

of an assassin who must have been a Muslim. I, who was watching Sehai die, was a Muslim like his killer. The thought did cross my mind that if the police arrived on the scene I'd be picked up, if not on a murder charge, certainly for questioning. And what if I took him to the hospital? Would he, by way of revenge against the Muslims, name me as his killer? He was dying anyway. I had an irresistible urge to run, to save my own skin, and I might have done that except he called me by my name. With an almost superhuman effort, he unbuttoned his shirt, slipped his hand in but did not have the strength to pull it out. Then he said in a voice so faint I could hardly hear it, "There's a packet in there . . . it contains Sultana's ornaments and her twelve hundred rupees . . . they were with a friend for safe custody . . . I picked them up today and was going to return them to her . . . these are bad times you know . . . I wanted her to have her money and the ornaments . . . Would you please give them to her . . . tell her she should leave for a safe place . . . but . . . please . . . look after yourself first!"

Mumtaz fell silent but I had the strange feeling that his voice had become one with the dying voice of Sehai, lying on the footpath in front of the J.J. Hospital; and together the two voices had travelled to that distant blue point where sea and sky met.

Mumtaz said, 'I took the money and ornaments to Sultana, who was one of Sehai's girls, and she started crying.'

We stepped down the gang-plank. Mumtaz was waving.

'Don't you have the feeling he is waving to Sehai?' I asked Jugal.

'I wish I were Sehai,' he said.

## The New Constitution

Mangu the *tongawala* was considered a man of great wisdom among his friends. He had never seen the inside of a school, and in strictly academic terms was no more than a cipher, but there was nothing under the sun he did not know something about. All his fellow *tongawalas* at the *adda*, or *tonga* stand, were well aware of his versatility in worldly matters. He was always able to satisfy their curiosity about what was happening.

One day he overheard a couple of his fares discussing yet another outbreak of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims.

That evening when he returned to the *adda*, he looked perturbed. He sat down with his friends, took a long drag on the hookah, removed his khaki turban and said in a worried voice: 'It is no doubt the result of a holy man's curse that Hindus and Muslims keep slashing each other up every other day. I have heard it said by one of my elders that Akbar Badshah once showed disrespect to a saint, who cursed him in these words: "Get out of my sight! And, yes, your Hindustan will always be plagued by riots and disorder." And you can see for yourselves. Ever since the end of Akbar's Raj, what else has India known but riots!'

He took a deep breath, drew on his hookah reflectively and said: 'These Congressites want to win India its freedom. Well, you take my word, they will get nowhere even if they try for a thousand years. At the most, the *Angrez* will leave, but then you will get maybe the *Italywala* or the Russian. I have heard that the *Russiawala* is tough. Hindustan, I can assure you, will always remain enslaved. Yes, I forgot to tell you that part of the saint's curse on Akbar was that India will always be ruled by foreigners.'

Ustad Mangu hated the British. He used to tell his friends that he hated them because they were ruling Hindustan against the will of the Indians and missed no opportunity to commit atrocities. However, the fact was that it was the *gora* soldiers of the cantonment who were responsible for Ustad Mangu's rather low opinion of the British. They used to treat him as if he were some lower creation of God, even worse than a dog. Nor was Ustad Mangu overly fond of their fair complexions. He used to experience near nausea when confronted by a white and ruddy *gora* soldier. 'Their red faces remind me of decaying carcasses,' he was fond of saying.

After a violent quarrel with a drunken *gora*, he used to remain depressed for days. He would return to his *adda*, and curse them while smoking his hookah or his favourite brand of cigarettes with the picture of a plough on the packet.

'Look at them,' he would say, shaking his head, 'came to the house to fetch a candle and before you knew, they had taken it over. I can't stand the sight of them, these human monkeys. The way they order you around as if one was their father's slave!'

Sometimes, even after having abused them for hours, he would continue to feel enraged. And he would say to someone sitting next to him, 'Look at them . . . don't they seem like lepers? Something dead and rotting. I could knock them all out with one blow, but what can you do about their arrogance? Yesterday, there was one I ran into. I was so sick of his *gitpit* that I nearly smashed his head in, but then I restrained myself. I mean it would have been below my dignity to hit the wretch.'

He would wipe his nose with his sleeve and continue his diatribe. 'As God is my witness, I'm sick of humouring these *Lat* sahibs. Every time I look at their blighted faces, my blood begins to boil. Maybe we need a new law to get rid of these people. Only that can save us, I swear on your life.'

One day Ustad Mangu picked up two fares from the district courts. He gathered from their conversation that there was going to be a new act for India. They were discussing the soon-to-be-introduced Government of India Act 1935.

'It is said that from 1 April, there's going to be this new constitution. Do you think it will change everything?'

'Not everything, but they say a lot will change. The Indians would be free.'

'What about interest?' asked one. They were probably moneylenders who were in town for litigation.

'Well, frankly I don't know. Will have to ask a lawyer.' replied his friend.

