

15-Apr-18

Dear Dad,

I've arrived in Lucknow safe and well after an uneventful journey. Here the skies are relatively clear of pollution, allowing the sun to penetrate to the ground, where the temperature is now around 40 deg C. Everyone here is fine.

More updates in due course ... but now I need to sleep ...

Love from Roger xxx

22-Apr-18

Dear Dad,

Greetings from Lucknow, where for the first time in many years (in my experience) we have enjoyed a whole week free of discernable air pollution. Geeta tells me that before I arrived the weather was unusually cool and wet, and I think it was this that cleared the otherwise-persistent murk. Then the clear skies have allowed the sun to be seen and its heat to be felt at ground level, thus generating strong convection currents (breezes) which have dispersed the air pollution (mainly from cars in cities), keeping it in check and preventing the murk from returning: a virtuous cycle, if ever there was. Seeing and feeling the sun also means that we are experiencing unusually high temperatures for the time of year, 40 deg C and rising. It's lovely just as long as one doesn't have to do any physical labour outside!

Speaking of virtuous cycles, two days ago Roshan showed me a short article in the newspaper announcing that Lucknow city would be introducing a bike hire scheme, along the lines of London's 'Boris Bikes', except they would be rented out at 2 rupees (about tuppence) an hour. This scheme is the initiative of Dinesh Sharma, who for many years was Mayor of Lucknow, and for the last year has been Deputy Chief Minister for the state (Uttar Pradesh). When Sharma was Mayor he was a regular chief guest at CMS functions. Several years ago, noticing that he didn't have any mayoral gown or regalia, CMS gave him a very fine cloak, based on something intended for a professor at the University of Oxford, with some colourful satin in place of the usual ermine: and very grand he looked in it. And becoming Deputy Chief Minister hasn't diminished his support for the school, or the school's support for him. In particular, when he visited London in January ... CMS provided him with a car and driver, in the form of Roshan, who happen to be in the UK in order to work on his part-time MBA. And it was while being driven around London that Sharma noticed, and became fascinated by, the Boris Bikes; and hence the proposed Lucknow scheme. Roshan tells me that he has explained to Sharma why the London hire cycles are called Boris Bikes - of course they're named after Boris Johnson, who was Mayor when they were introduced - and delicately hinted that the Lucknow hire cycles could be similarly personalised. We shall see.

Everyone here is well. Currently I am occupied with scanning a stack of old family photos that Geeta has found in her father's cupboard.

All my love to you and Mum,

Roger xxx

30-Apr-18

Dear Dad,

All's well here. The weather has continued hot and the air has remained relatively free of pollution. Last night we had a thunderstorm, which normally would have cleared the air, but somehow it now feels more humid than before.

I've spent most of the week scanning and sorting old family photos. Last night the family came round and I showed the results of my efforts, which as intended prompted Geeta's father to recount some favourite anecdotes, very familiar to most of us, but a new experience for Roshan, which I'm sure he appreciated. Indeed it was great to see both of Geeta's parents light up with their customary vivacity when talking about their herculean endeavours. Also Geeta's mother produced another huge stack of photos which should keep me occupied for most of the rest of my time here. By the end of it there will be a sufficiently large and well-organised archive that Geeta will be able to commission a really impressive coffee-table book of photos dating back to the early '50s. Plus of course everything is on the computer so all the Gandhis can have a copy.

For Geeta and Roshan work continues as before, at all hours, on all days. But they both seem happy and well. I don't know how they do it.

All my love,

Roger xxx

7-May-18

Dear Dad,

All's well here. The weather has continued hot and breezy. There have been some dramatic storms elsewhere, involving thunder and lightning, and rain or dust, but these have yet to hit Lucknow. According to the BBC, "The storms followed very high temperatures in the region. Just across the border in Pakistan, local media reported 50.2C (122.3F) in the town of Nawabshah - a record for April. Scientists say high temperatures played a significant role in intensifying the storms that originated in the desert area of north-west India and further west. ... The extraordinary dust and thunderstorms have come just when concerns have been mounting about the rapid rate of desertification in several Indian states. The environment ministry says a quarter of the country's land is undergoing desertification - while independent experts put the figure much higher. Increasing desertification would mean more intense and damaging dust storms." I don't recall any reports of dust storms last year, or the year before. Maybe there weren't any, because the air pollution was so bad that the sun couldn't be seen, so it couldn't heat up the ground and initiate convection breezes. (Perhaps the solution to the dust storm problem is to increase the air pollution again?!) As for the desertification, this is a direct result of too many people and not enough water, and I can't see any way around that; but at least there's plenty of sand for people to bury their heads in. For example, yesterday Geeta and Roshan and I visited a vast brand-new international cricket stadium on the outskirts, developed by Vijay Sinha, who also built the Mall Avenue flats where we're now living. The reason for the visit was to view a two-acre plot of land near to the stadium which has been set aside for a school; and it looks as if CMS will purchase that plot for its next big project. The stadium will be the centrepiece of a vast new city, which is already under construction, including hotels, high-rise blocks of flats, a shopping complex, a hospital, and a metro station linking directly to the airport. I asked Vijay where the water would be coming from, and he was very offhand, saying "the Gomti", which is the local river, or mainly-dried-up sewage channel as it has become. Mother Nature may have something to say about that!

