A Sense of Humour

JAYANT V. NARLIKAR

I was brought up in a middle class family with a predominantly academic atmosphere. My father, who was professor of mathematics at the Banaras Hindu University was, and still is, a voracious reader of books. His interests ranged across the board from humour and light literature to philosophy and religions of the world, from P.G. Wodehouse and Stephen Leacock to Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Albert Schweitzer. With a mathematics degree from Cambridge and an active career in teaching and research, he had come in close contact with Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Dr. Radhakrishnan. My mother was an M.A. in Sanskrit, one of the few women of her generation who had pursued academic career to this level. And rarer still as a housewife, she had sustained her interest in Sanskrit classics amidst thousands of distractions that a housewife has to face.

Perhaps some of these rubbed on me in my childhood where I shall begin the account of my interaction with books. I should mention that this interaction did not begin through direct reading. It started when my mother read books to me and my younger brother at our bed time. Very soon we had progressed beyond the stories from the *Puranas*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* or Grimms Fairy Tales. The historical novels of the Marathi writers, Hari Narayan Apte and Nathmadhava, the western

classics like *David Copperfield* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* and the famous Hindi spy thriller *Chandrakanta* by Devaki Nandan Khatri were first introduced to us in these bedside storytelling sessions. I read them on my own later.

Thus it was that in the early fifties, when still at school, I became a Wodehouse-fan which I remain even to this day. From the first story of Bertie Wooster and Jeeves that my mother read out early on, I have now read and reread almost all the works of P.G. Wodehouse. I recall, how, in the early fifties, my father used to write to the New Book Company, Hornby Road, Bombay, for the latest Wodehouse books and how we used to await the arrival of the VPP parcel of books from Bombay.

I strongly feel that a sense of humour, the ability to appreciate humorous literature and the capability of laughing at oneself are essential to get along in life. In P.G. Wodehouse one finds humour in a pure and innocent form. There is no satire in it, nor is it at the expense of real human beings. It is about an England that never existed, about situations and characters that are contrived and unreal, but it is fun to read and it is written in superb English. Distinguished critics have placed Wodehouse on a high pedestal as a writer of English prose.

In different Wodehouse novels the same situations repeat themselves. There are the same set of characters, terrifying aunts, absentminded old men, imposters posing as honoured guests, young men out to chisel their guardians out of money so that they can get married, competitions among collectors of rare items or prize pigs, and so on. Yet one reads and enjoys Wodehouse novels again and again. Indeed, once Wodehouse mentioned that because some critics had pointed out that his novels contained the same plot with different names for the principal characters he decided to write a new novel with the same plot and with the same characters!

I cannot resist reading out a sample of Wodehouse prose, his views on Shakespeare whom he quotes profusely in his novels:

> A typical instance of the bad critic is the one who said, "It is time that Mr Wodehouse realized that Jeeves has become a bore." When

my press-cutting bureau sends me something like that, an icy look comes into my hard grey eyes and I mark my displeasure by not pasting it into my scrapbook. Let us forget this type of man and turn to the rare souls who can spot a good thing when they see one, and shining like a beacon among these is the woman who wrote to the daily paper the other day to say that she considers Shakespeare "grossly materialistic and much overrated" and "greatly prefers P.G. Wodehouse."

Well, it is not for me to say whether she is right or not. One cannot arbitrate in these matters of taste. Shakespeare's stuff is different from mine, but that is not necessarily to say that it is inferior. There are passages in Shakespeare to which I would have been quite pleased to put my name.

That 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' thing. Some spin on the ball there. I doubt, too, if I have ever done anything much better than Falstaff. The man may have been grossly materialistic, but he could crack them through the covers all right when he got his eye in. I would place him definitely in the Wodehouse class.

One of the things people should remember when they compare Shakespeare with me and hand him the short straw is that he did not have my advantages. I have privacy for my work, he had none. When I write a novel, I sit down and write it. I may have to break off from time to time to get up and let the foxhound out and let the foxhound in, and let the cat out and let the cat in, and let the senior Peke out and let the senior Peke in, and let the junior Peke out and let the junior Peke in, and let the cat out again, but nobody interrupts me, nobody comes breathing down the back of my neck and asks me how I am getting on. Shakespeare, on the other hand, never had a moment to himself.

