



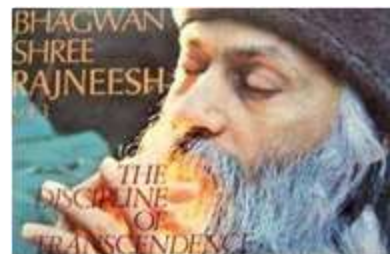
## Getting to Grips with *Gramayan*

The Taj Mahal bathed in afternoon sun was in stark contrast to the dead man I saw lying on a platform in Bhopal. Those first two weeks in India challenged my norms, as I rode aboard snake-like trains, pulled by huge diesel locomotives. The trains and I began in Bombay (renamed Mumbai), then drew a wide circle, via New Delhi and Calcutta, ending back near the start in Poona (Pune).



I doubted Poona's station had changed much since the British Raj; stone-walled with maroon-painted trim, it could have been shipped in from Winchester. Outside was another world, the clamour of Asia: brightly sareed ladies competing to sell their wares; taxis and assorted rickshaws vying for business; I spurned the bicycle variety and threw myself and bag into the back of an auto-rickshaw.

In those days, Poona was home to the infamous guru *Rajneesh*, and his *Orange People*: like an army of very clean mechanics in bright orange overalls they were everywhere. My own mission was for study, not meditation. I was there to report on activities of a local development organization: *Gramayan*.



On route to Gramayan's HQ, my balmy afternoon suddenly changed to a deluge of rain. Water descended in buckets, and despite the driver's attempts to batten down hatches with roll-down canvas doors, I stepped out, if not drenched, then noticeably wetter than when I stepped in.

Projecting the image of a half-drowned rat, I arrived to meet the head of Gramayan, a revered economist known for his work with *Harijan peoples* (labelled for generations *untouchables*). I liked him instantly: small and balding, with eyes that sparkled behind Gandhi-like specs. He arranged for me to visit Gramayan's villages the very next day.

The following evening, after a simple meal of dahl and rice, I sat on the dirt floor of a mud-walled house in the main village of *Shivtakrur*, chatting with *Namdeo*, my host. During the day I'd been his pillion passenger as we toured local villages. After asking to visit the toilet, the house-help appeared bearing a small can of water and a long stick.



*"What's the stick for?"* I asked myself.

Namdeo must have read my mind, as he went into mime mode to explain the tools; then directed me towards the bushes outside, to put theory into practice.

*"Ahaa, I see what you mean,"* I said sheepishly, then disappeared into a dark, starry night.

For a few weeks I travelled the 15 kilometres back and forth from Poona, sometimes by jeep, on other occasions by bus, often staying overnight. On leaving the villages for the final time, Namdeo dropped me at the main road to catch the bus. The bus never came, so eventually I clambered into the cabin of a large quarry truck. Sitting there, as the mid-

cabin engine roared and the driver crunched the long-handled gear shift, I looked around; bodies were everywhere; if I included the two young guys hanging on outside, we totalled twelve adults and a couple of kids! *"This is India,"* I told myself.

Those four weeks in Poona and Shivtakrur felt like a second homecoming: invigorating to say the least, and the start of a life-long interchange with a remarkable country.

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