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## South Asia - a toe in the water

**(My first time in India, now more than three decades ago.)**

Through my porthole I could see a multitude of small lights – yellow, orange, white – glittering and shimmering in the evening mist. A Summer wonderland perhaps? As the landing speed reduced, I noticed the lights were spread over undulating ground on either side of the runway. A few years later I would walk amongst that myriad of tiny lights, to realise it wasn't evening mist, but smoke from a thousand small cooking fires, that I saw on my first arrival in India. The runway was in effect a long flat valley, between crowded slums.

### ***A first acquaintance***

Bombay International Airport, in theory, might have been modelled on London's Heathrow, but in practice it missed the mark by a long mile. Empty concrete corridors, with opaque glass in rusting metal frames, dank stairwells and an unforgettable, all-pervading smell. I landed into and left from the place on numerous occasions and strangely came to love its all-pervading qualities of disorder and lack of upkeep. I always relished that tropical - yet unmistakably unique - aroma, which for me became synonymous with touch-down in Bombay ... or Mumbai, as it came to be.

The airport is nowhere near the nominated city centre. Imagine the vast metropolis as a spear, standing on its tip; the centre is at that very tip and the spear head is a large island, joined to its shaft by road and rail bridges. This vast city shaft stretches 50

kilometres upwards (or northwards), trapped between *Indian Ocean* on one side and *The Western Ghats* on the other. The airport is about half-way along this shaft.

The city, named by the Raj as Bombay, grew from an archipelago of fishing villages to become the main port and huge commercial centre of India. People came from all over to live and work in this booming, industrial mega-centre. Some flourished, while others struggled. When I first visited, the urban area was a place of extreme contrasts, boasting grand coastal mansions and the finest five-star hotels, while not very far away could be found places densely populated by the poor: slums, such as Dharavi, the biggest of its kind in Asia, famous for its two-storey accommodation and leather industry.

After gaining a first acquaintance with the endless queues in immigration and the custom hall's reverse, entry-to-India baggage scan, it was a steamy night ride by taxi, to the South (the tip of the spear), and a bed in the small *Sea Palace Hotel* ... situated across from the promenade, but by no means a palace. Some years later I would return to this area, as guest of a much-revered professor at The University of Mumbai. Her sixth-floor penthouse apartment - which looked over the Gateway of India - was a delight, enshrined and moth-balled from the 1930s. But that glimpse of the past was to be mine in the future; for now, I was feeling my way - with a mix of excitement and apprehension - into Bombay, and then on to the greater India.

My first morning, began with a short stroll around the corner to Leopold's Café - made famous by artists and insurgents - where I stopped for a coffee, accompanied by an extravagant, but delicious cheesecake. Then a short ride North, in a battered, black and yellow taxi - the age-old Ambassador variety - took me to the Fort district, with its large expanses of green, public fountains on roundabouts, and tall office blocks. After that it was westward to the towering Oberoi Hotel and the broad sweep of *Chowpatti Beach: The Queens Necklace* by night. In passing, I noticed the entrance to a slum at the southern end of Chowpatti, which I later found out was the focus of attention in the book *Shantaram*, and also a place I would return to, as a part of my work with children.

FOOTNOTE: When they opened a new airport - *Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj* - twenty-five years later; one dripping in gold, with soft carpets and Mughal arches (the most up-to-date and fashionable I have ever seen), I began to long for the old decrepit facility, with its black and white bathroom-style tiling and ominous smells, which I got to know so well.

The new opulent structure takes Mumbai into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and leaves Bombay way behind in the past: an analogy perhaps for the times in general. I guess I am a nostalgic soul at heart, but I realise that 20th Century India - from the *British Raj*, to *Gandhi* and the struggle for independence, then partition and the *Green Revolution* - can never be rekindled. The new edifice to the aeroplane has been built to capture the global market and to put Mumbai firmly at the centre of that endeavour.

## ***Punjab Mail to Agra***

Two days later, on advice from the guide, I booked a train ticket to Agra: *The Punjab Mail*. My train would depart from *Victoria Terminus* the next day, at 8.30 a.m. ... precisely! The station guide had advised, with a degree of emphasis: “*Don’t be late. It will start at 8.30, on the dot! You come here 8.31 a.m., then am sorry sah, you will miss your train.*”

I had been guided to the mainline station – known as *VT to locals and foreigners alike* – by an elderly man I met in the street a few blocks away. This Gandhi-like figure, bald and wearing circular metal-framed spectacles, with white shirt, green baggy pants and leather sandals, waved his white stick in the air, with a theatrical flourish.

