

## SHORT STORY

## Sargam Cola

ASGHAR WAJAHAT (translated by J. Ratan)

Just as the canine population gets into heat at the approach of *Kartik*, the eighth month of the Hindu calendar, the elite of Delhi gets into a craze for art and culture at the approach of winter. Winter is also the time when the city swarms with white-skinned foreign tourists. You see them around laughing and joking and bubbling with exuberance. They are said to be the biggest buyers of our culture and are, therefore, recognized as its connoisseurs. Not far behind them is the leisure class, specially the women of high families, with their faces heavily painted like those of the glamorous women of calendar art. In winter they spend their evenings going round art exhibitions or watching plays. Winter is indeed the 'art' season of Delhi. The sun sets quite early in winter and a cold wind springs up caressing the soft woolens of the people who frequent music functions or art exhibitions just for the pleasure of being singled out as the 'arty' people. Satiated with fullness of life, people get steeped in art and music and these in turn seep into them.

That evening a big musical soiree was in progress and a large number of VIPs had turned up. There were four policemen posted at the gate of the *pandal*. Bored and weary, they were lazily toying with their batons. Behind them stood two police sub-inspectors lazily watching the scene, and conscious of the fact that they had four policemen to lord over.

A gravelled path led up to the gate, apparently freshly laid for the occasion, flanked on both sides by flower pots dug into the earth, leaving it to the people to wonder how flowers could grow in such profusion in arid ground. A canopy of white paper flowers stretched over the path. Canopies of genuine flowers were to be seen in the past on the graves of *pirs* and *faqirs*. In course of time the practice caught on and they started decorating their wedding *pandals* with such flower canopies. The path leading to the gate was flanked by bamboo poles covered with coloured cloth, with bright tube-lights fixed over them.

Das Gupta, who was lingering outside the gate, could not see what was going on inside the *pandal*. As he stood there he wistfully watched the people going in: people in high heels who were making an ineffectual effort to look taller than they actually were and middle-aged women with faces that foreign cosmetics had played havoc with. Red sari to match with red eye shadow, blue sari with blue eye shadow. They seemed to have exhausted all the colours of the rainbow over their faces. Then there were women in jeans, staccato sounds on high heels. Faces, some sternly grave, other sterile, denoting wealth, fame, respectability, free from any taint of dejection or disappointment. The crowd passed byfashionable girls with strange hair-dos, girls who killed boys with a look, and dogs shadowing them--doggies, dear doggies and more doggies.

The function had started. It was Bhimsen Joshi's voice, but Das Gupta was still cooling his heels outside the gate. He had not been able to procure a ticket to go in.

The gate, the gravelled path, the well-turned-out visitors, the police officers and their men. At some distance, on the right side of the gate, Arjan Singh had set up his kiosk under a tree where he sold cigarettes and *paan*. Surprisingly, even in a big city like Delhi, Ajab Singh and Das Gupta happened to know each other. Moving away from the gate Das Gupta stopped before Ajab Singh's kiosk. The cold had increased and Ajab Singh had started a fire in a wrought-iron pan.

'Ten *biris*.'

'That makes it thirty, *dada*.'

'Yes, that makes it thirty. When did I say it does not add up to that figure? I'll certainly pay you.' Das Gupta took the *biris* from Ajab Singh. He lighted one from the fire in the pan and took a long pull at it.

'You've not been able to manage it, *dada*.'

'Oh, I will. Surely I will.'

'Better go home. It is going to be eleven.'

