

INDIA BOOK

PUT THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN AND IT WOULD REACH FROM EUROPE TO AMERICA: PUT IT TOGETHER WITH CHINA AND YOU'VE GOT ALMOST HALF THE POPULATION OF THE WORLD.

Salman Rushdie

The Taj Mahal was framed in the window at the end of the passage. It could not be far. I'd walk.

At the hotel gate I was ambushed as I stepped into Fatehbad Road: an ancient man with a prickly pear face spiked with grey stubble and teeth ground to the roots appeared beside me. He had a little English. He insisted I sit on his rickshaw. He patted the seat. I said I was walking (I didn't say where I was going), and that I liked walking. He kept talking, kept insisting, kept telling me how little he would charge.

If I said nothing he wanted to know why I was saying nothing. If I talked he was encouraged to talk more. It was the same conversation block after block.

Somewhere I'd become intertwined with a festival for some god. Or goes. A goddess perhaps? Goddesses and gods.

The pavement had been tented over with a patterned patchwork cloth and women with faraway eyes would get up and dance like rag dolls on elastic, throwing their limbs in all directions.

Then suddenly another would rise up and flop about and sit.

They would sit down. All was normal, passengers on a bus.

A band on a stage played music which did not end – one long piece of music which hardly changed from minute to minute but which wandered like a long river. It affected the women: the men in the crowd were motionless.

Not all the women danced. A few took turns. In between being possessed they behaved like housewives. They would flop about on invisible elastic for a while and then sit demurely.

Finally a holy man – you could see he was half here, half on the other side, by his matted hair and his calmness – appeared from the wings. The wings? He seemed to have walked into the shelter from the pavement. He put up his hand like a traffic cop at an intersection and the women became statues.

It looked like set-in rain. And indeed it was. In the afternoon on our coach ride the dancing and the music was going on as before. And the next day it was the same. Nearby in this street of shops and homemade temples, doctor's clinics and motor repair workshops and men squeezing sap from sugar cane there were sheets of stainless steel, as large as bedsheets, and spread like drying washing on the pavement. Two boys could carry a sheet at a time. Later, from the coach going with our party to the Taj for sunset, the sheets had turned into suitcases, toolboxes with domed lids, trunks with handles and lunchboxes.

A little further I saw a man in a box on stilts like a kennel. The box was not much bigger than the man. He was asleep. From a hook hung a leg of something, almost as large as he was. The leg looked big and he looked small as he was curled up. The meat was wrapped in cloth and it was dripping, not onto him, but making a pool next to his nose.

On the other side of the road, closer to the hotel, was another box on legs, so dark inside I at first saw nothing. But suddenly I noticed three or four bits of paw in a line. They'd been cut just above the ankle. They were the paws of what animal I don't know. As I stared I saw there was a man inside the box, sprawled face down, asleep, next to the dead feet.

The dentist had a shop the size of a one car garage: and with steel roller door onto the pavement perhaps it was just that. Two cane chairs, tiny sofas, were filled with two men lounging like Napoleon's sister by Canova. Their dresses were as white as carrara. One was the man himself, the other a friend, there was no patient. His instruments reflected the sun. He had four painted signs. Grinning dentures flanked the door, each looking outwards down the road. Above was a drawing of an upper set only, the teeth white, the gums shaded. Yet another rested on the guttering.

At the turn-off, the old man still with me, a step or two behind, I walked straight across. He shouted something. I pretended I didn't hear.

When I thought it safe, I turned back. He'd given up.

I took the Taj Mahal road.

Luck was not on my side.

Ten or more laughing Germans came down the road FROM the Taj, two to a rickshaw, pink in the sun, heading for town. One of the rickshaw pullers called that he would be back. No, I shouted after him, I was walking.

He came back, ten minutes later, sans Germans, smiling, and out of breath from pedalling so fast.

As we talked a squad of fifty soldiers in shorts and vests, and boxing gloves jogged by.

He said he had kept his promise and had arrived.

"I didn't ask you to come back."

"I told you I would."

"I said I wanted to walk."

"I will take you to the Taj."

"I want to walk."

"I came back as I promised. You can see I hurried."

Raj was charming. He was wet. He was a good actor. He had a way with words.

We walked and talked and finally made a deal – thirty rupees and a photograph of his children, (it didn't, in the end, happen), and a visit to some shops "just to look, not to buy."

What a very sweet abduction.

Four sisters from Colombo writing in the DAILY NEWS warn: "be extremely wary of smooth talking tour managers." They had been promised a forty seater AC Coach but got instead "an 18 seater with a novice guide and driver." As "the remote areas of Bihar are known for their extreme backwardness and lawlessness and so were dangerous at night," they were promised they would be at the Taj Mahal early. "But we arrived dustladen and nervous at nightfall. Our two days of Agra were an afternoon at closing time." Signed: Rani Weerasekera, Rohini Abeysekera, Srinii Karunaratne and Priya de Silva.

They say you have to see the Taj Mahal at three different times of day. The first should be dawn but does the order matter. This was noon.

And at noon I discovered the true colours of India – red and blue. Cantering downhill heading for the East Gate I was full of resentment that astonishing photographs were flying past and I couldn't catch them – the ramshackle temples, a tall concrete arch at the entrance to the Gandhian retreat with standard three paintings of him in high-gloss enamel, a cripple charging at me with a handcarved Taj Mahal, an under-the-tree barber lathering a client's head into a foam of shampoo like soft serve ice cream, Taj Mahal T shirts splayed like playing cards at three for a hundred and fifty rupees being waved in my face no matter which way I turned, camels and more camels...

Then abruptly we lurch left at the gates and the street is narrow and everything is red, not the red of the Agra Fort, which is the red of the carved stone, but rich terra cotta paint red. Every shop, every house, hotel, café, guesthouse, curio shop, the whole tumbling-all-over-the-place village as far as you can see, hugging the great walls of the Taj as if life depended on it, which I suppose is the truth for what would they be without the great building? – everything is red. And the details are blue, the blue of heaven, hot cobalt blue which sings against the red, trellis verandahs, flights of steps, carved shutters, window frames, doors and gutters, plant pots and handrails, tarpaulin curtains in archways, metal café tables and chairs, filigree and mesh, pillars and poles, the same blue the same red.

I'm glad that from the Eastern Gate the road is uphill as it is an excuse to get out and walk with Raj. I hate the idea anyway of me sitting in this pretty open pram with enormous wheels being pulled along by this pleasant man sweating in the noon sun, for it is now noon, the time you must see the Taj bleached white and as flat as cardboard. I see a picture of myself in my mind, a man in a red shirt, wild eyes, crouched, camera at the ready, while a waif, the father of three small children, knee high, calf high and baby, struggles up the hill.

He's happy we are walking. But he talks so much I can't take photographs. This is not the first time I've got down from the rickshaw. Each time it is to get something from under the seat to show me, and once it is for a change of shirt.

I read the letter from Sister Patience from a convent in Southern Oaks California. She talks of spiritual things, of trying to lead a worthwhile life, of helping others, of making the best of what fate has given you and so on and so on. It ends with the hope that the jersey will be useful for the child. It is not a fresh letter for there have been two more children since. Would I promise to write when I got home and would I please send him some clothes like the nun did, "nothing special, something for the children" and a jersey for him "as it is cold when I get home." His address is c/o Shital Jain, Behind Mayur Hotel, Gober Chowe, Taj Ganj, Agra. I promise. And I will.

I've known him only as Raj. Jain I notice only later and am cross because I would have asked if he was a Jain – he would have been the first I'd met – and who it was in his family that did most of the signwriting in Agra. The Pepsi signs mainly, outnumbering Coke by a hundred to one, are all signed and dated like art works in the same infantile hand which tells us, under the main label that "Pepsi contains no fruit pulp."

There are only 2 million Jains, in all India and they have built the most inspired temples of all time. Two thousand years ago their star began to wane as the Hindu star brightened. Someone suggests that, like Buddhism, it is too austere for the Indian temperament. Everything, for the Jains, even the four elements of earth, fire, air and water, contains a living soul and so everything a human does causes the death of some living thing. So the Jain monks used to walk on stilts to lessen the number of insects they would harm. They still wear masks over their mouths to stop them breathing in living beings. With such tough rules, they can't become soldiers, or hunters, or kill animals for food. Even farming is out as it will cause millions of tiny deaths. So with options so limited they have always been money lenders, jewellers and merchants. Today they run most of India's banking services and much of the cotton industry.

Jains are often very rich and almost always pious.

They believe in NON-VIOLENCE, SELF CONTROL AND PENANCE. Their code prevents them from lying, accumulating surplus possessions and they only eat pure food. They must tolerate a list of twenty two sufferings which include

INSECT BITES
THORNS
DIRT
HUNGER and
THIRST.

They worship regularly, three times a day.

I wonder if Sister Patience could equal this and, had she known Raj to be a Jain, would she have written with such smugness.

The Mayur Hotel I see from The Lonely Planet is recommended as one of their middle range places to stay. Though “one of the nicest places in this range is the elderly Lauries Hotel” which “the very pleasant management and staff” claim to be the place “the Queen stayed on a visit to India in 1963. You’d hardly believe it, it’s certainly not by royal appointment now.” The rooms are a little shabby, “it has a peaceful garden, a swimming pool, (not always full) and camping is possible at 30 rupees per person including access to a hot shower.” The Mayur Tourist Complex is “in the area south of Taj Ganj, about 1.5 kms from the Taj itself. Nearby I see is Major Bashski’s Tourist Home which “has been popular for many years – even Julie Christie stayed there.”

I see too from the map that they are all closer to the Station and thus further from the Taj, whilst we are the other way round.

He doesn’t let me forget that we have a pact. I’ve bargained his price from 60 rupees to 30. To make up the difference he’ll take me to three shops where all I will have to do is look and later he will return and collect ten from each. I am uneasy. There is nothing I want to buy and it will be awkward pretending interest and leaving without a purchase. It is easy he says, and quotes Sister Patience who believes we are put on this earth to help each other. Do I want jewellery? Carvings? Clothes? Leather jackets? Shirts? Marble boxes?

I tell him I want a Ganesh. It must be wood, it must be small. (Ganesh, the elephant headed god who is the patron of art, the remover of obstacles, the first son of Shiva and Parvati, God of wisdom and prosperity, the Lord of New Beginnings, and the great god who assists souls in their evolution. Before you worship any other god, you begin with Ganesh, as he smooths the way. He is known also as Ganapati. One day arriving home after a journey, Shiva found his wife in her bedroom with a young man. Not recognising the youth as his own son – it had been a long a trip – he flew into a rage and cut off his head. Distraught, Parvati made him bring their son back to life. The resourceful Shiva could only do this by transplanting the head of the first living thing he saw onto the headless body, an elephant. Ganesh has four arms: in one hand is a lotus, another a club, in another a shell and in the fourth a discus. His birthday is celebrated in the festival of Ganesh Cathurti, in August/September. Shiva and Parvati went on to have another child, called variously, Kartikkaya or Murugan (his Tamil name) or Soobramoniar or Skanda, the God of War. He rides a peacock, and has many heads and many hands which hold weapons. A family not to be taken lightly. Parvati, though beautiful, has a dark side too, when she appears in her frightening form as Durga the Terrible, with ten hands, in each of which she carries a weapon and riding a tiger. She also appears as Kali, the fiercest of the gods. Shiva carries the Goddess of the Ganges in his hair, rides on a bull, Nandi which one sees outside temples. This is Shiva the Destroyer, with a necklace of skulls, trident, drum, sword and a noose. He has the crescent moon in his hair. Shiva has another incarnation as the dancer whose dance shook the stars and created the world. He must dance forever. When he stops, the world ends. Some responsibility. He is dancing on a dwarf, has four arms, a necklace of snakes, and snakes which intertwine his arms. On his forehead is the third eye, a flame is in his left hand and he is encircled in fire. He does not dance only for our salvation, but for his Goddess as well, in all her three forms, Uma, Gauri and Kali. He is elusive. The image we know best is of the male dancer Nataraja on one leg, surrounded by a ring of fire. But nothing is as simple as it appears. There is also Shiva, the God of knowledge, self discipline and learning, seated on a tiger skin in the yoga position, legs crossed, meditating. Shiva, has for two thousand and more years been worshipped in temples as a pillar, an erect stone, a lingam, a phallus, or an uncarved block having no particular shape.)

We head for town and a handicraft shop I’ve walked past the day before and where I’ve said to the owners on the steps that there is nothing I want to buy, and, no, I won’t come in just to look.

I'm deposited on the steps. The people are charming. The lights are turned on and I'm shown a Ganesh in crystal, one in what looks like ivory and one in sandalwood. I like none. They are crudely carved. But they ARE small and they are less expensive than a rickshaw ride. "Please" they say, as I say no, "you must just look."

The smallest Ganesh at the next place is the size of a fist. I am relieved. I have walked into a dark shop with many rooms and the lights are switched on as I'm greeted by the owners, who tell me that I will not find a small Ganesh in Agra. "I have just seen one." I indicate its size with half my small finger. They seem astonished.

It is then that I'm shown miniatures so ravishing my heart leaps. More and more pile higher and higher on the counter. No, they are not originals, but original copies made by a son, Sunil. He's won prizes. They are brought out. Bronze plaques, framed certificates, framed newspaper cuttings. An exquisite tiny elephant is shown to me – "unfinished," the father says, - as Sunil comes in. A quiet man, older than his young photographs with thick Rocky Horror glasses. He explains how the faces will be fattened and the flesh rounded, how the eyes will be given expressions, and how the cloth will be tasselled and laden with jewels. We look through a magnifying glass and it is a wonder. His portraits are so real they look like shrunken people, each hair of a beard drawn separately.

They buy old books and cut them up, use the paper, painting over the script, but leaving some as a border. He's taken legal documents from the time of the Raj with embossing, seals and signatures and painted on each a minute figure in robes of state, his feet standing on the bottom line, a madness of an idea, inspired, which makes you wonder why he's doomed to tricks like writing your name on a grain of rice for ten rupees when he should be, could be, rich and famous in New York or London. I pick up the rice and hold it up to the magnifying glass. HAPPY CHRISTMAS, it says. He works in the window where the light is good. He needs no space at all. His glasses are thicker than they were inside, the frames wider and blacker.

Inside, I linger again over a less expensive work by a younger brother still learning, a Matisse woman, cross legged, next to a hookah on the floor with liquid eyes that beg you to take her away. I enter into another pact. If I bring some people in the afternoon, and if they buy one of the expensive ones, the brother's painting is mine.

Outside Raj waits. I can't do this again, I tell him. It wasn't difficult he says. "One more place."

Three film star brothers and a midget father turn on the lights. They are gentle and quiet. The brothers I can see work out at the Agra Gym: the father doesn't.

They may have a miniature sandalwood Ganesh but they doubt it. I have grown stronger and add that "it must be beautifully detailed."

"Everyone wants Ganesh. He's the most popular. We've got Hanuman, Shiva, Krishna..." They open drawers and glass showcases in another room. They are upset they cannot help. I console them as I leave. But I leave happy. There was no deception this time.

Raj is waiting. I've earned him his thirty. I now want to go back to the hotel.

He asks me to find some people for the afternoon to go shopping. Our party, I know, but he has yet to discover, has a scorched earth policy – buy everything which sparkles, is soft to the touch, costs a lot, and which will dazzle the people back home.

He shows me his spot – a distance from the rank outside the hotel, closer to the station, across the bridge where they dry the patties of cow dung, and beyond the cane juice crusher.

He takes me to the door, and I give him his 30 rupees. He's happy. And happier with the extra 25 I offer.

I take pictures of the embossed patterns on the tin decorating the panel under the seat – cut-out hearts and silver studs.

I promise to see him at 3 whether I have found people or not. I go upstairs and sleep.

At three I bump into Chantal and Philip who are going to cram in ninety minutes of shopping before the Taj coach tour. I suggest that the sun is hot and a rickshaw would be useful.

We walk the half kilometre. “Mr Raj is over there...” A figure springs from the shade. I introduce them to each other, and walk home. On the way I’m asked if I want a ride on “an Indian helicopter.” I remember what Raj has said. “We all do things for each other and that makes the world happy.” I say no. I’m happy walking.

Chantal and Philip come back ecstatic. They bear expensive treasures: 6 copper drinking cups covered in enamel with engraved designs and a marble box with inlaid flowers. They had bargained to half the original price.

They are back in time for the next treat: the marble workshop. When the Taj Mahal was finished, Shah Jehan had the hands of all the craftsmen, thousands of them, cut off so that they would not be able to work again. No building would rival his. Their descendants have to this day not pardoned him. We are about to meet some of them.

Mr Tati who built the The Taj Mahal Hotel in Delhi which too is splendid, invited all his workers to spend two nights with their families in the new hotel as a thank you.

“TAJ CLEAN-UP : New Delhi : India’s Supreme Court, cracking down on chemical and carbon fumes threatening the Taj Mahal, has ordered 292 coal-based industries to close by the end of 1997. The monument has been damaged by carbon smoke and sulphur dioxide fumes that decay the rock. - Reuter.”

“I prefer something simple,” one of our party says. Where does he think he is, Scandinavia? India is not for the faint-hearted: decoration is heaped on decoration. What will he make of the Taj Mahal?

We are standing surrounded by people whose families built it three hundred years ago. Here is a rose of a dozen pieces of stone, each the size of a nail clipping, shaped by someone on a medieval spinning stone and then inlaid into the marble by tracing round it and scraping an indentation, with a pencil shaped chisel whose point is no bigger than a hyphen.

Agra still has six hundred families who have guarded these skills: skills each new generation finds less and less appealing.

And you can see why. To perfect this art takes 20 years. At forty you have worn your fingers down and your eyesight has suffered. Only dancers have shorter lives.

“Child labour,” the Sandton woman on the bench next to me said disapprovingly as she settled down to enjoy a demonstration by two brothers, not older than ten, squatting on the floor. They turn the lathe with a right hand holding a stick with string which wound and unwound as it was pulled, while pinching the piece of semi-precious stone, so minute you can hardly see it, in the left. The lathe is kept wet and is smooth so it grinds the stone very slowly so you can never take too much off, making it possible, though not easy to shape each piece to fit its neighbour so that the join vanishes. Every so often he checks the piece against another he’s spent most of yesterday making.

We watch in wonder and in silence.

Later we are led into a showroom and given bottles of limeade.

The Sandton woman’s husband weighs up the idea of buying a ten seater oval table of solid marble, with a sunken pattern in the centre like a lace cloth, and a border as wide as two

spread hands of lapis lazuli flowers with coral centres and a tangle of linking stems as fine as vermicelli and saw-tooth leaves for their patio – “payshio” he pronounces it. “If it’s too big,” a friend says, “I’ll bring my ten pound hammer and cut it down.”

Indian marble is harder than Italian and less porous we are told. A man in a suit pours dark juice on the table and wipes it clean. “We won’t need a table cloth,” the wife says. “What about red wine?” the husband asks “No problem,” the man says. “You take Diner Club?” The man nods. “It will be fully insured to your door.” The room grows dark. He manoeuvres a box with some light bulbs under the centre of the table and switches it on. The table glows like a jukebox. The final trick has clinched the sale.

There is no dream of ours too excessive for India. “A pair of matching coffee tables? A set of ten lapis lazuli goblets for wine? Octagonal plaques for the walls?” Such timid vulgarities.

DURBAN/JOHANNESBURG

The Valley of a Thousand Hills was like a carpet laid by apprentices on their first day with lumps everywhere.

The man to my left had old breath and I was crushed into my window corner in defence.

“Holiday?” he asked.

“India.”

“You look like Ben Kingsley.”

The words came at me wrapped in cold ham, cold beef, process cheese and last night’s sleep.

The man next to him, though not connected, had an identical pullover. It was the new kind of knitting, colours all the same tone but made by a person with short concentration. “We’ve done that pattern. Next row: a different pattern. Now let’s do another. And then another.”

Across the aisle a man who seemed to be praying, stopped praying. He had his head cupped in his hands for fifteen minutes. A long prayer or bad hangover?

“Yes I’m a writer,” I answered the man in the jersey made by the manic machinist, to avoid further conversation. It didn’t.

“You’re writing your diary?”

“I’m not.” He was off to Kenya.

“Nice” I said, “more exciting than Bombay.” A wasted joke.

“Yes” he agreed.

JOHANNESBURG/DUBAI

In 30G a lady in black who overlapped onto me got up and moved to an empty seat giving me a view, my own window, and a seat for my bag.
Robert de Souza introduced himself and welcomed us.

Celine Dion “wants to be all alone” by herself.

The film was A HUNDRED AND ONE DALMATIANS.

“We cannot allow anyone to sleep on the floor,” Robert announced. I’m not certain if it was Robert or the system which had the hiss.

Dubai, he said, was seven hours away, another voice told us, repeating it in Portuguese.

The passengers divided easily into two groups. Ladies in gold shoes, impossibly suntanned, gold bangles up their arms like ritual torture, large rings on most fingers, (brown, wrinkled fingers), new paperbacks and an air of I’ve-travelled-the-world-and-have-been-to-Dubai-as-well.

Two rows down, the lady in a sari and cardigan was going to Bombay.

Another with a sari which kept trailing cotton threads which the person behind her kept pulling off or tucking between the blouse and fat shoulders was one of us.

Why, I wondered, were all the signs in Portuguese? What does SAIDA mean?

One: we are to have food over Africa. I could see nothing beneath the smoothed clouds but was certain a war is happening below us and that the ground was crawling with people leaving their homes yet again or going back yet again to homes someone had flattened since they left them the last time.

Lunch, called DINNER was an hors d’oeuvre of cucumber and tomato salad with plain yoghurt and toasted black mustard.

Main dishes: Mutton Chana, a mild curry of lamb and chicken pieces served with Basmati rice and spicy vegetables.

OR

Baked Cape Cod crusted with sal verde of parsley, basil, capers, onion, lemon zest and olive oil

OR

Panir Korma: Cheese curry with yellow lentils and steamed Basmati rice.

Dessert: Individual traditional milk tarts. Cheese and biscuits.

The other steward with the looks of a Boss Model was HUGO INFANTE and must have been the one speaking Portuguese.

All the food he told us was Halal.

He was pretty, but not bright. He didn’t know the plane went on east to Bombay. His mind was on the five days rest in Dubai.

If I’d cooked the mutton curry I would have marked it in the book for a second time. Not a mild curry. Made by someone who didn’t believe in toning things down for the box office.

Instead of the DALMATIANS we had AAGNEE PREM – drama 120minutes, rated PG: for airline use (edited). Two young lovers, Sangeeta and Rahul elope with the help of a famous lawyer. Sangeeta's father employs an ex-murderer to find them and kill Rahul.

ANOKHA ANDAAZ is a musical drama of 120 minutes, also rated PG and also edited for airline use. Manish and Reema plan to get married, But Reema's stepmother has a different husband in mind for her. The two lovers run away to Goa where they find shelter with Charlie, But when Charlie and Reema is kidnapped, Manish, while fleeing for his life, tries to solve the mystery. The director is Laurence B D'Souza, hence Goa.

