

COLLECTIONS

Livinder's Lamps And Lights

It was a dark

and stormy night — it really was — when Livinder Singh asked his taxi driver to pull over on the side of a pot-holed road in Calcutta. Having done so, he stepped out to ask a rickshaw puller to sell him the little candle-lamp lantern suspended from his rickshaw, swaying in the wind, its fluttering flame giving out almost no light.

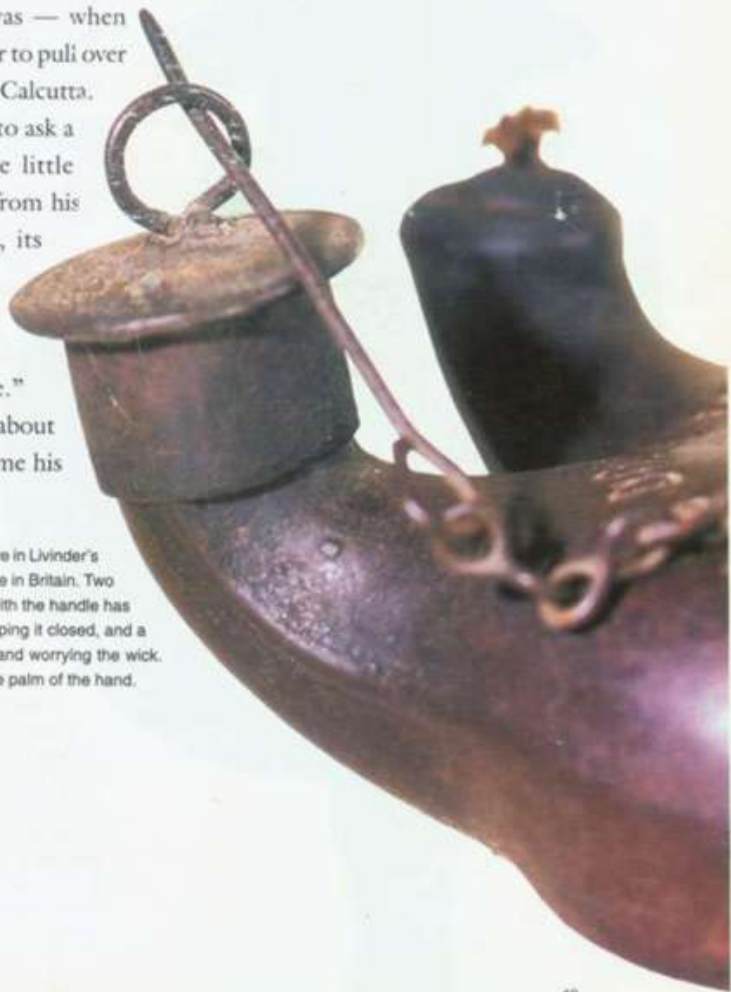
The rickshaw puller looked at him and said, "It's very expensive."

Livinder said he wasn't worried about the cost, and would he please name his price.

This twin-burner oil lamp, one of the most primitive in Livinder's collection, is in cast iron, and was probably made in Britain. Two spouts hold the wicks, and a chain connected with the handle has a lid for snuffing out the light, as well as for keeping it closed, and a long needle that is used for kindling the flame and worrying the wick. The shape of the lamp is ideal for carrying in the palm of the hand.



Text by Kishore Singh
Photographs by Shashi Sahai



That souvenir, which cost him two rupees, is today part of his collection of lamps and lights. "You should have seen the man," Livinder recounts, "so proud that he had a light on his rickshaw, just like the sahibs in their cars."

It's easy to understand why Livinder should be interested in them, for his line of work is related with lights too — the making and retailing of them — but that wouldn't take into account his passion for locks (most of which were gifted to him by art historian and fellow collector of whatever takes his fancy, Aman Nath), or his own, slightly eccentric bid for freedom (he's camping for a while in an unfurnished flat in Noida to

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escape the luxuries of his own city home and farmhouse, sleeping on a Rs 470 Khadi Gramudyog dhurrie on the terrace, and learning to cope with rain in the rooms). It's possible he wouldn't have collected lights if it wasn't his business, he says, just as it is possible that he collects telephones — despite being only a frustrated user of MTNL's services. He is being friendly, but can't help the sting in his caustic sense of humour. "I think one should have interests in life," he says, "and to be a collector with focus is to extend that hobby into a passion." Equally, he can't understand why people would want to collect things they need to guard — jewellery, for example, or expensive paintings. "One has to rise beyond collecting just things of value." Which is why his own collection includes lovely vintage lamps alongside those made from Dalda tins in backward areas in Bihar and Orissa which he bought for their beauty, painting them to give them dignity.



