

ANCESTRAL VOICES

'Why are the British so obsessed with the Raj?' was a question which cropped up repeatedly when I travelled round India last year, recording interviews for the Radio 4 series, *Indian Tales of the Raj*. I interviewed more than fifty people who had lived and worked with the British when they were there. Once awakened, their memories were prolific; but there was little trace of nostalgia, none of the yearning for the good old days which one is so used to hearing from British 'survivors'. Instead, there was polite bewilderment that anyone should be interested in the Raj almost four decades after it ended.

A couple of Indian 'survivors' were less than polite, like 83-year-old J. R. D. Tata, head of India's most cosmopolitan and patrician business dynasty, who flatly refused to record his memories of a humiliating colonial past. Another reluctant aristocrat was Lady Ranu Mukherji, wealthy doyenne of the Calcutta arts world, who is believed by some to have been the prototype for Paul Scott's Lady Chatterji. She made it clear that she was too busy arranging a local exhibition to spare any time for the Raj. Some of my own contemporaries of the post-independence generation were even more negative – shouldn't the BBC, they asked, be examining instead the far more invasive American influence of today; or better still, looking ahead to India's own arrival in the computer age?

Was I, after all, conjuring up the ghosts of a vanished era that had become irrelevant outside the pages of British fiction? My own childhood memories told me otherwise. The Raj I inherited had more to it than princes, tigers and mem-sahibs in distress; and its legacies were all the more pervasive for being so easily taken for granted.

Born three months after independence, I had grown up in a family, or rather two families, as proud of their services to empire as of their resistance to it. Some of my earliest memories were of my grandparents and the bedtime stories I coaxed and cajoled out of them. The stories were their own, not read from books; and they were an entertainment more avidly anticipated and consumed than any since. Through my gauze mosquito-net in a darkened room, all I saw were faceless, grey shadows, caught occasionally in the light of an open doorway. But in that nebulous hour between wakefulness and sleep, their voices transported me to a world where history was often stranger than fantasy.

My maternal grandmother, in particular, seemed to epitomise all that was most dashing and glamorous about the family's past: the only Indian woman to drive a phaeton, at full tilt, through the streets of old Kanpur (or Cawnpore, as the British called it); the first to make

speeches in the legislature of the then United Provinces;¹ and the first in the province to dance with a British governor.

Life for her, I learned as I grew older, had not always been easy. A north Indian Hindu of the *Kayasth* or scribe caste, she had married at fourteen the eldest son of a destitute landowner who had gambled away his wealth. In a remarkably audacious change of lifestyle and career, my grandfather, then sixteen, had decided to restore the family fortunes by training as a textile engineer in Manchester. He sailed for England, and my grandmother, only fifteen, went with him.

Life in Edwardian England cannot have been easy for a shy, teenaged, Indian wife who spoke no English. But in later years, she made light of her difficulties and laughed about how she drove her English teacher to distraction by insisting on 'soap' at table and 'soup' in the bathroom.

When they returned from England to the northern industrial centre of Kanpur, my grandfather's new, Western qualifications, coupled with hard work and a shrewd business acumen, worked like a magic wand. Starting as a technician in the British-owned New Victoria Textile Mill, he was successful enough to buy out its British proprietor within a decade. Making skilful use of the colonial managing agency system and the tax concessions offered by the princely states,² he went on to establish a chain of other family-owned companies across northern India. From business to politics was a small step for him; but unlike other Indian industrialists of his generation, he was an ardent empire loyalist till the bitter end. As an Executive Councillor, or member of the viceregal cabinet, in the 1940s, his opposition to Indian nationalism was hawkish even by British standards; and the Raj rewarded his loyalty with three separate orders of knighthood.

He died before I was old enough to remember him; but a silver-framed, full-length portrait of him still graces my mother's drawing-room, his bespectacled, pugnacious, brown face glaring defiantly from the eighteenth-century ceremonial garb of a viceregal councillor – buckled shoes, white hose and knee-breeches, a gold-braided tail-coat glittering with medals, a ceremonial sword by his side, and a plumed hat under his arm. Led on by such glittering prizes, my mother's parents dined and danced with the British and organised grand tiger-shoots for them; and the children graduated from a British governess to British schools and universities. But by the standards of the far more westernised metropolis of Bombay, where I grew up, they still seemed strongly rooted in a feudal, north Indian culture – equally at home in Urdu and English, connoisseurs of Indian classical music and dance, though fond of Western theatre and ballet. They were practising though not orthodox Hindus, who celebrated

