

# UTKARSH SINGH RATHORE

## Content Ranking

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### **Burmese Tea Set**

After an anxious wait of about four hours, the arrival of Kalka Mail was announced by a shrill bell, at Kanpur railway station. Nigam drew a sigh of relief and wearily looked at about half a dozen-cigarette butts, which he had littered around himself while waiting for the train. At last, it was arriving. Kalka Mail, during the summers, in North India, when the marriage season was at its peak was never on time. Thanks to its unscheduled stops due to chain pulling.

The steam engine with a logo of Indian Railways on its nose was now in full sight and it belched an extra puff of smoke as if trying to make up for the delay. Nigam tried to zero in on the carriage windows to catch a glimpse of the guests, whom he had come to receive. Coolies and the passengers on the platform were obstructing his view and scrutiny and he failed to spot any familiar face from the clan of Mathurs who were expected from Calcutta. Carriages came to a halt after brakes and the wheels made that customary screech.

The crowd grew restless and jostling between the boarders and the alighters led to a logjam. Coolies were scurrying around with head loads followed by hapless passengers who did not have a reserved seat. They were casting glances to explore the slightest opportunity to shove the passengers and their luggage through an open door or a window. "Despite such commotion and disorder everyone gets to board the train", Nigam mused and jerked his hand, when the burning cigarette between his fingers singed the skin.

He craned his neck in all directions, moved around a bit, to have an enfilade view of the platform. Mathurs were still not in sight. He decided to walk along the length of the train. He must meet them, greet them and hire a coolie before they do it themselves. After all, they were his guests, coming all the way from Calcutta to see his daughter for a possible marital alliance.

Finally, he spotted a lean and bespectacled figure, stuck at the door between two burly coolies, and quickened his pace to reach for his rescue. Mathurs along with two women and three men and some frugal luggage finally made it to the platform. Welcome! Nigam exalted with folded hands and enquired about the comforts of the journey, which they must have experienced while traveling in that third-class sleeper compartment.

Mrs. Nigam must have gone to the main door at least five times to spot the expected contingent from Calcutta. Mithu, her youngest son was placed at the bend of the lane for an early warning so that the entire household could be at the door to welcome the guests.

Seema, Mrs. Nigam's daughter was being dressed up for the occasion, by her aunt, Maya. It was perhaps the sixth time that the household of Nigams and Seema have had undergone this kind of frenzy but without any satisfactory outcome. Seema was a good-looking girl, educated up to Matric and well versed in the household chores; somehow she could not pass the test of such parade.

“Look into the eyes of the boy when you serve him, Gopal is a good boy, a clerk in the bank and he must not go away without selecting you”, Maya reminded her, while applying a dash of talcum powder on her perspiring wheatish face.

Panting Mithu heralded the arrival of the contingent; he had spotted them laden in three rickshaws near Sharma Sweet Shop. Mrs Nigam and Maya, her sister rushed to the main door to greet the guests.

House of Nigams wore a festive look. Everything was dusted and spruced up for the occasion, especially the sitting room; to its inventory, entire friends' circle of Nigams has contributed with paintings, vases, furniture and even a gramophone. Mr. Nigam was a compounder in the district hospital and was quite popular in the locality due to his private medical practice.

Guests finally appeared at the door and were ushered in. Gopal minutely observed the sitting room and secretly admired the artifacts, assuming the creator of all these may be the girl in question - Seema. Everyone was seated in that small room crammed with decorative pieces. A ceiling fan moved slowly with a groan betraying internal conflict amongst its moving parts.

Pakorras were being fried in the kitchen and their aroma wafted into the sitting room, stimulating the appetite of tired and hungry guests. Maya surveyed each and everything in the kitchen; snacks were ready, sweets had come, lemon squash was iced and even *paan* had come. Suddenly it struck her, just in case, if the guests preferred tea as they were from the city and modern people. She asked Seema's younger sister Reema to go with Mithu to Mrs. Gupta and borrow her Burmese tea set.

Mrs. Gupta lived across the road, who after a quick interrogation of the children, with great reservation and elaborate instructions regarding the handling of her precious ware, lent the tea set. It was a bone China, golden tea set for six, which Mrs. Gupta's father had bought from Rangoon and given her in dowry. Though slightly faded at the brim, it was still in fine fettle and worthy of showing off to the guests. Some months ago its one-cup and a saucer had broken when lent to Agarwals

for a similar purpose. “Still good for five”, Mrs. Gupta consoled herself as the duo prepared to leave.

Reema and Mithu sneaked in, just in time, as Mrs. Nigam had sent in the third reminder. After biting into snacks, the guests actually opted for a cup of tea.

Maya hurried up tea brewing by shoving one more twig inside the hearth. ‘Lipton Hotel Dust’ was boiled in pure milk till it bequeathed its all colour and aroma. She then liberally laced it with spoonfuls of sugar. After setting the tea set on a wooden tray, wrapped in an oversized crochet cover and issuing the last-minute instructions to ‘look into the boy’s eyes’, she packed Seema off to the sitting room.

Seema entered the room through slightly parted curtains. Her entry had the desired impact on the guest, as they stopped chatting and gnawing at the snacks. She looked pretty in a blue printed sari, puffed sleeved blouse and ribboned braids. Maya’s grooming was effective Mrs. Nigam thought, as she nervously looked at the wall calendar with Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati’s photograph on it and mumbled a quick prayer. Seema took measured step with remarkable confidence and poise of an old-timer.

She carefully placed the tray on the center table and coyly cast a glance on Gopal who sat wide-mouthed with a half eaten pakora in his hand. She straightened the cups and lifted the kettle to pour the tea for Mrs. Mathur, her prospective mother-in-law (in case everything went off well) sitting next to Gopal on the centre settee. With eyes fixed on his face, she tilted the kettle- a few drops trickled down.

A fat, shiny brown and scalded cockroach, unable to bear the steamy environ inside the kettle anymore, decided to eject out from the spout. It wriggled itself up – head first. With its wildly oscillating whiskers and joined forelegs, like a praying mantis, it surveyed the faces of guests (and hosts too), awestruck by its unexpected appearance. And in its dying moments, it bowed to the spectators and landed inside the cup.

Oblivious of the storm in the teacup, Seema still looking at Gopal, poured the tea, and by some instinct realised that the cup must be full. She placed the kettle away and daintily offered tea to the lady. Cockroach lay floating over the tea, perfectly blended with its milky brown colour.

Almost simultaneously, she noticed the horrified face of Mrs. Mathur and its reason, and with a loud shriek, she dropped the cup and ran back to the kitchen. One more cup and saucer shattered. “Good for four”, Mrs. Gupta would probably say the next time.

What must have happened after the entire episode?

Did Seema walk for the seventh time?

No.

Lest you accuse me of being a deadpan pessimist, I inform you that Gopal liked Seema so much and they got married during the same marriage season.

Just the other day, I saw them near Sharma Sweet Shop, managing a rickshawful of kids- arriving from Calcutta on a brief visit.