

# CONTRIBUTORIA

« **APRIL 2014**

**ARTICLE** THE PRESS FREEDOM ISSUE

## *Colonial ghosts of popular alchemy*



By  
**Danny Smith**

---



I'm on a plane, I'm settled and watching a film so bland I—hand on heart—cannot remember what it was now.

“Would you like a drink?” says the unusually perky flight attendant. She's doing well to hide her boredom. I start as I mean to go on.

“Gin and tonic please,” I say, and receive a plastic cup with a single ice cube. Then a tiny bottle of Beefeater: a fine if, somewhat unremarkable, gin. And then a small can of Britvic Indian Tonic Water. I pour in the gin over the ice (ice-gin-tonic always that order) and add the tonic slowly knowing that cabin pressure will make the drink flat in a short time.

Then the plane dips sharply and the seatbelt sign pings on as my lap is covered with the drink. I should have known then.

I'm in a bar, but that's not unusual. It's dark and windowless with posters for different drinks brands on the wall. The tables are slightly sticky and the music slightly too loud to talk without shouting. This bar could be anywhere, but is in New Delhi. This would explain why everybody is smoking. This makes me feel nostalgic, until my eyes start the familiar itch I recognise from working in pubs before the ban.

"G and T please," I order in the incredibly English way English people sound when they're trying to sound anything but.

"What?" he asks. He's a short guy with a waistcoat, and a wing-collared shirt undone down to the belly button.

"Gin and tonic?" I say.

"Gin?! You like gin?"

"Yes please gin yes," I confirm.

A short while later he comes back with a chipped dirty glass containing a clear liquid, and a bottle of Sprite. The gin itself is overpoweringly strong; there is the hint of juniper in there but it's chemically and sweet. I can't see what brand it is, but all the spirits behind the bar are off brand.

For the sake of completeness, I pour in some Sprite; it's warm. The man at the table next to me is arguing loudly with the waiter, so I advert my eyes and take

a sip of the 'G an S'. It's not entirely unpleasant. Sweet with a hint of gin, syrupy though without the sharp bitterness, with a thick texture. It's like the bubbles are stupid. It tastes like a gin and tonic flavour ice lolly.

Trying to find the perfect gin and tonic in the country where it was born, India: I should have known that this wouldn't be as easy as I'd thought. I don't believe in signs or portents as a rule, but what happened on the plane should have tipped me off.

In the 1800s the British Army here had taken to taking their quinine—a bitter powder—in soda water to diffuse the taste. This 'tonic water' became a staple of their rations. This naturally became a mixer for the gin they also got in their supplies and the pleasingly complex mixture of freshness, bitterness and sweetness became a staple in the British consciousness. Where it has stayed ever since.

Gin has been having somewhat of a resurgence in British culture as of that, with brands like Hendricks and Bombay Sapphire enjoying a resurgence in popularity. Even the speed rail staple Gordon's has been experimenting with sloe berry, and cucumber infusions. Somehow this has also been mixed up with the fetishisation of kitsch nostalgia that has also erupted. The patronising 'keep calm and carry on' poster has become ubiquitous, as have twee bakery competitions, giggling at doilies, and horrifically serving gin in a tea pot.

I love gin. It's complex, refreshing and so essentially British. There has to be

more than it than a nostalgia trip burped up from a culture eating its own tail like ouroboros.

I ask in few places more and it becomes apparent that, while procuring gin would be no problem: obtaining a gin, with tonic, poured with the amount of reverence and respect it deserved, would be a huge task.

With Delhi being a bust, I head to Jodhpur on an overnight train. There is a festival soon, so the train is full, bustling with families and luggage, settling and repacking, fidgeting. They bring atmospheric colour to the normal utilitarian blue carriages. I push my way to my seat and settle into by bunk. It is not quite long enough to lie on and yet not quite high enough to sit up on. The family around me chatters and the kids are too excited to sleep.

I catch on that the children are trying to get dad to take a photo of me. I hold up a finger for them to wait, and try to look stern. Then I take the elastic band out of my hair and strike a goofy smile. My blue hair has attracted a lot of attention since I arrived and kids have been especially fascinated. This guy definitely is, and laughs as he snaps shot after shot of my silly faces. One of the older men starts chatting to me. It turns out Sachit spent four years in Coventry.

“What on earth for?” I ask, “Sid you do something terrible?”

“No I passed a course,” he says. I was hoping the running joke between people from Birmingham and Coventry would have translated. It didn’t, but I tried. The

conversation comes around to why I'm here and I tell him about trying to find a decent G and T.

