

Photo by Duncan Gregory



India in Retrospect

Returning to India grew to be like a second homecoming. Touchdown was nearly always Mumbai - which for a decade I knew as Bombay - and each time, as the aircraft powered forward, dipping towards the runway, those snapshot glimpses of an uneven terrain crammed with shanty dwellings would resume in my view. More and more this struck me as a symbol of why I was there in the first place, for it was perhaps the most extreme lifestyle interface one could imagine: high-tech jumbos gliding past squalid slums. Neither existence could touch the other ... and one certainly did not want to.

The airport I first came to know did not alter much (apart from a new name imposed by the Maharashtra State Government). Most airports move forward to upgrade amenities and creature comforts, but repeated sightings of this one only managed to rekindled a series of constant trademark memories: the waterfall without water, a sort of trophy stand without trophies, the featureless walls and grubby stairwells. Rising above all this, the most indelible memory – from the sense they say lingers longest – was the smell: an especially Indian concoction of heavy air and spicy foods and a host of other ingredients rolled together, that once smelt cannot be forgotten; loath it or love it. ... I grew to love it! So much so, that when the gleaming new monument to progress came along, decades later, I began to pine for that musty, decrepit facility, which I loved to revile.

Immigration invariably presented those same long queues streaming back from old, battered counters; the opening of a new desk setting off mad scrambles for the fresh line: an opportunity to jump the queue. But perhaps this was simply an analogy of Indian life itself, so newcomers could taste what was to come, beyond the terminal doors.

After immigration came the untold vagaries of baggage collection and customs, with several different dockets to hold onto before final (and blissful) release. On one occasion I was half-expecting to see a friend's sister – the lady worked at the airport as a customs officer - after I had emerged from the immigration scrum. I remember wandering about, asking various uniformed personnel if *Lakshmi* was on duty; only to be received with rather blank, and (perhaps) questioning stares, as if they were wondering whether I was buttering them up, before slipping my cocaine laden bags between their legs. On subsequent arrivals, unless Lakshmi came running towards me with open arms - which did actually happen on one occasion - I side-stepped the whole issue of preferential treatment, in favour of letting events run their normal, elongated course.

I guess the crush of people that every arriving passenger faced as he or she passed through the terminal's glass exit doors – those who were there essentially to scrutinize every arriving passenger as they came into view – was in reality, different in individual make-up, each time. But from my angle - the passenger's angle - they always looked the same: a very Indian mix of meeters and greeters: friends and relations ... some with placards; mostly male, clamoring four or five deep; competing to gain attention.

I developed an exit routine which involved a spicy cup of chai and cigarette: a ten-minute break, before launching myself on the unique world of Indian transport. One valuable lesson, learnt early on, was that a pre-booked taxi saved the hassle of bartering for price, and ensured a quick route out of the airport, at a known cost. Price however was one thing, navigation was another. On one occasion I clambered into the back seat of my assigned black and yellow *fiat*, only to find the khaki-clad driver, looking at me with a blank stare: "*Kalina?*" he repeated back to me, as if I had asked for some destination on the moon, "*I not know sah*". I had asked for a district adjoining the airport, while he was locked into a to-and-from city-centre routine. He knew nothing else.

For many years, the streets outside the airport changed very little. A few kilometres of narrow road littered with retail shops and small-scale industries on either side, busy and bustling into the early morning hours (often the time I would arrive). But whether by day or night, the air was always heavy with an inbuilt variety of sub-tropical flavours which encompassed (amongst other things): culinary delights, industrial pollutants, vehicular fumes, monsoon rains, roadside rubbish and animal discards, a humidity that hung like a wet blanket, and heat ... that endless heat!

Doomsayers would declare that living in Mumbai was equivalent to smoking twenty cigarettes a day, which was not hard to believe (and seemed perhaps an underestimate) particularly when surrounded by a dozen vehicles, all belching forth thick, blue or black smoke, at the lights; this scenario gave a whole new meaning to the song: *Every breath you take!* Once whilst stationary for what seemed like eternity, with the three-inch exhaust of a battered double-decker bus blasting a cloud of toxic fumes into my face, I had visions of collapse through dire need of oxygen; to wind the window up tempted a similarly bitter end: asphyxiation caused by heat exhaustion!

