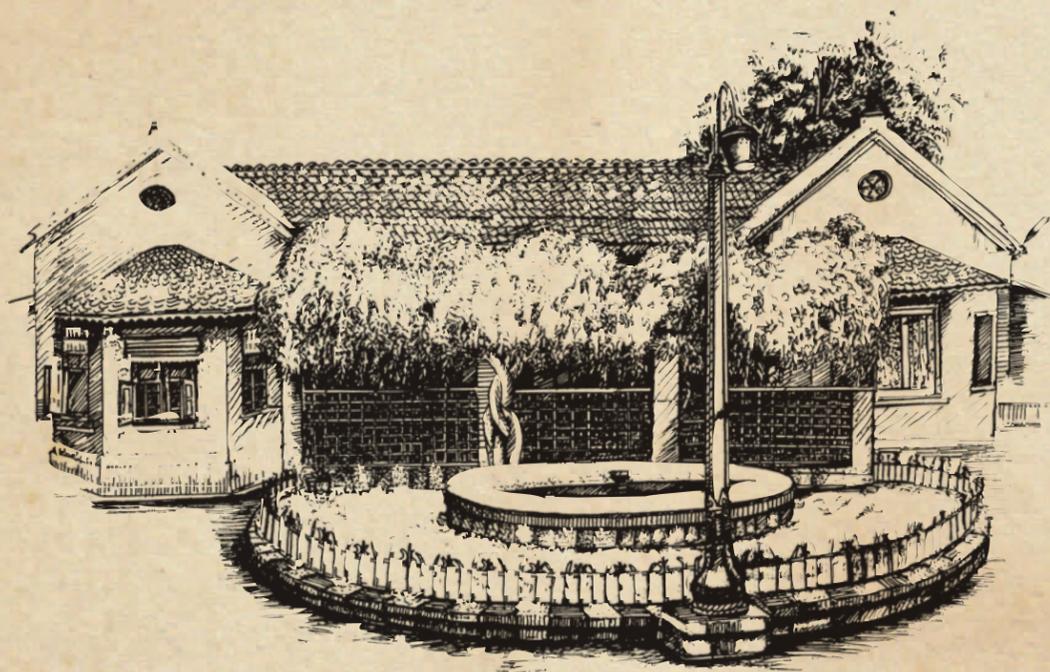

A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP IN

COLONIAL COMFORT

Despite crazed khansamas and ghostly cobras, colonial-era dak bungalows have afforded generations of travellers a good night's sleep



BY RAJIKA BHANDARI

PRAMOD BARUA/COURTESY ROLI BOOKS

Bengaluru's Kumara Krupa Circuit House belongs to a period when Indo-Saracenic details, and embellishments such as piers, jaalis, parapets, and intricate windows were important elements in colonial architecture.



RAJIKA BHANDARI/COURTESY ROLI BOOKS

Shaheed Khan, the *khansama* of the Narsinghpur Dak Bungalow in the heart of Madhya Pradesh, ushered me into the musty, dark building and led me to a full-length mirror in the master suite of the guesthouse. He reached behind the mirror and pulled out a small bundle of crumbling newspapers. They had been discovered when the bungalow's original mirror, dating back to the 1800s, finally gave way.

I carefully unfolded the 21 March, 1901, issue of the *The Bengalee* (which had sold for one anna). An announcement by the Royal Bengal Theatre urged all to come to a Society Sketch called *Shadhin-Zenana*, or Female Emancipation. The advertisement for Jabakusuma Taila hair oil proclaimed that "every man who has to exercise his brains should use it daily to keep his head cool". The Oriental Medical Association assured readers that snake venom pills were effective in treating the plague. The British traveller who had left the newspapers here had probably journeyed at least 1,000 kilometres, from Kolkata to the deep recesses of Central India, perhaps halting at other dak bungalows along the way.

Growing up in the India of the seventies and eighties, I had visited my fair share of dak bungalows and circuit houses, accompanying my mother, a government officer, to small, far-flung towns that had no hotels and where a Public Works Department-run guesthouse was the only habitable option. I belonged to a generation that had been reared on writers like Ruskin Bond, British by circumstance but wholly Indian by choice, and Rudyard Kipling, the great chronicler of the British Raj, both of whom often sought inspiration from dak bungalows and circuit houses for their bone-chilling ghost stories. But my interest in these old and isolated buildings was also triggered by a growing sense of appreciation for India's history and architecture in all of its varied facets, from the imperial British buildings of Lutyens's Delhi to the humble dak bungalow, as much a part of India's colonial legacy as cricket or tea.