Left: This lamp was used on a car before it took its place in Livinder's collection. Car lamps such as these, mounted on hoops on either side of the windshield, were patterned on similar lamps used in horse carriages. Electric lights later replaced these. *Middle:* This tin lamp was bought off a rickshaw in Calcutta for a sum of only two rupees. It was painted red by Livinder. *Right:*

Detail from an original Davy's Lamp. these were used by miners to detect leakage of inflammable gases under the earth, eliminating the fear of fire. These were suspended in the mine shafts and served as warning signals.





Livinder also insists that he is not a mere collector for the sake of possession. "Because I collect lamps, I would like to find out about the fuels, the oils and materials used in their making, their process of working, the possible ways they were used. For example, in an oil lamp in a temple, the smoke and smell of oil contribute so much to the atmosphere."

He is also well up on trivia. Such as that before we had electric lights, the rich used a lot of candles in their candelabras, and even employed professionals whose work was restricted to trimming their wicks. The influence of light, he says, cannot be underplayed. "In Western countries, only the rich could afford large windows, because they could afford the heating that went with it. Which is why the homes of the poor had smaller windows, and they needed more artificial light, and which is why their rooms tended to be sooty and dark." When lighting systems were automated, he says, "they were left with no soul". Handmade lights, on the other hand, were more intelligent. "The Paris lamp had a little spring which would keep pushing the candle up so that you could use it till the very last. And the scholar's oil lamp had a wick that burned without a flutter, thereby relieving the eyes of stress."

Lots of people collect oil lamps because they are beautiful, but Livinder is livid about the way "they drill holes into them and convert them to electricity — it's like raping them. And can they ever recreate the dance of the flame?" Which is why he mixes his

collection of lights and lamps — from the very old to the rarely seen humble village lanterns. "Village lamps still demonstrate the skill of traditional application, and the good thing is that they recycle materials like oil and ghee tins so well." Lamps, to him, also represent adaptation and enterprise. "The English brought their Victorian lamps to India but found that the punkah would snuff out the flame, so

Top, left: An early torch, this light was used by the army. It consists of a dry battery packed into a metal frame, with a little bulb in front. Shorn of any aesthetic pretensions, it was simple and very practical. *Bottom, left:* This railway lamp was made in Lahore. It has an inbuilt device that makes a clacking sound to accompany the waving of the light at the station by the station master, allowing trains through. *Bottom, middle:* This lamp, says Livinder, was undoubtedly a petromax. The slimmer base at the bottom indicates that it meant to be suspended from a ring.

Below: This Paris-lamp with two candles, probably of Russian origin, has a three-legged stand as well as a wall bracket. It has a reflector behind the candle stands, and should have had a glass door in front.



they designed the ornate chimneys that would release the hot gases, retain the flame, and these are collector's items today."

Livinder's interest in lights propelled his collection, but today its size is enviable. He has found them everywhere, in junk shops, in village homes and stores, and with friends. "When people learn that I collect lights, they often come up to say, 'I've got a very nice lamp that I know you'll like,' — they just give them to me." He cleans them, repairs them, but no, he doesn't use them. "Why would I want to? I haven't got them for their functional value." But is the collection old? Can he date them? "I have some earthenware lamps with spouts that must be a thousand years old." That old? "They're pottery, hard to date, and there's no documentation, but I know their function, and that is to light, and I'm not worried about their vintage." The retort sings in the air like a wick burning out.

These lights, which take so much of his time — he reads, and has books that tell him everything there



is to know about lights — "are a part of my house and my office. I don't hide them in glass cages, I live with them." But why collect lights of all things? "It's a harmless hobby, and unlike many things it doesn't cause any harm to the environment" — he has the makings of a Greenpeace novice — "and it has beauty. You learn so much from lights, from the materials used, the stability without which the oil would have spilled, or the container punctured..." And then, the lamp as a metaphor for philosophy: "If you

have the time, you can learn a lot from even a small thing like a lamp."

He sifts through them, his collection, or what there is of it currently in his office, his fingers running over the contours, taking in the markings, checking the mechanics (some of it quite complicated), and then says in an aside, "If somebody has lamps to give away, I'd be very happy to receive them. But if there's a fancy price attached to it, don't even bother to waste the money on the letterhead." □

Top and right : Sturdily built, and beautifully machined for flexibility, the cycle lamp was also known as the carbide lamp because it held water in a container on top, and calcium carbide in its base. The light was quite steady, and the lamp itself an object of no little beauty. It was also heavy so that it could weather the elements well.

