

## HOW GROWS THE MANGO TREE

We spend a great deal of time wondering about what - if anything - we can do within our own spheres of influence (however humble) to help in the face of world events in which we all have a stake. And we become so preoccupied with *wondering* that opportunities often slip by unnoticed. A good example of this is the Commonwealth, an historic association of friends worldwide; and Comex, an attempt by a younger generation (*the same age group as might be called upon in a shooting war*) to try and do something about preserving those friendships. Having thus stated the case, as I have had to do on occasions in the past to restore enthusiasm blunted by minor disappointments, I had better set out my own modest credentials.

I'm a simple man sir, a soldier no less,  
My ambitions scattered around:  
Big ones, little ones, inconsequential ones  
And some that have yet to be found.

I'm a simple man sir, a soldier no less,  
Dreaming dreams of what might have been:  
Climbing great mountains, adventuring in space;  
Discovering what heaven might mean!

I'm a simple man sir, a soldier no less,  
Just watching the seasons go by:  
Leaves falling gently, the soft wistful snow,  
Bird song and a cloudless blue sky.

I'm a simple man sir, a soldier no less,  
With memories that others can't see:  
Endless columns of men, marching in step,  
On the long road to victory.

I'm a simple man sir, a soldier no less,  
Counting my blessings each day:  
Big ones, little ones, inconsequential ones,  
And many more coming my way.

We all have ideas, and ideas are powerful things, but to stick with them is what matters. For example: *The Green Pennant Awards* brought about by Comex and representing perhaps the greatest single challenge of our times, merits more than a passing thought on how best to take the idea forward. As a child of Empire, growing up a man of the Commonwealth, I have good reason to know something about the good and the bad of both, and find it difficult to understand the constant knocking of the past. It is like spitting on the gravestones of our ancestors; or soldiers firing their weapons at a defenceless target. To have *lived* an experience is more instructive than simply speculating about it, and while each must have his or her own reasons for thinking, saying, or doing things, it is not always helpful to criticise a past one has not known.

The matchless quality of the Commonwealth armies of the last war for instance, set an example of comradeship the like of which the world had not seen before, and one that the offspring of that generation might do well to emulate - before it is too late. Does it matter? Of course it does: because war is not the only activity that can benefit from a little comradeship.

Much may have been wrong with the Empire, and now with the Commonwealth; but even more was right. And to make an informed judgement, it is necessary to fall back on one's own experience, and open up a window or two on a little inspiration from outside. One example comes to mind: '*Of all human institutions, the Commonwealth comes nearest to the ideal of the brotherhood of man,*' Prince Philip's words in endorsing the activities of Comex. It may be a challenge too far for Commonwealth leaders but it is still true, and represents a unique opportunity for the Commonwealth; both governments and people. But, as *The Passage of Time* suggests, '*opportunities missed may never come again*'.

The finest quality of the spirit of man,  
Tempered in an empire's setting sun;  
Whence *friendship, loyalty, and freedom* began  
A quest for *peace*, and so nearly won.

Opportunities missed may never come again,  
Leaving behind a fistful of crumbs;  
Only the passage of time, and regrets remain:  
To do better - if a next time comes:

But don't be afraid, the reassuring voice cries,  
The best intentions often falter.  
And all is not lost, for ahead the future lies:  
A world of hope, that time can't alter.

Courage alone can assuage the scourge of fear  
And damaged optimism re-new;  
While the many dreams that may once have seemed so clear,  
Slowly, but surely, fade out of view.

Although they have gone, and may never be recalled,  
A new dream awaits another night,  
To arouse the faltering progress, lately stalled,  
And replace the darkness with fresh light.

Once more the stars sparkle, a galaxy of dreams  
Anchored in a celestial sphere,  
At the confluence of life's miraculous streams,  
Guided by an infallible seer

I often dig into that magnificent storehouse of knowledge, Hobson-Jobson, written by Colonel Henry Yule and R.C. Burnell in January 1886, for a few nuggets of history, friendship and humour. To me it represents a lexicon of words, people and places, mingling and mixing at every level for the betterment of understanding; and binding all caught in its orbit with the invisible cords that bind kinsmen. On the back cover is this *challenging* statement: *'In vain our hard fate we repine;/ In vain our fortune we rail;/ On Mullaghnee-tawny we dine;/ on Congee, in Bangalore jail.'* That great work was continued a hundred years later, in 1992, by Nigel Hankin who served for some twenty years with the British High Commission in Delhi before taking refuge on the banks of the

River Yamuna 'in which he swam for pleasure' and perhaps for the inspiration to give us his inimitable Hanklyn-Janklin: 'A stranger's rumble-tumble guide to some words, customs and quiddities Indian and Indo-British.'

