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This day has started with an early morning taxi ride to the Varkala Town railway station, the starting point for a 1,200 mile, three train journey to the region east of Mumbai, formerly Bombay. Our trip up the west coast and a bit inland will take about 36 hours.

Although we arrive at the station on time, there is some confusion whether we are on the right train, which we board before we get off again. After the train leaves, we discover that the train employee who told us we were on the wrong train was wrong. Fortunately, we were able to book the next train and still catch our connecting train in Ennarkullum Town almost four hours later.

In Ennarkullum, it is necessary to travel from one train terminal a distance of about three kilometers to another train terminal – not unlike making connections in a large airport. The rickshaw ride is an emersion in a chaos of traffic and sound that makes the open window train ride seem quite calm, which it isn't.

This trip will take us out of Kerala State in the dark of the next night. Leaving Kerala, I read that it is the only region of India that has chosen an expressly socialist, communist approach. Lonely Planet's guidebook for Southern India calls it one of the most progressive in India and suggests that its form of government has resulted in "a more equitable distribution of land and income," with "impressive health and education statistics."

My personal experience is that it has been uniformly friendly – even when I was robbed.

My landlord in the very-away-from-the-beach-room told me, I have to say, to keep my windows closed at night. I assumed he was warning me of insects, of which there were a plethora in this tropical setting. So I pulled my windows shut without locking them.

The next morning, I stepped to the porch to check on my laundry and was puzzled to find my wallet sitting on a chair, laid neatly on top of a small Peruvian textile coin purse that I carry. My first thought was to wonder why I had left it there. Picking it up, I realized that it was lighter than usual. A quick examination found all the front pockets open, with driver's license and credit card missing.

My heart sank. I looked in the back of the wallet to confirm that my rupees were missing. They were.

What I did find in the back was a little stack of papers and receipts that I routinely carry in my wallet. Pulling those out for a look, I realized – a bit slowly due to the shock of it – that my credit card and driver's license were among the papers.

The thief took what he or she needed and could use. No more. Live and let live. What I needed was left to me.

How easy it would have been for that thief to drop the wallet somewhere else.

My loss totaled at most about 1,500 rupees – about \$33.

And I was left feeling grateful instead of angry or helpless or even violated – all common alternative reactions.

Riding on the train today quickly became very social. A group of young men asked if they could have their picture taken with me. I'm sure there are other white people on the train, but I was an available oddity.

Several other young men were anxious to talk, as I was anxious to talk to them. Most of these conversations simply confirmed that there is interest in America and Americans, but that there is little awareness of what Americans are like as people, behind the headlines that are

familiar to both us and Indians.

The more interesting conversation for me was the older businessman with whom I shared facing window seats. Conversation was difficult, since the windows are left open for ventilation and the overhead fans add to the general din of voices, vendors, and the frequent train whistle blown at each road crossing.

We shared general information – where we've lived and live, where we work and what we do. He had previously worked in California for a company that did construction services for an oil companies working in Saudi Arabia. He is now a mutual funds broker and feels that the Indian stock exchange is strong because it is supported by the government (sound familiar?).

We both stopped for breakfast of a dosa, sambar and chutney (a direct analog for corn tortillas with vegetarian filling, drowned in chili) eaten with the thumb and first two fingers of the right hand.

The aluminum plate and its cover go out the window, and there is a small sink at the end of the rail car to rinse the hand. Licking fingers is frowned upon.

“Out the window” is for me an unsatisfactory solution in the moment to a looming dilemma here. Water is routinely sold in plastic bottles for which there is no recycling program. There is, in general, no trash collection system anywhere we have so far seen. Garbage is burned, reminiscent of trash disposal where I grew up in New Mexico in the 1950's. The air, consequently, is continually fragrant with a complex texture of odors, including the smell of burning plastic.

As my conversation companion gained more comfort with me, we spoke of the difference in marriage customs, of our children, and the macrocosm of cultural differences.

