

Impressions of India 2014

The long wail and haunting sound of the air horn from the train approaching in the distance tells you that it is around eight o'clock and the Chennai Secunderbad express is on the move. People are crowded around the half barrier with motor bikes auto rickshaws over laden with goods sacks rice of chickens in crates and every conceivable item you can think of

Many do not wait for the barrier to lift but lean their heavy motorbikes to the left and scramble them under the barrier impervious to the danger. Gradually the pressure on the front row increases as more and more push their way to the front line, The growl of the horn intensifies as the express draws ever nearer with a grotesque menacing suddenly with a rushing scream, a blast of air hits you and the huge monster with the heavy diesel engine roars past then the constant repetitive swish, swish as each heavy carriage glides by. This seems endless as each express with its 30 or 35 bogies trundle by, suddenly it is gone and initiates a flurry of activity generated as the human flotsam of India pushes aside any obstacle, and crosses the rails as if life itself depended on it. Rickshaw drivers pull on their ropes to start their engines as bicycles laden down with oddments such as long poles of steel, the odd pig or three sacks of rice the owners struggles through as a tide of movement engulfs the rails as soon as the barriers begins to lift.

Life has resumed in India

The Auto rickshaw has arrived the unmistakable put put of its engine and the smell of petrol exhaust is unmistakable.. Cortee the driver climbs out brushes his rough brown kaki uniform down and smiles Cortee is rather short, stocky and unaware of the stains and dirt clearly visible everywhere on his dress, However his smile soon dispels any other thoughts as an immaculate row of teeth sparkle in the morning sunshine. He greets you with an impeccable "Good morning" in perfect Oxford BBC English as his eyes sparkle friendliness.. He busies himself adjusting the seat, dusting away imaginary debris and stretches the rope that he uses to start the engine from the back

Soon after a quick look back to see all is well in the passenger compartment his head drops and he is engrossed in talk seemingly oblivious to any traffic on the road. As we approach the main road he ignores the danger and turns into the road casting a distasteful glance at the huge lorry bearing down on us at a alarming rate

Near misses are the norm and soon we engage a higher gear and settle to the centre of the road where there are less potholes. To do this you have to ignore any other traffic who enjoy blasting out their warning as they force their way past

Pigs

As soon as you alight on the roof the fresh air hits you like oxygen to a breathless man. The mist lies low on the horizon and the trees sway slightly in the gentle breeze

The view from the roof allows you to see over the surrounding land and the first thing that catches your eye is the pigs. It is their breakfast time as they have been cooped up in a small hut made of oddments of rough wood bound together with thongs The sows love to wallow in a deep water hole and soak up the black mud, At feeding time they can be very aggressive and with one push of their snout catapult a piglet off the ground and away from the swill' Occasional they all scatter and a definite pattern is marked out as the piglets run from one trough to another It is surprising how fast they run putting the horses in the Grand National to shame. The pig keeper wanders almost aimlessly around some times shouting arrgh arrgh and sometime whacking a boar or sow with his staff. The pigs are adept at disappearing scattering in all directions. From the roof they are easily spotted but on ground level the keeper has to visit every secret water hole and whack them back to the hovel they live in.

At odd times they try to copulate and no one seems to care. At feeding time the boar and sows are entirely selfish and the piglets driven away, then later they have their turn as the keeper drives them into their hovel while the younger ones eat.

Morning

Every morning the same ritual is carried out. A woman carrying a water pot trails along the track and fills her water pot in the home. Later an elderly man dressed in untidy white rags gently and painfully walks to the home and sits on the step for a half an hour. He does not talk to anyone and seems to have a licence to rest there and no one bothers him. Later he wanders off to where the pigs were fed and squats on the ground seemingly for hours without a movement.

Two boys are washing at a water pump near the colony. They are naked and splash water over themselves with not a care in the world.

The next phenomenon is the tooth brush brigade who wander about, dream like, with a stick popping out of their mouths giving their teeth an occasional languid rub. The trick seems to be to have this stick in your mouth for as long as possible so that you prove you do have clean teeth.

