

A Lighter Shade of Brown

By Raghav Dwivedi - 6B

The cantonment was a different world, a small piece of faraway England transported to the dry plains of Northern India. We wore British school uniforms too stuffy for the hot Indian weather. There were piano classes every evening and dances and dinners for the adults almost daily. Although our mothers forbade us from crossing the river that separated us from the real India, we were fascinated by the dusty city on the other side. We used to look across and envy the dark-skinned urchins in their rags, running wild, kicking up the earth with their bare feet. We children never talked of it but we were all tempted to cross the river and experience life on the other side. This is the story of how on one occasion, that temptation took hold of me.

One sweltering morning, I awoke with a start. I could hear a great big hullabaloo, screaming voices and banging drums. The noise was coming from the 'natives' on the other side of the river. I got out of bed and tiptoed out of the bungalow. Past the army headquarters, past the barracks and through the orchard to the riverbank. I was transfixed by what I saw on the other side. The whole village was enveloped in a cloud of multi-hued dust. Children and adults were joyously flinging water and coloured powder at each other while drummers played a frenzied beat. I was immediately gripped by a desire to join in on the fun. As if in a dream, I found myself doing something I would never have dared.

It was dry season so I could easily wade across the river. I had barely reached the other bank when a dark, thin lad greeted me with the cry 'Happy Holi' and proceeded to fling a pot of violently-purple water at me. Looking at my shocked face, he explained 'Today is Holi sahib, festival of colours.' Sputtering, I asked him his name. "Ram, sahib", he retorted. "I'm Elliot", I said. "Elliott Abbot", and I held out my hand. He put his dark hand in mine and placed in it a pouch of bright pink powder. Then he looked at me and grinned.

We spent the next few hours running amok in the town, drenching whoever we saw with coloured water, our own faces smeared with every shade of neon. By the time we were through, we had dumped a vat of crimson dye

on a flock of goats and covered a stray cow in shades of blue. The colours I saw that day, the noises and smells, were more vivid than anything I'd ever seen at the cantonment.

By the time the celebrations died down, I was exhausted but happy. As we walked towards the main street, I took the town in. It was but a collection of rickety houses. The colours of Holi seemed even more vibrant against this rundown and poverty-stricken background. Skinny children roamed the streets, hungry but covered in colour. Some sang whilst others chased feral dogs. I remember feeling gloriously free. Suddenly I heard a familiar voice call my name. I wheeled around. A group of sepoy with Mother and Father at their head were coming my way. If I was caught like this, I knew that there would be hell to pay. With bated breath, I waited. The voices grew louder and louder, then faded away. They had walked right past us. I realised that at that moment, in their eyes, I was merely a raggedy, colour-splattered urchin from the wrong side of the river.