On Saturday Geeta and I celebrated our 35th wedding anniversary. We'd hoped to have a meal together just-the-two-of-us at the Taj Hotel, but in the event we ended up at a cheap-but-clean South Indian restaurant opposite the office of the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP), who Geeta needed to see, and who'd said he'd be there at 6.30pm, but in the event he didn't turn up until 10.30pm. Thus most of the evening was spent in the SSP's mosquito-infested waiting room, twiddling our thumbs, or, in my case, writing increasingly silly haikus, which are three-line couplets having 5, 7, and 5 syllables, for example:

11pm  
Finished with the SSP  
What a waste of time.

(You may need to say it out loud in order to verify that it is a pukka haiku.)

A pukka haiku?  
What is Roger on about?  
Most peculiar!

...

Roger xxx

17-Oct-18

Dear Dad,

Geeta and I have arrived in Cochin (in Kerala, South India) safe and well. She was there to meet me in Delhi and we flew down here together. We have a hotel room overlooking the Indian Ocean and I can hear the surf. Paradise!

Love from Roger xxx

24-Oct-18

Dear Dad,

...

We got back from Cochin on Sunday. (I refuse to use the modern Indianised corruption of this name, 'Kochi'. The original means 'Like China', so-called because the Portugese developed it as the main port for trading with the Far East.) ... We had a very relaxing time there. The 'excuse' was that we were attending the wedding of a CMS employee whose bride comes from that area. But we stayed on an extra couple of days in order to give Geeta a much-needed break from the everyday grind.

Geeta is well and happy, remarkably so given the pressures of work that she faces. In addition to the challenges of running such a large organisation she has to deal with many instances of outright corruption (fraud, theft, blackmail, 'protection', etc), which are a natural consequence of the schools' success. Indeed it's the legal battles resulting from the latter corruption which have been taking up most of her time, and her father's time, in recent months/years.

Mr & Mrs Gandhi seem reasonably well, although I think they are showing their ages a bit more. But Roshan has been here for two years now and he is a tremendous help and support for Geeta and the organisation. While she's been occupied with the court cases he's put in place a number of computerised systems which are helping to modernise the management practices.

Since getting to Lucknow I've been occupied in sorting out a big stack of old letters that were sent by Mr & Mrs Gandhi to their children when they were living alone in the UK, 1978-1983. I've put them all in date order and picked out one or two prize ones for scanning. Geeta has commissioned a biography for her parents, to be given to them on their 60th wedding anniversary in January, and the scan of one of the letters may go in to that. We'll see.

Love from Roger xxx

31-Oct-18

Dear Dad,

Greetings from Lucknow where it's a very pleasant 32 deg C (or thereabouts) with visible skies (i.e. relatively low air pollution) and tolerable humidity. ... It's been very quiet here - for me, at least. I'd brought with me from the UK an enormous book, 'Philosophy in Practice' by Adam Morton, which I'd bought for £2.99 from the Oxfam secondhand bookshop in Tavistock, and in the last week I've been going through it with a toothcomb, trying to find the one idea or argument or paradox that will invalidate or otherwise lead me to doubt 'my philosophy', <http://www.idealistic.com/idealistic/MyPhilosophy03.pdf>. I'm doing a chapter a day, writing my ideas in the margins (which I've NEVER done with any other book, but this one sets many problems and has wide margins!), and having got nearly half-way I can proudly say that my ideas are holding up very well indeed. Of course all this close study requires me to remain in the relative peace and tranquillity of Mall Avenue ... Geeta is very kind to me.

There is plenty of 'news' here, but Indian-style it is mostly "sound and fury, signifying nothing", so I won't relay any this week. Suffice it to say that we are all well, and life goes on.

Take care, and all my love to you and Mum,

Roger xxx

7-Nov-18

Dear Dad,

All's well here in Lucknow. Today is Diwali, pronounced Dee-var-lee, the annual festival of lights, celebrating the return of Lord Ram to his domain at Ayodhya. Usually this is an excuse for everyone to set off sufficient fireworks to start a world war, but this year there are restrictions because they are seen as one of the causes of the dreadful air pollution (which has been getting thicker since I've been here, albeit not anything as bad as last year or the year before). Geeta and Roshan and I are holed up in the Mall Avenue flat, just getting along with various things. I have just read the penultimate chapter of the philosophy book; Roshan is reading something for his part-time MBA course; and Geeta is editing a biography of her parents that she has commissioned from her cousin's cousin, a very pleasant and intelligent chap called Viveik Pandit. We have some classical music playing on Geeta's 'three-in-one' (radio/CD/tape player - identical to the one we'd lent Mum), and it's all very relaxing.

