

English Babu

By Vijay Medtia

Our second son is causing us trouble. He wants to marry an English girl. Anita has been crying for days thinking about the humiliation this will cause here and back in India. She blames herself for failing to bring him up 'properly'. Though what she had in mind for 'proper', I'm not sure. A decision has to be made soon. He'll be bringing Rebecca to the house at seven tonight.

5 Either we bless the union or we lose our son. He's stubborn and in love; he'll go ahead and marry the girl. I don't know why we should feel so surprised. Wasn't this inevitable? I've lost count of the friends who've gone through the same nightmare. Isn't this the price of coming to England?

10 My father gave me three pieces of advice when I first left for Manchester in the autumn of 1965. Work hard; stay for five years only; return to India or you'll regret it. Well, five years have become forty. Forty years is a long time by any standards, but at times like this, it feels even longer. I came to England full of youth and vigour. I thought five years was all I needed to strike it rich. But when the five years had passed and nothing out of the ordinary had been achieved, it dawned on me that this England enterprise might not be so easy.

15 The first house I rented was pretty much the same as any other. A row of houses facing other similar houses across the cobblestones, their red bricks darkened with age and soot. Short stubby chimneys rising out of slated roofs, throwing out dark smoke into grey skies. The rooms were barely furnished and the walls covered with old patterned paper. Most rooms had no carpets. It was cold, damp and miserable; when I wasn't freezing, I was shivering. And there was the constant threat of a runny nose or being struck down by flu. I wonder now how I survived those cold

20 winters with nothing but old blankets and hot water bottles.

I came from a prosperous family in the north of India and I graduated in Commerce. My high hopes of finding a good job over here were met with one rejection after another. Finally I found work in a mill in a corner of north Manchester; fixing valves on an industrial machine became the main stay of my early days and income. But it was a job and I was grateful. Recently, whenever I'm

25 feeling stressed, I seem to drift back to them days. They were difficult times sure but there was something innocent about that time too.

Certain memories stand out from them early years; the heavy snowfalls, the chimney smoke and cobbled streets lit by old gas lamps. These things seem like a distant memory now. Where's the snow now? And who'd heard of global warming then? There was the mania for the Beatles,

30 black and white television with hardly any channels, and that first landing on the moon.

When I returned to India, the villagers said I was telling 'fairy tales'. They'd heard some things on the radio but they refused to believe it. 'How can man go to the moon?' they asked. 'How can man go so far? Going to England Ramesh telling many lies!'

I laughed but what was the use? They would never believe it. Most of them hadn't even

35 travelled to Bombay. An old aunt once pulled me to the side and asked quietly, 'Ramesh, tell me. You will fly to England yes? How the plane stays in the sky for so long without falling?

'Magic,' I said. 'All magic.'

That word has some resonance. Considering my former life, my times in England have been like a magic show.

40 Anita joined me a year later when I had managed a little saving and moved to a bigger house. She hated England from day one; the cold damp climate, the strange white faces and, above all, the loneliness. The loneliness kills you for sure. It was the same for all of us migrating to a cold new world. The place was at work on me without me realising it, spreading its tentacles right to the tips of my fingers. My brown skin looked more or less the same, but day by day the old
45 conservative customs were giving way to more and more liberal beliefs. The change expressed itself in the most unexpected sentences.

When we returned to India with our first-born son, I said quite casually one afternoon, 'How polluted everything seems? No cleanliness and why is there no road traffic sense? And by God it's so hot here.'

50 Father had laughed and looked out across the wide green fields, saying, 'Our Ramesh has become an English babu.'

'I haven't become English,' I replied, irritated.

'Oh yes you have. And, by the way, it has already been six years in that foreign land. When are you returning home?'

55 'Father I can't. I'm finally making progress and I'm buying my first house. My son's got a British passport. I need to make some good money before I return.'

He had laughed again, this time shaking his head as well.

'That is what they all say. You will not return.'

