

## TAKE SOME NICE PICTURE

Time passes quickly, and once again we found ourselves planning a visit to India: this time to Ooty, in the Nilgiri Hills. Planning is always an excitement but plans to succeed call for patience, good sense, and goodwill - in that order. We looked forward to being transported South on the Tamil Nadu Express accommodated in an air-conditioned first class coupé - a long way from the early days of take it or leave it travel. But first we would be flying to Delhi and staging at Claridges. Our friends Pritam Singh Sandhu and his wife Cuckoo had invited us to stay with them but Pritam was not well - in fact he was in hospital - so we decided that the hotel would be less of a burden on the family. Anxiety over Pritam's health was all too evident, and Cuckoo spent most of her time at the hospital.

Before setting off for India, there was the small matter of a hundred and twelve paludrin pills at two a day, a booster of avloclor tablets at the end of each week; and typhoid, polio, meningitis and hepatitis jabs (cholera was off the menu). Then came the visas, bookings on a flight from Glasgow International Airport and assembling the appropriate kit. Put together this looks like a brave gesture of friendship, just how brave becomes clear once the journey gets under way.

It takes time to get used to the idea that the plane is securely anchored in the sky and unlikely to break loose and return to earth with a bump every time a bit of turbulence takes place. Changing planes at Frankfurt we found ourselves at the end of a long queue. Annie was surprisingly pleased about this - a shrewd understanding of modern air travel - because by the time we got to the check-in counter all the economy seats had been allocated and we were invited to be *guests* of the airline in business class. It would have been discourteous to decline!

A businessman sitting next to us managed seven *bloody marys* in quick succession while calling for a continuous supply of nuts to absorb the effects. When the nuts ran out he demanded to see the purser and complained that the stewardess had been rude. It was a remarkable example of *un-Indian* behaviour, but Lufthansa was engaged in a huge promotional exercise and the purser had obviously been briefed to avoid any unnecessary

altercations. So he authorised the release of his reserve stock. That was a tactical error: our businessman went on to demand dhal with his vegetarian lunch and when told that dhal was not on the menu became very angry. Looking around for support from his fellow passengers - all of whom avoided eye contact - he threatened to report the matter to the highest authority.

When the duty-free trolley appeared he was in action again. It was easily ambushed! Holding aloft a handful of digital watches and other souvenirs he called for suggestions on which to buy for his family back home. The response was muted apart from a fellow traveller muttering *sab achha hain* (all are good). It transpired later that not only had the gentleman been upgraded to business class, but that queuing late is a well known tactic among experienced travellers.

The approach to Delhi was rough but the ground below looked solid and the lights reassuring. There were no hidden hills to negotiate and we landed safely at 2 a.m. on Dassehera Day - the triumph of good over evil. A private, unauthorised taxi driver took charge of our baggage and was heading rapidly for the far corner of the exit when an official hand landed on his shoulder. We were at once Rs 100 better off. Smiles all round and no recriminations: you win some, you lose some, and the law is amenable to the ancient practice of a little something on the side.

The official taxis were not over enthusiastic about touting for customers with vouchers because it meant that a percentage of the fare would go to the establishment, while the driver did all the work. However, a helpful policeman managed to persuade a reluctant driver to take us on board. But he went down fighting feigning to the last that he had difficulty getting the car started. A few unkind words accompanied by a push put paid to that trick; the engine spluttered into life and we were on our way. In addition to the battery being flat the brakes did not work, a matter he was careful not to mention until out of earshot of the authorities, which raised the question of how to stop once on the move. But an optimistic view had to be taken; a combination of the hour and the lack of traffic mitigated against any serious risk and we allowed ourselves to be whisked off to Claridges.

The driver had one more card to play; he was not sure of the way. Passing trishaws, the occasional cyclist, and even an army checkpoint were consulted. '*Soldiers*,' he said

smiling back at us proudly. We had long forgotten the twists and turns on the Delhi road map and were at his mercy. He remained cheerful, and after a few additional detours, a sort of lap of honour, deposited us safely outside the main entrance of Claridges a few minutes short of 4 a.m. I handed over the voucher and he put his case succinctly: *'No little tip sir?'* The impression we took to bed was of trees coated with fine grey dust in the early light and the irrepressible good humour of India.

The morning waited patiently for us to rise and venture out to face Janpath on a bright sunny day. We chose to walk and soon discovered that while the rules of the road were much the same as when we last visited, the traffic had multiplied by a digit or two. Signalling the start of a busy day in the Indian capital a mighty cavalcade of vehicles with its own unique cacophony of sound welcomed us into its enduring embrace. Like *dodgems* at a fair ground they raced each other with a cheerful disregard for authority or disaster.

It was like a game with room for all: at one end a bullock-cart at the other a Rolls Royce, a thousand vehicles celebrating a new day. Drivers shouted the latest gossip at each other, and if a word of greeting failed to reach an inattentive ear there was always the horn. Rights of way had no rights here. Where there was a gap you went for it and the bravest got there first. Yet how is it there are so few accidents? Perhaps because this is India, and however crowded the roads may be there is still an instinctive sense of give and take; everyone seems to be happy just being alive and moving.

The late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi once explained that if every cyclist moved along the right side of the road, or the left, or the centre for that matter, claiming a democratic right to do so, who is to gainsay them? Challenge a bullock-cart driver making his way happily along one of the more prestigious roads in the capital and warn him not to appear there again, and he would probably remind you that his ancestors had been there a thousand years before the motor car came! The same could be said of the *tonga* (a two-wheeled carriage for three or four passengers - in special circumstances extended to as many as eight - with room for bundles of personal possessions) if not in the thousand-year class, then certainly in the hundred! The *tonga* cries out for sympathetic treatment today because dark clouds are gathering, and the airways are already full of gossip about the demise of these jolly single horse powered means of transport on the streets of India and Pakistan. According to the pundits - and they should know - it has been decided that *tongas* are out of

date, environmentally unfriendly, and generally slow up the flow of modern traffic. One could of course argue that any journey, point to point in the capital, or anywhere else, is just as quick in the agreeable comfort of a *tonga* as in any other form of transport; it is also so much more fun, and less expensive. I have often enjoyed a smart trot and, when circumstances demanded, a gallop past less adventurous vehicles. Moreover, one has heard of trishaw accidents, bus accidents and car accidents; but seldom a *tonga* accidents. And how can the horse, one of God's creatures, be environmentally unfriendly?