1 Now UP or Uttar Pradesh, India's largest and most populous state, in the northern, Hindi-speaking heartland.

2 India's nearly six hundred princely or native states covered roughly a third of the sub-continent. Though under the paramountcy of the British Crown, they were on a different constitutional footing from British India proper and enjoyed a fair measure of autonomy in fiscal and other administrative matters. After the British left, the states were integrated into independent India and Pakistan.

festivals like *Diwali* and *Holi*¹ with as much enthusiasm as Christmas. Their meals seemed to sum up their eclecticism – rich *Mughlai*² food at lunch, eaten with the hands off traditional silver *thalis*, and Anglo-Indian roasts and soufflés for dinner.

My father's family, Bombay Parsis,³ were a rather different kettle of fish. By the time I knew them, they might almost have been British-born, and indeed prided themselves on being temperamentally more 'Anglo-Saxon' than Indian. But curiously enough, their very anglicism made them politically far less loyal to the British than my maternal relatives. This was because their particular brand of westernisation owed much less to Anglo-Indian social fashions than to an austere Victorian ethic which stressed integrity, hard work and discipline and shunned the more ostentatious and hedonistic revelry of the Raj. My paternal grandfather was the first Indian to become Municipal Commissioner of Bombay and Vice-Chancellor of its university; but his leisure hours were spent, not socialising with the British, but on philanthropic endowments and on the writing of scholarly historical and anthropological works. Although he decided that it would be churlish to refuse the knighthood that the Raj conferred on him, he promptly hid it away in a drawer and preferred to be known as plain 'Mr'.

My parents had grown up in the inter-war decades, when the nationalist movement was reaching its peak, and their tales of the Raj were about youthful rebellion rather than the glories of empire. My father could look back on a long career of civil disobedience and imprisonment, starting in 1932. My grandfather ordered him out of the house for his socialist activities; but father and son had continued to meet once a week for lunch, when my grandfather supplemented the meagre rations of a full-time political activist with a good meal at Bombay's Grand Hotel. My mother, too, had stories of her student days during the Quit India movement of the 1940s, when her sisters and she smuggled confidential information from her father's official files to the Congress underground and shouted anti-British slogans when the Viceroy came to dinner. My parents' elopement itself caused something of a sensation in 1945, not only because inter-marriage between different communities was still rare, but because the daughter of such a die-hard loyalist was marrying a prominent nationalist.

When I appeared on the scene two years later, the British had left; and both generations of my elders – nationalist parents and loyalist grandparents – seemed to miss the romance and adventure of times past. British rituals lingered on in our home. My parents spoke only English to each other and to me, and followed British social etiquette down to the last crease in the damask napkins at their dinner-table. Most of our servants had worked for British masters and addressed their new

1 *Diwali* is the Festival of Lights which marks the Hindu New Year, and *Holi* is the colourful Hindu festival of spring.

2 The north Indian cuisine which originated in the Mughal courts.

3 India's smallest and most westernised minority, the Parsis were eighth-century migrants from pre-Islamic Persia.

employers as 'Sahib' and 'Mem-Sahib'; I was 'Baba'. I particularly remember our impressive, mustachioed butler, a north Indian Muslim, whom my mother triumphantly brought back with her after one of her visits to her parental home. He had spent his youth as valet to a British ICS officer, who had retired in England, but with whom he still corresponded regularly. Since the Sahib wrote in English, which Nanhey Khan, as he was called, could neither read nor write, I acted as his translator and scribe. I was to find his tales of serving the sahibs almost as inventive and enticing as the cooking of his British-trained brother, who later joined the household as our cook and produced every winter the best Christmas pudding I have ever eaten.

All that, of course, was a long time ago in the 1950s; and my family belonged to a tiny minority – a few thousand among several hundred millions. But it says a great deal about independent India that we never felt we were the odd ones out. I went to school with children who either came from a similar background or wished they had. It was an Anglican school, whose principal was an elderly, red-faced Englishman with a machine-gun stutter, appropriately named Mr Gunnery. The teachers were mostly younger Britons or 'Anglo-Indians' (in the sense of mixed race). We affluent Indians looked down upon the racially hybrid 'Anglos', as we called them; but we adopted more of their values than we realised.

