

9-Aug-06

Dear Dad,

...

Today is a public holiday in India, called 'Raksha-bandan'. Every year on this day women tie ('bandan') threads ('raksha') around the left wrists of their brothers. In the Jungle Book the mother wolf was called Raksha, but Kipling ascribed a different meaning to the word. In any case, Vinay is being trussed up by his sisters, and, not to be outdone, Kanchan-chachi, one of Geeta's old ayahs, came here today in order to do the same thing to me. Naturally the man has to return this loving gesture with a gift of money...

Much love from Roger.

9-Aug-06

Correction: 'Raksha-bandan' means 'protection-bond'. By allowing the thread to be tied around his wrist, the brother is promising to protect his sister.

Rxxx

27-Oct-07

Dear Dad,

It's 9pm here and in about 20 mins I'm off to the station to catch the sleeper train to Delhi. Also travelling are Mrs Gandhi and Sunita. Geeta's conference finished today, so tomorrow will be a day off together in Delhi for us. Then it's back here on the next overnight train, arriving in Lucknow Sunday morning.

All's well here. The weather is very nice at this time of year, warm and dry like a (proper) English summer. For the first time that I can remember everyone in the family is well and happy. Geeta sounded good, too, when I spoke to her late last night. I have been attending the various school events that are a permanent feature of life here. Yes, 'head office' means the family home, 12 Station Road, which is also the central administration building for the largest school in the world - 33,000 and growing.

I don't think anybody here thinks anything about Iran. They probably don't know where it is. I've just come from a school function where the chief guest was the Uttar Pradesh Minister for Education - responsible for all the schools in the state. UP has a population in excess of 110 million, so I guess that means 30-40 million schoolchildren. Trying to make conversation, the Minister's number one chumcha (sycophant) asked me where I was from. "England", I said. "Ah, England in America?" he said. "No, England as in London, England." "Oh, London! I have a friend in London, perhaps you know him..." Clearly the education of India's children is in safe hands!

Much love,

Roger.

28-Oct-07

Hello everyone,

We got back from Delhi on the overnight train this morning. Yesterday was spent in Delhi at a seminar organised by Sunita to promote the schoolbooks that she is producing (one of her many ventures). The seminar was well-attended and quite a success. I had the following conversation with one of the participants:

She: Oh, fraud in schools is such a problem, I can't tell you.

Me: It's the same in the UK. For instance, in Oxford there are now 2 universities, the famous Oxford University which Indira Gandhi attended and a former college that is now called Oxford Brookes University. But I know that many students who go to Oxford Brookes University pass themselves off as Oxford University students. That's fraud.

She: Oh, that's so bad!

Me: Are you running a school here in Delhi?

She: Yes. It's called Cambridge Progressive.

Me: Ah. Would you like another cup of tea?

All's well here. It's very nice to have Geeta back with me. Her conference went well, now she has several days going out to the local villages conducting ability tests.

Love to all,

Roger xxx

8-Jul-08

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. Roshan and I had a reasonable journey here on Saturday eve/Sunday morning, except that my suitcase missed the flight and I've only just retrieved it (intact) this morning (Tuesday). Well it's been a good excuse to be a bit disgraceful for a day or two! (It works wonders for getting out of meetings with the local bigwigs - not that they are particularly refined in their dress sense.) Arjun is fine, each day he goes out to Sunita's school on the outskirts of the city and teaches music and whatnot. The last couple of days he's had Roshan in tow. It's a nice exercise in doing something purposeful in a fairly independent but safe manner. They have their own car & driver and a bottle of mineral water each, what more could they want? Hopefully they will learn a little Hindi - just enough to get by - which of course one never does if there is always a proficient interpreter to hand. Geeta goes to Patna for 5 nights on the night train this evening, there she is conducting a large survey of 'para-teachers' (what we call 'supply teachers' or temporary staff). I am taking my usual low profile, just making sure that the boys are safe and that Geeta (and, in Geeta's absence, her mother) is provided with an uncritical audience whenever the need arises to let off a bit of steam.

I hope all's well with you,

Much love from Roger.

9-Jul-08

Dear Mum and Dad,

Today is a Bahai holy day so Arjun and Roshan didn't go to teach. Instead Arj prepared the course he is going to give at Bahai Summer School on his return, and Rosh took to his bed with an upset stomach. It can't be that bad because I think they're currently working on composing a song with Sagar. The school has its own brand-new recording studio next door and the lads get priority access - they are very very lucky. Most of the songs are quite rude! Typical teenagers.

Today I met a person from Allied Publishers who has agreed to publish my book. He seems trustworthy and reliable.

Arjun is teaching Class VII which I suppose is 14-year-olds. Especialy in Lucknow, which is about 50:50 Hindu-Muslim, there's not a lot of difference between spoken Hindi and Urdu - just the odd word or pronunciation. The scripts are entirely different, however. Yes, I am back on the 25th, together with Roshan and Arjun. Geeta gets back a week later.

