6. Black and White

Delhi and Calcutta

I lived in Delhi for about five years during the early 1960s – studying statistics and later feeling my way to a profession, starting at the Institute of Economic Growth in a very low position. I've many memories of those Delhi days, but a few are unforgettable: among them my camera work, and an association with the Delhi Film Society. Madhav Gohlar, a colleague studying statistics introduced me to the wonders of black and white photography to capture reality and to show in particular the many beauties and horrors of Indian life. He told me sternly: you can't catch rainbows in black and white; you can only paint stark reality in those primordial hues.

A friend of mine, living in London, on a visit then to Delhi, offered me his Leica camera for a price I couldn't afford. Gohlar got the news and we pooled our resources and bought the camera. We photographed Delhi and its people, the Republic Parade in its misty morning glory, Chandni Chowk and its spectacular displays of people and things, Connaught place and its beautiful shops and shoppers, happenings on the banks of Jamuna, and so on. This was all quite ordinary – anybody could do it. We searched all over Delhi for something to shoot in black and white that'll catch the attention of people, who matter, with no clear idea of what we were looking for. Days later, in confusion, and realizing that I'd no talent for photography I sold my share of the Leica ownership to Gohlar. That ended my brief career as a shooter of pictures. All those award-winning images I had in my mind – of people on the road and in the slums– portraying the reality and ugliness of Delhi, remained forever in the mind, never to see the light of day. I did get a very good shot of Qutub Minar in all its rising glory fraught with Freudian clues, seen though one of those majestic arches – in ruins but in position to look like a gateway. I was later sobered however by the thought that anybody could have made a photo of that scene even with those little cheap box cameras of that time – the beauty was in the setting that no photographer could spoil.

But Gohlar carried on with his camera work and soon discovered that the beauty of black and white can be seen not only in stills but in motion pictures as well. We soon found that there was a Delhi Film Society

(DFS) dedicated to good films – sometimes described as the art cinema, to distinguish it from the commercial stuff from Hollywood and Bollywood. The film society movement in India took off after Satyajit Ray's Pather Panchali (1955), the most remarkable film ever made in India. Ray himself, it's said, was inspired the realism in cinema as in Vittorio Desica's 'Bicycle Thieves' and a few other films of the same genre.

The DFS was started by Vijay Mulay (who worked for the central government in the department of social welfare), with the help of Poonen Abraham, a reputed journalist, and under the patronage of Marie Seton, a film critic of repute, who wrote appreciative articles and a book as well on Satyajit Ray. When Gohlar and I joined the Delhi Film Society there were a few members only. lt expanded fast later so that membership became increasingly hard to get. Gohlar and I rightfully claim to be among the founders of that Society: we did help them in different ways, getting new members to join, going round Delhi attending to DFS chores. Gohlar had a special bicycle made for him to pedal with one of his polio-affected short legs and I used to hire a bike from a Sardar shop where they simply accepted whatever I paid them – no matter how many hours I was out with the bike.

The membership of the DFS enabled me to see some of the best films ever made as well as the work of contemporary giants: Fellini, Bergmann, Kurosawa and others. For one fed so far then on a diet of the good vs. bad themes - with much song and dance, and the hero all alone succeeding in impossible fights with several thugs - in Telugu and Hindi films, all this was a revelation to me on the power of the moving pictures in portraying reality and how the masters tailored it to the perceptions of viewers. (Vijay Mulay's two young daughters used to romp around at the places the DFS held its meetings, with a show later of some classic film. Suhasini, one of them, later acted in a Mrinal Sen film of much acclaim, Bhuvan Shome, costarring Utpal Dutt, the famed Bengali radical actor. Still later Suhasini Mulay made films of her own – that I haven't seen.)

Bamboovilla

You'd be sadly mistaken if you think that Bamboovilla is a cottage in an exotic Caribbean island, where you could have fun and games after a hot

but enjoyable time on the sandy beaches. In fact, this was a dilapidated building on the Lower Circular Road in Calcutta in a huge compound. During my Calcutta times the place was already in ruin: it had a few pathetic-looking trees that'd never sprout a flower or show something attractively green shedding a cloak of dust and grime.

This building housed the Central Income Tax office in Calcutta. I had to go there (for the first time in 1981) to submit my income tax return (ITR). Thereby hangs a little tale. In the institutions where I worked earlier, IIM Calcutta and the CDS in Trivandrum, the accounts departments took care of the filing of ITRs. Indeed, they collected the basic information required, filled the forms and so on; all we had to do was to sign the returns. But here, at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, things were different. There perhaps hung an unwritten moral code that prevented office staff from helping faculty in their personal matters. I must add that this Centre was a Marxist affair, with Marxists of different hues practicing their own brands of Marxism in different social science disciplines, with - surprisingly - no serious internecine warfare of the kind ever present in all academic institutions irrespective of the ideologies, Marxist or other, of the constituent and contending faculties. So, here I was, having pulled up my (imaginary) socks, ready for action, standing in front of Bamboovilla.