My immediate destination after touchdown was usually (as mentioned above) the suburb of *Kalina*, where a friend and colleague arranged for me to stay at the university campus guest hostel (my work - and hers - was connected to the university, which enabled this). If I had been able to jump out of the plane onto the runway and clamber over the airport's tall, galvanized, perimeter fence, it would have taken about ten minutes to get to the campus. As it was, the roundabout journey (partly because of the fuming traffic) took up to an hour. By the end of that hour I had travelled in a circle and was close to the point where it was possible to glimpse the tails of those gleaming *Boeing 747s* from the other side of the social divide, moving in slow motion, above the rusty perimeter fence, like ostriches gliding along behind tall grass of the African Savannah. This led me to think a whole lot more about the city I had returned to ... and the world in general.

The hostel at *Kalina University Campus* was a spartan affair in those early days, and my first night, locked in a room which seemed to me at the time, something like a prison cell, was a testing experience. After that I grew to enjoy this rather basic facility,

eventually graduating to, what was termed, the V.I.P. suite (still spartan, but bigger), then subsequently to a newly built hostel, that whilst definitely not *The Ritz*, had all modern conveniences. Over the years, my pick would have been the VIP suite, mainly because it offered a small balcony which overlooked a garden of lush green lawns and tropical palms. In the monsoon, when the rains really got going, I would sit on this third-floor platform, watching as my sub-tropical surrounds disappeared behind a veritable waterfall of water. The coconut palms swayed to breaking point, thunder clapped like cannon fire and down below the ground became a murky lake!

Oh my God, how it could rain! On one occasion I recall breakfast at *Walk-In*, an airy, South Indian café just over the road from the campus gates. It had been pouring most of the day and night before, but for a short while there was a lull: a moment's respite. Then suddenly the clouds above opened up and it started to come down again, without warning: from stone-dry to Niagara Falls in seconds! Where did it all come from? I recall the sky above was not as black as one might imagine; more a grey, blanket-like, snow-filled sky in England. How could there be so much water up there? It must be stacked up, kilometres high!

It was easy though, to see where it went, or in fact, where it was supposed to go and didn't! Drains and culverts were everywhere, but unfortunately almost always non-functional; or at best, poorly functioning. The city had an interminable problem of blocked drains; plastics were an especial menace. But even with plastic bags outlawed and a pristine sewer system, it was hard to imagine how this mountain of water could be made to disappear very quickly.

People seemed to love the rain, children especially. A decent monsoon brought heartfelt relief from the searing temperatures of the April-May Summer season. Kids danced in the downpour; taxi drivers wandered casually between cars and those who didn't have, or couldn't afford an umbrella, just seemed to stroll along, oblivious to the water cascading on their hair and drenching their clothes. Even if you did have an umbrella it was unrealistic to think you could keep much of the body dry once the rains became

serious. Whether your shoes or your shirt, your hat or your hair; you were going to get wet anyway, so why bother about it? Throw caution to the wind. Get saturated!

Once whilst sheltering under a Santa Cruz shopfront, I noticed a man walking along, fully dressed in business attire and carrying a briefcase. Suddenly, he disappeared from view; he had fallen down an open manhole (which had been obscured by the flood waters). Undaunted and unhurt, he clambered out, shook himself off – a bit like a dog after a bath - and carried on across the road. “*Now that really does show a remarkable degree of Indian fortitude,*” I remember thinking to myself.

I guessed that the feeling of euphoria would wear off after a while; a constant stream of saturated saris and grubby wet trouser legs dimming most people’s enthusiasm. Of course, for the moneyed class, for people with a decent roof over their heads and an air-conditioned vehicle to drive, the monsoon meant a cooling euphoria, tinged perhaps with a modicum of inconvenience.

In stark contrast, for the poor of Mumbai, these annual rains usually spelt misery and disaster: rainwater pouring over banks and off roadways, to ransack their flimsy houses in the slums. Dirt floors and mud walls do not mix easily with a metre or so of uninvited water: they crumble, and they fall. People are made homeless in their thousands. The elderly and the young die from dampness and disease. That, I came to realise, was the flip side of this joyful, playful thing, called monsoon, which hits the sub-continent every year in June, then lingers through until August or September: a given essential, with, on all too frequent occasions, disastrous consequences!