I was discussing these matters, and the question of opportunities lost with my old friend Kamal Kant Sharma, a Brahman *tabla* player far away in the old market place of Delhi, *Chandni Chowk*, and posed the question of how best to preserve *The Green Pennant Awards*. How about *The Story of Comex in Song*? Would that help I wondered! Normally a keen and perceptive listener, for reasons of his own he launched into an account about a mango tree on the battlefield at Panipat. This sort of thing was not uncommon in our conversations and he invariably steered a course back to where we began. In this instance it was an opportunity lost by the Marathas on the battlefield at Panipat. When I checked it out I found not only the story of the battle, but of the mango tree as well.

Briefly, the battle was fought on 13 January 1761 across a front seven miles long and lasted from dawn to dusk: the Muslims under Ahmad Shah Durani and the Marathas under the nominal command of the Peshwa's (the Maratha ruler's) seventeen year old son Viswas Rao. Both armies were made up of cavalry, infantry, elephants trained for war, and ox-drawn artillery; in total a force of some 80-90 thousand on either side; and many more thousands of followers, including (with the Marathas) a few thousand *pindaris* (irregular horsemen of Pathan and Afghan origin). Up to noon the advantage was with the Marathas. Between two and three o'clock Viswas Rao was wounded and unhorsed; his army fled leaving 20,000 dead and many more to be slaughtered on capture. The dream of a Maratha Empire was over. But Kamal insisted that Viswas Rao had not been wounded; he had dismounted voluntarily at the sight of a solitary mango tree the fruit of which he *liked too much*. Had this not been the case the Marathas would probably have secured their empire. An enormous opportunity lost there!

How was it then that a mango tree found itself in such alien territory far removed from its native habitat in Maharashtra? He laughed. 'You see, Marathas were fighting in Panipat so the mango tree appeared there to encourage them,' a pointer to the miraculous qualities of the fruit! 'The Marathas missed a great opportunity, so what to do?' We talked about mangoes and their place in Indian society. There are so many varieties he assured me. There is even a mango festival, usually in May. 'You must come to India then!'

There are stories and songs and poems about mangoes. The scent of their blossoms attracts snakes and birds, squirrels and insects. The mango festival is the season, perhaps even the reason, for love; it inspires artists and craftsmen. The very sight of an Alphonso, a Langra, or a Kesar, quickens the blood and arouses the passions. The Payri and Malgis of Kokan, the Rajapuri of Gujarat, the Dalimbi of Valsad, the Lalbaug of Karnataka, the Neelam and Malgoba of Andhra Pradesh sound like great captains of war, and are yet the fruit of peace.

Edinburgh is a long way from Paniput but to my surprise and delight I found that Sainsbury's had got on to the potential of the mango. A few were on display, but none with the names I have mentioned. They were simply *medium* or *large* and priced accordingly. Some did have names such as Tommy Atkins (what were the origins of that I wonder, Kipling!), Kent or Keitt, but where were the Alphonsons, the Langras and the Kesars? And another thing: a really good mango is fibre-free.

I relate this vignette not to inform those unfamiliar with the mango - for I am no expert - but for the pleasure of recording yet another jolly conversation with my *tabla* playing friend six thousand miles away whose optimism left little room for doubt about anything; and certainly not about *The Green Pennant Awards*. When I mentioned the expedition to Sainsbury's, he came back with 'O Hoooo! *Mangoes will not come now, it is out of season. This is season for Green Pennant Awards, ha, ha, ha, you see? What we can do, please tell me?*' In his fertile mind he saw a link between the spread of the mango throughout the Commonwealth and *The Green Pennant Awards*. I would never have thought of associating the two, but one lives and learns!

Not until I had read Kusum Budhwar's '*Romance of the Mango*' did I fully appreciate Kamal's perspicacity. A copy of this highly entertaining and informative book came into my possession, but only after I had embarked on this chapter. So I am now able to inform the reader that '*Tommy Atkins was raised from a seed planted in Fort Lauderdale in 1920*', but without any mention of Kipling. And hear what she has to say about the rest of the family.