Ustad Mangu was already in seventh heaven. Normally, he was in the habit of abusing his horse for

being slow and was not averse to using the whip, but not today. Every now and then, he would look back at his two passengers, caress his moustache and loosen the reins affectionately. 'Come on son, let's show them what you can do. Let's go.'

After dropping his fares, he stopped at the Anarkali shop of his friend, Dino the sweetmeat vendor. He ordered a large glass of lassi, drank it down in one gulp, belched with satisfaction and shouted, 'The hell with 'em.'

When he returned to the *adda* in the evening, none of his friends seemed to be around. He felt bitterly disappointed because he had been looking forward to sharing the great news with his audience. He had to tell someone that there was going to be a new constitution soon which would change everything.

For about half an hour, he paced around restlessly, his whip under his arm. His mind was on many things, good things that lay in the future. The news that a new constitution was to be given to the country had suddenly opened new possibilities. He had switched on all the lights in his brain to examine carefully the implications of the 1 April change in India. He felt thrilled. He even smiled to himself when he thought about the fears of those wretched moneylenders about interest. 'The new constitution is going to be like boiling hot water which will destroy these bugs who suck the blood of the poor,' he said to himself.

He was very happy. The new constitution was going to force these white mice (for that was his name for the British) once and for all back into their miserable holes. No longer would they infest the earth.

When Nathoo, the bald-headed *tongawala*, ambled in a while later, his turban tucked under his arm, Ustad Mangu shook his hand vigorously and said: 'I have great news for you. It's so good that it might make your hair grow back.'

He then went into a detailed description of the changes the new constitution was going to bring to India. 'You just wait and see. Things are going to happen. You have my word, this Russian king is bound to show them his paces.'

Ustad Mangu had heard many stories about the Communist system over the years. There were many things he liked about it, such as their new laws and even newer ideas. That was why he'd decided to link the king of Russia with the India Act. He was convinced that the changes being brought in on 1 April were a direct result of the influence of the Russian king. He was of course quite convinced that every country in the world was ruled by a king.

For some years, the Red Shirt movement in Peshawar had been much in the news. To Ustad Mangu, this movement had something to do with 'the king of Russia' and, naturally, with the new Government of India Act. There were also frequent reports of bomb blasts in various Indian cities. Whenever Ustad Mangu heard that so many had been caught for possessing explosives or so many were going to be tried by the government on charges of treason, he interpreted it all as a curtain-raiser for the new constitution.

One day he had two barristers at the back of his *tonga*. They were arguing loudly about the new constitution. One of them was saying: 'It is section two of the Act that

I still can't make sense of. It relates to the federation of India. Well, no such federation exists in the world. From a political angle, it will amount to a disaster. As a matter of fact, what is being proposed is anything but a federation.'

Since most of this conversation was being carried on in English, Ustad Mangu was unable to follow it. However, it was his impression that these two barristers were opposed to the new Act and did not want India to be free. 'Toadies,' he muttered under his breath.

Three days after this incident, he picked up three students from the Government College who wanted to be taken to Mozang. They were talking about the new constitution.

'I think things are going to open up with the new Act. Just imagine, we are going to have elected assemblies and if Mr . . . gets elected, I'm bound to get a government job.'

'Oh! There are going to be many openings and much confusion, of course. I'm sure all of us will be able to lay our hands on something.'

'I couldn't agree more.'

'And, naturally, there's going to be a reduction in the number of all these thousands of unemployed graduates.'

This conversation was most thrilling as far as Ustad Mangu was concerned. The new constitution now appeared to him to be something bright and full of promise. The only thing he could compare the new constitution with was the splendid brass and gilt paraphernalia he had purchased a couple of years ago

for his *tonga* from Choudhry Khuda Bux. The new constitution gave him the same nice, warm feeling.

In the weeks following, Ustad Mangu heard much about the changes, both for and against. However, his mind was quite made up. He was secure in his belief that come 1 April, everything would change.

At last the thirty-one days of March came to an end. There was a chill in the air as Ustad Mangu rose earlier than usual. He went to the stable, set up his *tonga* and took to the road. He was extraordinarily happy today because he was going to witness with his own eyes the coming of the new constitution.

In the morning fog, he went round the broad and narrow streets of the city but everything had the same old and worn-out look. He wanted to see colour and light. There was nothing. He had bought a special new plume for his horse to celebrate the big day and it seemed to be the only bit of colour he could see. It had cost him a bit of money too.

The road lay black under his horse's hooves. The lamp-posts looked the same. The shop signs had not changed. People moved about as if nothing new had happened. Perhaps it was too early in the morning. Most of the shops were closed. He consoled himself with the thought that the courts did not open until nine, and it was there the new constitution would be launched.

He was in front of the Government College when the tower clock struck nine, almost imperiously. The students walking in through the main entrance were all nicely dressed, but somehow they looked shabby to Ustad Mangu. He wanted to see something colourful and dramatic.

He moved his *tonga* towards the main shopping centre, the Anarkali. Half the shops were already open. There were crowds of people at sweetmeat stalls, and general traders were busy with their customers, their wares displayed invitingly in their windows. However, none of this had any interest whatsoever for Ustad Mangu. He wanted to see the new constitution as clearly as he could see his horse.

