He sailed home once in two years, but always chose to come back, and ultimately planned to die in India. There were hundreds like him scattered all over India wherever there was an elevation and the possibility of cultivation. Some of them left their fortunes to Indian beneficiaries, institutionally or individually. One might hope that when the glamour of the royal trappings of the British raj is past, some film maker will see the value of the subject of an early British planter who alone could be called a pioneer and a true colonial hero.

India and America

The silent movies of the Twenties were the main source of our knowledge of America when I was growing up in Madras. We had a theater called the Roxy in our neighbourhood. For an outlay of two annas (about two cents) one could sit on a long teakwood bench, with a lot of others, facing the screen. When the hall darkened, there came before us our idols and heroes—hard-hitting valorous men such as Eddie Polo and Elmo Lincoln, whose arms whirled around and smashed up the evil-minded gang, no matter how many came on at a time, retrieved the treasure plan and saved the heroine while on the verge of losing her life or chastity. The entire saga as a serial would be covered in twenty-four instalments at a rate of six a week, with new episodes presented every Saturday. When Eddie Polo went out of vogue, we were shown wild men of the Wild West, cowboys in broad-brimmed hats and cartridge-studded belts, walking arsenals who lived on horseback forever chasing, lassoing and shooting. We watched this daredevilry enthralled, but now and then questioned, when and where do Americans sit down to eat or sleep? Do they never have walls and doors and roofs under which to live? In essence the question amounted to, “After Columbus, what?”

In the Thirties, as Hollywood progressed, we were presented with more plausible types on the screen. Greta Garbo and Bette Davis and who else? Ramon Novarro, John Gilbert and other pensive, poignant or turbulent romantics acting against the more versatile backdrops of Arabian deserts, European mansions and glamorous drawing rooms.

Our knowledge of America was still undergoing an evolutionary process. It took time, but ultimately one was bound to hear of Lincoln, Emerson, Mark Twain and Thoreau. The British connection had been firmly established. The British way of life and culture were the only other ones we Indians knew. All books, periodicals and educational material were British. These
said very little about America, except for Dickens or Chester-
ton, who had travelled and lectured in America and had written
humourously of American scenes and character—after accept-
ing a great deal of hospitality, and dollars of course. This
seemed to us a peculiar trait of Americans—why should they
invest so heavily in foreign authors only to be presented as
odities at the end?

After World War II, the Indian media focused attention on
American affairs and personalities and we became familiar with
such esoteric terms as the Point-Four Plan, Public Law 480, and
grants and fellowships, which in practical terms meant technical
training and cultural exchanges. In the postwar period, more
and more Americans were to be seen in India while more and
more Indians went to America. Americans came to India as
consultants, technicians and engineers and to participate in the
vast projects of our Five Year Plan. We noticed that Coca-Cola
and Virginia tobacco and chewing gum were soon making their
appearance in shop windows, and American bestsellers in the
bookstores. For their part, Americans displayed on their
mantelpieces Indian bric-a-brac of ivory, sandalwood and
bronze. Academicians from America came to India to study its
culture and social organizations, as did political scientists
(unsuspected of having CIA connections), and returned home
to establish departments of South Asian studies in such
universities as Chicago, Pennsylvania, Columbia and the
University of California at Berkeley. Some American scholars
of Sanskrit, Hindi or Tamil are unquestioned authorities, and a
match for the orthodox pundits in India.

Americans working in India adapted themselves to Indian
style with ease—visited Indian homes, sat down to eat with
their fingers, savoured Indian curry; wore kurta and pajamas,
enjoyed Indian music. Some even mastered Indian music well
enough to be able to give public concerts at a professional level
before Indian audiences. Such colleges as Wesleyan and
Colgate started regular departments of Indian music. Young
Indians began applying for admission to American institutions
for higher studies or training.

My first chance to visit America came when I was offered a
Rockefeller grant, which enabled me to see a great deal of the
country—perhaps more than any American could. By train
from New York to the Midwest and the West Coast, down
south to Santa Fe, then through Texas to Nashville and
Washington and back to New York, where I spent a couple of
months. The more cities I saw, the more I was convinced that
all America was contained in New York. For more than two
decades I have been visiting New York off and on and never tire
of it. I could not send down roots anywhere in America outside
of New York. An exception was Berkeley, where I stayed, in a
hotel room, long enough to write a novel. From my window I
could watch young men and women hurrying along to their
classes or hanging around the cafe or bookstore across the
street. I divided my time between writing and window shopping
along Telegraph Avenue or strolling along the mountain paths.

