

MY PRIVATE INDIA

ERIC MEOLA

OCTOBER 2007

I am in an air-conditioned car somewhere in the streets of Kolkata, scrolling through the names on my cell phone: *Pankaj, Deepak, Namas, Saritha, Venkat, Narendra, Mahesh* . . . I ask the driver to turn off the cold air as my lenses will fog as soon as I jump out, which might be at any moment now.

The summer heat has wrapped itself around us, but inside the car there is only the ubiquitous, incessant sound of honking horns. I watch through the window as men in the street sell fruit, candy, pots, tires, rope . . . all manner of things. A woman walks by breast-feeding her baby. A man, completely naked, walks by in the opposite direction.

What seems like a thousand thousand cars are simmering in the heat, packed within fractions of an inch of one another. Bicyclists weave in and out of the interstices of space between. A man approaches a porter carrying a huge container of water strapped to his back; lifting a bowl to his mouth he drinks, then dips again, and lifting the bowl far above his head he empties a waterfall over his body. Another man is kneeling nearby, welding a car's axle. Yet another is squatting at the street's edge repairing shoes, the tools of his trade scattered in dull scraps at his feet.

Dogs, cattle, goats, monkeys, cats, and children scurry through the traffic-choked streets. A man sleeps on his back in a cart. A donkey falls asleep while standing up. In ultra-slow motion we drift by a spotless polished Rolls Royce sitting on a rotating pedestal in a showroom. Billboards for Gucci and Prada hang above a man sitting on the pavement, legs crossed, eyes closed . . . motionless. There are no two-way or one-way streets. There are only Everyway streets—left, right, forward, and back. And around and around.

A woman knocks on our window, begging. Just beyond her a bus driver is counting money, the bills crisply folded between fingers of a closed hand while the fingers of the other hand leaf through tightly packed 10-rupee notes.

Suddenly I remark to my guide about this seemingly infinite chaos, which somehow seems choreographed by some unknown force. In its own way, the way of India, there is an order to this world I see spinning out of control. Nowhere is anyone quarreling, nowhere does anyone seem unhappy. A bit impatient perhaps. The honking horns fill my ears again. My ears pick up the incongruous ring of an old thumb-operated bell on a bicycle's handlebars . . . and then a calliope, its high-pitched notes a perfect metaphor for the circus in front of me.

I comment to my guide about how thunderstruck I am that everything seems to keep going, that somehow, despite a million people moving in opposite directions, despite an overwhelming sense of "it" not working, everyone will get to where they are going. He breaks into a grin and says, "Well, your country gave us that, you know!"

Seeing my puzzled look he continues: “Your great writer from America, Thoreau. He taught us this, this sense of acceptance, this inner peace, this patience with life.” It is not the first time I have been lectured about Thoreau by an Indian. Once, in a small village in the Rann of Kutch, a man came out of a doorway bent over from the blinding sun, which beat down mercilessly. He walked a few steps, then turned and asked me about Thoreau and told me how much Thoreau’s writings meant to him. And to Gandhi.

Suddenly I am wrenched back to the present—the driver is beginning to make a U-turn! He not only has the audacity to consider it, but somehow in this sea of metal on metal he accomplishes the impossible.

JANUARY 2007

. . . Seven and a half hours to Paris, two hours on the ground, another seven and a half hours to Mumbai, a delayed flight, and five hours in a dreary, dark lounge before going on another two hours to Delhi. Two hours for the luggage to come off the plane, and three waiting in line to report my check-in luggage had been lost. On to customs and the rep from the tourist board. But customs agent Singh has something different in mind, and I am soon in the midst of the abyss of Indian bureaucracy. I watch as my camera pack is taken into a labyrinthine room and locked away. Three days later my luggage is found and the equipment released. Then a 14-hour night drive to Allahabad to see the Kumbh Mela, the blinding light of oncoming headlights erasing my body’s need to collapse in exhaustion. The next day I am wedged in a mass of human flesh locked so tight that all movement is suspended by a simple law of physics: 10 million people cannot occupy the same space at the same time.

