

A PINCH OF SNUFF

Manohar Malgaonkar

MANOHAR MALGAONKAR (b. 1913) is a well known novelist and short story writer with over 25 publications to his credit. His important works include *Distant Drum*, *The Princes*, *A Bend in the Ganges* and *Bombay Beware*. The present short story *A Pinch of Snuff*, taken from *Contemporary Indian Short Stories in English*, is full of wit and adventure. The reader's excitement is built up through the accuracy and the profound comedy of Malgaonkar's narrative.



A. Answer the following questions orally:

1. Do guests visit your house frequently? How do you respond to them?
2. Do you like all of them equally? How often do you entertain your guests gladly?
3. At times you may have to welcome a guest whom you don't like much. How do you do this?

A PINCH OF SNUFF

1. Mother's announcement shook me. "Nanukaka is coming," she said.
2. "Oh, my God!" I said. "Couldn't we send him a wire saying we are leaving - that I am transferred or something?"
3. "No, dear," Mother said. "He must be already on the train. Besides," she added reassuringly, "he says he cannot stay here for more than two or three days."
4. "What is he coming to Delhi for - in this heat?"
5. "He wants to see some Minister."
6. "What! That means he will be here for weeks! Ministers don't see people for weeks...months! Oh, my God!"

7. "If your Nanukaka wants to see a Minister, I am sure he will manage to see him," Mother said, "any time of the day or night."
8. Mother has always been very loyal to her side of the family, and, after all, Nanukaka is her brother. I, on the other hand, may have something of a complex about Ministers. I am an Under-Secretary, on probation, and as such trained to regard Ministers as being two steps higher than God; the Secretaries being just one step higher.
9. I was waiting on the platform when the train came in. Nanukaka stood in the doorway of a second class carriage; a striking figure, white haired, with an impressive moustache. He still wears the old-fashioned knee-length black coat and the red silk *pugree* of the Deccani brahmin, and drapes a white *angocha* round his shoulders.
10. As I went up, he handed me a basket. "Take this out, quick," he whispered. "I'll join you outside the station."
11. I asked no questions. I tucked the basket under my arm and turned, only to bump into an enormous Marwari woman who had her head covered in a burka. But my apologies were drowned by the strange sounds emanating from the basket: the protests of an outraged kitten. "Spitts...strupst...meow...meooow...meooow!"
12. I ducked and ran, and mingled with the crowd and squeezed through the gate in the wake of a Sikh marriage party.
13. Nanukaka was long time coming. The station yard was nearly empty and the last tonga had gone when he emerged, escorted by a **fawning** ticket inspector.
14. "No room in the third class, and they wouldn't issue second class tickets without reservation," Nanukaka explained as he came up to me. "Had to travel second on a third class ticket! But it was all arranged quite amicably. Such a nice young man, the TC. You saw how he even came right out with me, so that there should be no trouble. The kitten, of course, travelled free. How is it?"
15. "Very quiet," I said. Perhaps it is dead, I thought hopefully.
16. We got into the car, and even before I had changed into second gear, Nanukaka asked: "When have you arranged for the minister to see me? Can't stay here for more than two days – three at the most."
17. It was a time for frankness. "Look uncle," I said. "I am merely an Under-Secretary, on probation, and it is more than my job is worth to go asking for interviews with Ministers."



18. "Oh!" Nanukaka said. "I had rather hoped ... oh, I see. Well, never mind." He took a pinch of snuff, brushed his fingers delicately on his *angocha*, and sat back, closing his eyes and **puckering** his eyebrows as through in deep thought. He also clucked his tongue several times in a typically Deccani way, registering pity.
19. Mother was waiting on the doorstep, her face **wreathed** in smiles. She went into squeals of delight over the kitten and made a lot of fuss over Nanukaka. I also found that she had installed him in my bedroom, so that I had to put a *charpoy* for myself in the back verandah.
20. At mother's insistence, I had taken two days' leave from the office, and in the afternoon, I drove Nanukaka to the north Block. He went in to see the Minister and I waited in the car park. It was two hours before he returned mumbling colourful Marathi **swearwords**. I didn't dare ask him what had happened, and drove without saying a word. He cooled down in a little while, though, and said:
21. "Two hours, I spent, being transferred from one *chaprasi* to another, **tramping** through the corridors, and in the end, succeeded in getting a Deputy-Secretary to give me an appointment - three days from now! Shameful! Shameful! And there was another series of Marathi **expletives**. In a linguistic emergency my uncle always turned to his mother tongue.