Anita still hadn't quite come to terms with England, but change was at work here as well. Her
60 first trip back to India had also opened her eyes; her sisters and brothers were clamouring to come to England. They envied her lifestyle: the international flights, the cars, the pounds. And when she protested that it was a lonely and miserable existence, they dismissed this as a small inconvenience.

In the next few years we had another son and a daughter. The house was full and there was little
65 time for boredom or loneliness. The first house I owned was a terrace, but from that moment I felt more secure than I had previously. So Anita too started to settle and make friends. The loneliness eased.

Even back then I knew several Asian men with English girlfriends. When we met in the smoke-filled pubs they always said, 'These English women are so beautiful.'

70 I met one of the English girlfriends of my friend once. His name was Haribhajan [meaning songs to the Lord] but she shortened it to Harry! Even the local regulars had labelled her a 'bloody tart'. But to Harry, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever met. He was a Sikh, but had removed his turban and his beard, and with it his bearings and his roots. She gave me the eye when Harry went to buy a round of drinks at the bar.

75 'You look a bit posh,' she said.

'I'm not.'

'I bet you are, and bloody loaded as well. If you ever need to go out for a drink ...'

'I'm married.'

'Oh don't let that stop you,' she leered and squeezed my thigh.

80 'I'll keep it in mind.'

'You make me go all tingly all over,' she said, shaking her ample breasts. And you can speak the proper Queen's English you can, unlike Harry, bless him. He can hardly stitch two bleedin' sentences together.'

He can't speak proper English, I thought.

85 Harry returned with two pints of lager and said, 'Isn't she wonderful, Ramesh?'

'She's wonderful all right,' I said.

After they married she remained true to her label and took him to the cleaners.

Of course because of my education and improving English, I met men and women who were gentle in manners, kind and considerate. I had also been made Supervising Manager. It was steady progress, but not quite how I had first imagined my life in England. On the whole, I've formed this opinion of the English: they're a good-looking race with a good sense of humour, integrity and fair play. Racism is there in some quarters, but Indians are guilty of this too, even in India. Who can stand on the moral high ground anymore? Every superior group or class looks down on the one below it, and even finds amusement at their expense. This is found everywhere in the world.

95 The time has come however. It's a little past seven, and there's a knock on the door. Prakash escorts Rebecca into the living room. The family greets them with much awkwardness. Mother sits to my right, adjusting her light coloured sari and round glasses. Sanjay, my eldest son, sits next to Anita on the main sofa and stares at the floor. He has avoided eye contact with everyone.

100 Rebecca passes a bundle of flowers to Anita with a smile. Anita I can tell is in a state, she is unsure how to handle this situation, and she sits down slowly. But Rebecca isn't how we expected her to be. She's wearing a floral blue summer dress, and her dark brown hair bounces past her shoulders. She's quick to smile, and the smile is warm and welcoming. For all his faults, Prakash has picked a beautiful girl. The silence grows, however, and the only sound comes from the clock on the mantel piece.

105 'I've heard so much about you,' said Rebecca, turning to Anita, and then to me.

'I'm sure he has plenty to say,' I reply.

'It's all nice things.'

'Where do you live Rebecca?'

'I live with my parents in Sale.'

110 'Have they met Prakash?'

'Yes, lots of times. They like him very much.' She turns to look at him, squeezing his hand tight.

'What do you do?'

'I'm an assistant sales manager at Debenhams.'

'That's very good.'

115 'Tea, would you like some tea?' asks Anita, rising from her seat.

'I'm fine; please don't go to any trouble on my behalf.'

Anita sits down again unsure how to act. If this had been an Indian girl with relatives, so much fuss would have been made. Tea and snacks would have been served without any objection. Anita looks at me to keep the conversation going. Sanjay still hasn't looked at Prakash, and I don't like it.

120 'She's a very pretty girl,' says Mother all of sudden. 'Too pretty for our Prakash, and too good.' She stares at Rebecca with a slight smile.

'Now Grandma, we'll be sending you to a Home if you don't behave,' said Prakash.

'He's so rude, why do you bother with him?' she fires back.

'I like him very much, Grandma, that's why,' replies Rebecca with a smile.

