

AFTER DIINER SPPECH BY ERIC PRABHAKAR AT THE GET_TOGETHER OF THE OXFORD & CAMBRIDGE SOCIETY OF BANGALORE ON NOV. 29, 2008

For an athlete, the Olympics are the mountaintop. To represent his country in the Olympic Games is the culmination of a sportsman's dream; particularly for track and field athletes for they don't have a Wimbledon or a world cup as tennis, cricket and soccer have,

I qualified for the 1948 London Olympics by clocking 10.6 second for the 100m Sprint at the All-India trials at Bangalore in 1948, which was the qualifying mark for the games. There were only seven track and field athletes who qualified. But full Hockey, Soccer, Water Polo teams and coterie of wrestlers, boxers, weightlifters, cyclists in all made a large Indian contingent for London. We could afford it as it was a year after Independence and we had a very large Sterling balance to our credit for supplies of khaki regimentals during the war.

I sat for the first IAS/IPS competitive examination in 1947. I was selected to join in September 1948. A hundred marks were given to each of the three optional subjects, two hundred for each of the three compulsory subjects, and three hundred for the viva voce. When the detail marks were published I did well in all subjects except History. What pleased me most was that in Viva Voce I was tops in India.

Sir Maurice Gwyer, Chief Justice of the Supreme court of India in 1947, was the Chairman of Rhodes Scholarship Selection committee that had the task of selecting two from India. At the third and final interview in New Delhi, Sir Maurice spoke more than I did. The climax of the British India has not affected Oxford, though half the Viceroy's of India were Oxford men. Sons of Oxford have proudly been among our greatest Empire builders and Empire rulers. I remained silent. He said that he had a general prejudice against all persons who do not succeed in the world. I was expected to say something during the pause that followed. I had a small speech prepared which I then made. "Lord Curzon was Viceroy of India and then Chancellor of Oxford University. My father, a civil servant, was an admirer of this great aristocrat and made us read all about him. I enjoyed it. It inculcated in me a reverence for the principals of honor and truth". Sir Maurice was pleased to hear me. I was awarded this most prestigious scholarship. "As you don't know the colleges in Oxford, and there are thirty-three of them, you probably have no preference." I responded gladly and immediately: "I don't know the Colleges. But I prefer to go to your college." Sir Maurice appreciated that. And so I went to Christ Church.

I now had a choice: IAS or Oxford in September 1948. With permission to leave the Olympic Camp for a day, I visited Oxford. The first visit to Oxford is a thing to remember for life. I saw with increasing amazement about ten colleges. I spent an hour in Christ church. I was truly happy that I had selected Christ church or rather I thanked Sir Maurice for being an almanac of Christ Church. The next day I wrote home that I am resigning from the IAS and will not return with the Olympic Team in August but go up to Oxford Team in August but go up to Oxford on the Rhodes Scholarship. I do think that was the best decision I made in my long life.

The entire contingent left for India on the fifteenth August. I informed the Chef de Mission that I am staying back as my Rhodes Scholarship in Oxford was to start a month later. Even on request, I was not given the return sea fare. I had to fend for myself. So I worked for a Youth club in the East End for a month for board and lodging.

I enjoyed the experience for it was mostly cricket, hockey and sports with young people. There was the annual dinner-dance banquet at Dorchester for raising funds for the Youth club (Bede House). It was a formal affair and with no money to hire a three piece dinner suit, I borrowed a black sherwani and white churidar. My legs were a bit too long for the churidar, but it was OK and sufficiently elegant. I did not realize till I got to the bouquet that I was the

only man and white down the legs. In middle – class homes in India, there was no opportunity for boys and girls to mix; and I had never ball-room danced before. I was urged to take the dance floor with a pretty young lady when they saw me sitting alone at a corner table. It was the waltz; a formal dance performed by a couple who as a pair turn rhythmically in triple time round and round as they progress around the dance floor clockwise with great elegance. I took the English lady the wrong way around and (just after the Olympics) much too fast. More than a hundred couples on the dance floor stopped to watch our amazing Waltz. The dance ended with a thunderous applause. The Director the Youth Club told me afterwards, in her precocious manner, that my waltz brought in more donations for the club than ever before. But I never ventured on the dance floor again till I learnt to dance at Oxford.

I was allotted spacious rooms in Meadows 3 -1 for my two years in Christ Church. A Step away was Cardinal Wolsey's Chapel (the smallest Cathedral in England). From ever since I know, in all that matters, I am an early morning person. In Madras it was 4 a.m, in oxford it was six. And there I was alone with time for myself. I would step in to the Cathedral with my bible an sit in the front row. After the allotted bible reading and prayer, spend half an hour of quiet in that sacred place.

Nick Stacy and I were both Olympians, representing Great Britain and India in the 1948 London Olympics. I knew the competition would be intense. Also the Oxford University Athletic Meet was in February, the coldest moth in a very cold country, especially for a Madrasi on his first winter in England. I had to train through the winter months of December, January and February. I bought a ward track suit for the one I had was a light one for the summer months of June & July of the Olympics. My work-outs were at three in the afternoon.

Finally we came out equally, I won the hundreds and Nick the two twenty. There was great joy at Christ church when I returned with the 100 yards trophy, the biggest of the cups, full three feet king size. The nondescripts club an exclusive dining society of the fifteen of the best in Christ church in which my moral tutor Sir Roy Harrod got met into and threw a sumptuous dinner in my honor. I was really glad that besides the fifteen of us, Sir Roy Harrod was invited and had happily accepted. Fish, flesh and fowl, fine strong beer, gooseberry, apricot and raspberry pies; there was such a profusion that scarcely two of the sixteen ate the same.

Nick and I were awarded our blue when we won against Cambridge by Roger Banister. It was a proud occasion. (I was the first Indian to get an Athletic Blue at Oxford). Sir Roger Banister, the first athlete to break the four – minute barrier for the mile. This was written as a special message for the book on track and field athletics" the way to Athletic Gold". I wrote in 1995.

"Eric Prabhakar was with me in the same Oxford University Team and represented India in the first post-war Olympic Games in London in 1948. His personal sporting success at his high level was always accompanied by an analytical approach to training. As a layman his desire to see more attention paid to sports medicine was wholly admirable. His life long fascination with athletics has made it possible tow rite this Book which I hope will influence a new generation of India's ' Young Hopefuls", as Well as providing the arguments needed by Government to make a full provision of coaching and facilities to make this success possible. I send it my best wishes."