

Steel Notes Magazine



SAINTS AND ROBBERS IN BOMBAY

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Before I'd gone there everyone had told me that Goa wasn't India. Having been a Portuguese Colony until 1961, and thus with a strong Catholic influence, it was in many ways different than the rest of India, through which I'd been traveling for the past six months.

Yet the sights and smells, the clothing, colors and textures, were definitely Indian, what I found very different was the liberty enjoyed and expressed by the mostly British, European, Australian, New Zealand and South African travelers. Although I understand that Goa has now changed, this was back in 1979, and these diverse tribes of Westerners had settled in their makeshift gypsy camps, and with their exotic Indian garments, piercings, tattoos and paraphernalia, resembled gypsies more than they did Indians or the people they were back home in their normal lives.

While some had become real gypsies of a sort, living in the north of India during the summer and down in Goa during the winter, dealing drugs and scrounging a living as best they could, others were doctors, lawyers, forest rangers and firefighters back in the West, who had mostly come to indulge some hedonistic fling. Goa was a sort of a Woodstock Nation realized, with all-night rock and roll parties on the beach and lots of nudity and drugs. I remember hearing Ian Dury singing "Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll" so much that it became the anthem or sound track for the scene.

Goa was great, and I had enjoyed my free floating months in that crazy community of expats and Asia travelers, but with another visa approaching its expiration date, it was time for me to leave. The next stop was Bombay.

I don't know what the visa requirements are now, but when I was there an American could get a three-month visa and extend it once for another three months, which amounted to six months in India. A new visa couldn't be had until one had spent six months out of the country. So my plan was to head for Bombay, then Calcutta and then

on to Thailand, Malaysia and wherever inspiration may lead me until I could return to India.

There was a steamer that left Goa and traveled up the coast to Bombay, the trip took 24 hours, and I booked passage on the deck at a cost of 50 rupees, which was then the equivalent of about \$4.00. Many of the passengers on the deck were the same British and European travelers that had populated the Goa scene. As we sailed north there was music and *chillums* full of hash, or *charras*, as it's called in India, passed around circles, as each traveler would shout out a chant, "Boom Shankar, Bholenath," praising Shiva the God of Destruction, who used to lie in the Himalayan valleys and smoke cannabis, and take a deep drag, the cone-shaped clay pipe glowing red against the dark night on the Arabian Sea.

When we pulled into the docks at Bombay I headed for a relatively cheap hotel that I'd learned about the way I pretty much learned about everything in India, from other travelers. I only had a few days in Bombay before I was to head off to Calcutta. I wandered through the labyrinth of market stalls around Sassoon Docks, where images both beautiful and grotesque danced before my eyes.

Sassoon Docks were not far from the grand hotels, such as the Taj Mahal, yet there were groups of people sitting one behind the other picking lice out of each other's hair. Barbers squatting in front of their customers giving them a shave, and scores of men, their *lungis* and *dhotis* pulled up on their thighs, squatting along the shoreline to defecate, as the gentle tide would wash in and carry the feces out to sea. Yet Bombay also seemed a majestic city, with grand architecture and those red, double-decker English style busses plying the broad boulevards.

On my last day in Bombay I had to check out of my hotel at 2:30 in the afternoon. My train for Calcutta didn't leave until nine-thirty that night, so I went down to the big train station, Victoria Terminus, where I planned to leave my Tibetan backpack at the cloakroom. The clerks in the cloakroom explained that they couldn't keep my pack because it didn't lock. So, with the pack on my back, I walked over to a large park.

Taking the one-foot square piece of woven Tibetan cloth I used for the purpose of keeping relatively clean and dry in all the situations where one must sit on the ground from my shoulder bag, I sat on the grass and began to write a letter.

It wasn't long before some young Indian guys called out to me, "Hey, you want smoke chillum?"

"Always," I replied, and went over to join them.

I was met with the usual questions, "Where is your natural place? Are you married? Do you have children?" Although I had no "natural place," which is why I was adrift in India, and had no wife or child, the conversation was very friendly. We sat smoking and talking on the grass, but before long a policeman came by to inform us that the park was

closing and we'd have to leave. I followed my new friends outside the park to a place beside the busy street where one of the guys, Raju, lived and worked. A mat spread on the ground, a small altar with flowers, incense and pictures of gods, served as his home and place of business.

Raju used to deal hash, selling little balls of *charas* for one rupee each. Then, in an effort to better himself, he learned to give massages and was now a masseur who worked out of his home, a mat on the street.

I sat with them smoking and talking for some time until I decided that I should get something to eat before I had to go and wait for the train. So I bid farewell picked up my things and walked off into the teeming streets of Bombay.

