

Moments in time from India

India first featured on my agenda in the 1980s and impressed enormously, right from the start, in part perhaps because I was mostly there for study or for work, and so was able to discover more of the 'inside story': to see what made things tick.

In India I was more-often-than-not by myself, with a tight itinerary, which meant I moved between target spots on the local scene, across the country, or within a large city such as Mumbai. Accompanied travel happened every now and then – one memorable time with family for an extended stay in a Juhu apartment; then much later to Rajasthan with one daughter and to the far South, a few years later, with two daughters in charge.

Over many visits I came to realise the camera can be pointed in any direction in India and the result will, more often than not, be a memorable picture. Similarly, there is a plethora of experiences to be had and nearly all can tell a remarkable story. The first poem was initiated as I sat looking out from a Mumbai café to the monsoon drenched street outside:

Mumbai Mad!

*I moved to take some refuge,
To escape this teaming 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.*

'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.

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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 fact 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.*

Holiday Inn, Juhu Beach
Mumbai 2003

The rickshaw wallah and I. It was on a 'work' visit five years later, when I acted out a mini drama, which 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's 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 the man, 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.

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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.*

*Frustrated by touts
In beautiful Udaipur
August 2006.*

In Octopussy Land. Udaipur is to be found 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.

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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!*

Global-ITE conference
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, where time became a central focus. For Indians, time is elastic, but for many westerners a rigid timetable is required to counteract the many vagaries they find around them.