B.1.1. Complete the following sentences on the basis of what you have studied :

- was coming to visit the narrator's family.
- The narrator was on probation.
- Nanukaka was to stay for
- Nanukaka was coming to Delhi to
- informed the under Secretary about Nanukaka's visit?
- The Under Secretary had to put a charpoy for himself in the back verandah because.....
- Nanukaka was related to the narrator as he was his

B.1. 2. Answer the following questions briefly :

- The news that made the mother happy disturbed her son. Why were their responses so different?
- Do you have a similar experience? Has your response to the news of the arrival of any guest ever been different from that of other members of the family?
- 'Had to travel second on a third class ticket? But it was all arranged quite amicably?' What 'arrangement' Nanukaka is referring to? How can such arrangement be 'amicable'?

22. A **garnish** yellow sports car flashed past us, blaring its horn in an uninterrupted blast, and the young man at the wheel waved his hand at me.
23. "What a rude man! Who was that?" Nunukaka asked.
24. "Chap called Ratiram, works in the same Ministry as mine."
25. "I see."
26. "There was some talk about his going as Trade Commissioner to Hajrat Barkat Ali, you know, the Ambassador, but they say it is all off now," I said, just to make conversation.
27. "Why don't you get sent out on one of these foreign assignments?" Nanukaka asked.
28. "To get sent on a foreign assignment is in the same category as getting an interview with a Minister, Uncle," I said, somewhat unkindly. "It takes pull. Ratiram is the son of Sohanlal Ratiram, you know, the Party Boss in Delhi."
29. Nanukaka sat up with a jerk. "What was that?" what did you say? Sohanlal Ratiram's son! How extraordinary! Well, well!" he leaned back in his seat and stared at me for a long time. "Now let me see. You've got a close-collar Jodhpur coat, haven't you? Good! And can you tie a turban? No? Well, I'll have to put it on you, although I am no expert. This tie-and-collar business is no good these days. Let's go home. After you have changed, we will go and see him."
30. "See whom?"
31. "Why, Lala Sohanlal, of course!"
32. "Do you know him at all?"
33. "Of course not," Nanukaka said.
34. I changed into Jodhpur coat and Uncle Nanukaka tied a huge orange turban round my head. "Act as though you were my, er, a sort of A.D.C.," he cautioned me as we started for Lala Sohanlal's house.
35. A secretary in spotless white clothes received us and showed us into a cool white room before he asked our business, very politely.
36. "Just dropped in," Nanukaka said casually. "I had come to Delhi for the **Zamindars' Convention**, a rather unofficial gathering you know, since we zamindars are not, not exactly, popular, these days ... V.P. has also sent a cable, he wants to see me, but he is not coming from Washington until tomorrow. I thought I might as well see Lalaji and tell him what arrangements we, the zamindars, have made for the agricultural vote..."
37. Nanukaka sort of **trailed off** and I could see that he was not really making an impression on the secretary who was just being polite, and playing it safe. "I'll

have to see whether Lalaji is free," the secretary said. "He seldom sees, er, visitors without a previous appointment."

