



BOOK REVIEW

Kitty's War – A Reality Check

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Daman Singh. *Kitty's War*. Chennai: Tranquebar, 2018. ISBN: 9789387578319

Kitty's War is the story of an Anglo-Indian (AI) girl set in the early years of World War II.

In that troubled time, when Burma, Singapore and Malaya were being invaded by the Japanese army, and England and Europe menaced by the advancing Axis forces, Kitty Riddle grows up in Pipli. It is a small railway colony in eastern India. Hostilities never reach Pipli but the demands of the distant war drain the resources of the Indian railways much to the ire of the otherwise phlegmatic Terrence Riddle. He is an engineer in the East Indian Railway and Kitty's widowed father. There is also an undercurrent of discontent among railway workers but it has little impact on railway officials and their families.

That is the setting of the book but a setting is merely a backdrop against which the protagonists, to whom the reader can relate, play out their lives. Strangely, the author treats her principal characters in a very sketchy, off-hand, fashion. We saw tremendous potential in the role of Kitty, her father, 'Chuckerbutty' the Assistant Station Master, and Ayah the Riddle's servant. But that potential is never realised and so they emerge as shadowy, transient, figures flickering on and off stage.

To add to the impression of this being a half-baked tale, are the casual references to an escaped prisoner-of-war, Ayah's lover with the long locks, the bumbling *agent provocateur* in the tea shop, and the pathetically vacillating Jimmy cautiously referred to as Kitty's "beau".

We find it strange that such an experienced author as Daman Singh has under-played her creations the way she has. Fictional characters take on a life of their own and become the children of their creator. Conan Doyle was most reluctant to kill Sherlock Holmes even though he had grown tired of him! One explanation for Daman Singh's curious reluctance to flesh out her characters could be that she had intended to write a much larger book but lost interest mid-way. She then decided to make do with whatever she had. She had obtained some fascinating technical details about the maintenance of a railway line, and she used them. We were captivated by passages like:

The flags were already set up and the bolts lubricated. The mate signalled to a gangman to remove a set of eight fishplates. Terrence examined each with a magnifying glass before handing them one by one to Stan ... The bolts, however, would have to be replaced. It was not uncommon for the threads to wear out so he ruled out foul play.

This is not, however, a paper on the running of a branch of an Indian railway line in the 1940s. The blurb on the back cover says that "this is an unusual novel about being torn between two worlds". That is either a blurb-writer's fantasy or a deliberate attempt to tap an all-too-common view once held about Anglo-Indians in India. There is absolutely nothing in this 243 page novel about any of the four protagonists "being torn between two worlds".

This is where we would have stopped if we had been writing this for a Sunday supplement. This review, however, is for scholarly consideration so we have to make a more critical assessment of *Kitty's War*.

To return to the phrase about Anglo-Indians being "torn between two worlds" we know of no Anglo-Indian, born of AI parents in India, who has ever been torn between two worlds. First generation AIs, of European and Indian parentage, could have faced this

conflict. But by the 40's, the period in which this novel has been set, our community had established an identity of its own. Als in railway colonies, like Pipli, mixed with other Als, and married them. Their world was a very secure, self-sustaining, one. They found no need to break out of their self-perpetuating environment.

Nor, for that matter, did many other Indians at that time. For the vast majority of Indians, the caste system had served them well for centuries. In it, everyone's role had been divinely decreed down to diet, dress, hygiene, occupation, worship and personal relationships. It was so pervasive that even faiths which outwardly proclaimed '*the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man*' succumbed. In a village in Goa, proudly Catholic for centuries, we were amazed to find a vicious form of caste exclusion. At a Sunday Mass we discovered that some parishioners, claiming descent from distant Brahmin converts, refused to receive Communion from the priest because his Hindu ancestors had been of a lower caste before their conversion hundreds of years ago!

Such deeply ingrained social biases keep surfacing, with abrasive frequency, in the narrative of *Kitty's War*. As observers of the rise-decline-rise of the Anglo-Indian community, in India, these comments in Daman Singh's book fascinate us. They start from the first chapter giving an interesting glimpse of where the book is going.

Kitty is sitting on her trunk, trying to get it to close.

This time her knickers were in the way. The peach ones edged with lace. The ones she wore when she saw Jonathan for the last time. She had hoped it would be the first of many such times. It was not. The peach knickers stayed exactly where they were.

Jonathan was like that, never one to rush.

The image of an eagerly amoral woman is graphic. Clearly, however, this is not unique to Kitty because

At the annual school dance her friends foxtrotted with the seniors from St. Patricks, not always keeping them at arm's length.

Quite apart from the technicality that it is very difficult to foxtrot at arm's length is the author's implied disapproval of such close body contacts, in public. In traditional Indian society men do not touch unrelated women. Even blood relatives are treated with great circumspection. But AI girls don't adhere to such prohibitions of traditional Indian conduct! They also don't conform to any of the other shibboleths of the ancient caste system. Their freedom from the shackles of caste was envied, and consequently resented, by virtually all other Indian communities. As a Brahmin friend once complained "Anglo-Indians seem to have all the fun!"

The epitome of such a vibrant, and seemingly uninhibited, lifestyle was the legendary Anglo-Indian Railway Colony. That vanished in the great AI diaspora when, largely between 1947 and the early 1950s, reserved jobs for AIs in the railways, posts and telegraphs, police and customs were abolished. Blue-collar Anglo-Indians suddenly felt insecure with their high-school diplomas. They could not compete in open competition with college graduates from other Indian communities. This was the main, though seldom admitted, reason for the great exodus of these AI families to the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Consequently, by the 21st century when, presumably, Daman Singh began her research into *Kitty's War*, most original sources of information of that milieu had either dried up or been dispersed. AIs who had, in the early 1940s, jived and jitterbugged in Railway Institutes, were grey octogenarians by the 2010s. They were also scattered across the world. But though facts about their mores were difficult to obtain, there remained a treasure-trove of speculation, by other Indian communities, woven around the fascinating, and intriguingly unorthodox, Anglo-Indians. Europeans were aliens, so their behaviour could be tolerated as a temporary irritation. But Anglo-Indians were legally Indians, and yet their customs and lifestyles threatened the very fabric of traditional Indian society!

