

SHORT STORY

Going to In-Laws' House for Food

ABANI DHAR
(Translated by Asrar Chowdhury)

TWO weeks back I drew rations after managing to scrounge up ten takas. Yesterday was the last date for getting them. I thought if I could somehow unload the children and the wife on my in-laws' for a few months, they would at least be able to eat two times a day. But the wife would not hear of it. Last year when she had gone to visit her father's house, she had to put up with a lot of comments about her lack of jewelry. Finally, after lots of endearments, I managed to change her mind. The bus fare? I borrowed the bus fare from BASHU and we started early in the morning. I didn't buy my ticket. I got off at Shialda, bought some sweetmeats, and then got on again.

In the bus I tried to convince my wife-- stay at your father's house for a few months. See if it would be possible to get our son some medical treatment. My wife didn't say anything. I tried to comfort her. I'm sure something will come up in the meantime. She answered me in a dry voice, "You know all there is to know: Father has retired. Dada is bearing the burden of the family all by himself. The quarter they are staying in is also in his name. There are still four unmarried sisters in the house. I would rather die than have to face Dada..." I bought ten paisas' worth of peanuts, handed them to my wife and told her, "Your father has a monthly pension. He also received a large gratuity. Both of your dadas have jobs. They are not wanting for anything over there." My wife chewed the peanuts and said, "But Father first has to build a house, then marry off my sisters... and both my dadas have declared they are doing all they possibly can, that they can't do anything more."

Mallikpur. The house is a two-storied government-allotted quarter right next to the station. Upstairs-downstairs combined are two small rooms like little caves and a tiny kitchen. Sunlight does not penetrate into the kitchen. One dugout latrine. No way can anyone inform the doctor about the condition of feces. Paper boats float all around the house.

I entered the room on the heels of my wife and children. My mother-in-law was wrapped up in a piece of cloth, sewing something in the veranda. On seeing me, she partially veiled her head. I went towards over and touched her feet. My youngest sister-in-law was wearing a loose frock. She came and took my son and said to her mother, "Look Ma, how thin Bura has gotten." She looked at my wife, "Don't you feed him?" In the meantime, everybody else in the house gathered around us. The youngest sister-in-law said, biting her lower lip, "You should feed him and fatten him up." This sister-in-law is the fairest amongst the sisters. She has failed twice in her class exams and is now studying in class eight. My father-in-law had asked me to find a B.A.-degree groom from a good family for her. I went to the drawing room and sat down. I overheard my mother-in-law rebuking my wife, "Why did you just land here without any prior notice? There is no spare room in the house. You should use some common sense." I gestured to my wife to give the packet of sweetmeats to my mother-in-law. We had gotten on the bus without eating breakfast. I made a motion with my hand as if to slap my belly to let her know that I was hungry. There was some milk beneath the bedstead. My son somehow spotted it and drank the whole bowl in one long gulp. My mother-in-law clutched her forehead with her hands and sat down, "Oh unfortunate me! I kept that milk for tea!" One of my sisters-in-law ran to my son and snatched the bowl from his hands. I think my wife slapped my son on his back once or twice.

After we finished having tea and some bread, my mother-in-law said, "There were biscuits in the house, why didn't you serve them?" I looked at my wife and she brought me two biscuits. Immediately, my two children started squabbling and then finished off both the biscuits.

My father-in-law entered the room. I went forward and touched his feet. He slowly surveyed me from top to bottom and then said with a raised eyebrow, "You look as if you've let go of appearances. What do you do now?" Seeing that I remained silent and kept my eyes on the ground--except for a "hmmmm"--- he again enquired, "What is the source of your income?" I replied, as meekly as possible, "Nothing." He looked at my son and said, "You seem to have nearly killed him. Haven't you taken him to the doctor?" My tongue slipped and I said, "Yes, I did." He looked at me again sternly, "So you don't have money to buy medicines?" He remained quiet for a while and then murmured almost to himself, "A seer of milk every day and gravy of fish curry, that's what you need to feed them." He called out to my wife, "Sadhana, come here, let me take a look at you." My wife came and bowed down to touch his feet. Looking at the ground my father-in-law sighed and said, "Can't you take the child to a doctor and at least get him some tonic-fonic?" My wife left the room. From behind a curtain my fair-skinned sister-in-law hissed at him, "You have a lot of money. Why don't you look after the treatment of your daughter and her husband." My father-in-law shouted at her to shut up.

