

24-Feb-15

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. The weather is fine and sunny, with the temperature 30 deg C and rising, and no sign of clouds or rain. However, the skies are grey rather than blue, on account of the atmospheric pollution that blankets the entire area (i.e., the whole of the Ganges plain) virtually all year round now. The only thing that clears the 'mist' (as the locals call it) is the rain, but that only comes with the monsoon, still 3 months away - and then you still can't see blue skies, because of the rainclouds.

Everyone here is healthy and happy. Geeta is increasingly in her element and getting to grips with the day-to-day management of the school. It's amazing to think that she's been based here permanently for four-and-a-half years already. Time flies!

It's just after 1pm here and the local mosque has started broadcasting its call to prayer. It's quite melodious, I suppose, but I wish they didn't use loudspeakers. I am in Geeta's flat which is in the old raj quarter of the city, quite central, but nevertheless not (yet) overrun with shops or markets or schools or slums. There are even one or two trees and some birdsong. I spend most of my time here, mainly reading, and making notes in preparation for my next writing endeavours. In the last week I have read Peter Ustinov's autobiography, 'Dear Me', Che Guevara's account of the Cuban Revolution, and a novel called 'The Humans' by a newish author, Matt Haig. Ustinov's book is terrific, the others are so-so.

There haven't been any school functions to speak of, as exam time is approaching. So this is a period of calm on that front - thank goodness. Other things are going on, so Geeta is always busy, but not overburdened.

Much love from Roger xxx

3-Mar-15

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. Against expectation we've had some rain, which has cleared out the smog and brought down the temperatures, so the weather has been very pleasant for the last couple of days.

I've been here two weeks and I still haven't attended any school functions, which may be a record! Instead I've been spending most of my time in Geeta's flat, reading and hatching book ideas. Currently I'm reading 'Vanished Kingdoms' by Norman Davies, which recounts the histories of various European states that once existed but now are virtually forgotten: Burgundy, Savoy, Byzantium, Lithuania, and so on. It's fascinating, and very well-written.

This morning Geeta took an early flight to Delhi, where she has several meetings with various MPs and other government bigwigs. Amongst other things she is giving evidence to the 7th Central Pay Commission, whose recommendations are likely to further boost state school teacher salaries (which already are many times higher than average private sector teacher salaries). Probably her words of wisdom won't be heeded, but she has to try. She gets back tomorrow morning.

I hope you're well and that springtime has arrived, at last?

Much love from Roger xxx

9-Mar-15

Dear Mum and Dad,

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All's well here. Yesterday was International Women's Day, and to mark the occasion there was an event organised by the Bahais of Lucknow, featuring a panel of a half-dozen speakers including Geeta. Such a panel is routinely described as 'eminent', but on this occasion the label was appropriate: as well as Geeta it included the current head of UNICEF for the state of Uttar Pradesh, the former vice-chancellor of Lucknow University, the serving vice-chancellor of Agra University, the editor of the Hindustan Times, and our regular walking companion Mr V N Garg, who is the second-most senior person in the state civil service. In her 10 minute talk Geeta explained the two most significant mechanisms that have led to female disempowerment in India. The first mechanism is the tradition of parents relying on their sons to look after them in their old age. Sons (the eldest son, anyway) continue to live in the family home, and when they marry their wives join them, and look after their in-laws as they get old. So it pays for parents to have sons and invest in them. This tradition, together with the modern innovation of being able to predict the sex of a foetus by ultrasound scan, means that for several decades now there has been the widespread practice of the unprincipled abortion of female foetuses. As a result, the populations of South and East Asia are skewed such that there are an estimated 100 million missing women - a genocide that far outnumbers those perpetrated under Hitler, Stalin and Mao combined. (In China the driving mechanism has been the one-child policy - but the outcome is the same.) The second mechanism is to do with the rural population density, the so-called land-to-labour ratio. In India this ratio is very low (i.e. not much land, and a lot of people), whereas in Africa it is very high (i.e. a lot of land, and not many people). As a result, in rural India another woman in the family is seen as an extra mouth to feed, but in rural Africa she is seen as an extra pair of hands to work on the land. Accordingly, in India the parents of a bride have to pay a substantial dowry by way of compensation, whereas in Africa it is the groom's family that have to pay a 'bride price' at the time of a wedding. Again in India this all contributes to the lower status and the disempowerment of women. Geeta mentioned a range of possible solutions to these problems, including old-age pensions, changes to the laws of alimony and property ownership, and, of course, the education of women.