The music channels had:
 JOHNNY CLEGG
 CELINE DION
 THE SPICE GIRLS
 PHIL COLLINS
 GLORIA ESTAFAN and
 NEIL DIAMOND

Across the way a girl too old for comics was reading the kids kit from SAA whilst her mother was petit-pointing something I'd rather like to have had of big blood coloured flowers the shape of turnips.

Intimations of snacks to come: a ragged procession of trolleys.

A sudden turbulence. The procession retreats.

It is four: two hours to go.

In the New Yorker I read about Katherine Graham of the Washington Post:

“SHE DID NOT TRAVEL IN THE STYLE OF THE BRITISH RAJ. BUT SHE WAS NOT ARRIVING ON A EURORAIL PASS EITHER.”

I studied the map as the geography below was a mystery and saw that Bombay is, as the crow flies, to the right, but that we must go upwards some distance first as Dubai is above on another sliver of sea before plunging gently downwards to the right.

Hugo and yet another steward share the aisle doing alternate seats. Mine was not Boss material, had a charming manner and a face like the moon in shape and texture.

Hugo knew Dubai, gave insider advice about where to eat a cheese curry, where to get leather jackets, where not to buy leather. He melted with women, ignored the men.

At Dubai we were told we must all get off – “you'll love it.” There is a “huge and wonderful jellyfish,” a cabin attendant said.

The airport is flashy and new and there are portraits of stern sheiks at the top of the escalator going down to the DUTY FREE. I find myself next to the couple sitting in front of me. They are on their way to Bombay, Delhi and Agra.

Pierre is in property which “has its ups and downs. But the rental part is doing fine.” He is twenty two.

“Don't eat anything you can't peel,” Leigh-Anne says. First-time-in-India-advice from someone who has never been there. “Yes,” I say.

Pierre tells me that all the crew are Portuguese from the Southern suburbs. He and Leigh-Anne are from the North.

They too look for the jellyfish without success. None of us is disappointed. We are pleased when the flight is called.

In Bombay they were met by a charming youth with bambi eyes and improbably long eyelashes from a tour company. Nilesh said I should come along too and gathered us under his wing and walked us to a bus beating off a person who clung to us wanting to carry our cases.

The air was pale blue and damp as we fled though the disappearing night to another terminal, so far away, it could have been another airport.

Four hours until the desks open.

Nilesh had gathered two more people belonging to Pierre and Leigh-Anne's party and we introduced ourselves to each other and I explained that I was not in their group but was going to Delhi as well.

Pavarti Munsamy tells me that she has been in Bombay for three days on a buying tour. Lakshmi is not her daughter but her niece, her sister Kogila Naidoo's younger child, and that she, Kogila and her husband Prem are having matrimonial problems and so she thought it a good idea for Lakshmi to have a few weeks in India "to get away from the tensions." They have a house in Newlands in Cape Town where Prem is a rep for a cell phone company.

Pavarti designs dresses. Dresses, I see from the well clutched photographs, which make a statement, which transform the ordinary into an occasion. The pictures were of vamp dresses posed in melaine kitchens.

She has them made in Bombay. They are all her own designs. She sends them by fax. Nothing is off the peg. "The ladies of Laudium want something exclusive." When she started thirty years ago she went by boat.

"Times have changed," I said.

As the flight time got closer we were joined by the first commuters to Delhi who were reading serious papers. The ECONOMIC TIMES had no photographs. A headline read: SHARAD YADAN PUTS SPOKE IN MULUYAMAN'S WHEEL. And another PAY INTEREST TO NHB INVESTORS TELL AZB AND LALOO.

The train which took us from Delhi to Agra must have been called the SHATABDI EXPRESS. The one across the track was a mirror of ours. It had AC CHAIR CAR painted on its side as well as the name. One of India's great trains.

Catching the train has all the anxieties you expect – every film you've ever seen has got it right, You know your porters are going to disappear on their nimble feet: you know the distance between you and them is going to get bigger and bigger: you keep wondering if the luggage you glimpse bobbing every now and then through the 5.30 am crowds is really yours: you are torn between keeping track of your friends around you and those who have been separated from you by the bigger crowds of India and who are further ahead: you worry about those who have lingered a fatal moment too long to get another photograph of the sign saying COOLIE SHELTER or the shops opposite the carpark which are so covered in advertising they look like a house of cards, or the carpark itself, a clutter of planks on bricks selling hot food and drinks, a place of puddles and rocks and gutters and potholes and dirt and stench and activity. There is confusion and chatter, people grabbing at you, grabbing your luggage, offering to be porters for three hundred rupees and settling immediately for thirty. There are people pissing against the walls and behind the buses, people sleeping on the traffic islands, and though the sky is just turning light, the street lights are still burning.

Inside the halls it is dark and the moment of panic returns but goes when your sight comes back. Ropes a yard from the train make a no-man's land holding the crowds back from the carriages. Someone puts his foot on the rope and you know you are where you should be. The officials are tall, calm, middle aged, two in white cotton pyjamas, one in a grey suit, always in motionless groups of three. Their hair is sparse their waists thickened.

Our seats are numbered, our bags are put in the racks, a couple from Australia are evicted as their seats are in another coach. We are counted. Only two are missing. We hear later that they travelled second class. And that after spending a sleepless night being nibbled by fleas – she showed me her arms patterned like a collander when we got to Agra. Neither was happy. Mrs Ramachandaran had found the forecourt of the station depressing: “here come the coolies,” she’d said as we were encircled by men in short pyjamas and turbans flattened from carrying luggage. She’d shuddered as we’d walked past a snake charmer.

Now we are settling down for the two-hour ride and in five minutes there is calm and peace and on the dot of six fifteen the train moves out. I try to write notes but the writing is spastic: all I can read later is FESTIVAL OF EUNUCHS, an advertisement in the Times from the Rajasthan Tourist Board. And “music and train...” reminds me how the sitar and a droning instrument over the speakers blend with the horn so well you wonder if they are on the same tape.

Someone had told me that you are not left alone for a moment and they are right. Such attention.

The newspapers arrive – THE TIMES OF INDIA, THE HINDUSTAN. A woman’s voice announces that breakfast will be at seven. There is a procession of sometimes grubby, sometimes smart men with trays giving us things – a can of Pepsi, then a litre of water which fits into a chromed clip next to your knee – and there are men checking tickets.

Alongside the track the country is flat with a scattering of palms, mud houses, cows, puddles of water, corn, and men pissing. I later realise that no picture of the Indian landscape is complete without someone pulling down their trousers or pulling up their dhoti, a woman in a sari fleeing into the bush, or someone scrubbing themselves. And always there is the cleaning of teeth, as unhurried as a meditation.

A lady beats some washing slowly to death in the water. Cows are everywhere, wading in the water, through the corn, wandering, tethered or just standing.

At seven it is breakfast outside as well: people squatting in groups under the occasional trees in the fields. Ours comes on trays, mine a white plastic oval with Disney teddy bear next to a Disney picket fence. The cornflakes arrive in a white bowl with a twisting fluted pattern. A man brings hot milk, another sugar. The ritual has been rehearsed, the timing perfected. The hot dish is vegetarian or non-vegetarian which means a omelette. I choose the vegetarian and it is spicy and textured. Both come on tray and like all Indian meals with a bottle-shaped squeeze pack of tomato ketchup, not a let’s-make-the-foreigner-at-home gesture but now part of the Indian way of eating. Coffee is a cup and a thermos and sugar in a packet.

It’s non-stop to Agra. There is a hurried clutching for baggage from the wire baskets overhead and on the platform the counting starts. Behind me I hear a thud as a man falls off the train. Or is thrown, for his clothes are scattered. His mouth bleeds. Everyone tut-tuts in a circle: thoughts of Gandhi make me photograph the scene in case it is history. It isn’t: just a man who has had too much to drink.

While I’m listening to Hanifa Ramachandran’s two hours of sadnesses a man begins to polish my shoes. I say I don’t want them done but it is too late, there is a blob of white cream on the toe cap and my foot is lifted and fitted on to a footrest. Five rupees.

Jeremy had been more forceful with a shoeshine man in Delhi. He’d said no a number of times. The man had insisted. Jeremy had turned his head away hoping to end the discussion.

When he looked back, the man was disappearing. It was then he discovered the lump of shit on his shoe. The man carried a little bag with him for un-cooperative clients.

Later that day out walking I learn that five rupees, (a rand is seven), is the call of everyone selling a service. It's a five rupee tricycle rickshaw ride into town and back from the hotel. For five rupees a man offers to cut my hair. His barber shop is a mirror nailed to a tree, a table, another with cut-throat razors, leather strop, and scissors, a chair and a hook for the mirror so you can see the result from behind. "It's kind of you," I say, "but I've no hair to cut." He smiles: it was worth the try.

You don't see an idle person. Such energy. Such industry.

Nobody sits around waiting for someone to solve their problem they get on and do it for themselves. The holy men appear to be doing nothing but they are only rooted to one spot hour after long hour because they are meditating.

I watched at noon as a man sitting cross-legged on a marble ledge at Varanasi's Mir Ghat examined a piece of saffron cloth printed with suns and stars inch by inch and then stretched out and completely disappeared under it, his walking stick parallel to his body, his sandals at his head, and became a still-life in the landscape for the rest of the day.

I loved the man who sold me the reflection of the Taj Mahal in the pond: such audacity. And the one who said "stand here" for the best photographs, and he meant exactly where he pointed, on the forbidden side of a little rope marking a no-go area, a spot he'd colonised as his own to let out at ten rupees a click.

"Massage your head?" "Rub your neck?" "Meditation technique?"

There is a man in Varanasi who stands waist deep in the mud sifting the cloudy water with a basket for gold that has been cast into the Ganges from the bodies before cremation. And perhaps a filling from a tooth.

A little higher on the bank a woman scratches through the still hot embers saving nut sized pieces of charred wood that could help a fire at home – a man has already carried away half burned twigs.

The burning ghat is circled by tiny industries of death – the wood-sellers with their hefty brass scales weighing trunks of trees cut to metre lengths, sellers of terra cotta oil lamps, and spices and powders and ghee to sprinkle on the body, sellers of stones to tie to the bodies that will not be burned such as women who died while pregnant, bodies which will be taken to the middle of the river and sent to the bottom, tea sellers with their always hot enamel kettles, musicians, garland makers and people who make themselves your companion to explain this or that.

The man who adopted me as I walked through the gate of the first Jain Temple in Calcutta talked without breathing, labelling everything he saw – and I had seen.

Mango tree
Statue
Italian pillar
Dutch tiles
Italian tiles
English tiles
Elephant
God
Chinese pillar
Water
Fish

But without him I would not have noticed their twenty six gods or have known that Brian MacMillan is “best cricket player,” and I would have missed the holy painting of a parable inside which would have been a pity.

It is a landscape. A snake has caught a cock and is eating it. He does not know that there is a peacock behind him about to attack and kill him. A man is poised with stretched bow aiming an arrow at the peacock. He is unaware of the lion behind about to pounce. On a short hill a short god stands watching the scene. You draw your own conclusion.

There were questions I would have liked answers to which he could not give: like who was this man in concrete and enamel who looked like a tourist with knee high stockings, camera and painted fingernails? And the Prussian officer and his Roman companion? Who was the baby with grown up face in Victorian clothes in a cage? There is the park bench from a Glasgow foundry. Tiles with country scenes from Europe. There are fairground lions and elephants. A man in harem pants and Ali Baba shoes. A man in a skirt with a sword and a turban like a loaf of bread standing on a plinth decorated with a Venetian tile.

Is eclecticism part of the Jain religion? Or did this all happen by chance, these gardens of delights and puzzles?

He took my photograph at the second temple and introduced me to the priest in the third.

He asked for ten rupees for his friend because he was a cricketer but I said that the friend had only just appeared and had done nothing and that cricket was too slender a reason. He shrugged. The friend left. I gave him twenty.

At Jaipur I bought nine resin elephants I didn't want with diamond shaped mirrors and glitter and beads which had already started to drop off because of the perseverance of an urchin with a heart-stopping smile called Ragu.

And Rajesh managed, just as the bus was leaving, to squeeze a hundred rupees out of me for two books of plastic postcards I did want but knew to be overpriced.

They've had no schooling and live by their wits and their charm. They've taught themselves enough English to carry on a not unsophisticated conversation – “examine this and compare the quality: I'm selling quality not quantity: you won't be disappointed...” And then he breaks into French for someone else “c'est ne pas tres cher...” And then German.

From another elephant someone must have taken our pictures. By the time we'd lumbered up the hill to the Amber Fort, gone round a few staterooms and bedchambers and marble courtyards and were sipping the too hot too sweet tea, there they were, wads of enlargements of all of us, each of us separately, pictures the size of this page, which you could buy or not buy, and take down the hill again on another elephant to the bus below.

Who could resist such service, such enterprise, such skill?

“Whisky?” a man asked as we got to the steps of the Yogi Lodge in Varanasi latish at night.

“No,” I said.

“Wine?”

“No.”

“Hash?”

“No.”

“Something else?”

“No.”

Anne and Carlene, two South Africans temporarily in London working in hotels were on the flight from Bombay. I wish I'd met them earlier for the DEPARTURE LOUNGE was bleak with nothing to do but buy things I didn't want. The bookshop had a display on DIANA, the LIFE AND TIMES OF LAUREL AND HARDY, a do-it-yourself AROMATHERAPY textbook, half a dozen picture-books on the QUEEN and the same best-sellers you see at CNA.

After two weeks of backpacking they were streetwise and thrifty with their rupees. They had done a camel safari in Jaipur, ridden elephants, slept under the stars and been to a circus like no other where the audience had not clapped but had sat in silence awed by the beauty and the daring of the animals and the people.

For a while before check-in time I could see all the SAHARA AIR staff behind the counter in silent darkness. Then at a moment the lights came on and the frozen tableau sprang into noisy life. In seconds the performance was over and they were ready to receive us. Notices were hung, tagged labels were put into a basket, flowers set on the other side of the counter, the flight number lit up and smiles were in place.

At Varanasi Airport there was no Lance, no Ronnie, no Shirley to meet me. And when I phoned, Ronnie didn't apologise which meant that that had not been the arrangement although Ramesh had told me otherwise. And when I got to the Yogi Lodge I understood. The old city has lanes for people and cows: cars have to be abandoned on the newer town's edges. "And when the taxi reaches there, get him to call me and I'll instruct him further."

At some point we reached the limit of the taxi's territory or the end of our three hundred rupee ride, (Ronnie's figure). We stopped and our luggage was put into the road.

Or driver didn't like the idea of the phone call but I made him come with me to a shop on the other side of the street where I gave the number to a man behind the desk. There was a conversation in Hindi with Ronnie which produced a frail man with a cycle rickshaw who was given orders. He'd pedalled over roads more potholes than tar and taken us to where he could go no further.

From here it was on foot. But where?

Bemused, surrounded by a tiny Everest of luggage, we stood.

From the cordon of street urchins all offering help, Pintu came up to us and took charge. He had the sweetest of smiles, a gentle manner and said he knew the way. He introduced himself as JK. He changed it to Pintu the next day. I never asked why.

He led us through passages and alleys with no names we could see, through doorways and up hills until we were at the Yogi Lodge.

Varanasi began two and a half thousand years ago and spread like mad knitting. Impossible to see ahead because the lanes twist and impossible to see much sky because the signs and the balconies and pirate electrical cables cover it I never felt I had a grasp of the place so I tried never to lose sight of Pintu who was a good walker and fast.

He wanted no money that night. He had other plans for later: visits to the shops of uncles and cousins, silk shops, shops with carved boxes and jewellery shops. I insisted he take money and the girls agreed: I put a hundred in his shirt pocket.

He said he would see us the next morning at nine. He made me promise and we shook hands.

The Yogi Lodge is two and a half centuries old, painted the red of Jaipur stone as if a slice of the Palace of the Winds had been dropped there, with clinging balconied rooms, and filigreed arches and turrets and columns and carved ledges. Were I ever to build a house it would be a copy. The courtyard in the centre has fourteen slim columns, oval, not round, with extravagant capitals like picture hats with twists and ornaments, not Corinthian, more complicated than Doric but with bits of both and a dash of Indian Ionic.

These support the first floor walkway. Four floors up you are on the roof, eye level with towers and spires and temples and other enclosed roof gardens.
Half way up the stairs is a sign:

PEOPLE WISHING TO OBTAIN FALSE POLICE STATEMENTS ABOUT LOST CAMERAS AND OTHER POSSESSIONS ARE REQUESTED TO DO SO AT THE POLICE STATION. THESE THINGS SHOULD HAVE BEEN LOST ON THE TRAIN FOR TO IMPLICATE THE YOGI LODGE CAUSES NEEDLESS PROBLEMS.

On Ronnie's desk was another sign NO BARGAINING, the only place in the whole of Varanasi you are not expected to.

In the morning the girls left early to see the sun come up on the river from a boat and then wandered to the burning ghats to watch two cremations.

At nine Pintu was there. And there too were the same two black goats we'd seen the night before.

And from then until he left me in the waiting room at the station four days later, he was with me every moment except when I was allowed back to The Lodge for a meal or to sleep.

Once I was late by twenty minutes and he was cross. I offered him sweets the girls had bought me as a parting gift – they'd taken a local bus to Agra. He refused. He sulked for a while until he was sure I was sorry. "The sweets are cheap."

He protected me from beggars and other street kids. He took me to see Benares brocades. We sampled perfumes across the way from the Golden Temple: I said I'd come back. They knew I wouldn't but we drank tea and left with smiles and good wishes.

Everywhere he bargained prices. He carried my bag. He took me to temples not in The Lonely Planet and to hidden places only a local would know.

And all the time he talked – not wonderful English, but English with ambition. I was to talk to nobody we met. He would do the speaking.

He was going to school whenever he had the money and wanted to go to university to become a scientist or doctor. He was sixteen, or so he said though he looked younger. He was shabbily dressed. Poor. I felt that his were impossible dreams.

He called me Baba which is a term of respect meaning father or teacher. But he was the teacher: I was the child.

He knew all the gods and all their names and at each temple and shrine he'd stop and say a quick prayer, which in Varanasi means a lot of stops and a lot of prayers. Varanasi is one of seven sacred cities in a land where the spiritual and the temporal, the sacred and the profane, the eternal and the transitory, the commonplace and the profound, the ordinary and the supernatural meet every moment of every day in every street, on every plain, on every hill and mountain, on every stretch of water, in the air one breathes, in the people one meets, in the animals, the birds, the insects, the plants, the food, the music, the dance and the songs. There are seven sacred rivers, the Ganges, here in Varansi, the greatest, the holiest, the most spoken of and worshipped. There are seven sacred mountains, the most sacred of all, the home of the all the Gods, Mount Kailish, now part of Tibet.

The east, the west, north and south are marked by four sacred places.

There are four sacred homes of Vishnu, who with Brahma and Shiva make up the Hindu trinity.

There are twelve places where you will find sacred lingum stones of Shiva.

There are four sacred Buddhist sites: the one at Sarnath, a twenty minute taxi ride from the old city, where he gave his equivalent of Christ's Sermon on the Mount, his Sermon in the Deer Park.

There are five sacred ponds and nine sacred forests.

And each of these is a place of pilgrimage, linked by a filigree of lesser ones which envelopes the land making it itself sacred.

And some places are more sacred than others, and Varanasi is more sacred than most with three thousand temples and the eighty four Ghats.

It is here in Varanasi that Shiva danced with Kali on the cremation grounds he in his incarnation as Kala Bhairava and she as Vishalakshi.

It is here that one of the parts of the Goddess's body fell to earth, her eyes. And earrings. This is celebrated at the Temple of Vishalakshi, five minutes walk from the Yogi Lodge.

The Goddess Kali has a hundred and eight names – that's why Mrs Nanda bought a garland of 108 red hibiscus at the temple in Calcutta.

In India many people can appear at times as one person, and one person can be many.

And the Ganges has a hundred and eight: MELODIOUS, FALLING FROM THE FOOT OF VISHNU, IMPERISHABLE, DAUGHTER OF THE MOUNTAINS, FLOWING LIKE A STAIRCASE TO HEAVEN, HOLY (of course), PROTECTOR OF THE SICK AND SUFFERING WHO COME TO YOU FOR REFUGE – and a hundred and one others.

There's nothing simple in India: you need someone who knows.

Pintu explained the Ghats, the flights of stone steps from the high town to the Sacred River, the steps which mark where the town extends to the north and where it ends in the south. Each is different, each distinct, each following the edge of the water at that point, so that from high up the wandering bank is an exquisite geometry, the world's most complex invention of angles and heights.

The Ghats are for ritual bathing and prayer, some for cremations, some more popular, some more holy, nearly a hundred in all.

The Manikarnika Ghat, the most used for cremations is closest to the town centre.

To watch a body eaten by flames is savage and moving.

It has both horror and beauty.

The sun was just rising on this side of the river. On the highest rooftop to my right a cluster of priests was praying in welcome. A gong was struck and a small bell was rung. I was too far to hear voices.

Below me to the left a body had been put next to the water, wrapped in scarlet with gold tinsel and garlanded with the flowers the French call Indian Carnations. The head and the feet were showing, bandaged, or so it looked, in white.

Not long after there was a commotion from the town side, people singing, chanting, music, and another body, carried shoulder high, came through the arch and down the steps to the water.

It was lifted from the long bamboo stretcher, like a ladder, and placed on the slope, its feet almost in the water.

The covering was the deepest blue.

Between the building I was standing, a tall ochre wedding cake, four storeys high, the closest outsiders may come, I looked down on the clearings in the sand, enclosures with low walls, where the burnings happened.

There were maybe five or six.

Cremations go on through the night, every day of the year, for there is a certain time after death in which the body must be burned.

Only the men of the family take part. They are thought less likely to show sadness. Tears could upset the departed spirit.

There is another reason. In times not so far distant, widows would throw themselves onto their husband's pyre. Burnt alive, the widow is seen as a saint. Suttee is illegal now: they take no chances.

Wood is now bought and the pyre is begun.

This is reserved for Untouchables. Or Harijans as Gandhi called them. Or Dalits as they call themselves today. Doms, the Hindu equivalent of undertakers, are responsible for cremations and the cremation grounds.

A row is laid one way and another crossways and so on until it is waist high.

The body is then lifted and immersed in the holy waters before being placed on the structure of logs.

Any jewellery is taken off and flung into the water.

And so are the garlands of Marigolds which float on the surface.

If there have been many funerals the water is yellow from the boats to the sand.

The body is blessed and sprinkled with powders and ghee.

Then branches are laid on top, thinner than those underneath, and finally larger ones.

Kindling straw is pushed under the pyre.

The eldest son, his head shaven, dressed in white cotton, does the ceremonies.

He walks round the body five times then lights the flame.

This flame is lit from another in a shrine, a holy flame which is never extinguished.

And soon it is burning. And it burns for four or five hours.

The men stand and watch in silence for a while. Then they sit on the wall and watch, chatting occasionally, not leaving until only ashes remain.

On the Sunday, coming back from Sarnath, we had passed a procession, six or eight men with a purple and gold wrapped effigy, jogging down Varanasi's main street, trumpets playing, the men chanting and singing.

