



empire of the soul

pat wilson roberts

summersdale *travel*

EMPIRE OF THE SOUL

Paul William Roberts



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For Contance, my mother



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About the Author

Paul William Roberts was born in Wales in 1950. He gained both a BA and an MA in English Literature and Language at Exeter College, Oxford. He has worked as a journalist, film and book critic, is an award-winning television writer and producer and established author of both fiction and non-fiction. He lives in Canada.

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Author's Note

Consistency in the spelling of transliterations from Sanskrit and the many other Indian languages is a nightmarish problem for the writer (and editor). I have endeavoured to maintain some semblance of it, but when quoting another writer have been obliged to use his or her preferences. There simply is no right or wrong when rendering into English sounds from a language with no written vowels. Similarly, I have tried to remain constant with the names of gods and goddesses, but have inevitably run into trouble not just with quotations but with the names of people. Ganesh, for example, is also called Ganesa, Ganapati, and so on. The god Siva often appears as Siv, Shiv, or Shiva; I did not feel justified in respelling Shiva Naipaul's name, for instance, or retitling a Hindu charity for the sake of consistency. The resulting confusion a reader may find is, however, a faithful reflection of the apparent chaos visitors to India often mistake for the rule of anarchy rather than the teeming profusion of too much sheer energy and life. At least, that's the way I choose to see it. Translations from the Sanskrit of the Vedic hymns are my own and aim more for a spiritual than a linguistic accuracy.

Introduction

I lived in India for a few years during the seventies and have returned for various reasons some twenty times since then. It is the only country that feels like home to me, and certainly the only country whose airport tarmac I have ever kissed on landing.

Like many of my generation, I originally went searching for that vague and tantalising thing Truth. What I found, of course, was a different sort of truth, another kind of relationship. Like all relationships, it has its ups and downs, its love and its hate. To portray this in all its variety, its simplicity and its complexity, I have divided the book into two sections: 'The Seventies' and 'The Nineties.'

Thus, you have not just the sense of a changing country, but also a changed narrator. I have relied heavily on notebooks, diaries and journals for 'The Seventies,' deciding to stay as close to my original perceptions as possible, with little revisionist hindsight beyond the addition of historical and philosophical information that, I hope, benefits the reader as much as it would have benefited me had I possessed it myself back then. Just out of university, I was naive and impressionable.

Over a decade of more mundane and material concerns later, in 'The Nineties,' my impressions are mostly more objective. Mostly. In certain areas, however, India still makes me wide-eyed with wonder, as naive and impressionable as ever – though with, I hope, a deeper appreciation for people, the individuals who are engaged in forging a modern nation from eight hundred years of internal division and foreign domination. Their task is truly daunting.

When I arrived in the first hotel room on my last visit, in 1992, I switched on the television out of habit. Before, there had only been one risibly antiquated state channel to watch, Doordarshan. Now, to my utter amazement, I found the Star TV Network beaming in via satellite from Hong Kong such choices as CNN, the BBC World Service, and even a special Asian version of MTV. This last, with Madonna bouncing around in her underwear – the kind of sight you couldn't pay to see legally in pre-1992 India – caused plenty of heated controversy in the press. Until someone noticed that two or three Indian performers had videos playing regularly, too, and that they looked just like everyone else's . . . It was an inspiring novelty for Indians to find that they could clearly compete on the common ground of international pop music. Yet, I soon learned, other novelties had been coming thick and fast for some time under the progressive, if troubled, government of Narasimha Rao.

With what may be the largest middle-class consumer market in the world, India was starting to interest foreign companies as never before. There really hadn't been much of a middle class when I first arrived. Now, however, in the midst of coping with a tragic resurfacing of communal violence worse than any since Partition in 1947, the government had managed to relax protectionist trade restrictions, and was actively courting international investment. Indian industries were even beginning to make a considerable impact on world markets themselves. Although the old pessimism remained in many quarters – a legacy of colonialism – even the population problem was being viewed by some as a potential resource, rather than a liability. It was indeed a brave new India, one that I believe is soon set to amaze the world in the next

millennium.

