



Republic Day in India

A couple of coincidences to mention here. The first is that I pride myself on being the same age as India, a little older to be exact, but almost one of *Midnight's Children*. In addition, India's *Republic Day* coincides with *Australia Day* - the 26th January – thus, as an Aussie I have two good reasons to celebrate. But I recall one of those days with a mix of affection and horror.

So here I sit, not long after the crack of dawn, astride an old wooden chair, positioned dead-centre, with a microphone on a tall metal stand in front of me. To my left, with jet-black hair and dressed like a queen in a beautiful azure and white, sequined saree, sits the school's director and principal, Dr Mabel Aranha; a somewhat formidable figure, attending her final Republic Day parade, before retirement. To my right a considerably more jovial character, the white-mustachioed Mister Mirchandani, new owner and director of the school, in crisp white suit and bright blue tie. It's hard to tell when he's seated, but when standing, the top of his shiny bald head, with its white *Friar Tuck* style fringe, reaches up to my chest. I feel a bit conspicuous in my open-necked turquoise shirt, with black patterned pockets ... and sandals!

In the distance and through the dust I can see about a million children, all adorned in khaki-coloured uniforms, with a number of very focused drummers in their front lines, going through some sort of military drill. After a while the drumming ceases and two of the khaki-dust blurr appear to separate from the rest, marching forward in perfect unison, to give a well-timed stamp of the feet and precision salute, directly in front of me. My throat dries up in anticipation of having to speak to this multitude of young people which seems to stretch to the horizon. I fumble in my shirt pocket and pull out a scrap of

paper with a few hastily written notes scrawled on it, from late the night before. Like my attire, it seems a bit inadequate for the occasion.

Looking back, it's hard to remember how many times I have sat in that middle seat as *Chief Guest* for some function or other. It was part of the job, but secretly it was the part I loathed, because I never saw myself as better than, or above, the rest ... and that includes kids. But even though I disliked the – what seemed to me to be something of a - throw-back to colonial times (with the white ruler, front and centre), I never said no, as I fully realized that this could upset the applecart and cause offence. As some sort of remedial measure I always tried to keep whatever pearls of wisdom I had to offer to a minimum, in an attempt to counter other podium speakers, who tended to gabble on into the sunset, causing soporific effects for their unfortunate listeners.

There have of course been many moments that I have relished and felt undeservedly privileged. One I recall in particular, when I stood with a massive gathering of schoolgirls in traditional dress, twenty-deep around a quadrangle - which somehow resembled an extraordinarily multicoloured crowd at the *French (clay court) Open* – to sing the Indian national anthem: *Jana Gana Mana*. But for the most part, as on the dusty dawn above, it was simply being there that counted, not how I looked, or what I said. So I usually tried to present as casual as possible and speak as little as permissible.

At some stage later in the day I am to be found at Holiday Inn, near Juhu Beach. There had been a small spat with the rickshaw driver on the way there, so now I sit overlooking the ocean - and the beggars on the sand looking up to me, in hopes of a stray coin - with a wonderfully cold *Haywards 2000* ale on the table. My mood is decidedly morose. I'm deep in thought about the bad behaviour I had shown to the *rickshaw-wallah*, who was probably illiterate and most likely had a wife and kids to support. I knew better and should have counted to ten – or a hundred - before re-thinking my approach.

The beer in front of me is carefully shrouded by a yellow napkin – a privilege, I am told, only for tourists and *Non-Resident Indians* – or NRIs, as they're known here – on what is a dry day for all other mortals. (I love Indians, but why they have to reduce everything to

acronyms is beyond my comprehension). I tear away the tissue in order to drink the chilled lager, without consuming a mouthful of wet paper. The trials of life!

“Republic Day is dry? I hadn’t realised. Let’s drink to that!”

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After my little ‘set-to’ with the rickshaw driver (known locally as ‘rickshaw-wallah’) and while quaffing beer – the privileged white man on the hotel’s marbled terrace, overlooking the sands of Juhu Beach - I began to reflect on my actions. This poem was the result:

The Rickshaw Wallah and Me

*I’ve just established bad relations
Between fellow man and I,
And now regretting
This irksome deed,
Sit, in search of an alibi.*

*The richshaw wallah – a faceless man,
Didn’t know where to go,
So I stormed away,
No payment made:
A rather despicable show.*

*He spoke Marathi, no English tongue
And probably came from far.
Why should he know
This ‘Holiday Inn’,
That served the foreign Tzar?*

*Now I sit secure above Juhu Beach,
With Hayward’s brew to hand.
The drink cost more
Than his daily pay.
Does that make me feel so grand?*

*I muse on this fact of relations,
Having time to do that you see.
I don’t have to climb
Into my three-wheeled cab
And work from dawn till tea.*

Mumbai, 2000