It is still common for young couples to have arranged marriages. Two of the young men to whom I spoke were, at age 23, in no hurry to marry, which they felt would happen at about age 26 or 27 through arranged marriages.

My older companion felt that family structure was absent in the U.S., and that the manner in which people were paired contributed to this outcome.

I shared my story of watching children play beneath the palms in Kottiyam. He was aware that children in the U.S. are being raised indoors to a much higher degree.

His final view. American materialism and immorality will bring it down, as Europe – at least for now – will surpass the U.S. in world influence.

As we talked, I was watching the land along side the train track. Except for cities, the vast majority of it is in small agricultural plots. More people here grow their own food or are more directly connected to those who do.

I think of how many young people in America – the very successful ones – who are on a treadmill of working long hours to pay large debt, as they increase the debt by attempting to buy the American dream of a large house and two cars on the installment plan. Growing foods seems – in this moment – a very sane alternative.

As our train brings us further north into late afternoon, we continue to see palm trees surrounding fields frequently punctuated by rivers that measure hundreds of yards in width, even though the floods of the monsoon rains have subsided. The train is not an express by any means, stopping at another station every fifteen or so minutes.

Late in the day, we begin to encounter rush hour traffic – commuters to one of the larger metropolitan areas returning to their smaller communities stretched along the rail. Our bench seats on the train are inundated with double the design load, with the individual seatholders coming and going for about an hour before the load thins back to our earlier long ride group.

Our train makes an unscheduled stop that I discover is caused by the breakdown of an engine on another train just ahead. While waiting on the platform, I am approached by a man

from Kerala State returning home after a several month stint working in Saudi Arabia. He speaks English to a point, and simply wants to be welcoming to the only white face on the platform.

Again, there is a sharing of information about where we live and what we do – the universal introduction. One pattern emerging from my conversations is that English speakers in this area have some connection outside of it. Men to whom I have spoken here, like people in many places, have to go elsewhere to make money to support a family back home. He is involved in supermarkets.

His family is extended – three generations living in one compound. All of his three children – aged 14 to 20 – interact with his parents each day.

I ask about children, telling him of the contrast I am seeing between children who grow up outside and those growing up indoors. He says that there is more and more of the inside version here, with more children playing electronic games, even in this very rural area.

The sleeper train is a new experience for me. Within the 11 foot width of the train car, two sets of bench seats face each other within a six foot space. Eight people share this space that is open to the aisle. Vendors selling coffee, tea, snacks and meals call their way up and down the aisle, creating a constant undertone of sound that becomes a harmonic within the modernist symphony played by the train's engine and wheels and wind through the window, along with the voices of the passengers raising over all else.

Dinner comes after the commuters finally depart. Within minutes, there is a consensus on raising the seatback, which forms the middle bunk between our seat and the top bunk which has endangered heads that stand up without paying attention.

Two young German woman arrive at bedtime with their packs. One has a top bunk assigned, and the other asks the Indian evangelist Christian minister if she can have his top bunk. He declines. White women traveling alone are often frowned on and stared at.

The women leave during the night as we reach their stop. The minister is first to turn on the overhead light as he returns to his English text. He tells me that he has learned English because most of the Christian books are in English.

We have left the coast and the ubiquitous fields. It is dryer now. The palms are gone, and hills are more frequent. The train enters tunnels now more frequently than it stopped on the prior day and night at coastal stations.

We have left the green of Kerala State and entered south Karnataka. Throughout this day, the terrain has varied, revealing different crops but a continuation of the small scale agriculture we saw on the first day. The landscape itself has become a little higher and dryer, although water for irrigation seems abundant.

I see horizons familiar to New Mexico and Colorado, including the flat tops of mesas, and older hills with many sedimentary layers with volcanic necks and flows exposed.

