

Ali The Tongawala

Before the outbreak of militancy in Jammu and Kashmir State, I used to go to my native place every summer. My annual visits were meant more to meet my friends than for the purpose of relief from the summer's heat of Mumbai. I used to enjoy these visits as I could revive my childhood bonds. I would spend hours with my old school and college mates, reminiscing the happy carefree days of the yore. I used to meet my friends at Lal Chowk, which was our meeting place.

One day it so happened that no one turned up. So I was all by myself. The weather was indeed balmy, as it was spring in Kashmir. I had no desire to spend such a pleasant day within the four walls of my home at Karan Nagar. Therefore I hired a tonga and directed the tongawalla to take me to Dalgate and then to Gagribal along the Boulevard, right upto the foot of Chasma-Shahi hill. While travelling along the outskirts of Dal Lake, each ripple on the surface of the lake brought back to my mind, the memories of my school days at Biscoe Memorial High school. The days, when there used to be a regatta once a week at Dal Lake. Besides these regattas of my school, my friends like Ras Masood, Mir Inayat, Ali Baksh, Farooq Sheikh, Nazir Sheikh, Khurshid Anwar Fazili, Omkar and I would go for a swim whenever we managed to have some free time. The visage of each one of them flashed across the screen of my mind, as the tonga took me along the Boulevard drive.

During the last two decades the lake has shrunk by more than one-third its original size. It is a pity that this process of shrinking of the lake is not going to stop. In fact I am told, there is a prophecy that a day will come when in place of Dal Lake, one of the most beautiful lakes in the world; there will be just a small spring. The very thought of such a happening sends a chill down my spine.

In between I stopped and took some snaps of the surrounding mountains of Mahadev peak, the twin peaks of Zabarwan and also of Shanakaracharya Hill. These mountains with their wisdom and solidarity of millions of years seemed to laugh at the sorry state of affairs all round, which is overflowing with rampant corruption, flagrant favouritism, blatant

hypocrisy and brazen nepotism. The setting sun provided diffused light, filtered through topless poplar trees, ideal for good photography. The tongawalla requested me to take his photograph alongwith his tonga. His tonga was tastefully decorated with flowers and multicoloured woollen balls. He, in his traditional outfit, the steed-like horse and the scenic backdrop of nature's beauty provided an excellent composition for good photographs. Therefore I readily agreed to his request and took quite a few photographs, with him and his tonga as the subject. On the return journey, I asked him his name. He said, "My name is Ali". Then I told him, "I have taken your photographs. How can I send them to you? I do not have your address" He gave me the address of a laundry at Lal Chowk, where his younger brother worked. I came to Mumbai, got the snaps printed. Sorted out the ones meant for Ali. Mailed the same to him. He never acknowledged my letter. time passed and in the hustle and bustle of this concrete jungle, the thought of having sent the snaps to Ali faded from my mind.

The following year in 1971, I went to Srinagar for my annual summer vacation. One evening, I happened to meet Ali with his tonga at Regal Chowk. Seeing me he stopped his tonga and jumped from it, his face gleaming with happiness, he embraced me. He had some passengers seated in his tonga. "Saheb, I am going a short distance. I shall leave them there and shall be back at this very place in about ten minutes. Please wait for me. Then, I shall take you for your favourite ride along Boulevard." He did not allow me to speak at all. So I waited. He came. I sat in the rear seat. He asked me about my welfare and all the rest of it. He said that he had received the photographs. Everyone in his family had liked them. He expressed his thanks to me. I asked him as to why he had not written to me that he had received them. "Oh, Saheb, how could I write to you. I have never learnt to read or write! My father was a poor tongawalla. I do not know what the future has in store for my son. He is little over two years now. I want to educate him, Insha Allah!" We went along the same familiar route. On the return journey he dropped me at my residence at Karan Nagar. I paid him the fare. In return he expressed his blessings to me.

This princely ride along Boulevard in Ali's tonga became a daily routine for me. I would meet Ali at Lal Chowk at about 4 p.m. Sit in the rear seat of his tonga and then travel along the same route. On number of occasions I took my daughter Fareez with me. She would sit with Ali in the front seat and even hold the reins. Sitting beside Ali she used to make herself absolutely comfortable. She used to enjoy the ride more than I. One evening I saw my friend Kanwal Krishen Muthu at Gagribal. I asked Ali to stop the tonga. I alighted from it

after greeting my friend, we started talking to each other. I told Fareez to come near us and meet my friend. She refused to budge from her seat. Seeing how adamant Fareez was, Ali saved the situation by saying, "Saheb, while you two are talking, I shall take baby little ahead. We shall soon be with you." I did not have even an iota of apprehension about the safety of my daughter, who was at that time less than two years old. Kanwal and I continued to converse, till Ali and Fareez joined us.

During my pleasure rides with Ali which gave me infinite happiness, I noticed that Ali never used his whip on his horse. One day I told him, "I see every tongawalla whipping his horse. But Ali, I have never seen you using the whip, why?" He replied, "I call my horse Moti. He is the bread earner of my family. Therefore he is as important to me as my kith and kin. Tell me Saheb, can I treat Moti like an animal?" I had no answer. Never-the-less I silently appreciated the greatness of his thought.

As usual, one day Ali dropped Fareez and myself at my residence, "So Saheb, tomorrow I shall meet you at Lal Chowk." "But Ali, tomorrow afternoon I am leaving for Mumbai. I shall come again next year." My reply was not expected by Ali. Hearing this, Ali stood silent. He wanted to say something but did not. Perhaps he was too overwhelmed on knowing about my departure too suddenly. Time stood still for him. I could see his eyes becoming watery. So did mine. He put his hand in his pocket, took out a one rupee coin, gave it to Fareez. A small gift from a humble man, which could be equated to a treasure.

He sat in his tonga. Took a U-turn towards his home. Fareez had grown so much accustomed to him that she kept on waving to him, even though his back was towards us. He did not turn round to have another look at us. Was he emotionally upset, as we were leaving the next day?

Next year when I went back to Srinagar, I enquired about Ali at the laundry at Lal Chowk. I was told that he had sold his tonga and horse and was driving a rickshaw in downtown Srinagar. I tried to locate Ali, but I failed. He was perhaps spreading his subtle sunshine and warmth somewhere else, which I was not destined to experience any more.

Those were the days when late Sheikh Abdullah was in political wilderness. His son Farooq was trying to acquire some medical degree in England, late Rajiv Gandhi was flying

for Indian Airlines. Politicians, wise or otherwise are deriving political advantage from the sorry state of affairs in the State. It is indeed sad to see that we have "lost the paradise". To "regain paradise" we need many wonderful people like Ali, whose message of love and good-will will go a long way in restoring normalcy in the state and mould the situation nearest to the hearts' desire of the right thinking people.

