

21-Nov-11

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here in Lucknow. I arrived here yesterday at 12 noon local time (6:30am GMT), my flight from Delhi having been delayed by 5 hours because of fog. Some of the passengers were up in arms because of the delay, but I wasn't, as I don't have huge faith in the pilots and air traffic controllers that they can put us down in the right place, and it was good to see that they recognise their own limitations and didn't risk it. In the event the flight was without incident.

Yesterday afternoon I attended (and was one of the three judges for) an inter-school debate on the proposition, "The internet will soon rule our lives". The standard was extremely high, and one or two of the speakers were truly exceptional - much better than anything I've seen in the UK, at the equivalent level.

I went to bed around 11pm last night, but for several hours had difficulty getting off to sleep, hence the email to you around 10pm your time, 3:30am here. But after that I slept very deeply until late morning here. Today has been a lazy day, just gradually unpacking and sorting things. Geeta is working but her office in 12 Station Road is not far away (I am in our flat in number 14 Station Road) and we are often on the phone for this and that. We went out earlier on a jaunt - if you can call it that, in this over-crowded city! The weather is fine here, as Geeta said, it's like a pleasant English summer at the moment.

...

Much love from Roger xxx

24-Nov-11

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. It's relatively quiet because Geeta has gone down South to Hyderabad for a couple of nights, and her father is in the Philippines until Sunday. I'm spending most of my time in the peace and solitude of our flat which is separate from 'Head Office' (number 14 Station Road rather than number 12), getting on with my various bits of work. I have seen the others (Sunita, Vinay, etc), but like me they spend most of their time engaged in their own pursuits. My main interaction is with Geeta and her mother. Yesterday, for example, I spent the morning at an education seminar where Geeta was giving a talk, then I saw her off at the airport for her flight to Hyderabad, and I spent most of the afternoon accompanying her mother to her doctor, to the park, and to one of her friends for a cup of tea.

The weather here is lovely at the moment, warm and dry, like a really nice summer day in England.

Thank you Dad for letting us know that Geeta's parcel has finally arrived. I'm surprised it came at all. Please just leave it on the blanket box in the spare bedroom.

How are you? Any news?

Much love from Roger xxx

26-Nov-11

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. Geeta returned from Hyderabad yesterday afternoon. The talk she gave there was very received, the only problem being the seminar programme, in which she was listed twice, once as "Dr Geetha Gandhi King Don" and once as "Ms Rita Gandhi". Well at least they spelt Ghandi correctly! Yesterday evening I accompanied Geeta, her mother, and young Robert to the opening ceremony of the week-long Lucknow Festival. This is an annual 'bread and circuses' event ordained by the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Mayawati, to justify her vast expenditure of state funds on enormous concrete edifices proclaiming her imperial ambitions. We were VVIPs (by virtue of the fact that CMS was providing most of the entertainment, gratis) so we had seats in the front, close to Mayawati, although not close enough for an assassination attempt, as she is quite paranoid and was surrounded at all times by a posse of security staff with machine guns at the ready. This was the first time I have seen her, and I hope the last. There are state elections in a few months and with any luck she'll be out.

All my love,

Roger xxx

28-Nov-11

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. I have settled into a fairly regular daily schedule, in which I spend most of the day getting on with my work in the peace and solitude of our flat, and in the early evening I join Geeta and her mother for a bit of exercise walking around the military cantonment here. This is a large area dating from the raj, not on the way to anywhere and cordoned off at every entrance, so you have to be pretty determined to get in. They stopped me the first time I tried to get in, apparently foreigners are not welcome without special permission. I have put in a request for a pass and the last thing I heard was that my details have been passed to Military Intelligence. (I am not joking.) Since then I have ducked down out of sight and our car has got through the cordon with no difficulty at all. Once in and round the corner we hop out and walk up and down these wide, straight, tree-lined, empty avenues, with colonial mansions on either side. It's heavenly. Then when we get back we have dinner and Geeta embarks on the 'dak' (pronounced 'daak', it is the post from the branches that requires answering in time for the start of the next school day) and I return to the flat to write emails like this one.

