



## University Guest House, Bombay, 1988

Re-arrival in India is akin to Armstrong on the moon a second time round. Loved it before but knowing it again feels like re-inventing the wheel: once the spokes are back in place you know you're getting somewhere. Bombay was still Bombay and arrivals the same dismal place I remembered. But thrilled to be back, for me the down-market musty halls took on another meaning: an intriguing gateway to a hitherto world of enthrall!

### **Arrival**

Soon after the aircraft had come to a standstill, I was handed a small envelope by one of the cabin crew. Inside was a short, hand-written message:

*Welcome to India. I am so sorry that I'm unable to meet you. My driver has a sign with your name and will be waiting for you after customs. He will take you to the Kalina campus hostel. He will also give you a note from me when you meet him.*

At the bottom of the note there was a one-word signature: *Priti*. Nowadays, WhatsApp would serve the same purpose, but in those times, In India, a hand-written message could suffice, providing one had the right connections ... as *Priti* obviously did.

There was a long line in the immigration hall and during the wait I was approached by a lady, clad in green and gold, with an angelic smile. 'A secret welcome for travelers from Australia?' I mused. But no, she was a customs official with much darker intentions, of rummaging through my bags in the hope of finding a stash of drugs, or something similar. Not quite sure why I should be smuggling drugs *into* India? Perhaps it was contraband dollars she was after ... the black market, apparently, was booming!

After changing the few dollars I had, for rupees, at the State Bank window and receiving one last clearance signature from a splendidly mustachioed airport official, I passed through the exit doors, to be greeted by a throng of chattering and waving Indians. Fortunately, one of the throng was holding a placard aloft which bore my name.

*Ranjan* was the driver for Priti's husband, who ran an air freight company, based at the airport; hence the connection to be able to deliver the message to my plane, on arrival. Once inside the car, he handed me another message from Priti, along with a sealed bottle of water: even at midnight the weather was steamy: hot and uncomfortably sticky. The hand-written message read:

*I have arranged for your stay at the university guest house in Kalina. The only space they have is a small single room which is unfortunately not air-conditioned. However, the rate is more than reasonable at Rs 25/- per day. They can provide meals on order (unless you would like to try local fare at the canteen). The driver (his name is Ranjan) is interested to wait till you are settled in. Please let him know all is OK.*

*Best regards, Priti*

For the first 10 or 15 minutes the route to Kalina was a small road with local shops and other businesses on either side. It was well after midnight, yet there was still an amazing amount of activity going on out there, beyond my open rear window. I had arrived at the halfway point of the twelve-day *Ganputti Festival*, which honoured the elephant-headed Hindu God, *Ganesh*, and was celebrated with great gusto all over Bombay. There were tall tent-like structures, lit with flashing lights and blaring loud Bollywood songs, with people all around, walking, running, talking, singing. As I was to discover, *Ganputti* continues, 24 hours a day for 12 days: a religious festival ... and a whole lot of fun!

And then there were the smells: the unforgettable range of aromas that came from the streets of this sprawling, sub-tropical city, as it awoke from several months of monsoon rain. The smells, more than anything else, brought back lingering memories of this incredible metropolis; this powerhouse of Indian commerce: this Bombay.

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### ***That first night***

It was one o'clock in the morning as our car wheels crunched along the gravel entrance drive and came to a standstill outside the main entrance to the Bombay University, *Kalina Campus Hostel*. The watchman was asleep; curled up on the floor in front of the reception desk. I noticed my name chalked on a board next to the wooden desk, immediately underneath the tariffs for different rooms; some degree of preparation was obviously in place. The forecast I had been given for room rate was indeed correct: a *basic single* room was listed at the incredibly cheap price of 25/- rupees (less than \$1) per day. Alarm bells were already tinkling in the back of my mind: there must be a catch.

Ranjan made a few appropriate noises and the watchman stirred into life, rubbing his already tousled hair and grimacing as if to say: *'Why the hell should anyone have the cheek to wake me up at this God-forsaken hour?'* Silently in tune with his thinking, I agreed whole-heartedly, but unfortunately, I could not control airline timetables.

