

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE EMPIRE

**M**any years ago, when newspapers were still important and indispensable, flipping through the pages of a London newspaper (probably the *Independent on Sunday*) I stopped somewhere and then read on, completely mesmerized, about an obscure settlement of Anglo-Indians along the lower ridges of the Chota Nagpur hills, about 60 km from Ranchi. ‘...there lies a sprawling monument to racial fears and racial fancies, and to an idea of nationhood that shimmered temptingly in the years between the two world wars and then vanished leaving this as its only trace. It has an odd name: McCluskiegunge,’ wrote Ian Jack, who had first come to India as a correspondent for *The Sunday Times* in the 70s.

The story of this enclave tucked away in the forested hills is indeed engrossing. Knowing the days of the Raj were coming to an end, Anglo-Indians, still an integral part of the colonial power structure and thus worried about their uncertain future in an independent India, lobbied with their British masters to create some kind of a homeland for them in the tribal belt of what is now Jharkhand. Misconceived from the beginning and geographically nonviable, the idea went sour in no time. Of the original 350 families who had moved into this pastoral idyll, not more than 23 are left now. When Jack visited McCluskiegunge in 1990–91, the signs of decay and decline were all around the place. Catherine Texeira, popularly known as Kitty Memsahib, personified the sad story of a small community trapped between nostalgia and the reality of hard times. The young woman – attractive, with hints of European blood – walked barefoot, her hair open, down the platform of the nearby railway station with a basket of oranges to sell to the passengers whenever a train arrived. In the fading light of a late afternoon, the traipsing figure of Kitty along the rail tracks, carrying a cane basket of fruits in the crook of her arms perhaps captured the past privileges and present gloom of a people. ‘My daughter,’ Mrs Texeira told the visiting journalist walking him to the station, ‘a perfect little tribal.’

Jack’s piece was one rare moment of newspaper journalism matching, perhaps even surpassing, creative writing. I read this piece again in *Mofussil Junction*, a collection of his writings from India published in 2013.

Anglo-Indians were an important part of Calcutta’s social picture until a quarter century ago. In the business district of Dalhousie, one would see those smart women – in skirts and highheels – walking daintily into the commercial buildings. While still keeping up an appearance, they somehow knew their good days were over. This crossover in history was sensitively portrayed in Aparna Sen’s award-winning 1981 film, *36 Chowringhee Lane*. Violet, the Anglo-Indian school teacher visiting her ailing brother Eddie in a nursing home, explains the loud political slogans coming from the street outside in terms of the Raj having ended quite some time ago.

As a university student, I earned a bit of pocket money by giving tuitions to school students. After classes, I visited an Anglo-Indian home on Theatre Road (the old name prevails despite being rechristened Shakespeare Sarani) to tutor a schoolgirl. They were tenants in that colonial but dilapidated house. The landlady, the same age as Violet (Jennifer Kendal) in the movie, would talk to me once in a while. She was proud of her possessions – an old refrigerator among them. One day, I saw a knot of people outside her door. Her husband had died in a private hospital; the body not yet been released, for the family could not pay the bills.

The small but colourful community has made important contributions in many fields – music, sports, and armed forces in particular. The new generation of Anglo-Indians, however, has been steadily migrating in different directions – Australia, Canada, Europe. Experts have identified them as one of the largest mixed-race communities in the world. The exit of the mainstream of the Anglo-Indian community from the Indian social scene would mean an irreparable loss denting our social mosaic. Interestingly, it is the expats who have gone back to their past and done some important research. Some of them are compiling a dictionary of the words from the community's everyday language, neither fully adopted in English nor exactly Indian.

For a long time in my life, I never came across someone from the Jewish community; I only knew that some of them, well-known and famous, lived in Bombay (still not Mumbai). Then something strange happened, giving me a taste of their forlorn place in the world, their isolation. Attending a conference somewhere in Brazil, I met a jovial, friendly man who was working as the Arabic translator for the proceedings. At the lunches and coffee breaks we were together, he used his limited knowledge of India to impress me. 'In India, a river is called Ganga,' he said, looking expectantly at me, perhaps for a little appreciation.

