears for the Red, White, and Blue." While 'threee' is a nonsense word, other misunderstood words can be the opposite: 'varicose veins,' for example. Somebody might hear it as 'very coarse veins' or as 'very close veins.' This problem, or process, is compounded when words journey from one language to other, as happened when the English, in the process of putting together their Indian empire, perforce came into close contact with the speakers of the subcontinent's languages. As a professor of Sanskrit put it, 'the human ear is far from accurate, particularly the English ear, which is unaccustomed to a definite system of pronunciation in its own alphabet, especially as regards vowel sounds. The consequences are an entire misrepresentation of the original spelling, and a total want of consistency, the very same word being written in every possible variety of orthography.'

Try writing the sounds of the above paragraph in Bengali, and then read it out loud, and think of this process taking place over centuries of a love-hate contact, and you get an idea how the words in Hobson-Jobson came about: a fascinating account of how sound patterns affect etymology, and how the subsequent derivatives then undergo further transformations.

The title, the term 'Hobson-Jobson', itself morphed from what the English thought the Shia Muslims were saying when they cried out "Ya Hassan! Ya Hussain!" in processions to mourn the death of the prophet's grandsons. T. Herbert in 1618 heard it as 'Hussan Hussain'; Fryer in 1673 wrote it as 'Hosseen Gosseen' and 'Hossy Gossy'; in 1726 it was reported that the Dutch called it 'Jaksom Baksom', and the Portuguese as 'Saucem Saucem'--of course it almost goes without saying that both the Dutch and the Portuguese actually might have pronounced it a little differently than how the English heard it. In 1902 a certain Miss Goodrich-Freer settled the matter by writing it as 'Hobson-Jobson.'

Yup, beats me, too! Even accounting for the fact that the English are a weird lot, as the gravedigger in Hamlet put it ("There the men are as mad as he"), this still seems a little excessive. Which is what Rushdie wrote, too, one of those times when we have to agree with The Bearded Provocateur:

"I don't quite see how the colonial British managed to hear (Ya Hassan Ya Hussain) as Hobson-Jobson but this is clearly a failure of imagination on my part."

True Indian English was what the Europeans spoke when talking with the natives. Within it sub-genres developed, simply because of the length of time the different classes from both sides interacted. So there was 'boxwallah English' (trade or commercial speak), 'babu English' (used in offices), and 'bearer English,' the lingo used when the sahibs and their memsahibs rapped with the domestics. The word 'memsahib' itself is conjoining of one-half of the English duo 'Sir-Ma'am' and 'Sahib'. It was some of these memsahibs, fluently 'bolting the baat' who have left us some of the most interesting accounts of the Anglo-Indian world. As well as some engrossing and well-written travelogues cum memoirs.

The word 'mandarin' (a bureaucrat)-- word that used to be favoured by The Economist, with its vocabulary of 'mandarin class' or 'company mandarins'-- is from Hindi *mantri*, a minister or counselor. It could conceivably be traced back to the old Sanskrit *man* (think), a distant relative of English 'mind' through obscure Indo-European language roots. Yellow robes worn by the Chinese mandarins inspired

the 19th-century English name for the loose-skinned 'mandarin oranges.'

'Punch' (the drink) has nothing in common with the roots of English words meaning to hit or a tool for making holes. Made traditionally from five ingredients (spirits, water, lemon juice, sugar and spice), the term for the drink came from *panch*, meaning five in several Indian languages.

Even place names. Cawnpore is from 'Kahnpur' or the town of Kahn, Krishna, or Kanhaiyya--the same 'Kanhaiyya' Anup Jalota Kirtans are about.

Tiffin. Rickshaw. Veranda. Cheroot. Calico. Words were borrowed from all possible fields: administrative, legal, business, trade. From Indo-Portuguese patois: 'caste' is from the Portuguese *casta*; 'mango' from the Portuguese 'manga', which they themselves had adapted from the Tamil *man-kay*. The Tamil *kattu-marram*, meaning 'tied wood', became the English 'catamaran'. Food stuff: 'Bombay Duck', which is not a duck at all but a kind of dried fish. Our *shukri mach*. But then 'ducks' was also slang for gentlemen in the Bombay Service, which must have led to some diverting asides.

And so on. You get the idea. If you follow the trail of words carefully, Hobson-Jobson takes you on a tour from King James (word man himself, who commissioned the writing of the immensely popular King James' version of the Bible) till the time of the *Times*.

This process of mutation is now referred to as 'Hobson-Jobson.' Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* defines it as the 'assimilation of the sounds of a word or words foreign to a language into sounds of a word or words coined or already existent in the language. So now it is a bona-fide entry in dictionaries with a definite meaning.'

The idea of a glossary was launched by correspondence between Henry Yule at Palermon and Arthur Burnell of the Madras Civil Service with the judiciary at Tanjore. The enterprise was not yet finished when Burnell died in 1882, leaving Yule to finish the job, with a little bit of help from his considerable circle of friends, associates and admirers. The book's language thus reveals the social impress of its authors and which is its chief attraction: a gentle, genial tone, what one other compiler of such words termed as 'a master-work of mellow, witty and leisurely scholarship.' Not the kind of stuff people write nowadays. Which is why despite fierce competition from a host of successors (The *Times* Literary Supplement, for example, pronounced that Nigel Hanklin's far more recent *Hanklyn-Janklyn, A Stranger's Rumble-Tumble Guide to Some Words, Customs, and Quiddities Indian and Indo-British* may have 'dealt a mortal blow' to Hobson-Jobson by being 'more precise, more up-to-date...and more explicit'), this particular book will remain a favourite.

