

MILLENNIUM SPECIAL

Four Parables & A Lie

The great Indian diaspora is more Indian than great

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The American space *wallahs* launch a rocket with a robot which they name Gunga Din. The Indians and Pakistanis settled in the US of A don't take kindly to the christening. Is it a joke? Is it an insult, an intended slight, an unintended gaffe, a philosophical code, a tribute from a lover of Kipling's verse? The reaction from the "NRIs", who may by now consider themselves well-resident in New Jersey and as American as hot dogs, was swift, predictable and entirely fatuous.

It was as though NASA had named a robot "Sambo".

Most of the protestors, I bet my green card, will not know the provenance of the name Gunga Din. Like the torchers of *The Satanic Verses* and those unfortunate few who died in riots against the book, they will be wholly ignorant of the cause of their belligerence, the prime mover of their tragic fate. Others among these aggrieved of Arizona are vaguely aware that the name comes from a Kipling poem and the man so named is a water carrier in the service of the British Indian army.

To the protestors, Kipling is the closest they can find to a racist, anti-Indian Hitler. The poor man is as unpopular among Indians as dams are among activists.

Then, being a water carrier is, to the struggling or rich nri "professionals" of the United States, doctors, dentists and drivers of taxis, an affront, associated perhaps with the *bhishti* caste which isn't top-hole. And finally serving the British common soldier! Haven't we been brought up to believe, before we left the shores of India and crossed the black waters in search of lucre or at least consumer comforts, that our national identity is predicated on our national struggle against the Brits? The national ancestors we want to boast about are the Bhagat Singhs and the Subhash Chandra Boses, regardless of the folly of their ways, not some water carrier who served the British too well.

The national who flees to america is forced by its hostility to be more nationalist than Sainiks.

In America we've always been separate. Britain boasts of assimilating us. but it may not always.

And here's the disease of the diaspora: the one must stand for the whole. Mention an Indian and you mention all Indians. Characterise one as shopkeeper on TV and even those Indians who are shopkeepers can be heard protesting that not all Indians are shopkeepers.

The ironies spin in opposite directions within each other, like the discs of a roulette wheel: the national who flees the coop for guaranteed pastures (where the card if not the grass is green) is forced by the hostilities of America to be more nationalistic than, say, the Shiv Sainik, whose nationalism is of a narrower kind and may not extend to Gandhi or Nehru and who would almost certainly shed no tears for the robotification of Gunga Din.

Gunga, as anyone who has read this great but not good narrative poem of Kipling will know, is "a better man" than the British soldier narrator. The story, which the diasporic spread does not seem to have carried with it, is that Gunga, the *bhishti*, his clothes in tatters, attends to troops on the battlefield and offers them water as they are dying, an act of benediction recognised in Hindu eschatology as meritorious and seen by Kipling as

heroic. The poor *bhishti* is flogged and flayed and constantly berated "*idher ao*", "*Jaldi*", "*pani lao*" and so on. He is relentlessly brave and his last act is to cross into the line of fire beyond the call of duty to offer the dying soldier-narrator a drink. He is riddled by enemy fire and dies.

The British soldier's dying tribute to him is

*Though I've flogged you and I've flayed you
By the living God that made you
You're a better man than I am
Gunga Din.*

Lloyd Webber couldn't bring a more heart-wrenching tear to my eye. This sacrificial heroism, courage in the service of duty may be foolhardy but it is nobler than the avengers and glory-seekers which the US has made a cult of in its latest adventure movies. Surely!

There is no doubt that the imaginative future of the diasporic Indian is America, for the simple reason that when he goes to the Gulf it is as indentured or contracted labour, living outside the society he services, even though he outnumbers it. In Britain or other points west, he enters a settled society whose class system, in small turmoil, may admit him into its interstices or make room for him through minor upheavals which widen the gaps. In America, flux is nature and the new nationality. The irony is that it is in the US that one clings to one's old nationality as though one had invented it oneself. The treachery of abandoning India, leaving its sick to rot in search of US dollars if you're a doctor, or leaving its teeth to decay if you're a dentist, is absolved by protesting against poor Gunga Din, God bless him-and send him to the moon or wherever he is bound on his spaceship.

Gunga goes West but whoever thought his films would follow him? Bollywood began by being an imitation of Hollywood, adopting its grammar and its dedication to myth-making. Only, the myths were distinct as they had to be. Hollywood championed the myth of the frontier, the cowboys conquering, not without sacrifice, the 'Indians' and law being brought to a wild frontier through bravery and sacrifice. That which belonged to Darwin with the law of the survival of the fittest was made fit for God by the cowboy who brought law order and love. It was always the story of civilisation retold in microcosm.

Bollywood's myth, quite distinctly, followed nationalist patterns. The peasant, the innocent, the wanderer was always the hero; and the city, the sophisticated, the mimic man was always the villain. More than half a century on, the myths of both the "Woods" remain the same. The dancers after Madhurisation are more raunchy but the myth of the modesty, truth and innocence of the sufferer as hero has not been dispensed with.

The incongruence of these myths confined Bollywood's sales to Russia and other primitive places. The European and American cinema-going public, which only wanted its corn sweet, salted, popped in a packet and not on the screen, stayed away in droves.

There was an "East is East and West is West and never the twain" sort of divide between the traditions. (The quote is from Kipling.) And then someone in the west made Braveheart. It was the story of Scottish rebels and English cruelty towards them, a Hindi film in English. Pure Bollywood and hugely successful in the US. Though there's no accurate way of telling who watched it, I am willing to bet that same green card that it wasn't the audiences which support the Henry James novels translated onto screen. The literary traditions of irony, moral ambivalence and the temptations and pitfalls of civilisation are not the concern of Braveheart or Bollywood. *Dhishoom, dhishoom*, as they say, gives way in nobler moments to sentiment which is unthinking emotion and that's the dramatic currency of Bollywood, unappealing to western audiences who come from books to the film medium.