Not much else to report from here - the weather is good and life goes on.

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Much love from Roger xxx

16-Mar-15

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. We've had another couple of days of (highly unseasonal) rain, so the weather now is really good, warm but not humid, with clear pollution-free skies. Geeta has spent the best part of the weekend interviewing candidate teachers, leaving me to supervise the assembly of Ikea furniture (designed in Sweden, made in China, delivered from Dubai) and watch Six Nations rugby. Also in the last week I've attended a couple of CMS functions. At this time of year the school organises 'Divines' (Divine Education Conferences), so-called because they are aimed at imparting good values to the parents of CMS students. The parents attend because otherwise they won't be given the annual report cards of their children. I've attended a couple of Divines this year - see attached photo. But most of the time I've been working on my latest book idea, which has the prospective title, 'How Not to Run the World: Twenty Disastrous Political Ideas'. Like 'How to Make a Mind', this title is an accurate description of its intended contents. I've sent a brief outline to my agent, Francesca, who has mentioned it to one or two publishers, and one of these has expressed interest, so my next task is to work it up into a proper proposal, with a couple of sample chapters. This should keep me out of trouble for the foreseeable future.

For your interest I've copied below a couple of front-page articles from a recent issue of the Hindustan Times. I've copied them word-for-word, the only variations being occasional explanations of acronyms and colloquialisms, in square brackets.

Much love from Roger xxx

Hindustan Times, 12 March 2015

Violence in Allahabad after cop shoots lawyer

Allahabad: A sub inspector shot dead a lawyer on district court premises following an altercation here on Wednesday afternoon. Upset over the incident, lawyers indulged in large-scale arson, pelted stones and set afire a number of vehicles.

The lawyers also vandalised the SSP [Senior Superintendent of Police] office where the SI [Sub Inspector] had taken refuge to escape the mob fury.

Lawyers of high court too staged road blockades and damaged vehicles outside the high court premises. As the news spread, lawyers at Karchana and Meja tehsil [district] courts too boycotted work and came out on the streets.

As per information, SI Shailendra Singh was escorting an undertrial [a person being tried in a court] to the district court when he had an altercation with some lawyers.

Peeved lawyers reportedly manhandled Singh who in retaliation opened fire with his service weapon at a lawyer Nabi Ahmad from close range resulting in his death. Another lawyer also is said to have sustained gunshot injuries. Singh, in a bid to escape the angry mob, took refuge inside the SSP office located nearby. But a group of lawyers barged into the SSP office and damaged the office property prompting cops to resort to cane charge that left many injured.

Upset lawyers later refused to hand over the body for post mortem and forcibly took it to the district court and staged a road blockade.

This led to further confrontation between the cops and the lawyers with people from both sides receiving injuries. Several lawyers, who were injured in the incident, were taken to Tej Bahadur Sapru (Beli) hospital for treatment.

Cops from all over the district along with RAF and PAC [elite police] personnel were deployed to bring the situation under control.

SSP Deepak Kumar said efforts were being made to control the situation and action would be initiated against the guilty.

IG [Inspector General] BB Sharma while talking to the media said, it was too early to comment on what actually happened and what triggered such ugly scenes but the guilty would be identified and action be initiated against them.

This article is accompanied by photographs of ‘Angry advocates set[ting] ablaze vehicles on the court campus in Allahabad on Wednesday’, and ‘A profusely bleeding lawyer.’

