

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GSA - 11
India--Delhi again.

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Dear Dick,

The last time I was here, in the summer of 1960, I came alone and lived in a hotel. Now I am escorted by a memsahib and four children. In 1960 I came with only a reader's knowledge of India, although five years spread between Vietnam and Lebanon had given me some inkling of what to expect. Now, as a result of that trip and of work at Oxford, I have a general idea of what's going on, and I can find my way about with comparative ease. The unknown country before me looms bigger than ever, but I do at least know some of the roads into it. The difference between that trip and this, then, is the amount of domestic responsibility and background knowledge that I've brought with me. Both have made their imprint on the past weeks.

It has been fun to return to places I've been before—even if only for a short time—and to see sights that seem familiar. The bullocks pulling their carts and stolid buffalo still amble through the city, giving it a peaceful air not entirely dispelled by Sikh taxi drivers honking their way down the wrong side of the street. The sweets and skewered kebabs in sidewalk cookeries are still enticing. The same gongs sound rapidly from Hindu temples. In Bombay two weeks ago the dhows slanted across the harbor as they did in 1960 and as they must have done in Conrad's day. The increasing heat is again thawing Thames chill from my bones—the other day it was 89 in the shade and 107 in the sun. Also, it's a pleasure to be among Indians, who are, with few exceptions, friendly to the friendly. A grin in almost any situation draws a favorable response. Nor has it been too difficult to adjust again to the pace of India. For if it has taken two letters, four forms, five trips to the post-office, and seven weeks to get a telephone installed, it took us nine months in Oxford.

The difference in domestic status between 1960 and now has been occupying much of my, and of Nancy's, time since we arrived two months ago. There have been the usual problems of finding schools, a place to live, furnishings, and transport. Schools were the easiest to arrange. Through Indian friends who had gone there we heard of the school of the Convent of Jesus and Mary (C.J.M. to the initiate), which has been educating the upper crust here for many years. Although there are English, American, Asian, and African girls in the school, most of the girls are Indian. Our daughters seem to fit in well. The English curriculum and style of teaching are familiar, and they like the discipline.

The boys' side of the compound was full, so we couldn't get Geoffrey in. He is going to one of New Delhi's many garden schools, is learning to read, and gets dirty enough to keep him happy. The baby, of course, doesn't go to school, but goes to the park nearby and has learned to salute the chowkidar, or watchman.

Transport proved to be less of a problem than we had feared, although we could not make arrangements from England by mail as we had in the case of the girls' school. Indian state-owned enterprises manufacture cars—Morris models of the mid-Fifties, the dies for which have been sent out from England—and there are imported cars here, too. Also, one can import a car. But it's not that simple. On cars imported straight into the country, there is a duty of 150%. (It is proposed in the present budget to reduce this to 60%.) Once it's imported the owner can sell his car at any time. He must, however, according to a regulation about three years old, sell it to the State Trading Corporation—which will pay him somewhere near his original purchase price, but not the duty he paid. Unless the person is a diplomat and imported the car duty-free, he loses a lot of money. Diplomats come out about even. The Government instituted the obligatory sale of imported cars to the State Trading Corporation to prevent profiteering. It now makes the money itself.

Tourists can import cars if they take them out of the country within a specified time. We, who are here under a change-of-residence visa, might also have been able to import a car under bond and take it out of the country after several years. But I've not been able to find out here if such arrangements can be made, and anyway no one at the Indian High Commission in London had heard of it, so we didn't import a car. We bought an Indian car, an Ambassador model made by Hindustan Motors in Calcutta. Instead of having to wait months or years for our name to reach the top of the list, which all except special categories of Indians do, we got the car in a month. We were given a special priority because we paid for it in foreign currency, sterling brought from England for the purpose. The car just had its 500-mile service and so far it runs well.

Finding the flat where we now live, negotiating for it, and settling in, which in our case meant finding furnishings, has been an enlightening process—an experience I certainly never had last time here. Nancy and I have become aware, even if somewhat superficially, of aspects of Indian and Delhi life ranging from the economic and social to the climatic. To put all this in perspective, it may help to give a little background.

Delhi is more than a city, although we have been mostly concerned with its urban area. It is a Union Territory, an enclave with its own government, but one that operates under the direct control of the Federal Government in a manner analagous to that of the District of Columbia. The Territory has an area of 573 square miles and a population of 2,600,000. With the exception of some fringes of 'countryside', having a population of 43,500, the Territory consists of the city of Delhi, which in turn is divided in common parlance into Delhi and New Delhi. New Delhi, as its name implies, is new, being less than 50 years old.