When the time came for me to leave Berkeley, I felt
depressed. I could not imagine how I was to survive without all
those enchantments I had got used to. The day's routine in my
hotel on the fringe of the campus, the familiar shops, the
Campanile, which I could see from my hotel window if the Bay
smog was not too dense and by whose chime I regulated my
daily activities (I had sworn to live through the American trip
without a watch), and the walk along picturesque highways and
byways with such sonorous names as Sonoma, Pomona and
Venice. Even the voice of the ice cream vendor who parked his
cart at Sather Gate and sounded a bell crying: "Crunchymun-
chies, them's good for you," was part of the charm.

On the whole my memories of America are happy ones. I
enjoy them in retrospect. If I were to maintain a single
outstanding experience, it would be my visit to the Grand
Canyon. To call it a visit is not right; a better word is
"pilgrimage"—I understood why certain areas of the canyon's
outcrops have been named after the temples of Brahma, Shiva
and Zoroaster. I spent a day at the canyon. At dawn or a little
before, I left my room at El Tovar before other guests woke
up, then took myself to a seat on the brink of the canyon. It was
still dark under a starry sky. At that hour the whole scene
acquired a different dimension and a strange, indescribable
quality. Far down below, the Colorado River wound its course,
muffled and softened. The wind roared in the valley; as the
stars gradually vanished a faint light appeared on the horizon.
At first there was absolute, enveloping darkness. But If you
kept looking on, contours gently emerged, little by little, as if at
the beginning of creation itself. The Grand Canyon seemed to
me not a geological object, but some cosmic creature spanning the horizons. I felt a thrill more mystic than physical, and that sensation has unfadingly remained with me all through the years. At any moment I can relive that ecstasy. For me the word "immortal" has a meaning now.

The variety of college campuses is an impressive feature of American life. One can lead a life of complete satisfaction at any campus, whether Berkeley or Michigan State or tiny Sewance in Nashville. Any university campus is a self-contained world, with its avenues and lawns, libraries, student union, tuck-shops, campus stores and restaurants. I spent a term or two as lecturer or Distinguished Visiting Professor or Very Distinguished Visiting Professor in various universities. Whatever my designation, it seemed more an opportunity to enjoy the facilities of a campus in comfortable surroundings, among agreeable and intelligent people. The duties I was expected to perform were light—give couple of lectures and be accessible to students or faculty members when they desired to meet me. I have found campus life enjoyable in all seasons—when the lakes froze in Wisconsin or the snows piled up ten feet high in Michigan; during the ever-moderate climate of Berkeley or springtime at Columbia.

If I were asked where I would rather not live, I would say, "No American suburban life for me, please." It is boring. The sameness of houses, gardens, lawns and dogs and two automobiles parked at every door, with not a soul in sight nor a shop except in a one-block stretch containing a post office, firehouse and bank, similar to a hundred other places in the country. Interesting at first, but monotonous in the long run. I have lived for weeks at a stretch in Briarcliff Manor, an hour's run from Grand Central Station. I could survive it because of the lovely home of my hosts and their family, but outside their home the only relief was when I could escape to Manhattan. The surroundings of Briarcliff were perfect and charming, but life there was like existing amidst painted cardboard scenes. I never felt this kind of desolation in New York at any time, although I have stayed there for months at a time, usually at the Hotel Chelsea.

New York takes you out of yourself. A walk along Fifth Avenue or Madison or even 14th Street, with its dazzling variety of merchandise displayed on the pavement, can be a completely satisfying experience. You can visit a new ethnic quarter every day—German, Italian, Spanish, even Arab and Chinese; or choose an entertainment or concert or show from the newspaper, from page after page of listings. If you prefer to stay awake all night and jostle with a crowd, you can always go to Washington Square or Times Square, especially on a weekend.

At the American consulate the visa section is kept busy nowadays as more and more young men from India seek the green card or profess to enter on a limited visa, then try to extend their stay once they get in. The official has a difficult task filtering out the "permanent", letting in only the "transients". The average American is liberal-minded and isn't bothered that more and more Indian engineers and doctors are snapping up the opportunities available in the U.S., possibly to the disadvantage of an American. I discussed the subject with Professor Ainslie T. Embree, chairman of Columbia University's history department, who has had a long association with Indian affairs and culture. His reply was noteworthy. "Why not Indians as well? In the course of time they will be Americans. The American citizen of today was once an expatriate, a foreigner who had come out of a European or African country. Why not Indians too? We certainly love to have Indians in the country."