According to the Times of India, ‘sub-inspector Singh, in-charge of Naribari police outpost, had gone to the district court in connection with a case when he had a heated argument with a group of lawyers near the stairs of the district court building. When the lawyers allegedly threatened to thrash him, the sub-inspector took out his service weapon and opened fire in which two lawyers were critically injured. Ahmad succumbed to injuries on way to hospital.’ Meanwhile, ‘The accused S-I is absconding’, i.e. he has run off.

According to our walking companion Mr V N Garg, this kind of incident is entirely typical, and it happens all the time.

Hindustan Times, 12 March 2015

Now, a fake police outpost right under your nose

Lucknow: While fake products, fake marksheets or fake institutes are commonplace, a bunch of fraudsters took the art of faking to quite another level, running full-time for the past one-year a fake police outpost [local police station] in Krishna Nagar by the name of New Golden City police outpost.

The fraud was exposed when a lawyer, Arun Kumar Giri, was held captive and beaten up there on Tuesday after a dispute over purchase of a plot at ‘New Golden City’ in Krishna Nagar’s Alinagar Sunahara locality. Some fraudsters were also present there posing as cops. The police have registered an FIR [first incident report] following the victim’s complaint and are probing the matter. "Initial probe suggests that the outpost is a fake. An outpost was indeed proposed there after a murder in a near-by area around a year ago but it did not materialise. No police staff were sanctioned for the outpost," said Avinish Kumar Mishra, circle officer (CO) of Krishna Nagar, told HT [Hindustan Times] on the phone.

He said the locality came under Vijay Nagar police outpost of Krishna Nagar and real estate agents were apparently misusing the fake police outpost to harass people.

Narrating the entire sequence of event, Arun Kumar Giri said that the youths started misbehaving with him when he reached there searching for a plot on Tuesday. The youths even beat him up and held captive inside a semi-constructed room of the New Golden City police outpost.

Giri said some more people turned up after some time and one of them posed himself as the outpost incharge Anjana Verma. He was in civvies.

Giri said Verma mounted pressure on him to settle the matter with the youth. Giri was released when he promised to not initiate any action against the youths. He said the fake cops snatched Rs 5,000 [i.e. 5000 rupees, worth around £50] that he was carrying.

This article is accompanied by a photograph of ‘The outpost that wasn’t.’



30-Apr-15

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. It's 10.30am and the temperature is already in the high 30s - we're in for a hot weekend, apparently. As usual I'm sitting up on a spare bed in Geeta's flat, from where I can look out of the window over the neighbourhood, and listen to all the birdsong and the noises of human activity. The flat is away from a main road, so these noises aren't drowned out by the traffic - unlike the previous flat next to 'Head Office' (12 Station Road). I have everything I need here: relative peace and quiet; a chowki (small table with short legs) to support my computer as I type; quantities of strong black coffee; and every now and then Puja (Geeta's maid) brings me some nice thing to eat, fruit or salad or some such thing. Luxury! I am getting along with background reading that I feel is necessary to defend my claims in my book ('How to Make a Mind') if/when it emerges in the bookshops. In particular I suspect it will kick up a storm amongst psychologists/psychiatrists (so I'm reading Freud, Jung and others), neuroscientists (so I'm reading other people you won't have heard of), and artificial intelligence people (likewise). Of course, most of this stuff I've kind-of read before - at least, I've been aware of it - but this time I'm trying to get into the details, in order to understand precisely why the established theories in psychology etc. have prevailed. And, despite trying to keep an open mind, time and again I've been drawn to the same conclusion: people are stupid. Sad to say, but that's what it looks like from here!