The hot train ride is about to end 36 hours after its beginning. People who speak English have easily identified me as an English speaker and continued to come forward to assist in small ways and to express their curiosity and desire to connect. This is a great gift of this journey.

Shortly before arriving at our train destination of Arangabad – the jumping off place for the ancient carved Ellore caves – we make a quick decision to detour. Just before jumping off the train at a city of 1.2 million by the name of Nizak, we arrange rooms by cell phone. The train station is large and very crowded. We negotiate a motor rickshaw to the hotel and settle in before venturing out in the dark to a restaurant recommended by Lonely Planet.

The restaurant absolutely lives up to Lonely Planet's rating, providing the best *thali* – a combination plate of bread, rice, four or five vegetables, hot pickles and ool yogurt – we have found.

On the way back to the hotel, I stop to buy some dates at a modern, shining dried fruit store. While I am at the counter, a young boy – perhaps ten or eleven years old – stares at me with beautiful eyes and friendly, curious face. I say hello, and he answers in perfect, crisp English. Asking questions, I learn that he is in the sixth grade. He is quite pleased to be speaking to an American. His father helps him a bit with one or two words. I am taken with his engaging and mature behavior – mannerisms that would be very unusual for a boy of his age in our culture.

The next morning we take the short walk to the old *ghat* in Nasik – a concentration of temples along the river where ritualist bathing and offerings are made, diviners are consulted, and religion is expressed in various ways. This is, of course, surrounded by small stands selling the wares needed by worshipers. In addition, there is a large vegetable market with a huge variety of healthy looking crops, testifying to the location of the city within a large, small scale agricultural area.

I return for late breakfast at the same restaurant, where three young men approach my table, wanting to use their English and vent their curiosity.

This is the opportunity I continue to search for. I am not uninterested in the temple experience – though more interested in how they feel than how they look – but I am far more interested in the culture of now. I want to know how young people in particular are experiencing the larger world through the lens of their own culture.

I have agreed to meet my traveling companion at noon, which limits my time with these men to about half an hour. I learn that they are all studying engineering and will go on to study management. These are glamour careers. Each continues to live with family and will postpone marriage until late twenties. All will have an arranged marriage, but anticipate that they will have veto power. They must also consent to the mate, but will rely heavily on the wisdom of parents.

They attribute great value to the combining of families. It is the primary social support system here.

What if you don't get along with your new mate, I ask. We will consult with our families, get some advice, and make a compromise. Divorce is a possibility, but only in extreme circumstances.

What about farming, I ask. Are there farmers in your family? Not anymore. Our ancestors, they all said, were farmers. Only one politician, they said, is encouraging a return to the farm, and recommending an increase in the standard of living for farmers to entice people back.

Although there is an overwhelming rush of new experiences here, I am beginning to see certain themes emerging. I am seeing a curiosity about Americans; a general level of friendliness that seems greater than what I see in America; a transportation system that, despite its apparent chaos, moves more people at lower cost than our own system; a persistence of small scale agriculture in rural areas and close to metropolitan areas; a deep commitment to the value of close ties to extended family; a respect by the young for the wisdom of their parents; an overtly spiritual culture that tolerates religious diversity; a high value placed on education; small scale food distribution; and serious air pollution where ever there is congested traffic.

I do not suggest these themes as conclusions so much as questions to help organize what is otherwise a chaotic presentation to my senses.

As we prepare to leave Nasik for our next destination, we catch a rickshaw to the public bus station. Our driver takes us instead to a nearby taxi stand, hoping that we will be persuaded to take a taxi, which will get him a small commission. We adamantly evade this small scam and walk the further block to the bus depot. What awaits us is the opportunity for a three or four hour trip that covers about sixty miles, at a cost of 66 rupees each, or less than \$1.50.

The bus is so ramshackle that, after boarding, we have second thoughts and head back to the taxi stand, where we negotiate a ride for about \$11.00, serving both safety and the conservation of our energy in this hot climate.

On to Shirdi.

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