

Who is in charge of the Rashtrapati Niwas?: Three Stories

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The author has been a Tagore Fellow of the *Indian Institute of Advanced Study* in Shimla. The Institute is lodged in the Rashtrapati Niwas, the former Viceroy Lodge on Summerhill, from where the British reigned the country during the summer months. This venerable old building with its long corridors and many spiraled staircases, with its dark furniture and its many rooms that become more and more decrepit, caught Martin Kämpchen's fancy. He has asked himself the question: Who is *really* in charge of the building? – the mice which roam freely, the monkeys which pester inhabitants and guests in the woods all around, or the proud pole which carries the flag on top of the tower – or do the memories of regal times overwhelm the inhabitants and their habitat? Here are three answers: Dear reader, take your pick!

A Short Speech by the Last British Mouse

Good evening everybody, may I introduce myself? – I am the Last British Mouse at Viceroy's Lodge/Rashtrapati Niwas in Shimla. I am proud of a direct lineage to the Mouse that nibbled at the last Viceroy Sir's naked big toe. During his long, long hours of ruling the country every day, he sometimes used to unburden himself, I mean, he took off his leather boots and his socks to air his feet underneath his big, big writing-desk. Oh, they had a lovely smell, his feet! So I was told by my father who knows it from his father and so on. My dear great-great-great-great-grandfather possessed his personal little mouse-hole in the Centre of Power of the British Raj. In the huge office, he used to skip from one chair-leg to another chair-leg and then settle down below the big, big writing-desk of Viceroy Sir. Well protected, he nibbled on the calluses of Sir's feet and, so I was told, found them very aromatic and really tasty.

At first Sir did not feel anything. He stretched his lovely feet long and broad under his writing-desk and

my respected forefather danced around his feet, jumped elegantly across from one side to the other and teased Sir by tickling his feet with his long, wavy tail. Sir sometimes stirred a bit, probably thinking that a gnat had strayed under his desk, but no! it was me ... err, sorry! it was my great-great-great-great-grandfather who busied himself in the privileged smelly air of the British Viceroy.

Once, I was told, my respected forefather bit off a tiny, tiny piece of the Viceroy Sir's big toe. All agree that it was a tiny, tiny mistake to do this, but a mistake after all, and it became a historic event! There was a debate raging among us of the Viceroy/Rashtrapati Mouse lineage whether it was the right big toe or the left big toe which he gently bit into with his wonderfully strong front teeth. My father and my grandfather and even my great-grandfather whom I knew told me *personally* that it was the *left* big toe.

But it remains unclear to this day what "left" really means. When you sat under the writing-desk looking into the direction of the toes, the left big toe was on your left. However, if you sat *facing* the toes, the same big toe was the right big toe! After a debate which continued generation after generation, I – as the Last Mouse of the British Raj – personally came to the following conclusion: Does it really matter whether it was the big toe to your left or the big toe to your right? The Viceroy's smelly feet were as lovely "on your left" as "on your right". This, however, does not indicate any political leaning. Any right-wing party-member may freely opt for the left-big-toe-version, and vice-versa.

What did *happen* after my great-great-great-great-grandfather heartily bit into the toe of the respected Viceroy Sir? This is the relevant question, and for the sake of history, I here give you all the facts that have come down to me. Viceroy Sir jumped up, of course, then he stooped down to look under his writing-desk, he even got on his knees and crawled there until he bumped his

head and stood up dazed, and when he saw the blood oozing from his toe, he clasped his hands to his head, and screamed loudly "O my God!" So he got blood on his hands as well from the bump. That rattled Viceroy Sir totally, and he stormed out of his room as he was, with naked feet and blood above and below.

People intercepted him and cried "What happened, Sir? What happened?", but Sir stormed through the Corridors of Power shouting "A rat! A snake! A monkey! A ghost! A fire!" ... He just could not decide whom or what to blame. Then Sir peered down on himself and must have, despite his panic, noticed how funny he looked with his naked feet and the bloody toe. And he said, "Oh, it's nothing! The august responsibilities of governance got me in a tizzy. It's nothing!"

