REMINISCENCES OF AN EX-BRAHMIN

PORTRAITS OF A JOURNEY THROUGH INDIA

John Lawrence Nazareth
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Berkeley, 1996
Dedicated to my father

John Maximian Nazareth, Q.C., M.L.C.
This book is a collection of impressions gathered during an extended journey through the Indian subcontinent during the early nineteen-eighties. The narrative is philosophical and poetic in spirit, and perhaps is best characterized as a sequence of verbal photographs, projected onto the printed page, that seek to capture the thoughts and feelings evoked in me by the land of my ancestors. If there is a guiding thread, it is the shift in perspective between eastern and western viewpoints. Amidst this stream of images and reflections where one mirror is held up to another, I hope that the reader will find some sense, as I did, of the “Wonder that is India”.

There is a certain nostalgia in the writing, which springs from two years that I spent in India as a boy, attending and largely confined to a boarding school in Bombay. Some twenty years elapsed before I was able to return. This time my travels took me far and wide across the subcontinent, encompassing two visits, each several months long, which were separated by a period of about a year. In this book, I have taken the liberty of splicing together these two extended visits into a single journey.

At the start of each main grouping of three chapters, I give a map that identifies the places mentioned in them. Throughout the narrative, I have focused on Hindu India. Mogul India, despite its obvious architectural magic, did not fascinate me in the same way and, although I greatly enjoyed my travels in this exceedingly romantic part of the country, it does not figure prominently in my book. Nepal and Ceylon were magical and fascinating too, but again they are only discussed within the context of their intimate relationships to Indian history and culture.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank relatives and friends who showed me great hospitality in India. To Lucy and Yvonne Freitas, Lenny and Margot Freitas and their family, and the DeAndrade family—thank you for your kindness and generosity amidst stressful circumstances. Freda Freitas-Pai and her husband Manohar could not have been better hosts in Ootacamund. Warm thanks to friends from Cambridge days, Shyam Ruia and P.D. Gupta, for their most generous hospitality in Bombay and New Delhi. Thanks especially to my wife, Abbey, who has always accompanied me in spirit on my travels. Without her encouragement and valuable editorial help, this book would not have seen the light of day.

Finally, deepest thanks to my loving mother, Maria Monica Freitas-Nazareth, and to my father, John Maximian Nazareth, brilliant lawyer and
maverick politician, who, unfortunately, did not live long enough to see the completion of this book. It is dedicated to his memory.

J.L.N.
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REMINISCENCES OF AN EX-BRAHMIN

Portraits of a Journey through India
Chapter 1
BOMBAY

Over the central Asian continent, but still several hours away from Bombay airport, the elderly folk begin to reassert themselves. Forlorn figures, uncomfortable and out of place in Europe, they seem to sense that the authority, commonly accorded by Indian society to those advanced in years, is being restored to them. A portly woman slowly rises, oblivious to the on-board movie that provides the after-dinner entertainment. She obscures a large part of the screen from view as she rearranges her sari, casually looks around to survey the other passengers and eases herself back into her seat. Later, she visits the facilities at the rear of the darkened cabin, pausing half-way down the aisle to converse, at length, with an acquaintance. Her obstinate refusal to sit and remain silent serves as a reminder that the disrespect of Europe towards the elderly is coming to an end; the world of Bapus and Mais\(^1\) is being restored.

Bombay’s international airport, where we land in the early hours of morning, is devoid of the pandemonium that normally accompanies travel in India. This awaits us at the exit gates, seemingly held back by the customs officers who stand in front of them. We assemble in a queue before the immigration desk where a petty despot extracts us, one at a time, and examines our documents at a leisurely pace. The arrival area, although designed along modern lines, is shabby and has a curious air of the makeshift. There is much evidence of poor workmanship. The overhead black-and-white television monitor announces times of arrival and departure in a double image. The luggage carts being wheeled to the carousel by passengers now past the immigration desk are of an oversimplified, no-frills design, painted a solid brown, graceless in appearance, and surely imitative in this land of cheap and plentiful labour. I await my turn at the head of the queue and, the interrogation finally complete, collect my luggage, which is cursorily examined by the customs officers. At last I can make my way through the exit gates to seek out my relatives amongst the anxiously awaiting crowd.

\(^{1}\)Elderly male and female heads of the family, who are accorded great respect in India.
Greetings are warm, but it is difficult in the space of a few minutes to bridge the gap of ten thousand miles and twenty years. I slip into a state of suspended animation wherein the excited conversation during the journey home, the unfamiliar streets whose delapidation is obscured by darkness but sensed nonetheless, the strange array of odours that assail the nostrils, all mix with the nostalgia of distant memory, touching yet failing to penetrate the wall of my emotions.

Morning makes the world real once again. At dawn, before light breaks, a solitary bird calls—one, then another. Cocks crow in the distance. Over a loudspeaker, a mullah calls the faithful to prayer; and as the sky lightens, the air fills with the cawing of crows and the flapping of wings.

Indians love their balconies, serving as they do to bring about a seamless transition between the indoors and outdoors. From my bedroom window on the third floor, I can see, almost at eye level, the huge fronds of a coconut palm, which occupies a central place in the yard below. The yard itself is of a particularly Indian design—trees and shrubs predominate, and the intervening ground is barren and swept scrupulously clean each morning by the Mali. Although quite common by local standards, the fruit and vegetable-bearing trees are exotic to a foreigner: papayas, guavas, love-apples, lady-fingers, baindi trees. The boundary at the front of the garden is a low wall marked by a row of Ashoka trees, tall, narrow and upright, shrubbed columns that take their name from the famous inscribed pillars of India’s most illustrious monarch.

It is the month of January, the middle of the ‘cool’ season, and there is a lingering freshness in the early morning air. But soon heat of day begins drawing one’s being to the surface, bringing with it that peculiar lackadaisical feeling and inability to focus one’s energies, which I have grown to associate with India.

My introduction to the life of the city comes by way of the hour-long bus journey from the distant suburb where my relatives live to the city center, which I must make several times in order to finalize travel arrangements. Even the cheapest car is beyond the means of most of Bombay’s inhabitants, including much of the middle class, and gasoline is expensive. So, with no stigma attached, all but the very rich ride the buses, rubbing shoulders with one another amidst that endlessly diverse collection of human beings that make up the city’s populace.

The buses themselves are delapidated and are given just enough care to

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2 Gardener.
keep them on the road. Little attention is paid to outer appearance. In any event, the abrasive, polluted air of the city, the heat and dust of summer, and the heavy monsoon rains would not make such care worthwhile. At the terminus, where I board my double-deckered bus, the journey is often preceded by the pouring of a considerable quantity of water from a spouted can into the radiator of the vehicle—a sort of rudimentary baptism. Across the lower-deck windows are metal bars whose purpose, unlike that of a prison, is to keep passengers from making illegal entry, because the bus soon fills, and competition, even for standing room, becomes fierce. No sooner does the vehicle come to a halt at a bus stop than a massive trampling begins, as those at the head of the queue make their bid to squeeze into a bus already filled to capacity. And when the conductor clangs his bell, the driver sets off without further ado, often without bothering to check over his shoulder that all are safely aboard.

On a bus, the conductor rules the roost, another petty despot who often makes arbitrary decisions. He rests secure in the knowledge that complaint to higher authority will make little progress in a city whose every artery is clogged by interminably slow bureaucratic process. The latitude given to Indian workers, not so much by design as by default, lends much colour to Indian organization and, at the same time, provides endless sources of friction. Arguments with the conductor or between competing passengers are routine, and everyone is schooled in the instinctive art of seeking an advantage. Action, as it were, springs from the elbows. Yet, given the many opportunities for aggressive behaviour, interaction is suprisingly benign and violence almost always restricted to words. Even in this limited arena, arguments do not turn to extreme abuse, but instead are deflected into sparring over technicalities and intricate details, an activity at which the Indian mind excels. A standing passenger accidentally bumps his briefcase against the leg of a seated passenger and a short exchange of words gradually escalates into a major argument, culminating in mutual indictments:

"You simply don't know how to act".

"You simply don't know how to think".

And the argument then does not so much cease as subside, for the inevitable audience has quietly taken sides, and there follows a general muttering amongst newfound allies.

Society rules the individual in India, much more so than in most western countries, and society itself is fractured into a multitude of communities, each of which circumscribes the lives of its members, defining caste and creed, duties and responsibilities, acceptable food, mode of dress. The bus
to the city center travels through several localities, each dominated by a different community. We set off from Church, harshly pronounced ‘Chaarrch’ by the locals, which takes its name from the church of St. Anthony, the focal point of an area that contains an unusually large number of Catholic households. En route, we pass through the district where the majority of residents are Parsi, descendants of the followers of Zoroaster who sought sanctuary in ancient times from persecution in their native Persia. This is a wealthy and close-knit community, and there is an air of hidden prosperity in the tree-lined streets that lead off the main road down which we travel. Still later, the Hindi shop signs give way to Urdu, written in a variant of the Arabic script. The Muslim men dress in flowing white garments and their women in burkas, a tent-like garment of black that covers them from head to toe, effectively erasing them from public view. But, the more colourful clothing that occasionally peeps through these outer garments, and the multitude of perfume shops, hint at a hidden life where sensuality plays a greater role.

The words of the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore come frequently to mind: “India, that magnificent cage of countless compartments”. Yet effective functioning of a city like Bombay requires a lessening of tensions between these different communities, which all too frequently have succumbed to communal strife. In microcosm, the bus is a harbinger of the future, mixing intimately the individuals of these separate groups, helping to break down social barriers that, for centuries of Indian life, have kept one community apart from another. Its winding route, like a thread, pulls together the diverse strands of the city.

The dilapidation that I sensed during the night-drive from the airport is fully revealed during these bus journeys. Hovels, where a family may live out their entire lives, often line the pavement. Houses and apartment blocks, where the more fortunate find shelter, are weather-beaten and usually have poorly maintained exteriors. Streets are potholed and the traffic lawless. The hot air, laden with the smell of gasoline fumes, the endless blaring of horns, the milling crowds on the sidewalks, the crush and endless contact of the lurching bus, all combine into a massive assault on the five senses. In India, must one therefore seek refuge in a sixth? There are, of course, pleasant and well-to-do districts of the city; and, sometimes, a run-down exterior is no more than camouflage, opening into a household of opulence. For this is a city where it is wise not to flaunt one’s wealth too openly.

Bombay originally comprised a number of islands in close proximity to one another, which man and his activities have joined together, and which
the Lord may yet see fit to put asunder. The prognosis for the city is frightening. It is estimated that by the year 2000, there will be fifteen million people in Bombay, with more than half of them living on the streets. A friend tells of walking at three in the morning from the downtown area to his home on Malabar Hill and seeing people arrayed for miles, “as though the pavement had been marked out for sleeping accommodation”. Yet the city has a power of attraction for the rural folk that resists efforts to relocate part of the population to the nearby mainland where “New Bombay” struggles to find its feet. Like an old river, Bombay keeps to its course.

The Railway offices in the downtown area are my principal destination. Victorian edifices erected by the British all over the country, they administer a rail system that has grown to be one of the most extensive in the world. Corridors lead off to huge halls, where office workers sit at row upon row of wooden desks, each piled high with bulging files tied together into bundles. These migrate from desk to desk, the room operating like a primitive computer composed of wood, paper, and bits of string, the whole cooled by whirring overhead fans. Unlike its electronic counterpart, everything proceeds at a snail’s pace. The path has been smoothed for the tourist by the provision of special tickets and quotas on the railways, tourist booking offices, and a network of tourist hotels. But, notwithstanding, one must plan carefully and make reservations well in advance, unless one has a friend or relative with knowledge of the system and influence over it to smooth one’s path. Fortunately I have such a relative and, with his help, my itinerary is mapped. I am provided with the services of one Mr. K., an individual who, like a worker ant, both purposeful and purposeless, navigates within the system by instinct. He leads me from office to office, greeting fellow workers, counselling patience as we stand in interminably long queues, and resisting efforts of others to usurp our place. Surprisingly, I have become quite resigned to long periods of waiting. Faced with a similar situation in the United States, I would very likely fret and grow anxious. “India turns one into a vegetable, America into an animal”, says a travelling acquaintance later in my journey. To some extent, the rich can insulate themselves from this endless standing-about in queues by hiring a sufficient number of underlings to run errands, make purchases, contact people on the telephone. (Even obtaining a dialing tone can be a cause for celebration, and a connection is often so poor that one has, literally, to yell into the telephone in order to make oneself heard at the other end.) The less fortunate must expend needless energy on circumventing these numerous obstacles to normal day-to-day living.
During these long waits, Worker Ant K. gradually reveals himself, and we develop a rapport after I tell him of my wish to visit temples and explore the religious life of the country. He, in turn, tells me that he offers yoga lessons to foreigners during the evening and even volunteers to be my Guru\(^3\). The faceless worker’s life reveals a rich hidden vein. When professional progress is barred to an individual, as frequently happens in India, there is often a flowering of the personal life that springs from character and personality. During my short stay in Bombay, I see this repeatedly. A vegetable seller on the street arranges piles of tomatoes into neat little pyramids before him. A pavement-dweller cleans and polishes her brass cooking pots to a burnished shine, and scrupulously sweeps the area in front of the makeshift family structure. And, because such a high premium is placed on the ritual of the daily bath\(^4\) and the daily change of linen, individuals on the street have a spotlessness that seems to come from abrasive soap reaching down beneath the epidermis of skin and clothing. Would that the city, itself, were cared for as well!

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Thus have first impressions been gathered, new acquaintances made, and a travel itinerary mapped out. The arrangements are complete, and I am ready to set off southwards on the first leg of my journey.

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\(^3\) Spiritual teacher.

\(^4\) Even if it must be taken in water from a polluted source.
MAP FOR CHAPTERS 2-4

Bombay • Poona • Sholapur • Guntakal • Tirupathi • Madras • Pondicherry • Kumbakonam • Tiruchirapalli • Tanjore • Madurai • Rameswaram • Kanya Kumari
Chapter 2

JOURNEY TO SOUTHERN INDIA

Like most train journeys in India, this one begins in massive confusion. Passengers await the shunting of the waggons, their bundles scattered at random across the platform. At the notice-board, where hand-typed sheets announce the assignment of sleeping accomodations, individuals flock en masse amid a general craning of necks. Porters scurry to and fro, anxious to unload their latest consignment of baggage and seek another. Vendors come and go. Beggars thrust their hands through open compartment windows, careful to avoid physical contact; not so much in the interests of sanitation, but rather, to avoid a spiritual pollution of the intended almsgiver.

Inevitably there is conflict about the assignment of sleeping accomodation. Families have been separated and the more enterprising are already busying themselves with attempts to arrange swaps. The train conductor enters our compartment to settle differences with a series of edicts, dislodging short-haul passengers, who have no need of overnight reservations, from the choice seating by the window. The hierarchy is established. And then follows an elaborate bidding of farewell from relatives and friends, especially to elderly passengers whose every whim seems attentively catered to by some younger member of the family. The final parting is formal, accompanied by a namastey\(^1\), a handshake, a reaching down to touch the feet.

When the train pulls out, former protagonists settle down to a new-found amicability. Bedrolls, later used for sleeping, are unfurled on the seats in order to make them softer and more comfortable. My fellow passengers, exhibiting a mastery of the art of removing clothing without unnecessary exposure of flesh, exchange shirts for vests, trousers for lunghis\(^2\). The latter are first loosely wrapped around the legs and the unbuckled trousers then wriggled off and allowed to free-fall to the floor. Overhead fans are turned on and adjusted, and, now that everyone is comfortable, conversations can

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\(^1\) Joined hands, the Indian form of greeting or farewell.
\(^2\) A wrapped cloth stretching from waist to ankles.
be initiated, with initial acquaintance often expanded through an elaborate questioning.

I share a compartment for the journey with two Government officials. (Other short-haul passengers make themselves so inconspicuous that memory of them fades overnight.) The middle-aged man opposite me, now comfortable in a khadi\(^3\) vest, his feet tucked up under him on the seat, is an official in the Ghandi mold, the sort of figure much castigated in V.S. Naipaul’s *India: A Wounded Civilization*. His concern is rural development, the channeling of funds to projects aimed at self-sufficiency such as bee-keeping for the production of honey and small soap factories, in order to make villages less dependent on imports from the larger urban areas. The other occupant is of Tamil origin, a dark, squat, bearish-looking man whose stained teeth betray a love for pān, the Indian version of chewing gum, which replaces the blowing of bubbles with frequent and, occasionally, inaccurate spitting. He is a railway official on a tour of inspection, but with me he does not stand on ceremony. We rapidly develop a shoulder-rubbing intimacy, especially after I seize the opportunity to mildly boast of a relative who is a high official in the Western Railway. My acquaintance is of some standing himself and, at many stations along the way, a railway official awaits him at the platform, anxious to please. At one such stop, he asks his welcoming party to fetch me a soft drink. I am the recipient of a baleful stare—the welcome obviously does not extend to me. Off goes the official, but he soon returns empty-handed, making no attempt at explanation.Knowing, as I do, how easily Indian pride is wounded, and how it can be redeemed through an assertion of rightful place in a hierarchy, I should have guessed that soon a lesser minion, a waiter, would appear, carrying a bottle and glass on a tray. As I stand on the platform sipping the drink, and the waiter dawdles nearby to retrieve the glass, I feel something gently nudge my back and turn to discover a cow, that most self-confident of Indian beasts, wandering along the station platform beside the train.

My travelling companions are amused to find that I am on my first extended tour of the country and quickly label it my “Discovery of India” after the title of Nehru’s famous book. They treat me most kindly, but, being apprehensive and preoccupied with thoughts of the unknown days of travel that lie ahead, I do not attempt a prolonged conversation. Night falls quickly, wrapping us in a cocoon of darkness that is protected from the world outside by the iron bars across the window; and, for this protection,\

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\(^3\)Home-spun cloth.
one is especially grateful when the train pulls in at dimly-lit platforms along the way. The milling crowd outside holds the threat of danger lurking in its shadows: the glint of a blade, a sudden snatch at wrist-watch or purse, swift feet fleeing to the dark alleyways of the town.

For dinner we request vegetarian thalis\(^4\), the orders being phoned ahead to the next station en route, picked up upon arrival by the train's catering staff, and served in our compartment. We eat with greedy fingers, and shortly afterwards, everyone settles in for the night. Two sets of shutters are pulled down, one with wooden slats to guard against the outside light, the other a transparent pane to guard against the dust. The whirring fan, close above my assigned upper berth, circulates the air and keeps the temperature tolerably comfortable. But the purple night lamp, which casts an eerie glow around us, the swaying of the coach and the rhythmic clatter of its wheels on the rails, the uncushioned berths and the loud breathing and occasional snores of my travelling companions, all serve to make sleep fitful. When morning comes, it is a welcome relief. Despite the shutters, the outside dust has penetrated the compartment as amply evidenced by my discoloured bed sheets and dry throat. We help matters with toothbrush, fresh air and morning tea, and, through these common doings, our sense of comraderie grows.

Overnight we have left the state of Maharashtra of which Bombay is the capital. Our journey has taken us briefly through Karnataka. Sholapur, Raichur, Guntakal are towns through which we have passed, but are known to me only from the map. Now the red fields of southern Andhra Pradesh register the slow drift of the miles. I begin to lecture the Government official on the need for an appropriate technology in the Schumacher vein, speculating on the possibility of solar-powered water pumps to irrigate the Indian fields. He, no doubt aware of the effect of the hot sun and rough peasant hands on delicate components, prefers to dwell on the benefits of improved production of honey, soap and home-spun cloth. But, underlying our polite and idle chatter is my unspoken wish for change, which would inevitably tear at the fabric of Indian life, and his deep-rooted desire that this fabric be preserved. Only later will I understand and sympathize more fully with this point of view. With the railway official, I talk about predestination and other weighty matters. "If I were to murder you here", he says, lifting a sturdy right arm, wielding an imaginary dagger and looking truly murderous, "it would all be fate". We rapidly lose our way on the ques-

\(^4\)Large metal plates.
tion of individual accountability. All the same, they are explaining India to me, supposedly through words, but, in fact, much more by their unspoken deeds: the firm but gentle rejection, with a wave of the hand, when I offer Indian sweetmeats that I have brought along for the journey (food sharing is a delicate business in India, because of caste restrictions); their collective excitement when the temple of Tirupathi is spotted in the distance; their attentiveness to a foreigner's comfort and safety; and, their many other acts of warm generosity.