Amongst other English humorists, I have enjoyed the nautical stories of W.W. Jacobs, the antics of sailors back on land after months on sea, the stories, told by the 'Night-watchman' at a typical wharf on the River Thames. In the modern age of jet planes and huge oil tankers, those boats and their sailors have become obsolete, but the stories retain their original flavour. I like to read them over and over again.

Ours was a Marathi speaking household in a Hindi speaking region. So my brother and I grew up with a familiarity of both these languages. Thus I developed a liking for stories of Munshi Premchand just as I enjoyed the plays of the Marathi dramatist,

Acharya Atre. Reverting once again to humour, I recall the ingenious Hindi book, लफ्टंट पिगसन की डायरी by Bedhab Banarasi. In this book one looks at India through the eyes of an English lieutenant stationed there on duty during the British rule.

In the following extract one finds the mythological explanation for the Indian habit of eating पान, an explanation given to the curious Pigson by a clever 'native':

> अपने देश के रहनेवालों के लिए मैं पान का थोड़ा वर्णन कर देना आवश्यक समझता हूँ। पान एक पत्ता होता है। इसकी शकल हृदय की भाँति होती है। इस पत्ते के भीतर चूना, कत्था और सुपारी की कतरन रखी जाती है और फिर उसे मोड़कर डेलटा की शकल का बनाते हैं; और तब दो या चार एक साथ लोग खाते हैं। मैंने गाइड से सुना कि जो जितना ही अधिक पान खाता है वह उतना ही बड़ा रईस समझा जाता है। बहुत से लोग इसके साथ तम्बाकू की पत्ती खाते हैं। इसके खाने का पुरुषों पर वही परिणाम होता है जो स्त्रियों को लिपस्टिक लगाने का, अर्थात् अधर लाल हो जाते हैं।
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> मैंने गाइड से पूछा कि पान यहाँ के लोग क्यों खाते हैं, कब खाते हैं, कैसे खाते हैं? उसने बताया—'भगवान एक बार पृथ्वी पर मनुष्य का रूप धारण करके आये। उनका नाम था कृष्ण। उनका एक यह स्वभाव पड़ गया कि इधर-उधर से मक्खन, दही, मलाई उठा-उठाकर खा जाते थे। एक बार इसी प्रकार से उन्होंने खाया और उनके होठों पर मक्खन लगा रह गया और पकड़े गये। लोगों ने मारने को दौड़ाया। यह भागे। भागकर एक कदम्ब के पेड़ के नीचे बड़े दुःख में मुँह बनाकर बैठे थे। सुनसान स्थान था। यह बैठे थे। टपाटप आँसू गिर रहे थे। उधर से एक लड़की आयी। इन्हें रोते देखकर उसको दया आ गयी, बोली—क्यों रोते हो? इन्होंने सारा हाल बता दिया। उसने कहा—तो क्या हुआ। इसमें रोने की क्या बात है। इन्होंने कहा—दुःख इस बात का है कि अब आगे कैसे खाऊँगा। लोग समझेंगे इन्होंने ही खाया है। लड़की ने कहा—इतनी-सी बात। वह दौड़कर गयी और एक पत्ते में कुछ लपेट कर लायी और बोली—इसे खा लो। मुख से दही और मक्खन की सुगन्ध भी नहीं आयेगी और अधर भी लाल हो जायेंगे। कुछ पता नहीं चलेगा। मेरा अधर देखो। यह जो प्रवाल के समान है, इसी के कारण है। तब से कृष्ण महाराज एक डिबिया में पान बाँधकर अपने दुपट्टे में

गठियाये रहते थे। जहाँ मनुष्य न खाया उसके बाद दो बीड़े पान; जहाँ दही खाया, दो बीड़े पान। उस लड़की के सिवाय कोई यह रहस्य जानता नहीं था। तभी से उस लड़की से, जिसका नाम राधा था, कृष्ण की गहरी मित्रता हो गयी।

I deem it necessary to describe pan for my countrymen. It is a leaf. Its shape resembles the human heart. Lime, *kattha* and areca nut in fine pieces are put on this leaf, which is then folded into delta shape. Two or four are eaten at the same time. I heard from my guide that the more a man chews pan, the more affluent he is considered. There are many who take tobacco leaf with it. Eating it gives the same result for men, as applying lipstick for women: lips redden.

