

INDIA – LAND OF EXTREMES

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The Nobel Laureate, Octavio Paz, was the Mexican ambassador to India, and out of his experiences there he wrote a book, In Light of India, comparing his host country to his native Mexico. In it he wrote, “India did not enter me through my mind, but through my senses.” I could have said the same thing about Mexico, a country I have had a love affair with for most of my life. But it was true in spades, doubled, of my encounter with the profusion of sights and sounds, colors and smells, people and animals that make up the subcontinent of India. One of our friends described India after his first visit as having all the television channels going at once. India is, indeed, a land of contrasts; or rather a land of extremes.

The ancient elegance of millennia of continuous high culture rubs shoulders with the crassest possible version of vulgar modernity. The incredible opulence of the maharajahs is surrounded by equally unbelievable poverty. The aloof grace of white mansions surrounded by spacious parks in the area around Lodi Gardens hardly seemed on the same planet with the frenetic chaos of multitudes fighting their way on and off the teeming trains arriving and leaving from Old Delhi Station. The extreme asceticism of nearly naked *sadhus*, mendicant holy men owning nothing but a begging bowl, lay well outside the envelope of my previous experience, as did the sensuality of enormous lurid billboards touting the latest erotic fluff from the studios of Bollywood.

Perhaps the greatest contrast is evident in the two dominant religions of India. – the austere discipline of Islam with its rigid uniformity of worship and prohibition against any sort of images, and the chaotic multitude of gods and goddesses incorporated into Hinduism with its profusion of images and highly individualistic worship. And yet, nothing is as it seems in the melange that is India.

One of our first excursions after arriving in Delhi was to Humayan’s Tomb, one of the finest examples of Moghul architecture. Erected by the emperor’s widow in 1565 the mausoleum is a graceful and symmetrical structure of red sandstone accented with black and white marble and surmounted by a bulbous marble dome. This imposing structure is situated in the center of a vast park.

The epitome of serenity, the park is a cool expanse of pathways, cypress trees and flowering gardens, interlaced with elaborate waterways and fountains. As we strolled through the park losing ourselves in its peaceful beauty, we were completely removed from the clamor of the sweating, toiling, jostling millions outside the walls.

But we quickly saw the other face of India. From this Muslim ideal of peaceful serenity, we went next to the shrine of Nizam ud din. Only a stone’s throw away in space, the tomb of the great Sufi mystic and saint, Shaykh Hazrat Nizam ud din Aulia, is another world. The tomb of the saint, who died in 1325 at the age of 92, immediately became an important pilgrimage destination, and a village sprang up around the holy site, a medieval jumble of narrow streets still negotiable only on foot.

The cacophony of the milling throngs of worshippers seemed more like the colorful chaos surrounding a Hindu temple than the disciplined worship of the Muslims. Arriving at the shrine, we removed our shoes as requested, and immediately plunged into a tangle of alleyways teeming with beggars, worshippers and importunate vendors of

everything imaginable. We resisted the blandishments of the merchants shouting the value of their wares, and reminding us, "Only looking. Costs nothing to look." It was harder to resist the clusters of impish, bright-eyed urchins demanding *baksheesh*. Our guide was adept at banishing the appealing youngsters and frowned whenever we seemed about to succumb to the wiles of a particularly winsome child. As we passed shop after shop selling religious trinkets, jewelry, clothing, food and drink, I was puzzled by the number of stalls selling great quantities of red rose petals.

We finally reached the courtyard surrounding the shrine, and the chaos of the streets gave way to even more clamorous sounds from a trio of worshippers chanting at the top of their voices *qawwali*, love songs to Allah, accompanied by *tabla* and harmonium. The tomb, itself, was an exquisite marble pavilion of delicate arches and fretwork screens, built by Shah Jehan, the emperor who also gave us the incomparable Taj Mahal.

Our guide indicated that I was to enter the shrine, and stooping through a low door I found myself in a narrow aisle that circled the tomb of the saint. Inside, men were prostrating themselves before the marble rectangle containing Nizam ud din's remains. A green cloth covered the tomb, and now I discovered the purpose of the rose petal stalls in the bazaar – the worshippers were showering the cloth with red petals as they made their supplications. As we circumambulated the shrine I was surprised to see, in addition to the round caps of the Muslims, turbaned Sikhs and the distinctive Congress hats of the Hindus. Such interfaith worship was certainly fitting because Nizam ud din preached a message of tolerance for all religions. Of course the one exception to open worship was that of women of any religion, who could only look through screens carved into the marble walls, being forbidden to enter the shrine. When we left to return to our car a very official looking person in a white robe and mosque cap duly entered into an enormous ledger our names and addresses and the amount of our gift.

