

Image: inspirationseek.com



Agra was a special spot on the map for me: the first Indian city I had visited outside what was then Bombay. Like a second kiss, it played an important part in building my relationship with an amazing country.

Returning to Agra almost two decades after my first visit was quite special. India and I were now 20 years older and much had changed for both of us during the intervening period. Since I first stepped down from the 'Punjab Mail' in Agra, those many years before, I had gained much more experience of this extraordinary country that infects your thinking and seeps into your veins. After that first stopover, I had re-visited India for work, on ten different occasions, some excursions lasting weeks, other months. Over those two intervening decades I saw India changing, in some ways it morphed into something almost unrecognizable, compared to what had been before. But in essence the heart of India – that unique core of culture and religion - could never change. On this visit, for the first time, part of my trip was pure holiday, with my younger daughter, Alice. Three weeks in Agra and Rajasthan: that was the plan.

Alice and I arrived by train, as I had done on my original journey from Mumbai, almost twenty years before - this time by courtesy of the 17-carriage Azahammudin Express – scorched by the baking heat of the afternoon sun, into the home of the Taj Mahal. After 24 hours on the tracks we struggled with our bags up and over the railway bridge,

descending to a barrage of taximen scrambling for business. This was the start of an incredible journey that would unfold in so many ways that we could never have envisaged. As we approached the taxi and rickshaw touts, I had a sense of knowing Agra; of being there before.

With a little help from *Lonely Planet* and some amount of tussling with our rickshaw driver over direction, we found ourselves an air-conditioned room, in a pleasant-enough budget hotel. After rest and some scouting around to buy drinks and snacks for the room, dinner followed, in the relative evening cool of a rooftop restaurant, with a wonderful view of a moonlit Taj Mahal in the distance. Sipping on cool drinks in the evening light and with the hubbub of street life down below, we roughed out plans for our stay in Agra.

Late the next morning, with the sun already high in the sky, we arrived at the main gate of *The Taj*

A young boy approached as we got down from the rickshaw.

“Sir, you want cool drink?”

It was a well-rehearsed question: at noon in the heat of the Indian sun, everyone wants a cool drink. Negative images flashed through my mind of cloudy liquids, containing a galaxy of stomach-churning bugs.

“No thanks. Maybe later.”

He persisted. *“Sir, you want cool drink, you come my shop.”* This, more of a statement, offering a solution to my problem.

I saw bottles of water stacked behind the boy, outside ‘his’ shop, but I still wasn’t convinced. We passed by, walking with the crowd towards the gates of the Taj.

Moments later the boy was alongside Alice. *“You like see Taj Mahal?”*

I could tell it was the same boy without even looking: his voice had a slightly croaky sound that was very appealing. An impish voice, if there was such a thing?

We walked and talked. He had a broad flashing smile and eyes to more than match the voice in their quality of mischief. I sensed immediately that this was no ordinary young man, or if so, then India was indeed a very fortunate country.

“You go inside Taj. sir, I give you umbrella and water – free! Your daughter need umbrella sir; it’s very hot inside.” It was becoming obvious that our young man had a much-practiced skill, to get under the visitor’s guard.

We strolled on past the main gate of the Taj Mahal, not entering then, but walking on a dirt track, by a high rust-red wall and down to the banks of The Yamuna River at the rear. The boy introduced himself as Vicky, spelling out V-I-C-K-Y, just to make sure. He was twelve years old and studying in his seventh year at an English medium school. His English was excellent, partly because of schooling, but also helped of course by his casual work with western tourists.

As we returned through the gate from the Yamuna, Vicky was there waiting, with that big broad smile, waving to greet us. He took us back to his grandfather’s shop, opposite the Taj gate, where we sat sipping cool drinks and examining a vast range of tempting souvenirs - small jewelry boxes, plates, coasters and of course mini-Taj Mahals - all made of white or black marble and intricately decorated with inlaid stones. Cooler now, we set off once again for the Taj gate, Alice holding the umbrella from Vicky.