38. Lalaji must have been free, because from the adjoining room we could just hear the unhurried gurgle of the *hookah*, and then we could hear the haughty secretary talking to him.
39. "What day is it, today?" Nanukaka asked me.
40. I thought he was speaking in an unusually loud voice. "Tuesday," I told him.
41. "Ooh, only Tuesday, and to think that on Sunday I was in Beirut. Amazing, isn't it?"
42. I swallowed hard. "Amazing," I agreed.
43. "And if I had listened to Hajrat, I'd still be abroad. Old H.B. was just dying to drag me to the Foreign Minister."
44. The steady gurgling of *hookah* in the next room had suddenly stopped.
45. "What did you say?" Nanukaka asked, although I hadn't even opened my mouth. "Why didn't I stay back? You know how it was with H.B. the last time, when he was in Geneva. Got me involved in the cotton talks. Besides, from Bombay, S.K. had been sending me cable after cable ..."
46. That was the moment Lala Sohanlal Ratiram came **waddling** out of the inner room with the secretary at his heels, and from then on everything was smothered in the **saccharine** courtesy of the seasoned political campaigner. As soon as the introductions were over, the secretary was sent bustling off to order coffee and sweetmeats and *pan*.
47. They **sparred** guardedly about zamindars and votes and the weather for a few minutes before coming to **brass tacks**. "I hear you know Hajrat Barkat Ali, well," Sohanlal said with an **ingratiating** grin.
48. "Oh, old H.B.! how did you know I know H.B.? Actually, we were at school together, always regarded me as a sort of elder brother. Rather touching, really: even today, he seldom takes a big decision without consulting me. When the P.M. offered him the Embassy, who do you think had to make up H.B.'s mind for him?"
49. "You?"
50. "That's right, me. Good old H.B."
51. "Ha, ha, ha, ha," laughed Sohanlal, now showing all his pan-stained teeth. "In that case it is a lucky day that you have come to my humble house. Very lucky, because my son - he is in the Balances Ministry here - he was going as Trade Commissioner to Hajrat Barkat Ali. But you know how there are wheels within wheels. Someone seems to have poisoned the Ambassador's mind about my son;

about some transaction concerning **evacuee-property**. Actually, it was a perfectly **legitimate ...?**

52. Nanukaka waved away any further explanation. "That should be quite simple," he announced. "I'll write and tell H.B. to do it. No, no. Don't thank me at all. After all, we, er, we men in the public eye, must do things for one another, ha, ha. One good turn deserves another."
53. Nanukaka opened his silver snuffbox and took a pinch. Then, **flicking** on his *angocha*, he casually mentioned the name of the Welfare Minister.
54. The fixed grin on Sohanlal's face vanished. "Is he a friend of yours?" Nanukaka admitted. "No, not exactly."
55. "I am so glad," Sohanlal said, relieved. "So glad. That man; such ingratitude! I gave him a ticket, helped him in every way, and what do I get in return?"
56. It turned out that the Minister and Lala Sohanlal, once the best of friends, were now **at daggers drawn**, since last year, when the Minister had refused to consider a proposal for his daughter to marry Lalaji's son.
57. "He wants a prince!" Sohanlal snorted. "What is a prince, these days! Faugh! Confidential, I can tell you that the Minister has burnt his boats; I'd be surprised if he is given a ticket for the next elections; very surprised. He turns my son down, and wants a prince! Baah! And what is even more funny, I am told that so far they haven't even exchanged horoscopes; even the astrologers on both sides haven't come together to decide whether it would be an **auspicious match!**"
58. "Disgraceful!" Nanukaka snorted. "Disgraceful! What prince did you say?"
59. "Some twopenny state called Ninnore."

B.2. 1. Write T for true and F for false statements :

- a) It was very easy for the narrator to get sent on a foreign assignment.
- b) Ratiram was the son of Sohanlal Ratiram.
- c) Sohanlal Ratiram was the Party boss in Delhi.
- d) Nanukaka went to Lala Sohanlal because they both were Zamindars.
- e) Nanukaka visited Lala Sohanlal in the guise of an astrologer.
- f) Nanukaka's meeting with Sohanlal Ratiram was very successful.

B.2. 2. Answer the following questions briefly :

- 1) The Under-Secretary always obeyed Nanukaka, although he was never willing to do so. Why?
- 2) This tie-and-collar business is no good these days." What did Nanukaka mean to say?
- 3) How did the Under-Secretary change his appearance to accompany Nanukaka?

- 4) Who is a Zamindar? Do you know any Zamindar in your locality? What do the people in your locality think about him?
- 5) How did Nanukaka impress Sohanlal Ratiram?
- 6) What important information did he collect at Ratiram's place?
- 7) Who is a Prince? Do we have any prince now? If yes, do they enjoy the same privileges which they used to do?

