



The Night Train to Benares

“Energy, spirituality and hospitality” describe India today—as always

Signs in the trains and in the stations quote Gandhi on the merits of traveling light. No one pays attention to this sensible advice. On the platform at Siliguri, waiting for the night train to Benares, I noted there was as much space taken up by bulky bedrolls and piles of household gear as by the crowds of people jockeying for position. Finally, to the accompaniment of much shoving and some angry shouting, the train puffed and clanked to a halt alongside the platform.

The third-class cars we were all waiting for were even more jam-packed than the platform. Friends had come to the station to see me off and had engaged one of the red-turbaned porters to help. Now they hurried up and down the platform looking for an opening chink through which to get me aboard. They had tried the conventional method of bribing the ticket collector, familiarly known as the T.C., but there simply was no seat to be had, much less a berth. All the doors were locked, but finally the porters spotted a window that was partly open. They eagerly pointed it out to me and urged me to climb in. I

stuck my head in, but, feeling a little embarrassed, I wasn't trying as hard as they thought I should.

The passengers perched inside among the mountains of bedrolls and bric-a-brac were struggling to close the window and shove me back out, and that confused me a bit. Then suddenly I felt my body lifted up from behind, and despite the shouting and countershoving of the passengers inside, my friends and the porters propelled me, like a sack of meal, into the crowded train compartment, where I landed on a pile of baggage beyond the window blockade. It was so crowded that for the next sixteen hours I was rendered almost immobile, sitting in a distorted position among the mass of people and baggage and gear. Soon after I landed inside, the efforts to keep me out were forgotten, and my fellow-passengers were smiling at me and sharing their food.

The incident reveals much about India today. The numbers of people are overwhelming. In the space of my seven months there, there were not just five million live births but a net increase of over five million in the population! The day I had arrived in Bombay I watched the masses of people pouring like rivers along the streets and thought it was some kind of parade or special

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Drawing by Frederick Franck

celebration. It turned out to be just the ordinary daily flow of people, infinitely various in color, costume, size, race, and language. To take language alone, India has, not counting the hundreds of less important ones, fourteen major languages, many of them with totally different written scripts.

It is hard to resist the conclusion that most of the problems of India come from the massive disproportion between the growing millions of people and the slim available material resources. There is never enough of anything to go round. The chaos that lurks beneath the surface and erupts at critical moments is usually triggered by this omnipresent insufficiency of goods and services. The corruption from top to bottom, which no one in India—from top to bottom—even pretends to conceal, is nurtured by the same scarcity. For instance, I went one day to a railway station at four o'clock in the morning to be in line four hours before the reservations window opened. I wanted to reserve a berth for ten days later. When I arrived, eight or ten nondescript derelicts were there, sleeping on the floor. They had been there all night, hired by the agent. He turned up a couple of hours before the window opened, marshalled

and instructed this motley crew, and then tactfully stood off at a distance as more people began to arrive. By the time I got to the window all the available tickets had been bought, to be sold by the agent at a profiteering price.

Because of the almost negative view of India now current in the American press, Americans might easily get the impression that Indians are all very unhappy about the present policies of Indira Gandhi. My impression, however, is a less uniformly negative picture. The ordinary Indian, one gathers, was quite pleased to see strong government policies suddenly reduce the price of a sack of sugar from 468 to 320 rupees. Government bureaucrats, it is reported, began to be available to the public punctually at the assigned hours instead of turning up an hour or two late.

Another Indian characteristic revealed in the Siliguri train episode is the immense energy of India's people. When I went, immediately after India, to Sri Lanka (Ceylon), I found that the beggars happily disappeared almost as soon as they were turned down. Then I realized how persistent the Indian beggars had been. One of them once followed me in Hardwar for at least fifteen minutes, gently and persistently tapping my elbow and repeating "Mah!" "Mah!" It is not the energy of swift violence,

like a shot or a blow, but more like the unrelenting pressure of flooding water, steadily penetrating until it finds an opening. This kind of energy is sometimes mistaken for weak passivity, but it is a powerful force to be reckoned with. It must have been on this powerful reserve that Gandhi's nonviolent movement was able to draw.