There were sacks of rice underneath the bedstead, row upon row of them. At one time, I pointed at them and told my wife "If it's possible to get even one sack..." My wife made a face and left the room. My father-in-law also went out somewhere. I turned on the fan and lay down on the bedstead. My youngest sister-in-law screamed at the top of her voice to my mother-in-law, "Dada said he would no longer pay the electric bills. Dada swore a lot when he saw the bill for the last month. The meter read twenty five takas." My wife came and turned the fan off. Outside, the light was blinding. One couldn't see anything clearly in the room unless the lights were on. Where could I go? Lying on the bedstead the smell of rice starch hit my nostrils. I couldn't tell if it was coming from the kitchen or from beneath the bedstead. I have no idea when I fell asleep.

My father-in-law woke me up. I sat beside him at lunch. While we were eating, my father-in-law said, "You can start doing business of some sort, can't you? Look at your uncle. He has a business, now has a car and his own house. It's a pleasure talking to people about him." I ate so much that it was difficult to move afterwards. It was after a long time that I had eaten to my heart's content. When my wife came to me with betel nuts, I told her, "Is it possible to manage ten takas from your father? There's mother back home..." She asked me, "What do I tell him when I ask for the money?" I answered her, "Tell them, it's for a job application, just make up something." Then added, "Perhaps it's better if I leave today." My wife said, "But mother asked for you to stay the night. A sadhu is coming in the evening. She wants to get a talisman from him to give to you." Hearing this I thought, well, good, maybe they'd let her stay for a few days.

In the afternoon, I was strolling by myself on the platform. All over the station, I saw writing, in red, blue and black, "Power flows from the barrel of a gun...armed revolution... freedom... leap forward." I felt a bit excited as I read them. A group of youths wearing shirts and trousers were sitting on a bench arguing about the election. Prickly, stubbled faces. They were staring at me. I moved to a



Illustration by Shibanshah Nazki

bench farther away. After a while, a working-class man came and sat down beside me. The youths were still looking at me. I was laughing to myself, but at the same time my heart was also beating. The man asked me:

"Where do you stay?"

"Ashoknagar."

"What's the news of the election in your area?"

"I really don't know."

"What! You don't keep abreast of the election?"

"Hmm, I don't actually live there--a little bit outside."

Looking at me angrily, after some time, he started to tear into all the political parties one by one. He looked at me, stone-faced and hot-eyed, and said, "This time not a single vote will drop into the ballot boxes here." Noticing that I was not responding, he asked me in a grave voice, "Who have you come to see here?" I showed him the Rail quarter. "That is my in-laws' house." "Oh! So you are so and so's son-in-law? Why didn't you say that before? I thought... You can understand. These days I become suspicious as soon as I see somebody new to the area. Well, that settles it, you are family..." The man passed me a bidi--"Here"--and started almost talking to himself with a dispirited face. "This year's harvest was terrible. The people fought among themselves and ruined whatever little did grow. You know, no matter what they say, parties and politics are not for the likes of us poor people." Then one of the youths whistled at us. "That's my call, I have to go now." The man got up and walked over to the men.

It was now evening. I went back to the quarter to find that my brother-in-laws had returned from office. My youngest brother-in-law, after consulting books, was giving my son homeopathic medicine. The elder brother-in-law was writing down household accounts in a notebook and telling his younger brother, "They cheated you of twenty paisas in sugar." He stopped talking as soon as I entered the room.

It's been quite a while since my eldest brother-in-law and I have been on talking terms. After dinner I went upstairs and sat down. My eldest brother-in-law shouted at the top of his voice from downstairs, "Tell him that those days are gone. It's no longer possible to feed the entire family when they come. I have to break my back to earn money." He told my wife, "Your children are going to sleep by themselves. All this flu, coughing is very contagious. I don't have money now to spend on medicine." My father-

in-law said, "All right, all right, shut up now." My eldest brother-in-law was silent for a while, then started up again, "How can anybody get a job just sitting around indulging in adda the whole day? You have to go out and beg people, fall down on hands and knees. This bugger is useless. The only thing to do is to kick his arse out of the house."

I woke up very early. My wife had woken up before me. The maids were washing the pots and pans beneath the tap in the courtyard. I was sitting in the veranda upstairs. I overheard one of the maids saying to somebody else, "So you thought you were the clever one, eh? You thought you could make molasses by stealing the date juice?" I laughed silently upon hearing this. Felt like saying-- Good morning! Good morning!

My wife returned after washing up and said to me, "Come on, let's leave while it's still morning."