Aspects of people-pressure and the rich-poor divide fascinated me. During those initial visits in the 1980s, I used the analogy of India and Australia to compare population pressure on Mother Earth. Back then, India’s people numbered some 900 million, almost exactly 50 times that of Australia. At the same time, the southern hemisphere continent was roughly twice the size of the northern country, meaning that on average there were 100 times the number of feet on a given area of ground in India, compared to Australia.

Since then, India's population has rocketed away, long since passing the one billion barrier, in hot pursuit of China (which it will overtake in the 2020s). An interesting aside was that India's speed of increase was, and still is, at least one Australia (or alternatively, one additional Mumbai): more than 20 million people, per year ... a staggering figure to contemplate! Australia by contrast, like other western, industrialised countries, and in tandem with education levels, is slowing to a standstill. This birthrate slowdown is also happening within the middle and upper classes in India, but for people on lower incomes there is little change, and the pull towards employment in urban areas continues to swell numbers in the old cities, while creating newly populated cities from places which existed as sleepy rural towns in the past.

On the ground in India, it is easy to see how people pressure plays itself out, especially at the heart of a large metropolis. Near any Mumbai station the numbers of people walking home from work can form an endless stream, eight or ten deep, as if hurrying to some distant cricket match or sell-out Bollywood blockbuster. But this is no mega sports event or movie festival, it is a twice daily occurrence, with a majority of male commuters heading to and from the train, where they will squeeze into airless spaces, or for the more daring, hand from the open doors, or for the even more daring, risk limb and life, by sitting atop the carriage! It makes London look like a stroll in the park.

Then alongside the lines of walking workers, moving along in seemingly infinite motion, one sees and hears unending numbers of auto rickshaws, waddling, jostling and squawking for position, like ducks coming home from the lake as they weave amongst the battered, red double-deckers and comparatively sleek private cars, For a newcomer from the West it all seems like something akin to a wild night at the fairground. One English friend who rode with me in an auto, on her first journey to Santa Cruz Station screamed with delight: *"It's like 'Alton Towers', but all for free"*. ...Well virtually free, at a nominal cost of twenty cents.

Some distance from the city and into The Western Ghats (the hills that border the sprawl of the city to the East) the line of trucks and buses grinding their way up the long and winding road from Mumbai to Pune, is endless. At night it is worse than day, as drivers

seek to ensure that in the relative cool of the night their - both fixed, and articulated - monsters, reach the lip of the Deccan Plateau without overheating or collapsing. Quite a few do not, and the steeper gradients are strewn with *abandoned, semi-abandoned* and *just-resting* vehicles. The rules on this road, or any road in India for that matter, seem to revolve around the mantra *bigger is better*, with the invisible centre-line, which would normally divide vehicles travelling in either direction, becoming a moveable feast, depending on the driver's appetite for sheer bravado and dominance!

And then there were the religious celebrations. I developed a soft spot for *Ganesh* - the rather rotund, elephant headed God – whom each year becomes the centre-piece for the *Ganesh Chaturthi* festival (which often happened to coincide with my being in Mumbai). On one of those occasions I was visiting a friend in Sion, an inland suburb far from the water, and watched in awe as the unbroken procession rolled past her front gate, carrying all imaginable sizes of *Ganesh*, from hand-held idols in the front seat of private cars, to lofty, multi-coloured affairs, on ten-tonne trucks. I was there for only one day, but was told the never-ending road parade went on for ten or twelve of the same!

A few days later I ventured down to the beach myself, to witness a multitude of similar *Lord Ganesh* icons, arriving at the water – the endpoint of the journey - to receive their last rights. “*And this,*” I thought to myself, as my daughter and I joined one of the send-off parties on the sand, accompanied by an improvised brass band, “*Is only one of a dozen festivals, spread out across the year. If we stay for a month or so, we’ll be into Dussehra, followed by Diwali, then after Christmas there’s Pongal, with Holi soon after that. Makes me a bit jealous really. Nobody ever told me that life was meant to be this much fun!*”

FOOTNOTE: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Not unlike the playful aspects of the monsoon, which can camouflage catastrophic impacts suffered by the poor, the frivolity of the religious festivals, such as Ganesh Chaturthi, conceal a debilitating effect on the natural environment, caused by pollution of air, land and water. Some progress is being made to reduce the negative impacts, but there is still a long way to go.

