

ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

NAME: Kavita Nandini Ramdas

DATE OF BIRTH: [REDACTED]

SCHOOL: Springdales School, Pusa Road - 1, New Delhi - 110005, India

CLASS A QUESTION NO. 2

Write an imaginary conversation between two people, one of whom might have lived in a Commonwealth Country long before it became independent and one who might be living in the same country today.

It is a cold, misty winter's day in 1978. The drizzle and the grey skies do not deter the crowds that throng to watch the spectacle of the year - Republic Day Parade. Distant sounds of military music fill the air. With the arrival of the President in his 'Cinderella' coach, complete with liveried footmen and eight gleaming horses, the parade begins.

In the midst of this splendour and pomp is a group of students, deep in discussion and totally unconcerned about the excitement around. From the shadow of some trees emerges the figure of an old man. He is small and bent and wears a spotless white 'chuvadhar' (tight trousers) with a black 'achkan' (coat). He listens to the tumult for a moment, shakes his head in bewilderment and turns to a young girl who is passing by.

"Excuse me please, could you tell me what all this noise is for?" he quavers.

"This? It's just our Republic Day Parade - happens every year, quite boring really."

"I...I don't understand. Republic? How?"

"Yes, today is the 26th of January, the day we declared ourselves a republic in 1950, I think."

"But we belong to the British Empire."

"British Empire!" exclaims the girl and stares curiously at the man.

"Hey, how old are you?"

"Very old, in fact, I'm not really alive anymore. I just wanted to come back for a while."

"So I'm imagining again," she smiles, "well I'll take you on an imaginary walk through history. Let's start with Independence which we gained in 1947."

The old man murmurs with a rapt look, "Free...really free?"

"Yes, as I was saying..."

"How we dreamt of freedom sitting on the doorsteps of our houses in Lahore..."

"Well, Dada* I hate to disillusion you but much has changed since then. India

* Reverential form of addressing an old man

as you remember it does not exist anymore. At Independence she was divided and the North-Western Provinces and a part of Bengal formed a new state - Pakistan."

"No, how terrible! It cannot be true!" cries the old man.

"It is sad but true and cannot be helped but at least we are free."

"Our dreams are only half realized," he whispers.

"Cheer up Dada; come and see the parade!" She takes the old man by the arm and after some pushing they manage to get a good view of the passing panorama. The old man pushes his spectacles up on his nose and peers at his companion.

"Tell me more; there is so much to learn. Are we on good terms with the British?"

"Yes, that is a wonderful aspect of Independence. Under Jawaharlal Nehru, our first Prime Minister, India was the first non-white member to join the Commonwealth thus changing it from a 'white man's club' to a congenial meeting point of different races. Our fight for Independence also inspired other colonies of Africa and Asia, who were gradually also granted their freedom."

"But of what use is this strange 'Commonwealth'?"

"It is a co-operative association of former British colonies which, along with Britain, seek to promote social and economic development. I have been of great advantage to most members and our country too has benefited by belonging to it."

"Really? In what way?"

"Well with agreements between most commonwealth countries, India has been able to develop her commercial and industrial sectors a great deal. This also is beneficial to trade all around the world. However, we avail of other co-operative schemes in the fields of science, technology and medicine and education as well. A very recent example is the conference on non-formal education that was held in New Delhi."

"Well it sounds a wonderful idea to me."

They look back at the parade as a Gurkha regiment, dressed in swirling capes and kilts and playing a Scottish reel, marches past. The old man gazes at them and asks, "Haven't the British gone?"

"Of course!"

"Then why are they dressed like that? It reminds me of the old days and British soldiers."

"Oh Dada, the 'Raj' cannot be easily forgotten. It lives on in parades, in uniforms, in the 'Viceregal Lodge' and in the bungalows of Delhi. There is a popular saying: 'Many Indians are more British than the British themselves.'"

The old man sighs and sensing his sadness the girl says, "It is not all bad, Dada. Independence has brought political freedom and though necessary social-economic changes did not occur simultaneously, we are trying to achieve these, too."

"True, at least you have a say in the Government. You have never known the burden of colonialism. For generations Indians were insulted and humiliated. We had

no right to vote and choose our leaders. We were outcasts in society - if Hinduism created casteism, our former rulers created Anglo-Saxon-Brahmanism. My child, do not underestimate freedom!"

"We shall not, Dada. We are proud of it; only at times we take it for granted."

"Yes, you are lucky to live in united India where people are close to their leaders."

