

# THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

Part 4: INNOCENCE REGAINED  
Part 1: INNOCENCE LOST

Part 3: PARADISE LOST  
Part 2: PARADISE GAINED

By  
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Sankalpa Publications

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### Author's Preface to the First Edition

This is a story about India.

The main protagonist is Dev Kumar, an idyllic person who could pass for a native of any province. As a boy traumatized by orphanhood, he returns to his mythical birthplace – Bakpur – in the mythical state of Mangal, which could just as well be any city and state in any part of India. When he tires of living in Bakpur, he travels to America to find the pot of gold that sits at the end of every rainbow on the horizon in that great country. What he discovers instead is that: the more one approaches the horizon, the further away it moves. The restless, prodigal *bhumiputra* eventually returns home – to a truism in life that greedy mortals do not recognize till it is too late – that all that glitters is not gold.

This is also a story about the aspirations and hopes of two other children of modern India - one a prodigy and the other, a diary writer - interleaved into the main story of Dev Kumar. Perhaps the more we grow and learn to understand, the more we learn to love and to hate all that India represents, for there is more diversity here than in any other place in the world. We see, daily, that there is the thickness of muslin between truth and falsehood, between the good and the bad, between the beautiful and the ugly, and between the right and the wrong. And there will be the diminishing few who will take comfort in asserting – for good reasons – that no other human civilization has graced this earth which has, perhaps with a misplaced sense of trust or perhaps completely out of naïveté, tried so hard to please her guests and visitors, that she has now nothing left for herself. But pitifully, instead of rejuvenating – breaking new ground and searching for our own destiny – we prefer to follow the beaten track. Like wretched hosts, we try to reclaim the gifted presents, thereby losing grace and any claim to the greatness that our ancient forefathers bequeath to us. And so we stumble and wallow in the potholes and cesspools left in the wake of those we seek to emulate ... to take shelter in decrepit towns and societies long discarded as obsolete by them ...

We have become vagabonds. Drifters. Nomads. Gypsies - without the lure. And the tragedy is that, even as we look into the mirror of conscience, our myopic afflictions render us incapable of discovering how unattractive we have really become! For a long time, the land has cried out for a messiah, but could it be that even the gods have forsaken us?

Date: November 16, 1995.

### Author's Preface to this eBook version

To make it convenient for downloads, the original publication has been recast into four parts, as shown on the cover of this book.

The present eBook contains 'Part 2: Paradise Gained', which tells the story of Dev Kumar's journey to El Dorado ... and ephemeral wealth. This publication also has the following parts:

- Part 1: Innocence Lost' (published) -- Dev Kumar's very own 'discovery of India';
- Part 3: Paradise Lost' -- his homecoming to fame and unbridled power ... and infamy;
- Part 4: Innocence Regained' -- his final redemption, as he completes the circle of life.

***Date: November 7, 2005.***

# The More Things Change

## Part 2: Paradise Gained

*By Subhrankar Mukherjee*

### CONTENTS

<u>Chapter</u>		<u>Page</u>
7	Dev goes to America ... ..	219
	<b>The Case of the Touch Artist - Prolegomenon</b> ... ..	235
8	Portrait of an Innovative Teaching Assistant ... ..	243
	<i>Excerpts from the diary of a despicable raconteur (Nov 1, 1984 to Dec 20, 1989)</i> ... ..	253
9	Ashok Chandra ... ..	263
	<b>The Case of the Touch Artist - The Perigee</b> ... ..	295
10	John Bogermille ... ..	301
	<i>Excerpts from the diary of a despicable raconteur (Nov 1, 1993 to Oct 26, 1995)</i> ... ..	319
11	Portrait of an Innovative Teaching Assistant (Concluded) ... ..	335
	<b>The Case of the Touch Artist - The Apogee</b> ... ..	337
12	Portrait of a Successful Businessman ... ..	349
	<i>Excerpts from the diary of a despicable raconteur (Oct 27, 1995 to June 1, 1997)</i> ... ..	363
13	Eldorado ... ..	367
	<i>Addendum Part 2 - Translation of words in dialect into English</i> ... ..	381
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	

## VII

## DEV GOES TO AMERICA

*They never got a chance ... I didn't even thank my father and my mother for bringing me into this wonderful world. And now I am going to America, the Land of the Free. They would have been proud of me. Yes! I am alive! I have overcome despair once before, so why must I now be fearful? I will live and overcome, no matter what kind of abuses they throw at me ...*

These were the thoughts that went through Dev's head as he swirled with the seething waves of travelers passing through JFK Airport.

## 1

As he collected his luggage from the cavernous baggage carousel, he recalled how the pretty girl at the travel agency had flushed when he revealed his plan. "Why can't you take a nice connecting flight like everybody else?" she twinkled mischievously. Truly, she had no idea how to handle bus reservations in America.

But Dev was adamant. He would much rather bus across the American countryside - plant his feet on earth - than continue looking into the clouds after spending an eternity doing just that flying into New York. He was emboldened by the American visa officer at Bakpur, the first Black American Dev had known, and who was quite an extrovert. "It's no big deal riding a bus in America," he drawled, shrugging his shoulders and arching his eyebrows as he tried to dispel Dev's anxieties and fears about getting stranded in the Big Apple.

So, Dev decided to be big and organize the bus-journey all by himself when he reached New York. But, this nagging fear of running aground persisted. His funds were locked into Indian currency ever since he had left Maldesh. The Indian Government permitted him to carry a bank draft for nine thousand five hundred dollars - a year's anticipated expenses at Milton - but for his inaugural journey to America, he could scramble together only one hundred and twenty dollars in cash.

One hundred dollars had come from the black market, at a fifteen percent premium.

It is silly to expect anybody to travel abroad with a measly twenty dollars cash. He cursed the government's blinkered foreign currency policies, on top of the great many miserable domestic

ones, which forcibly derail honest citizens. Remembering the great indignity of his first brush with customs officials, he had walked past Indian customs at Delhi International Airport as if he had a dead man's head in his wallet, so terrified was he of being caught with the contraband.

A gust of wind chilled him to the bone as he stepped out of the controlled environment of the airport, into a bright but cold New York morning.

Buses with massively sinister, dark windows and gleaming metal strips around their girth purred quietly across the road.

