

LIGHTS OF MY VILLAGE ARE MY PLANETS AND STARS



The hills and valleys along the Asian Highway picked up the sounds and echoes of *Together Unafraid*. Courtesy of Tengku Abdul Rahman and Lee Kuan Yew, Malaysia and Singapore accepted its legitimacy too. As for Canada: a little help from the first Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Arnold Smith, and a memorable journey on the Canadian Pacific Railway followed by an interview on the 'Good Morning Canada' radio programme

aroused a thousand Canadians to sing along with Comex. The only condition imposed on their British cousins was that they should learn to sing O Canada! That was not asking much!

With regard to Africa, I had heard Kenneth Kaunda singing during a Commonwealth conference in Lusaka and decided that any man who could sing like that must surely harbour a romantic soul. So I wrote to him, inviting his country to join Comex. His response came by return, followed later by this comment addressed to the men and women he wanted to send on Comex 10: *'I will sing in the streets of Lusaka if necessary to support this project.'* Whether other Commonwealth leaders would, or could, follow his example remains to be seen. But let's move on.

Judging from the latest figures available there must be near on a million villages in India today and, if the popular view is still valid that the hospitable face of India is to be found in her villages, then that represents some hospitality! Every village dance a story tells; but there is more to it than that. The Commonwealth Expedition went through, skirted around or stopped at a number of these villages. Curiosity was aroused. People gathered around, stall keepers offered tea and village headmen were summoned to come and welcome their guests - a few hundred of them. They usually spoke English, and managed to create an immediate rapport between hosts and guests. Language was no problem. There was entertainment too, best viewed through the experiences of individuals - edited here for brevity.

(Eve Muir). *We reached the Indian border town at Hussainiwala about lunchtime. A host of smiling faces was waiting to greet us. They threw garlands of flowers about our necks, thrust bottles of iced cola into our hands and embraced us. We had reached India. The first cultural performance was at the University of Chandigarh. The Welsh choir set the mood before an audience of some 2,000 Indian students and V.I.Ps with a very well received rendering of the Indian National Anthem, followed by the British National Anthem. Exeter's country dancing, Durham's Wear-side drinking songs, Glasgow's sword dancers, whirling to Mairie's Wedding, the Oxford madrigals and the Keele singers' Red River Valley, followed by the piper playing The Rowan Tree helped to create an intimate atmosphere that everyone felt comfortable with, and enjoyed. A spirited performance of*

Baba Noma (later translated into Crying Drums by Greg) was hugely popular, and the audience quickly picked up the chorus.

Eddie Torgbor of Ghana, studying law at Edinburgh University was responsible for introducing *Baba Noma*. But when asked to explain what it was all about, the answer was *nothing really!* Apparently the song had a comforting influence among children, underlying the notion that so long as you had the good life there was nothing to worry about; but when things went wrong you cried to mother for help. Well, that seemed the way things are. So the words were really sounds of happiness or misery, according to circumstances. It was the first Comex song sung in India, and it had to mean something more than just an idea. And that something had to be coaxed out of the sounds:

BABA NOMA

Baba noma, Alla Muta,
Baba ici ano luka,
Ke mezumba itchawalele
Ke mazumba zumba o-i-eh.
Chorus:
Chimame chumbulumba
Chimame chumbulumba
Chimame chumbulumba o-i-eh-eh
Chimame chumbulumba
Chimame chumbulumba
Chimame chimbulumba o-i-eh.

Discussion about Baba Noma continued all the way to Delhi and in the capital city the matter had to be resolved through diplomatic channels! Why? You may well ask. On arrival in Delhi, our credentials having been checked, a brief entertainment was called for by Her Majesty's British High Commission.

Eddie Torgbor was kilted and presented on stage to sing the same song which, coming from the lips of a kilted, Ghanaian law student, could have all sorts of implications. Was there a secret message here perhaps? A delegation was despatched to take lunch with

the Ghanaian High Commissioner. His Excellency immediately recognised the national spirit of the song but was unable to offer an explanation beyond what Eddie himself had said. Time was running out. The British High Commission might already be on the blower to London expressing concern. But a solution was at hand: the Comex songs had yet to emerge, so Baba Noma would be adopted, henceforth, as a Comex song (the melody straightened out a bit) and English verses introduced to complement the original Chorus. Delighted, His Excellency approved, Eddie breathed a sigh of relief and His Ex made a brief speech of welcome, expressing fulsome appreciation for the choice of English words:

CRYING DRUMS

Crying Drums, everywhere,
Their moaning sets a rhythm on the air,
If the good life really is to matter,
Time to pause a while and start to care.
(Chorus as before)
Crying Drums everywhere,
Echo sadnesses that everyone must share,
But the drums of hope will sound again tomorrow,
When we start to build new bridges and to dare.

