

India in My Life

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India in my life

Foreword

January 2018 was the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Moral Re-Armament (MRA) centre, *Asia Plateau*, in Panchgani, India. I was not there. I had wanted to be, but life circumstances had prevented me from travelling from my home in Sweden. Nor was I there in 1968 at the opening. I had wanted to be there then, too, but I was in Delhi, where I had been put in charge of the MRA house there. The fiftieth anniversary nonetheless gave me the chance to recollect. What follows is an account of my times in India (from 1967 to 1971 and then on subsequent shorter visits) and of the important place India has had in my life.

The story really goes back to the 1890s, when my father's father took the long journey from England to Jammu to run a Christian Missionary Society (CMS) school there. My father was then born in Gulmarg, Kashmir, on July 2, 1908. The family returned to England when my father was four. Then in 1931, while he was studying engineering at London University, he was introduced to the Oxford Group by his older brother, Francis, co-founder of the Anglican Society of St. Francis. Francis had met the American who had initiated the movement, Frank Buchman, while at Oxford. As a result of his encounter with the Oxford Group, my father switched to studying theology at Cambridge, was ordained, and then went to a village on the Welsh border to be curate. There he met and fell in love with a young lady called Margaret Mooring Aldridge, who was working in the household as nanny to the minister's children. In 1938 the Anglican bishop of Rangoon, George West, told his friend, Frank Buchman, that he was looking for a Chaplain. Buchman recommended my father, and my father travelled out to Burma. A year later he sent a telegram to Margaret, from Rangoon, suggesting that she meet him in Calcutta. There was no mention of marriage, but Margaret assumed that that was implied! Luckily (not least for me!), she got the hint and took the next available boat out.

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They were married in Calcutta cathedral by the Metropolitan on the 29th of September, 1939. In 1941 my parents, who by this time had just had a daughter called Rachel, crossed to India for a holiday, with Bishop West and his wife. Just after they had left Burma, however, the Japanese entered the country and they were unable to return – leaving behind pretty much everything they owned, including their wedding presents.

They then spent the rest of World War II in different parts of India, mostly staying with friends or relations (my mother's sister, Catherine, along with her husband, Burford, and their three children, were in South India). At one point they were accommodated, free of charge, for six months in a suite at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay. My brother, Stephen, was born in Kodai Kanal in 1943. Back in Britain after the war my father was "persuaded", somewhat against his own better judgement, to work full time with MRA as a sort of co-ordinator of the so-called "clergy work" in the country, based in London. In 1961, he finally returned to his real calling and became Rector (minister) in a country parish near Harlow in Essex.

I went to boarding school, first in my mother's hometown of Bournemouth and then at Brentwood in Essex. My sister, Rachel, started to work full time with MRA as a teenager and almost immediately left Britain – essentially never to return. She travelled the world with an MRA musical called *Space is So Startling* and then spent some time, until 1966, in India. Both in the show and in India there was a young Canadian, Tony Reynolds, whom she was to marry in April 1967. While in India, at various "youth camps" around the country, including at Panchgani, they met and got to know a group of young people who went on to create a musical show called *India Arise*, which toured India and then Europe. This will feature in my own story later.

All this is by way of saying that even before I ever set foot in India, the country had already featured large in my life. Hindi expressions, such as "*atcha*", "*katcha*", and "*badmash*" (most often directed towards me by my mother), were common parlance at home, and Indian cuisine was a frequent feature of the family diet. In short, India was a pervasive presence in the home, although certain aspects of Indian culture, particularly its rich religious culture, were never given much attention. That part of my education was yet to come.

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Pre-India

July 1966 – August 1967

After two years working for an insurance company in the City of London – a job I knew after two weeks that I would not make a career of – and having sold my (by then second) motorcar and changed to a motorcycle, I headed off on a tour of Britain with no idea of what I wanted to do in life. It was July 1966, when I found myself in the vicinity of Tirley Garth, the MRA conference centre in Cheshire, England. My sister was there and a cousin, C.M., and I decided to drop in for a couple of days to see what was going on. There were a lot of young people at Tirley and they were putting together a musical show that would become *It's Our Country, Jack!*. The shipping industry was being crippled by a nationwide port workers' strike at the time, and some Trade Union men and business people were there at Tirley. They suggested that the spirit that they were seeing at Tirley and that was expressed in the show, with its cast of enthusiastic young people, be taken to the "sensitive points of British industry". A tour was organized and, not having anything better to do, I accepted an invitation to travel with the show for the next six months.

Whether the show had any effect on the state of industrial relations in the country is doubtful, but for some of those who were in the show, it was the start of a journey that, in some cases, would last a lifetime. For myself, I had really only gone along for the ride, so to speak, but after about three months the subtle group pressure got to me, and one evening – in the bungalow of the elderly couple with whom I was billeted, in Oxford – I knelt down by my bed and "gave my life to God". At the time it was sincerely meant and the next day, at a meeting of the cast, I shared my decision.

The show had been directed by Canadian actor Howard Reynolds (shortly to become my sister's father-in-law). He had a vision of combining the faith and conviction of those taking part in the show with professional skill and training, which he felt would produce a very powerful effect when put on the stage. To this end, he invited ten of us from the cast to join a school of acting based at the Westminster Theatre. Over the five months that the school lasted I discovered the great pleasure of making people laugh and, in the case of at least three of us, we learned a few things that would be of help in our future careers as actors/performers. The school ended abruptly when Howard was sent packing back to Canada by a couple of men of no vision, who saw themselves as guardians of what they perceived as the purity of "the work". (This was also the time of the Great Split between MRA in Britain and *Up With People* in America when much mistrust and jealousy of power

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broke the movement into two unreconcilable factions. But this is not the place for further comment on that episode.)



India Arise

As mentioned above, that spring another MRA musical show, *India Arise*, had been touring Europe and came to Britain, where it was performed at the Westminster Theatre. Sixty or so young people – mostly students who had encountered MRA at the “camps” around India mentioned earlier – sang songs (written by an English woman called Kathleen Johnson) and performed sketches that painted a picture of India as they saw her and of the India they wanted to see. At the end of the show, one of the cast members stepped forward and spoke directly to the audience. “Our aim is to build a clean, strong, united India”, he said, “And we need help.” One couldn’t help but smile inwardly. The idea was just so preposterous, ludicrous: a bunch of sixty idealistic young people in a country of half a billion with, seemingly, as many problems. It was so ridiculous indeed, that when, a few days later, I received a personal invitation to travel to India and join them in this impossible task, I just couldn’t say no.

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India

August 1967 – November 1968

It was the early hours of August 13, 1967. My sister, Rachel, and her new husband, Tony Reynolds, and I, had just landed at New Delhi airport. (As mentioned earlier, Rachel and Tony had already spent several years in India before they were married.) As we travelled by taxi (in what I had always known back in England as a Morris Oxford, but – in actuality – was now the ubiquitous, Indian-made Ambassador) into town, I was fascinated by everything I saw: all sorts of strange-looking vehicles and bullock carts and bicycles and “put-puts” – 3-wheeled taxis based on motor scooters; little stalls lining the street with knots of people – men for the most part – clustered around little charcoal fires drinking tea. And the smells... (Air India once boasted: “There is an Air about India”!). A day was just getting going on a planet that was utterly alien from the one I had spent the first twenty years of my life living on, and an extraordinary thought suddenly exploded in my head: “I’m home!”

MRA was at that time renting a house on the busy Pusa Road that led out west from the city centre. It was being hosted by an Australian couple, Lindsay and Margaret Cartwright, and I found myself shown to a room on the top floor with three or four other lads in it who were just waking up. Among them was a very tall Dutchman called Johannes (people in India thought he was a prince because they thought we were calling him “Your Highness”) and an equally tall Swede called Lars. The next morning, after a cold shower, I went down to breakfast and, for some reason, I can still see exactly how the table looked that first morning: the crockery, the toast, the Indian cornflakes, and warm milk.

As per my MRA training, I had squeezed in a quiet time that morning before breakfast, and these are some of the thoughts I wrote down. (Fifty-six years on the phraseology looks bizarre, but it’s nevertheless interesting to look back at how the young man writing it thought that morning all those years ago.) I wrote: “I was lying on my bed – my first night in India – listening to the early morning sounds of the city – dogs barking, car horns blaring and crows cawing. It was as if I were at last at the front line, my year of basic training completed, and battle lay ahead India is ripe for a mammoth upheaval ... which way will she go? Needed: a monsoon of the Spirit. Do very little for the first 3 or 4 days. Eat and drink little. Sleep a lot ... Learn ten new Hindi words a day ... Clouds are gathering – the heat is oppressive. A storm is coming. What sort of storm will it be? ...”

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(The Swede, Lars, still remembers me getting up at a meeting one of those first days and saying, “I have come to do battle”!)

Later that morning, I wanted to buy an aerogramme to write home to my parents and I went out in search of a post office. I saw some people queuing at a bus stop and I asked one of them if he could please tell me where I would find a post office. After discussing with the others in the queue, he turned back to me and said, “I’m sorry, sir. This is not post-office queue. This is bus queue!”

The cast of *India Arise* was in Delhi, having returned from Europe a few days earlier, and after a couple of weeks, they began to disperse, some to their families whom they hadn’t seen for many months, and others to Bombay (Mumbai) or to Panchgani, where a new conference centre was in the process of being built. I moved from the house on Pusa Road to 3/5 Jhansi-ki-Rani Road, a house that MRA had rented ever since the 1950s and which was then the home of RD and Prabha Mathur and their two young sons. The Reynolds were also staying there, among others.

Not long after settling in there, something happened that was to colour the next three-and-a-half years of my life in India and leave an indelible mark on my life.

Rajmohan Gandhi had been asked by a social worker to come and meet a group of young men who lived in the so-called *Bhangi Basti* (“Harijan” colony, known as the “sweepers’ colony”) on the other side of the busy Panchkuin Road from 3/5. It was a place where his grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi, had famously held prayer meetings and had even stayed for some months. Mr. Gandhi took a few of us with him and we sat on wooden chairs in a large, bare room with a group of six or seven young men from the colony.

We told them about the idea, propagated in MRA, that one could change society by changing oneself and applying absolute moral standards. They also heard about “listening to the inner voice”, which Mahatma Gandhi had also spoken about. We each shared something of our own lives. They wanted to meet again the following Saturday and again the week after that. Rajmohan Gandhi had left Delhi by then but, all through that autumn, a small group of us continued to cross the road to meet the young men several times a week and sometimes every day. And they began coming across to 3/5.

As far as I can remember there were three or four of us: Tony Reynolds, Sailal (from Panchgani), Cedric Daniels (also from Panchgani), and maybe others – and me. Some weeks later the Reynolds, Sailal, and Cedric all left for Mumbai and Panchgani. Tony joined the staff of *Himmat* magazine and he and Rachel rented a flat in Kolaba. After that, I was joined by others. Sunil Mathur, who was destined to become head of Siemens in India, was often on deck to help translate.

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Ranjit Singh

(All the photographs of the “Harijan” friends were taken by David Channer)

Of the young men in the colony, one emerged as a leader of the group: Ranjit Singh. Ranjit had a beautiful singing voice and used to sing at weddings and other occasions. He began applying the ideas he learned about through MRA, and it soon started to have an influence on the community. A core group was formed and for many months three of them – Ranjit, Mange Ram and Ram Swroop – began crossing the road at 4:30 every morning to have a quiet time with me, to “share” their thoughts (in Hindi, thereby boosting my knowledge of the language!), and then head off to their jobs for the municipality. Then in the evening, they would come back, most often with several others in tow whom they were hoping to draw into their growing network in the colony. A “team” became established consisting of – apart from the three mentioned above – Ramji Lal (the “elder” of the group), Kashmiro Bhen, Ranjit Singh II, Chimman Lal, Amar Singh, Vajendra Singh, and two or three others whose names I forget. One of the first to come to 3/5 was Babu Lal. Babu Lal sat a little apart from the others, I remember, chewing pan and looking sullen. After sitting in silence for a long time, he suddenly stood up and launched into a bitter tirade against the upper Caste Hindus and about the suppression his people had suffered for millennia. Soon after that, they all went back home. A few evenings later he was back. As usually happened at these impromptu gatherings we would end by having “a quiet time”. Someone – I think it was an older English friend called Sydney Cook – asked Babu Lal what his thoughts were, and I thought: “oh dear, oh dear, now we’re going to have another long stream of venom – and it’s already late, I want to go to bed”. Babu Lal paused for a second and then he said: “You people say ‘When I point my finger at my

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neighbour, there are three more pointing back at me.’ Well, I was thinking about three men in the colony who have been plotting to kill me and I’ve been plotting to kill them. God has told me to apologise to them.” And that was all.

We didn’t see him for a few days after that, but then one evening a quite literally new Babu Lal came to the house. He told us how he had arranged to meet the three men in a very public place in the colony, so that there would be lots of people around if things got ugly. He told them he was sorry for hating them and for plotting to kill them. They responded likewise. From that day on we never heard another word of anger from Babu Lal about the Caste Hindus. He began thinking about what he could do himself to “lift up my people”, as he put it. He thought about the young children of the colony who were not getting any schooling because they were sent out to work to help the family economy. He decided to start an after-work school and enlisted the help of some friends. They taught reading and writing – and “listening to the inner voice”. They started with their own kids, but the group very quickly grew to twenty, then fifty, then to over a hundred. An extraordinary transformation in the colony began to take place.



Babu Lal

During the autumn the Mathur family had moved to Panchgani so that RD could oversee the building of *Asia Plateau* on site. A number of people passed through Delhi, and they were all interested in meeting the “Harijans”. New Zealand farmer Garfield Hayes spent many months in the city attempting to persuade various government bodies that half a dozen Jersey cows that had been donated to *Asia Plateau* from Australia were “non-political”. The cows were languishing in quarantine in a shed in Calcutta. Had he been

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paid by the hour for all the long hours he spent meeting with endless officials he would have become a very wealthy man!

With so many people passing through Delhi it was decided that a minibus was needed, and Garfield and I were commissioned to acquire one. The best minibus on the market was one manufactured by Mahindra & Mahindra on a Jeep chassis. They were made to order which meant many long discussions about seats and doors and colour and so forth. Garfield was (and presumably still is) a stickler for detail. I am not – as my wife would attest. Many were the times – not just in meetings about the building of the minibus but in many other encounters with officials of various kinds – when I would get really frustrated by Garfield's meticulous ways, only to recognise afterwards that they brought results that my impatience would have prevented. God bless him! The minibus was being built in Jaipur, which meant that Garfield and I took several trips down there to try to chivvy the process along: we had a deadline, which seemed to be an alien concept for the company. We were anticipating that several delegates to the opening conference in Panchgani would be passing through Delhi, and a big reason for getting the minibus was to be able to take them around the city. Then about a week before Christmas, we were finally told the minibus was ready to be picked up. However, when we went along to the dealer/agency, up on the Pusa Road, we were told it hadn't been delivered. So, Garfield and I decided we would just have to go down to Jaipur ourselves and fetch it. It was Christmas Eve, and we took an early train, or bus – I forget which. We got a taxi to the body workshop where the minibus was being put together only to be told that they were still putting on the finishing touches and that it wouldn't be ready that day. We decided to wait there until the job was done, which put the needed pressure on them to get it ready. Finally, at around six that evening, the shiny new turquoise minibus was driven out of the workshop and its long life began (I found it languishing in the workshop at *Asia Plateau* twenty years later, its useful life more or less spent.)

