## **IMPRESSIONS**

Lord Curzon remains one of the more significant of figures in the history of British colonial rule in India. Having served as Viceroy and Governor General of India between 1899 and 1905, he reflected on his impressions of the country in a combination of the serious and the comic. The following is the second and concluding part of the article, the first part of which appeared last week. Curzon comes forth with his opinions in a manner which amuses as well as worries, depending on how you look at the manner of narration. Star Literature expresses its thanks to Mahboob Alam, former ambassador-cum-literary aesthete, for making the article available to its readers.

## Inscriptions and petitions

MARQUESS CURZON OF KEDLESTON

This correspondent had indeed a richer vocabulary than any one I have ever come across, and the epithets with which he honoured me in a correspondence extending over nearly seven years would have surprised even the compilers of the new Oxford Dictionary. I find that in addition to the adjectives already quoted, he described me at one time or another as parental, compassionate, orpulent, predominant, surmountable, merciful, refulgent, alert, sapient, notorious, meritorious, transitory, intrepid, estimable, prominent, discretional, magnanimous, mellifluous, temperate, abstemious, sagacious, free-willed, intellectual, inimitable, commendable, allaccomplished, delicious-hearted, superfine, ameliorative, impartial, benevolent, complaisant, efficient, progressive, spiritual, prudent, philanthropic, equitable. I could have sworn that he composed with a dictionary at his elbow and dipped into it at random for his adjectives, were it not that several of these no dictionary in the world would be found to contain. He even pursued me to 'England after my retirement, and described himself as 'anxiously awaiting like a peacock that is longing for drops of rain, to receive his kingdom from the so-called just and benign British Government'.

The commonest circumstances in which the Indian petitioner would appeal to the Viceroy for help were, however, in respect of domestic trouble, or private debt, desire for employment, or failure to pass the University examinations.

A young Madrasi Brahmin, twenty-four years of age, had become engaged to a girl in Europe, whereupon his family turned him out, and he appealed to me. Writing in the third person, he thus described the attitude of his lady-love:

'He has many things to be proud of, but of nothing is he more proud than the love cherished for him by his European bride. She is the only daughter of a gentleman, has two bungalows and some landed property. She loves him too much, she promises to give him some thousands and a living.

Finally, admitting, in spite of the lady's prmises, that he was quite penniless,

'he humbly requests your excellency to Christianise him and make him the agent of a Mission College for at least a year. After collecting 500 Rupees for his ship fare let him reach Europe. If he gets the sum just now, he is ready to go away to Europe at once. Poor creature, he is passing sleepless nights and shedding midnight tears on his sleepless pillow."

I am afraid I was unable to give him the narcotic that he desired. One Hindu matron, I must confess, caused me a little embarrassment; for having appealed to me for succour on every conceivable ground, her destitution, her suffering, her parents, her children, herself, she finally reached this climax:

'We have been reduced to such a great poverty and high debt that even we are now spending most of our days by starving. My intention is to meet with you, for you are the Father of my whole family. Please write me

sharp when, where and on what date.' An even more poignant note was struck in the following native petition:

'Respectfully sheweth -- That your honour's servant is poor man in agricultural behaviour and much depends on season for staff of life, therefore he prays that you will favour upon him and take him into your saintly service that he may have some permanently labour for the support of his soul and his family; wherefore he falls on his family's bended knees and implores to you of this merciful consideration to a damnable miserable like your honour's unfortunate petitioner. That your lordship's honour's servant was too much poorly during the last rains and was resuscitated by much medicines which made magnificent excavations in the coffers of your honourable servant whose means are circumcised by his large family consisting of 5 female women and 3 masculine, the last of which are still taking milk from mother's chest, and are damnably noiseful through pulmonary catastrophe in their interior abdomen. That your honour's damnable servant was officiating in several capacities in past generations but has become too much old for espousing hard labour in this time of his bodily life, but was not drunked, nor thief, nor swindler, nor any of these kind, but was always pious and affectionate to his numerous family consisting of the aforesaid 5 female women and 3 males, the last of whom are still milking the parental mother. That your generous honour's lordship's servant was entreating magistrate for employment in Municipality to remove filth, etc, but was not granted petition. Therefore your generous lordship will give to me some easy work in the department or something of this sort. For which act of kindness, your noble lordship's poor servant, will as in duty bound, pray for your longevity and procreativeness.