“*Follow me,*” he said. “*I will show you the way to VT. No money. I want no money.*”

He told me he was eighty years old. His stooped back, missing teeth and blackened eye surrounds testified to this. But the man was still young in other ways, with eyes that sparkled and very alert of mind. He had tasted a lengthy life, but he was still determined to enjoy what was left of it, for as long as he could.

After a few minutes we rounded a corner, and he pointed his stick at a most impressive building façade: a Gothic pile of British architecture masquerading as a railway station. I had seen it a number of times in photos, but like a football match or a stage performance, nothing beats actually being there, in its presence.

“*Victoria Terminus young man. As I promised.*” His English was word perfect as he said this, with his hands placed together in the non-verbal *namaste* sign.

“*The guidebooks don’t do this one justice,*” I thought to myself, before turning back to my *Gandhiji* look-alike, with what I hoped was a good mirror image of the *namaste* he had just offered to me.

The gestures between us conveyed his pleasure and my thanks, with no further words necessary. I discovered *thankyou* tends to be an unspoken understanding, in India.

Moments later I had entered, through the imposing arches and came face-to-face with this cavernous wonder of the station concourse; people lying, sitting, standing, walking, everywhere. With its massive columns reaching to an arched roof, it had all the hallmarks of a lofty cathedral in the heart of England.

“*Are you hot?*” asked the railways guide, as I sat down. His luxurious black hair and splendid moustache were typical of many Indian men in their prime. He wore a navy-blue uniform; his peaked cap sat on the wooden desk, next to a *Lord Ganesh* glass replica, which controlled a pile of paper. He looked smart and efficient, but *not* hot.

*"Mmmm ...A little warm"* I replied, trying desperately not to show that I was almost at the point of melt-down.

He peered at me through black-rimmed specs. *"A little warm? A little warm? Then we need some cool air!"* His voice followed him through a wooden door, to some inner chamber and I heard the click of an electric switch.

Seconds later the overhead fan cranked into life, playing a most welcome breeze onto my perspiring forehead and sweat-soaked shirt.

*'You see the fan, but you do not see the breeze it creates'*, he remarked, gesticulating with the air of some bearded guru, as he returned to sit behind the old, battered desk.

*"Now. Some tea perhaps?"* As he spoke, I noticed to the side of me, a bare-footed man, dressed only in khaki shorts and turban, on his haunches, tiling the floor, while a sari-clad woman cleaned up the mess he created.

*"Well, at least he's dressed for the heat,"* I thought. *"Life goes on for us all, in different ways, I guess."*

The next day I made very sure that I was there well ahead of the 8.30 departure time, having heard (and read) various tales of woe related to Indian trains and the possibilities of seats being commandeered by interlopers ... much of it probably exaggerated to scare the novice (such as myself).

It took almost an hour to pass through the sprawl of suburbs to the north of Bombay. A never-ending stream of six-story apartment buildings passed by my window: high-rise concrete slums I thought, unpainted and tarnished by the monsoon rains, some looking as if they might crumble to heaps of rubble in the next deluge. I had a lot to learn.

Boom gates and bells held back vehicles of every description ... and people ... so many people! At times the high-rise vista gave way to ground level settlements, made up of straw dwellings and tin shacks, set around narrow alleyways with kids squatting in the dirt and women clad in colourful clothing. People gazed and waved at the metal monster as it trundled past, on its daily journey northwards.

In time I would come to know that the multi-floored apartment buildings were not slums, they were in fact the homes of salaried workers and the middle classes. These homes, constructed not so long before, were solidly built, sullied only by the rapid and constant weathering that takes place in the tropics. The ground level settlements were the slums, but even they housed workers who would emerge from their decidedly down-market dwellings, looking energetic and dressed smartly for work each day.

Alongside our rumbling mainline train and its convoy of fifteen carriages, pulled by two enormous, diesel locomotives, ran the speedy little electric commuter trains, with people jammed at the open doors, fighting to gain a breath of cool breeze. I noticed some young men braving the elements as they sat cross-legged on top of the commuter carriages, ducking low whenever their free ride to or from the city went under a bridge, or overhead gantry. For some, fresh air and a free ride was much better than being packed like sardines into the steamy carriages below, even if it did come with a decided risk to limb ... and possibly life!