Garfield and I did not relish the idea of looking for a place to stay the night and then spending all of Christmas Day driving to Delhi, so we resolved to head straight off for the 8- or 10- hour drive back to the city. By the time we got underway, it was already dark, and we soon found ourselves driving along the unlit, single-track road that was the main artery to the capital, through a heavy downpour. At around ten o'clock we drove through a flooded portion of the road and water got onto the battery, killing the engine dead. Stuck in the middle of nowhere, in the pitch dark, what were we to do? We tried sleeping, but it was very cold, and sleep was impossible. After a while, at around two in the morning, we managed to flag down an ancient truck that took us into the outskirts of Delhi. There we disturbed the slumber of a put-put driver who reluctantly agreed to take us all the way to 3/5, where we arrived just in time for Christmas Day breakfast. I don't remember how we retrieved the minibus – we must have done so somehow because I drove many, many miles around Delhi and its environs in that vehicle over the next three-and-a-half years.

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From the time the Mathur family moved to Panchgani, a steady stream of letters and telegrams kept arriving from RD with instructions concerning the ordering of furniture, cutlery, and the like for the new centre. Panchkuin Road, that ran from 3/5 into Connaught Place, was famed for its numerous furniture stores. The furniture was manufactured in the street behind the stores that ran parallel to Panchkuin Road. Another street nearby produced stainless steel cutlery and *thalis*. I still remember inspecting the hundreds of forks, knives, and spoons that were destined for Panchgani, and picking out those that were too big or too small or too narrow or too chunky.

Sending telegrams was often the most efficient way of communicating across the country, and one quickly got used to rattling off “A for Agra, B for Bombay, C for Calcutta,” etc. The particular difficulty I had was always having to spell out my full name over the inevitably poor connection: “...No, not ‘disco’, Biscoe, BISCOE! B for Bombay... BOMBAY! Yes, B FOR BOMBAY, I for India, S for Simla...SIMLA! You want me to spell Simla??” It could take a very long time and I would be hoarse for a week afterwards. And to think that in today’s digital age India has become a global centre of communications!

It was decided that some of the “Harijans” should be invited to attend the opening of the centre in Panchgani. Half a dozen or so agreed to go and I was looking forward to accompanying them on the journey down. But then I got a letter from RD Mathur requesting me to please stay in Delhi “to hold the fort”, so that was what I did – and it was a somewhat surreal time for me, being alone in the house for several weeks. Alone, that is, apart from Ayez Khan, the bearer; Swami, the cook; a daily cleaner (from the colony), a chowkidar, a gardener, and Hari Singh, the driver (from Nepal) – all of whose wages I had to dole out at the end of the month. (I continued as pay-master for as long as I lived in Delhi.) Swami, who was from South India and had only one tooth, was incapable of cooking for less than four or five people and so I put on a lot of weight during those weeks.

Ayez Khan had come to 3/5 in the fifties to apply for the job of bearer. The person who interviewed him was David Channer and, when Ayez Khan presented his credentials, David was amazed to see a letter of recommendation written by his father, General George Channer, when he had been serving in Quetta, where David was born. Ayez Khan naturally got the job and remained as bearer at 3/5 until his retirement, when he was given a pension by MRA. Apart from being a loyal and honest member of the household, he had a fund of wisdom and humour – a wonderful human being. (Peter Howard left an indelible impression on him by prostrating himself at Ayez Khan’s feet!)

Apropos food, for some reason – maybe because of the Bihar famine of the year before – a group of ladies around Europe had taken it upon themselves to coordinate the sending of food parcels to individuals working with MRA in India. A parcel would arrive every ten days or so – I forget exactly how frequently – so we always had good coffee and sugar to offer guests, as well as tinned food and other treats. In one of these parcels, from a lady in Denmark, there were some packets of tomato soup. We could tell it was tomato because of the red picture on the front. In any event, we had invited a family to dinner one evening but they never turned up (we learned the lesson not to serve soufflé when

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we were expecting dinner guests!). They did come the following evening, however – very late in the evening as we were all about to go to bed. Swami had already clocked off, so we searched the cupboards for something to offer them and came across these packets of “tomato soup”. But the soup was vile and the more pepper and salt we added the viler it became. Many months later, Kirstin Channer (a Dane) was going through the kitchen cupboards and suddenly burst out in delight: “Oh, there are some packets of rosehip desert here! How nice!” And it was nice – when you knew what it was!



3/5 Jhansi-ki Rani Road – standing: Ayez Khan; seated L. to R.: ?, Sachi Dananda (Bangalore), Rachel Reynolds, John Söderlund (Sweden), me.

After the opening of the Panchgani centre the house filled up again and the Channer family – David, Kirsten, and Alan – took up residence.

The early morning quiet times and sharing with, primarily, Mange Ram, Ram Swroop, and Ranjit Singh continued. During that time, I would also cross the road to the house opposite 3/5 every day to “share guidance” with the son of the family there, Prakash. (I have never inflicted myself on any other neighbour in this way, I should like to note...). I also, on occasion, enlisted Prakash’s help in translating for the “Harijans”. He was a high caste Brahmin and, as such, would normally have refused even to sit down in the same room as these Dalits.

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Mange Ram

I began spending more and more time over on the other side of Panchkuin Road, in the colony. Mange Ram hung up a sign over a shelter outside his mudbrick home on which he had painted *MRA Office*. We would have almost daily gatherings there over cups of sweet, milky tea, sitting on charpoys under the shelter. My family home back in England – an Anglican Minister’s “Rectory” – had eight bedrooms, three reception rooms, and about an acre of garden. Talk about a different planet!

A large stream of people passed through Delhi during that period. Some stayed for a few days, others for weeks or months. Visits to the *MRA Office* in the “Harijan” colony became an obligatory part of the programme.

One of those who was a constant companion during that time was a young man from Old Delhi called Anil Kumar. His mother produced the tastiest vegan meals I ever had! Anil had been one of those at the very first meetings with the “Harijans” and he spoke their language in a way that few others did. (Later, he would marry Padmini Kirtane, from Pune, who had been with us in *It’s Our Country, Jack!* Tragically, he was killed in a road accident in the early 1970s.) When RD Mathur summoned him to Panchgani to be his right-hand man there, we missed him greatly in Delhi.

There was also a young Anglo-Indian chap called Geoffrey, who was studying at St. Stephen’s College and who was often around to help communicate, but his Hindi wasn’t perfect. For many months I cycled across Old Delhi to St. Stephen’s college once or

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twice a week – about an hour each way – to meet up with him and his student friends. Cycling in the heat of summer, usually in the afternoons, was **very** hot work and I often thought of Noel Coward's song "Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun."

At one point I thought I should learn Hindi properly and got hold of a teacher who began coming to 3/5. However, I soon discovered that the brand of Hindi he wanted to teach me was high Hindi and not the common, or *chalu*, Hindi (what the British used to call Hindustani – a mixture of Hindi and Urdu) that my Dalit friends spoke, so I discontinued the lessons. (I still have the little novel that he had me read from – *Niband-mala*. I never got beyond the first page...) I had learned to read the Devanagari script early on by starting with the large Coca Cola hoardings dotted about the city - "K-O-K-A K-O-L-A" - and then moving on to road signs, which were all in both Latin and Devanagari scripts, matching sounds with letters. After a week or so I could read "Do ya tin baatche bas!" and "Sukhi parivar choti parivar!" I never did manage to fully master the multitude of "t" and "d" sounds. But being able to read was a huge advantage, even if I didn't necessarily understand *what* I read. (As I mention later in this narrative, when I visited Kashmir in 1978, I was extremely bucked to be told that I spoke good Urdu! Unfortunately, time's rust has taken its toll and particularly after studying Russian in the 1990s, Hindi now comes out as Russian if I try to speak it.)

At a very early stage, I had learned to operate the ancient Bell & Howell 16mm film projector. Often, I would set it up in an open space in the *bandi basti* and show MRA films. They were in English, of course, so no one would understand a word, but usually Mange Ram or someone one would give a synopsis beforehand, or I would stop the projector while he gave a resumé. People would sit enrapt on the ground on both sides of the screen. Eventually, we bought a new projector, and David Channer had a hole made in the wall between the office and the sitting room in 3/5 through which one could project a film, thus creating something of a real cinema feel.

Among those who came to Delhi around that time were two Swedish teachers, Karin Anderson (later Parsons) and Gudrun Frenberg. They were on a mission to show the film *Give A Dog A Bone* to schools and I became their driver and projectionist. We had some memorable adventures. On one occasion we were to show *The Crowning Experience* at a girls' school in Jaipur or Udaipur – I forget which. In any event, the electricity supply in the school was rather less than the 110 volts the projector was built for, with the result that the motor went at half speed, which didn't do much for Muriel Smith's voice, and the film lasted about three hours.

In April 1968 I had my twenty-first birthday. A group of British Trade Unionists were in Delhi, along with Duncan Corcoran, and I spent the day, which was hot, driving them around the city to visit Parliamentarians, Union leaders and the like. While they were inside the air-conditioned offices, I sat in the sweltering minibus (I was evidently

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considered to be “one too many”) with a large typewriter my parents had sent me for my birthday, and wrote a sonnet about turning twenty-one, which I shall not cite here. There was a dinner at 3/5 that evening and my birthday was suitably celebrated, and I felt mollified.

While on the subject of birthdays, my 23rd was also spent in Delhi. On that occasion an English friend from *It's Our Country*. Jack! days, Howard Grace, and I were invited by a friend of his, a captain in the Indian army, to go sailing with him on a lake outside Delhi. He liked sailing and fancied himself a master, participating in sailing races all around the country. He also appointed himself as the sailing correspondent for the Times of India. In every race he took part in, he invariably came in last but would always give himself an honourable mention in his write-up: “Captain Sammi Singh made a gallant effort in difficult conditions...”. The day we went out sailing with Sammi was a very hot April day, with hardly a breath of air. After what seemed to be an eternity, we reached a small island in the middle of the lake, on which there grew a single tree. We sat in the blessed (if meagre) shade of that tree and Sammi produced a large watermelon. At that time, we foreigners were strictly forbidden to eat watermelons on account of the possibility of them having been injected with water to add to their weight. However, Howard and I were far too near dying of heat and thirst to bother about such rules, and eating that watermelon was one of the most pleasurable experiences of my life. There not being a breath of wind, we had to row all the way back.

In May 1968 I went to Panchgani for the first time, accompanying a group of seven or so from the “Harijan” colony. Only one building had been completed at that time – *Valley View* – and it was full, so my “Harijan” friends and I were billeted in a house in a nearby village. I felt privileged to be housed with them there. It was a students’ conference, and I met several students then who have remained close friends to this day. At the end of the month, I returned to Delhi.

That summer I was joined in Delhi by a tall, thin young man from Bangalore called Hyder Ali. I have a report that we wrote together, dated 7th July 1968. In it, we wrote of the Dalit friends: “Fresh decisions on commitment and purity are made daily. During one meeting held in our home recently, a corporation worker, Santhu Ram, said how he felt that those who had been to Panchgani from the colony were not all saints, as some of them liked to make out. Mange Ram answered saying that of course they were not all saints, and that they all need much change. The help of men like Santhu Ram was badly needed to change them. The following morning Santhu Ram decided to start living by absolute honesty and to give his whole time to this revolution. Amongst other things this has meant the end of bribe taking.

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Asia Plateau – Valley View in the background, Mountain View under construction. (Still from A Galloping Horse)

“The families of the men have also begun to change. One of these is that of Amar Singh, who was at the conference in May. His wife and he have guidance together and think how God wants them to spend their money on food, clothes, pots and pans, etc. The entire family is transformed and is quite the happiest one could hope to find anywhere.”

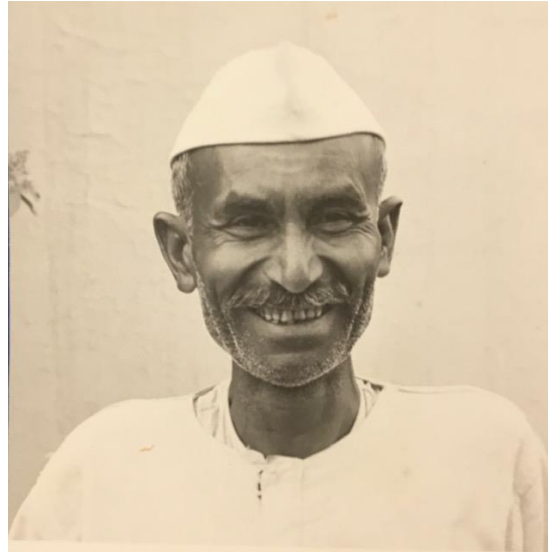
Once again, this makes slightly strange reading, looked at more than 50 years later, but no one could question our sincerity! The report continues:

“The eldest member of the MRA team in the colony was 65-year-old Ramji Lal. He always went about with a slightly mischievous smile on his face and would often come out with little nuggets of wisdom. Ramji Lal used to say that through MRA he had found a peace in life which he never thought possible. It shone from his face. We wrote of him in the report: “He is convinced that MRA is the only answer to the problems he has seen and been faced with all through his life and bashlessly (sic) declares his beliefs to industrialists, students, MPs, and factory workers alike, and all are deeply stirred by what he has to say.

“Earlier in the month, Babu Lal, Mange Ram and Amir Singh, ... gave their stories and convictions to a delegation of hill leaders from Assam, who were in Delhi for negotiations. Those influential delegates were very struck by their simple answers to jealousy hatred,

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fear ,and division. They returned to Assam shortly after with a new concept of what the ordinary Indian could do and how together they could solve their differences.



Ramji Lal



Amar Singh

“.... Women of the colony are now as much involved in the fight [sic] as the men have ever been. They have regular meetings each week and plan how to change the most difficult women in the colony.

“....One woman called Chandranbhai was notorious ... for her constant fighting and bickering with neighbours. She has decided not to fight with people anymore and has made many costly apologies.... A notice board has been erected on which daily news

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releases are posted, and pictures of meetings held in the colony with Rajmohan Gandhi and others, put up in one of the colony shops by the main road for all to see. As one walks through the colony one is greeted by varying renderings of MRA songs, which the children are taught in the four-hundred-strong school run by Babu Lal and his friends. The only lady delegate to Panchgani, Kashmiro, takes the P.T. class! She has become a leading light in the activities within the colony and a real leader of all the women – even the ones she finds [it] difficult to get on with.

“Before MRA came to the colony it had the reputation of having the worst crime record in the state. A year later it won a prize for being the “best kept” colony in Delhi. News of what was happening in the colony reached all the way up to the President of India, at that time Zakir Hussein, and he indicated through Rajmohan Gandhi that he would like to meet the women and men behind the extraordinary changes that had been taking place. We had a meeting to decide who should go and what they would say to the President. Seven were chosen.