60. We left the house soon after that, Nanukaka having again promised that he would write to "Old H.B." that very day. As we drove away, both Lalaji and his superior secretary were bowing to him from the porch.
61. Nanukaka was strangely silent that evening and went to bed soon after dinner, but in the morning, he was **chirpy** again.
62. "We are going to the Minister's house, this morning," he announced.
63. "Not me, please, Uncle," I appealed.
64. He inhaled some snuff before he spoke, and by that time he seemed to have forgotten what I had said. "This car of yours; too old, too small. We'll need something much more impressive. You noticed how that secretary treated us coldly at first. If we had gone in a bigger car, he would have been quite different."
65. "What about a taxi?"
66. "No; not a taxi. A private car, driven by a **liveried** chauffeur; the bigger the better."
67. I remembered that an acquaintance of mine has been trying to sell for some months an enormous, stately, **outlandish** car that would have only been built for a court procession. I told Nanukaka about it.
68. "That's it! We'll take it out for a 'brief' trial, he suggested breezily.
69. "I am sure we could," I said, "if we looked like genuine buyers. But do we? These motor-car touts can smell a rich man a mile off."
70. "You leave that to me," Nanukaka said. "You just leave the details to me."
71. "And what about this liveried chauffeur?" I asked.
72. "You, of course," Nanukaka said **blandly**.
73. He took out his cheque-book and wrote a cheque for a thousand rupees. He folded it neatly and put it into the inner pocket of an old coat of his. "Now call your *dhobi*," he told me.
74. I called the dhobi, and Uncle gave him the coat and took him outside and had a talk with him. Then we drove over to the Sikka Auto Dealers and Nanukaka asked if he could try out the car we had in mind.

75. We had barely got talking to the manager when the dhobi rushed into shop, holding Nanukaka's old coat in one hand and **brandishing** the cheque with the other. "Oh, there you are!" he panted. "Look what you had left in this coat of yours!"
76. Nanukaka held out the cheque at the arm's length, and clucked his tongue several times. "How careless of me!" he said. "I am always doing this sort of thing. Bearer cheque too; anyone could have cashed it. Here, my good man," he said to the dhobi, "here is a reward for you. There is nothing like honesty," and he gave him a two- rupee note and a pat on the back.
77. After this demonstration of wealth, it was quite easy about the car. I drove, wearing my white Jodhpur coat and the orange turban, and Nanukaka sat regally at the back, looking every inch what he was supposed to be: a hereditary pundit from a princely state.
78. We drove to the Minister's house, and the servants and the secretary fussed around Nanukaka who refused to state his business but merely called for the visitors' book.
79. "I have just come to make a formal call," he announced. "I have no wish to disturb the Minister. It is just a formality that we in the old princely states still observe. His Highness is a great **stickler** for these courtesies." They brought the visitors' book, and I watched Nanukaka in admiration as he wrote his name with flourish and added, "Hereditary Astrologer to the Maharaja of Ninnore." At the end he gave his Delhi address: my address.
80. Without another word, and as though he were in a tearing hurry, he got into the car and said loudly:
81. "Take me to the Maharaja Sutkatta's palace. I have to return all those horoscopes entrusted to me." As the car turned out of the gate, I glanced backwards and saw a huge dark, *khaddar*-clad figure peering at us from an upper-story window.
82. We had just finished tea, and we were trying to house-break the new kitten which had just made a puddle on the floor when the car with the white triangle stopped in front of the house, and Nanukaka went out with folded hands to receive the Welfare Minister who had come to see him.
83. Nanukaka left yesterday, his mission accomplished. I never found out what it was that he wanted to see the Minister about. Also, I wonder what is going to happen when the minister discovers that my uncle has never been within a hundred miles of a place called Ninnore, although I am now convinced that Nanukaka will deal with the situation without allowing a single fold of his *angocha* to fall of place.
84. Only, when it happens, I want to be somewhere far out of range.

B.3. Answer the following questions briefly :

1. Who was the second important person Nanukaka had planned to meet?
2. What preparation did he make to meet him?
3. What new role did Nanukaka give the Under-Secretary to play?
4. How did he manage to impress the Sikka Auto Dealers?
5. What did he do at the minister's residence?
6. How did he impress the minister?
7. Is the Under-Secretary impressed with Nanukaka at any point? When and why? Find out the evidence from the story.