The young man who goes to the States for higher training or studies declares when leaving home, "I will come back as soon as I complete my course, maybe two years or more, but I'll surely come and work for our country—of course, also to help the family." Excellent intentions, but it will not work out that way. Later, when he returns home full of dreams, plans and projects, he finds only hurdles wherever he tries to get a job or to start an enterprise of his own. Form-filling, bureaucracy, caste and other restrictions, and a generally feudal style of functioning, waste a lot of time for the young aspirant. He frets and fumes as he spends his days running about presenting or collecting papers at various places, achieving nothing. He is not used to this sort of treatment in America, where, he claims, he can walk into the office of the top man anywhere, address him by his first name and explain his purpose. When he attempts to visit a man of similar rank in India to discuss his plans, he finds he has no access to him, but is forced to meet only subordinates.
in a hierarchical system. Some years ago a biochemist returning from America with a lot of experience and bursting with proposals was curtly told off when he pushed open the door of a big executive, and stepped in innocently. "You should not come to me directly. Send your papers through proper channels." Thereafter the young Indian biochemist left India once and for all, having kept his retreat open with the help of a sympathetic professor at the American end.

In this respect American democratic habits have rather spoiled our young men. They have no patience with our Indian tempo, whereas the non-Americanized Indian accepts the hurdles as inevitable karma. An Indian who returns from America expects special treatment, forgetting the fact that the chancellors of Indian universities will see only other chancellors, and top executives will see only other top executives, and no one of lesser position under any circumstances. Our administrative machinery is slow, tedious and feudal in its operation.

Another reason for a young man's final retreat from India could be a lack of jobs for one with his particular training and qualifications. A young engineer qualified in robotics spent hours explaining the value of his speciality to prospective sponsors, until eventually he realized that there could be no place for robots in an overcrowded country.

The Indian in America is a rather lonely being, having lost his roots in one place and not grown them in the other. Few Indians in America make any attempt to integrate into American culture or social life. Few visit a American home or a theater or an opera, or try to understand the American psyche. An Indian's contact with Americans is confined to working with his colleagues and to official luncheons. He may mutter a "Hi" across the hedge to an American neighbour while mowing the lawn.

After he has equipped his new home with the latest dishwasher and video and his garage with two cars, once he has acquired all that the others have, he sits back with his family and counts his blessings. Outwardly happy, he is secretly gnawed at by some vague discontent and aware of some inner turbulence or vacuum he cannot define. All the comfort is physically satisfying, he has immense "job satisfaction" and that is about all. On weekends he drives his family fifty miles or more to visit another Indian family to eat an Indian dinner, discuss Indian politics or tax problems (for doctors, who are in the highest income bracket, this is a constant topic of conversation).

There is monotony in this pattern of life, so mechanical and standardized. India may have lost an intellectual or an expert, but it must not be forgotten that he has lost India too—and that is a more serious loss in the final reckoning. The quality of life in India is different. Despite all the deficiencies, irritations, lack of material comforts and amenities, and general confusions, Indian life builds inner strength. It is through subtle, inexplicable influences, through religion, family ties and human relationships in general—let us call them psychological "inputs", to use a modern term—which cumulatively sustain and lend variety and richness to existence. Building imposing Indian temples in America, installing our gods therein and importing Indian priests to perform the pooja ritual and preside at festivals are only imitating Indian existence and could have only a limited value. Social and religious assemblies at the temples in America might mitigate boredom, but only temporarily. I have lived as a guest in many Indian homes in America for extended periods, and have noticed the ennui that descends on a family when they are stuck at home.

Indian children growing up in America present a special problem. Without the gentleness and courtesy and respect for parents that—unlike the American upbringing, whereby a child is left alone to discover for himself the right code of conduct—is the basic training for a child in India, Indian children have to develop themselves on a shallow foundation without a cultural basis either Indian or American. They are ignorant of Indian life; aware of this, the Indian parent tries to cram into his children's little heads every possible bit of cultural information during a rushed trip to the mother country.

Ultimately, America and India are profoundly different in attitude and philosophy, though it would be wonderful if they could complement each other's values. Indian philosophy stresses austerity and unencumbered, uncomplicated day-to-day living. America's emphasis, on the other hand, is on material acquisition and the limitless pursuit of prosperity. From childhood an Indian is brought up on the notion that austerity and a contented life are good; a certain otherworldli-
ness is inculcated through a grandmother’s tales, the discourses at the temple hall, and moral books. The American temperament, on the contrary, is pragmatic. The American has a robust indifference to eternity. “Attend church on Sunday and listen to the sermon, but don’t bother about the future,” he seems to say. Also, he seems to echo Omar Khayyam’s philosophy: “Dead yesterday and unborn tomorrow, why fret about them if today be sweet?” He works hard and earnestly, acquires wealth and enjoys life. He has no time to worry about the afterlife, only taking care to draw up a proper will and trusting the funeral home to take care of the rest. The Indian in America who is not able to live wholeheartedly on this basis finds himself in a halfway house; he is unable to overcome his conflicts while physically flourishing on American soil. One may hope that the next generation of Indians (American-grown) will do better by accepting the American climate spontaneously; or, alternatively, return to India to live a different life.