When we were further along, Pintu said it was a body. It was the first I'd seen.

It was all so ordinary, so mixed up with the afternoon business of people out with their families.

And the afternoon, coming back from Ram Nagar they'd stopped on a bridge for a rest and left the body for a while amongst the rush hour stampede for home.

I don't know what I think about it all. But they are pictures which won't leave my mind.

Later in the morning, Pintu and I were walking near the burning ghat. The pyre I'd watched from the beginning was now a heap of smouldering logs. But further on, in another clearing, I saw a black torso in the flames: a rounded head and stumps for arms. A foot was pointing from the other side towards the river.

People come to Varanasi when they know they are going to die for to die in this holy city can mean an instant route to heaven.

Once called Kashi— a name you often still see — it was then Benares (Banaras) and now it has taken back its ancient name, which means the town between two rivers, the Varuna and the Asi.

THE FOREST OF BLISS, THE CITY OF SHIVA, THE CITY OF LIGHT, THE NEVER-FORSAKEN — it is called by many names. And the CITY OF THE DEAD.

Pintu suggested I might see a Holy Man. I don't remember saying yes, but it happened the way things often happen in India, one small thing following another small thing, each incidental and inconsequential in themselves, and then without asking how and why you find yourself some place you hadn't thought you'd be.

It was dark: and it was a labyrinthine walk through back black alleys, through openings and doorways and ending in a dank courtyard where someone in a lean-to was showering.

A grunt acknowledged Pintu's announcement that we'd arrived. Then the Holy Man appeared. He was damp and was wrapping himself in something longish. He wasn't welcoming nor was he unfriendly: rather he had a disdainful air. Bored perhaps at having to unravel yet another westerner's spiritual muddle.

Not a trustworthy man, I sensed, with more theatre than spirituality. But on to a good thing given the number of drifters in Varanasi looking for THE TRUTH.

He continued with his toilet as he gestured me into the room. I took off my shoes and sat on the big padded floor.

There was a small TV set, some prints of guru-folk on the walls, and some books and odds and ends which would divide me from him when eventually he'd sit down.

He took a while combing his hair (wet, grey, long in parts, shorter in others, the victim of home trimming), his beard, his moustache, his eyebrows, all the while removing loosened hairs from the comb and throwing them into the breeze beyond the door like holy offerings.

The time he spent I felt was less to do with making himself pretty than to buy time to look at me for clues. He was standing: I was sitting. He had the advantage. He could see the whole of me, a compact, folded bundle on the mattress floor: I saw feet, robe, and, as I looked higher, stomach, torso and head.

Pintu hovered just out of sight occasionally peeping to see I was alright. He helped me when I needed help in arranging what I'd come for which was settled as a palm reading. Like going to an overpriced restaurant with someone you don't know well, you choose the cheapest item on the menu.

I thought that if I were still hungry, at the end, I could come back the next day for a horoscope or something more substantial. Incense was lit and he sat down.

I handed over my right palm (or was it my left?). Either way it mattered little for his glance was brief before his eyes dropped closed. Was I to think this an immediate trance? I didn't.

He muttered a string of pronouncements – he thought me intuitive and strong – and woke up suddenly when the door was filled by a nervous American academic, a woman with a scarf over her head and a deferential manner.

He saw greener pastures and my future and much of my present was left dangling in limbo.

When he said something about prosperity (success, or was it happiness?), that I and my two children would have in 1998, (did he talk of a wife?), I was not sorry for the intrusion.

The audience had been brief. I was pleased I'd taken the hors d'oeuvre and not a main course.

And not cheap. (Had it been wise to have paid in advance?)

I thanked him and left.

As we made our way round two corners we passed an open window and I saw, framed like a picture, the American woman and the Holy Man face to face.

The incense MY incense, for it had hardly burned down at all, floated from the window and sweetened the lane.

A clever man.

How many of the new Flower Children at the Yogi Lodge had been his victims too?

The dormitory one had to go through to get to the showers had, maybe, nine beds, and people spent a lot of each day stretched out in sleeping bags in the half light, inert, dreaming and wrestling with the cosmos.

It was easy to tell the new arrivals: they'd yet to go native, dressing up (or down) in bits of something loose and soft and handwoven, tie dyed, or printed with esoteric signs and Sanskrit script, trailing scarves over unshaped shirts, with sandals or boots, and draped with tat from markets which they felt lent authenticity.

All had painted marks in their foreheads, middle class kids with time to burn.

On my way to shower one morning a pallid Norwegian girl was reading *Cosmopolitan*, occasionally exchanging a sentence with an Australian boy, just arrived from Nepal, cross-legged on his sleeping bag, reading the sports page of whatever English language newspaper there was. He was staring at it as I went to shower and was frozen in the same position twenty minutes later – I recognised the pictures. He talked about "a good boy" he'd found "with a bag full of dope."

They did come down to breakfast where they studied the Lonely Planet, in Japanese, French and German.

And they wrote in their journals. Poetry. Thoughts. Friendly kids all, lost, but not anxious to find themselves, happy to float for a year and then, one day, return to suburbia.

The Lonely Planet said that it shouldn't cost more than twenty five rupees to hire a boat to take you up the river. We'd paid twice that as a deposit to an ancient woman the night of my first day. I'd stood half in shadow on the steps while Pintu had gone back and forth between us negotiating a price.

She'd started at five hundred which I said to him was silly. But who's to tell the value of things when you are still green? And seventy rand seemed little enough to pay a grandmother to row you to a place so far away it was only a blur on the horizon.

After several trips she'd settled, and happily, for half that.

The next morning I said to him that we had things to discuss. I showed him the book. The fifty was written off as a bad debt and he said we had to be more careful next time.

So when we decided to go see Ram Nagar, the palace of the Maharajas of Benares, he promised economy.

We walked up river to where the ghats end (and Varanasi ends too) to get a rickshaw to take us to the ferry which would take us across the Ganges.

It was a long way as the Yogi Lodge is in the middle of the old town near the Dasaswamedh Ghat, one of the most important ones, a place with shrines and statues to Sitala, the goddess of smallpox, and the very place we'd talked ourselves into debt. We saw about fifty others on the way, including the ghat with the electric crematorium.

Here, with no camera I was cheated of a picture of who-knows-which-god in a small box shrine on the water's edge, a figure like an orange teddy bear flattened by a steamroller, covered in a skin-shaped orange cloth with two holes for his eyes to poke out like jellies with currants on top.

(He'd probably have said I shouldn't have photographed it anyway: he was very correct about etiquette).

He found a cycle rickshaw – a dispirited man, but desperate for work. The main street was under water so deep that each time the pedals vanished he wet his feet alternately.

I suggested we should get out and walk. "He's happy, Baba, he's getting paid." I didn't know then how little: nor did he.

As we came into sight of the ferry I slid some notes to Pintu and told him I wanted nothing to do with the bargaining. There wasn't any. He gave the man fifteen and walked away. The man was disappointed, but Pintu said we shouldn't worry, he'd be satisfied.

Chait Singh who lived in the Palace and who ruled Benares in the late eighteenth century would have approved of Pintu's haughty manner.

"MY FIELDS ARE CULTIVATED, MY COUNTRY IS A GARDEN, AND MY SUBJECTS ARE HAPPY."

The place is sad today. It's not in the guide books, there's no entrance fee and there were no other visitors. The lawns are lank, the fountains dry, the statues broken. The lights which are turned on as you enter each room and are switched off as you reach the next, are single naked bulbs.

You could look into the great Durbar Hall through a broken pane the size of a postcard but it is nothing like the pictures. Everything is there, the sandalwood throne, the gold and silk brocades, the tiger skins with their stuffed heads sitting on the great carpet presented by Lord Curzon, the stained glass, the filigree screens, the plaster moulding, the chandeliers, the tall gilt and enamel mirrors, but who knows when anyone last walked through the room.

Sentries guard the entrance to the archway which leads to the private apartments. They are as handsome as the marble elephants which guard them. The elephants sparkle with painted cloth and rest on the backs of crouching tigers. On the hour a gong is thumped and there is a ceremony of the changing of the guard.

Two hundred years ago the British attacked the palace and robbed it taking everything of value. They confiscated Chait Singh's estates. But he escaped.

It took another hundred years before the British gave back the title of MAHARAJAH. But they didn't give back the town. They kept it and all its wealth.

We took the same route back – another ferry, another cycle rickshaw for another fifteen rupees to the same place we'd found the first. It was dark by the time we got to Mir Ghat.

Pintu had decided that when we'd done enough each day he would take me for tea at an hotel called the Jai Shive. We'd sit on a narrow lacework verandah six storeys up in the sky and look down a thousand steps onto the river where candles floated towards Calcutta and where row boats took people to see the city by night.

And each evening it was the same ritual. He'd slip away and come back with a present. I'd have to close my eyes and put out my hands. The first was a box of tiny bottles of coloured powders with metal stamps to make patterns on your skin, the next was incense I could use in Calcutta, the next was a papier mache` Ganesh – he's said to be the most popular of all in India at present because he brings good luck.

The last was a box of sweetmeats for the train in case there was no food. He'd not travelled so couldn't know what treats awaited me on the Doon Express.

The station was further than he'd said but I was happy: I had time and every taxi ride has many rewards.

In a shop, open to the world, was a counter filling the front from wall to wall: behind it three men were sitting at high machines typing, and another three in an identical row behind them.

There was to be a
 GENIUS CONTEST IN ALL OVER VARANASI
 25 NOVEMBER
 FIRST THIRTY STUDENTS 30% DISCOUNT
 NEXT TWENTY STUDENTS 20% DISCOUNT

A squat Nehru in bronze, just unveiled, one and a half times life size, stood on an island looking down the road towards the station. How had the sculptor got it so wrong. How had a man so slender and spare become one as wide as he was tall?

At an intersection a man walked by with twenty or more bags of pink candyfloss fluttering like pennants on a long stick on his shoulder.

In the station forecourt you could buy

FRUIT

CAKES

And

RUF + TUF bags for your journey in a thousand different designs.

There was no board I could see of platforms and trains and times, but there was a queue halfway from the office to the entrance. I asked Pintu to find out. He ignored the queue and went into the room by a side door.

We found the WAITING ROOM on platform 6 and he sat for three quarters of an hour to make certain I'd be safe.

He left at three.

The train was at a quarter to five.

There were four pictures on the walls:

A Japanese scene with a double storey temple.

A South Sea island with two grass roofed huts under some palms.

An Alps scene THOSE WHO DREAM THE MOST DO THE MOST.

A sunset over a Malaysian village MEN ARE CREATURES WITH TWO LEGS AND EIGHT HANDS.

Nowhere in the station could one escape Gandhi's words: over doors, on poles, wire fences, attached to steel beams, in offices and waiting rooms and in the booking hall.

LIFE PERSISTS IN THE MIDST OF DESTRUCTION

NEVER BE STIRRED BY PASSION

GOD ALONE KNOWS WHAT TOMORROW WILL BRING

THERE'S NOTHING THAT CAN'T BE ATTAINED BY PATIENCE

LIFE IS NOT FOR MAKING MONEY

THE HUMAN BODY IS LIKE A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT

INDUSTRIALISM IS GOING TO BE A CURSE OF MANKIND

My companions on the train from Varanasi were gentle, kind people from a novel, three men who now spend more time outside India than at home.

How could one resist someone who in our first couple of sentences together asked me "Is that the Queen's English or is that yours?"

He'd arrived with many pieces of luggage with bearers and had sunk down onto the seat and patted his brow.

Jay Khettry was a doctor from Boston and had been visiting a sister in Varanasi – or Benares as older people still call it. He was just fifty, I learned later when we exchanged experiences

about the bookings – they put your age on the ticket if you are not a resident instead of your social security number.

“We’ll sort out the seats when the excitement dies down. Usually things are organized better than this.”

Was this an apology to me or simply his feeling that there had been changes?

The train had left ten minutes late. “It is a miracle we are moving.”

It was already dark but then the sun sets early in winter.

He heard a change in the sound and cupped his hands over his face to cut out the strip lighting and peered into the darkness. He made me do the same. The windows were not tinted, but as I saw the next morning, layered in red dust. “The Holy River,” he said, “we are crossing the bridge.”

The bridge was the one at the opposite end of the town to the Palace, the Calcutta side, and I’d seen it from a distance that morning as Pintu and I had walked in that direction to see the other fifty ghats.

Jay didn’t know then that the man across the aisle was married to someone he’d been at school with. They were not to discover this connection going back thirty and more years until morning.

Moni Sharma was a Hindu priest, and a town planner. The two men lived not fifty miles apart in America. They’d had almost met once when Moni had done a blessing at a new temple there: Jay had gone the next day.

Both revealed to each other and to me that evening that they were taking bottles of Holy Water back home.

Before the train had begun to move from the platform and we were surrounded by too many people for too few seats, too much baggage and not enough rack space or space under the seats, Jay leaned across and whispered conspiratorially that we should spread our things and I knew I’d made a friend.

He had more to spread on the vacant places than I but together we made a good show.

As the train would be stopping at stations along the way I asked if that meant we took on more passengers. “Yes. And no,” he said which I didn’t understand then but it was a good answer given the uncertainties.

The train until half an hour before it got to Varanasi had been called in announcements on the loudspeakers, in the Lonely Planet, on the hand painted notice in the waiting room, the Doon Express. Then it had changed without explanation to some other name I now don’t remember.

Seats were booked and we’d found our names on sheets of paper pinned to a board on platform 6 – ANDREW, SEAT 12 – but a lot of people were helping themselves to any seat they fancied.

Two schoolboys had neither tickets nor reservations and had challenged the inspector to evict them. He shrugged and left.

“They all take bribes,” Moni had said to us when the man came back for a second attempt, “the most corrupt people in the civil service.”

“It wouldn’t be worth his life to put them off,” Jay said quietly “they travel the route every day and will have friends down in the other carriages...”

After paying a thousand rupees..." a woman further up said to anyone who was interested after some confusion over her ticket. Everyone was.

"How do you know this carriage is 1A?" Jay asked me. There'd been no number we could see on the outside and the signs down the platform saying CARRIAGE 13, CARRIAGE 12 and so on had stopped at 2. "Intuition," I said which seemed the answer he wanted.

All these tiny dramas I loved.

The third man I only met the next morning. He was in the next cluster of seats, a handsome face from a miniature with eagle nose and glorious hair and eyes which were at times fierce at times tender. He was splendid in cinnamon cotton pyjamas, a tiny embroidered motif in white on the V of the neck like scimitar or an arabic letter.

Kumar Bose is a tabla player. He does concerts with Ravi Shankar and records with him too. A lot of people I later met in Calcutta said he was famous. Bose is an old family woven into the city's fabric distinguished in the arts and in business, their name on hoardings, posters, shops, buildings, and on books.

He travels the world, nearly a hundred concerts a year.

"Where do you call home?" one of them asked.

"Air India."

He asked me to come to his concert in Bangalore, Bangalore where they make Sandalwood Soap at the Government Factory, soap we often buy as a treat. I said I would try but I knew it would be impossible. "I'll have a car. I'll show you the country round there. It is very beautiful."

His tabla travelled with him in a cylindrical case next to his feet. His fingers made sharp alive sounds, mine dead ones.

Buying dinner when the man came with his tray piled with little boxes of various sizes in Alcan foil was a mistake.

The oblong box was vegetable curry, rice and chillie pickle.

The square one was watery dhal.

The tube unrolled into large chapatis.

There was nothing to eat with.

I felt there were a lot of eyes watching my struggle, but in fact I'm sure nobody cared or noticed. I brushed chapati and rice and bits of vegetable off my jersey and onto the seat then nudged the scraps over the edge between the seat and the window.

The taste was good, a little bland. I did not want the recipe.

"I said not to drink the milk," Jay said. He and I were sitting facing each other with our feet up on the bunk which we later decided was to be his, number 11.

"It was yoghurt."

"You were wise then. It will undo any harm the food has caused."

It was then I learned he was a doctor, JAYANT K KHETTRY MD INTERNAL MEDICINE.

He'd refused food but he had an orange I'd bought on the station and offered some to those around him.

We talked for an hour, maybe more.

He'd seen a film on Cape Point and had fallen in love with the sight of mauve flowers on every piece of land which wasn't rock, the savage rocks themselves, and the colour of the sea.

"The only thing you missed out last night," Moni said in the morning, "was Whitewater and Paula Jones."

He'd been listening to our conversation, collecting clues about the stranger he had begun to feel he might know.

At what point in the night or perhaps it was in the early morning they discovered their connection I don't know. But I woke to find them talking softly in the space between the two carriages, drinking tea from the last station. And they were talking about me. Jay was saying "he seems to know a lot about India..."

As Calcutta approached we stood between the coaches with the door open, early mist, wet fields, paddy fields, bananas and a wet sun.

"Not a blade of grass has changed," Jay said as it fled past.

At one station we got off. "Après vous," Kumar said, the first words I'd heard from him for we'd not yet met.

A man was there with a kettle of coffee and clay cups like oil lamps which you break and throw away afterwards.

Back on the train, Jay and Moni talked about a school friend who had gone to California and joined a plastic surgeon who had later retired and left him the practice. He'd gone on a visitor's visa but had managed to manipulate his way into permanence.

"You'd not recognise him now. He goes to gym every day." I gather he was a little Buddha at school.

Now he has wealth which is limitless, three Mercs, a Malibu Beach house costing I cannot remember how many million and a clientele of film stars and celebrities. He does faces.

"But he never goes south of the neck."

When the preparations began for arrival – the counting of cases, the checking of wallets, the last look under the seats – they all gave each other their cards. "We always do this," Jay said, "but we know we'll never meet."

He'd seen me writing, thought at one stage I was a journalist, then a writer. "Will I appear in your journal?" he asked. It was a wistful question: perhaps not a question at all, just something to say: it made me feel I'd been spying.

He was discouraging about the taxi I'd find at Howrah Station.

"It won't work. Taxis choose their fare. They want good areas only."

"The Ramakrishna Mission?"

"Perhaps. But it won't be easy."

Jay was wrong. The station was quick and easy. But then he hadn't known that Moni was going to take me under his wing.

We sped through the people who carpeted the platforms, the halls, the pavement outside, sitting, squatting, sleeping, waiting and waiting, talking or saying nothing, pots, pans, boxes, animals, parcels sewn into cloth. Even suitcases.

Low square white tiled boxes dribbling red slime were the first spittoons I'd seen. When we went through the entrance saying NO EXIT I knew I was with a local who knew the rules.

Are there any private cars in Calcutta?

The town belongs to buses and taxis. They are all beaten-up, filled in with patching compound, handpainted and fast.

Moni told me about everything we passed – the Maidan where ladies play gentle golf secure from the eyes of the urchins and beggars. The Writers' Building. The Victoria Memorial, big, white and squat. The Marxist government. Eden Gardens.

At the Mission we did an illegal U turn, reversed into oncoming traffic and stopped on a NO PARKING line. Moni would take no money.

Calcutta is long, hugging one side of the river, here the Hooghly but still the Ganges.

A nearly straight road runs down the middle from a temple to Kali at the top and another to her in the south.

The city belongs to Kali and Kali to it. Kalighat is the old temple, becoming Kalikata, and later, Calcutta.

It's really three towns. North Calcutta is the old part, the village which began three hundred years ago and spread into a tangle of lanes and squares and narrow roads.

At the other end is the colonial town the British built as the capital – good looking architecture imported from Europe tinged with India.

Between they cleared the forest so that they could see the natives coming, if they did, and shoot them before they attacked, if indeed that was what they intended doing, which they didn't.

Bits of this remain, a park where little boys and bigger ones play cricket..

The rest became the new town, suburbia, middle class and as tidy as anything ever gets.

And right in the middle is the Ramakrishna Mission on an entire city block and beginning to spill across to the next. The man before me had put under PURPOSE OF VISIT – PREACHING. I put HOLIDAY and hoped they wouldn't mind.

The gatehouse is in the Chinese style. And once inside you see that a lot of different architecture shakes hands. The mixture of Art Deco, fifties Japan, and modern Moghul was appropriate for a mission which so generously welcomes all.

"Are those little temples?" Fatima asked Professor Raneshrai, another Gandhi scholar, on our way to breakfast. They could have been but were houses for garden tools. The garden is a yellow and green Union Jack, not square, not oblong, not oval, but all of these: crazy paved

paths edged with marigolds, and, where they all meet in the centre, a medallion of white chrysanthemums in pots.

My room was brown and cream with a two seater writing desk but only one bed and an empty bottle of CAREW's gin in the drawer. PREMIUM BLUE RIBAND EXTRA DRY: MADE IN MADRAS BY MC DOWELL AND CO LTD : FOR SALE IN WEST BENGAL ONLY. There was one small swig left. I suspected the cleaner. He was just one of a team who looked after me. Did he feel that room was his and that my arrival had deprived him of a place to hid from supervisors and work?

He explained everything:

the taps

the toilet

the seven different taps on the shower, three pairs and an odd one

the fan

the lights

the shower

the airconditioner

the window catches.

As he was leaving he remembered some things he'd stored in the desk – a watch and something else.

The drawer was lined with a page from The Asian Age of October 30 and as it was my first Calcutta newspaper I took it out and read it. The PEOPLE, PLACES, ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT page was filled with larger and smaller articles on Kali which I cut out for my scrapbook – it had been her festival three weeks earlier.

I kept coming across her in the next days: she must be the resident goddess of Calcutta.

In the photograph is a statue wearing a bishop's mitre topped by a Red Indian headdress down to her feet.

On my second evening at a reception given by the director of the Goethe Institute, Mrs Ingrid-Maria Miemel-Metz, a Helen Barham figure in floor length black swept into one of the many sitting rooms and said coquettishly "you've seen my Kali? You like my Kali, ja?"

I don't think it was meant to sound suggestive, but it did.

She had a tankard of beer and a silver parting in the centre of her black hair. She must have missed a weekly appointment at the local hair dyeing saloon. It was pulled tightly like a lacquered cap. She wore a Queen Alexandra choker of sparkling gold beads.

Her Kali stood on the floor behind Fatima's back, the size of a six year old child, covered in tinsel and other flashy stuff, a bishop's mitre topped by Red Indian headdress. Kali is a terrible incarnation of Devi, Shiva's wife. Her black skin is bloodied. She is surrounded by snakes and wears a necklace of skulls. She is also called Mahadevi, the Great Goddess.

She'd just bought it and managed to make it the centre of one long conversation which, against reason and some resistance she kept alive all evening. As she became more tipsy, her English became more German.

When she called us for food cooked by her and her husband, Fatima said "I believe German cuisine is the worst in the world." Mrs Miemel-Metz's astonishment was momentary: mine remains. "One day I will cook you a proper German meal. Tonight it is a mixture of Turkish, German, Russian and Indian." All the places they had been posted while spreading helpings of German culture.

That afternoon, after a six hour tour of the slums, knowing there was to be a formal reception with scholars and academics in the evening, all I wanted when Sobiah dropped me at The

Mission was to lie quietly under my mosquito net with the fan stirring the heavy air in the darkening room and wait for EVENING TEA at 4.30

It arrived on a metal tray at a quarter to five brought by another member of the team.