I took her hands in mine and said, "Dear sweetheart, please stay back for a few days. Have patience with me. Don't worry, our time will come one day. Just stay." She would not listen to me. I tried again, "No use getting angry at their words. Look, I haven't gotten angry. Come what may, they are family, not outsiders. Please, my dear, stay. Listen to me: Stay." But my wife wouldn't listen, so in the end I said, "Make sure you get some money from your father." Both the brothers-in-law soon left for work. In the meantime, my wife had finished packing. I saw her entering her father's room. I spotted the fair-skinned sister-in-law looking on from behind the curtain to see what her father gave Didi or said to her. She moved away as soon as I made a coughing sound. My wife left the room after some time with her fists closed, with my sister-in-law following close behind. I tried to signal my wife about it, but she didn't notice. So then I loudly called my sister-in-law by her name and said, "Do come and visit us." This time my wife understood, and quickly left the room.

It was my father-in-law who bought our tickets. After the bus started, my wife started to laugh, then showed me the bottom of the bucket bag. I put my hand down and felt rice grains. My wife had managed to spirit away some rice from the sack beneath the bedstead. I wanted to hug her tightly and kiss her. But how could one do that in the midst of so many people? Instead, I pressed my wife's hand and said, "Bravo, Bravo!"

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On George Orwell

George Orwell is the English novelist, essayist and critic, famous for his political satires ANIMAL FARM (1945), an anti-Soviet tale, and NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR (1949), which demonstrates that destruction of language is crucial to totalitarian regimes. "The essence of being human," Orwell wrote in 'Reflections on Gandhi' (in Shooting an Elephant) is that one does not seek perfection, that one is sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, that one does not push asceticism to the point where it makes friendly intercourse impossible, and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals." Last year, 2003, was the centenary of his birth.

Orwell and Us

D. J. TAYLOR

George Orwell died 54 years ago this January, in a hospital bed in central London, of the tuberculosis that had afflicted much of his adult life, yet his legacy is everywhere around us. Like Charles Dickens, perhaps the writer who comes closest to him in long-term impact, several of his more resonant utterances are used on an almost daily basis by people who have never read a line of his books. Like Dickens, too, people mysteriously know about Orwell at second hand: that all animals are equal but some are more equal than others; that Big Brother is watching you; that Room 101 is where you go to be confronted by your worst fears. No other 20th century British writer has influenced the mental lives of ordinary citizens in quite the same way; equally, no other 20th-century British writer has so dramatically colonised the view that we take of the 21st century world.

In a professional career that barely extended beyond its second decade, Orwell produced a phenomenal body of work: half-a-dozen novels, two books of blistering reportage (*The Road To Wigan Pier* and his account of six months spent fighting on the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia*), countless essays, reviews and occasional pieces for periodicals ranging from the Observer to the tiniest of little magazines. Peter Davison's magisterial edition of his *Complete Works* (1998) runs to 20 fat volumes and takes up nearly four feet of shelf space. Trying to cut a path through his groaning forest of print, and to distinguish what in the last resort separates Orwell from practically every one of his contemporaries, one returns--inevitably--to the moral scent that rises off the page like sulphur. For Orwell is, above all, a moral force, a light glinting in the darkness, a way through the murk. His status as a kind of ethical litmus paper stems not so much from the repeated injunction to 'behave decently'--and some of the implications of behaving decently for the average western lifestyle--as from the armature that supported them.

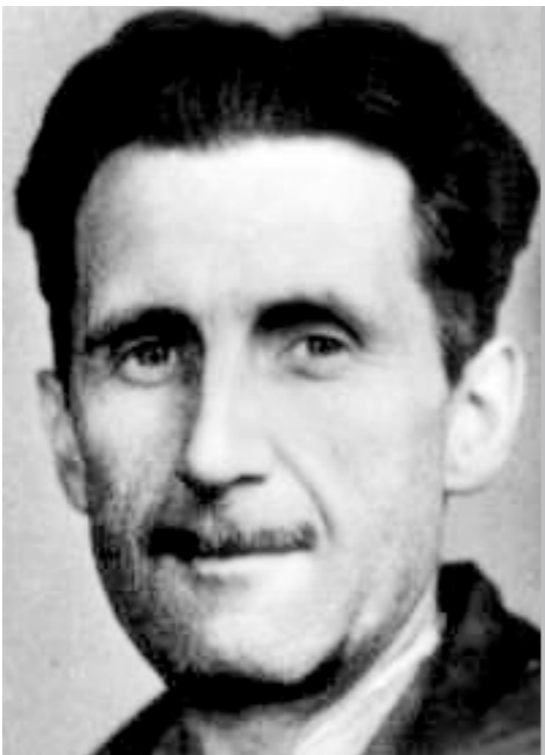
Broadly speaking he realised--and he did so a great deal earlier than

