

The Ballad of Raisina Hill

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I: Conquest

That man and monkey share a common ancestor,
Is quite plain in Delhi's Lutyens epicentre,
The evolutionary battle is still robust,
To see which a visit to Rajpath is a must.

He who holds Raisina Hill controls sovereignty,
There the head of state and chief executive be;
The South Block has External Affairs and Defence,
The North Block has Finance, Home and Intelligence;

On one side in North Block bureaucrats hold their court,
Across the road South Block is the Mandarin fort;
With Rajpath the line of control that transgressors
Only at great personal peril dare to traverse.

The Rhesus Macaque once ruled in Raisina Hill,
Till Lutyens built the new capital imperial;
It lost the battle, and with it territory,
But the macaque was not one to cede victory.

As bureaucrats and mandarins wound up their day,
The intrepid macaque was back to have his say;
His habits he changed by turning crepuscular,
At twilight in the corridors got muscular.

With fiery eyes and bared teeth spoiling for a fight,
The vengeful macaques did humans at sundown fright;
Homo sapiens dared not to look it in the eye,
As past the macaques to exit they sidled by;

The assaults and skirmishes finally did cease,
After bureaucrats and mandarins sued for peace;
Equal possession was the price to avoid fight,
Homo sapiens at daytime, the macaques at night.

The macaques soon got down to set the record straight,
Bundled files the target of their ire and hate,
Nightly they were focused on public policy,
To devastate the intruder's economy.

At budget time they went to serious work each year,
Shuffling tax rates and customs duties without fear,
And as their rival's growth to the Hindu rate fell,
They chuckled with delight at sending them to hell.

For emerging Asia passed their poor cousins by,
The four East Asian Tigers left them high and dry,
Malaysia and Thailand now joined the miracle,
And soon thereafter China moved in for the kill

II: The War of Attrition

Uneasy the truce that held in Raisina Hill,
With daily skirmishes in the corridors till,
The langur joined the evolutionary battle,
His fiery brachiating rival to rattle.

The Grey Ridge langur, bored and peripatetic,
Migrates oftentimes to Raisina to frolic,
The Rhesus strangely is by the langur daunted,
Scurrying for cover the moment it is spotted.

Macaques like man is prone to tribal rivalry,
Clans in North and South Block cannot eye to eye see,
From those that dared cross the Rajpath line of control,
The ferocious rival clan took a heavy toll,

Now the warring clans brokered peace and united,
North Block was vacated and South Block divided,
Mandarins and bureaucrats will likewise share room,
When a common threat on the horizon doth loom.

The Grey Ridge langur is restless and whimsical,
Easily bored of jungles concrete or sylvan,
Not long before their nerves were once again on edge,
And they brachiated their way back to the ridge.

The Mandarin and the bureaucrat were now free,
Their old warring selves at each other's throat to be,
Re-established was line of control of yore,
And somnolence reigned in Raisina Hill once more.

As the see-saw battle waged between next of kin,
It was anybody's guess as to who would win,
The triangular evolutionary tussle,
For the survival of the fittest on the hill.

III: Paradise Regained

Homo sapien now stepped up to the plate,
His pole position in the primate chart at stake;
A Final Solution was soon found to dispose,
Of the wily beasts at the root cause of his woes.

The macaque was technologically outgunned,
As man to his lethal tool making skills now turned;
Bloody and one sided the battle at the hill,
As primate turned upon rival primate to kill.

The macaque had played with fire and had to pay,
This was not the time to fight but to run away,
Discretion is also valour for as they say,
Timely retreat can to victory turn someday.

The shrewd warrior of the primeval rift valley,
Shifted battleground in one surprising sally;
Bringing human sensibilities into play,
The Final Solution was soon in disarray.

Non-lethal tools were now deployed, and the macaques,
Stunned and relocated to distant sylvan parks;
But soon back, Man had not reckoned their tracking skill,
The battle for Raisina Hill was at standstill.

Next he called upon his friendly primate ally,
The dreaded Ridge Langur to nearby trees did tie,
But as macaques with activists did conspire,
Its nemesis was soon out of the line of fire.

Man now changed tack and turned around his policy,
Leveraging his neocortical ability;
With laissez faire economic liberalisation,
Taxes and duties now moved in new direction.

Note: Frequent visitors and those who work in the corridors of power in New Delhi's North and South Block will vouch for the long-standing tussle between humans and monkeys. The satirical twist to this phenomenon was given by my dear friend and former colleague in the civil service, V Bhaskar, who alas is no more. It is to his fond memory that this poem is dedicated. The visible tussle in the seat of India's sovereignty is at one level a metaphor for the clash between ad hoc, irrational policies, and those based on science and reason. At another level, it reflects professional rivalries between civil servants and diplomats punctuated by episodes where the Prime Minister's Office seeks to dominate departmental decision-making.

[An audio recording accompanying this poem is available on the EPW website.]

Random change was no more a possibility,
No more through files could they wreck the economy;
Macaques found it no longer made eminent sense,
To control the commanding heights of governance.

IV: Paradise Lost

As Man now his fallen economy repaired,
Growth rates soared, incomes rose, and the poor better fared;
As East Asia and China faltered with the West,
His economy was poised as the global best.

Defeated the macaques from Raisina Hill fled,
And to the surrounding human settlements spread,
Houses they raided and the children they did taunt,
Monkey Man the entire city seemed to haunt.

Fear soon turned to awe and finally to scripture,
Monkey Man seemed to an epic god similar,
Milk, fruit and honey were on house terraces laid,
The macaque was soon master of all he surveyed.

As his following grew the macaque full well knew,
His influence on the country how to renew,
An opulent Temple to him dedicated,
Macaques were from rival to god elevated.

As the focus of man from science to faith was turned,
Ignorance spread its wings and old lessons unlearned;
Gone were the economic texts and the trade theory,
The method in taxes and tariffs went awry.

In triumph the macaque moved back to his old block,
Taxes and tariffs from budget to budget rock;
Economic growth once more to the Hindu rate fell,
As the macaque sent the intruder back to hell.

The see-saw battle wages between next of kin,
It is anybody's guess as to who will win,
The triangular evolutionary tussle,
Still raging in the Battle of Raisina Hill.

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