

The Man with the tilted hat

<https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/musings/man-with-the-tilted-hat-475992>

The tilted hat was my madeleine. The chain of memories that it triggered took me back to my childhood. It was at a friend's place where I saw another friend wearing a maroon felt hat, slightly tilted to one side on his bald pate. That was my Proustian moment. The style of wearing the hat brought back memories of a cigarette packet from my childhood.

Like most children at that time, I too had a collection fever. These included stamps and coins but also stickers from toothpaste packs, marbles and cigarette packets and matchboxes. The stamp collection grew very slowly and so one lost interest in it. The stamps were stuck in an album where each country was assigned a different page. Most pages had only one or two stamps but others like CCCP, Helvetia and India had lots of them, though I am not sure how one got hold of so many stamps from the USSR and Switzerland.

There were also transient passions which lasted for a few months. One such passion was collecting empty cigarette packets which were collected from the road, from street corners but mostly from near the *paan* shops. Each kind of cigarette packet had a "value" determined by its rarity. The packets were frequently bartered- if one had several of one kind, one could barter them for one or more of another kind to complete the collection. Of course, the packets were not just for the collection, though the collection was a source of much pride for the owner. The packets were also used as a currency in a game that we played.

The game was simple- a circle was drawn on the ground and one player placed a packet from his collection inside it. The other player then used a packet of equal "value" from his collection to hit it. If both packets went out of the circle, the second player would keep both of them. If either or both stayed within the circle, the first player won them.

My collection of empty packets was quite enviable. Apart from the Four Square packets which I had in surplus because my father smoked them, I had several others like Wills Navy Cut, Charminar, Red & White, Capstan, Gold Flake, Scissors and Passing Show. Passing Show was the one which had a handsome, though slightly evil looking man

with a tilted hat. And here was my friend, more than five decades later, wearing a similar hat in a similar style!

I told my friend about the Passing Show image. He had never heard about it. I also told him that the way he wore the hat reminded me of the famous villain from Bollywood's golden era- K.N. Singh who frequently wore a tilted hat and an overcoat and would never be caught without a cigarette in his hand. Needless to say, my friend was less than pleased with this comparison!

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