Morning turns to afternoon as we near the end of our journey. Now, in the state of Tamil Nadu, the station signs are written in a new script. The Tamil people on the station platforms are much darker in complexion, their bluish-black skin, like the god Krishna, having a beauty all its own. In the late afternoon, we pull in to Madras station. Arrangements have been made for a cousin to meet me, thanks to that far-flung web of family relationships, which brings some measure of safety and recognition in this land of anonymous multitudes. Precariously perched with my luggage on the back of his motorbike, we phut-phut our way through the untidy streets of the sprawling city for an overnight rest at his home. He lives with his wife and young child in a pleasant housing estate by the sea, on the northern outskirts of the city, and works as a manager at the adjoining plant, one of the 'industrial ashrams' that hold the future promise of India. But more on that subject in a subsequent chapter.

A day later, early in the morning, we set off for the bus station, again on the motorbike, at an hour when the city is just beginning to stretch its limbs and work itself up into another day of chaotic frenzy with its accompanying fatigue. I join a small crowd of fellow travellers beside a waiting bus, a no-nonsense vehicle of sturdy design, with stiffly upholstered seats and windows that slide open to let in the fresh air—a pleasant change from the tinted-glass, hermetically-sealed rolling prisons of Greyhound Bus Lines that take one on journeys across the United States. Most of the people on the six-day temple tour are Indians, who have come from various parts of the country to visit the holy sites of the south. There are, however, two other non-Indians. One, an Australian accountant, is a most charming and gentle man, who has realized a lifelong ambition to visit India and records his experiences each evening on a tape cassette to share with his wife back home. The other is of Tamil extraction and comes from Malaysia. Like myself, he is on a discovery of his Indian roots.

Rain comes to the state of Tamil Nadu late in the year, when the monsoon winds reverse their course and blow in a westerly direction from the
Bay of Bengal. By February, the rains have diminished, but the sea air is chill and moist when the bus sets off. Our journey takes us briefly along the coast before turning inland, and the morning quickly grows hot and dusty. It is the day of the partial eclipse, to my mind an auspicious day on which to begin our journey. But Indians are superstitious, and most prefer to remain indoors at such a time. We are therefore scheduled to interrupt our journey at noon, for the span of a few hours, in order to retreat to a hotel and place a roof between ourselves and the mysterious phenomenon in the heavens. It is curious how the tour is tailored in this and many other small ways to suit local customs and habits. In particular, our sleeping accommodation has been arranged for us, but no specific eating arrangements are made, presumably because many Indians must follow strict rules about what they eat and with whom they share their food. At mealtimes, the bus stops in a town, and we are left to fend for ourselves at roadside restaurants where curry is ladled from a bucket onto a banana leaf, and the accompanying rotis⁵ are full of grit. Not yet used to such spartan fare, I eat relatively little. But such inconveniences cannot be a primary concern. We must tolerate a procession of ugly towns, hot and dusty daytime journeys, and uncomfortable nights spent under sleepy overhead fans, because each one of us is on a religious pilgrimage of his or her own making, centered on the many spiritual sites that we are to visit, on an itinerary that will take us to Srirangam on the Cauvery river, then to Tiruchirapalli, Madurai, Kanya Kumari (Cape Comorin) on the southern tip of India, northeastwards to Rameswaram, which lies close to Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Pondicherry, Tanjore and Kumbakonam, and, finally, back to Madras.

And thus to tell of the thoughts and feelings evoked by the temples that we would visit, the embodiment in stone of the Indian religious tradition, and of men and women who, having no need of temples, are, indeed, the true embodiment of this tradition.

⁵A form of bread.
Chapter 3

TEMPLES AND SAINTS
OF THE SOUTH

To gain admittance to a Hindu temple, shoes or sandals must be removed and left outside. At the holiest temples, anything made of cow's leather is also excluded. Entrusting bare feet to the tender mercies of the Indian pavement, one makes one's way past a throng of vendors of temple offerings, past numerous beggars, and through the entrance doorway, a truncated pyramid known as a gopuram. Often, this structure is ornamented with abstract designs, but, more commonly, a gopuram is covered with sculptures of the Hindu pantheon. At the famous Meenakshi temple in Madurai, these sculptures are, in addition, painted in vivid colours. Dozens of polychrome figures, none of them particularly distinctive, peer down from above. The Malaysian gentleman and I, who have since become friends, agree between ourselves that an individual in India is rather like a sculpture on such a gopuram, lost in the maze of other figures, and reduced to near insignificance.

At Tanjore, the main gopuram is massive, of splendid proportion, and capped with a huge stone ball that gives stability to the structure. And, at the Ramanathaswamy temple in Rameswaram, is to be found perhaps the most harmonious gopuram of the south, engraved with a pattern of truly delicate abstract design.

Each temple has its own distinctive variations, based on themes that are shared by all. Usually there is a temple tank within the walls, where the pilgrims can purify themselves before worship. A common feature is a hall of a thousand sculpted pillars, the inspiration for which is clearly evident in the surrounding landscape of coconut groves, which cluster around oasis-like pools of water or range against a distant horizon. And, of course, every

1 This is a restoration. Like the pyramids of Mexico, the original temples of ancient India were often colourfully decorated.
2 The exact figure at the Meenakshi temple is 997. At the main temple in Srirangam, the count is 940.
temple has its distinctive inner sanctuary, where the most sacred idols are housed and ministered by Brahmin priests.

At the first temple on our itinerary, the Vishnu temple at Srirangam on the Cauvery river, the largest temple of the south, I am in the company of the Australian gentleman. We are both prevented from crossing the golden threshold leading to the inner sanctum on the grounds that we are not Hindus. I enter into an argument with the obstructing Brahmin priest, who puts me to the test by asking the name of my star. "Taurus"\(^3\), my answer after some hesitation, proves to be my undoing—the ex-Brahmin has moved far indeed from his roots. Embarrassed, I counter with a question: "What is a Hindu?". Now he, in turn, has no definitive answer, but he continues to insist: "In these matters, there are rules and regulations". "Well", says I, "Hinduism is not a matter of rules and regulation; surely anyone with a deep interest in religion should be allowed into the temple". But my arguments are to no avail. The Australian and I are separated from the rest of the group and left behind. We wander the periphery of the temple complex, a nested box-like structure with four outer walls, each with its own entrance gopuram.

Thereafter, whenever we approach a temple, I keep my distance from the kindly Australian and am not again excluded from an innermost shrine. My first experience of such a sanctum is at the Rock Fort temple in nearby Tiruchirapalli, so named because it sits atop a massive three-hundred foot high rock. We visit it early the next morning, when the site is bathed in the golden light of dawn. As we enter, cascading down the main steps come a troop of adolescent girls dressed in vivid saris, whose seemingly discordant colours are brought into harmony by their wearers' blue-black skin.

As one draws into a temple, there is less and less natural light, until, in the innermost sanctum, natural light is totally excluded, and one enters into a cave, so to speak, into the very bosom of the earth. I think it is not unfair to say that the Hindus have taken the unifying vision of the Vedas and splintered it into a myriad idols, which they have then enthroned in their shrines. And, at least in southern India, they have imbued them with a touch of the primitive, the instinctive life, the forces that well up from the earth. There is something most compelling about a black stone Ganesha\(^4\), glistening from the application of ghee\(^5\) or other oily substance, mysterious.

\(^3\)My horoscope sign of the zodiac.

\(^4\)The Elephant God, son of Shiva.

\(^5\)Clarified butter.
in its niche where it is only partially illuminated by oil-wick lamps, powerful
and not necessarily merciful. At the Meenakshi temple in Madurai, there
stands a most wonderful Nataraja, Shiva in his aspect of Cosmic Dancer,
made of silver plating and ebony wood. And, of course, Shiva in his most
common aspect of lingam or phallus, symbolizing creative force, is the most
common object of worship, the lingam at Tanjore being particularly gigantic.

At a smaller temple near Tiruchirapalli, along the walls of the inner
sanctum, are well over a hundred caged idols, representing the worshippers
of Shiva, each with a piece of coloured cloth draped loosely and diagonally
across it and tucked in most carelessly. The effect is voodooish. The colours
chosen for decoration, reflected in the garments that women wear, can hardly
be said to harmonize in the western sense of the word. But, I see a continuity
with the colours of Gauguin; and also with banners, which I witnessed several
years ago, strung across the entire length of ceiling of the Church of San Juan
de Chamula in the deep south of Mexico, where the Mexican Indians have
wrapped their ancient Mayan customs in the outer trappings of Christianity.
Hinduism too has blended together many different influences. Its temples
represent the world in microcosm: avaricious Brahmin priests, whose duty
is to minister to the idols; milling, blindly ritualistic worshippers with their
offerings of coconuts and flowers; curious onlookers; and, just as in the
outside world, occasionally a pure spirit, alone in a corner before an idol of
his god, pouring out devotion in a song.

At Kanya Kumari, or Cape Comorin as it was formerly called, on the
southernmost tip of the Indian subcontinent, we lodge at the Vivekananda
ashram, which was founded by and named after the great disciple of Ramakrishna, another famous Indian saint. The ashram is the center of a movement
that emphasizes spiritual growth through a life of service. As with so many
other spiritual centers in India, only the echoes of the past seem to linger
after the passing of the founder. However, the site is well maintained, and
the bookstore has a good selection of Vivekananda’s writings. I purchase a
survey of writings and poems, and one need only glance through them to
realize that he is indeed one of the towering religious figures of India. A
poem, entitled “Peace”, captures his spirit:

“Behold it comes in light
The power that is not power
The light that is in darkness
The shade in dazzling light.

6These are three of several stanzas.
It is not joy or sorrow
But that which is between
It is not night or morrow
But that which joins them in.

To it the tear-drop goes
To spread the smiling form
It is the goal of life
And Peace - its only home."

Not long after our arrival, we set off by boat to visit the tiny rock island off the coast. It is said that Vivekananda swam out to this rock to meditate and, two days later, came back transformed. “He obtained his enlightenment”, as Indians are wont to say in their spiritual jargon, making it sound like the attainment of a religious baccalaureate. Shortly afterwards, Vivekananda took Chicago by storm at the 1893 meeting of the World Council of Religions. The memorial that stands on the island is barren, giving little true sense of Vivekananda, but from here we have a splendid view of the legendary Kanya Kumari coast where the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean meet, and whose sands are said to be of seven different hues.

Upon our return to the mainland, we disembark and walk through the streets of a fishing village in order to visit another temple. I find myself being badgered by a pair of little girls who have decided that persistent pestering is the surest way to a man’s wallet. After a hurried conference between themselves, they follow me through the streets with piteous looks and a litany of entreaty. Refusal to give them anything only increases their persistence, but I am adamant—my Malaysian friend Siva, who understands the Tamil language, has translated their earlier conversation for me: “First you go and work on him, then I will”. At a tender age, deprivation has already made a stone of their hearts.

I circumvent the obligatory shoe removal by opting, this time, to remain outside the temple that is our destination. When Siva emerges, he says he has learned that nearby there lives an old woman, “a very highly evolved soul” in the spiritual vernacular. He wants to seek her out and obtain her blessing. A little urchin, whom we question, knows where to find her and, beckoning us on, leads us first to a little hut where there is no answer to our knock, then back to the temple and into an alleyway behind it. There,
sits an old woman, her back toward the temple walls, her legs drawn up beneath her. A cloth is draped over her head. A few devotees, both men and women, sit in a tight circle around her, a ragged-looking bunch. Worse yet, the group is surrounded by mangy dogs, sleeping on their sides, who, of a sudden, jump up at our approach and set up a loud barking, and then, just as suddenly, lie down again and go back to sleep. We are asked to remove our shoes and I have unpleasant visions of one of the dogs leaping up again and taking a rabid nip at my toes. But, I am equally afraid that the old lady, whom I now notice has a bloated and spoiled look on her face, might take offence at a hasty retreat and set the dogs on us, possibly even inflict a curse. Siva approaches in a most humble posture, beseeching her blessing, with me close behind, dreading the moment when I will be required to do the same. But the old lady refuses to bless him, and despite repeated entreaty from a woman disciple who seems especially close to her, persists in her refusal. All the while, a spoiled and pampered smile plays about her lips. Her only concession, if one might call it that, is to accept the two-rupee note that Siva had earlier borrowed from me.

While this drama unfolds, I seize the opportunity to slip back into my shoes and sneak off, breathing a sigh of relief, anxious to go home for absolution in a hot-water shower. Later, Siva joins me, but goes back for a second attempt that again flounders, this time on his reluctance to touch the old lady's bloated feet as requested by the disciples. He is much amused when I tell him that even though I could not see his expression, because his back was turned to me during our first attempt to obtain a blessing, I felt that his pleading entreaty, "Mai, Mai?", did not smack of any real conviction. He, in turn, accuses me of subterfuge in lending him the two rupee-note and thereby deflecting the blessing to myself. But, despite the hilarity of this adventure, two events did stand out. One was the mysterious control the old lady seemed to exert over her dogs; and the other, an unusually beautiful colour-music dream I experienced that night. Perhaps a little blessing did come my way!

During the bus journey next day, I ponder on how we like to have our spiritual teachers neatly packaged, resurrected in our image of them, smelling of fresh linen and flowers. Yet we may need, above all, to be shocked out of our mental fortifications, restored to a tabula rasa, so to speak; perhaps, for some, even by an old and bloated lady, seated in a narrow alleyway, beyond the temple walls.

7Mother, Mother.
At Pondicherry, when we later visit the ashram founded by Sri Aurobindo, another famous Indian saint, a political activist turned mystic, all is as one might wish—a hallowed atmosphere of devotion heightened by bouquets of lilies; visitors queued in hushed and reverential silence, waiting to visit the shared grave of Aurobindo and the Mother, a mysterious French woman who assumed his mantle after his death; money collectors discreetly placed in the background. Yet, the memory of the bloated old lady remains more vivid. I like to think that she was more than she appeared. After all, who am I to pass judgement on matters about which I know very little!

Why do I visit temples? Not for the architecture, else the strongest impression would have been left by the temples of Tanjore and Rameswaram with their magnificent gopurams. Not merely to satisfy curiosity about the form of worship or belief. No, I think that, for me, temples have themselves become idols that help to focus mind and heart on life's more pressing questions. As the Indian sages teach, the seat of worship can only lie within the deepest recesses of the human heart. Yet, what is external, may serve as an aid to achieving that deep and inner concentration, which is, in turn, the prerequisite for all true worship.
Chapter 4
KUMBAKONAM, MADRAS
AND REFLECTIONS ON GANDHI

The endless procession of ugly and overcrowded towns begins to take its toll. "The only solution is to drop the bomb, saying, 'Sorry, it went off by mistake!' and then, start afresh", suggests Siva, my Malaysian friend. His first pilgrimage to the land of his Tamil ancestors has not, so far, been a source of much satisfaction. When our bus arrives at Kumbakonam, as evening begins to fall, and pulls up to a hotel on a crowded street, the town seems no different from any of the others. But, soon, it proves to be otherwise.

Kumbakonam has a centuries-long tradition of skilled craftsmanship in the working of gold, silver and brass, and has long been a supplier of religious objects used in temple worship, for which there has always been a steady demand. A recent rise in the price of precious metals has caused both the merchants' hoardings and the already-worked metal objects to appreciate significantly in value. The result has been an infusion of wealth into the industries around which the economy of the town has traditionally centered and in support of which the town has long-established knowledge and skills. How unexpected, and how very different from an attempt at modernization that seeks to surplant rather than invigorate what already exists—a working example of the teachings of Gandhi, who stood for precisely such a rejuvenation!

Kumbakonam is also a religious center. An important festival will soon be held to which many thousands of pilgrims have flocked. It will climax, we are told, in a mass immersion at the main temple tank. The combination of newly infused wealth and religious anticipation has given the town a sense of vigour and prosperity, but it nevertheless remains cast in the traditional mold. The streets are as crowded as ever—a wonderful jostle of people, animals and vehicles so characteristic of India. But the decay and squalor that I have come to associate with towns in the south is not present. Even
the open drain that runs in front of house and shop, the Indian architect’s traditional answer to the necessities of drainage and waste disposal, often has a covering and, in any case, is not unspeakably dirty. We stop at a street vendor’s stall to enable a Gujarati gentleman in our group to buy paan leaves. These are wrapped around beetle nut and spices to make an Indian version of chewing gum. As the Gujarati has no traffic with the local tongue and our attempt to determine the price brings only an incomprehensible babble in Tamil, Siva is summoned to help. “He wants you to have them without charge”, he translates. And shortly afterwards, at a sweetmeat stall, huge slabs of the delicacies are handed out for us to taste before deciding on a purchase, turning this into a night of conspicuous consumption.

With the pressures removed that drive a man to pettiness, the traditional generosity of the Indian character reasserts itself. Perhaps the Indian reputation for “sharp business practices” is a corollary of the daily circumstances of life on the subcontinent, and, regretably, the trait is then elevated to the ranks of virtue. The situation is analogous to the aggressive competition, fueled by greed, that sometimes personifies the North-American character. An abundance of opportunity on the American continent can amplify such human traits, which are then again extolled as virtues, and celebrated in the workplace and on the sports field—“Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing!”.

Later, I wander off on my own to a metal-working shop, which specializes in temple idols, in search of a small Ganesha statue. They do not have one for sale, but the owner takes much pleasure in showing me a collection of photographs: Natarajas, Krishnas, Ganeshas and other Gods of the Hindu Pantheon, many of them of statues three or four feet high, which have been commissioned by Hindu temples, some as far away as Indonesia, Canada and Europe. As we talk, seated on the front apron of the shop, a crowd gathers, workers from the store forming a semicircle on one side and, on the other, onlookers from the street. Fifteen or twenty people have come together, well-wishers to our conversation. Perhaps I look like a wealthy buyer about to place a large and significant order, which would enhance the prestige of the shop. Then, without any prompting, the owner excuses himself, goes to the rear of the shop and returns with a little Ganesha statue, one that has obviously enjoyed some use and is not intended for the souvenir market. He charges a nominal fee and today it is one of my prized possessions.

Warmed by this wealth of human intercourse, I return to the hotel. Siva, with whom I am sharing a room, is nowhere to be found and, much later, he too returns. “Where have you been?”, I inquire. “I’ve been walking in
the real India”, is his reply. His pilgrimage to the land of his ancestors has at last borne fruit. For each of us, Kumbakonam1 that evening was a very special place.

Madras, where our journey terminates shortly afterwards, is a marked contrast, an Indian version of Los Angeles, only much more shabby. Bordered by the ocean on the west, it spreads north and south along the Bay of Bengal in a characterless urban sprawl that covers some fifty square miles. After the rigors of the southern tour, I am delighted to return again to the home of my cousin Sergio to spend a few comfortable days. A manager at an industrial plant on the northern outskirts of the city, he lives with his wife and young daughter in a pleasant and spacious villa in the adjoining residential estate. It is a walled enclave, across the road from the beach, within which lie many similar homes, linked by pleasant tree-lined lanes and spacious gardens full of flowering bougainvillea. The managers and engineers, who comprise the plant's nerve center, live on the estate. The workers of the plant, its muscle so to speak, inhabit the surrounding clusters of hovels that are such a common feature of the Indian urban landscape.

The isolation and self-sufficiency of the central factory and adjoining residential estate remind me of an ashram. I begin to think of the production unit as comprising an industrial ashram of sorts2. A traditional ashram is, of course, a place of religious retreat, a secluded dwelling of Guru and disciples, a place for focussed living, for self-centeredness. But its organizing paradigm is broadly discernible in the India of today, in both the spheres of industry (as just noted) and politics. Its influence is especially evident in the philosophy of Gandhi, who sought to direct his own efforts and that of his followers to spiritual and political ends, and to make the ashrams he founded into engines for both religious and political transformation.