Outside 3/5 before visiting the President of India, Zakir Hussein: From L. to R: Babu Lal, RD Mathur, Amar Singh, Ranjit Singh, Mange Ram, Chimman Lal behind Ramji Lal

When it came to the question of what should be said there was a lively discussion about all the many problems Harijans face in the country and they all saw this as a wonderful opportunity to bring them to the President’s attention. Then we had a quiet time, as was our wont, and everyone shared the thoughts they had had. Everyone had the same

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thought “Tell him our stories of change.” So that is what they did. They had been allotted ten minutes but were still ensconced in the lavish state room of the President’s Palace, where the President normally receives heads of state, an hour later. Afterwards he said to RD Mathur, who had accompanied them: “You know there are moments in a man’s life that he knows he will never forget. Today has been one of those.” As far as the men themselves were concerned, RD Mathur reported afterwards that it seemed as though sitting in that splendid hall with the President of India was something they did every day of their lives!

“Here are some of the stories they told:

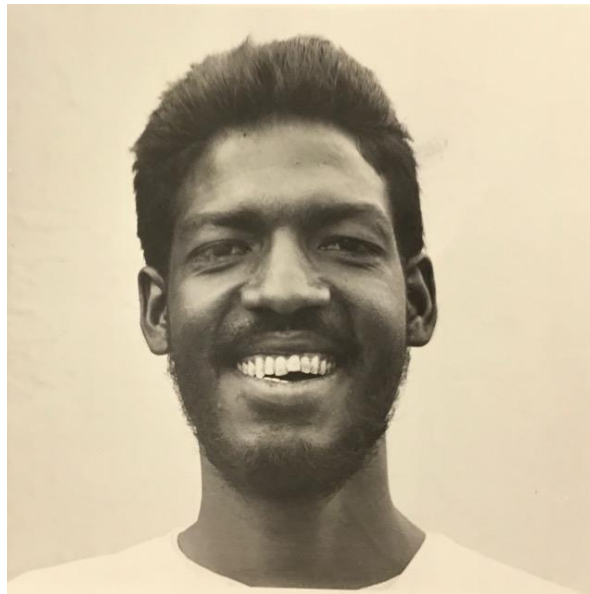
“Babu Lal told his own story of how he had mended the relationship with the men he had plotted to kill, how he had lost his hatred of the caste Hindus and how he had started the school for the children in the colony. Then he went on to tell the President about one little girl who came home from the school to find her father drunk, as usual, and she told him about the four absolute standards, that she’d been taught about in the school, and about listening to the inner voice. He ‘listened’ and suddenly saw the bad effect his drinking was having on his family and resolved to stop. He’d been buying liquor from the same stall for over twenty years and he had the thought to tell the stall owner of his decision not to drink any more. The owner was skeptical and waited some days to see what happened. The man didn’t come back, and the owner saw the difference it was making to his family. So he decided to stop selling liquor. He poured all his liquor into the gutter and went to the owners of the other two stalls in the colony and persuaded them to do likewise. Just like that! After that anyone wanting a drink had to go a long way to get it. It was said that within five months drinking in the colony had dropped fifty percent. Gambling and other crimes also virtually disappeared.

“Vajinder Singh was another of the young men who visited the President that day. He said, ‘When I was a young boy some bigger fellows bullied me into taking some liquor. To begin with, I resisted but after a while I began taking it on my own and soon I was a slave to it. I drank and gambled and was a real bane to my family and community. Then one night a few weeks ago I was walking home after drinking a lot and bumped into someone along the way. I swore and threw them into the gutter. When I reached my house, I heard someone come in behind me. It was Mange Ram. He said he had seen me knock the man down in the street and told me I could become a new man if I applied absolute standards of honesty, purity, love and unselfishness in my life and obeyed my inner voice. I was too drunk to understand what this was all about and went to sleep. In the morning, though, I woke up very early and everything he had said came back to me very clearly, and then I heard a voice which seemed to say to me “I can make you into a new man if you give your life to me.” I realized it must have been God who had spoken to me. I got up and went to Mange Ram’s house and told him that I wanted to apologise to the man I had knocked down the night before. I asked him to

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come along with me as a witness. We went together to the man's house, and I touched his feet, saying that I was sorry for what I had done to him and vowed that I would never touch liquor again.'

"Then there was Chimman Lal," the report goes on. "He was a very tall, fearsome looking man – very dark skinned and with a lop-sided jaw. He earned money by strangling stray dogs and getting a few rupees from the municipality for each tail he could produce. He told the President: "I used to gamble by day and in the evening go around beating up anyone who'd won money from me, take the money back and then go and spend it on liquor." He was the most feared man in the colony and Ranjit Singh and his friends had decided to try and change him. He used to say that when the drink was on him people appeared like flies, but that Ranjit and his friends appeared even less. He scoffed at them, he said. But in spite of himself he got very intrigued by their new way of life and by the fact that they were not going back to their old ways. Eventually, he decided to give it a try. He wrote to his wife, who had left him and returned with his children to their village and apologised for the way he had lived and had treated her and asked her to come back, promising to live differently. He got himself a job working on the municipal dump, where he worked hard. And he stopped gambling and drinking. I often used to visit his home and was always struck by the happy atmosphere in their one little room.



Chimman Lal

He was a big man with a big sense of humour. He helped a lot of others to stop drinking and clean up their homes. One man was in a very bad way when he met Chimman Lal. Two of his children had died of starvation and the rest of his family was under-nourished

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and under-clothed. His wife didn't have enough pots and pans to cook with and the home was a shambles. Three weeks after meeting Chimman Lal everything was different: the home was neat and tidy and had been decked out with new pots and pans. Everyone had enough to eat and new clothes, and he had even begun putting money aside in a post-office savings account.

“Towards the end of the interview with the President, Ranjit Singh asked permission to ask the President a question. He said, ‘Mr. President, sir, do you ever listen to God?’ ‘Sometimes,’ replied the President. Ranjit said, ‘Can I ask you another question, sir? What does God tell you?’ The President clearly wasn't sure how to answer this son of a sweeper, and Ranjit went on: ‘I have learned to listen to my inner voice, the voice of God, for an hour every morning of my life, and to write down all the thoughts that God puts into my mind. These thoughts show me how to change myself and how can help my family and friends to change. They take me out of myself and to the whole colony where I live, so I begin to care for every last individual who lives there. They take me out of the colony to the whole of India and out of India to the farthest corners of the world, which I never used to dream about, so I begin to think and care for them.’ The President of India didn't know how to respond.”



Slum area in Delhi today – not so much different from then...

Recalling all that happened in the “Harijan”/Dalit colony five decades later and reflecting on the amazing simplicity of these stories of change in people's lives and in their

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community, I wondered whether such things could happen today. It was encouraging to hear, therefore, as I did recently, that there were indeed similar happenings in a Dalit colony outside Jamshedpur.

It's easy – perhaps inevitable – to become blasé about the poverty that surrounds one on all sides in India. You stop seeing it. Or rather, it becomes such a constant backdrop that you stop thinking about it. This was no less true for me regarding my “Harijan” friends. I would walk through the colony practically every day. I would see the children playing in the dust and filth and step over the fetid open drains like everyone else did, and I would sit on the charpoy outside Mange Ram's house sipping sweet tea as if it was all just the most ordinary, natural thing. But the hard reality of their state was brought home to me one night when Mange Ram came to 3/5 late one evening, at around nine. He was looking a bit down in the mouth and I tried to find out what was on his mind. For some reason, I asked him if he'd had his supper and he said no. So, I asked him if he'd had any lunch. Again, he said “Nahī.” “Have you eaten anything today?” I asked him. Again, “Nahī.” So, then I asked him, “When did you last have something to eat?” After a pause, he said, “Persuī” (the day before yesterday). Then he said, “I don't mind so much about myself. I can go without eating for some days. But it hurts when the children come home, and I have to tell them there's no food.” I gave him some rupees to buy vegetables in the market, which was still open, and he went away. The next morning at six he was back and returned the amount I'd given him. I hoped he hadn't borrowed it at some prodigious rate of interest, but I fear he probably had. During the three-and-a-half years I knew him he buried three children who had died through lack of medical care. At a large meeting attended by a lot of wealthy people in Delhi, he got up to speak. He said, “I am a poor man. I come from a poor community. We do not want the money of the rich because we would only spend it on unnecessary things and our poverty would not be answered. What we want is for the rich to work alongside the poor to bring about a cure to the poverty of the whole of India by learning with us how to change human nature.” The last time I saw Mange Ram was in 1991. He had moved, along with most of the colony, to a huge area on the eastern outskirts of Delhi. There he had built a two-story house and had a television in every room. Outside he had a number of pigs that snuffled around in the dirt - and he had an elderly Ambassador motor car.

Regarding the extremes of wealth and poverty that one sees in India, I have a powerful memory of going to dinner with a very wealthy family in Calcutta. Outside the house, there was a large collection of American motor cars – not new, admittedly, but luxurious in their context. One entered through the double front door into a huge, marble-pillared front hall and behind each pillar, it seemed, lurked a liveried footman eager to take one's coat or jacket or whatever and usher one into the magnificent dining room. Meanwhile, right outside the gates of the mansion, there were several families living on the pavement and next door to the mansion there was a sprawling settlement of thousands of mud huts.

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Later, when I was back in Britain, I was shocked to discover that car workers were out on strike in demand of an increase in their hourly rate of pay that was larger than my “Harijan” friends were earning in a month. What a topsy-turvy world we live in, I thought.

Among my other duties in Delhi during the time I was there, was the distribution of *Himmat*. This involved collecting a bundle of the papers from New Delhi station every Friday, I think it was, and distributing them around the city, including the luxurious Ashoka and Oberoi hotels. In this way, I got to know the city of Delhi better than I knew my hometown, London.

While waiting in the queue for the package at the station I would idly watch the baboons swinging around among the iron girders above. On one occasion, I was watching a large female who caught me looking at her and began to climb down toward me. I left my place in the queue and walked briskly back to the car, not daring to look back. I returned to fetch the bundle later in the day.

When entering the air-conditioned opulence of the Oberoi Hotel one day, I pondered on the obscene gulf I saw all around me every day between India’s wealthy and her millions of poor, exemplified by the hotel, on one side, and my “Harijan” friends, on the other. I found myself reflecting that perhaps Marxism was the right path for India to pursue. I mentioned this thought to Mange Ram at one point and he said, “We don’t want the red revolution. It’s built on hate.” It was as simple as that.

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Sri Lanka I

In October 1968 I was in Panchgani, sitting in a meeting to plan for an international conference that was to be held in Colombo the following month. At one point, Rajmohan Gandhi suggested that the Delhi “Harijans” be represented and, turning to me, asked if I might be prepared to go up to Delhi to invite them and then bring them to Colombo. “Certainly,” I blithely replied, not knowing what I was letting myself in for, and took the next bus down the hill. I arrived in Delhi three days later with, by then, just ten days left before we would need to leave for Colombo. I found those we had thought to invite – namely, Babu Lal, Mange Ram, and Ram Swroop – the same day I got to the city and all three said they would like to go. Well, they would, wouldn’t they? None of them had ever travelled outside India. They then all disappeared to their villages (most “Delhiwallahs” had villages out in the surrounding states where they hailed from) to tell their relatives.

Four things were needed for them to be able to travel: train and air tickets, passports, leave from work, and vaccinations. Trains to Madras (Chennai) and flights from Madras to Colombo were all fully booked for weeks ahead, I was firmly informed. The men were required to give six months’ notice for leave from work (all three worked for the Delhi Municipality). And as for passports... well, first, they had to apply for a queue number, which would normally take about six months, and then it would take another half year to a year, or even longer, to obtain the actual passport.

Nine days left.

Two of the three didn’t return from their villages for three days.

Vaccinations and passport photos were easy to arrange. For the train and air travel, I was able to get bookings through a relative of RD Mathur’s. (He had relatives in senior positions in almost every government department and ministry, it seemed.) Specific details of how we (by which I mean, *I*) managed to acquire the three passports and the leaves of absence for all three and in time are lost to memory, but within the blur, there are scanty recollections of dashing from office to office around the city and even, on one occasion, to the home of a senior manager in the Municipality (I had Mange Ram with me, but because he was a Dalit he wasn’t allowed inside the house) with forms and documents that needed stamps and signatures. I would sit there and wait while the stamp and/or signature was duly applied and then rush off to the next official, thereby short-

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circuiting the otherwise interminable process by which papers would sit on each desk for any number of weeks.

The last day.

The train to Madras was scheduled to depart from New Delhi station at ten a.m. At nine-thirty, Ram Swroop and I were still sitting in an office waiting for the final stamp to be applied to the final piece of paper. Having got the stamp, we rushed out to get a taxi and arrived at the station *as the train was pulling out from the platform*. Fortunately, the incredibly long Indian trains take quite a while to gather momentum and we were able to throw our bags and ourselves onto the moving train and join the other two, who were already aboard. The train was scheduled to arrive in Madras 48 hours later and it did – on the spot! Incredible Indian Railways!

Once in Colombo the four of us were billeted in the Ramakrishna Mission, overlooking the beach. It was scrupulously clean and strictly vegetarian (vegan, in today's parlance), which I liked. I used the mission as a base during a subsequent visit.

I have one rather embarrassing memory from that conference. I was to translate for my Delhi friends when they spoke at a public meeting. At one point I relied too much on my knowledge of Mange Ram's "story" and was not paying enough attention to what he was in fact saying. The result was that I found that I had got ahead of him and then had to improvise to cover up.

(I also remember the split second of stunned silence followed by great cheering and applause when two older friends, Miles Paine and Janet Hutchinson, stood up and announced their engagement.)

After the conference in Colombo, a large group traveled up to Jaffna, where a performance of *The Forgotten Factor* was given by an Indian-Sri Lankan cast. The hall where it was played had a corrugated-iron roof and in the middle of the play, there was a heavy downpour that rendered the actors' voices inaudible. It wasn't much better after the rain stopped on account of the caterwauling of frogs in the field adjacent to the open-sided hall. The things one remembers...

The tragedy of the Tamil conflict was yet to break out, but I recall the already tangible tension in the atmosphere in the town.

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India again

On December 2, 1968, a group of us left Sri Lanka and traveled up to Kodai Kanal in southern India. My brother and two of my cousins had all been born there during the Second World War and I visited the small clinic perched on top of a hill, with spectacular views, where they had taken their first breaths. I found their names in the register. From there we traveled by bus down to Madras, and I continued on my own by train to Bangalore where I was to spend Christmas with Stan and Aileen Shepherd from Australia.

After Christmas, I was to travel to Calcutta and meet up with the same group who had been in Sri Lanka. We would then travel on up to Shillong, in the northeast, where performances of *The Forgotten Factor* would be staged. My cousin, Jean McAll (later Brown), was in Calcutta and was staying in a flat with a British couple, Douglas and Betty Cook. Before leaving Bangalore, I sent a telegram to Jean to say that I would be arriving by train from Madras on the morning of January 1. I left Bangalore by night train on December 29th, traveling 3rd class, with clucking hens and squealing, leaking babies and old men whose snores shook the carriage as much as the rattling of the narrow-gauge track. On arrival in Madras, early the next morning, I went straight to the ticket office to buy a ticket for the Howrah train leaving that evening. After standing in a queue for about an hour I was informed that there were no places available on the evening train to Calcutta *in any class*. So, I went to the tourist office, where I was told the same thing. Not for the last time on that fateful journey, I wondered what to do next. It occurred to me that the station master might be able to help, and I boldly knocked on his door and found him sitting behind the vast expanse of a sparsely littered desk. I told him that I simply had to be on the train to Calcutta leaving that evening. He politely heard me out without saying a word and then scribbled something on a scrap of paper that he told me to take to the ticket office. In some doubt, I handed the scrap of paper to the lady behind the bars, and, to my surprise and relief, she handed me a ticket – 3rd class, “military quota”. For the next 36 hours it seemed I was to be an Indian Army soldier.