After the city sprawl, the land was flat, with wide expanses of dark cracked soil, hay fields and vegetable gardens, divided by colourful flowering shrubs. Men in white, shepherded small herds of zebu cattle. Dark-skinned ladies, with babies in tow, heading for home carrying large bundles of sticks on their heads.

Light began to fade, as a haze emerged across the valley floor. A silhouette of jagged mountain peaks stood out against an azure sky, and as the train rolled on into the night, the unusual light, coupled with the heat haze, produced an eerie, almost mystical effect. The train rattled and swayed into more hilly terrain. It was possible to catch occasional glimpses of groups of round, bamboo and thatch huts, through the sparsely treed surroundings: traditional settlements of the rural Marathi people. Tall dry grasses reflected the brilliant orange sunset and looking back, those mystical mountains were also now enveloped in a red and yellow sky. It was for me, a magical moment in time.

During the long night the train made numerous stops, each time shaking me out of my half-dozing, half-sleeping state. At every one of these rural stations the platform was alive with people: some boarding, some disembarking, some meeting friends, others there to sell their goods.

As the night wore on, the air became crisper and the dress of the platform people correspondingly more elaborate, so that with shawls over their heads they began to resemble nomadic tribesmen. Even the carriage guard appeared a little more Tibetan, with his snug fitting woolen cap and brown tunic. At each stop, fellow insomniacs would rush off the train, as it slowly squealed to a halt, in search of a tiny earthenware cup of chai, or a small parcel of peanuts, to support their sleeplessness.

Dawn found us speeding through a half-lit forest area, then on to a plain of wheat fields that appeared dry and parched. We travelled across mile, after mile, of this semi-arid, and in places quite rocky landscape; it seemed to be never-ending: a small section of India's vast wheat bowl.

Breakfast in Bhopal: the place that had become known the world over for the *Union Carbide* gas leak, just a few months before. The industrial disaster had killed 2,000 and in total affected an estimated 50,000 people, committing many to blindness for the rest of their lives. I felt quite uncomfortable and conspicuous looking out from the train window - an open grill, without glass - towards the people on the platform: a Westerner ensnared, in the midst of an anguished population. I was not from the USA, the home-country of the company which caused their unspeakable misfortune, but of course they were not to know that. My train *Window to the world* took on a whole new meaning in this case: a tragic cameo, played out in real time.

Food on the train was a ritual not to be missed. I marveled at the routine: the meal order was taken, then some way further down the track the requested dishes were loaded on board and delivered, exactly as requested, to each passenger in turn. And it was not always curry and rice as one might have thought; my evening menu was made up of tomato soup, a burger, banana and pineapple for desert and a milk coffee, or *Nescafe* as referred to all across the country. The tomato soup and burger were delicious, if a little spicy ... which I was beginning to recognize as par for the course!

Hot afternoon arrival in Agra brought an introduction to my first landfall outside Bombay. Total chaos around the station exit and some frantic bargaining, preceded a frenzied bicycle-rickshaw ride to The Grand Hotel – pre-selected from my guidebook - in the centre of town. I lost my cool with the rickshaw driver, or *rickshaw wallah* as he is known, when he took me a roundabout route to his *cousin's* jewellery shop, before we reached The Grand (owned by another *cousin!*). I taught myself over time not to get angry over these little things: it was not the Indian way and never solved anything.

I soon found out the word 'Grand', in the hotel's masthead, referred mainly to price, rather than the quality, thus on the morning after I made the change to a much cheaper, but better establishment. The new place even had air conditioning! All that sorted, I set out with great expectations, to discover the Taj Mahal.

FOOTNOTE: It is interesting to look back on this first, of many train journeys in India, and that Agra was the initial destination. 20 years later I would make the same journey, with my daughter, on route to Rajasthan. In some ways there were similarities between these two spells in Agra. For each I was travelling with a blonde, female – the first my partner, the second my daughter. The big difference with the second visit was that we met up with two local boys, who in effect became our chaperones and thus we stayed longer, getting to know more about Agra, the town (as opposed to Agra, the tourist destination).