For five dollars, he bought a heart-warming ride from the airport to the New York Bus Terminal. The bus bore down crowded freeways and shivered through serpentine tunnels, finally plunging under a great concrete building with a fearful, steely facade. He marveled that - on a Greyhound - he could travel to any part of this great country!

Dev was astonished to learn that bus reservations were unnecessary in America. At Bakpur, reservations had to be made for everything ... standing in long queues even before they upped the shutters of the cadaverous booking windows. At the NYBT, the ticketing clerk confronted him even before he could say 'What?' The people behind him tolerated his confusion patiently, until he asked whether he could go standing part of the way if all the seats were taken ... the way they sometimes did even in Indian Airlines whenever pushy politicians hijacked the passenger lists and the pilot's console. The ticketing clerk got alarmed and Dev was gently prodded out of the way by the elderly lady behind him, as soon as Dev's ticket was delivered.

A little ashamed of his ignorance, he stepped back to ponder. These little things became part of the whole - makes America what it is ... the land of the free. So! Bus reservations were wonderfully unnecessary. In America, buses are never quite full. Just buy a ticket and hop on to go wherever you wish. If ever there was a rush, a fresh bus would be made available, even to carry only one extra person, theoretically.

He had worried a lot for nothing. Yes! He was going to like it in the US of A!



Fall season!

When trees turn from brown and green to yellow, red and orange ... when the forests come alive with an unbelievable array of colors ... as if God herself came down to Earth with brush and palette, and laid Her magical, prismatic hand on every leaf of every tree. And the vibrant brooks and springs framed by the tintured window of the bus, with the flaming forests against a pearly blue sky in the background, looked straight out of a page from a majestic, vibrant calendar.

It became monotonous whenever they descended onto the freeways. Miles of stupendous wheat or cornfields as far as the eye could see, punctuated with reddish-brown barns and white farmhouses. Some were abandoned derelicts; perhaps they were poor farmers. They stood out like sore thumbs - against a sea of carefree affluence.

Dev was elated whenever the bus forked back into the country roads - and the colors - to disgorge and take on new passengers. A couple of times, they stopped for lunch and a coffee break. Americans did not like tea at all.

Towards evening, they halted at a quaint little town called Sheridan for dinner.

Everyone made a bee-line for the toilet to answer nature's call. Dev was embarrassed to be directed to the "*mense room*", but he immediately realized that in America, these were the only places where women were not. His mind was still crowded with unsavory recollections of the horrors of public toilets in Bakpur. Reflexively, he puckered his face as he stepped inside.

It was amazingly clean and organized - there was even a faint, sickly chemical smell of deodorant in the air. Individual bathroom doors were coin-operated! - Bah! Even the johns are coin-operated, and he had no coins.

He returned somewhat agitatedly back to the foyer of the restaurant. A money-changing machine stood in front of a wide array of vending machines. Fascinated, he watched a man feed his dollar bill into it and marveled as the coins clattered automatically into a cup protruding from its mid-riff. When his turn came, he carefully read the sparse instructions on the machine. It was easy to operate - nothing to it, really. A current of thrill flowed through him as he scooped the change and burst triumphantly into the men's room again.

Reflected on the polished mirrors in front of him - above the row of gleaming basins where he washed - free of charge - Dev saw another battery of vending machines. Then his eyes narrowed. Could it be true! Unbelieving at first, he stepped closer. It was true! They displayed an astonishing array of lascivious condoms! Flustered and unaccustomed to such an overt display of sexuality, he hastily retreated to the warmth and familiarity of the dining room, where the people were cordial and friendly.

The initial fear, that he might be hounded out for looking stupid or doing something silly, melted away. The motherly waitress at the counter listened to his order for a chicken sandwich and coffee and immediately produced a tray of food, wrapped in transparent plastic - bursting incredibly with its naturally fresh colors. It tasted even better than it looked. Dev forgot his unease in the men's room. He glimpsed the young European boy sitting next to him. Dev remembered seeing him at the airport, too, because the fellow rambled in a strange dialect since he had no English.

However the boy had struck a vigorously animated conversation with the waitress, who exploded in a gushing, maternal display of affection at finding one of her own kind in her charge, and so lost at sea.

"*Che cosa desidera?*" he heard her plead, and the boy replied excitedly in an unintelligible dialect that Dev suspected was Italian. They talked as if they had always known each other. He remembered seeing a picture of Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroanni, where everyone spoke as lively as these two did. With a plate full of food in front of him, the boy pleaded helplessly "*Basta! Basta!*" between mouthfuls, as the maternal waitress filled his coffee cup for the third time, repeatedly asking "*Piace?*"

As the passengers drifted back to their seats, the signal that the hour-long break was finally over came when the uniformed bus driver - a gruff, hulking man, with bushy eyebrows and a stern jaw - yelled 'All aboard'. But really, he was a nice fellow to talk to. He had a habit of winking wickedly and puckering his face exaggeratedly whenever he said anything funny, which was almost all the time he spoke.

The maternal waitress shouted "*Buon viaggio!*" after her boy, who was by then teary with happiness.

Dev glowed exuberantly as he strolled towards the bus. He looked up into the darkening sky, and there framed amongst the billowy clouds, he thought he could see the portrait of his mother smiling down at him, too.

They drove on, relentlessly. He dozed on and off. And then suddenly, day turned into night. He could not believe his eyes when he checked the time. He tallied his watch with the bus driver later, and he learnt that through the agency of a mysterious daylight saving mechanism, Americans produced enough natural light to read by even way after seven in the evening.

But he had nothing to do. He discovered he wasn't the only one who couldn't sleep well. An irritating draft bore down frigidly, no matter how feverishly everyone tried to shut off or deflect the stream of air from the overhead nozzles.

There was nothing to see outside in the dark. Periodically, he wished that he had taken the flight instead. But right after these contentious thoughts, he remembered the glorious sights he had seen, the cheerfulness and high-spiritedness of his company that evening at Sheridan, and he temporarily forgot his discomfiture and dozed back into half-sleep, half- wakefulness - till it was time for the next round of self remorse to begin.

As dawn broke, the golden colors of America returned with renewed vigor and gusto. But Dev was too tired to appreciate any of the new offerings.

Immense watering holes called truck stops dotted the freeway, between quaint little restaurants and motels. He looked particularly long and hard at a pretty restaurant nested in a small valley between the pines. It had a large cutout of the bust of a pretty granny in a bonnie-hat proudly clutching a large willowy basket of fried chickens.