125 'Rebecca dear, do you like a roast?

'Oh yes, very much.'

'Beef roast, do you like beef roast?'

'Mother, there is no need for that,' I intervene.

'I'm trying to become a vegetarian,' said Rebecca unconvincingly.

130 'I'm not going to stop her from eating beef,' said Prakash, raising the stakes. 'I mean it's just an animal, like all others.'

'To us Hindus, it's a sacred animal,' said Sanjay. 'We consider her as one of our mothers, for we consumed her milk whilst we were infants. But I don't expect you to understand all these things, Prakash.'

135 'I understand plenty, brother. You can eat as much as you like, darling,' replied Prakash, I don't mind. Father we're getting married in October.'

There was complete silence again, so he added, 'I know you're not keen on the idea, but one day you will all come around. I love Rebecca very much, and she loves me.'

Then he stared at Sanjay and asked, 'Why don't you say what's really bothering you, brother?'

140 'What's left to say Prakash? You only make announcements.'

'Boys, don't argue in front of our guest,' I said.

'I think there is a need, father. I need to know too where you all stand,' said Prakash.

'Rebecca is a lovely girl, a credit to her family...'

'Father – why don't you say what you really mean?'

145 'I need time to think, Prakash. Or have we lost that right as well?'

'Prakash darling,' interrupts Rebecca squeezing his hand again.

'Don't make a scene. Your family is lovely.'

Prakash shakes his head. 'Will you come to the wedding?'

He stares at me, and then at Anita. Getting no response adds to his irritation.

150 'Treat everyone the same? He says, 'God created all men equal. It's all hypocrisy! Here's the news: I don't want any of you to attend my wedding.'

‘Who said we’d come anyway?’ Sanjay replies. ‘I have nothing against Rebecca, she seems nice enough, but you must face some bare facts. Why should we lose our family prestige, because of your stupidity? Why must we accept western culture and lose our identity?’

155 ‘You’re so old fashioned, brother,’ said Prakash. ‘Times have changed and it’s about time you came out of the time warp. We’re in the 21st century, not the 16th!’

‘Hear my answer, Prakash. Even if parents come to the wedding, my family will not. I cannot accept it. I don’t want *my* identity washed away. I don’t want *my* religion watered down. Your marriage will be a bad influence on *my* children.’

160 ‘Boys please, this isn’t the time or the place,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry, Rebecca.’

Rebecca stares at her lap.

‘I blame you, father,’ said Sanjay rising. ‘You’ve always spoilt him, and this has been the result.’

‘It’s not me who’s spoilt, brother,’ said Prakash rising as well.

‘You’re out of date, and I want you to apologise to Rebecca.’

165 Sanjay looks around the room, and then walks out without another word. Anita rushes out after him, calling his name.

The disaster I half feared has come true. What a mess. No one’s on speaking terms. Prakash phoned later; he’ll never forgive us if we don’t attend the wedding. Rebecca is apparently inconsolable and he never wants to see his brother again.

170 The only person I’ve noticed with any sort of normality is Mother.

Dare I say it, but there seems to be a spring in her old legs. I think I heard her singing the other night; having started the argument with her stupid beef roast, she feels quite pleased with herself.

The idea of sending her to a Home, with spacious gardens suddenly looks very appealing. She feels vindicated about how things are turning out – she always said that if we lived here long enough,

175 white people would marry into the family.

We will attend the marriage, even if Sanjay doesn’t. Rebecca is a lovely young woman. One has to move with the times; otherwise one is left behind and ignored.

My father said I had become an English babu. Maybe he’s right. I like my castle. Of course I’ve retained fond memories of India and visit as much as I can, normally in wintertime; the summers

180 are still too hot.

I’ve noticed a lot of people have no great fondness for their original motherland. And why should they? Hasn’t England provided them with a good standard of living, with law and order? For all its faults, the country and its people have been welcoming and considerate. And I value gratitude very highly. Our migration has been successful on the whole. The losses are replaced with other

185 values whether one likes it or not. This is what must happen when one crosses the seven seas to come and live in another land.