

Be It Ever So Humble

RAJNI LAMBA

As children of an always-on-transfer-Army officer father we have had interesting adventures at the various stations he had been posted to. The range of dwellings and the populace we cultivated is indeed vast. We learnt many lessons in human tolerance and sustenance.

In Shillong, the pleasures of living in an arcane house were revealed to us only after the initial bout of experimentation. On the dinner table one day, Daddy asked for the inevitable "muki bhan pyas" to go with the deluxe dal. As the floorboards were wooden and looked fairly worn, Daddy placed the onion on the wall and hit it with the heel of his palm . The onion just disappeared we gaped in wonder at the hole that was glaring down at us as a gentle shower of clay lime and straw stormed the dinner-table forum.

In Bihar the floods were to become an inseparable memory for us. In July-August orders would go out that all families should share the first-floor dwellings and leave their belongings at a central store which was considered to be well above the water level. Invariably the Ganga, Pun Pun, and Son waters would spare our perches and attack the arid zone around the central store with a vengeance. For weeks after the flood waters had receded, droves of army kids would go out on fishing expeditions to try and salvage their mothers precious cutlery, crockery and what-have-you. Even today we have a myriad collection of forks, knives and spoons.

In Jammu we shared our "home sweet home" with snakes and their mongoose enemies. During the bountiful monsoons the roof was covered with canvas sheets. This arrangement provided an ample breeding ground for an entire tribe of militant mongoose who immediately declared war on the snakes who had been living in harmony atop my brother's study room. Anyway, they provided hours of entertainment for us children as each selected his champion and cheered him on. Luckily, our mothers knew nothing of this, or else ...

In the region of highest rainfall in India, somewhere near the Cherapunji area we had the Kitchen outside the main living quarters. This factor proved a bane to our cook's culinary skills for, whatever he prepared for our repast was somehow spiced and seasoned by the prevailing weather conditions - usually pouring rain. As 100 cms of rain pelted panditji on his way from the kitchen to the dinning room, our chapatis came swimming in a sea of floury

water, the rice was usually in the form of gruel, cold and very fluid. In fact it would be no exaggeration to say that we had to all but don scuba gear for conjuring up a meal from the "rajma" and dal preparations. Poor panditji, our cook par excellence, quit in tears and set off for sunny UP, his homeland to redeem his faith in his ability.

Yet wherever we may have lived we enjoyed ourselves to the utmost as Daddy would brief us beforehand - and elaborately at that - about the topics and issues that found favour with or were taboo, as well as the plus point we could pick up from the people and cultures of these beautiful lands. Always there was the security of knowing that "be it ever so humble there's "no place like Home" ... and for most army children "home" is where "Daddy is".