

THE LAST JOURNEY

OF
MAHARAJA HARI SINGH of Jammu & Kashmir State

Way back in the year 1961 sometime in February or March, I am not able to recollect correctly, I was having breakfast in the mess of VJTI (Matunga, Mumbai), where I was a student. My attention was drawn to a news item, by my room-mate Romesh Gupta. It was about the death of Maharaja Hari Singh ex-ruler of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Barely, two lines were devoted to this news, at a very insignificant corner; at the bottom of the third or fourth page of the newspaper. However, it did inform that the funeral would leave from Hari Bhavan, at Peddar Road at 4:30 p.m. that evening. Romesh had his ancestral home at Jammu and I being from Srinagar, we naturally decided to go for the funeral.

We reached Peddar Road much before the announced time of the funeral. After asking a few people about the location of Hari Bhavan, we reached its gate. Inside its compound there was a carriage being decorated with flowers and garlands. We stood in rapt silence watching the people doing their job of decorating the big vehicle. While we were waiting at the gate, some people passing by, asked us what had happened and why the big vehicle was being decorated with garlands. To everyone we replied that Maharaja Hari Singh had expired and his mortal remains were to be carried in that vehicle. From the facial expression of most of them we were rather shocked to conclude they did not even know who such a person was! Indeed a sad end of a monarch who represented the Indian Princes at the Round Table Conference in London. However, there was some consolation for us, when an old Parsi couple asked us the same question; I repeated the answer. Both of them said that he was a great ruler who did not play second fiddle to the British. Both of them adored him for his love of horses. During his lifetime he owned some of the best steeds of that time. They had seen him regularly at Mahalaxmi Race course. It was obvious that they were regular race goers. Grim faced they walked away hand in hand. After a long wait the carriage left Hari Bhavan for Maharaja Hari Singh's last journey. If, I am not mistaken there were not more than twenty people accompanying the last remains of the former Ruler of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. I could see only one Indian Prince present, the one from Bhavnagar who lived in the nearby building Kailash. Romesh and I walked along the carriage for some distance. We soon gave up as we were already very tired having stood at the gate of Hari Bhavan for over an hour. We hired a cab and reached the crematorium at Marine Lines.



THE STRANGEST
RECEPTION COMMITTEE
IN THE WORLD!
India

18 STATE EMPLOYEES GREETED
THE MAHARAJA OF KASHMIR
BY FORMING A HUMAN
WELCOME SIGN!

The body was brought down from the carriage and placed on logs. Romesh and I stood a couple of feet away from the body of one who was once upon a time ruler of the land supposed to be Paradise on the Earth, according to the Mughal Emperor Jehangir who had said

“Agar Firdaus Bur Roye Zamin Ast,

Hami Ast, Hami Ast,

Hami Ast!”

(If there is Heaven on Earth,

It is Here, It is Here,

It is Here!)

How long I stood beside the body I do not recollect. For me, time stood still and nothing mattered except gazing and gazing at the lifeless visage, which I had beholden for the first time at such close quarters. Knowing that it would be also the last time to have this memorable experience I did not take my eyes away till all the rituals were over and the last rites were performed.

As I stood, I reminisced of the days of my very early childhood when the Dogra dynasty was at the zenith of its glory. How the citizens of Srinagar city used to greet their ruler when he used to go up the river Jhelum in a huge barge with men in very colourful uniforms, using decorative oars to row the huge, ceremoniously decorated, barges. The royal grandeur of that scene could be equated to the royal barges carrying Egyptian monarchs up the river Nile. The last time these barges were ever put to use was when the Russian leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin visited Kashmir in December 1955.

It was on the occasion of the Maharaja's shifting to the summer capital Srinagar, that the ace swimmers of my old school C.M.S. School at Fateh Kadal would make a human “WELCOME,” by forming these letters, with their bodies by standing in that formation, supported on four steel cables put across the Jhelum river, building to building on either bank. This idea of a human welcome was that of Mr. Tyndale Biscoe, Principal of the school then. The famous author Ripley describes this human “WELCOME” as the strangest reception committee, in his book *“Wonder Book of Strange Facts”* page 339. Ripley however has made a factual error by describing the participants of the human “WELCOME” as state government employees, which is not true.