He yearned to get off the bus.

As the sun rose higher into the sky, he learnt to keep track of the shimmering signs which counted down in miles their distance from Milton. He quietly celebrated when they passed a sign announcing the Agricultural College Extension. Then, he saw the sign that pointed to the turn-pike, which would take them into Milton Town.

At the first downtown crossing, Dev marveled at the menagerie of traffic signals, which seemed to hang mysteriously in thin air. The expert driver bore mercilessly through increasingly populated areas, until they drove down Main Street, which divided the downtown area into two equal halves. Nostalgic avenues and roads crisscrossed over a couple of square miles of concretized roads. Without much fuss, they sidled into the bus station, which was heralded by an enormous fluorescent signboard with the picture of a graceful greyhound in flight.

Dev rose to collect his articles. He stretched and yawned to relax his cramped muscles. As his numbed feet felt the warmth of the sun-drenched concrete of Milton for the first time, a current of excitement coursed through his aching body, just as it had when he had stepped onto Bakpur's soil for the first time, a decade ago.

## 2

Dev had already researched the facts about the quaint university town of Milton in the heart of Maitland, which was a proud mid-western state at the rim of the Great Lakes, bounded on the north and west by Illinois, on the east by Michigan and on the south by Ohio.

The University - the town's *raison d'être* - was founded by the brilliant Hon. John Milton ... better known as JM to his people in another century: judge, patriot, educationist, community philosopher, administrator, inventor, public executioner, and the Chief Pillar of Society of a brave, frontier colony in a volatile new world. One fine early morning in the summer of 1742, JM had stood mist eyed at the bedroom window of his enormous log-cabin - overlooking the hazy Lake Chiqua - praying to God and thanking Him for the glorious view of the sun rising over the land that his Pilgrim forefathers had bequeathed. He gazed at the gathering clouds over the horizon. And in them swirled the likeness of the atrocities committed by the marching British and French soldiers, as they sauntered across the new country, conquering and killing with impunity. If, the English pitted the Cherokee against the French, the latter would incite the Navajos to go on the warpath against their sworn enemies from another continent. The once-peaceful settlers and natives were increasingly getting caught in the crossfire of international intrigues. When innocent blood was spilt, even peaceful people became vengeant. Vengeance makes people go blind. It fetched more, fruitless retribution. Gradually, cyclically, everybody was getting sucked into a darkening whirlpool of death, destruction and misery.

Each passing day, the murmur of discontentment grew louder.

JM yearned to reach out to his people, to propagate his ideals about peace and prosperity - the belief in a universal brotherhood of man. In those days, the concept of equality and fraternity was quite different. Even the most vocal leveler of those times would summarily be dismissed as a racist or a bigot, by today's standards of reckoning. For, when they talked of equality and fraternity, they referred only to white men.

On that fateful summer morning, in those prophetic clouds, JM got the sign that he had sought for a long time. Yes! He would build a great University along the beautiful shores of Lake Chiqua. And he dreamt that one day it would rival Cambridge, or perhaps even the Heidelberg!

Exactly ten years later, as the founding President of Milton College, he inaugurated the first meeting of his Board of Governors - consisting of seven Lesser Pillars of Society - in the first high-domed building over a radius of one hundred miles, which he named Gordon Hall in memory of his grandfather.

Although it never did attain the heights of Cambridge or Heidelberg, JM's brainchild had her significant moments.

Straddling a crucial period in the nation's history, it was the first to establish an Agricultural Extension west of the Ohio River, where Founding Professor Sorenson patented a revolutionary mechanical manure-spreader and brought the first major industry to his community.

During the Civil War, the University's Engineering Departments played an important role in developing novel techniques to lay railroads in the muddy swamps around Washington, in the dogged defense of the North. Their famous Dean of Engineering, Winfred Jones, developed an inexpensive prototype of a recoilless rifle - the type that was then being bought by the Union's purchase agents for \$50 apiece from Switzerland.

After Thomas Alva Edison developed the electric bulb, he sent a working model of one of his earliest prototypes to his friend, Professor Tom Snellyfoot, in appreciation of the many hours of discussions and experiments that they had shared. To this day, that gift has found its pride of place in a glittering showcase at the entrance of their illustrious Department of Electrical Engineering.

In more recent times, Milton University was the first to introduce television instruction classes for the mid-Western region, which conceptually enlarged the size of their campus at least a thousand-fold.

But in one respect, Milton University will always remain foremost, for it is unquestionably the largest Land Grant University in all of America.

### 3

Dev collected the tab for his left luggage and strolled towards the University campus, visible just round the corner. It was a marvelous, sunny morning with a gentle breeze caressing his forehead. The International Students Office had erected a welcoming stand at the gateway, with the legend 'ISO' splashed boldly in red across a fluttering golden-yellow banner. Young boys and girls welcomed the new students as they entered the gates of their new home for the first time.

A young Indian man stuck his hand out and startled Dev. He said, "Hi! I'm Raj. I am your facilitator. Have you made arrangements ... um ... do you have a place to stay?"

The concept of a facilitator was quite alien to Dev. At Bakpur, everything was so complicated that, paradoxically, there was no question of facilitating anyone. One just did what one had to do, by oneself. "No ... well, uh ... yes. I'll be staying at Residential Life," Dev said hesitatingly. "By the way, what is a facilitator?" he asked simply.

Raj guffawed heartily and explained that he had volunteered to help students coming from India, in any way that he could. As if they had always known each other, Raj herded the incredulous Dev into a small, beaten-up orangish Datsun, which - on closer inspection - revealed that it had once been a flaming red, to run back and collect his luggage.

"You can stay at my place till the people at Residential Life sort out your staying arrangements. Okay!" Raj said matter-of-factly.

Dev could hardly believe his ears. Was this for real? Or was he still dreaming in the bus?

Raj's apartment was only a block away from the bus station. As they started to unload once again, Dev could see the white-red-blue Greyhound insignia across the vacant lot on the other side.

Together, they carried his bags into Raj's one-roomed apartment.

"Well, I've got to be off," Raj heaved when he was satisfied that Dev had tucked his items safely into the closet. Accustomed to singular events dragging on for hours, days, weeks and months ... even years, events in Milton were happening simultaneously in fast forward. Dev was so bewildered that he even forgot to acknowledge the ice-cold can of fizz that Raj thrust into his hand.