Part of the reason why I can get along with my own reading in the solitude of the flat is that Geeta is fully occupied with two major endeavours. Firstly, she's overseeing the construction of a 4-storey office building in Station Road, opposite from the family home/CMS Head Office at number 12. Geeta's experience is that nothing ever gets done and completed unless the head person (i.e. Geeta) is physically present, 'putting a bit of stick about', as she calls it. So she's moved into the top floor already, which has been just-about completed for the purpose, even though to get there she needs to walk up uncompleted stairs through a busy building site. But if anything should go wrong there's a handy rope ladder hanging out the window, so she can escape in an emergency. So that's all right then. Originally this new office block was just going to house Geeta's own staff (the 'Secretariat'), and the rest of the space was going to be used by the adjacent CMS school branch. But recently the owners of 12 Station Road have been making positive noises about selling the site to CMS, which would allow its complete redevelopment, and in anticipation of this the new office block has been reconfigured to take all of the main departments of Head Office - including separate offices for Geeta's parents. So it's quite a major undertaking.

Geeta's second big endeavour is to help her father and a huddle of lawyers to defend CMS in the High Court against a government order foisting a whole bunch of children from allegedly poor backgrounds into the school without paying the going rate. Five years ago the central government passed the Right to Education Act (RTE) which mandated that up to 25% of a private school's intake could be determined in this way. However, the RTE also included a whole load of conditions (in particular, fair compensation to the schools, proper notice being given, and a catchment area criterion) which the Lucknow authorities have chosen to ignore in CMS's case. Hence CMS is going to court. One would have thought that it would be a fairly simple case, but nothing is ever as it seems, because in this country there is no effective rule of law. Everyone from the judge down is fair game for bribery and corruption; and everyone from the judge down sees CMS as 'rich pickings'. So this isn't really a question of the rights and wrongs of sending poor children to an elite fee-paying school. It's simply a matter of protecting the school against the vultures.

The newspapers here remain full of reports from Nepal, but the tales of local 'suffering' because of the earthquake no longer feature, thank goodness. For two days running the schools were closed by

government order, plus whenever there was a slight (almost imaginary) tremor everyone just absconded and took the rest of the day off; but I never saw so much as a cracked window-pane, anywhere. What a bunch of cowards. Even the CCTV pictures from Nepal, showing people rushing for the exits during the main earthquake, showed that it was quite mild compared with what happened in New Zealand a few years back, or in Japan preceding the tidal wave that hit the nuclear reactors at Fukushima. Now THAT was an earthquake! The reason why the buildings fell down so easily in Nepal is that they hadn't been made to stand up during an earthquake in the first place. I'm sure it's the same in Nepal as it is here: most buildings are made out of mud bricks stuck together with flour-and-water paste.

Much love from Roger xxx

12-May-15

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. The weather today is cooler, overcast, with a good breeze and the occasional drop of rain - a much-needed break from the recent high temperatures (up to 43 degrees C) and humidity levels (up to 80%). But still it wouldn't be at all easy without air conditioning in the flat and the car. Compared with 30 years ago, or what the vast majority of people here have to endure, we are in lap of luxury!

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There's not a lot of news to report. The school year has ended, so there are no more functions for the time being. Geeta and her father are fully occupied with court cases, defending CMS against a host of scavengers. I am keeping my head down, working on perfecting my last book and collecting points for my next one, in the comfort of Geeta's flat. The newspapers are full of the usual politics and scarcely-believable scare stories. Life goes on.

Having said that: there's just been a letter delivered to the door from the agency managing the flats, which begins, "Recently criminals have been found to be using flats in apartment buildings for holding kidnapped persons as hostages. Cases have come to light wherein neither the society's, office bearers, manager or security guards were aware about criminals living in the Apartment Building. It happened because the owner of the flat had rented out his flat without informing the management of their apartment building's society." The letter goes on to request details and photos of all residents, for passing to the police. It's not clear whether this particular block of flats has been used by criminals in this way, or whether this is just a general circular. (I'm reminded of a line from 'A Fish Called Wanda': "We've got a high-ranking KGB defector in a safe house near here, we're debriefing him as of now so we're just checking all the houses round here.") Fortunately we've just had the locks changed...

And now the latest excitement, as I am typing the building is gently swaying, so it looks like another minor earth tremor. Ho hum, time for a little walk around the district!

I hope you're well?

