

Maharani of Coochbihar Indira Devi was playing host to the young king of Jaipur Jai Singh in Kolkata. The king had been in courtship with princess Gayatri Devi, the Maharani's daughter. Gayatri had just played tennis with Jai Singh beating him hands down and went on to her mother to give a run down of how she won. And then she casually suggested to her mother that she might try a hand in tennis with the king of Jaipur. This time Jai Singh won convincingly against what turned out to be 'a weak opponent' in the Maharani.

The Maharani had only this comment to make to her betrothed daughter: "Well, he wasn't playing tennis with you; but he did it with me." How eloquent and witty a remark strung out in a few words was epitomized by Maharani. By the standards of the day, it was a straightforward mother - daughter sharing of a moment of candour, something common in a super elitist circle in British India. In today's hyper-sensitive context, it might be termed sexist.

From maharani, princess and a king, we turn to the legendary statesman of a British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill and the first woman MP in the



Sir Winston Churchill

OF WIT:
DISARMING
AND
DEVASTATING

SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

House of Commons Lady Nancy Astor. The lore of anecdotes from imperial Britain is regaled with gems of which here is a selection: When Nancy Astor of Virginia, USA became the first-ever woman member of the British parliament in 1919 she arrived to an unfriendly reception on the floor of the House. When she tried to take a seat, the male members literally scurried away in an apparent gesture of boycott. The BBC feature which ran a story on her depicted the torrid beginnings of women's representation and empowerment through parliament. Lady Astor remained MP till 1945 and often got enmeshed in political banter with Churchill.

There was that famous exchange in a battle of sexes as it were between Sir Winston and Lady Astor



Lady Nancy Astor



Maharani Gayatri Devi

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Astor was not to be left behind; she retorted, "Mr Churchill should know that he is not handsome enough that I would chase him to the bathroom."

which left little unsaid. Churchill said something to this effect, "Whenever I see her, I feel like I am in a toilet, with a sponge to hide my ..."

Astor was not to be left behind; she retorted, "Mr Churchill should know that he is not handsome

enough that I would chase him to the bathroom." May be those were not her exact words but that is what she meant.

There is one famous quote of Churchill: "The top cannot take what the bottom can't endure."

Something in this category belongs a Ronald Reagan aphorism; "Government is like a baby: a huge appetite at one end and no sense of responsibility at the other."

Wit obviously is not something to pontificate about; it is self-explicable, easy to understand and appreciate. It can come in subtle, lighthearted forms. Or it may be disarming, even devastating for a person taken a crack at. But it has always been a convenient tool of appreciation, critical or otherwise, of a person or an organisation without intent to cause any offence to the receiving side. However, it does provoke repartee sometimes, making the whole thing entertaining, insightful and educative.