The Partition stands as the last and cruellest memorial of those whose interests in India were and are almost entirely self-serving. If I am harsh on the British in this book, it is my privilege: I am British by birth, and I now live in another ex-colony that still bears the unmistakable scars of imperialism.

Whatever the political upheavals that rock the subcontinent, religion and India remain inseparable. My understanding of what spirituality means changes – evolves, I hope – over the following pages, along with my understanding of a land that like no other pullulates with every imaginable variety of it.

I have spent some of the happiest days of my life in India, as well as some of the most bizarre. No other country has ever made me laugh so much, or cry so much. I hope the humour will not be taken amiss any more than the tears.

It was also not my intention to offend anyone's religious sensibilities, but accounts like that of the Inquisition in Goa can hardly avoid passing judgement on those institutions and individuals concerned with the atrocities I catalogue. Similarly, my experiences with the late Bhagwan Rajneesh and with Mother Teresa of Calcutta merely record honestly what I personally heard, saw and felt.

From enough material to fill three books this length, I have selected episodes and incidents, journeys inner and outer, anecdotes, and little histories and conversations that I trust will provide a mosaic image of a land that, in its richness, complexity and sheer size defies any definitive portrait. If what means much to me fails to please the reader, it is not India's fault. I take full responsibility.

The circle of history revolves. India has now turned outward, preoccupying itself more and more with the West's materialism. At the same time much of the West has come to preoccupy itself not with India's material riches, but with those spiritual treasures that to seekers of Truth have always comprised the subcontinent's real wealth. Finally, then, I have also attempted to show that what Mahatma Gandhi termed an 'empire of the soul' is also not as easy to colonise as some of its new conquistadores would have us believe.

Prologue

It was the summer before I went up to Oxford. We were in Tintagel, Cornwall, by the ruins of what was supposed to be King Arthur's castle, high on a cliff overlooking the wild Atlantic Ocean. There were three of us – Andrew, Barbara, and me – and we'd been up all night on LSD. It was a magical night, infused with the presence of something divine, and as a rosy-fingered dawn broke, we floated down the little cove behind which gaped what was known as Merlin's Cave. A light, peach-coloured mist wafted over the sea while we sat on the stones, entranced by the beauty of this planet, of life itself, and our young lives.

Suddenly, on the far side of the cove, a naked figure with long black hair darted across the beach and plunged into the surf, swimming powerfully for several strokes, then lying back and bobbing on the heaving waves.

'Now, there's a good idea,' said Andrew.

He tore off his clothes and ran into the ocean's foam.

Barbara and I soon followed, the three of us swimming out to where the long-haired stranger lay. He was East Indian, probably, and though somewhat chubby exuded an aura of immense strength.

'Thanks for the tip!' Andrew shouted at him.

The man nodded back, then asked us if we would like to share his breakfast with him. We eagerly accepted.

'Of course,' the man said, 'we've all really had our breakfast.' 'Huh?'

He told us that the mineral salts in the water here were particularly nourishing and beneficial. He drove out as often as he could, to 'revitalise' himself.

Back on the beach, we realised that towels were one item we'd overlooked. But it didn't matter.

In the back of his old car the man had spare towels, fruit, yogurt, honey and home-baked bread. No one in England thirty years ago ate such stuff for breakfast; yet, in my peeled condition, it tasted better than any food I'd ever eaten. There was something about this man: he seemed to glow with health, and with something else, something ineffable. When I realised he was staring back at me, I felt an odd jolt in my core.

'Have you read this?' he was asking, holding out a book.

It was the *Bhagavad Gita*, and I'd never heard of it, let alone read it.

'Keep it,' he told me.

There was something profoundly haunting and beautiful in his eyes and his smile. Like da Vinci's *St John the Baptist* or *Mona Lisa*. The smile of wisdom, of the Truth that is Beauty.

