

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GSA - 5

India: No home runs in Bombay

Marina Hotel
New Delhi
Room 24Written in Bombay
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Dear Dick,

One may have enough of travel, like wine, at a sitting, but soon after indulging the appetite returns. It was an adventure three days ago to take my 36 pounds of luggage and begin the most tortuous of all journeys, that from hotel to airport. In India, though, fewer people fly, life is more informal anyway, and the whole business is less like a hospital where one is prepped, etherized, and convalesced helpless and almost by remote control. Flying in the States or in Europe seems to have the irresistible progress of a wheeled stretcher down a surgery corridor. Here it is more a family affair.

A journey mood hits people in airports and the passengers rev up before the motors do. Caught for a spell between here and there, this and that, travelers loose a gaiety, some intimacy, that they strap away again with their seatbelts. There is an atmosphere of limbo about such waiting rooms. despite the neon airline signs, signs saying Foreign Exchange, the come-on book covers, and the hidden voices muttering unintelligible commands. I am about to be separated from earth and reincarnated in Bombay. The lounge at Palam had an assortment of bright eyed people: two Slays in brown wool suits looking a bit lost; a party of American women, thin eyebrowed, sparkling lipped, Carolina voiced--their leader had receding double chins above her dangerously loose sundress; a silver haired Italian with his sunglasses case fastened to his belt--accompanied by a blonde lady with wrinkles under her necklace; an Indian family of five, all attractive, and 'non-vege' I learned from being behind the husband in line. They got chicken sandwiches instead of cucumber ones at tea. I did, too. No one asked if I was vege or non-vege. People came and went, tapped each other on the chest, grasped elbows and escorted each other around, kissed, shook hands and then shook hands again. Abruptly, in response to an antlike, undiscernible signal, those on Flight 184 sorted themselves out, folded their personalities, and went single file into the airplane and became, except for the four who existed in profile or quarter-view from the rear, just the backs of heads.

Rising out of Delhi and heading westwards over the Punjab, with the ventilators whistling in my ears, I could see the brown and green postage-stamp holdings of the peasants, the concrete circles of wells, and some fields still flooded by the Jumna, which is not quite back to normal level. Occasionally there were clusters of houses, as pigeons around a nut. (I had a window seat, thanks to an airlines official who sympathized with my desire

to see India from 18,000 feet.) We hadn't been flying more than 20 minutes, and by that time we were headed southwest over Rajasthan, when I began to see long, low ridges rising like scar tissue out of the farmland. They were green with a thin grass that let the soil show through. I thought they were eskers, but they ran in all directions, not rather north and south as well-behaved eskers do in New England. No animals grazed on them.

A half hour or so later, the landscape changed again. Now there were sharp ridges, which, instead of lying about at random, formed rough circles and circles within circles with gaps in their circumferences to let a dry stream bed out or a peasant in to plow a square at the center. The same thin grass and increasingly more scrub covered the ridges. Here, I got the feeling that the land was still basically flat, that these crater-like formations were exceptions. But soon the land became more hilly--though I'd guess that none of the hills were over two or three hundred feet above the valleys. The scrub gave way to trees that must have been about 30 feet high. Only patches were forested; most of the trees were content alone. Huts were rare and I saw no villages and only one town--though the map shows some. Nor did I see animals grazing, though it looked like feasible cattle or sheep country. But why raise cattle in a country where few eat beef and not many more eat meat of any kind?

Vietnam was the first country that I saw frequently with a bird's eye, so I tend to compare many other areas with it--as a boy for years compares girls to his mother. Flying northeast from Saigon, away from the rice paddies toward Dalat or toward the savannahs or grassy plains that ripple north from Banmethuot, one looks down on low hills of the same shape, punctuated by trees and made by the soil and a bit of altitude so different from the land near them. This resemblance grew greater as we arrived at a point about two-thirds of the way from Delhi to Bombay where the trees unite into forest and the only sharp lines are the shadows in the valleys because all the hilltops and ravine edges are rounded off (by some trick of erosion) as are the mock hills on three dimensional, hard paper maps. There were still occasional flat bottomed valleys with plowed squares in them. We passed over a dozen small brush fires. Now and then a stretch of land was barren and desertlike, but colored brown, not khaki.

Somewhere, I never noticed it, there was a height of land and the rivers, instead of running against us, were running with us toward the sea. By then we had returned to the savannah and the low sun, it was nearing six o'clock, cast shadows much longer than the trees were tall, as scuffs in the snow are longer than the bootprints they lead to. Clouds had been beside us most of the way--dabs of cotton. Now a smooth orange sea stretched to a precise horizon. Then the irregular shoreline of the salt sea appeared under it and I realized that we were flying nearly south along the coast. The plane began to make strange noises and lose altitude. Silver snakes twisted to the sea to drink. We left the shadowy hills and turned into the sun, flew low over tin shacks, and landed at Santa Cruz airport, Bombay.