A second, contrasting paradigm of Indian organization, the traditional Indian village, has also penetrated present-day politics and industry. Imbued with greater vitality in the past, for example, during the the Gupta era (approximately the third to the fifth centuries A.D., India's so-called Golden Age), the rural village has decayed over the centuries into an isolated, stagnant, caste-ridden, largely self-contained entity that intentionally excludes the new and innovative. There is a misguided version of Gand-

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1I discovered much later that Kumbakonam was also the birthplace of Ramanujan, one of the world's greatest mathematicians—see The Man Who Knew Infinity: The Life of the Genius Ramanujan by Robert Kanigel, Scribners, 1991.

2Later, this characterization is reinforced by a visit to a prominent research institute near Bombay—a scientific ashram—see Chapter 10.
hism, prevalent in India today, that draws on this paradigm of isolation and stagnation, promulgating a village-centered economy based on outdated cottage industries, for example, soap-making and honey-bee production. It dresses the antiquated organizing principle of village production in modern economic clothing: *appropriate technology*. Despite the efforts of independent India's first Prime Minister Nehru and his dynasty to steer India on a modern course, it is this tradition that causes India to continue to seek a false self-sufficiency in her economy, often concentrating on the making of nuts and bolts even as the major industrialized nations moved toward the 'sunrise' industries, for example, biotechnology and computers. However, a post-Gandhian generation, to which my cousin Sergio belongs, is now beginning to assert itself. Its leading spokesman was Nehru's grandson, the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi⁴, and others will surely take his place.

It must be emphasized that Gandhi sought first and foremost to draw on the traditional village for the *symbolism* of his political and religious philosophy: home-spun cloth, the spinning wheel, bullock power. In so doing, he was able to marshall a vast following, and to focus the energies of the largely rural people of India in their struggle for freedom from British rule. This was his genius: the ability to clothe, in traditional Indian garb, a philosophy universal in its implications. But, it is easy to be ensnared in a version of Gandhism that is the antithesis of this idea, and even Gandhi was not immune from a confusion of *symbol* and *mode of production*, thus appearing, at times, to turn his back on the modern industrial era. How tenaciously can the traditional culture of a land cling on, reflecting as it does the way most of its inhabitants think and feel! A scene I witnessed during the earlier journey to the south comes to mind—a modern truck driven by its owner into a shallow pond, where the water came up to its hub caps, and then washed in the way that villagers wash their oxen.

The task facing us now is to extract the marrow from the dry bones of present-day versions of Gandhism, which we have seen are rooted in the ashram and village paradigms. Within a modern mode of production, twentieth-century tools and large-scale organizational practice, we must strive, as Gandhi did, to give modern technology a *human* face, a task for which India may be uniquely gifted. We must seek to adopt a mode of national, economic and political organization that does not turn its back on an ancient heritage, but is sufficiently forward-looking to be creative;

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³India produces more than half the manhole covers used in the United States.
⁴Not related to Mahatma Gandhi, but, like him, recently assassinated.
sufficiently far-sighted to draw fresh life from the ideas of the modern world.

It is for us to draw on the living spirit of Gandhi, a spirit that was immeasurably good and great. We must strip away from Gandhi’s teachings those ideas that may have arisen from human frailty and shed obscuring veils that, revealed as such, Gandhi would have been the very first to shed. Because, despite his all too often human failings, Gandhi was, above all, a discerning mirror that reflected back to us only the very best part of ourselves. And, guided by him in this manner, we may at last be able to act, as he did, in accord with the deepest part of our human nature, our nature universal and divine.
Chapter 5

CEYLON AND KERALA: OUTCASTS FROM EDEN

Coming to Ceylon\(^1\) from India is like emerging from a dark cave into bright sunshine. One senses the presence of the sea around this island paradise, even when it is not in sight. The greenery has an extra quality of lushness. In the coconut groves that stretch out in the distance, trees crowd together more closely than on the mainland. The people have a sense of the carefree that one always associates with tropical islands. And, everywhere, there are visible signs of prosperity, a higher literacy rate and a modern outlook that are evidenced, in particular, by many well-built houses and numerous children, dressed in sparkling white uniforms, seen journeying to school each morning.

My destination is the sacred city of Anuradhapura, site of the ancient capital of the Ceylonese kings. Although much now lies in ruins, it remains one of the loveliest spots on earth. Four enormous bell-shaped structures dominate the site. Built over two thousand years ago, after Ceylon was converted to Buddhism by one of Ashoka’s emissaries, these well-separated dagobas\(^2\) stand like monuments to the state of spiritual and mental clarity to which every Buddhist aspires. The three dagobas that lie in major disrepair are the most compelling, speaking across the millennia as do the pyramids of Egypt. The fourth has been restored to a pristine state and, although an interesting visual recreation of the original, has been stripped of its mystery. Nearby stands the sacred Bo tree, said to be grown from a cutting of the very tree under which the Buddha was enlightened; but for me, at any rate, this sacred tree holds no mystery either.

Above ground level, little remains of the original structures of the ancient city, save the ruins of columns and foundations, which are scattered over a large area. Paddy fields and banana groves dot the landscape, giving it a

\(^1\)Sri Lanka.
\(^2\)In India they are known as stupas.
green lushness. (Their cultivators have inhabited the ruined city for generations.) Winding paths make much of the area accessible and, motorized traffic being banned, an air of great tranquility permeates the site. I hire a bicycle and spend many peaceful hours pedalling along its paths, stopping now and then by the ruins of an ancient building or by the side of a water tank, skillfully built hundreds of years ago for storage and irrigation, and still in use today. And almost always, in the distance, there is a view of one or more of the mysteriously calming dagobas.

The majority of the Ceylonese are Hinayana Buddhists. It is the contrast between the attitudes of Buddhism and Hinduism that distinguishes Ceylon from India. Hinduism, and earlier Brahminism from which it grew, strives only for unity at the root. Hinduism, thriving as it does on the social multiplicity provided by the caste system, gives India the sense of a vast coral reef, where many different forms of living coexist, each in its own ecological niche. Buddhism, in contrast, strikes at the very heart of the Hindu system of social organization by condemning and eliminating caste structure, thus giving Ceylon a much stronger sense of social unity. However, a consequence of this social leveling is that Ceylon lacks the multifaceted quality of the coral reef, which gives India so much of its magic and mystery. "The colour is missing", is how a friend expresses it later.

Indeed, the history of Buddhism in India could be paraphrased as a gradual restoration of that missing colour to the mainland. Gautama Buddha, the epitome of spiritual and mental clarity, often described as the greatest man to whom India has given birth, cut like a fine scalpel through the amalgam of beliefs and practices that constituted Brahminism in the sixth century before Christ. But, although the monastic tradition that he founded was later elevated to the religion of state by one India's most enlightened monarchs, the Emperor Ashoka, and was spread far and wide through his influence, Buddhism failed to grip the popular imagination or cater to the needs of the larger heterogenous populace. Hinayana Buddhism, non-personal, ascetic, essentially non-theistic, and adhering more closely to the original teachings of the Buddha, gave way to the more colourful and theistic Mahayana Buddhism, which places greater emphasis on personal salvation and has conjured up myriad saviours and deities. Eventually, a revived Hinduism, ultimately syncretic and able to absorb even Gautama Buddha into its ranks, drove Buddhism as a separate religion to the far reaches of the land—Nepal, Ceylon and Burma. Mahayana Buddhism was eventually able to establish deep roots in the more homogenous societies of China, Japan and the far East, but in India, Buddhism declined to the ranks
of a small sect. What truer testament is there to the fact that mass religions are primarily a *cultural* phenomenon? Only through an *individual* religion, as all the founders of religious movements have emphasized, is salvation to be found.

From Anuradhapura I travel back to Colombo via Kandy, the capital, and from there board a plane for Trivandrum, near the southwestern tip of India. A Goan, whom I chance to meet at the Colombo airport shortly before departure, bears a remarkable physical resemblance to Sai Baba, a very popular Guru in India, regarded by his followers as an incarnation of the supreme deity. This likeness has a marked effect on the Indian airport officials at Trivandrum who seem ready to fall in reverence at his Goan-Christian feet. My own experience with these officials is, unfortunately, not as pleasant. I am treated abruptly, until an immigration officer, seeing my foreign passport, suddenly changes his tone. "So sorry", says he, "I thought you were an Indian". Anti-egalitarians that they are, Indians are capable of treating one another with consummate rudeness. Later, I am asked by the customs officers whether I have any precious stones, a favourite import from Ceylon, in my possession. Foolishly, I admit to having purchased a small blue sapphire and a few semi-precious garnets in Colombo. It would have been far simpler to have simply answered in the negative, for now the customs officials find it necessary to inspect my stones. This having been accomplished, I am told that the little cardboard box containing them must be taken to a back room to be sealed, and I am admonished that the seal must remain intact until I leave the country again. For my part, I insist that the box be sealed in my presence so that I may be certain the stones remain within. Their honesty impugned, the officials now resort to elaborate theatre: string, sealing wax and a stamp are brought to the counter. The little cardboard box is bound and wound and securely knotted, with a long end-piece hanging loose, which is ceremoniously draped over my palm. "Hold on to it, so that you know where the box is at all times", I am told, as liberal quantities of sealing wax are applied and the wax stamped with an official seal. "A real Hindu", I hear one official mutter to another.

Sai Baba's lookalike, with whom I share a room, turns out to be a talker, who keeps me awake until 2.00 in the morning with tales of numerous conquests of attractive nymphs. This, too, is a favourite occupation of Indian Gurus, at least those who find their way to the West. Finally, I dose off in mid-sentence. I am glad to bid him farewell early the following morning and set off by train along the Malabar coast, bound for Cochin. The journey traverses scenery of great beauty: palm-groves, lagoons, paddy fields and,
in the distance, the rib of mountains, the Western Ghats, which border the west coast of India. The Malabar coast, being cut off by the mountains from the interior, is most easily accessed by sea. Long fabled for its spices, ivory and sandalwood, this land has a rich and varied history. Borne on the winds of trade, sailors have visited it from ancient times: the emmissaries of Solomon, Phoenecians, Greeks and Romans, and more recently, Arabs and Chinese. The Portuguese, who arrived toward the end of the fifteenth century\textsuperscript{3} and colonized it, were relative latecomers.

Almost forty percent of Keralans are Christian, and this community traces its origins back almost two thousand years to the apostle Thomas, who came to India shortly after the Christian era began. The now dwindling Jewish community traces its origins even further back in time, and were permitted by the Hindu kings of the region to live in India unmolested. The people of Kerala are outward looking, and it is not surprising to find that Kerala has the highest literacy rate in India, approximately fifty percent, and that it was the first state to elect a Marxist government. Yet, as with Ceylon, this very cosmopolitanism and modern frame of mind deprives Kerala of the sense of deep-rootedness, colour and complexity that characterizes traditional India. Indeed, this sense of separation from the Indian mainstream could be said to characterize the places next on my itinerary: Cochin, Ootacamund and Goa.

Cochin, which sits amidst numerous lagoons and canals, is sometimes called the Venice of India. But, despite its obvious historical interest, I find the city flat and insipid. Foreign contacts have left numerous traces, yet they have failed to blend into a new and distinctive harmony. The Chinese fishing nets that dot the shores of the lagoons are particularly interesting curiosities, consisting of a net and a counterbalancing weight attached to opposite ends of a beam, which is pivoted on another like the arm of a balance, and alternately lowered into the water and raised, each time stealing a few silvery flashes from the sea. A boat trip through the lagoons reveals churches, a synagogue, palaces, mansions, a jumble of influences, swept up as the sea sweeps up shells, leaving them stranded on the shore.

I am not tempted to linger here, and next morning continue my journey by train, bound for Ootacamund in the Nilgiri hills. When no overnight accommodation is required, my Indrail pass gives me much freedom of travel, provided I am content with a wooden-slatted seat in a second-class carriage. The better accommodation has been reserved, often months in advance. In

\textsuperscript{3}Indeed, they arrived after Columbus reached the Americas.
these lower-class carriages, where the occupants are crowded together, there is a correspondingly greater degree of friendliness and curiosity, and talk easily turns to matters of religion when my neighbours learn of my interest in temples. An elderly gentleman seated opposite me recounts the following delightful Buddhist tale, illustrating how little mastery over nature has to do with spiritual progress. It is an excellent lesson for the twentieth century:

Once upon a time, the Buddha and his disciples summoned a boatman to ferry them across a river. When they were halfway across, a sadhu\(^4\) appeared, and, without need of a boat, simply walked across the water toward the opposite bank. One of the Buddha’s disciples, astonished by this feat, said to the Buddha: “Can you not surpass that miracle?” The Buddha, however, maintained his silence. When they reached the other bank, he asked this disciple to pay the boatman and, the disciple having done so with a coin of minimal value, the Buddha finally made his reply: “Do you see that small coin which you have just given the boatman?” he said. “It is all that the miracle you just witnessed was worth!”

\(^4\)Holy-man.
Chapter 6

OOTACAMUND AND THE BRITISH

It is a little known fact that the game of snooker, more popularly called pool in the United States, was invented by an officer of the British army at the Gymkhana Club of Ootacamund, sometime during the nineteenth century. Ooty, as the town is more affectionately called, was a favourite retreat for members of the British Raj, and especially popular during the summer months. Here, amidst the Nilgiri Hills, perched on the cool shoulders of southern India, and happily divorced from the teeming masses and the sweltering heat, the British could follow and, if necessary, even invent the pursuits of leisure. To make Ooty accessible, they built a narrow-gauge cog-wheel railway on which runs a train that is as delightful as a toy. Its wooden-slatted passenger carriages are painted blue, the colour for which the Nilgiri Hills take their name. A little steam locomotive pushes the carriages from the rear, chugging up into the hills at a snail's pace.

With the passing of the Raj, Ooty now caters to the class of Indians that have surplanted the British. The once exclusive whites-only clubs are faded but still alive, and offer a good liquor bar (provided one can secure the necessary consumer’s licence), along with the entertainments of snooker, cards and golf, the last on challenging courses set amidst the rolling green downs. The nearby artificial lake offers boating, fishing and shoreline picnic-sites. And the shopping center of the town, still called Charing Cross after its counterpart in London, has markets that are filled with flowers, fruits and spices. From Charing Cross, roads lead off in various directions to a countryside of magnificent views. The surrounding hills are dotted with tea plantations, and nestled within them are smaller settlements with names like Lovedale, Ridgeway and Wellington, where the Indian army maintains an important headquarters and military hospital. Here, too, are to be found the little settlements of the Toda people, the aboriginal matrilineal inhabitants of this area, said to be descended from the lost legion of Alexander the Great. Their flowing beards, toga-like dress and Grecian features do not belie this delightful legend.
The first Englishman, John Sullivan by name, settled in Ootacamund in 1819. In such small beginnings a town is born. The first English settlement in India, a small trading post on the site of modern Madras, was granted by the Hindu rulers of the south in 1639. In such small beginnings is an empire born. Extending control by degrees, the British eventually triumphed in the four-way struggle for control over the Indian subcontinent. The other protagonists in this struggle were the Indianized Muslim rulers of the north, whose series of incursions, beginning in the twelfth century, culminated in control over most of northern India during the reign of the great emperor Akbar; the Maharatas, who originated from Maharashtra in Western India, and were finally crushed by the British in 1818; and the French, whose fortunes in India were intimately linked to those of Napoleon in Europe, and whose last vestiges of influence are now confined to Pondicherry where the Sri Aurobindo ashram, mentioned earlier, is located. The memorable year 1776, when the North Americans finally shook themselves free of the British, is also the year when the Indians had almost completely lost their freedom to the British. The long shoreline of the Indian subcontinent, coupled with the total supremacy of the English navy and, in particular, its control over the sea routes, gave the British a great advantage in the fight for India. A tiny faraway island had forged an instrument that made vulnerable every nation bordering on an ocean. It is difficult today to comprehend the magnitude and extent of control that the English navy made possible. But imagine, if you will, a modern nation of the twentieth century, with growing economic strength coupled with intelligence, ruthlessness, guile, and energy—let us say, for purposes of illustration, the nation of Japan. Suppose such a nation achieved a mastery of space equivalent to the British mastery of the seas, and acquired a fourth military wing superior to that of any other country, namely, a space force – the next logical and inevitable step in the progression: army, navy, airforce. Would not every country in the world be suddenly vulnerable to such a nation?

The English hegemony over the Indian subcontinent lasted altogether about a hundred and seventy years. Now that it is over, we may ask the question: What enduring legacy did the Englishman leave to India? How did the two countries influence one another's character in an essential way? In seeking an answer, I shall attempt to look at the larger picture on hand, at the palimpsest that was India during this period, beyond the tyranny, pettiness and greed of the individual ruling British officials, which is so well known to anyone familiar with the colonial period.

The subcontinent of India has roughly the same land area, population,
linguistic variety and national diversity as the continent of Europe with Russia excluded. Fragmented into numerous states over most of its history, the Indian subcontinent was united under a common ruler only at rare intervals. India derives her distinctive quality, her colour, so to speak, from Hinduism, just as Europe derives distinctive colour from Christianity in all its various denominations—Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. Prior to the British era, the Indianized followers of Mohammed held control over much of India. An important consequence of British rule was to drive Islam to the far reaches of the subcontinent and to restore India to Hinduism in a secular guise in the year 1949, when the British era finally came to an end. And, in the face of the challenge from Western ideas during this period, reformist movements sprang up in many parts of India, which sought to purge decadent Hinduism of its dank undergrowths, for instance, dowry, child marriage and suttee. Gandhism, assuming both a religious and a political form, is an example of such a movement. So I would say that the first major contribution of the British was to give India back to the Hindus.

Secondly, the British gave this vast land an administrative unity and the infrastructure of a modern state by creating a civil service and a national army. An extensive network of railways was built, with the aid of Indian capital and labour one might hasten to add. And one cannot underestimate the importance of English being adopted as the lingua franca in a land of fourteen major languages, over five hundred dialects and at least six major scripts.

Thirdly, India acquired some of the modern means of production during the British period. However, I want to be clear on this point, for I would argue that India modernized in spite of British rule rather than as a result of it. Although the industrial revolution first manifested itself in England, it was a product of the collective genius of Europe. The British, as the foremost representative of the industrial revolution, brought it to India. And it was a two-way street, because a contributing factor to the rapid industrialization of Britain was undoubtably the infusion of vast amounts of capital appropriated from India.

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1Notably, by the Emperors Ashoka and Akbar.
2Namely, to Pakistan and Bangladesh, though, of course, India still has a sizeable Moslem minority.
3The practice of immolating a widow on her husband's pyre, which has recently returned in the murderous form of bride burnings.
4James Watt developed his engine in 1775, a year before the American Declaration of Independence.
There is ample evidence to support the view that the British did all in their power to impede the development of this new mode of production in India, preferring to preserve her as a source of raw materials, accessed and controlled through the large railway network, and as a market for goods manufactured in Britain. Indeed, to this end, the British often actively sought to destroy many of the village-based medieval industries of India, namely, textiles, metal-working, glass and paper, while simultaneously obstructing the introduction of new techniques. The inevitable consequence was to drive many people, who had formerly made their living from cottage industry, back to the land. India became progressively more ruralized. As Nehru notes in his book *The Discovery of India*: “In every progressive country there has been, during the past century, a shift of population from agriculture to industry, from village to town. In India this process was reversed as a result of British policy. The figures are instructive and significant. In the middle of the nineteenth century, 55 percent of the population is said to have been dependent on agriculture; recently (prior to the second world war) this population was estimated to be 74 percent”.

During the British period India moved from being an assemblage of medieval states, some of them amongst the foremost in the world, to becoming a united country that was amongst the most backward of modern nations. Meanwhile, many other countries not under the colonial yoke industrialized rapidly, notably the United States. This industrialization was brought about in India only by the changing fortunes of the British during and after the First and Second World Wars. A whole generation of Britons, who might otherwise have sought their fortunes in India, perished instead on the battle-fields of Europe. The effective conduct of these wars, coupled with increased naval isolation, required that domestic production of basic items be undertaken in India with substantial Indian help. Only in this belated fashion did Britain contribute to the industrialization of India. And simultaneously Gandhi, armed with the symbols of medieval India, which he used so capably to capture the spirit and imagination of her down-trodden inhabitants, was able to capitalize on the weakened grip of the British and win India her freedom. Since then, freed from colonial restraints, India has made remarkable strides in industrial production, as will be more fully discussed in a later chapter.