The river of people flowing by me made it feel like I was riding the rapids. With my pack on my back, I was bumped and jostled by the thick, fast running crowd. Finally, I found a small restaurant and sat down to eat.

I had fallen in love with India sometime before. I relished the slower pace and didn't miss the modern conveniences, except maybe hot water for a shower once in a while. Although the basic chores of sustaining myself took a lot of time, I seemed to have more time. My moments were filled with the reality of the world right up against me. No constant bombardment of news from beyond the borders of my daily life.

When I walked through Varanasi, Jaipur, or Bombay, among the people wound in *saris*, *dhotis*, *lungis* and turbans, enmeshed in the flow of modern life through ancient lanes, I'd witnessed an elegance of existence, imbuing everyday things with beauty and meaning. The slanting brightness of sunlight on a mound of spices, flowers in a garland, appeared as visual poems.

Yes, running water, especially hot running water, is rare. Power fails often, and although there is an intelligentsia, and India has nuclear weapons, computers, scientists and a middle class, a majority of the population remains poor and illiterate; irrigation in village fields is often accomplished by hand, with women carrying little clay pots full of water to pour on the plants. I used to see them when I traveled long distances by train. I'd look through the window and watch the women in their cotton *saris* and knobby bare feet carrying the pots of water as they moved through the fields.

But although Bombay's streets were crowded and dirty, and pervasive nature of India's disorder was always apparent, in the haphazard, kamikaze traffic patterns, and the ever wandering homeless and beggars, all was well.

Finished eating, I asked for the check and reached for my shoulder bag, but it felt strangely light. When I reached inside I discovered the small leather pouch containing literally all my worldly wealth, my passport, my visa, my ticket to Calcutta, about \$2,500 in Travelers Checks, \$500 in cash and a few hundred rupees, was gone.

When I had first arrived in India I had worn that little leather pouch around my neck and under my shirt, but after having spent so much time in the country, and feeling so comfortable, I had become lax and had left it in my shoulder bag.

My God! Here I was in the middle of Bombay with absolutely no identification and only about two dollars to my name. I couldn't prove who I was and I was destitute. What could I do? Who could have taken it?

Someone could have easily pick-pocketed it when I was squeezing my way through the crowded streets, and if that happened, it was gone for good. Or, one of those guys I was sitting with at the park might have taken it. If they had taken it, I don't know why the bag didn't feel light to me when I left the park, but that was my only chance. I still had about two or three dollars in rupees in my pocket. I paid my bill at the restaurant and took off, almost running back to the park.

As I turned the corner and approached Raju's mat beside the large fence surrounding the park, I saw him sitting there. Running to him I blurted out that my bag was gone. Raju didn't speak much English, and my Hindi was abysmal, but he understood what I was saying. His soft, black eyes hardened; he stood up with a swift seriousness, held up his hand and said, "Wait." Then he turned and jumped up grabbing on to the high fence behind him. Climbing up he skirted the barbed wire at the top and leapt to the ground, running off and disappearing into the darkness of the Bombay night.

An hour before my train was to leave for Calcutta, and here I sat with no ticket, no identification, and no money.

After about 10 minutes I heard a clanging sound and saw Raju at the top of the fence. With a smile as broad as a boulevard and as bright as a beacon he shot his arm upward and my bag was dangling from his hand.

Thank God, I thought, opening the bag and counting the contents. The cash, American and Indian, my passport, ticket to Calcutta and visa, all were there. I thanked Raju, whose eyes once again glowed with softness, and handing him a reward, I shouldered my bags and headed off toward the station.

After walking a short way I realized I'd counted the cash and saw that everything else was there, but I hadn't counted the Travelers Checks. Sure enough, I found that four one hundred dollar checks had been torn out of the center of the folder.

I ran back to Raju and told him. Once again he leapt over the fence, and once again, this time about 20 minutes later, he came back with the four missing checks.

Raju barely spoke English, and when I showed up saying that my bag had been stolen, he could have simply looked at me, shaken his head and uttered the phrase, "No, no sahib, don't know." There was no way I could have proved anything, and I didn't even know for sure if any of those guys had taken it.

Raju earned between five and ten dollars a month. The passport on the blackmarket at that time was worth at least \$500, the \$2,500 in travelers checks, unsigned, were worth half their face value, there was hundreds of dollars and hundreds of rupees in cash. If he could get that bag and give it back to me, he could have gotten it and kept it.

When I left Raju, he looked up from his mat and offered me a saint's beatific smile.

I was smiling, too, as I climbed aboard a second-class sleeper bound for Calcutta.