Well done Dad for winning the chess competition - that's absolutely terrific. I can imagine you and Mum spending many happy hours poring over that atlas!

Much love from Roger xxx

6-Dec-11

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. Today is a holiday to mark Muharram, the first day of the Islamic New Year. Because Muslims use the lunar calendar this is on a different date each year (on top of which, different Muslim countries seem to use different calendars!) In a few days time the Shia Muslims commemorate the martyrdom of Hassan and Hussein, the grandsons of the prophet Muhammad, in processions in which they flagellate themselves and lament "Ya Hassan, Ya Hussein!" The raja-sahibs have misheard this as "Hobson-Jobson", a phrase since used (as a mild pejorative) to describe any unintelligible chatter in an unfamiliar tongue. Lucknow's population is around 50:50 Hindu-Muslim, and the Muslims are around 50:50 Sunni-Shia. A combustible mix!

Another interesting word is "hullabaloo", which I am convinced has an Indian origin, but the experts think otherwise. Wikipedia says: "The Oxford English Dictionary has this as a native English word, first appearing in print in 1762 (Smollett). The OED and other etymologists do not consider the possibility that the word was introduced from India into the English language. The term 'Hullabol' is still used in Indian English to describe a type of public demonstration, involving making a great noise. 'Hulla' is either derived from 'Hamla' meaning 'attack' or from 'halhala' meaning 'ululation' (both words from Persian and then Urdu). 'Bol' is from the Hindi verb 'bolna', 'to utter or say'."

Much love from Roger xxx

10-Dec-11

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. The Chief Justices Conference began yesterday, so we're quite busy. Geeta is fully involved and I am trailing her after the style of the Duke of Edinburgh (including the ill-judged comments, as you'll see). This year there are judges from 70 countries including Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, New Zealand, Fiji, and Finland. Last night we also attended (part of) the wedding of Geeta's father's sister's grandson. At the tilak ceremony (a sort of pre-nuptual show-and-tell) on Tuesday the groom looked terrified. As asked whether he was nervous, he said yes, so I told him "Don't worry, after 28 years you won't feel a thing!" He laughed uproariously but afterwards Vinay told me that no-one understood what I was saying, they just laughed because the big white sahib was clearly wanting to amuse.

How are you?

Much love from Roger xxx

14-Dec-11

Dear Mum and Dad,

The Chief Justices Conference is over, and we have had a quiet couple of days catching up on rest & relaxation. Geeta had introduced a number of innovations to the programme, the format and the venue, all of which were very successful - her father said that they were "exceptional" and "revolutionary". The following from today's 'Times of India' gives a pretty good idea of the event (in wonderful Indian English):

"The 12th International conference of Chief Justices of the world on article 51 of the Indian Constitution concluded on Tuesday. Chief justices, judges, legal luminaries and peace promoters from 70 countries of the world, after four days of hectic activities and intense pondering on global issues, with their unanimous consent, released the 'Lucknow Declaration-2011' on Tuesday. The Lucknow Declaration contains issues confronting the entire world like terrorism, global warming, stockpiling of nuclear weapons and abject poverty. The declaration recommended strict measures against organisations and nations encouraging terrorism, enforcement of world law and constitution of world parliament, appealing all nations to implement provisions of fundamental rights as enshrined in declarations, conventions and resolutions of UN, dismantling of weapons of mass destruction, steps to reduce global warming, etc."

I must go - I've just remembered that I haven't done my full quota of intense pondering for the day...

Much love from Roger xxx

15-Dec-11

Wonderful quotes, etc but you have to wonder what they have actually achieved...?

Sorry, that's just me being practical & a little bit cynical. But possibly realistic.

So convince me - in what way(s) was it more than just a talking shop?

Debate, (not argue), anyone?

Rich xxx

15-Dec-11

Dear Rich,

Good question. Indeed the press report is extraordinarily bombastic and over-the-top - that's partly why I sent it, for a 'good laugh'. But there are indeed several things going on under the surface that give serious substance to these claims.