The three of us trooped up two flights of echoing concrete stairwell, then along a long, dimly-lit corridor, metal doors on either side: all closed except one, which I noticed contained a large wooden table, with plastic chairs scattered around it. I presumed that was where I would eat, if I went for the *meals-on-order choice*, as mentioned by Priti.

My bare-footed watchman reached a door on the left, towards the end of the passage, then selected a key from a large bunch attached to his belt. The grey metal door squeaked on its un-oiled hinges, then banged back against the wall. A small shower of plaster came off the wall and landed at the base of the door. He flicked the switch, and a stark white bulb came to life. The watchman stood back, allowing me to survey the scene, which revealed a small room with a window at the opposite end. The furnishings were spartan to say the least: just a single bed and wardrobe, both metal and painted in the same gun-metal grey as the door; all rusted with age. The floor was grey concrete and the walls a grubby and stained cream colour. The maroon stains I recognized from many hotel stays in Australia: squashed mosquitos. It was not what I had imagined the Bombay University Hostel would look like, when I had first agreed to stay there.

*'What did you expect, The Taj?'* I thought to myself.

Ranjan dropped my bag on the floor next to the wardrobe.

*"You OK here sah?"* He asked, with what seemed like a devious smile on his face. *"You like eat or drink?"*

*"No, no, I'm fine. I have the water from the car. Shukran Ranjan,"* I responded bravely. But inside I was crying out to myself: *'Christ almighty, they're not going to leave me alone in this God-forsaken place, are they?'*

But they did! Right there and then! So much for Priti's note: *'He's interested to wait till your settled in'* it had said. The footsteps of the two men echoed down the corridor, as I pushed the door shut behind them. It closed with a loud clang! Then I slid the large rusty bolt into place. The tiny room seemed more like a prison cell than anything else I could think of, at that point in time. I suffered with mild claustrophobia and if my two *wardens* had pushed the bolt home on the outside of the door I would have been petrified. Luckily, that was one thing still within my control.

I was lonely and it was too hot to sleep. My first night away from the comforts of home and family and I had parachuted into something which resembled my worst nightmare.

*"Oh my God! Why ever did I agree to come here. I must be stark raving mad to leave my peaceful existence in Australia, for this!"*

These and other similar thoughts kept bouncing around my head.

I sat on the bed, chain-smoking. Went to the bathroom down the corridor a few times; sorted my things, to work out what I had forgotten in my rush to get away; did anything but sleep. I could have murdered a Scotch, but the miserable duty-free shop had been closed. All I had to console myself with, was a half-full bottle of tepid water. I thought about cutting my trip to India short. *'Maybe the feeling will pass,'* I told myself. Eventually I dozed off, whilst half-dreaming of re-booking with Qantas the next morning.

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## ***Re-engagement***

I was awoken by the sound and smell of early morning rain. Light of day brought welcome relief as I looked out on green lawns below and tall tropical trees reaching up, past my window. The air was cooler now and the whole, quite beautiful scene, was shrouded in heavy rain. Beyond the lawns I began to hear distant sounds of Indian street life: tuk-tuks burbling, buses growling, dogs barking, the Imam's call. My dark and foreboding night had turned into a beautiful, exciting day. I suddenly wanted to be out there and part of it.

The rain had stopped and there were glimmers of sunshine through the dense clouds as I strolled across the garden, lush with green growth, after the monsoon. The sleeping watchman, also somewhat enlivened by the dawning day, pointed me in the direction of a student canteen not far away. But I was too early. The place was basic – student canteens must be much the same the world over - but the youngsters who were there managed to rustle up a cup of extremely sweet *Nescafe*, to get me going, after what had been a long, drawn out night. News was blaring from a TV, first in Hindi, then in English. It was too soon to expect anything like food, so I downed my coffee and set off for a walk along the local street, just outside the campus gates.

Returning to the streets of Bombay, a few years after my first visit, brought me up with a bit of a jolt. In times to come, after living and working in Asia and Africa for many years, I would get used to poverty - to view it (perhaps sadly) almost as the norm – but on that day of re-introduction to life on the streets, it came as a shock to my assembled senses. I had forgotten how India is capable of assaulting each and every one of our senses: the array of colours, the dis-array of structures, the multitude of sounds, the evocative aromas. We touch the spices and taste the *paan*, which brings flavours bursting into our mouth. In very literal terms India is a whirlwind of sensual experience.