The first day it was two coconut biscuits. Today it was two fake MARIEs. The last time in India there was a court battle over copyright. I was glad to meet the evidence face to face.

BAKERS has become

In the half light, blurred by the cooking, it looks convincing.

As does MARIE with two crossed Vs substituting the A.

There is a squiggle like a backward C for the E and underneath it says:

AH HA

The Gin man was my third visitor before breakfast – the paper man at 6.30 with the Telegraph and the tea man at seven the first and second. I'd met him the day before. Each time he'd been to the room he would hover and say "duty is over." I would thank him. He would hover awhile and then leave. I'd not taken the hint for a tip.

My mistake was to give the porter ten rupees and the Gin man 50 thinking they were both just passing through my life. I was right about the porter: wrong about the Gin man.

He made three separate visits before breakfast:
one to sweep and clean which he did by sprinkling water over the whole floor and then sweeping the slurry with a long straw brush,
the second to remind me to leave my washing at the door,
and the third five minutes later, (less), followed by a bandy legged older man in a dhoti who tick-tocked down the verandah and squatted outside the door.

He picked up each piece of clothing – four shirts –and examined it. He turned each inside out and then threw them onto a new pile he was making, all the time rocking as if in a dance. I was ready to bargain over price but it didn't happen. He bundled it up in a ball and left.

I reminded the Gin man that there was no toilet paper and that the soap was finished. He promised to bring them.

At 8.55 he presented me, on his fourth visit, with toilet paper, holding the roll on outstretched hands for me to admire like a holy relic. "And the soap?" "Soap will come."

Fatima was about to leave for her conference on the relevance of Gandhi today and said I should come to lunch.

That was an excuse to walk to get a feel of Calcutta.

Ballygunge Circular Road is not a circle but has twists and bends with the university at its beginning and MR PIRES'S PRIVATE SCHOOL: TRIVIA HALL –does it have a different meaning in Hindi? – at the other with the Goethe Institute opposite.

With an hour to spare, I went in search of a park with trees: mid-winter in Calcutta is a Durban summer.

I came across Bishop's College instead. Through the open gateway was a big lawn, trees, stone benches and buildings with classical columns. Separate and to the right was a heavy ochre building I took to be the chapel.

The guard was asleep under the tree, cross-legged on a plastic chair. He woke when he heard my footsteps on the gravel, unravelled his legs and put his feet into shoes before speaking. He didn't understand what I was saying: nor did he care so I went in.

A man I passed near the chapel was carrying a stack of books balanced on THE OLD TESTAMENT. I smiled. He didn't smile back.

The chapel was locked but I could see that it was splendid by crouching and looking through the keyhole.

The noticeboard had November's duty list of SERVERS, INTERCESSORS, BIBLE READERS and CHAPEL CLEANERS.

I wondered if Mr Pires's Private School had such a heady mix of students. There were SASHI PRAKASH, BASIL BASKEY, GLEAMLAND KHONGSIR, ALJOY DEMTER, JEREMIAH JEME, SAM GOLDWIN, SAMUEL OSWALD and a boy with only one name, but a good one, HMINGTHANSANGA.

In the road Don Giovanni's Pizza signs on every other pole with occasional opposition from A Slice of Sicily. Festoons of Communist flags, FUZLE-RUB MOTORS, FIFI CAFÉ. "MOTHER" Sonia Gandhi about to arrive to speak to the Central Leather Research Institute. HAIR DYEING AND DRYING salons. The CAMPA COLA logo a neat parody of the original. Six astonishing hours.

Bureaucracy was given by the British to India who perfected it. The post office at Gol Park in suburban Calcutta was not my first experience.

At Bombay International there are many signs in the customs hall:

IF AGGRIEVED – above a pulpit clutching a column – contact B B BOURKES, JP or RAJAN SINGH, JP.

Exits :
LADIES
MINORS
AGED
DISABLED
COMMODITIES
GOLD
(and men?)
also
GREEN and
NOTHING TO DECLARE

Bombay has officials who issue licences for beer bars with PERMIT ROOMS – "let's meet at the permit," friends say there.

IN COMPLIANCE WITH THE GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS the notice reads ALL BARS ARE CLOSED ON THE FULL MOON POYA DAY WHICH FALLS ONCE A MONTH AND THE SALE OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES IS PROHIBITED.

The newspaper article reads:

The chairman of The Coconut Research Board will introduce the Minister of Plantation Affairs who will present certificates of competency and pension benefits to young trainees who have got through their 2 month practicals in coconut plucking as part of an incentive scheme the Ministry has launched to overcome the shortage of pluckers...

And while standing in a queue which had spilled onto the pavement to post a letter a man behind me asked, "is this the queue for stamps?"

"I hope so," I'd said.

"No it isn't," the chorus came. We were to go inside to a window: none had signs.

A woman in a sari was sitting on a high stool. She wasn't trying not to see me but she didn't see me.

I stood with my envelope resting on the counter trying to catch her eye.

After some time she slid off her stool and began sweeping the floor under the counter and around the legs of the stool with a pan and brush improvised from two sheets of unlined paper.

At times she vanished. At times bits of her appeared and went away.

When she'd finished and had emptied the dust into a basket on the other side of the room she sat down and looked at me.

"Fifty," she said after weighing the envelope.

I licked the stamps, attached them and handed the envelope back.

She pointed to the other end of the counter.

I saw no post box inside or outside.

People stood back and let me through.

I was at a tall school desk with sloping top.

"Do I leave this here?"

A woman said, no, and pointed to another official behind the wire mesh.

She, like her companion took a while to look up from the book of forms she was filling in. When she did, she didn't see me but the big envelope I'd put on her side of the grille.

No words passed between us.

She counted the stamps and took out a different booklet and filled in a narrow form, stamped it, and handed it to me. REGISTERED ARTICLE it said. It was too complicated to explain: I thanked her and left.

A few hours later, after lunch, I'd gone back to post a letter to London.

"Sold out," my first woman said.

"What should I do?"

"Come back on Monday."

Although I had no part of the Gandhi Today conference I was included in all the entertainment.

And while they were inside picking apart each other's arguments, Mr Raman made sure I'd see Calcutta and ordered a car with a driver called Sobiah who was told to take me to

1. THE DAKSHINESWAR TEMPLE, the place where Sri Ramakrishna had been visited when he was twenty two by the goddess Kali, the moment which had changed his life. He'd built The Mission we were staying in. The pilgrimage was top of the list.

2. THE BELUR MATH – another Ramakrishna place on the Ganges.

3. THE JAIN TEMPLES

4. THE INDIAN MUSEUM

5. THE VICTORIA MEMORIAL

6. ST. PAULS CATHEDRAL

7. THE NEHRU CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

"But it may not happen in that order."

It didn't.

Sobiah worked independently of instructions and in six hours and twenty minutes spoke eight words.

MOTHER TERESA
MISSION
JAIN TEMPLE
CHURCH
and MOTHER TERESA again.

The day before, the day I'd got there, I felt I had not got a grip on Calcutta. After spending roughly one third of my ride through the slums in lines of traffic which didn't move, I'd absorbed a lot of the atmosphere and had my teeth into it.

WELCOME TO DUM DUM STATION the notice said.
WELCOME TO DHAKSHINESWAR STATION another said.

Men sat on street corners with upright Remingtons on high stools typing letters for people.

A traffic officer fluttered his hands like a bird trying to rise from the ground and walked away from the mess and disappeared.

The hand-painted cinema posters showed women with a flurry of chins and plump men.

As I was putting on my shoes at the Temple I saw stumps shuffling towards me. He had no fingers either. The leper's collection box was round his neck and he rattled it by shaking his body.

At one of the Jain temples I watched a man cover his mouth with a cloth to prevent him from breathing in insects too small to see.

The local whisky is CONTESSA and advertised everywhere.

ROBIN'S FONETIK SKOOL – GLORIOUS 53 YEARS the wall sign read.
They offered SPOKE ENGLISH, STENO, TYPE and BENGALI.

My Gandhian experience for the day was another roadside sign: "Earth promises enough to satisfy every man's need but not for every man's greed."

MOURN THE SAD DEMISE OF OUR BELOVED MOTHER TERESA the banner sponsored by Parvati's Electrical Company said.

The Belur Math was closed for lunch. I photographed the sign on the gate which said that taking photographs inside was forbidden.

INDULGING IN SINGING OR DANCING, PLAYING OF BANDS, HOLDING DISCOURSES, MEETINGS, PROCESSIONS AND BRINGING ANY FLOATS AND VEHICLES AS PART OF PROCESSIONS ETC. INSIDE THE CAMPUS WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION, NOISY SHOUTING (quiet shouting?), OR ROWDY AND UNSEEMLY BEHAVIOUR IN ANY FORM ARE NOT PERMITTED.

I left the Indian Museum, the Children's Museum and St Paul's for another day.

Back at the Goethe I thanked Mr Raman who said that Mrs Sen would work out the bill for the car ride and give it to me the next day – it was calculated in hours and distance.

He said I should talk to Mr Chakraborti who did "footstep walks to historic buildings and the slums of North Calcutta."

He got him on the phone and we arranged to meet the next morning at seven at The Mission.

"Seeing the lanes very early is preferable."

We would do the European colonial later and he would take me to breakfast at nine.

I asked how much he charged.

"I'm bad at working out prices."

"I'm bad at accepting them."

"We'll talk tomorrow."

Mr Raman said it would be about 450 including breakfast, that's R60 which is good value for a private guide and expert on Calcutta then and now.
In the evening Fatima said she and Mrs Nanda had organised a car to take us to the house where Tagore was born in the country at seven and I should cancel Mr Chakraborti.

Tagore is to India what Shakespeare is to England.

I lifted the receiver. It played ONCE IN ROYAL DAVID'S CITY and then OH COME LET US ADORE HIM.

Mrs Chakraborti said he would be back later.

At four it played JINGLE BELLS and SILENT NIGHT. He still had not come back.

Nor at 5, at 6, at 7.

At 8: RUDOLPH THE RED NOSED REINDEER.

At nine fifteen, THE CAMPBELLS ARE COMING. He was filled with apologies for the inconvenience of not being there.

I apologised for wanting to change the plans.

He said I should not apologise, such things happen “changes are unavoidable”.

With so much politeness going back and forth I realise that this is India where everything is possible, where plans can change and change again, where every mishap is dealt with with a shrug of the shoulders and where it is pointless to get angry.

At breakfast Professor Raneshrai who mostly talks in riddles said (about life but referring to the menu),

THE CUTLET ARRIVES ON THE TABLE WITHOUT ASKING FOR IT: IT MEANS NOTHING. YOU ASK FOR IT FROM THE WAITER AND IT DOESN'T ARRIVE. YOU HAVE NO CONTROL SO IT IS POINTLESS TO WORRY.

There was no trip to the country. Instead the same driver in the same car and the same route as the day before but in a different order. Tagore was only mentioned once – the mistake never explained. Nor did I have the heart to say to Fatima and Mrs Nanda that I'd done the rehearsal yesterday.

At the Dakshineswar Temple, the first stop, Sri Ramakrishna's bedroom, was open – it was closed for lunch the day before. Side by side is his narrow bed for sleeping on, and his wider one, which is six inches taller too, for sitting on. This was the room, with its red polished cement floor, opening onto a pillared verandah on three sides, that he shared with some of his disciples. His wife, Sarada Devi's bedroom was a distance away in another part of the temple complex.

Around the frieze is a procession of photographs of the two of them, but mostly of him, mixed with saints and friends, an Italian MADONNA AND CHILD and JESUS. Jesus appeared again in the museum at Belhur Math (math means monastery) “JESUS IN HIS LOTUS POSITION” the sign read.

Ramakrishna, a priest at the Temple in the early days of the nineteenth century, and now a Saint, was a visionary, a man of ecstatic passion, so in love with Kali that he would get up onto the altar and touch her and talk to her and sing and joke and at moments of joy, dance with her. He would garland himself with flowers and rub his body with sandalwood paste to get closer to her. And should he feel their passion cool for a moment, he would fall to the ground weeping, rubbing his face in the sand till it bled. His belief that all religions aspired to one god who was in everything and who was everywhere, caught the imagination and gave new life to the Hindu faith at a time of decline during the Raj.

It was the tiny group of disciples who, after his death in 1885, founded the Ramakrishna Mission, which today has branches across the world. And in South Africa.

Mrs Nanda too is a devotee of Kali. When someone told me that we are now living in the age of Kali, an era of disintegration and destruction, I assumed they were talking about recent times. But a book on the Bhagavad-Gita has another perspective: “the Mahabharata tells of events leading up to the present Age of Kali. It was at the beginning of this age, some fifty centuries ago...” Christian time is a blink of the eye.

She bought an hibiscus garland from one of the many stalls which sell sweets and Fanta, lacquered pictures of saints, hot tea and postcards. She offered it at the temple. She got back two biscuits wrapped in a leaf. These she dropped through a slot into a devotional box. "There is no question that we say Hinduism is the best. We accept all religions. Whatever works for you is right". Kali, she said, had a thousand names, but you could call her what you liked. Everything was elastic.

Fatima found the temple disgusting. How could they let it get so dirty? "Look at the flies and all."

She was hounded by my leper. He looked resigned at the end when nothing had popped out of her handbag for him. She gave many notes to clutches of small children who clung to her.

Driving to the next place Fatima added "is there a good part of Calcutta?" Mrs Nanda said nothing. She is not from Calcutta but Delhi, a scholarly, aristocratic woman married to a Gandhi scholar and author of many books. At The Temple she bent double at the altar and explained the lotus to me. "It is of the water and in it but it doesn't touch the water: just as we are in the world but must be apart from its everyday troubles."

The Belur Math, the international centre of the Ramakrishna Mission with monks and novices, is a little bit of paradise (actually it is quite a large bit as it spreads over many acres), on one bank of the Ganges with steps down to the water and many tinier and larger temples to various deities, and one very grand one in the centre, a blend of temple, mosque and church, guarded by a sentry who checked on shoes and cameras. Both prohibited.

The Mission, run by the Saint's followers, called by some the Jesuits of Hinduism for their heavenly intellectual discipline and their earthly pragmatism, has hospitals, agricultural schools, colleges of education, publishing houses and presses, libraries and dispensaries.

I got another glimpse of the elasticity of Hinduism when Mrs Nanda continued, "you say water, I say paani, someone else says jal. So you see..." the words vanishing into the silence.

"I'm glad you've brought us here, Mrs Nanda," Fatima said, "otherwise two non-Hindus might have left with a very bad impression."

Mrs Nanda explained in a gentle voice her frustration with the swami at the other temple. "When I get onto the subject of maintenance he just smiles as if to say I know nothing about management."

After lunch Manish Chakraborti arrived. Not an ancient pedagogue with a string of books and a thesis or two, but a young, passionate zealot burning with love for old Calcutta.

He said at some point, "we are standing in what is officially a slum." It's not just a word but can be defined.

There are five conditions. I can only remember three.

75% of the roofing must be impermanent.

There is no running water.

No sewerage.

He's documented a thousand buildings where are first on his list for salvation. And to save them he and three young architects (he's 28), have a programme which scoops into the same net politicians and the rich and influential at one end and the people living there at the other.

It's a life's work. His walks are part of his strategy to show people the problem and inspire them with his vision.

First stop – we'd taken a taxi to the underground which took us to the fringe – was an Italian Palazzo, The Marble Palace, the home of a family still living in part of it, who have been collecting artworks for a hundred years and still are.

It's a mad collection.

He liked Venus in one particular pose and bought as many copies as he could find in different sizes and different marbles, identical in other ways.

And Apollos and cupids and fighting animals.

There are floor to ceiling canvases by Rubens and rooms of almost-ran masterpieces.

There's a room of mirrors with palace furniture, porcelain, knick-knacks and chandeliers.

On the verandah round the open courtyard with its marble floor is an aviary of birds – not a beautiful aviary but an improvised muddle of packing cases and netting.

You can't take photographs. He's not keen too many know about it though it is open to everyone and it is free.

Its twin next door has only the tall portico pillars left and has a warehouse behind. "Now we will see some palaces." These he explained are houses built round a larger and a smaller courtyard, the one a more public space, the other for the family only. Bigger palaces would have others as well.

Calcutta must have been one of the most sumptuous of cities in all the world. In the past a palace would have been home to one family: now there is a family in each room.

He took me to a one of the tiniest, his favourite, a narrow house with double wooden doors onto the street.

In the blackness of the entrance hallway three people were asleep – one on a ledge, one under it, one on the floor.

The first courtyard is long and narrow. No, it's not long but it seemed long because the other way was so narrow. It had slim columns and Moorish arches, and through a dark space and a small opening, a smaller courtyard. It has two colours of brick and stone carved swags over windows. The robust stucco relief is by someone who understood the city's special light and was in love with it. It is a miniature gem.

Other houses have complicated ironwork verandahs and balconies, bought by the yard from a Glasgow catalogue. A local entrepreneur early this century had got in on the act and adapted some designs and cast them there – in wreaths of thistles Ganesh has replaced Scottish angels.

And then there are the fretwork fronts, the RAJASTHAN STYLE, so splendid and ravishing and so perfectly preserved that it takes little imagination to realise how his dreams could happen.

He's working with the tenants and landlords. And with the schools. And he knows them all, so can knock on doors and show one places one would never see.

Already lanes and thin streets have been cleared of rubbish.

Chipped and fallen plaster is being repaired by local people making jobs for people without income. Old skills newly learned are helping the place discard its shabbiness.

I said how unexpected it was to walk through such fragrant lanes – smells of different incenses and flowers floating from every window. “Once upon a time each part of Calcutta grew different flowers which were their own, so a blind person walking would know where they were.”

What I saw in my seven hours was only one small part of one of the sixteen sections which make up North Calcutta.

And I did see their first big success, a building now restored with a hall in its centre and rooms around which are let out bringing money to the people there.

A wedding was happening as we crept through to the first floor dining room which the four use as their headquarters.

The wailing bride was being comforted by sisters and aunts.

In the office hang handsome oils of members of the family whose house this once was – THE FAMILY DAS – one face fourteen times, some older, some younger, some men, some women, painted posthumously by a local artist just as the Stuarts had been done at Holyrood House.

Perhaps I should have begun these twenty one days at the start, in Bombay. But my thoughts won't come back in sequence: they return in their own time. Varanasi followed Bombay. Then Calcutta, Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. Then Sri Lanka. And then Hong Kong for an exhibition.

There is a story someone told which I present in mitigation.

VISHNU, THE THIRD IN THE HINDU TRINITY OF GODS WITH BRAHMA AND SHIVA, AND A FRIEND WHOSE NAME I NO LONGER REMEMBER, SET OUT ON A JOURNEY. AFTER A WHILE VISHNU SAID HE WAS THIRSTY AND ASKED THE FRIEND TO GO AND GET HIM A GLASS OF WATER.

IN THE DISTANCE WAS A FOREST AND ON ITS EDGE A TINY HOUSE. THE FRIEND KNOCKED AT THE DOOR WHICH WAS OPENED BY A BEAUTIFUL YOUNG WOMAN. THEY FELL INSTANTLY IN LOVE. THE FRIEND WENT IN.

SOME TIME LATER THEY WERE MARRIED. AND STILL LATER A NUMBER OF CHILDREN ARRIVED. THE CHILDREN GREW UP AND HAD CHILDREN OF THEIR OWN.

MANY YEARS ON THEIR EVERYDAY WORLD WAS TORN APART BY A SERIES OF CATAclysmic EVENTS – TORNADOES AND HURRICANES, TEMPESTS AND FLOODS. EVERYTHING WAS SWEEPED AWAY. AS THE STORM CALMED THE FRIEND WHO HAD SURVIVED DROWNING WAS WASHED UP ON A PIECE OF DRYING LAND.

THERE HE FOUND HIMSELF AT THE FEET OF VISHNU WHO WAS STILL STANDING WHERE HE HAD LEFT HIM.

“DID YOU REMEMBER TO BRING ME A GLASS OF WATER?” HE ASKED.

The friend had been away a very long time, maybe thirty or forty or more years. Vishnu, however had only been waiting a few minutes.

Our time is linear. Things happen only once. You can only go forwards not back. An event happens and when it is over another starts. For us history is a series of things from A to Z.

Hindu, Buddhist and Jain time is cyclic, things going round in circles which spiral and intertwine.

You see it in Indian paintings. There will be a landscape. In it you'll see a man walking along a path. Somewhere else he climbs a hill. Somewhere else he meets a friend. He sits under a tree. He swims a river. He meets wild animals

It is the same man at different times but all in the same picture. The events are not arranged in a sequence like a comic. There is no particular order. The different times are simultaneous.

When I heard this I began to understand something about India. But only something. Enough to know how much more there was to know.

It wasn't surprising then that I felt so under-educated and ill-prepared a couple of days before I left when I went to see Fatima and she asked,

"You've read the Bhagavad Gita?"

"No. I tried but found it confusing." (My copy of this most holy of Hindu books is 1047 pages of delicate type, published by the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Botany, Australia, and printed in Hong Kong. Peter Smith bought it for me at the Hare Krishna Temple in Chatsworth.)

"Confusing? It's very simple."

"I'll try again."

"The Upanishads?" (They too are not light reading, dealing as they do with the nature of the universe and the soul. They are ancient texts which are part of the Vedas.)

"No."

"The Vedas?"

"No." More sacred texts, a collection of hymns composed four thousand years ago, in pre-classical Sanskrit, and composed of four books.

"Gandhi's autobiography?"

"No."

I left with two volumes of the latter and read paragraph one to test the water which is warm and welcoming.

THE GANDHIS BELONG TO THE BANIA CASTE AND SEEM TO HAVE BEEN ORIGINALLY GROCERS. BUT FOR THREE GENERATIONS, FROM MY GRANDFATHER, THEY HAVE BEEN PRIME MINISTERS IN SEVERAL KATHIAWAD STATES..."

She didn't ask this time if I'd read *Midnight's Children*.

The failure to get beyond page thirty after numbers of tries haunts me still. Though only occasionally and not deeply.

Then two days later Uma announced that she would be taking over where Fatima left off in Delhi – on December the first I was to be handed over like a parcel as Fatima departed and Uma arrived. “You didn’t think I’d allow you to go to India a third time without me.”

She’d just returned from visiting her mother who needed a week or two of a daughter’s comfort and was now restored to proper health.

Uma happened to meet Mark Tully there while seeing her mother. He was BBC correspondent in India for a quarter of a century. Uma put him on the list of sights to visit. I’d bought his book at a by-the-kilogram bookseller in the Workshop a while back because I’ve followed his reports over the years: but had sampled only a few chapters.

We didn’t meet him. In fact his name wasn’t mentioned, but then we only had a week and a list of things to do which would have taken, ordinarily, a month.

I kept feeling that it was Aidan who should be going, not me, he’s read THE LIVES OF THE INDIAN PRINCES, the Thames and Hudson HISTORY OF INDIA, their INDIAN ART, A PRINCESS REMEMBERS, THE MEMOIRS OF THE MAHARANI OF JAIPUR (I fell in love with her when she did a World Service interview last year. She’s in her eighties and was the first woman to go into politics after 1947 and won by the biggest majority ever, 175,000 votes. “Yes, of course we had six hundred servants, but they didn’t ALL stay in the palace... It was a normal childhood, English governesses, and teachers, Indian servants, that sort of thing. ... Other people have lives like that today. Indians are very philosophical. They have a view of life. In general people accept their station...”).