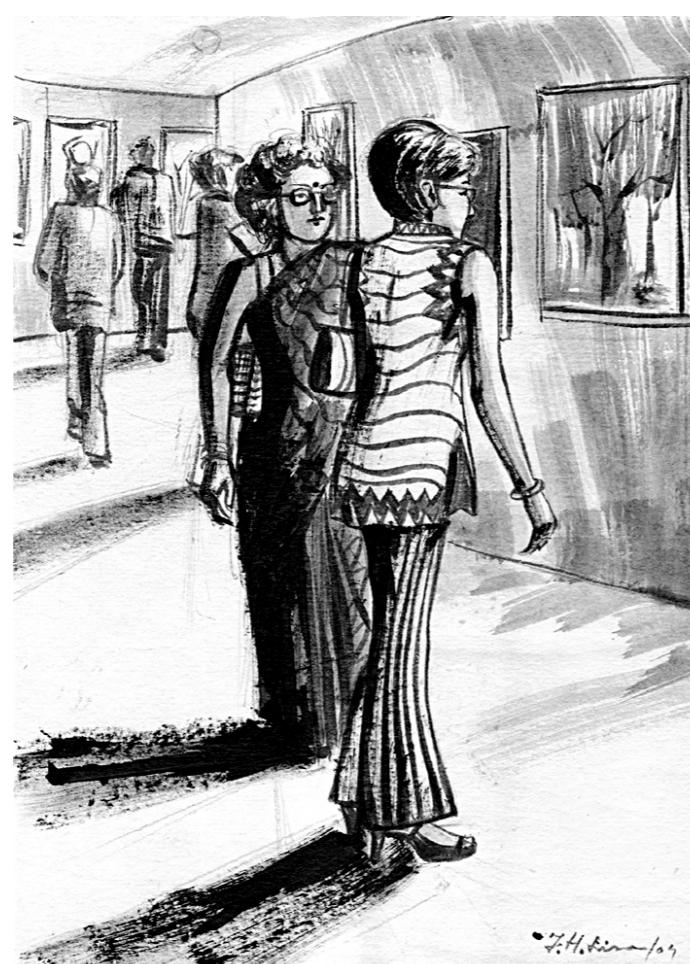
'No, not to that poor home of mine. I want to hear Bhimsen.'

'Two single Banarasi (*paans*).'

A note of Bhimsen Joshi's music came floating outside the *pandal*.

'Wills.'

'No, not these. King size.'



artwork by J. Ratan

Das Gupta moved towards the gate, hoping that he would be able to hear the music. But the sound drifted away, and then stopped. He had a brainwave. Why not steal into the *pandal* by the back? Taking a long pull at the *biri* he came to the backside of the *pandal*. Darkness, trees. He leapt forward. A light flashed on him.

'Who's there? Who could speak so curiously except a policeman? Das Gupta quickly opened the buttons of his pants. 'I've to piss.'

The torch went out. Das Gupta felt like pissing on the policeman. These *salas*, how duty-conscious they were when it was least called for! The urine sprayed the policeman in a thick stream. It also fell over the *pandal*, drenching the audience. The morons, yes, how else to describe them? They rushed out of the *pandal* in panic... Das Gupta started laughing.

Throwing away his *biri*, he returned to the kiosk. There was a counter near the kiosk, made by putting two tables together, a coffee machine, and a two-hundred-watt electric bulb. Hot dogs, hamburgers, pop corn, coffee cups, plates...

Das Gupta attuned his ears to catch the strains of music wafting through the air. It was meant for the people inside, while the bloody fool who could appreciate the music was standing outside the *pandal* making a complete ass of himself. Those inside had no ear for music. Did they really understand Bhimsen Joshi? Oh, what pretence! They made a beeline for the maestro as if they were great connoisseurs of classical music. And within minutes of their arrival they became restive, finding one excuse or the other to leave. They would go somewhere and eat and eat and eat, and having stuffed their bellies would then go to sleep.

'Dada, it's getting chilly.' While making a *paan*, Ajab Singh's fingers were becoming stiff with cold.

'What a surprise. It's only the month of December.'

'Here, *dada*, sit down.' Ajab Singh picked up a brick from the wayside and offered it to Das Gupta.

As the night advanced and the stillness increased, the voice coming from within the *pandal* became clearer. The *ustad* was going to start on a *khayal*. Shifting on his brick, Das Gupta became more attentive... *pag lagan de... dhi dhi... dhage tirikit tu na katta dhage... tirikit dhi ni*. Oh, how well he performed!

'Who's performing on the tabla?' he asked Ajab Singh.

'I don't know, *dada*.' Ajab Singh laughed.

'What virtuosity! The sound keeps descending into the very depths of your being... *tu na katta...*'

'*Tumhare pas Campa ha?* Do you have Campa?'

They were three girls and four boys. Two girls were in jeans and they had had long hair falling to their waists. The hair of the third girl was short and did not cover her ears. One of the boys was wearing a leather jacket while the other two were in Assamese jackets. The fourth had a black blanket thrown around his shoulders. His trouser legs were so narrow that his spindly legs stretched out in them. One of the girls with long hair needlessly kept tossing it back. The third girl kept fingering her nose ring.

'Have you got Campa?' the boy with spindly legs asked.

'No, we have just run out of it.'

'Oh, how silly,' the girl with short hair grumbled.

'What a stupid canteen they have.'

'We must complain.'

'Sweeties, let's have coffee,' the boy with the long legs said airily.

