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Recounted Remembrances of Times Past: Relics of the Raj, Stayers-on and Anglicised Indians

Abstract
In urban folk narrative, somewhere between the 'urban legend', which is melodramatic fiction, and the 'family story', which is of interest only to the family, lies what I call 'hardened gossip': outright inventions, embroidered 'factual' stories and stray dicta that outlive the usual fate of ephemeral tittle-tattle. Across a fairly wide social ambit, these tales become set-pieces in 'standard conversations' when familiar topics arise (for example, childhood, servants, ghosts). I listened transfixed in my childhood to such talk on 'the Old Days and their Legacy' — that is the Aftermath of the British Raj. Here is something of what I heard.
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THE SAHIB’S BATH AND THE CHAPTI

The claim to fame of my father, Ajoy Sircar, is that he is the model for the character of Kabir in A Suitable Boy. ‘Everyone,’ so he said, ‘knew of how the English memsahib thought she was telling the servant to bring a two-annas’ worth of lakri [wood] for [the fuel for] the sahib’s bath, when she actually said, “Bring a two anna larki [girl] for the sahib’s bath”’. Or how she wrote home, ‘They have wonderful unleavened bread here called chaprasi-s’, meaning ‘peon’, the Indian word for letter-carrier (chapra-si, ‘from Chapra District, Bihar’), a mistake for chapati-s, unleavened Indian wheat tortillas.

MONGYELS AND MAIDENS

Brigadier Apcar, permanent resident of the Ootacamund Club in the south, was married to Ilka, Countess von Kalmbach, who was from a ‘mongyel Euuyopeyan family’ but who didn’t use her title because it ‘puts the p’ice up’, and who was said by her relatives to say ‘mwevy’ for ‘ve’y’. They were ‘ve’y B’itish’ indeed, though ‘Apcar’ is an Armenian name. The family had owned Sunny Park, in Calcutta, a glorious row of beautiful nineteenth-century European houses, one of which was replaced with a large vulgar Hindu temple in the 1970s. The brigadier told of Maiden’s Hotel, Delhi, when it was one of the showcases of the Raj, and of visiting nieces from the U.K. sending a telegram in desperation to their uncle in the provinces: ‘UNABLE TO STAY MAIDENS ANY LONGER UNLESS YOU SEND MONEY.’

PISSPOTS AND GARDEN VEGETABLES

My father and Mr Brian St. John Conway, English public school product, resident at the Saturday Club, Calcutta, and the St. Paul’s Cathedral organist,
told of ‘Roman remains and Russian aristocrats’. In the 1940s, as the Raj was ending, the Calcutta Statesman reported that a Russian resident, one U. F. Uckov, Esq. had found a Roman remain, (relic), so to speak, a vessel with a Latin inscription ‘Is est matella’. When translated it proved to read, ‘This is a pisspot’. That may have been a dig at credulous Indian lack of Latinity, unlikely to have actually appeared in the newspaper, but long after independence British prejudice sometimes remained strong as did a corresponding Indian resentment about it. In the 1970s, for example, Said Aporajita ‘Pinky’ Bagchi Zachariah chortled, ‘And, said Madam British Council,’ the wife of a dignitary in that institution, “Oh, I never eat local vegetables — I grow my own!” in her garden, which counted in her mind as ‘the soil of Blighty’. This gem spread like wildfire.

NAMING OF DOGS AND DAUGHTERS

Middle-class Bengalis, Anglophone and non-Anglophone alike, said jocularly that dogs are traditionally unclean, and ‘sahibs’ pets; so all dogs understand English’. Indeed, Indians’ pet dogs were more often than not given English names spoken to in English. Quite apart from dogs, in the British period and only in Bengal, perhaps under the influence of George Eliot, came the middle-class adoption of European ‘Romola’ as a Bengali proper name, on the analogy of ‘Kamala’ (pronounced ‘Kom-ola’ in Bengali), and ‘Rama’ (Pronounced ‘Romma” in Bengali), both names for the goddess Lakshmi. From at least the early twentieth century, Bengalis have adopted and naturalised English nicknames, mostly female, sometimes male. ‘Nelly, Dolly, Baby, Ruby’ were common nicknames, as were ‘Daisy, Milly, Mini, Polly’. By the late 1950s, Hindu Bengalis were calling their daughters ‘Tinka, Jolly, April’ — all the given names of girls in college with me in the early 1970s.

ENGLISH POETS AND POETRY

At Presidency College, Calcutta, Bengali was the language of tutorials and conversation, and English the language of lectures. There, conveying a mild racial pride at an Indian being honoured in the U.K., Mr Asoke Kumar Mukherji told generations of students of Manmohan Ghose, the man who apparently chose the decoration for the title page of Palgrave’s Golden Treasury. ‘Manmohan’ means ‘mind-entrancer’. When he was at Oxford, Ghose was introduced at tea to Oscar Wilde. Wilde heard the name, and was duly entranced, murmuring to himself, ‘Man-mohan, Man-mohan,’ at its sheer beauty; then he flung his arms around him. Mr. Mukherji told this tale in heavily Bengali-accented English, because his first language was Bengali, but he was an M.A. (Oxon.) and was said to repaint the word ‘OXFORD’ on his trunk every year. Manmohan Ghose’s poetry appears in Primavera: Poems by Four Authors (1890) along with that of Laurence Binyon, Arthur S. Cripps, and Stephen Phillips. The students sometimes privately made risqué remarks about the arm-flinging. Our generation (mid- and late- 1970s) used to smile, ‘Oh, haven’t you heard that our teachers X and Y, with
their firsts from Oxford, courted each other by discussing Holinshed’s *Chronicles* on the bus? When they marry, the offspring will be called *The Golden Treasury*—punning on Palgrave and such Bengali phrases for children as ‘golden-moon’ and ‘treasure’.