And so the building of bridges went on. Here's another snippet, from Jhatikra:

(Gregory Lanning, Sheffield). *I was commissioned by War on Want to film Jhatikara, a recipient of aid from them. I set off early one morning on a rickety Delhi Transport bus that took me at breakneck speed to the small town of Najafgarh, about seventeen miles from Delhi, a duck shooting hideout during the Raj. There was no regular transport in the village, the bus services having been disrupted, so I got a lift in the jeep of a local magistrate who was accompanying the Mayor of Delhi on a visit to flood stricken areas.*

My host during a two-day stay was Nam Raj, a fifty-six year old farmer. Eighty percent of India's population lives in villages and men like Nam Raj give India its distinctive character. He is the oldest of three brothers who share twenty acres of land. As the oldest Nam Raj has special responsibilities, a position well understood and respected

by the rest of the extended family. He has six children of his own, the oldest eighteen, the youngest two. The twenty-three acres he shares with his two brothers have to support a total of twenty-three people. This would be difficult enough in a good year, but when the monsoons fail, as they sometimes do, the consequences can be catastrophic. An excessive amount of water can be equally bad, but there are ways of dealing with that; and the irrigation system is well enough prepared for just such an emergency. Lack of water altogether, and the families would face starvation.

As he smoked his hookah, Nam Raj explained that he had no expectation of improvement in his lifetime and was just waiting for it to end. Any hardship he had suffered in the past four years was the result of sins committed in his previous lives. Despite this pessimistic view however, he seemed happy enough, and was merely stating a fact - not complaining. Meanwhile, there is nothing that this good, and prematurely old man can do but pray that God might encourage the seasons to treat him, and those who depended on him, kindly.

Another view, more typical perhaps, from Sangrur:

(Kay Jordan, Sheffield). Heat, stinging eyes and a pungent smell. Faces swim before us: brown eyes, black hair and red, green and yellow turbans. I am in the audience witnessing a display put on for us by the residents of Sangrur where the Glasgow contingent, together with a few stray members from Sheffield, Durham and Edinburgh are staying with families. Strange sounds of sitars, harmoniums and lutes mingle with the soaring voices of girls and boys nervously eyeing their visitors. We see a vision of vivid colours as with great grace schoolgirls perform a Punjabi wedding dance. The gentle lilting movements are swiftly replaced by the bouncing whirlwind of a victory dance (Bangra!) by the boys. A group of children are then ushered onto the stage dressed in their national colours of orange, green and white to give a display of drill, gym, balancing tricks, and jumping through hoops of fire. We sit watching from our seats of honour, garlands round our necks, feeling a touch apprehensive as flames blown from the mouths of village youths fly up to the curtained roof. We leave with wonderful memories of camel rides and games in the village school, of a whole village turning out in our honour, of the amazing friendliness and hospitality of such wonderful people. So much given from so little. At last we can feel the Comex ideal of restoring old friendships being realised.

There were so many experiences to follow, all very similar, and for all of them we can only express our deep and lasting gratitude.

(Mark Lethbridge, Edinburgh). *Still in Punjab, the cultural show in the university's open air theatre before a packed audience was one occasion when the full potential of music blossomed as a means of creating the conditions for merging different backgrounds in a few inspiring moments. The singing of Heer and Ranjha, an epic story of tragic love, and a most attractive dancer swaying her body, with expressive movements of arms and hands, to the accompaniment of sitar and drums, put before Comex a new emphasis on time honoured themes of human experience. On the other side, the success of Donald Lunan on his guitar, making the entire audience sing an unintelligible African song, was measured by the echoes of its catching rhythm in the hostel courtyard later on that night.*

Ideas are big things. One may have them and act consistently because of them. But unless they are very precise, it is difficult to know by what yardstick to judge progress, and therefore they leave room for other things. Initially few people thought of Comex in terms of building a bridge of understanding between East and West. Most had their own thoughts about travel, experience, contact, all of which add up to understanding. All wanted to see India; but as the expedition took shape, ideas became more precise and a common identity emerged.