I thought of the evergreen velvet-like turf of the polo ground at Residency Road, Srinagar, where Hari Singh used to play polo. Some special chemicals were mixed into the soil, due to which its turf remained green throughout the year. I thought of the trout fish farms he had cultivated at Harwan and Acchabal, having brought the live species from Europe. As a child I had heard anecdotes about his generosity, philanthropy and ^{or} liking for ^{the} good things of life.

His annual Durbar on Dussera used to be a momentous event ~~of the year~~. My cousin Prof. Somnath Dhar who was a gazetted officer then was required to attend the annual Durbar at the palace situated at Boulevard surrounding the Dal Lake. He would wear a shimmering silk sherwani, a well-starched light pink turban, a churidar and had to carry an ornamental sword too, as perfect courtiers did then. Before leaving for the palace in my father's tonga, people from ^{the} neighbourhood would come and congratulate him for doing proud to the locality Karan Nagar and to the community ^{proudly} ~~at large~~. Few days before the annual Durbar all the gazetted officers would be given a gold coin each, to be offered ceremoniously on a silk handkerchief to the Maharaja, they had to rehearse the exercise a number of times before the actual ceremony. Incidentally the last Durbar was held in October 1947. It was on that day that the Pakistani tribal raiders had reached Mohra in the outskirts of Baramulla and destroyed the power station there. Just when the Durbar was over, the lights went off all over. Srinagar and its suburbs had no electricity for months together after that day. It was perhaps the same night that Maharaja Hari Singh left Kashmir for Jammu, never to return to the Valley again.

Suddenly it dawned on me how near I was standing to the once powerful human being, whose single word could change the course of fortunes of anyone in the land of my forefathers. It occurred to me that had he passed away anytime in the early forties, I would not have been allowed to be so close to the body. Now the same person was lying unsung and unknelled. I am told that at the time of his death, only his ancestral jewellery was worth a few hundred crores. But now he lay right in front of me denuded of all worldly possessions and power. He lay at rest with nothing to give and I had no gold coins to offer but only a few roses!

After the cremation Romesh and I sat on the sands of Chowpatty Beach overwhelmed by the experience we had been through. As the noisy waves of the mighty sea dashed against

the vast sandy beach stretching far, I was reminded of the lines from the poem "Ozymandias" (who called himself King of Kings) written by P.B. Shelley,

*"Nothing beside remains, Round the decay
Of colossal wreck boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away"*

These words kept on echoing in my mind and I kept on contemplating, how the fortunes in the destiny of human beings can take a turn so metamorphically! Such changes defy, definition and description. No words are adequate to describe them, only silence is!!

In May 1961, I went to my home town Srinagar for the summer vacation. Reaching my home at Karan Nagar, my old aunt Dhanwati welcomed me on my home-coming, with a glowing smile and then she asked me, *"When Maharaja Hari Singh passed away, how many days mourning was there in Mumbai?"* Confronted with this unexpected, spontaneous enquiry, I was dumbfounded, and reluctant to tell the truth to my septuagenarian aunt lest she be disappointed. In a flash the words of Lord Krishna to Arjun in the Bhagwat Gita came to my mind, *"If anyone speaks lies, without any evil motive, but with the purpose of serving a good cause, then the speaker cannot be termed a sinner."* *"For seven days there was mourning and everything was closed,"* was my answer to my aunt. On hearing me, both the glow and the smile on her face vanished. And there was an expression of disbelief, dismay and deep distress writ large on her visage. The few wrinkles on her face became deeper. In a distraught tone she shot back, *"Unbelievable and incredible! How could a solitary week's hartal do justice to the memory of a noble monarch like Hari Singh?"* Turning intently to me, she said, *"You do not either remember correctly or you are telling me a brazen lie".*

Yes, I had lied to my very dear aunt.



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