'But I can't have coffee here,' the girl wearing the nose ring said. She was more beautiful than the other girls.

'W-h-y, my dear?' the boy asked. The other girls looked annoyed.

'I always have coffee at home or at the Oberoi.'

'Fine. Let's go to the Oberoi then,' the boy said loudly.

'Sir, sir, Campa is here!' the bearer of the canteen said, pointing at a man who was coming towards them with a crate of Campas on his head.

'Oh, Campa has come!' the girls exclaimed in chorus. From within the *pandal* the voice of Bhimsen Joshi floated out.

'Oh, Campa-a-a has c-o-m-e!' they all sang with one voice. 'C-am-p-a... Par karo... Araj suno... O... Par... C-a-m-p-a... Par karo...'

'But now I want to have coffee at the Oberoi,' the girl with the nose ring pouted.

'But we have come here to listen to Bhimsen Joshi.'

'Oh, don't be silly. He's going to sing the whole night. Let's have coffee at the Oberoi and then come back. We can even have some sleep. Time enough for music and all that.' The long-legged boy broke away from the group, waving his key-ring. Bhimsen Joshi's voice, now saturated with sadness, was drifting out more powerfully: 'Aran suno more...'

Bang! Bang! The car door slammed and its engine growled in the cold.

It was past twelve. The road was steeped in silence with cars parked on both sides of it stretching into the distance. People had started coming out of the *pandal*, most of them middle-aged, looking a little bored, many of them accompanied by fat women, with flesh hanging from their waists. They yawned as they searched for their parked cars. This *sali* slept! A costly ticket gone to waste! The *ustad* would get into his mood only after two o'clock and these people didn't have the patience to wait till then. A slur on the *ustad*'s fair name. Their seats had fallen vacant. Why couldn't he occupy one of them?

Das Gupta started feeling chilly and he shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his secondhand, oversized, Air Force overcoat. Ajab Singh gathered some dry leaves to keep the fire going.

The director of the Art Centre emerged from the *pandal*. 'Sala!' Das Gupta muttered under his breath, eyeing the man malevolently. He had built a nice house by raking in profits on the poor painters' creations. Oh, how the organizer of the soiree ran forward to open the car door for him! The door of the imported car gently swung shut and Kusum Gupta, the organizer, turned to go. An idea flashed through his mind. He knew her very distantly.

'Er... can you please...?' Das Gupta mumbled in English.

She did not care to hear him properly. She had understood his purpose and shrugged her shoulders.

'No, I am sorry. We have spent thirty thousand to arrange this...' She disappeared into the crowd.

Thirty thousand, fifty thousand, one lakh. Profit, profit. She could think of nothing except making money. He resumed his seat on the brick.

'Wills.'

'Sweet *paan*.'

'Try number ninety. Ninety!'

'Oh how mean of you!' the innocent-looking boy was not allowing the woman-like girl to eat his hamburger. The girl stretched out her hand for the burger and he pulled it back.

'Mean!' she said tartly. The other two girls giggled.

Mean? What did 'mean' stand for, Das Gupta asked himself. Didn't it stand for a low-down person? But how sweetly these people uttered the word as if stood for something sublime.

The boy and girl now dug their teeth into the same burger.

'Did you attend the Chawlas' party?'

'Oh, no. I wanted to go but...'

'The Mehras give nice parties.'

'Hi Bobby!'

'Hi John!'

'Hi Kitty!'

'Yes, the Mehras give nice parties because they have a nice lawn. Last time it was terrific. We came back at 2:30 in the morning and...'

'Did you like the bridegroom?'

'Oh, he was so good-looking.'

'Hey, waiter, two coffees!'

'These skunks won't let me listen to the music,' Das Gupta grumbled to himself. The music coming from inside was faintly audible.

'He has just come back from Europe.'

'He has a house in London.'

'Must be loaded.'

'Of course he is. The *ustad* charges ten thousand a night.'

'Then I'll ask him to sing at our marriage,' the innocent-looking boy put his arm around the woman-like girl's waist.

'Look at his hand, look at his wrist!' Das Gupta muttered to himself. 'He can't earn a single paisa by dint of his own efforts. But he has the audacity to invite the maestro to perform at his marriage because of his father's wealth.'

Ajab Singh threw some more dry leaves over the sinking fire. A driver in khaki livery came and sat down to warm his hands by the fire.