In my opinion, the truly great contribution of the English to India was the infusion of a democratic spirit into her institutions. But here again I can only damn the colonialists with faint praise, because the British did not give, in the true sense of that word, or even educate India into the ways
of democracy. Only after the British departed in 1947 did India become a democracy under a newly framed constitution and governmental structure patterned, in many respects, after the United States. Rather, Indian democracy was the outcome of a historical process that began in England, came to flower in the American colonies where it assumed a positively English character, and was later transmitted to the Indian colony during the period of British ascendancy, often against the will of the individual British rulers of the time. Indeed, I believe, but must hasten to add that it is a personal theory, that the American revolution was an English revolution, a revolution nurtured by latent forces in England but that failed to take place in England itself⁵. Indeed it is fortunate that the revolution did occur in a distant virgin land, where it could flourish unimpeded by the forces of tradition and native culture, which invariably return to suffocate social change, as happened in France and later the Soviet Union. I also believe that the decline of England began with the American revolution, much earlier than is usually assumed, and during a period when English power and invention was very much in evidence (recall that the industrial revolution began around 1775), because her spirit failed to keep pace. In effect there were two Englands, on the one hand Imperial England, feudal in character, whose energies, thwarted on the American continent, were redirected to India; and on the other, the England of a democratic spirit that gave birth to and indeed nourished the American revolution. It was the imperial face of Britain that Indians saw at home even as they found allies for their struggle for freedom in England herself. It is a phenomenon more easily understood when we observe the similar split personality in the United States of America, the leading superpower of today—democratic and restrained by her constitution at home, yet dictatorial and supportive of some of the worst tyrannies abroad. Indeed, the United States has taken on the mantle of England, even to the extent of becoming the main shaping force of the English language. Viewed thus, we are able to resolve many a modern political paradox. For example, victims of the death squads of South America that receive the tacit support of governments propped up by the United States, can come for safe haven to the United States itself, where they find an effective political platform

⁵“Most historians now see the period between 1621 and 1720 as an epoch of continuous political turmoil, as England lurched unsteadily between tendencies towards royal absolutism on the French model and gentry-controlled anarchy of the Polish type, before settling down to the eighteenth century of aristocratic Whig control, of royal patronage and prerequisites, and corruption and manipulation of a sharply reduced electorate”, New York Review of Books, XXXIV No. 3, Feb. 1987.
for their cause. We understand also why Gandhi was so dear to the hearts of millworkers in Lancashire and to British intellectuals, both natural allies against the establishment, even as he was actively struggling to overthrow British rule in India. And it helps one understand the peculiar modern love-hate relationship between the English and the Indian peoples. For even as we recognize the injustice of the British period, the history of India is today very much interwoven with the remarkable people of the British Isles who ruled her for nigh on two centuries.
Chapter 7

GOA AND THE PORTUGUESE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

From my mother’s ancestral home in the Goan countryside, the criss-cross pattern of paddy fields stretches toward the horizon. In the foreground stand coconut-palm groves, behind are hills carpeted with cashew trees. This ancestral home remains in the family, as the large name-board that hangs over the entrance veranda proudly spells out in bold letters—FREITAS. An elderly priest, my mother’s uncle, until recently lived with two distant cousins in this now run-down house.

My father’s elder brother has retired to a colourful little cottage in the nearby village of Moira from which my grandfather immigrated to Kenya at the end of the nineteenth century. Here, amidst the paddy fields and churches, stand many derelict houses, whose owners have long since departed for other parts of India or for more distant lands. Most immigrant Goans trace back their ancestry to villages like Moira, and an elderly Goan matriarch will often inquire as to one’s surname and ancestral village, from which she can easily deduce one’s position on the social scale.

Nearby also is Calangute beach, famous for its wide expanse of white sand. The beach rises at a sharp angle, and the nude hippie sunbathers, who have made this their Mecca, occasionally reveal breasts and genitalia from most unusual points of view. The locals are indignant, even in this small island of relative freedom, but the strolling beturbaned Sikh, whom I chance to meet, is delighted. In confidential tones, he tells me that it is precisely for such a sight that he came to Goa on holiday. The sharp angle of the beach also makes for a dangerous undertow in the water that can quickly drag an unwitting bather out to sea, and the local fisher folk will sometimes refuse to go to the aid of a bather in distress. “It is One for the Sea” they will say, harking back to the days of Hindu human sacrifice.

I am a Hindu Indian twice removed. Born in Kenya, I was raised within a community that traces its origins to and lives by the traditions of this land.
of Goa, across the Indian ocean from East Africa. Goa was colonized late in the fifteenth century by the Portuguese and although the people of Goa have retained many of the social customs of Hindu India, these customs have been modified and veneered by Portuguese Christianity and Latin culture. The beliefs, practices and values of the great shaping force of Hinduism have thus acted upon me only in an indirect way, creating a psychological rift that separates me from traditional India. I describe myself, moreover, as an Indian twice rather than once removed, because I have spent much of my adult life in western countries, first in England where I attended Trinity College at the University of Cambridge, and later in the United States, where I continued my studies at the University of California at Berkeley and stayed after the completion of my doctorate to pursue a career. The many years that I have since spent in North America have instilled in me the spirit of the open road, the sense of broad open horizons that have long shaped the native American, and are now shaping the more recent immigrants of the last few centuries.

Despite the physical and psychological separation, the heritage of India remains very much a part of my life. We humans are much more sensitive antenna than we imagine, and the two years that I spent at St. Mary’s school in Bombay, when I had just entered my teenage years, have left me with an intuitive sense of the land of my ancestors and a deep reservoir of buried memories. My father attended this same Jesuit-run boarding school when he was a boy, being enrolled there in turn by his father, who had immigrated to Kenya from Goa at the beginning of the twentieth century.

According to family lore, my grandfather, Jocquaim Anthonio Nazareth, came to Kenya from India by dhow. Arriving at a time when the Mombasa-Nairobi railroad was being built, he traversed much of the three hundred mile journey from the coast to Nairobi on foot. He was an adventurous man of forceful character and endowed with organizational skill, who rose from humble beginnings and little knowledge of the English language to attain considerable prosperity. This included ownership of land, a store, a bar, a hotel, and the government railway catering contract. Errol Trzebinski’s book, The Kenya Pioneers, contains the following amusing passage concerning this railway contract in the description of the journey of one Abraham Block, an early settler:

> Most Europeans automatically travelled first-class unlike Block who could only afford a second-class ticket. The old Indian

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1Block later developed a chain of hotels in the country.
coaches had no corridor, and were referred to as 'the loose boxes' or 'horse boxes'. Each compartment slept four, the bunks lying parallel to the track so that progress was animated by a ceaseless jolting action only to be relieved by the halts made for meals. These were served in ‘dak’ bungalows where the catering was under contract to a Goan, Mr. J. Nazareth. Block, being more familiar with the necessities of life than the luxuries, thought the standard of food was good and happily paid one rupee for lunch and dinner and fifty-five annas for his breakfast of hardboiled eggs and tea. But his opinion was the exception. Generally newcomers were startled by Nazareth’s menu which seldom varied from watery soup, tinned salmon, meat balls and fruit and custard. More puzzling still was the nostalgia the railway meals summoned in the old hands, who appeared to find comfort in their awfulness. It was something to do with being back where they belonged. Dinner was served by Goan stewards in white gloves as multitudes of winged insects, attracted to the lamps suspended low like billiard lights over each table, slid down the shades into the soup or lodged themselves in the butter.

And with regard to my grandfather’s talents as a store owner, we find the following paragraph in Lord Cranworth’s *Kenya Chronicles* (Macmillan, 1939), in a chapter describing the first world war as it affected East Africa:

On March 21st, the line of the Ruwu being firmly held, the forces to which I was attached were moved back to Mbuyuni, a comparatively dry and healthy camp, to be reorganized and brought up to strength to resume active operations at the end of the rains. Major-General A.R. Hoskins was brought in to command the 1st Division, which was our official name, and I made his acquaintance in an unfortunate fashion in which I very rightly incurred his severe displeasure. My friend Colin Isaacson was acting as D.A.Q.M.G. and I had occasion to go down to his office. He was not in and I took the opportunity for some ill-placed facetiousness. This was the time when nearly all civilians were presented with military titles, and among others the head of the Y.M.C.A. store had been gazetted a Major. The only other store in the camp was run by a large Goan, with long yellow Dundreary whiskers named Nazareth. I took a sheet of official paper and wrote to Colin in official terms. I stated
that in the Major's store I had found neither soap nor toilet paper but proceeding had found ample supplies provided by the Goan. Under the circumstances I put forward the suggestion that Nazareth should be promoted to Brigadier-General, which I further pointed out would be a graceful compliment to our oldest ally. This I left in an official envelope and went on my way. Shortly the newly arrived General visited his H.Q. office and opened the envelope addressed to his D.A.Q.M.G. The fat was in the fire. I was sent for, properly told off, and told that he would take twenty-four hours to consider whether or not to send me back to the base. I spent a miserable day and night, and the following afternoon an orderly brought an official envelope. I tore it open in fear and trembling to read: "I have seen Nazareth. You are forgiven. He should be a General. Come to dinner tonight." I have never been facetious on office paper again. General Hoskins was perhaps the most gifted soldier of the campaign and was certainly the most popular. He has since been equally successful and popular as the head of the Bonar Law Conservative College at Ashridge.

It is clear that Jocquaim Anthonio Nazareth would have acquitted himself well in the Old American West. Indeed, the growth of Nairobi from a small railroad encampment into a large city parallels the growth of Phoenix, Arizona, which was also little more than a row of shacks at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Towards the end of the First World War (1914-1918), my grandfather lost his entire fortune and was forced to declare bankruptcy. In his book *Brown Man, Black Country*, my father traces this misfortune to the large amount of bad debt that my grandfather accumulated from British officers and soldiers, pilfering by his staff, his borrowing from money-lenders at exorbitant rates of interest, and possibly the conduct of business at times when he was the worse off for drink—in short, irresponsible business habits. Family lore, obviously exaggerated, holds that my grandfather gave away his hotel for a kiss.

My father, born in Nairobi in 1908, was enrolled at an early age as a boarder at St. Mary's School in Bombay, India, and completed his undergraduate education at St. Xavier's College, a Jesuit college also in Bombay. Always a brilliant student, he won the Gold Medal for graduating at the top of his class. He then enrolled at the Inns of Court in London where he studied
Goa and the Portuguese

law and again distinguished himself by winning a number of prizes\textsuperscript{2}. Called to the Bar in January, 1933, he remained in London for a year in Chancery and Common Law Chambers, and then elected to return to Nairobi where he set up his first practice\textsuperscript{3} in Kenya during the great depression. In 1944, he married my mother, also a lawyer by training, the arranged marriage taking place in Bombay. Shortly thereafter, they returned to make their home in Kenya, but the bond with my mother's parents, brother and three sisters in India always remained close and strong.

The extensive traffic between India and East Africa, which I have illustrated by briefly recounting my family's history, has occurred for well over two millennia. Although one might not guess it from present day India, two thousand years ago Indians were an adventurous, seafaring people with extensive contacts across the oceans that bordered on their country. The Indian Emperor Ashoka maintained a large fleet, as did his Gupta successors. Archeological evidence shows that Indians came to Africa, particularly the southern part of the continent, to mine for gold as early as the start of the Christian era, and quite possibly a thousand years earlier. Many of these Indian Canarins originated from the Malabar coast of India that includes Goa.

By the above standards, the Portuguese, who arrived in Africa and India in the fifteenth century were relative latecomers. Vasco da Gama is said to have been guided by a Goan pilot when he first set sail for India from the port of Malindi on the East African coast. Not far from where he embarked is an ancient Hindu phallic temple, located beside a mosque of more recent origin. The coast and interior of East and Southern Africa are littered with such mysteries, and there are African tribes that show strong genetic and linguistic evidence of having intermingled with the people of India.

The Portuguese proved to be ruffians and spoil-sports, wreaking great havoc on the Hindu temples of Goa. They are also credited, during the course of their adventuring, with disfiguring by gunfire the magnificent Trimurti sculptures of Elephanta near Bombay (as did the troops of Napoleon

\textsuperscript{2}Including the Special Prize of the Council of Legal Education, the Poland Prize of the Inner Temple in Criminal Law, and the Profumo Prize of the Inner Temple.

\textsuperscript{3}Thus began a distinguished career that included his eventual appointment as Queen's Counsellor (Q.C.), becoming president of the East African Indian National Congress (1950-52), Puisne Judge of the Supreme Court (1953), president of the Law Society of Kenya (1954), and elected Member of the Kenya Legislative Council (M.L.C.) for the Western Electoral Area (1956-60). I include this list in order to explain the letters after my father's name on the dedication page and record accomplishments of which he was most proud.
An Autobiographical Sketch

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disfigure the Spinx in Egypt) and destroying the relic of the Buddha’s tooth at the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Ceylon. In Goa, the Portuguese forcibly converted the local population to Catholicism and intermarried freely with them, unlike the British in this regard. Most Christian Goans have some Portuguese ancestry, and in the case of my family, this ancestry is evident from our surname—Nazareth.

About sixty percent of Goa's population remains Hindu, tending to be concentrated in the hilly areas away from the coast, where they were able to escape the proselytization of the Portuguese. Catholic Goans predominate nearer the coast and have evolved a curious hybrid culture, a blend of Latin and Hindu customs. The Catholic Goan attends church every Sunday, yet continues to be conscious of caste, particularly in matters of marriage. He or she may marry for love, but will encounter social discrimination if the chosen partner is of a lower caste. And many marriages continue to be arranged in the Indian manner, being viewed primarily as a union of two families, not of two individuals. The Goan is an intensely social creature. Clubs are focal points for the community, providing sporting and social facilities where the many holidays and events of the Goan calendar are celebrated with dancing of the Latin variety, feasting on the tastiest of fish and meat curries, and much singing and merry-making. The entire community—adults, children, the elderly—comes together to celebrate these events.

Social Club and Social Caste, Sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, Sacrifice to the Dark Depths of the Sea: A nimble fellow is the Goan. Like a trapeze artist, he walks a tight-rope that divides two very different cultures—Latin and Hindu. And although his Goan culture is distinctive, it is a hybrid, not an alloy. The Latin and Hindu elements, upon which it draws, have no natural affinity for one other. The soulful and nostalgic Mando songs of Goa, strongly influenced by the Portuguese, do not find an echo in the deep cavern of Hinduism. Yet with the ouster of the Portuguese in the early nineteen-sixties, Goa has returned more fully to its Indian roots.

To the mouth of the Mandovi river, near the city of Panjim, go flat-bottomed barges carrying a rich load of iron ore destined for export to distant lands. The seas yield a bountiful harvest of fish; the land a bountiful crop of rice, coconuts, cashews and spices. Goa, the Jewel of the Kings of Southern

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4 During a recent visit to Florida State University in Tallahassee (Florida, USA), a meteorologist told me of a region of the sea, north of the island of Madagascar, called the Nazareth bank. Perhaps Nazareth, our Portuguese ancestor, was a seafarer after whom it was named. I've also discovered that the small town of Nazaré in Portugal, from which he may have derived his name, was originally settled by Phoenecians from North Africa.
India, a rival once to Lisbon for wealth and splendour, has mineral resources, fishing, agriculture, tourism. This is a land with a past and a future.
I am having a continuing love affair with the Hindu maiden. Doe-eyed, lissome, full of grace and demure charm, almost all traditional girls of a marriagable age are alluringly attractive. Like blossoms on a tree, they bloom unplucked in a Garden of Eden, attractive, all in the same way, without individuality. To a man of a particular station in life is given the right to pluck, and enjoy through marriage, a maiden of a suitably matching bloom. But, once plucked, her colour will fade. For a woman has then embarked on a socially prescribed journey that leads to motherhood, childbearing and rearing, and, when her children marry, to the petty despotism of the traditional mother-in-law.

Today, some women can escape the cultural-social-religious matrix that has traditionally confined them to a deeply-rooted, but unselfconscious pattern of life. My fellow travellers on the Bombay-New Delhi train, with whom I am thrown together indiscriminately, provide a living illustration. The air-conditioned, dormitory-style coach is partitioned into groups of four berths, connected by an adjoining corridor that runs the length of the waggon, and I discover that I will share a partition with an elderly woman, her daughter-in-law, and her granddaughter. (The railway reservation system is a great democratizing force in India, respecting distinctions neither of gender, caste nor creed.) The two older ladies are cast in the traditional mold, but the granddaughter, a girl of college age, is westernized in dress and manner. We easily strike up a conversation that ranges over a variety of topics, under the watchful and disapproving eyes of mother and grandmother. Through education and contact with other peoples and cultures, either sought after or thrust upon her, this young maiden has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and, in so doing, has fallen from the grace of the Garden of Eden. On an individual scale, she gives me the same feeling as does New Delhi, making her a most appropriate introduction to the city.
What better place to recount impressions of the city than the ice cream parlour of Nirula’s, where I am often to be found seeking refuge from the oppressive heat of May. Patterned after its American counterpart, it offers ice cream flavours like jamoca-almond fudge and chocolate-mint, served by Indians who look particularly incongruous in white ice cream man outfits, complete with white ice cream man caps. Upstairs, a jazzed-up pizza parlour has a salad bar and serves lambburgers, respecting the sensibilities of Hindus, who will not eat beef, and Moslems, who prefer mutton. This is what New Delhi is all about: an attempt to prove that India can grow a taproot long enough to span the Pacific Ocean.

There has been a long history of cultural (or is it horticultural) overextension in this part of the Gangetic plain. Over the past millennium, no fewer than eight cities have been built on this site, adjacent rather than atop one other, as Moslem dynasties replaced Hindu, and were, in turn, replaced by the British Raj. The result is a feeling of being cut off from the living tissue of India, a feeling that persists even as one marvels at the wonders that set Delhi apart: the magnificent Red Fort, Hamayun’s tomb—precursor of the Taj Mahal, the Jama Masjid Mosque—largest in Asia, and the magnificent buildings and broad tree-lined avenues constructed by the British; awe-inspiring, yet not entirely real. But then the reality of India is hard to bear, and one is willing, if only temporarily, to set aside Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva—especially Shiva—and seek another nonindigenous perspective.

Islamic India has clearly not grown from the native soil. A Yogi clapped his hands causing it to materialize from a beautiful dream. Signs of the terror and destruction that accompanied the Islamic incursions into India have long faded from sight; what remains are the mosques, the gardens, the awesome fortresses, the deserted cities of enchantment. I set off from Delhi to visit the greatest of these wonders, the Taj Mahal in Agra. “Four rupees to the station”, says the driver of the autorickshaw that I hail to take me to my departing train. “Three”, I bargain. “O.K., O.K., if it will make you happy”. And, as we clatter off at a handsome speed, he repeatedly chants, “Spend, spend, God will send!”.

Agra itself is little more than an overgrown village. I stay at Lauries Hotel, which a cycle-rickshaw wallah tells me was a splendid place during the time of the British. Now, he says sadly, by way of explanation of its run-down condition, “It is in Indian hands”. However, Lauries remains enchanting. During the day, sparrows fly into the high-ceilinged dining room, which borders onto the back garden, hopping over the floors of the unoccupied areas. A lovely but unkempt front garden gives access to a
swimming pool, and, at the front gate, a horde of rickshaw wallas await, ready to pedal one off to the many sights for the price of a few rupees.

The Taj Mahal in the full blaze of noon is an overwhelming sight—wonderfully proportioned, massive, yet seemingly without weight. The reflected light is so intense that I must shield my eyes and reluctantly don dark glasses. The Emperor Akbar's tomb is another high point. A broadminded ruler, Akbar sought to bring various religious communities into harmony with one another, and his tomb reflects this cosmopolitan outlook, drawing on a number of different architectural motifs: Hindu, Muslim, and Greek. A man who was "dedicated to simple living and high thinking", says our guide. And, farther afield, I later visited other places of magic and romance: Fatepur Sikri, Jaipur, medieval Rajhastan, and Srinagar in Kashmir. All must await another writing, for this book primarily concerns Hindu India. We must return for the present to Nirula's in New Delhi, to reflect anew on the effects of outside influences, especially western influences, on India.