**Ducks and Bananas**

Indians may have laughed at British linguistic mistakes; they also laughed at their own. My father said that it was a hoary old Independence-era chestnut that a Pakistani dignitary said to a British diplomat’s wife, ‘Madame, I do so admire your ornamental buttocks,’ for *batak* is the Urdu for ‘duck’. Indians also made bilingual puns. Said Arun Karki:

- What did one banana say to the other?
- ‘Marry me, I’m a-kela’

*Kela* is the Hindi word for ‘banana’, and *akela* is the Hindi word for ‘alone’.

**Simple Fare, Simple Code**

Anglophone Indians sometimes mocked our own ‘native’ pretensions. The Indian Manager of the Jiajuri Tea Estate in Nowgong District, Assam, had worked up quite a routine. (Affectedly): ‘We’re having very simple fare tonight: wheat handcakes, spiced lentils and daai.’ Chapatis, dal, and *dahi* (curds), are indeed very simple traditional ‘fare’ dressed up in fancy translation.

My father, and absolutely independently, Moyna Khan, said that a specifically Indian Christian ‘Code of Hospitality’ had it that if there were guests to dinner, the murmur ‘FHB’ meant ‘Family Hold Back’ and ‘MIK’ meant ‘More in Kitchen’.

(Though, if the code was so commonly known, wouldn’t the guests know it too?)

**The Lorgnette**

During World War II, members of the US army were stationed at the Darjeeling Club. It was built on land donated by the Maharajahs of Burdwan and Cooch Bihar, and the members were always racially mixed. In the 1970s Mrs Susheila Rao told how an old Indian dowager stationed herself in the dining room early each morning before the officers came into breakfast, and scrutinised them all with a lorgnette. The affect was comically grotesque — one eye screwed up, as that side of her face went down, the other eye glaring wildly as that side of her face went up. One day, the officers bribed the bearers (waiters) to let them in earlier than her. When she entered, with perfect military timing, up went their porridge spoons over eyes as glaring as hers. She never used the lorgnette again.

The Raos moved in Calcutta High Society, and Mrs Rao told the story very well, and did the dropping of one side of the face as she raised the lorgnette with a skill worthy of Margaret Rutherford. Partially at least, though probably unconsciously, the story conveys racial pride. Whites may have been top-dog, and may have won in this case, but the Indian Grande Dame, whose name was given but which I have forgotten, was not subordinate to them. It might have been
some other club, and I am sure that in the 1990s, I heard or read of this as a joke or urban legend outside India too.

FANCY DRESS
Mrs R.: Do you remember how Bulbul Arnold carved out a permanent place for herself in Society annals by using her status as a white sahib’s brown wife to never wear a blouse? Not that you could see anything, for her sari was always carefully all pinned up round her.
Mrs S.: Speaking of ‘Fancy Dress’, there was Kutty Ramanair, a wild slacks-and-trouser-wearing socialite at a time when Indian women, even Anglicised ones, did not wear these as a matter of course. Her husband, ‘Baby’, was an engineer and he designed her blouses.
Mrs R.: Was she really so deformed as to need the services of an engineer — wouldn’t an ordinary brassiere have done?’
Mrs S.: Kutty won a fancy-dress party competition simply by announcing for months beforehand that her costume would be so fabulous that she would win it. The costume itself was very disappointing, consisting of a piece of gauze over her face, for she said she had come as The Painted Veil, after the Somerset Maugham novel.
Me: But how was the gauze painted?
Mrs R. (smilingly): The veil was not painted; Kutty may have been painted underneath, and probably more than made up for it.
Mrs S: And I myself won a fancy-dress party competition over much more elaborate costumes, at the Shirley and Charmaine da Silva’s, by taking in an empty matchbox and going in as ‘The Matchless Matchmaker’ in about the same period. Those were the days!

THE LORD’S CHAIR
Mrs Amrita ‘Trixie’ Handique told of ‘The Lord’s Chairs’. The Lord Sinha family, her first cousins, she said, had a pair of special chairs that went by ship to the U.K. for all Royal Occasions, from the Days of the Good Queen-Empress onwards, for them to sit in. Just like The Prince and the Pauper, said Calcutta, special dispensations to Sit in the Presence of the King! Even on the occasion of the ill-fated wedding of Prince Charles to Lady Diana Spencer, just like the old days, the two chairs went round the Cape of Good Hope for the Royal Wedding, and Lord and Lady having attended it, they all came back again. This would have evoked amusement at the pretensions and passé colonial conventions of the Aristocracy even in its twilight years. That world is gone now. My parents had known the late Lord from the 1940s, the days when he was merely ‘the Hon.’, as they said. And the lord’s relict, Lady Anju Sinha, rushed into my father’s arms at a British High Commission drinks party in the 1980s. ‘Oh Ajoy, how lovely to see you!’ she cried. ‘There’s so few of us left!’