Conscious perhaps of the threat hanging over their heads, we noted what looked like a smartening up process demonstrated by a distinctly handsome specimen trotting along the side of the road, conveniently placed to pick up passengers - without disturbing the peace or the rest of the traffic. The woodwork and brass fittings of the *tonga* were beautifully polished, the hood clean and well fitted, the driver smartly dressed in a garment of many colours, and the horse, in addition to its well maintained harness, sporting a plume of feathers between its pointed ears. It was clearly sending a message of defiance to fellow travellers on Janpath, and to the rest of the world. I could not help wondering what sort of conversation might be taking place between the *Tonga Wallah* and his horse, and for old times sake offer a few hypothetical exchanges which may not be entirely off the mark!

*Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.*

Tonga Wallah, why do you whip me so hard,

Why the fuss - I'm curious to know?

Have I disturbed you in some previous life,

That you should be treating me so?

Its alright for you, just sitting back there

Imperiously holding the reins.

Or playing with the whip, and enjoying yourself,

While I suffer the aches and pains.

*Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.*

*Now horse, stop this muttering, have you no shame?*

*Think of your ancestors instead.*

*Where's your patriotism, and sense of pride  
In the plume you wear on your head.  
You talk too much, that's the trouble with you;  
I warn you, you'd better beware:  
I'll sprinkle some chilli on top of your bit,  
And maybe a little elsewhere!*

*Clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop.*

Tonga Wallah, surely you wouldn't do that;  
No leader to such tricks succumbs.  
And look over there at those two pretty girls:  
Now they are what people call chums.  
Perhaps they overheard you speaking to me,  
I'll give them a wink as we pass:  
They must be quite rich, with good places to live,  
But they'll not look at us - alas!

*Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.*

*Now horse, trot on, as if you don't have a care;  
No winking, nor swishing the tail.  
If that policeman there notes down our number,  
Our next destination is jail.*

*Then, 'rattling bones,' how do we get out of that?  
Who'll come forward to pay the fines?  
Fresh air turned off; camaraderie gone;  
I warn you to think on those lines,*

*Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.*

Tonga Wallah, I'm tired and I'm hungry,  
My heart says its going to burst.  
Could we not stop at the next tonga stand  
For some hay, and to slake my thirst?

Of course (you are quite right), God made me to trot,  
But not with two shafts at my sides;  
A saddle on my back, a chassis behind,  
And a madman sitting inside

*Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.*

*Chup! Or I'll whip you till your bones start to shine,  
And pluck-out the hairs from your tail.  
You old bones of a horse with no fixed abode,  
Full of gossip to no avail.  
Trotting smartly is your natural state,  
So why do you always complain?  
And if your heart wants to burst, then let it burst,  
It will not trouble you again!*

*Clip-clip, clop-clop, clip-clip, clop-clop.*

Tonga Wallah, I'm thinking; now you must listen  
To an idea from the horse's mouth:  
Please marry someone with plenty of money  
And live in a very big house.  
The lady will enjoy the tonga too much,  
Because it is now in fashion:  
Fresh paint, new cushions, and an upmarket hood,  
And for myself, better rations.

*Clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop.*

*The horse's mouth talks about nothing but food,  
You bone-headed son of an owl.  
How do you suppose that we're going to live?  
And, you can get rid of that scowl.*

*Suppose I get married, then what will you do,  
If tongas are definitely barred?  
A car with a chauffeur will drive me around,  
And you'll go to the butcher's yard!*

*Clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop.*

Tonga Wallah I didn't hear that, because  
There's a friendly voice in my ears,  
Reminding me that polluting motor cars  
Are no longer what fashion fears.  
As to the owl, it has two legs (I have four)  
And the face of a scheming shrew,  
While my ears stand erect and my carriage proud,  
And my coat is as good as new.

*Clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop.*

*For once, just once, you are right about fashion;  
Which means there'll be no butchers' yard.  
But, if you take advantage of my kindness,  
I still hold the only trump card!  
Some people may call this a horse drawn carriage,  
Even a buggy or a gig;  
So long as they pay the fare, plus a tip,  
I don't care a mango or fig.*

*Clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop.*

Tonga Wallah, I don't like these fancy names:  
Is 'Buggy' Wallah something new?  
As for 'Gig' Wallah, that's not a nice name  
To describe great men - such as you!  
An 'old bones of a horse,' I still have my pride

Even if I sometimes complain:  
So now I will make a new resolution:  
Not ever to grumble again.

*Clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop.*

*Whatever customers say, hold your head high,  
Demonstrate 'the dance of the plume.'  
When people see this, they must surely exclaim:  
'Make way! Give the tonga more room.'  
Now, together with your new resolution,  
A gentle whip, and a brisk trot:  
Everyone will admire your appearance,  
And the style good tongas have got.*

*Clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop.*

Tonga Wallah you are my very good friend,  
You have spoken words of reason.  
I am saluting you, by shaking my plume,  
As this is the 'mango' season.  
So don't be too hard on the king of all fruit,  
And please don't be angry with me:  
Romance beckons and the *quawals* will cry:  
*'Tonga Wallah Makes History.*

*Clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop-clip-clop.*

*Listen horse! It is time to tell you the truth;  
Qawals are singing it thus:  
The world's careering on to nowhere, it seems,  
With no room for the likes of us.  
These trishaws and scooters have usurped the space  
We filled with dignity, and style:  
Welcoming passengers, whoever they were,  
With salaams, and a friendly smile.*

*Clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop, clip(ity)-clop.*

Tonga Wallah, next stop the minister's house,  
To demand an explanation,  
And invite him to ride in our tonga, free,  
To his favourite destination.

