

2. Early Days at Cambridge

Cambridge had always been the University of my dreams – Alhamah Iqbal, Allamah Mashriqi, Pandit Nehru, Bertrand Russell, Wordsworth, Newton, Lord Rutherford, J J Thomson – even R M Chaudhri. So to arrive there to read for a PhD was a great fulfilment for me. However, it was also an entirely new environment, culture and milieu.

I had formed new resolutions for a new life. The first was to get up early each morning (always a great failing for me!) and have a bath. In my rooms there were no washing facilities and no sink (as was the normal state of affairs those days). Under one's bed was a 'bed chamber/pot' for emptying your bladder in – which one's bed maker (an elderly lady) – would empty each morning. So, early the next morning, at about 6 am, I got out of my bed and out of my rooms. I did not know where the bath rooms were. In a corner of the Gonville Court, diagonally across, there was a man in a shiny white jacket, polishing shoes outside the staircase door. I wasn't sure whether it was a servant or a modest Professor cleaning his own shoes (for English Professors were reputed to be eccentrics). I timidly approached him and enquired where the bathrooms were. He addressed me as Sir, and pointed to the baths.

I found that I was the only occupant of those baths at that early hour – but was dismayed to discover that there was no hot water – at least at that time of day. It was a fair torture to take a cold shower. I later discovered that there was hot water on Sundays in those showers – for there were only showers, but that there were no curtains whatever. I was not used to wandering around in the nude in front of others (even though they were all men). It would be quite shameless to do that in India or Pakistan. So I never got used to taking a hot shower of a Sunday morning; I always waited until about 2 pm, when everyone else had finished showering and gone to lunch in the hall. This meant that I usually missed my Sunday lunch (which I was horrified to discover was often a cold meat and salad – despite it being winter – and often ended with an ice-cream: unimaginable as a winter dish in India!)

Also, at home I had never been in charge of getting my clothes washed. A dhobi (washman) would come once a week to our home, and my mother would give him (usually a young boy) a great load of shirts and shalwars and socks and handkerchief for a whole family of about 15 people – a detailed list of all laundry items being meticulously entered on a book – and each item checked against the list when the laundry was returned after a few days. Anyway, I had therefore never learnt to give my socks for washing; and while I gave all my other apparel duly stuffed in the laundry-bag that we had been instructed to bring from home – I never gave my socks for washing (to save a few pennies). The result was that – as I

still remember to my shame – my socks usually got rather ‘clammy’, as I wore them even in bed (for it was so cold). When I next washed them in the bathroom sink, they sometimes were on the verge of disintegration! I then took them to the ‘University Aunts’ for repair. As I had also not discovered as yet the use of under-arm deodorant – I leave it to the reader’s imagination the sour odours that may have emanated from my body. It may be worth mentioning, however, that in Lahore, College (male) students normally – or often – brought perfumes from the Anarkali Bazar, etc., and liberally applied them to their face, neck, etc. Prophet Muhammad had also recommended the use of *ittar* as a good social grace. The perfume widely used by male students of Lahore College was ‘Evening in Paris’ – a cheap and very sweet-smelling perfume – actually meant for women. I continued to use this and similar perfumes in my early days at Cambridge (and talcum powder). I am not sure what ‘queer’ impression such perfumes might have made on those one mingled with.

Speaking of food above, I am reminded that, since in India and Pakistan people used either hands, or at most spoons, for eating food (knives and forks being unknown), before leaving for England I had asked a college friend of mine (Sajid Abbas), who said he knew how to use European cutlery, to teach me their use. He said he would – if I invited him to a free dinner at a nearby restaurant on the Mall in Lahore. He told me that peas, instead of being picked up by a spoon or even a fork, had to be squeezed on to the back of a fork! I thought he must be pulling my leg. But I was surprised to find that that was exactly what the English did (for which purpose the peas were first cooked to become squidgy and mushy). Also, I did not at first become used to piling a lot of different food items on to your fork – e.g. mashed potatoes, peas, meat, etc., simultaneously. So, while eating in Hall at dinner time, I always got left behind vis-à-vis my English co-diners as I laboriously picked up these various items in sequence. I also remember that I was very abstemious, those days, about eating pig’s meat. Once, the menu at lunch time included cold cuts of ‘tongue’. I asked the waiter what type of meat was it?: He said it was ‘tongue’ – and put out his tongue and repeatedly pointed to it. I enquired whether it was cow’s tongue or a pig’s tongue. He said he had no idea; so I left it alone (although I am now almost sure it must have been beef).

Another cultural topic on which I had sought advice before leaving Lahore was about European music – about which I had absolutely zero knowledge. (How many Europeans know anything about the Indian ragas?) So I asked Mr Akhlaq Hussain, a highly cultured friend of mine, a year senior to me, to tell me the names of a few famous European composers. He said he could, off-hand, name only two; Beet (to rhyme with feet) – oven and Mosert (which sounded a bit like desert). I later remembered that one of our English lecturers at the Government College Lahore had once told us that some famous European had remarked that ‘God created the Heaven and Earth so that Beethoven could write his 9th symphony’. So, that was an Innocent Abroad for you: me!