"Don't you worry about anything," Raj said as he grappled with the doorknob. "There's plenty of time. I'll be back in about an hour and then we'll go to the ISO to start you off ... er, I hope you don't mind waiting that long. We could have gone right now, if it wasn't for this darned departmental meeting I have to attend. You'll get to know all the ropes in time, too, and then you're really going to hate it - har! har! Oh yeah! Carry this duplicate set of room keys with you in case you have to step out in an emergency. Don't get locked out. And don't press that button unless you hear my voice, okay," Raj said as he pointed to a push-button in the wall, below a panel with a speaker in it. Could it be true? Did that push-button really control the locking mechanism

of the street-door? Or was Raj pulling his leg? “If you’re hungry,” Raj said in the corridor, “help yourself to whatever you can scrounge from the fridge. Okay!” And then he was gone.

The culture shock was beginning to bite hard. The spontaneous cheerful familiarity of Raj jarred with the traditional standoffishness to which he had gradually grown accustomed at Bakpur. It took a few moments of quietness after Raj had left for Dev to gather his wits.

He carefully inspected the efficiency, as Raj had spoken of it. The window opened out into a red-brick wall. The apartment was not quite clean. The worn sofa was pathetic, with a deep depression in the middle, as if an invisible person was perpetually sitting on it. Hesitantly, Dev disrobed in a complete stranger’s house for the first time. Despite Raj’s friendliness, he could not help think of him as a stranger. It was also the first time that he showered in a carpeted bathroom ... practically lived in an apartment that belonged to a person that he had met only a few minutes ago. But by the time he had changed into the fresh set of clothes, Dev felt like a new man. He had begun to feel almost at ease, already. He pulled out a chair and sat down at the dining table to inspect his admission papers and documents. When he was satisfied that he had collected all the documents he would need, he started to drum his fingers idly on the table and after a while, he even started to whistle, absentmindedly.

Dev was jarred by the buzzer, which rang sharply at ten o’clock. In between the static that emanated from the dapper speaker, he heard Raj’s voice crackling through. There was a momentary whirr when he pressed the button, and soon after he heard steps coming down the corridor. The door latch clicked and Raj beamed into the room.

“You did swell,” he announced. “I was just testing you.” He stepped close to Dev and said confidentially, “Nobody explained how this thing worked. When my friend came and buzzed the first time, I panicked ... I went out to check the street door and this god-damned door closed on me. We got locked out. It was such a mess,” he laughed loudly. “You’ll have your fun, too ... just you wait ... “

They were in the corridor when Raj was seized with another fit of laughter.

It felt good to be out in the fresh air once again. The first thing that struck Dev was how spotlessly clean the street was. On the other side of the road, cars were parked all the way up and down the hilly road as far as he could see. A couple of parking meters glared back with red bands across their dials. The 7-Eleven store on the corner towards the bus-station receded out of view behind the trees as they approached the University Center.

“Hope you don’t mind walking,” Raj rasped as they heaved up the slope. “Parking in campus is a pain in the arse. An’ it’s expensive. It’s a good thing that all the places you want to visit are within walking distance. Registration takes place in the indoor stadium, though, which is a couple miles out that way. But don’t you worry. There’s a shuttle bus service that runs every ten or fifteen minutes, connecting the nodal points on campus. Oh! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to rush you.” Raj said when he discovered that he had merrily outpaced his Indian friend. “I guess we’ll cross the bridge when it comes, huh.”

At the end of the block, they trotted down a flight of stairs and strode across the path between the corners of two buildings. It opened majestically to the main courtyard of the campus. Ancient red-brick buildings surrounded a sprawling, green field, as if preserved in time. The lawn and the buildings were beautifully maintained. On the far side, suspended workmen crawled like spiders across the facade of a building discharging a high-pressure blast of water to clean out the accumulated dirt and moss. “Sometimes, they even use sand blasters,” Raj informed when he saw

Dev gaping in wonder. Because they stood close to the gothic Gordon Hall, Dev could barely see its massive dome - the proud hallmark of the University. Cement pathways spread into the middle of the field, where a bunch of ancient columns dignified the field, with dark green creepers growing all over them. Raj said they were called, quite unimaginatively, 'The Columns', the wistful remnants of one of the earliest buildings on campus, which was badly gutted in a fire many years ago.

Gordon Hall, although it was not the largest building on campus, it certainly was the grandest. Raj explained they would walk through it to reach McCormick Hall, where the ISO was located. They picked up free maps of the campus from an acrylic box under an enormous schematic diagram of the campus. Raj pointed out the location of the Business Department, and made sure that Dev understood the way between it, Gordon Hall, McCormick Hall and the shuttle bus-stand. But he took the greatest care to explain the various ways of getting back to his own apartment.

From a distance, McCormick Hall looked like a crumbling, smallish red-brick building. But once they were inside, the interior opened up into a bright and cozy office space. There were about a dozen foreign students of various descriptions, all wearing the same anxious looks as Dev. Raj excused himself and left. Dev was on his own till dinnertime, which in this country, Raj reminded him, was around six in the evening.

Dev took a chair and reflected how lucky he was to find such a special friend. What would he have done if Raj had not shown up? Much more than the money, he had saved Dev the time and energy and the bother of finding a hotel. He wondered what special present he could buy for his extrovert friend, as soon as he was decently settled down.

"Mr. Dave Ka-marh!" the foreign student counselor broke his reverie. "Come with me, please," the petite lady commanded with a Spanish accent. On her ample bosom, she had pinned a yellow button with a wide, toothless grin, just under a rectangular plastic tab, which announced that her name was Juanita.

She rifled through his file and checked his admission papers. Then she made photocopies of the relevant pages of his passport on the copying machine whirring constantly by her side. And before he could even ask if his papers were in order, she gave him an 'OK' slip and packed him off to the graduate admissions office.

Even as he was scrambling together his documents, Juanita returned with the next foreign student in tow, a shy Taiwanese girl – apparently no less awed than Dev himself.

Definitely, there was no possibility of anarchy here.



For the first time, Dev found himself in a long queue at the graduate admissions office. About a hundred American and foreign students mingled patiently, waiting to see their Graduate Counselors.