We have a young Indian friend, Ginu Kamani, a writer and cinematographer, who observed that Indians love paradox. She maintains that if you present them with a simple situation, they will make a paradox out of it. A comparison of the two Muslim tombs - a timeless serenity at the tomb of the Emperor and the teeming throngs of worshippers at the tomb of the Saint – is but one example of the paradox that is India.

Since the 12th century, Delhi has seen the rise – and fall – of a variety of empires that have made the city their capital, and all of them have left their mark. It is a throbbing, thronging city of fifteen million souls – an expanse of urban sprawl studded here and there with the jewels of history – relics of past empires.

By contrast, Rajahstan, the land of kings, our primary destination, has not yet been inundated by the accretions of modernity and industry. The Rajputs, a word meaning sons of princes, may have been descendants of the White Huns and other invaders from the central Asian steppes. At any rate, from the sixth century the Rajputs have controlled the area in the northwest of what is now India.

An arid land of harsh beauty, Rajahstan has bred a proud and handsome people who have traditionally been fierce warriors. Colonel James Tod, who was British Agent to the Rajput States in the early Nineteenth Century, wrote in his extensive Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan:

Reduced in power, circumscribed in territory, compelled to yield much of their splendor and many of the dignities of birth, they have not abandoned one iota of the pride and high bearing arising from a knowledge of their illustrious and regal descent.

That statement is as true today as it was when Tod wrote it almost two centuries ago. The women are among the most beautiful in the world, and the men have provided crack cavalry troops for a succession of Moghul and British rulers – even to fighting a pitched battle against mechanized forces in the Second World War. They are also among the world's top polo players. Maharajah Man Singh, commonly called Jai, maharajah of Jaipur, having captained the team that won the prestigious Gold Cup in 1955 and numerous other prizes, died on the polo field of Ascot in 1970.

His widow, Gayatri Devi, the *Rajmata*, or queen mother, still lives in a portion of the Rambagh Palace, now a palatial hotel on the outskirts of Jaipur. A renowned international beauty, she, herself, is another example of the paradoxical in India. Daughter of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar, she shot her first tiger at the age of twelve. As a teenager living in London, she showed great ingenuity in eluding her chaperone and carried on a whirlwind romance with the handsome young prince of Jaipur. In an independent India, she was elected a Member of Parliament from an opposition party and was jailed by the iron lady of Indian politics, Indira Gandhi. In her latter years she dedicated herself to founding progressive girls' schools in Rajahstan. This beautiful woman raised in luxury scorned an idle life of ease and became a powerful force in a male-dominated land. By contrast, her husband's other wife, a life-long friend of Gayatri Devi, remained in *purdah* all her life.

It was the son of that first wife who became the last Maharajah of Jaipur. The first male born to the ruling family in two generations, his birth was the occasion of much celebration. Because of the enormous quantities of champagne used in celebrating his birth, he was dubbed "Bubbles" by his English nanny, and the name stuck for the rest of his life. He now occupies quarters in the City Palace, a crumbling museum operated by the Indian government.

Jaipur is known as the Pink City because all the buildings inside the walls of the old town are painted a pinkish ocher color. And inside the gates of the old city I saw the India I had been expecting. The streets were teeming with life. Rivers of bicycles flowed through the streets tinkling their bells; carts drawn by bullocks or mules or camels plodded placidly straight ahead; motor scooters and ornately decorated three-wheeled taxis, buzzing like angry wasps; hurtled into the throngs of pedestrians who seemed oblivious to the traffic. In the midst of all this turmoil, the ubiquitous cows ambled back and forth as if serene in the knowledge of their sacred status. Into this mass of human and animal life our intrepid driver, Raj Kumar, edged his Ambassador forward with a continuous honking of his horn, to which no one paid the slightest attention.

He was a tireless guide, taking us into the market, and to our delight, into his favorite temples, and he was also protective of us. Jaipur is noted for its puppet makers, and he took us to their quarter where a long wall was hung with puppets of every kind and color, attended by their makers. An exceptionally ornate one in a rich scarlet and gold costume and laden with jewelry caught my eye, and as I was examining my find Raj Kumar took the puppet out of my hands telling me that it was of inferior quality, and that

I was not to buy it. He then made what sounded like a reproving comment to the young woman tending her puppets. In response, this mere slip of a girl, who looked no more than thirteen years old, her enormous brown eyes blazing, launched a blistering tirade at him that I would have given anything to understand.