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

wire (n): send telegram or message

fawning (adj): oily, greasy

puckering (v): knitting together

wreathed (past participle): adorned

swearwords (n): bad language

tramping (v): marching, slogging

expletives (n): bad language

garnish ((adj): pretty

convention (n): conference, meeting

trailed off (idm): grew faint, weakened

waddling (v): strolling

sparred (v): talked, argued

ingratiating (p.p): flattering

brass tacks (noun phrase): hidden course

evacuee-property (noun phrase): property of someone who has moved away from his home because of dangerous situation

legitimate (adj): lawful, fair

flicking (v): tapping

at daggers drawn (idiom): at odds, quarrelling

auspicious (adj): favourable, promising

chirpy (adj): cheery, happy

liveried (adj): uniformed

outlandish (adj): extremely strange and unusual

blandly (adv): unexcitingly

brandishing (v): waving so that others can see it

stickler (n): perfectionist, hard taskmaster

C. 1. Long Answer Questions

1. Nanukaka tells lots of lies. Why does he do so? Does he succeed in his pursuit?
2. What impression does Nanukaka make on you? Do you like him? Attempt a character sketch of Nanukaka.
3. Suppose you have Nanukaka as your uncle. How would you behave with him? Explain in detail.
4. Nanukaka made a big promise to Sohanlal Ratiram. Did he ever fulfil his promise?
5. Can a person like Nanukaka be more successful in the present society? Give reasons.
6. 'I wonder what is going to happen when the Minister discovers that my uncle has never been within hundred miles of a place called Ninnore... Only, when it happens, I want to be somewhere far out of range.' What light does it throw on the motive of the writer in the story? - Does he want to glorify manipulation? Warn us of the consequences which its discovery leads to? Expose the reality we are living in?
7. What is 'linguistic emergency'? Do we all face it? How does it affect our speech?
8. Discuss the significance of the title? How is it related to the theme of the story?

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

1. Taking tobacco in any form is injurious to health.
2. A guilty mind is always suspicious

C. 3. COMPOSITION

Write a paragraph of about 100 words on each of the following:

1. A scene at the railway platform
2. Influence of an astrologer

D. WORD STUDY

D.1. Dictionary Use

Ex. 1. Correct the spelling of the following words:

mustach	assinment	ambasador	secretry	campainer
cautiond	genuine	casualy	leiger	hearditary

Ex. 2. Look up a dictionary and write two meanings of each of the following words – the one in which it is used in the lesson and the other which is more common:

interview	transfer	blast	trade	course
touch	surprise	match	snort	

D.2. Word-formation

Read the following sentences carefully:

- a) Mother's **announcement** shook me.
 b) He seldom sees, *er*, visitors without a previous **appointment**.

In the first sentence '**announcement**', which is a noun, is derived from '**announce**' which is a verb. Similarly, in the second sentence '**appointment**' is derived from '**appoint**'.

Nouns can be derived by adding different suffixes such as '-ment', '-ion', '-ance' etc.

Use suffixes to the verbs given below to make them noun:

impress	arrange	transact	explain
acquaint	manage	demonstrate	marry

D.3. word-meaning

Ex. 1. Find from the lesson words the meanings of which have been given on the left hand side. The last part of each word is given on the right hand side:

in a friendly manner and without argument:ably
large in size or quantitymous
attracting your interest or attention :king
small nail with a flat topcks
correct according to law:mate
extremely strange and unusual:dish

D. 4. Phrases

Ex.1. Read the lesson carefully and find out the sentences in which the following phrases have been used. Use these phrases in sentences of your own:

at daggers drawn	drop in	as soon as
turn out	of course	try out

E. GRAMMAR

E.1. Read the following sentences carefully:

*You've got a close-collar Jodhpur coat, **haven't you?***
*(It is) Amazing, **isn't it?***

In the above examples '**haven't you ?**' and '**isn't it?**' are **tag-questions**.

Write tag-questions for the following sentences:

1. Amod was speaking in an unusually loud voice,
2. That should be quite simple,
3. Nanukaka chuckled his tongue several times,
4. You will do the work,
5. Gulu is eating a mango,

F. ACTIVITY

Ex. 1. The writer has mentioned several items people are usually addicted to. Make a list of such items mentioned in the story. Briefly mention the harmful effects of each of these items on our health?