He limped back to the Centre of Power of the British Raj and slumped into the largest armchair available in his office. By then the peons and the *chowkidars* and *chaprasis* and who-not had arrived in the room, a group of *memsahibs* had gathered in the doorway, some giggling, some uttering cries of panic. The fire-engine arrived, with bells ringing, in front of the Viceroy's Lodge. The firemen unrolled the hoses and seized the buckets with water and the buckets with sand, ready to pour the water and the sand over the Viceroy Sir's head. They could not quite decide what to pour over him first, the sand or the water. That saved the poor man.

He yelled, "I'm *not* on fire, you bloody idiots, my bloody toe is ... bloody! The doctor! The doctor, where is the bloody ... ?" ... Then he gave up and resigned himself to the vicissitudes of life. Oh, the confusion was heavenly, I was told on the authority of my forefathers – just heavenly!

But why delve into the hoary past of the British Empire? Let me talk about the present time. Compared to the past, I have a rather unexciting life. Where have the booted people gone? Where are the State Dinners with their rich leftovers? Oh, the cheeses which we could feast on, and the creamy pastries ...! Oh, I am again in the past, sorry for that. Now, all we get are *somosas* when these Fellows in the upper floors at long last decide to have a seminar or some other intellectual small talk. They shut the door of their Seminar-Hall and won't let us in. I am told that all they do is either speak or listen. One speaks, while the others listen – how absolutely boring! Is *that* exercising one's intellect?! I want some action, ladies and gentlemen! Some shouts, some laughter, some knocking on tables and stomping on floors. Alas, the former Corridors of Power have become places of feeble powwows. No more fun! No dances, no races! What can I do to bring back the old rollicking love of life?

Oh, we loved those races when we were young and when I had many brothers and sisters of imperial lineage.

Who will reach the lower Dining Hall first and sit there for lunch? – This was a grand competition, and I am proud to say that I won it one thousand and one hundred and twenty-one times. After that I lost count. Or, who would first reach the flagpole on the top of the tower? That was a more demanding competition and I wasn't that good at it. Besides, what is there to eat on the top? Nothing except a rotten bat here or there.

Only in the Library we still enjoy some action. From time to time we migrate to this vast dump of paper to get some dry food after all those oily *somosas*. We, too, have to think of our waistline. The library has lots of old books which smell of the Empire. To gnaw on these brittle pages is like living in the glorious past. – ugh! again I mention the *past*. Sorry, all p-words remind me of the past, first it was *pastries*, now it's *pages*. But these young men in the library, and not to speak of the ladies, are super alert. If we make the slightest sound, just the rustling of a page while we have our snack, they start running behind us. Books seem to have two purposes. They are food for us, but in the hands of the library staff they are murder weapons. They throw them at us, squeeze us, crush us. We have to be *so* careful!

Coming to an end let me clearly say: We startle you when we squeak while eating our dry food diet in the library, or we tickle you with our wavy tail, or we dance across the bodies of the *chowkidars* when they fall asleep at night. We do all this from a sense of duty. I would say, it is social service! We make sure that everybody remains alert and looks after his or her duties. *Somebody* must take charge of this place and be in control!

I remained single, never did I marry. What will happen, I wonder, to Rashtrapati Niwas after me? I believe, my demise will be the end, the final and absolute end of the British Raj. This lovely old building with its many crevices and small, small holes and big, big cracks which are so convenient for us mice to travel from one wing of the building to another, will probably collapse. I see it coming. The bonhomie, the old-world-charm, it will all go. The dance-parties and the races will not even be remembered. But, as the Last British Mouse of the Rashtrapati Niwas, I solemnly promise you that, as long as I'm around, I'll *keep you on your toes!*