Much love from Roger xxx

16-May-15

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. There is a lot of nervous excitement in anticipation of the annual school exam results which will be announced on Monday. In one case this has boiled over and yesterday the father of one of the students pulled out a gun and threatened to kill the Principal (in whose CMS branch his son is studying) if she didn't make sure that his son got a decent set of marks. After the usual hullabaloo, including the same man also issuing death threats to Geeta's father (by phone, so less credible than waving a revolver under his nose), a compromise was found: the student will be given sufficiently good marks for his father to be able to get him admitted in a residential school in Nainital (which is far, far away in the Himalayan foothills). Good riddance! But apparently this kind of behaviour is increasingly common, particularly from people having the profession of this student's father. He's a lawyer.

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Much love from Roger xxx

18-Sep-15

Dear Mum and Dad,

Geeta and I have arrived in Lucknow safe and well. The flights were smooth and trouble-free. On arrival here a couple of hours ago Geeta was whisked off on some urgent business, so I have come to the flat (Geeta's luxury penthouse in Mall Avenue) where I've been unpacking and settling in. Most importantly, I've checked that Geeta has subscribed to the 'Sony Six' TV channel which has the monopoly in India for showing all the matches from the Rugby World Cup... and she has! What a wonderful wife. So that's me sorted for the next month, starting at 8pm (BST) this evening!

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All my love, and Geeta's too,

Roger xxx

26-Sep-15

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here in Lucknow. The weather is very pleasant at the moment, similar to a hot summer's day in the land of our fathers. It was a lot more hot and humid than this when I arrived, but some heavy rain a couple of nights ago cleared the air and cooled the ground. Everything else here is pretty much as usual. Geeta is occupied with her work all hours, which means that I can stay in the flat (her new penthouse in Mall Avenue) and pursue my own work, most of the time.

Geeta's main occupation is the same it's been for many months now, trying to protect CMS from interference by the state government. A few years ago the central government passed the Right to Education Act, which (predictably for India) has come to be the means by which the state government effectively takes away from many children the right to a decent education. It's like in George Orwell's book '1984' where the Ministry of Peace concerned itself with war. In any case, Geeta and her father spend most of their time surrounded by lawyers, and increasingly Geeta has had to nip up to Delhi to consult with other 'top men' up there. The senior-most lawyer is Shanti Bhushan, who was India's Law Minister in the 1970s. He is 90 years old but still has all his intellectual faculties, apparently. This evening Geeta is flying to Delhi again for another round of meetings with him and others. She gets back on Tuesday morning, I think.

As for my work... I think I've told you already that I've given up on trying to find a publisher for 'How to Make a Mind', and instead I'm getting it published myself, through a company called The Self-Publishing Partnership. Their main jobs are to prepare the proofs for printing, design the cover, register the book (that is, get an ISBN code for it), handle print orders, and oversee the distribution. So far they've been very proficient and quick, and two days ago I signed-off both the contents and the cover, so it's ready to print. Also they've put me in touch with a specialist publicity agent, who reckons she can get me on national radio and TV to talk about my book, for a fixed fee, so I'm inclined to take her on. We're planning to launch the book at the beginning of November.

Then there's the rugby, of course! All the matches can be viewed here, on a particular subscription channel, and I have been watching the choice ones. I don't know if you saw Japan versus South Africa last weekend, but it was an incredible match. The scale of Japan's achievement in beating the Boks is clear from the fact that they (Japan) have since lost very heavily to Scotland. Their next game is against Samoa next Saturday. Arjun and Marika have tickets for the match, which is in Milton Keynes. I'll be watching out for them in the crowd! But before then we have the momentous clash between England and Wales, which I've been relishing for weeks. I just hope they aren't fazed by all the hype and that both teams play some decent rugby.

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Much love from Roger xxx

4-Oct-15

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. My book has gone to the printers for an initial run of 500 copies, which will be ready by the time I return: less than 2 weeks now! I've attached a picture of the front cover. The image of 'The Thinker' is based on a photo I took of the original sculpture in the grounds of the Musee Rodin in Paris in 1992. They've done a good job, I think: very dark, to bring out the brooding nature of the enterprise, and with gold lettering to make it look like a bar of Green & Blacks 85% dark chocolate! Yum.