When he finally packed up to leave and we said our goodbyes, his car was unable to grip the muddy track well enough to ascend the cliff road. I recall that there seemed to be something deeply symbolic about the three of us being obliged to push him until he gained firmer ground. It was as if we'd paid off a debt.

In the weeks that followed, I read the book he'd given me and found that it answered many of the questions that had been much on my mind after several conscious-expanding encounters with LSD. But it was still the psychedelic pharmaceutical that I placed my faith in. Like many, I believed it could and would cause change . . . if enough of the world took it.

It was with this end in mind that Andrew and I approached George Harrison, the Beatle. I remember that his house was filled with plastic dipping birds bobbing up and down over bowls of water. He gave us tea, then listened to our story: we had a line on a huge quantity of bargain-priced LSD; if he provided the money, we could purchase enough to pour into the vast reservoirs in Wales that supply much of England with drinking water. Half the country could be 'turned on' overnight. You have to laugh. George looked benignly amused, then told us to wait while he fetched something. He returned with a vinyl single record in its Apple sleeve, and a book.

'This is where it's at,' he announced. 'LSD can take you only so far.'

I was about to object when I saw the face on the cover of the book he held. It was the man we'd seen in Tintagel. George seemed not at all surprised, recounting how he'd come across the book himself: it simply fell from the sky onto a balcony in New York where he was sitting. He assumed someone had dropped it, but no one appeared to be looking down.

The book was *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda, a great Indian teacher who had been among the first to bring the spiritual science of India to the West. He'd died while conducting a public meditation in Santa Barbara the year I was born, and, as the Los Angeles County Morgue recorded, his body revealed no signs of decay for more than a week before he was buried.

The record turned out to be the 'Hare Krishna Mantra' set to be released by Apple Records later that month. Andrew was pissed off with George; he'd expected more. 'Can I keep the book then?' I asked him.

I was never the greatest devotee – I'm not devotee material – but I remained, and still remain, devoted to Yogananda and his teachings. It was he who, in a dream, told me to visit India and see another teacher – a very different kind of teacher than any I'd ever wanted or expected . . .

PART ONE

The Seventies

Whatever we do reacts upon us. If we do good, we shall have happiness and if evil, unhappiness. Within you is the real happiness, within you is the limitless ocean of divine nectar. Seek it within you, feel it . . . It is here, the self: it is not the body, the mind, the intellect, the brain; it is not the desire or the desiring. It is not the object of desire. Above all these, you are. All these are simply manifestations. You appear as the smiling flower, as the twinkling stars. What is there in the world which can make you desire anything? It is the heart that reaches the goal. Follow the heart. A pure heart seeks beyond the intellect. It gets inspired.

– From a letter by Sathya Sai Baba

‘Who’s in Charge Here?’

BOMBAY, 1974

And though I have discarded much of past tradition and custom, and am anxious that India should rid herself of all shackles that bind and constrain her and divide her people, and suppress vast numbers of them, and prevent free development of the body and the spirit; though I seek all this, yet I do not wish to cut myself off from the past completely. I am proud of that great inheritance that has been, and is, ours, and I am conscious that I too, like all of us, am a link in that unbroken chain which goes back to the dawn of history in the immemorial past of India. That chain I would not break, for I treasure it and seek inspiration from it. And as a witness of this desire of mine and as my last homage to India’s cultural inheritance, I am making this request that a handful of my ashes be thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad to be carried to the great ocean that washes India’s shore.

– Jawaharlal Nehru, Last Will and Testament

On September 5, 1974 – my birthday, in fact – I first set foot on Indian soil. Indian dust, to be exact. Bombay’s airport did not create a winning first impression to visitors to the subcontinent twenty years ago.

After the dryness of the Middle East, where I’d stopped over, the air that hung in Bombay’s steaming pre-dawn gloom felt and smelled like the enveloping breath of a monster gorged on overspiced sewage. The hot, sodden shroud hung oppressively on all sides, and within minutes I felt I was dissolving into it. You soon realise why Indians wear Indian clothes . . .