On my way back to campus I bought a copy of the *Times of India* from a Gandhi-like figure, dressed in white with small round specs perched on his nose. Back at base the canteen was alive with a mix of young students. I found a table in one corner and as far

away from the blaring TV, as I could get; then sat down to scan the front page of the broadsheet. It was presented in a boring format, akin to the way British papers appeared in the 1950s. The world had re-invented itself, but not yet the Indian press.

I ordered what turned out to be a hot, spicy omelet and began chatting to a young, male student, seated at the next table. At first sight this short, rather stocky figure, looked more like someone from Central Asia, rather than India. He told me his name was *Basanta* and that he came from Manapur, in the North East, beyond Bangladesh: about as far as anyone could get from Bombay, while still remaining within the bounds of India. *Basanta* struck me as an extremely likeable guy; very interested in the wider world ... and practicing his English language skills, of course! During my three-week stay on campus we became firm friends.

After finishing our breakfasts, he invited me back to have a look at his room in the student hostel, just a short walk from the canteen. His small room was like a lived-in version of my tiny *cell* in the guest's hostel. There was a well-worn rug on the floor and *Basanta* had embellished the drab walls with posters from the world I had left behind a couple of days before. Almost life-sized renditions of Bruce *The Boss* Springsteen alongside a *Band-Aid* poster of Madonna and, of all people, a somewhat scantily-clad Samantha Fox - the English Page 3 pin-up girl - met my gaze, as I sat down on the bed, to continue our conversation.

*'Obviously student minds, beyond their studies, are focused on similar, illuminating topics, the world over,'* I thought to myself. Actually, I remember wanting to ask: *'How on Earth, and where on Earth, did you come across Samantha Fox?'* But then I thought, *'Sometimes some things are best left unsaid.'*

The early morning spent around the campus and then with *Basanta* had the effect of renewing my shattered confidence, after the disastrous night. And in some obscure way the lay-back start to my day also renewed my faith in India, the country I had fallen in love with on my first visit, a few years before.

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### ***Planning ahead***

Later that morning my Indian host Priti turned up at the campus as arranged, with 10-year old daughter, Pooja, in tow. Pooja like mother, had a wonderfully welcoming smile.

I was scheduled to travel to Poona, some three hours inland from Mumbai, by train the next day, and so the three of us ventured forth - in their cute little pristine white, undented *Zuzuki Swift* - to buy my rail ticket in the city centre. In today's world we would just book a ticket online, but in 1980s India, things were a little different. This was all set to change rapidly over the next decade two.

Priti's driving skills were admirable, as we negotiated every imaginable obstacle along the jam-packed road into town. I much preferred the passenger seat; a window to India: *Haji Ali Mosque* with its paved causeway winding out across the water, *Chowpatti Beach* and the grand sweeping *Queen's Necklace*., the magnificent gothic architecture of *Victoria Terminus* ... and a million other marvels on the way.

*"How do you cope with this crazy traffic?"* I asked, as she negotiated a small opening I had not spotted, between a hand cart, a dented double-decker, and two auto rickshaws.

*"I was terrified at first,"* she replied, with eyes glued to the road, *"But I forced myself. My husband said, 'If they horn, let them horn', which in India means: 'do your own thing and forget all the madness around you'. It turned out to be good advice, don't you think?"*

I nodded, in silent appreciation. I was to meet this man of great wisdom, later in the day.

Having booked my train ticket to Pune at 'VT' (as *Victoria Terminus* is affectionately known) we returned back to the campus hostel, stopping en route for a delicious tandoori lunch at *Holiday Inn on Juhu Beach*, where I met *Doctor Celina De Lima*, who not only had a name to conjure with - Indians, I noticed often came up with these magnificent, almost melodic names - but was also a renowned educator. This was my introduction to this region of Mumbai ... and to Doctor De Lima. In years to come I would get to know both very well.

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### ***The dinner***

Later in the evening I took an auto rickshaw to Priti's apartment in Bandra, an up-market suburb that looked out over the Indian Ocean (or the Arabian Sea, to be more precise). If I thought the daytime car journey to be rather special, the evening auto rickshaw ride could only be described as total exhilaration! Again, the *Ganputti Festival* was in full swing, with music booming from the many brightly lit community tents, that housed the much-cherished *Lord Ganesh idols*, along the way.

