

woudhuysen :



LETTER FROM INDIA

Outside the Law Courts in central Mumbai, piles of big, wooden, official-looking chairs are thrown together upside down - a symbol, perhaps, of inconclusive cases from years back. Teenage soldiers sit with rifles peering out over sandbagged emplacements, waiting for God knows what. Islamic mujahaddin from Jammu and Kashmir? Disinherited divorcees, bearing a grenade and a grudge about judicial sleights long forgotten by all else? The Courts' windows are Gothic but intermittently broken. Disputes in India, it seems, cannot easily be avoided.

Nearby, there's more Gothic weirdness with Gilbert Scott's Mumbai University. A mini Big Ben presides over a long, swathe of grass, complete with scores of cricketers, a young, thin, white, red-haired English enthusiast, and lime-green tennis balls that whiz about. Walk a pavement at the end of the day, and spruce professional men in dark shirts and briefcases pass you by unnoticing, intent on getting home.

The police all look the same. Taller and fatter and with many more moustaches than civilians, they are immaculately turned out in khaki, with mean, polished batons nearly as long as themselves. The papers say there is only one for every 4200 inhabitants, compared with a world average of one for every 400 or so; but they look plentiful to me. The places they are concentrated in show that they are there to defend privilege. One need not be left-wing to know that.

I saw little of Mumbai when I was there, being laid out with a tummy bug almost at once. But wherever I was I was surprised to find little begging and virtually no smoking. The English you read is terrific, too: signs that warn against 'rash' driving; newspaper articles on politics that are full of ministerial statements 'as per' the policy of last year.

At the top of Malabar Hill, a swish, leafy enclave, the Kamala Nehru Park is charming, and walked only by a few courteous young couples. Across the street, in Hanging Gardens, you look out over a sweeping bay full of skyscrapers. Then, ambling along the beach at Land's End at night with a suave Sikh chief of worldwide innovation at Ericsson, we are shown the high rise flats of the Bollywood stars, gated, just a road away from India's relentless rubbish and rubble.

Following his work on Big Potatoes, the London Manifesto for Innovation, James Woudhuysen collected a prize for Excellence in Innovation on a recent trip to India. As Proof he records the boom and dust of his travels.

In the newspapers the main event is the slashing of cinema screens by supporters of Shiv Sena, a far-right, anti-migrant party of Hindu nationalists based in Mumbai. Their beef: Shahrukh Khan, the lead in a new rags-to-riches movie, *My Name Is Khan*, has been caught saying that Pakistani cricketers in India should be allowed to play in the Indian Premier League. Mistake! Locals, thankfully, are having none of this senselessness, and go to the movie in droves.

India's foreign secretary has agreed to meet his Pakistani counterpart, despite his government's refusal to say or do much about the 26/11 bombings in Mumbai more than a year ago. Back in London some weeks earlier, I'd heard Bronwen Maddox, the formidable chief foreign commentator of the London Times, describe India as surrounded 'almost like a ring of fire' by conflicts on its borders (Pakistan, China, Sri Lanka), and 'very arrogant' toward Pakistan; it's the country she seems most pessimistic about.¹ Me, I've no faith in diplomacy, and note that India plans to launch a sophisticated spy-in-the-sky satellite to watch its adversaries from 2014 on.² The news about willingness to talk, therefore, might be thought to be progress of a sort, but a war is more likely than not.

In south Kerala, southwest India, birds rule. Crows, yes, but also kingfishers, egrets, soaring sea eagles, cormorants, and battalions of ducks. You see them from boats, which, though slim, are big items here, sliding through still waters decked with palm trees.

The long coastal highway is a road where you overtake a car that's overtaking another car that's overtaking a three-wheeler – just as another car is doing all of that, from the other direction, coming straight at you. Beside the road here's a retail culture such as I've never quite seen. It's a religion of shop front signs, in English and the local Malayalam; even the smallest can boast HOTEL. FAST FOOD.

Conversely, there are giant photographic billboards with the inevitable light-skinned models and their false come-hither smiles; also, management gurus waving fingers that admonish that theirs is the only way to do business. I prefer the lengthy, confident pineapples, stacked so high they look like they could give each shopkeeper a bankruptcy.

Suddenly, a delicious surprise. By the road, in the evening of this Hindu festival day, we almost collide with six elephants in chains. With coiled trunks, they delicately and with great aplomb strip the branches of palm trees of leaves, break up the stalks, then suck them for their goodness and discard them carelessly. Two young riders apiece wave, and locals take pictures too.

Bronwen Maddox had insisted that India's casual attitude to everything from economic reform to corruption was stifling any kind of innovation.³ That was not how it looked to me. In all the dust and hooting of horns, Kerala's coast road bursts with ATMs, facilities for computer animation and high-tech healthcare, daring offices and new, tall, elegantly coloured blocks of flats. Yes, food price inflation tops 17 per cent, and inequality is worsening in the usual style. But growth in GDP is ticking up toward eight or nine per cent a year, and technological innovation is booming.⁴ There will be more to watch than Bollywood over the next decade. February 2010

1. Bronwen Maddox, Speech to Foresight 2010 Research Panel, Part 2, EpochPR, 7 December 2009, 5mins 28secs, on

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYJlQzwCvBE&feature=Playlist&p=83747BBoAID593BF&index=4>

2. Bhargavi Kerur, 'India's spy in the sky by 2014', DNA, 10 February 2010, on <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/reportindia-spy-in-the-sky-by-20141345753>

3. Bronwen Maddox, *op cit*, 5mins 08secs.

4. Joe Leahy, 'India: A nation develops', Financial Times, 10 January 2010, on <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/445586ac-fe13-11de-9340-00144feab49a.html>

5. For Paul Kelly's review of Big Potatoes, see p.42. And the Woudhuysen riposte on www.theproofsheets.com

Photograph above left: with thanks to Dido Powell