These few selected comments need to be balanced by how the hosts saw their guests:

(J. Agnihotrado, Delhi). *Where humanity is threatened by destruction, we cannot afford differences, however small. We have no choice but to solve our differences and live in peace. For example, when we think about relations within the Commonwealth, whether with British or other members, they are far from satisfactory. The differences between India and Pakistan are especially tragic. Something has to be done to bring the Commonwealth closer to reality. Comex is a venture towards this aim. The residents of Jubilee Hall were fortunate to have had some of them as our guests, and experienced six days of living together during their stay in Delhi. Their aim was to improve relations among people of the Commonwealth. They had enjoyed their stay in Pakistan, and felt a kind of eagerness in the student community there to have good relations with their immediate neighbour. It is pouring outside, and we were offered British cigarettes; the*

discussion turned to more serious topics. We talked about Britain joining the European Common Market (where does that leave the Commonwealth!), and British policy in what used to be Rhodesia. To all these questions Comex replied gently, sometimes agreeing with our opinions. They were no longer our guests, they were our friends and erased the earlier impression that they were on an adventure tour. It became increasingly clear that they were on a mission, with a message and a purpose.

(R.M.Gulatti, Sangrur). *Half the world does not know how the other half lives. This accounts for over ninety per cent of all the wretchedness, disease and poverty we read about.. Luckily, a wing of Comex paid a visit to Sangrur. As a family we had the good fortune to host two members. During the few days they stayed with us, their presence worked like magic on our outlooks. We met as strangers and parted as sisters and brothers. We are now a family; distance is no impediment.*

(S.K. Singha, Delhi). *Comex is an admirable adventure; a remarkable feat of a rare imagination. It is a better forum for a meeting between East and West, devoid of misunderstandings about victories and defeats and political wars. Why not more Comexes? Talking to people who seemed a little critical, a friend from St Steven's College remarked: 'Comex is not a bad idea. It is worth trying. I am sure that the outcome won't be disappointment. But what is bad about it is the Comexians themselves. Most of them are unimaginative, uninformed and say, dull. What a contrast with Colonel Gregory! He is a man completely in action.' Thus he left a note of optimism. I hope Gregoryism will never die.*

Editing these extracts from diaries prepared at the time, I found a remarkable similarity. As to the subject of Gregoryism, it could not be allowed to pass without a few comments from the Colonel himself. When future generations come to discuss *The Green Pennant Awards*, I hope they will bear in mind that I had seen it all before, marching to the sound of guns with the armies of the Commonwealth. No problem there about the brotherhood of man; it had taken root in countless hearts. The young men and women with whom I travelled now were volunteers. They had never been to India before but were learning fast. They had come as an act of faith, trusting in all that they had been told about the Commonwealth. Trusting too in the new friendships they hoped to make. They had

taken the risk to adventure, and had travelled fifteen thousand miles to play a small part in restoring those old friendships about which their fathers and grandfathers often reminisced.

Those friendships were not created by politicians or acts of parliament; but out of the sweat and blood of war; and that is where, and how, the spirit of the new Commonwealth was conceived. What these young men and women were trying to do had never been tried before. They had the temerity to expose themselves to the glare of publicity, its hostility as well as its generosity, and in the end made possible *The Green Pennant Awards*. Having done that, they moved on to greater things; to occupy positions of importance in many parts of the world. It was left to me to keep the spirit of their achievement shining brightly - so eloquently expressed by Prince Philip - and to do so in a language universally understood: by recording their experiences in song.

It is axiomatic that songs were once, and occasionally still are, the best way of communicating between people. That certainly was the Comex experience. But it was not until we had come face to face with the ups and downs, the joys and sorrows of ordinary people exploring the wilderness of human relations that our own songs began to emerge expressing the experiences we shared. Kenneth Kaunda once expressed the view that the language of Africa is the language of song. And it's not difficult to see why. Of the Comex songs, he prophesied that they would become part of folklore. In time no one would know where they came from, but they would be there, and continue to tell their story. From the million villages of India, a million songs reach out to heaven every day. To these Comex has added a few.

Writing about a Comex entertainment in Delhi a well known English language paper, had this to say:

(The Statesman) *'There could be no doubt about it. This is what our young people wanted. Thunderous applause, and screams of encore punctuated the second night of the Comex concert of dances, choirs and jazz music. And if the Welsh and folk singers received warm applause, and those with a finer ear admired the Madrigal singers of Oxford, the whole house rose like a man when we came to the Cardipool Shef Jazz Band, and the lovely voiced, sophisticated girl with the ash-blonde hair. Her performance was as good as professional. There were other good numbers: reels from the Highlands and Hebrides,*

Scottish sword dances, the pipes and Gaelic and Welsh songs, all most credible, some excellent. Some of the more exciting songs were folk songs, ballads and their kind. There was more goodwill built across the seas by the jazz players and singers of Comex, than by the politicians of the Commonwealth.'