*'Several thousand years ago, the mango had already spread over most of the Indian subcontinent. Over a period of time it dispersed to other parts of the world and became naturalised in many tropical zones. The introduction of the mango to other countries*

*makes interesting reading because its distribution is linked to the enterprise of human beings, who were largely responsible for its dispersal far and wide. The spread of the mango is closely associated with man's activities in the pursuit of trade and commerce, political expansion, exploration, adventure, piracy or simply the zeal of missionaries.'* Health and medicinal properties are also mentioned. On that wide canvas there must surely be a corner for *The Green Pennant!*

Kamal had himself been awarded a *Green Pennant* for distinguished service on the Queen's Silver Jubilee Commonwealth Expedition, Comex 8 - about which much has been written in *Together Unafraid*. Few *tabla* players can claim to have accompanied singers, dancers, guitarists and bagpipes from one end of the Asian Highway to the other without disturbing the peace. His playing has been compared to the *touch of feathers and the speed of a butterfly's wing*. No wonder the University of Delhi recruited him to head the Percussion Department.

Such was his popularity that he was also presented with a watch, engraved to commemorate the Silver Jubilee, which he has never worn *because it is too nice to wear*. When India took the initiative in organising Comex 11 Kamal Kant was to play a leading role; when India sent her own national contingent to Zambia, to take part in Comex 13/14, he was among the first to be selected. (I had arrived in Lusaka a few days after Kamal, but he had already taken possession of the key to the first room on the ground floor of the school in which we were billeted for my exclusive use, and had acquired an old electric kettle from one of the cleaning ladies for our morning tea. Throughout our stay in Zambia he made himself responsible for my well-being.) Unusual though it is for a Brahman to play the *tabla*, it had always been his ambition and the family had to put up with it. But apart from being a Brahman and a *tabla* player, he is also an acknowledged authority on Indian classical music and song.

I am not about to claim that the mango inspired *The Green Pennant Awards*; or that the three thousand men and women of Comex were nurtured on mangoes. Nor would I advance the proposition that the *mango festival* may have had something to do with the timing of the 54 leaders of fifteen hundred million arriving in Edinburgh to do battle at the 1997 CHOGM, each with a retinue of about thirty officials - a total of 1620, or two battalions! They had come to talk, and the number of words exchanged – whether in

concord, jest, anger, flattery or disapproval - would depend, not so much on the preparation and purpose of their respective forces, but on what remained of those old comradeships I have already referred to and the quality of the hospitality! They may also have been mildly interested in *The Green Pennant Awards*.

However, I was able to tell my Brahman friend that the whole affair had been a brilliant success, emphasising that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Lord Provost's Office had agreed to *The Green Pennant Awards* taking place on 24 October 1997 during the reception for those Commonwealth leaders. That would be the eve of battle - *not Panipat but CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting)*. His response was 'you mean *Commonwealth Heads of Government Mangoes!*' Mangoes would undoubtedly have filled the reception hall with an aroma fit for leaders. And the stimulating qualities of a mango festival might even have uplifted their spirits to the point of adventuring beyond the battle of words to something more fruitful; but, as Kamal had suggested, this was not the right season.

It had taken seventeen years, since the inauguration of *The Green Pennant Awards* by His Royal Highness in 1980 for these awards to find a modest corner in the pages of history. And the *inauguration* itself had come fifteen years after Comex had first been deployed in '*restoring old friendships eroded by time and neglect*'. Who knows but that had it taken place two centuries earlier, Paniput may never have happened; reason enough for a double '*wa-ha-wa!*' (the Indian equivalent of bravo) from Kamal in a spontaneous outburst of approval. Henceforth the mango festival would be synonymous with CHOGM, and I can see no reason why Commonwealth leaders should object to the soubriquet!

*Journey of a Lifetime* was published in time for the Edinburgh CHOGM and copies had been sent to most delegations. It was perhaps over-optimistic to presume that it would fire the imagination of our leaders, or that they would even read it, although most of them did talk about goodwill, understanding, co-operation, and even friendship. Hopefully, *Journey of a Lifetime* would remind them that most of the countries represented at the Edinburgh summit had in one way or another come in contact with Comex. I had explained how the idea was conceived in the Nilgiris - a small but significant junction between Empire and Commonwealth - and how it came to take root and grow in Devon, the adventurous county of Drake, where I had been posted to command a Junior Leaders Regiment. I mention the

fact because it was through the activities of those Junior Leaders (all six hundred of them) that the Duke of Edinburgh was persuaded to give his patronage to Comex.