Rushdie ended his article on Hobson-Jobson with a play on the last words spoken by Clark Gable in *Gone With The Wind*: 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.' It deserves to be quoted in full:

"To spend a few days with Hobson-Jobson is, almost, to regret the passing of the intimate connections that made this linguistic kedgeree possible. But then one remembers what sort of connection it was, and is moved to remark--as Rhett Butler once said to Scarlett O'Hara--'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a small copper coin weighing one tolah, eight mashas and seven surkhs, being the fortieth part of a rupee. Or, to put it more precisely, a dam.' Ha ha ha!

I can't end my piece that well--just not that good a writer--and so I'm going to simply end with an Edward Lear poem first published in *Times of India*, July 1874. And readers please, don't give it the old post-colonial reading (you know, the apocalyptic forefinger raised to the heavens and the high-pitched: "Aha, I knew it, white woman goes missing, brown man is 'nailed to the wall'"). It will so spoil the fun!

Din, then started to mumble something. Fazal Din placed his hand on Bishan Singh's shoulder. "I have been thinking of visiting you for a long time," he said. "But I couldn't get the time. Your family is well and has gone to India safely. I did what I could to help. As for your daughter, Roop Kaur..." --he hesitated--"She is safe too...in India."

Bishan Singh kept quiet. Fazal Din continued: "Your family wanted me to make sure you were well. Soon you'll be moving to India. Please give my salaam to bhai Balbir Singh and bhai Raghbir Singh and bhai Amrit Kaur. Tell Balbir that Fazal Din is well. The two brown buffaloes he left behind are well too. Both of them gave birth to calves, but, unfortunately, one of them died. Say I think of them often and to write to me if there is anything I can do."

Then he added "Here, I've brought some plums for you." Bishan Singh took the gift from Fazal Din and handed it to the guard. "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" he asked.

"Where? Why, it is where it has always been."

"In India or Pakistan?"

"In India...no, in Pakistan."

Without saying another word, Bishan Singh walked away, muttering "Up the gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the Pakistan and India our fifty moun."

At long last the arrangements for the exchange were complete. The lists of lunatics who were to be sent over from either side were exchanged and the date fixed.

On a cold winter evening truckloads of Hindu and Sikh lunatics from the Lahore asylum were moved out to the Indian border under police escort.

Senior officials went with them to ensure a smooth exchange. The two sides met at the Wagah border check-post, signed documents and the transfer got underway.

Getting the lunatics out of the trucks and handing them over to the opposite side proved to be a tough job. Some refused to get down from the trucks. Those who could be persuaded to do so began to run in all directions. Some were stark

naked. As soon as they were dressed they tore off their clothes again. They swore, they sang, they fought with each other. Others wept. Female lunatics, who were also being exchanged, were even noisier. It was pure bedlam. Their teeth chattered in the bitter cold.

Most of the inmates appeared to be dead set against the entire operation. They simply could not understand why they were being forcibly removed to a strange place. Slogans of 'Pakistan Zindabad' and 'Pakistan Murdabad' were raised, and only timely intervention prevented serious clashes.

When Bishan Singh's turn came to give his personal details to be recorded in the register, he asked the official "Where's Toba Tek Singh? In India or Pakistan?"

The officer laughed loudly, "In Pakistan, of course."

Hearing that Bishan Singh turned and ran back to join his companions. The Pakistani guards caught hold of him and tried to push him across the line to India. Bishan Singh wouldn't move. "This is Toba Tek Singh," he announced. "Up the gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan and India our fifty moun."

It was explained to him over and over again that Toba Tek Singh was in India, or very soon would be, but all this persuasion had no effect.

They even tried to drag him to the other side, but it was no use. There he stood on his swollen legs as if no power on earth could dislodge him. Soon, since he was a harmless old man, the officials left him alone for the time being and proceeded with the rest of the exchange.

Just before sunrise, Bishan Singh let out a horrible scream. As everybody rushed towards him, the man who had stood erect on his legs for fifteen years, now pitched face-forward on to the ground. On one side, behind barbed wire, stood together the lunatics of India and on the other side, behind more barbed wire, stood the lunatics of Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh.

She sat upon her *Dobie*  
To watch the Evening Star  
And all the *Punkahs* as they passed  
Cried, "My! How fair you are!"  
Around her bower, with quivering leaves,  
The tall *Kamsamah* grew  
And *Kitmutgarsin* wild festoons  
Hung down from *Tchokisblue*.

Below her home the river rolled  
With soft melodious sound,  
Where golden-finned *Chuprassies* swam,  
In myriads circling round.  
Above, on tallest trees remote,  
Green *Ayals* perched alone,  
And all night long the *Mussakmoan*'d  
Its melancholy tone.

And where the purple *Nullahs* threw  
Their branches far and wide,--  
And silvery *Goreewallahs* flew  
In silence, side by side,--  
The little *Bheesties*' twittering cry  
Rose on the fragrant air,  
And off the angry *Janpan* howled  
Deep in his hateful lair.

She sat upon her *Dobie*,--  
She heard the *Nimmakum* hum,--  
When all at once a cry arose:  
"The *cummerbund* is come!"  
In vain she fled;--with open jaws  
The angry monster followed,  
And so, (before assistance came,)  
That Lady Fair was swallowed.

They sought in vain for even a bone  
Respectfully to bury,--  
They said, "Hers was a dreadful fate!"  
(And Echo answered "Very.")  
They nailed her *Dobie* to the wall,  
Where last her form was seen,  
And underneath they wrote these words,  
In yellow, blue, and green:--

Beware, ye Fair! Ye Fair, beware!  
Nor sit out late at night,--  
Lest horrid *Cummerbunds* should come,  
And swallow you outright.