I asked my guide why the people here ate pan, when did they eat and how? He told me: "God Himself once appeared on this earth in human form. His name was Krishna. It became his nature to steal and eat from here and there butter, yogurt and cream. Thus he ate once and he was caught as some butter lay stuck to his lips. People came running to beat him. He ran away. In sorrow he sat under a Kadamb tree. It was a deserted place. He was sitting there, shedding tears. A girl came there. Seeing him weeping she was moved and asked, 'Why are you crying?' He told her everything. She said, 'So what? What's there to cry about?' He said, 'What I am worried about is how to eat in future. People will think I did.' The girl said, 'That's all!' Then she ran, rolled something in a leaf, gave it to him, saying, 'Eat it. There won't be any smell of butter or yogurt in the mouth and your lips will become red. Nothing will be known. Look at my lips, red as coral, because of this.' Since then Lord Krishna always kept pan in a small case concealed under his upper garment. As he ate butter, a couple of pans; as he ate yogurt, two more pans. No one knew this secret, except the girl. Since then grew a fast friendship between Krishna and the girl, whose name was Radha."

My favourite Marathi humorist from those childhood days was C.V. Joshi who created the now immortal character Chimanrao. A simple lower middle class citizen of Pune in the 1930s, Chimanrao readily wins the reader's heart by his naive bravado and attempts to be clever. I still find Chimanrao's various adventures hilarious to read.

Before I leave books from my early days I must mention that immortal classic, *Winnie the Pooh*. It is a book found in

children's bookshops but which has been appreciated by adults also. I recall that when I went to Cambridge and met the retired head of my father's college there, one of the questions he asked was: "Have you read *Winnie the Pooh*?" On my replying in the affirmative, he beamed in appreciation and said, "Without that book I would not have considered your education complete."

Indeed, the stories of Christopher Robin and his toy characters which include his favourite teddy bear Pooh, tell us a lot about human nature. Today, having run through the stock of Pooh stories, my youngest daughter asks me to make fresh ones that reflect her own experience. Only last year a friend in Cambridge, a distinguished Don in his mid-eighties, presented her a set of cardboard cutouts which he had used to illustrate a Pooh story to his son four decades ago.

I discovered, however, that unlike Pooh, the works of Wodehouse were controversial in the U.K., at any rate in the late fifties when I went there as an undergraduate. This was because of the inadvertent role of the author during World War II, when he used the German radio to broadcast his experiences as prisoner of war. Those broadcasts have since been published and are seen to be quite innocuous, in fact they make fun of the Nazi captors in a typically British way. However, the use of enemy broadcast media during a war was ill-advised and not liked in England. Thus it was that my landlady in Cambridge, an otherwise mild and kind lady, reacted negatively when I started discussing Wodehouse. In the course of the years Wodehouse has, however, been rehabilitated. He was given knighthood in the last year of his life and a Wodehouse Society of his admirers flourishes in the U.K. A replica of his study as it was in his final days has been created at his old school, Dulwych College in South England.

I was in the U.K. for about fifteen years, first as an undergraduate, then as a research student and then as a 'Don'. The Library of Cambridge University was one of my favourite places to visit, especially for literature not of my professional interest as an astrophysicist. (Other, more technical, libraries existed for

my research interests.)

It was during the latter part of my stay in Cambridge that I came in contact with E.M. Forster. I had seen Forster ambling across the hallowed lawn of King's College in my first or second year at Cambridge. While I was relaxing on the banks of the river Cam with the backdrop of the famous King's College chapel and the Gibbs Building, my friend pointed him out. "There goes Forster, the author of *A Passage to India.*" I had not read the book then but had heard about it and was thrilled to see a famous personality. Little did I imagine then that I would be staying next door to him and that we would share an enormous Victorian bathroom in just a few years' time.

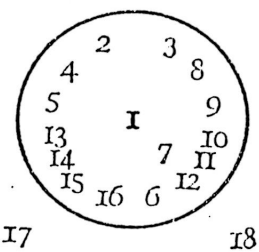
In 1963 I was elected a Fellow of King's College. On the night of my admission to the Fellowship I was dining at the High Table. Seated across from me was E.M. Forster. He was an Honorary Fellow of the College. In the course of conversation, Forster learnt that I was born in Kolhapur. This fact immediately roused his interest. For, he had, several decades earlier, spent a few months as Private Secretary to the Maharaja of Devas. In those days the states of Devas and Kolhapur were closely related through marriages in their respective rulers' families. It was at Forster's request that I was offered a set of rooms next to his. "You must call me 'Morgan' and I will call you 'Jayant'," he told me as we became neighbours.