India's old travellers' bungalows attracted me for their architecture, remote and often spectacular location, their eerie and haunted atmosphere, as tributes to a bygone era. Even today, many of these buildings retain this ethos, complete with sweeping verandas, high ceilings, polished wood interiors, landscaped lawns, and, most indispensable of all, a well-trained khansama (cook) who, at a moment's notice, can whip up a comforting meal for weary travellers. With most of the British Raj perpetually on the move, whether on tour for new postings or during the seasonal summer migration to the hills, the Spartan respite of dak bungalows inspired a brotherhood of sorts for generations of British and Indian officers who would, in their retirement, lounge with a gin-and-tonic and recount tales of horrid dak bungalow food, a crazed khansama, and the time their only companion at the dak bungalow was either a tiger or the resident ghost.

Eager to learn more about these travellers' bungalows that had originated in the Indian subcontinent in the 1800s, I turned to travel journals and memoirs of British travellers. Many of these were written by English memsahibs who, despite their delicate constitutions and aloofness towards all things native, travelled extensively across the subcontinent and documented their perceptions of the foreign land with fascinating detail and candour.

Inspired by their stories and experiences, I decided to follow in their footsteps. My search took me across the length and breadth of India, from the hill stations of Kasauli and Munnar to the deep interiors of central India, to obscure towns and nondescript places.

It was this quest that led me to that old mirror and the stack of crumbling newspapers at the Narsinghpur Dak Bungalow. There was no better place to begin my journey than Madhya Pradesh, an area that, during the Raj, constituted the two British strongholds of the Central Provinces and Berar, and was also an important centre of protest against British imperialism. I was excited yet nervous, unsure of what I would find in a state that in many ways represented the heartland of India. I wondered whether the carefully planned visits to the dak bungalows and circuit houses would reveal interesting tidbits and folklore. Would the architecture and ambience of these buildings evoke their origins during the Raj? Would the old generation of caretakers have faded away to be replaced by khansamas and *chowkidars* who would know very little about the past of these rest houses?

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On arriving in Sagar, the first destination in Madhya Pradesh, my mother—perennial and patient travel companion—and I found ourselves in the midst of the teeming market with no discernible directions or signposts for any location in town. We asked a fruit-seller for directions to the circuit house and he pointed up the road and said, "Just keep going straight." But the circuit house was nowhere in sight. We then asked a traffic policeman for directions. He first stared into space for a few seconds and then, squinting at us, inquired, "Sir Cute house?" When we all nodded vigorously, he pointed his finger to an indeterminate point in the distance and said, "Just keep going straight." So we went straight once again, manoeuvring the lumbering vehicle past vegetable and fruit carts, stray dogs, and cycles.

Although it was a good 120 years later, my frustrating search for the circuit house was probably no different from that of Thomas Stevens, who in 1886 wrote in his travelogue, *Around the World on a Bicycle*: "The average native, when asked for the Dak Bungalow, is quite as likely to direct one to the post-office, the kutcherry, or any other government building...Experience has taught that following the directions given would very likely bring me to the post-office and farther away from the Dak Bungalow than ever."

We eventually located the Sagar Circuit House which, like many sprawling and impressive travellers bungalows, is situated on a hill and was built as a guesthouse in 1893. Constructed with stone masonry using locally available Kaimur sandstone, the building is in typical British colonial style, with a tiled roof, deep verandas, high ceilings, and the promise of genteel comfort. The Islamic or Saracenic influence found in so much of India's architecture can also be seen in this circuit house, where the dark stone of the building is lightened by a profusion



A 1932 photograph of a meal at a guesthouse in Hazaribagh (top left), on the Grand Trunk Road from Calcutta to Ranchi; Built in 1890 over five acres of land, the magnificent and elaborate Jabalpur Circuit House (top right) has hosted practically every president and prime minister of India; Built in 1805, the Mysore Government House in Karnataka (above), is a typical colonial building symbolising British ascendancy in the region after the defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1799.

IMAGES OF EMPIRE/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES (PEOPLE EATING A MEAL); RAJIKA BHANDARI/COURTESY/ROLLI BOOKS (JABALPUR CIRCUIT HOUSE, MYSORE GOVERNMENT HOUSE)

of decorative details such as intricate fretwork on windows and eaves and elaborate lattices to allow air to circulate through the building.

Mohammed Sayeed, the khansama of Sagar Circuit House, belonged to a family that had lived and worked in dak bungalows for five generations, since the 1800s. His father, 82-year-old Ghulam Rasool, also lived at the circuit house. Many of today's circuit house and dak bungalow cooks are Muslims, often the descendants of khansamas who served during the Raj. Muslims were perhaps drawn to the profession because they had fewer religious restrictions about the foods they were permitted to handle, although most did not touch pork. They were also famous for the culinary skills that they had acquired and perfected in the kitchens of the Mughals and the households of *nawabs* and *diwans*. Dak bungalow khansamas soon became known for their ingenuity and were able to concoct a hybrid Anglo-Indian cuisine despite meagre ingredients and cooking facilities at their disposal. Because it was easily available and lent itself to so many variations, chicken became a staple.