It will be observed that the usual plea was for immediate and profitable employment, failing which the direst results were prophesied. Thus another letter ran as follows:

'I had a very hope from your Royal Majesty's Kingdom of my success. As millions and millions are being fed, by your Royal Majesty and your Royal Majesty is worldly God on the surface of the Earth can make a poor man rich in single stroke of pen. For God's sake pray order my being taken on in any Railway or in any other Dept. for which act of charity I shall ever pray to my Maker may your Royal Majesty bathe in milk and be fruitful in children. Failing all hopes will end my life.'

Sometimes a more purely business tone prevailed. A letter which two brothers at Bombay sent out to their patrons on the death of their father, who had been the head of the firm, came to Government House. It ran as follows:

'We have the pleasure to inform you that our respected father departed this life on the 10th inst. His business will be conducted by his beloved sons whose names are given below. The opium market is quiet at Malwa 1500 rupees per chest. O death, where is they sting? O grave, where is thy victory? We remain, etc.'

The 'failed' students were, however, the most prolific class of correspondents. One such sought to disarm me by commencing with a quotation:

The greater man, the greater courtesy. Tennyson



**Lord Curzon** 

'And hence I am writing to you, dearest and most revered Lord, with all the filial love and loyalty that Hindoo subject can bestow on their King. Cause of writing is some greatest grief and sorrow that I have met with. Being a student of the Central Hindoo College I have been most unjustly and cruelly treated and been failed in Physics in the Intermediate examination of the Allahabad University. I have passed in all other subjects, in aggrigate too. I was so very well prepared that the thought of wasting one more year in the same class breaks my heart. My Physics paper too is more than sufficient to secure me pass-marks only if examined ordinarily like other boys of the Government Colleges. Putting aside all these matters we must be shown some favour at the Coronation of King Emperor Edward VI this year. At least all those who have failed in one subject should be called successful. My spirits have, as Cowper says, sunk ten degrees below par. My eyelids are heavy with sorrow. Alas! Can no body remedy. Why do I not find some one who can relieve me. Perhaps because the only remedy is success. I fear I may not take too much of your most valuable time. As a King I appeal to your majesty, as a father I seek for your sympathy.'

Another unsuccessful candidate cherished the same bright idea of turning the Coronation of King Edward VII to good account; for he wrote to me with even more ingenuous candour:

'In the honour of the King-Emperor's Coronation Your Excellency might be pleased to declare all those the Candidates of the different Examinations held by the Indian Universities this time as "passed". In order, however, to keep up the appearance of an examination, I beg to suggest that the standard of passing be reduced to such a level that nearly all the candidates may get through.'

Yet another student begged me to relieve him of the moral stigma of deliberate falsehood. An order had been issued that sixteen years should be the minimum age of entry for the Allahabad University entrance examination.

'In my inexperience,' he wrote, 'I do not understand large administrative questions. But this order threatens to be of immense evil to me. I am taught not to tell a lie. But to lose the chance of passing an examination because I shall want a few short months to complete the limit has become the cause of a severe trial to me, presenting a temptation to violate the

truth. The mischief is certain. It will determine students oscillating like me towards dishonesty. I have passed months in vain mental struggle, and have not the strength to overcome the temptation. So as a last resource I approach Y.E. to withdraw the order with a hope that I may be spared the moral degradation and may live to bless the rule of the foremost representative of a great nation.'

One 'insignificant schoolmaster in Bengal', describing himself as 'an abandoned and cursed child of alma matter, who in her infantile wrath had refused to admit him into her favour', and 'as having been left in the dark to rot on the same pay these twenty-one years', desired, 'at this fag end of life to have the honour of being a Member of Your Lordship's personal establishment'.

Sometimes an even more exacting request would be put forward. A young man who was employed in a Native Press, finding himself in grave financial straits, thus addressed me:

'Evidently I am so tired of my miserable life that on oath I say I most egregiously wish my death. It may perhaps be my foolishness to take undue advantage of Your Most Excellent Majestry's popular philanthroposy, but it is easily to be apprehended that I (a wretch of course) and not in the least way at blame when the unfathomable ways of God and the most astonishing boundaries to which necessity runs are slightly touched.'

The petitioner thereupon asked me, 'just taking him as a son', to 'rescue him on such critical moment by sending, if not more, at least Rs. 7000'.

Now and then a different vein would be explored. A correspondent who described himself as a student of Shakespeare, wrote to say that he admired my speeches:

'A wandering sinner in search of Solomon the Righteous and Solon the Wise, best identified in Your Excellency, so far as he can fathom Y.E.'s speeches, when they reach him in these untrodden wilds of India, where he reads sermons on stones, books in the running brooks, and Good Gracious God! in everything.