Firstly, you can be sure that the very senior judges of (say) Egypt, Israel, Lebanon and Afghanistan didn't come here just for a holiday or to compose the Lucknow Declaration - this has become a convenient neutral non-political venue for all sorts of private meetings. The Egyptian delegate is their deputy chief justice and currently he is involved in rewriting their constitution. The Israeli delegate is their deputy chief justice and he is the current chairman of an international association that promotes training of judges to an international standard. (He has invited CMS to get involved in some capacity.) We have a good proportion of African nations represented here, also judges from Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and, this year, a big contingent from South America. Also for the first time in several years we had a couple of judges from the USA (state judges from Brooklyn and the Bronx, in fact).

Secondly, a big theme that has emerged is the emphasis on judges taking international law into account when interpreting their own constitutions and implementing their national laws. That's very important for countries like Afghanistan that otherwise might fall back on ancient interpretations of religious law (sharia). Here they are influencing one another in quite subtle ways, and coming to a common understanding in a way that you just don't see on the political level. Given the diversity of countries, it is amazing that all the delegates are effectively saying the same things, and in a common legal language.

Thirdly, at precisely the time when the countries gathered at Durban failed to agree (yet again) on an effective policy for reducing carbon emissions, the judges here were all agreed that since the atmosphere and the oceans have no national boundaries, global environmental issues should be handled by an international court.

There is more...

Much love from Roger xxx



19-Dec-11

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. Arjun arrived yesterday afternoon. He had a good journey but didn't sleep on the flight as he preferred to watch several in-flight films. So he went to bed early last night and he's still there now (12:30pm). He's in good form. Nita and children will also arrive here in a day or two, as will Vinay's son Sagar. And while there is always work to do, now that the Chief Justices Conference is over Geeta will be able to relax and spend some time with us.

It is really quite cold here. The temperature hasn't dropped below freezing but it's still jolly cold given that we don't have central heating or other space heating. As I type I am wearing my warm coat with a hot water bottle tucked inside. I see that it has been cold and windy and rainy there. I hope you are managing all right?

Now that Arjun is here I expect that we will have several shopping excursions. (I know he wants to stock up on medical textbooks, which are available here in standard editions but much cheaper than in the UK.) Is there anything in particular that you would like me to buy, that could be a nice Christmas present? (Richard - this question applies to you as well.)

Much love from Roger xxx

20-Feb-12

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. This month there are state elections in UP (Uttar Pradesh, population in excess of 200 million, state capital Lucknow), and yesterday there was polling in Lucknow itself. I went to the polling station with my inlaws and was hugely impressed with the democratic process at work here. For everyone polling day is a holiday, shops are closed, and people are discouraged from taking their cars onto the road. I have never seen the roads so empty, quite amazing really. At the polling station there were young and old, and everyone had to queue up in the same line, there was no fast track for VVIPs, and everyone took it very seriously indeed. Outside the polling station there were three armed policemen, and inside the polling station there were tellers from each of the main parties, scrutinising the process for every single vote, making sure there was no attempt at fraud. Thus far in the election (which continues throughout the state until the end of the month) the turnout has been in excess of 60%, which is around 15% more than in the last election, we think because on this occasion the Electoral Commission has been given additional resources and it is doing a good job of running the show - so people don't think their votes are wasted.

Much love from Roger xxx

27-Feb-12

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. This last weekend we went to Delhi to attend the wedding of the daughter of an old Bahai friend. We flew there on Saturday and returned 24 hours later, with the wedding strung out throughout Saturday evening. It was a curious mixture of the very long and rowdy Hindu rituals and the very short and sombre Bahai vows. It seemed to me that the result was the best of both, but whether that reflects on the happiness of the married couple, time will tell!

It is quite a bit warmer here than three weeks ago, so I no longer need to wear a jumper or warm the bed with a hot water bottle...

How are you?