The story of Comex in Song began on the Asian Highway with Together Unafraid, followed by Little Green Flags (the symbols of Comex) a tune for bagpipes which the postman Nikola's grandson Yair played on his mandolin at the Church of the Nativity in Jerusalem. We made good progress with Kenaki and How Many, both hugely popular and adopted by Cuckoo Sandhu as her favourites. And then came the challenge of the villages of India - a huge subject to be approached with sensitivity and a little first hand experience. A ballad prompted by casual conversations and the advice of friends seemed to fit the bill, judging by its subsequent popularity.

VILLAGE LIGHTS - GAON KI JYOTI

The lights of my village are my planets and stars
As the flowers of Heaven are Venus and Mars;
Dispelling at night my fears and my blindness
The replace them with warmth, comfort and kindness.

The lights of my village shine through the dark,
Searching highway and byway, meadow and park,
For sons and for strangers - wherever they roam, -
Guiding their footsteps safely back home.

The lights of my village have always been
The centre and focus of each village scene;
Of joys and of sorrows, of stories and dreams,
Of building great castles, compounding wild schemes.

The lights of my village are always at hand,
For the tailor, the grain shop, the *tonga* stand:
The fruit shop, the tea shop, the trays in the street,
The *Panchayat* hall where our elders meet.

The lights of my village are signals and stamps:
The brazier, the torch, the candles, the lamps,
Denoting professions, announcing their wares -
An unconscious tradition that everyone shares.

The lights of my village are both big and small;
The taper in oil of the tiny pan stall,
The hurricane lamps in our village *tandur*
And the candle flames dancing around sweetmeats and *gur*.

The lights of my village conform to no pattern,
Nor subscribe to the whim of a headman's baton.
Though neon and coloured lights, suitably central,
Proclaim our hotel: 'Modern - Continental!'

The lights of my village are gems of free choice,
In the life of us all a significant voice:
At births and at deaths, to crown marital rights -
To gladden hearts at the Festival of Lights.

The lights of my village recall an old friend -
A long trailing flex, with a bulb at the end,
The pride of our garage and spare parts store
And shared by the smithy and workshop next door.

The lights of my village are vital to me -
As the birds in the air and the fish in the sea -
Each sparkling moment I capture to make
A crown, that glitters for posterity's sake.

The lights of my village retire every day
Before the dawn breaks from far, far away,
With the millions and millions of lights that have done
For another short night the work of the sun.

The lights of my village acknowledge that state -
As God is to man in eternity great -
In the legends of glory and power long past:
Can any compare? Can any so last?

The lights of my village twinkle and shine
The part of all light that has always been mine,
Clustered together in distance of night,
Their message with magic shimmering bright.

The lights of my village bright eloquence give
To the house where my parents and their parents live;
My cradle, my background, my castle, my world,
Where our history, our fortune, and lives are unfurled.

The lights of my village feed the soul of our nation,
And thus it will be till the death of creation,
So I hope and I pray, I plead and I shout:
The lights of my village must never go out.

My friend Kamal had inspired the idea in the first place, and it was now up to him to find someone who could translate this *prodigious* work and set it to music suitable for Indian voices. *Village Lights* was written on the road heading towards the Nilgiri Hills; even so, Kamal knew someone there who could do the job. He was a music teacher at The Lawrence School in Lovedale, about four miles from Ooty, under whose tutelage Kamal had once sharpened his skills. His name was Pege. I don't remember the forename being mentioned - a not uncommon practice. Although arranged for Indian voices to be sung in Hindi, *Village Lights*, (or *Goan Ki Jyoti*), made its debut sung by British voices, and in Hindi! Henceforth, the songs of Comex began to fill the programme and became increasingly popular. Which is why, with the approach of the 40th anniversary of Comex 1 (2005) the idea of recording *TSOCIS* has taken root. But as in most things, enthusiasm is not enough.

Before leaving the villages of India, there is another matter I should like to dwell upon for a moment: the Comex tie. I am not talking here about a tie with the smoothness of touch and image of a Gucci product, but a real, fighting piece of equipment in raw silk, to be draped about the necks of brave men. Why else was the Silk Route (now the Asian Highway) so named? And these ties were woven in the villages of Karnataka, on the outskirts of Bangalore - whence the new metropolis of Karnataka gets its reputation for silk. *Sericulture* is common in other places too - China predominantly - but my little corner of activity is Karnataka. I was steered in the direction of the silkworm farms by Nanjappa, who presides over the Raja Silk House and was happy to have me as a member of his board for a day, and concluded the deal with a garland of sandalwood shavings.