It took the bus an hour to wheedle its way through the traffic of most of Bombay to get to the hotel. In the beginning the narrow streets were aromatic and decrepit with junkyards and houses of empty tar barrels. Then they became four lanes with grass and trams in the middle. The apartment houses lining the road teemed with people. Chinese in their overcrowding,

they lacked only long poles heavy with drying clothes propped over the street to be in Hong Kong, Singapore, or Cholon. The first shopping area we came to was more crowded than any place I've seen. The stores--selling everything from groceries to sarees--were not just packed, they were jammed. Everywhere was lighted up and betinseled for Diwali week. The frequent temples weren't as well patronized as the stores. Explosions reminiscent of Saigon's plastic and Beirut's dynamite turned out to be firecrackers--more Diwali. Cars bumper to bumper and door handle to door handle filled the streets and shoppers sidled and twisted among them, engulfing us as inevitably as soup does croutons. We reached the hotel--another Ritz--despite all. The hotel is very comfortable, more than adequate in every way, but it sells only American cigarettes (more expensive and no better, as far as I can taste, than Indian ones), serves no Indian food, and appears to have no Indian guests. I dislike being in a white hotel in a brown country.

I made a few phone calls and wrote a few notes to people here the night I arrived. The next morning at seven Minoo Masani got me out of bed to apologize for not having been home the night before when I rang and to invite me to his house at five that afternoon to go through his papers. Masani lives in Bombay and has a managerial consultants business here. We had hoped that he still had some documents from the Fundamental Rights and Minorities Sub-Committees of the Constituent Assembly as he was a member of both. I was also hoping for some letters and other material about the break-away of the Congress Socialist Party from the Congress in 1946--Masani had been in the Socialist wing of the Congress since the early Thirties. His tea was excellent--itself a treat in India, his view over the Arabian Sea was soothing, his manner was as engaging as usual, but we found no papers of value to me. He wonders, too, where his files have got to. By law of averages I was due for a blind alley, so I've no complaints.

At 10:30 that same Monday morning I started for Raj Bhavan, the Governor's Mansion, behind a taxi driver who rolled his head constantly as if he were trying to scratch his neck on his collar. With all this cranial activity he still got lost, but he managed it to the Governor's in time for my appointment at 11:00. The ride along Marine Drive over Malabar Hill to Malabar Point was very Mediterranean. The trees and the tint of their shadows had that Cote d'Azur look. (There's a 'one-up' sentence if ever I saw one.) Malabar Point is green, well mowed and peaceful with the sound of the sea. Raj Bhavan, the building itself, was a complete surprise. It was well painted and appointed, but it was built of wood in the style popular, in New England early in this century, for lakeside summer homes. It had a perky, comfortable airiness so absent from the customary bureaucratic stonework. The Governors of States in India are appointed by the President in New Delhi. Sri Prakasa was appointed because he was an able administrator--though a Governorship is an honorary position, and because of the prestige he had gained by not being a member of any factions in the Congress during his more than forty years as a leading member of the party. Governor Prakasa, who was 70 last August, was at Cambridge from 1911 to 1914--Prime Minister Nehru was at Cambridge until 1910. The two met for the first time in London. The Governor talked happily and frankly--most of his views are unorthodox by Congress standards--about life and politics in India, about the background of the present Constitution, including the British role in Partition, and about his disappointments in the present regime. But he barely touched the Constituent Assembly. After a few

tugs on the reins went unheeded, I gave up. Last of all, he had preserved no papers from the Assembly. I wouldn't call the Governor a blind alley, just a charming byway.

The Thursday and Friday before I left Delhi I went to the National Archives twice, each time with a bundle of papers for their micro-filming section. Thursday afternoon I went with the back seat of a taxi full of President Prasad's papers and Friday I took a much smaller, but not to be disparaged, bundle of Alladi Krishnaswamy Ayyar's. Ayyar was a famous, non-Congress, Madras lawyer, much respected for his objectivity and grasp of Constitutional Law. But those who are listened to respectfully are not always heeded and I've yet to find the sum of his influence on the Constitution. This group of his papers contained a few letters and many of his Notes on the early Articles of the Constitution--primarily on Fundamental Rights. The rest of his papers are in Benares; getting them will be another chapter. Anyway, last Friday night I breathed easier than I had in weeks.

Mrs. Savita Ambedkar, widow of the renowned Untouchable, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who was Chairman of the Constituent Assembly's Drafting Committee, is next on my list here after Masani and Governor Prakasa. I am trying to get in touch with her now. But this is not easy. If I do meet her and have any luck with the late Doctor's papers, it will make a rousing postscript to this letter.

Sincerely,

Red Austin

Granville Austin

P.S. Well, this won't be rousing, but things are looking up. I talked with Mrs. Ambedkar this morning in the house of a doctor friend of hers. Everything was jolly. She told me that after our meeting in Delhi last month she had instructed the librarian of Siddharth College here, who is more or less the custodian of Doctor Ambedkar's papers, to extract some of the better ones for me and to allow me to go through the lot if I wanted to. I'd tracked this librarian to his home in the depths of Bombay yesterday--after two attempts to find Mrs. Ambedkar had yielded only hazy negatives--only to find that he was in Allahabad. But he is coming home today or tomorrow, his daughter expects. I left a message with her for him to get in touch with me. Mrs. A. will also try to reach him. By Saturday morning I may get a peek at the treasure trove--nothing can happen before then as tomorrow is Diwali and the next day is the Hindu New Year. Stroke your rabbit's foot for me. A happy byproduct of these negotiations and convolutions is that tonight and tomorrow I am to be initiated into the deeper secrets of Diwali by Mrs. Ambedkar's and the good doctor's friends. In the ceremonies tonight, businessmen felicitate the Goddess of Wealth. Maybe I'll get a tip or two.

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