Another native correspondent, when I was having trouble with the Mahsud Waziris on the north-west frontier, suggested to me a quite original method of dealing with those unruly tribesmen:

'If the Waziris knew that he who represents our Queen was the giver of such help as artificial arms and legs to them, it would do more to calm the ruffled waters than any punishment is likely to do.'

On the other hand, when I made inquiries about the status of a very persistent petitioner, I was informed that he was 'addicted to wine and women; he associates himself with loud company, and there is no vice which he is not capable of. When drunk he spares nobody and even maligns his venerable grand-father-in-

While I was in India a native paper itself published the following specimen of forensic eloquence in the Mofussil, which was actually delivered by a Hindoo pleader at Barisal:

My learned friend with mere wind from a

teapot thinks to browbeat me from my legs. But this is mere gorilla warfare. I stand under the shoes of my client, and only seek to place my bone of contention clearly in your Honour's eye. My learned friend vainly runs amuck upon the sheet anchors of my case. Your Honour will be pleased enough to observe that my client is a widow, a poor chap with one postmortem son. A widow of this country, is not able to eat more than one meal a day, or to wear clean clothes, or to look after a man. So my poor client had not such physic or mind as to be able to assault the lusty complainant. Yet she has (been) deprived of some of her more valuable leather, the leather of her nose. My learned friend has thrown only an argument ad hominy upon my teeth that my client's witnesses are only her own relations But they are not near relations. Their relationship is only homoepathic. So the misty arguments of my learned friend will not hold water - at least they will not hold good water. Then my learned friend has said that there is on the side of his client a respectable witness, viz., a pleader, and since this witness is independent so he should be believed. But your Honour, with your Honour's vast experience, is pleased enough to observe that truthfulness is not so plentiful as blackberries in this country, and I am sorry to say, though this witness is a man, of my own feathers, that there are in my profession black sheep of every complexion, and some of then do not always speak gospel truth. Until the witness explains what has become of my client's nose leather he cannot be believed. He cannot be allowed to raise a castle in the air by beating upon a bush. So, trusting in that administration of British justice upon which the sun never sits, I close my case.

Finally, I will conclude with the following veracious summary of the Life of Henry VIII, which was written by the Babu student at about the same time:

'Henry the Eighth was a good looking man, he had a red beard, he was very well proportioned, but he had a hot temper. He was very religious and he pulled down a great deal of churches and monasteries, he built Colleges with them and schools with them too, the school he called the Blue Coat School, and a College called Oxford College. He turned the monks out who were rich once but had to go into the workhouse afterwards, he married Katherine of Arrogant for twenty years. He got to know Anne Beloyn; she waited on Katherine that is how he got to know her. Anne became a Queen and Katherine was sent away. She became religious and became a monk.

Henry got to hear things about Anne, and she had her head cut off though the things were not true, for she had but a little neck. Henry was left a widow, but he soon got married again-this time it was to Jane Seymour.

He liked Jane Seymour, she had a son a few days after she died. So Henry was a widow again, and he married another Anne; this time Anne Cleves this Anne he did not like, for she was floundering mare, and not Pretty so he sent her away again and gave her some gold to life upon without him, while he got married to another Katherine Howard. She was not a very good wife, and Henry got to hear things again as he did before - so she had her head cut off, and he married Katherine Parr who looked after his bad legs."

## **FICTION**

## A meal at a Chinese restaurant

LATIFUL QUADER

Hashikul has been briefing Nirmal-babu on the development, and Nirmal-babu has increasingly been feeling inadequate to advise him on this. Nirmal-babu himself has been learning about going abroad this way for higher studies. Hashikul has told him that all the hassles of processing this are being taken care of by the consultants.