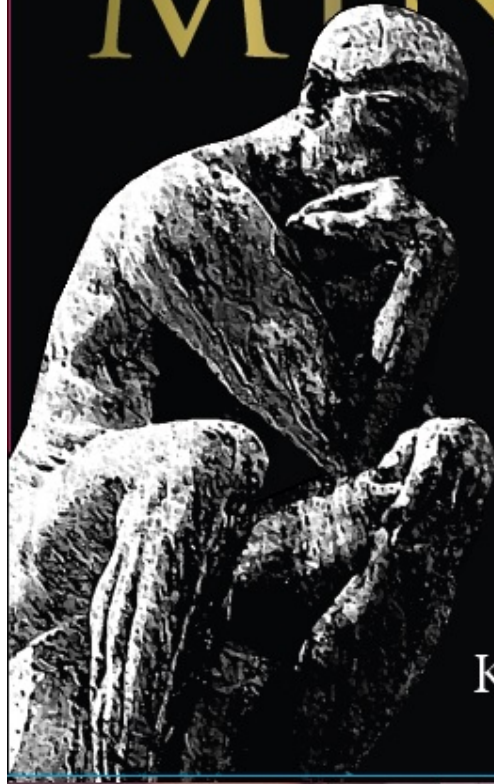
When not watching rugby I've been spending most of my time going through the proofs of my book again and again, to make sure that it's absolutely perfect. It's become a bit of a compulsion, but not an unpleasant one. Indeed, I'm really enjoying re-reading it - which is not something that I can say about many of my previous works. If there was any justice then this would be a bestseller. (That's the problem, of course: there is no justice when it comes to selling books.)

As for the rugby... the least said the better, I suppose, about England's two defeats! But I must say that on this occasion I am curiously detached about England's fate, not because I don't care, but because I thought that in both games the quality of rugby produced by their opponents was utterly outstanding. It's always been more important to me to watch a good game than to support a particular team - in any sport. And the great thing about rugby is the way the home nations come together every four years to make a Lions team - it's impossible to support the Lions and maintain a narrow tribal loyalty to just one of the home nations. You don't get that in any other sport.

Geeta's awake now, so I'd better go. Breakfast time!

Much love from Roger xxx

HOW TO MAKE A MIND



ROGER
KINGDON

13-Oct-15

Dear Mum and Dad,

All's well here. We've just spent the last three days attending the CMS Chief Justices Conference. This is usually held in December, but was brought forward for some reason: attendance, maybe, as this year there is a record number of serving and former heads of state here, as well as serving and former chief justices, etc. In particular there are a couple of serving Governor-Generals (of Tuvalu and some other place), plus the former president of South Africa, Kgalema Motlanthe - a very intelligent and cultured gentleman. The conference has been very successful, with an all-round improvement in the level of discussion and of engagement between the attendees and the CMS students. A judge from Thailand suffered a heart attack at the conference dinner, but CMS had an ambulance on hand that was able to get him to the hospital in time, and he's now out of danger.

The first print run of my book has completed, and a dozen copies have been sent to Arjun to await my return. Arjun reports that they "look gorgeous". I'll be spending most of this week writing articles and other short pieces suitable for newspapers etc, as requested by my PR agent. The media launch date has been fixed for 12 November, this is to give time to journalists to read the book and write their reviews.

I fly back to the UK this Friday, and will stay the weekend with Arjun and Marika in Cambridge. On Saturday Arjun and I will make a day trip to Cardiff where we have tickets for the rugby quarter-final match between New Zealand and France. Effectively this is a re-run of the match 8 years ago between the same teams in the same venue - which we also attended. On that occasion France pulled off a shock win: I'm sure that the All Blacks will want to extract their revenge!

Much love from Roger xxx