I, on the other hand had studied the pictures in INDIAN STYLE. (and the ones in the other books too), dipped into the Madras telephone directory. (I have a friend Marklyn Govender and was curious to see if the family had roots there. Govinda, yes, Govender, no, but spelling is flexible. I see that Govinda is the holy cowherd of Krishna. Marklyn is pleased to be of such lineage. But Fatima says it’s unlikely. She’s not infallible: I persist with my theory of casual spelling but don’t convince her. Marklyn on the other hand has spread the word. The Govenders of Durban glow with happiness.)

There were two other Govenders, Raj and Ravi who helped organise our exhibit at The Delhi Triennale and who arrived late in Delhi because of a mix-up in flights. They went to the airport here on three occasions and came back to their surprised families twice. Philip de Waal from the High Commission went to the airport in Delhi three times to meet them and came back empty handed three times. They finally arrived on their own having got a flight via Singapore and Katmandu.

I asked Raj about his name. He said that you won’t find any GOVENDERS in India but GOUNDERS. It was the British when they were shipping them to South Africa as indentured labourers who spelled it wrongly. The people would have been illiterate, probably and would have said their name was GOUNDER. W and V are often transposed when pronounced in India, a W sounding like a V and the other way round.

I’d plundered the Lonely Planet Survival Kit and assembled a mass of trivia.

Varanasi has the HOTEL GLORY, HOTEL TOURIST BUNGALOW, HOTEL RELAX, HOTEL TEMPLES TOWN, OM HOUSE LODGE, HOTEL IDEAL TOPS and the BURGER KING near the Taj Ganges Hotel, offering vegetable burgers. Fatima and I were booked in the Yogi Lodge which is run by Ronnie Williams – communal bathrooms, men and women together and dormitories at three rand a day. But we’d chosen their single rooms, their top of the range accommodation at ten rand each.

As it happened I went alone to Varanasi as Fatima’s ticket could not be changed. I would meet her later in Calcutta.

Yogi Lodge is so popular with people looking for a spiritual experience as well as a bed that it has imitators – JOGI LODGE, THE OLD YOGI LODGE, GOLD YOGI LODGE, NEW YOGI LODGE and YOGI GUEST HOUSE. Professor Dipak Malik, and acquaintance of Fatima's, suggested it, and did the booking.

When I told Aidan all I'd gathered he told me about the Maharajah of Benares and his palace which he described and how he had his power taken away after independence but had kept his position as a spiritual leader.

It was Fatima who said we would stay our two nights at the Ashram in Delhi.

I didn't know then that I'd spent my whole time there. Twelve days in all. They would not let me leave. "An Ashram without guests is not an ashram. This is your home." I was the only guest after Fatima left. "We won't let you waste your money in town." They did not charge anyone for staying.

The day after she left I was promoted from the annexe to the main house. Being given the room of the president's daughter was an honour and a sign of my new status as special guest. It had a three quarter bed with a proper headboard, carefully made by someone who knew about carpentry. Its two mattresses, one covered in hessian, the other patterned cloth, were tough and unyielding. The duvet was splendid, a darker red velvet than the one in the annexe, quilted and friendly. The bathroom needed a plumber's care so I used the one leading off the founder's bedroom with its stainless steel water heater like a samovar, its buckets for water and the low stool to sit on while washing.

In my mind was a picture – not a clear one perhaps but an idea nonetheless – about what an ashram would look like. Something Hans Hallenish with white-washed walls, stone floors, monks in white robes, and altar or two, some idols with marigolds, silence. The bowl of water to wash in as Fatima had promised. A roll of something on the floor to sleep on. Scrubbed tables. Rough food.

I'd not imagined the unloveliness of the suburban buildings which made up the GANDHI HINDUSTAN SAHATYA SABHA which I simply called the Gandhi Ashram when anyone asked where I was staying. It is at number 1 JAWAHARLAL NEHRU MARG just inside the ring road which circles Delhi.

Nor had I imagined the loveliness of the people. Living saints all. Whose only wish was to make other peoples' lives happier. And this they did without a trace of holiness or servility, but with a gentle passion, love and unselfishness you could feel.

I told taxi drivers it was near the ITD BUILDING – the Income Tax Department (known if not loved) – and near Rajghat, a main highway near old Delhi Railway Station. I got to know the landmarks quickly which was useful as most drivers were vague about the geography of the city and needed help.

The man who had started it was a Gandhi disciple and friend of Tagore. He'd died at ninety three. His bust in the driveway was washed down with buckets of water and garlanded with red and white flowers on the morning after Fatima and I arrived.

Sculpted spectacles are to be seen everywhere in India and nobody has got them right. The glass is the problem – how do you do it in stone and show the eyes behind? Omitting the lenses gives the glasses unnatural prominence, making them the first thing you notice when they should be incidental to the face. Some people looked like early aviators. Kakasaheb Kalalkar at his zenith was of the age when oblong horn rim was fashionable. They have a

television funnyman look. But they've done his beard and hair like waves of molten silver and his expression is of a no nonsense disciplinarian. Sunday was his birthday and the afternoon was spent in celebration and prayers in the hall and doubled as a homage to Fatima and a school prizegiving. And then a performance of three plays for the Untouchable children by travelling actors.

In his house where I alone lived after Fatima left is his bedroom. Now a museum. Preserved as he had left it. His photograph sits where his head would have rested on the bed surrounded by a string of dead flowers. Some tiny books are next to the pillow and a folded scarf.

In a glass cabinet are clothes of khadi, handspun, hand-woven white cotton. Sandals like Gandhi's made from an ox that had died naturally. Diplomas. A shoehorn. A rosette. A Brownie photograph of his wife, a tall plump woman with round glasses. Two nail clippers – an enema with a long pipe and a narrow nozzle. Medals with Hindi inscriptions and a child's slate and chalk. There's a family of gods on a steel safe and glass-fronted bookcases. Christ. Buddha and Gandhi on a high shelf under the ceiling stare down and he stares back. The four in eternal silent conversation.

I'd been woken that first morning in my ashram cell by a drum somewhere outside. It was not a wake-up call or a call for breakfast as I'd thought. It was two Buddhist nuns praying. Chanting began later and there was the tinkle of a bell.

They were the only other people in the ANNEXE and had a biggish room next to mine which Fatima and I were taken to see.

It was cosy and glittering with swags of tinsley strings, little pictures in frames, lots of plastic gods and bundles and bundles of cloth piled like rocks to make a warren of passages and smaller rooms. The air was blue with incense.

They were crouched in one corner praying at an altar so we didn't stay.

During the morning a hand lifted the curtain over my door and I found myself looking at two Japanese people, very tiny people, like porcelain dolls.

One was older and one was younger though both had faces so radiant that age seemed irrelevant. They glowed with inner light.

The shaven-headed doll with big glasses smiled but was silent. The other with hair cut like a rondavel roof smiled even more sweetly and said something. Both bowed.

The shaven-head doll stood with arms outstretched, holding presents on up-turned hands which the other took one by one and handed to me: some books, a hinged take-anywhere altar and a black velvet pouch with gold drawstrings in which were glass rosary beads.

The younger doll commented as I took each book and looked through it.

BUDDHISM FOR WORLD PEACE, translated by HUMIKO MIYAZAKI is the words of the MOST VENERABLE NICHIDATSU FUJII GURUJI a Holy Man born in 1885 and who at 101 "on January 7th. 1986 at 3.09 am entered Nirvana." Its 321 pages are dense, each sentence as impenetrable as the one before and the one after. I saw that he used a "single hand drum" while praying for peace "during the most drastic changes of history." THE SINGLE HAND DRUM: my awakening call was explained.

Gandhi admired him: the second present was his life in pictures.

Next, a small, roughly printed, roughly bound, higgledy-piggledy book, pages in every direction but straight or square, seems a child's primer with drawings too awful to look at, and, in Hindi, unreadable.

The postcards of the new Buddhist temple in Battersea Park which I'd seen from the other side of the river last time in London I was able to admire.

Their day is simple. And austere. They pray constantly.

They do nothing else. I am in awe of such dedication and strength for it is beyond my understanding.

What I only learned a week later was that the shaven-headed nun had just the day before begun an annual fast. This was to last eight days, during which time she took nothing, not even water.

Each morning, before sunrise, she would walk across the highway to a park where there are memorials to Gandhi and the prime ministers of India.

This is Raj Ghat where "on the banks of the Yamuna, a simple square platform of black marble marks the spot where Mahatma Gandhi was cremated following his assassination in 1948. A commemorative ceremony takes place each Friday, the day he was killed. The Raj Ghat area is not a beautiful park complete with labelled trees planted by a mixed bag of notables including Queen Elizabeth, Gough Whitlam, Dwight Eisenhower and Ho Chi Minh." The Lonely Planet.

There she'd set up a tiny shrine, put down a mat and would sit the whole day chanting prayers until sunset. And all the time she would thump the drum shaped like a large ping-pong bat, with stretched velum embellished with a circle of Japanese script.

Extreme forms of fasting and self denial are not regarded as part of the middle way the Buddha originally thought of as the path to enlightenment, but belongs to one of the major traditions of Japanese Buddhism dating from the early nineteenth century. It is practised by those who want to make a very clear statement about their commitment to Buddhism. It is a way of gaining enlightenment, and a final release from this world and its suffering. As well as purifying the body and mind such extreme practices can contribute to the acquisition of supernatural powers, which vary from individual to individual, such as supernatural hearing, supernatural visions, the ability to see the thoughts of another person, the ability to expand your bodily size, and of contracting it to the size of a nut. People who have put themselves through these extreme mental, spiritual and physical disciplines are rewarded with a clearer understanding of themselves and the world.

There are many choices: such as standing under waterfalls and reciting the Buddha's scriptures, a relatively common one, fasting in order to become a Buddha in this very body and in this life, and there is a form of fasting for a thousand days, where the person would drink water and eat something like tree bark or pine needles, a process of self mummification. The body shrivels and the skin becomes almost like leather, and once the person has died he remains in a mummified state without the need of further embalming.

A convert, a former British soldier, recently managed a hundred day fast becoming the first European high priest in the branch of Buddhism to which he belongs. He sat on the top of a mountain in Japan in a concrete hut, dressed only in a thin cotton summer kimono, and survived on rice water, green tea and two plums. Such feats have in the past claimed the lives of others. The last time this was successfully completed was over thirty years ago. He lost forty eight kilograms. His next aim is the thousand day fast.

On my first day there was drumming later in the morning in the double highway outside the ashram, drumming, shouting and music from loudspeakers. An animal rights march with placards. Vegetarians together can be fierce. Two on a scooter with DON'T EAT ANIMALS on cardboard on a stick asked if I was "veg" or "non-veg". I said veg and was allowed to take photographs.

**YOUR STOMACH IS NOT GRAVEYARD
BE VEGETARIAN FOR GOOD HEALTH**

ANIMALS HAVE RIGHT TO LIVE
and one calling for the prohibition of alcohol.

A family of pigs was capering up and down the pavement. Two were fucking.

It was after prayers in the ashram hall the next morning – Fatima had suggested I might like to sit with them – that we had walked to the park.

The shrine was a box covered in white cloth topped with a bronze bell shaped like a stupa. Her strong thumps with the stick echoed back from the arched walls which made a large square space for the granite memorial.

It was only much later too that I discovered that the younger nun had been to South Africa before the elections to pray for us. She'd walked from Durban to Pretoria – a homage to Gandhi – praying during the seventeen days and banging her drum.

Each morning she would walk to Kakalkar's bust, bow, walk to the back, bow again then repeat the circuits a few times before walking back to her cell.

If I happened to be there during the day I always heard the drum. Once I tried to count the beats, thinking they might be related to the human pulse, but couldn't find mine to read so couldn't tell.

After several mornings I did discover a pattern, five regular beats a second apart (or approximately so), followed by a double beat – which was softer – and then five more, and so on.

Sometimes they would go into the great man's bedroom and spend half an hour polishing and dusting the furniture and the statues, chanting all the while. The incense which they burned hovered till the next morning, hiding in corners, in the passage and behind my door.

The younger nun was usually at our morning prayers which began at seven, signalled by a bell like tinkling glass, which and lasted twenty minutes. There were never more than five of us. My place was between two people who spun lengths of cotton thread on their folding Gandhi wheels like wooden attache cases, praying at the same time. She'd sit next to me singing the verses from a book on the floor.

Each person's day, I soon found, had a pattern, its own, each different from the rest. Mine, I noticed, had begun to find its pattern too.

“SOME HARMONIOUS MADNESS THAT YOU MUST KNOW...” Uma quoted Shelley as we sat in the back of the car near sunset with Delhi's rush hour making tentative assaults on the already crazed roads.

HARMONIOUS MADNESS : an apt description of India: and for Uma herself.

At the same time the day before she'd taken me to Lodi Gardens where, strolling across the lawns we came across a group of four soldiers: two in front, two behind in crisp black with berets and each with a machine gun.

Between them a middle aged man with Toby Jug face in white loose fitting cotton. He greeted us, smiling, hands pressed together, just brushing his chin. I returned his greeting.

"A robber," Uma said.

"But he isn't handcuffed," I said, looking back to check.

"A Member of Parliament, then."

Parliament had that week been dissolved, new elections were in the air, he was out ingratiating himself to everyone in early preparation.

Uma was the key to many surprises. It was through her that I would visit one of the doyennes of Delhi's art world in one of many collisions of coincidence I'd come to expect in India.

I'd read a review of her last exhibition in Asian Art News and had loved the paintings which illustrated it.

She has forty or more solo exhibitions behind her.

Her husband is a retired diplomat. I didn't at the time we got to the apartment in New, not Old Delhi, not far from the Bengali Bazaar, know this. But it would explain things later.

I was standing on the balcony or just inside it with pots of roses at my ankles when I saw this grey haired woman in a sari come round the corner and look up puzzled at the stranger looking down at her. She'd just been to a talk at the Japanese Embassy all about games children play and was astonished that Japanese children today play games identical to the ones she remembers but which the present generation know nothing about.

It was too hot for tea, she said, so we had cool drinks and chocolate biscuits. The wind had got into her hair and the red spot on her forehead was off centre. That was neither the weather nor the wind. She's naturally impatient for the next adventure and is always in a rush.

The flat is a muddle, well lived in, with a view through french doors over tiled roofs and other gardens. It's been the same view all their lives for, although they have wandered a bit, this is where they have always returned.

Half the walls are covered in her paintings and the other half in gods. It is impossible to know what colour the walls are as Jesus, Sai Baba, Ganesh and others overlap. If one god is cross, she says, she uses another. She has a gold plastic St Peters, with ROMA in raised letters on the base which, when you plug it in, lights up orange. There are some saint's feet in a frame, bits of wrapping cloth for another god's holy day, a photograph of her presenting Sai Baba with a picture she's done of him stuck in the corner of another of her portraits of him, drapery covering boxes and chairs, postcards, reproductions and many posters. She's eclectic. There's little sitting space unless you make some for yourself by pushing things aside, as the couches are stacked with framed pictures and between their backs and the walls are more, and under the seats yet more.

She became an artist by chance. And suddenly.

In Yugoslavia their greatest artist visited the Embassy one afternoon and said he'd show her how he painted his pictures. It looked so easy. The next day she bought paints and paper and painted a picture exactly as he'd shown her, and it WAS easy. So she did another and another. She didn't copy him, just his method. The things in the pictures were her own.

Belgium, their next posting, was just round the corner, and there she put on an exhibition of the great master's work in the Embassy. Everyone thought them wonderful.

Whether or not she let them into the deception immediately or later or if ever I'm not clear. But the little exhibition of masterpieces made her realise:

she could paint
she loved painting

everyone thought she had talent
being an artist was better than just being a diplomat's wife

Her career was launched.

That was a long time ago now, she said, she was running out of steam. Her looks and her energy contradicted this and when I said I thought this nonsense, it was a signal for her to disappear in to the back and bring out bundles of drawings done since her last show in Delhi a year ago.

"She liked you," Paresh said when we rejoined the patient Sikh in the car under the plane tree, "it's the first time she's ever given anyone a painting.

She gave me two. They are as joyful as a child who has just discovered paint but with a simplicity you only discover with age.

On my second last day Uma took us to the Gymkhana Club in Delhi and it was like stepping into the Raj. No faded elegance: but elegance. Old elegance.

THE RUMMY ROOM
THE BRIDGE ROOM
THE BLUE ROOM
THE COCKTAIL LOUNGE
THE WEST LOUNGE
THE KASHMIR BAR
THE WEST BAR

Each on a brass plate, engraved and polished for 365 days each of its one hundred years.

We ate in the DINING ROOM with slow waiters and unadventurous food.

FISH MORNAY
CHICKEN WITH PINEAPPLE
JACKET POTATOES
PANIR
WHITE RICE

And for dessert, a doughnut with a hole, floating in custard.

We sat afterwards for coffee in one of the alcoves which are trapped between the passageway off which the reception rooms lead and the great pillared, wooden floored BALLROOM. The pillars go up two floors and are sumptuous with white gloss enamel.

Hunting scenes, (oils), above the fireplaces and clusters of leather armchairs and sofas give a particular atmosphere. As do the members, caricatures often from Illustrated London News or someone's film fantasy of colonial life somewhere – except that these characters, as old as the Raj, were Indians: a nice twist.

In the lobby behind glass in mahogany frames were notices and lists and news.

DEFAULTERS
IMPORTANT NOTICES

Each sign engraved in brass.

We were: Uma, Carol and Anita Henderson, an old friend of Uma's, for a week in Delhi staying with Uma's cousin, and that night flying to Singapore on business.

I knew she was 36 and that her birthday is on February 17th: she remarked as we dropped Carol off at the India International Centre that it was two weeks younger than she was, reading from the commemorative stone at the entrance.

I know too that she is probably dying of cancer unless the operation she is soon to have stops it. It's the same as the one which killed my cousin Dorothy. She has a tiny part of her stomach left and almost no intestines. Those that remain have growths.

We spent the afternoon going from one doctor to another trying to get a prescription for a combined morphine and some other drug as she was in such pain.

We failed.

"No matter. I have a marvellous Sri Lankan doctor in Singapore, Lucian de Silva Karunaratne: I'll go to the hospital from the airport and get straight into bed."

A more fun-filled, bubbly person would be hard to imagine. All she can eat is potato and even that is a problem.

With a passion for Indian food it is a cruel sentence.

Her job, and it is a high powered one, is setting up fairs marketing swimwear – not bathing costumes but "haut couture leisure-wear and sporting accessories, that is poolside costume jewellery" – around the world.

She has a son of thirteen living in Canada with his grand parents – her ex-husband's parents.

She'd not seen him for year, not since last December when she took him on Christmas morning to Rio as a surprise.

She phones him twice a week and was looking forward to seeing him in seven or eight days.

A bright boy, he holds the junior Vancouver tennis title.

There was non-competitive tennis happening on old courts with nets you no longer see and which television makes one believe don't still exist: the kind which droop in the centre and which hang in bunched folds to the ground.

People were playing in all kinds of clumsy outfits and it didn't matter at all who won or who lost: there would be drinks later in the KASHMIR ROOM or the WEST BAR.

As we drove out, I saw notices pointing to

SQUASH COURTS
LAWN COURTS
HARD COURTS
And
COTTAGES.

And, as is the Delhi fashion, flowers are grouped in clusters of clay pots, not in the ground, arranged in geometric squares or circles, or in long meandering lines, taller plants in taller pots, stepping down to shorter ones with smaller flowers at the edges in pyramids.

It is a lovely way of being able to rearrange your garden in a day and store the old one somewhere hidden at the back.

And it means too that each garden is always in perfect bloom.

I watched as a man lovingly shook the head of each giant Chrysanthemum to get rid of the previous night's rain so that they would not sag.

Uma's cousin (or nephew, the relationships are often fluid) is part Sikh and said that of course they trim their hair today and cut their beards or they wouldn't see their ankles.

The five rules which our guide in Agra and Jaipur had listed are for safety in battle and for recognising another Sikh – the arm bracelet, the turban, the knife for protecting others and a comb. They are symbols of who you were, not tenets of faith. Sikhs believe in the equality of men and women, that God has no shape and cannot be contained in an idol and is everywhere so you can pray wherever you found yourself and whenever you liked. And there was only one God: this I saw cut into the marble of the new Hindu temple built by a businessman at VARANASI UNIVERSITY: THERE IS ONE GOD: HE HAS MANY NAMES.

The cousin said that the bloomers are not for chastity like Mormon flannel. Running through the undergrowth in a dhoti was dangerous and pants made them mobile.

And they didn't all carry knives – an embroidered sign was enough today.

The cousin was a Prakash. I didn't catch his first name. He had a PRESS badge and seemed eager to be somewhere else.

"And when is your beautiful son arriving?"

"On the nineteenth."

"I must see him."

He shook hands and vanished into the uncrowded exhibition leaving us with a hundred percent Sikh, Harilal Singh. "HARRY," he said. His face was all hollows and angles and disobedient hair. He had bright eyes and an even brighter turban. And dimples.

We couldn't stay long with Harry which was a pity as we had to get to the Press Conference.

We both had fake PRESS tickets.

Uma's cousin, Chookie and husband Prem had organised the international trade fair BROADCAST CABLE AND SATELLITE INDIA 97 and things were not going well.

"There's more rain inside than out," Chookie said when we found her in the damp basement smelling like a hundred dogs. The opening day had been washed out and businessmen had to wade barefoot over glistening carpets.

One company had already filed a suit for destroyed equipment.

"We were running all night with polythene trying to cover the stands. What can you be doing with a tiny piece of polythene in a hall this size?"

I said she could be comforted that 60 percent of the stalls had not been sold – an earlier complaint – as it meant that there were 60% less people who could sue them.

As a joke it fell flat. “I’m an optimist. I’m trying to bring some sunshine into your life.”

The immediate help she needed was for us to pretend to be journalists.

Uma already had a PRESS card when I met her at the Bengali Market. She’d written ASIAN NEWS, omitting the ART between the two to make it less specific.

At the Press Desk at the entrance, realising there would not be one for me, she’d said to the young girl that as we were in a hurry she shouldn’t waste time looking for it but make another one out. “We are late for the seminar.”

VERSTER she got right: DAILY NEWS came out as DELHI NEWS, (which I realised could sound exactly the same), so she began again.

There were just three of us in the audience facing three speakers at a table with a white cloth.

They had three assistants – a man to work the overhead projector and his assistant, a young woman who handed him the transparencies in the right order and a maintenance man. We were outnumbered two to one.

We were not daunted by the technicality of the subject and made notes for an hour. Nitán Atrolley discussed ownership of copyright and cross-media laws, regulatory mechanisms for broadcasting, how foreign exchange legislation hampered outside investment and attacked the Broadcast Bill for having no vision and the ineffectiveness of the intellectual property laws. “In short,” he concluded, “all those nitty gritty things which go into making good business.”