Yesterday was more lively: India and the West Indies were playing a 20-20 cricket match at the huge new Ekana Stadium in Lucknow, and Geeta was able to get four tickets, so we (Geeta, Roshan, Sunita's son Robert, and me) went to it! Because the source of the tickets was the man who built and owned the stadium - an ex-CMS student called Vijay Sinha, who also built the Mall Avenue complex where we live - our tickets were for the 'President's Lounge' with the others who consider themselves the cream of Lucknow society. The rest of the stadium - capacity 50,000 - gradually filled up and it was a really impressive spectacle. However, it became evident to me (having attended a number of international rugby matches with up to 80,000 spectators) that a lot of the cheering came not from the crowd but from large speakers around the stadium, controlled by someone who turned the noise up or down according to the action. It was interesting to see how the hoi polloi were very easily led by this, that when the canned cheering got louder they too started cheering and waving their flags - again and again and again. The wisdom of crowds it was not. As for the cricket, there was some terrific batting and bowling, but cricket it wasn't - more like baseball, I thought - and as a match it was very one-sided, with India scoring 195-2 in their 20 overs and restricting the West Indies to 124-9 in theirs. Although I guess the WI's won't be too disappointed, the income from TV rights and gate receipts must be enormous in comparison with what they normally get in Barbados or wherever. However we did wonder whether the game was fixed for the benefit of the local betting mafia. When we left (half-way through the WI innings, in order to get away before the other 50,000 people, and see the last overs on the TV in the flat) we happened to be in the same lift as Rajeev Shukla, who is the chairman of the Indian Premier League (and who, according to Wikipedia, resigned as its chairman on 1 June 2013 because of a scandal over alleged corruption and spot-fixing, but two years later was re-appointed unanimously). Taking her opportunity, and adopting a light-hearted and innocent tone, Geeta enquired whether there was any possibility that this match had been fixed in favour of the home side. His look of alarm was something to behold!

So, as I say, all is well in this city of nawabs.

Love from Roger xxx

12-Nov-18

Dear Dad,

I'm sending this update a couple of days early, in order to help clear the decks before the annual CMS Chief Justices' Conference.

All's well here. I was able to follow yesterday's Remembrance Day proceedings on the BBC World channel. I felt sorry for the French, the way that Trump and Putin delayed their commemoration by 20 minutes because they refused to walk in the rain like all the others. Putin was smirking like a schoolboy. And of course Trump didn't support the subsequent Paris Peace Forum. But the commemoration at the Cenotaph was as punctual and dignified as ever. Very moving, I thought.

I have finished reading and annotating 'Philosophy in Practice', which exercise has left me feeling rather good about my own view of the world. Also it has inspired me to come up with the following set of five maxims (which are entirely original, as far as I'm aware, although the last one is quite similar to something attributed to Aristotle):

1. Data are stored observations;
2. Knowledge is organised data;
3. Wisdom is appropriate knowledge;
4. Virtue is enacted wisdom;
5. Happiness is recognised virtue.

I've discussed these with Arjun and Geeta, resulting in a very interesting question, again in relation to the last maxim: "Recognised by whom?" I can think of five distinct answers: God; oneself; one's family; society; and posterity (plus, of course, various combinations of these).

The behaviour of some world leaders suggests a more perverted form of these maxims, as follows:

1. Lies are alternative facts;
2. Conspiracies are correlated lies;
3. Delusions are believed conspiracies;
4. Violence is enacted delusion;
5. Happiness is a warm gun.

(The last of these is the title of a song by the Beatles.)

When being driven through Lucknow a couple of days ago I was startled to see a clothes shop called 'Hitler'. Apparently it is a chain of stores with branches nationwide. Initially there were international protests at the insensitivity of the name, but it appears that the controversy has been good for business. Roshan tells me that it's quite commonplace for people to use 'hitler' as a mild pejorative, meaning authoritarian (e.g. "My new boss, she's such a hitler, I can't tell you"). I guess this is the Indians getting their own back for the Nazis' appropriation of the swastika. Anyway, seeing the shop led me and Roshan to speculate on whether they also sold sporting equipment, in which case we could pay a visit and enquire whether they had any balls. "Sorry sir, we've sold our last one, but you could try Himmler's in Hazratganj ...".

Love from Roger xxx