Then you may start whipping as hard as you please,  
And I'll gallop, you wait and see,  
Till the minister raises his hand and cries:  
Oh! Ho! That's good enough for me.

*Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.*

*Ah! Ho! A hundred tongas will escort my bride,  
Ourselves in the VIP slot;  
Leaving pride of place in your tonga for God:  
To see just how well you still trot.  
Your harness and plume will be second to none,  
With livery of designer's choice:  
And you'll do your work with a new sense of pride,  
To the call of my lady's voice.'*

Our first objective of the morning was the Cottage Emporium at the end of Janpath to sample *panir pakoras* with cold coffee and ice cream that had been a speciality before a new generation of visitors unfamiliar with the customs of yesterday demanded and got their hamburgers and chips with cold coke. That the hamburgers were better known in the kitchen as cutlets was perhaps a small concession to the older tradition. However, with so much else to explore and friends to visit that little disappointment was soon forgotten.

There was also the pressing business of confirming that our booking made six months earlier for an air-conditioned coupé on the Tamil Nadu Express was secure. This was to be a special treat for Annie's birthday. We would be on that train for two nights and a day and had brought the appropriate supplies with us including a birthday cake. The travel agent greeted us warmly, ordered tea and assured us that everything had been taken care of. *'Don't worry'*, he said.

But such assurances are subject to unforeseen circumstances. Our reservations were dutifully offered to a minister and we were allocated two berths in a four-berth compartment sharing with two men. I protested to the TTC (Travelling Ticket Collector) explaining that it would be inconvenient for us to travel all the way to Madras with two strange men, which was one of the reasons for making our booking well in advance.

*'You see sir, minister has fever and must be accommodated in coupé. He is VIP sir'!* It reminded me of a little jingle I had written years ago about just this kind of situation: *'When is a VIP a VOP or a VOP a VIP,/ How tell the one from the other?/ By the rules of the game it comes to the same,/ One man is as good as another.'* However, there was no place for little jingles in this situation. We decided to cut our losses: *'In that case my wife and I will not be travelling with you'!* The TTC was clearly not happy about this and tried to reassure us.

*'No, no sir, you please have a seat. Sometime tomorrow minister will be leaving, and you may occupy coupe.* He was a good man and clearly embarrassed, but it was more than his job was worth to suggest that the minister might share with two of his fellow countrymen. We had been looking forward to crossing India by train, another reason for booking early and taking the precaution of confirming the booking - not once but twice - the first leg to Madras and then on to Ooty, and the second all the way back to Delhi. But we had not calculated on a minister developing a sudden fever. True or false, the cure lay in commandeering our coupé!

No angry words were exchanged, the porters were delighted to have their services extended, and we took a taxi back to Claridges for another night. The ministerial victory over lesser mortals was the main talking point among our friends the next day. *Everything is OK in India* said one, *until a minister discovers that he has a fever - or some other ailment!* The travel agent was furious. He immediately dictated a letter to the Railways Minister protesting at the treatment meted out to *distinguished guests*, who would now have to meet the additional cost of a flight to Madras, to catch up with their itinerary, and two extra nights in a hotel. Any reference to a refund was discreetly avoided.

Instead of spending Annie's birthday on the Tamil Nadu Express we were entertained to lunch at the Press Club by Promod Shanker, and Kamal. Our contribution was a Molly O'Rourke whisky cake. Promod called for the manager and urged him to find a bottle of wine. Then, to our astonishment, the entire company stood up and belted out *happy birthday to you*. This sort of spontaneity is not uncommon in India, and warranted more wine. The distribution of the cake was supervised by Kamal to the satisfaction of all.

We set off for the airport in a taxi driven by Jasbir Singh, his first and last call for the day before going home to the Punjab to celebrate Dewali. This bit of information prompted me to include a small contribution in his fare, which met with approval. When I asked if he would meet the train on the morning of our return from the South, he assured me that he would, but advised that we look out for him because it would be very crowded and we could easily miss each other.

We took off at 8 p.m. into a clear night sky. But the Southwest monsoon is not programmed to suit the convenience of Indian Airlines. The pilots know this of course but not the passengers; so when the buffeting began I had to admit that it might have been more comfortable in a four-berth compartment. The monsoon carried us all the way to Madras without much assistance from the engine. An Indian friend once gave me the benefit of his thoughts on air travel: *'On the sea, there you are; on the ground, here you are; in the air, where you are?'*

The relief of landing safely made the world look so much better. The airport was spotless, the reception efficient and friendly, and the sight of driver Krishnamurthy in a smart white uniform (courtesy of the Connemara) holding aloft a board with my name made me feel positively heroic! But it was hot outside. No doubt anticipating any adverse comments about the weather Krishnamurthy volunteered that the taxi was air-conditioned. Thus reassured, we enjoyed the drive along Mount Road, equilibrium fully restored, and with a sense of well being that only those who have come through a similar experience would appreciate.

It was time for a little prayer of gratitude for such a happy ending to Annie's birthday. So, installed in the comfortable surroundings of the Connemara, it was time to produce the bottle of Martell carefully packed away for just such an occasion to reinforce that little

prayer with *'something more fluid than the spirit that flows from the mind.'* The next evening Krishnamurthy transported us to Madras Central Station to board the overnight Mail for Mettupalaiyam.

I mentioned to the TTC that we would like to sit in the front seats of the meter gauge train from Mettupalaiyam to Ooty in order to take a few photographs.. Notwithstanding the obstruction of the guard perched in front of the leading carriage with his red and green flags, ready to leap into action in the event of an emergency, it would provide the ideal viewpoint for photography. We might even be treated to a ringside view in the event of an emergency should the guard be called upon to pre-empt the little train taking it upon itself to reverse direction and head back from whence it came by turning the brake handle fast enough to outmanoeuvre its homing instinct!

The TTC was a man of sympathetic disposition, with a sense of humour, and assured us that no such thing was likely to happen. With regard to the reservations however, these facilities were not available on the Mountain Railway, but he would see what could be done. At 6 a.m. there was a knock on the door. It was a matter of urgency that I should accompany him to the Station Master's Office. We had arrived at Coimbatore, the major junction before Mettupalaiyam, and the plan was that the Station Master would telephone ahead and arrange for two seats to be occupied by railway staff pending our arrival. The rest would be up to us.