Others had by then filtered in, and, though hardly a crowd, we sounded like one when we clapped.

Then Mahesh Uppal talked. He spoke without notes – Nitán had read his paper – and was passionate and impressive. When satellite and cable TV came to India he wanted audiences to have the options of unlimited choice of programmes.

“The West, they say, is wall-to-wall Dallas. Do we want to be wall-to-wall film music?” We took his point and nodded agreement.

He argued against several ministries competing to control different parts of the same thing leading to the absurdity of one lot of workmen digging up a pavement one day to lay a television cable after another crew had filled in the hole after laying cables for telephones the day before.

He had the delicate hands of a dancer. When he held up his right hand to emphasise a point the fingers curved backwards from the palm forming a gentle arc from wrist to fingertips. His left hand made dainty patterns, each finger taking a different position. Otherwise he was fierce looking, eyes squeezing his nose which rested on an ambitious moustache.

The question I thought might sound naïve in the company of real journalists who had each argued the case for and against government control, I was forced to ask moments after the session broke up and we found ourselves in the hall surrounded by tables of food.

He came straight towards us: he must have sensed our earnestness in the room.

No, he said, he didn’t have a lobby to fight the government, he operated alone. “A lot of people feel like I do. We will win. We have to.”

He detected my South African accent immediately though he’d not been to the country, and said that our legislation was amongst the best in the world, second only to Australia.

We were both pleased when he apologised for deserting us as he wanted something to eat because we thought that sooner rather than later we would be unmasked.

Uma had dressed in a navy pinstripe suit with mandarin collar and trousers and outshone everyone. A twenty fifth wedding present from Ravin, from Lausanne. "Forty eight and my first designer outfit. It cost an arm and a leg but only when I took it off did I see the label and by then it was too late." VALENTINO.

If I'd known that SATELLITE 97 was planned as an outing I would have dressed in my other Delhi uniform, full black. The half black (black shirt and jacket and denims, the other Delhi uniform) I felt had let the side down. It was wall-to-wall suits.

It didn't as it turned out. Chookie had had news of our performance and was happy.

We fled like naughty children.

MANEKA REVEALS HER WAR AGAINST SNAKE CHARMERS: Mrs Maneka Gandhi, (widow of Sanjay), chairman of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has launched a crackdown on snake charmers by invoking the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act, which makes it illegal to capture snakes. Society recently raided the village of Molarband on the outskirts of New Delhi, home to about 450 families of snake charmers and more than 10,000 snakes, fining anyone found in possession of a reptile 50 rupees, and a maximum fine allowable under the Act. "Every year we let our snakes go and find new ones in the jungles," said village elder, Somvir, whose family have been charming snakes for generations. "Now our business is so bad we cannot care for the snakes we have, let alone ourselves."

In her brief stint as environment minister from 1989-90 Ms Gandhi launched a similar crackdown on dancing bears and performing monkeys, provoking protests from thousands of itinerant animal keepers.

ABOUT MAD COW: It was mentioned specifically that the Prophet had forbidden Muslims from consuming al Jallah. Al Jallah means any camel, cow, sheep, chicken, goat, or turkey etc. which has eaten al Izrah, which is the meat of other animals or dirty, filthy substances. It is prohibited to eat the flesh of al Jallah, drink its milk, eat its eggs. It was prescribed that either these infected animals are killed, or starved for three to 30 days in order to purge them of the contamination. A MUSLIM SCHOLAR.

WRESTLING CANCELLED. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the Asia Pacific Wrestling Championship scheduled for November 1 to 3 in Madras stands cancelled. For refunds call 826 4932

SEWING MACHINES DISTRIBUTED : Congress MLA and party's chief whip in the assembly, Deep Chand Bandhu distributed 33 sewing machines to as many widows in his constituency Wazirpur and appealed to institutions and "well-to-do" people to come forward with similar efforts to help needy persons earn their livelihood.

THANKSGIVING: belated thanks to Holy Spirit. Thou who make me see everything and shows me the way to reach my idea. I in this short dialogue wish want to thank You for everything and confirm once more that I never want to be separated from you. Helen.

MANY THANKS TO THE HOLY SPIRIT for all favours received, sorry for the delay.

FIRST TIME IN INDIA, Mayura relax massage, facial by cute beauticians. Contact Ravi 6416221.

FIRED UP : Bombay: A secret list of women ready to burn themselves to death if the Miss world beauty contest takes place in Bangalore has been drawn up anti-pageant protesters say.

NOBLE FOUNDATION: "Attainment of God in Four Weeks" by Dilijit, 10.30 am.

TEENAGER ASSAULTED BY IN-LAWS COMMITS SUICIDE

NEW DELHI : In yet another dowry-death case a 15 year old girl married to a 17 year old boy reportedly committed suicide by burning herself in her in-laws' house in Khaira village on Saturday.

Sangeets who belonged to Rewari in Haryana was married to a 17 year old boy about six months ago. According to the police her father had given her husband's family Rs. 10,000 in dowry. However, her husband's family allegedly pressurised her to get an additional Rs 1 lakh (a lakh = a hundred thousand) and a motorcycle from her parents. She was even assaulted for this repeatedly the police said.

On a complaint lodged by her parents, Jaffurpur police have registered a case of dowry death. They have arrested the girl's husband, Jitender, and his father Mehtab Singh, Jitender's mother and sister are absconding, the police added.

SAINT CONVENTION : The Varanasi unit of the Indo-Tibet Friendship Association has taken a pledge to launch a mass-awareness campaign in order to liberate Kailish Mansarovar from China. Under the first phase, a one day saint convention has been organised at Kabir Kirti Mandir on Tuesday.

LOST & FOUND : I have really lost my original Marksheet of High School. Mysore University, Roll No. 1123164, 1992. Founder may return. Misuse will be illegal. Smita Srivastava D/o Sh. Vijay Kumar, 11 89 H Sleeper Ground, Alambagh, Lucknow.

EYE CAMP : Under the auspices of the Dalmia Educational Trust Hari Fertilizers and Rotary Club, a free eye camp has been organised on Tuesday.

BALDNESS PROBLEM? First time in Bengal also Calcutta by American Hair Weaving Technique. Non-surgical, painless & no side effects. Can wash, shampoo and set style, treat like you own hair. 'Sreepal' Hairweaving Centre.

GANDHI'S ASHES MOVE : New Delhi : A hundred strong parliamentarian unit will guard the last remaining ashes of Mahatma Gandhi when they are handed over to his great grandson today.

The Rapid Action Force personnel would guard the ashes of the former freedom campaigner when they are released from a bank vault in the eastern city of Cuttack where they had remained unnoticed for almost half a century.

The urn is due to be handed over to Tushar Gandhi then put on public display before being taken to the pilgrimage town of Allahabad.

The ADDICTS GOLFING SOCIETY OF Western India will hold their 74th competition in the Willingdon Sports Club course on October 24th and 27th.

IN MEMORIAM: In affectionate memory of our dear departed MRS GRACE PRISCILLA BAYNES (called to be with Jesus, 13 October 1950) and the REVD. EDWARD AARON CHOWRRAYAPPAH BAYNES (called to be with JESUS 31 October 1969) from CHILDREN, GRANDCHILDREN AND GREAT GRANDCHILDREN.

SIYABALAPITIYA Violet, Wife of late Solomon (former Post Master), mother of Ranjith Siyabalapitiya (RoyalCeramics), Rohinie (Staff, St. Sebastians convent), Ajith, mother-in-law Nimal Perera (Noritake Porcelain Ltd), and Sirini, sister of Blasius, Mable, Grandmother of Rangie, Himashie, Sajith, Githni, Rasith, expired. Cortege leaves residence at 4pm on Saturday.

AGRA: Four sisters aged 12 to 24 were found hanging in a row in the stairwell of their home. In a letter the eldest wrote that she was worried about getting her sisters married as she had no job and no income to provide dowries.

LIFE SENTENCES: Bombay: A court convicted 11 Muslims of murder and sentenced them to life in prison for burning six Hindus to death during religious riots in Bombay three years ago in which 800 died.

NEW DELHI : Six Westerners are facing child sex charges in the eastern Indian resort state of Goa.

The police said an Australian, a Briton, a Frenchman, a New Zealander and a Swede had been charged in absentia with molesting your boys.

They were also charged with running a paedophile ring with jailed Anglo-Indian septuagenarian Freddy Albert Peats.

REBEL RIDER : New Delhi: nine year old Yashawani who rode 2,365 kilometres across the country on a motorcycle with her father on the pillion, has been warned she will be charged with riding under the legal age.

Great Eastern Hotel is having 15 Banquet Halls of different sizes capable of accommodating 16 to 600 persons.

BOY KILLS SELF : An 11 year old student, of Class VII at Vivekananda Institution, Howrah, Tamojit Ghosh, committed suicide by hanging himself from his room's ceiling. Police said Tamojit was upset because his parents did not let him attend a relative's wedding.

CHANGE OF NAME : I Mary Magdelene Gomes have become Keya Gomes, vide Affidavit before Alipore Notary Court. Mary Magdelene Gomes and Keya Gomes is the same and identical person.

BOMBAY TIMES : MUST SEE MUST DO: Seascape with Sharks and Dancer at Sophia Bhadha Auditorium.

WE ALWAYS KNEW THAT YOU CAN STAGGER THE WORLD IN A LOINCLOTH. 20% FESTIVE DISCOUNT ON SELECT UNDERGARMENTS.

FILM FESTIVAL ON THE THEME OF DISABILITY. Occasion : Celebration of Disabled Persons. Two shows. Only 100 seats. ENTRY FREE. Mode : First come first serve.

In the centenary year of the birth of Enid Blyton, the Bombay Public Library has organised a fancy dress show for children. Register names with K S Chetty, Assistant Librarian.

A DREAMER AND SHARER OF DREAMS. That is how Ebrahim Alkazi described the artist on the last day of the conference. He is in Uma's pantheon of greats and hearing him I could see why. THE RANGE OF HIS INFATUATIONS IS INFINITE WITH ADMIXTURES OF THE SACRED AND PROFANE: THE SUBLIME AND THE RIDICULOUS. He was old enough to use HE and HIM: he was above pandering to fashion or jargon. HOME IS HIS WORLD AND THE WHOLE WORLD IS HIS HOME. HOME IS HIS NATIVE LAND AND THE WORLD IS HIS ASPIRATION. Everything was in his head: he needed no notes, and everything he said seemed enclosed in quotation marks from his own books. HE NEVER ACCEPTS ANYTHING AT SECOND HAND. BY SUBMITTING HIMSELF TO THE HORROR OF HELL HE CAN GLIMPSE THE LIGHT. ARTISTS ARE THE TRUE KEEPERS OF THE SPIRIT: LONG MAY THEIR TINY LAMPS FLICKER.

The second speaker was a pixie man, Haku Shah, an artist who had just done a series of collages in homage to Gandhi. In one he'd used a print of my cover for Fatima's book: the original we gave to Sonia Gandhi at King's House one afternoon. He told us about his work with folk artists "in the deepest, deepest country." I love their description of a mural they did, "WE HAVE GIVEN FOOD TO THE WALL."

He came across an old woman who could neither read nor write but who told astonishing stories from the beginning of time. He asked if he could record her on tape. "He will carry my voice anywhere he likes? No I can't." Then she wanted to know if the tape would last forever and her voice go on even after her death. "No, I can't give my voice."

During teatime which followed, one of the visiting curators rushed up and congratulated me on my wonderful talk the day before. She thought that what I had said was "brilliant and illuminating" and she admired my eloquence. I smiled but was unable to speak.

"So you are NOT Julian Opie?" she said.

"I wish I were," I said, trying to calm her embarrassment.

Jeremy pointed him out to me later. He and Carol had been to his talk at The British Council.

- 1 he has hair
- 2 he is half my age
- 3 plump
- 4 pale to pallid
- 5 tall.

November and December are the marriage season. Whole facades of tiny hotels were draped in bright cloth, the names of the bride and groom picked out in styrene or lights depending on how rich the parents.

On the outskirts of Varanasi was a whole street, as far as the eye could see, tented in a criss-cross ceiling of tinsel.

In Jaipur, the night we were there, we lost count of the wedding processions, squeezing through the evening traffic, sometimes passing each other on different sides of the street. Each was the same, the groom (often with an infant brother dressed in miniature matching cream silk suit and miniature turban) on a horse, a band of noisy trumpets and drums, the local Travoltas in the space roped off by the two lines of tower lights on the heads of tiny boys in soldier suits with tinsel braid and epaulettes and finally the generator on wheels with its loud speakers and the party of friends.

“Jai was to travel for my wedding to Cooch Behar with a retinue of about forty nobles, each of whom would be bringing his own servants,” writes Gayatri Devi. “Besides the wedding party, all the dignitaries in the town had to be invited to a meal, and special food had to be sent out to the Brahmins, the poor and the prisoners, as well as the household guards and our staff.

“As the date of the wedding drew nearer I started to receive magnificent presents. My favourite was a beautiful black Bentley from the Nawab of Bhopal. When I first saw it being driven through the town, I assumed that it was for the Nawab’s personal use during his stay at Cooch Behar. When he formally presented it to me, he asked tentatively whether I really liked it or whether, perhaps, I might prefer a piece of jewellery. Two other exciting presents were a two-seater Packard from one of the nobles of Jaipur and a house in Mussoorie, in the foothills of the Himalayas, from my Baroda grandmother. Against these, the rest of the presents, marvellous as they were, seemed less impressive – mostly jewellery. My own family gave me a set of rubies, both specially ordered from Chimanlal Manchand a famous Bombay jeweller. The jewellery included a clip-on nose-ring, an ingenious compromise because girls were expected to wear a nose-ring after they were married, but my nose wasn’t pierced to accommodate an ordinary one. Jai saved his present of a diamond necklace until after we were married. Three days before the marriage ceremony, I had to make the correct preparations. I had to bathe in perfumed oils and rub my skin with turmeric paste to make it more beautiful. I had to perform the prescribed devotions and prayers, and after that to fast for the last twenty-four hours.

“Jai was due to arrive in the morning and was to be installed at a guest-house with his party. The first indication that I had of his arrival was when I heard the firing of the nineteen-gun salute.

“Soon after Jai’s arrival the customary presents from the groom to the bride were brought in procession to the palace where they were ceremoniously laid out in the durbar hall. They consisted of the traditional Rajputana jewellery and ornaments for a bride and added to that, ten or twelve sets of clothes, also indicated by custom, and trays and trays of dried fruits, nuts, raisins, and other auspicious food.

“For days the palace had been buzzing with activity as all the traditional wedding finery was brought out and all the proper things assembled. There was music everywhere starting at daybreak, continuing on into the afternoon, coming to a climax in the evening when the actual marriage was consecrated.

“I went through the business of being dressed and decorated with jewels. Finally my forehead was decorated with sandalwood paste and I was ready.

“Suddenly the cannons boomed out and the band started to play in welcome to Jai. This meant that the bridegroom’s procession was at the gates of the palace and in a flash all my companions dashed off to see his arrival. First some messengers would be walking down the long drive, next a troupe of dancing girls, then a procession of forty elephants and many horses, behind them bands and finally the bridegroom followed by his guests, the Jaipur nobles and the rest of his retinue.

“As Jai crossed the threshold, he raised his sword to touch the lintel with it as a sign that he came as a bridegroom. He was then received by the palace ladies, family members and wives of noblemen, courtiers and visiting friends in the durbar hall. They held silver trays containing the proper offerings, kumkum, turmeric, a coconut, chillies and other spices, and a small light to signify the sacred fire. They waved the trays slowly back and forth in front of Jai chanting prayers.

“Against the pervasive background of the music and of the priest chanting the ceremony of giving the bride away took place. But before that as was the custom in Cooch Behar, Jai and I exchanged garlands. The wedding pavilion or mandap, as it is traditionally called, had been set up in the main courtyard.”

Just inside the entrance to the Jaipur Ashok, an Indian Tourist Board Government Hotel, a pavilion had been set up and a priest was already there when we arrived.

Later it was the arrival of the groom. And as we left for the City Palace, we saw the bride. She was laden with much embroidered cloth with jewels round her head and surrounded by many older and younger men and women who kept clutching at her gently as if they were afraid she might fall over.

The stairs were decorated too, the bannisters draped with scallops of red and cream flowers threaded on cotton and in the corners of each tread, an identical pattern of petals. The air was heavy with Frangipani.

When we came back three hours later, she and the groom were sitting under the canopy receiving guests who queued down the passage to wish them well.

From the bedroom window I looked down onto the garden round the pool where tables were set with food and where people had already begun eating.

**MATRIMONIALS: THE HINDUSTAN TIMES: NEW DELHI:
GROOMS WANTED FOR:**

Homely teachress.

Slim beautiful convented girl.

Haryana Government teacher, brother Chartered Accountant.

A suitable match for legally divorced Hindu Jat, 24, twenty one and a half years daughter, permanent in Netherlands, early marriage in Delhi. Wanted to start business in Delhi.

Medico preferred. MBBS girl 28/148lbs smart, adjustable in practice, income five figures.

Dr., Gynaecologist, slim, tall, beautiful, dusky complexion, convent educated girl, no caste bar. Early marriage. Doctors preferred.

Suitable match for BSc Biology, beautiful fair complexion, no dowry.

Convented, graduate daughter, 28/165. Clean shaven match preferred from respectable family. Send returnable full sized photograph.

Charming Brahmin girl BE Electronics. Sub-caste no bar.

Sihk girl. In prestigious public school, previous marriage broke immediately, due to non-consummation, brother clean-shaven.

Slim beautiful Delhite, father was renowned doctor.

Beautiful slim, Hindu girl, US Citizen, 39 years, looks much younger, never married, invites correspondence from highly educated, handsome professionals, willing to settle in USA.

Divorcee girl, separated after two weeks.

Jat Sikh seeking impressive, handsome, well-educated, good natured groom, willing to settle in Canada, for unmarried daughter, caste, creed, no bar, personal merits, Indian family values, only consideration.

Beautiful boarding-school educated, polished, seeks businessman professional up to 38 years, only brief marriage annulled.

Boy must be Hindi-speaking, vegetarian and teetotaller.

Exceptionally beautiful, very fair sharp-featured slim girl.

Innocent divorcee, marriage lasted only 4 weeks.

Wanted handsome doctor. Beautiful sharp featured U S citizen.

Qualified scholar uses glasses.

Intelligent wheatish Punjabi Brahmin.

BRIDES WANTED FOR:

Handsome boy, well educated, financially sound, clean shaven.

Teetotaller, vegetarian, Punjabi boy.

Handsome clean shaven Sikh CA boy from very affluent family.

Chartered accountant clean shaven, old established family, 1 daughter, living with ex spouse.

Vegetarian own house teacher preferred.

Wanted beautiful slim educated homely girl below 23 for 25/177 very smart B. Comm

Vegetarian non-smoking, non-drinking, clothing ready-made business, income good five figures. Own house/car properties in Delhi.

Beautiful match for Punjabi boy, bank stenographer.

Widow/divorcee for handsome bank officer, divorcee aged 55, looking young, good property.

Homely girl for Punjabi millionaire boy, slightly handicapped, caste no bar, no dowry.

Wanted suitable match for Trikha boy aged 25 own motor parts shop earning five figures.

Airforce doctor teetotaller seeks very fair beautiful preferably Delhite medico.

Handsome strong-built business boy wants educated girl round 25.

Alliance for Sikh orthopaedic surgeon 37 income high five figures owns own nursing home. (Singh was adopted by Sikhs as a surname and means lion, and is the name of the Rajput caste, the Maharjas. Not all Sikhs are Singhs, not all Singhs are Sikhs. Only one percent of Indians are Sikhs.)

Each day Uma would hire a car. And each day the driver happened to be a Sikh and only once the same one. We took an autotaxi once when our driver had gone to lunch and we needed to get to the Museum of Modern Art.

This man too was a Sikh. He was talkative, charming and told us he was the best taxi in Delhi.

The “best man in the world,” however, was Nelson Mandela.

He pulled a school jotter from under the seat. It was filled with messages from people he’d driven. Before starting our ride he made me read, out loud, all the tributes from page one to the end.

The foreign language ones I skipped. I did the English and French. He knew the sequence by heart and was quick to take over when the Russian came up. He read and translated. “ON THE WHOLE INDIANS CANNOT BE TRUSTED,” wrote someone from England, “BUT HERE IS A MAN I WOULD ENTRUST WITH MY LIFE.”

“I could be an ambassador for the world,” he said, “but I have to drive this taxi.”

To get me to the airport to catch the plane to Bombay the next afternoon, Uma suggested I take over her car and arranged a price with the driver, yet another Sikh.

The Sikh was younger than his car. One door had no handle, just a stump, the boot flapped like a loose sole on a shoe and the windscreen wipers had been amputated.

He was happy to wait from two to four at the ashram while I packed and said my good-byes.

The packing was quick, the farewells could not be hurried as I had to spend time with each of the people and have something to eat and cups of spiced tea.

Earlier at Nathu’s Pastry Shop – “sandwiches, patties, kababs, pizza, burgers, cheese, salads, bread,” – I’d bought sweetmeats for the untouchable children who spent each day at the ashram, round yellow balls like headless canaries, caramel squares covered with silver leaf, chocolate blobs and flat coconut cakes.

They were on the top floor roof with Vijay and Bina who run the classes. They live in one of the rooms like outhouses along one side where each night I’d eaten with them.

Vijay said that the next time I came he would take me to the mountains to hidden temples and to holy men. He reminded me to remind him to give me some Holy Water: I forgot in the confusion of leaving and he didn’t remember.

I wasn’t certain about the Water when he’d offered it that night before. Would I be able to take it on the plane? “They can’t stop you.” His Water was taken from the source. “Ganga Water very pure. It keeps forever. When someone is dying you put three drops in their mouth and they go straight to heaven.”

I said I needed some.

In the City Palace in Jaipur are two silver urns as tall as a person and as wide, which the Maharaja had made to take on the ship to England when he went for King George V's coronation. "Before he boarded his ship at Bombay, gifts of gold, silver, and silk were thrown into the harbour to propitiate the sea. The ship itself was a brand-new, specially chartered P & O Liner which had then been re-designed to meet his particular requirements. These included a room consecrated as a temple for his deity. The ship was loaded with specially prepared foods, all cooked in the prescribed way and water from the Ganges was carried onboard in huge silver pots specially made for the occasion. The Maharaja and retinue were away in England for six months and occupied three houses in Kensington. During this time Ganges water was regularly sent to them from India." A Princess remembers, Gayatri Devi.

A lawyer, Vijay had, twenty years earlier, given up practising, to devote his life to serving others. At the ashram he had met Bina who had already been there for five years.

Each morning, when the forty or so children arrive from the untouchable settlement which spreads from the ashram boundary, they fetch their wooden cases from a storeroom and begin spinning. (They are paid, not in money, but in books, clothing and in food. Their parents are street sweepers and toilet cleaners – jobs too disgusting and menial for anyone else, reserved in a system of caste now outlawed but still alive. Those in higher castes believed that touching them would cause them contamination.)

And each must spin a hundred metres of thread before classes begin. Perhaps an education will allow this young generation to escape their bondage?