The train rolled into Howrah station two mornings later, and I stepped down from the carriage onto the seething platform. I began looking across the jostling sea of humanity for the familiar face of my cousin, Jean – or for any other familiar face. I saw none. It was then that a ghastly realisation exploded in my head: Here I was in this huge, sprawling city, where I'd never been before, and knew no one other than my cousin, and *I didn't have the address!* I didn't have a telephone number, either. I had no idea how to find her.

At the end of the platform, I found a telephone booth with the remains of a telephone directory in it. I thought there might be an off chance that “Cook” was listed - Cook being the name of the couple Jean was staying with. But, although the “C”s were among the

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pages not torn out of the directory, there was no “Cook” listed. I wasn’t surprised. Disappointed, but not surprised. I knew that they were living in a flat. But there were probably about ten million flats in Calcutta. Then I remembered something I’d picked up from a conversation I’d overheard somewhere. A name – something like “Allipore”, but I wasn’t very sure. And was it the name of a street? A suburb? Or the name of the complex? I had no idea. Passing families eating breakfast on the floor of the station concourse, sleeping (dead?) bodies and the milling crowds, I ventured out of the main entrance of the station to be confronted by a clamouring crowd of taxi drivers. I scanned the long line of black and yellow Ambassador taxis and picked the most dilapidated looking one with a large Sardharji (Sikh) leaning up against it. (You could always trust a Sardharji, I had learned.) I put my suitcase into the trunk, on top of the spare wheel, and climbed into the front seat beside him. “Allipore,” I said, not knowing what would happen. He said nothing – which I didn’t know whether to take as a good or bad sign – and pulled out into the maelstrom of Calcutta’s traffic. “He’ll drive around for half an hour or so, to clock up a good price on the meter,” I thought to myself, “and then ask me where I want to go.” And indeed, after about half an hour, he did pull onto the side of a busy shopping street, with busses and cows and bicycles and rickshas swirling all around, and said, “This is Allipore.” Not wanting to give him the impression that I was not sure of myself, I quickly looked around and saw several blocks of flats sticking up over the roofs of the nearest surrounding buildings. Pointing at one of them at random, I said, “There.” He left the main street and wove through some narrow side streets until he drew up outside the building I had pointed at. Some small boys were playing football outside and, rolling down the window, I called out to them. “Cook Sahib?” One of them said “Seventh floor, sir.” In some trepidation, I paid off the taxi driver and found a lift that rattled and shook its way up to the seventh floor. There were four doors, and I rang the bell at the one first on the left. At first there was no response, and I was about to try the next door when I heard a sound from behind the first. It opened – and there stood my never-so-greatly-beloved cousin Jean!

The telegram I had sent from Bangalore arrived the following day.

My parents were married in the Calcutta Anglican Cathedral in 1939 and the Metropolitan (head of the Anglican Church in South Asia) had been a personal friend of theirs, so it was a pleasant surprise to find that my “billet” in Calcutta was the Metropolitan’s palace. There were four or five of us staying there, all in a huge room with an even more spacious bathroom. The cook’s repertoire seemed to be limited to roast beef, roast potatoes, and peas, done, it might be said, to perfection and meticulously served – every lunch and every supper. Among my fellow guests in the palace was Sachidananda from Bangalore, who, apart from being a Hindu for whom beef was of course strictly forbidden, was also a strict vegetarian. After two days of living off boiled peas, Sachi had had enough, and I also longed for a change, so we headed out together to a vegetarian restaurant just around the corner and that’s where we had all our meals from then on.

As mentioned, *The Forgotten Factor* was to be performed in Shillong, the capital of the as-yet-to-be-formed state of Meghalaya, in northeast India. I was to be part of the group traveling up there with the play, but – not being either Indian or Sri Lankan – I had no part in the play. I was just a hanger-on. A few days before leaving Calcutta we got an “urgent”

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message from Stanley Nichols-Roy, our host in Shillong and a leading local politician (of whom more will be said presently), to say that we should absolutely bring hot-water bottles with us. Few of us took the suggestion very seriously (apart from anything else, where on earth would one buy thirty hot water bottles in Calcutta?) and we lived to regret it.

From Calcutta, we flew to Guwahati, and waiting for us at the little airport were a couple of buses that took us up to the beautiful, hilly city of Shillong. On arrival, we were all given cards showing where we were to stay, and I and a couple of others were taken to a little "guest house". It was *cold*. There was a single-bar electric heater in the bedroom which I propped up on a chair and directed downwards onto the bed so that I had at least one warm patch in the middle of the bed in which to curl up. Among the others in our group was a young man from Sudan, SIRR Makwennanai. He was very tall, very slim, and very black, and he had never experienced a temperature of less than about 25 degrees Celsius in his life. Someone lent him sweaters and scarves and coats. The group's gathering point was a public library and one morning when we arrived there, we found it was locked and we had to wait outside for someone to come with a key. There was a fine drizzle, I remember, that swept horizontally across the plaza outside, blown by a bitterly cold wind. A little apart from the rest of us there was a tall pillar of coats and scarves, and if one went close enough to it one could just hear the pathetic sound of chattering teeth. Poor SIRR!

To help transport the group around the town, someone had lent a 15-seater bus of American manufacture dating from the 1940s, and I was put in charge of it. It had no handbrake and indeed very poor brakes generally, which made driving up and down the town's steep hills kind of adventurous. You absolutely could not afford to stop when going uphill for fear of the engine stalling, which it did very easily, and there was no starting motor. To hold the heavy vehicle stationary on the steep hill of the busy main street when forced to stop by the traffic and simultaneously keep the engine running was an art. And of course, on one occasion the inevitable happened. Fortunately, being India, a large crowd very quickly gathered, and several dozen willing hands helped push the bus up the hill to get it started. One of life's more embarrassing moments...

Among the outings that we made from Shillong, one was to the world's "wettest place" – Chirapunji. Those of us on the bus who came from Britain were greatly surprised when a group of school children sitting at the back suddenly broke out into the Welsh national anthem, except the words were Khasi, not Welsh. It seemed they had learned the tune from Welsh missionaries. The whole group also went to the famous Kaziranga Game Reserve, known particularly for its white rhinos. We were divided up into groups of three or four and taken for a guided tour of the reserve on elephant back. Memories are of elephant grass that towered above our heads, of the mahouts maneuvering the elephants into a ring around a rhino on the edge of a lake and then getting them to raise their trunks and trumpet to make the rhino move away into the water... In the evening some of us took a stroll along the dirt road outside the camp. A guide was with us, and someone asked him, jokingly, if anyone was ever killed by the rhinos. "Oh, yes," he said, "Just last week a man was killed when a rhino charged the tractor he was driving". On hearing this, we all turned around and walked briskly back to the camp.

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Sri Lanka II

March to September 1969

The group returned to Calcutta for a few days and then traveled on to Panchgani, where I stayed until March 10, when I returned to Colombo. I have no memory or record of how I got there from Panchgani, but I presumably took a train to Madras (Chennai) and then flew. I do recall staying at a very simple hotel next to a cinema and not being able to sleep for the noise. I ate at a vegetarian eatery where the food was doled out from buckets onto banana leaves at a long table.

In any event, I got there and Howard Grace, who was featured earlier in connection with a sailing trip on my birthday, was also there. We were both staying with Devar Surya and Nelun Sena. Before I came, Howard had been up in Kandy meeting students and at one point had been briefly kidnapped by a group of fanatic Buddhist nationalists - an ugly moment.

MRA in Sri Lanka had been given a long-wheelbase Land Rover to be used as a mobile film unit and Surya Sena put me in charge of it. But to be allowed to drive it I had to get a special driving license, which meant that I had to have a driving test. I'd had a driving test in Delhi soon after arriving in India to get an Indian driving license. The test had involved being asked three questions to which the tester supplied the answers when I couldn't. I had a feeling the test might be a little more stringent in Sri Lanka, so I went along to the testing centre feeling a tad nervous. I needn't have worried, for, somewhat to my surprise, the examiner sat in the back of the vehicle and not on the seat beside me. He then instructed me to drive down the street and after a hundred meters or so told me to stop, whereupon a whole bunch of guys climbed into the back to sit with him. He called out to me to continue on down the road and as I drove, he chatted away with his friends, paying me no attention. After another few hundred meters he again told me to stop and, again to my surprise, he got out along with the other guys. Sticking his head through the window, he instructed me to drive back to the testing station and wait for him there, which I did. After half an hour or so he walked in and handed me my semi-heavy-duty driving license, valid for the rest of my life, and that was it! It might be added that neither in Delhi nor in Colombo was there any hint that the examiner was expecting more than the stated fee. It's possible that they did but that, in my innocence, I was unaware of any signal they may have given me. But, in that case, they would have been disappointed.

Apart from a few weeks in May, I remained in Sri Lanka until mid-September that year. Memories from that time include taking the Land Rover – I think with Vijitha Yapa or maybe it was Donatus de Silva – to show a film (*Voice of the Hurricane*, perhaps?) on an open hillside near Deniaya, in the south. Some kind of festival was going on and, to comply with the event's dress code, I wore a white dhoti. I think I was almost as much of a spectacle for the huge crowd gathered on the hill as the film that I was projecting. People

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sat on the grass on both sides of the screen but how much they understood is only to be guessed at - and my own guess would be not very much.

MRA had been asked by the government to run a farm in the middle of the country, at a place called Mi-Oya. I never really understood the reason or what the expectation was, but a farm manager was employed and MRA had the charge of it for some years. I went out there at one point, again with Vijitha or Donatus. It was very hot. And the food was very hot, consisting predominantly of chilies served in various ways, along with other vegetables and pulses thrown in for good measure - and rice. Peter Howard is reported as having said that eating Sri Lankan food is like chewing on the wrong end of a cigar, and that is certainly an apt description of the food served at the farm. I can't say I was so terribly sorry to get back to the relatively mild cuisine of Colombo.

For some days, I stayed with a family in Wellawatta, a suburb of Colombo. Their name was Jayawaja, I think. The son, Tilly(?), was a friend of Mohan Bhagwandas, if memory serves me right. A vivid memory I do have is of walking down the road towards their house on the 21st of July and hearing, blaring out from the radio of each house as I passed, the running commentary of the Americans landing on the moon: "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind" and all that. Hearing it on that suburban street in Colombo, was more than a little surreal.

The family had some coconut trees in the garden and every morning someone had cut down a fresh coconut and the milk from it was served up for my breakfast. I also got an egg hopper every morning. I like egg hoppers (fried eggs in rice batter) and their accompaniments even more than string hoppers (steamed rice noodles).

I also stayed some days with a Muslim family who had a son called Shamir, who was also a friend of Mohan's, I believe, though Mohan claims no knowledge of him. The dining room in the house was devoid of furniture apart from a large, round tray, slightly raised from the floor, in the middle. No shoes were allowed to be worn, of course. The main meal of the day was eaten with the family sitting cross-legged around this tray, which was higher in the middle than around the edge. My first embarrassment was that I did not possess a pair of socks without a large hole in the toe. On my third day there I returned in the evening to find 2 or 3 new pairs of socks neatly placed out on my bed! My second embarrassment was caused by my predilection for rasam, a delicious spicy soup. There were no plates or cutlery and one helped oneself to the dishes placed in the middle of the tray and made a small heap on the area of the tray in front of one. I had taken a mound of rice and then poured the rasam that I loved so much liberally on the top. But I was rather too liberal, and the liquid ran straight through the rice and began to flow out on either side, threatening to mingle with the meals of my neighbours on each side so I had to keep frantically damming it up. Maybe I was the only one who noticed. Maybe I wasn't. What was noticed - apart from the holy socks - was the fact that at the end of the meal I found my legs had seized up under me and I had to shuffle backwards on my bottom all the way to the wall where I spent quite some time gingerly unfolding them before I could slowly stand up.

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Shamir surprised me at one point by saying that the rich, by which he meant his father, were the only people who could really afford to be honest. I remember thinking that that was an interesting concept.

At the end of August Howard Grace, Ian Robertson, a chap called Niranjana Deva Aditya and I drove up into the southern hills to Tallewakelle and Nuwara Eliya (altitude of almost 2000 meters). We visited a tea research station and Howard and I stayed the night in the home of the station's manager. Neither Howard nor I drank tea at that stage (me on account of my having been inspired by reading Mahatma Gandhi's "Experiments with Truth" to live a life without stimulants, and Howard because he has never drunk any hot liquid), which was slightly embarrassing. On the way back down to Kandy Ian was in terrible pain and lay in the back of the car all the way down the winding road, writhing and moaning. We took him straight to the hospital where he was diagnosed as having a ruptured appendix.

There are other memories of that time, (like Surya Sena pointing out to Howard and me over breakfast that in Sri Lanka bananas were called plantains and Howard saying that in England bananas were called bananas) but they hardly warrant being recorded here. I liked my time in Sri Lanka. Like all island nations, Sri Lanka had its own special characteristics. It was very different from India. And I had little reason then to suspect that within a few years the country was to be embroiled in a bitter and bloody civil war that would last for decades. Although I did feel seeds of discontent on my visits to Jaffna.

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Back in India

September 1969 to April 1971

On September 16, 1969, I took the train north to Jaffna. It was a quaint little narrow-gauge railway line that was to fall victim to the conflict that broke out a few years later. From there I flew, in an 11-seater Nord (unpressurized) airplane, for the short flight over to Tiruchirappalli on the Indian side, then from there took an overnight train to Madras (Chennai). Again, I stayed in the same vegetarian hotel I'd used before and remained in the sweltering city for some days.

I had some visiting cards printed at a little printer's shop and when I went to collect them there was a young assistant whose English was almost as limited as my Tamil. He kept repeating something like, "Waona naat hirr," which I took to be Tamil. Finally, seeing as how I wasn't getting anywhere, I turned to leave, but, after taking no more than a few steps he called out after me: "Waona hirr!" "Woana", it turned out, meant "owner".

I left by train on the 25th and arrived in Panchgani on the 27th.

In October, the cast of the European show *Anything to Declare?* arrived at Asia Plateau. Many of them had been with *It's Our Country, Jack!* back in Britain and it felt strange meeting up with them here in India - like invaders in what had become "my" world. I think I resented them in some way and tried to keep a distance from them by throwing myself into work on the farm. They had a doctor with them called John Lester, who was newly married to my cousin Elizabeth (sister of Jean whom I had "found" in Calcutta). John had quite rightly instituted certain "rules" for the sake of the group's health, one of which was that they should always wear a hat when out of doors. During the time I had been in India I had fiercely spurned the idea of wearing a hat, but John gently (he's a very gentle man) pointed out to me that my driving around on the tractor on the farm without a hat on was not giving a good example to the others. I acquiesced and I bought myself a hat, and ever since then, I have always worn a hat when in the tropics.