Expressions of appreciation were brushed aside. *'No, no, you please give something at other end.'* We were welcomed at the other end and escorted across the platform to the waiting train, steam up and ready to go. The train was crowded, but sitting in two of the seats in the front compartment were members of railway staff. These seats were for us, but there were six occupants in all and only four seats. The change over had to be quick, a scramble in fact; even so, local knowledge and custom prevailed: before we could climb aboard, the other passengers had slipped smoothly along to make themselves more comfortable. All is fair in love and war; they were in possession and armed with tickets. It was up to us, the losers, to withdraw and make other arrangements.

At this point the guard played a hand. Equally well armed, with signalling flags, he addressed his fellow countrymen in a gently persuasive manner: *'these people are our*

*guests'* and that did the trick. Bottoms were reversed and we were invited to *'please to take seat'*. The 'little something at the other end' was duly taken care of and the guard posed for a picture with Annie. Everyone was happy. We were now among friends one of whom, more forthcoming than the rest, explained that any man of *position* travelling by train from Mettupalaiyam to Ooty had to be seen sitting in the front compartment *'otherwise, where would be his position?'*

The station gong hanging at the end of the platform was a museum piece: a well preserved section of track about two feet long, that had been announcing the departure of The Blue Mountain Express and lesser trains for the best part of a century. A short iron bar bent at one end so it could fit comfortably into a rivet hole at the bottom of the gong provided the means by which it could be activated, radiating a clear, pleasing sound that could be heard all over town. The citizens of Mettupalaiyam were thus reminded that the BME was about to depart.

The excitement on board is palpable and reflected in every face. A burst of steam, a long blast and two short ones on the whistle, the guard's left hand rises to the semaphore position F (forward!) and we are off. Straight ahead. Following the line of the dusty road leading out of town, the little train races on accelerating to twenty miles per hour. The hills ahead are visible in outline through the morning haze. The spectacle of small brick-built dwellings and thatched huts soon begins to fade, merging into the landscape of coconut and palm groves. People can be seen walking in these places with bundles of bedding, firewood, or shopping baskets on their heads. Occasionally, a toddy tapper comes into view positioning his pots immediately under the upper foliage in readiness for the next morning's sap.

Although Mettupalaiyam is hot the journey into the hills has a psychological impact. and it begins to feel cool long before the temperature drops. Many of the stations are out of commission but may yet be saved if the friends of Ooty world wide could be alerted to what is happening. Adderley, Runneymede and Kartari are no more, but Kalar and Hillgrove, and the rest of The Blue Mountain Railway are still operational. The carriages and engine of the little train have seen better days but perform with inspiring fortitude. What would those brave men and women who built this dream railway a century ago (1898) think of the state of affairs today? And what sort of reception would be waiting for

the hundreds of thousands whose spirits had been lifted in the course of four unforgettable hours from Mettupalaiyam to Ooty? To put it another way:

How many have *ridden* the Nilgiri Express,  
And always to the same destination:  
*'But how you can sit in Blue Mountain Express  
Without having correct reservation?'*  
From Mettupalaiyam, in the heat of the plains,  
To Ooty, cradled in valleys and rills,  
Seven thousand feet up in the mountains,  
Through a tea growing succession of hills.  
Little stations slip by, hardly noticed,  
On the way to the main junction, Coonoor:  
Kalar, Adderley, Hillgrove and Runneymede,  
And in the run up to Ooty - five more.  
Wellington, Aravanghat, Ketu, Lovedale  
And Fernhill, out of service, retired;  
Then a long stretch along the lake to Ooty  
A station universally admired.  
Where, one must wonder, did all those names come from?  
Who the genius that inspired their choice?  
A blessing to all who remember the train;  
Those happy times, when the whole world rejoiced.  
With children on board, hear the whistles and cheers  
As the train puffs its way through the tunnels,  
And hands held out against the flow of the wind  
Holding home made propellers and funnels.  
The memory fades, unheralded, unsung,  
So the poet's lone voice must endeavour,  
To give the Nilgiri Express this modest space,  
To live in forever, and ever.

*(Nilgiri - now Nilagiri - means Blue Mountain. Ooty - short for Ootacamund - now Udhagamandalam.)*

We were welcomed to the Ooty Club (built in 1830) by a *Gurkha* guard, far from his native Nepal. It was a great pleasure to be able to exchange a few words with him in his own language - and to continue the practice whenever we met. We settled into Room 6. Anthony George, standing no more than five feet with a balding head and ready smile, was in charge of our welfare. *'I am senior room boy sir'*, he informed us. The resident manager, Nandan Kilpadi, treated us as though we belonged to the place. Log-fires at night, all our needs taken care of, and the wonderful weather were the principal benefits of spending ten days in Ooty. But there were others. Although the Commonwealth rarely features in clubroom gossip these days, the words of Her Majesty the Queen, in whom Commonwealth friendship is vested, are worth remembering. *'It is an entirely new concept,' she said 'built on the highest quality of the spirit of man: friendship loyalty, and the desire for freedom and peace.'*

That friendship is buried deep in the heart of the Blue Mountains and with good reason. The graveyard surrounding St Stephen's Church - to single out just one example - is testimony to the men and women who had made their homes in Ooty, and did not hesitate to answer the call to arms when the Second World War was forced upon them. There are graveyards like this in every city, town and village throughout the Commonwealth, honoured by the offspring of men and women of every race, class and creed.

They had shared their triumphs and tragedies, their tears and their laughter, and they had mourned their losses together. Nor had they any need of a Commission for Racial Equality to ensure that they cared about each other, understood each other, and respected each other. How could they when they were already brothers and sisters? It was their friendship of which the Queen spoke. It is their friendship that is the reason for the Commonwealth - something immeasurably bigger than politics. And they were wise enough to take the best of Empire and fashion a Commonwealth for future generations to cherish. The question is whether we are big enough to continue the great work they started. And that, in a nutshell, is what the six Comexes to make it to Ooty were trying to do.