Conditioned as he was with the Bakpurian agony of standing in long queues, where movement was sometime measured in millimeters per minute, Dev was spell-bound by the organization and dexterity of the young, pretty things at the special counters. His turn came in just a few minutes. The girl smiled, looked at his name on the admission letter and in a trice handed him a packet of papers from an enormous set of revolving trays that turned behind her like a small waterwheel.

Then, he was guided towards an elderly lady supervisor, who signed and stamped his papers officiously and informed Dev that he could register anytime after three that afternoon. This, she

explained, was another one of their crowd management techniques. Payment of fees, she rasped through smoker's breath, could be made either during registration or within two weeks times at the cashier. After that, there would be a fine to pay! But first, he needed the approval of his supervisor, Dr. Wallace, for the subjects he was going to take that Fall. With an unmistakable finality, she asked: "Do you have any questions ... no ... well, have a good day."

Dev mustered a weak salutation before he was squeezed out into the hall, where beefy boys and pretty girls milled purposefully all about him. For the first time, he felt like a motor on those impersonal, conveyORIZED assembly lines that he had left behind at IEC forever.

He saw that students freely picked up a newspaper-like document stacked high at the exit of the graduate student's office. Curiously, he picked one up, too. It listed every course offered by the University that semester. Clutching it close to his chest along with his other papers, Dev walked in awe down the hall, somewhat troubled.

Yes! He was disappointed.

The effortlessness, with which the ISO and the Graduate Office had dispensed with so serious an event in his life, baffled him endlessly. There must be something wrong ... they must have missed some detail, or forgotten to tell him something special to do! "But what?" he kept asking himself. Whom could he ask, about what? He felt as if he was adrift at sea, thirsty ... yet not a drop to drink. Everything was so terribly well organized, that it hurt.

Gradually, confidence seeped back into him as he walked down the elaborate stairway - to the ground level.

It was a glorious afternoon. He remembered that the Office of Residential Life was listed somewhere in the basement of Gordon Hall. He decided this was as good a time as any to find out what residential arrangements had been made for him.

At the reception desk at Residential Life, a sweet girl greeted him with a big smile on her pretty face. She directed him towards the closest of the three absurdly young residential counselors. The girl sat in a cozy partitioned space with a picture of her family leaning against a flower vase. Small yellow notes scribbled with a distinctive backward slant stuck to the wall in front of her.

Janet Edlip - that was her name clipped on her shirt - flashed his current student status on the computer terminal on her desk. Suddenly, it occurred to Dev that he had not seen a single register or *kbata* all day. The massive, bound-volume type that crowded every table in every Indian institution; the filthy, dog-eared monstrosities that people were loathe to read, anyway - requiring many peons just to lug around all day.

"You'll be staying at Ellis Hall," she blared cheerfully. "Officially, you're allowed to move in only after you've paid the residence fees, ... er, do you anticipate any difficulty with your payment schedule?" she asked, looking straight into his eyes.

"No!" Dev replied, distracted by the pretty, blue eyes. "I mean, not till I encash this." He showed her his bank draft. She peered at it and returned the note to him.

"In that case, I guess I could let you move in with your luggage rightaway ..." she searched with her eyes. Dev explained to her how lucky he had been to find Raju.

“That’s sweet, isn’t it?” she said in a bubbly voice. “Please pay this amount ...” she smacked her lips as the printer by her side whirred to life and spewed out an invoice. “I’m sure you’d love to move into your new residence, anyhow. Please pay this amount,” she repeated, pointing to a figure of four hundred and twenty nine dollars on the form that he had to sign, “as soon as you open your bank account, okay. I’d advise you to visit our Credit Union, which is just down the street, okay. That way, you could make your payments during registration. Okay!” she said cheerfully.

While he filled some more forms, she went inside to fetch his room keys.

As he stood up to leave, she informed him that his roommate would be an Oriental student who had already arrived.

“I’d recommend that you open your bank account right away,” she chirped sweetly again. “It’s just down the street past the columns.”

Dev sulked, glancing at his watch. “I have to go for registration at three.” It was already close to twelve-thirty. “Do you think I’ll have enough time to do that before I see my advisor and finalize my registration papers?”

Janet looked at him curiously, and then she simply said, “Sure! Have a good day.”

As Dev walked gravely in the direction of the Credit Union, he wondered who might give him an introduction, which was the first thing any banker in Bakpur demanded before opening a new account. Nationalized Indian banks practically cease to work after two in the afternoon; before that, they are not inclined to, work, anyway. Indubitably, they will tell you what you had to come back to do on the morrow, for it is beneath their dignity to conclude any bit of work at once. They seemed to enjoy making their customers’ lives miserable. And even if the account was opened, he would have to return for his checkbook - so how could he make the payments that Janet had suggested he make right away?

The Credit Union turned out to be really just a bank. The intrepid manager took one sharp look at him, then his passport and the American Express draft for nine thousand five hundred dollars in his favor, and broke into a wide grin.

He quickly explained the facilities that Dev would be entitled to operate as a savings account holder of Milton Credit Union, including the use of a miraculous plastic card to operate something called an ‘ay-teeem’ which somehow would give him twenty-four hour access to cash! The manager quickly filled out the membership form. The only problem was that Dev did not have a social security number, yet. But that was okay, too, the manager said. It would be kept blank till he got one! As simple as that.

In less than fifteen minutes since his arrival at the bank, his new account was actually operational! Meanwhile, an assistant returned with ten temporary checks. They were all beautifully made out, with his name and the address that Janet had given to him printed crisply on these temporary checks. “How’d they do that?” he thought, but was too shy to ask. She also said that Dev’s personalized checks, whatever that meant, would be mailed to his residence in about a week’s time. How incredible! He even got to choose the artwork on his checks. He chose the mountains.

“Yeah! baby!” he muttered to himself with glee as he left the bank premises. At the exit, he saw a sinister, black cubicle with the legend “Automatic Teller Machine” in bold red letters stare

back at him. In awe, he took a tentative step towards it, but it was too much to cope for one day. He would come back to investigate tomorrow.

It was one o'clock as he surveyed the concrete boulevard outside the hank. In the general excitement, he had forgotten how hungry he was.