The Head of the Monkey Union Speaks Up

A very good morning everybody, I am the head-monkey of the Workers Union of Swingers and Jumpers, Summerhill Chapter. Only few of you know of our Union and what we do. Therefore, I thought I call a meeting which brings us monkeys and the general public of humans together. We have founded this Union to look after the welfare of the Summerhill woods and of all living beings who inhabit

this area, and that includes, let me emphasize, the welfare of you humans. But we have serious complaints against you. Look! All we get from you are shouts, stones pelted at us and sticks shaken in our direction to intimidate us. You make us feel like some thugs, like robbers, like I-know-not-what. *Phew!*

And what do we do? – Nothing really, really nothing! We innocently sit in trees along the pathways crisscrossing the Summerhill woods. We lovingly carry our babies who cling to our breasts. None of you humans has such a caring attitude, have you? Obliging we slink away and let you proudly walk on your paths by yourselves. Ladies and gentlemen, dear fellow workers, more than that, we play circus for you! Every day we put on a grand trapeze show swinging from branch to branch, bouncing from tree to tree. High jump, long jump, trampoline jumping and pole vault – it is all there for you to enjoy in full measure. Okay, there is no music, there are no drum rolls, but you must agree we conjure up a wonderful family show. And have you ever seen anyone of us fall down from our branch and land on the ground with a broken arm or a bruised foot? – Never, I swear, will you see such accidents. We are more flexible, more agile, can jump higher and swing wider than anyone of you – oh we are *so* truly wonderful!

Well yes, you look at us and enjoy our elegance and artistry – but always from a safe distance! You pay no entry fee for our performances and give us no salary, not even an old-age-pension after a life of indefatigable artistry. And when we approach you humbly with our arms outstretched, what do we get? You scream and throw around your arms wildly, start wailing and pick up stones to pelt us. But do we ever attack you? We just want to *talk* to you. Is it our fault that our speech sounds a little screechy? Your speech sounds peculiar to us as well – like ... like, hmm, like you're biting into a rotten apple. Exercise some tolerance and pluralism! The Indian Constitution is all in favour of it. Be a true citizen, and above all, do not think we do it all for free! Why should we? Are *you* doing *anything* for free? Shame on you for being so selfish!

Sorry for heckling you a bit longer, my dear human beings. Now I have you right in front of me. Now I can say what I wanted to say for a long time. I feel you do not enjoy life as we monkeys do. When you drink from your bottles and when you eat the bodies of our fellow creatures, then you say: "Ah-ha! How good life is! How juicy the meat! How sweet the drink! How tasty!" But why get out of one's senses to feel the joy of life? Do you have to draw out your knives and dig into the carcasses of our chicken brothers and sisters to tickle your taste buds? Take our example, ladies and gentlemen! We monkeys love juicy leaves, we munch on flowers and berries. Look

how civilized we are! And for the joy of life we play with each other, we play with our children, we hop and slide, we hang and swing, we climb up and climb down. We become light like feathers when we play – no gravity! We are loved by the air and the wind, by the sun-rays and the blue of the sky. That is joy, dear human folks!

We need no bottles ... you object? – okay, okay, sometimes we do throw them at you, that is true! But you never understood that we want to play "Catch!" with you. But what do you do? When we throw an – empty – bottle, you yell and throw tantrums as if we were about to kill you. Why not simply catch the bottle and toss it back? Bottles aside, look at how much you need for your enjoyment. Those gaudy clothes, those stupid goggles, you make prisoners of your feet wearing those shoes. You cradle those smartphones – ha! like babies. It was a teddy-bear when you were infants, now as adults you still need a toy, that glittery, squeaky smartphone. Do you humans never grow up?!

We have founded our Union so that law and order may prevail in our woods. You feel great roaming around in this old building called Rashtrapati Niwas which witnessed so many decisions of great import, and saw people whose photos are hanging on the walls of big government offices even today. You humans are allowed to enter those beautiful salons with their dark and curvy furniture. You walk through them in hushed voices. Oh, how much we would love to sit on those chairs with their huge backrests. Being monkeys we would squat on top of those backrests giving them a dignity unknown to them so far! Alas! We are shooed away whenever we sneak close to these hallowed halls of history.