(that second story about Agra is told in the chapter entitled: *The Two Boys of Agra.*)

### ***Getting to Grips with Gramayan***

A week or so after Agra and following brief encounters with Delhi and Calcutta, I arrived in Poona, on the *Deccan Plateau*, just a few hours from my starting point. I was aiming to study the effectiveness of Oxfam's development work, at the grass roots level. For this I had been directed to *Gramayan*, a local group which delivered its agenda for the poor in rural villages, about twenty kilometres to the East of Poona.

On arrival, I found the city's main railway station to be something out of the British Raj, with its stone walls and maroon, wooden trim; it could have been transported from Winchester ... and maybe it was. Beyond the exit of course, the reality of an Asian world resumed, with taxis, auto-rickshaws and bicycle rickshaws all clamouring for business. Across from the station, ladies in bright sarees sat cross-legged behind stalls laid out on the ground. In a hurry to get to the centre of town, I threw myself and bag into an auto.

My first aim was to meet the head of *Gramayan*, *Vasant Deshpande*, professor in Economics at the Indian Institute of Education. He was revered as a supporter of the *Harijan* peoples (*Children of God* as christened by Mahatma Gandhi), and had written books, which focused in particular on the Adivasis, or indigenous tribes. I liked him instantly: a small, balding man, with eyes that sparkled as he told me of his work with the poor. We discussed *Gramayan*'s development work and he put plans in place for me to visit their field sites, beginning early the next morning.

Not long after dusk, a day later, I sat on the floor of a mud-walled house, after a simple meal of dahl and rice, chatting with the owner, Namdeo. We had travelled by motorbike in the afternoon and for dinner he had removed the red crash helmet, exposing a shock of jet black hair, which he now swept back, to stop it covering his face. There was a lull in conversation, and I needed the loo, so after a few minutes the house-girl arrived with a small can of water and a two-foot long stick.

"*What's the stick for?*" I whispered to my friend sitting beside me. She shrugged her shoulders and imitated the Indian head waggle, looking towards me with an amused expression on her face. Namdeo must have twigged what was going on and went into mime mode to explain what the tools were for; then with a wide sweep of his arm, indicated that I should go into the bushes outside to put theory into practice.

"*Oh, I see. Great. I get what you mean,*" I said rather sheepishly. Then rising to my feet with can and stick in hand, I disappeared through the mosquito netting at the doorway, into a dark, starry night.

Namdeo, tall and skinny with a good command of English, was Deshpande's right-hand man in Shivtakrur: coordinator for on-the-ground work in the villages, with the added burden of being my guide and interpreter for the few weeks I was there. He was an invaluable asset, demonstrating a well-developed rapport with his people, which was great to see and be a part of. In turn I tried to make sure I intruded as little as possible on the work he was engaged in.

The technical work involved what is known in the trade as *lift irrigation*: lifting water out of the nearby river to irrigate the fields, which in turn supported crop production, thus increasing incomes and providing a healthier lifestyle. The project in fact used old and disused irrigation machinery that had been out of commission for years. But the unsung work that Namdeo did, was much more abstract and related to guiding the community to understand that true benefits from the irrigation water were largely dependent on them working together in a cooperative manner. This was crucial to overall success (and in fact not being able to do this had been the cause for failure, all those years before).

As I would come to learn - particularly from later experiences of living and working in Africa - when people are poor, money is in short supply and disputes can arise over very small issues. Namdeo's role, as community advisor, was to bring the village community together regularly, sometimes men, sometimes women, and sometimes all in one big group, to discuss and debate their differences (in their local Marathi language). If the farmers disputed their water rights, this could be discussed and solved; if women had grievances regarding the village school, this could also be sorted out. It really was the cornerstone of community development, which supported all the other, perhaps more technical aspects, that followed on from that.

When I left the village for the final time, Namdeo dropped me at the main road, to wait for the bus. The bus never came, so I clambered into the cabin of a large quarry truck heading in the right direction. The people already inside helped to pull me and my bag up and on board. Sitting there, as the mid-cabin engine roared and the driver manipulated the long-handled gear shift, I looked around. There was a narrow bed behind the two front seats and bodies seemed to be everywhere. I started to count, losing track a couple of times, but then concluded to myself that, if I included the two young men hanging outside the passenger-side door, there was a total of myself plus twelve other adults, hitching an illegal ride into Poona. "*This is India,*" I told myself.