All sorts of things happen in a Junior Leaders Regiment, and always aimed at finding an outlet for the spirit of adventure in *an overcrowded and highly regulated island*. Two are especially relevant to this story. The first is Ten Tors, a well-known annual event in the south of England offering a challenge against self and the elements on Dartmoor. (*So far over 200,000 young people have taken part*). The other was in producing a choir to sing at the Royal Albert Hall in London. The former required the Junior Leaders to play host to their peers from all walks of life, and guide them safely through the bogs of Dartmoor - two and a half thousand at a time. The latter was intended to put singing onto the adventurous training agenda.

But selecting, organising and rehearsing a choir appeared, at first glance, to be more difficult than braving the inhospitable conditions on Dartmoor. So the matter was naturally placed in the capable hands of the Regimental Sergeant Major who called for a hundred and fifty volunteers, assembled them in the gymnasium, and won their hearts and minds with a single word of encouragement: '*Sing!*'

This they dutifully did; but it took all of a year and the tireless efforts of a choirmaster from Exeter University, to prepare and rehearse the choir for the ordeal of the Royal Albert Hall. The success of Ten Tors was rewarded with royal patronage, and as it happened to be the forerunner of Comex, His Royal Highness was prepared to *go the extra mile* and give his patronage to that too! Inevitably, singing became an integral part of Comex - but without recourse to that single word of encouragement. (Eight years later, the largest expedition - 500 strong plus an Indian contingent - was to follow the example of those Junior Leaders into the same historic auditorium after 15,000 miles on the Asian Highway).

And in India, a Maratha friend, Colonel Vasant Deshpande - a descendent of the men who had led the Marathas at Paniput - took up the challenge of Ten Tors urging his fellow countrymen to emulate the example of their young comrades in Britain. Deshpande's call was published in the Indian Statesman, and he had in mind not tors but mountains - no doubt thinking of Simla in Himachal (the abode of snow). The singing was held over for

the arrival of the Queen's Silver Jubilee Comex 8 in his home state of Maharashtra, to be welcomed at Shivaji's University in Kolhapur.

Tucked away in his little house in New Street, Old Delhi, Kamal busied himself constructing a *raga* for the Commonwealth *Little Green Flags (Nannhey Harey Dhwaj)* as his contribution to *The Story of Comex in Song*. For my part it was time to *get on message* in order to coax the project along. This came about with Annie and Judith Parkinson singing '*happy birthday*' outside my study door armed with a computer and a printer: a *Patriot* and a *Brother*. So equipped, and with a crash course of instruction lasting forty-eight hours, I was ready to rekindle my enthusiasm for producing *The Story of Comex in Song*.

The first e-mail message to appear on the screen was '*how grows the mango tree?*' In other words, *how are The Green Pennant Awards coming along*. From Canada, Chris Brown-Syed's output accelerated rapidly and I had to redouble my efforts to keep pace with him. Our immediate objective was to embark on a spectacular gathering in celebration of the Queen's Golden Jubilee in the Blue Mountains (Nilgiris), just as we had done for the Silver Jubilee. In the event, London (the Greater London Council helped to launch the Silver Jubilee Comex 8) did a much better job. And it was absolutely marvellous to see one of the greatest turnouts of the Queen's subjects in the capital, with a huge Commonwealth presence. The cynics were drowned in a sea of loyalty.

There was laughter and song, dance and drama, and music galore. It had been a long time since the home country of the Head of the Commonwealth had seen anything like it. Many Comex men and women were among the crowd and watched what they were to describe as *The Queen's Golden Jubilee Comex*. What they had seen in London was nothing if not '*the brotherhood of man*'.

During our next visit to India, Kamal insisted that Annie and I accompany him to visit a lady by the name of Bimla Balla, then one of the leading figures in India's Broadcasting Corporation. She was particularly welcoming and ordered tea. I mentioned that we were not sure why we were there; but as we had known Kamal a long time it was good to meet someone familiar with the work he was doing: teaching children to play the *tabla*, and spreading interest in Indian classical music. Tea is the traditional Indian ice-breaker and we

were soon talking like old friends. Bimla Balla had known Kamal a long time, was obviously fond of him and supported the work he was doing.