Drenched in sweat, irritable from jet lag, brain lag, and all the other lags a modern traveller’s flesh is heir to, I found myself in a line-up, waiting to reach a man who resembled a black Errol Flynn in soiled khaki – the ubiquitous uniform, it seemed, of all Indian officialdom. Above him, a battered sign read ‘Immigration Control’ in English and Hindi. Although there were only twenty or so people ahead of me, it took nearly half an hour before he asked for my passport and handed me a form to fill out, indicating Dickensian writing equipment: a gnarled nib pen leaning in a blackened, inkencrusted pot. I used a ballpoint that was destined to explode in my pocket a week later – as unhappy with the new climate as its owner – finding the porous form disintegrating beneath my damp fist as I struggled to answer questions that seemed either irrelevant (*Grandfather’s Surname?*) or impossible to satisfy in the centimetre of space allowed (*Purpose of Visit?*). Several times I had to ask the man what certain questions really wanted to know. His teeth, I noticed, were the colour of terracotta tiles. *Jew?* for example, turned out not to be a worrying inquiry about religious affiliation but an abbreviation asking if you were bringing jewellery into the country.

The man flipped through my passport upside down and encountered its photograph – taken in 1969, shoulder-length hair – and asked, ‘This is your sister?’ I told him it was me. He shrugged

and went on examining small print and blurred visas. He then hefted the largest rubber stamp I've ever clapped eyes on and smashed it down on an empty page, producing something illegible, across which he scribbled something, also illegible, with a nib that scored the paper deeply, spattering ink in several directions. He waved me on. I thanked him, turning to see the hundred sweltering souls still waiting their turn behind me.

You would have thought the luggage would have been unloaded by that time, piled up on conveyor belts. It was not – and there were no conveyor belts. The ceiling fans overhead turned only marginally faster than the second hand on my watch, perhaps *slicing* the sultry, turgid air, but not *moving* it. The airport's whole interior struck me as a scene from some discount *Inferno*. Hundreds of people shouted furiously at each other, roaming aimlessly; dozens of officials looked either whacked out on opium or more confused than the arriving visitors, who tried to interrogate them on tricky subjects: *Where's our luggage? . . . Where's the toilet? . . . Where do we get a taxi? . . . Who's in charge here?*

'This is fucking crazy!' a lone and desperate voice yodelled from somewhere in the vast, seething hangar of a room.

Finally I swung my case onto a stand beneath a sign reading 'Customs'. Another official demanded that I open it, and began sorting through its contents with obscene curiosity.

'You have any camera?'

'Yes.'

He continued poring over letters and notebooks, unzipping toilet bags, feeling the quality of my shirts, while I dangled the camera that had been over my shoulder all this time in front of his face.

'Nikon?' he eventually said, holding the object with measurable awe.

'Yup.' 'Best camera,' he stated with absolute conviction. 'Not quite.'

He then gave me another blanket-sized sheet of paper to fill out, which had me peering for serial numbers and manufacturers' codes, struggling to recall the place and date of purchase. Eventually his own massive stamp came down on the form, which was then attached to a page in my passport with a tailor's pin. What was the purpose of this?

'You must hand in form when you exit country, also producing camera.' India had severe import restrictions but this struck me as a rather fallible method of ensuring I would not sell my superlative Western camera while in India. I *was* eventually obliged to sell it, as it happened, but the form had fallen from my passport several months before, and no one ever questioned me about its absence when I finally did exit the country.

With some flourish, this customs man chalked a symbol on my case and waved me on. On to where a plate glass wall was filled with faces pressed against it from the outside, staring in, gesticulating, hollering mutely at us new arrivals on their planet. To leave the airport meant passing from relative security into this mad, babbling throng of wrecked humanity, much of it lacking limbs, noses, eyes, teeth, and certainly any sense of decorum. But there was no turning back now . . .