But we have our compensations! We climb and leap to places *you* can never get to. Well, even those British sahibs in their fine silken clothes and waxed moustaches haven't put a foot on the roofs on which we walk with ease and grace. And those funny sounds that we create when we pound on those tiles – can you humans produce them!? We crack and break the tiles when they are weak and fragile, so you can replace them with new ones. How else would you *know* which tiles have become fragile? This is our social service.

But we also look into your rooms through windows and doors to see whether propriety is being maintained. We know from our ancestors that during the time of the Empire such policing was even more needed. I could tell you a few juicy stories about these so-called gentle-ladies and gentlemen ... how they lolled in those armchairs with their mighty backrests, and what they said to each other and ... sorry! what they *did* to each other! I could tell you, but I won't because there are children in the audience.

Unperturbed and unwaveringly we continue to perform such duties even today. Today those Fellows

come from all over the world to have a moderately good time looking on a glitzy surface they call computer and talking to their little teddy-bear-substitutes they call smartphones. But we have a lot of fun together. We snatch their oranges, we eat their biscuits, we stomp on their roofs with *hey-holla!* and sometimes give them the fright of their life by baring our teeth and producing some snarling noises. You should see how they leap to their feet and holler! We merely have to show our faces to make theirs turn pale.

Coming to the end, I on behalf of the Workers Union of Swingers and Jumpers propose a grand peace meeting of all monkeys and humans of Summerhill. I want to wipe out the misunderstandings between us once and for all. I shall shake hands with each one of you. Don't be afraid of our claws. If they hurt, they'll hurt only a bit. I shall embrace each one of you. Don't be afraid, if we squeeze you, it will be over quickly. Our condition is that you come unarmed. No sticks and no stones! *We* are always unarmed! Please send me the Speaker of your Fellows Parliament so that we can plan it. I suggest the two of us meet on the roof of the main building. It will be my privilege to personally pull him up all the way to the top. The best spot is the round, steep roof above the Director's office next to the weathercock because the view is grand from there. We shall sit together and set a date for the peace meeting. Of course, you realize that peace does not mean we shall surrender the responsibilities which we monkeys feel for you since generations. We shall continue to guide and control you and *keep you on your toes!*

The Flagpole Greets His Subordinates

Good morning all of you down there! I must address you from the top, because here is where I stand without moving day and night, always erect, always tall and unbending. That is my nature, and you are welcome to take me as an example of unrelenting rectitude. Do not think that it is easy to stand here in winter and in summer, exposed to the chilly winds and the scorching sun, to the lashing rains and the dark, dark nights. No shade, no shelter, no lights – just the sky above me. Oh, how lonely my life is!

Twice a day I get some company. At dawn a man comes climbing up to me and draws up the flag, and at dusk a man comes up again to lower the flag and fold it carefully. Sometimes this man comes, sometimes another, and they look at me as I stand erect, tall and unbending, only to ascertain whether the flag can fly high and free, but never do they have a kind thought for *me*. But consider, what would the flag do without me who holds it up and makes it visible to everybody from below.

My fate is that all of you consider me as nothing by myself, nothing but a naked pole sticking out from this venerable old building. Nobody thinks of the services I render to the Rashtrapati Niwas and to the flag and to the nation. Nobody knows of my hardships. It is an injustice, but I bear it with humility because I am aware, if nobody else, that the flag would not flutter so joyfully on the top of the tower if it were not for me.

My stoic perseverance gets a jolt only when those monkeys try to climb up on me. Then I begin to tremble and quiver. But, imagine! They like it when I get the jitters and they won't be shaken off. Then all I can do is to bear the ignominy, and to command the winds to blow ever stronger so the flag will flutter high above, beyond the reach of those monkeys' claws.

Yes, you heard correctly, I do sometimes command the winds to blow stronger, or to change their direction, or just to give me a respite and abate. After a century – or how long have I been up here anyway? – one does develop a certain fellow feeling with the elements. With the rain in particular. Those drops that run down on me make me shiver with delight. They touch me, they embrace me with pure laughter and childlike mirth. Thank you, dear raindrops for visiting me now and then. I wish my body was taller, still taller so you could run down longer.