At morning assembly, we sang British hymns, chanted the Lord's Prayer and heard prefects reading the lesson for the day from the Bible. In the classroom, we prided ourselves on being good at English literature and history and scorned the Indian languages which had been made compulsory by government decree. In some ways, we were even less Indian than our parents, who had grown up under the Raj. My mother took her Master's degree in English literature, and she dined, danced and played golf with the British at Bombay's exclusive Willingdon Club. But she had also studied Sanskrit and Urdu and trained in classical Indian dance. Resistance to Anglo-Indian culture was clearly stronger when Indians were still fighting British rule.

Schools like mine are still crucial stepping-stones to the more select colleges founded during the Raj. When we of the convent schools, as Indians call them, arrived at university, we had to rub shoulders with a still-silent majority from the Indian-medium or vernacular schools, of whose very existence we had been scarcely aware. But with English as the medium of instruction, we were still the chosen few. We dominated the lecture-rooms, the debating societies, college plays and magazines, and became the favourites of the lecturers, some of whom had British degrees. As for the 'vernaculars', as we contemptuously labelled them, we made fun of their Indian English and their orthodox ways. And when, against all odds, they sometimes beat us at examinations, we did not really care. We knew we would still fare better in the job stakes and in admissions to the British or American universities on which we had set our sights.

Those of us who did make it to Oxbridge often found it a rude awakening. We discovered how the children of the old Anglo-India must have felt when they arrived after long absence in the mother-country. Our

picture of Britain was received from parents and teachers who had studied there thirty years ago. And so we had to start afresh, discarding our hopelessly old-fashioned tweeds and conventions for the Beatlemania of the Sixties. Since then, the arrival of American film and television culture in India has narrowed the time-lag between the fashions of its upper class and those of the West. But the power of that class and the gulf that divides it from other Indians is, if anything, wider.

Reflecting on this growing gap between India's rich and poor, between the ostentatious, five-star luxury of the urban élite and the crisis of rural unemployment and landlessness, prominent political scientists and development economists have discerned in independent India a new colonial domination of the urban centres, where wealth and decision-making are concentrated, over their rural hinterland. If there is a new internal colonialism, Indians of my generation and class are undoubtedly its guardians – captains of its industry and professions, editors of its newspapers and other media, and front-men for its political parties. And for us the Raj still has a relevance, not merely because we are its legacy, but because we have lost what was best in our colonial heritage: the idealism and courage, scholarship and versatility of an older generation which accepted the challenge of the West without being conquered by it.

The experience of that generation of Indians could also be a long-awaited antidote to the Western Raj-mania which many Indians find so irksome. One of the most galling legacies of empire is that its story has so far been told almost entirely by the former colonial rulers. The understandable nostalgia of British 'survivors', confined to Cheltenham and Tunbridge Wells after the wide, open spaces where they ruled the destinies of millions, has inevitably coloured contemporary British perceptions of the Raj, turning it into a sort of equivalent of the American Wild West. In this mythical, imperial frontier, with its swashbuckling heroes, lost jewels and far pavilions, Indians themselves have tended to dwindle into colourful but insignificant specks on an exotic landscape, figuring either as opulent and scheming potentates or as noble savages tamed into loyal soldiers and servants.

The British, it is sometimes said, have never paid much heed to what other races think of them; and this was one of their greatest weaknesses in the heyday of empire. But perhaps the time has come when they can begin to see themselves as Indians saw them; not the princes they propped up or the servants they commanded, but the Indians who have been the most enduring legacy of the Raj – the Western-educated middle class whom the British fostered to serve their interests, but which eventually threw them out.

The tales which follow are told by Indians from many different walks of life – former civil servants, army officers, businessmen, politicians, lawyers, teachers, journalists and artists – a cross-section of the many thousands who worked for the British, made friends with them, and learned to do without them. Rooted in an ancient civilisation of their own, and yet the most anglicised, and often anglophile, of Britain's former colonial subjects, they are peculiarly well equipped to assess the

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Raj and its legacies. Their perspective is certainly different from that of British 'survivors', but their memories and feelings are no more uniform or homogeneous than India itself. Their voices range across the spectrum from fond admiration to bitter resentment; and I have tried, as far as possible, to let them speak for themselves without interference. The last truly colonial generation of Indians is starting to die out, and I hope this book has recorded some of their wisdom before it is too late.