

With a machete in hand, the foreman made a clean slice through a stalk laden with bananas that fell on my shoulder. I was one of eight workers who lugged bananas to the transport truck each morning before breakfast at the Israeli kibbutz where I'd been living for six months. Just as the stalk hit my shoulder that morning, the thought crossed my mind: "I'm closer to India than I've ever been." The mystique of that country always captivated my imagination, and in that moment, something was calling me to come. I was twenty-two years old at the time. As ideas about travel routes and transportation options raced through my mind, other thoughts about the country's difficult living conditions and health risks tempered my enthusiasm. The days passed, along with my fantasies about India, and my journey continued in a different direction.

Thirty-two years later, I heard the call from India again when I accrued enough airline miles for a ticket to any destination in the world. But this time, I had a definite purpose in going. Several years earlier, I saw a picture of an Indian sage, or guru, and was struck by his effulgence. The immediate affinity I felt toward him prompted me to read a few books that offered explanations of his teachings. But as I read them, more and more questions arose. Even such, a curious yearning continued to grow within me. From the readings, I learned that the sage's presence could be experienced in the present just as vividly as when he was alive fifty years earlier. Believing that to be so, I was motivated to visit his ashram—the settlement built by his devotees that had developed around him.

Actually, I had no reason not to go, since my two sons had completed college and were living on their own, I was unattached, and my crooked career path was somewhat steady. I decided to take an unprecedented six-week leave from work over the holiday season, despite my concern that I might not have a job to return to after such a long absence.

When I asked a friend, who had lived in southern Asia, what I should take, he replied, “An empty suitcase and an empty mind. Leave your perceptions at home.” So, I bought a shoulder bag only big enough to carry a few toiletries, one change of clothes, a sketchpad and a notepad, since I planned to journal my journey. I also brought a book about the sage’s teachings in which I had meticulously marked many of the pages with my questions, hoping to meet someone at the ashram who could answer them.

Though my bag wasn’t completely empty upon flying out from the San Francisco airport, neither was my mind.

2000

First Impressions

When my plane landed in Chennai, India a few minutes before midnight, the passengers were asked to disembark on the runway and walk to the terminal building, which looked more like an airplane hangar than an international airport. Once inside, Indian nationals jammed into long lines in front of several counters while the queues designated for foreigners were short and moved quickly. Following the advice of a travel guidebook, I hired a taxi at a booth beside the exit doors of the terminal. The book also listed accommodations in different price categories. Before arriving in India, I decided to stay in the cheapest lodgings because I wanted to experience the country like an Indian and travel simply by limiting the number of choices I would need to make.

After I paid the fare at the taxi booth, a man led me to the parking area. Hundreds of staring men were quietly crowding behind the entrance barricade. I wondered if an important dignitary were arriving, though I hadn't seen evidence of that inside the building. When my guide pointed at the empty taxi in front of me, he held out his hand, expecting a tip. Since I had carried my own bag, I ignored his request, got into the taxi and shut the door. He pounded on my window while another man leaned his head through the

front window to explain the controls of the car to a boy sitting in the driver's seat. After pulling out of the parking lot, the boy, who didn't appear to be more than fourteen years old, turned to me and asked, "You like my driving?" Then he bounced up and down, like a kid on a carnival ride.

As we entered the city, I saw groups of people intermingling in dimly lit streets as though it were much earlier in the evening than it was. Chennai is the capital of Tamil Nadu, the southernmost state on India's eastern seaboard, and has a population of six million. The traffic was erratic. Streets abruptly changed from one-way to two-way whenever oncoming vehicles appeared. Many of the buildings looked as though they were in ruins and uninhabitable, yet I saw lights flickering from within them. Groups of men were milling around small fires burning on partially paved streets between randomly placed heaps of rubble and garbage.