Outside a thousand voices called out. Arms, stubs, hands clutched at my soaking sleeves: *Woh,*

swami! You want taxi? . . . Paise, pa? Paise? Taxicab, taxicab . . . Best taxi, sahib, absolute best . . . Karma, pa . . . karma . . . Little children gazed up with woeful kohled eyes, rubbing their tummies through shirts that looked as if they'd done a stint as mechanic's rags before getting promoted to garments. Mayhew's London was a welfare utopia compared to this. I allowed one man with pipe-cleaner legs and a face like a spray-painted skull to toss my bag on his head, and another man who resembled Albert Einstein's unwashed and unsuccessful twin to haul me by the elbow through the Babel and Bedlam of Bombay's professional greeters and over to a car no one in the West would have taken off his hands as a gift.

Painted black and yellow by hand, it appeared, with ordinary household exterior gloss some decades previously, the vehicle reminded me of a British car popular in the fifties. In fact, India in those days featured only two varieties of automobile: this contraption, the Ambassador, a hybrid Hindustan Motors edition of a four-door Austin now vanished; and the Premier Padmini, sleeker but tinnier, a mutation of some Fiat sedan that had disappeared from European streets by 1963.

Though plush and springy to look at, the Ambassador's back seat yields as little comfort to its passengers as concrete. Combined with an apparent lack of any suspension system, it made riding in the car feel like driving across the moon. I also noticed the floor consisted of blasted metal patched with planks from fruit crates, below which the pitted road was actually visible. Leaving the sinister sodium glare of the airport lights behind us, we turned onto a metallised surface whose camber was so drastic the whole track could well have been a partially buried oil pipeline; at times I was forced to lean at forty-five degrees to remain upright.

Then there was The Smell.

Initially, I assumed that the failed Einstein, clutching his steering wheel as if it might fly off unless sufficiently restrained, had produced a silent epic of a fart. But, cranking down the window, which failed to budge at first, then fell from sight like a guillotine, I realised The Smell was in fact crowding in, was indeed worse outside than it was inside.

Off beyond the road now stretched miles of huts like ramshackle wood, corrugated tin and tarpaper dog kennels, or tents left over from the Crimean War, crammed together side by side. Fires burned brightly or faintly in front of them, smoke rising, vague forms scuttling in the half-light. The Bustees, these were Bombay's slums, Bombay's famous shame. A North American rat lives better than the wretched of this earth who dwell around the perimeters of Bombay like lost souls waiting to be summoned back to real life. What struck me as most oppressive, though, and still does, though I have since seen wars and famines from Ethiopia to Cambodia, was the sheer normality of the life going about its business under such conditions. These people did not complain about their miserable portion. Indeed, many were happy just to be near the Land of Oz that Bombay represented. Very few of them were beggars. They were workers – either working or seeking work. The beggars were actually well-off by comparison, with steady jobs that kept roofs over their heads and wolves from their doors.

At the time, Bombay's beggars were a syndicate, handing their paise and rupees to a 'king of beggars,' who in return housed and fed them. He was reported to be a millionaire.

In a Westerner's eyes, the Bustees represented the most shocking introduction to India. Yet I later decided that it was only fitting that they were precisely where and what they were.

Horrific, sobering, a cattle prod of culture shock, they were also the worst sights I encountered in all of India. After the Bustees, everything else was an improvement, everything else was icing.

A dawn like bloodstained mercury poured up from the eastern horizon as we bumped down the winding labyrinth leading into downtown Bombay – Gateway to the East, the port that put an end to the great Silk Route. Like London, like Venice, like Cairo, like Shanghai, Bombay was once one of the most vital cities on earth, and it still shows it. And, like New York, it reminds you tirelessly that it's never over until it's over.

With a population density of one hundred thousand human beings per square mile – more than four times that of Manhattan – the city cannot help but pullulate with activity, with what Shiva Naipaul describes as 'a hundred minute specialisations of function, a hundred strategies for survival' on any stretch of pavement. If you can make it *here*, I thought, you can make it *anywhere*.