As with any people, Indians have particular genetic affinities and predispositions on which the culture, beliefs, practices and values of Hinduism have acted like a giant refining mill, creating a race with an especially fascinating quality to their nature. I can best describe it as a true depth of being.

"there is an almost obsessional cleanliness of the individual, an extraordinary grace of manner, a delicacy of form and of movement, a closeness to the rhythms of time and of place, a sense of mystery and drama, an intricate intelligence, a pervasive gentleness that showed itself as a longing for peace and an awe of life itself."

How well this quotation captures the spirit of the natural sons and daughters of the Indian soil! However, westernized Indians, who today play a dominant governing role in modern India, have turned their backs on this refining mill. Hindus once removed, they have embarked on a road that leads from the path of being to the path of doing. Indeed, for a thousand years, the rulers of India have sought their inspiration from outside her boundaries, and this tendency is in evidence even today. As V.S. Naipaul asks, quite fairly: "In light of the massive infusion of new ideas and knowledge from the west, is Hindu culture capable of regenerating itself from within?" Naipaul claims that the culture encourages a mental inertness and resistance to change, and he believes that regeneration can only come after further decay that permits a new imported approach to take root. But this may well reflect a
distorted perspective, a biased point of view. One could make an analogy with a husband's belief that reconstructive surgery of his wife's face and body would be capable of transforming her into a more suitable companion. But the truth of the matter is that true feminine beauty cannot be created externally—it must grow from within.

Gandhi's approach seems more on point. Having absorbed India thoroughly during his long life in politics and his extensive travels across the land, he was convinced, beyond a doubt, that regeneration could only come from the heartland, hence his emphasis on village development. But Gandhi's error lay in then turning his back on modern science and technology. In seeking, quite rightly, to keep the fabric of India intact, he sometimes sadly lost touch with the accelerating changes of the twentieth-century era.

India must find a science and technology appropriate to her needs. At the outset of my journey, I found myself very much in agreement with Naipaul's ridicule of Indian efforts to improve the bullock cart or the harvesting sickle. But after my travels in the south, I am no longer so sure. Many preconceptions go by the wayside when India is permitted to act directly on the senses, rather than indirectly through the visual or written media. Nevertheless, we must first face the facts of modern India, as Naipaul would have us do, before we can revamp a philosophy or rediscover an identity. And some of these facts are horrifying. Seventy percent of households own no land, yet a full eighty percent of the people live in villages, where land is often the only asset—this despite the country's land reform laws. Thirty percent of the people, the untouchables, remain in a state of slavery, masked by the name Harijans (Children of God) bestowed on them by Gandhi. The country calls itself a democracy, but, in reality, it remains feudal in its distribution of wealth and power. There is much that is savage and cruel in this culture. And, in India, there is a tendency for an entrenched social or economic practice to convert itself, in time, into a religious norm. The useful bullock becomes the sacred cow. Slavery becomes Karma. Poverty becomes Maya. Economic classes become Varna. And yet, let us tread carefully. This is the world from a western perspective: statistics, economic indices, religious concepts. Why not reverse one's point of view? The world is Maya. Varna is a fact of life. The only confrontation that really matters is between Man and his God. And what a wonderful conception of God,

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1See India - A Wounded Civilization.  
2We shall discuss this further in Chapter 12.
captured so well by the Trimurti sculpture of Elephanta\textsuperscript{3}! Man's foremost duty is to find enlightenment or, at least, to revere the enlightened. There is a hidden side to life and hidden forces that impinge on our lives, our Karma. We must live out our Dharma, our duty. Because there is so much cruelty and savagery in the world, some of the gods too are cruel and savage. The world in not a piece of clockwork to be taken apart with the mind. Rather, we contain the world within ourselves. To know what is without, we must know what is within.

It is, in reality, a delicate and fragile vision, easily challenged, and perhaps the main reason that it has not met the fate of the Mayan and Inca cultures of South America, in the face of western intrusion, is that the Indian populace was not decimated, and the vast majority of Indians still live unproselytized and unassimilated in villages, where they can continue to subscribe to this view of the world.

There is much that is elevated and sublime in this civilization. But, I think that it is also important to note that there is much that has welled up from more primitive springs, much in the culture and, in consequence, in the religious practices that is a refinement of the primitive rather than a transmutation of it. This is no longer a healthy arboreal land as it was when the Aryans first flooded into India, ample evidence for which can be found in early Indian writings\textsuperscript{4}. In India, this active spirit has been distilled, refined, mixed with other indigenous elements of the subcontinent, yielding, over time, a very strange concoction indeed.

Nirad Chaudhuri, in his book, \textit{A Continent of Circe}, has an extraordinary thesis. He believes the solution to the identity crisis of modern India is for her inhabitants to recognize that they are a \textit{European people}, whose vitality has been progressively sapped by the harsh Indian climate. How preposterous! Yet, he highlights a task for competent Indian philosopher-historians that remains unfinished; namely, to trace precisely how it was that free and healthy forest dwellers, over the course of centuries, became instead captives of that "magnificent cage of countless compartments"—the India of today\textsuperscript{5}.

\textsuperscript{3}To be described in the next chapter.
\textsuperscript{4}A spirit evident, for example, in German culture even today.
\textsuperscript{5}Words of Rabindranath Tagore.
Chapter 9

ELEPHANTA, AJANTA, ELLORA AND TEMPLES FARTHER AFIELD

The Hindu conception of God, Brahma—the Creator, Vishnu—the Preserver and Shiva—the Destroyer, is made even more subtle by the postulate that each of these three aspects must necessarily contain, within itself, the essence of the other two. There is a greater timeless unity embracing creation, preservation and destruction that can indeed be named by any one of these three names.

At Elephanta, in cave temples that lie on an island just off the coast of Bombay, is one of the most inspired expressions of this conception of God in all of Hindu religious art—the Trimurti sculpture, a depiction of Shiva in his threefold aspect. It is executed on a large scale, though not quite on the scale of Egyptian or Buddhist art, and its anonymous sculptors have touched the very stone with life. There is a mystery here, because I have generally found it to be true that the most marked characteristic of Hindu temple architecture and sculpture is fineness of execution and intricacy of detail rather than magnificence of creation. It is the work of gifted artisans not inspired artists. Yet, Elephanta is an exception.

A short journey from Bombay, this time in a northeasterly direction, will take one to an outstanding example of the virtuosity of such gifted artisans at the cave temples of Ellora. In particular, the famed Kailasa temple, cut like a jewel in one piece from the rock, is one of the greatest marvels in all of Indian sculpture. Nevertheless, it is a human construct. Go, however, to the neighbouring site of Ajanta, only a few miles away, but substantially separated in time, and there you will find a spirit in the art that is much more akin to the spirit of Elephanta—only now it is expressed through the medium of painting and in the language of Buddhism. The Padmapani painting of a Bodhisatva, in particular, has great spiritual tranquility and depth of being. In Elephanta, one feels that it is the fresh breath of the Buddhist spirit that is expressed in the language of Hindu mythology, in a way that makes the
Elephanta, Ajanta, Ellora

labels Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, largely irrelevant. The sculpture of Elephanta belongs to the region of religious expression termed mystical that subsumes and transcends mere belief or creed.

The Padmapani painting of Ajanta, the Trimurti sculpture of Elephanta, the Kailasa temple of Ellora: here, in pigment and stone, is told the story of the profound religious transformation of fifteen centuries, from the gradual rise of Buddhism between the sixth and the third centuries B.C. to the resurgence of a revitalized Hinduism in the tenth century A.D. Dates are always imprecise in Indian history, but the Ajanta caves were developed from approximately the second century B.C. to about the seventh century A.D. The excavation of the Elephanta caves is set at between the sixth and the seventh centuries A.D. And the Kailasa temple dates from the eight and ninth centuries A.D. Although founded in the sixth century B.C., it was only during the reign of the emperor Ashoka (269-232 B.C.) that Buddhism became a national religion. Even then, however, it remained a religion of monks and never penetrated deeply into the consciousness of the masses. Already Buddhism was going through change to meet the needs of the populace. The Ajanta caves record that transformation from the austere Hinayana to the more theistic and representational Mahayana. The abandonment of the caves during the seventh century, to be rediscovered only much later by an English hunting party, much like a Mayan site in South America, testifies eloquently to the dwindling influence of Buddhism. In the Ellora caves, we see the older Brahmanism gradually reformed through Buddhism into a new and revived Hinduism, and, simultaneously, one also sees an erosion of the freshness of spirit of Buddhism as its abstract and sublime teachings are surplanted by an elaborate mythology. This resurgence of Hinduism found expression over all of India, even as the Moslem advance into the country was under way.

The temples of Khajuraho are a notable example\(^1\) of this revival. The complex of temples lies southeast of Delhi and is most easily accessed by taking the Indian Airlines flight that leaves, each morning, from Delhi. The month of May, when I make this journey, is not the best time of the year to visit Khajuraho. The hot summer air stands in one’s every path, an omnipresent but unresisting wall. There is no single all-imposing temple here. Instead, numerous small temples lie scattered over the plain. Aided

\(^1\)Other notable examples are to be found at Halebid and Belur, not far from Mysore, and at the nearby site of Vijayanagar, but unfortunately, I was not able to include them in my itinerary.
by the restorer’s hand, about twenty, of an estimated eighty-five built here between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries A.D. by the Hindu Chandella Kings, have survived the ravages of time. Almost all contain vivid and sexually explicit carvings. Soon, the invisible heat of summer and the visible eroticism of the temples conspire to take away one’s breath.

To be alive is to be sexually alive. That is the principle clearly stated on these Chandella temple walls. The mating of humans is as beautiful and as unconscious as the mating of animals. Sexuality is to be practiced and to be celebrated. And yet one feels that there is a more encompassing explanation. A temple, after all, is a place of worship, not a statement of principle. “Why?”, one asks. “Why carvings that leave nothing to the imagination?” Why on the outer walls?” My own personal theory, let us call it a tongue-in-cheek Indo-Freudeanism, is that the carvings are intended to create a heightened intensity in a person who comes to the temple to worship. What better way to awaken the Kundalini serpent of Shiva than through a depiction of the sexual act! And the energy, thus awakened, can then be channeled to a deeper worship, from a worship of the physical lingam of the lover to the worship of the more abstract Shiva lingam, the symbol of creation itself, which stands in each innermost sanctum. Thus are we, the worshippers, lead from the human to the divine, to the sublime expression of sexuality.

However, if one turns only an artist’s eye to these Hindu temples of the so-called Western grouping, they are best viewed from a distance. Standing on raised pedestals, their roofs a cascade of carved spires, they resemble intricately and delicately carved jewel boxes. But, upon mounting the pedestals and viewing the temples at close range, one discovers that there is a certain naiveté to the sculpture. One cannot escape the feeling that they are made to formula. There is a cloying aspect to them, a cleaving to the earth. They reach to the recesses of the earth and the human heart, lacking an ethereal quality that a western eye has grown to expect from religious art.

Not so the Jain temples of the much smaller Eastern grouping. To reach them, I hire the services of a cycle-rickshaw wallah, who pedals me through the relatively prosperous village of Khajuraho and out to the fields beyond, where the temples lie far from the beaten track of the tourist. Old railings, leaning in places, protect the temples from the domesticated animals that wander the surrounding fields. Arriving shortly before sunset, I enter through a creaking gate, and find that I have the temples all to myself.

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2This prosperity no doubt derives from tourist dollars.
Here the carvings have a delicacy and a grace, a spiritually uplifting quality that one associates with a floating Botticelli Venus. They create a different sense of being as they draw one into the temple. Perhaps they are better suited to a western sensibility.

On the way back, an incident occurs that enables me to glimpse what lies beneath the placid exterior of village life. We find ourselves behind a bullock cart, in which sit two adults and three freshly-scrubbed Brahmin children. The children begin to jeer at us, unrestrained by the adult men. I sport a shock of overgrown black hair at the time, a veritable mop, and I believe that they are making disparaging comments, comparing me to the demon Ravana. The rickshaw walla refuses to heed my order to go ahead of them. This would violate the power relations of the village and, later, he may have to pay a heavy price. However, I assert myself by dismounting and walking ahead of the cart. Shortly thereafter, it veers to the left on another path, I remount the rickshaw and continue on our way. We have been given a vivid illustration of the caste structure that underlies all of Indian society.

If human cultures and subcultures are compared to animal species then caste can be viewed as the mechanism that ensures their survival. This is the positive view to which many defenders of the caste system have subscribed. Without caste, they say, India would have the blandness of the United States, blended together like a curry made from too many different spices, leaving only a dull and heavy flavour. But the reality of caste is that it is the mechanism that assures the domination of one group by another in India. The preservation of an unfair power structure, this is the root of the caste system. I vividly recall a terrible scene in Bombay, which for me symbolized the nakedness of the caste and power structure of India more than any other: a policeman driving a destitute street-dweller ahead of him at a run, periodically touching his victim's anus with his nightstick, the way a driver of a bullock-cart goads his animal.

When I set off at four o'clock the next morning to walk from the hotel to the bus station, it is so intensely dark that I find it impossible to find my way down the unlit road. Fortunately, a porter at the hotel is willing to escort me. The bus journey from Khajuraho to Jhansi and onward by train to New Delhi is memorable for its continual discomfort. The Indian peasant in the adjoining bus seat finds it necessary to simulate his more customary seated posture on a floor, which he achieves by bracing his bare feet up on the seat, and placing his right knee, therefore, in close proximity to my chin. Still later, on the train, the army enlisted man and his family, with whom I share a railway compartment at Jhansi, haul on board a number
of gunny sacks made from rough jute fibre from which crawl innumerable little cockroaches. One scurries up my trouser leg. Enough! I flee to the conductor’s seat at the end of the corridor to ride out the rest of the journey to Delhi. Shortly thereafter, I return to Bombay by overnight train.

And it is in the city where our journey to the temples of India originated that I find reaffirmation of the fundamental tenet of Indian philosophy, namely, that it is the human being who embodies the true temple. In a Bombay suburb, living most humbly, is such a living temple, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj by name. The Illustrated Weekly of India contains an article\textsuperscript{3} about him that is somewhat bombastic in tone, but nevertheless is best quoted verbatim:

Think of a tall granite cliff on the seashore .... Sri N. Maharaj is such a cliff of spiritual granite. He is stern and unbending. He speaks bluntly and upbraids sharply, but with his powerful words he sweeps away the mental debris of his visitors—moral cant, ritualistic religion and philosophical pretentions of various sorts. He is brutally straightforward, completely devoid of sugarcoated civility but, in reality, he has no desire to assert or dominate. He is what he is, because he is steeped in \textit{jnana} and he talks from the plane of true awareness, where the human soul is merged into the Oversoul, the \textit{Brahman}.

A man of medium height, 83 years old and swarthy with a wrinkled face, he looks no different from the vast multitude of lower-middle-class people that live in the lanes and by-lanes of Bombay. The Maharaj who has never had any formal education, is unable to converse in any language other than his mother tongue, Marathi.

The master lives in a tiny mezzanine-floor room of an old house and his humble abode serves as his living-room, bedroom and conference hall. He seems none the worse for these poor living conditions—he does not seem to desire anything better. The master is utterly indifferent to his apparently destitute dwelling, because he lives, and has his being, in the supreme state, the pure awareness in which the bodily existence is negatived, the mind is quietened forever and one becomes a mere witness, standing

\textsuperscript{3}May, 31, 1981, page 42-43. Unfortunately, Sri Nisargadatta passed away some years ago.
apart from everything. . .

... the central core of the master’s teaching. Until man can free himself from false identifications, from pretensions and delusions of various kinds, he cannot come face to face with the eternal verity that is latent within his own self. And the basic delusion is to mistake the body for the self. But what is the cause of this basic delusion, this “I-am-a-body” idea?

It is the overshadowing of the reality by the mind. Mind dominates one’s life. It remembers and anticipates. It exaggerates and distorts. Mind breeds selfishness—and selfishness is always destructive. Desire and fear are both self-centered states.

Desire is a projection of attachment. And all attachment is binding. The first step towards understanding our real self, towards cognition of the eternal verity within us, is non-attachment. But the practice of non-attachment entails the practice of many virtues: alertness, courage, compassion, love, freedom from lust, anger, vanity and fear. The non-attached man puts an end to pain and becomes progressively free from the shackles that bind him to the worldly life. . . .

People talk of liberation, moksha, without knowing what it means. True liberation is never of the person, but from the person. And for liberation, a guru in the usual sense is not an absolute must, if one is able to discover the sadguru within oneself. The master once said: ‘Your own self is your ultimate teacher, sadguru; the other teacher, the guru, is a millstone, it’s only your inner teacher that will walk with you to your goal, for he is the goal’.

And, for discovering the sadguru, all that one has to do is to discover all that one is not—body, feelings, thoughts, ideas, time, space and so on. “I” is the self and this self is a witness to the ever-changing phantasmagoria of the not-self appearing in innumerable forms and shapes. The self is the pure state, absolutely independent of everything else.

This aloneness of witnessing is not to be understood only intellectually or academically, but to be believed personally, intimately, intensely with one’s whole being.

This is the way and it is the only way.
Chapter 10

THE HINDU MIND: REFLECTIONS DURING SOJOURNS IN BOMBAY AND NEPAL

With the return of the monsoon rains, Eden comes to life. The foliage now has the verdancy and strength of some primitive force welling up from its roots. In the evening, the sky turns malevolent—dark-grey and threatening. Outdoors, everyone quickens pace. The light is that of an eclipse. Lightning flashes, and, when the rain comes, it comes suddenly; and goes suddenly. Quickly the clouds blow away, the sun sets and the night comes alive with the hum of insects, the bark of distant dogs, the occasional call of a nightbird. Then, during the night or in the early morning, the rain comes again, falling like a soft blessing.

I am to present a short course of specialized lectures at a leading research and teaching institute in Bombay, and have organized them as one would an informal graduate student seminar at a university in America. But there has been a breakdown in communication. The authorities have scheduled my first lecture for the main auditorium and advertised it as suitable for a general audience. A large audience has indeed gathered, drawn presumably by curiosity and my credentials, but when they realize that the subject matter is specialized and rather narrow in scope, they begin to drift away, one by one, until only a handful remain at the end, dotted here and there about the tiered seats. Thereafter, the lectures are rescheduled for a much smaller room and attended by a few specialists, and I am largely left to my own devices.

During the weeks spent here, I enjoy a unique opportunity to experience a premier scientific institution at first hand, and meditate on the life of the mind in India today.

“\textbf{A mind turned in on itself. It is difficult to think of a better description of the Indian mind. It can revel in itself. It can play}
with ideas as if they are ends in themselves. It can divorce itself from its environment, as well from practical purposes outside of itself. Yogic techniques which have come to us from time immemorial are at once a supreme expression of this mind and a superb aid to its development and enrichment—of course, on its own terms .... (A mind turned on itself has a logic of its own) .... Seen in this perspective, it is not surprising that yoga has made a remarkable comeback in independent India. Unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably, in view of the feeling of inferiority which the British people had managed to instil in us, this was accompanied in the early years of freedom by the claim that we are a spiritual people who disdain material wealth. This was uncharacteristic of the Indian mind and it exposed us to a lot of misunderstanding and ridicule. The fact was however quite different. Indians were seeing themselves through the eyes of others—Western scholars who either denounced us because we were different or expected us to conform to their own ideas of abstinence and renunciation. We still continue to do so. Having dropped the pretensions to spirituality, we are not able to appreciate that we are different—every civilization is different from every other—and the reasons for it. We hope that the exploration will now begin.” (Times of India, Sunday, October 25, 1981.)