The time spent in Shivtakrur and surrounding villages, was really my first *hands-on* experience of life at the grass roots, in an Asian setting. I saw Vasant Deshpande twice more: once for dinner and once in his office, before I was due to leave. When we met on a subsequent trip, I was able to show him the report my studies, from which extracts and



edits were published, as a part of a high school text in Australia. Sadly, Vasant died of throat cancer, a short time after that. This quite humble man, his work and his writing, would be missed by many. He was a bastion for the Adivasis (the indigenous, or aboriginal tribes of India), some of whom I met during my time in Shivtakrur.

FOOTNOTE: The study of *Gramayan* was part of a wider undertaking which related to *Oxfam*, in general. I was particularly interested to examine the image of *Oxfam* in its home base, the UK – how it projected itself to supporters – and the actuality of programmes carried out at the grass roots, in a recipient country. Needless to say, the image *Oxfam* presented in the UK was in many ways quite different to the work it supported at ground level, with *Gramayan*. That section of the study related directly to *Gramayan's* work in India, was published in Australia as part of a Geography text for secondary schools, entitled *Dilemmas of Development*.

### ***Back to Bombay: the circle completed***

I had managed to stumble upon a representative of the sacred bovine sect - a cow - all decked out with tassels and ribbons; its horns painted the colours of the flag: orange, green and white. An unusual sight, even in India.

*“For two rupees only,”* its owner said (also looking resplendent in baggy whites, with matching purple sash and turban, plus a magnificent, white moustache which looked as though it had been twirled to a fine point on either side). *“She can tell your fortune.”*

I smiled back at him, but then perhaps curiosity got the better of me and I handed over the coins. *“OK, bring it on,”* I murmured, more to myself than to the old man.

As it turned out, the bovid beast had three ways of answering questions – one nod for yes, two for no, or repeated nods for a numerical answer.

*“Brilliant! There goes my lunch money.”* I murmured, out of the cow's earshot, so as not to offend.

And sure enough, the bovine beast did the necessary. *“Will I have more children?”* That was a nod. *“How many more?”* Another nod ... just one. *“Will I live to old age?”* Another single nod. We seemed to be stuck in a bit of a groove, but anyway, doing OK so far.

After that, answers began to go downhill, even to the stage of becoming alarming - like being confronted by a toothless, cackling witch at a mystic tarot reading – so I thanked the man, and the cow, with a namaste sign, and the three of us went on our merry way.

Whilst making my various ways around this city, built from islands, I couldn't help thinking that, despite all their shortcomings, the British had at least managed to school the locals in how to build things that could last (or maybe this novel idea came from Indians themselves, I wasn't sure). It appeared as if the trains and buses were made to withstand an earthquake and though bearing some resemblance to their London counterparts, looked like they might be used as front-line assault vehicles in a war zone: not much glamour or glitter, but certainly solid! The same went for bicycles. No gleaming road racer, or mountain bike rubbish in Bombay; here bikes were built to traverse the Thar Desert and back, without faltering in their trajectory.

And again, with a nod to the departed colonialists, there also seemed to be an awful lot of time spent (and paper used) on menial tasks, such as producing and receipting a train ticket. An office was not serious about its role if it didn't exhibit folder upon folder of past documents, to gather dust behind the service counter, and stacked on shelves that soared to the ceiling. This was of course the 1980s, pre-digital age, and India would quickly come to master the art and even control the development of digital, as we moved forward through the 90s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In the daytime, chaos and climate appeared to collide to form a potent mix of madness. As a newcomer fresh from the West, I sometimes had to take refuge from it all - the heat, the noise, the turmoil of the street - by retreating to (what was at least for me) a more people-friendly environment, to cool off and re-group my thoughts; reposition my plans. Then after a blast of cool air, and perhaps even a cold *Kingfisher* to boot, I would venture into the fray once again ... revitalised.

When I first went there, I would ask: *"How long can Bombay go on like this?"* to which people would look back knowingly, with that characteristic waggle of the head and smile. After a few return visits, I stopped asking the question.

Later, after Bombay became Mumbai, it remained a city of contrasts, but more and more it became a city caught in the computer revolution: the commercial hub of India; the biggest movie house in the world. It became Mumbai, a city moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with gusto: a reflection of India's progress on the world's stage. Those people were right to wag their heads and smile back whenever I asked my rather juvenile, western-centric question. In time I came to know the answer too: *"Of course it will survive; this is our city, and we are Indians. Whether it's Bombay or Mumbai makes no difference; we will persevere, and the city will progress, no matter what the obstacles."*

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