'It's so cold--it's getting into my bones,' he said. Nobody spoke. 'Let's see how long this nonsense lasts. Driving 150 kilometers at this pace has killed me. The *sala* took it into his head to hear the *mujra* at two in this freezing cold.'

'It'll go on till six in the morning,' Ajab Singh said.

'Then I'm done for,' the driver said throwing up his arms.

'Brother, do you have a pass?' Ajab Singh asked him.

'You mean like an admit card? Do you want to go in?'

'Our *dada* wants to go in,' Ajab Singh pointed at Das Gupta.

'Let me see.' The driver got up and swiftly walked with long strides towards the gate. A fat Haryana, tall and hefty. He had a word with the policeman at the gate, then went to the receptionist.

The driver returned to the kiosk. 'Oh how cold it is!' He held out his hand. 'Here are the passes.'

'But there are four passes.'

'Don't they know that I am the driver of SP Crime Branch North District? Take all four. What good are they to me? I can't pickle them.'

'One will do,' Das Gupta said.

The Haryana Jat was in no mood to prolong the issue. He tore up the remaining three passes and threw them in the fire. Then he and Ajab Singh held their hands over the fire.

As Das Gupta walked to the gate he could clearly hear *Ja... go... jago...* The *ustad* was through the *alap*--leading to the morning's *Bhairavi*. *Jago mohan piare... dha dha, dhi, dha, ti, ti, ta... Jago m-o-h-a-n... p-i-a-r-e...*

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## On dicky and fitna

ANJUM NIAZ

Urdu in America: sounds strange? Out of sync? Oh yes. When the mailman rang the bell to deliver a parcel and asked, *aap ko Amrika kaisa legha hai?*, the dagger-sharp icicles on the eaves above my doorway stared down as his words hung in the air. You know... the demons of winter in the United States tend to play funny tricks on a mind already frostbitten over.

So, I had then wondered if I was hearing things! Embedded in a thickly WASPish (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) population with residents bundled up in a bridge-and-tunnel vision, as the latest edition of Oxford Dictionary would have us know on American suburbanites -- provincial and insular-- the sound of Urdu had been strange to hear, to say the least. Urdu, which means 'camp', derived from the term 'zaban-i-urd़u' or the language of the camp'-born when the Turko-Persian armies came to India and mingled with the Hindi-speaking Indian in the camps. Spoken, on the other side of the world from me, by about 50 million Muslims in India, it is the first language of about 10 million in Pakistan (with a further 80 million speaking it fluently as a second language).

Sohrab and I now speak Urdu whenever our paths cross. It's an event in itself. Always refreshing and reassuring. The mailman and I have exchanged titbits on each other. He's from India and went back seven years ago to marry a girl from his hometown of Ahmedabad in Gujarat, bringing her to live here in a joint family of aging parents, brothers with wives and kids, all looking for that evanescent American dream.

Owning his language, even though Sohrab breaks into Americanese whenever he runs into other residents, makes him a minority among the ABCD's (American Born Confused Desis) who insist on speaking English old -- ancient actually-- and not so old. This it was that Indians and Pakistanis romancing the past, while glued in hoary time zones and hazy spaces, arrived in America for a conference *déjà vu*. Poets and scholars; literati and critics; editors and diplomats; journalists and novelists; playwrights and politicians; bureaucrats and freelancers; men and women; old -- ancient actually-- and not so old.

even if they butcher the grammar. The other month, I called up a Pakistani-American who had lost a friend-- the only son of a widow, shot and killed at the gas station where he worked. The Edhi Foundation in New York performed his last rites and arranged for his body to be sent to Lahore for burial. I merely wanted to inquire if the 24-year-old Pakistani was a victim of hate-crime. Barely able to make sense of his syntax, I tried to break into Urdu with my interlocutor only to be suitably snubbed from the other end. The chap merrily forged ahead in an English only he could understand!

What's wrong with Urdu? Even the Oxford Dictionary embraces the usage of yet more words spoken in South Asia in its 11th edition unveiled just recently. Words like *dicky* (car boot or trunk), *batchmate* (classmate) *fitna* (unrest or rebellion), *jihad* or *jihadist*, *niqab*, and *punditocracy* are now perfectly legit (as the Americans call it) to use as *pucca* English. Not to be left behind is an editor at *The Washington Post*. In his book *The Elephants of Style - A trunkload of tips on the big issues and gray areas of contemporary American English*, Bill Walsh wrestles with troublesome lexicon: 'Although the people of Pakistan are *Pakistanis*, the people of Afghanistan are *Afghans*. The word *afghan</*