In the evening, some of us went out into town to explore the food street for an out-of-the-ordinary dinner. Guided by a local, we reached the city's Jewish quarters. It was a lively scene, full of music, smells of exotic food, and laughter. In the predominantly Latino culture with its memory of Portuguese colonialism, this little strip was like an island of diversity. Restaurants with tables spread out on the street, young men strumming their guitars on corners. Like hundreds of places around the world, this street too bore the sign of *dispersal*, a process that had taken place at different stages over the past two millennia.

Walking back to the 18-seater bus, I suddenly realized the Arab friend had not been with us. I asked the others; no one had seen him.

He sat crouched, almost ghostly, in a window seat, lonely in his alienation inside the dark bus in the parking lot, as if denying the reality of the fun street. I casually asked him why he skipped dinner.

'Not among them; they the pain of the world.' His voice was a mix of disgust, anguish, and fear.

Thousands of miles away from the hot deserts, the epicentre of the Arab-Israel standoff, this genial man somehow could not be impervious to the historical fault line that was now part of his cultural consciousness.

About two years ago, I saw a submission by a literary agent on behalf of an author from Israel in the Palimpsest inbox. As part of my other job, I read the whole novel and had it read by two of our editors; we agreed this was a book worth taking on. It had a distinct flavour of the old novel, of a time when a tight-knit plot was important. But what gripped me was the trajectory of the author's own life sent separately as a note. Born into a Jewish family in Pune, Sophie Judah first heard of the tea plantations in Assam from her father, an officer in the Indian Army. Later, as an air hostess flying the eastern sector, she got more familiar with that world. She did much research going through the documents of the tea-trading companies. *Victory Tea Estate* was an outcome of all that. Indian Jews have left in batches for Israel, listening to the call of the *promised land*. But Sophie, who had gone there more than 40 years ago, had a different reason – to marry the man she had first loved as a schoolgirl.

Well, the tea garden has nothing to do with the liturgical wish to meet *next year in Jerusalem*. There are no synagogues or rabbis anywhere in the novel. Perhaps the word 'Jew' does not occur even once in the 250-page book. It's a celebration of unreasoned, unequal but intense love between an English planter and a tea picker, against the bucolic backdrop of the plantation. For thousands of years after their ouster, Jews carried a map of Israel in their minds. Sophie, for almost half a century, preserved the memories of India to write this book. A writer's world is borderless and unlimited by time.

At a book launch recently, I heard an engrossing discussion about the reasons for the dwindling numbers of Jews in India. At the last count, there are barely 10,000 of them left in this country, scattered in small pockets – Cochin, Mumbai, Pune... Explaining their choice of India as a land of refuge after the Romans destroyed their temples in Jerusalem, the writer Shashi Tharoor said that unlike the other parts of the world, they faced no hostility from the locals in India. In fact, Bene Israel, the small Jewish community in Bombay, were considered for a long time as a Hindu sub-caste. The royal court of Cochin, eminent Malayalam writer Sethu said, had in fact offered the Jewish émigrés many privileges including a quota in government services. The only instance of persecution against the Jews, Tharoor said, was reported from the Portuguese-ruled Goa in those days.

Like the Jews more than 2,000 years ago, Tibetans too have been fleeing to India faced with persecution back home. But unlike the Jews, they cannot just anchor their ship at the harbour. Every arrival means dangerous border crossing through inhospitable mountainous terrain. Every such journey carries many meanings – societal, political, ethnographic... Running away from the brutalities of the inexorable Chinese system, they too carry the secrets of a culture increasingly coming under threat from the Han Chinese. With them come the runes of Buddhism, techniques of Thangka painting and knowledge of herbal medicine.

The value a small community lends to a society is specific to it, and relative. Arabs who have an overwhelming presence all over the Middle East are a minority in Israel, ill-treated and harassed. The few thousand Chinese still left in Kolkata are like the jetsam of history; their loneliness is hugely distanced

from the immense might of a swashbuckling China positioning itself as the next superpower. The other side of the empire could often be a row of refugee boats.

Bhaskar Roy