

TIME TRAVELING IN INDIA: HOW MUCH AND HOW LITTLE HAS CHANGED IN ONLY A GENERATION

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This past June 2007, I returned to India after 22 years. I was in my early twenties when I first went to India with two friends in my search for the meaning of life. That was in 1973. We landed in Bombay in January after two days of travel from the snows of Albany New York. The pre-dawn heat of the tarmac, the heavy smell of dung cooking-fires, the air laden with incense and humidity, the city crept from its light sleep. I felt as if we had traveled to a place where the old city of a thousand years ago had let a few modern elements slip through; where bullocks, chickens, scooters, buses, horse-drawn tongas and millions of people thronged the streets in a seemingly fluid and coordinated rhythm. We traveled on to Poona in the heat of the day, becoming an instant curiosity when we stopped for lunch halfway up the ghats (mountains) of the western coast.

I could not sleep that first night because of the enchantment of the song of India. It was a music made from the bells of the cows, the creaking wooden wheels of the bullock carts, dogs barking, a phonograph playing so loud out of true consideration of the neighbors (so they could enjoy the music as well!) I reached my destination the next day and the magic and meaning of India kept me there for another six weeks until the intense heat and dry winds of early March blew us back to late winter in New York.

I returned to India in 1974, 1977, 1980 and in 1985. The last trip was still before the economic reforms were implemented by the government but there were signs that India was moving into the modern age. There were even more western-style scooters, fewer beggars (or at least more organized begging), fewer tongas and more reliable electricity and water, and even a “ready-made” shop for clothing. But it still was the same recognizable India of enchantment and mystery.

What did I find in those early travels? How did it change my life? I think it helped me to develop a deeper compassion for the precarious existence of many people’s lives, of how little most people have, and that having things does not make us more secure or happy. And on our return the streets of our home country seemed so empty, houses too huge, and people so isolated from each other. In India, they live closer to the dust and so the return to dust is not as frightening as in the U.S. where we protect ourselves so vigorously from disaster. Life and death dance together there; we try to lock death away by any means, at any cost here.

In the mid-1990s, the government adopted several economic reforms that had the effect of opening India to trade and foreign investment and in 1995, India was admitted to the World Trade Organization. From 1992-97, India’s Eighth Five-Year Plan focused on modernization of the industrial sector (power, transportation, communication) and self-sufficiency in agricultural production with an overarching focus on human development. Subsequent five-year plans focused on achieving fiscal strength (Ninth Plan) and health, education, and quality of life.

Dramatic changes were evident on our return to India in 2007. Sweeping over the still-present informal and impoverished economy was a wave of energy, growth, development typified by Navi Mumbai (New Bombay), the brand new city development in south Mumbai. It is a planned city with wide streets, startlingly beautiful and modern corporate headquarters, banks, shopping malls. A shock to see after traveling at 5am from the portions of old Mumbai where thousands find shelter in corrugated shacks, the shell of buildings, or even on the traffic medians. The juxtaposition of the two sectors may be typical of developing economies and economies in transition, but after so many hours of sleep deprivation it seemed surreal.

Evidence of India's surge continued as we stopped for breakfast in Lonavla halfway up the ghats. Although we found refuge in an elegant, secluded, hotel resort and watched the parrots and chipmunks in the tropical garden courtyard, the trip to this oasis was a speedy one on the new Mumbai-Pune highway rather than on previous trips up the old, winding, two lane path that served as a road up and through the steep western mountains. The monkeys still were there on the highway, in the fog shrouding the peaks. But also evident were the wind farms – miles of high tech windmills generating electricity lined the mountain tops. I thought of our own controversy in western Virginia.

On our arrival in Ahmednagar, evidence of economic growth obscured the old and familiar places we had visited on prior trips. The sisal factory was gone. The sugar cane vendors were gone as were the sounds of their piping machines. Trees and landmarks were obscured by new shops, new schools, and a new row of street vendors (although the mangos looked particularly delicious!)

We took a day trip to the Ellora caves near Aurangabad through a particularly rural area where farmers lived in their houses made of mud-clay with thatched roofs, served by open stone wells. We passed irrigated paddies growing millet, perhaps, traveling on a two-lane road lined with banyan trees. This was the familiar ancient India. But a little way further, the road widened to four lanes, the banyan trees were gone or toppled like elephants as road crews continued their work laying cables and new roads to Aurangabad and on to Hyderabad.

Although I missed the beauty of rural India, this wave of economic development seems to enliven the economy and at least bring a better living standard for many people. Some are left behind, some lives disrupted. The materialism of the west is shaking hands with the spirituality of the east.