The trouble with finding a place to eat was that, there were too many, to choose from. There were glitzy pizza parlors, homely hamburger joints and ritzy restaurants, all within eyeshot from where he stood. At St. Joseph's, they only had that one Coffee House across the street from the University entrance, and even there the menu was so restricted that they seldom had to think of what to order.

He was carrying only the twenty official dollars on him, which ruled out the glitzy restaurants. The homely hamburger joint beckoned him, but the fame of the golden arch announcing the location of a MacDonald's restaurant around the corner made up his mind for him.

The restaurant was humming with dignified queues of young boys and girls lined up at all the three counters. Dev discovered that ordering and eating a meal, too, was quite business-like. Everything he wanted to know about the combo, including a realistic facsimile of the dish, was displayed in large, mouth-watering signs of light and plastic. The line he joined twitched along agreeably. He observed the way folks ahead of him placed their orders and when it came to his turn he ordered the Combo, which he guessed would be a combination of a BigMac sandwich, a large sachet of french fries and a large Coke. The buxom girl at the counter took his order and announced it crisply over a microphone to a couple of guys working feverishly in the kitchen. Then she trotted over to a gravity-fed, glass enclosure bursting with food packets, to fill his order. Before he could think what to do next, she had returned with the tray and briskly asked "Anything else, sir?"

Everything had happened so quickly that he stood momentarily transfixed. The queue trembled behind him - his indecision aggravated the persons around him, particularly the girl at the counter. Then he realized, by comparing the situation at the next counter, that he was supposed to pay up and just walk away with his tray of food. Dev quickly recovered his poise, paid the amount showing on the cash machine and retreated apologetically to a table at the back of the restaurant, which was just vacated.

The food was delicious. He had heard that MacDonalds was the cheapest place to eat in America, and yet the decor compared reasonably well with some of the best restaurants at Bakpur. As he wolfed the meal and sipped his coke, he reflected on the day's events. He had the glow of satisfaction that comes from progress, made rapidly.

He had been on the move ever since he disembarked from the bus, save for that brief interlude at Raj's. His legs ached, but he felt happy. There was no use comparing what might have been if he had to do it all over again at Bakpur. At a reception for new students like him at the United States Information Service at Bakpur, they had reviewed the culture shock syndrome that afflicts people from developing economies who come to America for the first time. So far, he had tripped twice - at the Greyhound ticketing office and again at this MacDonald's counter. Americans get very impatient if one dilly-dallies unnecessarily. At the Graduate Counselor's office earlier that day, he remembered the incident of an Oriental student, who had no English. He simply could not understand the girl at the counter. The grinding queue stalled as the Oriental student groped for words and stabbed at his papers. Although nobody was rude, Dev understood enough of body

language to feel the irritation of the people all around him. That day, Dev learnt that he had to be quick and forthright - always - if he wanted to succeed in America.

Meanwhile, the rush at the restaurant had peaked. All the tables were full. A boy and a girl, clutching their own trays, waited expectantly at Dev's table, since he had almost finished eating. No languishing here! The image of the coffeehouse flashed through his mind, where they had developed languishing for hours at a table with just a cup of coffee, into an art form. In any case, he could not afford to languish just now. He had to visit his professor before registration. And most of all, he wanted to move into his dormitory right away and save Raj the bother of having to put him up for the night.

That was the delightfully refreshing thing about Milton - one did not need to languish - there was always so much to do, anyway.

Dev trotted off to the Management Sciences block. A huge board at its entrance announced the names and room numbers of the faculty and staff members of the department. He bounded up the stairs two at a time in search of Room 218. Three boys and two girls were waiting outside Dr. Wallace's office. All save one were Americans, and they leaned against the wall with faraway looks on their faces. The Chinese girl in a smart blue suit fidgeted worriedly with her bag.

For the first time that day, Dev had to wait ... and wait. From the sound of voices that permeated through the door, Dr. Wallace's thoroughness and commitment to high scholasticism was apparent. He questioned his students meticulously, to ensure that his recommendations were consistent with their academic standing, their preparation and their degree objectives. He took as much as fifteen minutes with a pretty, blonde girl.

Eventually, it was Dev's turn. He was overwhelmed by the kind eyes and flowing beard of Dr. Wallace. Torn between a curious admixture of reverence and admiration, Dev fought an inexplicable desire to bend and touch the feet of his Guru, as he had often seen being done at Bakpur - but had never dreamt that he would want to do himself. The gentle voice of Dr. Wallace returned him to the earthly purpose of this interview.

Dr. Wallace enquired about his living arrangements, before checking through his paperwork quickly. Then, he bore into Dev to determine the extent of his academic preparation, which unhappily had not been augmented since St. Josephs seven years ago. Dr. Wallace hemmed and hawed every time Dev revealed how little he knew of the subjects that he had come to master. Thus, Dev took up even more time than the blonde, because his academic standing was on very loose ground. But Dr. Wallace was kind. He complimented Dev for his unique work experience.

At last, Dr. Wallace scribbled four course numbers and titles on the registration form and said, "There! That should be just about right. Now, about your job as a Teaching Assistant. Let's meet day after tomorrow when this darned registration fever is over, okay!" as he ran his fingers alternately over his beard and the well-used desk calendar on his table. He stated "... how does three-forty in the afternoon suit you ... is that fine? Okay, well run along then. Send in the next guy, will you, please."

• • •

Dev reached the Indoor Stadium exactly at four in the afternoon. It was a massively ugly steel, and concrete structure - home to the college basketball team and the official gymnasium, as well.

Inside, a massive carnival was already in progress. Students of every description milled in and out of it. Hand-written placards and instructions were pointing in all directions. Theoretically, there was no problem if one paid attention and could read English. But it was very easy to lose concentration - and then go astray. With all the hoopla around him, it was all he could do to stay on his feet.

Someone explained helpfully that the confusion was compounded by the recent computerization drive. Apparently, the admissions procedures were not completely debugged. Some of the ladies manning the counters were not young, and the strain showed on their harrowed faces. The first one he talked to snapped back at him because he had advanced the wrong papers, and he was pooed and shooed along when he fumbled with his registration packet. But there were some helpful counselors, who were mountains of patience. And always, there were pretty, young faces all around him to ogle at and rest his eyes.