On November 17, I arrived back in Delhi. Over the weeks that followed, I made various local trips, including one (December 21-22) to Agra with my godfather Alan Thornhill and his wife, Barbara. It was then that, for the first time, I met the larger-than-life Archbishop of Agra. We were to meet many times after that.

Among the many things that I learned during my time in India was print layout and I became a frequent customer of a small printing shop near "3/5". One project I worked on was a little booklet called *What You Can Do*, which we also produced in Hindi. It laid out in the simplest and most direct of terms how to go about changing oneself and then reaching out to society. We printed quite a few thousand and it was used widely in both English and Hindi.

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At one point we discovered that the garage at “3/5” was stacked to the ceiling with copies of Bill Cameron-Johnson’s booklet *Where Do We Go From Here?*, which had been collected in a moment of enthusiasm but had never been put to use. Sadly, the ants had gotten to them and by the time we had disposed of all but the most intact copies, there were very few left.

The Channer family was still in residence at “3/5”. Alan, aged around six at the time, had me chase geckos until they were too tired to hang on the wall and then he’d put them into a box so he could examine them close up. Later in life, he became a microbiologist studying nematodes. David had by that time made his first film, *The Galloping Horse*, about the Delhi “Harijans” and farmers near Panchgani.

David had a blue Volkswagen Beetle in which he had had a nasty accident, which, anywhere else in the world, would have rendered the car a write-off. In India, though, it was painstakingly restored to pristine condition.

During that autumn, Sydney and Linda Cook (England and Germany) also spent some time in the city and we would drive out together – with anyone else who happened to be visiting Delhi - to an industrial estate outside the city. We would go to the home of a worker and sit in his small living room where we would be served tea (sweet, with milk) and snacks. Our host would then take us to another home for more tea and snacks and then both hosts would take us to a third home for yet more tea and snacks, and so it would go on until the final living room would be crammed with people. At each home, we’d tell stories of change and have a quiet time. A group of half a dozen or so went to Panchgani from there. One wonders what happened to all those lives subsequently.

In February the *Anything to Declare?* (ATD) cast arrived in Delhi. A welcome reception was held for them, and they sang a song for India written by Penny Thwaites, who wrote special songs for all the places they visited on the tour. The first lines of the song were “Greetings, great land of India, nation of sage and warrior, nation of saint and pioneer, greetings today! Mighty far-flung democracy, people of rich diversity, show us the way to unity! Show us the way!...” I found tears were welling up in my eyes. But when they then launched into singing “*Sare jahan se atcha*” (“Of all places, the best”), a popular patriotic song. The tear ducts opened in a flood. Such were my feelings for India.

Among those who had come to Delhi to help prepare for ATD’s visit to the city was a couple from Sheffield, England, Jack and Hilda Spooner. Jack was a retired telephone engineer. A very wealthy family in Delhi, the Dalmias, had a large bungalow near India Gate, which they made available to MRA to use as a base over the time ATD was in the city. (As a measure of their wealth, I had been invited – I never quite understood why - to the wedding of one the Dalmia daughters. There were several hundred guests and each one was given a gold-embossed programme of events, printed on thick velour. I felt very under-dressed in my one-and-only cheap suit and did not stay long.) The Spooners had been asked to host the bungalow - number 1, Tilak Marg. It had been lying in disuse for many months and needed a major cleaning. Also, there was no telephone connection. Jack had paid a visit to the Delhi telephone company and had succeeded - where few, if any, could have – in arranging (*without paying a bribe*) to have a telephone installed *immediately*. A small army of cleaners had also been hired. Hilda was at home alone

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one morning when the cleaners arrived, dressed in brown uniforms. She ushered them in and showed them the cleaning equipment – buckets, scrubbing brushes, etc. They seemed a little bemused, but Hilda proceeded to give them a little demonstration of how to go about the job and they reluctantly began to scrub the floor. Just then, Jack returned and discovered that the men had actually come to install the telephone!

After the main group arrived, the house became the headquarters of operations and some of the huge bedrooms were turned into (gender-separated) dormitories. The women were apparently kept awake at night by the snores of the night watchman, who slept on a pile of sacks of pepper just outside their window. Among us chaps – I think there were six of us – there was a Frenchman called Jean-Louis Chaduc. (He was tragically killed in a car accident shortly after returning to France.) Jean-Louis had an alarm clock which he set to go off very early in the morning. It woke everyone else up, but not Jean-Louis himself. One morning his neighbour, another Frenchman, picked the offending clock up and hurled it across the room, smashing it to bits on the wall opposite. But the alarm kept on going. He discovered had thrown his own clock across the room instead of Jean-Louis'.

In February, the show was performed in RD Mathur's home city of Chandīgarh. In *The Punjab Mail* of February 22, 1970, a lengthy article appeared under the headline "*Anything to Declare Antidote to fissiparous factionalism [sic]*". One paragraph reads "The *impersarionics [sic]* fabulous as indicated shall portray a vivid glimpse of musical vitality at its vertex and the outline of a new Europe in its phase of social proliferation. Various authentic opinions describe the superb performance in modern stage presentation with catchy music. A grotesque portrayal of splendid and colourful costuming." And then further along: "...Evidently it is **bound** to mitigate the prevalent effluence of hatred arising because of class distinction and a morbid body odour. The revue may well mean a lesson to the myriads of ideologically and politically split people and act as an antidote to fissiparous factionalism." Sadly, the article carries no by-line, so the author of this literary masterpiece must remain forever unsung.

Those of us who were based for a longer time in Delhi had supplied each member of the cast with blank index cards on which to write the names and addresses of anyone they met in the city, along with some comments about each one, so that those of us who would be staying on after the visit would be able to follow them up. One cast member, R.W., left way more cards than anyone else and on almost every card he'd written "Had a quiet time. Went through the four standards", or words to that effect. The few of us who did stay on after the main group had left Delhi did our best to follow up on the names supplied, but we were not very successful. (Sorry, R.W.!) One can only conjecture about whether the travelers themselves ever followed up on these encounters in one way or another.

During that period a steady stream of foreign guests came and went, and I became a proficient guide of the city's sights, including the Taj Mahal in Agra, which I got to see in every possible aspect, including a full moon.

Among those who spent longer times in the city were Bror and Gerd Johnson, from Sweden. I have a vivid memory of the two of them wrapped in blankets and huddled over a little electric-bar heater in the living room of "3/5", when Delhi was at its coldest. It seemed paradoxical to me that these people who came from the "arctic north", should be

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suffering so from cold here in India. Bror and Gerd were also in Delhi at the time of the festival of Holi. Bror had put on a brand-new white shirt in honour of the festival, but it didn't keep its pristine whiteness long when the "Harijan" friends came around to the house armed with coloured water pistols and powder. Gerd was not pleased.

All through that period, RD and Prabha Mathur were living in a house rented by MRA in, what was then, the new suburb of Greater Kailash (at that time on the southern extremity of the city but now almost an inner suburb!). The Mathurs entertained many guests there, which often involved showing films and I, as the resident projectionist, would be called upon to do the job. I had by then had so much experience of projecting films that I regarded myself as something of an expert. I knew best. Or so I thought. So, on one occasion, Stanley Nichols-Roy - MLA and state minister of the newly formed state of Maghalaya - was on one of his frequent visits to Delhi negotiating with members of the central government. He had invited some senior local politicians to the Greater Kailash home for dinner and a film (*The Voice of the Hurricane*, I think it was). I set up the projector, the screen, and the speaker just as I thought best, but Stanley didn't think the speaker was in the optimal position. I, as the "expert" in the field of film projection and regarding Stanley as being merely a politician, insisted that my setup was best. The showing was not a success: people couldn't hear properly. The next day, I had to go to Stanley and consume a large chunk of humble pie. I still blush at the memory.

One of the most remarkable experiences of my time in India (I don't have a record of exactly when it took place, though others would know) was being in Panchgani when Stanley Nichols-Roy had invited two other rival politicians from Maghalaya. He had invited them separately, without saying he had invited the other, to avoid the risk of both of them declining. So, they both arrived without knowing the other would be there. When each saw the other, they were both ready to turn around and leave. At that time, Daw Nien Tha from Burma (affectionately known as "Ma-mi", and incidentally my sister's godmother) was also at Asia Plateau. She was dying of cancer. When she heard what was going on, she summoned the trio to her room. You cannot deny a dying person's wish, so the three of them went to see her. She told them that, in the kind of situation they were in, you should think about what is right, rather than who is right. Later that day, or maybe the next, there was a meeting (in what subsequently became the library in Rock View) led by Nikatu Iralu. At one point, one of the two enemies, Mr. Henyatta, went up to the platform and spoke at length about the history of their part of the world and of his own personal political involvement in events. He then addressed both Nichols-Roy and the other man - Mr. ('Bar') Hoover, I think it was - and invited them both up onto the platform. He told each of them how much he had hated them (as well as Nichols-Roy's father) and that he had been working against them. He told of the meeting with Ma-mi and the effect that it had had on him. Then, to everyone's surprise, he turned to the two of them and apologized to them for his side in the dispute and asked them to work with him, not for their own interests or those of their little part of the world, but for the wider interests of Assam and India as a whole. The three men then shook hands.

That scene, as seen from where I sat, on the Godrej black-metal-frame chair with plastic mesh seating - about halfway back on the left side of the room - is indelibly etched into my memory. Later, the three former enemies returned to Shillong together, creating

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headlines in the local press and helping to pave the way toward the eventual granting of statehood to Meghalaya.



Stanley Nichols-Roy

(from an interview with Michael Henderson, Portland, OR, 1980s)

On April 24, 1970, I traveled down from Delhi to Bombay (Mumbai) for the christening of my niece, Joanna Reynolds. This was a big family occasion, with no less than three cousins and an aunt and uncle all present. I then continued to Panchgani for a student conference, after which I returned to Delhi on May 3.

I had traveled down on the train – 3rd class, un-air-conditioned - with Howard Grace and another memory etched in my mind is of Howard dousing his face with water from the tap by the door and standing in the open doorway to let the passing air cool him off. It was hot. (Tea and a banana, or a bunch of small plantains, at each station is one of the joys of rail travel in India.)

In June, Rachel and Tony Reynolds (and Joanna) arrived from Bombay, and we took a night train together up to Kalka, then a taxi on up to Simla. Tony had rented a tourist bungalow in a village above Simla called Kufri, elevation 7,500 feet. Among my recollections of that holiday (my first holiday since going to Tirley Garth in 1966) are of hitching a ride on a truck with Tony to go into Simla to do some shopping. (It was the day of a general election in the UK, in which Edward Heath defeated Harold Wilson.) It started raining while we were there, and the temperature sank. Then on the way back, the bus we were on conked out on the steep, winding mountain road and began drifting backward, coming to a halt with the back, where Tony and I were sitting, jutting out over the edge of the precipice, which was kind of scary. The driver managed to get the bus going again, but after a few minutes he stopped again and refused to drive any farther, so we all had

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to get out and walk the rest of the way, which was about a mile. By the time we arrived back at the cottage, Tony had huge blisters on his feet and the beginnings of a cold that was to keep him in bed for several days.



Joanna Reynold's Christening, Mumbai, April 1970

(Cousin Liz & John Lester, Cousin Jean McAll (Brown), Aunt Catherine & Uncle Burford Weeks, Cousin Graham McAll, me, Tony, Rachel & Joanna)

Two or three days later we moved farther up to another Tourist Bungalow in a place called Narkanda. There we took long walks and enjoyed stunning views over the snow-clad Himalayas, chatted with local Tibetans, played cards, and read.

On our way back we spent our last night in the famous Cecil Hotel in Simla. We were the only guests and we sat down for dinner at the only table laid in the large dining room, placed by a bay window. On the other side of the room was a small platform on which sat a string trio whose enthusiasm exceeded their talent. Being the only guests and after agreeing that we would prefer to eat our meal without the scraping of the violins and 'cello, we asked the waiter if he could kindly ask them to desist. He turned from our table and began walking across the expanse of floor toward the trio - and it was then that we realized our big mistake: they clearly thought we had made a request for a particular number. We watched in horror as the waiter traipsed across the wide ocean of floor toward them, saw how their faces lit up at the thought of the request we had clearly made, and then watched their faces fall as the waiter delivered our message. In silence, they packed up their instruments and slunk out of the room. We felt awful.

We were to catch the night train back to Delhi from Kalka. The taxi we had ordered arrived late and by the time we finally set off into the gloaming a light drizzle was falling. The drizzle turned into rain. The taxi's windscreen wipers were not functioning, and, in

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addition, the driver seemed loath to use his headlights, presumably to save the battery. I was sitting in the front and could see next to nothing and presumed the driver couldn't see a whole lot more. But this didn't seem to deter him in the least. He drove like a maniac to make up for the lost time. Once we got below the clouds it stopped raining and the driver really stepped on the gas, careering down the winding road like he didn't care to live a day longer and didn't mind whom he took with him. Rachel began to feel queasy, and we persuaded the driver to take the bends a little slower, which he did – for a short while. Then the rain started again, by which time it was also pitch dark, but the driver continued his reckless descent undaunted. Remarkably none of us died and we reached the station in time to catch the train, much to our unspeakable relief.

Back in Delhi

Several students and staff at the Agricultural University in Hissar, Haryana, had established contact with MRA, Deepak Malik among them, and in July, Garfield Hayes and I paid them a visit. My only memory of the visit, though, is of staying at the home of a professor and of curried sheep's brain being served for dinner, which I could not bring myself to eat.

A letter I had submitted to *The Statesman* was published on 3rd October. I'd written:

“Sir, I was very grateful to see the caption beneath the picture on the front page of this morning's Statesman (city edition). “A time to tread the path he (Gandhiji) laid out for his countrymen...a path that did not end at Rajghat.” It seems to be a popular notion in India nowadays that Gandhiji's message of love, non-violence and, above all, Ram Rajya is no longer relevant or applicable. He is acclaimed today for having brought the nation to independence ... by peaceful means, by love instead of hate, but this latter aspect of his struggle has come to be regarded more as an odd character trait than as a still meaningful call to an entirely new way of living.

“His concept of Ram Rajya and of loving one's enemies, meaning incidentally one's enemies both inside as well as outside the country – is the only dialectic [sic] that could take this nation to her rightful destiny as a pattern for the whole world of how men [sic] are meant to live. Gandhiji's message far from being kept buried beneath the black marble slab at Rajghat, a thing for 'darshan' every Friday, must ... be carried to its global extreme: a freedom of spirit found through applying absolute love, purity and honesty [what happened to 'unselfishness' I wonder?!], for every person living in this nation and across the world. A universal acceptance and application of those standards would be

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the only fundamental and lasting cure to this or any other nation's ills. Yours, etc...." Looking at it today causes only mild embarrassment.

Thinking of Mahatma Gandhi and his broad understanding of God, with its inclusion of the best of both Islam and Christianity, puts me in mind of something his grandson, Rajmohan, asked me one day when we sat together in the sitting room of "3/5": "Have you ever thought what the Cross of Christ means in your life?" he asked. A remarkable question coming from a Hindu, and one no Christian had, or has ever, put to me. One wonders what had prompted him to ask it and I perhaps should have probed, although I can imagine I was maybe not too keen at the time to know what had prompted it. Was he feeling that my grasp of what Christianity is all about was not all that it might be? (He himself has, not unsurprisingly, forgotten the incident.)

