



My Gateway to India



Returning to India grew to be a second homecoming. Touchdown was always Mumbai, which for a decade or



two I knew as Bombay. Each time, as the aircraft powered forward, dipping towards the runway, those glimpses of a hazy, undulating terrain would return to my porthole view. In reality, it was the most extreme lifestyle interface one could imagine: high-tech aeroplanes gliding in over squalid slums. Neither existence could touch the other ... and one certainly did not want to!

The airport I once knew didn't change much. Repeated sightings only managed to rekindle trademark memories: a sort of trophy-stand without trophies, waterfall without water, grubby windows and featureless walls. Rising above everything, the most indelible memory was the aroma: a unique concoction of heavy air and spicy foods, rolled together as one. It was an element which lingered, unforgotten. Over time I grew to love this glorious mix of ingredients in my *Gateway to India* recipe.

Immigration invariably presented those same long queues, streaming back from battered counters. The opening of a new desk set off a stampede for the fresh line; perhaps an analogy of Indian life itself: a scramble for the best way forward.

Then came the untold vagaries of baggage collection, with seemingly useless dockets to hold, before final, and thankful release. On one occasion I was to meet a friend who worked in customs, thus after emerging from the immigration scrum, I began asking various badged personnel if *Lakshmi* was around; only to receive rather probing stares, as if questioning my intent. Was I buttering them up, in order to slip my cocaine laden bags between their legs?



Over the years, the streets outside the airport remained unaltered: a stretch of narrow road with shops and small-scale industries on either side, busy into the early morning hours (often the time I would arrive). But whether by day or night, the air was always saturated with an inbuilt variety of sub-tropical flavours, including culinary delights, industrial pollutants, vehicular fumes, monsoon rains, roadside rubbish and animal discards, plus a humidity that hung like a wet blanket in the endless heat!

Doomsayers would declare that living in Mumbai equalled inhaling twenty cigarettes a day, which on reflection seemed an underestimation. Once, static in horrendous traffic, with window down and three-inch battered bus exhaust blasting toxic fumes into my face, I had visions of collapse through dire need of oxygen. Yet, winding the window up tempted an equally bitter end; asphyxiation from heat exhaustion: Mumbai's *Catch-22!*

If I could leap from my plane on touchdown, then clamber over the airport's perimeter fence, it would take ten minutes to reach my destination, a suburb called Kalina. As it was, the circular route took an hour, which returned me to the point where I could glimpse the

tall tails of those gleaming aircraft, from the other side of the social divide; moving slowly and serenely above the rusty border wall, like ostriches gliding along behind the tall grass of an African Savannah. The extraordinary juxtaposition often led me to reconsider the inequities of this over-populated city – which I returned to on a regular basis - and the wider world we all share.



Duncan Gregory

www.whittlingourniche.com