Triumphantly at the end of it, but awed by the stately appearance of the cashier, he pushed his course slips and a check for two thousand and seventy eight dollars over the counter. She said sweetly, "You're from India, aren't you? My husband and I stayed in India for fifteen years ..." as she thumbed through the forms and entered data into the computer like a doe prancing over the meadows. "My husband worked at the diplomatic corps at New Delhi. We had the most wonderful time! Okay! Here's your receipt and ..." she rattled off instructions about what he had to do next to get his identity card, that she must have repeated a million times already that day. "Next!" she said.

At last, Dev was officially a student of the University of Maitland - at Milton.

## 5

Time passes quickly if one is having fun.

Dev's roommate was a boy called Lee Ming who came from Malaysia. From the first day, well before his Oriental Pidgin English was transformed by American idiom, Lee Ming had little difficulty communicating with Dev since they both shared a common, colonial cultural bond.

Lee Ming was a doctoral student in Electrical Engineering. His passion with computers and his high-spirited belief in its powers was infectious. The flowering of Dev's latent computing skills owed much to its osmotic diffusion across the room.

As a Research Assistant in the burgeoning field of microelectronics, Lee Ming stridently criticized the lack of numeracy amongst large segments of American students. "I am grad," he once lisped confidentially, "that I don't have to teach like you, *lab*."

Lee Ming was afraid that his excitable nature and his lack of patience might get him into trouble. They had both attained adulthood in societies which believed that exemplary corporal punishment is the only effective way to enforce their society's behavioral norms ... where authoritarians could rap their juniors with impunity, secure in the belief that the bigger and older the fist, the greater the right.

Lee Ming had wisely decided that that would not do here.

Fortunately, Dev did not share this problem. He was innately tolerant. Teaching and communication skills came to him naturally. He could convincingly break down even complex ideas into a

logical stream of its less cumbersome parts, so that even the simplest of minds could eventually grasp his drift.

Of the many differences in student-life between Bakpur and Milton, the attitudinal differences towards money were the most glaring.

In totality, education in Bakpur was cheap; as student fees could be kept ridiculously low because of the State's enormous subsidy. Even at St. Josephs' College, he paid about one-fiftieth of what it actually cost the State to educate him. The people got back very little from this half-hearted investment, because most of the intelligent ones, who could make a difference to the state of their society, smartly flew the coop, eventually. The steady deterioration in the standard of living in Bakpur, accentuated by the frigidity of the Communist regime frightened away new blood, aggravating not only the hemorrhage but also the quality of their education, in a vicious downward spiral.

Since students in Bakpur had little buying power, the commercial policy of suppliers of educational materials - like their teachers - was to palm off cheap merchandise at rock bottom, bargain prices. The quality of their class materials and their academic facilities matched the quality of these inputs. Across the nation, whenever the needs of students were considered, the cheapest and the shoddiest alternatives, woefully short on quality, came to mind first.

At Milton, however, nothing came cheaply.

Students paid a lot of money to attend the University of Maitland. Not only were the tuition fees astronomically high; even their living expenses were considerable. Education was big business. How much of this 'high cost' strategy was designed as a barrier to keep out the lower classes, and how much of it was due to natural selection, or a product of market dynamics, was anybody's guess. It was something Americans did not talk about too freely. Americans loved freedom, as much as they hated levelers.

There were two University Stores on campus. The Curators of the University managed the larger one. Both appeared to be constantly in competition to determine who could charge more from their student customers. Their wares were more expensive than many commercial outlets in town - and yet, they were never short of custom.



First impressions are usually the most indelible ones, and as Dev would discover with experience, they hide much more than they reveal.

American students were objective in their approach to academics. Perhaps they looked at the money they paid to go to college. Some of them worked purposefully, even frenetically. In the wake of their restlessness, they shook the lethargy out of the lesser-motivated ones ... who might have remotely harbored leisurely inclinations.

Time was of the essence. Americans measured their activity in hours, minutes and seconds - whether it was the time they spent in class listening to lectures conducted with clockwork precision, or to determine their compensation for work they had done.

Time was money. Money gave freedom. Americans prized freedom above all.

People like Dev and Lee Ming belonged to the new wave of pioneers who came to American shores from developing countries. They came because they, too, prized their freedom. For them,

to remain free, they had to stay in America. And the only way they could do that was to work hard, and be the best. For such highly motivated people, it was a matter of perennial levity to joke about the prodigal American habit of squandering their freedom in frivolous pursuits. Starting Friday afternoon till the early hours of Sunday morning was '*Party-time USA!*' Sunday was a day to lay back and mope with a hangover, which sometimes spilled over all the way till Tuesday. It was back to serious work all of Wednesday. The fever to plan for the coming Friday and Saturday evening bashes would begin to take precedence over less engaging pursuits from mid-Thursday. Thus, the 'party' juggernaut exacerbated the depraved and degenerate imagery of the 'ugly' Americans, in general.

Yet, it is true that there is nothing monotonic about Americans, although they constantly brood about the dread of tedium. Critical American thinkers grumbled about their mechanistic life, which they introspectively likened to a herd of cattle about to be driven to their destruction over a cliff, all single-mindedly running greedily after the bitch goddess. '*Where is the beef*' was the decadal enquiry. And their own critics badmouthed these gloomy soothsayers of doom as spoilsports and party-poopers who did not have the spunk to keep abreast with the pack in the first place. Was the truth somewhere in between?

But, if the average American is as decadent as their critics would like the world at large to believe, then what is the secret of their raging success? Their indisputable cultural domination over the rest of the world? Who can deny that the proof of the pudding is in the eating? Why did people in every ancient culture - from the Lands of the indomitable 'Rising Sun' afar to the neighborly 'Quetzalcoatl' - freely covet the raunchy American way of life? Why did they all succumb - to the images from Hollywood and the primal beat of Motown, to the new intelligence from Silicon Valley and to the perennial gold rush in Wall Street. What America thinks today, the world thinks tomorrow.

'It's a paradox only if one believes whatever one sees,' Dev told himself. In real life, the what-you-see-is-what-you-get syndrome seldom worked beyond the small screens of personal computers with the apple motif that he would later be so fond of playing with in their computer laboratories.

