

## COMMENT

MANOJ DAS

## Passages on India



DO you know that you figure in a silly way in a book bearing as pompous a title as *Om: Indian Pilgrimage*, by one Moorhouse?" asked a friend.

I did not know. But the author's name sounded familiar. I remembered. While preparing a special number of *The Heritage* on Calcutta, I had read a number of books. One was by Geoffrey Moorhouse. A passage in his book brought me the sort of sadness you feel when a man accuses someone you love (I am not a Bengali though) and you cannot dismiss the accusation.

On the individual being gheraoed, he wrote: "It is irrelevant for a brave Westerner to wonder why a man in such a predicament does not charge the mob and try to battle his way through them; the man knows perfectly well that they would beat him to death... Tram-burning is almost a curricular activity among students in Calcutta... People are quite often found decapitated round here, or stabbed or axed to death." What could this 'brave Westerner' write about me?

But I forgot about it and my friend's cynicism did not affect my orthodox respect for Westerners braving our sub-continent and producing literature. I was still under the spell of writers like Cousins and Nevinson.

While leaving for Delhi, I jumped at the suggestion by our librarian that I buy some recent books on India by foreign travellers.

Here is *City of Djinn*s by William Dalrymple. He is in an office in Delhi where the officer, already harassed by applicants must respond to yet another visitor, a candidate for elections in need of a phone. "My name is Sunil Gupta — please call me Sunny," he says and goes on to recite his bio-data. "I was a founder member-cum-chairman of the Religious and Social Institute of India, Patna branch..." His actions and designations spread over several paragraphs and also the claim that he had been jailed by the British four times!

We meet such characters galore, but the surprising thing is, one casual hearing and the author remembers every word of it! Of course, when Gupta laments his fate, looking at the author, the number of his jail terms has become seven.

Then there is the author's encounter with the Indian English. "Yesterday Sikh temple going with family. First going god, Puja doing. Afterwards whisky and German beer drinking, taxi-stand party having."

The great hunt for Indian English continues through book after book. In *Ram Ram India*, author Alex Thomson quotes a district magistrate (should belong to IAS). "Please, you must be careful with our doctor's speaking. He is having very strong accents and sometimes he is being difficult to hear with correctness."

All these travellers are gifted with phenomenal memory. Christina Noble (*At Home In The Himalayas*) reproduces the whole draft of a poor postmaster's application which she seems to have glanced through, for this special effect with Indian English. By the way, did you think the Indian rustic mistaking a Ph.D for a medical doctor was dead long since? But he is back with Christina Noble and asks a university teacher, "Will you do a sperm counting for me...?"

Alas, compassion alone sustains these travellers. "This was a dirty train..." and the filth is catalogued. (*A Goddess In The Stones*; Norman Lewis). And here is almost poetry: "The shops were tedious, the beggars merciless; the traffic odious and the air noxious." (*Indian Balm*; Paul Hyland).

I had forgotten *Om: An Indian Pilgrimage*. The book popped up in a fresh paperback edition, abundantly available in India. After the lethal gas-using Japanese Sect's use of Om, Moorhouse using it, atop each chapter of his book, pales into pardonable frivolity. And his pilgrimage? Why at Pondicherry did Sri Aurobindo "secretly hanker all his life for masses of people to humble themselves before him in this way"?

The provocation is too infantile to deserve any explanations on the tradition of Samadhi, but what is amusing is the blissful surety with which Moorhouse records misinformation, such as the Samadhi is shadowed by a neem tree and a woman sits nearby selling flowers!

The bewildering question is, why did he make a 'pilgrimage' at all? To tell the world about a hotel, a certain tension in its kitchen etc? Of course not. He came for enlightenment, and no wonder that he should gatecrash into a talk by me, on "The Hour of the Unexpected". His report:

"By the time he began in the floodlit garden of the school, addressing us from a table and chair set up beneath a tree, scores of people sat around him in the lotus position, on tarpaulins that had been considerably spread beforehand so that we shouldn't get our bottoms damp. Yet more had entered, so that when the microphone

was switched on and the professor's mellifluous voice began to caress the night, it was standing room only on every side. For forty minutes I followed him attentively, but with a growing sense of desperation: for, by then, he had scarcely finished reviewing the Bandung Conference of 1955 and was only just lining up his major theme, which was that the upheavals of the past year or two in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were simply an evolutionary change in the fortunes of mankind. Everyone but me appeared to be riveted by these disclosures; at least, I noticed no one else fidgeting."

I had not spoken on the Bandung Conference of 1955, but on a student conference at Bandung in 1956 when I had a midnight meeting with D. N. Aidit, the chief of the Indonesian Communist Party who was sure that he would capture power in 10 years. I referred to this to explain how his plan misfired, resulting in a bloody civil war, as one among a series of events to emphasise the element of the unexpected in the world today. In a talk that lasted 45 minutes, Bandung claimed hardly four minutes.

It was the time of The Mother's birthday. Hence the audience consisted of hundreds of visitors, including scores of Westerners. What happened to Moorhouse alone? How could he be in a state of hallucination for 40 minutes hearing only the Bandung Conference?

Curiosity goaded me to write to Moorhouse, care of his publishers, asking why he made such a colossal exaggeration and why he was unkind to this stranger. (He has used an uncultured adjective for me.)

In reply, he asked me to read the comments on the jacket of his book and asserted, "I do have something of a reputation for integrity, not only in my country but also in yours!" He concluded, offering me 'condolences'.

Does this answer my queries? I need not comment.

I remembered a story: Two officials of the early East India Company, back in London, were narrating their Indian adventure. "As I raised my head after a dip in the Ganges, what should I see but a Royal Bengal tiger on the bank. Begone! I roared, splashing water. It fled."

"True", said his colleague. "I saw the tiger and stroked its moustache. It was wet!"

It is still wet, not only for the countrymen of such travellers, but also for us Indians. As recommended by Moorhouse, I read the blurb. "He is excellent on Pondicherry," certifies K. Natwar Singh. ■

(The author is a well-known writer.)