The husband of the typist working in the club ran a taxi. By coincidence his name was Krishnamoorthy (Moorthy for short) but no relation to the Madras Krishnamurthy. He was a Hindu and his wife, Mary, a Roman Catholic. Moorthy knew his Ooty and drove us

somewhere every day. Mary had been working in the club for nineteen years. Moorthy's family were not over well endowed with the good things of life; indeed there was not enough sustenance for an energetic boy with a healthy appetite; but he was resourceful and became a regular visitor to the convent of St Francis de Sales. The site is called Nirmala (immaculate) near Finger Post, a wellknown landmark pointing the way out of Ooty, into the town centre and to the Railway Station. It was in the convent kitchen that Moorthy found solace and a regular meal in exchange for odd jobs undertaken with enthusiasm. He was popular and earned for himself the nickname *Kitchen Moorthy*.

The convent takes in children from the poor of Kandal village situated near the downs on the outskirts of town. Their mothers, working as labourers or tea pickers in the surrounding area, deposit their offspring at the convent in the early morning where they are looked after - rested, bathed and fed - until their mothers return to collect them in the evening. The facilities are free. But those who can pay a little do so. There are older children as well, all beautifully dressed and enjoying an education that might otherwise be denied them.

When Annie and I first visited Nirmala - transported in Moorthy's taxi - there were over 600 children. The complex embraced at one end a crèche for babies and at the other a small hospital and dispensary. Funding is provided by the nuns themselves who go out to work in the local government schools and hand over their salaries to the Mother Superior: at the time of our first visit Sister Agnes Laudu, and later the current incumbent Sister Josephine Thérèse. The meeting with Agnes Laudu began a valued and lasting friendship.

My brother had given me fifty pounds with instructions that it should be passed on to anyone we came across who might be able to make good use of it, and Agnes Laudu was the beneficiary. From her reaction one would have thought we had given her a thousand, which only goes to emphasise that a little at the right time is worth a great deal more than the amount involved. This incident encouraged us to repeat the gesture on an annual basis at Christmas. It was always received with the same undiminished sense of gratitude. During our most recent visit a baby had just been born in Nirmala's little hospital. Annie was invited to welcome the new arrival and to congratulate its proud mother. She was also mindful to honour an old Scottish tradition by placing a little money in the crib.

The convent was Moorthy's second home. He acquired a little education and in due course became driver and general factotum to a Colonel R. A. Wills OBE. The colonel and his wife had come to Ooty on an extended vacation so he could indulge a lifelong love of fishing and shooting. Moorthy learnt a lot from his colonel and was subjected to military discipline, including the daily inspection of his living quarters. *'Colonel sahib is looking at everything sir: cooking pots, clothes(es), my shoe to see if it clean; but he was very nice man sir.'* When the colonel left Ooty in 1980, he gave Moorthy his old Ambassador motor-car, and enough money to buy a small house - now Flora Cottage - below St Stephen's Church. But he did more. The colonel thought Mary (already working as a typist in the club office) would make an excellent wife for Moorthy and instructed him accordingly. *'So I married her sir, as my Colonel Sahib instructed, and we are very happy.'*

Mary was a child of Nirmala. She acquired an adoptive mother who remains devoted to her, but grew up with the nuns. She learnt to type and enough English to get a job in the club. When I asked Moorthy how he managed with his wife being a Roman Catholic and he a Hindu he replied: *'We praying to the God from two sides sir.'* They had a son christened Willis Mahendra who attended Brecks School (set up in the early days of Ooty by a philanthropist of that name) the fees for which were 600 rupees a month paid for out of Mary's monthly salary of 900 rupees. Willis Mahendra did well at school, won a place at the university in Coimbatore, and topped the university in his final year.

Staying at the club opened up for us a window on the past, a peep into happy boyhood days when my brother and I spent a great deal of time pursuing butterflies over these very hills. One of them, Elk Hill, was a particular favourite. We would often climb to the top to enjoy a panoramic view of the town, from which vantage point a few humble sandwiches and a flask of tea took on a quality of their own. Annie and I simply had to visit the scene of those youthful expeditions. But first we had to pay our respects to the famous shrine known today as the Kandal Cross erected in the poorest part of town by a French missionary priest, Fr Crayssac.

Moorthy drove us there in mid afternoon. There was not a soul about and as Annie explored the surroundings, I entered the little chapel next to the cross to photograph a framed portrait of Fr Crayssac. An irresistible impulse brought me to my knees and for some quite inexplicable reason I resolved to give a hundred rupees - in local terms quite a

lot of money - to the first beggar - man, woman or child - we came across, whatever the circumstances. As I came out of the chapel, the first words Annie spoke were *'look at that poor woman over there'*, and right enough, a little old lady in a shabby grey sari stood motionless beside the cross. She was not begging; just standing there in silence. When I went over and placed a hundred rupees in her hand, she bowed her head ever so slightly and faded away before we were aware that she had gone. How? Where? Nonplussed I despatched Moorthy to try and find her and joined in the hunt, but there was no sign of her. Normally very talkative, Moorthy was silenced. For him as for us, it was a disturbing experience, and as we drove along the only exit from the Kandal Cross there was still no sign of her, or anyone else.

I have read somewhere that Ooty is the last bastion standing out against the relentless onslaught of time, neglect and overcrowding - like an echo from the past - and that Ooty itself is a graveyard. But that is an extremely muddled view. There is great hope for Ooty, and the club offers a more enduring perspective. Although we were the only diners in a room built to accommodate a hundred or more, we enjoyed the company of some great men and women, and their horses, framed around the panelled walls. This gallery, stretching back a century and a half and since joined by many distinguished Indian members, helps to keep the footsteps of history moving. And therein lies a story. As is so often the case, the old has not been torn down to make way for the new, far from it, the new revitalises the old in a continuing saga of progress and friendship that many of us still call the Commonwealth.