Early settlements in Delhi, however, date back 2000 years, and occupation has been continuous since the eighth century. From the late twelfth century onwards Delhi was the seat of Muslim dynasties, and from the early fifteenth century it became the seat of the Mogul Emperors, of Babur, Humayun, Akbar, and their sons. After 200 years or so, Mogul fortunes waned and Delhi was taken by the Marathas, warlike groups from the Deccan plateau east of Bombay. The Marathas' turn came in 1803. They lost Delhi to the British, and from this date, with the exception of six months during the rebellion of 1857, the British controlled Delhi until Indian independence. They continued to rule the country from Calcutta until 1911, however, and only then did the Viceroy move the capital to Delhi. New Delhi was yet to be.

Conceived as a monumental imperial capital by, among others, the King-Emperor, George V, New Delhi only came into being in the 1920's. The area it now occupies was designated on a map in the 1918 edition of Murray's Handbook, India, Burma, and Ceylon as the "Projected Permanent Capital." The first cornerstone was laid in 1921, and work began on such huge buildings as Government House (the Viceroy's residence and now called Rashtrapati Bhavan or the President's House), the adjoining Secretariat offices, and the circular Parliament building (Pentagon-like with its thousand offices and eight miles of corridors). The city was formally inaugurated in 1931. Its residential areas consisted of generously proportioned villas, called bungalows, on broad, tree-lined avenues. These houses were built largely by the government for officials. Few private houses were built, and New Delhi remained a government town and a small one at that. The population of all Delhi in 1941 was only 918,000 and that of New Delhi could not have exceeded 150,000. It was probably a good deal less.

In the years since World War II the population of Delhi Territory has grown steadily. The population in 1951 was 1,745,000 and in 1961, 2,660,000. The jump of nearly 865,000 between 1941 and 1951 was caused in large part by Partition in 1947. Nearly 500,000 persons, according to the Delhi Census office, were defined as displaced persons in 1951, and there must have been many others whose presence in Delhi was indirectly caused by the holocaust of those years. The increase of nearly a million from 1951 to 1961 is explained partly by natural increase and largely by government expansion and by immigration to the city—the commonly-known attraction of the city over the country to rural persons seeking their fortune. The city also became more important commercially and this has affected New Delhi especially, for many of the Indian upper-middle class prefer to live here, and the foreign commercial and diplomatic communities, with few exceptions, live on this side of town. One result of this growth has been a shortage of housing.

Generally speaking, two types of residential housing have grown up to meet the needs of the increasing population and the desire for uncrowded houses and large flats by the Indian upper-middle classes and foreigners. One was of very low-cost housing. This took two forms. The first was constructed on the western edges of New Delhi soon after the War. Overcome by the rapidity of the population increase, these areas have become overcrowded and unsanitary. The census people with whom I