Ustad Mangu was one of those people who cannot stand the suspense of waiting. When he was going to get his first child, he had been unable to sit still. He wanted to see the child even before it was born. Many times, he had put his ear over his wife's pregnant belly in an attempt to find out when the child was coming or what he was like, but of course he had found nothing. One day he had shouted at his wife in exasperation.

'What's the matter with you? All day long you're in bed like you were dead. Why don't you get yourself out, walk around, gain some strength to help the child be born? He won't come this way, I can tell you.'

Ustad Mangu was always in a hurry. He just couldn't wait for things to take shape. He wanted everything to happen immediately. Once his wife Gangawatti had said to him: 'You haven't even begun digging the well and already you're impatient to have a drink of water.'

This morning he was not as impatient as he normally should have been. He had come out early to view the new constitution with his own eyes, the same way he used to wait for hours to catch a glimpse of Gandhiji and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

Great leaders, in Ustad Mangu's view, were those who were profusely garlanded when taken out in

procession. And if there were a few scuffles with the police during the proceedings, the man went up even further in Ustad's estimation. He wanted to see the new constitution brought out with the same razzle-dazzle.

From Anarkali he moved back to the Mall. In front of the motor showroom, he found a fare for the cantonment. They settled the price and were soon on their way. Ustad Mangu was now hopeful that he might learn something about the new constitution in the cantonment.

His fare got down from the *tonga* and Ustad Mangu stretched himself on the rear seat. He lit a cigarette and started thinking. This was one way he relaxed when he had the time. He wasn't looking for a new fare. He was only curious as to what had overtaken the new constitution.

Ustad Mangu was trying to work out if the present system of allotting *tonga* number plates would change with the new dispensation, when he saw a *gora* soldier standing next to a lamp-post.

His first instinct was not to take him. He hated these monkeys. However, it occurred to him that to refuse to take their money wouldn't be very wise either. 'Might as well recover what I've spent on the new plume,' he said to himself.

He turned round and without moving from his comfortable perch, asked in a leisurely manner: 'Sahib bahadur, where do you wish to be taken?'

He had spoken these words with undisguised irony. There was smile on his face and he wished nothing better than the immediate demise of this impertinent *gora*.

The *gora*, who was trying to light a cigarette against

the wind, turned and began to walk towards the *tonga*. They looked at each other, and Ustad Mangu felt as if they were two guns firing from point-blank range.

Finally he stepped down from his *tonga* all the while eyeing the soldier with mute fury.

'Do you want to go or are you going to make trouble?' the *gora* asked in his pidgin Urdu.

'This swine I know,' Ustad Mangu said to himself. He was quite sure that it was the same man with whom he had had a quarrel the year before. The fellow had been drunk and had abused Ustad Mangu, who had borne the insults in silence. He wanted to smash the bastard's skull in but he knew that if the case went to court, it was he, the humble *tongawala*, who would get it in the neck.

'Where do you want to go?' Ustad Mangu asked, not forgetful of the fact that there was a new constitution in force in India now.

'Hira Mandi, the dancing girls' Bazaar,' the *gora* answered.

'It will cost you five rupees,' Ustad Mangu said, and his thick moustache trembled.

'Five rupees! Are you out of your mind?' the *gora* screamed in disbelief.

'Yes, you heard me,' Ustad Mangu said, clenching his fist. 'Are you interested or do you merely want to waste my time?'

The *gora* remembered their last encounter and had chosen to pay no attention to Ustad Mangu's barrel-chested stance. He was determined to teach the man another lesson for his insolence. He took a couple of steps towards him, his swagger stick brushing past the Indian's thigh.

Ustad Mangu looked down on the short-statured soldier with great contempt. Then he raised his arm and hit him heavily on the chin. He followed this with a merciless beating of the Englishman.

The *gora* couldn't believe it was actually happening. He tried to ward off the descending blows, but without much luck. He could see that his assailant was in a rage bordering on madness. In desperation, he began to shout for help. This seemed to enrage Ustad Mangu even more, and the blows got harder. He was screaming with fury: 'The same old cockiness even on 1 April! Well, son, it is we who are the Raj now.'

A crowd had gathered. Two policemen appeared from somewhere and with great difficulty managed to rescue the hapless Englishman. It was quite a sight. There stood Ustad Mangu with one policeman to his left and one to his right, his broad chest thrown out in defiance. He was foaming at the mouth, but there was a strange light in his eyes. To the astonished crowd, Ustad Mangu was saying: 'Those days are gone, friends, when we were just good for nothing. There is a new constitution, a new constitution. Understand?'

The Englishman's face was swollen and he looked extremely foolish. He still couldn't understand what had happened.

Ustad Mangu was taken by the two constables to the local police station. All the time, even when he was inside the station, he kept screaming, 'New constitution, new constitution!'

'What rubbish are you talking? What new constitution? It's the same old constitution, you fool,' he was told.

Then they locked him up.