He had told her of our interest in India and in recording our impressions in simple lyrical poems. I illustrated the point by mentioning the bullock-carts on the Grand Trunk Road (national highways) - particularly at night - thousands of them, continuing a tradition steeped in antiquity. Few visitors would not have met a bullock-cart and exchanged a cheery greeting with its driver. Had she read the story in *The Indian Statesman* condemning the presence of bullock-carts on India's equivalent of the Royal Mile (Rajpath), and the response from a High Court Judge in Punjab who had quoted *My Friend*, a Comex ballad dedicated to bullock-cart drivers? She had not. What would be the effect, I asked her, if those bullock-cart drivers were made aware that they had been immortalised in this way? *'There would be much rejoicing,'* she said; *'and the song would accompany them all the way to the remotest corners of the country.'* That was a bit of encouragement! We talked about the villages of India, the *quawals* (minstrels), and *tabla wallahs* of course, and there were many more examples, but little time to explore them all. However, the seed had been sown and the idea of *The Story of Comex in Song* was beginning to take root which, in effect, was the purpose Kamal had in mind when he arranged the meeting. To anyone unfamiliar with the traditional role of the *tabla* the following may be of interest:

### **TABLA WALLAH**

Yours is the humblest corner,  
Your place is to squat on the floor,  
And your smile is the mark of your fortune -  
It asks for a smile and no more.  
Your reward is waiting in heaven,  
And your place secure in the sun,  
Let your hands touch those haunting wild rhythms,  
And play 'til the day is done.

*Tabla Wallah play your drums;  
Play them fast, play them slow,*

*Play them high, play them low,  
Play them everywhere you go,  
Play, your drum; play, your drum;  
Play-your- drum, play-your- drum; play, your drum.*

Play when the people are weeping,  
Play when they dance and they sing,  
Play when the seasons are changing,  
Play when the temple bells ring  
At the time when your drumming is over,  
And the time for the final beat comes,  
Leave behind their lingering echoes,  
To rise from eternal drums.

The snow melting high on the mountains,  
The winds sweeping over the plains,  
The mist floating up through the valleys,  
The roar and the splash of the rains.  
Play on 'til the last ounce of courage;  
Play on for the laughs and the sighs  
Play on 'til the sound of your magic,  
Fades out to live in the skies.

***Tabla wallah, play your drums!***

As far as we knew no one had written about the *tabla wallah* quite in this way, and when the song was first sung in India by Brenda Stevens of Comex 5 and 6, in a rich soprano voice, it gave special pleasure and aroused interest in this type of role for the *tabla*: creating Indian rhythms compatible with western melodies, while retaining its own distinctive tradition. As the architect of that innovation, Kamal was thoroughly pleased with himself, and persuaded a friend of his, Vastapathi Sharma (a teacher and Sanskrit scholar) to translate the words of *tabla wallah* and the other Comex songs for the benefit of Indian audiences. Where this would lead us heaven only knew; but the venue chosen to explore

the matter was none other than the well known Imperial Hotel in New Delhi and there, over lunch, the foundations of an *historic venture* were laid.

Vastapathi's view was that: '*whatever others may think of these songs, when translated into Sanskrit they blossom, revealing our deepest feelings. There is only one addition I should like to suggest, with your permission: in the Queen's Silver Jubilee song Silver Train, you have shown the silver train crossing, snow-capped mountains, flooding waters and sun-parched deserts. I would like to suggest that the silver train is not only crossing them, but dancing over them!*' Well, only the Imperial could inspire such thinking!

Yet another friend of Kamal's, the distinguished sarod player Promod Shanker, thought that the group *Indian Ocean* (which has appeared more than once at the Edinburgh Festival) would be the perfect vehicle for these songs, and demonstrated his personal commitment by performing *Little Green Flags* (for the first time in public) as a *raga*, accompanied by Kamal Kant, when *The Green Pennant Awards* were presented at the Three Rivers Theatre in Delhi. It was so successful that the experiment was repeated during an entertainment at the Post Graduate Institute of Medicine in Chandigarh, and that really did set the place alight with a rapturous response from a thousand medical students - an audience not easily swayed in such matters. The Vice Chancellor was even moved to ask Promod Shanker for the name of the *raga* he had just played.

Following this event several rehearsals took place with Indian Ocean, and at one stage Annie and I were confronted with the proposition that *these songs will sell millions of copies all over the Commonwealth*. But that sort of euphoria had to be watered down to the more modest prospect of simply reaching out to our friends. Nevertheless, it did help to underscore the view that *The Story of Comex in Song* was not an impossible dream. And it is a dream that may yet come true; but would require time and patience. Meanwhile Promod Shanker and Indian Ocean went their separate ways, while Annie and I began to investigate the ways and means of making *The Story of Comex in Song* happen. Kamal Kant was always available at the other end of a telephone with practical suggestions. No gloomy thoughts from him: '*People like to sing,*' he insisted '*that is why God gave them voices,*' and that seemed a reasonable guarantee against another opportunity lost!