At one point, the driver of my own little *ugly duckling* gallantly negotiated an intersection festooned with what seemed like fifty similar vehicles, spluttering and squawking, as they waddled and nudged their way through the jam, then down into the dimly lit tunnel, which passes under the main North-South railway line. A narrow, uneven road, traffic jostling for position in either direction, axle-deep in water, along with the loud echo of voices and two stroke engines, immediately conjured up images of Dickensian London. And in fact, that was always the first thought to come to mind whenever I traversed that underpass in later years: an imagined 19<sup>th</sup> Century England.

The dinner that night was also something of a new experience, but one, which in time I would become used to. Affluent Indians like to entertain with aplomb. The sequence usually starts around eight o'clock in the evening, with drinks for the men (and sometimes the ladies, depending on the group). On this first night, Priti's husband - a wonderfully vibrant personality with a marvelous *wing-commander* moustache - his younger cousin and I, shared a number of deliciously cool *Kingfisher* beers, before adjourning to sample a range of delectable snacks, including *pakoras* and *bhajias* and *chicken lollipops*, plus many delicacies that I had never even heard of, let alone tasted! Then, just when I thought '*Wow! That was a fantastic meal*', out came the *real* food; the main course: a range of delightfully spiced meats, served on gleaming metalware, accompanied by rice and a variety of Indian breads. It was a fabulous and in all senses of the word, delicious experience.



Then, quite opposite to Western tradition, the custom in India once the eating is done, is for all the guests to immediately pack up and walk - or stagger - to the front door, full of great food and potent booze, as is usually the case ... and which was certainly the case on this night, my first real night on return to Bombay!

There is often something quite amusing to recount from these evenings; cultural differences can manage to come to the fore in different ways. Sometimes the man of the house can get a little carried away with the pre-dinner drinks. He might profess to be a Scotch Whisky buff and so takes his guests through the range of single malts that he has in his elaborate drinks-cupboard. As the men get into their third or fourth double whisky, the women are standing just out of sight, wringing their hands for fear that the food will be spoilt.

*“No wait darling, just one more whisky, then we can eat,”* the host, by now a little tipsy, might say.

*“Come on dear, that’s enough. And you’re smoking too much, you know!”* the beleaguered wife whispers from the sidelines.

As in many non-Western cultures the man of the house appears to reign supreme, though beneath the surface the female often rules the roost. But when things are on show, for others to see, then the male definitely has to appear the boss. Perhaps in India’s circles of affluence this is slowly changing.

The thing in particular that amused me on this first evening out was that the cousin – a wonderfully friendly and well-groomed businessman, also invited (with his wife) for drinks and dinner - turned out to be the owner of a company that made lots of money out of toilet paper. So, as things transpired, I found myself in lengthy discussion about such things as the strength and porosity of different papers, as well as the benefits - in terms of health and hygiene - of washing one’s backside with water, compared to wiping it with paper. I knew that it was indeed an important topic, with both social and environmental ramifications, but on the night, it was not so easy to keep a straight face.

*“... You know, there are six million people who don’t have toilet in Bombay alone. Six million, I tell you! You can go for walk in the morning on Juhu Beach and see for yourself. It’s a disgrace!”*

*“... But the quality of the product sir, is of utmost importance. I give you sample of my product to try. The hand cannot pierce good quality, I tell you!”*

*(these two memorable quotes were both delivered along with that characteristic waggle of the head, which is probably a more visual way of saying: ‘I tell you, it’s the truth and if you don’t believe me, go and ask anyone in Bombay’).*

It was indeed a blessing that this line of conversation did not continue when we started eating ... I tell you!

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### ***Bound for Poona***

I woke early the next day (after a good night’s sleep this time) and walked the short distance to the student canteen for breakfast, half expecting to catch up with my new-found friend Basanta. He didn’t show up. So after a repeat dose of the spicy omelet and sweet coffee I piled my bag into an auto and headed for *Dadar* train station, to find out what was in store for me aboard the *Kyona Express*, bound for Poona.

**(Turn to the next chapter: *Kyona Express to Poona*)**