It is a twenty-minute bus journey to the institute from the teeming life of the city center, past the village where the washer-folk live, then a short walk down a busy street to the grounds that border on the ocean. The road to the institute, which occasionally floods in the torrential rain, serves also as a divider between walled areas, the research complex on one side and the living accommodations on the other. The buildings within are monolithic slabs whose concrete walls are much dampened by the monsoon air. The main monolith, whose perpetual air-conditioning has been known to bring on an attack of asthma, overlooks a well-grassed garden and the ocean beyond. The criticism frequently levelled against this building is that it is much too imitative of an American structure and that the institute looks too selfconsciously to that distant continent across the ocean. A low-lying building with broad verandas and a covered walkway to the living quarters would indeed seem much better suited to the Indian climate.

I am given a small room in the student block. Facing it is a taller and more imposing structure—the guru building, as I call it, where the top-level
scientists have their flats. (The institute has had more than its fair share of intellectual giants. For example, much of India’s atomic energy program was initiated here under the direction of the far-sighted scientist Homi Bhaba.) At right angles, joining the feet of these two concrete structures, is a third slab housing the younger members of the institute. How very Indian! Gurus tower above initiates, with aspiring younger stars forming a bridge between the two. Although the buildings themselves are not very different from their counterparts on an American campus, the deeper impression is that of the Indian tradition—‘the Hindu Mind’, reasserting itself. This is indeed an intellectual ashram. The great English universities, Oxford and Cambridge, grew out of the monasteries of Britain; similarly, the monastic tradition, so much a part of India’s traditional intellectual life, plays a role in India’s scientific institutions even today.

“In India there is a lack of scientific ethos. There is no sacrifice and research is treated as a profession. The personal equation is very important, and when a researcher makes an incorrect claim, his colleagues close their eyes to it.” (A former director of the Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi, quoted in a local newspaper).

This is an authority-driven culture, guru-oriented. As it is in society, so it is in society’s institutions: the enlightened shower benedictions on the initiates. And, on the occasion when a guru bestows something less than a benediction, that too is accepted. In India there is, moreover, a curious tendency to take ideas and technology based on modern scientific concepts and design and give to their local adaptations the appearance of the makeshift—adapting technology, as it were, to a culture that lacks a scientific or, indeed, even a civic ethos. The result is that science and technology can assume an air of make believe, creating an unhealthy intellectual climate that blocks advance beyond a certain point.

“Meerut: Nov 23 - An electronic compass that can guide the blind has been developed by a postgraduate science student here, reports PTI.

The device, claimed to be the first of its kind in the world, has been made by a Mr. K-. It consists of a foot-long wooden box and has an embossed arrow pointing north. The compass starts signalling north as soon as a switch is put on. It stops signalling the moment the direction of the box is diverted from north.
Mr. K., who demonstrated the working of the compass here, said that it was the first of its kind for the blind. It cost him Rs. 125 to build and is run on two small battery cells that can last for a month if used three or four times daily.

Mr. K. is willing to manufacture it on a large scale on a nonprofit no-loss basis once the Government gives the licence.” (Excerpt from a local newspaper.)

Well, at least this rain is genuine, pouring out of the early morning sky even as the monsoon season comes to a close. As I lie in my bed, awakened by the rain, a lonely whistler in a distant corridor goes about his daily work, pouring out his heart in a long refrain. Though all day he must rub and scrub with makeshift brooms, his song speaks of a heart made full from some hidden source. “If the rain were an enemy, then perhaps we would barricade ourselves against it better, with structures that don’t show signs of visible decay after every rainstorm, with sheltered walkways, with adequate drainage systems”, his song seems to say. “But, in a world that loves to throw open its windows, the monsoon rain, the patches of sunshine, the heavy sultry air are all simply elements from which one’s world is woven. Let it rain! If nature oversteps its bounds, we are ingenious enough to overcome it”.

Ingenuity in the face of a culture that substantially lacks, or is only now developing, a scientific and a civic ethos—this is a hallmark of the Indian mind. Ingenuity, the solution to seemingly overwhelming problems. The vegetable seller carefully arranges his potatoes, onions, and tomatoes into neat little pyramids on the pavement, thus creating his own little island of beauty and order, throwing out a challenge, as it were, to the surrounding ugliness of open drains, overcrowding and scavenging, wrought by village behaviour brought to urban life. At the other end of the spectrum, scientists at Bangalore’s Indian Institute of Science, despite governmental graft and corruption, manage to obtain financing and materials, enough to create a rocket capable of launching a communications satellite into space. The nuclear engineers at Tata Institute build atomic reactors, the modern temples of India, at Trombay across from the ancient temples of Elephanta Island, which rise majestically from the squalor of the surrounding streets. This patchwork pattern of development permeates the land and perhaps is in keeping with Indian sensibilities.

“Plastic cups will sit side by side with hall-marked silver. En-
chanting minatures will hang on walls that have been hideously coloured. Period tables will have pickle jars on them. Persian carpets are forced to occupy the same room as steel furniture. Aesthetic indifference is writ large over everything since the Indian mind pays no attention to its surroundings and is self-sufficient unto itself.” (The Times of India, October 25, 1981.)

Self-sufficient unto itself, yet all too often given to self-conscious mimicry. Despite the individual brilliance of her people, one wonders how India can regenerate herself when much of her intelligencia are mimic men, engendering a mimicry that extends to the traditions of the country itself. A puja\(^1\) to Sarasvati, Goddess of Learning, is held in the Institute library, with coloured lights leading up the central aisle to an altar. How appropriate! How modern to hold it in the library! And yet it is prettified, contrived, a caricature of a temple puja. Like a European lady who dons sari and toe rings and puts a dot on her forehead to accentuate an Indianness she does not possess.

In a country like India that is composed of a multiplicity of influences, one finds oneself asking: What is the truly genuine in Indian institutions? How does one separate the genuine from the make believe? Is India a country of mental agility, yet intellectually bankrupt? What is the blueprint for modern India? Should we look to Brahmanism at its inception? To the Buddhist University at Nalanda? To the Moslem culture of Fatepur Sikri, the synthesis portrayed by the Emperor Akbar's tomb with its motif: simple living, high thinking?

Looking farther afield in the modern world, it is perhaps Russia that provides the paradigm for understanding present-day India. Each country is enormous and heterogenous, governed by relatively recent political inventions—parliamentary democracy in the case of India, communism in the case of Russia, which were each grafted onto a more ancient culture. Already we have witnessed the disintegration of communism in Russia and the same fate may await the parliamentary system in India. Yet each country is held together at a deeper level by a unifying orthodoxy that derives from its history and strong mystical tradition: Hindu Mother India and Mother Russia. Perhaps this is why the two countries feel so comfortable with one another as illustrated, on an individual scale, by the great mutual esteem between Gandhi and Tolstoy. Both countries display dynastic tendencies even as they espouse egalitarianism. Both the Indian and Russian people

\(^1\)Religious ceremony.
have a strong anarchistic streak in their nature. Both countries have been
capable of great strides in the industrial arena, seeking self-sufficiency, but
at the same time curbing the material wants and basic human needs of a
majority of their inhabitants.

“The strengths and weaknesses of the Indian system are clear
enough. It permits endemic malnutrition and hunger that is not
acute, so long as these happen quietly. It permits the injustice
of keeping a large majority of its people illiterate while the elite
enjoys the benefits of a vast system of higher education. It tol­
erates the continuing disadvantages of those who formerly suf­
fered explicit discrimination, even though such discrimination is
now made illegal, and even though ‘positive discrimination’ pro­
motes a small number from the bottom stratum to positions of
power and influence as new recruits of the elite. The elections,
the newspapers and the political liberties work powerfully against
dramatic deprivations and new sufferings, but easily allow the
quiet continuation of an astonishing set of persistent injustices.
This dichotomy seems to me to be the central point in judg­
ing how India is doing. It is doing very well in many specific
respects—e.g. in accelerating the growth of income per person,
in guaranteeing many traditional liberties, in developing science
and technology and higher education, in putting more dynamism
into agriculture, in meeting the oil crisis and world recession.
But this record has to be assessed in the light of the persistent
inequities, and the basic weakness of modern India that sustains
them. It is a weakness that is not being conquered.” Professor
Amartya Sen (Oxford University) in an article entitled ‘How is
India doing?’ (NY Review of Books, December 16, 1982.)

Perhaps the vantage point of Nepal, to which I fly after the sojourn in
Bombay, can provide a historical perspective. Here, in Kathmandu, cul­
tural layers lie folded one over another like the rock strata of the geological
record. A temple synthesizes deities from the Hindu pantheon, minaturized
Buddhist stupas, prayer wheels, a Chinese pagoda roof. Just as plants pro­
duce hybrids so do cultures and, in this country, where Hindu, Buddhist
and Chinese cultures have overlapped over centuries, the Nepalese have pro­
duced a unique hybrid culture that draws on all these elements. One sees
the mixture of Indian and Oriental in the features of her people, too. And
the hybridizing influences continue. The local beer proudly bears the label: ‘Brewed with German Technical Assistance’. Street services are provided by motorized tractors that resemble mechanical oxen, specially designed for the narrow, twisting streets. Few beggars are to be seen on the streets, which are well swept, with garbage collected into large piles that are later hauled away by the mechanical oxen. Nobody urinates or defecates openly, the dogs are better fed than their counterparts in India, the cows more feisty. And a short journey by bus to the neighbouring sister-town of Bhaktapur reveals streets of great tranquility and timelessness, where temples, like hidden gems, are found in most unexpected places. The rice harvest is being brought in from adjoining fields by families at work together, and a walk through these fields conveys a hallowed and universal feeling of rural plenitude. This is how one might imagine life in India to have been during the innocent days, in the Golden Age of the Guptas; before the more rigid orthodoxy of Hinduism had taken form; before the centuries of strife with Moslem and British conquerers.

In Nepal’s Pokhara valley, the clouds veil and unveil the peaks of the Annapurna range, and the spirit soars like a bird with each unveiling. It is in these mountainous regions of the north that India preserves her freshness. Here she keeps her myth of freedom alive, not unlike the myth of freedom that America preserves in her beloved Wild West. But try to conquer these mountains in an effort to dominate and defeat them and the spirit will wither. Only the will to triumph will remain. I am reminded of attending a rodeo in eastern Washington State when the riders, lost to themselves, were warming-up, pacing their horses, criss-crossing the arena from every direction. I recall being filled with a intuitive understanding of why the myth of the cowboy has grown to such epic proportions in the United States. One could breathe the freedom in the air. Then the scheduled events began, calves were roped and bound, bucking horses eventually threw the riders trying to conquer them—and the sense of freedom drained away, leaving only the presence of men and women intent on holding the reins.

Nepal makes one acutely aware of India as a vaster, more complex culture. It is as though the people of India carry within themselves a long, rich and alive history. Yet there is a feeling of ossification in India that is not present in Nepal; a sense in India of a lack of originality. Cultural expression has degenerated into an excess of symbolism and categorization, the spiritually-elevated message having been lost amidst the hairsplitting and
casteism, amidst the litany of techniques of the Sutras\textsuperscript{2}, amidst the intricacy of the temple sculpture. Even the modern reform movements of Hinduism, for example, the Ramakrishna movement, have a non-creative air, as though a single perennial idea, multiplicity within unity, has been worked and re-worked to the point of having become threadbare. Mentally, the Indian is remarkably agile. The complex maze of rules that define Hinduism have produced a mind that is capable of great virtuosity, but that cannot break out of the mental barriers set by the larger culture. Perhaps this is why the Elephanta sculptures strike one so forcefully. Created at a time when Indian culture was in a much more fluid state, oscillating between Buddhism and Hinduism, they are imbued with freshness and energy. They are larger than man himself.

Can such creativity return to India? For this to happen, it is clear that Indians must once again begin to believe in themselves. I see a deep-seated lack of confidence in the people, the result of a thousand years of subjugation, first under the Moslems, then the British. Perhaps the primary contribution of the British was to release India from Moslem conquest. Now, an independent India must generate wealth, dismantle the barriers of casteism, and end the entrenched pattern of retreat into a make-believe world, thereby enabling her heart to break out into a fresh flowering. The songs of Tagore can be sung by a new India, capable of handling a vastly more complex world. Away from the endless hairsplitting, the counting of angels on the head of a pin! Away from Guruism, the elevation of figures of the past or present to positions of unquestioned authority! Away from the Bapus that shackle the mind, the Mais that sap the energy!

We must work, work, work! There is no other answer. We must develop confidence. We must question and reinterpret tradition without letting its roots wither. We must generate wealth without building a culture based on greed and plunder. We must hone our tools finely and hone them to our needs. And, indeed, India is in a unique position to address the question of how best to employ modern technology without succumbing to its dehumanizing influences. It takes a vastness of human culture to counterbalance machine and modern organization and their tremendous power and capacity to reduce man to miniscule proportions.

As noted in an earlier chapter, at the heart India’s tradition is the \textit{spiritual ashram}, an institution that has nourished many of her greatest sons, most recently, Mohandas Gandhi, and perhaps it is in the enclaves—the

\textsuperscript{2}Most notably, the Kama Sutra.
industrial ashrams and the intellectual ashrams of modern India—that her hope lies. The backward village may remain backward. The dynastic complex will endure, the thrusting forward of Indira Gandhi's son Rajiv as prime minister of India being but its latest expression. Many will be broken in spirit, yet some will succeed. And in the forest clearings, where ashrams have traditionally been located, advances will take place and their influence will spread, paving the way for a renewal of spirit in all of India. The spirit of Kumbakonam (see Chapter 4) will return.

In the final analysis, however, what men consciously achieve amounts to very little. An organic growth exists that has a momentum of its own. In India, the subtle clash of forces is already at work and where it will lead, no one knows. Of one thing only can we be certain, that in reaching to the farthest parts of the earth and the stars beyond, we end up only in reaffirming and rediscovering ourselves.
Chapter 11

VARANASI AND BUDDH-GAYA: 
CONTRASTS OF 
HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

It is only a short, late afternoon flight from Kathmandu to Varanasi\(^1\), and quickly the mountains of Nepal give way to the flat plain of the Ganges. My sense of India is restored during the taxi ride at dusk from the airport into the city: land, sunbaked and ancient; fields, lying fallow, awaiting the planting of the winter wheat; fields with corn stalks standing shoulder-high, parched and withered by the pre-monsoon heat; earthen houses, white oxen, water buffalo; little roadside stalls, each with their solitary light; thickets of bamboo, banana groves; dusty, ashen soil; camel trains, an elephant. All give to India her unique look and feel.

Sunset over the Ganges plain at Varanasi is a beautiful sight. The land stretches flat and seemingly endless. Clumps of trees, now slipping into silhouette, dot the landscape, and behind them the misty air envelopes the setting sun in a huge orange disk. Gradually, above the darkness that hangs like a pall over the horizon, the sky becomes tinged with pink, which is reflected in the waters of the Ganges; rising in the east, a full moon begins to shine like a knowing eye. Boats lie silhouetted on the water, lights wink on the ghats, the endless silence is sensed thorough a trelliswork of sounds: distant automobile horns, distant voices, the bark of distant dogs.

Throughout the night there is the sound of distant singing. I hear the tapping of far-away drums. And, at three in the morning, a harmonium player awakens me yet again with the repetition of a constant theme. Unrefreshed when light comes at dawn, I decide to spend the day wandering the city with no preordained plan. I quickly discover that something unusual is afoot, because the main route to the Golden Temple, the most sacred of the many temples of Varanasi, has been closed by the police. I hail an autorickshaw wallah, who drops me off as close as possible, and soon I am caught in

\(^1\)Formerly Benares.

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a tide of human beings flowing toward the Ganges, all with a common sense of purpose. I allow myself to drift in this flood, devoting much attention to the guarding of my pockets. Then, escaping, I veer to a side street where an ascetic lies on the road endlessly chanting a mantra, his eyes covered with ashes, his arms and legs withered, a picture of a deity by his side. Around him, a crowd has gathered to watch this display of religious zeal. Or is it religious theater?

Continuing my exploration, I wander through the side streets, ignoring repeated requests from shopkeepers ("Come to my own factory. Special bargains. Silk brocade. Saris"), and eventually merge again with the flood of pilgrims flowing towards the Golden Temple. Now, the street is lined with flower sellers and vendors of banana leaves, coconuts and rice, used in ceremonies of worship. Ahead, a group of lepers, their limbs wrapped in fresh white bandages, are conferring with one another in a convention of sorts. The beggars, too, are out en masse. Clearly it is a banner day, they too are here for a celebration.

We descend the steps of a ghat where a flotilla of boats is ferrying pilgrims to the east bank of the river. In contrast to the west bank, it is extraordinarily barren, being prone to flooding during the monsoon rains. (An untimely death on the east bank is believed to bring about a reincarnation as a donkey—a practical necessity transformed, in the Indian manner, into a religious norm.) In the flat area at the foot of the stairs, the pandits perform their benedictions with the aid of an abundance of coconuts, coloured powders and flowers. All has the air of theater. Increasingly, I realize that everyone is here to have a good time, celebrating a festival in an age-old way. The endless refrain: "don't let anyone touch you; breathe as little as possible", which has been running through my mind, begins to abate. In one stall, I discover a most delicately carved Nandi bull. In another, causing no consternation, a cow munches on the garland around a Shiva lingam.

I ignore endless requests from boatmen, who want to ferry me along the river for a fee. And, after an hour or two of wandering, having finally endured enough, I set off up the steps of another ghat, past the beggars and the lepers, to be swept along in another tide of pilgrims, now in retreat from their unhygienic absolutions in the waters of the Ganges. Gradually, the crowd thins and disperses, and I am able to hail a cycle rickshaw and return to my hotel. I have participated in the Kartik Purnima Festival in the month of the New Moon.

2Wise or learned men.
Next morning, I am the only non-westerner on a tour of the river. A tense group of tourists boards the boat, each trying not to reveal emotions of recoil, distaste, revulsion. Bathing in the waters and worship by the banks of a river may have had a healthy origin in ancient tribal custom, at a time when Indian population was low, but now it seems a decidedly unhealthy activity. I wonder silently to myself whether a bacterial analysis of Ganges water has ever been undertaken? (Or Lourdes water for that matter! ) But gradually, we begin to set aside our judgements, however temporarily. And when we do, a sense of pleasure comes over us as we witness and, to some extent, are able to share the religious expression of the residents, worshipping God in their age-old way by the banks of the sacred river, bathed in the light of the rising sun.

We pass the dhobis, busy at work washing clothes in the polluted water, and then the burning ghat, where cremations are performed and a strange odour assails the nostrils. Soon afterwards, the boat draws in to another ghat, and here we alight. Nearby, an old man sits with great dignity, a white shawl thrown loosely over his shoulders. Gently, with grace and patience, he submits to the peering camera lenses of our group, his meditation undisturbed. I long to make his acquaintance, and yet I fear to do so, lest he turn out to be less than the spiritually-elevated being of my imagination. He remains in my thoughts all day long.

The tour continues. We circumnavigate the Golden Temple, but do not enter, and are instead led to a modern temple, the Tulsi Malas Mandir, where gaudy idols are mechanically animated, debilitated priests hover in attendance and a large clock hangs at center stage—a truly garish example of latter-day Hinduism. In contrast, the modern Shiva temple on the Benares Hindu University campus represents a more noble attempt at reform. But it has the air of a church, lacking the mystery of a cave that I have grown to associate with Hindu temples, especially those of the Dravidian south where Shiva worship originated. (The idol of the ‘noseless fellows’, as the invading Aryans disparaged the people they conquered, is now a dominant feature of the Hindu religion, and Varanasi is a center for Shiva worship.)

Varanasi, despite its history and continuous occupation over several thousand years, does not have an ancient feel. It has been trampled over too often. Being a kingpin of the Hindu faith, the bigoted Moslem invader made a concerted effort to destroy as many of the existing Hindu temples as possible, and the ones that now stand are of relatively recent origin. The English invader no doubt found the city smelly and distasteful, and kept his
distance within the cantonment\(^3\), in refuges like the Hotel de Paris, a once delightful courtyard hotel, now well past its prime, which nonetheless conveys the air of splendour of a forgotten era. The palace of the Maharaja of Varanasi, much of which has been thrown open to the prying eyes of tourists like ourselves to replace discontinued revenue from the privy purse, also has an air of decaying splendour. I chance to meet an acquaintance of the Maharaja who speaks of him with the greatest of respect, but describes his lazy son, who neglects his studies, as 'a real Maharaja'. Shortly afterwards, the tour ends. The cycle-rickshaw wallah, who pedals me to my hotel, tells me apologetically that he has three children, and three are more than enough. It is a sign of the changing times.