"Perhaps the first half of that is a true statement. Even after the trauma of partition, under our secular constitution all religions flourish in peace. However, after the British left, a select educated minority took over their position and remained cut off from the masses till recently. The system of administration, while perhaps eminently suitable for foreign rule, is simply not geared to meet the needs of our vast nation."

The old man nods, then looks up again. Large tanks and missiles roll by in a show of might. They dip their turrets before the Presidential Stand. Excitedly he turns to the girl and asks in an awed whisper, "Are they Indian?"

"Yes, made by our own people in our country," smiles back the girl.

"How wonderful," he breathes.

"We make nearly everything in India now. We even export manufactured goods and have a fine textile industry. We no longer depend on the Lancashire cotton mills; Thank heavens!" she exclaims, pointing towards three, large industrial chimneys that belch smoke into the murky atmosphere. "Those are part of the thermal power station that provides all of Delhi with electricity."

The old man looks about happily and says, "How days have changed! During the British era, Indian resources - both human and natural, were exploited to produce wealth which only went to fill foreign coffers. And even the railways and road systems they built were mainly to serve this end."

As he finishes speaking, numerous gaily-decorated floats from various states, depicting different forms of cultural life and traditional craftsmen at work, go past.

"Do we make all these beautiful things in India?"

"That's right. This is one great achievement of post-independence years - a resurgence of our handicrafts, art, music and literature and their re-establishment in today's India."

"Yes, Independence must have brought great prosperity."

"Well, we have made great strides forward in various fields and in the cities people avail of modern amenities. Originally we laid more emphasis on industry, but increasingly are attempting to develop the agricultural sector as well."

"That sounds perfect to me."

"But it is not Dada, because, while one small section of society has advanced dramatically over the years; the great majority who live in the villages have not benefitted at all. This has created a situation of our own making where the poor seem to get poorer and the rich, richer."

"What a terrible thing and I imagined an India where progress would be shared by all. Yet there must be an answer!"

The next contingent of soldiers marches past erectly but the little figure stands dejected in the rain. The young girl stands straight and proud beside him, "We believe in a way which will change things for the better. The education system is already being modified to play an effective role in making the deprived aware of their rights and in teaching them scientific methods of production to raise their standard of living; for we believe the way to a peaceful revolution is through education. Many of my generation have found themselves cut off from their people because of their education. This results in many highly qualified professionals leaving India where they are desperately needed, to work abroad where conditions and pay are attractive."

"So Macaulay's policy is very much alive! I know how you feel, more at home with Keats and Shakespeare than any real situation in your own country, but at least for us under foreign rule it made more sense," he smiles knowingly.

"Yes - one foot here and the other in the West, rootless and yet with roots in many lands," the young girl cries, her eyes warm with affection. "But you know," the old man says suddenly, "perhaps without the stimulus of western, liberal political thought, our Independence movement would not have emerged as such a strong force. Only, I do not approve of the introduction of English."

"Why, I feel it is the best legacy of our former rulers!" exclaims the girl.

"Maybe this is an old man's view, but I feel no alien language has any place in a country with so rich a heritage as ours."

"There I disagree with you, Dada. I think that English is one of the factors that has contributed overwhelmingly to international understanding and friendship, and has acted as a link between all Commonwealth nations."

"But child, do you not feel that it further alienates you from your people?"

"No Dada, because we have encouraged English to flourish alongside our own languages and have thus retained our own identity and culture: to quote Gandhiji, 'I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible; but I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.' In today's world where hatred and war are more common than peace and understanding, a sharing of values through a common language is vital, both for our country and for mankind."

The parade is almost at an end - large groups of folk dancers and children with bright eager faces dance and sing. The old man looks wistfully at their youth and laughter and then turns to the girl at his side. In a slow tired voice he says, "Yes, you are right. You, the young and strong, are always right. In your hands lies the future and you alone comprehend its complexity and meaning. It is you to whom we trust our life's work, you to whom this country will turn in its hour of need. Live up to our expectations, have faith, believe in your hopes and vanquish your fears. Be careful how you tread the path that lies ahead."

"Tread carefully for you tread on my dreams."

W. B. Yeats. As he speaks, the words become softer and softer and through the haze and drip of rain-drops, the young girl can hardly make out his white beard and twinkling eyes.

Suddenly, with a roar, nine jet planes rent the air with thunder and the colours of the national flag fight bravely with the clouds to be seen. When Kavita can drag her eyes from the sky, she turns to look for the old man. He is not to be seen.

With his words still echoing in her mind, she leaves the crowds behind her...