

INTERLUDE IN INDIA

by
David Symington

Preface

Normally when reaching the age of five or six the children of Europeans working in India were sent home not to return to India, if ever, until they had reached adulthood. If it had not been for the war this would have been my fate; as it was I spent nearly four years in India from the age of nine until thirteen, returning to school in England in 1944.

In May 1940, aged nine, I was at a prep. school in Windsor and my parents, then in India with my sisters Bridget and Sarah (my father David being an ICS officer), were unwilling to leave me in an England threatened by a German invasion. A friend of mine at school and my age was Richard Batchelor and his parents had decided that he should go to India with his mother. She very kindly agreed to take me under her wing during the voyage to Madras with four, including Richard, of her own children, (one a baby), and two others!

The Voyage

This was a strange experience. It started in Tilbury in May 1940 on S.S. Modasa of the British India line and went around the Cape to Madras taking three months. The ship called at a number of ports starting with Gibraltar but the only ones at which the passengers were allowed to disembark were Capetown and Colombo. I remember the view from the top of Table Mountain. It was wartime and the ship was crowded. I was accommodated at first in a 4-berth cabin with three old ladies (at least they seemed to me to be old), who were strangers to each other! Later I was moved to another berth about which I cannot remember anything. Richard Batchelor and I saw a great deal of each other. In a letter to my father dated 1st August 1940 and I believe posted in Capetown, Mrs Batchelor wrote, "He and my Richard are a pretty pair of pickles, but very nice boys!"

Some days out from Tilbury our convoy was attacked by three German motor torpedo boats & bombed three times by the Luftwaffe, all on the same day. Our ship, the S.S. Modasa, was armed with an anti-aircraft gun and the noise of it firing, cooped up as we were in the dining saloon, was frightening. At least two ships were sunk; the three life boats from the second ship were strafed by machine guns from one of the aircraft and later that day so was S.S. Modasa! While the first two attacks were going on the passengers were cooped up in the dining room with the ports closed. The smokers were smoking and the atmosphere was intolerable.

In the afternoon of the day, when there had already been two attacks, some of the passengers, including me, were out on the forward well deck enjoying the sun when we were strafed by a German aeroplane. I did not see it but heard its engines and the noise of its guns. The men on the well deck promptly bolted down the hatchway like rabbits threatened by a golden eagle, leaving the women and children behind! I did not hear of any deaths or injuries - I like to think that the pilots of the aircraft deliberately missed when they saw the there many women & children. Mrs Batchelor reported to my father that the members of her party were very jumpy for some days afterwards!

Arrival In Madras

My father met me in Madras - this was in August 1940 - and we took the Bombay mail train, which stopped at the city of Sholapur where my father was Collector. I can remember meeting the rest of my family on the station platform - my mother and two sisters and their English nurse maid, (who was a friend of ours) - and I was very glad to see them after being parted from them for eighteen months. During the voyage I had been under the care of Mrs. Batchelor who, understandably, was not able to supervise Richard and me and my father said that I was as wild as a hawk.

Life In Sholapur

My father David Symington, an ICS man, arrived in India in 1926 and was initially posted to Sindh and became proficient in Sindhi. However in 1929, after his marriage, he was posted much further south in the Bombay Presidency and, at the time of my birth in 1930, was Collector of Ratnagiri a place on the Indian ocean some 330 kilometers by road from Bombay. His Sindhi was useless there and he started to learn Maharati.

My father took over as Collector of the district of Sholapur from Hugh Lambrick an old friend from their Oxford days at Oriel College Oxford, in March 1939. Sholapur is about 400 kilometers by road south east of Bombay and located on the vast plateau called the Deccan making up most of the southern part of India. Maurice Zinkin who became a distinguished I.C.S. officer who joined the ICS in 1938, was present in Sholapur under training by Lambrick and continued his training under my father.

Our family lived in a large bungalow. There were two bedroom wings and a central section comprising drawing and dining room with a long verandah. An extra room had been added to one of the wings, which provided an office for my father although he had a larger office somewhere in the city for special occasions. At night an armed police guard was on duty around the bungalow.

We had electricity and running cold water but thunder boxes provided sanitation. Hot water for bathing and washing was produced in what I can only describe as a metal circular tank filled with water around which a charcoal fire in a metal jacket was lit. When the water was hot it was run off through a tap into buckets which were brought into the bathroom by the sweeper.

There were swarms of mosquitos and everybody slept under nets. My sister and I had bouts of malaria but my father never suffered from it and was seemingly never stung. His theory was that the smell of the alcohol in his blood originating from the whisky and soda, (the chota pegs), that he drank every evening before dinner, was not to the liking of the mosquitos. Scotch whisky became difficult to find and a distillery in Nasik provided a substitute which matured, in bottle, on the train from there.

I was taught to shake out my shoes or slippers before putting them on in case scorpions / centipedes / snakes were lurking in them- for some time after my return to England I continued to do this simply from force of habit.

Part of the large compound was turned into a garden.