And this city doesn't sleep either. At dawn the streets teemed with belching cars, bullock carts, weaving bicycles, wandering cows with bells, paint and gold foil decorating their elegant horns. At every turn an accident nearly happened somewhere, but never did, amazingly, as pedestrians sidestepped out of the paths of vehicles and animals with the skill and grace of matadors. Flower sellers hawked their garlands of fresh jasmine, strolling from shopfront to doorway around wood-framed string beds, many still containing their occupants, stretching, or shaving, or smoking beedies, or sipping chai from tiny glasses.

A tailor sat beneath a peepul tree, one foot pumping the pedal of a sewing machine, his hands guiding a length of orange fabric past the needle. Here a fat Brahmin with ritual bands freshly painted across his forehead did puja before a tiny shrine to Ganesh, the elephant god, the remover of obstacles, lighting a fistful of joss-sticks and hanging a mala of yellow flowers around the statue's neck. There an ancient toothless woman squatted on a burlap square upon which, arranged in neat rows like soldiers, she offered perhaps a hundred small green chilli peppers for sale. Here a man repaired sandals, his workbench a portable box placed on a low whitewashed wall. There another man, wearing only a bandage of soiled linen around his groin, cleaned out the ears of a prosperous-looking fellow with oiled hair who was reading the *Times of India* upside down. A skeletal figure with desiccated brown skin hanging from his bones in folds as if it had melted carried a wooden yoke on his bent shoulders from which swung two aluminium pails. A formidable woman upholstered in a tartan sari, her oiled hair tied in a bun as tight as a black lacquer skullcap, hacked at a giant breadfruit with an ancient machete, aggressively offering the shorn fleshy chunks to passers-by.

We were swerving down toward the bay itself now, both sea and sky mottled with limpid metallic-grey clouds, the air mightily still, as if uncertain what to do next. A faded red double-decker London bus careered by, so crowded that its conductor was actually clambering along a ledge outside, collecting fares through the glassless windows. Then, suddenly, the Gateway of India loomed before us, the imposing triumphal arch through which countless viceroys and visiting dignitaries from the West had first disembarked onto the subcontinent, many heading, as we were, into the guarded compound of the stately Taj Mahal Hotel. The Gateway then housed lepers, urchins, entire tribes of the sick, the hungry, and the homeless – the orphans of Empire.

To step into the Taj Mahal's lobby, with its white marble fountains and air-conditioned breeze, after the dust and humidity, was to enter a desert nomad's vision of paradise. Even its inhabitants

moved and spoke and looked like the members of another species – clean, cool, starched, relaxed. I stood for a while on my balcony. Finally I was alone in India, for the first time since before my arrival. Two sights below impressed themselves into memory: a man mowing a lawn growing incongruously on a flat rooftop; and a Western hippy with blond dreadlocks sitting beneath a banyan tree, with a monkey squatting on his shoulders. The monkey was picking out fleas from matted tubes of hair and eating them with the delicacy of a gourmet. Symbiosis?

With these two images, I fell asleep, the heavy, rotting, spiced and salty, sultry air pushing its way in from my open balcony to do battle with the room's pristine air-conditioned blast. Two Titans, two Lords of the Air, fighting it out overhead. I had no idea then of the real battle that would take place *inside* my head. Like all good stories, this one is about a love affair and a war. Both began that dawn back in September 1974.

‘Meditate More and Find Out’

BANGALORE, 1974

How can the mind take hold of such a country? Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile.

– E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*

Captain Singh piloted his Indian Airlines jet through air that felt and looked like steaming broth with big lumps in it. Bombay from a few thousand feet above looked overwhelmingly verdant – at least it did when you could see anything of it. The predominant colour of the city from street level, however, struck me as faded ochre. Green it was not. Captain Singh continued speaking to his passengers with an aeronautical bedside manner, giving much information on wind speeds, height and local geography below the clouds, while his plane felt as if giants were playing catch with it. Whenever we hit an especially savage air pocket, we plummeted about three hundred feet, landing on what felt like boulders but were presumably clouds. During one of these abrupt descents, the man next to me threw an entire cup of orange juice over his pristine white pyjamas, as if intentionally.