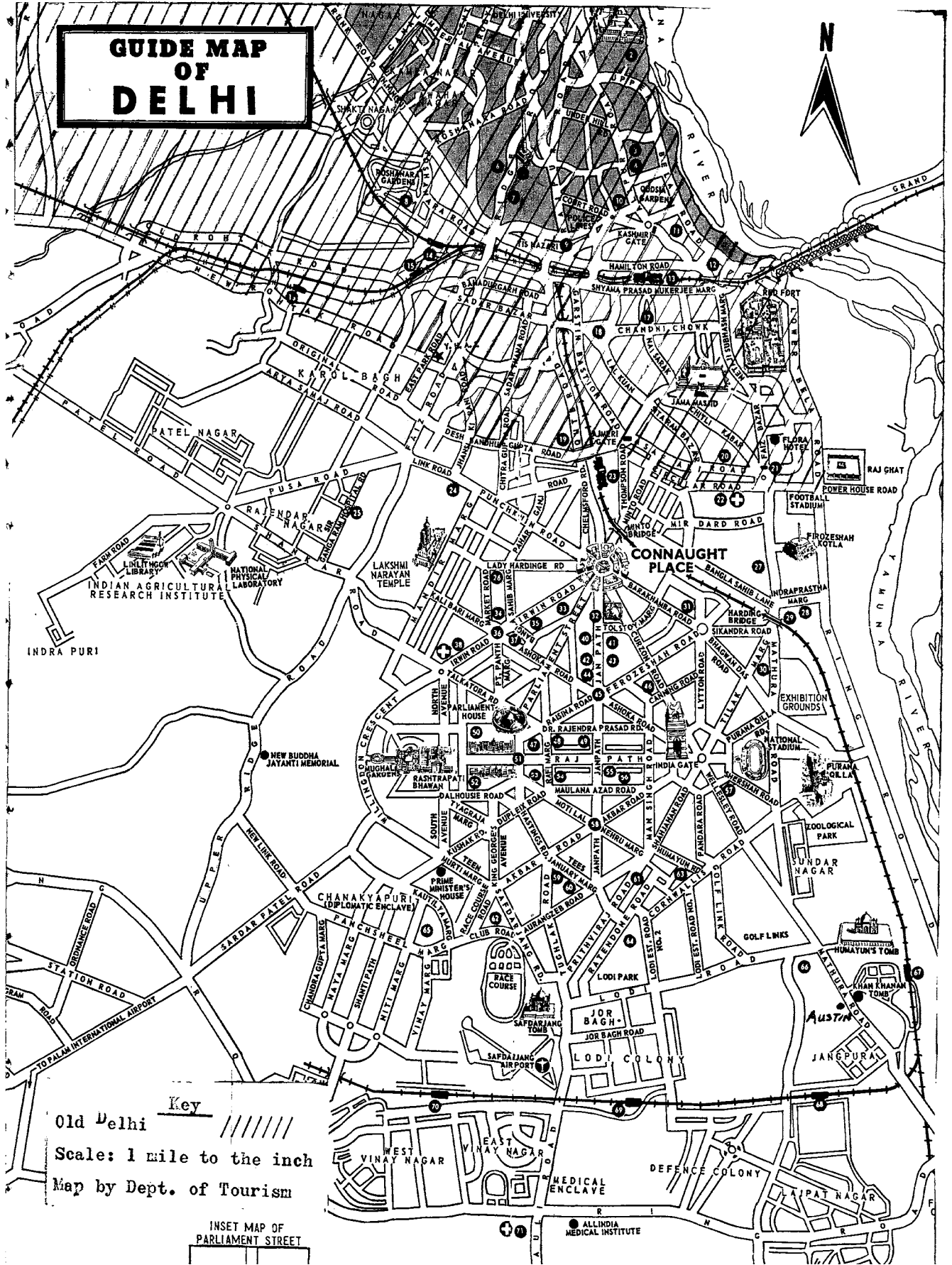
talked thought that they were the worst slums in India, worse even than the tenements of Calcutta and Bombay. They do not seem quite that bad from the outside because the buildings are usually two stories high and thus do not give the same feeling of toppling filth. The second variety of low-cost housing has been and is being built primarily by the government for low-ranking civil servants. It consists of large blocks of one and two stories filled with small flats. By your standards and mine they are small, hot, often overcrowded, and remote from the inhabitants' place of work. But seen in the context of New Delhi, they are reasonably good. These blocks of flats are grouped together on the southern fringes of the city in what are called colonies or Nagars, and they are frequently named after heroes of the independence movement. There is Patel Nagar and Lajpat Nagar (after Lala Lajpat Rai), and Sarojini Nagar (after Sarojini Naidu, who was also a poet).

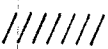
The second category of residential area has developed since 1950. These are also called colonies and have names such as Defence Colony, Sunder Nagar, Jorbagh, and Nizamuddin, but they consist of separate, single and two-story houses, usually set in small gardens, and they have been built by private individuals. Many of the two-story houses have been divided into two flats--as has the house we live in. The peculiarity of New Delhi in general and this type of colony in particular is that few houses are occupied by their owners. In 1961 the Delhi Census took a 20% sample of the dwelling places in New Delhi and found that of 11,032 dwellings, 9,501 were rented by the occupants and only 1,531, were occupied by their owners. More Indians than foreigners live in these colonies, but few foreigners live elsewhere in the city.

Such was the Delhi in which the Austins arrived on 27 January and in which we had to find a place to live. We first thought of old Delhi because it is sleepy and pleasant, but ultimately rejected it as too far from schools and most of the Indians and foreigners that I want to know. Besides, there were few houses available in old Delhi. In New Delhi, the bungalows were out, being either government owned--and rented to ranking officials for 10% of their salary--or, if privately owned, frightfully expensive. Rents for them begin at \$600 a month and \$800 is not uncommon. The Nigerian High Commissioner, a lawyer involved informed me, got taken for a rental of \$1600 monthly for a house until Lagos sent out an official to put him in more conservative quarters. Equally unacceptable were the very low-cost areas. We were left with the bourgeois colonies, where the architecture, by the way, might be described as neo-mediocre.