A large portrait of Lord Pentland caught my eye. He was President of the Ooty Hunt from 1914 to 1918 - a most agreeable way of passing the time during the First World War. The various albums in the library told us very little. There were many scenes of horses and riders and dogs, the Ooty hunt, and some amateur dramatics, but very few footnotes. There were a few familiar faces: Mrs Leech, who looked after the kennels; and her sons George, Kenneth and Godfrey, standing over six foot who could outdistance all comers at point-to-point meetings, led the hunt during the Ooty season and, when called, went off to die or survive in the Second World War.

Moorthy arrived early to drive us to Elk Hill. He had clearly been thinking about our experience of the day before and came up with the view that: *'I think so sir that little lady*

*coming to cross because you and madam also there.'* However that may be, I suggested to Moorthy that whenever he and Mary visited the Kandal Cross in future, they should light a few candles for their intentions and ours, and charge it to me. They have done so ever since.

In a happy frame of mind we set off. The most noticeable change was the lack of eucalyptus trees on the lower slopes. These had been removed to make way for houses creeping slowly but inexorably towards the summit. Half way up, at the junction where the lower hill gives way to the higher - once known as *Little Elk Hill* and *Big Elk Hill* - there is now an enormous temple, gaily painted and with an authoritative presence. Moorthy parked the car discreetly and we climbed to the top where to my surprise we found a number of labourers' huts. Half a dozen children ran out to greet us crying '*money-money-money*'. I should have liked to have been able to tell them that I was no stranger to the hill and had often visited it when I was no bigger than they were. But it would have been too difficult, they would not have understood; besides, their interests were focused on the possibility of a little pocket money. Tourists had already taken care of that - even in this remote corner of God's universe - and taught them the universal cry: *money!* I managed to line them up in an orderly fashion, taught them to say good morning, and then gave them each five rupees. They were off in a flash, either to report their good fortune, or to the top of a path leading down to a little tuck shop at the bottom.

The view of Ooty was unspoilt; I felt we were standing on hallowed ground. From the lake, St Thomas's Church and railway station at one end, to the botanical gardens, Assembly Rooms and the Governor's House at the other, with the market and racecourse laid out between, this was the whole of Ooty as Macaulay would have seen it in 1838 as recorded in his *Life and Letters (1876)*. Photographed in sections by Mr Thomas of Sunbeam Studios (below St Steven's Church), and put together with meticulous care, it now occupies a place of honour in our dining room.

Saying goodbye to Elk Hill, we turned to walk down the hill and hadn't gone far when we saw a girl - about twelve years old perhaps - coming towards us carrying a brass water-pot on her hip. She was poorly but neatly dressed. There was no smile. Her face was ageless and expressionless; yet she approached us and asked me, in English, to '*take some nice picture.*' Picture taken she turned and walked away without a word. Her home was

probably one of the labourers' huts we had just left behind. Moorthy was deeply moved by this and said to me later: *'You must tell some nice story sir.'*

The photograph was a success and I had a six by ten copy made and sent it to Moorthy. He was to go with Mary, find the girl, and give her the photograph with a little money I enclosed (in postal orders), adding a bit extra to cover his expenses. He was also to tell her that the strangers she met on her hill were not strangers after all; nor had they forgotten her. Six weeks later Moorthy's report arrived. *'Mary and I founded that girl as you order for me sir; she is crying but very happy sir. We are also very happy, sir. It is so nice picture. You and madam please come again soon sir. Ooty missing you and madam sir. Mary and I will do everything for you sir and we also go to the Kandal Cross to light the candles.'* I cannot express my feelings for the beauty and simplicity of these sentiments, other than to say that they are absolutely sincere. And that is why I have quoted them as written.

Ooty had not faded in my memory, and I will always associate those idyllic days with a remarkable man by the name of Anthony Nayagam. I have written about him in *Journey of a Lifetime* and mention him here because, in some ways, Moorthy reminds me of him. His enthusiasm for the little town in which he was born and brought up was infectious. We heard Moorthy criticised for talking too much. I didn't see it like that at all: he knew and loved his Ooty, and never tired of talking about it. I shared his enthusiasm and dare to express my thoughts in narrative verse which I am sure Moorthy and Mary will appreciate:

### **OOTACAMUND - OOTY - UDHAGAMANDALAM**

My brother and I had few cares,  
our world the passage of seasons.  
They would last forever, so we thought,  
for youth's idyllic reasons.  
We climbed those blue hills together,  
and climbed them again in our dreams;  
Chased butterflies, around Arum lilies,  
and fished in sparkling streams.  
Ooty as it is, or as it was,  
depends on one's perception.

And conundrums abound  
in folklore, or poetic conception.  
Eucalyptus trees flourished on Elk Hill;  
many now exported:  
For bridges, houses, furnaces  
and fireplaces assorted.  
What of the aboriginal Todas,  
their munds and dwellings gone?  
Or the toddy sipping Badagars  
who filled the valleys with song?  
Some prosper some don't;  
but all are cheerful, as they have ever been;  
Bringing their wares to market, on Tuesdays,  
to sell, or to be seen.  
An old tradition for many,  
a glancing nostalgia for some;  
The subject of dreams (or curiosity)  
in the years to come.  
Streets crowded, with people looking  
for something to gossip about.  
The siren obliges, perched on Church Hill,  
wailing the noonday out.  
Yet its purpose was heroic:  
warning of air raids (long ago);  
But none came, claims the Savoy,  
and certainly the Savoy should know.  
More prestigious still, the Ooty Club  
goes back to Macaulay's day;  
A matter on which storytellers  
have very little to say.  
Wren Bennets, Spencers, Bailey Brothers  
and P Orr and Sons, have gone;  
The State Bank, Higgambothams  
and the library - still serving on.

