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JOURNEY TO INDIA

Chapter four: Busted in Allahabad
and on to Varanasi

Rex Maurice Oppenheimer

The Taj Mahal was no doubt beautiful, and when I closed my eyes I could remember it's exquisite silhouette against the sky. While the throngs of tourists had marveled at the ornate details, it was that silhouette that had most impressed me.

The building seemed a perfect fit for this place on earth, like a puzzle piece popped into a hole cut to its exact dimensions, it completed the picture.

Thinking about it made me smile as I exhaled and passed the pipe to the man next to me. I was in Agra waiting for the bus to the station, where I'd get the train to Varanasi, and I had fallen in with a group of men, two of whom were police officers. We were smoking little pellets of opium mixed with rice chaff.

I'd only been in India a little more than three months, but I was already getting comfortable. The balmy night air, the road half paved and half dirt, the disorder of the buildings, with their missing and chipped bricks and patchy paintwork, the red stains of betel nut juice spit on the ground, and the happy laughter, which might seem incongruous to many Westerners, considering the impoverished environment, gave me a sense of ease I had never really experienced anywhere else.

Passing the pipe to one of the European hippie travelers that had joined the group, I smiled, "Got to go get my train for Varanasi"

The Italian, with smooth olive skin, a full curly beard and beaming eyes, took the pipe. "Be careful Allahabad, brother, police coming on train."

I took note, since I always smoked hash mixed with tobacco on my journeys by train in India. Grabbing my pack and shoulder bag, I squeezed onto the bus, which was so crowded, that people were literally hanging on to the outside edges, and headed to the station.

Many of the train stations in India are like little villages. There are people sleeping on the ground, others huddled together just outside cooking over a small fire of burning cow-dung patties, beggars with cups and hands outstretched and vendors selling spicy snacks and tea to the teeming crowds.

I'd bought my ticket a few days earlier, and now I made my way to the platform and looked for my name on the list of second-class sleeper reservations posted on a poll. It always made me laugh when I'd see these notices. There among the countless V.S. Guptas, R.K. Sharmas, S.K. Bhatnagars, and the Chatterjees, Boses, and Banerjees, was Rex Maurice Oppenheimer.

Second-class sleeper, which was really third class, considering there were two classes above it, was my preferred method of travel in India.

I boarded the train and moved down the aisle to find my section of the train. Two wooden bench seats facing each other about a meter apart formed each section. Above each seat was another bench folded against the wall, and above that another bench fixed in place. At night one passenger would sleep on the bottom bench, where three would sit during the day, another would sleep on the one in the middle, and the third on the upper.

I would use my pack as a headrest, my shoulder bag covered with cloth as a pillow, and snuggle in to my wooden plank secure that my belongings were thus protected. I much preferred the trains to busses, which could be quite uncomfortable.

I remember one long bus ride from Rishikesh to Delhi. The bus was the same type used in America as a school bus. It was crowded with people and animals. There were three of us crammed into the seat, and the only way to sleep, or doze, was to put my wadded up shoulder cloth against the bar on the back of the seat in front of me, rest my forehead against it, and let my body bob along with the bouncing bus.

Of course there are no bathrooms on the bus, and at some of the bathroom stops the only facilities were slabs of concrete with water and lota with which to clean one's self. You could shit on the concrete, and an Untouchable waiting nearby would clean it up for the next customer.

On my second-class sleeper train I could walk to the toilet at the end of the car, which was luxurious compared to the concrete slab. At various stations peddlers would either approach the window or come on board the train to sell snacks, meals and tea. Things may have changed now, but at that time there were no type of disposable cups available to the peddlers, and the tea was served in low-fired clay cups. When you'd finish your tea, you could just throw the cup from the train window to break and melt back into the earth.

I loved riding the trains. Journeying by second-class sleeper was to be in the middle of all of India. The other passengers, their dress, customs, food, talk, the vendors, mostly children, who would come on at one stop and get off at another after hawking their food and drinks, the rhythm of life that developed as the metal wheels rocked and rolled along the track. Even the history of the Indian Railways, with its British heritage, all contributed to a multidimensional experience.

I loved watching India roll by outside the window. I was heading to Varanasi, supposedly one of the world's holiest cities, just seven kilometers from Sarnath, where the Buddha had preached his first sermon. Indians from all over the subcontinent bring their dead to Varanasi, where they perform the ritual cremation and scatter the ashes in the sacred river Ganges, or Ganga.

I had a serene sense of peacefulness traveling in India, despite that I was unemployed, had limited funds and was alone thousands of miles from anyone I knew. Rather than a deep philosophical or spiritual reason for this, I

think it had much to do with the simplicity of my existence and that the overwhelming reality of the moment.

My reverie came to an abrupt end when we had pulled into Allahabad and a smartly dressed policeman came down the isle and stopped beside me. I had remembered the Italian hippie's warning and had pushed the leather tobacco pouch containing about an ounce of hash down my pants into my crotch.

Standing erect he announced, "We are looking for marijuana, heroin, opium, charras." Smiling up at him, I gestured to my backpack. But he shook his head and reached for my shoulder bag, which I surrendered without worry. I had forgotten that I still had a small piece of hash in a plastic film canister, from which I'd been rolling joints on the train.

Opening the little container and dumping the dark green lump of hash into his palm, he narrowed his eyes and barked, "Stand up, you are arrested!"