In October, Mange Ram, Babu Lal and I went to Panchgani.

I stayed at Asia Plateau until March 1970. One of my duties was to give the calves on the farm their morning drink, made from powdered milk, which they slurped up from the bucket like high-powered pumps. We also slaughtered hundreds of hens (putting them head-down into funnels made from coffee tins and lopping their heads off) and "dressed" them, which means un-dressing and gutting them – a process that put me off eating chicken for several years. They clearly knew what was in store for them as they waited their turn in the shed. I'll never forget that.

Those chickens were the cause of a memorable event in February 1971. The carcasses had been stored in a big walk-in freezer in Valley View, and someone discovered that the cooler pump had stopped working. Dr. Roddy Evans (from Northern Ireland) said that unless the chickens were re-frozen within four hours, they would all have to be incinerated. It was already supper time. Someone frantically began ringing around to all the hotels and schools in Panchgani to see if anyone had a freezer space large enough to house several hundred chickens. None did. Then they started on Pune and eventually found a hotel able and willing to take them. By that time, we had a little more than three hours left to load the minibus and drive to Pune, which at that time took about three hours at normal speed and traffic. Cedric Daniels and I would drive. We had to take the seats out of the minibus, and everyone lent a hand loading in the chickens, floor to ceiling. It was about ten at night by the time we drove out of the gates and started grinding down the hill. The brakes became red hot on account of the weight before we had reached the bottom of the hill, and the chickens began to get cooked. At that time, on the other side of what was then the village of Wai, the road ran down to a ford through the river, and as we drove across the gravel, we heard a loud *pop* and the minibus lurched to one side. Puncture - right in the middle of the ford in the middle of the night. It was pitch black. We had to unload some of the chickens to get at the jack and spare wheel. On trying to jack the vehicle up nothing seemed to be happening and we discovered that, instead of pushing the minibus up, the jack was simply going *down* into the gravel of the stream bed – which, fortunately, was dry at that time of year. In the end, we managed to get the wheel changed (we discovered later that the spare was itself almost flat), to reload the minibus, and to set off again for Pune - with less than two hours left. I think I drove, but my memory about that is blurred. Be that as it may, whoever did drive did so like a

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madman, and, with our combined guardian angels gathered about us in force, we arrived safely at the hotel about five minutes after the doctor's deadline.

About a month later, when the freezer at Asia Plateau had been repaired and was up and running, Cedric and I drove back down to the hotel in Pune to fetch the chickens. Now, the Asia Plateau chickens were large and well-fed. The ones we were told were ours in the hotel freezer were skinny and small. There wasn't a whole lot one could do about that, so we loaded them up and took them back to Panchgani. And that's the story of the chickens.

* * *

Naturally, conferences and training programmes were (are) a major feature of life at the centre, and music was an essential element. David Lancaster (Australia), who looked after the accounts for the centre, and Alan Porteous (New Zealand), who ran the farm, and I, often sang the old Colwell Brothers songs and others, and there was always a chorus to sing bigger numbers: "Water for a thirsty land", "Will we have rice tomorrow, Dad?" and others of Kathleen Johnson's classics from *India Arise* such as "Go, go, with an answer!" Niketu Iralu would sing the telephone song: "...The telephone starts early so take a cup of tea..." Another favorite was "The monkey and the crow". On one painfully memorable occasion, Pankaj Shah and I were singing it together when we discovered that we were going around in circles, repeating the same verse over and over with neither of us being able to break out of it – like a stuck record.

Other memories from that time in Panchgani include getting onto the wrong train in Pune, (when I was going to Mumbai to have my wisdom teeth removed at Breach Kandy Hospital,) and having to walk back along the track to the station; of eating the juiciest mango ever on the platform at Pune station; of traveling in convoy up to Panchgani when Rajmohan Gandhi's venerable Ford Zephyr (a gift to him from the manager of the World Bank in Karachi), which was carrying Gordon and Beryl Brown, broke down; of going for evening walks with Russi Lala up to Sydney Point... among many others. Also, of Christmas 1969, when no fewer than ten members of my family – sister and family, cousins, aunt and uncle – were all assembled at Asia Plateau at the same time.

At the beginning of 1971, the cast of *Anything to Declare? (ATD)* had returned to India after touring in Southeast Asia. One day I was approached by James Hore-Ruthven, who asked me if I would consider joining the show for the final leg of its tour, back to Europe. I hesitated at first. I had grown to love India and had - from that first drive into Delhi from the airport three and a half years previously - come to regard India as "home". At one point I had gone so far as to write to my parents that I quite expected to spend the rest of my life in India. What my parents thought about that I've no idea, though I don't suppose they took it so very seriously. But James's question set me thinking about my future and to feeling that my time in India was maybe drawing to an end. (From a purely practical

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point of view, I didn't have the wherewithal to get myself back to Britain and this would give me a free passage!) So, I said "yes".

I wanted to let my parents know that I was coming home. Today India is a world hub of communication. In 1971 it could take several days just to make a phone call from Panchgani to Bombay. And even when you eventually did get through, there was no guarantee that you would actually hear one another. Making an international call was a major event. It required booking the call via the exchange in Panchgani town. You would be given a booking number and then wait. Every now and then you would ring the exchange, give your booking number, and ask how things were going. About a week after booking the call to my parents, the phone rang at Asia Plateau, and the whole centre became a buzz. I took the call in what is now the office in Valley View. Everyone in the centre heard every word I shouted down the line. In fact, I imagine everyone in Panchgani town could hear me. "I'M COMING HOME!!!", I yelled. I heard a faint sound of voices at the other end – the first time I had heard my parents in three and a half years. When I eventually saw them four months later, they said they had thought I had rung to tell them I had gotten engaged!

The cast of *ATD* was to travel up to Delhi and Steve Dickinson (USA), and I went up together to help prepare, arriving on March 13.

Those last few weeks in India are a bit of a blur. One foot was still firmly placed in India, but the other foot was already back in Europe as I began rehearsing with the company. I don't recall taking part in the show in Delhi, but I do remember Ram Swroop coming to see it. He arrived on his bicycle with his eldest daughter on the cross bar holding the smallest child, his wife sitting on the rack behind the seat holding another child and the middle daughter perching on the handlebars – six people on one push-bike!

I was "in charge" of transport. This meant hiring buses and making sure they were in the right place at the right time, as well as coordinating the transport for everyone to and from the homes where they were staying around the city. Three of the women were staying with a family out in one of the new outer suburbs of the city. After they had stayed there for about a week, they reported that their hostess had arranged for them to move to their next-door neighbour. It turned out that it was the neighbour with whom they should have been staying all along, but the family they had been with hadn't dared say anything. Such is Indian hospitality!

An embarrassing memory: The cast had been invited to meet the Deputy Prime Minister, Moraji Desai, at his residence. We were in the spacious garden and as part of the presentation we were to sing a song – I forget which one – and I was to sing a solo verse. Well, I dived – my mind blanked! Oh, the shame of it!

ATD was to be performed in Hissar and I made three trips there with Steve Dickinson and others beforehand to prepare. Driving back to Delhi in a Jeep with seven others after the second visit we were passing through a village when a boy ran out in front of us and the driver (not me) had no way of avoiding him, despite driving very slowly. We could not know whether the boy was hurt or not because the driver didn't dare to stop for fear of

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being lynched by the crowd. And the very same thing happened again the next time we drove to Hissar.

I think it must have been in Hissar that I first took part in a performance. I do remember my embarrassment over not knowing the words of the medley of songs from the various European countries represented in the caste. I tried to coordinate my mouth movements roughly with those of the other singers around me and hoped no one was looking at me. Little did I think then that a decade later I would be able to understand every word of the Swedish song, "*Uti vår hage där växer blåbär...*".

On April 4, a chartered Air Iran plane took us all to Tehran.

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Other visits to India

Seven years were to go by before India was to enter my life again. During that time, I had done a two-year stint at the Birmingham Theatre School and was immediately faced with a choice: either to take up the offer of a small part in a popular TV series or to accept an invitation/request to join a group from the Westminster Theatre that was to tour India with two plays. I chose the latter. I thus turned my back on a potential career in theatre/film, but it seemed the right thing to do at the time and, in retrospect, when I view how my life turned out, I still think it was for the best. So...

1978

On February 1, 1978, I was part of a group of about a dozen that took a British Airways flight from London to Mumbai (or Bombay, as it was still called then). After 30 hours of travel, we arrived at Asia Plateau late at night, on the second. Over the six and a half years since my departure from Delhi with *Anything to Declare?* in 1971, I had often had dreams in which I was back in India but, strangely and despite the strength of emotional attachment I had had to the country, I always awoke from such dreams relieved to find myself in a bed in London or Birmingham or wherever. Arriving back in India, the negative sides of India hit me in a way it had not during my earlier years there. The drive into Mumbai from the airport, and especially the wait on the platform at the Victoria Terminus for the train to Pune, turned out to be a nightmare. The filth, the smells, the poverty turned my stomach. Driving through the gates of Asia Plateau in Panchgani was, as always, like driving through the gates of Paradise, but the feelings aroused by the arrival and the journey up to Panchgani remained with me. My first reaction was that I wanted to leave. We immediately set about rehearsing the two plays we were to tour with: *The Forgotten Factor (FF)* and *We Are Tomorrow (WAT)*. Others in the group included Bill Cameron-Johnson, Rob and Sue Corcoran, Janet Bouch (later Smith), Bob Normington and Jonathan Wheeler. Hugh Williams was the director. My uncle, Ken McAll, had flown out, too, as the group's travelling medic.

On March 15th Bob Normington, Edmund Rutter and I drove down to Pune to pick up a new minibus. We were driving around a roundabout in Pune – I can still vividly see it in my mind's eye – when I was suddenly struck by the thought: "I'm home!" And since that moment I have never awoken from a dream in which I've been in India and been glad that it was only a dream.

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The Forgotten Factor – Me and Bill Cameron-Johnson (Rankin)

On the 17th Jonathan Wheeler (an ex-British Army officer and Oxford graduate) and I set off from Asia Plateau in the new minibus to drive to Delhi. The first night we spent just outside Nasik and the second night in a field outside Shajapur, which we learned later is, or was, a centre of *goonda* (bandit) activities. We were left unscathed. We spent the third night outside my old home of “3/5”. I see from my diary that I stayed at Flagstaff Road, Old Delhi, but I have no recollection of whom with.

We performed the plays in Delhi. To be brutally honest, I find it difficult to believe the plays could have had any real effect on people’s lives, as was obviously the intention, but we had fun performing them nevertheless. The operation involved a lot of time and a lot of money, and one wonders if it was worth it all, but I did not regret my decision to go (though I might have done had we been in some other part of the world).

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Following Delhi, we were all given some days free to do whatever we wanted, and Jonathan Wheler and I decided we would go up to Kashmir, where my father had been born exactly 70 years before. On the train from Old Delhi to Jammu we joined up with an older Australian guy called Les and then on the bus from Jammu to Srinagar we teamed up with a young American called Gary. The journey from Jammu to Srinagar is spectacular. I was amazed by the fact that every landslide – and there were many, half-blocking the narrow, winding road – had been given a name. The bus had to stop at one point on account of a puncture and it wasn't until midnight before we finally arrived in Srinagar. We had stopped at a restaurant for dinner and been accosted by a swarm of houseboat owners pleading us to stay on their houseboat. We chose a chap who claimed that his boat was brand new. That sounded good to us and all four of us decided to take up his offer. And the houseboat was indeed new - so new, in fact, that it didn't have any running water or electricity. It was also moored on a not-very-salubrious side canal known locally as "the ditch", but it was cheap. The electricity problem was solved the next day when the owner climbed a ladder and draped a bare wire over the power line running along the bank. We stayed inside waiting for the bang and the scream of the man being electrocuted but nothing happened, and he got his free electricity supply. We never did get running water. He supplied us with buckets.

My father was born in Gulmarg (in 1908), which today is a popular winter sports centre. His father ran a Christian Missionary Society school in Patiala and his father's brother, Cecil, was rector of a school in Srinagar that was subsequently named for him, as "The Tyndale-Biscoe Memorial School". Cecil was something of a maverick missionary. He made his own rules. Small in stature, he was bullied at school until he learned to box and then he wasn't bullied any longer. While at Oxford, he coxed a rowing eight. On coming to "the Valley", he was shocked to find that there were a great many people drowning every year in the river and lake because they couldn't swim. So, one of the first things he did was to institute a school rule by which every new boy had to jump into the river from the balcony of the school, swim across to the other side and back again before completing his first year – or else leave the school. Then he taught them life-saving techniques, and the school soon developed a reputation for saving many lives in the valley. Many fathers came to him to ask that he baptize their sons, believing that it would be good for their careers in the British Raj. He only agreed to do so if they took on his gardener in a boxing match. His gardener was a well-known local boxing champion. He also had a notice on his office door which said: "Entry fee 2Rs, repaid if my time has not been wasted." The school's motto was, and still is, "In all things be men." The school acquired a glowing reputation which has lasted until today and former pupils and staff are proud of the link with the school, as witnessed by the fact that I have well over five hundred "friends" on Facebook who have attended or taught at the school and have wanted to link up with a "Tyndale-Biscoe"! The school's principle at the time of my visit was Rev John Ray (subsequently OBE) and I met him over a cup of tea. Several people I met in the city – officials, businessmen, etc. – were proud "Biscoe boys". Seeing the name of the school, "Tyndale-Biscoe Memorial School", emblazoned in large red lettering on a wall in this remote oriental city felt, to say the least, peculiar.

April 12 was my birthday, and I thought it would be fitting to visit my father's place of birth, and the others were happy to come along. We first took a bus to a village called Tanmarg

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and from there, it was a two-hour walk up to Gulmarg (elevation 2,750 meters). We didn't see much on account of the snow being more than two meters deep, with the path cut through it, but there was a clearing from which we could see Nanga Parbat rising majestically into the blue sky in the far distance. On the way back down, a porter attached himself to us and he and I had a long chat in Hindi, and I was gratified to learn from him that I spoke very good Urdu!

