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OBJECT: Scriptum Award 2014 | Travel Report

Two years ago, Neil and me have already had the chance to travel for two months in North-West India. It was our first meeting with the 'continent' - an incredible country. At that time we discovered Rajasthan, pieces of Gujarat, and went then up to the Himalayas, passing by Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and eventually Kashmir.

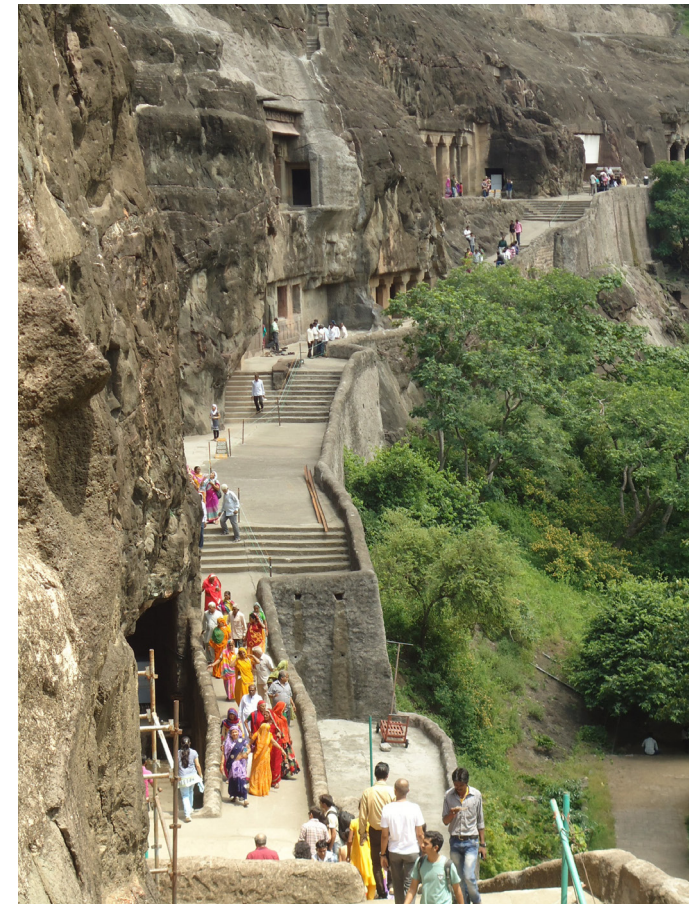
Neil and me are both architects. Of course, we like heritage and historic towns. But after our first experience in the North we found out that what interests us the most is in fact the collage of contrasts which constructs everyday life in India. Falling head over heels for the busy Delhi persuaded us to pursue our discovery of the large Indian cities.

With the remarkable support from BICC&I and Jet Airways we went then back in the middle of August 2015.

Before leaving, we briefly planned our trip. Our objective was to cross India from West to East, and thus link the two biggest cities of the country that we had not visited yet: Mumbai and Kolkatta. "Bombay Maximum City"¹ intrigued us by its well-known international character and the co-existence of contrasted lifestyles. Mumbai is also the city where has developed one of the most media-covered slum: Dharavi, the topic of my Architecture Master's Thesis². We had on the opposite very little image of Kolkatta that was by then just summed up in a vibrating story written by Dominique Lapierre, that obviously left its mark on us: "la Cité de la Joie".

1 Suketu Mehta, 2006

2 "Open Space – Means of redevelopment in Dharavi, Mumbai"



BACK ON THE TRACKS, FROM MUMBAI TO KOLKATTA

We decided to move by train. At the end of the monsoon, the rail sounded more reliable than the bumpy damaged roads. It is in fact a relatively strong public service, testimony of an amazing planned and regulated structure lying underneath the apparent informality that seems to fill every single neglected place.

A train journey is for us so much more than a practical concern. It is a world of variations between connexions and disconnections, a compilation of intensities. It is an intriguing moment behind closed doors where interactions between people can be fascinating yet difficult to picture at once. Disconnected from the daily time-frame, we forget there about habits and routine and integrate this simple place of sharing, constructed by little exchanges and short talks with curious passengers. All these happen, shrouded in edgeless green landscapes of small scale lush rice paddies, coconut palms and banana trees.

Even the fastest train, proudly called 'Super Express' would in fact stop a couple of times in between our departure and arrival and reconnect us to the reality, bringing back into our protected atmosphere the contrasted Indian flavours. Thick air replaces then the cool breeze that we enjoyed few minutes before when we were still floating on the landscape, followed by shrieked slogans promoting smelly food, toys and clothes.

A station is a story in itself, surely tiring but indubitably full of life. People on their go are waiting on the platforms: families are surrounded by their bag's army, some tired ones are sleeping on whatever would suit their insensitive backs, tall business men are impassively standing in their immaculate white shirts just cut out from a western magazine... And right next to these waiting bodies - traveling spirits, people live - bathing, brushing their tees, drinking at the public fountains ; eating, wandering, begging, chatting while mischievous children are playing with water, pooping like acrobats in equilibrium on the tracks, ...