Much love from Roger xxx

10-Jul-08

Dear Roger,

Those of the Muslim and Hindu faiths are living in harmony and in equal numbers in Lucknow, yet there was Partition when Pakistan and Bangladesh were created with great loss of life and hardship in the migration.

The music the boys play, is it Indian style or a mixture? Do they teach the students to play instruments?

Love from Dad

10-Jul-08

Dear Dad,

At the time of partition it was touch-and-go whether high-percentage Muslim places like Lucknow would be in India or Pakistan. In the end the division was completely arbitrary. (There's a very interesting book on this: 'Indian Summer' by Alex von Tunzelman. You'd enjoy it, I think.)

Arjun plays the guitar and leads singing in Western-style music (modern songs that are amusing or stirring or have a good meaning) and general knowledge things, using quizzes etc. Sunita's school is progressive and they don't worry about time lost from ordinary lessons - the children are progressing in other ways, e.g. trying out their English on Arjun and Roshan. But at the same time Arjun is discussing & trying out Indian music/instruments with the teachers in the school.

All's well here. Roshan had a temperature last night, probably a result of too much sun, but he's fine now.

Much love from Roger xxx

14-Jul-08

Thank you Roger,

I have been to the library and the book 'Indian Summer' by Alex von Tunzelman' is on order and we hope to have it shortly.

Does Lucknow have a town council such as in this country, or is the area controlled by people in the two dominant religions? Mother said that I could not assume that there was total harmony in the area.

What about the City Montessori School? That must have students from all sections of society and not necessarily religious? Does this cause friction? Does the Hindu caste system still operate? What about the untouchables? Are they welcome at the school, or is it more to do with being able to afford sending one's children there?

Love from Dad

14-Jul-08

Dear Dad,

It's difficult to describe the situation here. Lucknow is of course the state capital of Uttar Pradesh, pop. 120 million or more. Inter-communal relations are traditional and not affected by local political structures. On more than one occasion Mr Gandhi has directly soothed tensions in the city by leading CMS children on peace marches through the affected areas.

Yesterday I attended a 'sathsang' (the 'h' is silent) which involves religious discourse. After a few prayers set to music, there were 3 talks: (i) I read out a passage from the Bahai writings talking about the necessary conditions for a united and peaceful world, then added my own commentary on some of the points; (ii) Mr Gandhi retold one of the events described in the Bhagavad Gita concerning a king who, against all advice, insisted on naming his (highly unsuitable) son as his successor, and it all came to a sticky end, just like King Lear; (iii) A mujtahid (religious scholar) from the Shia community in Lucknow gave a very animated rant in Urdu... for all the world it looked just the same as one of those Finsbury Park extremists... but the audience began applauding, so I guessed he was saying good things... so when he was obviously referring to something I had said, I salaamed him politely, which he returned... a good move, because afterwards I found out that he was saying that all religions came from the same God, they were all true etc. So you see that appearances can deceive, and what is true for the Finsbury Park mosque ain't necessarily so in Lucknow. Indeed it is impossible to relate what goes on here to what happens in Iraq, Pakistan or even elsewhere in India.

CMS is a secular school which promotes (& indeed thrives on) all the religious traditions. e.g. every morning in every branch all the children come together for communal prayers, and together they all recite from memory one prayer from each of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Sikhism, and the Bahai Faith.

The caste system is alive and well and unfortunately has become the basis of political divisions here. Congress is the only party that tries to appeal to all castes and religions. One unintended consequence of caste politics is that, since at the moment the ruling party in UP represents the lower castes, and since the politicians can (and do) insist that their children are admitted to CMS, there is

a good representation of them in the school. From our perspective, referring to caste seems a bit non-PC, but in this place it is the natural order and the best approach is to understand how it works and to ensure that systems are set up so that people are treated equally regardless of caste. Thus in CMS all employees (including lower-caste cleaners, rickshaw-wallahs etc) can (and do) admit their children to the school for free.

Much love from Roger xxx

19-Jul-08

Dear Dad, Richard, Peternel and Nita,

The latest news in brief. Yesterday we bought a sitar for Arjun, he is currently having a 2-hour lesson with a CMS teacher. It is very hard on the fingers!

The day before (Thursday) the whole family visited Anandi Water Park where there are outdoor water slides, a wave machine etc. My hairy mane attracted many admiring/horrified stares. A good time was had by all! Geeta's father did not change into togs. Instead he brought a CMS film crew (which, with difficulty, we prevented from filming us at play), and set up a projector screen for us to watch an educational fillum.

Tomorrow is our last day here. Early on Monday we fly to Delhi, with Roshan following on Thursday for our return flight to the UK. I may not be able to email from Delhi, so this is probably my last email before our return.

It's been raining a lot, real monsoon weather, and is a lot cooler than in previous years when I have been here. But it is very, very humid.

Everyone is well, but just a bit lethargic on account of the humidity.

Is there anything you would like me to bring from India? We will have time to go shopping in Delhi.

Much love from Roger.