A few days later in Varanasi I watch as five women walk down the steps of the Sankatha ghat and with reverence place a diya at the water’s edge. It floats out to me. I can feel my body’s resistance give in to the week’s endurance marathon. . . . the sun is out now and all the colors are electric. An old man walks to the water’s edge and pours water from a small copper pitcher into the Ganges. Life on the river is in ebb and flow. . . . Suddenly my thoughts are interrupted by my guide’s voice. “You take many, many ‘snaps,’ so many, many ‘snaps.’”

. . . Amritsar, or the “pool of nectar,” is the center of the Sikh religion; in the midst of a huge pool surrounded by water sits the Golden Temple, and for two days it’s been obscured by fog. My train back to Delhi is a few minutes late that morning, so I rush to the temple and at last catch the glint of brilliant gold leaf reflected in the pool.

On the long train ride back to Delhi, a Sikh sits next to me and we talk the entire eight hours, discussing Sikh history, politics, Kashmir, Punjab, the war in Iraq and his life in Canada. He’s a truck driver and lives in British Columbia, and he keeps me entertained with his stories of working for Wal-Mart and his encounters with redneck truckers in Los Angeles.

FEBRUARY 2007

At last, sand. The desert. . . the road to Jaisalmer. . . fifteen degrees warmer here. Alone on the road, no constant honking of horns. A new driver, “Vinay.” We share a bag of cashews. No matter what I say he smiles and says yes. “*Great weather today, Vinay.*” “Yes.” “*Uh, the car has five flat tires.*” “Yes.” But Vinay has an uncanny ability to know what I want to shoot, and in the two hours before sunset on the road from Jodhpur to Jaisalmer, Vinay helps me make half a dozen roadside portraits and it’s as if he’s cheering me on, “. . . Yes, yes, YES.”

Jaisalmer sits on the western edge of Rajasthan, near the sand dunes of the Thar desert and near the border with Pakistan. The ramparts of the old fortress sit on a small mesa of crumbling sand, rising in a dusty pink mirage above the surrounding clay houses.

There is the sense of past glory, with entryways guarded by massive rusting iron doors. Long-forgotten empires are everywhere in this kingdom of color, in this nation obsessed with infinite detail and ambition and hope; each turn bedazzles more than the turn before, each nuance speaks of pageantry and celebration, of gods within gods, of maharajahs, of a sense of life and wonder unlike any other place on earth.

We are on the road—the rutted, dusty roads of an India exploding into the modern world. “She” appears from nowhere, patiently moving through a field of tall winter wheat, her backlit yellow sari unfurling in the sun, her arms outstretched, using a hand scythe to cut out weeds. I have Vinay pull over, and because I want to shoot from a somewhat higher angle I sit on top of the car on the luggage platform as traffic hurtles by. I had tried shooting a scene like this several days before, but this time the backlight is perfect, and although she is very much aware of me, I am able to shoot for several minutes before deciding my luck might run out with the traffic as the trucks are dodging cattle wandering on the highway.

A few days later Vinay and I are on the road again at 6:45 A.M. on a five-hour drive to Jodhpur from Deogarh. Twenty minutes after we start we pass a low stone wall in a field, with several peacocks walking along it toward an arched canopy on one end. I have Vinay maneuvering the car as the sun is about to rise over the Aravelli hills, when one of the peacocks abruptly jumps up on the dome. Just then a truck comes down the otherwise deserted road. . . . and the peacock flies off. I change lenses, look up. . . the peacock has returned. I manage to get two shots before it jumps down again. Another auspicious beginning to another auspicious day—a peacock, the national bird of India!

The next day I am at my favorite place in India, the Juna Mahal, the fading 13th-century “old palace” of Dungarpur—almost as old as the town itself. It is one of the lesser-known treasures of India, and I spend an entire quiet, glorious afternoon photographing the crumbling interior without being disturbed. The only other person there is an Englishwoman who sits on the floor of a nave, pastels and watercolors spread around her, patiently drawing the myriad

details of inlaid tiles, mirrors, and colored glass. Each room is a phantasmagoria of a bygone era; hidden behind a small pair of nondescript wooden doors is a series of detailed paintings from the *Kama Sutra*.