All my love,

Roger xxx

21-Mar-12

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. I thought I would entertain you with some of the political shenanigans here. Politics in Uttar Pradesh are dominated by two largely caste-based political parties, and last month's elections effected the transfer of power from one of these to the other. (It doesn't matter which is which, they're each as bad as the other, they just take turns to enrich themselves every five years, with zero positive benefit to the poor and needy.) The ministers of the new state government were named a few days ago, these include at least a dozen people who are criminals or have criminal charges drawn up against them. One of the new ministers has 15 charges outstanding, including rape, kidnapping with intent to murder, theft, 'dacoity' (the local word for being a gangster), etc. Another notorious criminal, known as 'Raja Bhaiyya' (Brother King), with 8 charges outstanding, has been put in charge of prisons. The following interesting snippet is from today's Times of India: "As per the latest affidavit submitted with the Election Commission by Raja Bhaiyya, his age is 38 that makes his year of birth as 1974. This, of course, can't be true considering the fact that Raja Bahaiyya contested his first assembly elections in 1993 and emerged as a winner. If one considers 1974 to be his year of birth, he was barely 19 years of age when he stepped into the Uttar Pradesh Vidhan Sabha for the first time, which was six years short of the mandatory age limit." When this was pointed out yesterday, his party chief responded with the usual bluster: "Who knows if it is the handiwork of his political rivals? Why would anyone do something like this when it does not make any difference...?" I suspect that Raja Bhaiyya did it in order to show brotherly affinity to the new Chief Minister, the son of the party chief, who is also reported to be 38 years old (although that may also be fake, in order to make him the youngest Chief Minister that UP has had). Also recently there was the case of the overall head of the army wanting to change his age by a year so that he didn't have to retire just yet. When challenged he too accused his accusers of being politically motivated, but he had to go, because in Delhi they do things properly. Not so in the case of Raja Bhaiyya, however. Apparently India has registered births, deaths and marriages for over 80 years, but the system can be by-passed at any time by obtaining (buying) a doctor's certificate saying that "I attended the birth of person X on date Y", for example. Meanwhile it has been announced that the glorious 'parks' (concrete monstrosities) constructed in Lucknow at huge cost by the previous administration are to be allowed to fall into disrepair, and there is to be an investigation into their procurement (and woe betide any 'babu' - civil servant - who is unfortunate enough to have his name on the documents). And the more modest park where we now walk in the evening (since the military clearly don't want me in walking in the cantonment, in case I am a foreign spy), which does have trees and grass and flowers (and music and lights and fountains and a big ugly statue), is being smartened-up because it was constructed at the behest of the current rulers the last time they were in power. As for how they get into power, it's quite simple, they simply make a load of outrageous promises that they have no intention of keeping. Once in power they cost up their promises and present their budget to the central government in Delhi; The central government says no; And the state government spends the next five years blaming the central government for why it hasn't done what it said it would do. But you can fool a majority of the people all of the time, the electorate is credulous and gullible, and this same thing happens, time after time, every five years. A few days ago government offices throughout the state

were besieged by thousands of people wanting their 1000 rupees (£12.50) per month unemployment benefit that the new administration has promised. They had to be lathi-charged (beaten with wooden sticks) and told that the promise has not yet been implemented. The new administration is honouring one of its promises, to implement a long-standing pledge of both main political parties to give a cash lump sum to girls aged 18 to help with their dowry. However, the amount of this lump sum has been reduced to a third of its original, it will only be given to Muslim girls (the Muslims are a strong faction within the new administration), and it has not been made conditional on the girl having undertaken secondary education (which was a previous very sensible condition, to give an incentive to educating girls and have sensible family planning). What a mess!

Much love from Roger xxx

21-Mar-12

Stop press: According to the Hindustan Times, Raja Bhaiyya is 42 years old (which means he was born in 1969 or 1970), and that "In 1993, he became a MLA for the first time winning nearly 67000 votes. He was 26 years then, one of the youngest MLAs to enter UP assembly" (which means he was born in 1966 or 1967). The newspaper also says that since 2002 Raja Bhaiyya "has been in and out of six different jails in the state several times", and that his grandfather "was the founder vice-chancellor of Pant Nagar University who also helped initiate the concept of dog squad" [sic]. The mind boggles!

Rxxx