After driving around for almost an hour, the driver stopped to ask passersby the whereabouts of the guest lodge I requested. People were eager to help him. One man even got into the cab to show him the way. When the driver stopped in a narrow, darkened street in front of a dilapidated building with a crooked iron gate, he indicated that we'd arrived. I wondered if I had written down the wrong address, since the place appeared to be abandoned. Reluctantly, I heeded the driver's gestures to get out of the taxi, walked in front of the gate and called out for assistance. After a few moments, a light switched on and a man appeared from the other side of the gate. Meanwhile, the driver grabbed my arm, demanding a tip. As soon as the gate opened, I pulled away from him. The man inside the gate grabbed the taxi receipt from my hand and yelled at the driver, shaking the receipt in his face. Then he turned to me and calmly said, "He's already been paid." After filling

out several check-in registers and collecting the room fee for one night, he woke up a man sleeping on the stone floor beside the gate and told him to show me to my room.

In the moonlight, the inner courtyard of the lodge looked almost elegant with its centrally positioned artesian well, mature tropical trees and overhanging balconies from the three-story building. When we got to my room on the second floor, he unlocked the door, walked into the room and pulled on a cord that was connected to a light bulb, dangling from the middle of the ceiling. The room was uninviting. Two cots, a table and several chairs were crammed into the dingy space. I then followed the porter to the end of the building, where he pointed out the communal outdoor sink that faced two doors: one opened to a squat toilet and the other to a spigot with a bucket positioned underneath it for taking showers. After giving him the few foreign coins I had acquired en route to India, I went back to my room.

The night was sweltering. I should have been tired, but when I turned the light off to go to sleep, strange sounds and smells in the room held my attention. Sparked by my anxieties, I had a sudden urge to use the toilet. After gathering up my courage and my flashlight, I ventured down the walkway. In the center of the narrow toilet stall was a porcelain platform with raised ledges, one for each foot, and a sewer hole in the middle. On one of the walls of the grimy enclosure, less than an arm's reach away, was a faucet with a plastic bucket beneath, which I'd read was to be used in lieu of toilet paper. Upon returning to my room, I felt confident that the worst part of my first day in India was over and quickly fell asleep.

The next morning, I was woken by the porter's knock on my door. He asked if I wanted breakfast. I was hungry and ordered the only things on his menu—tea, toast and eggs. After he left, I looked out the window from which I

had a view of a field adjacent to a mosque. I soon became mesmerized watching the people who were congregating around the makeshift shacks that lined the edge of the field. Several women were transporting jugs of water on their heads while others were cooking over small, open fires. Bigger children were tending smaller ones. A man was washing his teeth while a little further away several people were conversing. Their decorum conveyed confidence and purpose, which seemed out of sync with their commonplace activities.

I was reading in the travel guide its advice about tipping when the porter returned with two small packages and a glass of steaming hot tea. He appreciated the five-rupee tip, which is equivalent to about ten cents, that I gave him after he set my breakfast on the table. When he left, I unwrapped the newspaper packaging that had been fastidiously tied with thin string; one contained buttered toast and the other, barely warm scrambled eggs. The satisfaction the meal gave my appetite more than made up for its presentation..

I realized my dreary room had become a refuge when I considered wandering outside of it. I didn't recognize the once deserted street when I looked at it that morning from the entrance of the lodge because it was teeming with people, animals and vehicles of every description. I decided to walk around the block just to get my bearing and then return to my room. The meandering street soon turned into a wider one with even more people and activity. Vendors were selling food from carts, boys were playing cricket and cows were grazing on heaps of debris. Though I was curious about everything I saw, I felt out of place because of my foreign appearance, which caught the attention of a boy bathing himself beneath a water pump. His smile eased my discomfort, but as beggars, rickshaw drivers and people trying to sell their services or wares began approaching me,

my pace quickened. I had wanted only to walk around the block, but the configuration of streets didn't allow me that simple goal. I was lost.

