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EYE ON ENGLAND

AMIT ROY

New (Muslim) doctor in the house

Khalid Hameed — or Lord Hameed of Hampstead as we should now learn to call him — was last week named “Asian of the Year”. His is the classic story of the Lucknow boy made good.

When Khalid was elevated to the House of Lords earlier this year, there was non-stop partying in his home town of Lucknow, which he still visits regularly.

As an independent, he will sit as a “crossbencher”, pursue his interest in interfaith religious dialogue and oppose extremist ideology.



A GOOD DEED: Lord Hameed with wife Ghazala

“As a Muslim I want to say that Muslim role models are not doing enough,” he emphasises. “Moderate Muslims need to stand up and be counted.”

The 66-year-old medical doctor has promised me that should he get a licence to build a modern hospital in Lucknow, “I would consider allocating a proportion of the beds for the economically weaker sections of the community. I’m seriously bidding for a hospital.”

He believes that the way for India to extend basic healthcare to all is by making it mandatory for all major new factories to open an associated hospital “as part of the deal”.

Meanwhile, Khalid, who has lived in Britain since 1968, will have his new venture — the London International Hospital — operational by next year. Here, the fee for a bypass will be \$15,000, “half the cost” of the same operation in America.

“It will be the first specialist hospital to deal with cancer, heart and brain, matters of life and death,” asserts Khalid, who was the long-time executive medical director and chief executive of the private Cromwell Hospital in London.

By offering “highly competitive rates”, he hopes to attract patients from Britain, the rest of Europe, America, from “all over the world, including India.”

Surprisingly, he seems to have reservations about “medical tourism” which brings rich patients, especially from America and Britain, to India at a fraction of the price they would be charged back in their own countries. He acknowledges “there is a future for medical tourism for NHS patients with the means to travel to India”. But he also argues this entails a diversion of resources which should be used within India.

“Why do we (in India) need patients from abroad?” he asks. “There is a huge medical market within India.”



Diplomatic incident

As the publisher who began work on the Asian Who's Who in 1974, Jasbir Singh Sachar is pretty good at recognising all the Indian and Pakistani A, B and even C listers in Britain.

Last week at the Asian Who's Who gala banquet at the Hilton Hotel in Park Lane, a diplomatic incident was narrowly averted when the normally affable Sachar lost



FAST AND FURIOUS: Jasbir Singh Sachar

his temper with a TV crew which was clogging up the entrance to the main ballroom after he had given strict instructions that the whole area should be cleared to enable guests to proceed to dinner on time.

“I told you there should be no further media interviews,” Sachar raged at the guilty cameraman.

At this the subject being interviewed protested haughtily: “In that case, I’m going!”

“If you want to go, go,” responded an irate Sachar, who was now in an angry Navjot Sidhu mode.

It is not known if the guest stayed or left but let’s hope Nawaz Sharif’s brother, Shahbaz, wasn’t too offended.

From London with love

Sonjoy Chatterjee’s plans to enjoy a relaxed Puja in Calcutta were disrupted because the managing director and CEO of ICICI Bank in London was promoted to the main board of the bank in Mumbai.

“I had to take charge immediately,” explains Sonjoy, who becomes “executive director responsible for corporate & investment banking, government banking and international banking”.

The remarkable expansion of ICICI Bank reflects the growth of the Indian economy, he acknowledges. And back in Mumbai, he feels ready as the man in charge of international operations to help Indian companies make overseas acquisitions. The day Sonjoy got his promotion was also the day that ICICI got a licence to open a branch in New York.

“The next 10 years in India will be the best,” he says enthusiastically. “I feel I can play a role.”

After four years in London, during which ICICI has become the biggest international Indian bank, it will be a wrench for Sonjoy to leave the city “which has given me so much love”, he confesses.

One option would have been to leave his wife with his daughters, aged seven and three, in London so that the children could continue to receive the best English education. But by April next year, the entire family will relocate to a new home and a new school near ICICI’s Bandra Kurla HQ in Mumbai.

Though six foot something and an amateur boxer, our Sonjoy is a Bengali softie at heart.

“I couldn’t bear to be away from my family,” he admits.



GREAT GOING: Sheena Bhattessa with Cherie Blair

Shining Sheena

My, hasn’t she grown — artistically, that is? Time was when Namrita Bachchan was so shy she did not want to talk about her paintings since she feared being “outed” as Amitabh Bachchan’s niece. But for her forthcoming solo exhibition this week in London at Indar Pasricha Fine Arts, the gallery has hired an enthusiastic PR girl, Sheena Bhattessa, to promote Namrita.

Before long Sheena herself might merit her own PR girl. She does Bollywood dances at Asian functions, poses for photographs with the likes of Cherie Blair, the former Prime Minister’s wife, has trained as an actress with the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art and in New York with the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute and taken dance and singing lessons with Italia Conti and with the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

She now works in PR with a mainstream British agency, PagetBaker, handling the Namrita Bachchan account.

“I have been in the performing arts for 20 years, which seems a long time, except I am 24,” says British-born Sheena, most of whose clients are non-Indian.

Perhaps Namrita, rising star though she is, should return the compliment and look after Sheena’s account in Mumbai.

And, by the way, Sheena is also a graduate in business management with law from King’s

College, London.

Titlle tattle

Which British-born Asian singer has the most mellifluous and haunting voice in Britain? My choice — and that of most others — would fall on Najma Akhtar.

The 41-year-old songstress has inexplicably steered clear of Bollywood but now that she is keen to work in the Indian film industry, Najma, whom I have heard singing to jazz at Ronnie Scott's in Soho, could lay claim to being Britain's Lata Mangeshkar.

Yes, she is that good.

“Najma's voice has the soprano sweetness of early Joan Baez,” raved Jon Pareles in the New York Times after her concert appearance in New York.



SONGBIRD: Najma Akhtar

“I am now very focused on bringing my music into India and Pakistan,” says Najma, whose late father, Saleem Akhtar, was born in Moradabad, UP, in 1937.

Najma's CV, with awards, records and videos galore — she began by winning a UK song contest in 1984 — would fill a fat book but in case you are wondering what she studied at university, it's chemical engineering.

Should she be taken by Bollywood, she does not have to remain playback, either.



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