‘There is some turbulence,’ he said, laughing inanely, and wiped at the dripping yellow stains with a piece of tissue the size of a postage stamp.

A man seated in front with what looked like a tuning fork sketched in white paint on his forehead turned to peer between the headrests at us.

‘Turbulence, turbulence,’ he stated, in case we hadn’t noticed. Some rows down, an overhead locker had spilled its contents onto the passengers below. Uncomplaining, people were handing briefcases, a bag of mangoes, some shawls and a tattered cardboard box elaborately swathed in string back to a flight attendant wearing a sari of such opulence she could have been the subject of a wedding.

‘Bombay mangoes,’ the man beside me said as the attendant tried to squash the sodden and ragged bag of fruit back in its locker. ‘*Best mangoes.*’

I smiled at him, and attempted conversation. He owned some sort of electronics factory in Bangalore, and was returning from doing business in Bombay. Did he think India could one day compete with the Japanese in electronics? I wondered. He nodded his head confidently in the South Indian manner, from side to side rather than up and down. In my ignorance, I thought he was saying no. Having tried to start a conversation, or so I’d assumed, he was now doing his best to avoid one. My questions deteriorated to the level of asking him if he liked living in Bangalore, most receiving the same smug and circumspect rocking of the head. Since then I’ve come to believe the gesture doesn’t mean either no or yes, but, in a quintessentially Indian way, both and/or neither.

Bangalore, from my porthole, lay spread out like a vast flat garden. On a plateau high above sea level, it was essentially that in 1974. Now it's more like an Indian Silicon Valley. Tall rain trees waved their ragged arms in a mild breeze. As I stepped out, I noticed the air had markedly cooled and dried compared to Bombay's Turkish bath. We walked over to what resembled the airport in *Casablanca*: a low building, a control tower, some basic radar equipment. The luggage was wheeled from the aeroplane on a huge cart to an area beyond two high chain-link gates. On the other side waited an orderly, well-dressed crowd. Everyone was meeting someone. Flower garlands were placed over heads; children reverently touched the feet of elders; small pujas were performed: hand-sized trays of burning camphor waved around as friends and relatives clapped and chanted, praising the gods for a safe arrival. With us it's a hug, then hand over the bottle of duty-free. Indians do things with grace and style. They've had more practice at it.

Far from being harassed by competing taxi drivers, I noticed only one taxi waiting outside the airport, alongside a manicured lawn containing riotous pink hibiscus beds. And someone was already commandeering it. A little distance off were several of the covered three-wheel motorcycles known as autorickshaws. I consider them a distinct improvement on the old rickshaw; who feels good about having some emaciated octogenarian in a loincloth and turban hauling him barefoot around the city streets? There is a drawback: most of these vehicles are piloted by maniacs. I was approached by a short man with a crazy smile, no shoes, and a filthy tea towel wrapped around hair that shot out like black palm fronds.

'Autoauto?' he said, as if it meant something. I had the address of a cheap hotel, the Bombay Ananda Bhavan (literally the 'Bombay Bliss House') on Grant Road. I asked him if he knew the place.

He nodded in that unreassuring South Indian manner and hefted my bag over to the buggylike rear of his machine. Then he proceeded to get into a nasty argument with one of his colleagues, a man who could have been his twin, that was clearly related to my custom and seemed to reach the verge of blows but went no further.

Cursing and spitting red gobs of betel-nut juice through rusty-looking teeth, the driver finally kick-started his sputtering engine and we took off like a gnat in high wind. I bounced from side to side like a bell clapper until I learned to brace myself with steel struts supporting the auto's canvas roof. Between the driver's handlebars and the murky windshield were attached several small framed portraits of gods and film stars. In their midst, an incense holder held two burning joss-sticks emitting a smell like charred bubble-gum.