Sketch of Taj Mahal by Alice



The Taj Mahal, as I remembered, was mesmerizing. I watched from a distance as Alice sat cross-legged on the grass, sketching the main dome and its minarets. A crowd of mostly-young-men gathered around her, then faded away as I approached. We stayed for more than four hours, until a

magical orange glow reflected off the curves of the dome, before fading into dusk.

Emerging through the massive gates, with memories committed to camera and sketch pad, we were met in what was becoming customary fashion, by the wave and smile of

our young guide. Our visit to the Taj Mahal had been a truly remarkable experience, but as we ambled back through the bustle and chaos of the nearby streets, we were perhaps even more captivated by the young boy at our side.

The next morning, as arranged, Vicky was there by the hotel gate. We were late, he was early – a regular feature of our time together. On this, our second day in the Mhugal city he wasn't alone; he had brought his young friend Shan, to meet us. From that moment on we became a foursome, travelling anywhere and everywhere, by bicycle rickshaw, on the streets of Agra together.

Shan had a smile that stretched from ear to ear and eyes that glittered with an innocence to match that of Vicky's mischief. He was a much simpler boy and very much the junior of the two. I remember once when we sat in a café, Shan was giggling and whispering in Vicky's ear.

"What did he say?" I asked, thinking that Vicky could translate from Shan's Urdu.

"Shan can be very small at times," was the telling reply.

Though they were much the same age, Vicky had had much more schooling than Shan. He was in fact five years ahead, even though they were less than one year apart in age. This was a reflection of Shan's poorer family circumstances, as we would find out later. One result of this was that the older boy's English was far superior, and he acted frequently as translator, between us and his younger mate.

And mates they truly were. It was wonderful to watch how they held onto each other as we rode the rickshaws, or walked arm in arm down the street ahead of us, talking and laughing with a sort of bonded friendship that many people would give the Earth to find, wherever they were in the world.

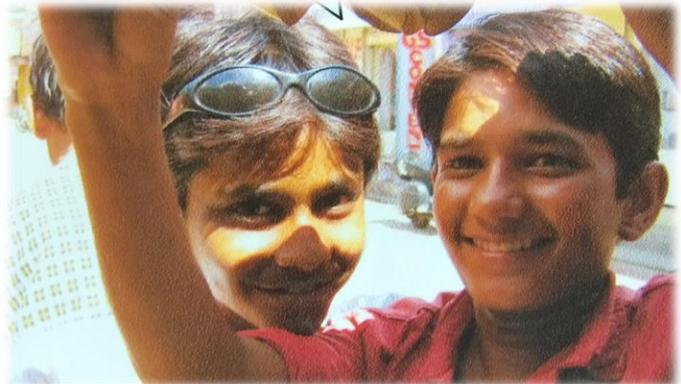
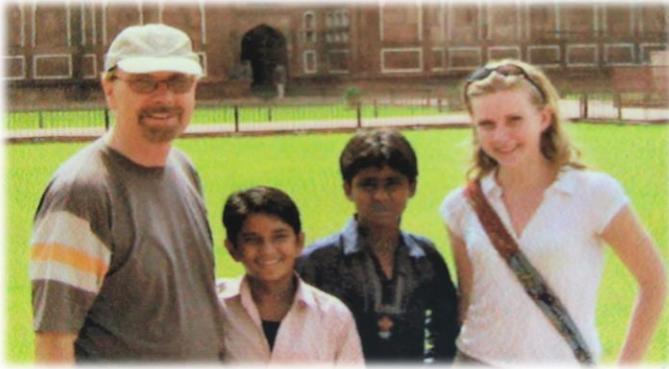


Image: Duncan Gregory

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The author with Shan, Vicky and Alice at the Red Fort

We went to the Red Fort together, all piled onto a bicycle rickshaw, with this poor guy at the sharp end working himself into a frazzle. But the man took it all in his stride - or rather, in his peddling - talking in a friendly manner with the boys. Every now and then when we struck an uphill bit of road one or both would jump down and help to push, to ease the *rickshaw wallah's* heavy load.