Roxann, who had lived in India for several years, was watching with amusement. The puppet was the image of a *hijra*, a bizarre form of transvestites who remove their genitalia surgically and go about dressed in flamboyant costumes and creating mischief at weddings and other celebrations. Apparently our driver thought it was inappropriate for us to possess an image of such a creature. At any rate I did buy the *hijra* puppet, with Raj Kumar salvaging some of his pride by insisting on a lower price than I had been willing to pay.

That day was *Bakra Eid*, the Muslim festival celebrating the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his only son. The celebration includes the sacrifice of a goat, and so we saw cart after cart loaded with bloody goats and skins being carried about. Raj Kumar smugly informed us, "Muslim peoples are not clean like Hindu peoples." I thought how ironical it was that in the Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella, people were afraid to bathe for fear of being suspected of being Muslim.

The great Hindu festival of *Holi* was approaching, and so that evening Raj Kumar took us to two temples. The *Lakshmi-Narayan* Temple was a commanding structure built entirely of white marble. We entered through a side entrance and made our way around an ambulatory behind the altar where there were relief scenes from Buddhist, Jain and Christian traditions as well as Hindu. Emerging from the passage we passed a priest who put into our hands a few white granules, which tasted like sugar, and then marked our foreheads with a dot of red paste. The altar itself held two immense statues clad in red and gold of Narayan, an avatar of Vishnu and Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. The temple is often referred to as the Birla temple, named after one of India's immensely wealthy industrialist families, who donated the money to build the temple. In front of the temple and facing it are life-size sculptures of Mr. and Mrs. Birla. Our young writer friend, Ginu Kamani, commented wryly that in a few years those two statues would probably move into the temple to be worshipped along with all the rest of the Hindu pantheon.

Our other visit was to the temple of the elephant-headed god, *Ganesha*, the remover of obstacles, and far and away the most popular god in India. He is also popular among tourists who buy quantities of his droll image in silver and sandalwood and brass. Before entering the temple, Raj Kumar bought leis of white and orange chrysanthemums and some *ladoo*, round balls of candy soaked in honey. (Ganesha has an insatiable sweet tooth.) We presented the leis and candy to the priest, who offered them to an enormous, garish bubble-gum pink figure of the god, and then handed the candy to Roxann. We were intrigued by the diversity of the worshippers. There were people of all ages and modes of dress - young men on motorbikes with their baseball caps on backward, elderly couples, lovely young ladies in saris, strolling up arm in arm with others in blue jeans. Here we received a spot of yellow on our foreheads as an indication that we had worshipped at Lord Ganesha's temple.

Our next stop was Udaipur, a city of lakes and gleaming white palaces, which are now hotels and museums. We arrived there on the eve of the great festival of *Holi*, and were invited to view the ceremony from reviewing stands along one side of the great

parade ground of the City Palace. We were also invited, along with the other guests who were staying in one of his hotels, to join His Highness at a cocktail party following the ceremony.

The ceremony of *Holika* was like getting a glimpse of the past glories of the days of the rajahs. The parade ground was lit by a multitude of blazing braziers, and in the center was a tree trunk at least 20 feet tall surrounded by a cone of branches and straw. The scene was how I imagine an *auto-da-fe* to look, with a pyre in the center prepared for burning heretics and viewing stands for the onlookers, though amongst the multitude of Hindu gods and goddesses it is impossible to discover either orthodoxy or heresy. As we watched from the raised viewing stands, the empty chairs on one side of the pyre began filling with a gorgeous array of ladies in bright saris of every possible color and hue. It was like nothing so much as a lush human flower garden with the blossoms swaying gracefully in a breeze. The chairs on the other side of the pyre remained empty. We discovered later that they were reserved for the male notables of *Udaipur*. From the top of the arcade opposite us a wailing wind instrument kept up a plaintive refrain, accompanied by a pounding drum.

A double row of mounted retainers in scarlet uniforms led the procession followed by a succession of ornately caparisoned riderless horses and an infantry troop some forty or fifty strong. Next came a troop of bagpipers in Scottish kilts, followed by walking men carrying the symbols of the Maharana's rank – ostrich plumes, umbrellas and great banners with the seal of state. Finally came the Maharana on a richly decorated white horse laboring under the royal weight. More parasols and two men fanning the regal figure with something looking like enormous pompoms completed the royal retinue. Finally the male notables entered with a Brahmin priest bringing up the rear chanting Sanskrit prayers.

