

Photo by Duncan Gregory



Gateway to the wonders of India

Country of customs, colours and contrasts, India is a place that reaches out to test all our senses, at times to their limits; love it or loath it some people say. In a chaotic marketplace with cows, cars and humankind jostling for coveted space, the sights, the sounds, the smells of India can sometimes overwhelm. But immerse yourself in all this: ask questions about the vividly coloured dyes, listen to the strange looking gadgets on Juhu Beach and taste the sweet sugarcane offered in friendship, then you can begin to love India ...like no place on Earth!

You pause at the lights only to be besieged by beggar children in rags; the car alongside is a late model Mercedes. Every scene, every subject seems to contain such an array of options: incredibly positive through to shamefully negative. And there are so many scenes and so many subjects. Which option does one choose to tell?

During the short time I have known this land its wonders have never ceased to amaze. But some of those wonders have changed, in name at least: *Bombay* assumed the name *Mumbai*, Madras became *Chennai*, and *Victoria Terminus* – the train station

masterpiece of English architect FW Stevens (and UNESCO World Heritage site) - was re-titled *Chhatrapati Shivaji in 1996*. A name can be changed of course, but in essence the place remains the same, and in many cases is still referred to by its old familiar title ... or abbreviation, as is the case of the much-cherished *VT*.

Fortunately for me, I saw India for the first time on a high note. Whether it was high note for me or for India I am not quite sure; but the bad points - the negative options - seemed to pale beside the obvious beauty of the place and its people. This feeling has continued in much the same vein over the years, with return there for work and for leisure. Of course, there were downtimes from time to time: pinpricks in the euphoric bubble; such as the dreaded *Bombay Bug*, or squabbles with an auto-rickshaw driver (see the poem at the end of this article), or just simply the heat!

India is such a vast and varied country that no one person could ever hope to know or understand a fraction of the total. I am fortunate to have sampled various bits of that whole, but Mumbai, the pulsating capital of Maharashtra State, is the part I most readily identify with. Mumbai has usually been with me at the start and the end of the times I have been there, and often the in-between bits too. In the 1980s I began to develop a programme within the city's education sector, linked first to Australia, then later to the UK and Kenya. This school and university work began in Mumbai, although right from the start I sought to branch out, travelling South to Bangalore and Chennai - and many places in between - to provide a broader scope of what India is all about.

With each visit I grew into India, more and more. Friendships developed and things I would never have dreamed of doing in the early days, became common place at a later stage. For example, I worked with one locally based friend in the early 2000s to develop a Mumbai-based business. This involved factory production in the far North of the city and working closely with a *patent* expert in the far South, close to *Chowpatti Beach*. My part in the venture involved travelling on trains, buses and autos, walking the streets and eating local: slowly becoming a *Mumbaiker* ... in a western guise.

But I also came to know a variety of other places too. In Bangalore I met up with a local identity, *Chipee Ganjee*, who rode an impressive Royal Enfield 350, with me - when in the neighbourhood – climbing aboard as pillion passenger, to tour Bangalore's night life and surprisingly for me, its many and varied jazz bars.

Then, as the result of a conversation on a train to Chennai, *Ootacomund* (or *Ooty* as it is more commonly known) became included as a part of the school network. Set in the tea growing area of the Gigiri Hills, *Ooty* should be on every quiz master's sheet, as the place where snooker was invented, during the time of the *British Raj*. It is also well known for its boarding school facilities: in those days of *The Raj*, for children of the British overlords, but today catering for the offspring of well-known politicians and rich Bollywood stars. *Ooty* was such a contrast to Mumbai - or anywhere else I had been in India - and a place which allowed me short respite from the heat of the plains.

For a third example – just three of many - perhaps more than anything, I will remember the quite astonishing welcome I was given by St Joseph's, a secondary boarding school for girls, situated on the fringe of Nellore - a small rural town in Andhra Pradesh – when 1500 girls stood, in traditional costume, to sing *Jana Gana Mana*: the Indian National Anthem. Also, the friendship that grew from that, with a brilliant young student named Jaya, who came from a *Harijan* family, but went on to study engineering at University.

After twenty years of knowing India, I set out with my younger daughter, Alice, for a holiday in the North, then a few years later, with both Alice and her older sister Kate we toured Kerala State in the South. Both excursions were a departure from the norm for me, because there was no work involved. I had always felt that involvement through work brought me closer to people, but it turned out I really enjoyed holiday adventures too, with different places providing unique experiences, such as: two schoolboy *chaperones* in Agra, the majesty of *Bundi Palace* in Rajasthan, magical rooftop restaurants in Mysore and rooting out the *Beer Kellers of Cochin* ... to mention a few.

I also developed ways to avoid the stress and down-time that India sometimes brings to bear. After a nightmarish experience in the early days, on arrival in Mumbai, I always

made it my business to start off on a high note, so perhaps a reasonable hotel with all mod. cons. In addition, if things became overwhelming at any stage and for any reason, I learnt to retreat to a *high note*: an ice-cold beer in an air-conditioned restaurant usually did the trick. Similarly, if sickness became a problem, – diarrhea, *Delhi Belly*, or any number of other invasive elements – I would seek early refuge to recuperate, see a good doctor and, if possible, fall back on friends to supply the bananas!

Through almost four decades of getting to know India, I find that though the element of change is always there – constantly moving forward; striving to compete - those simple charms that are so much in evidence also still remain in abundance, based on strength of culture and diversity of religion ... plus the overwhelming charm of Indian people.

To show that everything was not always rosey, I will end one of those *down-times* - which I hesitate to recount – that stemmed from an altercation with an auto-rickshaw driver. Of course, after the event I very much regretted what had gone before. Too late.

The Rickshaw Wallah and I

*I've just established bad relations
Between fellow man and I,
And now regretting
This irksome deed,
Sit, in search of an alibi.*

*The rickshaw wallah – a faceless man,
Didn't know where to go.
So, I stormed away,
No payment made:
A rather despicable show.*

*He spoke Marathi, no English tongue
And probably came from far.
Why should he know
This 'Holiday Inn',
To serve the foreign Tzar?*

*Now I sit secure above Juhu Beach
With Hayward's brew to hand.
The drink cost more
Than his daily pay.
Does that make me feel so grand?*

*I muse on this fact of relations,
I have time to do that you see.
I don't have to climb into
My three-wheeled cab
And work from dawn till tea.*

Holiday Inn, Juhu Beach
Mumbai 2003