

AN INDIAN JOURNAL

Francis Reid

I would have liked to have made my first passage to India in the gentler mode of 'Port out Starboard Home' with my wake fluorescing under the moon throughout a series of starry romantic nights. But today's passage is accomplished in a single short night. There are some stars but the moon softens only some woolly cloud far below the droning albatross in whose belly I contemplate, stimulated by Remy Martin and relaxed by Mogadon, a three week experience which may change my perception of life. I have overflowed India many times, with or without an hour's refuelling at Delhi, but never setting foot on this most mystic of ancient soils. Now the British Council have invited me to share experiences of design and technology with my theatric colleagues in Southern India.

SUNRISE IN BOMBAY

Arrival in Bombay is no anticlimax. Immigration, baggage retrieval, customs clearance and currency exchange are all carried out with a labour intensive bazaar bustle involving Dickensian clerical processes with ledgers and multiplied papers requiring sequential rubber stamping. Then onwards to that sea of meeters and greeters who inhabit every point of departure and arrival anywhere in India. It includes eager representatives of Thomas Cook waving a wooden flag bearing my name. They present a letter of welcome from the local cultural representatives of Her Britannic Majesty and whisk me off for bath and breakfast before my onward flight. The ten

minute taxi ride to the hotel at the domestic terminal carries me past many of the expected stock images of urban India — little shops for every possible entrepreneurial activity, housing of every construction from plastic to concrete, loads borne on heads and washing being flailed in any available water. A concerto grosso of motor horns obeying the command, painted on every tailboard, that following vehicles should sound off. Dawn temperatures, in the seventies and rising, contrast with the near zero of Heathrow. The bliss of a shower, fresh orange juice and crispy bacon to accompany the eggs with which I demonstrate respect for my ancient digestive system which has never let me down yet — but which I am resolved to lead into new and spicy experiences.

ONWARD TO HYDERABAD

A lunchtime Airbus to Hyderabad for an enthusiastic welcome from Professors Swarna and Ramdass of Osmania University. They taxi me to the Ritz Hotel through an urban landscape of eye widening fascination. The Ritz was sometime the Hill Fort

Palace and it perches above the city in whitewashed crenellated majesty with an ambience of an earlier more relaxed, more spacious age. I wander around the streets as dusk falls. The air is alive with survival, entrepreneurial activity everywhere. But my overriding impression of Day 1 is that the urban music of India is the motor horn, with every driver an aspiring virtuoso intent on practising his own personal cadenza. Dining early I have solo occupation of the dining room whose ancient waiters make me feel rather young whereas the band, with their extensive Glenn Miller repertoire, make me feel particularly old. And so to bed with Handel on my walkman: I cannot hope to see India through anything other than western eyes, so have resolved to use Handel's Italian Cantatas and Concerti Grossi plus the novels of David Lodge, as a daily reference datum for my experiences.

ALADDIN AT THE RAVINDRA BHARATI

Mrs Grace Krishnaswami, the British Council Cultural Activities Officer in Madras, flies in for breakfast. An enthusiast

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