There are other compensations for my melancholy loneliness. I get the best view of you all from here. Come up to the top of the tower – still you won't see what I can see from the tip of the pole. Yes, on clear days I can see all the way to China in the north and to Sri Lanka in the South. And to Pakistan, to Bhutan and Bangladesh in the West and in the East. What? You don't believe me? – Well, disprove me! Show me that I'm wrong! – You see, you can't, because I am the tallest, I am the greatest! I admit, sometimes the crows and buzzards land on me to give me some company, and they claim to know more about the world than I do. They feel they are superior to me because they fly higher up and further afield into all directions. Horrible chatterboxes they are, especially the crows with their eternal *craw-craw-craw*. I don't believe a word of what these gossips say.

I survey what no mouse and no monkey can see. Yes-yes, sometimes the mice do come up. The mice used to race up to me, five or six of them, and the first one to arrive pronounced him, or herself, the winner. Then they bite each other crying: "I was first! – No, it was me! – Stupid, did you not see me running before you!" – Ha-ha, these smart little liars! I hear it all, but I do not interfere. Don't I have my dignity? Hah-ha, they can't climb up on me though. They slip as often as they try and tumble down, becoming one squealing, irate heap. A few times, they tried to be extra smart and, leaning against me, climbed on top of each other. They managed three or four mice,

then the lower cried, "I want to be on the top, let me climb on the top!" The next moment all of them slumped to the ground. These mice just have no team-spirit!

But are you humans behaving any better? As I stand up here on the top – unrivalled! – I make fun of you down there. Oh, it's so easy to see the funny side of these men and women when they walk in front of the Rashtrapati Niwas and goggle at this old, venerable building. They must be feeling so small as they stand there and stare, with their mouth wide open like fish. Then they click all these photos with their smartphones – click! one selfie done, click! click! click! a dozen selfies! Do they look at these photos ever again? Do they never get sick of looking at their own faces? And at the faces of their boyfriends or girlfriends who dance around them all day? Still, they make a hundred snaps of them! Each one looks the same, yet they make click! click! click! waltzing in front of this venerable building. Phew! Am I lucky to stand up here, erect and unbending, unable to dance and prance and make a fool of myself. I, after all, have my dignity!

Only once have I bent down, and that was on a very special occasion. That was a few decades ago, I was young and flexible then, just cut off from one of those super-elegant pine-trees of the Summerhill woods and selected for this special national duty. There I stood, proud like a prince! A bit lonely, true, feeling home-sick for all my brothers and sisters in the woods. But I began to discover China and Sri Lanka when the view was clear and knew that nobody could see what I was seeing.

The British had their parties down underneath me, and I heard their shouts and their songs, their dances and

the clanging of wine-glasses. I did not approve of these clamorous celebrations. True, I am a bit old-fashioned. I prefer law and order and "due process". So once there was an especially grand party, perhaps the last one before these gentlemen and gentle-ladies retreated to the plains for the winter. I heard a music band, I gathered that dances were in progress, couples swirling around in the hall. People were clapping applause. Suddenly, I heard a commotion. One lady cried out angrily, chairs overturned and several humans rushed up the flight of stairs, some others behind them, and people rushed up and up, the small stairs first, then the narrow ladder ... until an utterly exhausted young lady, panting like mad, arrived alone on the tower and hastily bolted the heavy wooden door behind her. Oh, a damsel in distress! I thought and I bent down with compassion to the crying young lady in a long white robe. She felt comforted by my careful, but solid embrace. She stayed with me for several hours until she tiptoed back to the ground where everything had become quiet.

This incident gave me the idea that I have some responsibility up here, because I see and hear more than anybody else in and around Rashtrapati Niwas from my vantage position. I have the longest experience, longer than the oldest monkey and even longer than that mouse who calls herself the Last Mouse of the British Raj. What insolence! What chutzpah, if that is the word I want! I am up here for decades if not ... well, all I can say is that I have served this Rashtrapati Niwas, this country longer than all of you, and this gives me the responsibility to *keep you on your toes!*