We turned abruptly onto a broad boulevard teeming with every vehicle known to humankind, entering the vast honking caravan like a weaver's shuttle. I wondered if my driver had a personal problem with everything and everyone else on the road. When I dared to look, there were faded but elegant Raj-era bungalows – some, in their cuteness of detail, almost gingerbread houses – on either side. The bungalows of Bangalore attained enough fame to have once merited a picture book of that name, but were not famous enough to survive into the nineties. With its tolerable climate and strategic position in the centre of the South, the city was a major army base during colonial times – indeed, was still a significant base in the third decade of independence. As the focal point of Karnataka state, Bangalore, which borders communist-influenced Kerala to the west and the troublesome and occasionally separatist-minded states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh to the east, is still valuable in military terms. India's bewildering variety of politics usually coexist in a kind of querulous harmony. *Usually.*

Relaxing his grip on the accelerator for the first time in fifteen minutes, the driver zigzagged through cows, donkeys and people, coming to a jarring halt in the heart of a stupefyingly chaotic and noisy fruit and vegetable bazaar.

‘Bombay Ananda Bhavan?’ I asked, hoping it wasn’t.

The driver raised a grimy palm. He clambered out and began a belligerent conversation with a skinny and toothless man who must have been at least ninety-five years old. Both lit up beedies, the tiny, lung-ripping cigarettes wrapped in leaf that in those days cost about a cent for fifty and still weren’t worth the price. The old man pointed in several different compass directions over the course of this conversation, and I detected a look of desperation in my driver’s eyes as he glanced my way.

‘Grant Road,’ I reminded him.

I soon learned that, in India, even someone who lived on Grant Road might be unable to tell you how to get to Grant Road – not that this would prevent him from offering utterly wrong directions. There was a certain shame in admitting you didn’t know, so people frequently and confidently offered complex and entirely erroneous instructions. The driver evidently knew this and was not about to head off in the five different directions suggested by the old man. He waylaid a porter carrying about a ton of huge red bananas on his head. This man had been using tar for toothpaste, by the look of his mouth, and had one eye so bloodshot it could have been recently boiled. He uttered what sounded like one word a hundred syllables long. The driver pulled on his beedie, brows knotted. Then he jumped back and, sitting sidesaddle now, zipped off at maximum velocity, terrifying animals and any humans unfortunate enough to be in our path.

Twice more I endured similar stops, and presumably similar misinformation. Finally we hit Mahatma Gandhi Road – there is at least one of these in every town and city the length and breadth of the subcontinent. Then we turned onto St. Mark’s Road and off this onto a quiet, lushly tropical street of large, stately houses and bungalows . . . actually labelled Grant Road.

The whole history of Indian cities could be told through street names. The signs reading Grant Road and St. Mark’s Road have now gone, replaced by Vithalpatai Road, by Indira Nagar, or some such – yet the old names survive unofficially. Grant Road is still somewhere a taxi or auto driver will take you, if you’re patient.

The Bombay Ananda Bhavan proved to be one of the stately houses, its title on a weather-weary board looking at once out of place and a sign of the times. A semicircular drive drew you up to a robust, monsoon-proof porch over steps leading to double doors. After a screaming argument over the fare, my driver flew off, his machine sounding more and more like an angry bee trapped in a jar.

A reception desk with a bell greeted my entrance. There was no sign of human life. I rang the bell, hearing an odd guttural gurgling, apparently from beneath the floor. I rang again, shouting out that I was here. Nothing. Just the subterranean sounds of a viscous drainage. A clock ticked. A pleasant breeze blew in, carrying perfumed greenhouse smells on its wings. A fly the size of a small bird – or possibly a small bird the size of a fly zoomed straight for my nose, veering drastically away at the last moment. I looked in a room to my left – a bed draped in mosquito netting – and a room to my right – a bed draped in mosquito netting, and an armoire the size of a van. Then I peeked behind the narrow reception desk, to discover a bearded man in a T-shirt and

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