NOVEMBER 2007

It has been just 10 years since my first trip to India. The population has now swelled to 1.2 billion people—300 million more than there were in 1998. One of every six people on the earth is Indian. In 10 years the population has increased by more than the entire population of the United States, and it took the States more than 200 years to reach that number.

I have been trying for more than a year to get permission to photograph Durbar Hall, at the Amba Vilas Palace in Mysore. At first the minister of Tourism and Culture told me that I have to get permission from the maharajah of Mysore. The maharajah then told me I would have to go to the chief minister of the State of Karnataka, but as I am not a native of India I would need to seek permission from the Department of Internal Affairs in Delhi, which I did. But they have sent me back to the chief minister.

I have for now given up all hope of photographing Durbar Hall and am now simply seeking permission to use my tripod in the great caves at Ellora and Ajanta.

Late one afternoon, my driver takes me to the nondescript offices in New Delhi of the Archaeological Survey of India. In a room that could have been constructed by David Lean at Shepperton Studios near London, men scurry about, each clutching sheaves of paperwork, each holding his agenda like a baby pressed to his chest, each wide-eyed in a nervous quest to push to the front of the line. I am at some point given a few sheets of hand-lined white paper and told to write an essay about who I am and what it is I want.

The object of all the attention in the room seems to be a man that Charles Dickens would have called a “scrivener,” or clerk, or in this case the secretary to the secretary. This courtly old gentleman’s glasses have slid precipitously to the very end of his nose, and one can only guess at what holds them there. A man pushes to the front of the line and with a gasp of relief drops what seems like three New York phone directories’ worth of paperwork onto this man’s desk. Strangely, the clerk does not look up but almost immediately proceeds to make notes. He pulls back 30 or 40 pages, immediately scans the entire page he has miraculously come to and with an almost imperceptible movement crosses out a word or two. Then he’s on to the next invisible divider 20 or 30 pages later, and again, with a sharp clucking of his tongue, crosses out a word. All the while his body arcs forward as if his waist is a ball joint and his nose the beak of a bird, pecking out the words. *Peck, peck. . . peck, peck, peck*. In less than two minutes he has completely edited to his satisfaction what I guess is a 1,200-page document.

I complete my essay about who I am and what I want to photograph and the secretary to the secretary reviews it, makes a few notes and asks me to wait for the chief secretary, who will append his signature. I wait another two hours, my eyes glazing over, and then the clerk motions to me that my papers are now officially approved. As I am about to leave he begins listing, in a long, monotonous drone, a series of caveats. “You do understand, Sri Eric, that when you reach the State of Maharashtra, you will need to stop at the local office of the Archaeological Survey and fill out additional forms as each office has their own rules for granting permission. . . .”

I walk out into the air and take a deep breath. I smile a small smile. In front of me rotting ancient file cabinets in a long row lean precariously, as if a mynah bird’s weight would topple them in an instant. Papers bulge from every seam.

It begins to rain a soft, cooling rain.



Since my first trip to India, there have been so many changes, the changes that come with wealth and power and TV and cars and the modern world. I see rich and poor, but what I see more than anything else is an entire nation embracing life. Every day there is a celebration, if not dozens, throughout the country, for that is what India is about—a continuous celebration of life and its mysteries.

The light here is like no other place on earth, filtered by the dust of millions on the move, on fire with a sun that seems suspended in time and place. I love to wake before dawn and walk down to the ghats and watch the day, and the people, and India, come alive as the sun rakes across the Ganges.

As a photographer, I am drawn to India because of the psychedelic colors that seem to permeate every facet of life. I go there for all the contradictions of a place that is like no other I have been to; I am drawn to India because the people are blessed with childhood’s sense of wonder, which they have never lost.

I was startled one day to realize that what I had seen as infinite chaos was, in fact, infinitely ordered, and in that simple truth I found the soul of India. A sadhu faced the rising sun. A young boy crossed the Yamuna river on the back of a water buffalo. A mother’s hands gently cupped the face of her daughter. India is caught in the throes of change. But there will forever be a corner of the world that is my private India, the India in my eyes and of my heart.