most commentators of either Right or Left--that the single most important crisis of the 20th century was the decline of mass religious belief and its corollary, personal immortality. God was dead, and yet the secular substitutes erected in His place, whether totalitarian societies of the kind exposed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or western consumer capitalism, merely travestied human ideals and aspirations. The task facing modern man, as Orwell saw it, was to take control of that immense reservoir of essentially spiritual feeling and use it to irrigate millions of ordinary and finite lives. The atrocities of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia--and this point is repeated endlessly in his later work--could only have been planned by the goddess, because they presupposed a world in which there is no moral reckoning and where the only power that matters is the ability to control your fellow men, the history of which they are a part and the knowledge on which that history rests. 'Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past,' runs the party slogan in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Man's duty, consequently, was to fight against--that eternally memorable phrase from the essay 'Inside The Whale,' published in 1940--'the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls.'

It takes only a glance at the world of international power politics to establish that Orwell--to borrow the original title of Christopher Hitchens's recent polemic--'matters' in a way that 99 out of 100 writers do not. As a reader I have always been wary of 'relevance' in literature: so often it means the cast-off manuscripts of Group Theatre, Soviet-style 'social realism,' and novels with titles like *Brixton Superfly*. All art, Orwell famously pronounced, is propaganda; equally, not all propaganda is art. At the same time it is accurate to say that in the half-century since his death, Orwell has managed to colonise our thinking about politics and language in a way that would have seemed extraordinary to the friends who gathered round his deathbed in University College Hospital. A century after his birth, all of us are living in Orwell's shadow, from the

journalist who writes a newspaper essay about 'Englishness' to the Pentagon hawk grimly surveying the divisions of the New World Order--you, me, Tony Blair and the latest asylum seeker to Europe.

In his essay on Dickens, Orwell remarked that he was the kind of writer of whom you found yourself thinking half-a-dozen times a day. In much the same way, I can never



The Club

IFTEKHAR SAYEED

"In any town in India," writes George Orwell in *Burmese Days*, "the European Club is the spiritual citadel, the real seat of the British power, the Nirvana for which native officials and millionaires pine in vain. It was doubly so in this case, for it was the proud boast of Kyauktada Club that, almost alone of Clubs in Burma, it had never admitted an Oriental to

Sometimes the first duty of intelligent men is the restatement of the obvious.

George Orwell

look at a picture of Stalin, read one of those opaque pieces of official prose put out by government departments, or even pick up a book for review, without thinking of the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Were I to come across Orwell in the celestial equivalent of the Groucho Club--not, you imagine, a place Orwell would want to be found--I should want to say to him what Larkin maintained that he said to Cyril Connolly when they met at Auden's funeral: 'Sir, you formed me.'

It is hardly exaggerating to say that he forms us all.

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membership". Thus, Orwell gives brick-and-mortar shape to the psychology of the ruler-ruled relationship that was the Raj, where a couple of hundred thousand British soldiers controlled teeming millions. He emphasizes the stuffiness of the Club by locating it right on the edge of the Irrawaddy river:

"Beyond the Club, the Irrawaddy flowed huge and ochreous glittering like diamonds in the patches that caught the sun..."

There are only seven Europeans at Kyauktada, and four thousand locals, including several hundred Indians, and "a few score Chinese". Among the former is Dr. Veraswami; among the latter is U Po Kyin, Sub-divisional Magistrate of Kyauktada. U Po Kyin's ambition is to destroy the honest

doctor; the doctor wants to join the club, since it would make him invincible against the machinations of U Po Kyin. As the good doctor explains to our anti-hero Flory, "And you do not know what prestige it gives to an Indian to be a member of the European Club. In the Club, practically he is a European."

The members naturally object to having a 'nigger' in their midst. 'He's asking us to break all our rules and take a dear little nigger-boy into this Club.'

Dr. Veraswami's admiration for the British is pathetic. "Dr Veraswami had a passionate admiration for the English, which a thousand snubs from Englishmen had not shaken. He would maintain with positive eagerness that he, as an Indian, belonged to an inferior and degenerate race." Flory and the doctor have a regularly comic conversation, in which the Englishman knocks down the English and Veraswami defends them.

Thus, in 1934, Orwell documented the mental slavery that would persist to the present day, among all the educated inhabitants of South Asia. Take Nirad C. Chaudhuri. The frank expression of cringe has perhaps flowed from his pen: "...all that was good and living within us was made, shaped and quickened by the same British rule" he observed. How like the good doctor he sounds.