I can remember nothing much about our food. The tap water was always boiled before drinking it and the raw vegetables and fruit washed in a solution of potassium permanganate. Buffalo milk was available and occasionally buffalo butter otherwise we ate tinned cow's butter which tasted a bit odd. The local mutton tasted very strange but the chicken was reasonable.

The domestic servants consisted of: a butler, (bearer), and assistant; a male chamber maid, (the hamal); the cook and assistant; the syce, (groom) and assistant; the mali (gardener) and assistant; an ayah (children's nanny) to help with Sara Jane (born 1939) and sweepers. My parents conversed with them in Hindi.

The Sholapur Club was the focus of our social life and there was a swimming pool there in which I learned to swim.

Touring

In the cold weather of 1940/1941 we went on tour in the district. The Government of India set great store by this process as a means of finding out at first hand the condition and preoccupations of the rural populations. We moved from one place to another spending a few days in each. (I gather that the modern successors of the ICS -the Indian Administrative Service, with improved roads and 4x4s, do day trips and the old tours are a custom of the past.)

When my father first went on tour in Sind he used to hire camels for conveying the camping equipment etc. and he rode a horse.

However in Sholapur district there were dirt roads and my mother, Binny, the English girl who looked after Sarah my baby sister, and Sarah herself set out on tour squeezed into a small Ford car which was not provided by the government but by my father. Needless to say there was no air conditioning and it was hot. We kept the windows open the whole time except when oncoming traffic had raised huge trails of dust in which case we had to close them until the dust had cleared. The servants followed in a bus, if my memory serves me rightly, and the tents, office furniture, kitchen equipment etc. followed in a lorry.

The horses of my father and Binny, the English girl, were walked to the camping sites from Sholapur city by the syce and his assistant who set out some days in advance of our expected arrival at the first destination.

The government provided bungalows dotted about the countryside for use by travellers which were called dak bungalows and there was rudimentary furniture and a caretaker in each. No electricity or running water were features of the ones that I can remember.

In one visit a dak bungalow near the town of Pandharpur – a city holy to the Hindus on the river Bhima- had been taken for our use. A large tent was erected outside it to serve as my father's temporary office complete with a punkah – a sort of fan in the form of a flap hanging from the roof – a rope attached to it went through a hole in the tent wall and was pulled by a man - the punkah wallah- who kept the fan in motion by pulling and releasing the end of the rope.

(Was it in a short story by Kipling that I read of a dog who was trained to wake up the punka wallah when he fell asleep?)

A visit to Pandharpur with my father provided one of the most memorable days of my life- I was ten years old ; there my father bought a pony for me to be named Biddy. He paid 20 rupees about £1-10 shillings for her. We went back to the dak bungalow and after dinner were sitting outside in armchairs in the dark, with an acetylene lamp in the centre of our circle, when the syce who had walked all the way back from Pandharpur loomed out of the darkness leading Biddy- what a thrill it was! I learned to ride on her.

At another dak bungalow in a place called Malsiras. I remember accompanying my father on an official visit to a village some miles away. We were woken very early in the morning before sunrise with tea and some fruit collectively called chota hazri- small breakfast. The syce brought round Biddy and my father's horse called Trixy and off we rode. Biddy could never be persuaded to ride abreast of another horse but always trailed behind; I think she may have been used as pack horse by her previous owner. The early start was designed to avoid the heat of the midday.

At the village my father was met by the village headman, the mamledar who was the senior administrative officer of the sub district, the sub inspector of police and the village notables.

Seated at a table my father engaged in a long colloquy conducted in Marathi with this gathering; I got very bored and hungry & was glad to start back home for a late breakfast.

Altogether I found touring a welcome change from city life.

In about March 1941, and to escape the increasingly hot weather in Sholapur, we went up by car to a hill station in the western ghats called Mahabaleshwar in the Satara district. It was a long winding road up the hill and at one point we stopped to talk with the syce and his assistant who were walking the horses Trixie and Biddy from Sholapur. Further up the ghat we stopped for a walk and were greeted by the most deliciously cool air. Since my arrival in India I had been living in temperatures of 80 to 90 F. with no air conditioning, just fans.. The elevation of Mahabaleshwar is 4,500 feet. The rainfall in the monsoon season ever year was so heavy that I believe that a large part of the population moved away until it was over.

The Governor of Bombay and some of his staff used to move up there during the summer months although I am not clear whether this was a regular occurrence by 1941. There were lovely walks & views and strawberries grew there which were a great treat!

My mother was born in Mahabaleshwar in 1904. In 1842 or 1843 my great-great uncle, Lieutenant John Aitken of the 3rd. Bombay Light Cavalry, went on sick leave to Mahabaleshwar after taking part in the highly successful British punitive expedition in Afghanistan – this was in revenge for the massacre of the retreating British army in 1841. He died in England in 1844 at the age of 23.

In late 1941 my father was posted to Bombay and we had to move there. He ended his career as Secretary to the Governor of Bombay Sir John Colville and left the service in 1947. The Bombay period is not of particular interest.

I was shipped back to England in 1944 to go to public school which I found very disagreeable.

Note

My experiences were the subject of a talk I gave to some members of the Indian Civil Service

Association on 14th June 2012.