Perhaps this force is linked in some way to a phenomenon I find it difficult to pinpoint but which came home to me in a powerful way during my seven months bumming around India: I became even more conscious of it when I later compared India to the other Asian countries where I lived. I mean the deep well of what, for lack of a less-battered word, I will call spirituality. In the Buddhist countries (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan) I found better organized approaches to spiritual growth, and more specific methods. Individuals and groups—some monasteries and meditation centers, for example—had an impressive and communicable spiritual vitality. But nowhere but in India did I experience the pervasive—what should I call it?—spiritual energy; it seems to quietly saturate the whole Indian subcontinent. It was often wordless and inarticulate, more to be sensed in gesture and symbol and patient silence, more in a lifelong thirst for something mysterious and beyond, for some elusive inner liberation or fulfillment, than in clear-cut words or uniform patterns of practice. It took a more somber and austere form in the North, and found livelier, happier, and more friendly expression in the South. But I sensed it everywhere, like an inexhaustible underground reservoir.

One sometimes gets the impression that Americans feel themselves to be so much better off than poor, primitive, underdeveloped India, about which we feel a sense of guilt for the meager scraps of material wealth we share with it. Indians I spoke to did not complain about Americans consuming so disproportionate a quantity of the goods of the earth, or about how little we shared with them. Perhaps that was part of their delicate courtesy, but I think there is more to it than that. My impression is that they felt no sense of being inferior, but rather, if the truth were known, really were sorry for the materialistic, spiritually impoverished Westerners, whose young people came in droves to Mother India, spiritually starved and hungering for the bread of life. From the Christians in India the Hindu seems to expect no nourishment for the life of the spirit. This Western religion, he concedes, has provided some useful social services like hospitals and schools, but when it comes to spiritual resources it is the normal Hindu presumption that Christians—and that includes priests and nuns—have next to nothing to offer.

My primary interest in India was in Hindu religious experience, so I did not have time to study seriously the political situation. But even a casual observer noted the daily evidence that confidence in the ruling party was dwindling steadily. Many people resented the way in which the Congress Party piously invoked the name of Gandhi, wrapping itself, as it were, in his dhoti, while at the same time violating all that he

stood for. I frequently heard the joke about a certain kind of grass that grew wild in the state of Maharashtra. It was called Congress grass because, first, it flourished everywhere, second, it was impossible to get rid of it, and, finally, it was quite useless. Even members of the Congress Party laughingly passed on the story.

Much of the sense of political inertia came from a conviction that, although everyone recognized the complacency and corruption of the ruling Congress Party, there simply was no viable alternative. The Communists were divided among themselves, and the heavy-handedness they had shown where they came to power in India made people wary about putting them in charge of the country. I had long conversations with a politically alert doctor, of Brahman lineage, but now an atheist activist. His life is dedicated to helping the most oppressed classes with medical care and political conscientization. Violence, he assured me, is not the way. Not that he was opposed to it on principle, but against a government so effectively armed it would be suicidal. Conventional political means he also saw as useless, since the only way to political power in India today, he lamented, is along the route of corruption. Only the person who is willing to become personally involved in corrupt practices has any access to the political structure. So what is the way out? He believes, and many others told me the same, that the needed change would emerge only from a process that by-passed violence and conventional politics, and effected a mass transformation of attitudes.

It would be incomplete, misleading, unfair, and grossly ungrateful of me to conclude these reflections without a word about one of the most important and beautiful qualities I found in India's people. It was the trait that instinctively surfaced in my travel companions once I had been catapulted into their compartment on the Benares train. I mean, of course, Indian hospitality.

I found it everywhere. Young university students would see that I was lost and take fifteen minutes or half an hour to go out of their way to bring me where I wanted to go. And when I thanked them the usual answer, given with unassuming simplicity, was, "But it is my duty." A bus companion who had provided me with supper and a night's lodging when I was stranded after dark at Bangalore in the pouring rain, later wrote me a note to apologize for not having provided me with hot coffee before he put me on the autorickshaw for the airport terminal the next morning. A young factory worker at Hardwar shared his room and meals with me when a sudden thundershower caught me by surprise one evening as I was sleeping at the foot of a tree under the stars. Whenever and wherever I sat to talk with someone, there appeared at the very least a cup of hot tea. I spent a week wandering through South Indian villages, dressed in the simple saffron robes that said I was a religious seeker, carrying little more than a sheet and a bar of soap, and sleeping on temple porches. In all that time I was not able to spend one *pie* of the ten rupees (then about \$1.40) I had brought along in case of emergency. One of the first questions—after the obligatory "Where are you coming from?"—would always be, "Have you had a meal?"