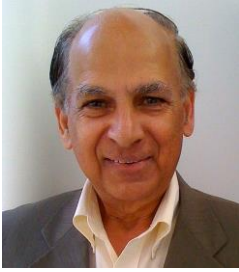


## Vendors and Hawkers of India



**Juginder Luthra**

Dr. Juginder Luthra completed his MBBS from Medical College, Amritsar in 1966, and his MS in Ophthalmology from the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGI), Chandigarh in 1970. He moved to Nottingham, UK along with his wife, Dolly — a dentist from the Amritsar Dental College — and a daughter, Namita. They were blessed with twin daughters, Rohini and Rashmi, in May 1975. The family moved to Weirton, West Virginia in June 1975. Now their three loving daughters are married to wonderful sons-in-law, and Dolly and Juginder are blessed with six grandchildren.

Once you have lived in the U.S. for many years, as I have, silence is the first thing that hits when you return from India. The orchestra of sounds created by dogs, birds and human vocal cords, along with a variety of man-made machines and amplifiers suddenly vanishes, making you wonder if you are losing your sense of hearing. No wonder it is sometimes called deafening silence.

This is particularly true of the era long gone, of the years I spent in Panipat in the 1950s. The years when the flower of life, as I know, started blooming and absorbed the panorama of the world around me. Times change but the memories of those days, somewhat faded, still linger.

Among the constant background sounds, one of the things that I miss most is the periodic yelps of numerous vendors and hawkers selling products in the trains, buses, on the streets and roads.

Who can forget the shrill high-pitched sound of '*Chai garam*' at the train stations? Just as the train begins to slowly pull in to the station, numerous young boys start the chorus, trying to outdo one another, to seek attention of potential customers. The bolder ones hop on to the steps of the moving train, precariously holding onto the metal handle while balancing their aluminum kettles and reddish brown clay cups. They briskly walk up and down the aisles to get a first shot at the thirsty, tea loving customers. Various tones and pitches saying *Chai Garam* fill the air spaces inside the train and along the windows blocked by horizontal bars with enough space to exchange a steaming hot cup with money.

Some vendors carry the tea in aluminium kettles, and some in open buckets. Flies tend to follow the sweet smell of pre-mixed sugar.

The tea sellers are soon followed by sellers of *moongfali* (peanuts), still warm in their shells. They are served in folded bags made out of old newspapers. It is a common scene to have the empty open pods scattered all over the train floor. Now, moongfalis are gradually being replaced by pre-packed nuts, spicy snacks and biscuits. Some snacks are served in conical containers created from old newspapers. Even the thought of spicy fried lentils in the cones with freshly squeezed lemon juice induces Pavlov's reflex of saliva trickling in my mouth.

"*Santra kele le lo!*" (get oranges and bananas) is hawked by another set of sellers. Fruits are stacked on round jute trays deftly balanced on one hand as the other hand exchanges the goods for money. The season dictates the types of fruits; cut slices of watermelons are popular in hot summers.

All of them manage to squeeze through the narrow aisles rubbing shoulders with the constantly moving passengers and fellow vendors. Somehow, they deliver the merchandise, collect money and almost always jump off the moving train, maximizing their time in the compartments.

Alongside the train are also boys walking briskly carrying *garam* (hot) *samosa pakode*. They make a great combination with *garam chai*. They are dispensed in the double-layered pieces of newspapers. *Imli chutney* adds the tangy taste and cools down the piping hot *samosa* and *pakode*.

"*Boot Polish Kara lo sahib*" is another sound that fills the railway platform as one waits for the arrival of the train. Needed or not, one gets them polished, partly to get rid of the pervasive dust that settles on the shoes, and partly thinking that at least the boy is trying to work to earn money and not begging.

When your *rickshaw* or *tonga* approaches the station, or when your train arrives at its destinations, you get surrounded by the sounds of "*coolie sahib*" from men wearing red shirts with a rolled piece of cloth on their heads to support some of the luggage as the rest hangs over their strong shoulders. No one tells you how much they would charge; they attempt to grab the luggage to beat the competitor. When one reaches the destination, coolies hop onto the moving trains, and vie for grabbing your luggage saying, "give whatever you please", but ending with hard bargains at the end. If you know the system, it is quite an enjoyable experience but to a novice it may be annoying. After the delivery of luggage the process of vigorous haggling starts. Finally, one of them succeeds, ending the bitter argument over the fair price for the services. Now a days this old tradition is gradually vanishing from large urban areas, but still prevalent at smaller stations. It is more orderly now but I still miss the old drama.