Jonathan had an ambition to get up to the Kolahoi glacier above Lidderwat, which involved taking a bus to Pahalgam and then hiking for about eight hours. He, Gary and I went, Les having already left Srinagar. Finding a guide willing to take us up proved difficult. It was early in the season, and no one had trekked up to Kolahoi. We found a guide eventually, but by the time we had hired all the necessary equipment it was getting on for midday when set off from Pahalgam. We arrived in the little mountain village of Aru in the late afternoon. I was very hesitant about continuing (I was wearing the same clothes I had worn while commuting to the theater school in Birmingham!) and it was already beginning to get dark. But Jonathan and Gary were determined to continue, despite the guide's protestations. I let them go on without me and began to wonder where I might stay the night. The season not having yet begun, everything was closed. A chap who owned the village tea shop said I could stay in his house, which turned out to be a biggish house with the livestock housed on the ground floor and the family above on the second and third floors. After an ample dinner with the family, I was shown to a large upper room with one small window in the thick mud wall, where I was to sleep. The room was empty when I went to sleep but, when I woke up early next morning, I was surprised to find it was full of sleeping bodies. I stepped over the recumbent shapes, crept out of the house and into the crisp morning air. Not knowing how the others had fared and not wanting to hang around, I set off back down the dirt track to Pahalgam on my own. On the long walk back, I got very thirsty and began feeling that I might pass out when I heard the wonderful sound of a trickle of water and discovered a small spring, bubbling up out of the rock. Oh, heaven! I finally got back to Srinagar late that evening and, very hungry, went straight to a restaurant and ordered two meals. My two companions arrived, intact, the following day. Apparently, the snow had been so deep that the guide, who was carrying the gear, had disappeared in a drift and, peering up at them, had refused to take another step. They hauled him out of the hole and, after relieving him of the load, they had continued to the hut in Lidderwat, arriving late at night. The next day the glacier was shrouded in cloud, so they didn't see a thing. I was very glad I hadn't gone.

After getting back to Britain I wrote to my host in Aru to thank him for his hospitality and I then received the following delightful reply:

“Paradise Tea Shop
Aru,
Pahalgam
Kashmir
India

27th August

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Dear Philip,

Thank you for the letter. Everything is fine.

You going come next time there.

Just you say all people by God you going come here; just you my names.

Just to going come September my wedding by God.

Just you listen people going come.

Good morning Sir

Ali Mohammad"

It is a letter I have treasured.

Kashmir is beautiful and tragic – a wonderful resource gone to waste. So sad. My dream is still to go back there one day with my wife.

On April 21, Jonathan, and I, together with Claude Bourdin from France, set off in the minibus from Delhi. Gary had cadged a lift with us as far as Jaipur, and after dropping him off we continued driving south to a field outside Udaipur, where we slept the night in the minibus. The next day we drove on to Panchgani, where we arrived in the early hours of the 23rd. A few days later a group of 25 of us left Asia Plateau by bus to travel south to Manipal, with a night in Hubli on the way. (Breakfast in the hotel at Hubli is memorable for the fact that Jonathan could not get across the idea that he wanted his boiled egg in its shell. Eventually he was served a raw egg. While the rest of us were highly amused, Jonathan was not. Jonathan later did me the honour of asking me to be his Best Man at his wedding, so our derision could not have left too much of a bruise.)

Manipal was hot and humid. We performed the plays in what was essentially a lecture hall and when we stood on stage our heads were practically touching the ceiling, which meant that we couldn't have the fans on, which meant that we perspired profusely. In *We Are Tomorrow* there is a scene in which we all had to stand on the same spot for a long time. When we finally stepped off the stage, there were six puddles in the canvas where each of us had been standing. My costume became so sopping wet that I wrang out a complete mug of sweat from my singlet. It was not pleasant

However, what was, by contrast, extremely pleasant was a visit we all made to a little island just off the coast where we spent several glorious hours languishing in a rock pool. (A calf on the island ate all the paper plates we'd had with us for the picnic.) I little knew then that I would be back in Manipal with my wife, Vendela, a few years later.

From Manipal, we returned north to Pune and thence to Bombay (as it still was then). A big public meeting had been arranged in a football stadium in Kalyan, north-east of Bombay. The stadium was packed. We were all expected to speak, and in a rash moment, I decided to speak in Hindi. I don't think the audience understood very much of what I said, though. They laughed all right, but in all the wrong places.

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We Are Tomorrow - L. to R. (standing): Jonathan Wheeler, Peter Shambrook, PT-B, Rob Corcoran; (sitting): Janet Smith, Bob Normington, Elizabeth Tooms

I recall being shocked and amazed by the utter desolation of the countryside for many kilometers to the leeward (eastern) side of Kalyan, where not a tree or even a blade of grass could be seen. The explanation given to us was that this was the result of the appalling pollution that poured constantly from the chimneys of the town's many textile factories. Hopefully, things have improved since then.

We returned to Asia Plateau, where we gave performances of *The Forgotten Factor* in the theatre for pupils of the town's many schools. At the very end of May, we left for London.

India in My Life

1982-3

Vendela and I walked arm-in-arm down the aisle on January 5, 1980, in Stockholm. For the next two years, we lived mostly in London, working with theatre and MRA. Then in 1982, we had that chance of travelling to India together.

On September 28, we arrived in Mumbai. (As we were landing at Santa Cruz Vendela looked out of the window and asked me what all those men squatting by the landing strip were doing!)



L. to R. (standing): PV Abram, Maja Ekdahl, ? ? Col. Rege, ? Balakrishnan, Mira Rege, Megumi Kanamatsu, Rangunath Prasad, PT-B. (sitting): Rahul Kapadia, ? Neketu Iralu, Vendela

A request had come from a medical college in Manipal for MRA to conduct a training course for students, and a group of thirteen of us spent a month planning and preparing. Niketü Iralu led the group. On November 1, we headed south in a hired bus, staying the night at Hubli as we had done in 1978, but not at the same hotel. Giving workshops to

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students rather than performing plays gave us the opportunity to interact with the young people in a different way than we had back in 1978 and it made the effort feel more worthwhile. The medical college catered mainly for foreign students who paid huge fees to attend. We had six days of sessions. How much the students benefitted from them is of course impossible to say, but the hope is that at least some ideas may have rubbed off on them.

We then returned to Panchgani, and later in November Vendela and I went to Mumbai to host a flat in Darbhanga Mansion. Our main job, apart from looking after the flat, was to meet people arriving from overseas who were on their way to Panchgani. This meant driving an elderly Ambassador motor car out to the airport in the early hours of the morning and then putting the new arrivals on a train or bus. Mike and Jean Brown had inhabited the flat at one point, and we found a Christmas crib with their name on it. We also inherited a cook and a bearer. We discovered sometime later that the cook was in fact a bearer who had somehow, somewhere along the line, managed to promote himself to the position of cook. He said he was a vegetarian but when some leftover chicken disappeared and Vendela confronted him about it he admitted that he had eaten it. "I thought you said you were vegetarian," she said, to which he replied: "Sometimes I am vegetarian, madam, sometimes I am non-vegetarian!" There was also a bit of a conflict over the fact that when Vendela bought some vegetables from the market one day, she discovered that the price she paid was somewhat less than the prices the cook had said he had been spending. We bought him and the bearer shirts for Christmas (they were both Christians) but the gifts were not appreciated. They had wanted money. One lives and learns.

A family lived on the pavement right outside the apartment and they kept the area around them extremely clean and orderly. The incongruousness of their existence outside the (for them) unbelievable luxury of the apartment building didn't appear to trouble them in the slightest. They lived their life and seemed, outwardly, at any rate, to be content with it.

On one occasion we went to the swimming pool at Breech Kandy and met the English captain of a ship that had been impounded because it had arrived directly from South Africa. He asked what we were doing in India, and we said we were working with something called "Moral Re-Armament" and he asked, "So what do you do in this 'Moral Dis-Armament'?" And we said, "Not '*Dis*-Armament'! Moral *Re*-Armament." Whereupon he said: "Oh my God, that's much worse"!

When I was at theatre school in Birmingham one of my fellow students was Kunal Kapoor, son of film star Sashi Kapoor, and I managed to find his telephone number and rang him. He said he was going to "a shoot" and invited us to join him, which we did. Vendela thought that "a shoot" meant a hunt of some kind but was greatly relieved to discover that it was a film shoot. They were making an historical movie and the scene to be "shot" involved an attack on a homestead where a farmer was tending his goats. It took most of the day to set the scene up and then many takes, but finally, as the sun was about to go down, the director announced that the scene was "in the can". There was only one little problem. Some observant individual pointed out that the "farmer" was wearing a very 20th-century wristwatch!

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On the last day of the year, we returned to Panchgani, where there was an international conference taking place, and on January 13 we left with a group of 56 by hired bus for Mumbai, from where we took a train (two nights) to Jamshedpur.

Jamshedpur looked like any other big industrial city in any other industrialized country. The only thing to remind one that one was in fact in India was the sight of a gardener on his haunches cutting an immaculate lawn with a pair of scissors. The remarkable “story” of Jamshedpur is told elsewhere but suffice it to say here that the city and its environs left a most positive impression: this, India can do!

We stayed in the air-conditioned home of a Mr. and Mrs. Swaminathan. Like most of the people in the city, he worked for TATA. I guess we had a tour of one of the TATA factories and probably had a meeting or two. After five days we were back at the station waiting on a train that would take us for the 35-hour journey to Delhi. As we waited for the train to begin pulling out of the station, a beggar-woman, holding a small child in her arms, came to the barred window, thrust her hand forward and started chanting, in the most soulful voice she could muster: “*Baba, mein bukha hun, mein bukha hun, bukha hun...*” (“Sir, I’m hungry, I’m hungry...”). Suddenly another woman appeared at her side and began the same lament, whereupon the first woman turned to her and jabbered and gesticulated at her in the most vigorous way until the second woman moved on and then, turning back to us, continued her pathetic pleading. We couldn’t help seeing the funny side of this performance.

We stayed in Delhi from April 21 until May 14, staying first with a family in the south of Delhi (who had a “vegetarian” Alsatian dog that we felt very sorry for) and then at “3/5”, my old home. During that time, we made one trip to Agra and another to Chandigarh – both with the same group we had travelled with from Panchgani.

Soon after we had arrived at “3/5”, word had clearly gotten around the “Harijan” (Dalit) colony across the road that we were there because suddenly a whole bunch of my old friends appeared at the house. There was Mange Ram and Babu Lal and Ranjit Singh and Amar Singh and I-can’t-remember-who-else, all sitting around the living room of “3/5” as if the intervening years had just rolled away. Later we visited Ranjit Singh and his family, together with the Chavannes (snr.) from France. The family had left the colony and lived in a one-room flat at the top of a building owned by Ranjit’s uncle. They gave us dinner – the first time I had had a full meal in the home of one of the Dalit friends.

All those who had been living in the so-called ‘*juggi*’ (mud-hut) part of the “Harijan” colony had been physically uprooted by Rajiv Gandhi’s efforts to “clean up” Delhi of its slums. One day trucks arrived, and the families and their belongings were loaded up and carried away. Bulldozers rolled in immediately afterwards and flattened the area. They were taken to a huge area beyond the city limits on the eastern side, called Tilok Puri, where they were allotted plots, supplied with bricks with which to build homes, and left to get on with it. There were public latrines and one tap per fifty households.

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Ranjit Singh, his wife and sons outside their home



Mange Ram and family

Mange Ram and Ram Swroop were among those who had been moved, and we drove out with the Chavannes to visit them. We had a plot number for Mange Ram and finding it in the sprawling labyrinth was far from easy, but we eventually we tracked it down. The area was a good hour's drive from the centre of Delhi, where most people worked. Mange

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Ram's circumstances, as mentioned earlier, were very different from what they had been in the 1960's. He had built himself quite a large, two-storied house and was evidently doing well for himself, having become a leading politician in the area. Ram Swroop, on the other hand, was in a very sorry state, although he was almost pathetically happy to see me again. As we left him standing in the doorway of his one-room shack (he hadn't invited us in) I couldn't help wondering how much longer he would live. Babu Lal was still living across the road from "3/5" and we met him in his home.

I was saddened to learn a few years later that Mange Ram had died. Of all the "Harijans" he was probably my closest friend

From Delhi, Vendela and I travelled by train first to Hyderabad, where we stayed with Varaja and Mala Varadarajan (friends of an old family friend of Vendela's called Ulf Langefors) and then on to Bangalore, staying first with the Joseph family (old friends of Niketu Iralu) and then with Ravi and Jayashree Rao.

From there we travelled on Trivandrum, staying with Koshy Mathew, and from there we flew over to Colombo and stayed with Rohini de Mel. She put us on a bus up to Kandy where we stayed in a hotel, and then later drove us to friends of hers in Negambo. It was a relaxing time and fun to be back in Sri Lanka after 14 years - and I had another birthday on the island. We returned to Trivandrum on April 21, again staying with the Mathews, and took a day trip to Kvolam Beach. Then on the 23rd, we left by train for Pune, travelling 1st Class un-air-conditioned, which is the best way to experience India. From Panchgani, we returned to Mumbai on May 22 and stayed at Worli Sea Face with Haridas and Tia Nair. Vendela ate something she shouldn't have when we were visiting some friends, and became extremely sick. Tia nursed her back to health and on the 31st we returned to London.

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1988

Someone – I'm not sure who, but I have my suspicions – came up with the idea that a small company of actors, sponsored by the Westminster Theatre, should go to India to tour the country's elite boarding schools with theatre workshops, using an anthology of excerpts from MRA plays and music. Nancy Ruthven was the producer/director/manager. Vendela and I were of course asked to take part and we of course agreed. We were a company of eight including Chris and Dick Channer and two professional actors who had acted at the Westminster Theatre but otherwise had no experience with MRA.

We left London on January 5, our wedding anniversary, having rehearsed beforehand at the Westminster Theatre. Apart from a "ghetto blaster", to be used for the backing music, and some costumes, we had little with us in the way of props and equipment, expecting to be able to find whatever else we would need at Panchgani. One of the excerpts we were to perform was a scene from Alan Thornhill's play *Mr. Wilberforce MP*, the role of Mr. Wilberforce to be played by Tony Jackson, who had for several years played Micky Merry in *Give A Dog A Bone* when it was performed at the Westminster Theatre. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to join us for rehearsals before leaving for India, so, as soon as we arrived at Asia Plateau we all had to work hard to bring him up to speed. Then there were all the other preparations: the making of props and more costumes (which gave employment to the local tailor), getting the equipment together, etc. etc. Everything had to be ready within the six days before we were due to leave for the first school, the Scindia School in Gwalior. It all became rather fraught, and Tony was clearly far from happy. On the morning we left, Nancy announced to us all that Tony had decided to return home, which meant that the *Wilberforce* extract had to be dropped from the programme, which was unfortunate as it was arguably the scene with the most relevant content.

The journey to Gwalior required taking an early bus from Asia Plateau down to Mumbai and then an overnight train. We had three days at the school, returned to Panchgani and then set off again on February 4 for Delhi. In Delhi, we had to transfer from New Delhi station to Old Delhi station to get the night train up to Dehradun. Standing on the platform in Old Delhi, waiting for the train to pull in, I was flabbergasted at how thick the pollution was: you could barely see from one side of the platform to the other. This was not like the Delhi I had known twenty years earlier.

We had five days at the famous Doon School, returned to Delhi and then took another night train to Kalka (memories of my holiday in 1970). We were met at the station by the Laurence School's school bus and taken up to Kasauli. The school is built on a narrow ridge, and Vendela and I were staying in the home of one of the teachers, perched on the highest point. It was **cold**. Our host kindly supplied us with hot-water bottles, which were indeed bottles – whisky bottles, to be precise! Vendela bought a black shawl there which

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she used until the day she died. We left the school on the 19th and on the 25th we arrived in Coimbatore, Kerala – the longest train journey I have had in India. After a memorable breakfast consisting of enormous *dhosas*, we were taken by a school bus up to another Laurence School, in Ootacummund,. After three full days there we were taken back down by the school bus to Coimbatore to get a train to Pune. Bookings for all these train journeys had been made on the internet before leaving London, but, when the Pune train arrived at the platform, we discovered to our consternation that there were no bookings for us on it. Notwithstanding, we clambered aboard and parked ourselves on seats. When the conductor came along, however, he told us sternly that we would have to disembark at the next station. There was a lot of arguing and finally, we were allowed to stay on the train, though we had to double up on the narrow 2nd class berths. Nancy was not well and, after almost coming to blows over the issue, a man on the lowest berth was eventually persuaded to swap it for Nancy's top one. We arrived at Asia Plateau at half-past three in the morning of March 2. On the 16th the group travelled down to Pune, then on to Mumbai and on the 27th we all flew out of Santa Cruz.