Charing Cross, the Post and Telegraph Office,  
and Law Courts remain;  
While aloof, facing St Stephen's,  
the Collector's Headquarters reign.  
So much of it bears the scars of time,  
far, far too many to heal;  
But still the rains come, flowers bloom,  
and the magic of frost is real.  
Shawls and mufflers appear, movement quickens  
with a new spring to life.  
The populace grows, whence trees have gone,  
and innovation is rife.  
Once red and green, the Railway Station  
is now bright yellow and blue.  
The Blue Mountain Express arrives on time  
with the siren, on cue.  
Horns blaring loudly, lorries and buses  
thunder and roar through town:  
On roads built for more genteel traffic  
or to promenade upon.  
The great and the good, herald the season,  
their presence is essential:  
To fill hotels, back horses,  
and boost the incumbent potential.  
Dodabetta, remote and unspoilt,  
Is still the queen of the hills.  
Ooty, having lost its full name,  
a new chapter in history fills.  
And Ootacamund, once known  
as a bamboo abode on a mound;  
Is now Udhagamandalam,  
Or the valley where mists abound.  
Boats ply their trade on the man-made lake,  
for seasonal enjoyment:

Driving fish, from their old habitat,  
into early retirement.  
Christmas bells ring from St Mary's,  
a Tamil choir sings the praises.  
The Sacred Heart Church (now Cathedral),  
the threshold of hope raises.  
Anthony Nayagam, most faithful friend  
as boyhood years avow;  
Lies buried in the soil he loved,  
secure in his resting place now.  
He made music, he painted,  
he used all the talents God gave him:  
If not rewarded on earth,  
then surely remembered in Heaven.

The journey back to Delhi - two nights and a day - was perfect. There are signs of progress everywhere, revealing a broader sharing in the prosperity of the country. Thatched houses supported on bamboo poles have largely gone, giving way to bricks and mortar painted white, with tiled roofs. There is a noticeable confidence and buoyancy on the platforms; and many more smiling faces. Station cries fill the air: '*chae-garam*' or '*chae-coffee*' followed by trays of exotic temptation - better avoided if ignorant of what is on offer. It all added up to a happy reminder of the excitement we were denied from the air. There were no VIPs with fever to upset the even tenor of our way and we enjoyed the exclusive use of a coupé. The welcome to New Delhi station, and the shoulder-to-shoulder brotherhood which is so much a part of it, is a reminder that India has the second largest population in the world. Faithful to his promise the turbaned pride of Jasbir appeared above the heads of the crowd as he pushed his way forward to greet us with a cheerful *Sat Siri Akal*, took charge of the luggage and whisked us off to Claridges. '*Good trip sir?*' We assured him that it was and sent him on his way with a more practical expression of our pleasure at seeing him again.

During our absence Pritam had had his bypass operation, and while the operation itself had been a success a kidney infection was causing serious concern. Meanwhile Cuckoo,

who had dedicated all her time and effort to looking after Pritam, had contracted a virus which meant she could no longer stay in the hospital for fear of passing on the infection. Annie and I called at the *White House*, the family home, and found her as steady and resourceful as ever, but were not allowed to visit Pritam. We met most of the family including Cuckoo's mother whom we always referred to as the *Rani Sahib*, a gracious and charming lady, hugely popular and much loved by everyone who knows her. I had once admired an occasional table in Cuckoo's house - within the same complex, behind the *White House* - made by a Sikh carpenter. The *Rani Sahib* came to hear of this and had an identical set of four made by the same carpenter which now adorns our drawing room: one of many reminders of her love and kindness. I mention this simply to mark the friendship that has grown between our two families over 35 years.

On our return to Edinburgh I telephoned Delhi to ask after Pritam and was told by the *Rani Sahib* that he had passed away never having regained consciousness. The last words Pritam spoke to me were that their home in Delhi was our home in India, and that we should always stay there. He was not pleased that we had defected to Claridges. Sustained by an acceptance of the inevitability of the ups and downs in life, and her enduring faith, Cuckoo continued to cope with the many demands made on her with the same cheerfulness and courage that had sustained her throughout Pritam's illness.

I often wondered whether we would ever visit India again. But we did, and spent three months with Cuckoo. We saw the winter out and the summer in. We enjoyed breakfast together in the mornings on the veranda of her lovely house watching the beginning of a new day: the mongoose scuttling across the lawn, and the squirrels quickly taking cover; the peacock flying in for its morning refreshment, followed by birds of every feather landing at the strategically sited bird bath for their morning ablutions. And we were together when the earthquake erupted in Bhuj, in the Rann of Kutch, shaking the foundations of Delhi on Republic Day, the 26<sup>th</sup> of January. We became aware of this when the ceiling fan began to swing violently, but not alarming enough to make a dash for cover. Here was a catastrophic event of major proportions, and the most inspiring memory of it was the nation's calm acceptance of the hand of providence. India could rightly be proud of the response of ordinary people: little was said and so much done. One example of international reaction remains with me. On being asked what help America proposed to send to India the President's voice came over the air: *'It is not what we propose to send; it*

*is what India needs - that's what friends are for.'* Brief and to the point it was the right thing to say.

The Comex songs were still much talked about particularly during the many visits we made with Cuckoo to meet her friends or relations. The conversation invariably moved from the songs to the (by now) well known narrative poem about Sikh Drivers on the Grand Trunk Road, *The Captains of the Road*, I had written in honour of her fellow countrymen. An invitation to declaim, with polite encouragement from all assembled became almost routine. To demur would be pointless, to muffle my lines a bad let down, so I had to be selective employing only those verses indelibly etched in my mind:

Upon the national highways, along the Grand Trunk Road,  
In an endless trail advancing come the Captains of the Road.  
I see their headlights flashing, their horns are blaring still;  
Their thunder dies in passing - the echoes never will.

From Bombay to Calcutta, Lucknow to Kathmandu,  
I convoyed with these gallant men, these noble hearts and true;  
We chased the stars together, we watched the setting sun,  
We've had our testing moments, but we've also had out fun!

Many years before his time a jaunty sardar went,  
To face the Courts of Heaven - by misadventure sent.  
'You have come my friend before your time,' the judge in session said;  
The sardar smiled, he stroked his beard, and sadly bowed his head.

'I have driven, sir, a million miles through every kind of hell,  
And once, just once, unwitting, to temptation's call I fell:  
She asked so softly, gently, and coyly looked at me,  
Then all the way to Heaven drove that pretty sardarni!'