"Why India?" he asks. I tell him, treading lightly around the British occupancy in case it seems like more ill-advised banter.

"Didn't you know that?" I ask.

"Gin is an old person's drink, we don't drink gin. You like the gin?" he seems genuinely surprised.

"Of course," I say, and this time they all laugh.

The journey to Jodhpur is 10 hours. After I arrive, find a guesthouse, sleep for six or so hours, have a little food and a shower, I immediately swing into action. The city of Jodhpur is beautiful, across from the station the buildings form a solid block that juts out from the side of a mountain which leads to an impressive looking fort. The fort looks as if it could withstand an attack by hordes of Transformers let alone some blokes on horses.

The solid block of buildings breaks into smaller blocks as it rises, but randomly some of the walls ceilings and floors are missing. It's like a giant puzzle or an Esher painting. Most of these building are painted a delicate eggshell blue. Between the buildings, the tuk-tuk taxis dart into narrow side streets with the abandon of people that don't have to worry about 'where there's blame' rent-a-suits. I climb into one and ask him to take me somewhere I could get a drink.

“What drink?” he asks.

“Gin and tonic,” I say.

Three shacks that sell bottles of spirits and beer by the case full later I abandon the idea and retire back to the hotel.

A while later over beers I ask the owner. He’s a small man that likes to sit in on the conversations among his guests to improve his English.

“Where can I get a gin and tonic?”

“Gin?” he says, confused.

“Yes gin. Gin, whiskey, vodka, gin,” I say.

“No, I ‘zin’”. He makes a hand gesture each time he says it, kind of pinching his fingers together with a twist of the wrist.

“We say ‘zin’ – I have none, but I can get you a bottle?”

“No, I was wondering if I could get anywhere a zin and tonic. Tonic water and zin.” My hands mime holding a gin and tonic for no reason I can fathom.

“My friend will sell you a bottle of gin, cheap price,” he says. I sigh.

“No thanks, I’ll take another beer though.”

An hour before I leave Jodhpur and I find a hotel bar. It's underground and it has the ambiance of an opium den, with red torn furniture and one single overhead fan. I order a beer, drinking half and watching cricket on a semi broken television. I put a finger up and the waiter comes over.

"I would like a zin and tonic water."

"Zin?" He asks

"Zin err gin," I say, doing the cuppy hand thing again. "Gin and tonic."

"Gin and tonic?" he says.

"YES," I almost shout back. He looks confused again and leaves the bar for twenty minutes. It's getting dangerously close to when I have to leave when he comes back. Proudly he presents me with a platter: on it rest five or six bowls of brightly coloured curries.

"No," with near hysteria in my voice, "GIN ZIN GIN, no food". I drop enough to cover my beer and food and leave to get the bus.

The sun is setting across the lake behind the white crumbling baroque buildings and minarets of Udaipur. I'm in a rooftop restaurant, enjoying a coke and watching a pug dog of indeterminable owner scramble around. He's resplendent in the attention he gets at every table and occasionally confused by the sound of two gangs of monkeys that seem to be waging a turf war a couple of stories

below.

Slowly, as the sun recedes behind the water and distant mountains, the silhouette of the buildings become a clearer picture of the ornamental balconies, spires, and rooftop verandas.

I only came here because the sign outside promised daily showings of 'Octopussy 7pm'. Intrigued by the sign when I first arrived two days ago I decided tonight was the time to find out what it meant. It turns out the sign was referring to the Bond film, the climactic chase scene of which was filmed through the streets and landmarks of Udaipur. I ask if they will be showing it tonight and get a shake of the head.

"Not for many years," I'm told. Which of course makes me want to watch it more than anything I've ever wanted ever. I look over the menu and the waiter leans forward and says,

"We also serve alcohol, but," and he says quietly "it's not on the menu."

"What do you have?" I ask.

"Lager, strong lager, whiskey, vodka, gin and tonic..."

"What?"

"Whiskey, vodka, gin and tonic," he says, reciting the list again.

"Yes! One of those."

I wiggle in my seat as dots of light appear in the buildings opposite; odd points of colour that only increase the mystery of these old structures.