MUMBAI – MAXIMUM CITY

From the very first days in Mumbai, we felt like being "back home". It seemed to us that once you have adjusted to the Indian culture, it lasts forever.

We arrived in Mumbai airport at night. At 6 am a cab quickly brought us to Colaba. Through the open window, we enjoyed our first morning in India, crossing the so-called megacity slowly waking up. The next days, we kept on bumping into the frenetic activities a few blocks away from our hotel neighbourhood. We saw the unbelievable contrasts and tensions opposing tradition and modernity, local and global, etc.

In the daylight we were fascinated by the incredible amount of very small scale businesses that 'informally' (?) invades the public space. At the sunset, we were pleased to meet a rising middle class chit-chatting in English, wandering on Marine Drive or having tea on this linear bench that underlines the whole coast.



Legal slum

plastic in house

13th compound.

aluminum

electric motor.

water inside

water paid

He

agriculture
150 \$/month
these products
increase.

THE PLASTIC YARD

washing plastic

plastic

We ended up in Kumbharwada, where we saw the lassi's and raita's clay pots made by the pottery industry, later to be exported in the whole city. On 90 feet street, we eventually took a cab that brought us to Matunga train station.

It was an amazing experience. Full of energy and creativity, Dharavi is called "slum" because the land is illegally occupied, and by consequence, very few regulations are applicable inside the neighbourhood. Activities are everywhere: streets and alleys are full of trucks, shops, goods' carriers, etc. Living places are often also workplaces.

IN BETWEEN MUMBAI AND KOLKATA, THE TRADITIONAL INDIA AND ITS GENDERED SPACES

Soon was already our first train to Aurangabad. During the whole journey, we could not stop looking at the landscape through the open window: a flat green carpet punctuated by steep and high plateaus on top of which temples were sometimes standing. From Aurangabad, we visited the heritage sites of Ellora and Ajanta caves. We were really amazed by the exceptional carving work both sites presents and the incredible depth of some caves.

Our second (night) train took us to Jhansi, from where we drove to Orchha. We stayed for four very peaceful days in this small village where the economy appeared to us to be almost exclusively oriented towards tourism and agriculture. We visited a series a beautiful palaces and temples and went down to the river.

The third train brought us in Khajuraho. We spent again a couple of days over there, in between humid heats and heavy rains. We enjoyed a lot visiting the old temples and wandering in the old village. We also went to see the Raghav falls 20 kilometres away from the very tourist city, by bike. The excursion was very nice but the way back quite difficult and we felt very lucky to arrive at our hotel 5 minutes after a torrential rain just started – soaked!

The fourth (night) train had Varanasi as final destination. After a long week in the countryside, we were happy to bump into a city again! The holy character of the place impressed us a lot. We met a Hindu family that did a more than 35-hour-trip from their home town by train to spend two weeks in Varanasi. Such devotion was not easy to understand, especially when we saw people bathing in the Ganga and drinking the brown holy water. We took a boat ride on the Ganga in the early morning to discover the ghats activities from another perspective. We lost ourselves several times in the chowk, looking for a place – finding another and mixing memories. But we eventually always met helpful inhabitants who sometimes guided us at night all the way through the dark alleys and stairs back to our guest-house. One evening, while wondering what could be all those cotton threads tangled in every electric pile, we enjoyed the light dance of thousands kites flying hundred meters above the roofs.



KOLKATTA — THE CITY OF JOY!

Our fifth and last night and day train eventually brought us in more than 14 hours (with 4 hours delay) in the sprawling Kolkatta. We had heard so much excitement and enthusiasm about this city throughout the last three weeks that we were really looking forward to visiting it!

After two long relaxing days in the Sundarbans, we were ready for the last step of our trip. We lost ourselves many times in the gigantic market that some commercial neighbourhoods form together, passing from a street to another as if they would have been rows in a supermarket. We looked for the colonial buildings in the city centre, walked twice the busy Howrah Bridge back and forth, took some boat trips on the Hooghly river to capture a piece of the brown Ganga at the end of its trip, took the single and overcrowded metro line whenever we had to go south or north, jumped in shared rickshaws together with local students, argued with taximen that would never agree to use the meter to drop us somewhere in the city, visited a scary colonial cemetery and the university neighbourhood, etc.

“Women empowerment” has never been so real for us than in Kolkatta. After three weeks in India, striding across medium cities where public spaces are full of men, we felt quite strange to meet again young female students smoking cigarettes in the university restaurants, wearing trendy or in a Western style in the streets, or ordering beers in bars at night.

THANK YOU!

We have seen a very different India than the country we visited two years ago. Having overcome the first amazements and fears, our perspective surely evolved and our eyes and thinkings were obviously attracted by another layer of interests. We were once again amazed by the inventive and creative society which inhabits and activates the overwhelming cities. We felt frustrated also, as outsiders we could not really picture the invisible social net that structures the activities in every single street and neighbourhood. But behind an apparent ‘informal’ surface, we could surely sometimes start to decode a much more formal order set up with lots of ingenuity and flexibility.

Looking forward to visiting again soon and pursuing our investigations!

Claire & Neil