Earlier that day, Hashikul and Nirmal-babu visited the consultants' office, where an advisor allowed them half an hour of his time after keeping them in waiting for an hour in the reception. The bespectacled young man sounded slightly peeved as he explained to them the benefit of processing the application through them, and didn't take notice of Nirmal-babu's probing of the course syllabus and education facilities. He gave him a typed paper, which detailed the documents that must be 'arranged' and a contract form to sign. Hashikul looked and folded them, on the assumption that Nirmal-babu would see them later and advise. The advisor addressed Hashikul as 'Sir' and was talking mostly direct to him, occasionally eyeing Nirmal-babu, and answering calls on his mobile. At one point, he said that they had a panel of experienced teachers who would even do the course assignments and write up the thesis of students from Dhaka

on a piecemeal basis, for set fees. He told them that their teachers were more experienced, and taught in more reputed universities, than the teachers who were employed by rival consultants to provide the same service. It was one of the reasons why more and more students were choosing their firm. He showed them to the exit and firmly shook Hashikul's hand, saying that he had taken a wise decision by coming to them, but must affirm soon his commitment to do business, as the laws could change soon. He then casually stretched out his hand to Nirmal-babu to allow him a courtesy hand shake. Hashikul set off for his hotel confirming that he would have his dinner at Nirmal-babu's on his way to the bus station.

Unknown to both of them, the advisor after going back to his chamber pressed some numbers on his mobile. When Lytton answered, at the other end, he briefed him about the meeting and reassured him [Lytton] of his 10% commission on the totality of the consultancy fees.

Ovi is closely watching a program on Iceland on National Geography, as part of his personal orientation program of the West. He has decided to work, live and study, among the USA, Canada, UK, Australia, Germany, Sweden, Russia, Finland

or Cyprus. And Avita is casually flicking through the

pages of Filmfare, rotating her eyes between its pages and the tv screen and monitoring the audibility level of Nirmal-babu's voice while assessing if it is reaching Niladri. Niladri and his aunt have just popped in unannounced and are being attended to by Avita, Ovi and Krishna in turn. Avita is there because her mother Krishna had summoned her earlier to the kitchen.

"Stay there, God knows what they'll be giving off", she has whispered to Avita.

"Give him dinner mother, or why don't I usher them into Baba's bedroom?"

"No", said Krishna. She has balanced the risks of letting Hashikul see their bedroom, where they have separate beds, and Niladri forming an opinion of the world of Hashikul and Nirmal-babu. Hashikul's bus will leave at 8.30. The bus station is half an hour by rickshaw from here. It will take fifteen minutes to eat and it is 7.15 now. His dinner is almost ready. Will Avita help?

Avita surely will. There are certain compasses of life where Avita sees eye to eye with her mother, no matter how outdated she is becoming as the days go by. And here, they are buddies. Her parents could be a source of embarrassment for Ovi and her at times; together or individually, whether they act in unison, or while at loggerheads. And Avita knows how to use or discard

both or either of them to her advantage, particularly when it concerns her self- image, which she frequently practices with certain tact, as and when it suits her.

Keeping up the pretence with Niladri these days, after her engagement with him, is of preeminent importance. At least, until Niladri's sister Sreya and her husband Shouvik come to Dhaka next month from USA, when they will meet her for the first time; until Borodi (Kobita) and Rishit and Kanta arrive from Dubai to bless Niladri; but foremost, until the day the god of fire has witness them moving round and round in circles until the count of seven, while one end of her Benarasi is kept knotted tightly with one end of Niladri's dhoti.

Till then Niladri should be cocooned to remain in the dark about certain facts. Or rather should be in a state of hazy twilight-zone like stupor, so that when the truth eventually surfaces, or allowed to be known, there are all covering plausible explanations. That Ovi has scored miserably in his IELTS and doing his MBA in 'The Harvard University of Bangladesh'; and that Nirmal-babu's third brother is a compounder at a doctor's clinic at Boishali Upozilla and his only son, who is called Liltu, converted (taking the name Mossaddek Ali, Akash) to marry a Muslim girl. But they need not be seen to or seen by,

notwithstanding Niladri. And essentially, that the birthday meal out will be the first time that Nirmal-babu has ever stepped inside a Chinese

restaurant. "Can you hear him from here?"

Both have agreed that he is just audible, but raising the tv volume will have them lose their conversations, and the bedroom where Niladri is now is a bit further down. Avita goes in to the sitting room: she could interfere in the conversation to change the subject, should it become necessary, or divert Hashikul's interest towards her in conversation, which would be easier, or guide back Niladri to the veranda if he wanders in the sitting room to join in the conversation. He could be a bit raw, at times, and annoyingly

unassuming like that. "You have to understand", Nirmal-babu continues with Hashikul, "It is not fully dark, rather shadowy."

"Oh?"

"Still, you can see and read the menu, that type of darkness", Nirmal-babu beams, sensing Hashikul's interest.

"I see", Hashikul murmurs.

(The first segment of this story appeared on

Saturday before last. To be continued)