Our programme in the schools had consisted of presenting the play excerpts and songs in our repertoire and then conducting classes rather along the lines of the sessions we had conducted at the Westminster Theatre as part of the *A Day of London Theatre* schools' programme, using improvisations and discussions to explore the issues taken up by the plays and songs and also sharing from our own life stories. We had the same group of pupils at each session and had one session a day.

The inevitable question arose once again in my mind as to what effect the operation had on the lives of the kids, and I could not help thinking "not much". I also asked myself whether the value of performances as a vehicle for transmitting life-changing concepts and ideas had changed over time. So, was the trip worth the trouble and expense? I doubted it, but I was glad of the excuse to return to India.

Sadly, Nancy Ruthven was killed in a solo car accident not long afterwards.

India in My Life

1990/1

We found ourselves returning to India in December 1990 to attend a conference at Panchgani. We flew to Colombo, arriving on December 23 and were booked on an onward flight to Mumbai and would arrive in Panchgani just in time for the beginning of an international conference. When we went to check in for the Mumbai flight, we were told the plane was full and that we would have to wait three days for the next flight out, or else fly to Madras (Chennai) and take a train from there. Either way, we would arrive in Panchgani as the conference was closing. To say we were frustrated would be an understatement. We had booked the flight months in advance. While we were still standing at the desk I said, perhaps in a louder voice than was wholly necessary, "Well, I guess we'll have to ring Vijitha Yapa and see if he can put us up." The lady behind the desk then told us to sit down and wait for a bit, which we did. After a few minutes we were approached by a whole delegation of uniformed officials, one of whom handed us boarding passes for the flight. Later I got to know that Vijitha had been conducting a press campaign revealing corruption in Air Lanka. Apparently, it was common practice for people to offer lots of money to get seats on full flights. So, thanks to Vijitha's media campaign, we arrived at Panchgani, intact, on Christmas Day – in time for the beginning of the conference.

On January 16 the first Gulf War began, and we seriously wondered if we would ever be able to get back to Europe. Anti-US sentiments were strong, even among our Indian friends. It was a fraught time.

At one point, Vendela started having a lot of pain and we took her down to a little hospital in Pune to see a surgeon who had helped Christine Iralu. He was very kind and thorough and concluded that she had a large ovarian cyst and said that he would like to perform a complete hysterectomy. In a state of some alarm, we returned to Asia Plateau to decide what to do. Vendela wrote to her kidney specialist in London, and he strongly advised against having a hysterectomy in India. "Wait till you get back to the UK," he advised. Just then there happened to be a lady from Pune at Asia Plateau, Mrs. B., who was a strong advocate of homoeopathic medicine. When she heard of Vendela's plight she recommended that she see a certain homoeopathic doctor in Pune who, she said, would definitely help her. We thought, "Well, what's there to lose?" and Mrs. B. fixed an appointment for Vendela to see the said doctor. He examined Vendela very carefully, from head to foot, and told her to **absolutely not** have a hysterectomy. He gave her a course of homoeopathic pills and said, "Take these and I guarantee that in six months the cyst will be gone." Vendela took the pills and six months later, back in London, a scan showed there was no cyst.

On February 16 we had the worst train journey of our lives. Well-meaning Mrs. B., whose face was barely visible through the layers of make-up she wore, had kindly offered to buy tickets for us on the train from Pune to Bombay. However, when we arrived at Pune

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station, we discovered that the tickets were just that: journey tickets, with no seat reservation. So, we found ourselves standing on the platform along with what seemed like the entire population of Pune, lined up a dozen deep. The train rolled very slowly into the station but by the time it had shuddered to a halt it was already filled to the gunnels. My mouth went dry. All there was to do was to join in the fight to get on board. We managed, somehow, to squirm our way into the passageway at the end of a carriage and to sit down on our suitcases, outside the toilet. A young mother came in after us with two small children and, while she sat crouched under the hand basin by the door, her little girl sat on the other end of my suitcase, put her head in my lap and promptly fell asleep – a little island of peace in the maelstrom. The train moved on to the next station where even more people tried to squeeze their way in. A very large lady appeared at the door and thrust an enormous suitcase over the heads of the people inside and then barged in with brute force, followed by her diminutive husband. She crashed her way through the crowd to the seating compartment where she merely parked herself on top of another passenger. The atmosphere was not friendly. At the next station, a group of soldiers wanted to board the train and they tried adopting the same trick as the large lady, launching their bulky kit bags in through the door over the heads of those in the carriage. At that moment something remarkable happened: the mood suddenly switched to one approaching camaraderie in the face of a common plight. The kit bags were passed across the heads of the crowd and thrown out of the door on the opposite side. The soldiers were not pleased but were helpless to do anything about it and had to give up. After that, the journey was relatively peaceful. At one point a blind beggar managed to make his way along the carriage by dint of squirming his way between the press of bodies, his feet not even touching the floor. After three hours – although it seemed three times as long – we arrived at Dadar station, and a lot of people burst out onto the platform. Suddenly I could see a glimpse of the passing landscape through the open doorway. O, what bliss! By the time we arrived at Andheri West, the train was practically empty and being met at the station by an old and dear friend, Ajit Patel, was a wonderful ending to the nightmare.

That night we left for Delhi on the Frontier Mail. We had just over a week in the city, staying at “3/5” with the Mathurs, and seeing old friends.

From Delhi, we returned to Mumbai to stay with Ajit and Daniela Patel. Very generously, Ajit said he wanted to give us a holiday in Goa, and on March 2 he sent us off by “luxury” overnight coach. It was possibly the most uncomfortable night of my life and a great relief to arrive at Baga, where we were booked into a bungalow belonging to the Miranda Beach Resort. The bungalow was about fifty meters from the beach, and we spent all our time lounging in the sea or on the beach and eating our meals in a little beach-side restaurant run by a Belgian cook, who somehow managed to get hold of the very best cuts of beef. The Europeans were less-than-minimally dressed – women topless and men in tiny thongs – which we found both shameful and embarrassing. We had ten days there and, while we were very grateful for Ajit’s generosity, we concluded that Goa was not a holiday destination we would recommend to others. After another horrendous night on the bus going back up to Mumbai, we were quite ready for another holiday.

We returned home after visiting Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan and Bangkok.

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2002 and 2008

Our last two visits were in 2002, to attend the so-called “Ho-ho” at Asia Plateau, and in 2008, to attend the 40th anniversary of the centre’s opening.

On the latter visit, it was a great joy to meet up with several old friends, some of whom I hadn’t seen since the 1960s or ‘70s. We also had with us a Russian pianist, Victor Ryabchikov, and, following the time in Panchgani, the three of us went down to Mumbai to stay with the Patels, and Victor gave a well-received concert at the Russia House, plus a more private recital at the Zubin Mehta museum, arranged by Keku Gandhi. Then we went up to Agra where we stayed at a hotel, and I got sick. Vendela and Victor left me at the hotel and went to the Taj Mahal, which, sadly, is not as pristine as it once was.

We left Mumbai on the 7th of February. For the last time? Hopefully not. My dream – currently at the top of my bucket list – is to visit Kashmir again.

(During our visit in 2002, Vendela and I had taken an outing to Mahableshwar. We went into a little Kashmiri shop and were looking at shawls and stuff. I mentioned to the shop owner that my father had been born in Kashmir. “What was his name,” he asked. “Tyndale-Biscoe”, I answered. “Ooh my gawd!” he said, and for an awful moment I thought he was going to touch my feet.)

India in My Life

What India has meant in my life

An Australian tourist I met once told me, “India gets under your skin. It can be bloody irritating but there’s no getting rid of it!” Although I cannot claim any Indian ancestry (that I know of) I feel as though India is part of my blood. Those first four years in India were a deeply formative period of my life. They were to me what university had been for others of my generation, although I like to think that my “education” there had a more profound impact on my personality than any university would have had. I learned to take people for *who* they are rather than for *what* they are. I also learned that friends can be found anywhere – they don’t have to belong to one’s own group or class or colour or creed or culture. This is a simple and obvious truth, but the discovery of it is something I treasure deeply. I’m not at all sure I would have tumbled onto it had it not been for those years in India.

There is the story of the Englishman who took a day trip across the “*English Channel*” and asked a Frenchman he met in a café what it felt like to be “a foreigner”. There is also the famous saying: “You can tell an Englishman anywhere, but you can’t tell him much!” I like to believe that India may have scraped off some of the less attractive features of my “Englishness”. I was asked once by a young student of law from an African country whether I had ever thought about the fact that wherever there was trouble in the world almost always a British hand could be seen at work somewhere in the historical background. A host of examples immediately presented themselves to mind and not least among them the whole tragic drama of Partition and the ongoing tragedy of Kashmir. I had to admit, both to him and myself, that had I been born a hundred years earlier than I was, with all the opportunities that the Empire offered of a good life, I would very probably have taken full advantage. In helping me to see my own country and myself from an outside perspective, India helped me see myself in a truer light and for that, I owe India a huge debt of gratitude.

Finally, what of India herself? Travelling to India, spending enough time there (how long is “enough”?) is a healthily humbling experience for anyone. The riches of the country – the nature, the deep culture and history, the staggering variety, and above all the people with their gifts of art and invention – are a source of constant wonder and challenge. How, I ask myself, could Clive and his ilk have had the unbelievable audacity to assume that they had the moral right to rule over this people?! But... “but for the grace of God”... This is not to deny the seemingly insurmountable problems that still face India. The ongoing poverty of millions, divisions between communities and regions and religions, corruption, etc. But the strides that have been made in so many fields these last five decades are awe-inspiring. (I just love the fact that Indian companies are buying up the

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former prides of British industry, like Jaguar and Rover! And – stop press – that the United Kingdom has a Prime Minister with roots in South India.) Today one takes for granted that when telephoning a helpline, the voice that answers has an Indian accent. (On one occasion Vendela eagerly asked: “Where are you sitting?”, expecting the person to say, “I’m sitting in Bangalore, madam”, as on a previous occasion. Instead, there was a pause at the other end and finally, a puzzled Irish voice said, “I’m sitting on my chair.”) My British pension comes into my Swedish account via India. In my work of recording university-level textbooks in all academic subjects, I found a very high proportion of authors and those listed in bibliographies had names originating from the Indian subcontinent. All-in-all, my connection with this amazing country will always be for me an object of pride.

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PS

Whenever I have landed in India, I have had the feeling of witnessing a theatrical performance that has been put on solely for my benefit, surrounded, as one is, by constant drama, both tragic and comic – like a Bollywood film. Every railway station is the scene of the whole gamut of human experiences, from birth to death (literally) and of all the joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointments, loves and hates, that come and go in between. Alongside the heart-rending grime of poverty, with all its misery, there is almost always something that can make you smile, if not laugh out loud. Like any comic performance, though, the one that makes you laugh the loudest is the one performed with the utmost seriousness. You may laugh at the performers, but they do not laugh back. Yet in laughing at them you are not laughing down at them. You are observing the humour of humans just being human...

One thing you meet everywhere in India is an inbred desire (altruistic or otherwise!) to be of service, to please. These stories illustrate that wonderful trait.

I have already told the story of my very first morning in Delhi being politely informed that a bus queue was not a post office queue. Then an English friend of mine, who was travelling in India as a tourist, wanted to pick up his mail at the *post restante* in Delhi (at Gol Post Office, as it happens). After asking a number of people who either had no clue what he was talking about or else gave him obviously wrong directions, he finally approached a well-dressed, seemingly well-educated man and said, “Excuse me, do you

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know where I would find *post restante*?" and the man said, "Yes, certainly, sir." "Oh, thank goodness!" my friend said, "I've asked so many people and no one could tell me." "I can tell you, sir. What do you want? Vegetarian or non-vegetarian?"

My sister, Rachel, tells the story of walking into a smart restaurant in South India with a friend and of eyeing the glass of water that was immediately placed on the table with a mixture of intense longing – they were very thirsty – and suspicion. Calling the waiter, she said, "The water is boiled, isn't it?" "Yes, madam, vaater is baailed" the waiter said. My sister's suspicion was not allayed and she said, "The water isn't boiled, is it." Whereupon the waiter said, "Noo, madam, Vaater is naat baailed." Confused, my sister asked, "Look, is the water boiled or not boiled?" Quick as a flash the answer came: "Madam, vaater is paart baailed and paart naat baailed."

When Vendela and I were in India in '83 she needed to have her visa renewed. We were in Mumbai and travelled in from Andheri West – a good hour's journey – to the office near the Victoria Terminus. When we got there, we discovered the office had closed for the day, so we had to come back the next day and did so, making sure we arrived early. First, we were informed that the clerk who dealt with visas had not yet come in and that we should wait, which we did. We waited for an hour, then two hours, and still no clerk. Finally, we went up to the receptionist to ask whether the clerk would be coming that day and she assured us he would. "But he should have been here two hours ago!" we said. "Ah, but you see," she said, "he has a very long way to travel." We sighed and went back to our seats.

Another friend tells of going into the Indian Airlines office in Mumbai to book a flight to Calcutta and was told by the helpful girl behind the desk that all flights to Calcutta were fully booked for the next two weeks. "But", she said, ever keen to be of service, "I can give you a seat to Bangalore."

Finally – although one could go on – Vijitha Yapa's story has to be told: Vijitha wrote for *Himmat*. He had been in the Northeast and had returned to Calcutta with an important story to send into the magazine. He wanted to place an urgent call to the editor, Russi Lala, in Bombay and was duly given a booking number by the operator and told he'd be called back in a couple of minutes. Many minutes went by and finally, he rang the operator, gave his booking number, and asked why the call hadn't been put through. He was told it would be coming through directly and to wait a minute more, which he did. The evening drew on. Finally, late into the night, Vijitha rang the operator and, after giving his booking number for the umpteenth time, shouted down the line that he *had to speak to Bombay NOW* (the magazine was about to be put to bed.). The operator said, "Just a minute, sir. I will put you through right away." And Vijitha did indeed hear a ring tone and then a voice answered. "Russi?", said Vijitha. It wasn't Russi. It was someone else. Vijitha slammed down the phone and rang the operator again. "*It was a wrong number*", he shouted. "But, sir, you both wanted to speak urgently!" Not surprisingly Vijitha wanted to lodge a complaint, which he did. Later that night, or rather in the early hours of the morning, after he had finally been able to dictate his story to Russi Lala and gone to bed, Vijitha was awoken by the telephone ringing. "Hello?" he said, sleepily. "You made a complaint, sir." "Yes, I did." "Your complaint number is..."