

Memories of Panditji



Raja Ramanathan

Raja Ramanathan was born in Independent India, in Calcutta. He has spent the last sixty years or so growing up in different parts of the world, Singapore, England, India, the Middle East, and, in the last twenty years, Canada.

Much before I was born in 1950, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was my father's political hero. Once when, as a child, I referred to him as Nehru, Dad corrected me, and said that I should refer to him respectfully as Panditji. That has stayed with me. I think a lot of my father's reverence for Panditji came from the fact my father had a close association with Dr. Annie Besant, and one of Panditji's early tutors, Ferdinand Brooks, was a Theosophist.

I do not know if all my family members had the same regard for Panditji. However, my mother has often related this story to me, perhaps more because it shines the light on her eldest child.

Panditji was an extremely good-looking man. Sometime in 1946, when my family lived in Calcutta, Panditji was visiting Calcutta. We had a Bihari cook at home, whose one ambition in life was to see Panditji. So, he took the day off and travelled by tram to wherever Panditji was speaking in Calcutta. It is difficult to capture in words how much of a hero Panditji was in his heyday. The crowds he could gather were uber phenomenal ... and people would wait hours to hear him speak.

At that time, my eldest brother, who is twenty years older than I am, was living in Calcutta with my parents. My brother is extremely fair skinned, and, that gave him very high marks when it came to being rated for looks. His name is Narayanswamy, and, the cook referred to him as 'Narayan Babu.'

So, that evening, after his trip to see Panditji, our cook came home, quite excited.

One of my uncles asked, "नेहरूजी को देखा *Nehruji ko dekha?*" (Did you see Nehruji?)

Cook replied, "हांजी, देखा *Haan-ji, dekha.*" (Yes, I saw)

Uncle continued, "कैसे थे *Kaise the?*" (How did he look?)

Cook, "बहुत अच्छे हैं देखने में *Bahut achhe hain dekhne mein* (Panditji looks very handsome). मगर अपने नारायन बाबू और अच्छे हैं देखने में *magar apne Narayan Babu aur achhe hain dekhne mein.*" (But, our Narayan Babu looks better).

Since that day, Narayan Babu, or my eldest brother, has been the gold standard for looks in the family. Needless to say, all of us other brothers come nowhere near the gold standard.

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My father, K.N. Ramanathan, worked with Reuters and then Press Trust of India. In the 1950s, he was in London, England, with Reuters, and he managed the India Desk, as they called it. As one of the senior Indian journalists of the day in London, he would be present when almost every Indian dignitary visited.

In 1956, Panditji was passing through London on his way to Ireland. He was scheduled to make a brief stopover at Heathrow airport early in the morning. My father decided that it was the occasion for a family outing to see Panditji. My father told my mother and me, "In India you will never get to see Panditji so close."

We did not have a car, and I don't think the Piccadilly Line ran to Heathrow those days. My father booked a rented car to take us to Heathrow that morning. I have a vague memory that it was a weekend day.

I was quite excited about the trip because Panditji was a great hero to my parents, and I had heard many stories about him. Also, those days, any trip to airports was an occasion for excitement for a six-year-old boy.

When we arrived at Heathrow, my father left us on the first floor of the then VIP terminal (wonder if it was the Queen's Landing Building?). From here, we could watch the plane come in. My father went downstairs to join the receiving line. Within about ten minutes of our arriving, the Indian Air Force plane (I think it was named Rajhans) landed. In those days, at 6.30 in the morning, Heathrow was not as busy as it is these days. We could see the aircraft taxiing with the Indian and British flags fluttering from the cockpit windscreen. (I am not quite sure how they placed the flags there. Maybe the pilot opened the window and just stuck them there after touchdown. Imagine doing that these days!)

Once the aircraft had come within range of the VIP terminal, there was much activity as the stepladder was placed. (There were no aerobridges even at Heathrow in those days). The plane's door opened. I distinctly recall a somewhat non-Panditji looking person in a brown *achkan* coming off first. My mom confirmed that it was not Panditji. "Maybe be his personal attendant," she said.

After a few others came off the plane, there was a pause for a few moments. Then, Panditji came to the door of the aircraft. He paused at the head of the stairs, and waved to the small crowd of High Commission staff and Indian journalists gathered. He was wearing what I remember as an off-white *achkan*, with his signature rose in the lapel, and, was twirling the small baton he would always carry. Panditji must have been 67 years old at that time. However, he looked several years younger, and, had that fair-fair complexion that every Indian mother-in-law dreams for the girl her son will be bring home as a bride.

In earlier years, Panditji would wear a western suit on his trips overseas. By 1956, he had totally adopted the Indian *achkan* and the Nehru jacket, which became a fashion statement. (Interesting how leaders brand themselves with their clothing. The present Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, has his signature Modi *kurta*).

After coming off the plane, Panditji walked to the terminal and went in. My mother and I were waiting upstairs. About fifteen minutes later, my dad came up and asked us to come down. He took us to the exit to the terminal building from where Panditji would go back to the aircraft.

We waited there for about another fifteen minutes, when we saw Panditji walking towards the exit along with my father and others. I do not recall seeing Vijayalakshmi Pandit, or Madam Pandit, as the western press called her. She may have been there. She was the High Commissioner to England and Ireland. More importantly, I cannot imagine her not being at the airport when her favourite *bhaiyya* (brother) came. My memory must be fading over sixty years.

I suspect that my dad had mentioned to Panditji that his family was at the airport. When Panditji reached the place where we were standing, he stopped, and my mother did a namaste. Panditji saw me, came to me and asked me, "What is your name?"

Not a difficult question to answer, "Raja", I said.

And then he said, "Do you know what your name means?"

Promptly I replied, "King."

Panditji smiled, patted me on my head and walked on.

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The next time I saw Panditji was in 1963, when he came for the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) session in Bombay. By then, we had returned to India. I remember my uncle taking us to a spot behind the old Bombay Santa Cruz airport where Panditji's motorcade would pass. In the fading evening light, we saw Panditji drive past.

By then, after the Chinese invasion in 1962, Panditji had aged. I think some months earlier he had suffered a stroke at the Bhubaneswar AICC session. The man I saw somewhat slumped in the back seat of the car that drove past was not the sprightly leader I had seen as a six year old at Heathrow.

No matter.

Despite the changing flavours of the day, Panditji has remained my political hero over the last fifty years.❖

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