Morgan was a humanist. Gentle in manners, sometimes deceptively so, he had firm views and deep sensitivities which show through many of the characters he created. He had no formal education in science; yet he was concerned with the growing impact of science on society. He had an abiding interest in frontiers of science. Knowing my interest in cosmology he probed me often on what was being discovered, discussed and debated in the field. One of my memorable encounters was at a meeting he had with Fred Hoyle in his rooms at King's. The two great minds shared their views on many things under the Sun and above it.

Forster is best known for his *A Passage to India.* In another, more autobiographical book on India, he displays remarkable

perception. This is *The Hill of Devi* in which he describes his experiences in Devas. A most entertaining (and illustrated) account opens the book with a description of a state feast. This was his first encounter with a real Indian meal and his first impressions are worth recounting.

> We all sat on the floor, cross-legged, round the edge of a great hall, the servants running about in the middle. Each was on a legless chair and had in front a tray like a bed tray on which was a metal tray, on which the foods were ranged. The Brahmins ate no meat, and were waited on by special attendants, naked to the waist. The rest of us had meat as well as the other dishes. Round each man's little domain an ornamental pattern was stencilled in chalk on the floor. My tray was arranged some what as follows, but 'Jane, Jane, however shall we recollect the dishes?' as Miss Bates remarked.



1. A mound of delicious rice—a great standby.
2. Brown tennis balls of sugar—not bad.
3. Golden curlicues—sweet to sickliness.
4. Little spicy rissoles.
5. Second mound of rice, mixed with spices and lentils.
6. Third mound of rice, full of sugar and sultanas—very nice.
7. Curry in metal saucer—to be mixed with rice no. 1.
8. Sauce, as if made from apples that felt poorly. Also to be mixed with rice, but only once by me.
9. Another sauce, chooey-booey and brown.
10. 11. 12. Three dreadful little dishes that tasted of nothing till they were well in your mouth, when your whole tongue suddenly burst into flame. I got to hate this side of the tray.
13. Long thin cake, like a brandy snap but salt.
14. It may have been vermicelli.

15. As for canaries.
16. Fourth mound of rice to which I never came.
17. Water.
18. Native bread—thin oat-cake type.

Some of these dishes had been cooked on the supposition that an elephant arrives punctually, and lay cooling on our trays when we joined them. Others were brought round hot by the servants who took a fistful and laid it down wherever there was room. Sometimes this was difficult, and the elder dishes had to be rearranged, and accommodate themselves. When my sweet rice arrived, a great pushing and squeezing and patting took place, which I rather resented, not knowing how attached I should become to the new comer. Everything had to be eaten with the hand and with one hand—it is bad manners to use the left—and I was in terror of spoiling my borrowed plumes. Much fell, but mostly into the napkin, and the handkerchief that I had brought with me. I also feared to kneel in the sauces or to trail my orange scarf in the ornamental chalk border, which came off at the slightest touch and actually did get on to the Jodpores. The cramp too was now and then awful. The courtiers saw that I was in pain, and told the servants to move the tray that I might stretch, but I refused, nor would I touch the entire English dinner that was handed round during the meal—roast chicken, vegetables, blancmange & c.

As someone very perceptively remarked: in his short visits to India, Forster observed about the country more than many Englishmen who spent their working lives there.

It was through Forster's influence, perhaps, that I developed a liking for the classical western music. The Director of Studies in Music at King's once told me that he made every student of his read the chapter in Forster's *Howards End* where he describes the experiences of listening to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. It is a remarkable piece of prose that takes you from the beginning to the end of that immortal piece of music as experienced by the author who 'feels' the music deeply.

Morgan once told me in his characteristically diffident way that he had also written a science fiction story. I went and looked up the reference. The story, "The Machine Stops", is a perceptive look at a future human society all of whose activities are controlled by a machine. What happens when that machine

stops working?

Science fiction *per se* has fascinated me although I do not count myself an 'S.F. Buff' who devours everything from trash to Asimov. From the classics of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells to modern authors I have read S.F. selectively and sparingly. I feel that good science fiction is hard to write. It is easy to degenerate in to a high-tech fairy tale or a futuristic version of a western or a straightforward horror story. The criterion for a good S.F. should be that some scientific concept should be intrinsic to it. Remove it and the story should fall apart. If the scientific idea is speculative and turns out to be right, so much the better.