Ghulam Rasool was very old and shaky on his legs, his eyes rheumy with cataract. Born in the neighbouring town of Damoh in 1926, he had served during the time of a Mr. Watson who was the superintendent of police of Damoh district. "*Huqum manana hi sab kuch tha,*" recalled Rasool—the entire system worked on the obeying of orders. The officers were accompanied occasionally by their memsahibs and a large entourage, especially when they were moving and needed a place to stay temporarily.

Among the special family recipes handed down through five generations of the Rasool-Sayeed family were ones for fish cutlets, beetroot wine, guava wine (a favourite with the memsahibs), and a specially formulated custard powder. Other dishes included the more usual fare: vegetable stew, tomato soup, chicken, mutton, or vegetables; bread, butter and eggs for breakfast. "Soup *hi* soup"—soup and only soup, lamented Rasool, a nostalgic smile wrinkling his face. It appeared that the typical Britisher hardly ate any vegetables even though these were plentiful in India. Sayeed asked me which of

his family recipes I would like and I picked the fish cutlets. When it was time for lunch, we sat down to a feast prepared by Sayeed: mutton curry, chicken curry, *tadka dal*, *gobi-aloo ki sabzi*, roasted peas, and an assortment of special pickles and chutneys. I wondered whether the delectably prepared chicken had been scuttling around the circuit house backyard just hours earlier, à la dak bungalow style, or whether it had been procured from the market.

We left Sagar at 2.30 p.m. to make it in time to the Damoh Circuit House, located on the

Damoh-Jabalpur Road, and dating back to the late 1890s. The town of Damoh was spread out below us in the amber light of the late afternoon sun. The setting was spectacular, a typical location for a travellers' bungalow: remote, away from the hustle-bustle of the town, and with the best vistas in the area. The architecture of the circuit house is in the typical British colonial style found in Central India, with deep verandas, high ceilings, thick walls, and a pitched tiled roof. The dark stone of the building lent it a gothic air. I was soon to discover that the imposing and brooding character of the building matched its notoriety.

Waiting for us eagerly at the circuit house that afternoon was A.S. Kureishi, an elderly gentleman whose father used to be the khansama. He was a striking character, his white locks and long beard a stark contrast against his deep tanned skin. His eyes bore a fierce gleam when they caught the deep orange light of the setting sun, as he narrated tales of the circuit house's hauntings and how he was often summoned to exorcise spirits. Apparently the spirit of a man and a woman haunted the site of this circuit house even before it was built in 1899. The spirits did not take kindly to British visitors and would scare them away by their poltergeist tactics: objects would fly around and pieces of furniture would march across the room by themselves. Any visitors who attempted to resist the ghosts would meet their end, as was the case with General Douglas. His wife and two children were staying in the circuit house and died under mysterious circumstances when the general shot his family and himself with a revolver. If Kureishi is to be believed, Room No. 1 of the building is still haunted and is often visited by a cobra, a harbinger of strange happenings at the building.

Damoh Circuit House is just one among many that is believed to be haunted. There is also the dak bungalow in the town of Misrod, near Bhopal, that is still visited by the spirit of a Miss Rod who committed suicide in the building in the 1890s and after whom the town may be named. There is no single reason that dak bungalows inspire ghostly folklore. Perhaps it was their location—large, rambling buildings on isolated hilltops or deep in the forests, cut off from humanity, the wind howling through trees and wild animals on the prowl—that seemed the ideal setting for wandering and restless spirits. Or perhaps it was because many travellers, British soldiers in particular, lost their lives in these buildings, especially in the 19th century when few cures were available for diseases like cholera and malaria.

Five years after my journey through India's old and new dak bungalows and circuit houses and some 12,000 kilometres away in New York, I met Muriel "Mike" Smith, renowned filmmaker and Indophile, who eagerly told me of her travels through India in the 1950s, and of how India's government guesthouses made it possible for her to travel off the beaten path. For Mike and for so many other travellers before and after her, foreign and Indian alike, dak bungalows had forever changed their experience of the real India. ■

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HOW TO BOOK A DAK BUNGLOW

The official way to book a room at one of India's government guest houses is to approach your local Public Works Department office and see if they can help you identify an existing bungalow at your destination. Many of the state tourism departments and government PWD offices have

good listings on their websites, such as the Himachal Pradesh one (<http://hppwd.gov.in/Rest%20Houses.htm>). If you already know the location of a guesthouse that you'd like to visit, you could also just show up, hope for an available room, and of course tip the chowkidar well.