Train stations are not the only places where hawkers thrive. Fresh vegetables filled carts, some pushed and some pulled by a bicycle, start making appearance on the streets at sunrise. The sellers move slowly, periodically howling "*Aloo pyaaz sabji le lo*" (Buy your potatoes, onions, vegetables). Housewives and sometimes men come out to avail these services, thus avoiding trips to the market. The vegetables were weighed in the hand held *taraazoo* (scale) with the produce placed on one side and different weights on the other.

The customer always wished to see the produce side tipping more, while the seller tried to keep it even, and sometimes tipping the scale down on the side of the produce with an invisible play of the hand holding the scale, giving false pleasure to the customers. Back and forth accusation and defence about this hand trick was always a way of benign bickering. These scales are now being replaced by the stationary weighing scales, which still need different sized weights to weigh the goods without the risk of tipping the scale with hand. More recently, the automated scales with the moving needle or even digital scales are making appearance.

Just about the same time one starts hearing "*Ande double roti makhkhan le lo*", (Buy eggs, bread, butter), the last one getting a prolonged stretch. Some of the carts have bells making their presence known to the potential customers.

These vendors not only sell their products but also become a venue for social news and gossip exchange among the customers as well as the sellers who keep track of what is going on in the *mohalla* (neighbourhood). After a fair share of gossip, bargaining and purchase, the hawkers move on to their next stop.

“*Doodh valla*” (milkman) sound accompanies a man on bicycle with two drums hanging on both sides of the carrier over the back wheel. Gentle arguments over water having mixed with his milk were commonly heard.

As the day matures, one starts hearing *Raddi, botlen!* (Used paper and bottles). These are buyers of used newspapers, magazines, bottles, and metal goods. They come on bicycles with two bags hanging on each side of the carrier. People come out with the recyclables, get them weighed and collect money in exchange. Most gave money in exchange of goods. The barter system was also common, exchanging the above items with vegetables, fruit or toys.

'*Bhaande Kalayi Kara Lao*' (get your utensils polished) sounded the announcement of a team of two or three men coming to put a shine on the cooking utensils. They used to come prepared with soft charcoal, a manual machine to blow air to keep the burnt coal red hot, *naushadar* powder, sticks of tin, a pan to hold cold water and woolen as well as cotton cloth. The brass or copper utensils were held by a metal tong, made burning hot, and then *naushadar* powder was applied and rubbed. It created white smoke. The tin sticks were sporadically applied to the inner surface. Melted tin spots were then spread out quickly with folded cloth to give a luster to the inside wall of the utensils. The utensils were quickly dipped in a pan of water. I can still see the steam rising along with the simmering sound of red-hot utensil cooling down in cold water. Utensils looked new for about six months till the cooking gradually melted the tin, which the hungry growing bodies gorged down with the delicious food made by Mata Ji. No side effects occurred unless you count waking up at 3 AM (after returning to the U.S. from India) and writing all this on iPhone as one of them.

In the evenings, after children returned from schools, one started hearing calls from ice cream sellers. These were particularly popular in the summer. The vendors entice children out by their calls of "*Ice Cream le lo*" (Buy ice cream) as well as loud bells announcing their arrival. A variety of ice creams was stored in the cooler pushed as a cart or pulled by a bicycle. The children beg their parents for money and merrily run out to lick their favourite flavour and cool down the sweltering heat.

At most urban road intersections, as the vehicles come to a stop, it is common for vendors of newspapers, books, and magazines to knock on the windows.

Street beggars in the form of a mother carrying an emaciated or a limbless child trying to induce guilt. Some of them are genuine needy and some part of a gang of professional beggars team. Even though it is illegal, the tradition still continues, but much less than before.

Some of the things of the past, which are rapidly vanishing, are a family bringing monkeys, which would perform tricks in exchange for some money.

Young boys and girls with rubber-like flexible bodies would dance and do acrobatics in anticipation of some money in return. Most would oblige but some people sheepishly walk away before the show ended lest they got too embarrassed of not paying the performers.

Not heard anymore, the sound of *Moongfali* just a few seconds before the interval in a theatre, which seemed to be an integral part of movie going experience. Sounds of *Chai garam* sellers filled the air here also. *Chana chor garam*, the spicy roasted chickpeas, were also our favourite snacks.

The humdrum of similar sounds fill the air in the small markets, tourist spots, festivals and rickshaw stands.

A mere 17 hours of flight back from India transforms you to an orderly but eerie silent life. Adjusting to the time difference takes a few days but the adjustment to the missing orchestra of sounds takes me several weeks, or even months, after I return from India to the U.S. In fact, the sounds of *home* sit on the back burner but never vanish completely.

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