On my second day Bina initiated me into spinning.

Like throwing a pot it is a miracle to look at, impossible to do.

But she has patience and skill – it was she who taught Ben Kingsley for his imitation of Gandhi, a film she'd not seen and in which she had no interest. But she did have snapshots of the stars and of Attenborough with her at the ashram. (Kingsley sent an iced cake for the children).

You begin on a spindle and matriculate on the wheel.

I'd come that afternoon to return the spindle. My failure to grasp the technique was disappointing: the handlength of thread I once and once only managed to make, was entwined and at the base and impossible to unravel. "You must keep it," she said, "you must practice." She gave me a dozen long sausages of cotton in a brown paper roll to take home.

We sat in the cooling winter sun sipping milky tea while Vijay told me of his grandfather who had died at a hundred and six.

He lived high in the mountains and from time to time took the train to Delhi. On what was to be his last trip he'd gone with his daughter-in-law.

As they were separated, she in a women's compartment, he in the men's, she'd asked two people they'd met on the platform to keep an eye on him.

During the journey the old man had called the two young men over and told them that the time had come for him to die. They were made to promise they would perform the ceremonies and prepare the body but were not to say a word to the daughter-in-law until they reached Delhi.

Within half an hour he was dead.

They kept their word.

At Delhi they put the body on a chair and carried him through the crowds, but were stopped at the exit.

Vijay's father had connections with the police and after a telephone call, they were allowed to continue. "Such things happen. You know when the moment has come and you leave."

Downstairs I said goodbye to Ramesh and Swati. Only saints would conceive of going to one of the most desolate parts of Rajasthan, buying some land with their own money and beginning a school and a hospital and a home for abandoned cattle.

"The people are so ignorant," Swati said, "they don't know the name of the Prime Minister or of God." And so poor they dress in pieces of rag in summer and wrap a sheet for protection in winter. Those who can find work in a factory may earn twenty rupees a day – less than three rand.

Ramesh, a professor of Sanskrit, has taken a year's study leave. When he is not building he is charming donations from the rich. "Next time we'll drive there.

As cows are sacred, you cannot kill those who have reached the end of their productive lives. "People of course do, but they must do it secretly." His plan is for a shelter – already there is space for twenty. He will show the people how the manure can be used to generate gas which can drive a generator for electricity or heating for water and cooking.

My departure could not, for ceremony, match Fatima's which was like a state occasion. All through the afternoon children and grown ups would come onto the closed-in verandah to sit a while with her, exchange some words, wish her well and leave. Some bent and touched her feet.

And then the moment itself. She climbed into the white car, the back illuminated so she gleamed like a goddess in the darkness, and then, waving gently, the car pulled off slowly, leaving the little group with praying hands alone in the dark.

Before she'd reached the gates, the light went off and she vanished.

My farewell was equally warm. I was now a member of the ashram. It was my home whenever I came back to Delhi: a promise I had to make before leaving.

I knew when my Sikh handed me a rose he'd picked in the ashram garden – "this is for you" – that he was preparing to extort more money. I knew too that he'd been drinking for the bottle of AMBASSADOR WHISKY on the front seat was less full than earlier. I had not expected it so soon.

In my mind I'd already decided to give him an extra hundred as he had been patient during the wait. And I'd already put the note into my top pocket.

"But we'd agreed in Delhi on four hundred," I said, knowing this was a game both of us were playing and which we both knew he had already won, "and we'd agreed to the delay." I did not mind about losing. But it was my turn to be silent for the next few blocks.

"OK five hundred," I said.

He aimed the car at the sunset and said nothing for two blocks.

Then we made peace. He became chatty again, the sulking was over.

Red lights were a challenge which made him speed up. He crossed the double yellow lines and rode on the wrong side of the double highway.

Every so often, no matter what speed, he would open his door and spit on the tarmac.

Once we'd reached the ring road, the journey was all but over. He found me a porter and we parted on a good note. I was happy: he was happy.

Indira Gandhi the prime minister I admired: Indira Gandhi the airport is in another league. It could be one of the designs they didn't accept for the old Jan Smuts.

But there was something which I loved: trapped between the luggage carousels were pots of plants which were so unusual that I took a dozen pictures. (I'd only later seen the notices at this and at all other airports that photographs anywhere even in the aircraft are forbidden).

The pictures have since become paintings: DELHI VASES: mournful aspidistras in tiered glazed pots with chunky handles.

A plastic sign said that MR MONNET, (Monnet with two Ns), was the author. He is the man who did many of the formal gardens in Delhi: traffic islands and circles are his tour de force.

Mr Monnet has his rival in Bombay. I didn't see his name but he's steeped in the French tradition of doing things with plants they didn't know they could do. Between Bombay Domestic and Bombay International is a coach ride of twenty minutes. Down the centre of the main road is an island of sculpted privet.

It is knee high, as flat and as crisp as a mattress and narrow and long. It surely must be clipped each day for not a random leaf destroys its smoothness.

Then suddenly this green island bursts into pattern as if square boxes have been thrown on top: perfect geometry: crisp right angles.

There is an order. They have not been scattered at random. Then suddenly it ends and the mattress is smooth for a while. Then the boxes begin, and this time they are all over the place as if they were in a hurry and just threw them down.

Then more flatness and more boxes and then suddenly a zig-zag.

Then it is flat. Boxes. Zig-zags, and then, without warning it ends in a flourish of sculpted waves. What a show. A film strip, a changing sequence of images rushing past the window, never allowing you to guess the next surprise.

Without warning, the island narrowed to a point. We turned right. On the left from the highway on stilts, a sign three storeys high:

MARRIAGES ARE MADE IN HEAVEN BUT THEY ARE BEST CONSUMMATED AT THE POOLSIDE: CENTAUR HOTEL.

I see LA KOZY MANSION and a Deco block LOVELY HOUSE. There is GODA'S PEOPLIZED TRANSPORT, ANYTIME MONEY at a shop in Laburnum Road and takeaway pizzas whose DELIVERIES ARE FASTER THAN CURTLY AMBROSE.

A painted tiger spans the road: BOYS GROW UP TO BE MEN, TIGERS GROW UP TO BE RUGS.

Some paragraphs in the paper tell more. "Due to increasing demand for tiger parts for traditional Chinese medicine in China and Hong Kong, widespread poaching for its bones, skin, teeth, penises and nails takes place. One or two tigers are being killed every day."

On the same page are other problems. "TRAFFIC PANIC SITUATION: 275 cars are added each day to Bombay. There are 80,000 taxis."

Bombay is India's richest city and its most industrialised. The airport is the busiest, the seaport takes half the country's foreign trade. Nariman Point on the curve of Back Bay has the country's tallest buildings. Bombay is the capital of Maharashtra State. On its northern border begins Madhya Pradesh, the largest state, and further up is Uttar Pradesh, with the biggest population which, were it a country, would be in the world's top ten.

And Bombay is the film capital: FILMISTAN STUDIOS, MEHBOOB STUDIOS, NATRAJ STUDIOS and nine or more smaller ones make the great Indian spectacles. One full length film on average rolls out of the studios each day: Hollywood in its youth managed three a week.

Half the films made in India come from here. Calcutta is the arthouse capital, Madras does musicals and family films.

Film came early to India. A century and a couple of years ago, just half a year after the Lumiere brothers introduced their moving pictures to Paris, the first film was shown in Bombay. At Watson's Hotel, now gone, a façade of iron doyleys and a filigree pavilion on the top, the programme, just short of an hour, had six films. Each was seventeen metres long and shown on a transparent screen with a hand operated projector. THE MARVEL OF THE CENTURY, THE WONDER OF THE WORLD, LIVING PHOTOGRAPHIC PICTURES IN LIFE-SIZED REPRODUCTIONS. The programme repeated four times a day at one rupee a ticket began with a documentary about film and then came THE ARRIVAL OF A TRAIN, THE SEA BATH, A DEMOLITION, LEAVING THE FACTORY, LADIES AND SOLDIERS ON WHEELS. Some of these you can still see any day of the week at the Musee d'Orsay in Paris.

After that first week of July 1896, with daily changes of programme, the cinematograph moved to another temporary home at the Novelty Theatre. Audiences wanted more for their money and six short pieces became twelve and then twenty four. The addiction was permanent. As happened in the Jaipur circus, the audience sat in silent wonder till the end and then broke into a frenzy of applause.

Within a year improvised cinema houses had sprung up in halls and tents and theatres and in two years one could see local events, a train arriving at Bombay Station and horse racing at Poona.

By the new century films had become an ambitious two thousand metres. PASSION PLAY, the story of Jesus which gripped Hindus as well as Christians, was six hundred times longer than the ARRIVAL OF A TRAIN. It set the tone for the action mix of Bombay films with miracles, arrests, death, suffering, love, drama, torture, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension, crowd scenes and spectacle.

We pass cinemas on the way, each with cut-out hoardings painted with skill by the same artists who make standing figures as tall as city blocks for political rallies – RAJA KI AAYEGI BAARAT in Hindi at the New Excelsior: RETURN OF THE JEWEL THIEF, at Dreamland (3 shows daily) and at Capitol, 4: ZORDAAR, "music and emotions": DILJALE in its "3rd. Mega-hit week with the City's top entertainer, the love story of a terrorist": BROKEN ARROW, John Travolta: THE USUAL SUSPECTS, 9th week, "it has become a veritable status symbol, and seeing it on video will give zero impact, but on the giant Sterling screen with the acoustic perfection of Dolby Sound you will realise why this has become the most talked about movie of the year...": MISSION IMPOSSIBLE and CASINO, at "a totally renovated entertainment centre" with a "heavy rush on plans." Centralplaza. "See what Sharon Stone can show. Adults."

The bus swings left and MUMBAI INTERNATIONAL: TERMINAL 2B appears.

“OPEN EVERY HOURS” the carpark sign tells us. THE GRAND TOURIST BUS COMPANY, sleek and streamlined. GREAT TOURS, a name from a Boy’s Own adventure, rainbow paint on the side and back, square and panelled, not young, with roof-rack and luggage tied with leather and rope, a hand-lettered address 10 GURU NIWAS, SANTA CRUZ WEST, BOMBAY 54.

Durban is eight and a half hours away across the Arabian Sea which slips into the Indian Ocean: Sri Lanka is three hours south, the “teardrop” just fallen from the tip of India.

Indian time and Sri Lankan is three and a HALF hours different. Can there be anywhere else where the half hour is on the hour and the hour on the half?

This is like no other place: how is it possible not to fall in love?

From the air Sri Lanka is oblong rice fields of mud of different colours and palms forever and ever. Without coconuts there would be no Sri Lanka. The Daily News stockmarket, lists SHARES, and lower down, COCONUTS.

But coconuts were not on the menu at the hotel. I’d arrived for the Italian theme night: a pasta buffet and a local guitarist singing O SOLE MIO and other songs, until his break, and then WHERE HAVE ALL THE FLOWERS GONE and Dylan medley threaded round BLOWING IN THE WIND.

My waiter wanted to know how to pronounce Boemfontein: “that’s where the cricket is.” He’d seen gumboot dancing and wild animals on television on Miss World: Miss Sri Lanka had done well. “It’s difficult to say,” he said in perfect English. I would have thought that anything was easy for people who could slip their tongues over names like MALWATHUHIRIPITAYA and SIVURULUMULLA.

At breakfast on the high terrace above wild waves and an ancient railway line next to the rocks, I knew I’d arrived: mango juice, red bananas, pawpaw as long as a foot, soft pink rice cakes shaped into diamonds, prawn curry, rice hoppers, battys and doughnuts which had spent time in the company of raw onions, small Danish pastries and coffee. Black crows dive bombed the table of a Lancashire couple, he tattooed, she improbably blonde, snatching fruit skins and sachets of sugar.

On my other side German honeymooners were already icecream pink from yesterday’s sun.

Neither couple noticed the liveried man with his handpainted sign, ELEPHANT RIDES ON THE BEACH, 11 AND 3.

I was adopted by Ronald as I set foot outside the hotel gates. Retrenched when his German factory closed because of the troubles, he was improvising work wherever he found someone to pay him.

“Taxi?”

“I’m walking.”

“Group? Arrange truck for Temple Dancing.”

“I’m by myself.”

“Tour guide?”

I said no but by the end of the road he'd decided and I knew it was pointless to disagree.

A little beyond St. Anthony's, his church, we took a back lane to a Buddhist temple where he showed me the holy tree enmeshed in a spider-web of string, cloth flags and plastic pennants. A row of twenty eight identical white carved, cross legged Buddhas sat in a line. “They have twenty eight different expressions,” he said. It needed trained eyes to see.

The temple murals were the work of one man, his brush preserved as a relic in the hostel next door where the monks “lived but didn't work.” It had taken him one year and nine months and he'd used housepaint.

Ronald knew his way around, and, upstairs turned on the lights.

A concrete Buddha as long as the room reclined on a daybed draped in patterned painted cloth. The bed at the head side became an elephant, at the other a concrete roll dimpled with folds. His halo was a tray, outlined in torch globes. He had blue curls: his couch had three stuffed satin pillows. Behind, the wall was a frieze of ruched cinema curtains. His secretary, a much smaller man, our size in fact but looking smaller, stood waiting for orders. His thumb, once broken, had been reglued.

“Lord Buddha used to be able to turn himself invisible. It isn't easy today. Only Sai Baba can do it.”

On the three sides of the room which weren't painted curtains, was the story of Buddha: the Kandy procession which was three hours long with the seven hundred kings who knew about making dams and the secrets of plumbing: the Tooth being brought from India to be encased in gold in Kandy: the conversion of the King's son whilst out hunting: another hunting scene, taken from a Greek vase of the King's daughter, a Sri Lankan Diana being converted during the hunt: the bringing of the Tree: the monks writing the holy story on strips of palm frond which they had ironed.

“You may take photographs,” he said. He'd got the monks' permission. It was to cost me three hundred rupees but I didn't know it then.

Downstairs he showed me the Buddha in Burmese carrara, three smaller ones behind lace curtains, and the floor mats of sewn cloth flowers, soft sculpture funeral wreaths. The floor was a mosaic of discarded Delft tiles and Willow Pattern fragments.

“Jose Rizal, Physician, Man of Letters, Patriot, Martyr and National Hero of the Phillipines, visited Colombo four times between 1882 and 1896 during his trips to Europe. He lodged at the GRAND ORIENTAL HOTEL on 18 May 1882.

“Rizal admired Colombo's beautiful buildings, barracks, temples, treelined streets, Botanic Gardens and Museum. After visiting a hospital he wrote, ‘no odour of sickness, no dirt, nothing that reminds me of illness, just by entering it, one felt half-cured.’ Impressed by what he saw he remarked ‘Colombo is more beautiful, smart and elegant than Singapore, Point Galle and Madrid.’ ”

DR JOSE MERCARDO RIZAL ALONZO (1861 – 1896)

This legend hangs in the foyer of the hotel, Colombo's oldest.

When Alonzo was born, the hotel was already thirty of more years old. It was built during Williams' reign.

The rooms are large enough for your team of servant to discuss the day's business and still leave space for your clothes to be spread out.

The passages are six people wide.

The furniture is carved mahogany, some, today desecrated with paint. Everywhere is darkness, light kept at bay by brown curtains draped and baubled.

In the lift with its brass expanding doors and diamond shaped holes, one of the new guests remarked, perhaps about the carpet with its flowers worn to hessian, perhaps about the blistering plaster, perhaps about some modern panelling, “decaying splendour,” to his wife as they left on the first floor. “Well, well, well, I see we have a real little Wordsworth with us,” a woman who had also got in at the bottom said to me, the liftman and waiter with a tray of highballs with Japanese umbrellas.

Alonzo’s portrait on one of the oak veneer columns is the past, a head and shoulders photograph of Mrs Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga opposite is the present.

She rejects labels of a political dynasty preferring to call it “the family business.” She grew up breathing the air of politics, the only daughter of a prime minister father. At fourteen he was assassinated, and her mother, a political novice, “not trained like my father,” took over. She was the first woman head of government, and the young girl sensed a future was being shaped for her.

As a student in Paris, the 1968 uprising was her baptism, a moment of “exhilaration.”

Later she married Sri Lanka’s most popular film star, turned politician, and her apprenticeship in the business began.

“Maoists? Certainly not. Radicals, yes. I was proud to be a socialist.” She had no time for the communists because of their “lack of human freedom.”

When he too was assassinated she fled with her two small children to London where she continued her university studies. Later she was persuaded back into politics, becoming the leader of the breakaway party the two of them had started, becoming its leader and later Sri Lankan President.

As I sat in the lounge the Phillipine Martyr and the President both looked at me, but missed each other’s eyes.

The lounge was an Axminster platform divided with screens into smaller compartments with clusters of chairs and coffee tables, and studded with palms in pots painted terra cotta red. Round me the pictures were watercolour prints of Greek statues, a strange choice but no stranger than the television set on a swivel arm from one of the columns broadcasting American CHART STOPPERS. In the paper which I found under my door when I woke at ten, I noticed an advertisement.

THE GRAND ORIENTAL HOTEL PRESENTS, AFTERNOON SPICE, 40 PERCENT DISCOUNT ON ALL ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES. THE TAPROBANE LOUNGE, MONDAY TO SATURDAY, 12 – 2.

It was then I saw the mahogany sign at shoulder height, on a bathplug chain, TAPROBANE LOUNGE, mahogany and gold. It was eleven. It was Sunday.

Sunday papers are always a cocktail of serious stuff and silliness.

CYRIL GARDINER: I just cannot get over the fact that Cyril is no more. I feel as if I have lost a brother for such was Cyril to me. As a photographer in 1957 I had taken pictures of his Mavis before she exchanged vows of marital fidelity with him. From the time I presented him with those pictures, a bond between us was formed, and when I took the last pictures of him and his son Sanjeeva with Arthur C Clark shortly before his demise, that bond was strengthened even more. For me it was an opportunity and an honour to have photographed our great space scientist with my dear friend and his son for posterity. Now it is history. So

much so that when I was honoured by the Rolleiflex Camera manufacturers it was Cyril Gardiner himself who suggested I celebrate the occasion with a party which he volunteered to host at the Galle Face hotel, in which as Chairman, he took a great pride. "I grieve for thee, my brother Cyril. Very pleasant has thou been to me. Thy love for me was wonderful, passing the love of women." L E Samararatne.

CALLING ALL SAI DEVOTEES.
 PILGRIMAGE TO PUTTAPARTHY
 10 DAYS TOUR
 TO TAKE PART IN
 BHAGAVAN SRI
 SATHYA SAI BABA'S
 BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS
 ALSO VISITING BANGALORE, TRICHY & MADRAS
 MAKE YOUR RESERVATION NOW!
 ONLY FEW SEATS AVAILABLE
 LANKA LINK TRAVELS

Sri Lankan names I notice tell a lot about their mixed history and connections, the English, the Portuguese, the Dutch. And others more recent.

WASAMATHA PERERA DA SILVA
 CALVIN OZNI ROBIN FONESKA
 KOLITHA PYUMI WIJEKOON
 FLORA MONTEIRO
 CELINE GRACY LONAN VARGHESE
 PARIKH AARON MOHAN WICKREMARATNE
 FELICITATIONTO KALUWITHARANA
 SERGIO RAGHAVAN
 URSULA MEERA SUZUKI

FATHER AND SON IN FATAL CRASH.
 (Chilaw special correspondent)

A man who tried to prevent his drunken son beating his wife, was attacked by his son with an iron rod and died at the Colombo National Hospital.

The Chilaw Additional District Sudath N Gopallawa returned a verdict of homicide on the death of Don Elaris Appuhamy of Wairankattuwa, Rajakadauwa.

5th week SAVOY
 ITS TOO HOT TO HANDLE, JUST WATCH, DON'T TOUCH
 "HARD ROCK"
 (THE SEX ZOMBIES)
 STRICTLY FOR ADULTS
 X CERTIFICATE

Antiques Sale
 Girl Guide Headquarters
 Marcus Fernando Mawatha
 Colmbo.

FROM TOMORROW
 SAVOY WELLAWATTE
 "A FEW MOMENTS OF Love is better than a life time without it"
 THE MOST EROTIC ADVENTURE OF THE YEAR

A CENTURY OF PASSION UNLEASHED
 KHAJURAHO THE SEX TEMPLE
 (Under 18 not permitted)
 (SHOWS WILL COMMENCE AS SOON AS THE HOUSE IS FULL)

When I'd arrived at 4 am, the temperature was already 30 degrees. People were sleeping on the pavements, saris rolled for a headrest, blankets spread, families, people on their own, in doorways, or in the open. A young boy was skateboarding. A man in a lungi, crouched under a fire hydrant was bathing. The taxi was stopped twice at roadblocks, I and the driver asked to get out of the car, were questioned, the boot opened, baggage searched and papers checked. Efficient, courteous, quick.

Early morning had been in darkness. When I stepped outside at 3, with the sun still high, I saw the hotel for the first time.

Fluted Doric columns as solid as a pyramid and looking nearly as old greet you at the entrance set at corner angle. From it an arcade, white enamelled stucco with a columns divides the building from the road, climbs gently up the shallow hill. The waters of the harbour almost lap around the hotel's feet and from the upstairs rooms you are eyelevel with funnels and cranes.

Notices everywhere tell you that "because of the military situation, no photography is permitted."

Up the road, down the next and across a square I came to a cast iron drinking fountain which was young when the hotel was already in its middle age. Tiers of cupids supported little children holding things which spouted water. Glasgow 1886, embossed lettering on one of the scrolls at the base read.

From the opposite corner came a young elephant, as glossy and as black as the wet metal strolled towards me. He was carrying a neat bundle of green leaves the colour of laurel, a take-home lunch.

The temple was so encrusted in carving that it would have taken a hundred men with all their fingers a whole day to have counted the figures. Inside it was a village of smaller and larger shrines, some with domes, all dark, lit by candles and clay lamps, and engulfed in smoke which solidified into white shafts of sunlight. Penitents crowded round their favourite gods, or sprawled on the floor, or lay prostrate, or bent themselves double. Some were just standing, silent or talking, while holy men rushed with fire and burning camphor through the chapels and in circles round the relics and gods, and the air was sweet with frangipani and other flowers, and the hot smell of ripe fruits and marigolds. You could buy coconuts from piles stacked near the doors to crack open and offer to the deities, or have a dab of ash placed on your forehead. Or buy a garland of fresh jasmine threaded on cotton. Or a folded paper sachet of vermilion powder. Rice crunched on the marble under our feet. It was dark and busy and mysterious and busy and mysterious and welcoming. Nobody asked for money: nobody said you couldn't take photographs.

Outside in the street, a short street, a side street between two bigger ones, though even they were narrow, for Colombo seems to be only side streets, a man was charming a snake from a basket. But the show didn't start until he'd collected enough from the audience.

Further along a youth fell in step beside me and asked if I wanted a boy or a girl. No I said.

"A woman?"

"No."

"A man?" After giving me a price, he gave up and took from his bag a sheet of stamps with flowers on them.

"No," I said, again.

The treasure of the day was happening on a house which has a branch of the JAIPUR FOOT: THE SELF HELP SOCIETY. It shares the premises with the HOUSEWIVES SOCIETY OF Colombo.