I walked with Annie among the mulberry trees and watched the silkworms at work eating leaves vociferously in anticipation of being transferred - with a hundred or more fellow workers - to straw frames wherein to complete the business of constructing cocoons, not unlike spiders weaving webs. From this happy state of affairs the cocoons are transferred: to be boiled, yarn extracted and spun onto spindles. The latter process is performed in the villagers' homes, a kind of cottage industry in which the whole family - particularly the women and children - take part. The designing, dyeing and weaving take place in Nanjappa's Silk House with the same consummate skill that has marked a tradition going back 4,000 years. I learned all this while sitting as a member of the board. But as I watched the raw silk coming off the looms I felt a special pride in having followed those silkworms all the way from the cradle to the grave! In honour of those silkworms, it was up to me to state clearly the colours required, and do justice to the cause to which they had given their lives.

The base would be *the wild green earth* (taken from the third line of the first verse of *Together Unafraid*) or more simply, *jungle green*. And the stripes across the tie would represent *the snow-capped mountains, the sun-parched deserts and the flooding waters* (from *Silver Train*) or simply, *white, gold and blue*. Nanjappa felt happier with the more poetic description, and when I told him that they were part of a song for the Queen's Silver Jubilee he was delighted. Thus was a great tie commissioned! The initial enthusiasm among my comrades soon wore off; but after a few years it became more and more common for visiting veterans to enquire, tentatively, whether by any chance I had the odd spare tie! I now have three left and have had to shut the door on that kind of hospitality.

The same is true of *Colonel Gregory's Hot Favourites* - a secret mixture of sixteen spices (half of the Buddha's *Excellences*) - that sustained Comex when all else failed. Spices too (*not curry please: a five letter word that eliminates with the speed of the delete button a thousand exotic dishes*) preserve their incomparable excellence in the villages of India where they are used as naturally as pepper and salt. Many is the time that friends, feigning love and affection, would appear bearing a bottle of wine and before departing express a desire to try again some of the old spices. On one memorable occasion even Kamal made the startling announcement that the only thing his father wanted from the UK was a small quantity of the colonel's spices. What more authentic testimony could there be! Faithfully did Annie and I discharge our obligations working overtime with a two-ounce coffee grinder.

And having said all that, perhaps a little riddle might help to focus attention on CGHF which, if solved, could be worth a fortune! But first a brief anecdote: A Canadian member of Comex 8 had taken away with him several packets of the CGHFs, and on arrival in Vancouver invited some friends to supper - including a senior executive of LOBLAWS. So impressed was he that I received a letter shortly afterwards asking how many tons I could supply! I replied that my operations were limited to the output of a two-ounce coffee grinder. Another major opportunity lost, but one that might be resurrected to support TSOCIS!

CGHF No. 1 (Spices)

**Coriander first, then ginger and cumin,
Turmeric to taste, and mustard to *run-in*;
Paprika and Pepper - the big double Ps -
Add sesame and chilli, for sweet and hot please!
Fenugreek and poppy, not so inviting,
Cardamom and aniseed, much more exciting;
Cinnamon and cloves, are an absolute must,
And a sprinkle of mace for that extra thrust.**

Formula: 800+400+200X5+100X4+50X5=16

CGHF No. 2 (Paste)

This is No. 1. You want No. 2?
Its ever so easy, here's what you do:
To one part powder, add two parts lime,
One part olive oil and warm for a time;
A splash of vinegar, measured to taste,
And for better results cut out the haste.
If you are minded to store in a jar,
Turn up the heat for another good hour.

Post Christmas. Flaming Hot Turkey

Ingredients stand-to on the firing line!
Olive oil and onions, and garlic chopped fine;
Turkey bits, fresh lime, and a powdered red chilli,
And a spoon of the Colonel's No. 1 willy-nilly!
'Fire the oil!' 'Fire the onions!' 'Fire the gar-lic!'
When crisp fire turkey - in time of the nick!
Pour salt on the wound, squeeze hard on the lime,
Rub in the chilli and your own bit of rhyme.
No. 1 stand by: 'Fire! Stir!'
Another hot favourite on target - 'Sir!'

POSTSCRIPT

For those *hanging over* from the evening before
Here is the Colonel's Sahib's sure fire cure:
Fry an onion brown, add two spoons of 'two' -
Or three if you like - but don't overdo.
Now stir for a while on a very low heat,
Make a pint of good stock and let the two meet.
Bring to the boil and add enough salt,
Then strain through a sieve before crying halt!
Cut a lemon in two and squeeze it therein,
To stimulate virtue with a few drops of sin.
By way of an extra - if you have to make haste -
A relish for grilling is the Colonel Sahib's paste.