Fred Hoyle's *The Black Cloud* falls in that class. In the mid-fifties Fred Hoyle, a well known astrophysicist, put forward the idea that the vast interstellar space contains molecules distributed in vast clouds. These molecular clouds would be invisible to the eye but could be detected through the microwave radiation from the molecules.

Hoyle's suggestion was, however, pooh-poohed by his scientist colleagues, who felt that nothing more complicated than atoms could exist in the interstellar space. When he found that he could not get the idea published in scientific journals he decided to write a science fiction novel based on it. And that is how *The Black Cloud* was born.

A few years later, microwave astronomy did indeed reveal the existence of molecules in space, and the notion of giant molecular clouds has become part of astrophysics texts today. Of course, Hoyle's speculations in this classic S.F. work go beyond these facts: his cloud carries intelligence, and therein lies the absorbing part of the story.

It would be impossible to do justice to all the books I read during my fifteen years at Cambridge. I may, however, make a general statement. The literature emerging from any region carries special imprint of that region. Appreciation of that literature becomes all the more deep if one gets the opportunity of savouring the local flavour. Thus it was that many of the books I had read earlier in India I could enjoy much more in

England because of the native ambience.

Conon Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is one example. Unlike most crime stories which can be read only once, the Sherlock Holmes stories can be enjoyed over and over again in spite of knowing 'who-dunit'. The atmosphere of Victorian England described in the books can be better appreciated if one has seen England (even a century later!). It is also interesting to contrast the highly individual style of detection of Sherlock Holmes with the modern methods of tackling the same problems.

Returning to India in 1972 and settling down in Bombay gave me an opportunity to renew my contact with Marathi literature. With my natural liking for humour, I became an admirer of P.L. Deshpande. Only the fact that a large part of this audience is likely to be unfamiliar with Marathi prevents me from sharing with you some of the extracts of PL's famous book *Batatyachi Chawl*. It is a humorous but highly perceptive account of Marathi middle class life in a *chawl*, where neighbours know one another well, perhaps too well for comfort. I have also had the opportunity of knowing the works of several short story writers and the relatively new contributions known as the 'Dalit Sahitya'.

This account would not be complete without some mention of the Sanskrit classics I had first read with the help and guidance of my mother. I have subsequently read some of them over and over again. Indeed, it was a matter of great delight to me to locate the works of Kalidasa in the Cambridge University Library. It has been a matter of great disappointment to me that my native state Maharashtra has lost that lead in Sanskrit scholarship that it once possessed. Sanskrit, a highly versatile and rich language with scientific grammar and great literary traditions, is now taught in a considerably low key in our school curriculum. This is all the more ironical since Sanskrit is being used increasingly to coin new technical words for our languages.

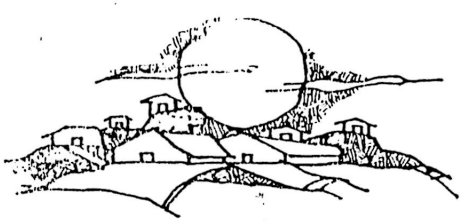
If I were to single out one highlight of Sanskrit literature I would agree with the choice made in the following shloka:

काव्येषु नाटकं रम्यं तत्र रम्या शकुंतला।
तत्रापिच चतुर्थोऽङ्कः तत्र श्लोक चतुष्टयम् ॥

Amongst literary works, drama is the best. Amongst various plays the most charming is Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. In that play the best is the fourth act. And therein the best are the four shlokas. Indeed, if, again, I were to choose, I would select the shloka in which Kanva describes his mental anguish at parting with his adopted daughter.

I could go on and on! But I must now end with a few remarks of self-criticism.

By profession I am a scientist. For my research and general knowledge I have to read technical books and journals which I have not mentioned here. But even allowing for the time taken for this purpose, I am conscious of my very limited coverage of the humanities. Whatever little I have read only scratches the surface of the vast treasure-trove of knowledge that is present in our civilization today. It gives me a feeling of great frustration to visit a good bookshop, to look at rows and rows of books that I would like to read but cannot find time to. I sometimes wish that I should take a year's holiday and just read books. But for the present that must remain wishful thinking.



Ved Pohoja