The Jaipur Foot had entered my mythology a few years back when BBC World had a series of three minute fillers called Earth File. A favourite told the story of an inventor who had sculpted a rough and ready artificial foot from discarded foam plastic and tyre rubber with a knife improvised from a sharpened hacksaw blade. Once it was Duluxed brown it looked and felt not unlike a real foot. And it was solid enough to take the body's weight, yet flexible enough to grip the ground like living flesh. People adapted quickly and in minutes were walking more or less naturally, then running, then climbing coconut palms. Its beauty was not aesthetic only: it cost nearly nothing to make as all the materials could be found on the scrapheap.

Kandy is two things, the Temple of the Tooth and The Temple Dancers.

They are spoken of in the same breath but, I suspect they share only the name. The Temple is in the city, on the lake: the Dancers are on a high hill half an hour ride away in a building more secular than holy, with a gambling hall and a press with elderly Heidelbergs printing cinema posters.

The theatre, open on its two long sides, is like a café bio with a narrow counter between each row of benches for your glasses and bottles. Though if you prefer you can watch the show at an oblique angle from the bar to the right of the stage. Stage? Packing cases tacked and nailed, electric lights in aluminium shells in a half circle on the floor, and a bedsheet backdrop.

The printed programme says nothing about the temple. They are THE KANDY LAKE CLUB DANCE ENSEMBLE. The hour's programme, danced by mostly men, has everything you'd expect in an oriental circus, fire-eating, dancers juggling tiers of spinning frisbees on contraptions with spikes balanced on their chins, clanking silver headpieces, with huge silver ears, like mad armour, decked in which they whirl endlessly in circles, the flying-through-the-air back somersaulters, the devil dance with masks as large as picnic tables symbolising the fight between a cobra and a bird, used to exorcise demons, drumming at a hundred miles an hour, a harvest dance and a dance with twirling sticks and agile feet. And then it was outside to a courtyard for fire walking on coals which were thrown onto the concrete floor from buckets and raked to a flat even redness. Who can say why the delicate costumes of tinsel and silk trailing at their ankles didn't explode into flame, and why they were able to walk across the coals with unhurried nonchalance? Perhaps it is because "the devotees who perform the firewalking barefoot seek the divine blessings of Lord Kataragama and Goddess Pattini before they do so."

When they had changed into their city clothes we were allowed to go backstage and meet them. They were small, neat and ordinary, tiny bank clerks in Woolworth shirts and trousers, lined up like children at a school prizegiving to shake the headmaster's hand.

They asked if they could get a lift down the hill in the bus. At the lake, we all shook hands again and they faded into the bustle of bullock carts and elephants and sidewalk stallholders and rickety shops and the rush hour masses in downtown Kandy.

AIRLANKA FLIGHT 422 from Colombo to Hong Kong takes six hours.

Breakfast: roast chicken, roast potatoes, mushrooms and spinach.

The film star who was photographed in the departure lounge by another passenger was in my row, but on the opposite side. Not a young woman, and not small, her face was masked by black glasses with Cadillac fins whilst she herself was disguised under a lime Kashmir cloak. Through a good part of the flight she held court: people knelt in the aisle and chatted. She

signed her serviette for my steward who showed it to me. The name meant nothing. SELVI PURACHITHALAIVI

Bangkok from the air could be Benoni but for the temples. The country is as flat as the Transvaal. One temple was scattered with spangles which kept catching the sun: the other had a marigold yellow roof and an oblong garden outlined in flowers which matched.

The plane emptied and an hour later filled with hectic Siamese, some in straw hats like the roofs of huts, some with full sets of gold teeth, some with filed down stumps which I took to be half way to being encrusted in gold.

The couple next to me were wild like animals popped into clothes just as the plane was leaving. For three hours he picked things from his teeth. He had broccoli breath. She had transparent finger nails, half as long as the fingers themselves, stuck onto her real ones. As I was writing on my fold down table, I noticed a long finger lifting the corner of one of the pages of my scrapbook. She was trying to read the other side. When the drinks arrived she took a Carlsberg, he a coke. She had hardly begun, when he took her can and poured it into my glass. They both leaned over and grinned. After the pork and rice she burped quite loudly and went to sleep. The moment the plane stopped, they both got up and ran for the exit.

In Hong Kong my room was a cupboard, a television width longer than the bed and so narrow I had to sit side-saddle. The BAYVIEW GUEST HOUSE: has no bay and no view because the cupboard had no window. And if it did it would have looked into an office which was inside a bigger room which too was without windows. Mr. Ho Suk Fong was not to know that the Canadian woman who had the room I'd reserved would be staying an extra night, but he hoped I wouldn't mind one night in the cupboard of the TSIMSHATSUI IMPORT EXPORT COMPANY one floor up. People came and went throughout the night collecting faxes and sending them, import/export being a twenty four hour business, and though I couldn't see them, I heard everything through the plywood partition.

The cleaning woman was called Ivy. Her name was on the plastic bag of coat hangers with her brooms, polish and rags.

Mrs. Chan woke me early so I'd not be in Ivy's way when she arrived. She managed to separate me from an American backpacker who was complaining about being given another of Tsimshatsui's cupboards, and took back the key she'd just given me and pushed me into the lift so we couldn't speak. But once she'd introduced me to my real room her fierceness turned to sweetness. The room was bigger, the television smaller. Instead of windows it had an extractor fan and an air conditioner.

The room Mrs. Chan stood in all day watching Chinese soaps operas, (a chair would not fit), had no windows either and was between my room and the kitchen which was also the RECEPTION. Had she seen Cleopatra part 2 as I had the night before with Taylor and Burton speaking Chinese?

No, Mrs Chan said that they didn't do washing at the Guest House but Mr. Fong would draw me a map to the street of many laundrettes.

He began tracing a route on my HONG KONG TOURIST AUTHORITY map and then changed his mind. He would do the washing himself.

He said that I should have breakfast downstairs at MAM PING LAM between VIOLET'S DANCING ACCESSORIES and the EXCELLENT CHILDREN FURNITURE FACTORY in the HONEST MOTOR BUILDING. There I found banana custard Danish pastries, fresh mango juice and baskets of apples polished to Disney perfection.

I took the underground to Central. As I walked into the Gallery, Brian fluttered his eyelids and said of the black paintings, "nice men." His lisp was the result of a harelip.

He pointed the fan he was holding, (and using, it being a hot day), at a woman on the twin seater couch at the far end of the gallery between the miniature water feature and an occasional table of imitation lacquer and hissed a name which sounded like CHIN but of which I wasn't certain enough to use. "Opera singer," he whispered not softly.

She was posed in a cream silk suit with a cream chiffon scarf at her throat. As I got there I felt an invisible curtain rise and she began her act. "Protection," she told me patting the chiffon.

She said how wonderful it must be to be able to paint. I said how wonderful it must to have a voice.

"Puccini," she offered in reply to a question I'd not asked.

"Tosca?"

"And all the other roles," she added.

She'd reached a point where her voice could no longer improve but needed maintenance only. It was less a boast than an admission of age. She would not see fifty again, though she could pass for thirty five on stage and forty most other places.

"Cabaret," Brian said, after she left. And she left before anyone else arrived preferring not to share the stage with others.

All the while Brian floated silently across the room like a dancer, his feet just brushing the floor, imposing liasons on paintings I would never have expected.

"June Li will be here at four. Very important reporter," he said lowering one picture a fraction and raising another by even less.

Miss Li was small and serious. Very small and very serious. She told me she was "chief reporter for most important paper," and then fired a rat tat tat of questions at me in abbreviated English, taking the answers down in Cantonese.

Her orders were martial.

"Choose best picture." I did.

"Stand. Smile." I did. Flash.

"Choose next best picture." We repeated this three times.

Then the interview began and like a Pekinese worrying a bone she didn't give up until she got an answer which pleased her.

What was the meaning of the picture on the invitation, she asked. What could I say about two Greek women on a Zulu vase in front of a curtain with Indian roses.

"The women are talking."

"Women?"

"Yes, women."

"Not women," she said, "one is a man."

"Women," I insisted, "Greek women. Housewives."

"Colour too passionate. Not possible."

“They are two women two thousand years old,” I said, feeling the waters rising, “and they are talking about the things women still talk about anywhere.”

She took down my explanation in silence, a silence full of disapproval.

Next was a picture of a broken fragment of a classical statue, a marble foot on a rounded plinth taken from the Victorian book of steel engravings, THE COMPLETE ENCYCLOPOEDIA OF ILLUSTRATION. It stood in front of a Chinese door flanked by Benares brocade. I'd liked the drawing, I'd liked the cloth and I'd liked door the from the Thames and Hudson HISTORY OF CHINESE ART. I'd put three together. I knew there was no message. I knew too Miss Li would demand more.

I stumbled and tripped over an idea of ordinary objects elevated to the spiritual, something about the soul and something about meditation and wished I'd not begun.

Another silence as her pencil made pretty shapes on her reporters spiral pad.

And then came the arums in a vase. I explained that they are wedding flowers but as these were black, not white, they took on associations of death, at which moment a doubt fled across my mind. Was white not the colour of death in China?

Miss Li looked at me, looked at her watch, and, in silence, decorated another page.

The gallery was beginning to fill with people. I smiled at several strangers who didn't smile back.

And then I was rescued. A tipsy young woman joined us. She greeted Miss Li and handed me her card: MAUREEN CHEU, MARKETING EXECUTIVE, ENA REALTY LIMITED, KOWLOON.

“So you make them black because you are warning people not to get married?” I smiled, but said nothing. She and Miss Li gabbled like geese for some moments, at times together, at times singly, waving at the arums, sometimes frowning, sometimes smiling, always intense.

Then followed ten more minutes of interrogation after which Miss Li said abruptly that she had to leave as she had to do the story for the next morning's paper.

More guests had arrived and I was introduced in turn to each of a clutch of people standing in line.

Each said how beautiful the paintings were and how very much they would have like to buy one but that Hong Kong apartments were very tiny.

The last in line was a judge. Brian said he was one of four who dealt with family matters.

“Divorce. That sort of thing,” the judge said in a voice more English than Chinese though from his appearance I would have assumed it to be the other way round.

“Tragic playing Solomon with the children. But when love dies...” He paused. Smiled. Sipped some wine and continued. “I can divide the money but when it comes to the children...”

He changed the subject to a postcard sized painting of a pretty cyclist.

“A friend?” he asked.

“From GQ.”

“Pity,” he said.

“Yes,” I agreed.

He then told me he'd just taken up mountain biking. "Sadly my crash helmet is not nearly as colourful." He said that he'd just turned forty seven. I could think of nothing appropriate as a reply. "I wish I had the money..." I said that I wished that too. We both laughed and searched for something to follow. I need not have worried for suddenly he was whisked away, looking frightened, by a pouting lipped girl in a small tight dress.

"You ARE going to take me to dinner, aren't you?"

"Certainly," he said, "but you are paying. I'm after all, only a lowly paid civil servant."

He flicked his tiny finger with its tiny ring as a good bye as she tugged him out of the door and into the street.

"Ring me next time you are here, you have my number."

"I will," I said.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

When, not many minutes later, the last of the guests-who-didn't-buy-pictures left, Brian and I viewed the table still resplendant with snacks. "C'est la vie," he said, as he began loading shrimps in batches of twenty alternately into the tabletop fridge and a carry bag. He arranged a melon porcupine of green onions and cucumber chunks cut into corrugated sections on a platter with assorted miniature skewers of barbecued meat and even tinier viennas and suggested I take them downstairs to the watchmen in the lobby: dainty fare for oriental Rambos.

CRASH VICTIM : A former electrician has been awarded 7.75 million USD in damages for a car crash that turned him into an exhibitionist.

Ip Siu-yeun, 50, began taking off his clothes in public after a 1986 traffic accident which left him in a coma for three months.

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STRAIGHT ACTING, CANADIAN, MALE, 38, who prefers to be the woman when "off duty," looking for m + f friends.

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ROY 'CHUBBY' BROWN, Britain's naughtiest comedian, live at the A.P.A. Wanchai, one night only. Warning. If easily offended, stay away!

HOTEL SELLS OFF GUEST'S JEWELLERY : The Mandarin Oriental Hotel cleared a several thousand dollar debt from a guest yesterday by auctioning almost a hundred thousand dollars worth of her jewellery and "personal effects."

"This is a credit collection activity," said manager Jan Goessint before May Wu Scales' possessions went under the hammer.

Ms Scales spent an "extended stay" in a de luxe room which cost 3,900 UDS a night and left her possessions in a safe on her departure for New York.

FLAGSTAFF HOUSE: MUSEUM OF TEAWARE

The CHINESE TEA DRINKING permanent collection. Approximate viewing time: 30minutes. Free admission.

CHINACHEM

Cine 1 2 3 4 & 5

BEYOND HYPOTHERMIA

(Cantonese)

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LOVE LETTER

(In Japanese with Chinese/English sub-titles)

ON THE BEAT

(In Mandarin with Chinese/English sub-titles)

NEW ACADEMY CLUB Open to the public for dancing and singing.

Ladies Hong Kong Hash: Meets 6.45 pm every Tuesday, different venue each week, (drinks afterwards)

OVEREATERS ANONYMOUS – St. Johns Church.

HAVING A ROUGH TIME?

Like to know why? Let an expert at Lifepath Astrological Research check on current trends indicated by the planets transiting your horoscope. Fax or phone to find out how you can get more clarity and focus.

JOHANNESBURG/DURBAN

There was a mix-up over seats in the row in front of me and Mr Nel in A (window seat) and Mr. Ntanzi (B) were moved to my row, and then their seats were swapped. Mr Ntanzi was put next to the window and Mr Nel next to me, though why this was necessary I didn't understand as they were together. They spoke Afrikaans to each other and English to everyone else, though in the fifty five minutes they said little to each other and even less to me.

Mr Ntanzi read *The Citizen* and Mr Nel, *Beeld*.

Mrs. du Plooy nudged me with a camera. "Would you take a photograph for me?"

"Of you?" I asked.

"No, of that," she said pointing at Mr Ntanzi's window.

Her seat was D, across the aisle but close enough to talk if we both leaned inwards, I to the right, she to the left.

I didn't know then that her name was Ina du Plooy (nee Oosthuizen) or that this was her first flight, that she was 49, that she was anxious about turning fifty.

Her present anxiety was the photograph. The camera was a box with a lens and a shutter. Although I was a little closer to the window though not much, I was unsure what she wanted me to do.

What little view there was played hide and seek between people shuffling down the aisle. "Are these the people I would choose to die with?" always flit across my mind the moment I find my seat: and then vanishes until the next time.

"I'll wait until things settle," I told Mrs. du Plooy.

She was going to Durban, she said because her son, Boet, had just lost his job (Traffic Police, "signs and lines") and because her daughter-in-law, Melanie, Dawie's wife, had had a miscarriage but was pregnant again.

"The plane is called UMGENI," I said, "that's a river in Durban, perhaps it means good luck."

"I could do with it," Mrs. du Plooy said.

Five girls in their twenties with look alike braided hair, carrying ghetto-blasters, large toy animals in clear plastic bags, made their way to the back. They wore identical T shirts with BOUNTIFUL BAZARUTO silkscreened across their bosoms. They chatted in a French which had spent a long time in Africa.

Between gaps in the passengers, Mrs. du Plooy leaned over and continued her story.

She had been born in Welkom and had fallen in love with the maths teacher, Fanie Smit when she was in Standard nine and that he was married with two small children and that they used to meet secretly at the Europa Hotel on Wednesday afternoons if the weather was bad and softball was cancelled (Fanie coached the second girls' under fifteen team), that the affair had gone on in fits and starts for nearly twenty weeks during which time they had slept together three times, (1962 had had the highest rainfall in the Goldfields since they started keeping records at the end of World War II), that he had wanted to marry her, or so he said and she had believed him, and he probably would have, but he had suddenly been transferred to Viljoenskroon when they changed the school from a dual medium one and had become Morewaghoorskool and had lost 45 English speaking pupil...

A party of fifty three Germans, (THE HOLIDAY HUNTERS) surged around us opening and closing stowage hatches and stuffing them with designer bag, duty free packets and anoraks. There seemed less of them once they'd sorted themselves into spare seats in rows 31 to 43.

Mrs. du Plooy's camera, (Ina, she'd said, between the Germans, "with an I") Ina's camera was still poised and I still waited while she picked up the end of her broken sentence and fitted it to the next part.

She had wanted to become a nurse like her late aunt Bossie, Frikkie's wife, but because her family didn't have the money to send her to college (there was only one bursary and her best friend Julie had got it) , had settled for a typing course and got a job with Venter and Venter who were lawyers in Odendalalsrus and it was there that she met Jacques and it was love at first sight.

"Life's like that" I said, holding the camera up between her face and mine.
 "Just the view, for the kids, they've never been on a plane either." I clicked and hoped I'd got a bit of Sudanair, some Transvaal brickwork and the fin of an Alitalia 747.

We were being asked to pay attention to the safety demonstration so I put a finger to my lips and she stopped.

All around the air was filled with foreign sibilants hissing through plastic teeth. People kept saying JA JA as if one were not enough, I was an English island in a German sea.

Captain Thwaite wished us a pleasant trip as we taxied to the runway.

Ina's father had had a mining accident and couldn't go on working (a rockfall, "two blacks got killed, no whites, thank God") so she had to go back home to help her mother look after him so in a way she got her wish to become a nurse.

"Funny how things happen," I said.

Mr Nel had reached page seven and was lingering over a photograph of Anneline Kriel.

His companion was doing a crossword.

Ina began to tell me about Boet, her second son, who was a champion ballroom dancer and who did work in the theatre and had helped produce the new Ipi Tombi which was his favourite musical and which "was going take the world by storm."

A steward asked her to fasten her belt and I helped her.

She asked if I'd flown before and I said many times.

"This is my first."

"I know, you said so."

She said that when her husband was still alive, ("Barnie a real gentleman, you would have liked him, everyone did, never used bad language") they often drove to Durban in five and a half hours in the Fairlane and that he had only once been caught. That was between Villiers and Warden but they hadn't fined him because it turned out that his friend Schalk deWet whose brother had been married to Moira whom he had gone out with for a few months after he'd come out of the army had lived in Florida in the same street as the man who set the trap. She couldn't remember his name.

I said it was a small world.

The plane dipped to the left as it came out of its climb and the lights of Kempton Park slipped past the wingtip.

"Just like fairyland," Ina said.

"Pretty much," I agreed.

When the trolley appeared from Business Class Mr Nel folded Anneline and stuffed her into the pocket in the back of the next seat and waited.

I looked behind me and saw that the Germans were all wearing hats, baseball caps, panamas with wide brims, soft cotton sun hats, all with HOLIDAY HUNTER in red. Three women wore peaks.

Captain Thwaite told us that he anticipated some cumulus as we neared the interior and so for our own comfort we should keep our belts fastened throughout the flight.

Mr Nel unclipped his belt and reached down and slipped his feet out of his Adidas trainers put his head back and went to sleep.

Bad weather was expected over Vrede.

“Vrede?” Ina asked.

“Not yet, but in a ten minutes or so.”

“That’s a coincidence. Part of our family comes from Vrede but we’ve lost touch.”

“That’s life,” I said.

“A cousin’s husband, I forget his name, had a trading store outside the town and one night it burned down and it looked like the end of the world for them but then they found that the insurance would pay out and they had more money that they ever had made from the shop and so were able to move to Volksrust where he bought a butchery.”

“Every dark cloud,” I said.

Dinner was promised.

“I don’t think I could eat anything,” Ina said, “I didn’t know you got food on the plane so I had a packet of chips in the lounge. Jumbo. Cheese and onion. Willards, not Simba. R5.95.”

On my left Anneline who had been taken out briefly was being smoothed flat and folded. Mr. Nel was telling the hostess that Mr. Ntanzu would like a whisky and he’d have a brandy and diet coke.

“Would he like ice with his whisky?”

Mr. Ntanzu was questioned by Mr Nel.

“He’d like ice and soda.”

“We are out of soda, would he be happy with Schoonspruit?”

Mr. Ntanzu nodded.

“Yes, that’s OK,” Mr Nel said helping himself to four packets of salted nuts.

Sharon had dropped Ina at Jan Smuts at four which had been an hour and half early as she had to pick up her husband from work in Benoni as his car, a Cortina, “gunmetal with twin exhausts,” was in the garage in Edenvale where they lived.

“Extension 5, next to Harmelia, a simplex, 2 bedrooms, both en-suite, open plan Italian kitchen, paved patio and thatched bar/braai area, a pool and a jacuzzi, and it’s clinker brick throughout so it’s very low maintenance, air conditioned and full security and it has a TV room and a conversation area and there’s room at the back for a granny flat when they get the cash.”

“Cosy,” I said.

The steward couldn't wake Mr. Nel, but Mr Ntanzi put his table down and he left a tray in case he woke. He was snoring and a thin line of saliva dribbled from a corner of his mouth, meandered through the stubble of his chin, hovered and then dropped.

My fillet of Kingklip had met its Mornay Sauce for the first time somewhere over Standerton and they seemed unhappy together. The fish was wettish, the sauce dry, the flesh smooth and soft, the sauce pimpled with cheddar. The plastic fork buckled as I pressed into the food. The Mornay lifted exposing silver skin, and dropped back into place. There was an indentation from the fork but the skin was not scarred. I ate the carrots and the rice and sealed the remains with the aluminium lid.

The captain's voice crackled over our heads, He regretted that due to unforeseen turbulence they would be “terminating the bar service.”

“Below to your right you'll see the little town of Vrede.”

Ina smiled at me and stood up to try to see out of the right window across the far aisle.

“It celebrated its centenary some years back. For the information of our foreign guests, I would like to say that in that time the white population has remained stable but that the black population has grown by one thousand five hundred percent. In the new South Africa, of course, we don't count in the same way.”

Necks craned to see the outcrop of dwellings which was “home to 4301 whites and 46000 blacks and 32 coloureds.”

“Vrede means peace” Ina said.

“I know,” I said, “but thank you. Nice name.”

As the engines changed to another key we were told we had started our descent and that Ladysmith was immediately below us. It was invisible behind the cloud.

Boet, Ina said, had just left Rhoda who had gone off with a German. They'd met on holiday in Toti in December. She'd taken the kids, Sharon (5) and Jason (4) and had moved in with Heinz in his duplex in Rodepoort. He had two kids as well from his first marriage, twins Heinrich and Hannelie, (3). He had access every second weekend so it looked as if everything was going to be fine for Rhoda.

“It's hard on the kids,” I said.

“Boet is staying with the Coetzees on the Bluff until he finds a job and can get his own flat. He used to work for Telkom in Witbank and is fully qualified but with affirmative action you couldn't be sure nowadays but there's always room for qualified people and Boet isn't afraid of hard work and he's not looking for a free ride.”

Lumps of cumulus sped past us as we headed downwards.

Old arms pink from the sun had begun tugging at belongings in the overhead lockers.

As we hit the runway, music burst from the roof. The closing notes of WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD melted into Perry Como ambling through IT WAS JUST ONE OF THOSE THINGS.