The *Maharana* circumambulated and then touched a torch to the great pyre, which immediately burst into flames. When the flames finally abated we were treated to a fireworks display, and then we were piped into the elegant courtyard of the Maharana's private quarters, which had formerly been the *zenana*, the women's quarters. We were treated to drinks and a dizzying array of delicious tidbits spicy enough to satisfy even my Texas taste buds.

In our final stop in Rajahstan, we stayed in the last palace built in India. Unfortunately the Maharajah engaged a British architect, and instead of the gleaming white palaces of Udaipur with graceful arches and spacious verandahs, the *Umaid Bhawan* Palace of Jodhpur is a massive sandstone structure more suitable for the cold northern climate of England than the desert heat of India. Jodhpur boasts not only the last palace but also the largest fort in a land of forts, *Meherangahr*.

Meherangahr, now a museum trust, is not only the largest fort in India; it is surely the most magnificent. Begun in 1459 by Rao Jodha, who gave Jodhpur its name, it towers above the city on a sheer bluff overlooking a broad valley. Jackie Kennedy called it the eighth wonder of the world, and Rudyard Kipling, in 1899, described *Meherangahr* as "the work of angels, fairies and giants . . . built by titans. . . He who walks through it loses sense of being among buildings. It is as though he walked through mountain gorges."

Although it is overwhelming in its might *Meherangahr* contains a palace of great refinement, with delicate traceries of marble, gilded throne rooms, and a ballroom

paneled in mosaics of mirrored glass. A tour through the palace museum is like a walk through the flamboyant history of Rajputana.

It was in Jodhpur that we met a most fascinating woman. Universally called, *Baiji*, an honorific term for a Rajput lady, she was a graceful figure in an exquisite sari of yellow and green silk, still a striking woman in her early eighties. As a member of the Maharajah's household, she seemed to be an untitled member of the staff. Having been educated in Switzerland, she returned as a young woman and, to her dismay, was placed in *purdah*. Her talents and fluency with European languages rescued her - one of her assignments was the delicate one of being the liaison with the architects when the palace was redone as a hotel. Her grandfather, Sir Prathap Singh, a stern and fiercely loyal Rajput noble, was thrice regent of Jodhpur. *Baiji's* lineage is illegitimate, for Sir Prathap, to prove he had no designs on the throne for his own offspring, slept only with his mistress and not his wife.

He was also very gallant. As regent of Jodhpur he was presented to Queen Victoria at her Jubilee, and had been informed that gifts were not in order. As he approached her majesty, he declared, "No one appears before a queen empty handed." And with a seemingly spontaneous gesture, he swept the jewel from his turban and placed it in the queen's hands, saying, "In India a gentleman's most prized possession is worn on his head." He must have made a striking figure, tall and erect in his regal Indian costume and magnificent black handlebar mustache. At any rate at the ball that evening, the queen was wearing the jewel he had given her and remarked to Sir Prathap, "And an English lady wears her prized possession on her heart."

Baiji's great brown eyes held a glint of impishness as she added to the story; "He had brought four turban jewels with him. It was all planned."

Having been treated like royalty in the historic former palaces of Rajahstan, we returned to Delhi to a completely different kind of luxury. At the urging of one of Roxann's Indian friends, we stayed in the Sheraton Tower, and our room was an experience in future shock. We found a fax machine, computer, a sophisticated sound system with complimentary CD's and even what we termed "The Electric Chair." One could recline in it and receive a progressive massage, beginning with the calves and ending with the neck and head. Instead of a directory of services - housekeeping, room service, front desk, etcetera, - our telephone had a single button labeled, "Butler." we could also communicate our wishes to him through the computer.

In contrasting this futuristic setting with the elephants and camel carts, sari-clad ladies of Rajahstan and the palace *chowkidars*, in their imposing uniforms and fierce mustaches saluting smartly as we entered or left, it came to me that Indian culture, like the Hindu religion, is all-inclusive. It absorbs everything in its path and creates in the process a kaleidoscope of contrasts and extremes and paradoxes that provide a most fascinating and alluring adventure. In conclusion, I can only echo Mark Twain after a visit to India, "So far as I am able to judge, nothing has been left undone, either by man or nature, to make India the most extraordinary country that the sun visits on his daily rounds."