Bapatla town

An auto rickshaw arrived and the driver carefully and slowly drove us up the rough track leading to the concrete road.

Then steadily increasing speed onto the main road and dropped us at the beginning at College Road. It was strange at first to notice how every one was looking and some wanted to speak and touch. One man mumbled something in English where are you going what he meant was where have you come from I heard USA and told him no London England. He was looking at Sheila's white face and shining grey hair and instinctively his hand reached out almost to touch her face.

His face radiated a big smile and soon we had moved on. The shoe repaired was bust gluing an enormous soul back on to a large sized trainer while the man stood waiting.

He skewered the glued on with his finger moving on we saw a man wrapping cotton onto his big toe and then wiping the thread up and down. We wondered what it was. Sheila suggested he was waxing the thread in preparation for future shoe repairing jobs. I think she was right. Two women and a child came to Sheila they were talking and it some while before we realised they were begging for money.

The shops, well small units, were a hive of activity with lively transactions and gesticulation adding to the sound and colour. Blast from air horns as buses wended their way missing people by inches. The constant toot toot and squeal of motorbike horns and cars and the unheard yet equally dangerous bicycles. Pedit bikes with their platform of wood carrying one lonely passenger.

School buses passed by and you could only just discern dozens of children as smiled and waved through the windows reminding me of the jails in the Philippines.

Occasionally a guru like figure with staff in hand would stop and confront you reaching out his knarled hand to salute or bless you I wasn't sure which. Moving on we came to a cross roads which was a challenge of your dexterity agility and maneuverability with motorbikes coming at you from all directions. They have no set pattern they could go in any direction so you have to keep your wits about you.

We meet Annu. He is smartly dressed with a pin striped suit which looks fine until you notice a huge pot belly. Annu smiles and converses unaware of my desperate attempts to place him. Later I was told that I last met him 8 years ago when he was working for Pastor Raja and then suddenly married a woman from Holland and then were planning to set up another orphanage in Bapatla.

We stop to buy some sweets for the children a modern sign proclaimed Bangalore Bakeries. College Road Bapatla. The sweets are in a cabinet and together is only one circular box containing dozens maybe 60 sweets. They are like our And are very Moorish.

Last year I remember I had a box full all my own.

We search out a place to buy an ice cream and found a place upstairs in a sort of restaurant , the lighting was dim and the tables were set out for the evening business. The owner offers two but strangely Sheila does not want one so we pay R40 and return to our auto rickshaw.

Morning visitors

A woman carrying a pot on her head appears slowly wending down the track leading from the nearby colony to the home.

Every morning about this time she comes and then with her pot full she returns to her village.

The train

We arrive on the station to find a big red neon sign proclaiming 7 59 PM I am shocked, our train usually late does not leave until 10 15 PM We wander in a long procession down the platform stopping for a moment to look longingly at the air con rest room for A/C passengers sadly this is India and it is dark locked we move slowly on They stop where there is some seating on a little platform and a man crouching with a light blue turban squats fiddling with something unknown. After a while we realise this is not a good place The mosquitoes are active so we move on retreating down the platform to cross over the bridge onto platform 3 . It is a long platform and the red flickering lamps of the indicator boards proclaim train numbers and then car number. This comes from platform 2 as platform 3 is not working.

We trail down languidly till we find a nice tiled seat and rest for a while There is Sujan Raja the Dossies son , Doss is the trustee who is employed by the railway and lives nearby in a railway employee home.

We wander alternately with seating 8 30PM then 9 PM comes and goes we talk spasmodically trying to swipe at mosquitoes and avoid eye contact with the various groups of young men who wander the platform who are looking for opportunities.

The loud speakers blast out an eerie sound as the Vijjawadda train from Chennai is approaching platform 1 Suddenly there is movement along the platform as gathering belongings and an assortment of bags and carriers the people drop down onto the rails and cross over to platform 1.

We watch as the approaching air

Then from time to time the silence of the evening is broken by an approaching freight train. The lights appear afar off then the long wailing and haunting sound of the air horn and with a rush which is breathtaking the mad monster screams through the platforms followed by the 40 or 60 bogies

With a rush of refreshing wind that blows all mosquitoes away.