I hesitated and he cracked his baton forcefully down on the seat beside me. "Up!" he commanded.

I stood, and he began patting me down. Thankfully ignoring my crotch.
"This is a serious offence," he said, "you are going to jail."

I knew he meant it, but I still found it incongruous that I had been smoking opium with the police in Jaipur, and had smoked hash openly with Saddus many places.

I began to explain, "I am a poor student, and I am traveling to learn about your wonderful country," I offered. "It is so important for my studies to continue to Benares, and it is such a little piece of charras, can't you have mercy?"

His harsh stare was unrelenting as he raised his baton as though ready to strike, "You have broken the law, get up now!" he shouted.

"But, but," I stammered, "I am so respectful of your country and customs, I didn't realize I was doing anything wrong."

"It doesn't matter." He barked.

Although I'd only been in India for a few months, I had experienced the need to pay baksheesh on various occasions, and I'd lived in Mexico where I'd paid off a traffic cop more than once.

"I understand," I said, "but surly I must be able to pay the fine now?" I asked modestly.

He hesitated as he sized me up.

"Hurry and give me a hundred rupees before others come," he said.

I stalled, "Please, I am poor, one-hundred rupees is so much money, I cannot do it."

"You must," he said, "other police will come and want more."

One hundred rupees was then about \$12.

I appeared desperate, "I am poor. I am traveling second-class; five rupees is almost more than I can afford."

He started to talk, but almost instantly four other officers appeared. They were demanding 100 each. The price had now gone up to 500 rupees.

Looking back on it I don't know if I was bold or stupid. I'm not sure if I'd become so entrenched in Indian ways, or if I was so financially insecure that I needed to preserve every penny I could, but I continued to bargain.

"As I told your fellow officer, I am poor," I pleaded. "I am not in first class, I have no watch, I cannot pay so much." Their demand weakened some, and they seemed willing to take 300, but I continued to offer small incremental increases, which was how I'd learned to bargain in India.

So many Americans were always meeting halfway. If the price was one hundred, they'd offer fifty, end up buying it for 75 and think they got a good deal. I'd discovered that you may have to go up, or down, many times, but the amounts could be as small as one rupee. I'd started at five for the first cop. Now I was up to eight for each. After more back and forth I made my final offer, 50 rupees for the five of them. Ten rupees each.

I held out the money, "Take this 50 rupees and go quickly to find another criminal on the train so you can get more, or take me to jail," I said.

With quick glances at each other, they took the fifty rupees and left.

As the dust settled and the train pulled out of the station, I smiled at my nearby fellow passengers, some of whom smiled back while others were either disdainful or distant.

Looking out the window at India, and as the train picked up speed, I pulled some of the hash from the pouch I had stuffed down my pants. Holding a little piece in the tweezers from my Swiss Army knife, I warmed it gently with a match and crumbled it into some tobacco, which I rolled into a joint. Lighting up and looking through the old window frame, I gazed out at women wrapped in cotton watering crops from little clay pots, as had been done for centuries, and inhaled deeply.

Next stop was Varanasi, India's holiest city by the Ganga River. This is where Hindus hope to die and to achieve a speedy moksha, or release. It is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, which is not hard to believe once one lays eyes on the historical tableau living and present every day.

Half-dressed and naked people smeared in ash, chanting holy verses, scooping vessels of water from the Holy River Ganga, or waving smoking bowls of incense. Dead bodies are being burned, their ashes being consumed by the sky, as cremation after cremation takes place on the Ghats, or steps beside the river. The narrow lanes filled with the flow of humans, animals such as Brahma bulls, horns wrapped in colored paper and ribbons, rickshaws, and dust, all seemed to shimmer before me, like I was peering through a vaporous window from a time machine, gazing back thousands of years.

It's a bizarre energy, primitive methods in modern times, and except for the watches on people's wrists, and the neon signs, flashing religious symbols and scripture, taking their place beside powders, pastes, incense, smoke

and ash, it's as though the last six centuries never happened.

Varanasi was a wild time, yet uneventful in many ways I don't remember the people I met there, and other than a boat ride on the Ganga amid decaying body parts, dead animals, and human ash, the incessant gongs and bells and chants, the intense movement in the streets, only two memories come to mind.

One was at night, when I was walking through the city and wandered into an alley in the darkness. As I stepped carefully through garbage and god knows what strewn on the ground, one of the shapes I trod upon, a sleeping Brahma bull, bel-

lowed and leapt to its feet, at the same time a giant rat, larger than a cat, ran right past me.



I had no watch when I traveled in India and have no idea of how I managed to catch trains and keep a reasonable schedule, other than the fact that Indian trains are usually quite late, as is everything. My train leaving Varanasi for Madras left early in the morning. I had to get up about five and get going. By then I was so used to the sounds and timing of the temple bells I was able to use them as my clock. But despite that, I awoke late, gulped down some tea, and ran into the street to find a rickshaw.

I found one in a side street and bargained for a two-rupee ride. Halfway there the driver started complaining and demanding more money. Outraged I yelled at him and told him if he didn't shut up I would call over a policeman to beat him. I tell this with a mixture of pride and shame. I had been in India long enough to behave like an Indian. On the other hand, as little money as I had, another twenty cents for riding his bicycle rickshaw through the tumult all the way to the station would have made the driver very happy. He didn't get it.