



On duty for Republic Day

So here I sit, soon after the crack of dawn, astride an old wooden chair, positioned dead centre behind a microphone on a tall metal stand. To my left, with jet-black hair and dressed like an Indian queen in white sequined saree, sits the school's head: a somewhat formidable figure, attending her final Republic Day parade.



To my right, a considerably more jovial character, the white-mustachioed Mr Mirchandani: new owner and director of the school, in crisp white suit and bright blue tie. When standing, the top of his shiny bald head with white 'Friar Tuck' fringe, reaches up to my chest. I feel a bit conspicuous in my open-necked, bright turquoise shirt ... and sandals!

In the distance and through the dust I see about a million children adorned in khaki-coloured uniforms, with a battalion of very focused drummers in their front line. After a while the drumming ceases and two of the khaki blur separate from the rest, marching forward in perfect unison, to give a dusty foot stamp and precision salute, in front of me. My throat dries in anticipation of having to speak to this multitude. I fumble in my shirt pocket and produce a scrap of paper with a few hastily written notes scrawled on it from the night before. Like my attire, it seems a bit inadequate for the occasion.

Looking back, it's hard to remember how many times I've sat in that middle seat as *Chief Guest* for some function or other. It was part of the job, but secretly the part I loathed; I never saw myself as better than the rest ... and that included kids. I disliked what seemed to be something of a throw-back to colonial times (with white ruler front and centre), but I never said no. I realized this could upset the applecart, causing offence. As a remedial measure I attempted to keep my pearls of wisdom to a minimum, to counter other podium speakers, who would gabble on into the sunset.



Later in the day I am to be found at Sun-n-Sands on Juhu Beach. There'd been a small spat with the auto rickshaw driver enroute, so now I sit overlooking the ocean, with a glass of wonderfully cold ale on the glass-topped table. The

beggars down below on the sand look up and call out to me, in hopes of a stray coin. My mood is decidedly morose. I'm deep in thought about the bad behaviour I had shown to the *rickshaw-wallah*, who was probably illiterate and most likely had a wife and kids to support. I knew better and should have counted to ten – or one hundred – then re-considered my approach.

The beer in front of me is shrouded in yellow napkin – a privilege, I am told, for tourists and *Non-Resident Indians* – or NRIs, as they're known here – on what is a dry day for all other mortals. I love Indians, but why reduce everything to acronyms? With some care, I tear away the tissue to drink the chilled lager, thus avoiding consuming a mouthful of wet paper, while still observing some semblance of legality and decorum. The trials of life for us privileged souls!

“Republic Day is dry? I hadn’t realised.

Let’s drink to that!”

Duncan Gregory

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The Rickshaw Wallah and I

*I’ve just established bad relations
Between fellow man and I,
And now regretting
This irksome deed
Sit in search of an alibi.*

*The richshaw wallah, a faceless man,
Didn’t know where to go,
So, I stormed away,
No payment made:
A rather despicable show.*

*He spoke Marathi, no English tongue,
And probably came from far.
Why should he know
This ‘Sun ‘n’ Sands,
To serve the foreign Tzar?*

*Now I sit secure above Juhu Beach,
With Hayward’s brew to hand.
The drink cost more
Than his daily pay,
Does that make me feel so grand?*

*I muse on this point of relations,
I have time to do that you see.
I don’t have to climb into
My three-wheeled cab
And work from dawn till tea.*

Duncan Gregory

Sun ‘n’ Sands, Juhu Beach, Mumbai 2003

Backgrounder

Over the years I attended many school events as that person in the centre seat: the invited guest. It wasn’t my favourite part of the job, but to refuse would be to cause offence. This particular school – St Johns - was the first one I ever visited some years before, and a firm favourite.

After the event depicted, and on the way back to base I opted for a cool beer at Sun ‘n’ Sands, overlooking Juhu Beach. On the way there, I lost my temper with the rickshaw-wallah (the auto-rickshaw driver); he either couldn’t understand my directions or had no idea how to get to the hotel. Later, I felt repentant because of my irresponsible actions. I was there to help build understanding and empathy between Australia and India; not wreck it! “Practice what you preach, or go back to where you came from,” I told myself.

The fact there is a napkin around the beer glass, is because *Republic Day* is deemed an alcohol-free day, for everyone except non-residents. But even for those permitted to imbibe, the drink should not be obvious to others. Discretion is called for.