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## Strictly Come Dancing ... India-Style

It was a baffling experience. Why would men – and men only - sit drinking beer, or whatever their tipples, whilst watching a fashion show, which consisted of young ladies walking around and around in a circle, endlessly; fully decked out in colourful sarees and salwar kameez? They were all dressed exquisitely. Could that be the clue?

My travelling companion Frank, and I, had wanted to get off the hot Mumbai street and into somewhere with cool air, for a cold drink. Unknowingly we found ourselves being ushered into this dimly lit cavern, in some nondescript area of the city, past a succession of handshakes and warm welcomes, as if we were old and valued guests. I knew I had not been there before, and I was pretty certain Frank hadn't either.

*“When in Rome and all that, just go with the flow,”* I thought to myself.

The street outside had been dusty and grimy and hot ... extremely hot! In stark contrast to the heat and traffic noise we left in our wake, a wonderfully cool blast of air from The Arctic and deafening music greeted us as we were guided by the maitre d (we were obviously unusual, but very valued clients) to one of several remaining ring-side tables.

Then, perhaps discretion got the better – and thank God it did, considering what was to transpire – as we looked around and spotted a table in a darker corner, further back from the strobe-lit centre circle. Finally, seated in that more secluded space, we surveyed the scene, throwing quizzical glances at each other as we settled into what

was, to say the least, a quite unexpected environment. We both thought we had walked into a restaurant or bar for a cool ale, but this was something surprisingly different.

Once my eyes got used to the dim light, I could see that a central area in the place was surrounded by three banks of tables and perhaps half of these were occupied by Indian men, mostly in western clothes and seated in pairs, with a couple of larger groups and a few in solitary confinement, sitting on their own. Discussions in the pairs or groups appeared quite animated - especially between men on the front row, closest to the playing field, one could say – though because of the blaring Bollywood music, these seemingly vigorous conversations were assumed, rather than heard.

A dozen or so very beautiful young ladies dressed in a variety of bright and arresting colours paraded around the circle, moving with a flowing rhythm, their bodies swaying in time to the pulsating music. The men watching - in between their quite vibrant deliberations – appeared to focus intently on certain ladies in the parade. Occasionally one of these *models* would disappear through a side door, only to be replaced by another equally vivacious female with long dark tresses.

Time passed and we ordered a second drink, which came with another tasteful array of spicy snacks.

*“I think it must be your turn to pay the bill, Frank.” I joked, assuming that the drinks and eats would not be cheap.*

*“No, no.... I paid yesterday! ...near the place where we saw the mongoose and the snake. You don't remember?”*

I remembered of course. *“But what I can't understand Frank,”* – I had to shout into his ear to be heard – *“Is what all these men are doing here.”*

Just then – as if in response to some undisclosed signal – I noticed one man with a wad of rupee notes, which he started to throw at the circular catwalk. Another man, seated nearby, then leaned over and began to push some of the notes into a purple sash that was tied loosely around one lady's waist. Given this lead, like the shot from a starting

gun, other men began to follow suit, throwing money with abandon at the catwalk and stuffing it into the nearest lady's waistband, until the floor was awash with notes and many of the women were garlanded with scores of rupees, of all denominations. The most involved males were even standing and applauding, and - we presumed - making encouraging noises towards the parade of females.

We both stared for a while at what was going on in front of us, then turned back to face each-other.

*"Ah."* said Frank (he was one prone to slow but astute deliberations), *"Now I think I get the picture. Perhaps we'll leave after this one. What do you say?"*

The next day, we were with an Indian colleague, a close lady-friend of mine whom I had known for many years, trying to explain - with a certain degree of embarrassment - where we had been and what we had seen.

She stared at us at first in what seemed like disbelief, then made a dismissive gesture, saying simply: *"Oh, that place. Not such a good place for you to be, really. I should have warned you both."*

We quickly moved on to another topic.

Later, I questioned another Indian friend - a male this time - who seemed not so circumspect.

*"It's all good, harmless fun,"* he remarked, looking out of the window, and not meeting my eye. *"These places are all over Mumbai. I've been myself a few times, before I was married that is; but nowadays I find better ways to spend my time."*

I think my friend caught the knowing look between Frank and I, in response to his statement. *"Oh, that's OK then."* Frank was off the mark quicker than me this time. *"We thought it was just a bit unusual, that's all. The beer was good though."*