The next and last day only serves to strengthen my liking for Varanasi. I like this city in spite of itself. There is something unique about the Ganges at Varanasi. Never have I seen so many people engulfed and united by a common belief in the sacredness of a river. In their practices, much goes against common sense and common hygiene. Thousands bathe close to places that ooze filth into the water, their celebration of a common belief clearly outweighing the need to maintain strict standards of hygiene. Perhaps when a believer is firm enough in his conviction, he or she does indeed have a certain measure of protection. The equalizing immersion in a common stream, the absence of rancour, the banning of motorized traffic on the river, all serve to create a calm and elevated atmosphere, one that is heightened by the genuine devotion that is everywhere so evident.

Varanasi is made interesting by her people, an incredibly diverse collection of individuals, brought together by the same desire for liberation. Differences of caste, creed and colour are broken down to a remarkable extent by the commonality of worship. The reformist movement centered around the city's Benares Hindu University and its over two hundred ashrams have undoubtedly also contributed in a beneficial way. I visited one of these ashrams very briefly during my wanderings, and although I was not greatly impressed by the teacher with whom I was granted an interview, I nonetheless found his advice to be both sincere and meaningful.

What then is the overall impression? First, this is a place of substance. Behind the religious theater, the inevitable fakery, the charlatanism, there is a sense of deep-rootedness and continuity whose equivalent I have not found elsewhere with the exception, perhaps, of Kumbakonam. Although few of the older structures have survived, the pattern of the streets is indeed

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\(^3\) An area where troops were quartered.
very ancient and evokes a rich sense of history. The site, where the second century, B.C. philosopher Patanjali is said to have written much of the Yoga Sutras, arouses the same feeling of reverence as does a Beethoven or Mozart residence in Vienna. In Varanasi, I found much less in the way of Indian sharp practices and rudeness than I encountered elsewhere during my travels. And, especially during the time of a major festival like the Kartik Purnima, Varanasi is a place where people have the equivalent of a *religious ball*. It is, without doubt, the most interesting Indian city that I have visited. In a sense, it is the Indian city, in the same way that Chicago is the American city, not imitative of any other, not patterned along western lines as are New Delhi, Bombay or Calcutta. Varanasi has been built instead, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that it has evolved, in order to satisfy a genuine and uniquely Indian need.

From Varanasi, it is about a hundred miles by rail to my next destination, Buddh-Gaya, site of the Buddha's enlightenment. A first or second class compartment on the train comfortably seats six passengers on two cushioned bench seats that face one another, stretching across the breadth of the compartment from window to corridor. I am seated by the window and share the compartment with three others when I board at Varanasi station.

Shortly before departure, two sannyasins enter, a man and a woman, both in their forties, fully attired in saffron. Even the bucket they carry on board, which holds their belongings, is saffron in colour. The female is big-boned with a manly, almost transvestite, air; the male, handsome in his greying beard, has a worldly twinkle in his eye. Sannyasins are held in high esteem in India regardless of whether they are in or out of saffron. They are immediately accorded one of the bench seats all to themselves, while we four non-sannyasins crowd together on the other. Soon the pair make themselves exceedingly comfortable, pull their legs up under them and begin to engage in Hindi conversation with my compartment mates, who are obviously much honoured by their presence. I have very little acquaintance with the Hindi language and sit quietly. When a beggar appears at the window, the female sannyasin goes through a very precise ritual. A coin, pinched between forefinger and thumb, is held a few inches above the beggar’s outstretched hand, then finger and thumb are flicked apart and the coin drops into the beggar’s palm without any polluting physical contact. And, when the train departs and we cross a bridge over the Ganges, another ceremony is performed. Sev-

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4 Wandering Hindu mendicant ascetics.
eral objects including a banana are thrown from the open window into the water below, accompanied by incantations to Mother Ganga.

Indians are an exceedingly curious people. Smiles exchanged earlier with my compartment mates are, in time, augmented by small queries in English, and soon I am drawn into conversation with the young man in his twenties who sits next to me. An engineer by profession, his mind is quickly revealed to be compartmentalized in a way that is surprisingly common among Indians. He astonishes me with the revelation that he believes, quite literally, that the Monkey God Hanuman is still alive and resident in the Himalayas. When I say that I find this hard to accept, the other passengers prick up their ears and join in the conversation. I am shown an article authored by a leading religious leader from Puri, who argues that sati, child marriage and the bridal dowry are a birth-right of the Hindu. Everyone in the compartment seems to agree, including the sannyasins, who unfortunately have insufficient command of the English language to defend their belief verbally. Clearly labelled an outsider, I am now subjected to a barrage of questions, directed primarily by the elderly gentleman who had produced the article:

“Where are you from?”
'I live in California'.

“What are you doing there?”
'I work at a University'.

“In what capacity?”
'I teach in the area of computational mathematics'.

“Are you married?”
'No'.

“How old are you?”
'Over thirty'.

“You plan to get married?”
'Yes'.

“You will marry anyone?”
'Yes, if I love her'.

“What is your caste?”
'I’m a Christian Brahmin'.

“You don’t want to marry an Indian?”
'I’d like to, if possible, but it does not seem to be the most important thing'.

5Described in Chapter 13.
6A widow immolating herself on her husband’s funeral pyre.
"What is your salary?"
To this I am non-committal, refusing to give any precise figure.
"You have a sister?"
'Yes'.
"Is she married?"
'Yes'.
"To whom?"
'An American of European origin'.
"She didn't marry an Indian! Why?"
'Because she met her husband at a university in America and must have felt he was the right person for her'.
"You have a brother?"
'Yes'.
"Where is he?"
'He lives in London'.
"Is he married?"
'No'.
"How old is he?"
'Thirty years'.
"You are older or younger?"
'Older'. (My age is being pried out.)
"How old is your sister?"
'Thirty-two'.

And so continues the interrogation, so typical of a conversation between strangers in India, until my questioners turn their attention to other matters. Only the male sannyasin with the worldly twinkle seems to have any sympathy for my point of view. I suspect that he is working the system, and secretly nurses his own not particularly favourable opinion of it. Perhaps I am sharing a compartment with the Indian counterparts of Jim and Tammy Baker.

My destination is the Mahabodhi temple in Buddh-Gaya, site of the Buddha's enlightenment, but the railhead is seven miles away at Gaya, a city that is as sacred to Hindus as Buddh-Gaya is to Buddhists. We arrive shortly before midnight and a crowd of cycle-rickshaw wallas quickly gather around as I emerge from the station, anxious for business even at this late hour. My travel manual offers little guidance. "A comfortable Circuit House

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7Two American fundamentalist preachers, now in disrepute after a financial scandal.
is at your disposal by permission of the District Magistrate.” “New Rest House, 16 beds, near the bus stand”. One rickshaw wallah offers to pedal me off to Buddh-Gaya immediately. There is always the temptation to proceed directly to one’s destination as quickly as possible, even at this time of night, but caution prevails. I select another who has recommended a nearby hotel where I order a late meal and spend an exceedingly uncomfortable night under netting that is far from mosquito proof.

Next morning, the rickshaw wallah returns as instructed to take me to the bus station. The waiting bus is already filled to capacity and I am lucky to secure a place in the aisle, firmly wedged in back-to-back against other standing passengers, so that it is difficult to even look out the opposite window en route. It is an uncomfortable seven-mile journey, but it would have been far greater folly to journey directly by cycle rickshaw to Buddh-Gaya the previous night, along a dark and lonely route and at the mercy of an unknown guide.

My travel-guide book has prepared me well for the tranquil setting of Buddh-Gaya, describing it as “a spot of wooded solitude on the banks of the Niranjana river silhouetted against a range of low hills”. But it has not prepared me for the contrast with Varanasi and Gaya. Just as when I emerged from India into the sunlight of Ceylon, once again I emerge from a cave, from the bosom of the earth, from the chaos of India, into a world touched by a different sense of being. Here the little street urchins hop up begging, fat and chirpy, looking rather like robins. In passable English, they ask for “pencils, to write”, more a ritual than an expression of need. The beggars, who in customary fashion line the entrance to the great Mahabodhi temple, are dressed for the part, reminding me of the chubby little children in Nepal I saw wrapped in sack cloth, their begging uniform. The larger world, the moneyed world, has touched the lives of the people here, giving them a greater ease. There is evidence of wealthy Korean and Japanese presence in some of the pilgrim rest-houses on the outskirts of the town, because Buddh-Gaya is sacred to all the Buddhist countries of Asia to whom India bequeathed the gifts of the Buddha whilst denying them to herself.

The focus of activity in Buddh-Gaya is the great Mahabodhi temple, which marks the site where Buddha found his enlightenment. It is a magnificent recreation and restoration of the original temple that dates back to the seventh century, when Buddhism was in its Mahayana stage. Within is a gigantic gilded image of the Buddha, before which pilgrims, many of oriental extraction, perform a particularly energetic form of worship, moving repeatedly from an upright standing posture to a position where they are
Contrasts of Hinduism and Buddhism

stretched out flat on the floor. A sliding wooden board facilitates this gymnastic form of worship. In the temple grounds are the lotus pond where the Buddha bathed and the sacred Bo tree marking the place where he is said to have been enlightened. I walk around endlessly, trying in vain to sense the presence of the Buddha, but feel nothing. The Mahabodhi temple illustrates only too well how irrelevant it is whether or not one worships at the site, or even under the very tree, where Buddha once meditated. What matters is his practice and his teachings, which are as relevant today as when they were first preached at neighbouring Sarnath and later magnified over the centuries into the Buddhist Canon, at the ancient university and monastery of nearby Nalanda. D.D. Kosambi's book, The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline, describes these teachings admirably:

Buddhism stood between the two extremes: unrestrained individualistic self-indulgence and equally individualistic, but preposterous ascetic punishment of the body. Hence its steady rise, and its name 'The Middle Way'.

The core of Buddhism is the Noble Eightfold Path. The first of the eight steps is proper vision: this world is filled with sorrow generated by uncontrolled desire, greed, cupidity, and self-seeking on the part of mankind. The quenching of this desire is the path to peace for all; the eightfold path is the way that leads to this end. So much for the first step, proper vision. The second step is proper aims: not to increase one's wealth and power at the expense of others, not to be lost in the enjoyment of the senses and in luxury; to love others in full measure and to increase the happiness of others—this is proper design. Third step, proper speech: lies, calumny, vituperation, useless chatter, and such misuse of the tongue spoils the organization of society. Quarrels arise that may lead to violence and killing. Therefore, correct speech must be truthful, conducive to mutual friendship, endearing and measured. Fourth step, proper action: taking life, theft, adultery and such other actions of the body would lead to great disasters in society. Therefore it is necessary to abstain from killing, stealing, fornication; and to do such positive deeds as will lead to the benefit of other people. Fifth step, proper livelihood: no man should make his living by means that harm society, e.g., the sale of liquor, dealing in animals for butchery, etc. Pure and honest methods alone should be followed. Sixth
step, *correct mental exercise*: not to let evil thoughts enter the
mind, to remove evil thoughts already in the mind, to generate
good thoughts actively in the mind, and to carry to fulfillment
the good thoughts that are already within the mind. This sort
of active mental self-discipline is the sixth of the eight steps.
Seventh step, *correct awareness*: to be ever aware that the body
is made of unclean substances, to examine constantly the sen-
sations of pleasure and pain in the body, to examine one's own
mind, to meditate upon the evils that come from bonds of the
flesh and attachments to the mind; to meditate upon ways for
the removal of these evils. Eight step, *proper meditation*: this is
a carefully worked out training in concentration. Briefly, it is to
Buddhism what 'gymnastics' was to the Greek body.

Kosambi can also be quoted verbatim on the relations of Buddha to his
society.

Buddhist scriptures work out the duties of a householder and
peasant regardless of caste, wealth, profession—and with no at-
tention whatever to ritual. They argue against brahmin pre-
tensions and specialised ritual with consummate skill but in the
simplest words. Caste might exist as a social distinction; but it
has no permanence, no inner justification. Nor did ritual, which
was irrelevant and unnecessary for the good life. The canoni-
cal writings, almost all supposedly from the Buddha's discourses
and dialogues, were in everyday language and plain style with-
out mysticism or lengthy speculation. This was a new type of
religious literature addressed to the whole of contemporary so-
ciety, not reserved for a few learned initiates and adepts. Most
important of all, the Buddha or some anonymous early disciple
ventured to propound new duties for the absolute monarch: the
king who merely collected taxes from a land troubled by brig-
ands and anti-social elements was not doing his duty. Banditry
and strife could never be suppressed by force and draconian pun-
ishment. The root of social evil was poverty and unemployment.
This was not to be bribed away by charity and donations, which
would only reward and further stimulate evil action. The correct
way was to supply seed and food to those who lived by agricul-
ture and cattle-breeding. Those who lived by trade should be
furnished with the necessary capital. Servants of the state should
be paid properly and regularly so that they would not then find ways to squeeze the *janapadas*. New wealth would thus be created, the janapadas liberated from robbers and cheats. A citizen could bring up his children in comfort and happiness, free from want and fear, in such a productive and contented environment. The best way of spending surplus accumulation, whether in the treasury or from voluntary private donations, would be in public works such as digging wells and water ponds and planting groves along the trade routes.

This is a startlingly modern view of political economy. To have propounded it at a time of Vedic *yajna* to a society that had just begun to conquer the primeval jungle was an intellectual achievement of the highest order.

But this religion of extraordinary clarity was never well suited to India. Well before the Islamic incursions, Buddhism was on the wane, and the invading Moslems hastened this process. Mistaking the great university of Nalanda for a fortress, they destroyed it completely. Buddhism, primarily a religion of the elite, vanished from the land, but Hinduism, deeply ingrained in the hearts and minds of the common folk, perennial as the grass, was impossible to eradicate.

And yet, today, Buddhism is the religious philosophy that is most compatible with late twentieth century science and modern political economy. There is a prophecy, which foretells that the Buddha's teachings will spread much farther east, beyond Southeast Asia, China and Japan, where Buddhism is already the major religion, and with the growing interest in Buddhism in the United States, this prophesy is perhaps now coming true. The Greek gods also are making their return in the language of science. Gaia, goddess of the earth, is the name of the new myth, metaphor and science of a living earth. Chaos, mother of Gaia, is the name of the new science of dynamical systems that evolve in time. Cosmogenesis is the new science of the growth of order in the universe. *Buddha*, *Cosmos*, *Brahma*, Chaos, *Shiva*, Gaia, *Vishnu*, Tao—a new synthesis of old metaphors is in the making, perhaps to light our path as we emerge from the materialism and genocidal horrors of the twentieth century.

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8 See, for example, F. Capra's *The Tao of Physics*.
Chapter 12

CALCUTTA:
ONE BRIDGE OVER THE HOOGLY

At each station, en route from Gaya to Calcutta, passengers disembark. The closer to Calcutta, the more deserted becomes the train, and soon I am the sole occupant of the compartment. The conversation in neighbouring compartments gradually dwindles to silence, and when I venture down the corridor, I discover that the railway carriage is completely empty. It is a situation that invites robbery, an event not uncommon on an Indian train. So I lock the compartment's door and decide not to permit anyone to enter when the train comes to a halt along the way.

Several times we draw into a platform and pull out again. Then, at yet another station, someone begins to bang on the compartment door. I remain silent, reluctant to release the lock, but the knocking persists until I realize that it is the train conductor, telling me to disembark. We have arrived at Calcutta's Howrah station.

The street lamps fail just as I set off from the station by taxi during the late evening rush hour (power cuts are a common event in Calcutta) and as we cross the Howrah bridge over the Hoogly river, the immense rush-hour crowd, now seen mainly in silhouette, looks like the staged set of a science-fiction movie on the horrors of overpopulation. The scene resembles, indeed it is the closing scene from Distant Thunder, Satyagir Ray's\(^1\) motion picture about the great famine of Bengal. Later, a map of the city reveals that there is just one main bridge across the river, which bears most of the traffic between its banks, estimated to be over two million people a day. This is Calcutta in microcosm.

I have no difficulty in finding a hotel room in the downtown area of the city, which has very much a Victorian air, albeit shabby and faded,

\(^1\)The Indian film director Satyagir Ray's films, set mainly in Calcutta and Bengal, have placed him among the ranks of the world's great film directors. In particular, his Apu Trilogy is a classic.
lacking the pomp and splendour of the British era. Next morning, I tour the area by cycle rickshaw. The rickshaw wallas wait outside every hotel and harry tourists, anxious for business, and almost every one will soon ask a male customer if he would like to be taken to a brothel. Judging from this alone, there must be a great deal of prostitution in Calcutta. I have a new name for these fellows—trickshaw wallas. Although unmarried at the time, I tell them that my wife would be most upset if I accompanied them to such a place, but to them this is no excuse—a commentary on the state of a typical arranged marriage in India. Like prostitution, there is no better symbol of the exploitation of one human being by another than the cycle rickshaw. They go together naturally, and subsequently I avoid this mode of transportation whenever possible.

Calcutta is the English rendering of Kalikata, the sacred spot where dwells the merciless black goddess Kali, consort of Shiva, typically depicted wearing a garland of human skulls around her neck. During a visit to the temple of Kalighat, named for the goddess, I discover that none other than Paramahamsa Ramakrishna, the 19'th century Bengali mystic, had served at the temple as Kali’s high priest. Of this goddess, Campbell\(^2\) says the following:

> New civilizations, races, philosophies, and great mythologies have poured into India and have been not only assimilated but greatly developed, enriched, and sophisticated. Yet, in the end (and, in fact, even secretly throughout) the enduring power in that land has always been the same old dark goddess of the long red tongue who turns everything into her own everlasting, awesome, yet finally somewhat tedious, self.

Ramakrishna greatly influenced all who knew him, and many in India are willing to accept him as a divine incarnation. How he was able to combine an elevated spiritual life with the role of high priest to the black goddess of destruction is one of those mysterious acts of synthesis to be found only in India.

At Belur Math in Calcutta, Ramakrishna’s greatest disciple Vivekananda, whom we have encountered earlier in our tour of the south, founded the Ramakrishna Mission. Its main structure expresses, in perhaps an overly intellectual and selfconscious fashion, the central and pivotal teaching of Ramakrishna concerning the equality of all religions. The temple combines

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architectural elements taken from a Hindu temple, an Islamic mosque and a Christian church, in this respect closely resembling the tomb of the Emperor Akbar. Viewed as a *vehicle for reform*, this highly artificial construct certainly has value, but nevertheless it would appear that God has been cast in Man's image at Belur Math rather than Man in the Image of God.

Sri Aurobindo, widely regarded to be one of the giants of modern Indian thought, was also a son of Calcutta. A political activist, terrorist and an advocate of violence during the struggle for Indian independence, Aurobindo Ghose underwent a spiritual transformation after his imprisonment by the British. Thereafter, he retired to the ashram that he founded in Pondicherry\(^3\) to preach and practice a different way. And it was also here in Calcutta that Gandhi worked his greatest miracle, when he exerted his enormous personal and spiritual influence over the masses, to put a stop to the bloodletting and rioting that engulfed the city during the partition of India.

Calcutta is the great center of literary and artistic expression of India. Amongst the many artists and writers who have lived and worked here, none is greater than the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, whose work *Gatanjali* expresses the very heart and soul of India:

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life. This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and has breathed through it melodies eternally new. At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable. Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill.

That is the opening stanza of his great poem, and the closing one is as follows:

In one salutation to thee, my God, let all my senses spread out and touch this world at thy feet. Like a rain-cloud of July hung low with its burden of unshed showers let all my mind bend down at thy door in one salutation to thee.

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\(^3\)See Chapter 3.
Let all my songs gather together their diverse strains into a single current and flow to a sea of silence in one salutation to thee.

Like a flock of homesick cranes flying night and day back to their mountain nests let my life take its voyage to its eternal home in one salutation to thee.