We do not believe that Daman Singh set out, deliberately, to pillory the Anglo-Indian community. Given her background, she is likely to be far too urbane to have committed such a breach of civility. That, however, is what makes those insidiously damaging remarks so dangerous. They reveal a once deeply pervasive mindset, among other

Indian communities, that Anglo Indians, particularly Anglo-Indian women, were a danger to the established social order.

Since India's caste-based society required women to be daughters-sisters-wives-mothers, sequestered from the world by fathers-brothers-husbands-sons, such an attitude was justified from their own point of view. We have analysed how this mindset evolved, but this is not the place to elaborate on such socially sanctioned prejudices. It is, however, important to highlight such biases. They underscore the extraordinary resilience of the Anglo-Indians who chose to stay back in their homeland, fight for their identity, and succeed in such an outstanding way. That is the real success story of the AIs in India that has not, as yet, been told.

We shall leave that tempting tale for another time and concentrate on a few of the trail-blazing steps taken by AIs, and so obliquely slighted in *Kitty's War*.

Working Women. Kitty was a teacher. Anglo-Indians were the pioneers of middle class Indian women venturing out into the workplace. They became teachers, secretaries, shop assistants, nurses and air hostesses. This was anathema to caste-conscious families who believed that women exposed to such un-chaperoned contacts would lose their 'purity' and, consequently, their chances of making a 'good' marriage. But here's the sting in the tale written by Daman Singh. The feckless Kitty whimsically gives up her job!

Feminine Hygiene. Traditionally, women were isolated during their periods. All women were not Europeans who were generally considered to be a dirty people and, given Victorian standards of personal hygiene, they probably were. If they were unclean, so must AIs be! This prejudice is highlighted in the book by the fuss being made about Kitty's smelly dressing gown. It does not help the narrative and so it must have been introduced for other reasons!

Miscegenation Annie, Kitty's mother "was an orphan brought up by missionaries in Ranchi" Then there is the remark that "People talked such rot about Anglo-Indian orphans. There were tales of planters who took local mistresses..." But if it is such rot why mention it? And how does it further the narrative? "Not knowing who her parents

were, what they did, where they were from.” The author does not say that Kitty was illegitimate, in so many words, but the insinuation is clear. How do these details help the tale? “Nobody commented on her unusually dark colouring ... instead they commented on her blue-green eyes..” Since Annie dies a little after giving birth to Kitty these hints of miscegenation have no relevance to the story.

These are just three examples of the compulsions of ill-informed biases, asserting themselves, to explain the trail-blazing successes of Anglo-Indian women. Their advancement in professional life is attributed to their allegedly easy morals which was a direct result of their preference for “love marriages” against the centuries old tradition of “arranged marriages”! It is more than likely that scholarly analyses of *Kitty's War* will unearth many more.

There is, however, a refreshing coda, a concluding remark, to this review which we must make.

For many centuries, Indian society was frozen in the reassuring time warp of the caste system. Then, with the arrival of the digital age and its information tsunami, a cultural revolution swept across the world's largest democracy. The *world wide web* leapt over the walls of caste and social prohibitions. Internationalism became the new social paradigm. Indian parents have always placed great emphasis on the education of their children. Across the land, often in spite of poverty and political pressures, parents send their children to “English medium” schools. Anglo-Indian teachers are in great demand. They become the preferred mentors of their students. Similarly, the mores of Anglo-Indians, because of their international acceptance, are being accepted as the norm by other communities. There is a backlash against this so-called alienation of ‘Indian culture’ as was the movement against Valentine’s Day. But the alienation argument is being steadily eroded. In spite of the initial resistance to the lifestyles of Anglo-Indians its appeal is steadily spreading all across India.

This is also why we believe that this book will be a rewarding guide to a study of the remarkable survival, and continuing success, of Anglo-Indians as a distinct community in India. This triumph was achieved in spite of AI lifestyles, initially, being seen as a challenge to the shibboleths of other communities in our motherland. On those

grounds, primarily, this book deserves to be studied. It puts into perspective the role that Anglo-Indians, and particularly Anglo-Indian women, have played, and continue to play, in the evolution of modern Indian society in spite of the societal prejudices once stacked against them.

We are, still, the tiny leaven, the catalyst for change, in the teeming millions of our aspirational land. And because such an ambitious nation rewards achievers, our minuscule community of Anglo-Indians in India has, incredibly, produced a Chief of Naval Staff and also a Chief of Air Staff. One of these Indian Defence Service chiefs was a very close relative, the other a classmate for many years. That is an example of just how small our community is, and also of the high percentage of national achievers we continue to produce.

This is the real war won by Kitty and her small, tough, clan in the world's largest, most vibrant, democracy. That is also why *Kitty's War* deserves to occupy a prominent place in any serious study of the Anglo-Indian community in India.

Hugh and Colleen Gantzer pioneered travel writing in India after Hugh got premature retirement from the Indian Navy as a Commander and a Judge Advocate. Over the last sixty years, they have jointly authored 24 published books, in various genres, run an influential column in a national daily, produced 60 TV documentaries and written a large number of articles for Indian and overseas publications. The Gantzers have won International and national awards for their work including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Government of India. They have an abiding interest in their Anglo-Indian community and believe that it is the leaven that has played a major role in the continuing globalisation of Indian society.