

Photo by Duncan Gregory



## Moments in time from India

Right from the start India had an enormous impact on my thinking, perhaps because I was there for study and so able to discover more of the inside story: to appreciate what made things tick. After that, work visits followed, building something similar on foundations already laid.

In India I was more-often-than-not alone and on a tight itinerary, with Mumbai as my start and finish point and target spots across the country in between. Accompanied travel happened every now and then: one memorable time with family for an extended stay in a Juhu apartment, then later to Rajasthan and more recently, Kerala, with my daughters.

Over many visits I came to realise the camera can be pointed in any direction and the result will most likely be, a memorable picture. Similarly, there are untold experiences to be had and nearly all can tell a remarkable story: in prose or in verse.

### *Mumbai Mad!*

*I moved to take some refuge,  
To escape this teeming deluge,  
That just appears to tumble  
From a darkly ashen sky.  
Then sit and watch them scurry  
In a lazy sort of hurry,  
Soaked, no saturated  
By that waterfall on high.*

**Battered buses honking.  
Auto rickshaws squawking:  
They wiggle and they waggle,  
As they tussle for the road.  
The noise, the air pollution!  
Who care? There's no solution.  
And bigger makes it better  
Is the only Highway Code.**

**No cease to endless motion.  
Is peace just a Gandhian Notion  
That Mumbaikars adhere to  
When they go to sleep at night?  
Or is this mad cacophony  
The prologue for a symphony  
That starts, as people say,  
When you've trod the path that's right?**

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*Walk Inn café, Kalina, Mumbai 1998*

**Mumbai mad** – one of my favourite poems - was written during a work trip to the sub-continent. I often went there early in the academic year, a time which coincided with the June to August monsoon season. I loved that time of year, partly because those regular daily rains gave wonderful respite to the oppressive heat, but also because it was fun and quite unpredictable: sometimes short sharp cloudbursts, on other occasions a total deluge which seemed to go on forever. On this day, the rain poured endlessly from above, saturating and almost obliterating everything from view that existed on Earth below, as I sit watching from a small café nearby.

### *The Rickshaw Wallah and I*

**I've just established bad relations  
Between fellow man and I.  
And now regretting  
This irksome deed,  
Sit, in search of an alibi.**

**The richshaw wallah, a faceless man,  
Didn't know where to go.  
So, I stormed away,  
No payment made:  
A rather despicable show.**

***He spoke Marathi, no English tongue,  
And probably came from far.  
Why should he know  
This 'Holiday Inn',  
To serve the foreign Tzar?***

***Now I sit secure above Juhu Beach,  
With Hayward's brew to hand.  
The drink cost more  
Than his daily pay.  
Does that make me feel so grand?***

***I muse on this point of relations,  
I have time to do that you see.  
I don't have to climb into  
My three-wheeled cab  
And work from dawn till tea.***

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Holiday Inn, Juhu Beach, Mumbai 2003

It was on a work visit five years later which prompted ***The rickshaw wallah and I***, when I acted out a mini drama that seemed to say everything there was to say about the gulf that existed between myself - as a privileged and itinerant white male – and the millions of people who live on the bread line, in Mumbai ...and across the length and breadth of India. In recovery mode from a school meeting and the heat, I opted for a cool beer at Holiday Inn, overlooking Juhu Beach. My auto-rickshaw driver either couldn't understand my directions or had no idea how to get to Holiday Inn. I lost my temper and refused to pay, then later felt repentant because of my irresponsible actions. After all, I was supposed to be there to help build empathy between Australia and India; not wreck it! "*Practice what you preach, or go back to where you came from,*" I told myself.

## ***In Octopussy Land***

***"Come to my shop"  
Is the chorusing cry  
From the Udaipur  
Shopkeeper's clan.***

***"I paint these myself"  
Says the mustachioed boy,  
As he points to  
The art on his stand.***

***“Which country you from?”  
Another weak ploy  
On the sidewalks  
Where tourists are crammed.***

***But if only they knew  
The more that they try,  
The more that we are  
Less likely to buy.  
And all that they do  
Is just make us walk by,  
Till we find that one shop  
Where no shopkeepers cry,  
And we’re able to browse  
In peace till we buy:  
A dream that’s unfortunately  
Destined to die,  
In Octopussy land.***

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*Udaipur, August 2006.*

***In Octopussy Land.*** Udaipur is in Rajasthan, the Indian state widely known for its vibrancy and colour. The lakeside town is also a major tourist destination, not least for the fact that it served as the backdrop for the James Bond movie, *Octopussy*. I visited in 2006, with my daughter Alice, who was 15 years old at the time, a tall blue-eyed girl, with long blonde hair. So, she had the looks and I had the money, making us doubly important prey for the men-dwellers of the touristic stalls.

The main tourist bazaar was a narrow, downhill street, crammed with small shops on either side, selling a range of items from locally made art and crafts, through to the worst of Chinese-style plastic rubbish. We could have been tempted to buy, but the brash shopkeepers were very off-putting, firstly trying to goad the prospective buyer into the shop and then more harassment once captured. The result was that we tended to walk on past the aggressive retailers and only enter the places where we could look around in relative quiet. But those shops were comparatively few and the conundrum was that the hassly shops might hold goods of interest to us, whereas the peaceful ones may not. *Catch-22*, you could say!

## *Indian antidote*

***Did you explain enough background?  
If so, why did they fall apart,  
With just days gone past?  
Did you enable them to consider  
And question?  
Answering, but not dominating:  
A fine line to tread.***

***Mumbai hits some people between the eyes!  
Senses unused for years, pummeled  
By sight, sound, smell and taste.  
Everything seems out of control and  
Uncontrollable.  
Instinct promotes fear and  
A search for the known.***

***Colds and flu and 'Bombay Bug' emerge  
Within hours of the first assault  
From the masses on Mumbai's streets.  
Time is elastic and thus provides  
A point for control.  
Time must be regulated  
To regain lost power.***

***And so, we bend to meet their wishes;  
To provide a more structured world:  
Antidote to irregularity.  
Reacting not unlike the Curzons and  
Clives of the past:  
To bring British order  
To undisciplined hell!***

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Mumbai 2004

***Indian Antidote*** tackles the issue of how non-Indians react to being in India. The topic arose whilst I was leading a mixed delegation of people from other countries, on a two-week tour of Mumbai schools and related institutions. Time became a central focus. For Indians, time is elastic, but for many westerners, a rigid timetable is required to counteract the vagaries they find around them. In the end a meeting was held to dispel disquiet and try to put the visit back on track.