There were more flats available in our type of area than I had suspected, and than the general overcrowding in the city might have lead one to believe. Yet supply did not much exceed demand. Consequently, prices were high. We could have found a four-bedroom place in Defence Colony for just over \$200 a month, but this newer, rawer area is short of water in the summer and the electricity supply is erratic. There is nothing one can do about the electricity, but if tanks are installed to hold extra water, the house becomes more expensive. In other colonies, a place large enough for us would have cost \$400 a month or more. There were, however, some flats at prices between these two figures.

GUIDE MAP OF DELHI



Old Delhi Key 
Scale: 1 mile to the inch
Map by Dept. of Tourism

INSET MAP OF
PARLIAMENT STREET

ALL INDIA
MEDICAL INSTITUTE

Our choice of a place to live was influenced by things other than electricity, water, and the distance from schools, etc. A major consideration was the effect of climate. For example, the place we could have taken in Defence Colony had the necessary space, but it was a two-story house, several rooms faced West, and there was no shade. Temperatures in New Delhi during May and June reach 115 in the shade, and air conditioners cost \$650 each new and not less than \$275 used--if such can be found. Considering the house plus these other factors, what should one do? Unless one can afford to air-condition much of the house, the answer is, Don't take it. The second floor will be especially hot, not having another story above it. The West-facing rooms will catch the sun at its hottest and will be oven-like until late at night. And with no shade, everything will be that much worse.

Because we hope to live without air conditioning, we held out for a place that suited us better. We managed to find a ground floor flat with a good deal of shade from trees and surrounding buildings in a house running East to West. One room gets the early morning sun, and another gets a few hours of afternoon sun--which we will try to fend off with chiks, or cloth-backed bamboo screens. Being on the ground floor, everyone assures us, will keep the rooms at least five degrees cooler. Time will tell if any of our self-congratulation is warranted. People living without air conditioning in second floor flats by the way, usually sleep on the roof, but during the day find little refuge from the heat.

Furnishing our flat has been a lot more fun than finding it, although women seem to fret unduly about color schemes. Handwoven fabrics here are cheap by most standards and the colors of the best of them are rich and exciting. Our living/dining room curtains are Khadi (Gandhi's homespun cloth) in a brown print--cost, 78 cents a meter. For beds and sofas we've used local string beds called charpoys. They cost \$1.90 each, but mattresses for them are more expensive. We've relied for much of our sitting on bamboo and string stools and chairs--big stools, called moiras, cost 63 cents. Wood is expensive, however, and a 4 x 8 foot sheet of $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood for our dining table--it rests on concrete blocks--cost \$19.00. All in all it has cost about \$150 to furnish our (large) living/dining room, not counting the books and record player that we sent out from England. To a woman this probably sounds cheap, but figures much beyond a dollar scare me.

Renting a place to live at Delhi's inflated prices, and even the cost of a moira, have made us personally aware of the colossal, much-talked-of gap between the rich and the poor, between the tiny fraction of persons at the top and the great mass of the people. We are part of the rich fraction. We pay for this flat each month twice as much money as we pay our sweeper in a year, and he is better paid and fed by us than he would be by an Indian family--not, mind you, because we are more virtuous, but because we couldn't get him for less. Our moiras at three rupees each constitute a day's wage for most Indians. So does a jar of strawberry jam. Yet our cook and sweeper seem to like being in a comfortable and reasonable well-equipped household, and even seem to frown on such low-brow devices as sofas from charpoys and a table

made by placing plywood on concrete blocks. Our infinitely superior financial status seems to bother them not at all, whereas we think of it frequently. This is India's major problem: the rich can afford to think of the gap—I wonder how deeply we do, for it doesn't reach our bellies—and the poor don't think about it enough. As is frequently observed here, until the comfort of the one and the apathy of the other are pierced, India's economic advancement will proceed very slowly.

The question of speed, and therefore of time, preoccupies, I suppose, everyone who thinks about India. Here in Nizamuddin we are the neighbors of time, for just across the road is Khan-i-Khanan's massive tomb. Khan-i-Khanan was the title of Abdur Rahim Khan who served in the courts of the Mogul Emperors Akbar and Jehangir until he died in 1627. Now, our children and many others play in the garden around the tomb. There, also, scholars young and old consult their books, economic textbooks for some and scriptures 1500 years old for others. The myna birds strut about while pariah kites circle the dome of the tomb. And the irrigation water for the flower-beds smells mildly of sewage. A scene so broad in time that it is timeless? There always has been time in India. But how much is left? Is there any psychological, political deadline for reaching some (undefinable) level of social and economic achievement so as to forestall national upheaval? I wish we knew.

Yours sincerely,

Red. Austin

Granville S. Austin