Santiniketan, the spiritual center of learning that Tagore founded, is a short journey by train from Calcutta. I spend a day there and find it shares the derelict atmosphere of the Vivekenanda ashram that I visited during the tour of the south—yet another example of how dependent an Indian institution is on the presence of its founding Guru. Now that Tagore is not alive to inspire and guide, the ashram of learning that he founded has fallen into disrepair. The magnetic force of his personality is no longer present to bring vitality to Santiniketan.

Despite the literary, philosophical and artistic flowering of nineteenth and twentieth-century Calcutta, one feels that modern India lacks true creativity. Tagore's masterpiece *Gitanjali* brings tears to one's eyes, yet some elemental force is missing. There is a repetitiveness in the writing—a single theme sounded once too often. The *Collected Works* of Aurobindo are voluminous, but, in my opinion, they contain relatively few themes that are then endlessly elaborated. There is little in the way of new forms being recreated from the old in Indian music, art or dance. Indians as individuals are extraordinarily clever; for example, one need only observe how well Indian immigrants succeed within the open-ended American system. It is as a nation that India has failed to recover a level of self-confidence that permits both a dispassionate evaluation and a shedding of the past, and so she continues to seek refuge within an outdated and traditional mold. Having no sense of history, Indians are prone to repeating the mistakes of history, piously mouthing all the while that the reasons for this tendency lie in a deep concern for another world, a more spiritual world. But all indications are to the contrary. Take, for example, that wonderful psychological barometer of a nation, the daily horoscope published each morning in the newspaper. In India, these astrological fortunes usually concern matters of day-to-day survival—money, economics, business. In contrast, horoscopes in American newspapers are mainly concerned with matters of love. Astrologers are the psychotherapists of India and psychotherapists the astrologers of the United States and, indeed, a study of astrological horoscopes in different countries from this psychological point of view would make a fascinating treatise.

The entire Indian system, as we have already noted, is two-tiered, a fact
captured vividly by Paul Theroux in *The Great Railway Bazaar*:

\[\cdots\text{they are the tiny children of tiny parents, and its amazing how, in India, it is possible to see two kinds of people in the process of evolution, side by side, one fairly tall, quick, and responsive, the other whose evolution is reduction, small, stricken and cringing. They are two races, whose common ground is the railway station and though they come quite close (an urchin lies on his back near the ticket window watching the legs of the people in line) they do not meet.}\]

Most of the inhabitants of Indian cities like Calcutta are from the lower-tier, refugees from village life. Yet a city must be much more than an over-enlarged village. A different civic ethos is required. Blow up an ant to the size of an elephant and the resulting creature will no longer be able to stand on its feet. Scale up a village to the dimension of a city and the same holds true.

The first-tier inhabitants of India are members of the middle and upper classes, small in proportion to the total population of India, but numerically as large as the population of a typical European nation. This group is capable of sustaining an economy within itself that requires only a source of cheap labour, and this is readily available in India by exploiting lower-caste members of the second tier. Nevertheless, the caste system, the traditional Indian approach to organization, is being eroded by the modern industrial mode of production, which mixes people indiscriminately and separates people by talent rather than birth. India must evolve something to take its place. Her challenge is to create a firm basis for a new mode of production that is capable of drawing the apathetic villages, where so many of her people still live, back into the mainstream. There is the need to foster a much higher rate of commodity exchange and the accompanying intense exchange of ideas amongst all her peoples, which, in turn, will breed a renewal of her ancient culture. Village-based economics of the Gandhi variety, even appropriate technology in the Schumacher\(^4\) vein, are both labour-intensive, and such approaches to development may not succeed in bringing about a transformation at a root level. For example, only when there is a clear economic incentive to have a small family (and an accompanying universal education program, especially of women) will India be able to curb her population growth. One cannot legislate it within a democracy. Tractor-based agricul-

ture is not labour intensive and therefore serves as a damper on population. But does it have to be a petroleum-driven tractor as in the West?

The former Soviet Union, a prospective United Europe and the present-day Republic of India are political entities, evolved during the twentieth century, that have elements in common, and it is interesting to compare and contrast them. We have already noted similarities between India and the former Soviet Union\(^5\), each with its dominant public-sector economy and overshadowing defense industry. Each was faced with the problem of uniting its people within a common political and economic framework and still maintaining cultural and multi-national diversity. Each sought to preserve the disparate elements that give the country its unique "colour", but in such a way that natural friction between these elements did not inflame the country.\(^6\)

India, however, has substantial advantages over the defunct Soviet Union, as would a future United Europe, namely, a political system that is, at least in principle, free and democratic, a free press, and a free judiciary. Unfortunately, in marked contrast to Europe, India has yet to free the minds and liberate the energies of all of her peoples. Compared to Russia and Europe, India seems to be the country that is least in intellectual ferment and has yet to reach the 'dynamic' stage. But there are some promising signs, revealed, for example, in V.S. Naipaul recent book, *India: A Million Mutinies*. When change does finally come, the individual brilliance and inventiveness of her people will be replaced by the collective brilliance of a people, and India will again regain the position she once occupied as one of the leading nations of the world.

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\(^5\) A reborn Russia now replaces the Soviet Union.

\(^6\) In contrast, in the United States, a deliberately sought after homogenization left a vacuum now filled by a largely sterile mass corporate culture.
Chapter 13

THE TEMPLES OF ORISSA: THOU ART THAT

The Jagannath Temple of Puri, the great Lingaraj Temple of Bhubaneswar and the Sun Temple of Konarak define the vertices of a right-angled triangle whose hypotenuse is the road linking Bhubaneswar and Puri, a distance of about forty miles. The three temples can be visited as a group and, for sheer visual beauty, they have no equal in India.

Puri is considered one of Hinduism’s four holiest places and the Jagannath temple is its focal point.

It is an extraordinary world. More than 6000 male adults serve here as priests, warders of the temple, or pilgrim guides, and some 20,000 people altogether are dependent on the temple whose vast riches and seemingly inexhaustible pilgrims’ offerings are sufficient to support them. The hierarchical world of priests is divided into 36 orders and 97 classes with the Rajah of Puri presiding over all: he is the ‘moving deity’ and alone has the right to carry Lord Jagannath’s umbrella and other paraphernalia. The others divide among themselves such tasks as preparing the god’s bed, attending to his bath, etc. Every minute detail of the temple’s life is strictly ordered according to prescription.

During the Rath Yatra or Car Festival, Lord Jagannath, Lord of the Universe, a title for Vishnu, is taken from his temple with great ceremony, carried on an enormous fifty-foot high canopied chariot pulled by thousands of pilgrims. (From it is derived the word ‘juggernaut’—massive inexorable force that crushes everything in its path.) However, I find the market-like atmosphere and garish spectacle surrounding the owlish-looking Lord Jagannath nothing but religious theatre and fanfare on a grand scale. This is the Indian version of fundamentalist evangelism.

The architectural form of the Jagannath temple, in marked contrast to the human spectacle within, is harmonious and exceedingly pleasing to the eye, being overshadowed only by the great Lingaraj temple of neighbouring Bhubaneswar. Both temples are in the Orissan style, which K. Chitanya describes beautifully as follows:

The profile of the Lingaraj is classic in the rhythm of the roof line that rises in waves. The surface of the sanctum tower is moulded in projecting vertical bands and the angles of the recesses are decorated with tower-motifs repeated in minature. We return to the concept that the microcosm endlessly repeats in minature the macrocosm of the world which is the living shrine of God.

The Bhubaneswar temples are mostly built in chlorite, which ranges in colour from orange through red to purple and produces rich effects in sunlight. The sculptural decorations are abundant and varied.

However, it is what lies within the temple walls that is the most compelling: the Nandi bull idol, daubed near the hump and around the eye with blood-red paint, which looks in its application remarkably like real blood; the carved cobra sitting atop the lingam; and the flower arrangements with the primitive power of the garden of Eden. No one can witness these idols and continue to believe that the common man practices a spiritually elevated Hinduism. In fact, in its common appeal, the religion draws on quite different springs, many reaching back to primitive practices that included human sacrifice and the daubing of idols with their blood. Nowadays the red powders and the red flowers retain the symbolism and the power of that primitive time. The spirituality of India as popularly conceived in the West is, in fact, neither widespread nor deep. Consider, for example, the following quote from Campbell:

... the concept of the ultimate godhead rather as female than as male has nowhere else in the world been so elaborately developed. It is, therefore, not to be marvelled that human sacrifice, which is everywhere characteristic of the worship of the Goddess, whether in the tropical or in the neolithic sphere, should have survived in force in India, both in temples and in village groves, until suppressed by law in 1835. Furthermore, it must be assumed that

\[2\]See reference cited in Chapter 12.
in the Indus Valley period rites of essentially the same kind were celebrated, not only in the native villages and workers' quarters, but also in the high calendric ceremonies of state. And what such rites entailed in the way of suffering for the victim and of excitement for the people may be learned from what we know of India in modern times on the village level.

Campbell then gives much more graphic and gory detail, quoting, in particular, from eyewitness accounts reported by the great scholar Sir James G. Frazer.

The capacity for a person with good analytic capabilities to accept some of the more primitive aspects and rituals of Hinduism creates a tendency toward mental schizophrenia, that may well be a fault-line of the Indian personality. (One finds something analogous in the Latin-American personality, where socialist and Marxist doctrines are espoused by the intelligencia, who nonetheless continue to prosper at the apex of a feudal pyramid.) The fact that primitive rites can still be formulated, maintained, and cultivated within a country that displays a high level of cultural sensibility is frightening. It strikes at the very root of our preconceptions on what constitutes and defines advanced cultural development

3. The worship throughout India of the phallus, the Shiva lingam, strikes the westerner as bizarre. The idea that an Indian woman would anoint a stone lingam with ghee

4 and not be consciously aware of the sexual connotations is difficult to comprehend. And yet in Western culture, the sexual symbolism of the electric guitar at a rock concert escapes many. Strung low over the waist, the sounding board held against and indeed shaped so very much like the testicles, the stem standing up in the position of an erect penis on which the performer plays fast and furious—what more obvious form of sexual worship is there? Yet, in all likelihood, the screaming teenage girl knows this only unconsciously.

There is nothing subliminal about the eroticism of Konarak. The setting is green and lush, and there is ample evidence of a long period of prosperity enjoyed by Orissa, thanks to its relative isolation and difficulty of conquest. The Sun Temple, itself, is unique in dedication and design, and gives the distinct impression of glory-seeking by King Narasimha who commissioned it in the 13'th Century. The structure conveys the same sense of centralized power that one finds, for example, in the pyramids of Egypt, particularly when the Sun Temple is viewed from angles that reveal its immensity and

\[\text{Cf. the brutal practices of the Aztec culture of Mexico.}\]

\[\text{Clarified butter.}\]
harmony of proportion. A local guide has pressed his services on me and tells me that the main tower, built without mortar and now largely in ruins, was given stability by a huge magnetized ball placed at the apex, which was attracted to metal girders placed at the base and thereby held the stones in place within the magnetic force-field. According to him, this magnetic ball disrupted navigation on the nearby waters of the Bay of Bengal, and was therefore toppled by Portuguese sailors. But this is quite possibly only a legend, because there is some debate among scholars as to whether the tower was ever fully completed. On one wall, I discover the sculpture of a giraffe, probably portraying a tribute from an African king. Giraffes are not native to India—here is direct evidence of India as a seafaring nation.

My guide is graphic in his descriptions of the erotic sculptures that cover the walls. “This one is fucking, this one is sucking and this one is looking”. A girl in her early teens who, with her mother, was on a bus tour I took the previous day, comes bounding down the stairs of the temple. “Are you enjoying it?”, she asks in a friendly voice. Exposure to explicit art of this sort must make the Hindu maiden non-prudish about matters of sex. But despite the healthy representation and enjoyment of sensuality, there is a certain naivete to the sculpture. The personality factor is missing, making of sex an unsophisticated thing. The fucking is of the fun and frolicsome variety, not the hard-core aerobic sex of western pornographic films. But there is no attempt to portray true courtship, the winning of a woman’s heart, only then followed by enjoyment of the body.

As the light of evening fades, detail on the walls of the Sun Temple slowly disappears. All that remains is a dense blackening mass. Then, the artificial lights are turned on, and they bring a yellowish glow to the stone. The sculptural details stand out again in serene splendour, my last view and memory of the Sun Temple of Konarak, as I set off for the railway station in Bhubaneswar to catch the Calcutta-bound train.

This day, which marks the beginning of my journey home is tinged both with sadness, because my stay in India is close to an end, and relief that I have survived its discomforts and can look forward to recovering sleep and body-weight. The express train to Bombay is scheduled to depart from Calcutta the following evening and arrive at its destination, across the sub-continent, after a journey of two nights and the intervening day. Well before the appointed time, I arrive at the platform of departure only to find something amiss. The rumour among waiting passengers is that a derailment has occurred, forcing a cancellation of today’s train. I join a lengthening queue at the ticket office (―an urchin lies on his back near the ticket win-
The Temples of Orissa

dow watching the legs of the people in line—”)\(^5\) and, after what seems an interminable interval, my turn comes at the counter. The ticket clerk, uncertain, uncooperative, nonchalant, foot-dragging, seems anxious to get rid of me. “There may be another train departing from Platform 10. Come back later”.

At platform 10, there is indeed a train bound for Bombay by a different route, and scheduled to depart very shortly. Should I wait in the hope that the train on which I have a reservation will come on line? My flight from Bombay is closely dovetailed with my scheduled arrival by train! What if no other train is scheduled for today and I must wait until the next day, or even the day after? I make one of those fateful decisions on which life hinges. Although I have no booking on this particular train, I throw my luggage into the doorway of the third-class carriage at the very rear, just as the train begins to move out, and place myself entirely at the mercy of the IndRail Pass, my faithful companion on this long journey through India.

And so begins a two-night saga wherein I strive to stay on board and the train conductor seeks to evict me. I am befriended by fellow passengers who explain my predicament to the conductor. “If there is nowhere else, you come to me here”, says one, pointing to the unoccupied area at the foot of his bunk. For the moment, however, there are a few empty bunks in this dormitory style third-class carriage, reserved for passengers en route. I settle into one on the upper tier and, sure enough, when we come to a station in the middle of the night, it is claimed by an embarking passenger. All the bunks fill up in this manner. Finally, I must avail myself of the vacant spot at the foot of my Good Samaritan’s bed. A couple of rough-looking and unfriendly goondas\(^6\), also without beds for the night, loiter against the wall next to the door, eyeing my luggage. Sometime before dawn they disembark, and I am relieved to be still in possession of my bags.

During the day, my IndRail pass is a guarantee of a seat in one of the better class carriages to which I can now transfer. Under the tutelage of new acquaintances with whom I share a compartment, I seek out the train conductor in an effort to secure sleeping accomodation for the coming night. Because this particular train has individual carriages with no connecting passages, one can only pass from one carriage to another via the platform when we come to a railway station. When the train pulls in, I walk about the platform trying to locate our conductor. I am loath to engage in the

\(^5\)See quote in Chapter 12.

\(^6\)The Indian expression for hooligans.
Thou Art That

subtle art of slipping him a note of a suitable denomination and, for this reason, he puts me off several times. But, eventually, I come away with the understanding that I will have a sleeping berth in the compartment where I am currently lodged. My fellow passengers congratulate me. Ever solicitous and friendly, they have even ordered a meal for me during my most recent absence.

When evening arrives, a male passenger appears to claim my berth for the night. I tell him that it has already been reserved. He departs, but only temporarily, and returns protesting that he has verified the matter with the conductor and there has been no mistake, the berth does indeed belong to him. The time for action has arrived. In a conspiracy between fellow-travellers, my newfound friends and I slip the latch and lock him out of the compartment, leaving him to bang on the inside door and outside window, until he tires and goes away. But we have not seen the last of him. Clearly a better practitioner than myself in the art of greasing a palm, he returns yet again, accompanied by the conductor, who proceeds to eject me from the berth amidst the protests of the others. Early evening finds me once again in the corridor of the carriage.

My adversary is soon made to feel uncomfortable by my friends and co-conspirators and emerges to tell me that I can return to the compartment and share the berth, which more than one can occupy in a seated position, until it is time to retire. But pride does not permit me to accept this concession. Later, the errant conductor appears and invites me to share his cubbyhole at the end of the carriage. Sometime during the night, he assures me, space will become available when other passengers disembark. At three a.m., I am led to a compartment, now entirely vacant, and I lie down at last and rest for a few hours.

By early morning we have almost reached our destination and, from adjoining compartments, comes the excited singsong chatter of people close to home. How well I have come to know this lilting, enticing, soft and generous voice of the Indian. I lie alone in my berth and find my eyes suddenly full of tears. Soon I must take my leave of this precious, precious land.

And, in bidding farewell, let us never forget the Hindu religion, the ever-present background to this journey through the temples of India—a religion of instruction and control, whence it assumes its fantastical proportions in stone; a religion of advanced concept and reform, whence it returns always to its emphasis on individual enlightenment and the pivotal message of the Upanishads: Thou Art That.
Return to the seed of creativity, which lies at the heart of each man! Return to the root! Withdraw from the cloud of knowing and unknowing! From ambitions, from thought, from hopes, from desires, from loves, from deeds! Withdrawn to the very sluice gates of being, to the essence, to the seed, to the very germ of creativity, shrunken in dimension to a pinpoint that is a universe, the point that contains all, yet is itself without dimension! Thou Art That.

Return to the inner world, as complex as the outer, from which emerge the most powerful symbols of the creative principle. Hence dreams, myth, alchemy, the transmutation of the personality to Gold. Thou Art That.

Know that the Brahman and Atman are One. Know that the universe itself springs from this source of creativity. Thou Art That.

Know that this universe is imbued with Love, Love is of its essence, the tinge of its colour, its warp and woof. Know that Love is the creative principle at work within the heart of man as it bursts forth in poetry, in music, in art. Know that You are no more than a reed through which God breathes his message of Love. Thou Art That.
EPILOGUE

India is a land ancient and worn, haunted by the sense of time standing still. This impression came over and over again during my travels. Perhaps one would be aware of it constantly, were vision not obscured by veils, many of one's own making, that can so easily hide the mainstream of Indian life from view.

This awareness was especially vivid during a journey by bus across the dry, dusty plains of former Mysore state, in the heart of southern India. The road was quite straight, often tree lined, with a wide unpaved strip on either side, to which the bullock carts would leisurely turn at the blaring of our horn. Dusty paths criss-crossed the main road, leading off across the fields to hidden places in the distance. Occasionally, a cart could be seen slowly making its way along one of these paths, the bullocks swaying in their age-old way. Even as we rushed along, held in the grip of our timetable, dominating the road with our speed and our blaring horn, ours was only a narrow strip of busyness; elsewhere was a sense of changelessness, of life lived in an eternal pattern. One has a similar feeling when driving through the deserts of the southwestern United States. But, in the desert, there are few visible signs of life, and the sense of an eternal present comes from the weathered sandstone, the light, the heat, the stillness. In India, man himself is woven into the eternal pattern. There is a standing still even in the presence of much motion. It is movement within an ancient pattern, a pattern of great richness, complexity, colour.

During my journey through India, this feeling for the land was noticeable sometimes by its very absence—in Ootacamund, in Cochin, in Ceylon, in Pondicherry and Goa, and in much of northern India. It is a fragile thing, this sense of time as a river. And perhaps some day, when the narrow strips of busyness criss-cross all the land, and when the communication satellites, which modern India is now able to launch into space, reach out with their invisible fingers to all the hidden, distant places, awakening the land to a new vigour, this feeling of timelessness will vanish altogether. A fresh reweaving of the pattern will have begun.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Lawrence (Larry) Nazareth was educated at the University of Cambridge (Trinity College) and the University of California at Berkeley. A mathematical scientist by profession, he teaches at Washington State University in Pullman, and is also affiliated with the University of Washington, Seattle. His other books are *Three Faces of God and other Poems* (Apollo, Berkeley, 1986), *Computer Solution of Linear Programs* (Oxford University Press, 1987), *The Newton/Cauchy Framework* (Springer-Verlag, 1994), a co-edited volume entitled *Linear and Nonlinear Conjugate Gradient-Related Methods* (SIAM, Philadelphia, 1996) and *The DLP Optimization Model and Decision Support System* (in press).