Americans are smarter than most people because they cleverly stay out of the way of the crucial people who make their society tick so well, even pampering them when needed. At Bakpur, such people are ground to dust under the heels of aristocracy and precedence. But, in American real life, beneath the veneer of merriment and flamboyancy, everyone danced with deadly seriousness - even if it was only for three days a week - to the mirthless, soundless tunes scored by a cold and remote, Orwellian Big Corporate Brother. Perhaps several Big Corporate Brothers - spread across the length and breadth of this great nation, who fought their own organized and bounded internecine wars with one hand, whilst conjointly orchestrating the unbounded ones of the Kiplingesque lesser breeds across the oceans, with the other ...

*The More Things Change ... the more they remain the same.*

Dev eventually learnt to measure his work in hours, too.

Between his learning and teaching responsibilities, Dev was already slogging away for more than fourteen hours a day, and yet he could barely keep abreast of the pack.

There was not a single road to the Temple of Mammon. Dev discovered that there were thousands of paths ... each forking out to a thousand different and dubious measures of success. It was like learning to skate, which he had tried for the first time in their collegiate skating rink, encouraged by a couple of his American friends. The moment he thought he had the hang of it - bang! He landed feet upwards and his head caught embarrassingly between two chairs right at the starting blocks. But...

Such is the power of perseverance that America promotes in all the questing people who come to her shores, that he learnt quickly what it took to be successful in America - just as he eventually learnt to skate moderately well after that inaugural fall, even though he had a bad back and a dozen body aches to show for it for a whole month.

## Addendum Part 2 - Translation of words in dialect into English

Word in Dialect	English meaning
<b>The Case of the Touch Artist - Prolegomenon</b>	
<i>burra sahib</i>	Senior Officer
<i>Thakur</i>	Upper caste member in traditional Indian society
<b>Chapter 9: Ashok Chandra</b>	
<i>saree</i>	Dress worn by Indian ladies
<i>tava paratha</i>	Indian bread cooked in Indian-styled earthen ovens
<i>mughlai</i>	Rich, spicy preparations originating from North India
<i>Kabaddi</i>	Team sport played in Indian sub-continent
<i>dacoit</i>	Robber
<i>shervani</i>	Formal, elegant dress for Indian gentry
<i>Aareh!</i>	Exclamation
<i>khansamma</i>	Orderly; domestic assistant
<i>Hindi-Chini bhai-bhais</i>	Brotherly affections between Indians and Chinese people
<i>jawan</i>	Soldiers
<i>Daat teri!</i>	Exclamation of disgust
<i>pucca sahib</i>	Exemplary, pure-bred senior administrative officer
<i>biryani</i>	Very rich and spicy rice preparation
<b>The Case of the Touch Artist - The Perigee</b>	
<i>Lok Sabha</i>	Lower House of Parliament
<i>rath</i>	chariot
<i>Chambal</i>	a ravine in the State of Madhya Pradesh known for its bandits
<i>Murgh mussallam</i>	a rich north Indian chicken preparation
<b>Chapter 10: John Bogermille</b>	
<i>batik</i>	Colorful printed cloth in characteristic South-East Asian style
<i>satay</i>	Meats barbecued while skewered on bamboo stakes in Malayan style
<i>Mee goreng</i>	Fried spaghetti cooked in South-East Asian style
<i>gulab jaman &amp; halwa</i>	Indian sweetmeat preparations
<i>Wok &amp; hadi</i>	Deep frying pan in the Oriental and Indian tradition
<i>raj</i>	Dispensation
<i>kabob</i>	Spicy meat preparation
<b>Excerpts from the Diary of a Despicable Raconteur (Nov 1, 1993 - June 1, 1997)</b>	
<i>thikkay jbee</i>	Part-time servant
<i>panchayat</i>	Rural administration

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Word in Dialect	English meaning
<b>Chapter 13: Eldorado</b>	
<i>mantra</i>	Chant
<i>choli</i>	Upper dress worn by Indian ladies
<i>Karna</i>	Valorous and brave warrior in Mahabharata

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## Acknowledgments

**Sankalpa** owes its inception to **Shri Subhas Mukhopadhyay**, Poet Laureate and keeper of the peoples' conscience.

Many people believe that the socio-political arena in India, especially in Bengal, has degenerated into a bottomless pool of greed and avarice, where loud people rule the roast ... and their loud voices drown the dissenting voice of conscionable people. **Sankalpa** was conceived in 1995 as a platform for people to externalize their inner feelings, especially on socio-political issues. An experimental "free" website <<http://members.tripod.com/sankalpa>> was created in 1998 with the twin objectives of amplifying the voice of the people on one hand, and providing a platform for creative people to express their creativeness, on the other.

**Sankalpa Publications** was the next logical step. '*Jontuder Plaza*', a Bengali language adaption of George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' and the '**The Tale of the Existential Relativist**', are two of its inaugural publications.

We hope more people will come forward and join **Sankalpa**, so that the true voice of the people can be heard again. Sankalpa has formed "**The Society for Appropriate Rural Technology for Sustainability**" (**ARTS**) and the "**COALITION of Moral Forces for Sustainability**" (**CMFS**).

Please enroll as members and voice your support for **Sankalpa**.

*For more information, contact:*

Subhrankar Mukherjee *PhD,MBA*  
Managing Trustee, Sankalpa Trust  
P6 Cluster 2, Purbachal, Salt Lake  
Calcutta 700 097, INDIA.

Tel: ++91 (033) 2335 9812  
Mobile: ++91 98447 47967  
*e-mail:* [subhrankar@gmail.com](mailto:subhrankar@gmail.com)



Subhrankar Mukherjee (aka Essem) is a founding member of Sankalpa Trust, which has initiated several social engineering projects, including the Society for Appropriate Rural Technology for Sustainability (ARTS) and the coalition of Moral Force for Sustainability (cMFS). He has a PhD in Electrical Engineering and an MBA from the University of Missouri - Columbia. His professional fields over the past 30 years include Information Technology, Quality Management Systems, Renewable Energy Technologies and Power Electronics. He is currently Management Representative of the ADA Software Group. He is also an Affiliate Professor at Colorado State University, where he is working closely with Professor Emeritus Maurice L. Albertson in the fields of renewable energy and appropriate technologies - specializing in sustainable village-based development. He was a Visiting Professor at Alagappa University, where he designed rural IT-Enabled Community Centers and worked at the grassroots - with *Panchayats* and local institutions - for promoting village-based sustainable livelihoods projects. He was the Principal Investigator for a World Bank project on the environmental economics of biomass gasification based power plants. He also specializes in digital painting and imaging.

## The More Things Change

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