There was a lot more to it of course, but having got that far without a disaster it was as well to take a modest bow. The *fun* part usually gave rise to a knowing wink and a titter: *More! More!* There was then no room for escape: a plunge into the deep was the only way

out relying on a few extemporaneous bits to come to the rescue when memory failed. Overall, it was not too hazardous a matter and it did have the merit of giving genuine pleasure. But when a song was called for I was in deeper waters. For one thing my voice was not entirely reliable; for another there was not much quality there either. However, if the modest bush fire we had kindled about *The Story of Comex in Song* was to spread, I had to sing wherever and whenever required, with enthusiasm, with confidence, and with volume; relying on the good Lord to take charge of the outcome. Although reluctant, Annie would sometimes accompany me - which added a little quality to the performance.

Cuckoo herself has a very good voice, had learnt some of the songs, and in select company could be counted on to help out. Her favourite was *Kenaki* adapted from the Punjabi expression *Ki Kehna* meaning *what can I say*, (an expression of pleasure when something is beyond praise). It is a song aimed at the timeless wonder of creation and has already found a place in the hearts of our friends. For these reason she was also attracted to *How Many*, concerning the major events of every day. So here they are, and the reader - who may remember that these songs were sung at the inauguration of *The Green Pennant Awards* - must try to imagine a beautiful, high-pitched voice ringing out across the fields of Punjab at sunrise and sunset.

### **KENAKI**

Where do they come from, and where do they go:  
The fruit and the flowers, the rains, and the snow?  
Who presses the button, who 'plies the brakes?  
Who gives the orders, who makes the dates?  
(For the summers to warm, and the winters to cold,  
The grass to turn green, and the leaves to gold.  
For fishes to swim, and birds to fly,  
Children to play, and lovers sigh:  
Kenaki, Kenaki, Kenaki).  
From the deserts of hate, to the mountains of love,  
From the gutter of living, to the heavens above,  
Relentlessly onwards, these footsteps don't change,  
Deaf to all pleading, they pass out of range:  
(But the summers still warm, and the winters still cool,

The grass grows green, and the leaves turn gold,  
Fishes still swim, and birds still fly,  
Children still play and lovers sigh:  
Kenaki, Kenaki, Kenaki).

The pendulum swinging to the passage of time,  
The wheel of life turning mile upon mile,  
Like streams flowing out to the wide open sea  
Men pass on to eternity.

(But the summers still warm, and the winters still cool,  
The grass grows green, and the leaves turn gold,  
Fishes still swim, and birds still fly,  
Children still play and lovers sigh,  
Kenaki, Kenaki, Kenaki).

### **HOW MANY**

How many babies will be born today?  
How many lives will fade away?  
How many hearts will laugh or cry?  
How many hopes will fade and die?  
(How many of these O Lord will there be?  
How many of these O Lord?  
How many of these O Lord will there be?  
How many of these O Lord?  
How many of these O Lord will there be?  
In the day we offer today to Thee.)  
How many words in anger or kindness?  
How many decisions in vision or blindness?  
How many rebukes, how many smiles?  
How many journeys, how many miles?  
**(How many of these...)**  
How many dreams are meant to come true?  
How many old make way for the new?  
How many ideas will take root and grow?  
How many winds of change will blow?

**(How many of these...)**

How many deeds will have been in vain?

How many bridges will be built again?

How many sins, how many prayers?

How many worries, how many cares?

**(How many of these...)**

I began to feel more confident that *TSOCIS* (the acronym did the job nicely and avoided the frequent repetition of six words) would eventually reach a wider audience. And to that end my friends suggested that I might join the *Qawals* always on the lookout for new talent. An exciting idea certainly, but one that prompted Annie to take matters in hand, and to issue marching orders for the homeward journey.

We never tire of mentioning our friends in India not only because they are our friends, but also because it is upon them, and the many, many more like them, that the future of the new Commonwealth largely depends. The oldest and the largest democracies have a special responsibility here, and if we can't preserve old friendships who can? (We have seen enough of what happens when old friendships collapse!) Our ancestors had shared the good times and the bad times, and out of the experience *the words equality, freedom and friendship were raised to the pinnacle of man's achievement*. How can one forget that remarkable event outside the Golden Temple in Amritsar, during the Queen's visit to India in 1996, when a white bearded Sikh elder presented Her Majesty with a golden *Kirpan* in a gesture that expressed so eloquently that she would never come to harm from the hand of a Sikh. Pritam (*Green Pennant holder number twenty-eight in a list of eighty-one*) would have been especially pleased about that. But I am sure he would have pointed a finger at me and added that *it would be helpful to see a more inspiring example set by everyone privileged to live in the home country of the Head of the Commonwealth*.

Before leaving Delhi, there was a small matter in which I needed Cuckoo's co-operation. Judith had given us her guitar to present to Kamal's son, Ragav - a fine boy about the same age as mandolin player Yair. And he is musical too! So a tea party was arranged with a generous display of Indian sweets, in the centre an enormous tray of *jellabies* - sometimes referred to locally as *jelly-babies*. At a given moment Cuckoo - in whose house I had first met Kamal when as a young musician he had come in the early

hours one morning to accompany her singing selected verses of the *Granth Sahib* - would make the presentation.

Kamal, his wife Lata, their daughter Swathi, the elder of the two children, and Ragav duly arrived. Sweets are part of a well established ritual on such occasions; too many are consumed, but always enjoyed. At the appropriate moment Cuckoo presented Ragav with the guitar. But it was locked and there was no key. Where was it? I pleaded ignorance long enough – but not too long - to arouse consternation. Then I remembered that the key had been tucked away in my wallet for safe keeping. There was relief all round and Ragav's face burst into smiles. We were later informed that Kamal had ruled against him playing the guitar before he had learnt to play properly. There were less prestigious instruments available in school for practice purposes. Ragav may have thought this a bit unnecessary but was reassured when permission was granted for the guitar to camp on his bed to help him dream of happy days to come.