Alas, no longer. Suddenly, there's *Taal* which enters at some low rung, and through some questionable statistics, but still enters, the charts of the top 10 of American films. Even if every diasporic person in the US has seen the film twice, it still would not account for the box-office volume. So what then is going on? Time to revise all theories about why Americans won't watch Hindi movies? Yes, perhaps, because while Bollywood retains its cliché, banality and plagiarism licences, the demograph of the US movie-goers is changing. If *Taal* is popular in the States and has moved onto the sales charts to rival their own releases, apart from the immigrant Indians, it's the Latino population and the blacks who put it there. Aman rings my doorbell. At the time I am working in TV and the channel for which I work is forbidden to give home addresses or numbers to callers.

The man is a stranger, an Indian, a fellow Parsee it would seem from the khaki of his skin and the hooked nose. His trousers are being held up by a belt over the top of which the cloth folds. He is tubby, balding, grubby-looking and carries a very worn exercise book. He greets me as a long lost friend would and says he has been stalking my house for days, having been told when he called before that I was out of town. He tells me who he is.

I know the name and forcing my memory through the dull prism of time, I recognise the man. He repeats his name like a mantra, and now and then throws in the insulting nickname by which he was known all those years ago in Poona, because he had sticking-out elephant ears. He reminds me that he once loved my sister but she didn't return his love. He quickly adds that she was very kind to him. Join the queue, I think, and invite him in.

It's touchy at home. I haven't seen the kids for a week and there's tension about having gone away yet again for "work". My partner has become a TV widow and her mourning has turned to resentment. And now a stalker from the past has found me in my first hour back.

As he settles down and accepts a whisky, I notice his shoes are torn and he wears no socks. Hard times. I knew him very slightly in Poona and now he recounts the stories and fate of people we may have mutually known. He is desperate. He speaks to me like a man addressing the straw to which he is about to clutch. It gives me a sinking feeling. I want no more dependents.

I ask him what he does. He doesn't answer directly but says that since he became unemployed his wife left him, implying that it was an act of treachery. For another man, I think, and cruelly assess that in her place... So what was he doing when he was employed? I dimly recalled that he had left Poona to study in England, an early drop of the contemporary wave. He dodges that question also and instead shows me his exercise book which is full of photographs of himself taken with leaders of the Labour Party who have since become ministers or other sorts of Labour grandee. They are obviously photographs which have been specially posed for, my guest having brought his camera and given it to some sufferer to click.

"That's Paul Boateng," he says.

"I know it is," I say.

"And that's me with Tony Blair."

He looks eagerly to see if I'm impressed. I have to show some curiosity.

"What are you doing with these people?" I ask.

"I was the vice president of the local Labour Party and I invited all these fellows to speak and then posed with them," he says solemnly. Then, reading my face he adds, sadly, hopefully, "I'm looking for some remunerative employment."

I tell him I don't have any. It's not that sort of job.

"But you've done so well for yourself," he says, implying in that word that I haven't done well for him.

He is despondent but resigned. I say I'll pass on his CV if he'll send it.

The personnel department at the TV channel where I work says they can only suggest that he apply to work in the post-room, sorting and delivering the mail. I phone the number he has given me but he has gone. Two years later, a colleague tells me that he has recruited a lively young spark of a dancer as a presenter and she said she knew me. Or, that she didn't exactly know me but that I was a friend of her father's. She is good on screen, completely at ease in a British TV environment, a leader of sorts of young British taste and cheek. So different from her lost father, one generation on. She'll make a career in television, she will look after him materially. But there was a hurt in his eyes which nothing but some token of his own success will remove.

I am invited to lunch in Southall by an Asian millionaire, a media zamindar, if not quite a Mogul, who owns a couple of radio stations, property, a tiny newspaper and has his finger in several other entrepreneurial pies. My invitation is tagged onto that of a friend, a communications czar of sorts, again of Indian origin. The radio whiz makes jokes in the course of the conversation, about how he is just a farmer's son made good through running a pirate radio station and applying for a licence when the opportunity arose and the airwaves were opened up. He is very proud of his origins. They make his achievement all the more remarkable.

The talk over jeera chicken turns to the Asian rich, to lustre and lucre in this corner of a foreign field that is forever Jullundhur. "They talk of millionaires, what does that mean? Today a fellow with a big house in the right place is a millionaire. Most Asians are still living on the bread line," the media zam says.

I put in a few pennyworth of statistics. That may still be true of Mirpuris and the Bangladeshis but not of the Ugandan Asians, the Gujaratis or some communities of Punjabis. Lots of them are either getting very rich or are doing startlingly well in their professions.

He remarks that while there are only three or four Asian MPs, the Jewish population, with a smaller but more deeply-rooted past in this country, can boast over 70.

The difference, I think, is that the Asian MPs still stand as Asians and Jewish MPs don't stand as Jews but as Tories, Socialists or Liberals. It is a measure of our still being outsiders, special cases, semi-detached, semi-enclosed communities. In the US it was ever thus. The newcomers established themselves as separate but equal and, if they could help it, better. Britain assimilated and still boasts that it always has. But that doesn't mean it always will. The arrival of blacks and Asians over the last 40 years may be the beginning of the formation of social encampments within the broader society-the American model.

Very many of the Asian millionaires, including the radio Mogul, but excluding the Info Czar, got rich by finding a niche in the needs of their own community, bringing *chhole* or *Sholay* to Newcastle.

Though the crime-rate of the immigrant Asian population of Britain has increased alarmingly in the last year or two, the crimes which are the lowest on their register of conviction are wife-beating and drug-smuggling and dealing.

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