I could reach the place in quick time because it was close to two of my favourite joints: the Windsor bar that had an open air space, that sported an open roof which could be closed mechanically in case of rain (a wonder to see it work) and Jimmy's kitchen, a Chinese hole-in-the wall restaurant best known for its pork balls. I managed to reach the man-in-charge for controlling the crowds of income declarers in due time and asked him: where will I get form 3A (or whatever was relevant then to reporting my sad income details). He said, "Go to Paradise". I love jokes, but this was a bit too thick to swallow. What do you mean, I said, I was in the queue for several minutes and you tell me to go to paradise, what's all this nonsense? The Babu merely smiled and said "next". I was ready to explode, but cool heads in the queue behind prevailed. I was told that forms 3A (or whatever) were no longer available at Bamboovilla, but another IT office in Bentinck Street near the Paradise cinema near Esplanade may have copies of the form. So I rushed to Paradise by taxi:

trams would be infinitely cheaper, but I wanted the form so as to submit my ITR in time (July 31) to avoid the dire consequences of late submissions. The fear of income tax sleuths stalking at my door was chilling. (Amaresh Bagchi, an expert in public finance, a chilling stalker himself in his professional days with the income tax offices, having pursued the likes of Biju Patnaik, to collect taxes, told me later that one could submit ITRs by August 31, without attracting the fury of the IT men and their rules.) So I went to Paradise and asked them to give me the precious 3A. I got another bureaucratic smile and "Out of print, Sir". Listen, I said, I've already paid all my taxes and want to give you the details as the law dictates me to do, why are you preventing me to do this? My shouts were totally ignored and I was the fool for all to see.

So the next day I go back to Bamboovilla and watch what other ITR fellow travellers were doing. Soon I discovered that a few were going upstairs, bypassing the Hitler at the gate, and coming out minutes later with smiles on their faces, armed no doubt with 3A and other goodies. So I followed one such adventurer to enter an office upstairs where a Babu was sitting doing nothing. My leader approached him and whispered something into the Babu's ear, holding a 2-rupee note in his extended right arm. The note disappeared and a printed form came out.

I'm happy to report that ever since my visit to Paradise and return to Bamboovilla, I've had no problems with my income tax returns in Calcutta. In the years that followed, the trip to Bamboovilla, the hasty filling of 3A and its submission became child's play, never taking more than an hour. Remember: greasing palms at the lower end is vastly different from corruption at the top.

(They say India is one of the most corrupt nations in the world. Surely, in accepting this judgment we should ignore the small grease and look at the big things: like the well-known case of Boeing bribing the prime minister of Japan. More to the point is the manner in which the entire legislative process in the US is influenced by 'lobbies' – through bribery or blackmail. If you consider these two things: corporate bribing of decision-makers and the control of legislation, the ranking of countries by levels of corruption would be vastly different from what's put out in the media. Will Indian corruption remain at the top? I don't think so The poor ticket collectors, doormen, clerks manning desks and so on –

scraping a few extra rupees - are now deprived of the grease thanks to computerization and much-vaunted vigilance. But a lot of money, thousands of crores of it, is going underground, thanks to the bosses in control, and into Swiss banks that say mum is the word when asked for the details of their hoarding.

Not going up in smoke

By the time I was 15 a number of my friends were already smoking cigarettes – on the sly, of course. I was the odd one out in their company when they went on their secret jaunts to light up. On those adventures, we went to the paddy fields beyond the famed Barracks Maidan in our town, Berhampur. In that quiet area of green fields, invisible to people in the town, my friends smoked. Where and how they got the pack of smokes is a mystery. But I remember how after the smoking session, there followed much chewing of cloves and cardamom seeds – thoughtfully brought by a member of the secret smoking fraternity. Also how they each blew their evil breaths on to my face and asked me how they smelled.

One of those friends, Sesha Rao, later introduced me properly to the white stick. His brother-in-law was in the army and carried, on his occasional visits to our town, a bag with army-issue cigarettes and other goodies. Sesha Rao could steal a pack or two of cigarettes from the bag and so there was a season when he would urge me to go with him to the fields beyond the Barracks. On one of those trips I succumbed to the constant pressure and lit up. I still remember the coughing fit that followed the first puff and how Sesha Rao's soothing words to me to continue puffing without fear ultimately prevailed. Those sporadic field trips did not however convert me into a regular smoker, nor did they ever give me the real pleasures of smoking – as smoking does for the addict: before, during and after coffee, lunch, dinner and so on.