The gin and tonic came separately, the glass isn't dirty but worn and scratched from repeated washing. It's a third full of gin, there is no ice or garnish. I sip the gin straight. It's not as rough as the one I'd tasted in Delhi, but the juniper is overbearing and artificial and the alcohol content hurt my eyes just inhaling the fumes. The tonic is Schweppes in a can, a quick taste and I'm overwhelmed by sweetness. The bitterness is there but an afterthought. Mixing them together I taste. The rough alcohol floods the drink and the ghost of juniper is an aftertaste, while there's a rattling projection of tonic bitterness that I'm not sure was ever there at all.

This will not do at all.

When I get back I ask at the reception of my hotel if they can get me some things: even though the place is a backpacker's hotel they oblige readily. A little while later they come back with a bag of cinchona bark and a couple of limes. I ask to borrow an empty glass bottle and I think they are too curious to say no. I've never made my own tonic before but the theory is easy.

I dump the larger strips of bark as well as the rinds of the limes in the bottle, cover them with water and give it a shake. I then leave it overnight.

I already have two miniature bottles of Beefeater gin I swiped from the trolley on

the plane. So I need to make a decent tonic to mix them with. Tonic is in essence, soda water with quinine. Quinine is the extract of the cinchona bark. The lime is for flavour. Next day, I pour the mixture into a fresh bottle of cold soda water, using my thumb as filter, and stir. It's not bad, but still a little bitter, So I add half a teaspoon of sugar to cut it a little.

I pour the gin into a glass, and slowly add my tonic mixture. It's a little brownish and bitty. I also drop in a slice of lime.

Upstairs I settle myself on a dirty plastic chair on a balcony overlooking the lake and take a tentative sip of my gin and tonic. That's my gin and tonic: the drink I've been looking for for three weeks.

I've always said to that to make a good gin and tonic you need a good gin and an average tonic or vice versa. Beefeater is, at best, an average gin. So for this to be good, I would have had to do incredibly well with my first go at making my own tonic.

I take a sip. It's still quite bitter, not too sweet though. It's grainy, the notes of juniper are nicely balanced and the lime isn't overpowering.

Looking out over the lake, the sun bounces off the still water in a way that catches your eye and makes you smile. Squinting, a breeze blows and I take another sip.

Gin started as a peasant drink made by witches as an herbal remedy but has

evolved and refined over centuries into the delicate spirit we know today. Tonic water is a relatively new medicinal drink, already out of favour, but with the power to grant immunity from the greatest killer in history: malaria.

I take another pull on my homemade mixture, knowing full well that any decent barman would be ashamed to put it in front of a customer, but enjoying it anyway as I gaze over at the old town.

Mixing the two, for me, represents the combining of both old and new worlds. Respecting the past, while driving into the future. Much like India itself.



### **About the writer**

*“My wings are like a shield of bourbon. Writer, drunk, lover, not always in that order.”*  
*Danny’s work has appeared in Vice, Fused and Area magazines. He typically writes about culture, pop and otherwise, and his own experiences travelling through subcultures. He’s worked behind the bar and on the doors of the roughest pubs in Birmingham, sold encyclopaedias in the Australian outback, and taught gang kids from the ghettos of New Jersey how to shoot a bow and arrow. He most recently worked as a teaching assistant in a pupil referral unit, but gave it up to explore India and spend more time writing.*

**[Go to writer’s profile page](#)**

**HOW THIS ARTICLE WAS MADE**

**700**

points

**9**

backers

**2**

drafts

**0**

comments

 [ARTICLE HISTORY](#)

 [COLLABORATE ON NEW ARTICLES](#)



[ADD TO FAVOURITES](#)



[LICENSE THIS ARTICLE](#)



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

## ***Bypassing the butcher - the rise of home meat-makers***

By **Louise Bolotin**

## ***The surveillance state in Russia***

By **Keph Senett**

## ***Letter from the Editors***

By **Sarah Hartley**

---

## BACKERS

No public backers.



## IN PRODUCTION: JULY 2015

See drafts of next issue's articles, and collaborate on the final publication.

---

*A sporting chance. How one woman succeeded in calling society to action.*

---

## PLANNING: AUG 2015

Pledge on Contributoria journalists' proposals for articles.

---

*Public vs private schooling in South Africa*

---

*Surveillance at Sea: technologies are creating a more trackable ocean*

---

---

**JOIN CONTRIBUTORIA**



**Support independent journalism by joining Contributoria! Back the articles you want to see, and give feedback to writers as they develop their work.**

**JOIN NOW**



**[About Contributoria](#)**

**[Cookies](#)**

**[Writing for Contributoria](#)**

**[Privacy Policy](#)**

**[Terms and Conditions](#)**

© Contributoria 2014