From time to time Sujan wanders off to ask at the office what time the train is coming or more positively how late will it be. This information is relayed with a India smile that takes any thought of complaint away At last 10 o'clock arrives then 10 20 and an amazing announcement is made on the tannoy The super-fast Express from Chennai to Hyderabad train no 246060 will arrive at platform 3 in five minutes. We gather together our luggage and gaze longingly down the platform to spot the initial lights of the train. Quickly we say our good bye and hug each other as the train approaches. Who will be the first to spot H-A/C on the side of the bogie. Carriages rush past and then gradually slowing the train eases to a halt

We are running as Pastor Raja sports the H A/c the conductor is waiting above as we scramble to load the heavy cases and jump aboard For a moment all is chaos as Doss gets stuck trying to carry the heavy case and the smaller wheeled one through the door to A A compartment we heave and pull and finally collapse gratefully into the compartment which is dimly lit and already occupied by two sleepy persons on the top bunks. We say goodbye to Raja and Doss shaking hands as they disappear then suddenly realising all the noise we have made are aware of two sleeping passengers. We stoop down to lower the heavy bunk and spread out the sheets and to arrange the heavy rough kaki blankets. They are of heavy duty and lined with satin edges. I locate and visit the Western toilet and as usual find it to be wet and dirty.

Then soon closing the curtain of the compartment and sliding the wooden framed door into place settling down to sleep. The train seems to be intent on keeping you awake by a series of rock jolts and swaying. This is severe at times keeping you wondering if the wheels will come off the rails. The train is amazingly quite very smooth and yet at times alarmingly violent.

Has the driver consumed vast quantities of alcohol and is intent on driving the train to destruction. Has he set the controls to fast and fallen asleep?

Through periods of dozing sleep and wakefulness when painful limbs are stretched and eyes seek any movement from the top bunks the night passes in a moment and with sudden realization that it is dawn and the time is 5 o'clock and time to quickly visit the toilet clean teeth and freshen up before the morning rush begins. Sheila scrambles out of her bed and trots off to the toilet she is back quickly as there is a queue. The train slows and then stops outside Secunderbad it is dark outside and it takes another half an hour before we enter the station.

Suddenly there is a flurry of activity as we grab cases and drag them to the door where Joseph appears and with one mighty heave grabs the two cases and disappears. We struggle to the door and drop down to the platform where we hug and greet each other. Joseph sets off at a pace weaving in and out sometimes avoiding sometimes pushing and soon we are out in to the car park. The air is surprisingly fresh and the melee of cars auto rickshaws buses and people crushed into gridlock honking tooting and air horns blasting are engrossed in extracting themselves from the trap. Using the back streets Joseph finds a peaceful path away from the noise and we wend our way to a fairly quiet main road and to Mary waiting at the gates.

Peddyim Home is situated north east of Visakhapatnam in a rural area. Around the home are cultivated cauliflowers, nuts, herbs and general vegetables. The women are up early in the fields and working cutting the cauliflowers into baskets and leaving them stacked at the side of the road ready to be picked up. The market does a huge trade supplying the city and lorries leave at 5 AM for the city. The flowers and fruit are prolific and the market teems with people either buying or selling. The smell, the noise the color are a rich tapestry from which a marvelous photo opportunity is available.

I asked the pastor how much you paid the man he said 20 rupees, I was shocked as I had pressed R200 into his hand as a tip.

Auto rickshaws had come laden and over laden with baskets tied on at all angles completely out of balance and blocking any moves to overtake them.

Hyderabad city is a chaotic place. A large city bustle populated with over 3,700,000 seeking to live in there severely polluted atmosphere and cope with constant gridlock traffic and rough roads potholed everywhere

The city are in progress of building an elevated metro system which while building is imposing severe restrictions on normal driving. Another 2000 licenses are issued every month adding to the millions of motorbike Old lorries and thousands of auto rickshaws. There are no police there are no rules on the road. If you think you can do you are right so jungle law applies.