When I enrolled in the Andhra University in Vizag in 1951, I was still essentially a non-smoker. I could resist temptations galore without conscious effort. Here is an example: My cousin Raju with whom I went to watch movies usually carried a pack of 10 Capstan Navy Cut cigarettes – and he smoked, as did one and all watching movies in those days. It was much later that smoking in theatres was prohibited – and unexpectedly accepted by the public, with no strong measures needed to

enforce the ban. So, it was Raju who introduced me to the pleasures of smoking to add to those of watching the dance and music of Indian films and the occasional Hollywood ones. Raju's younger brother Kistu was also a smoker. He fancied an after dinner smoke and I'd go out with him on his late evening strolls to end up near a paan shop where they made a specially concocted paan for him. As he extracted the juices of the paan, could there be anything more heavenly than a cigarette accompaniment? These early experiments with the puff didn't make me an addict, but later, my move into the university hostels in my final year did. In the hostels the majority smoked, aided by the ready credit given by the cigarette shops just outside the university gates. There was also a boy entrepreneur who kept vigil outside the canteen area to distribute cigarettes to the needy after a meal – also on credit. I wonder to this day how he managed to keep count of the sticks distributed to different students, but he visited our rooms once in a few days to collect his dues - with perhaps a small justifiable extra amount.

In the smoking sense I never looked back after that hostel life in Waltair. Over the next several years and decades I reached and maintained a nicotine dose of some 20 to 25 cigarettes a day. The lungs were getting damaged but the addiction was such that I (like any smoker) never thought of it in those terms: damage vs. pleasure. An addiction is an addiction. I seriously thought of kicking the habit only in 2003 at the age of 68. And it took me over six years to accomplish that goal. During that failed trial period, I'd reduce the intake; give it up wholly for a few days or even weeks, but the urge would reassert itself. The shouts at home and from a neighbor who smelt the smoke wafting out of my bathroom window did the trick finally. I bid goodbye to smoking in 2009 on my 74th birthday. Years on, I'm here still with poor lungs that may continue on duty for a time in some unpredictable measure.

Village Life

Research on the Indian economy by economists – in India and elsewhere, for example in the US and the World Bank, was till the mid 1980s, almost exclusively on the agricultural sector initially, planning and industrial development becoming an inevitable added choice later. That story of how research in "Indian Economics" was influenced by the realities of Indian political economy awaits fuller documentation than it

has received thus far. Let me ignore that big problem and refer to the well-known fact that most of this numerous breed of "agricultural economists" never went to a village, never seen how labourers work on the field, how farmers live and work, raise credit, sell their output. All this information could be gathered from readily available data derived from impeccable sample surveys and other types of data collection and aggregation. So, agricultural economists flourished without ever experiencing village life to any significant extent. My own sad story of relevance follows.

I was born and brought up in Berhampur a small town in Odisha, with not a clue about villages and what they looked like, how people there would be different from us in the towns. A friend of mine, A.V.Ramana, invited me sometime during 1955 to his wedding in Murapaka, a village near Srikakulam, a town in north Andhra. Going there gave me my first experience of a village, its environment, and day-to-day living conditions. There was no 'culture shock' as such because conditions in small towns – that I lived in till that time – were not all that different in basic terms. Neither the lack of running water on tap nor defecation in open fields surprised me. (Indeed, the latter was perhaps better than the inhuman practice of manual scavenging by the wretched classes in urban areas then widely prevalent all over India.) The arrangement of houses and activities, the organization of work – both domestic and on the fields – all obviously along caste lines, with the dalits at the bottom - likewise held no surprises because all that was well-documented in the academic literature. So, in a way, I didn't gain much new insight into village life from this first outing.

My second brush with rural India was in June 1961 when, as a part of my training as a statistician, I participated in a field survey of farming conditions in some villages in the Ludhiana district of the Punjab. It was boiling time then and the heat beat you down at night as well. We – the surveyors – were accommodated in a small town close to the survey villages in a school closed then for the summer vacation. That meant simply that we had those rope beds (called khatiyas) to sleep on, outside in the moonlight. Otherwise, it was still open bathing at a well and letting go in the mornings to fertilise the fields.

We used to go to the villages by bicycle under a hot Sun, stopping at places that allowed a shaded rest under a tree. Almost always, some men working in the fields nearby would bring fresh cucumbers and melons for us to gorge on and telling us: you'll reach village X in less than half an hour; our people will take care of you. And they always did. Usually, a village head of some sort would welcome us and make sure that our data collection went on without a hitch. More than all that, I remember best the hospitality we got, the food that was served – without our asking for it – the joviality that prevailed in the group-eating that ensued. Of course, the meal with a stack of rotis, a kathori of ghee, spiced dal mixtures, and some vegetable was always a delight we looked forward to after the hard cycling – not to speak of the huge glass of lassi that came with the meal. I must here add that the hospitality we experienced was most probably a feature in villages across the whole country, with variations in the quantity and quality of the food offered.

There isn't much to say about the substantive findings of that survey. The green revolution (GR) was some distance away, but the American-aided IADP programme was bringing about changes in farming practices that'd in due course lead on to the wonders of the new seed-feed technology – and further on, lamentably, to the horrors of environmental damage caused by fertiliser and pesticide use, and the indiscriminate exploitation of ground water.