Over the time we were in Agra, the boys took us to many interesting places, but it was during visits to their own family homes when we really came to know more about them ...and of life in their home town.

Vicky lived with his extended Muslim family in a relatively large five-roomed house in *Taj Gang*, perhaps ten minute's walk from the Taj. He led us along Market Street, then down a narrow, concreted alleyway, past hole-in-the-wall grocery shops, from which young girls and boys called out 'hello' as we walked by.

A couple of steps up off the alley and we were straight into Vicky's front room. This had easy chairs around the walls, but the central part was dominated by black, marble pedestals wrapped in newspaper, waiting for the finely inlaid marble table-top to be fixed to their upper surfaces. Most of the men in the family worked in the marble inlay business and the front room was simply a handy place to store the marble, as it passed through their hands.

Image: Duncan Gregory



The family's two-storey home was made up of five rooms, plus a roof top area from where we could see the Taj Maha. As well as the front room there were four bedrooms, one with a kitchen annex that doubled as a dining room, and where we ate the following evening.

Vicky's extended family was comprised of 20 people, divided into four units of mother, father and children, each of which used one of the four bedrooms as their sleeping quarters. The thing that struck me most, as a visitor from the west, was the way in which everyone seemed to bond together: to work as a homogeneous unit. It was something of a revelation, to be taken into this 'fold' and invited, quite genuinely, to become a part of this closeness, even if it was only for a short time.

Accompanied by the boys and the rest of the male members of the family, we were taken around the corner to see what they called the 'factory'. It was in fact more of a workshop and there were huge slabs of marble leaning against the walls, with one newly finished table at the centre. Two men came and washed the dust of this table, to reveal a beautiful black marble top with a symmetrical design of flowers, made from inlaid, semi-precious stones. Amazing work, but unfortunately a tad too heavy for us to carry on our forthcoming travels in Rajasthan ... or back to our home country!

In contrast to Vicky's house, Shan's family home was somewhere at the other end of the social spectrum. We visited a couple of days later, in the evening, climbing up stone stairs, past two dairy cows that inhabited the ground floor and emitted some characteristic smells, which I recognized from my upbringing on a dairy farm in the UK. Shan's family of eight shared a fairly small living space on the first floor, with a rustic kitchen on the adjoining terrace, where Shan's grandmother sat for her ritual evening job of cooking chapattis.

We clambered further up a steep and narrow staircase and there, sipping a deliciously spiced chai, I was struck once more by the feeling of togetherness and the fact that myself and Alice were indeed very privileged to be able to have such an insight into Indian life that very few outsiders would get to experience. There on the rooftops of Agra, in the heat of the night and just a stone's throw from the Taj Mahal, with Indian brass band music playing in the street below and people waving and shouting 'hello' from roof tops in the distance, the feeling was electric, yet at the same time so peaceful. That short spell, in the evening light, on the rooftop of Shan's house, was one of the most emotive moments of my life.

When we came to leave it was with some feelings of regret that we had to move on. Vicky's uncle Adil had arranged a car to take us to Jaipur and as promised, the boys arrived early, perhaps an hour before the car was due. By this time, the hotel staff were quite used to the boys joining us in the restaurant, laughing and joking together as we shared breakfast. Time passed quickly, as it always does when you want it to go more slowly. Very soon the car had arrived, and we were saying our goodbyes.

It was just four days since that first meeting with Vicky outside the Taj gate. His words, "*Sir, you want cool drink?*" still ringing in my ears. Since then, our time together with the two boys had been packed with some wonderful moments and glorious adventures. It seemed like we had known them for months, not days.

"You my sister, now and always," Shan reminded Alice. They had both called her sister since the day we met.

"You come back soon," said Vicky. *"Or I come to UK. What you say?"*

Ever the joker, Vicky flashed that big, broad smile, and we left.

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