Into this desiccated set of fixed relationships, enters the young and attractive Elizabeth, niece of one of the Englishmen, Tom Lackersteen. She and her aunt, Mrs. Lackersteen, quickly go about husband hunting for the girl. Flory is the designated target. However, to the very extent that Flory loves Burma, the Burmese and the life of the intellect, to that same extent does Elizabeth hate them. We get a fascinating lesson on cultural relativism in one of the scenes. (Cultural relativism is very important today, given the view that there are universal values and these are western values. Again, Orwell was ahead of his time.) In Li Yeik's shop, Flory and Elizabeth exchange their impressions of Oriental beauty.

"Do look at those women's feet!" Elizabeth whispered as soon as Li Yeik's back was turned. "Isn't it simply dreadful! How do they get them like that? Surely it isn't natural?"

Flory replies that ideas of beauty

are relative. Beauty, in short, lies in the eye of the beholder. Of course, he isn't so blunt, for he's hopelessly in love with Elizabeth by now. He says: "Those small feet are beautiful according to Chinese ideas." Here's the rest of the exchange:

"Beautiful! They're so horrible I can hardly look at them. These people must be absolute savages!"

"Oh no! They're highly civilized; more civilized than we are, in my opinion. Beauty's all a matter of taste. There are a people in this country called the Palaungs who admire long necks in women. The girls wear broad brass rings to stretch their necks, and they put on more and more of them until in the end they have necks like giraffes. It's no queerer than bustles or crinolines."

Today, The Club no longer has a physical locale. It nevertheless exists, as solid and real as any brick-and-mortar club. We, who were ruled by the British, have acquired mental habits of self-deprecation and self-abasement. We love white people: we jump out of our skin when we see a white person. We think it an honor to hobnob with the whites in London or in New York. We want to be members of The Club.

Rules of entry into the Club are simple: you have to think like white people, abandon your own culture, its values, ridicule your own civilisation and hold it in contempt; you must kowtow, not before people, but before ideas: the Burmese perform the shiko in the novel. When Flory chucks out his mistress, she bows "touching the floor with her forehead in the 'full' shiko of utter abasement."

Dr. Veraswami says: "My friend, my friend, you are forgetting the Oriental character. How is it possible to have developed us, with our apathy and superstition? At least you have brought to us law and order. The unswerving British Justice and the Pax Britannica." For 'Pax Britannica' substitute today 'Pax Americana', and you have the total picture of The Club.

After the Cold War, America reduced its military expenditure massively: you don't need weapons to control people's minds. Our admiration for America and American values sprang automatically, even though we were, and are still 'the niggers'. Nothing has changed.

The number of people here who still believe in democracy, for instance, even after the recent war

against Iraq, which should be so fresh in our memory as to obliterate all respect for Americans and American ideas, has hardly made an impression on the hardened *tabula rasa* on which deference for things Occidental has been so deeply etched since early childhood. Nothing has changed.

After the First World War, Indians, returning from the killing-fields of Europe, lost their awe of the white folk. They realised that these people were nothing better than savages, not so superior to us after all. Even a man like Dr. Veraswami, no doubt, would have abandoned his admiration for the noble Englishman. It didn't, as we have seen, last long: he was soon kowtowing again.

Then came the Second World war, when again we lost our respect for the West: the author's relatives recount how they refused sweets distributed in school after the Japanese surrender. To refuse sweets is one thing, to refuse a scholarship to a prestigious American university or an intellectual shindig in New England quite another. Nothing changed.

When Gandhi was asked, "What do you think of western civilisation?", he replied: "That would be a good idea." We forgot these words after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Algeria and the Vietnam War: nothing changed.

Our highest aspiration is still to join The Club.

Who does, finally, join the Club in *Burmese Days*? Not the benevolent Dr. Veraswami, but the scoundrel U Po Kyin. The latter incites a 'rebellion' of three people, then squashes it himself and takes the credit. His standing with the white people rises. But Flory also proves himself a hero by dispersing a riotous crowd of 2,000, and, his stock having gone up, asks that the doctor be allowed into The Club. But U Po Kyin destroys Flory: he sends Flory's mistress into the Church during prayer, screaming for money from Flory, before the Europeans, and, especially, before Elizabeth. Elizabeth refuses to forgive him, and he shoots himself. His patron dead, the doctor is finished. U Po Kyin joins the club, and acquires numerous other rewards.

Today, like yesterday, only scoundrels, it seems, can join The Club.

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