At noon, I went into a large restaurant with symmetrically arranged metal picnic tables filling the crowded room and sat down at an empty place at the end of one of them. When the waiter asked for my order, I pointed to the food the others at the table were eating. Within moments he returned, spread a banana leaf in front of me and placed a metal cup of water beside it. I sensed that I was expected to do something by the sober stares of those sitting around



me. The man sitting beside me showed me the way to prepare my leaf by sprinkling water onto it from my cup, rubbing it clean with my hand and shaking the residual water onto the floor. When I finished, the waiter returned with a huge pot from which he scooped a mound of rice onto my leaf. A boy followed him and placed a grouping of 10 small tin cups of prepared food items around the leaf. Following the example of those seated at my table, I poured the contents of one of the cups onto the rice and attempted to eat it with my right hand, which I read is the social convention since the left hand is reserved for attending to one's personal business. I didn't consider putting food into my mouth without utensils would be difficult. However, my hands were encrusted with food, unlike my table companions whose hands remained clean. I was amazed watching them scoop milk up from their banana leaves with a single swipe of their hands. To my eyes, they demonstrated their skill with such ease and finesse that I looked upon them as true masters of the art. If I ever thought eating with hands was primitive, my perception changed in that moment when I was shown its efficiency, resourcefulness and hygienic advantages.

In the days that followed, I wandered through the streets unsuccessfully trying to familiarize myself with the city and adapt to its ways. The architecture was monotonous and there were few landmarks or points of interest to mark the way. I was perpetually disoriented amid the dust and air pollution that gave me headaches and clogged my nose, and the blaring noise that made my ears ring. Yet, I didn't consider getting an earlier return flight because something about the country was enticing me. And, after all, I had a mission.

Heaven's Gate

Every one of the hundred or so buses I saw looked like a relic from another era. Though appearing to be marginally held together, they managed to whiz through the streets loaded beyond belief with people and everything else.

I sat next to a college student on a bumpy, five-hour bus trip to a town south of Chennai. He seemed intent on conversing with me. Though I told him I only spoke English, he continued talking. Hearing an occasional familiar word, I soon realized he had been speaking to me in English all along. Indians speak English faster than I can and tend to join and break words like they do in their native language. While I struggle to understand them, they don't seem to have any trouble communicating in English with each other.

We were sitting right behind the driver who kept honking his horn every few seconds. Above the noise, I could barely hear the well-mannered student, whose conversation never subsided. He asked me where I was going. When I told him about the ashram, he became interested and wanted to know everything I'd learned about its sage.

As we approached the town, the crowded hodgepodge in the streets appeared no different from the city from which we just came. With a population greater than a quarter million people, the town sits beside a mountain that rises from a flat plateau to one thousand six hundred feet. Not only physically impressive, the mountain is believed to be the earthly manifestation of Lord Shiva, the god known for his power to destroy the ego, which is the false identification with oneself. The teeming town is built around one of the most impressive temples in southern India, which hosts a multitude of religious festivals that attract millions of people throughout the year.

Disembarking from the bus, the student asked if he could come with me to the ashram and offered to pay the rickshaw fare. I had no qualms about his request but warned him that the ashram had required me to make reservations three months in advance. Undaunted by my response, he hailed a rickshaw.

As we approached the ashram, the road became densely lined with beggars and vendors' carts positioned on a narrow patch of dirt in front of a three-foot-wide, open sewage canal. When the rickshaw driver whisked us from the congested street through the arched entrance of the ashram, I felt as though I had been lifted into heaven itself. A massive tree shaded the expansive entry courtyard, which was flanked by buildings on two sides and an orchard with a water well on the third. A constant stream of people flowed to and from the buildings while monkeys and peacocks roamed freely among them.

I went into the office with my traveling companion and presented the letter that authorized my stay to the manager. With a scowl on his face, he studied the letter and grunted. Then, he gestured for me to sit in a chair in front of his desk and looked at the student.

“We came together on the bus,” I explained. “He’d also like to stay here.”

The manager gave the student a stern look and began shouting at him in their native language. The student meekly replied but didn’t appear ruffled by the manager’s threatening manner. After chasing the student away, the manager sat down in front of me and said, “You must be very careful of this type.”